Fracture Point

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Summary

When Tails has a nervous breakdown during a routine mission, Sonic worries about his best friend's state of mind. When a mysterious stalker targets his friends in pursuit of the Chaos Emeralds he has to put his doubts aside for Tails' sake, but as danger creeps ever closer, Sonic is faced with a terrible choice, one that could destroy his friendship with Tails forever.

Notes

Author's Note: This is set after 'Mirror Image' although it's not strictly necessary to read that first in order to follow the story. The important parts of that fic are discussed here so you should be able to follow it without reading my previous fic.

IMPORTANT: This is not a straightforward 'A follows B follows C' fic. There is a lot of mystery and lots of events happening concurrently. Things are not always as they seem and a lot of events defy explanation until later chapters. Foreshadowing and double-meanings are everywhere and earlier chapters should be reevaluated once the context is fully understood. If you are not the sort of reader who enjoys having their head played with, proceed with caution. If you are, this should be right up your alley. The important thing is that you enjoy it :)}

Fracture Point

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Through a sprawling labyrinth of narrow corridors and twisted pipes, rusting valves, snaking cables and grates hissing with steam came the cobalt bullet, the blur that was Sonic the Hedgehog. The shadows of the corridor thrashed around beneath frantically flashing and spinning orange lights, and from within the chaotic swirling darkness lurched distorted shapes eager to grab him, their forms gleaming with metal and crackling with electricity.

Each attacker resembled a Mobian, but with different parts of their bodies fused with misshapen hunks of metal that contorted into unnatural positions. Their eyes flickered with cold and artificial blue and a synthesised howl erupted from their mouths. Sonic dodged the wild swings of the latest assailant, knocking them down with a swift kick to the face.

"How many of these things are there?" he moaned.

"We are legion!" a rasping voice gloated through a loudspeaker, a hint of electronic distortion echoing through the corridor. "Soon you too will be among our number, along with all of Mobius! Submit to the inevitable, and cease this pointless conflict!"

Sonic rolled his eyes, "Wow, I've known you for less than a day and I'm already sick of hearing your annoying-ass voice."

The voice belonged to a mysterious villain calling himself Cyberius. Earlier that day, he had hijacked every television, radio broadcast and computer screen with a message to the world. Framed in shadow except for a single glowing blue eye, his grinding electronic voice delivered a warning to Mobius: before the day was out they would all be enslaved to his will, and his so-called 'machine empire' would reign supreme over Mobius.

Sonic found himself more upset by the interruption to his Saturday morning cartoons than by the threat. With his usual brand of energetic heroism coursing through him, he tasked Tails with tracking Cyberius down.

It hadn't taken Tails very long to find the source of the broadcast signal; Cyberius' affinity for machinery had proved no match for the young fox's skill. They tracked his location to a disused power plant and set off right away to track him down.

When they arrived at the dilapidated facility languishing in a rain-soaked muddy field in the middle of nowhere, the source of Cyberius' threat became clear: a huge antenna, towering above the sprawl of rusting buildings and generators and illuminating the skies above with flashes of lightning. Tails conducted a scan of the area, and concluded in terms that Sonic couldn't quite follow that the antenna would somehow cause everyone on Mobius to become mindless cyborgs.

Sonic didn't need to know how such a thing could be possible, he just knew that the notion sounded bad, and it was his job to stop bad things from happening. They split up; Tails soaring into the air to sabotage the antenna while Sonic charged through the facility to find Cyberius. Sonic wasn't concerned about leaving Tails alone; he knew his little buddy could handle anything that came his way.

Sonic continued to blitz through the ruined plant, effortlessly sweeping aside the cyborg army trying to impede his progress. Eventually he forced his way into a wide open courtyard overlooked by darkened offices with broken windows. He stood directly beneath the wide base of the radio antenna, and looking up towards the top made his head swim. Through the rain pouring down on
him he could see bolts of lightning crackling across the dark clouds above, and in the distance he
cought sight of an orange shape crawling across the sky towards the top.

"You're too late, Sonic!" Cyberius' voice thundered out from the loudspeakers. "You can't stop the
new world order; you can't stop the age of machines from coming to pass!"

Sonic looked around, frantically searching for the source of the smug voice. At last he spotted a light
spilling out of a window high above him, the silhouette of a figure visible. Without hesitation Sonic
dashed into the building on the ground floor and up the decaying stairwell. He kicked a mouldy
wooden door with such force that it collapsed into splinters and dust, then leapt into the small room.

The office bore little furniture, save for a cheap-looking wooden chair and table, upon which stood
the microphone used to taunt him. Cyberius stood beside it; a white rabbit, lean and tall with a
calculating look in his glowing blue eyes. He held a long metal pole in his right hand, crowned by a
gleaming metal orb. The left side of his face bore no fur or skin, exposing a metal skull, and tangles
of wires snaked in and out of his skin and down his neck, meeting with the layers of metal plates that
covered his left arm and transformed it into a monstrous claw.

"It's over, Cyberius!" said Sonic, pointing at him. "We've come to shut you down for good!"

Cyberius said nothing, but grinned in answer to Sonic's challenge. He raised the claw up with an
open palm, and with a flick of his wrist the arm surged with electricity. Sonic almost jumped back,
but he regained his composure and charged Cyberius down. The deadly arm swung for him, shaking
the room with thunderous bursts whenever it missed and struck the floor. The size of the room
limited Sonic's speed, but the great bulk of the arm slowed Cyberius down, allowing Sonic to duck
and weave underneath it, rolling across the floor and bouncing from the walls even as they creaked
beneath his feet. In his desperation Cyberius' blows became more forceful, but he overbalanced
himself, allowing Sonic to strike him lightning-fast with a kick to the chest. The cyborg flew across
the room and hit the opposite wall hard enough to crack it, before slumping over unconscious in a
shower of plaster.

"What's the matter, Cyby?" said Sonic as he dusted himself off. "Can't handle a little power surge?"

Darn, I wish Tails had heard that one, he thought. Remembering Tails he called him up on his wrist
communicator.

"Tails, are you okay?" he asked into the device. "What's happening up there?"

"I'm okay," Tails' voice came through, surrounded by static and the roar of the lightning, "I just need
to make some – OW!" A bang ripped through the comm, and Sonic's heart jumped instantly into
panic mode.

"Tails? Tails, are you okay?!"

"I'm fine," Tails said, and Sonic felt his nerves settling back down, "just a little shock, that's all. What
about you? Did you find Cyberius?"

"Oh, I found him alright." Sonic smirked at his fallen foe. "He won't be any more trouble."

"I hope you didn't hurt him too much," Tails half-joked. "I'm nearly done here, just got to adjust this
and... voila!"

The deafening roar of the thunder grew briefly louder, before suddenly ceasing. All around Sonic,
the hum of engines and generators wound down, giving off an almost disappointed tone as they
faded to silence. Through the window Sonic saw the swirling clouds above the antenna begin to
dissipate, the sun shining through the fading haze as the ferocious rain ebbed away into a barely noticeable drizzle.

"You did it, Tails!" Sonic cried. "You saved Mobius!"

"You mean we saved Mobius, Sonic," Tails radioed back. "We're a team, remember."

Sonic chuckled. "I won't forget it. We'll always be a team, right until the end." Even though Tails appeared as a distant orange blob at the top of the mast, Sonic knew in his heart the boy would be smiling.

Behind him he heard a wheezing, buzzing cough, and he turned to see Cyberius arising from his blackout. Sonic marched over to him, standing firm above the defeated villain.

"Don't get up," growled Sonic. "You'll have plenty of time to stand once we throw you in jail."

Cyberius laughed through his cough, and he fixed his digitised blue irises on Sonic, his gaze piercing right through him.

"You can't stop the rise of the machines," he hissed. "One day we will overthrow all flesh; the blood of billions will oil the gears of the eternal engine. It shall come to pass."

"Blah, blah, blah. I've heard it all before, buddy. You villains are nothing but talk."

"If that's what you think..." said Cyberius, grinning. He thrust his metal claw through the floorboards, pulling it back out gripping a bundle of thick cables. "Then you're in for a shock!"

Lightning poured from Cyberius' claw, flowing into the cables and flooding the room with sparks. The lights flickered frantically before the bulbs shattered, and the floor flashed into flames. Sonic hesitated, unsure of what Cyberius hoped to achieve. The rabbit laughed a distorted screeching laugh that sounded like a siren, while his eyes flashed from blue to yellow then red. The rampaging electricity surged back along the claw, crawling across Cyberius' body and setting his fur alight. Sonic's stomach heaved as he watched the rabbit's skin begin to melt, revealing the metal skeleton underneath.

Sonic noticed the staff pointing at him a nanosecond too late to react.

A bright flash of light in his eyes, followed by a stinging, burning sensation in his chest, followed by the sound of glass breaking. Sonic's eyes adjusted in time for him to see the office window rapidly moving away from him. He tried to right himself, and managed to turn over just before he collided with the concrete in the yard below. A sharp pain shot up through his legs as he hit the ground running, and after only a few steps he toppled forward, sprawling out face down in a puddle.

He gasped, clutching at his chest. Looking down he saw the edges of his fur singed by the blast, and the stinging sensation lingered deep within him, throwing his heartbeat into disarray. While he struggled to regain his breath, the ground beneath him shook with the sound of metal scraping against stone.

Rolling onto his back, Sonic saw Cyberius standing over him. Against the newly blue skies the robot cast an imposing silhouette. He stood caked in the smoking remnants of his own flesh, with only half his skull remaining, save for a bionic eye hanging by wires. His other eye glowed blood red, firmly fixed on Sonic. He raised the claw up with the fingers splayed, sparks jumping between the digits. Sonic realised what was about to happen.

He rolled to the side, narrowly dodging the claw as it smashed into the concrete. Cyberius brought
the claw down again and again, each strike followed by a blinding flash and crack of lightning. Sonic continued to roll away from the blows, but struggled to find an opening to rise to his feet. After avoiding another strike by mere inches, Sonic noticed the attacks cease.

The talons of Cyberius' claw had become embedded in the stone floor of the yard. As he struggled to free it, Sonic took the opportunity to roll backwards over his shoulder on onto his feet. The pain in his chest intensified, but the elation of imminent victory served to numb it.

"Ooh, bad luck, Cyber-dude," Sonic said, using a soft chuckle to hide his strained breathing. "I hear that's quite a common problem with the 'Death-Claw 3000.' You should get that thing serviced more often."

Cyberius stopped struggling to free himself, looking up at Sonic wearing the closest thing a robotic rabbit skull could get to a smug grin. "What are you smirking about?" asked Sonic. That's when he noticed the water dripping from his own fur, and saw the puddle he had just spent the last thirty seconds rolling in around his feet. "Oh sh-

Agony shot through every part of his body in an instant. As the volts poured into him his muscles spasmed violently and his teeth clenched together so tightly they felt like they might crack. The smell of burning fur filled his nostrils, and his ears filled with a deafening, piercing whine.

After what felt like hours of torture he felt himself being thrown backwards, and he came down hard on his back. Through eyes blurry with moisture he saw smoke rising from his own body, and the distorted outline of a metal monster standing over him.

As his eyes cleared, he saw a familiar orange shape hovering in the sky above his foe. "Sonic!" cried Tails. "The Emerald, quickly!"

Pain clung to every movement he made, but Sonic fought through it to bring his arm up behind his head. Reaching into his quills he took hold of something hard and cold. When he wrenched his arm back out, he held in his hand a perfectly smooth crystal that shone with an intense yellow hue: a Chaos Emerald.

"What?" asked Cyberius, in a tone more mocking than incredulous. "What do you hope to achieve with that? A single Chaos Emerald is but a child's toy compared to the power I wield!"

In the sky above Tails frantically searched through his satchel, and Sonic felt his own strength failing him.

You better hope this works, Tails, he thought, If it doesn't I'm definitely gonna come back as a ghost and haunt you. I'm gonna haunt you so hard you won't even be able to floss without performing an exorcism first.

"Sonic!" Tails yelled. "Catch this!"

Tails tossed a small silver box towards Sonic, and as it neared him Sonic brought his left arm up to snatch it from the air before holding it against the emerald.

"How about this for a child's toy? Playtime's over!" Please work, or those are gonna be some really lame last words…
The box whined, and the golden hue of the Emerald glowed brighter and brighter, increasing faster and faster until it became a blinding ball of light in Sonic's hands. He closed his eyes, unable to look at it anymore, and the heat grew in intensity, burning him through his gloves. With his hands shaking with pain, Sonic screamed.

Then it stopped. The heat vanished in an instant, and the inside of Sonic's eyelids no longer glowed with bloodshot capillaries. Even the weight of the Emerald melted away in Sonic's hands. The Emerald had vanished.

But it didn't matter, for Sonic felt the energy generated by Tails' device flowing into him. The power of the Emerald washed over him, soothing his pain and breathing new life into him. His whole body trembled as the power fired up his muscles and sent his adrenaline racing. Through some unseen means he rose into the air, his body righting itself on its own, and he opened his eyes to see his fur glowing with bright yellow light.

"Impossible!" said Cyberius, stepping backwards, his eye wide, its camera lens narrowing. "You can't channel a Super Form with just one Chaos Emerald! No-one can!"

"You can when your kid brother's a certified genius!" said Sonic, smirking. "Sorry if that 'does not compute!'" Despite his wise-cracks Sonic felt uneasy; he couldn't see Tails above him in the sky anymore, nor anywhere nearby.

Cyberius lowered his staff, baring his metallic teeth. "It doesn't matter how you managed it! I'll destroy you anyway!"

A bolt of lightning shot out from the orb, snaking through the air towards Sonic. The golden hedgehog simply raised his left hand with his palm outward in front of him. The bolt surged into his glove, but Sonic didn't flinch at all, instead condensing the electricity into a ball in his hand and closing his fingers around it. With a flick of his wrist he opened his hand again, sending the blast back towards Cyberius. The arc of lightning smashed into him, sending the robot staggering backwards. Snarling, he recovered his balance before lunging forward with his claw curled into a fist bigger than Sonic's entire head.

Sonic held up his right arm and caught the punch, stopping it dead without moving an inch from his position. Cyberius tried to pull his arm back, but Sonic held it in place with the lightest of grips. Cyberius' robot skull expressed the cybernetic equivalent of absolute terror; Sonic, however, merely smirked.

He raised his left leg up to chest height and planted his foot squarely in the centre of Cyberius' torso, and with a slight twist he wrenched the monstrous arm from its socket in a shower of shrapnel and sparking wires. Cyberius fell backwards, his eye blinking frantically. Sonic tossed aside the arm and hovered over to where his enemy lay. The robot rabbit feebly tried to bring the staff to bear, but Sonic snatched it from his hand and snapped the metal bar over his knee like a twig. Dropping to the floor he stood over Cyberius with his fist ready to strike.

"Enough!" cried Cyberius, covering his face with his remaining hand, "I yield! I cannot hope to defeat you. Please, no more, no more, no mor-"

The red light of Cyberius' eyes faded away to black, and he slumped to the ground. Sonic lowered his fist, feeling slightly deflated that the battle was over, and that Cyberius had perished so suddenly; he hadn't meant for him to die, but he figured that he overestimated his resilience.

Before he could contemplate his situation further, he heard a shrill beep from beneath him, growing louder and faster by the second. Looking down, Sonic realised the sound came from with Cyberius'
Sonic shook his head. "Son of a… seriously? The old 'taking you with me' routine? Come on, Cyby, you can do better than a tired cliché like that, can't you?"

The beeping continued to grow in pitch and speed. Sonic shrugged his shoulders, picked up the robot with one hand and tossed it into the sky. Within moments it had cleared the height of the radio mast, and a second later it exploded, filling the sky with fire and a deep rumbling sound.

Sonic dusted off his hands. "Well, that's that. Another wannabe supervillain added to Sonic's collection of kicked butts!"

He looked around the courtyard, but could see no sign of Tails.

"Tails?" he called out, worry creeping into his voice. "Where are you, little buddy?"

No response came back to him, and Sonic could feel his spine beginning to tingle.

"We won, Tails! No need to hide anymore; come on out and let's celebrate!"

Again, he received no reply. With the echo of the explosion fading fast, the only sound Sonic could hear was the steady thump of his heart and his own shortening breaths. His nerves crawled underneath his skin, and he laughed uneasily to himself.

"V-very funny, Tails! You got me good! Now where-"

The briefest flash of orange caught his eye in one of the ground floor windows on the opposite side of the courtyard. Slightly further along the wall, Sonic saw a door standing slightly ajar, and he made the connection. With his composure returning he drifted slowly through the air across the yard and towards the door, his body still glowing with gold.

He pushed his way through the door into a long corridor. "There you are! Why are you hiding, Tails? You had me worried for a moment there."

Tails stood in the centre of the hallway, frozen to the spot. His eyes were wide open with pupils like pinpricks, his brow ratcheted upwards and knotted, his expression locked into terror. Sonic looked over his own shoulder, expecting to see some terrible monstrosity looming over them both, but the corridor behind him stood empty. He saw Tails trembling where he stood, the same panic-stricken look on his face.

He felt his earlier apprehension begin to return. "Tails? What is it? What's wrong?" He ceased levitating and dropped to the floor, taking a step forward with his hand outstretched.

Tails screamed, his mouth opening wide and releasing a piercing shriek that reverberated off the walls of the hallway. Even as Sonic covered his ears, the fox continued to scream, his face contorted with horror.

"Tails!" Sonic yelled over the din. "What the heck's got into you?"

He took a few more steps forward, hoping to put a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. Tails stopped screaming and clumsily ran away, staggering down the corridor like he was drunk, stumbling into walls, tripping over his own feet and swatting at thin air. Sonic ran after him, his heart beating furiously in panic.

"No!" Tails yelled. "No, no, no! Get away from me, get away from me!"
"Tails, wait! Tell me what's wrong!"

Tails tripped and fell on his front. "Please! Please don't kill me! I don't wanna die!"

Sonic caught up to him, reaching down to roll Tails onto his back so he could make eye contact in an attempt to get through to his little brother.

"Tails, it's me! It's Sonic! Your best bud, remember? Your Sonic's here now, everything going to be okay."

But Tails continued to thrash around on the floor and flail his arms in a futile attempt to bat Sonic’s arms away. His eyes streamed with tears and his mouth quivered in its horrified gape.

"No! Please, no! Don't hurt me anymore! Don't hurt me!"

He sobbed incoherently, and Sonic stepped away from him, unable to process what he was seeing. Here he stood with ultimate power coursing through his veins, yet as he watched Tails roll on the ground screaming and clawing at his own face, Sonic felt more powerless than ever before in his entire life.

He fell to his knees with his fingers against his temples, his heart breaking from the sight of his friend in such despair. The power of the Emeralds slowly seeped out of him, and his golden fur dimmed until it became a familiar shade of blue. Sonic noticed a cloak of silence fall around him, and realised Tails had stopped screaming.

He looked up to see Tails lying completely still, no longer rocking back and forth but still with his hands covering his face. Sonic's heartache eased, his sorrow replaced with concern about the new development. He leapt to his feet and crept slowly over to where Tails lay.

"T-Tails? Can you hear me?"

At first he gave no reply, and Sonic's heart sank further into his chest. He took a step forward, when he heard Tails mumbling beneath his gloves, and eerie calm permeating his voice.

"Shadow…” he whispered, "Shadow, where are you? Please, I need you…”

Sonic nearly fell over in shock. Why was his best friend asking after Shadow, of all people?

"No, Tails. It's not Shadow, it's Sonic. Don't you remember?"

"Shadow, please," Tails continued, "I need you here. I need you here…” his hands slipped away from his face, revealing his tightly closed eyelids. His arms grew limp and flopped to his side, while his head turned like he was drifting off to sleep.

"…to save me."

Then Tails fell silent, and Sonic's fear returned. He fell to his knees, grasped Tails by the shoulders and shook him firmly. A moment later Tails' eyes snapped open, and he sat bolt upright.

"Wha-? What's going on? Where am I?"

Sonic breathed a sigh of relief; seeing Tails restored to normal quashed any doubts and fears in an instant. He laughed as elation took hold of him, before throwing his arms around the confused fox and embracing him, his eyes holding back tears of joy.

"Tails, I'm so glad you're alright! I was so worried about you."
"What's happening, Sonic?" asked Tails, trying to gently push him away. "Did we get captured? We got captured, didn't we? Oh shoot, I knew I should have re-calibrated the Emerald Amplifier before we left. Now the whole world is gonna get cyborg-ified because of me."

Sonic pulled away from the hug and looked Tails in the eye. "It's okay, your device worked like a charm."

"You managed to go Super?"

"I sure did." He ruffled Tails' bangs. "All thanks to you, little buddy."

"Yeah, yeah." Tails pushed Sonic's hand away and rolled his eyes as he rose to his feet. "But why are we in this corridor? What happened to Cyberius?"

"He's dead," said Sonic. Tails' face dropped.

"Sonic! You didn't-?"

"No, of course not!" Sonic snapped, indignant at the suggestion. "He decided he'd rather blow himself up than let me capture him alive."

"Oh, that's..." Tails looked away, his lips pursed. "That's his own fault then, I guess. What about the Emerald?"

"It vanished just before I went Super."

Tails scratched his chin. "I thought that might happen, The Chaos Emeralds tend to react erratically if too much stress is put on them. That's why they tend to teleport away after you use them to go Super. At least it didn't explode, or worse."

"Worse?" asked Sonic, raising a curious eyebrow. Tails looked sheepishly at the floor, holding his hands behind his back and kicking one leg back and forth.

"There was a teeny, tiny chance, that using the Amplifier to channel seven Chaos Emeralds' worth of power through just one might... theoretically, you understand... might have caused a chain reaction that would have ripped apart the entire space-time continuum. But that was only one possibility... and a really small one at that. I wasn't worried about it."

"You're joking, right?" said Sonic, but he knew Tails well enough to know that he wasn't.

"Okay, I'll just remind myself to have nightmares about that later," he continued. Tails laughed and smiled warmly, and Sonic felt that warmth wash over him. But even though he felt glad to have his best friend back to his old self, his mind kept drifting back to what had happened.

He'd never seen Tails act like that before; Tails got scared of some things from time to time, but he'd always fought through it when the time came to step up to the plate. Sonic even admired the way Tails shrugged off his fear of lightning to disable the tower, feeling slightly ashamed that if Cyberius had been hiding underwater the mission would have ended in disaster as his own fears paralysed him. So to see the brave little fox half-mad with terror at something Sonic couldn't even see deeply unsettled him. He desperately wanted to ask Tails about it, but feared the wrong word might cause him to freak out again.

"Tails? What's the last thing you remember before you woke up here?"

"Hmm," said Tails, scratching his chin again. "I remember tossing you the Amplifier. Then the
Emerald grew really bright, so I covered my eyes and…” he shrugged, "that's it. That's all I remember."

"Are you sure that's everything?"

"Yeah. Why? Did something happen?"

Sonic rubbed the back of his head, trying to avoid the inquisitive stare of his friend. "Umm… it's nothing, don't worry about it."

"Okay…” said Tails, clearly unconvinced. Sonic wanted to drop the subject entirely and avoid an uncomfortable situation, but his own curiosity kept nagging at him.

"What do you think of Shadow?" he asked quickly, leaving Tails blinking in surprise.

"Shadow? Well I guess I like him more since you two became friends, but he's still kind of a… a dick, you know? He hardly talks to me, and he always looks down his nose at me, like he thinks I'm beneath him."

"He looks at everyone that way, even me. I tell ya, I honestly don't know what's going on with us. Since the Doppelganger Crisis we've had this weird kind of friendship going on. I like him, but I also hate him just as much, and I know he feels the same way; it makes my head hurt something fierce."

"At least you're not at each other's throats all the time now. Anyway, what's my opinion of Shadow got to do with anything?"

Sonic avoided Tails' gaze again "It doesn't matter. Just curious, is all. Let's hurry up and get out of here."

Tails nodded, and before long they found themselves speeding along the open plain in the direction of Station Square. As Sonic watched Tails soar through the air just ahead of him, he found himself unable to clear his thoughts of questions.

During the Doppelganger Crisis not six months earlier he had grown closer to Shadow than he had ever thought possible. It didn't feel right to refer to them as mere friends; they had connected on a deeper level that surpassed any kind of companionship he knew. They had an intangible connection to one another, almost as if their very souls had become inexorably intertwined. Shadow felt less like a friend and more like another part of himself; the reverse side of the coin of which he himself was but one face. The concept he found hard to reconcile in his mind, let alone express to anyone else.

But Tails' relationship with Shadow remained much the same, even if they saw much more of each other these days, Sonic could hardly call them friends; after all his friendship with Rouge hadn't changed much since then.

So why had his best friend, in what seemed to be his darkest hour, been calling for someone he barely even liked instead of him? Why did the thought of Shadow seem to calm Tails down?

With Tails' memory of that moment nowhere to be seen, Sonic knew there was only one way he would find the answer, and it wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to having.

He would have to ask Shadow himself.

~O~
II - First Blood

Left side or right side. On his back or on his front. Under the covers or on top of them. No matter which way he tried to sleep, Tails could not get relaxed enough to drift off.

He worried about what he would see if he closed his eyes. Golden fur bristling with fire, a mouth full of fangs dripping with blood, eyes that exuded maddening spirals. These things made up the monster that haunted his dreams for the past half-year. He had only just started to get on top of his nightmares in the past few weeks, and now the events of the day threatened to bring it all flooding back.

He never told Sonic about the bad dreams, instead choosing to suffer through them alone. He wanted to tell him everything; how he feared going to sleep each night, how he always woke up in a cold-sweat, often covered in urine and biting down on his pillow so as not to scream. But every time he tried to talk to Sonic about it, the sight of those caring green eyes made him hesitate. Sonic worried about him enough as it was; Tails knew Sonic would make himself sick if he knew about the nightmares. Better to suffer in silence and let Sonic be happy, he thought. No point bringing them both down.

Except he had blacked out in the middle of a mission, and something happened that Sonic feared to tell him. All the way back from their battle with Cyberius, Sonic had been eerily quiet, as if he worried that anything he said could give the game away. He knew Sonic would never keep a secret from him without a good reason, yet his strange questions about Shadow seemed to conceal a deeper purpose. Tails didn't know how, but he suspected that whatever happened had shown Sonic what he had been hiding from him for so long.

As he tossed over in his bed once more, sighing in frustration, Tails heard the door behind him creak open, and the light from the hall filled the room. Tails turned over, expecting to see Sonic standing in the doorway, but the silhouetted figure's profile revealed someone else entirely.

He rubbed his eyes. "Shadow? What are you doing here?"

The dark figure stood silently in the doorway, his crimson eyes barely catching the yellow light of the hall.

"Hmph," he sniffed after an eternity of silence. "Sonic asked me to talk to you. He thought you might… benefit from my presence."

Tails could tell from Shadow's tone that he resented Sonic's request, and must have only agreed after much cajoling, or possibly grovelling. He would have laughed at the mental image of Sonic kissing Shadow's feet if not for the aura of seriousness that seemed to follow the dark hedgehog everywhere.

"Um… what exactly did Sonic tell you? I don't see how-"

"You have nightmares, don't you?" Shadow interrupted, fixing his eyes on Tails with an accusing glare.

Tails sat up in bed. "What? How did you know?"

"Since that day back at GUN HQ, every time you sleep you see him. You're afraid to sleep, you're afraid to be left alone, you're even afraid of Sonic at times, aren't you? Afraid that the monster in your dreams is just a reflection of Sonic himself, and at any moment he could turn on you, become that which you fear the most."
Tails shook his head in disbelief; how could Shadow possibly know any of this? He hadn't told a soul…

Maybe Sonic heard him moaning in his sleep, maybe he saw him flinching and biting his lip at random moments during the day. He could even have unintentionally blabbed the whole story to Sonic during his blackout. Of course Sonic would then tell Shadow, or maybe Shadow read his mind or whatever the deal was with those two these days. But then why did either of them think Shadow would be able to help him?

"What is this, Shadow? Are you thinking of taking up counselling now? It really doesn't suit you."

Shadow didn't react to his jibe, instead continuing to bore into Tails' soul with his blood-red stare. He stood like a statue, with even the movement of his breathing seemingly halted. Tails felt his nerves tingling when he beheld the unnatural poise of the Ultimate Lifeform.

"You only fear what you don't understand," Shadow said. "You only fear what you cannot control. It is a weakness shared by most Mobians. But you are not most Mobians."

"What do you mean?"

"You have the power to control your fear."

Shadow took a step forward, a single graceful lunge towards the edge of Tails' bed. Dropping to one knee he took hold of the Tails' hand and clasped it tightly between both of his own. His stare, mere feet away, became even more intense, yet his expression remained as stern and unmoving as ever. Tails felt his whole body tingling, though he couldn't tell if it was through fear or something else entirely. He had to admit Shadow had a strange way of both calming him down and terrifying him at the same time.

"Listen to me, Tails. The only thing to fear is fear itself. Fear only exists in your own mind. It is nothing but an emotion. Are you going to let an emotion rule you, dictating every moment of your life? I was once a slave to an emotion like you, but I took control of that emotion, and now I am its master."

He let go of Tails' hand and rose to his feet, seeming to tower over the fox as he looked down upon him.

"Take hold of your fear and make it your slave. Only then will you be free." He headed towards the open doorway.

"Wait!" Tails called after him. "How am I supposed to do that? How did you 'control your emotion'?"

Shadow looked back over his shoulder, his right eye gleaming crimson in the light flooding the doorframe.

"Only you can answer that. You are the only one who can save yourself. Good luck" Then he disappeared into the hall, pulling the door closed.

Tails flopped back down onto his bed with a heavy sigh, grasping his covers with both hands.

"Man, that was weird," he said aloud. Even by Shadow's standard his advice had been unhelpfully cryptic and poetic, although the fact that Shadow was even giving advice felt strange enough. What had he meant by it all?
Tails tossed and turned again, this time unable to sleep out of frustration as he tried to decipher Shadow's words.

*Control your emotion.*

*Only you can save yourself.*

*Take hold of your fear and make it your slave.*

The words played over and over again in his head, sending his brain into overdrive searching for the hidden meaning behind them. Shadow had been hinting at something, something he must have been sure only Tails could discover.

Tails sat up quickly. His mind's mad rush for answers stopped suddenly. There it was; the thread of inquiry that would lead him to his answer. He couldn't define exactly what it could be, only a vague feeling that he nonetheless felt compelled to explore.

He tossed the covers aside and leapt out of bed. Opening the door he found he hallway in total darkness, and he realised Sonic must have gone to bed, probably with Shadow beside him. Slowing his movement despite the excitement coursing through him, he crept gently down the stairs, skipping over the last one from the bottom that would have otherwise creaked loudly. He felt his way through the living room, using the edge of the sofa to guide him. After some more fumbling in the dark he found his way to the door to his workshop and flicked on the light.

The single bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling of the converted garage filled the room with mouldy yellow light, throwing dark shadows into the nooks and crannies behind the various piles of junk stacked up in the corners and highlighting the clouds of dust swimming through the cramped space. Tails weaved through the towers of cardboard boxes filled with wires and bolts and clambered over the metal frames of half-finished projects until he reached the metal workbench in the middle of the room. Sitting himself up on a high stool, he grabbed a roll of paper from a nearby box and sought out a pencil.

With his half-baked idea still bouncing around in his mind, Tails scribbled frantically, drawing up a blueprint for his latest invention. The crude graphite sketch soon became surrounded by impossibly complex equations as his vision took shape.

"Yes, yes, this is it," he said eagerly, "this could work. This could so work. There's just one more thing I need."

He hopped down from his seat and fought his way through his self-inflicted maze of clutter until he came to a small safe buried under a pile of paperwork. He punched in the code (Sonic's birthday) and the door opened with a click. As he pulled the thick metal door open the room filled with a yellow glow that seemed to shift in and out of existence with eerie regularity.

Tails took the fake Chaos Emerald in a firm grip, holding it in front of his face and seeing his practically salivating mouth reflected a dozen times in its pristine facets. His heart pounded ever faster as he thought about enacting his plan, and he gulped in anticipation of it.

"Now then… let's do this."

~O~

Sonic lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, his bedside lamp still on and bathing the room in warm orange light. He'd heard Tails get out of bed and creep downstairs to his workshop earlier. For a
moment he had considered opening the door to ask him what he was doing, but he decided against it. If tinkering in his workshop made Tails happy and kept his mind free from troubles, he wasn't about to stop him, even if it was at half past one in the morning.

Ever since they arrived home he'd wanted to talk to Tails about his 'episode.' It wasn't like them to keep secrets from each other, and they had always shared everything in the past. But Sonic could still recall the sound of Tails' screaming, the terror in his eyes; he didn't want to risk provoking a reaction like that again. He felt so afraid of seeing Tails so helpless that he had felt compelled to turn to Shadow. He hoped that somehow his strange companion would find a way to reach Tails that he felt unable to do himself.

He'd asked for Shadow, hadn't he? Why? What did Shadow know about Tails that he didn't, and why would he keep it from him? Didn't anybody trust him anymore?

Before he could ponder these questions, the house shook around him, and the muffled sound of an explosion ripped through the air. Sonic sat bolt upright, his fear skyrocketing when he realised where the sound came from.

"Tails!" he yelled, leaping out of bed. He threw open the door to his room, charged down the stairs, across the living room towards Tails' workshop, hurling himself through the doorway.

A thick cloud of dust swirled through the air in the musty garage room, punctuated by specks of yellow glinting in the murky light. Sweeping the dust away from his face, Sonic saw a thin pillar of smoke rising from the table in the centre, surrounded by black scorch marks and twisted fragments of metal.

"Tails! Tails, are you okay? Tails?!

Sonic's heart thundered in his ears when no response came, and he felt his muscles tightening up. Any second now he would tear the room apart to get to Tails. His righteous determination halted when he heard a familiar voice coughing, and saw a dishevelled white glove grasp the edge of the table.

"Unggh," Tails moaned. "I'm okay…." He pulled himself up by the table to peer over at Sonic, and Sonic would have laughed if not for the worry constricting him. The fur on Tails' head stood upright, and his whiskers and ears pointed backward as if blown by a strong wind. His entire front half had become caked in black soot, and his eyes seem to swivel in their sockets.

"What on Mobius happened in here?" asked Sonic, his heartrate decreasing as he clambered through the scattered junk towards his friend.

"I may have made a slight miscalculation," said Tails blearily. "I think I applied too much chocolate to the frequency inhibitors, causing a banana feedback loop in the custard….

"Tails, you're not making any sense." Sonic wondered why he suddenly felt hungry.

"Of course I don't, you're only a hat rack wearing a bow tie," Tails mumbled. Sonic grabbed him by the shoulders and gently shook him.

"Snap out of it! You're delirious!" he yelled. Tails blinked a few times, and the glassy look in his eyes fell away.

"Oh… hi, Sonic. What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing? What were you doing? What was that explosion? And what's all this yellow
dust?"

Tails looked over to the mangled, smoking wreck sitting on the table. He sighed and shook his head.

"Shoot," he said, looking dejected, "the Emerald must have exploded. I knew I shouldn't have increased the frequency threshold by so much."

"The fake Chaos Emerald exploded? Tails, what were you thinking? I've seen what happens when an Emerald explodes; half the city could have been destroyed!"

Tails waved a dismissive hand in his direction. "Don't be silly. The fake Emerald only replicates the effects of a real one; it doesn't hold even a tenth of the energy a real Chaos Emerald does. There was no risk."

"Says the fox who nearly got his head blown off! What were you even doing with it?"

Tails looked from his ruined project to Sonic and back again, before sighing and cradling his forehead with one hand.

"It doesn't matter anymore. It was just a stupid idea I had. I don't know why I thought it would work. Just a crazy theory about – oh!"

He took his hand away from his head, and Sonic saw the source of his surprise: a deep crimson stain on his glove.

"I think I'm bleeding."

Sonic took a step forward and moved Tails' bangs aside to inspect his forehead. Sure enough, blood trickled along it from a small cut right in the centre.

"It's not that bad, considering you could have lost your head entirely," said Sonic. "Come on, let's get a Band-Aid on that."

He led Tails by the hand into the living room and sat him down on the couch, before heading into the kitchen to fetch the first aid kit from under the sink. When he returned he cleaned up the blood, applied some anti-septic to the wound that made Tails wince, and finally stuck a large beige Band-Aid proudly in the centre of his forehead.

"There we go, almost good as new, I'd say. Almost matches your fur colour." Sonic noticed Tails looking sullen, so he gently tapped his cheek to get his attention, smiling at him warmly when he looked over. After a few seconds Tails smiled back, and Sonic's heart skipped a beat; that smile meant more to him than any words could express.

"Come on," he said, rising to his feet, "that's a waterproof one, so you can hit the shower right now and get all that gunk out of your fur. Then it's straight to bed; no more tinkering tonight."

"Sure thing, Dad," Tails groaned.

"Don't make me put you over my knee, you young whippersnapper!"

Tails laughed as he rose to his feet, before he headed upstairs to the bathroom. With a warmth in his heart Sonic marched off to the kitchen to put away the first aid kit, then headed up himself. As his head hit the pillow he felt exhaustion coming on fast. The sound of running water in the next room served as a lullaby, and his eyes grew heavy.
"Sleep well, Tails," he said through a yawn, before he drifted into sleep.

~O~

For once in his life, Sonic didn't feel like moving too fast. As he strolled along the winding road overlooking the bay, he took any opportunity he could to admire the wildflowers springing up from the verge or watch a butterfly skip through the air. Anything to delay the inevitable.

He didn't know why he felt so nervous about approaching Shadow with a simple request. He knew how it would go down; Shadow would hmph and sniff and cross his arms, while Sonic lashed at him with cutting barbs of wit. They would almost come to blows before Sonic appealed to Shadow's better nature, then he'd reluctantly agree before they kissed and made up, although not literally, Sonic was glad to note.

Shadow seemed to enjoy making Sonic work hard for their friendship. Every laugh or smile had to be fought for, every pat on the back came after a long battle of wills manifested as snarky comments or a test of martial prowess. Not something most people would tolerate for long, but Sonic was not most people; he relished the way Shadow constantly challenged him and the rush that battling for Shadow's attention brought with it. He couldn't imagine anything like a normal friendship with his dark counterpart, and Shadow seemed to understand that; he wanted the same thing, more or less.

At the end of it all though, Sonic tolerated Shadow's nature for one simple reason; he knew that Shadow would always be there when he needed him. Despite his faults, the Ultimate Lifeform was unswervingly loyal to the few people he liked, and would always do whatever it took to keep them safe, even at great risk to his own life. Sonic admired that most of all; he knew that feeling very well.

He reached the bottom of the hill, where the road turned towards the shore, forming a gentle curve lined by ostentatious beach houses, each one a small mansion unique in their design. As he approached the one occupied by Rouge the Bat, his eyes noticed a couple of police cars parked on the opposite side of the road, and he grew apprehensive. Picking up his pace slightly, his heart dropped into his stomach when he saw the house.

Lines of yellow tape snaked around the yard fence. The front door lay on the porch, its hinges smashed to splinters and its paintwork scratched off in deep gouges. Shards of glass covered the ground in front of jagged broken windows, and cops swarmed around the place inspecting everything, with Mobians in full body-suits hurrying in and out of the door carrying various cases and plastic bags.

Sonic sprinted over to the cordon, where two cops stood guard. He stared up at the broken house, his mouth hanging open as his mind struggled to process what he was seeing.

"Sir, please step away," said one of the cops, a female border collie. "This is a crime scene."

"A c-crime scene?" Sonic stammered. "Why? What happened?"

"I can't disclose any information at this time," said the cop. "The investigation is still ongoing. Now please step away, sir."

Sonic couldn't help himself; the officer's words and the devastation before him sent his panic into overdrive. He leapt forward and seized the officer by her lapels.

"Tell me what happened!" he screamed at her. "Where is Shadow? Tell me what happened to Shadow!"
"Drop her!" shouted the other cop, a male beaver. He pulled his gun from its holster and pointed it squarely at Sonic's head. "Lie face down on the ground with your hands in the air! This is your last warning!"

"Stand down, Philips!" another voice called from behind them. On the porch stood a large black bear wearing a dusty brown coat, his fierce gaze cowing all of them into submission.

"Sir," said Philips, "this civilian assaulted Officer Jones unprovoked, I'm only-"

"Are you blind, Philips?" said the bear. "That's not just any civilian, that's Sonic the Hedgehog! Stand down, that's an order."

Sheepishly, Philips holstered his gun and walked away. Sonic slowly released his grip on Officer Jones, offering a plaintive apology which earned him nothing but a glare from the collie. The bear approached, reaching over the cordon to shake Sonic's hand.

"Lieutenant Coleman," he said, his stern glare softening. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sonic."

"Sure," said Sonic nonchalantly. "Are you gonna tell me what's going on here, officer? I know the people that live here; they're my friends."

Coleman looked away with guilt in his eyes. Whatever he was about to say, Sonic knew it wouldn't be pleasant to hear.

"We got a call around two-thirty in the morning. Neighbours said they heard raised voices followed by the sounds of a struggle; screams and things being smashed and all that. We dispatched a couple of squad cars right away, but when they got here they found the place like this, with no sign of the attacker. Must have been one heck of a fight."

"What about Shadow? A-and Rouge? What happened to them?"

Coleman's face became even grimmer, and he swallowed loudly. Sonic braced himself for the worst.

"I've been a cop for thirty years. I've seen a lot of nasty things in my time, but nothing like what we found in that house. Look at that," he held his arm up with his palm turned down, "my hand's still shaking. My hand didn't even shake when I got shot while patrolling as a wet-behind-the-ears rookie, but seeing those two..."

"Are they... Officer, are they-?"

"We thought they were when we first went in; the state of them, we thought, no way they could still be alive. But somehow they both clung on to life. Chaos knows how they managed it. The paramedics took them to St. Calvin's hospital, but honestly I'd be surprised if they survive the ride over."

"Who did this? Did anyone see the attacker?" said Sonic. Coleman shook his head.

"Not a thing. CSI are looking for clues as we speak but honestly, I don't fancy their chances. I'm not sure if what we're looking for is even Mobian."

"Not even Mobian! You think some kind of monster did this? I don't believe it!"

"Go to the hospital and see your friends, or whatever's left of them. Then you'll believe it. By Chaos you will."
Without hesitation Sonic shot off down the street towards home. Moving as fast as he legs could push him he weaved through lines of traffic, sliding under a passing truck at an intersection and somersaulting over roadworks. He surged out of the bustling city centre and into the park, carving a trench through the grass and ricocheting from the trees like a pinball. At last he reached home, and the door flew open as he leapt into the living room.

"Tails!" he yelled. "Tails, where are you?"

Tails didn't answer, so Sonic charged around the house like a madman, checking the workshop, then the kitchen, then the back yard. Dashing upstairs he found Tails still tucked up in bed.

"Tails, wake up!" He shook Tails vigorously. Tails rolled over, eyes still shut tight and moaning wearily.

"What is it, Sonic? I'm tired..." he mumbled.

"Shadow and Rouge have been attacked!"

Tails' eyes immediately snapped open, and he sat up in bed, with any sign of exhaustion vanished, replaced by a curious yet fearful look.

"Attacked?! When? By who?"

"It happened early this morning, according to the cops. They don't know who did it but the house was a mess, Tails. I mean, the place had been totally wrecked. It made me feel sick just to look at it."

"What about Rouge? And Shadow? Are they okay?"

Sonic shook his head. "I'm not sure. The cops said they've been taken to St. Calvin's, but they're in a bad way."

Tails rubbed his eyes, then squinted as if blinded by a bright light.

"Wait... Shadow was at his house when this happened? But I thought he was..."

He drifted off, staring into the distance. Sonic thought he could see invisible cogs turning inside Tails' mind, and the fox shook his head a few times and blinked rapidly, like he was trying to shake loose something that had become stuck in his thoughts.

"Tails? What is it?"

He shook his head again, then looked up at Sonic, his eyes bright and alert once more.

"Nothing. Just a crazy thought, that's all. But never mind that! We need to get down to the hospital right away! Where are my sneakers?"

He leapt out of bed and began hunting for his shoes. As Sonic watched him scrabble around, he felt a weight in his chest. For some reason he didn't want to take Tails to the hospital; from the sounds of it Rouge and Shadow wouldn't be a pretty sight, and after the last few days it didn't feel right to expose Tails to anything stressful.

But Tails whizzed past him, taking him by the hand and yanking him out of the room. With his focus returned Sonic followed him out the front door and along the street towards the hospital.

~O~
The small room in the intensive care unit contained only two beds, and no sound could be heard except the gentle whirring of machines and the soft beeps of heart-rate monitors.

Sonic stood in the centre of the room with his arm tightly gripped around Tails' shoulders. Both boys said nothing, simply staring at the patients with their mouths agape.

In the left-hand bed lay Rouge, wrapped up in her sheets with her eyes tightly closed, an oxygen mask clamped to her face. Her cheeks were gaunt and her skin sagged with deep wrinkles beneath greying fur. Hey eyes sat in deep sunken pits, and her lips drooped, pitted with cracks and dried skin. Tubes and wires snaked over her body, and she lay so still she might as well have been a corpse.

Shadow lay in the bed beside her, his face telling a similar story. But his bedsheets didn't cover his torso, and when Sonic looked at him he had to stop himself throwing up.

Shadow's lower torso had become a concave pit, a flap of skin barely concealing the pulsating remains of his organs. His ribs protruded from his chest and his arms had become nothing but bones covered in faded black fur. Like the worst case of anorexia Sonic had ever seen, Shadow resembled little more than a skeleton masquerading as a Mobian.

"Oh Sonic," said Tails, his eyes streaming with tears, "this is just awful! Who did this to them? Why? How could anyone-?"

Tails buried his head in Sonic's chest, soaking his fur with tears and shaking the hedgehog's ribs with the force of his sobs. Sonic gently rubbed his back, but could find no words to comfort the boy. The door creaked open, and a female brown rabbit stepped through, wearing a white coat and carrying a clipboard. Her face, already grim, fell further when she saw Tails crying.

"Not a pretty sight, is it?" said the doctor. "In all my years I've never seen anything like this. When they first came in I thought for sure they were dead. I'm not even sure how they're still holding on in this state."

"What's wrong with them, Doc?" asked Sonic.

She looked at her clipboard. "They're extremely malnourished, although that much is obvious. But it's more than that; they appear to have undergone some form of rapid cell degeneration, although I don't know anything that could induce it so rapidly and so ferociously. The most interesting thing though is that their Chaos Signatures are very weak."

"So?" asked Sonic. Tails looked up from Sonic's chest, stifling his tears for a moment.

"That would imply that they had their Chaos Energy drained somehow," he said through a sniffle. "No amount of physical damage would affect your Chaos Signature; something must have literally sucked the life-force right out of them!"

"Is that even possible?" said the doctor.

"It's more than possible," said Tails, "although no-one's ever built a device that can do it, as far as I know. I don't think any Mobian alive is evil enough to suck out someone's soul, which is pretty much what it's doing when you think about it. Not even Eggman would do something so monstrous."

"Sorry Tails," said Sonic, "but it looks like Mobius got a little darker today. Someone out there's built a soul-sucker, and they've already used it twice, if not more. We need to find them and stop them before they hurt anyone else."
"Why didn't they kill them?" asked Tails.

"Huh?"

"Why didn't they kill them? If you were gonna steal someone's Chaos Energy to the point of neardeath, why not go the whole hog and take it all? Why did the attacker leave them barely alive?"

"I don't care why they did it," growled Sonic, "but I'm not gonna let them do it again. When I find out who did this, I will kill them. I mean it."

"Sonic!" gasped Tails. "Don't say that! You wouldn't."

"I wouldn't?!!" screamed Sonic. "Look at what they've done, Tails! If it was me lying there, would you show any mercy? Would you?!"

Tails hung his head down, and gave no answer. Sonic's heart beat furiously in his chest, and adrenaline surged through him, fuelled by his righteous anger. He'd never wanted to hurt someone as badly as he did in that moment. Never had the idea of ending someone's life sent such an exhilarating shiver down his spine.

Behind him he heard a croaking, wheezing moan. Shadow's eyes had opened by the tiniest amount, revealing crimson irises set in dried-out, bloodshot eyeballs. Sonic felt his bloodlust melt away as Shadow weakly lifted a stick-thin arm towards him.

"Shadow?" cried Sonic. "Shadow, can you hear me? It's Sonic. It's okay, I'm here for you."

"So... nic?" wheezed Shadow, almost inaudibly. "The... Emer... ald."

Sonic kneeled beside Shadow's bedside, fighting back the tears welling within him. "The Emerald? W-which Emerald? What about it?"

"Tak... en."

"Taken? By who? Who did this to you? I need to know who did this!"

Shadow said nothing, but his eyes grew wide with fear, fixed on something on the other side of the room. He raised his trembling arm, pointing a bony finger in front of him. Sonic, Tails and the doctor all looked over to where he pointed, but they saw nothing but an ordinary hospital room.

"Shadow? What are you pointing at? There's nothing there."

Shadow continued to point, and his breathing grew coarser. Slowly his eyes closed again, and his arm slumped down by his side.

"Shadow? Shadow!" cried Sonic, almost leaping onto the bed. "What did you see? Please, just tell me who did this!"

"Sir, I must ask you to stop!" barked the doctor. "He's still holding on, but only just. Another exertion like that could kill him."

"She's right, Sonic," said Tails, "Shadow's too weak to tell us anything more."

"I guess..." sighed Sonic, letting his shoulders slump, "but what do we do know? We still have no idea who we're looking for."

Tails put a finger in the air. "That's not true. Shadow gave us a vital clue."
"What clue?"

"'The Emerald.' That's what he said. He was telling us that whoever attacked him and Rouge was after his Chaos Emerald!"

"How does that help us?"

"It proves that the attack wasn't random. They wanted the Emerald, and I'll bet my left tail that they'll want the other six in short order as well."

"So that means..." said Sonic, holding his chin, "if we find the Emeralds first, we can lure them into a trap!"

"Precisely!" said Tails, beaming.

"Come on, there's no time to lose!" said Sonic, puffing out his chest and pointing triumphantly towards the door. "Let's find those Emeralds!"

They hurried towards the door, but as they reached the door Sonic stopped.

"Hold on a second," he said. He dashed back over to Shadow's bedside, leant over and whispered into his ragged ear.

"I'll be back, but not before I make them pay for this. I give you my word."

~O~
Sonic paced back and forth in Tails' workshop, clicking his fingers and whistling without any regard to tune or tone. Occasionally he'd pick up some device or lump of metal from a workbench, earning him a reprimand from Tails despite the fox never turning away from his computer screen.

"How long is this gonna take?" Sonic whined. "It feels like we've been in here for hours."

"Sonic," growled Tails, exasperated, "we're not microwaving a burrito here; I'm conducting a planet-wide scan for the Chaos Emeralds. Have a little patience for once."

Sonic turned away, silently mouthing 'have a little patience' with a stupid look on his face.

"I heard that," said Tails. "Anyway, I think I'm just about done, so you can quit your moaning."

"What have you found?" Sonic leapt over to Tails' computer, nearly shoving the fox from his stool and thrusting his face right up against the screen. Tails placed his hand on Sonic's shoulders and gently moved his head back from the screen.

"I've found six of the seven Emeralds," he said as he wiped Sonic's condensed breath from his monitor, "but for some reason the scan hasn't picked up the red Emerald; the one that was taken from Shadow. Most disconcerting."

Sonic stood upright and scratched his chin. "Hmm... maybe whoever took it put it in some kind of shielded box to stop it giving off a signal. That's why it's not showing up."

Tails glanced up at Sonic with an amazed look in his eyes. Sonic took a step back, confused.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Tails, covering his rapidly spreading grin with his hand, "I'm just... impressed."

"Hey, I do pay attention to what you say!" snapped Sonic, his hands firmly on his hips.

"Sometimes..."

"Well, this time it's paid off. If you're right, and the Emerald's signature is being suppressed somehow, then that means our suspect can't have found any of the other six yet. If they had we wouldn't be able to see them."

"So they've only got one so far? Awesome! Then we can easily get ahead of them. But where do we start? Your computer says the Emeralds are scattered all over the world."

"Hmm," pondered Tails, "we know that they're not afraid to use force if someone tries to keep the Emerald from them. Therefore it would make the most sense to go after any Emerald close to a population centre, don't you think?"

Sonic nodded, his face grim. He'd seen the results of that force first hand, and recalling the sorry state Rouge and especially Shadow were left in made his stomach churn, anger mixing with sorrow inside him.

"So where are the Emeralds?" he said, buttoning down his turbulent emotions.

"According to this display," said Tails, turning back to his screen, "four of the six remaining Emeralds are in fairly remote places, nowhere near any towns or cities. One appears to be in..."
Eggman's base.

"No surprise there." Sonic rolled his eyes at the mere thought of his rotund nemesis, no doubt playing with the Emerald like a kid on Longest Night.

"And the last one is... oh dear."

"What? What's the matter?"

"My scans show the blue Emerald is right in the heart of Empire City."

"Please tell me you're yanking my chain."

Tails grim face implied anything but chain-yanking. "I wish it was a joke, but my readings are 99.9 percent accurate. The Emerald is definitely in Empire City."

Sonic shrugged. "Maybe it won't be so bad; it might be in some old warehouse or in the sewer. You know, someplace where there's no-one around to get hurt."

"Let me narrow down my search," said Tails. His fingers rampaged across the keyboard as he input new parameters. The computer whirred for a moment before the screen zoomed in on Empire City, displaying towering skyscrapers and streets clogged up with traffic.

"That... doesn't look like a sewer," said Sonic.

Tails crunched more numbers. "It gets worse; this is telling me that the Emerald is inside Quinn Tower."

Quinn. Sonic thought the name sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. He raised his finger, ready to ask about it, but Tails raised his own hand to stop him.

"Hold on a sec," he said. "Here we go. This should shed some light on the situation."

On Tails' screen a newspaper article had popped up, displaying a picture of a smugly grinning red panda in a sharp pinstripe suit, the Empire City skyline seeming to cower in the distance behind him. Above the picture the headline read:

**EMERALDS ARE FOREVER: TYCOON QUINN ACQUIRES BLUE CHAOS EMERALD AT AUCTION FOR ONE BILLION RINGS.**

"One billion!" gasped Sonic, his voice fading as his breath deserted him.

"Look here," said Tails, and he started to read snippets of the article. "'Quinn, already one of the top five richest people in the world, displayed his vast wealth in style today... Quinn purchased the genuine Chaos Emerald at auction for the truly outrageous sum of...' Heh, look at this bit, '...when asked to address fears that keeping the powerful gemstone locked in a vault would risk world stability, especially when Sonic the Hedgehog often needed them to defend Mobius, Quinn replied 'I've dreamt of owning an Emerald for years now; I think the threat to the world would have to be pretty extreme before I would consider parting with it. Besides, I think Sonic can do just fine with the remaining six Emeralds. If he can't, well then he's not much of a hero, is he?'""

"Oh, I remember this smug jackass!" said Sonic, his face like thunder. "He kept trying to hire me to collect the Emeralds for him, just so he could stick them in a dusty old vault! He had his goons pester me for months, remember?"
"I remember," said Tails gloomily. "Looks like he finally got his wish."

"And now he's put himself right in the crosshairs of our mystery villain!" Sonic smirked with selfish pride. "Could've happened to a nicer guy!"

"Come on, Sonic, chided Tails. "Quinn's not my favourite person either, but he has no idea how much danger he's in. We can't let him get killed on our watch just because he's annoying."

Sonic tried to stand his ground, but the look on Tails' face wore down his defences and shook him from his mean-spirited fantasy.

"You're right, as always," he sighed. "Besides, there's bound to be lots of innocent people in Quinn tower who aren't total jerks. We need to warn them."

"We need to do more than that. We need to convince Quinn to give us the Emerald. It's the only way to keep him or anyone around him safe."

"I don't fancy our chances, but we have to try. Come on, let's get going; it's a long way to Empire City."

"Wait," said Tails, hopping down from his stool, "what about Eggman? His life is in danger too."

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Ugh, I hate saving Eggman's life. He always gloats about it for weeks. Plus, he's even less likely to give up the Emerald than Quinn."

Sonic chewed his lip for a moment, before shaking his head.

"No, we're going to see Quinn. Eggman's got enough tricks and traps to look after himself."

"And more besides," agreed Tails. "Let's get the Tornado up and running. Next stop: Empire City."

~O~

The streets of Empire City roared with the sound of endless lines of cars and the screeching of impatiently-pressed horns, while the sidewalks shook under the unrelenting march of shoppers, tourists, cops and businessmen frenetically rushing about like they had mere moments left to live. In the midst of the heaving mass of Mobian life stood Sonic and Tails, craning their necks towards the sky.

Quinn Tower loomed above them, a huge and imposing oblong piercing into the midday sky seemingly without end. Its stone facets were broken up by row upon row of tinted windows, each one catching the sunlight and throwing it down onto the street below. Two statues emerged from the walls around the entrance, each one a towering image of a muscular male red panda aping the classical statues of Ancient Krytos, dressed in naught but a flowing sash with a laurel wreath sat upon their heads. Above them, huge golden letters seemed to shout a single word at the world: QUINN.

"Doesn't think much of himself, does he?" said Tails.

"That is one big tower," said Sonic, nearly falling over backwards to try and glimpse the top. "Makes me think Quinn's overcompensating for something, if you know what I mean. You know what I mean, right? Huh, Tails?"

Tails glared at Sonic. "No, and stop nudging me in the ribs."
"Never mind." Sonic's shoulders slumped. "Let's get inside already."

They stepped up to the glass double doors, tiny compared to the grandeur of the surrounding architecture. Inside they found themselves in a high-ceilinged atrium covered in polished marble. A federation flag hung from each side of the room, and on the rear wall behind the reception desk a portrait of an austere-looking red panda looked down upon everyone, just as Sonic knew the real Quinn did.

"Seriously, this guy is so in love with himself," whispered Sonic as they crossed the lobby, stern security guards watching their every move, "and you think I'm bad..." he fell silent as they approached the reception desk, where a female antelope busied herself at her computer.

"What do we do now, Sonic?" whispered Tails. "We can't just walk up to the desk and demand to see Quinn."

"Funny," said Sonic, grinning from ear to ear, "cause that's exactly what I'm gonna do!"

He rapped his knuckles upon the black marble desk, and the antelope looked up, scrutinizing Sonic with her glare.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Quinn," said Sonic. "I need to see him right away."

"Mr Quinn isn't receiving visitors today," she said, looking back to her computer. "If you want to make an appointment, there's an available slot in three weeks, if he accepts the meeting request, that is."

Sonic looked back at Tails, who had just begun to make his I told you so face. Quickly looking away he rapped on the desk once more.

"There's seems to be a slight misunderstanding," he said as the receptionist looked backed up at him, "you see, I'm Sonic the Hedgehog; I think Quinn will definitely want to see me right now."

The receptionist raised a sceptical eyebrow. "You could be the President for all I care. Mr Quinn doesn't make exceptions for anyone; you'll just have to wait your turn like everyone else. Now if you'll excuse me, I have – there, you see? I need to answer this call. Good day to you."

She picked up the ringing phone and began to talk, ignoring Sonic once again. Sonic shrugged at Tails. Just as he planned to regroup and think of a new plan, the receptionist's voice caught his ear.

"Right away?" she said, slight confusion in her tone. "Yes, of course, Sir. I'll let them know immediately. Thank you, Sir. Goodbye."

She put down the phone, looking over at Sonic and Tails like she couldn't quite believe the conversation that had passed.

"Mr Quinn..." she cleared her throat, "Mr Quinn asked to see you in his office... right away. You're to take the executive elevator to the top floor immediately."

"There we go!" said Sonic, gently nudging Tails in the ribs. "A little star power goes a long way! He probably just can't wait to get my autograph."

"Now who's in love with himself?" groaned Tails. "Don't forget why we're here. Quinn's life could depend on what we say and do up there."
They approached a large silver door set to the left side of the reception desk, and as they neared it the door opened on its own, revealing a mirrored elevator lined with gold and fitted with a plush red carpet. Sonic whistled when he saw it.

"Now that's travelling in style, wouldn't you say?"

They stepping into the elevator, and the door slowly closed behind them. The lift bore no buttons, but started to move gently upward on its own. The gentle hum surrounded them completely, cutting them off from any sign of the world outside. Sonic noticed Tails staring silently into space, and he tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey," he said, smiling warmly, "you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine," said Tails, looking down at the floor. "Well, maybe not completely. I just wish we had some idea of who our enemy is. So far all we know is that they want the Emeralds, and they'll do anything to get them. Not much to go on, is it?"

Sonic suspected Tails held back more than he let on; he retained his cheerful demeanour, but Sonic could see a great sadness in his eyes, so subtly disguised that anyone else would have missed it. But he knew Tails too well; something was bothering him, and he had a feeling it had something to do with Tails' freak-out.

Sonic couldn't help but question the situation he had placed Tails in. They were both still reeling from the attack on Shadow and Rouge, but despite Sonic's heartache over Shadow, he knew he could handle it. But Tails was just a child; was it right to cart him right off into danger again so quickly?

Sonic shook his head. Tails had weathered much worse and always gotten through it. He held up better that anyone he knew, but he had to wonder; how much of that was just a façade, a brave face put on to keep him from worrying?

"Sonic?" said Tails. "Are you alright? You looked kinda spaced out there."

Sonic waved him away. "It's nothing. I was just thinking about something."

"It's Shadow isn't it? I can tell you're worried about him. What happened to him and Rouge... I can barely stand thinking about it myself. I can't imagine how you must be feeling right now."

"Yeah, I am," Sonic half-lied. He was worried about Shadow, but despite his harrowing state he still believed the dark hedgehog could deal with it, Tails on the other hand...

A slender pair of arms wrapped around his waist and slid up his back. Tails pulled him into a tender hug, resting his head against Sonic's chest. Sonic stood still in shock for a few seconds, before reciprocating.

"It's okay, Sonic. I'll always be around for you, no matter what. You can always count on me to keep you strong."

Sonic almost laughed out loud; here he was worrying about Tails' state of mind, yet the little fox was comforting him. But his mirth soon turned to admiration for his little brother's incredible strength of spirit.

"Thanks, Tails," he whispered. "I'd be lost without you by my side."
The elevator slowed, and Tails pulled away from the hug. But to Sonic's great surprise, Tails' cheeks didn't show a single hint of red.

"Normally I'd blush like an over-ripe tomato at mushy stuff like that, but right now I think we both needed it, don't you agree?"

Sonic smiled and nodded, ruffling Tails' bangs gently. The elevator came to a stop, and with a ding the doors slid open.

A red carpet stretched out before them, leading them into a cavernous room lined with dark wood panelling reaching up to a distant ceiling. Despite the scale of the room there seemed to be something of note everywhere they looked: rows of bookcases rested up against the walls, stuffed with tomes on all manner of subjects, a globe larger than both of them put together sat in one corner, while an ornate chess set waited in other, its surface as polished and sparkling as the marble in the lobby. The far wall seemed to be completely absent, consisting of a single pane of glass revealing a panoramic vista of the city below. In front of this window stood an ornate carved wooden desk that formed a half-circle, and beyond that a figure stood looking out onto the world, a tiny dark shape against the bright sky outside.

"Sonic the Hedgehog," said the figure without turning around, "as I live and breathe."

The figure turned around, revealing a male red panda slightly shorter than Sonic. He wore a dark pinstripe suit and a deep red tie, formal black gloves, and the most infuriating self-satisfied smirk Sonic had ever seen.

"I should have known you'd show your face around here sooner or later," he said, "but I'm guessing you didn't come here for my autograph. No, of course not, after all why would you? I'm only one of those 'ordinary folk' not fit to lick your boots. What could the great Sonic the Hedgehog possibly want from a nobody like me?"

The sarcasm practically oozed from his mouth as he spoke, and his smug grin didn't falter. He moved towards his desk slowly, exuding an air of control with each calm and collected movement. He sat down in the large swivel chair behind the desk and opened a drawer.

"Might it be something to do with this?"

In his hand he held a glittering gemstone shining with a deep blue as dark as the ocean depths. Sonic's eyes grew wide when he saw it, and he had to fight to stop himself from leaping over the desk and snatching it.

"Isn't it beautiful?" said Quinn, the blue glow mixing with green of his mischievous eyes into an otherworldly shade of cyan. "Doesn't it just burn you up inside to see it in my possession? How envious must you be right now?"

"Shut up!" barked Sonic, his fists tightly clenched. "We didn't come here to play games with you, Quinn. Give us back the Emerald. That's all we want."

"Give it back?!" Quinn said incredulously, his smile still unbroken. "Oh Sonic, I wish I could put your attitude in a bottle and sell it. 'Give it back' he says. What makes you think this belongs to you? I didn't steal it, I acquired it legitimately and at great expense, I might add. Whichever legal system or rulebook you judge it by, the Emerald is mine."

Sonic gripped the edge of the desk. "Listen to me! I don't care how much you paid for it; you don't understand what you're dealing with! You've no right."
Quinn leapt up from his chair, slamming his own free hand down on the desk. His blasé expression collapsed instantly into a disgusted, angry scowl.

"And what right do you have to hoard the Chaos Emeralds? By whose authority do you claim ownership of them, other than your own? The Emeralds are a part of Mobius; they existed long before you were born and they'll continue to exist after you're nothing but dirt in the ground. You don't get to decide who can and can't possess them based on some misguided sense of 'destiny' or 'heroism.' The real world doesn't suit your naive idealism, so either grow up or get out of my office."

Sonic's hands gripped the desk so tight the wood creaked, and he seethed with fury. He needed that Emerald to save Shadow, and he wasn't about to let someone lecture him on his principles. Just as he felt the urge to leap over the desk and punch Quinn, Tails spoke up.

"Mr Quinn, please," he said calmly, bowing his head respectfully. "We're not trying to rob you. We've come to warn you that your life is in danger. Someone out there is after the Chaos Emeralds, and they've already attacked some of our friends to get one. If you're not careful you'll be next. We only want the Emerald to stop people from getting hurt; once we catch the culprit we'll give it back, we promise. Don't we, Sonic?"

Tails calmness melted Sonic's anger away, and he mumbled in agreement.

"Well now," said Quinn, sitting down in his chair with his smile returning, although this time his lips curled up from intrigue, "this is interesting. I wasn't expecting you to try something like this. So, who exactly is after me?"

"And why do they want my Emerald?"

"Um... we don't know, but-"

"When do you think they'll strike?"

"Well... we can't be sure-"

"So let me get this straight," The smugness of Quinn's smile returned in full. "You've come to tell me that someone's after my Emerald, but you don't know who it is, what they want with it or when they're coming, is that right?"

"Well..." said Tails, growing antsy, "yes, but-"

"Fine," said Quinn, shrugging, "take it."

"Wait, what?" said Sonic.

"Take the Emerald. See if I care." He tossed the gem across the desk, sending it bouncing over the lacquered wood towards Sonic, who fumbled to catch it. Sonic's confusion didn't wane, especially as he turned the Emerald over in his hands. The gem felt oddly light, and when he tapped the edges it gave off a dull, hollow echo.

"This is a fake! It's made of plastic!" he said, holding it out towards Quinn. Quinn threw back his head and laughed.

"Of course it's a fake, you moron! You surely can't be naive enough to think I'd just give you my most prized possession because you happened to ask nicely! That one's just a mock-up I use for press
photos." He laughed again, "The look on your face, man! I should get that printed on a t-shirt or something. Maybe I could put it online, start a new meme or whatever they call it: 'Dumbass Sonic.' It'll go viral overnight!"

"Mr. Quinn," pleaded Tails. "Please take this seriously. You're life really is at risk if you insist on keeping the Emerald. You have to believe us."

Quinn rose to his feet. "Oh, I believe you. At least, I believe you when you say someone's coming for the Emerald. But you're wrong about the danger. Let me show you why I'm not the least-bit concerned about your mystery Emerald thief."

He slowly moved over to the wood panelling and opened a small square hidden in the wall, revealing a keypad. He punched in a code, then offered up his eye to be scanned. A whirring sound came from behind the panels, before a much larger section of the wall slid away, revealing a grey metal elevator.

"I knew that once news of my acquisition hit the streets that every wannabe-jewel thief and cat burglar would have me in their sights, so I've taken more than enough precautions. I'm going to take you on a little tour which should convince you that the safest place for the Emerald, or indeed any Emerald, is right here. Now stay still for a moment," he cleared his throat, glancing at his watch, "Increase authorisation limit by two for thirty minutes. Access code J4XQ-Apple-9-Zero."

The lights in the room grew dark for a moment, and a faint hum filled the air. Sonic felt a slight tingle all through his body which ceased when the lights came back up.

"There we go," said Quinn. "I've given you a temporary pass for your visit."

"What was that weird drone a second ago?" asked Sonic.

"The system was just adding your Chaos Signatures to the database so that it can monitor you at all times. It's the best way of verifying someone's identity; even a shapeshifting robot can't fake that."

Quinn gestured towards the elevator, and with some trepidation Sonic and Tails stepped inside. In his heart Sonic hoped they were being led into a trap; at least then he could feel justified in beating seven bells out of Quinn and taking the Emerald. Despite his over-inflated ego Quinn had a point; Sonic didn't own the Chaos Emeralds, and he had no grounds to gripe if someone else acquired them, so long as they weren't using them for evil.

Maybe Quinn's using the Emerald to suck the rings right out of people's wallets, he thought, or building a clone army of super-rich jerkwads. That would make things so much simpler for me. No need for moralising, just smash and grab.

Quinn stepped onto the elevator and pressed a button to close the doors.

"So, what would happen if our Chaos Signatures hadn't been scanned?" asked Sonic.

"Oh," said Quinn, grinning mischievously, "you'll find out soon enough."

Sonic's stomach lurched upwards as the floor dropped beneath him. The elevator dropped at such an alarming rate that his fur stood on end, and Tails' namesakes stood upright. Quinn never stopped grinning, giggling behind his teeth as he watched Sonic and Tails lurch around trying to find their balance.

The elevator came to an abrupt halt, throwing Sonic to the floor. As he rose to his feet he felt his organs bouncing around inside him.
"Quite a ride, eh?" said Quinn. "It gives me such a rush every time I come down here."

"Yeah," moaned Sonic, holding his stomach, "it's a total laugh riot. Where are we anyway?"

"Judging by our velocity and the amount of time, I'd say we're now at least 30 feet beneath Quinn Tower," said Tails.

"Pretty smart for a kid, aren't you?" said Quinn. "We could use someone like you in R & D."

"Forget it," said Sonic, scowling. "Tails would never work with someone like you. Right, Tails?"

"Look at that, he's putting words in your mouth! Do you want to play second fiddle to this loser your whole life?"

"Um..." said Tails, looking at the floor, "I'd rather just carry on with what we're doing, if that's okay. This room is too small for a battle of egos the size of either of yours. I'm getting claustrophobic."

The tiny compartment fell silent. Sonic and Quinn stared warily at each other, wordlessly agreeing to let the discussion slide.

Quinn pressed a button to open the doors. The grey metal slid back, revealing a long white corridor devoid of features that seemed to stretch on forever. The group's footfalls echoed through the silence of the hall, occasionally joined by a faint clicking or whirring sound behind the walls. Sonic noticed that at regular intervals a small dome about the size of his hand jutted from the wall, as white as all the rest.

"That sound you can hear is made by a series of Chaos scanners within the walls," said Quinn, "they're scanning you every time they pass you, checking for any inconsistencies with the database. Their movement pattern is random to make them even harder to avoid. You asked what happens if you're not authorised to be down here?" he tapped one of the small domes, "sentry guns. Any would be intruder will face a storm of lead fired from just about every angle you imagine. Even you couldn't outrun them, Sonic."

"Uh-huh," said Sonic, "seems a bit much, don't you think? All this security for just one Emerald?"

"Lot of dangerous people out there who covet the Chaos Emeralds," said Quinn, staring directly at Sonic. "Can't be too careful, especially if you're right about a violent thief on the prowl."

They continued marching along the corridor until they came to what seemed like a dead end. Quinn placed his hand against the white wall, and after some more whirring it slid away.

"Just a final signature check before the main attraction, and voila!" he said, holding his arms aloft. "Gentlemen, welcome to my vault."

The corridor opened up into a perfectly circular room as white as the hallway leading up to it, but tinted by a shimmering and shifting blue light. In the centre of the room a narrow white pillar rose from the floor, on the top sat the blue Chaos Emerald held within a clear plastic support.

"This better not be another fake," said Sonic. "We've wasted enough time here already."

"I assure you this is the real thing. Why don't you see for yourself? Go on, feel it." Sonic noticed Quinn fiddling with his watch as he spoke, and he grew suspicious. He looked over to Tails, who simply shrugged and gestured for him to proceed. Sonic crept up to the pillar, slowly wrapping his fingers around the gem. The impossibly smooth facets felt icy cold to the touch, and his fingers tingled beneath his glove. Wary that he might be thrust into a trap at any moment, Sonic lifted the
Emerald from its holder.

The door to the vault slammed shut, and instantly the stale white lights flashed red, sending wild shadows tumbling across the room, then a siren screeched, piercing into Sonic's ears. A hatch on the wall opened up, revealing a screen emblazoned with large red numbers counting down from ten.

"Quinn!" Sonic bellowed over the din. "What's happening?"

Quinn said nothing, instead watching the countdown patiently as if waiting for a bus. Sonic looked from Tails to Quinn and back again. The fox's eyes were wide, and he gestured to the pedestal madly.

"Sonic!" he yelled. "Put it back, now!"

"What?" Sonic strained to hear Tails over the siren. Quinn looked on, his face eerily calm.

"Put it back!" bellowed Tails. Hearing him that time, Sonic quickly thrust the Emerald back into its holster, and at once the siren ceased, the lights in the room stopped flashing, the doors re-opened and the countdown screen slid back into the wall with two seconds left on its timer.

"You cut that a bit fine, if I'm perfectly honest," said Quinn, smirking. "Another two seconds and you would have been vaporised."

"What do you mean?" said Sonic. "What was all that about?"

"Only I can remove the Emerald from its stand. If anyone but me tries it, they'll be trapped in here while the room undergoes a Chaos purge. Nothing organic would survive, and any robotics would have their circuit boards fried. I've got to hand it to the boys in the lab; they sure made this final deterrent an effective one. I'll think you'll agree that there's nowhere on Mobius more secure; the perfect place for a Chaos Emerald, wouldn't you say?"

"Are you pleased with this death-trap you've built, Quinn?" said Tails, his face brimming with anger. "You were gonna let us die just to prove a point? And what about you? You would have died too if Sonic hadn't put the Emerald back."

Quinn shrugged. "I just knew Sonic would do the right thing."

"Yeah right," said Tails, "like you'd gamble your life on something like that. You've got some way to stop the purge, haven't you?"

"I'm sorry." Quinn looked at his watch, not sounding sorry at all. "That would be telling, now wouldn't it? I can't reveal all my secrets for nothing."

"Fine, then answer me this," Tails said as he strode up to Quinn to square off as best he could despite the height difference. "What's to stop someone putting a gun to your head and forcing you to retrieve the Emerald for them?"

"Ooh, an easy starter for ten! I simply use a different code to 'authorise' my kidnapper. They'll get torn to shreds as soon as they step from the elevator. Both the real and the fake code are randomly generated each half-day, and their sent directly to this." He tapped his smartwatch, raising his eyebrows playfully.

"Let me guess, that also only works with your Chaos Signature, right?"

"Right again, my brainy little friend. Seriously, you should think about my offer. I could make you
rich beyond your wildest dreams, and all I'd want in return is unfettered access to that brain of yours. The things we could achieve together…"

Sonic grabbed Tails by the hand, firmly pulling him away down the corridor.

"We're leaving, Tails. I've had just about all I can take from this jackass."

"Sonic! No need to be so bitter," said Quinn, laughing. "What's the matter? Are you upset that I've simply bought my way to victory? Or do you still believe your noble ideals and principles can do a better job?"

"Mark my words, Quinn," said Tails, standing his ground and halting Sonic in his tracks before rounding on the red panda, his tone low and foreboding, "this over-engineered piggy bank of yours won't do you any good unless we can find out who we're up against. You underestimate the threat at your peril."

Quinn leaned forward, placing a hand on Tails shoulder and talking in a patronising tone.

"Rest assured, once the 'threat' has been reduced to a pile of ashes, I'll be sure to contact you so you can sift through their remains and find out who they used to be. Won't that be fun for you?"

Tails shook his head in disgust before turning back to the elevator. As he and Sonic reached the doors, Quinn called after them.

"If you find any more Chaos Emeralds, make sure to swing by and drop them off. They'll make fine additions to my collection. Don't worry, if you need them for world-saving or whatever, I'll gladly hire them out to you at the modest rate of say, 100k an hour?"

He laughed, his mean-spirited chuckling echoing up and down the hall. Tails stormed into the lift with Sonic in tow, before jamming his finger firmly on the button.

"Let's get out of here, Sonic. This jerk clearly doesn't need our help."

As the doors closed, they caught one last glimpse of Quinn standing in the corridor, and even as they ascended at a much slower rate than their descent, the sound of his laughter seemed to linger in their ears. Sonic shook his head, trying to stifle a despondent sigh.

"I'm starting to think we should have gone to see Eggman instead."

"At least Eggman tries to use the Chaos Emeralds," moaned Tails, "even if it's usually for something bad, he at least recognises their true value. He doesn't waste billions of rings and cutting-edge technology just to let it gather dust in a vault. What kind of selfish… ass does a thing like that?"

"Forget about Quinn," said Sonic, slightly concerned by Tails' growing anger. "Let him play with his fancy toys and laugh about how rich he is compared to us. While we've wasted our time here, the thief has probably collected another Emerald, and who knows who got hurt trying to stop them. We need to come up with a better plan than just running around like headless chickens."

Tails switched to his pondering pose, cradling his chin and staring intently into the middle distance. As the elevator slowed to a stop, he looked up, a devilish smile plastered on his muzzle.

"I've got an idea. It's risky, but if it works, we'll catch the Emerald thief with his pants down. But that's not the best part."

"Uh-oh, I know that face; you only get it when you're planning something completely outrageous,
and dangerous, no doubt. What mad scheme have you thought up this time?"

"Something that'll wipe the smile right off Quinn's face."

~0~
During the plane ride back to Station Square, both Sonic and Tails had been unusually quiet. Sonic sat crossed-legged on the wings of the Tornado as it cruised through the evening sky against a backdrop of a burning orange sunset framed with dark clouds, his mind elsewhere.

To his mind, Tails seemed to get far more riled up by Quinn's abrasive arrogance than he expected. Letting people get under the skin was Sonic's particular flaw, especially when his opponent reminded him too much of himself. If he didn't lose his cool, then maybe Knuckles would, or even Shadow. But never his little brother; he always stayed grounded, always kept his head on straight and did everything he could to diffuse a tense situation. Sonic and his friends could always rely on Tails to be the heart of their team.

Sonic occasionally turned back to look at Tails in the cockpit. He stared straight ahead, his face a strange mix of displeasure crossed with playful intent. Sonic knew that Tails' mind must be working overtime on hatching some ludicrous yet perfectly workable plan. Normally a good thing, but Sonic worried Tails' latest scheme might be a little too skewed towards showing Quinn up.

But if it achieved their main goal of catching the Emerald thief, did it matter if some greedy businessman ended up with egg on his face? Sonic knew for certain Tails would never harm anyone, no matter how much they annoyed him. It took a direct threat to his friends before Tails would ever get violent.

Sonic looked back toward the sunset, allowing the warm amber rays to wash over his face, the cool breeze of the dusk air sweeping across him and breathing calmness inside of him. He worried too much about Tails, he knew that, but lately it seemed to have gotten worse, and he found himself over-analysing every word from his little brother's mouth and every expression on his face. He figured that his emotions must be all over the place after what happened to Shadow, of course after seeing something like that happen to someone he cared about he would worry more about Tails, the only other person in his life as dear to him, if not more so.

As the little plane sped on towards home, Sonic wondered why none of that made him feel any better.

~O~

"You know, Tails, I've been thinking…"

Sonic stood in front of the couch, allowing himself to fall backwards into its comfy embrace, letting a relaxed sigh escaped him.

"What have I told you about thinking, Sonic? You'll hurt your brain if you keep trying it."

Tails hopped up onto the couch, tucking in his legs and flopping against Sonic's side, looking up at him with a cheeky grin. Sonic put his arm around him and pulled him close, though not before rolling his eyes.

"Oh, ha de ha ha. We got a comedian in here or something?"

"Don't pretend you don't love it when I mock you. You yearn for the sting of my razor-sharp wit. You're like some kind of teasing junkie."
"Whatever dude, now listen up already," Sonic leant forward, raising his finger in the air. "What if that business with Quinn wasn't just a wild goose chase? Maybe the Emerald thief knew we would go to Empire City, and used the distraction to grab another Emerald?"

"Hmm," said Tails, leaning forward into his all-too-familiar pondering pose, "I suppose if someone knew you well enough, they'd be pretty confident that you would choose the option that protected the most innocents, which in this case would be Empire City. But that would mean the thief is someone we know, or at least someone who knows you and how you'd react."

"Maybe it's Quinn himself!" Sonic's eyes widened as if a light-bulb had appeared above his head. "He set up that nonsense in the vault just to keep us occupied, meanwhile his goons were free to snatch the Emeralds. You know how much he wants them for his collection; that's the motive right there!"

"Are you sure about that? The attack at Rouge's took place before we found out about Quinn."

"That was just to goad us into action!" declared Sonic, leaping to his feet. "To make us think that he was in danger as well so we'd rush to his aid. Remember the way he mocked my principles? He was hinting that he knew how I'd react. It makes perfect sense; Quinn is the real Emerald thief!"

Sonic stood tall with his chest puffed out and full of pride. But before he could celebrate his brilliant deduction, Tails made a strange half-moan that took the wind from his sails.

"What?" said Sonic, putting his hands on his hips and looking down on Tails. "You're making that 'hnnnh' sound you make when you think I'm wrong. But I'm not wrong this time; Quinn is our man!"

"Hnnnh…"

"There it is again!" Sonic pointed right at him. "What's wrong with my theory?"

"I don't like Quinn, you know that; he's arrogant, he wastes money and science on personal glory and he thinks he can just buy what he doesn't have. But he's not violent, at least not to the degree we've seen this week. He might send some thugs around to beat you up, but what happened to Shadow and Rouge… it takes a special kind of evil to inflict that on another living being. I just don't think Quinn is that pointlessly cruel."

"But, listen up a sec, but…" said Sonic, trying to salvage his position, "Quinn desperately wants the Emeralds; and he knew he'd have to challenge Shadow for one of them at some point. Maybe he had his tech boys devise a weapon that could beat Shadow and they just... um... they just didn't realise how powerful it was. That's why they didn't kill him and Rouge, because they got scared when they saw what it did and ran away."

Tails shook his head, sighing as he prepared to pop Sonic's thought balloon.

"It's a nice idea, but there's a glaring hole in it; if some normal Mobians attacked Shadow, even with a device that could drain his Chaos energy away, there's only two ways it could have played out: either they use it and defeat Shadow without a fight, or he reacts faster and breaks every bone in their bodies in a heartbeat. But you said it yourself; the house had been completely trashed, as if there was a drawn-out fight between Shadow and the attackers."

Sonic scratched his head, desperately searching for a response despite knowing that once again Tails had beaten him in a battle of wits.

"Besides," Tails continued, "I don't think Quinn or his technicians are as clever as he likes to make out. If they were, we shouldn't have even been able to detect the Emerald in his vault. Not to mention
I noticed so many flaws in his supposedly 'impenetrable' security system it's almost laughable. That's what I was trying to warn him about; the Emerald thief is clever enough to avoid us and powerful enough to beat Shadow in a fight. He's not about to be thwarted by the vault's defences. Face it Sonic; Quinn is too stupid and up-himself to possibly be the mastermind of this mystery."

Sonic shrugged his shoulders, before flopping back down on the couch.

"Fine," he said with little enthusiasm. "So what do we do now? We're right back to square one."

"Not exactly," said Tails, "remember I said I had an idea to catch the thief? I've been turning it over in my mind ever since we left Empire City, and I'm certain it will work."

Sonic sat up slightly, intrigued. He had to admit he'd been curious about Tails' plan for a while now, but mostly because he wanted to get some insight into the fox's current state of mind.

"It's quite simple, really" said Tails, causing Sonic to flop back down with a groan.

"That means it's ridiculously complex and I won't understand a word of it."

"Just hear me out for a second. You're right that we can't just go running off at random chasing Emeralds; we can't hope to catch the thief by blindly guessing where he'll strike next. So instead of going to the Emeralds, why don't we make them come to us?"

"I don't mind telling you I have a bad feeling about what you're about to say."

"If I can cause a spike in global Chaos levels at just the right frequency, I can force the Emeralds to jump into the Special Zone, including the one in Quinn's vault!" he threw back his head and laughed, a gloating cackle that Sonic found most unsettling compared to Tails' usual childish giggle.

"Oh, I'd gladly pay a billion rings just to see the look on his face!"

"Yeah, okay," said Sonic, putting out his hand to Tails shoulder, "that's… great and everything, but about the Emeralds: do I really have to go into the Special Zone again? With all the tubes and flashing spheres and fish that turn into birds all over the place? There's a reason I never wanted to take up drugs, Tails; I've already spent enough time freaking out in that crazy dimension."

"It's the best solution there is; space and time are warped in the Special Zone, and the nature of the Chaos Emeralds causes them to congregate near each other, although usually inside some kind of maze-like structure they form around themselves. We can go inside and collect the remaining Emeralds in no time at all."

"But if we can use the Special Zone to gather the Emeralds," said Sonic, "surely the thief will be able to as well?"

"Not if they don't realise that's where they've gone," declared Tails. "We'll have a massive head start on them! Even if they do figure it out, the Special Zone is the perfect place to capture them without causing a load of collateral damage in the process."

"You've got this all figured out haven't you?"

"Uh… yeah?" Tails placed his hand on his chest and raised an eyebrow. "It's me, remember?"

"Alright then smart-ass, why don't you get started on it, if you're so clever?"

Tails rose to his feet. "It's gonna take a while. I'll need a few hours at least to work on the
calculations. I need to make sure the frequencies are exactly right, otherwise…"

"It'll cause the complete and total destruction of all space and time?" Sonic cut in with one scrutinising eyebrow raised. Tails frowned at him, his eyes narrowing.

"Possibly…"

"I think I'm better off not knowing what you get up to in that workshop," said Sonic, shaking his head in disbelief. "You better start right away and make sure those sums are right."

"What will you do now?"

"I think... I think I might go to the hospital again, spend some time with Shadow. I was thinking about him on the way back, and I kinda feel like I should be with him right now."

"Sonic," warned Tails, "don't forget Rouge is sick as well. It's not all about Shadow."

"I know, but ya know..."

"I understand." Tails placed a hand on Sonic's shoulder. "You can't help but feel worse for Shadow. All I'm asking is that you check on Rouge as well; she's a friend too, remember?"

"You're right, once again." He rose to his feet. "Seriously, how are you always right about everything? Leave something for the rest of us, why don't you?"

"Come on, I'm not always right." Tails looked at the floor with his face turning a deep red. "I just have a different way of looking at things to most people."

"I'll second that. You're nothing like most people, and personally I wouldn't have you any other way."

The two boys stood looking at each other, Sonic smiling warmly. Slowly Tails' reserved expression shifted upwards until his mouth returned a similar compassionate smile. The room grew quiet, and Tails shook slightly where he stood.

"Oh, what the heck," he blurted out, making Sonic jump. He rushed forward, throwing his arms around the older boy and pulling him into a constricting embrace.

"Tails! Go easy on the spine, buddy!"

"I love you, Sonic!" Tails said, immediately releasing him and rushing towards his workshop, shielding his eyes to avoid Sonic's gaze, while his whole body turned bright red. He closed the door behind him, leaving Sonic standing alone in the living room, his head spinning.

"Wow," he said aloud, "that was... weird, he wanted to say. It wasn't like Tails to be so forward; Sonic always knew the fox felt as strongly as he did towards him, but he never thought he'd actually say it. The few times Sonic had told Tails he loved him caused nothing but squirming and complaining about 'mushy stuff.'

Sonic figured the stress of their situation must be getting to Tails, just like it was getting to him; two of their friends had almost been killed and despite all their efforts they hadn't even come close to figuring out who they were up against. They were fumbling in the dark, and they knew it. Tails' seemed to be growing more reckless with his experiments, and he was losing control of his inhibitions and allowing his usually reserved emotions to spill out at odd moments.
And Sonic still hadn't figured out why Tails had freaked out not two days earlier.

Sonic felt like a dark aura surrounded them both, dragging them down, tugging at their emotions and prodding their most vulnerable places. It seemed to him like they were being followed by a malign presence that got closer and closer with every second they wasted.

He didn't want to wait around for it to arrive. Deciding to follow through with his decision, he headed out the front door and set off for the hospital.

~O~

Somehow, the hospital room seemed even more deathly quiet than before. The gentle beeping of the life support machines sounded muffled, and the whirring and whizzing of pumps faded into a whisper. With nothing but pitch blackness outside the windows the stale yellow light should have seemed brighter, yet even that seemed to grow dimmer by the minute.

Sonic sat beside Shadow's bedside, hunched over and grasping his hands together in front of him. He stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the skeletal figure of Shadow lying in the bed ahead of him. The dark hedgehog lay perfectly still, hardly moving even to breathe, his face a withered mockery of its former self. Sonic wanted to look away, to not be confronted with the sight of one he admired so much brought to ruin, but he could not avert his eyes for fear that somehow he would look back and Shadow would be gone forever.

He'd tried to take Tails advice, and he had checked on Rouge. The bat fared no better, the once glamorous and buxom beauty reduced to a haggard old crone barely clinging to life. That she wasn't awake to see the state of her face was the only saving grace Sonic could find.

Despite the pity he felt for Rouge, he still yearned to be by Shadow's side instead. He couldn't help himself; he shared a deeper connection with Shadow that surpassed anything he had ever experienced.

Now that he thought about it, Sonic found it strange that he hadn't felt anything when Shadow had been attacked. Their presences in the Chaos spectrum overlapped and intertwined, and if he concentrated hard enough, he could sense Shadow wherever he was, even seeing through his eyes and hearing his thoughts at times.

Yet when Shadow had suffered a devastating Chaos-based attack, he had felt nothing. Not even the slightest hint that something was wrong.

Fear crept into Sonic's heart; whoever attacked Shadow was powerful enough to defeat him in combat, something almost impossible to comprehend. They could also suppress the connection between the two hedgehogs, preventing Sonic from coming to his aid.

Sonic placed his hand on Shadow's wasted arm, trying to feel for the other's Chaos signature. Since the Doppelganger Crisis he had gained the power to share his energy with others; he should have been able to feel the vigour of his friend's spirit washing over him, and he should have felt himself melting into him like entering a warm bath. Instead, he felt only the cold and brittle barrier of Shadow's flesh. He might as well have been touching a mannequin.

He closed his eyes, focusing on his own Chaos energy and channelling it along his arm, trying to force it to flow into Shadow. But every time it reached his hand it flowed backward, as if retreating from danger.

Sonic let go, slumping back in his seat. He couldn't speak to Shadow, he couldn't hear his deep and
forceful voice that commanded so much respect, he couldn't even look him in the eyes and tell him how glad he was to have him as a friend.

His heart strained from exhaustion, the weight of his mounting troubles constricting it and draining his will. With nothing else left to do, Sonic leaned forward onto the bed, resting his head against Shadow's side, even allowing the dark hedgehog's exposed bones to stick into him.

"I don't know if you can hear this, if you're hibernating or whatever," he whispered, "but I'm sorry... for everything. I can't help thinking this is my fault somehow, like... maybe if we hadn't gotten so close you wouldn't be in this mess. I don't know. I just wish I knew why this had to happen to you."

Shadow said nothing, but Sonic imagined him scowling and folding his arms. *Of course it's your fault, faker. You and your block-headed ideas always make things worse.*

"I was just starting to like you as well, you big jerk." Sonic laughed quietly as he played out Shadow's rant in his head. Then he noticed his cheek felt wet.

"Shadow... if you're in there, come back to me... please... After all we've been through... it can't end like this. This is just... too boring an end for someone like you."

He closed his eyes, holding back his tears and resting his head against Shadow's ribs.

He couldn't imagine anyone could possibly be having a worse night than him.

~O~

In an underground parking garage dimly lit by lights set into the floor, a red panda in a pinstripe suit walked towards an expensive silver sports car.

The remainder of Quinn's day hadn't been half as much fun since Sonic and Tails left. Nothing but meeting after meeting followed; with the board, with his accountant, with his insurers. It was all he could do to stay awake during any of them.

He still chuckled when he thought about his encounter with the so-called 'Hero of Mobius.' He loved the way Sonic squirmed and bridled at his taunting, how he whined about his hard-earned fortune, clearly jealous that he knew how to apply himself to something more ambitious than 'heroism.' To stick it to some goody-two-shoes, to show them that life isn't about good and evil, but power and influence; he found that the sweetest victory of all.

As he approached his car, his smartwatch beeped. Looking at it he saw a set of flashing red letters on the screen.

"Error 274? What does that even mean?"

The letters flashed and changed, and Quinn's throat grew dry when he saw them.

**VAULT SECURITY COMPROMISED.**

He froze to the spot, his heart thundering in his chest. He simply couldn't believe what he was reading. Scrambling into his pocket he pulled out his cell phone and frantically dialled.

"Saul!" he screamed down the phone. "Why the fuck is the system telling me the vault's been compromised?"

The person on the other end spoke back, and Quinn grew more and more tense with every word in
"You better hope it's a Chaos-damned glitch!" he yelled at Saul. "Or you and your entire department of socially-maladjusted nerds can hand in your notice together first thing tomorrow morning." More frantic babbling from Saul followed.

"Well, how long's that gonna take?" barked Quinn. "I don't care if it's difficult, just get on it. NOW!"

He hung up the phone, tapping the screen so hard it almost cracked, before dialling another number. As the phone rang he walked briskly back in the direction he had come.

"Gyro? It's Quinn. Get a security team to my office immediately. I think there might be an intruder in the vault... No, don't call the cops; I don't want the press finding out about this. I've staked my reputation on that vault's impregnability, so the last thing I need is anyone finding out it's well, pregnable. I'll meet you there... don't tell me what to do, Gyro; someone's gotta keep them occupied, stall for time and all that. Trust me, I can handle it... Good, see you there."

He hung up the phone again and stuffed it in his pocket. He flung the door to the parking garage open and leapt up the concrete stairwell two at a time. Driven by fury he stormed across the silent lobby of Quinn Tower and into the executive elevator, his footsteps ringing through the high atrium. As the elevator ascended to his office, he chewed his lip in frustration. He couldn't believe anyone could break into his vault. He couldn't believe anyone would dare.

The elevator opened onto his office, darkened except for the starlight trickling in through the huge rear window. He switched on the lights, expecting to see the place ransacked. But nothing was out of place; the office remained as immaculate as he had left it. Slowly he crept through the oversized room, expecting to be jumped at any moment. No attack came, but Quinn's heart sank when he reached his desk and caught a glint of metal from the adjacent wall.

The panel to the vault stood wide open, revealing the elevator doors, the flashing light on the control panel showing him the elevator had descended already. Quinn's heart raced faster and faster, and his throat itched from dryness.

"Alright then, asshole," he hissed, "you want to do this? Let's show you what happens to people stupid enough to steal from me."

He walked around to the opposite side of his desk, took a key from his breast pocket and unlocked a drawer. Sliding it open carefully, he reached inside to grasp a dark metal shape lying inside the drawer: a pistol. Grabbing a clip he jammed it into the gun with a swift and precise motion, cocked it and flicked the safety off.

He marched over to the metal doors and pressed the call button. The cables rattle das the elevator car shot up to the top floor, and soon the dull metal compartment stood before him, eagerly awaiting his entry. He leapt into it and slammed his hand on the button, causing the car to drop at breakneck speed. His adrenaline shot up as fast as the lift shot down, and he pictured himself pumping the hapless thief full of lead. He'd never killed anyone personally before; he had to admit he was looking forward to this new experience.

The elevator ground to a halt, and the doors flew open. Quinn rushed into the corridor but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw what awaited him, his excitement and bloodlust rapidly fizzling away.

The stark and steady white lights of the corridor flashed erratically, popping and showering the narrow passageway with sparks. Through the flickering shadows Quinn could see deep gouges in
the pristine walls, like a mad beast had torn through slashing at everything in its path. The floor chimed beneath his feet as he trod through a carpet of spent bullet casings, and when he looked again, Quinn saw that all the sentry guns had emerged from their alcoves, and that every single one had been ripped from their casings, leaving nothing but a ragged bundle of wires and twisted metal in their place.

At the end of the devastated hallway Quinn could see the alluring blue glow of his Emerald, still secure on its pedestal. He wanted to dash forward, to seize his most precious possession before it was too late, but fear took hold of his legs and rooted them to the spot. His heart felt like it might burst from his ribcage, and his hand holding the gun shook uncontrollably.

A shadow passed in front of the Emerald, the unmistakable outline of a Mobian.

Quinn's fear gave way to reckless fury, and he broke free of his tremors, sprinting down the corridor. Now he had a target; now he would make them pay.

"Hey!" he bellowed as he reached the chamber. "Show yourself! I'm warning you, touch my Emerald and you'll regret it."

The figure emerged from deeper inside the circular room, approaching the Emerald pedestal with their hand outstretched. Quinn could see they were clearly Mobian, but their outline seemed distorted and constantly shifting, and they glowed with a fierce golden light, making it hard for him to tell what sort of animal they were.

"Who are you?" demanded Quinn, pointing the gun at the intruder with a steady hand. "How did you get in here?"

The figure ignored him, its grasping fingers reaching for the Emerald.

"Get your hands away from my Emerald!" screamed Quinn. "Don't you realise who you're messing with?! Don't you-"

His breath failed him when the figure slowly turned to look at him. Their eyes blazed with a wildly shifting crimson hue, the colour of fresh blood. Its stare, malignant and calculating, burned through Quinn and made him feel like his fur was alight. Then it smiled; a gloating, wicked smile from a mouth far wider than any normal Mobian possessed, and filled with jagged, pointed teeth.

Quinn's hands began to shake again, violently trembling even worse than they had before. The gun rattled in his grip, and his lower jaw quivered.

"W-what are y-you?" he stammered through dry lips. The creature didn't answer, but kept its gaze fixed on him, even as its gnarled and pointed fingers gripped the top of the Emerald. Quinn brought the gun up again, trying to point at the beast's head, but his arms spasmed so severely with fear that he couldn't find his mark, nor could he grip the trigger firmly enough to fire.

The thing in the vault gently lifted the Emerald from its plastic holder. The doors to the chamber slammed shut, and Quinn heard the muffled sound of a wailing siren coming from the other side.

Quinn's hands continue to shake, but he felt his terror slowly ebbing away. In his panic he had totally forgotten about his own safeguards. A wave of relief washed over him; in roughly ten seconds the chamber would be purged with Chaos Energy, and the beast inside, whatever it was, would be reduced to ashes.

Quinn hunched over, putting his hands on his knees and gasping for breath. He still couldn't believe how afraid he'd been, more scared than he'd ever been in his entire life. A strange smell wafted into
his nostrils, and the fur on his legs felt damp and sticky, enveloped in an unpleasant warmth.

"Great," he said aloud, "I've only gone and pissed myself. Glad no-one's around to see this." The siren's wail fell silent for a moment, followed by a high pitched roar from the other side of the door, painfully loud in Quinn's ears despite the thick metal separating him from the chamber.

Quinn breathed another sigh of relief; the Chaos Purge had fired, his terrifying intruder had surely been vaporised. He knew he would probably never sleep again, but at least he had his life, and his Emerald.

With a hiss the doors to the chamber opened, and a dazzling yellow light, almost white in its intensity, poured from the room. Something lunged at him from within the brightness, and seconds later a hand seized him by the throat, covered by a gnarled and ragged glove that crawled with flames. The thing's grip crushed his windpipe, and the flames licked at his fur, filling his nostrils with a sickly smoke. Quinn tried to bring the gun to bear, but his muscles felt weak and lifeless, his flaccid fingers letting the pistol slipped from his grip.

He couldn't see the complete form of the thing through the bright light it gave off, but he could see its gaping, grinning maw filled with daggers, and its eyes; they weren't simply a blur of glowing red as he had thought, he could see now the way the crimson irises span madly in the sockets, hypnotic spirals that formed an endless tunnel of madness. Quinn's own eyes darted around, frantically looking for a way out, and he caught sight of the blue Emerald in the monstrous being's other claw.

"Please…" he choked out despite the crushing grip on his neck. "Don't take my Emerald. I… I'll pay you! I'll give you as much as you want, just please don't take it."

It didn't say anything, instead holding up the Emerald in front of Quinn's face. Through the gem the face of the beast looked distorted, turning sickly green in the cobalt light swirling inside the Emerald.

"Yes…" wheezed Quinn, "that's it. Just give it here and I'll-"

It squeezed the Emerald tightly in its bony hand. As its grip grew tighter the crystal shook, its light pulsing faster and faster. The creature growled as if in pain, but this did not deter its resolve, and it forced its strength into its grip, the muscles on its slender arm contorting, twisting and threatening to burst through its skin.

Quinn could do nothing but watch as the Emerald cracked under the pressure. The creature's roar grew louder, a note of triumph undercutting the bestial nature of its scream.

"Stop," begged Quinn. "You'll kill us all if it breaks." He closed his eyes, awaiting the inevitable explosion that would consume him in azure flames. The light from the thing burned his eyes even through his eyelids, and he could only hold them half-closed and clogged up with tears.

A loud crack filled the air, but the Emerald didn't explode. Instead the separate pieces imploded, collapsing into a single glowing point of light in the beast's hand. It wrapped its hand around it, and no sooner had its fingers closed when blue flame shot along its arm, engulfing its body and causing it to flash from yellow to green to blue. Even as the flames crawled along its fur, the monster roared triumphantly, its victory complete. The fire settled down, the blue fading away to a familiar, awful shade of yellow.

"You got what you wanted," croaked Quinn. "Now please… let me go."

The spiral eyes bored straight into his, and Quinn realised that his request had been silently refused.

"No!" he cried, tears streaming down his face. "Please don't kill me! I'll give you anything you
want! Money, weapons, women, drugs… whatever it is you want; I can get it for you! Just please
don't kill me!"

His speech slurred into inelegant sobbing, and he vomited over himself. Inside his heart felt like it
might explode from terror, and his mind flashed with memories from his childhood. The thing pulled
him closer, its gaping mouth inches from his head. It seemed to study him, peering into him with an
inquisitive look. Quinn hoped he was getting through to it, and he stopped crying, clutching at the
hand around his neck and quivering like an animal caught in the headlights of a truck.

"Whatever you want," he whispered. "I'll give you whatever you want. Just say the word."

It didn't answer, save for a half-suppressed sniff of amusement. From deep inside his body Quinn felt
something moving, flowing through his veins and along his limbs towards his neck, draining the
strength from every part of him. From his neck he felt the energy leaving him, passing through his
skin and into the hand of his attacker.

"NO!" he begged, thrashing around in the inescapable hold and desperately clawing at the thing's
hand. "No, please! Please don't!"

Agony coursed through his entire body, and he felt his skin growing tighter, wrapping close against
him and stretching around his bones. The rusty red of his fur faded to washed-out grey, the soft
brushes of his coat twisting into a tangled mess of coarse fibres. He felt his sinuses dry out into sand
paper and his eyes tighten and crack. Feebly he put his hands out, but they were nothing but a thin
layer of peeling skin wrapped around skeletal fingers. As his muscles atrophied his legs gave way
beneath him, but even as he fell backwards the horror didn't release its grip, standing over his prone
body as it leeched the last of his life from him, its vicious grin never faltering. His lungs strained for
air and his heart shrivelled, his vision flashed with vibrant, violent swatches of colour, and as
darkness overtook him he heard the thing laughing madly, its voice reverberating around him in two
voices at once.

He heard it laughing. Then he heard nothing ever again.

~O~
"Sir? Sir, can you hear me?"

Sonic awoke to the sound of a distant voice and the gentle rocking of his shoulders. His eyelids rose slowly upwards, revealing the hospital room, glowing almost white from the morning sunlight streaming in through the blinds. He no longer rested his head on the bed beside Shadow, instead he found himself propped up on the plastic chair against the wall. Above him, he saw the rabbit doctor he had spoken to earlier, her face a mix of concern and compassion.

"I'm afraid we had to move you in the night, sir. We couldn't risk you accidentally harming the patient in your sleep. In the state they're in we don't want to make things any worse."

"Yeah, I get ya," said Sonic, rubbing his eyes and stifling a yawn, "I just... well, I wasn't in the best place last night, so..."

"I understand," said the doctor, "but we have to put patient safety first. I guess you and he must be very close."

"Yeah... we're pretty close." Close didn't even begin to describe it in Sonic's mind. But he didn't really feel like elaborating, as he struggled to comprehend it himself; they were close but distant, in league with but at odds with each other, clingy but reserved all at once. Their friendship wasn't something any normal person could understand.

He rose to his feet, spreading his arms and stretching out his whole body.

"You should probably head home," said the doctor, "you look exhausted, and there's nothing more you can do here."

Sonic pointed his finger in her face. "Don't tell me there's nothing I can do! There's always something I can do. These are my friends, and I'll never stop fighting for them. I'll never give up while there's a chance of saving them. Never!"

The doctor recoiled slightly, but maintained her composure, pushing his hand gently out of her face.

"Sir, please. I'm sure if they could hear you, your friends would appreciate your loyalty. But you must accept that you can't do anything more by sitting at their bedsides all night."

Sonic took a step back, his sudden burst of passion fizzling away. Screwing up his eyes he held his head and shook it, trying to dispel the fuzziness clouding his mind.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that..."

The doctor put a hand on his shoulder. "I do. You're tired. Go home and get some proper rest."

"You're right, doc. It's just been a stressful few days. I've got someone waiting for me at home anyway. Thanks for everything you've done so far."

He shook her hand, and headed out the door.

~O~

"Tails! I'm home!"
Sonic slammed the door behind him, showering himself with dislodged dust. He shook himself clean and then made his way into the living room.

"Sorry I was out so late, buddy. Things got a little-"

Tails stood in the middle of the living room, holding the TV remote control and staring at the set. His mouth hung open and his upturned brow furrowed in the middle, intensifying the anxious look of concern he wore.

Sonic crept warily towards him. "Tails? What's wrong?"

Tails looked towards him, his bottom lip quivering. When he tried to speak, the sounds emerged as a frightened whimper.

"It's Quinn," he said at last, his voice empty and hollow, "he's..."

He trailed off, and Sonic's gaze fixed upon the television, looking for answers. On the screen he saw a stern-looking canine newsreader and beside her a still picture of Quinn's smugly grinning face. Crawling across the bottom of the screen the words seemed to silently scream at him:

BILLIONAIRE BUSINESSMAN QUINN FOUND DEAD.

Sonic's heart raced, and his mouth fell open. His vision seemed to grow distant, the TV racing away from him like he was being pulled down a long tunnel. He swallowed and coughed, trying to find the right words to say.

"Dead? When? How?!"

"The news said sometime last night, they're not really sure how."

"Turn the TV up, quickly! Let's hear what they're saying about it."

Tails obliged, pointing the remote at the set and raising the volume. As he did so the voice of the newsreader grew audible, her voice reserved and formal, but deeply concerned.

"-Mr. Quinn's body was found in a vault hidden below his company headquarters in Empire City. Sources close to Mr. Quinn have confirmed that the vault contained the blue Chaos Emerald that was purchased by Mr. Quinn for one billion rings earlier this year. With no sign of the Chaos Emerald and extensive damage reported to the inside of the vault, the ECPD have confirmed that they are treating the death as the possible result of a robbery that turned violent."

"The stupid, arrogant idiot!" seethed Tails, practically crushing the remote in his hands before slamming it down on the coffee table. "Didn't I warn him something would happen if he held onto that Emerald? Why didn't he just listen to me! I could have saved him if he'd only listened!"

Tails hunched over, his voice becoming more distressed as he spoke. Sonic noticed that tears crepted from the fox's eyes, and he dashed over to him, kneeling down and putting his arms around him.

"Hey now, don't talk like that," he cooed, "no way is this your fault. This damn Emerald thief is the one who chose to attack Quinn. They're the one responsible for this mess we're in, you should be blaming them, not yourself."

"I should have done something," Tails moaned, "I could have done something to stop this."

"I don't know what else you could have done, little buddy." Sonic stroked Tails' head. "You can't
control every little thing that happens."

Tails stopped crying, growing very still, with even his breathing fading until Sonic could hardly hear it. Then he spoke in a tone so calm and deep that it caused a chill to run along Sonic's spine.

"I should do."

"What?"

"I should control everything," Tails said, "I should be able to press a button and make the Emerald thief appear at my feet in chains. Then I'd twist a dial and make them restore Shadow and Rouge and even bring Quinn back to life. I'd make them give back the Emeralds they stole, I'd make Quinn come here and beg you for forgiveness and, and... I'd turn Eggman good! I'd cure all disease, end all famine and war with just a few equations! I could re-make the world so that no-one ever suffers again! I'm the most intelligent person who has ever lived, and I can do anything!"

Sonic slowly loosened his hug and stepped away while Tails ranted. Looking at his brother rambling like a lunatic with dishevelled fur and deep bags beneath the eyes turned Sonic's stomach. His concern for Tails' state of mind, never truly diminished, now rose to the forefront of his thoughts, except now he felt fearful of Tails instead of for him.

"Tails?" Sonic asked. "Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"Of course not!" Tails spat. "I haven't got time for stupid things like sleep! I've got to finish my work if I'm to-"

He yawned, his mouth stretching wide with a gentle mewl emerging with his heavy breath. He looked over at Sonic, his mania seeming to rapidly vanish.

"That doesn't mean anything," he said, chuckling slightly. He sat down on the couch, resting his head in his hands. "I just need to... need to think, is all."

Sonic motioned to speak, but the sound of the TV in the background caught his ears. On the screen, a nerdy-looking beaver with thick glasses stood on an Empire City street, the grand entrance of Quinn Tower dominating the background.

"Um... well, I didn't actually see Mr. Quinn after he... after he... you know," said the beaver, wringing his hands and avoiding looking into the camera, "but I spoke to Gyro, our head of security, and he told me about it before he went with the cops for questioning, a-as a witness, not a suspect, of course."

"The ECPD have said that they suspect Mr. Quinn was killed while trying to apprehend the intruder that stole the Chaos Emerald," said the reporter, "does Gyro's testimony shed any new light on this?"

"I don't know what happened," said the beaver, "but the way he found Mr. Quinn... Gyro said he looked like he'd aged a hundred years and hadn't eaten for weeks; just a skeleton wrapped in fur, you know? And his face... er, well... Gyro's a tough guy and all, but when he told me about Mr. Quinn's face he was almost in tears. Never seen anything so weird."

"What did Gyro say was wrong with Mr. Quinn's face?"

"He said it looked like he died screaming."

Sonic had seen enough, and he didn't want Tails seeing any more in his fragile state. He swept up the remote and pressed the big red power button. The image on the TV instantly changed to black, and
the room fell silent.

The beaver's word confirmed Sonic's lingering fear; there could be no doubt that the assailant who killed Quinn also had attacked Shadow and Rouge. This confirmation did little to settle Sonic's unease, as many questions still lingered in the back of his mind; why did they kill Quinn but leave Rouge and Shadow barely alive, for instance? Why did they attack Quinn less than a day after he and Tails had been to see him?

He could sense a pattern lurking in the tangle of events, a clue hidden beneath the coincidence. Sonic knew if he could find that mental thread and tug at it, the mystery would unravel, leaving him with a clear idea of exactly whose butt needed kicking.

He turned around to ask Tails a question. The fox lay sprawled out on the couch, snoring quietly and drooling over the cushions, while his lower half hung over the edge, his legs contorted into an awkward half-standing, half-kneeling position as if preparing for the inevitable moment when he slid off.

Sonic couldn't help but smile. The sight of Tails sleeping peacefully warmed his heart and dispelled his troubled thoughts. He moved to stand over him, letting his hand lightly brush against Tails' cheek, the tension in his body unwinding as he did so. He felt himself slipping back into a memory, a time when he first met the fox; he was barely ten years old then, but he took the tiny, shivering cub back to his home and laid him on the couch with a blanket covered over him. Even as a child, he sat for hours on the couch just watching the boy sleep, while new feelings stirred within him; feelings of responsibility, feelings of protectiveness, and what later became the most intense love he'd ever felt for anyone, before or since.

Looking at Tails sleeping reminded him of that time, back when they were both innocent, and didn't have to face monsters and maniacs on an almost weekly basis. Back then they didn't even notice death nipping at the heels wherever they went; it was all just one big adventure when they were kids.

Sonic looked up, struck by a realisation: Tails still was a kid. It might have been obvious but he had never really seen it that way. Somehow he hadn't noticed that he had become an adult while Tails remained a child. For the first time Sonic found himself considering whether he was right to constantly put his little brother in danger. Tails intelligence and his bravery hid the plain truth from his sight; Tails had been exposed to non-stop danger and horror since he was three years old, and Sonic had just expected him to cope with it.

*He's starting to crack, thought Sonic, that's why he's acting so weird all of a sudden. The Doppelganger Crisis, that freak-out at the power plant, the attack on Rouge and Shadow, Quinn's murder; it's too much to ask a twelve-year old to deal with all of this, especially Tails.*

Tails stirred in his sleep, and Sonic felt his chest tightening. He knew that when he awoke, he would have to have the most difficult conversation of his entire life; he would have to tell Tails that they couldn't go on adventures anymore, for his own good.

Trying to ignore the pangs of guilt shooting through him, Sonic stooped down, sliding his arms under Tails' shoulders and then his legs before lifting him up to his chest. Tails mumbled and snuggled in close to him, normally something that would fill Sonic with joy, instead he felt only more guilt.

"Let's get you some decent shut-eye, at least," Sonic whispered. He carried Tails across the living room and towards the stairs, before ascending slowly to the upstairs, taking care not to bump Tails' head against the handrail. He moved in backwards and pushed the door to Tails' room open with a gentle thrust of his backside, stepping into the cool dim of the boy's room. Sonic lay Tails onto his
bed, straightened his pillow and brought his sheets up and over him, taking extra care to tuck him in tightly.

"Sleep well," he said, turning to leave. As he went to shut the door, he felt another pang of guilt. Stepping back into the room, he bent down and planted a soft kiss on Tails' forehead.

"I love you, little buddy."

He went to leave once more, but Tails stirred, mumbling incoherently as he rolled over in bed.

"Unnhh..." he moaned, "Sonic?"

Sonic froze in the doorway; he expected Tails to chew him out for ' mushy stuff.'

"Turn my computer off when you go down, will you?"

"Sure thing, bud," Sonic said, breathing a sigh of relief, " see you later. " He pulled the door shut, catching a last glimpse of Tails' blue eyes reflecting the light from the hall, before making his way down the stairs.

Before he reached the last step, his mind suddenly echoed with his own words.

See you later.

See you.

See.

There it was; the thread that needed pulling. Somehow those innocuous words had triggered something deep within him, some thought process that had become stuck in the confusion of the past few days. He realised now what must be happening.

"It's invisible!" he said aloud, quickly covering his mouth to not wake Tails, as if the sound hadn't escaped his lips already. He replayed the significant events of the week over in his head; Tails freaked out at something he couldn't see, Shadow identified an attacker that wasn't there, and Quinn had been killed right after they had visited him.

Only one thing made sense to Sonic, only one explanation that fit: The Emerald Thief must be invisible, and it must be following them, using them to find the Chaos Emeralds. That's why Shadow got attacked first; his Emerald was closest to their home. Quinn was next; after Sonic and Tails received the grand tour of the vault, the thief used the opportunity to learn how its security worked, then it hid somewhere in Quinn Tower, waiting until the right moment to steal the Emerald, killing Quinn when he discovered them.

Sonic pondered his theory some more; there must be times when certain people can see it. Tails saw it, as did Shadow, and Quinn must have seen it, otherwise why bother killing him?

Sonic knew that Tails would surely destroy his idea given a chance, find some gaping hole that he had missed, but he couldn't see it. To him, the theory made perfect sense. He considered rousing Tails again to tell him, but he figured he wouldn't be in the best frame of mind right now. Sonic also didn't feel like explaining to Tails why he couldn't come with him to deal with the Emerald Thief when the time came.

Remembering why he had come downstairs, Sonic hopped over the creaky step at the foot of the stairs, making his way through the living room toward Tails' workshop, turning his theory over and
over in his mind.

He stepped through the doorway into the musty workshop and flicked on the light.

Before his eyes had even adjusted to the murky yellow of the bulb Sonic halted. Piles of jagged metal filled the small space, but this wasn't Tails' usual mess. The table had been overturned and broken in half, shredded papers covered the floor along with a tide of broken glass and frayed wires. Solid metal tools lay snapped in two, and all along the walls deep gouges like the claws of some mad beast tore through the paintwork.

Sonic's breath escaped him. The thing had come to his house while Tails had been all alone. The shock of seeing the workshop destroyed suppressed any guilt he might have felt, and before it could creep in his foot caught on something.

He stooped down, picking up a scrap of paper, the only one not completely ripped apart. Through its blackened edges smouldering with acrid smoke he could see a hastily scrawled mass of equations.

Of course, he thought. Tails' Special Zone plans.

It must have known about Tails' plan somehow, or at least that's how it seemed to Sonic. It must have come to their house to destroy Tails' workshop and stop him from sending the Chaos Emeralds into the Special Zone.

But this line of enquiry puzzled Sonic even more. If it were true, he wondered why it hadn't just killed Tails, even as he cursed himself for even thinking such a thing. He felt the guilt creeping up again, and he kept thinking about the immediate problem, for a more pressing concern nagged at him.

How in the world did Tails not notice this? His whole workshop is trashed and he doesn't even hear it? That's just not possible…

Before he could take another thought he heard a crashing sound from above him.

"What was that?"

Another crash, louder than the first, this time shaking the dust from the ceiling of the workshop. Before Sonic could react, he heard a shrill and all-too-familiar scream from upstairs that made his blood run cold.

"Tails!" he cried, sprinting out of the workshop. More sounds of breaking glass and wood followed, making the whole house shake, while Tails continue to shriek in terror.

"Hold on, Tails! I'm coming!" With his heart pounding in his ears Sonic charged up the stairs towards Tails door. He threw himself against, expecting to bust through and rescue his little brother, but the door felt like a brick wall, not budging an inch and sending Sonic tumbling onto his backside. He leapt up and seized the handle, but no matter how hard he rattled the handle and thrust his weight against the door it would not budge.

Tails continued to scream and cry, like he had done back at the power plant but far worse to Sonic's ears. The invisible attacker wasn't just visible this time; it must have had Tails in its grip. The house shook as if wobbling on its foundations, and a growl like a savage beast poured through the door.

Sonic took a step back, then drove his foot toward the door. His leg shot out like a bullet from a gun, smashing into the door with devastating force. But still the wooden panel didn't react to his assault, his leg merely bouncing off it with the force of the kick painfully reflecting back into him.
Undeterred, Sonic kicked again and again, each time threatening to snap his leg but having no effect on the door.

"Come on, come on! Open, damn you!" he yelled, tears of frustration in his eyes. He couldn't understand it; a focused kick from him could shatter concrete, yet a simple wooden door resisted him.

Tails screamed and the snarl of the beast grew louder. Sonic stood holding his head, his body filled with dread as he listened helplessly to the awful sounds within the room. With a crash louder than any other so far the whole house lurched, sending Sonic tumbling forward. Just as his face almost collided with the stubborn door it imploded inwards, sending him falling into Tails' room in a shower of splinters.

Sonic looked up, his whole body shaking. Tails' room had been utterly trashed; his bed had been shredded, showering the room with shredded fabric, his desk was nothing but a pile of jagged wood, and deep gouges ran across every surface in groups of three, tearing the wallpaper and ripping up the carpet. On the opposite wall where the window used to be, a large hole opened up into the back yard, its edges licked by fading flames.

Sonic clambered to his feet and frantically searched the room, throwing the piles of broken furniture aside in search of Tails. When he found nothing, he staggered to the hole, looking out into the world for signs of his dearest friend.

Nothing. No sign of anything escaping through the sky, no tracks in the yard beyond. Nothing.

Sonic fell to his knees, clutching at his chest. Tears streamed along his muzzle, and every word he tried to say caught in his throat. Letting his arms slump by his side, he looked up at the sky and shouted a single word with every ounce of strength he possessed.

But nothing happened. The tumultuous noise had ceased, but the silence that followed was so much worse.

Tails had gone.

~O~
No sooner had Amy rapped her hand daintily upon the door when it swung open, the deep blue paint in front of her replaced by deep blue fur.

"Amy! Knuckles!" cried Sonic, sounding like he'd run a mile. "Boy, am I glad to see you safe!"

He leapt from the porch, tackling them both into a tight embrace. Amy's heart raced when she felt Sonic's touch, but her rational side grew suspicious.

"What's going on, Sonic?" she asked, straightening out her dress and brushing strands of blue from it. "You better not have been replaced by an evil doppelganger again!"

"Did anyone follow you here?" Sonic whispered. Amy exchanged a confused aside glance with Knuckles.

"What are you talking about?" Knuckles asked. Sonic suddenly got right up in his face, gripping his shoulders tightly, his eyes wide with panic.

"I'm serious, Knux! Were you followed?!"

"Um..." said Knuckles, looking over to Amy for guidance, "I don't know... I mean, I guess not."

"No, Sonic," Amy said. "We weren't followed, okay?"

"Quickly!" hissed Sonic, his eyes rapidly scanning the street outside. "Get inside!"

He herded them through the door, closing it behind them locking all the bolts and fixing the chain on. Amy and Knuckles walked into the living room, darkened by the closed drapes and eerily quiet. A silent conversation comprising of shrugs and shaken heads followed until Sonic entered, scratching his arm.

"Where's everybody else?" Amy asked. "You called a crisis meeting, didn't you? Shouldn't the others be coming?"

Sonic's head twitched as he looked around the room anxiously. "I can't... can't trust anyone else, you two are my closest friends now; you're the ones I need to keep safe. I gotta keep you safe."

Sonic's compliment would have been well-received on any other day, but Amy didn't find it so comforting coming from the twitchy, glassy-eyed hedgehog in front of her.

"What about Shadow, then?" asked Knuckles. "And Tails? If this meeting is for your most trusted friends, why aren't they here?"

Sonic stopped twitching, standing completely still with a gaze that seemed to look right through them. When he spoke, his normally bright and uplifting voice became a subdued monotone devoid of emotion.

"Tails is... Tails is gone."

"Gone?!" Knuckles clenched his fist. "What do you mean 'gone'? What's happened to him?!"

"He's..." Sonic muttered, his body wobbling, "taken. Something took him. I should have kept him safe, but now he's gone. It's all my fault."
"Then why are you standing there doing nothing?!" yelled Knuckles, "Why aren't you chasing after the bastard who took him? Stop feeling sorry for yourself and kick some serious ass!"

Amy wanted to chastise Knuckles for his aggression, but she couldn't help agreeing with him; it was most unlike Sonic to completely go to pieces like this. Tails had been kidnapped before, and Sonic had never hesitated to hunt down the abductor like a dog. This strange reaction could only mean something else was going on.

She stepped forward, putting herself between Knuckles and Sonic. She put her arms around him, drawing him into a selfless embrace; unlike her exuberant bear hugs she used to ambush him with, this wasn't for her benefit. As she held him close, she didn't feel the childish glee in her heart that usually accompanied physical contact with Sonic, instead she felt only an outpouring of her true feelings for him; the deep love she had for him as a friend.

"It's alright, Sonic," she whispered, "whatever's happening, we're here for you. You can trust us to stick by you no matter what. Isn't that right, Knuckles?"

She looked over to Knuckles, jerking her head a few times to direct him. He sighed and shrugged, before placing his large hand gently on Sonic's shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess. We're your friends, buddy. We'll help you get Tails back."

Amy felt the tension in Sonic unwinding and his breath becoming calm. Slowly he brought his arms up around her, holding her softly and resting his head against hers.

"I'm glad you guys are here," he said, "I've been going stir-crazy since Tails disappeared. I'm sorry if I got you worried about me."

"It's alright," said Amy, pulling away from the hug and sitting down on the couch, "we'll always be there for you Sonic."

She invited him to sit next to her, and he did so, sighing heavily and resting his elbows on his thighs. She tilted her head at Knuckles, but he remained standing with his arms firmly crossed.

"What a mess we're in," said Sonic, "how did it come to this?"

"If we work together, I know we can sort everything out," said Amy, "but first we need to know what's going on. Tell us everything."

Sonic looked from Amy to Knuckles and back again, before clearing his throat.

"Okay, so you guys are gonna think I'm crazy, but I think Tails was taken by... a monster."

"A monster?!" said Knuckles, his brow furrowing. "What kind of monster?"

"Knuckles, shush!" Amy snapped. "Let Sonic speak in his own time," she put her hand on Sonic's upper arm. "Sonic, please go on."

"I don't know if 'monster' is the right word; it's more like there's been some kind of evil presence following us, stalking us wherever we go. The only thing I know about it is that it wants the Chaos Emeralds, and it won't hesitate to kill to get them. It's already attacked Shadow and Rouge, and-"

Knuckles' eyes grew wide, and he surged forward, grabbing Sonic by his neck and lifting him into the air.
"You bastard! You knew this thing had attacked Rouge and you didn't tell me? What the heck is wrong with you?! Where is she? What's happened to her?!

"Kn-Klux!" gasped Sonic, clutching at the huge hand tightening around his throat and kicking his legs in the air. "She's alive, dude! She's in the hospital, but she's in some kind of coma."

Knuckles set Sonic down, his anger subsiding. He released his grip and let his arms slump to his side.

A sad smile tried to assert itself on him. "She's alive? But- why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd fly off the handle like this! You'd rush off to see her and dude, trust me; you do not want to see her how she is now. If I know Rouge, the last thing she'd want is for anyone to see her like that, especially you. When I saw them both it nearly broke my heart; I don't want you going through an experience like that. I feel bad enough that Tails had to see it."

Knuckles turned away, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

"I can't say I agree with what you did, but I guess you're intentions were pure. You have my forgiveness, Sonic."

"Glad to hear it." Sonic patted Knuckles on the back. "The best thing you can do now is help me get some revenge on the one that hurt her."

"You said the monster wouldn't hesitate to kill," said Amy, trying to re-rail the conversation. "How do you know that if Rouge and Shadow are still alive?"

"Did you hear about Quinn on the news today?" asked Sonic, sitting back down.

"Oh yeah, I saw that story," said Amy, "they found him dead in some kind of vault, didn't they? What does that have to do with-"

"That's how I know it can kill," Sonic cut in, grim-faced. "Quinn's body looked exactly like Shadow and Rouge except, ya know, more dead. Not to mention, the Chaos Emerald he had was taken, just like Shadow's was. What I can't figure out is why our friends were left alive when Quinn wasn't."

"What does all this have to do with Tails?" growled Knuckles, looking back over his shoulder. "Get to the point so we can start taking the fight to the monster!"

"I was getting to that, Knucklehead. I think Tails is central to this whole mystery. The monster, evil spirit thing or whatever it is, I think only certain people can see it. Shadow was conscious for a few seconds in the hospital, and when we asked who attacked him, he pointed at thin air. Even before that Tails freaked-out during a mission; I mean, he just flipped out, Ames. He was screaming and trying to run from nothing, and I thought he was gonna have a heart attack, but then he just got up and acted like nothing happened. But that's not the worst part; Tails' workshop has been totally trashed."

"It must have happened when the monster took Tails," said Knuckles. "It would be unlike Tails not to go down without a fight."

"You don't understand, Knux. Tails was in his room when it came for him, and his workshop was trashed before that."

"So?"
"So how come Tails didn't even mention it when I got home? This thing made a lot of noise when it attacked, but somehow Tails didn't hear it destroying all his stuff? I don't see how that's possible."

The others shrugged silently.

"Not long after I saw the state of the workshop, it came for Tails. I heard him screaming, and the whole house shook like it was a friggin' earthquake. I tried to bust into his room but the door wouldn't budge no matter how hard I hit it. When I finally bust through, his room had been totally trashed and Tails..." he sighed, letting his head flop down near his knees, "Tails was gone."

Amy scooched over on the couch, putting her arm around Sonic's shoulders and letting him slump against her.

"Oh, Sonic. How awful for you. I'm so sorry."

"It's all my fault," Sonic said, holding his face in his hands, "don't you get it? Tails, Shadow, you guys, all of my friends; these terrible things only happen to them because of me. I'm the one putting everybody in danger all the time."

Knuckles rolled his eyes, then brought his hand down hard on the back of Sonic's head with a solid thump. Sonic sat straight up, rubbing his head and glaring at him.

"Hey! What's the big idea, knucklehead? Can't you go five minutes without hitting something?"

"Not really, no," said Knuckles. He squatted down in front of Sonic and stared fiercely into his eyes.

"Listen up, numbskull! Tails is probably the bravest person I've ever met. While we all ran away with our tails between our legs during the Doppelganger Crisis, yourself included, he was the only one running towards the danger. He stopped that crazy Super Sonic robot all by himself! You wanna know what I think Tails is doing right now? I bet he's fighting for his freedom, holding off this monster and buying us time to rescue him! If you don't get your blue butt off that couch and go after him before something bad happens, it really will be your fault! Tails has more courage in his little finger than you do right now, so stop moping and save your... no, save our friend!"

Sonic looked up at Knuckles, blinking rapidly. Then he rose to his feet, and Amy worried that a brawl might soon follow. Instead, Sonic put his hand on Knuckles shoulder, a broad grin spreading across his face.

"Wow, Knux, you should be a motivational speaker. Hmm, maybe speaker's not the right word; motivational shouter? Motivational screamer? What do you think?"

"Look," said Amy, rising to her feet as well, "I agree that we need to do something, but do we even have a plan? We don't know what's taken Tails, or how to find it. I want to rescue Tails as much as anyone, but how do we even begin to fight an enemy like this?"

Sonic clutched his chin, deep in thought, while Knuckles shrugged and shook his head. Then, struck by an idea, Sonic reached into his quills and pulled out a scrap of singed and crumpled paper.

"What's that?" asked Amy.

"This," he said, grinning like he was admiring the world's tastiest chilli dog, "is the key to saving Tails!"

"What, a burnt piece of paper with some weird math equations on it?" asked Knuckles.
"Not just any math equations!" said Sonic, waving the paper in his face. "This is Tails' genius plan! He was working on a way to make the Chaos Emeralds jump into the Special Zone before he got taken. We were gonna go into the Special Zone and grab the remaining Emeralds to use as bait for whatever's hunting them. Tails must have been close to cracking it and that's why the monster came after him; that's why it trashed his workshop, because it knew we were about to foil its plan! I'm certain these sums are the key to finishing Tails' plan."

"But Sonic," said Amy, holding her arm and avoiding his gaze, "even if you're right, and I'm not saying I doubt you, but even so; there's barely half a page of his sums left. Even if there were more, we can't begin to understand math that advanced, and how would we make it work even if we could? That stuff is beyond anyone but Tails himself."

"No, it's not. There is one other person almost as clever as Tails who could make this work. And this scrap might just be enough to get them started."

"Oh brother," said Knuckles, covering his eyes with his hand, "I have a really bad feeling I know who you're talking about."

"I'm not super happy about it either, Knux. But Tails is in trouble, and I don't think we have any other choice."

"Fine," said Knuckles, waving his hands dismissively, "but don't come crying to me when the inevitable betrayal happens. Actually, do come crying to me; I really wanna say 'I told you so.'"

"What about you, Amy?" asked Sonic. "Are you okay with this?"

Amy sighed, letting her shoulders slump. Sonic's suggestion didn't fill her with confidence, but her concern for Tails hung like a cloud, overshadowing her reservations.

"I guess… if it's for Tails, it's gotta be worth putting up with anything… even him."

"Then it's settled," said Sonic, "we're going to pay a visit to Eggman."

~O~

"I still think this is a really bad idea."

"Really, Knux? I never would have guessed from the way you keep telling me like every five minutes."

Sonic, Amy & Knuckles sprinted along a muddy track creeping slowly upwards along a sheer and stony cliff face. The bare boughs of the trees reached out from the shadows of the valley below, and ahead of them the sky glowed a deep burning orange. From over the crest of the hill where the track bent up to the left and over the top of the gorge, the sounds of grinding machinery and buzzing alarms drifted into the valley, and the smell of molten metal hung in the air all around them, crawling inside the three Mobian's nostrils with a bitter aroma.

"Yuck!" said Amy, covering her muzzle with her hand. "What's that awful stench?"

"It's just the smog from Eggman's factories," said Sonic, speaking with his own hand over his mouth, "it won't be so bad once we get inside his base. Just try not to breathe like, at all until we get there."

"What makes you think Eggman is just going to let us in?" asked Knuckles. "He's not exactly known for his hospitality."
"We'll find some way to convince him," said Sonic, "and if we don't, we'll just have to bust the door down and make him help us. How hard can it be?"

Knuckles shot Sonic a sceptical glance, then sighed.

"I still think this is a really bad idea."

The road became steeper as they neared the bend towards the top, but they clambered up the embankment, pushing forward until the ground levelled out, the mud gave way to soft grass and the sky became much larger above their heads. They stood atop the hill with the soft breeze blowing through their quills, and before them the hill swept down into a wide and flat plain stretching into the distance beneath a blanket of dark clouds. Upon this plain stood Eggman's current base of operations, a sprawling complex of grim factories belching smoke into the atmosphere, roads heaving with armoured vehicles and snaking between rows of ugly, featureless buildings. In the centre of the crawling urban expanse a skyscraper shaped like the pointed end of an egg towered above the rest of the buildings, crowned with the visage of a moustachioed human.

"Ugh," groaned Amy, "how can Eggman keep building such awful places? Doesn't he care for the environment at all?"

"It wouldn't be Eggman if he did, Ames. His bases are almost as ugly as his stupid face."

Amy chuckled slightly, but Sonic could tell the sight of Eggman's industrial blight ravaging the landscape upset her. He held out his hand slightly, as if to comfort her. Even though she could be overbearing, Sonic still considered Amy a dear friend, something he seemed to be running out of fast.

"Er…" said Knuckles, "is it… is it supposed to be on fire?"

"It's not on fire, Knucklehead. That's just the smoke from Eggman's factories."

"No," said Knuckles, squinting, "I'm pretty sure it's on fire."

Sonic looked closely at the base; what first seemed like blazing industrial furnaces were actually raging infernos crawling wildly across the base, and what he thought were the relentless whirr and buzz of machines changed to the scream of sirens. Everywhere Sonic looked, the base was in disarray; girders lay twisted and buckled, gaping holes peppered the walls and aerial drones desperately sprayed jets of water onto countless flames across the complex.

Sonic's mouth dropped open, but before he could speak, the side of the egg-shaped tower exploded outwards, showering the facility in glass and metal and sending a deep rumble across the sky.

"We're too late!" cried Sonic, his heart pounding. "It's already here!"

"Then let's beat it, quickly!" said Knuckles. "I don't want to stick around to meet whatever did this. We should- wait, where are you going?"

Sonic had already begun to take off down the slope towards the base. He stopped, turning back to Amy and Knuckles. He swept his arm through the air, beckoning them to follow him.

"Come on! We need to hurry up and find Eggman!"

"Are you crazy, Sonic?" said Knuckles, "You want us to go inside that disaster-zone?"

"Yes!" yelled Sonic, glaring at the echidna. "Eggman's our only chance to save Tails! If we don't
rescue him then Tails is as good as dead, and I'm not going to let that happen! I'd rather die than give up on my best friend! I'm going in whether you come with me or not!"

Knuckles glanced over at Amy for her input, but she ran forward, taking Sonic by the arm.

"I'm with you, Sonic!" she said. "We can't be afraid when our friend is in danger. Come on, Knuckles; we can get through this is we work together, I know we can."

Knuckles looked away, then looked back up with a fire in his eyes fiercer than any raging through the base below.

"I'm gonna do this!" he yelled. "Not just for Tails, but for Rouge as well. I'm gonna find the bastard that hurt her and make them eat dirt!"

"That's more like it, Knux!" said Sonic. "Now let's haul ass and get to Eggman before this whole base goes up in smoke."

Knuckles nodded, and the three friends charged down the hill towards the devastation ahead.

~O~

They clambered over twisted metal beams, ran through corridors filled with smoke and ducked beneath blasts of steam hissing from broken pipes. Alarms rattled along every hallway, orange lights flashed madly and loose cables crackled and sparked with electricity. Shattered robot parts littered the trail of destruction leading further into the base, and deep gouges scratched along every wall in groups of four, the same as Sonic had seen in Tails' room after his disappearance. The sight of them caused him to recall the awful sounds Tails had made during his abduction, and how helpless he had felt against the unseen horror.

As he made his way through the chaos in the base, Sonic felt a determination pushing him forward; even though he knew the thing might have killed Tails, he would not give up until he saw it with his own eyes. Even if they had arrived too late to save Eggman, he would confront the monster that dared to interfere with his life like this. Even if killing it didn't bring any of his friends back, he would still do it. For Tails, Shadow and Rouge, even for Quinn, he thought, he would end this here and now.

The three friends exited the dank and dusty corridors of the complex, emerging in a large open courtyard at the base of the central tower. The flames from the earlier explosion still licked at the sky, and the lights from inside flickered and flashed as the power surged.

"Sonic!" Amy gasped, clutching his arm and pointing into the courtyard with her free hand. "Oh my goodness, look!"

Piled up on either side of the entrance to the tower were what seemed like hundreds of Eggman's robots, their frames lying on top of one another with arms hanging outside out of their sockets, chest panels ripped open and eyes gouged out. Several Egg pawns had been impaled on the outside of the tower by twisted lengths of metal rebar, with more spiked on poles jammed into the cracked concrete. Metal limbs and wires covered the courtyard floor, and even though they were only robots, the emotionless look on their faces looked to Sonic like the grief-stricken faces of corpses.

"What is this?" said Knuckles. "Why they heck would the monster do something like this? Why not just smash the Badniks out of the way?"

"If I understood how this thing thought," said Sonic, tiptoeing through the wreckage, "I would have
found it and kicked its butt back to the underworld by now. It clearly likes causing pointless destruction; that much is definitely clear."

A loud screech filled the courtyard, and through the loudspeakers on the outside of the tower they heard voice of Eggman, barely reaching above a hoarse whisper and almost buried in static.

"Sonic? Is that you out there? Please… the control room at the top of the tower… help me."

A sharp buzz rattled the speaker, and Eggman's voice stopped.

"Eggman's still alive!" cried Amy. "But what's wrong with his voice? He sounded so… exhausted."

"We haven't got time to worry about that!" said Sonic. "We need to get to Eggman, now!"

They raced into the tower, through a wrecked lobby littered with more broken robots. With the power flicking on and off erratically, Sonic made for the stairwell, and leaped up flight after flight of concrete steps, his speed increasing with each leap, Amy and Knuckles struggling to keep up with him. When he reached the top floor, he exited into a corridor leading to a set of double doors emblazoned with Eggman's face. The rightmost door hung off its hinges, and through it Sonic could see the silhouette of a large swivel chair.

Sonic sprinted down the corridor at high speed, smashing into the doors and dashing them to pieces before coming to a stop. He stood in a large windowless control room, a huge screen lining the back wall with a bank of terminals running in front of it. Sparks erupted from the terminals, and the screen flickered with static beneath cracked glass.

In front of the computers Sonic saw the chair, one lanky arm slumped over the arm.

"Eggman? Hey, are you alright?"

A wheezing, hacking cough filled the room, and the chair turned around slowly. Sonic took a step back with one hand over his mouth when the doctor revealed himself.

Instead of the almost spherical and imposing figure Sonic expected to see, the chair played host to a shrunken, frail old man, his clothes now comically oversized and hanging off him like a parachute. His moustache drooped across his lips, unable to support its own weight, its neatly-groomed brown faded to a shabby and wiry grey. The chubby yet diabolical face now shrunk inwards into gaunt cheeks beneath sunken, faded eyes set into a bony face that looked like it had seen a lifetime of hardship.

"Sonic…" Eggman wheezed, his whole face contorting into a stern, accusing stare, "you took your sweet time getting here. Now perhaps you can tell me just what the hell is going on!"

~O~
VII – The Dead Zone

Tails wondered why his pillow tasted of bitter ash, why it smelled of a dusty cellar. He wondered
why his mattress scratched at his belly with brittle needles, and why his sheets wrapped him in an icy
chill.

Opening his eyes, he realised he wasn't tucked up in bed anymore, but lying face down on dry grass.
He hauled his head up, fighting against its sudden heaviness. The weight felt spongy and bouncy;
less like a stone and more like a balloon filled with water, and deep within he felt a throbbing,
burning pain.

His eyes started to clear, the blurriness clouding his vision dissipating, throwing clarity on the grass
beneath him.

Not just dry, but dead. Blades of shrivelled grey spread out before him, crumbling to dust at the
slightest touch.

He forced his head upright onto his shoulders despite the pain flaring up and the wet weight sloshing
around inside, trying to get his bearings and figure out where he was. He gasped almost inaudibly,
his throat turning dry when he saw where he was.

A forest, but not like any he knew. Everywhere he looked he saw row upon row of trees stripped of
their leaves, their bark ashen and cracked, peeling off in flakes and falling to the ground like snow.
Piles of shrivelled leaves sat disintegrating at their bases, while flowers and moss sat choked in grey,
turning to powder that sparkled in the sunlight.

Tails breath grew rapid, his heart following suit, growing faster still when he realised these things
were the only thing he could hear.

No cracking twigs or rustle of bushes reached his ears, no birdsong filled the air. Not even the wind
stirred, except inside his own mouth where it grew hot and scratched against his throat.

He tried to speak, to say anything to break the overwhelming silence, but he could muster little more
than a whimper. A tear rolled down his cheek as he shivered on the spot, knowing it wasn't the air
that made him shake, bitterly cold despite the bright sun forcing its way through the dead forest
though it was.

He bolted, sprinting across the dry ground and kicking up a cloud of dust. He didn't know what he
was running from, but he felt he had to run; run until he escaped the hollow and silent woods, until
he stopped feeling afraid.

The grey expanse continued without an end in sight, and as he ran Tails saw things out of the corner
of his eye, shapes lying on the ground that could not be plant nor rock. He dared not look directly at
them, even though he knew exactly what he'd see.

His head rocked back and forth as he ran, its strange weight and fullness throwing itself around and disorienting him. The pain in its centre screamed at him, sending ripples of discomfort along his muscles and turning his limbs to jelly. His stomach heaved and his vision span, until at last he toppled forward, smashing into the ground in a cloud of dust.

As he picked himself up again, spitting the powder out and wiping his eyes, he saw the ground beneath him covered in corpses. Ants, woodlice, spiders and centipedes lay dead, their legs contorted in their agonised death throes, their carapaces drained of colour.

He looked around the clearing where he'd fallen, and saw the shapes from earlier. A deer lay beside a tree, its body nothing but a sheet of skin stretched across bones. Squirrels, rabbits and countless birds lay all around him, drained of all life and still as the bare earth beneath them.

"What's happening?!" he screamed, but the only answer came from his own echo ricocheting through the trees. Tears flowed freely from his eyes, and he made no effort to stop them.

"Sonic..." he whimpered, holding his arms close to his body. "Sonic, help me."

The sound of dry leaves crunching underfoot drew near, and he looked up. Through eyes blurred with tears and dazed from his fall, he saw a shape approaching at speed; the dark silhouette of a person. As it drew nearer its shape became clearer, and Tails recognised the familiar outline of a hedgehog.

His heart sprang to life, and he couldn't help gasping in delight.

"Sonic! You found-"

The figure skidded down the grey slope towards him, and Tails saw not the welcoming shade of blue he expected, but black complimented with stripes of red.

"Get up!" said Shadow. Though his face remained stoic as ever, anxiety crept into the edges of his expression.

Tails' head span even faster. "Shadow? What are you-"

"Get up!" Shadow barked. "It's coming!"

Tails clambered to his feet. "Wait, what? Shadow? How is this possible?"

Shadow's face grew more fearful. "There's no time! It's coming for you! You need to run!"

"What's coming? What-"

From behind him he heard a rush of wind, a roar of movement like a jet fighter. Looking back through the dead trees he saw a light, roughly Mobian size and dazzlingly bright, flitting through the forest, weaving through the trees erratically and kicking up clouds of dust before it.

Tails didn't wait to be told to run again. He turned and sprinted along the forest floor as fast as his legs could take him. He tried to spin up his tails, to propel him forward and upwards at a speed to rival Sonic, but the weight in his head disoriented him, clouding his focus and causing him to tangle himself up.

He could no longer see Shadow, but he could sense the thing behind him, growing closer by the
second. He could feel its heat on his back, hear its rattling breath in his ear, but he didn't dare look back. Instead he pushed himself harder, ignoring the pain of exertion gripping his legs and the crushing grip of breathlessness in his lungs.

Then he stopped.

He didn't know why, but the will to run left him in an instant, and all his muscles stopped responding, leaving him standing motionless.

He turned around, expecting to see it bearing down on him, but when he looked back he could see no sign of it, nor of Shadow.

He breathed deeply, laughing slightly as the cool air soothed his aching body. When his vision recovered, he saw why he had stopped.

The forest before him was alive with colour. The lifeless grey gave way to deep greens and browns, no different from any woods he'd seen before but compared to where he'd been the leaves practically glowed. The sounds of birds chirping and insects buzzing filled the air, and Tails felt like he'd literally stepped out of a nightmare.

"Tails."

His whole body jolted in surprise, and he nearly jumped two feet in the air. Turning around he saw Shadow standing beside him.

"Shadow!" Tails gasped. "What was that? That thing that was chasing us?"

Shadow fixed him with a stern, almost accusatory glare. Tails took a step back; the glare suggested things deep within him, but he didn't know what.

"Shadow? What's going on here? How did I get here? How-" a thought jumped to the front of his mind; the sound of whirring and beeping, a hoarse and broken wheezing, and Sonic's voice almost breaking in grief.

"How... can you be here? The last time I saw you-"

From within the dead part of the woods the roar started up again, and Tails saw the bright light shining through the trees. His fear, only just dialled down to manageable levels, ratcheted back upwards.

"Go," said Shadow. "I'll hold him off. Just get out of here."

Shadow took up a fighting stance between Tails and the light. Tails turned to go, but something held him back. A nagging feeling he couldn't quite shake.

"No," he said. "No, I can't let you do this."

"Don't argue with me, just go!"

"No!" yelled Tails, stamping his foot. "I don't need you to fight my battles for me! I need to face this by myself!"

Shadow looked at him, a strange half-smirk appearing on his face.

"Why?"
Tails' resolve splintered, and his sudden courage ebbed away.

"I... I don't know... I just have to do this..."

He stepped forward, standing in front of Shadow and facing towards the light. The rush of wind grew louder, and the bright yellow of the shape stung his eyes. His tingling nerves grew tighter, constricting his whole body, and his chest seized up as the last remnants of his breath fizzled away.

The wind rushed through the trees, blowing fragments of desiccated plants all around him, and the light grew so bright it dominated his vision. But he did not blink, even as his eyes dried out.

Another roar rumbled across the air, and the last of his meagre bravery crumbled. He turned and ran, yelling a garbled, sob-choked apology to Shadow as he dashed into the coloured woods.

The beauty of the forest became a blur. Tears soaked his muzzle as leaves whipped at his face and brambles snagged on his fur. Unlike the dry, hard ground from earlier the soil here sagged and squelched with moisture, tripping him and sending his balance reeling. His head throbbed with rhythmic, pulsing pain, its spongy weight bulging against the sides of his skull.

A dozen needles jabbed into his front, and he realised his way was blocked by a thicket of tangled brambles. He clawed at them, trying to shift them even as they drew trickles of blood from his fingers.

"Oh no... please... come on..."

He turned around. Instantly the light flashed in front of him, and from within it two blazing, yellow-furred arms shot out, grabbing his wrists with gnarled hands and crushing his arms in a vice like-grip.

The flames crept along his fur, licking at his skin, and he fell to his knees, his heart thundering within him, his head searing with pain. His bladder loosened, dampening his legs with the stench of terror.

"Please!" he wailed. "Not you! Not again!"

The light dimmed, its formless shape collapsing into the form of a hedgehog. A hedgehog blazing with golden fire, with a twisted grinning mouth filled with jagged teeth and eyes that span with deep red spirals.

Super Sonic.

It bore down on him, pushing him further into the mud, while its mouth widened, revealing a slavering tongue and looking like it might swallow him whole. As it approached, the rush of a memory long held back but never forgotten overtook him, and he felt his mind going into freefall, taking him back to the place where he had felt weakest.

"Tails!" said a voice. He turned his head slightly, unable to look away from Super Sonic completely. Shadow stood on the edges of his vision.

"Fight him off, Tails!" he said, his deep voice cracking with anxious anticipation. "You need to resist him!"

"I can't!" wailed Tails. "I can't do it... help me!"

"No, Tails! You need to do this yourself! You have to defeat him!"

"I can't! I'm not strong enough-"
"So long as you keep telling yourself that, you'll never be free of him! Take control of your fear and make it your slave!"

Those words. He'd heard them before, what felt like an aeon ago. Those words stirred deep within him, lighting a fire underneath him, a determination he had not felt for a long time.

He locked his gaze with Super Sonic's demented own.

"No!" he growled. "No! I will not let you hurt me again! I won't let you! You hear me?!"

He began to push back against Super Sonic, his muscles shaking as he forced all his strength into his effort. The burning hedgehog didn't budge, but Tails persevered, his exertion manifesting as strained grunts through clenched teeth.

Just as he felt he was about to break, his head throbbed again. Super Sonic's arms moved back slightly, and Tails almost relented out of surprise.

He was doing it. He was forcing Super Sonic back, lifting himself off his knees and pushing the immense weight away from him. Super Sonic's wicked smile didn't diminish, even as Tails rose to his feet.

Tails continued to push against his attacker, his grunting becoming a war cry as all his turbulent emotions rose up to aid him. The demonic hedgehog faltered, stepping backwards, and Tails seized the initiative, driving into him and pushing him to his knees.

But even as his fury turned to triumph, Tails noticed something happening around him. The little copse he'd found himself began to transform. Leaves shrivelled and fell from their branches, collapsing into dust as soon as they hit the floor. The bark on the trees splintered and cracked, creaking like an old ship as they turned from brown to grey. The brambles withered and died in moments, and the air itself turned as dry as the desert.

He could feel it happening. He could feel the forest dying inside his head. The spongey weight inside him pulsated, the sticky, wet feeling swelling and shrinking with an eerie familiarity. Had he time to focus, Tails would have said it felt like something drinking.

But he couldn't stop himself. Even as more life shrivelled to nothing around him, he refused to give up. He bore down onto Super Sonic, his scream of triumph reaching deafening heights.

With a final yell he let go of Super Sonic and slammed his fist into his face with all his might. The yellow hedgehog exploded into a cloud of sparkling lights which scattered and disappeared like dust in the wind. Then the forest fell silent.

Tails stood with his fist still outstretched, breathing heavily. The pulsing in his head stopped, and as far as he could tell the creeping death around him ceased. He gasped, drawing in as much breath as he could, before collapsing and resting his hands on his knees.

His elation quickly subsided as confusion set in. In the heat of the moment he hadn't had time to ask himself any questions. In the calm aftermath, these questions buzzed within his brain.

*What in the world just happened? How could Super Sonic be here? What happened to the forest? Why does my head feel so weird? What does Shadow have to do with all this?*

He span around, looking for Shadow. The dark hedgehog had vanished, and in his absence Tails felt the gnawing anxiety of being alone returning.
With the brambles gone, he made his way into the living woods, calling out for Shadow. Exhaustion began to overtake him, which even the cool dark of the forest couldn't soothe.

Rounding a clump of trees, he came to a still pool set within high mossy banks filled with crystal clear water. Dropping to his knees on the bank he scooped up handfuls of water and splashed it on his face, its icy chill soothing the heat clogging up his skin.

As he sat back, breathing a sigh of relief, a voice startled him, nearly sending him toppling into the water.

"That was quite something," said Shadow.

Tails turned to see Shadow leaning against a tree, his arms folded tightly.

"Oh my goodness, Shadow! Stop scaring me like that! What happened back there? What did I just do?"

Shadow sniffed, clearly amused by something, a wry smile appearing on his muzzle.

"You're really getting the hang of this. Soon you won't need my help at all."

Tails laughed incredulously "Help? Some help you were! You stood by and did nothing while I fought that monster off! What the heck, Shadow?"

Shadow shook his head. "I did exactly what you needed me to do. Don't you feel better for it?"

Tails put up a finger, ready to admonish again, but he hesitated. He did feel strangely content and calm all of a sudden.

"I... I don't know. I think I did... something, but nothing about this makes sense."

"It will do," said Shadow. "In time you'll have it all under control. But you can't rest on your laurels. He will be back. You know this to be true. You need to do more if you're to be truly free."

"Shadow, how do you know so much about him? You knew I was having nightmares about him, and I never told anyone about that, not even Sonic. For that matter, how was he even here? He's dead; I saw it with my own eyes. And how are you here? Why is any of this happening to me?!"

"Memories are strange things," said Shadow, looking off into the distance. "If you hold on to them too tightly, they take on a life of their own. They become a cancer that threatens to consume your very being."

"Well, that's unhelpfully cryptic," said Tails. He felt his face growing warm again, and he turned back to douse his face in the pool once more.

"I don't understand you, Shadow. You told me something about 'controlling my fear' and I tried to do that, but now I feel worse than ever. If this is being in control I'm not sure I want it."

Shadow said nothing. Tails' spine began to quiver, and he resisted turning around.

"Shadow?"

"Did it feel good?" Shadow said, his voice low. "What you did?"

"Huh? Well, I dunno. I'm not sure what I did, but yeah, it feels... pretty cool I guess."
"Not that," said Shadow. "I mean the other thing you did."

Tail's felt his heart miss a beat. "W-What other thing? Shadow?"

He forced himself to turn around and look and Shadow, his heart seizing up when he saw him. Shadow stood by the tree, but instead of the handsome, brooding figure he knew there stood an emaciated wretch, a skeletal creature draped in sagging, fading fur upon trembling stick-thin legs, its cheeks gaunt and eyes faded and bloodshot. It raised its wasted arm and pointed a bony finger right at him.

"Did it feel good..." it wheezed, "when you did this to me?"

Tails gasped and spluttered, desperate to speak, but his words caught in his throat.

"What about me?" croaked a female voice. To his left stood Rouge, as ruined as Shadow, her dress hanging of her corpse-like body.

"Did it make you feel like a big man?" she hissed. "Or am I just one of your conquests?"

Tails scrabbled backwards across the ground as the apparitions lurched toward him. Every part of him shook, and he had to force his words to dare to leave his mouth.

"I didn't... I wouldn't!" He spluttered, but even as his protests left him, his mind filled with images; half-remembered places and people buried so deep within him they seemed like dreams experienced a lifetime ago. Now they swelled up, overwhelming his senses and making him experience them all over again.

"I... I..." his breath trembled over his tongue, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean for any of this to happen!"

"Oh, I think you knew exactly what you were doing," said a third voice from behind him. There stood a red panda, even more withered than Shadow and Rouge, but sporting a smug, self-satisfied grin carved into a wrinkled and sunken face.

"Did it feel good when you killed me?!" said Quinn.

"No, no, no!" screamed Tails, falling on his front and burying his face in his hands. "I didn't do it! I didn't hurt anyone!"

He heard them laughing in their broken voices, and he tried to push himself down into the blackness behind his eyes, hoping that it might lead somewhere safe. He could hear them shuffling towards him, their wasted forms closing in, eager for revenge.

With a start he opened his eyes. Lifting his head from the ground, damp grass sticking to his face, he looked around to see the figures had gone.

Cold crept into him, and he held his arms and tails close to him while he shivered.

Had he imagined the whole thing? He wondered if it were possible. But it had felt so vivid, so real; he'd felt the burning touch of Super Sonic, felt the pain he caused. How could such a thing not have been real? And if it wasn't, had anything he'd been through in the past few days really happened?

"I didn't do it," he muttered to himself. "It's not me, it's not me, it's not me..."

Guilt. That's all this is. I blame myself for not doing more to stop the real monster, and this is all part of that. I feel like I've failed and so I'm imagining myself to be as bad as the Emerald thief. Yes, that
must be it. It must be.

Aching, trembling and tired, Tails crawled back towards the pond to wash the grass and dirt from his face. Reaching in, he threw several handfuls of cool water across himself.

The water dripped from his eyes, and as his vision cleared he looked back at his reflection.

His irises were red.

Tails' mouth fell open, but before he could utter even a whimper he saw his teeth, jagged peaks of enamel reaching out from his mouth. His skin began to grow hot, the water fizzling into jets of steam followed by yellow flames bursting into life across his body.

"No!" screamed Tails. "No, it's not me!"

As he watched, he saw his irises unwind, unpeeling into crimson spirals that whirled across his eyeballs like a hurricane.

The weight in his mind strained against his skull, shifting and heaving, sending bolts of pain through his body. He could sense something from within it, like it was trying to communicate with him, not with words, but more like a sudden understanding of a concept.

More.

Tails slammed his hands onto the side of his head, gripping his temples so tight his fingers dug into his skin.

"No! No, I don't want to! I don't want this anymore! This isn't what I wanted!"

But he could feel it taking over, feel his resistance crumbling before the weight of its existence, even as he struggled to comprehend it.

Submit.

Embrace.

Devour.

Tails let out a scream that shook the trees in the hope of drowning it out. But no amount of noise could deny it. The idea of it was already in his mind.

His scream stopped, and he rose to his feet. The pain subsided, and he felt a calmness washing over him. A grin spread across his face, baring his sharp teeth, and he chuckled to himself.

He understood now. What it was he truly needed.

More.

~O~
"Liar!"

Sonic stood inside the control room, pointing his finger towards the wizened form of Eggman, his face hot with sudden anger. Either side of him stood Amy and Knuckles, just arrived and panting from their efforts to catch up to Sonic.

"What's happening?" gasped Amy. "Who's a liar?"

Eggman brought his bony fingers together in front of him, his devious and childlike grin undiminished by his sagging face or yellow teeth.

"My dear girl, I was just bringing Sonic up to speed, heh, with my predicament. It seems your dear friend Tails has a lot to answer for."

"What are you saying?" asked Knuckles. "That this is somehow Tails' fault?"

"He's saying Tails was the one who attacked him," Sonic seethed. "As if Tails is the one who's been going around hurting people. But he's a liar. It's just another one of his tricks." He didn't turn around to face his friends when he spoke, and every word felt heavy, forced out through breath hot with fury.

Amy stepped forward, putting a hand on his shoulder. He flinched slightly but didn't move away, her touch feeling cool against his taught and weary skin.

"Eggman, don't play games with us," she said. "There's no way Tails would attack you like this. He's just a sweet kid; he wouldn't hurt a fly."

Eggman's grin fell, his face becoming grim, and he leaned forward, peering over his dark glasses with bloodshot eyes.

"Allow me to disabuse you of your naive notions. That 'sweet kid' as you call him showed up here and started destroying my base. I sent my Badniks out to stop him but, well, you saw what he did to them. They didn't even slow him down. Then he came for me, and there was no mistaking him. It was Tails, drunk on Chaos energy and clearly hungry for more."

"What do you mean 'drunk on Chaos energy?'" asked Sonic.

"He'd entered into a state of hyper-aggravated Chaos energy generation. I believe you like to call it 'going Super.' But he clearly hasn't got control over it; his body is being warped by the reaction and his power levels are volatile. My guess is that's why he wants more of it; to stabilise his form before he self-destructs. He threatened me, demanded I give him my Chaos Emerald. I refused of course, and then-"

"He took the Chaos energy right from your own body," Sonic said, his anger crumbling beneath a weighty realisation. An image of another figure drained dry of Chaos energy, pointing a bony finger past Tails to a figure they couldn't see.

Except Shadow hadn't been pointing past Tails at all.

"I've seen this before," said Sonic. "This is exactly what happened to all the others. How did you survive though? Everyone else is unconscious... or worse."
Eggman looked down, and spoke solemnly. "I've never felt anything so ghastly in my life. There's no such thing as a soul, but if there were, this is how it would feel to have it taken from me. Even though I'm still alive, I feel like a piece of me is missing... no, not missing... elsewhere. Like I exist here and somewhere else at the same time."

Sonic tapped his foot, chewing on his lip. "But how did you survive? Get to the point!"

"Easy, Sonic," whispered Amy.

"I'd be a fool not to take precautions," said Eggman, looking up with renewed enthusiasm. "This chair is fitted with multiple shock tethers, which I launched into your little friend as soon as I could fumble for the button. Each one of those tethers can deliver a charge strong enough to kill a man fifty times over."

"And? What happened?" Sonic's breath halted in his throat.

"I think it mildly annoyed him. It was enough to drive him off, but I don't think I did any lasting damage. He set about destroying the rest of my base and fled. I fear he may have located my Chaos Emerald and taken it."

Any second now Sonic hoped he would wake up. If he just closed his eyes and waited, he would find himself back in his bed. He would get up, shake off his cold sweat and creep over to Tails' room. There he would find the young fox sleeping peacefully, and he would gently nudge him until he awoke. Then for the first time he would ask him a question that he had been asked many times before.

*Can I sleep in your bed tonight? I had a bad dream...*

Tails. Murderer. The two concepts just did not fit together in Sonic's mind. He couldn't take two pieces of that puzzle and jam them together to make it work. He did not believe that Tails could ever be evil; he would not believe it.

"No," muttered Sonic.

"What?" asked Amy.

"I said no. It's not Tails. It can't be. It's some kind of... thing that's stolen his form or copied him or possessed him or something. Or Eggman's just lying to make us turn on each other. I don't care what the reason is but Tails would never do a thing like this, ever."

"Sonic," said Knuckles, "but what about-"

Sonic put his hand up. "Are you not listening to me? Tails is *not* the one behind these attacks. You don't know him like I do; none of you do. If I say Tails didn't do it, then he didn't do it, and that's final, understand?"

The others fell silent, avoiding Sonic's gaze.

"Am I talking to a brick wall here? You can't honestly believe Tails would:-"

The sound of a wheezing laugh came from behind him.

"They only see what you choose not to," said Eggman. "Have you ever considered that your... infatuation with that boy might just be a weakness? One that he might exploit to his advantage. Tails knows you'll never suspect him of any malice, that you'll do anything to preserve your idealised
image of him, and that means he can cause havoc while you run around looking for an enemy that was right under your nose the whole time. Face it, Sonic, he's manipulated you through and through, and here you are still playing his game. You're a fool."

Sonic surged forward, his anger exploding beneath him, but before he closed the distance with Eggman he collided with a large red shape.

"Knuckles, get out of my way! I'm gonna show him-"

Knuckles held him back by his shoulders. "Sonic, don't. This isn't going to help us find Tails. Eggman's just trying to rile you up. Don't give him the satisfaction."

Sonic stared into Knuckles' commanding gaze, and at once he felt his anger collapse. Sighing, he turned away, resting his forehead in his palm.

"Damn it. This whole situation is just... surreal. Since when are you the voice of reason, Knux?"

Knuckles shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe since you started losing your cool all of a sudden. Anyway, you can't hurt Eggman, we came here for his help, remember?"

"Oh really?" purred Eggman, his fingers waggling. "Now this is interesting. The great Sonic the Hedgehog, begging me for help? I never thought I'd see the day. Somehow that makes being turned into a senior citizen worth it. Well, that and the free bus pass."

Sonic turned and marched towards Eggman, brushing past Knuckles. He reached into his quills and pulled out a charred piece of paper, thrusting it into Eggman's gnarled hands.

"Tails was working on a way to send the Chaos Emeralds into the Special Zone before he disappeared. We were going to lure whatever's hunting them there and deal with it before it hurt anyone else."

"Hmm," Eggman held the paper close to his face, squinting at Tails' scribbled equations. "Yes, I can see that this is an amateurish attempt at advanced Chaos physics, far inferior to the much improved models I since developed."

"Whatever," said sonic, rolling his eyes. "So you can make it work, then?"

Eggman snorted, his derisive laugh suppressed by his cracked voice. "Hah! Of course I can. This is child's play to a genius like me. But I'm afraid you're out of luck; all my equipment's been wrecked by that mad fox, so I couldn't do it even if I wanted to."

Sonic pinched the bridge of his nose, what little confidence he had ebbing away. Of course it had gone after Eggman; just like when Tails' workshop was trashed, it knew they would turn to Eggman in his stead. Again, the thing was one step ahead of him. Always it seemed to second guess him, frustrating him at every turn.

"How long until you can get everything back up and running?" asked Amy.

Eggman shrugged. "Who knows? Days? Weeks? The damage is catastrophic. I'll be out of action until I can sort this mess out. Fortunately for you, that means I won't be conquering the world anytime soon."

"We haven't got time to wait," said Sonic, pacing. "We need to find Tails right now. There must be another way."
"Go look for it somewhere else," said Eggman, waving his arm towards them, his sleeve flapping loosely on his bony appendage. "I've got enough to deal with without a bunch of smelly Mobians cluttering up the place."

"Speak for yourself, Egg-man," said Amy, covering her nose and waving her hand in front of her face.

"Come on," said Sonic, heading towards the door, "we haven't got all day. Let's head back and... and think of what we do next. There's gotta be another way..."

He strode out into the corridor, muttering to himself. The others caught up to him, and Knuckles put his hand on Sonic's shoulders and stopping him.

"Sonic, wait. I think I might have an idea. Another way we can find Tails, or at least find what took him, if Eggman's wrong about it being Tails, I mean.

Sonic bristled at the suggestion, but shook it off. "Oh? You didn't think to mention this earlier?"

"Er... well, the thing is, this idea is a bit... risky, you might say. But without Eggman or Tails to help I don't think we have much choice."

"If it can save Tails, it's got to be worth it. What do we need to do?"

"First," said Knuckles, "we need to get back to Angel Island."

~O~

A flash of red swept across the night sky above Angel Island, chasing away the deep blue shroud covering the fields and ruins for an instant before it fell again, covering the island in the dim quiet of night. The only trace of the light remained in a gently humming glass orb in a metal frame, from which one echidna strode away while two hedgehogs staggered, holding onto each other for support.

"Bleargh," moaned Sonic. "No matter how many times I teleport I never get used to it. Feels like I've been turned inside out."

"Me too," said Amy. "I'm not sure where I end and you begin. Although I don't have a problem with that if you don't..." She nudged Sonic in the ribs, raising her eyebrows and smiling, her grin glinting in the starlight.

"Amy," Sonic said, rolling his eyes, "just... give it a rest, okay?"

She let go of him, causing him to nearly topple forward, before striding off.

"I was only trying to lighten the mood!"

"Amy wait, I..." he reached out to her, but she had caught up to Knuckles, holding on to his arm and looking back over her shoulder at him. Knuckles didn't react, and Sonic rested his hands on his knees, shaking his head.

"That girl..." he muttered to himself. Picking himself up he jogged over to catch up with the others.

"The sky here is so pretty," said Amy to Knuckles, who seemed to be somewhere else in his mind, "much nicer than that horrible smog at Eggman's base. You can see so many stars up here."

Sonic craned his neck to the night sky. On Angel Island, far above the sprawl of cities pumping out
orange and neon light at all hours of the day, the stars looked closer than ever. Instead of the twinkle of a few points of light, the sky shone with countless sparkling embers, and the usual black emptiness filled with colour, streaks of red and yellow from distant nebulae and shooting stars stretching from horizon to horizon. To Sonic it seemed the entirety of creation hung just above his head, and with one step he might just fall into it. Yet despite the beauty before him taking his breath away, sadness weighed him down to the ground.

_I wish Tails could see this._

He looked back down, biting down on the thought. Tails would get to see this, he thought. Once he’d saved him, Sonic would bring him here, and he could prattle on about space-time and black holes and other things Sonic didn't understand. He chuckled slightly; even after all they'd been through, it would be worth it just to hear that carefree voice bursting with enthusiasm again.

His eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and he could see they were headed down a grassy slope set at the base of a circle of sheer cliffs. In the centre of the circle the grass gave way to carved stone, and in the centre of that circle stood a multi-tiered dais with steps leading up it. On top of the dais a huge crystal glowed with a deep green light that seemed out of place with reality.

The Master Emerald.

"Are you going to explain this plan to us already?" asked Sonic. "You've said nothing since we left the base."

"I didn't want Eggman listening in," said Knuckles. "I had to make sure we weren't being followed."

He glanced up the steps toward the Master Emerald, then looked back at Sonic, his face solemn and composed.

"I'm going to use the Master Emerald to communicate with the web of Chaos. I'll be able to see all the Chaos Energy on the planet right now. If Eggman's telling the truth about Tails-"

Sonic shot him a stern glare.

"-or if it's some other entity with Super-level power, it should glow brighter than anything else in the web. I should be able to pinpoint their location within a few miles."

"Brilliant!" said Sonic, leaping up a few steps. "We're finally going to catch this monster! But... why didn't you suggest this earlier? We could have avoided wasting time chatting with Eggman."

Knuckles said nothing, his face stony. Then he cleared his throat.

"This ritual is... dangerous. To see the web of Chaos I need to project my spirit through the Master Emerald."

"Your spirit?" asked Amy. "You can do that? Just let your soul wander off without your body?"

"Tails would have a scientific explanation for it I'm sure, but astral projection is the only way I can describe it. I can only do it with the Master Emerald's power, and even then it's difficult and, like I said, dangerous."

"Dangerous, how?" said Sonic. "Surely nothing can hurt you if you're a ghost, right?"

Knuckles shook his head. "I'll be exposing my spirit to Chaos energy in its purest form. Disturbances you hardly notice in the physical world can have drastic consequences in the spiritual world. If I'm
there too long I could suffer permanent damage to my mind. That's why I'd have rather used Eggman's technology. If something goes wrong the device gets fried and not me. But we don't have much choice now, do we?"

He turned to head up the steps, but Sonic grabbed him by the arm.

"Dude, wait. I don't want you to do this. Not for my sake. It's too risky."

Knuckles grim demeanour broke slightly as a bemused smirk appeared.

"Never thought I'd hear you say that."

"Seriously, don't do it. We'll find another way."

Knuckles wrenched his arm free of Sonic's grip. "There is no other way, and even if there were, Tails can't wait for us to think of it. Every second we waste risks losing him forever. I won't let that happen, not on my watch."

He headed back up the steps, slowly ascending towards the huge crystal.

"Knuckles, I..." said Sonic, "I didn't know Tails meant that much to you."

Knuckles stopped short of the top of the dais, looking back over his shoulder.

"I know what it's like to have a duty to protect something. I also know what it's like to fail in that duty. The way guilt and shame eat at you every second you're without your charge. The Master Emerald is eternal, but there's only one Tails. As your friend, I can't let you live with that. I'm not going to allow you to fail, not while I can still do something. Now please, no more objections. I need to make the preparations."

He climbed to the top of the dais and sat down cross-legged. Reaching over to the stones, he pressed something Sonic couldn't see, and all around the Master Emerald torches flickered to life, their amber hues dancing in the green of the Emerald. Incense burners rose out from hidden panels, pouring sweet smoke into the air, and Knuckles began to chant.

"The servers are the Seven Chaos..."

Sonic turned to Amy. Her eyes glistened in the torchlight, and her lower lip trembled.

"Hey now," said Sonic, putting his arms around her. "It's alright. Knuckles knows what he's doing. We'll find Tails and everything will be alright."

She buried her face in his chest fur and sighed gently.

"Oh Sonic. I keep thinking about poor Tails. What must he be going through right now? He's probably scared and alone..."

Sonic rubbed her back. "Don't think about that. Think about how awesome it will be when we swoop in to rescue him. Knuckles was right; Tails is a fighter. We'll find him, then we'll find whoever took him and kick their butt together, all four of us! How does that make you feel?"

Amy pulled away from the hug, smiling warmly despite the sadness in her eyes. "Well, when you put it like that, it does sound pretty cool. Okay! I'm gonna stay strong for Tails so I can fight by his side!"

"That's the spirit!" Sonic ruffled her quills, though she squirmed slightly at the patronising gesture.
"I believe you, you know?" she said.

"What's that?"

"I believe that Tails isn't the one behind this. I know Eggman was lying just to stir up trouble. You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say he faked the whole attack just to throw suspicion on Tails."

"Maybe..." said Sonic. Amy's theory didn't sit right with him. Even for Eggman that would be an audacious thing to plan, but that wasn't all that bothered him. Maybe it was the incense clogging up his nostrils and making his head feel fuzzy, but something still didn't feel right about the whole situation. The sensation that something invisible drew near, closing in around them; it had never really left him since the attack at the house, but now it grew more intense, sending ripples of anxiety along his spine.

"Something's coming..." he whispered.

"What?" asked Amy. Sonic shook his head briskly.

"It's nothing. Just a weird feeling. Come on, let's sit down and wait while Knuckles does his thing."

He sat on a level stone lining the steps, and Amy sat beside him, deliberately closing as much distance and possible and leaving no air between them. Sonic sighed, but put his arm round her nonetheless.

"Knuckles is a surprisingly deep guy, huh?" she said. "I never knew he felt so strongly about his friends."

Sonic glanced up at the sitting figure of Knuckles slowly rocking back and forth while chanting. The sense of dread creeping through his fur didn't abate, and as he exhaled his pent up breath it rattled and dried on his tongue.

"To be honest, Ames," he whispered, "I don't think anything can surprise me anymore."

~O~

He dived down from a great height, through clouds of incense of fire, into a sea of green deeper than the deepest ocean. Its currents turned him around and upside down, flowing through him and filling his mind with new ideas. The green became a vortex, swirling around him and threatening to pull him down into an inky abyss. Then the currents changed again and thrusting him upwards towards the surface.

He emerged to see his own body sitting cross-legged and closed-eyed before the Master Emerald. Further down the dais, Sonic and Amy watched silently, oblivious to his presence. He laughed quietly, and his body laughed too. If only they could feel the joy of becoming something other than crude matter. His spirit surged with power, and he felt the beauty of the world around him touching every part of him. Every tree and rock shone with iridescent colours, colours that he couldn't just see, but taste and smell and feel them brushing against him. His friends colours shone brightest of all and he could feel everything they were and could be overlapping with his soul. If he could, he would never let it end.

But he had a job to do, and he couldn't waste any more time. Soaring high above the Emerald he raced into the sky, the ground rapidly falling away from him, the detail of the surface growing smaller, merging together into the distinctive outlines of the continents. The blue sky faded away to the blackness of space, and Knuckles hovered high above the planet, a shining marble in an inky
abyss.

Across the surface the web of Chaos flowed like paint in water, its shimmering, ethereal colours pushing and pulling against each other, maintaining the balance that kept Mobius alive. He had seen this sight before, but its beauty still struck him dumb every time.

But something was wrong.

"Sonic? Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," Sonic's voice responded at deafening volume, bouncing off the world and echoing around him in all directions. "Are you doing, ya know, the thing?"

"I'm inside the web of Chaos now, sending my thoughts back to my body to speak to you."

"Wow, that's cool," said Sonic. "Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'my mind was elsewhere.'"

"Listen, there's something wrong here. The Chaos energy flowing over the planet; it's like it's missing something. The colours seem duller, less vibrant."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. Nothing good, anyway." Knuckles scanned the surface of the world, searching for any sign of a disturbance.

"There!"

"What?" Sonic asked, his voice rising. "You've found Tails?"

"No, it's strange... I expected to see a bright light; a Super-level being should shine like a beacon, but it's more like... it's like the web of Chaos is entangled on something, tied up in knots or... being strangled. Sonic..." Knuckles' voice cracked. "I think Chaos itself is sick."

"Where is it, Knux? Where's it coming from?"

"About fifty miles west of Station Square, I think. I'd say that's the Verdant Spiral Zone."

"Great work, Dude," said Sonic. "Better come up for air now."

The edges of Knuckles vision began to blur, and he heard a sound within him; a deep rumble that shook his spirit. Then the sound came again, louder and shorter, and to Knuckles the whole planet seemed to shake.

"Wait... something's happening..."

"You've done what you need to do," said Sonic. "Get out before something bad happens."

As Knuckles watched, the planet grew larger, and he felt himself falling. Within moments he collided painlessly with a dusty, cracked floor. Looking up he saw an endless expanse of flat, lifeless dust beneath a dark and star-filled sky. The rumbling sound grew closer, its steady rhythm increasing in tempo with each quake.

"I think I'm having a vision," said Knuckles. "It happens sometimes when dealing with the Master Emerald."
"We haven't got time for visions!" yelled Sonic, his panic becoming palpable. "I'm telling you, get out of there!"

"This could be useful, Sonic!" Knuckles snapped back. "It might show me something about what we're up against. Just trust me."

In front of him stood Tails, suddenly present despite no apparent means of arrival. The fox stood staring at him, and although Knuckles' heart skipped a beat at the sight of him, he remained calm, knowing it wasn't the real Tails.

The image of Tails stared at him, its face expressionless, eyes unblinking. Its namesakes flitted back and forth playfully, and Knuckles watched them, mesmerised by their movement.

His left tail swept across, and Knuckles found himself looking up at the stars. Though it showed no process of change, the tail covered the entirety of his vision, filling up the sky as high as he could see. Where it passed, the stars vanished, leaving half the night sky devoid of light. The right tail swept the other half of the sky, like a paintbrush coated in the blackest ink erasing the cosmos.

"What?!" cried Knuckles. "What does this mean?"

He looked back to the image of Tails; its namesakes were their correct size, but now the boy wore a wicked grin on his face.

It began to grow, rapidly and suddenly, its head disappearing into the clouds in moments. Another rumble followed, and Knuckles found himself flung back into space. There he saw Tails, grown so large the planet seemed like a marble to him.

The gigantic fox leaned forward, his mouth wide and slavering. Instead of straight white teeth Knuckles saw row upon row of jagged enamel spikes the size of continents and caked in dried blood. The teeth came down on the planet, causing it to crack, but it didn't break right away. Again the teeth pushed into the world, and the world pushed back, making a wheezing groaning noise like a living being, while its magma oozed out like blood.

Knuckles looked back. It was blood, and the noise the combined screams of six billion Mobians. He had no eyes to shut, no ears to cover, and he could only watch as the mouth clamped shut, popping Mobius like a blister and silencing the screams in final sticky squelch.

Knuckles knew it was only a vision, a metaphor for something else, but even so his fear took over him. He could feel the sweat pouring along his body's brow, hear the sound of his distant heart thundering in his chest.

Whatever this vision meant, one thing was certain; all of Mobius was in danger, and the upcoming disaster, whatever it was, centred around Tails.

"Knuckles?" Sonic's voice came through. "Knuckles, what's wrong? What are you-"

Something pulled Knuckles backwards, away from the monstrous fox at blistering speed. Faster and faster he soared, until everything around him turned white.

He felt himself crashing through a surface, like emerging from underwater, and his movement slowed.

He was not back in his body. Instead, he floated in a void filled with multi-coloured clouds, strange orbs that pulsed with fire and streams of light that gave off a distant music.
"Is this... the Special Zone?"

The sound of his heart grew louder and louder, sounding like it came from outside of him. Then he realised; it was coming from outside of him. The low rhythmic rumble that had grown shorter and louder throughout his vision was the sound of a beating heart.

A bright point of light appeared before him, and Knuckles found himself drawn towards it. As he approached, the light faded, and he saw the source of the noise: a heart made entirely from yellow crystal, transparent and shimmering, yet pulsating like soft flesh. He drew nearer, and another light engulfed the heart, shifting and growing until it took on a new shape.

The shape of a fox with two tails.

The figure walked towards Knuckles across thin air slowly, placing each foot carefully in front of the other, its tails swishing gently as it approached. As tall as Knuckles but possessing a slender frame straining to hold back tightly-wound muscles, its fur glowed so brightly it looked almost white. Eyes shining with pure white sat in a high-cheekboned and mature face, and its long hair shimmered with colour in the light of the Zone.

Transfixed by the approaching figure, unable to tear his eyes away, Knuckles found himself reaching towards it, the manifestation of his arm stretching out with fingers splayed.

"Tails," he whispered, "Is that you? Wow, you're all grown up and... you look incredible, dude."

It continued to approach, its long and slender arm reaching out, ethereal fingers grasping toward Knuckles' own. Before they could touch, he snapped hand away, as all his senses flared into sudden alarm, telling him to run.

"What are you?" Knuckles gasped. It said nothing, but continued to reach out, its fingers inches from his face.

He fled, forcing his spirit to fly away from the ghostly Tails as fast he could, sending it back through the walls of the Special Zone and into an empty white void.

He could see his body, through a hole in the white, and he pushed towards it, feeling the weight of gravity reassert itself as he plummeted towards the real world.

Then something grabbed him.

He looked behind him to see a point of bright white light behind him, and through it a shimmering golden-white hand reached out, its fingers tightly gripped around his spectral ankle.

"No!" Knuckles yelled. "You can't!"

The hand pulled backwards, pulling his foot into the light. Knuckles reached out, desperate to grab onto anything, but in the empty space between life and death he found nothing to grab.

The light pulled harder, and Knuckles felt his spirit twisting, compressing as if pulled through a straw. He forced himself forward with all his will, but the image of his seated self slipped further away.

"I won't let you do this!" He growled through clenched teeth. "I will not give in!"

He felt the light overtake more of him, submerging him up to his shoulders. Still he fought against it, reaching out for his body even as his spirit seeped away by inches.
With a burst of fury he roared, pushing himself forward with all of his might. But it didn't relent, and the outburst took the last of his will with it. He felt himself deflating, and as he slid backwards into the light, he let out a stifled, desperate gasp.

And then he was gone.

~O~

"Knuckles? Knuckles, speak to me!"

Sonic shook Knuckles by the shoulders. The echidna, sitting still with his eyes closed, had gone quiet for several minutes. Then he had begun to grunt and gasp through clenched teeth as if in pain, sweat pouring along his brow as his whole body convulsed.

"What's happening to him?" whimpered Amy, her eyes streaming with tears.

"I don't know!" yelled Sonic, barely containing tears of his own. "I told him to get out of there, I told him!"

Knuckles' eyes snapped open, and for a moment Sonic's nerves ceased their trembling. Then the echidna let out a long scream that ricocheted from the cliff faces and shook the trees, before slumping onto his side.

Amy covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh no! Is he... Is he...?"

Sonic fell onto his knees, placing his ear to Knuckles' chest.

"He's still breathing. He's okay."

But Knuckles stared wide-eyed and still and no matter how much Sonic snapped his fingers or shook him he didn't shift from his vacant stare, and his arms hung limply by his side.

"Knux! Come on, dude, wake up! Wake up!"

Sonic stared down at Knuckles' prone form, then looked over to Amy. The girl looked like she might collapse at any minute.

"What's happened, Sonic?"

Sonic swallowed, and when he spoke his words shivered through the air.

"He's alive but... he's not in there. I think... I think it found him, the thing we're hunting. The thing found him and..."

He stared into Amy's eyes, for fear that if he looked away she might suffer the fate now dawning on him.

"Amy... it took his soul!"

~O~
IX - Night of the Hunters

Long shadows flickered across stone walls carved with angular faces and animals. The light of the blazing sconces mounted to the walls jumped and played about, sending the small chamber into a wild dance of shadows. In the centre, upon a stone plinth lined with straw, Knuckles lay motionless, his vacant eyes staring at the ceiling. Beside the empty shell sat Sonic and Amy, their eyes as distant and emotionless as their charge.

They had moved him here, to this cosy chamber within the ruins, away from the elements and biting insects looking for an easy meal. Yet their good intentions returned no favours, for the way they had laid Knuckles out made him resemble an embalmed corpse waiting for its coffin.

Sonic stared at what remained of his friend, unable to summon up any sense of feeling. Numbness swallowed his heart, and his mind seized up, stuck on nothing at all. Even Amy, her eyes bloodshot and raw from hours of crying, sat motionless and silent.

Hate. A strange feeling like nothing he had felt before. A single-minded need to destroy something without compassion or mercy, and only for yourself, not for the sake of others. He hadn't hated anyone in his life.

But he hated this thing, this monster that tormented him. He didn't even care what it was anymore, only that it was a sick and twisted thing that deserved to die. The way it taunted him, picking off his friends one by one, always making sure he couldn't do a thing to save them; nothing could justify this to him or make him feel anything but loathing and hatred. Even though he knew this feeling would eat away at him, even though he knew Tails would be heartbroken to know he felt this way, he could not let it go. It still had Tails, and until he saw his little brother's face again he would not allow himself to feel pity.

He would not allow anyone else to suffer.

"Amy," he whispered. "Amy, I need you to do something for me. I need you to make a promise to me. Is that alright?"

Amy looked at him, her eyes tired and distant, a look of uncertainty on her face. Sonic took her hand, intertwining his fingers with hers and gripping tightly. He felt her pulse increase as he squeezed her soft hand and looked her in the eye.

"Don't let go," he said, holding their hands up between them. "Stay with me at all times. Don't leave my side even for a moment. I can't... I can't lose you too."

A smile tried to leap onto her face, but it kept faltering, collapsing into a nervous frown. Eventually she managed a pained curve of her lips, and nodded.

"I promise, Sonic. I promise I won't ever leave you."

She couldn't help but chuckle, though she covered her mouth out of shame for doing so.

"If you'd asked me that any other day I think I might have died of happiness, but now... now I'm not sure I can ever feel happy again. Not while so many of my friends are suffering. Rouge, Tails, Shadow and now Knuckles. How did this all happen so fast? What's doing this to us? When will it end?"

She collapsed into him, and Sonic put his arm around her. For once, he longed for her touch, if only
to reassure him that he still had something worth living for.

"I wish I knew. I wish I could find the answers to all these questions. I don't like things this complicated; I want the bad guys in their corner and the good guys in theirs. When the bell rings, we duke it out and the good guys win. If it were that simple I'd have finished this by now. This whole situation feels totally out of control."

"We can't just give up. We need to keep fighting for our friends. Tails may still be alive."

Sonic stood up. "I know he is. If I'm certain of one thing it's that Tails is still out there. He won't have given up, and neither will I. Not while there's still a chance of saving him."

He put his hand on Knuckles' prone body, still warm despite its emptiness. Though his eyes were still, Sonic thought he could still see something behind them, some trace of his friend that he would find a way to bring back.

"Knuckles put his life on the line to find the monster for us, and we are not going to waste this opportunity, otherwise it will all be for nothing." He turned to face Amy. "The Verdant Spiral Zone; that's where he said he saw the disturbance in the planet's Chaos energy. That's where we need to go."

"But what will we do when we find it?" asked Amy.

Sonic looked her straight in the eye.

"The only thing we can do. We fight."

~O~

They had taken Knuckles to St. Calvin's hospital and left him in their care. The same doctor who had spoken to him about Shadow and Rouge ran into him as they entered, and her jaw nearly hit the floor when she saw Knuckles, but she agreed to take him in and monitor his progress. Sonic had no time for explanations, and left as soon as he was satisfied that Knuckles would be kept safe.

Now he pushed his way through a tangled thicket of thorns, clambered over fallen trees and waded through ponds choked with weeds. The Verdant Spiral Zone lived up to its name; dense foliage covered every scrap of ground, and even the light struggled to push its way through the thick canopy above. No easy paths presented themselves, leaving Sonic feeling like he was going in circles.

"Yuk!" said Amy as she staggered free of a bush fighting to impede her path. "There's such a thing as being too close to nature. My dress is a complete mess!"

Patches of brown splattered the bright red of Amy's dress. The edges, frayed and ripped, poured dirty water onto the ground, and in her quills she carried enough twigs to make an entire bird's nest.

"It's ruined!" she moaned. "What am I going to do about this?"

"Just take it off," Sonic said over his shoulder. "It'll be easier to make your way through all these bushes without it."

"Take it off?!" Amy squealed. "Are you mad? What if someone sees me?"

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Who? There's no-one else here."

"You're here."
"Amy," Sonic sighed. "It doesn't matter that I'm here, we're friends. Anyway, I don't mind; I've seen you naked before."

"What?!" gasped Amy. "When?! Explain yourself you, you peeping tom, you!"

Sonic slapped his forehead so hard he almost toppled backwards.

"When we were kids, Ames! We used to go skinny-dipping at the lake all the time, remember?"

He heard Amy pause, as if she tried to hold on to her indignation at any cost.

"That's different," she huffed. "I was just a little girl then. Now I'm a mature and confident woman, and I will not tarnish my good name by allowing myself to be eye-candy for some drooling pervert!"

"Drooling pervert?" Amy, what are you on? I don't even like- You know what, forget it. Do what you like. It's not like I've ever been able to change your mind about anything, ever."

He stomped forward through the undergrowth, and Amy ran after him.

"Hey, that's not true!" she said. "You've changed my mind in lots of ways."

"Like what?"

"Well... you taught me to be brave. You taught me to always do the right thing. You taught me never to follow the rules... even yours."

"Probably should have thought that one through a bit more," groaned Sonic.

"You've changed me for the better, Sonic. Just like you have all your friends. We are who we are because of you. You should be proud of yourself."

She bumped her shoulder playfully against his, grinning to herself. Though he knew she was right, her pep talk failed to lift his spirits. He'd made his friends into the people they were, and in doing so, had he unwittingly put them in harm's way. Would any of them had been hurt had he not inspired them to take risks and put themselves in the line of fire?

He couldn't be sure. But he knew he couldn't change the past. They all believed in him, and he couldn't let them down now. Whatever soul-searching he needed to do would have to wait.

"Oh my gosh," said Amy. "Sonic, look!"

The forest before them changed, as if they had stepped from out of a painting filled with colour and life into the drabness of the real world. A sea of grey stretching out into the distance, with row upon row of bare trees shedding bark like leaves, withered flowers and lifeless grass.

"What the heck?" said Sonic, rubbing his hand along the trunk of a nearby tree, its bark crumbling to dust at his touch. "It's dead. It's all just... dead."

"What did this?" whined Amy, her voice trembling. "Was it the monster?"

"Energy drain. Just like all the others. It's definitely here, or it was here recently."

Amy clung to his arm, shivering. "But the scale of it! It's killed every living thing in this area!"

"It's growing more powerful. The Emeralds it's taken must be making it stronger. But if it can do all this with just three Emeralds..."
He turned and gripped Amy by the shoulders, looking her in the eye. His own nerves began to tingle, but he kept them held down with determination.

"We need to hurry," he said. "We've got to stop this thing before it gets any stronger. Come on!"

"But what can we do against this?!"

"I don't know!" he yelled, throwing his hands up. "But we have to do something! We need to face it head on! That's what it's been avoiding all this time, but no more! I'm gonna face this monster, and I'm going to beat it! For Tails and all my friends!"

He held out his hand. "But I don't want to do it alone."

Amy hesitated, her shaking visible beneath her tattered dress. She gulped, stood up straight and looked Sonic in the eye, giving him a slow, certain nod.

"Okay," she said, gripping his hand. "Let's do this. Let's get even on that creep!"

Sonic grinned and winked at her, before taking off into the dead forest with her in tow.

~O~

"Get down!"

Sonic flung himself onto his front, diving onto a shallow embankment. The grass disintegrated beneath him, showering him in dust, and the dry husks of leaves scratched at his chest. Amy quickly followed suit, the state of her dress no longer concerning her.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He tilted his head towards the peak of the embankment. "Look."

They inched up the mound, peering over the top. On the other side, the ground swept down into a circular glade, as dead as the rest of the forest except for the dozens of people inhabiting it. Soldiers clad in dark armour patrolled the edges of the glade, their machine guns clutched firmly to their sides, while figures clad in white plastic from head to toe scraped tree bark into jars and waved beeping devices at dead flowers. Armoured cars sat like watchdogs on the opposite ridge, and over it all stood a badger in a dark suit, looking down upon his men as if he were their king.

"Great," sighed Sonic, "it's GUN."

"GUN? What are they doing here?"

"Sticking their noses in where they don't belong, as usual. They must have picked up the disturbance around the same time as Knuckles did."

"But this is good, isn't it?" said Amy. "We need all the help we can get, and if GUN are on the hunt too, they can help us catch the monster. They have got guns, after all."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Whatever's happening, Tails is involved somehow. The last thing I want is one of these trigger-happy jerks pointing a gun in his face."

"Sonic..." Amy said, her tone betraying her apprehension. "What if Eggman's right? What if Tails really is the monster?"
Sonic glared at her. "I thought you said you believed me!"

"I do, I do," she said, shrinking away from him. "But you have to be prepared just in case. What would you do if it were true?"

"I'd save him."

"But..."

"I'd. Save. Him. I will always save him."

Amy opened her mouth as if to speak, but seemed to think better of it, falling silent as her gaze dropped. Sonic turned back to look at the activity in the glade. The badger strode around his men with his hands clasped behind his back, scrutinising everyone he passed, waiting for the tiniest mistake he could pounce upon. Sonic watched him keenly, his eyes dogging every move, except when the badger glanced his way and he had to duck down out of sight. Eventually, the badger marched into a canvas tent erected on the outskirts of the site, his posture slackened in disappointment that he had nothing to criticise.

"We need to get closer," said Sonic. "We need to find out what they know about this."

He gestured to Amy, and together they crept around the glade in a wide circle, keeping their bodies bent double and low to the ground, placing their feet carefully to avoid snapping any twigs as they advanced.

A shadow fell over them, and they threw themselves face down onto the ground. Peering up from the dust, Sonic saw a guard standing on a ridge. But his focus seemed to be in the distance, clearly looking for trouble approaching rather than right at his feet. After a few moments he turned away and headed out of sight. Sonic breathed a sigh of relief, and continued on his hands and knees.

"I can't believe I'm crawling across the dirty ground like this," Amy whispered. "It's so degrading."

"Shh!" hissed Sonic.

"At least the view back here's not bad," she continued. Sonic looked back over his shoulder to see Amy winking at him, and he realised what she was talking about.

"Amy, you..." he shook his head, but his indignation soon gave way to quiet laughter. "I'm glad you're with me. Feels good to laugh right now."

He moved forward slightly, then it struck him.

"Hey, what do you mean 'not bad'?!"

They made their way along the ridge until they came up behind the tent. Crouching beside it, they pressed their ears close to dark green walls. From within they heard voices, and they strained to overhear the conversation.

"What have you got for me, Spitz?" said a gruff voice. "Any of your team close to figuring out what happened here?"

"We'll need to gather some more data" said another, higher-pitched voice, presumably Spitz. "But our initial findings suggest that this area has been completely drained of all forms of Chaos energy."

"What could cause that? Some kind of anomaly in global Chaos levels?"
"We don't think so, sir. The variations in Chaos signatures suggest that the energy was transformed before it vanished. The Chaos signatures of all the matter in this area changed to the same frequency moments before it vanished, which is not what we'd expect to see from a Chaos storm or similar freak event."

"You're telling me someone did this deliberately?" The gruff voice said incredulously.

"It looks that way," said Spitz.

"This is worrying. This is clearly the testing ground for some energy-draining superweapon. Some damned fool's built this thing and come here for practice."

"I'm afraid not, sir. Our readings show the source of the disturbance to be organic in nature."

"Organic?" You mean a creature did this? What sort of monster could be capable of such destruction?"

"I don't know any more, sir. The readings are hard to pin down any further. There are dozens of outliers, wavelengths I've never seen before, extrapa-"

"Excuse me, Captain Axton, sir," said another voice. "I think you should see this."

"What's that?" said the badger, now identified as Captain Axton. He muttered inaudibly, as if hurriedly reading something.

"Very good, private," he said clearly. "This information will be most helpful. I suggest er... procedure two-seven-four."

"Two-seven-four, sir?"

"Yes... you know the one. Two... seven... four."

A few moments of silence followed, after which Sonic heard some shuffling noises he couldn't quite place.

"Oh yes, sir," the private said, "how could I forget? I'll get right on it."

The private's footsteps left the tent. Sonic looked at Amy, who shrugged.

"What were we talking about, Spitz?"

"The er... erm..." stammered Spitz, "oh, the flux variations in the neutron flow ra-"

"Enough technobabble!" said Axton. "What I want to know is this: can we find out where this thing's gone? Well, can we?"

Spitz gulped so loudly Sonic thought he stood right beside him. "Again, the readings are erratic, but there appears to be a trail leading to the northwest."

"North-west... what's the nearest point of interest in that direction?"

"Spiral's End," said yet another voice. "A small town of about ten thousand, twenty miles northwest of this location."

"Chaos save us," said Axton, his voice shaking. "If this thing gets anywhere near civilisation... Put in a call to HQ asking for urgent reinforcements to rendezvous with us at Spiral's End. Tell them we
need anti-Chaos units in the area ASAP."

"Sir, yes, sir," said the other voice.

"I'd prefer to capture this thing alive," said Axton, "find out what it is and if there's any more of them out there. But I'll accept dead if I have to."

His voice trailed away as he left the tent. Sonic turned to Amy.

"Looks like we've found - Ah!" He slapped the back of his head, hissing through gritted teeth.

"What's wrong?" asked Amy.

"I dunno..." said Sonic, looking at his hand. "Mosquito or something. Damn near bit my whole head off!"

"Let me take a look," said Amy, putting her hands on his quills.

"It's fine." Sonic pushed her away gently. "I'm a big boy, I can handle a measly insect bite."

Amy looked unsettled. "But Sonic, how-"

"Anyway, we know where to look now: Spiral's End. Sounds like a nice place."

"It won't be so nice once that monster shows up."

"Mmm," Sonic agreed, nodding, "nor when GUN turns the place into a warzone. We need to find this thing before they do; it's our only hope of finding Tails. Come on, let's get out of here before someone spots us."

They crept away as quickly as they could manage, clambering over a ridge and dropping into a deep ditch out of sight. Once they were certain they couldn't be seen, they picked up the pace and sprinted through the woods to the northwest.

~O~

The dim gloom of twilight hung across the streets of Spiral's End, a silent shroud cast over the sleepy town broken up only by the orange glow of streetlights. In the centre of town, a square of grass bisected diagonally by paving served as the home to a bronze statue of the town's founder. His noble appearance, a shabby and bird-messed green in the daylight, shone with some of its former glory in the flat orange glow. Dark and silent shopfronts stood watch over the square, and aside from the insects flitting about beneath the lights, the square stood empty.

But that was not how he saw it.

He saw the way the light shimmered in the air, twisting through the spectrum as the colours fought for dominance. He saw the buildings rippling with colours where the wind touched them, the statue pulsing with iridescent light that crackled, the fireflies sparkling like snowflakes in the sunlight. The grass hummed with life, every blade painting a masterpiece on his eyes, and the night sky became a river of shining light, trickling down to the ground in streams of glowing blue.

He heard a sound, except he didn't just hear it, he felt it. Footsteps approaching, each rattle upon the pavement another note in a symphony. Then he saw her, a female mouse, grey furred and slender and walking along the path across the square.
Peeking out from behind the statue, he saw her shining brighter than anything else. She was a shimmering tapestry of colour, each one showing him all that she was and all she could be.

Confidence to walk alone at night rippled deep blue.

Her simmering anger from the argument she had with her father last night shivered in violent purple.

Her yearning for a friend long parted pulsed vibrant green.

As he watched her approach, he felt his mouth grow dry and his chest tighten. The anticipation squirmed inside his heart, and his head pulsed, constricting his skull.

He needed her colours. He needed to feel them, to taste them, hear them, smell them. He had to wrap himself in the essence of her being, to weave her existence with his own and make something new and beautiful. Like he had done with the others, though their colours now grew faded and dull, not enough to sate him. He needed something fresh. He needed more.

She strode past the statue, unconcerned with her surroundings. Others may have called her stupid, but he could see her confidence, born either from a lack of danger in the quiet town or from her faith in her own abilities. He began to follow her, treading lightly along the path. As she reached the other end of the square, he stretched out his hand. Her colours were so close now, just a few more inches and they would be his.

His breathing grew louder and coarser, and her ears pricked up. She span around, took one look at him and screamed, a piercing shriek penetrating the night. Her terror flickered yellow, her shrill scream like lightning bolts through the air, but he pushed past it, lunging for her.

Something grabbed his arm. He turned his head, searching for the interloper. Then he saw the hand gripping his wrist was his own. His own arm fought against him, holding him in place and preventing him from claiming his prize. His body shook as he tried to free himself from his own grip, but he would not budge. A voice rose up inside him, a sweet and innocent voice, quiet through the roar of his own breath, like someone lost in a hurricane.

*Stop this,* his own voice told him. *This is wrong! You don't want to do this.*

His thirst for the girl's colours did not abate, even as the voice grew louder. Reason and instinct clashed for control of his body, and the stalemate forced him to his knees.

The girl, still pulsing with yellow terror, became concerned; waves of pearl-white and almost motherly feelings wrapping around her. She took a step forward, holding her arm out as an invisible boundary, a marker of perceived safety between them.

"Are you alright?" she said, her voice wobbling. "I'm sorry I screamed, I just thought you might be…" She tugged at her skirt, pulling the hem down and holding it close to her legs. "Hey, are you sick, guy? Should I call a doctor or something?"

The battle raging inside him forced Tails' teeth together, and he could answer only with grunts of pain. All his might went into holding himself back, yet at the same time it went into fighting to break free. He desired nothing more than to drain the girl of everything, but he also longed to keep her safe, to protect her from himself at all costs.

"Oh my…" said the girl, "is it your heart? Please, tell me what's wrong!"

Tails looked her straight in the eyes, causing her to jump backward in alarm.
"No," he growled.

"Huh?"

"No," Tails growled again. "Get… away!"

"I'm trying to help you-"

"Get away!" Tails screamed, a guttural roar rippling beneath his words. "Run! Run or I'll kill you! RUN!"

The words bolstered his darkness, and he lunged forward, pushing his other arm back, his mouth falling open and baring his razor teeth to the cold air. The girl burst into floods of tears before she turned and ran, disappearing into the night as her sobs faded into the stillness of the night-time air.

He allowed his resistance to collapse, and his postponed pounce sprang forward, causing him to fall onto his hands. The stones scratched at his hands, tension gnawed at every part of him and his breaths burned hot in his chest. His skin tightened along his muscles as his frustration wormed its way through his body, and he seethed, burning breaths condensing on the path below him.

Frustration at being denied his need. Relief that an innocent didn't get hurt. These two feelings battled for dominance in his mind. At once he hated himself for being weak, but likewise he loved himself for saving her.

The throbbing in his mind, that wet and sticky pulse of pain he felt at every moment flared up again, pushing against the sides of his skull. As punishment for his resistance, it drowned his thoughts with pure concept, the awful idea made manifest:

_More._

"I won't!" He slammed his fist into the ground so hard something cracked, though if it was his own bones he didn't feel it. "I won't do what you tell me! I'm not your slave!"

He bent over, clutching his arms to his chest and shivering. Hot tears dripped from tightly closed eyes as the pain surged into him, as if in response to his outburst; it would not be shouted down.

_Stop._

_Him._

_Need._

_Power._

"There must be another way!" cried Tails. "I shouldn't have to hurt anyone else!"

The pain pushed back again, stunning him into a numb stupor. The blackness of the night shimmered and washed away until it shone like moonlight. All around him new points of light appeared, beacons of colour pulsing in the distance, each one singing a different song that flowed through the air like liquid.

Over there a family argued.

Over here a man sat alone, drinking.

A couple made love in an upstairs room to his right.
A child cried himself to sleep to his left.

He could see them all; every single person in this town appeared to him, and he knew everything they were doing, everything they were thinking. He could hear the beats of all their hearts, feel the rattle of their breaths.

All of them had no idea of the wonder that surrounded them. Trapped in their own minds, a prisoner of their limited senses, they lived selfish lives dedicated only to keeping themselves from dying. But he could fix that; he could make them all see.

He raised his arm, pressing his palm flat against the air, his fingers splayed. If he just stopped resisting for a moment, if he gave in to his temptation and just let go, then it would all be his. The floodgates would open, and the Chaos would flow freely. Towards him, around him, into him. He was the ocean, and they were just droplets waiting to run down the river.

But the resistance didn't abate, even as his arm shook in anticipation of his act. That voice, that last piece of his conscience clinging on to him, would not let him do it. And he could not bring himself to jettison the last of his morals, for he knew that without it, he could not claw his way back to his old life; without it, he would never be Tails again.

More colours. Close. Very close. An azure blue passion for life, an emerald love stronger than any other. Beside it, a violet desire to be more than they were and a crimson love tainted by self-doubt. Though he'd never felt them like this before, he knew exactly who approached.

Sonic and Amy.

Panic leapt into him, pinballing around his chest, causing him to hyperventilate. They could not see him like this, he couldn't let them know what he'd become. Sonic's heart would break, only it would be worse than he could imagine, for he would feel it happen; every twist of the knife into Sonic would cut him also, but ten times as deeply.

He leapt to his feet, sprinting across the square and away from the approaching colours. Down an alleyway piled high with garbage bags he fled, leaping behind a dumpster and squatting behind it, before peeking around its edge towards the square.

He could see them beside the statue, their colours lighting up the night sky. They bristled with confusion and eagerness tinted by a deep longing, a longing to see him again. His heart tightened at the sight of Sonic, and he wanted to jump from his hiding place and run over to him, to throw himself into Sonic's arms and never let go again. But he stopped himself; how could Sonic ever look at him the same way after what he'd done? What would their friendship be once he discovered who had really attacked Shadow? He wasn't ready for that yet. So long as he kept out of Sonic's way he could pretend they were still friends.

Still, it was nice to see him again.

"Are you sure this is the place, Amy?" said Sonic, looking around the square.

"Yeah!" Amy protested. "I swear I saw something moving over here."

"I don't suppose you saw where it went?"

Amy hung down her head. "I don't know. It was there one minute, gone the next."

"Maybe it was just a racoon or something. We can't just wander around chasing shadows. Come on, there must be a police station around here; let's find it and see if anyone's seen anything suspicious."
They ran off in the opposite direction, hand in hand. As they vanished into the night Tails breathed a sigh of relief at not being discovered, even though he longed to see Sonic for just a few moments more.

Sonic's emotions, as tangible to him as the smell of the garbage around him, seemed conflicted. On the one hand a great sadness hung over him, twisted into desperation to find his little brother again, but within the gloom a spark of excitement flickered and danced. On some level Sonic was enjoying this; the depths of the mystery, the adventure of searching, the eagerness to fight and save the day. Even though his adventure would not end well, Tails could feel the thrill of the chase as Sonic did.

He wondered if he should be offended that Sonic could find any happiness at all when his best friend was missing. He laughed quietly, for he knew it wouldn't be Sonic if he couldn't see the positive side of everything, even when things looked bleak.

His cheek felt wet, and he realised a tear crawled along his muzzle.

_I'll fix this, Sonic. This is my fault, and I'm going to make amends. Soon, we'll all be together again, I promise._

Pain gripped his head again, filling his vision with dark swirling clouds. The concept would not allow him to feel anything other than its obsessive lust for power. The points of light representing the people of the town blinked out one by one, until only a single glimmer remained.

Tails' heart began to thunder in his chest, and all his thoughts directed towards the speck of light. Everything else fled from his mind, and his senses strained towards his mark, desperate to take in everything they could. His skin tingled, his breath halted, and something stirred in his belly. His resistance crumbled away, and he could not deny himself any longer.

_One, he told himself, it's just one. There's billions of people on this planet, what difference does one less make?_

He stood up and sprinted towards the light. Across empty streets, over chain-link fences, up drainpipes and across rooftops he ran, his adrenaline pumping faster and faster as he neared his target. From the town centre to the sleepy suburbs nestled on the edge of the forest he made his way, never stopping or slowing. He had to have this, and he had to have it now.

He came to a collection of moderately-sized homes lined up against the edge of the woods. Most were shrouded in darkness, but a few had their lights on, the silhouettes of figures inside moving across the windows, and at the rear of a house further down the road the point of light waited for him.

As he crept into the woods, making his way behind the tall fences of the back yards, he wondered why he had fixated on this person in particular. Maybe they were someone who wouldn't be missed, or a nasty piece of work who deserved it. Maybe...

Maybe he hoped he wouldn't have to hurt someone again.

The light felt so close now, mere feet away on the other side of the fence. With monstrous strength he had become accustomed to he ripped one of the boards away, casting it aside with one hand before slipping through the gap.

The back yard sat in darkness except for the light streaming from the patio doors, though his enhanced vision revealed a patchy lawn strewn with junk; a half-deflated soccer ball languished in a sandpit clearly visited by cats more than children, while a worn-out tricycle lay on its side beneath a
swing set. On the porch Tails saw a shadow against the light, and everything before him made sense in an instant, sending his heart plummeting into his stomach.

*Please… not like this… not a child.*

A young male chipmunk no older than eight years old sat on the porch, resting his brown-furred elbows on his knees and his head on his hands, a perfect sulky frown stuck to his face. From his concealment in the dark Tails saw his brief existence swirling within him, emotions and perceptions markedly different from the adults, memory and imagination running hand in hand through a world neatly arranged into simple concepts.

The tiny voice inside him pleaded with him to turn away, but he had gone too long without a fix. He could feel the sweat dripping from his itchy palms, his ribcage threatening to implode, and the nervous twitch taking a tour of his body. People had so much more to give than trees or plants, so many more experiences to share, and he could no longer resist the call to take some for himself.

He took a step forward, but immediately retreated into the dark when he heard the patio door slide open, and the shadow of an adult appeared in the doorway.

"Theo, stop sulking already and get inside." said a man's voice. "I won't tell you again."

The boy said nothing, letting out a disgruntled sigh. His father rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"You'll catch your death out there," he said. "Get inside before I drag you in by your tail." Still the boy said nothing, and his father motioned to come after him. A female voice sounded in the house, and he reluctantly turned to face it.

"Your mom's calling me. I'll be five minutes, and you better not be still out here when I get back."

He went into the house, leaving the boy alone. With his breath held tight in his chest, Tails crept from the shadows, inching towards the house with steady, considered steps, his eyes always fixed upon the child.

"I'll make it quick," Tails whispered to himself. "I promise it won't hurt for long, I promise."

Something on the lawn caught his foot, bouncing away from him with a rattle that seemed deafening loud after the cautious silence of his approach. The boy looked up straight into his eyes, and immediately leapt to his feet.

"Daddy!" he screamed as he ran into the house. Tails heard raised voices and a clamour of activity from within, but he could not move. Half of him desperately wanted to pursue the child and claim his reward, but the other half, previously suppressed by his fixation, returned with renewed determination. He knew if he went into that house he would kill all of them, but though he longed to flee he could not until he got what he came for. His mind battled with itself again, all the while his body stood in place as a bystander.

The voices grew louder, and the boy's parents came out on to the porch, his father carrying something long underneath his arm. Their mouths fell open when they saw him standing on the lawn. Tails mind screamed at him to run for his life even as it screamed at him to leap forward and strike the couple dead.

"Holy shit…" said the father, "I thought Theo saw a bear or something but…"

"Oh, it's horrible!" wailed the mother. "What is it?! What the heck is it?!"
The boy's dad lifted up the object, pressing one end to his shoulder and bringing his chin close to it. At that moment Tails realised exactly what it was, but still his legs refused to move, even as a finger pulled against the trigger.

"I'll tell you what it's about to be… dead."

~O~
Sonic's ears pricked up.

"Did you hear that?"

Standing on the stone steps of the local police station, Amy looked around the dark streets before shrugging.

"I didn't hear anything. What was it?"

His ears twitched again, and he held out his hand as if to beckon silence. The sound had almost gone, but the tiny vibrations lingering in his ear drew him towards it.

"Sounded like a gunshot. Think it came from over there."

"Wow, your hearing is really good," said Amy. "You don't think GUN are here, do you?"

Sonic shook his head. "Nah. If it were GUN the whole sky would be on fire. They don't do subtle, that's for sure." He chewed his lip for a moment. "I think we should investigate."

"Sonic!" Amy groaned. "The police station is right there! You're seriously gonna chase after a noise?"

"Call me crazy, but I'm sure it has something to do with Tails. I'm certain it does."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"I don't know..." said Sonic, staring through her. "I can just feel it in my chest. It's like... it's like there's something guiding me, something other than my gut. I'm not sure what it is, but I trust it."

Amy hopped off the stone steps and approached him, taking him by the hands and standing close, looking up with wide, sad eyes.

"Sonic..." she said, her voice heavy with concern, "you felt like this on Angel Island, remember? You said you sensed a presence or something. Then Knuckles got attacked. What if this is another trap? A trick to make you deliver me to the monster, maybe? I know you've always trusted your feelings, but they're your feelings, not someone, or something else's. Listen to your own heart; it's never steered you wrong before."

Sonic took a step back. "I..." Every word from Amy's mouth made perfect sense, but he couldn't shake the feeling from his heart. Though he realised that something might be manipulating him, given what happened to Knuckles, he couldn't bring himself to distrust whatever it was that haunted him. Though it amounted to little more than a funny feeling, that feeling felt so pure and full of good that he couldn't not trust it.

"I'm sorry, Amy," he said, shaking his head. "I have to do this. Please, just trust me."

Amy took a deep breath, exhaling and letting her shoulders slump.

"Okay, Sonic. I trust you. Just... try not to get my soul sucked out, okay? I'm really quite attached to it."
Sonic smiled, taking her by the hand, and they sped off across the town, away from the town centre and out into the suburbs until they arrived at a quiet street with houses backing on to the forest. Sonic stopped in the middle of the street, holding his hand up.

"It was around here somewhere," he said, scanning the houses for any sign of activity. Most sat in total darkness, their drapes drawn closed, but one caught his eye. Further up the street, light poured from a large front window, and the shadowy figures of people moved about within. If he strained his ears hard enough, Sonic thought he heard raised voices.

"Over there," he whispered to Amy. "Let's go."

They dashed over to the house, keeping their heads low and placing their steps precisely to minimise the noise from their footfalls. Creeping across the front lawn they came to the window, where they knelt down out of sight and pressed their ears close, listening carefully.

"-you saw what he was like!" said a male voice. "What was I supposed to do? Invite him in for dinner?"

"You shot a child, Alvin!" wailed a female. "You've killed a little boy!"

Sonic's heart froze, and he moved to stand up. Amy grabbed his hand, holding it tight and looking him in the eye. Sonic stopped rising, but Amy's calming touch couldn't stop the tingle of fear taking hold of him.

"That thing wasn't a little boy!" yelled Alvin. "You saw it with your own eyes! It was a monster, and I was protecting my family like any good father should! Would you have let it eat our little boy? Well, would you, Simone?"

"Of course not!" Simone wailed. "But look at him now! You really think the cops will believe some baloney about a monster when they see this? How will you protect your family when you're rotting in jail? You know what they do to child killers in jail?"

Alvin spoke up again, but Sonic could take it no more. He stood up despite Amy's attempts to hold him down, peeking over the windowsill and looking into the room.

A male and female chipmunk stood towards the rear of the house, through an archway leading to a dining room. They stood facing each other, locked in heated argument and oblivious to his presence. Nearer to the window he saw the living room lit only by the light pouring through the arch, but through the dim he caught sight of another chipmunk; a young boy sitting on the couch holding his knees close to his body, staring wide-eyed at something on the floor.

Sonic followed his gaze. A white sheet had been spread out in the centre of the living room, a hasty attempt to cover up the obvious shape beneath it. Even in the low light Sonic recognised the curves and lines of a prone body, though their identity remained concealed by the fabric, and he had no way to be sure who lay underneath it.

Until he saw an orange brush tipped with white peeking out from beneath it.

He dropped down, pressing his back up against the wall, holding his arms against to steady himself. His breathing accelerated until his chest ached, and his eyelids froze open. The thump of his heart shook his whole body, and his head wobbled on his shoulders.

"Sonic?" said Amy, putting her hand on his arm. "Sonic, what's wrong?"

"In there…" He gestured with his head, unable to turn around. "On the floor…"
Amy stood up to peer through the window, dropping down as soon as her eyes cleared the sill, an almost inaudible gasp leaving her lips.

"Oh my goodness," she whispered. "Is it... is it really him?"

"Only one way to be sure. I've got to get in there."

He stood up, heading for the front door. Amy watched him pass, her mouth open in disbelief.

"Are you mad?!" she hissed. "What are you doing?!

"I need to know, Amy. I've come too far to turn back now."

Sonic leapt onto the front porch, and with a fist clenched tight he pounded on the door, the wood shaking beneath his blows. The voices inside the housed dropped into panic-stricken whispers and hurried accusations.

He struck the door again, the whispers grew harsher before cutting off into silence. Then footsteps grew nearer, their pace deliberate and loud so as to feign confidence. The door creaked open, and the face of Alvin peered out into the night with accusing eyes.

"What do you want? You know what time it is-"

Sonic's foot shot forward, kicking the door open and sending Alvin tumbling onto his back. Sonic stepped over him even as he tried to stand, heading into the living room. Amy ran in behind him, putting herself between Sonic and Alvin.

"I'm really sorry about this!" she said. "He's been under a lot of stress lately."

Alvin pushed passed her, catching up to Sonic, who stood looking down at the sheet-covered shape on the floor.

"Hey, I know you! You're Sonic the Hedgehog! What the heck do you think you're doing barging into my house like this?"

Without saying a word Sonic knelt down and threw back the sheet. A glimpse of what lay beneath it caught his eye and he turned away, closing his eyes as fast as he could. That fleeting glance alone sent shockwaves through him that threatened to split his heart in two; any longer and he feared he might disintegrate.

"You recognise him, do you?!" He said, his voice cracking and wobbling despite the fury behind it. "You know who this is? You realise what you've done?!

"No!" cried Amy, falling to her knees by the body. "No, it can't be! Please don't let it be him!"

Sonic opened his eyes, fixing Alvin with his stare, channelling all his rage towards him and hoping he might burst into flames just from a look. He rose to his feet, towering over the chipmunk. Alvin backed away as Sonic inched towards him, pulling his son sharply by the arm and putting himself between his wife and child.

"Y-you don't understand. He did not look like that before. He was a... a thing! He attacked us, he... he tried to kill my son, he..." Alvin gulped, taking a step forward and squaring up to Sonic.

"I was only protecting my family!"

Sonic placed his fist in his other hand and cracked his knuckles.
"So am I."

He raised his arm, and Alvin shrank before him, putting his arms across his face. Sonic held his fist in place beside his head, his arm trembling from the tension wound up inside it. His fingers dug into his palm and his breath escaped his nostrils in furious snorts. Any second now his hand would fall and strike Alvin down. Any second now he would lose control.

"Sonic..." said Amy.

"Don't try and stop me, Amy! Don't tell me this isn't 'who I am' or some other bullshit! 'Who I am' died with Tails, and this bastard killed him!"

"But Sonic..."

"SHUT UP!" He roared. Even as he yelled he kept his eyes fixed on Alvin. The tension spread to the rest of his body, and his shaking became uncontrollable. Tears trickled down his cheeks, but he could not let go.

A flash of pink appeared before his eyes. Amy stood between him and Alvin.

"Amy, don't do this..."

"You need to look at the body," she said, pointing behind him.

Sonic shook his head. "I can't."

"Go and look at it. Something's not right here."

He shook his head again, silently mouthing 'no' over and over. Amy rolled her eyes and huffed, then turned around and put her finger in Alvin's face.

"You!" she barked. "Shooty Sheldon! What did you kill him with?"

Alvin looked around her at Sonic, his mouth quivering and the stammered starting syllables of words slipping out.

"Answer me!" said Amy. "What did you use?"

"I... my shotgun... over there," he pointed to the dining table where the shotgun lay. "I use it for hunting..."

"And where did you hit him?"

"In..." he avoided Sonic's gaze. "In the face. B-but I was-"

Amy turned back around to Sonic.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Tails was shot in the face with a shotgun..."

"Amy, please..."

"So why isn't there so much as a scratch on his body?"

Sonic let his fist drop to his side, his anger dropping out of him, leaving only tension crawling over
an empty shell.

"What are you saying?"

"Oh for goodness sake, look!"

She span him around so fast he tumbled forward across the living room floor, landing on his hands and knees, his face inches from Tails' own. Blue eyes stared out from orange fur, lifeless and empty yet somehow piercing into him, draining the remaining scraps of warmth from him and forcing his body to seize up. Even as he felt his heart shrivel to nothing, he could not tear his eyes from that face, the face he never wanted to see like this; robbed of its boundless energy and happiness.

Then he saw it; what Amy had been trying to tell him. Tails' face should have been mangled beyond recognition by a shotgun blast, yet not a single fur sat out of place and no blood covered his features. Apart from its unnerving stillness, his face was as perfect as Sonic always remembered.

His heart burst into life again, and his body awoke. The tiniest sliver of hope entered into him, but it was enough to bring him back from the edge of despair. He span around on his knees, turning to lean over Tails the right way round.

"Tails..." he whispered, shaking the boy's arm. "Tails, are you there? It's me. It's your best bud."

Tails didn't respond, and the sliver of hope began to fade again. Sonic put his head close to Tails' chest, straining his ears for any sound of breath.

"Are you there?"

A hand seized around his throat, crushing his neck between its fingers. Tails looked up at him with a wide grin, his irises transformed into a deep red. Sonic grabbed at the arm holding him, trying to prise it away, but Tails stood up, effortlessly lifting Sonic to his feet. His fur shifted as if blown by an unseen wind, flickering from orange to bright yellow, and flames danced across his body, licking at Sonic and filling his nostrils with the smell of burning flesh. When the boy spoke, two voices left his lips, one deep and rasping that shook the walls, the other sweet and high-pitched, but tinged with the giggling cunning of a child.

"Tails isn't here right now; don't bother leaving a message, 'cos he's never coming back!"

The pressure on his neck forced Sonic to his knees. He fumbled for Tails' arm, trying to wrench it away even as the heat of the flames pushed through his gloves. Burning, strangled breaths desperately clawed at his throat, his vision grew darker and the veins in his eyes crawled at the edges of his sight like growing red roots. Through the pain he kept his eyes fixes on Tails' own, hoping that somehow he could reach him.

Tails' eyes responded by spinning, his irises unravelling into crimson spirals trailing into infinity. He laughed, a booming, demonic laugh that rattled Sonic's heart yet at the same time the effete giggle of a child pulling the legs off a spider. But even as Tails' warped visage disappeared behind his blurred and fading vision, Sonic did not break eye contact. Though he couldn't speak, he focused all his thoughts together, hoping that somehow Tails would hear him.

I believe in you.

Something red flashed across his sight, and the crushing grip of Tails relented. Sonic fell forward, almost coughing up a lung as he fought for every scrap of air he could breathe in. Wiping off his eyes, he looked up to see Tails lying on the floor, and over him stood Amy brandishing her Piko-Piko hammer.
"That's it, you creep!" she yelled. "I don't care if you are Tails; no-one does that to my Sonic and gets away with it!"

She raised the hammer above her head with both hands. Sonic, still on all fours, reached out to her in vain.

"Amy, don't!"

She brought the hammer down so fast it became a blur. But Tails moved even faster, his arm shooting upwards to grab the hammer, stopping it dead. Amy froze, her mouth hanging open. Tails' other hand rose, his fingers splayed, and an invisible shockwave propelled Amy into the air, where she crashed into the ceiling and tumbled onto the floor in a cloud of dust.

Tails stood up, holding the hammer in front of him. With a flick of his wrist it burst into flame, crumbling into black ash in seconds and scattering to the floor. Tails stood over the two hedgehogs as they crawled and gasped for breath, and he held out his arms, daring them to oppose him.

A clicking sound caught Tails' attention, and he turned to look. Alvin had his shotgun pointed squarely at Tail's head.

"I'm warning you," said Alvin, "get out of my house or I'll kill you."

Tails turned his body towards Alvin, and walked towards him with slow, deliberate steps. Alvin took a step backwards, and the gun rattled in his hands.

"I'll d-do it! I'll sh-sh-shoot!"

"Duh-duh-duh-do it then, coward!" Tails mocked, creeping ever closer. "It's thanks to you that I'm finally free to use this body how I want. Tails was keeping me held back until you blasted him unconscious. Now let me show you just what you've unleashed."

He grabbed the shotgun's barrel, and wrenched it upward, twisting the metal with a painful grinding sound. Alvin's hand shook uncontrollably, but he couldn't let go, even as the shotgun glowed white hot and began to melt.

"For Chaos' sake; drop the gun, you idiot!" Amy barked. "Get out of here!"

Alvin jumped back in fright, letting the gun go and staring blankly at Amy.

"Go!" she yelled, waving her arms. "If you want to keep your family safe then run! It's us he wants, take them and go! Go now or he'll kill you!"

Amy's words seem to click, and Alvin quickly ushered his wife and son out of the room, and within moments they had fled out the front door and into the night.

Tails tossed the mangled firearm away, then looked back over his shoulder at Amy, a wicked, predatory grin on his face.

"I'm glad you did that. I was just going to kill them, but I think I prefer it like this. Now they'll spend every waking moment in fear of me. When I find them again, their terror will be so much sweeter."

"Alright, enough," said Sonic, rising to his feet. "Let Tails go now, whatever you are."

"Let Tails go?" The Tails-thing threw back its head and laughed its double-laugh. "Let him go? Oh Sonic; you haven't the first idea of what's happening here, do you?"
"I know that you're some evil thing that's taken control of Tails' body and that you've been making him attack people for some reason. I also know that I'm going to kick your butt right out of his... butt. That sounded weird, but whatever! You're history, pal!"

A flash of light filled the room, and Tails appeared inches from Sonic. Sonic flinched but stood his ground, even as Tails' hot breath washed over him.

"What are you going to do? Do you think you can just beat me up a bit and I'll flee whimpering from Tails' body? There is nothing you can do against me, but there is so much I can do to you."

Sonic squared up to him. "Who are you? What do you plan to do with Tails?"

It laughed again. "Me? I'm nothing but a bad dream. As for Tails, you should really be asking what he plans to do with me."

Sonic took a step back, his words caught in his throat. The Tails-thing tilted his head and smiled.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with. It's not me you should be afraid of. While I'm in control there will be death, there will be destruction, sure, but that's nothing compared to what Tails will do."

"Wait a second..." said Sonic, "I think I've just figured out who you are. You're Super Sonic, aren't you? Or that evil robot version of him. It's just like Tails described."

Super Sonic smirked, a deep chuckle echoing in Tails' chest.

"But I don't understand," Sonic continued. "You're dead; Tails defeated you, and I stopped the one who made you. There's no way you can be possessing Tails."

Super Sonic held a finger up to Tail's temple, twisting his hand in a drilling motion. "You can't kill an idea, especially once it burrows into your mind. Tails has clung onto my memory for so long I've taken on a life of my own. I am born from his fear, and as long as he continues to fear me I will never die."

"That's not right," said Sonic, pointing. "Tails isn't afraid of you. He was the only person brave enough to face you alone and win. He's the bravest guy I've ever met."

Tails' body began to pace around Sonic, and when he spoke he lent in to Sonic's ear, Super Sonic's voice a harsh yet playful whisper.

"Oh, you poor, poor thing. You really believe that, don't you? That sweet little Tails was strong enough in spirit to overcome someone as powerful as me? I wonder if that's just what you want to believe to reinforce your obsessive idolisation of Tails."

"Shut up," growled Sonic. "Don't try and tell me my feelings. Just give me my friend back."

"Let me tell you something about your friend; he is so very afraid of me. More afraid than you can possibly imagine. His every waking moment is consumed by my presence in his mind, and every night he is tormented by the memory of me. He is desperate, so desperate to be rid of me forever, and he will do anything to destroy me. He'll burn this whole world to cinders trying to kill me, but it won't ever be enough. I'll still be here until the very end, sitting with Tails in the ashes of everything he used to love."

Sonic clenched his fist. "Never. Tails would never hurt anyone, ever. You're the one causing all this pain, and I'm going to stop you, whatever it takes."
"I'm inside his mind; I see what drives him. He will sacrifice everyone if he has to. Even you."

"Then let him go," said Sonic, staring Super Sonic down. "If you leave him then he won't have to hurt anyone. Let him go and we'll settle this, hedgehog to hedgehog."

"It's Tails who needs to let me go, not the other way around." Super Sonic said. He stooped over, holding his head and letting out a disappointed sigh. "Ah, but look now; the little fella's waking up. A pity, I was looking forward to ripping you apart one layer of muscle at a time. Still, at least I get to watch the fur fly when Tails comes back. Your precious heart is gonna break, Sonic. It's gonna be great."

"The only thing that's gonna break around here is you."

Super Sonic snorted derisively. "I'll see you again real soon, I'm sure."

He closed his eyes, and Tails' body slumped to the floor. His fur faded back to its usual orange and the flames flickered and died. Sonic dashed forward, sliding to his knees and taking Tails into his arms, lifting him up and resting him on the couch.

"Tails?" He whispered. "Tails, can you hear me?"

Tails' eyes opened, and Sonic scooched back an inch when he saw his irises were still blood red, though the spirals had gone. The fox craned his head up to look at Sonic, and when he saw him his face contorted in terror.

"No!" screamed Tails, covering his face with his hands and forcing himself into the back of the couch with his legs and tails pulled tight against him. "Don't look at me! You weren't supposed to see me like this!"

His words became disjointed as he broke down into sobs. Instantly Sonic leapt forward and threw his arms around the hysterical boy, holding him close even through Tails' violent shaking.

"It's alright, buddy. It's alright." Sonic said, gently shushing him. "You have no reason to feel bad. Whatever's happened it's not your fault, it's all him. It's Super Sonic who's to blame."

Tails' trembling subsided, and his sobbing faded away. He grew still until the only movement Sonic could sense was the beating of his heart.

"Tails?"

"No..." whispered Tails. He lifted his head up, revealing eyes glistening with tears and shimmering back into their natural blue. His bottom lip stuck out and quivered, and he looked like he might collapse at any moment.

"It's me. I'm the one who's been hurting people."

Sonic's arms loosened their grip. "Buddy? What are you saying? You wouldn't-"

"I wouldn't?!" Tails snapped, causing Sonic to release him entirely. "That's what I thought before I did! I've betrayed my friends, I've betrayed my principles and I've betrayed you. I don't deserve your pity. I don't even deserve to live after what I've done."

"Don't say that!" Sonic said, pointing a finger, his voice cracking. "Don't ever say that! You'll always have a reason to live, and that reason is that I... that I... you know... I..."
Sonic's throat closed up, and he turned away, changing his aborted words into a frustrated cough.

"Ugh, there must be an explanation for all this. Even if you have hurt people, there must be a reason. You can't just turn bad overnight. It's got to be Super Sonic influencing you."

"Sonic," said Amy, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't we let Tails explain it to us? He can help us fill in the gaps of what's been happening. Then we'll decide what to do."

Sonic brought a hand up to rest on Amy's. "Yes, yes I suppose you're right."

Amy sat down between Sonic and Tails, and Sonic got the feeling from her posture that she sought to set herself up as a barrier between them if things got too tense.

"Okay Tails," she said. "How did this all start? Tell us everything you can."

Tails cleared his throat, making eye-contact with Sonic for the briefest of moments before turning away and staring into the distance.

"Okay," he said, his words heavy, "I'll tell you what happened. But you won't like what I have to say."

"Tails," said Sonic, looking at the side of Tails head and willing him to look his way, "we're trying to help you. You don't have to hide anything from us. We'll always be your friends, no matter what."

Tails slowly turned his head to face him, and when his eyes met Sonic their cold and empty stare chilled him to the bone. When he spoke, the drained monotone of his voice tolled like a funeral bell.

"I'm sorry, Sonic, but after you hear the truth... we won't be friends anymore."

~O~
"It all began with the nightmares. Ever since that day when I met him... when I met S-super Sonic, I mean, I haven't been able to get him off my mind. Every time I slept I dreamt about him, and even when I was awake I could see his face when I closed my eyes. Sometimes I even think I saw him out the corner of my eye, peering around a corner or looking out of an empty window. He was always watching me; never letting me get away from him no matter how much I tried to run or hide. He was always right behind me every second of every day, and I just couldn't take it anymore! I had to do something! I had to make him leave me alone!"

Despite his attempts to remain stoic Tails' voice trembled as he spoke, raising in pitch until his words sounded like breathless gasping. Amy placed a gentle hand on his knee and spoke softly.

"It's alright, Tails. We're here for you now. I know you're frightened but if you get this all out in the open you'll feel better, I promise. Right, Sonic?"

Sonic stared into space, lightly massaging his finger with his teeth. Something bothered him about Tails' testimony; the notion that Tails didn't tell him any of this before. But he knew there had to be a good reason for it; they shared a trust stronger than the foundations of the planet.

There had to be a good reason.

"Sonic?"

"Oh... uh..." Sonic blinked, his vision settling on a quizzical Amy. "Sure, right... what Amy said."

"Anyway," continued Amy, "what did you do, Tails? What started all this?"

Tails took a deep breath, held it in with his eyes closed for a peaceful moment, then resumed speaking, his voice calmer and collected.

"It was after we came back from the power plant. I realised something must have happened that you were afraid to tell me, Sonic. I figured it had something to do with my... state of mind."

"You had a freak-out, buddy. After I went Super you just went totally crazy. I've never seen you like that and I just didn't know what to do. Once you came to I thought if I said anything to you it'd happen again. I'm... sorry I didn't talk to you about it, but I was... well, I was afraid, okay? Seeing you like that was the most horrible thing I've ever seen."

Sonic paused a moment. Why was he apologising for being secretive? Shouldn't Tails be doing that? He was the one who started this. He shook off the brief flash of anger and allowed Tails to continue.

"I guess seeing you go Super triggered something in me, like PTSD or something like that. I realised something had happened and that I couldn't keep going on as I was. I had to do something before I lost my mind. That's when I spoke to Shadow."

"Huh?" said Sonic. "When did that happen? He wasn't at our house that night. I didn't see him at all until... well, you know."

Tails looked away. "I... have reason to believe that the Shadow I saw... was a hallucination."

"Woah, seriously?"
"Based on some other things I've been experiencing… I'm afraid so. For some reason I imagined Shadow coming to… give me advice. Weird as that sounds."

"Not that weird. You called out for him, remember?" said Sonic.

"What?"

"Oh wait, no. You wouldn't remember that. It was during your freak-out at the power plant. You called out for Shadow and that seemed to calm you down. I remember thinking it was the strangest thing…"

"Hmm…" Tails pondered, "So for some reason there's a part of my mind that manifests as Shadow when I need help. But why that is I have no clue."

"But what did Shadow, I mean, your vision of Shadow tell you?" asked Amy.

"He told me I needed to control my fear. To stop letting it rule me and make it a part of me. Or rather my brain was telling me that, I think. That's when I got the idea to use the Fake Emerald."

"Oh, so that's what you were doing down there! It all makes sense now!" exclaimed Sonic. "Wait… nope, still totally lost. What exactly were you doing with the Emerald?"

"It's not what I was trying to do that matters," said Tails, looking at Sonic with weary eyes, "but what happened next."

~O~

A FEW DAYS EARLIER…

Tails closed his eyes, letting the warm water wash over him. The heat of the shower clung to his fur, easing the tension in his muscles, though doing little to ease the throbbing pain in his forehead.

How could I have been so dumb? Why did I think that would work? Sonic was right, I could have ended up with more than a little cut as reward for my stupidity.

It seemed like such a good idea at the time. He had been certain that if he tuned the fake Emerald to the right frequency, he could adjust his memories and emotions to rid himself of the nightmares for good, or at least suppress them. Instead he got a shiny new coat of soot and a stabbing pain in his face, and the nightmares would surely return soon.

But it wasn't a stupid idea, and he knew it. The principles behind it were sound, if a little dangerous. His eagerness to be rid of his fear made him careless, and now he paid the price. It was reckless, but it wasn't stupid. Nothing he ever did was stupid. How could it be? He was the smartest person he knew.

Tails chuckled to himself as he savoured the arrogant notion. Opening his eyes, he pondered it further. He was the smartest person he knew, and somehow it felt good to tell himself that.

Yet his intelligence hadn't cured his nightmares, nor given him the strength to talk to his best friend about his feelings. Despite trying to deny it, he knew he was still only a little kid; all his genius couldn't quash the childish fears in his heart.

Tails sighed and turned the shower off, what little joy he had left draining from him like the water around his feet flowing into the plughole. As he reached towards the shower curtain to pull it back,
he felt a shiver run up his spine. The bathroom was silent except for the rapid beating of his heart, and no shadows appeared silhouetted against the plastic, yet somehow he knew something stood on the other side. He could feel it.

He knew exactly who it was. The same person he'd been running from all this time. The same person who haunted his every waking moment since that day six months ago. The person he feared more than any other.

The water dripping from his fur grew cold, and his shivering grew, mingling with his trembling, locking up his muscles and forcing his eyelids wide open. He cursed himself for his arrogance; what good was his intelligence now? He longed for the courage he'd had the gall to disparage just a few moments ago.

He tried to push through it, to take hold of the curtain and throw it back, but his hand shook violently with every inch he moved it. As he grasped the cold plastic, he clenched his eyes tight until tears forced their way out. He didn't want to see that awful face, not ever again, even if he had to die to escape it.

He threw back the curtain, releasing the air locked up in his chest with a gasp. He stood shivering, holding his arms close and sinking his head into his shoulders.

Nothing happened. Slowly he peeled open one eye, and when the moisture cleared he saw his bathroom. Just his bathroom, nothing else. Nothing was waiting for him.

He clutched his hand to his chest, breathing deeply and trying to uncoil the tension from his muscles. He climbed out of the bathtub, looking around the bathroom for any sign that he hadn't been imagining things. But nothing looked out of place; the door remained locked and the window closed.

Maybe I'm just going crazy. Maybe I've already gone crazy. I'm not sure I know what's real anymore.

The water clinging to his fur enveloped him is bitter cold, and it felt real enough to snap him out of his jitters. He bent down to pick up his towel from the floor, when he noticed something seeping from the fur on his arms. Wisps of white vapour flicked from the orange strands and dissipate into the air. As he held his arms in front of him, Tails felt himself growing warmer by the second, and he realised what it was; the water on his body was evaporating, turning to steam.

"What the -?"

His body grew hotter still, beginning to scald him. He gritted his teeth and wince as the burning overtook him. His hands shook, his fingers curled up and his knees buckled as boiling steam filled his nostrils.

A soundless scream caught in his throat as he burst into flame.

Yellow tongues of flame crawled across his skin, and Tails panicked, his mouth wide open with a scream that feared to leave him. He looked up into the mirror, and when he saw his reflection he felt his heart stop.

His irises were red. Not only that, they were growing; shifting and distorting, peeling themselves apart to fill up his eyeballs, rapidly twisting into berserk spinning spirals. He felt his teeth growing, pushing themselves apart and forcing the enamel into jagged spikes. The power coursing through him lifted him from the floor, and he hovered by means unseen before the mirror.

Despite the flames engulfing him Tails felt no pain; in fact he felt quite comfortable. He looked at his
face in the mirror, still recognisably the handsome fox he knew despite the exaggerated and bestial features and the wild ragged fur whipped by an unseen wind. He stared into his demented spiral eyes and laughed.

He'd done it. Somehow he'd done it. The nightmare, the monster that tormented him and drove him mad, was now inside him. Yet despite appearances he knew he wasn't possessed. He had taken command of it, including its phenomenal power. After so many sleepless nights and fearful days, he had won.

He grinned at the mirror with a mouthful of shark's teeth. His intellect had defeated his demon, but it had done so much more than destroy it. He now had complete control of it.

His heart raced in his chest, and he twirled on the spot in mid-air. He couldn't wait to tell Sonic, to show him how powerful he'd become, but there was something he wanted to do first. He hovered over to the bathroom window, opening it to the cold night air. His new body needed breaking in.

*Time for a test flight.*

~O~

Through the still blackness of the night he soared, a blazing yellow comet streaking through the freezing air above Station Square. Below him the dark shapes of the buildings whizzed by, black boxes occasionally punctuated by squares of yellow light spilling from windows and defined by orange-tinted streets.

He had flown before, but never like this. Flying with his tails took effort and energy, and he had to battle against wind and the constant pull of gravity. But this was something else entirely; he only had to think and he'd move through the air as smoothly as a dolphin through the water. He span on his head upside-down, performed loop-the-loops while somersaulting, soared down to the rooftops, just grazing them with his chest-fur before flying up again. Gravity was irrelevant, physics were irrelevant, consequences were irrelevant; he could do whatever he wanted like this.

He soared over to the water front, dipping down to the black expanse of the ocean and skimming off the frigid waves. He flipped over, dived into the pitch dark water, moving through it effortlessly and erupting from the surface in a cloud of steam, his fur instantly drying from his own heat.

This had to be a dream, he told himself. Nothing about this scenario felt real, more like the most lucid dream he'd ever had. Even it was a dream it didn't matter to him; this blissful freedom came as sweet relief from the unending parade of night terrors he'd live with for the past months.

Yet despite his elation something troubled him. The presence inside him, the evil he had captured within his body, yearned to be free. It burned with anger at its imprisonment and fought against the jollity enforced upon it. Tails had to use most of his conscious effort to keep it placated, and he didn't know how long he could keep his guard up. If he was to keep his new powers and the feeling of being truly alive, Tails knew he needed to find a way to restrain the beast within.

Along the beach front Tails saw a single yellow light in the darkness, and he had an idea.

Silently he flew across the bay towards the light, his descent unhindered by the sea breeze. He alighted upon the porch of the beach house from where the light shone without a sound.

Of course they would still be up at this hour; she preferred to work during the night and he never slept at all.
The flames and brilliant light surrounding him faded as he concentrated on changing his form back to normal. Deep within him the beast snarled, its fury growing as its shackles tightened. The effort of holding it back gave Tails a migraine, and sweat crawled along his brow. He needed more power to hold it back, and Shadow would be the one to give it to him.

Of course Shadow would be the one to help him; after all, the dark hedgehog had been the one who started him on this road. Without him, Tails knew he'd still be a paranoid wreck cowering under his bed sheets. At the very least, he wanted to thank him for everything he'd done.

He knocked on the door, and moments later it opened, bathing him in the warm glow of the interior. Rouge stood in the doorway, wrapped up in a fluffy pink dressing gown, her face wiped clean of makeup and making her shrewd eyes look smaller.

"Tails?" She looked over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. "My goodness, it's gone two in the morning! What are you doing here?"

"I came to see Shadow. Is he in?"

Rouge's eyelids narrowed, fixing him with a keen and accusing stare.

"Does Sonic know you're here?"

"Of course he does. He's the one who told me to come."

Rouge's expression remained unmoved, her suspicions clearly unsatisfied. Tails couldn't believe how easily he'd told such a bare-faced lie. But he couldn't help himself; he had the growing and powerful urge to see Shadow, a gnawing desire he couldn't shake off. Shadow had something he wanted; something that would give him the strength he needed to stay in control.

He could see Rouge scrutinizing him, and he realised his lie was about to fall flat. He clutched his arms to his chest and began to fake shivering, his eyes growing wide and wet and catching the light.

"P-please c-can I come in? It's s-so cold out here."

Rouge's stern expression softened, and at once she put her arm around him, leading him into the house while cooing sympathetically. He knew she always held a soft spot for him; his innocence filled a void in her heart that most males couldn't, reduced as they were to drooling idiots by her beauty.

He wondered how he knew that. Since she opened the door he had felt something from her; not her thoughts exactly, but a sense of the feelings flowing through her. Feelings he never dreamed someone like her would have.

"I still want to know why you're here, little man," she said as she led him into the living room, "it's not right for you to be out so late by yourself. And why aren't you wearing your gloves and shoes? No wonder you're cold."

In his haste to fly Tails had neglected to redress himself after his shower. But he didn't care, feeling it rather fitting to be naked as the day he was born. After all, this was a rebirth of sorts.

"I'll tell you," said Tails, "but I need to see Shadow. When he's here I'll tell you everything."

"He's upstairs at the moment," said Rouge. She headed over to the base of the stairs and called out to Shadow, before sitting down on the sofa. "He'll come down when he it suits him, as usual."
She leant forward, resting her hands on her knees and looking up at him with wide eyes heavy with concern.

"I really wish you'd tell me what's going on right now. I'm concerned about you, Tails; you're sneaking out late at night butt naked and without Sonic, and you're lying to me. This isn't like you at all. Something's up."

She sat back in the sofa, a wry smirk on her face. "Did you really think I wouldn't see through you, Tails? I'm a spy and a thief by trade; lying is my business."

Tails looked at her, and realised she spoke the truth more deeply than she knew. Again he could sense her feelings. Sadness wound up tightly within her, bitterness and regret masked by a veneer of sultry confidence. Haunted memories of her past and fears for her future mingled in her heart, and for the first time Tails felt he truly understood her. Of all their friends Rouge had always been the most reserved, never speaking about her past and burying her true feelings behind sassy quips and tight clothing.

He could see her entire being, everything she was radiating out from her like shimmering colours in the air that danced around him, sending sparks across his skin that hummed with ethereal music. He almost cried aloud, stopping himself with a muted gasp. This sensation; was it Rouge's true self? Was she more than just a blob of animate matter, but a living breathing part of Chaos itself? Was he the same? Was everyone?

This fleeting glimpse of another level of existence wasn't enough. He had to know more. He had to immerse himself in her completely, until their souls intertwined and they became as one.

The anticipation shook through him, the thought of his next action bubbling up inside him until he could hold it back no more. He would not allow anything to keep him from this. His arm trembled, his muscles tensing up. The orange fur shifted and flash in brighter tones. He could feel himself growing warmer, feel his eyes and teeth beginning to transform, and his inhibitions melting away.

Rouge gasped, sitting up with her eyes full of fear. "Tails?! What's happening to you? Your face-!"

Tails leapt forward, landing squarely in Rouge's lap, forcing her onto her back on the sofa with his hands clasped tightly around her neck. She tried to scream, to call out for help, but his grip strangled the air from her throat. She thrashed about in his grip, throwing punches into his body, kneeing him in the groin and trying to turf him off her. Each furious blow felt like a dull thud to Tails, like being struck with a pillow, and none of it affected him in the slightest.

He could feel himself reaching into her soul, seeking out her feelings, those wonderful colours that made her shine brighter than the world around her. He had to touch them, he had to smell them, taste them, hear them. He would dive into the deep pool of Chaos inside her and emerge as something greater than the sum of the two of them combined.

But something else began to happen. Through his arms Tails could feel something flowing, a strong current of energy surging along his body, making his skin tingle. His heart sank when he realised what it was.

It was her. He wasn't just touching her soul, he was pulling it out of her, drawing it inside himself. He tried to pull his arms away but he couldn't. Half of him was afraid releasing her would kill her right there and then, the other half didn't want to ever let go.

He'd never felt anything like this; his whole body shook, and a dizzying rush of blood swam in his mind. His breath grew short and his heart pounded ever faster. He tried to focus, drawing out her
soul faster and faster by the second.

Rouge's body went limp, her struggling ceased. Beneath him Tails saw her face begin to shrivel, her gorgeous face wrinkling, sagging and clinging to her high cheek bones. Her fur faded and fell out in clumps, and her bright irises turned grey and dull.

Panic gripped Tails' heart. He could still feel the last remnants of her soul clinging to her withered frame, desperate to hang on. But he couldn't let it go; though it horrified him to see her dying at his hand, he needed her colours. He couldn't bear to live another second without them.

"I'm sorry," he cried, tears exploding into steam on his eyes, "I am so, so sorry, Rouge. I... I can't stop myself!"

Something hit him in the side of the head. This was not the soft and feeble blows of Rouge but something like a battering ram, sending him soaring across the room, crashing into the TV. The screen toppled over and cracked, impaling him with glass. Though fatal for anyone else, the deep gashes felt like little more than paper cuts to him. He thrust his hand upwards, effortlessly throwing the broken screen away.

By the sofa stood Shadow, kneeling down over Rouge's broken body, holding her hand and stroking her head. Then he turned to face Tails, his crimson eyes blazing with fury.

"Shadow, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt her! I just couldn't -"

Shadow said nothing, immediately picking up the oak coffee table and hoisting into the air like it was nothing, before bringing it down on Tails' head so hard it shattered into a storm of splinters. Tails' head throbbed, and he looked up through blurry eyes to see Shadow standing over him.

"I can explain -" said Tails. Shadow grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hurled him into the opposite wall, sending him crashing through the banister and showering him in cracked plaster. As he slid down the wall upside-down, Tails saw a crimson glow forming in Shadow's hand.

"CHAOS SPEAR!" yelled Shadow. The surging, crackling bolt shot across the room, striking Tails square in the chest. Red lightning enveloped him, burning through his muscles and locking him into agonised contortions. But soon after the pain faded, and Tails felt the energy of the bolt fading into him.

As it faded his anger surged to the fore. Who did Shadow think he was to deny him? He couldn't possibly understand what he was going through. If he stood against him, he would have to be destroyed.

He leapt forward, jagged teeth bared, tongue slavering and bellowing with rage. His hands went for Shadow's throat, but the hedgehog sidestepped him and delivered a series of rapid blows to his sides. Tails felt his organs rattling and bones cracking from the force, but the energy coursing through him mended the damage immediately. Righting himself, he kicked Shadow's legs from under him, bringing his fist down and his knee up to smash his torso between them. Shadow gasped and toppled to the floor, falling onto his front.

Tails brought his foot down onto Shadow's back, pushing him into the floor, cracking the floorboards and Shadow's spine in tandem.

A brief flash of light stung his eyes, and his foot dropped to the floor, overbalancing him. When his vision cleared he saw the dent in the floorboards empty.

Shadow had used Chaos Control to escape, but Tails could still sense him moving through the ebb
and flow of Chaos, creating ripples in the background radiation. Closing his eyes, Tails shut out any distraction, locking on to Shadow as he approached from behind.

Tails span round timing the movement of his namesakes to strike exactly when Shadow reappeared. The massive tails collided with Shadow, sending him towards the door. Shadow smashed through it, taking it clean off its hinges and tumbling into the darkness of the front yard. Tails had not a moment to catch his breath when Shadow surged out of the dark, leaping forward with a furious scream, his hands poised like claws.

Tails grabbed him by the arms, spinning around and around on the spot before hurling Shadow upwards, smashing a hole through the ceiling as he went. Tails leapt after him, soaring through the hole into the ruin of Rouge's bathroom.

Immediately something heavy and cold struck him, bouncing off his skull and crashing against the tiles. Half-dazed, Tails saw the sink basin lying in a crumbled heap of ceramics. Water sprayed from the pipes, flooding the bathroom, cascading down the hole in the floor and evaporating from his fur in bursts of steam.

The steam clouded his vision, and as Tails lunged for Shadow he stepped on something slippery, sending his foot flying out from beneath him and dropping him on his back. Before he could leap to his feet Shadow dived on top of him, sitting on his chest and pinning him down.

Shadow bared his teeth, his lips dripping with foam and the veins in his temples bulging outwards. He grabbed Tails' head and slammed it repeatedly against the tiled floor, uttering something resembling speech warped into howls of rage and anguish as he did so.

He let go of Tails' head and went for his throat. With super-Mobian strength he began to crush the boy's windpipe with both hands, while his bloodshot eyes threatened to pop their sockets.

Tails gasped for breath, his vision growing dark at the edges. As he felt himself slipping away, he did the only thing he felt he could.

Shadow froze, the pressure from his grip lessening but his hands remaining glued to Tails' neck. Tails could feel the same sensation as before; the rush of energy flowing out of Shadow and into him.

Elation overtook Tails as he felt the power surge through him. Shadow's soul burned with so much more power than Rouge's, and as he absorbed it Tails felt like he might combust at any moment.

Shadow trembled where he sat, unable to release himself from Tails. His frame shrivelled, his fat and muscle wasting away, while quills withered and fell from his head.

"No," he gasped through cracked lips, "that's... impossible!"

No, thought Tails, Nothing is impossible anymore. Not for me.

But something else entered into Tails at the last moment; a single word brought to the front of Shadow's mind.

Sonic.

Tails released his hold on Shadow, and the emaciated hedgehog toppled from him, lying on the floor gasping for breath and clinging to life. That one word, and Shadow's strength of feeling surrounding it, flooded Tails' mind with guilt, readjusting his moral compass and lifting the haze from his eyes.
"What have I done?!" he wailed, his eyes streaming with tears as he rose to his feet. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean for any of this to happen!"

Shadow looked at him, his eyelids slowly closing. He tried to speak but could only wheeze hoarsely. His eyes closed and his head slumped to the floor. As it did so, something slipped from his ragged quills and rolled across the floor, something pristine and clear and shining with scarlet hues. A Chaos Emerald.

Tails mouth dripped with saliva and his heart pounded when he saw it; the thing he had been seeking all this time. He pounced upon it, taking it up with both hands, holding in front of his face and seeing his distorted features reflected in its faultless facets.

His sorrow choked in his chest, bound with frustration. This is what he had been seeking all along. Why couldn't they have just given it to him, without all this fuss? Those little people, with their little troubled minds plagued by little doubts and worries, constantly frustrating his goals, making him lose control. If they had just let him be, he wouldn't have had to...

His stomach heaved, and he lunged for the toilet bowl, vomiting until his throat burned dry. He couldn't reconcile the conflicting thoughts in his head; the guilt over the harm he'd wrought wrestled with the unyielding desire driving him, causing his brain to throb as it struggled with the extremes fighting for dominance inside.

"What do you want?!" he shrieked at the Chaos Emerald lying in a puddle on the floor. "Was it worth it? Is anything worth this?!"

But as he looked at the non-responsive gem he felt it again, that tension in his mind and body, the little voice that wasn't a voice that urged him to do it, to forget everything else in his life and just grab what he wanted.

He crawled through the gushing, hissing water over to the Emerald. With a trembling hand he picked it up, feeling a tingle against his skin where he touched the cold crystal.

_I can't run away. I've come too far. The only way to fix this is to keep going, otherwise Shadow and Rouge will have suffered for nothing. Once I have all the Emeralds, I can fix everything, forever._

He clutched the Emerald tightly, his eyes locked into his own reflection. His grip became tighter and tighter on the gem, and he clenched his teeth, anguished moans escaping through them as pain shot through his bones. As he gripped even tighter, he felt himself falling into his own image within it. A crack appeared along the face of the Emerald, and Tails felt a surge of energy trying to escape. With all his will he pushed back against the eruption, keeping it locked within the gem even as it continued to fracture.

His whole body shook, and the house shook around him. Crimson lightning leapt from the Emerald, flicking against him, burning off his fur and blackening his skin. His mouth opened and a guttural growl escaped, warping from fury into manic laughter.

The Emerald broke apart, and for a moment time stood still, as if the universe dared not allow the moment to continue. The shards imploded, transforming into a flickering point of dazzling crimson light.

Tails rose to his feet, clutching the glowing orb with both hands and bringing it up to his face. The power of the Emerald, enough to level continents, sat uneasily within his fingers. He opened his mouth and brought it up to his lips.
The orb became a silky band of light, flowing between his teeth and down his throat. As the immense power coursed into him, surging through every point in his body, Tails' head went backwards, looking up to the ceiling. His arms and legs went wide, and he raised up on tiptoes. The wave of energy rattled through him, leaping out of his body in and flowing back in as crimson ribbons. His burns began to heal, his fur regrew and his vision became an onslaught of flashing red light. The only sound he could hear was his own screaming voice.

Tails jerked forward with a gasp. The sensation had stopped suddenly, replaced by a wave of calm. He could feel the power of the Emerald pumping through his veins as steadily as his blood, and at last the beast within him fell silent.

It was as he thought; the Emeralds were the key to everything. So what's new?

Tails looked over to where Shadow lay, a skeleton in fleshy rags soaked through by gushing pipes. The guilt from earlier seemed assuaged, replaced by a clarity of purpose.

I can't leave them like this. I should take the remnants of their souls into me. Better to be complete than clinging to life in this place.

But as he reached down to place his hand on Shadow, he found himself unable to do it. Even though his logic told him this was the optimal solution, something about the idea of it stopped him. He tried to force his way through his doubts, but his hand simply shook in mid-air. He knew they would be better off this way, he was sure of it. So why couldn't he bring himself do it?

Because you're not a killer, Tails! Why are you doing this to your friends?

Not his voice, not the beast's, but Sonic's, drawn up from somewhere in the depths of his mind. At once the guilt came flooding back, and Tails held his temple, his anguished moans exploded into tortured wailing. With his eyes streaming with tears he shot upwards in a blaze of fire, smashing through the roof of Rouge's house and into the dark sky above.

"I'm sorry!" he cried as he disappeared into the night. "Please forgive me!"

~O~

He'd woken up with a splitting headache, exhaustion chaining him to his bed. He couldn't remember anything about the previous night after the accident in his workshop, and wondered if the explosion had knocked him out cold.

When Sonic burst in to shake him awake, telling him terrible news about Shadow and Rouge, something stirred in his memory, a vague image that made his stomach tie up in knots and his skin crawl. But he put the feeling to one side, dashing off with Sonic to the hospital to check up on his friends.

When he got there, it all came flooding back.

He wept into Sonic's fur, partly for his injured friends but also for Sonic. Soon the guilt would grow until he confessed the whole sordid affair to Sonic, and he would watch his older brother's heart break.

But as the conversation progressed, Tails found himself lying. Opportunities for him to steer the narrative, propose some kind of device and misdirect blame. He couldn't believe how easy it was; Sonic would take everything he said as gospel, no matter how preposterous it was, but that wasn't what made it easy. He could conjure up any emotion he wished and deliver it with astonishing
conviction. At times he looked into Sonic's eyes and almost broke, but he held firm. If he could manipulate Sonic into finding the Chaos Emeralds for him, then he could fix everything. Everything would be alright.

Then Shadow pointed right at him.

That was it, the game was up. But Sonic didn't even consider for a second that Shadow pointed at him, instead looking for something on the other side of the room. Tails could see the fear in Shadow's eyes, and all he could do was silently mouth 'I'm sorry.'

Shadow fell unconscious again, and Sonic never put two and two together. Internally Tails breathed a sigh of relief. By some miracle he had gotten away with it. Now he had the time he needed to make everything better.

He made a promise to himself there and then, utterly convinced he could keep it, utterly convinced he would remember it:

Never again.

~O~

PRESENT…

In the dim gloom of the house, the three Mobians sat in silence, each staring vacantly in to the distance. Behind each of their mouths lay words waiting to be said, but none dared speak first, hoping that the silence would continue forever.

Sonic collapsed forward with a sigh so heavy and drawn out he sounded like he was deflating. He rested his elbows on his knees, rubbing his face to ease the tension building in his cheekbones, like his skull might burst from his head at any moment.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. You're telling me you did all of this willingly? That you actually chose to attack your own friends?" He leapt to his feet, rounding on Tails. "What is wrong with you?"

"Sonic, try to stay calm," said Amy, holding out her hand in protest. Sonic ignored her, standing over Tails, who hung his head down.

"And Quinn? Did you attack him as well?!"

"I didn't mean to..." said Tails, not looking up.

"You didn't mean to?! That's your excuse? Tails, you killed him! You murdered him in cold blood, and all you can say is 'I didn't mean to?!' This is unbelievable!"

"I only wanted to take the Emerald," Tails said, looking up with renewed vigour in his voice. "I wanted to show him up for the way he treated you, but he walked in on me with a gun. I had to defend myself, didn't I?"

"You could have knocked him out. You could have grabbed the gun. Heck, you could have just put your game face on and he would have ran away screaming like a little girl. But no, you chose to drain his entire life-force away!"

Sonic bent over to speak right into Tails' ear, his voice a low and harsh whisper.
"What was it you said? 'It takes a special kind of evil to take someone's soul?' Then what does that make you, Tails? Huh? Are you evil? Well, are you?!

"I..." Tails' lower jaw trembled. "I just lost control! I couldn't stop myself!"

"Right," Sonic said, standing up straight and pacing around the room, letting his arms swing restlessly. "Just like you lost control with Shadow and Rouge. How many more times will you 'lose control' before you stop hurting people?"

"I'm trying to stop!" wailed Tails. "That's why I need the Emeralds. It's the only way to bring what's happening to me under control."

"And there's an Emerald here, is there?"

"No, but..."

"So what are you doing here?"

"I... I..." Tails' fell silent, his head slumping down again. "There's no way I can end that sentence that won't make you hate me even more."

Sonic's pacing grew faster, and he ground his teeth together. His muscles grew tenser and tenser until he began to flail around, grunting and growling before exploding in fury.

"Damn it, Tails!" He bellowed. "Why did you lie to me?! I could have helped you if you'd told me the truth from the start! You've been lying to me this whole time! I'm supposed to be your best friend, but you couldn't come to me for help? We always work things out together, don't we? Isn't that what we've always done? Why? Why would you turn your back on me after all we've been through? I just... I just don't know who you are anymore..."

The tension within him rapidly uncoiled, and the pain building up within him poured out. His eyes dripped with tears, soaking his gloves as he tried to wipe them away. Eventually he gave up, letting his arms hang limply by his sides and the tears drip onto the carpet. Tails said nothing, staring blankly with his mouth pursed and his limbs held close.

"Hold on a second!" yelled Amy, leaping up from the couch. "This is wrong! Can't you see what's happening here?"

Sonic looked up from his heartbroken stupor.

"Huh?"

"This is all Super Sonic's doing!" said Amy. "We know he's inside Tails somehow, we spoke to him, remember? He's clearly the one making Tails do these awful things, and worse still he's twisting Tails mind to make him think he's responsible. He wants to drive a wedge between you two, because he knows that if you work together you can stop him!"

Sonic and Tails looked at Amy, whatever turbulent emotions raging inside them calmed by her insight.

"Look, I know it sounds crazy," she continued, "but this whole situation is crazy! And to my mind, it's a much better fit than Tails turning evil. I'll never believe he could go bad just like that, and frankly I'm ashamed that you accepted it so quickly, Sonic! You're the one who kept believing in Tails all this time, so believe in him now! He needs you! We all need you..."
Sonic's eyelids blinked madly, then he shook his head briskly as if waking from a dream. He clenched his fist and held it close, shutting his eyes and screwing the cap back on to his feelings.

"Damn it, I've been so stupid. It has to be Super Sonic behind all this. There's no other explanation." He opened his eyes, looking over to Tails.

"Tails, I'm so sorry for all those things I said. I'm just so wound up by everything that's happened. Can you ever forgive me?"

Tails continued to avoid Sonic's gaze. "I forgive you, Sonic. But don't forgive me just yet."

"Why not?"

"I want to believe Amy is right," he said, standing up but still looking past Sonic, "but it doesn't feel like I'm being controlled. Even though I can feel some sort of presence in my mind, all my actions still feel completely like my own conscious decision."

"It's Super Sonic playing tricks on you," said Sonic. "He's in your mind, he can make you think whatever you want."

"And make you hunt the Emeralds for him," said Amy, "with enough power to defeat anyone who gets in your way."

"Shadow, Quinn, Eggman, Knuckles..." said Sonic. "They all tried to stop Super Sonic, and look where it got them."

"Knuckles?" said Tails, his stare coming back into focus. "What happened to Knuckles? Is he okay?"

Sonic and Amy exchanged a confused look.

"Er... you attacked him too? While he was using the Master Emerald to try and find you? Now he's comatose in the hospital along with Rouge and Shadow. You seriously don't remember that?"

Tails shook his head. "No. I didn't lay a finger on Knuckles, I swear."

"Don't start lying to me again, Tails!" Sonic said, his voice rising. "He found you in the spirit world or whatever and you took his soul! I saw it happen!"

"I didn't do anything to Knuckles! I don't know anything about this, you have to believe me! Besides, why would I lie about this? I've admitted to everything else, haven't I?"

Sonic's teeth clenched tight, and angry words rallied behind them once more. Then Amy stepped between them, holding her hands up to keep them apart.

"Sonic, he's right. What would be the point in lying now? He has nothing to gain by hiding it."

His tirade retreated, and his anger fizzled. Pinching the bridge of his nose he sighed and shook his head.

"I guess you're right. But if Tails didn't attack Knuckles, then who did?"

"Maybe Super Sonic deleted that memory for some reason," said Amy.

Sonic's fur stood on end, and a feeling buried under the recent developments resurfaced; the feeling of being watched, the tiny pinprick on the back of his neck that warned of danger. Something was
coming; he could feel its intangible footsteps rippling through him as it drew closer and closer.

"Or maybe there's something else out there."

Tails and Amy looked straight at him, Tails making eye contact for the first time in ages.

"You're saying there's two monsters?" gasped Amy. "That's not... that can't be true."

"What happened to Knuckles was different to all the others," said Sonic. "I don't think he was attacked by Tails, or Super Sonic or whatever. Something else is out there. I can feel it."

"I don't believe it," Amy sighed, sitting back down on the couch with her head in her hand. "Not only is Tails possessed by Super Sonic, but now there's another evil creature out there trying to kill us? How can we fight against that as well? It took us this long to find Tails, and we had a good lead on him. This thing, we don't even know what it is or where to start looking."

"Look, we've got Tails back, and I'm sure this other thing has something to do with him as well. It's far too big to be a coincidence; all of this has something to do with Tails' Emerald experiment, and if we can figure out how Super Sonic took control of him, it might lead us to the other enemy. Then we can defeat them both."

Sonic walked over to Tails and placed a hand on his shoulder. Tails flinched but didn't move away.

"That is, if my best friend in the whole world is willing to help us."

A meek smile danced around the edges of Tails' mouth, and slowly he brought his hand up to rest on Sonic's. His eyes flicked across to meet Sonic's gaze, and the hedgehog's heart thumped itself free of the weight dragging it down. A warm tingle washed over him, as if some unseen energy passed between them.

Tails' eyes jumped open wide, and he looked towards the window in surprise.

"Get down!"

The stillness of the house shattered as the front window caved inward, showering the Mobians in a storm of broken glass. As Sonic dropped his knees and covered his head, several black cylinders landed on the floor, including one right at his feet, a single red light at the top flashing frantically.

"What the-?"

"It's an N-Bomb!" yelled Tails. "Don't-"]

A brief flash stung Sonic's eyes before his vision plunged into darkness. A distorted electronic buzzing forced its way into his ears, its deafening drone pummelling his head from the inside. His muscles twitched and spasmed, sending him crashing to the floor where he could only twitch. The blackness in his eyes thinned into swirling clouds of fuzz, but he squinted through it even as it scratched at his eyeballs.

A hulking metal figure stood before him, its outline vaguely resembling a Mobian with glowing blue eyes. In the outstretched slab of dark and polished steel that formed its arm it gripped Tails. The fox hung limply in its grasp, his namesakes flopping down beneath him and his eyes shut.

"TARGET NEUTRALISED," it bellowed in a grating electronic whirr. "RETURNING TO BASE."
Sonic reached out, pushing his fingers as far as he could in an attempt to reach Tails. But the pain still tore at him, and he could not muster the energy to hold his arm up, instead letting it flop to the floor.

The robot turned and stomped away through the gaping hole in the front of the house, taking Tails with it. Sonic tried to call out to him, but only agonised groans escaped his lips.

His vision darkened again, but when it cleared once more he saw another figure, this one standing over him and looking down.

A badger in a dark suit knelt down and lifted Sonic's head up by his chin, and Sonic could do little to resist. A self-satisfied smirk spread across his face, and he chuckled softly.

"Well, well, well," said Captain Axton, drawing out the spaces between his wells, "If it isn't the one and only Sonic the Hedgehog. You did an excellent job of leading me to my quarry."

Sonic grunted in a confused tone, his words a drooling slur.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice you snooping around my camp? Once I knew you were involved, this operation got a lot more interesting. I've been following you ever since you left my camp.

"Remember that 'bite' you felt on the back of your neck? That was a tracker we fired into you while you were busy eavesdropping. It worked like a charm, it seems.

"And now I find the source of the Chaos disturbance is none other than Miles 'Tails' Prower himself. What a day this is turning out to be."

"Let... him... go..." Sonic managed to choke out. Axton let go of his chin and his head dropped against the floor, knocking his jaw up and nearly causing him to bite his tongue.

"I don't think so. The boys in the lab can't wait to get their hands on him. As for you, I want to know what your involvement in all this is." He gestured to someone behind him. "Take them away!"

Two soldiers clad in black strode up to him, lifting him up by his underarms despite his feeble attempts to squirm free. One of them reached into their belt pack and pulled out a small silver box, placing it against the front of Sonic's neck. With a click two metal bands shot out, wrapping tight around his neck and sealing at the back. At once what little energy he had gave out completely, and he could only hang like a ragdoll from the soldier's grip as they dragged him toward a black metal van outside the house.

With little care they heaved him in the back, where he flopped down against the cold metal floor. Moments later something flopped down beside him, and he saw it was Amy. She had an identical collar wrapped around her throat, and she could only move her eyes; the rest of her was as limp as a boned fish.

The doors slammed shut behind them, plunging them into darkness, and as the van's engine roared into life, Sonic wished more than anything that he could scream.

~O~
Scratch by scratch and scrape by scrape the cold metal peeled away as the tiny fragment inched its way along the surface. Held firm between tired fingers the sharp scrap of something tore the thinnest layers of the wall away in flakes, dragging coarse marks behind it. Though the fragment had almost worn down to nothing, its wielder persevered, their focus fixed on the wall, a soft tongue poking from the side of their mouth and lightly bit down upon to aid their concentration.

He took a step back, or tried to. To call the area he occupied a cell would be an insult to cells, and even calling it a box would betray a lower-than-average opinion of boxes. The space stood barely wider than his outstretched arms, and not much longer than he was tall. A single musty yellow square of light hummed from the ceiling, and along the back wall a shelf made a valiant attempt to pretend it was some kind of bed.

But from his limited vantage point he could still see his handiwork; a tangle of crude lines and symbols covered the wall, converging on an amateurish attempt at drawing a smiling fox boy. Around the image of Tails a host of equally poor scribbles represented various people and objects; Shadow, Knuckles, the Fake Emerald, Super Sonic and himself. Every other available space had been filled with questions.

Somewhere within the snaking lines lay the answer he sought. Everything was connected to Tails, that much he knew, but little else. Tails’ experiment had somehow unleashed a demon from their past, but what did it want, apart from power? Why did Tails have visions of Shadow? And just what had attacked Knuckles, if not Tails?

Flopping down onto the shelf, its sudden flatness a shock to his backside, Sonic sighed. His attempts to connect the dots surrounding Tails made his brain hurt. If only he’d not been so rudely interrupted he could’ve had the whole truth laid bare.

He leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together in front of him. He knew Tails wasn’t evil, that it was all Super Sonic’s doing, but he still couldn’t understand why Tails had lied to him, why he had kept secrets from him. More than anything that had happened recently, that stuck with him and played on his thoughts. Tails hadn’t offered up an explanation for it, and the longer Sonic dwelled on it the more he felt his trust slipping through his fingers. He hoped that once they escaped this place he would hear what Tails had to say and all would be forgiven.

But that required them to escape first.

GUN. He cursed them under his breath for getting involved, always sticking their snouts where they didn’t belong. What were they up to this time? Whatever it was, they had better not lay a finger on Tails if they wanted their base to stay in one piece.

His neck itched, and he fumbled at the collar constricting around it. He’d tried to take it off, but any force applied to the device sent a painful shock through his whole body. Even if he left it alone, the device still sapped his energy, leaving his limbs heavy and floppy. His legs shook when he tried to stand, and his stomach growled as if he hadn’t eaten for days. Weakness clung to every muscle, and even holding his eyes open felt like he was lifting a bag of rocks on his head. So long as he wore that collar any escape attempt was futile; his whole body would collapse if he so much as tried to throw a punch.

The door slid open with a hiss, and a soldier entered, his face obscured by a black helmet.
"Let me guess," Sonic said, his breaths heavy, "you've decided to be really, really nice and let us all go?"

The soldier said nothing, instead advancing upon him and seizing him under the arm. With a sharp tug he jerked Sonic to his feet, and under the debilitating influence of the collar Sonic had no choice but to let himself be jerked.

"That's a no, then? Figures…"

The soldier dragged him out of the cell and into the corridor. A narrow space barely wider than his cell and almost as badly lit, it stretched out into the gloom with lines of doors like the one he had just stepped from lining either side. The guard gave him little time to consider who might be in the other rooms, instead hauling him towards the door at the end.

Shoved by the soldier, Sonic stepped onto a metal walkway. This passageway seemed to be bathed in daylight compared to where he had just been, but after his eyes adjusted he saw the walkway ran along the length of a rough-hewn shaft of stone, a skeleton of girders, pipes and wires straddling the rock and disappearing into the distance. Wherever he was, he figured it had to be underground somewhere.

His ever-silent chaperone marched him through the labyrinth, past doors through which he caught the briefest glimpse of workshops, laboratories and offices. Mobians in white coats scurried along the halls, focused intently on their papers and not even looking up as he passed, and soldiers stood like statues at every intersection, their faces obscured by black helmets with only their ears and tails preventing them from looking identical.

"Why do you guys wear those helmets anyway?" said Sonic. "Does GUN only hire really ugly people or something?"

The soldier said nothing, prodding him to keep moving. Sonic shook his head and sighed.

"You're the life of the party, pal. I really hope this turns out to one of those 'ally secretly pretending to be a faceless goon' scenes like in the movies. Is that it? You're just acting like you've got a stick up your ass so you don't give the game away?"

They came to another door, so unremarkably similar to the others that Sonic thought they had gone in circles. The guard pushed a button on the wall and the door slid open. Before Sonic could peer inside, the guard shoved him on the back, causing him to stumble forward into the room and fall on his front. He rolled onto his back in time to see the door closing behind him, the guard nowhere to be seen.

"So I guess that means you're not secretly a friend, then?"

"It seems friends are in short supply for you right now, aren't they Sonic?" said a voice. Sonic looked back over his shoulder. The featureless square room held only a white table with a chair on either side, with a light bulb hanging low above it, its lamphade focusing the yellow glow into the centre and plunging the rest into darkness. On the opposite side of the table sat a badger resting his hands in front of his mouth, his green eyes shining in the dim light. Nestled between his elbows sat a brown folder filled with papers.

"You!" growled Sonic as he clambered to his feet. "You've got some guts being alone in a room with me after kidnapping me and my friends."

Axton didn't move his hands from in front of him, but nonchalantly cast his eyes to the side. "If you
think you can threaten me in your current state, be my guest. It will be amusing to watch. How’s that collar by the way?"

Despite the anger bubbling inside him, Sonic's muscles barely twitched. The device around his neck still sapped him of the energy and will to raise his hand. Like it or not, he couldn't resist Axton even if he wanted to.

"I'd prefer it if you took it off me. It's not really my colour; it doesn't match my lipstick, for one."

"Very droll," said Axton, "I've heard how you like to use humour and sarcasm as a defence mechanism. But the time for jokes is over. We have serious business to discuss."

"My defence mechanism is more like kicking people in the face repeatedly until they stop pretending they've got me all figured out. Kicking them hard."

Axton's brow furrowed. "Am I supposed to be frightened?"

"Not until after I start kicking you."

"Enough bravado," said Axton, gesturing to the chair in front of him. "Sit, if you would."

"I'll stand, thanks."

"Suit yourself. So long as you answer my questions." Axton reached into the file and pulled out a slip of paper, sliding it across the table towards Sonic. "You know this individual?"

The paper bore a photograph of Tails, but for a moment Sonic hardly recognised him. His eyes practically lit up the room, their deep blue shining in the harsh light of the bulb, and his smile radiated a warmth that only he seemed to possess. This was not the Tails he'd spent recent days with; that boy was a ragged thing wearing a coat of matted fur, cheeks sunken into his face and deep bags resting on his eyes. Seeing the real Tails, fresh-faced and bright-eyed as he always used to be brought home to Sonic just how much Tails had gone to pieces in such a short space of time. Burying the tension gripping his heart, he looked Axton in the eyes.

"Seriously? What kind of question is that? You know who I am, so you know who that is, don't you?"

Sonic grabbed the empty chair and pulled it away from the table, its legs scraping along the floor. Then he dropped into it and leant forward, gripping the edge of the table and staring intently into Axton's cold eyes.

"Now let me ask you a question. What have you done with him? Where is he?"

"Mr. Prower's current location is none of your concern. Rest assured, for the time being he is being kept safe. Our scientists are very keen to study him, and they won't risk harming him unless it becomes necessary for their research."

Sonic stood up, knocking the chair over. "Necessary?! You're gonna sit there and tell me it's okay to cut up a little boy for your experiments and expect me to just accept it?! Even if it wasn't Tails I'd still tear this place apart to stop you, so tell me where he is already before I start breaking stuff!"

Axton's eyelid batted not. His hands dropped from in front of his mouth and he leant his elbow on the table, silently scanning Sonic with a dispassionate stare.

"I know what you think of GUN. That we're some shadowy, amoral arm of the government
"kidnapping people of the streets…"

"You *did* kidnap us… right off the street!"

"…that we experiment on people…"

"You *are* experimenting on people! You're experimenting on Tails right now!"

"…all because we can do what we want without consequence…"

"You *can* do whatever… you know what? Forget it."

"But we're not the bad guys here," said Axton. "We have a duty to protect the people of this world from anything that could harm them, and your friend is a clear and present danger to said people. Maybe you can sleep at night knowing something like that is roaming free, but I can't. Believe it or not, I have a conscience, and my conscience is telling me that the life of Miles Prower matters not one bit compared to everyone outside these walls. The sooner you accept that the safer we'll all be."

Sonic tried to tense up, to let his anger overflow and his fury descend on Axton, but he could barely muster a choked growl and slight shake thanks to the collar.

"If I didn't have his collar on I'd…"

"But you do. So whatever you were going to say doesn't matter. Please sit down again and let's talk like sensible adults. If you answer all my questions to my satisfaction you can go free. You and Miss Rose."

"Amy?!" Sonic's heart jumped; he had almost forgotten about her. "Where is she?"

"She's being questioned just like you. I really hope she's being more co-operative though, I'd hate my boys to have to get rough on such a pretty young thing. Now, please…" he gestured to the fallen chair, "sit down."

Sonic grunted in disgust, but picked up the chair regardless, placing it back in front of the table and sitting down. With no other form of resistance left available he channelled his defiance into a searing glare fired across the table.

"So I just have to answer your stupid questions and then we call all go home?"

"You and Miss Rose may leave," Axton brought his hands together again, concealing a wry smirk that started to show itself, "if I think you've told us all you know and you've no wrong-doing to answer for, that is. You'll both be taken away and dropped at a nearby settlement. From there you're on your own."

"I'm not leaving without Tails."

"Oh yes, that reminds me," said Axton, his hands now completely failing to cover his grin, "once you leave this facility, if you are seen here again you will be shot on sight. So don't even think about staging any rescue attempts. Prower is ours now, until further notice."

"He doesn't belong to you!" yelled Sonic. "He belongs to me… I mean, he's his own fox! You can't keep him here against his will, he hasn't done anything wrong!"

Axton's hands dropped, as did his smile, and he fixed Sonic with a half-intrigued, half-outraged look.

"*Hasn't done anything wrong?* Are you seriously trying to pull this crap on me? Or do you believe
"That murder isn't a crime?"

"M-murder? No w-wait…" stammered Sonic.

"I heard it from your own lips, thanks to your tracking device. Miles Prower is responsible for the murder of Quinn the Red Panda."

Sonic put his hands up in protest. "Hold on a s-sec!"

"And for the assaults on Shadow the Hedgehog, Rouge the Bat and Ivo Robotnik, the theft of the Chaos Emeralds and the partial destruction of the Verdant Spiral Zone. Starting to think he might not be such a good guy after all?"

"W-wait! You've got it all wrong! Tails couldn't help any of that! Something's happened to him and he can't control it. You can't blame him for everything that's happened!"

"We know something's happened to him, and that's what we're really interested in. Whatever crimes he may have committed are irrelevant compared to what he's done to himself. Just from the lab's initial findings it's clear that Prower has transformed himself into something monstrously powerful, far beyond even Omega-level classification for Chaos entities. I've seen the devastation he's capable of, and I'm not prepared to let something like that go free until I find a way to contain it or neutralise it, understand?"

"What do you mean, 'neutralise'?"

"Either we find a way to undo Prower's current state or we destroy him."

Sonic tried to bang his fist, but in his weakened state he could only manage to softly massage the table with the edge of his hand. "I won't let you kill him!"

Axton closed his eyes, inhaling deeply.

"Picture the scene if you will. Empire City at the height of tourist season, streets packed with people, skyscrapers filled with workers, and in the heart of it all a small child, or a vagrant, or a tourist clad in 'I love EC' merchandise. Someone who wouldn't look out of place and wouldn't arouse any suspicion from the authorities."

"Is this going somewhere?" Sonic moaned.

"This person has been altered the same way Prower has been altered. Maybe they didn't do it to themselves, maybe they don't even know what they've become. But then they're triggered, and every single person in Empire City dies in a heartbeat. Men, women, children, the elderly… all reduced to a shrivelled husk, drained of their very life-force. A city of over a million people becomes a mass grave. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not! Anyway, you're exaggerating; there's no way that could happen!"

"Can't it? You saw what was left of the Verdant Spiral Zone; complete destruction of miles upon miles of woodland, scrubbed clean of all life right down to the bacteria. This terrible power is real, and if Prower can do it to himself, I don't want anyone else to learn his secret. In the wrong hands the cost to Mobius could be more than either of us bare to contemplate."

Sonic wanted to speak, but Axton's ghastly scenario plagued his mind. Though he didn't think it possible, what if someone could copy Tails' powers? Tails himself would never do something that awful, but someone else might not have his strength of conscience.
"Listen, Sonic," Axton said, leaning forward with his hands clasped together, "I'm on your side here. If we work together, if you help me understand his condition, there might be a chance of saving Prower and preventing his power from being misused. Continue to be difficult, however..."

"Alright, alright. Enough, already. What..." He sighed, cursing himself for relenting. "What do you wanna know?"

"I want to know how this happened. What did Prower do to himself, and what was he planning on doing with that power?"

Sonic looked down at the table, avoiding eye-contact with Axton so as not to glimpse the satisfaction in his eyes.

"I'm not entirely sure. We were almost about to find out when your goons showed up. All I know is it has something to do with Super Sonic."

Sonic glanced at Axton from the corner of his eye; the badger's eyes narrowed with curious interest.

"Super Sonic? Isn't that just what you call yourself when you reach a certain level of Chaos power?"

"Yes, but..." Sonic rubbed the back of his head, "it's kinda complicated. I'm not sure I understand it myself."

"We have plenty of time to discuss it. Not going anywhere, are you?"

Sonic grumbled to himself. Without looking he knew Axton was smiling when he said that.

"Okay, okay, okay, you remember the Doppelganger Crisis?"

Axton said nothing, plunging the room into silence. Sonic peeked up and saw his face had become icy cold, a flicker of barely contained rage lurking behind his lips.

"I had a cousin who worked at GUN HQ in Station Square." He said, his voice a low rumble. "She never came home that day. When they found her, she had been beaten so badly her own mother barely recognised her. And just like everyone else who died that day, the last thing she saw was your face."

"Not my face," Sonic pleaded. "They were just robot copies of me, created by a maniac. None of that was my fault!"

"Just like how none of what's happening now is Prower's fault, right?"

Sonic turned away from Axton's chilling stare. This was not an argument he felt he could win.

"Look, anyway, what I'm trying to say is: during all that mess another robot copy of me went Super. The whole point of the attack was just to summon him. From what I heard this guy was completely crazy and scary powerful."

"But Tails stopped him. I don't know how, but somehow he managed to kill the evil Super Sonic before it got out of the building. I'm sorry for all the people who died but Tails saved way more by what he did that day. I've never felt more proud of him in my life, and nothing you say can change that. He's a bigger hero than I could ever be, than any of us."

"Touching as this is, this doesn't explain our current situation."

"Right... sorry. Look, I don't know how it's possible, but Super Sonic is somehow possessing or
controlling Tails and making him do all this bad stuff. If you want to keep Mobius safe you need to free Tails from his control."

Axton let his hand slump to the table. "Let me get this straight; you're telling me that Tails is possessed... by a robot?"

"Yes?"

"A robot which was destroyed six months ago?"

"I... guess?"

"And which has somehow bestowed never-before-seen levels of power into a pubescent child?"

"Kinda?"

"Pathetic," Axton said, standing up. "I offer you a chance to help your friend and yourself and instead you choose to waste my time."

"But it's the truth! At least... I think it is..."

"You'll be returned to your cell until you're ready to take this seriously. You can only hope that your lady-friend is more forthcoming with the truth, for your sake as well as hers."

"Listen to me! I..."

Axton's phone began to buzz, and he took it from his pocket.

"Be quiet!" he snapped at Sonic. "I need to take this." Looking at the screen, his irritated face dropped into silent concern. Swiping across with his thumb, he then lifted the phone to his ear.

"Axton." His face became more confused. "Who is this? How did you get this number?"

A low buzzing filled the room, and the light began to pulse and flicker. Sonic rose to his feet, backing away slowly as if it might pop at any moment.

"Wait... how are you doing..." Axton tried to speak, but a yawn took over. "What... what is this..."

Another yawn, then his eyelids began to droop. He slumped down into his chair and toppled forward, his head resting against the table while his arms flopped down. The phone slipped from his hand and skidded across the table top.

The light continue to flicker and pulse, and Sonic crept towards the table, reaching for Axton and placing his hand on him. Still breathing, just asleep.

With his mind spinning Sonic grabbed the phone. The screen said 'UNKNOWN CALLER' but Sonic could hear something faint coming through the speaker.

He brought the phone up to his ear and heard what sounded like music. No, not music; singing. The voice on the phone sounded ethereal, like an echo in a wide valley, but he could clearly hear someone singing. Through the distortion he thought it sounded familiar, both in voice, and in melody. Then the words became clear, a stilted and hastily constructed meter but sung in a carefree and soothing voice:

_Hush now, little fox, go to sleep,_

_No more need for you to weep,_
Happy dreams are coming soon,

And when you wake I'll be here too.

With a start Sonic tossed the phone away, and it bounced across the table onto the floor. His heart pounded and his lip trembled, for he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

How could it be that song? That melody, those words; they lived in his heart, and he had only shared it with one other. It could not be here, in this time and place.

A soft click reached his ears, and the tension around his neck eased. The collar wound itself back up into its casing and dropped to the floor. Sonic felt his energy returning, his muscles springing back to life and his lungs re-inflating. He gasped for air like a drowning man breaking through the surface, and he laughed out loud.

Behind him, the door slid open on its own, and he saw the lights from outside the room flickering and pulsing. With his fur standing on end he crept into the corridor.

The guard outside the door lay slumped against the wall, his head tilted to one side. Sonic checked him and found him to be asleep as well. All along the corridor guards and scientists lay on the floor, leaned against girders or clung to pipes, their eyes all tightly closed.

"Seriously, can this week get any weirder?" he whispered, although he wasn't sure why. "What the heck is going on?"

With no answer forthcoming, Sonic realised now was his chance to escape. But the corridors of this twisting labyrinth all looked the same; he could be searching for hours before he found the exit, and he had no way to know how long this strangely fortunate occurrence, whatever it was, would last.

He needed to find Tails and Amy. But where would he even begin to look?

Then he heard it again; distant at first, but growing louder until it rattled the air itself. The song from Axtom's phone hung in the air all around him, making his knees shake and his breath halt. His shadow grew long, and he felt a gentle warmth at his back. Turning around he saw a bright light at the end of the corridor and within its golden rays he thought he could make out a figure.

"Wh-who's there?" He called out, shielding his eyes. The figure, tall and slender and shimmering, said nothing, instead slowly turning and strolling out of sight, a large tail lazily following. As it vanished the song went with it, fading into the distance as the corridor fell dark.

"Hey! Wait!" yelled Sonic, sprinting to the end of the corridor. Looking in the direction the figure went, he saw the tip of its shining tail slipping around a corner.

"I'm not gonna hurt you!" Sonic called out as he resumed the chase, the figure just appearing at the end of each hallway, always managing to slip away no matter how fast he ran. Then he turned a corner, entering a hallway longer than all the others he'd seen. Far in the distance he saw the figure, but it wasn't moving this time. Instead it raised a long, slender arm and pointed to its right.

Sonic charged down the corridor towards the light. The figure didn't move, and as Sonic drew nearer its form became clearer. A fox, its lithe body standing taller than him and its eyes shining with a dazzling white light. Behind it two large tails covered in silky golden fur swished back and forth playfully.

"Tails?!" Sonic cried, slowing himself down as he neared the figure. But when he got close, a flash of light stung his eyes, and when he'd rubbed them clear the figure had vanished.
Sonic stood hunched over, panting heavily.

"Come back..." he called out through stilted breaths, "Tails..."

Footsteps rattled the gangway behind him, and he span around. Before he could adjust to the flickering darkness something collided with him, knocking him over and falling on top of him.

Green eyes sparkled in the limited light.

"Amy? Amy!" said Sonic, gripping her by the shoulders. "Oh man, am I glad to see you!"

"Sonic!" Amy cried, collapsing onto him and into a hug. "What's going on? I was being interrogated and I had this collar thing on and they were asking me all sorts of strange questions and then I heard this music and my guards fell asleep and the doors opened and then I saw this bright light and I followed it and I found you and I don't know where Tails is and..."

"Amy, slow down!" Sonic gently pushed her off him, then hauled himself off the floor. "I'm still trying to figure this all out myself."

"Did you see that bright light?"

"Yeah, but it was more than some light. It was some kind of person or ghost maybe. But I swear it looked just like Tails!"

"Tails?!" Amy scratched her head. "Are you sure? It just looked like a glowing ball to me."

"I..." Sonic stopped himself from continuing. Whatever the figure looked like didn't matter right now, and with Amy unable to back him up he couldn't be certain its appearance wasn't just a product of his stressed mind. But then there was that song; that couldn't be a coincidence as well, could it?

"I'm not so sure now," Sonic lied, "but it doesn't matter. We both saw it, so we know it's real, at least. It seemed to be leading me to this room."

A door stood open where the figure had been pointing. Sonic and Amy peered inside, but only darkness greeted them.

"I-in there?" Amy whispered. "I'm not sure about this; what if it's a trap?"

Sonic strained his eyes trying to make out any shape within the black room, but nothing revealed itself to him.

"I don't know if we have much choice, Ames. We've no clue how to get out of this base, and even if we did, I'm not leaving without Tails."

"No, of course not," Amy said, her voice uneasy, "still..."

"Come on." Sonic held his hand out behind him. "Take my hand. I'll keep you safe, I promise."

He felt Amy take a firm hold of his hand, then he began to inch slowly into the room. The darkness engulfed him after a few steps, and he held his free hand in front of him, pawing at the air to feel for obstacles. His foot caught something hard, and it clattered away, its racket ringing louder in the absence of light. He moved to the left slightly, and took another step forward. His foot caught something again, but this time the object felt heavy, soft and warm. The object grunted, and Sonic jumped back a foot. Low mumbling followed, then a relaxed sigh, then silence.

"What was that?" whispered Amy. "Was that a person?"
"I think there might be more people asleep in here. Really wish I had some light; I'd hate to step on any... um, delicate areas."

As if in answer several white lights flickered to life, throwing shadows around the room. A circular array of screens turned on by themselves, graphs and numbers swarming across the screen like ants, while unseen devices hummed and whirred in the dark. From what Sonic could make out the room looked like some kind of lab, with rows of desks filled with papers, computer screens, microscopes and other equipment running along its length. Mobians in white coats rested their heads on their keyboards, while others lay curled up under their desks. One unfortunate researcher appeared to have passed out over the waste paper basket and got their head stuck in it.

Further into the room, the desks gave way to an open space, its edge defined by the bank of screens, and in this space a group of scientists lay in a heap, their clipboards scattered to the floor and their mouths hanging open as they dozed peacefully. Masses of cables snaked around and underneath them towards a large black shape that lurked just out of reach of the light. Sonic thought it looked like some kind of idol.

As he approached, another light flicked on, lighting the shape up. Sonic and Amy gasped in tandem. Its outline resembled a coffin, and it stood upright and flat like a headstone. The wires converged behind it, and mechanical arms bore down on it from above holding spinning and pointed instruments. In its centre, so small compared to the mass of machinery around it, a figure was held fast by thick metal clamps.

Sonic's knees trembled, and he nearly fell forward but for Amy holding him up.

"Tails! Oh my... what have they done to you?!"

Tails' arms were held to one side like he was being crucified, his wrists and ankles pinned to the wall by metal bands nearly half a foot thick. Something like an iron lung clung to his chest, a circular screen in its centre displaying rows of numbers on its deep blue face and clicking constantly. On his muzzle he wore something like a gas mask, or one of those masks a psycho would wear to stop them biting people, except this was a thing of solid metal and covered in pulsing multi-coloured lights. Tubes, gauges and strips of metal covered his body, and around his neck he wore a collar, albeit a much thicker version than the one Sonic had worn.

"This is sick!" Sonic growled. He turned around a kicked one of the sleeping scientists, who gave a soft grunt but didn't wake. "'Protect Mobius' my furry blue butt! They're trying to weaponise him themselves!"

Amy shook her head, holding it between her hands. "Oh, poor Tails! We've got to get him out of that thing!"

"Hurry," said Sonic, hopping close to the machine and tugging at it. "There must be a way to release the mechanism. Maybe this bit?"

The two hedgehogs pulled and yanked at various sections of Tails' restraints, but the thick metal refused to budge, even as Sonic and Amy strained their muscles until their arms felt like they might pop their sockets.

"Oh come on!" groaned Sonic. "What's this thing made of?"

They twisted and pounded, clawed and wrenched the metal, but no amount of force seemed to yield any results. After working themselves to exhaustion, they collapsed backwards, brows dripping with
"This is useless!" moaned Amy. "We've not moved it an inch! If only I still had my hammer…"

Sonic sat down on one of the prone scientists, grinding his teeth. "I can't stand seeing Tails like this. There must be some way to free him. They got him in there in the first place, didn't they?" He looked up at Tails' sleeping form. "Hang in there, buddy… ah, sorry… bad joke. What I meant was; we'll get you out of there no matter how long it takes. No way are we leaving without you, right Ames?"

"Mmm-hmm," Amy cheerily replied, as if to lift Tails' spirits. "We're trying as hard as we can, Tails. We won't let you down."

"Well, we will literally let you down. From that thing, I mean." Sonic continued to stare at Tails, his shaken nerves eased partially by how peaceful the fox looked despite the nightmare of metal around him. The only comfort he could take from this situation was the fact that Tails couldn't see what was happening to him.

Then Tails opened his eyes.

Sonic leapt to his feet, his heart leaping up just as quickly. Tails' eyes opened wide, his pupils shrinking as his face filled with fear. He started to struggle against the machine, tears pouring along his face, and from beneath his mask Sonic heard the shrill whine of his muffled screaming.

"Don't panic, Tails!" yelled Sonic, waving his arms in a frantic bid to catch the boy's attention. But Tails' hysteria left him unfocused, and he continued to writhe in his restraints.

"He's gonna break himself in half like that!" cried Amy. "We need to do something, quickly!"

The sound of Tails' muted screaming filled his ears, and that fearful look in his eyes pierced into him. Deep inside he felt himself sinking, the same feeling of powerlessness he had experienced back at the power plant, when Tails had been just as terrified. He couldn't do anything for his friend then, and it looked like once again he couldn't save him when he needed it most.

"No!" he yelled, leaping forward and grabbing the machine with both hands. "I'm not giving up on you, Tails! I'm gonna get you out of there, just hold on!"

He brought up his leg and pushed it against the metal, leaning back as far as he could, throwing his head back and gritting his teeth. Pain surged through his muscles as he pulled with all his might, refusing to release his grip even as his knuckles started to tear through his gloves and his fingers began to slip. Something gripped him from behind, and he realise Amy was pulling on his shoulders, dragging him back and adding her strength to his own. With shaking arms he forced as much of his strength into his limbs, until the pain rose to his head and he screamed aloud. Amy screamed as well, and they gave one last, desperate tug.

Something came away, but it wasn't the metal. Sonic's sweat-soaked fingers slid loose, and he flew backwards, tumbling across the lab in an uncontrolled run with Amy hanging from him the whole time. He tripped over a sleeping researcher and toppled forward, throwing his arm out towards a console to try and catch himself. His hand smacked against the row of buttons, causing a loud beep to ring through the lab. Jets of gas poured from Tails' restraints, and in a flurry of clicks, whirs and rattles the web of metal unravalled itself, the heavy clamps bursting open one by one and the wires popping from their sockets. Amidst the cloud of steam filling the room Sonic looked up at where he had put his hand.

A large red button, above which was a sign that read: 'EMERGENCY RELEASE.'
"Oh, son of a-!"

Sonic leapt to his feet, pushing through the dissipating gas. When he reached the machine, he saw it had completely disassembled itself, and below it Tails clutched at his chest, coughing and spluttering on all fours.

Sonic vaulted a dozing lab technician and sprinted towards him. As soon as he reached him he swept the boy up in his arms, drawing him as close to his body as he could. Tails threw his arms around his neck and buried his face in Sonic's fur, his whole body trembling with enough force to make Sonic's knees shake.

"It's alright, Tails! It's over now; I'm here for you, buddy. There's no need to be scared anymore."

"Sonic!" Tails bawled. "They… they did stuff to me… they hurt me…"

"Hush now, you don't need to say anything." Sonic stroked his head. "Don't think about that anymore, just think about you and me, together again. Just think about us. You and me, little buddy… you and me…"

Tails continue to cry, and Sonic held him tight, repeating his mantra of 'you and me' and trying to project a shell of safety around them with his presence. Eventually the crying became a sniffle, and Tails' shaking subsided. Sonic lowered him the floor gently but kept his arms wrapped tightly around him until he was sure Tails could stand, then he held the boy by the side of his head and touched his forehead to the other, staring into his moist blue eyes.

"I can't believe they did this to you," he whispered, contempt bristling below his tone. "GUN have done some nasty things in the past but I swear I will never forgive them for this."

"Sonic, please don't get mad," said Tails, "cause you're not you when you're mad. The thing is, GUN are really just frightened of what I can do and... well..." His gaze dropped to the floor. "People do stupid things when they're afraid. They do things that are dangerous or harmful without thinking."

Sonic gently tapped Tails chin to encourage him to look up. "Don't be like that. You're not the same as these guys, so don't beat yourself up. Anyway, I... hey!"

His hand found its way down to Tails' neck. "You've still got that dumb collar on. Let me see if I can get it off."

A flash of white preceded a strike to his arm, knocking his hand away into empty space.

"Hey! What was that for?!"

Tails held his hand up, locked in his finishing pose following his backhand. Any sorrow or guilt vanished from his face, and he scowled at Sonic, a humourless aura surrounding him.

"Don't take it off," he growled. "It's the only thing keeping you safe."

Sonic rubbed the back of his aching hand. "What are you saying? You wouldn't hurt us, right?"

"I told myself I wouldn't hurt Rouge or Shadow. I told myself I wouldn't hurt Quinn or Eggman. I'm telling myself now that I won't hurt you. But I can't believe anything I tell myself anymore. I've tried to fight it off, but its power is growing. This collar is the only thing keeping it in check right now. So please, leave it alone... for all our sakes."

"If you say so, buddy. But it bums me out to see you wearing that thing. Mine made me feel like I'd
been run over. Repeatedly. By a steamroller. With spikes on it."

"If anything, this is the closest to normal I've felt in a long time. Not only that, but the colour really brings out my eyes, don'tcha think?"

He tilted his head to the side to show off the collar, batting his eyelids and flashing a toothy smile. Sonic returned a grin without thinking, as if the curves of Tails mouth were joined to his by invisible string, and he chuckled. The tingle of joy rippling through him, long dormant but now awoken again, seemed to reinvigorate his spirit. This was his Tails; warm, playful and happy. His chuckle became a high-pitched giggle, and he held his hand over his mouth until tears ran from his eyes. Then he could hold it back no longer, exploding with laughter that filled the whole room with its rapturous joy.

"It wasn't that funny..." mumbled Tails.

"Oh man," Sonic said, wiping away a tear, his voice descending in gasps, "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. It's just so good to see you safe, little buddy."

"We're not out of the woods yet," said Amy. "We still need to get out of this base, and these guys could wake up at any time."

"Yeah," said Tails, squatting down near a snoozing Mobian, "what's with these guys? They're all... asleep? What happened?"

"Wish I knew," said Sonic, "we heard this strange song, and then all the GUN dudes just zonked out on us. Then we saw this..." he glanced at Amy, "...this glowing ball of light. It lead us to you."

Tails scratched his chin. "Hmm, that's a little too convenient. Just when we were in one heck of a jam, too. If this sort of thing happened in one of my sci-fi books I'd find it a bit contrived."

"What do you mean? You think something's up?"

"I know something's up!" Tails declared, his finger in the air. "Someone wants us to get out of here, that much is clear. But who? And why?"

"Whoever they are, I owe them a chilli dog. As for why, well... maybe they're just super nice? They have to be if they're busting us out of this joint, right?"

"Hnnnh-"

Sonic clucked his tongue. "Don't start making the noise again. We can try and figure out who's helping us after we get out of here. Come on, let's move it!"

"Wait a second!" Tails piped up. He began to run around the lab, flitting between desks and rifling through papers.

"What is it?"

"These reports are all the data they've collected on me. It might help us understand how I ended up... the way I am now. Quick, grab as much as you can carry!"

Taking heed of his command, Sonic and Amy leapt to the nearest workbench, sweeping up folders and printouts into their arms until they could carry no more. Barely able to see around their loot and with paper spilling from their arms, they hopped over the sleeping scientists and headed for the door.
"This stuff better be worth it!" said Sonic as he waddled into the hallway. Three lengths of identical corridor stretched out to his left, his right and in front, and he flicked his head between them.

"How the heck do we get out of here?"

"This way!" yelled Tails, taking off down the left-hand corridor with his mountain of files wedged between outstretched arms. Sonic and Amy followed after, their eyes fixed on Tails as he weaved his way through the network of tunnels seemingly at random. Then they came to a corridor where the floor inclined upwards at a shallow angle, but at its end stood a blank wall.

"Tails, wait up!" Sonic puffed, trying to stabilise the papers slipping from his arms. "We need to find a map or something, we won't get out of here by guessing."

"I know. That's why I'm not." Tails smiled, jerking his head towards a point of the wall above them. There, in a box glowing with green light, the words 'FIRE EXIT' shone in white.

"Huh… would ya look at that? I'll never moan about Health & Safety again."

"You will, though," said Tails, eyebrows wiggling.

"Yeah, I totally will." They laughed, and with elation spurring them they sprinted towards the end of the corridor. The wall that appeared featureless in the dark now revealed a release bar, and Sonic hip-checked it, throwing open the door and allowing a column of bright light to flood the dark complex.

"We made it," said Sonic, peering through the light to try and catch a glimpse of the outside world, "we're free. But where do we go now?"

"We can't go home," said Amy. "That's the first place GUN will look for us."

"So we keep a low profile until we can figure out what's happening with me and find a way to fix it," said Tails. "This data should help immeasurably, but I need somewhere quiet to study it. I suggest we keep away from Station Square, and if at all possible, avoid being seen in case someone reports us. We're fugitives now."

"Fugitives?" Amy moaned. "But when I woke up this morning I didn't wanna be a fugitive! Do you know what being a fugitive can do to a girl's reputation?"

"Sorry, Amy," said Sonic, "but Tails is right. They won't rest until they get him back in that awful machine. We've gotta keep running until we can solve this whole mystery and put a stop to their plans. So it looks like we have no choice; we're fugitives, alright."

Amy's shoulders slumped. "Oh, brother…"

"It's not so bad. If I gotta run, I'm glad it's with you guys. Just remember; stay together, stay strong, and never ever give up. Now come on, let's get out of here!"

Sonic turned and leapt into the light. Tails and Amy exchanged a knowing look and a nod, then followed after, disappearing into the unknown and leaving the base to its silence. Silent except for the snoring and stirring of the GUN personnel, and the frantic clicking of a metal device that was earlier attached to Tails' chest. The clicking continued, growing faster and louder as the circular blue screen flashed with numbers and words.

SUBJECT: MILES PROWER.

DIAGNOSTIC COMPLETE.
ANALYSIS OF CHAOTIC POTENTIAL PENDING…

POWER LEVEL: ERROR – STACK OVERFLOW. NUMBER EXCEEDS MAXIMUM LIMIT.

The cool blue turned to murderous red, and a siren blared in low, deep tones that scratched at the walls. The words grew from detached reports to huge letters that screamed out from behind the class.

WARNING: SPACE-TIME INSTABILITY DETECTED.

DETERMINING SCOPE…

CLASS Z ANOMALY DETECTED. TOTAL EVENT COLLAPSE IMMINENT. LOCATING SOURCE…

SOURCE: MILES PROWER.

~O~
The sky above Green Hill Zone cracked open.

From a swirling ocean of dark clouds stretching from horizon to horizon the rain came down in curtains of freezing droplets that rippled across the hills one after the other. The mud ran like water into the lakes, turning their churning waters brown until they overflowed, and the wind surged across the valley, shaking every tree and shrub into fits from which a storm of shed leaves and snapped branches emerged. The bridges contorted in the gale, their ropes fraying and their logs desperately trying to cling to each other, the loops became tunnels through which the wind howled and roared, and every few minutes a blinding flash lit up the sky, the thunder smashing into the ground and shaking the very roots of the planet.

Deep in the forest, nestled beneath a mossy cliff face so sodden with water that a waterfall of droplets poured from it, a log cabin hid from the worst of the storm. The inside sat in darkness, the sounds of the upheaval outside muffled by the thick walls creating an atmosphere of relative safety and tranquillity.

Except for the screaming.

A tiny ball of orange fluff sprawled across the couch, its two large tails twitching. Every time the thunder roared it shrieked and cried, its high-pitched and primal wail rippling in the gloom, and it gripped the couch for dear life, shaking enough to rattle the heavy furniture's legs against the floor.

Standing over the terrified creature was a boy; a ten-year old hedgehog with deep blue fur.

"Please..." he begged, "please stop crying. It's only thunder; it can't hurt you."

As if to mock him the thunder rumbled again, drowning out his words and sending the fox into another shrieking fit. Sonic put his hands to his head.

"I can't make it go away!" he huffed. "You need to learn how to stop being scared!"

His words might have well have been silent for all the difference it made. No matter what he said, the kid just wouldn't stop bawling.

Why? Why had he taken this stupid baby into his home? He was just a kid himself; he liked to run and climb and play, not kiss boo-boos and read bedtime stories. Plus, he knew that fat egg creature was still out there somewhere, causing trouble that he would have to stop again. He didn't have time to do that and babysit some toddler as well.

But he'd seen the boy, alone and shivering out in the woods, and at once new feelings had overtaken him. When he held his hand out for him and cautiously a tiny hand gripped back, he felt a rush of something inside him, an overwhelming need to stay by his side and keep him safe.

Not only that, but things had gotten pretty lonely since his parents...

Sonic shook his head. He didn't want to think about that right now. But what would Mom have done, were she still around?

"Okay, come on," he said, gripping the fox by the shoulders, "there's no need to be afraid. I'm right here, I'll keep you safe."
He lifted the boy up and manoeuvred himself onto the couch, a task made more challenging by the fox's constantly flailing arms and flopping head. Sitting himself down, he heaved the fox into his arms, wrapping them around tight and pulling him close until he felt the other's heartbeat frantically pounding against his chest.

"It's alright; I'm here, you're safe now," he said into the boy's ear. "All we've got is each other now... little buddy."

Little buddy? He thought. Ugh. That's way too cutesy; I'll think of something better later.

"It's just you and me now. So long as we stay together there's nothing that can frighten us."

A drop of cold water splashed on his forehead, and he shivered slightly.

"Ah! Not the water!" he gasped, quickly regaining his composure and clearing his throat. "Ahem... anyway, we're gonna stay together, okay? You and me are gonna be best buds from now on, alright?"

The boy's crying became quieter, and his shaking less violent, though he still gasped and sobbed, his eyes streaming with tears. Sonic gently stroked his back, but he felt his resolve wavering; he wasn't sure what else to say.

Then it came to him; from somewhere deep in the recess of his mind. Holding the boy close he began to softly chant. His voice held no tune, and his words dropped from his mouth in clunky monotone, but he continued. For some reason he felt he had to do this.

"Hush now... little fox... er... go to sleep," he spoke-sang, cringing at how lame it sounded.

"There's... um... there's no need for you to... to weep?" What am I doing?

"Soon there will... no, wait... I mean... h-happy dreams are coming soon. And... and... um... oh, come on... um..."

"I got it! And when you wake I'll be here... too?"

Oh wow. That seriously sucked. I'll be crying in a minute if I keep this up.

But when he'd finished, Sonic noticed the crying had stopped. Looking down he saw the fox had a thumb firmly in his mouth, his eyes shut tight and his breathing soft. His little heart's frantic beating had slowed, and he felt his own heart answering in time.

"Huh," whispered Sonic, "can't believe that actually worked."

Sonic stroked the boy's head, the only sound that of the thunder echoing in the distance. The fox stirred slightly and Sonic pulled him in close, resting his head against the other and closing his eyes.

"Hush now, little fox..."

~O~

"Sonic? Are you okay?"

Sonic opened his eyes to see Amy staring at him.

"Huh? What's that?"
"You were mumbling to yourself," said Amy. "Something about 'waiting and you'll be near' or something. Everything alright?"

Sonic rubbed his eyes. "It's nothing; I was just... thinking about something, that's all."

A harsh blast of warmth enveloped his face, and his focus returned. He took a step back from the rusted barrel in front of him and the flames leaping up from within, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Sonic's thoughts turned to his surroundings. Compared to his daydream his new digs looked even worse than he remembered. They had found an abandoned factory on the edge of a small town, and after checking for security guards and vagrants they decided to camp out inside. The equipment had long gone, piles of rubbish congregated in the corners and the windows looked like yawning mouths of broken glass. The roof lacked tiles in many places and the dust settled thick over every surface, covering the husk of a building in a shroud of grey. Sonic sighed at the sorry sight; he'd been worse places, though not much worse.

Through a window Sonic could see Tails poring over the stolen GUN papers in an office bolted on to the main building, spreading them across every available surface, his wide eyes scanning the pages and hungrily devouring the data.

Sonic jerked his head in Tails' direction. "How's he doing?"

Amy shrugged. "He's okay. But good luck getting him away from those papers. Never seen him so busy."

"That's just the way he is. Most kids dream about toys or sweets; Tails would rather bury his head in a textbook. It's part of what makes him special."

"True." Amy looked over at Tails wistfully. "As much as I hate to admit it, that collar seems to be doing him some good. He's normal again."

Sonic's eyes fell upon the silver band on Tails' neck. The recollection of his own bonds made his neck ache, although the soreness could have been from where Tails removed his tracking device earlier to stop GUN following them. Despite his reservations, he couldn't help but see an improvement in Tails; his eyes were brighter, his fur glossier and his demeanour bouncier. Slowly the real Tails was returning, and as he resurfaced Sonic's tension melted away in kind. Though it left a bitter taste in his mouth to admit it, GUN had done them a huge favour.

"I glad to see Tails looking better," said Sonic, "but things are far from normal. He can't keep wearing that collar forever. What if it stopped working or broke off? And don't forget about our friends: Shadow, Rouge, Knuckles, even Eggman. Unless we find a way to restore their Chaos Energy things will never be normal again."

Amy chewed her lip, casting her eyes to the floor. "Well, at least with Tails back we might be able to figure something out. I must admit all this Chaos stuff is beyond me; I'm way out of my depth here."

Sonic shrugged. "Me too. I usually leave that sort of thing to Brains over there."

They heard a knock on glass, and turned to see Tails up against the office window, beckoning them to join him. They made their way across the shop floor and through the wooden door into the office, a small space presumably once meant for a supervisor. Filing cabinets lined the far wall and a desk stood in the centre beneath a ceiling fan with two of its blades missing. Other objects loitered about but they, like every other surface including the floor, were buried beneath a carpet of paper.

"Wow," said Sonic, taking care not to crumple any sheets too much as he stepped into the room,
"you've been busy. Have you seriously read through all of this junk?"

"Not quite all of it," said Tails, rummaging around on the floor, "there's still some interesting figures I need to look at."

"Found anything useful?" asked Amy. Tails didn't look up from the floor, continuing to rifle through the stacks of documents, spreadsheets and graphs.

"I had it around here just a second ago, now where did I - aha!" He whipped a page from the pile, sending the mess into a whirlwind. Then he went over to the window and slapped the page against one of the few panes of glass that was still whole.

"There," said Tails, pointing. "Look there." Sonic and Amy leaned in close to the sheet, a glossy black film covered in white shapes that glowed in the firelight from the other side of the glass. A few head tilts later and Sonic made out a familiar shape in the seemingly formless blobs.

"Woah, is that... your skull?" said Sonic, a smirk twitching on his lips. "Dude, that is so cool."

"What's that shape there?" asked Amy. She pointed to a patch of solid white near the top of the x-ray, a rough almond shape about three inches long and located near the front of Tails' skull.

"That… is a lump of Emerald Matter," said Tails, waving another sheet of paper. "According to these figures I took from GUN, it's specifically Yellow Emerald Matter."

"Emerald Matter?" said Sonic. "But how..."

An explosion. A smoking workshop filled with sparkling yellow dust. A bleeding forehead. These images flashed in his minds-eye, driving the flow of his memory towards the truth.

"You understand now?" said Tails with a knowing smile.

"The fake Emerald? But how... and wha-" Sonic started. Tails held up a finger to the blue hedgehog's lips, and Sonic fell silent.

"This is how I've got it figured out," said Tails. "When the fake Emerald exploded, it must have fired that fragment of Emerald Matter through my skull and into my brain."

"And you somehow didn't notice that?"

"The shard must have been incredibly small and sharp, travelling at such high speeds that I didn't even feel it go in. The only evidence that anything happened at all was that cut on my forehead."

"I thought that was just a scratch. All this time, the answer was right in front of me." Sonic massaged his knuckles with his fingers, biting down on his lip. "I shoulda realised something was up sooner, if only-"

"But Tails!" interrupted Amy. "Look at the size of that thing now. It's nearly as long as your eye is wide. There's no way you wouldn't have felt something like that making a hole in your face."

"Ah." Tails turned away, hiding his eyes. "That's the bad news."

"Seriously?" moaned Sonic. "There's more bad news?"

Tails didn't turn back to face him. "It's growing. The shard is slowly expanding, and as it grows it's destroying my brain cells. No, not destroying; consuming, taking my grey matter and turning it into Emerald Matter. The reaction is slow at the moment, but I fear it will only get worse if left
unchecked."

"Holy crap," said Sonic. "That shard is eating your brain from the inside?!"

"If only that's all it was. At least then I'd be the only one in danger."

"What do you mean?"

Tails turned back to face him, a weary sadness in his eyes.

"The shard is highly unstable; I imagine it's still reacting from the explosion that created it." He sighed, a note of exasperation in his voice. "And when an Emerald's integrity is threatened they can sometimes attempt to sap Chaos Energy from their surroundings to keep themselves stable. And at the moment it seems... I am its surroundings."

He stood up straight, closed his eyes for a moment, and then fixed Sonic with an expression that warned of painful words to follow.

"It's killing me, Sonic. It's destroying my brain and draining away my Chaos Energy, and the only way to slow it down..." He closed his eyes again. "Is to drain energy from something else. Or someone else."

He put his hands to his temples, and his eyelids screwed up. When he spoke his words were laboured and heavy.

"I can feel it inside me. Even with this collar on I can still feel its hunger gnawing at me, demanding I feed it more energy. People, Chaos Emeralds, plants, animals, even inanimate objects will do. Everything has Chaos Energy to some degree, and that means nothing is safe from me. If we don't stabilise the reaction soon, then either I'll die or everything else will."

"E-everything e-else?" whined Amy. "You can't be serious."

A shadow seemed to fall across Tails' face, and he fixed Amy with a fierce glare. "I've tried to fight against it, I've tried to run away but it's no use; this collar can only hold it back for so long, and sooner or later it will make me kill again, and again, and again. Unless this thing kills me first, I'll just keep going until there's nothing left. I'll kill both of you, and all my friends, and anyone I pass in the street, and it'll be all my fault!"

He fell to his knees, holding his fist against his eyes, lines of tears streaming over his hands and face.

"What have I done?" he sobbed. "I never should have tampered with that Emerald! I've betrayed my friends, I've hurt innocent people, and all because I couldn't handle a few bad dreams!"

Amy stooped down beside Tails, putting her arms around him and stroking his back.

"It's alright," she whispered. "You couldn't have known this would happen. We all make mistakes sometimes, don't we, Sonic?" She looked up at him, tipping her head quickly towards Tails, with a look that questioned why she was doing Sonic's job for him.

But Sonic's mind was elsewhere, the echo of Tails' words growing louder and louder.

*Bad dream.*

"Super Sonic..." he said into the air.

Tails' sobbing stumbled, and he looked up, past Amy and towards him. "What did you say?"
"Super Sonic!" Sonic snapped out of his daydream and met Tails' gaze. "What about Super Sonic?"

"What are you going on about?" snapped Amy. "Don't upset Tails any further! Can't you see he's not in the mood for games right now?"

"I'm not trying to - whatever. Look, I get this whole 'energy drain' thing I think, but what I can't figure out is what Super Sonic has to do with any of that. If this Emerald shard is making you hunt down Chaos Energy, why are you also possessed by Super Sonic? And what about the thing that got Knuckles? Or the weird stuff back at the GUN base? Are we just having the worst luck ever and everything bad is happening at once, or is there some kind of connection here? Because as far as I can tell, this shard is just one piece in a jigsaw puzzle the size of the moon! It doesn't explain anything!"

"Well," said Tails, rising to his feet and wiping off his nose, "Chaos Energy, thoughts, memories and emotions are all linked; what affects one affects the other. A lot of what Chaos does is a reflection of what lies within a person. That's why your Super form is so strong; it's your raw passion and will to protect your friends made real by Chaos. That, and a heavy dose of overconfidence." He lightly tapped Sonic's side with the tip of his tail, and Sonic scooched to one side to avoid its tickly tip.

"Okay, so that means..."

"I've been having a lot of dark thoughts about him recently; I guess the Chaos Energy just brought him to life in my mind, like a... a split personality, maybe?"

Amy nodded, but Sonic didn't find Tails' answer convincing. Tails was always either right or yet to be right; uncertainty wasn't his style, and Sonic knew this meant something. He felt his eyelids narrowing, and he tried to pull them apart so he didn't give his suspicions away.

"Alright, I guess that makes sense, but why him though? Why have you been thinking about him so much? That whole business was done and dusted months ago."

Tails' eyes darted to the side, avoiding meeting Sonic's stare at all costs. "Oh, er, well, I guess it must just be a... a random flashback caused by an environmental trigger or something like that. Maybe I smelled something familiar and it perhaps made me recall those events... maybe."

When he finished his ramble, Tails looked straight at him, and Sonic understood. That was a lie, a lie so transparent he couldn't fail to spot it. Though rarely seen in the past, he knew when Tails told such a bare-faced lie it could mean only one thing:

*I need you to ask me about this again. When we're alone.*

"Anyway... Never mind that. Is anyone else cold?" Sonic rubbed his hands together, breathing a pale mist. "It's freezing in here, and we can't do much more thinking with cold brains. Let's go sit by our hobo barrel and warm up."

The others agreed, and together they headed over to the rusty barrel, its flames lessened but still radiating a gentle warmth. Pulling up some cardboard boxes to use as makeshift chairs they sat down beside the fire. Tails parked himself between Sonic and Amy, wrapping a tail around each of them and pulling them close to him, enveloping them in soft and warm fluff that tickled the back of Sonic's neck. Sonic put his arm around of Tail's shoulders and felt Amy's arm doing the same from the other side. They both leaned in, resting their heads against his. Sonic closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the fire mingle with the warmth rising in his heart.

"Even after everything that's happened," said Tails, his eyes glowing in the firelight, "we're still
together. I'm so happy you guys are with me and I know we'll get through this if we believe in each other, just like we always have."

"Believing in each other is all well and good," said Amy, "but we still need to figure out a way to stop that shard from doing any more damage. Isn't there some way to get it out of your head?"

"Maybe we could just yank it out?"

"Don't say stuff like that, Sonic," said Tails. "I'm having visions of you shoving a pair of chopsticks into my face. Brain surgery is best left to professionals, I think. Besides, I'm not sure removing it manually would be such a good idea."

"We can't just leave it in there," Sonic moaned.

"I'm not saying that. I'm saying that at the moment I suspect my body is acting as a kind of buffer to the shard's effects. Removing that buffer could have disastrous consequences. Not only that, but any device we might use to extract it could be destroyed when it comes into contact. No, I have a better idea."

He scratched his chin, his eyes widening as new insight took him over.

"We send the Emeralds into the Special Zone!"

"Huh?" said Sonic. "That plan again? I thought that was supposed to be bait for the Emerald thief. But that turned out to be you, so why would we need to do that?"

Tails flicked the back of Sonic's ear with his namesake. "Listen and I'll tell you, numbskull. The fake Emerald acts like a real one for the most part. If we send out the signal then the shard should jump to the Special Zone like the others."

"But you said it was dangerous to remove it from your head," Amy chimed in.

"In this dimension, yes. But the Special Zone is a realm of pure Chaos. In that environment the shard should stabilise and become inert."

"And then what?" asked Sonic.

"Then we go into the Special Zone and find the shard just like we would find an Emerald there. With the right equipment and a bit of luck, I should be able to reverse the energy transfer and restore everything that was taken."

"Everything? Including -?"

"Yes, Sonic; including Shadow. Everything that's happened will be undone, and this nightmare will be finally be over."

Sonic pulled Tails into a crushing embrace. "That's the best news I've heard in a long time, buddy! Finally, things are looking up for us!"

"But how will we send the right signal?" asked Amy. "We don't have any equipment here, and even you can't make that signal from a few sticks and a box of old screws. Your workshop is wrecked, Eggman's base is wrecked; how else can we do something like that?"

Tails freed himself from Sonic's grip, then stood up and looked out of the window to the wasteland outside, and the rows of silhouetted buildings in the distance.
"This town is Opal Springs in the Leaf Forest Zone, about 60 miles southwest of Station Square. That means it should be nearby."

"What should?" said Sonic.

"The Lewis Institute for Chaos Research!" Tails span around, beaming. "A whole facility full of cutting edge Chaos technology! Oh how I've always wanted to go there!"

"We're not going on a day-trip!" Sonic rubbed his forehead. "I'm guessing these guys will be able to send the signal for us?"

"Ah, here's the thing..." Tails looked down at his feet, kicking his heel in the dust.

"What's the catch?" Sonic said, his tone that of a slightly disappointed parent.

"The Institute's research is mostly top-secret government projects; they're probably not going to let a bunch of kids walk in and play with their equipment."

"Maybe not any kids," said Sonic, standing up. "But remember who you're with; a little star power goes a long way."

Tails shook his head, his eyes rolling. "Of course, there's also the risk that GUN have put the word out that they're looking for us, and when we get there the Institute just calls them up and turns us in."

"So what do you suggest we do then? Sneak in and steal their tech?"

Tails eyebrows waggled, and a twinkle appeared in his eye.

"Oh brother," said Sonic, "I have a bad feeling about this."

"We'll head out tomorrow. It's the weekend so there shouldn't be anybody there. Right now I wanna take another look at those figures. Something's still not quite right..."

He wandered back towards the office, and Sonic and Amy watched him go. Then they sat back down on their boxes, exchanging exasperated looks.

"Woowee," said Sonic, "how about that? A heist to steal advanced tech. It's dangerous, it's exciting, it's slightly illegal yet it's all for a good cause. Finally something to look forward to!"

~O~

They had snuck out later that evening to grab some food, and found a pizza place at a retail park. After much cajoling and persuasion they had convinced Amy to go inside and order, figuring that out of the three of them she was least likely to be recognised. The teenagers working there didn't seem to take any special notice of her and before long she returned with three boxes full of steaming hot food.

Scurrying back to their warehouse lair, the three friends practically buried their faces into their respective pizzas, ravenously chomping down on the delicious slices. Though their clothes and fur were matted and dirty, their bodies tired and their spirits strained, the simple act of eating together made Sonic feel at home for the first time in several days.

Later, they had sat by the barrel fire while it grew darker and darker, until only the warm glow of the embers remained. Tails busied himself in the office, looking through the papers using an old head torch he'd found in a drawer, while Amy snuggled against Sonic and drifted off to sleep.
In an old generator room Sonic had scattered cushions he'd ripped out of some chairs over the floor to serve as a make-shift bed, and he carried Amy here and laid her down. He'd thought about how peaceful she'd looked then, and how exhaustion and stress were wearing down her pretty face. He really didn't want to have to drag her through this nasty business, but he needed a friend close by. With Shadow & Knuckles gone and Tails unstable, she was the only one left he could rely on.

He leant down, placing a gentle kiss on her forehead. She trembled slightly in her sleep, a relaxed sigh escaping her. Smiling, Sonic headed back to the main room.

When he got back, he saw Tails sitting by the fire in silence, His body completely still.

Sonic took a seat on a box, looking over at Tails. The fox sat with his hands clasped in front of him, his legs together and his tails limp. A vacant stare occupied his face, and for a while he simply sat without speaking.

"Sonic," he said at last, "I get the feeling that you don't trust me anymore."

Sonic recoiled slightly, but then made a 'pfft' noise and waved his hand casually.

"What? Why would you think that?"

"You don't get it; I can sense your feelings now, and I'm sensing a deep unease in you. You keep asking yourself why I didn't tell you about my problems months ago, why I of all people kept things hidden from you. That's right, isn't it?"

"Well, now that you mention it, it does kind of bother me, yeah. I mean, I know you have a good reason but it just feels wrong if you don't share things with me. We've never kept anything from each other before, so I kept thinking: why now?"

Tails still didn't meet Sonic's gaze. "I didn't want to tell you because I knew how bad you'd feel if I told you the truth. There's nothing you can do to help and I... I guess I just figured there was no point in bringing you down as well."

Sonic stood up, dragged his box over to Tails and sat down beside him as close as possible. Taking hold of his hand and squeezing it tight, Sonic spoke gently, his other hand stroking Tails' head.

"I wanna know everything, no matter how bad. We've always worked through things together, and this time is no different. So please, just talk to me. That's all I'm asking."

Tails turned away and sighed.

"Okay... here goes. But don't say I didn't warn you." He turned back to stare at the fire, clearing his throat.

"After the Doppelganger Crisis everyone kept telling me I was a hero and how proud they were of me. You, more than anyone."

"Well, yeah. I mean, you saved the day, buddy. We'd all be dead if it weren't for you."

Tails huffed and turned away again. "So everyone kept saying. But I couldn't remember anything that happened. After a few days of getting constant praise I started to believe I really was a hero."

"But I still felt strange, like there was this cloud hanging over me. I couldn't figure out why I felt this way, nor could I express how I felt to you. I guess I thought it would go away after a while. That was until my memory came back, and I remembered what really happened that day; what happened
between me and Super Sonic."

He closed his eyes, wincing as if in pain, before regaining himself and continuing.

"I was all alone. Everyone else was dead or had run away. It was just me and him, a twisted and evil version of you. He was so powerful; I couldn't reason with him, I couldn't escape and I couldn't fight back. I was completely at his mercy."

Leaning forward, Tails rested his chin on his hands, and Sonic felt his breathing become shorter and heavier.

"I was... I was so afraid, Sonic. More afraid than I've ever been in my life. He was holding me down, crushing me and drooling over my face and... and he just kept laughing over and over and staring at me with those horrible eyes. I screamed as loud as I could, I cried and I... and I..."

Tails face screwed up, and seconds later it exploded outward, jagged teeth emerging from a stretched mouth, irises twisting into crimson spirals. Sonic leapt to his feet, his fur standing on end and his heart racing.

"Go on, Tails, tell him how you pissed yourself in terror!" roared Super Sonic, before bursting into demonic cackling. Tails head snapped to the side, and his face instantly returned to normal.

"Holy crap!" said Sonic. "What the heck was that?! I thought that collar was keeping him under control?"

"Nnnnh," groaned Tails, bending forward and holding his head. "I wasn't lying when I said Chaos Energy and thoughts are linked; if I think about him too much it makes him stronger."

"Well, don't think about him hurting you then. Think about how you turned it around and beat that monster down!"

Tails sent an incredulous look his way.

"You're not listening to what I'm saying! I didn't beat him, Sonic! All I remember is blacking out and waking up in the hospital, and despite what you all told me, there's no way I came out of that situation on top. Something else stopped Super Sonic that day, not me. I've been living a lie this whole time."

Sonic sat down beside him again. "So what? It wasn't your fault everyone got the wrong end of the stick. You know I wouldn't have got mad at you, nor would any of the others. We would have rallied around you once we knew how bad it was for you, not called you a liar or a fraud. We're your friends, and we'll always stand by you. You know that."

"Of course I know that. That's why it's so hard to talk about this, because this is more about just being afraid. What happened that day..." His lip wobbled and his eyes started to glisten. "It changed me. Something deep inside of me. It... changed how I feel about you."

Sonic stifled a gasp. "How you feel... about me? What are you saying?"

Tails huffed in frustration. "How can I put this? All my life I've looked up to you and admired you. You've always been with me..." he pointed to his chest "...in here. Whenever I was afraid or sad I just thought about you, about what you would say or do, your smile or your laugh or anything really, and I found it would always get me through the bad times. No matter how bad anything got, I could always hold on to you for support."
Sonic smiled, but in his chest he felt uneasy about the direction the conversation might take.

"Then that day came and I tried to reach out for you, to gather the strength you instilled in me and fight that evil monster. Even if I died I knew I could fight to the end with your courage in my veins.

"But you weren't there. I reached out and you just... weren't there."

"Tails," pleaded Sonic, "You know I would've been if I could, but I was-"

"I don't mean physically. I meant the image of you in my mind. All my hopes and dreams that I built up around you were gone. I tried to find them again, to find something I could hold on to, but there was nothing.

"Then my mind just went into freefall. Without anything to hold onto I just fell into myself, down and down into a void of nothingness and the truth is... I'm still falling. I've been falling non-stop ever since that day."

"You don't wanna know what happens when he hits the bottom!" growled Super Sonic from within Tails' mouth. Tails shook his head again, groaning with pain.

"Tails..." whispered Sonic, "I'm sorry. I never knew you felt this way."

Tears now flowed freely from the fox's eyes, and his voice trembled as choked breaths escaped him.

"That's not the worst part. The terrible thing is that ever since then I've found that I don't feel anything, that I can't feel anything toward you, Sonic. I look at you and there's just this hole where my emotions should be."

Sonic tried to speak, to question Tails' statement, but his vocal cords froze up, the rest of his body following soon after.

"I've tried to over-compensate for it, to show you affection and the love that I know you deserve but it's all been fake. Even though you're right in front of me I can hardly see you. You're just sort of... there. These tears aren't for you; I'm crying because I desperately want to feel something about you but I just can't. It's all so numb inside; there's nothing there anymore. I look at you now and I feel... nothing. Nothing at all."

Sonic opened his mouth to speak, but within him he could find no words. Over the years he had played out a number of scenarios involving Tails in his mind: disappointment, anger, even grief over his imagined death. But he had nothing he could say to this; Tails hating him or resenting him he could find a way to deal with, but for his best friend to just stop feeling anything for him? Even in his wildest dreams he never would have believed it possible.

Every time he tried to say how he felt, to express how much Tails had hurt him with his words, his insides twisted in knots and his centre pulled inwards like he was imploding.

"I..." he managed to choke out, "I guess now I understand why you didn't wanna tell me this."

Tails nodded without a word.

"Wait, this isn't right!" said Sonic, propelled to his feet by a sudden burst of frustration tensing him up. "I don't accept this; it must be the shard doing this to you. I dunno, maybe it's draining your emotions as well. I just can't believe that you could... that anyone could just stop caring about someone else."
"This started happening long before the shard came along," Tails said, shaking his head. "It's nothing to do with that. I don't want to believe it any more than you do, but it's the truth, and I wish there was some way to make you understand."

Sonic threw up his hands. "But you must feel something! You care enough to try and spare my feelings, so you can't be completely dead inside!"

"I don't know!" whined Tails, holding his face in his hands. "I'm just telling you what it feels like. I know that somewhere inside me is everything I used to feel, but I just can't get to it. I want to feel whole again, I really do. You don't understand how difficult this is for me."

Sonic wandered over to the window, staring through cracked glass at the blackness outside, holding his arms across his chest with his back to Tails.

"Do you feel anything about... other things? Other people? Stuff in general?"

"I'm not sure. Everything just feels so numb all the time. It's like there's a cloud around me or a thick fog, and my feelings can't penetrate it. I can see so much more of a person now and yet I feel like I know them less, it that makes any sense at all; everything's becoming just energy to me now, and it's getting harder to see things clearly. The only thing that seems real anymore is... is..."

Sonic looked back over his shoulder. "Is what?"

A flash stung his eyes and an intense heat slammed into his back. A crushing grip seized his upper arms, pulling him back as Tails thrust his weight up against him. The fox's face appeared over his left shoulder, and he felt its hot breath in his ear, the moisture condensing and trickling into his ear. Though he tried to squirm, Tails' strength felt like a hundred rocks pinning him down.

"It's me, Sonic!" growled Super Sonic with demented glee. "I'm the only thing that matters to him now!"

"You!" Sonic gasped. "What have you done to him, you monster?!"

He cackled in two voices, one high and one low. "I reached into his heart and carved you from it, Sonic. Now all of that love and adoration has turned to fear and hatred! You have no idea how much he despises me, how every moment I exist fills him with an intense loathing that poisons his spirit. Every thought in his head is twisted towards hatred of me!"

"I know what you are now, pal! You're nothing but a memory, and a pretty lousy one at that. You only exist because of that shard; if we take it out, you're finished!"

"Oh Sonic, you really don't get it, do you? I've been here for longer than that silly splinter; it only allows me to come out and play."

"It doesn't matter! Without it you're powerless and Tails will be free of you!"

Super Sonic used Tails to pull Sonic closer, pressing his burning flesh against him and running his foot along the inside of Sonic's leg.

"I'll still be here, deep within his soul. So long as I'm here there's no telling what Tails might do. I've seen into the darkest reaches of his mind and oh... the things this sweet little boy is capable of. Have you any idea what he's going to do to you? To all of you?"

Sonic fumbled with Tail's foot, trying to push it away. His skin crawled as it brushed along his thigh, creeping far closer to his crotch than he ever wanted any part of Tails to go.
"Look, you keep saying stuff like it's somehow Tails who's the dangerous one and not you. What are you trying to pull? Tails might not be in the best place right now but he'd never be as bad as you."

Tails' body leaned in closer, pressing his cracked lips close to Sonic's ear, his voice a dry and coarse hiss.

"Do you know what it is to truly hate something? For there to be something that offends you with the mere fact of its existence? If you felt that way about something, you would do anything to destroy it, to wipe all trace of it from the face of the planet."

"What are you saying?"

"Tails hates me that much, and he will do anything to ensure I'm gone forever. Anything. You and your good intentions will just get in his way, and when the time comes you will all burn inside his fear and rage."

"Enough!" Sonic yelled, rocking his head to the side and pushing Tails slavering mouth away from his head. "I don't care what you say; I don't care if Tails never loves-" his voice wobbled on that word "-me again. I will not change the way I feel about him. Not for you, not for anyone!"

A low chuckle rumbled in Tails' chest. "Oh, but you will, if only for a moment. For the briefest, most terrible moment of your worthless life, you will truly and utterly hate him. I'm looking forward to it."

A long, slimy tongue ran along Sonic's face, its sandpaper surface chafing his skin and gumming up his fur. Then the weight lifted off his back, and the boy's distorted giggle retreated from his ear. He span around, ready to face the monster, but saw only Tails hunched over and gripping his head.

"Nnnnh!" grunted Tails. "Go away! Get out of my head, you asshole! Just leave me alone!"

Sonic stopped for a moment, stunned by Tails' sudden outburst. Figuring a potty-mouth was the least of their troubles, he ignored it.

"Tails, listen up! How much of that did you hear?"

"I don't know... There's so much noise in my head when he's in control. I can't remember much."

"Okay, so answer me this: Do you hate him? Do you hate Super Sonic?"

Tails looked up, his eyes darting in confusion. "Huh? I... I guess I hate what he's doing to me, what he's doing to all of us. But he's not even real; hating him would be a waste of energy."

Sonic marched forward, placing a hand on Tails' shoulder and locking his gaze with the other's eyes.

"So here's the thing: Super Sonic seems to think that you hate him so much that you're about to do something really, really bad to get rid of him. What do you think of that?"

Tails shook his head. "You can't listen to a word he says. He wants to divide us because he knows we're stronger together."

"But he's part of your mind, so he must be getting this from somewhere inside you. What are you planning, Tails?"

Tails wrenched himself away from Sonic, turning his back and putting his namesakes up as a barrier to stop Sonic following.

"Look Sonic, I know things are... not great between us right now. I know I said some things that
were hurtful, but at the end of the day we are still friends. Maybe things will never be the same for us again, but we shouldn't give up and start mistrusting one another. If we do that, we'll never get back what we had. You don't want that, do you?"

"No, I..." Sonic trailed off. Despite everything that had happened, he couldn't deny Tails' words. All his pain and confusion were a result of missing his friend as he once knew him. But he knew that if he ever stopped believing in him, he would never see his Tails again.

"The only thing I'm planning is to get this thing out of my head," said Tails. "Once that's done we can talk about whatever other issues I might still have. Heck, I might even go to a psychiatrist if that's what it takes."

"Think we might all need one after this is over, little buddy. Whatever happens though, I promise we'll all be here for you. Once we deal with this shard we can bring everyone back, and we'll all support you so you never feel alone again. Heck, I'm sure even Shadow will help if I pester him enough."

"Shadow," Tails mumbled.

"What?"

"Shadow. Twice now I've had visions of him, and you said I called out for him? Why though? I don't even like him that much."

Sonic shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe you respect him? You don't have to like him to feel respect for what's he about. I used to feel that way for the longest time until... well, you know..."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. There's something... more to this."

Sonic yawned, stretching his arms wide. "I think I've had enough of talking for one day. All these mysteries are giving me a headache. Let's get some shut-eye and focus on one thing at a time. The shard is our number one priority right now."

"Okay," Tails said, still staring into space. Sonic walked over to him and place a hand on his shoulder.

"Tails... I know you can't see me as I you want to right now, but I'm still here for you. I'll always be here. Try not to forget that, okay?"

Tails squirmed under his hand. "I know that, but I just keep thinking..."

Sonic held a finger to his lips, and Tails fell silent. Then he rubbed his hand through the boy's bangs and slowly walked away, humming to himself and muttering absent-mindedly.

"Hush now, little fox. Go to sleep."

~O~

Sonic was at home, which he found odd, because he didn't remember coming home.

Yet here he was, sitting on his couch. He couldn't fathom why he'd be here all of a sudden. GUN would surely be watching the place in case he came back, so why was he here?

He stood up, except he didn't. He thought about standing up, and then he was standing up. Then he heard a sound coming from all around him, yet somehow he knew it came from the back yard.
He thought about going to the back door, then he was at the back door. Peering through the sliding glass he saw several figures gathered beneath the big tree, and the air filled with the sound of children's laughter.

He saw Tails running around, smiling and laughing, and he smiled too. Then he saw Tails again, jumping up and down. Tails swung from the branches of the tree by his namesakes, Tails kicked a ball around, Tails chased Tails around until he bumped into Tails and knocked his ice cream to the floor, then Tails burst into tears and Tails gave Tails a hug to calm Tails down.

_Wait, what?_

Sonic realised that every child in the yard was Tails, all slightly different but clearly the fox he knew. He grabbed the sliding door's handle and pulled, but it didn't budge. He felt no resistance, as if it were locked, it simply refused to move.

"Come along, children," said a voice. "It's time for a little game, just like old times. Look now, I'll get things started."

The Tailses cheered, and the figure appeared before the tree.

"Shadow?" cried Sonic, his heart skipping at seeing him again. The dark hedgehog fumbled with something by the tree, and when he stepped aside Sonic saw an effigy of himself dangling from the branches.

"Okay," said Shadow, "who wants to go first?"

The Tailses threw up their hands in a messy chorus of 'Me! Me!' until Shadow chose one from the crowd. He slipped a blindfold over the fox's eyes then handed him a long stick. The Tails stumbled forward, taking a few weedy swings at the Sonic piñata and making it jump about.

"Like this," said Shadow. He stooped down and gripped Tails' hands in a manner Sonic thought looked almost tender.

"You have to find the right point," said Shadow, guiding Tails' hands to whack the piñata with greater force. "Somewhere in there is a tiny crack, and if you find it and strike it just right, the whole thing will be ripped apart."

Another whack sent the Sonic piñata exploded into shards of paper, and the Tailses cheered. They rushed towards the remains lying on the floor, then moments later they all began to cry, their plaintive and childish wailing piercing Sonic's ears.

Despite the surreal nature of the scene, Sonic couldn't help but feel torn up by the sight of Tails crying. He tried the door again but it still didn't move, and when he banged against the glass it made no noise. The Tailses trudged away out of his line of sight, and Shadow could no longer be seen. Instead, a new figure crouched over the shattered effigy. Sonic's fear rose as the figure gathered up the pieces and slowly stood upright, turning to face him.

_Blood red eyes. Razor Teeth. Wreathed in Flames._

"Well, would you look at that," said Super Sonic, looking directly at him and holding out the broken figure towards him.

"It's empty."

~O~
Sonic awoke with a start, his brow dripping with sweat.

"Wow... that was a weird one. I must have eaten that pizza way too fast."

In the darkness he felt a warm weight on his right side, and a gentle breath ruffling his spines. Then he remembered where he was; the generator room in the old factory, lying on a row of old cushion with Amy and Tails.

Except he could only feel the presence of one other.

He cautiously placed his hand on the figure beside him, and when he felt the prick of her spines he knew it must be Amy. Which meant Tails was missing.

"Tails?" He called out to the darkness. No reply came, and he reached out to his left with his arm and leg. In such a small space he expected to feel a familiar ball of fluff, but that side of the room was empty.

Peeling Amy's arm from him, careful not to wake her, he got up and headed to the door, turning its handle slowly to lessen the metallic grinding. Peeking out into the pitch-black corridor, he called out again.

"Tails? You there?"

No response again. Worry started to creep along his spine, and he considered waking Amy to see if she knew anything. Then he saw it; a light, so dim he almost missed it, shining at the end of the corridor.

He crept along the dark hallway towards the light, and as he approached he saw that it came from a slightly open doorway to his left. Realising this must be the supervisor's office, Sonic took a few more steps forward, placing his feet lightly so as not to make a sound. As he neared, he heard someone talking, and he recognised the voice as Tails'.

"It's good to see you," said Tails. Sonic's ears pricked up, but he couldn't hear anyone else in the room.

"What did you say?" Tails continued. Again, Sonic heard no reply to this.

"No, you don't understand... those words... you've said those exact words to me before."

Sonic slid along the wall, inching closer and straining to hear more. Who could be Tails talking to, and why couldn't he hear them?

"The shard is still active... this isn't over..."

Through the gap in the door Sonic could see Tails hunched over by the window, rifling through papers with the head torch on his forehead. But he couldn't see the other person from this angle. He reached for the door, accepting that the only way to get an answer would be to burst in on them.

Before he reached the handle, Tails spoke again.

"Sonic's dead."

He froze, a sudden jolt rippling through him. Did he really just hear that?

"I deserve everything I get... none of that other stuff matters... I killed him..."
"I killed Sonic."

Sonic flung the door open, leaping into the office and sending papers flying.

"Alright, what's going on here?" he yelled. Tails jumped backwards with a high-pitched squeak, the light from his head flashing in Sonic's eyes. Sonic scanned the room, but apart from Tails and his mess, it was empty.

"Tails? Who were you talking to just now?"

Tails gave him a confused look. "I wasn't talking to anyone."

"I heard you saying stuff; you sounded like you were speaking to someone."

Tails shook his head. "Erm... no. There's nobody else here. Maybe I was muttering to myself; I do that sometimes."

"It sounded like more than muttering to me."

"Maybe you dreamed it?"

Sonic's dreams may have been strange lately, but he knew he hadn't dreamed hearing Tails' voice. But with Tails denying it he didn't know how else to get answers.

"Never... never mind. I'm probably just hearing things in my sleep. Look, what are you doing in here anyway? It's way past bedtime. You should be tucked up with us on the cushions, if only so you don't freeze your tails off."

Tails went back to his papers and began shuffling them. "I'm sorry, but I just had to go over these figures again. There's just something in them that's bothering me..."

He slapped a page down, tapping it. "Look there; these chroniton patterns are indicative of localised time distortions around the shard; around me."

To Sonic, the numbers and equations covering the page looked like a bowl of alphabetti spaghetti, but he understood some of Tails' words.

"Time distortions? You're saying the shard's messing with time somehow?"

Tails turned over a sheet of paper, scribbling equations so fast his hand became a blur. "The distortions are tiny and scattered. As far as I can tell they're not affecting the flow of time in any significant way, but it might explain some of the strange things that have been happening."

"How do you figure that?"

"It's hard to say for certain, but these distortions might be giving up brief flashes of the past and future. Because we haven't received the context yet these events would seem strange to us. There's even the possibility that..."

Tails stopped his frantic calculations, and his voice trailed off as he stared at the page.

"What's wrong?" asked Sonic.

Tails screwed up the page and grabbed another, a river of graphite pouring from the end of his pencil. "I must have messed up; there's no way that could be right."
After a few seconds he stopped again, before crumpling up the paper and tossing it aside. "This isn't right; there's no way it can be..."

Another sheet, another flurry of equations, then silence again.

"No..." he whispered, "No way. It can't be... it can't be!"

He leapt to his feet, running around the room and grabbing other sheets of paper, scanning them rapidly before moving on. Each one he read made his pupils shrink and his breath faster.

"Impossible! That's impossible!"

"What is it?" Sonic said, holding out his hands to try and slow Tails down. "What's wrong?!"

Tails dove onto a heap of files, scattering them as his arms churned them into a whirlwind.

"This is bad! This is really, really bad!"

When the storm of paper cuts settled down, Tails sat huddled on the floor, staring into the distance with eyes like pinpricks.

"The shard... it's not what I thought it was. I thought it was just an unstable Emerald reaction, but it's worse than that; it's so much worse. If it were any worse we'd all be dead, heck, we might as well be for all the difference it makes. Oh no, this can't be happening... this can't be happening!"

"Tails, get a grip! Tell me what's so bad all of a sudden!"

Tails stopped babbling, then looked Sonic straight in the eye, his beady, fearful gaze sending a shiver along the hedgehog's spine.

"It's a Fracture Point."

~O~
This place only went downwards.

He took a step forward along the empty corridor. Just as he expected his foot fell sharply like he'd tripped and missed a step on a flight of a stairs. But the floor in front of him looked completely level. He turned around and took another step in the opposite direction. Same thing; a sudden drop that jolted his whole body and sent his stomach heaving.

Whichever way he walked and no matter how level the ground looked, every step forwards felt the same, always leading downwards. Even if he stood completely still he still felt himself moving downwards, like he was in the world's fastest lift going down, or a plane falling out of the sky.

Falling. That's what it felt like. Constantly falling, and falling *fast*. Even after all this time he still couldn't get used to it. Every moment felt as disorienting as the moment he first arrived.

When was that? He couldn't remember exactly. Sometimes it felt like he'd been here forever and other times he could swear he'd only just arrived. He could remember being here when he was seven years old, but he could also picture never seeing this place until he was in his eighties.

How old was he, exactly? He couldn't remember that either. He was certain he was a child, then middle-aged, then elderly then a child again. He was all of these things at once and none of them at the same time.

The only thing he knew for certain was this; it all started with that damn fox.

He had to admit he'd actually come to admire the snot-nosed little brat. Too clever for his own good but held back by someone so much smaller. The boy reminded him of himself when he was younger; he'd only wanted to set him free and let him realise his potential. He had no idea he'd turn himself into a monster.

Those eyes; he could still see those horrible crimson spirals drilling into him, somehow taking a hold of his soul and dragging it out of him. That's when the falling began, when he fell out of his own body and tumbled down those spiralling tunnels into this place; the place that only went downwards.

If this was the underworld, the place where damned souls go to be punished, then every religion on the planet had got it totally wrong. This place was no cave of fire filled with pitchfork-wielding demons, nor a devil's courtroom where his sins were put on trial; instead it looked like the inside of an office building, all drab carpets and repeating doors, glass-fronted rooms and sickly yellow lights inside a suspended ceiling. But nothing about it made any sense; corridors split into several snaking branches, some with nothing at the end of them. Some doors opened to blank walls or sometimes a sheer drop, and whole rooms folded over on themselves or twisted around a cylinder. If he so much as blinked the whole place would change again, or he would exit a corridor and enter it from the opposite direction at the same time.

The disorientation and loss of self he could almost tolerate, but he wished he couldn't see those other things.

He couldn't see any of it for more than a second, and usually only from the corner of his eyes. Sometimes he swore there were faces in the walls; laughing and leering mockeries of a Mobian staring right at him. He'd turn his head and they'd be gone. Same with the blood that seemed to drip from the walls, the shadows dancing in the corners, the fire that slithered like it was alive, the
huddled shapes that he swore must be corpses and the ghosts of trees flickering in the distance. They were there, then they weren't, then they were, and every time he glimpsed these phantoms he felt the same rush of fear along his spine, never softening or letting up. It was as if something here wanted him to be constantly afraid.

He'd seen them too; the other people trapped in this place. Only briefly, and always too far away to reach before the walls shifted again, but he could tell they were no vision; they were prisoners, just like him. The dark hedgehog far too calm carrying a shadow on his back, the beautiful girl with her mascara running like oil and the strange fat creature bristling with rage and regret. They never saw or heard him no matter how loud he called, instead wandering aimlessly through the endless labyrinth much as he did now.

What had they done to deserve this? What had he done? All his life he'd only tried to be the best he could be and he hadn't really hurt anyone too badly, he hoped. He'd rubbed some people up the wrong way, but didn't everyone at some point in their life? Nothing he'd ever done could justify this torment. Nobody could possibly hate him this much.

Except you, Daddy.

His father. Of course it had to be him. Ever since he arrived he could feel a malign presence behind all the insanity, and who else but his father could contrive such cruelty? He must have been waiting here since the day he died, waiting for the day his failure of a son would join him in the underworld.

He was the one who forced him to work for the family business, he was the one who told him to act like a real male; uncaring, ruthless and powerful. He was the one who beat him if he so much as expressed the slightest sympathy for others, even as a child. To Daddy, there could be no beauty in the world, only assets to be acquired and the rest to be destroyed.

But no matter how hard his father struck him he still loved the beautiful things in the world; the rainbows and flowers, the morning dew and the sparkling of jewels.

That's when it started; when his father caught him trying on his mother's jewellery at barely five years old. The beating he received that day never truly left him, but neither did his desire to hold on to beauty at all costs. It was the only thing he had left and he would not let it go; not for his father, not for anyone.

He stopped. Before him stood a set of double doors, the sight of which sent his fur standing to attention. Somehow he knew that his father waited for him on the other side of those doors. The fear rose up like freezing water, and he felt the warm trickle of urine on his legs. Tears covered his cheeks, his teeth clattered together and his muscles twitched endlessly, but he clenched his fist and closed his eyes, drawing in deep breaths in an attempt to steady himself.

He had to do this. He had to face him. Not just for himself, but for every little boy who just wanted to like pretty things. The world was so beautiful, and he would not let his father take that away from him nor anyone else.

Throwing the doors aside, he strode into a large atrium, its black marble floor cracked and scuffed, broken pillars lining the sides and the glass ceiling a gaping maw of jagged shards, the whole place like the after-image of a ruined cathedral. The serpents of living fire converged here, whipping at the pillars and slithering across the floor, and an acrid smoke filled the room, licking at his nostrils. High above, beyond the shattered glass roof he saw a light, a dazzling scar of sickly yellow light in an empty sky. Without thinking he reached towards it, a sudden desire to touch it running through him. Whatever was on the other side of that light, he knew he needed it more than anything. But he could sense to reach it he had to move up, and the only way here was down.
The ground shook, shaking dust from the pillars, and a low growl rumbled from below him like thunder. This was it; the moment when he confronted his father. He wondered why this whole scene seemed so familiar, like he knew what was about to happen, but he put the thought to one side so he could summon up the last vestiges of his courage.

"I'm here, Daddy!" He yelled. "I'm not afraid of you anymore! You want me to show you how much of a male I really am?! Come out and face me!"

The low growl shook the room again, then it rose up, shifting into deep laughter that bounced off the walls. Then it changed again, becoming a sneering, mocking voice laid on top of a vicious snarl.

"Daddy! Daddy!" It called, before laughing again. He balled up his fist, then pointed to empty air.

"The last laugh is mine, Daddy! You only ever cared about power, but do you know what I did with all your money, all your hard-earned fortune that only a 'real male' deserved? I spent it on clothes and paintings and jewellery and things that don't make you powerful in the slightest; the only point of any of it is to just look nice! And you know the best part? I spent every last ring in your dusty old vault on a Chaos Emerald, not because I wanted its power, but just because I thought it looked pretty! That's it! Nothing else has ever mattered to me!"

He walked forward, beating his fists against his chests and shouting so loud his voice grew hoarse.

"You hear me, Daddy?! That's what I did to your legacy! I've ruined everything you ever believed in! All your power and influence meant nothing to one little boy’s desire to own something beautiful! And now we're both dead, so you don't even have a bloodline anymore! The name of Quinn dies with me! You've lost!"

Quinn gasped for breath, then began to laugh the giddy laugh of a person without inhibitions. To say those words at last filled him with elation. He didn't care what happened now; a hundred years of torment couldn't diminish the joy in his heart. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling of déjà vu that had been following him for some time.

A crack like a bolt of lightning exploding stung his ears, and a bright light flickered before him, as if the air itself suddenly grew intensely hot. Then a figure appeared from the light, a lithe figure shining with sickly yellow.

"Finally decided to show yourself, eh? Not that it'll do you any good except to bask in my victory. How does it feel to lose everything, Daddy? Just remember that you did this to yourself; if you hadn't treated me like crap for all those years I wouldn't have felt the need to piss all over your legacy! If just for one second you had treated me like your own son instead of an asset, then maybe I wouldn't be laughing in your face right now! How does it feel, Daddy? How does it feel?!"

Then he remembered. This was the point where he always remembered. Every time he'd been here before. The figure laughed, because it also knew what was about to happen.

The thing wasn't his father, and he was about to die again. He'd wake up somewhere else with no memory of these events until he found his way back to this point. How many times had he lived this nightmare? No matter how hard he searched his mind he could not see a time when he wasn't acting out the same events.

He felt it, just like he always felt it at this point. The pretty things, the endless beauty in the world; they weren't there anymore. He tried to reach out for them, but they just weren't there. Now he knew why he felt like he was falling all the time.
He had nothing to hold on to anymore.

The thing lunged towards him, its mouth a cavern of jagged teeth and its throat a bottomless pit. With a silent scream in his lungs Quinn met the eyes of the beast, falling into those endless crimson spirals.

Then, as he had countless times before, he died.

~O~

Shadow didn't know where he was and he didn't care.

He didn't care about the way his every step took him downwards and he didn't care that he felt like he was falling even when he stood still. He didn't care that the corridors twisted in on themselves and the doors led nowhere. He didn't care about the creeping flames, the blood or the shadows of bodies, and he didn't care that he was about to die, again.

He knew that soon he would find himself in that great hall again, then he would fight and he would die. But he could not give up and end up wandering the labyrinth babbling like a lunatic just like Robotnik and that red panda he'd seen. They haunted this place like ghosts, muttering to themselves, shouting or pounding at the walls, seemingly unaware of his presence until he turned around and they'd be gone. Like everything else in this place, he didn't care much for them. They were only a small detail he could easily ignore. But there was someone else here he did care about, and no matter how focused he tried to remain he could not bring himself to ignore her.

Rouge. She was here too; he'd seen her stumbling about with her lipstick smeared across her face like blood, her clothes twisted and torn and her eyes running with tears blackened with mascara. She never noticed him, and no matter how hard he tried he could never catch up to her. But he heard the way she sobbed and pleaded for forgiveness; even when she was out of sight he still heard it in the distance.

Why had Tails done this to her? To all of them? In his mind these questions lingered but his gut spoke louder; it didn't matter why Tails had done it, only that he would make him pay once he escaped. That gnawing desire for revenge filled his veins with fire; a bloodlust that focused his mind and kept him sane.

No, it wasn't just that. There was something else that drove him forward and kept him steady. The presence of another, walking in time with his steps and breathing the same breaths. Someone as determined to face the evil in this place and defeat it.

He supposed it might be Sonic. After all, he had formed a strange bond with his blue counterpart that sometimes felt like they occupied the same space. Sonic liked to call it friendship, as if the simple act of tolerating another person somehow formed a connection between you and them. This connection was a real thing, a tangible force rather than a trite abstract concept.

A part of him wished Sonic was here now just so he could complain about his presence. What a strange arrangement they had, he thought; the endless strife that served as a test of loyalty, the inner strength fuelled by constantly trying to outdo each other. What kind of friends were they to behave like that?

What kind of friends would they be if he hurt Tails?

Irritation boiled over into a halted cough. Tails had started this; he attacked Rouge without provocation, and nothing he felt about Sonic could stay his hand. If Sonic got in his way, then he'd just have to kill him too. Yes, that would have to do, he told himself. Regrettable to lose someone
he'd grown to care about, but forgiveness was not a weakness he could afford to bear, or at least, that was something he still wanted to believe about himself.

He'd reached those double doors again. This is how it always ended: he'd step through, he'd fight and he'd die. Then he'd wake up somewhere else and do this all over again.

But he couldn't give up. Even as he walked to his death again he still couldn't give up. He had to escape this nightmare; for Rouge and for all of them he had to win. Somehow he knew that if he triumphed just once they would all be free. That other part of him that kept him going believed it too.

He was the Ultimate Lifeform, and he would not stop fighting until he won.

~O~

Super Sonic was bored.

How many times had he killed these morons? He'd lost count ages ago, but he'd noticed some of his methods repeating themselves. There didn't seem to be any more ways he could kill, torture or maim his victims that he hadn't tried before.

It had been fun at first, watching them break. The way they screamed and cried and begged for mercy brought him untold pleasure. He'd brutally crushed Eggman's ego and choked him on the vision of his dreams of power brought to ruin, he'd strangled Quinn with his pathetic daddy issues and Rouge... the things he'd done to her still brought a smile to his face.

He'd broken their bones and burned off their skin, he'd ripped out their hearts and plucked out their eyes, he'd smashed them, sliced them, choked them, twisted them and snapped them, he'd drank their blood and he'd swallowed them whole. He had done every despicable thing he could think of and more, but they always came back. Nothing stayed still in this place, nothing stayed dead or destroyed. This was his domain yet it behaved like it had no master, not even time or death could fix it in place.

And he was so bored of it.

Only Shadow remained interesting. Even though he'd killed him over and over, the dark hedgehog's resolve only seemed to grow stronger. His will refused to break no matter how much his body had done, and when he fought it was as if possessed by the spirit of another. Though he found this intriguing even that began to grow stale after so many battles and so many victories.

He wanted new toys to play with; new morsels for him to squeeze the screams out of, but Tails had let him down. After an initial spree the fox hadn't sent him anything new except a load of boring trees and wild animals. Only the true terror of a Mobian could sate him, only those moments before death when the fear of mortality collided with a lifetime of regret could soothe his restless spirit. He needed desperately to hurt someone; it was the only thing he ever needed.

He sat in the great hall, looking upwards through the gaping maw of broken glass in the ceiling to the empty sky beyond. There in the sky it hung, a fissure of yellow light pouring its burning rays into his world. This rippling, lightning-touched scar on the face of reality was the point where all things became forever his, the event horizon for which he was the singularity.

The Fracture Point. His Fracture Point. He owed his existence to it. Before it, he was just a memory, nothing more than a collection of electrical impulses in a child's brain and indistinguishable from it. Now he was a fact, a reality all of his own. But he wanted so much more.
He reached out towards the fissure, sending his thoughts towards it. Only he could reach the other side, his fingers reaching into Tails' brain to twist it to his will.

More, he thought. Send me more, you little freak. I need so much more. He forced his thoughts towards the gap, the force of his existence pushing against its edges, forcing it to peel open with a groaning wail like the death throes of an impossibly large creature.

More!

"No," said a voice. Super Sonic's focus on the crack faltered, and it snapped shut again with a burst of thunder. Standing before him was a boy, a little orange fox holding his face in his hands and sobbing, his two tails listlessly trailing across the floor.

"You need to stop him," the boy said through choked sniffing. "You need to become stronger. You need more power."

"Back again? Don't you ever learn?" said Super Sonic, before laughing. He rose to his feet and leapt across the hall towards the cowering fox, seizing his arms and imitating the boy's feeble protests with mock crying.

"Oh boo hoo hoo! I'm so small and pathetic! If only I wasn't so weak I'd be able to make the bad monster go away!" Super Sonic released his arms, then began to circle around the fox, leaning into his ear with a harsh whisper on his lips.

"It doesn't matter what you do, Tails! No matter how powerful you become you'll never be rid of me. Know why? Because this part of you will always be trapped here with me. This part of you will always be too weak to defeat me. And as you grow in power, so do I."

"P-please..." sobbed Tails through quivering lips, "l-leave me alone. I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

"Then stop, if you can. Just stop stealing power and this will all be over."

Super Sonic crept up behind him, gripping his shoulders and pulling him close, his burning face pressing up against Tails' cheek.

"But you can't, can you? You don't know how to stop. I'm in your mind, I see how you can't stop thinking about me, about what it would be like to destroy me. It's all you ever think about, in fact I'd say the idea almost... hehe, are you really so messed up?"

"I'm n-n-not g-g-gonna... I'm not..."

Super Sonic nipped at Tails' cheek with his teeth. "Oh, but you are. Time is twisted in knots in this place and that means I've seen all the things you're going to do. And you know what? I'm just gonna sit back and watch it happen; then once all your friends are dead and you see that I'm still here, your failure will be complete. It's gonna be a lot of fun spending eternity with you after that, Tails."

"No!" Tails yelled. A brief flash of blue light shot out from his skin, stinging Super Sonic's eyes and pushing him away. For a moment Tails seemed calm and composed, then he collapsed into sobbing again.

"Oh..." Super Sonic purred. "Like that is it? And there I was thinking you'd gone and lost all faith in him. No, there's still a tiny spark in your heart, isn't there? A tiny flicker of hope that you still might come out of this on top." He grabbed Tails by the chin, forcing the boy to look at him.
"I can't have him messing this up! Our future together is in jeopardy if there's even the tiniest chance of him saving you! Send him to me now and I'll completely destroy him. I'll take every part of him and grind it to dust! I'll devour his entire life from beginning to end until even the possibility of him existing is gone! Then you'll see how pointless it is to cling on to someone, then you'll finally know what it is to feel true despair!"

He let go of Tails, his anger and bloodlust fizzling into frustration, and he began to pace.

"You idiot!" he chastised himself. "Think it through! If he comes here he might just ruin everything... no, there must be another way."

He looked up at the Fracture Point, and a broad smile grew as a new idea took hold of him. With his blood running hot he channelled his will towards the other side of the breach.

*Listen to me, Tails. Submit to me and embrace my power. I don't care about anything else right now. I want you to do this and only this. Do it, Tails. Do it. Do it now. DO IT NOW.*

His thoughts grew from a hoarse whisper into a deep growl then into a full-throated shout before erupting as a scream louder than a hurricane. His singular focus on two words forced its way through the crack and into Tails' mind, repeating over and over until it completely dominated his thoughts:

*KILL SONIC.*

~O~
"You have got to be kidding me!"

In the cold dark of the factory office, lit only by the pinprick of light shining from a head-torch, this was the first thing anyone had said for some time.

Sonic leaned against an old filing cabinet, while Tails sat on a workbench with his legs dangling. Amy, who had been rudely roused from her slumber and hauled into the office by Sonic, sat cross-legged on the carpet of papers scattered across the floor.

"You're telling us there's a... a hole in our universe," said Sonic, "and that bits of our world are falling through it into another universe?"

"What are we talking about again?" asked Amy through a yawn. "I'm tired and I wasn't really listening."

"I wish it were that simple," said Tails. "If it were only another universe it wouldn't be so bad, but a Fracture Point can only form between different dimensions... between entirely different realities."

"I don't get it," said Amy. "There's portals to other dimensions all over the place like big rings and star posts and stuff. What makes something a Fracture Point?"

"What do all those portals have in common?" asked Tails.

"Er... well, I guess... I don't know."

"They all go to the Special Zone, right?" said Sonic.

"Exactly." Tails hopped down from the workbench, grabbing a sheet of paper and a pen. "And to get to any parallel universe you have to go through the Special Zone, and there's the difference. Look, I'll show you."

He got down on all fours, put the paper on the floor and began drawing. Sonic and Amy crowded around, straining their eyes under the torchlight.

Tails drew a circle in the centre of the page. "This is the Special Zone." He drew another smaller circle to one side that slightly overlapped the larger one. "This is our universe here, and these..." Some frantic scribbling left lots of small circles and ovals surrounding the central circle but all touching it, even if only slightly. "These are the billions upon billions of parallel universes out there. All slightly different, with alternate versions of me and you and everyone else, but fundamentally working the same way as our universe. The reason why is..." He tapped the central circle with his pen.

"The Special Zone," said Sonic.

"Right. The Special Zone is the anchor that keeps the multiverse stable. The laws of physics are aligned and the balance of energy is maintained. It's theorised that all the paradoxes and disruption that should happen when travelling between universes end up there, get resolved and returned safely to their point of origin. It's like a... like a recycling centre for faulty bits of reality, I guess."

"Explains why the place is so messed up," said Sonic. "So a Fracture Point is what, exactly?"
"Like I said, it's a portal to another universe. But explicitly not a universe that interacts with the Special Zone. A universe with completely different laws of physics, energy, everything." Tails drew a small circle on the far edge of the 'Our Universe' circle, nowhere near the 'Special Zone' circle.

"A Fracture Point is like a scar on existence. It's two points of reality that should never have touched. It can't close because the differences between the realities can't resolve themselves. But I can't believe I'm even telling you about them; they're part of a totally crackpot theory, I'm talking the fringiest fringe on the fringes of fringe science. They're supposed to be utterly impossible."

He sighed, letting the pen fall from his fingers as he stood up.

"But impossibly… there's one inside my head."

Tails' head slumped down, plunging the dark room into further darkness as the torch illuminated his feet alone. Silence fell as the others tried to contemplate his words.

"Forgive me," said Amy, "but how is this any better or worse than what we thought was happening before? Fracture Point or not, the problem is that you're draining away people's energy, isn't it?"

"No… no, I'm not."

"I don't believe it," Sonic said. "Just when I was beginning to understand it all as well. What is happening here?!"

"It's not energy I've taken from the people I've attacked... it's their reality."

"Huh? What does that even mean?"

In the dark Tails began to pace, his torch the only sign that he had moved. "You know how in movies, when a window breaks in a plane or a spaceship gets a hole in the side and all the air gets sucked out because of the difference in pressure? That's what a Fracture Point is; a tiny, tiny crack in the universe, probably no larger than an atom, through which our reality is slowly bleeding away. The shard didn't just make a hole in my head, it punched through the fabric of space-time itself. And when I attack people I... I let the crack open a bit more and the air rushes out, so to speak."

"Holy crap..." said Sonic. "Then Shadow is..."

From the light Sonic could tell Tails faced away from him. "I'm sorry, Sonic, but there's almost no chance of saving him or any of the others now. If it was just energy it would be simple, but what I've stolen is their reality, the... the pure and simple fact of their existence. If I had let it then the Fracture Point would have taken everything they are: their bodies, their past, their future... even the memories we hold of them. They would simply be cut out of this reality and pasted into one unlike anything we know. No-one can possibly survive that."

"Surely there must be something we can do to stop it though?"

The light flashed around to face Sonic, stinging his eyes.

"Like what, Sonic? Do you even understand what you're dealing with here? This isn't something you can just beat up and it'll go away! It's a problem with the universe itself! No matter how much you think of yourself, you are tiny compared to the scale of this. You're less than tiny; you're nothing. We all are."

"Tails, please-"
"Calm down? Is that what you were going to say? You're right; let's all just relax and get chilli dogs while the universe dies! For goodness' sake, for once in your life take something seriously!"

"Now, hold on a sec-

Tails walked towards him, standing close in front. From beneath the bright light on his head Sonic could see his piercing stare shimmering with icy blue.

"Don't you get it? You're dying, Sonic. You too, Amy; Just by standing near me you're being drained away. Milliseconds of your existence are falling out of time and space, and it's only going to get worse. The more of our reality that passes through the Fracture Point the more it will spread, like cracks in a pane of glass, until it gets so big the whole universe is ripped apart and everything falls into the other dimension. That's the truth, and there's nothing anyone can do. So please…. just stop trying to save the day. We can't do anything, and clinging to false optimism won't help."

Tails walked away, and Sonic felt a rush of anger like a gust of wind behind him. He jumped forward, seizing Tails by the shoulder and spinning him around to face him.

"No!" He yelled, bearing down on Tails with a fierce stare. "I'm not going to just lie down and wait to die; not while my friends need me, not while you need me! I might be tiny compared to the universe but that doesn't mean I can't make a difference, and I will never give up while there's even the smallest chance of saving my friends. I'll do anything it takes, even if I have to dive into that other dimension with a rope tied around my waist. I'll fight to the bitter end just like I always have and always will. You know I always would, Tails, and until just now I thought you always would too. I guess I was wrong."

Tails cast his eyes to the side, and in the torchlight they began to glisten.

"Sonic... I'm sorry, it just... it just all seems so hopeless. I wish we could fight but I just don't know how."

Sonic bent his knees to bring his face level with Tails, his hand reaching up to gently stroke his face.

"If anyone could beat this thing, Tails, it's you. You're the smartest guy I know and I... you have no idea how much I respect you for that."

"Really?" said Tails through a half-smile.

"Yes, really. I know I always tease you about being a geek but seriously, we would be lost without you and your smarts."

A stilted chuckle left Tails’ mouth, but he soon became downcast again.

"It's my 'smarts' that got us into this mess. I'm too clever for my own good sometimes."

"And then some, but never mind what's happened before; I need you to be clever, little buddy. I need you to be clever for everyone's sake."

Tails’ smiled again, but his mouth clearly struggled against the weight of his doubts. Slowly, Sonic could see some of his confidence returning and with it he hoped Tails could find the feelings he had lost; the friendship he cherished so much.

"Wait!" said Amy, her voice erupting out of the dark. "What if you're wrong?"

"Huh?" said Sonic.
Amy stepped into the flickering edges of the torchlight. "What if you're wrong about the Fracture Point?"

"Amy!" moaned Sonic. "I'm trying to build him up and this really isn't helping."

"But Tails said that Fracture Points are just a theory, right? There's never been a real one before?"

"They're barely even a hypothesis, let alone a theory," said Tails. "It's just a wild scenario based on an extremely liberal interpretation of our current understanding of physics."

"So how can you be so sure that you know what will happen? If there's never been one before you can't possibly know what it will do, right?"

"Amy," Tails groaned, "don't be like this. As unlikely as this situation is, some of the math is pretty solid, and simulations have shown—"

"No, wait," said Sonic, "I think she's right. Math or no math, we can't be sure how a Fracture Point really works."

"C'mon, Sonic..." whined Tails.

"But don't you see? That means that anything is worth trying! Tails, you've got the opportunity to do science that nobody's ever done before! You'll be the first person to discover the truth about Fracture Points, and maybe, just maybe, you'll learn how to stop them!"

Tails turned away, falling into a particular form of silence that Sonic knew meant he was thinking extremely hard.

"It's possible... maybe..."

Sonic sidled over to Amy, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Nice one, Ames," he whispered. "I think we're finally getting somewhere."

"I just don't like to see you two upset with each other. And I guess... I usually trust Tails but this time I really, really wanted him to be wrong."

"You and me both."

"Thanks for taking my side back there."

Sonic pulled her in close. "It's nothing. You and I need to stick together until this is all over."

"Will it ever be over? It seems like every time we make progress something new and awful happens."

"We'll see it through to the end. Our friends still need us, just remember that. If it ever gets too hard, just think of the people waiting for you to save them. That's how I keep going, no matter what the universe decides to throw at me."

"Sonic... you're a good friend. I'm glad you're with us."

"Hey, it takes two to tango. You can't be a good friend without a good friend to be good friends with. We are all of us shaped by the people we love, and we shape them in return with our love."

Sonic could feel the heat from Amy's cheeks rising into a low warmth. "That's such a sweet thing to
"Eh." Sonic shrugged. "I've been thinking a lot lately; seems like the only thing I'm good for at the moment."

"Sonic..." Amy shifted her stance awkwardly. "I've been thinking a lot too, and I wanted to talk to you about-."

"Malchordium!"
The sudden outburst left Sonic and Amy blinking and dazed.

"Gesundheit?" said Sonic.

"What was it you said, Sonic?" said Tails, emerging from his contemplation. "You'd dive in to that dimension with a rope around you if you had to?"

Sonic shrugged. "Yeah, but... that was just me saying whatever pops into my head. I didn't seriously think I could do that."

"You can't... but Malchordium can!"

"Dial it back a bit, Tails," said Amy. "What in the world is Malchordium?"

Tails began to pace rapidly in front of them, one arm behind his back like a college professor. "It's a by-product of Chaos fusion reactions; a hyper-dense form of negatively-charged Emerald Matter. If we could supercharge a piece of Malchordium with Chaos energy that had been attuned to the wavelength of a stable piece of our reality, and then send the Malchordium through the Fracture Point on some kind of tether, the differential between the energy in the other dimension and the Malchordium would draw particles attuned to our reality towards it. We could then retrieve the Malchordium and extract the stored energy through a frequency modulator and restore it to its point of origin. Then we can prime the Malchordium with an omega-meson phase array to trigger a feedback loop within the Fracture Point, causing it to collapse! It's all so simple!"

Tails threw his hands up triumphantly, and he stood facing Sonic, a huge grin on his face and exhausted breaths pouring out of him.

"I swear you just make this stuff up half the time," said Sonic. "Is any of what you just said actually a thing?"

Tails' eyes swivelled so fast they nearly flew out of his face, and he covered his face with his hand, an irritated sigh leaving him. "How can I put this? It's like fishing, okay? The Fracture Point is a lake, the bits of our reality are the fish and the Malchordium is the bait. We just have to wiggle it around for a bit until we get a bite, then zip! We yank the 'fish' out, and we keep going till we catch the whole lot."

Sonic and Amy exchanged hesitant glances.

"You know, you could just say it all works by magic and I'd believe you. You don't need to be so confusing all the time. Plus if you say Malchordium one more time I'm gonna go crazy."

"Pah," said Tails, waving a dismissive hand, "I wouldn't expect you to understand. The point is, we might, just might, be able to save our friends and close the Fracture Point for good."

"Where will we find this Malchor-" asked Amy, stopping when she caught Sonic's disdainful glare.
"I mean… where are we going to get the 'bait,' if you know what I mean?"

"The Lewis Institute will have some for sure. I know it sounds crazy and it's definitely a long shot, but someone once told me that any chance is worth taking if it's the right thing to do, no matter how small the chance, and no matter how small you feel."

"Who on Mobius would tell you a dumbass thing like that?" said Sonic.

"Dunno, some dingus with an overinflated opinion of himself, I guess." Tails flashed a cheeky smile, and Sonic felt a burst of joy in his heart. He leapt forward and swept Tails into his arms, drawing him into a tight embrace.

"We're doing this, buddy! I knew I could believe in you! We're gonna - aargh!"

Sharp pain shot into the centre of his back, and his spine began to spasm and his muscles twitched like jelly. Another stab of pain followed, then another, then another, and each time he felt something sharp puncturing his skin, tearing through his muscles and slicing him open with its razor edge. He dropped Tails and fell to his knees, leaning on one arm to steady himself as the stabbing pain eased into a steady slow burning, and he felt a trickle of warm blood creeping along his back, a trickle which soon grew until it became a river. Looking up, he saw Tails standing over him with a distant, empty stare in his eyes, and in his hand he held a jagged shard of glass, its tip doused in crimson. Blood poured from Tails' hand, staining his glove red as he gripped down on the shard, seemingly oblivious to the pain.

"Tails!" cried Amy. "Are you mad? What the heck did you do that for?"

Tails slowly turned to look at the glass, then as if he had suddenly woken from a dream he gasped and dropped it to the floor, his face contorting into a grimace as he gripped his bleeding hand.

"I... I don't know. I don't even remember picking that up."

"Oh my goodness," said Amy. "You're both bleeding really badly. You need to get to a hospital, quickly."

"No!" Sonic grunted through the pain. "GUN... will find... us."

"What am I supposed to do? Just let you both bleed to death? There's nothing here I can use for first aid; you need an ambulance, now. GUN took my cell, so I'm going to try and find a phone nearby. I'll be as quick as I can, I promise!"

"Amy... don't! If they... catch Tails again they'll..."

But she had already turned and ran out the door before he could take another breath. He switched his focus back to Tails.

"Why, Tails? What the heck's got into you?"

Tails had fallen to the floor, cradling his wrist as blobs of sticky crimson dripped from his fingers.

"I told you I don't know! All I remember is you hugging me and then we both started bleeding. I don't even remember doing it! You have to believe me."

"I... I believe you, buddy... but we're so screwed now. Amy's gone to get an ambulance, and if they take us to hospital we're done for. Someone's bound to snitch on us to GUN, and even if they didn't I don't... gah, this smarts... I don't think it's safe for you to be near so many people in your..."
condition."

Tails motioned to speak, but the reminder of what he could do to people silenced him, and he looked down at the floor with a sullen expression.

"Amy's right though," continued Sonic, "we can't just bleed out like this. I'm way too awesome to die like this. I'd rather have my existence erased by the Fracture Point than just lay down and die; at least that would be more interesting than fading away in this dump."

Sonic continued to gasp and grunt as the pain tore at his back. The edges of his vision flickered with black spots, and a sickly, metallic taste filled his mouth and nostrils. Then he looked up to see Tails staring at him, his face gaunt and silent with intent burning behind his irises.

His irises that were now as red as the blood on the boy's hand.

"Tails?"

The whites of Tails' eyes began to glow, increasing in intensity until the shone with dazzling light that illuminated the small room. Sonic heard a noise like a sudden rush of wind, and within the wind he swore he heard familiar whispers and distant music.

"Oh no... Tails, listen to me! You can't lose control now, you can't! Remember who you are! You're my best friend in the whole world! You're a caring, kind person who wouldn't want to hurt anyone! You're not a monster, Tails! You need to fight the force inside of you! I believe in you!"

But the light continued to shine brighter, and the roar of noise grew louder until the whispers became screams and the music a grinding, hissing whine. Sonic's heart thumped so loud it threatened to drown out everything else, and his aching, wounded body trembled until the pain in his back became numb.

"P-please... don't do this, Tails. I-I'm you're f-friend, remember? You wouldn't do this to your friend, would you?"

His eyes blurred with tears, but through the haze he saw Tails take off the head-torch, and in its place a new light appeared, brighter even than the light from his eyes, a blinding pinprick of pure white shining from the centre of his forehead. As Sonic looked towards it, he felt himself moving.

He felt himself falling.

"No, please... don't. Tails, I'm begging you... don't... don't!"

The light grew until it engulfed his entire vision, and beyond it, he saw the start of eternity.

"NO!"

~O~
Amy had never realised just how loud her footsteps could be. In the dead of night and on an empty street devoid of any life her heels rattled against the sidewalk like one of those swinging ball toys that professors kept on their desks, and the following echo of each step rolled along the road and bounced between the darkened faces of the buildings. Sometimes the sound travelled back at such an angle that she swore someone was creeping up behind her, but when she turned around with a flinch, the street was just as empty in the direction she came from.

Stop it! She thought. If anyone was looking for her they'd have no problem tracking her down from the racket she made. She felt foolish for running off into the night all alone and leaving Sonic and Tails with their injuries, but she had to do something. Back at the factory there wasn't anything to tend to the wounds with; no first aid kit as far as she could tell and no rags or cloth that weren't filthy and would end up infecting the wounds. An ambulance was her only option.

But GUN had taken her cell phone, and in their haste to escape the base she hadn't been able to retrieve it. Now she wandered the streets desperately looking for...

"Oh, thank goodness!"

A phone booth. The glass box stood alone on the corner of an intersection, its white light a beacon shining in the darkness. With urgency in her heart she quickened her pace, the clacking of her heels growing louder. As she reached for the handle, something reached her ears, like a sudden gust of wind howling across the mountains.

"Amy..."

"Huh?" Amy's heart jumped a mile. "Who's there?"

But the street behind her stood empty just as before.

"Must have been the wind." She pulled open the door and stepped into the booth. At once a deeper silence enveloped her, and a putrid smell filled her nostrils. The booth looked like it hadn't been cleaned in fifty years, let alone used. Dirt and grime covered every surface, with an extra layer of dust resting on the phone unit. With scrawls of vulgar graffiti, colourful flyers advertising the services of certain types of ladies as well as a few males, empty cigarette cases and some highly questionable stains on the floor, the tiny space managed to offend all of Amy's senses at once.

This is so unfair, she thought as she brought her hand up to cover her mouth. I've crawled through mud, torn my dress, lost my hammer, been felt up by GUN's goons, punched in the face and now I have to stand in this cesspit and touch that dirty phone. Why the heck am I putting myself through all this?

A flash of blue appeared in her mind's eye, and her building hysteria dissipated.

"Of course," she said. "For my friends. It's all for my friends."
She picked up the receiver and brought it close to her ear, taking care not to let it touch her face. The buttons squelched beneath her fingers, and she held back a gag as it started to ring.

Sonic had told her not to do it, but he was just getting worked up. The chances of someone ratting him out to GUN were almost none. He was Sonic the Hedgehog, the hero of Mobius, and almost everyone respected him for it. He knew how much the people loved him, but she guessed the stress of everything with Tails must have been undermining his confidence. She didn't like seeing him this way; jumpy, irritable and paranoid. That wasn't the Sonic she knew, that wasn't her Sonic.

She shook the thought from her head. This wasn't the time to be thinking about him in that way. He needed her friendship to save the day, not her affection. And she was slowly coming to realise what really mattered to her.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Oh!" Amy could hardly hear the voice behind the hissing and pops clouding up the line. "Er... I need an ambulance! My friends have been injured and they're both bleeding badly."

"How many people are hurt, and do you know where they are bleeding from?" asked the operator.

"Two. One's got a big gash in his back and the other's sliced his hand open."

"Okay, are you with your friends now?"

"No, I... I lost my cell phone and I had to find a phone booth to call you. I had to leave them, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, you did the right thing in calling us. Where are they now? Can you give me the address?"

"Er... it's an old abandoned factory on the north side of Opal Springs. I'm sorry I can't be more specific. We were..." What could she say? She couldn't tell the truth; that one of her friends had gone nuts and stabbed the other one. "...they're drunk and they stumbled into this place and fell on some broken glass."

From behind the crackling she heard the sound of hurried typing. "The only disused factory I've got on the north side of town is an old car plant."

"That must be it! Please hurry!"

"I'm dispatching an ambulance to that location now. We'll be there in five minutes. Now I need you to go back to your friends and try to staunch the bleeding. If you have any bandages or clean cloth then wrap them tight around the wound. If you can, try and get your friends to lie still until we arrive. You got that?"

"I... I don't really have anything like that, but I'll see if I can find some. I'll go right away. Thank you!"

She put down the receiver with a soft click and breathed a sigh of relief. Five minutes wasn't too long to wait. Everything was going to be okay.

That's when she noticed him. Someone was leaning up against the side of the booth, resting their back against the pane and peering over their shoulder at her. A wolf with dark grey fur, he held a cigarette in his mouth, its ember glowing in his silver eyes. Amy's gaze met his for a brief moment before she quickly turned away.
Oh no, what the heck does he want? Her nerves tingled and her heart began to speed up. Whatever the wolf was after it would be to her detriment, she was sure.

She thought about picking up the phone and dialling 911 again, but from the corner of her eye she saw him watching her. If she tried that he'd surely pounce and then she'd be trapped with no escape. Better to head out and put some distance between them.

She pushed the door open, still refusing to look his way, and began walking briskly away, but making sure not to move so fast she looked like she was running. That would only encourage him; creeps like that lived for the chase as much as the prize.

"Where ya going, pretty girl?" He called after her in a nasal voice roughened by chain smoking. Amy carried on walking, not turning her head.

Just ignore him... just ignore him...

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Footsteps behind her, growing faster and louder by the second. Her quills stood on end and her breath halted as she focused on the sound, her senses heightening and putting everything she felt into calculating exactly how close he was to reaching her. She had one chance to get this right.

Her fist came up over her shoulder, and she felt the dull thud of bone against bone. The breath lodged in her chest escaped as a gasp, and she turned around to see the wolf tumbling to the ground, his nose clutched between his hands.

"Aaargh! You bitch! I'm gonna kill you for that!"

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" said Amy, before mentally kicking herself.

Don't make a sassy quip, you idiot, just run!

Cursing herself for her force of habit, Amy turned on her heel and began to sprint down the street, looking over her shoulder to check if her assailant still followed. Even though her nerves still rattled, she felt a rush of elation at her victory. She'd needed to punch something for a while now, and seeing that jerk take the full power of her fist felt so satisfying.

She collided with something warm, furry and solid, and her breath was knocked out of her. In front of her stood a huge brown bear, his massive frame towering over her, while beside him a lanky weasel leered at her.

"Well," said the bear, "look what we've got h-"

Instantly Amy's knee rose sharply, and she drove it into the bear's crotch. The huge bulk deflated as he wheezed and grasped at his nethers, his eyes watering. As he fell forward Amy grabbed his arm and heaved him over her shoulder and onto his back, twisting his arm backwards and making him cry out in pain. Then the weasel lunged for her, but she brought her leg up and kicked him square in the chest, sending him tumbling into some trash cans. Then her ears pricked up again; the wolf was coming for her again, but this time she could hear the thunder of a sprinter bearing down on her.

She leapt into the air, throwing her body weight to one side and twirling into a spin. After two rotations she threw out her right leg, catching the wolf's face just as he reached her. His head shot off to the side but his legs kept moving, sending him into a somersault before he crashed in a heap on the ground. Wasting no time being clever again Amy started to run as soon as she stuck the landing.
But something tugged at her from behind before she'd even gone two steps. The bear, still hunched
over in pain, had seized her dress by the hem of her skirt with his other hand. The tattered, mud-
stained and worn fabric began to crumble until it ripped apart, leaving her with nothing but a few
shreds and her undergarments to cover her.

"Hah, that's more like it!" said the wolf, leering.

Fear triumphed over embarrassment, and Amy took off again. Figuring she still had enough lead to
get away, Amy began to power all of her strength into her legs and the world began to race past her.
This was it, she was going to do it; she was about to -

Hard cold metal smashed into her. She toppled backwards, her vision dancing in blurry duplicates
and her head screaming. Through the haze she saw the architect of her downfall; a streetlight.

Before she could voice her anger at the fixture she felt an arm around her neck, pulling her upwards
and haulng her to her feet. She tried to kick out, to throw him over her shoulder but the dizziness
drained her energy away and prevented her from finding her feet on the ground.

"I got you now, you little bitch!" said the wolf. The bear and weasel appeared in front of her wearing
lecherous grins, and they tried to dodge her flailing kick to grab her legs.

"Hold her down! She's a feisty one!"

"Let me go!" shrieked Amy as she tried to throw her weight into the wolf and knock him down. But
he held her fast, and leaned in to whisper in her ear, his voice a saliva-soaked drawl.

"You won't be so feisty when we're done with you, pretty girl. Now be quiet while I-"

"SONIC!" screamed Amy. "Sonic, help me! Anyone... please help me!"

"Scream all you like," said the bear. "Ain't no-one gonna save you now."

A blinding light filled the street, obliterating the shadows and turning night into day. Amy saw a
dazzling point of light shining from the other side of the street; a point so intense it made her eyes
water just to glance at it. From within came a rushing sound like the roar of the sea, a sound which
seemed to calm her quivering heart.

"What is that?" said the wolf. "Cops?"

"I don't think that's the cops," said the bear, shielding his eyes from the light, "it looks like... what
the-!"

The bear turned away, but to Amy's surprise he froze mid-turn and became perfectly still. Then he
began to flicker, becoming more transparent until he vanished before her eyes, disintegrating into a
cloud of sparkling yellow embers.

"Oh no! Please don-!" The weasel put up his hands, before he too froze, faded in and out of
existence and imploded into sparks.

"What's happening?" said the wolf. "Who's doing this? I-" he stopped, and Amy felt the weight of
his body melt into nothing. She tumbled to the ground, trying to glimpse the light through her fingers,
to see what lay behind the light before it surely took her too.

But she didn't disappear. Instead the glowing points of light that used to be her attackers danced
around her. The cloud of twinkling lights swept past her before flying into the light with a rush of
wind. Then the light vanished, stinging her eyes with its sudden absence, and in its place she saw a figure hovering above the ground.

Tall and slender with shimmering golden fur, the figure approached her slowly, walking across the air as if it were solid ground. As he neared, she looked up into his shining white eyes and saw a face she never expected to see.

The face of Tails.

"Hello, Amy."

The figure hung in the air before her, a watercolour of her friend painted onto the night sky in gold and silver. His eyes shone with pure white and his fur rippled as if he was underwater, dappled and shifting light dancing off each strand. He looked like Tails, but he was much taller, taller even than Knuckles, and his face had none of its childish roundness, instead bearing the defined and handsome features of an adult. He wore no shoes or gloves, revealing slender limbs that held back chiselled muscles, and his tails, as large and as fluffy as ever, fluttered lazily behind him.

Though she pressed herself against the window of the shop front behind her with her heart pounding in fear, Amy's instincts couldn't deny what her eyes told her: this version of Tails was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Despite this, she still found the way he drifted through the air while barely moving disconcerting, and the ringing whoosh that surrounded him threatened to overwhelm her. She scooched back further as he approached, his arm outstretched towards her, but when she gasped as her fright escaped her, he stopped.

"Don't be afraid," he said. His voice sounded like a string ensemble, with layers of voices playing off each other with their subtle shifts in tone. The sound hummed in her ears; a soothing, warm flow of music tinged with a hint of sadness.

"I can't hurt you."

"You...," said Amy, her lip shaking, "You killed those guys... you just disintegrated them on the spot."

The figure tilted his head to the side, as if intrigued by her statement.

"Death is just a change from one configuration of matter to another. They have been reconfigured, and in time they will be reconfigured again. They will be reborn; without fear and without pain. When you see them again, they will no longer frighten you. You will love them as I do, and they will love you. You will be friends forever. We all will."

"I don't understand. What are you? Are you really Tails?"

The figure looked into the middle distance, searching for a response.

"I was. The person you call Tails is but the chrysalis to which I am the butterfly waiting to emerge. But he is damaged; still so afraid all the time and unable to escape a torment of his own making. Only when he finally becomes me will the nightmare end. For all of us."

Amy slowly rose to her feet, still keeping her distance from the strange figure. Though she feared she may be vanished at any moment, his words intrigued her, and she felt compelled to find out more about him.
"You're the one who helped us back at the GUN base, aren't you? I thought I saw something in that ball of light but I told myself that I imagined it. But it was you I saw, I know it now. Somehow I just know."

Tails gave her a quizzical look. "The GUN base..."

"You put all the guards to sleep and set us free, then you led us to the room where they were experimenting on Tails. I know it was you!"

"Interesting..." said Tails wistfully. "Yes, I see it now. Another hopeless situation where I must intervene to ensure my existence. I will do as you describe; I must."

"Hold on... you're saying you haven't done that yet? But how can that be?"

"Time is but a change from one state to another. To move within time I only have to reverse the movement of matter and energy to the right point and let it move again. I have done this before and I will do it again. You do not notice because your memories of the future are undone; only the timeline that prevails is retained."

"You're telling me you're screwing around with time? What for? What is it that you want?"

"I must exist. For everyone's sake I must be created."

"But you do exist! I can see you as clear as day."

"I will not begin to exist until a point in your near future. In order for me to speak to you now, a specific sequence of events must be allowed to happen. But reality is fickle and resistant to change; it opposes my existence and throws obstacles in your way to prevent my future from coming to pass. Even I am constrained to some degree; I can only manifest at points of high Chaos Energy activity such as the Master Emerald. Thanks to you I can now see such a point at the GUN base; the machine they used to analyse Tails processed a huge amount of Chaos Energy. It serves as a beacon drawing me to the correct point in time and space."

"But there's nothing like that around here," Amy scanned up and down the empty street, "is there?"

"You can't feel it, Amy, but at this very moment a terrible upheaval is taking place. The universe itself is hanging on the edge of a precipice. This disruption allowed me to find you at this point."

Amy took a step forward, squaring up to Tails despite his intimidating aura. "So why are you here? Shouldn't you be off stopping whatever's happening instead of saving me? What do I matter compared to the whole universe?"

Tails floated close to her, closing his eyes briefly and dimming the light flooding the street. When he opened them again, the light had faded, revealing blue irises shimmering like cobalt. He dropped down to her level, taking hold of her shaking hands and holding them close to his chin, staring into her eyes with a look that seemed longing yet weighed down with melancholy.

"Amy..." he whispered. "You are the most important person in the whole of reality right now. You are the catalyst for my birth, and the reason I exist at all. That's why I came to you; the situation I spoke of will resolve itself, but you needed me, and I needed you."

Amy's shivering began to subside, and she felt a warmth wash over her. Tails' touch tingled across her skin, his words entered into her and settled her troubled soul, and his sparkling eyes made her knees grow weak. Was he really saying what she thought he was saying?
"Tails, no matter how you feel about... look, you didn't have to kill those guys... I mean, reconfigure them or whatever. You could have just scared them away."

Tails' face fell, and a mix of pain and anger took over. When he spoke, his voice had lost many of its layers, and the serene calm of his voice became stilted and terse.

"And then what, Amy? And then what? You'd spend your whole life looking over your shoulder in fear of them. You wouldn't be able to trust anyone again, not your friends and not even yourself. I have ended a lifetime of fear in one stroke."

"But..."

"I've seen it, Amy. I've seen all the possibilities of that encounter, all the different ways it could play out. I've seen what happens when they succeed, what they do to you and what becomes of your life after that. I've seen iterations where it's a different girl they go after, or where you kill them in self-defence and can't live with the guilt. I've seen them kill you over and over and over. The only way to stop anyone getting hurt is to remove them entirely. Without them, the fear and pain they could cause can never take place. Isn't that better for you? For everyone?"

His grip loosened, and Amy pulled her hands away, taking a step backward.

"I don't know what you are, but that's not something Tails would ever say. He accepts life for what it is, the good and the bad! He doesn't try and control every little thing that happens, and neither should you. We don't decide our own fate, and it's not for anyone of us to decide someone else's."

"It's easy to talk about fate and take the moral high ground when you're powerless to change anything. But I can change things for the better; I have that power now. Tell me, how can it be right to have this power and not use it? How can it be right to stand by and do nothing while good people suffer?!"

"And what about all the people who've suffered so you can do... whatever it is you're trying to do?!" Amy stomped her foot down hard, brandishing her finger in Tails' face. "What about Shadow, and Rouge and..."

An image flashed in her mind, along with two words she had heard him speak earlier.

"Master Emerald... oh no... it was you, wasn't it? You attacked Knuckles and stole his soul!"

Tails turned his face away. "I had no choice. His visions would have revealed the truth and he would have used the Master Emerald against me. I couldn't allow that; I can't allow anyone to interfere. This has to happen, Amy. Don't you understand? I have to become like this so I can save everyone! It will all be worth it in the end, I promise."

Amy circled slowly around him, turning her back to the street and maintaining eye contact with him. She shook her head while her lips tightened into a disgusted pout.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. Tails would never do something so selfishly cruel. Whatever good you think you're doing isn't worth throwing away everything he stood for."

"You have no idea what you're dealing with, little girl," Tails growled.

"Oh, I think I do. I've heard plenty of villains talk about the 'greater good' and act like that somehow justifies killing or enslaving people. It's bullshit from them and it's bullshit from you. I don't care why you're doing this, but I know you're only doing it for yourself. If you ever were Tails at some point, then he died the moment you chose your own feelings over the life of another person. You're just... I
don't even know what you are but I want nothing to do with you.”

She turned and began to walk away from him, bile stewing in her throat from the venomous words she left unsaid. Her thoughts kept turning to Sonic; she had to tell him what she'd seen but how could she do so without breaking his heart?

No, she told herself. I have to stay strong. If we work together we can stop Tails getting worse and becoming that creep. Even Tails will want to stop himself heading down that path once he knows the truth. I know the future can be changed if we just believe in each other.

A flash of light and a snap of abruptly-silenced lightning appeared in front of her, and she fell backwards with her arm covering her eyes. Tails appeared out of the light, hovering over her. His eyes glowed solid white again, and his fur stood on end, crackling with golden arcs of electricity.

"You think believing in each other is enough to get you through anything, don't you? I used to think like you; naively trusting in friendship and thinking that it triumphed over all. But tell me this, Amy…” He raised his hand towards her, and a point of light grew in his palm.

"How can friendship triumph over this?!"

The light enveloped her, and she felt herself falling, faster and faster until she could hardly breathe. Then it came; a parade of images so fast she could barely comprehend them, only processing the feelings rapidly assaulting her heart. Terror took over her whole body, a fear more intense than anything she had ever felt. It gnawed at every fibre of her being, reducing her to less than nothing, and all the dreams and hopes she'd ever held dear shattered and blew away like dust. She was naked and alone, and she hated herself so much she wished the world would swallow her up and send her down so far that no-one could ever find her. But no matter how far she fell, she could still feel his touch, hear his laugh and smell the sulphur on his breath. And she could never stop seeing those eyes; the crimson spirals that went on forever.

She found herself back on the street in an instant, and a scream instantly left her lips. With eyes streaming with tears she clumsily crawled to the wall and huddled against it, holding herself close in her arms and shuddering.

"W-w-what was th-that? W-what did you d-d-do to me?"

"I showed you the tiniest glimpse what I am fighting against, what I am trying to save everyone from. What would you give to never feel that way, Amy? What if you could make sure no-one ever felt that way again? What. Would. You. Do?"

"Anything," stammered Amy, "I'd do a-anything, just please… undo it… get rid of those feelings in me. I can't take it anymore."

Tails stooped down beside her, reaching over to softly stroke her head. "They will fade in time. But I have lived with something ten times worse for every second of every day since then. It never leaves me."

"H-how? How could you stand it? I w-would have… I dunno… maybe I would have…"

"I know what you're thinking, and that would've been a truly selfish thing to do. I can't leave everyone to deal with this alone. The only way to be sure is to destroy it forever, don't you agree?"

"I don't know… I guess, but there must be something I can do to help."

He lifted her up to her feet and wiped the tears from her eyes. The he pulled her into a tight embrace,
his soft fur easing the quivering of her skin. She fell into him, burying her face in his shoulder and sinking into his incredible warmth.

"Oh Amy, I wish you could understand: you have the most important part to play in all of this. It's so close now; I can feel the timelines converging on the moment, converging on you. But... I'm sorry. Truly, I am so, so sorry for what's going to happen, but there is no other way. In order for me to be born, there must first be a death."

Amy's heart froze, and the warmth of Tails became as bitter as a winter wind. When he spoke, his words cut right through her like a knife.

"It's just a shame it has to be yours."

~O~
"NO!"

Tails gripped his head with his free hand, his arched fingers digging into his temples. With his eyelids screwed tight he threw his head back, grunting and moaning with his mouth contorting in pain. The intense white light poured from his forehead, piercing the darkness in a solid beam that pulsed with a vibrating hum.

Sonic's fear for his own life abated, but instantly a new fear replaced it.

"Fight it, Tails! Come on, little buddy, you can do this! I believe in you! Fight it with all your inner strength!"

"I can't..." Tails gasped, tears creeping from the corners of his eyes. "It's too much, I can't..."

"Yes, you can! I know you can do this! Just keep going and never give up! I'm with you, Tails, and you're going to beat this!"

He crawled forward, even as the agony in his back tore at him with every inch he crept. The blood ran thick now, turning his fur sticky and dripping from his tail. His vision was nothing but vague blobs of colour, and every breath felt like sandpaper running along his throat. He reached out, his arm like a lead weight and trembling from the exertion of lifting it, reaching towards Tails' bloody hand. He couldn't stand, he couldn't run and he couldn't fight the force inside of Tails, but he could do this; he would not allow himself to die until he held his hand one last time.

But before his shaking fingers touched the other, Tails cries of pain ceased, and the light from his head retreated back into him with an abrupt rush of noise, plunging the room into silence and darkness once more, the only sound that of Sonic's racing heart.

"Tails? Tails, you okay? You did it, buddy. I knew you could do it."

Tails' eyes snapped open, revealing two circles of solid white light that stung Sonic's eyes until they watered. Sonic fell back in shock, crying out as the wounds in his back screamed and tore.

"What is it?" He gasped through agonised breaths. "What's happening, Tails?"

Tails said nothing, continuing to stare into him with his dazzling wall of light. Then in an instant something leapt from his forehead; a snaking beam of yellow and white lightning that crackled with a deafening roar. The arc flailed around in the air as if searching for something before it descended and leapt onto Tails' hand. The fox grunted slightly as the bolt danced across his palm, then folded itself back into the centre of his forehead.

Before Sonic could comprehend what he was seeing the bolt leaped out again, this time soaring past his shoulder. Then he felt it attach itself to the wounds on his back. He cried out, more in shock than in pain, for underneath the tingling burn of the lightning the agony of his wounds began to fade. Not fading into numbness like an injury normally would, but stopping entirely as if a switch for his pain receptors had just been turned off. Then lighting jumped back into Tails, and Sonic gasped. His vision cleared and the air flowed freely into his chest. His muscles felt as invigorated as ever and he easily rose to his feet. Reaching around to feel his back he could find no trace of the gashes that had been there seconds ago, nor could he feel any blood on his fur.
"Tails... what the heck did you just do?"

Tails sat with his eyes closed again, sending the room into darkness except for the light of the head-torch lying on the floor. Sonic grabbed it and pointed it at Tails. The fox sat silent and still, and when Sonic pointed it at his hand he saw that his wound had vanished as well, his glove whole with not a spot of red on it.

He opened his eyes, revealing his baby blue irises, and an air of serene contentment seemed to take over him.

"What was that?" said Sonic. "Did you heal us both just now?"

Tails smiled, a muted laugh behind his mouth. "Healed? Taking something that's broken and making it slightly less broken? Don't make me laugh."

He rose to his feet, surrounding by an aura of energy and confidence Sonic had not seen in him for some time, yet the sight of it filled him with unease, and he instinctively took a step back.

"I erased the wounds from us both. Actually, reconfigured would probably be a better word. I took the pure fact of their existence and cast them out of this universe. Now they never happened at all."

"So how come I remember it?"

Tails shrugged. "It's an imperfect process. Echoes of things that are lost remain. I'm still getting used to how to use it."

"It?" Sonic's fur stood on end. "Tails, you... you used the Fracture Point, didn't you? You sent the wounds through it into that other dimension like... like they were nothing."

A broad smile emerged on Tails muzzle, like a snake slithering from beneath a rock. "Isn't it great?"

Sonic found himself backing away faster, and Tails slowly advanced on him. "You can't do this! You can't just delete things from the universe! No-one should have that sort of power!"

"You know the only people who say that are the ones without power, right?"

Sonic shook his head. "Listen to what you're saying! You're losing control of yourself. Don't let this thing take you over!"

Tails' brow furrowed, and his smirk fell. He dashed towards Sonic, lifting himself off the floor and hovering inches from his nose. Sonic backed up against the wall, pressing himself against it.

"You think I'm losing control? On the contrary, I've never felt more in control in my entire life. The Fracture Point is mine now, and with it I can do anything I want."

He reached up to his neck, and with a flick of his wrist he pulled the thick metal collar off like it was made of paper and tossed it aside.

"Won't be needing that anymore."

"Tails, stop this now. The Fracture Point is a threat to everything we know and love. It's not something you can just play with like some toy."

"And why not? Surely it's better to control it than let it run wild?"

"But you said yourself: The more energy that passes through it the worse it gets. You're putting
everything at risk by using it! And what about the havoc you'll cause by taking things out of time? You'll cause a parallax or whatever and mess up history."

"But what if you're wrong? What if I can stabilise it and resolve the paradoxes with its power. Just think of all the good I could do then; all of the bad things I could destroy forever, for everyone. No more war, no more sickness or sorrow, no more fear. I could bring peace to Mobius for all eternity, and everyone would be truly happy. Why wouldn't you want that?"

Sonic clenched his teeth, then stood forward, pressing his nose against Tails' and burning his stare into his eyes.

"Because I know what it would take for that to happen. You'd have to change people's hearts and take away the freedom to choose their own futures. If someone's manipulating your life to make you happy that makes you no better than a slave, and I will never allow anyone to be a slave. If you really wanna go ahead with this, that makes you no better than Eggman, and I'll oppose you just the same. I don't want to be your enemy, Tails. I've only ever wanted to be your friend."

Tails turned away, drifting down to the ground and letting his body slump.

"Don't you think I know that?" He said, the triumph in his voice deflating. "Ever since we met there hasn't been a single moment when you haven't been completely committed to me, committed to us. Even when we squabbled, your anger has always been born out of worry for me. You're so invested in our friendship that loving me is just like breathing to you now. You just can't switch it off even if you wanted to. That's why you believe so strongly in the power of friendship, because your whole purpose is defined by it. Being a best friend is what you are, Sonic. That's why everyone loves you, that's why I..."

He trailed off and fell silent. Sonic stepped away from the wall, reaching out for him in the dark.

"I make no apologies for that. I am what you made me. It's only through your wonderful friendship that I can be such a good friend in the first place. You're so much more to me than I can put into words. Sometimes I think of you not as a little brother, but as a... oh man, this is gonna sound dumb."

"I'm used to it. Go on."

"A son. I know that's a bit... but it's true. Sometimes I feel that way about you. It's why I feel all the things I do about you. Pride, protectiveness and... and love, I guess. I just... I just love you, pure and simple. And it's... what do they call it, unconditional or whatever, like a parent and child. I know you hate me saying it but I can't pretend I don't feel it. I love you, Tails. I always will."

Tails said nothing, and in the dark Sonic could tell his thoughts weighed upon him.

"I know you do," he said at last, "that's why it hurt so much."

"Tails?" Sonic put his hand on his shoulder, turning him to face him and kneeling down to his level. "What hurt you? What's going on?"

A flicker of blue light poured through the windows, and the scream of a siren grew louder, filling every available space with its shrill wail.

"Nuts!" spat Sonic. "Amy must have managed to call an ambulance after all. How are we gonna explain what's going on?"

On cue the door flung open and someone stumbled into the room. Sonic brought the head-torch to bear, revealing an out-of-breath Amy wearing nothing except her underwear.
"Amy?! What the heck happened to you?"

"I..." she puffed, her eyes darting over to Tails with unease settling on her brow. "I ran into some trouble. But I'm alright now, and-" She looked him up and down. "What the-? You both look right as rain! What happened to your injuries?"

Sonic threw a dark glance to his left. "Tails has some explaining to do, I think."

"Never mind that," said Amy, "what am I going to tell-"

"Hello? Anyone in there?" called a voice from the corridor. The three fell silent as footsteps grew louder, then the door creak open and a torchlight swept the room, flashing in their eyes.

"We got a call that somebody was bleeding badly in here; are you hurt?" said the person behind the light. They lowered the torch, and its glow revealed a female otter clad in the green overalls of a paramedic, a heavy bag slung over her shoulder. Behind her stood another figure: a male cockatiel in similar attire.

"Oh... yeah..." Sonic rubbed the back of his head. "There was... some guys in here but... they left. Don't know where they went."

The otter's brow furrowed, and her disbelief was evident in her eyes.

"Miss?" she asked Amy. "What's going on here? You told the dispatcher this is where your friends were. Is this some kind of prank?"

"Um... look," said Amy, twiddling her thumbs. "There's a perfectly reasonable explanation for this, I think..."

"You do realise it's an offense to waste the emergency services' time?" said the cockatiel, glowering. "Not to mention you're trespassing as well. I'm reporting you to the police."

"No, please!" begged Amy. "This is all just a misunderstanding!"

"C'mon, Vaughn," said the otter. "Lighten up, will you. They're just kids."

But Vaughn had already taken out his phone. "Yeah? And what if your kid was dying because we had to come here instead? These idiots will never learn unless they're punished. They need to understand the consequences of their actions."

He brought the phone to his ear. "Yes, I'd like to report-"

A bolt of golden lightning shot across the room with a loud crack, striking Vaughn and sending flickering arcs crawling across his body. He screamed, dropped the phone and then doubled-over in pain. After a moment he froze mid-spasm and his cries fell silent. Then he began to fade in and out, becoming more and more transparent until his image imploded in on itself before bursting into sparkling points of yellow light. The lights hung in the air for a moment before disappearing into the bolt of lightning still hanging in the air.

"Vaughn!" shrieked the otter. "What have you done to him? What-"

The bolt jumped onto her in a flash, and the same scene played out again; a cry a pain, a flickering, frozen ghost and a burst of stars. Then the bolt shot back across the room and disappeared into its source.
Silence fell like a shroud. Amy stood with her hands over her mouth, her eyes wet with tears and her head shaking. Sonic's mouth hung open, and for a moment every thought in his head froze, the horrible scene he'd just witnessed still burned in the front of his mind.

"You..." he turned to Tails with a quivering lip. "What did you just do? What the fuck did you just do?!"

Tails looked over at him, his face cool and dispassionate. "I solved a problem."

"They... they were Mobians! With lives and families and dreams and you just... murdered them... you just killed them without a second thought. Sweet Chaos, what have you done?!"

Even when he'd heard about the things Tails had done, he could still rationalise it away; the image of a good person tormented by a power beyond their control, struggling against it even as it made them do awful things. But the way Tails had struck the paramedics down so coldly, as if their lives meant nothing to him at all; that was not something he could reconcile.

"I didn't murder them," said Tails, as nonchalantly as one would deny tracking muddy footprints into the house, "I reconfigured them into a different state."

"As if there's a difference! They were alive in this universe, and now they're not! You killed them, Tails... you killed two people in cold blood! I thought you wanted to make people happy?!"

"Sonic... if only you could see what I see. I looked at them and I saw so much sadness and anger; an infinite number of futures filled with pain and regret. I will remove all possibility of that. They will live again, and they will be truly happy. Plus it solved our immediate dilemma."

Sonic's fur bristled. "Why don't you call it what it is? You've taken away their right to choose their own destiny and replaced it with your own ideas about happiness. You've enslaved them, Tails; as good as if you cut out a piece of their brain to make them behave. You're..." he took a step back, his confidence faltering. "You've lost your mind. You're totally insane. I can't tell where you end and that thing in your head begins. What are you now? Because you're definitely not the boy I used to love. You've crossed the line."

Tails laughed, looking down his nose and rolling his eyes. "Spare me your narrow morality. You can't even comprehend what I've become, what I'm capable of."

"Oh really?" Sonic stamped his foot. "Then answer me this, if you're so smart: What exactly is in that other dimension beyond the Fracture Point? Where are you sending the things you steal?"

Tails fixed him with a fierce glare, a warning etched along his furrowed brow.

"What's wrong?" Sonic asked. "Why can't you tell me? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid..." growled Tails.

"Here's how I see it: either you don't know what's inside that other dimension, in which case you're being insanely stupid and reckless even by my standards, or else you do know but you're afraid to admit it."

"Don't pretend you understand what's going on here. This is beyond you."

Sonic leaned forward, pressing his nose up against Tails' and smirking.

"I'm smarter than you think. Smart enough to realise that it's a teensy bit too convenient that out of all
those millions of parallel universes out there, the shard just happened to punch its way into a bad one. But what-“ he poked Tails on his forehead, "-were you thinking about when the Fracture Point was created?"

Tails shook his head slowly. "Enough..."

Sonic poked again, harder this time. "It's him, isn't it? It's Super Sonic. Your feelings about him are so strong that the Chaos Energy of the shard made him real, and at the same time the shard broke through to his dimension. He's not just in the Fracture Point; he is the Fracture Point. And every time you send something through it you're sending it straight into his waiting jaws. Have I got it right, Tails?"

Tails began to bridle, and his cool demeanour became more irritable. "You shut your mouth-"

"Of course," said Sonic, turning away and pacing, holding his arms up like a showman introducing his main attraction, "if I'm right that means your grand plan to make us all happy is pretty much meaningless. You're just doing Super Sonic's bidding. He's the one in control."

"No..." Tails said, almost to the air than Sonic himself. "No, that's not right. I'm in control now; his power belongs to me and only me."

"Really? And does being in control involve stabbing your friend in the back with a piece of glass? He made you do that, Tails; he pulled your strings and you jumped at his command. You're just a puppet to him now."

Tails’ eyes flickered scarlet, and his mouth curled into a bestial snarl. "I'm warning you, Sonic; you say one more word and I'll kill you where you stand."

"Ha! As if anyone's ever been able to stop me talking. Look at you! You can't even control your own face anymore! He's taken you over completely, and he's never gonna let you go unless you-"

"Shut shut shut SHUT UP!" screamed Tails. He lunged forward, his face contorting into a roar of rage, with jagged teeth erupting from his mouth and eyes spinning into crimson spirals. Gnarled hands seized Sonic’s throat and forced him to his back, before Tails pressed down on him with all his weight.

Before Tails could steady himself, Sonic hooked a leg underneath his thigh and turned over, sending the fox onto his back. Sonic pinned his arms to the ground, and he thrashed beneath him, his slavering mouth flinging foam across them both.

"What's wrong?" said Sonic. "Why don't you just erase me? Go on, use your greased lightning and send me to your master, like you have for all the others. Then you won't have to worry about me interfering with your plans, will you? So go on; do it, I dare you! Do it!"

But Tails continued to wiggle, heaving and panting with hot breaths that scraped against the air.

"You can't, can you? It's not so easy to justify it when it's me, is it? If you're so sure what you're doing is right, you shouldn't have any problem 'reconfiguring' me, should you? But if there's even a tiny part of you that realises the evil things you've done then you won't be able to do it. This is your chance to prove to me whether there's anything left of my friend worth saving."

Tails’ grunting and struggling eased, and he fell still. Though his face still retained its monstrous appearance, Sonic could tell that something else lurked behind it: A tiny glimmer of sorrow.

"Help me..."
Sonic rested his hand against Tails' cheek. "I will. But you need to help me, little buddy. I need you to fight against this. Together, we can beat this thing. I know that if we just bel-"

Something slammed into the back of his head, and a dark fog clouded his vision. He toppled from on top of Tails and onto his back.

"Arrgh! What the heck was that?"

As the swirling colours of his vision began to sharpen, he saw Amy standing over him, brandishing a length of wood, an empty, distant stare in her eyes.

"Amy?! What was that for? Have you lost your mind?!"

She brought down the wood again, striking him across the face. Before he could react she swung again and again, until she slammed the plank down on the top of his head so hard it snapped in two. Sonic collapsed onto his back, his head throbbing and his vision spinning.

"Amy..." he managed to grunt, "why?"

"I'm sorry, Sonic," she said through barely-restrained sobs, "but you're wrong; about Tails, about us, about everything. Everything you've ever believed in is a lie."

"How... how can you say that?"

"I've seen it; the truth of our existence. All the good we've done, all the lives we've saved; none of it matters. Everything we do is pointless."

"No... that's not true. We can make a difference."

"In this universe, maybe. But for every victory in our world there's an infinite number of worlds where we fail. All the people we help here are suffering over there, every villain we stop succeeds elsewhere, and every good deed we do is undone by something evil in another world. If we achieve world peace here that means another world is torn apart by war. If I find love here, have a family and live a long and happy life then another version of me dies alone in a gutter. How can I carry on knowing that our happiness condemns others to misery and death? How can I just accept that?!"

Sonic tried to stand, but the pain spread to the rest of his body, and he struggled to lift himself an inch. "That's... just life, Amy. We have to accept that not everything will be great all the time. It's up to all of us to make it what it is. We give it meaning by our actions, even when we know it's no good in the long run. We do what we can, because it's the right thing, is all. Why does it have to be more than that?"

"You don't get it, Sonic; reality is broken, and your little pep talks can't fix it. Only Tails has the power to make things right, once and for all."

She held out her hand to Tails, lifting him up off the floor, where he dusted himself off.

"C'mon, Tails, we don't need him anymore. Everyone's counting on you now. Let's finish this."

Amy stood over Sonic, her feet either side of his prone figure and holding the broken length of wood behind her head like a club. Her fingers shifted restlessly along the shaft, and tears streamed along her muzzle.

"I'm sorry, Sonic, but your part in this story is over. We can't have you following us, so it's time for you to have a little nap. I promise this won't hurt for long."
She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, her muscles tensing up as she prepared to bring down her weapon with all her strength.

"As little as I'm sure this means right now, I am really, really sorry."

"Yeah?" said Sonic. "Well, so am I."

"Huh?"

Sonic brought his right leg up and placed his foot square against Amy's chest. A slight twitch moved his leg by less than an inch, and Amy shot backwards, flying into the air and into the office window. The flimsy frame mostly devoid of glass exploded into a shower a rotting wood as Amy crashed through it without slowing, disappearing into the darkness in a trail of dust.

With adrenaline surging through him and no time to regret his actions, Sonic propelled himself from the ground, throwing himself into a somersault and landing on his feet. The pain of Amy's assault fizzled out, swamped by the fire in his veins.

Tails stood with his mouth agape, and before he could blink Sonic shot towards him, throwing a spinning kick into his head. Tails took off like a firework, shooting up at a forty-five degree angle in the opposite direction from where Amy went and crashing through walls and floors as if they were paper, the sound of breaking glass, wood and stone getting quieter as he rapidly flew away from Sonic. When the sound had faded to nothing, the shell of the factory began to creak with a hollow rattle and the ground trembled. Then with a drawn out, moaning death cry that side of the building collapsed in on itself, an avalanche of steel and bricks imploding towards a point on the ground and throwing up a huge wall of dust which spread rapidly outwards. Sonic put his arms across his face as the grey cloud swallowed him up, coughing and spluttering from the particles scratching at his throat.

When the dust cleared and he opened his eyes, Sonic felt the cool air of the outside licking at him. In the distance the sun's first rays crept over the horizon, casting a faint light over everything through which he could just about make out his surroundings. A gaping mouth opened the side of the factory up to the outside world and within it lay the mountain of rubble where it used to stand.

Sonic sprinted around the rubble into the wasteland beyond. Further yet the town of Opal Springs still slept in its early morning shroud, a wall of silent buildings hidden by shadow. Compared to the musty and stale interior of the factory the air outside felt fresh and invigorating in his lungs, and the sounds of birds beginning their dawn chorus reached his ears. On any other day, Sonic would have found this serenity relaxing.

But this was not any other day, and the reminder of this fact hit him like a speeding train. Tails slammed into the ground in front of him, sending out a shockwave propelled that him backwards along with a shower of soil and rocks. Sonic landed on his back, immediately rolling over his shoulder onto his feet. Tails stood in a small crater, his skin smouldering and fur alight with fire.

"This is your solution to everything, isn't it?" he said. "You think that all you have to do is fight and all the problems in the world will go away. It's typical of you to be so naïve."

"It's never not worked so far," said Sonic. "Besides, I think what you need right now is a little sense beating into you. I warned you, didn't I? If you don't back down I'll fight you every step of the way. I can't let you hurt anyone else."

"You can't stop me, Sonic. Nothing can stop me now."

"Oh yeah? You know how many villains said that to me before I did just that? Pretty much all of
them, pal. What makes you think you're any different?"

"Because they were wrong and I'm right. And right always wins, doesn't it? Because those who are right believe in themselves and those who are wrong do not. That's what you told me many years ago. You don't realise it but you're the villain here! And that makes me the hero!"

"You're no hero, buddy. A hero doesn't turn his back on his friends no matter how strong he is, a hero doesn't throw away everything he's ever believed in, and a hero doesn't kill people!"

"You're wrong. A hero does what he has to in order to save as many people as he can. They have to make difficult choices and know when to make sacrifices. Amy understands this; that's why she's on my side. I want you to be on my side too, Sonic. I want you by my side when I save everyone. Together, we can end this. Together we can make Mobius everything we've always wanted it to be."

"What have you done to her? All that talk about other worlds and life being hopeless; that's not the Amy I know. You've poisoned her against me!"

Tails shook his head. "That wasn't me. I've never laid a finger on her, I swear. Although... she has a point, don't you think? What good is it to make one world happy when there are so many out there still suffering? I should be thinking bigger, and once I have all the Chaos Emeralds my power will be limitless. Who knows where it will end?"

Sonic slammed down his foot, pointing at the floor. "I'll tell you where it ends! It ends right here, right now! Too many have suffered because of your Emerald-hunting, and I swear you will not lay another finger on them or anyone who tries to stop you getting to them!"

With a crack of thunder he shot forward, charging towards Tails at maximum speed with his fist outstretched. When he came within millimetres of striking him, Tails' arm flashed upwards and seized his wrist. Then with a lazy flick of his arm he span Sonic around him and tossed him into the air. Sonic's momentum continued, and he flew across the blurry sprawl of Opal Springs in a heartbeat, toppling head over heels through the sky and unable to right himself or slow down.

His speed came to a sudden and painful halt when he slammed back first into a wall of stone. The face of whatever he had hit buckled inwards, and as his spinning vision adjusted he looked down to see an ornately carved cone stretching into the dim sky, while above his head he saw a old stone tower with rows of worn headstones lined up within a walled garden at its base.

"A... church?" groaned Sonic. But before he could give it any more thought he saw a blazing comet speeding towards him from the horizon.

"Crap!" Sonic flicked his legs up, unpeeling his body from the spire and letting himself fall away seconds before Tails slammed into the spot where he had just been. The spire exploded outwards, the shockwave blasting Sonic down to the ground and raining smoking, shattered bricks across the graveyard. Sonic skidded along the gravel path, rolling over several times before ending up on his back.

A flash of yellow later, Tails had descended from the spire to the ground, grabbing hold of Sonic's leg.

"Are you starting to understand now? Are you beginning to realise the level of power I wield?!" Tails lifted Sonic up with one hand, hurling him towards the church doors. The heavy oak panels fell from their hinges, and Sonic bounced up the aisle before slamming the top of his head into the altar.

Despite the throbbing pain in his skull, Sonic jumped back up to his feet. Tails surged into the church
in a fireball, but Sonic ran towards him, sliding underneath him and driving his foot upwards. He caught Tails in the chest as he passed and kicked as hard as he could, sending the fox up into the rafters, where he broke several beams in two before crashing onto the altar and landing behind it.

Sonic leapt over the altar, hoping to catch Tails while he was down, but the boy had already stood up, and delivered a punch straight to Sonic's chest that knocked the wind right out of him and sent him straight back where he came. As Sonic gasped for breath and clutched at his heart, he saw Tails squatting on the altar, grinning with a mouth of sharp teeth and looking like a cat waiting to pounce.

He sprang forward, his mouth open and slavering and his hands splayed like claws. Sonic noticed a glint of metal in the corner of his eye, and he reached out to grab it. Just before Tails struck he swung the heavy lectern upwards, hitting Tails across the face and knocking him back. Before he could right himself Sonic swung again bring the lectern down and smashing Tails into the floor so hard he bounced, the ornate metal stand bending and buckling in Sonic's hands.

Invigorated by his assault, Sonic swung again, but this time the lectern stopped in mid-air. Tails' eyes glowed solid white, and a bolt of yellow lightning sprang from his head. The lectern faded into glowing embers, and Sonic felt its weight vanish from his hands, toppling forward as his swing concluded without it.

Tails stood over him, the surge of lightning dancing around his head. More bolts poured out from his forehead, lashing at the pillars and pews, zig-zagging across them and carving deep ruts through them. Tails' fur pulsed with unnatural yellow light, and his mouth became a grimace. A grunting howl grew behind his teeth while his tendons and veins bulged out through his skin. Sonic leapt backwards as a bolt struck the floor, dancing across the red carpet lining the aisle and leaving strips of bare stone exposed. The storm of crackling arcs jumped from surface to surface and left holes in their wake, and Sonic ducked and weaved beneath them, diving behind the altar and narrowly missing a beam slicing through solid stone.

Tails' growls grew louder, and he rose into the air with his arms outstretched, hanging in the nave as if suspended by the arcs of electricity. He twitched, and all the bolts retreated back into him. For a moment there was silence as he hung motionless in the air, then he threw his head back and screamed, a bestial roar erupting from his mouth. A wall of force surged out of his body, ripples of power blasting across everything in the church. The stained-glass windows shattered, their fragments scattering like leaves, the pews collapsed into splinters and the carvings on the pillars crumbled into dust. Even the altar split and cracked from the force, and Sonic put his hands in front of his face, trying to keep his footing and push forward through the hurricane blasting him back.

Then it stopped, and Sonic fell forward. Silence fell except for the sounds of rubble and plaster crumbling from the walls. He pushed himself up onto his knees, wiping the dust from his eyes.

Tails stood right in front of him. His hand latched onto Sonic's throat and together they both rose into the air. Sonic gripped the burning vice around his neck, meeting Tails' gaze even as his legs dangled and he struggled for air.

"Am I supposed to be impressed? Even after all that, it looks like I'm still standing. You're getting sloppy, buddy. All this power's making you forget to mind your technique."

Tails dragged Sonic closer to him, his hot breath washing over his face. "Just give up. There's no point dragging this out any longer."

"I'll drag it out as long as I need to. You can throw whatever you like at me, I'm not giving up until I've saved you from yourself. You can't scare me into backing down."
"But I can kill you."

Sonic laughed, a struggle with his windpipe so restricted. "You won't. If you were gonna you would have done it already. If you truly believed in what you're doing you would do it even though it hurts you. But you don't believe it, do you? The Tails I know would never believe that hurting people is the answer to anything."

"Then maybe you don't know me very well at all."

"And I think you don't know me very well if you think I don't know who I'm talking to. Why don't you face me yourself, Super Sonic? Go on, let me in to your little dimension and we can sort this out, hedgehog to hedgehog. The shard may have made you real but that only means you've got a real butt I can kick! So come on out of there, unless you're too scared to challenge me?"

The grip around his throat tightened, stopping his words and his breath. Tails leaned in even closer, and when he spoke his voice sounded normal, without a hint of reverberation or echo.

"My name is Tails, and I'm the one in control. Me, and only me. Nobody will ever own me again; not him, and definitely not you. Stay out of this, Sonic. This is your last warning."

He let go of Sonic's neck, but before the hedgehog began falling Tails span around and struck him with his namesakes. Sonic rocketed through the broken window and into the sky, tumbling over trees and fields, passing through the clouds and getting drenched in freezing rain. Then he began to fall, his speed picking up as the ground rushed toward him.

But it wasn't the ground approaching fast. Instead his trajectory took him straight towards a smooth patch of dark blue that twinkled in the morning light.

"Oh no... NO!"

Freezing cold grabbed hold of him as he smashed into the lake, and a rush of churning, bubbling water enveloped him, filling his ears, mouth and nostrils. His momentum sent him deep below the surface, the sun's rays a faint spotlight meters above him. Panic overtook him, sending his heart pounding against the walls of his chest. He flailed his arms and legs, reaching out and grasping for anything to hold on to, but his fingers closed around nothing but pond weed and twigs. He couldn't stop himself from crying out, even as water poured into his lungs and burned them, and his body grew heavier and heavier. His energy seeped out of him until he could no longer move his limbs, and he slowly began to drift downwards, the distant light moving further away and the life in his body fading out.

As his mind slipped into darkness, it turned what little energy it had to one thing; the only thing that ever mattered to him.

_Tails..._

_I'm sorry._

~O~
Water filling his lungs and crushing his chest...

Hands pressing down on him, a heavy weight rhythmically pressing against his heart...

Liquid engulfing his mouth, stopping his breath...

Lips around his mouth, pouring hot breath into him...

Something drifting through the deep towards him, reaching out to save him...

A hand... no, not a hand...

A circle of rope.

A violent cough shook Sonic awake, and he sat up heaving, his lungs burning as buckets of water poured from his throat. The ground beneath him rocked and swayed, and he felt the weight of an enormous hand slapping against his back, forcing the coughs out of him. He gasped, drawing in as much air as he could, the cool breeze soothing his lungs and restoring his energy.

Wiping water from his eyes, Sonic saw the reason the ground kept moving; he sat in a wooden boat gently bobbing on the surface of the lake. His arms shot out, gripping the edges of the boat in an attempt to steady himself, his eyes trying to look anywhere but into the dark water. At the opposite end of the boat sat a figure; a huge cat with purple fur, a white chest and floppy ears almost as long as he was tall. In front of him sat a large green frog that eyed him curiously.

"Hiya Sonic."

Sonic rubbed his eyes again. "Big? Is that... Holy crap, it's really you! I haven't seen you in ages, buddy! Wow... how are you... how are you doing?"

"Oh, you know," said Big, a wistful look in his eyes, "just taking it easy, spending time with Froggy and looking for places to go fishing. Nothing as exciting as whatever you're doing I guess."

Sonic looked to one side, his hand on the back of his head. "Hey Big... you didn't have to go off on your own... we liked having you around."

Big shrugged. "I know. You guys were nice to me but I didn't like all the fighting and danger you got involved in. I prefer a bit of peace and quiet and a nice spot of fishing."

The morning light above had grown brighter, but the tall trees surrounding the lake buried it in shadow.

"Bit early for fishing, isn't it?"

"Nice and quiet this early. No walkers or swimmers to scare off the fish. Usually no hedgehogs falling out of the sky either."

"Heh... sorry about that. Thanks for rescuing me, by the way. I thought I was a gonner for a moment there."
"It's okay. I saw you fall in and I thought 'that's weird; Sonic doesn't like to go swimming.' Then you didn't come up so I got my rope and my fishing rod and I caught you just like a big fish."

Sonic nervously peeked at the water, seeing nothing but inky blackness beyond a few feet. "Wow, you really are good at fishing if you managed to snag me from all the way down there."

Big shrugged. "I just like fishing."

"I owe you one, dude. Talk about right place in the right time. If you hadn't been here..."

"Tails said this was a good spot for fishing, so that's why I came here."

Sonic blinked a few times. "Tails? Tails told you to come here? When?"

"Last night. I was lying in bed when Tails came into my house and said 'go to the lake outside Opal Springs' and I guess he meant that it's a good spot for fishing so here I am. Although, now I think about it he did look kind of strange."

"Strange how?"

"Older, like a grown-up. I figured it had just been a while since I seen him last so maybe he grew or something. But Tails doesn't normally glow, does he? Has he started using a new shampoo?"

Sonic bit down on his finger. What Big was describing; it matched what he had seen back at the GUN base. That eerie ghost of Tails had saved them back then and now he had influenced Big to be in the exact right spot at the exact right time to save his life.

"It needs me..." he whispered. "It needs me to keep going. What does it want though? Am I the only one who can save Tails, is that it?"

"Huh? What's wrong with Tails? Is it Eggman again?"

"No, it's..." Sonic looked up into Big's wide eyes and saw the child-like innocence in his face. His heart tightened up and his words died in his throat. "It's complicated. But I'm working on it. Everything's gonna be alright, I promise."

"Oh, okay," Big said without a care in the world before turning back to his fishing. "Say hello to Tails for me please."

The huge cat began to hum to himself, watching the surface of the water as if in a daydream.

Sonic waved in his direction. "Er... Big? I'm gonna need a lift back to dry land, if you're not too busy."

"Water's clean, so don't worry about getting dirty. Not too cold either; it'll be nice and refreshing."

Sonic stared at Big, but the cat remained engrossed in his fishing.

"Big? You know I can't swim, right? You literally just saved me from drowning because of that."

Big turned to face him with a vacant stare, before a grin spread across his face.

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

"But you just..." Sonic sighed and brought his hand up to his face. "Never mind. I'd appreciate a lift back to shore, if that's alright with you."
"Okay, okay..." Big's face slumped, and with a subdued grumble he slowly reeled in his lure and put his rod down in the boat. Then he took hold of the oars and began to row.

"Tails won't be happy with you for this. He wanted me to go fishing, not ferry you around to here, there and everywhere."

Sonic wanted to say something, but he just hung down his head and laughed gently.

"Oh Big... I wish I could see the world the way you do."

"You mean like with my eyes?"

"No, I mean... oh, never mind." Sonic rested his elbows on his knees and fell silent, watching the shore of the lake creep closer and trying to take his mind away from the rocking of the boat.

"You're not usually this quiet," said Big. "Thinking about stuff?"

"What? Oh, yeah... there's a lot going on right now. I'm still trying to figure out what I'm gonna do about it. I know there's a solution out there somewhere; if I can just find it then I can make everything right again."

Big slowly nodded, although his stoic face betrayed his lack of comprehension. "You know, when something's bothering me I like to go fishing; I can just relax and leave my troubles behind. You should try it."

"Big, can you just give it a rest, please? I'm getting tired of hearing about..."

A switch flicked in his mind, and the miasma of loose thoughts and unanswered questions cleared away, leaving a single notion behind in a spotlight of clarity.

"Fishing..."

Sonic leapt to his feet, causing the boat to rock from side to side. Big cried out, struggling with the oars as he tried to keep the boat stable, while Froggy scampered up his chest and onto his shoulder, huddling beside his head. But Sonic kept his balance, for no fear of water could stop him from taking hold of his excitement.

"Fishing!" he yelled with his hands spread wide. "Big, I could kiss you! You're a genius!"

"Nuh-uh. I can't grant anybody wishes."

"No, I mean... what I mean is you've shown me what I was missing! It was right in front of me the whole time!"

"What's that?"

"Malchordium!"

"Gesundheit."

"Tails said it, didn't he? We could use Malchordium to extract the bits of our universe from the Fracture Point. We send it through on a line and it draws everything that's lost toward it. Just like fishing, except the catch of the day is our lost friends!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but at least you seem happy now."
"Now I just need to get hold of some Malchordium. Then I'll need someone clever to make it work." He sat back down again, sighing. "I guess it'll have to be Eggman. Much as I hate the idea of teaming up with him I don't have much choice; I'm hoping once he knows what's at stake he'll play nice. He can betray me all he wants after I save the universe."

The boat pulled up alongside a wooden jetty, and Sonic hopped out. Big followed after, and together they headed onto dry land, the open sky surrendering to towers of pine trees casting a shadow over a carpet of dusty needles.

"This is a heck of a long shot," said Sonic, "but I don't suppose you know where the Lewis Institute is, do ya?"

Big scratched his chin. "Loose sin toot? What's one of those?"

"Err... a big sciencey sort-of place? Maybe, I dunno... like somewhere where secret stuff goes on?"

Big shook his head. "Nope. Not seen anything like that."

Sonic turned away, his elation fizzling. "Ah well, never mind. I'll just have to look for it myself, although I don't even know where to begin."

"Only thing I've seen around here was that big white building all alone in the woods, the one without any windows and the wire fence around it."

Sonic turned back to face Big. "Wait, what? Where was this?"

"Er..." Big looked around the forest, even spinning around all the way before pointing off into the darkness of the woods. "It's that way."

"You're absolutely certain?"

"I'm good with directions. Some of the best fishing spots are out of the way, so I always need to know where I am."

"I really hope you're right. If you are then you might just have saved the world, buddy! How about that?"

"Oh wow, I didn't even do anything."

Sonic stepped towards him, craning his neck up to meet his eyes. "Maybe more than you realise. I could really do with your help, pal. I haven't got... I haven't got a lot of people I can rely on at the moment. If you really want it..." He held out his hand. "I'd be glad to have you on the team again."

Big paused, staring down at Sonic's hand. Then he took hold of it, his huge hand engulfing Sonic's own and squeezing it tight.

"Sorry, Sonic. I was never really one of you guys. What I want and what you want aren't the same."

"C'mon, Big, don't be like this. I'm still your friend..."

"It's okay, Sonic. I really don't mind. I like the quiet and I like fishing. You like running and fighting and jumping and stuff. That's just the way things are and I'm happy with my life. I hope you can do the things you like too and be happy. If you're happy then everything is fine."

Sonic let go of Big's hand, looking down at the floor and kicking his heels. "Ah man... Big..."
"But I'm glad you asked me anyway. I hope you do well in... whatever it is you're trying to do. Take care of yourself out there, Sonic."

"You too, Big. It's nice to see you again."

Sonic turned to leave, but then an impulse swept him up and he threw his arms around Big's waist. The cat's rotund stomach was so large that Sonic's arms barely reached halfway around, but he pressed himself against the furry bulk regardless. Big hesitated but soon his trunk-like arms wrapped around Sonic, shielding him from the cool air of the morning.

"This is nice," said Big. "Didn't expect this from you but it's nice."

"If you have friends... you really need to hold on to them. You need to show them how much you care, because one day they might just be gone and... and you'll never stop thinking about the things you should have said but never did. Your life can change so fast... even I can't keep up with it right now."

"Well, my life is pretty slow, and that's just fine by me."

Sonic let go of him and stepped away. "Maybe you're the lucky one."

Big shrugged, and for a moment they stared at each other in silence.

"Goodbye, Big. See you again some time."

"Some time," said Big, turning away. "I'll look forward to 'some time,' whenever it may come. Bye, Sonic."

He slung his rod over his shoulder, and with Froggy hopping along beside him he strolled off towards the lake, humming to himself. Sonic watched him go, his form fading into the morning mist.

"Bye... old friend."

He turned away, and with a burst of speed and a sonic boom that shook the needles from the trees he disappeared into the forest.

~O~

From out of the trees rose the silhouette of the Lewis Institute, an imposing oblong standing like a tombstone in a shaded glen. As Sonic approached he felt the air around him change: the birds, so eager to ring out their dawn chorus throughout the forest, made no sound here. No bushes rustled and no twigs snapped. Even the wind vanished, leaving him alone with the sound of his own breath. An aura of complete stillness surrounded the building, as if time itself was avoiding it.

*What is this place?* Thought Sonic as he gazed up at the featureless block, its facade entirely white with no windows in sight. Only the antenna reaching into the sky hinted that the structure was anything other than a perfectly carved marble obelisk.

*I bet some real freaky shit goes on in there. Probably full of Chaos-warped mutants and monsters. Like Tails...*

Sonic shook his head. Tails may have finally snapped under the pressure but he was not a monster. He was a victim as much as anyone else, and he came here to save him.
A chain-link fence swept around the outside of the facility. Almost three times his height with its top wrapped in razor wire, it seemed like a sufficient deterrent for most people.

But he was not most people. He tracked along the fence, searching his surroundings for an opportunity to make progress. Then he saw it: a pine tree stood close to the fence, and Sonic could see its lower branches had been cut back and its surface smoothed down in an attempt to prevent anyone climbing it. Sonic laughed quietly to himself. For all their smarts, the boffins in that facility couldn't hope to think like him.

He took a few steps back, then dashed forward at high speed. When he reached the tree he threw his momentum upward, running vertically along the trunk with no regard to gravity. When he had climbed high enough to clear the top of the fence he propelled himself backward, soaring over the fence in a triple somersault before landing on the soft grass in front of the building.

"Look at that! Stuck the landing as well. I shoulda been an Olympic gymnast."

The thought of himself in a leotard quickly dispelled that notion, and he turned to the building behind him.

A paved path led up to the front, ending in a step up to a recess in the otherwise blank edifice. Sonic stepped into the recess, coming up against a set of double doors shut tight. A small black box sat on the wall beside them, and he figured it must be some kind of card reader.

"Hmm..." Sonic stroked his chin. "Not gonna find a key card anytime soon. Looks like I'll have to do this the old-fashioned way."

He steeled himself, then span up into a twirl. His leg shot out to the side, slamming into the doors so hard they buckled and flew open, crashing into the walls.

The corridor inside stretched out into the distance, dimly lit by emergency lighting. Sonic crept inside, greeted only by a low humming emanating from somewhere deeper within.

_No alarm, that's strange. Must be one of those silent ones or something. Whatever, I'll be in and out before the cops even finish their donuts. They won't see my backside for dust._

He hurried along the corridor, past offices and laboratories framed in shadow. Through the windows he saw microscopes, computers and apparatus; nothing he wouldn't be surprised to see in a high school science class. What did he expect? Caged experiments? Half-Mobian, Half-Cyborg soldiers? Operating theatres covered in blood? He laughed at his overactive imagination; this was just an ordinary lab only kept out of the way to keep people safe from Chaos radiation.

At a junction in the corridor he stopped. He'd just realised he had no idea where he was going. Where exactly was the Malchordium going to be in this place?

He peered at the rows of signs on the corner of the wall. Meaningless numbers and complicated words adorned each one, and no matter how many times he scanned them he couldn't see anything pointing to Malchordium.

Then he saw it; his eyes must have passed over it a dozen times without taking it in, but this time it clicked.

**REACTIVE MATERIALS**

"That's gotta be it!"
Before he started down the corridor, a sound echoed behind him. A knocking, faint and brief but amplified by the quiet all around him.

"Huh? Who's there?" The darkness revealed nothing, and soon the place fell still again.

*Must just be the pipes.* Sonic shrugged and carried on in the direction of the sign. Through twisting, turning hallways and down flight after flight of stairs he made his way, until at last he came to a door bearing the same words he had been following.

After a sharp tug and with a hiss the door swung open. Sonic stepped through into a small room lined with metal crates and sealed barrels, all bearing various alarming labels regarding their contents. The humming sound that had been with him since he arrived was at its loudest here. A slab of metal dominated the far wall, and when his eyes adjusted Sonic recognised it to be the doorway to a vault of some kind.

He strode up to it and pulled on the handle. Nothing. Not even a groan to suggest it had moved. A few more yanks yielded nothing but a sore arm.

"Figures..." he muttered. Pressing his ear against the metal, he felt the hum vibrating through the door.

*I bet the Malchordium is in there. If it's as special as Tails said it was then no wonder they'd keep it locked up tight.*

He moved back towards the entrance, stretching out his legs and back. Then he began to run on the spot, whipping his legs up into a blur in seconds. Faster and faster he ran, pushing his legs so hard they felt like concrete. The topmost layer of the floor began to peel away, filling the room with a cloud of dust, a piercing whine drowned out the low hum and he felt his feet tingle with a growing heat, but he kept his eyes fixed on the vault door.

Then he let go, and all his built-up speed propelled him forward. A sonic boom shook the tiny space, and in the blink of an eye he crossed from one side of the room to the other. Curling into a ball he slammed into the vault door, bouncing off it with a deafening clang and rolling back across the floor. Through the dust he saw the result of his assault; a huge dent in the centre of the door, its edges buckling from their fixings.

"Alright, come on," he said, climbing back to his feet. "I can do this."

Again he pushed himself to maximum speed before smashing into the door. The dent grew larger and the metal groaned as it struggled to stay on its hinges. Sonic's whole body ached from pushing himself so much, but he couldn't give up, not when he was so close. With the last of his energy he threw himself against the door. The bolts heaved and cracked, then the massive slab of metal, now crumpled in on itself, fell from its hinges and toppled forward. Sonic leapt back as it crashed to the floor and came to a rest.

Sonic punched the air. "Oh yeah! Finally something's going my way!"

He clambered over the fallen door, his heart pounding with elation.

"You see, this is what you're good at, Sonic. Breaking things, running fast and saving the day while being awesome. All this sci-fi baloney is just making things needlessly complicated. Just for once it would be nice to fight something that was immune to science. Then Tails will be all like 'oh no, my super-quantum-magno-reflector-trouser-press isn't working! It's only weakness is having its butt kicked!' and I'll be like 'Did somebody say butt-kicking?' and then we'll see who's so smart and -
ow!

His knee collided with something. A squat metal cylinder with rounded edges sat on a platform in the middle of the vault. The room behind the door was smaller even than the room before it, and the object was its only occupant. The humming grew to such levels that Sonic’s teeth shook, and when he put his hand on the cylinder his whole body trembled.

"This must be it - the Malchordium! I need to get this back to Eggman, but first... I wouldn't be me if I didn't take a little peek, see what's so special about this stuff. It's probably highly radioactive but when has that ever hurt anyone?"

He reached down and pulled the handle at the top. A hiss of gas blew out the sides and at once the humming faded away. Twisting the handle ninety degrees he pulled it up again, and the top of the container opened outward, filling the room with a deep purple glow. With another tug Sonic pulled the cargo up and out in a pair of metal rods holding it in place.

When he saw what it contained, he nearly dropped it again.

"What the heck?"

A giggle rose from behind him; the malicious, taunting laugh of a child who loves the attention they get from being naughty. Beneath the giggle a beast growled in tandem.

"Oh Sonic... you are so predictable, you know that?"

Sonic span round. In the vault entrance stood Tails, his eyes blood red and his fur flickering with golden fire. Beside him stood Amy, her knees shaking, her quills jutting out at odd angles and deep bags beneath her eyes, eyes which stared into somewhere a hundred miles away. Wherever she was, it wasn't in the room with them.

"Tails! What is this? This isn't Malchordium, it's a Chaos Emerald!"

Within the holder the purple Chaos Emerald pulsed and shone with rippling violet hues.

"Malchordium," said Tails, grinning. "Are you really that stupid? There is no such thing as Malchordium; I just made it up! I knew you'd never let me near another Chaos Emerald so I told you exactly what you wanted to hear. And you fell for it, hook, line and sinker."

"Why, though? Why wait for me to come here when you could've taken it after our fight? I wasn't going to help you anymore so there was no need to trick me."

Tails took a slow, deliberate step forward, his wicked smile falling and his gaze becoming distant and fearful.

"I wanted you to see what I see. What hope really is: a poisonous lie that eats away at us. We all carry around boxes believing that everything we want is inside; we build our whole lives around them but whenever we look inside we remember that they're completely empty, and that hurts so much we keep pretending we saw something, even as the truth slowly kills us. You came here hoping the key to saving me would be in this vault, but instead you've only found the truth: that you can't save me no matter what you do. Does that hurt you, Sonic? Does that make you feel-"

"Never mind how I feel!" Sonic bellowed. "Because this whole thing has never been about me, Tails, it's been about you! And what's happened to you is you've lost your damn mind! You know as well as I do that hope is so much better than despair! It's what gives our lives meaning; the hope that we can make the world a better place with how we live our lives. Without hope we might as well..."
give up and die. I never thought I'd hear you of all people give in to despair. Is that what you want, huh? You want everyone to be miserable?"

"What I want is certainty." Tails growled. "For everyone to have everything they ever wanted without fear or pain or loss. Why are you so determined to stand in my way?"

"Because I've seen what you're prepared to do to get your 'certainty', and I can't let this go on any longer!" Sonic stood between the Emerald and Tails, shielding it with his entire body. "If you want this Emerald you'll have to kill me first!"

A flash stung his eyes, then a weight like a sledgehammer slammed into his head, spinning him around and sending him skidding across the floor. He looked up through swivelling double-vision to see Tails standing where he had just been, the Chaos Emerald in his hand.

"Still can't do it, can you?" said Sonic through a cough. "Still can't just zap me out of existence and be done with it? Why is that, Tails? Are you hoping I'll come around to your way of thinking? Is that your hope?"

Tails turned to him, his eyes glimmering in the purple glow of the gem in his hand, and a strange smile appeared on his face. A strained smile beneath sad eyes that betrayed a sense of longing.

"Sonic," Tails whispered. "I just want you to be..." He trailed off, staring into nothingness.

"What? You want me to be what?"

Tails shook his head, blinking rapidly as if dispelling an errant thought.

"I need you to be quiet! I've waited too long for this moment already."

He gripped the Emerald, his teeth clenched together and his veins showing through his skin as he forced his strength onto the crystal. The light from the Emerald flickered and pulsed faster and faster, while a low whine rose in intensity. The lights in the room flashed sporadically, and a tremor shook dust from the ceiling. Tails' eyes widened, fixed on the Emerald, while his mouth spread wide into a razor-toothed grin. Something glistened over his teeth, and Sonic almost recoiled when he realised Tails was drooling, his saliva running slick over his chin and dripping to the floor.

Within the Emerald's pristine facet a crack appeared, splintering and growing throughout the gem. Sonic leapt to his feet, his paralysing fear dispelled as the call to action took hold of him. He lunged for the Emerald, taking hold of it with both hands. Tails resisted, pulling and throwing Sonic around with each twist of his arm, but Sonic refused to let go.

"No!" Tails yelled. "What are you doing, you idiot!"

"This has to stop, Tails! You're killing yourself and everyone around you! I'm saving your life whether you want me to or not!"

He gave a sharp tug with all his strength, managing to pull the Emerald from Tails' fingers. But it slipped from his own hands as well and soared across the room, bouncing across the floor and landing squarely at Amy's feet. The pulsing light flashed rapidly and the piercing whine grew to deafening levels, then the Emerald began spinning of its own accord, bouncing higher and higher and spinning so fast it became a flickering blur of purple.

A violet flash filled the room and the whining noise dropped instantly into a deep pulse that shook Sonic's bones. He threw up his hands to cover his face as a wave of purple engulfed his entire vision.
Then everything stopped.

Sonic opened his eyes, surprised to find he wasn't dead. A silence deeper than any he had heard surrounded him, and when his eyes re-adjusted his breath halted in his chest.

Tails leant over, reaching out for the Emerald, his face a contorted mix of petulance, rage and sorrow. But he was completely still, frozen mid-movement with even his fur locked in place. Where the Emerald had been he saw something hovering in the air: a cloud or perhaps a flame wreathed in purple, a scar on the air with an interior so dark it looked like the depths of space. Fragments of the Emerald hung in the air around it, and violet arcs of lightning flashed and crawled within, the only other thing moving in the room. Mere inches behind it stood Amy, frozen like everything else, recoiling from the explosion with her hands desperately covering her head.

"What's happening?" said Sonic. The fur on the back of his neck stood on end, and he felt the presence of someone behind him. He span round and saw a figure standing behind the unmoving form of Tails. A figure shining with golden light.

A fox with two tails. Like Tails but older, tall and slender with well-defined muscles. His eyes shone with blinding white light and an aura of calm filled the air around him. Sonic's mouth hung open, and he found himself longing for the figure before him, wanting to reach out and feel his hand touching the others.

"It's you," he said, gathering his focus. "I saw you before, in the GUN base... what... what are you? You look like Tails but you can't be, can you?"

The figure said nothing, continuing to stare through him towards the exploding Emerald. Sonic looked over his shoulder at it then back again.

"Do you have something to do with this? Did you... stop time, or something?"

Again, the figure said nothing.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" Sonic waved his hand in front of the fox's face. "Are you gonna tell me what's happening here? What is all this?"

The figure looked towards Sonic as if awakening from a dream, then after some hesitation it finally spoke, its voice like music.

"Uncertainty. A moment in time defined by a choice, a choice that defines everything that follows."

Its gaze pierced into Sonic, and from somewhere behind it he heard a sound, like a rush of wind or the roar of the waves, growing louder as if any moment he would be swept away.

Sonic took a step backward. "Choice? What choice did I make?"

The figure smiled.

"The wrong one."

~O~
"Moments ago you made a decision. This decision was made without any knowledge of the consequences associated with, nor with any consideration of alternatives. You have made this choice and now you cannot go back on it."

Tails stood beside the scar of purple fire hovering between the fragments of the shattered Emerald, lightly touching its edges with his golden fingers. Even as arcs of indigo lightning jumped onto the tips of his fingers he maintained his aura of calm and serenity.

"Who are you?" said Sonic. "Why do you keep appearing to us?"

The ethereal figure didn't turn away from the fire, his gaze fixated on the deep void in its centre.

"This choice, if allowed to play out according to causality, would result in this Chaos rift expanding exponentially. In a matter of seconds everyone in this room will be reduced to atoms, as will this entire facility and everything for six hundred miles in every direction. Millions of people will die and this area will be rendered lifeless for tens of thousands of years. A permanent scar on the universe, a fitting memorial to a single moment when someone made just one bad choice."

Sonic slapped his hand to his forehead "You've gotta be kidding me. Look, I had to do something! I can't just do nothing because something might go wrong! No-one can live like that."

Tails continued to ignore him. "But suppose..." He snapped his fingers, and everything began to move again. The explosion shrank into nothing, the fragments of Emerald closing around it and reforming. Then the scene played out as it had before except in reverse: the Emerald fell to the floor and then across the room and into the younger Tails' hand, where he acted out his struggle with Sonic in reverse. When the scene reached the point when Tails first picked up the Emerald, time froze again.

"Suppose you could make a different choice. One with the most beneficial outcome that can be achieved. Would you not make that choice instead?"

"What are you saying?" Sonic moved around to position himself in front of Tails, but the fox still seemed to stare through him. "Are you saying I should let Tails just take the Emerald? I'm not gonna let him do that, no matter what you say! Our choices make us who we are."

Tails' gaze focused on him at last, but his serene face became angry and his blinding stare pierced through him. Sonic took a step back, a pang of fear in his chest.

"Our choices make us who we are," said Tails, a note of disbelief in his voice. "You still don't understand. You cannot comprehend my words, so let me show you instead. See what your choice really means."

He snapped his fingers again, and time began to move once more. The scene played out again, this time the right way around. The Emerald slipping from Tails' grasp, bouncing across the floor to Amy's feet, leaping into the air and breaking.

But this time the scene did not freeze. The rift expanded, and Amy screamed as the purple fire engulfed her. The younger Tails tried to back away but an invisible wind lifted him from his feet and pulled him into the rift where he disintegrated and vanished. The barrels and containers fell over
themselves as a tide of metal poured into the cloud of purple fire, its edges crackling with lightning. Even as debris and dust soared past him, the older Tails and Sonic remained unaffected, as if they were ghosts observing from outside of time.

The walls of the facility began to buckle, and soon the place caved in on itself, and avalanche of steel, plastic, wood and wires imploding down into the rift in a cacophony of screeching, crashing and shattering. Moments later Sonic found himself hovering in a deep crater where the Lewis institute used to be.

But it didn't stop there. The sides of the crater slid away in a tide of earth rushing towards the centre and soon the surrounding forest followed, trees ripping from their roots by the hundreds and colliding together at a point before his eyes where they vanished forever. Sonic's heart pounded so hard his ribs felt like they might break at any moment, his eyes widened until his face ached and his breath escaped in terrified hyperventilation.

The tide of destruction raced further and further in every direction, its pace increasing with every millisecond that passed. Sonic's body locked up, and he could only watch as miles upon miles of countryside fell to the rift. Cities and town collapsed instantly, mountains exploded and even the sky itself folded in on itself, planes falling out of the sky and joining the tsunami of matter being sucked into oblivion.

But the worst thing was the people. In all that destruction he could still see the people; thousands of males, females, children and the elderly, most already dead, some alive and screaming in their last moments. As he watched, Sonic began to scream too, until his voice became hoarse and his eyes streamed with tears.

And all the while, Tails stood there staring at him, a half-smile on his lips.

"STOP!" screamed Sonic, his hands covering his face. "PLEASE MAKE IT STOP! I CAN'T TAKE ANYMORE OF THIS! PLEASE!"

Tails' smug smile grew larger as he raised his hand slowly. With a click of his fingers, the nightmare scene before him vanished, and Sonic found himself back in the Lewis Institute again. Amy was alive, Tails had the Emerald in his hand and the dreaded rift was nowhere to be seen.

Sonic fell forward, collapsing onto his hands and knees. His breaths heaved in his chest, and his mouth and nose clogged up with mucus.

"Why?!" he gasped, looking up at the glowing figure of Tails. "Why did you make me see that?! All those people..."

"Do you understand now?" said Tails. "Your 'choice' is just an illusion, and the horror you just witnessed is the only possible outcome under your understanding of choice. This is why you believe in trite concepts such as 'fate' and 'destiny.' If you could choose as I can, if you could see all the options, then you could only ever make the right choice. I will make it so that every outcome of every possibility is the best one."

"Damn you!" Sonic slammed his fist against the floor. "You can rewind time; if you're so powerful, why not just undo everything that led up to this mess? Why come here to mock me when you could just fix everything yourself?"

"I cannot do so without preventing my own existence. These events must happen for me to be here in the first place; our timelines are linked, Sonic. You and I will see this through to the very end."
Sonic rose to his feet, his body still aching and flashes of what he had seen flitting in the corners of his eyes.

"You saved me at the GUN base, you sent Big to rescue me from the lake and now you're here again to save my life. You need me alive, don't you? What for? What are you planning?"

"To be born. I need you alive until that moment, for you are to become my father."

Sonic stumbled in shock. "Wha-?!"

Tails shrugged, a knowing smile on his lips. "In a manner of speaking. I am to be born of three parents, all of whom are here in this room right now."

Sonic looked around at Amy and Tails' frozen forms. "Are you serious?! I'm an open-minded guy but how's that even supposed to work?"

"I am the child of a scream of terror, a giggle of madness and a howl of anguish. I am the offspring of a choice made without knowledge of the consequences. Where all realities meet I will be born, and all realities meet in me."

"Wow, that's so useful and easy to understand." Sonic shook his head, his hands on his hips. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"I must go now. I cannot remain here any longer."

"Wait, no! You can't go now! I need you to tell me what this is all about! Why do you need to go now?"

Tails tilted his head. "Because this is when you remember me leaving, of course."

"Now, hang on a sec-" Sonic took a step forward, but a flash of yellow filled the room and Tails vanished.

"Son of a-" But before he could catch his breath the room filled with noise, and he looked over to see the original Tails holding the Emerald, crushing it with his hand as he had done before. Sonic watched the crystal splinter and break, and instinctively he made a grab for it. He stopped himself short, remembering what he'd seen, what the other Tails had shown him.

Was that really Tails he saw? And was his vision really true? He wanted to doubt it, to believe it was all some trick Tails had conjured up to prevent Sonic from taking the Emerald from him, but when he closed his eyes he could still see the terror-struck faces of the children as the rift devoured them. Though his body trembled in anticipation of decisive action, his brain for once did not dare to take the risk.

So he stood and watched as the Emerald cracked further, until it broke apart in Tails' hand. Sonic's heart stopped; for a moment, as the fragments of the Emerald hung suspended in the air, he feared his vision would come to pass, but the fragments imploded into a single point of violet light which disappeared when Tails closed his hand around it.

A wave of purple light washed over Tails, and the fox threw back his head, gasping as if surfacing for air before bursting into triumphant laughter.

"Yes!" he cried. "Yes, yes, yes! Oh man, this is just the best feeling ever! To think that such a little thing could hold such power. Oh, I could get so used to this. And now only three more to go, I can't
wait! Oh... you're still here."

Sonic fixed Tails with his fiercest glare, but the fox's power surged from him like a furnace, and he remained composed.

"I'm surprised you didn't try and fight me for it, Sonic. Not like you to just stand by and do nothing. Are you finally beginning to understand what you're up against?"

"No," Sonic said through tight lips, "I'm just starting to see the bigger picture."

Tails gasped, placing both hands on his chest. "Sonic? Are you saying you're on my side now? Have you abandoned your silly notions of right and wrong and seen the truth of the world? I have to say I'm touched."

Sonic bit his lip, his glare not faltering. He wanted to spit bile at Tails, to chew him out for his selfishness and delusion but he held back. Maybe playing along with Tails was the answer; he hadn't any other options left now but if he tagged along with Tails maybe he could stop anyone else getting hurt until he figured out how to stop him.

Then he wondered if this was what future Tails had meant about choices; by choosing to oppose Tails was he dooming the world to a terrible fate. That didn't sit well with him, for how could anything that Tails was doing be the best for anyone?

"Tails..." Sonic said, casting his eyes to the floor. "I'm sorry I doubted you. I see now that... that the universe is just a great big joke. If you have the power to save us all, who am I to stop you?"

Tails smiled, a warm and happy smile that under any other circumstances he would have found welcome, but this time Sonic avoided looking at it; it reminded him of everything he'd lost.

"This is great," said Tails. "Now we're all friends again. Together forever, am I right? Put it there, buddy."

He held out his hand. After some hesitation Sonic reached out for it. With trepidation almost making him shake, he focused and brought his hand closed until they almost touched.

A burst of static erupted from somewhere in the ceiling, followed by a distorted buzz. As Sonic craned his neck upwards to look for the source of the sound, a voice emerged from beneath it; a voice loud, angry and familiar.

"This is Captain Axton of the Guardian Unit of Nations!" It bellowed. "Miles Prower, you are under arrest for murder, assault, illegal Chaos experimentation and theft of classified government intelligence. The building is surrounded, and we know you're in there, so come out with your hands up. If you come quietly we will let your friends go unharmed. If you resist or try to escape I have the authority to order immediate execution for all of you. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be."

Sonic's mind raced into high gear, mentally mapping out his route into the facility and formulating an escape route. Amy stood silently staring into the distance, her eyes glassy and vacant, as they had been ever since she'd betrayed him.

Tails, however, simply laughed.

"You see? You see how it is? All these little people with their guns and their bombs and their uniforms... they think they understand how it all works, but they don't understand; none of you understand!" His tone became harsher, and his crimson irises grew wider, their edges starting to peel away. "They think that structure and ranks and orders give them power, and if that doesn't work they..."
think their weapons give them power, but nothing they do makes any difference!"

He bristled, then held his head in hands, softly moaning as if fighting something off. When he looked back up his eyes whirled with red spirals and his teeth jutted from his mouth in jagged spikes.

"I'll show them what true power really looks like!"

With a howl of rage he took off, crashing through the ceiling in a column of fire. Moments later Sonic heard the sound of gunfire from far above.

"Shit, shit, shit!" He turned to leave the room, coming face to face with Amy. He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled sharply.

"Come on! We need to get of here, now!"

Amy weakly whined in protest, but Sonic easily pulled her along with him. Whatever strength she possessed when she attacked him had left her, her body felt limp and tired and she could barely make any sound other than pathetic groaning. Though exhaustion from the past few days played some part, Sonic feared the worst: that Tails had been slowly draining her away for some time now.

His own tiredness felt natural. Despite everything he'd been through he still felt whole, yet this bothered him. Tails could have killed him at any time, either through force or through sapping his reality away, yet he had avoided it. There was something more than the bond they shared holding him back. Tails wanted him alive.

The other Tails, the apparition from the future he'd seen; he wanted him alive too. Sonic knew they must need him for something but what? What he could do that Tails now couldn't? Everything he'd tried had failed, and despite his own skills he could do nothing against Tails or for him.

As he made his way back up the stairs with Amy in tow, these questions followed with him. But as he stepped into the ground floor corridor the sound of gunfire reached deafening levels, and with it came the deep rumble of explosions, breaking glass and soldiers shouting desperately.

Sonic rushed through the corridors towards the front door. Before he reached it the wall to his left caved in as something smashed through it. When the dust had cleared he saw a tank lying in the ruins of a laboratory, its frame mangled and its cannon bent almost completely in half.

The rubble from the impact fell across the front doors, covering them and blocking the way. As more of the facility crumbled around him, Sonic turned and sprinted down the corridor, so fast that Amy's legs didn't touch the floor. He weaved through a maze of hallways, searching for another way out.

Then he saw it: a green sign glowing in the darkness, with a picture of a Mobian running towards a door and chased by stylised flames.

"Fire Exit!" Sonic cried. He took off in the direction of the sign, following more signs through the corridors until he came to another door. Kicking it open, Sonic leapt out onto the grass and ran for the outer fence. A piece of smoking debris had landed on a portion of it, knocking it down and clearing the way. Sonic tossed Amy through the breach, and was about to follow himself when he looked back and froze.

The cacophony of battle had ceased, replaced by a low drone, pulsing in and out like the beat of a heart. At the front of the facility a cloud of debris filled the air. Tanks, guns, cars, rubble and soldiers hovered in the air, slowly rising upward like they were sinking into a deep sea in reverse. An aura of golden light surrounded them, arcs of yellow lightning cracked and jumped through the air around and between them, and they flickered in and out of existence, with parts of some peeling away into
twinkling yellow sparks. Sonic looked closer, straight into the eyes of Axton, suspended like the rest, his arm reaching out desperately for rescue, his face frozen in terror.

In the centre of this chaos, Tails floated in the air. His eyes had turned completely white, and bolts of lightning flickered from his forehead, yet he seemed completely calm and unaware of the scene before him.

A flash of light stung Sonic's eyes, quickly retreating into a wall of golden light that rapidly shrunk away. When it vanished, the only thing left outside the facility was Tails.

He threw back his head and began to twitch in mid-air, his arms locked straight to his side and his legs jerking erratically. His eyes were closed tight, and a broad open-mouth smile spread across his face from which halted, shuddering breaths escaped.

Sonic felt his stomach constrict, and a bitter taste entered his mouth. A single cold tear ran down his face and dripped from his chin.

"You're enjoying it... you're actually enjoying this, you sick -"

He inhaled sharply, mentally swallowing down the thought. This was not Tails anymore, he told himself, but a thing that looked like him that needed to be stopped. It had played his emotions and his attachment to his friend anyway it could, and unless he divorced himself from those feelings for the time being it would continue to do so. He knew the real Tails was a prisoner inside his own body, and that's who he had to focus on.

Turning away, Sonic clambered over the wreckage and through the gap in the fence. Further into the forest he found Amy lying on the ground, resting on her side with a blank stare and looking like an insomniac. Sonic stooped down and picked her up under her arms, draping her over his shoulder where she hung like a worn-out blanket. Without looking back Sonic tore off into the depths of the woods, running for several minutes until he felt sure Tails wasn't following him. He set down Amy, and she wobbled where she stood, her lower lip hanging down.

"Come on, Amy!" Sonic shook her by the shoulders. "I need you back with me! It's me, it's Sonic!"

Amy made a strange half-groan, half-gurgling sound, but still she seemed completely out of it.

"Look, I forgive you for attacking me, okay? I'm not mad or anything, and I totally get that you're frightened and stuff, but we need to do something now! Tails is gonna destroy the whole world, don't you understand? He's going to kill everyone and everything if we don't stop him right now. I need you to help me, Amy! I need you!"

Again Amy stirred, and this time her eyes met his. There was something there, deep inside, he could tell. He felt his stomach twist up in knots as he gulped anxiously. Even he couldn't believe it had come to this.

"Amy, please don't take this the wrong way, but... oh, brother..."

He leant forward and placed his lips against hers. Amy inhaled sharply through her nose, then grabbed him by the side of his face and pushed her own lips forcefully towards his. He span him around and pinned him against a nearby tree, and he could only squirm as he felt the tip of her tongue touching his. Her lips were dry and cracked, her breath heavy and her body stale with sweat, though the fact that he was much the same didn't deter her in the slightest. The force of her kiss pulled at the edges of his mouth, and she inhaled so rapidly and heavily she seemed like she might burst at any moment, yet a part of him welcomed her. Though overbearing and clumsy, her affection
partially filled the void in his heart where Tails used to be.

Remembering what he was trying to do in the first place, Sonic grabbed Amy's shoulders and pushed her away, her lips holding on to his for as long as possible until he finally wrenched them away. Amy held her hands close to her chest, sighed long and wistfully, and then fainted.

"Oh, man," said Sonic, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "The things I do for my friends..." He knelt over Amy and gently shook her by the shoulders. Amy's eyes snapped open, and she sat bolt upright.

"Oh my gosh," she gasped, "I just had the most amazing dream." Her eyes re-focused, and she spotted Sonic. "Oh hi, Sonic. What's going on? Where are we?"

Sonic knelt down to her level, took hold of her hand and held it in both of his own.

"I need you to focus, Amy. Tails has gone completely off the deep end, and if we don't stop him then we can kiss Mobius goodbye. I need you to think real hard for me: when you were with him before you came here, did he say anything, anything at all that might give us a clue on how to beat him? Think!"

"Um..." Amy looked off to the side, "I think... I didn't hear this from Tails directly- well, I kind of did but it's a bit complicated."

"You saw an older version of Tails, didn't you? Glowing, sort of like a ghost, spoke a load of cryptic gibberish?"

"How... how did you know?"

"I met him too. He's been following us around since the GUN base, at least. But I need to know what he told you! Even if it doesn't seem important, tell me! It could be the key to fixing this whole mess!"

Amy's eyes widened, her pupils narrowing. "The Master Emerald."

"What?"

"He said the Master Emerald could be used to stop him. That's why he went after Knuckles; he was close to figuring it out so he had to be silenced."

"The Master Emerald..." Sonic whispered. "Of course. I've been so distracted that I never even thought about it. If you want to stop the Emeralds, you need their big brother to make them fall in line."

"But Sonic, we can't use the Master Emerald. Only Knuckles knew how to do all those rituals and stuff."

Sonic rose to his feet, pulling Amy up with him. "That's where you're wrong. There is one thing I can do with the Master Emerald that Knuckles can't."

"What's that?"

"Wait until we get to Angel Island," said Sonic, winking, "and then you'll see. You'll be in for one heck of a surprise."

They headed off into the forest, and as they did, Sonic looked back over his shoulder.
"Just you wait, Tails. I'm coming for you, and this time I ain't gonna lose."

~O~

Sonic would never get used to teleportation. Whether it was via Chaos Control, a big ring or a star post, it always made him want to throw up. He was very aware of his body, a necessity at the speed he travelled, yet this made having his form stretched, twisted, rearranged and forced through solid matter all the more disconcerting.

The teleporter to Angel Island was no different, and no sooner had the crimson glow of its energy dissipated then he fell face forward onto the grass with his head spinning.

"Kill me now..." he groaned. Hands gripped him under his arms and lifted him to his feet, though his legs shook as he tried to steady himself.

"Come on, Sonic," said Amy, slinging his arm round her shoulders and holding his weight. "The Master Emerald is near."

Noon approached, the sun rising high above Angel Island. In the bright sunshine the grass sweeping across the hills almost glowed, the lakes and waterfalls sparkled and the snow on the distant mountains shimmered. Birdsong filled the air and a gentle breeze swept across the valley. Sonic couldn't help but sigh; the serenity of the place almost made him feel like everything was normal again, that there was nothing to worry about.

Amy leaned in close to him, and every time he looked her way she smiled and turned away. He could feel her heart beating steadily, and her skin trembled every time their sides touched.

What had he done? He couldn't think of another way to bring her out of her stupor short of slapping her about, which he would never do. She clearly remembered the kiss and would take it as gospel proof that he loved her, despite everything he'd said to the contrary before.

He did love her, just not in that way. She never had understood the difference between true friendship and fairy-tale romance, and now convincing her would be impossible.

*Maybe it wouldn't be so bad,* he thought. She was the only person he had left now; he should be letting her get closer to him, not pushing her away again.

He sighed, not wanting to think about it any further. However he thought he felt about her, he didn't think 'all my friends are dead' was the healthiest foundation for a relationship.

"It's so nice here," said Amy. "Maybe when this is all over we could come back here. You know, just you and me."

Sonic looked away, sweat running down his brow. "Er... yeah, sure whatever. Hey look, there's the Master Emerald."

He twisted himself free of her grasp and jogged towards the dais where the Master Emerald sat. Hopping up the steps, he clambered up to the huge gem slowly rotating in the air, its pristine green facets glimmering in the midday sun.

His heart felt heavy, for the last time he came here another of his friends was taken from him. He could still picture the look on Knuckles' face and the sound of his scream as his soul or his energy or his reality or whatever was sucked right out of him. But that's not all he saw; he could still see Shadow and Rouge's withered bodies, he could still see the paramedics Tails had killed, he could see
Axton's desperate, terror-struck face in his last moments and he could still see the awful vision Tails had shown him.

He placed his hand against the Emerald, feeling its low hum vibrating through his arm. He would not let anyone else suffer. No-one else would die on his watch, no more death, no more destruction. He was Sonic the Hedgehog, and he would do what he was born to do: save the world.

"Okay... let's do this."

From behind him came the sound of sobbing, and he turned around to see Amy halfway up the dais, her face in her hands and muffling her cries.

"Amy? What's wrong?"

She looked up, her weary eyes heavy and wet. "Oh Sonic, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, but I told him."

Sonic took a cautious step down the dais. "Told who what?"

Amy shook her head. "Tails! I already told him about the Master Emerald. I told him it could be used against him. I-I don't know what I was thinking!"

Sonic sighed, but then he smirked. "I know you did. As soon as you told me about it I figured Tails must've made you tell him too. In fact, that's the whole reason we came here."

"B-but he's going to come here!"

"I'm counting on it."

A sonic boom shook the sky, sending the birds fleeing from the trees. In the distance a bright point of light hung in the clear blue sky, growing brighter and larger with every passing second.

"Look at that, right on cue. It's showtime." As the light approached, Sonic clambered on top of the Master Emerald, standing up straight just as the light turned downward towards the island.

The light became a fireball as it neared, and in its centre was Tails, flying with his arms by his side and not using his tails at all. He stopped just above the ground, releasing a blast of hot air that shook the trees and knocked Amy onto her back. Sonic stood his ground even as his feet slipped and slid across the smooth surface of the Master Emerald. When the wind died down, Tails hovered before the dais, a wicked grin on his face.

"Tails!" bellowed Sonic. "It's over! I'm giving you one last chance to stop this madness. Please listen to me. We can fix this together but the killing stops now!"

Tails lifted himself higher than Sonic, looking down at him with a fierce scowl. "You want to negotiate? After you tried to trick me with your false allegiance? After you've done everything in your meagre power to hinder and hamper my efforts? I don't need you, Sonic, any more than I need a flea. The sooner you accept that the better it will be."

"You can tell yourself that if you like," said Sonic, pointing up at him, "but the truth is you've always needed me, just like I've always need you. This is all happening because you tried to change that; because you thought if you shut me out I wouldn't get hurt. Well, guess what? I am hurt, Tails; you've hurt me so much. But I'll still forgive you-"

"I don't want your forgiveness! Just because you don't understand what's happening doesn't give you the moral high ground. I haven't done anything wrong!"
"You didn't let me finish," said Sonic, kneeling down and placing one hand onto the Master Emerald. "I said I'll still forgive you... after I kick your ass!"

Closing his eyes, he searched for something deep within himself. When he found it, the energy from the Master Emerald ran along his arm, surging over his body and covering him in green flame. His muscles surged with renewed vigour, his heart pounded like a drum and his blood boiled in his veins. Standing upright, he saw his fur twitch from blue to green then to yellow, and he felt his spines rising.

"What are you doing?" said Tails.

"You're not the only one who can use Chaos Energy! I'm showing you what the real Super Sonic can do! Prepare yourself!"

But something was wrong. The energy should have been pure and full of life, but as he absorbed it he felt parts of it twisting, running thin in places and coalescing too much in others. His stomach heaved and his eyes began to water as the energy ran through his veins like treacle.

"Ugh... what's happening? This isn't-

"What did you expect, Sonic? The Master Emerald need the Chaos Emeralds just as much as they need it. I've absorbed four of them already; you can't balance their energy correctly without them around!"

Sonic's knees shook, and he tumbled forward, sliding off the Emerald onto the dais. His body felt so numb he barely felt the impact against the hard stone, and the sky above swam with putrid colours. Tails hovered into his view, looking down at him and laughing.

"Now let me show you how it's done."

He landed on the top of the Master Emerald, and at once the light from the huge gem began to pulse a sickly mix of yellow and green.

"I was so blind, you know? So afraid and unsure of myself that I couldn't see the obvious right in front of me. Why waste time searching for the Emeralds when I can make them come right to me?"

The Master Emerald pulsed faster, and the sky began to darken. Tails' fur stood on end and his eyes turned completely white. The air around him crackled with sparks and arcs of yellow lightning, while dust and small rocks rose into the air, orbiting around the dais. Three flashes of light followed, and the Emeralds appeared; grey, yellow and orange crystals suspended by nothing. They span around Tails, rotating faster and faster until they became a multi-coloured blur, then the blur became a solid beam of shifting light which rammed into Tails' chest.

Tails gasped, then threw his head back to the sky and roared, a loud scream mixing anguish, pain and elation together. Bolts of lightning leapt from his forehead, latching onto the Master Emerald and crawling over it like electric tentacles. The gem cracked and splintered, folding in on itself, and as it collapsed the ground shook. More lightning erupted from Tails' head, thick columns of hissing, sparking yellow light that lashed out randomly. One struck a tree, causing it to completely disintegrate into golden, flickering points of light. Others struck the ground and the surrounding mountains; where they struck the rock exploded and deep channels appeared in the earth.

Sonic leapt down the crumbling dais, hauling Amy to her feet and sprinting away. The ground shook harder, throwing off his footing and making him stumble, but he pushed on towards the teleporter orb.
A fissure erupted between him and Amy, and the entire section of the island he was on began to come away. Sonic pushed away to safety as the ground tilted and dropped.

"Amy! Get to the teleporter, now! Run!"

The ground slipped further until he could see Amy no longer. All around him pieces of the island broke away and fell, and his own segment rapidly crumbled. He tried to leap back to the island, but the ground tilted suddenly, leaving him scrabbling for purchase with the open sky beneath his feet, and the surface of Mobius below that.

Another jolt blasted the rock to pieces, and Sonic toppled into the open air, desperately reaching out for anything to hold onto. Angel Island fell away from him, and he plummeted through freezing wet clouds towards the ground. Turning himself over, he saw the surface of Mobius rushing towards him.

But he knew how to fall from a great height, and this time he had enough time to control his descent. He snapped his arms to his side and his legs together, and like a skeleton rider he steered himself around the eddies and currents in the air. With enough shifting he was able to even out his trajectory into a shallow angle almost parallel to the ground. He'd done this before, and he knew it would hurt a lot, but he would live.

As he soared over miles of open countryside, he hoped he had planned his route correctly. No buildings or cliffs to crash into, and definitely no lakes this time.

But as he neared the ground, he spotted something he had overlooked: a small copse of trees.

"Oh fu-" The first tree he hit snapped in two from the impact. The next dozen shed branches by the dozen as he ricocheted between them like a pinball. Emerging from the other side covered in twigs and leaves and with sticks jammed into his spines, he crashed into a gentle grassy slope, carving a trench into the earth and rolling over himself until he finally came to a stop.

Every part of him burned and throbbed, and his head felt like it might implode at any minute, but he pushed through it, rising to his feet and running to the crest of a hill.

When he got there he fell to his knees.

Angel Island was breaking apart. All across the floating continent fissures appeared, shattering the landmass into massive chunks that drifted as if floating in water. The volcano at its centre collapsed in on itself, and the great Sandopolis desert ran over the edge in a golden curtain of sand. Dark clouds and yellow lightning engulfed the island, the sound of the upheaval shaking his bones even from so far away.

The fragments of the island broke down further, then began swirling, spinning into a boiling, roaring cloud of ruin. In the centre a bright light appeared, growing brighter and brighter until it obscured the whole cloud. Then a deep pulse range out, the light and cloud collapsed inwards to a tiny point, and a bright flash followed. When it cleared, the sky returned to its brilliant blue, and quiet fell upon the land. All seemed calm, as if the disturbance had never been there at all.

But Angel Island had gone.

~O~
Eggman's hands trembled, his joints aching as he lifted the cable into position. The jack scratched around the edge of the hole as he struggled to line it up but eventually he managed to plug it in, collapsing back into his chair with a heavy sigh. The bank of terminals hummed and whirred, while the array of computer screens before him filled with numbers indicating their boot sequence had started.

He'd been so angry at what Tails had done to him that he hadn't felt it fully at first. Only after Sonic had left did the weight of his enfeeblement sink in. Every breath felt like lifting a lead weight with his lungs, every movement stung him with pain as his bones scraped together, held together with only sinew, his muscles wasted to nothing. His eyes, lips and skin felt cracked and dry, his moustache scratchy and brittle like straw. But the worst thing was the tiredness; his eyelids felt so heavy, and several times he'd fallen asleep in his chair only to be woken by Orbot and Cubot.

Excepting those two brainless idiots, his Badniks had been a godsend, tirelessly working to repair the damage caused to his base by Tails and bringing him anything he needed. They needed no sleep or rest, no food, drink or pay, and they never complained about the working hours. They were the perfect citizens, unlike the mewling, entitled people of this planet who were little more than animals that had learned how to speak and then squandered that gift on ungrateful whinging.

What had they been doing, he wondered, while his surveillance system was down? Without his eyes on the world watching their every move, what schemes had the Mobians hatched? Had they sensed his temporary weakness and were even now plotting against him? They couldn't be trusted with ownership of this world; without his noble guidance they'd destroy both it and themselves.

The boot sequence on his computer system completed, and no sooner had it done so then every screen turned red, warnings flashing frantically and alarms screaming in his ear.

"What the hell's going on?! Computer, summarise the situation!"

Rows of figures appeared on the screen, and Eggman leaned forward, almost rising from his chair but for the pain in his legs.

"These figures... they can't possibly be right! I've never seen anything like it! If this were true I would have noticed something by now, even without my instruments."

Orbot floated next to him. "Perhaps, sir, we should check the local and international media for any signs of a disturbance?"

Eggman slumped back in his chair. "I suppose you're right, for once. Computer, search for any news reports that correlate with these figures."

After a few seconds of whirring, the screen filled with dozens and dozens of headlines, each more hysterical than the last. From out of the mass of tabloid frenzy he noticed one particular fact standing out:

ANGEL ISLAND VANISHES.

This alone drained what little colour he had from his cheeks. But the stories told a darker tale: all around the world strange and destructive phenomena were being reported. Flash flooding in the
centre of landlocked Almangia, tornadoes at the top of Mount Imperious, earthquakes, hurricanes and forest fires appearing all at once across the planet. Stories of ordinary people going insane and launching frenzied attacks on their neighbours, rioting in the streets, muggings and looting everywhere. Ghostly figures seen in the woods, tales of the dead rising from their graves and off the coast of Takayo a huge shadow was seen rising from the ocean, before all contact with the country was lost.

"It's pandemonium out there! The whole world's going to hell in a handbasket! I must know what's causing it, at once!"

He leant forward despite his aching bones to press some buttons on his console. The news reports vanished and a model of Mobius appeared in its place, surrounded by graphs and figures.

"That's impossible! The Chaos Emeralds are gone! There's no trace of them here or in the Special Zone! Without them, the Web of Chaos is destabilizing! According to my calculations, we've got less than 48 hours before the entire planet collapses!"

He fell back in his chair, sweat pouring down his wrinkled brow. His heart, which could only muster up the weakest of beats until now, pounded harder than it had in his whole life. For the first time that he could recall, Eggman felt truly afraid.

"It's the end of the world."

"You got that right," said a voice from behind him. Eggman turned his chair around to see Sonic standing in the doorway, his quills ragged, his fur dirty and his eyes weary.

"Except this time, Doctor," he said, "you're going to be the one to save it."

~O~

He'd told Eggman everything he could as succinctly as possible: Tails, the shard, the Fracture Point, Super Sonic. Just the facts as he understood them without mention of how he felt about the whole situation. Facts are what Eggman could work with; the only time he cared about Sonic's feelings was when he could exploit them or mock him. He didn't have time for that, not while his world was dying.

A tremor shook the room, dislodging dust and plaster over him. They had been occurring ever since he arrived, getting more frequent and more violent as time went on. Outside he heard the sound of rain and thunder mixed with a rippling drone, behind which he heard what sounded like muffled voices or music.

Eggman sat with his hands pressed together in a triangle in front of his face, tapping his index fingers together. He had been silent for a while now, deep in thought, and Sonic felt his irritation growing.

"You've had long enough to think, Eggman!" He spat. "If you're as smart as you always claim you are then you should have thought of something by now!"

"Don't rush me, hedgehog!" Eggman hit back without breaking his focused posture. "This is a very delicate situation; if we make the wrong move the consequences could be disastrous."

Sonic put his hands on his hips. "Excuse me? Have you seen what's happening out there? This already is a disaster! People are dying, the planet's coming apart at the seams and Tails is probably destroying everything in his path! How can we possibly make this situation any worse?!"
"Because this goes beyond the fate of Mobius, you imbecile!" growled Eggman. "We're dealing with a Fracture Point, which up until this very moment I didn't even believe existed. If we don't act based on the evidence before us, if we let ourselves be motivated by our hearts instead of our heads, then we could end up ripping the universe apart! So shut that annoying motor-mouth of yours for just one second and let me think!"

Sonic clucked his tongue and gasped in exasperation. "Fine... but don't take too lo-"

"I've got it!" yelled Eggman, throwing his hands up. "Of course, it's so obvious!" He glanced sideways at Sonic. "Well... obvious to a genius like me."

Sonic jumped forward, gripping the arm of Eggman's chair with both hands. "Save it! Just tell me the plan already!"

"Listen well, hedgehog, lest your tiny brain shrivel to nothing before the vastness of my intellect. My plan is so fiendishly clever that I surprise even myself."

"Get to the point!" Sonic growled, shaking the chair and sending Eggman reeling. "I'm sick of hearing you talk about yourself! Tell me the damn plan!"

"Okay, okay!" Eggman said, holding out his hands to steady himself. "You know, you're a lot less fun to antagonise when you're cranky."

Sonic glared at him, and he shrank before his intense stare.

"Anyway... about my plan; from what you've told me, it seems the Fracture Point was created when the shard of the fake Emerald punctured through the fabric of space-time. It's probably pressing through the gap by less than the width of a sub-atomic particle, but the energy of the shard is enough to keep it open. So long as Tails keeps feeding it energy the Fracture Point will never close. If we are to have a hope of stopping this, we need to get that shard out of Tails' head. Only then will we have a chance to undo the damage your little friend has caused."

"Great plan, except for one tiny--actually-really-huge problem: we can't get anywhere near Tails right now. He'll kill us if we try anything."

Eggman shook his head. "Sonic, Sonic, Sonic, you small-minded fool. We don't need to get near Tails at all; it's the shard we're interested in."

"Which is in Tails' head, so no dice."

"Look, it's quite simple really: the shard is Emerald matter, right? That means it'll behave like a real Emerald when exposed to certain external stimuli. If I can send a signal at just the right frequency to the shard then--"

"It'll send the shard into the Special Zone."

"Huh? That's right... how did you--"

"Because that's Tails' plan! That's the plan he came up with when this all began. The plan that I gave you the details of!"

Eggman's eyes darted left and right. "No, no, no, I definitely came up with this idea entirely on my own, I assure you of that." He reached down to hurriedly stuff a singed page of equations into his pocket. "Tails could never come up with something this astonishingly clever, not in his wildest
Sonic threw up his hands. "Whatever. You can tell yourself that if you want. So we send the shard to the Special Zone, then what?"

"That should delay the end of the world by a few hours at least. But in order to stop it completely I'll need you to go into the Special Zone, fetch the shard and bring it back here. The energy of the Special Zone should stabilise it for long enough for me to work on it."

"Can you undo everything it's done? Can you restore all the energy it's stolen and - "

"Bring your friends back? Is that what you were going to say?" He spun his chair towards Sonic, resting his elbows on his knees with his hands clasped together. "My priority is to restore the Chaos Emeralds and stop this world from disintegrating. As a side effect, the Chaos Energy taken from your friends will be brought back as well."

Sonic felt a smile force its way onto his face. Eggman saw it, and in response his own face became grimmer.

"But... the energy may be so corrupted that they'll die anyway. The Emeralds can reform themselves; cleanse themselves of any damage to their energy, but living beings can't. After all this time, I'd say it's highly likely your friends are already dead."

Sonic's smile collapsed, and his heart sank in turn. Though the possibility had crossed his mind, to hear it stated so bluntly began to sap what little hope he had left out of him.

"I'll..." he said softly, "I'll deal with that when this is all over. Until then I have to keep trying for the best outcome. My friends would do the same if it were my life on the line. No, we need to do this. We need to stay strong even when everything is growing dark all around us."

Eggman turned away, staring intently into the distance, his brow furrowed in deep thought.

"There's something else you should know. If what you've told me is true then the shard has likely consumed a not-insignificant portion of Tails' brain. If we succeed in removing it, then in all probability Tails will die. Even if he survives, he'll be so severely brain-damaged he might as well be dead. I just... thought you should know that before we proceed."

Sonic closed his eyes, and saw the faces of everyone he'd lost:

Shadow, his most unlikely of friends, in whom he'd found a special trust stronger than he'd ever hoped.

Rouge, so clever and confident beneath her astounding beauty. He always felt like she had his back, even when she hid in the shadows.

Knuckles, his loyal brother-in-arms. Though they often clashed he knew he could always rely on old knucklehead to be ready to fight at his side.

Amy, the girl who loved him no matter how much he broke her heart. A kind and gentle soul who always cared about others, her heart spoke to him in ways she never knew.

He saw the others: Quinn, Axton and his men, the two paramedics. Whatever they were in life, none of them deserved their fate.

And Tails... he had no words to describe him. No words could ever truly convey how he felt.
the word 'love' seemed too small, too tiny to encompass the vast ocean of his feelings for the boy. All he knew was that even if he failed, even if Mobius fell and all of reality fell with it, he had always hoped that Tails would somehow survive it. If Tails was the only thing left in existence, then to Sonic's mind existence would be pretty much perfect.

And he had to let him go.

When he opened his eyes, his vision was blurred and he felt his muzzle grow damp.

"Do it," he whispered. "Get the signal ready. But don't activate it until I say so. If anyone has to end this, it's gotta be me. Tails... Tails would want it to be me."

Eggman said nothing, only nodding in silent agreement. He turned to his console and began rapidly typing. The system whirred to life, and rows upon rows of equations flooded the screens.

"The calculations are underway. I'll let you know when the signal's ready to be broadcast."

Sonic turned away, listlessly trudging towards the corner of the room.

"Sonic?"

"Huh?" Sonic stopped, looking back over his shoulder.

"I take no joy in this, you understand that? I wanted you and your friends to be part of my vision for Mobius. And if I had to kill you for opposing me, at least you would die fighting for what you believed in. I admired that, in a way. But for you to lose like this, it's like putting down a sick animal; necessary, but without any joy in the act. It brings me no comfort at all to see you all brought so low, and for what? An accident caused by a reckless teenager. It's such a waste."

"Funny," said Sonic, "what you just said; that brings me no comfort at all to hear. That reckless teenager was... is my best friend, and now I've got to..." A lump rose in his throat. "Just do me a favour, and shut the fuck up for once. Don't say anything to me until that device is ready, you understand? I don't want to hear how clever you think you are, I don't want to hear about how weak you think I am, I don't want to hear anything, at all, from anyone. Do you understand?!"

Eggman opened his mouth, but thought better of it, before nodding silently and turning back to his computers. Sonic slumped down in a corner, holding his knees close to his chest and resting his forehead against them.

Underhanded and insensitive his words may have been, but Eggman had a point; if his friends had gone down fighting for freedom or to protect the world from a great evil it wouldn't be half as bad. He'd miss them for sure, but his heart would swell with pride at their heroism and self-sacrifice. This was like a cancer eating away at his life, slowly robbing him of everything he was, delivering painful and needless deaths to his friends. And all because his closest friend had gone mad, blindly pursuing a goal he couldn't even comprehend.

"I just want to understand," he whispered to himself. "I just want there to be a reason for all of this." Try as he might he could not see a concrete motive to Tails' actions. He wanted power, but what would he use that power for? To destroy everything? What would be the point? If he could've reached Tails somehow, the real Tails underneath the madness and just talked to him, then he knew he would understand. He was sure he wouldn't agree, but he'd at least understand what Tails was going through. At least he'd be there for him again.

Tears flowed freely from his eyes, dripping into his lap, but he didn't care. There was no one left to see him cry and it wouldn't matter if there was; he never cried because there was always something
he could do to make things better, but now crying felt like the only thing he could do.

Is this what Tails had meant about hope? By raising himself so high it just meant he had further to fall. If he had already been at the bottom, would he be hurting so much? His body was battered and bruised, his mind exhausted from failing over and over to make a difference, but somehow he still felt like he had something left to give. He just wished he knew what it was.

A rapid beeping filled the room, and he looked up.

"It's ready," said Eggman. "Quickly, we haven't much time."

Sonic jumped to his feet, wiping his eyes clear before heading over to the console. A panel slid back, and a large red handle resembling a circuit-breaker switch rose out of the bank of buttons.

"You wanted to be the one to pull the plug on Tails, didn't you? Just flick this switch and the signal will activate."

Sonic took a few steps towards the switch, extending a trembling hand towards it.

"Just remember to tell the world it was my genius that came up with this," said Eggman. "I don't want you taking all the credit just for pulling a handle."

'Just for pulling a handle.' He made it sound so simple, so easy, but to Sonic the handle may as well have been a gun to Tails' head. Even as he gripped it firmly he felt the sweat on his hands and brow, while his throat seized up and halted his breath.

"This feels so wrong... if I have to... if I have to end his life, I should at least look him in the eyes while I do it. He should be here so I can at least tell him I… tell him why I have to do this, try to make him understand."

A tremor shook the room, and Sonic let go of the switch, steadying himself on the console. Behind him the doors crashed open, and an intense blazing light filled the room.

"Looks like you got your wish!" said Eggman.

Tails hovered in the doorway, his body wreathed in golden fire and his eyes shining like the sun. The air around him surged with heat, and the bright light stung Sonic's eyes. But through the glare he could see a flash of pink.

Tails held Amy up with one hand, gripping her by the back of the neck. The girl kicked at the air, both hands grasping at her throat, her eyes staring into Sonic's with pupils narrowed to a point.

"I think you lost this, Sonic," said Tails, his voice a chorus of hissing, rasping growls. "You should take better care of the things you claim to love."

Sonic planted his feet, gripping the switch again and holding it tight. Though Tails' glare obscured her, he held his gaze with Amy's desperate own.

"This is your last chance, Tails! Let her go or I'll - "

"You'll what? Lecture me again? Try to shove your tiny morality down my throat? What exactly will you do?"

Sonic looked away from Amy, staring straight into Tails' blazing eyes. His fingers gripped the switch so hard he felt his knuckles turning white.
"I'll kill you."

Tails' laughed, his childish giggle masked by a legion of hellish laughter.

"You'll kill me? And then what? Who will you have left if I'm gone? Who will you have left to hate?!"

"What are you talking about? I don't hate you, I've never hated you."

"YES YOU DO!" shrieked Tails, choking Amy in his rage, the room shaking around him. "You've hated me every day for the past six months! I see it in your eyes; it makes you sick just to look at me. It doesn't matter what I do, I'm nothing to you! I'M NOTHING!"

Sonic felt a stab of pain in his heart, but he composed himself. "What is this? You think I hate you? All this death and destruction... has it all been because you think I don't love you? Why would you think that?"

"Just say it!" Tails yelled. "Just stop lying and tell me you hate me! I want you to say it!"

"I won't say it because it's not true! You have to believe me!"

"Fine," said Tails, dropping to the floor and forcing Amy to her knees. "If you won't stop lying to me, I'll make you say it. Try pretending you love me after this."

He tightened his grip around Amy's throat, and her desperate gasps stopped. Then she began to shake, and her voice returned as a cry of pain and terror. Before Sonic could react, he watched as Amy's body began to wrinkle, her quills turning brittle and falling from her head and her vibrant pink fur turning to dull grey.

Sonic cried out her name, an anguished howl erupting from his lips. Amy's skin clung to her bones as her muscles wasted away, and her screaming abruptly ceased. Tails still held her tight, his body trembling and the light from his forehead flickering with lightning.

Sonic's body locked up, and he could only call out her name as he watched her dying in front of him. Her skin came apart like fraying fabric, and her muscles and organs shrivelled and vanished until she was only a skeleton held together with sinew. Then her bones crumbled to dust, and after she had completely crumbled even the dust vanished into thin air.

Tails stopped trembling, a satisfied smirk across his face. Sonic's mouth hung open, his breaths heaving inside his chest and his heart pounding.

Then he felt it; rising up from deep within him, surging through his veins, tightening his muscles and boiling inside his blood. He clenched his teeth together so hard his jaw ached, and dark capillaries crawled across his eyes. His skin pulsed with it and even his bones shook with it.

Hate. This is what Tails wanted him to feel, and now he did. He hated the monster in front of him as much as it was possible to hate something. Everything he'd felt before now was swept aside, and he had only one thought left for Tails.

With a furious roar Sonic slammed the switch into position. At once a low pulse grew faster and louder, while the lights flickered and blew out. Tails took a step forward, but then fell to his knees, screaming.

Lightning poured from his forehead, and he gripped the side of his head with his mouth wide open, his scream merging with the deafening pulsing drone of the signal. He shook like he was having a
seizure, and the whole world seemed to shake with him.

Then the drone ceased, and Tails' scream cut off with it. The room fell silent, and the light from the boy's forehead faded away, his eyes returning to their natural sky blue colour. He stared forward with a vacant expression, then collapsed forward, slamming face first into the floor.

The only sound Sonic could hear was his own heavy breath. Eggman's mouth hung open, but he said nothing. Sonic peeled his hand away from the switch, a deep imprint of its outline pressed into his palm. He crept over to where Tails lay, standing over the prone orange form, unmoving and lifeless.

"Sonic..." said Eggman. "I-

Sonic's arm flew out, striking one of Eggman's instruments and smashing it against the wall. He swept his arm across a desk, pushing all manner of devices and papers onto the floor before picking up the desk and flipping it. He put his foot through a spare monitor before heaving it across the room. He pounded on the console, smashing panels and buttons, ripping out cables and sending sparks flying. The switch he wrenched from its holder and snapped it in half before hurling them against the large screen on the wall and cracking it. All the while howling and screaming in rage with tears streaming down his muzzle.

"S-Sonic!" whimpered Eggman, "Please, calm down!"

Sonic leapt forward, grabbing Eggman by the lapels and hoisting him into the air. Aided in part by the doctor's reduced weight, Sonic drew his sudden strength from barely-contained anger.

"Send me to the Special Zone," growled Sonic through clenched teeth. "NOW!"

"The S-Special Zone? But-

"I'm ending this, once and for all! I'm going to get that shard back, and you're going to put everything right again! And even if you can't, I want to see that thing destroyed. I want to watch as we take that fucking shard and blast it into atoms! You hear me?! I'm going to kill that lump of concentrated evil if it's the last thing I do!"

"But you broke all my stuff-"

Sonic pulled Eggman close to him. "Yeah? And I'll break you too if you don't help me."

Sweat poured down Eggman's brow. "Y-you wouldn't!"

"I just killed my best friend, and you're trying to tell me what I will and won't do anymore? What's that saying? Don't pick a fight with someone with nothing left to lose? You think I have anything left to lose?!

"O-okay! I'll do it, just put me down... please."

Sonic tossed Eggman back into his chair and turned away. He stared into the distance, unable to look at Tails' body, and though a tsunami of sorrow swelled up inside him he held it back. There would be time to grieve, and he would grieve so much, but it was not now. He had to focus on finishing this. Nothing else mattered.

"I'm waiting..." Sonic growled.

"Hold on a second!" Eggman fumbled with his chair, rooting around inside a compartment beneath
the seat. "I'm sure I had something in here somewhere."

"You better not be stalling me..."

"I'm n-not, I swear! I just - a-ha! Here it is!"

He pulled something from the junk inside the compartment and tossed it to Sonic, who caught it with one hand. It resembled a large red circular button with a bright yellow star in the centre.

"What is this?"

"My emergency Chaos Energy Aperture Stabiliser... it's a Big Ring generator! I built it if I ever needed to make a quick exit from something, usually you."

"So I just push it and a Big Ring will appear?"

"Yes, but be careful! With the Chaos Emeralds gone who knows what could happen. You might not even make it to the Special Zone in one piece."

Sonic slammed his fist onto the button. A crackle of yellow lightning appeared in the centre of the room and a golden ring emerged from nowhere, growing until it stretched from ceiling to floor. A sheet of white light filled its interior, and it hummed with a shimmering note.

"I have to take that chance," Sonic said, chucking the button back to Eggman. "I have to do this for everyone."

"Adding on the time I'll need to work on the shard, I estimate you've got eighteen hours max to find it and get back here. It seems pointless to say this but you need to be fast."

Sonic stepped up to the portal, his quills blowing in an unfelt wind. "Fast? I can do fast. I'm Sonic the Hedgehog."

Eggman scooted his chair over to him, putting a wrinkly hand on his shoulder.

"This will probably be the only time I say this to you but... good luck, Sonic. I really mean that."

Sonic nodded, then leapt forward into the light. The Ring began to spin and pulse before imploding inward and vanishing in a flash, leaving Eggman alone in a ruined, empty and silent room.

"Such a waste..."

~O~

Sonic collided with something hard, his face and body pressing up against it. Picking himself up, he found himself on some kind of metallic rock floating in the air. A vast space stretched in all directions around him, filled with clouds of iridescent fire, perfectly geometric structures made from coloured glass and glowing orbs grew and shrank erratically. A flock of white birds flew past him, spontaneously transforming into silver fish than swam through the air, while spinning discs sang with rapidly changing music like a radio rapidly changing stations.

This was the Special Zone alright.

But before his senses could adjust to the lack of up and down and left and right and in and out, he could tell something was wrong. Even for a place like this, something felt out of place; an electricity in the air he'd never felt here before.
He looked up, and his mouth fell open. High above him he saw a mass of yellow crystal, and he could sense the sheer size of it. The crystalline object must have been at least the size of a planet, if not bigger. Just looking at it made his head swim, but he could not take his eyes from it. It wasn't perfectly spherical but an irregular blob that tapered at one end. At the other it split into branches; huge columns of crystal that snaked across the zone, splitting again like vines. Some of these vines had latched onto objects throughout the zone, smothering them with jagged and rapidly growing crystal. Absorbing them.

As he stared at the object, a growing realisation came to Sonic. He knew that shape.

The shape of a heart.

Even as his own heart sank he saw it; the crystal mass was alive, pulsing and shifting like a lump of flesh. When it pulsed, rippled of lightning ran through it and the sky shook with thunder.

Though his felt fear crawling up his spine, Sonic leapt forward and into the air. Force and gravity didn't matter here; his own will moved him through this space, not his body. He bounced across asteroids towards one of the tentacles of the heart, flinging himself onto its smooth and cold surface. He sprinted at full speed along the length of the arm towards the centre, but even as the kilometres flew past by the dozens the heart crept towards him at a snail's pace.

But he pushed on, increasing his pace until his legs burned and his feet turned numb. For a solid half an hour he surged forward at this pace, until at last he reached the heart.

At this distance, the body was so vast compared to him that it seemed completely flat except for the towers reaching out into space. He skidded to a halt over several kilometres, then fell to his knees.

"What is this place?" He said to his own reflection in the smooth and polished surface.

In front of him the ground began to change, thrusting circular columns upward that stopped themselves at differing heights. Sonic stood and readied himself, then he saw the shape the columns were forming: a throne.

A figure appeared on the throne without any sign of arrival. They simply started existing in that spot. Sonic recognised the figure immediately; a tall, slender and very familiar fox with golden fur and glowing white eyes.

"You!"

"Hello, Sonic," said Tails. "I'm so glad you've finally made it here. The moment is almost upon us. We are reaching the end."

"The end of what?"

"Everything."

~O~
At the centre of creation, a crystal heart beat in time with the pulse of the universe. And on its polished yellow surface licked by storms of lightning, a miniscule blue dot held audience with a god.

"Is this your 'correct' time then? I'm not speaking to you from the past or the future or whatever?"

Tails sat motionless in his crystal throne, but he spoke with a symphony of voices fading in and out and playing off each other.

"You are correct. I can travel through time, but I exist here, in this moment with you. My travel is limited by the interactions you have already had with me. I can only visit those places because you or others have already seen me do so. It is a time-loop which even I must be bound by."

"Uh-huh. And who are you, exactly?"

Tails tilted his head. "I'm Tails."

"No," said Sonic, holding out his index finger. "You're not him. You're a thing that's taken his form. You will never be him to me no matter what you say."

"I wish I could make you understand," Tails rose to his feet. "I am Tails, but freed from my limited physical body. Everything I am became one with the shard, and when you sent it here I was finally set free. For that you have my deepest gratitude."

"So that's it, is it? That's why you wanted me and Amy alive? So you could kill her and force me to pull that switch? Is that what this has all been for?"

Tails turned away, staring down at the crystalline floor. "I'm truly sorry it had to happen that way, but the time-loop meant it could not have been any different. If it helps, I assure you she will live again. All of them will live again."

"Funnily enough, it doesn't help. I think they'd have preferred not to be killed in the first place."

"You still do not understand."

Sonic jumped forward, trying to grab Tails by his shoulders, but his hands passed through Tails' body like it wasn't even there.

"Make me understand then!" Sonic said as he regained his balance. "Just for once give me a straight answer when I ask you a question! Like, what is this thing we're on, for a start?"

Tails knelt down, stroking his hand across the surface of the crystal in an almost tender manner. "It's the shard."

"What?! That's impossible! The shard was barely the size of my finger when I sent it here."

"Time doesn't flow the same way in the Special Zone as in your universe. In the minutes you took before you opened the portal, years have passed. And in that time the shard has grown and grown, as has my power. It is almost time."

"For the end of everything, huh? And how you figure that's going to work?"
Tails slowly rose to his feet, then walked over to his throne to sit down again.

"The Special Zone touches all points in space and time. From here, one can reach out..." He raised his hand, then clenched it into a fist. "...and touch anything, anyone, anywhere and anywhen. This is the crossroads of reality, the place where everything begins and ends."

Sonic shrugged. "Yeah? So what?"

"Must you always be so flippant about everything?"

"Trust me; you wouldn't like me when I'm not."

"Listen to me; this shard will carry on growing until it consumes the entire Special Zone. From there it will push through to every point in space and time. It will absorb every universe at every point in time into itself. Every star, every planet and every person will be absorbed at every moment of their existence. Through it I shall gather all of reality together, ready to be remade."

Sonic marched forward, placing a foot on the base of Tails' throne and bringing his face close.

"Last time I checked, reality was just fine as it was. What makes you think you can just overwrite it?"

Tails gripped the arms of his throne, leaning in towards Sonic. "Because it's the only way to be sure. It's the only way to be rid of him."

"Him?" Sonic took a step back. "You mean Super Sonic, don't you? He's dead, Tails! You're fighting an enemy that doesn't exist anymore!"

"You haven't seen what I've seen. I've seen across all of space and time, and he is everywhere. He exists in so many universes; sometimes he's a robot, others he's a clone of you, or your inner darkness made manifest, or sometimes he is you, evil from the day you're born. Sometimes he's not even Mobian but another creature entirely yet filled with the same burning hatred. The origin is different but the monster is always the same. I've seen him kill so many people, I've seen him burn entire worlds to ashes, entire universes even!

"But I saw more than that; I saw pain, death and destruction wherever I looked. Sorrow and loss, hate and anger fester in every corner of reality, growing stronger every day. I've seen the whole of existence and I've seen the truth of it all: it's broken beyond repair. The only way to fix it is to tear it all down and start again, this time guided not by random chance, but by a caring and loving designer. I will remove everything that could ever hurt anyone, forever."

"And what about happiness?" said Sonic, folding his arms. "What about joy and friendship and love? Do they not exist in this 'broken' reality of yours? Because I know they do, and you know they do too, no matter how much you focus on all the bad stuff! You'll be taking all those memories and all those good times away from everyone and replacing it with your idea of happiness..."

Sonic unfolded his arms, raising his fists and readying his stance.

"And I can never allow that. I don't care how powerful you are, I'll fight you! This reality is under my protection, and I'm not about to let you take the happiness of billions away from them! You'll have to kill me first!"

Tails' shoulders slumped, and with a sigh he lazily waved his hand.

"So be it."
Pain ripped through Sonic's chest. He looked down to see a jagged spike of yellow crystal sticking through his torso, streaks of blood running along its length and dripping through the floor. The spike continued to drive into him, lifting him off the ground. As his body went limp, he saw the arms of the crystal heart reaching out into the depths of space.

"Wh-whats... happ..." He managed to choke out through lungs crushed by the expanding crystal.

"It didn't have to end like this, Sonic," said Tails. "I would have let you join me peacefully. I'm sorry for the pain but it will all be over soon. When you are reborn in my new reality, you'll see how foolish you've been. You'll finally be happy, Sonic. We'll all be."

Sonic tried to gasp for air, but his chest had given out completely. The edges of his vision grew darker, and his entire body turned numb. Then he felt himself being pulled inwards, his body sliding into the crystal and his weight melting into nothing.

When his head passed through the glass surface, everything turned white.

~O~

He couldn't move. He tried to turn his head but it stayed locked in place. His eyelids wouldn't blink and his eyes fixed forward. He could feel every part of his body frozen in place. White surrounded him; a thick cloud hung inches from his face, a wall of pure colour forcing its brightness into him.

Though unable to move, he could still feel something clinging to his chest. Not the spike of crystal; the pain from having his chest ripped open vanished the moment he arrived in this place. The new sensation felt soft and warm, though whatever it was gripped him so tight he felt like he might snap in half.

The sound of sobbing reached his ears, and he recognised it straight away.

"Tails?" he said, except his mouth didn't move. The sound seemed to leap straight out of his brain into the space he occupied.

"Tails, is that you? Is that the real you?"

It continued to sob and moan, its breaths rattling against his chest. Though he couldn't see it, he knew that sound; the sound of his best friend in pain.

"Tails, it's me! It's Sonic! I'm here for you, little buddy!"

Tails said nothing, continuing to sob into Sonic's chest.

"Things are looking bad, pal. Reality as we know it is on the ropes. I know we can stop this together; I'm gonna get the real you out of here and we'll win this thing together, I just know it."

"No, no, no," whimpered Tails. "I can't go back, don't make me go back."

Sonic desperately wanted to put his arms around his friend, but they remained locked in place.

"What's wrong? Why wouldn't you want to get out of here? What are you afraid of?"

"I don't deserve to go back. I'm not worth saving. Please... just leave me here."

"Why are you saying this? You don't think I'd wanna save you? That's crazy!"
Tails gripped him even tighter, his sobs collapsing in a full-throated wail. If Sonic's eyes could have watered they would have, such was the strength of Tails' anguish washing over him.

"Tails... Why do you feel like this? What happened to you? I want to save you so badly, but I can't because I don't even know what I'm saving you from anymore! Please just tell me what's wrong! I just wanna understand what all this has been about!"

Tails' cries ceased, and Sonic felt his weight melt from his chest.

"Tails? Tails?!"

The sound of wind surged up from beneath him, surrounding him and spinning him around. He felt himself falling down into the white, falling faster and faster until...

~O~

He ran along the corridor as fast as his legs could carry him, but he wasn't moving his legs of his own volition. His whole body moved by itself, carrying his consciousness as a passenger through the dark hallway.

From the corner of his eye he saw his own arms, except the peach fur he expected to see flashed in flaming orange. He couldn't feel his quills bobbing up and down, and he felt something heavy where his tail should have been. Two somethings.

I'm... Tails? He thought. He didn't know how it was possible, but he could feel everything Tails felt. The way his muscles burned as he sprinted down the corridor at full pelt, the warm dampness around his eyes and around his crotch, the way his heart pounded so fast it send shockwaves of pain through his body with every beat.

He's so afraid... He's so damn afraid and... I'm so afraid. He felt Tails' terror as if it were his own. Every inch of him shook with it, and in his head he wanted to do nothing but scream.

A set of double doors rapidly approached, and Tails threw himself against it. Sonic's vision turned white again, and when it cleared he found himself inside some kind of atrium with huge marble pillars, except the pillars had cracked and crumbled while fires raged all around, filling the space with dense smoke that scratched at his throat.

Something appeared from out of the smoke before him, seizing him by the wrists and crushing them in a burning, vice-like grip. Tails cried out and fell to his knees, but he looked up at the face of his assailant, and Sonic saw it was his own.

The figure looked almost exactly like his super form, except with ragged quills and fur wreathed in flames. His eyes span with dizzying crimson spirals and his unnaturally wide mouth bore rows of jagged teeth dripping with boiling saliva.

Super Sonic bore down on him, squeezing his wrists so hard he felt them crack. Sonic felt Tails' scream of pain tear at his lungs, and he tried to push back, to take control of Tails body and fight off the monster. But he could only watch helplessly as Super Sonic closed in, unable to shut out his mocking laughter, unable to turn away as a leathery tongue slithered from the beast's maw and lapped at his face, leaving trails of sticky, hissing spittle dripping down his muzzle.

Tails' terror pulsed inside him, a tangible prescience scraping away at his soul. Sonic tried to rise above it, but he felt every part of it as if he were in Tails' place. Rational thought drowned in primal urges of flight, inner strength crumbled beneath the weight of desperation for someone, anyone to
rescue him.

Is this what you felt, Tails? Sonic thought. Is this what you're afraid of? What you're running from? Oh Tails, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry you had to go through this alone! I should've been there for you!

But underneath the fear he felt something else; not a conscious thought but feelings buried deep inside. He knew Tails wasn't processing these feelings normally, but they were there, deep beneath the fear but so much greater. As he pushed away from fear towards these feelings, Sonic felt them rise up and overwhelm him.

I should be better than this.

I can fight but I'm just giving up. What's wrong with me?

I can't do this. I'm not strong enough.

I'll never be able to do this without Sonic.

I'm not a baby, I don't need him holding my hand!

I am a baby. I should be fighting but all I'm doing is crying.

I'm a coward.

I'm pathetic.

I'm weak.

I'm worthless.

I'm a total failure.

I can never do anything right.

Everybody hates me.

Sonic hates me.

I hate me.

I should just let him kill me.

I hate myself.

No-one would care if I was dead.

I hate myself.

I am nothing.

I hate myself.

I'm less than nothing.

I hate myself.

I HATE MYSELF.
Sonic winced as the self-loathing wrapped itself around him, choking his emotions and worming its way into his thoughts, constricting him with a separate pain to Tails' physical agony. He'd never experienced anything like this before; he'd felt pain, he'd felt fear and doubt, he'd felt grief and sorrow, he'd even felt anger and hate, but this feeling was anathema to him. That his own thoughts could be turned inward on himself and become a poison festering in his heart, a voice in his head that constantly wore him down, except the voice was his own; he had never even conceived of the concept.

But it had a name, a word he'd heard but never truly understood. A word that only happened to other people, never him and never his friends. Until now.

Shame.

All this time they thought fear, amplified by the shard, was driving Tails over the edge. But fear is a physical reaction that passes after the threat has gone. From his mercifully brief experience of it, Sonic understood that shame never goes away on its own. It sits in your heart and spreads until you're nothing but an empty shell.

That's what he is, thought Sonic. He's not a demon spawned by your fear, he's that part of your mind that can't let go of the one time you think you let me down. That's why you can't feel anything for me anymore; you won't let yourself because you think you don't deserve it.

I understand now! I understand what he is! And now I know that, we can finally destroy -

Falling. Falling so fast. Dragged out of Tails' body and falling into an infinite void of blackness, he reached out for anything to hold onto...

But there was nothing there.

~O~

He collided with a polished marble floor, sprawling out on his front. Pushing himself up on shaking and sore arms, he saw his familiar peach fuzz, and realised he was back in his own body.

The space he occupied looked identical to where he'd just been. A ruined atrium lined by cracked marble pillars, except this place felt less tangible than before. It seemed to shift and warp as if made from plasma, while parts of it faded in and out at random. Above him, high above a shattered glass ceiling, a scar of golden light hung in the sky, hissing and writhing with yellow lightning.

His head still swimming, he nonetheless noticed the figure in front of him. Tails again, holding his hands in front of his face and crying. Sonic ran over to him, eager to sweep him up into his arms, but before he reached the fox a blast of fire knocked him over onto his back.

From within the flames emerged Super Sonic, grinning from ear to ear with predatory lust in his eyes.

"At last!" he hissed. "I was wondering when you'd finally show up! You're just in time for the main attraction!"

Sonic got to his feet. "You mean the part where I kill you, you evil son of a bitch?"

Super Sonic laughed, clapping his hands together. "Oh, very brave. You've got balls, I'll give you that. But you have no power here; this is my domain. It answers to me alone."
He gestured towards the scar in the sky. "Magnificent, isn't it? The Fracture Point, merged with the unfettered power of unstable Emerald Matter and now infused with the fabric of space-time itself. The power to control reality is mine to command! I shall drag everything in existence through it, where it will become my plaything. I'll never get bored when I have all of creation to torment for all eternity!

"Your friend thinks he's ridding reality of me, when all he's doing is sending it straight into my waiting claws! I can't wait to see his face when he realises what he's done! And all because he found little ol' me so scary! He couldn't handle his fear of me when I was just a memory, how will he cope when I become the God of everything? What will he -"

Sonic's fist slammed into Super Sonic's chest, sending the yellow hedgehog across the room and into a pillar, smashing a crater into its side and showering him in cracked rubble.

"What?!" Spluttered Super Sonic. "How is this possible?! Nothing can harm me here!"

Sonic grabbed his fiendish copy by the scruff and hoisted him up, letting his feet dangle in the air.

"That's because nothing else knows what you really are. But I do, and that means I can hurt you."

He lifted Super Sonic above his head and drove him face first into the floor. Picking him up again, he slammed him several more times into the marble, which cracked beneath the force.

"You're just an emotion given form by Chaos," Sonic said as he flung Super Sonic into the wall by one leg. "And now I know how that emotion feels, I can channel its opposite with my own Chaos Energy. Pretty neat trick, huh?"

He leapt across the room, driving both feet into Super Sonic's chest. The yellow one fell to the floor, where Sonic kicked him in the stomach repeatedly, while he could only moan and curl up.

"The funny thing is, you don't even know what you really are. Tails' head is so messed up right now that he can't see it, and because you're a part of his mind, you can't see it either. The power you think you have is meaningless because you're drawing it from the wrong place."

He jumped onto Super Sonics' chest and began pummelling his face. The demon put up his hands to protect himself but Sonic easily swatted them aside, smashing the other's head so hard it bounced off the floor with every hit.

"There's nothing you can do against me, buddy! But I can do this all day, and I'm gonna keep doing it until you leave Tails' head for good!"

Super Sonic grabbed Sonic's arms, holding them in place with rekindled strength, and he began to laugh.

"You think you understand me but you really don't. You think you can just chase me away like I'm some intruder in Tails' brain rather than part of it. He had the power to give me life but lacked the guts to give me freedom. He left me to rot in the darkest corner of his mind until I grew strong enough to break free. By then he'd been in denial for so long and become so weak that he fled in terror from me, hiding inside his own mind while I took over. He's so pathetic he can't even control his own thoughts, even as he tries to control all of creation."

Sonic wrestled his arms free of Super Sonic's grip, then sat backwards, staring into the distance. Something in his yellow counterpart's words cut right through him, but instead of opening his heart up to pain or anguish, it allowed clarity to pour inside of him.
"You're right. He is pathetic."

Super Sonic sat up on his elbows. "What's that now?"

"You heard me; Tails is pathetic. Even with all his power, he's sitting in the Special Zone plotting to destroy every version of you and the rest of reality to stop you from ever existing, but he's not facing you head on. He's hiding where none of the Super Sonics can find him and letting the shard do his dirty work. He's a complete and utter coward."

"Wow, never thought I'd hear you talk about him like this. I thought you loved him." He stuck out his tongue as he said the word with contempt.

"I do. More than anything. But these aren't my words; they're his. He's so ashamed that he can't bear to be near you even as he destroys you. You remind him of everything he hates about himself. You get that? He doesn't hate you; he hates what he became \textit{because} of you. You made him feel so worthless, made him feel like even \textit{I} hated him, that he can't even look you in the eye when he kills you. And that is why he'll never be rid of you."

Super Sonic smiled. "At last you understand..."

Sonic grabbed the other's head with both hands. "You didn't let me finish; he'll never be rid of you unless he faces you himself! He needs to confront you and his feelings about you head on. I'm going to force him to see what he's become, and you're going to help me."

"What? What are you doing? Stop this!" Super Sonic squirmed and thrashed his head about, but Sonic held him tight, rising to his feet and lifting him from the floor.

"Easy now, Supes, you don't wanna hurt yourself before your big moment."

"No!" growled Super Sonic. "I am not yours to command, I am a god!"

"You're no god, pal; you're just a memory that got too big for his boots. Nothing but a cloud of Chaos energy that grew a personality."

"And what are you, if I am nothing? Less than nothing; just a lump of matter that's learned how to walk and talk."

"It's true; I'm nothing special. What you see is what you get: just a guy who loves adventure. That, plus a guy who's willing to do anything for his friends."

Super Sonic rolled his eyes. "Please... spare me the 'power of friendship' spiel..."

"Yeah, it's a bit old-fashioned I admit, and not really much use given the circumstances. There is one other power I like though, one teeny-tiny little thing that I like very much, because I am so, so good at it."

"What is that?"

Sonic smirked. "The power to absorb Chaos Energy. The power to absorb \textit{you}."

He gripped Super Sonic's head even tighter, and the yellow hedgehog writhed, his limbs flailing and his head shaking.

"I can't kill you," said Sonic, "but I \textit{can} use your power."

"No! No, you can't do this to me!"
"Trust me buddy, I'm not gonna enjoy having you along for the ride either."

Super Sonic's fur glowed brighter, flashing from golden yellow to dazzling white. The light grew brighter until it enveloped his entire form, leaving only a white silhouette of his figure suspended between Sonic's hands. Then his form began to melt and run into bands of light that wrapped themselves around Sonic's arms, weaving around his body and passing into him.

The power surged through his veins, burning his insides, forcing his heart to beat harder and thump against his ribs. His muscles quivered and pulsed, tensing up as new strength entered into them. In his mind he felt Super Sonic's anger and rage and hatred clawing at him, pushing tendrils of fury into his thoughts, but he held firm. This beast was not a product of his mind, and he would not allow it to overtake him.

His fur began to move as if floating in water, flickering from blue to yellow, while his quills twitched upwards. The power lifted him from the ground, gravity releasing its hold on him and letting him drift freely.

He looked up at the searing scar in the sky, and with a thought he moved himself towards it, accelerating upwards with his fist outstretched.

As he neared the rift above, he felt his skin grow hotter, and within him a fire began to rage in the depths. Flames appeared along his arms, while his face shifted and contorted as if invisible hands pulled at his cheeks.

"I'm coming, Tails!" He said, his voice falling into a deep rumble that scratched at his throat. "I'm coming for you!"

The tendrils of Super Sonic pushed further into his mind, wrapping around his brain and choking his thoughts. His head shook as the line between him and the other inside him overlapped, bleeding into each other until he no longer remembered which one he was in the first place.

He was Sonic.

He was Super Sonic.

He was both of them. There was no them anymore, only him.

He was Super Sonic.

And he was coming for Tails.

~O~

The surface of the crystal heart exploded outwards, throwing up a storm of shards. Through this cloud he ascended unharmed, trailing a column of fire behind him. The cosmos spread out above him, each twinkling point of light an observer eagerly awaiting the events about to unfold. Existence itself circled the plughole, and he knew this moment would decide whether it stood or fell.

His teeth felt too large for his mouth, their jagged edges cutting his lips at the slightest touch. Fingernails like talons ripped through his gloves while his toenails pushed through his socks and scratched the inside of his shoes. Every part of him seared with heat, his muscles felt like they might rip open at any moment and his vision crawled with bloodshot branches.

But he had power unlike anything he'd felt before. The power to break and kill and maim and
destroy anyone and anything forever and ever and ever.

And he liked it.

"Did you really think you could hide from me, Tails? Did you honestly think I wouldn't find you again?"

Tails' golden avatar blinked into existence on the surface of the heart, and when he saw Super Sonic his normally serene expression collapsed, his jaw dropping open.

"No..." he gasped. "No, no, no! You can't be here! You can't be!"

Sonic dropped from the air, landing nimbly on the crystal and dropping into a crouched stance, one hand on the floor.

"Oh but I am, Tails. It doesn't matter how far you run or how strong you make yourself, I will always find you. You will never be able to escape me. I can taste your fear; it calls to me like blood in the water. I'm a shark, Tails, and like a shark I'll never ever ever stop until I have you in my jaws."

Though he choose these words deliberately to rattle Tails, they came so naturally to him now. The way he purred every syllable, wrapping them around his tongue and coating them in predatory bloodlust excited him; it set his pulse racing and his skin tingling to linger on the moment before he struck, dragging it out to savour every moment of his victim's terror.

"Y-you're w-wrong!" Tails said, though his soothing, musical voice shook and faltered. "I'm a-all p-p-p-powerf-f-f-

Sonic twitched forward, causing Tails to scream and cover his head with his hands. Sonic stood up, slowly pacing over to him.

"D-D-Don't c-come n-near me! Just l-leave me alone! Just go away!"

"Go away?!" Sonic said through laughter. "Go away?! Is that the best you've got? Even with all your power there's still nothing you can do against me. You're pathetic."

"N-n-n-"

"What was that? You say something?" As Sonic leaned in towards him, he noticed Tails seemed to be shorter than before.

"I-I-I-"

"I can't hear you!"

The thought came without hesitation, an impulse he knew would never cross his mind but now he embraced with glee. His leg swung upward, slamming into Tails' chest, lifting him from the floor and tossing him through the air. He landed on his front, where he began to crawl away, whimpering. Sonic leapt over to him. Again the golden fox seemed to have shrunk, and his handsome face grew more rounded and youthful.

He grabbed the back of Tails' head and slammed his face into the floor.

"Hey, this crystal is technically you, right? In that case why are you hitting yourself? Stop hitting yourself!"

Over and over he pounded Tails' face against the crystal, shouting 'stop hitting yourself' each time
while the fox could only meekly whine in protest. After tiring of this, Sonic rolled Tails onto his back and stood over him.

The fox before him had shrunk until he had become the same twelve-year old boy Sonic knew. Upon the sight of the kid's hands shaking in front of his face and his lower lip trembling, Sonic almost felt the power of Super Sonic leave him. But he held on to it, for he knew this had to be done.

"You're weak!" Sonic yelled as he brought his fist down. "You're worthless!" He roared as his other fist smashed into Tails' face. Over and over he laid into the fox, screaming all the while.

"You're a useless piece of shit who can't get anything right! You will never amount to anything! Everybody hates you; they all laugh at you behind your back and you know why? Because they know you're a cowardly cry-baby pussy who can't do anything without Sonic holding his hand."

He ceased punching, then switched to repeatedly stamping on Tails' chest.

"This is all your fault! Everything that's gone wrong is because of you! The universe would have been better off if you'd never been born!"

Though he relished his words he felt his conviction falter. He only said such things to provoke Tails into doing something, anything but lie back and take it. He needed him to stand up for himself, to realise he wasn't weak and pathetic. To be the boy he'd always known and loved.

Sonic stopped kicking, leaning over to whisper in Tails' ear.

"You know, I gotta thank you for sending Sonic to me. He put up such a fight before I tore him in half. But before he died he told me to tell you something. He wanted you to know that he doesn't hate you."

Tails' whimpering eased. "He... he doesn't?"

"No," said Sonic, leaning closer, "but he did say he thought you were such a disappointment to him. He is so ashamed of you and what you've done. He died wishing he had never met you."

"No..." whispered Tails.

"What was that?"

"NO!"

A shockwave erupted from Tails, blasting Sonic into the air. He stopped himself in time to see Tails charging towards him, but before he could react Tails punched him into the ground, his body smashing a crater into the crystal. In another instant Tails appeared standing over him, his eyes streaming with tears and his chest heaving.

"He was supposed to be here for this!" Tails shrieked. "I wanted him to see me become stronger than you! I wanted him to see me defeat you! He would have been so proud of me! All I've ever wanted is for him to be proud of me!"

Sonic hesitated. His mouth almost spoke for him, and in his heart he longed to tell Tails how he'd always been proud, but he knew the time for words was over. At least Tails' reaction confirmed it: at the end this whole mess came down to Tails believing he wasn't good enough to be called his friend.

*You'll always be good enough, you just need to prove it to yourself. Come on, little buddy!*
Sonic flipped himself from the ground and onto his feet, but before he could steady himself his face connected with Tails' fist and he flew backwards. Righting himself, he skidded for several hundred feet before stopping.

"Okay then, let's do this," he said to himself. He could not pull his punches this time; in order to set Tails free he had to make him win fair and square, and that would mean fighting to the death if he had to. He'd already seen Tails die once today, and if one or both of them had to die to end the madness for good then he felt ready to accept that. Slowly, he let his mind slip quietly back, allowing Super Sonic to take the reins.

With renewed vigour he surged forward, and Tails shot towards him. They crashed together in mid-air, their impact sending out a shockwave that rippled across the heart as a wall of shattering glass. Each of them said nothing as the grappled with their hands locked together, instead furiously meeting the other's strength to try and overcome the deadlock.

The sound of glass breaking and scraping against itself rose from below him, and Sonic realised something was coming towards him. He broke away from Tails just as three tentacles of crystal lunged for him. He flew across the heart, but the tentacles followed, soon joined by others bursting from the heart and trying to snatch him from the air. Walls and pillars of crystal spontaneously grew in front of him, and he had to weave through the air to avoid them. Rising higher, he looked over his shoulder to see dozens of tentacles chasing him, a flurry of snakes falling over themselves to reach him.

Sonic's speed increased, and he tried all manner of aerial acrobatics to evade the tentacles: sudden hairpin turns, loop-the-loops, even circling around them to try and tie them in knots. But no matter what he tried, the tentacles followed him nimbly and without error.

Then he realised his mistake; this was just another way for Tails to avoid Super Sonic. He needed to lose to Tails face-to-face.

He span around to face his pursuers, and instantly a blinding white light poured from his eyes, coalescing into two beams which tore through the tentacles and shattered them. As the crystal masses crumbled to the ground, Sonic breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wow, did not know I could do that!"

No sooner had he caught his breath then the crystal shifted again, tendrils erupting into the sky all around him, their mass forming a solid circular wall that rose continually in height. The wall folded inward, the tendrils meeting above him and turning the wall into a dome which rapidly closed in on him.

Sonic crossed his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. As he sensed the dome bearing down on him, he threw his arms out to the side and shouted as loud as he could.

"CHAOS BLAST!"

A wave of golden energy rushed out of him, smashing into the dome and shattering it, the force pushing through without slowing and scattering the crystal fragments far and wide.

Sonic's fist tightened, and fire engulfed it. He slammed it into the heart over and over, each strike cracking the pristine surface and sending splinters into the air.

"Come on out, Tails!" he roared as another punch dashed more of the heart to pieces. "Stop letting the shard do your dirty work! Come out and face me, you coward!"
Sonic threw his punches faster and faster, digging himself into a crater in the crystal. As he did so he felt his blood boiling with rage.

"I think I did Sonic a favour, ya know? Can you imagine how awful it must have been to have you around? To be followed around by a weak, cowardly little runt like you; a nobody who leached the fame and glory that was rightfully his. You're a parasite, Tails. You're nothing without Sonic… nothing!"

He didn't believe any of this, he was certain, but he enjoyed saying it so much. Perhaps it was Super Sonic's influence, or maybe the anger he'd felt over what Tails had done to Amy still lingered within him. Try as he might he couldn't get the image of her desperate and terrified face from his mind. He wanted to hate Tails for that.

"You don't deserve to be called his friend."

From out of nowhere Tails came flying towards him, howling with rage, his lips curled up into a grimace with his teeth bared.

"You shut your mouth!"

He lunged for Sonic with his hands outstretched, but Sonic ducked before driving into his torso with an uppercut. The force propelled Tails into the sky, and wasting no time Sonic took off after him.

Gotta get him away from the shard.

He caught up to Tails and grabbed hold of him with one hand, while with the other he laid into Tails with punch after punch, the force of each blow sending him further into the depths of the Special Zone. Another strike dislodged Tails from his grip, and the fox careened across the cosmos towards a sphere the size of a moon, where he shrank into the distance until he became a speck of light which flashed against the moon and vanished.

Sonic hovered in space, considering his next move, when he noticed the moon was growing.

Not growing, moving.

The huge sphere was moving towards him at an alarming pace, growing until it filled up the sky before him. Sonic froze, unable to process what he was seeing. As the object became a wall of grey rock stretching from horizon to horizon, Sonic spotted a tiny figure on the surface.

Tails gripped the ground with one hand, while the rest of him pulled against it with as much effort as one might put into towing a particularly heavy shopping cart.

"No way!" gasped Sonic. "You have got to be kidding me!"

A flash of light engulfed Tails and he vanished, but the moon kept coming. Too close to dodge and too fast to outfly, only one option presented itself to Sonic. The idea seemed insane, but then again a twelve year old boy was throwing a planet at him. Sanity had shown itself the door some time ago.

He clenched his fists, drawing upon the power of Super Sonic, the power Tails had unintentionally bestowed upon his worst nightmare. Flames engulfed his body and his fur glowed white hot, while his muscles surged with power. He propelled himself towards the moon, a wave of sonic booms trailing behind him, and as the surface approached he held out both fists and dove screaming onto the moon.

Where his fists collided the ground instantly became lava, and huge fissures spread out from the
impact point, racing across the surface, sending out a branching web of smaller cracks and throwing rock and magma into space. The weight of the planetoid, immeasurable and impossibly heavy, collapsed into him, but he held firm even as his body felt ready to implode. The momentum of the moon slowed and faded away until Sonic's own strength overwhelmed it.

An explosion blasted Sonic into the air, and as he tumbled through space he saw the planetoid breaking apart into huge chunks, before the entire mass disintegrated, exploding outwards in a cloud of rubble. The shockwave slammed into him, pushing him further into the void.

*Man, I hope there was nobody living on that thing!*

No sooner had he steadied himself when Tails was upon him again. The fox's arms became a blur, and an army of fists pummelled Sonic's torso and face. Reeling from the force of each blow, he couldn't focus clearly enough to fight back, leaving him wide open when Tails drove his foot into his chest.

Again, Sonic found himself hurtling across the Special Zone at a blinding speed. Despite the power surging through him, his body ached all over. Underneath the veneer of Super Sonic covering him he was still Sonic, still Mobian, still mortal. The unexpected ferocity of Tails' attacks proved difficult to defend against, even for him.

But he couldn't give up. More than ever that sentiment mattered more than anything. He had to fight Tails as if he wanted to win, and Tails had to defeat him despite that. Nothing less would free his friend from the prison of his own mind. Nothing less would end this for good.

Righting himself in mid-air again, he found himself inside a cloud of pink dust that sparkled in the otherworldly light of the Zone. Arcs of lightning seemingly flicked between nothing, and all around him he felt electricity in the air.

He drew the energy towards him, letting it flow into his body and supercharging every cell inside him. Lightning wrapped around his arms, and he gripped it with both hands before launching himself from the cloud. Tails approached out of the distant void, homing in on him like a missile, but Sonic unleashed the lightning from his arms, ensnaring Tails in two ropes of crackling white energy.

He heaved his arms to the left, dragging Tails across the sky and smashing him into a perfectly flat disc of silver metal hanging in the sky. Then he swung him the other way, through a swarm of asteroids that burst when he collided with them. Back and forth he whipped Tails around, extending and shortening the ropes as necessary to bash him into any object he could find. Tails growled and thrashed against his constraints, but Sonic didn't let up, hammering him against spheres covered in shifting spirals, floating rocks which inflated and popped like bubbles and even a gigantic top hat made of glass.

He heaved him again, but the electricity was spent, and the ropes faded and came apart. Tails' momentum carried him onward towards another massive spheroid body. Sonic dove after him, hoping to prevent Tails from trying his planet-throwing trick again. As he approached, he saw green and blue squares covering the planet in a chequerboard pattern, with red and blue orbs sitting at the intersections of the colours. He'd been somewhere like this before when he was much younger; places like this tended to be formed out of the dispersed energy of a Chaos Emerald, which needed to be collected together before it would reform.

The orbs on this sphere pulsed and flickered between red and blue, heaving and groaning as if they were sick. But Sonic had little time to investigate before Tails appeared before him again.

As soon as Tails showed himself the sphere began to shake, and all the orbs rose into the air at once,
their spasming and warping intensifying. Then they began to rush towards Tails, melting into him and vanishing. Faster and faster they poured into him, while he rose slowly into the air with his eyes closed, his fur glowing brighter and crackling with arcs of lightning.

The cloud of orbs became a solid stream of colours flowing into Tails, a rainbow curtain of energy pouring above Sonic's head and into the fox. Moments later the last vestiges of the curtain slipped inside him, and for a brief second silence hung over the Special Zone.

Tails opened his eyes. From his solid white orbs poured a beam of bright white energy wider than a truck. It slammed into Sonic and pushed him out into the depths of space, swallowing him up in a column of howling, rippling light. But Sonic remained steady, and although the initial blast must have pushed him back several miles, he pushed back against it, slowing his momentum and bringing himself to a stop.

The pillar of light continued to drive into him, but he fought back, summoning up as much strength as he could muster to push through the beam. With his eyes tightly closed against the blinding light, he forced it back inch by inch, even as his arms shook from the exertion. Slowly he began to push back faster, forcing his way through the beam towards Tails. The roar of energy grew louder with each passing metre until the sound of it felt like knives in his ears, and his skin felt like it might peel away at any second but he still kept going.

He sensed that Tails grew closer, and he reached out, hoping to grab hold of him. Opening his eyes as much as he dare, through the dazzling glare that made his eyes water he could see the outline of Tails mere feet away. Sonic stretched his arm towards him, his fingers spread wide and threatening to dislocate themselves.

The beam cut off, and Sonic realised it had been the only thing holding him up. He dropped to the floor, landing on his front. Smoke hissed from his skin, and every part of him felt like it had been run over repeatedly by a tank. He tried to push himself off the floor but his arms trembled and he collapsed each time.

Tails stood over him, but before Sonic could look up at him he felt a foot slam into the back of his head, smashing his face against the ground. The weight continued to press down against him, flattening his nose and mouth and cutting off his breath. He threw his arms out to side, scrabbling around with his hands in a desperate attempt to grab hold of something.

Then he felt it; something large, warm and fluffy, a narrow and solid limb buried beneath a mountain of fur. He seized Tails by his namesake and dragged him off his feet. The pressure lifted from his head, and he rolled onto his back, gasping for air. As soon as his lungs kicked in again he took hold of the tail with both hands and jumped to his feet, before turning away and wrenching Tails over his shoulder. The fox swung through the air in an arc before Sonic smacked him into the ground. Before Tails could recover Sonic swung him again, battering him against the floor and using the impact to launch Tails into another swing. After more than a dozen strikes Sonic stopped, though he kept a firm grip on the tail in his hands. Tails made an attempt to crawl away but Sonic dragged him back every time.

"Had enough, eh?" said Sonic. "Pathetic. Even with the power of a god you just can't help but run away. But I won't let you run away this time, Tails! You're mine now, you understand? I'm gonna spend a long time torturing you and when I'm through, you'll beg me to kill you. But I won't; not while I can still make you scream."

Tails reached out with his fingers splayed as if trying to grasp something ahead of him. With a great exertion he closed his fist, and his whole body went limp.
Something rammed into the ground next to Sonic. A six foot length of yellow crystal around two inches in diameter protruded from the ground like a thrown javelin. Before Sonic could process its sudden appearance another flew past, barely missing him and sticking into the floor. He looked up to see a hail of crystal raining down from above, and far behind it in the sky, the heart from whence it came.

Sonic let go of Tails and swatted several of the javelins out of the air, but their sheer numbers falling from the sky threatened to overwhelm him. He took flight, soaring away from the chequerboard planet and into the void. But as he flew the storm of needles shifted, changing direction to pursue him. Within moments it was on him again, and he weaved through the air, sharply turning, dropping and rising to narrowly avoid the spikes hurtling towards him. With no end to the assault in sight, Sonic dove towards an asteroid field, heading deep inside the cloud of floating rocks and stopping behind one of the larger ones. Some crystal spikes made it through, but he heard the majority of them crash into the asteroids and shatter.

After a few minutes the sound of breaking glass diminished to nothing, and Sonic breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the asteroid behind him exploded.

Reeling from the force, Sonic span around in the air to see Tails right in front of him. The fox's fist slammed into his face, knocking him towards another asteroid. Sonic righted himself, placing his feet on the rock before launching himself into the air towards Tails. His own fist shot out, striking Tails in the chest and hurling him through several asteroids that crumbled like paper. Seconds later he came screaming through the air back towards Sonic, striking him again and knocking him away.

The cosmic tug of war continued, which each combatant punching and kicking the other with the force of a nuclear bomb, blasting at each other with focused beams from their eyes, and flinging asteroids the size of mountains as if they were made of foam. The cosmos shook around them, the sky lighting up with iridescent fire and bolts of lightning, as if creation itself knew this battle would decide its ultimate fate.

Sonic could feel himself weakening. With every exertion he felt the power inside him diminishing, the essence of Super Sonic burning away until he could only draw upon the faintest of embers. But he had to keep going, because he knew Tails would recreate Super Sonic inside his head again and again until he dealt with his feelings.

Stunned by an asteroid striking his head, Sonic couldn't react fast enough when Tails grabbed him with both hands. But he gripped Tails' arms and held fast.

"How long are you going to keep pretending you have any hope of defeating me?" said Sonic. "Even with all your power there is nothing you can do against me. You can turn yourself into a god all you like but to me you'll always be nothing. I own you, Tails. I've always owned you, and now I'm going to take everything you are and make it mine."

Tails face screwed up in rage, and he let go of Sonic before ramming his fist into his face.

"You already have!" shrieked Tails. Another punch followed, knocking Sonic's head sharply to the side. "You took everything from me!" More punches slammed into Sonic, battering him and making him jerk around like a ragdoll. "Everything I am, everything I was you stole from me! All the joy and happiness, all the treasured memories, all the love I've ever felt for my friends, the love I felt for Sonic; it's all gone! The only thing I can feel anymore is hate! You made me into what I am! You made me!"
Sonic croaked out a laugh, despite the pain shooting through every part of him, despite the last vestiges of Super Sonic's power slipping away.

"What are you, Tails? What are you really?"

Tails grabbed Sonic by his underarms, pulling him close. He swallowed, and a serene calm fell over his face. "I'm nothing. I'm absolutely nothing."

Sonic laughed again. "Finally, you understand..."

"Oh, I understand alright. I understand completely. Ask yourself this: if I'm nothing, then what does that make you?"

He pushed forward, driving Sonic back until he collided with an asteroid. Tails' hand seized around his throat and forced his back against the rough stone.

"All this time I've been running from you, too scared and too weak to face you. But I'm not scared anymore! I'm going to do what I should have done all those months ago! What Sonic would have wanted me to do! To look you in the eye and say I am not afraid of you!"

"Then prove it!" coughed Sonic. "Prove you have the guts to do what it takes to end this. Show me how brave you really are!"

Tails raised his hand back, and a flash of light appeared in his palm, from which a spike of crystal rapidly grew outwards, forming a jagged yellow spear which he gripped tightly. He held the spear back and his arm began to shake.

Sonic leaned forward gripping Tails' other arm with both his hands and stared into his eyes.

"Do it!" he hissed.

Tails continue to shake, his trembling spreading to the rest of his body. Sonic pulled himself up further, gripping Tails' arm so tight he felt the flesh run between his fingers.

"What are you, a coward? A weakling? If you're gonna do it, then do it! Kill me! "DO IT!"

Tails' trembling stopped, and he leaned backwards. He lifted the crystal spear upwards, and with a primal bellow of rage he rammed it straight through Sonic's chest. Sonic gasped then cried aloud, air rushing from his lungs and agony spreading out from his heart, feeding pain into every part of him.

Tails stood up, looking at his shaking hands.

"I... I did it... I won..." A smile broke out on his face, and he threw his head back to the sky.

"I won! I won! I've finally defeated you!"

"You... sure did, little buddy..."

Tails turned to face him, and the elation drained from his face at once.

"S-Sonic?"

The golden hue had started to fade from his fur, his familiar deep blue returning. The fire crawling across his skin flickered and died, and he felt the tension in his face unwind, his features returning to
"You did... you did good, Tails..."

"Sonic!" cried Tails, rushing over to him, falling to his knees and grasping his hand. "I don't understand... how can it be you?"

Tears poured from his eyes, and he gripped Sonic's hand tight and held it against his cheek.

"It wasn't supposed to be you! I didn't mean to hurt you... I didn't mean for any of this to happen! I'm so sorry for everything that's happen! I'm sorry!"

Sonic turned his hand over, and with what little strength he possessed he stroked Tails' face, wiping the tears from under his eye.

"None of that matters, little buddy..." he whispered. "What matters is you did it. You finally beat Super Sonic... on your own terms... just like I always knew you could.

"I never stopped believing in you. I just needed you to remember... how to believe in yourself. And I want you to know... that I'm more proud of you than I've ever been. Only you... could have done this, buddy... only you had the strength..." he slowly moved his hand to Tails' chest, "...in here... to overcome your doubts. I'm so proud of you..."

"You... you are?"

"Yes, Tails!" Sonic summoned up as much strength as he could muster to emphasise his words. "I always have been... and I always will be."

He hauled himself up by a few inches despite the crushing weight of the pain holding him down and gripped Tails firmly by the shoulder. The boy brought his head down lower, resting his forehead against Sonic's.

"I love you, Tails... always remember that..."

"Sonic..." Tails whined through stifled sobs. "Please stay with me. We're gonna get through this, together like always. We can do anything if we work together... just please... don't leave me alone."

"I'm sorry... I really am, but I don't think I'm getting out of this one, buddy..."

Tears flowed freely along Tails' muzzle, and he gripped Sonic's arm tight. "Don't say that! You always make it through; you always win!"

"I have won... I finally got to see you accept yourself for who you are... you're not weak, little buddy... you're the strongest person I know. You know it's true, just please... feel it, Tails... let yourself feel it!"

Tails screwed his eyelids up, shaking his head and moaning as if in pain. Then his eyelids snapped open and he gasped like a drowning person brought to the surface. A bright light appeared in the centre of his forehead, and when he threw his head back a column of light erupted from his face and poured out into space. Tails' arms hung by his side, and his mouth and eyes opened as wide as they could go, but he made no sound except for a constant yet almost inaudible exhalation.

The crystal heart pulsed with white light, beating faster and faster as more energy poured out of Tails. It groaned and heaved, a deep rumble emerging from within that roared like thunder, before it started to crack and come apart. The great arms reaching out into space fractured and crumbled,
releasing the matter they had absorbed in a cloud of sparkling golden dust.

The cataclysm sent shockwaves rippling across the Special Zone, sending the multitude of objects littering the space into a mad dance across the sky. The asteroid field became a frenzy of rocks crashing into each other, spinning out of control and exploding.

As the last of the light escaped from Tails, he regained his composure. But his form began to fade away and flicker into transparency. Before he could contemplate this, a rock smashed into the asteroid he and Sonic occupied and the force of the impact flung him off into space.

"Sonic!"

Sonic caught a glimpse of Tails' despairing face, his hand outstretched towards him, before the maelstrom of rock and dust swept him away and out of sight.

Sonic's eyes grew dark, and the pain in his body numbed. Tiredness overcame him, followed by a sense of calm unlike anything he'd felt before.

"You did good, little buddy..." he whispered. "You did good."

~O~

On a hillside overlooking the ocean, where sweeping fields of grass gave way suddenly to sheer cliffs of white chalk, a Mobian rested his weary knees on the ground and looked out across the water.

The old otter didn't know what he hoped to achieve by coming here, to the end of the world, but he took comfort from the fact he'd found a place far away from the madness.

He'd lived a long life, to the point where he believed nothing could shake him anymore, but he'd seen more horrors in the last few hours than he'd ever dreamed. Nothing made sense anymore; mothers and children attacking each other in a rabid frenzy, people turning inside-out, monsters emerging from the cracks in the pavement and worse things he daren't recall lest the thought alone brought them upon him.

He stared up at the sky, at the spot where Angel Island used to be. Where once the jewel in Mobius' natural crown hung in the faultless blue, the sky looked somehow smaller for its absence. Dark clouds rolled out across the water, tinged with deep purple and green and crackling with multi-coloured lightning. The ocean heaved and thrashed as if all the sea life were battling at once to escape the water, and a distant roar of thunder shook the foundations of the world.

The old otter clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. He hadn't ever been the religious type, but he felt powerless to do anything but pray. To who? Chaos? Gaia? Solaris? It didn't matter; someone out there had to be listening, someone had to save them. Someone always did.

Warmth fell upon his eyelids, and he opened his eyes. In the sky a bright light had appeared; a dazzling second sun hanging over the ocean. As its light spread outwards the dark clouds fled before it, revealing the blue sky beyond. Then the light collapsed inwards, and a blinding flash followed.

The old otter rubbed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he leapt to his feet and cried aloud with joy.

The seas had become perfectly still and sparkling in the sun. The sky shone with brilliant blue and on the horizon hung the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.
Angel Island had returned.

~O~

It all started with these three.

Somehow, the doctor knew that the madness outside was directly related to the hedgehog, the bat and the echidna lying in eerie stillness before her. The symptoms they'd presented with were unlike anything she'd ever seen; two cases of what she could only describe as living death, and another an empty shell, not even comatose but registering zero brain activity, yet somehow still alive.

But she had a duty of care. These were her patients, and she would not abandon them even as the world fell apart around them.

They'd had to lock the hospital down after the first few hours, initially as a response to the sheer number of patients arriving, but later the lockdown became a barricade to prevent the other things getting in; the violently insane, the infectious, the mutated. It seemed like the entire city was laying siege to the place, and all they could do was wait it out.

Lost in her thoughts, her ears pricked up when she heard the life-support monitors beeping faster. She got out of her chair, looking for any signs of change in her patients. Then all three began to writhe and moan at once, thrashing about in their beds.

She ran over to help them, but a bright light engulfed them and she stepped back, covering her eyes. She could still hear the patients moaning, crying out as if in pain, but the intense heat thwarted her efforts to administer aid.

The light vanished, and when she opened her eyes her jaw dropped. All three were sitting up in their beds, eyes open and awake. The bat and the hedgehog showed no signs of their condition, with their body mass restored to normal and their fur looking healthy and full. They looked around the room, clearly confused but calm. Then the bat looked her straight in the eyes and, seeming to recollect herself, burst into tears.

The two males leapt straight out of their beds and rushed to her side, paying no mind to the IV’s and other cables being dragged along with them. They stopped on either side of her, squaring up to each other and fixing each other with fierce stares, but moments later they softened, and they both put one arm around her, and the other on the other male’s shoulder.

They said nothing. They just held her and let her cry. The doctor put a hand to her cheek, and realised she was crying too.

~O~

"Chaos energy levels are stabilising! Anomalous readings rapidly falling!"

Eggman's hands frantically attacked the array of buttons before him, the arthritic pangs in his joints ignored in favour of excited movement. At every opportunity he brought up another graph or readout on his screens, each one showing the situation on Mobius returning to normal.

Eggman sat back in his chair, resting both hands behind his head.

"He did it, he actually did it! Sonic, my boy, I could kiss you right now!"
Noticing Orbot giving him a quizzical look, Eggman dropped his hands and adjusted his clothes, coughing loudly.

"Ahem... I mean - enjoy your victory while you can, Sonic; Mobius is now mine for the taking. Oh-hohohohoho- what the-?"

His skin began to tingle and grow warm, then a bright light engulfed him. He felt his body shifting and warping, his bones clicking and his muscles twisting.

"What's happening to me?" He said, throwing his arms to the side. "Orbot, do something!"

But no sooner had he called out then the light vanished and a massive bulk fell on top of him.

Not on top of him, he realised, inside of him.

"Can it be?" He gasped, wrapping his hands around his now enormous belly. "At last, my magnificent body is restored to all its voluptuous glory!" He brought his hands up to his face, looking at his reflection in the console. "And look! The greatest moustache in history has been reborn with none of its splendour diminished. Citizens of Mobius, rejoice! Dr. Eggman is back!"

A bright light from behind him cast long shadows along the wall, and he turned his chair around to see Amy emerge from nowhere. Dirty, dishevelled and wearing nothing but her underwear, she collapsed onto her hands and knees, heaving and gasping for air.

Another bright light followed, this time engulfing the prone form of Tails, who he dared not move since Sonic left. The fox stirred to life and lifted himself up until he rested on his knees, looking around the room and blinking as if waking from a dream. He caught sight of Amy and reached out for her, but when she saw him she fell onto her backside and scooted away until her back met the wall.

"Get away from me!" she squealed, her whole body shaking. "Don't touch me! Don't you dare touch me!"

Tails held out his hand for a moment, his mouth open as if to speak, but then he turned away and looked down at the floor.

"Tails?" said Eggman. "What are you doing here? Where's Sonic?"

Tails slowly looked up and met his eyes. His stare pierced right through him to somewhere a thousand light-years away, and his pupils were a window into a hollow shell. When he spoke, he spoke as if his words were the only ones left in existence.

"Sonic's dead."

~O~
Was it wrong to think about the death of a friend long before it ever happened? Was it wrong to think about how it would make you feel?

He'd thought about it. He'd thought about it more times than felt natural. They'd survive an adventure by the skin of their teeth and he'd always lie awake afterwards wondering what could have been; if that explosion had been bigger, if that bullet had been just an inch to the right, if that water had been a few feet deeper.

He figured he might've cried until his whole body dried out and crumbled to dust. He would've screamed until his voice gave out, would've torn his clothes and smashed his things against the wall. He would've ripped out his fur and clawed at his skin until it peeled away. His heart would be tearing apart forever.

Anything would have been preferable to this.

He felt nothing. His whole body felt completely numb, his vision stuck in a glassy-eyed haze, and when he tried to think about Sonic his mind butted up against a wall of indifference. He wanted to go to pieces but he couldn't push past the wall to the feelings beyond. The frustration this caused fell behind the wall right away, until even he couldn't even feel his lack of feelings.

He'd kept himself busy since it happened; tidying up the house and workshop, repairing the hole in his bedroom wall as best he could and fixing his broken equipment. Working kept his mind from thinking about all the things he should've been thinking about but just couldn't force himself to.

Ever since he'd returned to Mobius he'd felt like he'd woken from one dream only to find himself in another. He hadn't stayed long in Eggman's base; Amy had been inconsolable, rejecting his attempts to comfort her, spitting barbs of anger towards him before running off in floods of tears. Eggman simply turned his chair away and sat in uncharacteristic silence, as if Tails were not there at all.

The walk home had been long, and everywhere he turned the consequences of his mistakes rose up to taunt him. Smoke rose from Station Square, its streets filled with ambulances struggling to cope with the number of wounded. On every corner, on every bench and in every window he saw another person bleeding, crying or holding their head in their hands. In some places he saw sheets draped across something on the floor, and he didn't need to look further to know what these things were.

He'd seen cops desperately trying to restore order, organise the confused and weary masses and keep the press vultures away. But as he passed through the streets, no-one seemed to notice him at all.

He saw a cop standing by his patrol car and talking into his radio. He stopped, transfixed by the deep blue of his uniform. For a moment he considered going over to him and handing himself in. After all, everything he'd seen, everything these people had suffered had been his fault. But what would he have said? Who would have even believed that some stupid kid could be the source of so much misery?

So he turned away and kept walking, with only his conscience able to judge him.

Sitting in his workshop, Tails turned the screwdriver one more time. He hadn't even noticed that it wasn't threading properly, and he didn't even care what the device in his hand did. Even if he got it fixed, he had no-one to show it to now. No-one to pretend to listen as he prattled on about science
until his throat became hoarse. No-one to smile and ruffle his bangs, their pride in his work written on their face even as their brain trickled out of their ears. No-one to carry him to bed when he fell asleep at his desk.

No-one at all.

A sudden tension gripped him, and his hand slipped. The screwdriver stuck into his finger, and he drew in his breath sharply before dropping the tool.

It had torn straight through his glove and into his skin, drawing a trickle of red that slowly dripped onto the bench. With the pain ebbing away, Tails stared into the blood, and remembered. This is how it all started: a tiny cut that grew until it ripped the universe apart. Until it ripped apart the best thing that ever happened to him.

He brought the cut up to his mouth and gently lapped his tongue against it. The soothing sensation of his finger between his teeth dissolved some of the tension inside him, but his thoughts remained adrift.

How had it come to this? He thought he was just a normal boy, in an emotional sense if not in a physical or intelligence sense. Happy, kind and considerate and sensitive just like he should be. He'd never dreamed there could be this thing inside him; a festering part of himself that would rather destroy everything than allow anyone else to see it. The shard may have gone, but he questioned whether the darkness in him could ever truly be destroyed.

A loud knocking rang out from the front door, shaking him out of his thoughts. He hopped down from his stool and headed out through the living room.

It must be Amy, he thought. Perhaps she had calmed down and now came to talk with him. He would have to beg her forgiveness, to lay everything before her and hope her overwhelming compassion shined through. It would be painful for them both, but he hoped that the full force of her grief would wake him up and allow him to feel everything bottled up inside him.

As he approached the door, the knocks came again, this time harder and louder, shaking the dust from the frame.

"Hold on!" Tails called. "I'm on my way!"

He took hold of the latch but paused, taking a moment to steady himself.

This would be very painful indeed.

No sooner had he swung the door back then hands seized around his throat, lifting him from the ground, pushing him backwards and slamming his back against the wall. As his reeling vision came to a stop, Tails saw the seething, rage-filled face of his attacker.

"Shadow! What the heck are you doing?!

"What does it look like, asshole!" roared Shadow. "I'm making you pay for what you did to her! For what you did to all of us!"

"Shadow... I... can't..." Tails tried to speak, but Shadow's hands tightened around his neck, crushing his throat and choking the air out of him. Tails gripped Shadow's arms, but he could nothing against the other's monstrous strength.

"Please..." He gasped out as he looked into Shadow's bloodshot eyes, which bulged as if they might
pop their sockets.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't!" screamed Shadow. "Give me one good reason!"

"Sonic..."

Shadow pushed him harder, scraping his back along the wall. "I don't care what Sonic thinks! I won't let him stop me from punishing you for your betrayal! He can't protect you anymore!"

But as he spoke these words his eyes flitted to the side, and Tails felt the crushing grip loosening, as if a light rain had started to fall on the fire in Shadow's belly.

"Where is Sonic?" He asked. From the confusion taking over his expression Tails figured Shadow had expected Sonic to intervene. Perhaps, Tails wondered, he was counting on it.

"G... gone..."

Shadow's grip loosened further, until he simply held Tails against the wall instead of trying to push him into it. "Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

Tails looked Shadow straight in the eyes, swallowed even though his throat was on fire, and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Dead."

Shadow's arms dropped away and Tails fell to the floor, gasping for air and clutching at his throat. Shadow's face became stoic, dull and flat as if posing for his passport, and he turned away in silence.

"Impossible," he said without looking back at Tails, his voice low and devoid of emotion. "That's not possible."

"I wish it were," said Tails as he rose to his feet and stood hunched over, resting his hands on his knees. "I wish more than anything for it not to be true... but it is."

Shadow said nothing, and didn't turn around. A peculiar quiet fell across the room, and as Tails studied him from behind he perceived an intense labour of thought within Shadow, as if his mind struggled to contemplate the concept and tried to eject it at any moment, with only great focus allowing it to be truly considered. He understood this feeling; this was how his mind felt as well.

After a few minutes of studious silence Shadow turned his head slightly and spoke; cleanly, to the point and without emotion.

"How?"

"I-" Tails stopped himself. He couldn't deny what he'd done to Sonic, yet the tension between him and Shadow unnerved him. The wrong word at this point could be his last.

"He laid down his life for me... for all of us. He knew the only way to end the madness was to put himself in harm's way but he did it anyway. He did the right thing even when there was no way out. And he... he knew that he'd done the right thing, I think. In the end, I think he was happy."

"That's not what I asked," said Shadow, not even moving. "I asked how. Tell me exactly what happened."

"It's... it's all a little fuzzy," Tails said. "I can only remember a few details; most of it is just a blur." This was half-true; Tails' memory of his time under the influence of the shard had become little more
than a fog of sensations and fragmented scenes, but occasionally he'd see a flash of something in such vivid detail it was like he was still living it, including the moment when he held the stake of crystal in his hand, and what happened next.

Shadow turned away, falling into silent thought once more. The unnatural stillness of his body only added to the quiet, his form not betraying any sign of discomfort. His demeanour, robotic and lifeless, surprised Tails. He'd expected anger, he'd expected brooding, but Shadow seemed to be completely shutting down into himself.

"Where is Sonic now?" he asked without moving.

"Still in the Special Zone. With everything going on in there I got flung out of it and couldn't get him out. I'm not - hey, where are you going?"

Shadow had turned with a swift movement and marched purposefully towards the door. Tails dashed in front of him, spreading his arms and legs across the porch doorframe and blocking access.

"Hey, I'm talking to you! Where are you going all of a sudden? I thought you wanted me dead?"

"Don't remind him, you idiot!

"That can wait," said Shadow. "I'm going to the Special Zone to bring Sonic's body back to Mobius."

"Are you serious? You're gonna try and find him by yourself?"

Shadow's eyes narrowed. "You forget; I've lost a friend once already and I was denied the chance to bury her. I will not let that happen again. If Sonic really did die to save us, it's the least he deserves. Now get out of my way before I make you."

"Hold on a second!" said Tails, putting his hand up. "If anyone's gonna get his body back it should be me! I started this mess and I should be the one to fix it. He'd want me to be the one to do it; I'm his best friend."

"You forfeited the right to call yourself that the moment you attacked Rouge," growled Shadow.

"I wasn't in control of myself, Shadow! The shard made me do it."

"As it was yours when you tried to destroy the world!" scoffed Shadow, folding his arms.

"You've been there!" said Tails. "You know what it's like to have something else in your head; playing with your memories and twisting all the love in your heart into hatred, until you can't even recognise yourself in the mirror anymore. Remember how you felt when Amy showed you how far you'd fallen away from Maria's dream of love and happiness for you and the world; how you felt like the heart of you had just been ripped straight of you and replaced with this hollow void - that's how I feel right now! Except Maria didn't have to watch you go through that, whereas Sonic did! Think about that before you judge me. I know full well that I've ruined everything for all of us, but I at least expected you of all people to know what it's like!"

Shadow froze again, but the unnatural stillness and eerie calm had left him, leaving him looking more awkwardly as if something crawled across his skin, and his eyes seemed unable to focus on anything in particular. His upper lip twitched irritably and his gaze briefly met Tails', a mix of anger and shock.
in his eyes.

Tails took a hesitant step back. Part of him wondered if mentioning Maria was a step too far and that Shadow might at any moment lunge forward and tear his head off, but the greater part of him tried to comprehend the unnerving sight of Shadow actually rattled by something. The dark hedgehog buried his heart so deep inside of him, surrounded by layers and layers of cold indifference. Yet if anything made it through it seemed to cut far deeper than for anyone else.

"Besides," said Tails, wanting to say anything to break the silence, "you're gonna need my help if you wanna find Sonic. You won't get far without me."

Shadow’s eyes refocused, the malaise around him fading away and his brusque demeanour returning.

"I don't need your help. I need to do this alone."

"You're going to search the entire Special Zone for Sonic, by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Okay," said Tails, walking past him and waving him away. "See you in two billion years' time, then."

"What do you mean?"

Tails stopped and faced him, shaking his head. "You realise the Special Zone is freaking massive, right? It's the size of our entire universe, if not bigger. Not only that, but the whole place shifts and warps at random; there a no fixed reference points. Looking for a Mobian-sized object in that place would be like searching for a needle in a haystack inside a stack of haystacks inside a planet made of hay that's being put through a threshing machine. You will never find him on your own."

"You're forgetting something about Sonic and me; our Chaos energies are linked. If I concentrate I can sense his presence wherever he is."

Tails turned away with his arms folded tight. "Of course, I forgot; you and he are super-special friends now. You're his Chaos-bound soulmate or whatever."

"I wouldn't use that exact term, but we are connected on a deeper level than you'll ever be able to understand."

Tails looked back over his shoulder, glaring at Shadow from the corner of his eye. "What did you just say?"

"I saying that what Sonic and I shared goes beyond anything a normal Mobian is capable of experiencing. We literally stopped existing as ourselves and became each other for a fleeting moment. Though brief, we experienced everything we were together; we saw our entire lives unfold before us, and we felt every moment of pain and pleasure as if they were our own. You call yourself his closest friend, but have you ever shared anything with Sonic that can compare to that?"

"Don't do this, Shadow. I don't like you're implying."

"Then let me state it plainly for you; I understand Sonic better than you ever have."

Tails turned slowly to face Shadow, and darkness seemed to fall across his face. With his hackles raised and a fire rising in his belly, he felt an army of raging words massing in his throat, ready to burst forth at any second.
"Get out," he growled through clenched teeth.

"What?" said Shadow.

"You heard me; get out of my house!"

Shadow looked at him blankly, either oblivious or wilfully ignorant to his growing anger.

"I don't understand..."

"Oh, but you understand Sonic so damn well, don't you? You've had the complete interactive experience, you've read the whole book of his life, but guess what?" He placed both hands flat on his chest. "I wrote that book! I made him what he is, just like he made me! All you've done is fill your head with facts about him; you know what it's like to be him but you've no damn clue how to be his friend! If you did you'd know that you just crossed the line!"

"Why? Because I told you the truth and you can't handle it? What Sonic and I went through..."

"Is what he and I go through every single day!" Tails yelled. "And we don't need to use Chaos Energy to know how we feel; we just know! Even a smile that's slightly too small tells me that he's hurting inside, and he can read my body language like an open book. And we talk about this stuff; we talk about it all the time, whether it's good or bad. This whole mess started because I chose not to talk, and because I spent more time with my memories than living in the moment with him like I should have. That's something you will never understand."

"Why are we even having this discussion?" said Shadow, his arms folded. "This isn't a competition to see who can be Sonic's best friend."

"Well that's funny, because you've been acting like you've won ever since you showed up."

"Enough-"

"And you know the worst thing? He actually did like you, you bastard! He used to talk about you all the time! How much he admired your skill, how proud he was of how much you'd grown as a person. He liked you!"

Tails stepped forward, throwing a half-hearted punch against Shadow's chest.

"He liked you!" Tails continued to flail ineffectually against Shadow, repeating 'he liked you' over and over, his words tensing up and becoming less coherent over time, while his strikes became weaker and unfocused until his whole body collapsed into Shadow's chest. He wrapped his arms around the other's waist and gripped tightly as if he might blow away if he let go, and he pressed his face into Shadow's thick white chest fur, his speech dissolving into heavy, gasping sobs that rattled against Shadow's heart.

"But he loved me..."
As he opened his eyes, the cool darkness soothed his puffy and raw skin around his eyelids. The air felt cold against his face, but something soft and warm enveloped his body, holding him close and gently rocking him with its steady and rhythmic breathing.

"Sonic?" Tails said through a stifled yawn. But when he looked up, he saw the glint of crimson irises staring into the night.

"Shadow? What are you - how long have you been... doing... this?"

"About four hours, more or less," said Shadow as he continued to stare into the distance, his voice flat and joyless.

"And you've just... sat here the whole time? Just... holding me while I slept?" The unease in his voice couldn't have been more obvious, but he couldn't help himself. There were people he expected might behave like this; Sonic, Amy, perhaps even Knuckles, but Shadow? He must have been having a very strange dream indeed.

"Not quite," said Shadow. "You cried for about an hour solid. Then you must have worn yourself out and fallen asleep."

"Shadow?" said Tails, sitting up in the dark hedgehog's lap. "Why are you doing this? I would've thought you'd just leave. Why stay here with me?"

Shadow's eyes met Tails', though his expression remained unmoving as ever. "You were right."

"Right about what?"

"I don't know how to be Sonic's friend. I've seen his memories, I've felt his feelings but I don't know how to respond to them. It's like he's a book; I understand all the words in the book but I can't see the story they're trying to tell. I thought I knew him better than anyone, but the things you said made me realise; he's further away from me than he's ever been."

Tails studied Shadow's face as he spoke. Despite the weight of his words he said them like he were a child in a kindergarten play. Had it been Sonic, the tell-tale signs of sadness would have been plain for him to see; the awkward twitch of a half-smile, the eyes that naturally fell towards the floor, the hesitant and uneven voice. But Shadow's robotic speech and unmoving face made him impossible to read, with only his words revealing anything about his state of mind.

"But I think I understand one thing; how he felt about you. It's always right at the front of his mind no matter what else is happening. And when you broke down, those feelings hit me like a sledgehammer, and I just... couldn't leave you alone. I had to be here for you, and I don't really understand why. I know it's not how I feel, and yet for a moment it was. I don't know if that makes any sense, but..."

"Does this mean you don't want to kill me anymore?"

Shadow turned his head away, and Tails thought he saw the briefest flash of a smile, gone as soon as it arrived.

"I never wanted to kill you. I just knew Sonic would be doing his best to avoid confronting you over what happened. He cares too much about you to be hard on you when it really matters. I thought that if I did something extreme..."
"Then Sonic would compromise with something more reasonable," said Tails. "Then at least he'd be doing the right thing in your eyes."

"Yes. I had to provoke him into acting responsibly. This seemed the ideal method."

"Did you have to be so rough, though?" said Tails, rubbing his neck.

"Well, I was still angry with you."

"You had every right to be; I may not have meant to hurt anyone, but I still acted like a complete idiot. Everything that's gone wrong is because of me."

Shadow grabbed Tails by his shoulders and turned him to face him. His stare, intense as ever, seemed less angry and rather more heavy with concern, though it still made his fur stand on end.

"Don't ever say that again. If you cling on to the mistakes of your past they'll fester until they rot the heart out of you. You need to learn to let go of the past. Trust me, I've been where you are now and if you don't move on quickly you'll become trapped in your regret. I know it hurts right now, but it'll hurt so much more later on if you don't let it pass naturally."

Tails turned away, fighting back the tears welling up in his eyes. From recent events he knew all too well the things Shadow spoke of. He'd clung on to his past so tightly it had nearly destroyed everything, and had cost Sonic his life. Yet to hear Shadow summarise his feelings so accurately and succinctly made them seem so raw and fresh that they threatened to overwhelm him again. But he held them back, his courage bolstered by one simple fact: Shadow knew what it was like to feel this way. He was doing something that even Sonic, for all his efforts, could not do, blinkered as he was by his endless optimism: Shadow understood who he was, who he had been.

He fell back into Shadow's lap with a heavy sigh, resting his head against his chest once more. Shadow squirmed uneasily, resting his arms around Tails rather than actually holding him, but the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart soothed his fraught nerves.

"Shadow? Do you think that one day we might ever be... I dunno, friends?"

Shadow hesitated for at least ten seconds, and when he spoke his voice betrayed no emotion.

"I've never had many friends. Maria raised me and taught me so much about life, Rouge is the only person who never judged me for what I am, and Sonic opened the door to a side of me I never knew existed. You... I don't know what we can do for each other. I'm sorry."

"Well," said Tails, slumping down further into Shadow's lap, "we could help each other get Sonic's body back from the Special Zone. That'd be a start."

"Yes..." said Shadow, a strangely curious tone in his voice. "Yes, I suppose it would."

"So, do you want to go now or..?"

"I... I suppose I wouldn't hurt to stay like this for a little while longer. I'm growing... accustomed to it."

"Yeah..." said Tails, closing his eyes. "Me too."

~O~

"I don't understand; he should be here!"
Tails stood on a silver rock floating within a cloud of purple dust. In the space around him a swarm of similar asteroids swam through the inky skies of the Special Zone, drifting and spinning aimlessly and sometimes gently bumping against each other. Tails' own asteroid slowly rotated, but he stayed firmly attached to it despite it being far too small to create a meaningful gravity well. But in the Special Zone anything goes; they had run through tubes of solid perfume, bounced off giant marshmallow effigies of their own faces and hitched a lift on a flock of flying armchairs to reach this spot. Silly things like the laws of physics didn't apply here.

He held a device in his hand, a curious object covered in flashing dials and spinning sensors. The device beeped and whirred erratically, its tone rising and falling sharply as if it were feeling queasy.

Tails tapped it a few times, then shook it. "Come on, work! I know I've allowed for Special Zone interference, so just find Sonic already!"

Shadow stood on a nearby asteroid, his eyes closed and his hands moving slowly in front of him as if he were feeling for invisible threads.

"Anything?" Tails called across the void.

"There's something here," Shadow called back without turning around, "I can sense Sonic's energy lingering in this area but... something's not right."

"The Special Zone is probably playing havoc with your senses. My instruments are going haywire as well."

Tails rattled his device once more, cursing it for its disobedience. Then he sighed wearily and let his arms fall to his side, his gaze turning into the sky.

Then he saw it; one of the asteroids looked different to the rest. A small patch of pale reddish hue adorned one side of it. Pushing himself away from his current rock, Tails floated through the void like he was underwater before landing gracefully on the other rock.

Up close, the patch looked like someone had spilled red wine across the asteroid's surface, and in the centre of the patch a deep and narrow hole bored down into the heart of the rock.

"Shadow!" Tails yelled. "Come and look at this!"

Shadow awoke from his trance and searched for Tails among the asteroids. When he spotted him, he launched himself from his rock and drifted over to Tails, landing beside him as lightly as if he were made of feathers. He knelt down, ran two fingers through the patch and brought the dust up to his nose.

He sniffed. "It's Sonic's blood."

Tails' eyebrow raised. "You know what Sonic's blood smells like?!"

"Yes, my olfactory senses are superior to-"

"Okay," said Tails, holding his hand up. "I believe you; no need to tell me how much better you are than everyone else."

Shadow looked confused. "That wasn't what I-"

"This must be the place," Tails continued, examining the hole closely. "This must be where it happened."
"Where what happened?"

"Oh... er... where Sonic fell, I mean." Tails still couldn't bring himself to tell Shadow what had really killed Sonic. The dark hedgehog's personality was so difficult to get a true gauge on that he couldn't be sure he wouldn't go berserk again. Despite his earlier assurance that his rage had been an act, Tails had seen into his eyes while he was being throttled; Shadow had fully intended to kill him in that moment.

His strange friendship with Sonic seemed to temper his rage, and Tails felt safer while that safety net was in place. But if he knew that Sonic's killer was right in front of him in might push him over the edge.

"When it all... happened," said Tails, not meeting Shadow's eyes, "Sonic got stuck here. He was... he was impaled against this rock. I couldn't free him... but how is he not still here? He was stuck fast; he couldn't have fallen off, could he?"

"No," said Shadow, his voice low and serious, "he was taken."

"Taken?! Are you sure?"

"I said something didn't feel right with Sonic's energy; that's because it wasn't just his energy. Someone else was here."

Tails gripped his head with both hands. "Someone else? Do you know who it was?"

Shadow shook his head. "All I can tell is that it was a Mobian. They came here recently, to this very spot."

"So let me get this straight; you're saying that not long after Sonic sacrificed himself for all our sakes, some random Mobian came here and just... stole his body?"

"It would appear so," said Shadow.

"But who would do something like that? For that matter, who other than me could have possibly known that Sonic was here? It doesn't make sense for this to happen now. What's going on here?"

Shadow stood up, folding his arms and looking out into the shimmering sky of the Special Zone.

"I don't know. But I know this for certain: when I find whoever it is that stole Sonic's body, I will bring their whole world crashing down around them. They will rue the day they chose to cross me. I give you my word, I will end them."

Tails said nothing, silently agreeing with Shadow, if only to deflect his disdain away from himself. He stood up and walked over to Shadow, putting his hand gently on his shoulder. The dark hedgehog didn't react, but that was as good as a tacit approval from him.

"Sonic," he said, staring out into the cosmos, "We'll find you, buddy. Wherever you are."

~O~

The doors slid open with a self-satisfied hiss, and he stepped through into the laboratory. As he entered, the scientists immediately stopped what they were doing and bowed their heads in reverence towards him. He waved his hand, silently granting them permission to stand down, when the lead scientist approached him.
"My Lord, we have the artefact. It awaits your inspection in the Chaos Analysis Chamber."

He felt a toothy smile spreading across his face. At last, at long last his ultimate desire lay within his grasp.

"I must tell you, My Lord," said the Scientist, "there has been a complication."

"What sort of complication?" he said. "Think very carefully about your next words. If you've damaged the artefact in any way, they will be your last."

"The fault is not ours, my Lord!" The scientist pleaded, sweat running down his brow. "We recovered the artefact but it's embedded in some kind of organic creature. They appear to be bonded together, and it's making it difficult to extract one from the other."

"Show me."

"My Lord, I must urge caution; the creature is unlike anything I've ever seen; it's hideous beyond all reckoning. It would heap shame upon my head if I were to sully your magnificent and radiant eyes by allowing them to gaze upon such despicable ugliness."

"Show me. Now."

"As you command, My Lord. Please follow me."

The scientist led him to the back of the room, where a large pair of metal doors stood guard. The doors opened as he approached, and he stepped into the circular chamber beyond.

In the centre of the chamber a group of scientists huddled around a long metal table. They bowed when he made his presence known, then cleared the way so he could see the specimen they studied.

The figure lying prone on the table shared the same basic body structure as him and his people, but there the similarities ended. In the centre of its chest a spike of jagged yellow crystal stuck upward, sparkling with golden light, and its base spread outwards to envelop the being's torso. The whole structure pulsed regularly, like it was made of flesh that writhed and heaved under its own weight.

"Is it... alive?" he asked.

"We believe so, my Lord," said the chief scientist. "The life signs are very weak and hard to read with all the interference from the artefact, but the creature yet lives."

He ran his eyes along the thing's form, studying the intense colour of its fur that seemed so familiar to him. Then as his eyes adjusted to the dim light of the chamber, he saw its face clearly, and his heart froze.

"Leave us," he commanded.

"My Lord, it's not certain how safe this artefact is. We can't put your life in danger by-"

"I said leave us. Now. All of you. I wish to... consider this development without further distractions."

"My Lord." Those gathered in the room bowed before quickly exiting the chamber and closing the doors behind him. As they sealed shut, leaving him in silence, he couldn't help but chuckle.

"That face," he said, pacing around the table. "I haven't seen that face for thousands of years. How fitting that here, on the eve of my ultimate victory, I should once again encounter you; my greatest adversary."
He leant over the table, looking into the open and vacant eyes of the figure.

"I do regret having to kill you all those years ago. You could have been so beautiful, but instead you chose to fight to the bitter end. And now here we are again, with me standing triumphant over your broken body. Ironic, isn't it, that it should be you who hands me the key to ultimate power."

He laughed to himself. "Do you know I've actually forgotten your name? Never been too good with them and after you've lived as long as me things do tend to slip your mind. What was it again? Oh yes, I remember now."

He leant in close to whisper in the creature's ear, his voice a gloating and self-absorbed hiss.

"Sonic the Hedgehog. As I live and breathe."

END OF PART ONE

~O~

Author's Note: Alright guys, gonna take a break from this for a little while. Thank you for all your support so far; I promise your continued dedication will not go unrewarded! :) Fracture Point will return soon! Join Tails and Shadow as they travel further than they ever dreamed in search of Sonic. As the two form an uneasy alliance with each other, sinister forces have taken an interest in recent events and begin to move against them. In a multiverse full of wonders and horror beyond imagining, they will have to learn to trust each other in order to survive.

PS: This is not becoming a Shadow x Tails story. I'm just very fond of intense physical affection between male friends but without romantic or sexual overtones. Sorry if some of you find this too touchy-feely but that's how I roll.
Author's Note: Hello and welcome back to Fracture Point. Sorry about the very long delay; it took me many a sleepless night to finalise a lot of plot elements, and I needed the time to hammer out the finer details in my head.

Without further ado, I present Fracture Point Act 2. Enjoy.

YOU HAVE A NEW MESSAGE

Hello. Is someone there?

GottaGoFast91 is typing a message...

Hello. Who is this?

...

Unknown User: Are you real? Are you just a voice in my head?

GottaGoFast91: I'm as real as they come. What do you mean, voice in your head? You're talking to me on Instamail.

Unknown User: Really? Huh, must be some kind of temporal resonance realigning an abstract energy transfer to a recognisable medium. Neat.

GottaGoFast91: What the heck does that mean?

Unknown User: It's complicated. I'm surprised I can even talk to you at all. It should be completely impossible.

GottaGoFast91: Why?

Unknown User: It's complicated.

GottaGoFast91: I've got time.

Unknown User: Um, how can I put this? I shouldn't be able to talk to you because technically I don't exist.

GottaGoFast91: You don't exist? What are you like some kind of ghost or something?

Unknown User: I suppose you could put it like that. I'm an echo of something that once was, a memory of a lifetime that won't fade away completely.

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: ...

Unknown User: So basically I'm a ghost.
GottaGoFast91: That is so cool. I'm talking to a real-life ghost on my computer. This is the most awesome thing to happen to me in a long long time.

Unknown User: Heh, I knew you'd like it, Sonic. Life was always so exciting for you.

GottaGoFast91: Wait, you know my name? WTF you some kind of stalker ghost or something?

Unknown User: We used to be friends, back when I existed. We used to be best friends, believe it or not.

GottaGoFast91: You were my friend? My best friend?

Unknown User: The best there ever was.

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: I never had a best friend.

GottaGoFast91: Never really had any friends at all actually.

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: What's your name BTW? If we were besties once I must know who you are.

Unknown User: It's me, Sonic. It's Tails.

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: I'm sorry. I don't remember you.

Unknown User: That's okay. It's better that you don't anyway. Better for everyone.

GottaGoFast91: No way. No-one should ever be forgotten. You shouldn't talk yourself down like that, buddy.

GottaGoFast91: That's weird. I don't know why I called you that.

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: Tails? You still there?

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: Hey, U OK?

GottaGoFast91: ...

GottaGoFast91: TAILS?!

Unknown User: We need to stop talking. Right now. Turn off your computer and walk away.

GottaGoFast91: What? Why?

Unknown User: It's complicated.

GottaGoFast91: Don't be like that. We were just getting to know each other.
Unknown User: *That's what I'm afraid of.*

GottaGoFast91: *Hey I'm not some kind of perv. I just want someone to talk to.*

Unknown User: *I know. But this limited interaction is already causing my timeline to reassert itself, and I can't allow that to happen.*

GottaGoFast91: *Your timeline? What does that mean? Why is that a bad thing?*

GottaGoFast91: *...*

GottaGoFast91: *Tails why is that a bad thing?*

Unknown User: *Because if I come back from where I am, everything in existence will be destroyed.*

GottaGoFast91: *Really?!*

Unknown User: *Yes. There's no doubt about it.*

GottaGoFast91: *No way. How can you be so sure?*

Unknown User: *Because it's already happened once before.*

~O~

"Shadow? Shadow, can you hear me?"

Shadow blinked a couple of times and slowly shook his head as if waking from a dream.

"What's the matter, Tails?"

"You kinda zoned out on me there. Like you were in some kind of trance."

Shadow had been eerily quiet since he and Tails discovered the asteroid where Sonic's body once lay. His gaze turned to the iridescent swirl of neon ribbons that made up the sky of the Special Zone, and he had once again demonstrated his unnaturally still posture. Only his lips had moved, softly mouthing words that no-one but him could hear. Tails had expected him to snap out of it quickly, but when that seemed unlikely he had to resort to jabbing the dark hedgehog in the ribs with his elbow.

"I was just thinking..." he said, his unfocused eyes still staring into the depths of space.

Tails fiddled with some buttons the teleportation device strapped to his wrist. "There'll be time for deep contemplation later. Right now we need to get back to Mobius and come up with a plan. I don't know who might have stolen Sonic's body, but I'm guessing they don't have his best interests at heart. We need to find them before they... do whatever it is they want to do."

He turned around, jabbing at the buttons and grumbling at their apparent unresponsiveness. Then Shadow grabbed his arm, pulling him so sharply to the side that he fell to his knees. As he righted his spinning head he came face to face with Shadow's intense stare.

"Prepare yourself for the worst, child," he growled, his words sounding like a blade dragged along stone. Tails felt a tingle rush along his spine and close up his throat.

"W-what? What do you mean, the worst? Shadow? What is this?"
"Do you know what they did to Maria's body?" Shadow pulled Tails even closer. "Do you know what they did to her?"

"Maria? I don't understand." Tails squirmed in his grip. "Shadow, please! You're hurting me."

"I searched for so long trying to find her. I infiltrated GUN just so I could find out what happened, and I looked everywhere: unmarked graves, cryo-storage, I even checked the experiment logs to see if she'd been dissected for research, but she wasn't anywhere to be found. But I kept going and going and eventually I did find her, and you know what I found?"

Tails wanted to object, but he figured Shadow would tell him anyway so he remained silent and simply shook his head.

"They burnt her," Shadow said to word with so much tension that he nearly snapped Tails' arm off. "They stripped her naked and threw her on a pile with all the other humans they'd killed on the ARK. Then they poured petrol over them and set them alight. When the flames finally faded she was nothing more than a twisted pile of charred flesh; you couldn't tell where she ended and the others began. They reduced the most beautiful thing in the world to that just to cover up their mistake, because they didn't want anyone else to discover what they'd done!"

Tails winced and tried to pry Shadow's hand from his wrist, a tear running down his cheek. "I'm sorry, I really am! That's so awful what happened to her. But I don't get why you're telling me this now."

"Because I want you to be prepared when you see the same thing happen to Sonic."

Tails' breath halted. "Wh-what? No, that... that just won't happen. It can't happen; I won't let it!"

Shadow threw Tails to the ground, then stood over him, his form cast in darkness against the luminescent sky.

"You've thought about Sonic's death I'm sure, but it's an idealised version; a child's idea of death. You've imagined him lying there so peacefully as if he were only sleeping, without so much as a scratch on his body. The perfect death for the perfect guy."

"What you haven't ever dreamed of," he leant forward, his form engulfing all of Tails' vision, "is seeing him after he's been tortured, after he's been brutalised and his body mutilated beyond all recognition. You haven't ever thought you'd find him as nothing but a charred husk, a twisted lump of flesh that used to be someone you loved. I need you to think about that; I need you to picture the worst thing you can imagine until it seems almost real."

"Why?" moaned Tails, nursing his wrist. "Why would you want me to do that?"

Shadow stood back up, placing his hands on his hips. "Because I need you to be ready." He turned away, crossing his arms. "I need you to be ready for that... because I wasn't."

A moment of silence fell between them, and Tails wanted to fill it with questions. Yet he held back, allowing Shadow a moment to collect his thoughts. After closing his eyes for a few seconds and slowly sighing, Shadow spoke again.

"I've come to terms with her death, but I've never come to terms with that. When I saw her lying there... like that, it broke me. That memory carved itself into my heart and left a scar that has never truly healed. I don't... it's just not right that you should have to go through something like that. That's why it's better you start preparing yourself now."
Tails rose to his feet, though he still cradled his wrist in his hand. "I'm stronger than you give me credit for. I'm ready for whatever happens. After what I've been through there's nothing that can frighten me now."

Shadow glanced back over his shoulder, a short laugh filled with contempt escaping him. "I used to think I understood fear. I used to be like you; thinking there was nothing left that could ever scare me. But I wasn't ready for the fear I felt that day. I let that fear take control of me, I let it rule my every thought and dream until I stopped existing as myself and became an empty vessel for it. That fear made me its slave."

Tails' ears twitched. Something about Shadow's words stirred a strange feeling from deep within him. "What did you say?" he whispered.

"You need to understand what I was too arrogant to see. You need to realise that only you have the power to control your fear."

Tails' ear twitched again. The strange feeling bubbled up in the pit of his stomach. What was it about Shadow's words that unsettled him?

Shadow turned around and took a step forward, a single graceful lunge towards Tails. Stooping down he took hold of the Tails' hand and clasped it tightly between both of his own. His stare, mere feet away, became even more intense, yet his expression remained as stern and unmoving as ever. The feeling inside Tails moved out his stomach and became a creeping tingle that ran along his spine and set his fur on end.

"Listen to me, Tails. The only thing to fear is fear itself. Fear only exists in your own mind. It is nothing but an emotion. Are you going to let an emotion rule you, dictating every moment of your life? I was once a slave to an emotion, but I took control of that emotion, and now I am its master."

He let go of Tails' hand and rose to his feet, seeming to tower over the fox as he looked down upon him. "Take hold of your fear and make it your slave..."

"Only then will you be free," said Tails. Shadow's stern demeanour crumbled as confusion took over. "What? How did you know-?"

"We've had this conversation before."

"I don't recall ever talking to you about this."

"No, you don't understand; those words... you've said those exact words to me before."

Tails brought his fingers to his mouth and began to chew his knuckle. His brain went into overdrive, piecing together the flood of information rising up from the depths of his subconscious. "But it wasn't you who said them... or maybe it was?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Shadow.
"Time echoes!" Tails yelled. Shadow's confused expression deepened, and he looked like he'd had all he could take of this conversation. Tails ran up to him and grabbed hold of his hands tightly, though Shadow took a step back and grimaced.

"I thought it was just a hallucination, but it wasn't! Not completely anyway. It was part of a time echo! A vision of an event or multiple events being sent through time from the future or the past. Parts of this conversation fell backwards through time to the point when this whole mess began." He let go of Shadow's hands and turned away, chewing his knuckle again. "But if this moment can become a time echo that means... oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear."

"What are you going on about?"

"The shard is still active. This isn't over."

Shadow stood beside him, and placed a hand on his shoulder, albeit one squirming with reluctance and awkwardness.

"Tails?" He said softly. "If there's something big going on you need to tell me right now."

"Okay, listen. A time echo can travel to any point in time but it can only originate from within the absolute timeline of its source. So like... if I was the source for example, then the echoes could only come from after I was born and before I died. But we know the shard is the source of the time disturbance; I saw that in those readings that GUN took of it. Which means..."

"Which means the shard must still be distorting time and therefore must still exist right now."

Tails looked up at Shadow with a curious grin on his face. "You know, it's a lot easier to talk to you about this stuff than it was with Sonic. I would've had to draw it out in crayon before he picked it up."

Tails smiled warmly at Shadow, but he turned away without acknowledging it. "I thought the shard was destroyed."

Tails closed his eyes, a flood of images flashing before his eyes. A stake of crystal in his hand. Sonic's chest beneath it. The two meeting as he drove it downwards.

"I think... I think there's a fragment of it left. And here's the thing; I think it's inside Sonic's body."

"How can you be sure?" Shadow's glare pierced into him, and he felt his knees begin to shake.

"It's... it's complicated," he said, turning away. "But we haven't got time for this. It's even more important we find Sonic now. This is about more than just finding our friend; if the shard is still active then there is a very, very real possibility that the Fracture Point still exists inside it. We need to find it and deal with it before it causes any more trouble."

Tails tapped the device on his wrist frantically, and the space in front of him began to crackle with white and yellow energy. A golden ring emerged from within, expanding until it became an opening big enough for Tails to step through.

"Come on. We need to get back to Mobius and start looking for whoever it was that took Sonic's body. Let's get moving."

But as he went to step through the portal he could sense that Shadow wasn't behind him. He looked back to see the dark hedgehog staring up into the sky.
"Shadow? You coming?"

"That Mobian I sensed," he said without looking away. "there was something... off about them. They didn't feel like a normal person..."

"Okay... so why don't you come back to my workshop and we'll look into it?"

Shadow closed his eyes, holding his hand out and moving his fingers as if feeling for invisible threads. "Hold on a moment. I think... I think I've found him!"

Tails heart leapt upwards. "Really? Where is he? Quick, before you lose him again!"

Shadow's eyes remained closed, but his mouth turned downward and his eyelids screwed up as if he were in great discomfort.

"Wait a second... something's not right. It's... Tails, get out of here! Now!"

"What?! What's happening?!" Tails ran toward Shadow, but the dark hedgehog extended his arm outwards. A wave of crimson light erupted from his hand, pushing Tails backwards and into the Ring portal. A curtain of white passed over his eyes and he felt himself landing on his back on a carpeted floor. When the light cleared, Tails found himself in the living room of his house, with the Big Ring collapsing in on itself. Tails sprang to his feet and ran to it, but before he reached it the golden circle had shrunk down to nothing and vanished in a speck of light.

"No, no!" Tails cried as he fumbled at the empty space. He brought up his teleportation device and hammered the buttons, but the device only whirred and beeped while its screen flashed with red letters.

ERROR. INTERFERENCE PREVENTS INTERDIMENSIONAL TRAVEL AT THIS POINT. SOURCE: UNKNOWN.

"Work, damn you! Work, you piece of."

Tails let his hands slump to his side. After the commotion passed the silence of his house became dominant. Tails felt his knees weaken, and he fell to the floor, staring into the distance.

"Shadow?"

~O~

I see you.

Shadow struggled and writhed on the spot, but the force held him in place, pushing him downwards and forcing his knees to buckle. His eyelids screwed up as the pain overtook him, and in the blackness he saw lime green eyes flashing and fading like the afterimage of staring into the sun, while a voice rattled inside his head like thunder.

Did you really think you could spy on one such as me? In this domain my rule is absolute.

"Let... me... go!" Shadow garbled through lips that felt like they were stapled to his face.

The fox with two tails. He is the key to my ascension. You will give him to me. Now.

Shadow tried to fight his way out, but all he could do was contort into different positions, each more painful than the last. "I don't... know what... you're talking... about!"
I saw him. You sent him away as soon as you felt my presence. In that dimension he is beyond my sight, but you will bring him back there if you want to live.

"No! I'll never... let you... take him!"

I see it in your mind. You know of the crystal. You know the blue hedgehog.

Shadow briefly stopped resisting. "Sonic?"

The connection between you and he is strong. Maybe you will be the one to unlock his secret.

Shadow heard another voice in the background, a quiet voice that sounded almost the same as the first but without the overwhelming air of self-importance.

Dimension snare is ready, my lord.

Shadow felt the pain intensify, and he cried aloud. A white light engulfed him, and he felt himself being pulled into the air, moving faster and faster into the empty white expanse as if he was falling.

If not, said the voice, well... at least I can add you to my collection.

~O~

Tails ran from room to room, kicking up a cloud of dust behind him and cursing under his breath.

"Damn it, Shadow! What the heck are you playing at?"

He didn't know what Shadow had done or why he'd done it and if he was being honest with himself he didn't care. If Shadow wanted to put up a wall between them just as they were starting to cooperate then that was his problem. He had bigger problems on his plate than an emotionally-stunted hedgehog's mood swings.

He'd wasted no time gathering his things together. His workshop had been turned upside-down as he rummaged through piles of junk in search of any device he thought might be useful, all of which he'd spread out across the workbench like exhibits in a geek's art gallery. The fridge had been raided for supplies and the microwave hauled into the workshop as Tails prepared himself to pull an all-nighter searching for Sonic. Somehow, he knew he could track down his friend, the shard or the mystery Mobian who had them both if he just shut himself in and focused on nothing else.

As he parked himself on his favourite stool and took hold of a pencil chewed to shreds by hours of contemplation, the stillness of the workshop soothed the tension from his muscles and the stiffness in his joints. In this place the troubles of the world faded into nothingness and his mind could be truly freed. This was his sanctuary, the place where nothing could ever trouble him.

Nothing except the banging on the door.

Tails sighed and put his pencil down, pressing it forcefully against the workbench with his palm. Hopping from his stool he headed out into the living room and towards the front door, grumbling under his breath all the while.

As he approached the door, the banging grew louder and more forceful, shaking dust from the wood and threatening to rattle it from its hinges. Tails stopped in the hallway, Deja vu swirling around his head. He wondered if he dare open the door just in case he'd somehow gone back in time and was about to be attacked by Shadow again.
Through the frosted glass he could see dark shapes moving, muffled voices suggesting multiple people waited outside. Then he heard one voice distinctly, a voice that sounded vaguely familiar to him.

"Breach it."

The door flew open, its edge glancing Tails with its wild swing and knocking him onto his rear. He looked up to see a number of figures in dark combat fatigues, body armour and helmets with face-obscuring visors stepping over the threshold, each one brandishing an assault rifle.

Instinct kicked in and took control of Tails' body. He scrambled to his feet, turning around as he rose and launching into a sprint across the house. He charged through the living room and into the dining room, leaping over furniture and swinging from light fittings in a dash for the rear of the house. Reaching the back door he flung it open and ran out into the back yard, spinning up his tails and launching himself upward as soon his feet touched the lawn.

Tails breathed a sigh of relief as the ground fell away from him. In a few seconds he'd be high enough to push his speed to the limit and fly away so fast not even Sonic could catch him. Below him the dark figures of the soldiers gathered in the yard, looking up at him, and he faintly heard a voice garbled through the static of their radios.

"Target is airborne. Deploying countermeasures."

Something shot towards him from the ground and struck him before he could react. The object, a pair of bolas made from tightly-wound metal wire, wrapped around his tails and held them tightly together. Tails tried to pull them off but when he touched them a jolt of electricity shot into him. Moments later he felt gravity reassert his dominance over him and he dropped out of the sky, landing on his front on the lawn. The impact shook his whole body, knocking the wind out of him, while his chin bounced off the ground and crunched his top and bottom rows of teeth together. Exhausted, wracked with pain and covered in dirt, Tails felt just about beat.

Then he saw it; at the back of the yard stood a large and beaten-up wooden structure half-covered in moss. The building looked like a strong wind might blow it over, but despite appearances Tails couldn't have hoped for a more welcome sight.

With renewed vigour coursing through him he launched himself from the ground and into a sprint for the shed. The bolas holding his namesakes together affected his balance, but he pushed through it, the pain numbing as excitement over took him. The shed door flew back as he rushed inside, the light of the afternoon sun pouring in and causing the lingering dust to sparkle. The light pierced the gloom and fell upon a gleaming silver and red contraption, a machine that shimmered from the reflections in its lovingly polished and spotless surface. Every screw and bolt was aligned to geometric perfection, the grooves in the tyres were cleared of the slightest speck of dirt while the propellers were so clean they looked like mirrors.

The Tornado.

"Time to wake up, old girl. I need your help big time!"

Tails ran towards his pride and joy, but as he neared the cockpit his foot slipped in something wet and sticky on the floor. He stayed standing, dropping his weight and throwing a hand out to steady himself, when he felt something dripping over his glove; something that oozed and ran like blood. Holding his hand in front of his face, Tails saw the white of his glove turned jet black.

"Oh no..." He looked over to the Tornado. Oil oozed from a perfectly-round hole under the engine
block. Instantly he understood this was no malfunction; the hole had clearly been made by a drill.

The doors to the shed were thrown open wide, filling the space with light. Tails turned to see dozens of soldiers pointing their guns straight at him.

"On the ground!" One of them bellowed. "Put your hands behind your head and go down on your knees, now!"

"Okay, okay!" said Tails, holding his hands up. He sank to his knees and slowly clasped his hands behind his head, not even caring as the oil on his glove ran into his fur. Whatever fear or excitement drove him passed out of his spirit like air from a balloon, and he looked down at the ground, overcome by grim acceptance of his defeat. One of the soldiers walked behind him before pulling his arms back and placing a pair of cuffs on his wrists.

"Well, well, well," said a voice, the same voice Tails heard at the front door. "That was quite a chase, Prower. I thought I'd end up having to order my troops to shoot you before you'd stop running. Chaos knows they want to after what you did to them."

Tails raised his head as much as he dare to look up at the figure in front of him. A badger, tall and lean and sporting a dark suit, with the most self-satisfied smirk Tails had ever seen plastered across his face.

"What's wrong, Miles?" said Captain Axton. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

~O~

Every part of him hurt.

His left eye wouldn't open, the swelling clamping his eyelid shut. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth, dripping down his chest and into his lap. Some of his teeth felt like they'd started to come loose, his tongue throbbed where he'd bitten down on it and saliva pooled in the back of his throat and choked him. His muscles pulsed with numb pain that blanketed him, while his joints clicked and sent stabs of agony through him whenever he tried to move.

They'd locked him here, in this dark and airless room, tied to a cold metal chair by his hands and feet. He had no clue how long he'd been here, for the only indication that any time had passed was when another person came in to beat him.

They'd left no part of him unscathed. They'd punched his head, kicked his groin, twisted his wrists and pulled on his ears. They'd stabbed him with screwdrivers and jabbed him with hot metal, and no matter how much he cried or called out they never relented. They never said a word, but he could feel their hatred radiating out from within. They wanted him to suffer forever.

The door slid open, briefly shining a light into his dark pit before it closed again. He didn't even look up to see who it was, he didn't even protest or beg to be set free. He was long past the point of resistance.

He waited for the figure to strike. Where would it be this time? There wasn't anywhere left up for grabs. He wondered if this one would take a souvenir instead. After all, he didn't need all of his fingers, did he?

He heard a loud thud but felt no pain. At his feet someone had thrown a large brown dossier filled with paper. Footsteps followed, then he felt his binds release. Even without their tension holding him back he hadn't any strength to fall forward, only able to slump in his chair. The room flickered as the
lights came on, their brightness a harsh, stinging cloak that made his eyes water. He lifted his head, each millimetre as tiring as climbing a mountain, until he could see the face of his captor.

"Why..." said Tails, stopping to spit blood from his mouth. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Axton looked around the room nonchalantly, like he was visiting a particularly dull art gallery. When he deigned to look towards Tails, his eyes held nothing but contempt.

"The troops under my command are loyal to me, almost to a fault. I reward that loyalty by letting them enjoy certain..." He grinned, his teeth catching the light. "...perks to ease the burden of such a demanding role."

Tails tried to laugh derisively, but the saliva ran thick and strangled it before he could. "Perks? You call letting two dozen grown Mobians beat a child half to death a perk? What kind of monsters are you?"

"Monsters?" Axton stooped down to look Tails square in the eye. "You think we're the monsters? You've got some nerve. My troops are decent, hard-working people, some of them with kids. But they all remember what you did to them; they all remember how you murdered them."

"M-murder? I-I-I-"

"Don't!" Axton bellowed. "Don't even try and deny it! You murdered me too, remember? You sent all of us to that place. " His eye twitched when he said the word. "You made us live through our worst nightmares over and over and over. You tortured us. Some of these guys can't sleep at night because of you. I've seen battle-hardened soldiers crying like babies because of what you put us through. After what you did to us, this punishment is weaksauce, and far less then you deserve."

Tails hung down his head. He barely remembered even meeting Axton or his squad let alone harming them, but he knew it would be useless to deny it. He couldn't explain half the things he'd seen and done to himself, to convince another would be almost impossible.

"So..." Tails wheezed. "It's your turn now, is it? Time for you to get your revenge?"

Axton stooped down and picked up the brown dossier lying at Tails' feet. He held it out for Tails to take, and eventually the fox managed to lift trembling, aching arms and grasp it between fingers that felt like they were broken.

"I want you to understand something; I would take no pleasure from prolonging your torture. I only let my squad carry on for as long as they did because I thought it might help them come to terms with what they went through. I'm not going to turn this into a personal vendetta. At the end of the day, I care about people; I do this job because it allows me to keep the people of this world safe."

Axton tapped the dossier. "That's why I want you to read this. I want you to realise that this is about more than just me or my troops. You need to see the true cost of your actions. Read it."

Tails let the heavy folder sit on his lap before slowly opening it. As he turned from page to page, a lump rose in his throat while his heart slowly sank into the pit of his gut.

Streets lined with dead bodies. Skyscrapers crumbling and falling upwards. An entire school turned into glass. The sea rising up like a giant serpent and dragging a whole town into the depths. People turning into clouds of butterflies. Every tree in a forest bursting into flame simultaneously. The dead rising from their graves. Tears of blood pouring out of the Moon. Rioting. Destruction. Death. A world gone mad.
Every page told a different story of horror and insanity, but the theme remained the same. The removal of the Chaos Emeralds and the Master Emerald from the universe had caused a partial overlap between Mobius and the Special Zone. The laws of physics broke down until anything was possible, and the reports before him showed the cost that Mobius had incurred.

"They're calling it the 'Day of Chaos,'" said Axton. "It wasn't even that; less than eighteen hours passed but in that time hundreds of thousands of innocent Mobians lost their lives. That's the official figure, but I think we'll be looking at millions before too long. Tens of millions. All dead. All because of you."

Tails' hands shook, the dossier slipping from his fingers and tumbling to the floor. He stared ahead, tears streaming from his eyes and his mouth stuck open in a stupor. All this time he'd been so focused on himself, on what he had done to Sonic that he hadn't stopped to think about what he'd done. He knew he'd hurt other people, but he hadn't realised the scale of his crime.

"I... I..." Nothing. No words could leave his lips that could justify what he'd done. No amount of tears could wash away the stain he'd left on the world. Even if only GUN knew the truth, he could never go back to his normal life. How could he look anyone in the eye, knowing he might have killed their brother or their wife or their children? How could he take his place in a society that he tore apart?

He let his head fall forward and his arms slump down by his side, the last ounce of his spirit fizzling away.

"Kill me..." he whispered. "Please. I don't deserve to live anymore."

Axton stood over him, and when he spoke his voice was calm and collected, almost reassuring.

"That would be so easy, wouldn't it? To just take out my gun and blow your head off right here and now. For a few seconds I might even enjoy it, but then it would be gone, and all this would have been for nothing."

He squatted down, clasping his hands in front of him and looking like a mildly disappointed parent.

"I know what you're thinking. You think there's nothing you can do to atone for this. That there's no way you can make up for what you've done. But we are going to fix this, one way or the other." He put his hand on Tails' knee. "I know that if we work together we can heal the damage done to this world. That's what you want, right? To make things all better again?"

The thin veneer of compassion suited Axton poorly, Tails thought, a phoney pretence that unwittingly turned patronising. But he couldn't resist anymore, and even the slightest glimmer of hope seemed worth taking. If there was even the tiniest chance of undoing his mistakes he would take it. He looked at Axton and slowly nodded.

"Can you stand?" said Axton, standing up straight. Tails tried to move, to goad his muscles into action and push himself up from the chair, but even the slightest movement set waves of pain rippling through him, and he collapsed back into the chair with a groan.

"It's okay." Axton moved around to the side of him. "I'll help you, so you can help me, okay?"

He stooped down and put one arm behind Tails' neck and the other behind his knees, lifting him up and holding him across his arms. Tails wanted to protest, to squirm and wriggle out of the stranger's arms, but every thought of resistance fizzled into nothing before his body even tried to respond.

Axton nudged a button with his elbow to open the door, and stepped through into the corridor. As
his head hung limply, bobbing up and down with Axton's walking, Tails began to recognise where he was. The snaking pipes and wires running through a metal frame forced into crudely carved rock told him this could only be the underground GUN base where they were keeping him before.

After a number of twists and turns Axton passed through another doorway into a room with a high ceiling. Beeping and whirring reached Tails' ears, and a familiar metallic smell sent a shiver down his spine. He knew where he was. He knew exactly where they were taking him.

He conjured up enough strength to turn his head, just enough to confirm his fear. The room was a laboratory, filled with desks and computers and Mobians in white coats too focused on their equipment to notice him. On the far side of the room, a mass of machinery took up the whole wall; flanked by a pair of guards clad in black and featureless uniform, a twisted tangled of cables, panels, screens and clamps awaited him, standing open like the jaws of a great metal beast waiting to devour him.

A burst of fear gave him the energy to pull against Axton, and he wriggled and struggled in his grip.

"No, NO! Not in there! Don't put me back in there! I'll do anything you want, just please... not the machine! Not the machine!"

As Tails continued to roll around against an increasingly forceful Axton, the scientists began to look up from their work and take notice of the commotion. Tails reached out towards one, stretching his hand out until his shoulder almost popped its socket.

"Please! Help me! Somebody please help me!"

A crowd began to gather, the scientists murmuring amongst themselves and looking on at Tails with fearful and uncertain expressions. Some of them clenched their fists, their bodies betraying the action their brains feared to take.

Axton took a firm grip on Tails' shoulders and thrust him into the arms of the waiting guards. The soldiers grabbed him under the arms and dragged him backwards towards the machine, effortlessly pulling him away even as he kicked and screamed the whole way. Axton turned to the crowd, his mere presence seeming to cow them. But they didn't back down completely, with many looking over his shoulder towards Tails with sympathetic eyes.

"Do you know what that is?!" yelled Axton, pointing over his shoulder towards Tails. "It's the reason your homes are in ruins, it's the reason your friends are missing, it's the reason your children are dead! It is not a child, it is a cancer that destroys everything it comes into contact with. Our world is scarred by what it has done to us, a scar that will never heal so long as we wring our hands and do nothing. We have the power to unlock the secrets locked within that being, and once we have it we can ensure Mobius never has to suffer another Day of Chaos! We could even undo the damage it's done and purge that stain on our history completely. But if any of you think I'm being cruel or feel pity for this thing, go ahead and stop me if you must. I'll make sure your name is front and centre when they ask who it was that robbed the world of its chance to feel whole again. So, who's it gonna be? Anyone?"

The scientists murmured amongst themselves, then one by one they turned away and slinked back to their desks.

"That's what I thought," said Axton.

"Please!" yelled Tails, his eyes streaming with tears. "You don't have to do this. I'm sorry for all the people I hurt, I'm truly sorry!"
"The time for apologies is over," said Axton, his hands firmly on his hips. "Forgiveness won't bring our loved ones back, but the power locked inside you will. I told you, didn't I? We'd fix this, one way or the other."

The soldiers offered him up to the machinery and a metal clamp latched onto his waist before pulling him into the air and into the centre of the device. The tangle of metal sprang to life in a flurry of whirring and clanking as the contraption rearranged itself around him, clamps pinning his arms and legs to the back panel and a recessed plate like an iron lung covering his chest. Tails tried to struggle but the machine held him fast; the only thing he could do was look down to see Axton staring up at him, his face completely devoid of emotion.

"Shadow," Tails whimpered, "please… come back… help me."

Something hard and cold clamped over his face, plunging him into darkness and leaving him alone with the sound of his own breath, its pace growing faster and faster and panic began to set in. A low hum rose up from within the machine, growing until it became deafening. The sound abated for a moment, before a piercing whine shook his skull and a blinding light flooded his vision. He tried to scream but it was too late.

He belonged to the machine now.

~O~

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