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[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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