Where You Go, I'm Going

Tails has always been certain of the fact he was unimportant. Lasting scars from his early childhood had always stuck with him, coloring every action even when he denied it to himself, letting himself believe he needed to be needed. No matter how much his speedy guardian and adopted brother told him he was special, Tails was certain he was just doing what little he could with his gifts and mutation. Merely a burden when he was anything less than perfectly useful. He tried to make the best of it, but lingering feelings of inadequacy haunted his every turn.

When Tails's 13th birthday finally comes around after years of adventures with his Sonic and his friends, a latent power makes itself known. With Tails's newfound abilities, appearance, and instincts, his belief that he was disposable turns on its head as he adjusts to his new life. Sudden and significant changes from the nature of one's existence to the very form they take are never easy to overcome. Thankfully, Tails is never alone against shadows without and within, even if he wishes he was.

Remember the pact of our youth... Where you go, I'm going, so jump and I'm jumping... Since there is no me without you.

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The first thing Tails felt in the morning was an unbearable itch. Sure, he'd woken up needing to scratch an itch before, but this was different. It was overpowering, unbearable and everywhere at once. Tails yawned heartily and drug his claws along his coat to relieve at least some of the terrible itching while he kicked his bedding away from him. The sunlight shone lightly through his blinds, indicating it was a fair while past sunrise. Sonic would be awake, probably cooking based off of the smokey scent of frying bacon wafting up from downstairs that made his mouth water.

As a fox mobian, Tails's dietary needs leaned more towards a meat and animal product based diet, as did most other carnivoran mobians. While Sonic as a rodent mobian could still technically consume meat, his preference leaned more in favor of plant products. Tails, too, could consume plant products in moderation, but the bulk of his diet was still favorably meat.

When he was much younger and had just met Sonic, Tails exhibited signs of serious malnutrition. Sonic had apparently made note of Tails's sickliness, as one of the first nights traveling with Sonic, the hedgehog had pulled out an entire slab of bacon slices he'd bought and cooked them over the fire. While Sonic had barely any of it, the young and scrappy fox kit had scarfed down most of the meat like he was starving. Which, for all intents and purposes, he had been. Since that night Tails hadn't ever truly gone hungry, always provided with protein-rich foods and three square meals a day as much as was feasible. When they'd settled down in a home in the Emerald Hill region, Sonic had insisted on filling it with the largest fridge his remaining money could buy so they could both store enough food for their respective diets.

Most mornings Tails would cook for himself, plenty old enough to know how to work kitchen appliances (even if he somehow *didn't* have an IQ of three-hundred, of which trivialized most tech, let alone an oven). However, sometimes Sonic would insist on cooking duties; usually when Tails was sick, busy or it was a special occasion. Today of all days it was the latter. Tails's thirteenth birthday had finally dawned, and it was a special one. After all, it wasn't every day one finally, *finally* became a proper teen. It was no wonder Sonic had likely gotten up early as the sun to prepare and ensure Tails had a good breakfast before the party preparations.

Though Sonic wouldn't call himself a sap by any means in a billion years, Tails absolutely knew he was. It wasn't just anyone who'd adopt an orphaned fox kit at eleven years of age and raise him to impressive effect for the nine years following. Yet, Tails felt guilt. A hedgehog blessed with the mysterious power to run faster than the speed of sound, to explore the world and save it with his gift, and he tied himself down with a child. A child who needed a caregiver, yes, but a child was a big responsibility. To this day, Tails couldn't fathom why he'd given up his nomadic lifestyle to ensure a (relatively) safe upbringing for a child he barely knew at the time. Tails doubted he would ever understand, but the significance wasn't lost on him, and neither were the acts of love Sonic performed to remind him he wasn't going anywhere. Bacon and who knew what else on the morning of his big thirteenth was just one of the many ways Sonic was absolutely, one-hundred

percent, without a doubt the biggest sap on Mobius.

Tails yawned again and slipped out of his woefully comfortable and warm bed in favor of getting ready for the day. Slipping on his socks and gloves, he reached for a brush to brush out his fur. Though summer was just ending, Tails's fur would be thin for a few weeks longer before the autumn chill set in and he shed his warm season coat for a thicker one. So it was fairly unexpected that when he combed the brush through one of his namesakes he saw a large chunk of fur break away from his pelt. Brows furrowed, he examined the puff of summer fur and found himself further confused by the fact the fur beneath was darker and thicker than the rest of his coat.

Tails's fur had always stayed rather consistent in its coloration through the years, a light yellow-orange shade with little variation or pattern. The fur beneath his summer coat this time was more of an orange shade with yellow highlights and darker roots, causing Tails to pause in shock. He hadn't been shedding yesterday, and shedding was always a gradual process. Tails was a practical fox, and knew there was no way these things happened that fast. However nice it would be in theory, he wouldn't have just shed his entire summer coat overnight… Except, he had. Tails brushed elsewhere, along his forearm, and noticed the same occurrence. His coat color had changed somehow, and so suddenly. Not to mention it was much thicker and longer. A million thoughts passed through his head in that moment. Was he sick? He didn't feel sick. Was this puberty? No, surely not just yet. Did he spill a formula in his workshop he didn't read the label on? No, he definitely wouldn't have done *that*.

A knock at his door jostled him from his thoughts.

"Hey buddy, you awake?" Sonic's muffled voice rang through the door. Tails flinched at the volume. Sonic hadn't been shouting, yet he pinned his ears in reflex as if he had been. Despite being caught off-guard, Tails forced a light tone to respond.

"Uh, yeah! Just getting ready!" he responded. Sonic chuckled on the other side,

"10-4, pal! Got breakfast ready when you come down," and with that, Tails heard soft footsteps depart, further concerning him. Tails always had very sharp senses, but Sonic's normal speaking voice had overwhelmed him, and he could hear the fibers of the carpet shifting beneath Sonic's feet outside of his very much closed bedroom door as he departed.

"This is so weird," Tails muttered lowly. He shook his head and resigned to finish brushing his fur out, even if he looked increasingly odd with his new fluffy coat and hue. A glance in the mirror on his writing desk had him pausing again to stare. He looked so… well, different was obvious. Strange was more like it. His bangs had lengthened out with the rest of his coat, but his facial fur had darkened considerably. A stripe of brown fur trailed from his nose along a bridge between his eyes, and his eyelids had darkened to a similar tone. His facial features still resembled him, however. The same sky blue shade of his eyes shimmered back at him with the uncertainty he felt. There was simply no way he shed and developed these patterns over night. Except he had. Tails's stalwart practicality was beginning to ebb in the wake of a pit of anxiety in his gut.

The itching had begun to resume with gusto, causing him no end of annoyance as he exited his room and flinched at the sensory input. The scent of bacon was absolutely overwhelmingly strong.

Tails wrinkled his nose in reflex and felt a bit of nausea as a result of the smell. He loved bacon, it was a bit of an uncomfortable feeling when he was nauseated by the smell of it. Swallowing his bile, he quickly made his way down the hallway and the flight of stairs leading to breakfast. However strong the bacon, he wouldn't let it ruin his birthday breakfast.

"Hey lil bro!" Sonic's voice rang out again, but Tails resisted the strong urge to flinch at its volume. He smiled as he rounded a corner to enter the kitchen and saw his older brother. The blue hedgehog wore a pair of hot pink oven mitts with a black apron depicting a spatula with the words "this shit is going to be delicious" emblazoned above it in bold lettering. Tails recalled buying that for Sonic some years back for New Year's after he'd insisted he needed a proper apron for grilling his chili dogs. Ever since, it was his cooking uniform, along with the mitts that Cream bought him for one of his birthdays.

"Morning, Sonic," Tails chirped, resisting the gag he almost succumbed to upon seeing the enormous pile of fried bacon on a large plate next to the stove. Under any other circumstance his mouth would water and he'd take at least half of the pile for his breakfast plate not counting seconds, but the sight made him queasy. Other plates were also set up along the rest of the counter. Easy-over eggs, sausages, cheese biscuits and even some sliced fruit adorned the large plates. It was actually really sweet that Sonic had gone all-out that morning compared to most breakfasts, and Tails so very much wanted to appreciate the effort and the flavors if he wasn't about to dry-heave all over the kitchen floor in that moment.

"Mornin'. Happy birthday, dude," Sonic pulled a hand away from his current pan of cooking bacon to ruffle Tails's bangs. Tails held his breath, hoping against hope that maybe Sonic wouldn't have noticed how long and fluffy his fur had become. However, it wasn't to be. His brother knew a lot about Tails, down to the individual hairs on his head, and he had noticed a difference. Sonic's hand flinched away slightly, before touching Tails's bangs again, this time in an analytic manner. He turned his head to look, and his emerald eyes widened in shock, "woah."

"Yeah…" Tails grimaced, shrugging his shoulders self-consciously. Sonic turned away from the cooking bacon to get a closer look at Tails, a pitching whistle accompanying his examination.

"Now, I know summer's comin' to an end, but I'm pretty sure you weren't due for your winter coat yet, right?" Sonic queried. Tails nodded.

"Not sure what happened, but I woke up and my entire summer coat just kinda… fell out," Tails explained, face still twisted in a grimace, "not sure why it looks so different."

"Well, it's new for sure, but it suits you," Sonic tried to alleviate some of the anxiety that had leaked into Tails's tone.

"Thanks…" Tails gulped against his queasiness, excited to get breakfast over with before he gagged on the permeating smell of glorious-yet-deplorable bacon.

As soon as the last of the bacon had finished cooking and been dumped onto the large plate, the pair had selected their food and sat across their small dining table from one another. Sonic had begun digging into his fruit and biscuits with gusto, while Tails simply picked at an egg with his fork

in uncertainty. Though the active scent of cooking had dulled a bit, the remaining smell still caused Tails to feel unappetized, not to mention the sound of Sonic's fork scraping against his plate.

Seeming to notice Tails's lack of chowing down, Sonic looked up from his own food.

"You okay?" he asked simply. Tails resisted the urge to grimace and nodded lazily, still staring at his plate with trepidation.

"Just uh, not hungry, I guess," he spoke flatly, trying not to betray his sickness, "'m fine."

"Are you sure?" Sonic pressed lightly. Tails knew Sonic wasn't an idiot, and that he wouldn't be able to hide the fact he didn't feel a hundred percent for long if at all. The hedgehog was probably already on alert from the sudden coat change. It wasn't like Tails didn't understand, he was pretty anxious too; it just wasn't normal to shed this quickly and drastically no matter how you spun it. Yet, he felt hesitant to tell Sonic that everything was too loud, too smelly, too warm and too bright. He didn't want to offend Sonic's efforts, or give him any reason to cancel his party. Tails had waited thirteen years for this, and he didn't want to disappoint his friends. Even if he would've rather been already rushing to his workshop to run tests on himself in paranoia to see if anything had somehow poisoned him, rather than partying.

"Yeah. Sorry, guess I'm just jittery about today," Tails lied, "you only turn thirteen once and all that, right?" he plastered a fake smile, hoping it would be enough. Sonic didn't immedietally respond, his eyes scanning Tails's face for a few tense moments before he smiled.

"Hey, don't sweat it! Figured we'd have leftovers anyways… Just try and eat a little, yeah? Don't want you to pass out while we're preppin' for your big party."

Tails didn't eat even a little bit. Sonic had definitely noticed, even if his expression didn't change from his signature smile when he grabbed up Tails's still-full plate from the table. As Sonic worked away at cleaning up the kitchen and putting away leftovers, Tails chewed at the inside of his cheek as he thought deeply. Yet no matter what he puzzled together, he couldn't piece together his odd symptoms. No sickness or disease he was even remotely knowledgable about matched his symptoms thus far, and it drove him crazy. He would need to check his poison and contaminant database twice just to ensure he hadn't ingested something somehow on accident… So much work to do, yet none of the time to do it. His party would absolutely get in the way of solving this mystery, and it drove him a little insane to have to pick between potential mortal peril and his birthday party. Welp.

"How about we start with decorations since Vanilla said she'd handle baking the cupcakes this year?" Sonic offered. Tails blinked upon seeing Sonic had used his speed to finish the dishes in record time. Cheater… Tails quirked a smile despite his turbulent thoughts.

"Sounds good to me."

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Tails's anxiety had only increased tenfold as the morning and afternoon melted away. The unbearable itching had continued, as well as a growing ache in his lower back and head making itself gradually more known as hours passed. His senses had dulled with the time to become used to them, but any time a sudden loud noise was made, Tails would flinch as if struck. Decorations had gone up, snacks had been put out, and his comical pile of gifts had been piled near what was likely to be the epicenter of the celebration in the living room. Tails was already flattered Sonic could think of so many gifts for him, not to mention the ones that their friends would bring as they arrived.

Flattery, however, did not make him feel any less like complete and utter crap. He had to take frequent breaks from any remotely strenuous work lest his head explode and his sight prickle with dark spots. Tails didn't often get migraines, but when he did, he'd typically allow himself to rest and recover fully before pushing himself in any way. This was different, though, because it was his first and only thirteenth birthday. Excitement buzzed beneath his aches and itching, with a lingering and powerful desire to not disappoint his friends.

Tails continued to ignore his pains, which reached a distracting level by time Cream, Vanilla and the Chaotix arrived. The cupcakes had been obtained, fitted with thirteen candles and displayed proudly as the center of the snack table, but at what cost to Tails's sanity? He tried to stay as awake as he could as Vanilla pulled him into a hug.

"Oh, you've grown so much, Tails!" her warm tone poured over Tails like warm honey into tea, and he couldn't help but blush beneath his fur as she held his shoulders and looked over him with pride and maternal affection in equal measure. It was no secret that Vanilla the Rabbit had practically adopted nearly all of Sonic's friends, himself included. While she wasn't their full legal guardian, she typically signed paperwork for Tails that Sonic couldn't (or wouldn't, much to Tails's appreciation). Her approval was like polished emeralds to Tails, a soothing balm over his validation-seeking heart when he needed it most. If Tails could ever call someone 'Mom', Vanilla was her.

"Heh… Thanks…" he bashfully looked down at the floor.

"It won't be long before you're competing against Sonic for height, either!" the matronly rabbit giggled kindly, "goodness, and your fur! You're growing into your own, little one. I'm so proud of you!"

"Mother, stop torturing Tails!" Cream interjected in indignation. If Tails had a friend even remotely close to Sonic's status, it had to be Cream. Once sweet as a sugar cookie, the young rabbit had developed a bit of a sharp wit to her boundless compassion in the past few years that rivaled even Tails's own. They once were as far apart and different as the sun to the moon, but they'd grown close enough through forced playdates that Tails found himself genuinely appreciating Cream's input on his projects, or even just her company.

"Oh, very well, sweetheart," Vanilla tsk'd and brushed Tails's bangs to the side before she pulled away, "I'll go put our presents on the pile!"

"Happy birthday, Tails!" Cream congratulated as soon as Vanilla left the vicinity. Tails chuckled awkwardly.

“Thanks! Guess I’ll be hearing that a lot tonight, huh?” he sheepishly scratched the back of his head. Cream smirked and poked his nose teasingly.

“Yes, and don’t mope about it! You deserve it!” the young rabbit insisted, “thirteen is a big number!”

“Well, mathematically speaking–” Tails began, but Cream had none of it. She blew a raspberry and crossed her arms.

“It’s your birthday, no nerd thoughts!”

“You just want an excuse for me to not be right,” Tails snarked, no real bite to his words. He enjoyed banter, and only a few of his friends could truly participate in a way that was fun for him. Cream rolled her eyes with a smile.

“Keep telling yourself that! Nobody’s right all the time, not even foxes with three-hundred IQ.”

A knock at the front door interrupted any further dueling for the young pair. Sonic rushed to answer the door before anyone else could, and swung it open to reveal a familiar pair. Amy Rose stood in all of her glory, at least five presents stacked up in her hold with no effort. Next to her was Knuckles, a single large present tucked into his side.

“Heyyy, Knux, Ames!” Sonic welcomed the pair with open arms, but it wasn’t long before they honed in on the man of the hour.

“Oh, Tails! Look at you!” Amy cooed, still balancing her pile of gifts impeccably, “I swear, you’re getting taller by the day!”

“Yes… You’re growing up fast,” Knuckles nodded sagely, though a small smile betrayed his real feelings, as always. Tails chuckled.

“Thanks, guys,” Tails gratefully smiled, though the pressure in his head made it increasingly difficult to behave naturally.

Guest by guest passed by, wishing Tails a happy birthday or commenting on his growth. He did his best to mask his discomfort, and his sensory overload as more and more mobians made their way into the house and mingled. Cream seemed to notice Tails’s increasing difficulty keeping up a genuine smile. As Rouge and Omega made their way into the mingling crowd, she stepped back up to him with a concerned expression.

“Are you alright, Tails?” she sweetly asked, brushing a hand along his arm in a caring gesture. Tails blearily looked at her, and grinned as best he could. He didn’t want his friends worrying, even if he found his significant malaise souring his mood more and more.

“Yup! Doing fine!”

Cream didn’t seem to believe him, and opened her mouth to inquire further when the crowd suddenly went silent and a few of the lights shut off, stalling any opportunity to continue the exchange. A moment later, a green flash lit up the entryway of the house, and in its place stood a particular black and red hedgehog. The crowd remained silent for a moment, before Shadow opened his eyes and… smiled? As if that wasn’t strange enough, the typically isolated hedgehog walked up to Tails and looked over him with an appraising eye. Tense moments passed before he nodded in approval.

“Quite the turnout, Miles,” Shadow complimented, which was even weirder than the fact Shadow actually cared at all. Tails was never especially close with Shadow, the latter preferring business exclusive exchanges when he needed his motorcycle repaired or intel regarding a contact. Tails had tried small talk with the hegdehog before, but Shadow insisted on a professional relationship.

“Thanks… I think?” Tails was completely caught off-guard by Shadow’s friendly demeanor. The hedgehog’s apparent kindness seemed to run out after that, though, because he simply huffed dismissively and turned away to go stand next to Rouge. Huh…

“I guess that’s everyone,” Sonic noted nearby, “I guess Shadow decided to accept the invite after all… Welp, let’s get this party started!”

The party ramped up from then on, Tails cycling through the crowd in a daze. He could barely comprehend what was happening after a certain point, just nodding and smiling against the muffled words and glaring party lights. Eventually the opening of presents had come upon them, and Tails had tried to focus in to make sure everyone’s gift was appreciated properly. He really did try, but he got the sense some of his friends were expecting a different reaction to their various gifts. Many were thoughtful additions to projects, many more yet were knick-knacks or things he’d mentioned he liked or wanted in the past year, but the best gift (even to his rattled minds) had to be the giant tome that Knuckles had procured for him. Despite its apparent age, it was in remarkable condition. The pages were slightly frayed with time, but there was no doubt it was pristine for its time.

“It’s a book from Angel Island’s catacombs,” Knuckles explained, “it’s in a language I cannot parse, I don’t know what it’s about… But maybe you can figure it out.”

“I look forward to the challenge. Thanks, Knuckles!” Tails felt a jolt of excitement at being able to translate a never-before seen book, from the ancient echidnas no less! However, his malaise quickly returned in force, and his ability to keep up the ruse of ‘everything is fine’ was failing fast. Some of his friends looked at him oddly, and he yearned to tell them everything was okay, but he could barely keep himself aware of what was going on around him.

It was time for blowing candles before long. Tails could barely think of a wish, or really anything at all, before he was ushered up to the cupcake tower, all of his friends singing for him after a hushed moment of anticipation. The pleasant tune, which he heard every year since his fourth year, blended itself violently into a cacophony of voices.

A dull agony ripped through Tails’s skull and black spots fractured his vision. He groaned, or maybe he cried out, he couldn’t tell, but the singing had stopped. Tails held a hand to his forehead, sharp

static buzzing through his mind and dulling all of his senses. The pain and itching reached a crescendo with his vision blacking out. A faint vibration spread through his back with the aching twinge throughout, making him vaguely aware of the fact he'd probably fallen over. Even fainter still were the alarmed voices calling his name from beyond the black, but his awareness was fading fast. He felt something warm and protective surround him, and he relaxed into the darkening of his senses. The last thing he felt was a hand gently slapping his cheek, and all became nothing.

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Sonic knew something was off the minute Tails had walked into the kitchen that morning. The kit had stepped quietly along the tiles for one; Sonic could barely make out that Tails had come downstairs at all when he greeted him. If it wasn't for Sonic's keen hearing, he'd have probably been startled by his brother's arrival. Tails hadn't walked like that since he was very young, as if he were still in the forests of West Side trying not to be heard by predators and bullies.

The boy's fur was a whole other issue. Sonic wasn't stupid, he knew something was up. At first he thought maybe Tails had dyed it, like Sonic had said he would be allowed to do along with piercing his ears if he wanted to once he turned thirteen. He wouldn't have blamed him for capitalizing on technicalities the very same day as his birthday. The fluffiness was new, though. Sonic thought maybe he'd brushed it in such a way that his fur fluffed out more than usual, but a good look at his coat was all he needed to know that Tails's fur had developed new volume and colorations quite naturally.

It was all so weird already, but Sonic could've brushed it off. What Sonic didn't brush off, however, was the fact Tails didn't eat at all that morning. Tails never skipped on bacon, ever. The lack of appetite in his little brother concerned him considerably, along with his physical changes overnight. Sonic didn't pry; maybe he was just getting a headstart on teenage mood swings? Maybe shedding prematurely was a part of development for him? It was uncharacteristic, sure, but what could he do? He didn't want to cancel Tails's party, and Tails seemed dead-set on pretending he was perfectly fine.

Sonic almost spoke up, though, when Tails needed constant breaks from the party preparations. Still, he didn't speak up at all, because Tails said he was fine. Sonic trusted Tails implicitly. Oh how he regretted not saying anything, but by time he was certain something was seriously wrong, the party was in full swing. He could only watch helplessly as Tails continued to push himself through whatever illness had taken hold, still insisting he was fine.

Then they sang happy birthday, and Sonic watched what followed in slow motion. Tails's eyes became unfocused and glassy, then began to shut as his legs collapsed under him. Sonic had just barely caught him before he reached the ground, a hand on his back to support him. The crowd gasped, various exclamations and shouts replacing the joyous atmosphere with worry and tension. In a rush of panic he examined the fox, noting how pale he looked beneath his fur.

"Tails?!" he exclaimed, eyes wide. Tails didn't respond at all, prompting Sonic to gently pat his cheek and repeat himself. Tails still didn't respond. A deep sinking dread replaced the anxiety he'd felt all day, "Vanilla!" he cried out. Not more than a moment later the adult rabbit was kneeling
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next to Tails, practiced eyes scanning him for injuries or apparent symptoms.

“I’m here, Sonic. Let me take a look at him,” she gently pried Sonic’s hands from the fox with some resistance from the hedgehog. Who could blame him? His brother, his child, had just passed out in front of him. Vanilla knew a thing or two about parental worry, even if Sonic insisted constantly Tails wasn’t anything more than his brother. Vanilla knew a parent’s gaze. She knew why Sonic always came to her for advice on raising Tails, why he stayed at her place in those early nights poring over legal texts and childcare books to ensure nobody could take him away. Tails was his brother in name, but Sonic was a father in his own unique way.

Though Sonic wasn’t related to Tails, he had put a part of himself into Tails in the same way Vanilla had given birth to a piece of her heart when Cream came into the world. And if anything had happened to Cream, she’d lose a part of herself in a way nothing could replace or console. So it was with double the resolve that Vanilla fell into her medical routine to ensure Sonic did not lose a part of himself.

Tails’s vitals were standard, no obstructions in his throat or lungs, and no apparent trauma had befallen him. Before Vanilla could continue her examination, though, she noticed something exceedingly odd. Turning Tails over, she saw a strange dark biomatter spreading along the back of his neck fur and upper back. She dared not touch the unknown substance.

“Stand back, Sonic,” Vanilla spoke gravely as the biomatter continued to spread along Tails’s spine and chest. She didn’t know what it was, but she wasn’t about to endanger Sonic if it spread. Vanilla was out of her depth, she realized, and stood. Whatever this was, it wasn’t natural or in her wheelhouse to treat. Sonic hadn’t moved an inch, so she grabbed his shoulders and tugged him gently away.

“But he’s still…” Sonic breathed, resisting Vanilla’s pull, “he needs help,” he croaked helplessly. Vanilla fought against her breaking heart at seeing Sonic so lost to keep them a safe distance from the ailing fox.

“I don’t know what’s happening to him, but I-” she was interrupted by a bright flash of blue emanating from Tails’s position on the floor. The crowd cried out in shock as Tails’s form was absorbed in the bright light, and Sonic felt his heart stop for a moment.

As soon as it began to dissipate, the biomatter was gone. The light fully faded and in its place was the same fox as before.

Except for the appearance of a third tail resting next to the other two.

2

Dr. Ivo Robotnik, known as Dr. Eggman by most, was a betting man.

One wouldn't expect a pragmatic and intelligent man like him to take many bets. They may, however, consider a man of his particular moral standing to make some easy gambles, especially with such eccentricities as his own. Yet they'd also expect anyone to cut their losses and give up after so many defeats at the hands of their adversary. Logic and statistic would state that such low odds of success, with proof to show, were insane to strive for, certainly.

Dr. Robotnik, however, continued to roll the dice. He did not give up. Such low odds of besting Sonic The Hedgehog and his allies, yet the thrill of each battle fought on any sort of equal footing with the rodent gave his intelligent mind a rush that few things in this world could hope to achieve. Sonic was irritating, annoying, unbearable and all manner of negative traits. Oh, how he *hated* that hedgehog.

Above all else, though, Sonic was a worthy foe. An enemy worth Ivo's time, a nemesis that kept pushing his genius mind to greater heights. Through the hedgehog he had met other foes he'd consider minor rivals at most, but one he had a special attachment to had kept Ivo on his toes in a different manner than Sonic himself.

Miles "Tails" Prower, red fox mobian, with the unusual capacity to fly thanks to his twin tails. Age 13 as of yesterday, and likely celebrated the pitiful milestone with his friends late into the night. Ivo wrinkled his nose at the reminder that the little kit had made it yet another calendar year without blowing himself up, but Ivo knew better than to hope the only being who could rival his intellect on the entire planet would kill himself on one of his own inventions.

Well into his fifties, Dr. Robotnik's mind had only aged like a fine wine, and he knew the same would be true of little mister Prower. The fox was a growing threat as his brain matured, and he was fiercely loyal to the very hedgehog who had been the driving force behind the failure of the Doctor's ambitions to conquer the world. If Miles had not been raised by his nemesis, Ivo would have seriously considered making an ally of the fox in some capacity. He had tried before with various methods, but the fox simply refused to budge. The only instance Ivo had found himself able to cow his stalwart mind was by complete domination using the hyper-go-on energy of the Wisps many years ago, but it wasn't sustainable at the time and the fox had slipped his leash. Indeed, the only thing stronger than mister Prower's keen intellect was his inherited stubborn nature from the damned hedgehog.

Ivo sighed, sipping on a mug green tea as he stared blankly at his various holo-documents floating around his desk. Asides from noting the unfortunate anniversary of young Prower's existence, nothing much caught his eye as he skimmed along his automated updates for the day.

A shift in the air caused Ivo to freeze up. Someone was here. With a practiced swift movement, he brandished his laser pistol and aimed it directly at the one who had trespassed in his personal quarters.

The hooded mobian figure didn't even flinch.

"Dr. Ivo Robotnik, age fifty-seven, grandson of the late Dr. Gerald Robotnik. Known for his futuristic technological advancements in robotics. Internationally wanted for…" the figure grinned beneath their hood, "well, it would be pointless to list them all now, wouldn't it?"

Ivo said nothing, expression still as a stone.

The hooded mobian shrugged and slowly lifted a hand to pull back their hood. A red fox mobian possibly in her mid 40's stared Dr. Robotnik down with sharp green eyes, scanning him for any sign of movement. She wasn't bothered at all by his brandished weapon, as if it were no threat to her.

"I have information for you, Doctor, if you would hear it," she uttered smoothly, getting straight to the point. Ivo scowled.

"From who," his voice was dark, his tone indicating not a question but a demand. The vixen smiled pleasantly.

"The Order of Saint Alain, with the upmost courtesies. I am Bishop Celine."

Ivo froze. That was the holy order many mobian foxes followed, well, religiously. It was no secret the order looked upon Sonic and his friends with scorn, but especially Tails. The order often spoke out publicly against Sonic and company's actions, painting Sonic as an unruly delinquent that subverted proper justice, and a harborer of demons and wielder of Chaos's relics. The order was not kind to outsiders, and often regarded as strict and even cruel with its tenets that had to be followed to the letter by their followers. Ivo thought it, and most religious orders, were hogwash and existed only to control the masses. He didn't much care either way, though, because the Order of Saint Alain hated Sonic almost as much as he did. Any public defamation against his nemesis, the better. This was the first time they'd actually bothered to contact Robotnik though, considering he was a wanted criminal in every civilized corner of the world. It wouldn't be a good look for their order to associate with a criminal of such abhorrence. If they had made a move to contact him personally, then they must've been getting desperate to make a move at all.

"Go on," he growled, lowering his pistol and reholstering it in a flash. The red fox smiled and nodded.

"The information concerns one Miles "Tails" Prower," she spoke the boy's name with a hint of disgust, "I believe this will be very shocking for you to hear, would you like to sit down, Doctor?"

"I'm not that old, spill it," Ivo gruffly remarked, becoming impatient from the vixen's niceties.

"Miles Prower is not what he seems," she began with an indignant sniff, "I imagine you're aware that he has accompanied Sonic The Hedgehog for some time?"

“What of it?” Dr. Robotnik raised a brow, “I know enough about the little rat; I’ve fought him off for years. Sonic picked him up off some dump island back in the day, been a thorn in my side ever since.”

“Ah, but that isn’t all there is to the story,” Celine spoke sagely, “the child was born on West Side Island thirteen years ago to two unassuming foxes, Rosemary and Amadeus Prower. They were devout followers of Saint Alain, so it was such a shame that what should have been a beautiful birth of a son became a much darker affair… The kit had two tails, the mark of the devil we know as Tamashi.

“Tamashi, if you’re unaware Doctor, is the ancient dark spirit that has haunted foxes on Mobius for thousands of years. A trickster that has stolen kits from us from birth in hopes to sew discord through their bodies once they grow. It is typically for the good of the world we euthanize such kits born with abnormalities as Miles Prower, so that Tamashi does not possess their spirits and wreak havoc on the world again.

“However, Rosemary and Amadeus were overcome with love for their newborn and resolved to hide Miles from the order, perhaps charmed by the devil to protect his new vessel,” Celine explained, “the order caught them harboring the demon after a… couple of years. Our eyes are many, after all. Once we apprehended Rosemary and Amadeus, Miles escaped our grasp. We hunted for him for months, but could not find him, save a few children claiming to have spotted him on the island periodically after our searches were called off. One could not expect a young kit to survive in the elements for so long. It seemed our assumptions were incorrect, though. Miles was found in the presence of the young delinquent Sonic The Hedgehog some time later, and that is where your story continues as you know it.”

“What’s this got to do with me, then?” Ivo wrinkled his nose, unimpressed with the paranoia regarding what was a simple genetic defect even to his keen mind, “I don’t care about your religious hysteria, if you haven’t guessed by the lack of crosses in my domicile,” he gestured vaguely to his lair. Celine patiently smiled.

“But of course, Doctor. I assure you, our ‘hysteria’ holds importance to what I am about to tell you,” her expression became grave, “Miles has reached the approximate age that the curse placed upon him by Tamashi will fully develop and continue to sully his spirit and body alike, until Tamashi himself inevitably fully possesses him and the world is brought to ruin. Regardless of your *interpretation* of Tamashi’s mark, the power Miles has lived to grow into is undeniable regardless of religious belief. I suspect that once his third tail grows in that he will find it incredibly difficult to live a normal life as he has thus far for all that comes with it.”

“I still don’t see why I should care. So the runt grows some extra limbs, just makes a bigger target for me,” Ivo shrugged, picking at his teeth with his pinkie in boredom. It wasn’t exactly rare for unusual things to occur on Mobius, though the Doctor hesitated to use the word ‘magic’. He was a man who based himself in science; there had to be a scientific explanation for everything, even mysterious gemstones with untapped potential and ancient earth-splitting entities slumbering in the planet’s core. If Tails was to grow a mysterious third tail, it was likely rooted in science somehow.

“An extra limb is not all Miles will grow into, Doctor,” Celine shook her head, “he will grow into *devastating* powers, as I have said. Enough to rival artifacts such as the Chaos Emeralds, if he is allowed to fester. How the power within him will be expressed only Alain knows, but it will be terrible. Not to mention the psychological struggle of his developing malady. It is important that he is stopped before that point.”

“Alright, now you have my attention,” Ivo’s face almost wrinkled into a wicked grin. A power to allegedly rival the Chaos Emeralds? Within an enemy he’d been fighting all those years? It was tantalizing as it was vexing. What once seemed as a pointless religious lecture to suffer though was quickly growing into a new scheme in his head at the same time as he spoke with Celine, “so you want the runt dead, that it?”

“You put it very bluntly. Yes, it would be best if Miles was put out of his misery before any harm can come to the world, or further harm to himself,” Celine spoke sadly, though Ivo suspected she was not very saddened at all. Not that he cared for the feelings of the lady fox; he was far too focused on the potential of this development.

“Fine. I’ll put a little extra pressure on the fox in the next bout if it’ll make you sods happy, but I want a favor for it,” Dr. Robotnik sneered, “any favor for my claiming at any time in the future, in exchange for eliminating the kid.”

Celine seemed to frown slightly. Ivo’s expression hardened.

“What, didn’t expect a fair trade? You want me to change my plans, you and your organization get to pay up,” the Doctor hadn’t planned on killing the fox boy for quite some time, not really. He couldn’t help if a piece of shrapnel or other chance event occurred and took him out, but Ivo deeply hoped that he could see more of what the kid could do before the inevitable end. However, with the promise of the boy genius potentially possessing a power to rival his most coveted prize, Robotnik’s plans had already been tossed on their head. He would need to account for a bigger challenge certainly, but he would have it one way or another. Research was in order. Sure, on paper he’d be making a ‘deal’ with the religious psychotics, but he couldn’t just pass up the promise of an advantage over Sonic for something so fragile as ‘honesty’ with a bunch of loons. If that meant pissing off a few priests, he could risk it.

Celine’s sour expression softened slightly as Ivo stared her down, though she didn’t seem entirely pleased with the prospect of her church owing a notorious criminal a favor.

“Very well. This is acceptable to us,” Celine agreed finally, extending a hand for Ivo to shake. The Doctor took her hand in a firm hold.

“Deal’s a deal,” he let a predatory grin spread beneath his signature mustache. Though they had shaken on it, Ivo mentally crossed his fingers. He doubted Celine would uphold her end of the deal once he eventually double-crossed her, but a favor was still a tantalizing hold over the church in the meantime. Maybe he’d claim it before he stabbed them in the back, just for kicks. A temporary and tentative alliance had been formed though, just until he could get the intel he needed to claim the ‘latent power’ within his long-time enemy.

Ivo was indeed a betting man. A power promised to rival even the Chaos Emeralds? It seemed only logical to place his chips all in.

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Tails slowly awoke to a world of stiff muscles and pain, which was unfortunate, but less unbearable than the horrible itching he had woken up to last time he'd faded into consciousness. What happened to make him so sore? The last thing he'd recalled was his party, then… nothing. In a daze, he fluttered his eyelids open, only to squeeze them shut quickly with a quiet groan of discomfort at the sunlight streaming into his eyes.

"…Buddy?" Tails heard someone mutter softly nearby. He recognized that it was Sonic's voice, but he couldn't understand why Sonic had been in his room at all. Did something happen at the party? In a rush of worry Tails tried to push himself up, but soft gloved hands pressed him back down.

"Woah, slow down. You're okay," Sonic's tone was soft still, which was disconcerting. Sonic's tone was typically brash or sarcastic, maybe stern or serious on the rare occasion and always upbeat, but never quiet unless something seriously warranted it. Tails's instinct something was up festered in his gut as he huffed at being forced to remain against his pillow for the time being. He rubbed at his eyes to try and get the sleep and sensitivity out of them.

"You passed out at the party. I knew somethin' was up…" Sonic trailed off, clearly berating himself silently, which caused Tails's anxiety to lurch further. Ah right, the migraines, "why didn't you tell me, pal?"

"I just… I didn't want to ruin things," Tails croaked pathetically, "everyone was g'na come, and I didn't want to disappoint 'em…" he finally managed to crack his eyes open partially, and took in a glimpse of Sonic's concerned expression that only made him want to close them again. The last thing he wanted was Sonic to worry about him. There were so many other important things, weren't there?

With a heavy sigh that hunched his shoulders, Sonic looked away for a moment before glancing back with a small smile.

"Well, Vanilla took care of you afterwards… Everyone else went home. I told 'em you just had another all-nighter," he paused, looking morosely at Tails.

"Ah," Tails muttered. Sonic grimaced, as if there was more to tell. After a few moments of silence between the pair, Sonic spoke up again.

"I, ah… I don't know what happened, exactly. Don't freak out, but–" Sonic paused, wracking his brain for a way to explain. Tails shot upwards at that, anxiety sharply rising. It only rose further when he felt an odd sensation around his namesakes. Something was wrong. Sonic reached a hand out to Tails, "it's okay! Nothing *bad*, I think? It's just uh… your tails."

"What happened to my–" Tails choked, too scared to even look. Sonic stuttered and tripped over syllables, struggling to find the words, before he finally blurted it out plainly.
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“There’s three.”

“…What…” Tails pronounced stiffly, turning himself slowly and staring at, surely enough, three fluffy tails rather than the two he’d always known. His blood ran cold. Why were there three? Why where there *three? Why were there* ***three?*** Suddenly, as he gazed at the very real and very much moving additional namesake responding to his crescendoing panic, the room felt way too small. Tails’s mind ran faster than Sonic on a caffeine high as his brain shorted repeatedly trying to come up with any possible explanation for this latest change. The feeling of his claws prickling and unsheathing out of his body’s desperate need to protect himself didn’t help matters. He barely noticed as he began to circle himself, dismay and further panic rising in his chest as he began to breathe faster and faster.

“Woah, woah, hey, Tails–” Sonic tried to intervene with a comforting gesture, but Tails dodged his hand and looked at Sonic uncomprehendingly, his panic overriding any sort of logical determinations he could’ve made in the throes of his anxiety that had escalated into an attack of some kind. Tails’s fearful gasps had been stitched together with primal yips and whines akin to his non-mobian counterpart as he puffed up and cornered himself against his desk. Blue eyes usually full of calculation and thoughtfulness had been replaced with unfocused eyes full of sharp fear, “Tails…” Sonic tried again, not moving to look any bigger or further corner his panicked brother. He noticed how Tails’s claws had fully unsheathed, and wondered if they’d always looked that sharp and dangerous before. It had been nearly eight years since Tails’s last episode that had progressed to such a point he reverted to instinctual reactivity, but Sonic fell into his practiced routine as if it were yesterday, “okay, okay. You’re alright, bud,” Sonic held his hands in a placating gesture, speaking in a slow and low pitch. That seemed to catch Tails’s attention, at least. With a hopeful smile, Sonic dipped into an even lower frequency to produce a low purr that had always calmed Tails in those late nights where thunder boomed and rains poured. He never, ever let anyone else hear it, of course. Sonic had a reputation to maintain. If he had done a few reluctant favors over the years to have blackmail recordings of the sound destroyed, that was his business.

Tails, lost in his terror, latched greedily onto the one grounding stimuli that he could find in the storm of his emotions. His rapid and shallow breaths slowed as minutes passed of Sonic just sitting next to him and purring, patiently moving to physical grounding techniques as Tails regained his senses and faculties.

Mobians of all kinds had the same vestigial instincts that stuck with them. They were expressed differently and in different aspects of life, but panic and fear had been emotions that were typically accompanied by the strongest of those dormant instincts kicking in. Hedgehogs like Sonic or Shadow would prickle their spines and roll up, and in extreme cases even self-mutilate as their non-humanoid counterparts did. Felines would arch their tails and fluff up as much as they could, while canines would raise their hackles, nip and whine. It was humiliating for most who had tried to detach themselves from their species’ feral origins, especially around humans. The presence of those instincts only ever served to undermine the mobians’ efforts to be equal to humanity. Only other mobians were familiar and understanding of these things, and there was a stigma around humans seeing one in such a vulnerable state. Sonic had of course turned the urge to roll into a defensive ball into an offense, either out of practicality or his stubborn nature rejecting fear entirely in favor of effectiveness in battle.

For Tails, he never let himself get to such a point that he would fall back on his innate impulses even in front of his friends, to the point he suppressed it so severely he was certain it would *never* happen again. He would *not* be made a burden by his own mind and body. Yet, as he sat there against his desk doing breathing exercises with Sonic, he realized his efforts had been in vain after all.

“Feelin’ better?” Sonic’s voice faded from its low purr, though his pitch was still low and soft. Tails nodded slowly, though his concern was more on his mysterious extra limb. He had curled it up alongside his left namesake in his panic, and was staring at it in trepidation as well as curiosity. It seemed to respond as his others did, and didn’t feel sore like the rest of his body had. He tested it with a small flick, and found the new sensation odd as well as… right? It didn’t feel foreign as it theoretically should have, as if his brain had already adjusted to its presence without issue, like it was always there somehow.

“This is so weird,” Tails’s voice was rough and worn as he spoke, making him feel even more useless in that moment. Pathetic. He hugged himself tightly and refused to let any more tears fall. In a million years, of all possible scenarios, Tails would not have once guessed he would mysteriously grow an extra limb from nothing. How was he going to fly Sonic out of danger when Dr. Eggman next reared his ugly head? Would his third tail adapt to the propeller motion that he’d taught himself? Could he even bear to be in a combat scenario with his newly overwhelmed senses? Tails gazed forlornly at his semi-sheathed claws in resigned misery, noting their significant hardening and sharpening since he’d last seen them. What else would change? Would he even be the same person when- or if- his changes ceased?

Tails had always prided himself on logic, practicality, probabilities… He denied his innate instinct and became more than the scared kit he had started as. So why was this happening to him? Why was he changing like this? What was he becoming?

“What am I gonna do…” Tails mumbled, retreating further into himself.

Sonic smiled sympathetically, rubbing his hand on Tails’s shoulder, “I know it’s gonna be a change, but we’ll adapt, alright? We’ll keep an eye on you in case anything else happens. Vanilla already offered to contact some of her colleagues at the hospital if you have any more symptoms, and said she’d come by right away when we needed her.”

The fact Tails hated hospitals wasn’t a secret by any means. He despised the sterile scents, buzzing flourescent lights and cold prickly atmosphere. It wasn’t logical by any means, but if he could avoid a trip to the ER he would, which led to numerous instances in the past of Sonic finding Tails hiding an injury he’d sustained on missions just to prevent a visit to the hospital. Obviously he wasn’t always successful; even if Sonic called Amy or Vanilla to administer first-aid, some injuries absolutely required the vastly more advanced resources of a hospital.

However, Tails doubted that spontaneous growth of new limbs, sudden drastic shedding, and significant heightening of sensory sensitivity could be explained by any doctor, specialist or not. Still he appreciated the gesture, and the part of himself that was still a scared kid latched onto the little comfort it brought in that moment.

“Okay…” Tails nodded slowly. Sonic’s smile became just a little more genuine at that.

“In the meantime, I know you haven’t eaten in over twenty-four hours. Can you try and hold somethin’ down this morning?” Sonic asked, standing up and holding a hand out to the fox, “I’ll bet growin’ a new tail probably took a lot of energy, huh?”

Tails prepared to decline, still feeling sore and sick despite the majority of yesterday’s nausea being absent. However, as he took Sonic’s hand and stood, he felt a wave of dizziness sweep over his senses and he nearly lost his balance. Sonic caught him quickly, supporting his weight easily. Tails felt a twist of guilt inside of him as he caught Sonic’s concerned expression, and realized he really probably should have eaten something if only to stay further concern regarding his wellbeing. His body went through quite a shock growing his new namesake and he needed to replenish himself.

“Y-Yeah, food sounds good,” he muttered, stabilizing himself once his dizziness faded.

As it turns out, bacon never tasted so amazing in his whole life.

Though Tails hesitated, the strong scent overcoming his nose making his stomach churn, he forced himself to take a small bite. From then he was a goner, his memory a blur as he zeroed in on the food in front of him.

Sonic was slightly less enthusiastic as he saw his brother’s eyes glaze over as he chowed down on the plate of bacon and eggs like a starving wild animal. Tails typically ate as politely as possible, but the sight of the kid’s fangs (did those things get a lot bigger or was that just him?) bared as he loudly tore apart his lovingly cooked breakfast with them. The kid didn’t even bother using his fork… Sonic felt a small twist in his heart. He tried to remind himself the kid hadn’t eaten for over a day, and just went through a traumatic change. It was fine! Tails’s body just needed nutrients depserately, that was why he seemed so desperate to eat. Sonic just couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going on, and he had the feeling that neither of them knew the answers.

Sonic reached a hand to grab the plate after Tails had finished licking off the grease. In a flash of shock and reflexes, he pulled his hand away as Tails snarled angrily and snapped his teeth at Sonic territorially, hackles puffed up and claws unsheathed. Sonic didn’t think he’d ever forget the flash of angry slitted blue eyes that didn’t recognize him at all in that moment. What was happening to his kid?

Shocked, Tails blinked and flinched away from Sonic and his plate, his pupils widening from the needlepoints they had been a second ago. Tears shimmered in his eyes as he desperately looked at Sonic, realizing what he’d just done with horror.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to!”

Sonic recovered from his startle at the sight of Tails beginning to cry, which tugged at his heartstrings harder than the fact Tails just tried to *bite him.*

“Hey, it’s fine, bud! I guess you were hungrier than I thought. It’s alright!” Sonic quickly plastered a smile on his muzzle, patting Tails on the head to ease any guilt.

But Tails did feel guilty, even after Sonic smiled at him like it hadn’t shocked them both to their core. Tails didn’t know what was wrong with him, but the sinking feeling in his gut remained throughout the whole day.

Sonic insisted that Tails rest off the last of his sickness, but the fox hadn’t wanted to sleep anymore; he needed answers more than he needed shut-eye. His brother didn’t make a move to stop him when he locked himself in his workshop for the majority of the late morning and afternoon, only taking a small break to have some lunch meat from the fridge at lunch time when his stomach complained. Sonic hadn’t really spoken up for the rest of the day, which was extremely weird considering it was Sonic, AKA his loud and endearingly smug and annoying brother who wouldn’t let Tails just mope around all day… Unless something was seriously wrong. His friends hadn’t sent him any messages either; probably told off by Sonic so he wouldn’t have to worry about explaining himself.

Even though Sonic’s unusual care and the silence from his friends on his communicator told him nothing would be the same again, he forced himself into his research routine to get to the bottom of his changes. Tails needed to prioritize the newest mystery in his life, not worry over if his friends hated him for ruining his party.

So, he buried himself in his work. Superficial Google searches told him that none of his symptoms lined up with any diseases or disorders or even puberty, though the one hour period where Tails clicked links to various cancer articles on WebMD in a panic was an interesting stretch of time. After medical science couldn’t explain away his changes, he got a little more receptive to the neopaganism websites and suggestions of magic. After all, if the Chaos Emeralds and Twin Gaias among others were real then other mystical things could indeed occur in the world. None of the websites explained anything, though. Many articles said a lot of fancy words for a whole lot of conjecture based entirely off of belief and not hard evidence and empirical data, which soured Tails’s mood until he came across one website in particular after a desperate Google search of ‘two tails’.

‘The Order of Saint Alain.’

Tails’s frown deepened. He knew that name. It was the name of the religious order that many foxes, including the ones on West Side island, followed. A religion that worshiped an ancient fox warrior by the name of Alain who saved their people by banishing a great darkness, or so they said. He was posthumously ascended to the title of Saint and became a figurehead of the religion that originated after his death. Most stories like that were relegated to myths, and were likely heavily sanitized and twisted with translations over so many years. Even so, the Order was strong in their belief. Tails knew the stories well, because he was partially raised with them echoing as taunts and curses in his ears so long ago.

Flinching as memories of abuse and fear bubbled in his head, Tails turned away from his screen to take a quick gulp of water from his bottle next to his computer setup. After taking a swig, then

another, he sighed and resumed scrolling. Tails figured he was really desperate for answers if he was bothering with reading through the psychotic order's website, but pressed on. He rolled his eyes as he skimmed over the various introductions of ministers and bishops, and flat out ignored the listed tenets of the religion in favor of reading over their archive of digitized texts in PDF form.

The Order didn't have any sort of unified holy text, but rather numerous journals written by long-dead priests kept over centuries and scanned once the world became digitally driven. Most things within the scans were uninteresting, just life stories of old dead guys chronicled for all to see, usually taken as lessons of the past. However, one journal caught his eye.

The journal of Gabriel Durand, disciple of Saint Alain himself. The scan was pretty bad; the parchment that had been recorded digitally had likely been in terrible shape when it was finally uploaded based off of the old wrinkles, stains and faded ink upon each page. It was legible enough though, Tails decided. A couple of clicks later and the PDF was downloaded and ready to be zoomed into. Setting up the first page, he hummed as he scanned the first line.

'9th of Summer's Wake of Year 198 of DE`

Tails raised his brows. That was at least two-thousand five-hundred years ago, based off of his rough estimation. The entry also used the old mobian calendar system, which was abolished nearly one hundred and sixty years ago in favor of using the humans' own calendar in any official capacity. As Tails looked further into the entry, he noticed that it was entirely written in Mobian, as opposed to English, further dating the journal. While Tails far preferred English that Sonic had taught him as opposed to the ancestral tongue of mobians, he still kept himself up to date on his native tongue so that he could communicate with people who still preferred it in every day life or mobian tribes who refused to adapt to human languages. With resolve, Tails translated the ancient text in his mind as he read.

'It has been five months since our last trek across the ice fields in Northern Apotos. Those remaining there who were loyal to Tamashi were struck down, as they should have been. We cannot allow his influence to further taint the world, not when we have just begun to rebuild. Still, I find myself haunted by the screams of ~~innocent children~~ my comrades as they fell to the demons' spears. They were rabid even as they fell, less than mobian. I felt no remorse as I silenced the beasts with my sword.'

'I am not guilty. I cannot be. I am home with my Fleur, now. It is time to put the past behind us and look forward to a brighter future without the demonic presence that once infested our people.'

Tails hummed with confusion. Tamashi was a name he had heard plenty when he was a toddling kit, typically when he fled from the children of his village. They'd cry out curses, calling him all manner of names and spouting cruel jabs including that very name. Tails didn't really put any effort researching the name, far too busy with other things to focus on past traumas. Yet fate had brought the name to him once again, so it was probably worth researching. Who was Tamashi? Tails scrolled to another entry hoping for answers.

'14th of Summer's Apex of Year 198 of DE'

‘I find myself questioning Alain more and more these days. I know it is not my place to, yet I find my heart conflicted. Though he says what we have done is righteous and for the good of the world, and I know it must be, the path has been paved with blood at every turn. I am a warrior to my people first, and it has always been my duty to serve without doubt in my heart.’

‘I should not be disturbed by silencing the cries of babes who were unlucky enough to be tainted with Tamashi’s influence. It is not my fault that those who only just grew to their first summit at tender ages became their last lines of defense, merely kits at the tip of a sword. Yet they are cursed, merely pawns of the devil. It is he who sends children to their deaths and taints the souls of our people, not I. To give in would be heresy, and I would be no better than those Tamashi sullies with his wicked sorcery. I am not a monster.’

‘26th of Autumn’s Drift of Year 198 of DE’

‘The Spring months were joyous following last year’s crusade against the demon’s forces. Spry young reynards had returned from our mission across Northern Apotos to their wives and many spent nights alone in earnest. I myself admit I had a wonderful few evenings with my beloved Fleur. It was not long before the morning sickness kicked in for her, and I have cared for her for many months in anticipation for the arrival of our child. With the demon’s spawn decimated and he himself vanquished, the birth of our kit will be a blessing to accompany the new dawn.’

‘19th of Winter’s Depth of Year 198 of DE’

‘The birth of our child was long and arduous. I nearly lost my Fleur, but she has begun recovering. The bleeding was almost too much for her... Yet it is with stones in my heart that I hide the grave news from her.’

‘Our daughter bears the curse. I could not believe my eyes, and my heart shattered at the sight of the twin tails upon her hind. She is so small, so fragile. Her cries upon entering this world were undoubtedly pure, yet the darkness resides within her to be awoken at the whim of Tamashi. Damn him. For months we prepared to love this child, for months we did, and now the product of our love is a monster.’

‘We cannot hide this from Alain. The fact that another child has been born with the curse following Tamashi’s death bodes ill. It’s likely he will want my child killed after examination. I lost a part of myself this day... Damn it all.’

Tails was stiff with dread as he read on, namesakes quivering tensely. Gabriel’s journal was grim, far more grim than he expected any sort of holy scripture to be. The implications that a newborn *baby* as well as entire tribes of innocent people had been killed for their circumstances made him sick enough to need a break. With a bitter grimace he minimized the PDF window and scrubbed his face with his paws to relieve some of his tension.

The implications were huge for Tails; he wasn’t the only one! It sounded like there used to be others like him. The fact they’d all been killed off, or at least most of them, soured the discovery. Tails didn’t know much about the practices of the Order in modern times, if they killed kits from birth, but the fact they actively spoke out against his existence on as many news channels as

would listen he figured that they at least didn't approve of his being born. He never really asked for details, preferring to avoid the entire issue of his existence being seen as 'wrong' or 'unnatural' and focus on his adventures.

Yet the texts he'd skimmed through and Gabriel's journal indicated that some sort of curse permeated those born with twin tails. Tails felt fine, though… Well, that'd be a bit of a lie, actually. He felt terrible, but he wasn't about to subject himself to believing religious propaganda over some moodiness. He wouldn't ever let himself feel like he was wrong to have been born again. Never again would he hear those taunts and believe them.

A seed had been planted in his mind, but he refused to let it grow and fester. Tails stamped down his insecurities and growled softly in determination. He released his tension a moment later and sighed. Flopping back in his chair, he resigned himself to glare into the light of his screens, mulling over what he'd been able to stand reading.

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In the heavy rain, three figures stood vigil near the den of their ward. They had watched for many years, never straying from their duty to protect the world and serve their Order.

In the heavy rain, three robed foxes watched through illuminated windows in the night. The tallest bore eyes of crimson and dark purple fur, expression hard as stone as he scanned the property. The second fox was the smallest, her figure not nearly as dense as her companions. Her icy grey eyes pierced the dark as she watched their ward within his workshop, ignoring how the rain drenched through her robes and darkened her pale white fur. The third was average in build, but his bright pink fur laced with notes of maroon stood out even under his dark robes. He was the youngest, and it showed in how his acidic green eyes kept darting between windows and movements beyond the property.

"Sister Esme," the tallest rumbled lowly to the shortest, age apparent in the gravelly texture of his voice.

"Brother Cedric," the snow white vixen rang, voice as light as glimmering glass chimes in a gentle breeze. The tallest grunted.

"Is there any word from the Bishop?" he asked after a moment. If Cedric was annoyed or impatient, he didn't hint at it.

"No," Esme shook her head slightly, eyes still focused on her target.

"It wouldn't take that long, would it?" the youngest chimed in, his nasally voice grating against the sound of the rain, "do you think she got caught?"

"It will take as long as it takes, Brother Lucas," Cedric droned stoically, "Bishop Celine is representing our entire Order with this contact. I would be surprised if it didn't take time to make a deal."
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“It’s been, like, a day,” Lucas wrinkled his nose after a droplet of rain almost nicked it, “I’m cold…”

“We’re only meant to be watching one annoying kit, I’m afraid. If you want to complain, go back to the temple,” Esme’s voice chilled considerably, her gaze finally breaking from within the workshop to glare daggers at Lucas. The youngest fox swallowed roughly and averted his gaze.

“Well, whatever. We’ll have to kill him soon anyways,” he grumbled dismissively.

“I believe there will be no need, at least for now,” a new voice rang from the treeline behind them. All three of the foxes turned to acknowledge a new one.

“Bishop!” Cedric purred, “how did the meeting go?”

“Well enough. I believe we have the good Doctor on our team, for now at least. I accepted his terms of a favor in exchange for his services,” Celine purred back, shaking some of the rain from her hood, “I don’t doubt he’s already scheming on what to ask for a favor, but as long as he fulfills his end of the bargain then I’m sure the Order can satisfy whatever insane request he’ll come up with.”

“So we’re leaving the job of killing the kid to the guy who’s failed at doing it for years?” Lucas questioned with a disbelieving tone. Celine nodded.

“I know you aren’t well-read on the topic, so I’ll excuse your *incompetence.* Dr. Robotnik is a game player, Brother Lucas,” Celine explained sharply, “he could easily overwhelm Sonic himself if he played dirty, that is no secret. But he wants to eliminate him in an even tilt, without cheating at his game. He is intent on playing cat and mouse with him for as long as he is entertained by the challenge. However, he wasn’t opposed to eliminating Miles Prower in the slightest when we discussed the topic of my visit. I trust that the Doctor will apply himself to the task properly and not jump around hoops for fun.”

Thoroughly chastised, Lucas lowered his ears in quiet submission to Celine.

“So we wait for the Doctor to strike?” Esme asked. Celine confirmed with a stiff nod, getting a small growl out of Esme, “boo… I was hoping to send that abomination back to Tamashi in pieces myself.”

“It can’t be helped,” Cedric hummed, “are we to remain stationed with Miles until the task is complete?”

Another nod from Celine had Lucas groan quietly. The Bishop’s pupils narrowed in indignance, but she was too wet, cold and tired to waste her time giving the insufferable whelp a thrashing, so she pointedly ignored him.

“Once the demon is dispatched you three are to report as soon as possible and return to the temple quickly. I don’t want the Order to be connected to the deed if we can help it.”

“Very well. We will remain in vigil by your leave, Bishop,” Cedric bowed to Celine, followed by Esme and, reluctantly, Lucas.

“Return to your duty,” Celine dismissed, “I will return to the temple. Contact me via our usual methods if you have anything to report.”

With a flutter of silken fabric, Celine departed quickly as if she’d never been there, leaving the trio of holy agents to turn their eyes and ears back to the house before them. Movement in the living room windows signaled that it had been late enough for Sonic to rouse from the couch and drag Tails to his bed, giving the agents a rough estimate on the late hour.

“Ugh… The hedgehog’s trying to get the brat to go to sleep again,” Lucas drawled in disgust. Cedric sighed softly and rolled his eyes; they didn’t need commentary on what they could all very clearly see themselves.

“Do you think he ever exhausts of that routine?” Esme wondered aloud.

“I doubt it. If he has been charmed by Tamashi’s will, he would do anything to ensure the wellbeing of his vessel. Especially now that the whelp has reached his first summit,” Cedric explained with a grumble, “once the kit has been returned to his maker, I’m certain any sorcery cast will dispel.”

Silence fell on the trio before long, resigned to their duty to watch over the demon spawn. The agents observed with stalwart faith, anxiously awaiting the end of their duty at the hands of the Doctor… Or anything worth reporting whatsoever.

Watching the same kit for years on end as penance had made them eager to see the end of it, after all.

3

Tails found himself endlessly alone. A pool of cold dark water that reached the middle of his shins extended to a pale horizon that faded into an impossible dark above him. A heavy and humid feeling permeated the air, dragging his long fur down towards the dark pool below. As he breathed heavy fog billowed from his airways and sunk towards the black pool. His soaked paws began to numb from the cold, and it wasn't long before Tails began to shiver before hugging himself to preserve what little warmth remained in his extremities.

Was this a dream? Tails didn't typically remember much of his dreams, specters of the day's memories flitting about in blurred colors usually the extent of his experiences before they faded moments after awakening. The fact he felt fully aware was strange, and his senses felt as real as if he were actually standing in an endless abyss of cold.

Tails took a step, still weighed down by the heavy air, but found himself fully capable of moving. The dark pool moved with him, lapping against his legs and soaking his coat further. Even still he pressed onwards in a forward direction through the dark and grey environment.

It felt like he'd walked maybe a good fifteen minutes or more when a strange sight awaited him in the distance. It looked like… buildings? A ruined city with unfamiliar architecture towered, and as he moved closer more buildings faded in from the suffocating grey fog that dominated the sky. His inquisitive nature took hold and a million questions bubbled to the surface. It looked like nothing he'd ever seen before, which made the fact is was present in his lucid dream odd to him.

Even smaller than the towering buildings were moving humanoids that drifted like tumbleweeds among the streets beyond. Tails wanted to get closer to them, to ask them where he was and why their city seemed so strange to him. He picked up his pace towards the city, though he was well and truly freezing at that point, teeth chattering as he fought to make his limbs move properly.

Closer and closer still, and the humanoids took a more familiar shape. Ghostly mobian foxes of all shapes, sizes and ages bustled through the city. Their faces were slightly blurred, but the expressions he could make out were crestfallen or resigned and apathetic. He reached out to one mobian vixen that passed by, but his hand phased through her and she barely seemed to notice him at all. With her back to him as she passed, Tails froze when he saw four ghostly tails that dragged behind her.

Wild-eyed, Tails set his sight on another mobian, a stocky middle-aged reynard that held the hand of a small kit that walked alongside him. The older reynard possessed five bushy tails, two of them protectively curled near his kit who Tails could glimpse had two tails of his own. Tails cried out for them to stop, but they kept moving as if they didn't hear him. He cried out again as they walked further, but they didn't react to him at all.

Tails pitifully wilted as a small group of two-tailed kits playing some sort of game phased through him, leaving him with an empty chill in his chest that wasn't just the cold.

"They won't hear you," a deep voice rumbled in Mobian from behind him. Tails whipped around with a start, heart beating rapidly in panic. Before him was an extremely tall mobian reynard with wild and wavy pale yellow fur adorned with pale green markings. His white chest fur was fluffy, much of its length poking out in many different directions as it stretched all the way down his abdomen. The tips of his ears, whisker markings, forelimbs and bridge of his nose were a light brown shade. His saddened eyes were a set of bright seafoam green, though their luster was dulled significantly by the dead grey lighting. What was most startling about him were the nine long and fluffy tails extending from behind him in the shape of a peacock's display feathers. His expression was morose, yet a glimmer of curiosity illuminated his eyes, "I'm afraid they're only the echoes that remain. They aren't aware enough to commune with the living."

"Who… Who are you?" Tails choked out, his shivers becoming uncontrollable. The feeling of Mobian rolling off of his tongue after a long while felt strange, but he fell into it easily. The reynard shook his head sadly.

"My name… I have not spoken it for thousands of years. It has become legend only. I doubt it would be important for you to know," he rumbled softly. Tails wasn't about to give up, though.

"My friends call me Tails," he offered kindly. The reynard froze, looking at Tails with mild surprise. Then, he smiled softly through his sadness.

"My birth name is lost to my duty, but my people named me Tamashi," Tamashi's tone thickened with grief. Tails perked his ears with comprehension at the familiar name, but nodded in sympathy.

"I don't like to use my birth name either, honestly," Tails empathized, "it reminds me of… bad times."

"I struggle to comprehend such a bright young kit having struggled so much," Tamashi wondered, walking closer through the dark waters. He offered two of his tails in comfort, and to warm the young kit that shivered before him. Tails was shocked at the gesture, but realized he must've been shivering quite violently if the reynard felt a need to warm him at all. He said nothing about it though, grateful for the heat.

"My village didn't like me very much, when I lived there…" Tails started, "but I'm okay now… Sonic got me out of there a long time ago. He named me Tails. He's like my big brother," he chuckled at the comforting memory of Sonic trying to come up with a nickname for Tails when he discovered he didn't like being called Miles. Tamashi hummed lightly.

"I can imagine it was very difficult for you to survive such cruelty," the tall reynard commented, "I am glad you survived. I have been… alone here, for quite some time. It is nice to have company."

"You said your name was Tamashi," Tails scrunched his face, "I read some old texts. They said something about a demon named Tamashi, and how he cursed kits?"

Tamashi paled slightly and sighed deeply, visibly wounded by the remark. Tails bit his lip anxiously.

“That… Is grave news. I can only suppose such beliefs would be the product of Alain’s treachery, damn his hide,” Tamashi growled to himself, “I assure you I have no control over such things, especially not here of all places.”

“Where *is* here?” Tails asked cautiously, “I went to sleep and ended up here, but I don’t know why or how. Is this some sort of dream?”

“This was once the spiritual home of all kitsune, but it has since been tarnished beyond recognition, I’m afraid,” Tamashi was glad to move on from the previous topic, as evident by his lightened tone, “we would come here as we dreamed, furthering our studies and techniques while our bodies rested from the day’s trials. Many looked forward to meeting loved ones from afar in this place.”

“Kitsune…?” Tails rolled the unfamiliar word over his tongue. Tamashi didn’t seem to mind Tails’s cluelessness.

“That is what people called foxes who were chosen from birth by the spirits to carry a fraction of their power,” he explained, “all kits born with the spirits’ blessing possess two tails from birth, and grow more as they mature.”

“Is… Is that what I am? Why I was…” Tails’s mind halted at Tamashi’s words, his original belief of merely possessing a rare mutation pushing back against his newfound discoveries. Tamashi smiled patiently as Tails mentally fought with the newfound information.

“Indeed you are, young one. It saddens me to see our people’s lessons did not survive the test of time, or the test of genocide,” Tamashi’s voice darkened as he was once again reminded of the terror that had fallen upon his people. Tails looked up at him sadly, the journal entries making more and more sense as he spoke with the ancient spirit. However, one question raised itself above the others crowding Tails’s brain.

“…The texts I read said you were killed. How are you here?”

“Alain would likely be to thank for that, though I haven’t the slightest clue what he did to me. I do not believe I am dead, else I would be in a similar state to the echoes of my people,” Tamashi furrowed his brows in contemplation, “I am here as though I were merely asleep, yet I cannot wake and leave this place. I am entirely bound here, yet you appeared from the depths of your slumber upon reaching your first summit.”

“…My what now?” Tails questioned in confusion, racing mind only able to latch onto any new information regarding his condition. Tamashi chuckled heartily at Tails’s curiosity.

“A summit, little one, is a stage in the maturation of a kitsune. You’ve reached your first and grown your third tail, so I can guess you’re thirteen or fourteen years old. Every summit comes with great changes set in motion by the spirits that both test and guide us,” Tamashi’s eyes glimmered with glee as he spoke, seeming to relive his own summits in his mind as he educated Tails.

“What changes are there?” Tails dared to ask, fear and guilt clawing at his heart as he recalled his physical changes and his newfound senses and instincts. The image of him snapping at Sonic’s hand with his sharp teeth glared in his mind like a vengeful spirit. With his fangs having grown with his new tail, he figured that he could’ve easily taken off Sonic’s fingers if he hadn’t dodged in time.

“Well, when a kitsune’s first summit comes to pass, he or she is typically blessed with powerful instincts, accompanied by newfound sensitivity to the world around them. Oftentimes they will experience sharper and longer claw growth, their teeth will lengthen and their fur may even grow thicker, which allows them to better survive their environment,” Tamashi regaled eagerly, “some may begin to develop the ability to manipulate certain aspects of the natural world, or call upon spirits to aid them. I even witnessed a rare few shapeshifters in my time that could blend in naturally with all manner of beasts…”

Tails’s eyes widened as Tamashi spoke, shaking slightly from the implications. Magic. Real, actual magic. There was no way any of this could be explained by science, but damn it if he wasn’t going to try. Who were the spirits? *What* were the spirits? How did they choose which kits to give their abilities? Was it random or was there a process? Perhaps there was a voting process? Did spirits have a democracy? Did they need one?

“I think I need to sit down…” Tails mumbled, his legs becoming jelly in the wake of learning all he had. Tamashi chuckled, and an ancient stone bench materialized beneath Tails as he slumped.

“I am sorry, I suppose this would be a lot for one who had no knowledge of their nature,” Tamashi smiled apologetically, “it has been so long since I’ve spoken with a living being…”

“Huh? Oh, it’s okay,” Tails distractedly shook his head, “I guess I should’ve figured, I mean… Chaos Emeralds and all that. Makes sense there’s more to the world than just hard science.”

“I do not know that word… ‘Science’… My people were deeply in-tune with the world around us, we had no need for questioning our place in it when we could simply feel how the world sang to us in the wind and rain, and know our purpose,” Tamashi explained, “I don’t doubt things are very different from how they used to be, but I trust that the song still rings out. It saddens me that none were able to hear it and respond in kind…” he looked at Tails hopefully, “until you were born, that is. I have not seen a living kitsune come to this place in so very long. Something, or someone, has been keeping kits from their first summits. The fact you survived to come here is a miracle, but is a bittersweet blessing accompanied by great danger.”

“The Order of Saint Alain?” Tails questioned, hearing a low growl rumble from Tamashi at the name, “they’re the only ones that really don’t like me. They make it pretty obvious why, too…” he gestured his three tails, and sighed as his eyes rested on the newest addition, “they’re just gonna *love* this…”

“It is worse than I feared…” Tamashi growled, “if there are those who still follow Alain to this day, you will be hunted without mercy. You are likely already being watched.”

“I’ll be fine; Sonic’s been a huge mother hen since I grew another tail, he won’t let anyone break in,” Tails tried to encourage Tamashi not to worry, but it did little to settle the older reynard’s

concerns.

“You must be vigilant, Tails,” he warned, “if you are caught alone and unawares, you will be struck down. They killed tens of thousands of my people, many who lived beyond their first century and possessed great power. It will be child’s play to end a single kit barely out of his first summit.”

“Wait, *first* century?” Tails asked with exasperation, ignoring the warning in favor of the new tidbit Tamashi dropped, “just how long am I gonna live?!” Tamashi sighed in equal exasperation at his ignored caution, but answered diligently.

“I myself was four-hundred and thirty-five years old when I came here last, though I since lost count of the days and nights following. Many others were much older.”

“…Who was the oldest?” Tails tilted his head curiously despite his growing shock. He could live for centuries?!

“Koike, our wisest vixen, boasted two-thousand years or more. That was only when she began to keep count when the earlier calendar systems were created,” Tamashi’s eyes crinkled in mirth as Tails’s jaw dropped, “many of the elemental sages were older than civilization itself. But that is all gone now…” his joy evaporated in an instant, “now there is only myself, or what remains of myself, and you. If you are cautious and alert, you may live quite long indeed.”

“Okay, I got it, I’ll be careful,” Tails relented, though only because Tamashi was insisting on the matter. He didn’t really want to piss off an ancient fox spirit, but he also didn’t exactly plan on dying to a bunch of fanatics. What could they possibly do to him, anyways? Sonic may have been able to break the sound barrier, but Tails was no slouch in his own abilities, and he had his gadgets that could render a grown mobian unconscious within seconds. Then again, if he was caught off guard… Or if the Order had actual trained agents… He shuddered at the thought. Death had never been a serious threat because he was never the main target, but this wasn’t an Eggman scheme. These were actual real people who wholly believed he was a monster and wanted him dead.

“Thank you. That is all I ask,” Tamashi sounded relieved. The two sat in silence for a short while among the wandering echoes of lost spirits, until Tamashi spoke again.

“It seems your time to awaken comes,” he hummed observantly. Tails looked at him, confused. The elder reynard gestured to Tails’s namesakes that had begun to fade from the scene.

“Wait! Will I get to come back?” he asked urgently as his legs began to fade as well. Tamashi smiled warmly.

“You are one of us, the first to reach his first summit in many years. Your spirit will always return to this place while you rest from this point on, as the spirits of your ancestors did long ago,” Tamashi assured, “I will await your return, Tails. It was an honor to meet you.”

Tails tried to respond, but his mouth had already faded. He waved the last of his arm in goodbye. Tamashi just smiled and waved back as Tails’s senses drifted from the dream.

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Tails's awareness of the real world seeped into his limbs, but not wholly unpleasantly. Unlike the last couple of days, he awoke refreshed and without any sore stiffness. He just laid there in his warm bed for a short few minutes, reveling in the feeling of calmness he missed in the mornings.

As he laid there, the dream he'd had flitted through his mind like a traditional animation, Tamashi's words as clear and loud as if he hadn't been dreaming at all. Tails had struggled to absorb the information as he'd been given it, but now that he had a few minutes to himself to think, fear crept into his heart as it had liked to do the past couple of days. Not only was he reminded of his powerful changes, but he was reminded of the inevitable to come.

Tails would be functionally immortal. Among other unfamiliar changes, but that stuck out the most to him.

The thought made him feel cold dread. If Tamashi was to be trusted, which he'd given him no real reason to not believe him, then Tails could 'live quite long indeed'… Tails truly only expected to live into his sixties, maybe his seventies, if he wasn't struck down by Dr. Eggman or other world-ending threats that were a part of his typical routine. He knew Dr. Eggman couldn't exactly live forever and wasn't exactly the youngest guy around, so he'd planned to invent technical wonders of all sorts to his fullest potential once the Doctor had inevitably succumbed to age or disease. He primarily focused on non-lethal weaponry, aeronautics and ballistics to combat the evil genius since Sonic had first found him, but to think of what he could do beyond that gave him a jolt of excitement. Tails always wanted to make the world a better place through his inventions, but with his newfound longevity… Tails could invent for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. He'd watch cities rise and fall, nations crumble and reform, continents shift and crash together–

He'd watch all of his friends die.

Tails's eyes opened wide as the bone-chilling realization settled against his heart and mind fully. Sonic, Cream, Amy, Knuckles… Everyone except Shadow. Even Omega would deteriorate within a couple hundred years even with maintenance. He would watch them all grow old and frail while he would only become more powerful as the years pressed on. It made him feel sick to his stomach. Tails had always known he would outlive many of his friends, statistically speaking. Sonic was seven years older than him, and lived on the edge. It would have been a miracle if Sonic outlived him. But these things were never on Tails's mind before. He was young, all of his friends were young. Even Vector was only twenty-five, and quite fit for his age. Mortality in terms of age wasn't really a factor when Tails calculated how likely his friends were to meet their ends. He was more concerned with how deadly the inventions Dr. Eggman threw at them were, or the statistical likelihood of Dark Gaia's premature return. But age? Never age.

Now, age was all he could think about. Calculations flew through his head, categorizing each of his friends' medical profiles and last vital averages from their communicators off the top of his head at a mile a minute, but he had to mentally chokehold his fear before he was up and off racing to his workshop to spy on his friends. Tails had promised most of them when he had given them out that he wouldn't use their communicators to be nosy… But it was tempting to just take a peek. *No!* He
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wouldn’t violate their trust like that. His friends were fine, Tails was just being sensitive. How could he not be sensitive? He’d just been told that he would outlive generations upon generations and have the power to boast for it.

Power… That was a foreign concept to him. Though he’d been able to keep up with Sonic using his namesakes, Tails figured in hindsight knowing what he did about himself, it made sense he could keep speed with Sonic at all. It was more than likely his innate abilities simply gave him and edge. But his own unique powers? It thrilled him as it scared him to think he would have his own two paws to stand on in a fight, gadgets notwithstanding, if he could figure out how to summon forth his power. Tails wondered what powers he could manifest? Tamashi said that different kitsunes had different powers, what would his be?

Tails shook his head of some of his wild racing thoughts as he uncovered himself and slipped out of bed. He could answer all these things in time, and he probably had plenty of it. Sonic was indeed a huge mother hen since the previous morning, and he doubted the hedgehog would let him leave the house alone. Tails figured may as well just stay where Sonic would be the least worried, even if he felt leagues better this morning as opposed to the previous two. Tamashi’s dire warning also echoed in Tails’s mind, and he wasn’t about to go risking himself just yet.

Tails grabbed his socks and gloves as per usual, slipping on the former with ease before he slipped on his gloves with a practiced motion. However, a quiet ripping sound accompanied the feeling of his gloves snugly fitting against his fingers before the fabric fell away. Looking down, Tails wilted at the sight of his newly destroyed gloves. His claws had unsheathed fully without his noticing, and they had torn through his gloves like a knife through tissue paper.

“Okay,” he grumbled with exasperated impatience, “plan B, I guess,” he sighed and discarded his destroyed gloves into his waste bin as he opened a drawer in his dresser. A moment of searching later and he pulled out his old fingerless bike gloves. They were still fairly pristine, the grey and black fabric still firmly stitched together even after a couple years of haphazard storage in his drawers. Cyberpunk-styled yellow patterns composed of faux leather adorned the top of the gloves and provided protection for his knuckles. The gloves were far from his usual wear, but he figured he had little choice if his claws were going to continue randomly unfurling to make his life hell. He slipped them on snugly and fastened the velcro at his wrists, and tested the feel by flexing his hand in and out a few times. The dark fabric contrasted heavily against the white fur that covered his fingers and his bright yellow-orange coat on his arms, but he couldn’t concern himself with aesthetics over function without going gloves shopping. ‘*Good enough’.*

Satisfied with his compromise, Tails quickly brushed out his fur. He still wasn’t used to the feeling of his longer coat, but the brush ran through it well enough that he could will himself to ignore the change. His extra tail was another matter, though. The feeling of running the brush through the new limb was alien, even if his brain had adapted quite well to its presence motor function wise. Tails decided to rush through brushing it out as fast as he could to move onto the next stage of his morning routine.

Looking in the mirror hadn’t been easy. In fact, it was only stranger in the bathroom mirror as opposed to his little desk mirror. He’d avoided looking at himself in the mirror the past few days,

but he forced himself to look if only to drill the fact he was changing further into his skull. Seeing the changes to his fur pattern and new markings on his face only made the voice telling him he was just in a fever-induced nightmare in his head even quieter. Tails brushed his hand through his bangs, terrified yet curious of the new texture of his fur.

With a huff, he resolved himself not to avoid the rest of his routine, and pulled out his toothbrush and toothpaste. Opening his mouth caused him to pause, though. His teeth really had grown longer, mainly his canines, incisors and frontmost premolars. The teeth looked sharp and deadly as opposed to the rounded shapes they'd once been. While before he could certainly do moderate damage if he bit down hard enough, now he could probably efficiently kill someone with his new set if he tried. The stray thought of harming someone in such a brutal way, casual and matter-of-fact as if it were a mere fact of life, caused him to shudder and feel a bit sick. He squeezed his eyes shut and got his brushing over with as fast as he could manage.

Desperately, Tails tried not to think about what his new and unfamiliar fangs could do. The fact he had the teeth of a meat-eater at all before his 'summit' was disconcerting enough when he thought about it, but his new nature taunted him with them. His primary caregiver was his wild counterpart's natural prey, but he couldn't think like that. He couldn't. Even after he almost bit that caregiver's fingers off in one swift motion. *It would've been all too easy…* Tails had always strived for scholarly pursuits, believing himself above the primal remnants all mobians possessed. He thought himself better, he *had* to be better. With the new potency of his wild tendencies, he would need to try even harder. If he gave into the powerful instincts that nagged at him, he would be no better than an animal. Tails was *not* the monster the Order believed he was. He was not the monster he worked so hard not to be despite the echoing shouts and insults that haunted his memories.

Tails spit out the last of his toothpaste and finished his routine before exiting the bathroom quickly, not giving the beast in the mirror or his unfamiliar face a second glance. As he made his way down the stairs, he caught a whiff of maple syrup in the air and deduced that breakfast must've been prepared. It was with no small measure of guilt he realized Sonic had been the one primarily performing household chores while he had been under the weather.

Sonic typically didn't contribute much to the house's upkeep. Tails had always been the one that swept the floors, cleaned up dishes and kept them properly fed. Sometimes Sonic would insist on grocery shopping because he could do it far faster than Tails, or he would pull out their grill to make chili dogs like they used to, but Tails was always the one keeping things clean. It wasn't that Sonic wasn't capable, but it was an act of service from Tails so that Sonic could spend more time running and less time shackled to the house. After all, it was Tails's fault that Sonic had to have a house at all. He doubted that without him Sonic would've purchased the property at all, and the hedgehog was always on the move even after settling down to raise Tails.

"Hey, pal!" Sonic's voice rang from the entrance to the kitchen. Though his green eyes were bright and cheery, Tails didn't miss the underlying concern that broke through Sonic's optimistic grin. It was evident in how Sonic's ears weren't perked up entirely, the way his brows creased into that familiar line on his forehead and the way his smile didn't quite meet his eyes that he was still burdened with worry. The unspoken question, 'are you okay?', dampened the atmosphere.

Tails, though off-kilter and far from truly ‘okay’, let himself smile at Sonic. A real smile, as much as he could manage. It wasn’t full, it wasn’t beaming, but it was a smile. Sonic’s expression lightened a bit at the small but hopeful gesture.

“Good morning, Sonic,” Tails greeted lightly, making his way into the kitchen. He couldn’t help himself from eyeing the plate of fresh waffles piled up by the stove. Say what one will about Sonic, everyone could universally agree with the fact that waffles were the *superior* breakfast cake, even the villainous Dr. Eggman. Anyone who said pancakes could compare to the crisp squares that held the perfect amount of any topping were just lying to themselves.

“Mornin’ kiddo,” Sonic’s tone held an undercurrent of relief as he passed by and gave the fox a noogie. For once, Tails didn’t avoid it, even if it was usually humiliating for him. He wanted to hold onto any sense of normalcy he could find. Another waffle was soon flipped from the waffle maker by Sonic. Before Tails could hunger any longer he was provided with a plate of fresh waffles, topped with berries, maple syrup and powdered sugar. It wasn’t as pretty as when Tails usually made it, but aesthetics hardly mattered when it came to most meals.

Tails’s urge to dig into the waffles like it was the last meal he’d ever have was powerful, but his urge to not relive the moment he’d nearly torn into Sonic’s hand was stronger. Carefully and deliberately, he cut into the waffled with a fork and paced himself as he ate. Sonic soon joined him with his own stack of waffles. The day began as most others, sans nearly mauling anyone.

A few messages had come in on Tails’s communicator, finally. He just responded to them as if nothing were wrong, just exhaustion as Sonic had claimed before. His friends seemed to buy it, wishing him well.

Vanilla had called over Cream’s communicator to check in with him on video, saying he looked significantly better than he had and inquiring about his newly grown limb, general medical questions sprinkled in with conversational ones. She was astounded as she was stumped with its appearance, but Tails just said he was investigating its appearance. He didn’t really want to get into his dreams, or mention his research into the Order of Saint Alain. Not only would his friends think he was crazy, but he didn’t want any information potentially leaking to the Order after Tamashi’s warning. Though Vanilla didn’t seem all too satisfied with Tails’s answers to her questions regarding his tail, she didn’t pry as she bid him farewell right as Cheese sped by in the background of the video feed with a handful of (likely stolen) cookies.

The rest of the morning was full of Tails reading through more of Gabriel’s journal, though not a lot of information could be gleaned to help his specific case. The depressing conclusion of his daughter being killed by Alain shortly after birth and his wife Fleur killing herself soon after left him with a hollow feeling in his gut and a bad taste in his mouth. Tails soon decided that anything was better than suffering through another old journal full of bleakness, and eyed the old tome that Knuckles had given him for his birthday.

Tails carefully cracked it open, the ancient spine buckling a bit as he opened to the first page. The tome was indeed written in some ancient language. Though nobody was certain what language the ancient Echidnas spoke, it wasn’t any identifiable dialect of Mobian, or any known language at all

based off of the unfamiliar runes scratched out in faded ink. Tails knew what languages were spoken throughout Mobius, and the runes before him didn't seem to originate from any human or mobian language he could think of... But he wasn't about to just leave it to his brain. He pulled out his Miles Electric and attached the scanner to the back of it in a few practiced motions and held it over the odd text. A moment later, the scan was complete and the Miles Electric chirped brightly.

Tails frowned at the result on the display. 'Scan Failed - Unrecognized Input'. So it wasn't a known language after all. That made his job of translating the tome much harder, but not impossible. He'd need to contact some of his anthropologist colleagues in Spagonia about the matter, see if they recognized any of the runes displayed in the tome. As he thought, he figured it wouldn't hurt to contact a few anthropologists he knew that resided in Monopole either.

With Monopole's advanced tech labs he could send topographical and chemical scans of the paper and receive a comprehensive analysis. Though Tails's own workshop was incredibly advanced on its own, he couldn't deny that Monopole had him beat as far as technological and scientific infrastructure went. Perhaps he'd call in a favor, if only so he didn't have to pay hundreds of dollars and wait for months on end just to have his samples looked over. Tails could get both a rough estimate on the carbon dating of the tome *and* perhaps some idea of what language it was written in, two birds with one stone.

Tails rolled his chair up to his computer and quickly typed out a few gracious emails to his various colleagues. After sending them off, all he had to do was wait. Many were likely busy with their own projects or with their work as professors, so Tails opted to take a break from his studying for the day. It was after lunch already, and he didn't especially feel like cooking, but perhaps he could snack on some meat from the fridge while he stretched his legs.

A stick of salami in hand and significant flagging of self-respect later, Tails sat on one of the old lawn chairs on their front porch. The weather was fair, only light clouds high in the atmosphere passing by in the light breeze. In the waning summer heat of late September, the sun was not as oppressive as it was a comforting blanket on Tails's fur coat to compliment the chillier nights. He deeply appreciated the warmth as he gnawed on the stick of salami he'd fetched from the fridge. Sonic didn't like the stuff, but Tails considered it a bit of a treat. Normally he'd slice it up and have it on crackers, however his growling stomach and the alien urge to simply tear into it convinced him to just grab the whole thing and feel bad about it later. So what if it was eight dollars a pound? Tails definitely didn't regret the large bites he'd already taken out of the very *expensive* and *valuable* meat, nope...

"You know I could make you somethin' if you're that hungry, bro," Sonic leaned against the front doorframe, looking at Tails with great amusement. Tails tried not to look at him sheepishly– that would imply regret, after all.

"Nah, I'm good. Just having a snack," he began to gnaw off another large chunk, taking advantage of his newly defined carnassials. Though Tails was of mixed opinion on his new features, he wasn't stubborn enough to deny that some of them had practical use. Sonic raised his eyebrows at Tails.

“Okay, ‘snack’, got it,” he chuckled, “pretty nice weather, though. Ain’t as hot… P’rolly good news for ya with that new coat, huh?”

“Weather small-talk? Really, Sonic?” Tails teased. Sonic just rolled his eyes lightheartedly at the jab.

“Can’t blame me when my lil bro’s been radio silent,” Sonic joked back, though his tone wasn’t entirely cheerful, “been worryin’ me a bit, pal.”

Tails’s smile died on his muzzle as the realization hit. He really hadn’t been communicating with Sonic at all since his birthday, but could anyone blame him? He felt sick and sore and he didn’t know why until the previous night when he had some sort of spiritual dream-walk to a realm nobody knew about, meeting with an entity that many considered a demon, if they indeed knew about him at all. Though Tails was mostly certain of his experiences being as real as the world itself, he had been keeping them under wraps as to not worry his friends. But Sonic had been worried anyway, noticing Tails’s silence and unusual behavior.

So the question arose; did Tails tell Sonic? Immediately his consciousness shouted ‘no!’ at the idea; Sonic was a good friend and was a bit more trusting of odd or wild things occurring in the world, but he was also Tails’s guardian before anything else, and would a caretaker just accept that their kid had dreams most could only describe in fevers or psychosis? Logically, Sonic would probably be fine with it only because there was physical evidence to accompany the odd experiences Tails was going through.

The scared child that survived for four years in the wild out of sheer stubbornness begged Tails not to tell him at all. The logician and scientist that built several planes and hundreds of inventions while fighting a homicidal mad doctor reasoned that the result would be within acceptable parameters. The little brother scared of disappointing his big brother and idol fell to his knees and cried at the idea of worrying Sonic further, yet knew he could tell him anything. The honorable hero knew he couldn’t rely on himself forever and that he needed help. The wild beast beneath everything else that Tails had been ignoring insisted that survival came first, and the less people that knew of his condition the better.

Well, if the monster thought he should say nothing, then that settled it. Tails steeled himself.

“I uh…” Tails cleared his throat, “I’ve been… Struggling,” Gaia, it was so hard to admit! Sonic just looked at him expectantly, his eyes begging Tails to tell him what was wrong, “I just… I don’t know if I can fly like I used to. My face is so different, I don’t even know who I am when I look in the mirror,” it all began to spill out as he continued. Tears welled in his eyes as he vocalized everything that was gnawing at him, “I keep getting tangles in my fur, which is just *really annoying*, and it feels weird on my body every time I move. Half the time the tails I already *knew* how to move keep getting caught on the new one! My teeth keep getting caught on my lips, and they’re so sharp and long that I’m scared I’ll bite my tongue off–” Tails took a sharp breath inward, pupils narrowing as he recalled– “I almost bit you. Gaia, I almost bit you and I can’t get it out of my head! I keep feeling these… these feelings that aren’t mine!”

Sonic wasted no time moving to comfort his kid as Tails began to cry as he spoke. He just settled into his routine by kneeling next to Tails and rubbing his back comfortingly as he continued.

“Like how whenever I see food I just– I just tear into it! I don’t even use a fork! And when I get mad or scared these stupid claws come out and I can’t get them to go back in!” Tails wailed pathetically, curling in on himself slightly, “I have to wear these dumb gloves because I ruined my other ones! Everything’s so different now, I… I don’t want everything to change…”

“Nothin’s gonna change without your say-so, kiddo,” Sonic comforted, “way I see it, you’re still the same Tails that’s always been. You’re the smartest guy I know, you’re brave as all hell, and as stubborn as your big bro. I know it’s hard right now, and I can’t promise that I know everything that’s happening to ya, but I know that the guy in here-” Sonic put a finger to Tails’s chest, right where his heart thrummed rhythmically below, “–is the same guy I’ve always known. Sure you got some sharp chompers now, and your fur could be used to knit a Christmas sweater for Big, but it’s you. My amazing little brother that keeps me out of trouble and makes sure I don’t eat chili dogs every day. Nothin’s gonna change that, got it?”

Tails sniffled as he brought a hand to where Sonic had pointed. His eyes shimmered with tears, and the foreign feelings that had plagued him still remained, but they felt a little smaller than the raging titans they had been a few minutes prior.

“Got it,” a small smile spread on his muzzle, but fell a moment later, “that wasn’t everything, though,” he admitted, “it’s the hardest stuff, but it’s also…”

“Whatever it is, I’m on your side, buddy,” Sonic reassured, “nothin’s gonna change. We’ll handle it together like always, yeah?”

“Right,” Tails nodded once resolutely, but his fear still gnawed at him, “it’s hard to explain… I guess I should start from the beginning.”

Tails began with his awakening in the dark grey realm, from how his senses felt as real as if he were awake to the oppressive heavy cold. He explained how he thought it had been a dream until the buildings with unfamiliar architecture appeared, and the ghostly foxes that wandered who had multiple tails like he had. How they wouldn’t respond to him and simply phased through him like ghosts, and how cold and empty he felt when they passed through him. Sonic seemed to follow along so far, not particularly impacted by what Tails had been describing.

Then, Tails described the corporeal spirit that had spoken to him, telling him that the ghostly foxes weren’t aware.

“His name’s Tamashi, he said. Something about it being a title that superceded his real name.”

Tails delved into his conversation with Tamashi, slowly. The information Tamashi had given him was a lot for his brain, he couldn’t imagine Sonic’s reaction. Everything from how Tails wasn’t a normal fox, to how he would live for possibly thousands of years, to the dire warning Tamashi had given him when he mentioned the Order.

Sonic gazed off at the horizon, quiet after hearing Tails's story. He observed the sparse palm trees and palm bushes that dotted the Emerald Hill greenery that the house overlooked. He surveyed the distant hills rolling in and out of valleys and dips. He looked at the naturally formed loops he had run through for years on daily runs, their home a familiar sight that stood among the lush green. Tails knew the look that accompanied his scanning eyes. It was distant, unfocused, and uncharacteristic of the hedgehog unless something was either really bad or really complicated. Sonic had been processing. Sonic was *thinking.*

Finally, Sonic took a breath and smiled confidently.

"Here's what we're gonna do, bud," Sonic put his hands on his hips and turned back to Tails, "we're gonna keep doing the usual. Gettin' up, having breakfast, grillin' 'dogs, hanging with our friends. We're not gonna tell 'em anything, though. Not yet. Don't wanna risk the Order overhearin' anything, right?" Tails nodded, and Sonic continued, "next time you dream about this Tamashi dude, tell me. While you're in that place, see if he'll tell you anything more. I mean anything, even if it seems small or dumb or super nerdy, I wanna hear about it. 'Specially if it concerns you. I don't want you to hide stuff from me about this, even if you're scared it'll make me worry. S'my job to worry about you, got it?"

Tails groaned, but a sharp look from Sonic drew a reluctant 'yes sir' from the fox.

"We'll keep this under wraps for as long as we can," Sonic assured. While the words described the matter as if it were a tactic, the unspoken message was clear; 'I'll keep you safe'.

"Sonic…" Tails began quietly, "I don't– What about when you're… not here anymore?" his voice broke. Sonic's quills rigidly twitched, but his expression didn't change from that confident grin. In fact, his smile looked sharper. Tails could hear the hedgehog's teeth grinding.

"Doesn't matter. Not gonna let anyone get'cha," his voice hardened from the cool and relaxed tone he'd been speaking in before. It left no room for questioning or doubt, yet Tails's heart was full of doubt. Sure, it'd be easy to keep things quiet for a while, but the Order would make a move eventually. Even if Sonic had protected him from them, he would eventually grow old and pass on, leaving Tails to combat their new generation of believers alone. Sonic seemed to sense Tails's lack of confidence in him, and put a hand on his shoulder, "I won't leave you hangin', buddy. I promise it'll all be okay."

"…Okay. I trust you."

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The agents had watched diligently as they always had, and were rewarded for their loyalty.

"The brat's been communicating with Tamashi. You hear that? He was actually *talking* to THE fucking devil!" Lucas whisper-yelled in Esme's face. The white vixen snarled and wiped Lucas's spittle off of her face deliberately.
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“Yes, *I heard*, you twit,” she hissed, flicking some of the loose spit back at the younger agent with a claw, “Brother Cedric, what is your call?” Cedric gazed ahead at the hedgehog and cursed fox from the shadows of the bushes alongside the other two, his expression grim.

“If he communes with the demon, then it is prudent that Bishop Celine be made aware. Brother Lucas, can we trust you to deliver the news?” Cedric looked meaningfully at the youngest agent, who was glaring daggers at Esme. He shot to attention and saluted.

“You can trust me, Ceddie!” Lucas eagerly grinned.

“Don’t call me that,” Cedric deadpanned, “go, be swift about it.”

With Lucas’s swift and silent departure back to their camp, Cedric turned back to observe the pair of mobians on the porch.

“The hedgehog may be a problem when the time comes,” Esme noted coldly. Cedric grunted noncommittally.

“He is easily handled. Dr. Eggman may refuse to play dirty, but I have no such reservations. It is merely a matter of catching the child alone, and there are plenty of methods we can employ to ensure he is unguarded when the Doctor strikes.”

“I will trust your judgement, Brother,” Esme bowed her head, “for the Order.”

“For Alain’s light.”

4

A/N: Sorry this is a bit of a different format than previous chapters. Sort of a small anthology of different points of view and lore before he head into more action! I hope it's still an enjoyable read!

Celine was *not* happy, not in the slightest.

“Thank you for your report, Brother Lucas,” her voice strained out, already seeing red, “you may return to your duty.”

“Roger that, Bishop,” Lucas’s irritating voice rang tinnily over the communicator, the fizzly hologram fading a moment later. Celine held still for a moment, then shouted in frustration and tossed the expensive holo-comm against the wall of her office. She stomped against the luxury carpet towards her desk before she slammed her hands against the surface of it.

“Dammit!” she seethed. The kit had been speaking with Tamashi himself! Before she could simply excuse the kit’s cursed nature as a matter of circumstance and he would die none the wiser to his malady. Now, Miles was actively conspiring with the demon, and she could no longer leave it to chance. Who knew when or how the demon would strike? Miles Prower was known worldwide for his high intellect. She had no idea what the greatest mind next to Dr. Eggman and the evil spirit could possibly be planning. Celine had no choice but to act first… Although she yearned to simply kill the treacherous child herself and ensure the world’s safety (and her status among the Order), as Bishop she answered to a higher power other than Alain himself.

“Celine?” a deep, motherly voice sang from behind Celine, causing her to turn around quickly in shock. As luck would have it, the alabaster sand fox mobian standing in the doorway was the very one she had wanted to speak with as soon as possible. Cardinal Minerva was taller than most foxes, with an ample frame that lent to her motherly aura that she exhibited to all members of the Order. Perhaps her comforting aura was assisted by her apparent age, as she wore wrinkles on her face that spoke of her wisdom. The robes of the Order draped over her form to just barely touch her paws. The Cardinal was the highest ranking official within the Order Hall stationed in the United Federation, and who Celine reported to.

“Cardinal… Alain must have sent you to ease my worries,” Celine sighed, relieved at the sight of her superior and friend. Minerva smiled warmly and made her way into the office, eyeing the damaged communicator at the edge of the room. She came so close to Celine that she could smell the vanilla and lotus flower perfume that Minerva wore.

“What troubles you, child?” she ran a paw over Celine’s shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“I have received terrible news from our agents observing Miles Prower, Cardinal,” she tensed up at the thought, “it is… worse than we feared. He has been communing with Tamashi, somehow. We don’t know how or when, but our agents overheard a conversation between his guardian and

himself confirming such.”

“And this worries you?” Minerva queried gently. Celine nodded with some hesitation, “fear is natural when we are faced with the darkness of the enemy, dearheart. It’s what keeps soldiers alive in the heat of battle, and protects us in times of strife. What’s important is that we do not let our fear guide our course.”

“I feel we should still contact Dr. Eggman, implore him to move the deed up his schedule,” Celine pressed, worry tugging at her features, “we don’t know what Miles and Tamashi are planning. Shouldn’t we prevent any hardship?” Minerva hummed thoughtfully, though she still looked at Celine as if she were looking through her very soul.

“Perhaps, but would that not be what the enemy expects of us?” she proposed, “Tamashi thrives off of darkness and negativity. It’s his realm to cloud and confuse, to scatter our numbers and let fear’s seed blossom. His evil is in all of us, and when he stokes the shadows it can make it hard to see the way to chart our path…”

“You suggest we wait…?”

“I suggest that we stay the course. I imagine Tamashi is aware of the information he has let slip through his pawn, and will be waiting for us to make an impulsive move to compensate for the knowledge we now bear,” Minerva spoke sagely, “do not let your fear drive your actions. We will wait to see the results of our alliance with the Doctor, and keep an ear to the ground.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Cardinal… Your wisdom humbles me,” Celine smiled with relief. Minerva just smiled sweetly and brushed away some stray hair from Celine’s face.

“Remember, there is nowhere we cannot go with the light of Alain in our hearts.”

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Awakening in the cold grey world was faster each time, Tails noticed.

At first it was suffocating to breathe the stale air, the black water felt heavy and his limbs refused to cooperate the longer he resided within the dream world. However, as he had returned each night for the past few weeks since his Summit, he found the world to be less and less oppressive on his spirit. Tamashi had said it was a matter of practice even with the choking miasma that permeated the realm, and that as he attuned himself with it he would find it easier to remain.

Tails had grown to look forward to his visits with Tamashi every night. While he was initially intimidated by the tall fox spirit, he found that despite his age Tamashi was actually interesting to speak with beyond matters of life and death. Tamashi spoke of the world long before, of legends that predated history that were lost with their speakers. Traditions that had been lost were found again between them, Tails eagerly learning all there was to know of his ancestors and the world before his time.
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Tails in turn regaled Tamashi with concepts and inventions that he couldn't begin to imagine, spoke of the world's cultures that had changed so much since his time and the adventures he'd gone on with Sonic and his friends. Tamashi did his best to understand more modern concepts, though Tails suspected he deeply struggled with the concept of microwaves. Tamashi did seem willing to learn *some* English, but much preferred Mobian in most cases when it came to complex topics and words.

What was the most fascinating topic between the two foxes were the changes that awaited Tails in the future, however. For all the talk of toasters and ancient flower festivals, Tails was an eager student for his own biology.

"Your first summit as I described before is just that, the first," Tamashi explained one evening, "the Spirits gift all kits who come of age only a taste of what awaits to prepare them. You have already experienced most of what comes; your senses are stronger, your coat is thicker, your claws can rend even Soleilan steel, and your instincts become powerful and difficult to control. You will likely develop tangible powers based off of the intensity of the instincts you've described to me, but they can develop any time following the first summit, and there's no telling how they will manifest.

"The second summit is easier compared to what you've gone through. It is experienced when one reaches the age of majority, around eighteen to twenty years. Along with your fourth tail, your powers thus far will reach their apex. You will feel strong, and most likely you will cease to age at that point in time. Some kitsune in my time aged to their third or fourth summit before their immortality found them, but most remained as young as their second summit for all time. This is also the stage kitsune would see one another as eligible mates," Tails wrinkled his nose at that, rousing a laugh from Tamashi, "worry not! Many kitsune never found their other half, or preferred not to trouble themselves with such things. It is unlikely you would find a vixen or reynard your age anyhow. I know of no others," Tamashi cleared his throat awkwardly, then continued, "many kitsunes did not survive beyond this summit, through recklessness or accidents. A spirit may very likely accompany a kitsune from this point forward throughout their lives to ensure their survival. The spirit abandons their place in the spiritual realm to accomplish this, so protecting them in turn is expected of young kitsune.

"The third summit is an important one. It is typically experienced by kitsune at some point between their thirty-fifth and forty-fifth years, where the Spirits call upon them to take a journey through their realm. The journey differs greatly between kitsune, but many who traversed the realm of Spirits awoke with greater power, and greater understanding of the world. Some were never the same, for better or for worse. Regardless of the journey, a kitsune always emerged from their slumber with a fifth tail. Many would obtain a secondary aspect of their power. For example, my primary power was always fire," Tamashi held out his paw, and a moment later a bright yellow flame flickered to life just above it. Tails watched in awe as it danced then faded away, "but on my third summit, a new aspect of my soul was unleashed. I found myself capable of controlling the wind itself to accompany my flame. The freedom the power bestowed upon me was incredible, and the knowledge I was given by the Spirits refreshed my vitality and widened my understanding of the world around me.

“The fourth summit is seen as the easiest of all summits, at least spiritually and physically. It typically occurs between fifty-five and sixty years. Along with one’s sixth tail, they would receive a message from the Spirits themselves. The contents of the message differ greatly. No kitsune ever received the same message for their fourth summit. Some described dire warnings, or final words from loved ones who passed on. It was always greatly personal for them, emotional and often humbling since few of us ever communed with the Spirits regularly.

“The fifth summit is perhaps the most difficult following the first. A kitsune is invited by the spirits at seventy years to bare their entire soul to them, in exchange for a tertiary power. If a kitsune fails this summit, or refuses to bare their soul, they will not receive a tertiary power. It hardly mattered if one failed, except for our greatest trainees who coveted the Spirits’ power to fight. All kitsunes would receive their seventh tail regardless of the result of their exchange. For me, I bared my entire self to the Spirits. It was a greatly emotional experience, and many things I tried to deny about myself were brought to the surface. In reward, I was capable of controlling a fraction of the sun’s power while it shined,” Tamashi eyed Tails’s awed expression, who was staring at him with wide and wonder-filled eyes, though the kit didn’t interrupt him with the plethora of questions doubtlessly flooding his mind.

Tamashi couldn’t blame Tails for his excitement; he had grown up without knowledge of his heritage, and had based his knowledge of the world on the ‘science’ he had spoken of at length when he visited. Tamashi certainly knew the world was always more than it seemed, before the word ‘science’ Tails had brought up was even coined. To him, ‘science’ was as unexplainable as the energy of the world was new and seemingly unexplainable for Tails. In time, if the Spirits were merciful to provide it, Tamashi hoped to learn as much from Tails as the young kit would learn from him. It had been many, many years since he had taken an apprentice, but he found himself increasingly fond of the inquisitive little fox. Perhaps it was from bitter loneliness, but Tamashi looked forward to their talks that always became lessons for the both of them.

“The sixth summit is when a kitsune earns their eighth tail, and a task is given by the Spirits on their ninetieth year. This task can be nearly anything. My master’s lesson was to locate the new Tamashi, which was an elusive and long-fought journey for her. It was many years before I was born that she began her search. A kitsune’s task will last as long as they live until they complete it to the Spirits’ satisfaction.”

“What was yours?” Tails asked curiously. Tamashi smiled wistfully in recollection.

“I was to spend my days teaching the next generations of kitsune throughout our lands and protecting the fox tribes without the Spirits’ power. It was through this task I eventually became the Tamashi of my people… Of course, when my people had perished, I assumed my task would never again be satisfied for the Spirits,” Tamashi appeared deeply saddened for a moment, then returned to the present moment with a smile in Tails’s direction, “it seems though our teaching grounds are long overgrown and our scrolls turned to dust, my mission persists in the limbo I’ve found myself in.”

Tails smiled in turn at that.

“I can’t promise I understand everything yet, but I *can* promise I’ll hear you out,” he offered kindly. Tamashi nodded once in gratefulness.

“Ah, but it seems we’ve gotten off track. Let me tell you about the final summit, and the most dangerous… On a kitsune’s hundredth year, they earn their ninth and final tail, and they will be called upon by the Spirits for a final time to complete their last test. The Spirits thus far would have given all of their gifts to a kitsune, and the culmination of their training and knowledge would be tested by defeating a great foe within the Spirits’ realm. Every foe will be different, with a different manner of defeating it depending on the capabilities of a kitsune. Mine was an Ettin, one of many beasts that roam the veil of our world. I succeeded in defeating my foe, but some kitsunes do not succeed. This was seen as spurning the Spirits’ gifts, and they would be forever marked by their failure and exiled from their tribe.”

“That seems harsh,” Tails commented sadly, “what if something out of their control happened? It seems like a lot of pressure for one person…”

“It was simply our way. I recognize that such a concept may be alien to you in the modern world, but the gifts given to us by the Spirits were precious to us, and to fail such an important task despite them was seen in a poor light,” Tamashi reasoned, “but our ways are all but memory, now. Perhaps when you find the next kitsunes, it will be in your interest to forego such practice in the new world. I would not fault you for that.”

“If I find any, I think I’d like that…”

Tamashi nodded, then smirked,

“Now, let me tell you a little bit about the time my master and I visited a small mortal fox village for a coming-of-age ceremony… My master had just left me alone to watch a flock of sheep that the chieftain’s daughter typically guarded, but some kits were running around the pen with ceremonial dyes…”

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“Miles ‘Tails’ Prower Kitsune Log number… two. I traveled to that strange place again. I can confirm that it was not a drug trip as my blood sample was entirely clean. I double checked. The details of the dreams I’ve had line up too consistently, to boot. Tamashi seemed happy to see me, even though we barely know one another. If his story is true, then he’s been alone for thousands of years. I think I’d be happy to see someone after that long, too. I was cold again in that realm, but he did that thing with his tails again to keep me warm. His are super long… will mine get that long? A-Anyways, I noticed the discrepancies between the journals kept by Gabriel Durand, among others preserved by the order, and Tamashi himself. The most glaring difference is the nigh-biblical depiction of the devil Tamashi versus the kitsune Tamashi’s own accounts of events. At this point in a personal sense, I am somewhat inclined to trust Tamashi’s accounts over those of a religious organization already known for their hysterical exaggerations of world events, such as the awakening of the Gaias. Scientifically, the odds of any of this happening are already far outside of my purview and I don’t know what to think anymore.”
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[Silence crackles over the tape for a moment.]

“I tried to ask Tamashi about my changes again, and he assured me it was normal… I don’t feel normal. I’d be fascinated by the changes if it weren’t so terrifying. I feel no adverse effects from my enamel growing and changing shape as it did, and there’s no spinal trauma or muscular damage to be seen from the growth of my… additional appendage. It’s like- I won’t *use the word magic. Tamashi used the Mobian term for it once in our talk last night, but I can’t. There has to be some scientific explanation for this. Tamashi seemed confused when I used that word, science, like he had no concept. He asked me what it meant, if it was a part of the ‘strange human tongue’ I described to him. I questioned him on if his culture had some sort of process for confirming objective information, like the scientific method. He looked at me like I was crazy and said he just* knew *things about the world in his gut, like instinct. I can confirm that the civilization of ancient kitsunes was not technologically advanced in the slightest.”*

“Sonic seems worried still, but I’ve been trying to act like everything’s fine. It really isn’t. I can’t believe I broke down like I did… I never cry. Never. I’m not just some kid… But I also never snapped at him like I did the other day. Gaia, what was wrong with me? Tamashi said it was normal, again- none *of this in any way normal. Maybe for him, but not for me. I’m well aware of mobian latent instincts in various species, such as Sonic flexing his spines under stress or my winter nesting urges, but what I experienced was way stronger than any sort of instinct I’ve felt before. It felt like I lost myself for a moment… Like I almost wasn’t even there. What if something else happens, and I don’t stop myself in time? I’m not dangerous… I won’t let myself be a danger to the people around me. There’s got to be a way to dampen these feelings somehow…”*

“Th-That’s the extent of my findings so far. Miles ‘Tails’ Prower Kitsune Log Two, end.”

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Sonic never thought about his family. After all, there was nothing to think about. He had been alone his whole life, running as long as he could remember. His earliest memories were of a mudslide and a broken house, but no faces came to him no matter how long and hard he recalled. No warm embrace of a loving mother, no protective essence of father. Not even the squabbling and snuggling of other young hoglets came to his memory. There was a heavy rain, a great crash, and from then on all he could do was run.

It was only around his tenth year he first started sparring with the upstart villain Eggman, and a year later that he’d found Tails and decided to give the kid a friend to count on. Sonic hardly expected to keep the fox around for as long as he did, and nothing could have prepared him for the role he’d stepped into once he realized he was attached at the hip with him. His other friends had never seen them apart long back then. Knuckles noticed that Sonic had been a caretaker to Tails, and teased him relentlessly for raising a kid even though he was still a kid himself. Sonic shut that down every time; Knuckles was barely a teen then, and still guarded the Master Emerald.

Amy was always supportive, and watched Tails when Sonic needed time to himself or if a mission was too dangerous. She probably loved Tails as much as Sonic himself did, if her spoiling him rotten every time she babysat was any indicator. When Cream, only three or four at the time had
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begun spending time with Amy, she was fast friends with a younger Tails. She didn't quite understand all of Tails's mechanical jargon, but it was a relief that Tails had a friend more his age.

Sonic had met Vanilla shortly after Tails had become terribly ill with a flu. The kid was horribly feverish, so Sonic had stayed with him around the clock. Cream had noticed Tails's absence… That was when they met Vanilla. The fact Vanilla was already a medical professional and first responder helped them both when they came down with diseases, and when they got into scary scrapes on missions. She helped out when she could with Tails, but she had her own child to care for with Cream. Sonic often discreetly approached the adult rabbit about advice in raising Tails, but as Tails matured he found himself less concerned.

Until Tails passed out on his thirteenth birthday.

Sonic had tried to keep as cool as he could, but the fact Vanilla had no clue what was happening only amped up his stress. Even after Vanilla cleared Tails following the sprouting of an entirely new tail, Sonic refused to sleep in his own bed that night. After he sent everyone home with assurances he'd update them, he watched over Tails the whole night. He tried to get some winks of sleep, but Tails's desk chair was terribly lumpy, and his heart heavy.

In the morning he did his best to drop the news to Tails, but the kit ended up having a panic attack regardless of his pathetic attempt at dropping the bombshell easily. Sonic was never particularly good at feelings, so he just did what always worked. Still, Tails was distant following that, and the kid had been acting… odd. But what was Sonic to do? He was in way over his head, he always had been, and he didn't know where to start.

Sonic was only twenty; mobians his age were in college or working jobs, but he was hardly a 'normal' example of a young adult who grew up with parents and a steady education. Sonic taught *himself* about the world, he taught *himself* how to survive, he taught *himself* how to scrape by- and when Tails came along, he made sure that kid never had to rely on only himself to survive. Amy would probably say that makes Sonic more than qualified, but…

Sonic would look at families as he passed by on the street. 'Real' families. Families with two parents, a kid or more, hand-in-hand walking down the sidewalk to a park or a store. He always felt a hollow emptiness in his gut, knowing the children would never want for anything and grow up in a stable environment. Sonic tried, he really did. He bought a property in Emerald Hill, he stocked the fridge, he gave Tails his own workshop and as many books as his ravenous mind could read. All things considered, Tails was definitely more educated than Sonic ever was.

Yet, he felt guilt.

Because he couldn't provide as much support as he felt he needed to.

Because Tails was hurting and he couldn't do anything about it.

Because Tails was suddenly involved in something he couldn't understand, and that scared the *shit* out of him.

Because he was always caught between being a brother, a friend and a father and he didn’t know which he needed to be for Tails.

One thing was for absolute damn sure, though. No matter how many evil schemes or world-ending disasters struck, where Tails went, he would go.

5

With the steady coming chill of October, leaves began to change into their seasonal colors. It wouldn't be long before the first frosts settled over much of the United Federation's Northern regions, including Emerald Hill. The nearby town of Emerald Ridge, where many of Tails' and Sonic's friends lived, was already bustling with farmer's markets and seasonal excitement. Though Halloween was still a few weeks away, young mobians and human children alike were buzzing with anticipation. Many public businesses had placed Autumnal decorations up for the occasion.

Tails, though, had hardly noticed the changing of seasons. His attention had been entirely consumed by his recent changes, and the history of them. Most nights he would be met by Tamashi in the strange spiritual realm. The elder kitsune and Tails would speak of the past and present, and of friends and family. However, in the past week, some nights Tamashi had been nowhere to be found.

Tails had figured it'd be unrealistic for Tamashi to want to speak with him every night, even though the trend of such had been consistent for their first few weeks after meeting. Another part of him, though, suspected that Tamashi being held in the realm for thousands of years had consequences, and his random failures to appear had something to do with it.

The stark, oppressive atmosphere and sudden disconnections from the realm were perhaps not just a consequence of lacking numbers, but a consequence of strain. Tails felt that the realm had its limits, like a server. It functioned like one, at least; it uploaded and downloaded data- it once hosted the minds kitsune who had access to it, and imparted knowledge to them. Yet, in the past, it was a constant ebb and flow of kitsune who were present as they rested and left as they awoke. The realm had breaks, it had varying periods of strains. For the two-thousand or more years that the kitsune had been gone, though, the 'server' had been overloaded with data constantly. The echoes of lost kitsune souls wandering unaware within the realm had constantly bogged it down, likely contributing to the realm's failing 'health'. Not to mention Tamashi's constant presence; Tamashi could not offload himself from the 'server', he was unable to awaken in his real body. Perhaps constantly hosting the presence of hundreds of thousands of dead mobians and one living kitsune had worn it down.

That was Tails's theory, anyway. He hadn't voiced that possibility to Tamashi yet, not sure if the very spiritual fox would like to hear a youngster's theory that his sacred magical realm of knowledge and respite was like a modern computer. It really was just a theory; he had no evidence, just a hunch. Still, Tails thought it would be nice to try and figure out why the realm was so uncomfortable to be in, and fix it. That was what he did best, after all. He was certain the lost echoes were the key, but he needed to gather evidence. Perhaps he could try interacting with the echoes further? Tamashi said they didn't see or hear the living, but perhaps he hadn't tried the right stimuli before. Tails would have to gather himself to write out an experiment, but his mind was split between studying his biological changes and theorizing when and how his 'powers' would

manifest.

Tamashi was certain that Tails's powers would manifest any day after his summit, but it had been just over a month and Tails had felt no different. Tails himself was still struggling with the realization he'd develop them at all. While he didn't discount the existence of his friends' powers or the Chaos Emeralds, Tails was quite certain they weren't 'magic' as much as they were understudied aspects of mobian biology and alien technology.

It wasn't uncommon for mobians to possess strange abilities due to the Chaos Emeralds' influence over their evolution; super strength, heightened mobility and some measure of elemental control were uncommon but not unheard of. Even so, those abilities had a root cause that was known and at least partially studied. Tails growing a new limb out of nowhere and supposedly developing powers of his own without the influence of Chaos energy was entirely unknown…

Tamashi had stated that the 'spirits' caused these changes, but Tails had absolutely no reference point for what that had in terms of his biology… Were mobian foxes, and thus kitsune, just naturally more susceptible to some particular wavelength that the spirits could tap into? Was there more to the spiritual home of the kitsune, perhaps a method of communicating with spirits through it? Of course, there was nothing for him to read about to find out about any of it. Tails would have to study it the old fashioned way, somehow. Yes, somehow, with absolutely no tangible starting point save the unresponsive echoes of a dead culture, his own biology he didn't even understand on a good day, and the journals of an obsessive genocidal cult that hated him since he was born.

Tails snarled and lashed a clawed paw out against his cluttered desk to sweep along its surface. He expected his papers to go flying, tools to drop to the concrete floor and a mess in his immediate future. What he didn't expect, however, was the swirling mass of blue fire laced with a strange energy that arced out from his paw and through the air surrounding his desk and keyboard. The blue glow billowed like a fiery mist, levitating his tools and papers in the air for as long as it manifested, then everything dropped with a loud clatter and fluttering of pages once it faded.

Tails froze, breath caught in his throat. Then he uttered, to his credit, his first curse in at least a month.

"What the fuck."

~~~

"Aether. Perhaps better known to the common fox as spirit fire," Tamashi's voice echoed through the empty realm of the kitsune, "I have not seen such power manifest in… well. A long while," he coughed awkwardly at the subtle reminder of his predicament.

Tails had a tough time reading the elder kitsune as he told him of the strange reaction he had experienced in his moment of anger, but something about how his sea green eyes lit up told him that it was maybe not a terrible thing.

"So… It's uncommon?" Tails tried with a measure of fear and fascination. Tamashi nodded, reaching a hand out to summon a mote of 'normal' magic fire in his palm pads.
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“Fire is not an uncommon element for a kitsune to wield; it is one of the elemental cornerstones of the world. Wind, water, earth, energy and fire are all elements that a number of kitsune from my time would be capable of controlling, sometimes multiple at a time,” Tamashi began to fidget gracefully with the mote of flame, juggling it between his claws and catching it in his other hand, “many kitsune would first develop such powers upon their first summit. The physical realm is one that all can witness for themselves, regardless if they are spirit-touched or not, so manifestations of its baser forms were often seen. However, matters of the spirit were different…

“When a kitsune is born, they are blessed by the spirits to carry their gifts for all time. Yet, only a choice few would be selected to be spiritual emissaries, perhaps every other generation. I am one such emissary; a Tamashi is a spiritual guide for his people, a teacher of the old ways, and provider of succor in times of great need. Despite my power, I was not the first line of defense for the kitsune, nor the spirits themselves. Instead, they blessed their strongest-attuned with powers of the soul of the world itself, something so pure and untouchable that even in the darkest and most dour of locales a kitsune Senshae could call upon their full strength with naught to fear.”

Tamashi looked upon Tails with equal parts trepidation and awe as his mote of flame dissipated and he regarded the young kitsune fully.

“What is that…? The word you said… ‘Senshae’…” Tails furrowed his brow in confusion as he repeated the word uncertainly. It was one word of many he was unfamiliar with that he’d needed Tamashi to elaborate on. One couldn’t be two-thousand years from the past and communicate entirely perfectly with a modern person, after all.

“Senshae were mighty kitsune. Secretive, even to myself. Their ways were of the spirit and the world’s breath, true bridges between the spirits and the world manifest in the form of great martial skill. There is no true translation of their name, not that I could interpret for you in your modern tongue,” Tamashi knelt down before Tails, still awestruck, “they were kitsune such as you, born with the favor of the spirits and gifted the ability to perform great feats of good on behalf of them, to fight imbalance in all its forms. No two Senshae were alike… Save the collective ability to manipulate the very essence of existence: Aether. All things are said to be constructed with it, by the spirits in collaboration with the Great Ones before the first dawns. The blood of the world itself flowed in the veins of all emissaries, but Senshae wielded Aether in combat.”

Tails was at a complete loss for words as he processed the gravity of what he’d been told. What in Gaia’s name did any of this mean for him?! That he was unique, he knew already. Oh yes, the only fox on the whole damn planet with two- now three- tails! But wielding the supposed blood of the universe to fight evil like some kind of super hero was a bit much, even he had to admit. Chaos Emeralds? Slumbering, worldeating gods? Space lasers? Half the damn moon turned into crumbs of the world’s most fucked up cookie? Sure! Chosen one of the spirits he didn’t know about until a couple of months ago? The ones who were apparently responsible for all of creation alongside Chaos himself? The ones who blessed an entire race of now-dead mobian foxes? Him a chosen one of said spirits that an entire church thought was a demon? Hell, just shoot him now!

“I…” Tails hadn’t even noticed he began to shake. Tamashi just kept looking at him like he was, what, special?! Tails wasn’t special. Tails knew he was the farthest thing from special. He tried to

make the most of it, sure, but this?! He couldn't handle this.

"Tails? Are you alright?" Tamashi finally realized that Tails wasn't taking this as well as he was, and began to lift a hand to comfort him. Tails's eyes widened and he scrambled back, hugging himself so tightly he felt his claws begin digging into his skin. Numb. Everything was numb, too much, too much…

"No- I- You're wrong. This is wrong-" Tails gasped and began to run in the opposite direction, ignoring the pull of the thick black water below his feet or the foggy forms of long-dead kitsune that didn't, couldn't, notice him. He didn't stop, even as the distant fog became as close and tangible as the spirits he'd run straight through to escape the inescapable. He snarled and clawed at it as he ran, until black consumed him…

…And he woke up from his bed tangled in blankets as the sun's first rays gleamed through his window. Tails gulped in breath after breath, until his chest seized and a wailing cry rushed through his clenched teeth. Tails clawed and raked at his blankets until he was sufficiently freed from their hold, pieces of fabric and threads tangled around his claws. His claws, his claws, his claws! Tails snarled and grabbed his head, ignoring how they dug into his pelt and drew the slightest drops of blood. Everything was wrong! WRONG! His claws were wrong! He stumbled away from his bed and towards his door, determined to get away. Get away from what? It didn't matter!

"Woah, buddy! What's-" Sonic's voice emerged as the door cracked open, and Tails's eyes went wild. No! He couldn't be here, he couldn't see him like this! Tails stumbled back from the opening door with an airy whine, and flipped towards his window in desperation.

"Tails! What the hell, kid?!" Sonic exclaimed as he watched his brother claw the curtains wide open and fumbled with the lock. All he had heard was a shout and scrambling from his room before he rushed in to see what had happened. Sonic approached, hands splayed out non-aggressively as Tails finally slammed the sliding window open. The fox paused, eyes staring down at the drop from the second story.

Sonic took the pause as an opportunity to examine Tails from a distance. His normally bright and focused sky blue eyes were opened widely and slitted, unseeing as they were during his old panic episodes. His fangs were fully on display, dangerous and glinting and ready to tear into anything the kit saw as a threat. For the first time in years, Sonic wasn't seeing Tails, his wicked smart and kind little brother. For the first time in years, Sonic saw a scared fox kit with no idea how to handle his wild and dangerous instincts.

"Tails. You need to tell me what's wrong-" Sonic started, but his voice gave Tails a sudden jolt, and he could only lurch forward to grab a small handful of fur at the tip of the kit's tail before he was leaping out of the window frame, "no!"

Sonic wheezed in disbelieving fear as he leaned abruptly over the window sill, eyes trained for movement down in the bushes below. A moment later, the bushes rustled and Tails leaped fully out of the leaves, bounding on all fours out of the yard and away, into the jungled treeline a few hundred yards from their front door. If Sonic had any doubts about Tails's speed with his new tail, they were utterly crushed as Tails sped not unlike a galloping wolf on the hunt through the grass

and into the underbrush within a solid fifteen seconds from his emergence from the bush.

It took Sonic's mind a moment to catch up with the fact, but he finally sighed heavily and staggered back from the window upon realizing Tails was probably unharmed from his fall if he could ditch the property in less than the amount of time it took for Sonic to cross the entire continent of the United Federation.

His fear remained, however, upon reminding himself that Tails was definitely not in his right mind, on the run, and afraid. Sonic needed to find him, but… He sighed heavily once again, face in his hand as he realized he was out of his depth. They had to be careful who they went to for help, in case the Order was listening, but… There was a Doctor who already suspected that they weren't telling her everything, and she of all people would know to keep things quiet, right?

Sonic set his face in determination as he lifted his comm watch, the one Tails had built years ago, and made his decision.

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Tails was running. He had been running for a long while. For how long he didn't know. A few hours at least, maybe two? It was only when his paws screamed for mercy that he slowed his sprint to a canter, a trot, then he collapsed next to a babbling brook under the shade of the tall tropical trees far above. His breaths were heavy, labored.

Tails had kept up with Sonic since he was just a toddling kit, he had great endurance, but even he had to rest… Especially after such an unusual method of locomotion. Tails had never really run far on all fours before. Many mobians didn't partake as much as they used to, preferring to be seen as more human than animal, Tails included. When he was a little kid, sure. He ran on all fours to escape his tormentors on West Side Island plenty, but after having Sonic as a role-model for so long, he preferred bipedal methods of travel.

Still, Tails felt a burning ache in muscles that had gone mostly unused for a decade, and it felt… nice. Like his tails burning after a long run with Sonic. It was an ache that brought strength, improvement and endurance. After catching his breath, the sting in his paws became more apparent. Tails hissed as he looked down at his hands, the pads skinned and bloodied and covered in muck. That was just asking for an infection… He grimaced and shuffled close to the brook. It looked clean enough. Not sterile, obviously, but it'd serve to at least rinse the mud and rotted leaves off of his hands.

As he felt the cool water sting against his pads, he let out a tense sigh that unbunched his shoulder muscles. Gaia, why'd he do that? Any of that? Tails recalled the crippling terror and boiling anger in his heart at the sight and feeling of his claws, his teeth, how loud and bright everything was… Sonic, worried and asking what was wrong… The look in his eyes as he leaped out of the window. Tails squeezed his eyes shut in pain and anxiety at the recollection, and focused instead on washing the dirt from his wounds.

Best to focus on the logic of his situation, and what he could change in the moment. Tails chuckled darkly at that; for a guy so intent on logic and facts, he'd been especially emotional the past couple
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of months. Then again, how could he not be? His entire world had been flipped on its head, essentially. In fact, he was probably doing pretty good, maybe even the best he could be doing. Powers, a long-lost culture, Tamashi, immortality…

Tails choked. Right, immortality. That was… that was a big one, wasn't it? If he thought his whole life was ahead of him already just a year ago, he was in for it. He didn't have fifty, sixty, even a hundred years. He had… Infinity. As long as he could go. What would the world be like in two hundred years? Hell, a thousand? Ten thousand, if he made it that far. The only reason his mind didn't swim with the mere notion was the cost.

The cost of life. Not his life… The lives of his friends, the ones not blessed by the spirits. The ones who would age, live happy lives, but ultimately deteriorate. Tails would watch them all grow old, die, and be forgotten. Why? Why, Chaos, why? Why him? Why him of all people? Not Knuckles, the last of his species, who could guard the Master Emerald for all time? Not Sonic, who would save the world far into the future and beyond?

No, it had to be him. The weak fox in his brother's shadow, who was nothing without his technology, who was afraid of something as silly as the concept of destiny… Afraid of being chosen. Of being important.

Tails felt his eyes grow wet, stinging as tears formed and fell. He watched the droplets splash into the stream, salty foreign fragments becoming part of the whole. Insignificant. He heaved with sobs, wailing his pain out for the whole jungle to hear. The sun was nearly at its apex in the sky when his sobs broke into sniffles, then nothing but quiet breaths.

"Tails?" a familiar voice, one usually accompanied by tragically unfunny nicknames and taunting jeers that sounded so soft in that one word. Tails didn't flinch or even look up from his morose stare at the stream.

Leaves crunched and foliage brushed against fur as a blue form made its way into the small clearing.

"Brother," the voice spoke brokenly in a tongue it rarely used, then reverted back to English just as quickly, "what's goin' on?"

Tails nearly felt himself begin to cry again at the rare term of endearment. Sonic hadn't bothered to learn as much of the mobian tongue as he did beyond basic phrases he'd known from his own childhood, but he could remember back when he was just five, when he was studying. It was late, way too late for a little kit to be awake, when Sonic had called him that for the first time and Tails had understood. Tails laughed, not fully understanding what that had meant for him at the time. He said that was a silly thing to call him, that Sonic was not a fox, so how could he be his brother? Sonic just smiled and told him it meant that he'd always look out for him, even when he was being silly and staying up past his bedtime…

"I…" Tails's voice cracked from strain, "I'm not ready."

"For what, buddy?" Sonic asked gently, lowering himself to sit beside Tails in front of the stream.

“Where do I start?” Tails snarked bitterly, “I’m not gonna die.”

“Hopefully not any time soon,” Sonic snarked back with a small smirk.

“Yeah, but I’ll still have to watch you and Amy and Knuckles and Cream and everyone get old and die, and I’m just gonna be… stuck here!”

Sonic didn’t respond to that at first. He sighed, prompting Tails to look at him uncertainly.

“I’m gonna die,” he stated bluntly. Tails opened his mouth to object, but Sonic raised his palm, “nope, not gonna hear it. It’s the truth. I’m surprised I’m still here, honestly. I’m gonna get old n’ creaky eventually, Chaos willing. We already knew I was gonna go first, kid. You’re nearly half my age,” Sonic looked at him with an unreadable but firm look, “We’re all gonna die. Fact of life. For as long as I’m here, I try to do the best I can to make my life have meaning, but it’s gonna happen. Whether it’s a stray shrapnel or I get to be an old man. But you know what?”

“...What?” Tails dared to ask. Sonic smiled and put his arm around him.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said simply, “I’m here now. So are you. We have all this time for as long as I’m here to hang out, kick Eggman’s butt, and make the most of life. I have my whole life to watch you grow up, y’know? Knowin’ you’re gonna be doing amazing big-brain Tails things long after I’m in the ground… You can’t know how proud I am, lil bro. You’re our future. You’re already building stuff that I can’t even dream of, and you’re just gonna get better and better at it. You’re gonna change the world, Tails. I know it. You already changed mine.”

Tails couldn’t help the sob that escaped his lips. Sonic just hugged him tightly into his side as he began to cry again. Sonic just held him, rumbling in that low churring purr that he would emit on long nights when thunder cracked and rain poured. It was perhaps ten or more minutes before Tails finally tapered off from his outburst, and shakily sighed.

“...I spoke with Tamashi again,” Tails mumbled, “well, I have been. Nothing really… I’unno, something important happened? Last night.”

Sonic just quietly listened as Tails recounted the outburst that led to his powers emerging, and the subsequent retelling to Tamashi, and the discovery of Tails’s role in the world. He was quiet for some time, eyes closed as he let Tails talk. Only when Tails finally ran out of words did Sonic take a breath… And then smile.

“Well…” he grinned, “doesn’t sound like all that big a deal to me.”

“What?” Tails leaned away, taken aback, “it’s a huge deal!”

“Nuh-uh,” Sonic smirked, “I got the cool powers first, which means I call the shots. I say it’s not a big deal, and y’know what else?” his smirk grew as Tails gawked at him, “I think it’s really badass.”

Tails paused in shock, then belly-laughed as Sonic brought him in for a classic S-tier noogie.

“Lookit my lil bro, all grown up with three tails and makin’ papers float with his kickass kitsune powers!” Sonic laughed, his noogie becoming a teasing tickle against Tails’s sides. Tails howled with laughter, begging for mercy between breaths before kicking Sonic away playfully. He took a moment to catch his breath, then looked at Sonic with a bright smile.

“You mean that?”

“What, you bein’ badass?”

“No… Um, about me being… grown up,” Tails elaborated shyly. Sonic snorted.

“Well you still got a bedtime ‘till I say otherwise, but you’re gettin’ there, kiddo,” Sonic’s smirk lightened into a genuine smile, “I’m proud of you. Don’t forget that.”

Tails’s eyes shimmered as he looked at his brother, really looked at him, and saw the truth.

“I won’t.”

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It turns out one pep talk didn’t solve everything, but that wasn’t the point. Tails knew he had a long way to go. If his scars didn’t fade after nine years, they sure as heck wouldn’t go away after a heart-to-heart and a hug. Still, he felt he was in a little better of a state than he was when he jumped out of a second story window into a bush. Sonic’s words made him feel a little bit more prepared, at least. It wouldn’t make the pain of his situation go away, but maybe he could reframe it in his mind, like Sonic had.

It hadn’t taken long to return to the house, despite the fact Tails’s tails were still out of commission. A piggy back ride later and the familiar front yard and two-story house welcomed them both back into its welcoming proximity.

“Well!” a motherly voice exclaimed. Tails’s brows shot up as Vanilla of all people stepped out from the shade of the porch, “you boys certainly know how to keep my life interesting, that’s for sure.”

“You… called Vanilla?” Tails nervously fidgeted as Sonic led him across the yard to the front door. Sonic grimaced and stopped to kneel and look at Tails meaningfully, as though he were pleading for him to understand.

“I’m gonna be honest pal, we’re way out of our depth here. I know we gotta be careful, ‘case the Order is watching…”

“We know they are,” Tails supplied. Sonic chuckled darkly, and nodded.

“Right. So… I only told Vanilla. She knows we gotta keep this stuff under wraps. Nothin’ medical goes on your record ‘till this all smooths over.”
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Tails nodded, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. Right. It was just Vanilla… They went way back, didn't they? She wouldn't do anything to put them in danger.

"Are you going to let me in, or do I have to do my check-up in the sun?" Vanilla joked as she stood by the front door. Tails laughed nervously as Sonic sped up to let them into the house, and approached her sheepishly. Vanilla tutted and bent down to get a better look at the fox.

"Well, you certainly don't look too worse for wear at first glance," the rabbit trailed her eyes down, and gently held one of his hands up to examine his skinned pads. She hummed sympathetically, "You rinsed it properly?"

Tails nodded, then cringed and lifted his other hand in a 'so-so' gesture. Vanilla rolled her eyes and shook her head in exasperation.

"Well, we'll get you patched up soon, dear. Just answer all of my questions honestly, okay?"

"Yes ma'am," Tails quickly answered. Vanilla tutted again at that.

"None of that, mister. You aren't in trouble. I just need you to be honest with me from now on."

"...Yes, Vanilla," Tails tried again. Vanilla smiled brightly in response.

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"Well, I can't see anything… Outright wrong," Vanilla summarized as she looked over her notes, "obviously a prime concern is muscular and skeletal strain following your… transformation. I can't see any, and you're reporting no pain or discomfort. Your vitals are average for a kit your age. Beyond excess fur growth, claw length and your dental changes I can't identify any other abnormalities…"

"My-" Tails's voice cracked as he began, "uh, my senses. I… Everything's louder. More clear? I can smell things I couldn't before."

Vanilla looked at him clinically, then nodded, writing something more down in her notes.

"Then there stands to reason there's perhaps neurological changes as well…" Vanilla paused as she wrote, eyes glancing to another page, "you mentioned… increased instinctual urges?"

"Um," Tails quickly looked at Sonic, who just nodded. With a sigh, he looked back at Vanilla, "yes. When I see food, I just. I need to tear into it, like some sort of… animal. I get these flares of anger, or fear, and my claws just come out."

"But you don't have anything else? Such as hunting urges?"

Tails's stomach dropped. He didn't, not yet. What if he did?

"N-No," Tails bit out, "is that a concern?"
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Vanilla remained strictly clinical as she wrote down more on a fresh page.

“Not necessarily, but you’re describing neurological symptoms and I want to get the full picture of what you’re experiencing so I can help,” the rabbit looked up at him sympathetically, “you’re sure the extent of your instincts are just exaggerated? Nothing else?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Tails asserted, his mind running wild. Hunting urges? Would he be reduced to a wild beast by the end of his changes? Tamashi had assured him it was normal, but how normal was it for a modern world?

Another glance at Sonic, and the hedgehog looked as cool as a cucumber, like everything was right with the world. But how much of that was a facade for his benefit and how much of it was the real Sonic? A wink and a smirk later, and Tails was no closer to knowing.

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Tails was back. He didn’t feel entirely ready to face Tamashi, but he needed to confront his fears. Tamashi… Everything he had told Tails was larger than life, bigger than himself, and it scared him. But he needed to confront it. Heroes didn’t run and hide from the call of adventure, even if guys like Sonic and himself spat in the face of destiny… Destiny had come. If Tamashi could help him to harness his power, to control it, then he wouldn’t need to be afraid of the Order, or of himself.

Yet, when Tails approached the ruined city, the tall reynard was nowhere to be found. The spirits roamed as they always did, ghosts doomed to repeat a constant cycle of their lives before the end. He wandered through them, watching kits play and adults perform their various daily tasks. If one forgot that they were echoes of long-dead foxes, it seemed almost… peaceful. Domestic, in a way. The last remnants of a culture, locked away in a realm only he could traverse freely.

One spirit stood out to him, and he curiously approached her. Through the haze all spirits possessed, he could see she possessed six tails and golden yellow fur much like his own. Bright sky blue eyes glimmered just beyond the veil as she looked ahead to something he could not see. Suddenly, she smiled and laughed. Tails looked ahead to see a dark grey reynard with six tails and acidic green eyes approaching, a smile on his muzzle as he embraced the golden vixen. As they hugged, their forms faded away, and the vixen appeared in the same place she had been, staring ahead where the dark reynard would appear.

“Her name was Usami,” Tamashi’s voice startled Tails from his stupor, and looked up to see the tall kitsune looking sadly down at the vixen.

“How do you know?” Tails queried, much to Tamashi’s humor.

“All echoes carry a remnant of a kitsune’s soul,” he explained, “I cannot know her life in its entirety, but fragments are carried. Her name was Usami, and she left behind three mortal daughters.”

Tails looked at Usami sadly as she approached the dark reynard once again in a loving embrace.
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“Did they survive?” Tails wondered aloud. Tamashi chuckled.

“I see a deep resemblance in you and in her. I think that perhaps, despite all odds, the Soleil spared them and they went on to grow and have families, which eventually resulted in a repeat in the cycle… A young kit born with twin tails.”

Tails smiled at the idea that Usami was his ancestor, and he was carrying on her legacy. At the reminder, he sighed and looked at Tamashi meaningfully.

“I’m sorry I ran. I was afraid…”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Tamashi remarked, “I was afraid. Afraid for my people, afraid for myself, afraid that there would be none left to challenge the injustice wrought upon the kitsune. Fear is natural in all manner of life, from the mightiest kitsune warrior to the smallest mouse,” Tamashi smiled wistfully as he knelt down to look at Tails eye to eye, “what matters is that we do not let fear control us. You will be afraid, Tails, but you are alike to the greatest heroes of our time because you do not let it dictate what you do. You fight this ‘Eggman’ because it is the right thing to do, not because you aren’t afraid to face him in battle.”

“What if… What if I can’t live up to it all? What if I mess it up?” Tails asked brokenly. Tamashi hummed thoughtfully.

“Then you will mess it up, and you will fight to fix it, because that is the kind of fox you are,” he said earnestly, “you must understand, you are the last of us that can fight. It is a heavy burden, but one I know you will rise to meet, because you’ve been preparing yourself for longer than you even realize to do the right thing. There is no failure until you no longer rise to fight.”

Tails thought about that for a long moment, then Tamashi lifted a hand and pressed it against his chest, right where his heart would beat in the physical world.

“You are not what the Soleil have made you, Tails,” Tamashi’s voice carried a strength that Tails couldn’t help but emulate in his posture, “they have beaten us, broken us, but our legacy carries on in the warrior you have become. This is who you are. A warrior, a fighter, a survivor.”

“…Well, Sonic always said I was too stubborn for my own good,” Tails smirked, confidence restored. He sighed a moment later, ears flat to his skull as he considered his next step, “Tamashi…”

“Yes, child?” Tamashi’s voice rumbled in Tails’s body. He looked at the tall reynard’s nine flowing tails, accepting it would be him someday, and that sublime thought urged him to be brave just this once.

“Will you teach me? How to use my powers, how to… How to live up to you,” Tails finally looked at Tamashi straight in the eyes. The ancient reynard smiled, genuinely, and nodded.

“It would be my honor to pass on my wisdom, one last time,” Tamashi stood to his full height, “you will be my final apprentice. The spirits have led us to this outcome, and so I will honor it with all I

have left in me.”

6

[The tape crackles and stutters for a moment before the audio feed stabilizes.]

“Miles ‘Tails’ Prowler Kitsune Log number four. It’s been a while since my last log… I haven’t been doing well. I mean, obviously I wasn’t, but it’s gotten worse. I can’t exactly go out in public without protection. I haven’t bothered leaving the proximity of the house in the past… Gaia, two months? Almost three? Except for my, uh, excursion last week. I guess the more time I have to think about all this, the scarier it gets. Sonic offered to take me to one of the big cities on the coast, get away from things for a bit, visit some old friends. I told him that was a stupid idea. The Order will be looking for me in population centers like that. Too many unknown variables, unaccounted for risks. I hope I didn’t hurt his feelings too badly… I don’t want to push him away. Not like before.”

“I know I need to focus on staying sane through all this, I know. Jeez, I can’t even escape it in my dreams. Tamashi isn’t around every night, but seeing all those wandering souls, it's just- it’s not healthy, constantly being reminded of what was lost, what’s at stake. What I could’ve had… No matter how hard I try, I can’t help but think if things could’ve been different for me if the Soleil tribes never found the kitsune to begin with…”

“Well. Anyhow, my findings have been fascinating, and utterly terrifying. I can apparently control an energy Tamashi called “aether”, the so-called life-blood of existence itself. It’s rare, apparently, and extremely powerful.”

[A heavy static sigh is heard over the recording.]

“This chosen one crap is gonna drive me up a wall… It already drove me out of a window.”

[A wry chuckle is interrupted by a blip of interference in the recording.]

“Tamashi wants to train me. I want to be trained, honestly. I’m scared of what I can do, what I might do, without properly learning how to control this. How to control my instincts. I hope--”

[KZZZZT]

[KZZZZZZZT]

[-PLAYBACK FAILED - DATA CORRUPTED-]

[The recording cuts out entirely.]

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“Aether is not just the energy from which existence originates. It is in everything, yes, but also everyone. It is a primordial force, the very anvil on which all things are made, including the soul. The teachings and techniques of the ancient Senshae are lost, but the lifeblood of the world remains as it always has and always will. To tap into your power, you need only look within yourself, and not the past.

“To claw flesh, to make blows with one’s fists and to put force into an intentional attack is not enough. One must feel themselves and their place in the world, to recognize that they are one part of a great and infinite whole. Feel it now, as you draw breath in both this realm and in the physical realm. Feel the heartbeat of the world, breathe in tandem with it, and release.”

Breathe in, breathe out. Tails kept his eyes shut, willing away his multitude of thoughts and focusing on only the chilly autumn breeze as it passed by his sensitive ears and into the rustling leaves above. The running stream as it flowed eternally through the jungle, the twittering flickies far above in the canopy, the slight warmth of the sun in the sky through the gaps in the canopy. It was all part of a greater whole, as was he.

Finally, he released a long breath and opened his eyes. With practiced ease, he flipped himself around into an aerial thrust, using his tails as a boost as he threw his paws into a high kick. From the force of the kick, a familiar billowing cloud of glowing blue flame laced with a foreign charge fanned out from where his paw had kicked. It lingered for only a moment in the air before it dissipated.

A wolf whistle from behind him broke his concentration, and his focused expression softened into a sheepish grin.

“Good stuff, buddy! You really learn fast, huh?” Sonic praised Tails from his position against a nearby tree trunk. Tails rolled his eyes and stretched to keep himself limber.

“Well, practicing in my sleep definitely helps speed things up,” he commented. Sonic shrugged.

“Pro’bly! I wouldn’t know, I don’t talk to ancient kitsune masters in my sleep every night,” Tails looked up at Sonic, who was staring at him with a teasing expression, “why not show me some of your moves for real?”

Tails hesitated at that. He hadn’t sparred with anyone before, and he wasn’t sure if his new powers would hurt Sonic or not. Sensing his hesitation, Sonic smirked and sped around to Tails’s side, throwing a fist through the air. The change in air pressure was enough warning, and Tails dodged Sonic’s blow expertly.

Tails opened his mouth to complain, but Sonic offered him no quarter, and threw a kick towards the fox. Seeing he wasn’t going to be getting out of a sparring session, Tails leaped over the sudden kick and landed some distance away on his paws. Before Sonic could reposition himself to attack again, Tails spun his tails around in a semi-circle motion. From the rush of his namesakes, a large cloud of aether billowed out and towards Sonic. It wasn’t meant to be an attack as much as it was meant to be a deterrent, but Sonic simply sped away and around the cone of energy to push Tails from behind.

Upon being destabilized, Tails growled and flipped around to throw his palm towards Sonic, ensuring his claws were entirely sheathed as he did so. His palm met Sonic's forearm in a parry, and Sonic twirled underneath to punch Tails in the stomach. He stumbled back, but the blow wasn't truly meant to harm, and he recovered his breath quickly.

"Left yourself open," Sonic teased. Tails growled at himself for such a stupid oversight, and reset his stance, legs splayed to secure himself in his position and his arms set to defend. Sonic did the same, although in a much less refined manner. The brothers circled each other, both waiting for the other to make a move. It remained like this for a good twenty seconds, before Sonic swept himself low to the ground to sweep at Tails's legs.

Tails adjusted his weight and jumped up, using two of his namesakes to boost himself a little higher. After Sonic's sweep met nothing, he began to fall and positioned himself to land on Sonic's back. The blue blur yelped at the sudden weight on his back and stumbled before he adjusted, giving Tails an opening to grab around his neck and restrain one of his arms. The pair landed with a wet slap on the muddy earth, but Tails kept his brother's limb firmly behind his spiny back. With his front firmly in the mud, Sonic couldn't find an apparent opening to escape, and he looked back at Tails with a devilish grin.

Tails didn't stand a chance. Sonic curled up suddenly, and Tails lost his grip on Sonic's arm as he spun through the mud. He fell on his rump, and got a face full of mud splatter as Sonic sped away and up a trunk in spin dash form. Tails recovered quickly, planting his paws back in the mud and spitting a spattering of mud out of his mouth.

"That's cheating!" Tails cried, still trying to get the taste of mud and leaves out of his mouth as he reoriented. Sonic unfurled, hanging from a branch above.

"No such thing as a fair fight, lil bro," Sonic snarked and wiggled the branch a bit with his weight as if testing its strength. Tails glowered at him, tails lashing in irritation.

"This isn't a fight, though!"

"Isn't it my job as your big bro to prepare you? Just doin' my duty!" Sonic punctuated his statement with a smirk and a calculated launch from the tree, directly flinging a kick at Tails. Tails saw it coming from a mile away, of course, and leaped into the air to meet Sonic's reckless kick with a countering blow with his palm. They met blows with great fervor, both refusing to budge until gravity reared its head to return them to its influence. Tails flipped back, using his namesakes to propel himself away. Sonic flipped a few times in the air before landing firmly on his feet.

"Well, if it's a fight you want…" Tails glowered playfully as he landed some distance away. In a moment of determination, he bared his fangs in challenge. An ominous blue glow began to creep out from under his chest fur and trailed down his arms and legs, concentrating along where his veins spread throughout his limbs and body. What was most striking, however, was the illumination of his pupils to the same blue.

"Woah…" Sonic faltered in his steps, eyes widening. A measure of fear wormed its way into his heart at the sight, before he squashed it with no hesitation. That was just Tails's power, he was

going to be fine!

“It’s a fight you’ll get!” Tails’s voice rang with an unfamiliar resolve that neither had heard from him before, and then he was off. Unnatural speed mixed with the ominous glow of his body caused Sonic to hesitate for just a moment before he was dodging a blaze of aether that licked dangerously at his spines. He barely had time to recover before a lash of the same fire billowed around his legs. He felt nothing, not really, just a strange sort of warmth…

“Gotcha,” Tails smirked. Sonic looked up at him in confusion, before the influence of the aether coalesced and he was flung twenty feet in the air by his ankles with all the grace of Eggman fleeing a battlefield. He cried out in alarm before he flailed wildly in the air in such a manner that he could spin dash to the nearest tree branch.

“Jeez, kid!” Sonic laughed breathlessly, “you’ve been holding out on- woah!” he barely dodged as Tails rocketed towards him in a flash, aether spitting out from behind him like he was wearing Shadow’s rocket boots. The impact passed Sonic and splintered into the tree trunk. A glance, and the tree was marred deep into its living wood with long gashing claw marks still glowing blue. Uh oh.

Sonic didn’t have time to stare at the tree any longer as Tails whipped to face him. The glow was stronger, more violent and striking against his coat, and his eyes were slitted akin to his prior panic episodes. That fear wormed its way into his heart again, nagging him, telling him something was seriously wrong.

“Buddy-” Sonic tried, but he was leaping away as Tails lashed his claws out at him, not in a focused and calculated hit, but in a frenzied and wild arc that would have seriously injured him if he hadn’t been so quick. As he landed on a different tree branch, Sonic banished that fear he felt and focused himself as best he could. Tails needed him, not to be afraid of him, but to be strong for him.

Tails scanned the trees until his dangerous eyes landed on Sonic, and an ugly snarl ripped its way through him. Sonic took a breath to prepare himself, then smirked like he always did, if only to assure what remained of Tails that everything was fine. Then, it started again.

A dance, a waltz between a brother who had lost himself in his power and a brother who wouldn’t let him go without a fight.

Sonic deflected claws and kicks, dodged snarling teeth aimed for his throat, and avoided the flashes of aether that tried to tear him apart.

Tails was lost in himself, the fear of failure and the excitement of combat giving way to a baser instinct that would not be denied any longer. He had no rhyme or reason to his blows, just a desire to live, to survive.

Amidst their fighting, Sonic had been luring Tails towards a bundle of vines. It was a long shot, considering his flurry of sharp claws, but he had to try and restrain Tails and calm him down somehow.

As Sonic angled Tails to a particular low-hanging bundle, he lost his focus for just a split second in his calculations, and that's all it took. Two of Tails's glowing claws swiped along his right collarbone and across to his left ribs. Sonic cried out in alarm and grit his teeth against the burning acidic pain that was no doubt from the lingering aether in his wounds. His hand flew to the claw marks, and fell against a nearby hanging vine that held his weight.

Pulling his hand away, traces of fading aether and fresh blood coated his white glove, but he could still breathe and stand, so it couldn't have been too severe. He noticed that the onslaught of claws and teeth had stopped, and looked up at Tails to see the kit staring at the same hand that had clawed his chest. His pupils had dilated once again, indicating the frenzy had finally ended, but the glow remained.

"H-hey, you with me, pal?" Sonic spoke hopefully. Tails looked at him with a start, a shuddering gasp rattling through him as the glow finally faded entirely. The kit's eyes instantly flashed to the wound across his chest, and the tears were almost instantaneous, "woah, woah, hey, none of that! S'okay, buddy. Guess I just underestimated you, huh?"

"N-No… No! It's not okay!" Tails blubbered, hugging himself as he backed away and into a tree. Ugly sobs filled the jungle as the flicky song returned to the air, a stark contrast to the feral flurry of power and claws that had once filled it. Sonic grimaced sadly and checked his chest to ensure it wasn't bleeding too profusely. With a hand to his wound, Sonic approached the crying kit slowly.

"Oh G-Gaia… I knew it… I'm a monster-" Tails creened sadly. Sonic's breath paused in that moment, and he growled.

"No, you're not!" Sonic's voice came out a little more aggressively than he'd intended, but to be fair that was an awful thing to say about oneself. Tails looked up at him in shock as if he'd been struck, "don't ever say that about yourself, Tails. You aren't a monster."

"B-But I-" Tails tried, voice small.

"But nothin'," Sonic shut him down firmly. He stumbled over and kneeled in front of the sniffling fox and let his voice take on a gentler lilt, "you aren't a monster, pal. You're goin' through scary changes right now, and I admit I'm a little out of my depth with a lot of it, but… You're not a monster 'cause of it. You're always my smart, kind, brave lil bro. If I gotta suffer a few knicks and scrapes while you learn how to do the things you gotta do so you can be safe… I'll take a thousand of these," he uncovered his chest, letting the light hit the glaring scores across his fur. Tails gasped quietly, tears welling again. Sonic just shook his head and smiled.

"You can't hurt me, bud. Not really. Not ever," Sonic soothed, then smirked as he always did, "'sides, I'll get some pretty cool scars from this, eh?"

"That's where your mind goes!?" Tails barked out a watery laugh and wiped some of his tears away.

"Well, we gotta keep our eyes on the horizon. Not focus so much on what-ifs and why's 'n all that junk, right?" Sonic offered. As Tails nodded, Sonic stood up again with a pained hiss.

“I’m sorry, though… I don’t know what came over me…” Tails slumped, rubbing away the remaining tears from his eyes. Sonic shrugged.

“Hey, don’t sweat it! Just means I’ll have to be more careful, and have a plan for if it happens again while we train.”

“‘We’?” Tails raised his brows in surprise. Sonic nodded as if it were obvious.

“Sure! Maybe we can get Knux in on it sometime, give you different fighting styles to learn from. Can’t just rely on me and a ghost all the time, y’know?”

Tails smiled at the encouragement, then wilted as he caught another glimpse of the angry slashes across Sonic’s chest.

“We should call Vanilla first, though,” Tails reminded, “I can’t stitch anything like that up with my claws the way they are…” And, he didn’t trust himself at all after that frenzy, he mentally added.

“Yeah yeah, gotcha…” Sonic rolled his eyes, already preparing for the ensuing chastisement from the motherly rabbit.

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Cream was at her wit’s end, and Tails was absolutely going to get it… Whenever he finally responded to her comm messages…!

Two, nearly three months of radio silence save Sonic’s vague assurances that they were doing okay and just laying low, and her own mother’s deflections whenever she asked about Tails. Oh, that boy was going to wish he hadn’t ghosted her! Cream may not have been much use in a fight, but she wasn’t so useless that they had to keep excluding her from whatever was happening! She wanted to help, and they wouldn’t let her… Well! She just wouldn’t let them ignore her, not without fighting in her own stubborn way!

Cream let herself stomp a little on her trek down the dirt road that eventually led to Sonic and Tails’s home, care basket in hand (and scathing words on her tongue, that stupid fox!). The walk provided at least a little bit of outlet for her simmering frustration, some choice rocks in her path that were quickly kicked into the yellow grasses of late autumnal Emerald Hill.

By the time the rabbit arrived at the brothers’ property, she was a little less ready to tear the tails off of her best friend. A knock on the door, then another five minutes before a second knock, and the door finally creaked open. The glinting light reflecting from a familiar fox’s eyes gave Cream a slight start, but she stood her ground.

“…Cream?” Tails’s voice sounded different, full of pain, trepidation and a deeper undertone that wasn’t present just a few months prior. Well, maybe she wouldn’t tug his ears so much after all, he was clearly going through… something. Something he wasn’t telling her, of course, but it was bigger than she could have imagined.
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“Tails,” she primly acknowledged, staring hard but not seeing anything beyond the fox’s silhouette and glinting eyes. A moment later, she cleared her throat, “can I… can I come in?”

Tails paused, and she knew he was going to decline, before she sighed sharply.

“I’m worried about you, Tails,” she admitted, “you haven’t talked to anyone except Mother and Sonic… Something’s going on, and I want to help you, but I can’t do anything unless you let me in.”

More hesitation, a tense few moments passed before the door quietly opened all the way and Tails fled the doorway into the shadows of the home. Cream stepped in and quickly shut the front door behind her. The house wasn’t too different from when she visited during the party; there was a distinct lack of balloons and streamers of course, and the shadows of the main room and kitchen were accentuated by the overcast clouds outside, but it was homey.

“Tails?” Cream called out gently. She placed the care package basket on a shelf near the front door, and wandered cautiously so as to not upset her friend. She turned a corner and stepped into the living room, instantly spotting him curled up on the far end of a light grey couch and curled into an old blue quilt. Any remaining anger seeped out of her at the sight.

“Hey…” Tails mumbled. Cream sighed, looking over his sullen form. He looked largely the same, maybe his fur had darkened and grown out a bit more, but he was still Tails with an extra tail as she’d seen him months ago. Cream smiled sympathetically and moved to sit next to him. As she did, he leaned away from her slightly.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong?” Cream asked gently. Tails sighed through his nose, and nodded.

He began quietly, then picked up steam as he described the horrors of the Order, his strange dreams, the danger of his heightened instincts, and the control he had over aether, even injuring Sonic just a week prior. Cream listened through all of it, not indicating any particular feelings in her expression just to keep him talking. She wanted to understand, but as he spoke, it became so much bigger than her, or even Tails, and she found herself thinking hard long after the fox had stopped talking.

“Do you… Are you okay?” Tails finally asked, looking at Cream directly for what felt like the first time since she’d arrived. Cream nodded, and smiled genuinely.

“Yes, I’m alright. Thank you for telling me. I know it wasn’t easy. I can’t say I get everything, but… You haven’t changed a bit, Tails,” Cream’s smile upturned into a grin, “still worrying over every little detail.”

“Hey!” Tails laughed, and Cream let herself laugh as well. Cream’s laughter died down a moment later, and she shook her head.

“If your path is being some powerful spirit warrior, well… You won’t be so different from our friends, really,” she hummed thoughtfully, “after all, Sonic is the fastest thing alive, and Knuckles guards the Master Emerald… That’s already two of our friends!”

“I mean, I guess…” Tails uttered noncommittally, “it’s still- I dunno, I guess I didn’t expect it to be me.”

“It’s always been you, Tails,” Cream said softly, “ever since you became a part of things with Sonic, you’ve been a hero in your own right. Now you’re just being given the tools and support to be even greater. Maybe my perspective is skewed because I’m not a strong fighter like you guys, but I think that it’s a good thing that's happening.”

“So you… You don’t care that I’m different now? That I’m…” Tails trailed off, so much to quantify in just that one question. Cream leaned in to hug him tightly at that moment.

“You’ll always be my best friend, Tails,” Cream whispered. She didn’t let go for a long time, just holding him as he choked up and quietly let the tears fall. He was relieved that at least maybe not all of his friends would hate him… Realistically, none of them would, but he couldn’t make a theory with no evidence.

Cream, Vanilla and Sonic’s responses thus far were admittedly pretty strong evidence he had trouble refuting.

Their embrace lasted a good few minutes. Cream let go suddenly as a loud bang ripped through the air outside.

“What was that?!” she gasped and stood to her feet on alert. Tails growled quietly and stood up into a slight crouch.

“Stay here,” he ordered, not giving Cream time to respond before he slipped out of the living room and to one of the front windows. Tails stayed low to the ground as he looked out and spotted a familiar shadow blocking the overcast clouds in all his maniacal glory.

“Come out, fox! I know you’re hiding in there,” Eggman’s muffled voice announced his presence as though his signature eggmobile hadn’t already. More shadows hovered overhead. Mechs and badniks lined up in the sky and ground alike, everything from Egg Pawns and Buzz Bombers to more dangerous looking semi-humanoid and strider-class mechs armed with various cannons and machine guns.

This wasn’t just any token Eggman regiment. These were mainly models Tails only saw when Eggman took things seriously, when he expected to be facing Sonic, or had something to lose. This was serious overkill for just him, and Eggman likely knew Sonic wasn’t home, unless…

“Oh Chaos, he knows,” Tails muttered numbly, feeling his body go cold. How did he find out about him?! He nearly succumbed to the fear of that realization, but grit his teeth and forced himself to stay standing. It wasn’t a time to panic; he needed to think. It wasn’t just himself or his home at stake. Cream was in danger too.

Another loud bang nearly shook the whole house as another line of strider bots landed in the lawn. Tails took a sharp inhale of breath, resolved to… well, it wasn’t a real plan. It hinged on tricking Eggman, of all people, and that was kind of a toss of a coin considering his intellect matched Tails’s

own on a good day. In reality, he wasn't prepared to face down an entire platoon of bullet-spewing robots like Sonic was, not with his level of training. He needed to think, and there just wasn't enough time before Eggman would start setting things on fire or littering the walls with bullets. So he'd do what he could with the time and resources he had. Tails was going to feint Eggman… Probably.

Tails quickly opened the front door, hands raised in the air.

"Okay! Okay, I'm here," Tails called out clearly, looking at his odds in the corners of his vision. It wasn't great. Eggman clearly wanted something badly, because this was just overkill. Did he expect Tails to suddenly match the speed and skill of Sonic? Obviously not, but he knew a smart man left as little chance as possible when it came to risk.

"Good choice," Eggman's signature mustache curled into a filthy grin, "I'm sure you know why I'm here, hm?"

"Not a clue," Tails deadpanned, neutrally holding back a growl. Eggman scowled,

"Let's not play games. You have something I want."

"Oh! Let me see here," Tails smirked, feigning digging around in the pockets he didn't have. A moment later, he let out a dramatic 'ah!' and pretended to pull something out, only to turn his hand over to flip a particularly sarcastic bird towards the doctor.

"Very funny, fox," Eggman growled, "one would think at a slightly less tender age you would grow out of such banal jokes. Unfortunately for you, I'm on a tight schedule, and I don't have time to entertain childish quips."

"What's the rush?" Tails raised a brow and crossed his arms, "want to take advantage of the fact Sonic isn't here to kick your butt before he comes home?"

"Oh, I'm not concerned about that," Eggman waved a hand, "let's just say the little rodent is… occupied."

"What did you do?" Tails growled. Eggman laughed jovially, as he always did,

"You understand, I wouldn't come straight to your ramshackle little hut without planning for all eventualities," he explained, "no, I've made certain of my advantage. Now, I want you to come quietly. You don't want me to employ more base methods for your cooperation, do you?"

Tails opened his mouth to continue stalling, but a new voice raised above the droning din of the present robots.

"That wasn't the deal!" a nasally and irate voice shouted from a nearby bush. A moment later, a pink-maroon fox no older than perhaps seventeen dressed in sickeningly familiar robes dashed out, accusing finger pointed at the doctor, "you were supposed to kill him, not grab him!"

“Lucas!” a feminine voice hissed from the bush. The pink fox, ‘Lucas’, ignored it and continued glaring at Eggman.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid you’ll have to remind me who the hell you are to tell me what to do…” Eggman dangerously sneered.

The fox flinched a bit at Eggman’s outburst, but stood his ground.

“You know what the deal was! You’re supposed to kill him! Bishop Celine said-” Lucas was interrupted by a white vixen in similar robes storming out of the bush to grab the boy by his scruff.

“Shut up, you little prick!” the vixen snarled, and glared directly at Tails a moment later. Her icy gaze and slate grey irises struck Tails with a sense of foreboding, and his fur fluffed in alarm as she smiled sickly at him.

The Order. They were here… How long had they been watching him?!

“I’m afraid the deal’s off,” Eggman sneered, “you have nothing I want, you understand. Nothing that can compare to the power your Bishop so kindly informed me of when she came to me for help. Now step off, before I blow you mangey rats sky high!”

Just as the robots kicked into action on Eggman’s immediate order, the strange white vixen disappeared back into the shadows, dragging the scrawny fox that had revealed them kicking and complaining. Their forms faded into the background as the badniks and mechs closed in on Tails’s position and the Order foxes’ last known location.

Well, that complicates things.

Tails dodged a spattering of concussive shells near where he had been standing, and his instincts kicked in immediately as he swerved around an egg pawn and kicked in off of its face to get away. As always, Eggman’s robots had terrible aim, and Tails easily tricked the shooting bots into damaging their own. He wasn’t as fast as Sonic, but his third tail gave him a boost he had been getting more and more used to. Before he knew it, a dozen badniks had been entirely nonfunctional from his efforts. He hadn’t even needed to use any aether yet!

Still, he needed to be careful to not catch any stray stun shots and stay on his toes. There were, ultimately, way too many robots to defeat all on his own even with his newfound power. Tails analyzed the battlefield quickly, eyes zeroing in on a potential escape route into the nearby treeline aligning as he moved.

With a forlorn glance back at his home, he hoped Cream would be alright as he made his decision.

“Well, if you want me so bad, come and get me, Eggman!” Tails shouted, leaping off of a mech’s long range rifle attachment and bounding into the grass towards the jungle. He only glanced back after a moment to ensure Eggman’s bots were on his tail, and sped as fast as he could into the foliage.

“Get that little freak! I want him alive!” Eggman spat at his robots, even as they turned on a dime to follow Tails into the brush. He himself was close behind, hot on the trail.

Tails galloped as fast as he could while whipping his namesakes to give himself a periodic speed boost and to help dodge vines and fallen logs.

‘You better find me fast, Sonic.’ he thought grimly.

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Sonic knew he should’ve stayed home today. He was off his game, even without Metal Sonic keeping him slowed down. Falling for bait? Hardly his finest moment, but he needed to know more and his tunnel vision led him into a trap.

In hindsight, Sonic probably shouldn't have been so desperate for information, but the potential to learn more about Tails’s situation was pretty tantalizing. When he’d been contacted by a supposed agent from GUN charged with overseeing ‘archeological discoveries’, he should’ve been far more suspicious… How would GUN even know about Tails if he hadn’t told anyone about it? He had sworn all of their friends to secrecy about the events on Tails’s birthday, and he doubted even Big would blab about it with how serious he was about keeping things on the down-low. Sonic’s only potential justification was that perhaps Shadow had constructed a team of some sort to look into things, but even that was far-fetched, knowing the dark hedgehog.

Sonic was stupid, plain and simple, and was paying the price. He just hoped that Tails’s enhanced senses and power could keep him safe until he could get back down South to Emerald Hill.

Metal Sonic, the shiny bastard, was making home a difficult goal to reach.

“Why don’t we call this a truce?” Sonic panted, having just deflected a blow with his spines. Metal barely reacted, a threatening trill being the only sound he made as he spun into a sharp ball and curved in the air to catch Sonic off-guard. Sonic balled up as well, meeting Metal half-way with a metallic clash. They glanced off of one another and landed some distance from one another, giving Sonic another chance to dash Southbound while Metal recovered.

Admittedly, Sonic was slowing down, just a little. He wouldn’t ever admit it, but the freshly scabbed claw wounds along his chest were a bit painful and seemed to weep clear fluid when he tugged the skin too taut during exercise or combat. Sonic knew he hadn’t given himself enough time to heal before chasing his so-called lead, and that would kick him in the ass seeing as Metal was gaining on him again.

“Dammit,” Sonic muttered, angling himself along a mountain as he spotted the distant glow of Metal Sonic’s booster. With a dry chuckle, he pushed himself just that little bit farther to arc over the summit of the mountain and curl into a spin dash. He careened into the taiga below and resumed his mad dash a few moments after he let himself recover, but Metal Sonic had appeared over the apex of the mountain and was still gaining on him.
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“Okay, I admit, you’ve gotten better at keeping up! And is that a new paint job I spy?” Sonic preened, hoping futilely to distract Metal as he sped side by side with him over the tundra. Metal gave no response, as per usual, and clashed against Sonic repeatedly as they ran. Sonic didn’t give in, despite the ache in his chest, and just withstood the assault as best he could. He did stumble when Metal tried to claw at his face, but he quickly recovered his footing and just kept moving. He needed to keep moving.

After thirty or so more seconds of relentless weaving and ducking against Metal’s onslaught, an opportunity presented itself in the form of a ravine full of strange twisted rock formations. Sonic smirked and suddenly veered off from Metal towards the ravine. The robot strayed behind a bit at the sudden movement, but quickly caught back up in a wide turn as Sonic slipped through the narrow spikes and twisting rocks.

“Let’s see if you can keep up with this!” Sonic taunted Metal as he jumped through a crooked loop. Metal didn’t even bother dodging and was just plowing straight through each obstacle with reckless abandon, which slowly but surely began to slow him down. Sonic waited a good few moments before he suddenly turned on his heel and smacked all his weight into Metal Sonic, who had already been structurally weakened by the numerous rocks he’d smashed through. Metal bashed his outer shell involuntarily on a jutting rocky spine sticking out of the ravine’s side, which lodged his remaining frame solidly around it. A grinding mechanical scream of fury faded behind as Sonic resumed his quick pace Southwards.

Sonic couldn’t help a quiet sigh of relief as he leaped across several spikey loops to escape the ravine. Any other day he’d play fair, but not today, not with the chips stacked against him.

“Just hold on. I’ll be there soon,” Sonic’s whisper was lost in the whipping winds against his sprinting form.

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Cream knew she was supposed to stay behind and be quiet, she knew, but the silence after Eggman’s robots had chased after Tails caused her no small measure of anxiety. After five minutes turned to twenty, she was fed up with waiting. She slowly emerged from the house, ears trained for any signs of life nearby. After hearing nothing save the early November rustle of remaining leaves on nearby deciduous trees, Cream relaxed and creeped further from the house.

Suddenly, a large hand moved to cover her mouth and grab her arms behind her back.

“Be quiet, please,” the voice of an older male rumbled urgently. Cream glanced back as much as she could to see a towering middle-aged fox with deep purple fur and remorseful red eyes dressed in strange robes, “I apologize, but time is of the essence. Please begin walking forward and do as I say.”

Cream nodded, frightened and unwilling to test the strange man’s patience. She didn’t know where the fox was taking her, but a sinking feeling in her gut told her it had to do with Tails.
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7

The temperate jungles of Emerald Hill expanded far beyond into the East Coast of the swath of landmass that comprised the Northern United Federation. It was not as inhospitable as the jungles of Adabat or the coasts of Mazuri, but still held its dangers. Luckily, many of the wild animals that stalked the underbrush avoided human and mobian activity, and most didn't have a taste for flesh. The most dangerous thing a person could experience on most days would be to walk into a tree or stumble upon a thorny bush.

Unless, of course, you were a teenage fox being hunted down by a maniacal super-genius and his platoon of advanced robots. Then, the jungles were pretty much as dangerous as one could get.

Tails, though, had known these jungles. He'd lived within them for a time, playing and racing and camping and exploring, and eventually he lived right next to them once Sonic had secured the remote property their house stood upon. Tails knew their dangers, he knew of many places he could lure and trap robots in, and his heightened senses only made him all the more dangerous.

Tails had the home field advantage, and he knew it.

Tails snuck through the underbrush expertly as a panther might soundlessly stalk its prey. The only thing that could give him away was the subtle blue glow pulsing in time with his heartbeat under his fur. Ahead, a strider-class mech scanned its surroundings, stun rounds at the ready.

Unfortunately for the strider, Tails was also at the ready.

The fox prepared his attack, and the fight was practically over before it started. He knew these models like the back of his hand, and thus quickly dug his claws deep into the covering of where its motherboard sat. A moment later, the entire thing shut down with a deep ka-thunk. He looked around on alert for any other robots nearby from atop the metallic corpse, but the strider was entirely alone. Assured he would go unseen, Tails disappeared back into the foliage of the jungle floor, on the hunt.

Things continued like this for a good while as the sun slowly moved across the sky. Tails had taken down dozens by time the horizon began to turn a dull orange shade with the evening closing in, but he had no idea how many remained of those Eggman had arrived with, or if Eggman had summoned more in the hours since he fled.

The canopy began to darken when Tails's ears perked with sounds of a distant struggle. Voices, one of which he could just barely identify, echoed distantly. Sufficiently distracted, Tails changed gears and let the dangerous blue glow he'd emitted all afternoon fade away so that he wouldn't be spotted.

“Let me go!” Cream’s voice, he was sure of it, exclaimed with force. He couldn’t see her just yet, but he could clearly hear her and moved in slowly.

“I’m sorry,” a deep male’s voice droned sympathetically.

“Just shut up, will you? By Alain’s holy balls you little brats are annoying,” a female complained, as sounds of Cream struggling continued, “once we dispatch the kid we’ll let you go!”

“I won’t help you hurt Tails!” Cream lashed hotly, “leave us alone!”

“You don’t even know, do you?” a nasally voice hissed, “you’re consorting with a demon, you idiot.”

“Tails is my friend!” Cream snarled. Tails could finally see slivers of movement through the foliage, and kept his approach.

“Stop trying to change her mind, Lucas,” the female, the same white vixen from before, said, “she’s probably brainwashed too…”

“You’re the brainwashed ones! I don’t know what you think he is, but Tails is the kindest, smartest and bravest fox I know!” Cream continued her struggle in earnest, beating her free hand against the tall purple reynard’s hold to no avail.

Finally, Tails arrived in the clearing that the three foxes and rabbit stood in. He took a moment to analyze them, his eyesight crisp and clear as if the sun were still overhead.

The female, the one who had dragged the youngest of them, was an arctic fox of some kind. Like Tails himself, her bangs matched the color of her fur. Her fur extended to a well-groomed bob cut that framed her permanently sour expression. She couldn’t have been older than thirty, perhaps in her late twenties.

The youngest one, the one who had yelled at Eggman, stood with his back to the arctic fox. His fur was a vivid pink with purple undertones, acidic green eyes glaring ahead at a tree like it personally burned down his house. His jet black hair was slicked back against his head in a mullet-like arrangement, shining even in the dimming daylight. The young male’s different facial structure compared to the others told Tails he was perhaps a less common species of fox mobian, such as a bush fox, though he couldn’t know for certain without getting closer. The older teen’s tail lashed back and forth, hinting at his agitation, likely towards the female.

The one who held Cream in his grip was a hauntingly familiar face, one he could categorize in the trauma-riddled mess of memories labeled in his mind with “West Side” in burning red ink. He was an incredibly tall and wide red fox mobian with a deep purple hue to his well-kept fur and a wrinkly off-white muzzle. A scruffy greying beard stuck out from his chin, and his thinned head fur was neatly combed against his skull between his ears. His crimson eyes scanned the forest, eyes that Tails attributed to trust and subsequent betrayal… He heard screams looking in those eyes.

Don’t you fucking touch my son!

Tails shuddered and shook his head to banish the long-dormant memories coming to the surface. He needed to focus on getting Cream away from them.

As Tails slinked through the underbrush, he found his composure difficult to maintain for long. His footing was off, his blood felt cold… Then, he lost his focus just long enough for a green branch below him to snap from his weight.

The tall fox's crimson eyes looked directly at him, piercing through his resolve, and suddenly he wasn't in the Emerald Jungle, but in a warm and cozy home thousands of miles away off the coast of Spagonia.

"Da…" Miles cooed, giggling while he watched an older orange-furred fox wave his hands animatedly as he told a story. His sea blue eyes were full of life and love for his young son, smile true and genuine.

"Now now, don't get Miles so excited before bedtime, Amadeus!" a female voice chided gently. Miles turned to see a cream yellow vixen he knew as his Mother, her glacier blue eyes striking as they always were, and he crowed joyously. Now they could all play!

"Ah, but look at how much fun he's having, Rosemary," his father purred, standing to his paws and taking her hands in his. His mother shook her head with a fond smile.

"Very well, just one more story…" she relented. As his father turned to him, a loud knock against the small home's door caused them all to jump.

"I wonder who that could be…" his father wondered aloud. His mother hummed thoughtfully.

"It could be the Abras boys playing jokes again," she offered. His father shrugged and went to open the door. Miles crawled into an unsteady standing position and waddled to see what all the fuss was about, and saw a familiar face as the door swung open to reveal a towering purple fox mobian.

"Ah-! Brother Cedric!" his father exclaimed in surprise, "what are you doing out so late?"

"I'm afraid we have some business to discuss, Amadeus," Cedric spoke in that same grumbling deep voice he always did. Miles fondly remembered the kind old fox who would visit on sunny days and tell him stories, and giggled in expectation of more heroic tales and scruffy scratchy hugs.

"O-Of course! Please, come inside," his father offered, and Cedric stepped in, hands folded behind his back. Miles cooed at him, but instead of excitedly greeting him as he always did, Cedric looked at him with sad old eyes that made him look ancient, and stepped past him.

"Miles, your mother and I are going to have a talk with Brother Cedric. Stay here and play, alright?" his father knelt down and handed him a toy, one of his favorites… A yellow fox doll with a golden bell hanging off of a bow around its neck.

Miles cheerfully grabbed at the doll and shook it around, delighting in the ringing sound as it moved. He sat there in the main room while his parents and Cedric walked into the dining room

quietly.

He thought nothing of the quiet, simply playing with the bell, until a shout broke him from his game.

A moment later, his mother came running in, looking upset.

“Ma!” Miles reached out for her, excited to play a game! Maybe she wanted to play?

Another shout, a male this time, and what happened next was unfathomable. What his toddler eyes and mind could not understand, his older mind looking back could see perfectly. Amadeus was in a struggle against Cedric, who held a kitchen knife in one hand and blocked Amadeus’s strikes with the other.

Before Amadeus could get any sort of advantage, Cedric slashed against Amadeus, who took the blow with a shoulder. Bright red splashed across the once pristine carpet, and his father cried out in pain.

“Please, don’t make this harder than it has to be!” Cedric bellowed. Amadeus just snarled and resumed his assault.

“Don’t you fucking touch my son, you bastard!” he yowled. Cedric shook his head, and a moment later a fleshy ‘crack’ filled the air alongside a wet gurgling choke. Miles watched the tip of the kitchen knife slide out from between his father’s shoulder blades in slow motion. His mother screamed bloody murder. Amadeus’s corpse slumped and tumbled onto the floor like a sack of rocks. Cedric’s robed arm was covered in arterial discharge and small scratches from Amadeus’s dying throes, a sight that darkly complimented his crimson eyes.

Rosemary was frozen in shock as Cedric began his advance on her. All she could do was throw herself over Miles with a guttural cry, before she was grabbed by the arm roughly.

“I’m sorry,” Cedric whispered, “may Alain keep you in his light forevermore,” and her neck swiftly bent in an awkward angle with a sick sharp sound he’d never heard before. Miles watched in confusion and fear as her body limply fell onto the floor next to him.

“...Ma?” he whimpered. Miles didn’t have time to crawl towards her before Cedric grabbed at him. He yelped and sobbed as he scurried backwards away from him, “Ma!” he cried again, “Help! Ma! Mama!”

Cedric kept grabbing at him, but Miles evaded his bloody claws over and over until he managed to wedge himself between his toy box and the fireplace.

Suddenly, a blue light shined from across the room.

“Quickly, this way!” the flickering light sang. Miles was afraid of Cedric, his parents weren’t moving, but something beyond his understanding had told him that it would all be okay if he just followed the pretty light.

Miles sprinted faster than he ever had in his short little life after the light, ignoring the bellowing curses he could not yet understand of Cedric chasing after him.

Tails gasped sharply as his surroundings melded back into what they were meant to be. Cedric was still staring directly at him, and his muzzle was twisting into an alert to his fellows, but he couldn't make himself move. MOVE!

"Esme! Lucas! He's over there!"

Tails darted away as fast as he could manage as Cedric raised the alarm, his gravely voice as haunting as it was eleven years ago. It made Tails want to stop and vomit, but he couldn't let himself be caught, so he forced himself to keep running. He knew he needed to stop, turn around, and get Cream away from them, but-

It just took one misstep, and Tails was tumbling into the dirt, tangled in some sort of net they'd thrown. He whined with primal fear, clawing at the ropes around his legs with tears in his eyes.

"Stay away from him!" Cream shrieked. Tails looked up as the three foxes cornered him where he was, Cream in Cedric's clutches.

"Let her go," Tails snarled at Cedric with renewed resolve, who looked at him with some sick righteous pity.

"We took the girl to get your cooperation, demon," Esme growled, "so play nice, or we cut."

A long blade was unsheathed with metallic rasp, and Tails's blood went cold as its side was pressed against Cream's neck. Tails felt nauseous as he stared at that blade, already seeing flashes of red along its length before he even made a sound.

"So this is the merciful light of Alain?!" Tails chuckled despite himself, "kidnapping innocent rabbits and making deals with criminals?!"

"We do what we must to maintain the glory of Alain's vision" Esme hissed, "submit yourself to His wrath, and we won't have to make any sacrifices for the greater good."

"You're bluffing," Tails growled, "you don't have the resources to cover up a high-profile death. The whole world will have its eyes on you!"

"The Order has cleaned up its messes before," Esme sneered confidently, "all we have to do is refresh the public's memory of the kitsunes, the curse of Tamashi, and all will be explained away."

"You kidnapped her at your home," Lucas, the pink fox, described lightly with a wicked smirk, "you dragged her away into the jungle, where you tore out her throat and ate her like the wild beast you are. The Order will state the threat was dealt with, for your safety and the safety of the world. Nobody will look for you, and everyone will live in fear of the kitsune again."

“You’re sick,” Tails spat. Esme glowered and swung forward with her blade, nearly slicing through the top of his muzzle.

“We walk in the light of Alain,” she spoke righteously, and raised her blade towards Cream again, “our cause is His plan. The devil Tamashi’s roots dig deep in your soul, Miles, but by His mercy you will be cleansed. By His will, we will-”

Before she could finish, a crackle of blue light seared bright spots in the growing dark, and Esme was knocked on her side with an indignant cry. Before anyone could react, Cedric was on his knees gasping, Cream was stumbling away from him, and Lucas was crying out as he bashed face-first into a nearby tree trunk.

A moment later, Sonic stood firmly between Tails and Cream and the acolytes in all his spined glory.

“Don’t think you wanna try that,” his normally confident and light-hearted tone was replaced with a deep, dangerous lilt, “don’t wanna, uh, bite off more than you can chew.”

“Dammit!” Esme seethed, glaring daggers at Tails, “you might be able to call your puppet for help, but mark my words, boy… You won’t last. We’ll find you. We’ll always find you! No matter where you go, Alain’s light follows. His judgement will-”

“Yeah yeah, that’s great and all,” Sonic rolled his head and shoulders, primed for a fight, “but maybe you wanna step off before I turn you sorry fucks into a bunch’a sanctimonious pin cushions,” he stilled, glaring murderously at Esme with faintly glowing sparks running along his spines, “now.”

That tone and the reminder they stood no chance against the fastest thing alive was all they needed to silently recover and disperse into the bushes. The last to flee was Cedric, who glanced back at Tails with an unreadable expression, and then he was gone. A moment later, Tails felt his shoulders relax as he let out a heavy breath. He worked to untangle his ropes fruitlessly, zeroed in on the task, until white gloved hands rested over his own.

“Are you okay?” Cream asked softly. Tails almost defaulted to ‘yes’, just to soothe her worries, until he looked down at his hands in Cream’s and noticed they were shaking.

“N…Not yet,” he admitted, “sorry, I’m…”

“S’alright, buddy,” Sonic knelt down on his other side, examining the ropes. With a grimace, he tested the fibers. They were apparently strong enough that Sonic just tsk’d, took off a glove and used a claw to shave through. A few cuts later, and Tails’s legs were freed, “now let’s-”

“Not so fast, rodents,” a voice boomed. Like they were on stage for the most absurd theater performance, several headlights shined down on them from various drone badniks. Then, a familiar shining eggmobile hovered in through the trees, “we have some unfinished business. It’d be rude to, ah, what do you kids say? ‘Leave me hanging’?” Eggman’s mustache twirled in the indirect shine of the headlights.

“Not really a great time, Eggman,” Sonic stood, spines twitching dangerously. At first it shocked Tails that he hadn’t thrown out one of his numerous (and ridiculous) nicknames for the villainous scientist, but then again, Sonic had two kids in the middle of nowhere to protect. Tails forced his hands to stop shaking, and resolved that he wouldn’t be a dead weight in what was to come.

“Oh no, hedgehog, you won’t be getting rid of me this time, I’m afraid,” Eggman jeered as ominous metallic stomps rang out from around the trio, “you may have evaded Metal Sonic, but even you should know when you’re cornered! Give me the fox, and I’ll consider not tanning your hide… for now.”

“Over my dead body,” Sonic uttered with seething finality. Eggman smirked greedily.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Then the spotlights blinked out, and all hell broke loose.

Sonic and Cream, cast into sudden darkness, could not see a thing.

Tails had no such limitations. As soon as darkness fell, he moved with fluidity that was perhaps entirely fuelled by his mixture of fear and adrenaline. The only thing the hedgehog and rabbit could see were streaks of bright blue energy and aether curling around jagged shapes in the dark.

Clamorous metallic sounds rang out all around as Tails slashed at wires and targeted weak spots with expert precision. As soon as Eggman realized his mistake and cast a single light on the scene, it was already too late for his remaining forces.

Tails stood surrounded by robotic corpses and sparking lumps of alloy, panting and ears twitching every which way to listen for more threats.

He wouldn’t admit it, being as stubborn as Sonic, but Tails was starting to flag. He hoped, as he glared up at the doctor, that paltry force was all that was left. Eggman, however, didn’t look surprised in the slightest. He wouldn’t, being smart enough to mask his emotions anyways, but Tails knew that face he made no matter how hard he could try to appear impassive. It was the face of a man who was thinking.

“That all you got, Eggface?” Tails challenged and bared his teeth before he could check himself. He hoped he didn’t look as ridiculous as he felt. Eggman’s thoughtful expression twisted into one of unbridled mirth and malicious glee.

“No. Not even close,” he uttered mysteriously while stroking his mustache. Tails poised himself for more conflict, but all Eggman did was turn and… fly away?

After a tense moment of waiting for the other shoe to drop, Tails felt his legs shake and give way under him. The mysterious glow (that he was still not even remotely used to) faded a millisecond later. Cream was at his side near-instantly.

“Are you okay, Tails?!” Cream fretted, hands hovering over him as though she wasn’t sure how to help. Tails didn’t respond, feeling bile rising in his throat as he began to process and come down from his adrenaline rush.

An impressed whistle distracted him from formulating any sort of response, and he looked up to see Sonic nudging a decapitated Bee Bomber’s thorax. Sonic then met his gaze, and he smiled encouragingly.

“Think you can make it home, bud? I’d give you a sec to rest, but I’m not sure we’ll stay alone for too long,” he spoke apologetically. Tails couldn’t bring himself to speak, and just looked at his shaking form once before he shook his head ‘no’.

“No worries, pal,” Sonic walked over and kneeled down, supported Tails on his back, and stood confidently. It was just like the distant past, when a young Tails would grow sleepy after a day of travel, and Sonic would carry him on his back, careful not to prick him with his spines. It was a practiced position for both of them even after years of Tails being able to keep up not just in speed but also in endurance as he aged. Though Tails was larger and catching up to Sonic in height (man, when had that happened?), it was a familiar thing that grounded Tails from his rising anxiety. It was so comforting in that moment that Tails couldn’t help but close his eyes and lean his head onto Sonic’s spines carefully.

“Hold on tight, kiddo,” Tails heard Sonic say, probably to Cream, before they were rushing off through the jungles.

The run back felt like it lasted too long. Tails’s mind, though he was exhausted, was lost in a deluge of the all-too vivid past. He hadn’t put much thought into his life before Sonic found him. Sure, he knew he’d been bullied relentlessly for his namesakes, the echoes of cruel words and curses haunting him his whole life… But the one thing he could never remember clearly was how he had found himself alone, orphaned, and without a family in the wilds of West Side Island.

The tall fox… ‘Cedric’… Flashes of how he killed his parents flashed through his mind upon recalling the name, and he lurched violently as soon as Sonic had halted in front of their yard. Red slick blood dribbling from a kitchen knife. A deep crack from vertebrae twisting beyond their natural limits. On his hands and knees he panted, tears pouring out of his eyes as he tried his best not to gag.

“Woah, Tails?” Sonic sounded off-kilter through the haze of his panic, but he couldn’t focus on it, he couldn’t. What were their names again? How much different would his life have been if they’d lived? It didn’t matter because Cedric killed them andhewasgoingtodietooshesaidtheywantedtokillhim-!

Tails let out a guttural sob and he violently emptied the contents of his stomach on the grass. After he gave everything he had, he just kept gagging until he couldn’t hold up his own weight anymore and collapsed onto his side. He could barely feel the cool grass beneath him or the late autumnal chill. It was just his rapid heartbeat and an all-consuming need for more air. I can’t breathe. I’m going to die, oh Gaia, I’m dying! He squeezed his eyes shut in a mixture of terror and overstimulation, his instincts desperately trying to hide him from what was happening.

Tails could vaguely feel hands on his body as he tried and failed to catch his breath. Some part of him knew he was hyperventilating. Some distant Tails in the past that was entirely unimpacted by his current state rattled off an exhaustive list of panic attack symptoms and common triggers, repeating in his head like a playlist on loop. He could vaguely recall his rudimentary medical studies, at least. Someone held him and was speaking calmly in his ear, but he could barely make out the words over how loud his heartbeat and cycling conflicting not-thoughts were. His head felt light, like he was floating away.

“Tails,” a voice cleaved through the haze like butter, “Tails, can you focus on my voice? You need to take deep breaths, okay?” he could distantly remember that voice. It was a voice that belonged to fun and safety; late night sleepover games even when Vanilla told them they needed to sleep, annoying inventor’s block broken with novel and unconventional input. Cream? But why would Cream be in a floaty dark place like this? Tails considered ignoring her voice, but then he reminded himself that half of his best ideas came from listening to Cream. She was smart, way smarter than she gave herself credit for. She could probably be an incredible scientist or inventor if she applied herself. Tails nodded, or he thought he nodded at least, and forced his unruly lungs to take in a deep breath and hold it even.

“Good, hold for four,” Cream’s voice instructed him. He could do that… It was always nice following exact instructions, because nothing could go wrong with perfectly precise and exact numerical values. He held his breath, then began to exhale at the end of the fourth second, then held it out for another four. Already, he could grasp the feeling of his own body again and recall the same breathing pattern he learned long ago.

“You’re doing great, buddy,” another deeper voice associated with safe, family, protection rumbled through him next to his ear. Right, Sonic was there and didn’t sound frantic or scared, so obviously it was going to be okay, even if he still felt kind of floaty and the bitter taste of bile on his tongue made him feel gross.

“In again. Remember, four-four-four, okay?” Cream’s voice cut in again. Tails thought he felt her hands holding one of his. In for four, hold for four, out for four… Again. Again. Tails felt more grounded with each cycle, until he could open his eyes and not see the world spinning around him. He saw Cream sitting in front of him, tactfully obscuring the sight of his spit-up with her body. She smiled as he looked at her, and she squeezed his hand gently.

“You with us?” Sonic gently spoke, interrupting his comforting churring that Tails just realized he had been purring like he did… when he was small.

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay… Just feeling stupid,” Tails croaked. Cream shook her head.

“You’re not stupid,” she soothed, “you had a really, really scary experience…”

“Yeah, but there’s… More to it than just a few robots,” he tried to explain. Sonic’s churring tapered off as he tsk’d.

“Just means you’re even more valid for feelin’ like you do. Double valid even,” he sighed lightly, “but maybe the couch s’more comfortable than grass, huh? Wanna head inside?”

“Yeah…” Tails moved to get up, but Sonic held him down and shook his head.

“Nuh-uh, I’m carryin’ you.”

“Sonic…” Tails tried to argue, but Sonic just stood up with him in his arms before he could even attempt to stand on his own.

“Lemme do this for you, ‘kay? It’d make me feel better if I…” Sonic trailed off and cleared his throat awkwardly, clearly not having planned on appearing so vulnerable in front of him or Cream at that moment.

“I’ll be in soon. I want to call Mother… Is it alright if I stay the night, Sonic?” she asked sweetly, pulling out her little cell phone with cute charms glued on its case. Sonic shrugged,

“Fine by me, s’long as Vanilla’s cool with it.”

Instead of speeding inside and risking another nausea-related incident, Sonic walked up to the front porch normally. The door hadn’t been locked at all and even left slightly ajar, so he just nudged it and flipped on the lights with his elbow. Tails simply sat in his hold, a bit miffed that he hadn’t been allowed to walk on his own at all. In fact, he couldn’t really remember being babied this much since he was a toddler with nightmares, yeesh…

“I’m really okay…” Tails grumped. Sonic didn’t respond, just lowering him onto the side of the couch that reclined; a little upgrade that Tails had installed when Sonic had sprained an ankle once years ago. Sonic always had a claim on that specific seat, so it somewhat surprised Tails that he’d given it up so easily. Once Tails was secured, he was a blur as he obtained an old fluffy blanket, a glass of water, and a Tylenol. Sonic didn’t say anything as he handed the glass and Tylenol to Tails and promptly tucked him into the blanket tightly, just like he did when he was little and had the flu.

As Sonic settled next to him on the couch, Cream slipped into the house, closing and locking the front door. She walked in wordlessly and quickly set up an ottoman from the other side of the room next to Tails on the couch. Tails, though he didn’t really want to admit it, did need the Tylenol and downed it with a gulp of water. The trio sat in silence, until Tails figured he could at least tell them what had gone wrong.

“He killed my parents,” he started off before he could even figure out how to begin.

“Woah, what? Who?” Sonic furrowed his brow, paying rapt attention immediately. Tails felt his fur prick as he forced himself to say his name.

“Cedric. The um, tall purple one. Red eyes, maybe mid-sixties,” he droned off, not allowing any emotion into his voice lest he fall apart again.

“You’re absolutely su-”

“Pretty sure,” Tails’s voice cracked as he interrupted Sonic’s inquiry, but he forced himself under control, “I… I remembered. When I saw him look right at me… It’s how he looked when he-” he

took a deep breath, desperate trying to keep himself grounded.

“He stabbed my Dad,” he whispered raggedly, “and then he broke my Mom’s neck when she tried to protect me. Then he wanted me, and I ran away… I followed something, I don’t know what. I think it saved me.”

Cream gasped quietly, hand covering her mouth in shock and sympathy. Sonic was rigid, but betraying no emotion.

“Dammit…” Sonic cursed under his breath, rubbing Tails’s back idly as both a comfort to himself and his charge.

“I guess I just couldn’t handle it after that,” Tails admitted quietly, “I can face down an earth-shattering god or a platoon of badniks no problem, but when he looked at me… I’ve never been that scared in my entire life. I thought I was going to die. Really, actually die…”

“Not gonna let that happen. Never ever,” Sonic uttered with such resolve Tails could almost forget how scared he felt, “gonna teach those fuckers a lesson.”

“You can’t. They’ll be waiting for you to make the first move, after this,” Tails let out a shuddering sigh, “they want us to provoke them so they can convince the whole world to be on their side… It’s what they said when they had Cream. They wanted to frame me, to tell the world I-I killed her and that there was nothing left to bury…” he nearly gagged at the recollection. Cream quickly took his water glass so it didn’t spill and placed it on the nearby side table. Tails gave her a grateful nod as he stared down at his slightly shivering hands.

Was there no limit on the amount of cruelty one person let alone an entire organization could achieve? What was the sum total of their sins, with an entire culture’s rotting bones scattered in their wake? What other abhorrent acts had they done to achieve their status? How many young souls had they slaughtered in faithfully coveting their so-called light? Would it ever stop? Could it be stopped?

Sonic sighed sharply, standing up abruptly and pacing across the middle of the room. Tails had rarely seen Sonic in such a state. Typically, Sonic was cool-headed about most things. The only times he was this bothered were in seriously dire situations or when he couldn’t spin dash his way out of a problem. Tails supposed that both applied in this case… Sonic was many things, but he was no slouch when his friends were at risk. Perhaps, though he loathed to admit it, doubly so in his specific case. Tails was more than a trusted friend or shoulder to lean on, he was the one person Sonic truly and completely considered family.

So, Tails wondered as he watched the hedgehog pace a line in the carpet, what was going through Sonic’s head at that moment?

Sonic suddenly stopped, and sighed again, letting his spines lay flat.

“Okay,” he announced, “here’s what we’re gonna do… Layin’ low hasn’t worked so far ‘cause we’re still doin’ the same things, repeating the same patterns. Clearly we’ve gotta up our game while we

figure out what we're gonna do."

"We're running away?" Tails raised his brows in surprise. Sonic made a strange noise.

"Not… Running away, exactly. More like we're making a tactical retreat."

"That's running away, technically," Tails commented. Sonic sighed, pinching his brow ridge tensely.

"Well, I'unno what else to do at this stage, bud. My priority is your safety, if that wasn't obvious. We're stuck between a rock and hard place. You say we can't confront these jokers-"

"We can't if we want our reputations intact," Tails reminded casually.

"Right, so, we're gonna take a step back and go somewhere safe where they can't follow us 'till we can figure out what to do," Sonic then looked meaningfully at Cream, a hand on his hip, "we'll pack tomorrow. Can you keep Vanilla informed 'bout this? She's been a gem takin' care of us throughout all this, and I don't wanna leave 'er high and dry."

"Of course, Sonic," Cream reassured, "I just want you and Tails to be alright. If you think you need to do this, I support you!"

"Are you sure…? I don't want to leave you out of things again…" Tails questioned, recent memories of Cream showing up at his house worried sick (and clearly miffed, oh Gaia save him from an angry Cream!) spurring him.

"I was only upset that you hadn't talked to me at all, but now that I know what's going on…" Cream paused thoughtfully, "…This is big. Bigger than anything that I can help on my own. I want to help, but even Mother is just supporting you, and I'm less useful than her, so…"

"That's not… You're not useless," Tails glowered at the self-deprecation, ironic as it was. Cream just smiled and shook her head.

"I know, but in this situation, I can't really do much for you. So I'm willing to take a step back if it means you'll be safer," the silent reminder of Cream being grabbed by the Order to get at Tails hung heavily in the air.

"Okay… Fine, but we'll use our comms to keep you in the loop," he acquiesced, "the channel is secure, and I'll take my essentials with me so nobody can tamper with anything while we're gone. If you notice anything, let me know. Or even if you just want to chat, okay?"

"That sounds lovely, you can count on me!" Cream smiled, then yawned widely, "what time is it…?"

"Too late for you kids to be up, that's for sure," Sonic chuckled, walking back in the room after he'd apparently left during their conversation. In his arms he held a few pillows and folded blankets, "we'll camp out here t'night. I'll take you home in the morning, Cream. Don't want those guys gettin' any funny ideas." With that, he distributed the pillows and blankets between the three of

them.

“I don’t think they’ll mess with you after that look you gave them,” Tails quipped as he tucked a pillow behind his head, “I think the pink one peed himself a little.”

“Ha! Nobody messes with my kid,” Sonic ruffled Tails’s bangs, much to the fox’s fond chagrin, “gonna get their butts kicked if they try anything. ‘Specially with your cool powers.”

“Once I get better, at least,” Tails rolled his eyes, “I was just running off adrenaline for most of that…”

“Honestly? Keeps me goin’ sometimes too,” Sonic admitted as he tucked up next to Tails on the couch. Cream stayed nearby, curling up on the ground next to the ottoman.

“Goodnight, Sonic, Tails,” Cream said sleepily.

“Night, kiddo,” Sonic responded. Tails hummed in acknowledgement, definitely feeling his fatigue. He laid back against the pillow for a few minutes, before he drowsily shifted and leaned against Sonic.

Safe with his family and closest friend, Tails found himself falling to slumber faster than he had in weeks.

While they slept, unbeknownst to any, a flickering blue glow watched over them from a nearby window…

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“You WHAT?!” Celine’s voice peaked the microphone on the small communication device. Despite the holographic screen’s low saturation, the acolytes could easily see her muzzle and cheeks turning pink with rage.

“Erm, yes-” Esme began, hoping to deescalate, but Celine gave her no quarter.

“You’re telling me,” molten acid dripped from the bishop’s voice, “you completely shattered your cover that has been flawlessly maintained for eleven years… Over an entirely accounted for betrayal? You revealed yourselves and subsequently kidnapped a little girl with absolutely no cover story planned except for in the case of your wholly unlikely success in killing a Tamashi-cursed, and trained mind you, kitsune well within his first summit?”

“Well, after this insufferable little shit-” Esme tried to interject.

“SILENCE!” Celine boomed, her presence commanding even over the communicator line, “this failure lies on all three of your shoulders equally, and you will answer to the Cardinal for your extreme lapse in judgement. Personally.”
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“Then we’re to withdraw to the Temple?” Esme inquired calmly, the picture perfect poker face despite Celine’s rage.

“Yes. All of you. Don’t do anything else, lest you entirely ruin this operation with your incompetence.”

With that, the communicator disconnected with an afterimage of Celine’s angry expression.

“Well she seemed like she was in a great mood,” Lucas snarked. A second later, his throat was grabbed by a hand nearly the size of his head.

“Your rashness has cost us our advantage,” Cedric growled dangerously. Lucas clawed weakly at his meaty hand clamped around his neck, “you will do as you are told and take whatever punishment is required of us without complaint, or I will personally flog your unrepentant ass before the Cardinal myself.”

After letting the threat sink in, Cedric released Lucas into a gasping lump on the jungle floor. Cedric turned away, scowling in the general direction of the fox and hedgehog’s residence. He knew its location by heart, after so many years. He knew every loose lock and vent, every potential escape route. Cedric could end it that night, if he could do so without blowback, but the Order would not cover him for rushing things. He had to act on their orders, or not act at all. He couldn’t let himself falter again.

After all, Cedric knew well the cost of divided loyalties.