

# 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 it 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

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 an 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 waffles 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.

“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.”

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