# Burning Beard

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**Summary:** Pt. 2 of Persona non Grata. Every day she gets up, drinks a lot of coffee and watches for the proof of villainous vivisection that will set her set her country on fire. A story of cruelty, power, and the seven habits of the highly effective squirrel.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Security District, 1 Floreal 3230

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. 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)

(1) Security District, Robotroplis, 1 Floreal 3230. Subject Sally Acorn begins the Knight's Gambit.

(2) Tolsalvey, Robotropolis, 2 Floreal 3230. Subject T. Baxter Posniak is bad at his job; Subject Sally Acorn is paged.

(3) Security District, Robotropolis, 2 Floreal 3230. Subject Amanda Polgato fights organics; Subject Snively Kolensky bears no fault.

(4) Terscala, 2 Floreal 3230. Subjects Baxter Posniak and Lupe Almatrican take account; Subject Myron Catalano revisits the scene of a crime.

(5) Unincorporated Green Hills Administrative District, 3 Floreal 3230. Subject Antoine D'Coolette's medical care develops a complication; Subject Molly Lotor has a meeting with her boss.

(6) Port Orange, 3 Floreal 3230. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Sally Acorn are lonely; Subject Tails Prower visits the old neighborhood.

(7) West Molineaux, 4 Floreal 3230. Subjects Joshua Dursine, Frank Pulaski, Baxter Posniak, and Renee Donlevy unknowingly compare notes.

(8) Muzenkspitz, 4 Floreal 3230. Subject Lila Spitz gives a history lesson; Subject Rotarak Tulugarjuk stops a wild pitch.

(9) Moselle, 5 Floreal 3230. Subject Lupe Almatrican makes a new friend; Subject Renee Donlevy's investigations unexpectedly intersect.

(10) Security District, 7 Floreal 3230. Subject Sonic Hedgehog and others go to the hospital.

(11) Security District, 7 Floreal 3230, continuing. Subject Tails Prower finds that nothing seems to go right; Subject Sally Acorn takes a snapshot; Subject Amanda Polgato thinks harder than she has in years.

(12) Tolsalvey, 8 Floreal 3230. Subject Baxter Posniak's employment and residential situations are complicated; Subject Joshua Dursine runs up his utilities bill; Subject Molly Lotor discovers a new talent.

(13) Great Forest, 8 Floreal 3230. Subject Tails Prower loses his tough coat; Subject Sonic Hedgehog confronts his fear; Subject Sally Acorn has a medical problem.

(14) Great Forest, 9 Floreal 3230. Subject Sally Acorn undergoes a medical procedure.

(15) Grosse Durchfahren, 2 Firmaire 3213. Subject Julian Kintobor describes a parabola.

(16) Kingsport, 11 Floreal 3230. Various subjects leave and return home; Subject Sally Acorn wins the morning news cycle.

(17) High Demon, 11 Floreal 3230. Subject Sally Acorn considers fear and love; Subject Sonic Hedgehog emigrates.

Part Three: Search and Destroy

Part Four: Immigrant Song

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**Security District, Robotropolis, 1 Floreal 3225**

The human's tie was too thin, limp and crimson, as though someone had botched the job of slitting his throat. Above the wound his face was pale, and that was about all that could be said of it. It seemed to change shape before Renee's eyes, indeterminate, suspended between the features of all of the other VIP's milling about in the shadow of the polished, new glass monolith reaching to the sky at 33 West Five Trees Street, two blocks west of the reconstructed Palace itself, known to most as the Carnival Building, probably because of the company's Carnival Wheel logo plainly visible behind the reception desk in the lobby inside. "Have you ever considered a career in private security?" he asked.

The pine marten blinked, staring at him a little more closely. "What?" He was aware that she had a job now, right?

"Pawel," the male said, extending his hand, and then followed it with a Lachels surname with four syllables and four v's. "Vice President of Hydrocarbons, Ellingson Mineral. We're going to be moving our Robotropolis offices into the twentieth through fortieth floors. Historically we've had some trouble with our desert explorations—"

"Of course," Renee nodded, dancing her eyes around the periphery of the wide cement plaza they'd decided to name Freedom Square. It was filled now with dark human suits, tables full of delicate vulpine fingerfood, eight or so mobians in tuxedos caressing the smooth curves of viols and violins. Along the sidewalk and the property lines were red-painted wooden sawterrapods, stenciled POLICE BARRIER, and curious Sunday mobians in tastefully rumpled cotton button-down shirts out of a Dudziak & Lowell catalogue, people wealthy enough to live east of the Great River or with enough time to bother crossing the security checkpoints at the bridges.

Renee's ears stayed on Pawel's moneyed drone while her eye gravitated to the back of the three meter bronze that dominated the front of the square. From here you just got the vulpine and squirrel tails emerging from a pair of Great War-era Mobian Standard Army uniforms, but you could see the weight of the homeland on their wide soldiers, the alert turn of the ears. The city had planned the plaza as "Great War Freedom Memorial Square," before some smartass ingrates joked that Mobian freedom needed a memorial. She wished there were some way to send them to a parallel universe where they could enjoy what freedom they could find beneath Overlander boots—

Just visible around the marble base of the statute was a young canine. He leaned over the barriers behind the back of a yawning, uniformed Robotropolis Police Officer, cobalt fur puffing thick and knotted around his neck and shoulders. Renee glanced down automatically and saw the cuffs of the wolf's pants, more likely to have seen the inside of a rock tumbler than a tumble-drier—

The human's voice pattered on, tight with indignation. ". . . . injustice of double taxation of corporate profits—are you busy, officer? Should I speak with someone else?"

Renee bumped the man's shoulder as she walked past him, speaking to the lapel of her jacket, the mic she kept in place with a lapis Mobian flag-pin: "Post four, wolf, blue fur, no shirt. Take him quietly."

They took him inside, downstairs, she followed down to check it out. The male's bathroom for service employees, her strike of dress heels on the grey tile floor reverberating. She took off the black jacket of her pantsuit and hung it on one of the pegs by the door. The wolf sagged over his spread knees, head low to avoid the lip of the pristine porcelain sink above him, the handcuffs the two uniformed RPD officers had threaded through the p-trap pulling his arms behind him. His fur was lumped and ruffed, his belly and shoulders crisscrossed with raised welts under the fur. One of the cops, a rat, still had his baton out and he was playing with it, spinning it around and around his forearm.

Renee sighed and shared a glance with the other officer, an unhappy otter with droopy whiskers. She didn't need to ask: the wolf kid fought like a demon and hadn't said a damn word. She almost wished she didn't have such a keen nose for subversion.

Stooping before him gave her a cleaner look at his half-lidded eyes and swelling cheeks. The wolf was a kid, real young, and for the first time in more than a year she was reminded of the Royal Army investigation that Captain Snively Kolensky had promoted her away from. That kid, the fox kit with the second tail, in trouble in the middle of the forest, captured by gunrunners after he tried to steal guns for his superiors. She wondered what had happened to him. Dead? Or just turned into a snarling beast like this one?

A good year trying to hunt down this strange group of occasional terrorists who weren't old enough to be out of high school and claimed to be led by the dead Princess Sarah Acorn, and then all of a sudden it was as though it had never happened. The operation had moved into a new phase, no longer an investigation, but a sting. The Lachels intelligence agent Captain Kolensky used had somehow dug up a raccoon that was both trusted by key members of Royal Army and totally beholden to the government for her survival, nicely situated to transmit false information to the rebels, setting them up for capture and destruction.

The old investigation, the hard, slow business of trying to figure out Royal Army's lines of supply and communication, root them out of their safehouses and bases, was languishing. Even though Renee was no longer part of Captain Kolensky's task foce, she would still get calls from bemused MobiusTelecom line workers, telling her that they'd found another one of the illegal phone splices left in their physical plant by the walrus (alias "Rotor"), slowly pulling away the strand of what seemed an endless web of mechanical misdirection designed to keep the government from tracing their calls in real time, keeping their electronic intelligence outdated and useless.

But right now she didn't really care whether they caught the walrus and the hedgehog and the squirrel or not. Why? Just to make way for this pup, even younger and more vicious?

"Are you one of Lupe Almatrican's?" she asked quietly, resting her arms on her bent knees. "Who's your Alpha?" In civilian clothes she was a Good Cop, but she was feeling it, too, too much. It was horrible to think of this kid putting a bomb in a mailbox, popping off at some clueless district official with a pistol two times too big for him, being dragged off, biting and snarling, to a long session on some ISO pain bed . . . . "You haven't done anything, have you? You were just looking. Looking where your Alpha told you to look." Renee leaned forward onto her knees, reached a hand out to rub the pup's neck. "If you—"

Renee felt in the cool motion of the air the wolf's teeth slapping together in front of her nose. She fell back onto her rump, legs splayed, and gasped as the pup spat a wad of bloody spit into her right eye, flecks of bright red foam spattering the floor. "Police whore!"

The heel of Renee's right shoe snapped as she drove her foot into the pup's chest. His skull slammed into the sink, closing his jaws over his tongue with a wet chop. The marten pulled the wolf's blood out of her face and shook it to the floor. The wolf's head bobbed sleepily, an incipient whine in his throat as the pain held him. The canine phlegm still matted Renee's fingerfur as she tightened her knuckles into a fist—

"I'm an undercover agent."

One of the badgers had a giggle that was far too weightless and girlish for his size. She couldn't see him. Both of them were behind her. "You're what?"

"I aAH! Ah!" The chain holding Renee's arms above her head winched from taut to tight. Her weight shifted from the balls of her shivering feet to her big toes. Her calves failed and tightened into rock. She felt her lips whimpering, pressing each other, wet.

That giggle. "I'm sorry, I—hehe—I couldn't quite, um, hear you."

She started crying. She wanted to cry. She was failing more miserably than she had ever feared; betraying her mission and her superiors and her country—

"Larry, shut up. Sydney, we need an explanation for the bodies. If you killed them, just tell us and we can stop stressing you. Because if you don't tell us, we're going to have to move on to hurting you. Do you understand me?"

"I'm a . . . . gugugods I'm an ISO agent. My real name is Renee Donlevy. I was in Marigold on a classified mission. I—I shouldn't be here—"

". . . To do what?"

"To kill a cyborg. A failed military experiment, dangerous."

"What, like a . . . like an Assaultbot? That thinks, or something?"

"No. It was a rabbit."

"Oh, a rabbot?" Larry giggled. "Why would you want to kill a cute little bunny rabbot?"

Such disappointment in that gentle voice. "Sidney. Really now. Did you think we were going to believe that?"

"It's true," she wept, "it's true it's true it's true it's—"

"Sidney," the badger interrupted, "have you heard of the 'pain bed'?"—

"Ma'am?" The otter had put her baton under the pup's neck, holding him firmly and silently against the underside of the sink. "You alright?"

Renee blinked, not taking her eyes away from the wolf's clenching and unclenching her shivering right hand. "Tell your Alpha that this city," she said, her voice an amphibious croak, "is off limits. I don't care how strong you think you are in Terscala. Any pack wolf that sets foot in the capital will learn that the strongest pack of all calls Robotnik its Alpha." She got to her feet slowly, sloppily, wobbling as she rediscovered her torn heel and kicked her shoes off. "Keep him down here until after the party. Then take him to the Gordon's Crossing freightyard and dump him. He'll find his way home."

"Sure thing, ma'am," the rat sat said, saluting loosely with his baton. He kept swinging it as she turned to the door. "Howsabout it, puppy? You want to call me Alpha, HUH—"

Renee lost the sound of any collision when she slammed the steel door sharply closed behind her.

The day before the mission, they went to Tolsalvey, just the three of them. They tended to group two together; the third would dash ahead through the relaxed Sunday streets to stare into a mute shopwindow, or dally behind, tying a shoelace. It was as though there were some strange tripolar magnetism at work. Perhaps there was. They had never been all three together much, by design, by necessity, and now all of them were on some level wondering if it risked some dangerous chemical reaction.

They walked along the streets with no aim other than staying south of the Desantis Post Road. There Internal Security Office had run out of money for the new CCTV cameras that watched most of Ascogne-Dascogne for student radicals aping Independence University north of the border, for student maniacs out to recreate last winter's campus riot at Corukas Technical. But they were still close enough to wade in the shallows of the University ecosystem. In a thin strip of grass and trees between the two one-way streets of D'Ansuzio Promenade cheap folding tables were lined with the young and old mobians that made up the ALL DAY CHESS PARTY. Banners hung end-to-end from rusted poles, £ 5 FOR 5 MIN, £ 15 FOR 30 MIN. Beneath them the sharks moved up and down the line, a pair of bony, underfed weasels and a very, very old mouse, smacking down the dilettante undergraduates from the University.

Tails jaydashed in front of a honking car to hook his snout around a meerkat in a GEOLOGY ROCKS! t-shirt and peer at one of the active boards. Sonic hung back uncertainly, brushing a dirty white glove back over his limp quills. Sally was always reading her puzzle books with the chess boards. "You and Tails gonna want to hang out here?" he whined. Then he glanced over at Sally. "Because, you know . . . ." His lip drooped, uncertainly. "I mean, we could hang out here, for a while." He blinked and put a smile onto his face like a stick-up man tying a bandana over his snout.

They crossed the street together and watched Tails stare first with struggling frustration and then wide-eyed admiration at three games being played by the same weasel. The weasel would hunker down over a board, study and plan and check for about three seconds each and dance away to the next board, turning his eyes to the third while his hand was still slapping the clock.

"What do you say, young sir?" The second weasel approached Sonic with the showman-politeness of the chronically poor, rubbing a white king between his palms. "Five for five? Ten more and I'll play against the lady and—" He paused, realizing at a second thought that the fox couldn't be their son. "And your friend here."

Sonic shook his head, quills half-up, closed eyes on his sneakers. "Nah, I don't, uh . . . ." He tried not to look at Sally's standing beside him, and tried to come up with something other than I don't know how to play chess. "It's just too slow for me," he laughed defiantly, watching the weasel from arrowslit eyes.

"At five minutes?" the weasel asked with a devious grin, picking up a second white king and holding it beside his head. "Five sovs gets bughouse, two minute flag."

"Bughouse . . . ." Sally groaned, pressing her fingers to her temples.

"Can we play bughouse, Aunt Sally?" Tails was tugging on the sleeve of her black windbreaker, huge young eyes begging like a repen puppy's. Sally didn't know where the kit had heard of bastardized, frantic, two-board team chess, unless he'd heard her complain to Rotor that bughouse had a reputation for turning budding masters into twitch-wrist caffeine cases—"I promise I won't get addicted to it please," Tails hopped on his sneakertoes, "please please can we play bughouse with Uncle Sonic?"

Sonic cringed; Sally sighed. They spoke in unison: "Tails, I—"

Five minutes and fifteen sovereigns later they were on their third game, Tails running the attack board, using most of his turns to lay down pieces that Sally had taken from the weasel on her board. If he hadn't played before he quickly learned the wild attacks the game required and yapped like a surgeon for tools to chase the white king about the board: "pawn . . . pawn . . . pawn," barely audible over Sonic, who grasped the spirit of the enterprise: "Get him!" He leaned over Tails' shoulder to point a gloved finger at the white king, "Get him! Get him!" And on the next board Sally traded a little plastic queen for a pawn, a little plastic knight for pawn, a little plastic priest for pawn, smiling at the light joy in the movement of her fingers.

It lasted as long as it could.

The next day was Moonday, cooler, fewer clouds. Tails returned very early, the sky a muted dawn blue. He wore a field hockey t-shirt over his cracking winter fur, straps of a small pack rubbed his shoulders. A chill breeze bit his thin ears and wet nose. Rotor walked alongside, the growing tension of the approaching mission muted not only by fatigue but what he guiltily realized was pleasure at the sound and motion of the city. "Y'all shouldn't spend—hrg—so much time with me," Bunnie had sighed two days ago, lifting again and again the tree-trunk segment Rotor had chainsawed into a clumsy, rough-gripped hand-weight for her. She'd used her unarmored hand—Rotor suggested it as a good idea to avoid scoliosis, though whatever nanomachinery infested Bunnie's biology seemed to counteract the risk of spinal curvature presented by her macromachinery. Most of the things that caused her the most discomfort—the botched attack on the hair follicles in her legs that left her with constant eczema, the disappearance of half her form under bulbous ablative armor—were things about which Rotor could do nothing. Well, nothing serious, just little things: his ridiculous little cortisone oilcan contraption; a rough tailor's job on the right sleeve of that purple t-shirt she loved. "It'll be good for you to—rrgh—get into a big ol' city," she said.

"Have you ever smelled one up close?"

She'd dropped the weight with a heavy, leaf-muffled thump, wiped her raw palm's dust and splinters off on her bellyfur. "I remember snatches a' Fortune—think I must have visited, once, when it was really little. Then she went—" Pause, a shiver signifying the momentary fight to reclaim another one of her memories, pushing past the strange distance Bunnie felt toward everything in her life before Snively had subjected her to his treatments. "—I saw a bit of Terscala back when I ran off with Rhett to fight under the Committee. Glass and steel and dust. Robotnik had it pretty much in hand, but it still smelled like burnt octane."

"All those attractions, huh?"

"You're missin' the big one."

"Rhett?"

". . . and all sortsa people," Bunnie had allowed, a hot blush gathered in the dark of her flopped ear. "Snow fun to spend all your time out on the farm."

"Or in a cave. I wish I could get Sally to agree to more travel for you, Bunnie." Rotor had hesitated awkwardly at the threshold of the joke, before tumbling into it face first: "Or at least that I was ravishing as old Rhett."

"Sally's right—you can't have pictures of me floatin' round till you can prove it was Snively done the experiments. And Rhett was always so . . . . He wasn't sweet. Not like you."

Her snout had brushed down his this bristles as she kissed him on the cheek.

No one else on the planet knew what Rotor was thinking, probably not even more experienced Bunnie with her petit aristocrat memories. He was still embarrassed. He could see the artist falling in love with his creation. But a mechanic?

"This way," Tails said, tugging him sluggishly from his reverie.

"Huh," Rotor muttered, looking at the row of perfect, unused chessboards. Tails walked silently. He'd been sullen ever since Sally kissed his nose at five a.m., promising a pizza dinner when they reunited in the evening.

The weasels were elsewhere; just the mouse sat in a lawn chair, ice blue eyes and sparse gray fur emerging from an unseasonably heavy parka, a green thermos on the ground beside him. Tails stood across the board, sharing the silence, then looked mutely at Rotor until the walrus produced five sovereigns. Quivering fingers emerged from the mouse's sleeves to take the coin and wind the clocks to 11:30. Tails touched his fingers to the white king, feeling the points of its crown, and moved its pawn two spaces forward.

Rotor hadn't learned as a kid—chess wasn't as big in the old country as it was in Mobius—and hadn't felt the need to since. Sally said Tails was good for his age, but the old man owned him. The mouse used two minutes to Tails' eight, and he studied the boy's face as much as the board. When Tails had his queen dodge a strike by her enemy counterpart, the mouse reached out and stilled the clocks.

"You are a strange one," the mouse said in a thin, dry squeak, tinted with Antoine's accent. "Why do you not trade queens with me?"

Tails shrugged. His ears were flat; he didn't meet the rodent's eyes. "I like the queen. It goes as fast as it wants—"

"This is the third time you have refused to trade pieces." His nose indicated the places of Tails' soldiers: "To trade your king's knight would have been to your mild advantage, unsettling the pawns on my queen's flank. To avoid trading your bishop and queen, you have ceded control of the center and given me an unopposed file of attack. Those who play bughouse—" the mouse spat this word from his lips as though it were a disgusting, chitinous insect in his mouth, bock-house— "normally face the opposite problem, but the decision not take a piece requires as much thought as to take it. You are young, but you seem to understand these difficulties you are causing yourself." His thin-furred scalp wrinkled: "Yes?"

". . . . I don't like to lose pieces," Tails replied, quietly.

The mouse searched the kit's face a moment before his wrinkled features drooped with placid understanding. "A recent complaint of young players," he said, his voice almost a laugh. "I am now . . . eighty-three years old. War has spanned your life, but this game will endure past any war. It is merely plastic, yes? No buildings are overturned, no one is hurt."

"Do you want to go?" Rotor asked, as quietly as he could. After a moment he realized that Tails wasn't answering because he was crying. "Let's go. We'll see you around, pops."

Tails gave a little boy's growl as he walked up the sidewalk, high pitched and soft at its edges, a sound that immediately made him look around, embarrassed, too see if any older kids were snickering.

"I'm worried about them, too," Rotor sighed.

"Then let's go," Tails mumbled, angrily wiping his arm fur under his eyes, trying to wrestle his voice down into his chest. "Let's go wait for them with everyone else."

Rotor fought his belly's weight with a heavy, deep breath. Quinn was playing sniper since Antoine was going with Sonic and Sally. Cat and Gunther Maersk were waiting with some Standard Army troops in a borrowed van, ready to haul ass if everything went to hell. He was sure a fat walrus and a prepubescent fox would make all the difference in the world.

But he knew how Tails felt right now, too. "Alright," he decided. "We'll catch a cab as soon as I can find one." He just hoped he'd be able to keep the kit safe if anything happened. Wiping his wet nose with the back of his glove in the open street, he looked so fragile.

"Thanks, Rotor," Tails said, sniffing. He reached up and felt again to make sure he was wearing his backpack. In it was a book he was reading and, hidden beneath a sweatshirt and long familiar from clandestine practice with Sonic, two pistols.

Every morning at five, for a month, Jacques and Andre would show up at Lord's Haven Hospital in Green Hills, the last suburb south of Robotropolis. They would suit up in the khaki private security uniforms, human-styled, long sleeves and pants. At six they would load the van and drive out from the recessed loading dock of the morgue. Right as they reached the overpass and the long, sloping stretch of the highway, Jacques would pull off into a Coffee Time Donuts that was sleepily drifting towards bankruptcy and park behind it in a lot heavy with the too-sweet, dirty scent of garbage. Andre would head inside for six glazed donuts, and Jacques would drum his fingers tensely on the wheel and wait to have the shit kicked out of him.

Jacques was a tree squirrel—royal squirrel, as was sometimes still said—and his deep brown eyes settled on the thin line of trees at the back of the lot that marked the end of the south suburbs, plowed fields of barley behind the leaves. That was where the terrorists would come from, just like fifteen years ago in the Worm foothills, the humans coming out of cover every evening like the fog.

This assignment was insane. These strict orders. When you are attacked, you do not just sit and take it! No matter how clever a trap you think you have or how consistent a history your enemy has of not killing anyone if they can help it (except the hedgehog). When the terrorists finally attacked, Jacques would run them down with the van. If the van failed he would shoot them.

They did not attack. Andre would return, invariably unmolested. Jacques would drive onto the northbound highway and they would eat donuts under the arrows to SOUTH SUBURBS/TOLSALVEY. "I wish they'd just come at us, already," Jacques would say—he said it this time, anyway.

"You're crazy," Andre replied, tiny mouth munching with quick little bites, his sharp ferret eyes rolling after billboards as they passed. "They say that bastard the hedgehog's killed two people and given five more five months in the hospital. I don't want to see a single hair of him. If I do, we're going to see if he can dodge a bullet."

"Yeah, I hear you." They would drive two hours, heavy uniforms cooking them even with the windows open, to an industrial park in the burbs, which wasn't much of a park. It reminded Jacques of a military airstrip with more empty cement, smaller hangars and no planes. They would drop the package with Gaumont Labs receiving just inside a sweltering whitewashed warehouse, grab a nasty lunch at a Jimmy's and eat it in the van on the way back south, the highway stretching long and monotonous—

"Shit, right there!"

Jacques cut the van across a lane of honking traffic into the tight Roisin Boulevard offramp, a nervous chitter in his throat as he passed the yellow MAX 30 KPH sign, feeling the van lurch beneath him as he pumped the breaks and brought it tensely into line. "I see it; I see it."

"Sure you do. Was your head this deep in the clouds back in the Worm campaign?" Andre shook his head snidely, crooking his elbow out the open window to catch the breeze in his long sleeve and his loose brown hair. Jacques glanced, then looked again as smooth and dreamlike, the hedgehog's head drifted into sight from behind the ferret's. Blue quills, a mad grin totally unstressed as he . . . ran? Alongside the car? Andre shook his head, smiling. "You ought to be dead by now, you oblivious son of a bitch."

White glovefingers interlaced in Andre's hair and slammed his temple against the doorframe. Jacques pulled his sidearm and felt the tire treads taking leave of the asphalt and without thinking he dropped the gun into the footwell and wrestled some centripetal force into the wheels. The hedgehog clambered in the window viscous and liquid, plopping onto Andre's lap in a ball of spikes.

Jacques kept his eyes taut on the street, hands at ten and two. "Don't hurt me."

"Whassat?" the hog asked. He jerked himself up with a sound of ripping fabric, leaving a lonely quill in Andre's thigh.

Jacques flinched, slowly rolling the van to a STOP at the intersection with Roisin. "Just . . ." He pressed his cheek to the wheel as his fingers groped by the brake pedal for his gun. The hog didn't kick him very hard, just sort of lifted him back against the wall with a quick press from the sole of his sneaker. The squirrel laughed, terrified. "You can't blame m-me for trying." It became a question. "Can you?"

The hog squinted, uncertain. "I dunno." What kind of question was that? He didn't know how to answer it. But an impulse came to him and he followed it, mashing the hopeful face into the wheel with a satisfying little honk! Sonic took the van to the shoulder by a vacant, tree strewn lot and got the guards out of the—

"Sonic," Sally goggled as he tumbled the guards out of the passenger door into the weeds. The ferret had an eye open, but they were both nowhere close to waking up.

He dusted his gloves, winked. "Ready to do it to it, Sal?" Just a little break and enter and steal evidence of a secret vivisection project that could bring down the government.

She raised her eyes and shook her head, smiling. "Shame on you,Sonic Hedgehog," she chided, brushing her hair out of her eyes as she knelt to undress one of the guards.

She and Ant switched clothes and got out the raccoon's ID cards and stuff while Sonic jerked open the back of the van and hopped in. The coon chick called it a bodybag, but it was more of a carton, hollow at a knock, styrofoamy to the touch. Army make, she'd said. Sonic smiled at the thought that there was fast food inside rather than a sleeping person for the robot experiments.

Sally and Ant came up. Ant had put on a pair of fake tiny glasses, the ones with little circle lenses, and he looked more like himself than ever. And Sally—

"You look good in uniform," Sonic purred as she clambered into the van with him. "Hey," he said, realizing. She glanced at him, snout bent quizzically. We're in a van, he mouthed. He leaned against the wall, and the chassis rocked beneath them.

Sally opened her mouth all sassy and her eyes sharp and sparkling oh you filthy BEAST and Sonic leapt over the bodybag and they did it right there in front of Antoine's hanging open mouth, to hell with all her "I just can't risk it for the next few months not until we're done with the blah blah blah I'm a cold bitch who doesn't know what's good for me" stuff, had each other right there with the doors open—

Actually he leaned back against the wall, eyes closed, somehow shutting off his brain's access to his limbs and letting the sensations of burn through him. Torture. Gods in hell, he muttered, brushing his lips silently together. He had wanted things before; some days he wanted everything he saw or scented, butshe was becoming . . . . worse, different. How could all the want stay inside him? Fuck, he would burst.

"Well, at least we've done one good thing. And before we even make it inside the lab," Sally said, taking one of the guard's codekeys and sliding it into the bodybag's security lock with a beep. "Wake up, fellah, it's your lucky day."

The smell hit all of them hard: artificial, sickly-sweet, and underneath it that faint shit-scent. Antoine's sleeve went to his nose with a weak, "oh, mon dieux!"

Sonic wrinkled his snout, quills low, and scratched at his chin in confusion. "Coon chick said the test subjects were supposed to be alive, right?"

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 2\*: Tolsalvey, 2 Floreal 3230

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**Tolsalvey, Robotropolis, 2 Floreal 3225**

Molly Lotor was hanging from a silver grab-rail on the train, eyes closed. Her mind was two miles behind in her apartment, sleeping. She swung against someone's furred backside, then someone against hers. Mobians packed into the traincar as though on meathooks.

The raccoon's black-rimmed ears rose at the minute, fuzzy beats of the Persona non Grata theme, and she blinked uneagerly, feeling for her cellphone in her hip pocket and wondering how she managed to wedge it in there in the first place. The train was rumbling past the deep foundations of the new Tolsalvey Swatbot plant. The workers looked haunted in hardhats that were toys compared to the flak helmets of the Army troops, lounging simultaneously nervous and bored in their street-level guardposts on the perimeter, scanning the streets for the first smoke of a communist or an Acorn-crazy or some other jobless sucker about to try to send a gas-oil cocktail over the ribbed brown safety wall. She dug her phone from her pocket and glanced at the message.

FROM: POSNIAK, T.B.

RE: GP

No body text. GP: the Ghettoplex, and her heart arteries clenched hard around their cholesterol deposits. Her undergrads were going sit in front of an empty whiteboard and wonder where TA Lotor was. She wasn't sure precisely why yet. But she could guess.

She got off at Militia and caught a northbound train from the other platform. The Ghettoplex was a patched up prewar grindhouse on the edge of Port Orange, a few blocks north of her apartment. Fourth-run films on two screens, announced with whatever letters were left for the marquee. ISO had given its nickname a double-ironic twist four months ago when it quarantined the worst of Port Orange with guards and razorwire: the theater was outside the wire, but its customers locked within.

Molly was astounded to find it open at ten on a Moonday morning, but she eventually figured out that the surly adolescent vole holding the bulletproof box office like a foxhole was the only guy minding the store. Next up was Sly Cooper, which at least had hunk Jack Foley in the lead. And Karen Sisco was supposed to be . . . well, surprisingly not bad as Carmelita Fox.

The Ghettoplex had pre-show trivia, but it used slides rather than digital projection. Clikclatch. BEFORE they were STARS: Before he was a star, BUBSY BOBCAT was . . . .

The raccoon raised her right hand and twined her index and middle fingers. ". . . . at the end of his rope, turning five tricks a day in a public bathroom?"

Clicklatch. A waiter!

Her tongue protruded at the screen, curling downwards.

"Someday you'll be right."

T. Baxter Posniak's voice was always disembodied, from some dark place behind her. It was surprisingly easy to forget the slight human from which the mild tenor emerged.

"Oh, I'm right today," Molly replied, levering her shoes off her ankles with her toes. "And it's happening today, isn't it? Somehow you and Kolensky know they're going to attack today."

The human kept silent long enough to let her know he was considering whether to answer at all. Then, "Yes." Baxter always told Molly the truth. This was probably some sort of professional trick: Establish Trust in capital letters, meet her alone, don't tell lies. He even said he wasn't working for the Mobian government directly—he was on loan from democratic Lachels, one of the postwar overlander splinter-states to the north (they very one she'd been sent to Ironlock for trying to escape to, in fact), under some treaty. She didn't care. If it was supposed to make her feel better, it did. She needed it, working for Captain Snively Kolensky. The shrimpy bald bastard was always yelling at her, at everyone. You don't need to know anything, Molly. Just do what you're told. Like she was some kind of robot.

The good cop/bad cop, Molly guessed, tossing oversalted popcorn into her jaws.

Or maybe she really needed both of them, the nice human and the killer human. The side she was working for wasn't the only one with killers. "Why didn't you send in the extraction team, last week?" she asked. For a year she had fed Kolensky's information only to old Myron—but not old Myron, with his bitter drinking and unearned sense of superiority over everyone he saw. He was uncanny with his wakeful eyes, always dressed like some sodkicker in flannel shirts and meshback caps, calling himself 'Cat.' A month ago she first met the chainsmoking coyote with the aristocratic accent, trying to hide his identity between long-sleeved red button shirts, white gloves and a pair of wide sunglasses. She was beginning to wonder how big a risk to Robotnik any of these people could be. Then last week, munching chicken strips in the latest bugged restaurant, sitting on a manila folder of fake tech specs, Molly heard the electronic chime from the opening door, looked up and saw the serial killer. "I thought they knew. I thought the hedgehog was going to cut my heart out."

Baxter sighed, faintly echoing her tension. "There was a lot of screaming in the ops room. Kolensky said the risk for you was worse if the hog suddenly found himself being shot at. I wish I hadn't told you anything about him. We've only linked two bodies to him, anyway, and it didn't do you any good beyond scaring you to death."

" . . . You're still worried about him, aren't you? That's why I can't go to work. You're worried that he's going to get away from your ambush and come looking for me."

That pause again, calculating whether Molly should have the information. ". . . There's Kolensky, too." She smiled; the human sounded almost as miserable as her whenever he apologized for the Mobian government's treatment. "I want you to go somewhere for most of the day. Not here, not anywhere I'll know about. Just to sit tight until the situation stabilizes and you're safe."

"How long will that be? Should I get a hotel room?"

"No, that's no good. Snively's got a watch out on your cashcard. Even then, you'd still have to give your name. If you know some kind of below-board hotel that would work. I'll call you tonight, when I get off the plane."

"You're leaving?" Molly turned her snout over her chairback and Baxter squeezed his mouth in his hands, squishing his face open like a tomato. Stop it! Stop telling her things! The raccoon's eyes glowed soft gold in the dusty light of the projector. ". . . . You're going back to—back home?"

Baxter knew what he had to do now, because he'd seen Kolensky do it often enough. Molly, shut up. You know I have your best interests at heart. Now do what you're told and wait for my call.

"I'm going to Terscala," he heard himself tell the gold eyes. "There might be a trip north over the border, but I doubt it."

By this point Baxter felt a flushed, nauseous humiliation at very thought of Molly Lotor. He didn't care that he was trained as one of Lachels Foreign Affairs Department's analysts, rather than one of the spymongers in its Operations Division, or if his behavior was so classified it would never see the light of a windowless room: his failure as the manager of a double-agent was objectively humiliating. First thing after Baxter retrieved Renee and Molly from Ironlock, Kolensky had taken Molly to a downtown hospital for a debrief and a mononucleosis cover story, Lila Spitz and Renee had wired the raccoon's apartment for visual and sound, and Baxter had dived into the stacks at National University's humanities library, researching the psychology of spies and double agents. Regulate their access to information, dominate their perceptions, make yourself their only hope for security—security! Currently dueling with "power" for the right to be considered the most basic concept in the international relations theory Baxter had mined for seven solid years at Independence University! Simple! Just make the prisoner—

Well of course there wasn't a big spycraft wing of the stacks; the books were on prison administration, snitches and canaries, but it wasn't his fault, damn it, that the first he'd seen of her she was in Robotnik's national security prison getting shocked in the ass with a bag on her head! It wasn't his job to keep these hopeless fucking furballs from herding each other into cages like screaming fucking animals! His role in this operation was just to manipulate Lotor's interests so that she did what Mobius—and Lachels—wanted. That was his expertise, on the level of governments and corporations, and failing again and again with Lotor cut at everything he liked about himself. He wished he could get out of this dump with the sugar-soaked floor clinging to his soles like something alive, his nose filled with rancid scent of fake butter mixed with the fainter, too-thick smell of the female's fur.

Why didn't he leave? He should leave right now.

Clicklatch. Rearrange the letters. High-flying pilot fights evil for money: FAXROST.

Baxter had no idea; he didn't watch movies. Molly was slumped low in the seat before him, ears laid sadly back along her scalp, the white-on-black stripes on their rims plainly visible in the netherworld light of the projector.

"I will call you this afternoon, okay?" Baxter said slowly. "I will call you as soon as I am done meeting with the accounta—the people." Gods fucking above. "This evening."

"Thanks."

"It's no problem."

The raccoon remained motionless. "Before you go," Molly said, "is she for real?"

The sideways effort needed to reach the new topic jerked Baxter out of his funk with a dour little laugh. Because he was Molly's handler, Kolensky let Baxter see the basic outline of the fraud behind Operation Terminator, and the fake robot monster at the middle of it. It was a fitting subject for their surroundings. Amanda: half-skunk, half-machine, all terror. "You know more about the technical background for the con than I do. But the key thing to an economist is that Robotnik doesn't need a cyborg supersoldier. He's got plenty of normal soldiers; they come with a much lower R&D cost."

"Not the cyborg. The squirrel. I meant—" Baxter heard Molly swallow with effort. "What they say about her. In the Port. Is it true."

Baxter considered Molly's sentiments somewhat . . . childish. Indeed, like many young Lachels, he felt that representative democracy and market capitalism went down best with a generous splash of hatred for kings and queens. But Molly had gotten little from life, and she had nothing, almost nothing left. Her own parents had been loyalists, dead in the coup, fighting on the street for the royal family. When she calculated whether she could still give something to the squirrel . . . .

"No, Molly. No. Absolutely not." He rubbed his eyes. "There's lots of evidence to the contrary. The real heir to the throne would have surfaced immediately after the coup, when there was still a massive nationwide revolt ready to rally around her. And you know better than I do this isn't the first Sarah Acorn or Elizabeth Acorn to surface—hell, Molly, I'm pretty sure you guys had a Maximilian Acorn robbing banks a while ago. Fool me twice shame on me. And that tells you everything you need to know about her, Molly; she's not only not royalty, she's a con artist. She's one of these tinhorn forest-tyrants that they tried to clear out with Operation Brushfire, just lucky enough to have the right ethnic mix. Giving her control of the country would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to Mobius. See?"

Molly didn't move. Didn't speak.

Clicklatch. Join the Mechanized Army!

"Molly, it doesn't matter who the squirrel is. The Port and enough of the opposition has made up its mind. Either Robotnik takes her down now or there's a civil war. More suffering, more death, more everything, worse than the last ten years."

"Oh," Molly said quietly.

Baxter felt filthy. Fucking furball bitch.

"I'll wait for your call," she said.

A plastic bag landed on the desk before him. Inside it was a stapled, thick brown paper bag, tightly folded. Inside that was a heavy black plastic container with a translucent lid. Inside that was a thick-cut terrapod steak and potatoes au gratin. "Why Josh," Michelle asked, a bit more country than usual, Jawsh. "You graduating from chicken?"

"Chicken will always be my first love," the bear smiled.

The possum stepped out of the hall and leaned against the doorframe. "Oh, really? How was home?" she asked, and her mouth twisted into a smirk. "What's her name again?"

Things had started looking up for the Joshua Dursine ever since Ambassador Amberson had given a few words to internal HR at the Lachels Embassy. For one thing, Michelle was in his office—His! Office! In the bad old days whatever Mobian aristocrat had leased the embassy grounds had probably considered it a closet, but it was a testimony to their opulence that a brown bear still had enough room to worm around the end of a desk and plop behind a keyboard. And his lunch allowance had changed from Corner Bakery to Terscala Steakhouse over on Gallows Court. And his unpaid vacation time . . . .

But if it was just his personal welfare at stake, he would still have broken his term of service months ago, resume or no. Even over a long-distance phone call he could tell Kima was nervous, waiting alone for him back in Winstone, Lachels. Her advisor at Independence was considering a move to the growing theoretical physics department at Autechre College, and she felt like the evaluation committee had a pistol at her head. When he flew back over the border for a week, her arms were hungry for him. She needed warmth and weight. When the seven days were up she followed him to the airport, even with as little time as she had, stood at the gate lounge with her nose fogging the cool windowglass.

No, Josh had to be here so he could keep one of his best friends from college, Baxter Posniak, from selling the entire continent down the river to Robotnik and his totalitarian cronies. He was sitting on top of a ring of double agents that ran well into the Foreign Affairs Department itself.

The phone beeped. Baxter. Last time Josh had met Second Assistant Director of Intelligence for the Mobian March Frank Pulaski in the Acorn Park he'd asked Frank to see if he could find out why Baxter kept asking about international money transfers. Pulaski had shrugged and said he'd look into it; in the mean time, keep waiting for instructions and keep Baxter in his good graces. Provide state secrets, so long as they're only Classified and not capital-S Secret. String him along until Lachels counterintelligence was ready to break this whole ring, right to the top. Josh put his hand on the receiver and lifted a finger to the possum. "Michelle—"

"Go right ahead, boss," bahwss, she sighed jokingly, kind of. "But y'all c'mon visit us dawn awn the cube farm when ya get a minnit, awright?"

Josh nodded, grinding his teeth, forcing his face into a smile. Locked into place, the voice will follow. He lifted the handset between three thick fingers and pressed it to his ear. "Hello?"

"No, I don't want a flexticket; I want a one-way to—Josh, are you there?"

"Yeah." What is your desire, O Master?

"Lady, hold on a minute. Josh, I'm going to have to make this quick and blunt. You knew a lady back in college named Deanna Kozinksi. Economics, looking into work with the big accounting houses; she was the one always wandering around Scheck Hall last semester of '18 with the highball glass—"

"Hard to forget. Mind the GAAP, right?"

"Momma told me bears had good memory; I had to look that up. She's balancing books in Kogen Baird's Terscala office. I'm going out there tomorrow and I was hoping to have a word with her."

Gods above, this was ridiculous. "Think you might be embezzling from yourself?"

"Think she might remember you better than me."

Josh heard the plastic of the handset groan under his fingers. He knew Pulaski would probably tell him to shut the hell up and swallow his pride, but he just had to say it: "You want me to call on behalf of the embassy."

A tinny, infuriating sigh. "Josh, I would never ask you to endorse me on behalf of the government of Lachels, okay? I wouldn't want you to. Okay?"

"Gotcha."

"Good. Just call her before five—"

The bear pivoted the receiver away from his snorting snout. Just make sure you call him from the office.

Pulaski wasn't here, so he had to make the decision on this by himself: would helping Baxter and Dr. Julian Robotnik hurt or help Lachels in the long run? An accounting firm in Terscala probably meant some sort of shenanigans with gas and oil, maybe rare metals. Ellingson Mineral or HCT Technologies. Josh doubted that Premier Stuntaz would be thrilled to learn a Mobian double agent was running wild in the books of companies with that much market cap . . . .

But if you asked Josh, there wasn't a lot to be said for companies with a bigger record of sentient rights violations than most small nations. "Sure, Bax. I think I can smooth things over."

"Thanks. Never call me Bax ever again. Wait—hold on, Josh—what do you mean my booking doesn't match my ID, it's—oh, gods, it's my middle name. Just put TB. TB, like the disease—"

Josh hung up.

The grayish human immigrant squinted against the white noon sky, grimacing uncertainly at the manifest on the clipboard. "Where the hell is Jacques?" the woman asked, not looking up.

Sally's knuckles cracked tight around the unpadded steering wheel; she felt her toes itching nervously over the accelerator. Then she said: "Who?"

The guard shook her head, yawning at the badge clipped to Sally's vest pocket, the ones that matched the ones the guards had worn, the ones they'd finally gotten last week through Cat's raccoon contact. The woman leaned close enough that Sally could see she was named SPITZ, LILA. Did Lila miss Jacques enough that she was going to do some detailed checking on FALSTAFF, SARAH and LAZSLO, ANTOINE? Riding shotgun beside her Antoine stared blankly at the dash, cigarette shivering in his lips, ashen tip jerking like the mercury of a skittish thermometer . . . .

"Alright." The human woman waved them into the loading dock. "Go on."

Sally glanced into the shivering side-mirror and saw the woman mouthing into a bulky gray walky-talky and she thought go, drive hard across that parking lot and go through that cyclone fence and don't let off the accelerator until you've driven a path five klicks into the forest—

Breathe. Deep breath, filled with cigarette smoke—deep breath. She was closer to the roboticizer than ever. Surveillance of the north wing of Gaumont Laboratories' Tolsalvey facility revealed little activity compared to the rest of the plant. Cat's ex—Molly, that was her name, said the place was labeled Facilities Services on all of the maps, despite the fact that there was already a Maintenance Department elsewhere. Other documents she'd snagged from the wing in some rather dangerous recon matched designs that Bunnie remembered—the tank, in particular, the healing tank in which subjects were infiltrated with nanomachines, strengthened, brains rewired. Sally needed to go in unless she was certain things would go wrong.

The person in the box had not been alive. The guard did guard things before admitting them to the loading dock. That did not constitute assurance that things were going wrong.

And even if something were going wrong, Sonic was waiting with half the Knothole arsenal inside the little styrocoffin in the back of the delivery van. Sally grinned. My hero.

Antoine and Sally wheeled Sonic onto the cement loading dock, the interlocking mechanism of the gurney leaping up to waist level as they ducked out of the sun into a small receiving room. Steel file cabinets. A steel desk with a smoking ashtray—"Kill it," she reminded Antoine—a small computer running a Gescom OS, little closed-circuit cameras of the van parked outside. She asked "ready?" as she pressed at the latch of the white swinging door with its many warnings (Danger Confined Space, No Smoking – Halon Fire System, No Pacemakers, Classified Material Clearance), but she didn't wait for an answer.

Sally took point, so she steered. Narrow drywall corridors that pressed close enough to make a starved whippet feel fat, following barely explicable plastic signs that made it feel like some test maze designed by alien scientists—luckily, one that Sally had memorized in advance with the plans they'd lifted from the Public Works department. Closed-circuit flat-television cameras watched them conspicuously from high corners, daring them to look back, start behaving doubtfully—

Thumps behind her as Antoine knocked on the coffin with his knuckles. "Twan!" she barked, trying not to yell. A hollow thump in reply, from inside the coffin. Antoine coughed. "Sorry, mon Princesse. I worried that he might have been without enough air—"

"Don't." Sonic is fine in there, we've been over and over and over this plan and it's going to work because he is an invincible goddamn demon but let's please not let him out in front of the cameras unless we're about to die, okay? Blue quills weren't exactly common; he was about as inconspicuous on a mission as Robotnik himself at this point.

Left. Four meters. Right. So quiet. Almost there—there, two meters away. White doors, solid steel, spotless. "NO ACCESS, READ NATIONAL REGULATION 43.103." Sally laid her hand on the latch, nothing in the air but her breathing and the minutest click of metal against metal as her fingers began to turn it.

Antoine gave a hacking, deep cough. Instinctively, Sally sniffed the air: smoke.

"Twan!" Sally hissed. He was covering his snout with his rumpled sleeve, bent over the styrocoffin, his cigarette still burning in his right hand. Sally's eyes shot to the ceiling. "Kill it!" Smoking in places with as many state of the art electronics as Gaumont Labs didn't hair-trigger sprinklers. It hair-triggered vents that flooded rooms with oxygen-eating halon gas, stuff that would kill you or at the very least flood the facility with solicitous EMTs and, behind them, cops—

She froze.

A sprinklerhead.

Definitely a water-based sprinklerhead. Stainless steel pipe, the sprocket-looking distributer to give a good spray. Ready to ruin millions of dollars of sophisticated equipment.

If this was in fact an advanced cybernetics lab, as opposed to a carefully-constructed simulation of one.

Next to the sprinklerhead one of those many, many CCTV cameras stared back at her, mute, unblinking.

Sally turned, about to push the coffin back down the hall, and stopped. They've been watching you since you came in. They know where you are and where you'll go to get back to the truck.

"Highness?" Antoine hissed.

She moved quickly, taking the datacard lock for the styrocoffin from her pocket and spearing it into the port. The light turned green, releasing Sonic—

No, it didn't. The tiny little red LED was still lit.

Sally pulled out the card and replaced it. Pulled it out, replaced it. Red.

She dug her fingers into the millimeter between lid and base and pulled, giving a little whine, but not at the pain.

What a great disguise, she thought. It really did look as though she and Antoine had, in fact, just delivered a fresh, strong robot-slave-to-be into Snively's waiting hands right on schedule.

"On me!" Sally barked. She dragged the gurney back into the hallway and made a different turn, away from the loading dock, deeper into the building. Somewhere a door clicked opened. She glanced behind her at the hollow, round sound of a pneumatic gas gun, saw the hissing canisters tumble into the hallway behind Antoine, unspooling their lullaby of white nerve agent into the fogging air. "Go! Go!" She grabbed the gurney with one hand and sprinted. They'd be all over. There wasn't even any actual science to get in their way. This entire wing of the facility was nothing but a baited deathtrap—

She froze. A moment of moral terror that quickly passed.

Right at the t-junction, right and left and they were almost in the main facility, the one that was an actual lab. Let's see if Robotnik's troops are prepared to handle a stampede of terrified scientists.

Left at the corner. Two doors saying EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY—ALARM WILL SOUND, DOORS OPEN IN TEN SECONDS. To guard them, two creatures with green ISO uniforms, furry arms and elephantine black gas masks trailing accordion hose to canisters on their belts lifted guns with muzzles the size of fists. "Frrz! Yrr undr arrrst!"

Sally dropped the gurney and leapt. One gun popped with a smoky FOOF and a sizzling canister bounced down the hallway as her right bootsole flattened the guard's mask, a high crack and a deeperwet crack. She leapt back to land squarely on her left foot and get knocked off it by a jab from the other guard's gas gun in the hard, stunned flesh between her breasts and neck. With a terrified yell Antoine drove the gurney into the guard's side, pinning him with a muffled squawk against the unyielding doors.

He stayed there, pinned, as Sally struggled to her feet. No, no—

The guard fired a gas canister directly into the ground. It hopped, flipped, then released, spinning hypnotically as its trail spiraled out around it.

Sally gave the guard a hard elbow to the neck. Then she dropped to her knees, into the growing white cloud, trying not to breathe. Her fingers found the spitting thing and sidearmed it down the hall. Then she stumbled to a run and slammed her shoulder into the locked door so hard she was for a moment convinced she'd broken it. To hell with it. She pushed down on the doorlatch, willing herself to stay awake, trying to focus on the earsplitting din that had started up. What was, seven, six—the gurney rocked, Sonic kicking, pounding in the coffin. Six. Seven. Eight—no, counting down—Sally realized she was breathing, coughed—

The doors gave and birthed them into crisper air. A wider, different hallway, up its length a rat and a lion in white coats stared briefly as they hurried to the exit, fire lights strobing white. "Come on," Sally gasped, getting to her feet. She grabbed her cell and hit the preset button that messaged "911" to Rotor. "Come on, we've got to—"

The alarms stopped dead with the click and hum of an audio feed being plugged in. "Sally?"

Her eyes shot wide at the voice. A camera watched the door to the ambush wing. It stared down, lens rotating as it pulled focus on the squirrel.

Amanda.

"There you are, Sally!" The voice was filled with relief, joy. "I've missed you. So much."

"Highness?" Antoine coughed. Sally was paralyzed. Rock hard, yet shivering, glistening eyes fixed on the camera lens. He'd never seen her so terrified.

"Just relax and stay still," Amanda said. "You'll finally be programmed, Sally. Very soon."

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 3\*: Security District, 2 Floreal 3230

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**Security District, Robotropolis, 2 Floreal 3225**

"Stay right where you are, Sally. I'll be there before you know it!"

"Do you hear that?" Snively asked.

"Hear what?" Hawkins asked.

Instantly the steady pant of Amanda's breathing was submerged in a growing hiss of white noise. The view from the camera by her eye became wintry with snow. Snively frowned, muted his laptop, and turned the armchair around to face the Dalmatian. "The simple joy of a well-designed machine performing its function."

The dog's eyes vibrated with concentration beneath the black lid and the white, but he worked a smile into his lips. "I can't hear a thing."

"It must give you such a headache to misuse your transmitter that way." Snively stood, rolling his neck, and walked to the side of the repair-refitting table where the dog was securely clamped by mountings built into the armor of his ankles, shoulder, spine. There was no need to bag his hands to keep him from mischief; the small chemical reserves in his armpits had been emptied. But the machinery Snively had implanted in his brain could not be easily deactivated. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like if you cooperated, Hawkins? What a gift it would be, to speak to your brothers and sisters at any distance?"

Hawkins sniffed disdainfully, opening his black eye. "Didn't ask for it."

"Aren't the greatest gifts the ones we don't ask for? Being born. Parents, a family, a country." Snively walked to the little OR tray. There were no scalpels, only a bucket containing a bottle of champagne, a pick still buried in the crushed ice around it. I'm talking about people, things people experience, Snively realized. I've given up on him. He'll never be a machine. "This should have been such a joyous occasion. A new brother and sister for you, as soon as Amanda brings them to safety—"

"Oh, shut up. Sweet Trix'ana," the dog slurred, "can't you go one godsdamned second without give me some kind of crazy babytalk? I remember—"

And so and so forth. Snively hissed, taking the icepick and nervously chip, chipping away beneath the bottle. After sifting through all the friendless scum penned in the various forest camps after the army went in to clean up the squatters, it was Hawkins Familaro that had risen to the very top: unnervingly good aim, calm under fire. The only thing lacking was the will, the shaping desire, the command. And the treatments would provide that.

Wouldn't they? Or could they? The disadvantage of using drifters and captured rebels for the project was that there was no opportunity to obtain a psychological history. Had Snively created Amanda, or merely found a loyal, conscientious skunk? Was the little spark of rebellion that had ruined Bunnie a careless, early mistake on his part? Or had it been there all along?

Any hypothesis was evolving. But Snively wasn't stupid. He hadn't screwed up this badly with the dog. This wasn't his fault.

He felt his jaw tighten, slowly. This wasn't his fault.

Snively walked to the dog's bedside. Millions of sovereigns in him, those precious, precious sovereigns. "Do you know what's made you so unhappy, Hawkins?" He felt beneath the table.

The dog gave a weak little laugh, muscles tugging against the anchors in his armor. "You?"

His fingers found it: the little hole in the table. Lining up perfectly with the other little hole in the skull armor, thanks to the precise placement of the anchors.

Just like on a computer case. Every machine needs a manual reset button.

Snively watched the dog's eyes as he slammed the icepick through the skull and into the medulla. "Because," cranking his wrist, those eyes wide with the sudden pain, growing confusion, "you're the dregs, Hawkins. Because you're a disobedient, unmotivated, worthless son of a bitch. You don't deserve what I can give you."

With the alterations to the dog's excretory systems there was no sudden reek of release, just the slow clouding of his eyes. Unfortunately, Snively could not enjoy the full show. More important matters were afoot. Technically, Lieutenant Spitz had operational command, it was dear old Lila's job to capture the rebels, and her plan seemed as proper and solid as her actions usually were. But of course it was doomed to failure, wasn't it? It was inevitable that Amanda would be required to save the day. The project would be redeemed in the eyes of his uncle. He would have the money that he needed so very, very badly to continue. And Amanda would reacquire the half-finished squirrel-bot that had left such a painful hole in her psyche. As inevitable as the transition from winter to spring.

While Hawkins' heart continued to beat, Snively reopened his laptop.

"We keep moving forward. The longer we stay, the sooner we die."

Antoine panted, running behind the gurney. The worthless fake security pass felt strange and heavy, swinging back and forth below his neck on its lampcord line. His hands felt empty without a long-range rifle in them. His body was naked without a sniper's den. But he couldn't think about that, couldn't let it take him.

They were running through wide beige corridors now, rows of fluorescent lights swiping by like dashes on a highway. Carefully lettered signs directed them towards various locations, including EXIT. Thirty seconds from the outdoors, assuming they met no resistance.

He couldn't think about what could happen. Her Highness needed him. He was her only aid.

"Don't let her touch you," Her Highness panted, leaning forward to pull the weight of Sonic, his personal prison rocking on wheeled bed. She pulled them around a corner and Antoine could see the blue light of the midday sun through a distant set of glass doors. "If she touches you, you're lost—"

She leapt to the center of the hall less than two meters before them, low on her crooked legs and sharp, spread fingers. The smile of a spider, white in gleaming black. A horrible kindness in her eyes.

"PUSH!" Sally screamed, leaping for the wall. Antoine closed his eyes and rushed the gurney forward, hearing close by a crunch of glass, feeling the cold handles of the gurney jerk as its front wheels collided with the dodging robot's leg, spinning her to her rump. The skunk was too heavy for her size, as though she were a creature not of flesh but of iron—

"KEEP GOING!" Sally roared. She ripped the fire extinguisher from its cherry box (some disconnected part of her mind laughing—Case of Emergency!), and spun and froze. Amanda gracefully flipped to her toes, curling her fingers sharp but soft, eyes so eager—

They were her least mechanical part and Sally sprayed ice at them. Amanda would throw her forearm before her face, and she did, so she couldn't see Sally swing the freezing tank into the side of her head with a solid thunk. Dropping the tank, Sally sprinted past the skunk and—tripped, stumbled over a grasping hand, but she was still up and going, eyes on Antoine looking back at her godsdammit, run, pumping her arms—

Pain, sharp and hot, in her shoulder. As the hall spun Sally realized it was from the yank on her wrist, still held tight, and then she was looking into Amanda's eyes. No. She seized the skunk's thick head by her temples and the skunk touched a finger to her throat. "Hush." The gentlest little prick, soft as a breeze, and Sally felt her grip on Amanda go limp. "Forget his lies."

The robot disappeared as though erased by a mortar shell. If Antoine were thinking he would have stopped pushing the gurney when it struck her, because she was heavy, and she would of course steal his momentum and stop his forward motion. But he wasn't thinking, and the gurney's rear legs crumpled as the bot skidded along the tile beneath. The coyote kept pushing and the wreck upended on the creature, Sonic's prison landing squarely upright on the creatures thick skull before tumbling off. "You will unhand her!" Antoine barked. If he were thinking he would have desperately sought to drag Her Highness to safety, because of course there was no way that one such as himself could defeat the monster. But he wasn't thinking. The fire extinguisher was by his feet; he grabbed the cylinder and lifted it up over his head. With the instinct of the deeply practiced, Amanda whipped her pistol from her hipholster and snapshot Antoine through the center of his left kneecap.

At first there was no pain; there was just a sudden absence of enough to hold him upright. He collapsed with a shivering crackcrunch, slamming the CO2 tank's backswing into the ground. He gave a feral growl through his teeth as he clawed himself about on top of it, looked down at his leg and saw it bent in a lateral plane orthogonal to that in which a knee was supposed to move.

He thought about that a moment. Then he thought about it a moment more, staring, while the monster scraped herself out from under the gurney, breathing like a furnace. ". . . duh, dededuhdeduh dieux—"

Another. Another to steal her bots from her. Amanda lifted her pistol, studied and put a round through the coyote's right arm above the elbow, inflicting massive damage on the triceps. Then the skunk lowered her pistol toward the homogenous mess of the coyote's right knee and shot at the thickest strand of solid matter in it. She waited, ears folded against the sound of his agony, until the flow of the blood had become clear and she could pick see clearly what remained. Then she shot the next-thickest strand.

She turned her mind to better things. Her Sally was on her haunches and toes, the collar of the stolen guard's uniform tight against her neck as she tried to press herself upright against the wall. The brown eyelids reluctantly kissed her cheeks, then shot open, and her eyes snapped into place on Amanda, squatting before her. "Nnnnnnh," her voice pinched.

Amanda scratched gently at the short fur of the squirrels chin, teasing her whiskers. "Time for a full dose, sleepyhead." She slid her arm around the squirrel's head. "Don't listen to them," she said, seeing the tears in her bot's cheekfur. "You don't need to worry about a thing."

She cradled Sally tight against her belly as the impact and sound hit her. There was a bullet pancaked in the armor of her upper right arm. If it hadn't struck her it would have taken Sally's head.

Pressing her sleepyhead roughly down into the tiles, she turned. Another gunshot, and another. With each another hole appeared in the person transport pod.

She ground her teeth. "Hedgehog." And she was under orders to capture him alive. She couldn't kill him.

But she'd been thinking about how to fight him.

They had a backup extraction plan, true. The plan was to take a pair of stolen, rusted-out vans up to the north entrance, pick Sally and everyone up and barrel on out of there. Not very sophisticated, but if all their careful planning fell through there really wasn't a better way to do it.

But when their binoc posts on the house's roof spotted a good five vehicles, three of them marked RPD cruisers, pulling into the Tolsalvey Industrial parking lot and clustering around the entrances and exits, there were plans and there were plans. From the get go things went wrong, starting with Tails darting through the closing rear doors, yanking Sonic's backpack and his own brush clear just as one of Ari Koren's men swung it home. "Chief! Fox in the back!"

The badger in the driver's seat froze, thick fingers pressed around the key in the ignition lock, and turned to Rotor, sitting shotgun. "I'm not going anywhere if—"

"You want to try telling the kid to do something?" Rotor barked. "Haul ass!"

Koren's badger waited a moment before his nervousness overcame his stubbornness and got them moving. The Standard Army troops were each used to their own commanders: Rotor was in the lead vehicle with troops on loan from the gruff, black-furred ram Ari Koren, head of all the Standard Army splinter branches, reluctantly following the rest of the rebels along on Sally's crusade; in the rear vehicle were Cat Catalano, Gunther Maersk, and a bunch of lightly-furred rodents under the command of Kevin Logan, a skunk who'd been sold on Sally, and lightly in her debt, ever since she, Sonic and Antoine had saved him from a government assault about a year and a half ago. Koren's men got to go in the front car because he outranked Logan and because they looked mean as hell. They glowered in the back, sitting on the hot steel lockers that hid their weapons. Rotor wished he were back there instead of riding in the death seat, but he felt good knowing they were behind him.

It was not far to the North end of the industrial park, just two minutes. But in the two minutes the cops had parked a pair of prowlers crossways across the asphalt entryway. The cops had gotten out and barricaded themselves behind. At least eight, sidearms and Jenks submachineguns aimed obliquely at the ground. One came forth as the badger pulled up, slowing. Now, Rotor thought. Punch it now.

The badger's skull bobbed as he cranked down the window. A rabbit doffed his crimson policeman's hat and leaned on the door. "You can't come in right now, Sir. Situation."

"Oh," said the badger.

Rotor waited. His hand played nervously along his knee, but he didn't want to reach down for his shotgun, not with the cop staring at him. So he waited for the badger to swerve right over the concrete embankment and around the copmobiles. That was the best way in now, right?

The badger turned his eyes to Rotor. He shrugged.

"You need to get these things out of here, now," the rabbit cop added, stepping a worrisomely safe distance from the window. His right hand still held his pistol at the ground. Tighter grip than before.

"Whatever you say, boss," the badger yawned. He pressed the clutch, reached down and wiggled the van into reverse. What? Rotor thought.

"What are you doing!" cried a shrill, angry voice. "We can't just leave them!"

The badger's fingers tightened on the wheel. "Kid, shut up."

"You have a kid in there?" The rabbit came close, pressed himself sideways against the driver's door, lifting a flashlight next to his temple to peer at the shadows in the rear. "What the hell are you delivering—"

He didn't have time to finish because a bullet bashed into the plastic at the tip of the light, though the glass bulb and mylar lens. The little bubble of compressed air in and about the bullet's hollow tip burst the cold, heavy handle around it like a thermos full of freezing water, shearing metal through the rabbit's palm and fingers. He had begun to look surprised when a second shot ripped his ear in half, erasing an inch of flesh at its middle with an invisible paff, sending the top portion flopping through the air in an awful dance.

Grinding gears as the badger worked the stick back into first, then spun the wheel and lurched onto the curb, canting the horizon, throwing the blankets off Rotor's gun in the passenger footwell—Biggs Autoloader with a big twelve-shot extension drum-mag for the occasion—and almost tossing it into Rotor's lap. Rotor twisted his face, pressed his cheek against the seat; beneath the headrest he could just see a pair of mustelids piled in a tangle of limbs with two red fox tails, writhing. For a moment he thought they were attacking the boy, but then the fiberglass body of the van was perforated with a neat line of holes where the soldiers had been sitting moments before, each appearing instantaneously with a harsh snap.

The walrus flinched, did not get shot, turned his eyes forward to see the wide glass façade of Gaumont Labs lurch downward as the van rattled up a bank of cement steps. "What was that shit back there?" Rotor asked.

"Shut up," the badger growled. A skunk in a red RPD uniform flew to one side in front of the vehicle as a gunbutt struck and spidered the windshield. The badger did something quick with his foot and the world spun, tilted, the steps pulling sideways against the rear tires as they spun out of control, the van about to roll—

Sonic drove his fists into the lid again, felt it sag, heard the sound of tiny cracks running between the bulletholes like in thin ice. The plastic bit deeper into the skin of his knuckles and the pain kept him awake despite the foggy sleep-gas he could see through the little shafts of light. Again, again, the rhythm building, the regular pull in his arms, bite in his fists, the deep huffs of his breath filling the little world. Crackkkk—push, push, the egg breaking—

Enough room for his knees and he squeezed them to his chest and kicked. The lid tore away and before it landed Sonic flipped forward, his head pressed low to show the world a ball of spikes, leaving behind a big plastic tray thick full of black guns. He landed on his toes, arms crossed across his chest; he whipped his pistols wide, then leveled them forward.

No one to grab him; his eyes darted. Black and white tile floor, signs, the main lab. No one, no, Antoine down, hurt. Sally, dazed, arms limp—

His quills pulled taut in his flesh and his head cleared. The only thing holding Sally up was a shiny black arm around her belly, a hand with its fingers tracing her chinwhiskers. Just enough of her brown eyes were showing to let her see him. Her lips pressed. "Sss. Suh. Suh. Soh—"

"Shh." The botbitch peeked her head out around the squirrel's, nosed lightly at her cheek. "Sally is mine," she said, turning her eyes to Sonic. She stepped aside to the wall, dragging Sally's boots along the tile as she went, giving him a clear path to the daylight-shining glass at the end of the hall. "But you may go."

He fired. The bullet glanced obliquely off the bot's smooth skullarmor. Sonic kept his guns ready, but the head did not peek around Sally again. There was only her chuckle, low under the echo of the shot. "You may even have the coyote," she said. Sally's lips were moving, soundlessly. Like a puppet talking, a puppet show. "But hurry, please. The police are already here. And my Sally is so eager to rest—"

Good boy, Amanda thought. She watched from the security camera on the wall behind the hedgehog as he dropped his pistols and dashed for her, hearing in her own ears the squeak of his sneakers growing louder as his quills retreated from the lens. She dropped her poor sleepyhead to the side as the hedgehog drew within one meter. An old memory

(Ropes. Lights. Scent of femalesweat, skunk and badger. Sergeant Amanda Polgato. Thick red gloves about her hands. Private Lendri is fast but she has no reach. Her jab looms; I dodge—)

not hers, from deep in her organic brain spread her feet, lowering her center of gravity, pulled her arms close in front of her body, fists below her eyes, elbows tight above her abdominal armor.

And now another memory returned to the present, a newer memory, her own, from a horrible dawn alleyway in a faraway city, the scent of blood and dust and oil: the hedgehog is so very fast, faster than her. He should not have been faster than her, but somehow he was. Many angles to his fists, his blows rained heavy and hard against her shell, the stress shivering into down her armor mounts into her endoskeleton. She was already against the wall and did not retreat, only compressed, shrinking under his blows, smaller and smaller.

Amanda felt the opening she sought and locked her fingers, stabbing her left knuckles hard into the bluefurred chest. Shock mixed with the pain in the green eyes and she locked her right fist and stood, the power in her legs driving the uppercut into his chin. He was already trying to backflip away from her and the punch ripped his toes from the floor, just a tantalizing moment in which she felt something hard begin to give beneath his soft flesh.

The hedgehog landed a little more than a meter away. Not close to beaten. But there was an unnatural set to his jaw, the start of a long bruise deepening in the thinning fur of his lower chest.

She smiled at him. He should not have been as strong as her. And he was not, not nearly.

Sonic came again, fists and knees. He worked hard at her middle, eyes darting, looking for counterpunches and hooks, leaving her forearms wet with his meat, trying to force her fists away from her soft, weak snout.

Amanda chose a precise counterpunch. Her right knuckles met Sonic's left and the unarmored ones cracked, the fingers popping loose and shearing to peek white and shining through the furless flesh and the holes in the torn glove. She dodged his other hand, sinking low onto her right foot and delivering a sliding kick with her left. She caught the hedgehog just below the knee and only her fear of following through into her Sally kept her from ripping the knee apart. He leapt backwards off his left foot and landed with a high, anguished cry, stumbling to the right before finding his balance and raising his guard. His shoulders rose and fell as his lungs fought for air.

"I am generous," Amanda said. "You may still go. You may still have your coyote." Her Sally was trying to crawl away from her, so she took a step forward, pinning the squirrelbot between her legs. As she did so, the hedgehog took a step back.

She smiled. "Do you want to be mine too?" she asked. "Or do you want to go?"

There was a hollow crunch from down the hall and no time to find a good security camera to watch from: she turned her eyes from the hog. The front doors had been shattered by the rear of a gray cargo van. The thing was abused, sagging to one corner where one of the smoking tires had suffered a blowout. Identify yourself, she ordered. The van did not answer; it was not ISO or RPD. The rear doors were kicked open; she drew her pistol from her hip and fired a series of long-range shots into darkness.

Sally tasted blood as she tried to press herself to her hands and knees. Her vision disappeared, eyes too tired, and she let it go, focusing on the unyielding plates biting into her sides like the teeth of a wild repentrap. Come, Sonic. Sonic was always so angry that no one would play the trick on Antoine . . . .

Sonic threw himself quills first at the Skunkbot's head. She dodged away—but rather stumbled over Sally as Sonic hit her. Her head struck the wall hard just above her neck, and she rebounded to land belly-down on the floor. Sonic rolled at impact, instinctively cradling his left hand and reaching his right for his pistol until he remembered that he wasn't wearing his holsters and he'd dropped his guns somewhere.

Amanda forced herself onto elbows and knees, biting down on something unyeliding that scraped enamel from aching teeth: a pair of blue quills, each stabbed through the flesh on the right of her snout. The rebel troops had crowded around the van at the entrance and were using it for cover in a firefight with RPD outside: weasels firing Poiccard 337s, a walrus stupidly trying to use a Biggs combat shotgun beyond its effective range. She quickly gave their position a GPS tag and sang her bots awake. Kill them.

A chorus of recognition codes. Yes Commander.

But there was one element of the door fight that had to be dealt with immediately: a small fox running toward Amanda with long, light strides, the recoil from his pistol spraying bullet after bullet randomly about the room. One impacted in the tile just short of her Sally's skull, spraying razorshards into her forehead, making her moan in pain. Amanda leveled her gun for a clear shot at the idiot and the coyote grabbed her arm, pulling himself onto it with a demon's fury. Why wasn't he sleeping? They were all over her, like bugs—

Enough. The butt of her gun snapped hard against the mad coyote's snout, a canine tooth popping into the air with looping a trail of red. The fox stopped short of her, gun empty, now a very fearful idiot. She threw herself forward and drove her pistolbarrel hard into his neck, knocking his light body to the ground. She landed on top of him, lifted her arm for the backswing, and bullets chattered into her side like a steady pelt of hail.

Sonic was no longer in a mood for precision gunmanship; he had quickly chosen from among the guns spilling from the coffin a ridiculous Jenks Marauder of Antoine's and pulled the longbarrelled steel monster it into his lap. It was at a little less than a meter in length the sort of gun Ant felt would keep him safe in close quarters: two alternating barrels, extended banana clips that loaded in the top to fight the kick. Something in Sonic's left hand was wrong, so he'd taken the gun in a big hug, propping the barrel on his forearm, worked the action-pull once with his teeth to load the chamber, and was now in his third second of pounding the botbitch off of Tails with a series of sixty .357 FMJ rounds. She rolled to the wall and turtled, pulling her limbs and head into a ball. Take it, bitch. He cut a steady haze of light black dust from her back, chipping closer, closer to her flesh.

Clickclickclickclick. Sonic ripped one of the hot empties from the gun and slammed a spare home in the mount, and as he lowered his head to bite the action lever he saw the botbitch contorted and glowering from a dark cave of her own armor, a pistol leveled at his face. He stopped, tasting the gritty machine oil on his tongue. He was dead. The botbitch had the drop on him, and she did not miss. She would blow his head apart before he could chamber a round.

Her black beetlefinger shivered on her trigger. "Commander is wrong," she said, voice dry. "You should die."

She disappeared into herself again, hiding from a lighter but steady rain of bullets. The kick had Tails almost on his back. He fired carefully between his legs at the bot, lips mouthing a steady count as he tried to make the clip last: four, five—

Sonic dragged a bullet into the chamber. "Tails, move Ant!" he shouted. "Sally!"

Sally grunted just as he began to unload on the bot. Short, uncontrolled bursts, pressing the bitch to the wall, giving Sally a handful of seconds to inch closer to him. "ROTOR!" Tails yelled; out of the corner of his eye Sonic saw Rote take the coyote from the struggling fox's side and lift him onto his fat shoulder; Cat waved him at the van. Sally had barely moved, still a meter from him, fingernails scratching on the cold floor. Fuck it; Sonic held the trigger until he heard a click. Then he tossed it and rolled and somehow he had Sally cradled in his arms, running to the van. Their guys weren't sure which way to shoot; some were trying to snipe over the hood at targets outside, others spraying suppressing fire around him and over him and hnggg—

In a moment he was still running but something was missing from his left shoulder and he was bent lower, Sally's weight almost pulling him down into a faceplant. He saw her eyes blink, brown and wet—

The bumper hit Sonic above the knees and he threw himself onto his side, flattening his quills. He slid until his skull slammed into something hard, squeezing Sally's soft between his chin and belly. The rest of the troops were climbing into the van; it was moving under him, the hallway was turning behind them as they pulled away. He had done it.

The air suddenly filled with the with the deep, rapid explosions of swatbot autocannon fire. He felt the van rock under him as the axles took hits. The badger at the wheel boiled in a pair of shots that pierced the door; Gunther roared in the passenger seat, reaching out one of his big bear paws to clap on the steering. Sonic saw the rocket trails of a pair of their mini- roombuster RPGs streak past the still-open doors of the van as it turned, felt the flash of heat and concussion as the second rescue van exploded, the hollow thoonks all along the wall as shreds of it bounced off them.

We're dead, Sonic thought, and then, why aren't we dead? Bots tended to think alike; all their rockets would have been fired at once.

Then he saw the bitch in the air. She was dented and pocked and hurtling at them like a meteor, legs drawn high, arms spread wide.

She must really love Sally, he thought, and he was filled with terror.

The bitch landed just in the door and the van sagged, screamed of friction as the rear chassis kicked sparks from the concrete below. "Gettout!" Sonic snarled, and slammed the heel of his right foot square onto the armor above her left knee. Behind him Tails screamed, high-pitched and furious. The bot threw her arms across her face as the fox managed to put a pistol round against her chest armor, the impacts and the balance tilting her with horrifying slowness out of the van and into space. As soon as her feet were gone Rotor and Cat reached out and slammed the doors closed.

Gunther had muscled on top of the badger and was pressing his dead foot against the accelerator, aiming them at the street. Sonic felt Sally breathing against his chest, warm and wet. She was alive. "Say something."

She shifted against his arms. He felt her fingerclaws press into his wrist. ". . . sssonic—"

Something landed on the roof, heavy, the thin fiberglass dented around it.

Rotor snarled, his tusks long enough to spike kebabs: "Oh son of a bitch!" he roared, lifting his shotgun to his shoulder and holding down the trigger. Shells tore the roof apart like paper. Her outline appeared, at first a shadow, then real and black against the wheeling sky, heavy and substantial and ready to fall on them—

She was gone. Rotor fired two more shots until the drum emptied, but there was nothing on the car. Gunther in the front seat finished muscling the badger into the passenger seat and sat down to work evading police pursuit on a pair of damaged axles.

And in the back, the Royal Army of Mobius finally let itself fall apart.

"We are in recovery," Snively said blankly.

Sobs. "Yes, Commander."

"Join your bots in the recovery vehicle and return to base for repairs." People had seen Amanda. From a distance. There were cover stories he could and would deploy. Next-gen armor. Convincing, from a distance.

"Yes, Commander."

Snively muted his microphone and sat back.

How could he make it to the end of the week?—

Right on cue, his phone. Rudi Sarkstein. Again. Before he could try to think whether it was better to let this one go with the other nineteen, he opened the connection. "I can't talk now, Rudi."

"Snively. Our friends are very worried. I have been trying and trying to call you."

"There's a very serious national security issue, Rudi." Snively's voice had the unsettling calm of someone burying unimaginable stress. "I'm afraid I can't talk right now."

"They are very impatient, Snively. They speak of taking action against you."

"I will call you back."

"Personal action. Against you. And against me." Rudi was crying the pathetic, helpless, wheezing tears of the elderly. "They think we worked together, to betray them—"

Snively broke the connection. He sighed distantly, as though this were happening to someone else. Poor Rudi, he thought.

Then he got up. He had to hurry to get the repair/refit table ready for Amanda, and that augmented dog corpse was going to be heavy as hell.

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 4\*: Terscala, 2 Floreal 3230

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**Terscala, 2 Floreal 3230**

Terscala was a city with no business being where it was. Cities in the eastern deserts should cling to the little trickles down the western face of the coastal mountains, then track the seasonal rivers, hunting for water like a repen sniffing out hood-ears in their little tunnels. And the older cities did, even though it had meant the bloody work of muscling out the wolfpacks. Over the past few hundred years, other considerations arose. Fennec Settlement grew because you couldn't bring the coal seams and ore deposits to the workers. But Terscala had nothing but trains and highways as warrant that this dusty, godsforsaken salt flat should sink steel roots to deep into the rock strata below, into rivers tens of kilometers away, sprout stems of steel and leaves of flesh packed into loud suits and insufficiently knotted ties.

But here it was, Mobius's link between wealthy swampland and its dirt-poor, rock-rich east. From the lobby of Kogen Baird GmbH, on the upper floors of the black DES Tower, you could see the city sloping quickly away from the financial district to some condo towers, out to dusty tract housing cut in among here-and-there patches of juniper trees and scrub pine. Ironically, it looked almost organic.

A touch of vertigo dissolved as Baxter stepped back from the window. He'd worn one of his normal suits to the city, and the air conditioning was freezing his sweat-soaked undershirt. He sat down on a black leather couch, behind a knee-high glass table lined with two-fold glossies explaining SHP's wonderful accomplishments in the field of publicly reporting and corporate accounting. Checked his phone again for a message from the Captain, but nothing yet.

"Mr. Posniak?" The receptionist, a mouse with chalk fur, pressed her black headset to her ear. "Take the elevators up to thirty-seven."

Deanna Kozinski was waiting for him by a passcoded door, sunbleached blonde hair carefully restrained behind her shoulders, a smile like muscular paralysis. "Come into my office," she said.

Baxter had never liked Deanna, back at Independence University. He considered himself a rather cold man, when you got down to it, but even he could tell there was something wrong with Deanna's brain. That didn't mean she wasn't worthy of respect. She was good at what she did, even if her lot in life was to make corporations appear as wealthy as possible without actually lying about them. She led him past rows of open frosted-glass cube "offices" to what was a wood paneled conference room looking out, as every vantage in the building did, towards stretching ruin.

"I don't have long to talk," she said. "I've got a meeting with Richard Watership at Ellingson Mineral in twenty minutes."

"Fine," Baxter said. "What have you got for me?"

"Next to nothing," she said. "Most of the names you gave us are privately-held, general purpose corporations. No trades since their inception, generally—"

"Is that suspicious?"

"No. Most corporations issue unregistered stock to a single holder or small group of holders and go without any change of ownership until they dissolve. That's these. Not subject to the Disclosure Act, no public filings, no idea what they do. We pulled the Articles of Incorporation on these, they give the names of initial officers and corporate agents under the Mobian Legal Entities Law."

Baxter took a binder-clipped stack from her and thumbed through it while she talked. There were a couple of names he spotted more than once: Dannon Woundwort, Rudiger Sarkstein, Pawel Kinziak. "These shared officers—"

"A little suspicious. We'd know a lot more if you could get Exchequer Ministry to authorize an investigation into—"

"Deanna, I told you, Exchequer can't become involved." He had told her that, and it was true. Baxter had also strongly suggested to her that he was conducting an internal investigation on behalf of the Mobian Internal Security Office. This was not true. His handler in Lachels, Second Assistant Director of Intelligence, Mobian March Frank Pulaski, had given him a pair of bank account routing numbers, with the implicit suggestion that he should investigate them. Why this had to be done by an intelligence analyst on international loan from Lachels to the Mobian Internal Security Office remained a mystery to him, but he'd turned the screws on his friend Josh Dursine at the Lachels Embassy in Robotropolis until he got information from Lachels Treasury Department that gave the identities of some accounts transferring funds internationally, and their owners. Two of the owners, the revealingly named HDX LLC and HDX Corp., were also in public Mobian databases as having government subcontracts with Steiner/Davion Medical (a sub of Steiner/Davion Holdings that operated a string of Hospitals in Robotropolis, Fortune Station and Terscala; one of the few normal, explicable companies involved). Disclosure docs from the contracting process revealed a potpourri of weird entities with fake-sounding names. That pretty much put him at the end of his abilities, and Dursine had bent the rules for him so much that Baxter was disinclined to push him much further.

This left paying people to find out what was going on. He'd been building a small savings, thinking he might not stay in public service long enough to accumulate a pension. Down payment for a condo, maybe. Or, alternatively, paying a major accounting firm to assemble information on all these companies. Pulaski would show appreciation; Baxter hoped he'd also show a little green when this was over. "So what does this mean?" he asked. "These are all dead ends? What if I were to file a lawsuit—"

Deanna lifted another stack, about as thick as the first. "Take a look at this before you go nuts. We've got a year's financials from one of your targets, Whiplash Corp. Back in 3227 the officers tried to incorporate a subsidiary called Whiplash II and issue it stock. That's totally illegal under the Entities Law—can't have two entities owning each other. Corporate Control people at Exchequer insisted on seeing a year's worth of financials to know what the hell was going on."

Baxter skimmed the first page. . . . to profit by strategic investments in foreign businesses and currency, following a proprietary trading model. Opportunities in the nation of Vorburg will be intensely pursued, as the potential for growth . . . . "What's the short of this?" he asked.

"Look, I got to go."

"Deanna." Baxter followed her back through the rows of low-level accountants, almost all humans, foreigners from Lachels, struggling to flip through the sheets on Whiplash. "This is kind of time-sensitive. This stuff about foreign investement—"

"Baxter, I will talk to you later. Do you know who I've got waiting for me here? Richard Watership is the biggest—"

"Deanna! Are we ready to rock?" Watership was rabbit with milk chocolate fur, aging with the synthetic grace of the wealthy workaholic. He had complemented traditional light mobian dress with a blinding white sportcoat. "Who's this, a client?"

Deanna paused, smiling hard enough you could almost hear bones straining. "Richard, this is Baxter Posniak. He's with the government and he's hired us for some light work on an internal investigation. Baxter, this is Richard Watership, head of our accounts with Ellingson Mineral, Marx Heavy Extraction Industries, and Star Circle Energy."

Very popular man with investors, no doubt. Very unpopular man with mining unions, not to mention the wolfpacks. "A pleasure," Baxter announced, shaking the rabbit's hand as he turned to Deanna: "give me the elevator ride."

Pushy clients seemed to amuse Watership. He just smiled as Deanna kowtowed and they all went to the car and got in. "This foreign investment stuff is probably fine," she explained. "It's the currency transfers that raise a red flag for me. It's easy to intentionally develop big losses to the counterparty, if you want, and still have it look reasonably normal."

"Why would they want to lose money?"

"I want to do more work, do you understand me? Anything I tell you now is entirely speculative—"

"Of course."

She sighed. "There's a chance this is embezzlement, lifting money from this medical contract pipeline and stashing it across the border. In a failed state, where there's no chance of recovering it by legal process. Or they could be laundering dirty money out of Vorburg, but it's hard to tell with just a year's worth of financials from one of the shells. Lots of dirty money up there. Guns, drugs, slaves . . . ."

Baxter whistled.

Deanna jabbed at his chest, bringing a giggle from the rabbit. "Or this could all be entirely legal, okay? I don't understand why you can't just go through Exchequer on this."

Baxter wasn't listening, stuck on the part where someone in the Mobian government was funneling money over the border into Vorburg. Deanna thought that Vorburg was an ideal place to stash money because there was no working legal system. But when there is no working legal system because the nation is in a furious civil war, there have to be safer places to park your money.

Parking money in Vorburg would make a lot more sense to Baxter if you were trying to pick a winner in that furious civil war. And if Mobius was looking to buy a winner, there was no question why Pulaski wanted the situation investigated from the inside. Vorburg was historically the only power on the continent tough enough to stand up to Mobius. The current rapprochement between Lachels and Mobius was rooted in two things: Mobius's current weakness, and the inability of either party to form an alliance with Vorburg and gang up on the other. There was no question of Mobius aiding the ruling Fourth Army. The dominant power in the capital contained the heart of the human supremacists that had supported the most ridiculous excesses of the Great War and driven Julian Kinotbor into exile. If Mobius was aiding the communist rebels or the ultranationalists, that would mean a gradual alliance with between Lachels and the Fourth Army, no matter how grotesque the idea was. The Fourth Army would stop providing their satellite communications monopoly on an even basis; Mobius would go dark. It would—

"Deanna," Baxter said, "Kogen Baird does work for multinationals operating in Vorburg, right? I need to get there."

"Baxter!" she cried as the doors slid open on a cold lobby, white marble walls surrounding the elevator banks. "This isn't just some—"

"No," he said definitively, the rabbit giggling as Baxter trotted to keep up with Deanna's powerwalk. "It's too weird trying to get up there by the normal routes. You people have to be experts. Get me over the border." Baxter was thinking: what does Captain Snively Kolensky do all day when he's too busy to do his nominal job? He was also thinking: the longer this investigation takes, the greater chance that a Great War veteran with anger management issues and family ties to Robotnik is going to discover I am abusing my position and violating international law in order to screw his adopted nation to the wall.

His phone buzzed. Without thinking he grabbed and flipped it open.

"FROM: [S. Kolenksy]

"RE: Fuk

"We fuked up coon is useles wher are you"

"—ren't even listening to me!" Deanna was losing composure: strands of hair were hanging over her shoulders, and she had forgotten to hide her ugly desert-noon squint behind her sunglasses. Baxter had followed them out onto the sidewalk, to a little three-cab stand. "We are getting in this cab! You are going back to your hotel! We will talk about this later—"

"Oh, give him another minute," Richard Watership laughed again. "I'll just take this." He pulled a phone from his pocket, playing a poppy little ringtone. He carefully held it at arms length, aimed at the sidewalk well away from his feet, as he unfolded the clamshell and pressed the TALK button. His grin brought his long ears up dead upright as he caught Baxter watching, mystified. "Just in case a moonhowler ever figures out how to build a bomb that's not strapped to his own chest."

Baxter paused, way off balance. Acorn was alive and hunting Molly Lotor. Kolensky was hunting him. ". . . . What?"

"I know, unlikely. But fools rush in." The rabbit held the phone to his head and flopped his right ear over it. "Hello."

Deanna sighed, sliding her compsatchel off her shoulder. "Richard swears that in the war, Mobian spies would put shaped charges in—"

Richard Watership's head exploded.

It gave the vague impression of a Mobian Candle firework: the black phone flashing white-hot, something like a shower of sparks shooting into the rabbit's fur, over it, around it. And then afterwards the rabbit just standing there, right hand suspended in air, the summer suit charred, the head erased at the neck, Deanna beside, her tasteful dress pocked with little black holes from minute red-hot shrapnel, her head and shoulders drenched in blood, bits of brain clinging to the white jelly of her open eyes. What was left of the rabbit slapped wetly to the cement.

Arooooooo!

Eyes following the howls snapped to see the motorcycle speed off through the downtown. The silver antenna on the radio detonator in the wolf's hand flashed in the merciless sun.

The taxi carried many old scents. Foods: the dusty nothingness of bleached-wheat bread, pungent stink of cheese, congealed grease and the turning of cooked meat, cooked and cooked again. In the back seat, Lupe Loborrero Almatrican sat in a more recent memory of fumbling coitus, breathing the fading desires of a pair of young rats. But all scents—the high reedy stink of the fox hireling piloting the car before her, her own low musk of wolf—disappeared beneath ocean-rot that blanketed the city.

The tires squeaked. "We're here, lady."

Reluctantly, she pulled the lever to release the catch upon the door and pushed it open. It were as though the ocean itself were pouring into the car: cold, damp, so full of life and death as to bury her in a mound of clumped algae and twitching silver fish. She stepped out, black bricks squeaking wet beneath her sandals, and breathed it deep. I will not fear this weapon of my enemy.

"Lady, it's fifteen seventy-two."

Reynard's runner had given her things to hide herself among the people of port Corukas: a shirt of thin fabric clutched tight and flimsy around her middle and down to beneath her hips; white gloves enveloped her fingers like the fog that had boiled through the town that morning: wet with sweat, clumsy and fumbling inside her leather bag. Finally she bit the tip of one of its fingers and dragged it off, then counted precisely the coin, fifteen sovereigns and seventy-two pence, and put it into the red fox's waiting hand. He poked at the pile, sniffed at it, and looked at her with contempt. Lupe's hackles bunched beneath the shirt, but the hireling lacked courage to give her more than an angry face. He worked the machine and it sped into the maze of the black city, leaving her alone on a narrow street of cold, shrunken brick and blank doors of hard, dark wood, scented of salt.

No. Lupe sniffed. Not alone. "One will grow fat," she announced, "breathing the fullness of this air."

Reynard emerged from the doorway in which he had concealed himself from her with disturbing ease. His costume remained similar to that he wore in Fennec Settlement, but he had slung a long cloth over the shoulders of his leather jacket, and he too wore gloves—though with the fingertips cut away, Lupe noted, an admirable invention. "Alpha," he said, folding his ears and fearfully lowering his snout before his eyes snapped up to her, sharp and alert. "I agree. A land very rich in food."

"That is not what I meant," Lupe snapped. She drew off her other glove. "The hireling showed fight to me and fled. I have made an enemy, though I do not know how."

"You're supposed to give them more money than they ask for," Reynard explained. "Much more, or very little more, depending upon how impressed you are with their service."

"And he cannot be bothered to ask for this pay?"

Reynard snorted, running his fingers over his grin. "Citizens of Acorn tend to avoid confrontation." A sniff, and his grin disappeared. "But not you, Alpha. Our people are in here."

She followed him down the narrow street to an even more narrow street, barely an alley filled with the scents of urine and ancient food and wet. The walls pressed her close enough to him that she could see the discoloration and swell beneath the fur behind his right ear: "You have fought."

"The soldiers of the Acorn King's former army. It used to be that if it didn't belong to Robotnik in this city, it belonged to them. Our ally wants what they have, and is taking it with our aid."

Lupe listened carefully for a note of dissent in his voice. They did not see the same value in an alliance with the rebel crime chief Griffith Varitek. More than a year ago she and the entire pack were bitterly insulted by one of the goat's underlings in the desert, after the same underling's incompetence had deprived them of a chance to take the life of the last child of Acorn, her pack's oldest and most bitter enemy, and a fierce warrior belonging to her. While the insult was smoothed over with Varitek's placatory gift of ammunition and plastic explosive, it had left Lupe and Reynard on poor terms. She liked a beta that questioned her decisions, but not one that could not truly accept them once her mind was made. There were many muted growls and dampened hackles, a hurt like a swelling boil, filled with foulness. Lupe had lanced it. One day he gave to her more of his poisoned words, clever and ironic and slinking and bitter, like a dog, and she turned on him. Once she began Reynard fought truly, with his all. But to whatever virtue and shame it brought him, he had never openly challenged her rule. So she stopped, bleeding and covered with bruises, when his left arm was broken and bent behind his back. She formally forgave his disloyalty, putting her teeth to his throat to feel the soft whines in his windpipe.

She wondered now whether Reynard's bones had healed as well as his messengers had promised her. "You have fought poorly?"

He stopped a moment beside an unlighted door, painted to be as black as the brick around it, unmarked and narrow. "The King's Soldiers are starving without their work at the docks. They know we are with the goat. Their leader, a ram called Ari, declares that no wolf is welcome in the city without police to protect it. They are not good fighters, but they are strong, and some are fierce." He snorted, breathing salt and rot: "And this sea makes it difficult to detect ambush."

That was . . . acceptable, Lupe thought. Your wolves grow fearful and weak, her thoughts replied, but this was wrong: in their home they were without equals. This alliance with the goat was a bold move, but would let them finally take back their stolen cities, free their siblings laboring beneath the earth.

You'd better hope it does, then.

The thought could have come from the mouth of her cowed beta, but it was her own. Lupe felt queasy. She nodded at the door. "This place does not belong to the goat?"

Reynard shook his head. "Not to Ari Koren, either. It was tough to find."

They went into the blackness. Every structure in old Corukas had been many things. This had been, most recently, a dry cleaner's, and even stripped to the cement the walls still gave the nose a cruel sting. But she breathed deep anyway, the deep and comforting scent of her pack. (Faint scent of dried blood, of odd clothes, but: the scent of her pack.) They were in audience in a black room that had once held clothing in bags, silhouetted along the walls, leaning and sitting. As she entered heads lowered; she heard whines.

"Richard Watership is dead," she announced. "With our ally's tools we have ripped the life from him on the street before his own house, in the eyes of all. All will know that this is the fate of any who steal the land of the wolves! Death on the street! Death before friends! Death in their own house! None of our enemies will go unpunished!"

No howl. The silence was cool, undisturbed. The pack's victory was not real to them, and she understood this, having only learned of it through a telephone; it was displeasing that their enemy should die while so many of her pack played this unpleasant part across the continent, aiding the ally whose clever bomb had let them take their victory.

"So," she continued, "good news from our home. What is the news of here?"

"Miguel is hurt," someone answered.

Miguel was a pup of twelve years—not one of Lupe's own. Twelve years ago the pack, all packs had been five times decimated by the confused and brutal fighting that swept their lands; one week striking at the underbelly of the Acorns and their war machines, the next bathing one's knife in the strange scent of human blood. With so little numbers her father had given all permission to mate as they would; a time both good and bad.

Lupe sniffed Miguel out and froze. She laid a hand on his face, ran her fingers down limbs that shivered. He was not hurt: no bones broken, no flesh missing. But he . . . every part of his body was soft and tender. She grasped in an instant that something was terribly wrong.

Miguel had not been in a fight. Miguel had been punished. None but she could inflict such an indignity on one of her pack and live.

But what if it was the goat, hmm?

". . . How did this happen?" Lupe asked. None answered. She squeezed the pup's shoulder. "Tell your Alpha who has done this."

"The weasel." His voice was quiet, musty and damp like the air. "I was to guard him from the Acorn soldiers; he is one of our new friends. He had some of the flower. He sold it to people, on the street." The pup bit back a whine, but it wove its way into his words. "I was angry. I struck him and bit him."

The flower, the podscaya bloom, the blessing of the desert. It was sacred. Sometimes, yes, some young one would use it without cause, and usually shiver and scream for a night against unpleasant sights as a result. And perhaps some other pack was degenerate enough for a young male to sell the bloom in Kingsford.

But not the Loborrero pack. "Did you give them the flower?" Lupe asked. Miguel whined, shivered his head no. He spoke the truth. Lupe stood: "Who sold them the flower?"

"When will we repay our new friends?"

Lupe got angry. If she did not, that would have to be answered. "This is a betrayal of my ancestors and my father and I will not let such disobedience persist!"

"But you will let them hurt Miguel."

The speaker was another young male, Jorge. Not a pup, barely, fifteen summers, the child of Miguel (the elder) and Adelia. "I will repay all when the time for repayment has come. Before I will strike against our enemies, I must rule my own pack."

"It is not your pack."

"You're too young to know what you're talking about," Reynard said, quickly, "This is a hard time for all of us, and—"

"He knows what he speaks," Lupe said, her voice placid, hard.

"You are not fit to lead me. You are not fit to lead any of us!" He stepped forward from the rest, amid muttered entreaties and warnings, the rough calluses of his bare feet scratching on the cement. "This pack is mine! My pack will not sell itself like a street bitch!"

Behind her, Lupe heard Reynard step back, leaving her and Jorge alone in the pack's midst. "I will kill you, Jorge. Offer me your throat and sit."

"You will die like the dog you are!"

Lupe leapt on Jorge, with no concern for his age or his parentage or for anything but that she was not a dog. He foolishly plowed his shoulder into her left breast, bruising deep, wrapping his arms about her trunk to press harder. Perhaps he thought this was the best way to fight against her weight; he had little experience fighting with a wolf of her size. She took the blow and with it the poor fool's head, her momentum forcing him to bend. He chose to bend at his knees. She accepted, forcing him to the floor, feeling his thighs shiver with the strain. Fingers raked and tore through the flimsy fabric over her back, ripped at her fur. That was all they could do. Lupe winched her left arm tighter around the upstart's neck, pressed her right between his ears, squeezing him tight against her breast like the pup he was, squeezing the thought out of him—

The male's teeth sank into the soft flesh of her breast.

Dogs, Lupe's father had explained to her as a pup, stop fighting when they feel pain. He was beating her with his open hand. They were camped in the hard lands, licking wounds from an attack on an Acorn convoy. She had been playfighting with Reynard, the pup of Luis and Fidelia, and had lost. What do Almatricans do when they feel pain?

Arms tighter about the head as she pulled it from the floor, bending Jorge at his hips again, resting her weight suddenly on his legs. The right one snapped first, above the knee, and the teeth released her. Good dog, Lupe thought as his agonized yelp filled the darkness. She took her right arm from the top of his head and slid it beneath his neck and up, pulling his wet snout from the welling blood in her chest. His shoulder was bared to her and she bent and bit into the taste of copper, the taut snap of the pup's clavicle against her jaw, the scream against her ear.

She released her bite and threw the head away, hearing the pup's skull knock against the hard floor. The stink of his urine was strong by her side, soaking the heavy cloth pants the Corukans favored. There was no sound but Jorge's terrified, shivering whines. No one spoke or moved.

Lupe rolled to her hands and knees, licking a bit of blood before it could fall from her teeth. She crawled to his head, putting her right hand into the growing pool of blood by his right shoulder. The whining paused a moment too long and Lupe drew her head back as the pup's teeth clacked by her ear; her left hand grabbed tight hold on his snout and pried it back, spreading the fur of his soft throat.

Her teeth found their way through the thick hairs, till they touched lightly against the soft pulse of the pup's life. The flesh between her jaws swelled to let a whine of terror through to his snout. She pressed harder and felt the lifepulse grow strong and desperate.

She sighed, breath hot in his fur.

The pup lay whining as she stood beside him, wiping her snoutfur against her barefurred arm. "Care for our packmate," she ordered. "Set his bones and bind his cuts."

After a minute or two Reynard walked softly after Lupe. She was in the alleyway, right by the door. She didn't know where else to go, lost in this city. Her shirt lay in shreds on the ground and she lapped at the wounds in her breast, squeezing the flesh to bleed them out and clean them.

"You forgave an open challenge," he said.

Lupe licked her teeth, tasting her own blood. She looked exhausted, far more so than a brief fight to the death would have left her. "He is young. The situation is . . . it's strange. Little makes sense here."

"The pack bends its will to Griff Varitek's scum and you forgive your mortal enemies." He folded his ears: "My Alpha, if you want to test any other innovations from the people of Acorn, I am here to listen and speak."

". . . . We are not a people who slink in barrens and salt." The thoughts had tortured her since she was ten years old, since a roil and confusion unlike, so the pack said, anything that had beset the deserts in generations, had come and gone and left her father dead and her people no better off. And no anger among the other free packs, just a sadness that the ten years of fury and blood were departing. Another chance for battle had gone. "We have grown too accustomed to our defeat. We pick every little triumph to the bones until we forget we ever lived along the rivers. Our wrong becomes nothing but an excuse to fight. Until we love nothing but the fighting. And there is nothing but the fighting."

Reynard nodded. "Agreed, Alpha."

"But my packmates will not become this goat's . . . ." Her snout wrinkled against a sudden gust of fish rot from the wharf. "His creatures."

Reynard closed his eyes, thinking. "There are other powers to ally with, Alpha."

She snorted bitterly. "Any that I should like more than Griffith Varitek and his many good friends?"

He rubbed his whiskers. ". . . If I were Alpha, Lupe, I would speak with one that you should like much less."

Cat wrinkled his nose as he came into the dark bar, bare-chested in the warm evening. The heavy scent of beer clung to the air, dug into his brain, tugged at the lynx's memories. Smell that? Smell that? Remember how you treated her?

He still didn't like to think about it. Even though he guessed they were even, now, pretty much—

"Myron!" The badger was still working the bar, a few streaks of gray in the muzzle the only signs that years had passed. The bar was like some sort of alcohol-fueled stasis chamber. "Gods, man, I thought you were dead!"

"Close enough," he replied. He'd been so worried that he'd forget which van he was supposed to be in, get left behind. If he'd been in the right one, he'd be in pieces on the parking lot. Over the bar a silent TV was on a satellite feed from Kimex News. Graphic behind the leopard anchor of what he by now recognized as a Poiccard Imperator light submachinegun. LAB FIGHT. "Can you give me a minute? I'm looking for someone."

Most of them were bottled in one of Sally's safe-farmhouses. Somewhere deep south, that was all he knew. He'd split from them, quickly named a rendezvous point where they could pick him up later, assuming they hadn't been exposed and all killed. Really, he told himself, you should be scared witless right now. But he was finding he had something that was not quite courage, closer to stupidity, the sort of dry, mild interest that had come over him as he leaned around a van to shoot at police, closing his eye as the windshield shattered above him—I wonder if there's specific ways they train people to use cars as cover. I wonder if they consider use as cover when designing a car. They know cops buy cars, right?

But even if he were pissing himself, he'd still have to get to the bottom of this.

Empty booth. Empty booth. He kept walking. Molly's apartment was no doubt being watched. If she was under guard there she would not speak to him anyway, even if there was some way he could sneak in or commando them all, like Sonic would. It was sick that at this point his best hope was to find her here—

Cat's breath caught in his throat.

—find her here, faceplanted on a sticky laminated wood table, little shotglasses marching around her arms like a chalk outline. Many with the milky-gray of her preferred Chocolate Ringtail Cream, but others with the clear, pure burn of vodka and whiskey. Anything.

The lynx sat down across from her. She didn't stir. Maybe she was asleep. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Ole damn day." Her fawn snoutfur stuck to the table, marring what of her words managed to find their way out of her brain. "Skiped work. He said to hide. Caysennything wenn wrong. 'Go somewheres 'Lensky can't find you. I've gotta go on a trip.'"

"Who said?"

"Handler." Her fingers tensed and she lifted herself aching form the table, snout twisted and eyes pinched against the nauseous imbalance of the room, and flopped back on the cushioned seat, a little duct-tape stopping its leaks. "He's beady-eyed fucker. Human. Worries bout me lot, but he still doesn't call. Thinks 'Lensky and youall'll kill me."

"But why did you come here, when you knew I used to drag you down here—" Oh gods. He grabbed his snout and squeezed.

Molly pressed her eyes closed, squeezing water into her mask. "Do it."

"Gods, Molly, I don't—"

"Glad you're okay," she said. "I hoped you'd live, so you could be the one to take care of me."

"Molly, I don't want to—"

"Do it!" she cried, slamming her fists on the table. A shotglass spun on its side, trailing syrupy remains. "I killed her." A sob in her chest. "They couldn't do it in the war and in the coup but I can do it! I'm a good little girl. Police always said so when I was in their damn orphanage."

Cat reached out and grabbed her deep black cheekfur in his fist, pulling her eyes open. "She's alive," he hissed. "Just relax, Molly, because she's alive."

Molly reacted with a moment of dull surprise that slowly sunk into a less piercing, more stupefied despair. "Bad coon," she mumbled. "'Lensky'll be angry."

He couldn't bear it. He needed to get out of here. "Molly," he said, "the roboticizer. It wasn't at Gaumont, was it?"

A bitter laugh. Or maybe a hiccup. "Course not."

"But it's real."

"Handler says 'snot. I know better."

"Molly, where is it? Where do they keep it?"

Before the first sentence was over she was shaking her head against his fist, jerking the roots of her fur with the strength of one who doesn't feel pain. "Dunno. They never tell me nothin. I just do what they tell me and they let me live."

"Good," Cat said. And it was, in part. If she'd known the real target, Cat knew he'd have relayed it to Sally. And if he'd done that, Sally would've known he'd found Molly, whether he told her or not.

And when he thought about Antoine, even he was almost serious about killing Molly.

"It's not good," she said, and her drunken eyes found his. "I'll do anything, Myron. Anything to stay alive."

He released her fur. Her head remained upright, eyes gleaming with horror. "Molly—"

"Thass whaddy taught me," she said, a mad smile baring her toothtips. "I'll do anything to live. 'Slong as I'm alive I'll do worse and worse. You've got to do it. You—"

Cat turned from her ran into the night.

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 5\*: Green Hills, 3 Floreal 3230

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**Unincorporated Green Hills Administrative District, 3 Floreal 3230**

Antoine was in some high-tension nightmare, his eyes swiveling horribly under his almost-closed lids. He made not even a single sound. He was lying on a broad, thick old table in this burnt-smelling ruin of a house. Out the window was the heady tangle of this year's quickly flowering cat's tails and stinkgrass. On the dusty floor were a set of warped, wobbly chairs and Sonic, balled in a corner with his elbows on his knees, face hidden behind his forearms, slowly and experimentally calling the fingers of his left hand into action under the wrap of torn fabric.

Sally walked the borders of the table, adjusting Antoine's blankets to cut off this or that draft, dusting its legs, peeking at the underside. Several hours into her vigil, after she'd sent Rotor to bring drugs, food and reinforcements from Knothole, she'd found a black spider with little white stripes on the tips of its spear-legs, about to slip under the topmost blanket. She'd swept it a meter away onto the floor and stamped it to a paste, then checked under all the blankets for spider infiltration, and had since kept her eyes raw, checking the dusty corners and unreachable rafters. She had a horrible idea of the spider crawling into the leg, where it lay red and slowly leaking, laying its eggs in the leg—

Get a hold of yourself. There were plenty of actual worries—the police, sepsis, gangrene, the possibility that one of the arteries in Antoine's arm had been grazed by the bullet that passed there—to let herself go to pieces over bizarre, fatigued fantasies.

In the van Rotor had ripped his belt from his jeans and snapped it tight around the thigh, planting a bare foot just below the hip and pulling with all his might. In the cool haze of the tranquilizer Sally had felt the floor slide under Sonic's heels as he carried her, but in the car the rapid-onset shock had already slowed Antoine's pulse to a quiet, uninsistent little momentary flow, and the press of the tourniquet cut it further.

It had seemed so ordinary there in the van, the cold floor beneath her cheek and the drug cool and smooth in her arms and her mind. Antoine's right knee was gone. The upper part of the leg dwindled to a shred of khaki uniform and an isthmus of flesh, tangled, shredded bone like an equatorial island of bleached rock bathed in the red waves. Below that the lower leg was twisted, the anklefur still wrapped in the elastic stretch of a white cotton sock, the sock still planted firmly in a brown leather boot, laced meticulously up to the top eyelets. It looked like a prop foot. It was when Sally noticed that she was rising out of her stupor like a bubble in a viscous slime that the horror of it stabbed her. She tried to crawl back down into the depths, but every effort just brought more awareness—

Rotor came in the door now, followed by Bunnie, who was not even wearing a jacket, nothing to hide her limbs—"Don't start," Rotor cut Sally off. "Help me get these blankets off." A stoat followed them into the room, dressed for the street, carrying a hefty red duffel with the red heart of first-aid on the side. "He's okay, Standard Army, one of Logan's," Rotor said, folding the blanket into a square. "Couldn't find the doc."

The stoat walked to Antoine's side and stopped, staring at the knee. After glancing up at the other gunshot on the coyote's arm, he squatted, unzipped his bag, pulled out a thin red plastic sleeve and withdrew a hypodermic and a minute little glass bottle of morphine. Two injections, deep into the flesh of Antoine's thigh. "How's he been? Lots of shivering? Awake any?"

"No," Sally muttered, walking in a tight circle, dizzy at the seeing the injury again. "No, he, uh—" And then she stopped because the stoat had just reached back into that bag and pulled out something that looked like it was for boning fish. "Oh gods." She turned and pressed her face to the wallpaper.

"What did you think was going to happen?" the doc asked, leaning down to inspect the bone. "He'll wake up. Get over here and help me hold him down."

Rotor took the left side, Sally the right shoulder. Bunnie watched wide-eyed from a meter away; Sonic balled himself tighter. But Antoine didn't wake up. He stayed under, the full thirty seconds that the stoat promised it would take to have the leg on the floor. When the time was almost up, the stoat lifted the saw and fingered at the blade while Sally and Rotor watched, mouths forming uncertain syllables.

"Oh shit," the stoat muttered.

"What?" Sally breathed.

"Teeth are fucked," he began, but his words were lost in Antoine's sudden shriek. "Hold him down!" the stoat barked, diving into his bag.

Antoine had a demon inside him, a demon of pain, and it threw Sally stumbling into the dust, pressed clawfingers deep into the soft fat of Rotor's arm, making him bellow. Sally rolled out of the way of Bunnie's feet as the rabbit grabbed Antoine and with her big left arm slammed the snarling beast onto the table with a force that knocked the medic on his ass.

Sally watched from the floor as he took out what for a moment she thought was a railroad spike and then a mallet and held the spike in Antoine's leg and brought the hammer down, missing, again, gouging a chip from the table, sending it flying into the air again as he finally and with a crack so sharp it was in her own teeth broke the dead lower leg away.

Molly was in Ironlock.

But no. Somewhere else, nderground. The pressure of the megagrams of rock above her was close and hot, in the darkness that seemed to suffuse the air despite the presence of the little lights along the gray ceiling. She was naked and shackled to a metal chair so cold she registered it almost as heat, an electric sting through her fur where it touched her.

In front of her was the desk at which the interrogators sat, a blaze of light that barely pierced the room. The interrogators were mobian and human. They wore human suits, ties, held sheafs of paper. They looked directly at her, spoke in television tones, bright television smiles.

At least eight gunmen were killed when

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At least eight gunmen were killed when

GUN BATTLE AT RESEARCH LABORATORY

Molly whined, the restraints burning her wrists, trying to squeeze herself down so they couldn't look at her. It was so hot she couldn't breathe. Like the bag they put on her head—yes, that was it, that was why the room was so dark, trying to look through the fabric. Fierce hands gripping her arms, walking her down the hallway. The guards were robots, but they were mobians at the same time. "Nanomachines, tell them," Kolensky said. "They integrate with the immune system. Affect the brain." No, she didn't want to. Autonomous nanomachines are unsafe. Plague. Moving person to person, infecting, integrating. Her guards would infect her. She shook the robots away and ran, stumbling downhill, trying to pull the bag from her face as it stuck to her like airless plastic, hot and close.

She was crying. She would get in trouble.

Her clothes. Molly was naked, naked at work! The lights were dark, after hours, but she needed to find her clothes. She would be fired, and if she was fired she would die. Her clothes were in her locker in the personnel room, but she couldn't read any of the names on the lockers. She hurried back into the black-checkered hallway, looking at the doors going past. In the window of the materials science lab Myron stood, wearing the stole of a priest of Trixiana, speaking with two raccoons, male and female. Molly could not see their faces. The two figures filled her with terror. She ran and felt a door and turned the knob.

The room was dark, a poll-hall light on an Office Warehouse plasterboard desk, blackfurred hands and white snout. "Ah, Miss Lotor." Dr. Dyson looked up from his desk. "You shouldn't work as hard as you do. Sit down." But it wasn't Dyson, it was Baxter, his eyes behind sunglasses. He grinned. "I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go to Terscala."

"No!" Molly wanted to scream but she couldn't, her voice too quiet, paralyzed. "Please!—" he clawed at the bag on her face, getting bigger, wrapping her whole body—

The blanket.

She groaned, slowly wiggling her sweaty hand in the cooler air of above the blanket, body stuck in the usual imprint she left in her couch, tangled in the close nest of the blanket. Licking her dry cheeks she stopped, whined, tasting vomit. Her throat burned from it. She remembered telling the bartender to pull one of the bottles from its mount, and after that, then . . . .

Then Myron. She grunted, wanting to retreat to the nightmare.

She couldn't stand to see Myron like that, sober and brave. Almost two years with him, back then when she had half a life that belonged to her instead of these government spooks, and she'd had the worst of him, drinking every night, that fragile, bitter superiority he felt to everyone and everything. Now he was worth it but he couldn't be with her. He would think of her with nothing but disgust and a faint sadness that she had let herself adopt this humiliating prostration before the human invaders.

Yes, that was it. There were lines between caution and sloth and evil, and she'd crossed them all. She didn't ever want to leave this apartment again.

Shit. Her apartment. Baxter, said not to be here—

Molly wasn't sure how she'd gotten home, but she didn't remember him calling her. Hell, she couldn't live at that bar. If he hadn't called, fuck it. She stretched under the blanket, letting more wakefulness creep into her limbs, outline the nausea and imbalance of the remaining alcohol.

"That a girl," Captain Kolensky encouraged her.

She tore the blanket off. Then she quickly jerked it back up to her shoulders. Kolensky was sitting on the edge of her coffee table, in his ISO uniform. He was holding an approximation of a Bloody Mary.

"Don't worry, I've seen everything. Tried to shake you awake for a half-hour. Thought about calling an ambulance." He put the drink down beside him. "Where's your keeper, hmm? Where's Mr. Posniak?"

"He—he, Terscala. Accountants."

Kolensky blanched as white behind his bare skin as if she'd pulled a gun on him. "Accountants?"

"He said, maybe Vorburg. I—he didn't call me, I don't—"

"Thank you," said Kolensky, suddenly all business. "Stay in your apartment until I talk to you. Otherwise you go home to Ironlock." He got up and left.

Molly ran to the bathroom and was violently sick.

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 6\*: Port Orange, 3 Floreal 3230

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**Port Orange, Robotropolis, 3 Floreal 3230**

"C'mon Tails!" Sonic was curled on his back, quills poking every which way under and around the fat coils of shiny new razorwire, his hands lowered above his head, white gloves waiting. "Jump!"

It was getting warmer; Tails wasn't wearing a shirt. In his fur the night air was pleasantly cool; in his nose it stank of burning garbage. Garbage is wet; it does not burn well. The scents are abominable alone and do not go well together: aseptic, dusty scorch laying over the deep stink of a used bathroom, and that horrible, lying tease in rotting food suggesting something that you once wanted to eat.

Tails missed the healthy stink of the forest. This city scents smelled old.

Across the fence in front of him, in Port Orange, the people were breaking streetlights with bricks and air rifles. The city glow grew darker over it, as though the light were sinking into a deep, dark cave. Tails had been back to the city before. But he had not been back here.

"Tails!" Sonic waggled his fingers, sighed in exasperation. "I'm kind of easy to see here!"

The fox closed his eyes just after his toes left the ground, putting his light body into a high leap. His shoulders jerked taut as Sonic grabbed his hands and pulled; the world spun; he opened his eyes and he was on a grimy, dark street, speckled with litter. At the corner ahead black plastic bags, plastic bottles and plastic diapers were heaped around a dead streetlight.

Tails almost yelped when Sonic slapped his back, then brushed some oily streetgrit from his bare arms. He was still favoring his right leg a little when he walked, but he healed really quick. Maybe he just didn't mind being hurt as much. "Alright, little guy?"

"'Mokay," he mumbled. Probably Sonic didn't mind being hurt, Tails thought. He was really tough and brave. But Tails didn't know what was the brave thing to do right now.

Tails wished that he could have—he didn't know what he wanted to do. He wanted to be in the farms because everyone was out there. And he didn't want to be there because everyone was sad, and because it was terrible to see what had happened to Antoine. But he wanted to be out there, too, for just the same reasons. It scared him just to think about it. One day Antoine was Antoine, and now he couldn't even walk. He could have died.

He wanted to be here, too, because he never got to do anything with Sonic. Now Sally wanted him to hang out with Sonic, all alone in the city, too. That was nice, but it felt weird. Sally said that she needed Sonic to be able to handle follow-up business with the Standard Army people if any came up, but Tails didn't think she'd want to use Sonic for that. He didn't know what she was thinking.

And although he knew that Sonic couldn't go sightseeing or take him to the downtown, because too many people could recognize him . . . Tails didn't like this place. It felt more crowded than the other city places he'd been to, but no one was going anywhere—of course they couldn't go anywhere, with the fences and the army troops watching them, but they didn't even go anywhere inside the fence. They were all slumped like puppets without hands inside, sometimes their head bobbing in a strange, sleepy way, like they were listening to quiet music, but there would be no earphones. They sat on the curb, sat on a dented trash can; they sat in the middle of the road, like there was no chance of a car, or like they didn't care.

Tails found himself looking at every face, even the ones that didn't belong to foxes. Checking them. He knew none of them. "Where are we going?"

"I dunno," Sonic replied, brushing his fingers back through his quills as he looked along the broken, dark windows. "There's all kinds of stuff here. Supposed to be. Year ago there was a poker game on every block, a—ooh, we could go to Barb's! The Woodwharf!"

Sonic led the way to a building. When they reached it he was disappointed. Someone had thrown something big through the painted-over windows a long time ago. More recently it had burned; the brick walls were blackened, and two colors of yellowed "CONDEMNED" tape fluttered from the empty doorway. Shapes moved inside. Eyes glowed.

"Let's go back to—" Tails stopped, sniffed, and turned as a tall fox as thin as cornstalks inside a crusty tan raincoat walked over him, gloved hands out wide.

"Hey man,"—wet snort—"canyem got any money—"

Daddy is new. He was at the Front, but now he is here, because the War is over. He's big. He smells different than Mommy. Daddy picks Miles up and Miles goes flying! Daddy goes flying, too, in a helicopter. He stops the Overlanders. He's a hero, like the King and General Kintobor. Go, helicopter, go! says Daddy, and Miles spins his tails and goes flying up over Daddy's head, right by the ceiling! He holds his fingers out. Ack-ack-ack-ack-ack! Take that, Overlanders! Miles wants to fly a helicopter like Daddy, but he can only do it after he grows up, and there won't be any guns on it, because the War is over.

Mommy says they will leave the Base and live in the city now. Miles asks do we have to and Mommy says he will like it. The city is very nice and he will make new friends there. Miles is sad. When Mommy and Daddy talk about the city they are very happy.

They go on the train and Miles watches the farms go by fast. Then there are big buildings. They are tall like mountains in the Library books. People climb them like mountains. Mommy says they are fixing the buildings. Miles wants to fix the buildings, too, but he can only do it after he grows up. He has to go to School first. School is next year.

They are on the second floor. They have three rooms instead of one. There is a swingset behind the house. Miles swings very high and it makes him frightened but he likes it. He lets go at the top and he feels strange as he falls, and when he lands he pulls fur from his knee. Mommy washes the hurt and tells Miles not to do it anymore, and to be careful. He does not do it for a day, and then another day. Then Mommy goes out to do Shopping, which is like going to Commissary. He lands on his feet. He does it three times.

Mommy does not come home. Daddy tells him to hide in the basement with the Neighbors from the first floor. The Neighbors smell funny. They have yellow fur with black spots. They listen to the radio. The mommy cries and the daddy cries, too. It makes Miles scared. He can't understand what they say to each other and he is afraid to ask them. Miles thinks and then knows that the Overlanders have come. Daddy stopped the Overlanders. But they are here, anyway.

Why doesn't Daddy stop them?

They stay in the basement a long time, eating food from cans and sneaking upstairs to use the bathroom. Then Daddy comes home and Miles can come upstairs again, but he cannot go outside. Mommy does not come home. Mommy is dead. At the Base Jenny's and Kevin's daddies died. Michael S.'s mommy died, and his daddy too. When that happened they never came home. They had to stay with the Overlanders.

Miles asks Daddy why he didn't stop the Overlanders. Daddy spanks him, but on his face.

Now Miles is five years old. He doesn't have a birthday party. There is no school. He can't go outside because of bombs, but he goes anyway unless there is gunfighting close enough to hear it. He is bored, but if he goes home late Daddy will be asleep. He goes to Jarvis Street and looks at the stores. He has no money. He wants to go into the drugstore where there are chocolates and take a chocolate, but there are police officers in every store and on every street. They have big guns. The guns are black and smell like the machine shop at the Base, when Miles was little. Miles is scared that the police officers will kill him like Mommy.

When you die, you don't go to the Overlanders. You go under the ground and have to stay there and never come back.

Daddy doesn't go to work. There is no work. He gets up very late and he goes to bed very early. Daddy spanks Miles a lot for being bad. Miles is bad a lot. He sneaks out and he eats too much food and he won't shut up and he cries for no reason. One day Miles comes home late but Daddy is awake and spanks him with the belt from his pants. It hurts a lot. Daddy says that Miles is stupid and selfish that he will get himself killed like Mommy if he doesn't stay inside. Miles cries and Daddy spanks him and Miles pushes Daddy's leg and Daddy falls down and knocks the empty bottles off the table. Miles tells Daddy good. He will never have to see Daddy again.

Daddy's eyes are big. There is red blood on his orange fur, under his ear. He says you freak. I'll kill you myself.

Miles believes him.

Miles runs down the stairs and outside. The grass is wet under his bare feet. Daddy is behind him. Miles runs around the swingset and keeps going. It is dark. He goes between houses and into the street. There are police officers to his left, at the corner, and he runs to his right. He hears Daddy close behind and he doesn't want to have to stay under the ground because that is even worse than having to stay inside, and he looks behind him and Daddy is right there and Miles runs so fast that his feet don't want to touch the ground and he runs into someone and hurts his ankle and falls.

It's a big kid, with spikes on his back.

—"Back the fuck off!" Sonic barked, stiffarming the raincoat in the shoulders. The fox stumbled off, mumbling; Sonic rubbed his left arm over his mouth, nudged gently at his bandaged hand. "Damn junkie."

Beside him Tails stared at the fox as he drifted into the night. Tails had never seen him before. The fur was too deep a red. "Sonic, I don't, you know, I don't—I want to go home. I don't want to be a pussy but I'm tired. I just want to go back to the safehouse."

Sonic kept his left hand over his mouth. His eyes looked nervous, thoughtful, like Tails' mood was rubbing off on him. That made Tails even more nervous.

When Antoine came awake with red-veined eyes and dry mouth he was in a bed, and the pressure around his left hand was Sally's. The whites of her brown eyes were flamed pink. She said nothing. She couldn't grant him knighthood. He had been a duke since his sixth birthday, when his father had died, pierced by traitors' bullets in the palace while he fled, fearful and oblivious, in the company of the other children.

He sighed and closed his eyes, as though it were the sight of her were the cause of his pain. "Mon Princesse," he coughed, nudging his head back, forth. "Non. It is my duty. All would give ten times as much. You owe nothing."

"I'm just so glad to see you alive," Sally said, cutting a smile into her face.

"How are the others?" he asked. "How is Sonic?"

"He's—He's—"

Mon Dieux. Antoine blinked, reading slowly through the pain-fog the agony in her eyes. Gods above, he is dead. How—

"He's in the city," Sally finished. "—I sent him there, I—we needed him there. People there, to keep an eye on the situation—"

"That is good," Antoine breathed, closing his eyes. "Tired, mon Princesse . . . ."

"Then sleep," Sally sighed, rubbing her fingertips against the grain of the short fur on his hand as Antoine blinked back into unconsciousness, turning his snout to the sweat-stained pillowcase. "Sleep, Antoine."

When she was sure he was gone she took her hand from him and rubbed her throbbing forehead, just above her eye sockets. She felt perfectly awful. Thank gods he'd slept until she'd gotten it back together. If he had come to and seen her last night—she couldn't even remember everything she'd done after she sent Sonic away, just snatches. The most concrete memory was outside, on her knees and hands in the grass, broken blades tracing intersecting paths on the skin of her palms. Somehow Rotor had been there. "C'mon, Sally, let's go back inside."

"Know. M'sorry." She'd crawled about in the tall grass like a sabertooth stripetail, except drunk, thrashing the stalks as loudly as if she'd been swinging around a thresher. "Security risk. Lights out. Are the lights out?"

"Let's go back inside, Sally."

"Are the lights out?"

"Everything's fine, Sally. Just come on back inside."

"I'm sorry," she'd said. She kept her thick, swirling head low as she crawled, unsure of whether she wanted to throw up.

"It's okay."

"I know you brought them for everyone. Everyone's bad off."

"Don't worry about it."

"Did—" Sally had paused, contemplating the steps up to the wooden porch, way above her head. Slowly she had pushed herself up to her knees. "Did I drink them all?"

"No."

"Good." Cautiously maintaining her balance, she had gestured away Rotor's arm and navigated upwards until she got a hand against one of the roof support beams to steady herself. "You have one?"

"No."

"Have one now," Sally had said, hugging herself against the pole, giggling wetly, lifting her right hand out imperiously. "I command you."

Rotor had cocked his head slightly, turned his eyes out to look at the stars over the fallow emptiness around the house. ". . . You poured the two you didn't drink out the window."

She had flinched and whined softly, turning away from him to face wood. When her cheek had pressed into the pole she felt the wet in her facefur, and then she smelled the beer. "I did?"

"You kept saying . . . something, like, they were bad for you. Something like that."

"I'm sorry, Rotor."

He had plucked her arms carefully from around the pole one at a time, helping her towards the yellow light and warmth in the open door. "It's okay, Sally. Just come on in."

"I'm sorry," she had said. Antoine was in there. "Oh gods."

"It's alright," Rotor had said.

Sally had done her best to avoid Rotor since getting up and had been surprisingly successful, which suggested that Rotor was doing his best to help her avoid him, which was awful. But of course the most awful thing of all was Antoine. She wondered if she'd ever be able to forgive herself for what Antoine had lost, if maybe—

No. That wasn't the most awful thing. She was thinking about Sonic. Gods damn it Antoine had just promised her his life, she was sitting on the mattress where Antoine's leg was supposed to be, and she was still thinking about what she had almost done to Sonic.

Would they have taken his quills away? Plucked them out, one by one? They were so useful, beautiful and jagged and alive, of course, but useful, too. No, they wouldn't give those up, the quills would stay. They would just rip out everything beneath them . . . .

After she finally passed out last night she had seen him. Polished blue steel, each false quill identical to the next, razors glinting as they spread in perfect harmony. His feet replaced with thick, two-toed pedestals, solid reactant microthrusters borrowed from a Whiteout VTOL to put some spring in his step. In the dream the arm-armor was as thin as his own lanky arms, the same color as the unfurred flesh. There was nothing beneath the armor; he wasn't even Mobian anymore. So thoroughly captured there was nothing left to free. The only thing that seemed to live were the points of cutting red laserlight in the center of his black lenses, like pupils.

Sonicbot had said something. The voice was inside her, cold like rubbing alcohol. Sally listened. She obeyed—

Sally lifted her left foot onto the bed and hugged her leg to her chest, chin pressed tightly to her knee. A free Mobius was worth all of their lives, but take that out of the equation and you are left with people. Sonic is one male. Antoine is one male. One of these has lost his leg in the fight. The other is perfectly fine, basically, for him. One of these deserves your worry and care. One must be put out of mind until after the other has been properly cared for. But she wasn't doing that, she was busy thinking about Sonic, even after sending him off to the city, dragging half her mind along with him.

And yesterday she had put him a box and tried to give him to Robotnik. Done everything but tie a bow around it. She shivered. What good is a hero you can kill?

"He can still feel it, yah know."

Sally glanced up and Bunnie was standing in the doorway. Shit. Maybe she still had more alcohol sloshing around in her neurons than she thought; she hadn't heard the rabbit come in, with heavy composite armor literally bolted to her legs through surgically molded gaps in her muscles. It had been a year since Rotor and Antoine had rescued Bunnie from her exile in the southeastern Great Forest. Another cyborg from Robotnik's vivisection project, a failed one, half-finished and patched together. Friendly to them, thanks largely to Rotor.

". . . feel his leg?" the squirrel asked, tentatively.

The rabbit nodded and sat on an old hand-made wooden chair, so solid that it barely groaned under her weight. It complained a little more when she lifted up the ribbed cylinder of her lower right leg and flexed the horrible, rounded steel foot-module that had echoed in Sally's dreams. She could hear the soft whirr of Bunnie's aging servos. "I thought I was crazy, but it takes Tails to tell me—kid never stops reading, you know? S'called 'phantom limb.'" Bunnie turned her soft eyes down to the mechanical foot as she waggled the two thick toes. "It feels like they're mine, you know? I must really feel 'em someways, 'cause I can walk on 'em. But when I touch 'em it's like the metal feels it, it's—" She broke off, making her right hand into a massive fist. "I want to get the guys that done it to him."

"We all do, Bunnie. But you've been through so much already. You don't need to—"

"I want to. I'm ready. The only thing that could put me in better shape is these milkshakes with metal alloy's in 'em that Snively used to give me, and I doubt I'll be slurpin' on those anytime soon."

"You know that if you're seen in public before we're ready, Robotnik will probably destroy all evidence of what was done to you. Until then, you need to—"

"I'm not a robot."

"That's not what this is about."

"Any more'n you are."

Sally glowered at Bunnie, most of her face hidden behind her knee.

"I know how Snively can make you feel," Bunnie said, and now she didn't at Sally anymore, just stared at her feet. "He's good at it. He's probably taught the skunk well, too. Back in the woods I always hoped he'd come for me, take me back. And now I'm afraid of what'll happen if I see him again." She stood up and reached out her hand, her left, the one that still looked like a rabbit's, put in around Sally's. "We all need to stick together. Your Highness."

"I know." Sally closed her eyes, but didn't otherwise move. "I'm sorry. It's hard for me."

"Well you gotta try harder, Sally. I'm thinking if Ida been at that ambush, that skunk woulda been eatin' more dirt than a pack of pack of prairie dogs." She swallowed. "Or at least Antoine might be okay."

"I know Bunnie, I'm sorry. I don't know when we'll have a fight next, though. A year wasted chasing down that raccoon traitor's ambush . . . . I've got an army and nothing to do with it."

"Well can you at least talk to me?"

". . . . Tomorrow. I need to be alone. I'm sorry."

"For ya go, Rotor says he needs to talk to you," Bunnie called after Sally as she left the room, with the same effect as if she had drenched her with a well-aimed bucket of icy water. With a sigh, she approached Rotor, sitting at the table where Antoine had lost his leg, cleaning his shotgun, but looked up when he saw her. "Your Highness."

Just looking at him she felt more hung over. The worst part was the embarrassment. "You want to talk to me?"

He nodded. "The driver tried to leave you for dead at Gaumont Labs. I'm worried Ari Koren wants to have you killed."

Sonic had found them a little late-night diner before they went back to the safehouse. Formica, hot dogs, raccoon lady on the counter reading a little book. The hot dogs were a little questionable, but the chili was spicy, and you could get them to bury the dogs in the chili, which was great. He got that and cola and ate it. While he ate he kept flexing the fingers of his left hand, freezing every few moments when the pain got too much. They had gotten wrecked up pretty bad, but they were coming together nice.

Tails said he wasn't hungry. He sat there reading the newspaper, spiked on a long wooden thing. He looked really bored. And Sonic guessed that he himself was really bored, too.

But he didn't want to go to sleep. He was thinking. Why didn't Sally want him around, he was thinking.

He hadn't always liked her. When he was a kid Rosie had said that she couldn't sleep with the rest of them, had to be in her special little room for the king. That was repenshit, and after that he'd always tried to sleep where he shouldn't: in the classroom, in the gym, in the hallway, then outside, when he'd built his hut. She always sided with Antoine, too, when they got in fights; all Antoine would have to do was start crying and Sally would be doing her Rosie impression, leave him alone, Sonic Hedgehog, and Sonic would sneak out into the forest and go running and tree-climbing by himself.

But she was funny, too, and that was nice. Sometimes he'd tell her a dumb joke like the knock knock one where it's orange and banana, and she'd roll her eyes and moan like it actually hurt to hear it. But she wouldn't go away, and she would give all the answers to finish the joke. Shame on you, Sonic Hedgehog, she'd say, and he'd tell her another one, and she'd close her eyes in play pain and frown and give little laughs, like she was crying.

He guessed they'd both kind of noticed each other at the same time. The way she'd wear clothes against her fur-color. The little chimpmunk tail her mother gave her: so teeny, but then it would move. Sonic liked her as good as any of the girls he'd seen in town, from the daughters at the Piren Farm to the women out late in the Port, always that red bow they wore somewhere to let you know they were for sale.

There was more to Sally than that, though. Or maybe it was something more to Sonic himself? He didn't know. All he knew was that he was miserable because Sally had kind of shipped him out. He'd pulled Rotor out of the farmhouse and asked him what to do. The walrus had shaken his head, taken off his hat and mopped his forehead with it. "She's a girl, Sonic, I don't know what to tell you. You're the girl expert, right? Compared to me."

He laid his ears back. "No I'm not."

Sonic started to feel like there wasn't something wrong with Sally. There was something wrong with him. He could feel it now, something wrong, inside him. Maybe not even inside him, maybe just him. Like he wasn't good enough for her.

Was he a good person?

Sally was torn up about Antoine. It was horrible. He couldn't walk. Sonic tried to imagine not being able to ever get out of a chair and couldn't even imagine it; he'd rather die. He just wanted to put his spikes out and hide. Did Sally think he didn't care about Antoine? Did he not care enough about Antoine?

Did she like Antoine? She was always talking to him, about plans and Robotnik and stuff.

Sonic was the girl expert, Rotor said. Did Sally know about the Piren sisters?

Did she know about the Port women?

Shame on you, Sonic Hedgehog.

He glanced over at Tails, but at least he was oblivious to whatever was wrong with him. Buried in day-old newsprint. It had the report on their attack on Gaumont Labs, but it didn't get the big headline. That went to the picture of a human woman who looked like a cartoon bomb had gone off in her face, her skin and hair and clothes streaked with black and murky red. Tails had heard from the TV news yesterday: a bomb had gone off in her face.

"**TO THE LAST MAN AND WOMAN"**

**Wolfpacks Promise Assassination Campaign; Merchant of Terror Claims Responsibility**

The story was long; Tails read all of it. The bomb was cruel, but that wasn't the worst part of the story: he kept reading and the Merchant of Terror slowly became a goat and then a goat with yellow fur and then the word Marigold popped and it was the man who'd kidnapped him in the forest, held him hostage, finally sent a rat to kill him before Cat rescued him. It was like the bomb had gone off in Tails' face. The goat was alive and well and making lots of money.

The stuff about Sally and everyone was on the fourth page and didn't mention any names. It barely mentioned anything, since all the government wasn't telling any more than they had to.

**Police Duel Gunmen at Research Facility**

"Armed attackers exchanged gunfire with police at the Tolsalvey facilities of Gaumont Laboratories on Moonday, forcing the evacuation of the entire laboratory and surrounding buildings. At least eight gunmen were killed. Police stated that the attackers had been led to believe that valuable industrial secrets were at the facility, but did not further elaborate on the identity or objectives of the attackers. Several officers were treated for superficial injuries at University Hospital and Napiers Hospital.

"Gaumont Laboratories is a major material sciences and engineering firm that has sold its services to government and private business. Gaumont agreed to cooperate with the investigation after talks with Internal Security Office. The facility evacuation lasted for less than an hour, after which employees were permitted to return to work. Gaumont's stock remains unchanged on the Robotropolis International Exchange, and CEO Richard Melies predicts no adverse . . . ."

Wait.

The evacuation lasted less than an hour. The robot-lady Amanda couldn't still be at the lab when they let people back in, people might see. Even if they hid her in a box or something, the scientists could see it and ask questions. So they must have left earlier, really soon after their getaway.

And that was got him thinking about the bit where it said several officers were treated for superficial injuries at Napiers Hospital.

They'd believed the raccoon lady when she said that the robot lab was on the south side of the city because of all the documents she could get. But it would have meant that the lab had moved. Bunnie had told them that her home was in one of the tall buildings in the city center. Snively would take her in a helicopter to the roof, then go down to the basement on a long elevator ride, never seeing anything else in the building. That was years ago, of course, so it made sense that the lab might have moved.

But what if it hadn't?

Bunnie didn't remember enough about the building for them to figure out which it was. Sort of middling in height, some bigger buildings around, some smaller ones. All rectangles. She didn't remember seeing the palace from it, but wasn't sure. Sally and Antoine had tried to figure it out, but figured it could be all sorts of government buildings downtown, space for War Ministry and Science Ministry.

But Amanda and Bunnie, doing the, the roboticizing took a lot of surgery and medicine. What if the hiding place was in a hospital? That would make sense. How many hospitals were there downtown? He knew there was Napiers, Not University Hospital, that was the hospital for National University, in Tolsalvey.

Right by Gaumont Labs, where you'd take people who were injured. Maybe you'd take them to Napiers if you needed better equipment, or a special doctor—maybe. But he thought that the University Hospital was pretty good. And the newspaper said superficial injuries.

But they'd taken someone there anyway. Before the evacuation was over.

"Sonic," Tails said, "I want to go back and talk to Sally. Or call her, right now."

Sonic groaned. Tails looked up; he was face down, hands pressed back over his quills. "Me too."

Author's Note: I've been forgetting to mention this, but all segments have benefitted from suggestions by Kain Blackwood. His name gets retroactively added after all previous chapters.

## \*Chapter 7\*: West Molineaux, 4 Floreal 3230

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**West Molineaux/Mooresville, Robotropolis, 4 Floreal 3230**

Josh skipped dinner and went for a walk. He couldn't eat. Some businessrabbit had been murdered in Terscala yesterday. No one had claimed responsibility but no one had to, all the Embassy regulars knew it was part of the grinding, depressing dispute between the innocent, stubborn wolves and the world that had displaced them. No solution.

But lots of ways to make things worse. Josh had learned from the Vice Consul that every tragedy was a weapon for someone. The rabbit's death had been spectacular and terrifying, and though he wasn't a Lachels citizen you wouldn't know that to hear the Radicals and the dissident Nationalists on Kimex and INC. On the Left, the Nationalist coalition was putting profits before people. On the Right, the Nationalists were rolling over for Robotnik, ignoring his pathetic failure to crack down on the wolf savages. There was pressure to issue a travel advisory, which would be hell for the Embassy and piss off Josh's counterparts at Mobian State Ministry. And they hadn't done a single thing wrong! It made for two solid days of unnecessary work, two hours a night slumped in an office chair, arms twitching in the constant glow of the unkillable ceiling lights. He badly needed some time away from work, no thoughts, just the steady hum of the evening traffic winding down.

A squeak of tires as someone brushed the curb. The sedan was blue, unassuming, wheelwells still grimed with the winter's salt. As Josh looked at it, the passenger's window descended. Frank Pulaski, scowling with rage. "Get in the car."

The backseat was half occupied by a minute light-skinned human who seemed to have been made out of whatever was left after the gods made Pulaski, which wasn't much. His hands barely emerged from his blue suitcuffs; his diagonal striped tie was tucked under a cracked brown leather belt. The man's thick plastic lenseframes did double duty, keeping the long mop of brittle brown hair barely out of the eyes in the center of his tiny head. His legs were crossed at the ankles in the middle of the footwell and he made no motion to cede it, so Josh found himself with his head bent under the ceiling, elbow jammed into the window, and knees crammed into the driver's seat. "I—"

"Shut up," Pulaski barked in the passenger's seat, thick fingers rapidly tapping the ALL LOCK latch on the door. Josh could only see the shadowed side of his head around the faded blue armrest. His tight beard still clung to his face but above the sideburns more skin shone than he remembered. Humans lose their head-hair with age, some of them, but Josh had never seen it happening to a single person before. It made him look sick, mangy.

Josh groaned, pressing his eye and left snoutcheek to the window. This far west the car was drifting out of the rebuilt brownstones and lofts that housed the upper-middle class ethnic mobians without political connections and into—what was this? Tight, narrow wooden homes, a quick climb up a cement staircase to the door. It reminded him of the bungalow belt, back home.

"It's maddening," Pulaski breathed, eyes closed. "Anything could be happening out there. I cannot see anything outside the reach of my own eyes. We might as well bring the Bureau of Elections down here and have a referendum on who the Mobians think ought to run the country—"

Glasses man squirmed against the backseat, hand tight around the window-grip, magnetically repulsed by Pulaski's worry. "Frank."

"Of course, we'll do the voting with bullets. We can have Pawel sponsor a goddamn MURDERFEST!" Pulaski screamed again as soon as he could fill his lungs. "It's dodgeball! With guns! He's got no respect for any—"

"Frank. Breathe. Slow down." Josh momentarily wondered if Glasses was Second Assistant Director Pulaski's psychiatrist. "I know you and Richard went way back, but you can't let this rattle you, not now. Wielblad's been off his leash for a while. We're not without resources—"

"All of them in that douchebag Ari Koren's camp. Our policy requires, at minimum, substantial influence over two, count them two, major dissident organizations operating within this country's borders. You try to balance a chair on one leg and were going to upend the whole mess. Five years and the next generation of AssaultBots will bepouring north over the border —"

"We have options, Frank, alright? Koren gives us some control over the squirrel. Long term, the Maybell and Posniak projects are still active. You can't seriously have expected this to be a walk in the park."

Josh turned his head, getting a fabric burn from the ceiling. "Baxter—"

"Why is the squirrel still in play?" Pulaski jabbed his finger toward the ceiling, slashed with it. Invisible touch-screen, moving things around on a map. "There. This is a great example. We're not routing money at her anymore; she's got no news play; why is she still conducting strikes! In Robotropolis!"

"Frank, Robotnik almost decapitated her organization—I can't believe I'm calling a half-dozen teenagers an organization."

"Six is enough, with who they got. The blue one has to be straight out of the black box." Pulaski shook his head, squinting with thought. "No. No. She's gone on too long. I want to take affirmative action. Options for that."

Glasses tapped a pair of thin fingers on a briefcase in the footwell. "Quickest action would involve intel from one of our assets with Koren. The squirrel made contact early today. She wants—"

Pulaski smiled angrily, lips pulling back from his square teeth like an animal. "Contact personally?"

A nod. "Will be, with the walrus. She wants blueprints to Napiers Hospital and a commitment on troops."

The human's eyes pressed closed, jaw cracking as it worked. "That does it. Hells, if she's aiming that closely at Kolensky, I'm willing to go black if this doesn't—You!" Pulaski wheeled on Josh, left hand gripping the seat hard enough to fill the air with the faint snaps of individual threads. "What is Baxter Posniak doing?"

"I—he—" Frank Pulaski was a large human. Josh was an average bear, but he felt pretty small. "He's—"

"Talk, damn it!"

"He's uh, he's been asking for contacts with Treasury, uh, that big, uh, firm, whatdoyoucallit, uh, Kogen Baird, accountants—"

"Not enough, not enough. These assets move. Now." To Glasses: "Who do we have to run the contact?"

"Tiger and Scully can't be touched for a week. I'd say Klingmann, but given the moves that, uh, Griffith Varitek has made during the past week—"

"Let's assume Klingmann's dead." Pulaski shook his head. "What a joke. I've got no one but—"

Oh shit, Josh thought.

"Give it to him," Pulaski said. Glasses pressed the briefcase into Josh's belly; Pulaski was scribbling furiously on a notepad. "There's fifty thousand marks worth of cash in there, some of it in Mobian sovereigns. The serials are tracked, so don't get smart. Follow these instructions precisely. You'll meet a weasel named—"

Josh's mind slotted away the words, instructions. Thirty seconds later, with Pulaski stuffing his handwritten notes into Josh's fist, Josh was able to get his first question together: "This is so she'll be killed, isn't it?"

The human clouted him and his lip swelled hot. "Do you think I owe you? Do you know how many felonies you've committed? Do you think you'll be able to drag me into anything if I drop a dime to Justice Ministry?"

The air felt heavy and wet as the car drove off, leaving him on a remote corner, each quadrant of street filled with another identical house.

Renee was off the case. But she read about the debacle in the newspaper, and the details were enough to suggest the underlying incompetence, so she decided to test whether Snively had ever bothered to remove her security clearance. No, as it turned out: Renee remotely logged onto Kolensky's server, twenty floors above, and read the forward guard debriefs. Then she sat and stared at them for about an hour. She didn't have any liquor—she didn't drink—but she just kept staring as the light from the windows died away, leaving her in the sickly glow of the screen LCDs.

—a fox child, approximately ten to fourteen years of age, fur toasted orange, approximately four and a half feet in height. Distinguishing features include a second tail.

So that's what had happened to the kid. It was worse than putting a bomb in a backpack without telling and sending him downtown. When did they start teaching him to enjoy killing people? I'm bored. They had given him, according to the reports, a small-caliber automatic. Let's play a little game of cops and robbers.

The wolf assassination had pushed the botched ambush below the fold in the Clarion. That single death was more important; it involved the mining multinationals and the other corporations that fed off them. This other disaster, by contrast, was a reasonable success: a couple cops shot, some fox's soul ruined. True, there was some minor property damage, but at least Gaumont Laboratories would be graciously compensated from the national treasury. Not a bad deal, considering their taxes were already so low that the Robotropolis Police Department was reduced to amputating neighborhoods from the city like gangrenous limbs. Walls laid so precisely that they seemed less designed to pen mobians in—there were mobians everywhere—this was Mobius—but to helpfully remind the humans where they couldn't go.

Mites were crawling through the fur of the body of the nation. Parasites. Their money sprouted skyscrapers in the city like hard tumors. Robotnik drives them to the border and then lets them sneak back in, fixing their suckers onto property and . . . .

. . . No. Not Robotnik. Robotnik had left the Overland Empire under a death sentence. He'd given everything he was to Mobius. He couldn't be more of a Mobian if he were covered in fur. But the rest of them, all of them. It couldn't have worked out better for the Overlanders if they'd secretly arranged the whole thing, put a guy at his elbow . . . .

Anger turned slowly to paranoia. Except it wasn't paranoia, the humans that had ruined her career were involved in very, very weird activity. Snively's incredible tale: sentient experimentation from King Maximilian's most desperate days in the Great War. Something that never should have happened, that Robotnik decided should be erased. Snively couldn't bring himself to just terminate the poor things, like some bad culture of bacteria, until his good deed escaped and was inches away from becoming the best tool for slander a rebel could ask for.

Weird. But true. She'd seen Amanda the skunk in the basement of the hospital. Bunnie the rabbit had given Renee her first concussion and landed her in Ironlock. The story checked out.

But then, something weird.

It was hard to complain about being taken out of Ironlock, but the order of events was too implausible. Posniak, another human, of course, was there to pick her up, and the guards just happened to bring out the wrong prisoner first. The right wrong prisoner, a mole perfectly placed to let ISO worm its way into Royal Army. It was too cute by half, and she'd told Captain Kolensky as much. Even if the raccoon's history checks up, there's something going on here that—

Renee, shut up. You need some time off. Just keep quiet about Bunnie and collect some paychecks while we regroup.

Okay. But shouldn't there be a double-blind operation on Posniak and—

I will take care of it.

She didn't know why, in retrospect—anger over her failure, the psychic fallout of her detention at Ironlock—but she hadn't believed Snively. Instead, she'd went out on her own initiative and bought Posniak a thank-you present for getting her out of detention: tickets to see the national opera. He was not rude enough to refuse them, so he came along and actually seemed to really enjoy himself. Which was good, because he didn't notice at all at intermission when Renee slipped his phone's SIM card into an identical model kitted out with a bug, courtesy of her friends back in RPD Controlled Substances Division. It would only give her half of a phone conversation, but it would transmit via occasional alternate-number broadcasts to cell networks, and wouldn't set off standard line-impedance wiretap-checkers.

It was illegal, but wasn't her mission in the forest illegal, too? Hadn't she just spent a stretch in prison that practically entitled her to commit a crime? She turned the bug on the first chance she got and heard Baxter ordering food at a Jimmy's.

Waited until the weekend. He was talking to a librarian at the university.

Another week. Pages occasionally turning.

After that, the business of wolf-hunting and downtown security had just somehow seemed more important.

But how, how could Snively have screwed this one up? The raccoon was the sort of asset that you dreamed about when chasing a small cell like Royal Army, and nothing suggests that the squirrel had suspected a thing before the ambush itself. But with the full force of the army and RPD and any other agency you need to deploy against them, how? How do you lose these people when you've got them in a building, surrounded by guns? Except on purpose?

Maybe Snively was just dumb.

For old time's sake, she fired up the app associated with the bug, and sent a request to transmit.

CRTS HANDSHAKE ACHIEVE, said the computer. Then the speakers fitzed and filled the empty room with a series of rapid, sharp pops, so close that they ran into each other. "Oh my gods!" someone shrieked. Shrieked it again. It took her a moment to realize it was Posniak. And then she realized that the pops were the cut-frequency remains of gunshots.

"Oh my gods!"

One of the vets grabbed Baxter's hair and shoved his face against the frozen remnants of brick at the base of the bomb-shattered wall. "Seien Sie still bitte, mein Herr," he said in the calm this-is-a-recording tones of a luxury hotel night manager on the front desk, then pivoted onto one knee, sighted his rifle and fired a precise burst of three shots into the gray darkness. Baxter had no idea what the vets were shooting at. He could hear return shots, but everywhere, all around them. It was as though the freezing air were filled with the mating calls of horrible, mechanical birds. As he levered himself up on his arm, another one of the vets shuffled past him in a strange wobbling gait, knees bent and fixed, staring down the rifle he kept gyroscope-steady in front of his chin. Without thinking, Baxter started to crawl after him.

The vets were of an indeterminate age. They were hard to see—not in the sense that they were good at hiding and using camouflage, though they were, but in that you could look right at them, turn your eyes away and be hard pressed to describe what you just saw. It was vaguely human in shape and size. It was gray: gray clothes, sallow skin. The face was dark, lurking in the shadows underneath a bulky ten-year-old helmet like a snail that has learned the hard way never to come out of its shell. Sometimes they would take a drag on a joint and a person would briefly flare up in the glow, a moment of boredom or fear or chiseled anger. They all smoked Mobian cigarettes.

The War MBAs called the vets Security. Security was a mass noun. "How much Security do we need for an Action like that?" one would say to the other, while the Security stood to the side, milling around like cattle, one touching her glowing butt to the tip of another's fresh smoke. The War MBAs, Manni informed him, always spoke Mobian, to reduce the chance that the Security knew what you were saying about it. Deanna had introduced Baxter to Manni, Kogen Baird's regular Vorburg operative, a crew-cut light-skinned human that looked like he could put his fingers through a man's body at will, and then retired from Baxter's current interests to spend some a couple weeks away from work in PTSD therapy. Then Manni had taken Baxter into the foothills in their weekly chartered plane, then taken him into the mountains in a towering Whiteout VTOL, Mobian army surplus. When the rotors and maneuvering rockets stopped, Manni took him out and across a snow-filled parking lot roaring with portable octane generators powering the perimeter floodlights and into a small building, to meet the War MBAs.

These held a kind of terror for Baxter: they were better than him. Political science was the art of making predictions regarding the distribution and movements of wealth, the application of force, and the interrelations between the two. The War MBAs did the same thing, except the wealth was wound about their waists in reinforced goretex belts, the force was used by men twice their size and less than a meter away who had no moral reservations about killing them for the aforementioned money, and the decisions were made in seconds. In a twisted way, what happened next was all their fault. Baxter arrived with nothing but the research, a drafty blue parka from the Terscala branch of Dickersons, a faint scent of airsickness on his shoes, and a burning desire to return to the VTOL's belly. "Look, if you know any of those names—"

"Oh yeah." The WMBA up on his stuff was a squatbodied, roundheaded human with thinning blonde hair and prescription snowgoggles, penlights mounted to each side with small plumber's clamps. "Fucking Pawel Kinziak, I think he's Pawel the Butcher, right. Rudi Sarkstein's a fellow traveler. These aren't our guys."

"Not Fourth Army?" Manny asked. "Commie front?"

"No and no." The WMBA flopped Baxter's manila envelope closed and pressed his nose to a bank of permanent laptops mounted on crates with duct tape and humming away. "What do they call it, Eternal Vigilance? Eternal Soldiers? These fascists hate losers even more than they hate mobians. Bunch of ex-Jagernaz Vorburg military intel hardasses peddling equatorial heroin to Mobius and young furry ass to the tropics. They'd liquidate half the citizenry they got left for treason if they could swing it. Fuckers hit our Firmaire cash drop back at the solstice, our whole damn escort crew blitzed on vodka. Cut Kowak's eyes out."

Manni gave a snake's hiss. "The fuck was that? That guy with the T-shirts?'

"Nah, the Kingsport CPA."

"They took his eyes?"

The CA nodded. "Plus ears, penis. Lucky they slit his throat, fucking savages."

"So," Baxter interrupted, desperately trying not to follow the anecdote, "we don't know anything about them, huh? No way to verify what they're doing with this money."

"Yes, no. Information is money. We could take an Action." The WMBA went for his belt and pulled out a wad of dirty bills the width of his wrist. "Fuckers are overdue for an Action."

"Action?" Baxter asked.

Manni scratched his chin. "How much Security would you need for an Action like that?"

"Buyers' market. Potato blight, vodka's way up." The WMBA shrugged as he licked a finger and started cutting up the roll, turning to Baxter. "You pick very deserving targets, so I'll give you a price break on the Action. Everything on you plus five gees plus interest due a month." As Baxter nodded and said "deal," he continued, "You ID the goods you want at the scene, of course."

The Dickerson's parka had a big hood; the Security used it as a handle. The vets decided he was not crawling quickly enough and dragged him forward, stumbling like a repen puppy until he was on his hands and knees in front of a black door. He had been told the target was a base that the fascists used about two klicks away, a former Gymnasium that was used for transacting business and (Baxter longed to pay less attention) 'maintaining discipline.' But he couldn't see that from here. He was lost. Brick wall, snow, darkness, the distant gunshots that he was growing to think of as silence. The Security arranged themselves carefully around the door. From Baxter's height on hands and knees, they were legs.

Thunder. "DURCHBRU—" The voice was lost in the cough of a shotgun. Baxter could hear it and smell its smoky aftertaste but he just saw the legs as the Security took him in, figid tile floors with boots on them. "KLAR," "KLAR," echoes from behind another door: "bruch!" They stopped again, another door-breach setup. The point man, pulled a shiny canister from his dirt-caked hip, kicked the door, everyone put their forearms over their eyes—

"Fuck!" Baxter barked, and in the brain-stabbing whiteness that followed the flash-bang, every single one of the pops and coughs and thunderous chatters that broke through the tinnitus ring were aimed directly at him. Something kicked him. He crawled away from it, found the door, crawled away from that, found a sleeping man, gingerly stopped, the returning darkness and color slowly revealing to him the sleeper's face, the grey nightmare of death.

He rolled away from the dead man and looked up at a pair of tall males, pale-skinned, grey knit caps, black steel. Their faces. Are they mine? Are they my Security?

How much money do I have in my wallet?

One knelt down and cuffed Baxter in the temple. "Stehen Sie auf. Auf." The man grabbed the chest of his parka and hauled him to his unsteady feet. "Schnell, bitte."

It took a minute for the place to resolve itself into a school. Baxter hadn't been sent to the principal's office for fifteen years, but it was hell to be back; the walls lined with paper file cabinets, wires snaking underfoot to some softly humming minitowers on a wide, old pre-War desk, an overturned lapcomp. One of the cabinets had tumbled and crap was spilling over the dead fascists and Security that littered the floor. One of the vets started flashing him crumpled graph paper with digits hand-scrawled in the boxes. "Dieses? Dieses? Mögen wir zurückgehen?"

It was a blur. The Security had a sack which they were filling with crap. Baxter grabbed, literally, a fistful of minidiscs, stuffed them into one of the wide pockets on his coat meant to hold the heavy gloves he was missing. They could do this all night, come and go in shifts. Surely these random numbers and half-trashed discs will put beyond all dispute that Robotnik is paying money to bring some sort of order to this madhouse. Gods bless the endeavor. "Mögen wir zurückgehen?" the Security asked again.

"Ja. Alles klar." Baxter rolled to his knees, swept some discs into a pile for good measure, grit scraping against the minute, perfect spirals. "Können wir—" Baxter glanced back at the two vets, then back at the other one, peeking around the door, as gray as the others. Confusing. "Wer bist du—"

The slender arm swung around the doorframe and pointed at the first half of Baxter's Security a gun so tiny it seemed dwarfed even by the rather tiny hand in its tight black leather glove. It shot the vet in the face, a hollow phup as it burst through the back of the man's helmet in a puff of fabric and flesh. He dropped straight down; an on/off switch. Baxter's other guard rolled to a squat and fired a haze of combat-shot into the door jamb, but the arm had disappeared. It came back about two thirds of a meter lower, almost at the ground, and popped at the man's unarmored knee. The vet cried out, grabbing his leg, and the woman came from around the door to put three more of her minute, deadly bullets into the man's face.

Baxter watched from his knees as the woman precisely checked the round in her pistol's chamber, then, keeping the gun loosely on Baxter's chest, swept the gunmetal cap from her head and scratched at her wire-tight platinum hair.

It took him a moment, because he hadn't seen her in combat gear before, and frankly, she hadn't been around Kolensky's Robotropolis office space very much. "Lieutenant Spitz," Baxter said. "Lila. I heard your ambush didn't work out."

"No."

"So," he said, the shock of the two murders slowly melting into a warm, drowning fear. "What else have you been up to?"

"Killing foreign spies," she said.

## \*Chapter 8\*: Muzenkspitz, 4 Floreal 3230

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**Muzenkspitz, 4 Floreal 3230**

"How'd you know I was here?" Baxter asked.

"Please don't act stupid," Lila Spitz said. She stood against the cold, gray bricks of the bare wall, feet well clear of the steaming pool spreading from the men she had just killed. "It's clearly painfully important to you that you're not. You told your pet raccoon what you were doing. You must have known she'd tell Snively. It was easy enough to pick up your trail. I'm not sure what sort of double-bluff you think you're playing, but I'd consider changing your strategy."

"I don't—I'm not—" Baxter's parka was stifling, air boiling up from under the collar onto his face, hot smell mixing with the cold, dry dust in his nose. "I'm not—saying anything, I don't know, I don't know what you're talking about, what the Captain—"

"No," she said, and the way she said no, that was that. The first thing Baxter had thought upon first seeing Spitz back in Robotropolis was that her suit was stiff, too tight. It wasn't the suit, it was her. In the shapeless cold-weather gear the rigid alertness was the only thing defining her; the way she relentlessly held the gun on his belly seemed almost casual, like a cigarette forgotten between a pair of fingers. "You obviously see what there is to see."

"Do you? I'm doing this for Mobius. I found evidence of embezzlement. Someone was—"

"No, no, no." Lila sighed. "You have discovered that your commanding officer is paying money to the Ewigesoldaten—that's what all these poor dead soldiers here call themselves, in case you don't know."

"Do you know how bad this is going to be for your country, if anyone finds out about it? Breaching the MAT and the alliance with Lachels? Arrest him."

"I suppose I would, if I were acting here as an agent of the Mobian government. But I am more than that—and less, even though I have moved my residence to the nation. I am a friend to Snively, and to what is left of our empire." She smiled. "I do not think that this will harm my country at all."

The news hit Baxter as a one-two punch. One: theMobian government would be just as eager to expose this conspiracy as Lachels. He could be safe if he got back to Mobius. Two: there was no way Lila was going to let him leave the building alive. "I think I understand," he said, keeping her talking. "You and Snively are just the longest, deepest-cover Vorlandreich intelligence agents ever. Problem: the Vorlandreich doesn't exist anymore—"

"You understand nothing, Lakolska. Not me. Definitely not Snively. How old are you? Twenty-two? Twenty-one?"

"Twenty-s—"

"Doesn't matter. None of you Lakolska ever understood. Stop me when this sounds familiar: spent the war at your mother's knee, listening to how cruel the mountain people were? How they couldn't leave well enough alone? How expensive the war was?"

"Nope, spent it bei Tante Trudi's farm in Pikau. Potatoes and turnips." Baxter felt his pantseat tug at his belt and realized he must be scooting himself minutely away from Lila. "My mom was a national police detective, so she was busy after the Kaiserin accused the Lachels branch offices of treason—"

"Busy with your independence movement, no doubt."

Another squirm, more distance from the gun. "It's starting to sound familiar; you can stop now."

Lila made a small movement and Baxter flinched as a bullet impacted in the floor tiles behind his head. "That's far enough," she remarked in passing, then continued: "Do you know where Snively was while you ate potatoes and turnips? In an infantry unit on the southern front, the Wymberg foothills."

"That's great," Baxter breathed. Anger was in his voice, without the force. He wanted to be angry. He didn't want to be scared. "And he loved the mother-empire and he got sixteen confirmed kills and he was a hero and if only my mom had done the same—"

"He got captured at the first Battle of Ordon, before the Mobian retreat."

Baxter said nothing.

"Ironlock was unpleasant," Lila continued. "You don't need me to tell you that, of course. Everyone knows that. The Mobians couldn't make any headway against us; the mountain passes were ours and we soon took back their stolen farmland. They were angry, frustrated beasts. And since they could not win a battle, there was only one place in which they could vent their anger."

"Or maybe they just learned it watching the Kaiserins Propagandverwaltung broadcasts. You weren't sure whether she was trying to refight a couple of hundred-year-old wars or to see if mobians became humans when all their fur fell out."

Lila waved that away. "Denken Sie, dass Sie dieser Krieg erweben können?" From then on Lila's voice sunk into her throat, gs squeezing off her sound in advance of most ts: all Vorbugisch. It caught Baxter off guard—after so long on his current assignment, he found himself translating it into Mobian—quickly, but translating. "This chilly place is the headquarters of many corporations. They're fictions by their nature, aren't they? Which of the lies led you to the rebel army?"

"Whiplash." He said it in Vorburgisch first, Peitshenreimen, but it was organized in Mobius and named in Mobian: "Whiplash. Limited Liability Corporation."

"He couldn't resist," Lila said, an indulgent, sad laugh shaking the words. "That's what they named him. The guards. Snively Whiplash." She shook her head. Baxter shook his a moment—he'd always read the Captain's name wrong, apparently, as Snivley, like the Mobian snivel, not the Mobian snide. "He did not have vital military information, but it was not interrogation. That warden. You would think the terrible ones would be the biggest and fastest and strongest. The ones with a predator's teeth. But she was a rabbit. Such a slight thing. You would hardly think she would eat meat, let alone find a small human so . . . . amusing."

Baxter moved and suddenly her eyes, which had been so distant, were staring down the short barrel.

"I don't hate mobians," she added, "but Snively does. I do not blame him for it."

"Okay. So your boyfriend is still angry with the furs, so you and Snivley—

"Snively."

". . . Sn—Snively . . . ." The name made Baxter want to sneeze. "You're going to come up here with your buddies, put the Empire back together, get up off the mat and have another go at the Mobians? You seriously believe that?"

"It's not about the War. You flatland traitors lost us more than that. I want to see my homeland great again. I want to see it again. Not this, dust and wreckage."

"You think that Snivley believes that?"

"Shut up. I'm not hiring you as a consultant, you Lakolska shit. I'm taking care of you."

"Taking . . . ."

"You're going to the Lachels border," Lila said. "You don't keep the evidence, you don't go back to Mobius and you don't talk to Exchequer Ministry. You go back to Lachels and do whatever your type does once it's done with the government."

She had suggested join some fixer law firm and peddle crooked bonds from a High Demon investment bank by the time he emerged from the school building's dark shell into the night and snow, a dark expanse that may have been a tackleball field, maybe that sloping chainlink the outfield fence of a baseball diamond. Lila was lying, Baxter concluded almost immediately. If he were found dead in the building itself, that would look bad—it would set Robotnik's counterintelligence people wondering why he was found dead in a fascist base in Vorburg, which might start Exchequer looking for a conspiracy as surely as if Baxter showed up alive and started yelling about it.

But, he knew as the few lights of the building shrank away behind him in what was becoming a blizzard, the information was too good for her to let him give to the Lachels government. Not even as unprovable rumor.

"Maybe," Spitz's voice suggested from the darkness behind him, "you could become one of these government consultants. "Tolkachi,"—the word was a Gruenzetz colloquialism—"you know."

So it was just a minimization problem, really, of how far away from the building he needed to get to make the risk of his escape, however minimal, match the risk of being connected to the fascist rebels. Maybe to what was left of the the Muzenkspitz suburbs. Maybe across town.

Maybe right across this tackleball field.

The lights popped without warning. Baxter was able to count two before the third forced his eyes closed against a sudden white blur of snow and halogen glare. "Hör auf!" Voices deep male, slightly amplified. "Fällt deine Waffen!"

Without thinking, Baxter ducked, hopefully out of Lila's line of fire, and ran parallel to where he thought the lights were coming from. Instantly the cracks of rifles boomed on the wind. His right foot skidded under him and he went down, making a little Snow Corpse. He rolled onto his back, saw the black night filled with the shadowy suggestion of snow falling, thick flakes the size of fingertips. A red streak of tracer round shot through it, and then another, closer to his eyes.

There was more gunfire than he would have expected, and shouting, Vorlandisch shouts from every quarter of the compass. They are always fighting up here, he thought with the idle interest of someone who knows he's already dead. And then he was seized with terror, because he saw a way to live: the Fourth Army, the most powerful group in town and the recognized government of the country. Lila was with the fascists, the people shooting at her could only be Fourth Army, and Fourth Army were the only people within a stone's throw that wouldn't want to kill him—they wouldn't want to kill him! They'd keep him alive! They'd put him in prison and put him on TV and make him confess to all kinds of espionage on behalf of whoever they wanted!

Baxter rolled onto his stomach, eyes and nose stinging, breathing wet, saturated air. The shots on his right were louder, so that was the Fourth Army. He got ready to sprint low for them, inhaled for I surrender! and he slipped because something grabbed his ankle. "No!" he squealed, kicking, grabbing at snow, pulling it, then spitting it out of his face. "I surrender, dammit!"

The grip on his ankle was relinquished so that his face could be mashed hard into the snow and the air squeezed form his belly. "You dumb motherfucker," said the head War MBA. "Don't know which way you're going."

The WMBA's disdain lasted until he and his Security, carrying the dog tags and valuables of the first wave of Security, had gradually disengaged from the firefight and gotten Baxter back to the Kogen Baird base camp, inside a knot of still more Security and space heters. Then he became effusive. "Genius move. Genius. Leave them all staring at a pistol and leave the bitch staring at five submachineguns. That's how the little fish do it, baby, make the big fish fight. Genius move."

"Well," said Baxter. He thought about it, and yeah. That had pretty much been his logic, he guessed. "Thanks," he said, graciously.

The WMBA nodded, grinning broadly, his headlights on, waggling conical beams in floating motes of asbestos dust powdering from the walls. "You owe us an extra hundred thousand for saving your life. Sound fair?"

Baxter reached his hand into his pocket and felt a loose set of five or so datadiscs.

"I can get that kind of money authorized by Exchequer," he said. "Back in Robotropolis."

"I surrender!" Lila cried, voice half-muffled by snow.

She had waited until her allies had advanced past her position, and the firefight had seemed to die out. Unfortunate, but there was no good way to identify herself to what she thought likely were her allies in the Ewigesoldaten, coming to reinforce the lost school-base. Guns turned to her but did not fire, and she stood up, brushing herself off. One of them approached her, a grey-skinned shade in a green tactical light from a HUD visor.

"You are Ewigesoldaten?" she asked?

"Yes," the man replied.

Lila sighed in relief. "I need your help. We must find the man I was with."

"Who are you?" the leader asked.

"I am a friend of Snively Kolensky," Lila replied.

The man drew his sidearm and shot Lila in the head.

Rotor yawned, glancing through the narrow gap between the windowframe and the rose curtains. They were outside of the little old city of Moselle, west of the capital, meeting the deliverymen halfway. They were outside of the War's saturation bombing radius and the buildings across the street from the motel were stone and wood, dark cool structures that used to be storerooms of the manors around tiny Moselle; now, barns for some of the smaller farmers. Far behind them Rotor could see the hidden bulk of the maglev line in the gentle moonlight, and occasionally he imagined he could see the soft gleam of the river beyond.

A buzz, and he slapped his fingers sharply against his forehead. The first of the year's mosquitoes. He scratched at the bite, just under the edge of his cap.

"Do you do that so you get a clean view?" Sally asked. When Rotor turned to her, she lifted her right index finger to point at the heavy red bangs covering her forehead, then drew it over her temple to point at the back of her head.

Rotor put down the black duffel, reached up and straightened his red cap, the fingers of his left hand pressing the sweatband in place against his forehead while his right reached back and tugged the brim against a lump of fat on the back of his neck. "That's how a catcher wears it."

"Catcher?"

He nodded. "Back when—you know, when I was a kid, my favorite player on the Royals was Fisk Carmichael. This big old badger with an arm like a recoilless rifle. Called a mean game, too; people always wondered why the team's pitchers suddenly got better right around the time they picked him up from Mikau. Once he waved at me when I screamed his name really loud, so when my mom got me a Royals hat I always wanted to wear it like him." Shrug, wistful smile. "Guess it stuck."

"Huh," Sally said, nodding with some nonspecific positive emotion. Rotor watched her face a moment and decided not ask her if she knew what a catcher was. Baseball was really an Overlander sport. Popular games in Mobius tended to involve some sort of territory fight or control—tackleball was the biggest—so baseball was cheaper, the kind of thing that an immigrant from Iceland could afford to take her child to when she had a day off. Back in Iceland of course there was hockey and water polo, but he hadn't been old enough before a torpedo sent the MV Olga Brookfield, a load of flash-frozen fish bound for the starving Mobian army, and his distant father to the bottom of the ocean. The best wages for an unskilled tundrawoman trying to support a healthy, hefty toddler were in Mobius, drained of workers by its conscript army—polishing marble in the new Royal Palace, as it turned out.

Being an outsider wasn't all bad, though. It helped him to see some things about Mobius more clearly. And when the country wasn't technically yours, you could proceed a little more cautiously to free it. "You have to give me a couple months off to update my phone hacks," he said.

Sally groaned. "You had years to work your magic on those phones, Rotor! I can't take months off of the offensive when every day has become critical."

"Internal Security had years to weave a few counterspells. And all these calls we've been making to Koren's people on the west coast have been giving Robotnik a lot more data to work with. Every time we use the system they get enough for a good engineer to burn another spoof. How would you like Robotnik listening in the next time you reach out and touch Ari?"

"All the more reason to expose Snively quickly." Sally said, clipping the ends of her words.

"That's why you're in such a hurry to hit this hospital?" Rotor wasn't entirely sure the roboticizer was there, despite the argument that Tails had made and Sally adopted so rapidly.

Sharp nod. "That's right."

"What's wrong with you and Sonic?"

Sally went bolt upright on the edge of the bed, the frail gray frame squrnking. She snapped her head down and to the side, then back up, then the other way, mouth open and sputtering like a car engine that can't quite turn over. "There's no—problem. But he's . . . it's just that he's gotten too easily identified after all his stunts the past few years."

"Yeah, yeah," Rotor said, idly rapping his knuckles against the windowglass, "no. He comes back from Robotropolis to the forest, and you take me back to guard you. You're clearly in a hurry, so I don't say anything, but don't you think this might be a little more up Sonic's alley?"

"Are you still pushing your backstabbing Ari Koren theory? If he'd wanted me dead there were simpler ways than getting me killed in what he couldn't have known was a government ambush."

"At any rate, that's not why you left Sonic back at ho—"

"And even if Ari had tried to kill us," Sally continued, cutting him off with a raised finger, "it would have been to steal the chance to reveal the experiments at Gaumont Labs, and they've turned out fake. The only reason Standard Army could have to kill me now would be someone paying them to do it." A satisfied chuckle.

Rotor nodded thoughtfully. "Did Sonic hit you?"

"Wh—No!"

"Was he screwing around with anoth—"

"No!"

"Did you have a fight?"

"No," Sally sighed, dropping her elbows to her knees, her bangs hiding everything above her nose. "I'm just—I need a—He's so—"

Rotor suddenly realized that she had never so much as admitted to anyone that she and Sonic were fooling around. It was easy to forget the lack of an official announcement when, hell: they would go off to one of their sparring sessions, but the gym would be empty. She would go out for a run, like Sonic always did, where before she had always used one of the treadmills. About the only thing she'd left off the list was asking Rotor to add Sonic's handprint to the security scanners that opened the royal quarters.

"He's a standup guy," Rotor said. "He'd never do anything he'd be ashamed of. But he's not easy to be close to. Do you want to talk to—"

"No."

"That's fine," Rotor said. "Just don't let it affect the war."

"Don't you think I know that?" She didn't look up at him, she pulled her head lower, the ends of her hair poking out between the fingers of her fists. "Gods, I can't think about anything else."

"Then why am I here guarding Her Royal Highness? Sheesh, do I have to type it out? You had a fight, you're mad at him, so now—"

"That's not it at all! Gods, if that was all there was to it . . . I'd be so happy . . . ."

Rotor watched with curious, limpid eyes, the fat in his cheeks hanging low. He opened his mouth to speak again, but his eyes darted to the curtains as a passing motor didn't die away. By the time the headlamps painted the windows he was squatting low in the corner, quietly unzipping the black duffel at his feet.

The first one in the door was a collie in a fawn longshoreman's jacket, an orange caution vest sewn into the fabric on her shoulders and front. Behind her followed an underfed muskrat, fur noticeably sparse with winter so recently gone. The first thing the new arrivals saw was the battery lamp on the nightstand—out-of-business motels make for fewer witnesses and less surveillance—and then the squirrel sitting on the bed in an ancient baby blue vest, her arms folded in her lap, boots crossed at the ankles, and a pistol beside her. The second thing they saw, after the sound of the action being pumped, was Rotor leveling the black shotgun from the far corner of the front wall.

A third person bumped against the muskrat from behind, clogging the doorway. "The hell is this?" the collie asked, her ears tight forward, as Sally calmly reached over, picked up the gun and centered it on the dog's belly.

"People have been getting the drop on me a lot the past couple of years," Sally said, easing a crick that had built in her neck in the seconds of waiting. "I'm tired of it. Don't worry, we're still on the same side. You've brought the hospital plans?"

The collie said nothing, just watched Sally's gun. "Yeah," the muskrat said after a moment, his head popping over the taller dog's shoulder like an eager kit, snout still hidden. "Snot hard to get, you know. All you need is a name it's safe to give the public records people, and we've still got a few clean ones sitting around in the Standard Army." One eye winked: "Mine, actually."

"Well you'd better leave town, if you want to keep it clean," Sally grinned, tossing her gun back on the bed. "You stick around too long, you're going to be invading a public hospital. That'll look pretty bad on your record until we take down the government." She held out her hand.

"Yeah, I've got 'em here." A sound of a zipper and the collie's eyes momentarily grew wider. "Kelly can you, uh, move a litt—right here!" The muskrat's lifted the roll of blue pages over the dog's shoulder, waved them back and forth in front of his eyes. "Right here. Kelly, scoot over let me give 'em to her."

Kelly the collie didn't move. After a moment she jerked, just slightly, as the muskrat bumped against her, tentatively. "Is there a problem?" Sally asked.

"Kelly, you want to move your damn ass?"

Another female voice, whoever the third one was, out on the edge of the motel parking lot. "Kelly, these people have a pair of guns on you? Give 'em the plans."

"Kelly?"

"Let's go. Let's just leave."

"Kelly?"

"We need that money," Kelly breathed. She reached to her neck and pulled her zipper as Sally kicked off the floor and rolled backward on the mattress, landing hard in the little space between the bed and the wall, catching the cheap frame on the funny bone in her right elbow, knocking the arm dead. Beneath her jacket the dog was a bit thin for early spring, a bit thin to be alive: mangy, emaciated, the straps of the gunholster pulled tight around her ribs, under her breasts. And she pulled the gun and it was such an improbable, obviously self-destructive act that Rotor was startled into not shooting her until the sights were almost at the foot of the bed. The shot speckled the dog's jacket with holes like drops of black paint and she fell to the side, the air filled with wisps of down and a second load of shot that knocked a hole from the cheap drywall and tore through the muscles of the muskrat's forearm.

The muskrat dropped the blueprints and dove for the bed, sailing through Rotor's third storm of shot but missing the worst of the lead. Sally grabbed at the blanket with her left hand and ripped it towards her, the gun leaping a couple centimeters, the muskrat's fingers knocking it skew and Sally grabbed it with her left hand and fired and fired until she had enough sense to remember the third assassin and jerked her shivering off-hand at the door. Rotor was running out of it, pulling the stock to his shoulder as he went into the night. The thunder of more shot.

Sally edged back around the bed and quickly checked the collie. She was out, bleeding badly. She was so thin, so very thin . . . . There'd been rumors of trouble on the docks, Ari losing control of the union work-assignments and featherbedding that he used to fund his operations, but nothing like this: a woman too deep in the rebellion to go to the state, no charity beside the other troops. She looked like she was sane, capable, hardworking, and literally starving to death in the middle of a major Mobian city. Ari couldn't compete with starvation.

But who would have—Griff the goat, that must be it, pushing his way out of the deserts and into central Mobius, his gun money buying more soldiers as he went. And money is fungible. If Griff could buy three rebels for a hit, then before too long Robotnik would figure out that he could print enough money to buy the whole show.

A cool wave passed through her, the absence of adrenaline. Rotor had been wrong; she was right. They had to move on the hospital very, very quickly.

Sally grabbed the roll of blueprints and ducked her head out the door, looking for Rotor; they'd call a doctor from Moselle. The lot was dark, silent. The cars were there, her fire-scarred hatchback and one of Standard's rustbucket vans. Nothing moving.

She took a couple steps on the warped boards of the patio. Glanced left and right; nothing. A few more steps, her boots crunching on gravel. She hesitated, then gave a conversational: "Rotor?" Nothing. No sound.

Not even a night bird, not a rustle. Nothing.

Sally turned. The wolf towered over her. The porch gave her some height, but she would have had at least a head and a half on Sally anyway. Sally had only seen her from a distant window in the desert mine complex southeast of Fennec Settlement: steel fur, blue bodysuit, probably the alpha. From here, obviously the alpha. The tarnished gold of her parents and parents and parents decorated her arms; the unbrushed guard hairs of her winter coat were broken and matted from wild living. Her cobalt eyes looked down from over bladescar that twisted along the bridge of her snout and through her cheek. Her own blade sat in a scaled leather sheath buckled about her thigh, almost a third of a meter long.

She was utterly silent. She looked like she had stood there forever.

Sally rushed her, striking the heel of her hand quickly at the wolf's snout. The wolf's arm flashed and grabbed her wrists and there was pain and twisting and Sally's right arm was bent behind her back and her neck was pinned in the crook of the wolf's elbow, and her ear was against the wolf's lips and every single joint was braced, tension spreading through the length of the bones—

"My father died very well. I was very young. I had only killed once, a human, a frightened furless thing that could not hold his eyes open as I cut him." The wolf's Mobian was off, accented, a copy of a copy. Her voice was cold stones and cardamom. "But my father was called war Alpha of three packs. When our wounded were pursued my father sent them with his beta and lay in ambush with two others. He killed ten Acorn soldiers himself in close combat. The last smelled his death in my father and ignited an explosive grenade in his own hand. I found the spot two nights after. It stank of burn, and the blood and urine of foxes and mongeese and squirrels and dogs. My pride was heard for miles.

"But he would have given the lives of all the wounded he saved, and the life of my mother and his beta and my life and all his own pack for their glory to hold the King of Acorn in his hands. And to hold the very last of the line in his hands and to end the line with his hands is the very greatest the thing that he could ever imagine.

"And I hold you," her voice rolled, soft and cool and relentless, "and I feel nothing but shame, because your father lost my land to the human, and you no longer have what is mine, and I keep counsel with dogs, and I cannot guard my pups, and I take orders like a hireling, and the sacred rites are abused, and all my skill and strength are of no use."

If you weren't watching, they seemed to just appear. The two with Rotor she saw emerge from behind the van, one relaxedly keeping a gun on the base of his spine. He rubbed his neck beneath the bristles, where the knife had just been taken away.

"I am not clever," the alpha said. "My beta is." The other wolf beside Rotor—the one that had held a knife to his throat, a big brown monster—gave a grin and waved a strong paw of a hand. "He says I should speak with you."

Sally turned, fighting to keep her arms from trembling as she brushed some of the wolf's guard hairs from her top and vest. "Princess Sally Alicia Acorn," she intoned formally and with only a little rush through the words, "of the Kingdom of Mobius."

"Lupe Loborerro Almatrican, Alpha, daughter of Miguel Loborerro." She sniffed—no scent of urine. A stern creature, for a squirrel. "Let us speak."

Kain Blackwood 2009

## \*Chapter 9\*: Moselle, 5 Floreal 3230

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**Moselle, 5 Floreal 3230**

"Here."

Sally glanced up at Lupe's moonshine eyes and shaded features before concluding that she wasn't being put on: the little buttons, as Lupe had called them, looked exactly like acetaminophen out of a brown glass bottle. Dried, white. She picked them up between her fingers and thumb. There was almost nothing to them; they had the density of styrofoam. When held before her nose, they smelled faintly sweet. "I've heard of these. They call them honeybuds—"

"Have you eaten any?" Lupe asked. The eternal icy calm of her voice did not vary, but something reminded Sally that she was alone with a disarmed Rotor—asking for the shotgun back felt like a faux pas—in the wolves' camp in a string of wild groves on the border of a small stream between some small fields. It was a camp in the sense that they had stayed there the night before and their alpha had instructed them to meet there the next evening. No fire, no shelter, only half of them carrying handmade packs.

"No," Sally replied, and immediately felt an extra pair of heartbeats as she remembered that alphas spoke for their entire pack. Sonic? . . . maybe, but probably no more than once. He was such a physical creature, but he always said that booze did nothing for him. "But I can see how there would be a strong temptation to sell—"

"My pack," Lupe pronounced sharply, "does not yield to such temptation."

"No, of course—"

"My pack does not sell itself for a pittance. We do not labor for a wage."

Sally nodded, slowly, because even if she had wanted to lie to the alpha something in the flawless glow of the wolf's tapetum lucidium told Sally that the wolf could see through her, and she wanted as much time as possible to think before Lupe asked for terms.

"My pack seeks only to regain its land. It will take an ally, in its fight." She folded her arms beneath her breasts. "If the ally does not wish our land for itself."

The economics of the desert were interesting; oil drilling had begun to peter out with the global non-military carbon ban, but mineral extraction industries were likely to persist for at least another two hundred years; without the Mobian desert the balance of raw materials production would shift heavily to higher-risk mountain seam mining in the former Overland Empire. That was why empire after empire had tried to put their hands on the desert, starting with the little-understood bronze age Canine Empires of the ninth century. The region had a long and fascinating history and it belonged to your Father for Gods' sake you swore an oath you swore it again and again don't do it—

"Okay." Sally rubbed her snoutfur back into her hair, then back down. Lupe could no doubt tell Sally found it a difficult decision, but she might have pulled any liquid into the fur beneath her eyes quickly enough to keep it out of the moonlight. "You'll have your land back. A Royal Concession. I can't work out all the details right now, but it'll—you'll have complete domestic autonomy," Sally clarified, Lupe's hackles having begun to inflate her silhouette at Royal Concession—"Pack law controls within your geographic borders—which, we'll need to study where the boundaries are, get historians, cartographers."

"It's all right." According to some mysterious, organic agreement with his alpha, Reynard would at times avert his eyes from her, folding his ears like a whipped pup, and at others like this would casually interrupt her, leaving her open-mouthed but unobjecting as he declared what appeared to be the will of the pack in a much more urbanized Mobian accent. "You seem clear on the basics. Enough to keep you honest, anyway."

"And," Sally added, "if the overlanders ever give us a national security issue related to supplying vital war material to heavy industry—"

"—then you'd certainly have no problem getting the packs to agree to mining." Reynard continued to speak to her in the same tone of voice, with the same stance, but his ears were laid back, and next to him Lupe blew dragon's breath condensation in the cool night air. "After all, Mobian security is wolf security. Will be, anyway. Won't it?"

Sally nodded, smiling. "Of course. And how are things with your former ally, Griffith Varitek."

Lupe spread her hands. "We are well aware of his intentions toward you. He has treated us very poorly, and we are no longer friends."

"But he doesn't know that yet," Rotor said. His loud, friendly, round voice seemed to echo over the fields. Sally wondered if his night vision was good enough to perceive everybody looking at him, or if he could pick it up from the tone of the silence.

". . . Yes," Lupe answered after a moment.

"We need specialized munitions to hit the hospital quickly," Rotor continued. "He can get them for us—well, for you. You see?"

"I'd suggest that you tell him you need it to rob a bank," Sally said, "but of course that's something for you to decide for yourself."

"Agreed." Lupe didn't seem to have an emotional understanding of why clear evidence of the roboticization project would set the country on fire; what could three or four complicated tortures add to a stone cold hate born of five or six centuries? But Reynard thought Sally's target was dynamite, and Lupe didn't object. There was no handshake or more esoteric ritual; word was enough.

Rotor explained the specs on the shaped charge he wanted. Sally sat herself down on the grass verge of the stream, about a meter above the water itself, watching the moonlight sign of its stealthy movement beneath her boots. The subtle sound of it percolated through her mind, cleansing it of the distant murmur of speech, leaching away the tension of negotiation.

The night was cool. A little on the cold side, actually, on her hands and in her ears, her lips, wherever her fur was thinnest.

Very lucky, she thought, that Griff had overplayed his hand. Sally almost have made Lupe's father so very happy. Rotor was right, she needed Sonic here.

She needed him here right now, in the cold. Next to her.

"Your Highness." Reynard stood behind her. He looked like any young dog from the southwest side of Robotropolis in his weathered boots and cracked leather jacket, but he moved as silently as his alpha.

"Where's . . . uh . . . ."

"There's no title," he chuckled. "Lupe's like you. Needs to keep her own counsel after she keeps her beta's."

"Rotor . . . well, I guess he could be my beta." She thought about it. "I've got more than one, though. My father had different traditions. Rotor is Minister of Science; Antoine is Minister of State . . . ." Her thoughts grew foggy as she tried to go farther, and she glanced up from the hypnotic rhythm of the stream. ". . . . What's your story? You are from the pack, right?"

"We played together all the time as pups. She was always—well, when it counted, she was always a bit stronger, a bit quicker. Then the war . . . it shook up the packs," he said, and she got the sense that there was enough horror involved in the shaking to match her own childhood. "Me and Javier fell in together, did a couple of years of breaking ore for FSME."

"Not Ellingson?"

"I insisted," Reynard replied, and Sally rolled her ears forward: for the first time in the evening there was nothing of a smile in his voice.

"Matter of principle?"

"Life-expectancy. Dogmeat's cheap. Ellingson knows it and acts accordingly. I'm not speaking for Lupe right now, but you shouldn't have to worry about Mobius doing without ore so long as the miners get what they deserve."

It was meant to put Sally at ease, and it did. Reynard's feelings were a little less alien than Lupe's. But that was because they were a touch familiar . . . . "You're with one of the unions out East? That is, the ones that had never gotten into the governing coalitions and had no interest in doing so. Reynard wasn't the alpha, but creating a potentially militant radical leftist state in the middle of her country would not only break up the family landholdings: it would be really stupid.

"Nah," Reynard laughed, and Sally laughed with him. "I'm not a very good communist, either. I guess I'll always be a wolf of Pack Loborrero first."

Renee dry-swallowed a pair of acetaminophen tabs before confronting the midday sun, taking the Office's car out of the National Police parking garage built underneath Lafayette Square. Her experience in the initial surveillance stages of the Royal Army assignment made her an ideal choice to spearhead this new and, the police clearly thought, hopeless investigation. Her current supervisor, a former National Police Regional Superintendent with a meticulously maintained white brush and the flattest, dullest yellow eyes a fox had ever had, concurred and didn't want the assignment. But he had to look like he was at least prepared to take it and handle it to the best of MISO's ability, so he ordered Lieutenant Donlevy's attendance and total silence while middle-managers at the two agencies debated over the finer details of Griffith Varitek's gunsmuggling operation.

She did her best to stifle her secret familiarity with the target and listened.

Was Varitek's operation truly international in scope? They had one proffer offer from a Corrections Ministry inmate indicating that he had taken guns over the border and sold them to a person who said that he worked, via intermediaries, for the goat. He had sold them on at least twenty occasions in the course of two years: was he "working for" Varitek? Was he part of the operation? What was a conspiracy, really? What was an agreement? How could people use words to make themselves understood? After three hours, Renee believed they could not. They might as well have brought in lawyers. Finally her boss backed off when NPD produced some ridiculous speculation from a Mechanized Army report that Varitek's paymaster was Lachels Intelligence—he seemed to be making enough money for the relationship to run the other way, but close enough for government work. After a half-day of intense focus, chugged coffee and spittle flying from gleaming teeth, everyone was now returning, burnt out, to their office, except for Renee.

"Handle it," her fox boss had said, stifling a yawn. "Keep me apprised."

Varitek himself was heavily domestic, as was to be expected for a man who once, long ago, had aspired to the lofty position of forest hellhole dictator and otherwise had one, count them one, high-profile murder to his name; moving the operation forward would require pulling personnel from NPD, which, unfortunately, had given the case to her specifically because they wanted nothing to do with it. Her own personal contacts were busy as hell trying to keep the lid on Port Orange and she didn't have any contacts at Army. Snively did, though, she thought with a sigh.

Renee rolled the car to a stop at a red light a block away from the brown steel foundations of the D'Artagan Bridge and pawed for her cell where she had tossed it on the passenger's seat. Captain Kolensky is not blah blah blah she'd be dreaming the words for all she'd listened to them in the past two days. "Captain, it's Lieutenant Donlevy. The Posniak files. They're interesting. Please call."

The light changed and she almost clipped a straggling Chevalier's bumper before she yanked her toe off the hyrdo and eased it gingerly back down. Snively wasn't returning her calls. Part of the problem was that she couldn't make the urgency of the situation clear to him, because it was so vague—vague, but clearly suspicious. The bug was an inartful thing, working better outside, not the best at picking up live conversation. But she wasn't building a case to arrest, she was building suspicion, or would be if the circumstances weren't, by definition, suspicious: a gunfight. Some sort of obscure, muffled conversation about the War with someone . . . Renee could almost swear the voice was familiar. Conspiracy. And just yesterday a phone call to some sort of bank. Embezzlement? Payoff from the home country?—he wasn't supposed to be that wealthy.

Over the river, a quick flash of her badge to pass the new reinforced steel barriers at the bridge, and then down to a small lot of cars and a drab brick building, all hewed in from the even grimier world around it by shiny cyclone fence and razorwire—a high value target if things got out of control in the Port, the South Molineaux Station of MobiusTelecom. Given her long relationship with the locals down southwest—they totally loved thinking they were spies, she could tell—it made more sense to talk to them first.

When Renee got in the door the fennec linemen supervisor was behind the front counter, pointing at, and apparently listening to, a computer monitor over the receptionist's shoulder. As he saw her straightened his tie and put a devious little asymmetry into his eyebrows. His name was Cordoba—Elmer Cordoba. "I thought you'd be down to speak in person, Captain," he said. "After all, people like us know that the telephone is not as safe a medium of communication as—"

"I'm only a Lieutenant. What are you talking about?" Renee asked.

"You didn't—? I sent an email. I mean, I used that new 128-bit crypto software I bought at SoftCon; do you still have a copy of the key?"

"Yeah," she lied, "but I haven't been to my office yet today. What's happening?"

Elmer leaned unlocked the partition that kept the phone company from the public and slowly pulled back the little gate in the counter. "Step into my office, Captain."

They went through the garage to the bank of five monitoring stations in the sweltering server closet. He sat and tapped up a customer report query. "We beat another of your walrus's spoofs two days ago. We got action on the phone this morning and traced it back to the next originating number in the sequence."

Again. "So?" she asked. And Elmer hit enter to pull up the customer report, but instead of one of the MCom ones she'd always gotten from them something else come up: VORBURG SATFUNK GmbH.

"The next number," Elmer grinned, "was directly off an Overlander communications satellite in geosynchronous orbit at the thirty-third parallel."

"A satellite phone." They were out of the hacked Port Orange physical grid. Unless Rotor was compulsive as well as obsessive, they were on a real, live phone, that they could listen to whenever they wanted. "Do we have some sort of—treaty or something, with the Vorburgers, so they have to give us the customer information?"

"Nope," Elmer said, tapping control-P. "But I asked them real nicely."

"Vorburg's name on the phone account is Ricky Squirrel, which we're pretty sure is fake," Renee said. "Bills are sent to a PO Box at general delivery in Four Mounds—little pop. fifty town down on the north edge of the Forest, which would make sense."

Snively flinched as some sort of paper slammed down on his desk, filling his field of vision. There were things written on it.

"The intercepts we've been getting all day concern the acquisition of a large explosive device from a gunrunner we've had our eye on for a little while, Griffith Varitek," Renee continued. "There were some rumors at Army Intel that he's an agent of Lachels intelligence; we previously didn't have anything specific to bring that up, but supplying Royal Army suggests it might be for real. They're planning action in the near term. Could be as early as tomorrow. Snively."

He looked up and cinched his jaw tight, so he'd look serious instead of panicked. "Yes?"

"They're going to hit a hospital. Napiers Hospital downtown—"

And she kept talking and Snively died, right there, just willed his heart to stop beating.

"—you agree, right? Snively!"

"What," he hissed.

"We can't just set up another ambush. I have no idea what's made these people suddenly decide to go for maximum casualties, but we are talking at minimum a gunfight in a crowded hospital. We have to find some pretext on which to ramp up security, maybe even evacuate, which doesn't involve giving up this satphone. You agree with that? Captain? Snively?"

"I'll take care of it."

"You'd better take care of it."

The words hit his brain's humiliation center like a jolt from the paddles. "This is not your case anymore!" he shouted, shooting out of his chair and planting his hands on the desk. "I will take care of it! Send the docs on your telephone intercept while I coordinate with RPD! Now!"

The pine marten stared at him with that uncertain, oblique look that people give the paranoid psychotic. Of course she knew something was wrong. By this point total strangers must know something was wrong within moments of looking at him. "While I'm here," she added coolly, "the Posniak intercepts." She dumped a pair of jewel cases on his desk and left his office in a pointed lack of a hurry.

Snively turned and looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows that met in the corner of the office. Then he ran for the nearest pane as hard as he could—

And stopped. No. Think. Fight.

He couldn't start moving things out of Napiers. It would be noticeable, and as far as his uncle knew the entire project was supposed to be already destroyed. Seriously, Snively had to have run out of money by now. There was no possible way he could acknowledge the continued existence of the project without telling his uncle where the money was coming from, and he wasn't going to give his uncle the satisfaction of what he would no doubt consider a very good reason to kill him.

But he wasn't going to "clean up" the Science Ministry Recovery Project at Napiers. Amanda was lethal, perfect, loyal, loving. How could that gross, malodorous ball of flesh think he had the right to declare an end to such perfection, such—

Snively swallowed, forced his hands to unknot. Amanda was also his best protection when things finally came down to a firefight. He wasn't about to take his Queen off the chessboard, no matter what the risk. And until then, it couldn't hurt to stay there with her. He hadn't heard back from Lila. Rudi's people might already be in the country, looking for him.

He called Posniak's cell and left him a message to meet him at Napiers when he got back to town. He'd have security show him into a special government-occupied wing of the basement. Then he left for the hospital.

He did nothing else.

Kain Blackwood - 2008

## \*Chapter 10\*: Security District, 7 Floreal 3230

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**Security District, Robotropolis, 7 Floreal 3230**

The motion sensors clicked and the glass panel doors stenciled ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY slid open, admitting thick drops of driving spring rain and a modified precision Penetrator warhead. The MDN opspecs called for delivery via a Kestrel air-to-surface missile, standard on the Mobian MST-Musketeer fighter and sometimes modded onto Locust and Whiteout VTOLs. They brought it in like a heart attack, rolling on a stainless steel gurney.

A&E was almost empty, so Sally did not, as she had planned, send the victims and doctors to the floor with a Poiccard burst into the ceiling. A pair of RPD officers looked up from an ugly knife DOA and stared in momentary confusion at all the guns. Without a word Reynard and another wolf walked rapidly past them with distractingly quick strides, magicians: and the police are gone, ladies and gentlemen! The procession hustled into a wide, soothing olive hallway, moving towards towards primary reception.

"She has metal legs." The mother of the teary little muskrat boy who had just announced this held him a little tighter, by instinct, wondering what that could possibly mean about his broken thumb. Across the room, there were two police officers lying on the floor.

The fire alarm went off after they made the turn for Radiology. Nobody flinched, it was going to get worse than that. Sally took point from Sonic, gave it to Lupe as they turned the corners, right, left, right, and reached their target: an empty stretch of hallway between a pharmacy of barium markers and one of the Radiology screening rooms. Reynard and a wolf named Muriel watched the far corner, Rotor leveled a shotgun to the rear. The rest could barely fit in the hallway.

That was about to change. "Bunnie!" Sally barked.

Bunnie let go of the strained steel of the gurney and pulled off her cloak, her steel fingers tearing through the fabric as the useless disguise rent up the back. The warhead was bolted to a reinforced frame of Grade-8 steel piping, black wires spooling away from globular solder-points in the grey housing. She grabbed the pipe in both hands and groaned, her more natural-looking muscles knotting monstrously as she lifted the warhead and cratered it hard into the tile floor. Tails took the detonator and spooled the wire out to Rotor, he and everyone else taking shelter around the corners. Sally saw a female skunk in a white coat look at Rotor's shotgun and keep right on going for the exits, just like the repeated announcement over the speakers said. No security—too busy at the entrances. I've got you, Sally thought, I've got you, you monsters—

Rotor didn't look as he depressed the button.

"Amanda, I said—Amanda, no—"

SCA001 stopped her ears and grabbed her Commander under his arm and around his waist. A prisoner-hold, said a memory, but again her mind tensed and squeezed and she felt nothing but fear that she might hurt her Commander. She cleared her couch with a leap that would fill a fox with pride, then rolled to the wall, holding Commander to her belly, bending their waists in tandem, wrapping him in her molded armor. She turned her mind again to the first floor surveillance cams, the requests and handshakes so familiar and quick that the cameras were little more than peripherals of herself, and observed the little pistol-fox spool the detonator from the warhead, aimed squarely at her home. Her bots already stood in the corners, safe as they could be. Commander said to her that the criminals would disable the secondary warhead, because they did not want to destroy her home and her support machines, only to steal them. But the Penetrator's C3 transponder had been disabled and would not answer her questions, and she was frightened for Commander so she grabbed him and held him tight against the wall.

Chunks of concrete and red-hot slivers of rebar slammed into her back and arms. If she had not had her armor replaced after the ambush, it might have caused her serious damage. Cameras screamed and went dark; her bots chirped nervously about possible harm, the click of their lenses distinct amidst the clatter of rubble. Commander's breathing pushed against her armor. "Let me go!" he grunted. "Get them!" SCA001 continued to hold him tight, feeling for broken bones, lacerations—

She was disobeying a direct order.

SCA001 pinged and pinged her repair/refit servers, demanding a quick radio systems check. It cleared negative. Her organic ears had heard the command and somehow her skunkbrain had failed to process it. With an otherworldly sense of uncertainty she turned her mind from her receivers and concentrated it solely in her ears, trying to make every sound distinct, glowing and labeled, the way she saw mission-sensitive objects through the HUD nanofilm that coated her irises:

Let me go!

Get them!

What's wrong with you!

Kill them all!

Three of her bots wooped excitedly, hostile contact engage/advise? SCA001 released Commander and pulled her pistol from her hipmount, leveling it over the back of the ruined couch at—her Sally. STANDDOWN STANDDOWN, she broadcast in a burst of panic, before she desperately ratcheted back, standby active weapons hold. The sprinklers went red in the hospital emergency system and she throttled them: smoke was worse for organic hostiles; artificial rain worse for her bots.

Standing up she lowered her pistol and lifted her right hand towards Sally, taking a moment to paint her as mission critical, no lethal force to be used. There was something wrong about her. It wasn't that her baby blue vest was replaced with a heavy black flak jacket; it went deeper: her face did not wear her usual bot's deference in the presence of her Commander, always tinged in Sally's case with the fear and indecision that betrayed her woefully incomplete programming. Instead the squirrelbot's eyes were guarded, the lines of communication cut.

SCA001 could guess what that meant: the hedgehog was close by. "Tell me where he is," she ordered. She twisted instinctively to minimize her soft target profile as Sally aimed something at her. But it was a camera. Flash. Sally took her Commander's picture. She took a picture of the repair/refit chair. She took a picture of the healing tank. "Stop it," SCA001 ordered.

Sally glanced back at her and raised her camera again. Flash.

When her organic eyes cut the flashpop, Sonic Hedgehog had landed behind her Sally, his cruel smile missing, but his eyes wide and hungry. Beside him dropped—

It was like SCA001. A rabbit. Lopsided, missing armor. What armor she had was bulky and primitive. Identify, she thought.

Bunnie, came back almost instantaneously.

Improper recognition code. Identify your Commander.

Don't got one, sugar.

Improper use of the frequency for pseudo-audio transmission. Stand down.

I don't got a history of quittin', dear.

The rabbit was ugly. SCA001 hated her.

"Kill them!" Commander was screaming.

SCA001 blinked and painted everything outside of her squirrel a weapons-free zone for her bots. But Sally stayed close to the rabbit and hedgehog, minimizing permissible lanes of fire, holding the shutterbutton down, flashbulb strobing rapidly. SWT734 GR4317, always clever, asked permission to move from its place at the corner, but the room was already very closely packed, and the hedgehog quick; she couldn't give him a chance to move behind her bots and tear them without mercy.

Beside her Commander leveled his own pistol over the couch. "For gods' sake do I have to do everything myself!"

SCA001 pounced, grabbing Sally, pinning her against the black tile of the floor. Sedate target, her taccomp module said, and SCA001 sharply backhanded the squirrelbot's snout, the stun of impact dilating the squirrelbot's eyes.

"Stop it!" Amanda screamed. Her skunkbrain was awash in an electrochemical storm of malfunction and overloaded circuits and

(panic, rage, love)

"Stop doing this to me!"

Above them, the room filled with bullets.

She had never seen the other parts of the building before. She hadn't even seen the crowded streets up close. But as soon as Bunnie leapt through the smoking hole in the floor and felt the pitch-black tile flex under the metal of her feet, the thought hit her before she could stop it: I'm home. A lot of the furniture had been pressed to the sides of the room, but as Bunnie spun to guard the Princess the key things were all there: the chair beside which she learned anatomy, the weaknesses which mobians had; the other chair with the goggles in which she learned who she was, where she learned how to see better and react more quickly, did fighting simulations. Other things were new—oh, mother a' mercy, swatbots all over the place!—

"Kill them!"

Identify.

Bunnie, she thought back before she could think about it. She sent them as alphanumerics, like the incoming. After that she sent back speech, shrugging off the new one's radio hails. She didn't like the old, instant familiarity of machine communication, didn't like how it made her feel at all; she wanted to attack something. But she stayed close to Sally until attacked, which was the plan. She glanced away from a slowly spinning autocannon on one bot's arm and looked over her shoulder.

Mister Snively had less hair than he used to—that sometimes happened to humans, she knew but had never seen—and he looked more angry than if the terrapods had gotten into the whiskey. He leveled his gun at Sally but before Bunnie could throw her arm in the line of fire the new one grabbed Sally and any mercy the swatbots might have had for them disappeared. Something in her mind that Bunnie thought of as instinct triggered the grafts in her brain, which triggered the springbolts in what were now her feet, her legmuscles channeling the force into a powerful leap out of the likely path of the whirring bullets. And at him. Snively's slug pancaked on her raised right knee as her left toe-extension caught the lip of the sofa, pulling it over as they tumbled to the tile. She looked at him and thought about the last orders he had given her as the Airshark VTOL had lowered her down to the forest floor six years ago and made her right hand a fist and ratcheted it up as Snively opened his mouth and

"Bubblegum Melanogaster."

Good Bunnie. Very good robot. She was very relaxed, limp on the floor, ready for repair. Listening to her special words that help her relax and listen. Commander's lips said them, close by her ear. She should not listen to bullets, only words. Listen and do. Bunnie remembered listen-and-do. Didn't she?

Commander petted her ears in that delicious way. She shivered like a wet repen.

Of course Bunnie remembered!

When Sonic learned the plan he had shouted so loudly that Sally had to take him out of the Moselle storage shed where they were meeting with the wolves. Seeing them made his old belly scar ache a little, but they seemed alright now, and they were tough, and Lupe wanted to do some sort of weird secret handshake thing with him because he kicked ass all the time.

He did kick ass. And he was their best decoy too, which was why Sally's idea was fucking stupid! No wonder; she'd come up with it in one day. Normally she just wanted to go to Knothole and stay in the basement all the time watching news shows and thinking and thinking until Sonic went insane and now she comes up with this! With his own left hand barely done working its kinks out! "Back to the drawing board!" he ordered.

Sally grabbed his shoulders. He flattened his quills. "She won't hurt me," Sally said. "You haven't seen it, but the way she talks to me . . . ." Sonic felt her fingers tighten a moment on his shoulders as she blinked, slowly. "She talks to me like I'm a child. She'll correct me, but she won't hurt me." She dropped her gaze and her poise, resting her arms and elbows against him. Her sigh was warm against his fur. "She loves me—"

Sonic angrily grabbed her, shook her, forced her cool nose to his. "I love you!—"

Shit, he hadn't hurt her, had he?

He wanted to kiss her so bad, but that strange new hedgehog inside him who was afraid of things wouldn't let him do it. She could get so serious—and this was serious—

"We're so close, Sonic," she whispered. "The entire nation, everyone will rise up. We'll be free, Sonic. We'll all be free to do whatever we want."

He slid his right hand back and pulled her to his chest, smelling her headhair, the deeper scent of her fur. He knew what he wanted.

When he saw what he wanted go to the floor under a half-ton of gleaming psycho cyborg bitch, that frightened stranger inside him grabbed the controls and wouldn't budge. He just watched and screamed at himself and screamed back at himself and listened in mute terror

RUN YOU BASTARD GO

He ducked as he kicked into motion and three autocannon rounds gave him the first quillcut ever. His head was low and the bots were close and his eyes alighted on a bot's hip joint. A whole new way to break stuff!—

And with that he was fourteen years old again, and he knew only one love.

"Stop it," Amanda growled.

After a second's blackout Sally was back in her head, her aching, swelling head, directly beneath that of Amanda Polgato. Sally could see nothing else. Her nose was filled with the sickly plastic smell that sat atop the burnt, neutralized odor of the skunk's facefur. Her ears were filled with gunfire and—"Listen to me!" Amanda screamed.

Keep her talking.

"I'm listening, Amanda," Sally said, and her own voice was forceless and it frightened her.

"Stop obeying the hedgehog," Amanda ordered. "He is not your Commander. I am. Remember."

"I remember older things than you, Amanda."

"Those aren't you! Those are the squirrel you were made from!"

"It's you, Amanda," Sally said. "All those memories you have, what it was like—"

"My skunkbrain is meat. It malfunctions. My C3 unit doesn't decay. Until you have yours installed you have to trust me."

"Why—"

"Because I love you, Iwon't let anyone hurt you!—"

Amanda clamped her jaws and the sob leaked through her teeth. Her biology flooded the blood vessels in her eyes and ears, neural and endocrine transmitters tumbling and washing over the levies built to stop them.

"Commander orders me to destroy you," Amanda said, the words like a thread of razorwire pulled from her gullet. "Bad materials. Bad design. He orders."

"I—" Sally couldn't think of any words. At least one of the fingers pressing into her shoulders could make her sleepy. That left nine other fingers that might put her to sleep.

"Please obey," Amanda begged. "Don't make me hurt you. Please."

Then Amanda's eyes shot up. Then her pistol. Then she scrambled over her squirrelbot like a stampeding terrapod. "Don't you touch my bots!"

Sonic's right arm led and shot shot shot shattered a tiny patch of ceramic eggshellthough which he could see steel ball and socket, a good range of motion to it, which meant a good lot of places to land. Duck, roll, shout and feel the shape of it outlined in your quills, minus the two that lodge and catch and pull free with sharp white pain. Take that! Asshole! He looked and saw another turning to aim at him from along the black wall. Run before the bot behind you tries to move, staggering and falling, and skid between the new one's legs, kick up and get squeezed by a brief autocannon burst from across the room, feeling it cutting into the bot and pressing it against you against the wall. More than enough friction to worm up, pull loose quills and stab them into the guy's face. Teach you to shoot at my girl, fucker!

That made Sonic think a moment: middle of the room is a kill zone if the two bots on this wall were both flagged casualties. He dashed quickly for the nearest of the two undamaged bots, sprinting low along the wall to his left, fingers of his left hand out and tracing the floor for balance—

"Don't you touch my bots!"

Sonic led with his left foot, giving a little jerk with his ankle to break his soles' friction with the floor and let himself skid as he spun his torso to face the skunkbot leaping at him. He leaned forward and waited until the last moment to have his toes eat his sideways momentum in a sharp squeak, and his quills popped as he threw himself at her from a low angle. Not enough to grab her or to stick her bad, as her smooth legs slipped past his arms and her carapace scraped against the grain of his quills, but she'd land funny. Sonic pulled his elbows to his hips and tucked his head into a roll, extending his right leg and planting it hard to stop before he hit the middle of the room and Sally. When his skid burnt off his kinetic energy he was a low slung tripod, two legs and right hand supporting his left hand's pistol as he popped off his mag at the skunk (ouch, catch as the bones scraped each other wrong), trying to find the face somewhere in all the black fur and black armor against the black concrete paint and—

Some part of his brain felt a shadow and he rolled to the left fast enough for only a bit of fur to be ripped out of his hide as the broad steel feet slammed down. He looked up. Bunnie smiling. "Bunnie gal, watch it—"

Bunnie kicked him in the stomach. The sharp wedge of her toe-part cut into his skin and he flattened his quills, rolling lengthwise away from her. She didn't chase and he had time to get up, the clean red cut in his belly belying the sucking black hole of a bruise that was swelling beneath it. "Bunnie—" He gave a short hop backwards as Bunnie leaned back, shouted and kicked her right foot square at his chest, missing it by a centimeter until five electromag bolts spaced about her footmodule popped and transferred the force they would usually send to the floor to Sonic's ribcage. He hit the wall hard, knocking his quills flat, missing the thick puncture wounds in his fur because of the paralyzing pain of the broken ribs. Bunnie was coming closer so he gave it straight with his right in that stupid smile—crazy bitch!—and then dodged left as she pulled her arms to block and then further left as she tried to hook him with that fat steel fist, missing most of the force of it by leaping away—

And getting tangled up with Amanda.

One of her arms coiled itself around his left in a motion that would quickly rip it out of its socket if he did not turn right to avoid it, which he did, driving his right elbow into the hard armor at the side of her face while one of her cool fingers touched his throat and bit.

"Goodbye," she said.

Sonic blinked and he opened his eyes; he was in front of the skunkbot and it was cold and he was tired. He stumbled back and found his feet a little more squarely, trying to shake it off—

"No!" Amanda cried. She glanced at her hand in disbelief, like it had just rotted and fallen off, then balled it into a fist and leapt at stumbling, helpless Sonic.

Bunnie stopped her short, grabbing her black wrist in a gray grip. "You," Bunnie said. Her eyes seemed uncertain of how hard to focus, but she wasn't smiling anymore.

"Bunnie," Snively warned. He was crouched behind the upended sofa, eyes peeking over the leather cushion.

"The new one," Bunnie said, eyes locked with Amanda.

"Bubblegum melanogaster!" he shouted, and the emotional anaesthesia spread over her features in a blissful wave, a wave that broke and rolled back, leaving narrowing eyes, a rising upper lip—"Bubblegum melanogaster!" he shouted again.

"You bastard," she mumbled though her conditioned haze, grabbing at Amanda's snout with her unarmored hand.

"Bubblegum melanogaster!" he shouted again. Amanda tried a different approach, grabbing the fabric of Bunnie's shirt before breaking her hold with her forearms and driving her polished forehead into the rabbit's. Bunnie fell back, Amanda turning to address Sonic as he edged toward her, still cautious, but quills up, empty pistol gripped by the barrel as an impromptu sap. Snively scooted back, aimed his pistol carefully at Sonic's back and fired. With that preternatural speed that no one should possess he dodged quickly enough that the bullet punched through some of the muscle holding back his intestines rather than through his spine. "Bubblegum melanogaster," Snively said again, hearing the swatbots reacquire and begin sporadic bursts just as a pair of furred hands from the other side of the couch grabbed his own and slammed them into the frame. He made a sound like tea boiling in his throat, fired two rounds into the floor. The hands fought against the kick and indeed overcompensated a just a little, yanking the gun forward and sharply down.

Snively's scream filled the room as both his wrists snapped against the couch's wooden frame. They crunched as Sally used them to pull her snarling face over the frame, eyes like headlights behind the tangled, sweaty mess of her bangs. She squeezed his fingers and they trembled, shedding the gun. Then she climbed onto Snively's side of the couch, starting with a headbutt.

It had been almost two years since he'd talked to her in Hewlett, but Sally was still angry.

She pinned him down at his shoulders, his broken hands gimped out at his sides, and drove four knuckles into the side of his head, driving it back and to the left. "Anything you want to say?" Punch as his head returned to true, snapping it back and to the left as it spat a wad of blood to the black floor. "About me?" His head didn't return to true; she punched the back of his skull, causing a dull sound of pain. "Or my parents?" She grabbed his throat.

And didn't do anything more. He'd defiled her in close to the most obscene and humiliating way she could imagine, but she still couldn't bring herself to hurt him any further. He a short, bald fetus, helpless in a spatter of his own bloody spit.

With his head still on its side, staring to the left, Snively's eyes shot wide. "'Manda!" he screamed. "Fox! Kill the fox—"

She drove her thumbs into the balls of muscle that held his jaw together until he screamed, then kept doing it.

Kain Blackwood - 2009

## \*Chapter 11\*: Security District, 7 Floreal 3230, cont

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**Security District, 7 Floreal 3230**

Tails had been a little frustrated when Sally told him. "But I can keep you safe, too!"

"I know," Sally had replied.

"And I'm getting really good aim. Sonic taught me how to use a—"

"Tails." Sally put her hand on his shoulder and looked at him with her serious face, which he hated, because Tails couldn't help feeling serious when she made it. "What you'll be doing is, in a lot of ways, the most important part of the mission. We know who we'll find, but we don't know precisely what we'll find to prove the existence of the roboticizer. We can't take heavy equipment out of there—"

He sighed, shuffling his sneakers. "Yeah, I know."

"—so we need to take what we can find that's light, and you're the best mobian for the job."

"Oh yeah?" He met her eyes. "Why's that?"

Her serious face did not falter: "You're fast—"

He harrumphed, but did not correct her. He was fast, kind of.

"—you understand technical stuff—"

Rotor's better, he thought, but of course Rotor wasn't very fast.

"—and," Sally finished, hesitating, "you . . . present a . . . minimal target profile."

Tails wore his own best serious face, refusing to look away from her: "I'm short?"

When Rotor whispered "okay go" and smacked Tails on his rump, resolving any doubts the fox had about leaping through the ragged hole in the hospital floor into a space where, seconds ago, four swatbots had been intermittently pumping intercrossed trajectories of autocannon antipersonnel rounds, Tails wished he were about a meter shorter. It seemed like a long drop, every moment waiting to pass between a stray round and its target, so the bullet would explode into the bulky black flak vest Sally had made him wear and sink shrapnel into him—that is, if he was lucky enough not to catch the bullet in one of his limbs. A fifty-caliber autocannon round would blast any of his limbs or tails clean off.

He wished he hadn't read so much about guns while he practiced with Sonic.

But he landed intact and low, his two tails aloft behind him to counterbalance the slight weight of his body and the more substantial weight of the jacket. He looked around the room. Sally was wrestling with Amanda Skunkbot; Sonic was fighting with two of the bots to his right. Lots of furniture (a little black table, a black armchair, a desk) had been shoved quickly to the wall, before they blew through the floor, it looked like. In front of him, an overturned couch; behind it a sink and the roboticizer tank and other things.

Nowhere a computer tower.

The benefit of going in late was that everyone else would already be distracted. Even the standard swatbot targeting programs were interlinked, concentrating fire and staying with their initial target. By this point they were probably trying to shoot at either Bunnie or Sonic, leaving Tails free to skirt around the periphery and pick up movable evidence of the roboticizer.

Why had they just assumed there would be any?

He scampered low, the little drawstring bag he'd been given dangling so lightly on his shoulder he kept worrying it wasn't there, putting his palms to the floor frequently enough he might be considered on all fours, and threw himself behind an overturned little table. He glanced at the swatbot in front of him and flinched when it half-blinded him with white flames of autocannon propellant, shooting across the room. Not at him, yet. He felt around, trying to look for something, a book, something. Black cup—was everything in here black? Some kind of black plastic tray. Nothing.

Tails closed his eyes. Go. Swatbot targeting programs are keyed to motion. Go. It has perfect peripheral vision and software that processes images from eight millimeter super-wide angle lenses.

Go move you're a freedom fighter GO

He almost got to his feet but wound up somehow running on his hands and knees. He opened his eyes and he was almost heading straight into the swat's knees, go right! He went right and Robotnik's nephew was right there, and Tails and somersaulted like Sonic. The bulky vest bunched up against his chin and he bit his tongue hard and he landed upside down against the far wall, between a cold steel washtub and a cold steel desk. There was blood in his mouth and there were tears running up out of his eyes. Kolensky didn't turn from where he hunkered behind the couch—how had he not seen him?—and above him, projecting over the lip of the desk, was a red hardcover book. Tails rolled silently to his feet, not quickly enough, and reached up a gloved hand to grab it. Leafing, rapidly, it was a handwritten book, lots of short numbers, all about the same size. It couldn't be a cipher; there wasn't enough information in the digits. It was nothing.

Beside him, under the desk, was a computer tower, a little power button on the front glowing green.

Tails wormed around the desk legs, swallowing a big mouthful of warm spit tangy with copper, and nudged the tower panel away from the wall. The black plastic grunted on the floor and he froze, pressing himself to the wall and Kolensky heard him and yelled at him—but no, he wasn't looking. Tails felt on the back—where were the thumbscrews? He pressed his snout up against the warm box, squinting as a heat fan blew dust in his face. No thumbscrews. No snaps. No steel bolts? Everything was black. Where did they get this black stuff? He grabbed at the rim of the case to just pry it off, but he couldn't get any purchase with his gloves on—why had he left them on?

Bodies tumbled toward him and he yelped and crawled back toward the overturned table and remembered the book and went back and grabbed it and put it in the bag and remembered it was useless and turned to crawl back and looked right into Snively's eyes as his lips moved.

"KILL THE FOX."

For no good reason Tails found himself scampering back along the path he had taken, avoiding the middle of the room, putting himself right between two of the bots that would shortly be shooting him. He glanced down, remembering at least not to trip over the cup, or the tray.

Which had a slowly blinking green light on the side of it.

Because it was a lapcomp.

Rotor watched with horror as Bunnie and Sonic squared off with Amanda.

It was like a movie or a comic book. Super heroes. When a bullet came at Sonic, he dodged—almost. When one of Bunnie's heel-kicks missed, the floor was dented. And Amanda just took everything they threw at her, Bunnie never quite catching up, still dazed by whatever Snively had said to her, Sonic losing more and more flesh and fluid, face betraying more and more exhaustion. And Rotor couldn't draw a bead on any one of them without blasting shot into the other two.

At the far end of the hall Reynard started shooting. Cops moving in on their position. They need to scratch the mission. They needed to get out of there.

"Get me out of here!" Tails screamed. He was running, awkwardly circumventing the mayhem in the middle of the room, his left arm locked around his bag and some kind of black plastic thing. The swatbots tried to track him, one with no line of sight through Amanda, the other—

Rotor rolled and almost fell into the gaping pit as he wrenched his shotgun around under the ceiling and went full auto on the bot's head. It flinched, tried to reaim, tried to reaim as Tails looked up, tensing his legs and raising his tails—

(big breath)

—and leapt almost straight up, toes pointed, tails pressed down against his legs, the fingers of his right hand straining so hard they were almost ready to pop out of his hand and carry the glove into orbit. It was an incredible jump that carried him almost within almost two decimeters of the tall basement ceiling. Lupe shot her arm down and the two grabbed each other at the wrist, Tails screaming as his shoulder was wrenched and he heard both swatbots open fire—

—on Rotor, fuck! The walrus flopped away from the pit, eyes closed, opened them to see the wolf deposit the fox safely on the ground, holding on to that little plastic tray as though all their lives depended on it.

"Bunnie!" Rotor bellowed. "Get out of there!"

Getting the last people out had always been the most questionable part of the plan.

Sonic tried it first. He had a gun full of ammo left to him and when he got about a meter away from Amanda in the dance, just far enough so that her move had to be to block shots or turtle rather than reach out and grab his gun arm, he unloaded. Amanda turtled; Bunnie leapt at the couch and pulled Sally off of Snively. Sonic kept Amanda pinned low until—

Oh, fuck, he realized with an ache in his chest and his side and his left hand and his legs and his face: he'd forgotten about those last two swats, hadn't he?

Raw backflipping away from the shell impacts in the floor, feeling the shock and agony in every inch of his left side from fingers to toe, one and two flips and he was out of space and roared, firing at the face of the one on the left, trying to get the lenses, and Bunnie was back in the middle of the room, her little right arm around Sally's middle. "Sugarhog!"

Sonic ran forward, put his right hand in her left, and screamed in pain as she literally threw him out of the basement. He landed above, outside the ragged hole, as Amanda dove for her lost pistol. Just Sally and Bunnie were left and she was going to shoot them; she lined her sights as tight as she could on the rabbit's head.

Priority override, Bunnie thought to the skunk. Commander's hurt.

Before Amanda could fight through the message, the floor shook as the rabbit fired her jump-bolts. Amanda fired after them, one miss into the distant first floor ceiling, another miss into the floor—

And they were all gone.

SCA001 screamed. She screamed at herself, hooking her fingers inside the armor of her cheeks and pulling, pain filling her head as the anchors in the armor transferred the force to her skull. Her taccomp said WARNING WARNING WARNING. She kept pulling. Criminals had destroyed her home. They had damaged her bots, her own bots! Two of her own bots so damaged they could not think without repairs so expensive that Commander might insist that they be scrapped! So many components ruined, so much hurt and failure! All because she did not want to hurt Sally. Because she could not keep her secure two years ago. Because she did not listen to Commander—

Commander was injured. She leapt over the couch and knelt next to him. He was on his right side, slowly curling into the fetal position. He had severe contusions on the left side of his head and on both wrists, which were likely broken. His hand was still wrapped about his nine millimeter automatic, lying on the tile before him, his thumb awkwardly under the triggerguard, the barrel pointed the wrong way.

At his face.

Commander's arm shook and the gun scraped short, parallel white lines in the tile glazing. His thumb tried to pull on the trigger, but with the bone damage in his wrist he could not generate enough friction with the smooth floor to fire the weapon.

"Commander," SCA001 said. Her mouth worked, trying to find words. "Orders please," she requested.

The human whined. Because he was small it was very high-pitched. A memory from deep in her organic brain said it sounded like a repenomamus pup

(The repen pups are very cute. They have no fur. They squirm in the basket and make sounds, high and soft. The sounds are sweet like chocolate milk. The push against the big repen mother's belly. She lies on her side, curled around the outside of the basket. Mandy likes them, but Mom says that they cannot keep them.)

Commander's cry sharpened to a point and showed his teeth. Bones clicked and he slowly edged the pistol closer to his face. "Commander," SCA001 repeated. She was frozen, as though Commander had said her special words, but he hadn't. He nudged the barrel with his nose, sliding it toward his eye. His thumb tightened again and his hand tried to press the gun into the ground.

A pair of bones clicked. They crunched. Commander screamed.

Amanda grabbed the gun, slipping her pinky behind the hammer to prevent it from drawing back. "No!" she barked. "This is psyops." Psyops was when the enemy tried to get soldiers to take undesirable actions by hurting morale, or poisoning command lines with false information or orders. Commander was more vulnerable than her. He did not have a taccomp. She plucked his fingers from around the metal like creeper roots from cracks in a boulder. The overturned coffee table shattered at a kick, and the wood immobilized Commander's wrists and hands when tied with strips of leather from the couch.

Listening to the air, the gun battle had moved away. Listening to the security band, police and hospital guards were converging on Accident & Emergency. Amanda knelt and put her soft mouth to Commander's ear. "Tell me a safe place. I will take us."

There was no sound behind his lips, but she could read them, in case her auditory receptors were damaged. You can't. You're seen. I'm done.

"I will. I will not be seen. It will be a black op."

Amanda crossed Commander's arms in his lap, picked him up and carried him to the elevator.

Cat dropped to his knees and pressed his sallow fur to the wall to his right about a meter before the hallway opened up into A&E's receiving room, checking the action on his Poiccard. The rain was still coming down against the glass, but had slackened off, no longer hammering, offering a touch of ashen sun.

To Sally, the automatic doors directly across the wide-open room looked like something from ten years ago, a world away, even as Lupe Almatrican backed out through them after Reynard, joining the rest of Sally's troops at the getaway point. The princess grabbed Tails by the scruff of his bulletproof vest and pressed him to the wall, too. His arms were wrapped tight around his black bag of treasure; otherwise, he was a crying, useless wreck. She pushed herself against him, giving cover, and leveled her pistol back down the long wide hall to General Admittance, tracking the distant moving bodies that crossed the lane of fire, waiting for the one that sprouted a gun. At the opening of the secondary hallway she had just left, Rotor had installed himself against the corner, shotgun parallel to the floor; behind him, Sonic slumped, breathing hard, both his arms useless and his guns gone, one lost, one given to Sally. But he was still able to run.

Behind the counter halfway across A&E receiving Bunnie was hunkered down; she glanced in the direction of A&E's treatment stations, to Sally's right, and jerked her head back from a bullet in the drywall of the counter, flattening her ears so hard it looked as though someone had yanked them with wires. Cat turned back to Sally. Pulled down the flesh underneath one eye—he had seen—a two-finger V—two hostiles—and pointed to the right, away from the exit and windows, toward the treatment stations. Sally nodded, raising Sonic's pistol beside her head.

Cat fired his first burst of three shots before he had properly aimed his rifle around the wall, to scare the cops. In a moment he bellowed "CROSS!" and Sally dragged Tails into the lobby. After about five feet Tails caught up with her idea and started running alongside her, freezing and stumbling when he glanced to the right and saw a pair of pistol-armed guards crouching behind a pair of structural pillars. Before she reached cover Sally was already handing him off to Bunnie, who came out of cover with her eyes fixed on the fox's tear-streaked face. She picked him up, shouted something to him about a sugar-fox and sprinted him to the van so quickly the raindrops' paths seemed to curl in their wake.

Sally had tried to teach herself to count bullets, and she had reached around eighteen, but thought she had missed a few, when she rolled behind the curve of the abandoned reception counter, braced her feet, stood up and screamed "CROSS!" She emptied her pistol at the guards, a pair of brown-furred mutts. They could tell the difference between automatic and semi-automatic fire and began cautiously aiming, so Sally added "RUN!"

Cat did not need to be told; he wasn't a natural fighter like Sonic, but he was learning to make up for it with absolute devotion to procedure and plan. When his cover-team called cross, he ran at his highest practical speed toward the next cover station, because statistically that was what was likely to keep the most people alive. If this meant he sometimes dived at a gunshot, which he did, leaping towards a sudden impact crater in the ground before him, then he was just going to hope that this war stopped before the law of large numbers took effect.

Two to go, Sally thought, as Cat commando-wormed beside her. She slid to the floor, dropped Sonic's empty gun, and plastered herself flat atop the lynx as outside, in the rain, the rest of her team's automatics simultaneously burst to life. Sally knew what that meant: the first major wave of police opposition responding to the alarms. According to her mission plan, they were already in the vans and pulling onto their escape route now.

That was the part of the plan that accounted for why they didn't all get shot to death.

"Give it!" Sally barked at Cat, ripping his rifle out of his hands. On instinct he tried to take his gun back and she planted her elbow in his chest, knocking him at the door. "Get out!" she screamed, ejecting the live shell from the chamber and spinning on her hip, leveling the gun at the hallway to general admission.

Rotor had flattened his blubber against the wall, the drum of his combat shotgun level with his head. He was about to lean around the corner and start firing on the positions he'd seen Sally and Cat firing on when they did their cross.

Which positions the guards had advanced from as soon as Sally's already meager covering fire had ended—right on schedule, eight shots. They were creeping up the wall toward Rotor, a little less than two meters away, pressed to the wall and ready to pound semiauto fire into anything that crossed the plane of their vision. Rotor was almost guaranteed to get shot in the face.

Beside him on the right, Sonic grimaced as he summoned all his strength, darting around the walrus's hip, almost horizontal, a kinetic-kill torpedo. The guards wouldn't track him at his speed, but there were starbursts from far down the hall behind him—not quite far enough to be potshots. There was maybe a ten percent chance that he would catch a bullet and go down before reaching the parking lot.

That was what Sally would work out from her brief glance at the scene over the next three days, and then the five years after that.

At the time, Sally didn't think. She screamed "SONIC," slammed the stock of Cat's rifle to her shoulder and kept her shots down the hallway and high, to keep clear of Sonic's quills. When she felt the blastwave of his passage ruffle her fur she swung the rifle to the left. Rotor fell back to the floor, landing like a sack of jello. Sally noticed the red hole in his shirt as the butt of his combat shotgun hit the floor and sprayed shot wildly at the A&E stations.

Sally opened fire right as the guard in front shot Rotor in the head.

Three-round controlled bursts. One struck the dog in the neck, but he stayed up. She fired again, emptying the clip. One of the two bullets shattered his skull, while the second guard returned fire at her, missing wide. Sonic grabbed her under her arms and pulled, yelling "come on!" But she couldn't hear, with all the gunfire and her boots scraping on the ground and—

She realized that she was screaming.

Kain Blackwood 2009

## \*Chapter 12\*: Tolsalvey, 8 Floreal 3230

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**Tolsalvey, Robotropolis, 8 Floreal 3230**

The phone rang, her land line. Throughout the hopeless week she'd felt lethargy filling her, pooling in her feet and legs and arms like heavy stuffing in a ragdoll. But Molly Lotor leapt at that phone like a trained pet, rolling off the couch and scampering to her feet, sending a little chip of plastic to the floor when she ripped the handset from the mount. "Hello?"

"Molly?"

"Baxter?" she cried, and she wasn't able to keep the relief from her voice. "Thank gods! Where have you been?"

"Are you okay?" the human asked.

"Yes," she said, and then "no," and then, "I had to—Kolensky—it's been a bad week," she finished.

"Get to my apartment. Now." He barked out the address like a quarterback calling the play action.

"Baxter, I can't. I'm under house arrest; Kolensky has a camera—"

"Fifteen minutes, get here." The last of his syllables were eaten by an ocean roar of fuzzy sound.

"Baxter, this phone—you shouldn't—"

"Damn it, move your ass over here!I need to talk to you now—"

Molly slammed the handset back on the wall mount and turned, heard it clatter onto the kitchenette tiles behind her, bent back around and grabbed it and put it back on the mount and it started to slip off again, and she felt that some sort of hook was gone that kept the handset in place, and then she ran for her door, the faint harmony of the dial tone receding quickly behind her.

Bus to the bridge, leap off it, wait horribly at the security checkpoint while the guard scratches at the little red dot on her ID that means potential treason, wondering if Snively has told these guards to arrest her. Maybe, she thought, looking at the river, she should just kill herself. She couldn't imagine living like this much longer.

"Go on through," the male said, returning her ID.

Molly stopped running at the northern edge of the downtown, laying her palm on the rust-pocked newsbox and retching fruitlessly down at the gutter while the legs of her shorts dug into the burning rut they were cutting in her thighfur. Her job was an expired fiction; her teaching position was in jeopardy, but all of that was secondary: Baxter was going to kill her. She had betrayed him and he was ordering her to his apartment so he could kill her. But he might not. Kolensky was definitely going to kill her. Someone was going to kill her, and she had to obey the man least likely to kill her. That was Baxter. She was his slave, and she had angered him, and with a squeak from her throat that was something like laughter she forced herself to start running again, to throw herself at her master's feet and beg for a chance to earn his forgiveness.

When she buzzed the door clicked open without a word. She stumbled up the stairs, the aching cramp in her belly bending her to look at her watch—twenty-five minutes, an unthinkably short time in which to reach the near east side from Molineaux—and knocked on the walnut door beneath the number, gasping, eyes stinging, panting openly.

The door opened a couple inches and Baxter nodded absently. "Oh! Right, come in."

"I'm late," she gasped.

"Don't worry about it. I just got in from the airport, I can barely think—come in, come."

She followed the human through as he walked down a narrow hall past a kitchen into a colorless library, shadowed in horizontal flares of sun from between the slatted windowblinds. About three times the kind of place that her money and furred skin could by. There was a human dress shirt, worn and torn at multiple points in the expanse of fragile white fabric, balled on a low-slung modernistic black leather chair with chromed steel arms and leg-structure; a fresh one was on Baxter's shoulders, the pointed collar turned up against his throat like the edge of a cloak. He was looping one of those bizarre human ties around and around in front of his throat-apple, looping the thing into some black-and-blue-striped noose.

"You wanted me?" Molly asked his back.

"What?—No," he said, threading the knot taut and carefully flipping the collar down around it. "But I'm having a showdown with Snively—did you know that's how he pronounces his name? With Captain Kolensky this afternoon, and I wanted to find out whether he would try to involve you somehow. My guess was if you could get over here pretty quickly on short notice, you couldn't be part of a trap. Not a well-organized one, anyway." He nodded, turning to her. "And you did. How'd you get across town so fast?"

"You're okay?"

Bemused grin. "Barely."

"Why didn't you call?" Molly was still breathing hard. "Why didn't you call me after things went to hell with the ambush?"

"Oh fuck, I forgot. This . . . bomb went off in front of me, if you can believe that, and then I had to go to Vorburg, and up there . . . ." Baxter shrugged, fastening the buttons over his wrists. "There's just been a lot going on."

"You're not angry," she said.

"About?" he asked, with the self-satisfied smirk that he sometimes wore when he felt particularly smart. "No, I'm not angry. Wait here until I get back."

"Here?" she said. "In your room?"

"You're here already, aren't you?"

"Where will you—what are you going to do?"

"I'll let you know what I can when it's done."

"Where are you going? What are you—"

"Gods, I got to get moving, okay?" He picked up a thick manila folder, waved it at her. "It'll all be fine. Don't worry your pretty head about it."

Molly struck Baxter in the face.

He had not been expecting the blow and there was no flinch, but Molly was not weak, and she did not slap him but cuffed him, aiming the heel of her palm at the front of his little pushed-in non-snout. The force of it turned his face a little off true before he turned back to stare at her, brown pupils tightening with shock, fear creeping toward offense. "What—"

Molly hit him again. Her muscles had been fallow and building tension all week, all year, longer, and the sense of acting on something was so pleasing that she just kept hitting him while he threw up his hands, his tie somehow winding up flipped over his shoulder, while he said over and over again with the halting speech of a choking man, "Molly—Mol—M—Molly—"

"Do you like this?" she was yelling at him, slapping the top of his head, following him to the corner as he tried to take shelter beside his bookshelves, "Do you like this?"

"Moll—I'm sorry, Molly, stop!"

"Do you think I like being treated like this? Do you care about me at all?Do you like being hit?"

"Yes!"

She stopped, left hand tight around his shirtcollar, right poised in the air.

Baxter cringed, ratlike, looking up at her, at her hand. "I mean, no—yes to the—the other one—"

The raccoon grabbed the man's tie and hauled upwards, screamed in his face. "Get out!"

"I—"

She put a hand on his shoulder and threw him towards the kitchen, almost tripping him over the edge of a glass coffee table. "Get out!"

He backed away from her, turned and stampeded for the door. "I live here!" he protested.

"Get out! Get out!"

He turned back on the stairs to see her start down after him, the bulk of her fur filling the doorframe, snarling face lowered so that it looked like her skull was anchored between her shoulders, and after that he didn't stop running until he was in the noon sun, turning at the curb to raise his hands to his chest in a shallow imitation of a boxer. The front door shut with a click behind him, the glass a mirror of golden sunlight. When it didn't open in a quarter minute, he strode forward and pressed his hands and face to the glass, looking at the dark, empty lobby. He stepped in an unthinking circle on the sidewalk patting his pockets, finding wallet and phone and no keys. Pulling out his phone, he dialed for the police . . . . and then stopped, thumb over the send button.

There was no reason for Molly not to be killed, at this point, other than her potential value to Snively in locating Baxter himself, which, at this point, unbeknownst to Snively, was nothing. Calling the police to get her out might as well be killing her.

With perfect timing, his cell phone was buzzing. Baxter prayed for a wrong number, turned it over and saw a call from Code 19. "Hello?"

"Captain Kolensky can no longer meet with you at Napiers Hospital." It was a woman, but not Lila Spitz. Baxter didn't recognize her.

"No shit. You read the papers?"

"You will go to the Eastview Park. It is close to your place of dwelling, but you will not go there directly."

"Who are you?"

"You will follow the route I dictate." The woman had a warm central Mobian accent, but wedded to the precise, cold tones of a soldier or functionary and that peculiarly Vorlandisch nominative command form. She dictated a ridiculous route: through the city center and over the river, then back east over the river again and back to the park. It multiplied the entire distance tenfold or more. "You will follow the route exactly. Wait by the flagpole in the middle of the park. You'll be approached by an associate of Captain Kolensky. Go now."

"What's your number if I have a problem?"

"I don't have one. I'm broadcasting to the cell network directly."

And then she wasn't. Baxter was successfully unnerved.

Baxter collapsed his phone, walked to the curb and sat down, leaning against a hot cherry car.

For a week, he had been making greater and greater leaps after the rottenest, most reeking bits of intelligence, finally packaged into a deluxe stinkbomb for the bosses, something to finally shut Pulaski up, socking it to him hard enough to make those lips part and spit loose just the finest amount of involuntary respect. Something, also, to at worst lock him in a MAD relationship with the Director's angry nephew. He had felt fast and sharp and very, very smart.

Now he was sitting on the curb, eighty sovereigns in his wallet, over a hundred thousand sovereigns in debt not secured by either of his government employers, a passport with a pair of missing entry and exit visas, and a folder full of incriminating records prepared by Kogen Baird that constituted the stinkbomb. The last two of these were in his apartment, which had just been stolen by his confidential informant.

How can you steal real estate?

He had to meet Snively Kolensky in about an hour and a half, at which point Snively might try to kill him. Alternatively, Snively might try to have him arrested for espionage, a death-penalty felony of which Baxter was guilty.

He was starting to feel a little less smart.

The Captain's initial suggestion that they meet at Napiers Hospital was ominous, given events of the previous day. At Napiers Baxter could have been disarmed by security, then been required to meet in a place without witnesses. This new place, a public park, was a lot better . . . . but the steel sandwiches of the security checkpoints at the river weren't. Snively was clearly in some sort of trouble after the bizarre massacre he'd apparently caused, but it would only take two or three allies left in ISO for someone to cry look out, he's got a gun . . . .

Eastview Park, the sign said. Robotropolis Park District, Established 3221. The timing was a little suspicious, and the topography added to it: in the middle of a swampfill city, a tiny park filled with hills that limited the east view—as well as the views on the north, west, and south—to the second floors of low-rise "middle"-income flats, squatting over the place like people poking their toes at some interesting but not particularly enticing mystery. The hills didn't roll so much as erupt from the dirt fully-formed like Winged Victory from the brow of her father: grassy and smooth. Baxter was convinced they were piled atop bombing wreckage the government hadn't bothered to drag from the city. Anemic, crippled trees clung to them, but their roots didn't penetrate far; if trees could have emotions, they would be unpleasantly surprised.

Baxter walked around a slight right bend in the cobbled path and encountered what he was told to expect: flagpole with halogen bulbs sprouting from it like warts, dull in the daylight. He walked up, touched the little bubbles in the greenish paint, then had his face shoved into it with a soft, metallic ting. "Hands behind your head. Spread your legs."

"Gods," he hissed, but he didn't fight, for two reasons. One, it was the lady from the phone. Two, she had a grip like a pair of handcuffs.

She finished patting him down, and, weirdly, removed his cell phone from his pocket. He heard it get crushed on the cobblestones. Then she stepped back. "Safe, Commander."

Baxter turned. It was the fake robot monster. He blinked, looked over the contours of the skunk's armor, verifying that they were to the specs they had given to Molly to give to the Royal Army, that they weren't just some new suit. They were.

"How much did you cost?" Baxter marveled.

"My uncle says too much, but don't believe him," Snively rasped as he hobbled forward behind his monster. There was a laugh in his voice but not his face. His cheeks and throat were bruised. Some knot of pain in his neck kept tugging at the corner of his mouth like an invisible fishhook. His arms hung limp, his hands at the end swollen like a surgical glove when you blow air into it, fingers bulging and discolored up to the unmoving knuckles. Tongue depressors or popsicle sticks pressed into his palms, tied down with some kind of thin surgical tape, preventing excess movement and anchored deeper in his sleeves. "Surprised?" he croaked.

"That you've got a new female to do your dirty work for you?" Baxter asked. The monster upended everything. He had no idea what was happening. Bluff. "It's practically your standard operating procedure."

Snively gave a horrible grin. "Well, no one has ever accused me of lacking charm with the ladies."

Baxter glanced nervously at the sculpted, post-sexual creature beside him. "Can I be the first?"

"Cute, but 'you have a problem with women' is so trite. Can you leave the psychoanalysis to experts, such as me?"

"You know, Lila said something about a female warden at—"

The monster punched him in the stomach. Punched in the stomach, however, did not adequately convey how hard the thing drove her fist into his belly. She punched him in the lower spine, via the front of his body. Then she grabbed his throat and choked him against the flagpole.

Snively leaned at him, a horrible, shivering energy in his face, like he was about to fly to atoms. "I'M SORRY, DID YOU JUST ASK ABOUT IRONLOCK?" The film was shuddering, about to fly out of the sprockets, lock and burn. "I DON'T THINK THAT'S A VERY INTERESTING SUBJECT; DO YOU?"

"Nkk. No. No." Baxter shook his head. The monster tilted her hand with him, to let him shake it.

"THEN WHY DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT IT?"

"I don't," Baxter whimpered, tears on his cheeks.

"GOOD!" Snively took a pneumatic breath through locked teeth and then let it out of him in a fit of laughter like a burst of steam from an emergency release valve. "HAHAHAHA, woo, hah! Glad we see eye to eye on that one." He nodded at the monster and she let Baxter breathe. "I brought you here because I need your help. Thanks to Renee's decision to bug your cell phone and the computer intrusion skills of my lovely Amanda here, I can truthfully tell you that I now am in sole possession of recordings that prove you've committed espionage with another spy in the Lachels Embassy in Robotropolis, with the goal of humiliating Mobius and destroying its reputation. Either you protect me from my uncle or I send the tapes to Justice and State." He gave Baxter a moment, watching the news sink in. "And if that doesn't sell you, I could have Amanda here kill you. Or what's left of your family in Lachels. Or your raccoon girlfriend. I could get very imaginative."

He let that one slide, focusing on the insane part: "You want me to protect you. From your uncle."

"You've got proof of my dealings with the fascists, no doubt. Take the case to him, get in his good graces. Show some goddamn imagination!" Snively sighed with exasperation.

". . . . That's protecting you?"

"I'm leaving my day job to pursue my interests in cybernetics full time," Snively smiled. "It will require extensive travel. I need someone on the inside to smooth travel for me."

So much for bluffing. Baxter was totally and obviously lost. "So why'd you send Lila after me?"

"She practically sent herself, she was such a true believer. Anyway, things are simpler for me now that she's dead."

"She's dead?"

Snively rolled his eyes. "The fascists killed her! Keep up!"

". . . . But you were giving the fascists money," said Baxter.

Snively blinked, then broke out in laughter so intense he winced at the pain it caused him.

"Or laundering it," Baxter corrected. The evidence was still a little ambiguous. "They transfer dirty money to you, you route it through Science Ministry's medical programs, and then . . . it must go . . . ."

"You're looking at where it goes!" Snively gasped for air, tears on his horrible cheeks. His expensive monster put a hand on his shoulder to steady him, shared his mirth with an affectionate smile. "I've been robbing them blind, you idiot! Everybody I used to set up the deal has been assassinated! I've been hiding out in a hospital basement since Thunderday to stay alive!" He threw back his head in an airless cackle.

"Huh," Baxter said. It was starting to make a little sense. "So that's why I was supposed to cross the river and back. The checkpoints would have made sure the fascists couldn't follow me to find you."

Snively went totally silent, though he still smiled. "You didn't cross the river?"

The monster leapt to cover her master from any gunfire. If the snipers had been waiting for a better shot over the steep hillsides, they didn't wait any longer. The bullet hit the monster's armor with genuine sound of ricochet, dulled slightly by the ablative effect of the black plate. The sudden tumult gave Baxter a sense that the shooter was close, and he spun and hunched, gaze flying over the blank, reflective windows rising above the park's sheltering hills, one of them, the roof—

Snively turned and hobbled back along the cobblestone path to the street; behind him the monster pulled a pistol from a holster that was actually glued to her hip and fired a string of shots high into the solar glare flaring around the building to the south, gouts of flame matching its loud barks. Five shots and she ran after her Snively, reloading with another clip from her body of tricks.

After a moment's hesitation in the sniper's silence, Baxter ran after them. The monster seemed good at keeping the people around her alive.

The gentle path serpentined for them, and the artificial hillocks provided good cover. A police siren swelled in the air—that was fast, Baxter thought, remembering for some reason the monster's ability to command the cell network. Everyone but the monster stopped when another sniper shot came up low and kicked a clot of sod flying over Snively. He recoiled and his monster grabbed him in a bear hug, making him squeal as she hustled him forward faster than his injured body wanted to go. A pale ghost in a charcoal suit ran up the sidewalk and Baxter wondered whether he'd seen the man before at the airport, or back in Terscala, wondering whether the man and his maniac brethren harbored any hope of getting their money back with that banana-clipped machine pistol he aimed at Snively.

The monster threw herself into a matador's spin that turned her into a dust-devil of black and sunshine gleam. Baxter could have sworn she had been shot and shot but the bullets must have gone between her limbs or into her armor as she aimed with impossible caution and put a round into the man's face. He flew backwards, arms opening out like the petals of an ash flower, gun silent.

Snively was curled on his side by her feet, a squirming, screaming fetus with thinning hair. The monster moved to pick him up, but stopped as a red police cruiser screeched to a halt on the far side of the street, rear wheel jumping the curb. Baxter's heart leapt: Cops! He threw up his hands, running forward. "Help!—"

Before the driver's door could open the monster snapped her pistol forward with one hand and shot him through the window, backsplash of red against the powdered glass. Then she holstered the gun and ran, shoulders low like a linebacker, and threw her left shoulder into the door with a sharp bark of effort, the crumple zone sagging. Her right hand seized the underside of the body and with no visible strain under her featureless armor it lifted. She braced her feet against the asphalt as she pushed forward, the car's front right tire blowing out under the lateral strain, and then the dry, brittle crunch as the prowler rolled onto the sidewalk and punched its roof through the windows of a ground-floor apartment.

Baxter stood with hands in the air, motionless. He was terrified.

But not of the sniper, which he didn't remember until he felt his right arm explode.

After that things were spotty as his consciousness decayed. Baxter felt grass against the back of his neck, the broad warmth and the distinct blades pressing into the fringe of his haircut, the white hot pain everywhere under his shoulder. Somehow he saw a hand, saw the fingers moving at his volition, but it was in the wrong place. Police over him—

"Sniper!" he gasped. "Sniper." He jerked his head to indicate behind him and passed out again.

Someone took his belt off. He kicked his heels against the dirt and the dirt gave way. There were people in white coats against the sky—paramedics.

"Oh thank gods," he gasped. He may have gasped it more than once. Someone tapped a hypodermic needle and knelt beside him.

Someone put a black bag over his head.

"Hi!" Kima said again. There was such energy in that voice. All gone, all gone, when he'd seen her last.

Josh felt himself starting to cry. "Oh shit," he sobbed.

"You've reached Kima and Josh," Kima continued. "We can't come to the phone right now, but we'd love to hear from you! So leave a message at the tone."

Josh hung up before the tone. He'd already left one long message and two short ones, so there was no point. He opened the line again and hit redial, listened to the rings.

"Hi! You've reached Kima and Josh. We can't come to the phone right now, but we'd love to hear from you! So leave a message at the tone."

She was probably out at the University. Her cell phone was clearly turned off, because that dumped him to voicemail without a ring. She was probably in a lecture or something. There was no reason to assume that she was sitting at home, had listened to his first message, and then just sat there, refusing to pick up. Hell, she said she'd love to hear from him. Right? Just to check and make sure, he hit redial.

"Hi! You've reached Kima and Josh. We can't come to the phone right now, but we'd love to hear from you! So leave a message at the tone."

Your lover would like to talk to you, honey. I know he's ignored you for two years while he plays around at saving the world and commits multiple felonies and buys murders and has a grand old time. But he's in trouble again. Please pick up the phone. I promise I'll come home if you just pick up the phone.

"Hi! You've reached Kima and Josh. We can't come to the phone right now—"

He hung up. This international phone bill was really getting out of hand. He called 411.

"Yeah, international. High Demon, Lachels." He waited. "Premier's Office. Yeah, the Premier of the country, yes. . . . Yeah, you can connect it, thank you."

He sighed.

"Yeah, hi," he continued after a moment. "I need to talk to someone who could address a possible conspiracy within the Foreign Affairs Department? Who would that be? . . . . I work at the Lachels Embassy in Robotropolis. My name is Joshua Dursine." He gave his employee number and waited. "Sure, I'll hold."

With a squeak the gurney bent behind Baxter's hip, turning his back almost upright, filling his headspace with intense, enervating whirlpools, prolonged by the opiate fog and the lack of any external reference beyond the black bag. Then the bag was whisked from his head, burning the tip of his nose. He squinted, but the room was dark and quickly resolved itself.

Standing in front of him was a mongoose in a human-style navy blue suit that had been lived in for well over twenty-four hours. The mongoose knocked a cigarette from a carton and slipped it back into a vest pocket; beside him on a desk an ashtray smoked like a recently doused housefire, rising at a near-perfect vertical in the undisturbed air, positioned carefully so as to not interrupt the view of the two minicams of the tri-vid recording setup aimed at Baxter.

The desk was big enough to pass beyond ostentation and into levels of wealth and power approaching science fiction. It was an aircraft carrier of a desk. If the institution of monarchy had developed during a period of modern industrial technology, they wouldn't have bothered with really nice chairs. They would have used this desk.

Two people sat behind it. One was a white mouse court reporter, her pinkish ears folded down over a pair of earbuds, delicate, quick fingers working a shorthand keyboard as she tracked the audio that was simultaneously sent to a discrecorder.

The other person was Julian Robotnik.

Baxter thought that his right arm was gone, but he wasn't sure.

"My nephew," Robotnik said, "is out of control." His voice was deeper than on trivid, grinding through registers that dropped well below the mass media definition of a mellow, powerful voice. "You're going to tell me everything that you know about him. If I'm convinced that you haven't been complicit in his treason, you may live to see something other than this room."

He coughed once, putting his fist before his lips, sinking down, down into the groaning leather. Then he pointed at Baxter: "Go."

Kain Blackwood - 2009

## \*Chapter 13\*: Great Forest, 8 Floreal 3230

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**Great Forest, 8 Floreal 3230**

Tails hugged his knees, scrunched between the roots of the big old oak by the top of the rise. It had gotten cold again, just a couple of days after he'd brushed away most of his winter coat. Not all of it himself, though. He couldn't reach his back, even when he pushed his arm against the wall and curled against it. In the mirror he'd looked like he was hunched over, because of the longer, thicker fur and broken hairs all down his back. The Wildfox! Aunt Sally had laughed last year when he asked her for help with his back. Save me from the Wildfox! Tails had growled loud and snarled with his mouth open, like some big toothy animal, curling his fingers tight like claws, and pretended to chase her around the table in the conference room while Antoine made one of his hard-to-see smiles and Sonic laughed.

This year, Sally had been too busy with the wolves and Sonic to help, but Tails was sharing his room with a pair of young wolf brothers that had come with the pack. They were spooky, with too-small mouths and too-big eyes and shorts that had been made by cutting away the pant legs of old jeans, and they didn't talk. Tails had thought they might be a little afraid of being so far underground—Aunt Bunnie said that most people weren't used to living in caves like they were, and that the wolves might not be used even to big buildings. But they had done Tails' back. They seemed nice. Tails had thought he was going to get to like them.

Then he had spent a day learning how to run in the flak vest, and then he had slept, and then they had gone to the hospital, and then Rotor had pulled him out of the hole, and then Sally had taken him away to Bunnie, and Bunnie had taken him away to the car, and then the car had driven away fast, scraping horribly, a smell of burn in his nose, and then they had got into the other cars in the tunnel and they had driven away and had made it back to Knothole. They had arrived one at a time, so it was like Rotor had gotten there first, and had been down in his lab.

Tails hadn't gone down the elevator or the stairs; he had gone to Sonic's shack, scented warm and musty in the springtime. Sonic wasn't there. Tails had gone inside and laid down on the floor, next to Sonic's mattress. After a few minutes he had closed his eyes and tried to sleep but he hadn't. He had pulled Sonic's guitar from the wall and looked at it, then put it back.

Now Tails was outside. It was late afternoon, and the breeze was thick with the smell of new flowers from the clearing by the stream a bit to the north. There was a snap and brush of plants and he turned quickly and wolves were hiding in a line of stinkgrass that had grown up where Sonic had cut the smaller trees away to make space for his hut, the wolves that had slept in the bunk over him.

They spoke—they weren't hiding the way Tails would, he realized, they were just taught to move that way. "Your pack is less," said the taller gray-fur one. They lifted their heads back and howled, arooo, the smaller brown-fur one coming in just a moment later, higher-pitched and soft.

The sound was quiet, but it hurt.

Tails looked at them and they looked back at him. He didn't know what to do. They didn't know what to do, either. After a minute, they went back though the stinkgrass, and they were gone, leaving him alone.

He felt the dirt in his tailfur. The sun moved, and made the oak's shadow cooler.

Aunt Bunnie wasn't quiet like the wolves. Her feet were wide in the grass, crunching; Tails looked up at the sound before the smell. "Hello Tails," she said. Her arms were at her sides and it made her steel arm seem to sag heavily, like it was just a big bunch of metal that had been bolted to her shoulder. Her toes were scuffed dirty and clogged had bits of grabweed root from dragging through the forest.

"Hey Aunt Bunnie," he said.

There was quiet just long enough so that neither of them was speaking, and then Bunnie said, "How're you doing?"

"Okay."

"You know about Rotor," she said, and Tails was angry.

"Yes." He hunched his knees up against his chest, and planted his snout between them. "I heard Sally yelling." Actually he didn't know for sure from her words—she had been yelling words and Rotor and he's dead and killed were in there, but how could she be sure what she'd seen? Maybe Rotor had been captured. Maybe he was in a bed in the hospital right now. They would have to rescue him! Or the police might be making him say where Knothole was! They would have to hurry. He squeezed his eyes shut. Why wasn't Sally worried about Rotor telling things to the police?

He felt Bunnie sit beside him on his left and he wanted to punch her and spit at her. He wanted her to go away crying. "I heard Sally too," she said. Of course she didn't see anything either, Bunnie had been right with Tails in the van. "I couldn't believe—he saved me, you know, from what I was, in the forest. I'm more and more like a—person, now, but he saw something in me even then. When my own grandma thought I wasn't more'n some kinda smartbomb."

Blah blah blah, what a stupid thing to say. Tails liked Rotor, too; everyone did! Rotor was a good guy and he knew lots of neat stuff, math and physics and chemistry. No one wanted Rotor to get hurt. Bunnie was stupid. Tails hated Bunnie. He hated Sally, too.

"You know it's not your fault," Bunnie said, and she put her arm over his shoulders, like she had done in the van.

"Yes." Stupid question.

"It's hard."

"Yes!" He said it loudly enough that Bunnie had to know to leave him alone.

"And you didn't see it. That makes it worse—"

"I know he's not coming back, Bunnie!" He snatched his arm from her before she could grab it and rolled out from under her arm, onto his hands and knees, tails thrashing wildly, too angry even to pummel her. "I'm not a little kid! I get it!" You stupid kit, you just don't get it, no matter how many times your father explains and growls and finally shouts that your mother isn't just on a long trip, she's not in jail, she has been destroyed and they've buried her in dirt because she can't move anymore, ever, no matter what kind of racket you make or how many dishes your kicking shakes to the floor. "He's dead! Soldiers die! I get it! They go away and they die and they don't come back!"

Bunnie seemed startled by Tails' ferocity, her metal arm drawn up not quite far enough to shield her face. "But you didn't even get to say goodbye," she mumbled.

. . . what?

Tails knew what a funeral was—it was a religious thing, Sally had told him when the Old Lady Mephit had died in Four Mounds and he had seen people in the graveyard a long way off, all wearing black pants and vests and stoles and scarfs and gloves. It was so that the person could go to the underworld—a sort of imaginary place, he had come to understand. But Tails had never been at a funeral himself, and he had never had this idea of saying goodbye to a dead person before and it . . . .

It was horrible.

A person is going out a door. Goodbye! I'll see you tonight. But you know that they will not, that they will never return. You wouldn't say goodbye! You'd run after them and grab their legs and pull them back and warn them you're not going to come back! You're going to die! Don't go don't go, come back, don't . . . .

Tails didn't fight when Bunnie held him to her chest, only cried. Once he put his head back and tried to howl and couldn't, only wail, and it didn't sound like come back. So he yapped, and yapped.

Sonic was walking laps in Knothole, following the route he would run when he was a kid and Rosie was still large and vital enough to keep him from wandering outside: up to the galley, over to the gym, down the row of bedrooms and heads and showers, and then over to the library. His hands throbbed. His chest ached from the number Bunnie had done on him.

At the bottom leg of each lap, he would pass a heavy steel door with a palmpad next to it, and a golden plaque with the green leaf that went on the stuff that belonged to the royal family. It said SECURITY CELL ACCESS. Sally slept in there; she had since just a little after they had first came to Knothole, when Rosie had said she had to, because that was where royalty slept.

The door was ajar.

At the top of the lap, in the second big room of the library, Cat was teaching a curious young wolf girl how to install a freeware SkinnersoftOS ("Gescom is a piece of shit") on a computer while his bullshit program made an "image" of the hard drive on Snively's laptop, which took forever and did nothing to break Snively's codes—a bunch of files were all coded. "Break the codes!" Sonic would scream at him every couple of hours or so.

But Cat had apparently done this kind of thing before, before he'd become a freedom fighter, and he'd shout back with authority. "Image first! SOP! Fuck off!" When he yelled this Sonic felt like going in there and kicking the shit out of him, but then the wolf girl might get in on it and he'd have to kick her ass, and then he'd have to kick everyone's ass and the wolves would leave and Sally would fall apart.

He couldn't stand it. Every time he went past the galley he'd look in and see Antoine all ruined in his electric wheelchair, a blanket tucked under his chin, the Postalitas kids running around while the mom drank coffee and tried to hold it together, and the wolves standing around quiet, not getting it because they thought everyone was tough as they were.

Sonic wanted to curl up in a corner and show the world his quills.

Rotor had been a good guy. He knew a lot of stuff but he didn't go crazy with it like Antoine did whenever he knew something. He liked his friends and he fought good in a scrap. Rotor seemed to understand Sonic, too, that he didn't get other people very well, and that when he wanted to do stuff with them other than just fight and have fun—like with Sally—that it was kind of weird and freaked him out. Rotor was a good friend, and when he thought about it, Sonic didn't really have many friends. It kind of came with living in Knothole and being a freedom fighter.

Shit would be harder without Rotor.

It scared him. Like Knothole was getting smaller. He turned the corner from the bedrooms and jogged quickly to the library. "Finish the fucking image because the Princess is waiting on it!" he screeched. "Chop chop! Let's go! Time's a'wastin'! We're going to take out Robuttnik! She told me that if you don't—"

"You didn't talk to her," Cat said.

"I did!" Sonic told himself he should be angry and he checked and he was angry, his quills were up, and the lynx was just sitting there tapping his middle finger on his trackball like a dork. "She said for you to get off your lazy ass and decode, the, the thing—"

"Listen you idiot." Cat's voice was like ice. "Rotor's dead. I'm just about ready to shave my fur and sit in ashes and I'm just some drunken imbecile met him two years ago. You four, you're . . . . you were family. It's in the way you talk to one another, the shorthand, everything. No one can go in there and help her but you. Understand?"

Sonic wanted to run away and never come back. "She . . . she said—"

"Antoine is a wreck. He's lost his foot. He wasn't there. He can't talk to her. You have to talk to her now. Go."

Sonic turned and ran toward the galley, toward the rotted elevators and the stairs. He went through the door and ran up the stairs and tumbled out into the lobby, slamming his face into the dead minigun before he saw it. He roared, feeling another bruise starting, and he leapt on gun, tearing at the cables that threaded down from the ceiling to the body, snapping wires. Then he ran back down the emergency access stairs, slipping on the third landing and flying into the wall, then running again, until he was at her door and inside her door and he closed it behind him. He was in darkness, soft yellow light filtering from a room down a short hallway, like from those lights, those lights in the mine in the desert. He was panting, his ribs screaming, barbed wire was getting pulled into and out of his lungs.

He sobbed: Rotor was dead. Oh gods, he was dead. He was dead.

Sonic reached behind him for a doorknob and felt cold steel bolts.

The carpet was long, thick, gave under his sneakers like spring grass. He stepped forward on his toes, slowly approaching the source of the light, the centimeter or less beneath a closed door. He turned a knob, silently opened a crack of light.

Red wallpaper, expensive-looking. There was a lamp on a small table. There was a dresser. There was a painting picture of a bunch of people sitting on a couch, another of a tree by a pond. There was a bed. She was lying on it.

Sonic ducked back, quills flaring out. Scraping the door. Fuck, fuck—

". . . Sonic . . . ."

Fuck.

He looked out again. Sally was lying on top of a heavy white blanket that looked like it had been slept in a lot more than Sally had been sleeping anywhere the past few days. She looked at him over her shoulder, lifting just enough of her head to show an eye that was already ducked halfway behind its lid. Her voice had this . . . horrible softness to it that . . . reached down his throat and grabbed his heart and squeezed, pulled him inside out.

Her brown eyes followed him as he approached, but the rest of her remained nestled on her side, one arm crooked by her chest, the other off the side of the bed, reaching limply. The droop of her eyelids, the way her hair flowed above her on the bedding, as though she were underwater, it made her look so exhausted, helpless. She wasn't wearing her vest—

She wasn't wearing anything.

His first instinct was actually to run out of the room. But she'd seen him moments ago, she'd called to him.

Her fingers worked in the air.

Sonic was terrified.

They didn't talk. They touched, slowly, like in a dream. Sonic wondered if he was dreaming, if he had gone crazy. If she had gone crazy. Rotor was dead, the way she was screaming in the van. They might as well have been perched on his coffin, but he wanted her so badly, like a knife in his belly, slicing out, in—

"This isn't the first time. That I've . . . ." He couldn't finish.

Her eyes, brown and soft, looking up at him like he was some kind of demon from the heavens, still. This idiot, covered in bruises, his chest full of holes, wincing with every breath.

Her fingers tracing his bent tail to its dagger tip.

"It'll hurt," he whispered, pain in his voice.

Her hand on the smooth fabric of his running shorts, beside his tail. Her eyes.

It was not okay when they began. It was alien-animal, almost repulsive. They continued, drawn along that slowly blunting razor's edge of addict need.

The fighting, the hiding. The loneliness, the death. So much less, all around them.

They needed each other so much more.

It was self-defense. It was an act of war.

Sonic needed her like a fish needs water, like a guerilla needs the forest, and he could hear in the whistle of her breath on his face that she needed him, and that made him blossom.

He wanted to protect her. He wanted to wrap himself around her and show the world his quills. If she wanted a throne he'd find one and lift her on to it and beat the snot out of anyone who came near it. But he hoped they'd get the idea from a look, so he could be right up there, leaning on her arm.

I love her, Sonic thought afterwards. He'd had the thought before and he'd said the words, to Sally, a lot, but something had happened. The words had acquired a heft and a mass that could counterbalance death. He needed new ones.

I want to marry her, he thought.

Little tingling pricks, one after another, in the quillbases down the length of his spine. He swallowed the nervous laughter that swelled up from his belly; he didn't want to wake her.

I'm going to marry you, Sally, he thought, and he closed his eyes.

Sally slammed her doors open, kicking them back at their frames as she passed. She disrobed, got under the covers, and tried to sleep.

It wouldn't let her. She couldn't even get far enough from consciousness to dream about failing to save him, memory of the colors and the light and the horrible shapelessness of him on the floor, blubber and muscle, repeat and mutate in phantasmagoric recombination. She threw off the sheets and sat on the side of the mattress, nauseous. She wanted to cry and scream. She couldn't even do that. She dug her nails into her cheek, pulled. The pain was nothing, it did nothing.

It was like you put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

Sally got a glass of water from the little bathroom that she had shared with her sister when they had stayed here during the war. She put it down under the lamp. Then she reached into the drawer where she kept some of her notebooks, her dainty little .22, some plastic pieces that she could not identify, and the two little mushroom caps she had found still in her pocket when she returned in a breathless excitement from her meeting with Lupe Almatrican, ready to rush to battle in the city. She put them next to the glass of water.

She looked at them. Honeybuds. Pictin River Valley Mushrooms, h. pictin, a hallucinogen with euphoric properties. After a while of staring, they became magic death soul poison.

There was no alcohol anywhere in Knothole. If there had been, they would have gotten rid of it for Cat, who otherwise would have been a snarling, lurching wreck by now—Not that Sally was like him, of course. One . . . shameful night did not make her an alcoholic. Indeed, Sally had not so much as smoked marijuana before—a filthy habit, her mother would say as some soldiers, on orders of her solicitous father, would leave a palace room to go light up in the hall, or the grounds. No children, she had made clear to Sally, should smoke, let alone a child of the Great Tree of Acorn. It led to laziness and sloth, slovenliness of thought and person. It robbed a child of its ambition and future. It was a vice of cowards and the poor-in-spirit. Did Sally understand?

Yes, mother, she did.

The buds probably didn't do anything, anyway.

Settling her elbows on her knees with a sigh, letting her head hang, she let herself remember that even now she had to face the old question: what next. Once Cat gets the files cracked, prepare the evidence for dissemination to the media outlets. That's the easy part. The tricky part would be to combine that with a series of attacks on high-profile targets, something to let her people know that this was more than just another bit of information spat at them, that it was a gunshot, her opening salvo. Something to give her people hope.

On top of that, there was the issue of other rebels that wanted her dead. Griffith Varitek, there was no question, was a problem that heretofore had lacked a solution. Maybe there was some way to make him see reason, to stoke the fires of patriotism in that hungry heart. Maybe if she couldn't reach him, she could reach his soldiers. Then Rotor thought that Ari Kor—

. . . Then there was the possibility that Ari Koren was in on the action, too. The chief force in Standard Army before Sally had come along, he'd opposed aiding her while the two other leaders, Kevin Logan and Deidre Connell, had backed her with little reservation. Her success would mean freedom for the country. But if Ari Koren had lost sight of the public good, were motivated only by power . . . how deep would that corruption run?

And on top of that, Robotnik and his nephew were neither on the mat nor stupid. They'd no doubt been in intense damage control mode, trying to find some way to parry the offensive that they knew must be coming and to counterattack at the same time. Her own troops, needless to say, were exhausted. Rotor was dead. Rotor was dead. Antoine was crippled. Morale was low. Rotor was dead. She would have to give a memorial service. A speech to bring them all out of it, something inspiring and beautiful. Explaining to everyone that Rotor had died in a good cause, given his life for something worth more than himself.

Sally swept up the buds and tossed them to the back of her tongue; they caught in her throat. Before she could think about coughing them out she slammed back half of the glass of water.

She waited a few seconds. They did nothing.

She lay back on her bed, digging her fingers into the comforter, feeling the threads stretch and her muscles stretch.

Little Princess Sarah is a thief and junkie.

She rolled to her left, plucking up the blanket and nesting in it, in the process hiding herself from the old family portrait. Honestly, Daddy, they didn't even do anything. Little snort of a laugh: I got burned. That's good, come on. Keep smiling.

Little Princess Sarah is a meatgrinder.

Rotor. Antoine. Will and Mary, two years ago, dead and MIA presumed dead. Four. Really that's not so bad. That's incredibly good, considering. She was a Princess, weeks away from becoming Queen. She wasn't just herself. They were a nation. They were conducting the restoration of peace and order most expeditiously and with minimal loss of life. It wasn't a cause for a change of national policy that some squirrel who wasn't even old enough to vote for a representative in a restored Parliament particularly liked the walrus—

Well, not that particularly.

Little Princess Sarah let Rotor die because she likes Sonic more.

It had taken her only seconds afterwards to realize what she must of already known, that it was Rotor who needed her help. Odds were that if she'd shot his attackers Rotor and Sonic would both be alive now. There was a possibility that Sonic might have been hit, but it was slim, next to none. Rotor'd be out there, showing her the files, doing that thing with his eyebrows, that little smile that showed in them more than in his bristled cheeks. If she asked him how the task was proceeding, he would, without boasting, give her a rundown on the portions of the file structure deciphered, and the amount of time needed to decrypt the remaining files, that was almost alarmingly fast for a self-educated son of a washwoman working alone in the middle of the forest. If she asked him how it was going, now that everything had changed and freedom wasn't just some pipe dream anymore: the eyebrow thing. "Oh, same old, same old, Sally—"

It was the way that those words sounded coming from his mouth that sent Sally to the depths. That mellow softness to his voice that spoke to you as much as his words did. He wasn't always happy and he wasn't everybody's friend, but happiness and friendship were his natural conditions. He cared about her, about Antoine, about Sonic. He taught Tails when Sally no longer could; he'd brought Cat into the rebellion when no one even liked Cat. Without him Sonic and Antoine would be at each other's throats, Tails frustrated at anything but target practice. They hadn't lost a deckhand, they'd lost the ship. Nothing but icy water, the brush of a cooling arm, clutch at it, hold it—

Pure grief exploded in her, flowed out of her, around her, crashed at her in titanic, drowning waves, shaping her like the sand of a beach. A hurricane's flood, breaking and twisting. Then pounding, awful, draining, emptying, those waves of agony dying out, becoming less, and less. Imperceptibly slow. The ocean's steady, encompassing hush, breaking in peaceful curls along her coast. Until Sally was a beach of fine white sand, lapped at by a warm sea that traced its subtle fingers along her sides, a rhythm emptied of sense, calming, geological.

This island is a young island, in a young sea, in a young planet. Strange plants, fern and bladeleaves, slowly grow in the steam of the fetid, warm ocean, sinking their roots. In sand-burrows, lizards dart, their minds empty, their eyes dull pebbles. In the leafshadow of bushes, strange creatures, subtle, go obliquely about their hidden work.

Pristine.

Eons pass.

Sally was exhausted, the weight of the years of her life pressing down on her like a pleasantly oppressive blanket. The fur was damp on her face. Her palms were wet with sweat. Her muscles ached sweetly. The lamp blew its light on her cheeks, warm and undulating, caressing her cheek like a wave caresses the shore, rebounding, ever spreading in a circle from every point on its wavefront, unstoppable. Light is a particle and a wave, but Sally knew then that this was not true, that the truth was beauty and beauty was truth and the truth was the waves she now saw filling the room from the lampbulb, iridescent and with the insubstantiality of a smoke ring. The promised beauty of science, there for the seeing and touching as naturally as the apple is for plucking, the water for drinking.

The light was so beautiful. It was beautiful in the air, on the wall. Sally held out her fingers and watched the flow divide and rejoin around them, feeling the texture of light, dry like dust but somehow smooth as water. When her hand came close to her face all diffracted and softened and she put her hand against her face and it was furred and soft. She closed her eyes and the bed was soft and she rolled to her side.

Then Sonic was there.

The light danced from quill to quill, making rings, like ripples in a pond. His fur was blue like water.

Sally swam. She sank. She let the water turn and play on her, lifted her mouth to gasp softly the sweet air. She swam like a fish, underwater, undulating, the sweet, smooth light shifting in the green, close depths of his eyes.

A tired eon, an age of exhaustion. Shoulder and thigh motionless, a topography born of long-gone volcanism, now weathering, slowly eroding to their ultimate form. This the island of the west, isle of the long day, the isle of sleep.

When Sally woke up it was an indeterminate time later. She ached. She was sensible of a sort of thin barrier between her and reality, a broadcast delay. It took a few minutes for her to assemble the world around her.

She had gotten Rotor killed. Her eyes closed, teeth crunched, shoulders shivered against Sonic's chest. She had a sharp ache, deep between—in—

She'd just—

Oh whined, pressing her thighs together. She'd hurt herself. She'd let him hurt her.

She'd been puzzling over how best to make a scandal out of roboticization, thinking in terms of headlines, big and tabloid and full of words that were interchangeable with other words like sheets and drugs and pregnant—

Oh gods. When was it oh gods the the the the seventh when had no the eighth, when was, when had she last, what, what—

The tension passed suddenly, her inner conflagration stunned into a dull, chill sensation. If he'd put a baby in her, she'd just have it killed.

Yes. Of course. She couldn't carry a child right as the war became serious, became a war. She'd told him that already. How ridiculous. And even if it survived, it would be a bastard, gnawing at the legs of the throne.

So her bastard would have to die. Rotor, her child. Then maybe a squad of Lupe's wolves. Or Tails. Or a small city.

He's a thug. He's a murderer. He murdered a dog, in front of her, while she watched, and then she just kept watching. She should've known right then; she did; she did know right then that this was impossible. It wasn't a question of him growing into the role of monarch. There was no seed. He wasn't from the garden. He was a weed.

A beautiful dandelion.

Sally kept still, and Sonic just continued to lie next to her, breathing, sleeping, as though the entire world were not being ripped in two, as though you couldn't hear the crust and mantle groaning with the tidal stresses. For years, now, maybe longer, she'd turned her mind's eye to the future and saw herself the Queen of a prosperous Mobius, beloved of her people, sitting on the throne and deciding policy with a wise, measured, infallible hand, and then—

— jump cut and she was touching Sonic and it didn't make any sense, it was like some surrealist monstrosity of a dinner party unconcerned by the host taking a shit on the coffee table.

Sally wasn't marrying Sonic. He couldn't be King. He was barely capable of surviving in civilization at all.

She just had to rip her own heart out of her chest. He was her every terrible habit; she would never surrender him, she would never make him surrender her. She'd march her troops into combat behind him with no thought for safety or even victory; if the chips were down they were all there to protect Sonic.

Sally loved them all, and she was killing them. It would be better if she didn't love any of them. It would be better if she hadn't been in Knothole, if she'd been killed with the rest of her family, if all of them had been killed, better for everyone, better—

She sat there, staring at the ceiling, paralyzed, while Sonic slowly took a waking breath, reaching a bare hand across her belly.

She waited for something to give.

Kain Blackwood 2009

## \*Chapter 14\*: Great Forest, 9 Floreal 3230

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**Great Forest, 9 Floreal 3230**

The wolves began to ask questions first, their directness overcoming their lack of familiarity. To be honest, the questions were worth asking, given that Cat had begun to pull files off Snively's hard drive and was slowly assembling them into a picture of the roboticizer project: What were they going to do with the treasure? Was it time to contact Standard Army? When would they attack Robotropolis?

It would be good if the Princess could sort this all out.

Next, Tails joined in. "Is Sally okay?"

"Yeah, she's alright, big guy," Sonic told him, splayed on the ground outside his hut, arms covered with a thin sheen from pushups. "She's got a lot on her mind, you know. I mean, we all do . . . ." She'd been quiet, again, when they both woke up, but that worried him less, now; it was just a mood. He felt it, too. It was like they were sharing a brain and a pulse. "She wants to be alone for a while."

The fox nodded, sitting with his legs crossed. ". . . . You mean Rotor, right?"

Sonic sighed, quills rustling the stinkgrass. "Yeah. Other stuff, too, but apples and oranges. I'm going to miss him; he was one cool dude."

"Me too." Tails said. He put his elbows on his ankles and leaned forward, a contemplative pyramid. ". . . . Did we win?"

"We got the robo-stuff we needed. Buttnik's going to be history., Thanks to your fleet feet." Sonic grinned. "I'm proud of you, Tails."

The fox's ears went pink. "Aw, Sonic—"

"Couldn't have done it better myself—not as good, even. Sneaking around's never been my thing. You're a hell of a soldier."

Tails squirmed, scratching sharply behind his right ear, but he smiled.

Sonic grinned and leaned back, watching the clouds. "You don't gotta talk about it. Just keep fighting the good fight for Sal."

"For her? She'll probably never let me on a mission again. She probably doesn't want me to see sun again."

"Ah, don't be angry. She loves you."

"I know . . . ."

"You're lucky to have an aunt like her."

"She's not really my—"

"Yeah, but who cares? My uncle took care of me as far back as I can remember. He wasn't my dad or my mom, but I miss him like both of 'em put together."

Tails had ducked his head. "I don't like talking about my mom."

Sonic blinked. "Yeah, I know, big guy—I just—"

"Or my dad."

"I know he was kind of a—Listen, I'm sorry—Where are you going?"

"I don't know," Tails said. He got up and waded off quickly into the grass, towards the treeline.

"Tails," Sonic called, but he didn't finish getting up; the stalks had already closed behind the fox. And if Tails wanted to be alone, he probably oughta. He'd had as rough a go of it as any of them.

Sonic lay breathing for about a half a minute, then did more pushups; sit-ups. He sprinted to the river along a new path, leaping roots, propelling himself from trunk to trunk, seeing how long he could keep off the ground. Then he went back and shadowboxed the trees around the clearing, knocking the bark away with sidekicks. Made the sky turn, morning to afternoon.

When the sun had reached the beginning of its descent, light slanting down at a tottering angle, Tails returned. "Sally wants to see you."

"Yeah?" Sonic asked, flipping himself up to his toes, hissing at the pain that flashed like lightning up his belly to his neck. Tails still looked unhappy . . . spooked. "Where is she?"

"She said she'll be in her room."

"How is she?"

"I don't know. She wants to see you alone."

"Alrigh—"

"I think she's angry."

". . . .Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I'll go talk to her now, alright? Don't worry about it."

"Okay."

Sonic was still feeling a little weird when he found Sally's room open and went in, slamming the heavy steel security door into place behind him. Sally was sitting on the edge of her bed, and she was ready to get back to work: hair combed, bangs curled clear of her eyes, which were clear as glass. Vest and boots, arms folded. "Hey, Sal, looking good. What's up?"

"You're banished from Mobius," she said.

". . . . What?"

"We banish you. You are not welcome in our lands."

Sonic laughed. Sally's arms went weak and she turned her face away from him. Now he comes and holds her up and tells her that she is joking. She echoes; she is joking. He asks her what she wanted him for. She says oh nothing. His fingers are in her hair; he lays her back on her bed in this room deep under the leaves and dirt, her arms at her sides. Springs squeak as he eases himself down on to the bed beside her, his warm knee against Sally's soft arm. His face is not stern, but his smile is commanding. You're my girl, ain't you baby.

Yeah.

Sonic smiles, sliding his fingers into Sally's hair, coarsely combing it. Atta girl.

Maybe she tries to say something else but he slides his hand around her neck, lowers his face to hers. You know what you are? he asks.

She says nothing.

You're the prettiest squirrel in the world, he says.

Beautiful, she says.

Very beautiful—

Her limbs were still weak, but her lip drew up, a flash of humiliation burning through her face. "We do not desire to look upon you," she spat, more loudly.

"Sally, this isn't funny," Sonic laughed. "I—"

"We expect you to remove yourself from Knothole immediately. We—"

"Sally, stop!" he shouted. "Calm down! What's happened?"

"We will punish any trespass upon our sovereign—"

"SALLY!"

She looked up at his roar and a hard instinct kept their gazes locked. She'd known this would happen. If she broke up with him it wouldn't work, he was right there and she had to look at him every day; they lived together. And then, when she horribly saw that she could order him to leave, he wouldn't go. He didn't give a damn about her crown or anything that couldn't beat him up, and nothing could beat him up. She couldn't get free of him, no matter how hard she tried. His arm was around her neck, his lips at her ear, lulling her back to sleep—

She had prayed to Vidavin Vulanis. This was something she hadn't done for years, because the gods were a superstition, but she did it, for hours, and the answer came to her, how to hurt him. A weapon from the gods, a divine tool so terrible that when it struck him he wouldn't be able to look at her, any more than she could endure him.

The truth.

Without looking, she reached over, pulled open a small, decorative drawer in the lampstand and withdrew a gun.

Sonic had never seen it before. It was not a gun to fight cops with. Muzzle about a twenty-two, he'd guess. Pretty little thing: little white handle like a bar of soap. Sally thumbed back the hammer and set her elbow in her lap, leveling it at Sonic's belly. "Sally, stop it," he said. "This is stupid. Tell me what's wrong and—"

"This is for our protection from you."

"Enough of the we we we bullshit!" he bellowed. "You're angry, maybe you got reason, but I don't believe you're gonna shoot me. So just tell me what vase I knocked over and we can—"

"You raped me."

Sonic stared at her as though the top of her head had opened and bugs and vines had come crawling out.

"Sally!" he cried after a long moment. He laughed. Once. "Not funny!"

"You raped me."

"And—and when did I—"

"Yesterday." Her voice was very calm. "Here."

"But you—it was—you were—"

"I wanted it?" Sally said, a hot blush in her ears. "So bad?" She pouted her lips at him like one of the Port ladies, swiveled up onto the bed, on her knees, hair tangled in front of lidded eyes. "Oooh, remember how I begged you? 'Sonic, please, I need it in me, now—'"

"Stop it!" Sonic yelled, horrified. "That's not what happened!"

"No," she replied, looking up at him. "It's not."

It hadn't been like that, not at all. Sally wasn't like that, she was such a . . . mystery . . . she was gentle . . . subtle . . . . "You didn't . . . tell me to go," he told her. "You said my name—"

"I didn't fight you off hard enough?"

"Shut up!" Sonic snapped, and he suddenly realized that he had his right cocked at his side, and that his quills were shivering taut and upright. What the fuck am I doing?

This was insane.

"Look, Sally, don't joke. Please. I remember what happened, okay? I know that . . . it was good . . . for . . . I mean, at first it was kind of . . . but . . . ."

His ears were burning. What had happened to that oneness he'd felt; where had it gone? Had he imagined it?

"We liked it, Sally. I could tell . . . by the way you moved, everything. You weren't sleepwalking, for gods' sake."

"I was on drugs."

Sonic didn't say a word.

"Buds. I was upset. You may have noticed this coming back from the hospital. I took two buds. Then you tiptoed into my bedroom and—"

"Stop." He stumbled away from her, then felt like a coward. But he still didn't look at her. "I didn't know—"

"You didn't ask," Sally replied flatly. "Did I talk at all? Tell me. I honestly don't remember."

"I—You—but—I'm . . . . I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Sally, I'm—I thought that, that with everything, how horrible everything had been—"

"You thought that I'd want to get fucked," Sally spat. "By a thug." She was shocked, and then she wasn't shocked. She hadn't imagined them, but as the words left her mouth she realized they were true, a mosaic of truths that she had never wanted to see. He was a thug. He was a murderer. He was a maniac. Her mother would pass out. Her father would lock her in a School for Troubled Girls and lock Sonic in jail. Truth to truth to truth until she couldn't believe that she had been in love with him, that the part of her locked in her belly was was screaming and reaching out to him like a terrified kit.

"Sally." Hands on his forehead, staggering like a boxer without ropes. "—I want to be good. To you. I want to be good to you, take care of you. I—"

"How? You're an idiot. You can't do anything but beat people up."

Sonic looked in Sally's eyes and she froze. So tense his irises themselves seemed to vibrate; the hysteria of a man charging a machine gun. "I love you," he said.

"We don't care."

"Stop the 'we' shit!" he roared."Talk to me yourself!"

"I don't care," Sally said.

Sonic's belly ripped open and his guts spilled down his legs.

"I don't want to see you again," she said. "I don't want to think about you."

"Sally."

She shoved herself to her feet, gun still in her hand. "Stop talking. Get out."

"Don't do this to me, please. I can't—I need you."

"Shut up."

He sat down on her bed, grabbed quills tight, felt them cut through gloves to skin. "I need—all of you. I need Knothole. I don't know anyone else. I don't know how to—I don't know what to do. I don't know anything."

Sally's mouth twisted, eyes stinging red. "Just go. Now. Please."

"Please, I can't go," Sonic begged, words quick with panic, pulling the live quills from their roots. His heart was racing. He was trapped. He was being crushed. "Put me in the brig. Lock me up. Let me stay, please."

"Go now," she said, a catch in her voice, "and I won't tell anyone what you did."

"No." He looked up, adrenaline spike setting his jaw, clenching his fist, first tears forgotten on his naked cheeks.

"Go," Sally continued, voice sliding up in pitch, "or I will be forced—"

Sonic's voice was like taut razorwire. "If you say one word to him." He got to his feet with a smooth, slow motion, stepped toward her.

The end table thumped the wall as Sally backed into it, panting as she retrained her shivering gun on Sonic's head. "Tails deserves to—"

His right exploded and she ducked, but he grabbed the gun, yanking it down and forward, jerking her face into his left fist. Her head snapped back and the lamp bulb popped white; the gun was in his right fist and he brought it down into her, again, again, again, again—

Up from the nadir of his panic Sonic saw with electric, mad clarity the swollen, warped flesh and clumps of bloody fur, her jaw shattered by the pistol's hammerpoint, the dark indentations where eyes might still be, and it was a wound, just a big wound where she was supposed to have a face, broken and inert on the shattered lamp. His fist throbbed around the gun.

She was dead.

Sonic lowered his snout, closed his teeth around the gunbarrel and pulled the trigger.

Metal rattled cold against his teeth. His arms began to shake. He pulled again. Click. Click.

He broke the wheel, his breath one long, rising, continuous wail. The gun wasn't loaded.

Sonic screamed.

Then he dropped the gun, turned, and ran.

Quiet.

Sally remained slumped on the end table, bent against the wall, almost completely motionless. If one waited and watched carefully, little bubbles formed at her lips as she breathed.

She couldn't move. Her body didn't work. She couldn't see.

Noise

". . . . Sally?"

She couldn't answer. The kit's voice was sick, nauseous, flooded by memories like foul pus from a burst cyst, old memories, his dead mother, his monster father—

"What did he do to you?" Tails roared.

Lupe field-dressed Sally, lancing the most dangerous swelling with her hunting blade. The medscanner took care of her blood chemistry, its calm synthetic voice telling Tails how to spike her arm and set up a drip of blood, glucose, and opiates—gentle, just enough to keep the pain from pushing her into madness or spurring her to try to move. For everything else, Cat had sent wolf runners to Four Mounds for the doctor. Tails should have gone, being the last ambulatory member of the great and glorious Royal Army of Mobius that had ever seen the scumbag MD before. But Tails had no intention of leaving Sally's bedside, and the way he snapped at anyone who came in, one hand squeezing Sally's fingers and the other squeezing a pistol, no one tried to change his mind.

Sally could see from her left eye. Some sort of hot pressure made her vision warp with strange colors and rings. She didn't speak, it hurt too much. Her cheeks were damp with drool; swallowing hurt too much.

With her right hand and focus she could scratch messages with a pen Antoine had wheeled in. The shock of it, seeing mon Princesse perhaps even more injured than himself, had snapped him out of his dark stupor. He was everywhere in Knothole, supervising Cat's codecracking and talking Lupe through skittishness brought on by the sudden, disastrous violence.

Sally wasn't sure how much time had passed. The lights in the med center did not dim. Tails did not sleep. The doctor did not come.

"No," Tails was saying, and Sally was again blinking her way slowly over the fuzzy line between sleep-thoughts and waking-thoughts.

"Just for five minutes, Tails," Antoine replied, and Sally heard his chair squeak outside of her field of vision, to her right. "You must secure the door. No one gets in or out of Her Highness's room. Yes?"

The kit's gloved fingers squeezed her for a moment longer. Then she heard the fox stand up. "Yes, Sir."

The door closed, and with a whirr of motors Antoine glided to her. He had the soft, shrunken look of a person who hasn't been moving or eating much, but the eyes didn't belong to that face anymore. He was approaching his old self: awake, alert, pessimistic.

And embarrassed? "I have come from Cat." He held up a sheet of paper, carefully lowering it over her good eye. "Look at this."

It had the hot, dusty scent of fresh laser toner, but it was a scan of a pen scrawl on blank paper. It began with big block letters at the top, sloppy with the press of time: EYES ONLY ROYAL COURIER.

Sally didn't need to read any more to know why Antoine was embarrassed, but she went on anyway.

"HRM Max IV, High Command Mobotropolis." "Re. Priority Appropriations." Signature unreadable, but scratched beside: "APD, Science Ministry"—Advanced Programming Division? Applied Projects Director? She gathered in slow tracks of her left eye that the memo was a suggestion to move research money from something called Project Redsky to two other projects, designated Pullo and Helper. Helper was well-known history by this point: an early name for what later became Project Flyswatter, the advanced combat robotics project that, championed by General Kintobor, would result in the Mobian Mechanized Army's tech infantry and victory for Mobius.

That left Project Pullo, of which she'd never heard. But the name was familiar: Pullo, the bruiser bruin bedeviled by the enmity of the gods, the unkillable bear of myth. Demigod patron of martial artists, weightlifters, bodybuilders, anyone who valued personal strength.

The author was a big booster of "P. Pullo."

"P. Pullo is READY FOR MOBIAN TESTING NOW. Gen. Kodos GREATLY exaggerates risks, achieved 70 pct. successful nanobot integration w/immune sys in animal tests; v. increased strength, endurance, advanced heal factor. NEW CONSIDERATION: advanced heal sugg. poss. increased transplant success, MACROCYBERNETICS. Sugg. for rapid deployment of Pullo tech w/in 12 mos. put grunt in tank NOW!!!"

Nanobot infiltration.

Macrocybernetics. Implants, that is. Like, say, a radio in the brain. Armor mounted in flesh, on bone.

And at the top, a date that put the memo just a touch too early for General Kintobor to have had anything to do with the project's initiation.

Four lives, now, to get her hands on these papers and prove to the world that Robotnik was a mad scientist who treated her people like cattle. And her father's advisors couldn't even be bothered to talk about 'preliminary testing on soldier volunteers' or 'reassignment of non-essential personnel to voluntary weapon-system research.'

Grunt in tank.

"This is probably the worst that Cat has found," Antoine apologized, taking the paper away. "But there are other documents mentioning Pullo over your father's signature, on the royal letterhead. Captain Snively's own notes frequently suggest that his own experiments developed from his investigation of Science Ministry weapons projects that researchers loyal to your father destroyed at the time of the coup. He calls it the 'Recovery Project.' As of yet, however, there is still no evidence that any actual testing of the technology on persons occurred during your father's reign."

That could be the day two headline. King Max Did Not Actually Put Grunt In Tank.

"As of this moment, Your Highness, only Cat and I are aware of this. Two young wolves have helped him with his work, but he has not let them read the documents. I felt that you should be consulted to determine what course of action would best—"

Her pen bit into her notepad, cutting out block letters. BURN THEM

Antoine nodded. "I will ask Cat to do what he can to remove the unfavorable portions of the evidence from the original drive, in case Robotnik has additional copies which he may attempt to release to the public and blunt our offensive. It may take time, however, and—"

TAKE IT

He nodded again, while saying: "Are you sure? If the propaganda war is to be two-sided, it is essential that Robotnik not be permitted to seize the initiative by releasing—"

Sally underlined the words.

"Yes, mon Princesse. . . . may I return? To speak to you soon?"

Her neck was swollen, she discovered as she levered her skull up a centimeter, down.

Objectively, she considered, drifting, waiting for the doctor, there was just as much reason for hurry as there had been a day ago, when she was rushing her people at the doors of Napiers Hospital without wasting time on things like breath and food and the value of their lives. There was more reason for hurry, in fact. Antoine was perfectly right, as he always was.

But that hot insistent need for everything to be done now, to be accomplished now, was gone. She was floating outside of her body, outside Knothole, outside the planet. Time ground away beneath her, slowly, spilling left to right. It was simple to take the country back, like building a structure from the ground up. Start with strong foundations. The speed of building is not important; its unyielding soundness is.

The threats were clear. Robotnik would fight back, hard and slow, but he wasn't the immediate problem. Mobius had never freed itself because of the constant, pointless infighting among its rebels. And it was clear where that would come from now: Griffith Varitek. And possibly Ari Koren, in the Standard Army.

She'd have to arrange a meeting with both of them.

The tools were at hand. For policy and diplomacy Antoine: loyal, perceptive, a worthy aid and test to her judgment. For combat, Lupe Almatrican and her wolves: brutal, experienced, and as loyal as she intended to be to them.

And of course Tails. Fierce as Sonic; smarter. He'd grow into an ideal commando, in a year or two, one with the personal loyalty to her that was beginning to run in short supply among her gunmen. And if he was hurt—

She tested herself.

She imagined two grief-stricken Privates dragging Miles in by his arms, his torso almost discorporate with red holes, his snout still twisted in a grimace at the pain that had chased him out of the world.

Thinking of it, Sally felt a sort of—letdown. She wished the breaks had gone another way.

Other than that, she felt nothing.

She felt nothing at all.

Despite the violent and unanticipated complications, the patient experienced a remission of symptoms and was recovering. The operation was a success.

Kain Blackwood - 2009

## \*Chapter 15\*: Grosse Durchfahren, 2 Firmaire 3213

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**Grosse Abfahren, 2 Firmaire 3213**

The car burned hydrogen, and in the still pre-morning air the wastevapor billowed out of the tailpipe like the coronal ejection of a dying giant in the first stages of nova, the lowest clouds turned a perfect red by the taillights. Field Marshal Julian Ivo Kintobor had instructed his aide-de-camp to leave the car running while he went into the all-night newsstand to obtain blisteringly hot, tasteless coffee in paper cups and, if possible, pierogis or blintzes in wax paper. He could not see the interior of the store, its dirty window plastered over with numerous ads in Vorlandisch and Mobisch for brands of alcohol, tobacco and paper news. Prominent in their midst was a rectangle of cardboard torn from a shipping box and lettered with heavy magic marker: "NO FREEMAN OR SUN-TIMES – EMERGENCY SEDITION EDICT."

Julian was a large man, heavy but hard, squeezed uncomfortably against the door and ceiling of the small city-car. He was in civilian dress, but clothes selected for winter with the thoroughness of a veteran soldier. His brown hair (once a regular bush, now not merely thinning at thirty-four, but positively evaporating under the stress of the past months) was rendered irrelevant by a fat cap of synthetic fur, the earflaps pulled down over his stinging, clean-shaven face. His gloved hands were stuffed into the pockets of his down parka, which unfortunately had the words MAXIMUM SPORT emblazoned across the back in a sort of cartoonish, zooming italicized text, rounded like graffiti. He had shed his Riechsheer garb bit by bit, in the basements and tanning sheds and attics of sympathizers.

Whether Julian had sympathy for the sympathizers was an interesting question. Beneath a rural potato farm cut into the foothills of Dinns Hut a staring owl of a man had shown him the Mobian flags that he kept locked in a chest in his root cellar. In a northern suburb of Hochteufel called Hinswald—"behind the forest," a place of interminable boredom in which Julian was desperately fearful that he would stand out—a housewife named Woczyek butchered Mobisch verb conjugation ("I am pronounce it correctly?") while they waited for her husband to return with a replacement automobile for the octane-burning junker in which they had hurtled out of the mountains. It appeared that Kaiserin Melissa's propaganda machine had been hard at work even before Julian's recent reversals, making his respect for the enemy and differences with Riechsheer Command into out-and-out treason. Clever enough for removing him from public favor in Muzenkspitz, but a strategy that assumed he would not escape military custody; now that he was on the run in the Lakolska farming districts, it gave him a native population in which to hide.

The error, Julian believed, smacked of Propoganda Minister Narubin, he of the wide-eyed enthusiasm and flushed cheeks. He was one of the personages in the Reichskabinat primarily responsible for the war, in large part because he thought winning a war was simple: just get the entire population very, very excited about it and convinced of the inevitability of its success. In a way this erroneous impression of war was understandable, Julian thought, because it very closely resembled how Narubin and his cronies, Foreign Secretary Vikernes, Security Chief Marek, all of them had managed to ascend so rapidly through the obtuse labyrinth of imperial politics. Narubin had learned how one aspect of civilization worked, and it seemed only natural after such stunning personal success to simply assume that every other thing in the universe operated on the same principles. Alternatively, given that Narubin had managed to rise on the sentiments of the most navel-gazing, undereducated bourgoise in the central Empire, it might have simply been that he no longer recognized the difference between his own sentiments and conditions in the external world—perhaps, when he used one of his favorite lines on the trivid, he meant that the war was literally won in the hearts of the people.

Kintobor, by contrast, had not risen through the Imperial military on the strength of his political savvy but because he was a genius and a patriot. On the former count, he had long since ceased to be modest or embarrassed. After earning his doctorate in physics at age twenty-five, with enough time left over to throw himself into a second and equally brilliant career in the military when the changing historical circumstances made it clear that was where he would find the most interesting stages of action, pretending otherwise served simply to waste time and alienate others.

On the latter count, he now for obvious reasons felt less certain. It remained clear to him that upon enrolling in the Hollabold Kriegsakadamie he had wished to see the Vorlandreich triumph in a war of conquest against the Kingdom of Mobius to the south, winning back the continent's breadbasket, the central plains that had been slowly removed from its control over the past centuries. He also wished to see the Empire's industrial base strengthened, its clumsy government reformed, and its people united more strongly. The Reich should be more than a loose agglomeration of human states bound by species and the force of the Kaiserins Reichsheer. It should be a massive and powerful nation.

Like Mobius, to the south. There was much to learn from Mobius.

Narubin began to take a personal interest in Julian's rising star in part because of sentiments such as these in his internal strategy memoranda to his superiors. Was not Colonel Kintobor aware, as explained on numerous occasions by the Minister and by the Kaiserin herself, that mobians were a degenerate and inferior species, without the full blessings of rationality and indeed barely more than members of the brute animal kingdom, as illustrated boldly on their very skins, or should we say pelts? That, at the successful conclusion of the glorious and patriotic war against Mobian aggression, their nation would be disbanded and the furred creatures brought under human rule in a station less dignified than citizen or subject?

Julian had his aide-de-camp acquire a copy of one of Narubin's rants and sent it to Narubin under a cover letter stating in its entirety: "I have read and do understand the attached document. Signed, Colonel Julian Kintobor."

Then there were the questions of military strategy and tactics. Julian was, unlike most of the officers around him, entirely self-assured and not afraid of making unorthodox and arguably risky but uniformly successful strokes against Mobian positions. It was he who prevented Mobian pushbacks in the foothills with their new high-altitude rocket-adjusted VTOLS, dropping his units down impassible rises and giving them no choice but (a) die, (b) take Mobian rearguard positions and cut off support for their front-line troops. His soldiers, as it turned out, chose option (b), and the thousands of starving, mangy mobians waving the white flag on Imperial television broadcasts had thrilled Vikernes and mollified Narubin sufficiently to permit Julian's promotion to Field Marshal.

But then, having finally risen to a position from which he could address global war strategy as well as tactics, Julian's bold strikes began to fall out of favor with the Kaiserin again. In large part, this was because he presented them as part of an overall strategy to force a Mobian cease-fire on at least pre-war boundaries.

The Kaiserin's initial plan for the war had been thrillingly bold, but ultimately a little thin and with the troublesome and seductive atmosphere of a gambit: massive bombardment of Mobian defensive positions and industrial base from orbit (the Imperial trump card) and high altitude, timed to coincide with rapid advances of troops dosed on amphetamine and other stimulants to provide the most prolonged and destructive advance possible. It had possessed startling effect and maybe, with better fortune, might actually have succeeded; perhaps if the advance had actually taken Mobotropolis proper rather than stalled in house-to-house combat in its charred northern suburbs. But even then, Julian suspected that Imperial fortunes would have changed more slowly but just as inevitably. King Maximilian would have setup a provisional capital in Corukas, in a forest camp, wherever. The Mobians had an intense devotion to their King and possessed inner emotional reserves that let them tolerate hellish conditions as they got down to the grinding, unpleasant work of rebuilding their military-industrial base and slowly pushing back against the invaders.

These reserves, it was becoming clear, were something that the Vorlandreich as a whole could not match.

The Lakolskas were the chief symptom, of course. Narubin fretted over how best to address the province, using the most powerful mischaracterizations and euphemisms his mind could produce. For the first three years, as the province's VAT and income-tax evasion had spiked and the Mobians had, with the infinite canniness of their elite diplomatic corps, failed to open up a third front on the ill-defended provincial border, the Kaiserin's communications apparatus had simply decided that there was no problem in Lachels because that would mean that the war was not going perfectly, and if people believed that the war was not going perfectly, the enemy would be comforted and Imperial troops would face more strenuous resistance. When the vast enthusiastic proletariat of the Empire began to groan under impresses that the Lachels provincial government was by now simply not bothering to acknowledge—how come the war is eating up so many people if it is going so well?—the Reichskabinet decided to do everything but declare the province in open revolt. The long-conquered but underregulated backwater with the unexpectedly growing economy was now said to be honeycombed with traitors and fur-lovers who were determined to sabotage the war effort, explaining the unfortunately prolonged resistance of the Mobians in the central plains. Julian had suspected that insulting the province might not be the best way to seduce it into compliance with the war taxes and draft. One of those genetically suspect Mobian diplomats might have more specifically suggested that decrying Lachels as rife with extremist Mobian irredentism, which it wasn't, would serve to radicalize Lachels politics and create a window for the secessionists who were now dangerously close to majorities in the provincial government.

But Lachels was only half of the problem, at best. The war may have fallen short of its grand goals, but there had been benefits, domestically—centralized imperial control over the armed forces, even the regionalist crisis that was brewing. The Lachels conservatives were screaming for negotiations to end the war and tax reform, but what would really put an end to provincial troubles would proportionate representation in a national parliament, something which was more than a few obsolete noble families doing whatever the Kaiserin wanted. Julian thought this would work because it seemed fair. Mobian diplomats might suggest that it would also cut most Lachels succession arguments off at their knees and create a local power elite beholden to the Imperial government.

The Kaiserin was having none of it; until the war had been fought to something she could think of (and explain to the public) as a successful conclusion, there was no goal but victory. The Vorlandreich needed a terrifying blow to force Mobius to agree to peace with territorial concessions. This meant that Julian needed approval to push all his forces south as the snows started to fall—attacking right when the enemy would assume combat operations would slow. Approval was not forthcoming. Narubin had asked for and received vast power over the military's internal communications apparatus, searching for traitors. Julian suspected his suggestions were not reaching their targets, or, worse, reaching them after critical alterations.

So he just launched his attack without authorization.

It would have worked, he was certain of it, if he'd received the long-range bombers he'd requested from Kerensky at Eagle Watch, out of the desert airbases at Adama and Arepo. Instead, his infantry were slowly chewed up (the Mobian General Kodos, in particular, scented blood and held his units hard in the face of artillery bombardment). Julian's command privileges at rearguard in snowbound Prusakisk were revoked, and he was instructed to remain there pending further deliberations by the Reichskabinet. Julian had responded by commandeering a VTOL with his aide-de-camp, abandoning it under pretense of having been shot down, and picking his way through the down the Lachels foothills toward the Mobian border.

Which now sat three blocks away.

It was remarkably underdefended for a wartime frontier. The bridge was named for the Vorlander city in which he sat, but translated to mobian, the Grand Crossing Bridge, leaping the wide, slow expanse of the river, hanging from cables strung from tall towers mounted at both ends of the bridge. The entire span was choked with gentle drifts of hip-deep white snow, pristine and unmarked. The Mobians had set up defensive positions on the far end, in Kingsport. In the black of the pre-morning the sharp blue halogen floods clustered about them, sweeping the barren expanse of the bridge, part of a long chain of lights picking out the ice of the river, LPs looking for commando or saboteur insertions. While the lights indicated the defenses, they did not reveal them; the bunkers remained only black shadows against the taller lumps that his aide-de-camp informed him were the smoked-out remains of a brewery. Behind the army's positions and its cluster of light fusion generators, Kingsport was entering this year's third month of winter without electricity.

On the Vorlandisch side of the river things were a little more clear under the regularly spaced streetlights. "Grand Crossing" had never quite lived up to its name, and the war had been bad for the city's efforts at tourism; a series of peirogi stands and Mobian-style cafés on the road along from the bridge had been closed for lack of custom; a few Lakolska-heritage souveneir shops peddling two-headed eagles and old family-colors had been closed as part of a moronic crackdown on the province's rising nationalism.

At the bridge itself the Reichsheer's defenses were clear. A series of tank traps sunk into the intersection of Bridge Street and North and South Wharf snarled local traffic. Behind them, the heaviest, tallest concrete wall that the suspension cables could support forced any foot traffic to wind through an extra few hundred meters under a pair of fragile-looking sniper's nests bolted to the bridge towers.

In other words, by failing to attack Lachels, Mobius had forced the Empire to defend its own borders against itself. The army feared that the greatest risk here was Imperial citizens trying to run the border to become Mobian irregulars.

Today, the army was right.

Julian watched a pair of privates in gray fatigues walk the limits of the traps, sliding in and out of overlapping pools of light, hands on the actions of a pair of automatic rifles. Sloppy posture, poor procedure—the Empire could not spare crack troops for this march. He factored that in, slowly constructing a plan of attack, working out his resources and acceptable losses.

In order to reach safety on the other side of the bridge, Julian was prepared to suffer the death of his aide-de-camp, and to lose one arm and one leg. He gave a snort of a laugh and rubbed his mouth, remembering that in Mobisch, "an arm and a leg" was a colloquialism meaning a great sum of money. He would be willing to pay that, as well, what little remained to him that his enemies in the Imperial court had not by now secured for themselves.

Let them seize his family's property. He would be repaid with interest.

At the sound of the door Julian woke instantly. The ability to fall asleep quickly and for odd intervals is common to all soldiers. He reached a hand down to the metal cot-frame to raise himself, did not move, and remembered that the arm was gone.

He sighed, a long, exasperated hiss. It would take a while to adapt.

Two of the lower-ranking officers of the Mobian Royal Guard entered the cell, foxes, their golden epaulettes tarnished from a long lack of proper laundry soap. They silently took up positions at either side of the door and, he was relieved to see, saluted him. It had been a depressing pair of weeks. The Mobian army had either abysmal intelligence or a shocking lack of imagination. What, he wondered, was the theory: had the Reichsheer decided to insert one of its Field Marshalls as a saboteur?

After medics cleaned out his arm—and let the window for rapid-response neural prosthetic integration pass, ensuring a recovery period measured in years—he had been kept incommunicado first in a cell frightfully close to the border, then moved to a second location via, to his horror, a C-22 light cargo plane, a fast mover but still defenseless against air-to-air by Sky Marshal Kerensky's Valkyrie-class deep penetration fighters. From a military airstrip he was moved in a windowless van to a complex that he suspected was the new Mobian POW complex, deep in the central swamps. Until the arrival of the Royal Guards, he'd had yet to see someone above Sergeant.

He'd felt the beginnings of anger.

Now, as he got to his feet, a hedgehog entered between the Guards. A bizarre union of the foreign and the familiar, Robotnik thought. Those quills flared out over his head hard and unreflective and animal, yes, precisely the alien quality that the Propoganda Ministry sought to seize. But more lightly furred than other mobians, and hence dressed in the same sort of winter dress that filled the Kandinskyplatz at Muzenkspitz: a soft blue parka over gray slacks, leather shoes. More amazingly, although the cultivation of facial hair among mobians tended to be a long, arduous process (King Maximilian's tiny pencils grew from five years of careful sculpting), the man had managed to secure himself a thick handlebar moustache worthy of an old burgher from Gruensetz. Perhaps the furless snout had something to do with it.

Julian grinned wide as the hedgehog unhesitatingly offered his left hand for shaking. He was evidently the sort who did his homework. "Hello, Field Marshall. Charles Hedgehog, Science Ministry."

They completed the handshake. The hedgehog gave him a parka—another one, not the one taken from him in Kingsport—and followed one of the guards into the unfinished cinderblock hall, dust drifting under the exposed bulbs hanging from the wire snaking across the ceiling. "You're to debrief me?" Julian asked, incredulously.

"No. I'm to escort you to General Kodos and His Highness Prince Richard, who will debrief you. I don't know where His Majesty is—the Guard try to make his whereabouts as mysterious as possible—but you'll no doubt be able to meet him eventually. I'm also to extend you every courtesy."

"As an Underminister of Science?"

"Advanced Projects Division, speculative military technology," Hedgehog replied, as they stopped at a barred door that slid open with a prolonged alarm honk. "Before that physics, Royal University, '06, chaotic behavior in weak force quantum events. I spotted your name the moment it started appearing in the intelligence digests. I don't think I ever full understood your doctoral thesis, though I spent about a year trying."

"I'm flattered," Julian replied as the door slammed home behind them. Actually, he was a mite impressed—he too had never been entirely sure he understood the full implications of his own thesis. "Mobius is working on non-WMD superweapons, hmm? Antigravitron disintegrators? Contained zero-point energy release? Remote assassination via quantum entanglement?"

"—That isa wild idea!" Hedgehog chuckled. "No. I hope they'll eventually clear you for full access, but for the moment I can say we're mostly looking at advances in robotics and biology."

"Biology?"

"Robotics and biology. Something a little more elegant and far-reaching than hooking the troops on speed—I'm sorry, this hall was rather unpleasant on the way in—"

They turned the corner and were moving past two barred walls opening on some large holding cells for enlisted prisoners. Loud. Though the loud prisoners were few, the loudest complainers crowding the bars ("Get us some food!" "Animals!"), clearly the ones that were doing best. A lot of others huddled together along the far walls in their field dress, skin tight over their bones, buzz cuts grown out into ugly mops of hair.

"I got me a lucky rabbit's foot!"

"Animals!"

"You suck that hedgehog's dick fat fuck?"

Julian spun around, colliding with the Guardsman to his rear and knocking him back. Yeah we know why you're getting out, he thought he heard through the shouts. But the angry faces behind the bars were all the same. Charles Hedgehog was tugging at the sleeve of his coat. "Best we keep moving—"

"Julian! Uncle Julian!"

He didn't recognize the voice, at first, and he saw no one familiar, but he kept looking. Hedgehog had heard, too, and waited. Momentarily a stalk of a hand, a horror-movie prop burst through the bars at ankle-level, clawing at Julian's pants. One of the prisoner's legs kicked to the side and slammed the fragile-looking thing against the bars, wringing out an almost feminine shriek that carried over the sea of curses. "Oh gods Uncle Julian help me get me out—"

"You," Julian replied, because he could not remember the child's name. The Kolenskys—Maria's boy, yes; the sickly one with the big nose. Hopeless batter. Closed his eyes when he swung. "Snively?"

"Move away from the bars!" One of the Guard foxes shouted, slapping a baton against the steel with a sharp clang, then again. The less serious troublemakers fell away and left only the weeping boy, barely twenty-one, the mess of brown hair hanging over his eyes indicating a long stay.

He was trying to rub his cheek against Julian's leg but touching only bar. "Oh gods uncle please don't leave me please get me out of here please get me out please . . . ."

While Snively took a breath, Julian asked his hedgehog escort, "Can he come, too?"

The new palace was slowly resolving itself from scaffolding into an increasingly perfect simulacrum of its ancient state: steel piping melting into white marble, which would in time resolve itself into the bas-relief work that was being carefully duplicated from art-history texts and souvenir coffee-table books. The King was not there. He was several blocks away, in the sub-basement war room that had been the first addition to the new War Ministry complex. The place was so new it carried a faint polymer stink. The previous time that Julian had visited, the first meeting of Royal High Command in its new secure quarters in the capital, he had removed his chair from a large plastic bag.

The place was a more serious version of the rich, uninspired décor that the King seemed to prefer. The walls were painted much darker to permit the LCD screens to stand out. One currently showing the deployment of forces along the northern and eastern fronts—it required an unusual latitude on which to center the display, given that Julian's robots had pushed so far north while Kodos hung back, cleaning up enemy infiltrators behind his lines and chasing the Wolfpacks, which destroyed and killed as invisibly as poltergeists. The second screen showed close detail of the Schneetanz and Korubin passes into the Vorburg plateau. Last reports, and the board, indicated that Julian's tech infantry held the Schneetanz and were currently fortifying the far end under heavy artillery bombardment; the latest product of Kaiserin Melissa's Field Marshall roulette (Julian couldn't remember his name) was desperately trying to shuffle troops between the two passes, unable to make up his mind which one to take, whether to take any at all, what to do.

But the most disturbing projection was on the holographic at the center of the ellipsoid ring of the table: a proposed settlement line for a cease-fire.

"She won't agree to anything less than original borders," Julian said, tensing and releasing the fingers of his prosthesis around the lip of the fake walnut, just short of enough force to leave marks—a habit he'd grown into, originally a great help to the neural integration process of his prosthesis. He was in a red uniform he had designed for the Mechanized Army personally. His high-crowned scalp was shaved bald, a vanity he allowed himself—its impressive, naked size complementing his bulk, imposing. So much bare flesh had struck him as boring, so he'd also grown a moustache, a firey thing that drew eyes as surely as a detonating bomb. "You haven't had to live with her cabinet. They don't respond to reason."

"Then the suffering of their people—"

"They don't care," Julian growled at Royal Guard General Pierre D'Coolette in exasperation, and the coyote reacted with a closed-eyed sigh through upturned snout, as though Julian were somehow responsible for Vorland's pointless continuation of the war, through some sort of grotesque breach of etiquette here at the table. "You will not be able to end the conflict, short of total occupation of the Empire, except with an agreement to a peace-treaty on pre-war borders. Probably with some asinine admission of historical guilt on part of the Kingdom."

"Then maybe we should agree to those terms."

Julian and his friend Jermaine Kodos, a ferocious mutt whose General's stars meached his own, competed to be the first to object, but His Royal Majesty King Maximilian IV extended his unassuming hand with a firmness that stilled viewers through its clear familiarity with command. Ten years of dancing with defeat had worn on the king: heavy clouds of gray crowded his precise snout and streaked the wisps of hair that looked forlorn without his crown; one might mistake him for fifty-five or even sixty rather than in his mid-forties. There was a slight tremble in the tip of his tail, suggesting the stereotypical anxiousness of the squirrel. But it wasn't nerves, it was nerve damage, the beginnings of a degenerative disorder that the royal physician was keeping tightly under wraps. The rest of him was still, and he wore his royal blue robe as though it were a suit of armor.

Maximilian, Kodos had explained to Julian, had grown into his job over the course of the crisis.

"Ten years," he said, and let such a long, slow breath from his lungs that one almost expected him to deflate. "One seventh of an average life—an average life before the war. Health Ministry tells me it does not have figures updated to account for the deprivations and suffering, but the average life has presumably not lengthened. Ten years is enough to ask from any mobian."

"Have you asked them?" Julian suggested, drawing eyes from D'Coolette, Charles Hedgehog, everyone at the table. Kodos had advised him, at previous meetings, not to speak at the table unless spoken to first. Julian credited this to inexperience and the rulers' unease with his history of betrayal, but he sometimes wondered if there was a racial issue, as well. "You are on the way to victory because of the tenacity and devotion of your people. I've admired their quality long before I served on their behalf. Don't assu—If I were you, Your Majesty," he corrected himself at a slight cringe from Kodos, but to judge by the dog's expression the correction did little good, "I would not assume what my people were prepared to bear for their country."

"We aren't as tireless as your robots, General," the King sighed, cheeks drooping, the wrinkles of concentration disappearing from the fur around his eyes. "Or as unfeeling. So many broken people, broken families. It has to end sometime."

A squeak from the table as Julian's metal fingers dug into it. Don't insult your people, he thought, but the King wasn't talking about his people. He was talking about himself.

"If you end it now, the humans rearm," Kodos spat, leaning forward on his elbows. "That's it. You aren't winning peace. You're buying a worse war twenty years down the line."

"A lot can happen in twenty years."

General D'Coolette and Admiral Belmondo nodded in agreement, the core members of the High Command Optimism Club. The Sanity Club needed more members, so Kodos, keeping his eyes on the King, gave an opening to Hedgehog: "We should be pushing the advantage of our recent technical wonders. Assaultbots—"

"Or," the King interrupted, "we could have the benefit of a peace dividend. Director Hedgehog?"

"Many of Science Ministry's projects have potential application to peacetime governance. As General Kintobor and Justice Ministry can tell you we've been working on adapting Scoutbots to heavy civilian law enforcement applications. Your standard police SWAT team will be obsolete." He gave a conspiratorial cough. "We can't discuss the matter in detail due to extreme security classification, but if I can use this opportunity to again address Project Pul—"

"You can't," the King said, turning his head to the far wall, clearly annoyed.

"The potential benefits to health, welfare—life expectancy, as Your Majesty was discussing just a moment ago—"

"It's undemocratic. It's too expensive. It would frighten the public. It frightens me. That's enough."

"It's inmobian," D'Coolette interrupted. Julian was surprised and unnerved to see tears on the coyote's cheeks. Julian—and Kodos, and most people at the table, were lost. This strange fight was between Hedgehog, D'Coolette, the King, and maybe Belmondo—it was hard to read the rabbit's expression. Sometimes information control on secret projects in High Command made Julian long for the intrigues of the Reichskabinet.

The King raised his head, but did more than that, and Julian felt his heart sink because it was too late; Maximilian underwent that subtle shift of posture that sometimes came over him when he reached a decision and spoke definitively from the throne. "The depths of our despair at the most extreme point of the invasion led us to explore possibilities . . . make decisions, that we now regret." He swallowed. "When we look back on these acts, we are ashamed."

D'Coolette's hands clutched his face. A horrible, quiet sound.

Despite the dignity that possessed him when he felt the weight of the crown, Maximilian's face betrayed a certain submerged anguish as well. "The war has consumed too many of our children. We will bring an end to it with all speed."

Julian sensed the battle was lost, but the future of the world was too important to let it go. "Your Majesty, regardless of the tragedy of your own son and—"

"That's enough!"

Everyone shrank back from the table, even Julian. In an instant the King had himself under control again. Just a tremor in the King's right hand matched the regular trembling of his tailtip.

"No more Mobians will die for revenge on your former masters," he said. "This meeting is over. Jim, stay."

Julian sat heavy in his chair, stunned. On his right, State Minister James Magowan let his striped skunktail relax and unfolded his reading glasses, preparing for more work. Pierre D'Coolette got up, leaving his materials, and almost ran out of the room. Charles Hedgehog yawned, closing his lapcomp, less disappointed than bored and tired.

That wasn't it at all. That wasn't what Julian wanted at all. He couldn't remember the last time he'd thought about his enemies in the Reichskabinet. When was the last time he had thought of any of their names, Narubin, Kerensky, Vikernes . . . he wasn't angry at all.

He was furious.

The King was an idiot. He was a petulant child. He was totally undeserving of the rule of such a powerful, virtuous nation.

In the brightness of the doorway, Kodos gave a quick oblique glance back at the disintegrating meeting, then continued to the elevators.

Julian had caught it, and the cautious suggestion in his eyes. Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe Julian had been thinking the idea already. It was obvious, really, the only way to win the war if the High Command refused to do so.

He got up and followed.

Julian was depressed.

He had preferred to think he was melancholy, but Snively was irrepressible with his interrupted psychologist's training, and brought him a printout of an electronic DSM. Julian shouted until Snively scampered away, tail between his legs, but he left the papers, and a morbid curiosity forced Julian to read them.

\* Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day

\* Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day

\* Feelings of worthlessness or intense or inappropriate guilt nearly every day

He stopped reading then as he felt the building's foundations shiver. He wasn't sure what had caused the detonation, being that he slept in a room near the center of the War Ministry compound without windows to avoid Mobotroplis's tenacious sniper population. The piercing, manic wail of the fire alarms filled the hallways. Julian lay back on his bed and closed his eyes until it stopped. Then, after about five minutes, he got up and dressed and rode the elevator to the old command center in the basement. Jermaine was there, a crude imitation of military discipline and efficiency in his Standard Army combat vest—the army that had mutinied en masse and abandoned him—and his meticulously maintained crewcut. He was cultivating the nickname Warlord Kodos among his private staff, according to Snively. Lord of all he surveys, so long as he doesn't leave the heavily defended compound in the center of his rioting capital city. Or so long as he asks the other member of his duumvirate to deploy his loyal troops and robots accordingly.

Julian used to wonder why it was that his troops had remained loyal while Kodos's had turned upon him at the news that the King was deposed. Julian was no genius of politics; he had not taken special preparations for the coup beyond the installation of a few individuals upon who he knew he could rely for personal loyalty if all else broke down—among them his nephew, who owed him his life and who, due to the vagaries of war and fortune, simply had no other friends he could turn to after a betrayal. Yet this rank and file, thousands of soldiers who of necessity he could not personally know, continued to follow orders and even to fight their fellow citizens while Kodos's men turned riots into a simmering insurrection. Why?

Because they knew that Julian had won the war for them. While Kodos had just been out in the desert, playing at wolves and lawmen. He hadn't underestimated the people, he'd underestimated his partner. If he'd had someone else—Charles Hedgehog, maybe. That unwise offer had only led to early trouble with the Royal Guard and smoking ruins where the probably fictive—maybe—Science Ministry superweapons were supposed to be. He'd asked Snively to take a look at the wreckage. As of yet, not much luck.

"Carbomb, on the street," Kodos said as Julian entered. "The new fortifications by the gate held beautifully!"

"Great."

"We're going to hit back. Hard. Get the city in hand."

"Great."

"Oh, and I've got a nickname for you."

". . . Great. What?"

"Think anagram," the Warlord said, checking the chamber on his sidearm. "Give me a heads up by tonight and I can get it leaked to the Clarion by morning." And he strode out of there to play Warlord in his playground.

Julian went back to his quarters and got some scratch paper. Jermaine must have meant something in Mobian, and indeed Julian's last name was naturally more exotic in Mobian than in Overlander—the k and b were rarer characters in Mobian words. He tried a very simple re-arrangment and reached what Kodos undoubtedly meant on his first try. And surprisingly, Julian was very pleased by it. It sounded rather like an actual surname from his homeland. It called to mind the last success he'd enjoyed, what had turned out to be his tech infantry's deathblow against the Vorlandreich, the defeats that sent it spiraling into disintegration. And to the common people it would carry not only the association with his Assaultbots, but also the image of a person cold and ruthless, yet sophisticated, calculating, intelligent. Cousin of weapons, family to robots. He sat on the edge of his bed and rolled the word around in his mouth, letting his old accent play in the vowels, rowboat, wide eee, paired it with his current and past titles.

Robotkin.

Doctor Robotkin. Field Marshal Robotkin. General Robotkin.

He kicked an email to Kodos telling him to go ahead and spent a rather productive day catching up on intelligence regarding the worst pits in the city. The east bank was already pretty well pacified, the hot spots on the west bank—Molineaux and Port Orange the biggest problem—were becoming clearer, limited, addressable. He worked late, planning strategy, feeling like he might enjoy pacifying the city after all.

In the morning he read the Clarion, then went to visit his nephew. He shut the door behind him. "We're going to kill Kodos," he said.

"Supreme Leader Robotnik." Snively traced one of his long, delicate fingers along his smiling lips. "I must say I like it."

What was the problem?

Was it that there was nothing left to achieve? Yes, perhaps. The great enemy shattered, and nothing to do in Mobius itself, except wait for entropy to do its work, for the inevitable rise and fall of empires required by the laws of thermodynamics, the wheel of fortune. Waiting for nemesis to arrive, as cold and certain as decrepitude, the great heat death of the universe.

Here, now: another lesser man to betray him, yet another presented to take his place. Snively, busy playing mad scientist, had not kept his eye on the Lachels spy. Though Tavian grilled him ruthlessly, Posniak had not admitted to any transfer of the information he had gained concerning Snively's treason to his superiors. Tavian continued to work, and doubtless there was something Posniak was holding back, but what point was there in tracking that now that the worst of anything he knew was already in the newspapers?

Every other government in the world was denouncing Julian. Lachels was upset for a betrayal of his alliance with them against the unsteady, schizoid monster to their east, trying to subvert the few stable elements in Vorburg and bring the racist maniacs into power. Vorburg—the Fourth Army with its satellites and orbital mass-launchers—was upset that he was supporting the racist maniacs who wanted to liquidate them. The racist maniacs were upset because his nephew had stolen from them and destroyed their military capacity, though the racist maniacs were not favorably quoted in the papers.

Julian's instinct was his usual one, to tell the truth about his nephew's dealings. But Tavian assured him that this could not be done, and if he could not trust Tavian he might as well flee the company of all other creatures. Medically unnecessary experimental surgery on unwilling sentient creatures, the mongoose told him, was inside a "moral event horizon"—if his government became associated with Snively's hobbies, then the bulk of the middle class that "tolerated" his rule would irrevocably become suffused with a desire to see him hung upside down from a lamppost and shot.

For the time being they had to batten down the hatches, plan for the worst, and see if there was some way out of the trap. If Lachels somehow knew about the experiments, the nationalists seemed to think that they had more to gain from an alternative, simplified version of events. And as for Acorn . . . . she hadn't done anything yet. Maybe there was a factor they didn't understand. Cross fingers: maybe she'd caught a bullet. Tavian kept extending his debriefing of Posniak, trying to find sufficient evidence of Lachels' misconduct against Mobius to give them diplomatic leverage.

Julian could not even see why the cyborg research had been wrong. Out of rebellion and dissention, unity and perfection.

At night he lay awake, thinking of the time before college, in Gymnasium and hopelessly bored. Trying to find the annihilating riffs that matched the horror and majesty in the woods around him. It was a clumsy adolescence that he had often done his best to forget: greasepaint, volume. Lars, the lead, had performed in a mask, called himself Naugus, and fancied himself a sorcerer. But even then, had he not sought the great purpose, a life in service of some massive and truly deserving force?

In the Mobian people he'd thought he'd found it.

Had he been wrong?

Tavian gave another hacking cough and killed his cigarette, three-alarm breath drifting through the hot lights. They'd been working through high members of the Mobian government, asking with regard to each if Posniak had worked with them. Spied on them. Sucked their dicks on direct orders of the Lachels Premier. Anything.

Then they moved on to terrorists. Had he known them? Worked with them? Held back valuable information about them in violation of treaty obligations?

The human shook his head yet again, then flinched hard, gritting his teeth and pressing his head to his right shoulder as the fingers of the prosthesis locked tight. He was naked to the waist. His body was thin but still seemed to contain a decent dose of fat; he was covered with a thin sheen of sweat as his body toyed with deciding the prosthesis was a parasite and launching him into a fullblown fever. The immune suppressants weren't doing him any favors, either.

The Director had insisted that the human be fitted for a replacement limb as soon as possible. Anything else, he said, would have been barbaric.

The aide called up the next picture. "Yes?"

Posniak started to shake his head no and then something came over his features. He started to shake his head again, but chickened out. The sweat in his black bangs glowed in the spotlight.

"You know him?" Tavian asked, coming forward to look at the screen. "Tell us."

"I . . . don't know why you're showing him to me. I lost track of him a long time ago. And that's not his name."

"Actual name?"

"Weilblad. Pawel Weilblad. I knew him in analyst orientation for a Foreign Affairs intern program at Independence. He seemed alright, smart, motivated. But afterwards I just . . . lost track of him. I think he may have quit."

"Or gone into deep cover?"

Posniak sighed, that exhausted expression that was a tell for him. "The program was for future analysts, not spies. But of course it's possible. You can't falsify a claim like that."

On the screen was a surveillance photo of a known gunrunner and terrorist. Ethnic mobian, previously thought to be a Mobian citizen as well. Clever, ironic smile in his golden fur. Goat. Griffith Varitek.

Kain Blackwood 2009

## \*Chapter 16\*: Kingsport, 11 Floreal 3230

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**Kingsport, 11 Floreal 3230**

MacMillan was a badger who liked sausages. He would eat them with whole wheat buns and horseradish mustard. At the Halloran Meat Packing plant, the regulars all assured him, were such sights which would render the very word sausage repugnant to his palate. So he'd gone to work at the import/export railyard, ten acres of blasted dirt, humming with tingling current from the magrails that the bosses said about five times at the training sessions were in fact incapable of giving you cancer, even if the electromags were powerful enough that you had to go through a metal detector before heading near active platforms, lest your belt, tail, or spine be ripped from your body.

Ah, well, there were probably horrible, spinning blades and the like before you got to the sausages. The main thing was that he was going to be capable of eating terrapod sausage until the day he died.

So on the eleventh MacMillan got a call from Murray at the union; dispatch reported that grain trains from central were in early and they were rousing bodies. Under the waning stars of the four a.m. sky, the milky fog of the galactic core drifting slowly into the pink haze over the city center and Grand Crossing, he put on his caution-orange work jacket and walked out. The huge hovering ovals, stained brown with rainstreaks, always looked to him like something that had come out of a wonderful sci-fi future a long time ago; gifts from aliens of which the mobian recipients had not taken good care. They reached the grain loadoff dock, a long row of plastic hoppers leading down to the central storage point for the trucks that the baking company sent. The mags cut out with an imperceptible thinning of the air, and then the entire train settled down onto the shocks with a deafening lurch. MacMillan climbed up onto the walkway of the first oval, loosened the lock-tight wheel of the rounded tophatch with his wooden mallet, and vented the box, letting the hatch wheel slam on the hull.

Lying in a bed of brown wheat was a dead, balled-up hedgehog.

MacMillan was never eating a bun again.

He was convinced of that even after he noted that the guy was breathing, found the hole in his blue armor, dragged him up and laid him out on the walkway. The badger went down and started the flow of kernels out the side of the car into the hopper, then went back up and saw that the guy was coughing.

"You idiot," MacMillan grunted, hunching down across the open hatch. "These new boxes are airtight. You're lucky we're ahead of schedule."

The hog looked like shit, chopped, sterilized and hammered. He stared around the yard with bloodshot eyes, none too pleased with his surroundings, though judging by the look of him—and the smell of him—he hadn't been seeing anything better than this for a while. "I'm alive?" he asked in a dry croak.

"You want me to lock you back in?" MacMillan asked.

". . . the hell am I?"

"Kingsport Railyard. South of town. There's no work for you here. Keep on moving."

The hog shut his eyes and mouth, lay back with the hiss of his quills finding their way into the hex-holes of the walkway. Then with a wild kick of both his legs he was flipped up onto his toes, hunched over his knees with his quills up. A remarkable display of agility, but he still had the exhausted face of a man who'd been breathing stale air for a few hours. "Which way's the river?" he asked

"North."

"Which way's that?"

MacMillan grunted and pointed a finger into the heavens. "Okay, that's the Great Huntress Kayshara, right? Then over there's the northern cross . . . ."

The guy got up and jumped the four meters down to the ground without blinking, tucking into a roll and stopping after a single revolution. Then he dusted himself off and walked slowly and tiredly toward the northern fence, following the stars.

Weirdo.

MacMillan finished the train, car by car. He signaled the all-clear, but the mags didn't cut back on and the boxes didn't move. He went back across the yard into the breakhouse to find out what the fucking problem was.

The door was open with the spring warmth. Callaway and Bratile were there, and the human loser Strosek, who amazingly was not out back in the dying grass, puking it up from the night before and hosing the vomit down with the acid wash. "Coffee," MacMillan barked loudly, stamping his boots as he—

"Shut the fuck up," said Callaway.

There was such intensity in the beaver's voice that MacMillan froze, thinking about the war, when the point man heard something out of place, tripwire, blood drops. Callaway and Strosek had their eyes fastened to the crap flat-TV that they had. Strosek's mouth hung open. Bratile was stomping around the boundaries of the room, mumbling something about calling the boys, like it was a Queensday night and they were going to get boozed up and cruise the south town, looking for trouble.

The TV was on Kimex News, which had a big BREAKING NEWS alert plastered above the crawl: MAD DOCTOR? The head was talking next to still shots from some kind of accident, injury pictures, close-ups of black fur, cuts and—

A long shot of the female.

It was no accident.

MacMillan kept watching, walking silently to get out of the way of Bratile's pacing, mumbling, his violent eyes. The crawl kept running. No response from Mobian government. Pictures delivered by hand to Kimex News, Robotropolis Times, other papers. Claims to be Princess Sarah Acorn. Would be rightful heir to Mobian monarchy.

Different pictures now, a rabbit with sad, dark eyes. At least two victims.

Strosek shook his head. "I can't believe this shit you people are doing down here."

"Don't try to leave the country," warned Richard Tavian.

"Why," said Baxter Posniak, "would I want to do a thing like that?"

Tavian was confident that Baxter wouldn't, because two guards took him down the elevator, walked him through the forlorn, echoing checkerboard great hall, through the gardens to the closed iron gate. One of them pulled it open and the other dumped him on the sidewalk of Five Trees Street.

Four days growth of beard clung to his face, uneven and spotty. He wore his suitpants and a baby blue souvenir t-shirt that a guard had bought from a shitty wheeled kiosk on the corner of Five Trees and Victory Circle; it said MOBIUS in navy-blue college athletic font over the golden sign of infinity. His right arm was stainless steel under flesh-colored plastic. He felt like an orange rind, still filled with the fibrous remains of the crushed segments, dry.

The streets were empty. He looked up and saw a blue-tinged white light alone in the sky. Maybe Ixis, maybe the inner planet of Morningstar.

Baxter stumbled slowly down Five Trees, heading west, looking drunk. Patting his pockets, he drew out his wallet, a little cash in it. Five Trees to Victory Circle; down the roundabout to Dalry Road, passing old, restored offices of the government, and then on the sloping curve, through the pedestrian bollards and onto Lafayette Street. Cool cobblestones under his shoes. As he approached the embassy he got looks from the RPD Officers, still blinking the sleep out of their eyes, huddling about over a thermos. Baxter worried a little, but on second thought they were considering picking him up, as was said, "for vag." They didn't move as he walked up to the gate, looked up at the black-brick mansion with its coat of ivy and yawned. A human in blue emerged from the guardhouse and came up to the bars.

"He won't be in yet," Baxter yawned. "I want you to give a message to Joshua Dursine. He's one of the consular—"

"Mr. Dursine doesn't work at the embassy anymore."

". . . oh. I'm afraid I've misplaced my passport. Could you—"

"We're under instructions not to provide you with aid and comfort, Mr. Posniak."

Baxter blinked.

"You're under suspicion of treason," the guard explained helpfully.

"Uh." Baxter chewed thoughtfully on one of the longer hairs growing out of his upper lip. "Could you call me a cab?"

"No."

He walked west before he went back east. The river was slowly catching fire in the rising sun, the slow tide of cars beginning to push at the security checkpoints on the far banks as the city came awake. He turned and looked at the new skyscrapers, half in shadow, half a blaze of light.

He walked back. In the downtown, people ignored him. As he passed back into apartment blocks, mothers gently shepherded their kits away from the strange man.

The building in which he rented was still standing there, as though nothing had happened. He shuffled to the buzzer and pondered the intercom entry, T.B. POSNIAK, Times New Mobian font. With a hiss of pain, he lifted his new index finger to it and pushed.

"Hello?" Molly answered after a moment.

"May I come in, please?" he asked, looking up at the wide-angle security lens.

". . . .Where have you been this time?" she asked.

"I was shot, arrested, and denaturalized," he said. There was no response. "Can I please come in, Molly?"

A long pause, the carrier wave hissing from the intercom. "What's the T. stand for?" Molly asked.

"Thomas."

He could hear a chuckle. "Mi casa su casa, Tommy boy." The doorlock buzzed.

Behind him, a shifting mushroom of smoke and burning gas rose into the air as a car-bomb destroyed the D'Artagan Bridge security checkpoint.

Most of them were fertilizer bombs.

The primary working element by weight, animal shit, is very readily available in the rural hamlets that the Royal Army used as its secondary bases of operation. It is also, despite the obvious gap, not capable of setting off an alert on the standard bomb sniffers strung up along the river and near major government buildings. There were actual trees on Five Trees Street and nitrates in the soil that got kicked up by the passage of tourist's feet. There wasn't a reliable way, assuming a well-constructed bomb, to scan for the difference between "trace nitrates" and "suspicious levels of nitrates" in the air.

So fertilizer bombs were the way to go for most of the targets in the city center, which were targets both symbolic and hard, and to some extent symbolic because they were fairly hard: security apparatus offices at the Richelin Building and the Pompey Tower, cars taken over the thigh-high cement protection walls, crashed into glass lobbies, then detonated. Another of Griffith Varitek's borrowed shaped-charges used on a wall at the Ministry of War compound, then smaller satchel charges taken in while the sniffers warned that there might be a bomb in the proximity. This was dangerous work, madman work, wolf work, and their only regret was that their howls could not be heard over the secondary lurches of the buildings on their faltering foundations. They were on the verge of collapse, would eventually have to be brought down. The current occupants were evacuated, and all the occupants of all buildings adjacent to the Richelin Building were as well—there was a risk the thing would go down into the street, or take another building with it.

People spread out into the downtown streets, blocking the passage of the taxis for which they fought. The cell networks buckled. It was all people could do to keep away from other national government buildings, keep away from police stations, stay the hell away from the palace! For gods' sake! The capital's paralysis deepened when the Royal Army's operatives, in conjunction with personnel supplied by Kevin Logan's branch of Standard Army, blew up the security checkpoints at the D'Artagan and Chiffre Bridges, doing enough damage to the supports to render the bridges unsafe pending inspection. That left only the King's Bridge as a safe way of traversing the river.

A different trick was in store for the King's Bridge.

It hung over the river and the stalled commuters all along the banks could watch the empty span. They couldn't see everything—the sandwiched walls of the security checkpoint remained intact and opaque—and they couldn't see who it was that muscled from Wharf Street on the western bank into the kill zone between the plates. But they could see the green-uniformed Internal Security Office guards running back east along the long length of the bridge, clutching arms, thoughtlessly dragging Poiccard assault rifles with cartoonishly bent barrels, all the long way to eastern bank.

On the east bank, it took ten minutes before red-uniformed RPD arrived and put up sawhorses encouraging the crowd to stay back. It was not an ugly crowd—not yet, not quite. When the jet black SWAT van pulled up and started backing onto the span, there were some scattered yells and boos, enough to cause a little nervousness for the RPDs running the cordon. But no one was about to start shaking the barricades right after a van carrying three unloving, unbreathing swatbots had arrived on the scene.

The van rolled backwards almost to its ideal deployment point before Bunnie bounded out of the captured security checkpoint on magbolt propelled feet, and gave the van a hard left. The van took it like a boxer leading with the jaw: the rear doors popped out of true and hung loose, while the shock of impact visibly flowed up the box chassis to the cab, tearing rifts in the outer ablative armor and the white SWAT lettering. She reached in and jerked at one of the still-dead bot's legs, tearing it halfway out of its mountings before the van driver poured on the hydrogen, loosing a cloud of vaporized rubber from the tires and helping her yank the bot loose. The van fishtailed at high speed toward the scattering crowd at River Street at the east end of the bridge, leaving the bot to clatter to the cement, an obscure tangle of wire and armor and titanium alloy.

One of the techs in the van turned it on. If you were watching from the bank, it was like lightning striking into a corpse-monster. Actuators tense; formless struts become limbs; fingers grasp hungrily—

The rabbit fired her mag-launchers and soared through a two-meter vertical leap that concluded with her right foot landing upon the monster's head with a resounding crunch. By the time the sound reached the banks, it sounded like the pop of a balloon. The machine rattled as it tried to redistribute targeting control to remote sensors, pushing central balance functions down to the distributed processing units in its limbs. It was almost in condition to get to its feet by the time Bunnie, having dragged it to the sidewalk, sank her foot-anchors into the concrete and with a sharp cry hurled the thing tumbling down into the current. It smacked the water with an ungainly splayed-limb flop and was gone from sight.

On the banks they were taking pictures, throwing up their hands. On either side, a little bit of the noise was an echo from the other bank. All they could see from that distance was the rabbit. Her ears showed the position of her head as she glanced back and forth at the people staring at her, her thick metal left crooked at the elbow, hand resting against the geometrically precise curve of her thigh; her diminutive right lifted behind her head as if to scratch, a gesture of thoughtfulness, surprise.

She didn't seem used to being looked at or cheered by lots of people, but she seemed to like it.

Then she turned and loped along the bridge, hurrying to join the fight between the police and the crowd that had the SWAT van rocking on its axles.

Joshua Dursine knocked. The wood swallowed the impact of his knuckles and the dull buzz of the fecund insects, the layered squeaks and chirps of the near-tame birds picking in the grass, faintly scented of a diminishing cut and fresher insecticide.

The door was a twin of one immediately to its left; a duplex, white false-wooden siding with just enough speckle-texture to hide the stains that would accumulate between the annual pressure washing; faux-bark shingles pouring down the banked roof to a brown gutter, new enough that the bolted joints where the segments met were still perfectly flush. The conjoined-twin house came from a huge litter, stretching down the slow, unnecessary curve of the street, family resemblance coming through just a touch too strongly as the possible permutations of this cupola, that garage slowly ran out and structures repeated under the few chosen shades of siding. Across a T-intersection marked with a green crossroads marker, names unreadable at the distance, Josh could see a squat brown sign, decorated with middling woodworking and rustic paint on the gold-and-silver compass that designated one of the suburban park districts.

He only knew this house was in Oak Park rather than River Forest because he had the address written down on a piece of paper. The paper was now stowed in his pocket, next to his cell phone, the battery of which was dead because the charger was in his biggest suitcase. His suitcases were who knows where, in the untrustworthy hands of Wilson Overnight Parcels. Joshua had nothing else, besides the clothes on his body and the suitcoat slung over his shoulder, collar taut around his index finger.

Contemplating the door, he grew a little nervous at the continuing silence. There was not even subtle knock of the taxi's engine turning over, since he had sent it back to the airport. Maybe she wasn't home. Things had been—well, he thought, and that was the last he thought about it, sinking back into a tense, wordless expectancy. The door was a bit small for a bear, let alone a bear of his size—wrong place? He glanced over at the dark glass of the latticed window, the draped rose curtains, and felt himself a stranger, peeking in the neighborhood's windows. He lifted his knuckles and knocked again, but missed, because the door opened and Kima exploded out of it. She was dressed light for the air warming to summer, cut-off shorts and a tank top and the brown fur of her arms audibly brushed against both sides of the doorframe as they leapt up and grabbed him.

Somehow she pulled him inside, while kissing him, and he felt his rump knock against some furniture that he couldn't even see and something hit a hardwood floor heavily, shoes squeaking on it, wondering if this was what it was like in Mobius, when the war ended, those few weeks when people had come back from the front and thought it was over.

"Mr. Dursine," the man from the government said," we're very thankful for the information you've provided us."

"Yes? Was it—was Mr. Pulaski up to no good? I mean, was he still doing work for our side or not?"

"The information was very useful, and we intend to take appropriate action in light of it." The human struck Josh less as a G-Man than as middle-management in some private corporation—while the Lachels government rented space in this dull office openly, it wasn't an embassy or consulate. Tiny eyes, toothless smile, closed posture, hands held together: Josh had a premonition that he would forget what the man looked like if he didn't write his impressions down within the hour.

"The Premier?" Josh asked.

"All relevant parties." The man inhaled expectantly: "About your request for reassignment to a domestic post or for early termination of your Foreign Affairs commission."

"Yes." Josh said, throat tensing.

"We think that we can approve a discharge with positive references for future employment. We also think that we can give you the lowest pension available, equivalent to a Level Ten employee, which, well, it's not inconsiderable."

"Thanks." Josh's smile curdled at its corners even before he was at the end of the word. If nothing else, his internship had developed his cynical faculty, and it didn't take much imagination to guess why a Level Seven employee would be given money it takes a Level Ten employee twenty years of service to earn. "Thanks very much."

"I'd like to go over the separation agreement with you," the government man continued smoothly, producing more papers than would seem necessary, "to cover all its terms carefully, including some terms relating to the disclosure of things you witnessed or learned while working for Foreign Affairs. I'd also like to remind you about certain criminal laws governing the unauthorized disclosure of confidential information."

Without a moment's hesitation, Josh grabbed the document, tore it open to its last page, and signed, right through the government man's requests for patience.

Yes, there was an oppressed nation four times the size of his own to the south. There was something big going on today, apparently; everyone crowding around the airport trivids. There would always be something. He didn't care; somehow, despite his idiocy and his casual, constant cruelty to the woman that loved him he had a home.

Forget a home country. That was enough.

Kain Blackwood - 2009

## \*Chapter 17\*: High Demon, 11 Floreal 3230

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**High Demon, Lachels, 11 Floreal 3230**

Second Assistant Director of Intelligence Acquisition Frank Pulaski had been denied permission to smoke. The immediate purpose of this was to make him uncomfortable, which it did. The secondary purpose was, presumably, to rattle him and unsettle him, to demonstrate, through comparison to the chainsmoking, oily-curled hysterical imitation of an interrogator they had assigned him, the hopelessness of his position in the coils of the state's power.

He smelled the stale sweetness of the secondhand marijuana going rancid under the hot light, watched the numbers on the audiodisc recorder click endlessly upwards. Arms folded, he crouched like a feral swamplurker behind the big shotgun microphone on the steel table before him, possessed of a bottomless contempt.

"You have operated outside the control not only of your own department, but of the Premier himself." The interrogator carried on like he was a prosecutor, working in front of a jury—Pulaski would not be surprised if the man were stupid enough to think that this would someday be presented to a jury. "You run a private foreign policy, endangering the international standing of this country. And, am I hearing this right: none of your projects worked?"

Pulaski closed his eyes, let the sigh of exasperation hiss from his throat. But it wasn't just exasperation, that fist in his stomach that was his ulcer reminded him. There was a bit of displeasing truth to this. Very displeasing. "They could not be expected to succeed indefinitely."

"Pawel Weilblad," the interrogator recited, slapping the file on the table, one of Pulaski's personal files, which had evidently been raided at the same time that he, Samsa and Tyrerson were taken into custody—Greg Amberson was still on the loose, until they could do something about his ambassadorial appointment. "Pawel Weilblad, gone private and playing around with a private army in the Mobian desert. Baxter Posniak, double agent."

"I dispute that characterization. Even so, Wendy—"

"Wendy Maybell." Slap. "Dead."

This caught Pulaski in the chest, a bit harder than he would have wanted. "When? Do we have verification?"

"Flushed and killed by Mobian counterintelligence two days ago. We're still trying to figure out if she got burned or if she tried to do something stupid when everything started going to hell."

Pulaski sat back. His beard itched, he scratched it. He felt the fire in him sputtering. "That is unfortunate. A dead loss."

"Appropriate choice of words."

"What I mean to say to you is that these operations weren't total failures. Each of my operatives was inserted with both a primary and secondary purpose, one with an eye to the longer term. Although we undoubtedly would have been in a better position to control events in Mobius had we received the support we requested and deserved from the Department and the Premier's office, no such policy could succeed indefinitely. Sooner or later, a confluence of events like the present one would have arrived."

"And?"

"And what happens then? Mobius rises again. But seeded with agents—"

"Former agents."

". . . with people, known to us. From our culture. Respectful of our traditions of peace, individual liberty—"

"Property."

"—private property and free markets, precisely. If Posniak is a double agent, he is at least potentially close to Robotnik's War Ministry. Weilblad may yet become a trusted lieutenant of Sally Acorn." Pulaski coughed, having amused himself with a thought: "Well, a lieutenant, anyway."

"And you believe that this justifies your behavior?"

"Yes," Pulaski replied, without hesitation.

The interrogator sighed rather theatrically, a low breath that could have been heard twenty rows out at a theater. Pulaski grinned. For a man accused of violations of multiple felony statutes, he was feeling pretty good. He had not planned to survive discovery of his operations by the Premier or other professionals in the foreign policy apparatus. His actions did redound to the benefit of Lachels, but their discovery did not; the Premier's best course of action was simply to hush everything up and hope that Weilblad and Posniak made it through. That meant that if the Premier was of like mind with Pulaski, then Pulaski and everyone else he'd involved in his planning would already be dead, even informants—while he couldn't be sure of the security breach, Pulaski suspected that the moronic bear Dursine hadn't believed him when he'd truthfully warned the bear that exposure would lead to his imprisonment, or worse.

But it seemed that the Premier was not of like mind with Pulaski. He'd sent a showman rather than a plotter, which meant that he wanted this to wind up in a criminal court rather than the real world. And Pulaski's crimes, while serious by some measure, did not carry the death penalty. Even assuming that they could build a case for treason—against a person who'd done more for the good of Lachels than its own parliament—they wouldn't want to have to air the requisite details in court. He was safe.

The interrogator carefully moved the pile of Pulaski's failures aside. In their place, he gently laid a single file. "Are you familiar," he said, "with one of our diplomatic cover agents, Corporal Darcy Sobotka?"

Unless, Pulaski amended his reasoning, they had a murder case.

Griffith Varitek sat in the depths of a soft, pink loveseat, his leather jacket on his shoulders and a nervous emptiness on his face as his eyes tracked the fox around the room. "You know there's no hard feelings, ri—"

"Shut up."

I was right about you, Griff thought. He should have made sure to kill the kid when he had the chance. Miles Prower was still in the sunflower shorts and his beatass red sneakers, the dirt of Marigold ground into the white polycotton, but now his shoulders were set in the stiff jacket of a borrowed Royal Guard uniform, the hem brushing around his thighs, empty sleeves slapping his sides at a long step. His eyes seemed darker, maybe a toasted brown, but Griff knew that was just his imagination; he was letting the scowl on the kid's cheeks cloud the rest of his face. It was the sort of humorless face he'd want in his security detail if he were a besieged Queen about to meet with a man who had once tried to kidnap her.

Alternative: he should have killed the kid, or he never should have been in Marigold at all. He should have just stayed on the reservation. That was what the meeting was about, from Griff's perspective.

They were in the bridal sweet at the Green Hills Bacall Hotel. They'd arranged the loveseat Griff was on and a small, backless cushion that he suspected was actually a footstool for an armchair across the room around a long table that was meant to support flutes of sparkling white wine and which would instead support any notes and treaties they cared to write down. A joint team of wolves and Griff's own men were holding down the entrance, the front desk, the disabled elevators and the hallway. They weren't expecting much trouble, though. The business travelers were either long-gone or barricaded in their rooms, surviving on the minibar and waiting for the crisis to pass. Even if the desk clerks had got off a silent alarm or a phone call, you could see the smoke rising from the city center just by going to the north windows, and the national government had called up the suburban cops to protect the national infrastructure in the city center while the army redeployed.

Sally Acorn and her rescued robot monster had set the country on fire. She had also quickly and quietly stolen Griff's toughest troops, Lupe Almatrican's wolves, and the masses of support that would more or less follow Lupe—the vast reserves of poor, disaffected canines east of Fortune Station. In five days of dangerous work, Sally Acorn had become what the Mobian resistance had lacked for ten years: a resourceful, determined leader, in command of antigovernment sentiment east and west, with a claim to legitimate rule.

So when one of Almatrican's wolves had got word to Griff's people that Her Royal Highness wanted to have a long heart-to-heart about the future of the country, there was nothing to prevent it from occurring.

Other, of course, than Prower's paranoia. The fox opened the fridge and hefted the candy bars, seeing if any were heavy enough to be bombs. He flipped the honeymoon mattress. He disconnected the phone. He pulled the roses from the vase and sent the water down the sink Then he poked around under the sink with his pistol, looking for midget assassins or child commandos—as if he hadn't cornered the market on that.

He strode up to Griff and poked his hands out from the jacket, motioning him with the barrel of his gun to stand up. Griff obeyed slowly, still towering a good pair of decimeters over the kid, but he'd lost something on him in the past couple of years. Prower was what now, thirteen? His fingers had filled out into bigger gloves, and had a more commanding grip on his piece.

Griff held his arms out. "I'm carrying a .357 automatic in a shoulder holster," he said. "Don't try taking it. Your Queen held her own against Lupe Almatrican; I'm not meeting her unarmed."

"If I had my way she wouldn't meet you at all," the fox said, moving around behind the goat and patting down his sides, pulling out the announced gun and checking the load. "Her Highness says you can have your gun, but I know better. If you try anything—"

"I know, I know, you'll come in here and kill me," Griff said. The kit's voice had cracked and slid rather noticeably when he tried to put force into the word. Griff didn't find it funny—a confusing enough time for a young male without having to deal with the rest of this shit. Miles would be waiting outside in the hall, alongside one of Griff's own gunmen, each ready to go crazy on the other if Griff or Sally tried something violent. Interesting choice of bodyguard, Griff thought—he would have gone for Lupe, himself, had the wolf still been working for him, but maybe she was busy setting off bombs in the city.

Miles inserted the gun back into Griff's shoulder-holster himself, then pulled his hands back into the darkness of his oversized guardsman's coat and came out with a small spiral notebook, a ballpoint jammed in the spine. "This goes on the table here, for her. She'll use it to talk to you. At the end of the meeting we get it back."

"Okay . . . ." Griff took it, flipped through the blank pages before tossing it on the table. "You want me to write down everything I say, too?"

"No," the fox said, walking backwards to the door, hands hidden inside his jacket. "She can hear you." He held the door open and nodded into the hall. "Safe as it's going to get," he said.

So what, somebody jinxed her? Griff was going to ask, but then Acorn began to shuffle in and he shut up. She had the stereotypical hesitant step of someone with a balance problem, inner ear infection or—

Swelling.

From the snout up, that was the issue. Her red hair had been shared back to a thin buzz like a skullcap, doctor's work to expose the contusions. Heavy lumps under her fur spreading it thin enough to reveal glimpses of the skin beneath, deep, cold blue and soft black. Some light scalpel-scabs here and there suggested that at its worst the edema had been dangerously extreme, but it had begun to retreat, leaving firm nuggets of wounded flesh that would persist for weeks. On the right side of her face a welt pressed down over her eye, leaving only a bit of angry white to show under her lid, wet and gleaming, seeming to pulse slightly when she rolled it, as though the contents were under great pressure. On the left a pair of lumps were placed higher and deeper, far enough back to press on her ear canal and cause problems there, but leaving more than enough room for her iris to scout about under her brown-furred lid, the brown marbling matched horrible red to the crushed capillaries in the white around it.

Once your gaze dropped into her snout, though, it was clear that she had been hurt very badly.

Her face sagged. It listed to its left, like a ship taking on water. Griff thought at first it might just but heavy swelling around a bone break, but he looked closely with the shameless curiosity that an injury can draw out and saw that while there was a bone break it was the break itself that he was seeing. The entire left side of her face was a blurred, impressionistic portrait of a jawline: a little upwards brushstroke here, here a little sense of motion to the side.

The sight tapped sympathetic reserves that Griff had thought long emptied. Shit. She used to be kind of pretty.

The squirrel moved with a slow caution to her seat, the fatigue of her injuries weighing on her like a lead blanket, and put the contents of her vest pockets down on the table: a nine-millimeter pistol, and a pair of needlenose bolt cutters. Varitek had never been in any army, but the goat had, under another name, and the goat had seen casualties who carried bolt cutters everywhere: jaw wired shut. If pain meds made you vomit, you would choke to death on the contents of your own stomach unless you could quickly cut your mandible free, re-breaking all the bones in your face.

The sound of the fox shutting the door to the hall gently nudged Griff out of his stunned trance. He sat on the edge of the loveseat, looked up and saw her crimson gaze, and just started saying all the points he'd been meaning to have artfully dragged out of him over the course of a few hours.

"I'm not a Mobian in terms of nationality. My family's from here, of course—north-central, the Worm foothills—but they've been away a couple generations and I wasn't born your subject. I'm here because my employer sent me here, to sell guns. To make money. Money is good; cash without legislative oversight is better. I'd say I've bankrolled . . . ten murders. Less, if they've been trying to affect the balance of power in parliament with the gray ops funds.

"But they cared less about what I made than who I sold to. I'd get the orders in classified ads, five newspapers. I liked that. Forced me to keep abreast of current events." Griffith yawned. "I'm trying to think what the order was on my early major customers. Triticale—yeah, remember her? The Thermidor insurrection. Then I sold a lot to a couple of key groups inside what was left of the Standard Army—I know you know one, Koren. Big old bull. After that, about four years ago, Leslie Nicarico and Martin Stamp. The Rise of the Committee to Free Mobius as a fighting entity, as opposed to a press-releasing entity.

"Not much to you, though, even indirectly. You've never bought much, have you? Always had enough guns for your own people. I should have seen that earlier. Such a good sign for you, that independence.

"I got sick of the whole thing. It was obvious what they wanted: set up a new rebel army to crowd out an old one, over and over, so there's no end to the civil war. They don't want to have to deal with Robotnik, once he's managed to get control. There would be no stopping him. Your subjects would get enough food to work an assembly line building assaultbots, and his army would roll up to the equator. He'll never be satisfied. Once he's got the entire world at his command he'll start building rockets.

"But," and Griff wondered if the mind locked behind the wired jaws and the mutilated face was conscious of how dangerous she had suddenly become to the rest of the world, "they didn't want to have to deal with you, either. Not once you're seated firmly on the big chair."

She continued to watch him, impassively. No reach for her notebook.

"The death of a thousand cuts," Griff explained. "No one in Lachels thinks that you would invade any country, violate anyone's rights. But no one thinks you'd be inclined to give an inch on commercial or territorial rights, once you had the world's biggest industrial base and army backing your words. Mobius has been slow-motion steamrolling the continent for centuries, and I doubt you're about to turn that around.

"So that's their problem. No one can be trusted to run Mobius, so it's either let Mobius conquer the world or keep you in civil war until the end of time. My employers decided that your people should suffer. They didn't get to see it up close; I did. It has to stop.

"So I came up with a new solution: I'd just run the country myself."

So hard to read her face. But Griff kept talking anyway, because there wasn't anything left to do.

"I still think I could derail you. You may think that's conceited, what with your unkillable boyfriend and Lupe Almatrican backing you, but I am resourceful. And if worse came to worse, I could always reconnect with my bosses in Foreign Affairs. They'll forgive a lot if it means keeping you off the throne.

"But they're wrong. I stand down; you win. If you can make use of my guns, they're yours." He swallowed. "And if you want another subject, you've got one."

He folded his arms over his chest, sat back, and realized that he had not been so worried since he went into the wilderness three years ago.

Slowly, the squirrel's right hand rose from her side. Extending it out over the table, palm up, she spread the fingers, held it still.

Griff smiled, and let a sigh of relaxation slide from his core, shoulders drooping as the weight came off them. It was a nice way for a gunrunner to change careers: he took his pistol from inside his jacket and with a deft motion that he had never practiced before in his life tossed and caught it by the barrel, butt toward Acorn. Patiently, he waited until the gun was secure in her grip, fingers gingerly tensed over the triggerguard—a pre-rational instinct that it was wrong, putting something so heavy on the muscles of someone so obviously weakened—then left it in her hand.

The cushions embraced his weight again. His Queen—what a weird feeling! he thought, laughing nervously and quietly, surrendering his hard-won citizenship to subject himself to this girl—his Queen took the pistol to her lap, rested the oily metal on the tough blue fabric of her jean-shorts, seeing that the safety was on. Her left hand nudged the barrel-assembly gently, just enough to see the safety of the empty chamber.

For a moment, Griff was almost worried that his Queen was going to shoot him with his own gun. But she didn't.

With dreamlike quickness she chambered a round, disengaged the safety, swept out her arm and obliquely fired a round into the wall behind her.

The goat was still just sitting, eyes intense, that nervous mouth just fallen out of its smile as Sally tossed the gun at his feet, heard with precision the hot, tumbling shell bound off the edge of the wooden table. Then the muffled sound of the gunfire in the hallway, just one gun, three shots. Griff was started to his feet, but he didn't have time: she grabbed her unsafetied nine-millimeter and put the hot round in the chamber into his heart.

Through the wall, Sally heard Tails scream, rage and terror: "Sally!" Good, she thought as she carefully steadied the sights in front of her good eye and put a red hole squarely between Griffith Varitek's murdering horns.

Leon-Vulnet recommends that if evils must be done to remove an enemy, all evil be done at a single fell swoop, so that one does not develop a foul reputation or become hated. In illustration, he cites to the example, at the time of writing nearly contemporary, of Taksi, tyrant of Iona Minor, who seized power by inviting the noble senate of the city to a dinner in their honor, and setting swordsmen upon them at a hidden signal. Afterwards he ruled the city for twenty years, beloved of the people, before losing the city to the superior arms of the bear army of Iona Major.

Today Leon-Vulnet was today regarded as amoral, a monster of a philosopher who wrote recipes for tyranny, but that wasn't it at all. In his works prior to Wise Ruler Kit, like the Mobian Histories, he'd revealed himself a friend to what were for the time very broad-based aristocratic republics during a period of local petty monarchies. He was just a thinker, clear and deep and hard, that wasn't afraid of what the friends of such institutions would have to do for their founding and defense. Few were up to his logic. Lupe Almatrican was, which was why she was currently in Corukas with two of her best wolves, killing Ari Koren and his closest associates.

But it was much easier to develop a foul reputation these days. Lupe had worked with Varitek, knew how he killed, so framing him for the murder of Koren would work so long as Sally herself could frame him for the attempted murder of herself. She'd puzzled over that a little, trying to find a way that she could convince the police he'd tried to kill her.

The answer was simple, and lateral: The country was about to burn; no police department was going to investigate this crime scene—it wasn't even a crime—and if they did, Sally would just accuse them of being tools of Robotnik—which they would be. She didn't have to convince the world; the world would believe the story of the first person on the scene.

Wood splintered around the lock assembly as Tails kicked in the door. He'd forgotten everything Sonic taught him about coming in low and just ran in, smoking pistol trained on Griff until he saw he was dead and then he dropped his pistol and grabbed Sally—hard enough to send a stab of pain through her jaw, hugging her and grabbing her fur in his fingers and tugging it, feeling her still alive and breathing and moving, darkening her vest with his sobs. "Are you hurt?"

She was hurt, but what he really wanted to know was whether Varitek had hurt her. She shook her head. "Nnn. Nnn."

Naturally Tails believed that Varitek had shot first. Varitek had held him prisoner in the woods, taunted him, held a gun to his head and took pictures. Varitek was a boogeyman out of a storybook for him, probably always would be, long after he'd grown old. And even if he wasn't, Tails almost thought of Sally as though she were his mother. He'd never believe that she could have murdered anyone, even someone as horrible as the goat.

Part of Sally searched for it in his hug, his tears, looking for that little germ of doubt that she worried might be there . . . .

She didn't find it. She doubted she'd find it anywhere else that mattered.

And if a few people thought she was a murderer, Leon-Vulnet did urge strongly that it was better to be feared than loved. Being a good ruler wasn't about being nice. Truthful. Happy.

Sally was understanding that more and more clearly.

At nine in the morning, cars were blowing up in the Robotropolis security district. Flaming barricades were up in the narrow streets of old Corukas; "militant dockworkers," as the phrase quickly propagated, were turning away tugs and waving the old flags: acorn, infinity. At five minutes past nine, the first simple verbal reports were circulating on the radio and satellite trivid broadcasts.

At nine forty-five, a mob broke the windows of a police station in a suburb of Fortune Station with bricks. The mob quickly dispersed when police fired small-caliber pistols into the air. The entire city's police force was called onto emergency alert, all cruisers visibly on the street.

At nine fifty-five, "youths" in the suburban university-hamlet of Moselle were rolling cars.

At ten o'clock, a security team at Ellingson's Mineral's Thunder Mountain mine near the small city of Dignan, south of Fennec Settlement, fired into a crowd of people by the highway outside of facility gates, killing two. Some of the people in the crowd were employees who had walked off the morning shift.

At ten past ten, an Ellingson Mineral spokesperson went on satellite trivid to explain that three people had rushed the gates with Molotov cocktails. Asked to explain how the employees could afford octane mix, the spokesperson became flustered.

At ten-thirty, the Office of the First Director in Robotropolis issued an Emergency Directive to all national and local security forces to protect government property and central authority. Redeployment began promptly, with police pulling back to central positions around government offices.

At eleven o'clock, the first breaches occurred in the abandoned security cordon around Port Orange on the west side of Robotropolis. Within thirty minutes, the cordon no longer existed, and cars full of movable property were clogging the highways as the wealthier neighborhoods nearby emptied out.

At eleven-thirty, in Kingsport, on the Lachels border, the first person wandered past the abandoned guardhouses on the Mobian side and walked out onto the eerily empty span of the Grand Crossing Bridge. It was a kid, an otter playing hooky. He had a skateboard, but carried it under his arm. He leaned out over the metal railing, looking down at the cement bank-reinforcements along the river, thinking about going down to try them out. He wandered all the way down to the other end of the bridge and spoke to the blue-uniformed human guards there, defending the frontier at Grosse Durchfahren, for a couple of minutes. While one continued talking to the otter kid, another moved away and started speaking into his hand-radio. A few people started hanging around the striped gate blocking the bridge on the Mobian side.

After about fifteen minutes of discussion, the guard put his radio back on his belt, went back to the other and talked for a little. Then both guards stood aside as the otter dropped his board, kicked, and rolled off into the foreign city.

By four o'clock, the Lachels Premier's office and the National Parliament were both remaining studiously quiet, but the decision had already been made by a low-level commander of the border guard. The news choppers were careful to keep out of Mobian airspace, but they didn't need to enter it to get sweeping shots of the people clogging the bridge, the streets. The trivids were eager to capture the scope of it.

What they didn't get was the strangeness.

On top of one of the white lines at the center of the span, a rabbit woman of about forty embraced her sister, about the same, and lifted her off her feet. They had not seen each other for the past decade and a half and had not expected to meet again. Beside them, a huge bear spiked sausages and rolled them over the coals. Human high school students from Lachels, having detected a lack of beer, made a call on a cell; more arrived with a cooler. The mob was the size of a small city; its members were every shape and size. A wealthy Lachel walked about with a private bodyguard, oblivious to the insult as he handed out foreign money; Mobians owning nothing more than the shorts that kept them from being wild savages told the border guards that they didn't have passports, and were let off of the bridge anyway. The only requirement for membership in the party was the sense of electric possibility that would, in a pinch, substitute for happiness, the willingness and ability to give anything and take anything as the moment required.

Sonic drifted through the interstices of the crowd in a daze.

Who were all these people? How did there get to be so many of them? They pushed up around him until he could no longer smell himself, until their passage tugged at quills like waves crashing over strands of seaweed. They talked and talked and talked and the babble washed through his ears, cleaning his thick head of any thought.

He turned his head to the side and in the gaps in the crowd he could see the river, feel the cold breeze whipping above all their heads, twisting the roadbed under their feet.

He'd seen the TV a little, earlier. Either the rest were lying or somehow she'd lived. He hadn't killed her.

Oops.

This is where her land ends. I set foot on the other end and I'm gone forever.

Out of some horrible perverse instinct, Sonic wanted to do it for her. It was like giving her a present, stealing her some flowers. He imagined himself giving her his absence like it was a physical thing. He would give it to Rotor, because he might as well be in this horrible scene, too, and Rotor would take it in and lay it on her lap while Sonic stood leaning around the doorway, squeezing his gloves, hoping to see Sally treasure him not being there, watching carefully her eyes for the sign that he could come closer, maybe put his hand on the side of her hospital bed. It was like imagining yourself dead: there's your body, there are your friends, looking down at you while you stand off to the side, watching them, seeing if they cry.

Sonic kept drifting on, the cold wind chilling his fur. It was colder up here. His eyes floated up and far in the distance he thought he could see the mountains, a purple smudge on the horizon.

"Passport?"

"Huh?" Sonic blinked, shook his head a little, feeling his quills trail behind him.

He was standing in front of a row of impromptu gates that had been set up, cement barricades dragged into place so that the Lachels border guards could check through seven people all at once. "Do you got a passport?"

"No." He wasn't sure what a passport was, but he knew he didn't have it. He didn't have anything.

"Okay, what's your name?"

"Sonic."

"Sonny?"

"Sonic."

"Spell."

S-O-N-I-C, hedgehog by name and nature, while another guard at a folding table typed it into a little lapcomp. Yes, that was his real name. No, he did not know what kind of name it was; both his parents had died in the War. He closed his eyes and felt like he was falling asleep, right there on his feet—

"Is your fur—quills, uh, always this color?"

He opened them again. "Color—blue?" he asked.

"Yeah," the human said, nodding like it was the most serious thing you ever heard. Beside him the other guy kept typing, clickclickclick.

"Just like the gods made me."

"Are, are you." The guard was this stringy guy in a uniform about Sonic's own color but with a few drops of ink mixed into it. A beret sat on his head like a punctured hot air balloon, trying to slip off his narrow, bloodless scalp before he died. He was very pale, hands nervously going to his belt, his pockets. "Are you. Have you ever." He swallowed, the guy at the computer typing, clickclickclick. "Committed."

Sonic didn't get what the guy's problem was until he saw two of the guys from the other lanes crowding over. Three more guys were running up from the back with foreign submachineguns, each with a big wide black snout like a bulldog and a tiny little barrel in the middle of it. Some of the people behind him were already pushing back into the bridge, the force of their motion pulling a little semi-circle of space around him that the gunmen ran in to fill. Sonic turned his head to watch them as they ran, setting up on one knee and sighting down the barrel just like they say in the manual.

He slowly let his gaze drift back in front of him as the guy who'd been asking him the question fumbled his hand over his hipholster and pulled and pulled and finally drew his pistol and aimed it at Sonic's face. By then the guy at the computer had to shout over the noise of the crowd as they backed off. "Mister Hedgehog, you are a known terrorist and are forbidden entry to the nation of Lachels under the Immigration Act of 3225!"

"I'm a freedom fighter," he said. He didn't say it very loudly, and couldn't hear it.

The guy kept reading off his little screen. "You have the right to petition the Foreign Affairs Ministry for a re-evaluation of your immigration status. If you believe you are immediate danger of suffering torture in violation of the International Convention Against Torture, you can request an emergency rehearing from the Officer-in-Charge at any border crossing or consular office."

Sonic started laughing. They knew who he was. Sally had tried to sell him on dyeing his quills and wearing some kind of lame clothes over them to get all torn up, because otherwise the cops'd see him easier. He'd held off, because he thought he looked good the way he did, and Sally'd backed off, because she thought he looked good the way he did. But Sonic had always kind of wanted people to know who he was, too. He was proud.

And now, hahaha, he was famous!

A wave of tension passed through the border guards arrayed around him. The hedgehog was now supposed to run off back along the bridge; they'd left him an opening for that and hadn't said he was under arrest. This just standing there laughing was unnerving.

The guy in front of Sonic edged closer, waggled the pistol at his face, trying to spook him like you would a wild animal. "Put . . . . get on your knees! Put your hands on your head!"

Sonic's smile disappeared. "Don't—"

His right arm snapped up and grabbed the cold metal barrel near the back, yanking it hard down and to the left, feeling the slow human's arms resist and then snap, the weak pair of bones above the wrist; the guard dropped down to his knees, too slow, following the gun. The hammer assembly shot forward and bit Sonic's pinky as he forced the gun out of the man's hand. He was seized with a sudden, bitter disgust and took a step forward, driving his kneecap into the guard's eye. "—point that gun at me."

The other guards were frozen, guns still trained. Sonic watched them, his new gun light in his glove. He started laughing again. "Who's next, huh? Hehehe, who's the next contestant on Arrest the Hedgehog?" His sneakers scraped on the cement, turning him slowly round, looking at the kneeling guards and the panicked, ever more distant crowd, the straggler kids hunkered behind the divider at the bridge's centerline, holding up their cellphones like antennas. "Step right up," he said, "try your luck."

One of the guards moved—didn't fire, maybe he did. Sonic let the adrenaline flood him, leapt and put bullets into the man, and from then on it was a dance, a dance and music. He shot a man's legs out. He grabbed a man's blue bowl of a helmet and pressed the man's face down onto the barrel of his pistol and fired. His eye caught sight of one of those cellphones at the end of someone's hand like a target in a shooting gallery and he shot and saw the thing vaporize and shatter and heard the sharp, high cry of the kid with the plastic in his hand and he laughed at the bullseye. He tore one of the submachineguns from a guard and held the man against his chest as one of his countryman's slugs tore into the man's flak vest, the little shreds of fabric leaping into the air as Sonic fired back with the stolen gun, making sure to keep to the man's unarmored legs and arms.

The dance first faltered when Sonic caught a bullet in his belly.

Oh no, he thought, feeling the world slow to normal again. Not again. His eyes spun and the guards had enough sense to be in deep, hard cover behind cement by now but he could see the wreckage he'd made, the broken glass, overturned cookfires, here an abandoned shoe. He wondered if the whole city was empty by now, looking up at the thudding blades of a pair of helicopters high above him.

Another shot like a fist in his belly. Another into his gun arm, deep, grazing bone.

Sonic stared running again with a scream. In front of him he could see the steel fence bounding the bridge, and behind that the cities stretching away down the banks of the long, slow, deep river, and its promise of the sea, far away, and he thought, hell, they have to take me. No matter how bad it gets there's always the ocean.

Sonic didn't jump, just ran as hard as he could into the railing and closed his eyes. Slap into his wounds and with the pain his momentum no longer belonged to him. He let the force hold him, flip him—

Freefall.

It felt good. It was like he was flying.

END OF PART 2

Kain Blackwood – 2007

Persona non Grata will be continued in Part 3: Search and Destroy

Thanks to my beta readers Wingless Rain and Kain Blackwood, and particularly Kain Blackwood who saw through the composition of the second half as I wandered jobless on the streets of Edinburgh. :P Special thanks to my reviewers, whose work is always appreciated. And as usual, thanks to all my readers, including the weird ones from like Italy and New Zealand and so forth who read the whole thing in one sitting. I hope you enjoyed it! As always, feedback is greatly appreciated.

Everyday I wake up; we drink a lot of coffee and watch the CNN

Everyday I wake up to a bowl of clover honey and let the locusts fly in

Lobster backs attack the town again

Wrap all my things in aluminum

Beams of darkness streak across the sky

Paintbrush from the ancient satellite

Every time I look out my window, the same three dogs looking back at me

Every time I open my windows cranes fly in to terrorize me

The power of the Holy Ghost (Woof, woof, woof!)

The power of the Holy Ghost (Results!)

Shadow of the new Praetorian tipping cows in fields Elysian

Saturnalia for all you have, the seven habits of the highly infected calf

Swan diving off the tongues of crippled giants

International Business Machine

Choking on bits of falling bread crumbs

Oh this burning beard, I have come undone

It's just as I feared, I have come undone

Bugger, bugger, bugger-dumb the last of academe

Occam's razor makes the cutting clean

Shaven like a banker, lilac vegetal

Break the glass ceiling and golden parachute on down

The power of the Holy Ghost comes to town

Remove the shadow of the new Praetorian

Tipping cows in fields Elysian

Saturnalia for all you have

The seven habits of the highly infected calf

- Clutch, "Burning Beard"