

# 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry," a deep male's voice droned sympathetically.

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

"I won't help you hurt Tails!" Cream lashed hotly, "leave us alone!"

"You don't even know, do you?" a nasally voice hissed, "you're consorting with a demon, you idiot."

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

"Stop trying to change her mind, Lucas," the female, the same white vixen from before, said, "she's probably brainwashed too..."

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

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

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

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

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

Don't you fucking touch my son!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, a blue light shined from across the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"N...Not yet," he admitted, "sorry, I'm..."

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

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

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

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

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

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay... Just feeling stupid," Tails croaked. Cream shook her head.

"You're not stupid," she soothed, "you had a really, really scary experience..."

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

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

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

"Nuh-uh, I'm carryin' you."

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

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

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

"Fine by me, s'long as Vanilla's cool with it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're absolutely su-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

figure out what we're gonna do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

them.

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

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

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

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

"Goodnight, Sonic, Tails," Cream said sleepily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"SILENCE!" Celine boomed, her presence commanding even over the communicator line, "this failure lies on all three of your shoulders equally, and you will answer to the Cardinal for your extreme lapse in judgement. Personally."

“Then we’re to withdraw to the Temple?” Esme inquired calmly, the picture perfect poker face despite Celine’s rage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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