# Gardenia

**Story:** Gardenia  
**Storylink:** <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/3581752/1/>  
**Category:** Sonic the Hedgehog  
**Genre:** Adventure/Drama  
**Author:** Fish the Impaler  
**Authorlink:** <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/931227/>  
**Last updated:** 12/08/2007  
**Words:** 103923  
**Rating:** M  
**Status:** Complete  
**Content:** Chapter 1 to 23 of 23 chapters  
**Source:** FanFiction.net  
  
**Summary:** Pt. 1 of Persona non Grata. One blow ‘till he takes you down, one touch and they can’t be cured, one word and it can’t be stopped, six hundred and sixty six miles per hour . . . . A tale of terror, lust, and above all freedom.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Molineaux, 15 Thermidor 3228

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

**Persona non Grata**

a story of Mobius in four parts

Part One: Gardenia

(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)

(1) Molineaux, Robotropolis, 15 Thermidor 3228. Subject Sonic Hedgehog commits aggravated assault and kidnapping.

(2) Port Orange, Robotropolis, 16 Thermidor 3228. Subject Sonic Hedgehog sings of speed, slaughter and joy.

(3) Downtown Security District, Robotropolis, 19 Thermidor 3228. Subject Snively Kolensky runs off at the mouth.

(4) Great Forest, South of Narsurpan, 19 Thermidor 3228. Subject Sally Acorn dresses to the nines and lies.

(5) Outskirts of Mills Bend, 1 Fructidor 3228. Subject Rotor Tulugarjuk has second thoughts; Subject Sonic Hedgehog hitches a ride.

(6) Ascogne-Dascogne, Robotropolis, 1 Fructidor 3228. Subject Antoine D'Coolette fights the only way he knows how; Subject Sally Acorn thinks fast and slow.

(7) Four Mounds, 2 Fructidor 3228. Subject Tails Prower learns a lesson.

(8) Racine Park, 17 Fructidor 3228. Subject Rotor Tulugarjuk gains notereity.

(9) Findrasay, Robotropolis, 25 Fructidor 3228. Subject Snively Kolensky mixes business and pleasure and business and pleasure.

(10) Uptown Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228. Subject Sally Acorn deals with people and bombs.

(11) Downtown Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228. Subject Sally Acorn undergoes medical treatment.

(12) Downtown Hewlett, 15 Vendemaire 3228. Subject Sally Acorn undergoes further medical treatment; Subject Sonic Hedgehog stumbles into a trap.

(13) Port Orange, Robotroplis, 21 Brumaire 3228. Subject Renee Donlevy makes a discovery; Subject Darcy Sobotka's job gets more complicated.

(14) Great Forest, Southeast of Coolette, 2 Firmaire 3228. Subject Tails Prower fails to stay put; Subject Snively Kolensky engages a janitor.

(15) Marigold, 2 Firmaire 3228. Subject Antoine D'Coolette commits a faux pas; Subject Sonic Hedgehog just says no; Subject Tails Prower is a good actor.

(16) Great Desert, West of Fennec Settlement, 3 Firmaire 3228. Subject Sonic Hedgehog visits a place he doesn't like.

(17) Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228. Subject Griffith Varitek has a management problem; Subject Myron Catalano thinks hard and long.

(18) Great Forest, Outside Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228. Subject Lupe Almatrican exercises two kinds of discretion; Subject Sonic Hedgehog has a misunderstanding.

(19) Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228. Subject Emily Rabbit goes to the well one too many times.

(20) Independence University, 7 Firmaire 3228. Subject T. Baxter Posniak dances with the talking cure.

(21) Borgadan International Airport, 21 Firmaire 3228. Subject Sally Acorn makes a new acquaintance, Subject Molly Lotor leaves on a long journey.

(22) Old Town, Corukas, 30 Firmaire 3228. All is well with Subjects Sally Acorn and Sonic Hedgehog, Subjects Joshua Dursine and Snively Kolensky ask favors, Subject Darcy Sobotka undergoes a performance review.

(23) Ironlock Prison, near Wolvesforge, 31 Firmaire 3228. Subject Molly Lotor prays to Trixiana, Subject Joshua Dursine gets a promotion, Subject Amanda has a wonderful, wonderful dream.

Part Two: Burning Beard

Part Three: Search and Destroy

Part Four: Immigrant Song

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**(1) Molineaux, Robotropolis, 15 Thermidor 3225**

Our cameras were in place to witness as these wild repenomami fell victim to the terrible beast.

A pack of shiny-furred repens play in the tropical jungles far to the north, in the endless oceans of the equator. Chase-the-tail, tug-of-bone. They are little brown torpedos on four legs, slapping the dirt with their thick claws, biting at each other with their short, stubby snouts. The hungrier ones have their faces in the red mess of the kill, munching.

Myron Catalano was sleepily, unpleasantly drunk. The bar's atmosphere was as muggy and quietly desperate as that of the neighborhood around it, thickly scented with sticky, spilled beer. "Those fuckers, Parkman Properties?" asks Renz, sitting on the stool next to him. The white-furred rabbit's voice bashed at Myron's ears like a battering ram. "Raising your rent?

And here's the thick, scaled cable spilling out of the leafy underbrush everywhere at once, coiling around everything. The little hunter-beasts scream, squirming away, running anywhere. Then the camera zooms in on the doomed one, the one that finds itself looking the nightmare in the face.

One of the strangest phenomena natural selection has produced, a mysterious weakness in the brain of the tiny mammal. It feels the danger but cannot run, cannot move, cannot even look away, hypnotized by the snake's undulating coils.

Oh yeah, Myron thought, sneering tiredly at the bar's television. This is the most responsible nature documentary ever. Why the hell wasn't there a game on? Even a shitty game, like baseball?

"After they didn't fix your shower for like a month." Renz shook his head, apparently unable to shut the hell up. "They better give you that promotion to project supervisor or it's gonna be like an honest coder can't even live in Molineaux no more."

Myron gave a feline grimace as the dull throb in his head waxed powerful. He was twenty-seven years old, skimming above the median age for post-War Mobius. Fur the color of piss on dirt peeked from the rolled-up sleeves and unbuttoned front of the white, human-style dress shirt he wore at Gescom Systems, the software developer. Two months ago Molly left him, saying he was too much an asshole to date. A month ago, the humans that ran the phones had changed the bills from PAST DUE to FINAL NOTICE. A week ago, they pinned a note to his door saying they were jacking his rent.

Two days ago, while he was throwing rocks at swans in the park after work, the coyote had come to see him.

Its heart still beating, the beast is already being digested from the outside in, helpless to avoid feeding the monster that stalks its pack. Mercifully, only a few minutes will be spent in this paralyzed, living death before—

"I got bigger problems, Renz," Myron muttered, the natural gray traces on his wide, sagging cheekbrush seeming to give him a deep frown, old and haggard.

"Baeh," the raging anger that had seemed to fill the rabbit dissipated into a flippant, weak wave of his hand. "Problems can't finish you. They did, none of us'd be alive, right?"

You know, there was something to that, there had to be. Every moment of every day since Myron was sixteen he had felt doomed. That year Mobius had won the war against the human empire to the north; that year War Ministry decided that no, the war wasn't over until it said it was. The end of the King, the beginning of Robotnik. In this town—in Robotropolis, Myron thought, wondering how many years were left before the name would cease to sound stupid—in this town, the humans had you coming and going.

But things couldn't go on that way, he thought a few hours later as he fumbled for his keys at his back-stairs door. At least not for you personally; the law of averages said so. He bet this trouble with the coyote wouldn't pan out. "Tony" and his cronies would leave him alone. Myron might be broke and lonely, maybe he'd even have to move to the Port, but he'd be walking the streets as free a man as he could be.

He went in to his kitchen and locked up against the burglars. But that was unnecessary: when he turned on the lights, there was already a pair of cops in there with him.

"Mr. Catalano," said a lithe pine marten. Brains was a stark portrait in starched red cloth, brown fur, and a white, toothy smile. Her eyes were naturally slim and predatory, with sharp, deep brown irises in the middle. The gleaming badge on the marten's vest pocket said DONLEVY. You wouldn't be sure she was Brains if it weren't that Brawn was a dull-eyed, thick-armed badger named VALJEAN. He stood a head taller than Donlevy or Myron, the top two buttons of his creased uniform unbuttoned in the heat.

"Oh fuck," groaned Myron. Then he realized that sounded guilty. "Oh," he groaned, "fuck me."

Ravenous: that was the word for the smile on Brains. She lifted a small timestamped photo, a grainy blow-up detail of a tan-furred coyote on a street not to far from Myron's apartment. Worried blue eyes under prissily combed blonde hair, a snout that was naturally upturned and biting itself back. He seemed to be waiting for someone to tell him he couldn't be there, wherever he was. "Let's talk about this guy," she ordered.

"Oh , mother-fuck—"

They sat at his kitchen table and Myron told them everything. Gescom had gotten a government construction subcontract on a building on the south side. Gescom's job was to implement computerized aspects of the plant's security's system—

"Wait, wait," the marten interrupted: "The swatbot factory in Ascogne-Dascogne, by the university? The one that got blown up two years ago?"

Myron wished he wore his head-hair longer than his fur, so he could get a good grip and tear it out by the roots. "I didn't tell them anything!"

There wasn't anything to tell. The coyote—Tony, he said his name was—asked about the factory. Asked what sort of work he'd done, if he'd like to talk about it more some time, hinting that there was money in it. But he hadn't said anything, anything at all, and he hadn't heard from Tony or anybody like him since, and he wasn't going to—

"Why didn't you report Tony to us?" the marten accused with a cold frown.

"I—" Why hadn't he? "I was afraid," Myron decided. That was a good answer.

The marten smiled—no, she smirked, shaking her head. "Now what do you have to be afraid of, Mr. Catalano?" she asked. "We'd like to know."

Myron felt sweat slowly matting his neckfur, felt a humiliating need to loll out his tongue and start panting right in front of them. The badger stared, the marten's eyes pierced deeper and deeper into his own. This couldn't be happening to him, not this on top of everything else. He was just a normal guy; he was no troublemaker. Couldn't she see that?

The marten turned to her partner with a shrug. "I guess we're done here."

Myron sighed in relief. Later he'd be angry at them, but for now all he could feel was the shivery, weak feeling of disaster averted, and then the painful bite of the badger's gunmetal handcuffs on his wrists.

". . . No," he said stupidly as the badger wordlessly hauled him to his feet. "But you said—Officer Donlevy—"

"You don't want to talk, you can sleep at the station," the pine marten explained, turning off the lights as the badger hustled Myron out the door.

"No!" Myron squealed as they descended the stairs. "I've told you everything! Why would I lie? If you arrest me I'll get fired! I'll be out on the street in the gods-damned Port, I'll, I'll, I'll . . . ." The marten paid no attention.

Myron was going to get fired, evicted. He'd never come back to his place again. He'd wind up in the worst parts of the Port, and a guy like him—

"I won't live," Myron breathed as they reached the bottom of the stairs. It was insane, but he could feel the end already on him. Why shouldn't he die for no reason? It happened to lots of others, every day. "You've killed me," he almost wept as they took him towards the street.

Officer Donlevy turned her face to him in the light of an overhead bulb. The half-shadowed monster was smiling as she dragged him into darkness. "Shut up," the marten said cheerfully right as four white-hot knuckles rocketed into her face. Then again, from more angles, a blur of blue and white.

Even before she hit the ground the hedgehog's eyes had turned to the other one, Officer Valjean. The badger's hand flipped the holster-latch for his pistol.

Rookie mistake. Less than four meters away you got a knife or nothing. Sonic always had a bunch of knives. If he got pissed they'd stand up all along his back, ready to rock, natural-like. They wanted to rock with this one, but his legs wanted it more. He used the lynx as cover, threw himself into a hand-plant on the cement walk and swung his legs low under the cop's thick knees, like an axe taking a chunk out of a thick-ass tree. They didn't take a chunk out of anything, 'course, just drove a clean break through both the shinbones with a nice sharp crack.

Sonic flipped back onto his feet while the badger hit the cement and flopped like a bass. The hot air was full of his screeching, like a cheese grater against a chalkboard against Sonic's goddamned eardrums.

"Shut up!" he bellowed, kneeling on the guy's chest and swinging his right into the guy's face. His right liked that, so he did it a few more times. "Shut up shut up shut up shut up, you whining freak!"

The badger got quiet and still. Alright. What the hell was he doing here? He looked up at the lynx. Oh yeah.

"Hey there, cat," the hedgehog said.

Myron couldn't move. He'd killed them; the maniac had killed two people for no reason—

"Here ya go." A keychain bounced off Myron's chest and landed on the cement. The hog looked down at it, then frowned up at Myron. His blue quills rose and fell like some wave sent by a hurricane under the horizon. Everything about the kid was sharp, his narrow green eyes, his razorcut mouth, the thin furless legs sticking out of his blue runner's shorts, ending in spearlike red-toed shoes. He snatched the keys from Myron's feet and grabbed his wrists. "C'mon you little bastards, come on . . . . there." The cuffs popped; Myron's wrists were free. "Alright cat, time to get you down to the Woodwharf—hey. Where you going at?"

Myron heard the bemused cry in the air behind him as he ran for help, for the police, his eyes exploding out of his head, the world tilting under his drunken feet. He checked over his shoulder as he ran up the alley to Adama Street. Had he lost the maniac? Maybe, he thought with relief as he ran straight into a brick wall and stumbled back, his heart seizing, because it wasn't a brick wall. It was the hedgehog, spiny and murderous.

"How," Myron muttered weakly. "How did you—so fast—?"

He flinched and closed his eyes as the hog's gloved hand grabbed his right wrist and pinched it tight. No murder came, though. The hog just slapped his wrists in the cuffs again.

"Clown," he muttered as he hooked an arm around Myron's elbow and dragged him south. "C'mon, cat. Let's go for a stroll."

"You with me, Marcel? Look up here, look up here."

"Keep talking to him; that'll help," the EMT muttered, turning a penlight on Marcel's eyes, holding the lids open with his thumb.

"I know—We're going to get that son of a bitch hedgehog, Marcel," Renee said through her fat lips, a raised welt on her cheek pressing her right eye closed. Valjean was a paper guy, from Frauds. He hadn't had a chance once she went down. It was a hard education in street work, and she wanted to continue it: "We don't let perps touch officers. He's not going have four limbs and a head by the time he gets to the station. You have a preference?"

"My leg." The badger's groan was quiet, dazed. Almost calm. "My leg."

"He's up, he's talking," the EMT announced, his undulating squirreltail betraying his agitation while his voice was as dispassionate as a PA announcement. "Get him into the ambo, we're gonna need heavy PKs—"

"Marcel." Renee elbowed her way between the paramedics and grabbed his huge hand. "Marcel; it's Renee. You're gonna be alright, big guy. You're not losing blood; you've just been knocked around a bit."

"Where are the police? Not you, you worthless cur, the witnesses."

Renee tried to look back at the crime scene tape that marked off the walk-up. She'd heard that reedy voice before: on the news, speaking from a podium with the seal of Internal Security Office, the antiterrorist service attached to the Mechanized Army. She saw a flash of green before Marcel's furry grip jerked her along with the stretcher.

"Renee?" he groaned. "Renee, I'm hurt. Renee."

"Just stay awake," she said. "I've got to go for a moment."

"Renee," Marcel grunted, clutching at her fingers as they wormed out of his grasp. "Renee, don't go—"

"You'll be fine," she said to no one as she walked back into the flashing red and blue lights and saw him in the flesh. Shorter than she expected, maybe five foot five, but still the almost-bald scalp (though he was apparently only thirty-five) with its ring of harshly trimmed steel-gray hair, the protuberant nose, the sharp blue eyes. He even wore the polished green dress uniform—Renee had suspected he might wear something more comfortable when he wasn't in front of the cameras, but apparently not.

"Captain Kolensky?" she asked as she ducked the yellow tape.

His gaze snapped over to her, as did that of a light-skinned, dark-haired human woman in a gray human dress-suit, about the same age. It took him a moment to stop talking to the officer-in-charge, though: "—you incompetent bastard, I've got a situation—who the hell is this?"

"Officer Renee Donlevy, RPD Political Division," she answered with a salute.

"Yeah, that's her. The other one's in that ambo," the police sergeant said, pointing as it pulled away. He sounded relieved.

"Hmm," Kolenksy hummed, turning up his nose at her gloved hand with a sniff. "So you're the one who lost the hedgehog."

"It's the lynx, Myron Catalano, that you should be interested in. Before he was kidnapped he offered us a solid lead on a plan to bomb—"

"Miss—" the human interrupted with an unctuous smile that quickly turned into a gritted-teeth squint as he tried to read the name-badge above her uniform's breast-pocket. "Miss policewoman, let me explain something to you. I decide what I am interested in. You are part of this investigation as a witness. You tell me what I want to know about the hedgehog's whereabouts, and then you shut your little snout."

"The Woodwharf Tap," she answered.

"What?"

"I wasn't all there, but he said something about the Woodwharf," Renee replied. "It's a dive down in the Port, a little ways away from the river on Armitage."

"How do you know so much about it?" the human scowled suspiciously.

"I used to work VC—I mean, Violent Crime, sir."

"Hmm," Kolensky droned, scrutinizing her with a look of faint disgust. "Spitz, find out where this . . . dive is, and get me every swatbot we can beat out of RPD."

"It might be simpler just to have Officer Donlevy take us there, Snively" the human woman replied with equanimity.

"I won't let you down sir," Renee agreed, giving another sharp salute.

For some reason Renee couldn't fathom it all seemed to fill Kolensky with barely-suppressed fury. "Come on," he muttered, stalking to an unmarked white van.

Edited VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 2\*: Port Orange, 16 Thermidor 3228

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**(2) Port Orange, Robotropolis, 16 Thermidor 3225**

Myron had some definite ideas on the laugh-or-cry dilemma, especially with his head pounding, pounding, metal jaws biting his wrists and his shoulders almost being wrenched out of his sockets whenever he got a couple of steps behind the hedgehog. But beyond that, he was lost. Doomed. If he somehow got away from the terrorist alive it looked like the best he could hope for was to wind up homeless in the Port, which was unthinkable—an OD in an alley, lungs collapsed by chain-swinging gang dogs, or an even worse metro news headline. If he just let the killer drag him—where were they, anyway?

He lurched out of the depths of his head to see it was after the apocalypse. The sky's normal electric street-light glow was sickly and muted. The buildings around them were either dusty yellow brick, smoothed by age, or only half-there. Walls with holes, torn like yesterday's paper, sections of roof ripped away. Myron hadn't checked his watch but the world suddenly had an after-midnight feel, the air seemed colder and smelled faintly of garbage, everything seemed covered with an imperceptible layer of dust. Then he saw a mutilated tourism bureau sign someone had torn off its mountings and his heart sank.

WELCOME TO PORT ORANGE! Someone had added on and around the sign with a free, wide hand and black spraypaint: where the war never stopped

"Come on!" the hedgehog growled, slamming Myron's armbones against their housings again.

"Please," Myron squeaked, again and again. People were out at this hour of the morning, dogs and cats bigger than himself, wearing big, concealing dusters despite the heat. Appraising eyes would land on him until they caught the hedgehog and let them go deeper into the neighborhood. "Stop," he begged finally.

"What's the problem?" the hedgehog asked with oblivious curiosity. "It's just round the corner here."

Myron's brain was too overworked to do anything but relay its contents plainly, and the alcohol had grown too thin too block the truth anymore: "I'm afraid."

"You should be, cat," the hedgehog muttered, scanning the street ahead of them. "Cops run in packs down here, always looking for a fight. They'd jump if they saw those cuffs on you."

"Well . . . ." He lifted his wrists. "Then, could you—"

"No. Jackass. Up in here."

The building wasn't post-war, but it didn't look to have caught the worst of the bombardments twenty years ago, and unlike most of the Port someone had put a little bit of money into keeping it back together. The windows were glass—solid black, but shiny—with the word WOODWHARF stenciled on it in tight white letters.

"Try not to piss anybody off," the hog muttered, reshouldering his green canvas backpack, as he drew open the door.

Inside was a forest fire. Enough smoke for one, anyway, decades-old tobacco and the oak-sweet smell of fresh marijuana. Shapes moved the in gloom, shouting at each other over the roaring lo-fi guitar from some unseen radio feed, throwing Myron's headache into unbearable overdrive. He squeezed his eyes tight; when he opened them a broad-shouldered shape with long, viciously sharpened horns shot out a fat hand and grabbed the chain between Myron's wrists. "What the fuck are you bringing in here, you lousy—"

"Cat's with me," the hedgehog muscled against him. "You got two more guys working door, or you gonna let Cat in?"

The hedgehog dragged Myron into the smoke and in a moment he no longer knew where the door was. Somewhere some sharp horns were talking to a pair of slightly smaller ones, a big herd slowly gathering, and the rational, functioning, horribly helpless parts of his brain that were coming back online realized that his chaperone would get in a fight with everyone in the place before long.

"Sonic!" someone yelled, weirdly. But it was someone Myron's desperate brain recognized, with smoke-bleary eyes and sleep-wrecked blonde hair. Coyote Tony wormed through some tall dogs (maybe even wolves) and reached a thin arm at the hedgehog like a drowning man at a rescue rope.

"Twan," the hog cried. "You bring the car?"

"Yes, Sonic," he sighed tiredly. The hog—Sonic? what kind of name is that? Sonic looked a little more tuned to this hour and place than Tony, who only seemed to wake up when he saw Myron. "What has happened?" he asked nervously, staring at the bracelets.

"He killed two cops," Myron shouted by way of explanation, spreading his wrists to show Tony the handcuffs.

There was this ad sometimes on the Kimex network's channels. A dinner party in some lofty corner apartment across the northern border in Lachels, the lights of downtown High Demon spread outside the window. A constant hubhub of light piano and clinking wineglasses, until a quiet conversation near the middle of the room turns to someone's broker. As soon as a man mention's the firm's name, everything goes silent, the entire party silently staring at the lucky lord of the stock markets.

Myron had intuitively guessed the kind of world he was falling into, but learning that a cop killer was the social equivalent of a guy with an account with Krajewski, Scolnick really drove the point home.

"Someone's been shooting his mouth off," Sonic hissed in the sudden guitar-pure calm, dragging Myron and the coyote into a more secluded spot by a wood-panel wall. "Someone's got cops crawling all over him, so someone needs a lift out the city and a goddamned beat-down—"

Tony pressed his snout against Sonic's black nose. "Did you murder them?" he accused.

"Cat don't know murder from a pop in the jaw," Sonic sneered. "He ain't never had one, I bet. Just like you. Now gimme your keys."

"Cops!" roared one of the bulls by the door, slamming it shut. "Cops!"

The bar was filled with the sound of metal on metal as a half-megagram of pistols emerged from pockets, waistbands, under the bar.

"The military cops!" the bull clarified. "They're unloading bots!"

For the second time, all eyes were on Sonic.

"Yeah," he yawned. "They'd be here about me. Everyone take the back after I take the front. You too," he muttered, pressing the handcuff keys into Tony's hand. "Get Cat to the Hole."

Tony nodded, pressing his lips together tight. Sonic slid his backpack off as he sauntered toward the thick wooden door.

"Money's tight," the weasel—Barb was her name, right?—grunted behind the counter, thumbing shells into her bird gun. "You draw fire away from the windows or you don't come back here without a roll."

Sonic chambered a round in Righty, chambered Lefty, checked his stock (two clips in his pack), put his hand on the doorknob and looked back. The whole local mob was ready to blast out of the back with enough firepower to brush off anything with flesh under its armor. He nodded to Barb, hunkered under the counter: "Will do." Then he let go the knob, ran at the window to the left of the door and threw himself tail over head.

His soles hit the ground running and he blasted through the left flank of the cop line (shoddy setup, way too close), with about a two meter lead on the first of the cop bullets ringing off the pavement and glass behind him. In front of him the thick-goggled techs had offloaded three black-armored swatbots from a black transport with the Army Cop sign on the side. They techs had woken them up but didn't have them shooting yet, alive but not armed. He heard their heads and their little lens-eyes whirring to see him as he dove through the armor plates around their thin, stalklike legs, spun and sent some heat at the cops—mostly locals, foxes and chipmunks with teenies and dumpy little snotnosed submachineguns.

"No plasma?" Sonic laughed loudly, showing his canines as chips flew from bots' armor. He swung his right gun around one of the dumb bots and put down two or three of the assholes, swung the smoking, empty gun into the face of the tech who came at him, then spun west into the alley across the street, a couple decimeters ahead of the bullets.

That may have got their attention, Sonic speculated as he ducked behind and pressed his flattened quills against a PUBLIC WORKS dumpster, sending an I'm still here round back down the alley. He looked himself over: not leaking too bad, belts and pistons in pretty good shape. He yanked the biggest wedges of glass and armor out of his arms and slapped a fresh, cool clip into Righty's breach.

"I tell you what," he yelled, faintly hearing sirens in the city to the west, in front of him. "Let's settle this mano a mano. You send your three toughest guys in here—"

wee-CHUNK, wee-CHUNK, wee-CHUNK

"Yeah," Sonic snickered derisively, tapping his barrels together in front of his eyes. "Those guys."

His legs pumped and he was in front of the column of three bots marching into the alley. Both his hands shot forward, CRACK CRACK CRACK jerking the bot's head up in waves of recoil and pulverized glass from its ruined face. CRACKCRACKCRACKCRACKCRACK chipping and webbing the chest armor just as Sonic ducked, rolled and threw himself upwards, his quills piercing the weak points, cutting cables, lodging in servos, killing it, killing it dead. The upside down alley sang with his scream of joy, echoing down to the endless black sky below.

Don't stop! Sonic's limbs cried, and there was no reason not to listen. He crossed his legs around the tottering bot's head and swung himself up onto its shoulders. Before the next bot back could figure out the first was out of commission Sonic took out its eyes—that's two million sovereigns now, and counting, says Sally—and rode the first bot down into it, knocking it back into the third, the whole bunch sagging like a row of dominoes. Ant and Cat were probably dusting south in the beater towards the number two and forest by now, but he was in no mood to stop, long as they hadn't sealed off the west end of the alley behind him—

"Internal Security!" came a brassy lion's roar from behind.

Sonic smirked. Why'd they always shout first, like they wouldn't start shooting right afterwards?

He closed his eyes and kicked his heels hard against bot number two. His spine curled him into a perfect ball. The world spun around the pit of his belly and he was running low through the alley, quills down for speed, hands spread wide for balance. The army cops were peeking around the walls from the next street, a car behind them to block off escape. Sonic swung his guns forward and made a storm of brick dust along both walls. Behind him blind bot number two's chaingun cut loose with a roar, chewing through the armor of the dead bot in front of it.

Faster. The walls flew past; chips of screaming brick and swatbot armor slashed through his skin; his muscles were sweet with pain. The storm of metal grew thicker as he raised his quills, lowered his head and leapt at full speed over the roof of the car.

Oleanna slowly raised her head from the steering wheel, lifting one hand to touch the long, curving bruise behind the red fur of her forehead. She must not have been watching carefully: someone had clipped her as she went by those cop cars. Oh no—she hadn't hit a cop! She turned and saw her backseat covered with pebbles of safety glass and a hedgehog covered with a thousand gashes, smudged with grime and with a torn swatch of cloth—not from his clothes—spiked on his quills. He looked at her, blinked, and raised a gun. "Drive!"

The vixen shrieked, fumbled the door open, and fell out on to the pavement.

"Fine," Sonic sighed, crawling into the driver's seat. A gunshot ripped the side mirror from the door as his foot stomped the accelerator. "I'll drive."

Officer Renee Donlevy was getting worse by the hour. From the neck up she was nothing but a big, puffy mass of throbbing flesh that even through the fur you could see was red and deep purple. From the neck down she'd been stripped of her uniform, sat on the gleaming metal cot in nothing but her fur and her gloves. Even her boots had been taken, so the thick shackle that anchored her to the floor could be closed around her ankle.

Her near-eyeless face stared into the one-way glass of the cell. She couldn't know she was looking right at him, Snively thought. She couldn't know that even if he were standing right in that room with her.

But the rodent—what the fuck was she? Weasel? Stoat? Gods, there were millions of little ethnicities that looked like stoats. Whatever she was, she had a proud, eager little smirk on her bloody muzzle.

"She knows about Hedgehog," Lila Spitz observed, nursing a thermal mug of coffee by his side. "A little work and she'll connect him with Royal Army. What are we going to do about it?"

"She's going to Ironlock," Snively muttered, not looking at Lila, refusing to lose this one-way staring contest. "Let them put her on the pain bed, for all I care. I've already forgotten her. So has everyone else."

"You could promote her," the human suggested, watching Snively's face.

"Sure," he growled, tugging a hand inside his stiff collar. He still hadn't had a chance to change out of his armymonkeysuit since Lila had dragged him out of the State News studio. "Bet she's one of the orphan cadets. I'm just going to let that little rat write her way onto the case. Write her way clean into the cabinet."

"You know," Lila mused, "if I were the one with the psych degree, I'd think maybe you—"

"You're not." Snively grunted.

Lila shrugged. "Don't sign the transfer papers until you have a chance to think it over, rationally," she said. "I'm at my usual numbers."

The metal door to the observation room squeaked open and clanked shut behind him, but Snively didn't move. Barely blinked. "I don't want to think it over rationally," he muttered. "I want you in Ironlock, rat." But he couldn't help it. He'd been trained to think rationally since he was knee high.

And judging by that smile, the rodent somehow knew it.

**MCom Central**

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MCOM CENTRAL ROBOTROPOLIS OFFICE

TRANSCRIPT REQUEST

GOLDMINE ARCHIVE

REQUESTAGENCY: ISORBT1

REQUESTID: RDONLEVY

REQUESTPROTOCOL: GOLDMINE SEARCH REQUEST

REQUESTDATE: 11/22/3028

SEARCHPROTOCOL: ORGNO (11073752) & CALLTERM(300) & DATE(08153028, 08153028)

RESULTID: 342DF06113025AJS38Dl2!P

CALLINIT PUBLOGAN12 TO RECPHONE MISSING CODE 19 CONTACT GOLDMINE ADMIN FOR DETAILS 132633 HOURS 08/16/3228

**TRANSCRIPT**

FEMALE 1: DOUGH NAUGHTY IS CHICKEN

MALE 1: ITS ME

F1: THANK GODS

M1: YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN ME BABY THERE WERE LIKE SIX BOTS IN THIS PITCH DARK ALLEY AND I JUST

F1: HOW ARE THEY

M1: THEY BOTH MADE IT OUT BEFORE

F1: WHERE ARE YOU

M1: HOLD UP IN MOSELLE

F1: YOU SCREWED UP SOMEHOW YOU HAD EVERY POLICE OFFICER IN THE CITY LOOKING FOR YOU

M1: THAT'S ME BABY

F1: YOUR GOING TO GET EVERYONE KILLED

M1: LIKE YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT ME SHE'S

F1: YOU SHOULD BE MORE CAREFUL THAT'S WHY YOU WORK WITH OTHERS SO SOMEONE THINKS BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO SHOW EVERYONE HOW TOUGH YOU ARE

M1: THAT I DON'T NEED TONY TODAY

F1: NO NAMES GODS

M1: OH FUCK SHIT SORRY BABY

F1: OH YOU GIVE ME A HEADACHE ARE THEY INCOMING

M1: TALK TO TONY BUT PROBABLY YEAH CAN I COME TO I WANT TO BOX

F1: UH

M1: AND STUFF DON'T MAKE ME BEG

F1: GODS JUST GET BACK HERE

M1: WHO HE SHOOTS HE

F1: AS SOON AS I SEND WORD

M1: DAM IT

F1: STAY PUT, ALL SEND INSTRUCTIONS

RECPHONE TERMIN 014913 HOURS 08/16/3028

M1: CAULK TEAS

CODE HANGUP TONE

CALLPHONE TERMIN 152726 HOURS 08/16/3028

**END TRANSCRIPT**

Already Sally wished she hadn't killed the connection, but although Narsupan was a good, small town, right on the edge of the Great Forest, you still had to be careful. She squinted against the midday sun and turned her wristwatch to her brown eyes. Featherlight would be by with the pickup in about a half an hour. She sighed, collapsed the thick, silencer-looking antenna on her satphone and slid it into a pocket inside her much-abused baby blue vest.

The screen door screeeked as she stepped out of the cicada hum and into the hot wooden darkness of Corey's Restaurant. The tables were empty mid-Thunderday, the neon beer signs dark, nothing but unpainted wood darker than her fur, less reddish than her head-hair. Corey's daughter Janet and her weekday waiter, a mouse, were both perched like statues at the bar, eyes fixed mournfully on State News via a tiny little CRT TV. Today's horror was a regular, the ugly little human. He leaned into rather than over a bundle of microphones, his always-sneering voice routed straight out of his gigantic nose.

"Fighting should continue in Coolette for some time," admitted the pre-recorded CAPT. SNIVELY KOLENSKY, ISO, "but the Committee's forces have no way out of the city and no reinforcements to send for, even assuming they could break our cordon." The Captain gave a grotesque smile. "In the next few weeks, the most dangerous terrorist organization in Mobius will effectively cease to exist. This is a major blow for the stability of the country and the lives of" (here his smile actually gets more cruel, knowing and cruel) "decent, ordinary Mobians."

Docile, compliant slaves. In case you didn't get the picture State News had already cut away from the Director's nephew to shots of APCs rolling through the rubble thrown about by the last stand of the Committee for Public Welfare, one of the two big rebel organizations that had grown up after the coup. Now sliced into long ribbons of mobians being packed fur-to-fur in prisoner transports, their wrists in plastic ties, their ears low, their whiskers flat, their faces empty and beaten, as full of fear as the people who were now watching them all across the country.

Sally herself had gotten sick of state broadcasting's news at an early age, because the lead stories were always the same: you've lost, you're helpless, you're nothing. Obey or suffer. Other people couldn't stop watching, though. A ten-ton weight about to fall, a truck without breaks, the ground rushing up to you. Why did they want to see that? They didn't. Everyone hated Robotnik, everyone. Why couldn't they look away?

It was three years ago that she began to understand. It was because they didn't know, didn't know what she did: that it was all a big lie. Robotnik was cruel, but he wasn't a god. The Mechanized Army was terrifying, but it couldn't crush a whole people.

Not this people. Not her people.

It was three years ago that she'd vowed to destroy the factory within a year. All her people needed was a dose of the truth: a few chances to see the police running around in panic, see the invincible kill-bots shattered like glass on the pavement, to see a little bit of freedom. Then Julian Kintobor's Robotropolis would burn; the turncoats would turn back. Then there would be no one to keep her from taking the murderer of her parents, the one who had wanted to end the House of Acorn, dragging him out from behind his stolen throne and, and . . .

She let her fists loosen, bought a sandwich, and daydreamed about justice, justice.

Edited by VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 3\*: Security District, 19 Thermidor 3228

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**(3) Downtown Security District, Robotropolis, 19 Thermidor 3228**

The view was quite impressive—or, rather, it would be in just a few years. A panorama from ten stories up, a forest of cranes and slowly growing steel frames of the so-called "security district" that dominated Robotropolis's east side, some close enough to see the star-bright points at the end of the miniscule welder's torches. Skyscrapers. If Snively understood correctly, each was financed by a major holding corporation based across the border. The kind with subsidiaries as big as Carnival Home Products, Sacoff & Collins, Gescom Systems and Squarepush Technologies, who would put their offices in the upper floors.

It was rare for so much money to crystallize into physical form at once in a single place, but the spectacle was becoming common on a smaller scale. As soon as the Mobian government could keep any city safe, the investment money would pour in from what used to be das Vorlandreich, the Overland Empire—mostly from Lachels. The same money that twenty years before the Lachels had refused to devote to the Empire and the War. The money that ten years later, after the War was lost, the Empire had sparked a fatal, infectious rebellion trying to tax.

Since the Empire had disintegrated, Lachels and all the other northern provinces had become nations in their own right. Snively was supposed to call Lachels his homeland.

No.

It was sort of pleasant to pretend, Snively thought, tightening his grip on the window's edge, leaning forward and pressing his bald forehead to the glass—nanoreinforced shockglass, of course; can't have anyone interrupting the nation's work with a surface-to-air missile or a high-velocity rifle round. From this angle he could stare straight down the palace's marble slope, down to the swirling flowerbeds filled with clumps of minute mush-headed little tourists following their dictated paths through the lower floors and grounds.

Snively Kolensky, Snively recited to himself. First Director of the Autonomous Republic of Mobius Snively Kolensky. Lord of all I survey—

"There you are!" Snively spun from the window and found himself face-to-chest with a bulbous mass of pink flesh. Julian Kintobor, his uncle, known to most as First Director Robotnik. Today his ample torso threatened to erupt from black pants and a t-shirt with the strained, sweat-dark logo of Foulke-Zero Weapons Systems. The excellent silver prosthesis that was Julian's right arm chased some glistening beads of sweat beyond the horizon of his hairless scalp as his smile snapped his thatch of red moustache in two. "Glad to see security let you in without too much trouble," he announced.

Even in his dress greens Snively's short stature and baldness—almost complete, at his age—did not impose. Today he was in civvies, a white golf shirt and khakis. He wondered briefly how much his uncle knew of his personal guards' unrelentingly degrading searches and insulting demeanor, but this was no time for confusing, irrelevant speculation. He politely dipped his protuberant nose. "Uncle."

"Hope you're hungry," Julian laughed.

Dinner was served in the relatively well-ordered dining room, muted walls and pristine plates with the first course, local steak tartare. Snively pecked at the meat; Julian discussed trivia, the true message of which was that Snively's handling of Committee in Coolette pleased him, or else cross-examination would have replaced conversation. Julian should be pleased. Mechanized Army First Regiment was currently trying to repeat the magic without the assistance of Task Force Beta or any other ISO subdivision and draw what was left of the old monarchist Standard Army into a standup fight in Hewlett in the southwest. It was failing. Snively had been the catalyst, Snively and ISO's ability to cherry pick its contacts with army, intel and police.

Julian peremptorily inquired whether Snively was done and pushed the button for the main course, a wheeled serving-bot with a wood-broiled trout, startled face still attached. Talk moved promisingly to politics and the mechanical fist beat the walnut table: could Snively conceive of the treatment that War Minister Deshaney received at a state dinner in Lachels? Students hurling eggs at his car, and as recompense lame excuses not only from Lachels Foreign Affairs Department, but from Mobius's own ambassador? "I should recall him," Julian barked. "That nation is the most repellent thing to come from of the collapse of the Overland Kingdom. Do you know what I've sent them, under the officer sharing program?"

These feelings were one of the few passions that Snively and his uncle fully shared. "In the Mutual Assistance Treaty? Snipers, right?"

"Mechanized special forces, yes. They're killers," Julian said. "From Lachels come five who have just received their commissions."

"Plus my spy," added Snively. "Did you see that?"

"What do you mean, a spy?" Julian demanded darkly. As a former baseballer he found espionage to be in poor taste, like stealing signs or hiding the ball, and believed that all practitioners of such acts deserved the special attention of Corrections Ministry.

"With plenty of police detectives they could send to learn how Mobius integrates military and public safety agencies, Lachels seems to believe that the interests of our two countries can best be served by loaning me an intelligence analyst from their Foreign Affairs Department," Snively explained.

Julian shrugged; apparently the faux pas was not as bad as he had feared. "A full-time analyst will be good for the Task Force. Keep an eye on him, of course."

"It's a bit of a distraction," Snively said testily.

"Distraction from what, Snively?" Julian forked trout into his maw and chewed.

Calm, Snively thought. Calm down. "Uncle," he said, "the Committee is gone. That's nominally Beta's primary objective, but—"

"No, your objective is Royal Army. It has been for two weeks. In fact, your recent efforts with regard to the hedgehog wound up in the newspapers as well as my morning briefing." He stabbed a hunk of flesh from his plate. "I don't like it when that happens. Especially with the squirrel and her friends."

The best thing to do now was to let the issue go and swallow the shit for the time being. But Snively's stomach wouldn't allow it. His intestines reached up to take a stranglehold on his brain, and to his horror he found himself arguing. With his uncle.

"Sir," he said, hand grabbing the lip of the table tight as he struggled to keep himself in check, "with all due respect, there are other branches of the military better suited to address these sorts of threats. Even during this past campaign our attention was already shifting to the Recovery Project. We're already as much as subsection of Science Ministry as—"

"How are you still working on that?" Julian's complaint kicked a couple of dollops of fish out onto the table as he chewed.

"There's still money in the joint fund," Snively said stiffly, trying to look his uncle in the eye without seeing his mouth. "It's all in Treasury's books."

"I don't care. You're soldiers, not scientists."

"I'm a scientist by training—"

"Snively, the squirrel is dangerous. You and I know that. I don't see any reason why you shouldn't have her entire organization in custody within the year."

Snively's intestines choked his brain so hard that it passed out, leaving his mouth to struggle on alone. "A year!" he screamed incredulously. "We barely know anything about their operations!"

Julian's massive shoulders shrugged. "Have your new analyst investigate."

"He's a spy!" Snively reminded him. "And I am a scientist—more a scientist than you ever were, and—"

(Now Snively's brain comes slowly to life, realizing with slow horror what has just been happening, the strength and breath leaching out of his voice.)

"—I have better things to do than . . . chase around a pack of teenagers with some dynamite . . . . I mean—"

"Snively . . . ." Julian's deep voice started as a piercing, toneless hiss, then sagged wide, like the ocean pulled back by an advancing wave, rising in pitch just as he finished the name, throbbing with fury.

A great field of goosepimples bloomed on Snively's bare arms in the sudden cold. A single being crafts many personalities, and the thing across the table was no longer the man who had stifled his mean curve for Kintobor family reunion pickup game. This was the man who had dethroned the most powerful person in the world. Twice. This was the one responsible for the death of millions, the one who had destroyed Mobius for the Overland Empire, then destroyed the Overland Empire for Mobius, and then, still hungry, destroyed Mobius again, all in the space of a single decade.

"I am building something magnificent, Snively," he said, closing his metal fist. "Under my rule, Mobius will become the grandest nation the world has ever seen. And ever will." BANG. Snively's eyes pinched tight as the fist gouged the tabletop. "And you think you have something better to do than aid me?"

"No, sir," he squeaked. "I just—I—"

"The audacity." It was the face of a fire demon: deep red irises, two gouts of furry dragon's flame over the mouth. "What other reason do I have to let you live? Knowing what you know about me? About the squirrel?"

"Please." Julian hid guns everywhere in his chambers. You would never find any, but he invariably had a pistol at hand. "Sir . . . I just . . . I would never . . . I—"

The air was pierced by a high, machine-pure tone. "Director?"

"Gods DAMN IT!" Julian bellowed. "What?"

"Sir," the invisible intercom continued apologetically, "There's a situation at State Ministry that Minister Praxair believes requires your immediate attention."

"Fine," he grunted. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave, Snively. State Ministry always requires privacy."

"Of course, sir. I'd like to talk to you again soon about—"

"Get out," he shouted, but Julian's annihilating power was gone. The demon had retreated into brown eyes and a moustache; the man was back, soothing his throat with a drink of water from a tall glass as Snively stood to leave. "Leave me alone."

Well, Snively thought as he rode down to the tourists in the darkness of the secure elevator. He was alive. That was an acceptable short-term outcome.

But his uncle hadn't authorized more funds for the recovery project. And not immediately, but inevitably, that was going to make it staying alive difficult.

"Josh, we're smaller," Michelle the opossum argued. "If you got in front then no one could see."

"C'mon!" the brown bear groaned, hunching over, trying to look between their shoulders. His tie felt tighter around his thick neck as he ducked.

"Greatest good for the greatest number," she smirked back, nudging the rat beside her.

"Uh huh, yeah," Darcy the rat muttered distractedly, her uneasy eyes on the scene down the street.

Hundreds of years ago the aristocrats would arrive in Mobotropolis in glossy black coaches slowly clattering behind plodding, bridled terrapods. In between the meetings of the High Council the rulers would retreat and spy on each other from the front windows of their sumptuous city estates. Now, on Lafayette Street, the diplomatic missions of Embassy Row spied on each other . . . probably they did, Josh suspected, with parabolic mics or some sort of wire coil in the basement or something, like on Guardsman. Of course, an intern like himself knew nothing. But the employees of the Lachels Embassy could still take a moment to go to the second-story front windows and gaze across the lawns at the Vorburg Embassy's deep, tangled rosebeds, or, today, at the little crowd of ethnic mobians mobbing its front gate. Josh's eye stopped on an orange, black-striped fellow up against the thick black bars of the embassy's fence. Whoever it was grabbed the bars high and leaned back, swung forward, leaned back. The bars did not appear to bend.

"They'd better get this under control," Darcy muttered again. She'd worked in the private sector back home for a long time before joining Foreign Affairs, and although it was not required wore both human-style shoulder-length hair and dress, today a blue pantsuit.

"Well look who's no fun," drawled Michelle. Despite her thoroughly central-Mobian name—and dress: white gloves, fur-silver white top and shorts—she was from Mobius's deep southeast, almost in the Great Forest, and sounded like it. "You like 'em even less than us, don'tcha?" she asked Josh.

When the Overland Empire had fallen apart after the War, the resulting nations had found themselves in somewhat different situations vis-à-vis the Empire's "triumphant" enemy, Mobius. Some, like Lachels, had a bilingual population and a fifty year history of newspaper articles with the prefix "the restive province of." Others, like Vorburg, had the ex-Vorland capital, what was left of its military aristocracy, and an angry crowd milling around outside its embassy, looking like it had somehow managed to bypass the bridge checkpoints and wandered en masse into the security district from the poor neighborhoods across the river.

Joshua Dursine wasn't sure how he felt. A lot of people assumed the brown-suited young bear was, like Michelle, a Mobian émigré. The assumption was wrong. Though the name hinted at Mobian nobility, the Dursine family had been merchants in Lachels for its past four generations.

"Where are the cops?"

The knots of workers at the windows turned. A bald, dark-skinned human—Josh thought his name was Hamig—was leaning around the doorframe to the Ambassador's Office. Manion Delaches, the shriveled fox ambassador, sat in there holding a desk phone to his black-furred ear, not talking, rapidly drumming his claws on his huge desk.

"Assume that Vorburg's asked for aid under the MDTR," the human's deep bass filled the office again. "Why isn't RPD here in force already? How long have those people been there?" Josh turned his eyes to the window to the street: the detachment of Robotropolis Police Officers assigned to Lachels' own embassy gates were hunched together, talking into their collars. "Call around," Hamig ordered, "Unofficial sources, anyone at RPD you know personally." He retreated into the office

"What's the MDTR?" wondered Josh.

Michelle smiled toothily at him. "'Multilateral Treaty on Diplomatic Relations. Treaty what says Mobius has gotta take care of us while we're here. You'll learn to love it if you stick around, college boy."

The main office was a large, open room in front of the Ambassador's chamber. Refurbished more than a few times since the days of the old Mobian aristocracy, it was filled with clusters of half-cubicles: walls up to Josh's shoulders, bundles of cable dangling from the drop ceiling to the computers. Two or three people had gone for their personal phones, making calls. Josh didn't have contacts, whatever the hell that meant, but he did know Baxter, and he felt awkward just standing around. Baxter worked in Foreign Affairs for real, meaning in another sub-department. He wasn't in the basement with the mics and coils, but he might talk to someone who was. Josh didn't have his number, so he called Huley Doeke in Hochteufel. Huley gave Josh the number but told him not to call it until Huley got back to him in five minutes.

In three minutes, rocks; soaring in long arcs, thudding into the dry grass, smacking off helmets. The police at the Vorburg Embassy were squeezed into nothing; the crowd's fur bulged through the bars. The brown-armored Vorburg Army guards sprinted up the embassy's long drive from the brick and shattered-glass gatehouse. A couple cops ran up Lafayette, trying to force a gap to let the trapped officers out. Punches started flying.

"Woo-hoo!" whooped Michelle, pink nose and fingerpads smudging the windowglass. Josh felt a tingle in his rear end—his phone.

"Huley?" he asked his phone, keeping his eyes on the riot.

"Baxter sagt, ruf ihn an."

"Vielen Dank." He hung up and dialed.

"Josh," Baxter's dull tenor cut off the ring. "What's up?"

"It's a . . . ." Oh shit. He'd forgotten about Baxter's new assignment. "Are you working at Internal Security Office yet?" Josh asked in a whisper, moving with what would have been slight, surreptitious steps had he been a couple decimeters shorter and a few tens of kilograms less massive. His desk chair groaned under him as he curled his huge body around the phone. "I mean, are you in Mobius already?"

"I'm okay," Baxter answered flatly. "Don't give me confidential information. What's up?

"It's a riot," Josh said.

"Yeah?" Baxter's voice hinted at a rare smile. "What is it?"

"Not a laugh riot, an actual riot. They're throwing . . . bricks or something outside the Vorburg Embassy next door." You know, where had they gotten a bunch of rocks in the middle of the city? How do mobs develop? Baxter, where do babies come from?

"Oh." But Baxter wasn't disappointed, he was never disappointed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm alright—"

"Why are you calling me?"

"Oh, you know, just to shoot the shit." After five seconds of dead air, the bear slowly muttered, ". . . the, uh, boss, Ambassador, has the whole office trying to figure out what's going on."

"Why?" Baxter asked. "It's not your job to look after the neighbors. Vorburg will call in its MDTR rights and RPD will be there yesterday."

"It's been a couple minutes, no cops."

"None?"

"Just the two normal ones."

"No cops anywhere?" Baxter pushed, interested. "What about your gate?"

Reluctantly Josh got up and plodded as lightly as he could to the front window. No rioters here, nothing. The gates, as usual, were open; the pedestrian-only cobblestone street was empty. One lonely chipmunk looked uncertainly down at the rioters and then up towards the building, almost at Josh. "It's fine."

"Where are your cops?"

"They're up the street, too, they're helping the—holy shit! Anyone just waltz right in here!"

"A-ha," the phone breathed. Baxter's epiphany triggered a similar, much less pleasant echo in Josh a moment afterwards. Most of the embassy officers were clotted around the window on the Vorburg embassy. Josh eyed the slightly-ajar door to the Ambassador's office. He didn't think anyone was watching the brand-spanking new graduate intern on the edge of accidentally flushing national security down the toilet.

"But that's not what I—we have guards and—" Just shut up! yelled the part of his brain that had always gotten good grades. "Uh . . . ."

"Now that's an interesting problem," Baxter muttered.

Josh managed to mumble, "I really shouldn't be talking to you . . . ."

"Doesn't matter. I doubt Delaches wants my advice."

"I'm hanging up, Baxter. I'm sorry."

"But if he does, a day's worth of immigrants won't do any permanent harm."

Josh couldn't say anything. He had to shut the hell up, that was his job. And it was an easy job at this point, because he was too ashamed to talk.

"Call me later," Baxter told the dead air. The connection died.

Baxter's heart was sweating. Sweat was running down the inside of his chest, salty and burning. He should tell the bosses—Manni the Supervising Asylum Officer, whoever that skunk was who was Consular Officer in Charge, somebody. If you screw up, even when you screw up this bad, trying to hide it just makes it worse . . . .

"What's wrong?" Josh jerked his face to see Michelle's snout right at his shoulder. Don't look terrified. Stop. "Hear anything interesting?" she asked with a smile.

Josh wasn't a racist, but he was not feeling calm right then, and a toothy possum grin was not helping. "Um. No."

"I'm wondering what—hey—"

Michelle noticed the steel gates in front of the embassy trundling closed before Josh did. In the otherwise empty street were a chipmunk and a pair of foxes, all almost nude in the summer heat. The vixen was running all out for the narrowing gap, dragging a leaking duffel bag in one hand and a dog fox in the other. The male was pulling back, pulling back from her grip until vixen gave him up and sprinted for the line of yellow concrete paint that marked the start of official Lachels territory. Then she slowed, stumbled to a walk. Her hands dropped the bag and slowly raised into the air on either side of her head, no doubt on instructions from the two Lachels army guards who had left the gatehouse to level their rifles at her chest.

"Ever tell you about my swim across the river?" Michelle asked, eyes on the vixen. "Up in Kingsport?"

Maybe ten times, Josh thought without anger, watching her face. The vixen's confusion, her pain and fear were reflected more clearly in the oppossum's pointed snout and darkened eyes. They showed Josh the world clearer, starker. Ugly.

"I took bullets from the Mechanized Army goons on the south shore," she continued, not waiting for a response. "Two through my back. Docs told me I might have to shit in a bag hanging out of my belly." Her left hand unconsciously scratched at the rounded scar on the right side of her navel. "It'd be worth that," Michelle explained. "Getting out of this country would've been worth my gods-damned face." Josh shook his huge head as the gates slammed closed in front of the vixen, blocking the entrance to the embassy.

"It's evil not to help us," Michelle said. "We have a right to get out from under Robotnik. One at a time, in a bunch, any way we can. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," Josh said quietly. Of course he knew it. Everybody knew it. They just didn't do anything about it. Relations with Mobius dictated, very quietly, that no one did. That was what the bosses said, anyway.

And that was how long it took Josh to catch up to Baxter. Although relations with Mobius dictated one thing, it wasn't Robotnik that kept the Nationalist Party away from a no-confidence vote in the parliament. Everyone knew that Mobians had to be helped, and if that vixen found her way into the newspapers, every Lachels voter was going to know that the evil, cruel Robotropolis Police Department wasn't the only reason Mobian refugees never could manage to get onto the grounds of the Lachels embassy and claim asylum.

Everyone was going to be very, very upset if a witness talked to the papers.

Of course, even without a witness, Josh had just accidentally confirmed the dirty little secret to a Foreign Affairs Department intelligence analyst. Which might not be that big a deal if it weren't an analyst who would in the near future be working for Mobian Internal Security Office under the new officer-sharing program the government was so excited about.

As he thought about it for the next few hours, Josh concluded that the vixen probably was going to talk to the newspapers. She would be angry as hell, and that was the only way she could strike back. So the slip with Baxter—that probably wasn't important. It'd really just confuse the bosses more than anything.

Maybe, Josh concluded, this could serve as good practice for how to keep his gods-damned mouth shut.

Edited VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 4\*: Great Forest, 19 Thermidor 3228

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**GreatForest, South of Narsurpan, 19 Thermidor 3228**

"Well, Cat—"

His sullen eyes sparked to angry life. "What did you call me?"

"I—" Sally hesitated, realizing she'd just stepped in a big pile of repenshit. "I got the impression . . . that you had a nickname—"

"From the hedgehog, right? From that Sonic character?"

His public records said he was twenty-seven, about eleven years older than Sally, but he'd had a worn look about him as he stumbled out of the emergency staircase. His deep yellow fur was part washed-out and part speckled filthy with bits of forest; the dark gray traces seemed unusually wide on the edges of his fawn snout. The creases in the fur around his eyes showed exhaustion and bitter, ingrained hatred.

"I want to apologize for your trip here," Sally told him. ". . . . Myron."

"Do you now."

Man, she hoped that name was right. In the south suburbs Antoine had handed the lynx off to the wolf twins, Will and Mary. In four days, they had made the one-and-a-half day trip from the city to the royal hiding place, Knothole. Will had shown up in his fourthhand leather jacket, dragging the cat down five flights of hard steel stairs from the concealed entryway at the forest surface without even bothering to take the blindfold off.

"The location of my family's bunker is a closely guarded secret," Sally continued to explain. "And with what Robotnik has done to our country my people aren't always . . . competent, in . . . social niceties. Will and Mary were born and raised out here, in camps in the forest."

The lynx just kept staring. "Raised in a barn, huh. Was the hedgehog raised in a cave?"

They say you never got a second chance to make a first impression, but Sally always found herself trying. She had carefully planned the sight at which Myron was staring: a diminutive brown-furred squirrel, about five five and without the signature tall, bushy tail—shrew blood, most likely. Her underclothes were a tight-fitting brown top and shorts; above those her blue vest set off her deep red, neck-cropped hair. On her hands were the ornate, oversized white gloves of Mobius Minor, one of which clutched the perfectly polished chrome Orb of Clarendon. Around her neck and down her front to just above her knees hung a length of purple cloth with gold bordering, not quite purple, something very old: the Stole of Mobius Major. Above her pointed ears and high up on her forehead sat the united crown: a very thin gold circlet, three minute stones set together in the front: green, white, red.

In the moment when the lynx had first seen her he was gone, twenty years gone, his yellow eyes shining in the glow of some bright place of an early childhood for which Sally hadn't even been alive. The eyes rolled with equal astonishment to Antoine—he was a different man in the stiff red-and-blue Royal Guard jacket he wore in the forest, thick-furred golden military epaulettes on each shoulder.

The eyes went dark a moment later, but Sally knew the lynx's memories were still drowsily awake, somewhere behind them.

"So what do I call you? Your Majesty?" frowned Myron.

Sally hesitated before she took another step, black nose twitching at the faint odor of more repenshit. The Knothole conference rooms were built for her father and his ministers. For her they served a different purpose: their fine red carpeting, holoprojectors and table-set comp stations impressed forest dwellers or comforted city folk lost in the wilderness. But a cubicle worker like Myron was a new species, one that had been . . . well, kidnapped. He saw the like every day, at long unpleasant meetings with overbearing, entitled superiors . . . .

"Highness," Sally smiled, placing the Orb of Clarendon in an ashtray on the table in front of her. She sat, causally and imperceptibly nudging the crown to a more jaunty angle as she did so. "And don't bother with it; this get-up is for you. The head of state traditionally wears the Authorities in major diplomatic conferences, and your help is that important to me. Care to sit?"

"Why do you want me here?" he asked, motionless.

"I wish you were still at home," she replied honestly. "Taking you from Robotropolis tipped our hand."

"What do you want me to do?"

Antoine flopped a little manila folder open on the table and slid it in front of the cat. "In 3227 you were part of a Gescom Industries team that reworked security at Foulke-Zero Weapons Systems/Mobian Mechanized Army Joint Venture Robotropolis West Number Two."

"That's right."

"Danny Mackel says that you basically ran the programming team," Antoine continued.

Myron blinked, then gave the slightest smile. "Man, you know Danny," he chuckled. He sat down and spread the papers in front of him. "Yeah, that's right. We either called it Foulke-Zero Two or 'the mouthful.' So I guess you're going to try to—" He suddenly stopped and looked up at Sally. "Again?"

Sally nodded. "Again. It was us. To handle the computers, you'd have to know the security system, its strengths and its weaknesses."

"I'm familiar with it," he shrugged. "I don't know about weaknesses."

Sally had spent months by her parents' reading lamp, paring the plan down to the uncuttable core. "We need to get in and out of the building, entry and exit maybe ten minutes apart, without alerting anyone."

"Parachute in, tunnel out," Myron suggested. "Don't look at me like that. I'm giving you the truth, which is more than I ever thought I'd do. We weren't losers and the contractors weren't either. The fences, gates, and utilities access panels are on a timed interlock with central police dispatch and Internal Security Office. You know a death switch? It's like that. MCom laid a dedicated pipe under the city. When there's any interference in communications, when their ping jumps hard, anything, plant security and dispatch get alerts."

"Sounds like overkill," Sally suggested, a little worriedly.

"It is," Myron agreed. "Gescom monitored the installation for a month after it started. There were two major false alarms a week. 'Good,' say the War Ministry people."

Antoine coughed nervously. "You didn't leave any, uh, birthday surprises . . . ?"

"Thirteen year olds talk about birthday surprises," Myron scoffed. "They're called backdoors, and I didn't leave any. I'd be in jail. I can give you a rundown from memory on the system, but I won't guarantee anything." He slapped the folder closed. "I wish I had my stuff."

"Do the best you can," Sally said unexcitedly. "Can you give me the basics in three days?"

"Depending upon what you mean by basic I can do it in one."

"Give me what you can in three."

"Sure," Myron said with a tiny bemused smile, very tiny and very brief. "Did I just take an order from you?"

"Yes," Sally confirmed.

The yellow eyes narrowed suspiciously, but there was a kind of warm twinkle at the back of them. "How did you do that?"

The squirrel smiled, lowering her face demurely to make the light catch the gems on her forehead. She told him to talk to Rotor before he did anything and he was off. As soon as he was out the door she dropped her smile like an empty beer cup at a tackleball game. "How did this happen," she asked.

Antoine gave a polite cringe, dropping his nose and ever so slightly flattening the slope of his ears. "My only guess, my Princess, is that Myron himself was the security leak."

More like you wandered in front of one of those new surveillance cameras RPD is putting up, she thought, but said nothing. "You assured me he was our best bet."

"He is." Again with the cringe.

"You think he's trustworthy?" Sally asked. She snatched the ancient chrome sphere as she stood up, began to toss it nervously hand-to-hand. "Is he telling us everything he knows?"

"Do you intend to torture him if he is not?" Antoine spread his empty hands.

"Fair enough," Sally sighed, resting her hips against the table. "But we're going to take whatever he gives us and do it. Our window's only going to last so long."

"Hmm," Antoine mused. The Committee for Public Welfare's terminal descent was the first major Mobian political development in five years. It left a gaping hole at the top of a power pyramid that had in its base basically all the antigovernment sympathizers east of the Great River and a lot of them to the west. It was talking to Antoine—he was a natural politician—that Sally first realized the way the vacuum would be filled would be dictated in the depths of Robotnik's stolen palace as much as in some skirmish in the woods. Robotnik owned State Broadcasting and had Kimex News watching his every move. The Committee's collapse was good TV, stuff to paralyze the locals and bring a twinkle to the eyes of foreign banks ready to move into Coolette. When the news went stale The Great Robotnik would himself pick a new adversary to pummel in front of the cameras. And unless something happened, it wasn't going to be Sally Acorn.

"The cat will give us something. We are going to find a way to make this work," Sally insisted.

"Hmm." Antoine said again, deeply frowning in intense thought. His eyes didn't meet hers, but they knew they were being watched.

Sally sighed. "How's Sonic?"

Antoine's snout scrunched up, whiskers out. He didn't like Sonic. "He is restless. He—"

"He's beating the snot out of people left and right, it sounds like."

"My Princess, I wasn't there. And if I was, certainly you must know that I would not be able to lay a hand upon—"

"You," Sally turned and pointed sharply into his startled face. "You are Sonic's leash. You and anyone else I send out with him. I know it's hard, but he has to be controlled, and you are the ones who have to do it. All of you."

"Only you can do it." As soon as Antoine's mouth closed he grimaced, eyes pinched against—

"Don't say that." She reared up her father's daughter, his flag-blue cape and his medallions, rallying his people to stem the tide of human battalions pouring forth from the mountains. Beyond this line they shall not . . . . Antoine's regret softened her brick will into tired resentment. "Just, don't. When you were in Robotropolis were there any signs that he, that some female, that—"

"No."

"A male?" she mused, raising one eyebrow.

Antoine shook his head. Sally nodded. "Your Highness—" Antoine began.

"Thanks for the information, Antoine. Beyond that it's not your concern," she said.

Antoine rose from his chair to bow slightly, a smooth, natural motion. "Your Highness. Anything else?"

"No. Dismissed, Antoine."

He bowed again and left.

Gods damn the hedgehog.

Sally's thoughts were running in tight, dizzying circles as she stomped out into the buzzing blue fluorescent light of the hall and smacked into a small fox kit whose thoughts always ran that way. He stumbled backwards and shook, the undulation passing quickly from the cowlick of yellow head-hair down his spine to his tail and his birth defect—no one had ever decided which of his perfectly formed, bilaterally symmetrical but too plentiful fox tails were which. Tails (he had once told Sally that his real name was Miles) was another stray that predated Myron. He didn't talk about his parents and neither did Sonic, who had "found" the boy in some nonspecific way on the west side and brought him to Knothole about five years back. In summer he favored a pair of fur-blending bright yellow athletic shorts, a gift from his 'Uncle' Sonic, shoplifted from places unknown. "Hey Aunt Sally," the kit yelled as he started to tear off down the hall again.

"Whoa, whoa!" she grabbed a pinch of the fur on his bare back. "Where are you going, young man?"

"Mary says it's sunny out!" Tails smiled, pointing at the door stenciled SURFACE ACCESS—EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY. "I've had breakfast already. Rotor's stew was left from last night!"

He looked so happy Sally hated to even think of bringing him down, but . . . "Today is Warday." Sally reminded him. Warday was math day; and this month she'd given him the last of the geometry proofs she'd learned from her poor old tutor Rosie. "Have you done your problems?"

"Uh-huh," the child replied, nodding vigorously.

It was ten in the morning, but it wasn't improbable that the kit had just gotten up, solved Rosie's problems and wolfed down some food. Tails had trouble focusing, but when he wanted to (often) he sank his teeth deeply into hard sciences and didn't let go. Sally had dithered about showing him algebra two years ago until he finally invented it himself, using an empty box for a variable, to do some of her harder word problems. "Because that's what the equals means," was all the explanation he could give when Sally asked him, almost worried, how he'd written the symbols he had. She'd have to turn him over to Rotor before the year was out. Maybe he could have done this at half his age if it weren't for the coup. Maybe he was a genuine prodigy.

Or maybe he was lying and going out to fish in the creek. Because skipping out on schoolwork is cool.

Gods damn the hedgehog.

But Sally's stomach lining had worn too thin to push for the truth. "Good," she said, walking away. "I'm glad you're such a hard worker."

"Are you okay, Aunt Sally?" Tails asked.

"I'm fine. Just a little tired."

"When's Uncle Sonic coming back?" the kit asked.

". . . Not yet," Sally answered, stooping down to speak to him face to face—Tails said he was twelve years old, but that was doubtful. "He's still got things to do in Robotropolis, Tails. He'll be okay. Are you bored?"

"Lonely," he answered. And suddenly she saw as though for the first time how alone Tails was, how the walls and the megagrams of rock behind them dwarfed a boy of his size. "Do you miss Uncle Sonic?" he asked her. He was going to cry.

"Of course I do, Tails," she nodded earnestly, lifting her gloved hands from her knees. "We all do. Come here, honey."

There was no need to take the fox child; he ran up to her and wrapped his arms around her, clinging to her neck. A wet nose sniffled by her ear. "I miss Uncle Sonic, too," Tails croaked as she folded him in her arms. "I wish he would come back tonight, and then we'd have leftover stew for dinner."

So needy, so desperate, so pathetic.

Two days later Myron gave his report. The easiest way to disable the alarm system at West Number Two without setting off alarm bells at Mechanized Army Base Jarmit, every police station in town, and Internal Security Office's floors at the Naugus Building would be to first destroy MAB Jarmit, every police station in town, and the Naugus Building. After that a number of techniques would do the trick, ranging from cutting the power to obtaining intrusion software routinely distributed for free to eleven year olds. Once they were in, Myron could recommend devices to bash through internal locks.

In the evening Sally summoned her troops to audience in the mess. Almost twenty, if you included absent the absent Sonic and Featherlight. She would have more, many more. The way to win people to her was simple.

"Troops," she said. "Tonight I'll tell you how we're going to destroy a swatbot factory." The Postalitas children started at 'destroy,' hooraying and yaying, while their mother watched silently. Antoine clapped precisely. Deacon, who had picked it up from Featherlight, made the gesture of pulling an old fashioned air-horn. Maersk beat his crutches against the floor with resounding thuds. The new one whose name she couldn't remember, the cat who thought he was so smart, had a face that asked: are you stupid? She smiled and gestured for them to calm down. "It will take at least two more weeks of planning on top of what we've already done, and a little more time and luck to get started. But once—"

"Why isn't Sonic here?" Tails demanded in the quiet, sitting on the floor by Rotor's feet.

Because he's turning the sweetest, brightest little fox kit into an empty-headed good-for-nothing, because no one has the time or sense to keep him away from you.

"I'm getting to that," she said.

Edited VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 5\*: Mills Bend, 1 Fructidor 3228

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**Outskirts of Mills Bend, 1 Fructidor 3228**

From the window Patrick Rodneys saw steam curling off the maglev line's cooling coils across the river, little plumes of white twisting out above the wisps of dawn fog in the wheat fields. One of the huge cargo trains, a chain of forty-foot grey ovals, shot along the rail towards Robotropolis and was gone, leaving nothing but a faint electrical whine.

Patrick idly tapped his bare mousetail on the leg of his chair and brushed what was left of his of dirty blonde hair back up under his green Terscala Chainsaws cap. The clock behind the counter said five forty-five a.m. He could piss another half-hour before rolling the wheels again.

"Hey," he said, flagging the counter bear. "Hey. More coffee."

"Right," the bear nodded. He was a big old fella, shaggy brown fur bulging over big old muscles and a big, newer beer gut hanging over the tie of his stained apron. The guy threw a get-ready glance at the bum sleeping at the corner table, but decided that he wasn't wound up enough yet and stalked back into the kitchen. "Melda, where'd you put the new coffee," he bellowed.

". . . fuck we got, I'm sick . . . ." shivered faintly through the ceiling. The white-furred mouse heard heavy steps in the back, slowly rising.

What a life. The gentle, homely touches, the soft off-white paint, the quaint little coat rack: Melda's Sandwiches was their home, with everything in it but the bedrooms turned restaurant. Out front they'd strewn crushed gravel over the lawn in front of the big Iken Fuels hydrogen tank, for parking. He'd only seen six years of this sort of thing, but he knew that this couldn't have passed for a fuel stop before the war. Shitty, shitty job.

Nothing on driving a truck, though. They had more of it up north, where the humans were so ass-backwards that in some places cars had showed up before railroads, but it had crossed the mountains, along with a lot of other truly rotten shit, after the war. Safety regs, said the state rail authority: can't ship explosives or other hazmat in normal trains; only in dedicated trains, fun trains that kill you in six different ways if they jump rail. But there are only so many of those, so if you aren't 'essential to national security' (bribes) or 'suppliers of core industries' (bribes), you pay Intermodal to wheel your germs, ammo and uranium.

Today Patrick was hurtling himself along the Royal Western Highway (No. 4) in front of two full trailers four times the weight of the car, full of something the manifest called 8-8-9 Zwaraline. The SHIP TO was Sigsauer Constructions in Terscala. Bad news if some son of a bitch clipped his wheels. But it was either that or the army, and he'd had quite enough of the army, thanks. He'd heard from Louis Osela, who'd decommissioned with him and reenlisted two months later, that Robotnik's new "Mechanized Army" was even worse.

The bear came back and slid a tall, chipped mug onto the table. Patrick took the too-cool thing in his hands and lowered his pink nose to sniff at the warm coffee.

"Hey, hey." The counter bear was across the room, scowling as his big hands shook the table where the bum was sleeping. The bum lifted his head, noticed a rope of drool clinging to the corner of his mouth and wiped it away on the back of his glove. Young guy, a stringy hedgehog with blue quills.

"You don't live here," the bear said bluntly. "You leave when you're done with the pie."

"What?" the hedgehog yawned. His eyes lowered to the empty plate by the pool of spit in front of him. Damn it, said his frown, no more pie.

The bear's thick fists slammed the table, rattling the silverware. "Buy something or get out."

"Yeah, alright. Sheesh." The hog stood, one hand scratching his hairless belly. Patrick got the feeling he was used to waking up in places he hadn't seen too much before: his eyes casually but thoroughly appraised the walls, the brown bear, the white mouse. Apparently the hog didn't like the look of any of it; he scooped up a green canvas backpack and moseyed toward the bathroom, sliding his hand along the edge of the counter.

"Get out," the bear growled. "Piss out in the bushes."

The hedgehog made a sleepy, swaying turn to the door. "Hey," he said to Patrick when he reached it. "Those trailers yours?"

Patrick shook his head in apology. "No riders. Company policy."

The hedgehog nodded. A bell tinkled as he skipped down the red wooden steps and started trudging across the gravel lot, past Patrick's truck to the green dumpsters and the fallow field beyond.

"Bastard'd wash in the sink," spat the bear. "They all do it."

"They?"

"You know this?" the bear asked, resting his rump against the counter. "There's people living in the Great Forest. Old hard-line loyalists—still waiting for the royal guard to fight off the coup, I guess. Sometimes the kids say fuck it and try to hitch it up to Kingsport and across the border to Lachels."

Patrick grimaced as he gulped the cooling coffee. "They make it?" he coughed.

The bear shrugged. "Probably not. Smart not to let him ride. That one stole the money he paid me with, I got no doubt. Now, I ain't afraid," he said, thumping a fist on the counter with a knowing, cruel grin, "but he ain't to my liking then it's the cops. On principle, you know?"

"Huh," Patrick wondered. Outside the window was nothing but gravel, wheat and blue sky. Maybe the hedgehog was in the bushes, like he was told.

"You need anything else, let me know," the bear laughed as he went back into the kitchen.

Poor kid, Patrick thought. A teenager, he looked like, and no ID card, no citizenship. No way to get a job, use the trains, stay at a hotel. He pushed away the rotten coffee and tossed a couple of bills on the table. Outside the window the morning continued, still and sad, with the exception of the hedgehog digging around through the broken passenger window of Patrick's ride.

"Hey!" Patrick snapped as his boot crunched gravel. "What the fuck!" He stomped around the cab, reaching back under his baggy green shirt to pull his piece from his belt. The kid grabbed the doorframe with his left hand, swung from the car and leveled at Patrick a long, black, steel-stock shotgun.

"What're you carrying?" the hedgehog asked.

No pump. Patrick had seen them in the War: Jenks Autoloader. Use them on wooden doors. "Just—please don't." Patrick raised his hands. "You can have—"

"Arms down. Don't look over there," the hedgehog snapped as Patrick glanced at the wide window of Melda's Sandwiches. He had a pair of black elastic shoulder holsters stretched around his sides, the kind that humans used to hide pistols under their clothes, each with a black automatic. He forced Patrick behind the trailers and knocked a fist against one. "Plates say explosives. What's in 'em?"

"Explosives," Patrick stammered.

"Yah-huh." The hog rolled his eyes. "What kind?"

"I don't—uh—construction," Patrick said.

"Ha!" the hedgehog sneered, turning his green eyes toward the house. "Destruction, chump. Move it."

As soon as he turned the hog yanked Patrick's gun from his backside and tossed it in the cab. Shit, shit, shit. Once he got in that house there wasn't a chance, he was dead—

The shotgun barrel jabbed a kidney. "You'd think a guy'd move a little quicker, dickhead. Are you sure you know what this thing does?"

Patrick opened the door and stepped inside. The bear was walking out of the kitchen with a towel around his fat neck and his wide eyes saw something, because he dove for the counter and came out racking it.

The mouse couldn't flatten his ears quick enough to keep his left from turning into a solid plug of ringing pain. The hedgehog walked the shotgun out of the bear's hands. For real: shot the barrel right by the muzzle, knocking the pump out of the left hand, then nailed the barrel again as the bear let go.

The fat hanging on the bear's triceps jiggled as his hands rose. With his left hand the hog held one of his pistols on the bear; with his right he pressed the shotgun to Patrick's back.

"If you're not upstairs when I count five you're both dead, one, two—"

The wife started screaming when they were halfway up. She crawled towards a nightstand with a telephone on her hands and knees, her thick black body tangled in a blanket, until the hedgehog threatened to ventilate her. Then she flopped on her side, fingers curled a couple of inches from the phone's power cord, panting with exertion and fever.

The counter-bear fell to his knees at her side. "Are you okay, honey?" he wept.

The hedgehog poked the bear's little tail with the shotgun. "Where do you keep the stuff for tying people up?" he asked.

Clothesline in a hall closet. The hedgehog had the husband tie the wife and Patrick tie the husband while he dialed the bears' phone.

"We're go," the squirrel asked rhetorically, cracking her knuckles. She was in a loosely-buttoned short-sleeve white shirt and shorts. Tiny wire-rim glasses disappeared just a tad under her red head-hair, but the tan-white fur of her snout was locked into a distant frown. Many college students went around with half their brains otherwise engaged, but few of them had a face-mask for a face, an expression like the helmet on a suit of armor. Unless Sally could start acting more like privileged rich kid, some cop'd look at her and wonder what the hell she was doing.

"Yeah, I got the call," Rotor nodded, closing his phone and dropping it into the pocket of his gray duster, draped on the back of the chair in which he sat. The chair was tilted back from the table; the walrus continually adjusted the angle with bare, stubby toeclaws hooked under the table's edge to keep his heavy belly over its center of gravity.

"What did he get?" asked Quinn, leaning over the little counter of the kitchenette, watching the proceedings with a squinting concern—very interested, one sensed, in whether any of them would be alive by sundown. The otter was older than the rest of them, probably a little past thirty, and with a kind of uneager weariness about him. Mostly Quinn worked under Sally's cars in a musty-sweet barn outside Four Mounds, but he had experience with the Committee for Public Welfare out east, and that was always welcome.

Like Sally, he too was in disguise. Glasses with thick plastic rims broke the hydrodynamic profile of his hard otter skull and flat brown fur. His jeans were no longer recognizably blue, and he wore oil-stained, frayed, but structurally sound flannel plaid over a solid old work tee—that wasn't the disguise; all of that was normal. The addition was a little worn cardboard sign he'd left on the counter next to him: HUNGRY PLEASE HELP ANYTHING WILL HELP TRIXIANA BLESS YOU

"Construction explosives, Sonic calls them," said Rotor. "Probably raise an eyebrow when it gets out. He's round about Fortune Station, maybe six hours figuring nothing on the highway, and State News and South Pass both say that the No. 4 is running dead empty up to the beltway."

"Alright," the princess said with a steel-solid nod. "Time to hit the street."

Rotor couldn't let her go, worried as he was. "Shouldn't you get into character first?" he asked, nervously rubbing his thick bristles.

Both hands swept her autumn-red hair out of her eyes, and she winked into a doofy smile with just a faint savor of ditz.

Rotor nodded appreciatively as she shouldered a huge blue backpack. "Huh, little lady. What's your major?"

She pulled an issue of Continental Affairs from the pack. "Poli sci!" she chirped, eyes googly in her lenses.

"Huh huh huh huh!" Rotor closed his eyes when he laughed.

"Don't forget to call Antoine," Sally reminded him as she stepped out the front door.

Rotor heard them stepping heavily down the back stairs. "You look a little young," Quinn mused uneasily.

"The props sell it—" Sally said as the door swung shut behind them.

The walrus fished a cig from his duster and lit it. He blew a long stream of gray smoke at the small cracked-open window, letting it carry out among the brick low-rise apartments of Ascogne-Dascogne. The tiny view stretched away to some of the taller, more modern steel buildings at Royal University. He couldn't see the factory from here—that was about a mile from the other end of the building.

There wasn't much for Rotor to do from here on out. He wasn't ashamed of that or anything—everyone had stuff they did well, and he wasn't very good at the front-line running and shooting, so what? But with nothing else to do his neurons could devote their full energy to worrying.

Sally's plan was clever, really . . . clever. Kluge, like the humans say up north. Mobians in tech industries had stolen the word, mispronounced it as a verb: to "klooge," to jury-rig, to band-aid.

He didn't like it. What the plan might do to so many innocent bystanders, what it might do to Sonic, even Sally herself. That's what can happen when you don't have a solid solution for a basic problem, when you just go in there and kluge things, clever it up . . . .

But Sally was who she was. What she was.

Rotor grabbed his Mobotropolis Royals baseball cap and planted it squarely backwards on his gray scalp. "Long live the Acorns," he grunted to himself, hopefully. Then he picked up his phone and dialed Tony.

Snively Kolensky's office was on the twenty-second floor of the Martin Ixit Naugus Memorial National Building. The olive walls were covered with his framed degrees and metal bookshelves filled with binders of Spot's Defense Weekly. His desk was big and wooden . . . and cheap. But, he thought, drumming his fingers on the edge, at least it was big. It put a good meter between him and both Lila and Renee. Especially Renee, playing lets-dress-up-human in a cheap, brutally cut brown pantsuit that matched her fur. Because she's a Special Agent.

It made him want to vomit. "Who do we have inside?" he grunted.

"Nine special forces from Mechanized, First Robot Division," Spitz answered, passing him a stack of manila hardcopies. "We've worked with some of them. Adharra. Prower. Lysis. Defestrato."

"Hmm, hm hm hm," Snively snickered, quickly pulling out one file and flipping through it. He raised his hands and mimed the motion of snapping someone's neck: yes, Defestrato. "Do the plant workers suspect anything?"

"Yes," Spitz replied crisply. "We've done our best to mask the substitutions with disciplinary firings, but the tactic has limited effect."

Snively shrugged. "Has counterintelligence turned up anything with the employees?"

"Nothing yet."

"Good." Rumors wouldn't mean much without a Royal Army agent inside the plant. "Then we're ready. Reasonably ready."

Spitz nodded. "We'll be better by the end of the week, but reasonably."

Royal Army had tangled with normal Mechanized Army grunts and with NETA Security, to which Foulke-Zero normally subcontracted its plant safety. To the best of Snively's knowledge, they had yet to meet Mechanized Army Special Forces. If they were fool enough to try infiltrating the plant after openly abducting Myron Catalano, corpses were to be expected. A reasonable number.

"Alright." Snively gave a flick of his right hand. "Dismissed." Now, he thought, lifting his private p-comp out of the bag by his chair, there was time to address pressing matters. For the past month or so, things had been rather rocky between him and Amanda. What was she thinking? How, how to get inside that woman's head?

"Sir?"

"I didn't—Ms. Donlevy," Snively snapped, clapping his p-comp shut on his desk. "Perhaps there is a deviant usage of 'dismissed' in the Robotropolis Police. For future reference, 'dismissed' means 'get out.'"

"It might be bad for me to communicate on paper about this, sir," she—what, explained as she sat down across from him again? This fur just didn't know how to take fuck you for an answer. Which would be fine if she were, Snively didn't know, Kiefer Facconier or something, but she wasn't. She'd done decent desk work so far, but she was nothing special.

"Ms. Donlevy," Snively began, draining his sarcasm reserves with a wide, bitter smile, "Internal Security Office is like . . . Mobius is like a finely-oiled machine. All the pieces have their place and fit together, moving in unison. And they don't squeak. Now—"

"The exception being Posniak," she said, unflinching. Snively stared at her silently, his smile emptying into a mouthbreathing scowl. "That's the pronunciation, right, Paws-knee-ack?" the marten asked. Her brown eyes danced conspiratorially to the half-open door and back to him. "If you're worried about espionage, there might be better things than keeping him out of the office. I was once assigned to an Internal Affairs detail. It lasted a few months. I know how to spot a troublemaker—"

"Duly noted," Snively cut her off, now feeling nervous, angry and queasy. "Dismissed." She smiled and even saluted as she got out, get out, get out, shut the door. Good.

Snively had met T. Baxter Posniak almost a week ago, had him sit right where Donlevy did. He turned out to be a light-skinned human with carefully pruned black hair and, to judge by the two times times Snively had seen him subsequently, an infinite closet of black suits. His handshake was just a shade too close to dead-fish for ease, and his face was a perfectly expressionless squint through rimless lenses.

Snively opted to go full dress uniform for the special occasion, and he did plan for it to be special, very rare. Shuffling in both Donlevy and a spy into offices on the twenty-second floor? "I'm sorry to make you work in your own space," Snively had explained with a wistful, apologetic half-smile, gesturing vaguely. "I'm afraid we just don't have any here at the Naugus Building." Unfortunately, they also had no work for the spy to do other than background research on Royal Army, to be conducted without classified sources. First assignment: determine whether, as it had claimed two years ago, Royal Army is led by Sally Acorn. Research suggestion: check the official Robotropolis Clarion archives for the articles about young Acorn's (official) corpse being found in the palace during the second day of the coup, at the site of her parents' (official) suicide. There was plenty of work where that came from, all of it just as interesting!

"I understand," Posniak acknowledged in a dull tenor, his eyes wandering the walls rather than meeting Snively's. "It would be especially hard under the circumstances, rushing to shore up defenses at the Foulke-Zero factory."

"You're dead!" Snively shrieked when he'd recovered from the shock. "The penalty for espionage is death!"

"It's in the news," Posniak replied, totally calm.

"What's in the news?" Snively spat.

The fingers of Posniak's left hand lifted, one at a time: "Catalano's kidnapping is public. The Robotropolis Clarion said Catalano worked for Gescom. Gescom won a security subcontract at West No. 2 after Royal Army bombed it." The shoulders of the human's dress shirt rose and fell.

"When I want your analysis, I'll ask for it!"

"Those are your rights under the treaty, Captain," Posniak had replied, picking up the latest issue of Spot's off the corner of the big desk, pulling out the loose subscription card and staring at it curiously.

Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to tap the pine marten's . . . expertise, if she had any, in matters of intraoffice spying. If building services could surreptitiously wire an office for video and sound, maybe, then have Posniak and Donlevy work together—no, Snively's instincts were right. That was a terrible idea.

Now, what had he been doing before—oh yes, Amanda, Amanda. Sweet, fragile Amanda . . . .

Sonic liked the truck; it handled like hell, felt like a roller coaster. He stopped in a little one-house burg called Tam Lin, where the wolf twins and the chipmunk Deacon were waiting for him. Deacon put up all the stuff Rotor had made on the doors and gave Sonic the jacket, the death switch, and a shot of Wicked Jamie's Red Label. Now the truck was really going, the windows open and the air tearing around his ears, yanking on his headquills. Green Hills riff-rock was blaring from the radio receiver and from his throat:

DAH DUH DAH DAH, DAH DAH DUH DAH DAH, DAHDAHDAH

DAH DUH DAH DAH, DAH DAH DUH DAH DAH, DAHDAHDAH

Then the radio cut out of the duet. "FUCK!" Sonic bellowed over the empty roar of the wind. "FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCKING BASTARDS!" He pulled on the horn so hard that the little cord broke and it went quiet.

The radio news people didn't even have anything to say. They were only talking about what he'd already done, and not all of that.

The main assembly floor was like the inside of a big tent of steel and glass: a rectangular grid of steel girders sunk in a wide cement floor, rising up to a thin, sloping corrugated roof above. In the cement you mount the conveyors, eight of them side-by-side, and along them, tied by cables to breaker boxes mounted on the girders, long-armed, many-jointed weldbots, torquebots, liftbots, paintbots. Blue-jumpsuited guys went up and down the line checking oil and lube levels, checking the command comps.

That wasn't any of Skins's business. The scrawny, hairless feline worked quality inspector, one of the easier jobs near the end of the line. Touch the spots with the electrodes. If the diagnostic machine lights up, the thing don't work, and it goes to Assessment. The swatbots always worked. Easy.

"Hey," Skins yelled. New guy was smiling. "What you smilin' at?"

New guy was a tiger name of Tiger built like a mountain that was built out of bricks that were made of steel. Tiger was manual quality inspector now they had shitcanned Mulvaney (which was bullshit and the reps were taking it to the labor board). Guy looked happy as hell, big flashing crazy yellow eyes. "I need a reason to smile?" Tiger yelled, and then damn near twisted the bot's head clean off. You're supposed to make sure that thing holds together, but shit.

Then Skins noticed it. "Hey," he called to Tiger again, pointing at his own right ear.

"Since I was a kid," Tiger said. "Can't hear a thing without it." He got a good grip on the swatbot's wrist and tried to rip its arm off.

"You look like one of those police guys on the old TV shows. For the King, Royal Guard. Kiefer Facconier." It was the same little curlicue wire running down from the earplug and everything, disappearing inside his blue collar. Seemed stupid: lots of guys wore earplugs on the line. If you go deaf, saves you money.

"That's what they tell me," the tiger giggled loudly, almost angrily. Skins decided to let it go; ain't a good idea for a guy like him to go messing with a guy like that—way too into his work.

"Where is it?" Renee asked like a person who should be strangled with a steel chain. For a moment it looked like she might fumble and spill her armload of stuffed hardcopy files all over the floor of Snively's office.

"Two floors down!" Snively shouted, his hand clamped on the receiver, as she wobbled towards the hallway and the elevators. "It's called the Ops Center! Internal Security Office, Robotropolis Divisions Operations Cent—follow Spitz! Shit gods!"

Snively was worried enough to move out of the Task Force Beta offices for the rest of the day, down to ops on twenty. If there was one thing they knew about Royal Army from two years ago, it was that they had more than enough hyenprotide explosive to conduct their planned operation. Why snag what Sigsauer Constructions said was enough hulelaminide-based compound to level a city block?

Step one was to alert their undercovers, accomplished. Step two, move to ops, in progress. Step three, find the hijacked truck. On the national highways, this required national PD. Snively found himself thinking of his uncle as he put the phone back to his ear. "You were saying."

Snively had met NPD crisis chief Damon Corduroy once; an old, unthreatening little tan bear with a creaky voice to match. "There is no guarantee," Corduroy verbally cringed. "The local units have their own priorities."

"Should I tell the Director that national PD can't address this threat?"

"Understand, sir, we're not a military organization. We can't have the kind of discipline you're talking about."

"If you want Robotropolis under a posse comitatus, be my guest."

"Robotropolis isn't the problem. Chief Cooper will have RPD out; if the vehicle is coming here you're set. It's the Highway Patrol and, say, Corukas PD. Now I don't want to insult anybody, but some cities in this country are better at stopping this kind of thing than others—for whatever reason, I'm not saying that Corukas PD has rebel sympathizers, I'm just saying that Robotropolis can't guaranty what sort of search will happen someplace else. . . . Are you still there, sir? Hello?"

Snively breathed, wide eyed: "Yes, I'm here." If the vehicle is headed straight for Robotropolis.

So much of psychology relies on metaphors from hydrodynamics. Reservoirs of suppressed libido, pressure and its release, and most importantly the first thing sentient life ever noticed about water: it flows downhill, following the path of least resistance. Plant an obstacle in the river's path and it will grind a new bed to the same mouth.

After their botched recruitment of Catalano, Royal Army knew ISO would put new security measures in place at the factory, make it impossible to infiltrate. So grind a new bed. Use a truck bomb to blast a bed straight through the walls and everything else near the factory.

"I'll call you back," said Snively, but he'd already hung up. He loosened his tie as he ran for the elevators.

To the side of the main factory floor was a cinderblock-and-steel nest of administrative offices, tile floors and rattling ventilation. Deep in the nest was the central security office: a communications hub built around the Chief Plant Security Officer, a quick-moving shepherd dog named Dempster in a black suit and a sharp red bolo tie. At the news from NPD she'd dragged a pack of clericals and temps up from records and packed them in around her camera-watchers to work the phones, trying to get permission from Foulke-Zero International's HQ in High Demon, Lachels, to shut down the factory.

It was necessary to go to HQ because of Mr. Krause. A puffy, sickly-white skinned human whose job it was to run the plant, and by running the plant to bring Foulke-Zero in line with Mobian War Ministry regulations and, Dempster would explain to anyone who asked, to louse shit up in here. Every word from his mouth was an ultimatum. "We aren't under siege. We're taking the afternoon electronics delivery at three-thirty."

"What do we have on the front gate," the dog asked one of the clericals. Perhaps if the human were ignored . . . .

But no. "I am not," Krause announced, "shutting this plant down based on your speculation."

"Fine. You don't need to do anything," Dempster decided. She grabbed her phone and dialed receiving. "Security. There's a threat on the building. I need you to block off the gates with something solid. What do we have that would work? Shipping containers?"

"You're fired," said Mr. Krause, shaking his head with disappointment.

"Uh huh." Ms. Dempster said into the phone. "Very good."

"You're—" Mr. Krause looked around hopelessly for a phone that wasn't already in use. "DEMPSTER IS FIRED!" he yelled as the shepherd replaced the handset in the cradle.

"Evacuation will begin in five minutes," she told the foreign plant manager, powering through his every attempt to turn her announcement into a conversation. "We need the time. Either you get it on your resume or I do."

"No, Robotnik's not a good leader. Well, not necessarily." The speaker was a thin brown weasel, maybe nineteen, dressed in a pricey green windbreaker purely for the looks. In his hand, silhouetted against the backwards "GROUNDS OF BELIEF—Coffee-Pastries-Magazines" painted on the plate glass window, was a paperback of anonymous pamphlet from the days of Sally's great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather. Anonymous was what at that time would have been considered a radical democrat; the pamphlet's subject was "tyrannicide." The weasel used it as a prop, pointing with it, flipping it open without reading it.

"That's what it sounds like you're saying," the poofy-haired white sheep replied, gazing deep into his eyes from across the small round table, two fingers twirling a plastic stem in her coffee. By listening, Sally had learned that she was a freshman, and that her father was "in meat-packing" out west in Corukas. Sally doubted he wielded the bolt gun himself.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. The political system is valid because of the process, not because of the end result." The weasel leaned a little closer, ever so briefly stealing a glance at the front of the sheep's shirt. "Now, a lot of people hate Robotnik because he's a human . . . ."

The sick part was, Sally thought as she turned another page in her own prop book, a copy of Leon-Vulnet's Wise Ruler Kit, she had to listen to the traitors above the coffeehouse's hubbub, watch them all morning. Behind them, through the window, beyond the street was the reinforced chain fence, and behind the fence were the steel walls of the factory. Somewhere behind it, watching the other end from the gutters, was Quinn.

Sally's eyes turned to a high, wall-mounted TV (TURN RADIO TO 79.5 FOR SOUND), and a graphic on it: NEWS ALERT. Alright, she thought as a picture of a truck came up. Sonic had called the police to take responsibility. All systems go. She quickly hauled her huge backpack down a dark hallway to the bathroom. In the stall she changed quickly, stuffing the student clothes into the big backpack that she would leave and putting what she needed into the little shoulder-bag that she would take. The pistol went in her waistband, and she checked to make sure she'd taken everything from the backpack.

Not quite.

She opened the tiny black-laquered box and quickly slammed a row of stone figures on the edge of the sink. Her eyes fell to the tiles under her knees as she mumbled rapidly:

I honor you protect and watch over me Vidavin lord of Mobius, Vidavin Vulanis lord of Mobotropolis falsely called Robotropolis, righter of wrongs I call upon your name abandon this city for its masters are corrupt and my cause is just open the gates and allow my army passage. All glory to the gods.

Sally swept the idols back into the box. The front of the store already sounded of bedlam, so she slipped out the back.

xxx

At 12:39 local time, the pedestrian gates on the east and west sides of Foulke-Zero Weapons Systems/Mobian Mechanized Army Joint Venture Robotropolis West Number Two opened and workers in their blue jumpsuits began to trickle out. People in the surrounding blocks could hear the wooweewooweewoowee from the weapons scanners as people ran out with coin money, keys, tools, and, in the case of some of the NETA Security employees, weapons. But few workers managed to leave. A huge crowd piled up behind a barrier of metal shipping crates at the front gate, demanding to be let out and finding no one—those guards, hearing early of a bomb threat, had already fled. The factory, long past tired of as many as three serious false security alarms in a working week, never seriously practiced its evacuation drills; no one was sure where to go. Meanwhile, some neighborhood people were trying to push their way into the factory—they'd heard a rumor about a bomb and figured that 'the army building' would be safer.

At 12:43, observers at the front gate could see an Intermodal Transport semitrailer barrel through a red light on Minotaur Street and roar north with tires flapping and a pair of red Robotropolis Police cruisers behind it. But the police pulled off, not brave enough to be caught in the blast. Nothing stood between the mad bomber and an explosive collision that would easily erase a few shipping containers, would in fact obliterate much of the factory and the apartments around it.

The truck crossed the second-to-last block, the final block, then squealed wildly to the left, its rear trailer fishtailing and screeching just clear of the factory gate. It went west, roughly in the direction of Royal University, again building speed. A red light at Denali Street did not stop it, and neither did the two civilian cars it bashed out of its way as it rocketed through the intersection. But at an alley halfway into the next block an inattentive pickup plowed into the rear wheels, sending the cargo trailers squealing through a wide, long arc and into a storm of shredded glass as the rear trailer smashed through the front window of a grocery store. The trailers caught in the wreckage and finally dragged the cab to a halt a block and a half away from the factory in a street lined with small stores and second-story apartments, filled with shocked, bleeding people, staring from cover or curled on the sidewalk.

The driver's door, beaten out of shape by the collisions, shook loudly and didn't open. The passenger door shook and did. Out hopped a hedgehog. His belly was hidden by a bulky gray vest with red wires running all over it; a single pistol hung from a belt on his right side. In the hog's right hand was a bulky thing that looked like one of those spring-grips to strengthen your hand, except it had an antenna. Viewers of the popular television action-dramas Guardsman and Persona non Grata recognized it as a death switch and ran like hell.

"Hey!" yelled Sonic. A nice-looking vixen with cherry hair and a matching vest was lying on the ground by his feet. Her yellow eyes blinked, blinked as her concussed brain fought to get working again after she was thrown against the curb . . . . and then she noticed his gun. Sonic grinned wildly, seizing her elbow before she could scurry away. "Hey baby, don't you want to hang out with the loudest, fastest hog in town?"

She started screaming.

"Oh, come on!" he laughed, dragging her to her feet and pressing her against his wired vest. "It'll be a blast!"

If Rotor had known it would be this cool deep in the lightless utilities access tunnel under Ecks Avenue, he might have rigged up a way to come down sooner, when he had more time to relax and enjoy it. It was hard to relax with a flashlight between his teeth, his rubber-gloved, grounded hands twisted awkwardly to hold the bolt cutters deep into the jagged hole he had pried in the massive aluminum conduit. His eyes, and the beam of the flashlight, were on his wristwatch.

"Why," he counted down, "whore, he, who, hun . . . ."

"Snipers!" Snively screamed. "RPD snipers!"

"Doing it," yelled Spitz, grabbing the shoulder of the rabbit at the nearest free comstation. The Office of Management and Budget had complained about the Op's center's cost and size, occupying most of the twentieth floor with clusters of black computer workstations. But anywhere you were, you could instantly get someone to take care of what you wanted. Snively was wading through the sea of workers with Spitz and Donlevy on either side, to prevent the need for any direct interaction.

"I want his head blown off!" Snively squealed. What a nightmare! He wheeled on a Donlevy, jerked her away from the shaggy-haired lion she was talking to. "What would the truck do in that—"

"Zwaraline," she said, handing him a stapled bundle of photocopies someone had brought her. "Vaporize to ten meters, buildings flat for thirty, severe damage for one hundred." The marten leaned conspiratorially close, close enough to get the stink of her fur. "What if this isn't the real play?"

". . . What? What are you talking about?"

"What if their real target is still the factory?"

"Are you insane? This is two cargo trailers full—" Snively waved her away, thinking. She might be right. It was hard to take your eyes off a truck bomb, but two years ago they'd used the hedgehog the same way, sending him into the command and control complex while the rest of them laid the bombs . . . .

"We've got incoming transmissions from our troops," Spitz said, ear by the whispering lips of a doe with a massive black headset over her thin ears. Next to her a nimble-fingered mongoose was trying to patch the audio feed into a small speaker.

"Go ahead," barked Snively.

"Downers and Pleiades are on Point Street near the hedgehog, in position for a move. Defestrato's transmission was interrupted. Adharra is reentering the factory now."

"Okay, let's—wait, they're in evacuation, right? They should be locked down by now. How did she get back in?"

"She says the guards are letting everyone in."

"Gods!" Snively screamed in agony. "Why!"

"Unclear," Spitz replied. "The factory's out of control, sir."

xxx

Now that they knew the factory wasn't the target, Krause was sold on the evacuation. The Mobian Mechanized Army would never put a native mobian this stupid in charge of an operation this crucial, but they might pick someone this heartless. "Do you know where the subway is?" Dempster asked Krause.

More spit flew from his teeth: "I don't—"

"Seventy blocks north," Dempster answered for him, feeling her hackles bunch under the shoulders of her suitcoat. "The trains run above ground here. We're the closest thing to a bomb shelter this neighborhood has."

"Don't move." Krause's ice-blue eyes swelled wide in their fat sockets as Dempster felt the round tip of a pistol barrel press cold and steady behind her left ear. "Mechanized Army," a gunwoman said. "Order the workers to listen to me."

"You're to do what this woman says," announced Dempster, slowly raising her hands from her sides.

"Thank gods you're here," snarled Krause, stepping forward. "This woman has—"

"Shut up. I am in command. Put your hands on your head and sit in that chair." The woman said as Dempster felt hands pat her down, a boot kick her ankles for holdout pistols. "Same deal, Ms. Dempster."

The human couldn't quite bring himself to put his hands up. "But—" he puffed, his white skin flushing almost pink.

"Shut your fucking mouth," the woman ordered. Dempster sat down, smiling, and saw with only a moment of surprise that the soldier was a taut meerkat in an assembly line jumpsuit. "We're locking the factory down."

xxx

Sally kept her lockbreaker's magnetic passkey to the doorpad as it cycled codes, getting error after buzzing error as it narrowed down the possibilities. Her free hand rested on the butt of her pistol. She'd already left one of Rotor's chalky-white bombs at the base of the primary support here in Assessment, a room crowded with spindly half-assembled swatbot endoskeletons hanging from hooks, each flagged DEFECTIVE.

Twenty minutes to detonation. There had been no need for the bolt cutters in her satchel; the guards had already let Quinn in before she arrived! With so many civilians about there was little need to pretend to be out-of-uniform line workers; Rotor's clipping of the plant's alarm line would still probably be buried by all the alarms Sonic had caused. Things were going better than anyone could have hoped!

The door popped and Sally threw herself backwards, feeling the slightest tug as the tip of the gigantic tiger's six-inch knife shore a forelock of her hair. Then Sally screamed as the backswing sliced into something very, very painful in her left hand, dropping her gun to the floor before it could find the tiger's heart.

There was no chance. The tiger's mad yellow eyes chased her back through the room and down a dark cement hallway to the assembly floor. Still at full speed, she reached her left hand intOH GODS—screaming, dug her right hand in her satchel for one of Rotor's bombs. An official voice was blaring over distant speakers:

"—the Mobian Mechanized Army. We are initiating lockdown. Swatbots in yellow caution stripes will activate and—"

Her hand found a bomb and depressed the detonator; in five seconds it would be an improvised grenade. To her horror, she saw no passkey pad on the door toward which she was sprinting. Either it had an emergency release or those yellow eyes, that long knife . . . . She lowered her shoulder and hurled herself forward.

Cold metal smacked her cheek; wrenching hot pain mixed with light and colors. When she could think again her squirrel instincts had her tucked and rolling away from the impact as the pain shrank back to a deep hurt in her left shoulder, pulsing to meet the piercing, unthinkable horror in her hand and fill the whole furry arm with agony. She shoved herself GODS THE PAIN back to her feet and staggered-ran north along the easternmost of the floor's conveyor belts. All she could do through the pain was run and drop the bomb, but it might be enough.

If it weren't for the two swatbots tromping down the assembly line, their armor yellow and black and their wide-angle lenses scanning for targets, headed straight for her.

"In position," Mark Pleiades breathed. The long-snouted weasel would be an odd sight on the street normally—the blue jumpsuit, the determined stare, the long silenced pistol in his hand. But at the present time, it wasn't that strange, not with the sunlight catching the sparkling glass and shiny blood and oil spilled all over the street. The weasel was ducked for cover behind the truck's cab—if he lost the element of surprise, he and a lot of other people would die.

The hog had been in spiral-notebook manifesto mode for at least two minutes, long enough for EMTs and bystanders to drag most of the wounded out of range, thank Vidavin—out East, wolf suicide bombers didn't even have to wait for people to see them. Everyone knew the drill by now. But here, you couldn't hear the headlocked vixen screaming over his bellowing. "You wanna work like good little animals? Get the zookeepers to give you two-bedroom cages in a trendy little neighborhood? Some nice gourmet slop?" he sneered at a pulpy mass of glass and grapefruits he had pulverized in the truck wreck—uncomfortably close to Downer's black boots, half-hidden behind some of the rear tires.

"Help me!" screamed the vixen, head pinned in the crook of the hog's furless elbow. "Someone fucking shoot him!"

"Give me firing angles," whispered Pleiades. A contact mic pasted on a bit of shaved fur by his throat picked it up.

"Eagle One has a shot at Ecks and Ninety-Fifth," his radio announced. "Rooftops aren't in place."

"Eagle One fires on my mark," Pleiades whispered, eyes locked on the weaving, waggling sights of the hedgehog's gun.

"Negative," ISO replied.

"Either you're with us or you're licking Buttnik's boots," the hog screamed, waving his pistol.

Be angry later or die now, Pleiades thought. "Eagle One fires when we hold the detonator in hand," he bargained. The weasel's eyes jerked to Downer's boots across the truck from him, saw them tap twice for yes.

"Now you got one minute to enjoy it all," yelled the hedgehog. "One minute exactly."

"Affirmative," ISO indicated.

"Covering fire on my mark," said Pleiades, seeing Downers' boots tap twice.

The hedgehog flashed a wide grin up at the dusty second-story windows around him like the seats of a theater balcony. "Get ready to die!" he bellowed.

"Mark."

Pleiades ran. Downers, a short black bear, slid into half-cover at the tail of the second trailer, lifted his pistol and put squeaking, silenced rounds into the asphalt by the hedgehog's shoes. The hog snapped his gun-hand at Downers and must have relaxed his left, because the vixen spun and clawed him hard just under his eyes as Downers put another shot by his toes.

Dance. He did. Lightning, too quick to see if it weren't for the adrenaline: his pistol-butt knocked sharply into the vixen's temple in a spray of blood and hair even as he was already leaping into the air, pulling his legs out of danger from Downer's low shots. Shifting his bulk in midair, he fluidly threw a heel into the vixen's sternum and stole some momentum by kicking off her falling body. The quills forced their way through the death-vest, piecing out though gaps as the hog's gun turned back toward Downers, as Plieades leapt, too late, his mind filled with a scream—

The hog's gunshot roared in the weasel's ears as they landed together, the detonator grasped tightly one of the hedgehog's hands and both of the weasel's.

"Eagle one, no shot—"

They were dancing too tightly to shoot, but the hog loved his gun as a club, a steel fist crashing into Pleiades's face, his neck, coming on fast even in the bulky vest. Pleiades shrank, unable able to protect himself, pulling, rolling away from him. The hedgehog came on strong, rolling on top, rearing up on his knees, lifting his gun-fist.

Taking the bait.

A red laser-dot played on the center of the hedgehog's chest. Pleiades wouldn't have known, if he had been asked, whether a gunshot would set off the vest.

"Fire!"

Edited VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 6\*: AscogneDascogne, 1 Fructidor 3228

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**Ascogne-Dascogne, Robotropolis, 1 Fructidor 3228**

The blow jerked the detonator out of the weasel's grasp. The hedgehog fell hard on his back, legs bent obscenely beneath him, eyes wide.

The eyes blinked. The hog shook his head, flexed his quills.

"Verify the kill," ISO asked in Pleiades's ear.

"Eagle One reports negative, no kill," buzzed the sniper.

"No miss!" Pleiades shrieked. "It's a bulletp—"

The hedgehog's fist did something very bad to the bones of Pleiades' face. Then after a foggy gap of what must have been a few seconds the hog's arms were dragging him to his feet. The weasel could barely stand, the world swaying under his slowly scrabbling boots, the street disappearing behind a river of blood.

"Say again Pleiades," asked ISO.

The hog tore the mic away from his throat as he dragged him towards glassless windows of the food store, towards the cargo trailers and cover from the snipers. "Try not to yap so much," the hog growled in his ear.

"Please—" Pleiades said, and then it was a second later. Trying to move his jaw had almost made him black out.

"What?"

"Hease wet he go." Pleiades was terrified. He knew combat autopilot from the inside, the sudden return of reality as soon as you were safe. The hog was dragging him around the back of the rear cargo trailer; in seconds he'd get his bearings, drop the trigger and kill everyone within two blocks. "Hot hids," Pleiades lied. "Hease, I—oh hods . . . ."

"What?" the hog asked. He dumped the weasel to the asphalt and then winced, laying his ears flat: "Shut up your damn screaming. What is it?"

"I—" Pleiades gasped, clutching at his face, trying to press it into shape, to think through the agony. "I—"

The hedgehog pointed with his right hand, index finger leaving its three friends on the death switch. "Look, I don't have time to—oh yeah!" The hedgehog's green eyes flared as he recognized the switch. Like any old bit of trash, he tossed it to the ground.

Boom.

Pleiades opened his eyes. Through the endless clouds of gray smoke that filled the air he saw the doors of the rear cargo trailer blown open. Charred leaves of paper spilled forth into an already three-foot deep pile; others looped and danced through the smoke.

"Aw," the maniac winked with a deranged smile. "Looks like you're not the only dud around here. Now sit tight; I gotta juice." He turned heel, spread his wings and juiced, pulling the smoke and leaves into wild tornado eddies in his wake.

One of the papers fluttered to the pavement by Pleiades's dull, shrinking eyes.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SLAVE FOR THE HUMANS

this message brought to you by the

ROYAL ARMY OF MOBIUS

and its leader

PRINCESS SALLY ALICIA ACORN,

RIGHTFUL HEIR TO THE THRONE OF MOBIUS

**PLEASE EVACUATE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY**

**THE FACTORY IS ABOUT TO EXPLODE**

It was really stupid, hours before carrying explosives into a government factory during a bomb threat, to get his fur in nits about what kind of homeless guy he was pretending to be. But Quinn Featherlight had written a great sign: filthy, half-wilted cardboard filled with lines of tight block letters that buckled and shrunk as they ran out of space at the left margin, all about how THEY STOLE MY INVENTION and all the stock in his company. They PLOTED to put him in the nuthouse and ***BRAINWASHED*** his wife into divorcing him and were **EXPARIMENTING** on his children.

The Princess didn't like it. A lunatic draws attention, she says, a bum doesn't. Did he see that?

Yeah. He guessed.

Quinn was in a hallway by the worker's lockers, leaning half a head, a lens and an eye out of a doorway at his final target, a cement-wrapped steel column that kept the roof from falling down onto the line machinery in the event that the walls were to disappear, which if the Princess hadn't run into any trouble they'd do in about twenty minutes. The floor was deserted by this point, as far as he could see. Silent, too; someone had cut the emergency stops. The otter levered his thumb on the button of the wad of play-dough that Rotor had insisted was a bomb, then dropped it back into his canvas duffel and walked out on to the floor like he didn't own the place, like he was some dope in off the street who didn't know where he was going at, staring around at the lights hanging from the ceiling, the power cables tangled from bots to breaker boxes, like he was some dope in off the street. He backed into the target, which startled him, making him absentmindedly drop his duffel. He turned around, foolishly forgetting the bag, glancing confusedly at this bit of nothing, that bit of nothing.

"You lost?"

The speaker was a bony ferret, his sky-blue line uniform unbuttoned and open on a white tee, squinting his dirty-black eyes at Quinn. A little older than Quinn, but not by too much; maybe at the big four-oh. There wasn't enough meat packed onto his bones or sun bleached into his sandy fur. Something told Quinn he spent every night either at home, drinking, or at the Assembler's Local lodge, drinking.

"I'm looking for the bomb shelter," Quinn answered, taking off his glasses and scratching the fur over his black nose.

"You're in it, fellah." The guy stepped up and kicked steel toes against the cement column. "The walls here are pretty solid, and from what I hear the bomb's a couple blocks away. We oughta be alright if we sit tight. You live around here?"

"Yeah . . ." he answered, trying to think.

"Got rooms?" the ferret asked with a sideways glance at Quinn's ragged shirt.

No, Quinn answered, because being homeless was part of was his cover. But for some reason he didn't say a thing.

"There's no shame in that, not with things the way they are," the ferret shrugged gently, looking a little embarrassed himself. "I had it rough for a couple of months a few years back. Got a work license? Family?"

"I got . . . I got a sister, near Corukas," Quinn answered, thinking of old Midge and her old, prematurely wrinkled frown as she laid the blanket on Dad, rocking and rocking in his chair as the river glittered. "But she . . . we aren't that close, anymore."

"Well, everyone's got what they got. What they got left after the War. Leastways we aren't those guys, huh?" the ferret asked, nodding his head vaguely at the west, roughly the direction of Sonic's stolen truck. "What we got, we get it straight."

"Yeah, those guys are nuts. Politics, I don't really—"

"Politics my ass," the ferret muttered, squirting a little bit of spit through his incisors and rubbing it into the dusty floor with his boot. "I knew a weasel, in high school back out west. Didn't know nothing but nitro-boosters and smoking up. Spent all his time in his car, then in everyone else's. Locked up during the war for AWOL. Now he's stealing cars for what's left of the King's old army. There's some convenient patriotism. Meanwhile I'm three years chasing line work all over the other half of the country."

"I tried," Quinn muttered, eyes on nothing. "I'm . . . It's so hard to get mechanic's work anymore. Since the war the army buys all the motors and all the vets know how to fix 'em . . . "

"Ain't we just the Brotherhood of Honest Suckers, huh, eh—" the ferret gave a quiet, wry laugh and offered his hand. "What's your name?"

"Uh . . ."

"Attention!"

"Uh-oh," said the ferret, lifting his eyes to the loudspeaker mounted on the column overhead. Quinn had to agree.

"Attention all personnel and civilians. This is the Mobian Mechanized Army. We are initiating lockdown. Swatbots in yellow caution stripes will activate and patrol the factory. They will harm no one that stays still and holds no small objects. Please drop what you are holding and sit down where you are. Lockdown will begin in ten seconds."

"Hey!" cried the ferret, fingers missing by centimeters as they grabbed at the hem of Quinn's retreating shirt. "Hold it, man!"

"No, I can't—I just gotta—" Quinn backed away north between the conveyors, holding his palm out stiffly behind him, mouth twisted into a worried scowl. "We both have to go, now."

The ferret shook his head and weaved his hands behind his neck, sitting down with his back against the cement column. "Nah, you don't want to play around! They aren't kidding about the bots; they'll clear us out in a few minutes. And hey, your stuff—"

"Hands off the bag." Quinn didn't watch the ferret's face, just the sights of his own pistol on that shape there, sitting down by the column. There was no need to look at the shape's face. "Tell them the factory is filled with bombs, filled. There's no time to—we don't want to hurt anyone," Quinn babbled, "we don't want to cause any trouble at all, we—"

The sound of a steel door slamming open snapped him out of it. He spun to see the Princess stumbling north across several conveyors from him, teeth bared in pain, her left arm limp and bloody, headed right into the chainguns of a pair of hornet-colored swatbots.

There was no time to waste or think of anything but a little trick he'd picked up carrying a gun for the Committee. Quinn vaulted a motionless grey conveyor and jumped for an weldbot-mounted fire-pull. The shop bell filled the air with a brassy din as the sprinklers filled it with artificial rain, and the bots didn't like it one bit, racking their lenses, cycling their CCDs in a sloppy attempt to cut the interference from the sudden downpour. The Princess dodged around them and almost as soon as she was past a grenade hit behind her—one of Rotor's bombs, no doubt—hiding the bots in a black incendiary cloud.

That would be enough to keep her safe it weren't for the killer tiger leaping a conveyor to circumnavigate the wreckage, coming up fast on her limping retreat. Quinn steadied himself against the weldbot chassis, lined his sights and squeezed off a few, sending the tiger stopped and ducked for cover.

Quinn couldn't help smiling: a mechanic . . . a bum had just saved old King Max's kid. Now, Quinn thought as the tiger peeked over the conveyor and a ricochet spat a chip of steel against his face, maybe he could save himself. He shuffled north, keeping low behind the conveyor and the line bots. Drawing nearer before him was the wide-open door to an empty loading dock and the autumn sky, blue and cloudless. Clear sailing.

Except for that rain-wet swatbot, spinning its lenses to the left of the door.

Quinn had nothing for a bot, nothing but his legs, the blood slamming through his chest and the breath screaming in and out of him. Sonic made it sound sometimes mysterious, but sometimes as simple as a tackleball drill: knees up, kick hard, long stride. Feels fake, but he swears it's legit. Don't look at the bot, just go, like a halfback taking it outside. The line's right there; you can't go further out. Ignore the linebackers. If the linebackers aren't shooting, you aren't dead.

wwwwhrrrRRRRRRRRRRRBRBRBRBRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR—

Quinn dove out over the loading dock, fur ruffled by the wake of the bullets roaring through the air behind him—until one nicked his left calf, filling the everything below his knee with a white-hot stun. He came down hard in a jackknife on the cement drive. Gasping, sucking air past a broken rib, he looked up and saw the rear gate trundling open. The Princess was almost out of it, Sonic dashing up the street behind the fence, holding a pistol on a guard.

"Quinn!" the Princess screamed. "Roll!"

Something huge leapt from the top of the dock down on to him, squeezing all the air of his battered chest with its weight. That meant there was no air to scream when the same thing, whatever it was, slammed a gigantic knife through his right forearm, pinning him to a crack in the cement like a dead bug. Iron fingers cinched down on his head, bracing against his shoulders.

"Tell me where they're going," the tiger growled like an earthquake in the hot cement underneath him. "Where's the retreat."

Featherlight might have said something if it weren't for his flattened lungs. The claws jerked his head to the side, locking all the neck-bones as far as they'd go. The weight of the huge cat sank even more heavily onto him; the claws loosed to make room for a good, thorough twist.

Only then did the otter hear the thunder of the shot.

"Gods damn it!" yelled the princess. "Run!"

Featherlight clawed his way out of the loosening grip. Who's working sniper? he wondered, gasping horribly as he lifted his left hand towards the monstrosity in his right arm, took a solid grip. Antoine, right?

He owed the coyote one.

Adharra called off lockdown at Defestrato's request, to give him a chance to catch the squirrel. That didn't work, but it did allow a successful evacuation, which plant employees started even before an unidentified male Royal Army operative claimed responsibility for the impending explosions on a mobile phone that RPD eventually found in a trash can at the corner of Ovidalos and Oswald. Accidental gunplay damaged property at the Dental Investments building a few blocks from the factory when the police tried to corner a sniper that had already flown the coop. A small riot simmered around the wrecked truck as civilians emptied the stores and police tried to impound the terrorists' leaflets.

Among the official casualties: Patrick Rodneys, the first to escape from his bonds and call in the robbery at Melda's Sandwiches, permanently lost hearing in his right ear and was compensated by his employer under the National Workers' Insurance program in the amount of one thousand four hundred sovereigns. Pamela Volari suffered a vicious concussion and a slight, modeling career-derailing but otherwise non-dangerous deformation of the skull. Mark Pleiades had his jaw wired shut and his vision permanently skewed, derailing his career to a desk; Pierce Downers's nasty belly shot gave him a brief but nearly fatal battle with sepsis and left him unable to digest green leafy vegetables. Marcellus Defestrato got his head blown off with a long-range high-velocity rifle round. Numerous other injuries occurred around the truck's resting place, carefully quantified by the newspapers.

The southern half of Foulke-Zero Weapons Systems/Mobian Mechanized Army Joint Venture Robotropolis West Number Two was destroyed when a series of explosive charges damaged the building's primary structural supports and pulled down the roof.

The diners that filled Corey's restaurant came separately. Janet Forrael, dark-furred daughter of Corey the puma, of course knew that her patrons that night couldn't be strangers to one another, and that perhaps something was up—many of them were banged up: arms in slings, legs bound in bandages, one tied up enough that she wondered if he ought to be in a hospital—but she wasn't curious about the injuries, or why the mood was so festive in spite of them. She was no friend to Robotnik's government, you see. Not that events in the city made much difference on the edge of the Great Forest, but she had been brought up to respect the old ways of doing things. So she brought out the endless supplies of chicken wings, petzels, chips, beer, soft drinks that they wanted. When she had a spare moment, she sat at the counter and watched the foreign news show the factory in Robotropolis explode again and again on her tiny television set.

Things looked to be winding down a bit. Several of the young children were sleeping. The lynx was still reeling, yelling variations on the theme that he was screwed now, screwed for life, but he had the walrus minding him, telling him he'd done a great job and keeping him from breaking anything.

Janet got up from the counter as the squirrel in the blue vest summoned her to a shady corner booth. "Thanks. It's been a wonderful time," the squirrel told her, pulling a wallet from her vest. "Cash?"

Janet smiled. Then she reached out and seized the squirrel's right hand, the one that wasn't splinted and resting in a white cloth sling. The squirrel didn't pull away. The puma went down upon one knee, closed her eyes and splayed her ears, holding the squirrel's hand slightly above and before her forehead.

"Rise," said the squirrel, very quietly.

Janet obeyed. "This is embarrassing, but we can't find the check," she said. "I don't think it would be fair to—"

"Thank you," the squirrel said.

The puma curtsied with the edges of her stained apron and went back to the counter.

"Wow," said Tails. Sally turned to him, his muzzle fur sticky with ice cream from a big mug of root-beer. "Was that because you're a princess?"

Sally nodded. "Mmm-hmm."

"Should I do that?" he asked with a curious, serious half-frown. He clearly loved the idea.

She smiled and shook her head. "You don't have to bow to family."

"Okay." Tails saluted clumsily and ran off towards the Sonic and the dartboard, what was left of his float sloshing in his mug.

"You don't need to do that, either," she called after him, cracking up. She was in position to watch and close enough to listen as Sonic whipped another red-finned dart into the 20. "Like this, see?" he said, doing it again. "You don't gotta hit the bullseye. Just keep it near the top, kiddo."

"But you can hit the bullseye every time," said Tails, looking uneasily at the three yellow darts Sonic gave him.

Sonic cocked an eyebrow: "Every time?"

"A lot," the fox amended.

The hedgehog knelt down behind the child. "Keep it near the top. Don't think about it. Just whip it in there."

Tails squinted in fierce, determined concentration. He leaned back and threw the dart like an overlander baseballer, taking a step forward. It was almost on target: it hit the one wedge.

"Again!" barked Sonic before Tails's face could fall into a frown. "Again again throw throw throw throw—"

The second dart impacted wide right in the outside nine wedge. The third hit on the inside twenty wedge.

"There ya go!" Sonic rubbed his left glove in the head-fur of the intrigued, half smiling fox. "You're getting it."

"How do you do it every time?" Tails asked.

When Sally left the bathroom she was surprised to see Sonic, leaning against the wall across from her, sucking sugary root beer slush from a mug. "Hey," he smiled.

"Hey." She winced, feeling her hand throb in sympathy at his face. "Does it hurt bad?"

"What? Oh." He ran the tips of his gloves over the angry red streaks on his bare cheeks. "Nah, she didn't get a good hold of me. They look bad?"

"It looks like you're crying blood," Sally said uneasily.

Sonic smiled fiercely, warping the scrapes around bright balls of his cheeks. "You won't see 'em in a week."

"That's good." Sonic beat injuries fast. "How's Tails?"

"Pounding away at that board," he giggled gleefully. "He'll get good if he keeps it up. We gotta get one for the bunker."

"How much do they cost?" she asked.

Sonic shrugged. "Steal one."

Sally's kept watching his face, puzzling over it, and over what he said. "You know what Tails wants to be when he grows up?" she asked.

"Best shot in the world?" Sonic winked, lifting an invisible dart between his fingers.

"Sonic Hedgehog," she answered, watching him.

"Best shot in the world," he agreed, loosing it to sink into the wall somewhere by her ear. "So what's next?"

She watched him a moment more before she spoke. "First I take everyone who needs it to the doc, myself included. Maersk did a good job, but I think I may need a tendon tied. Then in a couple weeks I need you to escort me to Hewlett. It's a town southwest of Corukas. Mechanized Army has been—"

"Yeah, I heard."

"Good." She glanced back up the hallway at the fox, rapid-firing darts with a focused squint and his tails spread for balance.

"Think fast," Sonic said. Without sight, with the almost unnatural sense learned from years of sparring with him, Sally's head dodged away from his quick fist, straight into his unexpected lips. Her spine aligned with the wall as he pressed himself against her, kissing hard, teeth scraping teeth. Then, with a little lick at the tip of her lips, he was done. "You're something else," he said. He spun gently away from her and walked back towards the restaurant. "You wanna juice? We're gonna need two people to hold up that Cat."

"Uh," she grunted.

He looked back to see Sally still leaning against wall, blinking her eyes open.

"I call him that," he explained. "The computer lynx, My-ron."

"No," she said, quietly. "I should probably put things to bed here."

"Alright, well." He snapped his fingers and disappeared around the corner. "See you back at the Hole."

Sally closed her eyes and licked her sticky lips. Her tongue only made them stickier; sweet with the taste of vanilla bean and deep tree root.

Edited VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 7\*: Four Mounds, 2 Fructidor 3228

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**Four Mounds, 2 Fructidor 3228**

Tails didn't get why Rotor wanted to trudge straight back to Knothole instead of going to town. There was still room to ride in the back of the pickup truck.

"I don't trust any doctor who would treat people like us," Rotor explained, the silver frame of his backpack looming over his head as he turned to plod away through the tall, shadowy trees.

Tails stood in the gravel on the side of the road, sun beating down on his shoulders and gnats swooping about his head, and pondered what Rotor meant. Sally always took him to the Doctor in Four Mounds instead of other doctors because this doctor hated Robotnik. Tails hated Robotnik, too, just like Sonic! And Sally . . . and Rotor, too. People who fought Robotnik were good, and they had to stick by one another. Right?

He was jarred out of his thoughts by Sonic's heel pounding on the pickup's tailgate. "All aboard, Tails!" he called, leaning over to offer a hand up. "Unless you think you can outrun us."

The mental file on Rotor was casually dropped into the jerk drawer as Tails turned his mind to more important matters. The fox dug his red sneaker toes into the dusty stone and kicked into a sprint. When his right sole slapped the asphalt of the road he leapt, and ground and gravel and car dropped away beneath him.

Tails was weightless. He was flying. He could do anything . . . .

His toes skidded over the lip of the tailgate and Sonic caught him by the shoulders in an airplane ride, laughing as he swung Tails's feet clear of where Quinn lay sleeping and groaning in his blankets and bandages. Tails loved to ride in the back with Sonic! The wind blew loud and cool on your ears and your tongue, you could lean over the side to see the yellow lines shoot by, and because Sally was driving in the cab, Tails could sit against the side of the pickup bed and talk with Sonic as much as he wanted.

"So the bear jumps out from behind the truck, all 'freeze, dickhead!'" Sonic lifted his quills halfway and made a hand-gun in the air by his head, two fingers for the barrel, a thumb as the hammer. He let his pink tongue loll from the side of his mouth—there weren't any retards in Knothole, but Sonic had told Tails about them.

The fox couldn't help but giggle. But he knew, of course, that the soldier who had threatened Sonic was not really the picture next to doofus, n. The soldier had been a bear, a big strong one, with an automatic pistol. "What did you do?" Tails asked, ears turned attentively forward.

"Well," Sonic smirked, lifting a single finger next to his head and shaking it in warning. "Here's some advice for you, little bro: when someone tells you to freeze, don't."

Tails nodded, filing it away. When someone tells you to freeze, don't. "Did you run away?"

"Run away?" Sonic laughed. "Who do you think you're talking to, Tails? I ain't afraid of five of Robuttnik's jokers, whether they're packin' pistols or powder or plasma! There ain't man alive that shouldn't be afraid of the Hedgehog!"

"Yeah!" Tails cried, throwing a punch of his own in all the excitement, a tight right hook that cut the air under his own chin. "Did you beat 'em up real good?"

"Tails," the hedgehog continued, getting up off his butt and onto his knees, his hands out before him, the left spread like a sculptor's hands about to work on clay, the right like his own about to work on a speedbag. "First I—" he blinked and scratched at one of the cuts on his face. "Did I mention the vixen?"

"No."

"Oh, okay. Well—oh," he sighed as he felt the pickup's motor slide into a lower gear, saw the thick, hot, cricket-buzzing wheat fields fall away around them. "Finish the story later, little bro, alright?"

The Doctor's office was in a little red house right on the edge of town. The Doctor himself looked like the most mournful person in the world: a wrinkly-snouted old pug dog with soft white fur, a soft black face and a soft voice. "Why hello again, Ms. Squirrel," he said, opening the front door a crack at her knock. He called Aunt Sally Ms. Squirrel. He called Tails Mr. Fox. He called everyone like that. Behind her Sonic and Antoine were carrying Quinn (mostly Sonic). "My word, you look quite badly hurt."

"That's why we've come to the best doctor in the entire district," Aunt Sally smiled.

"Indeed," the dog nodded in polite agreement. "Where's the cash?" Aunt Sally reached into her vest and pulled out a rubber band full of paper money.

Later Tails might sneak away to see if the town kids were playing football out by the tall grain silo with the dusty-sweet scent. But for the mean time Tails would rather stay in the Doctor's office, a room at the back of his little house. It was cooled by a dripping-wet air conditioner hanging on the windowsill and its chill tile floor, speckled black like a swallow's egg. There was a rough, thick-legged wooden table to sit on while the doctor had a look at you, and walls were covered with neat jars of chemicals like alcohol (isopropyl) and peroxide (H2O2) and posters that were pretty gross and really cool! In one an old man's teeth got brown and small in gums that looked wet and soft like watermelon (ADVANCED PERIDONITIS) (Tails had checked; that was a gum infection). And he had a guy without skin—not for real, of course (that would be so gross Tails wasn't sure he was cool enough to look at it), but a drawing of the muscles and their names. The fox stood on a round cushioned stool and frowned closely at the red and white ribbons in the outturned wrists. "Did Aunt Sally hurt her flexor carpi radialis?" he wondered.

"No," the Doctor answered in his calm, quick voice, "Miss Squirrel sustained major trauma to her left forearm resulting in a partial tear of the tendon flexor digitorum superficialism—Mr. Coyote, please."

Antoine had been far away from the fighting because he used a Poiccard L7 long-range sniper's rifle (once he'd let Tails look at the disassembled firing mechanism, but non! non! insisted that Tails keep his arms behind his back). But when he was running to meet up with Rotor's car he'd stepped on a bottle, and now he was sitting on the doctor's table, shirt sloppily half-buttoned and his toasted fur matted with sweat, holding out his bootless right foot. Lengthwise along the sole was a little line, bloodless and almost invisible. Sonic leaned against a bookshelf behind the coyote, observing the injury with bored disdain, tapping his toe insistently against the tile.

Tails felt a little embarrassed for the coyote and turned his eyes back to the gross, neat exhibit of the visible fox's wrist, leaning over at the waist with his tails up for balance like a peacock. Flexor digitorum superficialism. He traced the red lines with his gloved fingers . . . "Is it this part here, by the wrist?"

"Please hold still, Mr.—yes," the Doctor confirmed, glancing over his shoulder to see where Tails was pointing. "You have quite the interest in anatomy," he remarked as he went back to work, pressing fingers to either side of the line and opening a thin, pink slit.

"You just have a really cool poster, is all. It's a lot better than the encyclopedia."

"You read about medicine in an encyclopedia?"

The fox's tails snapped down , one against each leg. His snout tucked low, Tails could see Sonic still staring displeased at Antoine. Was he listening?

". . . It was rainy out," Tails muttered, his hot ears plastered against his skull. Once when Sonic had taken him deep into the forest south of Knothole for target practice, Tails had announced proudly that Rotor was going to teach him algebra, with two placeholders, 'variables,' Rotor said. Sonic had snickered and shook his head. That Rotor, he sighed. He's the kind of guy that reads a dictionary on the beach . . .

"Well, Mr. Coyote." The Doctor got to his feet with a whiny grunt and brushed his hands on his long white coat; Sonic's ears perked up. "There's very little inflammation," the pug continued, "clotting and scabbing along the length . . . . It's unusual for a wound on the bottom of the foot to heal so cleanly."

"That is good, yes?" Antoine said, peeking his eyes from behind their squinting lids.

"Oh no, I'm afraid not," the Doctor replied calmly, crouching down to pull a rust-crusty red toolbox out from under a white porcelain sink. "It will have to come off. Mr. Hedgehog, if you would please assist?"

Antoine's eyes were bloodless and white as the midnight moon in a winter sky. "Whuh—wh-wh-wh—" He couldn't stutter out a full word before Sonic leapt heavily onto the table, landing on hands and feet like some wild hunt-beast, and easily wrestled Antoine into a full nelson.

"Thank you, Mr. Hedgehog," the Doctor said calmly as he flipped open the latches and squeaked open the toolbox to reveal a grease-stained hacksaw. The mount was spotted with rust like the skin of an old banana and the blade was as toothless as the old mouth in the poster, clotted with soft clumps of something black.

Antoine's frail arms pulled weakly against Sonic's harsh grip, his mouth flapped like a hummingbird's wing: "B—bbbbbbbbbbbbut, but certainly it cannot—I am unusually sensitive to pain, and this—it cannot—it doesn't hurt very much, not at all—"

"No, I'm afraid it does hurt quite a bit," the Doctor replied, flicking a finger against the saw and loosing a shower of metal oxide. "Normally, I would offer a patient an entire bottle of whiskey, but I'm afraid there simply isn't any time. Mr. Hedgehog?"

Sonic turned his eyes to Tails and gave a sharp wink. "Sure thing, Doc." He wrenched Antoine further back on the table, laying his legs out nice and straight.

The dog nodded, took a firm grip of the coyote's bare ankle and pressed the soft blade just under the knee. "Thank you very muCK—" With a hollow chop the toe of Antoine's left boot slammed into the Doctor's wide chin. "Good gods," he growled in agony, squeezing his snout in both hands, "you have to hold him—"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Antoine's legs bicycled in the empty air, heels pounding the table like an terrified toddler, his eyes squeezed fiercely shut, so terrified that even Sonic had to fight to keep his pretzel-hold: "C'mon, Antoine! Take your medicine."

"Non, eeeeemon dieux, non,nonononon eeeeeeEEEEEE! EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—"

"What the hell is this!" Aunt Sally filled the door, her left hand in a wrap of tight white bandages and her right hand in a fist. Tails shuddered—it was Sally's behind-doors voice: behind the doors of one of the Knothole conference rooms after something had gone wrong, like an underwater volcano. Tails had never heard it himself. It made him shiver, almost cry. It was terrible, so terrible to hear—

"ZUT ALORS!" Her scream washed through the room and slammed off the walls like a heavy wave, trembling through Tails' bones. "Talk! What the fuck are you doing?"

Tails had to say, just to make her stop: "Son—We—It's a joke." He lowered his eyes to the floor, wanted to disappear, to run away through the fields . . . .

Antoine had spilled onto the floor in a sobbing heap of tan fur and tears. Sonic was a storm of tears and laughter, pounding the table with his open hand. "You should've seen him! The look on his face—"

Sally snatched the Doctor's tie like a leash, pulled him nose to nose. "You went along with this?"

"Mr. Hedgehog paid me twenty sovereigns," the Doctor explained calmly. "In cash—Ms. Squirrel, no!"

Ms. Squirrel should take two tablets of amoxicillin daily and avoid stress on her left arm for two weeks, and that included bashing Sonic in his laughing face. So she lowered her cast and clumsily swung at Sonic's cheek with her off-hand. His own hand flashed and caught it, crushed it—

Sally gasped in pain and he dropped it like a rattlesnake.

He scrambled off the table. "Get a funny bone," he muttered, stomping out the door.

Sally massaged her hand against her cast, the air empty of all but Antoine's quiet gasps. "Bastard," she muttered.

Tails just looked at his sneakers. It was kind of funny. It was a pretty cool joke, he guessed.

But he wished he hadn't smiled when Sonic winked.

Tails hated it when they fought.

VT2, Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 8\*: Racine Park, 17 Fructidor 3228

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**Racine Park, 17 Fructidor 3228**

Like a lot of raccoons, Mike Homan was always different depending on what direction you looked at him from. "In here, Louie," he yawned, his tongue curling towards his pointy incisors as he spun the padlock to his little wire cage, deep in the high-walled maze of metal inside the Homan Salvage warehouse. "My uncle's been so kind as to lend me some space. Can't be too careful who you rent from nowadays. Ever since maybe-kid Acorn gave it to the army in the gut. Heh heh, right Lou?"

Lou shrugged. "You some big loyalist now?"

"Well, they stir up the cops, but I have to admit, Lou, a little more rebellion—nothing successful, mind you, just a little more small-scale insurrection would be mighty good for business." He popped the silvery lock and twirled it on his long, black-furred index finger. "And, well. Enemy of my enemy, all that."

Lou grunted his approval—and fair enough, too, because there's no way Mike'd be dirtying his hands with anyone else just two weeks after that factory lit up. The dirty-yellow overhead bulbs brought out the contours of the rat's dented face, bent like a junk car. Louie Spaulding had spent years before the War in bare-knuckle out east, where they liked their boxing hard as miner's booze and mind-altering as that shit the wolves smoked, regardless of whether any of it was legal. It had left Louie kind of slow, but that was good: you had to be murder-crazy to be a bare-knuckle prizefighter, and Louie wasn't crazy; his brain had been pounded into a solid rock. He wore a brown duster in all weather, but you didn't need to see the furless scars webbing his body to know they were there.

Mike ushered Louie into the cage, followed by this fall's young lady, a brown-furred pine marten with bob-cut black hair and a pink bubblegum smile. High boots, white gloves—Louie ran with the Mobius-for-Mobians crowd, but the schoolgirl giggle that escaped her lips as she rubbed up against the rat's thick arm confirmed that she was just some fast local girl.

"Well," Louie asked, planting his boots squarely on the cement, "you wanna do some business?"

Mike was not allergic to money. "But I gotta tell you, stock's a bit light," he warned as he stepped around his card table desk and reached deftly into a nest of razor-sharp scrap. "New crew's muscling in on the powder trade." Gunpowder, gas-propellant weapons.

"That so?" the rat frowned. Louie'd tolerate people, but he had a kind of thing against arbitrage, speculation, entrepreneurship. He felt you ought to make money the old fashioned way, by being punched in the face.

Mike confirmed it: "Yeah. Big outfit from up east, backed by some big-shot goat. Now, I do happen to have a few small pieces, but they're milspec, at a premium, and—"

The marten giggled: "Garage door openers." Her teeth and the wet gum: smeck, smack, smeck. The wink was grossly sexual.

"Little suburban B & E, huh?" Mike smiled. That was the innocent explanation. His hands felt blindly and quickly and pulled out a knot of tangled cables and boxes. "This," the raccoon continued, nimbly extracting a small beige box with a white button. His fingers tossed and turned it, showing it from every angle in the light, a born TV salesman reduced to a monte operator. "Modified Picon 5000; clean in a patdown. Beats all the big brands. If your target uses randomized codes it triggers—"

"Nah, this one!" the marten whined, snatching up a black box dangling a thin white card from a delicate-looking umbilical wire. "This one looks real top-drawer, baby."

"You don't need that. It opens locks you won't see in a house," Mike explained, reaching for it back.

But she lifted it away, holding it up to the hanging bulb. "Well how come ya got it if nobody needs it? I think you ought to get this one, Lou."

"Look!" Mike tore it away from the bitch with a scowl. "You robbing a corporate HQ? That's for a Zweifer passcard lock; you won't see it."

"Well who needs this thing if big Louie don't?" she whined. "What sorta guy is good enough for the good stuff?"

Mike tossed the breakers back into the junksea behind him and spread his hands. "Lou, can you knock some reason into her? It's my job to sell you shit, but you don't need it."

"Who buys that shit?" the pine marten snapped again.

It wasn't the most posh job on the planet—it wasn't even the best salvage warehouse in the district—but Mike Homan was a good dealer, a professional, and he was not about to let some dumb cooze lay a goddamn stink up in his cage. The raccoon spun his huge bulk around, tail thrashing, stabbing a finger in the bitch's face. "None of your fucking goddamn business buys that shit!—"

The walrus.

"Lou," Mike continued, his voice seeming to shake off a momentary fright, "you are a sensible fucking man! Get her out of here."

The fucking walrus kid.

"Renee can go where she wants," Lou shrugged. Utterly dispassionate, but staring. Staring at him. Intently.

The fucking fat walrus kid with stoned blue eyes and bread crumbs in his bristles, the one who didn't understand how a baseball hat worked. Always sending Mike to canvass the wholesalers for weird RT equipment.

"She can go wherever the fuck she wants once she gets out that door," Mike declared. "We're done here, until she gets out."

The thing was, though, Louie didn't look very done yet, and he looked like the god of brawling in the fur. Even his stupid cunt girlfriend suddenly looked cagier, determined.

Mike usually insisted on cash, but the walrus kid always paid in milspec pistols. War-era and before, finest quality. Once the kid asked for magnesium tabs. Alias high-temperature fuses.

Who was the last guy to buy that shit?

Mike's right hand felt back into the scrap pile behind him and instantly found the taut rubberized handle of a battlescarred aluminum baseball bat. Shhhk from its steel nest, swinging low and wide. No hitting women: that was kind of a guideline, really. The marten caught it with her gloved hands but mostly with her belly, knocking her eyes closed and her mouth open. Mike lifted it out and up, hoisted for a down stroke.

No hitting cops: that was a rule.

It was wrong, a distant part of Mike thought as he swung the barrel straight at the rat's thick skull: this whole thing had been bad business, and now this was worse, throwing good money after bad. The smart play was to tell 'em what they wanted to hear, eat a little time and see about segueing to something else. They say the average guy changes careers at least three times nowadays.

But no matter how many times you get tricked and betrayed and humiliated and . . . . fuck him. Fuck that undercover cop right in the middle of his face—

SMACK.

The bat had smacked to a dead halt. Right in the bulging, rock-solid grip of Lou's raised hand.

Well, okay. The bareknuckle part of Lou's story wasn't just cover, Mike thought right before he was on the ground, trying to give his useful parts to save his weak parts.

". . . Don't," Renee gasped as her wind came back, filling her lungs with air and her abdomen with hell fire. "Don't, I—" Gasp . . .

"Like to hit girls, you son of a bitch!" Spaulding snarled as he put his boot into the general area occupied by Homan's knees, hands and squealing head. "Show me what you got, tough guy."

"Don't," Renee said, finding enough strength to stand up. "Don't," she ordered again, pushing him gently from the sobbing raccoon. "Can't waste time at the hospital."

"He tried to kill a—"

"I know." She'd worked VC for five years; she knew the rules inside and out. But there were other ways to play by them. Grabbing the lapels of the rat's jacket in both gloved hands, she pulled herself close to his big ear:

"Unrestricted interrogation." she whispered. "Fair?"

". . . Yeah," Spaulding agreed quietly, appraising the broken creature on the ground next to him. Thinking about what it would be like, trying to get his revenge in advance . . . .

"Now get an ambo," Renee added. She didn't want to sit down until the paramedics had a look at her belly, so she leaned against the cool mesh of the cage.

Homan was terrified and crazy enough to be a really good lead, but the Captain probably wouldn't hear it for days. Right at the time they needed to redouble their efforts against these murdering scum, he was pulling away, losing interest. Strange and distressing, disappointing. But then again, she had to have faith: Kolensky was related to the Director himself, and who knew what sensitive assignment couldn't be exposed even to the most trusted?

The Captain's twenty was unknown, Lila Spitz was occupied with interagency contacts related to the factory aftermath, and Renee was until something changed effectively in charge of the task force. Responsibility meant glory or humiliation, and Renee was more determined than usual to make a good account of the power and forces that had been left at her disposal.

All of the forces. Even if it meant a calculated risk.

"Economics," Baxter declared, tapping the tines of his fork against the little plastiwood booth. The human's magnifying lenses inflated his irises to brown, overripe cherries with black pits, a picture of horror, comedy, madness—and he was a picture, every hair on his head absolutely motionless, not even a sense of tension in the fingers holding the fork. It was unpleasantly hypnotic. Suddenly, with just the effect one would expect: the picture's eyes moved—rolled down towards his own lap.

"Is that all?" Josh asked, wedged into the booth across from him. "Economics?"

Baxter's brain slowly lifted his absent mind back onto the rails. "No—well, there's more to it, but yes, it's—just hold on, I have to take this."

While Baxter pulled a buzzing cell phone from inside his black suitcoat—he'd come straight from work, as he invariably did—the bear hungrily scraped the tip of his knife through the sauce vin blanc left on a long-since-empty plate of pates avec coq et sauce vin blanc. Josh appreciated an introduction to high fox cuisine; really, he did. Even in a patched-up old wood-frame building with bare booths and tap water, deep enough in the unindustrialized north side to have avoided the worst of the bombardments twenty years ago, the food had to cost a lot for a guy who was more of a college acquaintance than a friend. He'd never seen Baxter at a social dinner back in Winstone; but here they were a pair of public servants on long stints in Robotropolis, who knew almost no one else in the city.

"Huh. Like on a helicopter?" Baxter asked the tiny black phone between his ear and his shoulder, pen writing in a little palm-sized spiral notebook. "Uh huh."

. . . Helicopter?

Forget it, Josh decided as he traced patterns to emphasize the emptiness to the plate. Next time, Josh would pay for somewhere a little more modern. Steak, a buffet. Something a little less prone to starving bears, you know?

"Alright. Bye." Baxter put his tools away and glanced up the aisle. "You see the waitress? No? What was I—"

"Economics," Josh prompted him.

"Yes." To Josh's horror and annoyance, Baxter grabbed a fork and pressed its tines against the table, but he seemed to jump whatever mental roadblock he'd hit before. "King of the social sciences. Anything involving an even moderately large number of people, you don't need another discipline."

This was old hat, a little game played by Baxter and his cronies in the most hard-headed reaches of Independence University's political science department. Josh had never played much before he graduated, but he'd been stocking up a couple of good entries: "Adoption."

Baxter lifted his eyebrows as his lids closed, actually giggled: "Adoption?"

"Helping someone you aren't even related to, out of the goodness of your heart—"

"There are other reasons to have a kid than altruism. Adoption is just a market for kids."

"But you can't buy a kid. There are laws—"

"Plenty of corporate transactions don't involve any cash, just trading debt." The human's eyes positively glowed, more alive than they ever were as he explained: "The purchase price for a kid is taking on the cost of its upbringing—it's a legal debt like any other; you can be forced to pay it in the courts. And studies show that selection among high- and low-fee adoption lawyers result in a price differential for race. That's the first question their receptionists always ask, you know, what race the kid is. What do you suppose brings top dollar, huh? Male squirrel? Female fox?" There was nitrous oxide in Baxter's giggle as he loosened his long tie. "C'mon, guess."

"Let's talk about something else," Josh sighed.

"Fine. How are things at work?"

"Ah," Josh said, nodding vaguely.

"Anything fun going on?" Baxter asked, softly raising his eyebrows, filling his face with refined mischief. "How's Amberson running things? Any different?"

The new ambassador was Gregory Amberson, a thirty-year-old bull terrier with a blunt, smooth face. The Nationalists had weathered the riot scandal—the story on Kimex was that the gates closed as soon as things started, to protect the embassy. But irresponsible rumors still circulated on the Radical net-newsletters and UHF blasters, so Manion Delaches, old and frail as he was, had decided to spend more time with his grandchildren.

There was something like a smile on Josh's face. "I gotta tell you, Baxter, I feel a little uncomfortable telling you anything about the office."

"Well, maybe you should," Baxter admitted, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. "It is a weird situation."

"How are you supposed to do analysis for Mobius when you're still working for Lachels?"

"Well, Josh, that's not a problem because Mobius and Lachels are just best friends forever. Haven't you read the treaty?" Josh chuckled at Baxter's perfectly serious face. "Of course," he continued, "I'm also supposed to wall off sources of data. If information comes from a sealed folder at ISO, it never gets to Foreign Affairs. Of course, anything else does, or else how do our two fine nations benefit from exposure to and comparison of our different methods of intelligence gathering and processing?"

"Does anybody think that'll work?"

"No," Baxter shrugged. "ISO's been shutting me out. Before last week I was doing deep background. It felt like undergrad research back at Independence."

Josh leaned over the table, losing track of who was being lied to about what. He pushed his big shoulders up protectively around his snout as he quietly asked: "Baxter . . . . Why is Mobius even willing to have you? What are you doing for them?"

Baxter directed his goggle-eyes right into Josh's, and a mirthful little twist wormed into his lips. "Maybe I shouldn't be talking to you, hmm? Sit up; people will think you're proposing. Speaking of which, how's Kima?"

Josh closes the door of his tiny east-side apartment, frightening a pair of water-bugs into a dark gap between the carpet and the wall. His shaggy brown hair needs to be cut back into his fur, his white shirt is dark under his arms, his head pulses with a now-constant throb of caffeine withdrawal and secrecy.

"Joshua," Kima says, startled. The bear's heavy elbows rest on the kitchen table, her red pen paused above an undergrad's QM problem set, poised to slash it to ribbons. Her bright yellow-brown eyes turn reluctantly to the papers for a moment—every second comes at a premium for a physics grad student—and then she drops the pen. Josh would do the same for her. "What's wrong?"

They are on the couch, her warm brown bulk next to him, her scent and his mixed in the fabric cushioning them. "I'm so worried, K. I know this woman Darcy at work, a rat. Real quiet, you know? All business. Today I saw her putting a stack of papers into her bag just before she left."

"Hmm," Kima sighs thoughtfully, pressing her fingertips against his, rubbing against the grain the fur on the back of his hand. "You know you always worry you aren't working hard enough. You're doing fine, even if you aren't taking your work home with you." A breath, and then: "Wait, is there some kind of secrecy regulation that—gods above, Josh, you don't think that—"

"I'm worried about it, yeah," Josh nods, eyes red and hot. "And I want to at least tell the bosses. But accuse someone of treason? If I do that, they'll check me out, too, for sure. And if they find out I've got a friend working for the Mobian government, and that I called him on the day of the riot—Kima, I've talked to him, and for all I know he could be some kind of, I don't know, double agent."

"Oh no . . . ."

"I don't know what they'll think, Kima," he says, holding her, clutching her. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Hmm," she ponders with a deep growl, still caressing his hand. Josh already feels so much better, talking to her about it. He loves her, he trusts her, and now she opens her mouth and says:

"She's back home in Winstone, Baxter," Josh sighed. "Doctoral program. I haven't seen her in four months."

Baxter observed the deep ache with bemused confusion. "You call her, right?" he squinted.

"It's not the same," Josh assured him. And Mobius claims it can monitor any phone call made from within its borders at any time, but if that were all there was to it, who gave a shit? "I miss her so bad. She's all I can think about, now, every night. I'd do anything to have her here, just for one day. Just to talk with her," he added when Baxter faked an embarrassed cough into the elbow of his jacket.

"Man, this waitress is really on a frolic," Baxter said, surveying the empty aisles of the restaurant again. "I still think we ought to give her a pretty good tip, though. Poor Mobian dopes can't even keep their damn country together; they need some good tippers, at least." He fished out his wallet, pulled out a ten sovereign piece. "Can you match this?"

Josh stared, motionless.

"Mobians." Baxter laughed nervously. "Citizens. Mobian citizens. Big-Em."

VT2, Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 9\*: Findrasay, 25 Fructidor 3228

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**Findrasay, Robotropolis, 25 Fructidor 3228**

Mobius had been less than fortunate for the past ten years, but Vorburg was a terminal case. It had come through the war looking good—almost no fighting on Vorburg territory proper, an intact industrial base, and the only satellite surveillance and communications network left on the planet after Vorlander ASAT missles had wiped out Mobius's orbital presence during the first assault—but the fascists soon fixed that. The imperial line of Arkanan was exterminated just as effectively . . . more effectively than the House of Acorn when deranged rival factions of the high command disputed who could best crush the Lachels rebellion and most quickly repudiate the peace treaty with Mobius. Now Muzenkspitz, the old capital, was an archipelago of armed camps the ruling Fourth Army had built around essential infrastructure, standing in a rough sea of almost random violence.

And that was the reason (one of the reasons) that Snively had pulled strings at NETA Security to crank out a job and at State Ministry to crank out an immigration visa and thus take Rudiger Sarkstein out of the mountains. Though you couldn't take the mountains out of the man: Rudi was snow-pale with thin lips, shallow eyes, invisible hair, a t-shirt of the lightest white cotton even in a mild early autumn. A tight, drawn, almost polygonal face; now worn, fading—he was fifty years old, Great War-fifty. Seventy. One thousand. "Snively," he rasped, a voice thin with altitude even in the swampy grasslands of central Mobius. "Der arme verlorende Knabe."

"Rudi," Snively answered, "der hartnäckige alte Knabe." Their embrace was brief—Rudi had more than a head on Snively, and Snively wasn't as strong a support as the wooden cane Rudi quickly returned to the floor—but fierce. Squadmates developed a sympathy that was strong, pre-rational.

"Setzen Sie sich hin," Snively suggested, sliding into the dark booth. All the booths in the Bigelow were dark, and the beers were wheat. Hidden in the bungalows of Findrasay on the east side, it wasn't the Trinkhaus Weitflugel, but it was as close as you could get on the south side of the border. "Und wer sind deine Freunde?"

With a painful, almost panicked grunt Rudi threw himself down to sit. His friends glided after him: similarly taut faces, but young, sharp, with bullet-gray eyes and buzzed black hair. They wore gray suits and moved smoothly and assuredly, like ghosts. Snively didn't like them, so he gave them a big smile.

"Snively, you have been too kind to an old hindered," Rudi tried out his Mobisch, botching cripple. "If you had not helped me, I do not think I would still live. And now," Rudi continued, clasping his bony hands together, "for this help, to my land . . . I am always more misdebted to you." The ghosts: "This is Manni and Klaus. They are worthy of credit, good men. You must speak to them about details—the accounts that will be used, the time that the money must go and return—Gibt's Problem?"

"Moment," said Snively, lifting his buzzing phone straight from hip to ear. "Kolensky," he chirped. "Don't fucking call me."

"Call you what, nephew?"

Ist privat? mouthed Roger with a quizzical squint.

Snively nodded, sliding out of the booth and bowing apologetically to the ghosts: "Uncle, I . . . ."

"I've received a memorandum from ISO Task Force Beta that's under your signature. I don't believe you've read it. Number two-eight-null-eight-three-two-two-eight-null-null-five-eight. I would suggest page thirty-seven, footnote fifty-seven."

"Yes, sir."

"Get to a secure phone within two hours," a demon growled before the click.

It took Snively a moment to recognize the document when he pulled it up at his office one hour and fifty-two mintues later, and when he did he was perplexed. "FROM: Capt. Snively Kolensky; T. Baxter Posniak." Posniak's memo looked precise but was long, inconclusive and over-researched, not to mention on a subject that Snively had selected as deliberate torture. Footnote 57 was three paragraphs long and took up two-fifths of a page. To make the task somewhat interesting Posniak assumed, counterfactually, that Sally Acorn had not officially been found dead, and the call text discussed the entry logs at the Royal Palace. Sally Acorn, age five, had been in the building when elements of the Mobian Mechanized Army had entered it intent on destroying personnel loyal to the monarchy. Posniak unnecessarily verified this with palace day care records he'd dug up at the National Library before noting that, obviously, none of this conclusively proved Acorn dead.

57 In a somewhat humorous worst-case scenario, it is possible that the entire palace preschool class escaped the coup to plot insurrection in the Great Forest. (See generally Appx. B.) This farfetched theory would reveal RA Squirrel One as Sally Acorn, RA Coyote One as either Crispin Dionesca or Antoine D'Coolette, and RA Hedgehog One as the uniquely named Sonic—

"Oh no . . . ."

—uniquely named Sonic Hedgehog.

If the unsigned attendance log for 15 Germinal 3116 is complete, further operatives might include Bain MacMillan, Rotarak Tulugarjuk, Bannon Chubb, and even Alexis Napiers, the son of Rear Guard General Fiona Napiers. If the attendance list is incomplete—

The phone rang. "Uncle, I—"

"Did you tell him Hedgehog's name."

"No, sir," Snively shivered.

"Did you give him access to surveillance records in which Hedgehog's name appears."

"No, sir, and I certainly won't now that—"

"The day care records," Julian declared, "will be destroyed at an opportune time, once we can be assured that Mr. Posniak will not have cause to look for them again. What to do about the man himself is a different question. We certainly can't deport him, not without fabricating a plausible pretext."

"Sir," sputtered Snively, "I could suggest a number of—"

"KILL SALLY ACORN!" the line thundered. "Kill her, you wretch! Once she's dead, there is no threat! What are you doing about her!"

"Agent Donlevy is investigating Royal Army's, ah, logistics—"—she'd sent him emails saying . . . something—"—and I've already set up a meeting with my regular captains next week." No he hadn't. He was going to take Amanda on a trip out west. So many balls in the air, he thought as he prattled on mindlessly to quench his uncle's rage, so many plates spinning . . . .

Molly's cream-furred knuckles hesitated above the door. DR. MORRIS DYSON, ADMINISTRATOR, ADVANCED MATERIALS. She preferred to avoid the bosses, both here and at the University. You bugged the bosses if you were desperate for a promotion. Get promoted enough and you can't even work in a lab anymore, and lab work was one leg of the tripod that was Molly's stable life.

Okay, the last leg wasn't so stable recently, thanks to Myron. And now the colossal fuckup was throwing the other legs out of whack, too. Myron Catalano, Terrorist. She wished she'd had some kind of feeling about him, so that it could be like: somehow I knew. That's why I dumped him. Not because he was an alcoholic who couldn't kiss.

Molly's life was certainly not the world's easiest or most fun, but it was interesting enough, calm, and there was no bullshit. She did not tolerate bullshit in her life. This was the strategy that had brought her fifteen years of peace after the initial thirteen, and the bullshit was stopping, as of this week. Myron was gone for good and she would get her life back in order, one leg after another. Step one, talk to the political cops, was accomplished.

Step two: DR. MORRIS DYSON. Knock knock.

"Enter. Please."

The voice, smooth and as artificially sweet as icing on a store-mix cake, was enough to bristle the fur upright on Molly's shoulders. When she opened the door the office was quite dark—the imbeciles who built Gaumont Labs' Robotropolis facility (actually located in the Tolsalvey Industrial Park on the far south side) had decided to turn almost every light in the building off automatically at ten every night, as though the building would normally be empty by then. But her supervisor had a desk lamp on its own circuit, and it threw a pool-hall light on his Office Warehouse plasterboard desk, his black paws and his white snout. Dr. Dyson was a grayfur raccoon. Molly Lotor was a brownfur.

"Ah, Miss Lotor. You shouldn't work as hard as you do," the snout's lips said, looming out of the darkness. A pair of eyes flashed gold and disappeared. "Would you mind getting the lights—thank you!" he said, something close to friendliness and interest in his smile. A white human dress shirt and a red tie made him look more like an enormously fat ape than a gristle-furred raccoon. "Sit down. How's everything going?"

BossBot, the advanced materials lab said when Dyson wasn't around. BossBot's advanced dual-processor technology permits it not only to handle the most complicated personnel problems with ease, but display a broad range of life-like emotions . . . even if they never come off quite right.

"Fine, Doctor," Molly muttered back, plopping her heavy haunches into a squeaky chair Dyson kept in front of his desk. Her face's natural camouflage seemed to make her flat, soft and unintrusive. She'd already gotten out of her lab whites for the night, and was dressed to go home in a small black top and baggy jean-shorts. "We'll be ready for the second tensile strength tests next week."

"Well, are you enjoying yourself?" The mask scrunches over the dark eyes in something close to empathy and concern. "I know the whole team's been putting in really long hours and—"

"Dr. Dyson, I guess I ought to get right to the point." Don't hurt yourself caring, or I might have to do it for you. "Have you or somebody in admin received a call from the police recently?"

"Yes. RPD Political Division sent us a letter. They requested that we have a supervisor send reports on you to some sort of loyalty committee."

"Well, good," Molly said, feeling her tail angrily cut a figure-eight from the air behind the chair. "I'm sorry to lay this on you, but although my place is near Port Orange and I speak a little Overlander, I'm not actually a lethal terrorist sleeper agent. So it shouldn't take too much time." Maybe she should be looking at Dyson's eyes instead of a pen on his desk, but she didn't want to. Why couldn't the police just work it out with her directly in some way? Why couldn't they just spy on her without her knowing about it, instead of making her go up to everyone she knew and tell them that—

"Why is all this happening, Molly?" BossBot asked with a flat note of anxiousness, folding his hands. "Is something wrong?"

"An ex-boyfriend of mine got involved in something he shouldn't have." A glance revealed that hadn't quelled BossBot's information-acquisition subroutine, so she quickly continued: "And my parents are less than—my parents manned a barricade during the coup, okay?" She noticed that her hands were nervously kneading the arms of her chair. " And the cops see that and see me hanging around with my crazy ex-boyfriend, and they think—"

"Are you a full citizen?" Dyson asked curiously.

". . . . No. They denaturalized my parents after . . . everything was over, and I'm listed as provisional citizen. So yeah, if they catch me doing something naughty, it could be serious. Which is why you'll never see me so much as jaywalk. I love Mobius. The way it is, I mean. I know families that left during the coup, I even know someone who works at the Lachels embassy, but I've never even asked about leaving. I don't want to cause the company any trouble—Do you have a problem with any of this?"

Dyson turned his eyes to the fluorescents on the ceiling, no doubt fixing all of the innocent details of her life into an appropriately paranoid mosaic. "Why no, Molly. I'd be, uh, honored." He seemed to come to a full decision and lifted a black index finger next to his head. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about that. But I do take this job seriously; I'm going to do it right."

Molly opened her mouth to say thank you before getting up to leave. Then she just sat there, staring at him with her mouth open. Pretty little head? "You'll what?"

"I mean, if I have to tell the police what you're up to, I'm going to make sure I know you well enough to certify you Grade-A, Government-Approved Law Abiding Raccoon. Sound fair enough?" he inquired, spreading his hands.

Was this happening? Nothing was happening. It was some unusual idiom of Dyson's native management-speak; a sleazy but meaningless glitch in BossBot's Subordinate Emotional Support subroutine.

And if it was happening, fuck it. There was some HR guy who you were supposed to complain to, and you could sue, but Molly wasn't some crybaby. Raising a stink would be more trouble than to answer a few phone calls before looking for someone to succeed Myron. "Sure," she answered with deliberate coldness, her dark eyes flat. "I mean, of course; yeah."

"Wonderful!" Dyson said, clapping his hands together. "Dinner? Next Cosmosday?"

On the way home Molly slowly thought over how best to discharge the obligation, how to prevent any interest from accruing on whatever weirdo books Dyson kept, wondering if anyone else in Advanced Materials had ever had this problem. Not a PhD, that would have drawn attention. Maybe another one of the grads or the support staff. It'd be easy enough to check for rumors behind Dyson's back; he wasn't a tyrant.

Molly blinked and squinted as the rumbling, squeaking electric train suddenly brought a blaze of light into the window. A rubble-filled lot stretched for almost an entire city block, blazing with blue-tinted halogen day at almost the very middle of the night. People crawled through the wreckage. Suits, insurance people; glowing red uniforms, army people.

How could you do it, Myron? You can't even remember when my birthday is, but you can give me nine kinds of bullshit to deal with. And now this crap with Dyson—

It was right then that she saw the catalytic effect. The trouble multiplier.

She could ask around behind Dyson's back. She could, if she thought it was a good idea to start being furtive and asking embarrassing questions about her boss, right at the same time as he acquired responsibility to report whether she was a traitor or not.

Or she could complain about him. And then if he suddenly . . . well, framed her for something, she could . . . say she was being framed. Probably a lot of people that got reported to the political cops did that, but the difference was that she was being framed, and the cops would see that.

If, you know, they didn't just say fuck it and lock the traitors' kid up. Put her on the pain bed and find out for sure what she's been up to.

But, she decided when she was back behind double locks in her apartment, it wasn't anything to worry about. Not yet, anyway. Right now she was going to put on the after-midnight Persona non Grata-rerun, sink deep into one of the pits in the disintegrating sofa and munch reheated clam chowder until she had to sleep—not long, she had a problem session to run tomorrow.

She had to proceed cautiously, she thought, luxuriating in the taste of shellfish and cream as though it were a long, hot bath. She couldn't just rush into this. There were any number of ways this could be neutralized. Dyson might not be very persistent. The company could side with her. The police could side with her.

Maybe Dyson was really a swell guy.

Maybe there was a way to put an icepick in his brain.

We shall see what we shall see.

VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 10\*: Uptown Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228

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**Uptown, Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228**

Taney bobbed his head up over the windowsill and got a flash of sun and color, but no movement. He did it again. Finally the heavy badger went up on one knee and took a hard stare out a corner of the shattered window with one black-streaked eye. The asphalt street had buckled like a throw rug under the treads of a heavy tank. Their hiding place: the first floor atrium of a dead apartment building; across the street: a gutted Mattress Madness. Punctured waterbeds were piled up in an ineffective barricade behind the door, thrown through the plate-glass windows, thrown everywhere. BLOW-OUT! declared a banner folding gently in the breeze.

Things had calmed down. One pock of a distant gas propellant gunshot, but Taney flinched no more than a dead man. You can't dodge a bullet.

"What?" asked Kilroy, sitting across the corner of the room. He was a big pair of eyes with a vestigial body. You could sense the nervous old skunk's skeleton jumping around under the flesh and the thin, almost hairy black fur that clung to his skin for dear life.

"I got nothing," grunted the badger, relieved.

"Light?" the skunk asked hungrily. Begging, a little.

"Yeah," Taney answered, embarrassed, as what was left of his squadmates pulled the little pack of Trapper's Cigarettes ("Finest Marijuana") from the vest-pocket of his uniform, right under the PATTERSON nametag. Kilroy Patterson was old school, from the Mobian Standard Army that had been both Mobian and Standard. Northern Front, stuff wide-eyed eight year old Taney had heard about: House-to-house fighting in Lee's Run and Ordelan; the frozen limbs and death-by-gravity of the southern Worm Mountains, the Vertical Campaign. Those guys were supermen, heroes.

Had Patterson been a coward then, too? Was that how he had lived through it?

Taney liked to think so.

"Just one," Taney warned, letting his husky body slide back down onto its rump. He picked up the sixty cal and broke it in half, exposing the mechanism to clean it.

"You still got ammo, what?" asked Kilroy, breathing out a lungful. He set the cigarette in the fur above his ear and went back to wiping down the EMP grenades. The tremor in his left hand had subsided.

"I figure the tee cees will hold out for another eight hours, maybe," mused the badger, glancing at his two tiny green boxes of stolen armor-piercing rounds, Foulke-Zero by make—rare finds, 'Botnik didn't have as much need for 'em as they did.

"Not long enough," the skunk replied, punctuating it with a smoky, hysterical little giggle. "We're stuck."

"Brass says we're still open to the south," Taney reminded him.

"They're holding on to this town too damn long. We can't keep this up."

There was a crunch by the entryway.

Taney flopped awkwardly back against the wall and floor, pressing himself as low as he could but still feeling like an upturned turtle. Kilroy's fingers scrabbled madly at the pistol on his hip and finally trembled it at the door.

With a few more solid crunches a large dog, Doberman by extraction, stepped through the empty floor-to-ceiling windowframe alongside the locked door. He wore a weatherbeaten brown-and-tan desert uniform, a wide-brimmed hat with a small skull-shaped pin winking from its center, and a permanent squint. A bulky plasma rifle hung from a strap over his shoulder.

Kilroy moaned in relief, snatching the joint quickly to his lips. "Chief," Taney said with fading fear and just a touch of awe. The dog acknowledged them with a curt nod. "What are you doing here?"

"Moving back from the LPs," the Chief replied. Mobian Standard Army Colonel K.G. Kraken had a hands-on management approach. "Radio intercepts say Mechanized's bringing in hardware, old Bucklers refitted for offensive launches. We're pulling out of here in ten hours."

"Damn!" said Taney. What he meant was Oh gods motherfuck we're going to die but for some reason he found it hard to speak his mind to Kraken.

"Hmm," Kraken gruffed. "My escorts bought it, so I need you two to—"

The air exploded in gunfire. Shattered ears meant something close, two blocks. Through a deaf aural fog the sound of breaking glass, then silence.

Taney lifted his head from the floor. Kraken, still on his feet, stared out the missing window with a look of dignified reproach. "So I need you two," he growled with exasperation, "to get me back to HQ. Gotta be there for a rendezvous in five hours."

"Who?" Kilroy demanded brashly. "Why are we waiting for some dime-a-dozen gunrunner?"

Kraken's toothy smile caught light like a signal lamp. "Loose lips, man. Now come on."

Taney pushed himself back up on his haunches, ready to go. What the hell? Kilroy's eyes asked, pleading for unity on the insubordination front. Frankly, there were some parts of the badger seconded the question.

Well, Taney guts responded, Kraken is what you call a leader. The look was part of it, certainly, and the way he gave statements rather than commands. But it would be nothing without the occult chemistry, that alchemically golden halo he carried even under gunfire, even in a mess like this.

With a FWUMP

the air was filled with coarse, gritty dust. Taney moved his limbs, opened his eyes and followed a ray of divine white sunlight to a small hole in one of the exterior walls, about the size of his fist. Stray hand-mortar. A pair of more distant blasts confirmed it.

"Ah," sighed Kilroy. The skunk left obscure trails in the plaster dust as he slithered to where Kraken had hit the dirt.

"Oh shit," Taney said. "You alright, Chief?"

". . . No," Kilroy answered, peering closely at the dog's face. "He's got metal in his brain."

Taney's mind ran into metal in his brain and tried to go around. Metal in his brain . . . . "We got to get a medic."

"Nah, it's coming out over here, too." The skunk pointed a bony finger. "Wide. Like two inches."

Taney was silent.

"It's bound to happen, sooner or later," Kilroy explained, smoke winding from his nostrils into the gently drifting streams of dust. "Help me get this gun off him."

"Come on," Sonic yawned, worming himself deeper into a nest of dry, tall grass like a repen mashing down a place to sleep. "I've been up for twenty-four hours."

"Your fault," Sally rejoined, which was true. "And you can do thirty-six without blinking." The problem was he'd been up longer, probably listening to the car radio last night, at any rate something better to do than sleep the night before the mission. "We move in an hour. If we're spotted I need you to wake Antoine while I get the packs together."

"You're always giving 'Twan a break," he whined, kicking his toe petulantly against the dirt.

"He's not as strong as you are. I need both of you. Stay awake."

"I will." He brought his bare knees to his belly, curling into a little ball. "I'm just going to rest my eyes a minute, here," he explained.

Sally turned her head with a weary sigh.

"Hey, the hedgehog needs his shuteye if he's gonna kick Ro-butt-nik out of this burg, right?"

"We're not here to fight," she reminded him. "We're here to talk and get out."

Sonic's whine was muffled by the dying leaves. Sally stayed quiet, but her guts hummed with an echo of his impatience, the same she'd always feel before throwing away a chess game to do something more important. Chess was like rebellion in that both shared a frustrating, unpleasant disjunction between strategy and tactics. Early in the game you know that certain things are necessary to put yourself in a position to win (control the center of the board, castle your King). But although a strong player could understand and to some degree feel the stress a pawn-protected Knight at c5 put on black, it had never compared for Sally with the electric certainty of pinning the enemy Queen on her King with a Rook, forking a Rook and Queen.

But unless you first focused on the amorphous long-term strategy, those opportunities would never present themselves. And so it was that the euphoria of the Robotropolis mission—her whole army united in a single fight, a single celebration—was already long-gone, a purely intellectual memory. Instead of shooing and blowing up, Sally's army needed to spend its time seeking alliances and keeping its logistics straight. And that was why she had brought Sonic and Antoine to hide behind a thick fallen tree at an sharp, artificial edge of the Great Forest (Hewlett was a logging town). Sally nestled close against it for cover, revealing nothing but her eyes watching the big, dead cornfield and beyond it, hell.

Not even State News could hide it anymore. The official story was that Standard Army had recently "invaded" Hewlett—maybe some through-the-looking-glass reference to their well-established underground presence in the town when Kilgore Kraken had offered a summit with her two months ago—and that Mechanized Army had come in to "free" it. The truth was buried somewhere. All she knew for sure was that it wasn't safe to go into Hewlett from the north, by road, and that thick pillars of smoke were rising against the dusk sky, bright at their burning hearts with a glow that wasn't the sun.

"City on fire," Sally breathed. Then conversationally: "Takes you back, doesn't it?"

No answer. Sally turned to see both of her escorts asleep, their burdens in a little pile between them.

Quills limited. Sonic could sleep on his back, but he hated it. He was curled on his side in a loose spiral, legs crooked together in the dirt, bare cheek resting against bare shoulder, breath coaxing upright the few little wisps of light blue, almost white fur on his upper arm.

She watched him, shamelessly. He mumbled once in his sleep, lips pursing and relaxing. The fingers of one hand twitched, and then the strangest thing to see: even as he lay almost perfectly still he grew. His quills brushed each other, his head slid lower with a quiet breath and the bend of his spine disappeared beneath his needlesharp outer curve, the twining of his two backs.

Sally tore her eyes away.

Life would be easier if he were ugly. If he had some disgusting, chronic ulceration of his bare skin; if his mangy fur were falling in clumps from his oozing sides. Then it would be the simplest thing in the world to string him on. He certainly wasn't smart.

"I don't need you," she whispered, unconsciously winding an auburn lock of hair tight around an index finger. "I've got the strength of my ancestors." She raised her face to the rolling clouds above. "Hey Grandpa, could you wake up Sonic and Tony if there's trouble?"

She listened to the rolling clouds for a moment, then dug in her pack for some dried apple. "Gee, thanks Grandpa."

xxx

When they took the cuffs off her wrists and the sack off her head, Sally shook her hair from her eyes and squinted against a whitewashed cinderblock room, the walls liked with bulky white rectangles, big round openings—industrial washing machines. A solid skunk in a buzz cut and a brown-and-green Standard Army uniform with Lieutenant's bars, labeled LOGAN, leaned against a plastic table mounted on the far wall. His arms were folded; his white snout angry, his ice-hot eyes ready to be furious.

Why couldn't she just set bombs until Robotnik gave up? Bombs were easy, but people . . .

"Thanks, Leonard, I'll take it from here," the skunk said in a voice with a touch of a northwestern farmer's twang. "Help Bristow empty the cages, okay?"

Sally glanced behind her to see her guard leave. He didn't shut the door, and though her gear had been taken away she wasn't in manacles.

Not dangerous, am I? Not important, am I?

"Miss Acorn, is it?" the skunk asked, raising one bushy black eyebrow, not standing up. "Sally the Fifth? Fifth person claiming to be her since the War, I mean."

"Princess Sally Alicia Acorn," Sally said firmly.

"Miss Acorn." The skunk nodded his head in imitation courtesy: "Colonel Logan. What brings you to our lovely city?"

"Colonel Kilgore Kraken."

"He's dead."

". . . I'm sorry," Sally said, forced to turn her eyes to the floor. Vidavin, she thought, recalculating . . . .

"It's not unusual," Logan pressed, shrugging it off. "I'm the third CO of this branch in under two years. What did he want with you, then?"

"Cooper—coordination between the Standard Army and my personal forces. I—"

"Well, sorry that didn't work out," Logan apologized, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. "Now tell me why you don't leave Hewlett with us, under guard."

"It is me," Sally stated. "Check my blood if you want."

"Fine, it's 'you.' Why should 'you' be trusted?"

"You mean," inquired Sally, stiffening her spine, "besides the fact that I was sworn from birth to guard and care for my people? What else?"

"Why not try ordering me to trust you, Your Royal Majesty—"

"We destroyed the most prominent Mechanized Army supply source in Robotropolis," she said, sensing that she couldn't sell herself : why don't you try begging him to trust you, Your Powerless Impotence? She glanced unsuccessfully for a chair—the bastard skunk had planted his striped tail on the only perch in the room, she realized—and settled for cracking her knuckles. ". . . But maybe that doesn't count for much with you."

"Counts for nothing," Logan said, getting squarely to his feet. His stare was beginning to burn hot, a pinkish tinge visible through the white fur. "We specialize in fighting Robotnik, protecting people, that sort of thing. Less in terrorizing entire neighborhoods to get on the news."

A dozen defenses were at hand. She ignored them: "Do you know what they think of you on the west bank?" she growled. "Bandits. Stealing cars, driving up food prices. Common thieves—"

"Don't you give me that!" bellowed the skunk, grabbing Sally's shoulders and throwing her against the washers with a hollow thud. Sally didn't fight, even when the grain of his irises loomed coarse, when he pressed her nose to the wellspring of his nasty breath. "This town protected us," Logan hissed. "Mechanized Army marched in a month ago for house searches, and from there on you don't know what they did, what they did to families; you know nothing. We've been bleeding for a month to get the people out of here, safe up to Corukas or into the forest. The people know who we are."

"I just told you—"

"They know here," Logan barked. "Here, in Bouville, in Corukas."

"Robotropolis doesn't matter?" she asked.

"Those knee-bending cowards've been chummy with Robotnik from the get-go," he spat.

"Oh." Sally said slowly. "Western Mobius is different."

"That's right."

"Do you get much money over the border?" she asked in a tone of practiced innocence. Mobius's northwestern border, of course. Lachels.

"Why should you know about our logistics, prisoner?"

"I shouldn't," Sally replied. "It's just that I've heard that story before. Brave, strong western Mobius and servile, fawning eastern Mobius. Aren't the same country, really. Corukas is closer to High Demon than to Robotropolis."

Whatever Kraken had been, it seemed that Logan was not a strategic thinker; the idea may not have occurred to the open-mouthed skunk before. "Lachels wouldn't fight a war of conquest."

"Try liberation," suggested Sally with the faintest smirk. "Corukas winds up on the front lines without defensible borders, but vigilance is the price of freedom, isn't it?"

"Their army is all missiles, mines and guns in houses. They don't have the troops to hold foreign territory."

Sally glanced out the laundry-room door at a set of storage cages—washers, storage? They'd set up HQ in a hotel—where Leonard and other uniformed Standard Army troops were moving heavy crates out to the upper floors.

"This is a Mobian army, Miss Acorn," Logan said firmly when Sally turned her gaze back to him. Was that sweat she smelled, along with unbrushed teeth?

"For now," she agreed.

Logan stepped back, nervously rubbing his whiskers. He looked bewildered, almost helpless. Then to Sally's horror he announced: "Look: in four hours the whole south end of this town will one big crater. I don't have the time to be insulted and accused—"

"Chicken."

"You—! If you'd like to stare down a missile platform, be my guest! Because I'd be happy to chain your lot to the pipes and leave you here to—"

"Where is it?" Sally interrupted again.

"Coming in from the north on the Ursus Minor," he said curiously.

"Probably a refitted interceptor platform, right? Tower? Buckler?

"Two Bucklers," he said. Almost asked.

"Alright," Sally nodded immediately. Let's call that an ask. "Give us three blasting blocks and put us on top of the route. My troops will give you all the time you need to be insulted."

"Yeah?" The skunk reached for his reflexive, sullen anger, twitching his tail threateningly up against his back. "And what do I do when your handlers in Mechanized intelligence pick you up, 'Sally'?"

"What am I going to tell them; that you're evacuating? They'll still attack. Unless I take care of those platforms," she argued, driving her right fist under his sternum, enjoying the rounded lips, the frightened blue eyes. Before he could take the offensive she slipped her left heel behind his and shoved, topping him to the tiles as surely as a rootless tree. "Now," she continued, planting her boot on his chest. "Can we have thirty pounds of Hulelaminide or do you wish to keep insulting us and questioning our motives, subject?"

"Did the Colonel show loyalty to his rightful ruler?" Antoine asked as he unzipped his satchel and flipped the gleaming latches on the black box inside. Under the lid were something that looked like a midget's crutch, a long, long tube with a flared, perforated cylinder at the end and something that looked like a gun.

"Some," Sally answered. Her fingers couldn't twist the screw on her flashlight's barrel-mount any tighter. She'd brought her Poiccard 335, a solid gun from Knothole's deep armory, Mobius's standard gas-propellant assault rifle during most of the War. "I used my we on him."

"What effect did it have?" Antoine asked, slapping the butt into the stock, screwing the long barrel and its flash/bang suppressor into place.

"Well, Antoine, I've found that the we doesn't mean much if you haven't set the stage for it—You like this angle?"

Antoine lifted the long scope to his one open eye and squinted from the window of the abandoned second-story apartment to which Standard Army's scouts had brought them. The boar, name of Brody, sat in the corner with one arm on the radio and one cup of a pair of headphones pressed to his ear; the slender marmot, who called herself Jenny, hunched by the wall. For a while she stared at Antoine's Royal Guard jacket, but now she was fascinated by Sonic's contortions. His right heel was on top of a shelf cleared of books; his upper body was draped low along the leg, eyes closed, quills low.

"It is satisfactory," Antoine decided. He slid the scope firmly into its mount.

The intercept point was a dark block about fifty meters north of their position on Randolph Street, the sidewalks strewn with burnt-out cars. Randolph was one of the few streets on the north end of town that could accommodate the Bucklers' width, so they'd likely get a shot. Six EMP grenades from the Knothole stockpile, Sonic's Jenks .357s, Sally's Poiccard 335, Antoine's Poiccard L7 and the blasting blocks. The EMPs stop the platforms, the guns handle the opposition, two blocks take out the platforms with one to spare.

It required a lot of skill. Luck couldn't hurt, but the main thing was skill.

"Your Highness." Antoine motioned to her as he set up his tripod, apparently asking for help. But he could set up his rifle blindfolded.

"What is it?" she asked when they were close enough to talk privately.

"It is not too late to withdraw," he muttered so very quietly, eyes busy guiding the barrel-mount onto the tripod's swivel. "With all due respect, Your Highness, you have promised this skunk too much. Even if Sonic can neutralize the troops, Jenny says that Mechanized has an attack helicopter patrolling the city airspace. It could be on us in less than a minute if they deploy it close to the platforms, which is what I would do."

"The factory was worse," Sally argued.

"Screw," said Antoine.

She raised an eyebrow as she tightened it down for him. "The factory was win or quit. This is the same."

"There's no—"

"See those guns! Huh!"

They both turned to see Sonic with his fists lifted to either side of his head, pumping his biceps one after the other. Jenny the marmot was staring pointedly at nothing, but not before Sonic had caught her staring at something. "Yeah. You like that?" He planted his right fist into his left hand and flexed, showing the tricep. "You want some of the hedgehog?"

"I want his head. In the game," Sally replied flatly. "You ready?"

"Always," he replied, wheeling his arms.

She turned to Brody. "Only Antoine shoots, understand? If there's any friendly fire, we're the cause."

"Be our guest," the boar shrugged.

"I'll make myself at home, then," Sonic replied with a wink. He slid two of the three satchels over his shoulders, pulled a pistol and pressed it against Antoine's head. The coyote went corpse-stiff.

"Sonic," Sally warned.

"Aw, he knows I don't mean nothing." Antoine's arms began to shiver. "Or he oughta. Look at him go!" Sonic snickered as he stowed his pistol.

"Sonic."

"Let's move, Sal," he growled, his rudimentary social sense evidently informing him that the room was, for some inscrutable reason, turning against him. "I'm bored." He stomped off to the back stairs, muttering.

"Are you alright?" Sally asked.

Antoine politely slid the rifle's mag home, locking his first high-velocity round into the chamber. "I am fine," he smiled, panting. "I will be fine in a minute."

She smiled apologetically. "Ready to play guardian demon?" she asked.

He smiled, he ached: "There is no need to ask, mon princesse." One of his hands reached up to repart his blonde hair. There was no way to dissuade her, of that he was certain—it was becoming more and more difficult to dissuade her from even the most extreme risks. But once she was committed, the best thing was to show the utmost confidence and poise. He cut his face from his stormy nerves, bottled his quaking guts. Keeping the squirrel who would be Queen from harm would be the easiest thing in the world.

And as it turned out, it was. The foolish guards sitting on the armor plate and walking by the platform's heavy treads were armed to the teeth with the heaviest plasma rifles a fellow could carry, all able to melt steel and all highly vulnerable to the EMP grenades that lit both of the launchers in an ascending cascade of blue sparks. His crosshairs hopped nervously from skull to skull, resting for a tense moment on a quick-draw rabbit until something invisible knocked her sparking gun off aim (he heard the report of Sonic's pistol a half-second later). The troops raised their hands, began to slowly back away. It was the easiest thing in the world.

Until they started taking plasma fire from the north.

"Merde," breathed Antoine, swinging his rifle's muzzle wide to the right. A pin stabbed his throat just at the base of his male's lump, a pin that rose and sagged under his snout as he breathed. He checked briefly on the Princess and Sonic in the meager cover of the stalled missile platforms, preparing the charges. The Princess was scanning the east side of the street, but Antoine was sure the shots had come from the west. She had no idea how to flee once the charges were set. Sonic was oblivious.

The coyote dropped magnification and slowly, carefully scanned the storefronts, the bass pulse of an approaching helicopter already undeniable. A plasma bolt lanced into the armor plate at a corner of one sparking tank and he traced it to a dark storefront, a little telltale puddle of melted glass magma-bright a moment on the sidewalk. Insufficient to draw a bead. "You must tell me when they have set the bombs," he informed whoever was listening, eye screwed to his sights. That is, you must speak when the Princess is about to run directly into a ray of sun-hot death. He repeated it like a mechanical public address: "You must tell me when they—"

"Now!"

Quick pulls of Antoine's finger sent a loose suppression pattern of shots onto the sniper's position, cracks dulled and weakened by the flash/bang suppressor. Eight rounds in five seconds kicked the hot, empty magazine onto the carpet; his arm quickly slid his secondary magazine into place. While his eye was away from the scope, he saw the far away window flash white, twice.

"Salo!" Antoine scrambled into place behind his gun and swung it madly to the window right as the invisible swine popped another flashbulb streaked with red, tried to murder his Princess again. Antoine zeroed in instinctively and breathed slow and steady, his finger tight on the cold curve of the trigger.

And merde, paused a moment too long. At the factory it had been reflexive.

I can kill again. For her. The trigger pull seemed jammed, but he did not eject a round to check the chamber. It was just heavy, so heavy.

I can. Mon Princesse—

All sightlines were sundered as the forward satchel erupted, shredding the tank treads to a cloud of glowing shrapnel. The axles shattered and the heavy missile clusters collapsed through the buckling chassis, igniting the backup octane tanks. A moment later the second platform went.

When Sonic returned Jenny was still at the window with her binoculars. "Ha!" the hedgehog laughed exuberantly, throwing himself into a needless spiny somersault as he reached the top step. "I don't believe it! She's on a roll!"

"I cannot believe it worked either," said Antoine, pressing a palm to his forehead. Combat still had him dizzy. "Where—"

"Sally's so cool," enthused Sonic, hopping like a sugar-crazed child. Combat still had him manic. "Where's she at?"

"Is she with you?" Antoine asked. Sonic stared at him as though he had announced an intention to rape a child. "Is she with you?" Antoine asked again.

Sonic spread his arms broadly. "Do you fucking see her?"

"I mean, did you see where she went? Is she hiding—"

"Didn't she get off the street?"

"We couldn't see."

"Were you watching?" Sonic accused, planting both hands into the coyote's chest.

Antoine tripped over his own boots and fell into the wall, squeezing against it as Sonic advanced. "I was watching for gunfire! You were right there!" Antoine yelled.

"Maybe you didn't notice that I WAS BEING SHOT!"

"Watch it! Get down!" hissed Jenny, scrambling from the window. All went deaf and blind as helicopter painted the windows with light, then moved off to continue its manhunt.

"It was your—" Antoine began, but he stopped because if he said more Sonic would kill him. Vengeance was written in every murderous spine

Oh gods, you've killed her. You've killed your Princess. Your cowardice, your unmanly weakness . . .

The coyote turned to the soldiers. "You have listening posts; radio them," he cried stupidly, standing at attention with his jacket flapping open like some drunken, shell-shocked veteran. "A squirrel! Female, five foot five! Tan fur! Blue vest!" He swallowed. His voice was starting to quiver. Oh gods, oh gods.

"Fuck," Sonic spat, stomping along an endless, tight circle, eyes on some alternate dimension full of severed limbs. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Brody twisted the headset transmitter to his tusks. "Ikiru five, Ikifu five, we need seventy-two on Mr. White."

"Mr. White?" asked Antoine.

"MIA," said the boar gravely.

"Fuck, fuck." Sonic was almost spinning in place. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck . . . ." The boar relayed the information. After ten seconds the hedgehog checked the ammo in both his pistols with machinelike speed and precision. "Fuck this shit. I'm gonna—"

"Hold it." The boar held up one hand. "Yeah. Blue." He sighed. "They've got her six blocks east. She's holed up in an alley across the street from one of the LPs."

"They sure?" asked Sonic.

"Checking," he snorted, probably wishing that Sonic did not appear ready to shoot him if they weren't sure.

Antoine sighed and sank to the floor. Sally had been playing it so loose, working her soldiers beyond their limits, stretching herself thinner and thinner. He couldn't slow her down, but maybe this scare could do what he couldn't, show her the breaking point without snapping her in two.

He didn't deserve to be near her, with his coward's heart and his ugly, sniffling face. But that didn't make it any less difficult to imagine life without her.

"We're lucky," Antoine sighed.

"Not luck," Sonic laughed, twittered, tension draining out of him with each breath. "She's tougher than jerky. Back to the hotel?"

"Not right away," said Brodin. "Mechanized is going to hit back hard. We should stay off the street for a few hours."

"If you say so." Sonic upturned a hamper and flopped on a pile of stale laundry. "Ah, shut-eye . . . ."

The honchos of Standard Army in Hewlett were waiting for Sonic and Antoine in the crazy-black front hall of the Regency Hotel, Standard's little base in town, blackout-lit with battery lamps. The head honcho was a skunk with a sleepy, kind of sheepish look about him. If if weren't for the lack of marks, Sonic might have thought he'd just been beat up. He had this weird insistence on shaking everyone's hand: "Are you all in one piece?" he asked.

"We are well," Antoine answered.

"Good," agreed the skunk—Kevin Logan, he said his name was. "Especially since Mechanized is operating out of the city hospital," he chuckled. "We'd have to do you up in the kitchen."

"Where's Sally?" asked Sonic, eyes on the troops streaming out with cases and crates.

"Coming in now; the LPs are evacuating." Logan couldn't look 'em in the eyes. Sonic didn't get it. "You've bought us time we can use. Thanks."

"No problemo," said Sonic.

"Hedgehog," the skunk grabbed Sonic's bare wrist and dragged him aside while Antoine talked with a saweet vixen (no fair!). ". . . What is it about your CO?"

"Uh." He shrugged uncomfortably. "You should talk to Antoine; he knows all that stuff."

"No, I don't mean . . . ." The skunk hesitated, eyes somehow tiny and lost in the black then said: "People—I was drafted, and . . . we did what we were supposed to do, understand? We held off the humans and beat them back. And then it's over; it's time to go home . . . and the one thing, the one thing that it was the King's job to do himself, to watch his damned Generals . . . ." He glanced at Sonic, maybe hoping for some kind of answer, but he didn't see much in the way of sympathy. "The Acorns failed us. But your CO shows up and in five minutes—I shouldn't tell you—in five minutes she socks me good, and what I do is trust her with the lives of two good soldiers."

Sonic smiled and shrugged. It was kind of nice when someone else noticed, too. "She's pretty sweet, isn't she?"

"The Princess." The skunk shook his head. "Maybe she's right. Maybe we should think bigger. I haven't even seen the capital for . . . . hell, the last ten years. I've never seen 'Robotropolis.' Have you—"

His words turned to uff as Sonic's shoulder drove into his chest. Then the gunfire started. Five seconds later Sonic was on the ground with four rifles pointed at his snout.

"What the hell is going on!" someone yelled as the vixen choked him with a barrel lengthwise on his neck.

"The hedgehog went nuts!" said the male badger who had just walked into the room. "He tried to kill the Chief!"

"And Her Highness!" added the little skunk indignantly.

"That's not her." Antoine said.

The rifle lifted enough from Sonic's neck to allow a hacking cough. All eyes were on the fallen, gasping squirrel in the blue vest, bleeding from shots in her shoulder and hip.

"Where is the Princess?" asked Antoine. He was calm except for the crazy terror in his eyes.

"That's her," said the badger.

"Help—" The squirrel gasped like nails on a chalkboard, clawing at the pistol by her hand. "Look out, the hedgehog—"

Sonic whipped his second pistol from its holster and shot the squirrel's gun spinning across the floor. The badger and vixen pressed their guns to him again, but they looked uncertain.

"That's not her," said Antoine, the crazy leaching into his voice

"Kilroy!" Logan screamed.

"Aw, hell!" the little skunk quavered. "We dunno her face!"

"The tail!" Logan shrieked.

"Tail?" asked Taney. The squirrel's long, fluffy squirrel tail curled behind her shoulders. But before Taney could get an answer the hedgehog was out from under the guns. By the time he was covered again he was kneeling on the squirrel's chest, pressing the muzzle of his pistol against her temple and pressing his teeth against her nose.

"Sarah Noizet," she choked out, "Sergeant, Serial Number Four-Seven-Two—"

"Don't kill her!" Antoine screeched.

Sonic thumbed back the hammer. "WHERE IS SHE?"

VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 11\*: Downtown Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228

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**Downtown Hewlett, 14 Vendemaire 3228**

The hunter/killer was painted for night ops, jet black. It was nothing but a loud searchlight picking over the fiery wreckage of the missile platforms. In a minute, it would get tired of that and start sweeping the nearby streets.

By then, Sally would be inside or she would be full of depleted uranium. She'd lost the crew protecting the platforms, but she'd somehow lost her rifle, too, and was legging it south down a windowless alley a couple blocks west of Randolph with her sidearm and a pair of EMP grenades; her troops were east. They'd have to meet later, there had to be a hideout here.

She reached a T-junction with a back-alley and stopped a moment. Small dirt courtyards for the flat dwellers and sagging, tar-topped one car garages. About ten yards to her right one of their big doors was open, revealing nothing but blackness. Inviting. The squirrel drew her pistol and held it low to the right as she approached with careful steps, her blue boots making no noise on the pavement. If there was anything in there now, she couldn't see it, and that meant Mechanized wouldn't see her.

The safety was off Sally's pistol before she finished swinging it forward. "I don't want to hurt you," she said. For a moment she'd mistaken it for her own reflection, but a cracked window was missing the curve of a broad shoulder, and once you saw that you could kind of see the rest: about Sally's height, legs together, arms at its hips. Sally lined her sights on the stomach to compensate for the kick. "Come on; hands up."

"Put the pistol on the ground," said the shadow in a soft alto. Some stray light picked out a white stripe on the tail. It was a skunk.

"I'm serious," Sally assured her. "Hands up."

"You should put the pistol on the ground," the skunk repeated coolly. "I'm less likely to injure unarmed criminals."

Sally couldn't see any colors or insignia, but this skunk was more trouble than she was worth, no matter who she worked for. "Alright, hold still," Sally ordered, shuffling cautiously backwards down the alley. "Just don't—" The skunk moved and Sally loosed a round right as she noticed the breadth of the skunk's shoulders, the angularity: shit she's in heavy body armor. And she was a demon. A ballet demon, dancing to Sally past two shots, three, four, five, six, seven—

Eight stopped her dead at two meters. Sagging, knees together, her left hand clutched to her chest. Maybe she's not dead, Sally thought hopefully. The body armor could—

The armor . . . .

The skunk was armored . . .

The skunk was coated in overlapping, interlocking plates of what looked like black ceramic: they silently slid and made way for each other as she breathed, hugging her like skin. The back of her hand was delicately scaled, and a thick case enwrapped her skull, releasing only her pointed ears and her grimacing eyes and mouth. From the shoulders jutted large guard-plates, each inlaid with an unreflective green seal of Mobian Internal Security Office.

Sally gaped as the skunkthing raised its head and looked into her eyes. The fist clamped to its chest slowly unknotted and gingerly traced the rounded dent in the armor.

The white-furred lip slid from its bright white fangs as it snarled.

Oh gods oh gods oh gods, Sally half-thought half-breathed as she sprinted away up the alley. Which way, right. Street ahead; a big, blue-black swatbot tromping into the gap—

Grenade, she thought as it swiveled its guns. She yanked one from her belt, heard its pin ting off the pavement behind her feet, and lobbed it at the bot's legs. "Shit!" the skunkthing yelled right behind her. Sally sped up, kicked her legs forward and slid down under the aim of the bot's guns, the asphalt tearing at her legfur. The grenade popped blue. The bot tottered backwards, dropping its arms. Sally spun around onto her back and leveled her pistol between her knees, back down the alley.

The skunkthing screamed with fury, sprinting at her from ten yards away. Why was it so far? Sally wondered. She aimed for the rapidly approaching head and realized that it must be electronic—it had must have been afraid and run from the EMP.

She pulled the trigger. Click. Oh shit—

The skunkthing was on her. The bony shell bruised the squirrel's flesh; its clicking hands reached for her neck. Sally desperately swung and smacked her pistol square into the thing's left eye, just beneath the armored forehead. It muffled its roar with both hands while Sally squirmed out from under it on her belly, reaching blindly back to her belt to find the last grenade—no, a vise that crushed her wrist and slammed it to the pavement. Something pushed the back of her head, hard—

Pain, the grit of the alley in Sally's cheekfur, and such a heavy weight squeezing down on her lungs, hurting her breasts. "I can't breathe," she tried to say, hearing only a high pitched grunt. She reached for her belt, which was important somehow, but there was something big and hard on either side of her.

The thing. The thing was sitting on top of her, the knee-plates cutting into Sally's armpits, its weight pressing down on her back. Sally felt for her pistol, couldn't find it, and remembered her empty clip.

"HEL—ppp!" Sally mmphed as the thing clamped a hand around her snout. It yanked her head up, wringing a squeak from her snout as its claws found the hollow in her neck. There was a sharp jab, a hiss, another squeak.

"There," it said. The fingers stroked the spot they had struck, the place that felt cool, the coolness that was spreading fast. "Go to sleep."

Sally moaned and tried to shake her muzzle.

"Shhh. Close your eyes. Go to sleep."

Sally couldn't feel her arms. She could see them lying in front of her, little bits of oily dirt trapped in the brown fur. Her eyes closed.

"That's a good prisoner."

"Stand up."

The world rocketed back with a shout. Sally was on a cold floor, slumped against a wall, hands behind her back.

"Stand up." The skunkthing took a fist of red hair and hauled Sally screaming to her feet. "Shut up. Step forward. Step—good." Sally stumbled and almost fell. What was wrong with her feet?

"Eyes forward," the skunkthing barked with a smoldering frown. "Don't look at me, eyes forward."

Forward was a blue curtain. An operating room. The sparkle at the base of Sally's vision was a tray of surgical tools. "What—"

"Shut up," it growled, clamping a hand just tight enough on Sally's neck to make breathing a conscious act. A few seconds of obedience and it released. "Good. Stay until you receive further orders. My swatbots will tell me if you move." Sally remained still as the thing walked out of her frozen field of vision, the clicks of its boots (its feet) withdrew and a door squeaked.

Okay.

What the hell is it—

Okay.

Her muscles were sore and stiff; she must have been out for hours. A gleaming-clean, empty operating room, black tile and blue cloth. Was this Ironlock?

Was this the rest of her life?

"Sally?" Oh, that cruel, smiling voice. "Hello?" he asked again. "You can talk now. Miss Acorn?"

Sally shuffled to face her interrogator. Kolensky wasn't in the dress uniform she was used to from the news, rather a baggy, too-big set of black-and-gray urban combat fatigues, red and green patches for Mechanized Army and ISO on his wrinkled sleeves. He pulled a chair up to a tray of scalpels, delicately pulled them aside and opened a pcomp. "I know it's you," he said, not bothering to meet her gaze. "We've checked your genetic markers. We haven't met, Miss—"

"Her Royal Highness Princess Sally Alicia Acorn."

"Yes, hello, I'm Captian Snively—"

"I know who you are, too, traitor." She rolled her head and flexed her narrow shoulders, trying to feel what kind of give there was to the stuff they had put on her.

"Don't do that," tutted Kolensky, wagging a long index finger. "It will rub your fur away. Unsightly."

Plastic ties digging into her underfur. One held her wrists behind her back, a looser one hobbled her ankles—her boots were gone, along with her belt and vest, she realized. Another tie collared her neck, pressing some broad piece against the top of her spine.

"What's on my neck?" she asked. "Does it shock me? Blow my head off?"

Kolensky's laugh was uglier in person; wrinkles exploded at the corners of his eyes. "I don't know," he lied. "Ask Amanda. She put it there."

"Amanda?"

"You met her just now."

The collar seemed to shrink. "What is . . . what is it?" demanded Sally.

Sally had always hated Kolenksy's smile, but now she was really beginning to detest it. "She is a combat robot."

"What?"

The human nodded with quiet, maddening reticence.

The feet weren't real. Standing out in Sally's memory was the tip of a metal rod in the armor at the side of the ankle. The rest of it could've been . . . grafted, on top. But if it was a skunk they had cut off her feet.

". . . It's a skunk," Sally insisted. She was terrified, she realized, her soft, fearful features reflected in the human's quiet glee. Just thinking about the skunk, she was terrified.

"Ask her what she is, if you won't listen to me," Kolensky shrugged. "Now where's Knothole?" Sally read the new smile-lines sprouting on the human's face; she must be surprised. "We have records that refer to it. Where is it?"

"Fuck you," she growled, screwing her eyes to the empty black wall behind him. She felt stronger. The drugs must be wearing off.

The human bowed his bald head and shook it sadly. "Acorn, relax. You're not going to escape and believe it or not I'm not going to hurt you. Good . . . interrogation, takes time, and I don't have it. Your troops may already know we have you; they could be evacuating the bunker right now. What I want you to think about," he said, lifting his blue eyes and reaching a limp hand out to her like hers were free to take it, like she was supposed to believe any of this shit, "is your future. It doesn't have to be as hard as you think it does. There's no need for this to end in blood and tears. Think about that. Are you thinking about it?"

"Fuck you," she spat, too furious to throw his faux-cheerful voice back at him. "An Acorn doesn't betray her subjects."

Kolensky cocked his head like a curious bird: "Are you sure? You don't have to die; you don't even have to go to prison. Would an Acorn betray her subjects to be put under quiet house arrest in a city of her choice?"

"Fuck you," she snarled. She was a wild beast. She could eat concrete, chew steel.

"How about exile in an old island mining colony?" he suggested in all seriousness. "Life on the beach; a warm blue ocean. We'd even give you your real name to—"

Gleaming toothy maw in a roaring tan face, halo of red fire. "FUCK YOU!"

"Even to see your parents?"

Sally tottered backward into the wall.

Kolensky nodded with more of his obviously feigned sympathy, every bit of him laughing. "I'm a good guesser," he said. "Don't worry, though, it doesn't matter. We've already decided what to do with you."

By the time it finally left her lips, you killed them was: ". . . you killed them?"

"No," he said. He slipped his pcomp back into its black case and slowly traced the zipper around its edges. "It was suicide. Read the papers, you dumb bitch." The OR doors flapped closed behind him.

She sobbed only once. He didn't see. Nobody had ever seen since she was five, since she was a wretched, squealing, pathetic little whelp, and no one would ever see. The Acorns are a tree, Sally, a big, sturdy tree. Father and his fathers are the trunk; we are the branches. And when her roots were first cut from her, hugging herself tight in the dark bunker, knowing the bad army people knew where Knothole was, that they would come in now and do the most terrible, horrible things to her and her friends, feeling so dry and brittle and helpless . . . .

Fuck it. Fuck them. Fuck Kolenksy. He'd let things slip. She might be able to escape from Hewlett in the short term—she hadn't left town; Kolensky would only wear urban combat fatigues near urban combat. And he sported a pistol on his hip. If she could free her arms and get it away from him, then—then she would have a pistol in a hospital that was probably filled with Mechanized Army soldiers.

But that might not be a bad thing. It would keep her from talking. She wouldn't talk. She was Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea, Heir to the Throne, and she knew her duty, written on her heart in deep scars.

Sally snapped out of her thoughts as the doors opened and it was the thing, oh gods the skunk thing was back. It clicked across the tiles to one of the swatbots and went down on one knee, the plates of armor covering its backside sliding improbably. Thick armored fingers probed a hole punched in what you would call the swatbot's right thigh. One curled and gently tugged a bundle of optic cables, some black and fried. The creature looked up at the bot's head, put its hand on the armor beside the hole and rubbed with a dry sound.

Then it stood and turned to Sally. Behind it the swatbots lowered their guns, turned and lumbered towards the still-swinging doors, the one dragging its crippled leg.

"Hello, Sally," the half-skunk said cheerfully, clasping its hand-things behind its back. Its smile lifted the corners of its lips under the contours of its face-armor; one black eye was still infused with angry red from the knock Sally had given it. It gleamed like a polished statute, a life-size trophy.

". . . . Hello," Sally tried.

"I'm Ess-See-Ay-Null-Null-One," it continued just as pleasantly, "but when people talk out loud they call me Amanda. Don't be frightened. I'm going to take good care of you."

"I bet," Sally scoffed before her fear could stop her. But Amanda didn't hit her; Amanda's smile disappeared as she sucked her lower lip between her teeth. "What's wrong?" Sally asked cautiously.

"You," answered Amanda. "I need to give you lots of help. That's my function."

Kolensky had said—"Are you a robot?"

"Serial number Ess-See-Ay-Null-Null-One," she recited again with what Sally felt sick to see was pride. "Special Combat and Apprehension Robot Number One."

Not even a fanatic could agree to. . . it. That. The black armor imprisoned her almost completely. The eyes and a little bit of fur around the nose and mouth were free, and so were the palms—hiding them would probably be bad for fine motor control. You'd have thought the feet might be important, too, but no: they had cut those off. Sally snuck a glance before she could feel dirty. It didn't look like there was some kind of bathroom access panel. That must get complicated. And putting Sally to sleep with what, her finger?

It was disgusting. It was nerve-wracking. Sally couldn't stand to look at her, shiny like a bug, hiding god knows what scars and wet, unhealing wounds behind that gleaming, tight armor, so tight that—

Oh gods, they must have cut her breasts off—

"You're not a robot," Sally insisted.

"Yes I am!" laughed Amanda, lifting a black lizard-paw to cover her giggle.

"What did Kolensky tell you," she shouted, almost panicking. "That, that you came off an assembly line?"

"No." Amanda used a voice reserved for explaining to four-year-olds. "I was constructed specially."

"Did he tell you how?"

"Do you mean Amanda Polgato? Captain Kolensky made me out of a skunk," Amanda explained.

". . . . oh."

"Don't talk about her anymore," Amanda ordered.

Sally shivered, wishing her arms were free so she could wrap them together. It was cold in here. "You're the boss," she said quietly.

Amanda nodded firmly. "That's better. But don't call me Boss. A robot calls what it takes orders from 'Commander.'"

Sally was instantly and acutely aware of the bend and poise of her own ankles. "What?" she asked blankly.

Amanda smiled sweetly. "You're going to take orders from me."

"Oh gods," Sally squeaked.

"What was that?"

"Nothing!" Sally yelped. They couldn't just . . . change you. Make you into another person. There was a book she kept in her bathroom that said they couldn't do that. They couldn't.

"I've never had a bot like you before, but Captain Kolensky says that I'll be a good commander for you," Sally heard Amanda say. Sally jerked reflexively backwards and saw Amanda reaching her hand out, surprise and disappointment on her features. She had tried to touch Sally's face.

Sally pressed herself against the wall. "Are you okay?" Amanda asked, reaching her complicated fingers for Sally's cheek again. "Answer, Sally. How are you?"

She tried to squeeze herself into nothing. "I don't know," she squeaked.

Amanda seemed to respect this, reclasped her hands behind her back. "That's okay. If you have problems, I'll take care of them. That's my function now."

They couldn't do that. "Fools! I'll Show Them All!" Mad Science in Fiction and Fact had a chapter called "Brainwashing." It covered hypnosis and drugs and everything and it was crap, it wasn't real. Drugs and electricity would wreck your brain, ruin you. Hypnotic suggestion couldn't make you do anything you didn't want to do.

Maybe they skewer it maybe they know right where to go and they shove a long thin needle through the bone and into the brain and you jerk once because there is a needle in your brain and they have hundreds of long wires leading into you and you jerk in the chair where they tie you because they are shooting electricity straight into your brain, hundreds of fine wires doing fine work, 'Amanda' is fine work, she looks authentic she's the real deal and when she wants (they want) she's cruel or she's gentle, hospitable, she'll be your server tonight, the special is brain damage, it's very good I've had it myself it's mouth-watering, water drooling out of your hanging open mouth

Thanks, Amanda; that was great! Could you send a big "I Obey, Master Robotnik" back to the kitchen for me? And the check.

Sure thing! Let's see, that comes to . . . yikes! You'd better just put this on and start serving the customers.

Well, I do live only to serve! (They laugh.)

Sally's blind horror was interrupted by Amanda ripping her from the wall and clamping her in a headlock.

"You're thinking about hurting yourself, aren't you?" she demanded worriedly, ratcheting her fat, smooth elbow even tighter under Sally's snout. "Answer!"

"Ungh—no," Sally grunted.

"Captain Kolensky said you might," Amanda groaned. "He said you might lie to me."

"Fuck you," Sally muttered weakly, trying to clear her throat.

Kolensky's chosen torture was subtle. Was it subtle? Well . . . fuck it, it was effective. Sally couldn't stand Amanda. She wasn't just physically unpleasant; it was . . . Sally couldn't stand thinking about her. It was like having your body being slowly turned to stone from the legs up by a medusa, like being ripped apart on the edge of a black hole. Everything became a grueling, enervating trial: a walk down the hospital hallway, dragged with Amanda's hand clamped on her arm; a visit to a hospital bathroom, spent with the stall door open and Amanda waiting right outside in case she tried to 'hurt herself.' Every moment was a ticket to muscle-shivering exhaustion, and Sally couldn't be tired, she had to stay sharp, stay on guard, because at any moment, at the moment she couldn't take it anymore, Amanda was going to ask politely: where's Knothole? Or maybe that wouldn't be the play, maybe they'd take her to some horrible chair, the Brain-Skewer-O-Matic (fake, of course, all fake, it was impossible, it wasn't real), and let her give her people away as she panicked. She couldn't panic. She wouldn't. She was Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea, and she was going to stop thinking about Amanda—

"Here."

Sally blinked. Amanda, on edge since she'd started worrying about Sally 'hurting herself,' had led her through the empty halls and up an elevator. They had been on the fourth floor, where were they now? Sally checked a plaque by the wooden door's frosted window.

**564—Remote Neural Stimulation**

I am Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea. I will not betray my people. This will . . . it will break against me like water against a rock, wash over and go away . . .

Amanda opened the door. "Go inside," she ordered.

Sally walked into the doorway and stopped—she'd never seen one before. On both sides of the room were tables with three computer monitors a piece, keyboards and less normal terminals. On the far wall, the centerpiece: a wide pedestal topped by a cushioned bed of some tough black material, rising a bit less than a meter from the tiled floor. Above it dangled mobile metal wands, coiled with wire. Padded black cuffs lay open on the bed, ready to grab a patient's wrists and ankles.

"Do you know what that is?" Amanda asked behind her. She almost sounded frightened herself.

"That's a remote neural induction driver," said Sally.

"Do you know what it's for?"

"Treating nerve damage. Leprosy."

"Do you know what else it's for?"

Sally said nothing. Everyone heard about the 'pain bed.' If you didn't, there was a sign above the control terminal:

**WARNING! DANGEROUS EQUIPMENT**

Improper operation of the Halifax Neural Induction Driver can cause extreme pain and convulsions. Follow all safety instructions. Only properly licensed physicians may operate this device.

Evidently Kolensky had given up on subtlety.

"I won't injure you," the skunk said, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Go and sit on the bed."

I am Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea. I will not betray my people and I will not betray myself. I will not bow to this.

"Sally, I want you to sit on the bed and wait. That's an order."

I am Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea. I will not betray my people and I will not betray myself. I will not bow to this.

"Sally?"

"I will not," she said.

Snatches: on her knees, her skull filled with the dull stun and pain just blooming on the crown of her head. "Piece of junk!" The grout-lines in the tile floor sliding past one after another under her butt while her collar dragged her away from the door. A hint of the skunk's real, immense strength as Amanda hoisted her on to the bed with one arm. Tears of fear burning in Sally of Acorn's eyes but they will not fall, they will not, even as waves of pain rebound and cross inside of her, as the cuffs inflate around her bare ankles, squeezing them into place. Amanda sliced through the plastic that bound her wrists, forced her onto her back. She was Sally of Acorn, oh Gods no, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea. She would not break. She would not speak.

"Open, Sally."

Amanda was looming over her, dangling a horrible red jellyfish, long tentacles brushing her face. It took Sally a moment to recognize it as some kind of mouth guard, like a boxer's.

"Sally, open." Sally pursed her lips closed. The skunk frowned. "Do you want to bite your tongue apart, Sally?"

Sally nodded fiercely, gasping breaths through her nose like sobs.

Amanda shook her armored head sadly. "Poor Sally," she sighed. Then she twisted Sally's ear and forced the plastic into her scream. The straps went around her head and fastened tight. Sally tried furiously to spit the thing out, but couldn't.

"That's right, Sally," Amanda said sadly, fingers with a hint of something sharp tracing her fur alongside Sally's left eye. Sally of Acorn was distantly aware that she couldn't even answer questions now, that the torture was pointless and inexplicable, and that the Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea was going to endure it.

Amanda turned to walk to the terminal, stopped, looked back down. "I'm sorry I called you junk," she said. "I didn't mean it."

She left Sally of Acorn's field of vision; a chair squeaked. Then a hum under her, all around her, she would not break, oh gods it's going to happen, I am Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximillian, oh gods, of Andrea, oh gods, the wands were whirring, fanning out, oh gods, I will not betray my people, oh gods no, I am—

A bridge, back arched like a bridge, she was a bridge, a bridge you could drive a truck over her stomach hard without any air in it, no air in her body, her body that was unmoving and hard like stone and insensitive like it wasn't her at all dull dead oh gods it hurts it hurts oh gods stop stop please gods no it hurts please

Something left her, and it still hurt and still she couldn't move . . . and then her muscles cracked, crumbled and she slid back down onto the bed. The room was silent except for the hum of the machine.

Then she started screaming. Before, she hadn't been able to breathe. It had seized control of everything—except her heart; she remembered the flood slamming again and again through her carotid artery. Just her heart and her brain and her spinal column. Scream now. Scream the pain out of you.

A touch on her forehead. Amanda. Sally's mouth worked inarticulately around the plastic as she screamed. I am—I—am Sally of Acorn, Daughter, oh gods, Maximillian, Daughter of Amanda, please stop, Sally of Acorn, I will not, I will not, I am, I am—

"This will calm you down," said the robot. "It calms down prisoners. I know it hurts. I know you're frightened. I'm sorry. I won't injure you. I even took you to the bathroom, so you wouldn't make a mess." She glanced over her shoulder at the terminal then said to the squirrel: "You'll have an auto-sequence for twenty-second stimulation and forty-second breaks. Just half an hour, okay?"

She didn't try to scream, because her body couldn't move, and it hurt.

VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 12\*: Downtown Hewlett, 15 Vendemaire 3228

**Downtown Hewlett, 15 Vendemaire 3228**

Her ears were hot. Her eyes felt too big for their sockets, itchy and burning. They kept blinking: half-open, half-shut. When she breathed in the air was cold, chilling her wet lips. When she breathed out it was fire.

Fingers pressed into her left shoulder, digging past the long hairs, seeking her skin. She heard a soft, gentle shhhh and her arm's twitching began to slow. The fingers found her other shoulder, then the thighs of both legs, midway from hips to kneecaps. The muscles began to slide and unknot. Her eyes drifted closed and rested.

The fingers were gone. She was alone in her endless darkness, in her bone-deep ache. Oh no. She whined in misery, like a wounded repenomamus lying in the wild grass. Oh no—

Then they returned with a friend: a soft cloth, wet and cool. It wiped the lids of her eyes, cleaning away the stickiness and sting, then pressed water on to both sides of her fevered ears, soothing the burning skin through the sparse, sharp hairs. Then it wiped away the clumps of snot that had sprayed from her nose, dried to a crust by her black nostrils or run down to mix with the spittle on her lips and cheeks.

A finger pressed into the aching ball of muscle at the back of her jaw and forced her to relinquish some hard, intrusive contraption from between her teeth. A moment later a cold plastic nozzle came to her lips. She took it hungrily—cold water, freezing—gulped greedily, feeling it spilling into her blood, spreading down her limbs, infecting her gently, sweetly. The desperate, burning heat was soon broken and she settled down to drink, sucking rhythmically. Her darkness was soft and cool, perfect. Even in the pain she purred with contentment.

"Aren't you thirsty," Amanda chuckled.

Sally of Acorn, Daughter of Maximilian and Andrea—

Sally squeezed her eyes and moaned at the familiar knot of pain in her heart. Restraints rooted her helpless, sweat-soaked body to its place of torture. And she had to fight.

"Sally?"

Another swallow or two of the water, her cheeks contorted as though it were urine, and she spat the bottle away.

"How are you, Sally?" Amanda asked, her armored face peering askew at Sally's.

"It hurts," she answered, weakly. Oh gods, it hurt.

"I know just the thing . . . ."

"It hurts everywhere," Sally said again with sudden horror. This wasn't right. You couldn't hurt everywhere. Then the fingers were adding more pain in her neck, stressing the tendons, again seeking the hollow of her throat. "No!" she begged, unable to turn away, "No more—mmk!" The spray pierced her again. "What—"

"Shush," Amanda said, laying a finger across Sally's lips. Sally's mouth slid open under it; her wrists went slack in the cuffs. "Relax," said Amanda. "It will make you better." She watched Sally's brown eyes blink slowly. "See?"

"It feels nice," Sally answered softly, uncertainly.

"Better in every way," Amanda assured her.

"Please," she said.

"What is it, Sally? What do you need?"

". . . I don't want to be a robot," she croaked.

Tough padding squeaked as Amanda eased herself up onto the pain bed beside Sally, her smooth armored leg against Sally's soft arm. Her face was not stern, but serious. "You are a robot, Sally."

"But . . . ." Sally turned her eyes, as though there were some clue to the nightmare on the ceiling. "No . . . I'm not. . . I don't have armor."

"It's not installed yet," explained Amanda. She smiled, sliding her fingers into Sally's hair, coarsely combing it. "Silly."

"But I don't have anything."

"Yes you do." A wave of tingling fear filled her insides, strange and alien. "Your locator," Amanda continued.

"My what?" asked Sally.

Amanda slid her hand around Sally's neck and tapped on the hard piece. "You talk to me. You say: Here I am." Amanda tapped again. Sally's secret voice was a sparrow's: "Here I am," she chirped.

"No," breathed Sally, wriggling, waking the lingering pain in her exhausted muscles as she arched her back and hips against her bed. She had to get these things out of her; she had to—

"You are my robot." Amanda promised, her gleaming face looming close. "I'm your commander."

"No," she repeated. "No . . . ."

"You obey me. I take care of you."

"No—"

A hand rested softly on Sally's forehead, pressing her to the padding. "Don't say 'no,'" Amanda commanded.

Sally was quiet.

"I'm almost a year old, now," Amanda continued with a strange, muted look in her black eyes. "It's hard to remember waking up for the first time . . . I was—confused." Her hand curled, fingerjoints bending one after another in perfect sequence. She turned it over, studying it like some abstract sculpture: skunk palm, robot claws, skunk palm, robot claws . . . . "I couldn't tell what I was. I couldn't recognize—things. I couldn't think." The organic half of her face fell, blank eyes lost in the dim, formless memory. "It was terrifying."

Amanda's eyes turned to Sally's. "You don't know what you are, do you?" she asked.

The squirrel said nothing.

"Don't be afraid, Sally," Amanda said. "You're something new: a brand new robot. It's a wonderful thing to be. When we get to Robotropolis I'll refit you, program you. Make you strong and good." She turned her eyes down the length of the squirrel, appraising the raw material, the toned muscle of the arms and legs. "You'll be my reconnaissance bot."

"Recon," said Sally.

"Mmm-hmm," she decided. "I'll program you to be very tricky, very sneaky for me. Very helpful and good." Amanda smiled, reached out a hand and scratched behind Sally's ears. "You'll be beautiful in armor."

"Beautiful," said Sally.

"Very beautiful," Amanda assured her. "I can see." Her soft fingertips smoothed the fur along the top of Sally's snout back into her head-hair. "I'm going to stand you up now," Amanda announced. "Then I need you to cross your arms behind you and hold still. Do you understand, Sally?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Call me Commander," Amanda chided gently.

"Yes, Commander," the squirrel answered.

Amanda smiled, pressing a button to deflate the cuffs around Sally's wrists. "You're a fine bot."

Sally's bed released her, but she stayed still until Commander put a strong arm under her back and helped her to her feet. Then Sally held her arms as she had been told, clasped over her tiny tail for Commander to tie them. "Look, Sally. This is a useful tool." On the inside of Commander's hard forearm there were many things. One thing was a tiny slot. A white plastic cable-tie whirred out, curling away from Commander's arm. Commander used it to wrap Sally's wrists snug, and another to fix her ankles, too.

"Too tight?" asked Commander.

"No," Sally answered. Then she stood and listened while Commander explained.

A good machine is the most wonderful thing in the world. It makes people happy; that is what machines are for, why there are machines. Some special machines can make people happy all by themselves, without help. They're robots. Robots make people happy by being useful to them, to their owners. They do that by obeying their commands, and their commanders. If a robot didn't obey, if it didn't have an owner, then it wouldn't make anyone happy. It would be unnecessary. Useless. Junk.

That would be terrible. That would be the most awful thing imaginable.

But Sally and Commander were owned by Mobian Internal Security Office—Commander showed Sally the etchings she bore on her shoulders. A government agency, Commander explained, for everyone in Mobius. By serving their owner, they made all of Mobius happy and safe.

Commander knew it was hard for Sally to obey now, before she was well programmed. She was very proud of Sally. She brushed Sally's fur with her fingers.

The city wasn't safe to leave yet, to go to Robotropolis. Commander asked if Sally was hungry. Her belly was very empty and grumpy, so Sally said yes Commander. Commander told Sally to follow.

Commander's tail was much bigger than Sally's, tall and full with long black fur. Sally watched it sway back and forth as Commander walked, and as Sally walked right behind. It was pretty and relaxing to watch. Once Sally walked a little too close, and the long fur brushed her face, tickled her nose.

When Commander told Sally to stop they were in a hallway lit by a vending machine. Commander asked Sally what she would like the most. Sally looked and saw there were Kinney's, which were big and had lots of peanuts, so she said that one. As she said it the wire began to spin, and the food dropped, all by itself. Sally looked at Commander, her face asking, and Commander tapped her finger against her head armor. She had talked to the machine and told it what to do, she explained, and the machine had obeyed. Sally asked if the vending machine could talk. Commander said a little, but it didn't have much personality.

Commander unwrapped the candy bar, broke it in two and fed it to Sally, who chewed and crunched and swallowed hungrily. She told Commander thank you with her mouth full of food, but Commander didn't answer. Commander was quiet, eyes distant. Sally asked Commander what was wrong, but Commander told her to shush. Sally obeyed.

Commander was thinking. Talking to other machines Sally couldn't see.

Then Commander said that they had to leave the hospital. Now.

Sally followed Commander's black tail into an elevator and down a hall, to a green door with a red sign telling them EXIT. Commander laid a firm hand on Sally's shoulder to steady her. Sally needed to be brave, now, Commander explained, and quiet, like a fully functioning recon bot. She should follow close. If there was trouble, she should hide close by and wait for Commander to tell her what to do. Sally said yes Commander. Commander squeezed her shoulder, then pulled her pistol from the holster welded to her hip. She laid her wrist against the silver doorbar and lifted her free hand to count down, dropping fingers. Three, two, one.

The door slammed wide open and Sally followed close behind out onto a narrow loading dock between two large hospital wings, leading out to an alley under a black-blue, not quite dawn sky. There were loud sounds close, blocks away, explosions and gunfire. Sally focused on Commander and her orders as she followed down the cement steps and across the cement to a black car left by the alley. As they approached the car chirped, opened its locks to them and coughed to life. It obeyed Commander well.

Another shot, closer than the rest. Shouting. Commander lifted her gun and fired rapidly off to her left, up the alley. Sally didn't see what happened after that because she was crouched half-behind a dumpster, eyes on the cement, quiet and waiting. What was happening was none of her business; the sounds of dying gunfire, then of collision and combat, were not for her. She had to be quiet, and to wait.

"Sally!"

Sally looked up and saw Sonic's green eyes wide, his mouth open with surprise and the beginnings of a raw, voracious smile. His expression had no time to change as Commander's knuckles plowed into his left temple, skewing his eyes, turning his head with a sharp thwack. He tumbled down, quills scraping and snapping as he landed with his arms spread supine, unmoving. Commander's toes scraped loudly as she stepped over a dead rabbit—Commander and Sonic were in the middle of several bodies leaking dark red onto the cement—and quickly knelt to put her fingers to Sonic's neck.

"NO!"

Sally leapt to her feet, ran two long steps and delivered a tackleball block, barreling her shoulder into Commander's face and chest. They rolled off the hedgehog in a tangled heap, falling side-by-side on the cold cement. Commander used a second to look at Sally, just a second staring at her malfunctioning bot with her bruised, wounded, angry eyes.

But the second was too much.

Commander spun back to Sonic, her steel-hard fists cocked and ready, to discover that Sonic was pressing a gun to her forehead. She threw her arms forward to protect herself and shift her inertia as she fell onto her back, causing the bullet to crack millimeters over her head and puncture the car's fiberglass with a hollow chuck. But Sonic was already rolling to the side, and Commander had no defense as he slid next to her, slammed the muzzle of his gun against her temple and pulled the trigger.

Commander's head instantly slammed into her shoulder; her whole body jerked as her outer skull desperately strained to spread the massive impulse to the rest of her exoskeleton, squeaking as a web of cracks drove into her. Commander squeezed her head in both hands, opened her mouth wide and shrieked banshee.

"No way," Sonic muttered. He swung the pistol down over Commander's battle-scuffed body and dove like a seahawk, plunging the barrel into a momentary gap between the armor of her abdomen and her hips. Commander felt it, tore one hand from her shattering head to grab the gun.

Sally heard herself scream as Sonic pulled the trigger.

A strange, bright pop like a massive lightbulb burning out. Sonic scrabbled backwards, squeezing the blackened glove of his gun hand in his other, hissing "mother fuck!" Commander's armor plates had pinched the barrel too much before the shot; the gun had exploded. Commander was curled on her side, shuddering, eyes clamped closed, both hands pressing the gun parts and other parts to her stomach. Blood with soft things in it was spilling from her back. Her armor had shattered from within like an eggshell.

The hedgehog gingerly flexed his smoky hand and winced as he waggled the fingers. Between him and a dead rebel lay his other gun, dropped or knocked from his grip. He retrieved it and stood. Then he turned and leveled it at Sally.

She lay helpless in Commander's bonds as the hedgehog carefully lined the sights. His right eye closed in a slow wink, mouth battle-smiling.

Sally squeaked. She closed her eyes.

Pak.

She opened her lids a sliver. Her hobble was in two pieces, the shredded ends curling from a powdered hole in the concrete. "I got her! It's her!" Sonic was bellowing into the transmitter of a radio strapped to the back of one of the dead Standard Army troops. The air was still filled with gunshot sounds. "Get everyone the hell out!" He tossed the transmitter and went back to Sally, cradling her back to help her up. "C'mon, Sal. We gotta move."

"No," she said. Sonic blinked, confused, and she stuttered, "Uh, my neck. Around my neck. It's a tracker."

Sonic nodded and drew his gun again, leveling it obliquely at her throat, licking a canine and squinting. Then he realized that was a terrible idea. He scratched the back of his neck, flinched, and came out with a loosed quill. Sally could sense the sharpness as he wedged the point under the plastic above her right shoulder. "Coming off. Brace."

"You'll—don't hurt me! My neck!" she begged.

"Hold still!" he barked. "One, two—"

"No!—"

Soft dirt and the thick, body-filling scent of rotting leaves cushioning her tired body. Sally felt her recovered vest and her front-fur glowing with heat as the sun painted her through the leaves far above, light so warm on her closed eyelids. The portable medscanner chattered as it inspected her fingers, wrist, elbow, shoulder, slid again over her chest. It beeped.

"You are clean," said Antoine. "There is nothing missing from you and nothing added. The blood draw shows amounts of five drugs."

"Which?" Sally asked.

"Pomfridan," he began slowly, probably reading from the display as he talked, "made by Patterson Pharmaceuticals. It is a high powered soporific used in mental institutions. There is also a counteragent and trace amounts of two muscle relaxants. Lastly there is Lifflucan, a painkiller, again manufactured by Patterson. It has high strength and euphoric properties."

"Mmm."

Something in the unseen world was producing a very awkward silence. "We should make camp here for the night, I think," said Antoine. "Mechanized Army is holding the town rather than pursuing, and you deserve some rest." Another silence. "You should not feel low."

Her eyes jerked open with a vicious spark. "Low?" she inquired.

"Depressed," said an Antoine-shaped silhouette, a fragment of afternoon sun blazing behind its right ear. "Down."

Sally nodded, closed her eyes.

"I have heard of no escapes of high-level prisoners," he continued. "And to defeat the monster you described? You should be proud. There is no doubt in my mind that you must be the toughest, most resilient soldier they have ever seen."

"Shut up, Antoine." She said it like she said hello. "I'm sorry, I'm just—they said that they were going to do it to me, too, make me like she—like the thing was. . . . I needed to play along, until I had a chance to escape, and . . . those drugs, and I felt like . . . I felt—"

"It must have been horrible," Antoine commiserated. "I am sorry to have broached the subject. You must wish to rest; I will go seek Sonic. He should be returning from Standard Army's retreat within the next few hours."

"I'm going to bed," Sally said, keeping her eyes closed.

"I take my leave, Your Highness," Antoine replied. His bootfalls minced away, then faded with distance.

Once she couldn't hear him anymore Sally sat up and hit herself. In the snout, with her closed fist. Then she flopped back on the dirt, breathed a lungful of sour, earthy rot and let it spill silently from her aching mouth and swelling nose. Come on, she thought. You know you can hit yourself harder than that.

Mission failed. You're a failure, she repeated to herself, mouthing the word silently in the bird-chirp silence of the forest: failure, failure, failure. She'd gotten lots of goodwill with Standard Army, then let Sonic and Antoine spend far more, surely put her deep in debt. How many of their troops were dead, fifty? One hundred? They had to think that it wasn't worth it, just for her.

It wasn't.

She sobbed. She needed to, badly, and no one would see; no one but the trees to watch her disgrace the House of Acorn. She wept, not diminishing her ache. Her sobs were empty and weak, sterile and clean.

Sally missed them so much, the whole comforting canopy of family that had grown for more than a decade before she was born into its shady dominion. Her older brother, Richard, assassinated in a tour of the Eastern Front desert; her older sister, Elizabeth, dead in a last spattering of Overlander orbital strikes.

A true Acorn would feel her station as a joy, not a duty. She wouldn't feel the absence of her family as this need, this humiliating weakness. This temptation to be something else, something less. Any of them, siblings or parents, would have been a better ruler than her. And now they were pressing down on her, crushing her like so much deadwood.

The afternoon was getting on when she petered out and grew quiet. Fire was spreading through the dying leaves, yellow and points of red. Dusk afterwards.

How many of the old tales had this? The young nobleman lies down in the forest, exhausted from travel. Never a good idea. When he wakes up there is something inexplicable—a mute little totem, a tree where none was before, a gorgeous woman. The old tales were heavy on gorgeous women. The young nobleman does not have enough sense to realize that he is in an old tale, however, and fails to see that the gorgeous woman isn't some kindly soul who had decided to share her body with the forest rather than sell it for a dowry. She is a wild demon, and barring some unlikely intervention, the nobleman is never to be seen again. It was an obsession in the tales, like the humans and their demented, cannibal stepmothers.

Once upon a time there was a young noble squirrel whose house owned lands in the east. When he came of age (sixteen) it was decided that he should marry a squirrel from the royal city and unite his father's lands with proud river country. But in autumn, when it was time for the young male to undertake the journey to Iona Major and claim his bride, he dismissed his retinue and determined to proceed himself, and not on the long circuitous trade road, but through the great forest. The journey would be shortened by weeks, and the noble would benefit of the rare opportunity to observe the wonders of the great wilderness.

Dusk was approaching and he was about to climb a tree to tie up his provisions when he encountered a startling appearance: lying to one side of his path beneath a great maple was a figure, its limbs as though the body had tumbled to rest. The young noble leapt quickly to the place and discovered not a corpse but a squirrel like himself, her face in only the gentle death of sleep. Her fur was a deep brown flecked with dirt, her tangled hair a fading russet. In his presence she awoke, soft brown eyes rolling weakly. The noble stooped and offered her water and food, for he was moved by great compassion at her pitiful poverty and rough condition. She drank greatly of the water, which seemed to return some vitality to her.

Thank you, kind one, she said in a voice weak and wavering. Truly this gift is a great blessing.

The male, startled and affronted by this improper address, demanded of her to know her place of attachment and the line and name of her land Lord, or the common name of her manor.

I know no manor, she said.

Then surely you are an outsider, exclaimed he, drawing back. You are but one of the many wild demons of this forest, and a block to my path and my paws.

You think me a demon? spoke the female.

I do not hesitate to say it. But yet the noble squirrel did hesitate, for he saw in her movements and her face a rough and wild beauty, and he was filled with desire for her.

You have the mien of a highborn, she said. Have you not been given knowledge of the demons and their kind? Do you not know the words of protection from such creatures?

Surely you are a tree sprite, said the male, such as imprison travelers within their trunks until the time that the great wood itself should fall.

I know no wood, said the female. And the noble then bespoke the words of protection from the trees of the forest, and the female remained and was not dispelled.

Truly then you are but a wave of the river I have passed, which did yearn to drown me in its cold embrace.

I know no water, said the female. And the noble then bespoke the words of protection from the dangers of running water, and the female remained and was not dispelled.

With this the male's heart swelled within him, for the squirrel truly was of his kind. He descended and smelled the heady scent of the rich dirt beneath her, and touched his hands to her. And he lay down next to her.

A sigh of pleasure from the female's mouth, cool like the coming night air that rustled the leaves about them. Kindly male, she said, have you not been told of the demons of the trees?

Yes, he whispered.

Beloved male, she said, have you not been told of the demons of the river?

Yes, he whispered, his heart full to bursting.

Foolish male, she said, have you not been told of the demons of the fallen leaves?

With a quiet rustling breath she called to the winds to gather. The broad maples leaves were tossed and tumbled about them and over them, full leaves and half leaves and mere scraps of leaves.

What witchery is this! he cried.

We do naught but as the wind moves us, she said with a strong, rejuvenated voice like the gusts that tore among the trunks. She laughed with joy and cried: come, sisters.

The demon's claws were weak like the webbing of a broad palm of sycamore, but they wrapped the male's head and pulled him to her mouth as the leaves blew and heaped around them. The lost noble's nose was filled with the scent of autumn wind and deep, damp rot as the dry lips brushed him, as the demon sought the damp of his mouth, as he felt himself turning cold, turning to the cold wet earth of the forest, and . . . .

Sally sank deeper into sleep.

She woke up with a kick to her ribs. "Hey there, Sal."

"Shit!" she gasped, rolling to her side. She rubbed the hurt, below her right breast: a bruise coming. Probably nothing—hopefully nothing. "Gods, you bastard!" she sighed.

The late-afternoon sunlight was deep red on her cruelest soldier's smile: "Heh heh heh, good morning." Sonic knelt in the middle of the clearing and let an armful of dry, dead branches tumble into a loose pile. "Wake up, tough stuff."

"Shit," Sally muttered, licking the sleep-taste from her mouth and rubbing some twigs from hair. "Where's Antoine?" she asked.

"Getting wood. Slowly," he mocked, dropping his backpack. His gloves began to mold a little heap of twigs. "How big a fire you want?'

"I don't know," she said, lying back down, turning her eyes to the dying red of the dusk sky. "Damn it, that hurt."

"You won't believe what I scored from the hotel," Sonic announced.

"Probably not," she agreed, still rubbing her bruised chest.

"Candy bars!"

Sally sighed, resisting the temptation to find it funny. "Are you ever not hungry?" she asked. Did Sonic ever think about anything other than eating, stealing, fucking, hurting?

Suddenly he was looming over her, his face and quills half-dark in the fading light. His teeth flashed as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They were gonna light 'em on fire with the rest of it. Said I could have 'em as long as I didn't sell 'em to 'Buttnik's troops. Sweets for the sweet?"

"Later," she replied.

"How big a fire you want?"

"I don't care." Sally rolled away from him, grabbing the lapels of her vest and drawing it tight around her.

"Get up, damn it. I'm not gonna be the only one awake here."

Sally drew a shivering, tense yawn. She curled her lips into an oo and watched her exhalation blow a storm of dust along the ground.

Sonic's sharp sneaker-toe kicked her butt with a strength that for him counted as playful. "Get up, you lazy bitch," he laughed. And with him, she thought, that was playful too. He doesn't know his own strength.

"Make me," she said.

"Do you know what you've done?" She felt him thud down behind her, close. He had the worst fake Overlander accent: "Vee haff vays off making yoo getchoo ass up! You muss—what—what are you—are you okay?"

"Come closer," she whispered.

"I am close."

"Touch me." He touched her shoulder. Her heart filled with warmth, bled. How could he behave like he did, day after day, and now shrink from touching her? "Hold me," she ordered. "Hold me, damn you."

His hand on her soft, bruised belly; his hand holding her left breast. The hedgehog molded the squirrel to him, back to his chest. Sally could feel the bare flesh warmer than the rest: his arms, his belly. "Okay," he whispered.

"Tighter. Tighter."

Like a vise around her arms, squeezing her still, making her feel the push and recession of his breathing. "Like this?" he whispered. He'd never been so quiet.

"Yes." Gods, he was strong. She couldn't stop herself, she couldn't hide from him: she started sputtering. "You—I—You, y—yuh—yuh—"

"Don't cry," Sonic whispered.

"Shut up!" she shouted, her breath catching and croaking in her throat. She turned her face from the light, pressed it into the dirt, muddying her tears. "Oh gods . . . ."

"No, no," he was so quiet. He sounded almost frightened. "You're—no—"

"Hold me," she sobbed into the dust. "Kh—khh . . . k-kkkkhhkiss me." The air was still. The birds were sleeping, the violin-bugs had been scared quiet. Her shuddering breath was loud: "Kiss me!—"

Oh, she sighed at the warm press of his lips on the fur of her bared neck. Her scent was in him and he took more, rubbing his nose deep into the underfur, ah: taking her flesh between his teeth to taste.

"I want," she breathed. ". . . . I want to be yours."

". . . You want to be my girl?" he asked.

"I love you," she wept.

VT2 - 2007

## \*Chapter 13\*: Port Orange, 21 Brumaire 2338

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**Port Orange, Robotropolis, 21 Brumaire 3228**

"Show him what you showed me," Renee ordered.

The potbellied rabbit tipped his yellow hardhat and drew a flashlight from his orange MCom utility vest. A moment later, anyone walking past the POLICE LINE tape at the end of the alley saw only a pine marten in a dress suit and a fur coat—the kind that came out of your skin, fawn underfur grown winterthick and warm under her brown guard hairs—and two butts sticking out of a big green steel box. "Alright," the rabbit said, now and then silhouetted by his shaky flashlight beam. "Now this is a junction box for all the landlines south of Mordecai, west of Tri—"

"Phone lines, you mean?" asked Baxter. A knit cap and shadow made the top of his head look round as a cue ball.

". . . . Yeah. Now you see this wire that's not supposed to be here? Cuts out of 7732 up here, runs down here to this router—"

"If you say so."

"Alright. That's—we can get out of here, now. Hey, watch your head—" Whung. Baxter's limbs locked against the pain; his breath sounded like a snake lurking deep in the phone box. "You alright?" the rabbit asked, and without pausing for a response: "Okay, that's called a spoof. Son of a bitch switches an incoming signal off to a different circuit without setting off a line impedance check. You call number A, this sends it to number B."

"Yeah, I get it," Baxter nodded, pulling off his cap to tenderly test the back of his skull with a light finger-press. Of course he got it. Renee had tasked him to map out Royal Army's phone network, starting with the hedgehog's call from the hijack truck stop. He brought back a pattern. The web began at cell accounts cancelled for nonpayment and then quickly terminated at places around Port Orange: an empty restaurant once called Donati's Chicken, an apartment building with CONDEMNED stamped over TEMPORARY HOUSING, PUBLIC WORKS DEPT. Sometimes calls to no number at all, or CODE 19—ROUTING ERROR.

"The Racine Park lead," Baxter said to Renee, twirling a finger in the air above his head like helicopter blades. Royal Army's tech-savvy walrus.

"He's how we're going to blow this case wide open," Renee announced. "He's the weak point in this antisurveillance wall."

"And why is that?" Baxter asked stupidly. Renee might have been more generous—it wasn't completely obvious—if it weren't for the clothes. The weekend, it seemed, was for laundering his suits. Called from his apartment to the Port at ten in the morning on a Cosmosday, the human had shown up in a blue polyester jacket and whitish blue jeans cracked enough to be leaning on a rail switch in Fortune Station. And that hat! Maybe they were more acceptable in a culture filled with almost furless heads and naked ears, but he looked like he should be warming his hands over blazing trash in a hundred-liter drum. He'd even switched out his little wire-rim glasses for an outdated prescription in thick brown plastic frames that pulled his lids to a squint, then electrocuted them to a mad hobo glare, over and over.

"He's the weak point because he built it," Renee explained, grinning at a delightful thought: maybe the walrus was as oblivious as her foreign partner. "These spoofs are complicated, but they aren't expensive. He could have the entire Port phone system gamed. This box can point to another box ten blocks from here, and that points at—"

"Wait a sec, none of this works if the phones involved are getting any legitimate calls," Baxter interrupted. "Who's paying for the lines? Why isn't MCom shutting them down?"

Renee turned to the rabbit a moment before Baxter did. The ragged-eared lineman was leaning against the open door of the box, cigarette screwed between the index and middle fingers of a near-fist obliviously dropping ash onto the rounded mound of his belly. "You want a job application, you just call the work hotline," he suggested. "Number's on your bill."

"Thanks, Mr. Warren. We appreciate your help." Renee gave the rabbit a stiff-elbowed salute that was a touch more condescending than Baxter wanted to admit. But he had to admit it; Renee had the facts: "The War left the phone system a wreck," she sighed as she buckled up in the back of a marked Robotropolis Police Department squad car. "Emergency reconstruction in the 'tens. The army just laid new wire on top of whatever was already there. Some of the old lines still work, some don't . . . ."

So, Baxter thought as his own seatbelt stubbornly refused to extend: War dents Mobius's capital stock. The diminished capital makes it too expensive to police its own infrastructure. This leads to rebellion and war. Which dents Mobius's capital stock. At thoughts like these würdet Baxter errinert sich auf die Wyrmvorbergen, the foothills north of Winstone, whisper to himself Zeitarbeit, Zeitarbeit, temporary assignment.Yet according to Renee . . . . "You said this was a good thing."

"To work the phones this well Rotor needed more than a contact with some greasy ringtail in Racine Park," she explained. "He must have his fingerprints on every contraband tech channel in Robotropolis. And that is how we're going to find him."

When Renee didn't talk for a few seconds, Baxter realized that was it. ". . . Okay, we do a lot of work and find the walrus. But we still don't know who the rest are, what else they've been doing, who they've worked with, why—"

"It doesn't matter who they are," Renee concluded triumphantly. "It matters where they are. We capture the walrus and make him tell us where the rest are. We send people there. Case closed." She winked.

Baxter nodded as thoughtfully as he could but made a mental note to roll his eyes later. He sort of liked Renee: hardworking, with that kind of earthiness ethnic mobians had. But so, so stupid! It's not a case, you dumb cop, it's a rebellion The individuals are fungible. The average Mobian is 5.7 feet tall, has brown fur, is female (slightly), sits on the poverty line and hates, hates, hates Doctor Ivo Robotnik. She's not a rebel herself because she doesn't think it's worth it. Rebellion has a fairly fixed cost in the risk of having your house burnt or your head blown off, and the value of a revolution and the repercussions of a failed one aren't easy to influence without serious alterations to economic and social policy. The only variable within the reach of the law enforcement apparatus is the chance that a rebellion will succeed.

Vreb Ps (S + C) + (1-Ps) (F + C)

Vreb is less than zero and Mobius slowly staggers into the next decade. Vreb climbs above zero and the nation explodes. And the way Renee wants to keep Vreb below zero is to hunt rebels like ducks and hope she bags them quickly enough that the general public doesn't get the wrong idea about Ps. Not smart. But what would you expect from a law enforcement apparatus that spends hundreds of millions of sovereigns on a fully searchable, omniscient telecommunications archive and uses it is to check whether Donati's Chicken is still in business?

Speak of the devil. There it is now: soaped windows and a dark, rain streaked sign blighting the corner of 31st and Orien—

"Hey, the station for the Findrasay line is back on 33rd." Baxter reached his hands through the divider and rattled the wire mesh that kept him from the big-shouldered shadows of the two officers in the front seats. "You're too far. Hey!"

"How about we give you a lift all the way back?" Renee suggested.

". . . That's like forty minutes away. You don't need to do that, just drop me near the train. This is close enough."

Neither shadow officer turned, but the long-horned driver lifted a forearm the size of a Leberwurst, fingers the size of a brat. "That won't be necessary, sir. We'd like to take you somewhere in Molineaux, at least."

"Molineaux?"

"It's an interagency security directive, sir," the shotgun dogshadow explained.

For the first time, Baxter wondered if he was badly underdressed. ". . . . Renee, I thought you were just bumming a ride off some friends. This is official RPD business?"

"It's not their case. They're just here to drive us around. Port's just been a little hot lately."

"Hot?"

"Unruly."

". . . . So we need armed escorts? Just to—"

"Shut the fuck up," Renee muttered, putting one hand to his chest as she put her ear to the divider. The radio was buzzing loudly, numbers, some of that police number-code. The shadows in the front slid into undulating motion, arms grabbing things, a voice pattering numbers and words rapidly back to the radio.

"Renee, what's . . . ."

Baxter trailed off uneasily and squinted past her out her window as Dielle, the bull, rolled the prowler up onto the cement driveway. The house was a magnificent antebellum disaster: sagging third-story gables losing a battle against the cold sky, a decimeter wide crack that ran from foundations to roof, dividing the home so cleanly that one might toss out bombs as a cause in favor of a particularly acrimonious divorce. The resident, a septuagenarian tabby cat who stared with harvest moon eyes out of a shawl of yellowed filth, stood on the lawn in earnest conversation with some uniformed officers.

"Disturbance," Renne explained as her fellows left the prowler. That's all the civilians ever want to know. She added the additional news Baxter would want before she slammed the door behind her: "Not ISO business. We'll take care of it. Stay in the car."

Dielle had said they were right on top of it, but a beat car was already parked with two wheels over the curb and the officers, a pair of mice, male and female, turned heads to the new arrivals marching across the lawn and raised their snouts with an air of dignified and unjust suffering. They had just gotten a grip on this hour's psychosis, and now. . . .

"Get that car out the drive!" the cat snarled, pawing at the fresh squad car as though she thought the thing might be within the reach of her hands—maybe she did; she wasn't wearing glasses. Baxter peered back at her from between two palms pressed flat against the windowglass. "You can't put that car in the garage!" the feline yowled again.

Renee got a hand on the washboard ribs of the woman's chest and held her outside of fingernail range. "Who called in the ten forty?" she asked one of the rodents. Ten forty—shots fired. How close and why was an interesting question, as was whether someone had called in the report for some other reason, such as revenge, poor hearing, or schizophrenia.

"Her?" the female shrugged. "I think? This is the place, and she says she's the owner. What are you, some kind of social worker?"

The cat wanted to get back onto the subject of who owned the house: "It's mine!" she gasped, reaching hard for Renee's suitcoat. A shove and she stumbled back across the hard ground, clutching her rags tighter around her face. "It's my home these fifty-five years and I won't have you parking your cars willy-nilly all about the lawn and house so move them!"

"Anyone else living in the house, ma'am?" Renee asked.

The rhythm of street crazy was unrelenting. It took the assembled officers only a moment to hear the cat's unnatural pause. Illegal psychoactives operations needed places to stay in the city. A lot of the times they'd sublet from established locals for a little bit of the product.

"Front door, garage," Renee pointed. "Any other ways into the house, ma'am?"

"You." She looked back at the mice, thinking they might understand better. "You'd best not be going into that house right now."

"Is somebody hurt in the house? Ma'am?"

She considered. "Not yet."

"Alright." Renee reached into her coat and pulled out a black-matte .357, held it low. "Lady, I need you to tell me about the inside of the house and who is in there. When we go in the front door, what do we—"

"Forget that. You gotta move the car," she said again, a little more urgently. "You got that skinbag in there."

"Hold her," Renee told her new arrivals as she strode back to the prowler. Baxter Posniak was up against the glass with animal curiosity, a little zoo monkey. She cranked her hand in the air by her head: roll it down, man. "You need to get out of the car."

She'd almost gotten there when the garage door rumbled open. Behind it were a frayed, black-furred young rabbit with bloodshot eyes like halved oranges and next to her, roaring quickly to life at the insistently turned key of a panther that looked about fourteen years old, a hell of a pre-war muscle-car, Arilou Quasar with its octane engine's still-gleaming air intake pipes protruding from the center of the cherry hood. As the people in the garage processed that there was a car blocking the driveway where none was a minute ago, that the car was a police car, and that there was a woman with a pistol standing next to it; Renee observed that the rabbit was carrying some kind of hacksawed bird gun in her free hand and that the panther kid looked more determined than many murderers.

"Oh shit!" yelled the rabbit.

The engine's hum grew to a furious growl as the panther aimed, optimistically, at the lawn visible between in the narrow gap between the prowler and the side of the garage. Renee didn't have time to react as his headlamps punched into the equally solid chassis of the prowler. Baxter was on the very edge of her vision, gesticulating wildly in the backseat, mouth open wide as though to bite the mesh divider, which at the collision he did in a burst of red. The prowler rolled listlessly back into the street as the Quasar, its virgin paint job already a wreck, roared and then silently rolled onto the lawn in a thunderstorm of gunfire, blood and snow white windshield glass. It arced slowly through the parted police to tap lightly against the other prowler on the curb, a visitor from some horrifying dimension even more obscenely violent than the Port.

"That bitch has got her!" the old cat screeched in the sudden silence, walking towards the garage across the ruts of torn grass as though she saw that sort of thing every day. "That bitch has got Amiele's baby!"

The next thing Renee knew she was edging slowly up a dark, purplish hallway with walls of mold and rot and drywall, an air of silent, careening little bottle-flies. Her shoeless feet stepped silently onto the freezing ceramic floor of a possible kitchen, cracked tiles threatening to shift like splinters of ice. A propane tank had been jury rigged into a gas range that was mostly used to cook some coffee-colored tar stuck all along the filthy counter. Her gun passed over a semiwhite prewar refrigerator silent in a semicircular field of brown growth marking some long-dead pool of water, and a rail-thin burnt-orange tigress sprawled along the wall. Amilie's head looked huge in the tiny shock of apple hair left to it; the belt of her cotton dress dangled from her elbow. She was thin as a rail, open-eyed and quiescent.

"Keep back!" Thunder, splintering wood, breaking glass. "You keep the fuck on out of here!" Renee waded forward through the brown, feeling it warm and itchy on the bottoms of her socks, raised her free hand to wave Dielle along behind her as she slowly pressed against the jamb of an open doorway to a dining room. Blue bedsheet drapes tacked along the rear windows next to a boarded-over door flapped in the chill breeze. They showed and then hid a ragged hole of splintered wood, torn threads and lead shot, threw a noon shadow over a skew wooden dining table. There was crying in there, some sort of young kid, somewhere out of sight to her left past the table. As she watched, motionless, another bolt of lightning gouged a chunk from the top of the table, swept a dark vase and a digital scale away into another shredded gap at the back of the house. "I wanna talk to David! Bring David in here."

Renee's ears shot forward as she heard a dull crack. Breech loader. Two strikes and you're out. She swung her head and hands around the door, sticking her gun to the first thing that moved. "Police! Drop the weapon!"

The rabbit was hunched over behind a sagging sofa, backed right against the wall. At the noise, nerves like little firecrackers jerked her to the side, bringing her eyes into the light like a pair of miner's lamps and bringing the butt of her war surplus pump-action Biggs shotgun into the brittle drywall with a dull crack, bringing its muzzle to face the door.

There were two shots. The second one missed, because the rabbit was already on the ground. And then Renee was lightheaded, running through the room at right, perfect angles like some automaton, hearing and echoing the call of "clear!" She was sitting on an arm of a couch, looking down next to where an officer was picking up the kitten . . .

"Better," she said, and then stalled. "Uh, better get an ambo for her."

"We already got one for your boy."

"Huh?" She looked up as Dielle laid a warm hand on her shoulder.

"Your human. Conscious three by three; they'll probably send him up to Napiers downtown. You ever use your weapon before?"

"Not, uh . . . ." She gestured at the rabbit. "No," she amended. "I'm going to be alright."

The bull watched her a moment, then turned and trod to the window. "Yeah. Probably. She had it coming, you know."

"Yeah," Renee nodded. Pins rattled along the floor as Dielle pulled the sheets loose from the wall and threw cold blue light over the squalid room. The floor was covered with dirt and thin glass vials; the once-white walls were covered with stains, scrawls of magic marker (genitals in action, slogans such as "IN CASE OF INFORMANT, BREAK SKULL"). More tacks holding up filthy posters out of some gutter, t-shirts with inadequately clothed, heavy-breasted vixens (FRAKE'S POINT: SPRING BREAK 3227), and high up—

" . . . Holy shit! Dielle!"

"What?"

She pointed.

"Oh." He lifted his shoulders toward his horns. "I know all that's your job now, but don't make too much of that. I've been doing house searches the past couple of months, and you see it around. Who knows which one of them put it up. You don't need to question the old lady, if that's what you're thinking."

Tacked prominently to the cracked drywall, an old, motheaten Mobian flag—although you shouldn't call it that, not anymore. Not ever. There's nothing inherently Mobian about the Acorn seal, since the revolution removed it from above the golden, curled strip that symbolized the infinite, perfection. She turned her head back to the graffiti, thinking, when suddenly she saw in the middle of the rest: black and white, hand drawn oak leaf. She stood up and leaned in to examine it.

Penned beneath: fuck all police

What the hell was this? Some kind of fad?

The college boy, Darcy Sobotka decided, mussing her black hair and what chocolate fur she had exposed to look a little more undergraduate, radical, reefer-scented. Joshua Dursine. If she had a scrap of tie-dyed cloth it would have gone decoratively around her bare tail. The humongous bear with the miniscule personality. There was no one else, really. She paid a few extra visits to the bathroom and surveilled him on the way, his elbows on the desk of his cubicle, fingers grabbing his headfur as he assessed another one of the asylum applications that a quick peek in his desk's trash can revealed him to be working on. New to the business, dilettante, probably an idealist. A big, high-pressure heart waiting to explode if someone uncorked it.

Not that Darcy could be sure, of course, which made things dangerous. But if what Molly was telling her was true, everything was dangerous, inaction included. Molly Lotor didn't even get it, just sitting in the pastry shop, yawning over a tall paper cup of coffee as she complained. But Darcy was a career Foreign Affairs staffer, a senior clerk with a chance at a more serious posting as Consul in a minor Mobian city far from the capital. Sitting astride the diplomatic channels, you heard lots of complaints, pleas, stories about arrests and what came after. Maybe ten percent true, with the kernel from those reverberating through half of the remaining false claims. And in that universe, her raccoon friend's story—provisional citizen status, the boss or the cop or the landlord or other character witness showing a distinct lack thereof—was not special.

The stories did not tend to end well, absent intervention. The embassy never intervened, of course. Like the papers said, people just couldn't ever seem to make it onto the grounds with the evil Robotropolis Police Department working night and day to keep them out.

Dursine shut down his compstation at five and ignored the restaurants, the marble and water of the parks on Robotropolis's near south side, heading straight for the eastbound electric train at Pindar Square. That was good, Darcy decided as she followed a block behind, not bothering to deploy her usual tricks—the bear was lost in his own head; he wouldn't notice a bull following him up the stairs to the platform stuffed in among the last of the leaves, let alone a rat. A train was always good; the low-frequency rumble was a perfect and inconspicuous bug-killer. No ticket, but she fluidly scampered through the handicapped turnstile and squeaked between the closing doors. Josh was sagging despondently near the back of the car, meaty fingers hooked around one of the overhead handrails, politely clogging the entire aisle to avoid occupying a seat.

Darcy hooked a finger inside the collar of his sportcoat and tugged twice. "Joshua."

He turned. And when he saw her it was momentarily as though he had found a hole in the floor and laid a toe on the third rail. In a half a second he had his fur tamped down and his eyes blinked to size, but all of Darcy's senses had gone queasy . . . .

Abort launch. Hold count.

"I didn't know you lived out this way, too," Darcy began, spooling small talk from her medulla oblongata while her cerebellum sized things up. Josh had taken a closed stance, keeping his hands close to his face and using his gigantic back to hide them both from whomever was behind him. Respiration slightly elevated, frequent eye movements (normally to the ground, indicating embarrassment or deception).

But the next best method was an emigrant smuggler. That would drop Molly's odds to 50-50, maybe lower. . . . "When did your tour of service start? How much longer do you got on your stint?" she was asking.

"About nine months," the bear sighed, sounding like a female anticipating an agonizing labor. Chuckling nervously: "Assuming they don't do me like the old ambassador."

T-minus five, four . . . . "Oh, that sorry business. I wouldn't blame them for giving Delaches the boot if he hadn't been doing just what he was told." Darcy shook her head and turned her eyes to a point on the car's window where she could unobtrusively catch the bear's reflection superimposed on the blur of leaves and brick and sky. "Man, if I could have seen that poor vixen they locked out, I'd have probably—" She broke off at Josh's stage cough. He squirmed in embarrassment, then put a fist to his mouth and puffed out his cheeks in another cough. "You saw?—"

Go, go, go! We have liftoff!

"Josh . . . I need your help," Darcy said, pulling him into a seat at the rear of the car, half-submerging her voice in the rumble of the rails. "Well, I've got a friend who needs some help."

"Yeah?" Josh asked, relaxing a little. "What's her name; do I know her?"

"She's having trouble at work. Bad trouble. It could turn into trouble with the government. And she's a provisional citizen, so that's really bad trouble—so she's thinking about quitting."

"Uh huh . . . ."

"And her getting a different job would involve her . . . moving. You know. Out of her current place. So she wouldn't be in trouble with the Mobian government. So she needs some help."

The bear sighed. "Sure. I've got a lot of practice," he smiled wryly. He flexed his huge biceps, missing the point. "Does she have furniture, or is it just boxes?"

". . . . No," Darcy said, nervously moving her vocal volume into the genuinely conspiratorial range. "She needs our help. To move. Because of this government trouble Maybe you could meet her on one of your usual lunch hours some time." The ones you always spend with a bagged sandwich, inside the embassy. "You wouldn't need to vary your routine any—"

"—Oh my gods." He turned his head to stare resolutely at a map of the eastern half of the metro train system plastered above the door as the PA droned now approaching—Petite Folie/Norman Street. "Shut up! No no no no no no no no no—"

"Josh," Darcy said with bared teeth, having calculated that it might be helpful to turn angry, "I can't take their bullshit anymore." And strangely, she was angry; it felt so good to take an act that could pay off immediately, without years and years of causation upon causation and inference. But it was safer to keep that secret, show the standardized sentiments people expected. "I got into this business to help people, not just—"

"No!" Joshua lifted himself to his feet, the train slowing to a halt a full stop ahead of where she was pretty sure he wanted to go.

"Well think about it, okay?" she pleaded with a veneer of earnestness, gently setting the hook for later. "If I'm going to help her out, you're the only one good enough for me to trust. She's a really nice gal."

"Uh huh." He muscled his way through the passengers like a terrapod through tall grass, ignoring a fuck you, pal as the train squealed to a long platform by the satellite dishes and low roofs of the east side. When the doors opened he flowed away with the rest. Could have gone worse, Darcy assessed.

Please watch the doors. The doors are about to close.

FWUMP. A muscular brown-furred arm was trapped in the door. Darcy raised her eyebrows with practiced, softly-arcing hope as Dursine pushed his way back in, moved to the rear seat with unsettling speed. "Darcy," he gasped, planting a hand on a vertical handrail beside her, pinning her in. "Like two months ago you put a bunch of papers in a bag at work and walked out with them."

Mission Control! Abort Abort Abort!

"Oh," she gasped, medulla oblongata working furiously to see if the horror was leaking from some orifice, to stop the hemorrhaging. "Yeah. I actually do a little fiction writing, and uh," (embarrassed! not frightened, embarrassed!) "sometimes I bring it to work with me."

"And now you're asking me to sneak people out of the country!" he hissed loudly. People could be listening, but Darcy couldn't look away; she had to watch him, control him"What if she's . . . a spy? A Mobian spy? How do I know you're not—"

"Joshua:" her pointed snout blunted and low; eyes like marbles, lucid and plain: "of course not. How could you even suggest that—"

"You aren't supposed to take stuff out of the office," he said.

"I know, and I'm not supposed to be writing personal stuff when I'm on the clock, either." Flatten whiskers, beg pity: "But sometimes I do. You're not going to tell anyone, are you?"

Josh stared. Now approaching—Petite Folie/Trixiana.

". . . Okay," he said, voice flat, emotionless. Terrified. Without another word he spun and almost ran out of the quickly opening doors.

Darcy sat there for half an hour, riding to the end of the line. She reached into her bag and thumbed through the big brick of paper. Her Great Lachels Novel. Her Really Awful Lachels Novel. The thing that would have her laughed at around the water cooler for the rest of her natural life if anyone found out about it. No state secrets in there. You'd have to be an idiot to smuggle state secrets in bulky hardcopies. That was why Darcy made a point of invisibly downloading her cargo off of the basement compstations to cheap, generic Gescom pendrives picked up second-hand at the Racine Park fleamarkets and graymarkets every couple of months, hard to trace by serials. There was one sitting in the bottom of her bag right now, loaded with incident contingencies and a map of the Great Forest filled with inexplicable location markers, property of Intelligence Acquisition Division back in High Demon, that she was supposed to deliver to her Mobian handler via the dead drop by the end of the week.

Poor Joshua Dursine. He seemed like such an unlucky person, so unhappy. And now . . . .

Well, Darcy had murdered four people since her twenty-first birthday. She was getting quite good at it.

VT2, Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 14\*: Great Forest, 2 Firmaire 3228

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**Great Forest, Southeast of Coolette, 2 Firmaire 3228**

"Shit. Shit—Tails, get back in the truck. Shit."

You could smell the blood in the dark, coming at you. The ground was sterile and dry, the wind freezing cold, but the blood was tangy and warm and wet. Tails wasn't hurting, so it couldn't be his blood—right? . . . It was terrible even if it was someone else's, Antoine's or Mary's or Cat's. Why was there blood?

"Fuck," Rotor muttered, which was a bad word for doing it. There was a loud noise of hollow metal on metal, and Tails saw the beam of Rotor's flashlight dance as the pickup's hood thumped down onto his head. Tails shivered, propellering his tails: the soldiers couldn't be close enough to hear, not yet . . . .

The flashlight clicked off. "Bitch cunt fucker," Rotor cried—Tails didn't know all of those words—and whispered, "they put a round through the engine block. Antoine, how far were we from Marigold when you checked the—Antoine—Antoine."

It was so dark that Tails couldn't see Antoine, only hear him breathing. Squeaking. Antoine was so very, very scared.

"Antoine!" Rotor hissed. A moan, somebody else—Will in the truck bed, next to the shivering lynx Cat. Maybe he had been hurt. That smell . . . . "Antoine," Rotor said again, "where's the compass?"

They had to have been going the right way before the trucked stopped. They had to: they had been going the right way and they hadn't turned. They had been so surprised by the soldiers there hadn't been time to turn or get off onto a wrong path, so they hadn't gotten turned about and lost, even with all the shooting and screaming and holding Mary's leg and squeezing your eyes shut as hard as you can.

"Antoine!" A loud noise, flat and fleshy. "Pull yourself together, Antoine! Where is the compass? Where—fucking worthless." A door squeaked, boots trudged. "Mary, just pay attention for a moment. Have you seen the—Tails? Where's Tails?"

The dirt was craggy and rough under the fox's belly like the pictures of volcano islands in the sea, igneous rock. Only the moldy leaves were soft and even they were clumped with little chips of ice. Sonic taught him how to sneak up on someone. On your belly, nose to ground, arms and legs flat. It was like swimming in dirt, up a slowly rising hill.

We had to have been driving the right way, Tails thought as he crawled, leaving their loud whispers behind him in the blackness. How could they have found a wrong path so deep into the forest? If Rotor had turned he would have run into a tree. He only thought they were lost because he was scared. Tails couldn't stand it when everyone got frightened. Why couldn't everyone be tough like Sonic? Marigold had to be close. Right over this hill . . . .

Light. Faint, but a glow of white light above the hill! Marigold! He pressed his gloves to the earth and scrambled to his feet, running to see.

"RIGHT THERE I'LL SHOOT YOUR GODDAMNED FACE OFF YOU COCKSMOKING SHITBAG HANDS IN THE AIR,"

a deep, guttural gasp of breath; a riflebarrel with a blinding flashlight pressed straight between Tails' lamplens eyes

"—ON YOUR KNEES HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD YOU . . . are like six fucking years old!" the gunman noted with amusement and a hacking cough. "Good gods!" The light pulled away and a crazy-smiling white dog with big black spots marking his face loomed down into it. "Hey there little fellah, welcome to Marigold! Rotten time to show up. Are you lost? Where's the head of your caravan?

Tails told the dog about a hundred meters back, as opposed to right in front of him.

Snively felt the pits of his white shirt begin to dampen. "With all due respect sir," he pattered, snatching breaths when he could, "I have to say that this is not the best time for an operation on the scale that Minister Deshaney is proposing." His words seemed to dissipate into the high, dark corners of the Director's office; he sounded weak, looked hysterical. "The chance of generating any high-value captures or casualties is minimal. It will certainly disrupt Acorn's supply lines in the short term, but she can easily reestablish them. The only long-term effect will be to render the intelligence we've been gathering on Royal Army worthless and keep us from building on our successes."

All Snively could see was Julian's impassive skull over the back of his magnificently expensive hoverchair. "What intel." It was not a question.

"Uncle—"

"What successes."

Snively made his hand into a petite fist and lowered it into his other palm with high-pitched slaps: "Amanda—captured—Acorn! Psyops had her obeying orders, primed to—"

"You had Sally Acorn," Julian stated with unpleasant, breathy excitement. "In chains." The s had a soft, reptilian lisp to it; the voice shivered with restrained emotion. Snively was about to take the offensive when his uncle enunciated wetly: "Why aren't I looking at her head on a plate, right now?"

". . . Uncle, allow me to explain some of the complicated issues of strategy that one faces when interrogating prisoners of—"

"Were you out," the voice growled with sudden volume, the bald head trembling with fury, "of plates?"

I work like some desert dog for you, Snively thought. I am a slave to your endless, insatiable needs, and you can't give me one little thing for myself; I can't have one little thing to call my own . . . . "Uncle, our psych profiles have long suggested that Acorn would be ideal material for the Recovery Project—"

SCREEEEEE. Ribbons of walnut curled away from Julian's desk as his silver fingers brought his spin to a halt. His eyes were red and purple-ringed from lack of sleep; the severe red-and-black military uniform into which he was stuffed was not yet fully buttoned and a small wedge of body hair quietly violated Snively's eyes. "Your little science fair," he growled, pointing at a budget binder resting upon a point of his desk sufficiently remote that an underlying would be required to actually fetch it, "has cost me a quarter of a billion sovereigns. Now thanks to your incompetence it has consumed a chance to end the greatest threat facing my plans for this nation. And it has yet to produce any worthwhile results."

Snively felt as though he were an antique Mobian aristocrat, swiped on his cheek with another's empty white glove. He couldn't be said to rear up, short as he was, but he stood tall as he could: "That is a filthy lie! Amanda—"

"SNIVELY!"

The eyes. The maw. Snively shivered silently, transfixed and hopeless. His head was filled with rage, his viscera with a queasy loathing at their own jellied quaking.

This creature is not Uncle Julian, he thought. The intensity was his, but this shallow armor, the truncated fuse . . . .

Snively pinched his eyes tight, clenched jaw, hands, ass: why not, when fury produces instant obedience, when it always gets results? I am not a repenomamus to be trained, Snively thought, his whole body in turmoil around a chill, soft, rational core whispering with sickening calm that conditioned response theory was of general applicability, that it was too late now, that it had been too late since well before the coup, ever since . . . .

No. He didn't want this. He couldn't take it, not again—

"Director," someone said.

Snively blinked. Julian was staring with scientific, disgusted curiosity at the squeamish pucker on Snively's lips. "What, Richard," Julian asked quietly.

The new voice belonged to Julian's chief of staff, a brown-furred mongoose sticking his sharp snout and black nose through one of the concealed side doors to the office. Behind him Snively could see a trivid crew cutting a test tape with a holograph recorder, droning level . . . level, bearing light meters like religious icons. "Sir," he spoke with professional deference, "we still have to do makeup. If you want to make the morning news bumpers—"

"Another minute," Julian growled, waving the fur away with his prosthetic hand. The panel clicked shut.

"What was that?" Snively asked, his voice diminishing with foreboding. "Why are you cutting an address at two in the morning? Why couldn't I see you before now?"

Julian hesitated, watching Snively as though fearing he might might melt, explode into red mist or undergo some other obscene disintegration. Then he slowly announced, "Brushfire is go and hot."

"Hot," Snively echoed, eyes hollow.

"As of midnight," Julian confirmed. "State Ministry contacted Lachels, Vorburg and Korbresia two hours ago in case missile contingencies are necessary."

A noose was thick around his neck, but the only thing Snively felt was the saber's deep thrust into his pride. Not even CC'd on the deployment?

"For the moment, Snively," Julian continued, nothing more than the slightest touch of shame in his voice, "it's Deshaney's turn to have a serious crack at the rebels. We'll see if you get another."

"Will that be all, sir," Snively said icily, straightening his little green tie.

"No. If the Recovery Project fails to produce reliable results before your fund is exhausted, destroy everything—everything. I won't deny that your suggestions were . . . intriguing, but I doubt the public will share my sympathies toward your research."

He stiffly raised a bladed hand to his temple. "Will that be all, sir?"

"YES!"

Snively's resentment and fury grew with his distance from his uncle, but more immediate considerations soon forced their way to the forefront of his consciousness. Soon he was stomping wildly through the dormant, freezing downtown, beating his thick-gloved hands for warmth, and the syllogism had him literally in tears.

Major Premise 1. MSA Third Regiment, Seventh Division, was tasked to Marigold.

Minor Premise 2. That dried, vindictive harpy. That long-eared shrew.

Conclusion. Snively was a seventeen year old blonde on prom night. He was a crooked accountant in supermax. He was going over the threshold in a white dress. He was, in short, fucked.

He had only one chance. Someone had to go in there right under everyone's noses. Someone trustworthy and loyal and qualified to do the necessary clean-up work, then let the madness of mass combat do the rest. And in Snively's experience, whenever he needed a little trustworthy, unofficial assistance, there was only one person to call from the public bathroom of an all-night Jimmy's Sandwiches on the corner of Lafayette and Robespierre. And if he's not answering his home phone at two-thirty in the morning, that's because he's at the office! He'd have to be, because if not—

"You have reached NETA Security. Our offices are currently closed. If you know the extension or last name of the party that—" Snively punched S-A-R-K into his phone, then glued it to his ear.

"Hello!" a woman chirped.

"No!" Snively screamed. "No!"

"Rudiger . . . Sarkstein," said Rudi precisely.

"Is not available to take your call!" she finished.

"Pick up, Rudi! Fuck you! Ah, fuck!" The toilet stall shuddered at Snively's sharp kick; he leaned against some obscene graffiti, gasping for oxygen. Every day, every hour would bring him closer to exposure. He needed to move now, and there was no one else to play the cleaner! No one in whom Snively was reasonably confident, that he knew he could trust, that couldn't be connected to him—

It was no time to indulge a grudge, he thought as he dialed. Two out of three isn't bad.

"Mobian Internal Security Office, Task Force—"

"Donlevy!" Snively cried, his voice resounding off the bathroom walls. "It's Kolensky; thank gods you're in the office—you are in the office, right?"

"Yes, sir, of course. I—"

"Stay there!" He hung up, ran out onto the street, hailed a taxi to the Richelin building and practically kicked open the door to the main Beta offices.

"—aren't going to catch them through some random contact! We have to look at their incentives, see why—Captain." Posniak nodded in some sort of civilian salute.

Snively boggled: the Lachel and the marten arguing in the office in the wee hours, conniving together at a reception table covered with paper coffee cups and crumbs and sealed files! Was that a command-org chart of Royal Army on the magnetboard?—who the hell was that walrus? Why was the foreigner looking at him? Why was the foreigner looking at any of it?

"What's the emergency?" Posniak asked, a sleepy look on his face. Snively blinked: the human's eyes drooped sleepily because a swatch of brown medical tape was plastered to either side of his nose.

Snively ignored him. "Why is he here?" he asked the marten.

Renee sat up in her seat, straightened her collar. "We've been having an . . . . a discussion, about the course of the investigation," she replied. "Sir."

"Perhaps you'd care to join in," said Posniak. "I realize that you've been busy recently, but we could re-acquaint you with—"

"Go home, Mr. Posniak," Snively said, eyes on Renee. "Hello! Mr. Posniak!" Posniak finally grabbed his compcase, got up and winced slightly as he reset his glasses upon the medical tape. "Non-spies only tonight, please! Thank you!"

As soon as the door shut Donlevy jumped to her feet and saluted, her chair hitting the carpet with a muffled bang. "I take full responsibility, sir," she announced crisply. "I realized the risk Mr. Posniak might present, sir, but he's been very helpful the past few weeks, sir, and under the circumstances I thought that—"

"No no, don't worry about—forget that for now. Renee—stand easy, Renee," Snively ordered, trying out the name as he took an uncomfortably relaxed, informal seat on the corner of the table. "Since you've come to ISO, Renee, you've done nothing but confirm everything I saw in you when you were first pursuing the hedgehog. You're intelligent, experienced . . . and a real . . . self-starter. But more importantly I know that you truly love your country, and you're not afraid to—"

"Captain," she interrupted eagerly. "What is it that needs doing?"

There was little time to feel her out. Renee lobbed question after question about what it was that required her expertise (ha!) on such short notice: was she to act alone or as part of a team? Surveillance or operations? Was she to be attached to army or police? Snively dodged each question artfully, but couldn't help answering a few of her questions as he asked his own back: Did she have any formal survival training at all? No. Hmm, but she had lived through the coup in Mobotropolis, with food and garbage service halted and every other street lethal, yes? Any undercover work—Psychoactives Division? At Robotropolis Police, hmm? Each question made Renee more and more desperately curious, and none of her answers gave Snively a good enough reason to cut her out.

So it was that twenty minutes after leaving the Richelin Building, with the dull light from the dormant skyscrapers drowning any faint hints of blue above, Snively led Renee through a small but heavily-secured back entrance to Napiers Hospital at Union and Demitas. She followed him into a humming black-and-gray elevator and a passcode-secured subbasement hallway with black-painted concrete walls that thirstily drank the output of the fluorescent bulbs overhead. The air was cave-cool, but strangely dry . . . .

"Agent Donlevy, please," Snively said over and over, pulling her eyes away from a pile of rounded black pastisteel plates like enormous beetles' shells, from a forest of rubber and polyester vines dangling in a synthetic jungle alcove. "Please. I will explain momentarily."

"Sir . . . ." Renee trotted to keep up and almost collided with him as he stopped before a black steel door. It was submarine-thick and bulbous, rivets dimpling its border. The human laid a pale hand on the its chessboard-black handle.

"Renee," Snively said hesitantly—could anyone be this user-friendly?—"I'll understand if you have some . . . reservations, about what you're about to see. Before I open this door, you must understand that this mission is vital to national security—"

"Sir!" The marten cocked her head, rounded ears forward, jaw hanging in exasperation.

Snively hesitated a moment longer, watching her face for the sign that he might be making some monumental error, then squeaked open the door on a room, black and dark, with a fount of shifting and glowing colors:

"We have no choice!" a humongous bear growled.

A diminutive rabbit wrung her hands. "Kiefer, you can't be serious! He's an unarmed prisoner of war!"

"An assassin, Anna!" Kiefer corrected her. The bear's fur was rough and blonde; his face was hard, blunt, sociopathic, photogenic. " Five seconds more and he would've murdered the entire royal family!"

"Please, Kiefer!" Anna the tech cried, her broad ears laid back on her head, her face a mask of squeamish, impotent dread. "We've already disarmed the warhead! We don't have to torture—"

On the expensive holographic TV, Kiefer grabbed her shoulders and shook to emphasize his words: "Anna, we are out of time! This weasel is our only lead! Not just to the virus, but to the traitor in the Third Regiment! Call Division, call the King himself if that's what you have to do! But I won't let Mobius lose this war!"

"Kiefer, no!"

Kiefer Faconnier's bulging muscles knotted as he shoved Anna from his path and slammed open the door to the interrogation chamber. The camera lingered on Anna for a moment after he left, long enough to catch her yellow eyes as they narrowed with malicious intent. She was a rabbit, but she was also a mole.

A smirking, purple-furred weasel was sitting at a steel table next to a small microphone, playing idly with the shiny chain linking his wrists together. "I want a JAG," he sneered, not bothering to raise his eyes as the scowling bear kicked a metal chair into place under the door handle. "Let me guess, you're the bad cop—"

Kiefer backhanded the weasel with the sound of a honeydew hitting cement (which it probably was). His pistol pressed against the purple fur of the traitor's face in closeup. "Talk or you die in this room. Who gave you the virus?"

"You kill me," the weasel giggled, "and you never see Elise again."

Kiefer's eyes shot wide enough to occupy the full holographic display field with horror. "What do you know about my daughter?"

"Captain," Renee whispered, confusion and a growing fear of humiliation in her TV-blue eyes. "I don't have any 'reservations' about Guardsman. I own a few of the early seasons—"

She was interrupted by a scream of agony as Kiefer Facconier crushed the assassin's hand. "WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR?" Facconier roared.

"Hooray! Make him tell, Kiefer!"

Then Renee noticed her. Amanda's black armor blended into the black couch on which she lay, her clear, sweet smile garish in the cold light from the television, hands clapping in glee. The lower abdominal plates were still absent; dark stretch bandages covered the staples. "Hello, Captain," she said. "Who's this?"

"This is Corporal Renee Donlevy, Amanda," Snively replied. Renee didn't seem to notice the promotion, her ears probably as distracted as her amazed eyes. "She likes Guardsman, just like you."

"Wake up, Sal."

"Mmmnh?" Sally's eyes slivered open. Sonic, leaning in through the driver's door of the little red hatchback, quills stuffed into a heavy blue parka, his head ringed with a fat hood lined with fake fur—poor guy had so little of his own. Behind him the sky was a frigid dawn blue, slowly clogging with gray clouds.

"Coffee," he said, sliding a steaming styrofoam cup into the broken drink-holder under the radio. "Paper," he added with a wink, tossing a fat bundle into her lap.

"Mmmnh, thanks," Sally sighed, blinking under stringy red bangs and drawing her light brown jacket tighter about her thick winter coat of fur. Cold air had been blowing over the forest from Meerland to the south and finally made it into central Mobius today, blasting over the dry, winter-dead great plains.

And then the world streaked and turned and shifted. The space around her jumped at a pothole. "I'm awake!" she cried, blinking. "I'm awake, I'm . . . ." Her voice softened and died into a yawn and a quiet moment of pure, light animal chitter.

"Good morning," Sonic winked. He turnedhis eyes back to the featureless road, stretching away before the car toward the desert and . . . .

Sally lowered her slowly waking eyes to the sloppy pile in her lap: the morning's paper and her book of middlegame chess puzzles. Her failure in Hewlett, all of Standard Army's dead troops, that thing . . . . she wasn't going to dwell on it, but she doubted it had won her any friends in Standard Army. So with no tactical opportunities, she was back in the unpleasantly amorphous world of strategy. Her army was still divided in two: Antoine her Rook taking some Knights and Priests and Pawns to the bigger refugee camps in the eastern reaches of the Great Forest to trade ammo for food before Knothole's inadequate supply of home-grown carrots and potatoes gave out. They'd follow the bigger back-paths to Marigold, and if necessary send a detachment of Pawns on foot to Mudhole or Deep Springs.

Meanwhile, Sally would seek an alliance to upset the government with a force other than Mobian Standard Army. The best of these bad options was someone Sally had yet to see; in fact, she'd yet to meet anyone who'd seen him face-to-face. Word was he was a gunrunner with a political mind, a golden furred short-horned goat named Varitek. The Overlander-sounding name suggested an origin and connections over the border, as did the Lachels-made rifles his men were peddling. But the way he was moving into the eastern power vacuum left by the Committee for Public Welfare suggested a Mobian patriot.

Sally wasn't sure how to get him in her corner, but sitting in Knothole wasn't going to help. So Sonic and she were on a long road trip into the eastern deserts, to the old mining city of Fennec Settlement, Varitek's reputed base of operations. And from there . . . well, they were going to wing it, basically.

Part of her wondered how she was able to tolerate the risk. But of course she knew: the White Queen, her hedgehog. She had the strangest feeling that no matter how bad things got, nothing could truly be wrong with him near her. Even with the car's heater long since disintegrated, she felt warm.

Sonic flicked his eyes from the road and caught a blink of her wide sleepy smile, a soft version of the one that appeared on his face a moment later. He dug a hand into his sweaty parka and pulled out a crinkling wax bag full of cherry fruit pie. "Here."

She turned it over in her hands, staring at it with a stupid look on her face, like she didn't know what it was. But maybe, Sonic thought with a low, quiet little fear, she was hung up wondering if he'd paid for it—which he hadn't . . .

"What is it?" Sally yawned.

"You never had one?" Sonic asked, appalled. "Oh man, eat it." He kept glancing over as she carefully opened one corner, took a tiny bite and chewed, closing her eyes to taste.

After Sally broke out of the hospital, she'd lay in the leaves with him for hours, crying. He'd just sat there with his arms around her, stupefied, horrified. He'd never heard her cry, ever. He tried to think of times when she'd hurt herself as a kid, but he never remembered her crying. She stayed quiet all the time they were driving back from Hewlett to Narsurpan, staring out the window all sad at the trees and farms. What was wrong? What the hell did she want? What was he supposed to do? He had no idea what it was that made her happy. It didn't matter whether she should be happy, like if she'd just broken out of army jail and killed a robot monster and a bunch of bad guys. She could just fall apart . . . .

"Oh what the hell," Sally mumbled through the pie, looking at the masthead of the Robotropolis Clarion. "They didn't have the Times?"

"I looked, Sal," Sonic shrugged.

Sally unfolded the paper, grumbling in annoyance: "Someday, I will live in my capital city agaiAAAAAAAAAAAAA—"

The tires spit storms of gravel as Sonic nosedived the hatchback into the shoulder, turned to Sally ready to—he wasn't sure what. But he couldn't help her with the headline.

**Mechanized Army Invades Great Forest**

***Operation Brushfire* to Clean Nest of Crime, Terror with Full International Support**

## \*Chapter 15\*: Marigold, 2 Firmaire 3228

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**Marigold, 2 Firmaire 3228**

Two stories! Windows! White paint, galvanized cistern in the back, a patio hung with tied mosquito netting. And—an addition that succeeded their most recent visit—a gaggle of guards with bands of dark cloth tied around their arms, standing watch over the entryway and patrolling the perimeter with rifles.

True, the windows were sun-fogged plastiglass; the paint crumbled from columns hewn and smoothed by machete. When they Knothole crew had staggered into town the night before, the first step of the "guards" had been to call Tails a cocksucker and take all their guns away. Now they leaned around on their rifle butts, thuggishly scoping out the refugees like hawks gliding over some wide, grassy field. Rotor wondered about them . . . .

But you measure money by what's around it. Deep in the Great Forest this was the lifestyle of the richest of families. The word from Antoine was they were "petty, untitled" landowners with a tenant farming scheme near Coolette. Hardcore loyalists, so the coup took care of that. But even as public enemies they were still landlords, selling rainwater to and extracting "taxes" from the squatters of Marigold, their little tent-town.

Hard people to see. But Antoine was determined, and it turned out that High Mobian verbs and a touch of scent on your handkerchief were the keys to the front door. That made sense when you learned the person who'd locked it was—

"Wah hel-lo, hello!" The woman traipsed off the last creaking wooden step to grab the hem of her brown dress and curtsey. Her fur was orange and her steps were sure, but her muzzle was gray as her hair, tightly tied back with her ears. "Mister D'Coolette, is it?" she asked, flapping her eyes. "Bienvenue, Monsieur D'Coolette. I am afraid I speak only a trifle of High Mobian, Monsieur."

Antoine smiled graciously, lifting the sleeve of his starched blue jacket to his chest as he bowed. Rotor suspected that Moan-Seer Dahcoolit found Mad-Damn's pronunciation a mite hard on the ears. "Mayor Rabbit," Antoine said. "Allow my companion and I to thank you for such a kind welcome."

"Oh, dear me!" the old rabbit twittered, blushing. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for my daughter, Monsieur. I'm Emily; my daughter Jean is the mayor. May I take you up to her? Oh," she held up a hand, "I'm afraid it might be simpler if you were to remain here, Mister . . . ."

"Tulugarjuk, ma'am. Rotarak Tulugarjuk."

"Ah, welcome to you, Mister—ah, sir," she balked, staring with confused disapproval at the backward-angled brim of his baseball cap. "Now if you'll follow me, Monsieur . . . ."

Rotor eyed them sullenly as they marched up the staircase. Antoine might be worthless in the field, but he was ace with a stale, stuck-up bitch.

That was unfair, he thought as he walked away from the staircase and wandered around a little living room (the drawing room, one of the guards had said). It made it sound like Antoine's skills, such as they were, lacked importance, but at this point it was absolutely necessary for Antoine to get the daughter of the stale, stuck-up bitch in their corner. Rotor had woken up at dawn on a bed of frosted dirt with cold settled in his fat like a bad houseguest. He was in a sea of unwashed fur, shit smell and burning smell. People spilled out of tents, into the forest, filled every square foot of spare space.

Upstairs, they were slowly wading through a swamp of oh dear me and excuse me madam to get to a discussion of all those desperate people. About how it wasn't natural for the town to be this swollen, even with the army tearing up woods. About how it made no sense, even with those highly trained, scrupulously dutiful new guards and their military rifles, that the army hadn't invaded the dumpy town like so many other little camps that dotted the Great Forest.

That is, unless the army were deliberately herding squatters here. Unless Marigold were less refuge and more Future Site of Prison Camp Shithole.

Twan and Rotor had quickly worked out that there were only two outcomes. Either everyone, guards and all, mustered up a push and broke through the army cordon to Coolette, or at best they were in for years of hell. Rotor doubted a smaller group could pull it off. The Knothole crew certainly hadn't made it through the line last night with raw courage and impeccable skill.

Rotor swiped a handful of peanuts from a bowl on a kerosene lampstand and wondered if the Rabbits had more mettle than Antoine. He poked through the furnishings: delicate magenta wallpaper, tables bearing what was left of the family's photographs, a scuffed upright piano: could they stand to leave these posh digs to save something as cheap and common as their own pelts? He worried, scanning the stodgy pictures—

The girl was young. Her head tilted softly above a simple purple dress: sleepy blue eyes, shaggy orange cheek fringe, and in between a kind smile showing just a hint of ivory. Rotor lifted the photo to his eye to better see the bend and slow descending curve of her flopped ear.

"The name is May. May Rabbit."

Rotor bobbled and caught the frame. "She's—uh." He carefully replaced the photo and stood to face iron, stealthy Emily. "She's beautiful," he stammered.

"More's the pity she's dead," Emily replied. Her eyes leapt to the empty bowl of peanuts, then snapped back to him.

"Uh. I'm, uh—" He tried to bow like Antoine and wound up bent slightly with his arm gimped before his chest. Rotor appeared to be about to vomit on the furniture.

"Perhaps you'd care to sit," she ordered sternly. "I've brought refreshment.

"Yeah, sure." He sat his fat ass heavily on a heavily starched, abrasive couch as she left. On the table she'd left a plastic pitcher and a pair of cups. Class. As soon as she was out of the room he unclipped his canteen from his belt and filled it. An urge: keeping an eye on the door through which the battleaxe had left, carefully spilled water onto the cushions.

"GUARDS!"

Rotor bristled, staring at the empty room. "It was an accident!—"

Thunder rolled from the second story and turned into Antoine, leaping awkwardly down the stairs three at a time. "Rotor!" he screamed, eyes wide in panic. "Run!" He leapt off the stairs and reached for the door, which opened inward directly into his forehead, slapping him off his feet like a headshot in a Great War movie. The rat stopped halfway in the door, gloves on his fingers, dark armband in a bow above the elbow of his jacket and the greasy black muzzle of his machinegun like a smaller version of his round, astonished mouth, gaping at the floor by his shoes.

"Mayor Rabbi—" he said, and then Rotor's full canteen slammed into his jaw. He bounced off the door and rebounded into a fine plate of pearl ceramic, smelling of peanuts and fracturing into six or so jagged plates that sliced into the flesh of his face. Then Rotor's fat arms caught him just under his ribs, crushing the air out of him and slamming him down onto the brittle wood of the patio with a shivering crack.

They tumbled off onto the dirt until Rotor rolled on top, grabbed his neck and slammed an heavy fist into a big shard of plate sticking out of the guy's head. "Shit!" he shrieked, the walrus roar loud enough to turn the heads of all the scraggly blanket-hugging people that clogged the clearing in front of him. This was right in time for them to see the rat's head explode.

He stared open-mouthed into a thousand faces, a twisted potsherd protruding from between his first and second knuckle, his rivulets of copper blood running into his eyes, his mouth. Now this time Rotor heard the shots, a quick three round burst from his far right that pulled at his whiskers with the bulletwake and called forth a trainwhistle shriek on the far left. While he stumbled to his feet Antoine bounded past him, wet blood flying from his snout and breathing like an industrial engine: EEEEE-HUUUH, EEEEE-HUUUH. But it was too late: more astonished greasy black mouths poked at them from right and left, pressed forward inside the crowd—

"Don't shoot!" yelled a strong female voice from a window somewhere above and behind them. "Y'all hit someone! Grab them! Somebody grab them!—"

The five meters the crowd parted in front of Rotor and Antoine like a herd of terrapods circling away from a repenpack. Then there was no more give and they slowed to a crawl, stepping carefully over heads and smoking ashpits until a silver-furred, black-armbanded wolfdog was reaching for their belts. And then they ran, stumbling, tripping on cobblestones (or something like that), cracking branches (oh good gods that was not a branch), kicking, punching, biting at a mob that was beginning to sense its power. Rotor screamed in rage, lowered his head and barreled forward, snapping loose of the frail claws that sought to anchor him and shouldering undernourished chimpunks and squirrels into a tumbling wake. They drew apart to reveal emptiness, a line of frigid, barren trees—

"Keep running!" screamed Antoine.

"But," gasped Rotor, lungs on fire, "the Army—" He screamed as a chainsaw chatter of bullets shredded a trunk before him, spitting woodchips into his hands and his recoiling face.

"They'll keep—EEEEE-HUUUH—the guards away," Antoine yelled.

And they did, for the time being. In minutes Rotor and Antoine were wedged under a tight rock overhang like lizards, hiding deep beyond the treeline. It was the first chance Rotor had to ask: "What the hell did you do!"

"Nothing!" Antoine cried, leaves stuck to the coagulating blood above his eyes. "I spoke to her of the matters that we discussed! I set forth my arguments with sound reasoning! And when she was recalcitrant, I tried to stir her feelings of patriotism, appealing to the needs of Her Highness and—"

"You told them we're with Sally?"Rotor almost yelled, grabbing Antoine by his filthy, mud-spattered dress jacket. "When Army comes in she'll finger us, Tony! She'll finger us like a snot-filled nose! You said they were loyalists!"

"There must be some misunderstanding," Antoine whined.

"Well not anymore," Rotor snorted, taking an adrenaline-firm hold of the shrapnel in his hand. "These Rabbit bastards can fuck their own people if they want, but they can't fuck with us. We're getting our people, we're getting our guns and we're getting—"—he hissed at his sudden, sharp, successful pull—"getting out."

"We can't go back into town!" Antoine squealed, loudly enough to risk their position. "The guards may not remember every member of our caravan! The children must fend for themselves until—"

Rotor put his palm on Antoine's snout with a slap like a punch. Antoine stared, eyes shining, growing shinier. They squeezed, his body shaking silently.

At least he was quieter than last night.

"Come on, come on," muttered Sonic, blowing a stop sign to turn left onto another dusty, deserted street. In rigid military order on either side of the road stood prefab houses of dry, shrunken wood shipped up from Coolette and the Great Forest over a century ago. Each had a thin yard of red alkaline dirt fenced by belly-high wire mesh; dented tin: BEWARE OF REPENOMAMUS. At dusk the windows were dark. They looked long dead. Sally met the eyes of a graysnouted wolf buried in a thick quilt on a porch, barefurred feet and the dusty aluminum stalks of a lawn chair peeking out from underneath, as Sonic squealed the hatchback through another turn onto a two-lane asphalt street. Electric signs on fat steel poles: FENNEC SETTLEMENT USED AUTO, Jimmy's Sandwiches, AUTOWASH LAUNDRY. "Here we go . . . ." Sonic muttered, licking sugar teeth with a strawberry tongue.

"You sure you can take care of this?" Sally asked. Since being chased into hiding at age five the one thing Sally had never lacked was firearms: an armory chock full of gleaming pistols, petite submachineguns, rifles taller than her head. She'd never had cause to buy one, or learn how to find a man who sells them.

"Leave it to the hedgehog, Sal," Sonic smiled, green eyes tracing the sidewalks as he drove slowly along the curb. "You don't gotta worry about a thing. And hey," he momentarily pressed the points of his quills into the hemorrhaging wounds of the long-since pincushioned driver's seat, "if my girl needs a little help persuading this Varitek goat, all she's gotta do is say the word and—hey! . . . "

She took her lips from his warm cheek and sat back down, blushing, eyes closed.

Something was off. Where was her adrenaline nausea? Her people might be in trouble in the forest. A full army division was scouring the woods to find her home. Her rebellion was gasping for air, grabbing at any allegiance in reach before it sank back beneath the waves, and she had her hedgehog with her and she really, really wanted to kiss him again. Somehow, everything was going to be alright. Silent, nervous giggling breaths, all her fur alive and tingling, ready for any touch . . .

The feelings were strange, she thought as her snout pulled into a soft grin. Alien.

"All right. Here's a good spot." Sonic rolled into the parking lot of a grocery store with a special on RETAIL SPACE, on sale for MAKE OFFER. But unlike the rest of the neighborhood, the electric lights on the stalks above were lit, and the lot wasn't empty: cars, cycles, boomboxes, barrel firepits, kneeling leather jackets and battery lamps clustered around snarling, thick-tailed repenomami in spiked collars and cruel choke-chains. Sonic parked the hatchback across one of the yellow lines.

"What do we do now?" Sally asked.

"Hang loose." He yawned, splaying in the driver's seat and cracking the window a centimeter. "Good looking beasts," Sonic laughed, jerking a thumb back at the repenfight. "I'd lay even money that one'd kick my ass."

Sally pointed at his window. "Uh, Sonic . . . ."

The mole wore his sunglasses at night. He smiled a groovy, dead grin as he tapped thick-gloved fingers on the window, sighed a drugged out come-on: "Hey, lovebirds, you new to the mines? Damn right it's rough; you looking to stay well?" He lowered his hand to catch a small plastic pillbottle that slid quickly out of his gray trenchcoat sleeve.

"Nah, man," Sonic mumbled, instantly on his level, "We're lookin' for—"

"—Something sweet?" The pillbottle was switched with a thicker flask of something pink. "Liquid 'moxicillin, so fresh they didn't have time to pay the import duty. I don't wanna lay a bad trip on you, but if your baby comes down with mine cough—"

"Nah, man, we want—"

"What?" the mole whined in exasperation. "Junk?"

"Guns."

He swallowed: "—Guns?"

"Assault rifles," Sally clarified, leaning over the stick and pressing her head to Sonic's chest. "Jenks Arms 101FBs. A lot of them. Maybe a little hard to get." Maybe impossible for anyone but Griffith Varitek to get in volume. Maybe a surefire path to him.

The mole pulled his coat a little tighter against a brief gust. "Try that guy there," he nodded, turning to wander away between some chopped bikes.

Sonic snickered and winked at Sally as he pulled toward the guy in question, a big gray wolf in blue jeans and a black leather jacket. "Mondo thanks, my man. Sorry to harsh your buzz!"

The brown-furred marten traced a black-gloved finger lightly along the white fur of the Dalmatian's chin as she drew away. "After your shift, Hawk. It's a date."

"Yeah, you better believe it, Sydney baby," the Dalmatian called as the tent flapped closed behind her, grinning and licking at at one of his canines. He wore a beaten forest camouflage jacket with a deep green armband above one elbow, and corralled his shaggy brown hair under a black baseball cap with white letters reading POLICE. He turned to Myron, his soft brown eyes glowing in the faint light of the lamp on the picnic table. "Sheeit! Man, if I'd known they had her in the forest—hey, I ever say that nothing good came out of this mess, you hit me. In the face, okay?"

"Sure," Myron agreed, yellow eyes lingering on the tent flap. The moment Myron had seen that woman, he'd known they were meant for each other for ninety minutes. But hell, the dog had probably saved all their lives last night by roping them into Marigold. Myron couldn't hate the lucky fucker too much.

"Now what were you bitching about again?" the dog asked. "Your mob, right?"

Another thing: Hawk the Dalmatian had been kind enough to invite Myron into the guards' empty mess tent for warm beer. Myron didn't really need it anymore, not after his bad times in the dry bunker, but it was a little like returning home. More like it than the real thing, probably. Dad was decidedly not close. After all this Molly probably hated him. Kidnapped, criminalized, going to be killed by the army, nicknamed "Cat." This isn't me. I don't die running through the trees like some hunted animal . . . .

"I guess I don't feel like I'm using my skill-set, you know?" Myron sighed, returning the can to his lips.

"Your skill-what?" the Dalmatian asked.

"My skills. What I'm trained to do. Coding. Programming. What I do at my job."

The dog shrugged and laughed incredulously, spreading his hands on the little picnic table. "Ain't your job no more, looks like."

"Look, you do one thing, you wanna keep doing it. Like—" Myron pointed at Hawk's hat. "Right? You were a cop, and now you're a guard."

"Nope, I traded some cigarettes for this. Last legit work I had was cooking up in Terscala."

"Well alright, but wouldn't you rather—don't you think like a cook?"

"One guy doesn't think like another?" Hawk found the idea amusing. "So I think everyone's a dish and you think they're computers?"

"Well . . . . yeah," Myron realized. "Programs, actually. Output as a function of input. We've got a guy who produces beatings and bad jokes as a function of food. While guys in your . . . Group? Army?" The town guard were recent arrivals in Marigold. An armed merchant caravan . . . well, a bunch of thugs under this one trader's command, name of Griff.

"Sure," the dog shrugged. "We sometimes say 'mob.' Heh, the Committee always used to say 'organization.'"

"You were with the Committee to Free Mobius?" Myron asked. "You know a Quinn Featherlight?"

"Glasses, otter? He with you now?" He joined in Myron's nod, leaning back in his chair with satisfied features. "You must be an alright bunch; he'd never get mixed up in anything too nasty. Surprised he wound up that far from home, though, what with the boss running around. He's picked up a bunch of us since Coolette."

"Are you caravan guys . . . . rebels?" Myron asked. "I always heard Committee soldiers were idealists."

"Well, Griff Varitek wants more outta life than dough. He says—"

"Hawk!" the yellow-furred goat called as he strode into the tent. He was tall and solid, with tiny dull horns to highlight a thick forehead. His drooping snout was ugly, but there was something like a smile always about his face, a strange charisma. Solid black armband around a brown duster, another of Griff's men, unless he actually was—

"Yassir, Griff." Hawk stood up and whipped his cap to his black-spotted head in a sharp salute.

"Who is this man, Hawk?" Varitek asked, sizing Myron up with a skew yellow eye. He had a strangely soft, mellow voice. It was the voice of a most reasonable, even compassionate man.

"Thinkin' about bein' a recruit," the Dalmatian joked, nudging his elbow into Myron's shoulder.

"Good news," Varitek nodded. "We'll need all the help we can get. You couldn't have known, Hawk, but that group you brought in last night is causing trouble."

And maybe Hawk had been an improv actor or a criminal before he cooked, because he didn't so much as bat an eye. "What kind of trouble?"

"Mayor Rabbit that they're spies for Robotnik. Spy hostages would be better defense against an army attack than all our guns, so we're going to flush them out of hiding."

"How?" Myron asked.

"Got him here, boss," said a Doberman as he lifted up the tent flap. "Couldn't miss the little freak."

The dog dragged a little two-tailed boy that showed no obvious signs of recognition when he laid eyes on Myron. The kid had brought them into town, too, right? He was smart, brave, and another good actor: shreds of a mean smile were plastered to the corners of his mouth; only the slightest bit of wetness glistened in the corners of his eyes.

"You're going to have to give the boys a rundown on what the rest of them look like, in case this doesn't bring them out with their hands up," Griff added. "And see if you can get some gear for . . . what was your name, recruit?"

If Cat and his sudden acquaintance couldn't figure something out, Tails was going to die.

"So cold," Sally yawned.

"That's why they call it Frimm-Air," Sonic muttered. He drew the blanket closer, wrapped his arm a little more tightly around her.

I'm going to sleep with him, she thought again. It was too cold to focus on anything but staying warm. Even if she had the IDs to safely get a room in town, the idea still would have fascinated her: sleeping with him in the back of a car in an empty salt flat, not a soul for kilometers around.

For all the day's horrible news, things were looking up already. Their wolf was undoubtedly a Varitek contact, and they'd finagled a sit-down (ostensibly to purchase guns—turning the conversation to political matters might be a little tricky) with an unnamed but identifiable goat at a spot deep in the desert early tomorrow. But for now . . .

In the hatchback window a tiny blink moved across the sky from east to west, a Vorburg satellite transmitting for some Lachels corporation or spying on her country's northern reaches, hundreds of miles away. Outside some unthinking mammal stirred some pebbles, a tiny desert eomaia near the car, or far away an wild amblypoda lost from its tiny herd.

"I wish it were warm for you," Sally said.

"You're warm," Sonic yawned. "I wish I had fur like yours."

"Wish we both had fur like wolves, fat like a walrus. They have it so good this time of year."

The wolf observing in complete silence from his seat in the cracked dirt twenty meters away had to agree. His leather jacket wasn't for warmth. He barely needed so much as a shirt in the night air.

Night is worm time.

They press upwards through walls of clay and rock, swing their eyeless, undulating faces. They look starved for air, as though they are drinking the air through their little squeezing rings of bare, pink flesh.

They are helped. They swing through the night air high above their dirt, dangling and swinging from finger to finger. Curling about those bigger worms, hugging. Her innumerable, nameless brothers and sisters, each as unwelcome and revolting as she herself.

She smiles.

VT2, Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 16\*: Great Desert, 3 Firmaire 3228

**Great Desert, West of Fennec Settlement, 3 Firmaire 3228**

The sign hung on a high barbed-wire fence that stretched endlessly along the highway under a concrete-cloudy sky. It was steel painted with raised black letters and said the place was the CLAYMORE MINERAL EXTRACTION COMPOUND, or had been, anyway. Property of Ellingson Mineral Corporation, which explained not only the fence but the massive-blast shielded gatehouse, the gun mounts, the dormant severe tire damage strips, and other anti-wolf precautions. All dry and desert salty, long abandoned. The mine must have run dry.

Beyond the gatehouse was an asphalt road that ran a half-kilometer to another fence and a shattered, candy-striped wooden gate. Here Sally slowed the car to a roll and they watched, again, through windows open on air as cold, dry, and pleasant as outer space. It was only fair to let Griffith Varitek choose his own turf; if Sally were asked to meet a complete stranger she'd probably choose a site just as convoluted and fortifiable. And as a big name out east who valued his business, he had every reason not to develop a reputation as the kind of dealer who would murder a pair of buyers for their money. But still . . . .

"What do you think?" she asked Sonic quietly.

He scowled at the freezing desert out of his thick blue parka like a soldier out of a bunker: "Good enough."

"What about snipers? Could he—"

"He could." He rolled his eyes to her and mustered up a smile in his chapped lips. "I'll watch. You'll have to do the talking."

Sounds like a division of labor, she thought as she pulled in between the buildings. Old things that looked like little more than girder frames with corrugated steel sheets stapled around them. Long, dark two-story ovens for workers, very occasionally gapped with holes in some loose gesture at the Labor Ministry's workplace quality regulations. Bigger boxes, warehouses near a slag pit, and more buildings after that, laid out around a small, central square . . . Mine buildings. Sally's experience underground was limited to maximum security luxury bunkers. A gunmetal gray pickup truck was resting in the middle of the asphalt, a bit of glistening, barely liquid water on the pavement beneath the tailpipe, but the owner was nowhere to be seen.

Sonic peered, but didn't detect anyone either. Sally was about to lay on the horn when a loud electric hum pierced the silence and a large cargo door trundled open. Ducking out of the dark came their tall gray wolf from town, a shred of cigarette clinging to the side of his mouth like a cancer, and behind him . . . a black and tan shepherd dog. He wore a ratty brown jacket and a wide-brimmed straw sunhat that buried his sleazy smile in shadow at all times. He was sloppily one-handing a Poiccard assault rifle and conspicuously lacking in horns or the other stereotypical features of a goat.

"Well, well," the dog grinned, showing the white teeth under his tan-furred lips. His tail wagged as Sonic and Sally got out of the car. "What do you think, Reynard?"

"About what?" the wolf asked with what seemed like monumental disinterest. A moment's attention revealed that it wasn't: the leap and flash of his eyes testified to an acrobatic mind. But whatever he was interested in, he wished to make it damn clear that he didn't particularly care what interested the dog.

"These youngsters," the dog clarified with an earnest air. He was apparently of the school that disdain does not exist unless it is acknowledged. "Do they look like standup guys to you? Trustworthy business associates?"

Reynard shrugged; his cigarette glowed. "Dunno, Terrell."

Terrell frowned in annoyance and lazily indicated Sonic with the rifle. "What about him? Do you think he's packing ninety kinds of heat under that coat?"

"He's a hedgehog," the wolf answered with a shrug. "Maybe he's cold."

The dog sighed and raised his free palm to the cloudy sky. "Do you always gotta be such a dipshit, Reynard? Get over there and find out."

"Close enough, pal," Sonic smiled evilly before Reynard could move. "Don't put your fingers close to the machine." But native confidence aside, he was nervous. Sally watched his eyes flick to windows, back, doorways, back. He saw nothing, but he felt something . . . .

"You're here to see Mister Varitek, yeah?" Terrell snapped, boots crunching in the frozen dust as he stomped a pair of steps toward Sally to pace back and forth, angrily, jabbing with his finger. "Well I don't care how much scratch you got or how much product you want to move. No one sees Griff Varitek wearing a rod, not even hedgehog here."

"The goat knows the kind of weight we want—" Sally began before coming to an awkward, paralyzed stop. Hedgehog? she thought, brain stuck. 'Not even hedgehog?' As opposed to 'the hedgehog'? Capital-H 'Hedgehog'?

Reynard the wolf remained perfectly blasé, but it seemed nervousness was contagious for dogs. "Stubborn bitch!" Terrell growled loudly, something strained in his voice like a corpse under a heap of violets. He flung his floppy hat to the dust in exasperation and in the process moved the muzzle of his rifle about a decimeter from where it started. "You wanna buy that weight, you gotta loan me what you're carrying now." And as he talked, he moved the barrel another half-decimeter towards Sonic. Then another.

There was no time to lose on tactics, communication or thought. Sally ran two steps and kicked her right boot up waist-high to meet the top of the dog's gunbarrel. They met and she just kept running, running up the sawhorse balance beam in Knothole's gym, swinging her right foot forward to sock into the punching bag. But the balance beam never falls from its mount like a gun from a stunned dog's hand, and you don't wind up awkwardly delivering a superhard kick to the punchingbag's armpit and tumbling with it into a bruised knot.

"Sally!"

Sonic saw her blink up at him, more conscious than the dog. And then he had to dodge the wolf's left, and then the wolf's left—Reynard wasn't too slow, and he kept coming. Block, counterpunch, dodge, divert. And while Sonic's arms fought his legs were scheming, because—

From somewhere behind him came a loud, clear, high arooo.

Sonic threw both his arms in the way of a solid right hook to buy a quick glance over his shoulder. There weren't two wolves, there were four, more. They weren't in the windows, they were springing up out of the ground, the desert itself, out of nowhere and nothing. All of them in gray fur like dust, all of them carrying long, sighted rifles.

His first thought was to shout. "Sally, run!—"

The knife slammed hard into Sonic's chest. He didn't see it but his chest knew it was a knife from the way the serrated edge scraped and tore into a rib as it stabbed for lethal depth, a lung filled with blood, choking and dying and no, no, NO

Sonic's lunge brought the knife through his shredded rib with a loud crack to slide smooth and hot through the white fat and red muscle of his left side. Ignore, kill the wolf. Punch through his face, but no: when he blocked, Sonic's fist let the blocking arm hold it back; it stayed in place to block a counter-punch as Sonic's elbow gleefully drove into the side of the wolf's face, only the cushioning of Sonic's parka keeping the canine's skull from fracturing into his eye. Run the fucker over like a car, suggested Sonic's legs, driving an uncushioned knee into the soft, firm bits the wolf tried to hide. All of Sonic's parts sang, ran riot, too fast, punches and kicks pummeling the wolf as he fumblingly drew the knife from Sonic's coat and slipped in a big puddle of muddy blood someone had left on the ground.

The wolf was nothing now but a bundle of arms and legs, basic instincts for life.Sonic was not thinking, but his quills had made the decision: those instincts were in for some disappointment—

The bullet tugged at his shoulder like an insistent hand; a blast of white goosefeathers and red, misty flesh. Time to go, Sonic. His hand reached for his holster but it found itself against the front of his still-zipped parka. Before he knew it, he was running through a doorway as bullets punching through the thin steel around him, then diving into the dark innards of one of those big steel boxes to hide and run again.

It was cold like a refrigerator. He couldn't see Sally. He couldn't hear her. He had no idea where she was. He had no idea where he was. His belly (oh fuck you) was beginning to wake up, wonder where the rest of itself had gotten to. It was starting to cry out, scream.

"Hunt them down!" a bark echoed from behind him. "Hunt them down, damn it!"

Sonic pressed one white-gloved hand to his long, gaping gash, more shots turning the dark warehouse into a disco of sunlight. All he could do was run.

Molly was tangled in the embrace of cold, sweat-damp tentacles. She groaned, rolling but still caught, reaching a bare, burning palm out into dry, freezing air . . .

The fall off of her couch to the shag carpet was enough to wake her up. She groaned: her head was stuffed with more pain than a fall from a bed deserved, her hands were hot but unsweaty, dehydrated. Too hot under a blanket, too cold in the air; a throat raw and parched; a mind that couldn't remember why she should be suffering this way: oh, she could guess. It took hard work to earn this hangover.

The raccoon groaned, rubbing and rubbing her snout and eyes, forcing herself to smell her own drunken stink of fur oil and barley beer and . . . caramel? She squeezed her black eyes tight: oh fuck. If she'd been getting bombed on caramel liqueur, there was simply no telling what she'd done last night, or why. If she'd been blasted on Procyon's Ringtail Cream then she didn't want to ever get up again, ever. For a moment she rolled and wormed around her coffee table, seriously considering trying to crawl under there and just hide. And from under the table, she could see a spent green bottle of Procyon's on the kitchenette counter. On its side, dripping. Gods above.

Wait: she'd gotten drunk at home? Alone? She glanced around in a nervous fog at the undisturbed mess of her laundry, sniffing her stink in the stale air: yeah, alone. What had happened here? She remembered the door, the door was stuck—she looked, it was locked now—and some sort of yelling. She'd been in a bar a couple of streets off the river with Dyson at one point, and—

She curled up into a ball, straining the seams of the filthy quilt around her, giving an wild, animal growl of horror and hate. Who did I not sleep with last night?. . .

It had happened, just like Darcy had promised. Molly was sketchy on the details, but somehow it involved a walk over here—had she told Dyson she'd let him in? Had he promised to walk her home, close as she was to the Port? And then the door stuck, on his arm, his arm wedged in the door—

Molly wasn't ever going to be in the same building with anyone she'd met before ever again. How was she supposed to explain this if it got around? How was she supposed to work next to people who heard—What if Dyson told some lie about happened—what if he . . . with the police, like she'd worried about? Had he been that angry?

Well, how many empties of Procyon's were in the sink?

Molly got uneasily to her feet and walked over to check when she noticed the envelope that had been slipped under the door. Oh gods. 'Attn. Assistant Researcher Molly. It has come to my attention that I desire to palpate your—' She opened it.

21 Firmaire. Borgadan Intl Jimmys

Fox in red hat.

NO ID NO BAGS

-D.

I'm going across the border, she thought.

Thoughout the rest of that day, even while lying at her door to the neighborhood cops about why she had felt the need to scream, shout, dance, hurl empty bottles at the walls of her apartment, she just couldn't stop thinking: an agent of the Lachels government is taking me across the border.

Jean Rabbit's poor, dear husband Peter was long gone in the war. She did miss him so, although she wondered whether his mind and soul, quite competent at tending to the affairs of their estate in long-gone Tananou, would have been up to the task of hacking a brand new estate from the wild forest. However much his absence was still felt, Jean had, on the advice of her mother, hired numerous forest squatters to help fill the gap. Martin Ivoire, for instance, maintained Jean's rainwater tanks, exchanging a liter for any of the currencies that circulated in the forest: ammunition, army surplus, dry rations and even, at a substantial discount, paper Mobian currency. Now the poor chipmunk was mobbed, of course, and rationing rather than selling. Every single last one of the refugees was clamoring for a few more drops. And early this morning one of them had given Martin one of the pictures. Martin explained to Jean that the little instacam photos were circulating around the camp, enough of them that everyone in town would be sure to see one.

Jean sat alone at her dresser in her office-bedroom, blue eyes uneasily examining the photo in the late-morning light, urine-filtered through the plastiglass window. It made her fur look a dirty light brown and the fur of the young, orange fox-boy in the photo an unsanitary yellow. He was no more than twelve years of age at the outside, looking squarely into the lens. A black pistol pressed into the flesh of his cheek, warping his snout. Someone had penned stark block letters on the base of the photo: COME OUT COME OUT. Wherever you are.

The voice of reason, tut tut in her mind. There are so many more pressing matters to worry about, Jean. The rebel coyote Antoine was right; the army might move on her town at any time. It might attack even sooner if some damn fool tried to lead an untrained suicide charge right at their lines. And the water was going to run out in a few days, which would mean a riot.

But if her family wriggled through it all—and Jean's mother was right, it always did, somehow they invariably landed on at least one foot—even if they made it, this picture would still be around. It would filter through the game paths and beaten wheel ruts to every squatters' camp in the entire Great Forest.

"I just told you to find 'em," Jane sighed, crossing her arms and letting her white-furred chin sink onto her folded hands. Rebels were bad news in the forest, whether they were loyalists or communists or anarchists or fascists or realists or ironists. They pretended to care about the forest dwellers, of course, but if you loved them so much, why don't you just settle down and live with them? Why, instead, do you gotta press them into your hopeless little war for the distant cities Jane had by now almost forgotten, spend their lives like the cheap rounds you spray outta your machine-gun?

But she hadn't told her benefactor Mr. Varitek how to find the coyote and his troops. And this mathematics, this boy's life against the risk to her town: was this any different? What could sanctify this? It isn't on you, the voice of reason reminded her—it sounded, she had noticed over the years, a lot like her mother. You didn't ask that monster to kidnap a poor, defenseless child.

"I didn't tell him to let the kid go, either," Jane muttered quietly.

"But you don't have a choice, dearest—"

Jane almost tumbled to the ground as she spun to see her mother Emily already inside the open door to her room, her face a mask of concern and caring. "Mother—"

"Oh, my stars, dearest, did I startle you? I was only downstairs minding little Timothy, but I heard your voice and I just couldn't bear to hear my daughter abuse herself needlessly. I mean to say that I doubt very much, in our present circumstances, whether we could convince Mr. Varitek to release the child."

Her mother was right. "But I haven't even asked."

"Well, I can send an invitation to our benefactor to pay you a call later today," Emily suggested, uncorking a bottle of vintage dry sarcasm for benefactor. "Although I doubt we will have the power to effect his comeuppance until some time after our present crisis. Perhaps fate will strike him down first—"

"Think we'll be alive then, ma?"

It was as though Jean had wandered into the clearing before their house happily drunk and naked. "Jean-Mathilda-Rabbit!" Emily cried, rearing her ears up to their full height of dignity. "What need do we have of such pessimistic tripe in this house!"

"What if he's right, mother? What if Antoine D'Coolette is right and our only chance for freedom is to run at the lines—" Jean broke off, stunned as her mother's open hand clouted her nose.

"You let that fast-talking 'Committee' vagabond talk May into battle!" she exclaimed in horror. "And now you would let some charming young aristocrat do the very same thing to—"

Jean's chair fell to the floor with a hollow boom as she stood: "You can't talk about my Bunnie!" she shrieked. No one touched that wound. "She was my poor sugarchild and you will not throw mud on her—"

"My dearest," Emily sighed, so reasonably, "I don't wish to speak ill of anyone, least of all your poor, sweet daughter. But our town is safe. As long as I live, I can guarantee you that this village will be a refuge for our family."

But she'd been thinking about it all through her last sleepless night, and despite her fear of a bloodbath if D'Coolette was given his way, there was a simple math about it if they stayed in town: Varitek's ragged-looking villains against the might of Robotnik's army. "How can you be so certain?"

"I have my reasons," Emily replied.

"Which are?" Jean demanded.

". . . Robotnik's army should have no quarrel with us so long as we give no shelter to rebels. Which I certainly hope you do not intend to do. Nonetheless if you insist on speaking to Mr. Varitek about releasing the child, I'll have him brought up. . . ." Emily turned a cold blue eye down her daughter's untucked white shirt and blue jeans. ". . . though you may wish to put on something a little more presentable before he arrives."

You're the one to talk, Jean thought to herself, instinctively checking each button of her shirt to make sure nothing irresponsible was showing. Her mother's comments were always meant well, she meant everything well, but they sometimes stung a little. And today her mother, who was almost never underdressed, was in the rough, almost peasant-like brown dress that wouldn't suffer on one of her long walks in the forest—

What the high heavens, Jean wondered, was her mother doing in woods filled with government soldiers?

## \*Chapter 17\*: Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228

**Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228**

A pair of Griff's recent recruits out of the deep southeastern forest, stupid young male lions, gently lowered the steaming stainless-steel washbucket to the tent floor. "No, here," Griff clarified. "Over here, by the doorflap—that's the ticket, guys! Hey, here."

The one Griff thought had a lot of promise, the one with the long, stringy brown mane, took the packs of cigarettes like a five year old birthday kitten. "Thanks, Mr. Varitek, sir!"

A friendly smile filled the goat's long snout. Griff didn't smoke. "Right. Now report back to your watch posts."

"Yes sir, Mr. Varitek!" The lions ducked through the tent flap and ran off, trained repen puppies ready to spread another bit of word about how Griff Varitek always put his troops first. And he did. All the same, you needed a little theater to get ahead in any business.

Now Griff was alone, and he quickly tied down the tent's doorflaps. There was a cold wooden crate filled with some of his spare traveling stock (mostly nine millimeters, if he remembered correctly) close enough to the washbasin. He sat, then leaned forward and with methodical pressure from his thick, yellow-furred fingers eased his boot from his right foot. Then he gritted his teeth (every damn winter! every time!) and slowly rolled the sock off a big-toed, yellow-furred foot with a thick, scaly scar curling halfway around the ankle. It descended into the steaming water and slowly, slowly, the world became livable.

Oh, Griff thought, legs splayed, fingers dangling loose from his baggy sleeves, eyes half-lidded like a sated sexpot. You're a stone cold bitch of a bone, but when you line up right you are so sweet . . . .

He sleepily lifted his phone from his coat pocket and unfolded it. He was careful to give the bulky satellite antenna line of sight out a small gap in the canvas before he asked for the connection.

"Terry. Status report."

A quiet pause in the tent, during which tension slowly crept back into his slack features.

"Oh gods, Terry. In one of my arsenals—what do I have in there? . . . huh . . . . Don't. . . . Well, I have a whole town to deal with, Terry. I got this rabbit bitch, I got all these new recruits, I got—You had them on my turf in the middle of the desert with six crack wolf guerillas. You tell me what happened."

Griff sighed in pain. Already the bones were cooling, pushing at each other, inflaming the surrounding flesh.

"That sounds about right, Terry. Yes sir. No, that's not acceptable—Terry, I need the squirrel alive. But with re—okay, 'extreme prejudice,' sure." Drama queen. "What else should—Uh huh. What kind of problems?—"

Griff lifted his free hand to his face, slowly smoothed down the fur.

"Terry, she's not a robot. Just treat her with respect. Wolves consider—Respect. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Respect. Could I use it in a sentence? Show me some fucking respect and buy a dictionary. Just don't be—Yes. Yes, you have my complete authority to—"

If looking at a satphone connection that had just been remotely terminated could kill, Terrell Domasio would be stricken lifeless in the heart of the desert. Griff spat angrily into the dirt, rubbed it in with his left boot, and remembered that he wasn't alone.

The kit had his wrists cuffed around the tent centerpole behind his back, sitting cross-legged. Mighty hard to move from that position. The fur under his eyes was a flat riverbed of dried tears.

He'd heard—so what—and he'd seen. The kid had seen his foot.

"Hey, kiddo. What'd you say your name was again?"

"Miles Prower," the kit replied with a stony glare at his shoes. "Freedom Fighter in Training. Twelve."

Griff couldn't keep a chuckle out of his throat at the undoubted substitution of age for serial number. "Ever see one of these before?" he asked, showing him his phone before replacing it in his pocket. He found the idea of teaching the kid about the difference between cell and satphones humorous and strangely enticing.

"It's a satellite phone, so it doesn't need a local UHF radio relay, just a line of sight to a relay sat in geosynchronous orbit," the kid replied rapidly.

". . . . But have you seen one before?" Griff continued, deflated.

"My Aunt Sally has one."

All Griff's digits curled and cramped in horror. And then he broke out in loud, quick laughter, forcing his seizing foot flat against the cooling metal at the bottom of the washbucket. "Aunt Sally, huh? I bet she would. I bet she would own one. Tool of the trade."

Miles's eyes widened as he realized that his kidnapper knew his "Aunt," as he called her. What a fierce little guy. Griff would love to have him on payroll. Would he ever get the esoteric concept of business? Of a business rivalry, and how it's segregated, apart?

"What's wrong?" the kid asked.

"Nothing, kid." Griff lifted his dripping foot from the lukewarm water and pulled a little rag of a towel from his coat. "I just got the funniest feeling that you're gonna murder me some day."

In the square in the middle of the disused mine, Terrell was on the warpath—heh. Warpath, wolves, get it?

"I got Griff Varitek, fucking king of gods east of the Great River, on this goddamn phone right here," he screamed, lifting the phone into her face in case the crazy bitch had never seen a phone before and somehow doubted he could communicate with big radio medicine, "right here on this phone giving me the Shit Act about how you can't catch the squirrel bitch! Why don't we know where she is?"

"'Cause you broadcast the ambush, you—"

"Reynard!" The boss was a tall, ugly female. "He speaks to me!"

Rennie fell silent, an easy enough trick with a scrap bandage tying a bit of cold earth to his battered snout. Lupe, her name was, didn't take her eyes from Terrell, always angry over a thick, furless knife-scar. Her lumpy, muscular body was covered only with thick blue steel fur and some plain, dull gold bracelets scattered seemingly at random on her arms and legs and some blue, furtight bathing-suit like thing that hid her heavy breasts, her belly, and her crotch, the concessions she'd made to trends of the past few thousand years such as hiding your cooter and living in cities. Her hair had been knife-hacked into bangs in front and pulled into a thick dirty-towel braid in back. You could practically see the stink coming off her.

"My people," she continued with this smooth, deep, maddeningly calm voice, "are looking throughout your compound. It is taking time because we are now the ones risking ambush. Ambush from the weapons you tell me you have stored here—"

"Antitank rockets? Antitank rockets?" Terrell asked, appalled by her ignorance. "Locked up, I might add! Antitank rockets?—aren't good for shit in a fight against infantry. You just gotta find the squirrel. You have to stop fucking up." He slammed his boot into the dirt with each word to make his point.

"I have brought five good warriors. What have you—"

"Well they've fucked it up!" Terrell screamed again, spit flying from his lips. "You fucked it up and you're fucking it up. She's some little tinytits highschooler trying to hold on to a rifle and you're letting her piss all over you. You find her!" He pointed at a bunkhouse that was yet to be checked. "Why are you standing around talking? Get in there!"

"You get in there," she replied.

"Shut up!" he yapped, loud, so that all her soldiers could hear what a worthless bitch their boss was. "Toughest wolf north of Highway 2 my ass; you're chickenshit. You're a coward. You're afraid of a pair of kids? You make me sick!"

"Alpha!" One of the other wolves was running up, barefoot and silent in the dirt, a ratty ponytail waving behind her. She wants to be just like the boss!

"You've found her," Terrell demanded sarcastically. "Sweet Trixiana, you've caught the squirrel."

"Cornered," she gasped, hands on her knees. "Cornered the hedgehog."

"Fuck!" Terrell spat, again throwing his already filthy hat to the ground. "Okay . . . Okay, they say she likes her troops. We can use this. Take me to . . . no, take me to the management shed."

The young wolf girl glanced at Lupe. "Alpha?"

She nodded precisely. "Thank you," sighed the shepherd. "Sweet Trixiana—hey, wait! Slow down!"

As Varitek's lieutenant Terrell Domasio ran after young Maria, Reynard rose to his feet. The fur of his neck and shoulder was matted with sticky brown blood, but his cuts had given their worst and would not require the needle. His eyes were bright yellow, mobile, and unconcussed. Lupe was pleased, because Reynard was a fierce warrior, and displeased, because he wanted to talk.

"He's a charmer, that one," Reynard nodded. "I'm glad you loaned me to him. The city women just eat him up."

"All must serve the pack," Lupe declared. "It is no less honorable than any killing I could ask."

"Yeah. You're right. And you know what they say, you can't pick your friends." Reynard cocked his head and watched the thickening clouds slide along overhead. "Is that right? It is, isn't it? You can't pick your friends?"

Lupe Loborrero Almatrican walked up to him and growled low in his ear, which quickly laid back in a deep, formal blanch. "Not when you're beta."

Sonic's balls were bunched up tight against his crotch. With every breath the air stole from him, leaching heat from his core, filing his lungs with sharp grit and mud. His lungs told his arms to kill the air. His arms didn't quite know what to do. They put the guns down for a moment and wrapped together over his chest.

His gut had settled down from panic into resentful disbelief. The blood that ran down his leg felt burning hot, but the pool on the floor felt cool through his gloves.

An image: the pool of blood was rich red, inches deep, and stretched to a dark, subterranean horizon. In the middle of it Sonic was slumped face down, black, a little submerged stand of rocks, motionless . . . .

Sonic shook the image out of his head, but it didn't go. Out. Out. He gritted his teeth, tensed his knifethrobbing belly as though trying to take a shit: get out get out get out! And then it was gone, to be replaced by nothing: the mineshaft was pitch dark. It needed to stay that way. If there were lightbulbs down here that the wolves could turn on, there was no guaranty that Sonic could kill all of the two or three riflemen they'd send after him before one of them could draw a good bead, and, and . . .

The blackness was filled with a loud, abrasive sound of a needle on vinyl, ghostly feedback, and—

"Hey Hedgehog!" The shepherd dog's sneering, machine-tinted growl seemed to come from everywhere at once. "The wolves tell me that you're stuck underground right now, and I need to give you a message on the management PA. Listen, this is important: can you feel any icicles hanging off your dick? Because that's the first sign of frostbite."

The guy's name was Terrell, and he had a huge, disembodied floating head with red eyes, a making-other-people-eat-shit grin on his tan snout and a pink tongue like a diseased tropical flower.

"I don't like to see a guy suffer. The wolves don't either; it's part of their secret, uh, lore or something. Just come on out, huh? We're all friends up here."

If any of them came down here he'd hear them, blow them away. If they dared come with flashlights he'd shoot the lights and then he'd shoot them and lay them out and do somersaults all over their goddamned bodies. If the fucking dog came, he'd—

"Me. My wolves. The squirrel cunt. We're all good friends."

Where was the pistol—where was the pistol—here. Sonic would kill him. He'd—

"I like her. Quiet type, you know? I mean, not so much at first—just wouldn't shut her damn yap!—but I had the wolves quiet her down a bit."

Sonic felt the ringing impact of the shepherd's forehead in his teeth. The dog stumbled back, eyes all full of nothing. Sonic grinned, breathed a little laugh as he ripped a good hold of the shepherd's chest fur to keep him upright and watched the eyes roll around until they slid forward and pointed at him. The black parts shrunk as the white parts got big. There you are.

"I don't mean we beat her up; don't worry, we can't do that. We think Little Miss Princess'd do real well as a spokesman. Remember how that old professor dude with the glasses used to make all those tapes that the Committee'd send to the networks? Well Acorn can do that, too, for us. Or else. But the endorsement's a lot less convincing if she's got visible marks."

With a sneaker sidesweep Sonic sent the fucker to the ground. A hard knee into the guy's chest stopped him breathing, eyes going wide as he gave a weak cough.

"From the waist up, I mean. And that's good, because I've got some business I want to conduct with her from the waist down."

Sonic ripped a quill loose from his lower back and jammed the point deep into the shepherd's throat. It jerked against his wet hand with each heartbeat. Sonic growled, keeping it right where he wanted it as he dug his knee a little harder into the his chest, staring into those pale, bloodless eyes.

"Sally doesn't seem very into it, but a relationship takes time, you know. Getting to know each other, getting to trust each other. Love takes hard work. But it's worth it. Unless it takes more than an hour. Because then fuck it, I'm just going to have the wolves hold her down and—"

BANG. BANG. Sparks swim, streamers, colors, white, green, slowly fading back to black.

"I'm assuming you didn't just off yourself. Though I suppose it could take two shots for a musclehead like you."

Sonic ejected the half-spent mag onto the rock floor with a clink and fumbled for his spare clip. I'll kill you. I'll kill you.

I'm killing you.

He grinned crazily. He could feel and see the son of a bitch dying over and over while he was lying here freezing to death under the lifeless desert: see the guy with his guts pouring out of his belly, see the guy with his legs cut off, see the guy's face with his eyes cut out, see Sally hunched over in pain, tears pouring from her eyes—

What the hell was wrong with his brain?

Fuck it! Fuck his brain! He was going to—

He rolled into a wet, tangy puddle, clutching his belly together with both hands. Don't forget me, his belly whined. Don't lift a finger without talking to me first.

Sonic hated this. He hated this place and he hated the dog and he hated the wolves and he hated his belly and—

"One hour, pincushion. Come out come out." And there was nothing but static.

"Lift on three," the lion said. "One, two—"

On three Myron strained his legs (not his back!) and brought the hefty crate of ammunition up on to the freezing pickup truck. The collision shivered into his fingers and stung them deep.

"Great! Thanks . . . ." The younger of the two lions blushed through his fawn muzzle "I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

". . . Cat," Myron replied, sucking on the worst of his freezing fingers. He scratched at his arm where the green band was tied around it—it would be hard to get used to having it there, if he had in fact planned to get used to it. "I go by 'Cat.'"

The lion smiled slightly, too kind or cautious to use the corny nickname as a weapon. He gave a big thumbs up! "Thanks!"

"No problem . . . Al, was it? What else should I do?"

"You're one of the brand new recruits, right? No gun training?" Cat shook his head. "I don't think there's anything they need the brand new recruits doing just yet. Just keep yourself available, okay? You see an alarm flare go up, drop it and come running—it might be the army, and Griff'll need everyone he can get."

"Alright, man. Talk to you soon." One of the little stump-chairs outside the canvas guard tent was occupied by a cruel looking Doberman whose ridiculously large gun had a curved, knife-like magazine protruding out of its top. Cat huffed his haunches down on a free stump and watched with steady, appraising yellow eyes as the lions put the pickup in gear and took half of Varitek's weapons and ammo somewhere else for some unexplained reason.

Cat was mapping the systems of Varitek's LAN. It was, by basic programming standards, a really shoddy piece of work, almost Gescom-shoddy. The main guard tent was supposed to serve as a communications hub, but the soldier-elements there were constantly changing and didn't have a good sense of their operations. Then the main comms hub was separate from the one element that could communicate outside the network (Boss Griff and his satphone), and generally there were just too many subsystems kluged grotesquely around the main elements (people running in and out from every quadrant of the village).

Now that he was flowcharting the operation, it was obvious that anything as ugly and jury-rigged as Boss Griff's defense of Marigold was a stopgap. Enter taking the ammo onto a pickup truck, ready to move at a moment's notice. Whatever happened to Marigold in the next few days, Griff didn't intend to be around to shoot at the people who did it.

But enough belittling the work of lesser coders. The task was just to write one small subsystem; call it the retrieval routine. The retrieval routine retrieves a small fox who is sitting, still alive (thank you sweet Trixiana) in the tent directly behind program element Cat. It does so without provoking malicious operations that could damage either the fox or his own damn self. The biggest problem: every element of Griff's system is capable either of malicious action or triggering near-term malicious actions by other subsystems, such as the Doberman sitting next to him (near term meaning that Cat could do a hundred yard dash in maybe two minutes).

There was a good reason (in addition to all the bad ones) that workers in the industry spent so much time belittling bad work: bad work created exploits. Drop it and come running: what awful search architecture. Very inefficient information spread. It ensured over-deployment of resources to trouble spots, necessitating subsequent reassignment of—

Hmm.

Damn, it was cold. He needed to figure out if an element of the system had coffee . . . and maybe he should see if he could bum one of those smokes that Boss Griff was supposedly handing out. And a light for it

In the afternoon light reflected from a distant window you could see that the steel box was painted green and yellow, the colors of BUNDESHEER LACHELS – FEDERAL ARMY OF LACHELS. It said that it contained FREIMANN A1 PANZERRAKETE (1) – A1 FREIMANN ANTITANK MISSILE (1). A serial number had been scratched away with a razor.

Sally swung the monkey wrench in her mightiest overhand chop, bringing the bulky head down from almost the middle of her back to collide with the chipped, bruised padlock. Her jacket wrapped around the wrench-head turned the collision into a dull, quiet, deafening little thok as the tumblers took another hit, another chip was beaten into the steel.

Reflexively, after each hit, she would turn and lift her pistol to the door of this dark storeroom and wait, listening, listening for any of the wolves hunting for her. But she wouldn't wait; she had to work fast.

Faster, if 'Terrell' was telling the truth. But he wasn't. He was lying.

"His fingers are black," the dog said from the little speaker in the corner of the room. Sally could hear his filthy words echoing back through distant windows, coming from hundreds of speakers in all the facility buildings. "That means that a doctor has to cut them off, right now. Frostbite's sending your pincusion into shock."

Liar. Sonic's in a parka and he's fast enough to run circles around any two-bit hood. You wouldn't catch him in a million years.

"I hate to see a guy suffer, lady, but he's not getting a doctor. Not until you come out here with your hands up and empty."

Put him on the line, if he's so captured. Make him talk to me, you sick dog.

Methodically she lay down her pistol, raised the wrench, fixed her eyes on the padlock . . .

In the side of a steep rise of rock, oak roots scrabbling down it in a frantic search for water or soil, was a cave. You had to look carefully for the black little entrance, hidden low among the desperate roots and sandy limestone. It was her home. A squat passage led down to a chamber where she could lie about and sleep. Outside, at night, she would sit on the dirt, climb the tall oak. Once a week she was brought water and food. In the summer, beautiful little white flowers grew around her doorstep. And at every time of year, there were the worms.

Worm time came and Emily came down from the forest, poking her silvery snout into the mellow blue light of the battery lantern, lifting the frayed hem of her old mudspattered work-dress as she stepped carefully into the cool cavern. With Emily came breezes of cold night air from the world above.

She wrapped her old quilts tighter around her legs. Her legs were always alight with invisible fire, burning with prickly, itching, cracking heat. They could not be scratched, of course, but the heat could be endured, but when the limbs froze and burned at the same time . . . .

Her legs could also be ignored, especially when there was something to do. "Who needs killing?" she asked.

"No one, child," Emily smiled sadly. "I've come to see how you're feeling."

"Ya come to see if I done away with any soldiers," she replied with a soft sad smile.

"Have you?" the old rabbit replied with dry suspicion.

She shook her head. "Just me and the worms, like always."

Emily frowned. "You mustn't say such things."

"It's not bad. They're good little boys. Hey, hello . . . . " There was one now, poking its end up through the packed clay that plugged one of the gaps in the rock floor. She reached down and nudged it softly with one of the thick, dull fingers of her left hand. "They love the attention. They're very grateful for anything."

Emily narrowed her eyes. "What did I just say?"

"It's true," she shrugged, watching the little worm curl eagerly around her cool fingers.

The visit was brief. "There is so much to take care of in town," Emily explained. "I will see you again soon."

She liked it when there was trouble in town. Then she got to see Emily more, and sometimes she got to see other people, too. If only for a few moments.

Emily came again that next day, waking her. Cloudy gray light daylight filtered down through the tunnel from the forest above.

"Who needs killing?" she asked.

"A benefactor of ours," Emily snorted haughtily, turning her eyes back up the cave mouth, thinking about the benefactor. "A goat. Golden fur, short hair, tiny rounded horns, long, ugly snout. Very cruel and quite dangerous. My poor innocent daughter just doesn't have the head to see how much he'd like to take over our town, steal our citizens. . . ." She seemed to suddenly realize how much anger there was in her raspy voice and her old, wrinkled gray snout, and she consciously recomposed her face in a gentle, ladylike demeanor. "Of course I just can't allow that."

"One goat." She yawned. "That all?"

For now," Emily confirmed sternly. "I'm worried about a troublemaking young coyote, but for the moment he's powerless and likely unreachable. "

With a grunt from her chest and quiet squeaks from her limbs she stood and stretched. "How should I track 'im down?"

"There's no need to risk a run-in with the army. I'm already making efforts to bring him here. The next time I return the goat and some of his men will be following me. The details . . . ." She gave a demure cough. "Of course, I don't concern myself with them—"

Her ears shot forward; her legs scraped into a ready stance. "Sure you ain't been followed already, Emmy?—Come on!" she shouted at the tunnel to the surface. "Show yourself! I can run you down, so just c'mon in if you wanna keep breathin' that air."

I silent, fearful pause, and then the grunches of shoe-on-pebble were louder as a creature slid its way down into her room. It was a middle-aged rabbit in dirtied blue jeans and thick orange fur the color of Emily's. The lady looked up, and her face was like Emily's, too. The same blue eyes, the same fur-colored hair, but the mouth was ripped by a painfully wide smile.

"Bunnie!" the lady shouted. "Sweet gods, my Bunnie! My . . . ."

"Jean," Emily said in a flat, taut voice. "There are things at work here that aren't going to be easy for—"

". . . . What happened to you?" The lady whirled on Emily, eyes bulging and purple-veined in the blue light: "What did they do to her?"

"The government?" Emily asked in a voice like a sigh. "What you see. I assure you they're not proud of it, Jean. In fact, I have been personally assured Marigold's safety in exchange for her never seeing the light of—Jean, don't be hysterical."

"What have they done to you?" Something in the voice and horror-stricken face stalled her instinct to punch as the lady threw itself on to her, clutching her, staring wildly at her face, her limbs. "What have they done to my baby! Oh gods! Can you move, sugarchild? Can you feel your—does it hurt? Oh gods!"

"I'm okay," she replied quietly, uncertainly.

"You're going to be fine," the lady sobbed, clinging to her cool, smooth parts like the tree roots to the rocks above. "We'll get a doctor, a real doctor in a real hospital. They'll know what to do."

"No!" shouted Emily. "Jean, did you hear a thing I just told you? Our town's safety—"

Without unhooking claws from her armor, the lady tore herself around, a feral snarl on her lips. "You put my Bunnie in a cave! Like a monster! Like the village idiot!"

"I did nothing." Emily replied, standing tall, folding her hands. Her mouth was flat and stiff, but her eyes glowed with deep, genuine sadness. "It was done to us, like always. But this family will not break. Each of us has a role to play. You, me, some day little Timothy. And Bunnie . . . ." Her voice had a sound like a misplayed violin as she said: "Bunnie has a harder job that most."

The thing reared back and spit onto the cave floor. "You're sick. We're finding that coyote and taking his advice and heading straight for Coolette."

"Jean." The voice was cold. "Speak carefully. Our townspeople—"

"Fuck them!" the thing wept. "Fuck you!"

"Bunnie," Emily said. Her ears turned quickly to listen. "Kill her."

She lifted her bulky left arm from the lady's back, lightly grabbed the back of the lady's head and twisted. After an instant of resistance the head spun freely away. She let go and the lady fell. She looked to Emily. Emily stood tall and still.

"Good," Emily croaked, eyes fixed on the body, folded hands shaking. "Dispose of her. Hide outside. I'll come at dusk and the goat will follow. Be careful."

"That was my mom, right?" she asked.

"Yes," Emily said after a moment.

She nodded, looking at it. "Thought so."

Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 18\*: Great Forest, 3 Firmaire 3228

**Great Forest, Outside Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228**

"Tickle tickle." Sydney traced the pads of her fingers under Hawk's chin, working against the grain of the Dalmatian's white fur. His head was cradled in her lap, watching her sleepily. The marten's ears were plastered flat under a thick, blue-black knit cap, almost as black as the bony, rattling branches that cut apart the darkening gray sky above her. But a faint, ironic, happy smile was on her lips.

"Hmm," he grunted, deciding not to take his eyes off her cream-and-coffee face. He could get to like a setup like this: her, him, privacy—he'd led her a good fifty meters out of town on the east flank. Mechanized Army wasn't watching the town's east and south as closely as the north and west, where they expected a push, so it was pretty safe. And snuggling up against some fat bear belly isn't all that romantic, you know?

"You're thinking," Sydney mused with astonished eyes. "This is a whole new side of you."

Sydney was so fierce! Long-sleeved top and bottom to match her cap, stuff to keep you warm enough no matter where all the hell you had to hump it in the winter. When he'd first seen her in the middle of a clump of other refugees she glowed, had a kind of black shine around her like a commando in the rough. And here he was lying around on her lap with a walnut-stock hunting rifle he stole from Cost-Less and a pair of old socks tied around his mitts. He felt like he'd been snookered into boot camp again, that he'd have to bust his ass to keep up with this woman.

He loved it. Man . . . . "Yeah, I think too," he smiled lazily. "Who knows what else I can do? Gimme a week and I might just blow your mind."

"There's that grin, Spots," she chuckled in her deep alto. She'd taken to calling him Spots. "What's got you so tense?"

"Syd—do you mind that name? Syd, whaddaya think of sneaking outta this place, right now? Just you an' me?"

"And the army makes three," she added wryly. "And why would you want to run out on your people?"

"My people," he sighed, closing his eyes. "I dunno, Syd. Some of 'em are all right, but now this stuff with the fox, you know? That ain't right."

Sydney blinked, an almost exaggerated frown of pity on her face, a little gleam of curiosity in her eyes. "Well, be fair, your boss is probably just talk on that."

"He'd do it." Hawk growled. The marten stared down at him with strangely soft, upside-down surprise.

Hawkins Familaro Jr. was a loser. A decent rifle shot, but no money, a long record, few real friends. This didn't bother him. Losing was alright; really he was kind of unclear on what winning was. They'd "won" the war, right? How much did a guy need, really? How much did a guy even want? Freezing his tail off in an empty wood with the most toothsome and toothiest woman he'd seen in six months, his mouth falling into a smile as naturally as a clothesline hanging from a pair of windowsills.

But. All you wanted was to not be an asshole. And now he wasn't just a sucker, he was a sucker who'd played along with Griff's goofy, embarrassed smile and his soft voice into being a part of this, this hard, ugly thing . . . .

"Yeah," Hawk shook his head, bristling, "he'd ice a six-year-old. I don't think there's anything he wouldn't do, to . . . . You know, he laid a line on me and Mike Dickinson, back up in Salt Forest, all about, you know, freedom, and struggle, and how a Mobian's got to stand up, gotta, just gotta—"

"Well maybe he's gotta!" Sydney cried. His talk looked to be making her nervous—funny, he didn't think she was the kind to back away from a scrap of any kind. "You have to fight for what's right!"

"No you don't," he almost laughed. The words did something to her, sort of hollowed her face out. Somehow in her dulled eyes Hawk saw her unease as his lack, her beauty as his defect, and without any warning or explanation he was explaining himself like she wanted to explain Boss Griff: "And spies? Don't make me laugh. Boss was chasing that coyote for hours before he came up with this spy business. Now Mike tells me that Griff's got 'im tailing the Mayor, because now she's working with the 'spies,' meeting 'em outside of town. Probably she is. Probably because they're good guys and so's the Mayor and Griff probably wants to ice her, too. I wouldn't put anything past him anymore—"

"Outside of town?"

"Yeah, south of town somewhere," Hawk explained. "Word is the Mayor's gone south of town a couple of times and Griff thinks she'll lead him right to the coyote—maybe the Mayor's old lady; I don't remember. Mike says Griff's got a squad watching her like—"

"Who's Mike?" Sydney asked again.

"Oh, you know, that jackal guy with the thorn tattoos, the one always picking at his nosehairs when he thinks no one's—"

Ooooh, man was Hawk drunk. The world was filled with green sparks from some low fire and canted, slowly spinning back upright. Getting better too fast, though, less like the worst hangover ever than like this beautiful woman leaning over him had just given him the hardest, most deliberate punch in the face, a punch like a sleeping pill.

Hawk laughed at the familiar, confused sense of his fingers bobbling something nice, his arms too heavy to do anything to protect his woozy head. "Alright, Syd," he told the strangely frightened marten, jets of steam gasping out of her mouth, her fist balled up in a tight leather glove. "Just don't do anything that I wouldn't—"

Renee snapped her fist into Familaro's head again and it rolled limply to its side, eyes lazily spinning under half-closed lids.

Focus. Tie him up. If he gets back into town now he could sabotage the entire op.

It had been necessary. There was no way to get close to Emily Rabbit directly, and signing up as a guard herself would have put Renee under greater scrutiny. It was the smart play, just like back in the Tarantella psychoactives case, with Marian Tarantella and her fragile, sick daughter, and she'd put it together on the fly. And it had worked. So there was no need to panic.

There was a need to focus. She needed to hurry or Mike the jackal might move before she was ready for the encounter. Renee left Familaro to his fate, running north to dig up her special gear: two Kusanagi Armaments Electromagnetic Pulse Grenades to put it down, a Jenks Arms .357 with mercury bullets to take it out, and a HE satchel to finish the job.

One of Almatrican's wolves had brought Terry a hunk of dry, lightweight red rock about the size of his fist. He'd turned it over, scrunching his snout: it had a faint but unpleasant, almost organic smell. It was like a clean bathroom that hadn't been used in a couple of months. "The fuck is this?" he'd asked.

"Meat," the gray kid answered. A line of ivory (bone?) studs skewered his right upper lip, a pair of hawk feathers hung from a jagged, torn ear. "You asked for food."

It did not resemble any kind of jerky the shepherd had ever seen. He eyed it with disgust, lying there on the little management office's dusty counter, next to his boot heels. The chair springs squeaked as he leaned a little farther back and sighed. Gods Terry hated this waiting and searching. Hated hated hated it. He wanted this to be over. He wanted to go back to the Settlement and buy a woman. And he couldn't, and it made him want to hurt somebody.

He couldn't do anything he wanted. But there was something that was kind of like all three. He uncrossed his feet and nudged the button for SHAFT 4 on the PA panel with his toe again, lightly tapping the microphone stalk against his lips.

"Mmmm," he sighed, closing his eyes. "Mmmm, hmm hmm hmm. Ah, that was good." Tap, tap, tap on his lips. "That hit the spot. Fit for a king, sure enough. Truth in advertising."

The reply monitors were perfectly silent. He wondered if the hedgehog was somehow dead. That was one of the goals at this point, but gods he hoped not. Terry's ears were alive, ticklish, waiting for the first blast of the pincushion's berserker roar, the hail of bullets from Almatrican's gunkids cutting him to pieces.

"She . . . is like a sweet, young flower." His lips pecked into the mic head: "Po-etry. She's poetry. I wasn't sure if she was experienced, so I was gentle. You ever hear of a donkey punch? I—"

Everyone has a "will it kill me?" section of the brain; for every thing you can see or hear or taste or smell or feel, a constant, insatiable question: will it kill me? When stationed in the foothills of the northern front, right in the blades of the Overland meatgrinder, this portion of a Mobian Standard Infantryman's brain will metastasize and slowly make inroads on the rest of the consciousness, suppressing other functions until threats blot out the rest of existence, the person itself. Thus Terrell Domasio heard nothing, did nothing, was nothing: there was just a Freeman Armor Rocket punching out of its tube, its solid booster snapping into its short life. By the time what was left of ex-PFC Domasio's sickly identity had reassembled itself he was already walking out into the paved square at the center of the mining compound, a stifling, thick-aired blast furnace fired by the black and orange hell that had been his pickup.

Almatrican was already there with her man Rennie, her bare arms folded over her fat cow breasts, wrinkling her nose at the overwhelming smell of oxidized plastic and the rawest octane exhaust. She raised her icy eyes up along a vanishing trail of thin gray smoke to one of the window-holes in the worker boxes. "It seems our prey has found a use for your harmless stock of—"

"That cunt!" Terrell screamed. He stomped about, each step enough to smash the life out of ten cockroaches, unable to take his eyes off the fireball. "That filthy whore! Seal that bunkhouse off! Forget the hedgehog! I want her hurt! I want you to break her—"

"We're leaving," Almatrican sighed.

"What?" Terrell barked, spinning to see her lift her head and cup her hands around her rounded mouth to blow a loud, long arooo. In the silence afterward her ears darted about to catch the harmony of mournful, disappointed howls returning to her on the wind. "No," Terry barked, waving his finger as he stomped in front of her: "What?"

"Sounds carry well in the air this cold," she said. Her face belonged to someone explaining something to a very young, sickly stepchild that one does not like very much. "The explosion will be heard in King's Passage, maybe even Fennec Settlement. And to the police, explosions mean wolves. They will come before long."

"How do you even—they won't be here for at least—Do you see me running?"

Somehow a cruel, sharp smile found its way around the old knife wound in her face. "They aren't coming for you, dog."

"Dog!—" Terrell stopped his finger an inch from her snout. "You . . . inbred, fleabitten bitch! Just because my dad's not too lazy to get a job or too chickenshit to join the army, you think—you can't—you—" His face boiled like a pot of water, lids sagging and popping up, words exploding from his maw: "You can't talk to Griff Varitek's man like that! You fuck with me you're gonna be out on your ass with no guns no ammo no dirt to cover your shitty corpse! I don't care how much wolf blood you got in you, you don't talk to me like that! You shut your mouth!"

Who is it, Lupe wondered, watching the child and grandchild of miners, that turns this word to a curse in my mouth? Domasio's ragged coat hung from his shoulders like a frightened pup's blanket, his eyes red and shiny with wet, teeth uncertainly bared, one knee involuntary trembling, stinking of fear and hurt. And behind him was Reynard, his arms crossed angrily and defensively into a knot, eyes regarding the shepherd dog with infinite disgust, one hand ready to plunge his hunting blade deep into the small of Domasio's back.

A sigh. An imperceptible shake of her head and Reynard angrily and silently sheathed his blade. One last glance at the empty window where the tribe of Acorn, in the person of her old enemy's child, had once again confounded her people. Then she turned to her desert. "I leave you in peace."

"You want trouble?" Terry squealed as the bitch walked away down the side of the road, her packmates appearing from the buildings to join her. "You got it, bitch! You leave Griff Varitek's man alone? Alone with—"

The dog swallowed his words. His legs felt rooted in the asphalt: Corukas gangsters, the "trip to the lakebottom."

You leave Griff Varitek's man alone. With the cops coming. And a baited, homicidal hedgehog nearby. And a squirrel with a crate of rockets probably listening to his every word.

Including "alone."

Breathe. Terry breathed—no wait, he didn't. Breathe! Breathe. Terry remembered that one of the Ten Habits of Highly Successful People was coolness under fire. His copy was presumably not cool, because it was on fire, in his truck—

I am a happy person, Terry thought. I am a successful person. He slowly pulled his .44 from his waistband. There is nothing some wolf can do, he thought, that I can't do, too.

Continental Airlines Flight Eight Hundred to Winstone is now in final boarding at Gate G-17. Passengers Ott and Posniak, please proceed to the gate with your boarding pass and immigration documentation ready. Again, Continental Airlines Flight Eight Hundred—

As Baxter hustled off of the people mover his shoe slipped into one of the many inexplicable loops of fabric hanging from the garment bag on his right shoulder. This was to be distinguished from the backpack hanging from both shoulders, the pcomp bag dangling from the aching fingers of his right hand, and the other pcomp bag dangling from the shivering ring, middle and pinkie fingers of his left hand (the passport and ticket were pressed painfully between index and thumb). So much carry-on luggage made him look ridiculous; doing a face plant in the middle of a crowded airport terminal didn't help.

"Okkkh, thit!" The bundle of suitcoat and clothes pulsed and squirmed like a polyester amoeba. "Awf, muh node!"

"Here, let me help you up. It's not broken again, is it?"

"N—node, thank gods, it seems okay." A fair human hand attached to the sleeve of a fine black overcoat yanked Baxter to his feet, still under all his luggage. He was going to thank the guy for the help when he thought again? and then saw through his dangling, skew glasses that the guy was Snively Kolensky, bald head hidden under a thick, furry brown hunting cap.

"Here, let me help you to the gate," he hissed with clenched teeth that might at a distance look like a smile. A hand patted Baxter's back, clutched the collar of his suitcoat, and dragged him towards the gate not quite quickly enough to knock him off his feet. "I was at the office when I heard from friends in State Ministry that Lachels was a little upset with Operation Brushfire and asking a lot of shared officers under the Mutual Assistance Treaty to return home 'temporarily.' So I thought, why not go to Borgadan International to see Mr. Posniak off?"

"Captain, I—"

"I know, I know, 'I'm sorry for sneaking around behind your back and stealing Renee Donlevy's Goldmine password.'"

Baxter's shoes squeaked on the hard synthetic carpeting, scrabbling like some tiny repen's paws. Kolensky was this strong? "Captain, she gave—"

"Oh, it's perfectly all right, perfectly. State Ministry tells me they'll look at your flagrant disobedience to my instructions and tell me if a violation of the no-doubt-soon-defunct MAT was involved. They've also specifically informed me that I cannot arrest you, so—"

"Hello, gentlemen!" The poodle dog standing next to the boarding gate met them with a flip of her long, curly ears and a bright service smile that quickly decayed as her free hand stabbed blindly around the airport security panic button. "Is there a problem, gentle—"

Kolensky ripped Baxter's passport out of his fingers and gave it to her. "Put him on," he ordered, flashing some sort of identification from the inside pocket of his coat. "Well," he continued, "you know how they say it down here: Bon voyage!"

"Captain—"

Then Kolensky gave Baxter a big farewell hug. Or punched him so hard it was like his guts had been pounded into beef sausage. It depended on where you were watching from.

"Sagen Sie irgendetwas davon," he muttered,"was Sie gesehen haben, denn wird jemand ihnen umfahren." Kolensky clapped his hands on Baxter's shoulders. "Well. Anything else you need to say?"

Baxter gaped, tilting his head up in an effort to keep his glasses balanced on one ear and the very tip of his nose, diaphragm paralyzed.

"Very good! Off you go!" Baxter stumbled off into the gangway, still trying to find air.

". . . Officer?" asked the poodle. "Is there a problem?"

"If he's checked any baggage, hold it for a search," Snively replied, eyes narrowed seriously. The spy was getting out just in time; snow was beginning to fall from the steel clouds in sticky wet clumps. "And make sure he doesn't drink any alcohol on the plane."

"—and now, I am pleased to announce . . . ."

Dramatic pause. Julian cleared his throat, the pulse reverberating off the white marble walls of the palace's state dining room like a cannonade. His death-grip on the arms of the chair seemed to make him levitate slightly.

"I am pleased to announce that as of morning tomorrow, every major news outlet will be reporting that Operation Brushfire is a rousing success. The Mobian Mechanized Army has scored a major victory against terror. For the first time since the Great War all of Mobius, city and country, is again one nation."

The fat faces around the long table stared at him impassively, waiting. Business suits with the exception (most of the Director's guests were human) of one ethnic mobian in starched white gloves and a wide sash. The CFO of Gescom held her hands suspended slightly apart in clap position before her chest, uncertainly watching the other guests.

"One nation ready to stand up to those who would stand against it," he continued, his voice gaining in amplitude and resonance. "To crush those who would visit criminal acts of violence against us and our allies—"

"Military, Cultural, and Industrial."

Julian blinked at the sudden stillness and turned his eyes briefly to his side and the slim mongoose who had spoken, forced to squint against the light catching on the opal Mobian flag pin in the mongoose's lapel. Richard Tavian was one of the few people who could interrupt the Director of Mobius, in part because of his ability to edit out any interruption. Already, a revised statement was in effect; in the smooth inflections of his voice and the deft motions of his hands it was already clear that he was finishing a whole, perfect and obvious sentence: "A nation ready to protect" (did someone say something about crushing? I could have sworn) "our interests and those of our allies, military, cultural and industrial."

"And of course together, we can make this nation even stronger," Tavian continued with a camera-ready grin, embarking on a casual, friendly circumnavigation of the entire table. "A safe and secure wilderness will mean better resource extraction opportunities for our friends at Ellingson Mineral and Patterson Pharmaceuticals, but more importantly, a safe forest means safe cities . . . ."

Julian's charismatic levitation field died away, his starched red uniform squeaking as he sank into his chair. He might as well let Richard handle it. Mobisch wasn't Julian's first language and neither was Businessman; he understood in a general sense what his chief of staff did at these meetings but he didn't know or care how. He closed his ears to a wasted half hour of prattle about investment-incentive zones, mass asset transfer excise waivers, visa expedition programs, more and more. And meanwhile his troops were hard at work in the forest, sniped at, constantly harassed and endangered by traitors and criminals. Good work was being done: re-mapping territory, tagging and sorting people, removing innocent children from the cruel influence of traitorous parents. His troops needed guidance, supervision, support, leadership, and all he could do was sit here and watch as food was brought out and a maddening murmur of pointless talk did its best, which wasn't much, to fill the huge room. Finally he could take it no longer; when Tavian (who was not eating or even sitting, apparently somehow sustained entirely by small talk and petty greed) passed him, Julian grabbed his sleeve.

"Sir?" the mongoose muttered.

While Julian understood nothing of the mongoose's social tastes, there was no one more loyal, focused or effective. "Where is he now?"

"I spoke to Special Action Division by phone ten minutes ago. He's at the airport speaking to the foreign assistant to his team. The agents have noted no suspicious activity as of yet."

"And Marigold?"

"No reports, sir. I remind you again that while it would be politically unwise for you to know the source of our intelligence, it was not entirely trustworthy."

"And neither is my nephew," Julian hissed, hands trembling. Family must be respected, as must be the loyalty Snively had shown to him during the battles of the past. But Julian knew all too well his nephew's creeping dissolution, his vicious hedonism. And to know him accused of some betrayal, but to know only the where, not the what . . . . "I am surrounded by snakes!"

A furred hand squeezing his shoulder, a warning voice: "Sir . . . ."

"Take care of these people, Richard," Julian growled. "Get them out, before they deserve something rash."

"Five minutes."

"Very well," he sighed, eyeing the food-filled mouths, the heads stuffed with exchange rates and epicurean fluff. Such ignoble stones with which to build . . . .

The little rust hatchback was still sitting where Sally had left it. The paint was more hopelessly blistered than before; the fiberglass body a little more blackened by the smoke from the now smoldering truck chassis. And sticking out the shattered driver's window was the dog's butt, tail plastered low between the white-furred last-legs of a pair of jeans.

Sally's stinging, half-frozen fingers leveled her pistol at the base of his spine. "Slow."

He didn't listen and banged his head on the low roof. The shepherd tried to point something at her as he awkwardly scrambled out of the window, but it fell to the dirt, shiny black and wet red. "If—fff—" A click of chattering teeth cut him off as he clutched a little tighter a right hand wrapped in shards of glass and bloody rags. His hat was gone, his ears were low. "Ifffff you kill me, Griff—Griff'll . . . he'll . . . ."

"I don't care. Where's Sonic?"

". . . . he'll kill everyone, everyone you ever . . . who?"

"Sonic!" she yelled, stamping her dusty boot as she jabbed her gun another decimeter forward. "The pincushion." As soon as Sally had decided that the wolves' departure was not a ruse she'd looked for him in all the buildings where he'd be likely to hide and snipe, and nothing, he was nowhere. And if he had run into this terrible, desolate desert, that belonged to the wolves . . . .

"He's . . . around, somewhere . . . ." The dog tottered as some bit of glass touched a fresh nerve in his hand. "Lady . . . ."

"Where! You had him; where? Where's Sonic!" This was not what happened. Sonic was waiting for her in the square with a foot up on a pile of trussed up, gagged birthday presents, smiling at his good hunting. Sonic was in the car, tires roaring and spitting chunks of asphalt, waving her in.

". . . . Lady, I can't hotwire it," the dog prayed, clutched his bleeding hands together under his chin. "The cops are coming and I . . . can't, I can't go back to . . . you need . . .start the car right now, Your Highness—"

"SONIC!" Sally roared. This helpless, pathetic dog had been telling the truth. Sonic was in a basement with his fingers curled and black. His eyes were pinched and hidden, his mouth was warped and torn in freezing agony. But he was a rock, as smart and as solid and as reliable as a rock. He wasn't just gone, here and then gone.

The dog's brown eyes shot wide, mad and yellow: "Highness." He staggered forward, trailing his ragged gray coat from his elbows. "Highness, save me. Get us out of here. Griff Varitek won't forget . . . I'll tell him, tell him what . . . help . . . ."

Her first feeling was to grind her teeth, rear back and smash the barrel of her gun against the side of his grotesque face. But her reason reared up, seized her brain stem and shook: this is it. Play this man, this man toppling forward and collapsing on to you, hugging you like a drunken, weepy john in the north of Port Orange. Louis the Great pardoned his enemies; play him right and you will have your audience with Varitek, you will have your alliance, you will have Mobius . . . .

"SONIC!" she bellowed, shaking him, shaking it out of him, shoving him to arms length to see the truth in his terrified, staring eyes. "SONIC! Where's SONIC!"

"SALLY!"

Before her eyes the dog's neck lost definition, spread, disintegrating into small streamers of red, dollops of white and pink, a separate process from the resounding crack that lanced through her eardrums, blasted through her bones, rebounded off every metal wall to penetrate her again. Her hands did not hold him; the beseeching, terrified eyes dropped and fell from her field of vision.

The cry cracked, wept: "SAL-lyyyy . . . ."

As the dog dropped to his knees in front of his princess a sudden, black hole appeared in the left side of his coat, then another, and opposite each hole that appeared a puff beneath the fabric, a red burst, a gaping red crater of viscera and bone, another whipcrack explosion lashing her ears. But the dog's eyes were too startled to close, too transfixed by agony and a pathetic, childish fear to lose their awareness, locked on to her even as he toppled all the way back to the ground, great gouts of blood bursting up from his chest.

A hot steel bullet clip fell to the ground by the unbreathing, still-conscious canine's wracked hand. Sally finally moved her eyes away up Sonic's bloodsoaked pant-leg past his blue parka, a huge, red-soaked stain hanging in it like a cancer, up to a half screaming wedge of teeth and tongue and smoking breath and a pair of glistening green spiders with millions of branching red legs clutching the white spheres of his eyeballs. The quills were up in a uniform, jagged halo as his gloved hands, white and coal black and wounded red fumbled and slapped a full clip at the base of his pistol until it clacked home.

Sally watched, limp and paralyzed, as the hedgehog pointed the gun straight down into the shepherd dog's face and pulled the trigger.

And then again. And again. And again. And again. Seven times—Sonic underloaded his pistols to prevent jamming.

With a click, and a click, the finger pulled and the pistol dry-fired. The clip slowly slid out of the butt to land with a wet thud in the smoking mess.

"Sally . . . ."

He shambled to her, arms hanging limp and stalklike from the sleeves of his fat parka, blood-sticky legs braced wide on the asphalt. His face was bloodless pale, his quills and cheeks and mouth mired more and more deeply in sorrow as he saw and sank into the shock, horror, abhorrence in every line and hair of her face.

"Are you okay?" he dared to hope.

Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 19\*: Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228, dusk

**Marigold, 3 Firmaire 3228**

Marcel was the one who spotted the sputtering plume against the orange sky. It was rising from the north end of the camp, tentative but black, opaque and heavy. Cookfires did not look like that.

The lion's snout pulled into a stupid grin. He pointed a golden finger on the arm that carried the band of black cloth: "It's happening, Al."

Aloysius turned his head and lifted a white-gloved hand to his brow—he cut his mane short and lacked his brother's greasy, glare-cutting curls. Tent aflame, he thought. He bounced hopefully off implausibilities (an accident, arson) until he joined Marcel's conclusion: "Army's making their move."

The brothers reached to their lips and tossed a pair of Griff Varitek's cigarettes to the leaves. They wore identical cracked leather jackets bought off the back of a pickup at a nameless campfire close to the wild coast of the eastern ocean. Their only unshared attributes were height—the same jacket that gloved Marcel bunched at Al's elbow and wrist—and disposition. Al opened his mouth to speak but Marcel was off, hurdling lifeless refugees like the college jock he'd have been with different parents. Aloysius picked along behind. He might not have caught up if it weren't for the rat.

"You two." They'd seen him before: the armband barely visible as a deeper black against the city shine yet on the overcoat beneath it; black eyes set deep in his thick skull. One hand was buried in his coat pocket; the other hooked a V of leather-clad fingers. "Follow me. We need to take care of something."

"Alright, fellah!" Marcel nodded, his locks bobbing along in agreement.

Aloysius didn't know the rat's name—nobody did. He had a disinclination to give it out. Al didn't like him. Didn't like the recent wealth in his clothes or his smooth, assured movements. Maybe it was foolish, but they stirred memories of his childhood in Two Creek, in front of the camp's little viddisc player. Always crime movies: racketeers, hit men. The villains always filled him with anger and jealousy. Yeah, he had known even then that he should run from any national police or DOR cop. And the viddisc player was secondhand stolen. But that was the woods. What rat would behave like that in Fortune Station or Terscala? Who would live in the woods if they had a choice?

Marcel followed the rat quickly into the little guard tent, eager and ready. To do what, Al wondered. Then he thought of hustling the water and uneasily remembered that the tent was where they were keeping—

"Where's the fox," the rat said.

Aloysius's eyes adjusted quickly to the lampless dimness as the tentflap dropped behind him. Another recruit was there, the obviously-named Cat, his mouth struggling for syllables to give to the rat. The centerpole next to him was bare, only the tamped-down grass around the base to mark a small, absent body.

"Where's the fox." The rat's question was like a slab of cement. Both hands were in his pockets. Marcel glanced to his brother, confused, as the rat stepped forward. "The hard way," he announced. One gloved hand emerged and struck; Cat's yellow eyes winked out in the involuntary whimper. The rat laid it out again, like some automatic recording. "Where's the fox."

Pause button click. "Freeze, joker!" cried a high-pitched sarcastic sneer. "Unless you need lead in your diet!"

In a shadowy corner of the tent was a gun crate, its lid pried with a slim crowbar, and behind it the traitor fox. His head was low; his yellow fur bristled like a porcupine's quills. Aloysius eyes squinted, working: it seemed that a pair of handcuffs dangled from one wrist, and each gloved hand was filled to the brim with a jet black nine millimeter handgun. But at the same time, it looked like he was nine years old.

"Hey!" the fox chirped, his head jerking upright with curiosity. "You froze! Alright!" He giggled, hopping from foot to foot with nervous excitement. A gun waved: "Now let Cat go. Uh . . . Hands behind your head! Siddown!"

Al watched as—

"DO it, Al!" Marcel's voice detonated. He was sitting in the dirt with his hands behind his head, staring at Al in uncanny terror. "He's not a kid, Al! He's a midget! He's a midget assassin!"

Marcel and Aloysius had watched considerably different sorts of movies Two Creek.

The rat watched, appraising, his first still full of the winter fur on Cat's neck. "You're holding those the wrong way, kiddo," he said.

In a split second the sudden fear in the kit's snout melted to anger. The rat's tiny mouth slowly spread into a thin smile as the kit's throat purred with a prepubescent growl. He pulled his little right index finger from the trigger and flipped the gun forward in his tiny grip to toggle the safety on and off.

The rat's amusement was slow and subdued, ponderous and pondering: "Hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm," he sighed. His left hand emerged from his pocket with a .357 revolver.

"Oh sweet fucking Trixiana," Cat breathed as the leather gloves slowly relinquished his fur.

"How's about it, kiddo?" the rat asked with mirthful eyes. "You a midget?" He raised the gun slowly, telegraphing the entire movement from its first few centimeters, the full, slow journey upward and forward to point straight at the child's forehead. The kit's snarl redoubled, his fur puffed higher, and the gun continued to climb, a slowly ascending acrobat in the spotlight. Al couldn't take his eyes from it. Neither could the fox.

"Huh, kiddo?" The rat's voice sparkled as he thumbed back the hammer. The kit's orange arms shook with rage as the barrel traced up his chest. "How's about it? You an assassin?"

The kid wasn't growling anymore. He was grunting, straining like he was trying to lift the heaviest weight. Little beads of sweat appeared in his facefur as the black hole stopped to look deep into his eyes. It held there, motionless, nobody but the rat able to move as he galacially tightened his index finger with a soft creak of leather.

The fox yapped loud and high, both arms shivering, eyes and pinked ears burning with impotent rage. He barked sharply with a intense, childish rage: "SUCK MY CUNT!"

And then it was the rat's turn to freeze. Frozen, totally engrossed and utterly perplexed, his snout pulled into an uncertain grimace at the smell of some faint, mildly repellent odor. "Gods, kiddo." He shook his head, still wondering as he fixed his elbow and shoulder again. "Ain't exactly famous last words—"

The rat stopped with a hollow metallic bang as the lynx swung a shovel hard into the back of his head. He slumped to the ground, still moving and groaning, in pain or the depths of some unnerving psychological nightmare.

"What was that?" Aloysius asked.

"I swore," the kit answered. He stood like the kid gunslinger of a ranchers and wolves Eastern movie, all his confidence in his iron and none in his eyes.

"Yeah . . . but—"

"Look." Cat planted the blade of the shovel in the earth. "We've got more to worry about right now than who might have said what filthy word for what reason—"

"Cat!" Marcel roared, restraining his hands at the sight of the fox's two guns still in place. "You dirty Robotnik-loving—"

"I don't think so," Aloysius said ruefully.

"You think right," Cat muttered, poking the rat with his toe. "Nice Mr. Varitek isn't so nice. You're Al, right? He's Marty?"

"Where's everyone else?" the fox demanded, bending to pick over the ammo crate. Al blinked—he'd heard the rumor, but the kid really had two—

"I dunno, Tails," Cat replied. "But we're gonna do the smart thing and run like hell for Coolette. Find one of the cars left in town, fill it with people and go." He turned to the lions. "You two on board?"

"Yes," Aloysius replied before Marcel could get all indignant about being ordered around. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he'd seen enough. "We'll wait for you up by the foodstores. They're keeping a pickup there."

"Cat?" asked Tails when the tent flap fell behind the long-maned one. He had the pistols in his hands and an uncertain look in his eyes. "What about the guards?"

"Listen, Tails," Cat said as he peeked out of the tent at the worried, clueless refugees. "I'm nothing if not a good town guard, okay? And when you light a tent on fire, everyone in the whole town guard runs to find out what the trouble is."

Tails blinked, stared at Cat as though maybe the wrong lynx had come in to break him out.

"Have both those things ready," Cat reminded him. "I don't know how to use them, and a ten year old's going to have the element of surprise. Okay, follow me—"

"What's wrong?"

Maribel Sirius was a grayfurred wolf in heavy boots and a full body's worth of denim, wearing a weathered blue jean jacket like a tent over a modest top. She was seventeen maybe eighteen you might guess if you didn't know many wolves. She was fourteen or fifteen; she wasn't sure. You saw worse in the woods these days, and if she'd ever thought about it she didn't anymore. She tried not to think too hard about things: "You been shot in the femur," she replied.

When Will had caught a stray bullet from the Army on the way into town, he'd been in snarling, tightmuscled agony—she'd knew enough that bone shots were almost as rough as belly shots. Then he'd seemed to get better, or at least used to the pain. The crusty bandages they'd torn from his shirt had slowed the bleeding to a slow seep. Now . . . .

You might say he seemed tired. Well Mary didn't like it. Not one bit. Her brother's voice wheezed from his lips in soft puffs, like at age fifteen there was no more where that came from: "Har dee har." Breathe in, his half-lidded eyes closing completely in foggy concentration. Then: "Rotor."

"No." The guards had a problem with Rotor and Antoine. Tails they couldn't forget, but Will and Mary could have come from anywhere in the forest. Cat was lucky, too, she'd seen him walking around unsuspected. Rotor for the moment was hiding in the woods, but he was brewing a fight down the way. Mary had seen him, briefly, covered in leaves and reconnoitering the camp from between a pair of fat tents pressed up against the trees. Trying to get a look at the tent where they were keeping the boy.

"It's Tails," she said.

Will's eyes closed, he breathed. His fur was on fire. She could feel it without having to touch him. "Wha happen."

"I dunno. He's gone. I put my head right inside the tent and it's empty." She'd been trying to keep an eye on him with everything else—Rotor, the Army, wherever Cat could be—but there was just too much to follow without just up and leaving her brother. She took the canteen from under the blanket she'd found for him, shook it—half full—and poured a little swallow in his mouth. "I saw a bunch of the guards getting together there. Hung around a few and pushed out to the south. I think they must have took him with."

"Well." Her brother's head nodded once, condensation in the air above his nose. "Better go tell Rote."

Mary kneeling in the dirt of a stretch of open land that was now serving as Marigold's infirmary. Some sick bastard had christened it Trixiana Lady of Mercy General Vacant Lot. Mostly it was an awful flu that had been sweeping the forest for a month, with some distemper in the mix now. The sick bodies were laid like railroad ties, fighting each other out of meanness or delirium for bits of blanket that weren't theirs to begin with. She looked at it and feared a bed-hopping infection, something genuinely nasty like typhus or cholera.

Will closed his eyes now, took deeper, frequent breaths. "You gonna. Have Rote." He swallowed, licked his lips with a dry tongue. "Tell him. Find Tails." He gave a long exhalation, smiling at the completion of some great exertion.

"You're crazy," she said. She glanced at the fire in the north. "I told you. The Army—"

"What?" he breathed. "Whatheydo?" His smile spread to his closed eyes. Then, slowly, they seemed to round in a suggestion of fear: "Lookout. He's. Gottagun." He sniggered like a stalling jalopy.

"Bill," she said. She grabbed his hand through the blanket, hot and wool-rough.

"Gwon," He breathed. "Growup. Pipsqueak."

When William Sirius next opened his eyes his fraternal twin sister was gone. He didn't remember where she said she was going. Maybe for more water. He lay there breathing, thinking. He remembered something with her, unclear and dreamlike. He hoped he dreamed it. He hoped she'd come and give him some water.

Mary was unusually testy tonight, but she was getting the job done. The group they were tracking had about six men, she said, experienced soldiers by the look of their bootprints. Rotor wasn't rosy about their odds with his stolen hatchet, Antoine's pocketknife, and Mary's bad attitude. He'd have felt a little better with all of inseparable Willandmary, but what can you do. "Hey, how is—"

"Shut up a goddamn second, alright?" She bent over to look at a mess of sign a few moments before leading onward.

The squad seemed to be leaving enough for an experienced woodswolf like Mary to follow, and Rotor figured it'd probably be better to catch them in the open, when they aren't expecting it, than when they finally reached wherever it was they were headed. Not to mention the possibility of an army patrol inside their perimeter. Or that his thighs were chafing like a belt sander. So he didn't get why every three minutes or so Mary had to put her nose to the dirt and paw around rather than forward. They were losing a lot of time. "Why are—"

"What kind of shoe does Tails wear?" Mary interrupted.

"I'm not sure."

"Me neither," she sighed, lifting a crushed leaf to her nose by its stem.

"Well, then," Antoine said, brandishing the closed pocketknife like a candy bar. "How do we even know that they have Tails with them? Perhaps he escaped your notice when . . . ."

In the fading light it took Antoine longer to see that Rotor staring at him, saying nothing, holding a hatchet. Mary was not even listening. He cleared his throat with a high-pitched cough: "I am worried that—"

"We know you're worried," Rotor grunted. "Just assume until further notice that we know you're worried. Mary, what's taking so long?"

"Sorry, Rote. But . . . ." She was on her fingers and boottoes, stepping lightly and gingerly towards the edge of the path. ". . . when you're tracking . . . something that can . . . hunt you . . . you want to . . . hello."

Both her ears pulled sharply forward; she went to hands and knees, looking carefully at a particularly clean print in a bit of granular dirt. There were two tracks she was watching hard. One, a woman's riding boots, did not fit the profile. The other, an army surplus tread, was pretty normal, but very deep, unworn and very new, which was not normal. There were many clean prints of that pair, suggesting that the boots were in back of the rest of the squad she was tracking. And now, she saw, they moved east off the game path the guards had been taking south for a good three-quarter mile.

She moved quickly, following the sign. "This ain't good," she announced, stepping through some light underbrush, turning back to the north . . . .

"Why not?"

"Because—"

"Because I'm armed and you're not." It was a female, species indeterminate due to the white glare from the flashlight held alongside the pistol. "Lose the hatchet," the light said. "Toss it in the woods." Shivering, Rotor heaved it into the black. "Good. Wolf, back it up." Mary stood still and sharp in the light and dusk, hands at her sides, the shoulders of her jacket puffed because of her hackles beneath. "Wolf, slowly, hands on your head! Turn around!"

"Do it," Rotor said after a moment. She did.

"Step forward. Forward. You two get up there with her, both of you. Good."

What was left of the Knothole crew were three defenseless targets in a spotlight. "Okay, what," said Rotor, his cheeks stinging. "What now?"

The light flicked off. "Now you all go back to what you were doing, Rotor." The gunwoman was a thin pine marten, clothed in black. No armband. "I may have lost them, but I doubt you're going to."

The wind that sucked at Sally's tangled hair through the absent driver's window was black and murderous as a pure vacuum. The desert was a deep-space asteroid; the shattered glass was a hull breach; the broken heater was life support, and Sonic was . . . oh gods, his head was lolling down, skin frosted blue in the light from the broken, hissing radio, eyes half-lidded and blind.

"Merde," she squeaked, pumping her fingers around the steering wheel to make them feel again. If her hands froze she might lose control of the car. It would careen into the drainage ditches that lined the road. The roaring, squealing engine would burst into flames and fry her in a lake of flaming gasoline. And then, she thought, Sonic would not get to a doctor—a safe doctor, a non-canine doctor in the Great Plains. And then he would die.

With a sound like a serrated blade through burlap Sonic's black jeans lifted from the sticky-black car seat, little black strands of viscous blood grabbing at him hungrily. The seatbelt snapped tight around his chest, his hands shot forward over the dash, gloved fingers curled to clutch and rend. His mouth dropped open in an anguished scream that was too rasped and painful to be the word no. "Sally!"

"I'm here!" Somehow Sally's right hand had pried itself off the wheel and thrust itself stiffly beyond her vision. Sonic's grasp pinched it, rolled the knuckles, made her gasp in pain. "I'm here, Sonic. We're going to a doctor. You're going to be okay."

A long, wheezing breath resolved into a question, shivering like a man asking after the details of some unremembered drunken shame: "Hhhhhhhwhhhhhwhhhwhat did he . . . . hehehe-hee-he do to you?"

"Nothing," she told him for the twenty-third time. "He didn't do anything to me."

"Hetouched you," he said, crushing her hand in his fist. Touched wasn't even a word, just a strangled roll of insect clicks deep in his throat. "I'll kill him."

"He didn't touch me," Sally reiterated, watching the yellow dashes streak through the headlights, like the beat of a frantic, dying pulse. "He lied. A lot. He didn't lay a finger on me."

"I'llkill him," Sonic said, weeping.

"You did," she assured him. And suddenly she was able to think about something other than the nearing horror of Sonic's death: the hapless terror in the dog's eyes, the way they stayed open as the body disintegrated under them, piece by piece, each muzzleflash etching a different picture in Sally's memory like the frames of a film.

"You did," Sally repeated, her voice quiet and empty.

Sonic was crying openly now, squeezing her hand in time with gasps for air. "I—won't let anyone—huh—hurt you. I won't."

"I know, Sonic."

"I won't let them touchyou. I'll kill—kill anyone." His eyes bored into her, glowing with starlight and madness. "I'll kill anyone you say."

"I . . . ." Sally's hand was limp in his clutches.

Sonic was weeping with hunger. "I love you, Sal."

They walked ahead of the marten in what starlight made it through the branches. It was enough for her to sight a pistol by; she didn't bother to make them keep their hands on their head. She didn't know that Antoine had the pocketknife—but come on, now, let's be realistic.

She insisted on moving quickly and silently. For the former, she ordered Mary to stop checking for a backtrack. For the latter:

"Why?"

"Shut up, Rotor."

That was her answer to everything. It began to bother him more than their helplessness and the danger. She said his name a lot; she never bothered with anyone else's. "Who are you?"

"Shut up, Rotor."

"Can you turn the light back on?"

"No. Shut up."

"How do you know my—"

"Shut up."

"How are you going to take on a bunch of armed men?"

"Quiet, or I shoot the coyote."

A whimper, and they moved on in quiet. Nothing but rustling leaves, wind, once or twice disturbing sounds, low boom, high pop, echoing from behind them with increasing distance.

And something else. Rotor heard nothing, but Mary lifted her hand to signal a halt. The marten ran forward at the sign and put her pistol to the base of the wolf girl's neck, whispering in her ear. Mary nodded, slowly. The marten showed her palm to them—stay back—and the two moved forward more slowly, making no sound.

Once they were a safe distance forward Rotor followed, close enough not to lose track of Mary. He looked back; Antoine was keeping close to him. He thought there were bits of voices, scraps of light. He wasn't sure. Maybe he was imagining it.

Then he stumbled on the first of the bodies.

"Homely little ferret!" Emily cursed, hiking up her skirt as she crouched by the creature's frozen eyes, the wide-open mouth. "Every creature that followed me is here? You didn't move in behind them too quickly? You lost some of them?"

She wondered about faces. When you kill someone, the face is some way—teeth bared with anger, eyes wide with shock. Or maybe they saw nothing, maybe there is a smile. But the face doesn't stay that way. There's a natural resting place; the muscles and flesh move to it with their own weight. Down under the fresh turned dirt Jean's eyes had unpinched at their corners and slowly begun to close in their middle. The little back pupil was just disappearing under the lashes. Soon the same would happen to this one . . . .

"Bunnie!" Emily's eyes blazed white above her silvery muzzle in the harsh light of her fluorescent lantern. "I'm talking to you!"

She looked up from the prairie dog. "What?"

"Oh!" the elderly rabbit cried in exasperation. "It barely matters. Varitek will have to know that something is wrong out here, whether any of his men return to him or not. Now if . . . ."

She sighed and sat down by the prairie dog, not listening. It was so tiring to her, all of this scheming about a town that she had only remembered to begin with and barely understood anymore. Emily could take care of the scheming, and she could take care of everything else. That was what she was good for. That was all—

Stop, said the cold little voice in her head. Stop. She—

"Enough!" Emily sighed. "Our options are dwindling. I need you to listen carefully. I will return to town and speak openly with Varitek. I need you to remain awake and—"

"You shouldn't go into town without me right now," she replied. "It's not safe there."

"Bunnie, this is no time to start up those old arguments," Emily replied quickly, eyes unfocused, planning feint and counterfeint. "You aren't going into town while there are people alive there, and that's final."

"Army's there."

"What?"

She looked up from using her armored finger on the dog's stale chin: pull the mouth open, push it closed. "The army. They're attacking the town, now."

"May Rabbit!" Emily laughed with a confidence that wasn't, that was nervous anger flaring into her battery lamp eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I heard them. They're going into town from the north and southeast. A column just missed us—"

"You heard? You heard? You heard, you, you . . . soldiers going into town . . . ." Emily's whiskers stood out from her gray fur, nose wrinkled and ugly as she nervously sniffed the air. ". . . . into town and you let them live? You were close enough to hear them talk! What kind of foolish nonsense is that?"

"I heard the talk," Bunnie answered testily, tapping her fat finger against her skull, right under the base of her long ear. "Lotsa chatter; people and bots. Everything's go. No resistance, they say."

"You've been using your radio?" Emily paced quickly but aimlessly, lost in horror. "You've been using your radio? You . . . you littledolt!"

"I ain't saidshit, Grandma!" she yelled angrily. "I just been listening."

"Liar" Emily shouted, eyes jumping away from and returning to the freshly turned dirt of the grave. "You're a cursing, lying, untamable little beast! You don't know what your grandmother has to do, what I have to go through. No one does. You haven't suffered like I have, so don't you dare lie to me!"

"Emily—"

"Kolensky would never let such a thing happen to our town!" Emily continued, oblivious. "He knows what I'm capable of. If he did such a thing, I wouldn't hesitate to show you to the whole world! Even if it meant death for my own . . . ." Her voice trailed off, tried to reassert itself. "I . . . protect this family . . . ."

She winced as Emily talked about him again, as the thought returned to her. Every night's sleep brought a new dream.

"Maybe he's come back for me," she whispered.

Emily's open hands stung hard as she boxed her. "Ingrate!" Emily sobbed. "You little ingrate slut! Even before, running off with that dirty—I told you how it would end! I raised you, I saved you, and look at you now! Talking about that cruel human that way, plunging me into this misery, you lying, stinking—"

The mobian perceptual apparatus is specialized; it recognizes certain things better than others. A fellow mobian with her mouth wide open, screaming: that's easy to see. Ancient threats are easy to spot, snakes and spiders. It's harder to see trouble that's only been around for a short while, evolution-wise: oncoming traffic, a gun.

In May "Bunnie" Rabbit's case, this flaw had been overcome through fear so intense that it hurt. She would eat her medicine, and then be put into the goggles and the earphones and the gloves, and then after an eternity she would shiver in Snively's arms as he eased away the soaked goggles and quieted her sobs. Good girl, he would say, wiping her forehead. It will be worth it. You'll see. It will be worth it.

So when a deep blue Kusanagi EMP grenade bounced into the electric glow of Emily Rabbit's lantern, Bunnie could see nothing else. She scooped and tossed it in the direction it had come. It was only fifteen feet from her when its parts disentangled into a ball of blue that lit the marten and the wolf kneeling on the ground next to her in grave tones, pitting their eyes like the long-dead. And as the light touched the rabbit like raw alcohol flushing her veins. She dropped to her knees and to a ball, flailing her hands against her ears to press away the obliterating ocean roar of static that surged from the antenna wound about her spine.

Renee watched in the light of the sputtering lamp the botched prototype writhing. It was an image inmobian and awful, a symphonic scream out of a horror movie, and it smelled, it smelled terrible. But she felt a calm and distance. She had worried that she'd break down, that she'd get the shakes, but she felt—scientific. And she felt cautious. She kept her feet where they were and unhooked her second EMP from her belt, loosing the pin.

Then the crazy walrus leapt on her. His one advantage, mass, struck hard in her upper back, his fat arms trying to wrap her up like a linebacker as they hit the dirt. And then the pony's one trick was gone: elbow to his lowest rib; shoulder to his chin. A couple quick kicks to the gasping, bulbous fish on her way out of his grasp, reaching her fingers out for her gun in the dead leaves before the leaning wolf kid could grab it. There was no way Renee would get to it in time—

She closed her eyes.

The EMP detonated by Renee's side, singeing her armfur in the hot blast of the vaporizing coil. The radiation wave was useless at this range but Mary cried out as her vision went white, then blue, then streaky. The first thing she saw when her eyes restarted was the marten on the ground in front of her, pointing the pistol at her face.

Then she saw the marten's face fill with fear, saw her try to take aim at something behind her, heard the monster's heavy feet charging through the leaves. She tensed her legs to leap out of the way.

The tension was still in Mary's legs as Bunnie seized her head and jerked her forward in front of her with an sound like a bundle of celery twisting apart, the vertebrae in her neck shattering and shredding her spinal chord. She couldn't feel it as her collarbone and neck shielded the rabbit from Renee's shot, and it was just a big, warm body that fell onto the gunwoman a moment later.

One heavy, wide foot on the marten's gun hand made her scream. A second kicked sharply into her forehead and made her quiet. And then the remaining threats were minimal, already helpless, a fat walrus staring at her with lidless eyes, a coyote balled and shaking. She could hear again now—

"Kill them!" Emily was screaming. "Kill them, Bunnie!"

She turned, electricity still burning in her nerves, eyes stabbed by the sputtering blue light that flashed the shriveled face of rage and terror at her. "Oh! Kill them, Bunnie! Kill!"

She killed.

Lots of people have heard of the term piledriver, but few actually know what it means outside of a wrestling ring. A pile is a large pillar to be sunk into an ocean or riverbed and used for navigation—tying up boats, supporting piers, etc. Rotor was probably the only one of Sally Acorn's freedom fighters to have seen a piledriver in operation, in Port Goodchild of the old country when he was a little kid. Lifting up and pounding, lifting up and pounding the steel into the muck under the ice. So when he thought that the creature's fat arm—it was true, he hadn't really believed them on the gut level, but it was true, everything Sally and Sonic said about Hewlett was true—when he thought that the bot's arm going into Emily Rabbit's supine head was like a piledriver—

"I don't owe ya nothin'—" Whok. "Ya done nothin' for me—" Whok.

"May," Rotor breathed.

The blue eyes stared up at him under the tip of one ear and a long flop of tangled, stringy orange head hair. The mouth was halfway into a snarl of rage and fear. A baggy, torn shirt ended at the round ball of her left shoulder and showed a bit of her winter coat, still thick with a few matted curl's of last year's fur.

Rotor's mind slowly tried to think of a way to stop her from killing him, tried again and again.

In a few moments she broke the stare and climbed off the body. Her legs scraped and squeaked as she pulled herself to sit next to it.

"Didn't ask ya to save me," she muttered to the air, hunching behind her crossed arms.

Edited Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 20\*: Independence University, 7 Firmaire 3228

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**Independence University, Winstone, 7 Firmaire 3228**

Hochteufel was, despite what nonsense anyone said about ghostly pines amidst the spring fog, a city of winter. When the snows descended from the higher peaks behind it the city became an austere granite geometry at one with the wedge trees and ascending faults.

But the capital of the Bundesrepublik Lachels was wedged right up against Vorburg, its old partner from the days of the Vorlandreich. In Winstone, halfway to the Mobian border, the land bottomed out into the floodplain of the Vanzfluss, warmed and wetted he easterly winds pushing inland from the western ocean. In the summer the citygrew thick with leaves and grass, buzzing cicadas and filthy mosquitoes. On the east side, Independence University was a maze of leafy canopies and cool, musty libraries.

Then, in the winter, the trees were stripped of their leaves and the boring, cheap sandstone facades of their ivy. Too far from a major coast, the weather quickly turned too harsh to support life other than muffled-up, desperate-looking grad students hustling for a space heater in the stacks and that all-temperature creature, the sanctimonious protestor. They marched around the parched fountain in the middle of the empty quad, racial affinity skewing the fur quotient, chanting:

Freihandel ist Tatenlosigkeit; Tatenlosigkeit ist Scheise

Which sloganeers were on a faintly skew, distant collision course with the ones repeating

Nein zum Kreig gegen dem Mobischen Volk

The initial wave of outrage at Operation Brushfire broke quickly, as they all did, once people realized there was nothing they could do about it. Now was the test, Baxter thought, leaning against the Metternich Political Sciences Building, arms clumsily folded over the bulky chest of his heavy black parka. Now we find out how much you are willing to suffer in order to convince yourself of how good you are. For the first week you could be trying to impress others, fit in, but if you get frostbite now? Ah! Your imaginary place in the fictional afterlife is thereby assured.

"International Worker's Weekly?" The paper was suddenly in his face, followed by the student: stringy brown hair dangling down over her tan (semester abroad) skin, lips inflamed by the constant flow of invisible runny mucous to her scarf. SPARTACIST YOUTH LEAGUE, roared the italicized, zooming masthead. MOBIAN SLAVES FOR LACHELS CAPITAL! "We ask for one-mark donation."

Baxter shuffled back along the wall into some fresh personal space, wondering vaguely whether he had cash. "It costs a mark?"

She hesitated. ". . . . We ask for a one-mark donation."

It took him a moment to realize was what happening. Then he gave an almost silent snicker, voice muffled and skewed by the elastic band holding the ugly plastic mask in place over his nose. "You'll sell me that paper for one mark?" he asked.

"We ask for a one mark donation." It was clear that she already wanted to leave. But the chance to get a buck for the cause, just one, finally . . . .

"So if I don't give you a mark . . . ." Baxter said, gesturing precisely in the air before his face, dusting a bit of brown blood from his underused conceptual razor. "If I don't give you a mark, is there any chance you're going to give me that paper?"

"Sadist."

The speaker had a voice like a Zwerg, a geologically bass voice tweaked to permit surface-dwellers to hear. He was fair and tall with a big, round head, big limbs and a big belly. Scraggly black hair clung brutally to the back and sides of his head. One meaty paw offered a quickly-snatched one-mark note.

"Thanks, Brother!" The student lifted her fist sharply next to her head, then took her donation and beat a movement in retrograde back into the circling mob.

"Hummm." The big man flipped up the headline, was unimpressed, and filed the thing away in the deep pocket over his overcoat. "I was wondering if they'd change you," he said to Baxter.

"What? You think I've learned how to work a pain bed?" Baxter snorted defensively "I've always enjoyed a good argument. You know that."

One of the busy eyebrows rose. "I meant that you were sticking to Mobisch," he said. You've never enjoyed an argument with mehe didn't say. But if he had, it would be true that Baxter did not enjoy himself as much when his opponent was Frank Pulaski, Second Assistant Director of Intelligence Acquistion, Mobian March. And it wasn't just because Pulaski was, for present purposes, his boss. Then without a word he turned and took long strides into a narrow passageway between yellow sandstone PoliSci and yellow sandstone Div School.

Baxter trotted a step behind. "I was wondering when I was going to see you," Baxter said. "How did you know I was here?"

"What are you doing here?" Pulaski volleyed. "Shopping for a job?'

Baxter sighed. "Visiting."

"Old professors. Hummm." The noise Pluaski made when he was contemplative started with his mouth open and then dropped sharply in pitch as he closed off his lips. It sounded as though he were imitating a muscle car. "Were they able to help you out with your current problems?"

"What, you mean at MISO? That—" Baxter broke off as he saw the corner of a smirk on the huge human's half-turned face. Pulaski lifted a leather-gloved finger and roughly scratched the side of his nose. You got a little something—

"Did I ever tell you I thought it would be fun to get out from behind a desk?" Baxter asked. "Reminder: the answer is 'no.' I didn't ask to be put me in a squad car with some gun-toting, power-lifting policewoman." He sighed. "Police work."

"Hummm, police work." When Pulaski said it, striding quickly across the crunching grass of a small quad towards another dark alcove. the invective was absent. "If you want advice you should leave your teachers alone and talk to your mother. I understand that before her work in the revolution she was well-respected inside theReichspolezei. Arrested—"

"Forfuck's sake," Baxter said angrily, "leave her out of this, okay? Don't get all psychosexual on me."

Pulaski stopped, turned halfway about. "Sexual?"

"Psychosexual," Baxter clarified. "You know. Let's talk about your mother."

"You took me to be suggesting that you're sexually attracted to your mother?"

"Look, don't do this." Baxter jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat and turned his eyes to the featureless face of an ugly building. "I don't have it in me for one of your games right now. You know what I meant."

"No," Pulaski replied with a molasses voice, tilting his head to the side in a kind of slow, irritated nod. "I do not know why you would have taken me to have suggested that your broken nose was indicative of a sexual problem or that you are sexually attracted to your mother. Are you sexually attracted to the MISO policewoman?"

Baxter turned angrily about as though looking for something to destroy. The only things in arms length were dead grass, concrete, and Pulaski. He slumped over, gloves deeper in his pockets. "Forget I said anything."

"No," Pulaski replied with a molasses voice, tilting his head to the side in a kind of slow, irritated nod. "You're in a highly sensitive position and it is my duty to determine your continued fitness for it. Are you sexually attracted—"

"Frank! She's a mobi—" He stabbed his fingers into the air in sequence: "One, no. Two, do you think I'm stupid? Three, she's covered in fur." Baxter laughed suddenly at the idea, flinching in pain as he unconsciously pushed his glasses higher against the plastic shield covering his nose. "I mean, come on! Okay? No. Absolutely not. Does that answer your question? I hope so. So no;the answer is no. Now can we drop it?"

Pulaski watched with flat eyes. And then as quickly as he had stopped walking he'd darted into a small, recessed door in an alcove to his right. Ducking inside, Baxter realized they were in one of the campus's small temples. Independence had never been a particularly religious institution, even back when it was still Provinzielluniversität Lachels under the reich. But it still had a small but functioning temple to Trinian and a couple of shrines to the regional demigods with some empty benches. Pulaski had brought Baxter to an empty shrine to Gorond Freihaben (though the charged Freimann variant of his last name had become more popular since the War, especially once Jenks Arms named their line antitank rocket after him). The marble statute had small, clever eyes, a thick beard, and the flowing robes that had marked the priestly classes for millennia. Reasonable people speculated he had been a very early philosopher, a sort of pre-scientist who brought the northern tribes and kingdoms innovations in protoalchemy and medicine. The passage of time had given him some anachronistic glasses and credited him with some additional accomplishments, such as introducing fire to mortals.

"What's her name, by the way?" Pulaski asked. He ran a finger along the cold marble and rubbed the dust he found against his thumb.

"Who?"

He plucked off his leather gloves, working one finger after the other quickly and efficiently, like an industrial process. "The policewoman to whom you owe your broken nose."

"I think her name might be protected information under the Treaty," Baxter speculated, turning his eyes to the god.

"Hummm." Pulaski sat his heavy haunches on a corner of the altar. "That's right."

Baxter smiled. In a moment, Pulaski did too.

For all his Kunstfehigkeit und Klugheit, Freihaben hadn'tinvented fire. He'd stolen it—from the mobian fox Vidavin, no less, in a rare case of open cross-pantheon mythic interaction. The Lakolskas' god of science was a god of theft.

"What's the good word?" grunted Pulaski.

"Sally Acorn's alive, hiding in the Brenan Forest, and in command of the Royal Army of Mobius." He gave the AD an opportunity to join in his smile, then continued: "I'm almost dead positive. They're young because they're privileged army brats, from the upper echelons of War and Science Ministries. My guess is they've got a really secure base, probably some sort of bunker from the War. And—" Baxter lifted his hands and broadened his grin his boss's continued unsettling silence: wait, there's more! "And, you want to give her money, you send ops to look for Rotarak Tulugarjuk." He spelled it. "Walrus. MISO has a name but no other leads."

Pulaskli sat motionless, marble cutting into his rear end, watching and listening.

"Well?"

Watching and listening.

"Gods, don't tell me you already knew she was alive," Baxter said. "One, what the hell, and two, don't tell me I've been working my ass off for these assholes just so I can tell you something you already knew—How could you even know that? What sources could you possibly—"

"It's not your job," Pulaski gruffed, "to know every method that Acquisition may or may not have of gaining Mobian intelligence. I should think that you'd understand. In your position?" He let out a sigh of air like the crack by a subsiding tectonic place, letting his flesh sink a little deeper deeper onto the altar. "Continue."

"To be honest, there's nothing else. That's all we do. Kolensky might be on something else, he's been out of pocket about three quarters of the time the past few months."

"What's that?"

Baxter shrugged bitterly. "The office doesn't have a water cooler. And he doesn't need help."

"Hummmmmmmmmm," Pulaski's belly resonated. "Okay." Without a word he got up and left the temple's front entrance into a hallway lined with chalkboards and stickytacked fliers. STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS; JUSTICE NOW, etc. etc.

"Well," Baxter asked, charging up behind as Pulaski left the building. They'd wound up back in the main quad, another vantage on the protestors swirling around the fountain. "What is it? Am I back to analysis? Are you moving me up to Hochteufel—

"MAT's still in place. Stuntaz will complain for a period and then back off. You don't know that," he added without a pause, quickly turning his eyes over his shoulder. Bazter passed a gloved in front of his face. "Good. I may contact you before you go back. Until then just go about your business."

"Right," he said, but Pulaski was done cutting his companion and was gone across the grass with the smooth speed that planets are said to possess.

Baxter sighed, thinking, trying to reassemble the bits of his shattered picture of Mobian Internal Security Office. Kolensky, huh? Close relation to Robotnik, minor player with a sketchy role in the coup ten years back. There might be something there. But it was an odd play by the AD. Baxter would have sworn the Acorn angle—

"Internationale Arbeit-Zeitung?" A snowshoe hare was in front of him in a jacket and light fingerless gloves, her neck thick with white fur. "Wir besuchen ein Mark."

Baxter blinked, then nodded, digging for his wallet. "Yeah. Sicher. Moment, bitte."

Around the corner of a sandstone building, watching with what was for a man of his build was astonishing stealth, was Frank Pulaski. His eyes followed the folded newspaper as it passed from hand to glove.

"Hummmmmm . . . ."

Antoine's boots swelled at the pressure of his toes wriggling inside. He wormed himself tighter against the rotted underside of the downed tree beneath which they were hiding, staining his filthy jacket more thoroughly. "I do not wish to alarm you—" He broke off for a moment and allowed his teeth to chatter, illustratively.

"We'll be alright, Ant." Rotor answered peremptorily, watching her. "We're making great time." Four days of little sleep, little warmth and next to no food, humping it twelve hours a day across forest still in the process of being cleaned up by the army. Okay, yeah, you kind of wanted Ant to shut up so you wouldn't have to think about it. But on the other hand you kind of wanted to hear someone say something. Just that stupid, pointless talk that Rotor normally prided himself on not being able to produce.

May was lying on her side, eyes empty, unflopped ear perched over her head like a radio antenna. It wasn't. Probably. If it was implanted with an appropriate metal it would really hurt, and it would wreck the ear's natural role as the body's heat sink. But it was hard to combat the impression, given what she was up to.

She didn't move while she did it. Didn't close her eyes, either. He wished she would do something, wouldn't just lock up.

He wanted to speak to her, but he hesitated. Then: "Anything?" he asked. "Troops?"

"Getting quiet," May replied, moving nothing but her mouth. Gettin' quiaht. Rotor had only heard these southeastern accents on the trivid. "Real quiet, now. I—" She squinted, concentrating.

"Yeah?" Rotor whispered.

"Don't know." She gave a slight shake of her head. "Weak. Innerference; long ways off."

He nodded, wanting her to see his nod, but she wasn't looking at him or anything else. The walrus felt more awkward than he ever had in his life, which was saying something. She had followed them through the woods for more than half a week now. Stray puppy. There was no spoken agreement. She hadn't asked a question. Antoine had mentioned Knothole, but of course that meant nothing to her.

It bothered him. And he knew why, and he didn't like it: He wanted to think of May as a machine.

Rotor was good with machines. They were his friends, his special friends!—Okay, that was unfair. He wasn't an aspie. He got along well with Maersk, Sally, Old Lady Postalitas. But talking to anyone required a lot of tact; most sentient relationships consisted of a lot of waiting for someone else to do something—ask if you wanted to borrow a book, something like that. Maybe Rotor was a bit uncomfortable around people, but that was alright, because they all had their own things going on. They can take care of themselves.

Machines, by contrast, can't. They just sit there, waiting for you to mess around and see what makes them tick. No feelings to hurt, no mystery you can't pull apart. Nice and easy. Just like May.

No, he thought. That's not fair. That's cruel. Indeed it was very cruel. He tried out the cruelty again: May Rabbit is not a person.

So then why did Rotor have such a hard time talking to her?

"I miss it," she said.

Rotor's tongue was a swollen worm. This was the first she had said in three days that wasn't immediately related to hunger, cold, or troop positions. "What?" And there was no answer for a moment, maybe he had said it too quietly: "Miss what?"

"Talk." Her eyes rolled strangely in their sockets. She was looking at him; then she quickly wasn't. "The forest is so quiet," she said. "It used to be everything was talking. Commander. The bots. The cars, the choppers. Everything. Everyone was so interested how Bunnie was doing. Bunnie is doing so great."

". . . .Okay—"

"No."

She rolled away from them, folding her arms—no, Rotor thought. That's how the gesture normally ends, but she probably doesn't have that range of motion in the fat, heavy left arm anymore.

"I smell bad," she said. "I know I do," she insisted against the silence, "It's my legs. He had to get rid of the fur on 'em else they'd shed and bunch up under the armor and clog things up. But he didn't know how to get rid of the oil and stuff that goes with it. He didn't figure that out till my arm. So now I can't wash them, and it smells bad and they itch."

Rotor shrugged delicately. "It's okay—"

"We'll fix it in the next gen," May interrupted. "That's what Snively said when the docs asked him about it." The blades of her unmoving shoulders were asymmetrical, as though one was used to carrying a much larger weight. "Do you want to take the armor off and fix her. No. We'll fix it in the next gen. He thinks I'm asleep but I'm not. The doc says I'm doing well—"

Now the shoulders began to shake, rustling the leaves

"—Commander Snively always tells me you're doing so well, Bunnie. You're learning so fast. You're doing such a good job. We're going on a trip to the forest, Bunnie, for field training—"

No,Rotor thought. The human took May to her home town. He knew with instant certainty, with the directness of the slap of a rock landing into still water: That's not a coincidence. That's the start of a loyalty test.

"—and I recognize where I'm at and I run. He calls me and calls me. Where are you, Bunnie. Come back. I find her and I know who she is and she takes care of me, but she doesn't feel like Grandma. And I had in the caves and I can't hear him anymore but I know he's calling and calling me. Voice channel. He sounded so worried—"

Waves of clarity spread outward through his thoughts like steady, smooth ripples over the face of a pond, advancing smoothly and unceasingly. Everything Sally and Sonic had said about Hewlett was true. Itwasn't just some kind of experimental armor. Someone, Robotnik's cousin or whatever the hell he was, had dialed a cell phone standing over a gurney, an empty syringe of barbitate overdose in his hand: could you please kidnap me another one—

"I need to go back." Just her eyes showed over her shoulder, wide and blue and begging and screaming oh gods I can't go back to him. "He wasn't going to—"

"He was," Rotor said. "I don't have the slightest doubt that he was."

"It'smy fault," she said, her eyes still transfixed and in desperate need. "I should have asked him what he meant. He didn't really—he—I deserved it. I did. I shoulda—"

"May."

Her eyes closed like she'd been slapped. When they opened again, she was awake. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, more frightened than she had been any time in the past six years. "Who are you?"

The inside of the semitrailer was freezing cold, and they had zero blankets between them. But they were going to be home before they knew it; the rig was headed all the way to Corukas and the driver'd been more than happy to drop a few passengers off in Narsupan in exchange for an unlicensed, untraceable pistol.

Just one, though. When Cat, Tails and the rest of the people they dragged out of Marigold with them had wandered past the rusted razorwire into the sleepy Coolette freight terminal, they'd gotten more than a couple looks. Looks like, maybe it would be a good idea to take these guys to Freeport Rose and sell them to a freighter bound for the Antarctic. But then they got a look at Tails and what he was carrying in his waistband. He wasn't sure precisely what emotion seemed to come over the truckers—scared? unsettled? depressed?—but at any rate thy seemed to decide that they were in the presence of something they did not entirely understand, with which it was not wise to fuck.

Now Tails was sitting on his haunches across the dark trailer, back against a chill wooden crate with the Carnival Products logo stenciled on the side. And maybe Cat thought it was a little creepy, too, now that he had a chance to think about it, but the kid didn't have any other toys with him: he'd emptied the clip of bullets but reslotted it for weight, and was twirling it on his fingers like a circus shooter. Pretty impressive. He found himself warming to the idea of how good Tails was with it. Probably because Tails had saved his life.

"Hey Tails," he yawned.

Eyes squinting at the flash of the metal in his gloves as he practice: "What?"

"Where'd you learn to shoot that thing? Sonic taught you?"

The fox caught the pistol against the heel of his palm with a loud slap and leaned between his knees. "You can't tell anyone," Tails whispered, straining to make the whisper heard over the dull roar of the engine. Cat nodded, swallowing a grin. "Uncle Sonic takes me out to the big old dead oak by the creek and we do target practice! We shoot bullseyes and we toss cans and rocks, and he showed me how to use the machines in the exercise room." He nodded with reproach, as though Cat were sure to dismiss weightlifting as irrelevant to weapons training: "You have to be really strong to shoot! Metal's heavy, and a nine millimeter has a lot of kick—"

"I'll bet!" Cat answered.

"Yeah!" Tails said. He flipped the pistol up and down, up and down in his right hand before suddenly lifting it to aim at a crate, effortlessly . . . seemingly without effort, as he put the gun down and massaged his forearm a moment later. "But you can't tell Aunt Sally about it, because she told Sonic to stop. Okay?"

Cat locked his lips and swallowed the key. "You'd better be sure to give me the gun before we get in, then. Not yet," he clarified, as Tails offered him the butt. "I'm worried about the driver. Once we're there."

"Okay." He went back to twirling the piece on his finger. "Sonic says I can do draw practice once I get a little bigger, but he doesn't have a holster for me yet."

For a couple seconds they just chilled—the high-pitched vibration of the tires, the quiet clicks of the gun. "Hey Tails?" Cat wondered. "Sonic teach you anything else?" Tails stared back, confused and uneasy. Uncle Sonic is obviously The Uncle That Gets You Drunk, Kid, he thought: "Does Sonic teach you how to swear?"

It took Tails five seconds to faintly duck his snout a couple times. ". . . Yeah." Deciding whether picking it up by osmosis was teaching.

Cat couldn't hide his smile. "He teach you about girls? Women and men?"

He lied more quickly and easily this time: "Yeah! That too! I know all about kissing and . . . girls, and—"

"You might ask him if he can do a better job," he yawned. He rolled onto his side and pulled his knees to his chest, seeing if he could nap the rest of the way.

When Baxter got off the train at Bahnhof Bundesplatz it was already late evening and a fresh few feet of snow were falling from the clouds as they crept up over the mountains. He lugged his bags up onto the street and found himself in glaring snow bright and snow darkness: regularly spaced lamps cut the plaza from the surrounding night like the footlights of a four-sided stage; behind them were spaced the intermittent yellow shine from windows in the long stoneBundesparlament and, stuffed over to one side, the coldRathaus. The lights of the skyscrapers of new town were too far away in the snow to see, but you could feel them, rising up in the darkness like the ascending escarpments of the mountains.

It was lonely. Beautiful. Kind of.

But it was also cold as hell. Halfway on the walk to his Gasthaus a globe of white came out of the dark with a small sign, black on white, TRINKHAUS ◊ suggesting the cellar steps leading underneath an old, gray office-building. He knocked his shoes at the entryway and got a booth. The menu was simple and local; he ordered a pair of pierogis and ate them with his bare hands and wheat bear and contemplation.

The place was quiet and dark and almost empty, with the feeling of being chronically so. It was a real oldster's place. A pair were there; one fat and gray haired, one skeletal and bald. Government functionaries, probably. Büroangstelltern, you would have called them in a novel at the turn of the millennium. Baxter had the impression they'd been there a while; they seemed completely familiar with their surroundings, including each other, but they did not speak, or look at the waiter, or at each other. Baxter watched them, thought about taking out his pcomp, maybe reading the paper he'd bought at the Winstone station—

Fuck. He'd forgotten. Josh's girlfriend, Kima. He'd been supposed to say hi to her, get her something too, but just relay greetings in person. But he'd been in such a hurry to get out of town . . .

He sighed and pulled out his phone. New message after going through the foothills tunnels. Not Josh, he thought, pressing it to his ear. Not Josh. It wasn't. He heard a strange, rough voice, a Lachel's lilt laid over and over the mountain gravel and throaty consonants of a transplant from the farther reaches of the defunct Vorlandreich.

"Hello, Baxter, it's mom. I read in the news this morning that the Premier had recalled all non-essential diplomatic officers from Mobius, and—Don't hang up. Hoer mich zu, bitt—"

He put the phone flat against the cold wooden tabletop. Then he put it to his ear again.

"—was figuring that would include you. I don't care what—I'm not going to talk about what you've been doing. I don't care why your home or how the family feels about it, and I don't want to talk politics with you. I just want to say hello. Give me a call before you leave town, okay? You ought to know the number, but—"

Baxter killed the signal. The he started as the waiter, who had apparently somehow glided frictionlessly up along the tile floor, folded a long, old-fashioned check on the table before him. "Mein Herr."

"Danke,"Baxter yawned, waving him to glide back to the bar. He flipped the little tent over, briefly checked the tally, and pulled out his card before he noticed the little index card that the tent had held. He picked it up; it was laser-printed in a tight little serif font.

CALLING ALL CARS

00E103523000013 33300392392895

-F

Pulaski's office was nothing to brag about, a windowless interior office in Ministry with one of the drop ceiling tiles removed to run the data arteries down to his computers. About fifteen dry, brown-stained coffee mugs, all of them bearing the national seal and stolen from meetings. Maybe he never wanted to meet there because he was ashamed of it. Maybe there was some legitimate reason of security or espionage for him to always be relaying information like this.

Or maybe, the Baxter thought with a slight grin, he got as big a kick out of it as an ex-academic political economist did. The numbers weren't anything he'd seen before, but that could wait. If he'd been given them, it was sure to be for some sort of reason that—

He unzipped one of the pockets of his pcomp bag, took out his checkbook and scanned till he found them. A row of numerals in a strange font along the bottom:

000332PP000138

Oh. Bank account routing numbers.

This could be fun.

Kain Blackwood - 2007

## \*Chapter 21\*: Borgadan Int'l Airport, 21 Firmaire 3228

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**Borgadan International Airport, Robotropolis, 21 Firmaire 3228**

"Any luggage?" asked the panther. She slid a little gray plastic tray onto the white folding table, the buttons on the stiff sleeve of her green uniform gleaming a bit of stray halogen light leaking from the little translucent plastic cell where they did the searches.

"Nope," Molly answered with a smile. One after another, her fingers dropped into the tray her keys, her wallet, her palm-balm for the winter, a pack of Comiskey bubblegum, and a couple of five-sovereign coins. With the exception of the furbrown winter jacket and the other clothes on her body, everything that she owned was in the tray.

"Mmm-hmm," the panther hummed, swirling the bowl beneath her eye like a miner panning for gold. "Can I see—uh huh, thank you . . . ." She leaned closer to Molly and squinted, trying to match the smiling raccoon with the face on the ID Molly held aloft by her head. "Uh huh. Uh huh . . . ." The guard's face dropped cold and flat as she saw the little red warning circle next to Molly's picture: half-citizen. "Step through the light-rad, please."

"Yup." Molly gave her ID to the airport guard and stepped through the plastic doorway. There was no squawk from the machine, but her little red circle had earned her a lot of practice: without waiting for the command she planted her feet beneath her shoulders and spread her arms wide, fanning her fingers in their bare-tipped gloves.

"Destination?" the guard's brother-in-arms, a sloth, mumbled. He loudly masticated a wad of gum in his left cheek while one hand lifted a faintly whining black wand and slowly passed it over the raccoon's limbs.

"Terscala," she said, growling inwardly at the hand-scanner's invisible caress as it slid over her belly. Her tail seized in a brief wave of panic—you're losing it you can't lose it just one more fucking time, everything suddenly erupting into life to grab her again, Dyson, the police—before she beat it back down. That was good, she thought, as her heart thumped dully in the aftermath;that was alright. It looked like anger, and a little bit of anger was good. She'd never been happy to be searched before. It would be suspicious for the half-citizen to be too happy.

"Boarding pass?" asked the panther, glancing up from Molly's open wallet.

"It's in there," she answered over one lifted arm.

The panther sniffed and began to flip an index finger rapidly through the receipts and dry cleaning tags in her wallet. The sloth grunted as he waved the wand under her tail—how could she hide a gun in hertail? "Reason for travel?" he droned.

"Business." She didn't know why Darcy's people needed the fifteenth of Firmaire, but it worked out well. Structural Engineering Con 3228 ran the twenty-third through the twenty-fifth in Terscala, and her story was . . . plausible. As long as they didn't call Gaumont . . . .

"Ma'am." Molly blinked. The panther was offering her tray of things; the sloth was slowly creaking back down onto a little padded stool. "Have a nice trip," the panther said flatly.

". . . Thanks. Thanks very much," Molly answered, taking her boarding pass. Her lucky day.

She shuffled unhurriedly out of security and into the terminal, broad, slow steps rolling the weight in her hips. Cold white sunlight gleamed through the perfect windows that striped the long ceiling far overhead, spotless—heated, she guessed, with a transparent monofilament mesh to keep the snow from caking on the edges. It was a weekday and everything was open, all of the little magazine shops, battery shops, shops filled with lowland Coolette wine and highland Corukas wine and brandy and every other kind of liquor matched to a part of the country, free of tariffs. Travelers flitted between them. Molly stepped to one side as a train of squirrels ran by, parents and three kits all in fine white gloves and expensive leather boots still dripping with salted slush from the sidewalks outside, hustling to a gate from the rail exchange deep in the underlevels.

We will begin final departure procedures shortly, some airline's distant computer-voice announced.

She went to the bathroom and threw away her ID and boarding pass, took what was left of her cash to a newsstand for a Clarion and Scientific Mobian and to a Jimmy's for coffee and a sandwich. Then she walked until she found an empty gate for Polar Air without so much as a NEXT FLIGHT: announcement on the monitor, just WELCOME TO ROBOTROPOLIS! She settled down into one of the sixpack chairs to read and wait and watch for a fox about whom she knew only two things: he was wearing a red hat, and he was about to save her life.

"You're sure you don't want to sit down for a minute, Sonic?" Sally asked. They were getting close to Knothole, but how close she wasn't sure. The heavy snow she'd waited for would cover their tracks, but it was also hiding the way. "I mean, the doctor—"

"Hell, no, Sal," the dark hole in the middle of the stained parka's hood replied, glancing back at her through the flakes. "It's been weeks. You know the doc gave the hedgehog a grade-A bill of health."

"Technically, Sonic, the doctor said he was amazed you were alive."

"Yup, amazing, recovery, that's what he said. Amazing!" He raised his hands up in the air and Sally tensed—a somersault was asking to open his stitches—but for once the hedgehog himself seemed to think the better of it and return his gloves to his pockets. "All I really need right now is a little less snow, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Sally agreed, trying to dig her gloved hands deeper into the pockets of her jacket. But she needed a rest, too. And, to be honest, she wasn't entirely eager to arrive back at Knothole. Janet of Corey's restaurant said that no one had stopped by on their way back from Marigold. That might be because they had come directly through the forest. It might mean they were captured or dead out east. The bunker might even have been taken during Brushfire. Though, she reminded herself every twenty minutes or so, Mechanized Army did not know where it was, and the odds of someone just stumbling across it were next to nothing—

Sally's eyes squeezed tears against the whiteout as her shin kick into the rim of a stump. "Ah!" she cried as she slid down onto the rim. "Gods"

Sonic appeared next to her, giggling. "Nice work, Sally-girl."

She massaged her leg, appalled. "Sonic, it hurts—"

"No. I mean, we're here."

She blinked and looked around, but didn't see it. It was only when she actually found the old switch under a nearby rock and popped the hatch set into the false stump that she believed it. Sonic slid down the ladder without using the rungs; by the time she had her feet on the tiles he was already shaking out his parka, the stretch bandages hugging his ribcage pierced scattershot with quills and stained pink with draining lymph over the wound. "Rotor?" she called, lifting off her earmuffs. The air smelled, as always, of stainless steel ductwork; the only response was the buzz of the sputtering fluorescent tubes regularly spaced into the ceiling. "Antoine?"

"Hey TAILS!" Sonic bellowed, making the walls ring. He looked back at Sally with her burning ears plastered to her head, shrugged, then led on into the bunker.

The entryway was bare white tile like a clean room in a medical laboratory, unfriendly and sterile and empty. They ducked around the dead security emplacements (the circuits cut—even without ammo, it was disturbing to have a four foot minigun whirrclkclkclkclkclkclking at you whenever you came in from the outside), then went to the propped open EMERGENCY ACCESS door next to the dead elevators. Stairs seventy meters down the walls of a circular ventilation shaft, the depth marked with paint over the rusted emergency blast shield points (INJURY HAZARD – STAND CLEAR). And then the second door at the bottom (SURFACE ACCESS – EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY) and they were standing in one of Knothole's hallways. Soft carpet, impressionist paintings of the forest far above them lit to suggest windows that disappeared when you turned your head to look. A faint buzz of the lights, whirr of the air recirculators.

And that was it.

Sally traced the seam of her jacket to its pocket as though to pull out her gun but uneasily chose to just station her hand there, for the moment. She took the lead and Sonic followed. The conference rooms were empty. She tried the south corridor first, towards the mess—

"Aunt Sally!" Tails was leaning out of the hatch to the mess, his head a disaster of untended orange hair, his gloves peeling and filthy with dirt, his snout with the biggest smile she'd ever seen. "Uncle Sonic!" he yelled as she scooped him up on the run, hugging him, rushing with him into the noisy mess hall and that's when she saw it, queasy contrast of flopped ear and welded limbs, standing in the middle of the room like she owned the place, because she did own the place and Robotnik owned her, the thick, shiny punch press riveted into her left shoulder reaching out for Rotor, to squeeze and pierce his flesh—

"Aunt Sally?" Tails asked. He was crying.

She came off of autopilot squatting in a far corner of one of the conference rooms, clutching the fox kit to her chest, aiming her shivering, still cool gun over his shoulder at the distant door for the hopeless defense for when the personbot would come through it for them. There were sounds of screaming, tears, combat, death. It was as though they were pounding up to her eardrums from deep inside her as well as from without.

"Aright!" Sonic's voice cut through the din. "Everyone just shut up for a goddamn sec!"

Tails squirmed in her grip. "Are you alright, Sally?"

She just breathed, deep and sharp. Every breath gave the fox a crushing hug, every exhalation was a tiny scream.

From the photos on page fifty-five and fifty-six, it seemed that Bryson Air Motor, the infamous advertising boondoggle of Bryson Auto, had finally achieved some success. Incredibly expensive, impractical, ridiculous-looking success. The prototype, accompanied by a bundle of humans and mobians that had donned lab whites for the photographer, was a juice-sucking Wiley-Kleiner antigravitron drive dangling heavy black and red cables like a gigantic optic nerve, mounted in a spherical cassis strung with small subsidiary drives and compressed-air canons for maneuverability. The accompanying article indicated that Bryson was confident enough in their long dreamed-of flying car that negotiations were welcome from anyone with the money and nothing better to do with it.

Molly grinned. The pols were so ridiculous. Cold fusion cranks and antigrav losers installed hot, cold, and grant money nozzles in their showers, while the chemistry and materials science likely to actually pan out—dirt-cheap photovoltaics, room-temperature superconductors—languished by the wall, unsexy and unloved. There was at least some compensation: the sight of some superrich moron paying enough to feed a neighborhood for ten years so that he could float around in a ping-pong ball.

She tossed Scientic Mobian aside and stretched back with a wide, teeth-baring, tongue-curling yawn, reaching her arms so far onto the chair-backs on either side that the thick brown fur above her black wrists peeked from the sleeves of her jacket. It angered her, too, of course. You could say that it didn't matter whether you got your picture in the paper, and in fact she and Mark and Amilie and everyone else in MatSci at Gaumont pretty much did whenever they got the chance. But it's understood that you're just lying. And some raccoon woman raised in a war orphanage, plugging away in Tolsalvey eleven hours a day, plus work at the university, would only wind up making people a perfectly safe car. And you don't want to have to think about anyone else when you're enjoying your car. Just yourself—

Okay, be fair: the flying car was rock star science, and rock stars were rare even among people with relatives in Science Ministry. And the cold molds her team was working on—well, they could make really safe cars. Or they could make really light, mobile, well armored APCs for war ministry, which was where the grant money came from. Or, as Karena had bitterly surmised to Molly while reviewing the specs after last year's project review, they could make a next generation SWT series automated combat android; Swatbots that could storm a house without scratching the paint. This would resolve a terrible moral dilemma for Robotniks' security people, who lie awake every night after their order one of their particularly lethal bot-fronted arrests, especially one outside of the Port, thinking about all the terrible property damage they've just caused . . . .

Well, fine, then. Molly closed her black eyes and sighed, shoulder slumping like a clothesline, low as her grip on the chairbacks next to her would allow. Leave now, before things get even worse. Then she opened her eyes, because she had to keep watching. It was getting on to about eleven in the morning, and the terminal was getting thick with suits and young squirrels and foxes buried under heavy backpacks. Subdued suits of black and blue; brown and orange fur. Nothing red, yet.

She wished she didn't have to watch. She wanted a blindfold and wax in her ears, or a good solid knot to tie her to the mast. Scientific research was a patient, steady business. All matter is the same, wherever you find it (that's the assumption, anyway), so there's never any reason to go anywhere other than where you already are. Maybe that was the reason that unlike apparently everyone else on the planet she didn't dislike travel, or airports. Borgadan International looked sofestive: warm rose walls; wide, gently sloping corridors; nothing to do but wander from shop to shop, sit and wait, read and relax.

It wasn't real, of course; she had to remind herself of that. She only felt like this because she had effectively just quit her job and everything else along with it; this wasn't an actual day in Robotropolis. Hell, in a sense it wasn't even Robotropolis. The reconstruction of the civilian airport had been a bit of a cause célèbre around five years ago, when Robotnik's plants in the city government had been flailing about in the most desperate attempts to break the constant, low-level rioting that sat in the city like some dizzying, incurable fever. So it was a perfect, exact reproduction of the pre-War creation. Robotnik himself had opened the palace to heavily searched tours at the same time, another reconstruction.

Come enjoy the sites of yesteryear. It was a theme park, a pretty little playground for human tourists. MobiusLand. And if it seemed attractive compared to sleeping on a refugee association cot for a year or so while she tried to find some sort of job—Molly didn't have any illusions about what life would be like in Winstone or Hochteufel without so much as she knew a tail in the whole country with the same stripes—well, that was because MobiusLand was a lie. That Mobius, the one to which belonged the little, broken fragments slowly disappearing into the darkened corners of her mind, it was gone. It had been gone ever since her twelfth birthday just at the end of the war, the start of that long, hard-won peace, leaving those pastel memories on its way out.

It was the sort of thing you'd grown to expect over the past ten years, hitting a woman below the belt. And if it was true, that made it all the worse, if it could all be that way again, if—

Shut up, Dad, Molly, thought, digging her nails into the fake leather of the chairbacks, the stink of her own chestfur suddenly thick in her nostrils. Shut up and get the fuck out.

A coward wouldn't have lasted this long, Dad. What more could a thirteen year old raccoon have done, with the police already watching her right from the start, thanks Dad? When she, hell, when she was raised by the police? THANKS, DAD—

They were the ones who couldn't take it. Molly had to face up to what had happened to her; they were the cowards, didn't even have to hear the ultrasonic rocket that took out their barricade. Love your country more than your own daughter, you degenerate? Even a woman with nothing but selfish bastards after helpless drunks in her bed, at least she cared enough about the emptiness in her middle never to fill it—

Red hat.

Molly was taking long, nervous strides, hands empty, the last of her possessions behind her somewhere hive of small, uncomfortable chairs. She wiped at the damp fur of her mask, looked to the side to see if any airport security people were wondering why the halfcitizen raccoon had been crying don't do that, just follow the fox. Slow down, relax, okay, fake relax, move slow and steady. Let the suits see you coming and get out of your way; no collisions to keep you here. The long orange brush swung behind the short fox's baggy khakis like a battle standard leading the retreat, leading her on to safety, the white tip dancing around the travelers like a willow-the-wisp. Step, step, step . . . .

The tiny fox easily ducked to the side, somehow opening and slinking through an almost invisible employee door set into the pink walls, giving her eye contract for the first time as he made the move, a knowing, wicked little grin on his short, straight snout. Molly reproduced his motions perfectly. She felt nothing, just excitement, butterflies, trying to compose the letter in her head: Darcy, how can I possibly thank you enough? The door closed behind her; exit beautiful MobiusLand! into the ugly cogs and belts that kept the happy animatronic squirrels and running. It was actually a room with smooth eggshell walls suggesting one of the prewar space station, lights set deep into protected panels in the ceiling, nothing in the way of permanent furniture, just a steel gurney with a yellowfurred fox lying on it neck askew and wrong above an unbuttoned flannel shirt of blood plaid from dry red hole in his chest like the other one about an inch below his left ear, eyes a dried kernel of startle and fear.

Molly's hands felt behind her at a perfectly featureless, smooth white wall, fingers scrabbling for a doorhandle that wasn't there. The fox, the living one, slowed his quick pace to a lazy stroll as he turned about the corpse-bed and turned to her with that same jaded little smirk. He lifted the hat off of a head of jagged, short cut hair and tossed it onto the lap of the thing in the gurney. Then he hooked a finger inside one of the deep cargo pockets on his pants and fished forth a long, silvery line of lampcord. A bulge in the pocket awoke, rose, and emerged: a brassy six pointed badge. He flipped the cord back over his head, flashing her a little wink.

The tall feline that leaned against the wall behind him was dressed human-formally, a dark blue business suit and pants, but she had an almost identical badge in a little leather clasp hung on her vest pocket. The two humans stationed by the door next to her didn't have badges. They just had snubbarreled rifles and the green uniforms of the guards who worked the airport radsacanners.

"Lady," said the fox in a muted Corukas accent, "we need to talk."

"You're going to need to talk to her at some point," Rotor said. "She's beginning to open up to . . . well, Tails. And me too, a bit. But she knows that you're in charge. She needs to know that you're a friend." His heavy mouth opened and worked inarticulately, pulling into an uncertain grimace as he watched the reaction in her face. "Or not, that—you don't have to—she just needs to talk to you, okay?"

"Okay," Sally nodded rhythmically. But she was doing that constantly, fingers plastered to the sides of her skull and digging into her autumn hair as though they were the only things keeping her head from rolling off her neck.

"Some point soon," he added, uneagerly. "Bunnie's really frightened. She's trusted a lot of people that used her like a . . . wrench . . . uh, or . . . ." The walrus shrugged, sheepishly. "Something that gets used."

"O-ka-ay," Sally droned, gluing her chin to her chest over her crossed arms. With her knees up tight against her abdomen it was as though there were some sort of invisible egg sealing her away from the rest of the room, a little cocoon. Her snow-wet bangs hung to her snout at that angle, leaving her without eyes.

"Sally, I don't—" Rotor licked at his lips with a thick pink tongue, took a deep breath. "Sally, can you tell me what happened in Hewlett? I mean, more about it? I know you haven't wanted to go into details about the skunk, but now given that—"

At the word skunk Sally shook, like she was trying to crush herself, squeeze herself into nothing. "I need Sonic. Look, can you get Sonic?" she asked, grabbing a firmer hold of her vest. "Can you get Sonic to come here? Where the hell is he?"

"He's with Tails, calming Bunnie down. Are you—"

A single eye opened under the squirrels hair, staring like the barrel of a gun from a bunker. Bunnie is nice, Tails said. "Why is he with her? Get him. I need him—"

Sally drew a breath like a snake's hiss at the sudden heft of the fat, blubbery hand on the fur of her shoulder. A bit of uncertainty passed over the walrus's close-leaning face like a cloud before it returned to his usual sagging, kind smile. "You've got all of us, Sally. Sonic. Me, Antoine. Tails, everybody. You're ourPrincess. We'd give everything for you, Sally. We're with you to the end."

She gave a series of short, sharp nods, tension shivering out of her shoulder under his hand.

"And Bunnie's got only one friend, Sally. She knows he's her friend because he used anaesthesia before slitting her up. Why should she think different? All she has to do to know she doesn't deserve to be treated like normal people is to look down at her legs. She needs us to tell her different. And you . . . ." He took his hand from her shoulder and huffed down against the wall, kitty-corner from her. "I think you might know better than any of us what she's going through. That's another reason why she needs to talk to you, Sally. She needs to know that the things that happened to her . . . how they make a normal mobian feel. She needs to know that it would make any normal mobian sick."

Sally nodded softly, sniffing and rubbing her snout, and suddenly thought: oh my gods.

"I don't mean you need to talk to her right away. But she ought to meet you today, just to . . . . Sally?" Rotor asked, noticing the frozen stare, the calculations running behind her eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Any normal mobian," she echoed, rechecking her arithmetic. "Everyone. Everyone in this country who learned what happened to your rabbit would feel . . . fury. Rage."

Rotor nodded in slow, uneasy agreement: "She's not particularly myrabbit."

Not getting it.

"Rage," she added, "against Robotnik." She unfolded her arms, slipped one leg underneath the other. "That's who did it to her."

"It was Snively." Rotor remembered that Sally had not spent the last couple weeks hearing all about Snively and how thoughtful could be and how wonderful and relaxing it was to talk to him, so he sighed and added: "Snively Kolensky. But yeah. They're related; it's close—" He stopped as he got what a horrifying propaganda tool had slipped out of Robotnik's control, had just fallen right into his worst enemy's lap. "Close enough," he coughed.

"Who's doing it," Sally repeated, eyes straining against their sockets as though her skull couldn't hope to contain the idea that had just germinated within. "If there's two, there's ten."

"That's—"

"I need to talk to Bunnie now," Sally said, sitting up straight.

"Well, let's take it slow," Rotor said slowly, watching his princess warily. "I don't want to push her into something she's not ready for."

"I need," Sally repeated, "to talk to Bunnie now."

Rotor's eyes narrowed for a moment—an unnatural accompaniment to the balls of fat in each cheek, which quickly disappeared as his snout dropped into a slight frown. "Certainly, your Highness." He rolled away from her, onto his knees, then got slowly and heavily to his feet.

Sally put her hands to her hips and pressed her haunches forward, eased the stiffness from her shoulders and back. "But tell Sonic to get over here first," she called firmly as he walked from the door.

"Now this fellow, right here," said vulpine Robotropolis Police Officer Rawls, patting the corpse's forehead, "is what we call an escort. A people smuggler."

"Damn stupid escort," added National Police Detective Seale darkly, rubbing her chin whiskers, long and white against her deep gray fur. She had moved to lean against the wall behind the raccoon, no tie, each half of the unbuttoned collar to her white shirt twisted and warped. She looked like five bucks.

"Well, that's true," the dog fox allowed with a nod and a sympathetic glance at the foolish corpse. "Drawing down on Melanie Seale with nine millimeter pistol at the cab stand, that ain't smart. I got no idea how the dope thought he was gonna get the piece through security, either, so . . . you doin' okay, Miss Lotor?"

The airport guards had brought Molly an unpleasantly narrow metal chair that cut into her buttocks. Her left arm was cuffed to the seatback just below the thick brown fur above her wrist, and there wasn't a good gap for her ringtail, but what really bothered her about the chair was that it was composed of exactly the same cold steel as the gurney in front of her, that it was pointed so she could stare into the dead little seeds of the dead fox's eyes. She was gonna barf.

"Could I . . . could you take me to another room, maybe?" Molly asked quietly.

"Well." Officer Rawls sucked in his cheeks, twisting his smile in a parody of thought. "Well, you see the problem with that, Miss Lotor, is that there's no other place in this airport that's so, well . . . . Everywhere else in here you've got all these long hallways, all these emergency exits all over the place, and call me crazy, Molly, but—" He smiled at her inquiringly, though he knew the answer: "Can I call you that? Molly?"

"Wha—uh, okay." She swallowed. "Sure."

"Call me crazy, Molly, but I have this feeling like you're the sort of person who might try to run on me." The fox paced casually around the death bed, while behind Molly the panther kept her eyes on her Molly's free hand, her back against the hard white wall. The airport guys just stood there, like robots who didn't know anything horrible was going on until someone decided to tell them. Gods, she just needed to get out of here, she needed to think about what this all meant, what she could do—"That wouldn't be very smart, Molly." She looked up, blinking: gods, what had the fox been talking about? "I think we should probably just take care of our business in here," he concluded.

". . . . Okay," she agreed.

"Now what were we talking about, huh?" Rawls wondered. He shuffled through Molly's ID and cash cards—when they'd asked, she'd pointed them at the right bathroom trashcan. "Were we talking about the possibility of you getting death for destroying your IDs?"

"Huh?" asked Molly. Her brain wasn't working, everything gummed up by that dead fox, dead, dead . . . . "I'm—I didn't destroy it! I just—"

"Plus jumping the border without permission," the fox continued, pulling out her ID. "Yeah, here it is—provisional citizen status. That means for border jumping—hell, for pretty much anything above jaywalking, you go to Internal Security at Ironlock, and what happens once you're inside isn't any of my—"

"You were talking," Seale interrupted, "about the escort." She pointed, and the fox followed her finger to the dead man.

"Oh yeah!" Rawls turned to Molly, smiling. "See, this guy is an escort. He goes to the airport and picks up people his boss tells him to. But he's not the boss. We don't know who the boss is, because this guy here, he wasn't that smart. But if you're smart and you—"

"Oh shit," she said out loud. They're going to ask—don't tell them about—

"Who?" Seale was asking.

"Darcy," she said again.

"Soh-Bot-Kah?" asked Rawls, adjusting some little thing inside another one of those deep, innumerable pants pockets. Probably a microphone. Fuck it. Fuck everything. "She the boss?"

"She's my friend," Molly said quietly. "She helps me."

"Uh huh." Rawls nodded. "Spell that?"

"Ess-oh-bee . . . ." Molly grabbed the chair back with both hands and let her eyes close.

"Molly?" she heard Rawls say. "How do you spell it, Molly? Molly, are you alright? Do you want some water?—Fuck. Try S-O-B-O-T-K-A."

"Citizens database?" Molly heard the panther ask.

"Run immigration, too."

Molly tried to focus on her own breathing, leaning lower and lower in the chair. Fuck. Gods, her throat hurt so bad. It smelled like dead person in here. She was going to throw up. She was going to throw up all over herself.

"Oh, fuck yes," laughed the panther.

"What?" Molly raised her head to see the fox was practically jumping with each step as he came over, there was so much energy in his legs. "Wanted?" he asked eagerly. "I haven't seen her name on any alerts. You're telling me she's running the bodies five deep?"

"You wish," Seale smiled as she slunk past the fox, waving a little pocketcomp at him triumphantly. "Embassy. She's Lachels Embassy personnel."

"Well," said Rawls, and suddenly, the blood and mirth drained out of his face. "Diplomatic immunity." Seale nodded as she continued to walk away from him, thumbing more notes into her little comp. "You goddamn bitch!" The fox stomped over to her: "How thehell is a police supposed to make a living when every goddamn time I move up the ladder on one of these shithead traitors you have to lock me out of the room while you have a circle jerk with State Ministry? I swear to fucking Vidavin!"

Detective Seale pocketed her pocketcomp, then planted one hand firmly on the gurney. She lifted the other two her ear, pressed fingers to thumb, and played the world's smallest, quietest violin.

The panther didn't move as Rawls's stabbing finger came within centimeters of gouging her eye: "I got quotas, you bitch! You want I should give the Captain your number so he can ream you out at eleven o'clock at night when—"

"Excuse me?"

They both turned to look at the raccoon cuffed to the chair.

"What are you talking about?" Molly asked.

Rawls sighed, gestured vaguely at the green-uniformed humans still posed stiffly alongside the far door. "Christ, people, can't you see we're done here? Take care of it."

"What?" Molly asked more insistently. Then one of the guards made a circular motion above his head. He and the other spread out and her eyes went to the belt as they came forward and saw the cable ties for her wrists and ankles, the black muzzle for her snout, the black bag for her head—

Her tail whipped furiously in the air behind her, left and right, like some crazed venomous snake. Spit flew form her teeth as she swung and jabbed with the chair she was still cuffed to. The guards stepped carefully forward, pressing her closer to the wall. "No!" she growled. "No!"

"Can you people hurry it up?" said Detective Seale. "I need to get back to the office."

## \*Chapter 22\*: Old Town, Corukas, 30 Firmaire 3228

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**Old Town, Corukas, 30 Firmaire 3228**

In the truly old days, it might have been something more terrifying, sacred. But for a long time now it had been a spirits cellar. A circular wall of wet black bricks ate sound and drank light, wrestled with little cave-white tubers that wiggled through the mortar. On almost all of the walls walnut casks were stowed to the ceiling, biding their time, liquid fire waiting to re-emerge. Along one side there was a table of iron and old wood like stone, anchored in the floor to the floor and set with curved mounts for the coopers. Sitting behind it on old, hard little stools were the skunk, the ram, and the groundhog. Standing before them on heavy feet was the rabbit.

"I just—It was a dark place," Bunnie stammered, "very dark." Her furred hand grabbed around the warm fat of Rotor's. Her eyes were on the dizzying spiral of bricks that led around, down, down into the dulled steel edge of her feet. She closed her eyes, steadied. "We'd come in from the roof in a helicopter. It would let us off and the elevator would take us down. Once we came in through a car."

"Where did the car let you off?" The ram's horns curled back in slow loops like heavy seashells. He chewed thoughtfully the tip of a short tough brown cigarillo, his soft brown eyes reflecting nothing. The ram was asking all the questions.

"It was . . . . a street, a narrow street," Bunnie said quietly, her voice dry. "Brown doors, big. There was an elevator right there. Not the same one. It took us down."

"What else do you remember about it?" the ram said, his voice a sigh of disappointment. "Do you remember anything else?" His name was Ari Koren, and he seemed to sit a meter and a half tall and a meter wide. All bone and muscle, smooth under this rough brown fur like a tightly-sewn bag of tumbled rocks. A red vest with color but no luster left in it was draped down to the last of his ribs, a single tiny star on each shoulder to mark it as belonging to a Mobian Standard Army Brigadier General.

"'Svery dark," Bunnie said. Everyone in the room flattened their ears as she shuffled her feet against the brick with loud, grating scrapes. ". . . Sorry," she said, standing as straight as she could. "The walls're very dark. Black. There's a lotta things there."

"Things?" asked the skunk. He was Colonel Kevin Logan, in a vest of Forest Camo #2—all greens, no browns. He had nervous eyes, short cut black hair and a striped tail dancing in the cloud of smoke that spooled slowly from his cigarette. Sally said she knew him. He was a friend, sort of.

She closed her eyes and remembered: "There's a bed for sleeping, and for doing . . . ." Rabbit's face squeezed as if she had bit down on a lemon fitted with a live electrical wire. A moment later she blinked, ears shivering. "There's a water fountain. There's a waste port on the wall. There's a chair for holding people down in. There's—"

Colonel Deirdre Connell was heavy and fat and wore nothing warm in the winter cold. She lifted a white-gloved hand, spoke in a softer highlands accent: "I'm sorry—not you? You don't sit in the chair?" Rabbit shook her head, eyes closed. The light from the two overhead bulbs shone off Connel's stringy, bowl-cut brown hair as the groundhog turned her eyes to the ceiling, lifting her heavy, fat chin. She was aloof, contemplative, not deliberately callous: "Someone else sits in the chair?"

"Yes," Bunnie whispered.

"What happens to the person in the chair?"

". . . . Bad things."

Connell opened her mouth and shaped it slowly. "What—no," she said. "Who does those things to the person in the chair?"

Bunnie's hand seized on Rotor's knuckles and it was like she was underneath the floor, pulling on him, he bent so far over. You wouldn't know which of her hands was armored if all you could sense was pain. "I wanna go," Bunnie squeaked in a whisper, "pleaseRotorIwannagoIwannagoIwannago . . . ."

The walrus made his hand limp and steeled himself. "She's done," he announced, grabbing her long raincloak from where it hung on the casks.

"Your Highness," Ari sighed with deep annoyance, staring straight at the rabbit as she wrapped herself up in the dark, oversized cloak. "We're not satisfied. If you want Mobian Standard Army to—"

"Well, that's too bad," Rotor declared before Sally could interrupt, drawing the cloak tight about Bunnie's shoulders. "Because she's done." He ignored their eyes, Sally's angrily pressed lips, and guided her to the low wooden door before Sonic could watch Sally long enough to figure out how he should feel. "Do you want the hood on?" he whispered. It was still pooled deep and black behind her neck when the door closed behind them.

It sounded as though the room itself were breathing, the source of the stink finally departed, but none of the deep breaths did anything to relax anyone. Logan's exhalation was the hiss of a failing hydraulic jack. "I told you, General," he said from behind a black-furred hand clutching at his snout like some alien creature. He shook his head: "I told you, what the hedgehog said they saw in Hewlett. All covered in—"

The ram rolled his cigarillo to the corner of his mouth. "Shut up, Kevin." He chewed.

"I knew," Logan said, two hands now trying to pull the flesh from his face, showing the pink under his eyes. "Night after the hedgehog told me I woke in a sleepbag full of sweat, dreaming about beetles—" A giggle of panic. "How could they make it up? I ask Jenny. How could they make something like that up?"

"Colonel." Koren puffed a small gulp of smoke. "Shut up." You take a repen pup, put it with another, older animal that bites at its hindlegs and bosses it around. Then you wait five years. The pup grows twice as big as the other animal, the other gets arthritic. And still all the old mongrel has to do is growl and the bigger repen'll lay its ears back. When he'd first met the squirrel, Kevin had been in his command for hours. Whereas the little congirl had been at one game or another probably her whole life.

He turned to her, laying an elbow on the table with a loud, unyieldingthump. "It's fake," he declared. "It's a costume." On the docks his people were facing the worst squeeze since 3225, the Port Authority purging the government's Longshoreman's local and yanking the food right out of their mouths, and thanks to Kevin he had to sit here watching as this short, weightless heir to Robotnik's strained, sweaty throne of Mobius—Why not? Pick a squirrel, any fatherless squirrel—folded her arms over her chest and stared up at him under her red bangs with cagey, oh, come on look. You're going to have to do better than that.

"You did it to her," Ari said nastily.

"Hey!" The hedgehog barked, puffing himself up in front of his moll. "Fuck you!" Deirdre looked worriedly at Ari, but the girl didn't flinch, didn't lose her little smirk, because for all the foam on her repen's snout she knew how deep she had her hooks in him. It wasn't time for a brawl yet. The leash was still snug about her wrist.

"You're nuts, Ari," Kevin said. "I mean, you saw it, right?"

"It's what Robotnik's going to say when you show her to the networks," Connell said. "That's what Ari means. Right, Ari?" He tilted his head back and forth as though weighing his horns, then nodded. Sure. "Even if you march her down Five Trees Street you won't have her in public long enough to prove anything. She's an urban legend."

The squirrel's hedgehog snapped a word so sharp and enraged it was barely even a curse, before she stepped beside him and laid some quiet words into the hollow of his ear, holding him back with a hand to his bare chest—letting it dawdle there, Ari noticed with a snort.

Then she spun back into performance: "Find it a little odd that she's dressed like an evil druid?" Sally asked, asked Deirdre specifically. "She doesn't like it, either, but it's the only way to keep people from seeing any bit of her." Now she turned to Kevin, striding into the center of the room, hitting the ram on his other flank. "Colonel Connell is right: we don't have proof, and if we don't have proof it's just like everything else—What goes on in Ironlock? Where are all those MIAs from the coup? Wheredoes all that tax money go?" She smiled and without opening her mouth gave a lifeless little laugh. "Cut the truth into small enough morsels and you can almost pretend there's not much taste to them. That's how my people got used to being ruled by foreigners. That's how they're getting used to being slaves. But I will not have them become cattle."

"She right, Ari." Deirdre said, nodding. "If we're in a position to take advantage—"

"Get out," Ari told the squirrel. He pointed at the tiny door.

The squirrel didn't move as the hedgehog slowly wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He fit on to her like he'd been designed that way, sold separately. "Get out, you two?" he asked with a wide smile and lethal eyes.

Fifteen minutes later Sally walked into the bracing air on the roof of the Clayton Brewery and Restaurant, her heart swelling so much she feared her boots might lift clear of the bricks. She strode between the snow-covered wire tables and dormant patio umbrellas to the edge of the building. Before her the black bricks and tarred roofs stretched out under a snow-gray sky to the rusted freighters and black, freezing chop in Mephit Sound.

Behind her Sonic winced at the cold and pulled on the new parka Sally had got for him in town. Fire red. He didn't like the way it clashed with his fur, but she did, so he liked it, too. The contrast made him look good, proud, regal. And it was pretty warm. "What did all that mean?" he asked, jerking his thumb back at the little door to the top of the staircase.

Sally rested her hands on the lip of the brick roof and leaned her face out into an updraft that raised her hair from her eyes and her chestnut forehead. "It means we're going to do it. They're going to argue about it for a few hours or days and then Connell and Logan force Koren into it." Behind her she felt the whole immense breadth of her country swelling, weak and feverish but great, wide, begging to be purged. She closed her eyes and spun about to embrace it. It was warm and puffy; its cheek was hot, dry and furless; it smelled of sweet sweat and the dry musk of quills. "And once the world finds out about Bunnie, there's only one way this can end."

"HA, hahahaha!" It's not funny, she thought, but the butterflies as she felt his stomach flutter through the coat . . . . "Past cool, Sal. We're gonna kick us some fat Buttnik ass." A cold nose brushed under her ear. "It's freezing out here, though. Can we go back downstairs and see if they'll give us some beer?"

"Shut up, hero," she told his lips before she picked a fight with them, tussling, grappling, waiting to deliciously lose.

Josh's head was pounding.

No, it was the door.

He rolled off the couch, squeezing his eyes against the pounding and the blinding yellow glare of the lamps streaking across the room as he plodded to the door. The bolt slapped like a gunshot and the chain shivered with the force of his forearm still pulling the knob.

"Surprise!" Baxter said. His face had taken on a yellow sheen to match the new paper on the hall of Josh's east side apartment. The ears were under a black catburglar's cap, his black parka was open on, amazingly, a long line of buttons without a tie. "Guess whose alliance is still key to regional stability and worldwide economic growth?"

"Baxter," Josh groaned, rubbing his chin, lapping his fat tongue against his dry cheeks.

"Yes, yes," the human laughed, a dark glimmer of confusion crossing his eyes as he reached down and unconsciously turned the doorknob, let it spin back. "The news is so hot I still have all my luggage in a cab outside: A rising tide of economic prosperity is a necessary prerequisite any serious progress on universal human rights, so little incidents like Brushfire are . . . just, uh. Not that important." He wrinkled his weak, stubby human nose, winced sharply and pointed a finger tentatively into the decimeter gap to Josh's apartment. "What are you up to?"

"What does it smell like?" Josh asked. A single eye, a shadow of dark shout.

". . . .Marijuana and red wine." Baxter said. "That'll be punishing tomorrow."

"I need a little punishment." The door rocked slowly forward towards the frame. Baxter leaned forward, reaching his fingers for the gap. When the door rocked back the point of a long tooth was less than a decimeter from his eye. "What do you need?"

"Well," Baxter said, frozen, "funny you should bring that up." Two thoughts struck him in sudden succession: I wonder how quickly he could haul open that door and oh Christ Kima don't ask about my theoretical visit to Kima.

"Funny," Josh growled.

Baxter grabbed at the empty space where his absent tie felt tightly knotted. "I'm in a bit of a situation. Did you know that Monetary Division—Assistant Secretary Treasury for Monetary Policy, her people, have these extraterritorial regulations governing anyone that wants to bank in Lachels? Vorburg has those great banking privacy laws, but any stuff going into or out of a Lachels-registered account or called in from a Lachels branch has to go into a database at Treasury. Now—"

"No," said the bear. Baxter blinked, opened his mouth uncertainly, closed it. "No," Josh clarified, "I did not know that."

"Well, they do. Foreign Affairs can get into the database with an interagency request, but things are a little weird with me right now—" He chuckled, rolled his eyes—"Do you know if there's any way you can put in an interagency request? The Embassy, I mean."

"Nope." An unhappy, twisted little smile was all it took to make the tip of Josh's face something horrible. "I don't."

Baxter smiled, the lower lid of his left eye strangely high above the ball of his yellow-stained cheek. "Guess the fuck what, Josh: you can."

The eye squinted: "What happened to your nose?"

The human's eyelid twitched. "You got absolutely no reason to treat me this way. For gods' sake, we're the only people we know down here. We have to stick together."

"So you want me to find some way to get access to Treasury information you're not supposed to have."

"Troop deployments? No. Confidential correspondence? No. Wire transfers. To and fromtwo bank accounts. It's not even public information. It's nothing."

"Why do you want it?"

"Fuck you."

"You sick or something, Tee Baxter?" The bear's face disappeared from the door which rocked loose on its hinges. Behind it heavy weight slumped with a sigh. "You don't seem as amused by this as you usually are."

"What's wrong?" Baxter couldn't see anything now. Just a jaundiced little strip of shadowy wallpaper, muted lights from somewhere within. "What the hell's wrong with you you're giving yourself a Rotweinkater?"

"Ich hab' es abgefuckt, Baxter." The bear rarely spoke Vorlandisch, but he had a full accent that melted and merged with his heavy voice. "Uberhaupt abgefuckt. So weit, dass man es nicht erkennen kann. I passed an accusation up the line against someone at work. Treason."

"What?What are you doing down there—"

"Please, shut up.They took her out yesterday. Heerspolezei, little HP armbands over their elbows. Going aaaall the way back home for questioning. And then this morning I check out the papers from last week and I know for a fact that she wasn't doing a damn thing wrong. She was maybe the one person I saw each day trying to do something right. I've put her in trouble. And herfriend,her,I—I—" A pause, and then the softthink of a heavy glass bottle landing on carpet. "I had to call in sick. After that, you want me to abuse trust so you can poke around in some guy's bank account?" The door bumped, pulled back, and Baxter still saw nothing. Then he looked down. Josh's burnt-leaf brown eye stared up at him from knee height behind the door, glaring up out of some sallow, black pit. "Then you do something for me, meinen Freuden."

Baxter coughed a laugh. "Sure. Anything you want."

"I need you to get someone out of Ironlock."

"Goodbye," Baxter said as he pivoted and walked off.

Seriously, what the hell? He was boiling all during the taxi ride back to his apartment, smashing his numb hands together in their pockets at theunreasonableness of it. Yes, Ironlock belonged to Mobian Internal Security Office, the agency to which Baxter was attached. That was because it was the coup prison, for gods' sake; that was where they stuffed the resistors, where no judge or magistrate or anyone who didn't owe his soul to Julian Gregor Kintobor was doing anything other than begging for mercy or waiting to die.

He pumped slugs into the newsprint dispensers in front of the stomach-churning raccoon diner a block from his place and cracked the evening editions as he ignored his mailbox and tapped his foot in the elevator. Josh had said last week, but he found a story in the Free Press on the Embassy business. Declared persona non grata for violations of the Emigration Control Act. There might be stories on that from last week; it would be pretty easy to track down what happened.

Once the door was locked behind him tossed the papers to the carpet and then almost swooned. He'd forgotten to empty the garbage when he ran out of the country. "Oh, you piece of shit," he hissed, stomping into the gleaming-until-a-day-after-he'd moved in kitchen. What did Josh want? Assuming he could find out who it was, assuming he wanted to get someone out of Ironlock Prison, the MAT did not require ISO to give him authority to put suspected terrorists on the street. Baxter knelt, flipped open the doors under the sink, and pulled out a light plastic wastebin with a spotless white liner.

"The hell," he growled, not sure whether to be enranged or mystified. Where the hell was the smell coming from? He pinched his nose closed, yelped, carefully sealed his nose from the bottom with a gentle thumb and forefinger and prowled into the library, as he'd renamed the living room once he lined it with shelves for his journals. Half-cut blinds, the source of the dim gray winter light that suffused the place, chairs and a table of glass in a frame of black steel tubes, all out of the catalogue when he'd signed the lease. He kicked and an empty, black wire trashcan bounced long the carpet with a sound of warping metal.

"You should've smelled the place before I took out the trash."

He didn't show any emotion; like an automaton, T. Baxter Posniak spun and huffed it ungainly towards his front door. Snively sniggered a little in the Lachel's ugly chair, watching the way the hem of the Posniak's jacket dawdled behind him before being cartoonishly yanked after. He counted: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three . . . . It was ten seconds before Posniak shuffled sheepishly back into the room, exhausted, eyes burning with embarrassment and hate over his finger-plugged, slant-healing nose.

"You'll get used to it after a while," Snively said, tapping his finger against his own. The blinds streaked him with gray light, a half-seen, grinning corpse.

"So I don't have to pretend I don't think you broke into my apartment while I was gone." Baxter's pause to suggested a man mulling something over while his stare burned through Snivel's head and into the chair. "It's nice. We're opening up to each other."

Snively lifted a hand out of the darkness by his side with crisp leaf of watermarked, notary-sealed paper. "It's a letter of authorization. For a full year, you can go anywhere with the full authority of Mobian Internal Security Office." He turned it to his face, admired it as though it were some rare painting. "I backdated it to the first of this year, so I'm afraid you'll miss any new year's parties tomorrow unless you move fast."

He loved how effectively it doused the man's eyes. Black like charcoal in the gray darkness. ". . . . Sir?" Baxter asked.

Snively sighed indulgently. "I know you can't be trusted not to ask questions. So I'll lay out the five W's. Renee Donlevy, under the alias Sydney Bristow. Release her from ISO custody without revealing her identity or mine. Tomorrow. Ironlock Prison. Because," he rasped, "I will use every resource at my disposal to make your life hell if you don't obey my instructions this one—single—time. Understood?"

He smiled. He'd never seen Posniak look so uncertain. So terrified.

The HPs popped the cuffs at the top of the little staircase as it peeled away from the side of the jet. Bright white lights glared at her along its descending length, showing wet cement and part of an enormous white 5 painted on to the runway. Beyond that was only black, lines of regularly spaced blue and red lights in the distance, abstract and detached from any sense of land and sky.

This was good, Darcy Sobotka thought as she smoothed the fur over her wrists. Staying away from one of the gates meant that they weren't thinking about public charges. She turned to the military police. "Who's my contac—"

The billy club didn't touch her, but the first wrapped around it did, driving deep under under her left breast. The rat tumbled down the short flight of stairs, grabbing at the miniature rails, before landing in a painful, wet heap on the cement. She snarled and broke her nails against the cement as she scrambled to her feet. She was dressed in the same suit she'd been in for four hours, soggy blue over her deep brown fur, a light drizzle dripping through her clumped, greasy black hair, a grimace of pain and surprise on her snout. Behind her the engines on the petite little executive jet whined. It turned its one marking, a little row of black alphanumerics, away from her and rolled with increasing speed down the runway, into someone else's future.

This, Darcy thought, was not good. On one side the distant, shimmering lights of the terminal at Hochteufel International, full of witnesses. Maybe the red lights on top of a huge hangar KOJAK AIR LINES, a little closer. On the other side, black and rows of fallen stars. The mountains, invisible, and otherwise no telling. It was a horrible choice. She froze, knees bent, ready to leap but without any criterion on which to act.

"Good evening."

The rat's snout jerked, lips drawn back, fingers of her forward hand drawn into a spear for a death stroke. All the white illumination behind the figure revealed was that it was huge, that it had a hand raised, but the voice was unmistakable. Darcy forced her muscles to relax, drew herself up into a ragged, exhausted semblance of professional courtesy. Her spear bladed out into a casual wave as she walked toward him, off of the cement and onto the rocky soil

"Frank," she said, decimeters of smooth alto shellacked over any tension cracks. "Couldn't you have asked them to be a little gentler? For old times' sake?"

Second Assistant Director of Intelligence for the Mobian March Frank Pulaski met her stride for stride, cutting the distance twice as fast. "Can you really blame them for being angry?" he asked.

She walked close enough to bring his unsmiling face out of the dark and cut the black waterbeaded umbrella over his head from the bald dome of his skull. "Them?" she asked with a screwy grin.

Darcy's arm swung high and left, clawing for his eyes. Pulaski blocked with an arm of stone in a suit of silk but she was already squirming low around his perimeter as he hammered a fist through the air beside her ear. The human's face was the key. Everything else was too insensitive. She skidded out of the way of another kick and saw the face wide open. Nothing could stop her, once she had a clean stroke at it—now. She leapt, one hand speared towards his right eye, another towards the soft of the left cheek, in exchange for one free shot on her belly. She tensed her abdomen as she felt his fist drive up and in—

ZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAP

A pair of jet engines screamed slowly along the runway behind them as the taser flashed blue and blue and blue and blue until Darcy's belly was blue, her brain was blue, her teeth were blue. She was on her back, unable to hear herself screaming over the roar of the jets. Pulaski was over her, his skull glistening without his umbrella, one eye glaring so white in the sweeping groundlights of the passing airplane that it didn't appear to have an iris. Silently he plunged and he ground his square cut teeth as the electricity played in her belly and leapt onto his wetted knuckles, ZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAP.

In a quarter of a minute he stood up, pants ruined, and squelched away through the grass. In a moment he returned with an umbrella in his left hand and his right bound in muddy rags. Darcy's nose felt dry. Her shivering breaths smelled cold, rain, jet fuel, barbecue.

"Why?" Pulaski asked. His voice had a tone of genuine intellectual curiosity.

"Eh—eh—eh—can't blame me for trying," Darcy gasped. She laughed and stopped, her fingers clawing deep into the gray, dead mud underneath her.

"Why with the ringtail." There was no curiosity anymore. "Risking your entire mission for a slut grad student."

"You got it easy," she sighed. "You see it all. Do you know what it's like giving secret after secret to those monsters and not knowwhy? I know it wasn't all misinformation. You had me give them the names of—"

A ball of blue flashed, then disappeared back into the black taser. "Why."

"I wanted to do something good," she said. "And know it."

"Why didn't you kill Dursine?"

WHY?something screamed in her, something fleshrending and ravenous and so very, very frightened. She'd tracked him twice with a silenced .22 so late at night that there was a chance some legitimate mugger would take his life, had a vial of botulinium toxin from the back end of a bio lab sitting in her desk at work . . . but she muzzled the scream. She was getting better at muzzling it.

"It would have defeated the point of the exercise," she giggled, eyes squeezing water from their corners like crushed fruit. "Du würdest nicht verstehen."

"You would consider him a good man?" Pulaski asked, putting his taser hand into the deep pocket of his muddy overcoat.

"His heart's in the right place," Darcy sighed. She felt like she was floating, high on the fumes of her dead, charred bowels. My heart's in the right place, she thought. What good is it, she thought, hearing the clicks above her in the rain, if someone gains control of their entire sphere of influence, but puts their heart in—

Frank Pluaski had done his homework. He used a silenced Jenks Arms .357 automatic, which was favored by Mobian Counterintelligence. A lookalike had already staged an escape from her guards at a public gate in one of the terminals ten minutes ago and "escaped" into the night, fleeing towards her theoretical handlers.

He really liked this one.

"Do it, lad! Go! Go! Go!"

Tails lifted the mug under his snout, tilted it back. He sniffed experimentally at the strange, sourish smell.

It was hard to say which of the crowd were from the docks, which were standard army guerillas, and which were standard army guerillas somehow squeezing money out of the Longshoreman's Union. Cat didn't think it mattered much; just a sea of grizzled fur, wool jackets, small pistols and knives in every pocket, a cheer on every mouth. Their eyes bugged at Tails hesitation with more desperate concern than any takleball fan. "You're going to love it, sonny! Tom's lived on nothing but, for weeks at a time! You—" Inhalation, silence.

Tails tilted the half-liter glass back with both hands, catching a mouthful of the almost black stout. Now it was his turn for his eyes to bug, his cheeks to bulge. He slapped the glass back onto the table, slopping a bit onto the forest of empties at the center. The fox stared wildly about, then squeezed his eyes tight . . . and forced the bulge down his throat.

"HOORAH!" Arms shot into the air, a din of clinking glasses. "Whiskey!" someone called. "Whiskey over here!"

The kit looked up Cat with wonderment. Tails didn't know the full story, but he did know that Cat was somehow the authority on booze at Knothole. "It's an acquired taste," the lynx explained.

Tails looked confused, but happy—hey, he'd done it, at least! Cat didn't have any more time to explain right then because the ancient door beside the bar groaned open and a tall, black-furred bull squirmed out of it. "Tom!" the mob cried. "Tom!" And, "whiskey!"

"Alright!" he drawled as he approached the table, waving his arms like a prestidigitator. "Alright, settle down, you. The bossfellahs are done with the huddle, and—"

"Is it for real?" a weasel leered, leaning over the table with a clatter of bottles.

"'Swhat for real, you lousy drunkard?" the bull sighed.

The little candle on the table threw fantastic shadows into the weasel's face. "Therabbot." A swell of guffaws. Rabbot!—

"No it ain't!" the bull grunted back. "And you'd do better to keep your feet on their toes and your eyes on your backsides than sit around drinking and spreading rumor if you want to keep ahead of the army. You got it? Alright. The fellahs are done, but they've got some questions for the rest of the fellahs."

"Yeah, yeah! Spit 'em out, man!"

He cleared his throat, stood "at ease," Cat thought it was, hands clasped behind his stiff back. "Does anyone know someone who works in Science Ministry?"

Silence. Then a wet raspberry. Guffaws followed. "What science?" "Lifting science!" "I swear!"

The bull frowned unhappily, toughened his stance. "Does anyone know anyone who would know anything about—" His face cracked as he struggled to remember. " . . . . Bio-chemistry. Really. You don't—" He pulled another breath to get above the laughter: "You don't have to be friends, even. Just do you know them—"

"NO!" they roared.

"Anyone know a child psychologist," he shouted into the hysterical tornado. Cat didn't think it crazy that someone should know someone as highfalutin' as a head shrink, but he laughed until her hurt anyway. No, the monster was just a figment of Acorn's imagination. By the way, does anyone happen to know an expert in Rabbots? Next they'd ask if anyone knew about cybernetics, and then—who would handle the armor? A materials engineer, probably, like Molly—

"You alright, there, Cat?" drawled the badger. As Cat continued to cough he pounded on his back hard enough to bruise the lynx's lungs. He crumpled over the bar, coughing convulsively. "You got something down the wrong pipe, mac?"

"Does anybody," bull bellowed over the storm, "know a materials engineer?"

## \*Chapter 23\*: Ironlock Prison, 31 Firmaire 3228

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**Ironlock Prison, near Wolvesforge, 31 Firmaire 3229**

ISO-4411THIS IS NOT A PUBLIC DOCUMENT

Autonomous Republic of Mobius

**INTERNAL SECURITY OFFICE**

**JUSTICE MINISTRY**

Bureau of Corrections and Detention, Ironlock Prison

**ADMINISTRATIVE DEATH WARRANT**

Detainee(s): MOLLY IVORY LOTOR

NATID 78932-28576-21

(Attach additional sheets if necessary or use form ISO-4414 [Conspiracy)

I, DONOVAN CRUNCH , Officer-In-Charge, having examined the evidence against the detainee(s) listed above, including the testimony of all witnesses and any statement(s) offered by the detainee(s), as well as all documents, upon reasoned consideration do conclude and hereby convict the detainee(s) of felonies including, but not limited to:

(state here the crimes of conviction)

ILLEGAL EMIGRATION TIT 16 SEC 3321

DESTRUCTION OF GOVT DOC TIT 18 SEC 732(A)

CONSPIRACY TIT 18 SEC 20

Additionally, I have concluded that further circumstances aggravate these crimes, as follows:

( ) The above crimes are political crimes under Emergency Public Safety Directive 33192 (March 31, 3218).

( ) The detainee(s) (has/have) been previously convicted of political crimes, as described on an attached sheet.

(X) The detainee(s) (is/are) (a) provisional citizen(s) and/or probable political criminal(s) under the applicable security directives and the provisions of the Immigration Code, Title 16.

( ) Other circumstances aggravate the felonies, as described on an attach sheet.

( ) Other circumstances aggravate the felonies, as described in an associated confidential file.

Having considered the crimes and all aggravating and mitigating circumstances, whether or not listed above, including but not limited to the history, associations and potential risks posed by the detainee(s) to the safety, security, and wellbeing of the Autonomous Republic of Mobius, as well as the potential value of the detainee(s) to the Republic, after reasoned consideration do conclude and hereby order that the detainee(s) should be executed at Ironlock Prison on or after the30th day of FIRMAIRE, 3228, by whatever method the of Warden of that prison shall see fit to employ.

So ordered.

/S/DONOVAN CRUNCH

Officer-In-Charge

THIS IS NOT A PUBLIC DOCUMENT

It was said that the ever-flooding road through the swamps brought nothing good. That day at eight a.m. it brought a black-haired egghead to the prison's old tourist gate in a rental car, a black suit, a heavy overcoat and little wire-rim glasses perched on a wife-fucker's nose. He spoke little; when he did his tense voice carried a faint foreign accent. But his hand held an auth letter, so the perimeter guards explained his mistake and loaned him a wheelman. They skirted under the rifle perches on Mosquito Road, circumnavigated the sunken, evil-looking stone fortress that had once, in the distant, foggy past, been converted into a museum, and passed through the barbed wire that bounded what had fifteen years ago been a brand new prisoner of war camp, squat steel buildings sprung up like fungus in the middle of the swamp.

Immigrant foreigners weren't that rare in the higher-up, polit branches of ISO. They all acted like this one: he didn't have to answer your questions; he didn't need to explain; he just needed to see two prisoners. Now. Now now now. Ironlock was stuffed with detainees some of whom had been rotting away since before the coup, and on an ever-dwindling budget—well, one that wasn't growing fast enough—they were supposed to shuffling the prisoners into and out of interrogation rooms like monte. The prison was supposed to be a swarming like an antihill. Sure, pal. Sure.

Eight hours later, the sun had slunk guiltily down into the cold gray miasma around the trees. Baxter Posniak didn't see it. There were no windows in the guards' break room. The walls were deep gray paint over cold metal. Formica cafeteria table, dripping refrigerator, beige countertop, sink with a coffee mug scrubber sitting in a stagnant, scummy styrofoam cup. The one wide wall was hung with a corkboard stapled three sheets deep with home-printed offers of used furniture, guitar lessons, and Directives. He had plenty of time to look these over, but they seemed to be written in some strange, randomly capitalized Mobian dialect based entirely on threats and uncited references to other documents that sounded like they didn't exist.

NOTICE

Proposed New Rule – Exception to Dietary Policy Directive for Systematic Caloric Incentives

In Discretionary Sessions of less than three hours length, it is a punishable violation of the Dietary Policy to offer caloric intake as a Disclosure Incentive, with a limited Discretionary Exception available to tenured Interrogation Officers not to exceed one Incentive per day and not to exceed one hundred calories. A Rule has been proposed that would allow greater caloric Incentives to be deployed to encourage disclosure among certain classes of Detainees according to a Medically Approved Systematic Caloric Disclosure Incentive Plan (MASCDIP) . . . .

The phrase MASCDIP did not appear anywhere else in the document. He wasn't sure what was more unnerving: that the walls were covered in garbage or that it was some parallel universe of words that could be navigated, given some mad plunge . . . . He didn't like it. A world to itself, with no sense, no reason . . . .

He bent over the files, clutching at the binding like a life preserver. There was familiar stuff in there, stuff that could take him places if he could learn how to work the clutch. The door opened and the hound came back, yawning and pudgy in his crumpled green uniform, a deep plastic tray in each hand. Baxter didn't look up as the dog slid them down on the table: "Who's Donovan Crunch?" he asked.

"He's uh . . . ." Baxter looked up, his fingers tapping a pencap nervously on the tabletop as the sleepy-eyed hound scratched his wrinkled, drooping chin. "He's a sergeant."

"What's he in charge of?"

"In charge?" The dog shook his head slightly, feeling sorry for Baxter's hopeless, stupid curiosity. "Uh, a shift, I guess. When he's on."

"He's not on tonight?" Baxter confirmed.

The dog lifted his sagging face in a grin and raised a finger toward the steel above the doorway and the little chain of paper letters hanging there: HAPPY NEW YEAR! "If I had me some seniority, I wouldn't be here, either."

"Uh huh, yeah." Baxter tossed the file onto its sister and began to dig through the trays. "What's this?"

"Personal effects. Clothes and stuff that was on 'em at apprehension."

"Yeah." Baxter checked the labels and picked LOTOR, M. Brown overcoat, pockets emptied. Some kind of hand lotion. Cash. Cell phone—

"You sure you don't want us to bring you the marten first?" The dog asked with a sigh as he leaned back beside the door. "We know where she's at; Marty's logging some time with her. Nothing harsh, just stress positions and threats. She'd be ready for anything you want."

Baxter stopped his work, folding his hands and smiling. "Has the marten had a death warrant issued against her in the past . . . ." He checked his watch: "Fifteen minutes since you last asked?"

"No—"

"Raccoon first."

"Sure pal. Sure." The dog sighed and shut his eyes.

Baxter had no idea what he was doing. In the drinking after he was awarded his BA he had narrowly avoided a tattoo on his back, "RESEARCH/RESEARCH/RESEARCH," and now he had no idea what he was doing. Renee would be simple: material witness to an investigation. But if he took two prisoners out, Renee would have to be right there at the time. Anything she saw would go straight to Kolensky.

Step one: get Molly Lotor into this room. Step two???

There had to be an answer in this plastic box. Point: no, actually, there doesn't. Counterpoint: shut up. No daily planner. No address book. The phone might have contacts—

Or it might ring. He flipped up the display: GAUMONT LABORAT, south Robotropolis number. He lifted it to his ear, hesitated a moment, and took the call. "Hello?" he asked.

A smooth, prerecorded voice asked: ". . . Hello, is Molly there?"

"Not right now. Can I take a . . . ." Baxter slipped his pen from his shirt pocket and looked around hopelessly for some clean paper. "Is this a person?" he asked.

"This is Morris. Morris Dyson," the voice slowly poured. "If you are a . . . friend, of Molly's—and I suppose that you must be—tell her that . . . I have the most . . . the strongest possible desire to see her succeed. Both at this comp—at her job, and in her personal life, in everything. I have the strongest possible . . . affection for her. And a failure to show up at work for more than a week, so that she can . . . ." The voice got hard, angry, live: "So that she can apparently enjoy the company of some strange man—"

"She'll call you back," Baxter decided, killing the call. He thumbed through the contacts list. The names meant nothing. How could they? He didn't know the raccoon; he didn't know any of these people—

Myron Catalano. Okay, him. But how could that work? Baxter wasted thirty seconds and confirmed that this number has been disconnected for nonpayment. He didn't know why he'd bothered. After half a year off the radar Catalano was either dead or gone native. He'd make a great character witness.

The hound blinked awake as Baxter tossed the phone angrily into the plastic box and stood up, stretching his shoulders, his hands in fists. He hated this place. He wanted windows. He needed some godsdamned air—

BOOM. An instant later, wham! An unseen door slammed off and unseen wall and a siren screeched with the impossibly long wail of a machine that needs no breath.

"Gods," the dog said, unscrewing and lifting, Baxter stared, a pocket flask to his mouth. "Finally. Seven hours to go."

"What kind of prison is this?" Baxter shouted. And then two guards in sharp military green carried in the siren.

An orange vest was on Molly Lotor's shoulders and a featureless black bag was on her head, fastened around her neck. Stainless bracelets kept wrist to wrist. Chains dangled from them to her ankles; her mammoth, swinging kicks kept her wrists glued to her hips as the feline and the pig struggled to keep out of her way. The room went silent for a moment, the sound of a deep, guttural breath, and then the siren motored up again. It was located inside the black "MMMMMMMM—"

Without so much as a heads-up, the guards swept the table clean and slammed the raccoon hard into the bench, forcing her over at the waist. Baxter leapt back against the wall as the table lurched. The Head-Bag landed before him, jerking, shrieking—

"Will youstop—fighting!" the pig yelled. He went for his belt and roughly yanked the raccoon's thrashing tail up and aside, pressing into her heavy, furred cheek some kind of—

ZAPZAPZAP

She went limp before the first spark. She already knew it by its shape.

Afterwards she just breathed, whimpered. The guards panted. With an instinctive motion he would not be able to repeat, Baxter caught his glasses as they fell from his face.

"It's only her second week," the pig grunted as he hung the taser back on his belt. It took Baxter a second to guess that was supposed to be some sort of explanation. The guard saw him staring as he mopped sweat from his shiny cheeks with his sleeve: "For the first couple weeks, every time you take 'em out of their cell they think you're gonna do it right then."

"Get that—" Baxter recoiled, gestured uneagerly with a single limp finger. "Get that thing off."

It look seconds for Molly's black eyelids to blink away the sudden light and the tears. The cat used it to unbuckle the constraining muzzle from around her snout. The pig planted an elbow on her spine and a hand on her skull. When her eyes pulled focus she could see only two things: a crumpled white shirtfront and the dangling bottom of a black tie.

"Oh my gods," she grunted, trying to lift her head and getting her cheek smooshed flat against the wood. "Are you a lawyer?"

"Well?" asked the pig, crawling up on to the table to get better leverage on her. He was the most impatient fat man Baxter had ever seen. "What do you want with her?"

Her eyes rolled back so hard Baxter thought she was having a seizure. But no: she was just trying to look at him. "Are you a lawyer? I haven't done anything wrong! I didn't do anything! It's my boss—"

Baxter squinted. "Your boss?" The phone—shit, these thugs had knocked everything to the floor. He strode frantically around the table, squatting, looking. He bumped into the cat without looking up: "Out of the way," he grunted as he got on his hands and knees, staring under the table.

"No! Come back! I love Robotnik!" the raccoon spasmed, as though love were less a word than some sort of involuntary, painful convulsion. "He raised me! I owe him everything! I hate my parents and I love Robotnik and I HATE Myron, I hate that stupid, rotten drunk—"

"SHUT UP!" the cat roared.

There it was. The phone was lying on the tile by the torn DEATH WARRANT, beside the thin cream fur of the raccoon's bare foot. Baxter reached for it and she stepped on his knuckles.

"Let me go!" she screamed in a duet. "What are you doing to my lawyer!"

"He is not your—"

ZAPZAPZAPZAPZAP

It wasn't a duet. It was hell's orchestra. This is hell, Baxter thought. I am in hell: It had the agonizing intensity of the mental invasions that occur on the edge of sleep. He clutched his hand, mindlessly trying to squirm away from the kicking legs of the grapple. This is what hell sounds like.

"PLEASE!" Molly screamed, melting his face. An instant's relative silence as the desk beside him shook with a bone-bruising impact. And she stopped wrestling, started sobbing. "Please gods, don't leave me here oh gods don't let them kill me. Please, sweet Trixiana muh, muh—oh, lady of mercy, please, PLEASE—"

The director of hell's orchestra drew his hand dramatically upward, calling on the guard section: "SHUT UP!" A gentle baton swing at the player of the crushed hand: "Mother fuck!" A quick nod to the cell phone section—

Baxter's eye twitched open. The phone was inches away, so close he could barely focus on the tiny pixilated bell, clanging side to side. CODE 19 was calling.

Thoughts came in a desperate, needy rush, like waking up from a nightmare: code nineteen, I know that code nineteen, some filthy alley, my aching nose, code nineteen, what's—

Sweet Gornod Freihaben.

"Shut up!" Baxter yelled. He roared as he staggered to his feet.

Lotor was singing, eyes masked from the world. A soft, three note little chant she'd heard long ago at some brief trip to a public temple, with her own words. "Sweeeet laaady—" Sob. "I will burn fifty—" Sob. "Baskets of apples—"

"SHUT UP!"

Her eyes shot open as though at the feel of some completely silent, invisible taser pressed into her flesh. This human bent over in front of her, his eyes on fire with pain and his teeth pressing out of his mouth with furious intensity, her own lawyer had just told her to—

The human jammed a cell phone against the pinched flesh of her ear, then thumped down on the table beside her to get close to the speaker himself. "Everybody shut up!" he yelled.

It wasn't like dialing a normal phone. Rotor could have built his hacks on the Robotropolis phone system for ease of use, but that couldn't be done without relative ease of detection. So Sally dialed for him, then pressed the speakerphone button, placed the ringing satphone on the middle of the wire patio table and sat back, hugging her jacket against one of the sudden gusts that tore unimpeded across the brewery roof. Next to her, in another wire chair, sat Dierdre Connell. Below her was a two floor maelstrom of revelry that intermittently blasted through the windows in the form of a bottle, a chair leg, or a deserving dockhand. Above her, the night sky stretched cloudless to infinity.

Across from her sat Cat. He was sober, cold, nervous, and desperately wanted to be none of the three. His whiskers were out; he licked his lips. Sally watched him. She had learned something of the history from Sonic and Rotor, but not enough to understand why he stared at the phone like the new member of the bomb squad—

The ringing stopped. Cat shot his eyes to Sally, back to the phone. He had forgotten to breathe.

"Hello?" asked a tinny female voice. It sounded slightly perturbed.

Cat looked as though someone had a gun to his temple. He couldn't move. "Heh—Hey, Molly. It's C—." He swallowed. "Myron. It's Myron. Happy New Year."

He swallowed. No more where that came from. His eyes got wider with every second. I've cut the wrong wire—

The woman cried.

What? Sally mouthed. She leaned silently forward, pointed at the phone. Cat? What the hell?

"Molly?" he asked, putting a hand over his starlight-glistening eyes. "Are you okay?"

"It's so good to hear from you," Lotor sobbed.

Baxter had returned, with a vengeance. He was beating rapid triplets against the door with the core of a closed fist, every five seconds or so. It sounded like he might have upped the ante and grabbed a barbell before he came.

"You son of a bitch!" Josh stomped to the door. THUMP-THUMP-THUMP. "How am I supposed to stay up for midnight coundown—"THUMP-THUMP-THUMP. "—if I can't get any sleep?"THUMP-THUMP—Josh jerked open the door and flinched back from a faceful of laminated ID:

FRANK PULASKI

FOREIGN AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT, INTELLIGENCE ACQUISITION.

A rotund human and a broadshouldered wolf. Josh led them without any additional shame past the downed bottles in the hallway to the couch room. The air smelled of fever. "Feel free to move the—" He gestured at the tangled bedding on the couch as he slammed himself down into the easy chair opposite. The wolf with moved behind the sofa and folded his thick leather gloves. The enormous human sat on the central cushion without hesitation. "Well," Josh smiled nastily to himself. "What do you two want to know about traitorous Darcy Sobotka?"

"Nothing you can tell me," the human replied in a voice like unmined coal. "I was the one that ordered her to commit treason." He offered his ID to Josh for further inspection, then tossed it into his splayed lap when he just sat there with his mouth open. "My name is Frank Pulaski. I and my colleagues concluded that it would be advantageous if the Mobian government were to receive various pieces of information—some accurate, some less than accurate—from a source it believed to be a traitor within the Foreign Affairs Department. On my authority, Miss Sobotka applied for a position within our Mobian Embassy and acted outside of the normal chain of command. Unfortunately, her recent violations of Mobian law—acts contrary to our instructions—set into motion a chain of events that we were, despite our best efforts, unable to bring to an acceptable conclusion. You have been thoroughly drunk for the past twenty-four hours."

"Uh . . . yes?" Josh ventured. "Yes, I was—"

The scraggly-haired human's toss landed Darcy's ID picture right on top his own in Josh's lap. But it wasn't her ID; it was the front page of Hochteufel's Mobischen broadsheet, the Free Press.

**DEAD SPY TELLS NO TALES**

Mobian counterintelligence suspected in brazen airport assassination

"They're right that her cover was blown and she was assassinated." Pulaski added. "They're just wrong about which nation she was working for, and why she was killed."

"I did this," Josh croaked, imagining what that smiling face looked like now . . . .

The scraggly-haired human shook his head, once. "No. I just told you, this was caused by Miss Sobotka's own indiscretion."

It took Josh's a few seconds to become more worried about the mystery than his possible guilt. He raised his eyes to the human's: "So why are you telling me this?"

"Your lack of training aside, Mr. Dursine, you are in a somewhat unique position that makes you unusually valuable to Foreign Affairs Department at this point in time. If you agree, I'd like you to continue Miss Sobotka's work. You will operate under my direct command and feed information to Miss Sobotka's contact in the Mobian government, a source inside Mobian Internal Security office that Sobotka confirmed acts as a direct pipeline of information to Julian Robotnik himself."

"My position?—" Realization hit him like a bat, from behind. I knew. I knewit. I worried about him from day one. "Her contact?"

"His name," Pulaski said, "is T. Baxter Posniak."

Inside, with the beer and the revelry, it was easy to forget about things like the rent. But in the quiet, freezing alleyway behind the docks bar the revelry was just a distant roar like a rough, drowning sea. "The fellahs are okay for the moment," the black mouse said, breath rising thick and foggy from his fawn-furred snout. "Nobody's starving."

"What do Logan's people say?"

"Nobody's starving, yet," the mouse corrected himself, biting his bottom lip. "You're behind this, aren't you? Paid for this shenanigans in the Port Authority with that fat wad of yours. Well I don't mind telling you I don't like this one bit. Seeing the fellahs sitting on their porches all day with nothing to do, having to explain it to their kids how come they're eating potatoes every night. It's brother against brother—"

"Do you think I like it?" the goat said. When the mouse didn't respond for a moment he sighed quietly and turned his soft, kind eyes to the ground. "Maybe you do. I just like peace. Unity. A united front. United, we could shake off Robotnik like snow off your shoulders.

"And what do I got to do for unity?" the mouse wondered.

The tall brown wolf standing watch over the alley entrance behind the goat glanced over his shoulder like maybe he was kind of wondering about that too. But the golden goat smiled reassuringly as he stuffed the bills into the mouse's hand. "Just eyes and ears, Mickey. Just keep me in the grapevine with Standard Army in Corukas, like always."

"And what do you got to do for it?"

"You buy your girl something nice," Griff Varitek said. Then he turned away and followed Reynard Cordoba into the festive night.

SWT734 GS9291slumped quietly against the wall, sleeping. It quietly suckled electricity from the umbilical cable planted in its belly, charging its many internal capacitors. Its guns hung quiescent and motionless; its lenses were dark and capped. Light gleamed from its shining new armor, smooth and flawless.

SCA001 felt wet at the inner corners of her eyes. She lifted her right hand to wipe away the leak before it got under her snout armor, then froze, nose wrinkling in disgust. Even though she had washed, the warm copper odor still clung to her palms and fingers, her soft skunkparts. Her soft, smelly skunkparts—

"Are you okay, Amanda?"

"Oh," she sighed, blinking. "I'm sorry, Commander. I was just thinking." She smiled at Commander Snively. He was wearing his fun clothes, the ones that made her feel happy inside just to look at them: a colorful shirt of bright orange with the curling white vines and tiny white flowers. It was a Frake's Point shirt, from the equatorial seas. SCA001 remembered that, but from Before. It wasn't her memory.

"Is something worrying you, Amanda?" Snively asked, scrutinizing her. He was seated on the black easy chair he had installed in the room for his visits. Amanda was seated across from him on one of the cold, black-painted steel chairs. Behind her, strapped into the black dentist's chair, was the empty-faced mole she had just tortured to death.

"Well," Amanda replied, staring at her hands folded in her lap. "My bots are a little angry with me."

"Angry," Snively echoed. Her swatbots were angry.

"Frustrated, I guess," she clarified, squirming in her little seat. "Impatient.Commander, status report. Commander, status report." She sighed. "They wish I could be repaired as quickly as they are. They're ready for combat. They want to fight criminals."

"They want to fight."

She lifted frightened, nervous eyes to him, nodded sadly. "Especially GS9291. Look atit, sleeping there so peacefully."

"You know, Amanda," Snively said, leaning forward on his knees. "You're ready for field work. You had a great practice interrogation just now. You made the mole tell you all his secrets—"

"No," she said, blushing with shame. "No, I'm—I'm a bad robot—

Snively rose to his feet, stood over her with gentle pity in his eyes. "Would you like me to help you relax?" he asked.

Amanda looked up with surprise and need. "Would you, sir?" she pleaded.

"Of course. Maybe you should—yes, that's good," Snively praised as she sat up quickly, set her butt squarely on the couch with her spine straight, hands palm-up in her lap. "Are you comfy?" he asked. She nodded. He looked into her eyes and firmly grasped the armor of her shoulders.

"Laserbeam birdcall," Snively said.

It hit her like a thick green sea wave, forcing the air from her lungs in a gentle groan. He steadied her as so many tense bands of flesh within her shifted, her head sagging deep, then bobbing up, finding a new equilibrium as the wave washed over her.

"Thank you," Amanda breathed, blinking unhurriedly. "Thank you, sir." She always wanted to thank him.

"Good," he said, keeping his voice quiet and steady. "Are you comfy?" he asked again.

He guided her as she slumped a little against the chair, legs spreading slightly. "Comfy," she said.

"Good," he repeated.

"Thank you for my special words," she said, eyes sliding along the silk petals of his shirt's white flowers.

"Mmm-hmm." He squatted down in front of her and grinned. In a moment her eyes found him and her muzzle aped him with a broad, slow smile. Some part of him idly wondered whether she was more addicted to this than he was. "How do your special words make you feel?"

"Relaxed," she answered.

"That's right." He fished his penlight from his pocket and pointed it at her from a point just above and before his right temple. Amanda's smile widened as her eyes swiveled to it. A press of his thumb to the soft button on the side flicked it on. Off. On. "Do you remember my pretty light?"

"Yes," she said, eyes rolling to follow the metronomically blinking bulb as he slowly tracked it across her field of vision. "Light."

"How does it make you feel?" he asked.

A strange, light giggle leapt from her lips as she let her eyes close for a long moment. "You know."

"Oh, I do?" he smiled. "How does it make you feel?"

"Sleepy," she sighed, letting her chin slowly descend into the cup of his waiting left hand. Her eyes shut. "Sleepy."

Snively slowly let off his pressure and took his fingers away, leaving her head to rest a little above her chestplate. "Isn't my light pretty?"

"Mmm."

"You can still see my light, can't you?"

"Mmm."

"Are you relaxed now?"

"Yes."

"Good, Amanda." He stood up and stretched his legs, both hands on his lower back. Even after so much conditioning, inductions demanded a total effort from him, but when your robot needs debugging, you need to go to the lowest-level programming languages. "How are you, Amanda?"

"Good," she said, voice forceless and vaguely pleasant.

"Are you ready for field work?"

"Nnnn." Her head slowly tilted upwards. Under her armor the tendons of her throat were tight as suspension cables.

"Why aren't you ready for field work?" he said, voice smooth and soft.

"Sonic Hedgehog," she answered instantly.

"Ah,shit," Snively hissed. He walked around her couch once to let himself calm down. "Tell me about Sonic Hedgehog."

"Hehurt me," Amanda said.

"Uh huh."

"Here." One hand raised and pressed against her belly-armor. She winced and shivered at the memory invading her. "He broke me."

"Well, you're fixed now, Amanda. You're all fixed and repaired, and you don't need to think about Sonic Hedgehog. You don't know if you'll have to fight him or—

"No!"

As his adrenaline spike wore off he knelt carefully in front of her. Her snout was scrunched with near-conscious anger, her tail-tip lifted against the back of her armor in threat. Her breaths were rapid and deep, and with each her lips rounded to breath a quiet: "No, no, no, no . . . ."

"What is it, Amanda?" he whispered. His nose did not quite touch hers as he leaned closer, eyes widening to watch hers closed so tight. "Do you want to fight him?"

"Sally come back!" she cried. "Oh . . . ." Her words turned into a piteous whine, animal and naked. Her head lowered and her limp-wristed forearms lifted in some sleepy, gimpy gesture, the drying carcass of a dead bug.

He seized one of her hands and held the warm palm as it lifted to her chestplate. "Tell me about Sally, Amanda."

"Oh," the skunkbot moaned, drawing a huge breath, "I don't know where she is and she doesn't answer when I call her and he stole her and she doesn't have a serial number," breath, "and she's malfunctioning and she doesn't have a radio or a serial number and I can't find her and she's all alone and malfunctioning and she doesn't understand and he's hurting her and she's lost and I call her but she doesn't answer and—"

"Shush," Snively said quietly, going down on one knee so he could stroke the fingers of his free hand along her palm. "Shush. Quiet."

"I'm a terrible mother," Amanda whispered, miserably.

The cell phone in his pocket burst into a tinny, autistic rendition of the anthem of theVorlandreich.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" Amanda roared, eyes closed, squeezing his hand tight.

"Quiet," Snively hissed, quiet now, shush. Easy. Diagnostic shutdown, now. Diagnostic shutdown . . . ."

"Shutdown," Amanda sighed, tears squeezing from her eyes as Snively slipped his finger from her grasp. "Ten. Nine." Her counting quickly slowed, her head sagging, a new 'subsystem' going offline with each number, as he had instructed, copying the way he first learned of their susceptibility to hypnosis upon first emerging from the velvet darkness of the chamber. The soft surprise of the rabbit's blank face, hopelessly ensnared by the descending line of floor-indicators above the elevator door. What had happened? Ah was lookin' at the pretty lahyts—

He sighed and checked who had placed the call, and then had an aneurism. He called Posniak back—why not, so long as you're disobeying orders—then listened. For five minutes. "Do it," he said, finally. "I'll call you in half an hour." He returned the phone to his pocket, a curious, scheming grin on his taut face.

"Zero," Amanda slurred. Snively turned his head and saw her lying in her chair with her arms limp alongside her legs, like a marionette on loose strings.

"Listen to my words, Amanda," he said. "My words are true. They wrap around you and hold you still. They become part of you. Do you feel my words become part of you?"

"Yeh." A little rope of spittle descended from right corner of her mouth.

"You'll have your Sally back."

"Oh," she cried, raising her head suddenly.

"For the first time we've got a productive lead on Royal Army. More than a lead, we have a hook. A nice little raccoon double agent who will tell them whatever we want her to. That's good, Amanda, isn't it?"

"Guh."

"You'll have your Sally back. In armor. You'll program her."

"Mmm." Wetness by the armor around her eyes caught a glint in the lights above. "Uhn, guh. Mmm."

"And together," he said, "you'll make Sonic Hedgehog tell you all his secrets."

END OF PART 1

Kain Blackwood - 2007

Persona non Grata will be continued in Part 2: Burning Beard.

Thanks to my beta readers Wingless Rain and Kain Blackwood, without whom this piece would have sucked a lot more. Special thanks to others who provided feedback on this or earlier versions of the piece, including Steven Zacharus, Jim Doe, and all my reviewers, especially the nasty ones. And thanks very much to all my readers, especially the ones who read this far! (The small minority of readers who made it past chapter one get a slightly less special thanks. Everyone who just read part one gets an ordinary thanks and a coffee coupon.) I hope you enjoyed it! As always, feedback is greatly appreciated.

One blow till I take you down, take you down

One smoke and your head spins around and around

Chrome mags, a million drags, she never lags

An old transform queen, momma, you never seen

Hear her purring motor, and she's a burning fuel

Push it over baby, we're making love unto you

Power booster, I'm talking to god and more

Crank it up and above my head

Smell my shit-eating grin on the skid of my world

Six hundred sixty-six miles per hour

Hear her purring motor, and she's a burning fuel,

Push it over baby, we're making love

Get back, get back rolling

Get back, get back motherfucker

- Kyuss, "Gardenia"