# Stranger

**Story:** Stranger  
**Storylink:** <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2665301/1/>  
**Category:** Sonic the Hedgehog  
**Genre:** Suspense/Drama  
**Author:** Fish the Impaler  
**Authorlink:** <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/931227/>  
**Last updated:** 11/18/2005  
**Words:** 17822  
**Rating:** M  
**Status:** Complete  
**Content:** Chapter 1 to 1 of 1 chapters  
**Source:** FanFiction.net  
  
**Summary:** When the freedom fighters learn that Robotnik has plans at an abandoned precoup Mobian army base, Sonic and Sally take off to stop him. But what’s more dangerous: Robotnik’s minions, or what’s been lying in wait at the base for ten years? Contest piece.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Stranger

Copyright Act Admissions/Lanham Act Disclaimers. Copyrights belong to Sega or DiC. All of the copyrights are used without the permission of the holders. Please don't use it to make money. The following is not a product of Sega or DiC.

**Stranger**

Fish the Impaler

(written for the "revise a character for SatAM" contest at FUS)

It was when she was setting the last of the taps that Sally tripped the alarm. It was understandable, though not acceptable. She was already getting audio feed in her earplugs while Nicole was running the decryption and zero line impedance checks, and without warning she heard the three-tone prefix of a voice transmission and then that disgusting throaty grumble:

"What are you interrupting my sleep for now, Snively?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have terrific news!" She could hear the little human shivering with delight. "We've finally been able to locate the sabre compound!"

"This had better not be another educated guess, Snively. You do know how I feel about your educated guesses after midnight."

"Oh, no, no, sir! The seismographs match one of the possibilities perfectly! It's practically a dead certainty at forty-four degrees five minutes west—"

After spending most of the night lining up her share of the thirty hardline wiretaps they had planned she was having a hard time keeping up. Sabre compound? she mouthed silently, although there was little risk of being overheard by anyone in an optic line conduit fifteen feet underneath a Robotropolis street. Sabre? In arming his swatbots Robotnik didn't think beyond plasma casters.

"This is good news, Snively. I want a contingent of swatbots on the scene now."

"I can do better, sir. We already have some assets in the area—"

And that was when her thumb slipped. "Warning, Sally," her computer's voice said in her ear. "Cable tension has passed suggested alarm parameters. Silent alarm likely activat—"

She cursed, unplugged Nicole, jerked the tap off the line and wriggled her way back towards the junction. She hurried up to the surface not only to escape, but because if she could make it they might yet think it was just a fluke, just some fluke alarm deep beneath the pavement. She bypassed the utilities access lock and the panel slid open on a chromed barrel pointed at her face.

"FREEDOM FIGHTER. DETAIN BY ORD—HEDGEHOG ALERT, PRIORIT—"

With a loud bang the entrance was clear. But not for long. She almost smacked foreheads with Sonic climbing out.

"Yo Sal," he said, head propped on his wrist, lying on the grimy pavement as if it were a lawn chair back in the royal gardens. "Finished early and I thought I'd drop by. Happy to see me?"

She felt her hair brush the side of the sewer access and realized that it must be all over the place. She must look like a total wreck. "Can you carry me to the rendezvous?" she asked.

At the rendezvous, in one of their 'safehouses,' Antoine predictably tried to put a positive spin on it, either to convince her that they didn't need to try again, or, be fair, to keep her spirits up. "Of paramount importance in every mission is of course the safety of you, my Princess, without whom we would of course have no rebellion to begin with!" The fact that they were all cowering beneath a nest of scrapped transport chassis kind of cut into the sense of grandeur he seemed to be shooting for. "All in altogether, a strong success, no?"

"Mmm," she grunted. "Robotnik won't have a hard time figuring out what I was doing down there. He'll scour the entire physical communications network and keep anything important off it in the meantime."

"Man!" Sonic just grasped the idea. "You mean we put in thirty wiretaps and don't get to hear a single thing?"

That's right, Sonic, and it was very sensitive of you to point it out in that tone of voice. What she actually said was, "Not quite. Nicole? Do you still have the audio from the last tap in your buffer?" It did.

"Saper?" asked Sonic after the playback.

"Sabre, you fooel," Antoine scoffed. "A cavalry sword. The blade is curved—"

"Sheesh, Antoine, I'm just sayin' what I'm hearin'. And what's a sword compound?"

Sally shrugged. "You've got me. Maybe a metal. A large ore deposit might be noticeable with a seismograph. Nicole, what substances are used to make sword blades?"

"Modern sword manufacture uses either steel or titanium alloys, Sally."

"What could you use to make a blade?"

"Bronze, iron, various steel compounds, various titanium compounds, reinforced aluminum compounds, reinforced nickel—"

"That's enough, Nicole," she said, yawning in frustration. "Any entries relating to the geographic coordinates?"

"Two entries. Volney. Volney Royal Amy Base."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Summarize first entry."

"Volney. Population one thousand and sixteen at time of coup. Major transportation: Royal Railway Number 4, Eastern Trunk Rail. Major industries are governmental support. Founded in—"

"Enough of that, Nicole. The base."

"Volney Royal Amy Base. Home of minor elements of Fourth Infantry Division, Fourth Air Division, Second Robot Division at time of coup. Major transportation—"

"Stop," Sally said. She glanced inquiringly and got a blank stare from Antoine and a shrug from Sonic. "Any related entries on . . . any units, the Sabres. In the Fourth Division."

"Negative, Sal—"

"Anywhere in the army."

"Negative, Sally."

"Any entries on 'sabre compound.'"

"Negative, Sally."

"Anything on 'sabre.'"

"A saber is a type of sword used by—"

"That's enough." She rubbed her eyes. "Sonic, you didn't use the power ring, did you?

"Nope."

"How much longer can you stay awake?"

"Sal." He smiled. "Look who you're talking to, here."

"Okay. Antoine, can you make it back to Knothole?"

"Of course I—I am to return alone? In a swatbot alert?"

She sighed. "Sonic, get Antoine outside the city. Antoine, you go to Knothole and get reinforcements. At least Rotor, probably Bunnie, anyone else you think might help. I've got no idea what we're dealing with here." She lay down on her side in the dirt and nestled up in the dark underneath a blackened dashboard. "Sonic, you come back here and wake me up."

"And then up Railway 4?"

"If you carry me, we can get there in another couple of hours."

"Excuse moi, Your Highness, but wouldn't it be better for all of us—"

"No, Antoine. There are troops up there already." Sally's yawn turned into a hard sneeze. She rubbed a little bit of sooty particulate out of her nose—nothing quite as bad as catching z's in Robotropolis. "Robotnik has a real jump on us."

xxx

From a distance, it was safe to say that Base Volney hadn't lost its charm. True, the little rows of single-family houses and green park that had sprouted opposite the dormitories on the north end were still tacky and worse. A patch of lower-income Mobotropolis suburb didn't sit well alongside the network of hangers and warehouses—it looked like a foreign organ grafted on to the buildings or sprung up out of the dormitories like some mutant cancer. But ignoring that he could still pick out all the old landmarks. The UHF antennae. The air control tower. Just the top of the Officer's Club. It had been a nice little base.

Up close, though, it wore its end on its moldering sleeve. The skunk climbed down from his treetop vantage point in the declining slope of the forest and slid in under the wire at the north end of the base, in the park. On his left he could see the doors of the dormitories not only open but off their hinges and laid neatly against the walls. That, the skunk remembered, made it easier for the swatbots to go in and drag out the ones that didn't follow the instructions and come out single-file with their hands behind their heads, waiting to be cuffed and put into the convoy. There was something tickling him the wrong way about the gaps between the dormitories, but he put it out of his mind for the time being, unlooped a set of bolas from the lower end of the sash he wore and moved south into the weedy park. If it was meant to recall south Mobotropolis suburb, be a little piece of Linnaeus Park, then perhaps it was appropriate that it was going to pot. Brand new eleven years ago, the little merry-go-round moved an inch at his shove with a painful squeak and crunch. At the south end of the field the rec center claimed to be Now Showing Four Nights of Love, with Twist the Knife Coming Soon, but you had a hard time believing it.

Then there was an unmistakable thump of an explosion. He felt it more in the ground than in the air. He stowed the bolas, jumped off the merry-go-round and headed for the rec center, the tallest building in the north end of the base. He ignored the front door and jumped for the alley fire escape. After climbing up on to the rusty metal superstructure supporting the marquee, he could see smoke rising from the southeast—the base's primary entrance off the Railway. From what he could see through the binoculars, a swatbot convoy had been coming in low, probably ready to drop one unit to check the status of the base computer network at Access Control, when it had triggered a pop-and-blow, one of the old antihover mines. That would explain both the round, charred hole in the shattered asphalt and the smoking transport sitting on and in the curb. Two swatbots had laid some disabled comrades out on the grass and were scanning the perimeter for movement; a roboticized rabbit was kneeling in the dirt by the wrecked bots, probably running diagnostics on them. Another maintenance bot, this one a badger, looked to be investigating the Access Control terminals under the supervision of another swatbot.

Base Volney had never, not even during the war, routinely mined its main entrance. Maybe the bots had done it themselves when they dragged all the soldiers away to Robotropolis. It didn't make sense, but neither did the idea that a bunch of anti-Robotnik guerillas had decided to plant themselves in a location as well known to the old War Minister and as ultimately indefensible as a disused Royal Army base. Just for the hell of it, he sent out an unencrypted general call on an old army distress frequency. "This is Second Lieutenant Geoffrey St. John, Fourth Infantry, immediate assistance, over." He repeated it once and was about to forget about it when he got it.

"This is Royal Army Base Volney!" It was a young voice, young and desperately eager. "Where are you?"

"Hold on, son, who are you? This is no comms officer procedure."

A pause, and then a slightly chastened: "This is Private Jack Echidna. Can I see you or just hear you?"

"No video signal, I've just got a radio transmitter," St. John responded, confused. "Where are you? What are you doing?"

"I've been guarding the base. There are robots here. They're coming! I'm—"

Then he remembered. Not possible, thought the skunk: "Knuckles Echidna?"

"Yes."

"Listen, I knew your father. Not just from his fights; he was under my command."

"You were his—Where is he, sir! Is he with you?"

"He's dead, son. I'm sorry. I saw it. We were both in the officer's mess when the bots started it. I told him there was no chance, told him to save himself. But he wanted to do something. That was him all the way."

The frequency was quiet for a moment, and then a much deflated voice came back. "You know I'm not a Private then, huh?"

"The son of Locke Echidna is good enough for me." And then St. John stopped, because even if the kid was from the base it still didn't make sense. The kid hung around here for ten years after they packed everyone else off? With just one guy there was food enough for a lifetime, but still. St. John would've run off or gone nuts for someone to talk to.

Was this kid on the level? Or was it a ploy? To get him to let his guard down, to get information?

Was this kid fucking with him?

And then he thought: If the son is anything like the father, then no, he's not fucking with you. You can trust him to the edge of the map.

"I need your help, son."

"To fight the robots! I've set up a lot of traps, sir. I've done as best I can, but I don't know."

Well, that explained the pop-and-blow, at least. "Don't worry, we'll have more help. There's more freedom fighters coming in, mine and maybe others; we're not as coordinated as the old army. Here's the big problem: if what we've heard is right, there's a valuable substance somewhere in the base—"

"In the tunnels," Knuckles responded.

"Tunnels?"

"I can't go there. They're secret. But I can see them; there are cameras and microphones. There's lots of pipes and humming."

That actually sounded about right. "I think you may be on to something, son. Robotnik will be wanting to get into those tunnels. Here's the plan. When my guerrillas get here we can take the fight to them. In the meantime I need you to keep your eyes open. I've got word that Robotnik is sending his chief underling up here, a scientist, under escort. I need you to—"

"Get him." The echidna spoke with such intensity that for a moment St. John got that worry again, that there was something going on here. That this wasn't going to go as he planned it. And he'd leaned to trust his instincts when they were strong; it had won him a flawless operational record. Flawless.

He weighed the feeling, and after a moment tossed it aside as not strong enough. He was in luck. The kid was going to be a huge help.

xxx

Three hours were supposedly enough to refresh your memory, Nicole said. Sleep another five, or ten for that matter (mmm, thirteen hours of unconsciousness), and you wouldn't remember anything better than you had if you'd gotten up after the first three hours. Three hours were also all it took to keep you from having a fullblown psychotic episode from sleep deprivation. Memory and sanity were nice, but creatures couldn't live without more. Sally had never before slept at over a hundred miles an hour, but Sonic had to shake her in his arms.

"C'mon, Sally. Wake up. You don't want to miss the Home of the Regional Champion Volney Lightning, do yah?"

Sally groaned. The dawn was already over and early morning underway. "Any welcome wagon?"

He shook his head and frowned angrily. "Nimbus Island oil refinery all over again."

The town had a score of student field hockey awards under its belt and a sign to tell the world about them, but it no longer had any students to keep its streak going, or any other inhabitants for that matter. If it hadn't been so close to a necessary target for Robotnik's coup a few people might have slipped through the cracks or taken shelter there later, but as it was the swatbots had been thorough and the refugees cautious. Nicole's updated entry should indicate that Volney's primary industry was labor-intensive manufacturing, in Robotropolis.

Of course, although it was a bit ghoulish to say so, Volney's misfortune offered some boons. Sally and Sonic were hiking cautiously down an alley behind the town's main street when Sally stopped and pointed: convenience store. Sonic knocked the locked delivery door off its hinges, and inside the shelves were untouched. Into their bellies went a couple of tiny vacuum-sealed packs of peanuts. Into Sonic's backpack went a pile of multivitamin capsules and aspirin, some dried food, and behold: canned soda (!) (Tails would be bouncing off the ceiling with joy if Sonic could keep them from shaking too much in his backpack).

Right as they were leaving, Sally told Sonic to wait a moment, went back and scanned the shelves again. There was coffee, but she didn't want to waste any time brewing it. She grabbed a sports drink and an electric pink soda with little arcs of static electricity drawn on the can.

"Man, look at you go!" Sonic said in the alley. "You still gonna say I eat too fast?"

"Knock it off, you. This is for the good of my people." She wiped the corner of her mouth and tossed the empty cans into a disused recycling dumpster.

When they reached BASE ROAD they turned north and got into a combat mood.

xxx

"Okay, sir! Over and out!"

Knuckles released the button on the microphone and fumbled as he set it down. He fumbled because he held it in his left hand. He knew what his left could do, and how much more he could get from his right. Just add the middle finger let alone all three that his left was missing, and you gained power and stability. His left hand not only made a rotten fist, but the grip was uneven: things would just dangle, wavering as the index finger and thumb pushed back and forth.

Stupid. You should just use your right hand. But his left hand had to be as good as his right, even if it was hurt. Balance. Every part of him had to be ready, awake and taut.

Then you should've just used the radio the robots put in your teeth.

Knuckles frowned and bit his tongue. He was a youngish echidna, red-quilled, about seventeen years old, if he remembered correctly. He was forgetful, and he'd kind of lost track since the robots had taken his parents and everybody else. But now that he had had the Lieutenant tell him everything that he knew, Knuckles knew enough about what time it was. Time to fight. Hurt them. He'd been getting ready for a good long time, and now it was time to fight. He left the TV room, which was also the radio room and the room where he ate the food he took out of one of the quartermaster's storage rooms, and went down the hall to the stairs. On the second floor he stopped in the room where he slept. There hadn't been a bed there to begin with; originally it was a kind of meeting room like a lot of the others. But he had dragged a mattress from the dormitories, and everything he needed. His father's speedbag, although he hadn't found a way to mount it on the ceiling, the punching bag and some weights from the gym, some books. Hurry, lazy. You'll miss them. He grabbed one of the water bottles and one of the sealed trays of soldier food and ran quickly to the roof.

He had everything set up—he already had for a while. One of the big rifles, the one that was two meters long, was laid out with its tip on a short tripod on the edge of the building. He sat down, slid the molded butt over his shoulder, slipped his right hand around the trigger guard, and raised his poor left hand to the scope. Stupid. That's what not being careful enough had done to him. A true fighter fought with his hands, but a warrior was careful, too, totally careful and prepared. The gun was part of that, and the traps another part of that. The list fingers were a sign that it wasn't right, but he had to. He was an important man. Coward. No, he was an important man. He had to be careful with his own life.

And he was. And he was ready. The traps were set, the gun charged. Even if he wasn't good enough to get into the tunnels, he was certainly good enough to keep them from raiding them.

The main thing was to kill the squirrel. Then the hedgehog, if possible. But that was just icing on the cake.

xxx

Robotnik, as promised, had his assets in the area ahead of them. A quick glance through the binoculars showed that they'd had some kind of accident by the front gate, with fire and a mess of swatbots milling around. But Sally hadn't planned to use the front door anyway. She and Sonic moved west into the trees that backed the base from the southwest to the North. When the reached the unelectrified wire Sonic spun though the fence and then pulled the metal back with a deep bow and a smile. "Ladies first," he said inaccurately.

"Thanks, Sonic. You'd make a good doorman." She winked and smiled and almost didn't see the twine as she turned a corner into a small grass gap between a pair of buildings. She stopped in time and stared in foggy, horrified shock. I'm awake! she thought, as though someone had just shouted in her ear. I'm awake!

"Doorman, huh?" Sonic smirked behind her. "You too good for a doorman?"

"Sonic," she said, "I'm ordering you not to move."

"What?"

"Come here. Slowly."

He stepped over with exaggerated care. "What?" Then he saw.

Without speaking Sally lifted an index claw and traced the twine in the air, chest height, sagging in a slight grin between the triggers of a pair of demolitions charges. Facing a street near the other end of the buildings was another at about knee height. They walked carefully down to the next building and found more. When they crawled under them and reached the street, it was Sonic that saw the round patches of extra-crumbled asphalt where antivehicle mines had no doubt been buried.

In the air there was a distant boom.

"Looks like Robotnik's finding these too, the hard way." Sonic smiled with satisfaction. "Get it, Sal? The hard—"

"I get it," she sighed. "We'd better stick to the streets if we want to get anywhere."

It didn't let up as they walked. It was bizarre. Every narrow gap had been trapped with obsessive thoroughness, and there wasn't a street intersection without signs of excavation. But everything was so obvious. Nothing but a swatbot would steer itself into any of the triggers, half of which were jury-rigged jobs of twine or clothesline and the rest of which were strung at eye height. Sally stopped and marveled when she discovered a laser-tripwire mine. It had been staked to the ground as though to the wall, and was uselessly shooting its beam straight into the clouds.

"Who would booby trap a place like this, Sonic?" she asked.

"Hmm. Spiders," he speculated. "Armed to the teeth and after some big flies. They're mondo annoying, Sal."

"But they do make finding the bots easier." Right on cue she heard another pop echo from the northeast, and she started across the street towards it. The bots seemed to have learned how to avoid the buried mines, but their limited circuitry was still plowing into some of the less bluntly visible string-and-grenade setups. "We're on the right track."

Sonic scratched his head-quills. "Is that where we're going, Sal? Following the explosions?"

"It's the swatbots that are setting them off, and we're going to have to find them. We're not sure what they're looking for." A bit of glare caught in her eye from one of the taller rows of distant metal buildings to the west. "If we want to keep it from them we can only keep an eye on them and try to make a move when we find out what they're doing."

"Man, this stinks," said Sonic. "What're you looking at?"

"Something sparkling," Sally said with a yawn, raising a hand to block out some of the ambient light from the sky. "Looks like it might be on a roof—"

"Down!" Sally uffed as the flat of Sonic's quills impacted in her side. He grabbed her and rolled out of the street and into the wall of some metal warehouse.

"What was that?" she snapped when they stopped. Then she saw the three little melted craters in the asphalt road, and then she heard the shots, one after the other, high, whining thunder off the horizon.

"Bot eyes, Sal," said Sonic, unwinded. "You know that's what they look like in the sun."

"Yes." She shook her head. "Thanks."

"You alright, Sal?" he asked with concern.

"I'm fine. I know what I'm doing." She was just a little slow. She looked at the little march of plasma burns in the pavement again, little meltholes. "That's not like a bot. They'd radio priority one and send in a squad to take you alive."

"Hey, yeah," puzzled Sonic.

There had been a seconds-long delay before she heard the weapon's power-up, which indicated a very long-range plasma rifle. Robotnik's weapons and tactics tended to be blunt, inelegant, based on overwhelming force. This was different, cautious, almost cowardly. No bot eyes behind it. Just a lens.

"Traitor," she said simply.

She wasn't sure whether Sonic followed her reasoning or simply believed whatever she told him, but he nodded in agreement. "We gotta find him, Sal, or he's gonna be popping off at us all day."

"Good chance he's reporting our position, too. We'd better get moving. I don't want to throw your back out carrying me around all day, but how quick can you get me towards those shots? And can you stay out of the mines if you run on the street?"

He smiled. "Let's do it to it?"

"Yes. Let's."

xxx

An orange cake.

"Shh," Knuckles whispered.

The crosshairs settled again on the bridge of the short snout as he breathed deep and slow. In a second he would bag the squirrel. A squirrel in a smiling bag.

He giggled, throwing the sights off. That was funny, but he couldn't laugh at it now. You're going to miss. It was time to aim. He gently brought the crosshairs back down on to the squirrel's forehead. Almost. Do her now. You'll miss, bastard. Not quite yet, though. Kill her.

The scope became a blur of movement and he pulled the trigger, then trying to follow, again, again. Again Again Again. He dropped the scope back x2 magnification. Nothing.

You missed, you worthless bastard. He pulled his head away from the scope, shook his red quills out of his eyes and looked out over the base again, the little plumes of smoke rising along the distant east edge. He was struck with another spasm in his back. He'd been bent underneath the rifle for about two hours now. Steam flowed from the hot tip into the air. Even the tripod would be hot by now.

Go up there and take the tip in your mouth, worthless. Knuckles gripped the barrel more tightly. It will scorch your tongue and cheeks. Tie a string to the trigger and shoot it.

"I'll kill them anyway," he said. He would have more chances, more than he might want. A flash of motion caught his eye and he leaned back into the scope. He tracked down, kept missing the movement, dropped back 10x magnification and saw them coming. The hedgehog was fast, very fast. They were coming towards him.

His heart fluttered, but he thought good. Just two.

He could feel the fight in his muscles already. It was like the sound when an orchestra gets ready, a bit of pain in his calves, a stretch of his neck to the right, to the left. He left the rifle sitting where it was and turned back to the roof panel. This would be a good fight. Honorable, like Archimedes said. Fair. Only two. The hedgehog had quills, like him. And when they came close guns wouldn't matter. His father had said that there were only five fights that an Echidna would ever have that were really fair, but that you had to make them count. That meant beating the hell out of the other side and making them loose.

Knuckles giggled at the thought of them losing. Getting precisely what they deserved, getting up close and personal with his fists, making everything right with the world. Hurt them. That was the way of a fighter. A warrior. Hurt them. Well there was also—but there were two of them and one of him. Even if it killed one of them it was still fair.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he balled both of his hands and savored the sweet tension. He tapped them together twice, his big right fist and the finger-and-thumb torpedo of his left. He walked to the thick metal doorway that led into the black foyer and the bright ring of white sun at the entrance to the building, forty feet away. Hurt them. No, he thought, wait.

This was going to be great.

xxx

The sniper had been firing from on top of a three story structure scrabbled together out of sheet metal, fairly rickety, backed right up against the western side of the compound. In fact, the building straddled the fence itself, reaching slightly into the trees. When he piled up against the metal he lowered Sally to the ground and turned to the main doorway.

"Is it safe to be this close?" she whispered.

"Safer than far away, I'd say," he muttered, and gestured stay. He wanted to go in first.

The door was absurdly large, thick, and long for the building, a tube-like rivet-studded metal entryway that pushed more than a meter out from the exterior of the building. Sonic crept slowly to the exterior of the entryway, then edged up along its length to its lip. Sally crawled up behind him. Then with a flash Sonic ducked his head in and out of the entryway.

He shook his head. "Pitch black," he mouthed. He gestured stay again and slid silently out of his backpack. He took out his goggles and slid them on to his forehead, then flipped out the power ring, caught it on the tip of his index finger and didn't hold it, not yet, just twirled it around his index finger. It was still too bright to use the goggles. He took one step forward, then another.

"Careful!" Sally hissed.

He nodded half to her, half to himself as he walked in. The building had a draft coming out the door and its breath was cold; it felt more like some dark cave than a prefab metal shell baking on the edge of the Great Plains. He thought he might be far enough in to use the starlight filter, so he flipped the goggles on and slid them over his eyes as he took another step inside.

Two things happened at once.

The first was that Sonic whipped his head to the right as he perceived something that shouldn't be where it was, a bulky metal canister clinging to the wall against gravity, held in place by magnetic anchors, a thin cord hanging from a hook on its top. He didn't see the row of similar cylinders that marched up and around the entire entrance tunnel, carrying the cord. The only thing he saw clearly was the word ANTIPERSONNEL on the canister, black on green in the starlight filter.

The second was that Sonic felt his ankle kick some kind of tight rope as he stepped forward.

He grabbed the power ring and hurled himself into the room at three hundred miles an hour and then somersaulted as his legs were blown above him by a blastof burning air. He saw upside-down the storm of red-hot metal that hid Sally from him, heard her screaming EEEEEEEEEEEE, realized that he was no longer holding the power ring just as he plowed into a steel wall head first.

He was somehow on his feet. This confused him. There had been an explosion. His head hurt. The power ring was gone. He was in a place that was brown and swayed under his feet. The air was filled with the piercing, perfect sound of:

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeee

The sound wasn't in the air, he realized. It was in his ears. Not screaming, he thought. I'm deaf.

He either groaned Help! or EEEEE depending upon whether you believed his mouth or his ears. Help, Sally, help—

There was red and white and the blow crushed his face and his legs gave out and that was it.

xxx

Knuckles felt the sweet concussion in his wrist and his elbow and his shoulder as he drove his right at the back of the blue hedgehog's head by way of his face. Keep it up. Destroy. The hog went down hard on his back. More. Knuckles kicked him once in the belly to make sure he was down, and then punched him twice more there to make triply sure. Keep it up. Do it again.

"Nah," he said, panting.

Do it. Find a. Vacuum cleaner. Beat his head open.

"Shut up," he snapped, and he laughed. What a weird idea. A vacuum cleaner: what would Angry come up with next?

One down, one to go, but he wanted to stop and savor it. The terrible, fast one was down and he was protected from the other by the building's steel doors. He'd done it. You cheated, coward. You let your bomb do the work. No, he'd done it. You're worthless. Your mother tried to kill you when you were seven with poison soap. You don't deserve—

"Shut up!" he barked. He'd done it. Half of it, anyway. He was safe for the moment. It was such a wonderful feeling that he wanted to dance, and he did jump, in fact, laughing happily to himself.

It was wonderful to destroy a robot. What a feeling to do it with your bare hands, to crush one and know that you're doing a wonderful thing, a hero thing, and that even you can relax more now, because there's one less terrible robot lurking in the world. Angry was right about that, at least.

This robot wasn't destroyed, but that was good: he could maybe hack it and get it to give up information on the scientist. It didn't look like a robot; it looked like a blue-quilled hedgehog. But that was a trick. The robots had all kinds of tricks. They could sneak up and take everyone away without warning, and put things inside people, put it in them while they slept, or put it in the soap and then have the mother make the child eat the soap, and make people do things that they didn't want to do. They could make robots that looked like people. And this was sure a case of it: no mobian could have survived his trap.

The most terrifying thing was that maybe they could make you into a robot without your knowing it. Sometimes he thought that robots had come taken him to a lab where they shined lights in his eyes and then tied him down on a table and cut him open and put things in him that made him think what they wanted, and that his eyes weren't really eyes anymore, but only looked that way, and that they could only see what the robots wanted, and that some of the people who talked to him were really robots talking on radio receivers in his teeth and wrapped around his spine. Mean said that sometimes, and he hated Mean for that and the things he said about his mother. Neither had happened, though, they weren't true any more than there were really Dobermans that followed him in a black hovercar when he went outside and chased him into corners and shined hot flashlights at him, or that he had ever eaten a meteorite. That was just dreaming. It was important to remember that, because he really could be very forgetful, and when he thought some of those things they distracted him, and it made it seem less important to protect himself against the robots. But it was important; it was the most important thing in the world. The robots were dangerous, they had taken everyone away and done horrible things to them, and if he wasn't on guard all the time they'd come and take him, and they'd take the weapons that the base held. Everybody said so. Mean said it, and Angry and Archimedes, too.

That would never happen. He was a hero, like his dad. He would do something. He'd listen to his CO and go all-out.

He dragged the hedgehogbot into the TV room and got ready to break its codes.

X X X

The guy was a cat, and he was about as big as a damn planet. Fat as hell, maybe some of it muscle, terrible mover, reach not too good. Probably some staying power. Still, a sawbones with his head on straight could've called the fight right there.

The Fourth Infantry guys went nuts when Locke climbed up into the ring, like they always did, calling Bruiser, knock the shit out of him Bruiser, rearrange his face. He never got as much into it as they did, because for some reason even after a year of him being the Fourth's representative in the monthly flyboy versus jarhead match they could somehow get pride out of the business. Probably because they didn't know anything about boxing. This knock the shit out of him, rearrange his face: yeah, okay, sure. It was something to do, it'd take thirty seconds, but it wasn't a contest. Someone ought to tell the cat, the dumb purple lug. They were taping up his hands; they oughta tape up his face.

The purple-quilled mobian knocked his fists together twice and hopped a little as he scoped out the crowd of off-duty soldiers, smelling the ripe air of the base's gymnasium. It wasn't any real fight, but it'd keep him in condition. He was still pretty young; he had a good number of fights left in him; with the war over he could have a bit of a run at it yet, professionally. His company's CO, St. John, was back just outside the corner, waving. Locke trotted over and leaned against the post.

"Sir," he said, bringing the mitt up to his temple.

"Private," the skunk responded, and barked a laugh. He was a really young career guy out of officer's school. Locke didn't like him, but it wasn't an issue. "Feeling good, Echidna?"

"Never better, sir."

"Good. Get out there and knock that flyboy dead."

"Don't joke about it. This guy box any before the war?"

"QM tells me he wrote plays."

Locke sagged on the ropes. "Gods! How can he even fit in a cockpit?"

"He loads their munitions," the Second Lieutenant laughed. "This'll make a full twelve month run without air division even getting to a decision. You're a great boxer, Echidna. A great soldier, too. Brutal." The skunk motioned him closer; Locke squatted down as St. John leaned forward, one black-furred hand on a red rope. "You're a very good soldier. Very. I want to talk to you about a chance for—" He stopped for a moment, thinking. You could barely hear him at all with the crowd going. "—advancement. It's a tad extracurricular."

"I dunno, sir."

"It's very important. I've got orders from my superiors in Centcom. It's very big. Kind of a joint operation with some of the robot divisions. There are—great possibilities."

Locke shrugged. "War's over, sir."

"We should talk. There's not much time."

"Maybe later, alright?" He faked a couple of light punches to his head. "I gotta keep focused."

"Yeah, get him, Dad!"

Locke looked over and sure enough there he was, hopping backwards, off-balance, and throwing little left jabs at the air in front of his face. "Jack!" Locke wailed. "You know you're not supposed to come!"

"Da-ad—"

"Your mom's gonna kill me!"

"She doesn't know! I told her I was playing with Jeremy; he'll cover me."

"I think Knuckles ought to watch you work," said St. John with a smile. Barely three months since the base had been cleared for children, and already Locke's fighting had won his kid a nickname. Not that the kid would mind, he thought. Jack threw the air a wide right hook that if he were older would beg someone to knock him senseless with some quick jabs to the face.

But at his age it was priceless. And his mom was silly; it wouldn't do him any harm. "Alright, Jack," he smiled, and he took the mouth guard from the sergeant who worked his corner. "Thit tite, ah thee yah in a minnit."

"Get 'im, Dad!" he heard his kid yell and St. John yelled something else, probably more about his spooky special ops shit, as the crowd yelled like they always did when they saw the ref come out. Mostly it was the Fourth yelling. Air division was generally pretty stoic about their duty to compete against him, though he did hear a lonely "Beat his ass, big guy!" carry from the purple cat's corner.

They backed off and the bell rang. The cat came out slow, natch, and though it wasn't necessary Locke was perfect like always, arms up, elbows in, sneakers shuffling on the mat. The cat had a lot of height on him, he realized as he landed a couple of quick body shots that didn't seem to mean too much. Easy business, though, sloppy as the cat was. The echidna danced out of the way of a pendulous hook, landed two hard jabs in the cat's side and then socked his right deep into the cat's fatass solar plexus. The cat doubled over and Locke went with a couple of two-ones on his head, making sure to keep the angle high on his right hook to force the head down, and then he did what you should never do, ever, and paused for a half-second to take stock of the situation.

The cat was hunched forward, eyes shocked, not breathing, mouth open and a rope of glistening spit dangling from his lip. His head was unguarded and bobbing in the air. Clearly he could see nothing. In two or three seconds he would topple forward on his belly and have enough sense not to get up until next week, no matter how bad air division felt about it. Out of the corner of his eye Locke could see the sawbones at the table, not moving, not about to call it a technical.

If that's the way you want it, he thought, and drove his right into the cat's waiting jaw with an audible sock! and now the doc was out before the ref, waving his arms for a technical while Locke turned his back on the supine cat and walked back to his corner as the loud bell rang five times. He waved once at the cheers, spat out the mouth guard and hopped out over the ropes next to his son. "C'mon," he said, holding out his left mitt, and Jack followed him along by his arm back to the locker room. They were all yelling, hooray Bruiser Echidna, and some saw Jack and yelled something about Knuckles, and without warning St. John, looking crazy, leaned in and screamed to be audible over the yells:

"—seven—officer's mess—family's welfare—"

A few minutes later Locke had managed to get everyone out of the locker room. Almost everyone. "You won fast," Jack said with a bit of wonder.

"Huh?" said Locke through clenched teeth as he tugged the tape off the base of his left glove. He was a little distracted. "Oh, yeah. Rotten fight. They never should've put that lug in there."

"Why'd you punch him the last time?"

He laughed. "Punching the other guy's what it's about, Jack."

"He was going to fall down anyway."

"You could tell that, Knuckles?" he asked, trying the name out.

His son nodded. He didn't look as pleased with the name as Locke had expected. "He didn't even know where he was, did he?"

"Yeah. Well." Locke glanced at the clock and saw it was five-thirty. "You can't really stop when you're out there, you know?"

"You can't?"

"Nah. You shouldn't. You're in the ring with someone good, you stop to give 'em a break and they'll knock your socks off. It's like being a soldier. You gotta fight right there, and if you stop they're gonna come right back at you. CO's done the thinking for you; you just gotta go as hard as you can. You always gotta be on your toes. Ready to take 'em out."

"Wow," said Jack. His wild ideas of Locke's heroics against the humans made his eyes glow. He smiled adoringly. "Archimedes says you fought like ten dragons."

Locke cringed inwardly. He'd been hearing a lot about Archimedes in the past couple of months. The base head shrink said seven wasn't too old for imaginary friends, but he and Locke didn't quitesee eye to eye on that. His mother was worried sick about it, and understandably what with the way her father and now her brother had ended up, but she was overreacting. He hoped. Hell, she'd wanted to go on meds herself just as a precaution, and that was way overdoing it. She'd tell him about his uncle and his grandfather when she was ready, so he could ask for help if he thought there was something wrong with himself. And if things did get bad, the army had good hospital benefits for families. Even if they both died tomorrow, at least Jack wouldn't wind up on the street.

But it wasn't time to think about that even if he wanted to, and he didn't. He was too busy ignoring his advice about trusting superiors. He was thinking about St. John. Hard. He was thinking about the clock, and thinking in a different way about his family's welfare, and the thinking was driving him nuts. He didn't like it one bit. If the shady-ass skunk didn't start talking straight and making everything he meant real clear, Locke Echidna was gonna make it so that St. John didn't like it one bit, either, stripes or no stripes.

"Yeah, Knuckles," he said, seeing the wild beam in the kid's eye and the way he cocked his fists at his waist and thinking, yeah, I could see that, Knuckles Echidna. He's gonna be alright. Hell, every boxer needs to be a little crazy. "Yeah, I knocked him but good." And then he thought about the robot division stationed a mile up the magrail. "Hey, why don't you and Mom go for a walk tonight, huh? It's pretty nice out."

"Where are you going?" Jack asked, a little crestfallen.

"Gotta see a guy. Army stuff. Understand?"

Jack straightened a little, like he was in inspection line. "Uh-huh."

"Good kid. Why don't you head off-base a bit?"

"Out by the robots?" Jack asked.

"I was thinking up in the hills, right? They got the sunflowers."

"Good idea! See you tonight?"

"Late, but yeah. Better get moving if you two want to catch the best of it, huh?"

"Okay!" he chirped, and he skedaddled out of the locker room like a shot.

"Love ya," Locke called after him. He pulled the second glove off and had a weird feeling he didn't normally have after fights—like he ought to leave them on. He felt a little naked without them.

Sheesh, he thought. Forget about her family. Now I'm being paranoid.

X X X

It looked like the building had eaten him, like he had walked in and it had belched a fountain of dried bones. Sally didn't scream because she didn't have enough room in her belly to breathe as she plastered herself to the wall, and then she only grunted as she rolled around the doorway, trying to keep under the sights of any guns. A siren was blaring full tilt and some kind of white smoke was pouring out of the ceiling that didn't smell like anything but made it impossible to breathe—it wasn't just choking her; she was breathing as hard as she could, but she wasn't getting any air. She stumbled and crawled back out into the midmorning light, and still she wasn't getting any air and she collapsed on the dirty asphalt, gasping, and finally she began to feel like she was breathing.

It was quiet again, except for her. She rolled painfully to look at the metal building. The entryway was now blocked by a thick looking slab of metal that said:

FIRE EMERGENCY

DANGER HALON GAS DANGER

DO NOT ENTER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES

He's dead.

Or he's not. She'd first seen him do impossible things at age four; she'd first seen him do impossible things that by all rights should have killed him at age ten. He had a power ring. That ought to count for something.

She winced as she pushed herself to her feet. A twisted metal triangle protruded near the heel of her hand. She pulled it out and the cut began to bleed. Good. She didn't need an infection. Some more bits of metal were at her knees, but had barely broken the skin; she brushed them away and stumbled over to the building. Knuckles on the blast door didn't make a hollow gong or a metallic ting, just dead raps. She touched her fingertips to the door and walked to the right, the north, tracing her fingers along the rough, weatherbeaten metal walls of the building. The turned the corner, saw no clothesline deathtraps, and traced the wall up to the base's western fence and the edge of the forest.

Why am I doing this? she thought dazedly. She yawned. That was it: she was looking for a window or another entrance, but there weren't any on this side. Maybe—

No windows at all, on an entire wall of a two or three story building. That was weird. As were foot thick blast doors on some metal box that looked like it was supposed to hold sacks of potatoes. And, now that she thought about it, a lethally foolproof fire response system. Why not just water? What were they keeping in there, sacks of computer chipboards?

The whole building wasn't what it looked like. It was less a shack and more an impenetrable fortress. What was it even doing there? Not that it mattered much. She didn't know what was supposed to happen if she managed to find a way in. The mystery traitor would probably kill her, too. Kill her, rather. Worrying won't do you any good. He's fine.

Well . . . .

He's alive.

She thought she saw that the building had some sort of casement window on the other side of the fence, under the leaves. It didn't seem likely or the most secure way to design a building that was straddling the base fence for no good reason, but it was worth looking at. She climbed to the top of the fence and started rocking back and forth. Once a good vibration got going steeled herself and launched heels-over-head in a high arc that barely missed the outer loops of the razorwire that ran across the top of the fence. She landed on four limbs with a soft thud and instinctively rolled to take the impact, acts that came naturally to a squirrel and saved her some hairline fractures.

And all for what was not a casement window but instead a big bundle of cables not quite buried with topsoil, running out from underneath the building, angling down into the dirt, then running out underneath the trees. Power cables. She followed them. She didn't know why. There wasn't anything else to do at this point other than fall asleep and wait for the bots to find her. The soda was long gone. She'd have followed a chalk line if you drew it in front of her.

She made it about a hundred yards parallel to the wire. Forests were normally quite alive to her ears and eyes. This just felt like the woods. "Maybe I should just go to sleep," she said. "Hear that?" she asked, turning around. "Will you all give me twelve hours to sleep? Hmm?" She stumbled on a bit further and then saw something off in the trees, too artificial to be a stump. She broke away from the fence and walked out to find a thick blue-black metal tube sticking upright from the ground, a rounded hatch with a round, spoked-wheel handle sitting on top.

Finally, she thought with a quiet, assured sense that she must be losing it. The headquarters of Volney Army Base's vaunted Fourth Buried Submarine Division.

Her first guess was, Robotnik. But that couldn't be right; she'd gotten here by following the tubes that lead out of an older Royal Army base. This place was hers. Underneath the handle there was a numeric keypad and a dataport; she plugged Nicole into it. "Access system and report, Nicole."

There was a beep and a calm male voice. "Warning. Unauthorized access attempt. Two further unauthorized attempts will result in autodestruct."

Nicole harmonized over it. "System Identified as Volney Security, proprietary systems of Science Ministry. System access blocked by keyed access subroutine, Sally."

"Do we have Science Ministry access codes?"

"Affirmative, Sally."

"Try the highest-classification code you have."

There was a beep, and the hatch stayed silent. "Access granted, Sally."

"Status on the security system?"

"Active. Emergency security parameters in effect. Remote access east two insecure. No unauthorized entries."

"Does it give this place a name?"

"Science Ministry Saper Volney."

She blinked, shook her head. "What?"

"Science Ministry Saper—"

"No, uh—I mean, spell it."

"S-C-I-E-N—"

"Spell saper."

"S-A-P-R."

"Nicole, are there any entries related to both Science Ministry and Volney? Any at all."

"Negative, Sally."

Gods. She was too tired to do this, she wasn't thinking straight. She'd been toying with panic for minutes, eyes arranging twigs into phantom snipers in the trees with more plasma rifles, ears amplifying soft footsteps of a pursuer she never saw when she turned a glance behind her. And now this. First Nicole knows nothing about the roboticizer, and now it doesn't know where some weird underground structure is. How much else didn't it know about? How much more had Science Ministry kept from the royal family?

Even her dead allies were deserting her. Pretty soon the only dead ally she'd have would be Sonic.

Stop it. Stop thinking about it. Freak out later.

"Open this hatch, Nicole." It popped open with a thunk of neutralizing pressure. "Can you make sure it doesn't lock again? I don't want it blowing up when I leave."

"Affirmative, Sally."

Sally slid down into the cold tunnel and the hatch did not quite close all the way behind her.

xxx

Sonic woke up to the still throbbing pain in his head and eeeeeee . . . . . eeeeeeeee. He moaned and could kind of hear it, almost, like it was coming from a TV a couple of rooms away. His ears felt thick, stuffed with cotton. A forced yawn to pop the ears did nothing.

He was slumped on his knees. His face felt tight, like there wasn't enough skin there, and hurt. His hands were stuck. His eyes slid open and saw that his wrists were in a set of metal cuffs, cheap, not like the bulky ones Robotnik used, hooked around a pipe that ran up a metal wall. He wasn't in any position to spin through them without ripping both arms from their sockets, but jerked the cuffs hard and felt them slam solidly into the pipe. The little chain would go before the pipe, and he'd be out in no time.

He rocked back and forth, slamming the cuffs against the pipe in a dull, mechanical rhythm, and looked around the room. It looked like one of Robotnik's security rooms. Consoles filled with TVs were all around, showing security cams. A table in the middle of the room had a roll of twine and a few dirty plastic dishes on it, which weren't standard for Robotnik. By one end of the room there was a doorway with an EXIT sign above it that led out to a familiar hallway and part of a big metal slab that said "DANGER" and "DO NOT ENT." That's where I got beat up. On either side of the door were little posters, not standard for Robotnik either. One had a frazzled fox sitting at a desk, fur wild. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE CRAZY TO WORK HERE, BUT IT HELPS! On the other side was a picture, an art picture, the kind of stupid art that didn't look like anything. It was mostly black with little white lines on it, going straight and curving and doing loop-de-loops and spirals. It looked like a five year old had done it. Our Masterpiece, someone had written with a pen at the bottom. He looked back down to check on the cuffs, watched the little solder-lines begin to show up in the links and disappear as he tugged and tugged again. That was enough entertainment until he didn't hear but felt something, wondered if it was the floor shaking slightly, and turned in time to catch a boot to the stomach.

He hunched over for a bit with his quills up, sucking air, and then looked up at red and white. The guy who had knocked the crap out of him was an echidna, and a pissed echidna by the feel of his stomach. He was moving his mouth like he was yelling something. His finger pointed down at Sonic, or maybe the handcuffs.

I can't hear you, he said. I can't hear anything. The bomb hurt my ears.

The echidna's teeth came together, and he started looking around the room. He came back with sheets of paper from a hardcopy printer and a ballpoint. He leaned over the table and in a moment came up with a scrawled, all-caps message.

NO ESCAPING!

Sonic coughed a laugh and his eyes rolled to look at a corner of the ceiling. Sure thing, big guy, he said. You should've told me before. Whaddaya got against me? You don't look like the kinda guy to help Buttnik. And really, he didn't, Sonic thought as the echidna wrote some more. Other than that he had his quills hanging down in his face, the echidna didn't look that much different from Sonic himself. The echidna turned around eagerly with a bit of a smile and held up the paper.

Where is scientist?

What? Are you talking about Buttnik? Snively? Sonic saw that big right tighten up momentarily and involuntarily flinched. He relaxed as the echidna went back to scrawling. But not that much, he reminded himself. The echidna wasn't so tough. Just let him out of these cuffs and he'd run circles around him. He'd punch and kick him back, too, just watch. The echidna lunged around:

Where is /e/n/t? SQUIRREL?

Sonic didn't know what was wrong with this guy, but he didn't want him going anywhere near Sally.

I don't know any squirrel. Are you working for Buttnik? What are you—hey, come back—

The echidna left the room quickly. Whaddaya got against me? Whaddaya think I'm trying to do?

Sonic looked at the empty door for a second more, shrugged, and started jerking at the handcuffs again. He thought he was making good progress when he felt the floor shivering slightly again and balled up. He cautiously peeked one eye over his arm, then got up and looked.

What're you doing? The echidna had gotten a black case from somewhere. It opened on a whole lot of things Sonic didn't like. Alligator clips. Long, sharp little metal things. If they just hurt, that was alright, but Buttnik's stuff didn't tend to stop at hurting you. They messed you up. This is mondo uncool, man. We're both mobians. Same team. The echidna was taking out a wire of some kind and screwing it into something else. Hey! The echidna wasn't even paying attention to him. Hey—

Sonic hunched over, extended his quills, and started working at the handcuffs a little more quickly.

xxx

Sally climbed down almost fifty feet into a cement tunnel lit by long strings of extralife fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. The hallway stretched to her right and left until she couldn't see any more, but the reason she couldn't see anymore was a slow and normally imperceptible curve to the hallway cut off her view—which made sense, she thought; she'd walked straight out along the fence from the mystery building and the hatch had been a few yards away. A sign by her said EAST-2: EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY. Along the far wall by the floor was a network of pipes that stretched out far down the hall to in both directions. They were thick and bore labels of which Sally couldn't make heads or tails. She wasn't even sure if she would've been able to figure them out wide awake. LOOPS 15-20 ACCESS. STEAM-->. SPUR INTERSECTION. MAGNET-->.

She looked left and right. Left, she thought, was back in the direction of the mystery building. She turned and went. After fifty yards or so a blue door sealed off the corridor. She plugged Nicole into the keypad and it opened. The layout of the place was starting to ring some bells in her head, as though she would be able to do better with this if she were awake, that it was a type of place that she should recognize. Among the increasingly bizarre signs (ANTIPROTON-->) she saw two that promised answers.

SPECIMEN CONTROL-->

CENTRAL CONTROL-->

She trotted a little faster. She came to another blue door; through the glass she could see that there was more than corridor on the other side, some kind of room. Nicole opened the door and Sally stepped inside.

For a moment Sally actually became certain that she was dreaming, or that she was hallucinating, that somehow she hadn't left Robotropolis. The room was big—at least twenty meters from top to bottom. A catwalk went around the borders of the room, skirting large pipes and blue metal consoles that she didn't even want to try to figure out. She walked to the railing and bent over. Most of the cavernous room was empty, with the lower reaches of the pipes, some more consoles, and a couple of industrial-grade hoverlifts sitting inactive in one corner. But oddly, there was a metal staircase in the middle of the room that appeared to lead to a spot where the climber simply dropped ten meters on to the floor, and the right wall was a surprise: the little pipes and conduits that she had followed continued out into the room on top of a gigantic cement extrusion. It looked like the room sat along some kind of massive octagonal tube running beneath the forest. It was largely blue with the exception of a yellow-and-black hazard-striped swath in the midway between the walls.

She turned to follow the catwalk and a sign on the wall caught her eye: a picture of a rectangle and beneath it a small curved arc, part of a circle. Red arrows lead from the box down one sides of the arc to a small dot. EAST-2, it said, and near that "In Case of Emergency." At the top of the map there was a small legend:

**Science Ministry**

**SAPR Volney**

Strangelet Advanced Physics Research Project

Secure Cyclotron Compound

AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY

Oh, she thought. A particle accelerator.

"Nicole, where did Science Ministry have particle accelerators?"

"Twiggins Ring Number One, located fifty miles north of Nimbus Island. Relativistic Heavy—"

"Do you have any listings of accelerators the locations of which aren't public record?"

"Negative, Sally."

So why hide this one? "Nicole . . . . Nicole, entries on 'strangelet'?"

"A strangelet is a piece of what is called strange matter. It is distinguished from normal matter by the presence of the strange quark, which is not found in natural—"

"Stop," Sally breathed, and the playback stopped, leaving only the hum of the cables around the gigantic tube beneath her. Behind her in the accelerator hallway: she hadn't heard a clunk like that from the machinery the whole time she had been walking down. She hadn't been listening, but she could have sworn. The odds that a swatbot would have found the entryway and made that little noise coming down the hallway were minimal. But it wasn't a swatbot that killed Sonic, now was it?

Don't panic, she thought. Lock the door. She was about to hit CLOSE on the door keypad when someone cried, "Wait!" A skunk came out from behind one of the arched supports in the hallway. He wore a blue sash with utility pockets instead of a belt, and a beret, the sign of the old Special Forces. "Thank goodness I've safely caught up with you, Your Highness!" He saluted. "Late of the lamented Fourth Infantry, your servant—"

Her right hand reached for the keypad and she screamed as her left arm was jerked back hard, almost pulling the ball of the humerus from the shoulder socket. It was pinned to the railing with a tight cord and two dangling bolas.

"Hold it, lass." The smirking skunk stepped forward into the doorway. "You'd best calm down. I can electrify it if you don't."

He laughed a little when she leaned back against the railing. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Hook your other elbow around the railing," he ordered. "No, from below. Good girl."

He took a pair of metal cuffs from his sash and approached the sagging squirrel. When he slapped one pair around her right wrist she drove her left foot up and into his side. He took the impact, grabbed the boot and forced her left leg against the railing on her right, drawing a shriek. She clung to the railing with all her might.

"Would you mind cuffing yourself to the pipe there, please?" He watched with amusement as she put all of her weight on to her already strained left shoulder and did so. "Very good." He let go of her leg and she slumped back down. He hunched down in front of her and smiled. "And all without having to electrocute you! Unless you don't care to tell me how your little passkey works. Then I might have to." He held Nicole up before her face.

"It only works for me, St. John," she gasped, reading the name off the sash. "Or did you take that uniform out of the pile by the roboticizer?"

"I should be insulted! It's been Colonel St. John to the likes of you for five years now. I get what you undoubtedly would consider some astonishing privileges when I'm in Robotropolis. It's the highest rank there is in Lord Robotnik's army."

"For a mobian traitor," she spat.

He frowned. "How to get you turned around," he said, slipping Nicole into one of his sash pockets, his mock gallantry gone.

Her snout took on the touch of a cold smile. "You take orders from robots, don't you?" she said.

"I'd keep my mouth shut—"

"I've always wondered: do you call a robot 'sir,' or 'master?'" She shouted as a few amps lanced her arm. "Ow—uh—huh—heh—you—you didn't even touch anything!" she laughed weakly. "Did you ask for weapons implants? Did they bother to ask you? Or did they just grab you and put you under and explain later?"

He took out another set of the electric bolas. "Put your legs together," he said.

After a few careful maneuvers he got her wrists cuffed behind her back. Then he pushed her along the catwalk past the dials and down a long set of metal stairs.

"And where are we going?" she asked.

"To help me open the cyclotron," he explained.

"Why should I help you do anything?" she asked. Then she cringed, because she had already helped him. She'd led him right to the ring and gotten him in the door that would have blown everything up.

"If you don't help me, I just wait for the swats and workerbots to come in and have a go. I think they'll do rather nicely with your passkey and the opened doors to work with."

He was right, she thought as he dragged her to a console. He was right. She doubted he could radio from this far underground, but he had probably sent a transmission before he followed her down. Robotnik knew where the place was now, whatever he was looking for. The only chance was to find what he wanted and move it. But: "You let Sonic go," she said.

The skunk smiled. "You'll get to see him. If you're uncooperative, I can see to it that you won't."

Sonic was alive. They had a chance.

The console was labeled SPECIMEN CONTROL. A monitor said simply "Standby."

"Plug the wire into the dataport," she said. The skunk smiled and did so. Would it do any good to tell him that for every prisoner and cargo he turned over to Robotnik his usefulness was reduced? Probably not. Who knows what else they'd put in him after he'd helped them spread the coup to Volney Royal Army Base. Tracking device. Remote control bomb. Something more painful. And all that aside, he might do it anyway: workerbot was the only promotion left.

"Activate console, Nicole."

"Nicole, eh? Little girl's computer? Open it up."

Sally gulped a bit of saliva and said, "Open the accelerator ring."

xxx

Knuckles wasn't getting anywhere. The robots were. He could see them on the television, moving more quickly now, and directly toward the building where he now lived. He didn't know what was bringing them on all of a sudden, but his traps were only slowing them down a little bit. A lot of them were walking slowly up the sidewalk of one of the streets, keeping off the pavement where he had buried the mines. He had seen one of the hover units take off and not come back down inside the base; he hoped it had gone but he was worried that it was looking for a clearing in the forest behind in which to unload the attack robots closer to him. He didn't think there was a clearing back there, but he wasn't sure.

The hedgehogbot's audio inputs, what equated to ears on a real mobian, had been damaged. The visual inputs were working well enough, though, and for a moment he thought that the explosion had damaged its programming so that it would obey him instead of the other robots. He wasn't so lucky. With that option gone there was nothing left to do but go into the computer directly more directly, by wire. The main computer was in the head, just where the brain would be on a real mobian—the design was clever and made the false mobian much more difficult to detect. He got stuck a couple of times by the robot's quills while he looked for a dataport or secondary audio jack that he could plug a microphone into—he had a headset microphone and headphones that would work perfectly if he could find the right slot. He hit the robot—hitting the robot seemed to temporarily suppress its defensive systems—and then tried putting the audio plug into the bot's mouth and holding it closed. That didn't work. Touching it to the teeth didn't work. He tried to spool the line further down the bot's 'throat,' but he couldn't seem to do it. Then when he tried the nose, the bot's defensive systems came back online. It dropped its head forward sharply, turning into a ball and raising its quills, sticking him.

Knuckles cried out in pain and walked away from the bot. He slammed his hard right fist into the wall, did it twice, and then sank down onto his haunches. He whimpered to himself as he contemplated the approaching robots. This was it. He couldn't try to run away from them—that would be just as bad, they'd be sure to catch him if he fled the base. If he could only crack the hedgehogbot and find the squirrel then probably everything would be okay, that was what the CO St. John had said, but he was stuck. He breathed faster, beginning to panic. Those robots were going to find him. And cut you open. Mean was right. Cut you open. I heard you the first time, Mean, he thought. There were too many of them for him to fight. They wouldn't lose. They were going to catch him, like they had caught his mother while he hid like she said. While you did nothing but wet yourself, bastard. Then they cut her open.

Calm your distress, young warrior.

Oh thank gods, thought Knuckles, thank gods thank gods. He turned to his shoulder. Archimedes was back. He was probably Knuckles' oldest friend, very wise and a master of all the martial arts and the tools of chi focus and balance and inner harmony, just like in the old Saturday movies in the soldiers' children camp. He even talked a little like his favorite character from those movies, who was also called Archimedes. This Archimedes wasn't a fox, though, but an ant, which was why nobody could see him: because he was so small. He always had lots of good advice and had even taught him chi balance, which was why he could never touch his weewee under any circumstances. It was also Archimedes that had first told him about how his task was more important than just self-defense, that the base held the Armor of the Sky, the Chaos Emeralds, and the Katana of Wayne Chung, artifacts of tremendous power that were his ultimate destiny, but which could be a force for terrible evil if they fell into the wrong hands.

"Archimedes," he asked his shoulder, which was where the ant was, "how can I get to the hedgehog robot's main computer?"

The windows to the soul are not hard to find: they are the eyes and ears.

Knuckles tossed his head and rolled his eyes with self-deprecating relief: of course! He was a fool not to have thought of it sooner. He got up and ran down the hall to the utility closet and dug around for a moment before he found the blue box. He yanked it to floor, unlocked the clamps and saw that everything was there. He slapped the blue battery into the base, just like a clip into a pistol, and pumped the drill twice. It made a wonderfully loud buzz. Knuckles laughed and ran back to the TV room with a handful of bits.

The panic was beginning to come back a little when he dumped everything on to the desk, but he just needed to get it over with. He needed something wide enough to feed the audio jack into, so he could talk to it, but some of the bits were obviously too big, and they might damage the dataport. He could always widen the hole later, so he grabbed the one marked three millimeters to start with. But then he couldn't figure out how to get the bit to stick in the drill. There was a large hole, not a tiny slot, and there weren't any instructions on the drill, and Archimedes wasn't saying anything to him, and he could barely even think anymore because it was so loud in the room. He put his hands over his own windows to his soul and put his fingers in them, trying to shut out the robot screaming, "What are you doing! Mondo uncool! Are you nuts!" Knuckles gritted his teeth and fought not to cry, because this was all so hard for him, he was so forgetful and had such a hard time figuring everything out. The enemy was so crafty, so full of traps within traps and shadowy dangers. His mother had said once that when he was older she and his father would always be there for him and help him. He didn't think this was what she had been talking about but he needed help and there was no help; not one of the people that talked to him was his mother; he never heard his father's voice no matter how much he wanted to; and not a single person ever came to help him defend himself.

But his father's friend! The Lieutenant! Knuckles punched the robot a few times to make it quiet and then went to the radio. The old skunk would know just what to do. He'd been fighting the robots for years and years and had been a hero like his father. He knew all their tricks; to him drilling into a damaged robot ear would be as easy as popping a soda can. "Lieutenant! Lieutenant St. John!" he called into the transmitter. No response. "I need your help! I've captured one of the robots and we can use it to find the squirrel but I need help! We need to stop them!"

Nothing. Knuckles hurled the transmitter into the wall, heedless of the damage, and turned in frustration to the cameras, looking at the outside, the trees, the warehouses. He could see the robots walking in the warehouses, looking for him, coming to get him and do terrible things to him.

But there! There was the skunk! He had gotten into the tunnels and he had caught her, the scientist that the hedgehog robot had been guarding! He sighed in relief. Everything would be okay. St. John would tell him what to do and they'd defeat the robots together. Then he'd go into the tunnels and reach the thirty-sixth chamber of destiny, and use the artifacts there to restore peace and harmony to the world. He turned up the audio so that he could listen.

"Nicole, eh? Little girl's computer? Open it up."

Knuckles could see St. John's cruel smile as the squirrel's head sagged with fear. And then she opened her mouth.

"Open the accelerator ring."

Knuckles squealed in horror.

xxx

The air was filled with a piercing hiss as steam shot from the borders of the hazard-stripes on the accelerator. The skunk unplugged Nicole, failed to find an empty slot on his sash and slid it into one of Sally's vest pockets. "Cute. You hold on to that, Lord Robotnik will want to have a look at it."

As a loud siren began to blare, the hazard-striped segment of the ring slid slowly from the wall. The skunk took her to the bottom of the stairs and ordered her to sit as an octagonal network of wire bundles, circuit boards, and what looked like glass canisters filled with some kind of clear liquid rolled out along tracks in the floor. The skunk walked up the stairs, keeping an eye on Sally. The absolute center of the ring's cross-section reached the head of the stairs just in time for the skunk to reach in and pull out a bulky gray case with a single large metal handle.

When the skunk reached the bottom step he tilted the box and peered into a long glass plate along the side. Sally in turn got a good look at it the reverse of the box. "Magnetic Vacuum Containment—Negative Pressure," a small label said in the least hysterical announcement any inanimate object in the SAPR compound had ever made to her. Some angry raised red letters more than made up for it. "WARNING: SEGSAKINUM-3. CONTENTS POSE EXTREME DANGER. DO NOT EXPOSE TO INTENSE RADIATION. CONTACT SCIENCE MINISTRY IMMEDIATELY."

"Pretty, aren't they?" St. John said with a theatrical smile, and he held up the little window to her. Inside the metal box, lined up neatly in a row and apparently floating with little concern for gravity, were what looked for all the world like six well-cut gemstones.

"What are they?" Sally asked.

"Quite unusual."

"What do they do?"

"Not sure. I gather Lord Robotnik thinks that with a bit of work they could generate enough energy to make a fusion reaction look like a pack of matches. That and they destroy planets."

"Are you insane? You can't give Robotnik something like that! This isn't his planet; he doesn't care what happens to it. He doesn't care what happens to us."

He dragged Sally to her feet. "On the contrary, lass. He cares deeply about what happens to us. He's very insistent that we both return to Robotropolis. Walk in front of me."

How to do this? When to make the move? She wondered as the skunk steered her back the way she had come, toward fire escape East-2. The ladder up to the surface would be a good bet. He'd have to uncuff her hands if he wanted her to climb, and he'd want her to—he'd have his hands full carrying up the bulky case for the gemstones. She'd probably have to go first or he'd be vulnerable to attack from below on the ladder. If there were no robots, she could just take off, then—without the stones, or Sonic. Or she could wait until she got to Sonic, on the off chance that they didn't have him so cuffed and tied that he looked like some sort of weird robot already.

St. John made the choice for her when they got to the bottom of the ladder. He took out one of his bolas, draped it around her shoulders and proceeded to wrap it snugly around her neck. "Looks good on you," he said of the makeshift collar as he released her arms from the manacles. "Go up in front of me. When you get to the top, keep your hands on the edge of the hatch where I can see them and kneel down outside. If you don't behave yourself I'm going to give you enough juice to cook that sweet meat of yours clean through. Understand?"

"Yes."

She flinched as his hand smacked the tip of her left ear. "How do we say that to an officer, lass?" he asked.

She suppressed the urge to try and kick him between his legs. "Yes sir, Colonel sir," she said icily.

"Ah." He patted her head. "You'll make a good workerbot yet. Up you go."

The bolas rolled from one side to the other as she climbed. She wondered if the wire was getting tighter each time she swallowed. Not good, not good. Without Sonic to tug them along, Rotor and Bunnie wouldn't get to Volney for another half a day at least. She had to try something when she first saw Sonic. They fought well together, they might have a shot. If not . . .

She put her hands on the rim and climbed out, blinking in the forest light. No robots to meet them, but they were undoubtedly coming. The leaves were soft under her knees as she got down, hands on the rim.

"Ah, good lass. Stay for a moment." St. John cinched his way up the last few rungs, tossed the case on to the dirt, and climbed out behind her. "You can stand up now." He walked to her as she stood and tapped one of the bolas resting on her chest. "I'm going to need to cuff you again before I can take that off."

"Where's Sonic?"

He laughed. "You hedgehog. Based on what I saw—shit—"

"Don't you touch her!"

The skunk spun her to the ground, but quickly moved back next to her. Sally could see why—this was the sort of person it was good to have a bargaining chip around, though she didn't know why she was a viable chip. He was a red-quilled echidna, hulking, mean, his unkempt quills dripping with sweat.

He brought his fists up—one of them stunted. "I said don't you—"

St. John threw up his hands. "Whhh—whoa, whoa! Just stop!"

"You're working with the robots, aren't you!" Then with less certainty: "Are you working with the robots?"

"Knuckles, please, for your father's sake! You have to trust me. We're still in great danger. The bots are on their way."

"Let her go," the echidna 'Knuckles' said, pointing at Sally. "Take that thing off of her."

"Knuckles, please! You're making a mistake! I don't know what you think you know about this woman but she's evil to the core. If I let her go she'll have a full company of robots on us before we can blink."

The echidna wavered. Before Sally could start screaming her name and parentage he turned to her and asked with stern worry, as if it the question obviously concerned a matter of serious doubt, "Were you trying to distract me? Talking about cake and the smiling bag?"

"Uh—" Sally shook her head, bewildered, and then answered honestly. "No! I'm—"

"She's no scientist!" he spat at the skunk. "She's nice. You knew she wasn't a scientist and you told me to kill her anyway!"

"I haven't hurt her, she's hurt us," St. John said calmly. "She's the one that's turned everyone into robots. She took your mother and—."

"Stop lying!" The echidna's voice was shaking with rage. "You hurt her, you liar! I saw you on the cameras!"

"I hurt her?" St. John asked in a voice that sounded genuinely confused.

"Yes!"

"Hurt her? You mean like this?"

St. John didn't even have to move and Sally fell to the ground screaming in agony, reaching instinctively for her neck but unable to hook her claws inside the burning wire. She lost what she thought was a small amount of time, and then felt an absence of fresh electricity lancing into her flesh and saw the echidna run forward, screaming, and drive his big right fist into the skunk's belly. The skunk's eyes nearly bugged out of his head, but she saw that on the whole his ploy had succeeded: his right arm finished unhooking his second bolas from his hip and swung painfully into the echidna's quills, wrapping the bolas tight enough to touch the flesh on the echidna's exposed throat. Sally and the echidna screamed in harmony and the skunk shoved his opponent away. A bootheel in the chest sent the stunned stranger on to his back. He groaned. The skunk snarled and knelt down over him, grabbing both ends of the bolas, ready to draw the wire until it sliced through the skin, ready to do anything. "Now, you great stupid bastard, are you ready to come along quietly?"

The echidna's eyes fluttered open. "I strike at your soul." He seemed almost unable to breathe, but somehow choked it out with the calm cadence of a matinee kung-fu hero.

"What?" said the skunk, who had evidently never heard a more bizarre thing in his life. Then the echidna's slim bullet of a left fist shot up into the skunk's face and the skunk roared, stumbling backwards, clawing at his face. "YOU SON OF A BITCH! OH GODS YOU BASTARD! YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Sally saw the echidna get up with a savage grunt, eyes wild, quills up and sharp, some kind of thing on his left glove because oh gods he had punched hard and the little fist had fit perfectly in the skunk's eye socket. "SON OF A BITCH!" St. John screamed again, hand seizing and squeezing his snout and cheek together as if to press and seal off the gaping wound in his face. His remaining eye suddenly fixed with furious hate on the echidna. "I'LL KILL—"

The echidna's big right fist sailed in an arc and plunged into the skunk's face, snapping the head to the left, spittle into the air. The skunk stumbled in a wobbly pirouette, his left toe tripped over his right ankle, and he flopped down to the ground by his beret, silent and unmoving.

The echidna turned away from the skunk, quills still up. Sally scrambled to her feet and came instinctively into a ready stance, ready to try something if she didn't have enough time to run. The echidna clasped his hands in front of him and leaned forward with a kind of eager shyness.

"Hello, Nicole," he said.

She hesitated for a half-second in which her eyes just slightly twitched toward his spattered left pincer. Then she spoke: "Hi," she said quietly.

"It's great to see you," he said. "Normally I don't see you. I mean, I've never seen you. I didn't think you could be seen. I thought I could only hear you, like everybody else." He pointed at his ear.

"Oh." She nodded slowly, as if to say: ah, I see, now I'm beginning to understand you.

"You sound a little different now that I can see you," he added. "Normally you sound more like Nicole from the children's camp. But it's still very nice to hear you. I wish you would talk to me more often."

"I will," she obliged. Don't stare.

"I like you a lot. You don't tell me what to do all the time, like everybody else. You're very funny."

"That's very nice of you to say." And then with a fixed smile: "I'm afraid I need to go right now, though."

"Oh," said the echidna sadly. "Okay."

Relief washed over Sally as the echidna did not start raving or try to grab her or do something worse to her. But she didn't turn to go: "I'll be back soon," she said.

"Good."

"You should probably go into the woods now and hide for a few days. The robots around here will be—"

"Looking for me." He nodded seriously. "I know."

"Then come back—so I can help you."

"Okay," he said. "Will I be able to see you then, too?"

She nodded. "Thanks," she added tautly.

Then she turned and didn't stop running until she reached the above-ground entrance to the SAPR compound, where Sonic had disappeared. She didn't see him anywhere. His backpack was still where she left it, as were the steel fire doors. She dropped the box of gems, unable to even remember when she'd grabbed them, desperate for a way into the building—the skunk had to have come out from somewhere, and oh please he hadn't been lying about Sonic, he hadn't—when there was a deep thump on the ground behind her. She turned and screamed, ready to try a roundhouse kick on the creature that must have jumped three stories down from the roof. Then the creature stood and she saw it was Sonic. It was horrible: one of his eyes was swollen purple and shut, his cheek was puffy. The other eye and parts of his bare belly were shaded blood blue with deep bruises. A sole metal handcuff was around each gloved wrist, dangling a couple of metal links.

"You alright?" he yelled with concern.

She shook her head in disbelief. "You're a tank," she said.

"You gotta talk louder," he yelled.

xxx

"Nicole, any entries on Segsakinum-3?" Sally asked quietly. She had plugged the earphones into Nicole's audio port again, out of deference to Sonic. She should it would be kind of rude to use the internal speakers, under the circumstances. This way, Sonic wouldn't be missing anything, it wouldn't be like she was making fun of him or he was missing out on something that could interest him. They would just both be silently watching the fire in the late-afternoon light, waiting for their unnecessary reinforcements to reach them on the direct, cross-forest route from Knothole.

It was overcaution. Sonic wouldn't notice rudeness if rudeness were a twenty-foot tall robot with guns. "Well," he half-shouted, apparently under the impression that he sounded as quiet to Sally as he sounded to himself, "what are they?"

Sally grinned to herself and raised her voice. "I've barely started listening to all Nicole has on them. It says they're only theoretical. When you bombard them with high-energy radiation they create some kind of strange—well, strange matter. Apparently it releases a lot of energy as it decays." She coughed and swallowed. No longer worried about permanent injury after consulting Nicole's entries on tinnitus and the decibel scale, Sally let herself become annoyed: Sonic's ears had just better hurry up and get better. "Nicole," she asked gingerly at a less painful volume, "what's this nuclear assimilation scenario?"

While she listened to Nicole calmly describe how the gems could eat the entire planet, one proton at a time, in under six seconds, Sonic took out one of the cans of soda, tapped the top with his index finger, and then frowned in dismay at the BEST IF USED BY date stenciled around the edge. He tapped it again, throwing it a suspicious sideways look, and glanced at Sally. "We oughta put those stones in the power ring generator?" he asked.

Sally shook her head. "Ought to bury them," she said.

Bury them, hell. She wanted to shoot them out of the solar system, assuming there wasn't some way to destroy or neutralize them. They'd stand a good chance of taking out some stray star, but she'd feel a lot worse if they took out Mobius. And yet all she was going to do was sleep on them and then bury them deep in some out-of-the-way place that couldn't be traced back from Knothole or Volney. Maybe raids on Robotnik's network and his plans for the rocks would reveal some safe method, but there were more pressing concerns.

Some things, she wanted to do more about them, but her resources were limited and Antoine was ultimately right: the rebellion came first. Some things couldn't be handled the way they needed to be. They were just too dangerous for you to touch.

Schizophrenia, Nicole said after some judicious inquiries. Psychotic disorder characterized by delusions and hallucinations, generally auditory, occasionally visual. Auditory hallucinations are often accompanied by strong impulses to irrational, antisocial, or self-destructive behavior. Physiological mechanisms reasonably well understood, genetic predispositions well tracked. Incurable. Primary drug indicated was chlorpromazine.

Of course, any drug was still up against the adjective "incurable." And Knothole was built for the royal family, not for everyone under the sun, so she could already guess the answer to her question.

"Supplies of chlorpromazine in Knothole medical, Nicole? In daily doses."

"Assuming minimum Physician's Desk Reference dosage, five days supply."

She wished she could help the echidna—she couldn't remember the name the skunk had given him—but there was nothing she could do. What was she supposed to try? Should she go back there with Bunnie? Apparently he'd nearly killed Sonic. You shouldn't feel guilty, she told herself. She'd done nothing to him. She hadn't even known he was there. If he'd been in a different mood, if he'd had a banana instead of an orange for breakfast, he could've killed her without breaking a sweat or losing his smile.

She couldn't help it that he'd saved her from slavery, right?

xxx

Knuckles wanted to watch Nicole leave him, but Angry kept interrupting him, and Angry was hard to ignore. Cut him. Cut him.

The robot trickster that had called itself St. John was still lying on the leaves, sprawled on its back, deactivated. One of its optical units had been pulled from its setting. There was no reason he couldn't do the same thing to the skunkbot that he'd been trying to do to the hedgehogbot. Like Nicole said, he should probably take him out in the woods to do it. He could use the strange taser-wire that the bot carried to secure it by some trees—

He couldn't do that. You're wetting your fur. Baby. Little baby echidna baby.

It felt bad enough to be outside of his room, worse to be outside of the building. It was dangerous outside with all the robots around. At least in his room he knew the territory, nobody could sneak up on him. CUT HIM. DRILL—Okay, okay. There had to be some way to do it without crossing the wire. The wire was important. Even if the robots today were inside the base there were probably a lot of things that couldn't cross the wire—at any rate the wire was important—and he only had bombs inside the wire.

He should go back to his room with the skunkbot. To the COWARD room.

"Shut up," he whispered. It did no good. The only way to silence Mean was to ignore him. You're a coward, bastard fuckwit. That or do what Mean said. Mean wasn't that much different from everyone else that way. Your whole family, you're a bunch of loser nutcase cowards.

"Fuck you!" he shouted. "Don't you talk to me like that!"

Nicole would never talk to him like that. He turned to go out and see if he could follow her. She said such funny things. He wasn't sure why they were funny. You'll never do it. Shoot your mouth. Knuckles ignored Mean. Some part of him knew that Mean was right, but he didn't think about it. Nicole said strange things, but when he heard them he felt so nice. Unafraid, relaxed, like he was about to fall asleep.

And then he did.

"Mmm," he hummed with sleepy joy, and he closed his eyes.

xxx

St. John didn't realize that the distress signal was going when he woke up. The distress signal was automatic whenever he involuntarily lost consciousness, and it was loud. To him, at any rate. He heard it as REE, REE, REE. The receivers that picked up the transmission from his internal radio processed it according to their local protocols. The first thing he saw was Commandbot KS001. He'd worked under it for months, his handler as he infiltrated the West Fregellen Falls freedom fighters.

"SKUNK UNIT WILL ACKNOWLEDGE COMPLIANCE."

"Yes, sir," he groaned.

"DISCONTINUE DISTRESS TRANSMISSION."

"What?"

"DISTRESS TRANSMISSION ACKNOWLEDGED. SWATBOT UNIT HAS RECOVERED SKUNK UNIT AND IS PROTECTING SKUNK UNIT. DISCONTINUE."

"Oh." He complied.

"STAND DOWN. AWAIT RADIO TRANSMISSION."

"The Falls rebels," he asked, almost pleaded. "My transmitter—"

"MISSION CODE KOBAYASHI LISTED AS CLOSED, MISSION FAILURE. STRIKE UNITS DEPLOYED, NO REBELS CAPTURED."

That too. He would never have thought the rats capable of realizing he'd planted a transmitter in their little lair. If this hadn't come up, he would have had more time; he could have brought down the whole string of western guerillas, he was sure of it. He cursed as he slowly crept to his feet, keeping his throbbing, thick head tilted back, a hand cupped firmly over his right eye. Six months. Six months of work shot down the tubes and his name, rank, and affiliation ready to be passed around all over the western terrorist networks. And the south—Acorn had his name. Hell, he might even be through with undercover work out east.

I'm practically useless, he thought.

Then incoming on the long, thin wire antenna that ran up and down and up and down his spinal chord. Three tones. He heard them in his bones.

It was the little one, Snively. "Colonel, this is Robotropolis—"

"Stop it! Get away from the microphone, you wretched—don't touch that door! Where do you think you're going?" With that Robotnik stopped growling and switched to that phony, slimy voice of unnecessary ingratiation. The one that kept everything in reserve; the one that sounded like a pipe organ with phlegm. "Skunk?"

"Yes, Lord," St. John responded, hearing his words in the air and in his transmitter. His normal impulse to bow his head at the sound of his master's voice twitched once in his neck and back before he suppressed it, keeping his head tilted back. He couldn't see how bad it was, but he was worried that if he leaned forward—if he inclined his head that way—

"I understand you've encountered a setback."

"My eye, Lord. My right eye. It's not—it's—" He stopped. Some residue of childhood's magical thought had him secretly convinced that if he didn't actually say that his deflating eyeball was spilling a wet, lumpy teardrop onto his check fur, if he didn't touch it, it wasn't actually happening.

"That's of no concern, skunk. I have a number of superior replacements I'm dying to try out. You'll need that and more if you're to join the other robots in front-line combat. I understand you're not good for much else now."

"Yes, Lord." Don't touch it. Don't put your finger in it.

"What concerns me," Robotnik said with sadness like that of a woman for her disappointed, cookie-less grandchild, "is that you won't be brining any of the Ministry samples back to Robotropolis along with that ruptured eyeball, will you?"

"That's right, Lord. I failed at my primary objectives."

"Hmm. How unfortunate. Will you be bringing anything else of value back from Volney? Am I to have anything special to occupy my interest this week other than slicing and splicing?"

St. John took a look out of the corner of his eye. Knuckles Echidna was slumped underneath the guns of a pair of swatbots, eyes closed (both eyes closed, bastard), breathing strongly, quills low to his back, a faint exhausted smile on his lips, quiescent. The old door squeaked on impact as the fox maintenance bot—the skunk had used to think of them as medbots, but his vocabulary had drifted over the years—brought in the collapsed gurney and dropped the legs. The foxbot worked efficiently, pulling the dart out of the echidna's shoulder for refill and reuse. It'd momentarily have him strapped down and his veins fed with a further supply of tranquilizer more than sufficient to get him to the glass cylinder.

At least in terms of the fight St. John hadn't done too poorly, given his natural disadvantages. The echidna hadn't even lasted as long as his old man.

In spite of himself, in spite of the fact that the maintenance bot's orders wouldn't permit it to divert its attention to the vitreous humor that was trickling out of his white snout fur and on to his upper lip, St. John smiled up at the ceiling. Vitreous humor was salty, he discovered.

"I think, Lord," said the Colonel happily, "that you will find my record still lacks any completely unsuccessful operation."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Copyright implicating shoutouts to Sega, DiC Productions, Archie Comics, and their workers-for-hire. Non-copyright implicating and increasingly tangential shoutouts to Davids "No, the Other Voices" Cronenberg and "Smiling Bag" Lynch, Valve Software, the Wu-Tang Clan, and of course budding economics professor Wayne Chung. This story tangentially features one hundred percent real pseudoscience with actual pseudoscience terms! See Exit Mundi's presentation of the "Strange Apocalypse" scenario (http/www.exitmundi.nl/strange.htm). For the actual properties of either the strange quark, strange matter in general, tinnitus, and schizophrenia, find a book on the chosen subject that knows what it's talking about. Special thanks to TMW for editing.