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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."

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"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.

“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

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.”

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?"

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.

“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.”

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