Albedo

by ToyTowns

Summary

Dr. Eggman accidentally wakes up a ‘witch’ queen that’s been sealed in a crystal for five thousand years. She finds that the parasitic creatures her people initially sealed in the protective iron core of the moon millennia ago have been released due to the events that transpired after ARK came crashing to Mobius.

Magically bonded to the witch as her guardian by ancient magic, the two have to learn to get along and try not to kill each other.

Oh. and G.U.N. has taken notice. Shadow is not paid enough for this.

The toned down version of Alchemy.
Dr. Eggman wandered through the mysterious cave he discovered by the extremely flat Dust Hill with his 'trusty' robots, Orbot and Cubot by his side. Each held a bright flashlight that cut through the pitch black. The robots were short and thin and moved by hovering off the ground.

Their color-coded chassis labeled yellow for Cubot and red for Orbot. Like their names suggested they could be compacted into a sphere and a cube for easy transport which made it easier for Eggman to use his lackeys in emergent but tight situations.
The mouth of the cave was a gaping hole in the ground with an unnaturally smooth ramp that descended forward like a road from an underground parking lot. At first the trio was hesitant to go forward, worried they'd be run over by some kind of vehicle until they realized the cave itself was abandoned. The path was too narrow for their own hovercraft so they had to continue on foot.

A peculiar wailing noise met Eggman's ears from far off ahead. It was a little sour and off-key, like someone trying to sing with a sore, phlegmy throat.

"I don't understand, how are you two not hearing this sound?" Eggman questioned his robot lackeys. "It's giving me a headache."

He rolled up the sleeves of his red and gold jacket before unzipping it.

He thought that perhaps it might have also been a bad idea to wear tight black pants in a desert. In his defense, he never expected to leave the luxury of his air conditioned vehicle and assumed that because it was winter it would be cooler outside. As it turns out 'winter' in the arid desert typically means 'occasional rain if you're lucky'.

"I promise you we aren't hearing anything," Orbot piped up.

"Maybe it's at a frequency you can't hear. However I designed you so that you should be able to hear things that even I can't."

Eggman paused to catch his shaky breath while Orbot and Cubot waited. He was older fat man who really needed to take better care of himself. It felt like they were traveling for miles and he was growing tired of the feeling of having a rock in his throat.

“Had I known this was going to be such a difficult traipse I would have brought something motorized.” He complained to himself.

“Don’t die on us, boss.” Cubot chirped.

The cave itself was only a few hundred meters deep underground but the air was thick and humid-completely different from the surface.
There was no evidence of any living creatures ever being in the cavern path. There was no sign of any activity, actually. No litter, no graffiti or even gum wrappers accidentally blown in by wind. With a heavy sigh he continued on. It's not like they had to spelunk down, but it was still an oppressive trek.

It was a winding, slight decline and he knew getting back up was going to be the worst of it. While it was about as wide as your average street, the ceiling was low and Eggman had to bend forward at some points so he wouldn't scrape his bald head.

The walls and ceiling were rough but the floor appeared to be carved smooth with surgical precision. The beading precipitation made the ramp no different from a park slide after the rain. Only a few pebbles that fell from the walls and the ceiling marred the otherwise spotless floor.

Eggman was in this previously unexplored desert for 'industrial' reasons. He hoped to scout out an area that would provide adequate space for solar energy farming and possibly a place to safely store hazardous materials.

What was supposed to be a quiet Sunday became an adventure when his various sensors picked up an unknown energy signature below them only moments after arrival in the southeastern section of Iran’s Dasht-e Lut desert. His computers couldn't identify what the source was but Eggman guessed that it wasn't a Chaos Emerald.

"The moisture doesn't even make sense down here. There are no bodies of water according to the sensors. Where can it be coming from?" He spoke rhetorically.

"Maybe it’s all your sweat, boss." Orbot hummed.

Eggman lifted his hand as if to strike his rude robot.

"What if it's not actually a sound? " Cubot asked excitedly.

"What?" Eggman raised an eyebrow and lowered his hand.

"Yeah! Like, what if it's actually a psychic attack or something?" Cubot sounded excited at his idea but Orbot did not share this enthusiasm and simply shook his head.
"Listen, Cubot- the day you are right about anything is the day I wear my footie pajamas in public. This wailing is giving me a headache. Maybe we should come back with more equipment. Maybe some kind of drill. Henchmen that don't suck..."

At this point the wailing quieted down to a more bearable tone and almost started taking on a discernible voice. It sounded like whispers punctuated with cries and Eggman could almost make out the words.

"You seriously do not hear that? It sounds like a female voice-" He straightened up and cupped his hand around his ear.

Orbot and Cubot simply shook their heads and looked at each other. Maybe their boss finally cracked? Help

I'm

Sh... release...

please...

Open it

trapped

Save

Moon.. and..

"Okay, now I'm starting to pick something up. It's coming up like interference. Like crackling, but I still don't hear any voices." Orbot looked around with the beam of the flashlight nearly blinding Dr. Eggman when it swung to his face.
"I hear it, too!" Cubot straightened up with a start and pointed down the 'hall', "It's coming from that direction!"

"The path only goes in that one direction," Orbot scolded his square friend.

"Move it!" Eggman shouted, shoving the two robots aside and charging ahead. A green light faintly glowed like a dying candle down the path. "I see a light, do you see the light?" Eggman asked his two lackeys who were lagging behind him.

Don't...

help me... help

open ...

…..reliquary .. witch

H-help...

He broke into a sprint. The floor seemed to give way when Dr. Eggman slipped and tumbled forward for what felt like forever. He tried to grip the wall to stop himself from falling and sliced his gloved palm open on a sharp stone. The searing pain did nothing to dull the sensation of blood pouring from the wound. When he came to a stop he found himself lying on his back in a room that was wide open and brightly lit by what looked like a large glassy object embedded halfway into the wall on the far end. The ceiling was high and looked like it was carved in the same manner as the path floor. He sat up and looked at his palm and winced.

Eggman balled his hand into a fist to stop the bleeding and stood up with a pained groan. He was dizzy and nauseous after his tumble. His head ached and he wondered if he had a concussion.

"Orbot! Cubot!" he called out but received no reply. He looked around the room and realized there was no door. He looked up but also saw no opening from which he could've fell. He was trapped.

How do you get out of a room with no exits? The same way you got in! The old schoolhouse riddle
came to mind. But how the hell did he get in?

He turned to his communicator gauntlet and saw the screen was shattered and useless.

"Damn it." His heart was pounding with anxiety. "I'm going to die of starvation before my idiot robots find me." He fruitlessly pounded on the screen with his fingertips hoping to turn it back on.

Help…

The voice spoke again. Dr. Eggman stared at the glowing object at the other end of the room. He could vaguely make out the shape of a human in it.

He tentatively walked forward as if drawn by some invisible hand. The shape within it came into focus: it was a woman.

Now he was only a few feet away from a giant crystal. The woman suspended within was a tall, brown-skinned adult in her early thirties. Her hair was long and snow white, reaching her knees in length. Her sharp cheeks were softened by gray freckles. Her eyes were closed and her face was in a resting expression as if she was deeply asleep.

Her skinny arms hung at her side limply and clutched in her hand was a tome with a leather cover. He could see she unshaven on her underarms and legs.

Her clothes were strange and few: a simple brown leather cloth across her chest and a ripped fabric skirt that was tied in a crude knot. She was barefoot and wore little jewelry except for a bronze circlet on her head and a round opal-like cabochon embedded at the top of her sternum.

I won't hurt you…

"Are you speaking to me?" He could feel his heartbeat throb.

Yes…
He noted that the figure was not breathing. "Did you trap me here?" He asked accusingly.

You are trapped?

"Yes, I don't see a way out."

I'm sorry...

"Who are you? What are you?"

Touch the reliquary...

"What is a reliquary?" His eyes narrowed.

I am in the reliquary. I am not the reliquary.

Eggman paused again. He didn't want to release some kind of world-ending thing for a second time without a plan to control it.

Touch the reliquary... the voice repeated with slight firmness.

The figure's eyes opened slowly revealing wide violet irises devoid of pupils.

The woman moved very little and seemed to still be half-asleep in her movements. She looked at Eggman with sleepy curiosity and lifted her hand to the inside of the crystal and pressed it against the surface.

He didn't move.

Please touch the reliquary... The voice spoke from still lips.
"What is this?" He felt the urge to break the walls of the object holding her in.

Her eyes drifted to her hand and then back to his as if to direct him to press the crystal.

He hesitantly lifted his unhurt hand and pressed it to the crystal wall lining it up with hers. In a moment the reliquary walls melted away like cotton candy in water.

The strange woman unsteadily stepped onto the ground and looked over Eggman. She barely reached his shoulders in height. Light continued to pour from behind her but changed to a white glow.

\[ \text{You've freed me. Thank you.} \]

Her mouth still did not move. Eggman stepped back unsure of what to think other than cursing himself because Cubot was right. He felt something tighten in his chest and understood it as something tightening between them.

"Sure." He said curtly. "How do we get out of here?" He looked around nervously, "And where are Orbot and Cubot?"

\[ \text{Orbot? Cubot?} \]

"My two robots I came here with." The light began to fade quickly and Eggman's panic increased when he saw her eyes glowed. This is not a human.

\[ \text{What is a robot?} \]

"Never mind. Just get me out of here, please."

\[ \text{I have little energy, but I will try. Where do you want to go?} \]
She stepped forward and offered out her hand for the doctor to take. He hesitated.

The light was dim now and her glowing eyes made her face look sharp and menacing.

"Take me to the surface," he said just as the light died and the only light came from those vacant purple orbs. He grabbed her hand with his injured one and squeezed it.

It felt like he was in a vacuum. All the air was sucked out of his lungs in an instant and the world swirled around him.

And then he found he was outside the mouth of the cave with Orbot and Cubot waiting for him. The two humans were still holding hands. He inhaled the fresh air deeply and didn't mind that it was hot and burned his throat. She seemed to be unaffected by the glaring sunlight and the white-hot ground she was standing on barefoot.

"Boss! You're okay!" Cubot bounced with joy. "And you made a friend!"

"Who is this ?" Orbot gestured to the new person standing beside Eggman.

"I… I don't know," the doctor looked at her. "What is your name?"

"What happened to your hand?!" Orbot cried when he saw the blood still dripping from the gash.

The woman looked to Eggman's hand which was still clasped in hers and lifted it.

"Ah! Don't..." Eggman tried to pull his hand away but she grabbed his wrist hard and pulled him forward, nearly tripping him.

She let go of her book which floated in place and wrapped a length of her hair around his wound and squeezed it. Eggman felt a cold sensation and then nothing. The injury was healed.

She let him go and he pulled his hand back. He took several steps away from her and flexed his hand. He was fully healed; even the strain in his body from falling and the craning of his neck was
gone.

She took hold of that old book again and looked off into the distance.

"Thank you? How did you do that? What are you?"

"Boss, that strange energy we were tracking is gone now." Orbot piped up, seeming to not see the magic trick that was just performed.

"I think it was her, or the thing she was in." Eggman pulled off his ruined glove and wiped his blood-caked hand on his jacket.

That was when a rumble in the distance startled all four of them.

It was one of G.U.N.s large terrain vehicles. They picked up the energy reading and made quick work to travel there to investigate it.

"Time's up!" Eggman said. He ran to his Egg Carrier with Orbot and Cubot following suit.

The woman stood and watched them.

"Lady, come on." He motioned for her to get in, immediately regretting his invitation. She obliged.

The doctor made a beeline for his island lair hoping that G.U.N. did not see him leave. After about half an hour of oppressive silence someone took the initiative to speak.

"What happened back there?" Cubot asked, "You sort of just vanished and we hit a wall."

"The path started closing and pushed us to the front right after you slipped." Orbot, who was sitting behind Eggman, looked the woman over, "It was like being squeezed out of a tube."
The yet unnamed woman was sitting next to Dr. Eggman with her book in her lap.

"Who is the pretty lady?" Cubot was sitting behind her.

"Stop asking me questions you know I don’t have the answers to!" Eggman said.

She leaned back and shut her eyes.

Within hours they were at Eggman's gigantic metal lair that sat atop a semi-dormant volcano and overlooked the ocean. He couldn't wake the woman so he had to carry her in.

He laid her gently on his large gray sofa, instructed a nearby Crabmeat robot to chaperone her and ran to his bedroom on the other side of the building.

"Orbot, Cubot, we cannot tell anyone about this." He quickly threw on a clean, identical outfit.

"Are you gonna keep her? Ooh, let's name her something like Snowy! Or Blanca?" Cubot was pacing Eggman's sparse bedroom.

"She's not an animal, you idiotic bucket of bolts. I’m sure she has her own name."

"If she’s not a human or an animal then what is she?" Orbot rolled up to where Eggman was.

“Dangerous,” he sat on the edge of his bed and looked at his healed hand again. "I thought we were done dealing with mages and witches and all that magical nonsense."

“Maybe consider sticking her in a cage before she wakes up.” Cubot suggested.

"Now that I think about it... a human doesn't sound like a good pet." Orbot picked up the laundry and moved it to the hamper where it belonged. “Let’s get a budgie!”
“No birds!” Cubot cried, “They poop *everywhere!*”

“Shut up, you two! Hmm,” Eggman pondered the thought. “No. I have a feeling she will be somewhat compliant when she wakes. It’s clear she’s not from our time.” Eggman slipped on a spare older model gauntlet. “Let’s not alarm her with guns akimbo.”
Safe And Sound

An hour passed before the woman woke up. She opened her tired, aching eyes and sat up straight to look at her surroundings. The room was large and brightly lit with metal floors, walls and ceilings in silver and white with red glass inlaid. She shut her eyes tightly and gripped her book tightly to her chest, feeling a lump form in her throat.

She wondered if she had finally died and she had gone to some kind of purgatory. She ran her hands over the plush sofa she was sitting on admiring the unnaturally consistent color and stitching of the fabric. Such decadence!

She tentatively lowered her bare feet to the floor and winced at how cold it was. She opened her adjusted eyes and saw a pair of boots.

“You’re finally awake.” Eggman stood before her grinning broadly.

She squealed with fright and dove behind the sizable cushions with only bits of her hair poking out.

“Miss?” Eggman cocked an eyebrow. “I’m not going to hurt you.” He tried to coax her out using his softest, most calm voice possible.

He could hear her breathing heavily behind the cushion. She peeked out over the top, eyes wide.

“Sen...” She shook her hair out of her eyes. She adjusted her circlet.

“You’re safe here.”

She ran her hand through her hair and saw the spot where Eggman's blood was. She furrowed her eyebrows trying to remember what had happened.

She felt incredibly insecure surrounded by so much metal on all sides. She stepped out from behind the cushion and stood up straight, regaining composure.
“Thank you,” she twisted her sarong back into place. At first the words that came out of her mouth sounded foreign and guttural but quickly made sense to Eggman seconds later. “Thank you for releasing me.”

Eggman took a step back out of politeness.

"I apologize for inconveniencing you." She bowed slightly and held the book in her hand over her heart.

"My name is Sheptilah, queen of the Nannae people." Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment over being startled.

Now this was interesting. Eggman had rescued a queen, and a very young and inexperienced one to boot. He could use this to his advantage!

He bowed in return with false modesty.

"Your majesty, my name is Doctor Ivo Eggman and I am pleased to meet you." He smiled broadly trying to appear harmless to her.

"I'm grateful for your rescue of me and I am honor bound to offer you my services in return. Within reason, of course."

"Services?"

"You haven't heard of the Nannae?" She squinted at him. She decided to hold back as much information as possible out of caution. "Well, as you know, I can do magic."

"No, unfortunately I have not." He really hadn't.

"Boss! You’ve got a call-" Cubot came into the room. His face changed to an expression of joy when he saw the strange lady was awake and waved at her.
"Your strange metal golems… I can't understand them." Sheptilah raised an eyebrow at the little yellow man. "What kind of souls did you use to make them?"

"Souls? These are robots."

Sheptilah shook her head.

Cubot was looking back and forth between the two and was unable to understand Sheptilah's language but saw that Eggman was able to respond in his own language.

"Madame, may I ask how old you are?" The doctor asked her sweetly.

"All of my teeth are in, so adequately old enough." Clearly the Nannae and their methods of telling age were… prehistoric.

"Would you say you are in your thirties?"

"My thirty what? Most people like me have thirty-two teeth if that's what you mean."

"No...thirty years." He was growing frustrated.

"May we step outside?" She offered as a compromise, "I may be able to explain more not inside your bizarre dwelling. The metal is hindering me."

"It's night right now," Eggman offered his arm to her.

"Perfect. Bring your tiny metal golem." She did not take his arm but instead walked next to him.

Dr. Eggman and his two robot lackeys immediately took her outside. It was dark and chilly but this did not seem to bother Sheptilah anymore. The sea was calm and the waves breaking on the volcanic walls was the only sound. She inhaled the salty air quite deeply and breathed out slowly as if to calm herself.
She scanned the sky for familiar constellations and saw that a few had slightly shifted positions but overall retained their shapes. Sheptilah opened the book she was holding and turned to a page that looked like a hand-drawn star chart and compared it to the sky.

She sprinted further away from the lair which was blocking her view of the full moon and breathed a sigh of relief to see that it had seemed to be unchanged. She was on the same planet but in another time and place.

"Why were you in a crystal?" Dr. Eggman finally asked.

"I was put there by my people." She flipped through the pages to another chart and held the book up to the sky.

"And what was the reason?" Eggman tapped his foot impatiently.

"They wanted to keep me safe and alive for the future." She shut one eye and turned the book sideways. “To protect the planet.”

"What do you call this planet?" She changed the subject abruptly. The sound of her bare feet slapping the volcanic rock as she jogged back to him was almost amusing.

"Mobius." He nodded.

"We called it Zanu. The stars have shifted. How long was I hibernating?" She sounded nervously excited.

"If the stars have shifted positions for you… it was probably a very long time." Eggman frowned when he did the math in his head. He was going to have to teach her so much about modern times and it would be frustrating.

"Hey," Orbot began, "How are you understanding her language? We can't."

"What did the red golem say?" Sheptilah shook her head.
"Why can I understand you and you understand me, but not my robots?" Eggman crossed his arms.

"Oh! My Oracle Stone." She rested her free hand on the opalescent gem embedded in her sternum. It glittered in a faint rainbow of colors even in the dark.

"It is interpreting meanings for us, but it doesn't affect your golems because they have no living qualities in them. With this stone I can do many things as it's the source of my magic, but it has its limits. I will have to learn your language manually."

"It's quite beautiful," Ivo complimented her. He wanted the power in that gem. His eyes lingered on the gem a little too long, "How does it stay on?"

"Please don't stare at it," she turned away from him, "It's part of my body. It’s something we’re born with."

"Oh! My apologies for staring." He cleared his throat, realizing he had been very close to her chest. "Orbot, Cubot… do a search for the Nannae people. Let's see if we can find her majesty's kingdom to return her to her people."

"Right away, boss!" Cubot grabbed Orbot's arm and dragged him inside.

"It's not like I wanted to watch my favorite soaps or anything…" Orbot said dejectedly.

She knew she likely didn't have any living descendants but opted to let him do a 'search' anyway to see what he could find.

"Tell me more about yourself," She asked Ivo. She wanted to get a feel for him and this new place.

This was Ivo's best subject: himself!

"I am a beloved inventor! I am a genius and far smarter than anyone else on this island and I create the most magnificent of things. I can play several musical instruments and build the tallest towers."
He beamed, "I am also quite wealthy."

“You don’t look like a medicine man.”

“Not that kind of doctor. I have a fancy piece of paper from many schools called a doctorate that makes me a very educated expert on robotics.”

"So what is a robot?" She asked with a smirk.

"A robot is a machine made of metal and electricity. I have made thousands of different kinds."

"Your people have captured lightning?"

"A long time ago." He could tell she was easily impressed when explanations were given a magical twist.

"That’s marvelous! What else have you done?"

"Hm…” he looked around for an example, "Well, we have been to the moon."

"What!? The moon? You’ve been to the moon?" Her eyes were huge with a mixture of excitement and horror.

"It’s not that impressive anymore. There’s nothing up there." He lied.

"Did anything get found up there?"

"Just lots of dust and a great view of the planet."

Sheptilah let out a laugh to shake off the tension she felt in her chest. Thank goodness, she must have been woken up for another reason.
"We worshiped the moon. It's where we believe we got our Oracle Stones. It was always our dream to go to the moon and you've done it. I can't wait to explore this world and see what it has to offer."

"Wait, you can't leave yet." He needed to keep her in one place if he was going to use her powers for his own gain.

"I certainly can't stay with you." She didn't necessarily want to.

"Why not? I have more than enough space."

"But your tower is made of metal. Iron inhibits my powers… did I forget to explain that? That and… I actually need to charge. Being in a crystal for a long time really weakens you."

"Your majesty, you are welcome to stay in my lai- I mean, home, for as long as you need. I can even show you around when it is daytime. It's the least I can do since you healed me."

She hesitated for a moment and looked out to the sea. The waves rolling in the distance looked so free and careless and she wanted to melt away into them. She finally looked back at Ivo and nodded.

Eggman was happy to be back inside where it was warmer. He offered to have his robots make her dinner but she politely declined citing that she was not hungry. Instead he spent the rest of the evening teaching her things like what computers were and how to use indoor plumbing.

Ivo sincerely enjoyed having someone around to talk to; especially someone who was so enthusiastic about what he was teaching her. Sheptilah was just happy to not be talking about herself and instead focused on surviving this alien future.

She quickly figured out that stroking Ivo's ego was the best way to keep him from asking questions she was not prepared to answer.

When she felt she learned enough she had used her magic to quietly put Eggman to sleep by lightly pressing her thumb to his forehead. The magic that flowed from her thumb into his forehead felt cold and tingly but did not hurt him. As he slumped down over his desk she removed her circlet
and placed it in his hands as a sign that she would be back. Sheptilah greatly disliked abusing her powers like this but really wanted out of the iron box.

She exited with no trouble since Ivo lived alone and his robots were charging for the night. When the doors to the lair behind her hissed shut she realized her mistake.

There was no way for her to get down from the volcanic outcrop without using magic and even then she'd have to swim through the water to get to the shore. She concentrated hard and attempted to teleport to the beach but ended up about waist-deep in the frigid water.

Before her brain could register where she was a tall wave pushed her forward and sent her spinning under the cold water onto the sand.

Sputtering and choking on saltwater she stood up, soaked to the bone. She was still clutching her book in her fist. She walked from the beach to a nearby patch of grass and tried to wring out her hair unsuccessfully. She had so much hair that it was practically impossible to move without feeling weighed down by it when it was wet.

Sheptilah used magic to dry off by concentrating and sending the water droplets in all directions leaving a fine layer of salt on her skin and hair. She moved to a nearby palm tree and sat against it with her knees drawn up to her chest. She laid her head down on her knees. Her salt-flaked hair pooled around her body like a protective veil.

After a long silence she let out a choked sob and began to cry- mourning for her lost family. The fight would start again soon and she prayed that she would be able to finish it.

Sheptilah took a shaky breath and swallowed hard. She had heard a rustling coming from behind.
A pale man in full military garb drove the heavily armored G.U.N. vehicle toward the source of the energy spike. Rouge the bat sat strapped into the back of the vehicle with Shadow the hedgehog sitting across from her. She crossed her legs and anxiously shook her foot anxiously. They had left Omega the robot back at the base for repairs. The ground being the hard, dried dirt it was made it a bumpy ride.

The squeaking of her pleather boots was putting Shadow on edge. He couldn't understand how it didn't bother Rouge because her ears were much larger and therefore more sensitive than his. He wished the sound the vehicle made while rumbling through the desert was louder.

"It's not a Chaos Emerald, I can tell you that," Shadow spoke up, "It feels different." Rouge rolled her eyes at him. She was a treasure hunter! No need to rub salt in the wound- she was already miserable coming to the desert.

"Whatever it is it better be worth my time coming out here." She was greatly annoyed.

"We're here," the man said. Shadow and Rouge exited the vehicle and looked around. In the distance they could see Eggman's carrier leaving. The land was unmarred and no evidence of a cave existing was left.

"How did he beat us to it?" Rouge scoffed.

"He could've been the source of the energy spike, I guess." Shadow shaded his eyes with his gloved hand and walked forward several paces.

"Should we follow him?" Rouge sounded bored.

"It doesn't look like anything happened out here, so no." The overlander shrugged. "All of my sensors stopped going off."

"There's blood here," Shadow pointed to a few drops he was standing next to, "and two sets of adult overlander footprints in the dust: one with shoes and one without. These huge footprints are Eggman's."

The overlander took a sample of the blood for testing, "How do you know it's his footprint?" He asked Shadow.

The black and red hedgehog simply pointed to the little cartoon logo of Eggman's face in the depression. "The man wears his own brand of shoes."

"Tacky," The overlander said getting up. He called his supervisor and asked if they should chase after Eggman but was given a negative and ordered to return to base.

Rouge pulled out her phone and snapped pictures of the evidence up close and then flew into the air to take aerial photos. That's when she noticed a large area of freshly disturbed earth near where Shadow was standing.

"Hey, Shadow!" She shouted, "Looks like something was right where you're standing but is gone now. Maybe it was Eggman's ship?"

Shadow sighed, "I don't think it was anything important. We might as well go back and test the
blood we found. We can confront Eggman about it later."

Rouge landed gracefully and sent the photos she took off to their director.

"It must have been a small injury if there's only a few drops. I don't see any tracks that show urgency, so maybe one of them was hurt and that's why they left." The overlander suggested. "No drag marks."

"Why would anyone be barefoot out here in the desert? Their feet would've gotten burned." Shadow crossed his arms.

"Maybe he was entertaining a lady friend," Rouge chuckled, "And he got fresh so she stabbed him."

"Why are we assuming it's Eggman's blood? Besides, If the director wants us to go back we should."

"Let's load up, then." The overlander adjusted his dense bulletproof vest. "I feel like a turkey in an oven out here."

The trio was loaded back into the blessedly air-conditioned vehicle and drove off again. While the overlander was chatting casually with his director for the day Rouge pulled her phone out and texted Sonic.

[WhiteEcho] Hey are you there?
[BlueBlrr91]Whats up
[WhiteEcho]I need you to do me a favor
[WhiteEcho]Keep an eye on eggman for me
[WhiteEcho]And let me know if he's with anyone
[BlueBlrr91]whats he up to now?
[WhiteEcho]I don't know, but we just saw him leave an area of interest
[WhiteEcho]I can't say anything else
[BlueBlrr91]It's quiet on the island, I'll let you know if I see anything
[BlueBlrr91]Is Shadow there? Say hi for me!

Rouge looked up from her phone at Shadow who was staring out the window. He wasn't even bothered by the constant dinging from her phone. Maybe he was counting the cacti they passed by.

[WhiteEcho]he's lookin at cacti
[BlueBlrr91]What does that even mean
[WhiteEcho]idk it's just what he's doing right now
[BlueBlrr91]kkkkkkkk have fun out there
Rouge put her phone into sleep mode and nudged Shadow with her foot. "When are you gonna get your own phone?"

"I don't need a phone." He rested his head against the window.

"We can't use our G.U.N. communicators for everything. Besides how else are you gonna take cute pictures of your food?"

"Why would anyone take pictures of their food?"

"You must eat boring food."

"We can't all take artsy pictures of our burritos, Rouge."

"I was very proud of that burrito I made you! It was gourmet quality." She rarely cooked for herself but when she did for friends she went all-out.

"It was delicious," he admitted, "But I wouldn't put it in the Louvre."

"Anyway, Sonic says hi." She smiled at Shadow. He just let out a scoff and rolled his eyes.

Back at G.U.N.'s base Shadow and Rouge were sitting with a different overlander who was almost done making repairs to Omega. The robot was patiently holding her in his hand so she could reach the smallest parts of his neck with an equally tiny wrench.

Her phone dinged. She put the wrench in the front pocket of her overalls and looked at the message.

"The results are in," spoke Hope, niece of Dr. Eggman and resident teenage tech genius of G.U.N., "It's Eggman's blood." She wasn't disturbed by this at all and was a little disappointed her uncle didn’t die. Hope shoved her phone back in her pocket and took the wrench out again and went back to what she was doing.

"So today was a waste of time," Shadow sighed. He was gonna be kicking sand and dirt out of his skates for weeks.

"Maybe he lost a finger," Omega helpfully suggested.

"No, we would've found it." Rouge smiled broadly.

"So you still have that theory that Eggman was the source of the energy spike?" Hope brushed her blonde hair behind her ear, "He was probably testing some kind of weapon out there."

"If I was there I could have gone after his ship." Omega said.

"I haven't heard back from Sonic, so I don't think anything is going on at all." Rouge shrugged, "I'm going to bed. Good night, Hope; you too, Shadow."

Hope waved goodbye as Rouge left and Shadow only let out a grunt. He was thinking about that second set of human foot prints he saw.

"Is something the matter, Shadow?" Hope asked sweetly.

"Nothing. Just annoyed. You should go to bed, too. Don't work yourself sick." Shadow ran his hand through his spines.
"I'm almost done..." With a few more turns of the wrench her work was finished. "Give that a try, Omega."

Hope backed up so Omega could test out his new parts. "I am lithe again. Feels good. Thank you, Hope." he nodded. Hope jumped down and smiled broadly at her work.

"Excellent job as usual, Hope." Shadow smiled at the girl. He was curious about Rouge's aloofness and decided to keep an eye on her.

After tucking Hope into bed he silently warped out to his dorm which was adjacent to Rouge's. Shadow looked around the windowless room which contained an overstuffed bookcase with one lone chao plush Cream the rabbit had given him seated on top, a desk, a closet and a twin size bed.

That was when he heard Rouge's phone start chirping. Sonic had finally replied.

Sonic was enjoying a sleepy Sunday afternoon in his beachfront shack when Rouge had texted him. He was about to fall asleep, too.

Keep an eye on Eggman. What's new? It's not like Sonic had anything else to do today. He hopped out of his hammock and went over to a wooden dresser to find a pair of binoculars Tails had made him.

"No… no… no...", Sonic spoke to himself as he was digging through his junk. His binoculars were missing.

He groaned to himself and sped around the shack looking for the misplaced item. A blue blur whizzed through boxes and around furniture, the breeze caused by his super fast movements blowing loose magazines around.

"Well, looks like I have to go to Tails' to get a new pair."

In a flash Sonic zoomed out to the workshop Tails lived in. The little two-tailed fox was working on another invention and wearing protective gloves and goggles while soldering.

"Hey, bro!" Sonic cheerfully shouted.

Tails jumped and nearly dropped his tool, "Sonic!" he yelped.

"Oh, sorry! Didn't mean to scare you." Sonic lightly pat Tails on the back.

Tails clicked off his tool with his thumb and took off his goggles. "What's up, Sonic?"

"I got a text from Rouge earlier. She wants me to spy on Egg-face and I can't find my binoculars. Can I borrow a pair?" He smiled broadly.

"Okay but try not to lose them this time. They're expensive to make. Maybe I should go with
you…" Tails pulled off his protective gloves and put on his plain white ones.

"Maybe we should invite Knuckles and Amy, too. Make a day out of it." Sonic suggested.

"I guess that could be fun," Tails dropped his goggles on the table and walked over to a shelf where he had a spare pair of binoculars sitting out.

"Hey Knucks, Sticks or Amy, you there?" Sonic spoke into his little wrist communicator.

"Hi, Sonic!" Amy spoke cheerfully.

"Let's meet up at the beach by Eggstain's. I got a mission from Rouge."

"Rouge!" Sonic heard Knuckles' voice sound antsy.

"Yes, Rouge," Sonic said, "Bring a snack!"

The group sat on the beach enjoying the mild weather waiting for Eggman to come back. Tails was looking through his binoculars at the lair.

"I've never met this Rouge; is she trustworthy?" Sticks the badger was digging in the sand for shells she could weaponize.

"She's great," Sonic said, "But will steal your jewelry if you're not watching. She goes on missions with Shadow and a robot named Omega for G.U.N."

"She doesn't sound very smart. Who would willingly cavort with robots? Maybe she's a robot herself!" Sticks was not a badger that trusted anything mechanical.

"Omega is a nice robot, Sticks," Amy said as she turned a page of her sappy romance novel she was reading. She was sitting in a beach chair with her purse beside her. She carried Sonic's phone in it along with other junk of his since he wouldn't wear pants and therefore had no pockets.

"If we spot anything out here you may get to meet her and Omega. Even Shadow, maybe." Sonic shrugged. He and Knuckles were building something out of sand that sort of half-resembled a castle.

"Last time we saw Shadow he was mad and I think he tried to kill you," Sticks dug deeper into the sand, "I still trust him more than a robot."

"He didn't try to kill me," Sonic corrected her, "We have a rivalry."

"Uh huh," Amy said unimpressed. "Tails, do you see anything?"

"Nope," he adjusted his binoculars, "Maybe he stopped for junk food on the way back from wherever he was."

Knuckles walked out to the water and took up a huge armful of wet sand and dropped it directly onto Sonic's head.

"Whoops, sorry Sonic." He chuckled.

"Ugh! Knuckles, watch where you're going! I'm going to be digging sand out of my spines for a year…" He shook the sand off of him getting it all over Amy and Sticks.

The girls yelped with outrage at this treatment and threatened to throw Sonic into the water if he
wasn't more careful.

"Hey, guys... Eggman is back." Tails said. He watched the scientist land his carrier carefully outside his lair. Everyone moved to where Tails was sitting and looked out to the lair but without binoculars they couldn't see much. Knuckles falsely believed if he pantomimed holding a pair that it would help.

Eggman exited the carrier holding something in his arms.

"It looks like a white curtain or a rug?" Tails seemed unsure of what he could see. Sheptilah's hair was wrapped around her body like a mummy. Sonic took the binoculars from Tails and took a look for himself.

"More like he's carrying a person. Actually, it's a woman." Sonic was scandalized! Another human on the island? One overlander was way more than adequate. He took out his phone from Amy's purse and immediately began to text Rouge back.

"A woman in white? Like a bride?" Amy sounded interested and took the binoculars from Sonic. "Maybe she'll keep him busy for the rest of his life and he won't bother us anymore. Ooh he's doing the princess carry! Oh how romantic… wait… she's asleep. Or dead." Now Amy sounded concerned.

"We need to investigate! He may have kidnapped someone! Or worse… she willingly went with him!" Sticks stood up and held her boomerang in the air, "We can't allow Eggman to breed! Imagine: a disgusting dozen of bald babies with ugly mustaches! The horror….the horror…."}

[WhiteEcho] What's going on?

[BlueBlrr91] we're camped out watching eggdude's lair and

[BlueBlrr91] he got out of his carrier and hes got a girl with him

[WhiteEcho] a girl or a woman?

[BlueBlrr91] a woman. A human and she's asleep or unconscious

[WhiteEcho] is she hurt?

[BlueBlrr91] doesn't look like it

[WhiteEcho] thanks Sonic. Keep an eye on him let me know if he leaves.

[WhiteEcho] I'll see if I can do a flyby to the island tonight. Don't confront him unless

[WhiteEcho] you think something is wrong. Wait till I get there

[BlueBlrr91] sure

"What's she saying?" Amy peeked at Sonic's phone.

"She says not to engage unless we think something's wrong," Sonic handed his phone to Amy to hold, "And that she's gonna try to come out here tonight to investigate."

Sticks growled, "I don't like this. I hate waiting!"
"Rouge is coming by? Tonight? Oh no!" Knuckles jumped up, "I have to…" he paused, "get ready!" He ran off, kicking sand everywhere.

"Subtle," Amy remarked, "He's still got a crush on her."

Sonic chuckled, "Well she is a babe…" Amy shot him a look and Sonic shrugged.

"Wait, how long do we have to be out here?" Tails sounded frustrated. He wanted to get back to his workshop and finish what he was doing if he wasn't needed at the beach.

"We don't all have to be out here. Sonic and I can stay while you guys go back to what you were doing. We can meet up again if Eggman makes a move." Amy smiled at Sonic who only met her look with a raised eyebrow. He decided it wasn't worth the stress so he agreed.

Tails made Amy promise she wouldn't lose this pair of binoculars and left. Sticks took home her respectable collection of shells to make weapons and hair accessories out of.

It was a long while before anything else had happened at Eggman's lair. Amy and Sonic had built a small fire on the beach to keep warm with. The sun had set early since it was winter and the sparkling ocean was illuminated by a full moon. She and Sonic were laying back on the beach chair together watching Comedy Chimp episodes on his phone.

"What if Eggman did run off and get eloped? That's so weird." Amy wondered. She was resting her head on Sonic's shoulder in total bliss. Now she had marriage on the brain. She was only thirteen years old but she loved to imagine wearing a gorgeous, flowing white dress down the aisle when she becomes an adult.

Her hair done up with real roses and a veil of the most sparkling gossamer that floated on the air… Sonic in a tuxedo waiting for her at an altar with tears in his eyes…

"Amy, your sappy romance paperbacks are complete fiction. Nobody would marry Eggman. It's probably a robot," Sonic chuckled, "Though he did make a robot bride or two when I was a lot younger…"

"They didn't last long did they?"

"Nope!" Sonic grinned from ear to ear. Amy was so taken with Sonic's smile she was tempted to lean in and kiss him on those fawn-colored lips.

"Oop, I see movement." Sonic reached down and picked up the binoculars. Amy frowned- Yet another nice moment ruined by Eggman.

"The woman is okay and… all that white stuff? That's actually all her hair. Look," he handed Amy the binoculars. "Check it out." Amy took the pair and sat forward staring intently.

"She's running… running… stopped. Looks like she's holding a book? She went back to Eggman and they're talking. I can't tell what they're talking about, but their body language tells me they're both okay with being around each other."

Sonic was already texting Rouge again.

[BlueBlrr91] guess who! We're on the beach by eggman's

[WhiteEcho] Hi Sonic, good timing I was about to fly out.

[BlueBlrr91] Eggman is with a woman with way 2 much hair
"She's facing this way but I don't think she can see us. She looks...sad." Amy frowned, "She just went back inside with him." Sonic got up and was kicking sand on the fire to put it out.

"Rouge is on her way; she says to stay put."

"Why are you putting out the fire?" Amy asked as she put the binoculars in her purse.

"You said she was looking this way, right? I don't want us to get spotted."

"Good point but how will Rouge see us?"

"Um..." Sonic was stumped. "She'll text us!" Smooth.

Rouge packed a pink heart-shaped messenger bag with some tiny bombs, a loaded handgun, warp ring and her lipstick.

Normally she didn't go anywhere without Shadow but she needed some time to herself. It had been a long time since she was at the Seaside Island and she would enjoy a short tropical vacation.

Since she was doing this 'under the table' she felt it was best to be as discreet as possible. Her plan was to fly out a good distance then use the warp ring to get to the island. Leaving the G.U.N. fortress is not that hard if you aren't a prisoner. It is situated on a mountain that overlooks the sea. Rouge had taken the stairs up to the roof and was disappointed to see it was threatening to rain when she opened the door. The air felt electrified and thunder rumbled overhead.

"You'll get struck by lightning," she heard a voice from behind her. It was Shadow.
"Shadow! You scared me."

"What are you doing out here?" He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, blocking the stairwell.

"I should ask you that," Rouge put her hand on her hip, "Are you spying on me?"

"I want to go with you."

"We can't both go out without permission."

"We can if we're back before morning," Shadow smirked.

"Is this about that second set of footprints?"

"Something about it is bothering me and I can't put my finger on why that is."

"It's a woman overlander. Sonic said Eggman carried her into his base earlier and he saw her again just now. That's why I'm leaving. I'm going to investigate it."

"Why are you going alone?"
Rouge raised an eyebrow and then chuckled. Shadow was so naive.

"What's so funny?" He was annoyed.

"Because if Eggman isn't doing anything wrong we don't need to start a scandal. The blood was his. There was no struggle. No reason to give us more paperwork than necessary."

"I'm still going."

"Fine," Rouge sighed, "Are you going to teleport us or are you going to use my warp ring?"

"I'll teleport us." He stepped forward and took Rouge by the upper arm.

"We're going to Seaside Island. Specifically, the beach across from Eggman's lair."

Shadow nodded and in a flash they found themselves standing in front of a startled Sonic and Amy.
Beautiful Creatures

Shadow and Rouge teleported several feet above the beach so they wouldn't accidentally appear on or in anything. They landed softly behind Amy and Sonic who was still kicking sand on the freshly extinguished bonfire.

"Yikes!" Amy cried when she felt the puff of air from the teleport push her forward. Sonic nearly jumped out of his skin when Shadow tapped him on the shoulder.

"Being defenseless will get you killed, Faker." He smirked baring uncomfortably sharp-looking canines.

Sonic's spines were puffed out defensively and spun around to look Shadow in the eye. He grinned trying to cover the fact that he nearly gave up the ghost.

"Hi, Sonic." Rouge giggled, "Hi, Amy."

"I thought you said Shadow wasn't coming …" Sonic spoke through his clenched teeth.

"I invited myself." He stepped around Sonic to greet Amy.

"Don't startle me like that," Amy sighed, "You almost got a hammer to the face." She hugged Rouge tightly. It had been a very long time since they last saw each other.

"I tried to sneak out without getting his attention but he busted me anyway. Sorry, Sonic." Rouge shrugged and hugged Amy back. Sonic was brushing down his spines with his hands.

The quartet moved to the cover of the bushes and discussed what they saw. Shadow explained the footprints and the weird energy spike G.U.N. was tracking. Rouge showed them the pictures she took at the site. Sonic scrolled through them and wondered what kind of weapon would make that weird shape in the disturbed earth. It was nearly a perfect circle, so it could be an exceptionally massive Egg carrier or maybe the base of a new missile he was testing out in the desert.

"If he was testing a big weapon out there and got hurt… where is the weapon now? And what's that
lady got to do with it?" Sonic handed the phone back to Rouge.

"It was hardly much blood, so maybe it was a simple paper cut or something," Rouge put her phone in her purse, "unless it happened off-site. But you said that he didn't appear injured."

"From what we saw she was wearing just a tube top and a ripped sarong. Maybe he found her out there in the desert." Amy shrugged, "A lost tribe, maybe?"

Shadow ignored the conversation going on next to him and stared off at the silvery tower in the distance. It was a clear night and the moon's fullness made it easy for him to see far away. His eyes focused on the entrance to the lair and he let out a low growl when he saw the doors open.

"Shadow?" Rouge whispered. Shadow didn't respond.

"Shads," Sonic said, "Why are you growling?"

Still no response.

Amy summoned her hammer just in case she had to clobber the dark hedgehog.

"Shadow," Rouge snapped her fingers next to his ear, "focus."

"Hm?" Shadow turned to Rouge and saw the nervous faces of the other two hedgehogs, "sorry, lost in thought. Someone just left the lair."

It was at that moment that Sheptilah teleported over the water and let out a scream.

They heard the resulting splash and turned to the water to see a soaked overlander get pushed over by a wave and roll onto the beach.
"Graceful," Rouge whispered.

All four kept their eyes locked squarely on her while she walked to a nearby tree and tried to wring out her hair. She walked right by the four and didn't notice them. The Mobians looked at each other and then back at Sheptilah.

Amy gripped the handle of her hammer hard when she saw the overlander use magic to dry herself off but loosened her grip when the human began to sob.

"Amy… Amy don't…" Sonic whispered as the pink hedgehog rose from her crouching position and walked toward the woman. It wasn't in her nature to not comfort someone who was upset. Shadow pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Are you… are you okay?" Amy slowly approached the human, still carrying her hammer. “Miss?”

The woman looked over Amy with surprise and stood up. Rouge flew over to Amy as backup in case the overlander attacked.

Sheptilah took a step back when Rouge made herself known.

"Did my crying disturb you?" Sheptilah finally spoke. "I apologize. I am alright." She knelt down on one knee to be at eye-level with the much shorter Mobians. The sparkling gem on her chest caught Rouge's attention.

The other two hedgehogs emerged from the bushes and calmly walked over to their friends by the kneeling overlander.

"My name is Sheptilah." She smiled sweetly. She had never seen so many creatures this brightly colored before.

"I'm Amy Rose, this is Rouge, Sonic and Shadow." She offered her hand.

"Strange to see clever folk of your species and colors. We had bats where I am from, but not your kind. What are you?" She took Amy's hand and gently shook it. There was something warm and
familiar about the lot of them but Sheptilah couldn't place why.

"We're hedgehogs," Sonic said, offering his hand. Sheptilah shook his as well. They all felt more at ease now that they've had their introductions.

"What's clever folk?" Rouge declined to offer her gloved hand but instead smiled.

"You; you're clever folk. Sapient non-humans."

"We call ourselves Mobians," Shadow corrected her.

"Mobians, then. I am a Nannaic witch." She bowed slightly out of respect. She sensed unusual power from all four of them and did not want to bring their wrath. Rouge rested her hand on her purse that held her weapons.

"Why were you crying?" Amy asked sincerely.

"Death in the family. I apologize again for disturbing you. I thought I was alone."

"You're related to Dr. Eggman?" Rouge asked.

"Oh, no. He is a…" Sheptilah paused to find the word, "A friend? A friend."

Shadow and Rouge looked at each other and then back at Sheptilah. Sonic stifled a laugh. Eggman? Having friends?

"Why were you in the desert?" Rouge asked her, "We were out there earlier and saw Eggman leave."

"Don't worry about it." Sheptilah waved her hand not clutching the book.
"Answer the question," Shadow demanded. "Why were you in the desert?"

Amy crossed her arms and frowned at Shadow's rudeness. Sheptilah brushed her hair behind her ear and smiled. "Don't worry about it. You kids are kind of nosy." She repeated.

"You shouldn't trust Dr. Eggman, Sheptilah," Sonic said taking a step toward her, "He's a bad guy."

"Maybe," the overlander said, "But I owe him for rescuing me." She realized she said too much and face-palmed.

"Rescued you from what, exactly?" Rouge stretched her wings a little. She could sense Sheptilah was about to make a break for it.

"I don't want to talk about it right now," Sheptilah was getting overwhelmed. Fight or flight, she had to choose one. Why was she being interrogated at every turn?

"Guys, maybe if we tried not ganging up on her she'd answer our questions." Amy was using her 'therapist' voice.

Sheptilah turned and broke into a sprint but was immediately stopped by Sonic who didn't even break a sweat. He moved so fast that he was almost an invisible blur kicking up sand. She tried turning directions and was met by Sonic's smirking face at every one.

"You're not going to outrun him, honey." Rouge called.

"So I'm trapped," Sheptilah gave in. If she had her familiar or even half of her powers restored she'd be able to blow all of them to the other side of the planet without even lifting more than a finger. She brushed the salt that was still on her skin and hair away.

"I'm afraid we can't let you just walk away unless we know you're alright and not evil or anything like that. Dr. Eggman has done a lot of bad things to us. Do you understand?" Sonic tried to explain the situation.
"What has he done to you?"

"Well... he roboticized many of my friends, destroys our town, tries to take over the world every other day..." Sonic trailed on and on.

"Tried to blow up the planet several times," Shadow added.

"Eggman cuts in line at the food court all the time." Amy was still scrolling through her phone.

"He cheats at sports, too, since we're being petty." Rouge nodded.

Sheptilah thought about this. How could such a nasty person be the one destined to set her free? Was her understanding of the spell that put her in the crystal flawed? Why would a human hurt the clever folk and why would someone so obviously talented fail so often? She did not know what 'roboticized' meant but she guessed that it was to turn living creatures into soulless metal golems. She was angry at the thought of someone abusing living things. She came from a culture where even the royalty were servants to those that needed their aid.

"I was trapped in a crystal in the desert for a very, very long time. So long that the stars have shifted in the sky. I belonged to a dying race of witch people known as the Nannae who protected the planet you now call Mobius. We called it Zanu back then. My people put me there and I was found today by Dr. Eggman. He let me out."

"A giant crystal, huh?" Rouge walked up to her. "Were you a prisoner or something? And is the crystal still there?"

"No. I wasn't a prisoner and the crystal is gone. I was put there to defend the planet whenever I woke up at a later time. I was their queen. I was supposed to be awoken by someone who would help me defend Za-, I mean, Mobius."

Amy pulled her phone from her purse and was looking up the Nannae people. She got no results at first because she searched it phonetically. She tried several other search terms and eventually got something. She put her hammer face-down in the sand and leaned on the handle while she read the articles.

"Defend it from what?" Shadow looked the overlander in the eye. Crimson met violet directly for
the first time and she swore his stare almost burned.

"The… the witch-eaters. A race of semi-sentient beings that wanted our Oracle Stones." She
gestured to the charm on her chest, "This. The source of our powers."

"How do we know you aren't lying to us, though? I would say I was a queen, too, if I fell out of a
crystal." Rouge reached into her purse and took out her phone to snap a photo of Sheptilah
candidly. She made sure the flash wasn't on when she took the picture.

"You don't have to believe me." Sheptilah shrugged, "but I don't know how to prove to you what
you want to know."

"This article I found says that the Nannae were a diverse race of humans that disappeared over
five-thousand years ago and not much is known about them except they built a massive oasis in the
desert and were likely extremely hospitable." Amy was reading from her phone.

"Another one says some ancient paintings suggest they often had Mobian familiars to aid in their
magic."

"A familiar?" Rouge asked, "Like a pet?"

"Oh, no way," Sheptilah shook her head, "Familiars are our equals. Predestined creatures that pool
their powers and abilities and their friendship allows them to do great things. Most of them also
had Oracle Stones of their own. There are some spells and actions that can't be done without a
familiar.

"Please… please let me leave now. I will make a deal with you if you let me leave." Sheptilah
yawned, "I need to charge."

"What kind of deal?" Shadow eyed her suspiciously.

The overlander suddenly bit into her hand between the thumb and index finger drawing blood.
Amy looked away with disgust and Sonic's jaw hung open with surprise and horror. Shadow
remained unphased by this sudden behavior from the human. Rouge cringed at the sight and felt
bile rise in her throat.
Sheptilah bent down and picked up a handful of sand and squeezed her bloody palm. She used a portion of her remaining energy to create three orbs from the mixture. Each was a tiny glass marble with a red swirl in the center. The wound she created in her hand healed itself instantly.

"This is a witch orb. You can summon me from anywhere with this if you squeeze it and say my name three times. I'm sorry, I only had enough power to make three and there are four of you…" She tossed one at Sonic. "Try it. Run to somewhere I cannot see you and then summon me. I will appear."

He caught the marble and looked at it. It appeared like the typical child's toy. He nodded and sped off to the other end of the beach. Sonic squeezed the marble and spoke her name three times. In a moment Sheptilah appeared next to him.

"Cool!" He ran back to where the others were and summoned her again. "It's auto-magic!"

"Anytime, anywhere, this will work." She tossed one to Shadow who caught it immediately. Sheptilah handed the last one to Amy. "I will keep an eye on Dr. Eggman for you. If he gets up to any trouble I will stop him."

"Aw, I don't get one?" Rouge pouted.

"I'm sorry. I will give you something else when I am not drained. I promise, Miss Rouge."

Shadow looked over the strange object. Clearly this overlander meant no harm and was simply a fish out of temporal water. He did not fully trust her but was more at ease knowing re-capture was simple.

Sheptilah was starting to feel greatly fatigued now. She hadn't eaten and certainly did not get any restful sleep in the time she was suspended in the reliquary.

"I'll hold you to it." The white bat smiled.

"Please don't let anyone know I'm here. I need to rest for a few nights. After that I will gladly serve you with my magic." Sheptilah bowed to them. She tried to teleport back to the lair but she did not
have enough energy to do so. The woman seemed to vanish for a moment but then come back into focus.

She tried again with the same results.

"I promise you kids I am much more impressive when I'm not so groggy."

"Are you trying to get back to the lair?" Rouge asked.

"Yes."

"I gotcha." She grabbed Sheptilah by the waist and flew off with her over the water.

The human clung to the bat tightly from surprise.

"You're a bit heavier than you look, overlander," Rouge glided over the sea effortlessly and gently landed at the entrance to the lair, "maybe consider a haircut."

"Your grumpy friend Shadow is a lot less agreeable than you are. Thank you, miss Rouge."

"I wanted to isolate you for a moment, actually."

"Oh?"

Shadow teleported himself next to Rouge. The human was startled by the sudden movement but then let out a chuckle.

"Mobians will never cease to amaze me."

"Shadow and I work for G.U.N., which is a worldwide police force that protects the planet from things like Eggman and aliens. You're going to be a person of interest. If G.U.N. forces come
looking for you... don't attack them. We're on your side."

"Do they know about me?" Sheptilah sounded worried.

"No, not yet. We had to investigate the weird energy spike this morning in the desert. As far as they know Eggman was the cause of it."

Shadow pointed at the overlander, "If you make one false move we will immediately take you into custody."

"Why aren't you taking me in now?" She worried that maybe her magic was subconsciously brainwashing the clever folk into leaving her be.

"I think you could be of more use to us right now if we don't bring attention to you. G.U.N. will eventually have to know about your existence; especially because of your mention of witch-eating beings." Shadow crossed his arms.

"They are dangerous," Sheptilah nodded. "They're a scourge. We couldn't kill them so we trapped them in the moon before I was crystallized. Something must have happened because I shouldn't be awake unless they've gotten out."

"The moon?" Rouge looked at Shadow worryingly.

"Yes, the center of it. Did something happen?"

"A few years ago the moon was halved by a weapon wielded by your 'savior' Dr. Eggman." Shadow said.

For a moment Sheptilah forgot how to breathe. She swallowed hard and tried to calm her trembling body.

"Take me to G.U.N."
"Stay put, overlander." Shadow took Rouge by the hand and teleported to G.U.N.'s main gate. He then cast the spell to summon Sheptilah. When the human arrived there was a slight delay and she landed hard on the soaked asphalt. The rain was pouring heavily and lightning flashed overhead.

"I just got dry," Sheptilah lamented. Rouge helped her stand up.

"Director? We've just brought in a person of interest," Rouge spoke into her wrist communicator, "She's a friendly, so no need for armed support."

"It's... two in the morning," a groggy male voice spoke. "Alright. Meet me in my office."

The giant metal doors slid open and the two Mobians escorted Sheptilah inside. The guards stationed on both sides of the hall took their hands off their weapons when they saw the overlander was not cuffed.

"Oh great… more metal. I can feel it." Sheptilah's eyes darted in every possible direction. She went from a sleek, brightly lit metal tower to a more rugged, darker one. She almost preferred Eggman's lair simply because she missed that amazing sofa she woke up on. Sheptilah's eyes met that of Mobians and humans as well as robots but she could not read their emotions.

Shadow and Rouge escorted her to the director's office. He was an unassuming looking elderly man in a bathrobe and pajamas with a fair complexion washed out under the harsh fluorescent lights. His graying hair matched the gray of his eyes. The lines in his face were deep and broad like canyons carved out by rivers.

His office was large but empty. There were no windows, much like the rest of the building, and few pieces of furniture. A desk, chair and laptop were all that was in it.

"This is Sheptilah," Rouge gestured to the woman, "Self-proclaimed queen of the Nannae."

"I see you brought a very under-dressed self-proclaimed queen into my office," He said while handing her his bathrobe for modesty. "My name is Boris Cabbot, I'm the director for Team Dark." He had a voice like honeyed gravel.
Sheptilah accepted the robe and wrapped it around herself like a cloak, "I apologize for not keeping up with the fashions. I've been asleep for five thousand years." Sheptilah covered her mouth with her hand and yawned.

"Ah, she's funny." Cabbot smiled, "So what's all this, then?"

Shadow explained as briefly as possible what was going on. Cabbot understood the situation but ordered them to put Sheptilah in a cell for holding while verification was done. She did not protest. Shadow and Rouge escorted the witch to the prison hold deep under the fortress. It was a long elevator ride down and it was becoming evident that Sheptilah was claustrophobic. Her breathing quickened throughout the descent; almost to the point of hyperventilation.

"If you keep breathing like that you are going to pass out." Shadow warned her.

"How far down do we have to go?" Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. She was wringing her hair in her hands nervously.

"Not much longer, Tilly." Rouge smiled at her, "I don't like being underground, either. The pressure change makes my ears pop." She was texting instructions to Shadow and Amy on her phone and apologies to Knuckles for not seeing him while she was there. She wanted the two hedgehogs to stand down but keep an eye on Eggman as usual.

Sheptilah thought the nickname the bat had just bestowed on her was adorable. With a chime they finally reached their destination and stepped off the elevator into yet another dismal hallway.

Beyond extremely thick steel doors was the prison section. It was well lit and wide open. Sheptilah had to shield her eyes from the painful brightness. Dozens of spaced-out glass cubes with air holes drilled into them at the top were aligned in a grid. Each one was supposed to be a tiny room to house a prisoner but G.U.N. currently had nobody detained, so Sheptilah was alone aside from the robot guards standing at the entrance.

Their footsteps echoed, or rather, Shadow's metallic footsteps echoed in the cavernous space.

Each block had a number painted on the floor. They relegated Sheptilah to the fifth cube as it had a bed in it. Rouge held her communicator up to the cube and it registered her identification and the door slid open.
"Someone will be by in the morning to collect you," Shadow said as the door shut with a hiss.

"I have a lot to talk about when that time comes." Sheptilah laid back on the bed. She tucked her book under her hair and fell into a dreamless sleep almost instantly.

"Hey, boss?" Cubot poked Ivo in his side, "It's morning." He was still slumped over his console in a deep sleep. He woke up with a snort and looked around. Had he fallen asleep while at work? And what of the woman? Ivo questioned for a moment if he dreamed her up.

He looked around for the elusive silvery lady but found no sign of her except for the bronze circlet in his hand. Cubot was still poking the rotund man in the side when Orbot came in arms flailing and yelling.

"That lady is gone!" He shouted, "I checked surveillance and she left last night, came back and then left again with Shadow and Rouge."

"Oh, great." Eggman looked around for his sunglasses which had fallen onto the floor, "bring me something to eat and a lot of coffee. I need that woman back as soon as possible. I need to weaponize her before G.U.N. does." He reached for his glasses and felt his back pop as he did so. He groaned and brought up a search on his computer. Orbot and Cubot floated off to get the doctor what he asked for.

"Did you morons ever do that search I asked you to do?" He called to them.

"We forgot!" He heard Cubot call back. He sighed and began the search himself and came across some extremely short articles on the internet about them.

Abridged Encyclopedia of Mobian Indigenous Peoples
Nannae, The: [Nuh-Nay]

Not much is known about these people except that they had disappeared suddenly five thousand years ago. Second-hand accounts, including the name of the people, from ancient texts of other cultures depict them as a servantile group of both humans and furries that used their magic granted to them by their so-called Oracle Stones embedded in their chests.

Some folklore depicts them as having been nomadic at first but finally settling in the desert to build an artificial oasis. The validity of these secondhand accounts are heavily disputed.

Some clay tablets recovered with proto-cuneiform writing at Nannae ziggurat oasis ruins in the Dust Hill desert have yet to be fully deciphered.

Dr. Eggman needed to get her back right away. As far as he was concerned it is the rule of 'finders vs keepers'. Orbot and Cubot brought him his breakfast and he wolfed down his food so he could get back to work. If he wasn't contacted soon he would have to go and retrieve his lost property himself and that gauntlet still needed fixing.

"Good morning, miss." A buff red-furred fox in uniform tapped his knuckle on the glass to wake up Sheptilah, "The president wants to see you." He was holding some sneakers, sweatpants and a sweatshirt with the unit's logo for Sheptilah to put on.

She sat up and looked around with blurred, sleepy eyes. She stretched her back and smoothed down her messy hair.

"The president of what?" She yawned as the room came into focus.

"The president of G.U.N. His name is Abraham Tower." The fox answered. He opened the door for her so she could get the clothes to change into.
The fox was about to turn around so she would have privacy but instead of putting the clothes on traditionally she opted to 'poof' them on herself instantly. The rags and bathrobe she was wearing previously had vanished into nothingness. It felt good to have some of her magic back.

This startled the fox at first but then he shook his head in disbelief and escorted her to the president's chambers at the top floor.

It was much like Cabbot's office but larger and with a wide window that overlooked the choppy, storm-torn sea. Shadow and Rouge were looking out the window and talking quietly to themselves while Abraham was tapping away at his laptop on the computer. Both Shadow's and Rouge's sensitive ears swivelled toward the door when they heard footsteps approach.

"Sir?" The fox knocked on the president's door.

"Come in," he said.

The fox entered with the woman who looked much perkier now that she had some sleep. Abraham stood and greeted Sheptilah by firmly shaking her hand. He looked her in the eyes and she in his. The fox had left to stand outside the president's door.

"Your eyes… they're like the earth and the ocean… they're gorgeous." She had never seen someone with eyes of different colors before.

"Yes, I was born with these. It's called 'heterochromia'." He was unimpressed by the flattery.

"What can I do for you, president Tower?" She let go of his hand and crossed her arms. Sheptilah could tell immediately the man was cold and standoffish.

"I'm told that you are an ancient queen and a powerful witch." Abraham went back to his desk and sat in his chair, "And that Eggman has once again started something that spells doom for our planet."

"I was powerful, but not anymore." Sheptilah shrugged. Rouge and Shadow sat down in the two chairs across from Abraham and Tilly took the cue to sit in between them, but since there weren't enough chairs she sat on the 'air' with magic instead and laid her book in her lap.
"Are you talking about the witch eaters?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," Abraham said shortly.

Tilly raised her hand and slowly waved her hand in a circle, forming what looked like smoke. It took the shape of a creature in white that constantly shifted forms but overall maintained a viscous consistency. The figure was pulsing and oozing in the palm of Sheptilah's' hand and even took 'bites' out of her fingers.

"Shape shifting creatures driven purely by instinct. They ate our Oracle Stones and slowly wiped out my race. They would eat anything living, but seemed to really be after our stones. A legend was passed down through generations that it was their jealousy of our powers that drove them to kill us but this is untrue. They are merely animals that did as nature intended them to."

"There have been no reports or sightings of such creatures," Abraham frowned.

"The creatures may be weak, but they will regroup. They will multiply and they will make themselves known." The witch almost sounded like she was in a dreamy, subdued state.

They watched Sheptilah bend and move the figure she created with magic across the desk. The witch eater chased figures of humans and Mobians, some with white spots on their chest representing Oracle Stones and was shown devouring them whole.

"I had a familiar…" Sheptilah stared intently at the figures she was manipulating. She wiggled her fingers to have the form show a silhouette of herself and her familiar, both with Oracle Stones, which was a female armadillo. "Her name was Hebat and she was murdered during the final battle." Tears welled up in Tilly's eyes as the figure was bloodlessly torn limb from limb, "They stole my soul from me when they killed her. It's why I'm so weak."

"What's a familiar, exactly?" Shadow asked. "You mentioned the concept last night."

"A familiar is a person, place or thing that the witch in question is destined to spend their life with. They are like two individuals that share one soul. It's rare to have a nonliving familiar but it has happened. My great grandmother's familiar was the ziggurat we lived on itself. She was never able to leave it."
The figures began to take the shape of a human man with a hedgehog standing hand-in-hand and using magic.

"We pooled our powers and did great things. If all my people came together as one we could move stars if we wanted to."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and the figures faded.

"Tell me more about this final battle." Abraham was listening intently.

Sheptilah took in a shaky breath and made the figures appear again. This time they were entire armies of humans and furries fighting the creatures that congealed into one giant beast. One by one the witches fell except for Sheptilah and another figure with a cat furry.

"My older mother, her familiar and I managed to seal the remaining creatures in the moon since we were unable to kill them. Our magic was at a disadvantage with them; we still don't know why. We just assumed that nothing would ever happen to the moon to let them out.

Countless Nannae gave their lives to seal the creatures in the core of the satellite and only a few of us were left so they put me in a crystal in the desert in case something happened to the moon. Just as a precaution. I expected to be in that suspended state for all time."

Rouge and Shadow felt guilt wash over them. They had indirectly helped cause this by giving Eggman the Chaos Emeralds years prior. This was their fault. Rouge looked like she was about to say this but Shadow shot her a look.

"But I did not know I was going to be put in the crystal. When the survivors were sure there were no creatures left on the planet they sacrificed all of their power to seal me up. The spell was also a prophecy. 'Whomsoever should release the crystal witch will be her guardian and bound to her in the new world. They will help her destroy the creatures or die trying.'"

"Dr. Eggman had blown up the moon as an act of terrorism with a giant weapon." Rouge gently rubbed Tilly's shoulder, "How could he be the one meant to guard you?"
"I don't know why the Universe does what it does, miss Rouge... but why does the moon look whole?" She looked at the bat with sad eyes.

"Because he 'repaired' it with metal and most of the damage was to the side that doesn't face us." Shadow spoke through gritted teeth.

"Oh," Tilly sounded emotionless. After a moment of silence Abraham cleared his throat.

"Sheptilah... as tragic as this is we must inform you that you need to have some medical work done seeing as how you have been asleep for thousands of years. Today you will be seen by some doctors who will inspect you and give you vaccines. After that, we will discuss your options."

She furrowed her eyebrows, "Inspect me? Discuss my options? You cannot keep me here." She raised her voice defensively.

"We can and we will." Abraham asserted. He was unafraid. Shadow stood and faced Sheptilah ready to fight her if he had to.

Sheptilah stood and leaned over the desk and stared the man in the eye, "I am not a prisoner," she hissed, "I must prepare to fight again. It takes time and I must find a familiar, if I even have one."

"It's my duty to protect this planet and the people on it. I have to take every precaution." Tower persisted.

"I protected this planet long before your family tree was sowed!" Her anger made the desk slightly rattle. She inhaled deeply to calm herself.

"Tilly, don't get angry. It's okay." Rouge frowned at her.

"You can't escape for long anyway," Shadow held up the witch orb, "I have this, remember?"

Sheptilah glared at the hedgehog with burning violet eyes and snapped her fingers. The orb vanished from Shadow's grip and appeared between her index finger and her thumb.
"You were saying?" She smirked at the now growling hedgehog and handed the orb to Rouge for safekeeping.

"Understand this, president Tower: I am only staying for your 'inspection' out of the goodness of my heart. The moment I have had enough I will be returning to the island your two operatives pulled me from last night. I have unfinished business to attend to."

Abraham understood this woman was going to be difficult. He called for the fox to come back in and escort the three of them out to the medical wing of the fortress and two additional robotic armed guards to be with Sheptilah at all times.

Shadow and Rouge had been told to supervise the witch as they had a rapport together. Sheptilah was given a rather thorough inspection by the doctors.

X-rays proved the Oracle Stone was indeed part of her body and not ornamental. Blood tests were inconclusive and something seemed to gum up the machines but it was determined that her blood type is O-. She was administered a broad spectrum vaccine to prepare her for the new diseases of the century.

The site of the shot and blood tests on her arm was red and rashy from the contact with the steel of the needles. Even the most sterile and refined surgical instruments still contained too much iron for her to withstand without slight reaction.

Sheptilah kept up a humorous conversation with the various doctors. She was not a shy woman so she did not fight back against them when they poked and prodded her and asked her ridiculous questions about her family history. They determined she was indeed in her early thirties by her dental records and fully-fused skull. She thought the x-rays were truly a novelty. Being able to see inside someone without cutting them open was on par with magic in her opinion.

The whole time Shadow was sizing up the witch he came to understand she always started her conversations with compliments that may or may not have been sincere to lower the guard of whomever she was meeting. She often made jokes to be friendly and get people to trust her. She was manipulative and he was surprised at Rouge trusting her so quickly.

Then it came time for the final humiliation: the gynecological exam.
Shadow had stepped out of the room out of modesty but lingered by the door, not looking in.

"You've never had children?" An elderly dark-skinned woman was doing the exam and asked Sheptilah casually. Tilly was starting to miss the weird clothing they gave her earlier as she was now in a paper gown.

"No." She answered curtly.

"I didn't think so. Have you thought about having children?" She smiled sweetly at her patient. She frowned when she couldn’t find the uterus and mentally kicked herself for putting her foot in her mouth.

"Also no," Sheptilah shook her head, "I'm concerned with more pressing matters."

The doctor waved her off with a smile, "I had birth control options, that's all."

"I actually regulate that myself. I control whether or not I can get pregnant. It's one of the few blessings of being a Nannae."

Shadow groaned from outside the door. He did not want to be hearing this.

"Don't be so prudish out there, Shadow; you know where babies come from." Rouge teased him.

"Ugh," was his only response, but he was secretly glad he didn't have to go through such nonsense with doctors. Being the 'ultimate life form' and all meant he never got sick.

_Why can’t everyone be reptiles and lay eggs? _He thought to himself, _or at least monotremes._

The doctor directed Tilly to sit up as she was done with the exam. The witch poofed her sweats back on and stood up. She thanked the doctor and was escorted again by Rouge and Shadow to Abraham's office.

Sheptilah assured Tower that she told him all she knew but would need to gather supplies to build
up an apothecary and find her family's royal grimoire. In it would be the instructions to recreate the weapon.

"Would the Chaos Emeralds help?" He asked her.

"I do not know what that is…" She raised an eyebrow. Such a concept never reached her people.

"Magical gemstones, seven of them, that contain infinite power when put together." Shadow nodded, "the Master Emerald controls the other seven."

"I don't remember the exact recipe for making the staff but it certainly didn't call for any strange minerals other than a specific kind of pearl." Sheptilah shrugged, "The grimoire has the whole list."

"Where is the book?" Tower was typing away on his laptop looking for any information on the ancient grimoire.

"The ziggurat, most likely," she paused, "Honestly I'd like to go back to the island now. I have things I need to do first. Just summon me if you need me. At the moment I have to go convince my 'guardian' to behave long enough to help me. After this is all over you can do what you want with him. I'm told he's a real asshole."

Abraham mulled over the options. He determined that Sheptilah was not G.U.N. material but would still need her to fight off the new threat.

"We can always bring her back here if need be," Rouge reminded Abraham.

"Fine," he gave in, "Gather the things you need. We will be watching you, Sheptilah."
The Game Has Changed

Sheptilah was escorted from the building by armed guards so she could tear away to Seaside Island. After concentrating on the hulking steel door to the lair she appeared and landed softly on the ground.

It was warm and bright on the island which was a welcome change from the dark and damp mountain fortress. The sun was starting to set on the horizon making the sky a rainbow of colors. She knocked on the metal door as politely as possible.

The computer console in Eggman's office lit up and showed the woman standing outside on the surveillance cameras.

"Oh!" He hopped up immediately and ran to the door to let her in after confirming she was alone. "Sheptilah!" He smiled broadly at her. Orbot and Cubot were behind him waving.

She maintained a neutral expression and went inside. She was angry with what he did but opted to show mercy since nobody could have known that blowing up the moon would result in a deadly species coming back to Mobius.

"Why were you at G.U.N.?" He asked as he followed behind her. She was making a beeline for that heavenly sofa. She flopped down on it and stretched out, sighing contentedly.

Ivo sat next to her on the far end. Orbot and Cubot came into the room to observe.

"I was a person of interest," she sat up, "A cute bat and a grumpy hedgehog had me go with them. The doctors there gave me something called a 'vaccine'."

"I know Rouge and Shadow. Wait… you didn't join G.U.N., did you?"

"No. They didn't even ask."

Ivo breathed a sigh of relief. Sheptilah sat with her legs crossed and turned to face him.
"Hey, boss," Orbot waved to get his attention, "It's dinner time. We only set one place, though."

"Well go and set another you idiot!" Eggman shook his fist at the little red robot. Orbot rolled his eyes and went to the dining room to set out a second plate.

"Why are you so mean to your creations?" Sheptilah squinted at him. She had no idea what the robot was saying but still thought Eggman's reaction was unwarranted.

"Because they should know better but continue to disappoint me." He stood, "It's time to eat. Follow me."

He led her to a dining room with a massive table that ran the entire length of the room with chairs on both sides. Two plates with a salad on both sat across from each other were meant for Sheptilah and Eggman. He directed her to sit and invited her to begin eating. She gratefully ate everything as she had not actually been given food at G.U.N. Sheptilah was delighted to see that forks were still en vogue in the far future.

"How did you know I do not eat meat?" She swallowed, "I love that tomatoes are still the same flavor."

"The salad is the appetizer." Honestly he wished his robots would stop trying to get him to eat healthier.

"What's an appetizer?" It was kind of cute how she spoke while chewing.

"The food before you eat the real meal." He was picking at his plate, mostly moving the bits of greenery around with his fork.

"So, Dr. Eggman," she ate the last leaf off of her plate, "I'm told you're an evil dictator who murders Mobians for fun by turning them into robots and you blew up the moon."

He nearly choked on what little food he had in his mouth. That came out of nowhere. He coughed a bit before swallowing and clearing his throat.
"Who told you that?" His face was red from the choking.

"The Mobians." She rested her elbows on the table and her chin on her knuckles.

"That was years ago," he tried to cover for himself, "I de-roboticized them. They're organic again. They were never killed."

"Why did you destroy our moon?"

"It's complicated, Sheptilah."

"I want you to know what you released when you destroyed it." She showed him the same thing she showed Team Dark and Abraham Tower. The same images of destruction and devastation.

"You did this, Ivo. You did this and you need to help me fix it."

He accidentally released a world-ending entity. Again.

"Why should I help? I don't owe anyone anything."

"I assume you don't want to die, that's why. You can't rule over a kingdom of corpses."

"And why would I die? I have plenty of ways to defend myself. I have bunkers on other planets, Sheptilah. I am an extremely wealthy and intelligent man."

"You could be a hero." She cupped her hands and showed a magically projected image of Eggman beloved by all, surrounded by confetti.

"So what? I don't want to be a hero. I want to be king of the universe."
"My people were like gods when we worked together. We could move stars. We could raise entire continents out of the sea. The creatures killed almost all of us and it only took a few generations to do it." The image of Ivo disappeared and was replaced with corpses being fed on by the creatures all strewn about, some even laid off the edge of her fingers swaying in a nonexistent breeze.

Eggman's stomach churned at the images appearing in her hands. He definitely wasn't going to eat dinner.

"Clearly we are all going to die and I am wasting time by arguing with you when I could be hightailing it out of here." He had a point.

"You have great resources and I will need every possible one I can get my hands on. Please. You will have nothing to rule if you do not assist."

Still he refused.

"I was hoping you would willingly want to help. You won't be able to leave. You're bound to me." The magical images disappeared and she laid her palms on the table.

"Bound to you?"

"Yes, you woke me up, so you're magically bound to me. It started the second you touched the reliquary. You're my guardian in this future and I don't like it, either."

She explained as succinctly as possible what it meant. They were stuck with each other because of the nature of the spell: her people wanted to guarantee their queen would be protected if she was awoken and that meant that if they were too far apart for too long it would make him sick and possibly kill him.

"Didn't you feel that something was missing the whole time I was gone?"

"How do I break this bond?" He avoided the question. It's true that in her absence he felt lonely again but told himself he was mostly worried that he would have to deal with G.U.N.'s forces.
"I don't know. That would be in the family grimoire. If you want me to sever the bond I will need to get that book. It's also how I will create the weapon my family passed down, but I will have to improve on the design because the first one obviously failed."

"And where is this book?"

"The ziggurat. It should be near where you found me. It's a giant structure in the desert. You honestly cannot miss the damned thing."

Orbot came into the room in a rush, "Sir!" He shouted, "There's a distress call coming from Thunderbolt the chinchilla. Her base is under attack!"

Eggman ran from the dining room with Sheptilah following behind him to his office and brought up the Eggnet webcams to look at the live surveillance from Thunderbolt's lair in Soumerca. His heart was thudding in his chest- nothing should be happening in Soumerca since the crisis involving Dark Gaia was resolved over a year prior. After the world was reformed he dissolved most of his Egg Bosses throughout Mobius only keeping Soumerca and the Deep Blue Realm as the most active and populated bases. The rest were merely fronts with less than a hundred workers in each.

He swapped between cameras showing empty rooms that were absolutely trashed. Deep claw marks in the thick steel walls sent a chill down his spine. Many of the images were unsteady and came in and out of focus. Others were pure static.

"Where is everyone?" He whispered as he tabbed through cameras and stopped when he saw the main foyer was filled with destroyed robots and a few bodies. Dark brown hand and paw prints were smudged across keyboards and computer screens.

"What is this?" Sheptilah was horrified, "Is this one of your buildings?"

"Incoming message..." The computer spoke as it brought up another live feed, this time from Thunderbolt's communicator. The image was dark and he could barely make out where it was coming from. He flipped through other cameras and saw something that seemed unable to contain it's shape was tearing apart robots.

It was white and pink and sliding around as if it was made of goo. With each bit of living material it consumed it grew slightly larger.
"Lord Eggman! Lord Eggman!" He heard Thunderbolt's voice gurgle like she had water in her lungs, "Something is here and…." her transmission was cutting out.

"Thunderbolt? Thunderbolt what's happening?" He was panicking, he would have to go rescue her himself since he had no other militants near the area capable of doing so.

"Some weird creature…" Thunderbolt coughed, "I'm hiding in a pipe, I think. I'm gravely wounded."

"That's one of the witch-eaters!" Sheptilah pointed to the screen, "Look at it! You have to take me there. I can save them from it! There's only one, I can do this."

"It sounds like she's got blood in her lungs, she's not gonna live much longer. I'm not going down there." Eggman shook his head. Thunderbolt heard what he said and wheezed.

"Lord Eggman, please… don't… let me die … Ivo…" Thunderbolt was begging him.

"We won't be able to get there in time," he told both women, "It's so far away and I don't have nearly enough robots to fight back."

"Call G.U.N.! Something!" Sheptilah took grabbed Eggman's wrist, "I can warp you there. Just show me a map of the area and I can get us there."

"But you couldn't possibly warp us there in a warship. The steel it's made out of would hinder you, right?"

The surveillance footage did not include sound but the images of humans and Mobians being devoured by the creature was enough to make even Orbot and Cubot sick.

Eggman paused for a moment and then nodded. He brought up his gauntlet to his mouth and hailed G.U.N.'s president to ask for assistance.
"I can't believe I missed out on seeing Rouge!" Knuckles was sobbing into his cheeseburger at Meh Burger's food court. Tails, Amy, Sonic and Sticks were with him. They all went out for dinner as a group often.

Amy lightly patted him on the shoulder, "She'll be back."

"I'm more concerned about that overlander, you say she's at G.U.N. now? I trust her even less!" Sticks slammed her fist on the table causing their drinks to almost tip over.

"The Guardian Unit of Nations are the good guys now, Sticks." Tails tried to explain it.

"No government agency is to be trusted!" Sticks was all fired up, "I especially do not trust those sneaks at the post office! There's brain-melting chemicals in the stamps they make you lick."

"There's more to the story though, isn't there?" Tails looked worried. He was ripping his napkin into tiny pieces.

"To the post office? Yes! Stay put I am gonna go get my evide-"

"No, Sticks," Tails cut her off, "More to the story with… what was her name, Sheptilah?"

Sonic was holding the witch orb in his hand and staring at it. No matter what direction he turned it the swirl in the center did not move or change angles.

"She said some race of creatures attacked and ate her kind and that she has to fight them off and that Dr. Eggman, of all people, rescued her." The blue hedgehog bit his lip in thought.

"Oh great, another threat." Tails sighed, "What did they look like? I can do a search to see if anything has happened."
"They're shape shifters." Amy watched Sonic play with the marble.

"Of course." Tails was already regretting having gotten out of bed today.

"So it could be anyone… even me!" Sticks looked around at everyone suspiciously, "If I start acting like a cannibal you have my permission to kill me."

"Yeah! You have my permission to kill Sticks!" Knuckles spoke up.

Tails opened his weather worn laptop and started doing searches for news of cannibalistic activity or shape shifter reports. He found a few articles but was disappointed to see most of them were from tabloid newspapers that made their money being clickbait.

Sonic's phone chimed. He got a text from Rouge explaining that Sheptilah was back at the lair and with Dr. Eggman.

"The witch is back," Sonic said.

"We should go and talk to her and Eggman then, shouldn't we?" Tails asked.

"I don't know if he's going to cooperate," Amy sighed, "but it's worth a shot, right?"

The group threw away their trash and made their way to Eggman's lair. Just as they landed on the volcanic outcrop they saw the Doctor holding a massive laser gun and the witch with her book in hand run out the entrance in a huff with Orbot and Cubot nowhere in sight.

Sheptilah began to open a small portal to transport her and Dr. Eggman to the Soumerca base. It appeared in front of them first as a pinpoint but gradually opened up to the size of a door.

"You kids again!" Sheptilah said out of breath, "You need to leave!"

"What's going on?!" Sonic demanded.
"Don't worry about it!" Eggman yelled, "Just stay out of it." The portal opened all the way revealing the base's entrance at the other side. Eggman was the first to jump through.

"Oh no, I'm going with you!" Sonic ran through before Sheptilah could even blink.

"Are you kids coming, too?" She looked exasperated.

"Yes!" they all shouted in unison.

"Then go on in, quickly! I can't keep the portal open for long."

They all ran in one by one except for Sticks who was pulled in by Amy. Sheptilah jumped through and closed the portal behind her.

Shadow was relaxing with Hope and Omega on a sofa in the communal area of the fortress where the agents could unwind and socialize. They were watching a documentary together about the history of robotics and enjoying each other's company.

Rouge herself was about to get into a nice bubble bath with a good book when the call came in.

"Team Dark to the armed hangar. I repeat, Team Dark to the armed hangar." That was Cabbot's voice over the intercoms.

The group made their way quickly to the hangar where G.U.N. kept their armed fleet. Cabbot was waiting there for them with a small plane ready to go.
"You're being deployed to Soumerca immediately. There has been activity there and Dr. Eggman and the witch woman has called for help." Boris spoke calmly.

"What's going on?" Shadow asked, he had Hope standing behind him. Cabbot handed Hope a headset and a laptop so she could listen in and monitor the trio while they were deployed. The ship's back opened to let Omega load in.

"One of those witch-eaters has appeared and is ransacking Eggman's Soumerca base. Sheptilah and Eggman are going to meet us there."

"Finally. I get to fight." Omega spoke in his tinny voice.

"I have no idea what's going on," Hope shook her head, "But you have my support."

"I'll explain everything after they take off." Cabbot nodded at the girl, "For now you should go to my office."

Rouge herself loaded into the cockpit of the ship and Shadow sat shotgun. He gave Hope a thumbs up.

"Hope, can you hear me?" Rouge spoke into her communicator on her wrist while she was powering up the plane. Cabbot and Hope left the hangar so the plane could take off.

"Loud and clear!" She responded, "All systems on the plane are appearing as OK to go."

"Let's go, then," Shadow spoke into his communicator, "We'll finish the movie when we get back, Hope."

"I can't believe you talked me into th- ack!" Eggman found himself squashed by Sonic, Knuckles and Amy who also fell out of the portal. Sticks landed on her feet and Tails flew above the pile of
"Why'd you kids have to come!?" Eggman shouted as he stood, "This is definitely no place for you!"

Sonic helped Amy up.

"What's going on?" Knuckles asked.

"Stay out here, please," Sheptilah begged, "Eggman and I are going inside to fight one of those shape-shifters I told you about last night. G.U.N.'s coming to help." The witch tucked her grimoire away in her hair and it disappeared much in the same way Amy's Piko Piko hammer could vanish.

"How many are in there?" Sonic looked around at the carnage. It looked like something burned a trail into the ground leading to the entrance. Robot parts and what looked like ripped clothing was strewn about but it was deadly silent.

The G.U.N. Ship came into view- it appeared through the use of a giant warp ring and floated above them. The sudden displacement of air nearly blew everyone over.

Shadow, Rouge and Omega all bailed out of the ship but left it levitating in the air so that it couldn't be easily hijacked. Rouge landed gracefully, Omega landed with a massive thud and Shadow simply appeared.

"Who is the big guy?" Sheptilah asked.

"Omega. He's one of our robots." Shadow explained.

"I did not understand the woman's words," Omega said, "But I understand we have to kill things."

The gigantic base was on lockdown. Eggman went up to the console and was trying to get into the base by overriding the security settings. The bulk of the computers inside the base were all destroyed and he couldn't get them remotely turned on or restarted.
"Let me try-" Tails began to say but was interrupted.

"Move!" Knuckles pushed Eggman aside and punched the console as hard as he could. It shattered into pieces and sparked - but it got the job done. The hulking doors slid open and out wafted the stench of decomposition from a long, dark hallway.

Parts of Mobians, overlanders and robots were all strewn about. The corpses had been rotting there for days.

"Holy moly," was all Eggman could say.

"I need all of you to stay out here. Rouge, Omega and I are going in to stop the beast." Shadow directed them. Rouge and Knuckles choked on the fetid air and moved away from the door.

Amy and Sticks had to avert their eyes. They had never seen this kind of violence before.

It took all of Tails ¿ willpower to not vomit right there.

"No way," Sonic defied Shadow at any chance he could, "I'm going with you." He pulled his brown bandana over his nose to keep from choking on the smell of death.

Eggman turned his laser gun on and it emitted a high pitched whine.

"Those creatures are really hard to defeat with magic, even harder with brute force. I'm going to go rescue any survivors. Shadow, Rouge and Omega please do what you can to fight off the monster. Summon me with the witch orb if you can't defeat it. It's a small one but the more it eats the bigger it gets.

Sonic, you can come with me and Dr. Eggman as part of a rescue mission. The rest of you stay out here and let us know if you see anything, okay?" Sheptilah used magic to shorten her hair to a chin-length bob.
"Yes, ma'am," Tails said.

"Sounds good to me, too." Rouge nodded.

"I'm not arguing," Knuckles gagged. Amy and Sticks nodded.

"Sonic, be careful." Amy begged. Sonic winked to reassure her.

"Orbot, Cubot, do you read me?" Eggman spoke into his gauntlet. The two lackeys were back at the lair manning the console.

"Loud and clear, boss!" Cubot chimed.

"Orbot, I want you to do a search for survivors and broadcast it to me on the map." Eggman brought up the map of the base on his gauntlet and sent copies to Omega digitally.

"Well, it's moving but it looks like it's back in the industrial wing," Cubot sounded nervous, "Where the bombs are made."

"Let's go, then! As fast as we can!" Sheptilah ran in the entrance.

"You said the magic words!" Sonic sped ahead of her in a blue flash.
The Game Has Changed

Shadow teleported Rouge and Omega via Chaos Control to where the beast was.

The massive wing was lined with aisles like goods at a wholesale store with various sized warheads. The walls had cutesy signs with safety slogans over Eggman's smiling logo:

**LOOSE LIPS SINK WARSHIPS**

**NO EATING OR DRINKING PERMITTED**

**DO NOT PLAY ON OR AROUND THE AMMUNITION**

Lights flickered overhead making it extremely difficult to spot the monster whose size kept fluctuating from the size of a loaf of bread to the height of the ceiling. It left a slimy, winding trail of congealed blood and crude oil and the residue began to dissolve the metal floor ever so slightly.

The trio could see that the creature had no eyes or mouth between shapes and yet it seemed to be aware of its surroundings and able to eat. It was struggling to maintain a form and transformed between the appearances of the robots and the various Mobians that worked in the base.

It seemed to be inspecting the weapons, unsure of what they were. It moved almost silently except for the occasional 'sloshing' noise when it moved and changed shape.

Omega wirelessly connected to the computer servers for the base and scanned the bombs.

"No firearms," Omega chirped as he withdrew his massive guns, "Every bomb in this room is petrol-based and armed. None are nuclear. According to the data this place has been under siege
for five days by the beast. The first thing it did was cut every communication method off and trapped them inside."

"Great," Rouge commented, "So it's smart. We have to lead it out of this room or we're all going to be jelly."

"I will be fine," Omega said flatly.

"The witch said brute force doesn't work on these things… I wonder if Chaos energy is effective." Shadow teleported to be in front of the beast. Just as he was going to use a very precisely aimed Chaos spear the monster roared at him and dashed out of the way and toward Rouge.

The bat jumped up and used her screw kick attack on the beast. The creature split itself in half in order to dodge her attack and instead aimed for Omega.

The hulking robot grabbed the two halves of the beast and tried to hold it but the creature dribbled through his hands and turned to attack Rouge. Shadow teleported in front of Rouge and used a Chaos spear on the beast and nearly missed. The golden electricity that came from the hedgehog's hand crackled in the air leaving the distinctive smell of ozone behind as it hit the gooey creature.

The creature howled in pain and tried to get away but to no avail. Shadow shot it again and again with Chaos energy until it finally collapsed into a disgusting puddle of slime.

Omega looked at his arms and saw the metal was slightly sizzling. "Eggman. The threat is neutralized," then he saw the ooze was only playing dead. It inched slowly toward Shadow's metal shoes and began to eat away at the metal soles.

"Omega? The beast is dead?" Dr. Eggman spoke from his gauntlet to the robot.

"Down, Shadow!" Omega saw the beast move and instinctively fired a small rocket at it. The projectile ricocheted as the beast dodged it and hit one of the smaller bombs. The resulting explosion was relatively small however one bomb lit up another and the chain reaction set off the sprinkler system above which tried to douse the fire but to no avail.
"Omega!" Rouge shouted, "This whole place is gonna blow!"

"Seriously?!!" Shadow was bewildered at the recklessness.

"I panicked." Omega explained.

"We're reading a massive temperature spike in your area," Hope shouted into her headset. The ship was scanning the base and feeding the data back to her computers, "What's going on down there?"

"Technical difficulties," Omega responded to Hope as Team Dark was fleeing from the bomb room, "Target is neutralized. Scanning for survivors now… Orbot reports there is a cluster of people in the lowest level."

The trio had left the creature in the room to burn to death. More and more bombs started going off shaking the premises.

"You two go find the others and get the hell out of here. I'm going to get the survivors out."

Shadow teleported to the basement and found dozens of weakened Egg army soldiers crowded behind a barricaded door. They were all emaciated and dehydrated from being trapped there for days. He grabbed them five at a time and deposited them outside where Sonic's friends were waiting.

Sonic skipped over the junked robots and zigzagged between corpses checking for life on the ones that were less obviously decayed. He thought he heard something moved and ran to the uniformed body of a cat Mobian. He bent down and gently rolled the body over and saw that it no longer had a face. Exposed bone was all that was left. Sonic shrieked. He was going to have nightmares for months.

Just one survivor was all Sonic wanted to find. One.
The hedgehog backed up into the wall with his hands pressed flat against it and shut his eyes. He took several shuddering breaths before he regained his composure, or so he thought.

Eggman was struggling to keep up, his body was fighting him on exerting itself. “Sonic?” He turned to the corpse and winced, kicking it over with the toe of his boot so the rotted face was no longer visible to them. “Ugh.”

“I thought they were alive,” Sonic’s forehead was damp with sweat, “I thought they were alive… I’ve never seen a corpse like that before.”

Sheptilah gently cupped Sonic’s cheeks with her hands, “It’s okay,” she stroked his face with her thumbs. “You’re okay. There’s nothing you can do for a dead body. It’s okay. A dead body can’t hurt you.”

“I know but…” He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. “I thought they were alive and … ugh.”

“Yeah,” Tilly said sympathetically. “The witch-eaters do that. I can send you back home if you can’t do this.”

“I can do this! I have to do this. I just got spooked, that’s all.”

Sonic’s breath hitched trying to stifle sobs. Normally he wouldn’t dare allow anyone, especially Eggman, see him so shaken but in this extreme situation there was no shame in it.

Ivo groaned and looked upon the hedgehog with pity. “Shake it off, Sonic! We’re on a time limit here.”

Sheptilah shot him a glare while Sonic looked up at the overlander with wide, exhausted eyes.

“He’s just a kid, you jerk.” She frowned.

“What? We have a mission to do.” Ivo shrugged.
“He’s right; we have living people to save.” Sonic swallowed hard and lifted himself from the wall. He shook off the tension, making his spikes rattle against themselves.

"Go straight and then take a left down that hallway, that’s where Thunderbolt's vent is according to Orbot's map. Take Sheptilah with you."

"How am I supposed to keep up wi- AH!" She was startled when Sonic simply picked her up and ran with her in his arms as per Eggman's directions. "You are a lot brawnier than you look, kid!"

"I'm just full of surprises!" He turned to find a door that was shut and set Sheptilah down on her feet.

"How are we getting in?" Sheptilah felt around for a key or a button that would let them in.

"Watch it," Sonic nudged her out of the way and turned into his spin-dash form and ripped a small jagged hole in the thin metal door. Sonic unfurled and stepped inside after Sheptilah squeezed in but lightly scraped her arm on a sharp edge. The pain was searing all up her arm due to the metal allergy but she did not bring attention to this as it was a minor cut.

“Thunderbolt?” Sonic called, "Thunderbolt!?" It was a smaller room meant to store office supplies. Many of the boxes were turned over revealing their contents: light bulbs, duct tape and paper towels were the most common items. A haphazard pile of crates leading up to a wall vent in the corner had small hand prints stained with blood showed Thunderbolt climbed them not that long ago.

Fresher blood stains covered older, flaky ones on the wall under the vent's opening.

Sonic jumped up and ripped the vent cover off the wall and climbed inside. It was a tight squeeze but he was able to flatten his spines enough to fit in.

"Is she in there?" Sheptilah called. She took off the glamour hiding her absurdly long hair in preparation of healing the wounded Mobian.

"There's a blood trail, it leads further down. I think I can hear her breathing." Sonic was crawling on his elbows and knees now and squinting in the darkness.
"S.. Sonic?" A very quiet voice spoke, "I'm here." It was almost heartbreaking for Sonic to hear the very feisty chinchilla barely able to even whisper. Then again, she did try to kill him and his friends a few times, so maybe she deserved this. No, he shook that thought from his mind, nobody deserves this.

"I'm coming!" Sonic turned a corner and found Thunderbolt lying on her back. Her cybernetics were destroyed and her normally extremely soft fur was caked in blood. Her nose and mouth were leaking a slightly pink foam. She was definitely drowning in her own blood. Slowly.

"No," she wheezed, "Why you?"

Sonic looked down at her and saw she had a proportionately deep cut in her torso.

"God, oh God, oh God," he was started to panic. He spoke into his wrist communicator hailing for his friends waiting outside.

"Guys?"

"Sonic!" they all shouted in unison.

"Wh- what do I do if someone… if their insides are outside but they're not dead?" His voice was shaky.

"What?" Amy's face contorted with horror, "Who is hurt?"

"It's Thunderbolt," he swallowed hard.

"How much of her inside is outside?" Sticks spoke. Her years in the jungle made her somewhat of an expert in on-the-fly medical care.

"Just… I see a bit of bone; maybe a rib? It's across her torso." He felt queasy.
"Tie your bandana around her torso and carry her to the witch." Tails tried to be as calm as possible when giving first aid directions but his voice was cracking.

"Okay… okay," he took off his bandana and gingerly tied it around Thunderbolt's stomach. "I'm gonna pick you up, okay? I am getting you out of here, T.B."

"Sonic?" Sheptilah's voice echoed, "Are you okay?"

"She's alive! I'm coming." He called back to her.

"Don't touch me," Thunderbolt spat, "I'm proud to die for Eggman." She weakly coughed between words.

"He's here; he came for you." He gently tucked her in his arm and prepared to turn around to crawl back to Sheptilah.

"Take me to him," she shut her eyes and welcomed death. She would never admit it but she was grateful to be laying against Sonic's soft fur.

Sonic tried to turn around but found he couldn't. He was too tall to simply turn and his barbs wouldn't let him crawl backwards out of the vent. Sonic tried to push through the pain but the sheer agony of his spines being pulled out of their roots was like fire burning each and every nerve ending he had.

"Sheptilah, I'm stuck! I have to keep crawling forward. Meet me at the other opening."

"Where?" She was more lost than he was.

"Just follow my voice!" Sonic crawled forward on his knees and elbow and held tightly to Thunderbolt. He could see the light coming in from the nearest vent opening and moved as fast as he could toward it. His sensitive nose also picked up the faint smell of bleach.

Eggman finally caught up to Sheptilah and helped her out of the hole Sonic cut in the door. That was when the whole building rattled.
"What was that?" Eggman spoke into his gauntlet.

"I set off some bombs," Omega responded.

"The creature is neutralized. I'm collecting survivors now. Some were hiding in a basement, it's about thirty people." Shadow's voice was almost a comfort to Eggman, "But the bombs are still going off. You need to get out now."

"Sonic's got Thunderbolt and he's moving forward to the next vent opening. Where is that?" The witch's hands were shaking.

"This way," he led her to the next room down the long hallway which was a public unisex bathroom. The walls were tiled a pristine white and the floors were shiny and black with inlaid glittery specks. It was like walking on outer space itself.

There was no door to this room- instead zigzagging partitions offered privacy when entering.

Sonic stuck his fingers through the vent opening above the sinks trying to push it open but he couldn't get the leverage.

"I can't get it open," the hedgehog shouted.

"Stop shouting! I see you. Hold on," Eggman leaned his gun against the wall, reached up and ripped the cover off almost effortlessly. He threw the grate down with a metallic clang that hurt Sheptilah’s ears. He held his hand up so he could take Thunderbolt and so Sonic could get out. Eggman handed off the chinchilla to Sheptilah who looked over the little yellow puff with pity.

"Eggman, I am never going to complain about fighting your robots again." Sonic stuck his head out and was trying to figure out how to get down. Ivo grabbed the hedgehog by the underarms and pulled him out and set him down gently on the floor. Sonic threw the human a thumbs-up as thanks.

The witch wrapped her hair around Thunderbolt's tiny body and concentrated hard. It's one thing to heal little cuts but it's another to repair entire organs. The chinchilla shivered from the ice cold
sensation of the magic and opened her eyes. When things came into focus she saw the violet-eyed woman staring down at her with her lips in a thin frown.

"Am I dead?" Thunderbolt wondered, "This doesn't look like the underworld…"

"Thunderbolt?" Eggman gently poked the little rodent on the forehead.

"Am I in heaven?" the chinchilla's face flushed until she saw Sonic. "Never mind, I'm alive."

"You gave us a scare," the blue hedgehog put a hand on Sheptilah's shoulder, "This witch saved you." The building rumbled again, this time it was louder.

"Is she related to Regina?" Thunderbolt was asking about Snively's former lover and techno witch the Iron Queen. She squirmed in Tilly's arms when another rumble went off.

"No, I'll explain later." Eggman said, "It's time to go."

"What's the fastest way out of here?" Sonic was bouncing on the balls of his feet. They were deep in the building and the rumbling got louder and the quakes shook the building enough that it nearly knocked them over.

"I hear voices," Rouge spoke from outside and poked her head into the bathroom, "Hey!"

"Rouge!" Tilly smiled, "You're okay!"

"I'm tough as diamonds, sweetheart," she winked.

Omega led them out of the base through the most direct route which incidentally was blowing a giant hole through the walls with Eggman's laser gun. Even the thickest steel walls melted away like butter under its blasts. Omega silently made a note to steal that gun for himself when the doctor wasn't looking.

The man was becoming exhausted now and found it very difficult to go on. With every labored
breath his muscles burned. Tilly took his hand and gave him a magical boost so he wouldn't collapse from exertion. It was like drinking four espressos at once!

Thunderbolt was scandalized that some hussy touched her beloved overlord. The ferocious chinchilla decided, however, she'd hold onto her anger for later use when she could exact revenge.

Finally everyone who wasn't dead or destroyed was out of the building. Sheptilah set down Thunderbolt and began to tend to the survivors who were grateful that a rescue came at all. The ends of her hair were stained pink from all of the bloody wounds she healed with it.

Sonic's friends immediately group hugged him and happy that he was okay. Amy showered Sonic's cheeks with rapid fire kisses.

All of his emotions poured out and he began to cry from relief. His tears causes his friends to sob in return and soon they were all a pile of wet cheeks, choked laughs and pained smiles.

"Don't cry, faker," Shadow approached the group, "You did well today." Shadow's praises made Sonic sob harder but the ebony hedgehog couldn't quite place why. He felt pity for Sonic and his friends for having to see those horrors.

"Get in here, buddy!" With a swipe of Knuckles' muscular arm Shadow was drawn into the hug and loved against his will.

"Ack! Knuckles!" Sonic cried out, "We love you too, man, but you are making it hard to breathe!"

Rouge giggled and snapped a photo of this to tease Shadow with from now until the heat death of the Universe.

Knuckles felt satisfied and let them all go. He approached Rouge to talk but chickened out and went back to Tails to discuss how they were getting home.

Tails went up to Sheptilah and sheepishly asked her if she could open up another portal to let them go home.
"Absolutely," she looked around, "I just need to find a quiet place to do it."

Thunderbolt looked on at the commotion with hatred in her heart. How dare Eggman threaten to leave her to die and how dare he send Sonic and some woman to save her? She was disgusted and humiliated. She took off Sonic's bandanna and threw it on the ground, digging her heel into it.

Eggman saw this and approached the chinchilla. "Omega told me that you survived in there with that thing for five days," Eggman looked down at the angry Mobian, "You're an excellent addition to my army."

All of her fire instantly melted away, "Really?"

Eggman nodded. Thunderbolt nearly jumped three feet into the air from excitement.

"President Tower is sending emergency vehicles to pick up the survivors," Hope spoke with relief in her voice, "He wants everyone moving as far away from the building as possible."

"Understood," Rouge said, "Anything else?"

"He wants you to bring Sheptilah, Thunderbolt and Eggman back with you immediately for questioning." Hope remotely lowered the plane so that Omega could board.

"Do you want Sonic, too? He helped us directly." Rouge asked.

"Hold on…" a pause and then, "Tower says yes." Hope confirmed.

"Team Dark, you're ordered to come back to base with Dr. Eggman, Thunderbolt, Sheptilah and Sonic the hedgehog immediately," President Tower spoke into their communicators.

Just then the emergency vehicles had warped in overhead and hovered close to the ground to load in the survivors to be taken to the hospital wing at G.U.N.'s fortress. The displacement of air was greater this time and sent the bulk of the people standing on the ground flying a few feet back.
Rouge and Shadow escorted Eggman and Thunderbolt onto the plane first and Shadow stayed behind to make sure they wouldn't get up to anything troublesome. Shadow had immediately confiscated the laser gun and handed it to Omega for safekeeping. If the robot could smile he would grin from ear to ear. What a great day!

Rouge went up to Sonic's friends and Sheptilah to get them going as well.

Eggman sat with Thunderbolt in his arms and she couldn't have been any happier. She was almost purring.

"Wait, hold on," Sheptilah had trouble lifting her wounded arm but managed to open a small portal for the Mobians to return to Seaside Island.

"Thank you, miss!" Tails said as he hopped in. He was followed by Amy, Sticks and Knuckles after saying their goodbyes to Sonic.

"Don't let them make you lick any stamps, Sonic," Sticks warned.

Sheptilah closed the portal and nodded to Rouge that she was ready to go back to the G.U.N. fortress.
Initially Dr. Eggman and Thunderbolt were put into separate guarded interrogation rooms while Sonic and Sheptilah were questioned jointly by Boris Cabbit.

The rooms were small and only contained some uncomfortable chairs and an empty table. Oppressively bright fluorescent lighting beamed down on them, making it hard to focus.

There was nothing Sonic could tell them that they did not already know through Team Dark. He stared at his filthy gloves while talking non-stop so he wouldn't have to see the images of the corpses in his mind again.

Thunderbolt absolutely refused to divulge any information to G.U.N. out of loyalty for the Egg army. She stood on the table and threatened to physically attack anyone who came near her.

President Tower just stared daggers into the tiny rodent. He was not afraid of her and did not take her threats seriously knowing her cybernetic weapon was disabled. He turned to the guard and asked them to escort in Eggman.

The nervous overlander was brought in with high powered weapons pressed into his back and his cuffed hands raised.

"I don't appreciate being forced to play musical chairs right now." He complained then understood when he saw Thunderbolt.

"Sit, Doctor." Tower directed him.

"I prefer to stand."

"Very well. Your underling refuses to discuss what she saw." Tower sat back down in the interrogator's chair.

"T.B., just tell them what happened." The mustached doctor urged her from the corner.
The yellow chinchilla growled and finally gave in.

"We did not know anything was wrong until it was too late," she began, "Whatever it was it snuck in on one of our robots. It did something to our computers and jammed all of our signals, automatically locking us in." Thunderbolt's ears and tail twitched with agitation. Her eyes darted between Eggman's and Tower's.

"We fought so hard for days to get ourselves out of the base. Nobody was answering our distress calls. Eventually after three days we found out that it was some monster attacking us.

We then followed safety protocol and made our way to the lowest point of the Egg base. Myself and several others attempted to fight it off but it just kept changing."

She paused to catch her breath.

"That thing ate through my mecha. It learned to dodge and it learned to attack the organics and not the robots. It sliced me open with a piece of metal!"

The chinchilla huffed, "I held myself together, literally, and ran. I ran for the glory of the Eggman Empire! I found a vent to crawl in and wait it out. I didn't even feel pain. I felt nothing."

"How did you get communication back up?" Tower stared intently at her fiery green eyes.

Thunderbolt turned to him and hissed. "There was a brief power outage before the emergency generators came on. In that time I was able to get a message out on my cellphone."

Sheptilah tried her hardest to look at the screen but every so often she had to look away from the carnage. She didn't understand any of what was happening. Was she wrong? Did she remember it
incorrectly? The creatures were never able to eat through metal, she kept telling herself, that's why we sealed it in the core of the moon. The iron core.

Team Dark, Sonic and Cabbot were in the media room watching footage from the battle lifted from both Omega and the Eggnet with Sheptilah there to offer her insights. Cabbot seemed to have his eyes fixed on the witch the entire time.

Hope was scanning through the various files on her laptop with a coffee in hand and a furrowed brow.

"While Eggman's Soumercian base is now a smoking crater, we have no way of actually going in and getting a sample of the beast so we could do a scan to find more lifeforms just like it. The parts of Omega that it touched didn't leave any actual residue, just damage." Hope looked exhausted as she spoke to the group and took another sip of her drink.

It was so much to take in: she had just learned about the witch and the moon. Sonic and his friends had just sealed Dark Gaia in the core of the planet. Now they had to deal with a monster released from the core of the moon. It never stops.

"The thing seemed to be seriously hurt by Chaos energy," Shadow sat next to Sonic, "Does this mean we have to gather the Chaos Emeralds?"

"President Tower hasn't ordered that yet but it is never a bad idea to have the Emeralds all in one safe place." Boris shrugged.

"Just once I'd like to have a week where the whole world isn't threatened by crazy things," Sonic chuckled nervously, "Just one."

"It was… never able to do this before," Sheptilah said, "Eat through metal, I mean. I also do not know about the Chaos Emeralds or what that entails, Shadow."

"It's possible the monsters have begun learning," Rouge's heels clicked as she stepped forward to turn off the video feed as it was beginning to loop, "Which means getting that royal grimoire you spoke of is a priority, Sheptilah."

"I still need to charge," the witch rubbed her eyes, "I hardly have any energy. Sleeping helps but I
"You seemed to do just fine earlier today," Shadow huffed.

"Yes, well, you should see me at full power," she shot him an angry look, "Glamours and local portals are nothing. Nannaic children can do them before they can walk."

"I don't think that matters," Rouge looked at her phone, "It's already eight in the morning on Tuesday. We completely missed the night."

Sheptilah slumped back in her chair and dragged her hand down her face.

"So where is this 'grim-more'?" Sonic asked to break the tension.

"The ziggurat." Sheptilah turned to look at the blue hedgehog.

"What the heck is a ziggurat?" Sonic raised an eyebrow.

"It's like a step pyramid but larger;" Hope answered, "Entire cities could fit in them. From a distance they look like mountains."

"Right. Ours was in the middle of the desert Ivo had pulled me from. It was an artificial oasis we had built for travelers to stay in." Sheptilah elaborated on Hope's description.

The blonde girl pondered for a moment and then brought up some satellite imagery of the Dust Hill zone.

"Most of this area remains unexplored but we cannot possibly miss a structure so big from space…" she flipped through images until she found something, "There. The Nannae ruins, right?"

"Yes, but I remember it being green and blue- water flowing like waterfalls down the sides and plants of all kinds in bloom. It looks so naked now." Sheptilah shook her head.
"I'm sure it was beautiful," Boris commented, "When this is all over I would like to see it restored." He smiled at the witch sweetly.

Rouge tried to stifle a laugh; was her boss flirting? Shadow rolled his eyes at Rouge's behavior but she couldn't help it. Rouge thought it was cute how he looked at her whenever she was in the room.

"When should we leave for the ruins?" Sonic spoke in a small voice.

"'We'? What is this 'we'? You can't come." Shadow shook his head, "This is G.U.N. business."

He couldn't believe Sonic's audacity. One of these days the cobalt speedster was going to get himself killed.

"Shads, you can't do everything by yourself," Sonic stood, "I'm involved now, too." He was the hero of Mobius and it would take more than that to stop him from helping. He saved the world so many times he lost count; what is one more time? If Sonic wrote memoirs they'd be a collector's set you'd have to dedicate your entire bookshelf to.

"No you aren't," Sheptilah grabbed the blue hedgehog's wrist and gently pulled him back into a sitting position, "You gotta stay on the island and keep an eye out for more of those… things."

Rouge smiled, "I agree with Miss Witch. You gotta sit this one out, Sonic."

Well, that stopped him.

"I will talk with President Tower about getting to the ruins as soon as possible. In the meantime you should all go home and rest. All of you. Omega is already undergoing repairs." Boris escorted them to the door, "Except for you, Sheptilah. I want to have a word with you."

Shadow and Rouge left for their dorms with Hope but instructed Sonic to stay and wait for the witch to warp him home. The cobalt hedgehog rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall wondering why Shadow couldn't just teleport him back to the island himself.
"I didn't see anything of note while trudging with the witch and the hedgehog through the bodies," Eggman began, "However I will say this: you are all incredibly lucky to have me on your side in this matter."

"If you have Lord Eggman's support then you have mine by proxy," Thunderbolt stood.

Tower looked over the two rogues without much care. "We will contact you when we need you or the witch."

Boris waited for the others to leave before he approached Sheptilah who was now leaning against the wall and closed the door.

"I need to ask you a personal favor and it must stay between us," he let his eyes drop to the floor, "My wife is dying of renal failure. Can you heal her?"

"Renal failure?" She brushed her blood-stained hair behind her ear to buy time while her Oracle Stone translated, "Oh, the kidneys."

"Yes. Can you heal her?" His eyes were pleading, "She is in a private hospital room in this building. I can take you now."

"Sir…" Sheptilah began, "I would be happy to but…"

"But what?"

She hesitated. If she saved one person from death then they would all want to be healed. It wouldn't be fair to tell one person yes but another no. Her entire race was a servile one made to care for the planet and the things that lived on it. Sheptilah was so tired both emotionally and physically. She did not have the energy to spare.

"Why must it remain secret?" Sheptilah raised a white eyebrow.
"The president may think I’m abusing you for my own gain," his polished shoes were suddenly the most fascinating thing he ever laid eyes on, "And we cannot owe favors."

She felt sympathy for the old man.

Sheptilah extended a cold hand and pressed her fingers under his chin to bring his eyes up to hers. She smiled broadly, "I can do that and you will owe me nothing. However there is a caveat."

"What is it?" His voice was cracking.

"You have to wait a day or two while I charge. I do not have the energy right now."

"That's alright," he smiled, forcing his crow's feet to become more pronounced, "She's been waiting years for a kidney transplant. Another day or two will be fine."

Sheptilah nodded briskly and left the media room. Boris lingered for a while in the silence.

Tilly saw Sonic was waiting and was about to greet him but was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"There you are," Eggman called. He was walking down the hallway in a huff with Thunderbolt and armed Mobians at his side, "I was told you were here."

"Dr. Eggman," Sheptilah smiled, "And the brave warrior Thunderbolt. I'm glad to see they don't have you both in chains."

“I was cuffed briefly. After they took my weapons they let me go under the condition I have loaded weapons pressed into my flesh at all times.”

“Did they hurt you?” She cocked an eyebrow.

"I just want to get out of here before I run into my niece," he scratched his cheek, "I'm sure she has several choice words for me." He also wanted to get the hell out of there before they decided to re-arrest him for his war crimes.
"I was directed to go home so I assume that means I'm staying with you tonight, Dr. Eggman."
Sheptilah yawned behind a fist.

That was the last straw to Thunderbolt. That witch had to go. She had half a mind to take a good chunk out of that woman's leg and show her who's boss.

"You could stay at my place," Sonic offered. Thunderbolt's head whipped around to the blue 'hog and she felt hopeful that she'd get to crash at Eggman's place alone.

"I shouldn't be too far apart from my bound guardian right now but thank you, Sonic. I need to warp us all back to the island now. We should go outside." Sheptilah eyed the armed guards suspiciously.

*Drat*, the angry yellow puff thought, *guardian!?*

"Where are you going, miss Thunderbolt?" The witch leaned down and grinned.

"That's Egg Boss Thunderbolt to you, overlander," the blonde puff snapped. Sheptilah was taken aback by the tiny one's rudeness.

"She's coming with us back to my lair. I have to make repairs to her cybernetics." Eggman yawned too, "Don't mind her, Sheptilah, she's just tired. We all are."

The armed guards escorted all four of them outside so that Sheptilah could open a portal. The sunlight was warm and blinding in the early morning and the ocean surrounding the fortress shimmered. Sheptilah ran her fingers along the air and felt for something. She finally snagged a fingernail on it and opened what looked like a mirror to the island lair gateway.

Sonic jumped in first and landed cleanly on his feet and sped off to the shore. He ran on the water as if it was solid. His sheer intensity left a rainbow glittering in the droplets behind him. The first thing he did when he got home was take the longest, hottest shower he ever had in his life.

"I'm not going in there," Thunderbolt protested, "Dr. Eggman you are the wisest, smartest man ever to walk Mobius but do you really trust a witch? The troll twins Wendy and Walter come to mind."
"I do not have time for this right now," Eggman bent down and picked up Thunderbolt by the base of her tail between his thumb and index finger and carried her into the portal. She instinctively froze as chinchillas picked up by the tail are wont to do. Sheptilah soon followed and closed the opening behind her.

"Doesn't that hurt her?" the witch asked while Eggman gently set Thunderbolt on the ground. The chinchilla was puffed up and outraged beyond belief. Her face was red with embarrassment and yet she didn't find Eggman's touch unwelcome; even if it was from lifting her like a purse.

"Nah," he chuckled, "Not as long as you pick them up by the very base of the tail and don't swing them like a lasso." He opened the door for them and was greeted by Orbot and Cubot who had lots to complain about.

"You let your dinner get cold," Orbot sulked, "I worked so hard on it."
It was another warm, sunny day at Seaside Island but it wouldn't last. Gray clouds in the distance foretold of a heavy thunderstorm.

Ivo himself had asked the women to get along; although he was speaking almost exclusively to Thunderbolt. He promised the chinchilla he would repair her cybernetics after he slept; citing that working while exhausted would end poorly for her.

Sheptilah wandered into the kitchen to retrieve fruit to eat. A bright green granny smith apple sat alone in the basket on the counter, beckoning her to take it. Thunderbolt followed the woman to look for some food for herself as Dr. Eggman had retired to his room to nap for the day without offering her anything.

"What is your game, witch?" Thunderbolt snarled, "I demand you tell me."

The woman took a bite of the apple and chewed it while staring the chinchilla in the eye with a blank face.

"Tell me!" Thunderbolt stomped her foot. She did not deserve such disrespect from an overlander.

"I'm an ancient witch queen and I have to save this damned planet," she swallowed her food, "And I am very tired." Not wishing to engage any further Sheptilah made her way to the door to find the bathroom. Thunderbolt dashed to block her way.

"I want to make one thing very clear, human," she bared her razor-sharp teeth, "Eggman is mine."

"In what capacity?" she stepped over the Mobian and walked off not expecting an answer only to be followed by Thunderbolt through the lair.

"We are lovers," the blonde puff stated matter-of-factly, "Or we will be."

"Wouldn't that kill you?" Sheptilah was humoring this nonsense for her personal entertainment. Sure, in her culture some humans and clever folk were married and even adopted children together
but certainly not with a size discrepancy that would end in certain death.

Thunderbolt jogged after Sheptilah who had found the extremely sterile and minimalist bathroom. All it contained was a claw-foot tub in white, a toilet and a sink.

Sheptilah ran the water to its hottest setting.

"What do you mean?" The chinchilla was out of breath.

The witch turned her head and looked at the Mobian, " Seriously? "

Thunderbolt's cheeks turned red. She crossed her arms and looked away. "I didn't think that far." That was all she could come up with as an excuse.

Eggman's entire lair was state-of-the-art and this included the bath facilities. The tub filled within minutes and wonderfully scented soap was mixed in with the water from the faucet. All Sheptilah had to do was get in. She pulled off her clothes directly in front of Thunderbolt, completely unbothered by being seen naked. The witch stepped into the tub and sank into the bubbles with a deep, long sigh.

Thunderbolt saw this as Sheptilah flaunting her human body. She became enraged and desperately wished her cybernetics weren't destroyed so she could electrocute the human to death. She wanted to watch that snooty little 'queen' shriek in pain and then pawn off that shiny bauble on her chest before her body went cold.

The human was scrubbing the blood from her hair when Thunderbolt jumped on the edge of the tub and was prepared to scratch out Sheptilah's eyes when the witch split the apple in half and offered an unbitten piece to the chinchilla.

Thunderbolt was taken aback by this and pushed the witch's hand out of the way.

"I have no interest in anyone, miss Thunderbolt," Sheptilah offered the apple again, "I know I will not be alive at the end of this."
"Why?" Thunderbolt was suspicious of both the apple piece and her assurance of death. A queen witch offering an apple was never a good thing, especially not to darling and gorgeous 'princesses' like Thunderbolt.

"That thing you encountered this week was a monster from my time. We tried our hardest to fight it but it killed all of them but me. I was sealed in a crystal until I was rescued by your Dr. Eggman." Sheptilah ate the last of her share of the fruit, "I expect that destroying them for all time would kill me. It nearly did the first time and I had the help of hundreds of my kind.

"Because of this, he is my guardian. We're bound at the soul by the magic that sealed me in the reliquary. He wants to sever this bond, which is fine, so that means we have to go dig up the family grimoire from the desert to learn how to do it."

Thunderbolt sat on the outside edge of the tub and snatched the apple piece from Sheptilah's bony fingers and greedily munched away at it. She was very hungry and made quick work of the slice.

"What does it mean to be bonded?" She wanted to know as much as she could about this witch as possible to formulate a plan of attack.

"My people wanted to make sure I wasn't alone in the future so whoever woke me up was connected to me. If we're apart for too long the guardian will become sick and die. It's really a stupid plan but I didn't cast the spell so whatever."

Sheptilah was rubbing soap on her arm where the iron had scraped her. It was still puffy and red. Although the skin was not broken it was very aggravated.

"What happened there?" Thunderbolt asked with her cheeks full.

"Iron makes me sick," she brushed her hair out of her face and behind her ear. "A scrape or a cut makes me ill. I can't use my magic well if I'm in a big iron box like this lair, either. That's why I'm fine with severing the bond. I really need to get out of this prison."

Ah. Perhaps Thunderbolt had misjudged the woman. If I have any weaknesses, she thought to herself, it's that I love Dr. Eggman too much. I'm just overprotective.

She stored away that little tidbit about the iron in the evilest corner of her brain. If the witch became uppity she could simply hop over to a pharmacist, pick up an iron supplement and murder the woman from the inside out.
She imagined Sheptilah's face becoming puffy and ugly; eyes and ears leaking with blood while she fruitlessly gasped for air.

Thunderbolt suddenly found herself lifted in the air and scrubbed by invisible hands, dried and set down on the floor. Her soft fur was puffed out like a dandelion and uniform was repaired.

"What the-" she looked around, "Did you do that? Don't use magic on me without my permission!" Thunderbolt was outraged by being manhandled.

"What? You were filthy." Sheptilah laughed, "Ivo is going to be so impressed with how cute you look now."

Thunderbolt gasped. "You think so? Too bad you couldn't fix my cybernetics, though." She was still plotting Sheptilah's murder and body disposal, however. *Perhaps at the bottom of the sea...*

"Iron," the woman said in a sing-song voice, "Can't work with it. I can work with apples, though."

"What?" So the apple was poisoned! Well, Thunderbolt wondered, *If I was to fall into a deep sleep like Snow White only to be awoken by Dr. Eggman's true love's kiss... that wouldn't be so bad.*

"Apples represent love, fertility and wealth," Sheptilah grinned mischievously, "If you want Dr. Eggman to fall in love with you... offer him an apple."

The witch was intentionally manipulating Thunderbolt into being compliant.

"Any kind of apple?" Now the yellow chinchilla was listening. She leaned in close to get the juicy details.

"The largest, reddest apple you can get your paws on. Pick it yourself from the tree and whisper your desires into the flesh of the fruit, but don't bite into it. Hand-deliver it to him wrapped in gold paper when you are done. It will soften his hard-boiled heart," She lied. You use silver paper for love spells.

In order to get any work done Sheptilah would have to placate her living obstacles and find them.
That means keeping Dr. Eggman and Thunderbolt busy with stupid things, gathering the grimoire, finding her familiar and assembling a makeshift coven to help gather the materials to recreate the staff her mother used.

Of course Sheptilah knew that Thunderbolt was not her familiar. Nothing is ever that easy.

She had a feeling she already met the clever folk she was to spend the rest of her life with but wasn't quite sure who it could be.

Whoever it was, they had a great power. She felt it when she had awoken and felt it again at the beach with the Mobians during their first encounter.

In order to find her familiar she would have to do a little digging on a metaphysical plane when her energy was restored.

"You could probably sneak off to where he's sleeping and worm your way to under his arm," Sheptilah teased.

"You're right," Thunderbolt sped out of the room to do just that.

"Oh," was all the witch could say. I didn't think she'd take that seriously...

She tried to remember the layout but got lost. Instead she focused on Eggman's cologne, that wonderful earthy cologne, and sniffed her way out to his room. She saw he had fallen asleep halfway off his bed with his shoes still on and something strange in his hand.

She crept in quietly so not to wake him. She wondered why his bed was so small, it didn't even look adequate for himself. Oh well, all the better to facilitate cuddles! She could see just fine in the darkness and noticed a photo of Metal Sonic on the shelf next to the bed. Thunderbolt was already plotting to replace that with a glamour shot of herself.

She inspected the strange thing in Ivo's hand. It looked like a bronze ring, almost a tiara.
A tiara? Thunderbolt sniffed it and smelled the witch on it. She narrowed her glowing emerald eyes and grinned evilly as she slipped the circlet from Eggman's hand. That witch will burn at the stake and I will reap the rewards.

She hopped up on the bed and nestled next to Dr. Eggman's head on the pillow and fell asleep with visions of human vivisection dancing in her mind.
Forget everything you saw, Sonic lied to himself, they were all robots. No humans or Mobians. All robots with synthetic skin and bones. By the time Sonic had gotten out of the shower his hands and feet were pruney and spines were pressed flat against his back.

The bathroom mirror was fogged over which was just as well- the cobalt speedster didn't want to see how awful he looked when exhausted. He grabbed a towel and vigorously rubbed his spikes dry; procrastinating by drying as many as he could individually.

Sonic then decided to focus on getting something to eat and walked zombie-like to his kitchenette.

He opened the refrigerator and looked blankly inside. It was as if his brain couldn't process what he was peering at. He saw vague shapes: lumpy things wrapped in foil, jars of chili sauces and random fruit haphazardly thrown around cans of soft drinks.

He lingered in the cold radiating from the appliance for a moment. Sonic gingerly shut the door without getting anything and flopped into his hammock and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

Amy pinched the bridge of her nose with frustration. She had her tarot cards spread out in front of her looking for guidance. She was in her bedroom sitting with her legs crossed facing the headboard with the cards spread out on the neatly arranged blankets.

Sweet sandalwood incense burned. Pink and white candles spread about the room flickered impatiently.

The pink hedgehog had done this many times, each spread becoming more and more complex; but this time her cards were giving her mixed signals and were hard to read. She had a tarot handbook next to her and her own grimoire full of notes to refer to and neither was helping. Clearly she would have to simplify her spread and questions.
She gathered up the cards and shuffled the deck; taking extra care to feel the smooth cardstock the images were printed on. The illustrations were gorgeous watercolors where all of the subjects were different flowers instead of people.

"Can I trust the witch?" she held the deck to her lips, "Or rather can we trust what she says?"

The first card she had pulled was the King Of Cups, reversed. She pulled another card and laid it sideways on top of the first: The High Priestess.

Amy wrote this down in her notebook and moved to the next set question without putting the cards she pulled back into the deck.

"How do I protect myself?"

The first card in response was The Lovers. The next one was Ten Of Cups, both upright.

Again she penciled in these notes. She always wrote down the results before calculating the meaning.

"How do I protect my friends?" She asked this one last question before stopping for the day as she was getting sleepy and hoped to nap after this.

Her result was death and Seven Of Pentacles, again both were upright.

The first two cards, she figured, meant that Sheptilah was emotionally manipulative and powerful, but not untrustworthy. Because that makes perfect sense, Amy scoffed. She's manipulative but you can trust her. The second set meant to befriend the witch and make her like family. The third answer was simply that change only comes from investments.

*Fine, she thought, be obvious. What a sassy deck I've got.*

A familiar chime cut the silence. Amy wrapped her cards in the red silk handkerchief they arrived
in and felt around the bed for her phone.

"Where is that darned thing," the chiming continued, "I hear you! Stop yelling at me." She found it tucked under her pillow.

[WhiteEcho] Amy, how are you doing?

It was a text from Rouge.

[Th!nkP!nk] hey, I'm ok. Hbu?

[WhiteEcho] I wanted to check on you

[WhiteEcho] stuff at the base was bad

[WhiteEcho] and Sonic just left

Amy got up and blew out her candles. 'Stuff at the base was bad' was understatement of the year. She took her phone with her into the kitchen to get herself a snack. She found a half-eaten muffin to finish off.

[Th!nkP!nk] I'll be ok

[Th!nkP!nk] wait he was held there all night?
[WhiteEcho] yeah. He wants to come with us
d to some ancient building but we all said NO
so he's probably grumpy
keep an eye on him ok? We need you all to stay on the island
and defend it

[Th!nkP!nk] I always got my eye on Sonic! ❤️❤️❤️
you're so cute, don't ever change ok?

[Th!nkP!nk] never!

Amy chuckled and put her phone on her coffee table and laid back on her sofa. No matter what was happening in the world she knew she could always rely on her friends. Even the aloof ones.
Hope was in her dorm writing up notes for Cabbot on her laptop. The lights were off and the only illumination came from the soft glow of the computer screen.

**Wednesday December 10th**

- Thunderbolt the chinchilla's Soumerca base is attacked by the 'witch eaters' and put on lockdown

**Sunday December 15th**

- Dr. Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik claims he discovers the witch Shep-til-a in the southwest quadrant of Dust Hill

- Shep-til-a is brought to G.U.N. by Shadow and Rouge for questioning and voluntarily surrenders herself to cell block 5

**Monday December 16th**

- Shep-til-a is given a medical work-up and leaves the premises

- Thunderbolt's distress call makes it through

- Dr. Eggman requests assistance from G.U.N. at Sheptilah's behest

- Sonic the hedgehog, Amy Rose the hedgehog, Tails the fox, Knuckles the echidna and Sticks the badger all come along but remain outside
- Thunderbolt the chinchilla along with thirty-three Egg army survivors are removed

- Dr. Eggman is given a G.U.N. communicator by President Abraham Tower

[Last Edit: 12/16 11:20]

Hope was sick to her stomach. The very concept of being forced to work with Dr. Eggman, even if it was from a distance, made bile wind its way into her throat.

Ivo was her uncle. They were related. She is related to a monster.

All the chaos and bloodshed he's caused and will cause. She rested her elbow on her desk and her chin in her hand and stared at the screen with her upper lip curled.

On top of all that, another witch has wormed her way into the Kintobor family drama. Apparently Regina Ferrum and the Naugus twins were just the beginning. Now they have some ancient queen to deal with and the eldritch abominations that come bundled with her.

Great. Wonderful. Fun-filled times ahead.

However... unlike Regina, Sheptilah's magic doesn't work with iron. That's her weakness; her Achilles' heel. She can't understand typed or pre-recorded language, either.

If Sheptilah proves to be untrustworthy, Hope pondered, we can always throw her in the Special Zone with Feist to suffer with everyone else.

A knock on the door broke her concentration.

"Come in," she called, closing the lid on her laptop. Shadow stepped in holding a foil-wrapped hot dog.
"You missed lunch so I brought it for you," he turned on the light. Hope's dorm was just as bare as his was save for pictures of Team Dark plastered on the walls.

"Oh, thank you," she took the food and munched on it, "I totally lost track of time. I was writing up the summaries for Mr. Cabbot."

"I figured you were busy," he sat on the edge of the bed, "are you doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just… old family memories bothering me. You know how it is."

"If it makes you feel better, the witch said she was going to kick Eggman's ass when this was all over," he grinned at her.

"Did she really?" Hope's mouth curled into a smile, "It's a lot to kick. I hope she's up for the challenge." She took another bite, "So you trust her?"

"I don't trust anyone that works with Eggman, but it's not entirely her fault. It's actually somewhat my own fault, too. I let him destroy the moon years ago and she doesn't know this."

He stared at his metal skates, "All those people that died in the Soumercian base… they died because of my indirect actions."

"Shadow," Hope sulked, "None of this is your fault. Nobody could've known this would happen." She set the remains of the hot dog on her desk and sat next to the hedgehog.

"Still," he began, "I thought I was making up for my past. I guess it will catch up to me over and over again."

Hope wrapped an arm around his thin waist and pulled him in for a hug. "You've already done that and then some. This is Eggman's past that's catching up; not yours."

Shadow felt great comfort in Hope and it wasn't simply because of her resemblance to the late
Maria. She was one of the few overlanders he could stand to be around for more than an hour. Hope is a trusted confidant and wise beyond her years- so he always turns to her for advice when he can't find his own answers.

The hedgehog rested his head against her shoulder gently. He was quiet for a while, lost in thought.

"Something else is bothering me, too," his ears flicked impatiently.

"What?" Hope sighed.

"She's way too nice," Shadow closed his eyes and wrinkled his brow.

"Wait, her being nice bothers you?"

"Yes," he stood up, "And I think she pretends to be weak to feign innocence."

He didn't trust many people but he certainly didn't trust strangers that come bearing armfuls of gifts and promises.

"And the witch orb. She just bit into her hand like it was nothing so we could simply summon her if need be; and those promises that she'd fix whatever Eggman broke. I think she is manipulative and more suspicious than she lets on. Why everyone seems to trust her right off the bat is beyond even me."

"She bit into her own hand?" Hope's mouth curled in disgust.

"Yes. Just… right in the area between your thumb and forefinger," he held the fingers apart for emphasis, "She bit right into them and drew blood and picked up sand. The witch orb works as she described it but… it was just weird." Shadow has seen a lot of nonsense but witnessing someone self harm by taking a bite out of their own meat was unsettling.

"Yikes," the skin between her fingers ached just thinking about it.
Hope then sat up with a start and grabbed her laptop and opened a search bar.

"I was doing some casual research on witchcraft and what you just said reminded me of something I saw." She was typing frantically. She brought up a webpage detailing blood magic rituals.

"This may be out of date since she's thousands of years old but," she scrolled down, "it sounds like she may be a blood witch. If this is correct, and it may not be, blood magic performed using the witch's own blood is irreversible."

"Irreversible?" Shadow knew nothing of magic beyond technomancy and crystalmancy.

"As in, the spells cannot ever be broken; even by the witch themselves. So those witch orbs are permanent." Hope paused, "that also means anyone whose blood she comes in contact with she can use to curse them or kill them by mixing it with her own."

"That could explain why she's so quick to heal people and uses her hair for it. The ends were pink with it after the run-in at the Egg base." Now the wheels in his head were turning.

Sheptilah was leaning on the sink and staring deeply into the reflection of her eyes in the mirror. The witch had gotten out of the tub and caught her own vision in the silvery surface and was drawn to scrying without intending to. The sound of the water going down the drain was the perfect white noise.

Show me, after a few minutes she felt her ears begin to ring, show me my familiar. Her eyes unfocused and her vision blurred.

Show me. She felt angry. Very angry. The world was whirling around her.

Suddenly the world shifted as if she was high up, walking precariously on a narrow surface about to fall. The feeling in her stomach of being dropped from high up was nauseating.

Her breath quickened and her grip tightened. Her knuckles were almost as white as the porcelain she was clutching.
Death. She felt death pounce. Something hot entering the back of her head and an explosion of color and then blackness. The sensation of heavy iron holding her arms and legs down.

The feeling of running in a loop-de-loop and pushing yourself forward with tension.

The taste of sugar overflowed in her mouth making her teeth ache and saliva drip from her chin.

The feeling of drowning with your lungs full of water overcame her next. That dreamy, warm feeling of drowning when you accept that you are about to die and go with the flow of it.

Blood everywhere that wasn't yours.

Starlight was the next thing that came into her mind. Starlight so blinding and beautiful and something golden and fiery in your line of sight. She wanted to catch whatever it was with all of her heart.

The planet from high above looks so beautiful and strange. Was Zanu really this green?

A strange kind of twinkling music coming from instruments she did not yet know the name of drowned out the incessant ringing in her skull. Brightly colored lines in the shapes of an archer and a whale. Lights that felt ice cold to the touch.

*Who is my familiar…* She demanded again. Flight- the feeling of being thrown high into the air only to be caught and let down gently. Sheptilah was experiencing all of these sensations at once and shivered.

The feeling of questioning your own reality. She was suddenly unsure if she existed or was a dream. Who am I? Who am I? The words bounced in her brain like distorted echoes in a tunnel.

*Who is my familiar? Tell me, Universe. Who is it? Where are they?*

Sharp. Round. Sharp. The adjectives kept changing. Which was it? It could not be both.
Hot. Cold. Why is this so conflicting? Blue eyes. Eyes as blue as the morning sky.

"I can't move my feet."

She felt intense fear trying to access whomever it was that was her familiar. Something was blocking her and it began to hurt. She felt pain shoot up her arms and feet as if her bones were snapping. Sheptilah tried to snap out of the scrying herself but it was not working.

Then a crack. The clatter of something breaking on the floor 'woke' her along with the painful thud in her foot.

Her vision refocused and she saw she had chunks of porcelain in her hands and another had hit her toes. She broke the sink.

She looked up into the mirror and for a brief second saw herself with only one glowing eye. The vision came and went like lightning.

Sheptilah looked around and saw she was still wet and dripping. She heard the tub still draining. She checked the water level and realized wasn't even scrying for more than a few seconds when all Hell broke loose.

She was afraid of her familiar.
Who Was In My Room Last Night?

Orbot was cleaning nearby when heard the noise and floated off to investigate. He saw the mess Sheptilah had made and was incensed.

"Do you know how long it took him to pick out that pedestal sink? Four hours. Four! We were standing in the hardware store for that long so he could decide on a sink he hardly ever uses. Why did you break it?" He had a hand on his 'hip' and was pointing at her with the other.

"Hm?" Sheptilah still didn't understand the robot.

"Oh right, you can't talk to me," Orbot went up to her and pushed her out of the bathroom so he could begin repairs, "might as well since nobody listens to me anyway. And put on some clothes!" He punctuated his anger by slamming the door.

Eggman was awakened by the commotion and shuffled bleary-eyed and half-asleep down the hallway to the source. He was so exhausted didn't even notice Sheptilah was nude. All he saw was a mass of white hair and a brown human shape against a gray wall.

"What did you do?" He asked with sleep still lingering on his tongue and glasses still on his face. Apparently they were never taken off.

"I accidentally broke the washbasin." She was still shaking from the scrying.

"Don't do it again."He turned around and walked to the living room to flop on the sofa. He landed with a soft 'oomf' and was right back to sleep, snoring loudly.

*That's not even where he woke up from, Sheptilah thought, and that's where I wanted to sleep!*  

Sheptilah herself went to Eggman's room and curled up under the blanket next to the still-sleeping Thunderbolt since it was the only other place she knew of to rest. The chinchilla rolled over and nuzzled next to Sheptilah's cheek thinking it was Eggman's. The witch was enthused with how soft Thunderbolt's fur was and snuggled up closer. She felt much better not being alone.
The peace didn't last very long.

It was only a few hours into the afternoon when Eggman had woken up on the sofa. He didn't remember falling asleep there, but he didn't care to question it since he slept there more often than his own bed.

He trotted into the kitchen to make himself some coffee and review any messages on the Eggnet. He noticed a pile of garbage by the entrance that Orbot was tying closed.

"What did you do?" His tone was one of annoyance.

"Me? I did nothing! It was that lady friend of yours. She broke the sink." Orbot slung the bag over his shoulder and proceeded to put it in the dumpster out back.

"Huh. I feel like I already knew that. Hm." He scratched his bald head with a gloved hand.

He should have felt angry but he didn't. Maybe it has to do with the bonding, he thought, I will have to push for the separation. The very concept of not being in control of his own emotions was depressing.

Orbot came back in with Cubot who was out tending to the garden. Eggman ordered the two to start making some food for himself and the two visitors.

"Remember that Sheptilah is a vegetarian. Thunderbolt will eat whatever you put in front of her but she prefers dried food." He was fixing himself a cup of coffee, "I'm going to go shower. Where are the girls?"

"Scanning..." Orbot was connecting with the internal surveillance, "They're both in your bed."

"Oh," Eggman pursed his lips, "That's... unexpected." With coffee in hand he walked to his room
nearby and turned on the light.

"Five more minutes, Clove," Thunderbolt mumbled and rolled over and in the process getting tangled up in Tilly's hair like a fly in a web.

The witch stirred. She opened her eyes and squinted at the brightness. "Who turned on the sun?"

Ivo sipped his drink, "While I'm typically not opposed to having women in my bed- you have about thirty seconds to get out of here before Thunderbolt fully wakes up and rips out your jugular." He said it so casually and so quietly it was as if he was joking.

He certainly enjoyed the view. Her small and perky breasts were barely hidden by silvery white tresses. The woman’s soft brown skin was covered in a smattering of dark freckles head to toe like stars peeking out in the dusk sky. Her bony physique was worrying, though. He was afraid she may snap in half if he so much as looked at her too hard.

"She wouldn't," Tilly smiled nervously, "Right?"

"Twenty-five seconds…” He tapped his foot for each second that passed. "Twenty-four… when she murders you I am not going to be able to put you back together because I'm not that kind of doctor. Nineteen…”

His calculations were wrong. Thunderbolt was roused by his talking and went to stand but found herself struggling against the massive amount of hair she was wrapped in. Tilly sat up and covered herself with the blanket with one hand and shook Thunderbolt out of her locks with the other.

The chinchilla landed on the pillow face-first. She lifted her head to look at Eggman with a flushed and angry face.

"I can explain!" She started, but realized it was of no use since there was nothing to explain.

"It's so cute when my underlings get along," he quipped.

Sheptilah rolled her eyes indignantly, "I am not your underling; if anything you are my underling."
"You keep telling yourself that," he smiled behind his mug. He certainly couldn't see anything of Sheptilah's that would warrant an R-rating and her normal clothing left little to the imagination regardless. Ancient desert dwellers seemed to enjoy the climate in two ways: wearing a lot or wearing a little. Sheptilah apparently came from a culture that practiced the latter.

Thunderbolt let out a horrified gasp when she realized Sheptilah was 'al fresco'.

"Where are your clothes?!" Thunderbolt's tail bristled with agitation, "How dare you defile this sacred space." She pointed a gloved finger at the overlander, "You make me sick!"

With a snap of her fingers the witch brought her clothes she was found in on, "Are you less upset now?" She stood and stepped on her circlet. "What's this doing in here?" She retrieved it and put it on her head where it belonged.

Eggman laughed. "Relax, it's okay. She's not from our time. They didn’t have the same kind of modesty or shame we do. It’s culture shock."

Thunderbolt smoothed down her fur. "If you say so."

"Are you hungry, T.B.?" He asked the chinchilla, "Orbot and Cubot are making something for all three of us."

"I get to eat in Lord Eggman's home? I'm so honored!" She clapped her hands together joyfully. Eggman gathered up the clothes he intended to change into after setting his empty cup on the dresser.

"We'll discuss new plans for the Soumercian base over dinner. Right now I need to tidy up." He shot Thunderbolt a look over his shoulder, "And no fighting." He left for the bathroom and wanted to inspect the damage done.

"Yessir!" She saluted him. How exciting; a new base! Maybe this time she'd get to pick the interior decorator.

"Thunderbolt," the woman turned to the Mobian and whispered, "Remember what I said about the
apple and that you don't have to worry about me and Ivo? I'm serious about that."

"Well, I was thinking about that. How could a spell like that even work for me? I'm not a witch." The chinchilla was looking around the room and decided to snoop a little. She sniffed around and looked in some of his drawers and was disappointed to see he had several 'copies' of the same clothes he wore all the time.

"All sapients can perform magic like mine," Sheptilah made the bed a little neater, "Some better than others. You, Dr. Eggman, anyone with a heart and a brain… you can do magic. It's a wonderful thing. It's an energy that unites all living things throughout the universe. It's also possible to borrow my energies for your purposes."

"I know that you can do anything with the Chaos Emeralds if you have enough of them," the chinchilla shut the drawer, "And that if you have magical artifacts you can use those."

"I don't know anything about any Chaos Emeralds," Sheptilah bobbed her hair again with a glamour, "Come on, let's go eat. Stop snooping."

"Don't tell me what to do, human." Thunderbolt snapped but did follow Sheptilah to the dining room.

They passed by the bathroom and could hear the shower running at full blast. Steam was crawling out from under the door and Thunderbolt was tempted to take a peek and lingered.

"All human men look the same, Thunderbolt," Sheptilah nudged her along gently with her bare foot, "Don't be a creep."

"You are no fun." She scowled.

Orbot and Cubot had set out a salad for Sheptilah but reheated the leftover chicken for everyone else. The blonde chinchilla’s mouth watered at the sight of the fried chicken wings and bolted for the table.

The bathroom looked mostly untouched except for a cracked tile and the sink missing.
"What the hell did that woman do to destroy it in the first place? I spent four hours picking that sink out and I don't think they make it anymore." He was grumpy at the thought of having to buy a whole new sink.

It wouldn't match the current fixtures and he'd have to redo the whole damn bathroom!

He ran the shower hot because he just didn't feel clean unless he was properly boiled. After undressing (except for his glasses) he got in and inhaled the cleansing steam.

"This is ridiculous," he was mumbling as he lathered up, "Absurd and ludicrous. Well, maybe not. I have been wanting to redo the lair...and having guests for once proves I should really have a second bedroom or three.

I could also upgrade to an en suite. Maybe put in another closet for my weapons." The ideas were bouncing in his head wildly.

Then he started thinking bigger. Maybe a terraced garden out back instead of the small one he has now. He could create tiny robotic bees that kill all the flowers on the island except for his beautiful botanical garden and he would charge admission for people to come see it!

Why stop there? He could grow genetically modified fruits and vegetables and those same bees could kill the unmodified ones on the island and the people would starve if they didn't buy his special food!

He finished washing, dried off and got redressed. What an invigorating shower! All of his best thinking was done under hot water.

He combed his fingers through his silky mustache with excitement.

"Ladies, where are y-" As he entered the dining room he saw Thunderbolt was standing on the table with a knife pointed at Sheptilah just inches from her throat.

"I explicitly forbade fighting," Eggman frowned. "Feet off the table, T.B."
Thunderbolt was startled and dropped the knife. "I'm so sorry, Lord Eggman! I was trying to teach the witch a lesson in humility." She jumped down into her seat and sat primly with her hands gripping the table's edge.

Eggman looked at Sheptilah and raised his eyebrows.

"Miss chinchilla wanted me to wear an Egg army uniform and I refused," she sighed with relief.

Like most knives that one was made of steel which contained iron. One small nick to the jugular and the witch would've been about as lively as a carrot.

"Thunderbolt is extremely passionate about my military-industrial complex and I look for that in an employee," Thunderbolt squeaked with joy when she heard those words, "However she is merciless."

"I don't like the color red," Sheptilah took a bite of her salad with a slightly jittery hand, "I prefer purple."

"You threatened a witch over that?" Eggman knew she had a short temper but that was an overreaction.

"She said I looked like a pumpkin!" Thunderbolt bit into her chicken angrily.

"Ah, well then you kind of deserved it, your highness." Ivo sat to eat his meal in between the women so they wouldn't kill each other. While Sheptilah and Thunderbolt were sitting across from each other Eggman sat at the head of the table.

"Sir, I'm extremely honored to be sharing a meal with you;" she licked the chicken grease from her fingers. “And I'm excited to discuss the new Soumercian base."

Sheptilah listened intensely to the conversation but did not participate. The two excitedly discussed better weapons storage, an improved safety system and perhaps an internal bunker with more creature comforts like a pool table.
She was horrified at how gentle Dr. Eggman can be and yet how vicious he was. She thought back to when he pulled Sonic from the vent so gingerly it was as if the hedgehog would shatter if he squeezed too hard.

And here he was planning a rebooted base for his goal of world domination.

"Thank you for the meal," Sheptilah bowed slightly. The two were too engrossed with their conversation to notice. The witch went outside to rest in the meditation garden. It was small but lovely.

The air smelled sweet from the harsh downpour of rain that beat against the sea all day and the clouds were finally dissipating.

She laid back on the wet grass as the sun set in the distance, staining the sky a bloody orange.

"Sonic, are you home?" Amy knocked on the wall since Sonic did not have a door, "Sticks is doing her thing, again."

Sonic groaned and sat up, "What is she doing? What time even is it?" He saw the sky was painted a deadly red from the sun retreating.

"You have to see it for yourself," Amy shook her head in disbelief, "Tails and Knuckles are helping her. Also it's sunset."

Amy led a sleepy Sonic to Sticks' bungalow in the jungle. The badger was hammering long metal pipes into the perimeter of her home. Tails was standing and watching while Knuckles was actively helping by unceremoniously shoving pipes directly into the stone like cutting into butter.

"Sticks, what are you doing?" Sonic was perplexed, "Is this another one of your traps?"

"No," the badger looked up from her work, "I'm keeping that thing Sheep Tiller or whatever her
"Sheptilah?" Sonic corrected her, "She's a witch not a 'thing'."

"Yeah, that; and no she isn't." Sticks trudged up to Sonic and Amy, "Witches are not hurt by iron! Fairies are."

"Everything is hurt by iron if you hit them hard enough with it," Knuckles chimed in as he shoved the last pipe in place.

“He’s right,” Sonic nodded in agreement with the echidna.

"Sticks… there's all kinds of witches," Amy had one arm across her chest and was gesturing with the other. "What's the difference anyway?"

"There are all kinds of fairies, Amy. They steal babies and replace them with sticks called changelings! They sour your milk and keep people as love slaves! They hate the sound of church bells and will steal sparkly things. The precious sparklies… Sheet Stealer is not stealing my glittery preciouses!" Sticks balled her hands into fists and punched the air.

"Sheptilah," Sonic corrected her again, "It's not that hard."

"She's been doing this all day, guys." Tails was exhausted but was supervising making sure nobody got hurt.

“Mispronouncing her name or building this thing?” Amy asked.

“Both.” Tails sighed.

"If you see a fairy ring, don't walk into it," Sticks warned, "Or you'll be whisked off to Fairyland! ...Or maybe the government's secret brainwashing station. Could be the same place; I'm not totally sure."
Sticks stuffed the pipes with sticky clay and put the handles of knives in it so the pointed ends were straight up as a warning.

"Fairy or not she's working with Eggman," Tails pulled out the knives carefully. "Which means we cannot trust her but we cannot kill her either, Sticks."

"It's not like she wants to work with Eggy; Sheptilah's bonded to him." Sonic took the knives from Tails and put them in the bushes.

Just then they heard a shriek from above. It was the witch and she was falling.

She found herself suddenly up in the air and quickly righted herself, landing softly with the aid of magic.

"What in the world-" Tails backed up.

"Oh! Did I say your name three times?" Sonic forgot he kept the witch orb in his glove, "I didn't mean to summon you." That was embarrassing. He could've accidentally dropped her right on the pipes, too. That would bring down Sticks' property value to say the least.

"I told you she couldn't be trusted!" Sticks pulled her boomerang out of her skirt and threw it at Sheptilah's head. It smacked her in the temple with a thud and fell to the ground.

"Ow! Hey!" the witch rubbed her cheek. "This is the second time today I was assaulted."

"Hey! It's that… lady!" Knuckles was a little slow on the uptake, "I remember you from yesterday, but you had longer hair back then." He walked up to her and looked her over, "Don't fairies usually have wings?"

"A fairy? I don't know what that is but I certainly don't have wings. You, however, are the largest Mobian I ever laid eyes on," He was as tall as Sheptilah, "What are you?"

"I am Knuckles the echidna!" He said flexing proudly.
"What's an echidna?" She was unfamiliar with that animal.

"I'm an echidna," he repeated, "Pay attention!"

"Egg-laying endotherm known as a 'monotreme'." Amy said flatly, "Also a meathead."

"Thanks," Sheptilah raised her eyebrow, "And this is…?" gesturing to the badger.

"None of your business!" Sticks got into a defensive position.

"Sticks, be nice," Amy chided.

"Thanks for telling her my name!" The badger shouted.

Sheptilah bent down and picked up the boomerang and offered it to the badger on her open palm. "I mean you no harm."

"My name is Tails," the fox came up to her and shook her hand, "See?" he showed her his twin tails.

"That's different," the witch smiled, "How wonderful."

"You reek of Eggman," Sticks took the boomerang back, "Badly."

Sheptilah put her hands on her hips and shifted her weight to one leg, "That man is a menace and when this is all over I'm probably going to have him sent to a void somewhere far, far away."

"What did he do now?" Sonic pulled the woman by her wrist away from Sticks who looked ready to bite.
Sheptilah waved him away, "He's going to rebuild the Soumerca base. I don't think he's even given thought to all of his people that were murdered. He seems completely unaffected by everything and so does that chinchilla."

"He's probably repressing his emotions," Amy cut in. "This is a man who cries over his robots being destroyed. It's not healthy. One day he's going to boil over and crack." She emphasized the last word by snapping her fingers.

The sky got dark quickly. Tiny stars peeked out and twinkled. The air grew colder and a gentle breeze caressed over them.

"A king who mourns their toys and not their people," Sheptilah dramatically looked at the sky, "Is the kind of king who gets… you know." She drew her hand across her throat.

"What? What is it? A sore throat?" Knuckles scratched his head, "That would be awful."

Tilly thought that perhaps the gesture was too antiquated for them. She sighed softly, "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"She means killed, Knucks." Amy pinched the bridge of her nose with frustration. "Beheaded. Like with an axe or a guillotine."

"Oh! It's better than a sore throat," the big red one nodded sagely.

"Oh… uh do you remember how you said you'd fix anything he broke?" Sonic chuckled nervously, "I have an idea of what you can do to help."

"What's that?" Amy was confused, "there's nothing in town that needs fixing."

"So fix Eggman." Sonic stood proudly with his hands on his hips and his chest puffed out.

There was a pause before everyone broke out into laughter.
Sheptilah's sides were aching from giggling so hard, "There's not enough magic in the world for that one, Sonic."
"A blood witch?" Rouge was sitting at her vanity in her dorm brushing her hair, "Shadow, you're being paranoid" She squinted at the hedgehog's reflection in her mirror. He was standing in her doorway and leaning against the frame with his arms crossed.

It was the same size dorm as his but it seemed more open. Pictures of friends and magazine cut-outs added color to an otherwise drab gray wall. A soft fuzzy rug next to the bed in pink that matched her bedspread. Overall it was very cute and maybe a little juvenile for someone her age.

"I'm being prepared, Rouge." He was annoyed with her waving off the possibility. Rouge picked up a spray bottle filled with sweet perfume and spritzed it on her neck.

"Rouge…” he was getting impatient, "It's not a date."

"Hmph!" she turned to pout at him, "We're going to be in the vehicle for a long time and in the big ancient building even longer than that. I want to smell nice at least."

"We don't even leave for another hour," he put his arms up in frustration and walked over to her, "What perfume is that?"

She smiled coyly, “It's called 'dark kiss'."

"Ooh, dark kiss," he mocked her playfully. "Who are you trying to be fancy for anyway?"

Rouge turned back to her mirror and smiled at her reflection. "Myself." She blew her reflection a kiss.

Both Rouge and Shadow's ears swiveled to the noise of Hope running down the hall. "Hey guys!" she said breathlessly as she came to Rouge's dorm. "Ooh you smell nice!"

"Thank you, Hope! What's up?" Rouge shot a sassy look at Shadow and he rolled his eyes in return.
"President Tower was considering asking Sheptilah to join G.U.N. if the mission goes well; but that's not why I'm excited!" She was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"I was about to point out that you didn't like the woman," Shadow sat on Rouge's bed and almost fell into it. It was like landing on a warm marshmallow. He was caught off-guard by how plush it was and struggled to sit all the way up.

"Rouge, your bed is eating me alive," he held out his hand so she could pull him out of it.

"What is it, honey? The suspense is killing me!" Rouge stood to help Shadow get unstuck from the bed.

"There's a Chaos Emerald near or in the ziggurat!" Hope chirped, "so we get to kill two birds with one stone tonight!"

Shadow smiled, "That's great!" He turned to Rouge and asked under his breath what the bed's stuffing was.

"Memory foam pellets," she winked, "I sleep like the dead on it."

"Why are we leaving at night, anyway?" Shadow brushed his spines back down, "Wouldn't going during the day be more practical?"

"It's exclusively Cabbot's decision. He thinks Sheptilah is nocturnal and prefers moonlight over sunlight." Hope shrugged, "She's certainly not nocturnal but he says it's 'her house' so it's a matter of politeness according to him. I think he has a crush on her."

"I know I prefer working moonlight," Rouge stated, "It also helps Shadow blend in better to his surroundings."

"I'm stealthy no matter where I am," he puffed out his furry chest, "I am the Ultimate Lifeform."
"Yeah and you almost drowned in a mattress." The bat snickered.

He turned away and huffed, "He is a married man, Hope. He better not have a crush on anyone but his wife."

"His wife's dying," Rouge frowned, "She is a poor candidate for a kidney transplant, right? So she basically lives tied to that dialysis machine. It happens sometimes. Your spouse starts dying so you look... elsewhere for later."

"Just because your wife is dying doesn't mean you start planning to sow your oats elsewhere," Shadow crossed his arms, "It's just crass."

"Grandpa, nobody says 'sow your oats' anymore." Rouge teased, "Besides I was kidding about the crush thing. I think he wants her to heal his wife."

"Tower is going to blow a gasket if he finds out." Hope furrowed her brow. "But it is better to ask for forgiveness and not permission."

"Tch," Shadow scoffed, "He's desperate if he is resorting risking his career by dealing with witches... but I understand." He was thinking about Gerald and Maria. His scowl softened into a slight frown and he looked lost in thought, "I understand completely..."

"Try not to summon me by accident anymore," the overlander lightly patted Sonic on the head, "I'm always happy to drop in, though. Anything that gets me away from Thunderbolt."

Sonic blushed with embarrassment. "Again, sorry about that."

Sheptilah looked around in the darkness. "Since I'm out here I might as well explore the island a little."
"I got my eye on you," Sticks gestured with her fingers, "Alright! Everybody off my property! Scram!" She shooed her friends away and slammed the door to her hut. She then moved to her window to spy on the group still outside her home.

"Sheptilah, I actually have questions for you! I am way into archaeology and I want to learn your language and everything." Amy smiled broadly and sweetly.

"Ask away," the human walked away and gestured for them to follow her.

"I actually have a lot of questions, too," the little blond fox twisted his tails together nervously, "And I'm afraid of the answers."

The Mobians turned on their luminous garments to light the way. The human was amazed at the beauty of the neon lights embedded into their clothes and accessories.

"This is nothing; you should see what I have back at my workshop. You have so much to catch up on after having been asleep for thousands of years." Tails beamed proudly.

"How long is a 'year'? We measured our passage of time in seasons. I'm sixty-four seasonal changes old and we only had two seasons: dry and dry but with a little rain." The witch shrugged.

"A year is three hundred and sixty five days long and there's four seasons to a year in this hemisphere so that makes you about thirty-two years old." The pink hedgehog was amazed at the differences between the cultures already.

"Five thousand and thirty two," Sonic corrected them, "Give or take."

"Wow! You look good for your age," the echidna laughed. "You must be a great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great," he inhaled deeply, "Great-great-great grandma!"

“Thanks,” Sheptilah giggled, “Yeah I do look great for my age, huh?”
Sheptilah was careful to step over rocks and twigs that got in the way on the dirt path, "I never had children. Even if I wanted them I didn't have the chance. We were fighting those creatures all the time. What's the life-expectancy of your average human in this time?" The witch asked the group. They were near the ocean now and the air smelled of it.

"Uh… about seventy years." Tails answered, "Why?"

"How old is Dr. Eggman?" The human tilted her head.

"Physically? I think he's in his forties. Emotionally he's about five or six." Amy smirked.

"Wonderful," Sheptilah chuckled, "We have about thirty years left of his nonsense."

They came to the empty main street of the small village. The cobblestone road was cold and slightly damp but it felt nice to walk on compared to the harsh metal of the fortresses. The area was dimly lit by streetlights.

Then came a strange noise in the distance that rapidly got louder. It was Dr. Eggman on his little hovering vehicle with Orbot and Cubot in tow, both small robots yelling for him to slow down. He saw the group and abruptly came to a stop, throwing his lackeys forward and onto the ground with a loud metallic clatter.

"There you are!" The man shouted. "Don't run off like that." He scolded Sheptilah as if she was a child.

"Eggface!" Sonic dodged the incoming Cubot, "What do you want?"

"I don't want to deal with you right now, you filthy mutated rat," he spat, "I'm here for the lady." Ivo landed his vehicle and hopped off of it. His two robots groaned and stood up.

"Where's your chinchilla friend? Are you hiding her in your pocket?" Sheptilah smirked, "Go away I'm busy."

"Thunderbolt? I sent her back to Soumerca. I came to find you because G.U.N. called and said they
sent a ship to come pick us up right now. We're leaving for the ziggurat tonight." Eggman looked nervous and unhappy.

"Seriously?" Her shoulders drooped, "But why not during the day?"

Eggman sighed deeply. "Probably because it's too hot during the day. Come on, they'll be here soon."

Sheptilah turned to her new Mobian friends and bid them goodbye, "We will talk more later. I can't wait to see all the wonderful things you have to show me."

She turned and felt the air with her fingers until her nail snagged on something invisible and she pulled open a portal to Eggman's tower large enough to accommodate the man and his weird flying machine.

Sheptilah closed the portal behind her and turned to Eggman. "There's some things I'd like to discuss with you before we leave." She motioned for him to follow her as she walked off to the meditation garden to sit on the grass. Orbot and Cubot followed curiously. Sheptilah patted the ground next to her indicating she wanted him to sit next to her but he opted to stand instead.

Orbot and Cubot took the hint and sat next to her.

"Sit, Dr. Eggman. I don't bite. Sit." The witch was getting annoyed, "Even your robots understood." She stretched her legs out in front of her and leaned back on her hands, resting her cheek on a bare shoulder.

"Ugh, fine, but these pants are dry-clean only." He sat cross-legged in the grass next to her and they looked out to the ocean, "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry for breaking your washbasin. I was scrying for my familiar as an impulse and I got scared of what I saw and… I guess it broke in my grip. I will fix it."

"Scrying?" He thought she said, "What's scrying?"
She used her magic to swirl up an image of a mirror floating in the air between her hands, "Staring deep into a reflective surface for divination."

"What did you see?"

"It was more like... feelings than things I saw." The smoky illusion changed to Mobius from high above in space.

"Seeing the planet from so high up... this and the feeling of falling. Like falling forever..." she sighed, "I don't remember the rest." She was lying, she remembered it all but didn't want to think about it. She closed her hands to make the illusions vanish.

"Listen... I have to ask you why you are the way you are," she flexed her ankle until she heard it pop, "Because I don't understand you."

"What's to understand? I'm Dr. Ivo Eggman and I am going to rule the world!" He clenched his fist victoriously and his robots next to Sheptilah clapped politely.

"For someone who hates Sonic and his friends you were awful gentle with him back in Soumerca," she sighed softly, "and for someone who loves his so-called empire you seemed unaffected by all the bodies of your people in your base."

Eggman looked down at the blades of grass gently swaying for a moment before taking a breath, "I knew if I was rough with him you'd have slapped me upside the head."

"Oh, please!" She guffawed, "I've known you for about three days and even I can tell that's a lie; but you're right I would've smacked you. You're not afraid of me."

"It's complicated." To say nothing of the corpses he really was not about to throw the hedgehog across the room after pulling him from the vent in her presence.

"Let's play a game: I'll tell you a secret if you tell me yours," she raised her eyebrows playfully, "I have a lot of secrets."
"Okay," he was hesitant. "What's your secret? You never shaved your legs in your life?"

She looked off at the rolling waves glittering in the moonlight, "For years I've wanted to throw myself into the sea. I wanted to melt into the salty abyss and exist there forever."

"That's not much of a secret." He was expecting something more substantial than that, "lots of women want to be mermaids."

"Ah, I guess I have to be more literal," she inhaled deeply, "For as long as I can remember I have wanted to die."

"Oh," he half-chuckled, "I'm not that kind of doctor, either. I cannot help you." That's when he noticed the raw-looking portion on her upper arm where the metal scraped her.

"I'm not asking for your help," she smiled at him, "I'm just saying. I never wanted the responsibility thrust on me. I knew we were all going to be wiped out by the beasts and I figured why draw it out?"

"What happens if you die since we're bonded?"

"I don't know. You might die with me. I want this bond severed so that doesn't happen because I guarantee you that fighting these witch-eaters will kill me this time," she coughed, "but I think the planet might benefit from you being gone."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," he flashed a crooked smile, "Don't die before the bond is removed, I have stuff planned for next week."

"Like what?"

"I want to expand my meditation garden and try that new meat-lovers pizza coming out at Meh Burger."
She gagged, "Ugh, meat," she shook her head, "After what I saw yesterday I don't think I'd be able to eat meat even if I did."

"Sheptilah, I always regret losing assets. I'm used to them being robots and not living things but I still regret their losses." It was true. Dr. Eggman did not show much emotion other than anger and haughtiness but seeing some horrible things in his life did keep him up at night sometimes. Cubot and Orbot grew bored with only getting half of the conversation and wandered off.

"Assets," she looked at him with those poisonous violet eyes, "As if they were objects."

"You know what I meant," he waved her off, "I didn't know any of them personally. You compartmentalize and move on with your life."

"Compartmentalize and move on," she repeated, "So you do have a heart, maybe; but you were going to leave Thunderbolt to die," she laid back and rested her hands behind her head, "And that's someone you know pretty well."

"If you weren't there she would've died. I'm pretty sure she actually was dead for a moment there but you brought her back." He checked the time on his gauntlet and wondered where the hell the G.U.N. ship was and why it was taking so long.

"You think too highly of me," she chuckled, "I can't do necromancy."

"That's a shame; I was hoping you could revive my mother." He pouted jokingly.

"I'm sorry. When did she pass?" Sheptilah frowned.

"No, she's still alive but sometimes I'd like to kill her more than once."

There was a pause before the witch understood and laughed, "You think you had it hard? I had two adoptive moms. Two. I lived in a constant loop of 'go ask your mother'."

"Two moms?" He raised an eyebrow.
Sheptilah nodded, "Yeah. My biological mom was a friend of theirs. She was killed by a witch-eater not long after I was born so I was raised as the princess by queens Tiamatu and Lulu. When my moms retired I became queen."

"Wait. One of your moms was named Lulu? You have the names 'Sheptilah' and 'Tiamatu' and then Lulu?"

"Lulu means ‘well mixed person’, as in well made from fine clay. Your name is Ivo," she squinted at him, "Ivo. Eggman. Doesn’t mean anything in my language."

"I am named after a strong, vibrant tree species!" he pushed out his chest defiantly, "What does your name even mean?"

"Banana."

"What?" He couldn't hold in his amusement and laughed so hard his glasses almost fell off his face. "Banana?" He was gasping for air between giggles.

"Oh, shut up," her face was red, "Bananas were rare to us and we liked the curved golden ones because they looked like a crescent moon during harvest season."

He wiped a single tear from his eye and wheezed, "Oh that made my day."

She frowned at first and then started laughing, too. It was pretty funny. "You can just call me Tilly for short. It's what Rouge called me." She stood up and removed the glamour keeping her hair bobbed.

"Look," she pointed out to the sea. The G.U.N. ship was approaching. Eggman stood as well and brushed the soil from his backside and straightened his coat.

"Finally!" He brought his gauntlet up and typed something into it. Orbot appeared moments later with a silver briefcase in one hand and a small box in the other and presented it to the doctor.

"What's this?" Sheptilah asked with upturned eyebrows.
"Just some provisions," the briefcase was heavy but he lifted it with ease, "Weapons and the like. I also have this for you."

Orbot lifted the box to give it to Sheptilah. She took it and opened it gingerly. Inside was a little pin in the shape of his logo that emblazoned everything.

"This is a tracker," he explained, "Since I can't communicate with you over a radio due to the language barrier I figured I could give you this pin so I can find you if we get separated."

She affixed the pin to her leather tube top. "Thanks." She thought it looked a little ugly but it would be a good idea to have it due to the nature of the ziggurat's inner chambers.

The G.U.N. ship was large and imposing, unlike the other one they were in the day before. It landed with a heavy thud. The ship was black with the association's logo emblazoned on the side in a deep red. Something hissed and a door slid open. A set of metal stairs unfolded and down descended Boris Cabbot.

"Mr. Cabbot!" Sheptilah waved, "Nice to see you again." She walked up to him and smiled. Eggman sighed and followed suit after giving Orbot orders to keep the lair on the tightest lockdown while he was gone.

The two were escorted into the ship by the director. It was open on the inside with a few soldiers sitting next to each other all strapped in and wearing full combat gear. She couldn't see their faces behind their alien-looking helmets but recognized the red fox from the other day.

"But where is-" Sheptilah was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Yoo-hoo," Rouge called attention to herself. She was strapped in her seat securely next to Shadow, both were wearing warm-looking jackets. Omega was securely fastened into the back for balance.

"There you are! And our grumpy hedgehog friend," She sniffed the air, "Someone smells nice."

Rouge shot Shadow a smug look, "Told you," she muttered.
"You're wearing that to the desert at night?" Cabbot gestured to all of Sheptilah, "Won't you freeze?"

"I don't have anything else," she shrugged, "I'll be ok. The cold night is not that bad."

"I admit I was wrong!" Sheptilah was hit with ice-cold air the moment she stepped off the ship and shivered. She wrapped her hair around her bare arms. Each shaky breath was visible.

"The ambient temperature is four degrees Celsius," Shadow walked past and zipped up his jacket, "Slightly above freezing."

"I envy your chest fluff," Sheptilah squinted at him. Rouge followed behind and looked around with a sensor. Three other G.U.N. operatives got off the ship and set up computers and other monitoring software around the entrance. They were looking for both a Chaos Emerald and those witch-eaters. Omega descended from the ship and stomped around scanning the area but finding nothing.

It was a beautiful clear night and the sky was littered with stars behind a glowing moon. The ruins of the ziggurat looked so small compared to what she remembered with many of the layers and stone houses missing. Time was a cruel mistress.

The ziggurat itself was made up of six layers, each about half as tall as the one it was sitting on. A long, steep and crumbling stairway led straight up to the top with ramps to move up and down each layer where homes and businesses once stood. There were still stains down the sides where artificial waterfalls once flowed.

Cabbot opted to stay inside the ship and monitor from there with Hope still at the fortress.

"The ziggurat regulated its own temperature back then," her teeth chattered, "It was always beautifully mild." Her voice got high pitched and squeaky.
"Oh for the love of-" Dr. Eggman stepped off the ship and took off his jacket and plopped it on Sheptilah's shoulders like a cape. He felt pity for the poor woman but began to regret this act of kindness after he felt a slight chill. She wasn't expecting it to be so heavy, but it was warm and she felt better.

"Thank you," she put her arms in the sleeves, "I think I could live in this coat it's so big." She hugged herself and snuggled into it.

"Aww, how cute!" Rouge teased, "What a gentleman." Rouge's ears were getting numb from the cold and she was rubbing the tips with her fingers to keep them warm.

"I've always been a gentleman!" Ivo huffed, "Have I ever been untoward with a lady?" He paused, "Don't answer that."

"There's something I have to tell you about the ziggurat before we enter," Sheptilah giggled nervously.

"Oh, here we go," Shadow complained.

"So… the inner chambers move. They shift around constantly when someone is inside. It's to protect our giant cauldron and our family grimoire among other things like the royal coffers. So we are gonna get very lost very fast. If you stick by me things will be okay since I am the queen and this is my house," She tried to stand confidently but the cold made her hunch over and shiver instead.

"We're all going to die," Eggman groans, "I never saw Paris."

"Royal coffers?" Rouge perked up, "You mean like gold, jewels, other valuables?"

"Well, y-yes. I have no use for most of it anymore so you can keep whatever you find." She coughed.

"How do we get inside?" Her ears stood straight up and her grin was so wide it almost took up her entire face.
"Up the stairs to the great temple where there is a secret passageway to the inside." Sheptilah pointed up at a few lonely columns that stood at the very top.

Rouge was energized by this information and grabbed the witch by the upper arm and started running up the steps, "Let's go, let's go! I want those jewels!"
Levels

The summit of the building itself was as long as a football field and twice as wide. Getting to the top of it would have been a very long trek for everyone who didn't have wings.

"Rouge," Shadow sighed, "You're forgetting something." He gestured to an operative who was holding headsets for everyone.

"Oh, right!" Rouge stepped down and sashayed over to the man and held out a gloved hand for hers. It had a camera and small microphone embedded into the delta-shaped metal plate that rested flat against the forehead. With it came an earpiece that nestled snugly in anyone's ear and clipped to the back of the lobe.

"This is so we can see what you see," the unnamed fox operative explained, "And this one is yours. Apologies for not having a spare uniform for you, Sheptilah. We dropped the ball on that one."

Given Sheptilah's known iron allergy her unit was made with a thin ceramic coating on the underside so it didn't irritate her skin. He gently traded her bronze circlet for the iron one and helped her put in the earpiece.

Dr. Eggman opened his briefcase and assembled a smaller version of the laser gun he used to blast away the metal walls of the Soumercian base. The small black weapon had a line of red light going down the center indicating it was charged and ready to fire. He put the safety lock on and stored it in his pants pocket.

"Can you hear me?" Hope's sweet voice spoke into their gear.

"Hope?" Dr. Eggman was surprised, "You're still with Team Dark?"

"Aie?" Tilly spoke, "D'jen mi?"

"What?" Hope ignored Eggman, "Oh, that must be Sheptilah."

"She said 'hello, can you hear me.'" Shadow translated, "This is going to be annoying."
"Don't worry, I am just recording what we find. I can see all of your cameras are working. That is the most important part. Can you hear us, director Cabbot?"

"Yes, I can," he answered over their coms.

On Hope's screen were five different squares, each representing an individual's camera. They were all properly labeled with their names except for Sheptilah's which was simply labeled 'witch' and Eggman's which was labeled 'jackass'. Omega had a built-in camera and light, so he did not require any additional gear.

"We are also recording all conversations for posterity, so don't say anything you'll regret." She warned them.

"I have something to say," Omega began but was interrupted by Shadow and Rouge.

"Fine," the robot gave up. He was going to ask if they really needed Dr. Eggman to come along.

"Please, can we go now?" Sheptilah's lips and fingers were blue. She turned to the ziggurat and lifted a shaky hand, feeling for a snag in the air to open a portal to the top. She put a numb finger in her mouth to warm it up and try again when she couldn't feel anything.

"What are you doing?" Rouge raised an eyebrow, "Opening a portal?"

"Yes! I'm feeling for a snag in space to open a portal to the top so we don't have to walk all the way up there," she felt around again and found one and quickly pulled it open large enough to accommodate Omega.

"There are gaps between our dimension and others. If I can find the gaps, which I feel for with my fingers, I can open doors but only if it's to a place I know." Her legs were shaking badly and she had difficulty stepping into the portal but immediately found herself feeling warm and safe when she did.
The moment her feet touched the stone of the temple many rocky torches lit up with blue flames. The group could see a glowing portal appeared at the top of the ziggurat and followed the witch through it.

Sheptilah bent down and touched the floor. Magic flowed through her body and out her fingertips to the temple ruins, restoring it to its former glory with a large illusion. White smoke crawled across the surface revealing what it used to look like. The floor became smooth tiles of lapis lazuli inlaid with gemstones representing individual stars, planets and constellations that have since shifted.

The marble pillars were tall and crumbling. They were placed in a pattern that suggested it was used for telling long periods of time. A deep fountain appeared in the center of the summit with vapor spilling from the spouts.

The rest of the ziggurat remained unchanged as she only needed to remember where the hidden entrance was.

Repairing such a massive building for real would need the added energy of a strong familiar.

"It was gorgeous," Eggman admitted, "Maybe I will base one of my park attractions on it."

"We have good visuals," Cabbot's voice spoke to them.

"Confirmed; looks good up there." Hope responded, "No pun intended."

"First class transportation," Rouge chirped, "I can get used to this." She gasped at how pretty the floor was and marveled at the gemstones in it, but frowned when she realized she could easily kick away the smoke holding the illusion in place.

"We slept out here in the temple to charge at night under the stars. Some of my best memories come from this summit." Sheptilah could feel the sadness welling up in her throat.

"Witch, I have a question," Shadow looked at her with suspicion, "Why can you not just open a portal to the inner chambers where the grimoire is?"
"Because they move," she closed the portal behind Omega and gave Eggman his coat back, "If we open portals and wind up inside something solid it would be instant death." She interlocked her fingers to explain what she was talking about.

She picked a flame bare-handed off of one of the pillars, "Follow me. Grab one if you'd like, they won't hurt you."

Rouge tentatively reached up to feel the temperature of the flames and felt a comforting warmth but no burning. She blew onto it and the flame did not shift with the gust. The bat then gingerly picked it up with her fingers and understood what it was.

"It's a will-o'-the-wisp! There's will-o'-the-wisps here!" Rouge was very excited, "These things lead people to fortune and treasure! This is already the best mission ever!"

"I think it's just a flame," Shadow picked one up and 'juggled' it between his hands, "Like a night light."

"So which is it?" Eggman asked the witch.

"I don't know, they've always appeared when someone was at the temple at night." Sheptilah shrugged, "But you could both be right."

"Or you could all be wrong," Eggman looked over it curiously. He made a mental note to bring one back to the lab to study it but did not pick any up.

It was a fair walk to the other side of the temple. She pointed to a large stone slab, "This is where we performed the executions. Just under the beheading altar would be the entrance to the core."

"Executions?" Eggman's throat suddenly hurt, "Hey…" He hoped she was joking and not serious.

"I only oversaw the beheading of five people in my life; you're fine. These were individuals that committed heinous crimes. Crimes like murdering your own familiar to summon a world-ending demon." Sheptilah shrugged it off, "Y'know, people who really deserved it."
"He's summoned a few world-ending beings," Shadow pointed out with a smirk, "So if you want to make it an even six…"

Eggman's eyes grew wide with horror, "Shadow!"

"Did you ever murder someone in order to summon them?" The witch raised her eyebrow at the extremely nervous man.

"No," Eggman huffed, "I never killed anyone." His bald head was damp with sweat.

"Then you wouldn't get death." Sheptilah said curtly. Ivo exhaled a sigh of relief.

"You'll get a lifetime of hard labor," she flashed him a sharp smile, "As a reward for your treachery."

"An even six?" Rouge scolded under her breath, "We're being recorded." His only response was an uncaring shrug.

"Your highness- please have mercy," Eggman took her small hand in his and jokingly begged, "I learned my lesson the first time I tried to take over the world with unknown magic. I'm not doing it with force anymore."

Shadow could almost feel Hope rolling her eyes at what her uncle was saying.

"Oh?" The witch smiled coyly, "You're so cute when you're nervous and begging for your life."

"Cute?" Eggman squinted.

"Yes, we had humor. I'm going to fix as much as I can without hurting anyone, I promise." She took her hand back and turned to the stone.

Sheptilah dispelled the illusion and was horrified to see the butcher's block was missing and a large hole was visible.
"It looks like someone got here before we did," Rouge spoke into her com, "A very long time ago."

"I expected damage but given the protective nature of the ziggurat we should be alright. The grimoire should be safe." Tilly reassured them and peered into the hole with the will-o'-wisp. The blue light revealed crumbling steps leading downward in a spiral at a width Omega could not breach.

"I will guard outside," the large robot spoke, "And stay in contact. I will not fit."

"Sorry we can't take you with us," Rouge frowned, she was hoping Omega could punch his way through walls and boulders.

"Don't descend yet," Cabbot's voice called into their coms, "We're unable to get a proper reading on the ziggurat."

"It could be the magic interfering," Shadow suggested. "It's happened in the past."

"Our sensors picked up the Chaos Emerald energy in the area but it seems to have moved to five miles below the ziggurat into solid rock. It's not possible." Hope was annoyed, "It keeps fluctuating."

"We are definitely gonna die out here," Eggman's mustache drooped and then perked up, "Wait. There's a Chaos Emerald out here?!" That renewed his spirits a bit. He started typing away at his gauntlet but was disheartened to see the magic was affecting his gear as well.

"Why don't you have faith in me?" She sounded genuinely hurt at the doctor's half-joking comment. He felt a pang in his chest and believed it was the bond punishing him for being mean. To him it made more sense than to label it as 'guilt'.

"Sheptilah, is there anything below the ziggurat?" Rouge asked her.

"No, it's built on solid sandstone. There's nothing under it, everything is inside it." The witch shook her head, "Unless a giant hole opened while I was asleep."
"According to Sheptilah there's nothing under the building," Shadow sighed, "We'll find what we need come Hell or high water."

"We'll keep you posted. You're clear to descend." Cabbot could be heard typing while he was speaking.

"I'll go first," Sheptilah stepped into the opening. Her bare feet met piles of soft sand on the steps and frowned. Seeing her home in such a state was greatly upsetting and if she wasn't so cold earlier she would have cried.

Eggman quickly followed behind her, sucking in his gut a little to get through the small opening. Once inside it was much wider and he could breathe again. Shadow and Rouge descended after that, both holding their wisps close. Something about the structure was making Shadow's spikes stand on edge and he was irritated by every little noise.

"We see you moving downward," Cabbot spoke, "Good. The emerald has shifted positions again as well. Our sensors show it as bouncing around in the center of the building. More or less it is staying put."

Shadow grunted to acknowledge they heard the message.

After a few minutes of carefully descending down they came to a doorway that seemed to lead into solid blackness.

"Stay close," Tilly warned, "The internal lighting should have come on but…" She looked at her wisp, "It seems I will have to do it manually." She handed her wisp to Eggman and touched the ground.

The magic from her Oracle Stone was visible in pure blackness as a faint white glow that spread to each corner and became bright as the sun. They all shielded their eyes as their pupils dilated painfully.

When their vision came back the room was bare and a startled scorpion skittered across the ground and out another stone doorway.
"There used to be furniture in here," Tilly frowned, "Wooden chairs and a table…" Her eyes darted in every direction. "There used to be paintings on the walls, too."

"Our concern isn't furniture, overlander." Shadow spoke, "Let's move on."

"I'm just stating a fact. What is your problem with me?" Sheptilah was feeling extremely uncomfortable with his presence, "And is overlander a slur?"

"Several things about you bother me. Where should I start?" Shadow nodded at the doctor, "Should I go by size or alphabetically?"

"Listen, if you think you're so important why don't you go on without us?" Sheptilah gestured an open hand toward the black doorway, "Go ahead and get yourself killed."

"Please. I'm here to make sure you don't get killed." The black hedgehog was feeling particularly sharp-tongued today.

"You're mighty sassy for someone who barely comes past my waist," she stuck out her hip to emphasize the point, "You are so small and so full of hatred."

"Enough," Rouge stepped in, "Let's continue on." She pointed to their coms again as a reminder that they are being watched, "And no, it isn't a slur."

"It sounds like it is," Sheptilah balled her fists and growled. Eggman laid his hand on her bare shoulder and gently squeezed it to calm her down. She was startled by the sudden contact and squeaked.

"Tilly," he whispered, "It really isn't a slur. I'll explain what it means later. Come on… lead the way."

The tension was palpable. Something was setting Shadow on edge and it was noticed by everybody. Eggman made sure to walk as far from the black hedgehog as he could. She walked through the black doorway and lit it with magic. It was just as empty and run-down.
"They're going to kill each other," Hope spoke directly into Cabbot's com.

"I hope not," he responded to Hope, "At least Rouge and Dr. Eggman are being level-headed, surprisingly."

Sheptilah inhaled deeply to calm herself down. "We have several more levels to go down before we start getting to the shifting rooms. The next set of rooms is…. was a lounge with a pool. Off to the sides of those were my room and my mothers' rooms. After that it becomes a maze."

"Mothers, huh?" Rouge smiled, "Did you ever get caught in a constant loop of 'go ask your mom'?"

"Yes!" Sheptilah nodded, "How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch," the bat winked, "It's still a thing today"

They came to the large and deep room that used to house a pool. All that remained was a large hole in the floor filled with dust and sand and graffiti from thousands of years on the walls scratched in with rocks.

"I can read these," the witch placed her hand on one of the scratches, "My stone is telling me they're from centuries ago."

"What's it say?" Rouge was very curious, "Any maps to treasure?"

Sheptilah was stifling a laugh. "It's a fart joke in Sumerian. 'Why do girls always fart in their husband's laps?' This one on the far end I don't recognize the letters but it says 'George Was Here'."

"That's in English," Eggman nodded, "Our language."

"Ugh. That means people have been trashing my house forever…"

"And that people have been making fart jokes since the dawn of time," Rouge chuckled.
Sheptilah immediately walked around it and got to the remains of what were her room and lit that as well. It was totally empty, not even any graffiti remained.

"Why are we in here?" Eggman looked around, still holding that wisp.

"Because my stuff is probably still here." Tilly walked up to a large stone slab and laid her palms flat against it.

"This room is empty," Ivo coughed, "Unless you can see things we can't?"

"Back up," she pulled the long stone out with magic like a Jenga block and set it aside on the ground with a very heavy thud. She hesitated and then climbed up into the hole and disappeared into it.

"Please don't get stuck," Rouge called into the hole.

Shadow felt fear creeping up the back of his neck. The witch described herself as being claustrophobic and yet was crawling right into a wall. Maybe she had trapped them there as part of some ulterior motive.

Tilly's heart pounded as she felt around for something in the dark and piles of dust. A moment later she shimmied back out of the tunnel with a large box in her hand. It was wooden and did not age well. She was covered in dirt and shook the filth off as best as she could and coughed.

"What's all this? " Rouge gasped, "are these the jewels you spoke of?" Her wings stiffened with excitement.

"My secret stash of stuff." She set the trunk down on the stone slab she removed and opened it. Inside was a very dirty collection of things. A cup made of beautifully carved marble, what looked like a wand with a crescent moon on the end and a long sheathed dagger with rubies embedded in the handle.

"A chalice for drinking ritual potions out of," she held up the cup and then put it in her hair like she did with the grimoire for storage.
"This is my boline," she held up the moon-shaped 'wand', "Its blade is made of the sharpest, purest silver. I cut things with this."

"And finally my athame…" she unsheathed it showing a rusty iron blade, "For ritual cutting. It was a lot prettier when it was new." She re-sheathed it and put it in her hair like the other items.

Under those objects was a small pouch filled with pink armadillo scales. She put that one immediately with the other things without explanation.

"Where exactly are you sticking those?" Ivo stroked the back of her head, "Where does your hair go, exactly?"

"Please stop touching me." she pushed his hand away, "I'm using magic, Ivo. Now let's go get that grimoire. It's huge so we can't miss it. It's a book that's almost as tall as I am."

"And the jewels!" Rouge reminded her.

They came to the doorway that led to the shifting rooms. Sheptilah stuck her arm through and it felt like she was swimming in honey. She took her wisp back from Eggman and held it up to the darkness but it disappeared into the black and illuminated nothing.

Shadow's fur was standing on end and his spines were puffed out defensively. His ears were swiveling in all directions trying to track sounds nobody else could hear.

"Shadow? Our sensors are showing your heart rate is accelerating. What's happening?" Hope spoke into his earpiece, "Hello?"

"I'm fine," he lied, "Just alert." He could hear the sounds of children screaming for their lives.

Rouge shifted uncomfortably on the balls of her feet, "I hear music… dance music. What's going on?"

"Your gear is starting to crackle," Cabbot spoke, "You're cutting out. All of you."
"I don't hear that," Eggman pressed his fingers against the semi-solid blackness, "I hear whirring and heels clicking…"

"Hello?" Cabbot's voice was surrounded by static, "H-he -l l- o"

"Huh?" Eggman tapped his earpiece with his finger, "Hello? Is someone trying to talk?"

"This isn't right," holding onto the door frame Sheptilah took a deep breath and stuck her head through. She opened her eyes and tried to understand what she was seeing. It looked like a small room that was solid, untextured white on all sides and lit so brightly it was like staring into the sun.

From the other end of the room she could see her own head sticking out of the black only it showed her skin melting and barely hanging off her skeleton. She heard a sickening 'plop' as a chunk of flesh hit the floor.

"What are you so afraid of?" She heard her own voice speak from the other side. "Sheptilah," the figure pulled itself from the black and showed her body was badly decomposed and she was dragging the fetid remains of her familiar by the tail, internal organs leaving a slimy mark behind. The Oracle Stone fell off the figure's chest cracked. The burst of energy that came from it pushed Sheptilah back.

She pulled her head back out of the blackness and yelped. "What the… that wasn't normal" She was panting heavily. She swallowed hard and stuck her head back in. The room was empty and appeared to look like freshly-painted with Nannaic figures and writing on the walls. Two doorways appeared, one seeming to lead to a beach and the other to outer space.

She stepped all the way through and pulled Eggman in with her. She was holding his hand so tightly he thought his fingers might fly off.

"What happened?" He could feel his heartbeat throbbing in his fingertips.

Shadow and Rouge stepped in. The noises stopped for all of them and they breathed a collective sigh of relief.
"Hello?" Their coms rang. It was Hope trying to contact them again.

"We're here," Rouge responded.

"Sensors are showing you are all five miles underground now," Hope sighed, "I am going to just disregard that."

"We're definitely not that far down." Eggman spoke, "Can you see the doors?" He turned to the doorways that seemed to lead to space and the beach.

"No. Visual is totally cut off. Nobody can see anything you're seeing." Hope was getting frustrated, "The only cam still up is Omega's."

"What do they look like? Describe it for us." Cabbot was trying to reconnect visual contact by rebooting some of the laptops.

"One looks like a white sand beach that stretches out forever. There's a blue sky and no clouds." Something about the beach seemed off to Eggman. "It doesn't look real, like really bad video game graphics. The other looks like it leads to the edge of the Milky Way."

"The door we came in disappeared," Shadow banged his fist on the wall, "Totally gone. Where is the Chaos Emerald, Hope?"

"Five miles above you according to these stupid sensors." They could hear the girl typing, "Omega's sensors are telling me the same thing."

The witch looked around confused, "this isn't how it's supposed to be. The doors aren't supposed to disappear behind us. This is all wrong."

"Which door should we take, Sheptilah?" Rouge curiously reached out to touch the door with the beach scenery and found it was solid and she couldn't put her hand through.
"We shouldn't take either door," she was holding onto Eggman's hand for dear life. With her free hand she felt around the back of her head for her grimoire. She let go of Ivo's hand and flipped through the book looking for answers.

"Nothing...nothing...ugh." She stomped her foot with frustration, "I'm sorry. I don't know. I can't even dispel this nonsense without the family grimoire, either."

It was then the following cuneiform appeared above the door leading to the beach:

While the following appeared above the door leading to space:
"Tilly," Eggman nudged her, "look." He pointed to the writing.

"That's my language," she squinted, "Those are our phonetic names."

"It wants us to go through specific doors?" Rouge looked over it curiously and took a photo of the writing with her phone, "which one is mine?"

"You and Eggman are labelled for the space door. Shadow and I would go through the beach door." She frowned and put her grimoire back in her hair.

"What happens if I don't agree to that?" Shadow crossed his arms.

"Well, when I touched this portal it wouldn't let me through so I assume it's the same for you." Rouge shrugged.

Shadow confidently turned and walked to the space portal and pushed on it with his hands. It simply would not let him through.

"Let us out," Sheptilah demanded of the ziggurat, "Lead us to the grimoire. It's my right as queen."

No response.

"Let us out!" She shouted again. This time there was a response: the ziggurat began to shake a little.

"Calm down," Rouge tried to soothe her, "You're gonna bring the place down."

"I'm not doing this," Sheptilah jumped back.

"The walls!" Shadow shouted. The walls were closing in on them slowly at first but then began to close in on them quickly.
"What's happening!?!" Hope was shouting into their earpieces, "What's happening?"

"We're about to get crushed to death. Go! Go!" Eggman pushed Rouge through the space door and ran in after her.

Sheptilah was in full-blown panic mode now. Her claustrophobia made her freeze in place.

"Come on, overlander," Shadow pulled her by the wrist to the beach door. "Snap out of it, damn it!" He used all his strength to fling her through the portal and stepped in right before the walls closed on all of them.
Eggman rolled through the portal and landed hard. His head was throbbing like something was trying to claw its way out. The room appeared to be all of space with the edge of the Milky Way visible before him. He tried to find some celestial bodies he recognized but found none. He stepped forward and his footsteps echoed as if he was walking on glass.

"Rouge?" he called into the glittering darkness, "Rouge?"

"I'm down here," her voice echoed from above him, "why are you on the ceiling?"

Eggman looked up and saw the bat was walking around. "Actually, you're on the ceiling to me," he waved.

"Hello?" Their earpieces clicked with Hope's voice, "H-hello? Rouge. Eggman. Somebody?" The girl was typing away on her computer between sips of iced coffee, "Hello?"

"Hello?" Eggman called into his piece, "I hear you, Hope."

"What's going on? Everyone disappeared off of our radar and your video com is showing you are walking around in space. We cannot get data from either Shadow or the witch." She was trying to do a search from Omega's communications for them but again nothing appeared on his radar.

"We stepped into another room. These are illusions, I think." Rouge flew up to be at the same level as Eggman. A large space ship appeared out of a wormhole and passed under them, making the room rumble.

"That's… that's one of my ships," Eggman pointed, "From the Starlight Carnival." Dance music played faintly.

"So remind me again why your witch girlfriend had to drag you along for this?" Rouge smirked.

"We're bonded," he used air quotes. "She claims she doesn't know how to sever it without the family book of spells. I honestly cannot wait to be rid of her." He was walking slowly so he wouldn't bump into any walls. His headache was getting worse and he wondered if it was the separation that was doing it.

"What, you don't like having a cute lady live with you?" Rouge elbowed him gently, "You're both on a first-name basis."

"Not when she is yelling at me all the time, no." His eyes felt like they were bulging, "And I don't think she has a last name."

"We need to find a door out of here," Rouge looked around, "Cover your ears, Eggman. The easiest way is to find the walls."
He put his gun away and covered his ears tightly with his palms. She inhaled deeply and let out an echoing screech.

She was listening intently for the noise to bounce back off of a wall but nothing came. It was as if her voice disappeared into the void.

"One more try," she inhaled deeply and tried to screech but nothing came from her throat but a strained squeak. Rouge coughed and swallowed hard hoping to clear any blockages that might be in her lungs but they were clear. She simply lost her voice.

The music grew louder and fleets of ships began to appear, making the ground rumble enough to almost knock Eggman off his feet. He pulled his gun out of his pocket and aimed it straight ahead and fired. The laser beam travelled a few feet before freezing in place and then dissipating as if it was made of water vapor.

Eggman started humming along to the music, "I know this song…"

"What?" Rouge whispered hoarsely, "What's it matter?"

"'I saw the sign- and it opened up my mind…' That's Ace of Base. Old musical group from decades ago." He nodded, "What happened to your voice?"

"I don't know," she choked. "This has never happened before." The music’s volume hurt her very sensitive ears.

"Hello?" Hope was yelling into her mic, "Hello?!" but no response. They couldn't hear her tinny shouts over the thrumming music.

Rouge saw something flick out of the corner of her eye. More ships appeared under them and the room shook again. The bright pulsing lights made it difficult for her to lock onto whatever it was that was moving.

Wait. Where were their will-o'-the-wisps?

That's when the floor began to crack. Slowly at first but then rapidly. Eggman tried to run but it was like his feet were stuck in place under heavy sandbags. Rouge grabbed onto his arm and tried to lift him by flying to no avail.

\[
\text{What are you so afraid of, Rouge The Bat?}
\]

\[
\text{What are you so afraid of, Ovi Kintobor?}
\]

Before they could react to the sudden voices filling their heads they heard something else become more emergent.

The flicker of light that caught Rouge's attention bounced back and forth at lightning speed leaving cracks on invisible walls and lunged straight at them. She recognized what it was when it was inches from her face.

It was a witch-eater.

All of the walls shattered with a deafening crash and all went black. By the time they came-to they
were in another place and Eggman was drowning in blood.

Dreamscape 2: Concrete Angel

Shadow clung to the doorway by its very edge when he saw how high up the portal was. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly and calculated that he was about seven stories up. He could barely get a grip on the sharp edges of the portal and felt like he was going to fall forward at any second. His tail was pressed uncomfortably against the solid stone sending painful throbs up his spine.

Sheptilah already landed on the soft sand head-first and for a second he thought she had snapped her neck and died.

"Sheptilah!" He called, "Please tell me you are not dead. I am going to be really angry if you are dead."

"What?" She pulled her head out of the sand, "Dead? We're not dead." She looked up and saw him trying to stay on a ledge about an inch wide.

"Jump down, I'll catch you." She stood and brushed herself off and held up her hands.

"I am fine," he lied, "The impact of my weight would kill you."

"With magic, you dingus, magic!" She stomped her foot, "I'm not going to let you stab me to death by catching you with my bare arms!"

"I don't need your help!" He looked out to the distance and saw there was nothing in all directions. He couldn't even see where the sun was. He looked down for a brief moment and then leapt, landing next to the witch as softly as if he jumped from a curb. She took her earpiece out and tossed it into the sand.

He was happy to be on the ground again and looked up and noticed there was a white wall that seemed to reach up to the sky next to them that cast no shadow.

"Where did this wall come from?" He touched it and was rewarded with the sensation of his arm going numb. He quickly withdrew his arm and the feeling came back.

Sheptilah was spitting sand out of her mouth, "It was here when I arrived."

"No, it wasn't," he knocked on it, "This was not here when I was up there. There was nothing in all
"Yeah, well, I promise you it didn't appear the moment you landed." She crossed her arms, "I hate this. I hate feeling so useless and lost."

"Then be useful and find the portal to the next room." He was fiddling with his com trying to get it to work. All he could hear was the low hum of static in his ear so he took out the headset and carried it in his hand.

"Let's walk and see what we find." Sheptilah bobbed her hair with a glamour. "At least it's not hot like my desert."

"Fine." Shadow was already dreading having to dig sand out of his skates again.

The duo silently walked away from the wall. Without any landmarks it was hard to tell how far or long they traveled. The more they walked the more their feet felt heavy and stuck as if the sand was made of molasses. Sheptilah wanted to talk to learn more about him but felt it was better to let him initiate any conversations.

The silence was oppressive. Sheptilah begged in her heart for any kind of noise; a bird calling or a breeze shifting sand. Anything!

Shadow was counting his paces as a way to keep track of distance. After ten thousand steps he felt more tired than he ever had in his life and looked back. To his great horror the wall was still there and only a few feet from them.

"What the hell…?" He growled. "Witch…"

"Hm?" Sheptilah looked over her shoulder to see what he was complaining about.

"We didn't move at all," he swallowed hard, "We had to have traveled at least five miles and the wall is still here."

"It might not be the same wall," Sheptilah looked around but without markers it was hard to determine. Even the stones on the wall were all identical in shape, size and color.

"What if we try to go over the wall? There has to be some logic to this room." Shadow was at his wits end with this nonsense.

"Maybe… but first I want to try something." She held out her arm and with her index finger traced a line lengthwise between her elbow and wrist, drawing blood.

"What are you doing?" Shadow was horrified.

"Marking." She pressed her arm flat to the wall and it left a horizontal line. Then she pressed her arm again at the corners to form an arrow pointing to the left. The wound healed itself instantly when she was done.

"See?"
"That is disgusting. You are disgusting," he scolded her. "You are so reckless with your own body." His arm felt itchy just by watching her.

"What, are you hemophobic?" She was offended by his disgust.

"No but I do not trust people that play with their own blood so much." He felt a knot form in his stomach.

"I don't have paint on me," she shrugged, "And witch blood cannot be washed off easily. This way the damn ziggurat can't undo it and we have a marker to gauge distance with."

"Oh," he sighed, "I suppose that's reasonable."

"It doesn't hurt, I promise." She smiled sweetly, "Let's try again. You wanted to go over the wall?"

"Yes." He looked up at it. It was maybe thirty feet high and could be submitted with a good running start.

She used magic to stir up the stand and forced it into becoming a glass surfboard-shaped plate about four inches thick.

"What are you doing?" He squinted at her.

"We flew on these," she stepped on it and it levitated, "Though typically it was made of stone."

She offered out her hand. "Glass heats up too quickly, so I can’t go too fast. I was the most skilled dune drifter around in my time."

"Dune drifter, huh?" He hesitated but then took her hand and she lifted him onto the board. She scooted forward so he could stand behind her and hold onto her waist.

She lifted the board and the jostling of it made Shadow cling just the slightest bit tighter. He definitely did not like heights and most especially not being in control.

They floated upward to the edge of the wall and peered over it. It looked the same on both sides, the marking in blood included.

Sheptilah slipped off her anklet and let it drop. When it fell on one side it appeared on the other. She looked at the vista before her and a reflection of the two bobbled in the same way heat makes the air dance.

"It's a mirror. Both sides of the wall are the same. So much for my idea of going over it."

"We've wasted enough time; I'm getting us out of here. Chaos Control!" He expected to warp out of there but nothing happened.

"Chaos Control!" He tried again, "Chaos-!" He huffed, "Damn it."

"I'm going to feel for a portal, see if we can't at least get out and start over." She felt around the air but picked up nothing.

Sheptilah lowered the to be a few feet off the ground and pushed forward on the plate. She wanted to make sure the bloody arrow was disappearing behind her. When she felt confident that they were actually moving across the sands she burst forward.
Shadow was beginning to panic at the thought of watching this woman starve to death. They were alone with no foreseeable way to get out and with no food supplies. Shadow, being the ultimate life form could survive for months without sustenance but humans could only last maybe three days.

"Is this normal?" He asked her.

"Is what normal?"

"The ziggurat doing this to the rooms."

"No, it isn't. It just shifted rooms. We stored a lot of junk in them. Huge jugs of water, seeds, things like that. It discouraged people from stealing our stuff and the witch eaters from finding our most precious things." Sheptilah wished her mothers were here to help her, "I can't even ask it to just deliver the grimoire to me. Some queen I am," the witch sighed, "Was."

"How long can you live without food, Sheptilah?" He thought he saw something move across the dunes but decided it was nothing.

"Five thousand years." She joked to cut the tension; she knew why he was asking.

"I'm serious," he groaned, "How long can you survive?"

"Five days."

"And how long could we possibly be trapped here?"

"I don't know but I will not let us die here." She slowed down and came to a halt when the bloody arrow came into view. All of her anger boiled over at that simple mark she made.

"Ziggurat!" Sheptilah shouted upward. "Where is the door? Stop messing with us. As your queen I demand you let us into the next portal. I want my grimoire!"

"Don't antagonize it," Shadow growled. "It may try to crush us again."

"Where there are walls there is a door," she winked.

"Huh?" His ears picked up the sound of something rapidly flicking back and forth. The sand started to swirl beneath them like the sea.

"A witch-eater…!" He could hear it but not see it since the sand was the same shade of white.

"Where?!!" She instinctively flew up higher so it couldn't reach them.

What are you so afraid of, Sheptilah?

What are you so afraid of, Shadow The Hedgehog?

"Did you hear that?" Shadow's heart began to race so fast he could feel his heartbeat down in his
"Yeah," Sheptilah swallowed, "I did. The ziggurat has never spoken before."

The rapid flicking got louder and the creature jumped upward at them and hit the bottom of the glass plate hard enough to form a tiny crack.

Sheptilah screamed and wobbled but caught her balance. Shadow was holding on for dear life with one arm and formed a Chaos spear with the other and was ready to fire it.

The creature resurfaced and lunged at them from behind pushing them both off of the glass board and into the shifting sand. The Chaos spear bounced off the wall and fizzled away. They were quickly swallowed up by the sand and woke up in another room.

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**Dreamscape 3: Let It Flow**

Ivo was drowning. He heard something clatter against glass and the faint sounds of familiar voices shouting. His vision was going black and everything felt numb but he was unhurt.

Eggman felt like he was floating on air and smiled in the simple ecstasy of oxygen deprivation. *Dying wasn't so bad.*

Blood that wasn't his, frothy and pink, bubbled up out of his lungs.

"Get up." He heard his grandfather's gruff voice over him.

*Gerald,* Eggman thought, *you bastard. I knew I'd meet you in Hell.*

"Get. Up." The voice demanded of him again.

*Let me die in peace, damn it.*

"You are not dying. Get up."

*I am most definitely dying. My brain is already starting to go. See? You aren't real. You're dead. You died a long time ago and I am dying in the pit of an ancient building. I think.*

*If you were real you would know what my favorite color is.*

"It's orange. Because it's the opposite of blue."

*Okay, lucky guess. When did I have my first kiss?*
"Ovi…"

See? Fake.

"Do you remember your first kiss? No."

Oh.

Grandpa. Talk to me. I don't want to die alone.

There was a long pause and then:

"What are you most afraid of, Ovi?"

What? Don't call me that. Nobody calls me that.

"What scares you the most? Think about what scares you the most."

Cracked glass. Cockpit glass.

"You're afraid of that?"

Sonic the hedgehog. Glass breaking. I…

"Eggman is drowning," he heard a female voice say.

"Roll him on his side," a male voice replied.
All four of them were reunited in a glass forest. All of the trees, shrubbery and even some skittering woodland creatures were made of it. The leaves scraped against each other like nails on a chalkboard.

Sheptilah was the only one to be hurt when they fell in. The poor woman was directly impaled through the stomach on a short pine tree.

Shadow was roused from unconsciousness by the feeling of something warm and wet dripping on his face. He rolled over and looked up. Through the branches he could see the distorted figure of a woman.

He jumped to his feet and craned his neck to see the witch's eyes were open but were devoid of pupils.

"Sheptilah!" He called. Her eyes moved to the direction of the voice. Her glamour was off and her white tresses were tangled in the branches like tinsel.

Help me, Shadow. Her voice sang in his head.

"How?! How can I help you? You're going to die faster if I pull you off the tree."

Trust me; I will be alright. Be not afraid.

"Rouge!" Shadow looked around for the bat and found her laying on her side a few feet away. He shook her awake and pointed to the witch.

"Oh my God!" Rouge felt her heart drop, "What happened?!"

He climbed up the limbs in seconds, the leaves tinkling against each other. He lifted her by the back of her neck off of the spike and toss her over his shoulder before jumping down.

"I don't know," Shadow laid the witch on her back and gingerly turned her head to the side.

Don't listen to the voices, the witch rang in all of their heads, they aren't real. I am healing myself. Do not panic.

"Eggman's choking on something," Rouge's heels clicked loudly as she ran off to check on him.

She heard him gurgling softly, "Eggman's drowning."

"Roll him on his side," Shadow instructed, "God, why are overlanders so useless?!"

The hedgehog was absentmindedly humming the bars to Mr. Sandman and didn't realize it.

Sheptilah's body was pale and cold. The edges of the gaping wound came together with a silvery sparkle and healed itself.
After a moment her pupils appeared and she sat up, gasping for air between shrieks. She wasn't fully back to normal as her brain was starved for oxygen while she was bleeding out.

Although the Oracle Stone was in control of her body's movements it still couldn't prevent her organs from dying from suffocation.

"Stop yelling," Shadow tried to calm her, "You're okay. You're alive."

The witch's eyes darted in all directions and finally settled on Shadow's. She recognized them and sobbed. She immediately pulled him into a tight hug, stroking his spines.

He allowed this for a moment before pushing her away. His fur was already filthy and matted and the last thing he needed was more witch blood to wash out. *Why do I have The Chordettes stuck in my head? He thought. Of all the songs...*

Ivo himself was awoken by the commotion and coughed up reddish phlegm.

"Eggman?" Rouge spoke to him softly, "Eggman, what happened?"

"I heard Gerald talking," his throat sounded like it was full of marbles, "I thought I was dying. What the hell happened?" His head was fuzzy as if made of cotton candy.

"Sheptilah was impaled on a tree," the bat felt sick to her stomach. She pointed to the gory mess. It almost looked like someone tried to decorate a Christmas tree with paint instead of powdered snow.

Eggman coughed into his hand and looked at the red glob in his palm. "So she was right. The bond would kill me if she dies." He wondered if the blood was even his. He heard Shadow humming to himself and found it almost endearing.

After a moment the witch stood and felt her stomach. Her clothes were soaked in her own blood and she almost slipped on the drops that puddled underneath her feet. She took a few shuddering breaths and swallowed hard.

"Is anyone hurt?" She asked the group.

"Physically? We are okay. Mentally? We are going to need a lot of therapy," Eggman laughed to himself.

Sheptilah scooted up to Eggman and Rouge and hugged them both tightly, "I'm so sorry," she sighed. "I'm so sorry. Maybe we should just forget everything and go." The witch hung her head with shame.

"No way! We came for a book and a Chaos Emerald and we're not leaving without either." Rouge was putting on a brave face.

"We shouldn't sit still for long," Shadow's shoes scraped the glass painfully, "If those damned witch-eaters are around."

"They may not even be real," Eggman pointed out. "In the same way that nothing in this room is
actually real. It's *solid* but it doesn't truly exist."

Sheptilah got to her feet and looked around. In the distance she thought she saw the figure of a little girl in blue run by. "You would be surprised how real fake things can be." She reabsorbed her lost blood.

"I heard your voice tell me it wasn't real." Rouge adjusted her earpiece. "You did say that, right?"

"Yes, I did;" the witch was looking around for movement, "But the voices aren't real. Something is projecting them."

"It asked what I was afraid of and it used a name I haven't called myself by in decades." Eggman absentmindedly tapped his fingers on his gauntlet.

"So it's digging into our memories." Rouge paced back and forth nervously, "It's aggressive and it's attacking us outright."

"No kidding. My own home trying to kill me… something else is influencing its magic." Sheptilah tied her hair in a knot to keep it out of her face.

"The witch-eaters?" Shadow felt a chill creeping up his spine.

"Or the Chaos Emerald," Sheptilah heard footsteps approaching, "Something's coming."

"Shadow! Come play with me!" A small feminine voice called to him through the trees.

"No," his ember eyes grew wide and his hands trembled.

"Maria…" Ivo’s eyes grew wide. It was his little cousin who was murdered over fifty years prior, "Shadow…" He looked at the black hedgehog who met Eggman's eyes and nodded with understanding.

Maria's slight figure emerged from the trees with her hands behind her back. She was a young teenage girl not unlike Hope with blonde hair and blue eyes and a matching blue dress.

"Come play, Shadow. We can listen to The Chordettes on Grandpa Gerald's records like you like." She was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Go away," Shadow turned away from the figure, "You're not Maria."

"How can you say that?" the figure pouted, "It's me. This place is magical! I came all the way here to say hi. Mobius looks nothing like I thought it would. Is this ice?"

"Leave." Sheptilah stepped forward and recognized something and froze in place with fear. Those eyes. She's seen them before.

"Why are you so mean, Queen Sheptilah?" The figure stomped her foot.

"Leave." Eggman stepped forward this time and drew his gun, "Now."
"You'd shoot your own cousin?!" The figure started to cry crocodile tears, "Ivo, no!"

"Eggman," Shadow hissed, "Put it away." His heart was aching hearing her voice again. It had been so long since she was murdered for the only sin she ever committed: helping Shadow escape the ARK colony purge. Every word spoken in her voice was like another stab in his chest.

Ivo hesitated and then put the weapon back in his pocket.

"What's behind your back?" Sheptilah cautiously inched closer, "Show it to me."

"My name is Maria Robotnik and I was murdered by another human." The figure spoke as if she was practicing a line for a TV commercial. "I lived in the Space Colony ARK and was dying in my own body. I am fourteen years old. Shadow is my friend. I died because of Shadow. Shadow The Hedgehog is why I am dead."

"What's behind your back?" Rouge pressed.

"A Chaos Emerald!" The figure revealed it with a big smile, "And it's green! As green as the Mobius I never got to see in person!"

Rouge was already calculating ways to steal the Emerald from the ghost when Sheptilah suddenly jumped forward and grabbed the figure by the throat with magic and squeezed.

Maria's ghost dropped the gem and struggled against the invisible grip holding her in the air.

Rouge immediately lunged for it and held it in her arms as if it was a baby. The emerald was real.

"Where is my grimoire?!" Sheptilah demanded, "Show it to me!"

"Shadow, help!" Maria's doppelganger cried, "She's hurting me!"

"Sheptilah, stop!" Shadow clenched his fists, "Drop her."

"She's not real, Shadow!" The witch bent the figure backwards so far the spine would have snapped if she was real. The trees began to fall apart like a closing umbrella and the crystalline twinkling sound they made was almost as delicate as Maria's suffocating voice.

"Shadow!" Maria's voice grew more pained, "Shadow….."

"Sheptilah, let Maria go," Shadow's world was spinning. He was starting to forget the apparition wasn't real.

"She's going to kill me," the figure sobbed and choked, "Aim for her Oracle Stone!"

The hedgehog could not take it anymore and threw jetted forward on his skates and punched the witch directly on the jaw. The impact sent the woman flying and dropped the figure of Maria.

Eggman ran to the witch's aid and hoped her face wasn't caved in.

"Screw kick!" Rouge shouted as she flew up and shoved her spinning heel into Shadow's clavicle. The wind was knocked out of him and he too was thrown back but rolled into a ball to soften his landing.

The glass forest all at once became a whirling tidal wave of deadly shards rushing at them.
Sheptilah awoke in a darkness so oppressive it almost hurt to have her eyes open. She felt around and realized she was underground in a very small space.

She strained her ears hoping to hear something.

Silence.

*Dead silence.*

Her heart nearly beat out of her throat. She began to scream and scream but her words found no ears to nestle in.

She tried to dig herself out with her nails but she was afraid of suffocating if the packed dirt walls collapsed on top of her.

Then an idea. She'd search for Eggman and warp to him.

Inhaling deeply the witch tried to calm herself and 'looked' for the man.

She felt around for a snag- hoping to find a knotted piece of universe to open a portal with.
Dreamscape 5: [There's No Place I'd] Rather Be

Rouge was in an empty city. Red and gray brick townhouses with cloth awnings over the windows stretched down steep hills. Cute storefronts bursting with fruits, flowers and antique furniture had their doors open but nobody shopping or running the registers. Colorful bicycles with wicker baskets leaned against manicured trees and parked cars.

A cool, gentle breeze scented with lemon made the leaves rustle quietly.

Rouge looked around suspiciously but heard nothing out of the ordinary. She walked downhill slowly and cautiously with the Chaos Emerald tucked under her arm.

After a moment Sheptilah appeared from a storefront with a paper bag full of groceries.

"Rouge! You're okay!" Sheptilah sighed, "I was so worried."

"Tilly!" the bat embraced her warmly. "You found food?"

"Yes! Would you like some? I only have fruits since I don't eat meat."

"No, thank you. Are you sure it's real?" Rouge was feeling hunger pangs in her stomach. How long had they been in the ziggurat?

"I summoned it with my magic. It's real food." The witch reached in the bag and pulled out a shiny red apple. It was so beautiful it could've been mistaken for a jewel.

"Well," Rouge hesitated and then took the fruit and bit into it. The apple was juicy and tasted amazingly sweet. It was room temperature; Rouge would've preferred it to be cold but beggars cannot be choosers.
"I'm glad you still have the Chaos Emerald," Sheptilah nodded, "I was afraid you would've dropped it between rooms." The two continued to walk downhill at a leisurely pace, enjoying the calmness.

"Don't worry! I have a death grip on this thing. Have you seen Shadow or Eggman?" Rouge spoke with her mouth full.

"No," Sheptilah frowned, "and I guess you haven't, either."

"Nuh uh," she held the emerald tighter, "I figure if we keep moving around something will happen." Rouge looked over Sheptilah curiously, "Aren't you hurt?"

"From what?" She paused to think, "Oh, when the hedgehog hit me? No. I can heal myself, remember?" She smiled.

"He really packs a punch; I was afraid your face would be mush." Rouge carelessly threw the apple core over her shoulder. Sheptilah chuckled to herself and kept her eyes fixed at a point in the distance.

"Why aren't you eating?" Rouge wiped her lips with the back of her hand, "Aren't you starving, too?"

"Nah," Sheptilah adjusted the bag, "I had some already and I am saving this for the boys. They're probably worse off than we are."

"What would they do without us?"

"Die, probably," the witch grinned.

Rouge thought her reaction was strange but they were all extremely stressed. She wondered if Sheptilah was just delirious from blood loss. She was still covered in wet stains. It should have dried by now, Rouge thought, didn't she absorb it all back?
"When we get out of here I am going to take you shopping for some real clothes." Rouge loved makeovers and Tilly was the perfect subject for her to work on. The bat wanted to have good thoughts rolling while walking around the death trap.

"Don't I have to give you some jewels first?" Sheptilah flashed a fang, "Speaking of- what exactly do those gems do? How do you even use them?" She pointed her chin at the Emerald.

*Did she always have sharp eyeteeth?* Rouge thought to herself, *I can't remember.*

"Pretty much anyone can use the Emeralds for anything they want if they gather enough. Some people like Sonic and Shadow can go super and do godlike things. Shadow doesn't even need more than one in his possession to warp around.

Chaos energy is really difficult to control. I just like it because it's a giant gemstone." Rouge held the Emerald up to her cheek and gently nuzzled it as if it was a baby.

"I did a search for a familiar earlier but all I got as feedback were some jumbled memories and I can't figure out who it was from but I do know that I already met them."

Rouge could have sworn Sheptilah's words matched her mouth's movements when she spoke. Usually when the Oracle Stone translated her words it was like a bad dub of an old movie.

Sheptilah pulled another apple from the bag and offered it to Rouge. The bat gratefully took it and munched on it, noting that it was a little softer than the first one. "I saw a gold streak roaring across the sky above the planet and a world made of food and something about a girl with blue eyes."

That could be a lot of people. A lot of us have blue eyes. But that gold streak...was it Sonic's super form? Did she see the fight against the Biolizard?

"Hmm," Rouge chewed loudly. "So you saw your familiar's memories?"

"Yes," Sheptilah avoided eye-contact with the bat.
"What else did you see?"

"A feeling of falling rapidly. I think maybe a feeling of extreme guilt? Something black becoming round and sharp again." Sheptilah sounded spaced out, "And being shot in the chest with a gun."

"I think I know who your familiar is," but before Rouge could say anything more the witch's head whipped around and sneered wide to show off a mouth filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Rouge felt like her mouth was full of writhing worms. She looked at the apple in her hand and saw it was rotten and crawling with bugs. She dropped to her knees and started vomiting uncontrollably.

Between gasps for air she opened her stinging, tear-filled eyes and saw maggots wiggling on the cobblestone drowning in her sickness.

"Thanks for the information, bat." All at once the figure of Sheptilah melted into a white witch-eater and grabbed the Chaos Emerald with its gooey 'hands'.

It attempted to use its power but the concentrated Chaos energy filling the crystal proved too much for the creature to handle and it exploded with a piercing shriek; vaporizing instantly and leaving the pristine gem behind.

**Dreamscape 6: I Was Made For Loving You**

Eggman groaned softly and rolled over, having found himself in a warm and fluffy bed under a down comforter. He couldn't open his eyes and instead felt around with his ungloved hand in the sheets. His fingertips bumped into something and he traced it. It was the shape of a woman.
She giggled with delight, "Ivo!" It was a voice he hadn't heard in years.

"Lucinda?" he managed to force his eyes open, "Lucinda is that really you?"

"Ivo, honey…" the figure gestured to herself, "Who else would it be?"

Eggman was very confused. He hadn't even thought of his high school crush in the longest time. She didn't look like she aged at all. She still had those bright eyes, rosy cheeks and wavy red hair like he remembered.

"You work too hard, you know. All those sleeping pills the doctors had you try still leaves you confused in the morning." She gently patted Eggman's head, "You're okay."

Eggman sat up and observed it was his old bedroom from years ago except there were some stuffed children's toys on the floor. They were hedgehogs in pink and blue with little green buttons for eyes.

He looked at his bare hand and saw he was wearing a silver wedding ring.

"Mommy! Daddy!" Two little voices threw his door open and rushed in, "It's Christmas!" They were twin girls who couldn't have been older than five years with hair as red as their mother's. One had short hair and the other had very long hair.

*Christmas? I don't even celebrate that holiday* - his train of thought was interrupted by the little girls jumping on the bed.

"Girls, please!" Lucinda tried to calm them, "Don't jump on the bed." She got out and put on her robe and slippers.

"Sorry, mom," the twins spoke in unison.

"Daddy," the one with short hair whined. "Nanny says we can't open presents until you're up so
come on! Get up!” He was relieved to see they didn't inherit his eyes.

He felt better, calmer and more at home. Maybe it was all a vivid dream brought on by sleeping medications.

Two familiar faces knocked on the door frame. It was Sheptilah and Shadow. They shyly peeked their heads in the room

"Masters," Sheptilah bowed, "May we come in?"

"Yes, of course," Lucinda invited them in. Both Shadow and Sheptilah were wearing matching servant uniforms in black and gold.

"We apologize for the disturbance but," the short-haired girl ran up to the hedgehog, grabbed his hands and bounced, "But Mistresses Ivana and Rosie were too excited about it being Christmas morning." Shadow couldn't help but smile at the sweet little girl.

"Shadow? Shadow the hedgehog?" Eggman was confused again. "Good heavens, man."

"Yes, Master Robotnik," he bowed his head slightly. "Are you alright?" He looked very worried.

Nobody calls me Robotnik anymore, he was highly alert. This must be another room. I'm trapped in another room. It was easy to figure that wasn't the real Sheptilah or Shadow. He resolved to play along until he could find a way out.

"Maybe after some breakfast you will feel better. Mistress Maria will be here any minute with her children. Shadow and I made our famous skyscraper pancakes!" Sheptilah boasted, "the kind you like."

"Well, I do like pancakes," Eggman got out of bed and found he was already fully dressed.

"Come on, girls," Shadow, with Sheptilah's assistance ushered them out of the room. From down the hall Eggman could hear them struggle to keep the girls from tearing open presents.
"I'm so glad we ended up hiring them both instead of just one," Lucinda grabbed Eggman's arm and held it close, "Who knew we'd have twins?"

"Thanks for the exposition," he resisted her touch but became comfortable with it after a moment, "Where is the grimoire?"

"Oh, I see" Lucinda smiled at him, "So you know."

"Yes," he flinched when her grip on his bicep tightened.

"Dearest Ovi Kintobor, I have an offer for you." Lucinda's figure shut her eyes and rested her cheek on Eggman's shoulder.

"What kind of offer?" The hallway they were walking in stretched in forever.

"I am the ziggurat's core itself. I can do anything for you within these stone walls. I developed sentience after five thousand long and lonely years." The figure of Lucinda faded and the world around them dissolved and became something new.

It was now Eggman's office with Sonic standing in the corner with his ankles chained together and looking despondent. The once stunning blue hedgehog was now a bit paler and his spines kept woefully blunted to prevent any uprising. His wrists and ankles were scarred from years of being shackled. He dare not make eye contact with his master. In his hands was a golden tray with a fresh cup of coffee.

The figure of Lucinda was now Katella, another redhead from Eggman's past. Busty and brutal, Katella was not a woman Eggman remembered fondly. She was too rough with the merchandise, so to speak.

"Come, hedgehog," the woman motioned for him to bring the coffee to Eggman. The projection of Sonic shuffled uncomfortably and silently presented the drink with his head down.

"This is sick." Eggman refused the drink, "None of this is what I want."
"Isn't this what *all* men want? Ultimate power. Their own personal slaves that don't speak or run. What else could you want?"

"What is it that *you* want?" Eggman had had enough.

"You are a tough one to figure out," Katella circled him, "I can see that in your heart you want this. You want to be loved, adored and to have Sonic grovelling at your feet."

"It isn't real," he kept his eyes on her, "So it means nothing."

"I see… I know what your fear is now. The witch, the hedgehog and the bat were quite simple to figure out but you… " The mirage pressed her finger accusingly over Eggman's heart, "You're afraid of stagnation."

"Or so you think," Eggman tried to keep his head clear so the 'core' couldn't read it.

"You changed your name many times," Katella counted off on her fingers. "You changed your appearance many times and well...you also keep changing your goals. Stop resisting and stay. Stay here with me and I can be whatever you want me to be at any time. Stay with me forever." She cooed at him.

"Where is the grimoire, the Chaos Emerald and the others I came in with?"

"Is that what you want-" the figure paused and had a thousand-yard stare. Eggman watched the ghost stop moving altogether. A portal opened up beside him, almost inside him, and out stepped the real Sheptilah.

"Gah!" Her hair was matted with dirt and blood, "That would've been *uncomfortable* if you were standing a little closer."

"Tilly?" Eggman stepped back.
"The one and only!" She beamed despite being absolutely filthy.

"How do I know it's really you?" He squinted at her behind his dark glasses.

"I had to convince Thunderbolt to not walk in on you in the shower today by gently punting her down the hall."

"It's you!" He gripped her shoulders tightly. "Don't leave me alone in this cursed place ever again."

"Ivo, please stop touching me," she struggled to breathe, "All day you have been hands-on and it's weird."

"Sorry," he let go, "What happened to you?"

"The room I was just in buried me underground and I'm extremely claustrophobic. I literally dug myself out by my nails. I'm fucking pissed."

"Okay, then," he made a mental note to not trap her anywhere cramped.

"You," Sheptilah stepped up to the projection of Katella which was still frozen in place, "I have had enough of this nonsense." She reached behind her head and removed the rusty athame from its sheath and stabbed the image with it in the throat.

She then sliced in the shape of a pentagram and uttered some ancient cleansing spell, the words making themselves visible on the blade in her language. The magic flowed from her stone into her hands and twisted like dark purple vines around her fingers and onto the athame. The projection fizzled into smoke and the room returned to its natural state: sandstone with empty clay jars.

Sheptilah was panting and sweaty with exertion. "Now let's go find my book."

She opened another portal and stuck her head in to check for danger. When she was satisfied that it was safe enough she pulled Eggman in with her.
Eggman and Sheptilah hopped through portals in a frenzy. She cut locks of her hair and dropped them to mark off the rooms they had already been in and dispelled the mirages in each of them.

The first dozen rooms were simple with nothing special in it as the genius loci was busy tormenting others elsewhere. It felt like hours before they found Rouge's room.

The bat was curled up into a fetal position on the ground, holding the Chaos Emerald to her aching stomach.

"Rouge!" Eggman knelt beside her and saw the poor woman was soaked with cold sweat.

"Eggman?" she weakly replied, "are you the real Sheptilah and Eggman or are you more figments?"

"We're the real deal. What happened to you?" Tilly sat next to her and gently brushed the hair out of Rouge's face.

"Don't take apples from witches;" she managed to crack a smile, "That's what happened to me."

"Can you heal her?" Ivo asked Tilly.

The witch was still panting from exhaustion but nodded, "I have just enough to boost her." She laid a hand on Rouge's cheek and the magic flowed into the bat, curing her nausea and dehydration. The Chaos Emerald released some energy in response to Sheptilah's and it shocked her arm badly.
"Ow!" She shrieked. Her arm had burn marks on it from her fingertips up to her elbow.

Rouge sat up and flexed her wings. She was overjoyed to not be sick anymore.

"Why'd your gem hurt me?" Tilly was rubbing her arm to get feeling back. It was the same kind of pain and numbness felt when your limb falls asleep.

"Oh… the same thing happened to a witch-eater when it tried to use the emerald." Rouge rubbed her eyes, "I don't think it's ever done that."

"Let's go find Shadow," Eggman helped the women to their feet, "We'll figure the rest out later."

**Dreamscape 7: Message In A Bottle**

Shadow found himself standing alone on a beach. The water was dark and looked oily in the orange sunset. The hedgehog could look directly at the setting star and not hurt his eyes. The sound of the water lapping against the shore was calming. Shadow's fist throbbed dully. He couldn't remember what he did to injure it. He flexed his hand to ease the pain and his knuckles cracked back into place.

"Shads!" He heard Sonic's voice call. He blinked and saw the blue hedgehog standing in the sea with the water up to his shoulders.

"I'm so glad to see you!" Sonic struggled to smile, "Help me out of here!"
"You aren't real." Shadow shook his head and realized the gear he was wearing was gone. He looked around for it and found nothing. He looked behind him and saw the empty landscape stretch for miles like the first room and turned back to face the water.

"Dude, come on," Sonic urged, "I found myself warped here. I'm in a concrete block or something. I've been trapped here for hours and the tide came in and if you don't get me out of here I'm going to drown."

"You're a mirage," Shadow insisted.

"I know I'm a sight for sore eyes but a mirage is a little much, don't you think?" Sonic spat out seawater, "Dude…"

"How did you get here?" Shadow brushed sand out of his spines, "That is, if you're not a faker."

"Remember? I wanted to come along so badly! I followed Queen Sheptilah and the doctor all the way out here. I snuck into the building and it attacked me." Sonic was tilting his head back as far as he could, long black nose sticking out of the water.

Shadow weighed the pros and cons. If it really was a mirage he would gladly beat it to a pulp; if it really was Sonic he would get to lord this favor over him forever.

The black hedgehog stepped forward and the water split apart revealing half-buried rusted car parts. It was strange how the water was avoiding even touching Shadow; almost as if it was afraid of him.

He found it difficult to keep from tripping on the debris crunching beneath his shoes but made it to Sonic after a few moments. He looked back to the shore and he couldn't see it. It was as if the ocean stretched on forever.

"My hero," the blue hedgehog smirked. His arms were behind his back and he was up to his chest in the block. Shadow punched the block with lightning-fast reflexes and it crumbled to dust. Sonic stretched and rotated his shoulders.

"Thanks, Shads," he sighed. "I wish I didn't tag along. Thought I was going to drown."
"Have you seen a door? A portal? Anything?" Shadow was not about to play small talk with a mirage.

"All I saw today was a whole lotta beach," Sonic suddenly paused and stared off in the distance.

Shadow peered blankly at the blue hedgehog for a moment and then waved his hand in front of soulless green eyes.

"What? Oh, sorry," Sonic's demeanor changed, "Race you to the shore!" he sped off as a blue smear to the shoreline and waved at an unbelieving Shadow who was still standing in the parted waters.

Shadow simply walked back calmly, the water now only as deep as his knees.

"It's no fun when you don't put your all into it," Sonic kicked a hubcap away dejectedly.

"You're a very convincing fake," Shadow pointed a finger at Sonic, "But I still know a bootleg when I see one."

"Oh, whatever," Sonic's figure leaned forward, "It's also no fun when you don't play along." His body started to bubble and expand as if he was full of roiling water. The blue and peach pelt burst apart like cheap velvet and exposed the witch-eater within.

This one was different from the others. It looked the same but it could speak- and that made it very dangerous.

Shadow formed a Chaos Spear in each hand and was ready to strike.

The witch-eater backed up and remained hunched over its viscous, drippy body.

"Shadow the hedgehog," it spoke with no mouth, "I know what you are. Do you know what you are?"
"I am Shadow the hedgehog, Ultimate Lifeform. That is what I am."

"Do you know what I am?" The being's voice sounded like Shadow's own.

"You are scum."

"I am me," the vile creature straightened up, "And I am here to end your life before you can end mine."

"Fat chance!" Shadow hurled the energy at the beast and it dodged the blasts effortlessly but did not retaliate.

"You may have noticed you cannot teleport here," the creature's voice bounced in Shadow's skull distortedly, "Thus far I have not figured out how to stop your spears."

"I've had enough of your nonsense," Shadow jumped upward and threw more bolts which also missed its target. Glass discs formed on the sand where the spears struck. Under these discs appeared to be portals much like the ones the witch could open.

The hedgehog noticed this and grinned. He didn't have to hit the beast- just everything else around it until it's cornered.

A door opened over the sea. Eggman, Sheptilah and Rouge fell through it with their hands clasped together in a circle. The trio landed with a loud splash but not before Shadow could hear the witch screaming apologies for her bad aim.

Rouge flew up out of the water and spiraled toward the creature at the shore and kicked it in the jaw. The fluid beast absorbed her impact and flung her upward. Rouge twisted so she was right-side-up and landed safely on the sand.

Eggman and Sheptilah popped their heads out of the now waist-deep water and tried to walk to the shore but were met with rusty metal slicing up their legs and feet. Eggman scooped up the witch in his arms and carried her. His boots protected his feet from getting too badly injured but Sheptilah, by virtue of being barefoot, was unable to even stand on her own since her leg looked like cheap sashimi.
"Shadow, catch!" Rouge threw the Emerald at him. He caught it in his hand and used its power to create a massive Chaos Spear and aimed it at the water away from the two overlanders.

The resulting energy surge caused the entire Ziggurat to shake violently.

Omega was nearly knocked off the summit of the building from the tremors. That was the final straw for him. Everyone had been missing from communication for over six hours and G.U.N. agents were unable to get to them. It was time to blow apart the problem.

"I'm going in!" Omega announced to Cabbit and Hope.

"Wait a second-" Hope's exasperated little voice fell on deaf ears. Omega was already punching and blasting his way inside. The robot was careful enough to take out one wall at a time as he was looking for his comrades and, unfortunately, Eggman. G.U.N. agents followed the robot in.

Back at the 'beach' Shadow and Rouge were each taking turns attacking the cackling monster while Eggman was doing his best to keep Sheptilah from bleeding to death.

"You owe me so much when we get back," Eggman flinched when the ziggurat rumbled again. "If we get back." He was squeezing her calf to stop the flow as much as possible. He did not do well with blood which is why he became a doctor of robotics and not biology. He was getting queasy.

"I know, I know," Sheptilah was writhing with pain. "Whatever you want just hold my leg closed! I feel like I'm going to faint."

"Don't faint- you may not wake up again." He wasn’t being dramatic.

"I'm trying not to… I feel like I'm falling asleep," she gritted her teeth, "I don't feel good." She whined.

"I was talking to myself!" Eggman huffed.
"I am here," a robotic voice announced itself. It was Omega, making a grand entrance by punching a wall out. This caused the illusion to fully fizzle out and reveal the room for what it was: empty but quite large.

"Omega!" Shadow and Rouge shouted in unison.

"I am impatient," the robot beeped.

Shadow cornered the creature and was able to use one final Chaos Spear to destroy the witch-eater before it could rebuild the room. The being exploded in all directions with an ear-splitting shriek and vanished like water vapor.

"I'm so happy to see you, Omega." Rouge stood and brushed herself off, "We must look awful."

"Your appearance is unchanged," the robot beeped. Rouge scoffed at the unintentional insult. G.U.N. agents immediately tended to Sheptilah's more dangerous wounds with their first-aid kits and carried her and the limping Eggman to the ship outside.

"We can't leave until we find the grimoire," Rouge explained to the other agents.

"We found a big book in a crystalline box on our way down, actually." The red fox nodded, "It's already been loaded into the ship by one of our larger agents."

"Well that's extremely convenient." Shadow smirked and held up the Emerald, "At least one of our targets today was easy to acquire. We went through Hell to get this."

"Several Hells," Rouge corrected him. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Shadow. Just be grateful this excursion to Tilly's house over."
"You should really take a gentleman out to dinner before you handcuff him to something," Eggman joked, "This is wholly unnecessary."

A female overlander in G.U.N.-issued nursing scrubs rolled her eyes and scoffed. Eggman tried to get comfortable in the hospital bed but he just couldn't. He was also dressed in those flimsy, drafty cotton gowns they issue all of the patients.

He felt especially naked without his gauntlet. They at least let him keep his glasses.

"Why can't I just go to a hospital of my choice?" He shifted his weight and the cuffs clinked against the bars of the bed.

"Because you have been a thorn in our side since..." the nurse crossed her arms, "since whatever day you were born." She tried to storm off but her squeaking shoes dulled the bite.

Ivo's leg was bandaged tightly and the wound throbbed painfully with each heartbeat. The cuts were so superficial all they needed was to be cleaned and glued shut. He was fit enough to be released immediately but no- those damned unjust G.U.N. officials wanted to keep him prisoner.

Rouge stood under the shower-head just leaning against the tile. She was so tired and felt so disgusting she barely had the energy to wash herself. Through sheer willpower alone she managed to get the bulk of the filth off and pull on her pajamas.

She flopped into her big, cushy bed and fell asleep almost instantly.

Shadow was sitting in a hot bath furiously scrubbing his fur. The witch blood would not come out no matter how much soap he used. "This must be how Lady Macbeth felt," he muttered to himself. Out, damned spot!

He remembered an old trick Maria taught him when it was nearing the end of her life: blood comes out with hydrogen peroxide.
Grandpa tells me it causes blood cells to lyse… that means break apart, he could remember her little voice teaching him, you pour it on the stained thing and it bubbles! And the blood washes out.

He pouted; the medicine cabinet was on the other side of the room and he was comfortable in the water.

The hedgehog groaned and got out, careful not to slip on the cold tile. He grabbed the brown bottle of the peroxide and got back into the warmth of the tub. He began by pouring a few drops on his extended arm and expected it to bubble but there was no reaction.

He poured on a little more but still nothing. Then he flipped the bottle and read the underside.

"Expiration date August fifteenth, two-thousand-and-one. This expired before I was even resurrected." He groaned loudly and set the bottle on the edge of the tub and slipped under the water leaving only his ears poking out.

Of course it's expired. It wouldn't be my daily life if things didn't go wrong.

_____________________________

Sheptilah awoke to find her left arm was burning and she couldn't move her right leg. She pulled back the blanket to see that she had black marks all up her arm and a rash where a blood transfusion IV was taped to her skin.

She reached to pull the offending needle out but was met by scolding.

"Do not take that out," Shadow hissed. He was sitting next to the bed in a chair, feet swinging absentmindedly as he read a thick paperback. Although Sheptilah couldn't read the cover it was House Of Leaves.

Her heart rate monitor beeped with her startled jump. "Shadow! You nearly scared me to death."
"I am told you bit a doctor so I am here to make sure you do not do that again." He didn't look up from his book.

"I don't remember biting anyone." She ran her tongue over her teeth, "Why would I do that? Ugh, my mouth feels like it's full of cotton."

"Welcome to the G.U.N. hospital wing," he turned a crisp page, "Where sometimes our doctors are chew toys." The beeping on the monitor slowed as she calmed down.

"Is this blood?" She gestured to the plastic bags hanging from a metal rack. One was red and one was clear and both had tubes that met in a small cylinder at the ends that slowly dripped into the tube leading to her arm.

"Blood and saline;" he turned another page, "You lost a lot of blood. Most of it in my own fur."

"Whose blood is this?" She was slightly disgusted by the idea.

"Another human donor. It's anonymous so we don't know their identity. Apparently O- is in high demand so you should consider donating when you're not recovering from being impaled on glass trees."

"Here," she reached out her palm and curled her fingers as if grabbing something. This caused the dried blood that still clung to his fur to disappear into a dusty powder and absorbed back into her hand.

Shadow ran his hand over his now clean fluff. "Thanks," he paused, "I also want to apologize for sucker-punching you."

"No, it's alright. You hit my jaw. I can heal my jaw and I barely felt it. Had you hit my Oracle Stone you would've killed everyone." She brushed off the attack; she knew it wasn't his fault.

"What?" He raised an eyebrow.
"My stone holds all my magic so if it breaks, even a little crack, it unleashes all that energy at once and it goes off like…” She made an explosion sound and gestured with her hands.

"Wait," he remembered the 'Maria' figure urging him to punch the stone and at the last second he aimed upward instead of downward, "I almost killed everyone?"

"Yeah. Everyone. You would've taken the whole ziggurat with you and then some. We'd be scorch marks right now if you didn't aim at my mouth. So… thank you. Thank you for splitting my lip and not splitting my stone." She watched the mixture of blood and saline drip.

"The ziggurat tried to kill us all?” What else almost happened in there? He felt dread creep up over the back of his neck.

"No. Whatever was controlling it was." Sheptilah sighed, "Something was controlling it. Or someone- and it knew about our stones and what it does."

She struggled to sit up. She just couldn't seem to get the leverage to scoot upward and laid back down with defeat. She tried to bend her knees and learned she was cuffed to the bed by her ankles.

"Why am I being restrained? I want to speak to Mr. Cabbot."

"Because you bit a doctor." He was finding it hard to concentrate on the page before him and shut the book, "Did you know you talk in your sleep?"

"I do?" She sounded dreamy, "Did I say anything nice?"

"You were calling for Hebat; your old familiar."

"Precious Hebat," the witch sighed, "I miss her so much. I wonder…” Tilly was a little loopy due to pain medications and drifted off without finishing her thought.

"Wonder what?"
"I wonder if I could bring her back." She sighed softly, "My little pink armadillo."

"Bringing back the dead?" His stomach knotted.

"Yes..." She held the 'sss' longer than necessary.

"Bad idea. Bringing back the dead is... impossible, isn't it?" Impossible wasn't the word he wanted. Shadow wanted to say 'sacrilegious'.

"Is it? I never tried. It's probably possible but..." She coughed, "Oh so forbidden. I would give my life to have Hebat back, though. I don't know who my new familiar is but I am scared to death of them. I am pretty sure I've already met them. That's what scares me so much; I felt things and what I felt..."

Sheptilah shut her eyes and her words slurred a little, "I don't want that familiar. I don't want to know who is holding those secrets."

"Would the Universe really pair you up with someone or something so vile?"

"Well, it paired me up with Eggman."

"Fair enough."

"I’m just... I’m just afraid my familiar will hurt me. Sometimes bad pairs do happen. It’s rare but I’ve executed people for abusing their familiars before. It happens. From what I’ve seen and felt this being is uncontrollable and vicious. Dangerous. Has killed before without reason or remorse. There was a human child involved, too, or something."

Sheptilah’s head hurt from trying to recall what she saw.

"What if my destiny is to just die? Go out with a very large bang like the ziggurat wanted. Am I supposed to take Eggman and my familiar down with me because the Universe deemed them so
Shadow was uncomfortable. He almost wanted to go back to talking of necromancy.

"Can you talk to the dead?" He changed the subject.

"Sure, that's easy!" She was talking fast and excitedly. "All you need is a talking board and-"

"Yay- you're awake!" Rouge popped her head in the door and grinned at the witch. Then she saw the hedgehog and her face became serious. "Shadow, can I talk to you for a second? In private?"

The hedgehog sighed and stood up, metal shoes clicking on the ground. He dropped his book on the seat and walked into the hallway with Rouge.

The poor bat was so nervous her wings were twitching.

"Shadow, do you know what you are?" She asked in a small voice so that nobody could overhear.

"A half-alien half-Mobian hedgehog hybrid known as the The Ultimate Lifeform?"

"Yes, but…" She looked around to make sure they were alone, "You know how the witch is looking for her familiar?"

"Yes…” Shadow was growing suspicious. Don't you dare say it, Rouge, he thought.

"I think you're it."

"Rouge, that is not funny."

"I'm serious!" She bit her lip, "The ziggurat came to me when we were separated as a figment of Sheptilah and it asked me questions and when I figured out it was you it… it disappeared."
Shadow put his finger in the air to silence her. "You've gone batty."

Rouge blushed and crossed her arms indignantly, "If you were anyone else I would have your jaw on the floor."

"I am nobody's pet." He spat the word out with such vitriol, "We will go sort this out right now." He took Rouge by the wrist and walked her back into the room where Sheptilah was lying.

Cabbot was in there sitting with her in the chair Shadow once occupied. They were talking softly about his wife and her condition.

"She's doing just fine, it's you I'm worried about." Cabbot undid the cuffs on her ankles. Sheptilah instantly felt better and thanked him.

"I'm alright. The only reason I'm still all messed up is because I was unfortunately attacked with iron. The painkillers are only dulling the ache a little. Has Hope gone through the footage yet? I still don't understand the concept of movies," Sheptilah's mind wandered again, "I wonder what is there."

"She's got a lot of recordings to go through even though some of you lost the gear so it'll be some time before she goes through it all." He heard footsteps approaching.

"Rouge and Shadow," Boris turned and saw them standing in the doorway, "Come in."

Tilly waved at them cheerfully.

"Poor thing got dozens of stitches in her leg," Cabbot smiled, "She says you were talking about necromancy?"

"Yes. I was telling her that is an idiotic idea." Shadow squinted at her. The witch shrugged innocently.
"I want to state for the record that I am sorry for biting that doctor," she frowned, "are they ok?"

Rouge smiled, "Oh, Tilly. It wasn't a bad bite you just didn't want to be stabbed with a needle. You didn't even leave a mark. You nibbled at best."

"Oh. Well, when can I leave? There's something I need to do." She looked at Cabbot.

"First you need to get your grimoire and separate yourself from Eggman so we can be done with him." The bat's wings still twitched even though she was doing her best to keep it together and not blurt out her hypothesis on the witch's familiar.

Sheptilah gasped, "It's here?"

"Eggman and the grimoire are both still here." Shadow nodded.

Sheptilah threw back the blanket and looked down at her legs. They were all bandaged up nicely. She carefully flexed her toes and determined she would be able to stand on them.

"Wait a second-" Cabbot was interrupted by Tilly jumping out of the bed and unsteadily placing her weight on her 'good' leg. The motion pulled the short tubes connected to the IVs, nearly knocking over the rack.

"I'm okay," Tilly smiled with her hands on her hips.

"Listen," Rouge caught the pole holding the IVs, "You are gonna hurt yourself."

"But I'm so close!" Tilly's eyes were wild with agitation and excitement.

"You need to take it easy and we'll escort you to it in a wheelchair." Cabbot lightly rested his hand on her shoulder. He needed her magic and would be very upset if the witch would be unable to heal his wife.

"Please let me take this damned thing out of my arm," she pointed to the IVs, "It hurts like hell."
She felt useless being escorted around in a wheelchair as if she was weak. Sheptilah absolutely hated not being able to move around on her own and was quietly seething from the throbbing in her leg. Strangely enough Rouge volunteered to push the chair.

They wheeled her down the hallway past Eggman's room. He was having a heated debate with the nurse from earlier that could be heard from far away.

"You are disgusting!" Her expression was indignant, "Pepperoni, scrambled eggs, ham and onions on pizza? Of all the things I know about you that is the worst."

"Says the woman who claims she puts anchovies on her pizza," he pointed at her with his free hand. "Those bony little fish are mostly salt!"

Sheptilah gestured that she wanted to go in and talk and Rouge nodded.

"What are you so angry about now, Ivo?" Tilly tapped her fingers on the armrest.

"Hey," Eggman grunted.

"You," the nurse narrowed her eyes at the witch, "I'm surprised you are not muzzled."

"Oh!" Sheptilah blushed with shame, "You must be the person I bit. I apologize…"

"You two deserve each other." The nurse stormed off, shoes still squeaking.

"Ah, you bit her," Shadow rolled his eyes, "I'm surprised she didn't bite you in retaliation."

His quip elicited some polite chuckles in return.

"Guess what we're going to do?" Tilly clasped her hands together in her lap.
"We're going back to my lair?" Eggman guessed hopefully.

"Nope! We're getting unbonded. Some G.U.N. soldiers found the grimoire while you were holding my leg together. I never have to see you again!" She grinned.

Eggman frowned, "you don't have to sound so enthusiastic about it."

Cabbot approached Eggman and uncuffed him so he can follow them down. Given the superficiality of his wounds he was forced to walk.

Hope sat in a big chair in the basement laboratory. Instruments quietly beeped, reading energy levels on the massive crystal with the tome inside it.

It seemed to contain a massive amount of stored energy and she couldn't tell if it was the book or the mineral surrounding it. The object already broke some of the sensors and three laptops.

"This thing is a thousand pounds of nonsense," the blonde sighed with defeat. She at least was able to determine it's not radioactive despite its bright green glow.

She went back to reviewing some of the footage extracted from the gear worn at the ziggurat excursion. There was a lot of static and hardly any speaking from any of them.

Eggman's footage was especially a jumbled, terrifying mess.

In it was nothing but blackness and then suddenly Sheptilah impaled upon the glass tree. The gory image made Hope jump and she slammed her laptop shut.

"Hello!" Rouge greeted the girl and was met by a loud yelp.
"I… sorry; you startled me." She panted, "Looks like everyone is alive and… together."

"More or less." Eggman's sardonic comment was mostly unappreciated.

Sheptilah stood and hopped on her good foot over to the crystal. She ran her hands over the smooth mineral and it disappeared, leaving just the book. She picked up massive the book effortlessly and hopped back over to the group.

Shadow's fur was standing on end making him look fluffier than usual. With magic the witch held the book up and opened it. She scanned through the pages all with different handwriting, inks and in some cases different languages.

"Resurrection spells, healing spells..." the witch was speaking to herself." Her expression turned to a frustrated one, "It says my familiar has to do it. They take a piece of iron and 'slice' it between the two joined spirits and it will undo the spell. All this while standing in some sigils."

"How do you find your familiar?" Shadow asked. Rouge looked at him and then at the witch.

"Finding spells… finding spells," Sheptilah flipped through the pages again. Rouge and Shadow approached the book and looked at the illustrations and writing. The book was so large the two Mobians could each fit on a page with room in the margins.

"Hmm. I can read this…" Shadow pointed, "I can read this cuneiform. All of it. Does the book allow anyone to read it in the way your stone translates speech? If so, move over I can read much faster than you can."

"Shadow, that's not funny," Sheptilah stared at him with horror, "That is not funny."

"What's wrong?" Cabbot asked. Hope sat up and Eggman looked at Rouge.

"The book doesn't allow itself to be read by just anyone. This means Shadow the hedgehog is my familiar. Only a familiar can read the book. Especially one without an Oracle Stone."

You could hear a pin drop. Shadow's blood ran cold.
"I knew it," Rouge's wings flicked, "I knew it. I was right."

"Wait, what does this mean?" Hope stood, "What are you talking about?"

"Prove you can read this," Sheptilah pointed to a random entry.

Shadow looked at it and understood. "It's a spell for banishing nightmares using a white candle anointed with lavender oil and deadly nightshade leaves."

Pause.

"Well, is he right?" Eggman asked.

"Yes, he is." Sheptilah shut the book and knelt on her bad leg despite the pain. Her white hair pooled around her body.

"As your destined witch I will serve at your side until my death." She refused to make eye contact.

Shadow stepped back, "Wait-"

"The witch serves the familiar," she spoke through her gritted teeth, "I have said they are equals but the truth is the witch who serves."

"I don't wish to be your familiar. How do you pick someone else?"

"The Universe deemed it so. It cannot be undone. Another would be selected for me if you die."

She was angry. First the Universe decided to bond her to Eggman and again in its infinite wisdom it determined that Shadow was her familiar.
"Honestly, I'm just glad it's not Thunderbolt." Eggman was almost relieved.

"But it makes sense." Rouge stepped forward. "It makes perfect sense. You're both from different time periods. You're both powerful and the ziggurat separated you two together at first. It asked me for information on your familiar and when it figured out it was Shadow it tried to have him kill you."

"The ziggurat did that?" Hope was confused, "But it's just a building."

"No, something controlling it did that." Eggman interjected, "There's also the fact that Shadow was involved in the moon blowing up as well."

"What?" Sheptilah was stunned, "It… it wasn't just you?"

"No, it wasn't. Shadow was involved as well as Rouge. Neither of you told her?" Eggman smirked, "Sorry to spill the beans then."

Shadow shot Eggman a glare and Rouge face palmed.

"I'm being punished." Sheptilah stood and touched the still-floating grimoire, "I'm being punished. I have to work with the people that released the witch-eaters causing all this trouble. The Universe is punishing me."

"Rude," Eggman huffed, "I'm a delight."

"Sheptilah," Cabbot approached her, "you did nothing wrong. Come on, let's get you back to your bed."

"Do not come near me," She hissed, not looking up, "And do not touch me."

"Stop being so mean!" Hope raised her voice, "We would have to work together anyway to defeat these witch-eater things, right? So what difference does it make if they're 'magically' bound to you or not? Grow up. You've had five thousand years to come to terms with the possibilities and you act like a spoiled child."
"There are implications of this beyond your understanding," Tilly shot the girl a poisonous look. "Far beyond."

"Then explain; tell us what these implications are." Rouge spoke softly.

"Death. Death is the implication! I know I will die regardless but what matters is who goes down with me." She stood and limped over to Hope, "I watched one familiar get torn apart and I don't want to do it again." She turned to Eggman, "You I don't particularly care about; but you ," she turned to Shadow, "you're a demon in the metaphorical sense."

"You don't know anything about me," he crossed his arms defiantly, "Unlike you I face my challenges head-on and without fear or blaming others."

"I know what I saw when I was searching for you. It was not good. I don't want you as a familiar, either." Her leg was throbbing and the movement caused some of the wounds to open a bit and she was bleeding through the bandages.

"All of the deaths we saw back at Eggman's Soumerca base? That was your fault," she gestured to Eggman and the Mobians, "All of it. You released those beasts when you destroyed the moon for what I'm sure was some ridiculous and selfish reason." Sheptilah's anger filled her heart with fire and her throat with bile.

She turned to the giant book and shrunk it with magic and placed it in the pocket behind her head like everything else she carried with her.

Eggman himself was a little hurt that she said she didn't care about him. After all he was the one that found her! She owed him for waking her up.

"But you are correct, Hope. I am handling the situation quite immaturely. I apologize for my outburst. I'm happy to work with irresponsible people and clean up the mess they made by paying for it with my life." She forced a very fake and cheesy smile.

Hope was speechless. The hedgehog was deeply insulted by her words. His actions were due to the manipulation by the doctor and not of his own true volition. His anger and hatred for humans was exploited for Eggman's gain; but understood that she didn't know the context.
"Fight me." Shadow turned away, "If you're so angry at what we've done then fight me and get your justice. Prove your strength to me, witch."

Sheptilah laughed. "*Fight* you? I cannot fight my familiar; as detestable as they may be."

"Fight me," he repeated, "When you are fully recovered. I challenge you to a friendly sparring match. Work out your anger and aggression on me, if you hate me so much. I'll prove myself worthy."

"Wait a minute-" Cabbot raised his hands defensively, "I can't allow this."

"Sir; consider it a training exercise. If we are supposed to be together then we should know each other's limits, strengths and weaknesses." Shadow was persuasive when he wanted to prove his strength.

"This is a bad idea," Rouge shook her head. "You'll kill each other." She was already texting Sonic and his friends letting them know some nonsense was about to go down in case she needed backup.

"I suppose I can allow it if you both agree to the sparring match- but it is by *my* rules." Cabbot felt like a pushover.

"Challenge accepted." Sheptilah nodded, "I will fight you, if that's what you wish. We do not have to wait for me to recover; we can fight right now."

"First- let us be unbonded, shall we?" Eggman clasped his hands together nervously, "Since Tilly and I share pain sometimes it would be unfair for *me* to suffer."

"I'll fight you, too," Sheptilah pointed at Eggman, "If you don't shut your mouth." The witch snapped her fingers and appeared in her usual clothes with the sarong and leather top. She extended her nails into deadly claws with a glamour to appear menacing.

"You brought this on yourself, hedgehog." She grinned with a mouth full of razor-sharp shark teeth.
"Tch," Shadow scoffed, unimpressed with shallow magic. "Let's go, then. To the training arena."
The training arena was a massive room in the very bottom basement level of the fortress. It was illuminated by hot lights beaming down from the ceiling.

Eggman, Cabbot and Rouge were watching from the observation deck which was embedded directly into the wall behind thick glass. Hope refused to attend.

"These are the rules of engagement," Cabbot was speaking over the com to Sheptilah and Shadow, both of whom were in the pit already and waiting on the cue.

"You may not inflict grievous bodily harm upon each other, limit your use of Chaos Energy and magic and I will stop the fight whenever I feel it's gone too far. Do you agree?" Boris' voice sounded grandfatherly.

"When are they going to realize I don't understand them when their voices come from technology?" Tilly bobbed her hair and encased her calf in a purple crystalline substance to prevent her injuries from ripping open any further.

"He said we're not allowed to kill each other or overuse our powers." Shadow rolled his eyes, "Do you agree to that?"

"Yes."

"We agree." Shadow gave the thumbs-up.

"Here we go," Eggman was watching nervously.

"Is this being recorded?" Rouge was looking over the equipment in the observation deck.

"Yes, for liability purposes." Cabbot's forehead twinkled with a few beads of sweat.

"Oh, dear God." Eggman whined, "I'm going to die."
"You've been saying that all week and you haven't died yet," Rouge was texting someone on her phone.

"Statistically speaking one of these days I'll be right." Ivo couldn't help but insist on that.

Shadow and Sheptilah stared; each waiting for the other to make the first move. Crimson eyes met amethyst and she raised a brow.

"Come on, then," she teased, "Or are you afraid?" She smirked.

He let out a quiet growl and teleported behind her and nudged her forward to test the waters. She took a clumsy step forward and steadied herself.

"Why is he hesitating?" The bat was responding to rapid texts blipping on her phone.

"There's no pride in destroying a handicapped target," Eggman peered closely at what was happening below, "But that's not why he's doing what he's doing."

Destroying. That was an inappropriate choice of words.

Shadow felt strange; he was so angry earlier but now he was somewhat numb to everything. The witch turned around to look at him and tilted her head. Something was wrong with her eyes although they looked the same.

"So then what is he doing?" Cabbot asked the doctor, "If you know so much."

"Getting a feel for how far she's willing to go at this moment." He pushed his glasses up on his nose, "Trying to get her angry."

"Your cheap glamours are shallow. I know this and you are wasting energy trying to be intimidating with them..." Shadow clenched his fists.

She brought a long nail up to the corner of her mouth tauntingly, "So you think the glamours are
"Everything about you is fake."

She chuckled, "Cute. You're cute." She rotated her shoulders and cracked her neck, "Not as cute as Hebat but beggars can't be choosers, now can we? My glamours are solid. Temporary transmogrification."

He was hyper aware of her every movement. Was she trying to bring his guard down? He couldn't tell if she was intentionally making herself vulnerable or if he was second guessing this sparring match he initiated.

She started to hum. Quietly at first but then gaining in volume. She brought her palms together above her head and rotated her hips like a dancer.

She bent forward and then flung her head back, releasing the glamour keeping it bobbed and unleashed a wave of silver hair. Sheptilah then continued dancing in circles as the length of her hair continued to grow by dozens of yards.

The sound of a percussive rhythm filled Shadow's head and then he understood what she was doing: the witch fights with her hair like a performer to the literal beat of her own drum.

The hedgehog curled into a spiked ball and spin-dashed around her at lightning quick speeds, slicing the hair apart as if it was wet paper.

Her hair was prehensile when she wanted it to be. She lifted her hair from all directions and tried to catch Shadow but he was just too fast. She remained in place and shot her hair out in all directions.

He teleported above her and found himself tangled in her tresses like a tasty insect in a spider's web.

"Chaos spear!" He summoned a crackling beam of energy and cut himself free.

He thought the tendrils were not an issue once they were cut but he didn't feel that it was sticking to his spines like marshmallow fluff.
She turned and extended her nails like claws and slashed at him. Shadow skillfully dodged back and forth with minimal effort.

Because her magic was invisible it was impossible to dodge it. You only knew it was there after it hit you or if it was moving another object.

While he was distracted with dodging from the front she used magic to grab him by his spines. She threw her arm back in a ripping motion and several of his spikes came out with it.

He howled with pain that shot all the way down to his knees. Ripping out a hedgehog's spines was the most cruel thing you can do to them. Sheptilah in turn felt sympathetic pain at the back of her neck like someone stabbed a hot knife between her vertebrae. Small prickles of blood formed on invisible wounds, dripping down her back.

Shadow teleported again and grabbed Sheptilah by the wrist and with all his might he flung her down, breaking it.

All at once his limb shrieked in sympathy as if something was stomping on his arm. His own hand felt like it was being sawed off with a rusty butter knife.

Eggman only felt a twinge.

"Do you see?" Sheptilah rolled over to look at him. "Do you see why I did not want to fight?"

"We share pain," he lightly panted.

"Yes, we share the pain we inflict on each other." With her unbroken hand she snapped the tiny bones in her wrist back into place and lifted her hair to show him the injuries she caused him reflected on her own body. The searing pain in his own hand ceased instantly.

"Now, do you still wish to fight? If it is what you want I will comply." She looked at him with determination in her eyes.
"I won't lose to you," he spat and charged forward.

"The goal isn't to win; the goal is to see how far we can go before Cabbot panics," she rolled out of the way and grabbed him in mid-air with visible magic taking the form of a large, gloved hand.

[WhiteEcho] Shadow drew first blood

[BlueBlrr91] how much blood?

[WhiteEcho] it's not literal

[WhiteEcho] he just broke her wrist

[WhiteEcho] it's flopping around

[BlueBlrr91] don't tell me these gross details!

[BlueBlrr91] I'm eating!

[Th!nkP!nk] Ew

[WhiteEcho] she just healed it she's fine

Shadow teleported out of harm's way and curled into a ball. He bounced off of the floor and walls just barely missing her. Some of his razor-sharp spikes grazed her skin.
She struggled to keep up with his incredible speed but saw a pattern in how he was bouncing around. The figure of the glove disappeared and the witch's leg was in searing pain. It was difficult for her to concentrate.

[WhiteEcho] Eggman is freaking out it's hilarious

[BlueBlrr91] I wish I was there to see it

[BlueBlrr91] his panic I mean

[BlueBlrr91] I do not want to see broken arms

[WhiteEcho] I understood ;)

[Th!nkP!nk] Sticks doesn't know who she wants to see win

[Th!nkP!nk] Knuckles says 'I hope I win'

[BlueBlrr91] gotta love knucks

"I'm not feeling any of the pain but the back of my neck itches." Eggman scratched it, "I suppose I worried over nothing."

"It's the iron box you're standing in," Cabbot was watching carefully, "It's probably hindering the bond, yes?"

"Could be…" Eggman instinctively reached to make a note in his gauntlet but frowned when he remembered it was still impounded somewhere.

"Stop holding back," Shadow growled, "Show me what you're made of, witch."
"And I'm worried again," the doctor sighed.

Sheptilah complied, "I'm made of equal parts human and magic," all of the cut hair pooled into a silvery liquid. What was stuck to Shadow's body seeped into his spines and fur, significantly weighing him down.

He struggled against the liquid hair.

“How many people have you killed, Shadow?”

“How many as you seem to think and certainly no innocents. They were trying to kill me first.” He tried to bite his way free from the goo that pulled his fur.

The material almost looked like the witch-eaters did. She danced again and she beckoned the liquid to coat all of the surfaces of the room, excluding the glass window in the observation deck.

“It was self defense?”

“Yes, of course!”

Shadow instinctively tried to jump out of the way but was immediately engulfed in a bubble of the weird goo as it flew at him from the walls on all sides. The hedgehog didn't miss a beat and teleported behind the witch, sweeping her legs and knocked her down with a hard thud.

The drums were silenced.

All at once the magic disappeared. Her hair was back to its typical but absurd length and the crystal protecting her leg dissolved. The pain of having been kicked, even lightly, on her severely injured leg was too great and it broke her concentration on controlling her powers.

"I expected more," Shadow stood over her with a frown on his face, "And yet I foresaw this would be the result."
"It's my leg," Sheptilah sat up and looked over the blood-soaked bandages, "Pain is distracting."

"I told you I would wait until you were healed."

"I am not one to accept pity," she huffed, "Besides, you can heal me."

"So how do I do this?" He did feel slightly guilty for kicking her over.

"Imagine my leg but healed; and then touch it. You won't hurt me."

"I remember Rouge telling me how it hurt you when you held the Chaos Emerald. My powers are all Chaos Energy manipulation. I do not like the possibility of .-"

"What's happening?" Cabbot spoke to them over the PA system.

Sheptilah waved to the window, beckoning them to come down. Boris shook his head and motioned for them to come up.

"We'll continue this later," Shadow grabbed her wrist, the same one he broke earlier, and teleported up to the observation deck.

"I am not going to lie; I am a little disappointed that was all it was." Eggman's mustache drooped.

"If it makes you feel better I made Sonic freak out over nothing," Rouge looked at the text messages from the frantic blue hedgehog who was certain Shadow would accidentally kill the witch and bring a slow but assured end to all life on Mobius as a result.

"That does make me feel better!" The doctor perked up, "Tell me, did he cry? Panic? Wheeze? Ooh, tell me, Rouge! I'm all tingly with excitement."

"I ruined his lunch," the bat shrugged.
"I'll take it!" Eggman wiggled with joy.

"Why were you texting Sonic?" Shadow raised an eyebrow.

"I was also texting Amy." Rouge turned away and smirked. "They wanted to know who would win."

Sheptilah was dizzy from the teleportation, "Shadow definitely won this one," she rubbed her eyes with her fist. She was swaying on her feet. They could see chunks of her hair was missing from the fight and from her time in the ziggurat using the tresses like breadcrumbs.

"So that is your natural hair length," Rouge chuckled, "Or was."

"It will grow back. Hair always grows back," Sheptilah looked at Eggman's bald head, "For most of us."

She reached down to Shadow and gently stroked his spines, healing the ones she pulled out with an icy rush.

"Don't do that again," he scolded her. She wasn't sure if he meant pulling out the spines or touching him. It was likely both.

Sheptilah's wounds were redressed and she was given another G.U.N. tracksuit to wear around. Eggman was given back his old clothes and gauntlet which Sheptilah had absorbed the blood off of so they were clean.

She was relaxing in one of the common rooms draped across a sofa and eating fries while Eggman was talking to his robots.

He sat near her but not within arm's reach.

Shadow himself was sitting on the floor with a hot dog in one hand and a pen in the other. He was
going through the massive grimoire and writing down what he felt were important notes.

"Wait- where's Cubot?" Eggman was talking into his gauntlet, "Is that Dave?!" He peered into the screen.

"David popped in to bring you a Hanukkah gift." Orbot held up a small blue box, "First of eight, he threatens."

"Is that Eggman? Doctor Eggman!" Dave the intern waved to the camera. As a light blue river rat Mobian with buck teeth and braces he didn't appear very intimidating.

"What? That started today?" Being busy not dying all week was throwing off his internal clock.

"Actually my calendar says it starts tomorrow but I have to work a double shift so I thought I'd drop in and see how you were doing… and if you still needed an intern." Dave was sucking up because he didn't want to be forced to work holidays.

Sheptilah sat up and scooched over to Eggman and looked at the screen. "Who is the pretty blue kid and why is he in your house?"

"That is David… somebody who used to work for me and he was just leaving, right?" Eggman finished that sentence with a sing-song voice.

"Who is this?" The Mobian leaned a little too hard on Orbot and nearly caused the robot to fall over. Orbot pushed him away with prejudice.

"She's nobody- thank you for the gift but please leave my lair at once. I will be returning to it soon."

He closed his gauntlet and sighed. "Why do I even have high tech security if a teenage rat could just walk in?"

"Hanukkah, huh?" Sheptilah paused while her stone translated, "Oh, you're Hebrew! Oh, that's still a thing! Nice. You guys were kind of new back in my day."
"We endured," he was only ethnically related to it, not religiously, "It's not the only culture that's been around as long, either."

"It's nice to know that there are some things have not changed all that much; but I really love these," she held up a fry, "What are these again?"

"French fries," Eggman gestured by making a chopping motion, "Potato that's cut up and fried."

"So have you thought about what you want? Don't go crazy. I'm not a Djinn so I can say no to you." She poked him in the arm with a fry.

"What? Oh, for waking you up?"

"Well yes but also for holding my leg together, remember?" She stuck her injured leg out for emphasis, "What do you want?"

"World domination!"

"No."

"It was worth a try." What did he want?

"Maybe it'll be easier if I just suggest things and you pick from that. Um, gold?"

"I'm already filthy rich; I have enough gold."

"A wife?"

"Are you offering?" He paused. "Wait, wouldn't that make me a king?"
"A king of nothing, really. Oh; and a haunted house. No, I'm not offering myself!" She stuck out her tongue playfully, "I could summon a succubus." She joked.

"What's… what's a succubus?" Shadow turned his head back to look at Tilly.

She stared at the hedgehog for a moment before her face turned bright red. She couldn't gauge how old Shadow was because Mobians didn't age the same way humans did.

"Never mind." She finally said.

"Whatever," Shadow turned back to his work. A lot of the pages were diary entries from past royalty and a lot of them gushed about their familiars and had their hand prints in the margins.

"I wonder why you can't touch the Chaos Emeralds," he was looking for entries about them but none seemed to exist.

Sheptilah laid back down with her head by Eggman's thigh and flexed her foot on the uninjured leg, "Beats me. What are you looking for?"

"Information about the Emeralds and what familiars do," Shadow's ears flicked.

"We should start working on the weapon after you heal my leg." She looked up at Eggman and could almost see under his glasses. He looked down at her and she swore his sclerae were black. She quickly looked away with a mix of embarrassment and horror.

"Wait," he saw something and flipped back to it. "Aliens… alien parasites…” he paused, "You're not a human at all."

"Eh? I most certainly am."

"This entry states that your people are descended from aliens." The hedgehog tapped the page with his finger.
"No, that's not what it means. You're looking at it literally," Sheptilah sat up and wove images out of smoke. Tall beings with severely elongated arms and gray bodies stood among primitive humans.

"Only about two thousand years before I was born did they come. They were the last two of their kind." The figures had no discernible faces and instead communicated with smoke imagery in the same way Sheptilah was doing.

"They were unable to reproduce on their own - and even if they could they would be severely inbred. They were the last two of their species and they told us they came from beyond the stars we couldn't even see from Mobius. Our moon was like theirs- granting them the ability to recharge their power from the diluted sunlight.

"We didn't know the witch-eaters were parasites and they infected the aliens like a disease. They wanted to live out the rest of their lifespan peacefully but instead brought the deadly creatures with them unknowingly and unleashed it on our planet."

The alien figures were hunched over and their bodies heaved as if they were coughing.

"We cared for them and taught them sign language and they taught us about their magic. In return for our love and kindness they bestowed upon the original two witches Oracle Stones when they died. One was a human man, the other a Mobian man. All of my people were descended from the two. Every child born to a Nannae witch is granted a stone of their own, regardless of the sex of the parent. At least one of them has to be Nannaeic.

"There were twelve houses because each of the men had six children. We named our zodiac after them. Each season has three houses divided among the days:

Spring has Aries, Taurus and Gemini. Summer has Cancer, Leo and Virgo. Autumn has Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius. Finally, winter has Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces."

"So the zodiac hasn't really changed in all that time?" Eggman wondered just how old the concept was, "My birthday is June twenty-third, so I am a Cancer." He mimicked a crab clinching its pincers with his hands.

"Huh. Lots of things seem to endure, then." She smiled, "I am Sheptilah of the house of Aquarius. My patron symbol is an armadillo holding water."
Shadow smirked, "I am on the cusp of Cancer but I fall under Gemini. My records stated I was 'born' June nineteenth."

"I can do a proper star sign reading on you two later because it's a lot more complicated than just the days you were born. Gemini had a human patron holding twins, but they were not identical twins. Cancer is a desert jackal Mobian with crab claws; I think that Mobian was a hybrid. Anyway - that's what it is. I am not an alien; just part alien."

"So your gift is also your burden," Shadow nodded, "And now it's my burden, too."

"Yes, but it's a wonderful burden. We were like gods among men. We could live for hundreds of years if we wanted to. We dedicated our lives and powers to making things better for all life. We were worshiped and revered! Now I'm all that's left and my own home tried to kill me." Sheptilah frowned and the magical vapor disappeared.

"I'm starting to understand why I'm your familiar. I am also part alien." Shadow's ears swiveled back slightly, "But I will discuss that later."

"But-"

"It's a long story, Sheptilah." Eggman patted her shoulder, "Don't bother him about it."

"I'm sorry for calling you a demon earlier, Shadow. Things have been messy with me lately, haven't they?" She felt his own emotional turmoil. It was as if someone was twisting a knife in her heart.

"You aren't the first and likely won't be the last to do so." He carefully turned a page and then realized he left his book back in the hospital room. It was probably lost forever. Well, he thought, this one is just as mangled on the inside as House Of Leaves. Not much difference.

Sheptilah turned back to Eggman and tilted her head.

"What?" He leaned away from her.
"I think I know what I can do for you."

"Oh, God."

"Any living creature can learn and perform magic. I will teach you something small. Perhaps magical chemistry?"

"I have no use for magic," he straightened up, "I have science and real chemistry!"

Sheptilah pouted, "I think you'd really like learning it, though. You could do wonderful things with science and magic."

"Like what?" Eggman furrowed his eyebrows.

"Alchemy." Shadow turned his head to them, "She's proposing to teach you alchemy. Aren't you?"

"And that's why he's my familiar," she smiled with pride.

"This isn't going to end well for anyone." Eggman's mustache drooped, "Last time I used magic things ended poorly." He was thinking about the Chronophage and the Naugus twins.

_You shouldn't be teaching this terrorist anything_, Shadow thought to himself.

"Alchemy is as much mathematics and logic as it is magic. Once you learn how to wrap your brain around it you will be able to do wonderful things- like give your robots life." She sat up and cutely brushed her hair behind her ear so as to appear innocent.

Life? In his robots? The whole point of them being robots is their artificiality. However...if Metal Sonic was alive… that would change things drastically. A devious grin spread across the doctor's face.
"In that case I would love to be your student," he offered his hand to be shaken in agreement.

Sheptalah's eyes glinted mischievously and shook Eggman's massive hand with both of hers.

Eggman suddenly felt like he made a deal with the devil and was already regretting it.
Invisible Touch

Shadow's handwriting had a blocky look to it. It is an angular, sharp way of writing: although the penmanship was extremely well-practiced it was obvious he never curved the pen much. His notes filled up every square inch of the the notebook pages in tiny print.

He learned to write this way when sneaking notes to Maria and Gerald on the ARK on tiny gum wrappers.

NOTES:

Baneful herb = ? poisonous - fairies are not to be trusted, often steal children - get a grimoire - moon phases are important / red moon = blood moon? Ask about red energy - Oracle Stones are alive? - witch-eaters are known as 'LIBBU MARUS' - succubus = female? sex demon / incubi = male? sex demon / aka SPIRIT WIFE/HUSBAND/SPOUSE / Hahanu = sex demon of indeterminate? gender - Sheptilah means 'banana' - they do not celebrate birthdays but have one big party at the end of the year - iron is deadly - silver is a preferred metal for all purposes but athames- SCRYING: divination through a reflective surface - JOKE that is older than time apparently: what hangs by a man's thigh and pokes many dark holes? A key - energy comes from diluted sunlight from the moon's reflection / harvest moons have 'adverse' affect on witches? ^ Red moon ? / performing their magic without an OS is difficult - it is possible to borrow energy from a witch - witches can use power rings - familiars have arguably more power than the witches that serve them - they learned all kinds of magic from travelers and invited them to write it in the royal grimoire- witches get drunk on poisonous liquids in moderate doses - WITCH HUMANS CAN HAVE CHILDREN WITH MOBIANS?

"This cannot be right," Shadow was very confused. Maybe he was reading the diary entry wrong?

[Midwife notes: If both are from a race that gives birth to live offspring then it is possible for them to have children together as facilitated by the Oracle Stones.

A male human and a female clever folk will always produce a clever folk child but a female human and a male clever folk has a one out of two chance of giving birth to a human or a clever folk. Size difference permitting. This act is taboo and while not forbidden it is frowned upon. It is much more acceptable to adopt a child. The offspring often have mixed magic and
are considered 'changelings'. This magic is unstable at best.

No. It was very clear.

"Creepy..." he muttered to himself. The very concept of giving birth to something that wasn't even your species twisted his stomach. Maybe it was because he himself was a hybrid; however his birth was from a tube.

"What needs clarification?" Sheptilah peered over Shadow's shoulder.

He closed the grimoire and his notes abruptly. "Never mind; I misread something."

Boris walked into the room and beckoned for Sheptilah to follow him. The witch turned to Eggman and put him to sleep in the same way she did back at the lair by pressing her thumb to his forehead.

"I can't trust him to behave without us here." She smiled innocently. Sheptilah stowed the royal grimoire away and turned to Shadow who kept a tight grip on his notes. The witch's leg had already almost completely healed itself so she walked with only a slight limp.

"You should come with me," she then turned to Cabbot, "Is that alright?"

He paused for a moment and then nodded.

"I must ask you for complete silence on the matter," he spoke to both of them.

"Of course." Shadow nodded curtly.

Boris led them quite a distance to the dorm in which he lived. It was like a luxury apartment compared to the simple rooms many of the other soldiers had and the path to get there seemed intentionally confusing.
"Why would you want to teach Dr. Eggman anything?" Shadow finally asked.

"Sonic the hedgehog asked a favor of me, though it was in jest. He requested I fix the doctor." Sheptilah smirked.

"So how does teaching him alchemy change anything about him?" Cabbot furrowed his eyebrows. He would have to tell her that she wouldn't be able to do much with Eggman once they were unbonded because he would be immediately arrested by G.U.N. forces and executed.

"As above, so below." The witch flexed her fingers at her side like she was playing an invisible piano until the joints cracked. "Alchemy is about change. Changing your way of thinking, changing how you understand the world around you and changing one thing into another."

"Well, yes, we as modern scientists understand that alchemy is mostly nonsense. There is no such thing as turning lead into gold and creating a universal solvent and."

"You break my heart, Boris," Sheptilah frowned dramatically, "It's what my people did before we got our Oracle Stones. Maybe your modern idea of alchemy is warped. Magic comes from somewhere and goes elsewhere; alchemy is the study of what that means. Sure, we had lofty ideas when it was a new concept but it set the foundation for everything else."

"And you think this is going to inspire him to be a better person? That's foolish." Shadow raised an eyebrow.

"Well, if that fails I can always behead him." She shrugged.

"An even six," Shadow smirked playfully.

Cabbot's wife, Andrea, sat on a black leather sofa with a newspaper and pen in hand. Her skin had a yellowish pallor to it. Her hair was white and cut short and her body was thin and frail as if her skin was draped over her bones. She was wearing three pairs of fuzzy socks and a thick housecoat to keep warm.

"What is a five letter word for a magical woman?" She was working on a crossword puzzle,
"Mage’ only has four letters…”

"Witch,' Shadow answered, "Hello, Mrs. Cabbot."

"Oh, Shadow! What brings you here?’ She turned to him and smiled warmly and then to the tall woman beside him, "Oh, this must be...Sheptalah?"

"Yes," the witch bowed slightly.

"I'm told you're a panacea," Andrea folded the paper and stuffed it between the seat cushions, "Snd that you can heal anything."

"A panacea?" Sheptalah blushed and stuttered, "I'm no such miracle; I can only heal physical injuries and illnesses. What has Mr. Cabbot told you?"

"Oh, he mentioned you had way too much hair for any adult woman and you healed people instantly." Sheptalah could see the woman's teeth were stained gray.

"I really do have too much hair," the witch ran her fingers through it, "But it's how I heal. I am absorbing your illness or pain into it because hair has no feeling. All the pain and injury must go somewhere so it goes into me while you are healed." This was only true for cuts and bruises. She was lying so they wouldn't panic with what was about to happen as it is incredibly painful for the witch.

"Why are you wasting your energy on an old woman like me?" Andrea adjusted her housecoat, "Aren't there younger people who need your help more?"

"Well, I am in the room with you." Tilly straightened up her posture. "I'm going to help you if you will let me."

"What do I have to do?’ The old woman eyed the witch curiously.

"Just sit there," Tilly sat next to her and wrapped her hair around the woman's frighteningly small torso.
"It will feel cold," Sheptilah steadied herself and took a deep breath. Healing internal illnesses took a lot more finesse than simply patching together a wound. First, she had to think about the sick organs and where they were located in the body. Then she had to replace theirs with hers, heal the sick organ from within her own body and then return it to its proper host.

The whole process takes about a minute but is extraordinarily difficult.

Boris went over to his wife and sat next to her and held her hands tightly. His heart was beating so hard the pulse was visible in his throat from across the room.

Andrea felt ice form in every vein in her body. It was like she fell through snow into freezing water. Sheptilah's face was pinched with pain and exertion while the exchange occurred between their bodies. It was over so quickly that Sheptilah didn't realize she was sweating profusely. Her hair was damp and stuck to her face.

"Wait…" Andrea felt her torso, "Is…is that it?"

"Yes," Tilly wiped her brow with the back of her shaky hand.

"What do we do now?" Boris stood and got Sheptilah a hand towel.

"Go see your doctor," she dabbed her face dry. "Make sure everything is where it belongs."

"Are you okay?" Shadow eyed the witch, "You look unwell."

"I'll be fine…" she was a bit nauseous but was otherwise alright, "I want to get back to the island now." She stood up and took a deep, calming breath. Boris immediately showered his wife in kisses and hugged her gently.

"Thank you, Sheptilah." Andrea managed to speak after pulling her face away from Boris'.

The witch nodded politely. "If anyone asks I healed you of my own volition; because I did."
Shadow tapped the witch on her elbow, "I'll take you to the mess hall. You must be hungry."

He led her to the hallway so Boris and Andrea could have time to themselves. The clicking of Shadow's metal skates and the quiet whirring of machinery within the thick walls was the only sound as the hall was deserted.

"Shadow," the witch pursed her lips, "Why would the Chaos Emerald hurt me? Does it not like me?"

"The gems aren't sentient if that's what you're asking," he brushed his spines with his fingers, "However the witch-eaters are extremely vulnerable to Chaos energy. Maybe you are, too."

"And you use Chaos energy."

"Yes."

"And you are my familiar."

"Yes, Sheptilah."

"So you could kill me simply by touching me if you wished."

"I could do that regardless."

"Don't challenge me to any more fights," she chuckled nervously.

The mess hall was a large open area with vending machines, soda fountains and boxes of ready to eat rations lying about large tables with benches. Some agents milled about talking quietly amongst themselves and Shadow pointed to a familiar white and pink figure standing across the room and tapping her foot in thought. Rouge was at one of the refrigerated machines picking out a salad. She couldn't decide between the chicken or garden varieties.
"Rouge!" Sheptilah walked up to her, "Are you feeling okay?"

The bat turned around and smiled, "Oh yes," she decided on the chicken salad since the garden salad had apple slices in it. She opened the door and selected her meal which came prepackaged with a plastic fork. Rouge then picked out a small carton of orange juice and invited them to sit with her after they picked out their food.

Shadow wasn't hungry so he simply watched Sheptilah grab a garden salad, bottled water and followed Rouge to a table.

The witch sat down next to Shadow and poked at the plastic wrapper on her food. “What is this weird material? It’s clear like glass but it’s springy like some kind of film.”

"Plastic," Rouge opened it for her, "Cool, isn't it?"

Small talk. A lot of small talk between the three of them and all of them avoided discussing the ziggurat. Rouge was anxious to find out how Mrs. Cabbot was doing but was more than smart enough to know not to ask in public.

Sheptilah didn't realize how hungry she was until she took her first crunchy bite of apple.

The bat concentrated on scrolling through her phone to distract herself from remembering how it felt to vomit up all those maggots.

"We will have to get you one of these so we can remain in contact." Rouge had at least sixty emails from spam bots.

"But I can't understand your talking over technology. Wouldn't it be pointless?"

"Shadow and I can teach you sign language until you learn our spoken one." She held up the back of her hand to her face, curved her finger like a hook and 'dragged' it downward. "American sign language for 'witch'."

"Oh, video chatting," Shadow narrowed his eyes, "Another way to try and trick me into getting a
phone."

Sheptilah smiled, "Wait, show me the sign for 'bat'."

Rouge crossed her hands at the wrists over her chest and with her index fingers pointing toward her shoulders and flapped once, "Bat."

Shadow held up a fist with one hand and brought up his other hand behind it with his thumb tucked in and fingers sticking up in a single wave motion. "Hedgehog."

"We had something similar but it was definitely not the same signs," she took a sip of water, "Why do you know any at all?"

"Well, we have deaf and hard-of-hearing colleagues but it's also important to be able to communicate silently on more covert missions." Shadow was lying a little; Maria had taught him in case her hearing failed her before she died.

"We also need to get you some legal papers. Stuff like a photo ID and birth certificate." Rouge tapped her phone on her chin, "That's a lot to do."

"Do whatever it is you need to do," Sheptilah suddenly stiffened up.

"What?" Rouge peered at her.

That was when Abraham Tower approached the trio.

"Dr. Eggman?" The red fox walked into the room to find the overlander passed out on the sofa. "Hello?" The fox paused for a moment thinking Eggman had died but was oddly relieved when he saw that his mustache twitched.
His gauntlet was blinking. He had urgent messages from the Egg Army and the bots back at his lair.

"Dr. Eggman-" the fox nudged him.

"Go away, Clove," Eggman rolled over, "I'm napping…"

"Clove? My name is Apollo." The fox's ears twitched when he heard the door slide open.

Eggman's gauntlet shocked him awake. That meant it was a very serious message.

"I'm up, I'm up!" He jumped and looked at his arm, "Where's the fire?"

An image came on screen showing Thunderbolt with some exhausted robots around her. "This base is unsalvageable. I request a transfer." She was alone with only robots helping her as the other Soumercian Egg army soldiers were still at G.U.N. under lockdown.

"What?"

"We cannot salvage it."

"Why not!?"

Apollo instinctively reached for his gun when Eggman raised his voice.

"We think more of those witch-eaters came back after we left. We should quarantine what's left with a shield and start over somewhere else."

The door slid open and Sheptilah was with the two Mobians beside her and president Tower behind them. The witch appeared to be very upset and angry.
"Fine," he lowered his voice, "Meet me back at the lair." He hung up before Thunderbolt could deafen them with her squeal of delight.

"Dr. Eggman," Abraham peered at him unflinchingly, "We cannot allow you to be separated."

"Come again?" He narrowed his eyes and stood.

"I cannot allow you to become separated from the witch." He repeated coolly. "We are also holding your Egg army militia as collateral. We want to ensure that we have your full cooperation in defeating these witch-eaters and will not undermine us at every turn."

"We have to stay joined," the witch emphasized, "It was that or they arrest you indefinitely and we lose unfettered access to your resources."

"Unacceptable!" Eggman stomped his foot, "You don't want this, either." He pointed at the woman.

"I had to convince G.U.N. not to just 'acquire' all of your property and arrest all of your people right this second." Sheptilah crossed her arms, "We cannot trust you or your militia to not back-stab us so I have to stay joined to you to make sure you behave."

"Team Dark will check in on you periodically; but for now you are instructed to stay on Seaside Island. Rouge will escort you both home." Tower let a small smirk creep up the corner of his mouth.

"So does this mean you've joined G.U.N., Sheptilah?"

"No. Absolutely not. It means you are my puppet and you will do as I ask until the alien threat is neutralized. After that I will see to it that G.U.N. shows mercy on you for your crimes against the planet and its people." Sheptilah lowered her gaze to the floor, "we must return to the island now."

"Bow to the new ruler of the Eggman Empire," Rouge smiled devilishly.
Eggman was silent. Terrifyingly silent. The devious little cogs and wheels were already turning in his mind.
Sheptilah waited until after Tower and Apollo left the room to relax her face. She immediately broke out into laughter once the door slid shut.

"The new queen of the Eggman Empire?" She was hunched over and holding her stomach from laughing so hard, "Rouge, please!"

"What?" Ivo was very confused.

"I could barely keep a straight face when you said that," Sheptilah wheezed, "Why are you so dramatic? I had to keep a scowl as tight as I could or I was going to crack up and undermine everything president Tower was saying."

"I wanted to see what color Eggman's face would turn." Rouge stifled her giggles behind a gloved hand.

Shadow could only shake his head with disbelief.

Rouge saw to it that Eggman and Sheptilah got back to the island lair in one piece. The sky was stained a royal purple as the sun began to creep up on the twinkling horizon.

"I'll have legal papers and other things for you later today, Tilly. In the meantime stay put; a lot is happening at once." Rouge smiled and turned to go back into the portal before being stopped by the witch.

"Wait," Sheptilah reached into the back of her head and fished out a small large uncut ruby and one of Hebat's scales.

"This is for Shadow to hold onto," she placed the delicate heart-shaped scale in Rouge's palm. "And this is for you, Rouge." The ruby was about the size of a small paperweight and looked like a chunk of frozen meat.

"What's this?" The bat held the pink translucent scale up to look at it.
"Shadow will know. This ruby is for you; It's uncut, so you can get it done however you like. I did promise you something from the coffers. This is all I have on me and I can get you more later. It was a gift from the emperor of Chun-Nan."

Rouge gasped softly. Although the gem itself was ugly uncut she could still see the potential beauty. She could put it on a platinum chain and wear it with a lovely cocktail dress as a statement necklace or split it into a pair of earrings. She could potentially wear it as a very heavy ring, too. But did she have the wrist strength for that?

"That ruby has to be worth…” Eggman flicked his fingers to count, "One-hundred million Mobians." Jeez!

"That's about a good estimate," Rouge somehow stowed the gem in her cleavage, "I'll keep it forever. Thank you, Tilly." She squealed with delight. It was all worth it to suffer in that ziggurat just for that one ruby; and the witch promised more!

"I'm very pleased you're happy but It's just a rock."

"It's more than that!" Rouge's wings twitched, "It's a gift from a friend. That means it's special." She went through the portal and waved goodbye to Sheptilah as the witch closed it behind her.

"I wish she was my familiar," the woman spoke to herself, “She’s so enthusiastic.”

Eggman silently walked up behind Sheptilah and placed his massive hand around the back of her neck but did not squeeze. If he wanted to he could unscrew her head like a bottle cap and not break a sweat.

"Is it true?" He spoke quietly.

"Is what true?" Tilly didn't move. She knew that he wouldn't dare hurt her and opted for perfect stillness to appear vulnerable.

"That you convinced G.U.N. not to arrest me. What is your endgame?" He applied a little pressure to her neck; not enough to hurt her but enough as a warning. Nobody was going to take his life's
work from him. Especially not some witch.

"You could go a little harder," she flexed her fingers until the joints cracked and then lightly gripped his wrist, "I can still breathe."

"I forgot you're suicidal."

"Evidently you are as well," she craned her neck to look back at him, "You're going to summon my familiar if you aren't careful. If you want to die so badly maybe you should just touch my Oracle Stone." She hooked a finger into the collar of her shirt and exposed the top half of the gem.

"This is a warning, Sheptilah," Eggman lifted her a centimeter off the ground by her neck, "I am not an ordinary human. I am an overlander. I will do what I need to do to protect my assets."

Now she was nervous but she had to remain calm or Shadow would be summoned and ruin her plans.

"First rule of alchemy-" she wrapped her legs around his torso and extended her nails into deadly claws, "You get what you give!" She inhaled deeply to brace herself and stabbed her own stomach and twisted her hand around.

Fire erupted in Eggman's belly. It was the most excruciating pain he ever felt. He shrieked with agony and threw the witch hard to the ground with a wet crunch. He fell to his knees and held his stomach thinking his guts would spill out.

The witch rolled over and gasped for air. The world was blurry and incomprehensible for a moment while her skull healed itself. Dr. Eggman had thrown her so hard he cracked her head open. Had it been anyone else they would be dead.

She sat up and saw the man was hunched over, eyes wide and stomach heaving.

"Second rule," she pulled her hand out of her torso and healed the wound, "As above, so below," she stabbed herself again.
Eggman coughed up blood that wasn't his own for the second time that week. She inhaled a deep, shaky breath and stood up.

"Third rule!" Her eyes were wild and glowing, "Do not turn away from the moon for you can only see her face and not what she hides behind her back."

He spat out the foreign liquid that pooled in his mouth and stood.

"The dark side of the moon is my base," Eggman growled, "I will always have the upper hand."

He lunged at her with speed that belied his great mass and punched her clear across the outcrop into the water with a splash.

Thunderbolt had seen Eggman punch the woman as she was about to land outside his gate on her tiny ship.

"Something's wrong," Shadow was pacing in his dorm unable to sit still, "I don't know why I'm jittery."

"I think it has to do with your witch being so far away again," Rouge was running her fingers over the uncut ruby. She was growing obsessed with the gem.

"No, I don't think that's it." He handed Rouge his notebook and allowed her to read it.

"Hmm…” Rouge hummed and then came to that part, "No way."

"Creepy, isn't it?"
"No kidding," she gave the notebook back. "Did you look up changelings further?"

"Yes. Some say they're the children of fairies and they're often ugly which is why they swap them out like that. These are from all different cultures, though. It could be a mistranslation." Shadow tapped his foot impatiently, "But it was mostly ignorant explanations for congenital birth defects and disabilities. Great cruelties were inflicted upon innocent children because of a fear of fairies."

"So these are shape-shifters with unstable magic?" Rouge tossed the gem between her hands, "Like the witch-eaters?"

Shadow's eyes grew wide with realization.

Sheptilah flung Eggman with magic toward the island and he landed face-first into the shore so he could not have the advantage of summoning his iron minions. She flew across the water on a puff of air and waited for him to stand.

"You're quite fast for a man your size," she kicked sand in his face, "I like learning new things about you every day."

"How dare you attack Lord Eggman!" Thunderbolt landed her ship and lunged for Sheptilah but missed.

"Augh!" Eggman growled and attempted to punch the witch but she dodged those attacks, too.

"Hold still!" Thunderbolt charged up to attack the witch with electricity.

Villagers heard the commotion and came running only to quickly back away when the fight got too close.
"What's going on?" Sonic sped by. "Woah!"

Thunderbolt got in one good shock before Sheptilah trapped the chinchilla in a large glass ball she formed out of sand and flung her out to sea. Thunderbolt couldn't break out or move and the glass insulated itself against her cybernetics. She tried to roll forward but it was of no use. All she could do was watch helplessly from the water.

"Stop!" Sonic got between Sheptilah and Eggman only to be thrown out of the way by the witch's magic into the water. She tackled Eggman and stabbed him in the gut with her claws.

“Don’t ever lay a hand on me again, do you understand!?” Her pent-up fury unleashed all at once.

"The final rule of alchemy," Sheptilah panted, "Is you are the Philosopher's Stone. You are rough and uncut and need polishing, but you are the stone; and I will break you."

Eggman choked and lifted his hand in submission. Sheptilah suddenly snapped out of it. She looked at her bloody hands with horror and regret. She had lost control.

Sonic panicked. He couldn't swim and he flailed around helplessly until he saw Thunderbolt floating in her ball and grabbed onto it for dear life.

"Get off my bubble!" Thunderbolt stomped her foot, "Or get me to the shore so I can kill that witch!"

The poor blue hedgehog had a death grip on the slippery glass and clung to it with his arms and legs, "A little help, guys!" He shouted into his wrist communicator.

"Eggman!" Thunderbolt cried, "Eggman!" She saw the witch stab him again and again with her claws. The chinchilla began to hyperventilate and realized she was running out of air.

She healed her injuries as well as Eggman's and got off of him. She then turned to the water and beckoned for the ball to come to her and Sonic came along with it.

She broke the glass so Thunderbolt was free and gently set Sonic down on the sand.
"What'd we miss?!" Tails flew over to Sonic and checked him over.

Sheptilah smiled, "I'm teaching Eggman alchemy. Sorry you got caught up in it."

Eggman groaned. Thunderbolt ran over to him and held his face in her tiny hands and showered him with kisses.

"T.B.-" Eggman held her at arm's length from his face but she continued to kiss the air, "T.B. come up for air."

"Are you okay?" The chinchilla was all flushed, "I thought you were dead!"

"I'm fine, we just had a disagreement." Eggman sat up as if nothing happened. He had a new perspective on the witch and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

"A disagreement?" Sonic shook the saltwater out of his spines, "You tried to kill each other!"

"Not seriously," Tilly shrugged, "We're still bonded." She tore open a portal to the lair and stepped through it, closing it behind her.
Sonic nervously looked over the doctor. Eggman wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and stood up. He tucked Thunderbolt under his arm as if she was a purse and turned to leave.

"Wait-" Sonic stopped him, "Are you okay? Like, seriously? Are you okay?"

"It's not my blood," he brushed the sand out of his mustache, "It's the witch's."

"That's not really a comfort." Tails was standing next to Sonic, twisting his tails nervously.

"It's seven in the morning and you woke everyone up by fighting another overlander and all you can say is it's not your blood?" The hedgehog was exasperated. He wasn't sleeping when the villagers called for him but he was still upset to have been disturbed so early in the day.

"Well, it isn't." His head was still hurting from when he slammed the witch into the rock but all other pain was gone when she healed him.

Thunderbolt's little legs were flailing, "Lord Eggman, please set me down!" As delightful as it was to be carried under the arm of the most esteemed overlander this side of the universe she was embarrassed to be held like a toy.

"Oh, yes," he gently plopped the chinchilla down.

"Sonic," Tails yawned, "I guess the fight's over. We should probably leave now."

"Seriously," Sonic shifted his weight to another foot, "Are you okay?"

"He's fine! It's Dr. Eggman you're talking to! I'm sure she deserved it, anyway." Thunderbolt was sparking from her cybernetics and nearly frothing at the mouth.

"Go away, rodent. I'm fine." Eggman shooed Sonic away and hailed for Orbot and Cubot to send an Eggmobile to pick him up.
"Suit yourself," Sonic turned to Tails, "come on, buddy."

Tails looked back as they walked away wondering if leaving Eggman and Thunderbolt alone was a good idea. He sighed softly when he noticed Sonic removed the witch orb from his glove and rolled it between his fingers.

"What can you tell me about alchemy?" Sonic squeezed the gem.

"Um," Tails bit his lip, "It's a philosophical proto-chemistry pseudo-religion school of thought-"

"Can you say it plainly?" Sonic raised an eyebrow, "I'm not fully awake yet."

"Sorry; it's a combination of magic and science. Mostly nonsense about creating gold from lead." The fox shrugged.

"From what I saw it looked like it could be a fighting style."

"Are you going to summon her?" Tails eyed the orb.

"Yeah, when we get further away." The duo quietly trudged from the sandy beach to the dark jungle. The only sounds were the crunching of leaves under their shoes and the occasional tweet until they came to a clearing.

"Sheptilah, Sheptilah, Sheptilah," Sonic stood in the gap between trees and muttered the witch's name all at once as if it was a single, dangerous word that could pull every last bit of the air from his lungs if misspoken.

Sheptilah appeared with a puff of displaced air and landed softly on the dirt with her arms at her side. She bent forward as if to bow, still wet from having been thrown into the water.

"How can I help you, Sonic the hedgehog?" She grinned innocently.
"Why did you attack Dr. Eggman?" Sonic cut to the point.

"He tried-" she caught her breath. "He grabbed me by the *throat,*" she hissed, "So I taught him a lesson about how to treat women." She extended her 'claws' and clicked the nails together.

"Why would he do that, though?" Tails put his hands on his hips.

"He thinks I'm gonna steal his empire from him or something because G.U.N. is forcing me to hold his hand. They think us staying bonded is the best way to keep him under control; apparently it's not." Tilly shrugged and retracted her nails, "I just asserted my dominance."

"Don't do that again," Sonic felt his stomach churn, "I've seen enough violence to last a while."

He looked like he hasn't slept in days. The last thing he needed was a witch going berserk.

Tilly tilted her head and looked at the blue hedgehog with curiosity, "Are you alright?"

"We've all been having trouble sleeping since the incident at the Soumerca base." The blonde fox sighed, "We saw some bad things."

She crossed her arms and shifted her weight so her hip stuck out and then sighed.

"I'm so sorry about everything. I won't do anything like that again where you can see it."

"Don't hurt anyone like that," Tails stomped his foot, "Don't be that way!"

She wanted to tell them that he crushed her skull on the rocks. She bit her tongue and took the verbal lashing because in the end the little fox was right.

"I don't know how things were back in your primitive times but these days we're civil and we do not do that. Sure, Eggman deserved a punch for laying a hand on you but to throw him to the beach where the innocent public could see and stab at him?" Small tears appeared in the corners of those big blue eyes, "That's terrifying."
"Tails," Sonic placed a hand on the fox's shoulder to calm him, "Don't get too worked up."

The witch ran her fingers against the side of her head that was still slightly damp with blood and felt where the crack had been. The fuzziness between life and death was terrifying. Feeling her brain heal itself and make connections again in real time was like waking up numb from a nightmare but unable to move your body.

Her face flushed red with shame, "I..." she scratched her cheek, "You're right. I need to be the better person. I suppose I should go apologize to the villagers as well."

"Nah," Sonic kicked some dirt aside with his toe. "No need to make a bigger deal of it."

Sheptilah looked around and marvelled at the jungle. It looked different when the sun was up. The beams of light peeking in through the leaves lit up the dust motes floating in the air like sparkles.

"I'll leave you alone now," she bowed again, "And again I am sorry. Summon me if you need me for anything." She turned and disappeared into the trees. Sonic looked at Tails expectantly but when neither said anything they too decided to leave the jungle.

"The audacity! The nerve! If I ever see her again I'll-" Thunderbolt was stomping around the lair, "I ran out of threats. Help me think of something else."

"You haven't threatened to peel back her skin yet," Eggman was sitting at his desk and typing up something at his computer.

"I will peel back her skin! Like a banana!" The chinchilla stood triumphantly.

"Hah," Ivo chortled.
"What?" She twitched her tail expectantly.

"Nothing," he grinned, "Inside joke." He went back to writing up a report on the witch, "What's wrong at the Soumerca base?"

Thunderbolt paced back and forth, "I went back with and we found there was more damage. At first I suspected G.U.N. was behind it but it was those goo monsters again. There was even more slime; like they were actively eating away at the base." She took out her phone and brought up the images she took at the site.

"There was nothing there when we got back, however."

Eggman hummed quietly in thought as he scrolled through the images. "Why did you not put these on the EggNet?"

"I wanted you to be the first to know," her face was full of determination, "I have ideas for a new base as well." In all honestly she didn't want the remaining Egg Bosses to see her perceived failures and any excuse to see Ivo in person was an excuse well-used.

The man tapped his finger absentmindedly on the control panel. He was still a bit preoccupied with having just lost a bloody fight and potentially dealing with G.U.N. 'seizing' his assets and didn't want to talk about the Soumerca base.

"Computer," Eggman spoke to his machine, "Deploy a shield around the remains of the Soumercian Base and put up a motion-detecting security monitor."

The computer beeped with understanding.

"Is there anything I can do for you right now, sir?" She stiffened up when Eggman shifted in his seat.

He handed the phone back to her and sighed softly, "Just make yourself comfortable somewhere."

"Really?" Her tail bristled with excitement.
"By the way," Thunderbolt fluffed up her chest fur, "What started the fight?"

"Insubordination."

The witch had draped herself over a thick branch in a very tall tree and changed back into her sarong and leather top. Her hair hung loosely over the side and she appeared to be sleeping comfortably in the humid shade like a cat.

"Amy, this is a bad idea." Sticks' voice was full of suspicion, "I'm telling you this jungle is cursed."

"Sticks," Amy huffed with frustration, "I just want fresh berries to make pies with. Sonic's been feeling bluer than usual and I wanted to cheer him up. Please stop being weird for a moment so I can concentrate on picking the ones that aren't poisonous."

Sticks got down on all fours and smelled around, "I smell fair folk."

"What?"

"That witch is here," she was sniffing the dirt frantically.

"Is she a witch or a fairy? Pick one." Amy adjusted the empty basket under her arm, "While you're down there keep an eye out for any edible mushrooms."

Sheptilah opened an eye to see the girls were standing beneath the tree she was in and that they hadn't seen her. She glamoured herself into the form of a simple brown mouse with a white tuft of fur on its chest and skittered down the trunk of the tree, disappearing into the brush. Sticks' ears turned to the sound of the leaves rustling and jumped toward it and was disappointed to see the
pink tail of what she thought was a rat vanish into the shadows.

She followed the girls around the forest silently and curiously. Amy and Sticks had gone back to foraging in the undergrowth for berries, mushrooms and other treasures. Whenever Sheptilah found something good she would swing from the limbs of the bushes and make noise to get their attention. She would also direct them away from anything baneful with the same method.

"I don't know what you see in the guy," the badger shrugged, "sure, Sonic is cute but blue? Overrated color."

Amy tilted her head to the side and a faint blush crawled up her already pink cheeks, "it's his enthusiasm for this world. He can control the Chaos Emeralds like it's nothing. He's saved the world countless times!" The hedgehog was practically skipping on her toes, "Sticks, he's perfect!"

"Okay, I see how he appeals to you." The badger grinned mischievously.

"What about you? Don't you like anyone romantically?" Amy giggled.

"Me!?" Sticks sounded scandalized, "Romance is for the birds; and the bees, if I am to believe what I'm told. All I want out of life is muck to roll in and lots of pretty rocks."

Amy snorted, "okay." The jungle was quiet and the air began to smell sweet. Almost sickeningly sweet.

The hedgehog picked up the scent and was delighted to see it came from a cluster of white mushrooms. As she bent down to reach it the witch nearly dispelled her glamour to stop the girl but Sticks had already slapped her hand away.

"No! That's a deathcap!" The badger's icy eyes were wild with panic, "Don't even look at those!"

"It looks like any other mushroom, are you sure?" Amy trusted her friend but Sticks was also known to be paranoid, "And they smell sweet!"

"See that bottom part?" the badger nudged the leaves away with her toe to reveal a puffy bottom to
the mushroom's stalk, "Looks like a skirt?"

"Yeah?"

"That means it's a deathcap. Other white mushrooms in this area don't have that. See if it's wearing a skirt, it's gonna hurt!" Sticks stomped all over the mushrooms to prevent anyone from accidentally eating them.

" Down- "

Stomp!

" You- "

Stomp!

" Evil- "

Stomp!

" Fungi! "

Stomp! She pretended to brush sweat away from her brow. "Now they won't come back."

When the girls weren't looking Sheptilah snuck into the basket full of treats and hitched a ride back to Amy's house. She set the basket on her kitchen counter and started to wash the berries she picked to prepare them for baking.

The witch jumped out of the basket and tried to run across the counter but couldn't get any traction on the smooth surface. Her small brown eyes met Amy's large green ones. At first the hedgehog was startled but then breathed a sigh of relief when it came into focus that it wasn't a big roach but a simple little mouse. Sheptilah froze in place, unsure of what to do but was ready to transform back into a human if the hedgehog was prone to smash pests.
In one motion Amy scooped the rodent into a bowl she took from the sink and gently plopped the creature outside in the bushes. It's what Sonic would do, she thought to herself as she scrubbed her hands with hot water and soap.

Sheptilah sped off as fast as her tiny mousy body would take her until she came across somber music floating in the air.

Sonic swung in his hammock and strumming a few bars of a sad song on his acoustic guitar.

"All the leaves are brown," he hummed, "And the skies are gray -" He clicked his tongue disapprovingly and adjusted the strings. He plucked a few chords and turned a few pegs until the notes were satisfactory and he strummed again.

That's when he noticed a brown mouse sitting on the tip of his shoe.

He turned away from it at first thinking it was a mirage from exhaustion but then raised an eyebrow at it.

The mouse nodded at him as if to say 'continue'.

He shrugged it off as he had fallen asleep and obliged the critter. Sonic strummed the guitar with his fingers and tapping the body with his thumb to create percussion.

"Since Christmas is right around the corner, and a little mouse is disturbing me, perhaps something seasonal?" He grinned and played Tchaikovsky's Coffee.

A simple melody with deep tones that sounded sad and pained. It evoked a feeling of slowly sneaking around a large room shrouded with mystery and heavy incense.

After barely a minute the blue hero dozed off with his guitar in his hands to the first peaceful, dreamless sleep he's had in a week.
The witch turned back into her human form and draped a nearby blanket across the sleeping Mobian and snuck out as silent as a breeze.

She then wandered around the beach past the big red echidna lifting weights.

"Hey, Knuckles." She greeted him as she walked past.

"Hey, lady." Knuckles didn't break concentration.

She continued on until she came to a palm tree with fronds large enough to weave with. She sliced them down with magic and sat under the tree knotting together the leaves to make a shallow bucket-style basket with a braided handle she could sling over her shoulder.

It wasn't a pretty basket but it would serve her purposes and like the pocket behind her head it was a little bigger on the inside with magic.

Tilly dug her toes in the warm sand while she put the finishing touches on her new bag. It felt good to do things by hand- even if she did cheat a little by reinforcing the ends with a spell.

She then stood, stretched until she felt the bones in her spine pop and walked into the water. The cold waves lapped against her feet making her shiver.

Then, like the water in the ziggurat at Shadow's feet, she beckoned the sea to part only where she stood. The witch, protected by a bubble of air around her body, picked up abandoned shells and stones she thought were pretty and put them into the bag.

She walked so deep into the water that it became too dark to see without the glow of her Oracle Stone to light the way. The bottom of the sea was freezing and silent but peaceful. She came upon the real treasures now: nautilus and conch shells, anemone, seaweed, coral and starfish; all of which Sheptilah put into the bag.

"Ah," she felt a painful tug in her heart. She was too far from Dr. Eggman and the bond was pulling her back. Somewhere in his lair Dr. Eggman felt it too.
"Damned witch," he rubbed his chest with the base of his palm, "I don't know what she's doing but she better stop it."

He and Thunderbolt were drawing up plans for the next Egg Army base in Soumerca and he was having artist's block. Balls of crumpled paper were tossed everywhere around the dining room.

"Don't think about her," Thunderbolt brushed a paper ball off the table with her tail, "She'll be the death of you."

"I know," he chewed on the end of his drafting pencil, "Maybe we should focus on getting rid of her."

"I'll get the vegetable peeler!"

"No; I meant getting rid of the threat of the witch-eaters."

"Oh," she was disappointed, "What of G.U.N. threatening to arrest you when it's over?"

"The witch won't hand me over, I know this." He wondered if he could incorporate the ziggurat which was somewhere in the Midesta region as an Egg Army base, "She doesn't like them. However her familiar is there… This does pose a threat to me."

"Her familiar?"

"Shadow the hedgehog is her familiar. Neither of them like that fact, which is a silver lining. This means I can manipulate her into seeing G.U.N. as the enemy. All I have to do is paint myself as the sympathetic man who, by no fault of my own, inherited the sins of my grandfather. I'll have her join my Egg Army."

"What!?" Thunderbolt was horrified, "Sir, please!"

"It's perfect!" he stood and paced around the room, "She'll have a uniform and everything. I'll turn
her against G.U.N. and she can work with our Egg Bosses as another one to fight the alien threat citing the organization's failed attempts at dealing with similar situations."

"But a Boss?"

"Yes! Picture it: Egg Boss Sheptilah of the Bygone Island region!" He rubbed his evil hands together, "And you as my most trusted boss will be her instructor."

"Yes, sir!" She saluted him, "Do I get full authority over her?"

"Yes, within reason. I have calls to make and Egg Bosses to reinstate. For now make yourself scarce: I have to charm the woman into seeing things my way.”
"The preparations are complete; though I do not see the point to it." Orbot scratched his dome, "This seems a little much."

Eggman crossed his arms and looked at the dim dining room that was filled with the glow of burning candles and the smell of savory vegetable dishes.

"What do witches like?" Eggman pulled at his sleeves.

"According to the internet they like jars. A lot of jars." Cubot straightened up a napkin he so lovingly folded into the shape of a swan.

"Broomsticks, pointy hats, coffee mugs that say 'the witch is in'." Orbot unfolded the swan and flattened the napkin.

"Dead flowers," Cubot folded the napkin again, "Five-pointed stars."

"Ouija boards," Orbot ripped the napkin from Cubot's hands and unfolded it and slammed it on the table. Cubot reached for it but decided it would be best to leave it alone and backed away when Orbot's eyes glowed red.

"I think I need to update your search engine on the EggNet…" Eggman sighed.

"She's at the gate, Thunderbolt poked her head in the room, "Ready to work your magic, boss?"

"Let her in the lair and bring her to me," he cracked his knuckles.

The chinchilla bolted to the entrance to let the woman in.

"I wanted to apologize to you for earlier, Thunderbolt, I just didn't want you to get hur-" Sheptilah was interrupted mid-sentence by the chinchilla pulling her by the skirt to the dining room.
"Lord Eggman has much to discuss with you," she tugged, "It's urgent."

"You're going to rip my skirt off if you pull any harder," she gripped the knot holding it up so it wouldn't come undone.

"That's the last thing I want to do," Thunderbolt let go of the hem, "This way." She led the witch to the dining room.

"Oh, gods." Sheptilah felt her stomach drop when she saw the romantic setting complete with two cups of chilled red wine.

"Your highness, welcome back to my tower," he pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit in it, "Thank you, Thunderbolt. You can go back to your business."

"Yes, sir." Thunderbolt bowed and scurried out of the room and slid the door closed then pressed her large ear to it to listen in.

The witch furrowed her eyebrows suspiciously and sat in the floating chair. "Doctor..."

"We got off on the wrong foot. I wanted to apologize for my reckless behavior earlier," he sat in his chair with a soft 'whumf' as the cushion gave way under him, "I really must explain my actions."

"I wanted to apologize, too," she cast her eyes to the side, "I did go a bit overboard." Even though you crushed my skull, she seethed internally.

"I truly didn't mean to slam you so hard. When I heard that wet crunch," he winced, "I realized had gone too far. I still have a slight headache from the bond retaliating against me."

He honestly did not intend to throw her with such force. He sometimes forgot how strong he was compared to normal humans.

"Overlanders… we are mutants." He removed his glasses and revealed those eyes like dim-burning
coals in the pitch of night.

Sheptilah flinched. She had only ever seen those kinds of dark sclerae in people who were slowly strangled to death.

"Mutants?"

He put his glasses back on, "Alien interference thousands of years ago caused this. Thousands of years before you were born, even. It seems that aliens have been altering living things in this planet since the dawn of time."

Eggman wove a long and sad tale that was actually mostly true. He spoke of his cousin Maria and her relation to Shadow and the ARK his grandfather worked on. It began with alien betrayal and the state-sanctioned murder of his grandfather on camera for the world to see. It all clicked into place for Sheptilah: she saw Maria's murder and the fight with the biolizard when she scryed and those feelings of fear and hatred were Shadow's, not his perceived victims'. She was afraid of him for no reason. He was telling the truth.

"I was lucky enough to be the one who caught Shadow in the exosphere and helped him gain his strength back but he eventually joined G.U.N. against everyone's better judgment. I have been trying to emulate what my grandfather wanted to do with his life but I decided ruling the universe was more fun and profitable."

The witch chewed her food slowly and thought about all he told her while she tapped her extended nails on the table's glass surface. She waited for her Oracle Stone to detect if he was lying but it determined he was not.

"Why would you save Shadow's life?" I owe you for protecting my familiar, she thought.

"Because he was as much my grandfather's as he is mine. I inherited my grandfather's sins and accomplishments by virtue of blood." Eggman traced his finger around the rim of the cup.

"It's complicated," she echoed his words from earlier, "You were afraid of losing your life's work to the same people that murdered your grandfather so you panicked."

"Yes, and after having thought about it I sincerely apologize for it. I do not trust G.U.N. to stay the
way it is—especially not if they steal my weapons technology and my wealth as well as my people.” He finished off his food and sipped his wine.

"Why do you want to take over the world?" She avoided eye contact and stared at her plate.

"Why not? Besides, if I am in charge of everything nobody else will get hurt."

"So you think acute fascism is the only solution?" She raised an eyebrow, "Excellent way to be murdered by your constituents."

"No, the other solution is to kill everyone," he chuckled. "Look, I was a lot wilder in my younger days. It's much different now; even Sonic would tell you that. I am probably going to give up soon and retire and enjoy my golden years." He feigned sadness at the thought.

"I suppose," Sheptilah reached for the wine and took a sip only to choke at how strong it was. "Wine-making has certainly gotten more potent with time," she coughed, "I was unprepared."

He grinned, "Sorry."

She shook her head and took another sip, "It tastes great! I am just used to it being more watered down. Alcohol doesn't affect me much anyway; it's those healing powers I have. Back in my day we ate poisonous things for a slight buzz."

"You ate poison? For fun?" He squinted at her from behind dark glasses.

"Yes, certain poisons." She threw back her head and finished off the wine in one gulp, "So don't waste your good wine on me." She set the cup down with a click, "But if you have hemlock on hand I will take it."

"It isn't a waste, I rarely have guests over." He shrugged. "I'm a very solitary man. Besides, you are a queen. Aren't you used to the finest of everything?" He poured her another glass.

"I slept outside with my family under the stars every night and was never fond of covering myself in jewelry," she tilted her head cutely, "So yes and no. I noticed that you live quite minimally. Your
bed is too small for even just yourself. I'm willing to bet you actually spend most of your time on your amazing sofa."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, you walked out of your room and straight to the sofa after I broke the sink- which is how I ended up in the room with Thunderbolt." The woman pushed her food around with her fork.

"Speaking of Thunderbolt," he leaned in, "I would like for you to lead my army in the fight against the witch-eaters."

"What?"

"While we remain bonded it is in my best interest as well to help you. Therefore I would like for you to assist in commanding my army."

"I already have G.U.N. at my disposal and they should be enough." She crossed her arms.

"Yes, but why not double your firepower? These witch-eating beasts are extremely dangerous."

"I still have to make the staff my mothers had in the fight. The same one that sealed the beasts away the first time. It takes so many rare items-"

"And the Egg militia will help you. I promise."

"I would prefer not to involve more people than necessary."

"They're already involved. Many of them are still being held hostage at G.U.N. for my insured cooperation and their friends and family were murdered by the witch-eaters. These are very capable people from all over the world with many talents that would be a great advantage for you." He reached across the table and put his hand on top of hers as a friendly gesture.

She did not trust either organization; however if she had her hands in both of them she could keep a
watchful eye on them. She had already gained an improbable amount of trust from Cabbot and Tower so why not? Being bonded to Eggman might not be enough to keep him under control, either.

"Alright. On one condition." She took her hand off the table.

"Name it."

"You leave the Mobians alone until after this is all over. All of them."

He opened his mouth to speak and she interrupted him by holding a finger up in the air.


"Done." He grinned.

She sighed softly, "Okay. What's first?"

"Let's get you fitted for a uniform."

She snorted, "Are you serious?"

He nodded and let a smile spread on his face. "I'm not complaining but you can't run around half-naked."
"Your blood tests came back clean. You're completely healed; it's as if you're twenty years old again. However, your kidneys are now showing as sitting backwards," a young male doctor with blonde hair and blue eyes was looking at the x-rays with befuddlement.

"Backwards?" Andrea was holding onto Boris' hand so tightly her knuckles were white.

"Yes, or rather reversed. Your left one is on your right and your right is on your left. Otherwise they're in perfect health." The doctor was pointing to the location of the kidneys with his capped pen on the x-ray. It looked like vines in white facing the spine, "These should be facing outward-not inward."

"What does this mean?" Andrea felt dread creep up her neck.

"It's called an ectopic kidney. The flow of urine is still going toward the bladder so overall you're fine it's just...posed oddly. What doctor did the transplant? I should send them back to medical school." The doctor put his pen in his pocket, "Also, how did they do it? You have absolutely no scars, and traditional transplants leave the old kidneys in!"

"We do have the privilege of doctor-patient confidentiality, yes?" Boris leaned in.

"Of course," the doctor nodded, "Nothing leaves this room. Not even President Tower can compel me to say anything."

He paused and then sighed, "The witch who helped all of those Egg Army people? She healed Andrea."

The doctor bit his lip. "She cured your renal failure?"

"She did it in under five minutes." Andrea nodded, "It felt cold...like being in an ice bath. It didn't even hurt."

"I wonder..." the doctor turned to the x-rays and then back to the Cabbots, "Do you think you can
Shadow was sparring with Omega in the training room to blow off steam.

"We may have been fighting deformed children," the hedgehog dodged the robot's attacks, "And we may have to fight more."

"Those were not children," Omega caught the hedgehog by the ankle and flung him toward the wall. Shadow righted himself and pushed off the wall with his skates and grabbed Omega's head.

"It's still possible," Shadow's goal was not to actually damage the robot so he simply jumped down and rolled out of the way of Omega's incoming punch.

"I wish I wasn't her familiar," he spin-dashed around and knocked Omega over by hitting him directly in the chest, "I wish I wasn't involved."

"Calculating…" Omega righted himself, "Kill the witch and kill the beasts. This solves all problems."

"That's your solution to everything," Shadow rolled his shoulders, "But that isn't mine."

"Am I wrong?" The robot stared down the hedgehog, "This would also kill Eggman. Three birds, one stone."

Shadow paused before walking out of the room to go find Rouge for advice.
In Eggman's large office Orbot was taking Sheptilah’s measurements while Cubot was pawing through her purse. Thunderbolt lounged off to the side watching carefully.

"It's bigger on the inside, boss!" The robot pulled out a shell, "Kinda like my brain."

"That's because it's so empty," Eggman groaned, "Chest out, Sheptilah."

She stiffened up for the measurement. "So Thunderbolt is going to train me? Right now, in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, you will need to learn how to use most of my technology and our written language as well as the history of the Eggman Empire." He was sketching up designs on his computer console.

"And how to command everyone," Thunderbolt chimed in, "Which means not being nice."

"Seriously?" Sheptilah yelped when Orbot took her chest measurement, "Watch those hands!"

"You don't have to be cruel but you do have to be firm." Ivo shot Cubot a look for going through the bag.

"I know how to lead an army;" she groaned, "Can I request that the uniform be a pinkish-purple? And there should be an opening for my Oracle Stone. Fabric rubbing up against it feels weird."

"Weird?" He leaned back in his chair, "What happens if someone touches it?"

"Have you ever noticed that I never touch it?" She gestured to it, "You just don't do that. The sensation is unpleasant and if someone grabs it it will shock you. Badly. It won't shock me of course since it's my stone but still."

"Keyhole it is, then," he turned back to his computer.
Orbot finished taking measurements and gave them to Eggman to do with what he pleased and he and Cubot left the room to go do chores.

Eggman's computer beeped. He had an incoming message. He looked at his gauntlet and excused himself to answer it.

"This is Axel," the image of the water buffalo appeared on the gauntlet, "Egg Army Efrika is online and we are ready to re-engage. We have a group of thirty capable Mobians, not including myself."

"Good work," Eggman spoke quietly, "I am still waiting to hear back from Akhlut, Nephthys, Tundra, Cassia, Clove and Mordred. As always you are the first to be ready, besides Thunderbolt."

"I have not heard from them." Axel shook his head, "Sir, why are we re-engaging?"

"The Eggman Empire has expanded." He grinned, "And I have a new member to introduce."

"What of Wendy, Maw, Conquering Storm, Abyss and Kukku?"

"Wendy and Walter are currently imprisoned in another dimension. As for the others I am being extremely selective at this time. Consider yourself the cream of the crop, Axel." Eggman disconnected and returned to his office to find the witch had taken the form of a typical chinchilla and was chasing Thunderbolt around.

"I can't leave you two alone, can I?"

"Not really, no," The witch stood on her haunches and swished her tail back and forth, revealing a white tuft on her chest on otherwise gray fur, "I wanted to prove regular chinchillas are just as fast as Mobian chinchillas! Turns out Thunderbolt was right and Mobians are faster."

"I'm starting to wonder if you really look like a regular woman or not." He stroked his mustache in frustration.

"Well, my true form," she shifted into the image and voice of Sonic but with patch of white on her
chest, "Is this!" She posed and blew a kiss.

"That is literally the worst thing you've done to me today," he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Including the gut-slicing?" She put her hands on her now blue hips

Thunderbolt twisted her face up in disgust.

"Oh, especially," he chuckled, "Though it's good to know you can take the whole form of others. I may need to use that ability later."

Sheptilah looked back over her shoulder at her tail. "This form is really cute but it's so hard for me to hold the glamour of my voice," she cleared her throat. "Maybe once I have more practice I can do it."

She bounced back and forth on the balls of her feet for a second and then changed back into her typical self and breathed a sigh of relief, "I can't mimic his speed, though. That would give it away. I also haven't spoken to him enough to feel confident in how he speaks."

"I think your uniform design is ready, what do you think?" He gestured to his console. It showed a long-sleeved orchid turtleneck coat that flared like a bell at the bottom. The length of the coat was modest and only came to her mid-thigh. The sleeves and hem were gold and it had a simple diamond-shaped keyhole opening across the chest to allow for breathing room for the Oracle Stone. Above and below the opening were golden crescent moons so as to frame the stone like a vertical triple moon goddess symbol.

White straps with gold buckles on the coat matched a white belt that went around a black jumpsuit, also with a keyhole, and black boots with gray slotted screw head-style padding at the ankles. White gloves completed the look.

"Wow. That's frighteningly conservative," Tilly was impressed, "I actually love it."

"And to think you could've had a wonderfully designed Eggman ensemble days ago if you had listened to me," Thunderbolt beamed.
Eggman smiled, "I'm so pleased you like it." He typed something into the console. Within minutes Orbot brought in the clothes fresh from the printer.

Tilly snapped her fingers and the clothes appeared on her body and fit perfectly. The weight of her hair being down pushed the coat forward and ruined the shape so she put it into a high ponytail with a glamour.

"It's fade proof, waterproof, and your shoes are shock absorbent. They will also allow you to walk on even the smoothest of surfaces without problem."

Sheptilah felt along the buckles that went across the middle of the coat's flare and gasped softly, "And there's hidden pockets!"

"Sir, what about the communicator?" Thunderbolt pointed to the side of her head where the injected device was to remind him of his next move.

"Cubot? Cubot!" Eggman tapped his foot impatiently, "That was your cue!"

Cubot came floating in holding a box. He was in such a rush he nearly crashed into a wall.

"Here you go, boss!" he held it up. He opened it and showed the woman: two glassy red earrings and a golden tiara with a red gem in the center.

"You should always wear these," he handed her the earrings. "The other Egg Bosses have little trackers and communicators in their skulls but seeing as that would kill you I've instead opted for these. All you need to do is squeeze one and talk and we will hear you if you are within range."

She put the earrings on by forcing the backs through her unpierced ears and was delighted to find they felt nearly weightless.

"With these you can be found anywhere and communicate with the rest of the army bosses. With this-" he took the tiara out and gently placed it on her head, "You can gain access anywhere on any of my properties. Never take this off when we are away from the lair."
Thunderbolt was awfully quiet. She knew full well what that crown did. In fact, she suggested it. The gem functioned like a key card that let her enter rooms any other Egg Army personnel would have access to but the most top-secret. Built into it was a mind control device just in case something went awry. Eggman had installed such fail safes in his traditional injected technology but he had to get creative with the witch.

"So it is a fancy key," it felt denser than her normal tiara, "Thank you."

"Soon you will meet the other regional commanders and those that serve under them." Eggman was very pleased with himself.

"What about Shadow?" Tilly bit her lip.

"Oh," Eggman had completely forgotten about him.

"I want him there, too." She flashed a cute grin, "I mean he is my familiar."

"He is going to be upset that you've joined the Eggman Empire, to put it politely." He stroked his mustache in thought. "Alright, just him, though."

She bounced on the balls of her feet, "Where are we meeting them? The others, I mean?"

"I haven't decided yet," he checked the time, "We should be off to bed. It's already one in the morning."

"Oh, by the way," the woman straightened her coat, "When is the next red moon?"

"What, a lunar eclipse? In this hemisphere?" He looked it up on his gauntlet, "Not for a few months, why?"

"Oh, uh, no reason," she lied, "It's just been so long since I've seen one…" she snapped her fingers and was back in her G.U.N. scrubs, "I'm going to sleep outside. Thank you, again."
She waved at them, grabbed her frond bag and left to sleep in the garden.

Thunderbolt turned to Eggman and smirked. "You're good."

"Oh, I know." His devious grin made her heart skip a beat, "Human women are easy to charm."

"Hey, boss?" Cubot floated up to him, "Thunderbolt's new mecha is ready."

The chinchilla could barely contain herself. "Really?!"

"Yes! You've been a good minion so I thought I'd reward you." He bent down and lightly pat her on the head. This simple friendly gesture nearly killed her.

Men are so damned easy to charm, Sheptilah thought to herself as she settled down on the grass, it's almost too easy.

She got comfortable in the cool, waning moonlight and almost fell asleep when Shadow, of all people, warped in.

"Oh for the love of-," she rolled over and sat up."Oh, hi." Her entire demeanor changed. "What brings you here?"

"Your legal papers," he tossed a manilla envelope at her, "We need to talk."

"About?" she opened the envelope and let the contents spill into her lap. A passport, photo ID, a temporary birth certificate with question marks for all of the data validated by G.U.N., none of which she could read. She put the materials back into the envelope and stuffed it away into the frond bag.

"Changelings."

She looked up at him with hatred, mouth curled into a snarl. "Don't you dare say that word," she hissed.
"Why?" He crossed his arms defiantly.

"It's the most heinous slur I know," she stood, "Hebat was one. Do you know the ostracism we faced when we became queens?"

"Hebat? Your familiar?" Uh oh, he thought, I'm definitely in trouble now.

She balled her fists and sighed, "It's not your fault. You couldn't have known." She bent down and grabbed her frond bag and walked past Shadow.

"Follow me," she opened a portal to the shore and stepped in.

He nervously obliged. Tilly closed the portal behind him. She sat in the cold sand and motioned for him to sit in front of her. He did so and she pulled him closer and held his hands in front of him.

"We don't say that word because it elicits hatred from the tongues that speak it and the ears that catch it," she pressed his hands together with her fingertips.

"What are you doing…?"

"Watch," she pried his hands apart and a puff of smoke escaped his palms and fizzled away, "Why would you ask about such a thing, anyhow?" She pressed his hands together and pried them apart again and sighed. She would have to share energy.

"I saw it in the grimoire. I think I misunderstood something. They have unstable magic and shape shift so I incorrectly guessed they were the witch-eating things."

"No, not at all," she rested her chin on the top of his head very carefully, "The beasts don't have Oracle Stones. Even hybrids do; any biological offspring of a witch will have one."

He chuckled, "I'm relieved to say the least. I thought we may have been killing misunderstood creatures that were defending themselves."
"Oh, that's what this was about? No, no, they're like under-evolved animals."

"But one of them talked to me in the ziggurat."

"What?"

"It talked, remember?"

"Ivo was holding my leg together, I don't remember much at that point." Her limb tingled just thinking about it.

"It was talking to me telepathically. It said it was the core of the building- seriously, what are you doing with my hands?"

"I'm trying to get you to use your magic. Sometimes it's like a plug that you have to pull out in order for it to flow with outsiders. There's something there but I'm having trouble. It could be that chaos energy." She groaned, "This is annoying."

"It could be my rings." He shook his wrist, the golden band glittered in the moonlight.

"What about them?"

"They're inhibitors. If I use my full powers I could really hurt myself. I am the Ultimate Life Form."

"You mean to tell me this entire time you've been holding back?"

"Yes."

"Oh my gods, are you serious?" She grumbled, "Then we gotta do this the hard way." She put a hand over her Oracle Stone and drew out raw power that took the form of a glittering, silvery liquid
and pressed it against the white fluff on Shadow's chest.

He felt the magic 'bounce' around inside his body until it settled in place. It was so cold his first few breaths were visible.

He shuddered and choked, "A little warning next time!"

"If I caught you on guard you would've resisted," She shrugged, "The core of the ziggurat was my great grandmother. I mentioned that the building was her familiar, right? The core is her essence. Whatever was messing with its magic was manipulating a witch-eater that was already there."

She again pressed his hands together and pried them apart. This time there was more smoke and it held a form for a few seconds before dissipating.

"It worked! It worked! The magic's going!" She could barely contain herself.

"Okay, so how do I use it?"

"Think of something," she urged, "Like a little bird. Let the image 'flow' from your head to your shoulders and then your hands."

He closed his eyes and concentrated and was able to get it into the form of a little sparrow for a few moments.

"You did it!" She squeezed him, "You can do a lot of things as long as you concentrate hard enough and use your imagination."

"What happens if I run out?" He looked at his fingers and wondered if the Chaos Energy he could wield would hurt him now.

"Eh, you should be able to develop more on your own but if not I will just give you more. Oh, by the way I am involved in Eggman's army now and you are coming with us to the next meeting."
"Sheptilah," he looked back at her.

She squinted, "What? It's the only way to keep Eggman under my full control. He has already agreed to stop everything he's doing until this is all over and that includes harassing Sonic and his friends. He witnessed my power earlier today when I nearly killed him after he nearly killed me."

"You fought him?" Shadow's ears drooped down.

"Mhm," Tilly sighed, "He smashed my head against the ground and that made me upset; so I stabbed him in the gut in front of everyone in the village as a warning."

Shadow frowned and looked back toward the ocean. Storm clouds were forming on the horizon. "Well, I guess he deserved it for trying to murder you."

"Tails yelled at me for that. He was right, though; I shouldn't get carried away with flexing my powers. Anyway, Eggman apologized and offered to help. He must think I'm stupid and I may be in a strange time and place but I'm no fool."

The witch closed her eyes, "So I'm going to work both sides to my advantage in fighting off these lunar beasts. I don't trust G.U.N. for what they did to you and Maria and I certainly don't trust Eggman but I trust you, Shadow. I hope you can trust me."

"So you know about Maria? Eggman told you?" The hedgehog gripped his knees.

Sheptilah recounted the story Ivo had told her. Shadow growled softly, "He left out the part when he manipulated me into being his slave. You really should have talked to me before you did this. Do not trust him, Sheptilah. Never trust him."

"I don't," she pulled the tiara and earrings out from behind her head, "I would like G.U.N. to quietly take a look at these and tell me if they're safe. He gave these to me and told me it's for tracking me and letting me into his buildings. Please bring them back as soon as possible."

Shadow took the jewelry and looked at it, "He gave you a crown?"

"I know, right? He thinks he's funny." She pulled the shrunken grimoire out as well and placed it in Shadow's hands. She then stood and opened a portal to G.U.N.'s main gate for him.
"Just imagine the book as being larger or smaller and it will shift in turn. Study it, write in it, whatever you like. It's just as much yours as it is mine. Take care, Shadow. I will fix everything in time."

"You are a real pain in the ass," he chuckled, "President Tower is going to be mad."

"Let him be mad," she shrugged, "This is what he gets for not letting us get separated."

"Okay," he stepped through the portal, "I'll be back as soon as possible."
"Midesta is online, sir," Nephythys spoke with great confidence. She is an older black and white vulture who wears a golden mask covering her face. "We are back at full capacity."

Eggman checked the time on his gauntlet. It was four in the morning. Damned time zones!

"Good," he hung up abruptly on her. The next call came from Mordred.

"Eurish is online," the green and gold cobra dragged out his 's' sounds. The robotic bodysuit he was wearing quietly creaked with each movement he made. Eggman dreaded having to upgrade that.

"Also good," Eggman hung up on him, too. His gauntlet beeped again, it was Cassia and Clove. Both were green and white pronghorns in gray uniforms with gold accessories.

"Yes?" he sounded annoyed.

"Northamer is back up and running," Clove looked weary, "Sir- may I ask-"

"Thank you and goodbye," he hung up on her. Why did everyone have to come online at once at four in the morning?

Ivo rolled over and yawned. I might as well get up now, he thought. As he was about to sit up his gauntlet beeped again.

"Oh, for the love of - yes?"

"Artika is functional," Tundra the walrus spoke in a gruff, almost gravely voice. Although it wasn't visible under his thick blue coat and white mustache, Tundra's fur was bright purple. His tusks were no longer ivory but were replaced with steel implants.

"Good; and amuse me, Tundra, did everyone coordinate a four in the morning wakeup call just to annoy me or was it a coincidence?"
"It is a coincidence, sir." Tundra raised an eyebrow. Eggman had specifically asked them to contact him the moment they all were functional, regardless of the hour.

"It was a rhetorical question." Eggman hung up. He dragged his hand down his face and then got ready to take a shower.

"Why don't you sleep at normal hours any more?" Shadow handed the items to Hope to analyze.

The blonde girl looked to the time on her laptop and sighed, "I am stressed." She rolled the earring between her fingers.

"Careful," Shadow gently nudged the girl, "That's a short-range communicator."

"Ah," she put the earrings and crown down on her desk, "So you want me to scan them?"

"Mhm, these were 'gifts' given to the witch by Eggman. She wants to make sure they're safe." He kept his voice low.

She nodded and got to work. The earrings were perfectly safe but the crown was suspicious. Within the jewel was a tiny machine that could emit short-distance paralyzing rays.

"It's not tamper-proof. Look-" she was able to disable the software in the tiara while keeping the radio-frequency identification material safe so it would still function like a keycard.

"Check this out," Hope copied the software to her computer, "I think now I know how we can disable the injectors in Eggman's minions without him knowing. I would just need to be able to get a hold of one. If he's as sloppy with those as he is with this we can free them. The doctors are afraid if they surgically remove them the injections may explode, killing the patient. Have Sheptilah try and get us one."
"Okay." Shadow took the crown and the earrings, "Maybe it was a good thing she joined Eggman's Empire after all."

"What?" Hope nearly bit her tongue with surprise, "She did what?"

"She fancies herself as a double-agent. We're going to meet the other Egg Bosses soon. I don't know how she did it but the woman convinced him to let me come along. Frankly I'm impressed." Shadow scratched his chin absentmindedly, "I suppose I need to get that phone then."

Hope groaned. "She's gonna get herself killed."

"No," Shadow held up a finger, "She's going to get herself and Eggman killed." He sighed, "Thanks, Hope. See you later; and get some sleep."

He teleported away to return the items leaving an exhausted Hope to spend her time alone on the internet in the middle of the night.

Eggman was surprised to see Sheptilah and Thunderbolt working together to make breakfast. Thunderbolt couldn't reach most things so she was directing the witch on what to get and how to make food.

Orbot was teaching Sheptilah the words for objects but Cubot was nowhere to be found.

He leaned in the doorway quietly watching them until he was noticed.

"Good morning, Lord Eggman!" Thunderbolt chirped when she saw him, "I made sure we both got up before you did so we could make you breakfast."
"Wanna know how to say 'eggs' in my language? *Nunus,*" she flipped an omelette with the frying pan, "And learning this was *namrasu,* " she grinned, "*Difficult.*" The way she pronounced the words in English sounded funny because of her thick, Midestan-sounding accent.

"Do you even eat eggs?" He stroked his mustache.

"Of course I do," she flicked the spatula, "It's not meat."

"I made sure she added cheese to the middle," Thunderbolt beamed, "And chopped onions."

Eggman sat down with low hopes of the food tasting good but was pleasantly surprised.

"Did you cheat with magic?" He eyed the witch suspiciously.

She put both her hands behind her back and shook her head, "Nope, Thunderbolt wouldn't let me." Sheptilah turned around and shut off the stove top and placed the skillet in the sink. She then sat down to eat after gently patting Orbot on the head so as to thank him.

"So, when did you want to start learning alchemy?" She still had that bad habit of speaking with her mouth full. Orbot rubbed his head with confusion and got drinks for the table.

"After we meet with the Egg Bosses. They are all already back online." Eggman grinned from ear to ear, "I'm quite pleased with their progress."

Thunderbolt gulped down her food, "I haven't trained her yet."

"That's fine- train her on the fly." Eggman was very impatient, "With any luck I will have Metal Sonic back online, too."

"Where is Metal Sonic?" The chinchilla overloaded her eggs with ketchup and greedily munched down on them.
"Safe. Metal is safe, squirreled away somewhere top-secret." Eggman rested his elbows on the table and tented his fingers.

"Who is Metal Sonic?" Sheptilah eyed how Thunderbolt was eating and moved her plate further away from the Mobian.

Eggman straightened up, "Metal is only my greatest invention! My most beloved creation- a robot made in Sonic's image."

"So you hate the hedgehog but you built a copy of him?" Tilly raised an eyebrow at Ivo.

"A superior copy! It takes a hedgehog to beat a hedgehog." Eggman pointed his fork at the witch somewhat menacingly. He then looked at his gauntlet and to Thunderbolt.

"I have an idea. Get ready," he stood, "And call Shadow." He half-jogged off to his office.

"I…” Sheptilah sighed and stood up, "You better go follow him,” she urged Thunderbolt.

She watched the chinchilla run off after Eggman.

How in the hell was she going to call Shadow? They certainly weren't around each other enough to develop a telepathic bond. She snapped her fingers and transformed into her Egg uniform and opened a portal outside of the lair to G.U.N.'s gate.

"I know it's highly unorthodox but I need your permission to leave the premises at any given time." Shadow was sitting in Cabbot's office. The man appeared more cheerful than usual; that is until Shadow explained what Sheptilah was up to.

"Keep an eye on her," Boris pinched the bridge of his nose, "And I'll try and butter up President Tower to keep him from flipping his lid. But yes, you can go."
"Sir?" Apollo stuck his head in, "Miss Sheptilah is here looking for Shadow. She says to meet her outside?"

"Ugh," Shadow scoffed, "What does she want now? Excuse me, Mr. Cabbot." Shadow teleported outside and nearly knocked over the woman with the air displacement.

"Hey," she greeted him by bending down and waving.

"What the hell is that outfit?" He grimaced.

She twirled around and posed. "My uniform."

"You shouldn't come around here wearing that," he sounded stunned at how ugly it was, "Well, why are you here?" He figured it was best to not to comment on the aesthetics.

Sheptilah sighed and put her hair behind her ear with a finger, "Eggman said to get you. Apparently we're leaving soon."

"I have to get some things first," he pointed his thumb back at the fortress.

Sheptilah nodded and opened a portal back to the island. "Please hurry. I don't know what he's got planned but between you and me I'm terrified to be alone with him after he nearly killed me."

Shadow nodded and warped to his dorm.

"Alright, make sure there's enough supplies to last four adults for the week." Eggman was directing
Orbot and Cubot around the docks under the lair, "you never know with the arctic circle."

"It's the middle of December and you want to go to the North Pole? I ask this as someone who is concerned about you but why?" Orbot pressed his fingers together with frustration.

"It's the most remote," Eggman tapped his foot impatiently. Orbot threw up his hands in surrender and went back to loading the submarine. It was a massive steel ship that could dwarf a gray whale.

"Here's the sealskin coats, boots and gloves out of storage in the sizes you requested." Cubot handed Eggman a big box of coats made from seal leather and lined with real mink fur. Ivo set it down with a heavy thud and checked the contents.

"Ah," he admired the workmanship, "Such luxuries." He looked down at Thunderbolt, "While your kind has the thickest fur of all Mobians I still think you will freeze to death without a coat so-" he handed her a tiny cloak, shoes and gloves, "This is for you."

Thunderbolt gasped softly and nearly cried from the overwhelming beauty of it. She knew how expensive such clothing was and vowed to never even look at it too hard for fear of ruining it.

"You are truly the most generous. I'll treasure them forever." She rubbed the soft fur up against her cheek.

He himself put on a coat to test its size. It fit very well except for it being tight in the underarms. After removing it and putting it back in the box he tested the cushy boots and gloves. Everything was nearly perfect.

"Eggman?" Sheptilah was wandering around the lair calling for him.

"Hey, boss," Cubot floated up to him, "The lady is looking for you upstairs."

"Is Shadow with her?" He sounded eager. Cubot shook his head and Eggman's mustache drooped. He instructed Thunderbolt to board the ship and wait for him.

After taking the elevator to the top floor he found the woman going through his pantry and holding
an assortment of spices in her arm.

"I got tired of looking for you and decided to further stock my pitiful apothecary," she spoke without turning to him, "Ginger, garlic, cinnamon, cloves, sea salt," she was counting off the list of items she was holding, "And last, but certainly not least: chili pepper."

"I thought you couldn't read the labels." He scoffed.

"I can't; I'm using my nose," she tapped it with her free hand, "I'm not nearly as stupid as you would hope I am, Ivo." She pushed past him and laid her treasures on the counter and loaded them into her frond purse and was disappointed to note that the hammerspace she created was nearly full.

"Why do you need all that?" He peered over her shoulder curiously. She stuck out her elbow as an aggressive gesture telling him to back off. He stepped to the side courteously.

She inhaled sharply, "Because it's what witches do; they carry around random assortments of herbs and other things for witchcraft on the fly. I don't know what you have planned but I hope I can find use for the things I've collected so far."

"We're going to the arctic," he noted, "So I don't think you're going to need anything like that."

"The arctic?" She waited for her stone to translate, "Why are we going to the North Pole?"

"It's remote and we won't be bothered," he shrugged. He had ulterior motives for going that far north in the winter, "And unlike G.U.N. I will actually have supplies and winter clothes for everyone. Have you ever seen snow before?"

"Snow? No, I have not."

"You're gonna see a whole lot of it," he beamed, "Where's Shadow?"

"He will be here shortly-" and like that the doorbell rang.
Shadow had a gray messenger bag with him that contained his notebook, the shrunken royal grimoire and some weapons as well as miscellaneous items like gum and hard candy.

"Cabbot is displeased, Sheptilah," he squinted at her when he opened the door, "But I have permission to come at least."

"Shadow!" Eggman seemed much happier than usual, "What a pleasure! Come on in, we are about to embark to the great white north."

"We're going to the arctic? In the middle of December?" He looked at the man blankly, "Have you gone mad? We'll all die in a whiteout."

"We're going in a submarine."

"That only makes me feel slightly better," Shadow turned to the witch. All she could do was grin nervously.

Eggman showed them to the underground docks where the massive submarine was located.

"My beautiful Ohio Class Submarine known as the N.S. Chondrichthyes." He gestured broadly to all of it with his arm. "The Egg Purse! Isn’t she adorable?"

"Ohio class? It's named after a mostly land-locked Northamerian state?" Shadow scratched his chin.

"It just means it's nuclear powered," Eggman shrugged, "That's the classification. You take the fun out of everything."

The hedgehog shot the witch a look as if to say come on, really? Sheptilah put her hands together pleadingly and promised to make it up to Shadow.

Eggman led the group into the submarine and closed the hatch. He then sat in the cockpit which
was covered in dials, buttons, levers and small screens displaying all kinds of information but no windows. Thunderbolt was already buckled into the copilot's seat with her microphone and headphones on, holding Eggman's out for him to take.

Ivo put on his headset and started flipping switches to start the submarine. Orbot and Cubot had directed Shadow and Sheptilah where to sit and buckled them in. The seats were surprisingly cushy and comfortable.

"Ladies and Shadow," Eggman's voice came on over the PA system in his best flight attendant accent, "Please remain seated until you are given the all-clear. We're getting ready to take off for the Egg Army Base in Artika. Estimated time of arrival is in ten hours. In the unlikely event of an emergency there are Air Charms located under your seats. Please note the emergency exits plainly marked to your left and your right."

Ten hours to the arctic from the equator? That's insanely fast, Shadow thought. If it was roughly four thousand miles from the equator to the arctic circle then that means they'd have to travel at three hundred and forty seven knots. Absolute madness!

Orbot and Cubot gestured to the exits and then hooked themselves up to their docks to charge.

The ship rumbled slightly. "Here we go!" The hull slightly creaked and they felt the sensation of descent pull in their guts.

"I understood exactly none of that," Tilly anxiously chuckled, "What'd he say?"

"We'll be there in ten hours and there's Air Charms under the seats if we sink." Shadow was going through his messenger bag and pulled out some sour hard candy. "Do you get motion sick?"

"I don't get sick, period," Tilly breathed a sigh of relief.

He popped one in his mouth, "Want one?"

"Sure," she held out her hand. He shook one out of the container into her palm.
"Don't bite it," he warned, "Just suck on it."

She put it in her mouth between her teeth and her cheek. For a moment she didn't taste anything and then her face was turned up in a twist.

"Oh, gods what is *that*?" The candy clicked against her teeth.

"Sour apple," he couldn't help but snicker.

Tilly coughed, "I kind of like it but," she swallowed it, "A little warning next time!"

"Did- did you swallow it?"

"Yes?"

"You're supposed to suck on it until it's gone," he blinked.

"Give me another one," she held out her hand, "I can do this."
"Sonic? Sonic." Amy tapped her cards impatiently. She and Sonic were kneeling at opposite sides of her coffee table and she was waiting for him to pick a card for his daily horoscope. She still had some cookies baked with the ingredients left over from when she foraged in the jungle with Sticks.

"Oh, sorry Ames," he carefully picked a card, "I'm dozing off." He took a sip of his cola which had gone flat. It was only midday but he was already exhausted.

"It's alright," she took the card from him, "Six Of Cups. Oh, man." Amy wrote this down in her notebook and looked up the meaning.

"You yearn for a time when things were easier," she put the card back into her deck.

"I could've told you that," Sonic sighed, "But I mostly just want the nightmares to stop." He was nervously shaking his tail.

"Well, sometimes the cards get sassy. " Amy said.

Sonic playfully rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

"I find that if you talk about your nightmares they seem less scary." She urged him.

"Nuh uh," he shook his head, "Bad stuff. From back at the Soumerca base. I only got one good night's sleep since."

Amy pondered this for a moment. "What if we threw a sleepover here at my place? I'll get Sticks, Tails and Knuckles to come over!"

Sonic yawned, "sure, that sounds like fun. I can't suffer if I can't sleep."
To pass the time Shadow taught the witch more sign language and she let him read her personal grimoire. The ship moved so smoothly you wouldn't know how fast it was going unless you stood up and walked around.

He was surprised to see she used it more like a diary scrapbook than a notebook.

Leaves with notes for identification were stuck to the pages with honey and bits of sand fell from the spine of the book. He could barely make out her choppy handwriting at times but skimming through it it was obvious she had trouble maintaining power as queen.

Both the hedgehog and the woman were doing their best to remain amicable despite neither wanting to be there. She wanted to get started on the Lunar Scepter but decided to look at the royal grimoire in a more private place.

"They hated you," he said.

"No, they hated Hebat." Tilly corrected him. "Because her father was an armadillo but her mother a human." She was braiding her hair absentmindedly.

"I still don't understand how that's physically possible," he shuddered, "So many Mobians are born with claws and-

He was interrupted by her putting her hands on his cheeks and stroking his soft face with her thumbs, "Healing powers. We have healing powers. Don't think about it."

"But-"

"Shadow…" she smiled nervously, "Don't think about it."

Well, now he couldn't help but think about it. His expression was of disgust and fear.
She sighed, "Doulas cut them out with a sharp knife made of bone right as labor started and healed the mother right away but there was still considerable pain and blood loss."

"Are… are you one, too?" He squinted at her, "Your eyes and hair are unnatural colors."

"No," she shrugged, "I am pure-bred hominid. I'm just a mutant one, I guess. An overlander."

She withdrew her hands. "We need to track down all of the beasts and destroy them. I don't know how many there are," she flipped through the pages of her grimoire, "I would also like to see the damage to the moon."

"I'm sure I can find you some photos," Shadow said, "Maybe even some live satellite feed."

She turned to him and smiled half-heartedly, "Sure."

After about three hours into the open ocean Eggman put the sub into autopilot and came into the guest quarters with Thunderbolt.

"Orbot, Cubot, it's lunch time!" he nudged the robots awake so they could prepare a meal for them.

"Eggman, I will admit that this submarine is impressive," Sheptilah sighed, "But ten hours in an iron box? I might go insane."

"You'll be fine," Thunderbolt jumped into her lap, "For now we need to train you." She squinted at the woman, "Where's your earrings and tiara?"

"In the back of my head." She answered.

"You should be in full uniform at all times!" She turned around and slapped Sheptilah with her tail, "Even if it includes a tacky crown!"

"Tacky?" Eggman sounded wounded.
"Uh, yes ma'am!" The woman took the refurbished items out of their hiding place and put them on.

The chinchilla then took out her phone and showed Tilly mugshots of the Egg Bosses they were set to meet.

"Mordred," Thunderbolt nodded and flicked the screen, "Cavel Clove?"

"You were right the first time," the chinchilla scolded her. Shadow got up to walk around and stretch his legs. He could hear the two women chattering, or rather, he could hear Sheptilah squeaking whenever Thunderbolt used her tail as a weapon.

He was mentally kicking himself because he forgot the book he was reading again. He lost the first copy of House Of Leaves at the hospital and the second copy Rouge got him was left behind. He slipped Hebat's scale out from inside his glove and looked it over. Why did she want him to have this? For luck? A reminder? And yet he found some comfort in having it.

"Shadow?" Eggman approached him from behind. The hedgehog slipped the scale back into his glove.

"Yes, doctor?" He turned around to face the overlander.

"I'm so glad you could come along. We do have some things to go over." Eggman tented his fingers, "For one, I would prefer you not be in the room when she is introduced to the underlings. They may panic."

"Not gonna happen; anywhere she goes I also go." Shadow said defiantly, "Or we leave right now."

"You can be outside the door."

"Inside the room."

"Shadow," he pleaded.
"Those are the rules. I am in the room with her." He crossed his arms.

Eggman made a strangling gesture with his hands and then let them fall to his sides, "Fine."

"Lunch is served," Orbot spoke over the PA system.

The men rejoined the women back in the passenger compartment. Thunderbolt's meal consisted of dried dandelion leaves, freshwater and dried apple chips. Shadow and Eggman's meals were both rigatoni pasta with sausage and Parmesan cheese whereas the witch's was a plain bag of carrots.

"We didn't bring a lot of fresh vegetables," Eggman shrugged, "Everything is frozen or prepackaged. We did what we could with short notice."

Sheptilah was already munching on the carrots without a care. "I'm used to them being purple but these ones taste just fine."

They all enjoyed their meals quietly and then Eggman went back to the cockpit with Thunderbolt. After a few minutes they could feel the submarine slow down to a crawl. Eggman turned on the PA system and spoke.

"Looks like there's after meal entertainment," there was a click and then whale songs, "There's a large pod of humpback whales following us. They're also slowing us down."

Shadow looked at the ceiling on the submarine, ears subconsciously twitching trying to track the noise.

It sounded like sad wailing with clicks and purrs mixed in. Several whales were trying to talk to the sub.

"Sometimes whales mistake submarines for one of their own," Eggman chuckled, "It's kind of cute."
Sheptilah audibly swallowed but then relaxed. "I wish I could see them," she pressed her hand up against the side.

"They won't hit us, will they?" She turned to the hedgehog.

"No," he shook his head, "Well, probably not."

Eggman flipped some switches and brought up the external camera to see what was going on since all of the whale songs were messing with his sonar. He was annoyed with having to drive manually and huffed.

"Do you want to blast them?" Thunderbolt grinned.

"No, they're just whales," Eggman scratched his chin, "But they are getting annoying."

Sheptilah moved to the cockpit with Shadow following behind and knocked on the door. Tilly found it was unlocked and opened it.

"What brings you here?" He looked over his shoulder at her.

"I wanted to see the whales." She leaned on the back of his seat, "Is that them?"

"Those big gray blobs on the screen are the whales, yes," he tapped the screen.

The hull of the ship creaked slightly and then it started to tilt; Eggman quickly righted the ship.

"And it just bumped into us," Ivo huffed, "That's it." He flipped some switches and adjusted his microphone.

"They're exploring the sub," Shadow said.
"Get out of here you overgrown fish! Shoo!" He yelled into the microphone, "You fat… fats!"

"Fat fats," Shadow repeated.

"Hush, you," Eggman cleared his throat, "Abscond! Vamoose! Overgrown sardines! Nobody likes you- you fat salty assholes!"

The whale songs got louder and it was almost as if they liked what they were hearing. The animals were then suddenly alarmed by something else and swam in the other direction freeing up the submarine.

"Finally," Eggman turned off the microphone, "Hold on." He sped up the sub and re-engaged autopilot when it was safe.

"Thunderbolt, man the controls. I have to go train them now," he stood with a groan and escorted them back to the passengers' quarters.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Thunderbolt saluted.

"This way," he led them to an office meeting room with a large metal table shaped like an egg. It was bare and the seats, also egg shaped, were cold. Orbot and Cubot were waiting for them and served three cups of tea.

"Thank you," Sheptilah took hers and sipped it. Green tea without sweetener was bitter. Shadow politely refused his drink.

"I have some materials for you two," Eggman pulled the box out from under the table. In it was the rest of the the winter clothes like the ones he bestowed upon Thunderbolt earlier.

Shadow's was a toddler-sized hoodie and Sheptilah's was a very long hooded cloak that fastened closed with buttons. Both were made of sealskin with mink lining.

"It's so heavy," she put it on. It was at least twenty pounds and it was warm. "I could've used this the other day back at my house." She rubbed the soft fur against her cheek.
"There are also mittens and boots," Eggman pulled them out, "I had to guess Shadow's shoe size."

"I won't wear them," he pushed them away, "I do not take off my skates."

"Your feet will freeze solid," Eggman furrowed his brow.

"I'm the Ultimate Life Form; I'll be fine."

Eggman drove the sail of the submarine up through the ice with a loud crunch. The quartet exited the submarine in their winter gear and admired the beautiful terrain. The cold was biting but there was no wind so it wasn't entirely unbearable. The sky was littered with stars and the aurora borealis danced above them like a dancer's scarf. The moonlight softly illuminated the snow. They each had explorer's backpacks full of materials in case of emergency, except for Thunderbolt who was in her mecha.

"This is the great north," Sheptilah was dazzled.

"Due to the ice being so thick from disuse of the base - they were unable to open the submarine gate so we must drive the five miles across the snow." Eggman pointed to a large covered sled that looked more like a sports car with two reined robotic reindeer idling, waiting to drive off.

They were standing at the top of the submarine, at least twenty-five feet from the ground.

"How are we getting down?" Orbot spoke curiously.

"Here's how," Eggman shoved the robot back into its compact orb shape and chucked it into the snow; then did the same with a screaming Cubot.

Sheptilah took several steps back then ran across the hull and jumped. She landed in the thick snow with a shrieking giggle.

Thunderbolt and Eggman jumped together while Shadow simply teleported.
"I love snow!" Sheptilah was up to her waist in it. Thunderbolt stood proudly in her warm, cozy robotic exoskeleton while Shadow was sinking into the soft powdery snow and could barely keep his head up.

"I do not," Shadow was aggravated. Sheptilah lifted the hedgehog up by the waist with her arm.

"You are dense, mister," she chuckled, "Why do you weigh so much?"

"I have a lot of secrets," he joked.

The group piled into the sled and dashed toward the base at the Cool Edge Zone, which was only five miles away.
"Is it true?" Dave, the blue river rat that seemed to be the only employee to work at Meh Burger asked Tails about the fight with Dr. Eggman while flipping the patties.

"Yeah," the fox sounded sleepy, "It's been handled."

Dave squinted suspiciously at him and began to formulate a revenge plan. How dare someone do that to the greatest evil mind in the world?! After his shift he ran off to the Lightning Bolt Society to get their support.

Knuckles, Sticks and Tails arrived to the sleepover at Amy's house with armfuls of Meh Burger plunder, chips and liters of soda.

The night went well enough: music, dancing and party games that Sonic was having trouble enjoying and quite frankly so was Tails.

When the early morning hours crept up on the group they all slept in a row on Amy's floor under blankets and on cushions. Sonic was very cozy nestled between Tails and Knuckles while Amy and Sticks were snuggled up using Knuckles as a pillow. He found comfort in their soft breathing and quiet snoring. He drifted off to what he hoped would be a dreamless sleep.

Thunderbolt was outside, attached to the back of the sled by her mecha. Shadow sat between Sheptilah and Eggman while Orbot and Cubot remained in their compact forms at his feet.

"Don't speak. Be mysterious and keep your hoods pulled over your heads when we get inside." Eggman was instructing them, "I do not want any surprises or rumors. It will be a bit before the rest of the bosses get here so I've made sure we have accommodations waiting for us."

Sheptilah slowly turned her head to look at him blankly. She drew her hand down her face and it
disappeared into the hood like pitch blackness. Then she flashed a sharp, toothy Cheshire grin; the only thing visible in the darkness.

Eggman was unimpressed, "Reel it back a little."

She frowned and dispelled the glamour, "I can glamorize Shadow, too."

"Please don't," the hedgehog said, "I'm glamorous enough."

Eggman stroked his chin, "Make the cloak black and hide your face. Don't let your hands or uniform be seen. Do the same for Shadow."

Glamorizing herself was one thing but holding a glamour over someone else could be difficult if they strayed too far. She would be next to Shadow the whole time, so this would not be a problem.

She thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Shadow, when glamoured you will still be you, but your clothing will change." She ran her hand across the velvety soft hoodie he was wearing and it transformed into a thick black hooded cloak with pockets for his ears. The new clothing was longer than he was tall so it completely covered his shoes. The backpack and messenger bag he had on were rendered invisible to everyone but him.

Although the shape of the coat changed, it was still just as warm. She did the same for her own clothing.

"That's perfect," Eggman grinned, "This is going to be entertaining. As much as I hate Shadow being in the room- the looks on their faces when he pulls back his hood is going to be priceless."

"This is going to end in tears. Probably mine." Orbot moped.

They arrived at the massive construct within minutes. Tundra himself was there to greet them and escort them into the gigantic igloo painted to look like Eggman's face that served as the main hub.
The floor was smoothly cut ice and very slippery. The boots Eggman designed definitely would come in handy when Tilly took off the sealskin covering them. The tall, imposing walrus was a little unnerved by the hooded figures and wondered what exactly Eggman was up to. He swore he could see black smoke drifting out from under the hems. For a moment he wondered if the two were wraiths.

Orbot and Cubot followed behind Eggman lamenting the cold. Though the frigid temperatures were necessary for the supercomputers housed below them, the little robots only cared about themselves and complained of freezing to death.

Tundra did not speak to the two in the hooded cloaks and silently showed them to their quarters which was directly next to Eggman's and the rooms had a door that allowed guests to pass between them.

They were essentially hotel rooms with en suites. Each had a large, plush wooden bed and an empty wooden trunk.

"I was expecting a bed of ice," Shadow said. Sheptilah dispelled the glamour on both of them and set her bag down. She started digging through it for snacks and came up with apple chips that were as hard as rocks.

"I'm going to go wash up. Thunderbolt, I want you to prepare the meeting room for when the rest of the bosses arrive." Eggman took a knowing tone with her.

Thunderbolt saluted in her mecha, "Yes, sir!" She walked off, barking orders to the skeleton crew on the way.

The man then turned to Sheptilah and Shadow, "Stay in this room."

"Ivo?" Tilly tilted her head.

"Yes?"

"Don't tell them about my iron allergy. That's all I ask."
"Of course. The idea is to make them believe you're invincible." He grinned mischievously and left the room, softly closing the door behind him.

"Wanna go explore?" She whispered to Shadow.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Not yet. I have things I need you to help with." He set his bags down and sat on the bed and motioned for her to sit with him. She did so and pulled off her sealskin boots and set them aside.

"Rouge?" Shadow spoke into his communicator.

"Shadow?" her sleepy voice responded after a moment, "Good to hear you arrived alright." Rouge looked over at her digital clock and sighed, "It's two in the morning."

"Here it's ten at night," he chuckled, "Go back to sleep. I was just checking in. Let Cabbot know, please." He looked up to the witch, "So, about that thing-"

"What's the issue?" With a snap she changed into her usual clothing and shook the contents of her frond purse onto the bed.

Shadow leaned in and kept his voice low.

"Every living being involved with Eggman has something injected into their brain. This thing is rigged to explode or paralyze them whenever he sees fit. G.U.N. wants you to procure one for us so we can safely remove them. Our doctors are afraid that if they remove it manually it will detonate."

"I'm aware of them and I will be more than pleased to help with that," she looked over her things and seemed alarmed. She reached into the back of her head and pulled out all the objects stored within. Some gold pieces, the bag of Hebat's scales, the manila envelope with her identification papers, the boline and her personal grimoire.

"What?" Shadow squinted.
"My athame," she felt around the hammerspace with her other hand, "It's gone."

The hedgehog picked up the large conch shell and looked it over. "Are you talking about that old rusty knife? You probably left it back at the ziggurat."

Sheptilah's eyes were wide with horror and she nervously bit a fingernail, "I'll have to get a new one. Getting a new athame is a real pain in the ass. You have to consider what it's made of and what the handle is like and the weight of it and… ugh!"

"So we can go get you a new athame," he snorted, "Or you can go into the kitchen and just take a butcher knife and call it a day."

Sheptilah rolled her eyes at his suggestion. She then stood and went to the bathroom door.

"Could you check for mirrors? Please?" She chuckled nervously, "I don't...want to get caught scrying again."

Shadow hopped off the bed and peeked into the bathroom. He saw there was a mirror and turned to Sheptilah. "Yes, there's a mirror."

The witch groaned with disgust and went into the bathroom and filled it with thick mist. When she located the mirror by feeling for its smooth surface she untied her sarong, hung it over the mirror and dispelled the fog.

"Captive scrying is dangerous," she flicked the light on and drew herself a very hot bath, "I broke Eggman's sink by accident looking for you."

Shadow was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom. "I am afraid to ask for the details."

The steam crawled out of the bathroom by Shadow's feet, curling around his shoes like ghostly fingers.
"Are you cooking yourself in there?" He heard her get into the water and sigh contentedly.

"Hey, Shadow?"

"Yes?"

"What was it like living in space?"

He was quiet for a moment and then spoke with words heavy with bittersweet nostalgia.

"We're at the north pole right now in the winter season. That means it's dark all the time with the stars and planets always visible. It was like that but without the aurora and you could look down at the planet. When the space station was orbiting over Mobius when it was night the major cities lit up like constellations."

"Heh," Tilly chuckled, "That sounds nice."

"Gerald had told Maria and I how blue the sky was during the day. What he didn't tell me was what sunsets looked like. When Maria jettisoned me to safety it was a hard landing and by the time I woke up the sun was going down on the horizon. For a moment I thought the world was ending because that beautiful blue sky turned so dark and red."

Shadow pulled at the sleeve of his glove, "I was trapped inside that capsule until G.U.N. retrieved it and put me in suspended animation. I thought the world was on fire because everything was so orange when they whisked me away. I thought the ARK had crashed."

To him the color blue is intense. It's the color of Maria's dress that matched her eyes and the sky she will never see. It was also the color of his rival. He is surrounded and haunted by the simple hue.

"They kept me awake for a few years running experiments on me while I suffered in silence. I was in a tube not unlike the one I was born in. I was kept drugged but conscious, so I remember everything. It was about six years of that treatment. The worst of it was being left alone for weeks on end to suffer in paralyzed darkness. I suppose it wasn't much different from your experience in the crystal."
It was so easy to open up to her. He mentally kicked himself for allowing her to see this weaker, more tender side of him.

"I feel your sadness," the witch sat in the water with her knees drawn up to her breast and her arms around her legs. Her heart was fluttering wildly like a caged bird.

"Are you empathizing with me or are you literally feeling it?" He kept a close watch on the gap in the doorframe to see if any of the Egg army minions were walking around.

"Both," she saw her submerged skin was turning bright red but it did not hurt. "I'm sorry for being cruel to you this past week. You really didn't deserve it and I am a terrible witch for treating you that way."

She watched the steam come off the water in the brief moment of silence.

"I accept your apology." He heard the water slosh as she stepped out of the tub. After a moment she stepped out in the uniform.

She looked depressed and her eyes appeared dulled.

"Nobody is ever going to hurt you again. If someone so much as looks at you wrong I will…" She held her tongue. "Never mind; I shouldn't use violent words. An even six, seven, eight, et cetera."

"I can protect myself." He looked up at her. "Would you have said that if I wasn't your familiar?"

"Yes, of course. Nobody deserves such cruelty." She frowned, looking down at him. She then realized how physically small he really was. "We should practice your magic."

His ears perked up and then flopped down, "I need to know something."

"Yes?"

He inhaled sharply, "Would I have been able to heal Maria?" His gut tensed up and his tail pointed
"She was born sick? Her body was attacking itself?"

"Yes."

"No, you would not have been able to." Her ponytail swayed softly as she shook her head.

He exhaled slowly. He felt a mixture of failure and relief knowing he couldn't have helped her.

"I don't quite... understand what DNA is but I do know that if someone is dying in their own body and they shouldn't be they would need an extremely difficult procedure. It's called Vampire's Bath. It sounds more romantic than it is."

She knelt down so she was eye-level with him, "You drain the blood from several witches to the point that they feel faint, but not completely. This blood goes into a cauldron and it must be filled to the brim. Then it's slowly boiled until it becomes thick like honey. After that it's allowed to cool."

His stomach was turning.

"The sick person is then cut all over the body with a boline and lastly across the throat. Then they are submerged into the cauldron and after a while brought back up. By then the concentrated witch blood would've entered their body and began to heal it from the inside."

"That's... that sounds like a primitive blood transfusion." His eyes darted around the room, "Your blood is what heals internal injuries and illnesses?"

"For things like nausea and dehydration I don't have to do such extravagant magic. However for sickness like with Mrs. Cabbot that's how I cured her. I magically transferred her kidneys into my body, let my blood heal them and then put them back in her body."

"You can't let anyone know that your blood is a panacea," his voice was almost a low growl.
"What?"

"You can't tell anybody about that." He looked very nervous, "Sheptilah, if someone like Eggman finds out your blood can cure anything you will be bled dry. They'd sell it to the highest bidder and keep you just barely alive to harvest more."

"Shadow," she sounded offended, "I haven't told anyone but you." She imagined being kept in a cell unable to move with needles and tubes sticking out of her just like in the hospital. She shuddered. She smiled at him, "But that's good to know."

"This world is dangerous." He warned.

The Lightning Bolt Society met once again in Dave's tiny basement. Well, his mother's basement.

"I'm not getting involved," Willy Walrus shrugged, "That's Eggman's thing."

Dave sucked in hair between his clenched teeth, "You don't understand! She disrespected him!"

"She tried to kill him," another person spoke up, "I'm not messing with overlanders."

"I agree," another spoke with a mouth full of potato chips. "You're on your own with this one."

Dave was livid. He could almost feel the braces on his teeth straining to keep his jaw in place from clenching so hard.

"Fine!" He stood proudly, "I will handle this myself!"
They sat and spoke for a few hours while he practiced making smoke figures.

Sheptilah had put all her things back into the frond purse and then put the bag in the interdimensional pocket behind her head.

"How much can you fit in there?" Shadow was bored being confined to the room and decided to do push-ups to ease it.

"It's about full, actually. Hey, can you do that thing where you curl into a ball?"

"You mean this?" He tucked himself into a spiky sphere.

"Yeah! That's so weird, isn't it hard to breathe like that?" She tilted her head curiously.

Shadow rolled himself forward and with a muffled voice he answered, "Not at all. You said Hebat is an armadillo?"

Sheptilah nodded, "Pink fairy armadillo."

"Armadillo Mobians can curl like this, too. She never did?" He unfurled himself.

"No, her armored back was delicate unlike typical armadillos. It also flared at the ends and it took on a tube shape when she rolled up. Not very practical."

She brought up a magically projected image of Hebat. She was very short and curvy with white fur covering her legs that flared below the knee. Her torso had heart-shaped bit of sand-colored peach fuzz and soft white hair kept in a cute bob framed her round cheeks and dark eyes.
Unlike other armadillos her nose was quite small and pink. Her 'armor' went from her head to her ankles and was bell-shaped with frilly layers and lace-like fur at the ends. Her hands were large claws shaped like a shovel and her tail was long and thick. A stole of white fur around her neck and shoulders made it hard to see her Oracle Stone.

*She looks like a princess,* Shadow thought to himself.

"You know- they should start calling you king." The image of Hebat dissolved.

"I'm sorry?" It was as if Sheptilah could read his mind.

"King Shadow. I'm queen and you are my familiar- as equals that means you are a king."

A knock at the door interrupted his train of thought. It was Thunderbolt and Eggman.

"Are you decent?" The overlander's voice called.

"Shadow isn't wearing pants," the woman used her tattle-tale voice. The hedgehog rolled his eyes.

"Now is not the time for jokes," Eggman opened the door, "It's showtime." He looked quite serious.

She and Shadow stood and she re-applied the glamour to them both.

"I look like the grim reaper," Shadow said. He was surprised that his voice came out distorted and breathy.

"You sound demented," Eggman commented.

"I thought I'd disguise our voices, too." Sheptilah shrugged.
The meeting room was brightly lit and smelled of coffee and freshly baked cookies. Orbot and Cubot had put out settings for the tired guests. Only a few of them sipped their drinks.

Eggman entered the room followed by Thunderbolt in her mecha and the two wraith-like people behind her. All but Tundra quietly panicked wondering just what it was Eggman had roped them into now.

Thunderbolt stood by the door while Ivo had walked with Sheptilah and Shadow to the head of the egg-shaped table.

"I'm pleased you all made it in one piece," Eggman grinned. "I have quite the tale. I was out in the Dust Hill Zone and encountered something wonderful."

Sheptilah's hooded figure slightly turned toward the man. Wonderful? He tried to kill me yesterday.

"She is an ancient witch queen and I had rescued her from a crystalline prison. Because of this we are now tasked with something intense that I require your assistance with." Eggman sounded grave.

"A witch?" Clove found herself speaking up without meaning to. The hooded figure nodded. Her face reddened with embarrassment quickly cast her gaze downward.

The others looked at each other nervously while Thunderbolt herself appeared bored.

"As you may have heard, the Soumerca base run by Thunderbolt was ravaged by a strange creature. This being killed dozens of our people and nearly took us out with it when we rescued Thunderbolt." Eggman continued, "our guest single-handedly saved the life of Thunderbolt as well as the lives of other Egg Comrades with her immense healing powers.

Now it is our turn to repay her. She has agreed to be the newest Egg Boss and she is your superior so you will follow her every direction. Do this for us and I will do something unprecedented: you will all be freed from your lifetime contracts with me." He shot a pointed look at Clove, "This includes your injectors."

"What?" Tundra leaned forward with both of his huge hands pressed flat against the table.
Nephthys and Mordred were uneasy as they were both using Egg Army forces to maintain control over their respective regions but they loved the concept of the injections being removed.

"Free us?" Clove's ears perked up.

Cassia stood, "What about our cybernetics?"

"You can keep them." He shrugged innocently.

"What is it we have to do?" Axel leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands.

Eggman turned to Sheptilah as a cue. She pulled back her cloak and it vanished when it hit the floor. The other bosses were expecting an eldritch horror but instead saw a perfectly normal-looking overlander and were visibly relieved.

"I am Sheptilah, Egg Boss of the Bygone Island Zone. This world is in danger." She described the witch-eating beasts and the bond with Eggman joining them together. Then she explained Shadow's role.

"And this… is my familiar." She gestured to the smaller figure.

Shadow pulled back his hood and expected to hear outrage but none came. In fact there was palpable sense of relief.

"I feel better knowing Shadow the hedgehog is on our side," Cassia said.

"I actually agree," Akhlut raised an eyebrow.

"I want one thing to be clear," Shadow spoke, "I am not on your side. I am on hers."

Sheptilah nodded, "First thing I ask you to do when you all return to your respective zones is to
stop any and all projects you are working on and inspect the area within fifty miles for any activity that could have come from the witch-eaters. I also ask that you speak to the locals to gather any intel on odd, shapeshifting monsters they may have witnessed."

The witch smiled, "I also wish to spar one-on-one with all of you to get to know you better."

Eggman's smug grin turned to a slight frown and raised eyebrows.

"And I would like to start with you," she pointed to Axel, "And do not hold back."
Eggman could kill her. She wants to fight them? Of all people she chooses Axel first? She's incredibly weak to iron and his gauntlets are iron chains. He wanted to strangle her for her recklessness.

"Wouldn't that hurt Lord Eggman?" Mordred nervously pulled on his tongue, "Since you are bonded?"

With one hand on her hip and the other on the table Sheptilah leaned forward. "Good question, Prince Mordred." The cobra Mobian flushed a bit at being called by his self-given royal title by an actual queen.

"Also a bit of a dumb question but at the same time it is a good one." She stood up straight and gestured with her free hand as she spoke. "What makes you think that Dr. Eggman cannot handle whatever you throw at him? Please."

Shadow knew she was being tongue-in-cheek but Eggman and the bosses all took it like she was telling the truth. The good doctor's ego was given a strong boost by her words.

"If you aren't terrified of him you aren't paying attention." Sheptilah stared down Mordred.

"Rest up; the scuffles will begin in a few hours." Eggman said proudly.

Orbot and Cubot were picking up the plates and cups to be disposed of. All of the Egg Bosses had left the room to rest and prepare for the sparring with Thunderbolt directing them where to go.

Shadow watched closely as Eggman approached the witch who was fiddling with her gloves.
"Are you warming up to me?" His hot breath tickled her neck. She stuck her elbow out as a warning. He backed up obligingly.

"They have to believe you're invincible. Leaders do not show weakness." She huffed.

"I've seen you cry at least four times since I met you." Shadow chortled from the corner.

She turned to look at the smug hedgehog and pursed her lips, "Crying isn't weakness. Weakness is pretending you have no emotion because you are afraid of how people will perceive you for shedding tears."

"Hmph," was his only response.

"Your mortality cannot come into question, Eggman. I know most of them hate you. I don't want them thinking they can kill me just to get to you." She looked up at him and his glasses she could see a faint glint of red.

"And yet you wish to fight them?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Why are we out here in the arctic, Ivo?" She dodged the question.

"Because it's quiet."

"Yes, and?" She expected a better answer, "Tell me the truth."

"Your highness," he said glibly, "I wanted to see the northern lights reflected in your beautiful violet eyes. I wanted to see you playfully frolic in the snow you've seen only for the first time, your gorgeous silver hair blending in with the frozen landscape; your face standing out like a defiant flower blooming out of season. Hearing your screaming laughter was delightful. Putting our differences on ice seemed like a cool idea after the… misunderstanding yesterday morning."

Shadow nearly gagged.
Her cheeks felt warm. Was she blushing? She looked to the side with embarrassment and shame.

"Such a romantic," Orbot sighed wistfully.

"I think there's a cream for that," Cubot mused.

"He wanted to make sure G.U.N. couldn't bother him," the hedgehog rolled his eyes, "And we couldn't run away just in case we dismantled his entire empire by eliminating all of his active Egg Bosses. Isn't that right, Doctor?"

Shadow hit the nail on the head. Eggman grinned, "You always were my grandfather's greatest achievement."

Sheptilah sidestepped around the man and went over to her familiar. "To answer your question earlier… I was inspired by the fights with you and Shadow. I learned a lot about the both of you. I also need the training as it's been five thousand years since."

"Haven't you been in suspended animation?" Eggman was typing something in his gauntlet.

"I was awake for much of it; conscious, rather." She bit a nail.

"Wait, you were alone with your thoughts for that long?"

"Yes and no." It was hard for her to explain. "I was aware I was trapped in the crystal. My biological functions were stopped but my magic was still going. I tried to get out but surrounded by absolute blackness and impenetrable walls made me terrified. After so long I was so drained of energy my Oracle Stone took over and waited for someone to revive me."

"Were you always claustrophobic?" Shadow asked.

"No," she nervously straightened her coat, "Now that I think of it maybe my people trapped me because they thought I was useless but didn't have the guts to kill their queen. I must fight all I can..."
now. I need to prove I'm worthy of the Nannae lineage and the title of queen."

"You two were made for each other," Eggman rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "Creepy likenesses."  

"Well, duh. That's how the Universe works." She squinted at him with disbelief, "That's how familiars work."

Orbot and Cubot left the room to dispose of the cutlery.

"Come on, Shadow," she gestured to the door, "Let's go walk around. I need to stretch my legs after spending all that time sitting down."

"I'm coming with you." Eggman insisted, "Can't have you two getting into trouble!" The witch's response was to put him to sleep with that thumb-against-the-forehead trick. She then put him in a chair and rested his head in his arms on the table.

"Like I said, let's go for a walk." She shut the door behind them and they wandered around the icy fortress. Even with the Egg Bosses and their skeleton crews around it was still very empty.

Sheptilah felt around for snags in the Universe to open portals but found none.

"Hm…" She grumbled to herself, "Not a lot of activity here. No people, no knots."

"What's up?" Shadow's metal shoes clicked against the ice floor.

"I wanted to check on Sonic but…" She sighed, "If I can't open a portal I can't do that."

The hedgehog rolled his ruby eyes, "Please, what could he need?"

"Ever since the thing at Thunderbolt's base he's been plagued with nightmares. It's gotten bad enough that he can't even function."
Shadow felt a pang of guilt, "I should never have let him in that base."

Sheptilah reached over and lightly stroked the spines on the top of his head, "As if you could've stopped him. I haven't spent much time with him but I can already tell he's stubborn as hell."

"He's just a kid." Not much older than Maria was, he thought to himself. Now he felt even worse.

The witch crouched down. "Usually when a child experiences death for the first time it's a pet or a family member. I guess with strangers it's weirder."

"No, it isn't that. Sonic… loves everything with all of his heart. He believes that he can save anyone and anything if he tries hard enough." Shadow clenched his fists, "We should not have let him in there."

"He saved Thunderbolt. He was the only one small enough to fit into the vent and I did not have enough energy back then to shapeshift. Without Sonic that chinchilla would've died." She felt the bridge of her nose tingle, "I saw a weird side of Eggman that day, too. He pulled Sonic from the vent when he realized he couldn't get down easily and he was so gentle. I don't understand any of it."

"Yeah, he does that sometimes." The good doctor did in fact save Sonic and Tails on more than one occasion.

"Shadow? How old are you really?"

"Nineteen."

"You're just a kid, too." Her heart thudded painfully. She stopped speaking and stood when she heard footsteps approaching. It was Tundra.

"Where is Eggman?" The gruff walrus demanded. "You should not be out wandering alone; especially with him." The walrus stuck a thumb out toward Shadow.

Sheptilah stuck out her chest and crossed her arms, "He is in the meeting room drawing up plans."
We are just exploring this base. I am from an arid desert so being in a frozen one is fascinating."

"I see," he peered her over, "At any rate I'm eager to watch you fight. I cannot respect a leader who has no taste for war and I want to see you prove yourself."

She couldn't help but smile, "I told Eggman the same thing earlier." The trio walked forward with Tundra serving as a sort of chaperon to make sure the hedgehog did not get into any trouble.

"Are you eager to fight me? I'll have you know I'm a trained archer." Tilly chuckled, "I heard you have ice breath. I want to see it in action."

Tundra pounded his palm with his fist, "I am always eager to fight!"

The arena was a massive room with stadium seating. Large flatscreens fixed to the walls along with a heavy-duty speaker system provided music and visuals. The battle ground was deeply recessed into the ice floor and hard as concrete. Shadow, Thunderbolt out of her mecha and Eggman were sitting near each other with the Egg Bosses scattered around the room in their seats. Orbot and Cubot were offering bags of popcorn to each of them.

"Are you sure you're read-" Eggman was cut off when she handed him her accessories. Sheptilah removed her earrings and crown and gave them to the man. She then took off her coat with a flourish and gave that to Shadow. The clothing under her pink coat was a simple tank-top sleeveless style bodysuit. The thinness of the fabric combined with the cold air made her skin break out in goosebumps.

"I'm always ready," she gave the thumbs-up gesture she learned from Shadow. She then jumped into the arena and waited for Axel to appear.

"You didn't give her underwear?" The hedgehog narrowed his eyes at the overlander.

"I realize the mistake now," he pinched the bridge of his nose.
Thunderbolt growled with displeasure.

Axel appeared and made his way down to the ring and jumped in. "I apologize for being late," he said, "This place is a maze."

"Twenty bucks on Axel beating her," Thunderbolt held out a crisp twenty dollar bill.

"You're on," Eggman grinned, "MARI?" He spoke into his gauntlet.

"Yes?" The digital image of a pale teenage girl with one eye a darker blue than the other, short black hair and a button nose. She sounded like she was heavily autotuned.

"Play some mood music," he grinned.

"Gotcha," MARI winked. "Now playing… War Cry by Indecent Noise."

A heavy, driving hard trance beat came on over the speaker system. Eggman spoke into his gauntlet again but this time his voice was heard over the music. "The sparring matches will each be over under one of the following conditions: you are knocked out of the arena or you are unconscious. You may also surrender at any time. Begin!"

Axel swung his hooked chain at the witch.

"Who is MARI?" Thunderbolt wondered if she had another overlander to deal with.

"She is the deejay at the Stratosphere club as part of my recommissioned Starlight Carnival. Her name is an acronym: Music And Remix Interface. She also controls my music libraries and maintains some of Eggmanland's robots." He seemed proud to show off his latest AI creation.

"You own the Stratosphere Club?" Shadow couldn't believe it. Rouge loved that club and tried to drag him there many times.
"I own a lot of things-" he was interrupted by Sheptilah impacting the wall with great force.

The pain went away with her rapid healing powers before either Eggman or Shadow could feel it. Sheptilah landed hard on the ice and rolled over, dodging Axel's thrown hooks. One of them had gotten lodged in the ice and the water buffalo struggled to get it free. The witch jumped and ran across the taut chain. She then kicked Axel hard in the chest and rolled forward when he landed. She stood up with a bow and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"Woo!" Tundra shouted excitedly. Axel looked up at the witch and growled. He dislodged the hook and caught it in his hand.

Sheptilah took her hair out of the ponytail and split it in two, one half in each hand. She rolled her wrists to build momentum as her hair grew longer and longer.

MARI'S voice came back over the system to announce the next song change. "Now playing… Problem [Solo Version] by Ariana Grande."

"Nobody cares, MARI," Eggman barked into his gauntlet.

"I care," her face turned to a tongue-wagging emoji before disappearing.

"What the hell is this music?!" Axel grunted.

"It's one of my AIs, she thinks she's funny." Eggman shrugged.

"I kind of like it," Shadow pursed his lips.

"See?! Shadow likes it, what's your problem?" Eggman was gesturing broadly with his arms.

Cassia was dancing in her seat to it with a hesitant Clove bobbing her head along.

"Focus!" Sheptilah shouted at Axel, "This is a fight!" She sent a bunch of tendrils at the man who punched them away. More came at him with great speed. He flung his chains around successfully
"I wonder what hair conditioner she uses," Nephthys mused.

"Why do you have Ariana Grande, of all people, on your playlists?" Thunderbolt was a little weirded out.

"MARI is streaming from the internet. This is how she runs the club music, too. MARI, bring up the queue." Eggman flicked through the songs and removed some of the odder choices she had cooked up.

"You are so old, Eggman," the AI sounded annoyed. She hated when people screwed around with her sets.

Axel grabbed a fistful of Tilly's hair and pulled her forward like he was playing tug-o-war. She was dragged slowly across the ice. Axel, however, didn't see what was coming up behind him. The hair he had pulled back changed into a dagger-like entity that wrapped itself around Axel's arms and pulled them back violently, dislocating both shoulders.

The pain was excruciating and all Axel could do was howl. Silently on the mounted flatscreens MARI announced the song change with text over a visualizer graphic: Geometrix (feat. Driftmoon) \[Tempo Giusto Radio Mix\], Ferry Tayle.

The audience winced and yelled when they heard the 'pop!' of Axel's shoulders move out of place. The water buffalo was so angry he bowed his head and charged at the surprised woman and nearly bisected her at the torso. He kept running forward with his arms flopping uselessly at his side until he hit the ice. By virtue of his horns being solid steel, this did not hurt him.

He did, however, hurt Sheptilah. Shadow felt the crushing blow in his ribs and gasped for air. Eggman himself felt the same pain and gritted his teeth.

The witch broke out into a cold sweat from the agony and realized she couldn't move her legs. He had paralyzed her. She was protected by her clothing but could still feel the rash forming from the iron.

"You forced me to do this, mistress," Axel snorted, "You asked me not to hold back."
"Then why are you holding back?" She managed to choke out. With a smirk she flicked a finger and the hair wrapped itself around his torso and dragged him back until his horns dislodged from the ice wall and dropped the woman to the ground.

Once free of the steel horns she was able to heal herself and gave her foot a cursory wiggle to test the repair. Unfortunately for her when Axel rolled on the ice wall it reset one of his shoulders. With his now semi-fixed arm he popped the other in place.

"Easiest twenty bucks I ever made," Thunderbolt chuckled, "So much for your overlander friend, huh?"

"Just wait," Eggman said.

Powering through the soreness the hulking Mobian pulled his chain back and sent it flying again, the hook cutting her upper arm. It felt like fire was licking her flesh. The wound bled freely and openly. She sealed it with a crystalline band and she had had enough of him; with one final magical blow she had sent the water buffalo out of the ring and into the unoccupied seats. Orbot and Cubot ran to him to make sure he was still alive, both giving a thumbs-up to confirm this.

The robots then administered first aid.

Thunderbolt groaned and handed the money to a very excited Eggman. Sheptilah sighed and retracted all of her hair. Her eyes scanned the room looking for her next victim. Mordred tried to make himself as small as possible and prayed that he was not next.

"Akhlut!" She called, "I challenge you!"

The orca grinned and stood. He made his way to the arena just as the music changed again.

“Professional Griefers by Deadmau5 featuring Gerard Way”, MARI announced.

"Want to make another wager?" Eggman turned to the eager Thunderbolt.
"What's your bet?" She asked him.

"Twenty on Tilly getting knocked out."

"Ye of little faith," Shadow rolled his eyes and then realized something. "Akhlut is the one with psychic powers?"

"Yes," Eggman bared his teeth in a devious smile.

"So if he scrambles her brains, does that mean ours gets scrambled, too?" The hedgehog squinted at the overlander.

Eggman's mouth became a tight line. He leaned over the wall and shouted, "Tilly! Don't let us down!"

She turned to the man and waved her hand as if to tell him to shut up.

Orbot and Cubot continued to hand out snacks to the viewers. Other members from the skeleton crews came in to observe after they heard the commotion.

"Do you need time to rest?" Akhlut politely asked the woman.

"No," she bobbed her hair, "I hear you have excellent hand-to-hand combat skills as well as mind-breaking powers. This will be fun."

The orca took a powerful and defensive stance waiting for the witch to make the first move. She ran at him and unleashed a flurry of punches, none of which landed as he blocked them effortlessly. The Egg Bosses had a very bad habit of leaving their backs unprotected.

Before the orca could use his psychic powers on her she shapeshifted into a little brown mouse and slid under him.

"What the-" was all he could say before she changed back to her human self and extended her nails
into deadly claws, stabbing his tail.

"She fights dirty," Clove sounded extremely stressed.

"We'll fight dirty, too!" Cassia flexed a robotic arm trying to appear brave.

"You are not going out there, I won't allow it," Clove shot her sister a look, "You're too young."

"Oh, please," Cassia shrugged, "I can handle myself."

Akhlut felt the dull pain throb in his tail and retaliated by attempting to punch her down. Instead he hit the ice and it left a huge crater in his wake.

With shovel-like claws she stabbed Akhlut between his ribs. She didn't count on his dolphin hide being so thick. Akhlut barely felt the stab and did not even flinch.

Tundra fell in love instantly. There was a deadly conflict going on between his clan and Akhlut's, which seemed to be getting resolved all at once by a strange woman with too much hair.

"I just might propose to her," the walrus sighed wistfully. Nephthys raised an unseen eyebrow at him and shook her head disapprovingly.

"You would have ugly children together." She commented. Tundra couldn't help but guffaw.

The televisions changed again: Pangaea, F.G. Noise vs Tom Exo.

"Did you think you could gut me like a fish?" Sharp green irises on black sclerae were piercing.

"Kinda, yeah," she laughed nervously, "Is it just me or is this music weird?"

"At least the robot has the courtesy to let us know what artists are responsible for such cacophany,"
Akhlut grabbed the witch by the throat and squeezed. He then shot a psychic attack toward her. Her body went limp for a second but then her eyes glowed brightly as the Oracle Stone took over.

*This is my space,* the witch spoke,* no visitors allowed.*

Akhlut seemed to be standing in a black room with no discernible walls or ceiling.

"Madame?" He found it hard to breathe, "What is this?"

*You are in my mind,* the witch's voice echoed, *this is my turf. You will learn just as Ivo did that you cannot choke me and walk away unscathed.*

She uttered an ancient banishment spell, filling the orca's head with screeching noise. Back in the tangible world the orca was screaming and clutching his head before he collapsed, unconscious. Sheptilah felt something warm trickle over lip. She had a nosebleed.

"God," Eggman had a slight headache, "What happened? Do I keep my money or not?"

Sheptilah knelt down and healed the orca who then left the arena feeling about shameful for his loss. She then climbed the wall and made her way to the water buffalo and healed him.

"Thunderbolt gets her money back," Shadow said. Eggman scoffed and handed the bill back to her.

"I should've healed you right away," the witch said dryly, "I got distracted. You almost killed me, you know that?"

"Well, you said not to hold back," Axel smirked.

Sheptilah looked around, "Who's next…? Mordred!"

The cobra, being cold-blooded, was unable to stay awake in the icy fortress and went into a hibernation-like sleep.
"Or not… Nephthys!" She called for the vulture.

"Yes, my lady?" She turned her masked face toward the overlander.

"I would like to challenge you, though perhaps I shouldn't."

"Why not?" The vulture tilted her head ever so slightly.

"When I am from, Nephthys was in our pantheon of gods. Specifically the guardian of the dead and putrefaction."

"I assure you I do not fill such a role in this day and age," Nephthys chuckled, "But I have heard of the Nannae."

"So you admit you are the goddess!" Sheptilah smirked, "To the arena."

They each made their way back to the ring. Nephthys, despite being a vulture could only glide with the use of her cape and would have to be very protective of her rear unlike the other two Sheptilah took advantage of during the fight.

"Why are you here, really?" The vulture picked up a chunk of ice and bounced it in her palm.

The overlander sighed deeply, "I am here to atone for the sins of those that came before me and ensure that life continues here on Mobius."

"Noble," the vulture admitted, "But I do not trust you." She tossed the ice ball over her shoulder.

The witch, using magic, lunged forward with great speed and wanted to make quick work of the Mobian woman.

Nephthys was faster and quickly jumped into the air and landed hard on Sheptilah, breaking her
shoulder and arm with wet crunches. The witch screamed with intense pain. Orbot and Cubot looked away from the carnage. Eggman himself clutched his arm from the sympathetic pain and Shadow let out a low growl without meaning to.

"Surrender," the cloaked woman demanded of the witch. Sheptilah dragged herself forward with her better arm, leaving a trail of pink blood on the ice from the compound fractures.

"Now playing... Lone Digger, Caravan Palace." MARI wasn't one for obeying orders even from Eggman, "Also, ew." she commented.

Cassia buried her face in her bag of half-eaten popcorn and Clove was visibly sweating. They had to be next to fight her. There were few left to fight besides the sisters: Tundra and maybe Thunderbolt.

"Heh. I can't surrender." Sheptilah said over her unbroken shoulder. Nephthys walked forward and pressed her foot against the flopping arm. Unwilling tears streamed down Tilly's cheeks.

"Surrender," the bird woman demanded again, applying more pressure to the injuries. The witch's head was swimming. She nearly passed out from the pain and had a hard time controlling her magic. Her body subconsciously healed itself and every injured nerve began to dull.

"We shouldn't have let her fight without breaks." Shadow spoke through sharp, gritted teeth.

"Get up, Sheptilah!" Tundra howled, "I still haven't fought you yet!" Some other members of the Egg army cheered half-heartedly for the witch and others cheered for Nephthys. Shadow's spines stood on end and all at once flattened when he became calm again.

"Surrender so Cassia doesn't have to fight," Nephthys spoke quietly. She swore she could see glitter form on the wounds and heal them.

"I never intended to fight Cassia," the witch whispered, "Only heal her by 'accident'."

The vulture looked away toward the small crowd where the green pronghorns were sitting and holding each other nervously.
"Great healers, your people were. They lived in a terraced garden ziggurat in my region. The subject of myth." She kicked Sheptilah hard in the chest and sent her sliding across the ice.

The vulture spied the wound protected by the crystal band did not heal.

"I can also see you are weak to iron," she knelt down and grabbed the witch's hair and lifted her to her feet. "I don't trust you, Lady Sheptilah. I don't trust anyone who deals with G.U.N. and Eggman's empire. How do I know you are not here to undermine everything Eggman has built up?"

Sheptilah rolled her shoulder which was now fully healed. "I don't like G.U.N." She was panting and sweaty, "In fact I hate them."

"FINISH HER!" Thunderbolt screamed, "Kill the overlander!" This was followed by her yelping as Eggman lightly swatted her.

Nephthys' feathers stood on end and then relaxed. "Don't get me wrong. I respect you, I just do not trust you. Your orders to stop all other projects is disrupting my very delicate balances I've put in place in Midesta."

"Thunderbolt told me that you had your face crushed when you were younger; that you had Ivo give you facial cybernetics. Unfortunate that I cannot help you. I think you are my favorite of the Egg Bosses." Sheptilah was deeply regretting challenging them all to battles one after another while only having eaten bits of carrots and apple cookies.

Nephthys let go of the exhausted overlander's scalp. "I admire your power but you are reckless. Work on that. I will fight you again when you are at full capacity, Lady Sheptilah." She then jumped up and glided back to the seats and walked out of the arena with her cape flapping behind her.

Tilly's face was flushed with embarrassment; was she really that bad a fighter?

"We will continue the fights at a later date. Great work, everyone!" She made her way back to where the good doctor was sitting. He reached over the wall and pulled her up by the wrist and set her down gently next to him.

"You're hard to kill," he chuckled.
"I learned a lot," she forced a smile. Her chest rose and fell with exertion. "Everyone except Mordred is great. I'm happy to be on your team."

Eggman's eyes skimmed her thin, frail figure. Poor thing is all skin and bones, he thought, and yet …

"Eggman? Are you listening?" Shadow pulled on his mustache, "Eggman?"

"Woah, sorry; lost in thought." He batted away Shadow's hand.

"Tilly is hungry."

They didn't stay the night. Everyone packed up and left for their respective bases except for Eggman. He decided to linger a little longer and procrastinate about going out in the snow again.

"Next time maybe consult me before you decide to fight everyone; and don't do it on an empty stomach. Great show, though." He was going through their backpacks one more time before going out.

"Did you know he bet against you?" Thunderbolt was getting into her mecha.

"You bet against me?" Tilly pretended to be shocked, "Well my loss is your loss." Orbot and Cubot came up with thermoses full of piping hot minestrone and handed one to everyone.

"Mamnoon," she took it, "Thank you." Though when she said it it sounded more like 'sank thyoo'.

"You're getting better!" Orbot chirped. Just then the base shook a little. Shadow was alarmed and looked around.

"Don't panic. I'm pretty sure that's just the staff finally getting the submarine hatch de-iced." Eggman stroked his mustache, "Fat lot of good it does for us though since I had to park in the boonies…"
Sheptilah sipped from the thermos. A moment passed without any more tremors.

"See?" Eggman grinned at the hedgehog, "Nothing is wrong."

"Fine, let's just go." Shadow was eager to get home.

Eggman opened the gates and a cold gush of air washed over them.

"I'm so glad I do not have nerve endings," Orbot was the first to leave the building for the sled that awaited them. Sheptilah had an uneasy feeling of dread crawl over her. She sipped the thermos nervously and hoped to get back into the submarine as soon as possible.

"Is something wrong?" Eggman noticed the wide-eyed woman's anxious expression.

"I don't know…"

"Maybe you do get motion sick…" Shadow recalled the earlier conversation, "I still have some sour candies if you'd like."

"No, thank you." The woman stared straight ahead.

"You are such a grandpa," Eggman chuckled.

"Eggman?" MARI's voice spoke over the gauntlet, "Eggman. There's something moving beneath you."

"What? MARI! You're being nosy. Go back to being a deejay." He raised a finger threatening to silence the AI.

"Sir, your other robots are in sleep mode and aren't responding. There's something large moving beneath you according to the sled's sensors…” her voice sounded worried.
"It’s probably a whale."

Shadow was straining his ears to hear for anything but couldn’t tell over the noise of the two adults yelling.

"We gotta get out of here!" Sheptilah dropped the thermos and pounded on the roof of the cab.

The hedgehog chalked it up to her claustrophobia and tried to calm her by rubbing her shoulder.

"MARI- we are almost at the submarine. I’ll deal with you later." Eggman growled.

Then came a rumble and a scraping noise much like a freight train struggling to hit the brakes. Eggman instinctively placed his arm across the two smaller beings he was sitting next to. The sled was overturned and rolled across the ice a few times before finally settling right-side up with its robotic reindeer having been destroyed and kicking their legs in the air flaccidly. Thunderbolt’s mecha was thrown in the other direction.

"Damn," Eggman coughed. He wiggled his toes to make sure nothing was broken, "Is everyone alive?"

"Define 'alive'," Shadow groaned. Before Sheptilah could respond the cab started to tilt.

"Time to go," Eggman kicked the glass window free and climbed out. The sound of cracking ice was very subtle, but Shadow heard it clear as a bell. The overlander reached in and pulled Shadow and Sheptilah out and tossed them onto the ice. Orbot and Cubot, both still in sleep mode, were too far down to be reached and he had to abandon them.

"Go!" Eggman commanded. "If you fall into the water you will die!"

The snow was thick and difficult for Shadow to trudge through and he could not get the leverage to get on top of it to skate away. The ground shook violently and in a great plume of ice and water a witch-eater shot through like a geyser.
The beast threaded in and out of the ice like lightning. It was obvious its goal was to make the ice sheet into more manageable floes so as to leave the group stranded.

"Chaos Spear!" Shadow cried. He aimed for the creature but it dodged the sparking bolt of energy by diving.

"Mayday, Mayday!" Eggman screamed into his gauntlet. "A wi-" he was violently cut off by being thrown at least one hundred feet into the air by the creature jettisoning itself from beneath the floe.

"I got you!" Sheptilah ran toward where she estimated he would fall. She caught him with a gust of air and softened his landing by quite a bit, but he was still stuck face-down in the snow with his legs kicking wildly.

A dazed Thunderbolt managed to sit up in her mecha. She then righted it and looked around to see where everyone was. The North Pole this time of year was always very dark with only the thin moonlight and aurora borealis to light the way.

Her mecha, luckily, did have built in floodlights. She activated them and looked around, breathing heavily. She spied rapid motion in the distance and ran toward it.

Sheptilah made an attempt to pull Eggman out of the snow but had difficulty trying to grab him by the ankle. She leaned down and gripped his thigh and trailed her hand up to his boot and pulled with all her might. The sensation of being touched there almost made him stroke out until he realized who it was and what she was doing.

Shadow teleported around the beast and used spin dashes to tear holes in it with little effect. He wanted to preserve his Chaos energy but found that brute force was not going to work with a monster so large.

"Tilly!" Eggman's voice was high-pitched with surprise. "You grabbed my thigh!"

"Yes, and?!" She was bewildered by his reaction. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the beams of the mecha lights flash followed by two small missiles whizzing just over her head.
The projectiles hit the creature head-on but caused more noise than it did damage.

"Tundra!" Eggman shouted. "For God's sake where are you?!

"We're on our way!" The walrus was already getting his handful of troops ready for a rescue.

The creature roared and split itself into two smaller halves, one going for Shadow and the other for Thunderbolt.

The hedgehog teleported and shot a massive wave of Chaos spears at the beasts. Thunderbolt screamed as she shot the one that was aiming directly for her cockpit with alarming speed. At first she believed she made it dissipate but instead it dove down into the ice.

"Chaos spear!" Shadow cried one last time with what little energy he had left as the beast chasing him was hit. The smell of it was acrid. The hedgehog landed in the snow with a crunch and eyed the beasts as they retreated.

"We need to get off the ice." He stated the obvious.

"All the North Pole is ice!" Eggman was brushing snow out of his hood. The sound of the ice sheets rubbing together was like nails on a chalkboard.

"They followed us here," Sheptilah spoke weakly. "In the water." She picked up Shadow and balanced him against her hip so he wasn't face-deep in the snow. He lightly gripped the neck of her cloak for leverage.

"Or they were hiding out here the whole time." Thunderbolt said as she rubbed the inside of the windshield clear of condensation.

"Shadow, can you teleport us back to the base?" Eggman said.

The hedgehog nodded, "I can try." He inhaled deeply but before the words could come out the ice floe they were on began to tilt downward at an alarming speed. The beast was pushing against the massive chunk of ice hoping to drown them.
They tried to climb up away from the water but the thick coating of fluffy snow acted like an avalanche, forcing them down into pitch black seawater.

Thunderbolt in her mech sank quickly while Eggman struggled to keep from inhaling the water as a reflex from being temperature shocked. Sheptilah, by virtue of being a shapeshifter, gave herself gills on the outside of her throat so she could breathe. So long as she didn't try to speak or breathe with her mouth she wouldn't drown. Eyes glowing to light her way, she propelled herself through the water to find the others.

Eggman allowed his body to float to what he hoped was the surface only to find that he hit solid ice. He attempted some fruitless punches but even with his mutant strength he was unable to crack it without leverage. His head filled with screaming panic when he felt something touch him only to be relieved when he saw those familiar lavender eyes staring at him like headlights on the highway.

She formed an air bubble around his head. He took in deep, greedy breaths and held onto her tightly. Her cloak was heavy when dry but soaking wet it nearly dragged her to the bottom of the sea if she stopped moving.

"I'm going to die of hypothermia," he said between shivers, "If we do not get out of the water immediately." Eggman's lips had already begun to turn blue.

She looked around for Shadow but because of his dark pelt it was nearly impossible to see him.

*Shadow! She called telepathically, Shadow! Think at me - I'll find you!*

*Tilly? He thought back at her. Can you hear me? It sounded faint in her head. He was either very tired or very far away. She touched her Oracle Stone and pulled out a ball of raw energy and used it as a bright light source. Everything became clear to her: they were not that far from the seafloor as the thick ice sheet had pushed them down when it flipped. Shadow was struggling to pull Thunderbolt's mech free as it was wedged in a thin crevice.*

The adrenaline rush was keeping Sheptilah alive and lucid enough to focus. She formed an air bubble around Shadow's head and then punched a hole in the glass of the cockpit, pulling a terrified Thunderbolt free and gave her her own bubble to breathe in.

"Where's the creature?" Shadow held onto the chinchilla's bubble.
I don’t know, the witch’s voice spoke.

"Holy moly, are you a mermaid, too!?" Thunderbolt noticed the gills that looked like knife wounds on the woman’s neck.

For the last time I am a witch!

"Tilly…” Eggman's voice started to drawl and his words slurred. "I don't...want to die."

"He's going to die if we don't warm him up soon." The hedgehog gripped her arm. She propelled herself forward where the gap between the ice sheet and ocean floor widened. Sheptilah was heading toward the open ocean.

A current pushed them forward as the witch-eater spiraled toward them from behind. Shadow had enough lingering energy for one massive Chaos Spear, but it would drain him to use it. He let go of Thunderbolt's bubble and waited for the beast to get up close enough so he couldn't miss.

"Chaos spear!" he said, throwing the massive bolt of energy like Zeus throwing lightning. The creature let out an ear-splitting howl before dissipating into nothingness. The shine from the spear was painfully blinding. They did not see that a few witch-eaters had split off the main amalgamation and fled.

Shadow was exhausted from using up the bulk of his Chaos energy and being submerged in the freezing cold water. Sheptilah was now becoming extremely uncomfortable in the water due to both people she was bonded to actively dying.

Please hang on, she spoke to them as well as herself, we're gonna be alright. Her vision blurred and she felt like she was struggling to stay awake. Please.

Her conscious self fell to the wayside and her Oracle Stone took over. It tracked the nearest form of life it could find: ringed seals. The small mammals were miles away but the stone warped to them nearly instantly; something Sheptilah herself didn't know how to do.

The curious and somewhat doofy creatures swam along calmly, digging their snouts in the sand
and disappearing into the ice.

The witch's body followed the seals and saw they were going up into a cave. Unlike typical seal lairs this one was a naturally occurring cave and it was huge. The walls and floor of the cave looked like sea waves frozen in time except for parts worn smooth by the seals dragging their fat bellies across it. It was almost too dark to see.

The witch pulled her team through the opening and pushed them away from the edge. The frightened seals flopped away from the intruders, their barks of displeasure echoing off the walls. She immediately dried them all off by instantly evaporating the water, leaving a thin salty film on everyone but Thunderbolt.

Thunderbolt was the only conscious one. She ran to Eggman and frantically checked for a heartbeat. It was thready, but it was there.

"Help him," she begged, "He's dying."

I know, Sheptilah responded. She approached Eggman and pressed her bone-white hands to his cheeks and brushed the salt flakes away. She hummed quietly and repaired the damage done to him by the cold. She then turned to Shadow and was pleased to see he didn't need healing and was just very, very tired.

The Oracle Stone rescinded bodily and conscious control back to the witch.

"How..." She felt the fur of her cloak and was surprised that it was dry. "I..."

"Where am I?" Eggman's voice sounded hoarse. "Thunderbolt?"

The chinchilla hugged his head and rubbed her cheek against his ear. "I'll keep you warm!"

“If you had a twin I could make a decent pair of earmuffs from you. Have you sit on my shoulders and hug my head." He mused.

"I must get bigger so I can hug your whole head!" She was determined to be perfect for him.
Shadow's entire body ached. Laying on the ice helped to ease it a little. He groaned. Using up stored Chaos Energy was painful. Normally he had no issue with using the power lent by the stones but when so far from a Chaos Emerald things were much more difficult.

"Are you hurt? I can help you." Tilly felt around for where he was.

"Conserve your energy for now." The hedgehog warned.

Some of the more brave and curious seals slowly approached the strange group of visitors. Shadow looked around and was upset to see his bag was missing. He became panicked when he realized nobody had their packs anymore.

"How did… we get here?" Tilly looked to Thunderbolt.

"That rock on your chest brought us here. I have no idea where here is though, because it teleported us."

"I can teleport to unseen distances?" She shook her head. "I have no idea. I have no memory of it. I'm also very tired..."

"Why wouldn't it just teleport us somewhere else? Like the base?" Shadow's breath was shaky. Sheptilah shook her head.

Eggman sat up causing Thunderbolt to lose her grip and flop onto the ice. He looked at his gauntlet and brought up a map. The ice was too thick for the gauntlet's GPS to show where they were.

"Tundra is never going to find us…" He sighed. "But if we find another way out of this cave we may be able to send out a distress signal." The screen of his gauntlet was fogged over from the cold.

Tilly moved over to the hedgehog, placed his head in her lap and stroked his cheeks comfortably. Normally he would be annoyed with being touched like that but was too tired to argue.
"Thank you for saving us, Shadow," Tilly said.

The hedgehog closed his eyes and exhaled. "Sure thing." He then looked over at Eggman when he heard the Overlander thumping his palm against the gauntlet.

"Doctor… your eyes." Shadow said with concern.

Ivo felt his face and realized his glasses were missing and felt extremely self-conscious.

"They were always like this." He finally said.

"I love them," Thunderbolt chirped, "So devious!"

One of the smaller seals flopped up to Shadow, curiously sniffed him and then laid itself across his legs. Another came up to Sheptilah and tugged on her cloak with its mouth.

"Hi," Shadow sounded annoyed, "Can I help you?"

"Aren't you cute?" Eggman lightly pat one as it scooted by.

"Back off, back off!" Thunderbolt was tackled by one that wanted attention. One by one more of the herd emerged from what appeared to be a tunnel hidden behind an outcrop of ice.

"They're so fat!" Tilly was enamored and pet one. She was surprised to see that they felt like they were covered in wet dog fur and not soft like velvet. Ringed seals never grew bigger than the length of a labrador retriever so even the biggest of them was pretty small and endearing. Their wide, glassy eyes and kitten-like snouts betrayed their sharp, flame-shaped teeth hiding in their mouths.

"Are they stealing our body heat?" Eggman was a little irritated by their wet noses rubbing his face. He gently pushed it aside and it showed its displeasure by slapping its belly.

"We should get moving." Thunderbolt said. "We'll freeze to death if we don't."
"I saw the seals come out from behind some ice over there." The woman pointed.

"Then let's go." Eggman stood and stretched, his spine cracking.

"I don't think Shadow can move," Tilly frowned, "And not because a seal parked itself on him."

Shadow sat up defiantly and gently nudged the seal off of his legs. He then stood and took a few shaky steps. "I'm fine." Through gritted teeth he trudged a few feet before falling over.

The witch sighed and scooped up Shadow in her arms. She supported him with one arm and buttoned the cloak around him with the other, essentially making a papoose for him to nestle in.

"Like a little baby," she shook her head to brush some of his spines out of her face, "With built-in pricklies."

"Baby Mobian hedgehogs don't have 'pricklies'." He corrected her, yawning broadly as he did so. "I shouldn't be this tired." He rested his chin on her shoulder.

"I think it's the cold too; not just you using up your power." She had a good grip on him so he wouldn't slip. He limply wrapped his arms around her neck.

"Thunderbolt? Some light, please." Eggman looked down at her.

The chinchilla jumped up and activated her cybernetics so that it would give off enough illumination to comfortably see by. Eggman bent down and picked her up so that the light was at the Overlanders' eye level. Was he finally coming around to her? Her tiny rodent mind raced with the romantic possibilities.

The Overlanders, each with a Mobian in tow, made their way past the chunk of ice blocking the view of a natural path through the glacier.

"Next time I will bring a Chaos Emerald with me." Shadow was falling asleep.

"At least you have a cute lady to carry you," Eggman quipped, "I know for a fact you all would
leave my bloated corpse behind with Thunderbolt fruitlessly trying to drag me across the ice."

"What? Of course not," Sheptilah furrowed her brows, "We'd eat you."

They wandered in the cave paths for hours. The only sounds were their echoing footsteps on the crunchy ice until Eggman led them to a massive cave where floor was coated in dry sand.

“Did you know that hedgehogs are likely to go into a kind of hibernation in the cold?” Eggman broke the silence.

“No, I didn’t. We didn’t have hedgehogs where I’m from. Most of the Mobians were pangolins, armadillos or hamsters. Typical desert animals, you know?” Sheptilah whispered so she wouldn't wake the sleeping hedgehog or cause a cave-in.

“There are desert hedgehogs;” he cocked a brow, “So you’ve never seen one before? That sounds like paradise.”

“I guess I have not seen one, no.” She shrugged.

"You can't open a portal here, can you?” Eggman kept his voice equally low. Shadow’s ears twitched when the Overlanders spoke but he remained asleep. Occasionally he nuzzled his face into her collar, tickling her neck with his soft breathing.

"No. Without people coming and going there won't be many, if any, knots in the Universe I can pull open."

"It's obvious nobody has been here for thousands of years." Thunderbolt said.

"Great acoustics, though." Eggman cleared his throat. "Oh, what will the signal be for your eyes to see me?" His deep voice singing the lyrics to Send Love Through echoed off the walls of the cavern beautifully. Shadow's ears twitched but he didn't wake up.

Thunderbolt looked up at him and gasped softly. Who knew he could sing?
"Watching offside as I wait just in case you need me." He grinned. "With the right acoustics anyone can sound good.

"What song was that?" Thunderbolt said.

"Old Blondie song." He explained. "Really old."

"We should keep moving." Sheptilah adjusted her grip on her familiar. "I'm starting to fall asleep, too."

"Alright. Let's go." He began walking again and held up Thunderbolt like a flashlight when he picked up the faint smell of wood.

"Do you smell that?" He asked the witch. She shook her head. "Thunderbolt; turn up the wattage."

The chinchilla obliged and the cave brightened quite a bit. In the distance the image of a very old scuttled ship took shape. It was an explorer's vessel from at least two hundred years prior made entirely out of wood. The air around it smelled stale and earthy.

Painted on the hull was the ship's name: HIRMS Цветущий снег.

"His Imperial Royal Ship Blossoming Snow?" Sheptilah could read the Russian because it was hand-painted onto the hull.

"I'm not sure," Eggman cautiously approached the boat, "But I can guarantee you there are bodies in here."
"Like skeletons?" Sheptilah sounded hopeful that things wouldn't get too gorey. Thunderbolt shook her head.

"Expeditions to the great north from this long ago often ended in tragedy. When people die out in these conditions their bodies mummify in the cold. The corpses are going to look somewhat fresh." The chinchilla explained.

"My concern is any lurking viruses and bacteria that may be hiding out on these corpses."

Eggman hesitantly approached the hull and knocked on it with his knuckle. It sounded solid and sturdy.

"What are viruses and bacteria?" Sheptilah asked.

"Microscopic things that make you sick." Eggman explained it as succinctly as possible.

"I will heal you if you get sick," the witch sighed, "You know that."

"You're exhausted; we'll build a fire and camp out for the night. Stay out here with him. Thunderbolt and I will explore the ship's deck for supplies, and only the deck."

"Wait, out here? In the dark?" She was terrified of being in that level of blackness after having suffered it for five millennia.

"You're an adult; you can handle it." Eggman shrugged off her anxiety and made his way to some chunks of ice that would allow him to reach the deck. Sheptilah held the sleeping hedgehog even tighter.

"Why don't you want me to go with you?" She sounded terrified.

"Tilly, just stay there." He said forcefully. He then landed with a heavy thump on the deck. With
the faint light of Thunderbolt's cybernetics the two looked like a ghost wandering the vessel aimlessly.

*Why is he treating me this way?* She asked herself.

Eggman walked around the deck looking for supplies they could salvage and for wood to burn. The ship was in a shambles and the planks creaked underfoot. The chinchilla was grinning ear-to-ear because lord Eggman decided he wanted to spend this time alone with *her*.

He took another tentative step forward, slowly putting his foot down on the brittle deck. The ship groaned as if it was in pain. His mustache bristled as every hair on his body, which was mostly concentrated to his back, stood on end.

He froze in place for a moment and then relaxed when nothing happened. He chuckled softly to himself with relief.

Then there was a snap.

Tundra and Akhlut, with a handful of Egg militia in tow, rode their snowmobiles to the last known location of the sled. When they found that it was under the ice they immediately drilled a hole into it and sent the orca into it to rescue Orbot and Cubot who were still in sleep mode.

"There's no sign of Eggman, Sheptilah or Shadow down there except for *this.*" Akhlut tossed Shadow's waterlogged bag onto the ice along with the two robots still in their compacted forms.

"Any blood or torn clothes?" Tundra was punching info into his handheld computer. Although his sense of smell was acute it became useless underwater and thus the scent trail ended where they stood.

"No, but the windshield is broken and Thunderbolt's mecha is empty." Akhlut said. "I'm going to keep searching in the water. You search above the ice." The orca disappeared back into the sea before Tundra could punch the damned dolphin in the face for daring to tell *him* what to do.
"Shadow? Shadow, wake up." Sheptilah nudged her nose against his cheek. The hedgehog groaned and rubbed his face with his hand.

"What?" He sounded like he was still half-asleep. He nestled back into the crook of her neck intending to resume his nap.

"You're very cute but I would like to put you down now."

"I'm not cute." He squinted in the pitch blackness.

"You're very cute and you are very heavy for someone who looks like they should weigh as much as a loaf of bread."

"Stop saying I'm cute." Shadow the Hedgehog is a seventy-seven pound war machine and he demanded to be treated as such. "Yes you may put me down."

"Fine, fine. You're not cute," she unbuttoned the cloak with one hand and let Shadow jump to the ground, "You sleep like the dead."

"Where's Thunderbolt and Eggman?"

Sheptilah closed the cloak and crouched down. She closed her palms together and slowly pulled them apart, creating a smoky wisp of light.

"He went off with Thunderbolt to explore the ship we found." She stood up straight and rolled the wisp around in her palm to make it grow to the size of a basketball.

The cave was now illuminated bright enough that she could see several yards away.

"An old exploration vessel," Shadow knocked on the wooden hull with his knuckles, "Really old."

"Ivo says there's bodies in there."
"He's probably right but why did he leave us behind?"

Sheptilah shrugged. "I've got no idea."

The brittle planks gave way under Eggman with a loud snap and he tumbled down with a loud crash into the bowels of the ship.

The mummified, freeze-dried corpse of a human fell on top of him. Eggman screamed with horror. The body was hard and heavy.

Thunderbolt, equally terrified, instinctively unleashed a sharp bolt of electricity that shocked Eggman to within an inch of his life.

The surge made the witch’s hair stand on end.

"Eggman!" Sheptilah called. She ran off with Shadow on her heels and the wisp following behind her lighting the path. With the aid of magic she hopped up on the piles of ice and quickly bounced to the deck of the ship. Shadow was able to keep up with her but still felt the exhaustive effects of having drained most of his energy earlier.

She kneeled over the edge of the hole he fell into and peered in, the bright light hovering behind her like a halo.

"Sheptilah?" Eggman looked up and saw her.

"Whatever happened to you just now is something you deserve; every bit of it!" She shouted with annoyance into the pit. Shadow put his hands on his hips and leaned forward.

"Are you hurt?" The hedgehog asked.

Eggman looked around and saw he was nearly impaled on a sharp chunk of wood that was sticking up by his armpit.
"No," he coughed, "Except when Thunderbolt electrocuted me into the next century."

"Ow." Thunderbolt sat up. Shadow jumped in and pulled the corpse off of Eggman. Sheptilah floated down, her wisp following and lit up the messy deck.

"I'm so sorry, my lord!" Thunderbolt apologized profusely.

Eggman stood and brushed himself off. "Thank you for asking, Shadow."

Sheptilah went up to the corpse and looked it over with an unimpressed expression. "Sometimes we were mummified by baking in the sand. It looked like this, but we took the eyes out first."

"I'm gonna be sick." Eggman was a mess.

"I wonder what killed them?" The witch said to me.

"Is anybody worried about me?" Ivo smoothed out his mustache.

"I am!" The chinchilla was quick to answer.

"Please don't touch the corpses, Sheptilah." Shadow was grossed out by her careless handling of it.

"I'm just wondering if whatever killed them could kill us." She backed up from the corpse and took a look around. They were in a kitchen. She spotted a small hanging iron pot and went over to it. She picked up a piece of wood, carefully lifted the heavy lid with it and peered inside.

"They probably died of starvation." Eggman felt dizzy and stumbled a bit when he walked around.

"Cannibalism," the witch said, "Human hand and neck bones in an empty pot? They clearly were resorting to cannibalism. They did starve to death. We should keep looking around."
"I want off. I don't want to fall through the floor again." Ivo was anxious and hyper aware of every little creak the ship was making.

Sheptilah let the lid slam shut. Eggman jumped at the noise.

"You can go if you want; but then you'd be all alone in the dark." The witch was clearly bitter about being left behind.

"I'll stick around." He quickly changed his mind. "Look for oil or alcohol... something to make the wood burn more easily."

"We're camping out here?" The hedgehog was hesitant to stay in one place.

"Sure, outside the ship on the sand. You slept all this time so you don't get to be picky."

Thunderbolt was peeved at the whole situation.

Sheptilah continued to poke around in drawers and cabinets but found nothing of any real use. They explored the ship further, each going their own way but not straying too far from the wisp giving off light. Shadow opened a closet and found a pile of human bones inside it. He gently shut the door and propped a plank of wood under the doorknob so it couldn't open from the inside. Just in case.

"I found something," Sheptilah was holding an old notebook, "Captain's log." It was written in a shorthand form of Cyrillic. The script started off neat but became excruciatingly sloppy toward the end. They were deep in the bowels of the ship and knew they wouldn't find anything else.

"What's it say?" Eggman was curious.

"Let's build that fire first, then I'll read it to you." Sheptilah tucked it under her arm.

"How are we getting out?" Thunderbolt was holding onto Eggman's leg.

Eggman ran his hand against the ship's wall. He took a step back and punched a hole directly into the side. Wood splintered and landed softly in the sand directly below. Sheptilah and Shadow
exchanged unnerved glances.

"So strong." Thunderbolt's voice sounded dreamy.

"Yeah, I'm aware of that despite having my head caved in just days prior." Sheptilah spat.

Eggman looked back over his shoulder and frowned, "I told you it was an accident."

"How do you accidentally crack open someone's skull?" Shadow said.

Ivo didn't answer the question. He stepped down from the newly created porthole onto the sand and waited for them to follow him.

Tundra immediately called for a helicopter to pick him up. He instructed a few underlings to follow on the ground while he flew overhead. They found nothing.

Akhlut was right at home in the frigid water. The darkness made it hard for him to see so he shut his eyes and relied exclusively on echolocation. After several minutes of picking up nothing he was able to locate the same herd of seals that Sheptilah had found only two miles away.

He communicated with them telepathically to find out if they had seen anything. To his relief they were able to point him in the right direction. The seals remembered them as 'nice warm strangers that scratched our heads that disappeared behind the ice.'

The group built a fire in the sand a good distance from the ship using the planks Eggman punched out earlier. Sheptilah sat with Shadow across from Eggman and Thunderbolt with the fire crackling between them like a protective barrier. She dissipated the wisp she created earlier and began reading the captain's log by the firelight.

"Still nothing?" Eggman asked the hedgehog who was fiddling with his communicator.
"Dead air. Could've been damaged in the fight but it's most likely all the ice." He was falling asleep again. He silently cursed himself for being so reckless; *that was the witch's job.*

"I'm so hungry I could eat Axel." Thunderbolt sighed.

"That'd be impressive seeing as how I'm sure he's had droppings bigger than you," Eggman laughed.

"I'm not that little!" The chinchilla whined.

"How was it you described yourself? Compact? Lightweight and built for travel?" He grinned at her. He loved teasing his underlings. Sheptilah stood, walked to Eggman and crouched in front of him. She stared directly into his eyes for a moment, unblinking.

"*What? What do you want?*" He furrowed his eyebrows.

"Prove to me it was an accident." She was angry and there was hurt in her voice.

"How? I *already* told you it was an a-" He was interrupted by Sheptilah gripping his shoulders and pressing her forehead to his.

She forced his to share his memory of the incident while it was still fresh in his mind. It was from Ivo's perspective. She saw her own figure staring at the ocean and felt his emotions. She perceived the thought he had of strangling her at that moment and throwing her lifeless body into the sea. She saw Eggman gripping her throat and understood that he had no real intention to hurt her—only scare her.

Eggman was hesitant to reach out and grab the witch. He knew it was risky to even approach her but he was not going to lose his life's work to some random woman. He understood her frailty when his thumb could touch his fingertips when wrapped around her throat. She was so small, underfed and *weak.* He could kill her with the same effort of opening a bottle of soda.

How could a queen be so *skinny?* Why was she such a waif? *Damned vegetarians. Real queens should be strong.* She reminded him of the smallest matryoshka doll in a set his mother had when
he was a child. Each one smaller than the last and painted with great detail by a skilled hand.

"Don't be so heavy-handed," his mother would scold him, "You'll crush the hollow dolls."

You'll crush the doll. He was caught between anger and pity. Somewhere inside he wanted to nestle her in a sHell and then another to keep her from breaking. He couldn't risk her getting hurt since it hurt him, too. Shells.

She hooked her finger into the collar of her sweatshirt and tempted him to grab the Oracle Stone. He didn't look down at her chest though he knew she wasn't wearing any underwear beneath the GUN scrubs. Now was not the time for distractions.

Then came the stabbing. His guts erupted in flame and, without meaning to, he threw the witch down. The sickening, wet crack the sound of her skull breaking against the rock brought him back to his senses almost instantly.

He was on his knees gasping for air. He looked at the woman and regretted everything. The moon's destruction, waking her up, killing her. He regretted everything. Panic swept over him.

I've killed her, he gritted his teeth, I messed up!

What amazing cruelties people can inflict upon one another without meaning to.

"S-Sheptilah?" His head started to ache. He tried to crawl forward but was too shaky. The bitter taste of hot copper welled up in his throat. For the second time that week he was drowning in her blood.

It was then that her body began to heal itself. The smallest matryoshka doll was always the hardest to break because it is solid.

Sheptilah broke the mental bond by pulling back. It had only lasted a second but it felt like eternity for the two of them. She had tears pouring from her eyes. It was unclear if she was crying her own or Eggman's.
Our actions have consequences.

"It was an accident." Her voice wavered.

"What was that?" Eggman swallowed hard.

"Memory sharing." She hung her head. "I saw everything from your perspective exactly as it happened. Everything."

Thunderbolt was grinding her teeth. How dare she get so cozy with him!

"I should've never attacked you." She blamed herself for everything. She dried her stinging eyes with her fists.

"I never should've threatened to kill you." He admitted. “You were defending yourself.”

She slowly leaned in and embraced him in a tight hug. He held his hands out at first but after a moment he returned the gesture, holding her chastely.

"We can't end up like the people on Blossoming Snow." She buried her face in his shoulder. "They killed themselves and each other. The diary talked all about it."

Real human contact. It had been years since another person touched him without it being an assault.

“Chalk it up to the language barrier,” Eggman chuckled nervously, “We’ll call it even and start fresh.”

She sighed softly as the weight on her heart lifted. Everything was back to normal.

"Alright, alright, break it up!" Thunderbolt kicked sand toward Sheptilah. "Paws off!"
The woman let go of Eggman and turned to Thunderbolt, smiling like a cat. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous!?”

“You are!” Tilly pointed accusingly at the ever-reddening chinchilla. “Thunderbolt is jealous of our bond, Ivo.” She said sing-song.

“I think you have manhandled Lord Eggman enough, that’s all!”

"Miss Thunderbolt, would it make you feel better to know I prefer women?"

"What?" The chinchilla squinted at her.

"I’m not that picky but I really like women more than I like other genders."

A pause.

Thunderbolt frowned. She was trying to calculate how much ‘really like’ actually meant.

"Ugh, for heaven's sake." Shadow sucked air through his teeth. “Thunderbolt. Sheptilah is Sapphic."

“I get that, you idiot,” Thunderbolt’s tail stood straight out, “She said she prefers women. It means there’s still a chance she has disgusting ulterior motives with Lord Eggman! He is one Hell of a male specimen; it’s to be expected.” She brushed nonexistent dust off of her shoulders. “I’m trying to protect him.”

“From hugs, T.B.?” Eggman joked. “You really think banana-butt over here is going to try to seduce me or something?"

“Oh, Ivo,” Sheptilah said dramatically draping her arm across her forehead, “It’s that mug in your office with your face on it. I must have it or I’ll die. I’ll do anything to have it.”

“Right here? With the dead bodies?” Eggman played along. “Won’t you get cold?”

She and Eggman burst into laughter. Thunderbolt sat with her arms crossed and her face sour.

“I’m going to be sick.” Shadow threw some more sticks into the fire.

“Alright, alright.” Eggman picked up Thunderbolt by the back of her coat and rested her inside his hood. “Enough joking around, we need to recuperate.”

The chinchilla sighed contentedly, nestling her soft cheek against Eggman’s.

Sheptilah laid on her side and beckoned Shadow to join.

“I’m good.” The hedgehog refused. “Someone has to keep watch.”

“Shadow,” Tilly frowned, “There’s nothing here. Come on, I’m not sleeping.” She scooted over to give him room.

He looked at her for a moment before shaking his head. She instead got up and went to him, sitting
behind him and draping her cloak over him. She held him close and nuzzled his face with hers. The warmth between the two soothed his small, aching body.

Tilly brought up her hand and gently stroked Shadow’s head to help him relax. Shadow focused on the fire, watching the orange flames flicker.

The only sound was their quiet breathing and the crackling of the fire.

After an hour of silence Sheptilah leaned down to kiss the top of Shadow’s head. He did not object to this gesture and the tiniest of contented smiles appeared on his lips unseen. He felt like he did when he was a hoglet in Maria’s arms aboard the ARK. He felt like he was home.

"Hello?" Akhlut's tired voice called from far away. "Lord Eggman?"

He sat up, letting Thunderbolt tumble out. “Akhlut?”

“Sir!” The orca rounded the corner. “Finally!”
"How'd you sleep?" Tails was checking his messages on his laptop while everyone else was eating lunch.

Sonic chuckled. "Just fine. Thanks, guys."

"Of course!" Amy smiled behind her cup of juice.

Sonic's phone beeped. It was a text from Rouge.

"My babies!" Eggman shouted gleefully at Orbot and Cubot. They were reunited at the submarine. The robots immediately floated up to him and hugged him.

"We slept through the whole thing!" Orbot said.

"Boss! I'm so glad you're okay! I was worried we'd be homeless and overlord-less." Cubot frowned.

Tundra handed Eggman the soaking wet messenger bag that was found in the wreckage. The bag itself had begun to ice over in the cold. Eggman held it for a moment and then passed it off its rightful owner, Shadow.

"Thank you again, Tundra and Akhlut. Please continue to keep the poles safe. As you know the witch-eaters attacked us from under the ice. They also most likely followed our submarine when we were coming here." Maybe that's what scared the whales away, she thought.

"While in the air I saw no other evidence of them," the walrus spoke, "No tracks or broken ice."

"Can I ask you for a favor?" Sheptilah hesitantly tapped Eggman on the shoulder to get his attention.

"That depends," he flashed a crooked smile, "What is it you want?"
"Can we not take the submarine? If those beasts are still in the water I would prefer to not be stuffed in the can." She pouted.

"We don't have an airship for you at the moment." Tundra shook his head.

"I have an idea," Shadow held the communicator in his glove up to his mouth. "Rouge? Text the following to Sonic for me."

[WhiteEcho] Shadow wants you to summon the witch

[BlueBlrr91] why

[BlueBlrr91] dont you have a stone

[WhiteEcho] IDK he just asks you do it

[BlueBlrr91] okay?

"I'll be right back, guys." Sonic stepped outside and fished the witch orb out from his sock.

Sheptilah turned to an annoyed looking Akhlut and Tundra. "You're going to witness something cool."

It was a moment before she was summoned. Her body fizzled away like desert mirage.

"Wait!" Eggman said. "What just happened?"
"Sonic summoned her." Shadow shrugged.

"He summoned her?" Eggman was bewildered.

Something was miscalculated and again she was teleported high up in the air but was able to right herself. She landed gracefully in the sand, took off the heavy cloak and immediately started feeling around the air for knots.

"Come on, come on…" She muttered to herself.

"Uh, what's up?" Sonic scratched his quills in confusion. "And what the heck are you wearing?"

"Looking for a space… aha!" She pulled open a portal to the arctic circle as wide as it would go. Having to create a snag that far away instead of just opening up an old one nearby was an uphill battle.

"Alright, everyone off the North Pole!" Sheptilah stuck her arm through and pulled Shadow to the beach. Thunderbolt gratefully followed afterward. No more drowning in soft, powdery snow for the two little Mobians. Cold air blasted Sonic in the face but it felt nice.

"All this time you could make portals?" Akhlut was frustrated. He wandered in ice caves for hours only to find out all this time she could teleport?

"Yes but it isn't as easy as it looks. There's all kinds of nonsense involved in getting one open. You really did need to rescue us." The woman shrugged innocently.

"But my submarine!" Eggman whined.

"You're welcome to drive the ten hours to get back to your lair by yourself." Shadow huffed.

Without a moment’s thought Eggman stepped through the portal with his robots following suit. Sheptilah waved goodbye to Tundra and Akhlut and closed the portal. Thunderbolt, Eggman and
Shadow all peeled off their winter boots and coats. The weather was sunny and mild, a very welcome change from the cold, dark north.

"Yay, the Overlanders are back." Tails said sarcastically. "What the heck are you wearing, Sheptilah?" He walked up to Sonic and stood beside him. Amy, Sticks and Knuckles approached them soon after.

She looked down at herself and realized she was still in her Egg Boss uniform, sans the tiara which was lost in the watery scuffle.

"I would like to introduce you to this island's Egg Boss." Eggman broadly gestured toward the woman, smiling menacingly.

"I told you she couldn't be trusted!" Sticks picked up a small rock and chucked it at Sheptilah.

The witch yelped and just barely moved out of the way in time. The badger snarled and sprinted at the woman on all fours. Sheptilah turned and booked it, wishing she pulled off her boots before doing this.

"Tell them the truth, Eggman!" The witch shouted.

"That is the truth!" He responded.

Shadow was too tired to interfere and knew that Sticks couldn't do too much damage to the Overlander.

"Get back here!" The badger continued to give chase. Sheptilah initially made her way toward the ocean but stopped at the shoreline when she remembered the witch-eaters and turned. She fled to the nearest coconut tree and shuffled her way up to the top.

"Sticks!" Amy scolded her.

"She's not really an Egg Boss," Ivo admitted, "I just wanted the other Egg Bosses to think she is."

The coconut tree was at least fifty feet tall and Sheptilah was all the way at the top. The witch pulled off a snow boot and threw it at the badger, purposefully missing her. Sticks got halfway up the tree before she heard that the woman wasn't really a Boss.
"So she's a spy?" Sticks narrowed her eyes at Eggman.

"A spy? No I am just manipulating them into helping me stop the threat. I don't trust GUN alone to help."

"Hm," Sticks thought for a moment, "I can respect anyone who undermines government entities; especially two at once." She jumped down from the tree and made her way back to the group.

"Hey, Shads." Sonic chuckled. "So why are you hanging out with Eggman?"

"GUN business." The black hedgehog said curtly.

"Hmph." Sonic wanted more details than that. Sheptilah also made her way down the tree, straightened her coat and rejoined the group. She opened a portal so Shadow could return to the GUN fortress. He gratefully stepped through and bid her goodbye. She closed the portal and then turned to the Mobians.

"We have to stay out of the water." Her face was grim.

"You don't have to tell me twice." The blue hedgehog dug his toe into the sand.

"We were attacked by a massive beast up at the pole. It tried to kill all of us by trapping us under the ice. I think it followed us in the water up there." She let her hair out of the ponytail.

"Do you have a sample of the monster?" Tails approached the witch. "I can do a search for organisms like it."

Sheptilah shook her head. "Sorry, Tails. There was nothing to collect. It vanished as quickly as it arrived. It had to be at least sixty of them stuck together as one. Shadow was the one who managed to blow it apart with Chaos energy."

"We need the Chaos Emeralds. GUN has two of them, the other five are still out there." Eggman
scratched his chin.

"What good would that do? We'd have to find all of the beasts, right?" Thunderbolt's tail twitched. "Or make them gather in one place so that the effort to collect all of them isn't wasted since they just scatter again after use."

The sound of the ocean lapping against the shoreline felt louder and harsher to all of them. "Come into my shack; we'll discuss it there." Sonic turned to go back into his house.

"Wait," Sheptilah hesitated, "We need to rest first. We'll come back later."

"Are you sure?" Amy tilted her head.

"She's right, we haven't slept in over a day." Shadow huffed.

"We should also have Shadow and Rouge here when we discuss it. We'll come back tonight." She opened one last portal to the lair after picking up her cloak. Thunderbolt, Eggman and his robots stepped through after Sheptilah. The portal zipped shut.

Sonic looked and saw some young children playing in the sand near the water with their mother.

*It's always something.*
Fall Into You

The ziggurat was a lush and green paradise. Terraced farms were ripe with fruits and vegetables. Cold, blue water flowed from the top all the way down the sides, cascading over smooth white stone and disappearing into the base of the building.

A soft zephyr blew through Sheptilah's hair. She sat cross-legged at the very top, looking out at the glittering desert vista warbling in the heat.

There was no noise, not even from the running water.

The sky was devoid of clouds and although it was bright there was no visible sun.

She sighed quietly and just stared unblinking into the distance.

"Sheptilah?" Eggman's familiar voice whispered behind her.

"Ugh," she looked over her shoulder at him. "I was hoping you wouldn't be able to dreamwalk."

"What is this?" He tried to step forward but his legs felt cemented in place.

"We're both asleep and you are in my dream." She turned back to the empty desert, "Congratulations on your first astral projection."

"What?" Eggman wasn't sure if it was his own dream or not.

"Our bond."

"What… about it?"

"It's grown strong enough in these last few weeks that now you are able to dream walk. You're in
my brain." She stood and turned to him. She was dressed in a long, black cotton sarong tied at the breast. The fabric had golden thread embroidered in a filigree pattern at the hems. "Watch your step."

"I don't want to be here." He looked around uncomfortably. It was hard for his vision to focus on any one detail. With a wave of her arm, Sheptilah made everything disappear. They were now standing in total blackness.

*Wake up, Ivo. You shouldn't be here.* Her voice whispered.

Eggman opened his eyes and saw he was in his bed. He remembered everything he saw clearly and lucidly.

He sat up and looked at the time on his digital clock: he'd been asleep for three hours. It was only a nap but it felt like he was blacked out for days.

Sheptilah was standing over him with her arms crossed and eyebrows furrowed. At some point she switched out of her uniform back into her old top and sarong. Eggman opened his mouth to say something but she waved her hand and pointed to Thunderbolt, curled up at the foot of the bed. She had initially fallen asleep on the sofa with Sheptilah but wormed her way into his room.

She motioned for Eggman to follow her but to stay quiet. He hesitated at first but with a nod followed her out of the room. She was very hungry and made her way to the kitchen. Sheptilah pawed through the refrigerator and took out a whole head of lettuce; there wasn't much else in there that wasn't meat.

"Are you… angry?" Eggman spoke quietly.

"No," she nodded toward the door, "Follow me." She took him to the pool in the lowest level of his lair. The humidity and the smell of chlorine became stronger as they descended the stairwell.

"I have an elevator." He reminded her.

"I have a phobia." She responded. The pool room was huge and well-lit for an area without windows. There were many beach chairs despite the fact that Eggman never threw any pool parties. Huge fake palm trees towered over them. Upon closer inspection the coconuts were actually
"Why'd you bring me down here?"

"Chinchillas don't like water and I don't want Thunderbolt bothering us." She peeled a leaf off the lettuce and munched on it. "I gotta teach you how to ground yourself so you don't kill us both when dreamwalking."

"Is that like astral projection?" He stroked his mustache between his fingers. Sheptilah made herself comfortable and stretched out on one of the lounge chairs.

"Yes, but we're only in each other's brains. That's how I knew to come down here. I learned you had a pool in that brief time you spent on my plane." She beckoned for him to sit next to her. He did so after unzipping his shirt a bit.

"I don't want you in my head." Ivo adjusted his glasses.

"And I don't want you in mine," she munched on more leaves, "But that's not an option anymore."

The chewing noises were getting on his nerves. "You're never going to get to a healthy weight if you eat like that. Carrots and lettuce? I think you're so malnourished your stone is the only thing keeping you alive."

"I'm used to not eating much." She shrugged nonchalantly.

"You're a queen. Why are you used to starvation?"

"It's important your people eat before you do," she pointed at him, "But you probably wouldn't know that seeing as how most of your people are golems."

"As long as we're forced to be together you must take care of yourself."

"It's cute how your soft side peeks out from that cruel exterior. I saw how you put your arm over us
when we crashed; and now you're yelling at me about my health."

"What? That's a reflex." He crossed his arms and stuck his nose in the air.

"I saw some of what the ziggurat showed you, that red haired woman and two little girls? I guess it was tapping into your greatest desires in order to keep you placated. It was afraid of your mental prowess. It tried to take us all down separately but even that didn't work. I saw you defeated the specter right away." Tilly smirked. "You have a thing for redheads?"

"What on Mobius does this have to do with the astral projection?" He had a slight embarrassed blush on his cheeks.

"I'm getting to that." She rolled to her side facing him and continued to eat bits of lettuce. "You're incredibly intelligent and devious but there is a tender side. You're softboiled. I'll teach you how to ground yourself so that you don't run the risk of having your memories warped or worse: people seeing things you don't want them to. The world can never know about how many times you've been downright gentle and caring. That would ruin your image."

Softboiled?

"It's easy, too. Close your eyes. First you imagine a pinpoint of light above your head and four at your feet and lines of light connecting them in the shape of a pyramid around your body. Now just imagine a box. Place all the specific memories you don't want getting seen into the box and lock it."

"That's it?" He rubbed his nose, "Fine." He visualized it exactly the way she asked him to. In the box he placed passwords, Lucinda and finally the memory of his grandfather's murder that was broadcasted to the world. He mentally placed a steel padlock on this memory box and opened his eyes.

"You should ground yourself from now on before you go to sleep. Just imagine the pyramid and I won't be able to cross into your plane anymore, or you mine. This also blocks the memory sharing we experienced earlier when I headbutted you."

"This sounds too easy." He peered at her casually eating.

She shrugged. "Sometimes magic is absolutely mundane."
"Can I astral project anywhere?" He was curious if he could infiltrate the minds of his enemies while they slept.

"You? No. Just to me and maybe Shadow."

There it is. "I'm sure he has lots of secrets he wants to keep locked away." Eggman paused.

"What?" Tilly tilted her head.

"Keep this between us, Sheptilah." He rolled to his side to face her.

"Of course." She raised an eyebrow.

"Shadow means a lot to me. He's the only family I have left on this planet besides my estranged nephew and niece. Everyone else is dead."

Sheptilah frowned.

"He was the life's work for my grandfather and as you know he died for Shadow; and so did my cousin. If anything happened to that hedgehog I don't think I could cope with it."

"You love him."

Eggman hesitated for a moment. "I don't love a lot of people but Shadow is one of them and I hate that he's your familiar. In the long run I don't care what happens to me. I'm getting old and tired but Shadow? Shadow has suffered more than his fair share."

"I would give my life for my familiar." She sounded angry, "You don't have faith in me?"

"You said you know you will be dead when this is all over. You said that you were very, very sure of that fact. You would be just like your mothers died sealing off the monsters."
"Yes."

"And their familiars died along with them, didn't they?"

Sheptilah inhaled sharply and cast her eyes down at the tile floor.

"So they did." His voice was grave. He turned to look at the pool's still water.

"I won't let you or Shadow die, Ivo."

"Don't make promises you cannot keep."

Shadow was handling the Chaos Emerald the team retrieved from the ziggurat. The warm power of the stone flowed from his hands to his body, energizing him. He held it close to his chest and silently thanked it for sharing its power with him.

He replaced the emerald in its protective case and went back up to his dorm. On his bed were two small boxes labeled with his name and the other simply said 'witch'.

Rouge tapped her knuckle on the door to get his attention. "Hey, Shadow."

"Hi, Rouge." He scratched his ear. "What do you want?"

"I read your report on the great north. I also heard that Cabbot chewed you out for being so reckless." Rouge smiled gently.

"Ah yes, I believe his exact words were 'that witch is rubbing off on you.'" Shadow opened the box with his name on it. It contained a smartphone. He rolled his eyes at the bat.
"Gramps, you gotta start carrying a phone. I've preloaded everyone's numbers into it." She pulled her phone out from a hidden pocket in her jumpsuit and waved it.

He narrowed his eyes at her and then sighed with defeat. "Fine, but don't send me a bunch of stupid texts when I'm trying to sleep."

"No promises!" She winked. "I do think we should keep Tilly here at GUN from now on. I don't like the idea of her playing triple agent with Eggman."

"She's nuts, that's all I'm gonna say." Shadow tossed his new phone on the bed and went to his ruined bag sitting on the floor. "I agree with you, though. We should go collect her."

Sheptilah sat at the edge of the pool with her legs in the water. The cold tile felt nice on her bare thighs. Eggman changed into his swim trunks before coming back and sat at the edge with her.

"Do you have to put your face on everything?" She nodded her head toward the center of the pool, a mosaic with his logo smiling menacingly at them.

"Because I have a very marketable face." He said. He called for his robot lackeys to bring them some dinner. "So when I was on your dream plane was that what the ziggurat looked like back in the day?"

"Yes, except it wasn't empty. It's dangerous to dream lucidly and have people there that are dead." She put her hair behind her ear with a finger.

"Why's that?" He noticed her teeth were slightly crooked.

"Because you'll never want to leave. You can do basically anything on that plane and some people become obsessed with it. Sometimes they even get seduced by the shadow people or other spirits visiting the plane. You shouldn't worry about it, though. I won't be lazy about my psychic grounding anymore." She sniffed.
"What was your kingdom like?" He leaned in.

"I spent most of my time with Hebat and playing the harp. They didn't like me much so I didn't go out much. Occasionally I had a suitor try to marry me but I was more concerned with the witch-eaters than anything else. That and I was seeing a succubus named Fegato."

Sheptilah frowned. "She's probably dead by now. They live extraordinarily long lives but… not that long."

"Marrying a regular person after being with a succubus would be a tough act to follow." He wiggled his eyebrows knowingly. She lightly shoved him for teasing.

"It wasn't that! So rude." She said between laughs.

Orbot and Cubot came in with lemonade and some hearty sandwiches. The two Overlanders ate and generally enjoyed each other's company for once.

"I have to say it's pretty nice having another Overlander around." Eggman wolfed down his sandwich.

"How so?" She ate her sandwich a little more daintily. Peanut butter and jelly on toast deserved to be treated politely.

"The furries get annoying, honestly. Even my best underlings, Thunderbolt doesn't understand personal space." He guzzled down his drink.

"She's in love with you, you know." Sheptilah finished off the rest of her sandwich.

"I know. I'm not stupid. I worry that if I outright reject her she may come down on me with the wrath of the heavens itself." He would never admit it to anyone else but he was a little afraid of the chinchilla.
"I think it's just a girlish crush," Tilly giggled, "You know, like having a crush on your teacher? Something like that."

"She's the size of a basketball! What does she think she'll get out of a relationship?"

"I asked her the same thing and she said the thought never crossed her mind." She said with a shrug. "Before I forget I'd like to share a memory with you."

Eggman wasn't really paying attention to Sheptilah; he was lost in thought about that damned yellow puffball. He jumped when he felt something touch his hand: Tilly had laid her palm on top of his fingers.

"What? Oh, a memory? Of what?" His face flushed slightly when he turned to her and saw her face was inches from his.

"You." She gently pressed her forehead to his.

Eggman found himself seeing things from Sheptilah's perspective. Peering at the man from inside the crystal while half-awake and feeling absolute guilt over his bleeding hand. Then he felt overwhelming fear in the strange, new future. He saw himself gingerly carry the witch into his home and felt her relief. She believed she was safe.

Suddenly they were in his dining room with the candles burning faintly. Sadness and panic is what he felt. He saw himself remove his glasses to reveal his mutant eyes. Her reaction was one of horror and intrigue.

They were beautiful, Sheptilah thought. Exotic and spooky but… beautiful. She was incredibly grateful he saved Shadow at one point and he experienced that emotion as a warm feeling starting in his heart and spreading through his chest.

Then undiluted terror when he grabbed her throat. Boiling rage and primal fear when he slammed her into the ground. The feeling of fighting back tears of regret, guilt and hatred as she dug her claws into his stomach.

She pulled away from him so he could process all he saw.

"Why did you want me to see this?" He scooted back from her.
"Because it's important you know how I see and feel about you as being my partner. We're bonded. Let's make more positive memories of each other and less negative ones. Let's be friends." She held out her hand and waited for him to take it.

"You don't want to be my friend." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Sheptilah nodded curtly but still held her hand out.

"Allies, then?"

He took her hand and firmly shook it. "Allies." She smirked and jumped into the pool pulling him in with her.
Eggman popped his head above the water and yelped. The cold was a shock to his system but he quickly adjusted.

"Had you agreed to be my friend I never would've pulled you in!" The woman was spitting hair out from her mouth between laughs. Unfortunately, when submerged, her hair became a deadly net and stuck to her face.

"You're in trouble now!" He bellowed. He picked her up and held her over his head.

"Wait!" She yelped as he threw her into the deep end with little effort.

She broke through the surface and took several deep breaths. The pressure of the water on her chest felt comfortable; like a tight hug.

"Why does the water smell like it does?" She flipped her hair out of her face.

"Chlorine. Keeps the water clean so it doesn't get gross." He took off his glasses and set them on the tile.

"It kind of stings." She bobbed her hair with a glamour but that didn't stop it from sticking to her face. "So what's up with what you're wearing?"

Eggman is a conservative person. His swimsuit was an Edwardian style one piece with red and white horizontal stripes. He looked like a mustachioed peppermint candy that was shy about its arms and thighs.

Eggman swam over and circled her like a shark. "Sunburn raises your risk of cancer and I am very fair-skinned."

"I can't burn, but I can tan a little browner." Tilly shrugged. "We usually swam nude." She stated it so matter-of-factly.
"I'm surprised you can swim at all." He eyed her.

"Why?" She turned to keep eye contact.

"You're from the desert." He said.

"Oh," she chuckled, "We had pools, too. I think I mentioned it back at the ziggurat... that one was dried up and looked like a big hole in the floor."

"So much happened back there it's hard to keep the details straight, honestly."

"I assure you I'm not as ignorant as you think I am." She stuck her nose in the air.

A pause, and then: "Is that what you really want, though? A family?"

"Hm..." He hesitated. "No, I don't want a family." Eggman shrugged. "The last thing I need are sticky fingers all over my work."

"Family just gets taken from you." She frowned. "The moral of the story is don't love anyone. Don't care about anything! Exist in the void! Nothing hurts in the void!" She cackled.

"Except Shadow." Ivo waved a finger.

"All hail Shadow!" Sheptilah pumped her fist in the air. "King of the Nannae!"

"King? What do you mean king?" Eggman furrowed his eyebrows.

"Shadow is functionally my brother and because I'm queen that makes him royalty. Rulers of nothing; but you understand how inheritance works, yes?"

"If Shadow is king... what does that make me?" He leaned in expectantly.
"Hmm," she grinned, "The court jester."

Eggman pouted. "I suppose I deserve that."

She looked down at her hands and looked like she was counting something off on her fingers. "King, prince…" she stuck out her tongue, "You're a duke. I think that's the order in which it goes."

"Ooh, a duke," he snickered, "Don't I feel fancy?" He wiggled his shoulders.

Sheptilah grinned mischievously. "Who was that other redhead from the ziggurat? The one with the big breasts?" She shook her chest a little for emphasis.

"Hah! That was Katella!" He pulled on his mustache. "She was something else."

Sheptilah dove under the water and swam to the shallow end of the pool. The weightless feeling was nice.

"She was in love with me but she was really violent. I had no peace whenever she was on Mobius." He followed her to the shallow end.

"You didn't even like her?"

"No," he rolled his shoulder, "I'm pretty sure I still have scars from the last time I saw her."

"Maybe if she comes back to Mobius I'll make her my wife. Healing powers, you see."

"You can have her!" He laughed. "You really are suicidal; she collected rare species. You, by definition of being the last of your kind, would be something she would keep in a cage."

Tilly blushed a bit. "So do you think I have a chance with Katella?" She stuck out her tongue.
With a broad motion of his arm Eggman splashed her. "Don't invoke her, you reckless woman!"

Tilly spit out water and coughed. "I was only kidding! She sounds awful."

"You are reckless and it's gonna get us both killed."

Sheptilah rolled her eyes and made her way to the ladder. "I have no interest in someone who would try to pry the stone off my chest." She tentatively took hold of the metal ladder banister and was relieved to learn it didn't hurt her hands.

"Aluminum," as if Eggman could read her mind, "That's why it's not hurting you."

"Au-rumin-um…" She tried to pronounce the word, "I like it! It's shiny." She ascended the ladder and wrung the water out of her skirt.

"Getting out already?" He frowned.

"Yeah. I'm still a little tired." She took off the glamour and dispelled the water still on her.

He followed after her. He grabbed a towel from the nearby rack and dried himself off. "I'm glad I changed into my swimsuit."

"What about your gauntlet?"

"Ah, this thing is waterproof for the most part. It's fine."

"Speak for yourself!" MARI complained.

"MARI!" Eggman yelped. "I told you to go away!"
"You almost died because you didn't listen to me! However, I have been listening to you." She displayed an ear emoji. "I've identified a few words in the woman's language. If I listen long enough I can put together a dictionary for you."

"You're a glorified boombox." He furrowed his brows.

"I was made to analyze sound." MARI displayed a megaphone emoji. "I added it to the dossier you started a week ago."

"Huh." He said. He accidentally made a program that's actually *useful.*

"I'm going to go take a shower," Sheptilah waved to him, "Have fun yelling at your bracelet!" He looked up from his gauntlet at the shadow of the woman who had just left the room.

"Hey, boss?" MARI showed a question mark emoji on the gauntlet.

"Yes? What is it?" Eggman typed away at his computer in his office. He was updating many of his files and preparing for what was sure to be an uncomfortable trip to Sonic's shack.

"I found something." Her melodic voice chirped. "When you talk about a bond, she uses the word *pādu*. It's Akkadian for 'to take prisoner'. She considers herself your prisoner."

"Akkadian?" He raised an eyebrow but did not stop typing.

"Akkadian is one of the oldest languages we know of. Stems from ancient Babylon and the fertile crescent. Her language is a mishmash of everything."

"That makes sense. She did explicitly say her culture was extremely mixed."

"Another troubling thing is she sometimes refers to herself as *wardum*, Sumerian for slave. Next time you talk to her ask about Gilgamesh. Also please refer to her as *Nin* Sheptilah so I may gauge her reaction."
"What is nin?"

"It means 'queen'. If you are also curious you can have her read ancient cuneiform writing. I can analyze the text and compare it to what she says and how she says it. This way I can extrapolate what words are borrowed from what language and which are purely Nannaeic, if there even was such a language."

Eggman let a small smile form at the corner of his mouth. "MARI, you are proving to be very useful. Nosy, but useful."

Eggman had sent Thunderbolt home and went to Sonic's house with Sheptilah. Shadow and Rouge arrived later having looked for the two Overlanders at the lair only to be directed to the shack on the island.

Over extra cheesy pizza the group discussed their options. Sticks was outside sitting under the window listening in.

Sheptilah cleared off the coffee table and put the royal grimoire on top. She thumbed through the pages with one hand and with the other enjoyed the savory mess that is pizza.

"This is disgusting," she said with her mouth full, "But delicious. So far this is the best thing in this century."

"Why isn't anything bookmarked in this mess?" Shadow was growing impatient. Amy looked at the book with great wonder and desire.

"Mm," Tilly finished off her slice, "Okay I found something." She licked her fingertips clean and tapped the page. "Somebody write this down." She sighed.

"I got it." No less than four voices spoke in unison. Tails with his laptop, Amy with her notebook, Eggman with his gauntlet and finally Rouge with her phone.

"A giant round pearl, roughly the size of my head. Three ingots of pure silver-"
"Are you making a magical scepter or one Hell of a piece of jewelry?" Eggman frowned.

"Zzt zzt!" She flapped her hand to hush him. "Five golden power rings. A frozen heart. A golden apple, mercury, witch blood, a nazar, salt, sulfur, five mermaid tears, mummia, Yggdrasil dew, Hellfire… and lastly iron cauldron large enough to cook an adult in but not for that purpose." Sheptilah chuckled.

"Oh, Tiamat definitively wrote this; she had a dark sense of humor."

"What the heck are most of those things?" Sonic scratched his spikes in thought.

"Ugh, it's a MacGuffin quest." Eggman leaned back on the sofa and sighed heavily. "This is gonna take forever."

"I actually know all of that is… and where most of it is." Amy spoke up. The group looked to her pleadingly.

"A Nazar is a little blue charm that looks like an eye. Mermaid tears is sea glass, mummia is mummy dust and a frozen heart is a piece of permafrost. Yggdrasil is the tree of life, Hellfire is an eternal flame. The rest is obvious." She shrugged. She knew all of this offhand because she loved the supernatural.

Sheptilah smiled at her. "Ah, I'm not the only witch here I see." Amy blushed and looked away, biting her lip.

"Where are we going to find a pearl that massive? Or a giant cauldron?" Rouge's wings twitched.

"There's the family cauldron in the ziggurat. It's all the way in the cistern which takes up the whole base of the building." The witch nodded.

"It's probably rusted away to nothing." Tails frowned.
"It's magic; it's probably still down there." Sheptilah was already planning her next excursion back to her old house.

"Yggdrasil is real?" The black hedgehog was stunned. "It's not just a fairy tale?"

"Uh, no," Tilly said, "It's very real."

"I know where we can get the giant pearl." Eggman sat up with a start. "The Aquarium Park."

"I remember that place," Sonic sounded cocky, "I remember it being a piece of cake. Isn't it a rusted-out junkyard now, though?"

Eggman's face turned up with anger.

"What happens if we can't make the the staff in time? Or what happens if the staff fails? We gotta have a plan B." The blonde fox spoke up.

"We need all seven of the Chaos Emeralds. The beasts are extremely weak to the energy. I can go super and fight it." Shadow crossed his arms.

"Hmm," Sheptilah puffed out her chest, "You may not need to do that."

"What do you mean?" The black hedgehog side-eyed her.

"My gem." She pointed to it. "When broken it unleashes a ton of power vaporizing everything in the area for miles. All I have to do is break it, if push comes to shove." She spoke so calmly about turning herself into a suicide bomber.

"All that power in something the size of a coaster?" The blue hedgehog raised an eyebrow. Sheptilah nodded sagely.

"It won't come to that," Rouge said, "We've saved the world a million times without someone needing to turn themselves into a bomb to do so. Besides, what the Hell would that do to Shadow?"
Rouge realized her mistake the second the words slipped past her lips. Alas, you cannot unring a bell.

"Why would her death affect him?" Amy reached for another slice of pizza.

"He is my familiar. My death would hurt him a lot, metaphysically speaking."

"Okay, wait." Sonic was very confused. He held his hands up on either side of his face. "He's your familiar? Is this a sick joke?"

"It's true," Shadow turned away and held out his hand, "I've already been able to do some magic." He imagined the figure of a little white bird sitting in his palm and it appeared.

"Oh, wow," Sonic leaned in, "So we absolutely cannot have her die; not that we would have anyway."

Shadow closed his fist and the bird vanished into vapor.

The cogs in Eggman's head were turning. Perhaps it was time to rebuild the Eclipse Cannon but build it better and more precise. He kept this idea to himself and he would work on it in secret. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the gauntlet showed a message from MARI.

Oracle Stone: lapis oraculi mentor stone / She is using Latin for some of her sentence structures and Akkadian for others.

Eggman made a mental note of that. A mentor stone? This suggested some level of self-awareness of the object.

"What about the ocean? If they're in the water then they can attack us from anywhere. So much of the ocean is unexplored, too." Tails was worried and nervously adjusted his goggles.

"We don't know that they're only in the water," the witch shrugged, "That's the problem."
Sheptilah shut the book. "Team Sonic: you should keep protecting the island."

"Team Eggman, that's you and I," she said to Ivo, "We'll get to work on getting everything I need to make the staff. Team Dark, you get to keep doing what you're doing at GUN The other Egg Bosses have been taken off their projects to monitor for witch-eater activity."

"Team Eggman?" Ivo was delighted the team was named after him and let out a grin.

"Don't push your luck." The witch rolled her eyes.

"I want to be on your team." Amy spoke up. She approached the witch, pushing pink hair behind her ear. "I want to help with the magical stuff."

Sheptilah looked into those innocent green eyes and frowned. "It's dangerous."

"I know." She put on a determined expression. "I can handle myself."

Tilly sighed. "Alright. If things get too dangerous I'm warping you home."

"Yes!" She jumped with joy.

"We should head back to GUN," Shadow gripped Tilly's shoulder, "There's still a lot you need to do. You need to be trained for combat."
"I understand; but I would like to stay one more night. I have unfinished business here first. I'll come by the fortress in the morning." Tilly smiled.

Shadow nodded with understanding. "Alright."

"I have something for you." Rouge dug in her purse for the little white box and handed it to Sheptilah.

"Witch," she read the writing, "I guess nobody can spell my name?" She chuckled.

"Not by a long shot." Rouge scrunched up her nose cutely. "Since you're staying here, Eggman can show you how to use the phone. I preloaded my personal number and Shadow's in it."

Sonic's eyes lit up. "Ooh, can I have your number too, Shadow?" He was already planning to spam the Hell out of him whenever he acted extra rude.

"No. This is GUN business." He was very serious-looking.

Sonic pouted. "Fine."

Rouge winked at Sonic. The blue hedgehog let a sly smile draw up on his face and he turned away, "I can respect that." He was going to get that number some way, somehow.

Thunder rumbled outside in the distance. Tails' fur stood on end and he whimpered. The poor thing was terrified of lightning.

"Are you afraid of the thunder?" Tilly asked sincerely.

"Y-yes," the fox swallowed, "The sudden loud noises and danger of lightning bother me."
Sheptilah felt severe guilt over involving these children in her troubles. How are they supposed to save the planet if they're just kids? Sure, they say they've done it before but it isn't something a child should have to do.

"I don't like it, either. We didn't get a lot of rain in the desert but when we did it was a bad omen. Hypocritical superstition since we use rainbows as our war emblem." She shrugged.

"She doesn't like tight spaces, either. Don't put Tilly in an elevator, she may kill everyone trying to get out." Eggman said. The group giggled and Sheptilah turned her nose upwards.

"Being struck by lightning is common when you're flying in a storm. I won't fly out in the rain, either." Rouge went up to Tails and smoothed down his fringe with her hand. He brushed her hand away.

The rain began to beat against the shack with fervor. Without a door or window panes the shack sometimes flooded but the wide brim of the straw roof usually protected it.

"Who designed this house? You're too close to the sea. What about the tides? A tsunami?" Tilly attempted to change the subject.

"I can outrun a tsunami!" Sonic crossed his arms. "Besides, I built this place and it's not finished."

"Huh," she paused, "Well that answers my question."

Back at the lair Eggman and Tilly were sipping hot cups of mint tea over the grimoire spread out on the coffee table. Eggman sat on the sofa while she sat cross-legged on the floor. The warm drink made her feel better. When she wasn't sipping it she let it float in the air next to her.

"Applying a living soul to a metal object seems to be almost impossible; at least if it's iron." The grimoire page was written in hieroglyphics and featured many intricate alchemic diagrams.

"The Kemetics were geniuses when it came to metallurgy. In Chu Nan they were all about healing. Most others wanted to turn garbage into gold. I think what you want to do with Metal Sonic is a combination of metallurgy and necromancy." Sheptilah bit her thumbnail in thought.
"I don't necessarily want to kill someone to get it done." Eggman was thumbing through a gossip magazine he had lying about.

"You don't kill for necromancy; you bring them back."

"Let's not mess with the dead, alright? Can't you just make him into a real boy like Pinocchio?"

"I'm afraid I don't get the reference." She chewed her nail down to the quick but it regrew instantly.

"A toy maker wished for the puppet he made to become a real boy and a blue fairy obliged but the puppet had to go through trials to earn total humanity."

"For the last time I'm not a fairy." She scoffed.

"I didn't say you were, Sheptilah." Eggman raised an eyebrow.

She exhaled slowly. "At any rate I don't think I'm gonna be able to do what you want with Metal. Sorry about that."

"It figures." He turned the page. He wasn't really reading the magazine. He was only looking at the pictures.

"Shadow asked me about talking to the dead the other day when I was in the hospital. Ever since I learned about Maria it's bothered me that he asked."

"You can't let him do that."

"I won't." She looked up at him with determined eyes. "My job is to protect him."

"That reminds me- you gotta get your act together. I… we… cannot have your suicidal butt get killed and ruin it for everyone."
She sat up straight and gasped softly. She looked around the room wide-eyed and then to Eggman.

"I'm.. I'm cured!" She said dramatically. "Oh, Ivo you've fixed everything."

She was rewarded with a pillow to the face. She grabbed hold of the pillow and squeezed it in her arms, giggling.

"I'm serious!" Eggman pouted.

"I know you are! I will live, for better or for worse." She stuck out her tongue. She finished off her tea and put the empty cup on the floor.

Eggman sighed heavily. He was too old for this nonsense.

"Do you think it's stopped raining? I wanted to go out and fly around."

"What? Like, on a broomstick?"

"No! On a rock! Why would I fly on a broom?" She shook her head with disbelief.

He imagined her struggling to stand on a pebble as she levitated. This he had to see. They went outside to check the weather. It had in fact cleared up. Only a few small clouds remained, hiding the waning moonlight.

"Awesome!" Sheptilah bounced on the balls of her feet. "I love flying." She walked around the outcrop and found a loose chunk of volcanic rock and, with magic, chiseled it into a surfboard-like shape.

She laid it on the ground and stepped on it. She took a stance like a skateboarder with her right foot forward. Magic flowed through the soles of her feet into the stone and it floated several inches off the ground.
"Huh. I imagined a boulder." He scratched his chin. "Where are you gonna fly to, anyway? Stay away from the water."

"We're going to survey the island." She grinned mischievously.

"We?"

She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him onto the stone and took off. Eggman let out a high pitched squeal and grabbed onto her waist. He held on for dear life fearing she would let him fall.

"Shadow doesn't like flying, either! It must run in the family!" She laughed into the wind.

"I like flying when I'm the pilot!"

"You're squeezing too hard! I can't breathe!" She slowed their speed. They were at least one hundred feet off the ground, safely floating above the shoreline.

"Sorry." He let his grip loosen. "What are you looking for?"

"I'll know it when I see it." She didn't find anything suspicious. She found it marvelous that the small island was made up of many different biomes. A desert, a tropical jungle, a forest, mountains and snow. This island is a great resource for an apothecary, she mused to herself.

"I think I'll make myself a house here. It'll take a while to synthesize the staff and for you all to gather the Emeralds right? So I'll make my own place. Maybe I'll even open an apothecary."

"Why can't you just stay in the tower?" Where I can keep a close eye on you, he thought.

"It's iron. Makes my brain feel like it's vibrating being surrounded by so much of it." It only took about an hour to make it around the island. Eggman finally relaxed and kept his hands on her shoulders for stability.

"Nowadays witches fly on broomsticks, vacuum cleaners or in mortar and pestles. Well, at least
"Baba Yaga does for that last one."

"Baba Yaga?"

"Baba Yaga is an old white-haired woman with a face like gnarled bark. She's got iron teeth and lives in a hut that walks on chicken legs."

"She sounds wonderful!"

"The roof of her hut is covered in human skulls and the fence around her domain is made of human bones." Eggman said matter-of-factly.

"I rescind what I said just now."

"According to my grandmother." he switched to a very heavy Russian accent. "Ivo, If you misbehave Baba Yaga will come to you and steal you away in the night! She eats children!"

Sheptilah laughed. "That's ridiculous! Children taste awful."

A moment of silence passed. She landed softly back at the lair in the garden and laid on the cold, damp grass. Eggman flopped down unceremoniously, glad to be back on solid ground.

"How do I use this thing?" She pulled the phone from out of her headspace. Eggman took it and turned it on.

"It's really easy." He swiped across the screen with his thumb to unlock it. "You just lightly tap the glass."

"This is so weird," she was delighted that it lit up on its own, "And it's so light, too."

"It's not waterproof or anything like that so be careful with this thing." He didn't mind teaching someone how to use technology. In fact, he liked it; but it was frustrating to teach someone from the Bronze Age the basics.
"So you've captured electricity and in turn trained it to display certain things on glass with metal backing." She smiled so wide her nose was scrunched up.

"You make it sound like intense dark magic." He chuckled. "It's just basic technology."

"But it's so cool! You know I've never really seen what my own face looks like? I get trapped in reflections so I never kept anything big enough to work as a mirror around. Now I can."

The black screen of the phone in sleep mode made it so she could see her face faintly but not trigger scrying.

"You don't know what you look like? You've never even had a portrait done?" He shook his head.

"Our painting style was more of an expressionist look than a realistic one." She pouted. "I know my eyes are purple!"

"Here." He took the phone and held it up to her face. "Say cheese."

"What?" Then a snap! A small flash of light came from the phone. Sheptilah jumped. "What was that?"

"The flash," he handed the phone to her, "Look."

She held the phone with one hand and lightly touched her cheek with the other. "That's so strange… and I'm really cute." She snickered. "That's so cool. For the first time since I was awakened I really like the future. I'm going to take photos of everything!"

"The phone can only hold so much memory." He warned.

"What makes it forgetful?" She raised an eyebrow.
"N-no, it's not that, it's that it can only store so much data."

She scooted up next to him and asked to take a picture of them together.

"Alright, I always oblige my fans."

"Your fan?" She turned to him and looked at him with a somewhat disgusted expression. He had a smug, toothy grin across his face when he took the picture.

"Hmph! You wanted me to make a weird face."

"Oh, yes."

"First you blow up the moon and then you make me look weird. I should turn you into a toad. A little toad with an impressive mustache." She secretly loved the picture, though. Had she had this technology back in her time it would be filled with her mothers and Hebat.

"You're perkier than usual." He leaned forward. "You haven't threatened me like that in days."

She inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, "It's the moonlight. It feels nice." She looked at his shoulder and then his hand. She extended her pinky in order to test the waters. Slowly her ring and middle fingers followed. She almost was close enough to hold his hand.

"Doctor Eggman?" a familiar voice called from around the corner. It was Dave with the last Hanukkah gift.

"Dave?" Eggman called out.

The blue river rat heard his voice and ran to it. When he saw the witch sitting beside him he went into hero mode.

"I'll save you, Doctor Eggman!" He put the small box down and tackled the woman.
She yelped with surprise and fell back. Eggman scratched his head.

"Dave, what are you doing?" He was unphased.

"On behalf of the Lightning Bolt Society I'm getting revenge for you!" He lisped, "I heard she tried to kill you!"

"Oh, hey, you're that cute blue boy from earlier!" Sheptilah smiled.

"What? Dave, get off of her. She's the Egg Boss of this island. Besides, we cleared all that up."

Sheptilah moved her bare feet under Dave and lightly pressed the soles against his rib cage, gently lifting him off of her and setting him down on the ground.

"W-wait you're the Egg Boss? For this island?" The poor kid was so confused. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Sheptilah sat up and combed through her hair with her fingers. "We resolved our earlier fight. We're friends now. What's the Lightning Bolt Society?"

"Oh!" Dave stood up. "I founded it. We're a group of evildoers who live on this island. We hope to someday take down Team Sonic!" He took a heroic stance.

"I see," she raised an eyebrow and smirked, "Good work."

"Thank you." He bent down and picked up the box. "It's the last night of Hanukkah, Doctor. Here."

"Dave, I appreciate it but I don't celebrate. You can keep it." The Overlander tried to let him down easy.

"Oh," Dave frowned, "Well, sorry then. I'll see you around then."
"Wait," Tilly spoke, "How'd you get here from the beach?"

He turned to her and looked serious. "Don't ask questions you aren't prepared to have the answers to." Dave walked away and disappeared from the edge of the outcrop.

"I don't know how any of them make it here without swimming. I just don't ask." Eggman patted her on the shoulder.

"Furries." Was all Sheptilah could say.

"What was that unfinished business you mentioned earlier?" He was fiddling with his gauntlet.

She closed her eyes, "It's this. Just hanging out here. GUN is nice and all but they made me sleep in a prison cell. I don't like it there. Anyway, I wanted to verify that you shut down all your side projects like I asked you to."

"I haven't raided the village since you got here." He huffed. "I can't shut down everything. I still need to produce my things, refine the oil for my machines, et cetera. I have, however, stopped harassing the furries."

"Speaking of the Mobians... what is up with the injectors? Are you really going to remove them from the Egg Bosses?" She said.

"If you survive, you will force me to. If you die, you can't stop me from reneging on my word and I absolutely will not release my underlings." He decided brutal honesty was the policy to use. He needed her to live. He has plans to exploit hers and Shadow's magic to take over the planet after the witch-eaters are disposed of.

"What do they even look like? They have to be small, right?" She certainly didn't forget what she promised Shadow.

"Yes, they're tiny. I'll show you. They are one of my finest inventions."
Eggman's lair contained many workshops and even more storage rooms. Most of it appeared to be junk and old robots he planned to recycle at a later date.

He held up a tiny disc-shaped object. It looked like a little metal button. "This is it."

"And it goes behind the ear?"

"Yes, nestled slightly into the bone so that it cannot be cut free." He flipped it over and showed the bottom side of it.

"That's horrifying. How do they even come out?" She bit her nail.

"They don't." He narrowed his eyes at her.

"You have no way to even remove them?" Her upper lip was curled in a slight snarl.

"Not without them exploding, no. I never designed them to be removable. However I can invent a way to remove them safely if you were to persuade me to."

"Persuade you?" Her cheeks prickled as they reddened. What the Hell was he asking for?

"Yes. Remember earlier? Survive everything and I will be forced to do it."

"Oh." She looked at the floor. Thank the gods.

"What did you think I meant?" He crossed his arms.

"Don't be coy with me," she snapped, "Humans never change."

"What, did you think I was going to ask for intimate favors?" He chortled. "Dear God, woman. I've seen you shape-shift rows of fangs into your mouth. I'm not stupid nor am I interested."
"And you'd be smart to remember that!" She grinned. "I'm gonna kick your rear when this is all over."

"Let's go back to talking about alchemy over tea and cake. I have more questions about what you can and can't do." He gestured to the door.
Morning came. Eggman convinced Sheptilah to at least stay for breakfast before leaving.

"How did you warp away back at the North Pole?"

"Hmm?" She drank a cup of milk. "Witch orb. Sonic has one; so does Amy and Rouge. They can summon me from anywhere in the world with it."

"Do I get one?" He seemed eager.

"Uh, no." Sheptilah grinned behind her cup. "You don't need one."

"Why not? What if I need your help?" He frowned.

"The bond," she gestured like she was tugging on a rope, "Remember?"

"Bah," he waved her off, "That's not as fun. Oh, before I forget please give this to Rouge," he slid a red envelope with gold edging across the table to her.

"What is it?" Sheptilah ran her thumb over the paper. It was expensive, thick cardstock.

"A present. She'll know what it is." He grinned.

"Sure, I'll give it to her." Tilly smiled.

GUN wasted no time offering to train Sheptilah as an unofficial member of Team Dark. Although she didn't catch on quickly with hand-to-hand combat she took surprisingly well to firearms.

"Finger off the trigger until you are ready to destroy the target," Shadow instructed. He was wearing earplugs and protective glasses. The gunmetal in the vintage semi-automatic glock contained no iron, so it didn't burn Sheptilah's hands. It was an older weapon but still in pristine condition. She opted to not put earplugs in but did wear the goggles. The weight of the gun, although it was unloaded, was almost comforting. It felt stable.

Rouge, wearing the same protective gear, was standing with her back to the wall behind the two. Her sensitive ears made dealing with ongoing gunfire difficult.

The range was empty except for the trio so they could take their time with the lesson.

With her index finger not touching the trigger she instinctively cupped her free hand under the grip where the magazine would go.
"You're teacupping," Shadow sighed, "Look." He was holding a plastic orange replica of the same gun she had in her hands.

"You're going to end up smacking yourself in the face if you do that." He gestured what would happen.

"Clasp your non-dominant hand over the dominant one like this, and watch the slide."

"Does any of this really matter, Shadow? This isn't going to kill a witch-eater." Tilly sighed.

"It's good to know if you're ever in a situation in which you will need to know it; but remember: don't ever shoot at a living target you do not intend to destroy."

"Destroy…" She repeated. "Napalu…"

"Most bullets are designed to cause a massive amount of damage to whatever they strike. Many of them actually break apart when they hit something solid. The metal bits that break off is called shrapnel. That's what does the most damage long-term if you survive being hit. Guns destroy their targets." Shadow knew first hand what chaos and strife gun violence creates.

"Never shoot at something unless you know what's behind it. Never shoot at something you don't intend to destroy. Finger off the trigger." It was becoming a mantra. Sheptilah muttered these things to herself so she would remember.

"Are you ready?" Shadow switched out the plastic gun for a loaded magazine.

"I don't know." She was nervous. Shadow gestured for her to hand him the gun. She did so by placing it flat against his palm and the barrel facing away from all of them. He motioned for her to step further aside. He loaded the magazine, put a round in the chamber and aimed.

The target paper was a vague humanoid silhouette with the organs mapped out.

"Range is hot!" He shouted. "Firing three rounds."

POP! POP! POP!

He fired at the target in quick succession; each bullet landing square into the heart. The spent casings tinkled as they hit the ground.

The loud, frantic noises sent a jolt in Sheptilah's chest. "Jeez!"

"That's why we wear ear plugs." The hedgehog shrugged.

"Okay, I'm ready. I want to try now." She bounced on the soles of her feet.

"Calm down… calm down," he couldn't help but crack a slight smile, "Why are you so excited?"

"That thing shoots out metal bits at blazing speeds, what's not to be excited about?"
"Fair enough." He handed the gun to her and positioned her hands so she avoids slide bite. "Do not fire until I am standing to the side. Take your time. The recoil may be stronger than you expect it to be."

A deep inhale and slow exhale. She aimed.

"Range is hot." She said. After a few seconds she pulled back the trigger, amazed at how much pressure a user had to apply. The first shot missed the target entirely but once she got her bearings she was able to shoot the last two bullets into the same holes Shadow made earlier.

The empty casings clanged on the floor. She ejected the empty magazine and locked the slide back.

"Nice shootin', Tex!" Rouge called, "We should get you a bazooka next. Eggman is toast."

"That was... unexpected." The hedgehog accepted the gun from her. "So you can't fight hand-to-hand worth a damn but you, an ancient woman who is unfamiliar even with the concept of wearing underwear, can fire a weapon proficiently?"

Sheptilah shrugged. "The gun does all the work. You pull back the thing and it goes pow!"

Sheptilah stayed with Rouge in her dorm for the night. Tilly drew herself a piping hot bath and got in. She played with her phone hoping to learn what the symbols meant. What was intuitive for the modern user are foreign, unreadable glyphs to her.

"Rouge?" She called for the bat. "I forgot to give you something earlier."

Rouge poked her head in. "How hot is that bath you're running?" The bat could feel the heat coming off the water.

"It's still kind of cold for me..." The witch reached into the back of her head and pulled out the envelope. She held it out for the bat. Rouge took it and flipped it over.

"What's this?" She opened it. A smile formed on the bat's face. "Oh! VIP tickets to the Stratosphere Club!"

"It's from Ivo." Sheptilah went back to her phone. "I don't know what that means."

Inside the envelope was a handwritten note on a folded piece of loose leaf.

To Rouge,

I owe you a favor or two. I heard from a little hedgehog you love the Stratosphere Club. I happen to own it.
Enjoy these VIP tickets.

Doctor Eggman

"It's only the hottest nightclub in the world! Getting a hold of tickets for the VIP club is impossible" She was floating off the ground from excitement.

"What's a nightclub?" Sheptilah scrunched up her nose.

"People get together and dance! It's a fun party. I think you'd like it, but you certainly don't have the clothes for it. I had no idea Eggman owned the place. Well, the deejay is a robot. I should've known; but that place is too cool even for him." Rouge was talking quickly. "Maybe someone else designed it and he just owns it…"

She gasped softly. "We should go! I'll take you and Shadow. It'll be fun, like a Christmas party."

"What's Christmas?" Tilly pouted.

"It's a holiday. On the twenty-fifth of December people give gifts to their friends and family. It's a celebration of love and charity." Rouge grinned. "I got Shadow a sweater. It says 'Merry Grumpmas'. I saw it and I knew he'd love it."

"Oh," Tilly smiled, "Wish I knew of that a bit ago. I could've gotten something for him, too."

"Ah, don't worry about it." Rouge said, "I'll have to take you shopping for clothes. You need to wear something besides GUN scrubs or your Egg uniform."

"I don't have any money or things to barter with," the witch said, "I'm sure I can get back to the ziggurat though and try for the coffers again."

"Money's not a problem, dear." Rouge snapped her fingers. "I have a lot squirreled away."

"I'll pay you back, of course. You can still raid the coffers whenever or if ever we get to them."

The woman perked up and then sulked again. She set aside the phone, drew up her legs and rested her chin on her knees.

"Why do you run the bath so hot?" Rouge put the tickets back into the envelope and carefully stored it in her cleavage.

"I don't feel clean unless the water burns." She sighed softly.

"You're not self-harming with the scalding temperature, are you?" The bat was not easily fooled.

"Self-harming is pointless; I would just heal instantly. I'm just not clean until the water is hot and I like to linger in the water." She paused for a moment to catch her breath. "I'm really overwhelmed. So much is happening at once and I feel so weak. So useless."

"You are hurt by iron, right? Well, you're surrounded by it. In this century most buildings have iron supporting them and cars are all steel. Everything here at GUN and at Eggman's lair is all
steel. You're not weak, you're just at a terrible disadvantage." Rouge was doing her best to comfort the woman.

"Thanks, Rouge." Tilly sniffed. "I guess you're right."

"We'll blow off some of that steam at the club. Though, maybe I should save these tickets for a special occasion," Rouge patted her breast, "Since you're an Egg Boss now and the good Doctor owns the place… you can probably get us in regardless."

"I really shouldn't show up to places claiming to be the head of a fascist organization. I'm a queen, not a dictator." She shrugged. "Then again… if I've got the clout I should use it."

Rouge grinned. "I'll let you finish your bath. We're having a sleepover in my dorm tonight."

"Why don't I have my own room yet?"

"You know what? I don't know. You'd think this place would have more spares and be more organized." Rouge shrugged, "That's above my pay grade though. We wouldn't be a government entity if everything made sense, was on time and efficient."

Sheptilah redressed into fresh GUN scrubs and wandered around the dorms in the form of a fat brown tabby cat with white fluff on her chest. Being so low to the ground most people didn't notice a random animal walking the halls, so she was free to be as nosy as she liked.

After finding nothing of interest she waddled back to Rouge's dorm and turned back into her human form.

She eyed Shadow's door and hesitated. She wanted to spend some time with him but she understood he valued his solitude.

"You can come in." His voice spoke from behind the door.

"Shadow?" Sheptilah was confused. How did he know she was out there? "How did you-"

"I can sense your presence."

Ah. That's how.

She turned the knob and let herself in. She softly closed the door behind her. Shadow was resting on his bed with a book in his hands; at some point he found his lost copy of House Of Leaves.

"So," she nervously giggled, "How's my familiar doing?"

"What is it you need?" He turned the page crisply.

"I can't simply spend time with you?" She rubbed her upper arm a bit. Maybe he wasn't starting to like her after all.

"There's nothing for you to do in here." He closed the book and set it aside.

"Well, there is," she hesitated, "I need to show you how to close off your mind."
She explained the astral projection and dreamwalking and how Eggman had wandered into her plane without meaning to. She taught the hedgehog how to seal off his plane and lock his memories. Shadow mentally put his entire life in an imaginary safe with thick steel walls and closed it tightly.

"It's possible for him to astral project all the way out here, but that's highly unlikely. I really want to sever the bond. Do you think there is a way we can do it without Tower knowing?" At this point Sheptilah was sitting on the bed beside Shadow with her hands clasped together in her lap.

"It's the only way we can maintain control over the good Doctor at the moment. I really detest the idea of him coming into my mind, however." He scratched his chin in thought.

"I'm making everyone suffer, I'm sorry."

"Oh, please. We are always suffering regardless." He waved her off. "It's always something."

"I guess." She sulked. "I want you to know something else, too. If I die violently it's going to destroy you the same way losing Hebat destroyed me. I wasn't always this weak and distant."

"So don't die." She certainly wouldn't be the first or even the second Overlander he was close with to die a horrible death.

"We had gotten separated in a fight against the witch-eaters. Nannae and those beasts... it was calamity. One grabbed her and it tore her to shreds." She had a thousand-yard stare. "Every day I wonder if my people let her die because of their hatred of her kind."

"Don't go down that rabbit hole. You won't come out of it." He snapped his fingers to get her attention. "I am Shadow, the Ultimate Life Form. I've been through worse than dreamwalking."

"What's wrong with everyone in this century? Why is everyone saying that? I've been through worse? That's not a comfort, that's terrifying. You're kids! You should be out catching bugs and going to school. Rolling in the mud. Instead you fight monsters on behalf of a government entity."

"Bah," She flopped onto her back, "It doesn't matter; there's no possible good ending. If I don't die defeating the beasts I'll outlive all of you."

"You certainly won't outlive me. I'm functionally immortal, remember?" His ears folded ever so slightly.

"Alright, we'll outlive everyone by a century or two and then I'll finally be the last one of this group to die. Slowly, withering away one by one." She sighed.

Shadow leaned in and pointed a finger at her square in the chest. "You never know when someone is going to die. Live in the moment."

She grabbed his finger and pulled him into a hug. He resisted at first but then relaxed. She lightly stroked his spines downward so as not to prick herself. Unlike Hebat, who was fluffy and
soft, Shadow was akin to a cactus.

"You're right, as usual." It was quiet for a moment.

"Thanks for carrying me around without complaining when I exhausted myself. I appreciate that."

"What? Oh, goodness!" Sheptilah laughed. "Okay, yes I had a lot of trouble seeing around your spines," she patted one cluster for emphasis, "But it wasn't bad at all."

"I do have a big head, don't I?"

"Not nearly as big as Ivo's." She said under her breath. She began to scratch the back of his ear. "Rouge wants to take us clubbing. I'm still not completely sure what that means. Eggman gave her some VIP tickets to Stratosphere."

"Oh, God," Shadow rested his cheek against her Oracle Stone, "I guess he remembered I told him she liked that place."

Sheptilah shuddered. The sensation of the stone being rubbed up against, even by a familiar, was so weird. Similar to the feeling of a brain freeze except it was felt in the chest.

"I kind of want to go. I want to know what kids do these days. Rouge thinks I can get us in without using up the tickets on the virtue of me being an Egg Boss. She's so determined, I can't say no."

"I guess that means I have to go to babysit you. I can't imagine how much trouble the two of you will cause if I'm not there to chaperone." Shadow could feel the stone pulsing as if it had its own heartbeat.

"What's the thing about the red moon? I read about it in the grimoire." Shadow drew up his knees. The stroking was making him fall asleep and his voice got quiet. Under the touch of his witch he seemed to unwillingly melt away and become vulnerable.

Sheptilah squeaked. "What?"

"The lunar eclipse," he shut his eyes, "And does it affect me, too?"

"Oh, dear gods, no. Only someone with a stone. It uh…" She chose her words very carefully. "Exposure to the moonlight of a lunar eclipse, which appears red for most of it, makes the magic in the Oracle Stone frantic. Manic, even. Witches and familiars alike have trouble maintaining their forms for a while afterward. Their behavior is unpredictable and can become violent."

"Have you ever been exposed to it?"

"A red moon? No. We were very careful about that and I want to keep it that way." She rested one hand behind her head and kept petting Shadow with the other. "The rapid change of the lunar phases is what does it."

"That sounds exhausting, having to do things by the moon."

"You have no idea." Sheptilah snorted. "I think I should head off to Rouge's room now. I'm falling asleep."
Shadow shifted positions and put his arm around her waist. He hated feeling vulnerable and tried his best to hide every bit of weakness he had. In the end, just like Eggman, he was touch-starved and quietly accepted the affection shown to him.

Being carried for hours half-asleep was something he never experienced before and would treasure the memory of being treated so tenderly. He wondered if that's how toddlers felt when a parent gently rocked them back and forth to make them fall asleep.

"Shadow," she lightly flicked his ear, "I gotta get up."

"Okay." He sat up so she could stand. "I don't sleep much but I still ask that you stay out of my dreams."

"I don't like wandering when I'm asleep. I won't go anywhere near your plane while I'm asleep, I promise." She stood and stretched.

"Good night." Shadow picked his book up and resumed reading it, a little sad to be left alone.
Twin Souls

Sheptilah found Rouge's bed comfortable but small. Instead of maintaining her human form she again turned into the fat cat and cuddled up against the bat's side.

She had a hard time falling asleep and tried to remember her younger days at the ziggurat.

"Mama Lulu! Mama Tiamatu!" A younger, teenage Sheptilah embraced them. Tiamatu shaved her head bald and was a tall, imposing woman with very dark skin.

Lulu kept her short black hair tightly braided against her scalp. Like Tiamatu, Lulu also had very dark skin but was a much shorter, heavier-set woman. Both queens were decked out in black robes and gold jewelry and their Oracle Stones glistened like suns unto themselves. The queens were lounging at the top of the ziggurat on plush pillows eating fruit. Their familiars, a cat and a jackal, were also lounging about doing nothing.

Sheptilah stood out against them being a much lighter brown skinned girl and having white hair. Tilly herself was only wearing a purple sarong around her waist but no top or shoes. Instead of gold she opted to wear a simple bronze circlet.

"I have been looking all over the ziggurat for you," Sheptilah sniffed, "The citizens were mean to me again."

"Where is Hebat?" Tiamatu asked.

"She ran off crying. Moms, I don't want to be queen." Warm tears ran down her cheeks. "Why can't you adopt another child?"

"The throne is yours when we retire whether you like it or not. You can do this, Sheptilah. It's one ziggurat, how hard can it be? Lulu and I spend most of our time not doing much but guarding the structure." Tiamatu was stroking Sheptilah's hair comfortingly.

"It's hard when kids throw stones at your familiar because she's half-and-half. It's even harder when her own parents aren't around anymore."
"You're a witch, use your magic to teach them a lesson." The jackal spoke up.

"He's right, you know." Tiamatu nodded.

"It's the principle of it! She's not hurting anyone, why are people so mean? She's just an armadillo."

"Mrrow," the cat familiar stretched, "Princess, you know changelings have unstable magic. People are just afraid of what could happen to them. You have to defend your familiar with your life, regardless of who or what they are. This also means you need to stick up for Hebat."

"Sometimes people won't respect you unless you flex your powers." Lulu chuckled. "Listen…"

"I don't want to hurt a bunch of kids," Sheptilah wiped her nose on her forearm, "They're just dumb kids."

"You don't have to hurt them, just scare them." The jackal laughed. "Turn one into a toad!"

"Go find Hebat and be with her." Tiamatu squeezed Sheptilah's shoulders gently.

The memory of her first act as queen intruded on her mind. She was barely twenty years old when her mothers retired and left the throne to her. More and more outsiders came to live at the ziggurat who were unfamiliar with the concept of witch-eaters. The queens did their best to hide the fact that these parasites were slowly destroying those with Oracle Stones like a communicable disease.

An outsider was caught committing a heinous, unforgivable crime against a child and was swiftly sentenced to death by the courts. The punishment was the classic beheading. There is no coming back from that.

Nobody had been sentenced to death in so long that Sheptilah had never done it before. As queen it was her duty to carry out the sentencing she did not even lay on the prisoner. The man was old and weary, drugged to keep still. His arms and legs were bound with heavy rope and his head placed on the pedestal at the top of the ziggurat.
Sheptilah was dressed in a white sarong and leather sandals. She wore no jewelry as was the custom for executions. Her mothers and their familiars looked on with expectation and pride. Along the steps to the top of the temple people had gathered to witness the execution.

She gripped the iron machete's ivory handle nervously. Her hands were shaking and she was sweating.

"Ti-ti, do you want me to do it?" Hebat stood next to her witch.

"I have to do it," she swallowed hard, "I have to be the one to do it. If we want the people to respect us I have to carry out the sentence." I've never killed a person before, though, she thought.

"Alright, but if you want I can do it." Hebat clasped her long claws in such a way that it resembled a dagger. She intended to behead the criminal with her own hands.

The man moaned. The drugging was wearing off. "Where am I?" He slurred his words, struggling to open his eyes.

"The gates of Hell," Hebat spat on him, "And you've got a one-way visa."

"For your crimes committed against my people I hereby condemn you to the netherworld." Sheptilah lifted the machete above her head. She hesitated for a second and then brought down the weapon with great force.

She missed the man's neck by several inches and only managed to lop off the top of his head at a strange angle.

The man was still alive.

Sheptilah raised the weapon and tried again.

The head turned up to look at her. It was Shadow.

"You can't do anything right," his head laughed at her, "You can't do anything right."
She woke up when Rouge yelped. The bat had hit the floor when Sheptilah's glamour broke and she returned to her full size, shoving Rouge off the bed.

"Rouge!" Sheptilah leaned over the edge. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry!"

"It's…" Rouge looked up at the digital clock. "Four in the morning. What happened?"

"I'm so sorry, I had a nightmare. I dozed off and messed up… I wasn't able to dream lucidly. I was bouncing between memories and dreaming. I guess I got so upset I changed back to my normal form."

Rouge crawled back into the bed. "No more nightmares, okay? That kind of hurt." Sheptilah scooched back to make room for the Mobian.

"I'm so sorry," she wiped sweat from her brow, "This is usually why I sleep alone."

The bat yawned, "Well if you want I'm sure Shadow will let you stay with him. He never actually sleeps. He doesn't need to. He just sits up and reads all night."

"I don't want to bother him," she sulked, "I'll be okay."

"But will I be ok?" The bat giggled. "Don't sweat it."

_I should've stayed at the lair, she thought, at least if I kicked Eggman I could say he deserved it._

The weather at the shopping arcade was warm and sunny. Sheptilah had warped them to a warm, southern part of the country at Rouge's recommendation.

"Ladies, can we get a move on?" Shadow was impatiently sipping an iced coffee while Sheptilah and Rouge were window shopping. He insisted on going with them because he didn't trust the two women alone.
"What? We're waiting on you!" Rouge tapped her foot. "You can't bring in food or drinks."

"I'll wait out here." He sucked on the straw loudly.

"Don't make me invite Sonic." Rouge wagged a finger threateningly.

Shadow pulled the lid off the drink and guzzled it, ice and all. "Now will you get a move on?" He smacked his lips.

"You… didn't even chew the ice!" Rouge's wings drooped.

The trio enjoyed the day although Shadow himself would never admit it. He even got himself a new pair of sunglasses. They stopped to get lunch at a cute bistro. Rouge had to read off the menu items for the witch one by one.

Sheptilah even convinced Shadow to take a selfie with her. He frowned in it, of course; he had a reputation to uphold.

"This century is so cool… once I get used to being surrounded by so much iron I'm sure I'll be comfortable enough to carry on like a normal person in this time would." She sipped her sangria between bites of salad.

"May I see your phone?" Shadow held out his hand. Sheptilah nodded and gave it to him. The hedgehog thumbed through the pictures. She was already taking pictures of random things like pigeons and dressing room mirror selfies. Then he saw the photos with Eggman.

"I still don't understand how alcohol doesn't affect you," Rouge raised an eyebrow, "that's honestly just odd."

Sheptilah shrugged. "It sucks, though. Everyone without a stone can get a buzz and have fun and I'm over here like the designated camel driver."
"Yeah, well, most alcoholic drinks taste like garbage anyway. The point is to get the buzz." The bat opted for a dark cola to go with her cheeseburger.

"Rouge, you are not missing out. This is glorified fruit juice. What is the drinking age, again?"

"Twenty-one. You are way over the age limit." The bat grinned.

"Oh, you have three years, that's not that long." Sheptilah stuck out her tongue. "Mind your elders, little lady."

"There's elder and then there's ancient artifacts. You, ma'am, belong in a museum."

Sheptilah gasped as if she was greatly offended, "Well I look damned good for my age. I put the 'great' in great grandma."

"When did you take these? Don't tell me you're getting all chummy with the good Doctor." Shadow placed the phone on the table.

"What? Oh, I asked him how to use it. Up until that night I didn't know what I looked like. I made him take that photo of me then I asked for one of us together and he made me make that stupid face." Her cheeks were slightly pink, "I was trying to butter him up to get information out of him about the injectors."

Rouge chuckled, "Oh, that captive scrying nonsense? You've never seen what you look like until now?"

"Nope, and I am damned cute." Sheptilah looked at the back of her hands, "My skin used to be darker, though. I guess being out of the desert sun for five thousand years sucks the color out of you."

"What did you find out?" Shadow asked.
"They can't be removed. He never devised a way for them to come out. He said if I survive the whole ordeal with the eaters he would be forced to invent a way to remove it. They are also embedded into the bone." She sighed.

"So he lied when he said he'd remove the injections back at the north…" Shadow was disgusted.

"Can't trust him worth a damn." Rouge scoffed.

"I don't trust him," Sheptilah said. She finished off her drink and chewed on the ice.

They were quiet for a bit as they finished off their food.

"I still want to go to the club, though. It sounds like fun." Sheptilah grinned.

Rouge gasped. "Yes! We should go tonight. The theme is outer space according to MARI's blog."

"Why does the robot have a blog?" Shadow narrowed his eyes.

"Hello? It's all about marketing!" Rouge snapped her fingers.

"Outer space, huh? Sounds cool. Are you sure I'm not too old for clubbing?" Sheptilah blushed. "I feel like I would be out of place."

"I'm pushing being a century old, if I'm not too old you aren't too old." Shadow brushed back some of his spines.

"I always forget you're a vintage piece, Shadow." Rouge teased. "One of these days I'm going to buy you a big box of those lemon candies you love to carry around like a grandpa."

"The joke is on you seeing as how I would enjoy the Hell out of that gift." He crossed his arms.
"I prefer bubble gum," Rouge paid for the meal and gathered up her bags, "Let's go back to shopping! That is if you two aren't feeling achy and arthritic from being out all day."

"Silly me! I left my orthopedic skates at home. I guess I'm done for the day." Shadow smirked.

"Thanks, MARI." Eggman lounged on his sofa watching a soap opera when the robot sent him a message.

"Absolutely. They talked about you." Eggman had quietly uploaded MARI's app into Sheptilah's phone when he had access to it the night before. The app itself was small and allowed the device to connect to MARI's main servers remotely. With this app sitting in her phone the robot could monitor her as long as the device was on and connected to wifi.

"Anything nice?"

"Actually, yes," MARI's tinny voice chirped on his gauntlet, "They're coming to your club tonight. You should dress up and go meet them. Tonight's theme is outer space."

"Hmm," Eggman stroked his mustache, "I know exactly what I'm going to wear."

"One other thing-" MARI displayed a frowny face.

"Yes?"

"Shadow knows you lied about the injectors coming out of the Egg Army militants."

"Shadow is an idiot if he believed for one second I was going to do that," Eggman laughed heartily, "Thank you MARI. See you in an hour. Tonight I am going to paint the town red."
Pop Culture

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Stratosphere Club fit perfectly in the densely populated Southern California section of Northamer. The city itself was massive and many clubs lined the streets. Even from space you could see the bright spot of the state lit up in a rainbow of colors.

The sections were divided by four colors marked by the paint used to decorate the street: the pink district were clubs and arcades dedicated to children, the blue district was for teens and young adults and the green district was for adults.

Somewhere on the edge of blue and green was Stratosphere. The gigantic whale-shaped building took up an entire city block. The windows were brightly lit and tinted many colors but designed so that you cannot see into them.

There was a line down the block as Mobian bouncers fought to keep people from running in. Dressed to the nines, Sheptilah, Shadow and Rouge walked to the very front of the line.

The woman, clad in blue bell-bottom jeans with yellow star decals along the bottom, white boots with matching belt and a low cut orange crop top stood with her hand on her hip. She smirked at the bouncer who was ready to throw her to the end of the line. Her long hair was tied into pigtails at the back of her head like handlebars. The shorter hairs stuck straight up giving her the illusion of antennae.

"And who the Hell are you? Get to the back of the line." The large bull was imposing, sneering at her past his snout. His deadly sharp horns glowing from the neon lights behind him.

"I know the owner." Her large earrings, a planet and a star, tinkled when she turned her head. Shadow himself only wore red shutter shades and a black leather jacket.

"And we've got VIP tickets." Rouge handed them to the bouncer. Rouge herself was wearing a lot of colorful plastic jewelry known as kandi, which stood out against her black bodysuit.

"Hey boss." The bouncer spoke into a wrist communicator shaped like a star. "You know this chick? Uh huh? Well, alright." The bull's demeanor changed. "You three are more than welcome to come in. Save your tickets." He opened the door and let them inside.

"It's good to be queen." The Overlander smirked, head held high as those in line openly complained.

At the vestibule were two robots behind a large desk. A short greenish one with drills for hands could barely see over the top of it and the other a tall chicken who seemed to do all the work. The chicken was typing away at a laptop computer. At the other end were two heavy doors shut tightly, but faintly thrumming music could still be heard. As the little green one moved back and forth behind the counter his antenna bounced.

"Are you drinking tonight?" The chicken squawked.

"Nothing alcoholic." Rouge spoke.
"Wait." The rooster clucked, looking down at his screen then up at the trio. "Are you Shadow the hedgehog, Rouge the bat and Shep-tee-luh?"

"Yes." Shadow nodded.

"Ha-ha Ha-hah!" The chicken laughed. "Welcome to the Stratosphere Club! It's a real pleasure to meet another of the Robotnik family. I mean you specifically, hedgehog. The Doctor is waiting for you three upstairs."

"Welcome, welcome!" The little green one chirped, his drill hands rotating with excitement.

The chicken typed away at the laptop. Suddenly a portal opened up underneath the trio and warped them to the top floor.

"Au reservoir!" The green one waved.

The chicken slapped him upside the head. "It's au revoir, you dope!"

The VIP loft was plush, had its own robot bartender and a disco ball in the ceiling. The sofas and chairs spread about were soft and colorful. One wall was a large glass pane that allowed you to look down at the dancing masses.

Eggman stood proudly at the warp's exit. One hand was on his hip and in the other a glow-in-the-dark alcoholic martini. He was wearing his typical clothing except it was hues of bright yellow instead of red with glowing white piping.

The trio appeared confused and startled but relaxed a bit when they saw the Doctor.

"Hello, treasured guests." He grinned.

"You're glowing!" Sheptilah looked down at herself and saw that her hair was brightened under the black lights as well as the decals on her clothes. Shadow's glasses and red streaks were all that glowed but Rouge herself was bright enough to light up her own city.

"Yep, that's the magic of black lights. Welcome to the Stratosphere!"

"How did you know we'd be here tonight?" Rouge raised an eyebrow.

"When the bouncer called me and told me you were here I warped in," Eggman lied through his teeth, "These warps are actually a prototype. Still in testing. If, at a later date, it's found that your internal organs have shifted I'm sure Miss Witch here can fix you up."

Sheptilah bit her lip nervously. She didn't want to be up in the loft if Eggman was going to stay.

"I still can't believe you own this place," Rouge looked around, "I thought it looked a lot like the Starlight Carnival but I incorrectly assumed it was a coincidence. There is no way you are this cool."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment," Eggman chuckled, "enjoy yourselves."

"Is... is that Vector?" Rouge looked down at the crowd, "Oh my God it looks like he's talking to the deejay."

"Vector? I thought the Chaotix were blackballed from this club... Oh well. MARI can defend herself if they cause trouble." The man gestured for them to sit somewhere. Rouge stayed watching the crocodile from the window but Shadow sat with Sheptilah on a sofa. Eggman sat across them...
and crossed his legs at the knees.

"So," he sipped his drink, "I made sure nobody else would be up here tonight when I heard you were coming."

Shadow tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. How could he have cleared anyone out within minutes unless he knew hours ago we would be here? This place is absolutely deserted.

"How did you sleep last night?" He nodded to the woman.

"Me?" Sheptilah pointed to herself.

"Yes, you."

"I slept fine; why do you ask?"

Eggman dragged his index finger across his throat and made a slicing sound.

"You… you saw?" She furrowed her brows, "I'm sorry."

"I saw it, too," Shadow muttered, "I couldn't do anything, though."

"So even at great distances between iron walls and locking down my personal astral plane it's not necessarily enough…" Her face flushed with shame.

"I have to say I have a newfound respect for you." He smiled smugly behind his drink; his mouth warped into a snarl by the glass.

Sheptilah's cheeks flushed harder. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Never mind, then," he shrugged, "Enjoy your night."

"I'm going down there. I don't like how the deejay is looking at Vector." Rouge pulled some cotton balls out of her cleavage and stuffed them into her ears. She did this to prevent hearing loss.

"The door is back there," Eggman pointed, "It's the same way back up."

"Thanks." She flew off and disappeared.

Shadow went up to the window and watched for Rouge. He was able to spot Charmy flying around having fun but did not see Espio.

_He must be in camouflage, but why would the Chaotix even be here?_ The hedgehog wondered quietly.

"Why did your robots refer to me as a Robotnik?" He was speaking to Eggman.

"Are you not a Robotnik? Gerald considered you his son. Your legal papers sometimes refer to you as Shadow Robotnik."

"Don't get it twisted," Shadow peered over his shoulder, "I'm not your family."

Eggman was hurt by his words and felt his chest tighten slightly. Sheptilah felt the pain too, albeit briefly.

"I'd like to talk to Sheptilah alone for a bit, if that's alright with her keeper." Eggman raised an
eyebrow at the hedgehog.

Sheptilah nodded at Shadow. "I'll be down in a moment."

Shadow lingered for a bit before he turned and left. He closed the door behind him but pressed his ear to it so he could eavesdrop. As it turns out the stone did not translate her spoken words for him so he heard her speaking in Nannaic but with context clues was able to understand the conversation.

"How do you miss when chopping off someone's head? He wasn't even moving." He snickered a bit.

"*I said* I didn't want to talk about it." She crossed her arms, hair swaying as she shifted her body weight from one leg to the other.

"I'm kidding," Eggman frowned, "I was kidding." He set his empty martini glass on a nearby decorative table and stood.

Sheptilah turned to the window and watched the guests dance and party. Some of the colorful lights moving up and down the walls changed from stars to snowflakes and back again. The robot deejay was scratching digital records on the decks and jumping up and down with the crowd. Every so often she would pose for selfies with one or two partiers.

"I mean, he deserved to die," she sniffed, "So I don't feel bad about that."

"Well, yeah, nobody is arguing about *that*." Ivo walked up to her. As big as he was he was also quite stealthy.

"I had just never taken a life before. It was a little traumatizing."

"I wish I didn't see the dream, either." He placed his big hands on her shoulders. He felt her jump with surprise; she didn't realize he was so close. Instead of threatening him with her elbow like the other times she placed one of her hands on top of his. His sausage-like fingers dwarfed her bony ones.

"I asked Shadow if we could break the bond in secret and he refused. He said it's all that's keeping you behaved."

"He's right," Ivo chuckled a bit darkly, "It is." A pause, and then: "What else do we share?"

"I felt it when Shadow said you weren't family," she sighed, "We share pain and dreams… I don't know what else if anything."

"We don't share happiness?" His breath tickled her ear.

"I think that when one person is happy another tends to feel happy too; even without a magical bond." Sheptilah giggled, "Right?" She nodded toward the crowd, "It's a party down there. I don't see one sad person."

The music thrummed quietly and the lights changed colors to match the beat.

"What do you want for Christmas? I think it's tomorrow, actually." She looked up at him.

"I don't celebrate that holiday," he shook his head slightly, "I don't really celebrate any holidays."

"You've gotta want *something.*" She raised her eyebrows.
"Hm…" He squeezed her shoulders slightly; then his hands slid down her arms to her hips. "I think I know what I want."

The only way Rouge could make it near the deejay deck was by dancing through the crowd. The guests were dressed in many different styles of clothing. Some were classic ravers with fluffy leg warmers and bouncy cyberlox and others dressed in a more modern look of bodycon dresses and glittery high heels.

A few were even dressed as sexy snowmen and sexy Christmas elves. Perhaps they didn't get the memo that it was a galaxy themed night.

"Exploration of space!" The crowd sang in unison with MARI. It wasn't hard to learn the song since that was the only lyric. The words Cosmic Gate appeared at the front of deck in LED lights showing the audience who the artist was.

If you don't back away from my deck I swear I will make an ugly alligator skin purse out of you." MARI hissed at Vector.

Although the robot was a short and thin one, she was packing major heat. Her black bodysuit was shiny and her chest contained a heart-shaped subwoofer. Her eyes were two different shades of blue and she wore large green headphones. A transparent pink visor made her eyes appear purple. Above her head was a rainbow halo made of light and tilted as if it was falling off. From her feet to her thighs her legs lit up as an equalizer to match the song currently playing. One gloved hand was bright pink and the other green.

"I am a *crocodile!*" He hissed back. "I just want to know if you're really a robot."

"I am a gyndroid, I will have you know," she didn't take her hands away from the deck, skillfully moving switches and pushing buttons, "Now get off my stage!"

"Who built you? Sony? Yaskawa? Stäubli? Toshiba? Sega? " Vector was rapidly naming off technology companies, hoping to trip up the 'gyndroid'.

With one hand still on the controls she used her other to reach under the deck and pull out a massive laser gun and aimed it at the crocodile.

"Back off," the gun whined as it charged up.

"Alright, alright!" He put his hands up in submission, "Put the gun away!" He jumped off the platform and rushed back into the crowd.

"And you," MARI turned around and pointed the gun at seemingly nothing, "Need to bounce, too."

Espio the chameleon was standing behind her ready to pounce and save Vector in his invisibility camouflage.

*She must have heat sensors,* he thought. He nodded and ran after Vector, still invisible. Although typical chameleons did not give off much heat at all Mobian chameleons were a bit different and did.

"Scratch, Grounder," she spoke into an unseen communicator, "How are the Chaotix in here? They're blackballed. Bounce them out." She shoved the gun back under the deck and switched
songs with flawless fading.

"Three! Two! One! Space Love!" A male singer cheerfully shouted. According to the screens it was Fastway.

"Going somewhere, Vector?" Rouge smirked.

"You!" The crocodile stopped dead in his tracks. "Are you here on GUN business?"

"I'm here for pleasure." She chuckled. "Why are you here?"

"Trying to find out who runs this joint." He scratched his chin. "You wouldn't happen to know who it is, would you?"

"Doctor Eggman, of course."

"What?!" His toothy mouth hung open.

"I was just as shocked as you! He's upstairs in the VIP loft right now. He gave me some tickets, too; but I got in because I know somebody."

"You just… we've been investigating for months!"

Rouge shrugged, "You better get out of here before you're bounced with great prejudice."

Sheptilah's breath hitched when she felt his hands slide down her waist. Before she could react he turned her around and grabbed her free hand and started a tango.

"Let's dance." He smiled innocently.

"Woah!" She squeaked as he dipped her.

Shadow breathed a sigh of relief. He was about ready to kick in the door and then kick in Eggman's skull if he so much as even joked about being untoward with his witch.

"You look good in orange," he was supporting her by her lower back, "But why are you dressed like a disco queen?"

"Rouge picked out this outfit." She put a hand on his shoulder and one on his forearm for leverage. You know, if he wanted to kiss me I am not sure I would have said no, she thought to herself.

"I like it," he lifted her upright and gently brushed her hair out of her face. "I see you've shaved, too."

"I didn't shave," her skin prickled at his touch, "Rouge made me feel self-conscious so I'm using a glamour." She inhaled sharply, "We should dance downstairs with everyone else; I can barely hear the music up here."

"You want me to go down and dance with you in a crowd of people?"

She looked at him wide-eyed.

"I would gladly do so!"
She smiled. There was safety in numbers.

Shadow teleported to the main floor of the club and made his way toward Rouge. She was easy to spot because she glowed so brightly.

"Where are the Chaotix?" He asked her.

"They got bounced," she grabbed his wrist and pulled him into a dance, "They pissed off MARI and she pulled out a giant gun."

"So she's not Asimovian."

"Why would any robot of Eggman's be? Then again she never intended to hurt them just scare them. Her finger never touched the trigger." Rouge clasped her fingers with Shadow's and moved a kandi bracelet from her wrist to his. She hugged him briefly and then let go. "You look so naked without beads!"

"What is this, Mardi Gras?" Shadow looked over the beads.

"It's kandi!"

"Candy? This is cheap plastic pony beads."

"Kandi with a 'k'! Ravers give them to each other. They're treasured presents between friends. You're probably going to be given a lot tonight, too. Christmas spirit and all!" Rouge was shouting over the music.

"I thought you were making a fashion statement!"

"No, all this?" She gestured to herself. "Gifts from others. I go clubbing a lot!"

"I can tell. Maybe you should open your own club!" Shadow had to dance a bit to avoid being knocked over by partiers.

"Hey!" MARI shouted when she lowered the volume a bit. "Look who is here!" Some spotlights moved and focused on Eggman. Sheptilah was caught off-guard by all the attention of the dancers cheering. Rouge and Shadow had trouble seeing over the crowd given that they were so small. The bat flew up and saw the two Overlanders had came in together.

"Doctor Eggman!" MARI pumped a fist in the air. "If you're alone tonight - can I be by your side?"

MARI's words started to blend with the song's lyrics.

"Little rocket in the sky!" Some of the dancers sang along. Most were cheering only because MARI was.

"If you care for me -"

"Why don't you come and give me some dignity, yeah?"

"Some decency, yeah…"

The words seemed to bounce off the walls.
After a few minutes Sheptilah relaxed and began to have some fun, though she was overwhelmed by all the alien lights and noises. She was delighted that some dancers came over and gave her kandi during some of the songs.

Feeling inspired, Sheptilah used her magic to add a bit more sparkle to the surroundings. Even the ends of her long pigtails glittered like they were dipped in starlight.

She bounced off to find Shadow, which wasn't difficult because she could sense where he was, and left Eggman alone. The man was a bit weary and shuffled off to rest at a bar stool.

"Little rocket in disguise… little rocket in the sky…” The song blended into a generic techno beat.

"Is that Shadow the Hedgehog?" MARI leaned over the deck. "It's Shadow the Hedgehog, baby!" The lights focused on the poor Mobian. Some of the dancers backed up out of the spotlight.

"Show us what you're made of!" The robot cackled. "Can the Ultimate Life Form dance?"

"Oh, no." The hedgehog's ears pointed backwards. I'm going to kill that man, he thought.

The songs changed again and the guests gave Shadow a little space. The hedgehog felt hot under the lights and crossed his arms.

"Shadow!" Sheptilah bounced up to him. "I think the robot likes you."

"Tilly!" He was relieved to see her.

"Waratte ireru yo, baby, 'cause it's like, docchi wo tottemo-"

"Aren't you having fun?" She frowned a bit.

"Not at the moment." He swallowed. He noticed she had a bunch of bracelets now.

She touched the top of his head and the stripes on his spines began to sparkle. He could faintly hear Rouge cackling from above them. The bat was flying around the air doing loops.

"Get into the groove! Did I say that right?" The witch laughed, "I'm having the time of my life."

"I'm glad one of us is having fu-" He was cut off when she pulled him by the hand and spun him.

"When the spotlight is on you, you are supposed to dance! Don't disappoint everyone," she chuckled.

"Aw, is the little hedgehog scared?" MARI teased him. "You can deadlift a thousand pounds of weight but you can't boogie?"

"I'm not buying into your hype," He pointed a gloved finger at the robot.

"I knew it! The Ultimate Life Form is a weenie." She laughed behind a gloved hand.

"I'm no weenie! Back up." He motioned for Sheptilah to scoot to the side. She did so, giving him space.

"Let me hit you with the ryuusei sound; this is how it goes down…"
With his hands on his hips he tapped his foot, getting into the beat. After a moment he loosened up and started to break dance - all moves he learned from watching Sonic.

"That's my familiar!" Sheptilah cheerfully shouted. "Do you see- oh!" Sheptilah was surprised when she turned to see Eggman had walked up to her, shaking his hips.

"Look at him go," he laughed, "I told MARI if she insulted him enough he'd start dancing."

Sheptilah grinned.

"Wow!" The deejay grinned. She couldn't wait to put that footage on her blog. Shadow stood and crossed his arms proudly. The dancers around him cheered and tried to give him bracelets but he refused; a major faux pas. Eventually he gave in and let them give him some but didn't hug them in return.

Espio snuck back into the club at some point and looked for Eggman. When he found him he stood next to the man invisibly and observed.

Eggman shook his head. "I see you got some kandi, Tilly!" He shook his wrist, he only had one; Rouge gave him a pity kandi.

Sheptilah scoffed and took his hand. She slipped a bracelet off of her wrist onto his, but struggled a little over his meaty hand.

"There! Now you got one from me." She smiled as she hugged him.

"Like raindrops... from the... desert... sky..."

"Pick a decade or genre, MARI. She's been bouncing around. She's playing SNBRN now but she just got done with something else entirely. I don't know why she mixes like that. Maybe I should tweak her code-" The embrace interrupted him.

"For you I've been waiting..."

He was surprised by the hug. "Thank you," he looked at the bracelet. The pony beads spelled the word PLUR. "Peace, love, unity, respect. I think that's what the letters mean."

"Like seeing stars and endless nights..."

The woman shrugged and broke the embrace. He almost wish she didn't let go. The next song was slower and more intimate.

"What was the hug for?"

"Can we stay like this forever?"
"It's just what they do after they move kandi around," her pigtails swished back and forth as she swayed to the music. "Thanks for the tickets. I'm glad I came out tonight." She stopped moving after a moment and frowned. She suddenly remembered her troubles.

"Come a little bit closer ... a little bit closer... oh, we go together..."

"I found out that we also share happiness," he gently placed his finger under her chin and lightly pushed it upward. "Not just pain."

"Bring me out from the under... come a little bit closer..."

"So?" She furrowed her brows.

"So be happy." For once he had a genuine smile. He brushed some loose hairs out of her face with the tips of his fingers. "Doesn't it feel good?" He took hold of her and resumed dancing.

Her eyes widened a bit and her cheeks became flushed. For a moment it was like they were alone. She felt her chest twinge.

They swayed back and forth to the beat, bright lights beaming down on them in colorful shapes making it appear as if they existed in an aurora borealis. The way his nose scrunched up when he genuinely smiled was cute to her.

They laughed together when she did a twist and a pigtail lightly slapped her in the face. He responded by gingerly moving the hair out of her eyes. Then and there she felt a spark between them. All it took was a gentle, gloved touch.

“I think we need to invest in getting you headbands. You have little baby hairs that get in your way.”

She laughed awkwardly. “Ah ... yeah that was part of why I wore the circlet.” She avoided eye contact, cheeks reddening.

“I don’t have that problem.” He ran his hand over his bald head and wiggled his eyebrows. “Doesn’t it drive you crazy?”

“You drive me crazy,” she laughed a little loudly, “My hair I can deal with.”

I suppose, she thought, he's got potential.

Uh oh, she panicked. Oh, no. Oh, no; oh, no! She covered her Oracle Stone with her hand. Is this your doing!? She wondered. Are you forcing me into this with the dumb bond?!

Eggman leaned in and whispered something to her. "I have a confession."

Oh, no. Her mouth became a tight line.

"You're my only friend. Please don't die on me." He sounded almost sad. Possibly heartbroken.
Was he still upset because of what Shadow said earlier?

"I thought you said I wouldn't want to be your friend."

"Ah, well." He pulled back and shrugged. "That ship has sailed. We should go back up to the loft. I'm feeling hungry and we serve food up there. We got French fries." He remembered how much she loved them. He also wanted to sit down since his feet were starting to hurt.

"Oh! Fries… I could go for some." She actually was feeling peckish. The change of subject was also nice.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Songs used:

Tripod Baby - M-flo Loves Lisa

Space Love - Fastway

Raindrops - SNBRN ft Kerli

Rocket In The Sky - Benassi Bros ft. Naan

Exploration of Space - Cosmic Gate
The robot bartender already had drinks and snacks prepared up in the VIP loft. Sheptilah was absolutely enchanted with the concept of cheese being gooey at room temperature. The fact it was drizzled over crisp, hot fries was just decadent.

Espio stood invisibly and unknown at a decent distance away and listened in. However, like with Shadow, the stone didn't translate the witch's words for him.

"I keep thinking about that ship we saw." She very carefully dipped a fry into the cheese. "Should we, y'know, go back and burn it?"

"Why would we do that?" He thought about how the stone took over and saved them. He started to wonder that the deal was with it. He gave the stone a sideways glance.

"You can't just leave the dead like that. You need to do something with them. At least alert their families or something."

"Sometimes it's better to just leave the dead where they are." He sighed deeply.

"I still have the diary. It's in my headspace." She chewed on the fry absentmindedly.

There was an awkward silence.

"Does killing people get easier the more you do it?" His voice was quiet.

Sheptilah nearly choked on her fry. After a cough she swallowed and straightened up.

"Witches and familiars tend to have one or two things they're really good at. Mine is healing others and flight." She inhaled sharply. "All I wanted to do was fly around and make people better. I wasn't allowed to do that; I had to be a queen and chop the heads off of criminals. It didn't get easier- I just got used to it."
"Well at least now I know you weren't actually kidding when you said you'd behead me." He smiled uneasily. Espio furrowed unseen eyebrows.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Nah. I'm not going to do that to my only adult friend."

His cheeks grew warm. "Well, at least you're more comfortable around me."

Espio watched carefully. He hated only getting half of the conversation and wondered why, if Eggman spoke this foreign language fluently, was he talking in English?

"But I suppose eight or nine days together saving each other from varied eldritch abominations will bring people closer, I guess." Eggman admitted.

But how close?

"I think I'm going to go and build my own little place on the island. I'll need the space to work on the scepter, too. Maybe I can make more friends while I'm at it. There were some cute people on the dance floor I'm interested in."

"One thing you probably shouldn't do when you're out alone is shapeshift on people. You'll scare the heck out of them." He took a sip of his martini. The bartender robot rolled its eyes.

She lifted up her head and looked at him with feigned surprise. Truly his condescending 'advice' was unnecessary. She is an adult and knows how to behave among the non-magical. She suddenly shapeshifted a second pair of arms and wiggled all twenty fingers at him.

"Why would this scare anyone? Or this?" She shifted a third pair of arms and now resembled a spider woman.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, creepy spider girl." He playfully shook one of her hands.

"Creepy? Whatever are you talking about?" Her arms were doing different things. One set was straightening her pigtails, another was moving the food around and the last pair had hands in her lap demurely. "It comes in handy when doing a very complex hairstyle. Not that you would know."
Espio was making a mental note to not antagonize this woman or she may tickle him to death.

"I am not bald! I actually shave my scalp," he ran his hand over it, "I think I look quite attractive. It's a bold statement; I want my mustache to be the center of attention."

"Maybe your head is the giant pearl I'm supposed to use in the scepter. It's so round and shiny." She brought up her main hands and created an image of the scepter but with Eggman's head as the jewel. "I imagine you would yell at me the whole time when using it." The mouth on the figment moved as if it was angrily shouting displeasure.

She dispelled the illusion and the extra arms.

"Speaking of the pearl - we should probably go grab that first. The ruins of the park where it's located are in the Basque region. You probably remember it as Iberia or Gaul. Today it's the space between France and Spain."

Sheptilah shook her head and smiled. "Are you talking about the countries above and to the far left of where I'm from?"

"Yes." He nodded.

"Why would you put anything out there?" She rested her elbow on the bar and her chin on her palm.

"I have a lot of ruins and scrap heaps scattered all over the planet. Makes it easier to have them left alone."

"Sir, it's midnight." The robot spoke to its master.

"Oh! Look at that. It's Christmas eve. I'm sure you don't care, though. I know I don't." Eggman shrugged.
"I care if you care. Since you don't, I don't care." She ate more fries.

Eggman finished his drink and set the martini glass down. Before the bartender could take it Sheptilah picked it up and crushed it in her hand. She then formed it into a marble and healed herself. Not one drop of blood or shard of glass hit the counter.

"Say my name three times while you squeeze this and I will be summoned. Don't abuse it."

"Oh!" He carefully took it. "This is a witch orb?"

"Yes. For emergencies only. I'm serious." She gave him a pointed look.

It was nothing more than a tiny marble with a string of blood in the center. He slipped it into his pocket for safekeeping.

"Could you have done that without crushing the glass in your hands?"

"Sure, but it's less dramatic. I like to remind people I'm not so fragile." She giggled. "Hey. Thanks for inviting us out here with the tickets and all. It's been good to forget about everything at least for one night."

Eggman turned to her and leaned his elbow on the bar. "Nin Sheptilah," he said, "Miss Banana- try to keep it together when we go."

She blushed when he used her language. "Who taught you that word?" MARI was mostly correct. Nin is closer to the word 'lady' than it was 'queen'. To Sheptilah in this context it was like hearing the word 'honey' as a term of endearment.

"I picked it up listening to you." He lied.

"Do you want to learn some dirty Nannaeic words?" She grinned mischievously.

"Absolutely."
She taught him a few words, one of which he recognized.

"That's Latin. Et Latine loquimur."

"Scitis enim linguam?"

"Certe!"

She clapped her hands together. "Magna!"

"It's the root language for most modern languages spoken in this hemisphere. It's also one half of the root language for English; the other half is Germanic."

"First you are descended from the Hebrews, which by the way brought manna to the ziggurat so thank you for that, now you reveal that you speak a very ancient language. How old are you, really?" She did find great comfort in the fact that many things still have not changed. She was confident she would fit into this century just fine.

"I'll have you know I am forty-six years old," he smiled, "And full of surprises."

Espio silently left the room to go rejoin the rest of the Chaotix with the information he gathered.

"I heard there was a new Egg Boss." Vector was sitting in his chair with his feet on his desk. "I don't like it."

"It's good to know that I was right about the Stratosphere Club being parts of the Starlight Carnival but I wasn't expecting the boss to be an Overlander ." Espio leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. "She's also involved with GUN for some reason. Maybe we should ask Sonic about it
since Eggman's lair is on his island."

"Another magic using Overlander; because Regina wasn't more than enough trouble." Vector leaned back, the chair creaking under the strain.

"This Overlander has killed people according to Doctor Eggman himself," Espio grunted, "She was sad about it but I don't know what she was saying. She was speaking some foreign language the whole time so I only understood the Doctor's half of the conversation.

"She doesn't sound nice; killing people is mean and wrong." Charmy walked in holding a cold soda. He wasn't wrong but the statement certainly reflected his innocence.

"Most people involved with GUN have killed." Vector shrugged, "It's an unfortunate side effect of working for the military."

"Eggman said that they were going to go to the Basque region of Eurish… the spot between France and Spain. There's something important there they need to get." The chameleon tapped his foot impatiently.

"We should go to Seaside Island, interrogate Sonic and his friends and investigate the Overlanders for information!" Vector sat up abruptly.

"It's not like we have anything else to do…" Espio scratched his cheek.

"Ooh, are we going to see Sonic!?" Charmy hovered by flapping his wings at a super speed, "I'll pack the sunscreen!"
To say the way Eggman wrote his notes is messy is an understatement. He writes his thoughts as they come to him word-for-word and very sloppily. Sometimes he spends hours just trying to organize his notes later. He keeps lying to himself that one day he will write a program that will sort out his thoughts.

**SCEP TillAH Dossier** [rough draft] started 12/18

5’ 10” female Overlander, 120ish lbs, 5,000+ years old, relies on magic for communication

I have a feeling I’m misspelling her name in Romanization. Too much white hair. Why is it white? Is it because she’s so old? Skin is pale but not so pale as to be confused for a white person [would she be Persian by today’s standards? Maybe get a dna test]

Overly affectionate, openly suicidal, reckless, what’s going on here

Possibly BPD [???]

Maybe it’s spelled Cheptilah???

Actually maybe not, online symptom checker suggests ptsd instead

She challenged all the eggbosses to a fight one after the other and nearly got us both killed but impressively enough she made it all the way to nepthys!! She still can’t fight for beans. What does that say about my bosses?!

// IT SAYS THEY SUCK // - MARI

Despite the fact that when she bathes she doesn’t use soap but doesn’t smell bad. Doesn’t smell like anything, actually. Runs the water too damn hot. Ever hear of boiled bananas?

I think that oracle stone or whatever is its own thing and isn’t just an inanimate object

// EXCUSE ME, I SUGGESTED THAT // - MARI

Phonetically it is Shep-ti-ah, so maybe Sheptilah from now on. Some of the mobians call her Tilly so I will just use that

Purple eyes? Possibly blue-eyed but it’s so pale it turns purple because of the blood vessels under the iris

Mari says she understands some of her language and is trying to compile a small dictionary but it looks like it’s bits and pieces

Shadow the hedgehog is her familiar; not like a pet but like bound at the soul? They share powers, i think

Please stop crying you’re an adult
Cannot use chaos emeralds. Touching them burns her severely.

So then maybe they can’t share powers

We share nightmares sometimes. Looks like shadow connected too and tried to force her to wake up but no go

I found out today that we share sadness and happiness and pain, but nothing else. Not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. She also cannot dance well but that doesn’t seem to stop her

Subconsciously shape=shifts fangs when she’s trying to be threatening, doesn’t work. She looks like a kitten trying to be scary

She made shadow sparkly for a while that made my week too bad the glamor didn’t show up in photos or recorded video i could’ve used that kind of blackmail

SHE SPEAKS LATIN. WE HAVE A COMMON LANGUAGE. Maybe now we can get somewhere over digital lines

// THIS IS GOOD NEWS FOR ME, TOO. // - MARI

I’m thinking about how I had to hold her leg closed at the ziggurat. That was some bull, honestly. How is she supposed to survive in this century with such a bad iron allergy? Everything is iron or steel. Maybe it’s a good thing her people thought ahead to bond her with whomever found her. Then again, everything I do and have involves steel.

My robots, computers, my lair… no wonder she doesn’t want to stick around me for too long. I thought it was my personality. She keeps wandering around the lair, her bare feet making a papping sound on the floor.

She dragged me into the pool - I was so grateful I had the foresight to put on my swimsuit first. If I find a massive amount of hair in the pool drain I’ll know it was her.

// WE BOTH KNOW IF YOU FIND ANY HAIR IN THE POOL IT’S HER FAULT. YOU DON’T EVEN HAVE EYEBROWS. ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE A MAMMAL? PROVE THE MUSTACHE ISN’T GLUED ON // - MARI

Sometimes she’ll stop talking mid-sentence and forget what she was saying. I found her once crying in a closet. I don’t think she knows I was outside of it, but i just walked away.

This whole situation is a mess.

// HERE IS THE NANNAEIC-TO-ENGLISH GLOSSARY I PROMISED:

Nin: Queen, lady
Sheptilah: Banana
Pâdu: Prisoner
Khabu: To love
Anbar: Iron, steel
Eseru: To imprison
“Amy! Just the hedgehog I wanted to see!” Sheptilah was still in her clubbing clothes when she ran up to her friend on the beach. Amy was picking up trash left along the shore and putting it into a garbage bag.

“Why are you wearing boots on the beach?” The pink hedgehog raised an eyebrow.

“What? Oh this is basically the only civilian clothes I have.” She snapped her fingers and transformed back into her usual sarong. “Anyway, I was hoping to ask you for some advice. I want to build myself a little home around here but I have no idea what your local customs or laws are.”

“You just need a permit from the mayor; but today is a holiday so nobody is in city hall.” Amy smiled. “Want to help me clean up the beach?”

“Sure,” Tilly huffed, “But stay away from the water. It’s dangerous for now.”

“The ocean is always dangerous. It can, at any point, come and swallow you whole and nobody would ever find you again. Undertows, rogue waves, tsunamis…” Amy shuffled the bag to make more room for trash. “Sharks.”

“You kids are grim but you aren’t wrong.” With a flick of her wrist Sheptilah was able to pick up all the remaining trash she could see and directed it into the plastic bag Amy was holding. “If it’s a holiday, why are you out here cleaning?”

“We’re having our Christmas party out here. We stay up all night, weather permitting, and exchange gifts.” Amy tied the bag shut. “Thanks for making the clean up easy.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner.”
“Why do you want to build a house out here?” Amy walked toward a nearby trashcan and motioned for the woman to follow her.

“I can’t be too far away from the Doctor and making the staff takes a long time and I need to be able to sit and watch the pot boil, so to speak.” The cold sand felt nice on her bare feet.

“I don’t see why the mayor won’t give you a plot of land,” the pink hedgehog hesitated, “Do you think… you would need an apprentice to help you?”

“That’s what my familiar is for.” Sheptilah brushed her hair behind her ear.

“No, I mean like, a witch’s apprentice.” Amy’s cheeks got pinker in color.

“I probably can use all the help I can find. Would... you like to be my apprentice?”

Amy gasped softly. “I would be honored! A real witch!” She bounced on the soles of her feet. “I know where to start, too!”

The Overlander couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“You have five thousand years of magic to catch up on, first! There’s Eurish alchemy and tarot cards, the Salem grimoires, Aleister Crowley, daemonologie, for starters!” Amy grabbed Sheptilah’s hand and started jogging toward her house, “I think you even predate the Egyptian Book Of The Dead.”

“I don’t predate the Book Of The Dead.” Sheptilah tried to keep up with the hedgehog but Amy was quite fast for someone so little. “It was sort of a new thing when I was born… wait, hold on.”

Amy stopped in her tracks and looked back at the woman.

“I have to go with Eggman to get the giant pearl at the Aquarium Park ruins today. We’re leaving whenever he summons me.” She shrugged.

“Well… can I go with you? I can teach you stuff along the way!” Amy was very eager to get started on learning the old stuff after refreshing Sheptilah on the new stuff.

“I don’t know,” she scratched the back of her head, “I don’t think Doctor Eggman likes you very much and it might be dangerous.”

“Oh, please,” Amy smirked and summoned her hammer, “I can protect myself.”

“Oh, dear…” Tilly chuckled nervously. “I assume you never take no for an answer.”

“Only rarely!” She effortlessly supported the hammer across her shoulders. “This is Piko Piko.”

“What’s it made of?” She sounded hesitant and fearful.

“Solid steel.”

“Gods help me.”

What the Hell are Mobians made of, anyway?

Sheptilah went back into the lair to see if Eggman was still napping or preparing to leave for the
ruins of the Aquarium Park. Orbot and Cubot were preparing lunch for him in the kitchen.

“Where... Eggman?” She said in halting English.

Orbot turned to her and pointed downwards.

Ah, he is in the lab, she thought. She gave a thumbs up to the robots and meandered toward the stairwell. Her bare feet made little noise as she quietly checked each floor, which had its own lab, for the only other Overlander on the island.

A soft melody drifted up, echoing off of the metal walls. Sheptilah followed the sound and quickened her pace. The music was sad and slow as if the instrument was in pain.

It got louder as she got closer but soon a familiar voice followed behind the words like a ghost trailing the same path it traced for centuries- undisturbed by the objects in its path as it passed right through them.

Although Sheptilah couldn’t understand the words from the distance, she understood that it was melancholic.

“I heard there was a secret chord that David played and it pleased the Lord; but you don’t really care for music, do you?”

She approached ever closer to the source gingerly as if her moving through the voice could break it.

“It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth,”

“The minor fall and the major lift,”

“The baffled king composing hallelujah…”

She exited the stairwell as silently as she could, closing the door behind her. The long, lonely hallway was like a gateway to a mausoleum.

Sheptilah was nervous as she walked the empty hallway to the room on the far end. It was a large, well-lit room that contained nothing but a large black piano.

“I used to live alone before I knew you…”

Eggman was hunched over the keys with his back to the open door. Sheptilah crossed her arms and leaned against the doorway simply listening and smiling. Now that she was near enough the stone could translate what he was saying and her smile gradually became a frown.

At first Ivo was gently tapping the keys but soon was forcefully bringing his fingers down on them.

“It’s not a cry you can hear at night, it’s not someone who’s seen the light,” he inhaled sharply as if he was hit with something, “It’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah…” The words tumbled out over his tongue and past his lips like they were rats escaping a sinking vessel.

A song about love and loss, she understood, one that was every bit as painful to hear as it was to play. Her face grew warm and her eyes stung.

“Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah…”
Her lips parted and trembled as she struggled to fight back tears. She was feeling the full force of what he was feeling for once and it was a great deal of suffering.

“Halle-” He stopped abruptly. His hands hovered over the keys, hesitant to continue. He sensed her presence and knew she was watching.

“Sheptilah,” he did not turn around, “What is it you need from me?”

Good question.

“I’m sorry,” she rubbed her eye with her fist, “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.” Her breath hitched, trying to kick the rock from her throat. “The kids wanted to invite you to their Christmas thing tonight.”

“We’re leaving for the Aquarium Park ruins tonight, aren’t we?” He straightened up his posture.

“Well, that’s up to you.” She stepped into the room. “I understand if you don’t want to go to the party.”

He paused for a second and then sighed.

“Sit with me for a moment.” He scooted over on the piano bench and began to play a slower, more plodding melody. The first few chords played as if it was someone working up the courage to say what they were truly feeling, each word harder to speak than the last.

“You might like this one. It’s Clair De Lune, or Moonlight in French. It was composed to compliment a poem by the same name. I haven’t had to recite it since high school but I remember most of it.” He cleared his throat.

Sheptilah reluctantly approached him and sat beside him with her hands in her lap.

“Your soul is a delicate landscape,” the stone translated literally, “Where charming rogues roam… something, something…” While Ivo forgot the entire poem he did not forget the notes. Soon his fingers were moving to meet the necessary allegri and adagio.

Sheptilah swayed back and forth to the tempo. He gave up trying to remember the words and focused on the music.

“I like this one much better than the other song you were playing,” she sniffed, “Why were you feeling that bad?”

“Thinking about Lucinda.” He said without looking up from the keys. “How did you find me?” He continued to play.

“I followed your voice down the stairwell.”

“Funny, that’s how I found you,” he grinned, “Except it sounded like a ghoul wailing in pain.”

“Was I not a ghoul wailing in pain?” She shrugged.

“I think I’m going to pass on the furries’ Christmas special, Tilly.” He finished the piece.

“What instrument is this?”

“It’s a piano,” he dragged his fingers across the keys, “An original Steinway.”
“How does it work?” She was afraid if she stopped talking certain feelings would come back.

“There’s metal strings on the inside that are hit by little felt hammers when I press the keys. The inside is hollow so the sound echoes a bit.”

“So it’s similar to a harp,” she scratched her chin, “I played one, but it was a lot larger than the piano. It was taller than you, some notes you had to jump to hit.”

“One of these days I’d like to hear you play. MARI would love to learn some ancient music, I’m sure.”

Tilly blushed. “I’d love to at some point.”

“Can you sing?”

“Not to save my life,” she laughed, “Okay, I can mask it with a glamour but that’s about it. I was told once by Tiamatu that I sound like a dying cat.”

Eggman grinned, “I won’t ask you to sing, then. I came down here to play because music calms me. When I have trouble building things or making blueprints I simply come back to the piano and play a little. Helps me clear my head.”

Orbot and Cubot appeared with lunch for Eggman and some fruit for the woman.

“This may be cannibalism,” Orbot handed her a banana, “But it’s delicious cannibalism.”

Sheptilah held up the fruit between her fingers. “This is *cannibalism*,” she shook the fruit at Eggman, “but I will gladly consume it, regardless.”

Sonic and his friends had built a bonfire on the beach not far from Eggman’s lair. They were singing and dancing around it and tossing balled-up wrapping paper into the flames. Sheptilah and Eggman were standing out at the door with supplies for the trip. It was going to be just the two of them.

Perhaps Amy wouldn’t be too angry when Sheptilah got back, but she decided she didn’t want to get the little girl in more danger than necessary.

“Look at them prancing around like Pagans at a feast.” Eggman laughed.

“It’s not too late to go down there.” Tilly nudged the Overlander with her elbow.

“Oh, no,” he adjusted the pack on his shoulder, “I’d rather spend ten hours in an airship with you and the bots than ten minutes with those kids.”

“I’m so flattered,” Tilly laughed, “Okay… I want to have a little fun with them first.” She lifted a finger and traced a circle in the air. The fire extinguished on the logs, leaving the Mobians very confused.

Sonic re-lit the fire with a long match only to have it go out again.

Sheptilah was giggling. “See?”

Knuckles pushed Sonic back and yelled at the fire, demanding it come back. He believed he could do magic when the fire did light itself again and stayed lit.

“Well, you’re not very good at pranking people are you?” Eggman grinned.
“I don’t want to hurt them, they’re just kids.”

“They’ve been a pain in my ass for years.” He huffed.

“And you’ve been a pain in my ass for days!” She couldn’t help but laugh. “Come on, let’s go. Gaul is waiting.”
"I'm the god of fire!" Knuckles shouted. "Bow before me!"

"You're not the god of anything," Sticks huffed, "I think a fairy is playing a trick on us."

"Maybe," Amy crossed her arms, "Maybe not." She watched Knuckles prance around the fire and couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm.

Just then there was a whoosh that nearly put the fire out once again. Conveniently, the Chaotix appeared nearby by use of a warp ring.

"I told you we took a wrong turn! We needed to go left at the Cracker Barrel- Oh! Sonic!" Vector shouted.

"What brings you out here?" The blue hedgehog chuckled. "Merry Christmas, guys."

"Merry Christmas!" Charmy Bee shouted. "We're here to interrogate you!"

"If it's about the witch she's over at Eggman's lair." Sonic sat back down in the sand and strummed his guitar. "I think. That or she's at GUN with Shadow and Rouge. She kinda bounces between places."

"How did you know?" Espio curled up his tail.

"Rouge texted me that you guys got bounced out of the club and thought it was hilarious- and that you saw Eggman there. It was only a matter of time before you started asking about his Overlander friend." Sonic was not stupid, contrary to popular belief.

"They're headed for Spain," Vector put the warp ring away, "Looking for some giant pearl or something like that."

"Sheptilah said she'd come and get me when they were leaving. I volunteered to be her apprentice"
"Then why is an airship leaving?" Charmy pointed to the lair across the water. A small Egg Carrier emerged from behind it and flew off at breakneck speed.

Amy stomped her foot. "She left without me! I have a present for her, too!"

"Vector, we can beat them there with the warp ring." Espio nodded.

"Is that such a good idea? They're just going to the Aquarium Park ruins." Sonic shrugged.

"I acquired some intel from them earlier when they didn't know I was in the room. We want to conduct our own independent investigation on them." The chameleon shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I don't trust any Egg Bosses."

"She's not really a Boss," Amy explained, "They're just manipulating the other bosses into helping."

"No offense but after the Soumerca base incident I wanna avoid going anywhere with her." Sonic coughed.

"And then that nonsense at the ziggurat," Tails wagged his tails nervously, "I heard things, unholy things, went down over there."

"I would avoid going after them, period." Sticks butted in, "You can't trust a fairy!"

"Is she a fairy or a witch?" Vector was confused. "I thought you said she was a witch." He looked at Espio.

"She didn't have wings." Espio shrugged.

"I have wings and I'm not a fairy," Charmy pouted, "But it would be cool if I was one…"
"She's a wairy! A fitch?" Knuckles scratched his head. "A chairy! Wait…"

"Lady and gentleman, I am proud to welcome you aboard Eggman Airlines. Please remember Eggman Industries is not responsible for damaged items or loss of life during the trip." MARI's sarcastic voice filled the cabin, "Keep your hands and legs inside the vehicle at all times. We're going to Ibiza!"

"MARI, don't you dare." Eggman threatened the disembodied entity as he shoved some things into an overhead compartment. It was a small ship but it was big enough for the two Overlanders and the little robots in compact mode.

"Woah! We're going to Ibiza!" MARI began to sing along to the VengaBoys song. "We're gonna have a party!"

"MARI, I will walk back into my lair and unplug you right now!" That song irritated him to no end.

"Ee-oh ee-oh oh way-oh oh way-oh..." The AI teased, "Thank you for flying Eggman Airways…" She giggled.

"Ibiza?" Sheptilah laughed. "Uh…"

"No, we're not going to Ibiza," the man huffed, "Ibiza is an island off the coast of Spain. MARI is just pushing my buttons."

"Nin Sheptilah," MARI spoke, "D'jen mi ?"

"Huh?" Tilly looked at Eggman, eyebrow raised. "Why is your robot calling me sweetie?"

"Nin means sweetie?"
"No, uh, in this context it's like infantilizing, my name comes first. It is properly said as 'Sheptilah nin'. So it's like calling me 'little girl' or 'sweetie'."

"MARI, don't try talking to her for a while." Eggman buckled himself in. "In fact... MARI, shut down for the ride."

"Goodbye…" MARI said and did not speak again.

Eggman took off with great speed, forcing the woman to yelp. He couldn't help but laugh at her reaction.

"Shadow is going to kill me when he finds out I did this without his supervision." Her knuckles were white from gripping the armrests so hard.

"You're an adult; you don't need supervision."

"This is true," she let go of the armrests, "But still, they don't like us being alone together. They think I'm going to let you indoctrinate me. Then again, you did put a mind control thing into the crown you so warmly gifted- so maybe they have a point."

He choked. "You knew about it?"

"Mhm, that's why the crown was conveniently 'lost' at the North Pole."

"I was taking precautions." He set the ship to autopilot so he could sit back and relax a bit.

"You moron- we're bonded. If you had rendered me unable to function you would've done the same to yourself! How many times do I have to go through this with you? You have to treat me like you'd treat yourself!"

"You have to treat me like you'd treat yourself," he mocked, "Oh, please. You don't want me to treat you like I treat myself. I haven't so much as looked at a vegetable in years."
She snapped her fingers and changed into her Egg Boss uniform sans the jacket. She sighed and rubbed her temples. "I'll never get used to all the iron."

"Headache? It's probably from the change in air pressure. Just pop your ears."

"No," she sighed, "It even makes my teeth hurt. It's all the iron."

"I'm sorry," he actually apologized, "Maybe enough exposure to it will build up a tolerance."

"I hope so."

The silence between them was weird, they both felt the urge to fill it with their voices but neither of them wanted to initiate.

After about ten minutes of uncomfortable quiet Eggman finally asked the loaded question.

"Is your Oracle Stone alive?"

"What?"

"Is that rock on your chest alive? Like, is it its own thing?"

"No, it's just my stone. It's not alive," she tapped it with her fingernail, "Solid magic rock."

"... Sometimes," he paused, "Sometimes it seems like it's talking to us when it takes over."

"That's my subconscious talking to you, sort of like sleep-talking; but it can't tell you anything I don't already know. When it takes over it's pure instinct."

"Ah," he laughed, "I was a little worried you were actually two things and not just one."
"I am two things," she held up two fingers apart and then brought them together, "Me and my familiar make one complete being."

"You know what I meant." he stuck out his tongue.

It was a long flight, but not quite as long as Sheptilah expected it to be. They killed time by playing cards together.

"Got any threes?" Eggman looked up from his hand.

"Go fish?" Sheptilah was having a hard time remembering the rules and remembering what symbols meant what numbers. Thankfully, she could count the number of suits on each card. "Wait, here's one." She handed the three of spades to him.

"A-ha! I win!" He laid out the final cards across the small table and grinned widely. He had most of the cards whereas Sheptilah didn't and this was the fifth time he won in a row.

"Ah, you're cheating!"

"How could someone cheat at go fish?"

"You're the Doctor Eggman- you could probably cheat at solitaire. Well, at least when it's just us I know you're not raising any Hell so I'll gladly play again."

"I'm actually getting bored. We should eat." He pulled a small bag out from under his seat and handed it to her. "I quickly put together something for you yesterday."

"What is it?"

"Calorie-dense foods. Typically this is for people who are ill or very old, but since you are sort of both you can bulk back up to where you're supposed to be."
She unzipped the bag. Inside were dried dates, trail mix, bottles of weight-gain smoothies and other goodies.

"For your height, which is five-foot-ten, your ideal healthy weight is somewhere around one-hundred-and-fifty. You're currently at one-twenty-five, if we're not counting your three pounds of hair."

"Twenty-five pounds, huh?" She tried to imagine herself as being a little heavier, "Are you sure that's enough?"

"Give or take," he shrugged, "I'm not a nutritionist but I can see your ribs. Doesn't take someone with a degree in medicine to tell you that's probably not healthy for someone your height."

She ran her fingers up and down her ribs, feeling the ridges. "Yeah, you're right." She opened a bag of dates and chewed on one wrinkled fruit. "Why are you being nice?"

"You ate an entire head of lettuce the other day. I was disturbed." He grinned. In reality, he kind of liked having someone to talk to and care for a little.

"You're a bad liar," she smirked, "You like me."

"And you like me," he looked over the rim of his glasses at her, ruby irises peeking out, "You haven't threatened to kill me once today."

"Mmm," she swallowed her food, "You're right." Her phone chimed. She pulled it from her pocket and unlocked the screen.

"Oh," she placed the phone on the table, "Can you read the message for me?"

Eggman carefully picked up the phone and looked at it.

[Shadow] Where are you?
[Shadow] Nobody is answering the door at the lair.

"He wants to know where you are."

"Tell him," she urged.

[Banana] This is Eggman. She's on an Egg Carrier with me.

[Banana] We're going to retrieve the pearl.

[Shadow] Without telling me?

[Banana] It's not going to take that long.

[Shadow] Eggman.

[Banana] What?

[Shadow] Shadow is typing…

"It says he's been typing for three minutes now. Is he sending me a dissertation?" Eggman pouted. "He must be angry."

[Shadow] Fine. Don't die.

"He says don't die." He handed the phone back to Tilly.

She sighed. "I think he's secretly relieved he doesn't have to spend more time with you." She slipped the phone back into her pocket and leaned back.
"Honestly I'd rather be with you than at GUN; at least you don't have an armed guard escort me all over the place."

"I am the armed guard." He pulled out a bag of beef jerky for himself.

"It's a little red fox named Apollo. He's my assigned chaperone or something, I guess. Both iron fortresses are on islands by the sea but yours at least has a garden. Orbot and Cubot are also really cute."

She finished off the bag of dates and opened the little plastic container with the drink in it.

For the first time in her life she tasted chocolate.

"Whatever this is, it's amazing!" She guzzled the shake down, stars in her eyes.

"You've never had chocolate?"

"No!"

"You poor woman."

Vector bid the group goodbye and brought his warp ring out. "Let's hope we don't get lost in France like last time."

Charmy and Espio jumped into the ring. Amy dove in after them without getting permission. Before any of them could react the warp ring had closed.

The Aquarium Park ruins were just that: ruins. Scaffolding and shattered glass filled the small,
uninhabited city-sized dump, jutting dangerously outward just begging for someone to fall onto it. It was obvious some time was spent breaking down the buildings and rides to recycle the parts, but then abandoned later for other endeavors.

Rusted out remains of Egg Pawns and Crabmeats lay strewn about haphazardly.

Eggman and Sheptilah had landed not far from the Chaotix's location and prepared to disembark. He handed her a hard hat and work gloves to wear. He put on his own set of gloves and hard hat.

"Safety first! Try not to get impaled on anything this time." He remembered the incident back at the ziggurat. Damn, this woman gets eviscerated a lot, he thought. Like, a lot.

"I just ate a bunch of food," she adjusted her backpack. "I'm gonna do my best to keep it on the inside."

"I hear voices!" Charmy shouted. He flew up over the rubble and spotted Eggman and Sheptilah's Egg Carrier. He pointed to their location. "There they are!"

"You've gotta be kidding me." Eggman sighed. Squinting, he looked up and shaded his eyes with his hand. "Is that Charmy Bee? The Chaotix are here?"

Vector's imposing crocodile silhouette appeared over the edge of a pile of trash. "Yeah! We're here, and you've got some explaining to do, Eggman."
"How could you leave me behind?!" Amy trudged over the pile of garbage and pushed past Vector. "That's so mean!"

"Amy!" Sheptilah cried out. "As you can see it's dangerous as all Hell out here; what are you doing?"

"I'm coming to kick your butt for lying to me!" The pink hedgehog took out her hammer.

"You kids are not genre savvy, are you? We wanted to get this done as quickly as possible because if anything is gonna attack us it's usually at this part of the story." Eggman was shouting, his face red with anger. Orbot and Cubot floating nearby tried to calm him down, afraid he'd give himself a stroke.

"Leave. Now!" Sheptilah stepped up on the rubble and pushed Vector back. "Before I warp all of you back myself!"

"You are so rude!" Charmy flew up to the witch and stuck his tongue out at her.

"I'll show you rude!" She stepped back and tore open a portal to the island. "Step in or I will throw you in."

"Stop. There will be no fighting," Espio tried to calm them, "We've been lost out here for hours looking for them. We should just take this opportunity to-" The chameleon was cut off by Vector knocking him out of the way.

"We want to know what you're up to!" The crocodile roared. His breath was rancid. Sheptilah winced but did not look away.

"I already explained all of it," Amy leaned on her hammer, "You don't believe me?"

"I want to hear it straight from the horse's mouth." The crocodile peered down at the woman past his long snout.
"We're going to get a giant pearl and then we are getting the Hell out of Dodge," Eggman put a meaty hand on the witch's shoulder and pulled her back as he spoke, "And we're going to do it in one piece; whether you idiots bother us or not."

Sheptilah created a great gust of wind that picked up Amy along with the Chaotix and pushed them into the portal. She then closed it and beamed at Eggman.

Just then the group re-appeared with the use of a warp ring.

"You can't get rid of us that easily." Espio chuckled.

"So you're a queen." Vector huffed.

"Yes, I was a queen." Sheptilah was following behind Eggman who was using a map on his gauntlet to find the location of the grand hotel.

"And Shadow is your familiar."

"Yes."

"And Eggman is your guardian?"

"Yes!" Sheptilah was intensely annoyed by something but she couldn't put her finger on what. It was not the incessant questions from the crocodile but something far less tangible. Something about the area was pissing her off and making her hair stand on end. She shrugged it off and chalked it up to all of the raw iron laying about.

"So you are literally torn between two massive entities; both GUN and Eggman Industries." Espio butted in.

"Absolutely," Sheptilah nodded, "And that's why I am not in one place for long because it hurts to be separated; but it doesn't matter because I will always be away from one or the other."
"So sever the bond." Amy shrugged.

"GUN won't allow it and it's the only incentive they have to keep the good Doctor here from dying in a cell." The witch gestured toward the man.

"I am highly desired." He joked.

After walking among the rubble for what felt like hours, they finally came upon the remains of what was once a deluxe hotel. In the chandelier centerpiece was the giant pearl, just waiting for them. Orbot and Cubot were lamenting over how badly the place had decayed.

"It's perfect!" Sheptilah pulled the pearl free and tore open a portal to the lair, dropping the pearl at the door. "Are you going?" She asked the Chaotix.

"I guess we should." Vector looked over at the very sleepy Charmy floating beside him, rubbing his eyes. "We'll be keeping an eye on you, witch."

She sighed, letting her shoulders drop. "I have nothing to hide." She heard a chittering sound behind her. "Hm?" She turned to see it was an adorable little wisp. A drill wisp, to be exact. "Aw! You're cute."

"You should get out of here," it told her, "It's not safe here."

"Why is it not safe here?" She tilted her head. The wisp gestured to Eggman.

"I guess some of these wisps are still around," Eggman groaned, "I thought they were all released."

"This isn't a will-o-the-wisp." She seemingly ignored its warning, following it with her eyes as it bounced from side-to-side. "So what kind of wisp is it?"

"Little aliens I enslaved for their power."
"You enslaved these little things? You are a monster."

"You're just figuring this out now?" He flashed a crooked smile.

Sheptilah rolled her eyes and then turned to the wisp. "Are you alone?"

"Don't let it touch you," Amy walked up to it, "You'll absorb its power and turn into a drill."

Something fell over and startled the wisp, causing it to flee to the nearby pink hedgehog and she absorbed its power. She immediately turned into a drill and dove straight for the ground, unable to control the direction she went in or for how long.

The building shook violently and collapsed on everyone near instantly.

Then there was the sound of coughing and debris settling.

"Groan if you're alive." Eggman choked.

"I cannot move my legs," Espio's voice sounded panicked, "I cannot see anything."

"Hold on." Sheptilah sat up. She made a will-o-the-wisp to light the way. They had evidently fallen into some kind of old tunnel with the debris blocking the way out. "You okay?" Tilly asked Eggman. He had a small cut on his scalp which she promptly healed.

"Yeah," he smiled, "Thanks."

The witch wiped the dust out of her eyes, cursing loudly.

"Language! We say 'fudge' in this family." Charmy scolded her.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Tilly was embarrassed that she forgot the little bee child was there. "Well, we
know Charmy is okay."

"Aah!" There was a distant scream followed by a heavy thud and the sound of more rocks falling. It was Amy hitting a wall; evidently the wisp ran out of energy and escaped somewhere, leaving the hedgehog to fend for herself in the dark.

"Help, please." Espio's legs were trapped under a large chunk of scaffolding.

"Espio!" Vector cried. "I got you, buddy!" He hooked his fingers under the steel beam and strained to lift it.

"Don't move it!" Eggman shouted. "It might be the only thing keeping him alive. Look," he pointed to the pool of blood under Espio, "See that?"

"That's mine?" The chameleon sounded eerily calm. "I can't…"

"Hang on, buddy!" Charmy sobbed.

Amy trudged along the muddy ground in the dark toward the noises.

"Ivo, help Vector lift the beam. I can help Espio." Sheptilah nodded. She scooted over to the chameleon and lifted his head into her lap. His pupils were large and his breathing rapid but shallow.

"He's in shock from blood loss," Eggman stated the obvious, "What if his legs are no longer connected?"

"I can put them back," she shrugged, "I've reattached limbs." She stroked the area around Espio's horn to make him fall asleep. She let his head rest on the ground and hooked her hands under his arms. "Now you can lift it. I'll pull him out."

The Overlander and the crocodile worked together to lift the beam. They strained against its weight but the two of them combined was just enough to get Espio free. Sheptilah pulled the chameleon out and was relieved to see his legs were still attached, but barely.
She magically drew up his blood and put it back into his body. She then healed him and felt for his heartbeat in his wrist: it was thready but it was there.

Eggman and Vector let the beam drop.

"He'll be okay; he just needs a little sleep." Sheptilah gave Eggman her pack to carry and picked Espio up, carrying him on her back. "Oh gods he weighs more than Shadow does." She sighed. "Seriously, what are you kids made of?"

"My mom said I was made of honey and love," Charmy buzzed over to the witch and hugged her face, "Thank you for saving my friend!"

"Aw, it's my job." Tilly giggled. "Okay, okay! You're gonna rub my skin off."

"Yeah, thanks." Vector peered at her suspiciously. "Why did you help?" He asked Eggman.

"Because Miss Witch asked me to." He shrugged.

"Where's Amy?" Vector heard someone vomit further away, "I think that's her."

"Ow, I'm so dizzy." The hedgehog coughed. "What happened?"

"You turned into a drill and now we're under the junk heap in a tunnel," Eggman sounded annoyed, "Also the chameleon almost died."

"What?" Amy choked. "Is he okay?"

"He'll be ok," Sheptilah nodded. "You okay?"

The hedgehog nodded. She was physically okay but emotionally she was wracked with guilt.
"Tilly, open a portal so we can go home." The Overlander looked around. "Where's Orbot and Cubot?!

"Boss! We're back here behind the rubble." Orbot yelled. "Can you see us?" He pushed a rock out of the way and peered outside. The group could see his little blue eyes glowing in the darkness.

"Where's Cubot?" Eggman looked at the trash pile and knew he couldn't get them free without everything collapsing on them.

"I'm over here." The little yellow bot chirped.

"Ivo? I can't get any knots open. I feel there's some but they won't open." It was not budging whatsoever.

"Why not?" Vector took Espio from the woman. He didn't trust her not to drop him.

"Hey," Amy felt the walls, "Bring that will-o-the-wisp closer."

Tilly pushed the wisp forward. The walls revealed anti-witchcraft runes etched in them.

"Where are we?" Charmy flew behind Vector. "So creepy."

"Oh my gods, this is a necropolis." Sheptilah pulled Amy closer. "This is why I was freaking out so much earlier. I was reacting to the runes under my feet."

"Necropolis? Like catacombs?" Vector sounded fearful, "Like… lots of dead bodies?"

"We're between France and Spain, right? Those two countries are famous for their catacombs. Especially after the black death ravaged the area during the middle ages." Amy crossed her arms. "You put your junkyard on top of a cemetery, you huge idiot."
"I didn't know!" Eggman said. "This area was supposed to be totally uninhabited."

"To be fair... a cemetery isn't really inhabited." Sheptilah sighed. "Great. This place has anti-magic runes and I guarantee you there are ghosts."

"So how do we get out?" Charmy asked the question on everyone's mind.

"We gotta go forward. There's always an exit or two to these kinds of places." Amy sighed. "I'm sorry I got us into this mess."

"Well, nothing is ever easy with us, is it?" Eggman tried to comfort her a little. "If it wasn't you who sent us up the creek it was probably going to be Banana Brains over here."

"Don't be rude," Tilly snorted, "But Amy is right; we gotta go forward."

"Into the necropolis." Vector shuddered. "This is the worst day."

It wasn't so bad. The tunnel was long and winding but they did not encounter any bodies at first. Most of what they did encounter was mud and old bones stacked in piles. Eventually they came to a fork that diverged in two directions.

In the wall was etched Sceleratis on the left tunnel, Sanctus to the right.

"Unholy and Holy," Eggman read, "Why is it in Latin? It should be in Basque."

"No, Latin is the vernacular of the ancient Christians." Amy explained. "The 'unholy' half is probably non-Christian and pagan corpses or those that died in massive groups and couldn't be sorted. 'Holy' must be everyone else."

"Why do you know so much about this kind of stuff?" Charmy was impressed.

"I love the occult!" Amy beamed. "And I'm training to be Sheptilah's apprentice. I have to know all
"Hello?" Sheptilah called into the left tunnel. "Salve!"

"Manes quis hic?" Eggman called into the right side. Neither got a response.

"It doesn't matter which road we take," Amy took charge, "Because both halves are going to have lots of anti-magic charms."

"The irony in using magic to repel magic never ceases to amuse me." The witch dug into her pack for some food. She split it up among all of them evenly so they could ration their own shares. "I want to go down the unholy side. It sounds like my kind of people."

As they walked the tunnel the mud became dry, hard cobblestone and the walls expanded to the point where it was is if they were in a giant room. Lots of caskets, ossuaries and miscellaneous piles of bones, both human and Mobian, littered the area.

"This place is sacred so I shouldn't have to tell anyone not to take anything." Amy took a stern tone.

"You don't have to tell me twice." Vector's teeth chattered.

"If you can't use magic how come you can still heal and speak?" Eggman was curious about these anti-witchcraft runes and wanted to know their limits. He was made mental note of what they looked like so he could exploit it later.

"Localized," Sheptilah shrugged, "As long as you're near me the stone will translate and my healing is an intrinsic skill. I'm pretty sure the runes are meant to keep witches and the like out, so I can't open portals to or from this place."

"This place feels so calm." Amy inhaled deeply. "And it smells like flowers."

"I smell it, too," Tilly sighed, "Perfume, maybe? Or incense?"
"Incense," Eggman huffed, "Who would be burning incense down here hundreds of years after burial?"

Little pairs of golden lights appeared in the darkness. The eyes of ghosts disturbed by the presence of the living were like hundreds of candles suddenly coming alight.

"Hic omnes qui ingrediuntur caveant," a small voice spoke, "Hoc est locus mortuorum."

"Ghosts!" Vector yelped.

“Ghoulies!” Charmy cried out. “Don’t eat my soul!”

"Shh," Sheptilah said, "Amicis, quomodo relinquere nos."

"Tu scis verbis nostris?" A different voice responded.

"Ita vero." Eggman moved closer to Tilly.

The ghosts lit up the room with their powers. It took the form of a flowery field that extended in all directions endlessly. The ghosts were wearing clothes from different periods of time.

"We have not had visitors in quite a while," a ghost of an older black man spoke, "Forgive us if we scared you."

Sheptilah smiled. "You didn't scare us. Why are you still here in the catacombs? You should be On The Other Side."

"We're stuck here." The ghost of a small girl holding her pet kitten ran up to them. "The runes that keep you out keep us in." The little girl offered her kitten to pet but when Sheptilah tried to her hand simply passed through the specter.

Charmy tried to smell the flowers but frowned when he, too, passed through them.
Espio stirred from his sleep. "What happened?" He tried to sit up in Vector's arms but couldn't.

"Hey, buddy!" The crocodile smiled, "You got hurt but the witch here saved you."

"Hmm… I remember now," he gave his feet a cursory wiggle, "Thank you."

Sheptilah nodded at the chameleon.

"For hundreds of years we've existed together like so. We learned how to manipulate our surroundings but not much else." The old man ghost looked sad.

"Why can't you leave through the exit?" Eggman was getting used to the occult at this point.

"There is no exit. The whole place is sealed. If you made a big hole in the wall then we could leave." A different ghost responded.

Sheptilah pulled her grimoire from her headspace and flipped through the pages. There was nothing in it about breaking charms from inside them and Shadow still had the royal grimoire.

"I can make a big hole." Amy took out her hammer. "Just tell me where to smash!" More ghosts appeared and began to congregate around the group, quiet chatter echoing from their incorporeal forms.

"We have no idea how far down we are or if there’s anything above us,” Eggman reminded the hedgehog, “If we’re under a river we would drown.”

"Well, where did you come in from?" An older woman asked.

"Hole in the floor, but it's been sealed off by debris." The hedgehog said. “A cave-in occurred in an abandoned junk yard.”
"So make another hole in the floor right next to it." A small cat Mobian child said matter-of-factly.

“Hmm?” Tilly raised an eyebrow, “Dig ourselves out?”

Eggman dragged his hand down his face. "We're a bunch of idiots."

"Why didn't we think of that!?” Vector huffed. "We really are a bunch of dummies. Occam’s Razor! Obviously the floor was the thinnest where we fell in and we know there's not much above it that could fall on us."

Sheptilah put her grimoire back in her head and turned to the ghosts. "Follow us. We'll get you out of here."

The group led the ghosts down the corridors. There were thousands of ghouls just lingering around though most were afraid of the living people that occasionally wandered through the crypts so they hid. Word spread quickly that the living visitors were going to get them out so they could be reunited with the rest of the dead and excited chatter soon filled the tunnels.

They asked so many questions of the living and wanted to know what was happening on the outside. In the dark, Sheptilah took Eggman's hand and squeezed it. Initially he didn't return the gesture but gave in and held hers. He wasn't sure why she did that but was happy she did and occasionally squeezed her hand back.

"It was here," Amy pointed to the rubble, "But I wonder how much of the building came down on top of us."

"Back up," Amy wanted to have lots of room to swing her hammer, "Time to bring down the house!"

“Hopefully not literally.” Vector whined.

Swinging upwards was a bit difficult but she managed to get a hole big enough for them to climb out of after a few tries. After determining the safety of the tunnel she broke down the boulder blocking Orbot and Cubot, freeing them.
Eggman gave Sheptilah a boost out of the hole and in turn she helped pull everyone up. The ghosts immediately started pouring out of the opening, making the air shimmer like glitter as they successfully passed on to be with everyone else who had gone before them. Many of them muttered quiet thanks and prayers as they vanished. Others laughed happily now that they were free to explore the planet.

"Thank you, Amy. I'm glad you came. You proved invaluable to us." Sheptilah embraced the hedgehog after pulling her to the surface.

"But I'm what got you in trouble in the first place!"

"And you got us out of it!" She let a few hot tears roll down her cheeks. "And we freed thousands of spirits because of you."

"Why are you crying now?" Eggman tapped his foot.

"These ghosts get to go home and be with their loved ones, now. Isn't that beautiful?" Tilly's happy sobs caused Amy to cry tears of joy, too.

"Yeah," he admitted, "I guess it is."

“I wonder how many other crypts are full of ghosts who cannot leave them because of runes,” Espio spoke quietly, “How sad they must be to be trapped.”

“Maybe someday we can go to some famous crypts and find out!” Amy wiped her tears away with the back of her hand, “That could be fun.”

“Hard pass.” Charmy shook his head, “Hard, hard pass!”
Jewel

For a long time after retrieving the pearl there was a welcome lull in excitement for Sheptilah. Although she continued to bounce between the lair and GUN she was comfortable with doing so. She hoped she was building up an immunity to all of the iron rather than just becoming used to the constant, throbbing pain in her body.

January sped by. Sheptilah, with Amy's help, refurbished an old abandoned shack in the forest. It took a long time and a lot of lumber but they succeeded in getting it to not fall over in the slightest breeze. However, no amount of work they did could stop the leak in the roof whenever it rained.

"Hey, Tilly?" Amy was sorting through the random items Sheptilah had picked up including the spices pilfered from Eggman's pantry.

"Yeah?" The witch was on the roof patching the thatches.

"When's your birthday?"

"Oh, uh," she had to think for a second, "It already passed. Birthdays aren't a big deal for us, and I'm only turning thirty-three."

"Five thousand two hundred and thirty three," Amy corrected her, "And happy belated birthday! They're big deals for us so next time give us warning!"

Sheptilah laughed. "Alright, fine, I'm ancient! Old as dirt! Older than-"

"You're an antique," Eggman chimed in, "It's much more polite to put it that way."

"Ivo?"

"I'm down here." He responded. He had a briefcase in his hand. "I'm actually looking for Amy. The blue rat said she'd be out here."
"Eggman?" Amy poked her head out the window.

"Fuzzy Puppy Buddies released some new blind packs and I've got doubles. I was wondering if you wanted to trade?" His voice had a higher inflection and he bounced on his toes.

"That stuff's back at my house," Amy brushed her hair out of her face, "We're kinda working on our apothecary here."

"On your what?" Eggman sulked. "A witch house?"

Sheptilah jumped down and landed in front of Eggman. She was sweaty and a bit dirty. Her hair was tied into a bun and her clothes were a simple black dress and a leather apron with a large front pocket.

"You're a terrible liar! You came to see me." She said smugly.

"What if both things are true?" He grinned. "I've got news about the witch-eaters too."

Amy and Sheptilah sat next to each other at her heavy wooden table while Eggman sat across from them. The hut was large and well-furnished with overstuffed shelves and wooden chests strewn about. He placed some papers on top of the table and slid it toward Amy.

"Mordred, the Egg Boss of Eurish if you remember, his team found some evidence of wiccaphage activity."

"Wiccaphage?" Amy's brow creased.

"Yes, as in 'witch-eater'. Wicca meaning witch and phage meaning to eat."

"Wicca is a religion, but go on." Amy rolled her eyes.

"Anyway," Eggman cocked his head, "They found the same kind of iron-dissolving marks on nearby buildings from a few years ago. Thunderbolt's people interviewed the locals and found that
there were odd disappearances years ago as well."

"When was the moon destroyed?" Sheptilah bit her thumbnail.

"Around the same time," he sighed, "So they immediately started causing trouble."

"But then… I should've been awoken immediately. The burst of energy that attracted you in the first place was the only one sent out."

"I was out there for something else. Finding you was an accident." Eggman pulled on his glove, "I didn't go out there after the burst of energy; it happened after I arrived."

She crossed her legs and bounced her foot nervously, "Why would the magic choose you?" She jumped up and grabbed the royal grimoire, dropped it on the table and began flipping through the pages.

"Un-fudging-believable," she pulled out some of the bookmarks, "Okay." She paused. The spell listed in the book was slightly different from the one that was imposed upon her. It wasn't unusual for a mage to alter a spell to suit their needs but it was rude of them to not apply their notes to it.

"What is it?" Eggman adjusted his glasses.

"Nobody kept their damned notes the way they should've. Then again, I guess they all died after they sealed me up." The witch crossed her arms. "I honestly don't know why you were chosen."

"Divine retribution for blowing up the moon in the first place!" Amy flashed a sharp-toothed grin. All of the Mobian hedgehogs had fangs, but Amy rarely showed hers.

"Unless… there is a theory," Sheptilah interrupted, "About the sun and the moon."

"A theory or a prophecy?" The hedgehog mused.

"The Red King and the White Queen. The sun and the moon 'marry'," she used air quotes, "Or
come together soul-to-soul. It's an allegory of two conflicting forces coming together to create the rebis. I think the rebis would be whatever we defeat these wiccaephages with. It's gotta be the staff my mothers designed."

Amy gripped the table. "Where does this leave Shadow?" Her heart was beating hard and fast. All of this was exciting to her.

"Shadow is the third facet in the Tria Prima! He's salt! Salt is all about what's left over between life and death, right? And we all know his story fits that allegory. Gods, it makes so much sense!" Sheptilha grabbed a pencil and flipped to a blank page in the grimoire and started scribbling in cuneiform.

"The Universe is bringing us together to fulfill this alchemic theory," Sheptilha spoke rapidly, "I should've known. There's always a reason for something."

"What the heck are you talking about?" The Overlander was very confused.

"Eggman, you're the sun." The little pink apprentice slammed her fist on the table. "The Universe chose you for this on purpose. That's why the crystal didn't call for you until you were close enough. You were predestined for this. All three of you. Mercury, sulfur and salt are what metaphorically make up all of the Universe."

"But marriage?" He squinted.

"It's not literal, you doofus," Tilly stuck out her tongue, "I'm the moon and you are the sun." She brushed her hair behind her ear. "Sulfur and mercury."

"It makes so much sense!" Amy jumped up, slamming her hands down with a loud slap. "Mercury is the moon, right? Mercury is a shapeshifting material both literally and metaphorically. That's what you are, Sheptilha! And Eggman is sulfur! Active, fiery and volatile!" She jumped up and down. "Oh my God! It's all coming together!"

"Ladies," Eggman was thrown off guard by their enthusiasm, "The sun?"

"You were meant to be together!" Amy sighed wistfully. "It's almost romantic."
Sheptilah bit her lip, she didn't want the budding feelings known to anyone. She hadn't even told her familiar. It was a simple crush, nothing more.

"Amy, you need to lay off the pulp novels." Eggman chuckled.

"Sulfur represents wants and desires," Tilly interrupted again, "Salt is the manifestation of hard work and mercury is the constant movement between shapes."

"You're always pursuing your goals, Shadow is an engineered being and Sheptilah is always moving between here and GUN and moving between shapes." Amy explained. "Sheptilah has white hair and you wear red, primarily."

Eggman's eyes grew a bit wider with understanding. "And sulfur smells like eggs."

Sheptilah sat down and rested her head on her grimoire. "My head hurts."

"My mind is blown," the hedgehog squealed, "Oh my gosh!"

"Before we get any further off topic," Eggman snapped his fingers to get their attention, "The Avalon Egg Boss has been able to collect samples of the phages. Now we can try to track them globally. We may not even need to complete the staff."

"He did? That's great!" Tilly felt her heart lighten.

"Yes. I've already begun working on the device that will search for traces of them. Currently what tracking technology we have for living organisms isn't sophisticated enough to detect residue globally. You have to be in the area for it to scan anything." He scratched his forehead, "which means putting yourself at risk for being attacked by one."

"Please send a sample of the phages to GUN as well." Sheptilah pressed her palms together and brought her fingers up to her mouth as if she was praying.
"You can do that yourself. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't accept any packages from me." Eggman shook his head.

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**SHEPTILAH DOSSIER … last edited 2 / 25**

I have my suspicions about the Oracle Stone. I feel this urge to grab it sometimes to see what it feels like but I know I would pull back a bloody stump.

So much information was dumped on me earlier. Supposedly the universe intentionally brought all three of us together to save our planet.

It seems like the 'sun' and the 'moon' are supposed to survive together, but it makes me wonder. There's something, dare I say, bewitching, about her.

I question whether or not it's me feeling her feelings, my own or the bond that forced us together in the first place. What's real anymore? At least she's healthier and happier now, but so far she seems irritated with me whenever I'm around. Very cold and distant.

I went back to the catacombs in Eurish and took some photos of the runes on the walls. That along with a very strong iron box would make a suitable cage for her. Hopefully I can study her more and have a more complete dossier. If she's trapped in that box I can do whatever I like to her without the bond affecting me!

I wonder if a raw iron collar and shackles is enough? I may not even need a box. That may make her limbs fall off, though.

"You got any love potions?" Rouge giggled. She went up to the large window and called in.

"No, I don't do love potions but I can tell your future! It says I'll be right out." Sheptilah stood up from the table and went to the door. "Where's Shadow?"
"He's talking to Sonic about collecting the last four Chaos Emeralds. That doctor back at the lab is still pressing for you. We keep telling him no but he refuses to let it go. President Tower is starting to press for your blood sample as well." The bat frowned, "You have no real choice now."

Tilly raised her hand to hush the bat. "Eggman is here."

Rouge's mouth became a tight line. "Sorry."

"Oh, don't be sorry. Come on in, I was about to make some fried honey bread." The witch smiled brightly.

"Tails," Shadow's voice was low and growly, "I would like to get the Emeralds some time this century."

"I'm working on it! Jeez. You're immortal- all you have is time." The fox typed away at his laptop. "One is in a museum in Dubai. If they refuse to lend it you could probably replace it with a fake and they'll never know. That just leaves us with three to find. I'll keep the program running at all times and I'll contact you once we find something."

"Dubai?" Sonic furrowed his brow. "Isn't that where the cops drive Lamborghinis and Bugattis?" He laughed, slapping his knee. "Could you imagine the cops chasing Shadow in one of those?"

"They'd never catch me," the black hedgehog smirked, "But it would be entertaining to see them try."

Tails frowned. "They're also known for brutality."

Shadow waved off his concerns. "I can teleport in and out before their cameras even notice. GUN has diplomats in the Arab Emirates so I highly doubt it'll come to that."

"I hope I don't have to bail you out of prison," Sonic shrugged, "It's been nice seeing you, though. How goes the work on the witch-eater things?"
Shadow winced. "Don't even bring it up. We haven't found a damn thing and it's driving Hope up the wall. She seems to think they're responsible for the small quakes in the ocean. I keep reassuring her she's just stressing out over not having any real answers."

"That bad, huh? If we got a sample we could build a tracker." Tails sighed. "Sorry I couldn't be more help."

"So it's just fried dough dipped in honey?" Amy stood on a stool to see over the counter.

"Yep," Sheptilah showed Amy how to make it, "Really easy."

Rouge sat across from Eggman at the table and flipped through the grimoire.

"So why can't you do love potions?" Amy wistfully sighed.

"I can, I just don't. It's about consent!" Sheptilah flipped a half-fried chunk of dough. "You can't just mess around with that kind of thing."

Eggman rested his elbow on the table and his chin in his palm. "Amy, if I may be so bold; I don't think Sonic has time for feelings."

"Nobody around here does," Rouge's wings twitched, "We're all too busy."

"Saving the world." Sheptilah stared at the bread bubbling in the oil.

"Sonic spends three quarters of the day asleep," Amy sighed, "I guess all that running exhausts him. You should see his caloric intake; it's insane."

Sheptilah scooped the finished bits of bread and drizzled on fresh comb honey.
Amy took the grimoire off the table and put it away so Tilly would have a place for the snacks.

"I'll tell you what, Amy," the witch smiled warmly at her, "I have a surprise for you tonight, so cheer up."

The pink hedgehog continued to pout. "Alright."

Almost everyone enjoyed their treat. The only odd man out was Eggman, frustrated with getting honey in his mustache. Rouge went on a walk with Amy to talk with her about her feelings; leaving the two Overlanders alone.

"I see you've been sticking to your prescribed diet," Eggman leaned in, "I decided I was going to work on myself, too. Notice anything different?" He grinned expectantly.

Sheptilah stared blankly at him. "You're using a different cologne?"

"Well yes but," he flexed his arm, "I've been working out."

"Well, you do look slightly thinner." She raised an eyebrow, "Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine." He grinned. "You're a good cook, you know."

"Thanks. Listen, I have stuff to do. I have to go collect some things from the forest before I can open my shop."

"Can I come with?" He asked innocently.

She paused then blushed slightly, nearly faltering in her steps. "Sure, I guess."

The jungle around the hut had been cleared and a garden was started. Pumpkins, watermelons, pineapples, kiwis and sunflowers were bearing fruit.
"Amy put in an order for cacao seeds so I can grow my own chocolate plants. You got me hooked, you know." She adjusted the basket she was carrying.

"I apologize for nothing." He watched her bend down and pick up seemingly random things. Specific kinds of tree leaves, twigs, coconuts and wildflowers.

"Sheptilah, can I be honest with you about something?" He held his hands behind his back.

"What is it?" She stood up and looked at him over her shoulder. Her expression was that of worry.

"You mentioned consent earlier. It made me think about the magical tethering and how it affects us."

"Yes?"

"Is it something that would force us to become complacent with each other?" He chose his words extremely carefully.

"Oh, no," she smiled, "It doesn't. Messing with people's emotions is explicitly forbidden. It just isn't done."

"That's a relief. Good to know you actually like me and it's my charms, not some kind of magical sedative."

Sheptilah raised an eyebrow and then began to laugh. Eggman laughed with her, their loud voices startling the wild birds.

She dropped the basket and ran to him, embracing him tightly. She buried her face in his chest and sighed. Ivo wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"So I'm the sun, huh? I guess that means the world revolves around me."
Sheptilah snorted, her voice muffled. "Yes. It absolutely does." She gripped his leather jacket; feeling the smooth, velvety texture with her fingertips.

"We're both going to die, aren't we?" He asked her flatly.


"Of course the sun goes out with a supernova." He looked up at the swaying leaves breaking up the beams of sunlight coming through them. "It's just as well. I don't have a family or children or anyone who depends on me. Once you're gone GUN is probably going to imprison me for my crimes for the rest of my miserable life."

"Do they allow conjugal visits?" She looked up at him and smirked.

He chortled. "I don't think so."

"That's too bad," she shrugged, "Thunderbolt would find a way." She stood up on the tips of her toes and chastely kissed him on the cheek. He was startled by the show of affection and his cheeks reddened.

She, too, was startled by the sudden bravery she felt in expressing her feelings. She played it off like a friendly gesture. What she truly wanted was to be touched intimately, even right there on the jungle floor. Imagining his massive hands trailing her nude body made her swallow hard.

She suddenly felt shame for these thoughts and shook it off.

"Come on; I have more stuff to collect."
"Sonic knows how I feel. I feel like he is intentionally teasing me and playing with my heart."

"Between you and me I think Sonic likes you, too."

Amy brightened up. "Really?"

"Sure! You kind of are the only other hedgehog on the island, too. No competition." She put a hand on her hip.

"He liked that squirrel-chipmunk girl Sally," Amy's face turned a bit sour, "I don't think it's a species thing."

"How is Sally?" Rouge's ears picked up a noise nearby and swiveled to its direction.

"She sends letters sometimes. Knothole is thriving now that Eggman is quarantined here where GUN has no legal jurisdiction. It also helps that he's busy with that other Overlander."

"Speaking of," Rouge turned her head, "I think I can hear them."

"They're here?"

"Shh," Rouge hushed Amy and pulled her behind a tree. "I want to know what they're doing out here." She grabbed the hedgehog and silently flew into a nearby tree and perched there.

"...Apologize for nothing..." Eggman's voice was drowned out by the rustling of the leaves.

"Rouge, we shouldn't spy." Amy whispered. Rouge leaned forward to hear better. The girls heard the humans laughing, the sudden loudness startling some birds. Eggman looked up toward the fluttering noise, nearly spotting the Mobians.
Amy was confused by Overlanders hugging. "I wish I knew enough Nannaec to understand what she was saying."

Rouge was gripping the branch she was perched on tightly. Her eyes were wide and a smile crept across her face when she saw the witch kiss Eggman on the cheek.

Amy squinted and her mouth hung open.

"It's a secret rendezvous," Rouge whispered excitedly, "Shadow is gonna kill him."

"I don't think that's what this is." Amy flapped her hand to hush Rouge.

"Tower is gonna kill her," the bat's wings twitched, "It's like *Romeo and Juliet*."

"That play ends in a double suicide," Amy shut her eyes and shook her head, "it better not be."

"No, I mean a forbidden love." Rouge snickered. "Shadow is gonna blow a gasket."

"Maybe I have more charm than I thought," Eggman chuckled nervously, "What was that for?"

"You really aren't used to affection. That's kinda sad." She sighed and broke the hug. She bent down to pick up the spilled contents of her basket.

"Tilly," Eggman squatted next to her, "I get the feeling you're not telling me everything."

She kept her eyes focused on the spilled objects but her face reddened a bit. "About what?"

"The affection."

"W-what about it?" She avoided eye contact.
"You're not sucking off my energy, are you?" He narrowed his eyes at her. "Like an energy vampire? You seem perkier around lots of people but colder and more tired by yourself."

"What? There isn't always an ulterior motive, Ivo." She frowned.

"My whole life I've been betrayed by friends and family with ulterior motives. You can't blame me for being cautious." He stood when she stood.

"I guess I can't trust you," she sneered, "Because you don't trust me. I don't like being alone with my thoughts, that's why I prefer to be around a lot of people."

Doctor Eggman isn't stupid. He could tell she had a crush and he was going to use it to his advantage. He reached into the basket and pulled out a flower and stuck it behind her ear.

She felt electricity run through her body. The simple gesture nearly stopped her heart. The poor witch felt like a teenager again, unsure of the world but wholly optimistic of the future.

She then remembered all the evil he did and frowned. Her eyes dropped to the jungle floor, thinking of how foolish she was for letting her feelings develop unchecked.

"What's wrong?" Eggman pouted.

"Preemptive regret," she admitted, "And future regrets."

"Lighten up," he shrugged, "Collect some coconuts and relax."

She wrung her hands together. "I actually need to get stuff from the ocean but it's too dangerous for me to go alone."

"Are you asking me to go with you?"
"Only if you want. You can sit on the shore if you like, otherwise I'll ask Amy."

"No, I'll go. Should I bring my personal submarine?" He chuckled.

Tilly shook her head. "No, you won't need that."

Rouge looked at Amy and shrugged.

The beach was nearly deserted save for a few Mobians walking about. Sheptilah kicked up some sand and made a surfboard of glass with the flick of her wrist. She jumped on it and pulled Eggman with her.

"How far down do you plan on going?" He furrowed his brow and put his hands on her shoulder.

"Half a mile out," she rotated her shoulder, "Give or take."

"We'll be killed by the water pressure," he swallowed, "Wait!" He cried as she sped off laughing. It took less than a minute to reach their destination and she dove straight down into the water. Eggman screamed thinking he was going to drown, but after a moment he realized he was in a bubble of air and they were at the seafloor. She didn't mean half a mile down in the sea but half a mile out from the shore.

Sheptilah made it so that the bubble was a foot off the sandy bottom so as to not kill any of the wildlife. She sat on the edge of board, legs dangling. Eggman followed her lead as he was afraid he'd fall over. She created a wisp to light the way.

"I come down here a lot," she said, "The ocean is so beautiful. I wish I grew up near it." The air surrounding them was cold and dense, but it didn't hurt to breathe. “I keep finding my way back to the water.”

Eggman gripped the edge of the board, "You shouldn't come down here alone so much, then. You know those wiccaphages are around here, right?"
"I haven't seen any." The board pushed forward slowly.

"For once I wish you would just listen to us and be safe. I realize you're sick but-" Eggman was interrupted by a large sea turtle swimming by and distracting him. “Wow, it is gorgeous down here.”

"I can protect myself," she reached down into the freezing cold water and pulled up a small chunk of half-dead coral, "Not that you care too much about me."

"Hey," he lightly placed his fingertips on her thigh, "I do care."

She inhaled sharply under his touch, charged by it. She wasn't sure if it felt nice or painful.

"Only because you care about yourself."

"You're my friend," he reassured her, "We don't see eye-to-eye on most things but you're still my friend."

She held up the coral and pointed at him with it. She looked like she was about to say something but paused.

She looked up, her eyes darting between his lips and his eyes hidden behind the dark glasses. She couldn't tell what he was thinking. She sat up a bit and brought her face in close to his, tempted to kiss him and see how far he'd let her go before pushing her away.

He held his breath, unsure of what she was going to do. Ivo brought his mouth together in a tight line; assuming she was going to share another memory.

She saw him withdraw so she sat back, leaning on her hands with her chest puffed out. Eggman raised an eyebrow at this behavior. Her feelings were so confused.

She looked up at him abruptly and decided a change of subject was in order.
"I'm going to take Shadow to Yggdrasil to get the dew tomorrow. I'm going to need everyone's help," she finally spoke. "It's extremely dangerous and it's going to be the hardest item to get."

Eggman took off his fogged glasses and dried them on the edge of his coat. "And what am I supposed to do to help?"

"You have to hold me down. Sonic will have Shadow while Amy supervises and takes notes." The witch shrugged. "Meaning you will literally have to hold me down. This kind of astral projection is dangerous and if one of us gets lost on that kind of plane we'll be screwed."

"Can't someone just duct tape you down?" He laughed.

"No!" She giggled. "No! You have to physically ground me. The unfortunate thing is it could take hours. As long as you don't let go at any time it will be okay. Sonic and his friends will be there to help."

A pod of dolphins clicked at the intruders as they swam by. Sheptilah stopped the board to pick up a dead giant clam under them. She lifted the sixty pound bivalve into her lap and cackled.

"What's gotten into you?" Eggman scoffed.

"Incense burner!" She cheerfully said.

That night Sheptilah and Amy sat by a small bonfire on the beach. The woman had a small cup of dye and a paintbrush in her hands. Amy kept her eyes closed.

"Now that you're my apprentice," she dipped the paintbrush in the ink, "This means you are a princess."

"Really?" Her spines stood on end. A real princess!

Sheptilah nodded and painted three raindrops with their points touching at the zenith on Amy's forehead. She then painted the same shapes on her own forehead.
"So, in the end, my kingdom will be yours and Shadow's to share. There isn't much to it, but I'm pleased to have you in my court."

"A seelie court princess. Me!" Amy couldn't believe it. "Wait, I have to share it with Shadow?"

"He is my better half. What's a seelie court?"

"Yes! It's a royal court of fairies. I know you keep saying you're not a fairy but... I've always wanted to be a part of a seelie court!" Amy cupped her cheeks in her hands. "Aah! I'm too excited."

With upturned eyebrows Tilly peered at the little hedgehog and then hugged her. "Alright then! Seelie court it is."

Amy looked around to be sure they were alone. She leaned in and pursed her lips.

"So I saw you kiss Eggman today," the hedgehog raised her eyebrows, "So did Rouge."

All the color washed out of Sheptilah's face. "You did?"

"We were up in the trees." Amy blinked.

"You were spying on me?" Sheptilah raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Amy nodded. "Rouge sort of made me. I'm sorry."

Sheptilah pouted and scooted back, "It was a friendly gesture. He said that he was going to go out like a supernova. He's pretty sure we're going to die. I've told him before I wouldn't let that happen but... " Her voice drifted off.

"But what?" Amy furrowed her brow.
"I don't know if I can keep that promise."

"Look," Amy scooted forward, "We could all benefit from Eggman being gone but none of us want him to actually die."

"Don't worry about this stuff, Amy. You're thirteen years old. Be a kid."

"We were all forced to grow up fast years ago." Her young, pink face was serious. "Besides, we don't age like humans do."

Sheptilah looked at her wide-eyed with her brows knitted together, frown wrinkling her expression.

"Hey." Shadow's familiar voice called. He walked up to the girls and sat by the fire.

"Hi." Tilly waved half-heartedly at him.

"I'm a princess! I'm part of the court now."

"Still handing out royalty titles?" He turned to look at the witch who shrugged innocently back at him.

"Are you ready to get the dew?" Amy chirped. "I'm so ready to take notes!"

"Okay, everyone!" Sheptilah stood outside her hut with her hands on her hips.

Amy, Sonic and Tails looked up at her while Shadow and Knuckles moved the furniture inside to make room. "We're just waiting on Eggman but we are basically ready to start. Come on inside."

She opened the door to let them in. On the heavy wooden table were a bunch of seemingly random items. In the center of the table was the giant clam sHell with incense burning in the center.
"This is called a flying ointment," the witch held up a small dish, "None of you should touch this bare-handed."

Sticks shook her head. "I'm supposed to make sure nobody, mostly Knuckles, doesn't touch the flying ointment."

"I can already glide, why would I need to fly?" The echidna stood defiantly. "That and I don't know how a lotion can make someone fly. Don't be ridiculous."

"So help me I will beat you over the head with my foot." The badger gestured broadly to the group. "You're all also fools for allowing this whole astral projecting thing. I won't help you if the shadow people come and try to eat our toenails!"

Amy set out two smaller coffee tables in the middle of the room and placed a pillow on each of them.

"They're not bringing anyone back with them." The pink hedgehog shrugged.

Eggman and his two robots appeared in the doorway. "The cavalry's here!" Eggman said sing-songy. "Did I miss anything?"

"No," Tilly smiled, "We're about to start."

Sheptilah laid Shadow back on one of the tables and slipped off his gloves but left his power rings in place. She dipped a finger into the dish and lightly applied some of the ointment to his gums, careful to not cut herself on his sharp teeth.

"It tingles." Shadow said.

"It's supposed to." Tilly rubbed the remaining bits on his lips and the inside of his ears. "Try not to bite Sonic, okay?"
"I make no promises." He flashed the blue hedgehog a smirk.

Amy gave Sonic a chair to sit in so he could be comfortable. The witch instructed Sonic to take off his gloves and rest his bare hands on Shadow's cheeks.

"Do not, and I mean, do not ever take your hands off of him or he may get lost," the witch warned, "Not for anything."

"Stuff is gonna get weird," Amy said to the group, "Really weird. I'm tasked with taking notes the whole time so we just have to keep our two grounders comfortable."

"I'm gonna record this on my laptop for posterity, is that okay?" Tails asked sheepishly.

"Sure." Tilly nodded.

"Your face is so soft, Shadow," Sonic teased, "What moisturizer do you use?"

"Can I bite him?" Shadow innocently pleaded with his witch. "Can… can I…" He started to doze. "Bite…"

Tilly applied the ointment to her own lips and gums. She then laid back on the table and instructed Eggman to hold onto her face. His ungloved hands were soft and warm.

"This is weird," Cubot commented, "Is this a seance?"

"Not if we do it right." Amy sat nearby with the royal grimoire and a pencil in hand.

"See you on the other side," Sheptilah dozed, gripping Shadow's hand, "See you soon."
Come Into My Dream

Shadow sat up and sighed. "It isn't working. Maybe the ointment stuff doesn't affect me." He looked over and saw the witch was still laying on her back with a bored-looking Eggman moving in slow-motion as he tapped his thumbs absentmindedly against her cheeks.

He looked down at himself and saw his own body appearing to sleep peacefully as Sonic, also in slow motion, laughed at something. It was dead silent.

Sheptilah sat up with a start and looked around. "Shadow!" She chirped, "Welcome to the astral realm."

"I do not like this," he complained. He looked down briefly and then away. "May I ask why you're naked?"

"Astral forms don't wear pants," she shrugged. She moved her hair out of the way to show that her torso was completely without detail like a doll's, "Can't see anything anyway."

Shadow lifted his leg and saw that he was barefoot. The red stripe on his legs stretched down to the side of his foot and across his sharp, curved pinky toes and claws. Sheptilah held out her hand.

Shadow sighed and took it, careful not to cut her with his claws. She lightly pulled him toward her and he floated off from his body like a half-deflated balloon.

"So how do we get to Yggdrasil from here?" He wiggled his legs trying to get his bearings.

"The World Tree's roots are huge. Can't miss them." She guided him further away from his body.

Amy looked them over, frowning. "It's been ten minutes and still nothing. They should be speaking backwards by now."

"Speaking backwards?" Tails raised an eyebrow, "What else can we expect?"
"Rapid eye movement and possible seizures." Amy took note of the time in the grimoire.

"¿MƏ́WƏ́ERƏ́QƏ́W" Shadow spoke hoarsely.

Sheptilah's voice overlapped with his, "¿ă̬tə̬sə̬lə̬r ə̬nə̬t rə̬nə̬w ə̬c tə̬l mə̬r ə̬m ə̬kə̬r ə̬m ə̬w ə̬rə̬ n ə̬t"

"¿ə̬e̬t ə̬l tə̬n tə̬l wə̬nə̬r ə̬qə̬tə̬r" Shadow's eyes opened but were devoid of pupils.

"Can we get a translation, Tails?" Sonic chuckled nervously.

"I can't get a real translation," the fox's face grew serious, "From Shadow I can pick up a few things like 'Rainbow Bridge'."

Amy wrote everything down dutifully.

"¿ə̬tə̬nə̬s ə̬qə̬tə̬r ə̬sə̬ ə̬l tə̬n tə̬l wə̬nə̬r ə̬qə̬tə̬r" Sheptilah's body rolled its head back and forth a bit.

Shadow's body arched its back, metal skates grating against the table he laid on.

"Easy." Sonic cooed.

"If she starts foaming at the mouth I'm getting out of here," Eggman frowned.

"Be careful what you say," Sheptilah warned, "They can hear you back at my hut, but it's garbled."

She showed him how to move around, which was simple enough: you just imagine yourself floating in a certain direction and your projection does so. She led him outside of her hut, straight through the wall as if they were ghosts. She imagined herself in a long, flowing white dress and it appeared on her body.
From there they could see large tree roots jutting straight from the ground and into the sky like towers.

"These are the smallest of its roots," Sheptilah pointed, "Which means the only way to go is up."

They rose over the island. It quickly disappeared behind them into the big ocean.

Shadow was entranced by the beauty of the Rainbow Bridge. It was a simple rainbow but glittered like it was made of precious gems. Each band of color was like a river unto itself and seemed to stretch into the sky infinitely. As they flew above it Sheptilah dipped her hand into the violet row and lifted her stained hand to Shadow's face.

"I thought you said not to touch anything," he smirked.

Sheptilah stuck out her tongue. "This is okay," the color faded off her skin, "It's like touching the sidewalk."

"So how are we supposed to bring an item back from the astral plane?" He dipped a finger into the purple band and shuddered at the cold sensation that ran up his arm.

"Simple," Sheptilah sped up, "You just find the leaves to get some dew, then I will open a portal back at the hut to the realm. Amy's ready to collect the dew with a jar."

"What even makes this tree so special?" Shadow struggled to keep up with her. He saw that trailing behind her was a faint, glittering silver cord not much thicker than fishing line. He looked behind himself and saw he had the same cord.

"It's the tree that holds up all of the astral planes across the universe as a whole."

"What is this, then?" Shadow tugged on the cord.

"That's your Silver Cord," she rolled over, "It's what keeps your soul attached to your body. With that line you can return to your body."
"So then why are Sonic and Eggman holding our faces?" The hedgehog asked flatly.

Sheptilah winked. "It's the only way to keep them from killing each other while we're projecting. We don't actually need them."

Soon a large cylindrical brown object came into view at the end of the rainbow. The closer they got to it the more they understood the massive size of the World Tree. Yggdrasil's trunk was hundreds of miles in circumference with branches extending out endlessly.

The air around them was thin but warm and a thick fog rolled across the landmass making up the 'ground' upon which they stood.

"How do we get to the leaves?" Shadow sighed, "This thing is huge."

"It's basically holding up the Universe, more or less," she looked around with wide-eyed wonder, "It would have to be huge."

Some strange-looking creatures meandered around them. Horses and foals with more than two pairs of legs, small dragon-like lizards and simple squirrels paid them no mind.

"Some creatures are born here," she said, "This would be them."

One of the foals turned back to the woman when she spoke and looked at her with twisted eyes, tilting its head curiously. She watched it closely as it trotted off to rejoin its group.

"I'm afraid to ask but," Shadow kept his voice low, "Will we see many dead people here?"

"Oh, yes," she looked at him with sad eyes, "But probably nobody we know."

"Is this where all the dead go?" His eyes darted around at every movement.
"No. Lots of places for the dead to go, this is just one of them." She began to climb up the trunk, "Life on Midgard, which is where we're from, is short. Life after life… is eternal; and it's immense."

"So where's your plane? The dream plane that I visited, I mean." Shadow followed her

"Elsewhere," she shrugged, "It's totally different from this one." Her hand hit a strange part of the trunk that looked like the rest of it but felt like rushing wind. Her arm was pulled into it by an unseen force. She tried to rip herself out of it but was unable to free herself. Shadow grabbed her by the other arm and bracing his feet on the trunk tried to yank her out but it was no use; they were both gone.

They could hear the sound of faint, braying laughter as they tumbled around in the darkness. It was the sound of the descendants of Sleipnir laughing at the visitors' misery.


Halo

They were surrounded by dark, cold water. There was no urge to breathe, as they could not drown. Shadow's projection floated limply toward the surface but Sheptilah's sank.

The hedgehog looked around and silently panicked. Where are we and how deep does the ocean go? Which way is up? He felt like they were being watched.

The witch's dress floated up around her, giving the illusion that she was a giant upside-down jellyfish. She kicked hard and swam to him, embracing the hedgehog.

Sunlight filtered through the water in wavy golden bands. He pointed to it and beckoned the witch to follow him. They seemed to get nowhere no matter how hard they swam. Without landmarks it was hard to tell in what direction they were moving if they were moving at all.
Sheptilah crossed her arms in frustration and let herself sink. Shadow gestured for her to keep swimming but she simply huffed.

A massive shadow came into view beneath them. Many glowing green eyes the size of dinner plates stared at them inquisitively. Shadow pointed to it with alarm. The witch turned around, wide-eyed at what she saw.

The voice was pleading but booming. The creature swam up to them, the waves pushing them back violently. Once they righted themselves they saw the beast was a gigantic mermaid. Her mouth alone was large enough to swallow a whole island and her two large eyes were actually millions of smaller ones clustered together, moving in all directions in a pattern like a wave.

The goliath's skin had the color and texture of cracked asphalt. Sheptilah moved in front of Shadow protectively though they were both without powers.

The ten-fingered hand of the mermaid goliath grabbed them and flung them with great, spinning force out of the water.

**Waltz of the Flowers**

In a second they were transported to a glen filled with humanoid flowers dancing in circles. Roses, daisies, morning glories and hydrangeas were among the swath of dancers twirling in the sunlight.
"Huh," the hedgehog spoke, "This land is much more pleasant than the last."

"Please stay close to me," the witch put a hand on the top of his head.

"Visitors!" A booming voice called to them from behind. They turned to see a black cat with a white locket wearing a golden crown. The flowers stopped dancing when he shouted and bowed. As it turns out, they were not flowers at all but cats in costume.

"I am Cat Sidhe," the large cat came up to them, "King of the cats."

"Sheptilah, queen of the Nannae," she bowed to the cat politely.

"Shadow, king of the Nannae," he followed suit.

"Don't tell an old fairy your full name," she remembered hearing Amy warn. "They can trap you by knowing it."

Too bad Sheptilah's full name was her first name. Shadow had thankfully not uttered his last name, Robotnik.

"Ah! Welcome to my seelie court," he tipped his crown, "Always a pleasure to have other fae in my realm."

The costumed cats came up to them and purred curiously.

"Don't ever thank an old fairy," Amy once said to Sheptilah, "It's a curse to them."

"What brings you to my kingdom? We have not had your kind of visitors here in thousands of years."

"The fae realm?" Shadow squinted.
"Land of the fairies," Tilly turned to Shadow.

"Quite so," his tail swished with slight agitation. "Show us your powers, queen of the Nannae! Entertain us with your moon magic," he urged. "I want to see it for myself!" He went up to Shadow and cocked his head, "I see you have a locket but no Oracle Stone?" He was disappointed.

"I cannot perform magic," she chose her words carefully, "We are mere astral projections."

"I was not born into her race but accepted into it," Shadow crossed his arms.

"Ah," the cat became morbidly interested in them. "So you are here as phantoms."

"Yes," Tilly looked around, unsure of what to say. "How may we leave? We fell into Yggdrasil's trunk and we're very lost."

"Leave? Why would you want to leave?" Cat gestured to his kingdom, "This is the land of cats and joy. Eternal sunshine and peace."

"We can return when we have more time," she clasped her hands together as if in prayer.

"At least stay for dinner," he pleaded.

_Don't eat their food._

"We cannot eat, either," she chuckled, "We're not corporeal."

"Fine, you are no fun!" The cat extended his claws and sliced a hole out of his realm into another.

"While I cannot send you to Yggdrasil itself I can at least send you to a different, closer plane."

"How may I repay your kindness?" She asked politely.
"Leave me a saucer of milk with honey at your abode," he grinned, "I will find my way to you."

Sheptilah knit her brows together. Whatever you do, don't let them come into your home, Amy's voice echoed. She nodded, accepting the deal.

"Th-" Shadow tried to thank the fae when Sheptilah slammed her hand over his mouth. She was met with muffled protests. Sheptilah stepped into the portal with Shadow.

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**Slumberland**

"Hey, wake up!" A soft voice startled them. "Wakey-wakey."

Sheptilah sat up with a start. They were in a small wooded area with a ring of doors around them. A slim, frail-looking humanoid figure with two long horn-like appendages coming from their head, giant violet cat-like eyes that shimmered like gemstones and a ruby embedded in their chest.

"Are you Visitors?" The creature tilted their head. "Or are you a Nightmaren? But you can't be…" Their eyes fell to Sheptilah's Oracle Stone.

"Sheptilah?" Shadow's voice called.

"O-over here," she responded. He turned to the direction of her voice and ran up to her.

"NiGHTS?" Shadow looked over the Nightmaren, "NiGHTS, it's you!"

"Shadow!" NiGHTS cheered. "How are you?"
"Is it really you or are you an illusion?" The hedgehog was skeptical.

NiGHTS floated up to and around the hedgehog and playfully pulled at his ears, "It's really me! You're at the Dream Gate!"

Shadow swatted the Nightmaren away, "So it seems."

"Dream Gate?" The witch stood, "But we're not asleep, we're astral projecting."

"I see that," NiGHTS tugged at her silver cord between their fingers, "How did you end up here?"

"The Dream Gate," she muttered to herself. Sheptilah looked around with alarm, "How can we be here?"

"I don't know, that's why I asked you!" NiGHTS became a little annoyed. "Pay attention!"

"We came here from Yggdrasil," Shadow said gruffly, "It pulled us into its trunk."

"What?!" NiGHTS became alarmed, "No way! You shouldn't jump from plane to plane or you might tear holes! That's dangerous. If worlds leak into each other you could collapse the whole thing."

"We didn't do it on purpose," Sheptilah whined, "It was an accident. We just wanted some dew."

"Hey, I recognize your kind. You're a Nannae witch, aren't you?" NiGHTS tapped her Oracle Stone with a finger, "Yeah! That's what you are. I haven't seen your race in thousands of years! Why did you stop visiting." The Nightmaren was easily distracted.

"We all died." She said flatly as she turned away from them.

"Oh." NiGHTS' mouth became a tight line. "My apologies."
"How... old are you, NiGHTS?" Shadow peered at the Nightmaren.

NiGHTS flushed. "I'm timeless!" They giggled, looking away and flapping their hand.

"How do we get out of here? We're on a time limit here." Sheptilah was growing impatient.

"You wake up; but since you're not asleep," the Nightmaren crossed their arms and looked down. "Follow your silver cord back where you came from. It should take you back to Yggdrasil eventually. I'll personally escort you around my plane!" They were excited. NiGHTS grabbed each of visitors by the hand and flew off into the glittering sky of Nightopia.

"Shadow, how do you know this person?" Tilly frowned.

"It's a long story," the hedgehog shook his head, "Don't ask."

Breathtaking views and a full moon were no match for Sheptilah's worry. How long have they been under? Time moved so differently on the astral planes. They could've been unconscious for seconds or for days.

The trio came to a leafless branch that jutted out of the ground at the edge of Nightopia.

"Oh!" NiGHTS chirped. "A root, maybe? I've never been out this far before."

"Yggdrasil!" Shadow said.

"Thank you, NiGHTS!" Sheptilah cheered.

"Any friend of Sonic's and Shadow's is a friend of mine," they smiled widely. "Come back and see me sometime, okay?"

"Sure," Tilly smiled, "Thank you, again."
NiGHTS waved goodbye to them and returned to the Dream Gate in case other visitors arrived. The human and the hedgehog together breathed a sigh of relief. They were growing tired from being too far away from their bodies.

They found themselves at the trunk of Yggdrasil in no time.

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**Big Sky**

This part of Yggdrasil housed many of the known fae species throughout the world. Bergresars lumbered by, nearly squashing the others underfoot. More of Sleipnir’s descendants trotted by and brayed angrily at the bergresar who did not hear them.

Draugs, enokke and banshees milled about the crowds. Built into the tree were their homes and little market stalls that spread vertically. Floating will-o-the-wisps in every possible color lit the way.

A heavy-set hulder approached Sheptilah from behind and moved her hair out of the way. The witch jumped and turned to see who had touched her. The alluring woman mistook Sheptilah for one of her own and wanted to see the knothole in her back, as you do.

"Oh," the hulder frowned, "I see; I thought you were someone I knew but I was just making sure."

"Apologies." Sheptilah shrugged, "Do you happen to know where we can get some of the dew from Yggdrasil?"

The hulder pushed her pink hair out of her face and pointed up. "The branches are not far from here."

"You have my appreciation!" She waved as she jumped up, floating off.
"Is this trip through Wonderland finally almost over?" Shadow sighed.

"Should be." They floated to the end of the tree branch and marveled at the sheer size of the leaves. Each was big enough to cover the hut twice over. The dew that formed on the edges fell down like raindrops.

"How do we get the dew home?" Shadow reached out and touched the leaf, surprised at its thickness.

"Stay here. I'll open a portal to you." She tugged on her silver cord and was immediately drawn back to her body.

Sheptilah took a moment to wake up once rejoining her body. She groaned and rubbed her eyes, "How long was I out?"

"Fifteen minutes." Amy nodded.

"That's it?" The witch sat up and jumped off the table. "Doesn't matter. Amy, get the jar." She searched the air for a knot. When she found it she concentrated with all her might to open it to where Shadow's projection waited. "Help me pull it open, please!" Beads of sweat formed on her face from exertion.

"Seriously?" Sticks scratched her ear absentmindedly.

"Why isn't Shadow awake?" Sonic asked nervously.

"He's not back yet. I'm trying to open the portal to him and it's being difficult!" Sheptilah motioned for Eggman to come over. He awkwardly walked up behind her, took hold of her wrists and pulled.

"Open, you stupid portal!" She huffed, "Hnng!" Knuckles grabbed hold of Eggman's torso and helped pull. Even with their combined strength it wasn't enough. Amy, Sticks and Tails joined in the conga line.
"You guys look ridiculous," Sonic laughed, "Sorry I can't help. My hands are full."

Sheptilah shot a pointed look at the blue hedgehog then turned back to the knot she was trying to open. She exhaled sharply and tried one more time. Their efforts paid off and the portal to the astral plane opened horizontally, sending them all falling to the floor on top of each other.

"Graceful," Shadow's projection sneered.

"Hey, Shads!" Sonic chirped. "I got your face." He teased.

"Amy! The jar!" Tilly shouted. The portal was already closing rapidly.

The pink hedgehog dug her way out of the pile with her jar in hand. She tossed it to the witch who caught it and shoved it through the portal. She caught a couple of large raindrops and pulled her arm back in.

"Pull on your silver cord to come back," she told Shadow just as the portal shut on her. She screwed the lid on the jar tight.

In less than a minute Shadow was back in his own body. He immediately pulled Sonic's hands off his face and rubbed his cheeks.

"My face is all clammy now," Shadow complained.

"Sorry," Sonic put his gloves back on, "Your face is warm."

Sheptilah locked up the jar in a large chest that also contained the pearl needed to make the staff.

"Thank you for coming with me, Shadow." Her eyes were heavy.

"Let's not do that again, ever." He pulled his glove on.
"Understandable." The witch slumped over the chest. "Thank you, everyone."

"What was it like? Tell me!" Amy was practically standing on the tips of her toes, "What did you see?"

"NiGHTS says hello," Shadow nodded.

"You guys saw NiGHTS? I'm jealous! How're they doing?"

"They're fine," the black hedgehog stretched.

After everyone except for Eggman left Amy wrote the details down as Sheptilah dictated them. The woman was sipping a cup of black coffee to perk herself up. Astral projection takes a lot out of a person.

"Giant mermaids, banshees, yikes." Eggman brushed his mustache with his fingers.

"It sounds like an adventure." Amy put the pencil down. "Remind me not to astral project."
Hope's dorm was full. Sheptilah rested in her lap in the form of a cat while Shadow and Rouge stood behind the blonde teenager.

Hope marked off spots of unusual seismic activity on a digital map. There were several clusters in the deep ocean but because these mini quakes didn't cause damage it was shrugged off.

"Something keeps cutting our internet and phone lines in the ocean, too." She pointed to the spots she marked off in a different color. "A lot of these mini quakes are occurring near the internet lines as well; almost overlapping."

"It's not unusual for internet lines to get damaged by passing ships and sea life," Rouge shrugged, "But the quakes are suspicious."

"I think it's those witch-eater things." The young girl had a very graven expression.

"Why won't Tower listen to you?" Shadow huffed, "He should know by now not to ignore you."

"Because I have no definitive proof. It's just a hunch," the girl sighed.

"The ocean, you say?" Sheptilah's ears perked up. She hopped off of Hope's lap and transformed back into her human body. She then took out her phone and snapped a photo of the laptop screen.

"Let's see," the witch searched the screen for the exact app to open.

"What are you doing?" Rouge's ears twitched.

"Using my clout." Sheptilah smirked. She texted Eggman the photo. She then called him and put him on speaker.

"Yes?" He sounded agitated. "What do you want? What's with the map?"
"Ivo," she bit her lip, "What is Akhlut up to?" She asked in Latin.

"Nothing, as you instructed the bosses to do." He responded back in the dead language.

"Do me a favor; I want you to deploy Akhlut to check those locations for damage and have him use that wiccaphage tracker you're tweaking."

Rouge looked at Shadow but all the hedgehog could do was shrug and shake his head. None of them spoke Latin.

"Huh," there was a pause; then: "I'll deploy him and some of his underlings right away. A lot of these are near his base in the Deep Blue Realm. This is concerning."

"Tell him I said he can go suck an egg." Hope scowled.

"Hope? Is that you?" Eggman asked in English. "Sheptilah! Am I on speaker? Take me off speaker!"

"Sorry… I don't speak English." she replied in a heavy Persian accent. She tried her hardest to stifle her giggles as she switched back to Latin. "Hope says to take a long walk off of a short pier."

"Aah!" Eggman shouted in frustration. "Women!" He hung up.

Sheptilah couldn't help but laugh. "He's funny when he's angry."

"So you can speak Latin," Shadow narrowed his eyes, "And so can the Doctor, apparently."

She nodded. "Which means I can yell at him over technology since we have a shared language."

"I hate that we have to work with him." Hope interjected. "So much."
"It won't be for much longer," Sheptilah made a chopping motion with her hand, "I'm already halfway to getting all the materials I need to finish the staff." She ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm going to go back to my hut now. I don't want that damn doctor knowing I'm here and harassing me."

"Hold on," Rouge reached for the witch, "I want to talk to you about something. Let's go for a walk."

Rouge kept her voice low until they got outside of the fortress.

"I saw you kiss him." She frowned.

"I know," Sheptilah rubbed the back of her head. "It was a friendly gesture."

"So Amy told you we saw." The bat smirked ever so slightly.

Sheptilah nodded sheepishly.

"Don't play coy, honey," Rogue put her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest, "I know you've got a crush on him."

Sheptilah held up a finger and opened her mouth as if to protest but then simply shrugged. "So what?"

"You could do better." Rouge giggled. "It's cute, though. Shadow doesn't know and I won't tell him."

"Cute? How is it cute?" The witch raised an eyebrow. "It's pathetic. It's sickening."

"You're not the first witch to have the hots for him nor are you the first Overlander but you are the only one that ever ripped his guts out."
Sheptilah exhaled sharply. "He started it."

Rouge laughed behind her hand.

"He says I'm his only friend and he doesn't want me to die." Tilly's cheeks grew warm. "He told me that at Stratosphere."

"Oh, he likes you, too!" Rouge squealed. "That's even cuter!"

"It's not cute!"

"It's so cute." Rouge grinned so widely her fangs were visible.

Sheptilah slouched forward, defeated. "I hate him so much, but I like him so much."

"I still think you can do better," the bat bit her finger trying to stifle the laugh, "But you could also do worse."

Sheptilah dragged her hand down her face. "Trust me, Miss Rouge; he and I are going to die. I keep lying to him and myself that I won't let it happen but I know deep down that's what's gonna happen. He knows it, too."

"Shadow won't let either of you die," the bat shook her head, "None of us will."

"You're sweet but it is what it is." Tilly opened a portal. "See you later!" She stepped through and closed it behind her.

Akhlut got the message. The next day he and his team embarked out to the nearest marked spot on the map to their lair location. Although he was able to survive at extreme depths he still took the precaution of putting on a dive suit with a breathing apparatus.
As he and his team approached the local internet lines he noticed that they were melted and not cut. They were not near any open thermal vents, so the only conclusion was that they were chemically destroyed.

The area was almost completely deserted save for a few antarctic crabs walking about. The seafloor should have been teeming with all kinds of life like starfish, anemones, octopi, icefish and seals. There was nothing.

"I really don't like the looks of this." Akhlut spoke into his mic.

"Grab a sample and get out of there," Eggman responded, "Immediately."

"You don't have to tell me twice." The orca muttered under his breath. He and his team made it back to the lair as quickly as possible with a small chunk of the melted fiber optics.

"Move your base of operations to the North Pole for now. I will let Tundra know you are on the way. I want everything on lockdown immediately." Eggman took a long sip from his coffee. "Cubot, remind me to do a search for the same kind of damage around this lair."

"Right away, boss." The little red robot made the note.

"What about the other Egg Bosses?" Cubot wondered.

"That is a good question." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. His eyebrows shot up and he turned around when he heard his door slide open. It was Sheptilah.

"Hello." She waved. "I came to see if Akhlut is okay."

"He and his team are fine but I've got some troubling news." He took off his glasses to show her how serious he was. "Not only is there a good amount of evidence to support Hope's theory but the whole area itself was deserted. It should be teeming with sea life but there was nothing out there."

"The wiccaphages." Tilly looked at the screen, her face wrinkled with a frown.
"It looks like they are much more intelligent than you believed. They seem to be attacking the
internet lines. That's what connects all of our computers across the globe." He tapped the screen.
"And it's close to where Akhlut Egg Lair is."

Orbot came in with a fresh cup of coffee for each of the Overlanders.

"Thank you." She said in somewhat hesitant English. She took a sip of the drink and winced.

"You're welcome, Miss Sheptilah." The robot replied meekly.

"Thanks." Eggman took the coffee and drank it all in one gulp. "Hmm."

"Yes?"

"I may have to bring all my Egg Bosses in-house." He typed something into his keyboard. "MARI,
have Metal Sonic come home immediately."

"Yes, sir!" The AI chirped. She summoned the robot from his dormant state on the moon base.
Metal ran diagnostics to make sure he was operational.

"He'll be home in about forty minutes." MARI responded. "He's just fine."

"Excellent!" Eggman was enthused. "My little robot son is coming home."

"You think of your robot as your son?" Tilly smiled and cocked an eyebrow.

"All of my robots are my babies," Eggman pouted, "Even Scratch and Grounder."

"You're sweet," Sheptilah stated matter-of-factly, "When you want to be." She looked up at the
screen and her face became grave again. "Can you send some robots to scout out the oceans?
Satellites or something? Sorry if I'm getting my terminology mixed up… I'm still not quite sure
about all the new technology."

"Satellites, huh?" Eggman tapped his chin with a finger. "I know who to call, or rather, I know who MARI should call." He grinned mischievously.

"Hey, space catz! This is Ulala coming at you live at Space Channel Five! I got some hot, hot, hot tunes for you!"

The pale, tall and pink-haired young woman sat at her DJ deck cockpit and popped a CD into the disc reader. A fresh, thrumming dance tune came on over the radio waves across the Milky Way. Her pigtails bobbed as she swayed to the music.

She noticed she had an incoming call from the emergency phone. She muted her personal mic and picked it up. "Jaguar, I swear-"

"Hello, Ulala!" MARI chirped. "Eggman is calling in that favor."

"Seriously?" Ulala frowned. "What's he want? If this is about Sonic..."

"Can we borrow your space station's satellite capabilities? GUN's too nosy about mine right at the moment. You know I wouldn't call in if it wasn't important."

"You want to use the satellite? What for?" She re-applied a new coat of lipgloss as she listened to them.

"Mobius is being systematically attacked by alien parasites," MARI texted Ulala a photo, "These things."

"Yucky!" Ulala grimaced.

"GUN is still breathing down my neck so we kindly ask that your satellites scan our oceans for a while to look for any weird activity. They seem to be targeting our internet lines." Eggman shook
his cup at Orbot, signaling that it was empty.

"That's it?" Ulala looked over at her deck and put another song on to play, "Alright. You're lucky we're close to that planet and can do that."

"Thanks, Ulala. You're my favorite space DJ." MARI was all a titter with excitement.

"Yeah, yeah. I want five VIP tickets to Stratosphere for doing this favor, by the way! Would make a great giveaway for the radio station's listeners."

"Find me more data on these wiccaphage things and I'll send you twenty." Eggman nodded.

"You got it!" Ulala hung up the phone.

"You got girlfriends in space, now?" Tilly smiled.

"No, just one ex girlfriend." Eggman braced himself. "I am gonna summon Katella."

"Is that really a good idea?" Cubot cowered behind Orbot.

"No, but I need her help. Ulala will watch the sea and the sky, Katella will help on the ground." Eggman tented his fingers and called up the fiery redhead.

"Yes?" A gruff, slightly annoyed voice responded.

"Is this Katella the Huntress?" Eggman asked flatly.

"Eggy-weggy peachie poo!" Her entire demeanor changed. "Have you finally accepted my marriage proposal?"

"Uh, no," he shook his head, "I need your services."
"Is this a date?"

"What? No!" His cheeks were red. "I need you to hunt some rare animal for me."

"Ooh, that's even better." She was using her seductive voice. She immediately turned her spaceship around and headed back to Mobius.

"And you can keep whatever you find." *If it doesn't kill you,* he thought.

"Oh, my eggy-weggy, I'm already on my way." She disconnected the call with a click.

"I'll **protect** you from her." Sheptilah teased.

"I don't think Katella is into women." He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Ruin my day, why don't you?" Tilly pouted.

"Sonic, can you keep a secret?" Amy was at Sonic's shack cooking up some chili dogs for him.

"That depends." He was playing a game on his phone while lounging on his sofa. "Who is it about?"

"The witch."

"Ah, sure then. What's up?"

"Please don't let her know I said this but she's got a crush on Eggman."
Sonic put his phone face-down on the coffee table and stood. "First it was Katella, then it was Wendy, then Thunderbolt and now our resident witch?"

Amy shrugged as she stirred the chili. "I saw her kiss him on the cheek."

"Hmm… gross." Sonic said. "What do these women see in him? Besides Thunderbolt, I know she lusts for power; but the others? I don't get it."

"Love is blind." Amy added chopped garlic.

"And oblivious to the heinous war crimes he's committed."

Amy looked at him and then off in the distance. "I think it's that mustache. It mesmerizes them when it moves."

"So what do you want to do about it?" Sonic sat back down with a whump.

"Well." She loaded up a half dozen hot dogs with chili and brought it to Sonic. "What if we… got them together?"

"You're kidding, right?" Sonic grabbed the plate. "Thanks! Yum."

"Not kidding. She's convinced they're both going to die so we might as well make what's left of their time nice, right? And even if they both survive she'll keep him busy and under control so we can move on with our lives."

Sonic scarfed down three dogs before she could even blink. "Sounds like a bad idea, Ames. They're both adults... I really don't think you should get involved."

"But it's so romantic! The sun and the moon," her voice became airy, "Saving our planet together. Their magical bond keeping their hearts tethered no matter the distance. It's so meant to be!" She sighed thoughtfully.
"What would Shadow think?"

"Bah," Amy waved Sonic's concerns off, "Mr. Grumpy will have to learn how to accept it."

"Well, it *would* be nice to not have to deal with Eggman anymore…" Sonic chuckled. "Okay, I'm game. I have nothing else to do."

"Great! I have an idea of how to start it off, too." Amy rubbed her hands together.

Amy had convinced Sheptilah to go into the woods at dusk to collect more items. The two always chatted about ancient and modern alchemy but this time she was asking things about Tilly's culture.

"You ask the familiar for the witch's hand in marriage. If there is no familiar or if the familiar is an object then you ask the parents. If you want to marry the familiar you ask the witch." The basket bounced against Sheptilah's hip as she walked.

"So how many spouses could someone have?" Amy didn't want it to seem obvious why she was asking the questions.

"Oh, as many as you wanted." Tilly shrugged. "But most people stuck to one because sister wives and brother husbands are very hard to deal with."

"What were weddings like?" Amy's green eyes sparkled.

"At moonset the betrothed have their dominant hands tied together with silk and they have to stay like that the whole day. They exchange vows and then the party begins! Everyone who wants to go is invited and there's lots of games and dancing. It gets really funny when you're trying to jump over obstacles with your spouse and bob for fruit in water when neither of you is facing the same direction. Unless of course one of you is a leftie and the other a rightie or ambidextrous."

Sheptilah laughed. "I wish I could've seen my moms running through an obstacle course!"

"That sounds like it was a lot of fun." Amy picked up some mushrooms and put them in the basket.
She could barely contain her excitement as they edged closer to their destination. She just hoped that Sonic could hold up his end.

Sonic convinced Eggman to go into the forest with him simply by saying Amy set something up for him. He didn't like lying but was perfectly okay with not telling the whole truth.

Sonic and Eggman arrived to the clearing first. There was a cute picnic set up with fairy lights strung up in the trees.

"Oh Sonic, you shouldn't have." The Overlander joked. "Seriously, what's this about?"

Amy and Sheptilah came to the clearing right after. Sheptilah calmly set the basket down so she could angrily put her hands on her hips and glare daggers at the little pink hedgehog.

"Wow, what a coincidence," Sonic said flatly, "We all stumbled upon a romantic picnic." He threw up his hands dramatically, "Woe is me! I cannot stay."

"I'm about to astral project out of here." The witch said through a clenched jaw.

"What are you kids trying to do?" Eggman decided to act naive.

Amy chuckled nervously when she met eyes with her teacher and looked to Eggman. "Double date?" She sounded unconvincing.

"What?" Sonic put his hand behind his ear. "I think I hear my plants dying. I forgot to water them! Bye!" He sped off back to his house leaving a trail of rustling leaves behind him.

"I'm sorry!" Amy took a step back. "You're not mad, are you?"

Tilly's expression softened. She dropped her arms and sighed. "No, I'm not mad."

"You have really bad timing, Amy. Katella is on her way." Eggman lifted his hand to his face and smiled behind it.
"Katella?" The hedgehog raised an eyebrow.

"Ask Sonic about her. He knows who I'm talking about." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, she won't get here until sometime tomorrow. What's this about?"

"I, uh," Amy tapped her fingers together, "I saw Tilly and you were both really stressed about everything and thought you could use a nice picnic. I'm gonna go now… " Amy turned tail and got out of there before either of the Overlanders could respond.

Eggman waited for a moment before he spoke to make sure they were alone. "They're playing matchmaker."

"They're playing with my patience is more like it."

He gently took her hand. "We shouldn't waste food, though."

Her cheeks erupted in flames. "Please don't play with my heart." She pulled her hand back and she turned away from him.

Now that the cat was out of the bag she decided to just come clean so she could move on with her life.

"It's a stupid crush." She swallowed. "Nothing more."

"The truth is I like you, too." He half-lied.

"Ivo, please," her chest started to hurt, "When you're good you're really good but when you're bad it's unforgivable."

"What is it that you like about me?" He could never pass up a chance to have his ego stroked.
"I like that you're tall," she raised her hand for emphasis, "And you are really kind when you want to be. You're thoughtful and extremely intelligent. You're patient with my iron allergy and the language barrier and..." She bit her thumbnail, "You're willing to accommodate for my shortcomings. You gave me gloves and a hard hat, winter clothes."

She cast her eyes downward. "And you even care about my health. Even from someone like you I am not used to such kindness. You destroyed our holiest heavenly body and released a plague when you did so and you've probably committed more war crimes in your short life than most other countries have combined."

"I'm not quite that prolific but I appreciate the sentiment." He stepped toward her. "So you have a crush on me because I showed you basic human decency?"

"It sounds so pathetic when you put it that way."

"Tilly," he cupped her cheek with his hand, "You really are my only friend. I do care, and it's not just because of the bond or whatever. I need you to live so that I can use your magic," he thought.

She leaned into his hand and looked up at him. "I know you'll never change."

He grinned innocently. "What's so bad about that?"

She furrowed her brow, looked down at her Oracle Stone and then back up to him. Well, why not, she thought. She stood up on the tips of her toes and pressed her lips to his.

He didn't see that coming and nearly jumped out of his skin when she did that without warning. Reflexively he leaned into the kiss and held her by the small of her back for a moment before breaking it.

She looked up at him with a mixture of fear and excitement. He didn't know what to think at that moment and every nerve felt like it ran cold. He mentally shrugged it off and pulled her back in for another chaste kiss.

Shadow is gonna kill me, he thought. Hell, so will Katella and Thunderbolt; but for the moment he didn't care. He was rendered numb by the affection and felt invincible and like everything was falling into place.
It was nice until it wasn't. She genuinely liked him but he wanted nothing more than to chain her to a wall and systematically drain her magic for his own purposes. His stomach twisted and he suddenly felt nauseous.

"Tilly," he pulled away from her, "I'm sorry, but I need to get back to work."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed.

"Come back to the lair with me. I want you to meet Metal." He smoothed his mustache back into place.

"Sure…" She took a cue from him and ran her fingers through her hair to make it neater. "What about all this stuff?"

Eggman looked around at it. "I guess leave it."

"Nah, I'll pack it up and bring it back to Amy." She pushed her hair behind her ear and began to put everything away before opening up a portal to Amy's house to drop the stuff at her doorstep.

"Tearing holes in space really comes in handy, huh?" He chuckled. "I'll see you at the lair. Come in uniform."

"Ivo?" She looked at him over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Forget that the kiss happened." She turned back to her work.

"Sure…” He walked back to his home feeling conflicted. He didn't necessarily feel the same way toward her but at the same time he felt guilty for wanting to hurt someone that saw the good in him; as deep down as it was.
He wondered what he was going to do next.

SHEPTILAH DOSSIER … last updated 3 / 3

Well, she kissed me. It seems that I can't pretend to not know how she feels anymore. I must admit it was nice to be shown affection in that way but I can't forget my goals:

- Build the Syzygy Canon (big sister to Eclipse)
- Destroy the wiccaphages
- Get a sufficient amount of Sheptilah's blood for analyzing
- Build a cage to keep her in
- Figure out how to extract the magic from the stone
- Gain immortality from the healing capabilities of said magic

I may not be able to beat that hedgehog but I will try to outlive him.

Sheptilah admired how sleek Metal Sonic is. "You've got your father's eyes." She joked. The robot couldn't understand her so he ignored her. She lightly ran her ungloved hand over the top of his head.

"Don't pet him; he's a war machine not a toy." Eggman scolded her. He was agitated with having to call for Katella's help given their history but found Sheptilah's and Metal's presence a comfort.

"Sir?" Cubot got Eggman's attention. "Katella is here."

"Here we go…" He huffed. "Metal, stay here. Sheptilah, let's go greet our guest. I don't want her in my lair." *I hope she's cooled down*, he thought.

They walked side-by-side to the front door. Eggman grabbed Sheptilah's arm and leaned in to her.

"Do not under any circumstances tell Katella you are the last of your kind, do you understand?"
"Yes."

"Good." He let go of her arm and they exited the lair.

Katella descended the steps of her golden boomerang-shaped spaceship which floated just above the edge of the volcanic outcrop.

Katella wore the same clothes, hairstyle and carried herself in much the same way as Eggman remembered. The only difference was the laser gun she had holstered at her thigh and the fine lines starting to form at the corner of her eyes.

"Eggy-weggy peachie poo!" She cooed. "And friend." she said flatly.

The witch crossed her arms. "I'm Sheptilah, the Egg Boss of this island."

"You never made me an Egg Boss," she feigned being hurt, "That's okay, though. You are still as grotesque as ever." She sighed wistfully. "I missed you."

"You're here on a job." Eggman reminded her.

"Can't I have a little fun?" Katella shrugged and shook her head in such a way that her hair swished like a supermodel's. "Or is that what this Egg Boss is for?" The redhead was a little jealous.

Sheptilah looked down her nose at the rude woman, her lip slightly curled in a snarl.

"Touched a nerve?" The huntress smirked.

"Katella, focus." Eggman was losing patience. "You will be monetarily compensated for your work."

"I don't want your money; you know this!" Katella pushed out her sizeable chest. "I just want you."
She walked up to him and pointed at his heart. "Why did you dump me again?"

"I didn't dump you; It was a restraining order because you broke my arm in three places," Ivo grumbled, "I evicted you with great prejudice."

"It was one night gone wrong a decade ago," the woman shrugged, "I apologized, didn't I?"

"That's not what it was; I never wanted that." He stopped himself from talking further.

Sheptilah frowned; Eggman was extremely uncomfortable and she could sense it. Her eyebrow twitched slightly but she wanted to maintain composure. In times of war sometimes you had to form uneasy alliances.

"Oh please; you liked it up until that point." Katella put her hair behind her ear with a finger.

“You never asked and you never took no for an answer. You just did what you wanted and it took my arm hanging on by a thread for you to stop.”

Sheptilah was wide-eyed. She involuntarily let out a low growl and balled her fists. She finally understood.

"So what's the deal with these witch-eating things anyhow?" Katella pulled out a mini computer from a hidden pocket and opened it.

Eggman took out his phone and sent Katella the dossier on the wicccaphages. "I have Ulala looking out at the oceans. I just need your skills finding them on land. This is very serious-" He was cut off.

Katella took a running start and knocked Eggman to the ground with a very violent tackle. She rubbed her cheek against his and giggled. "I missed you so much; I'll be gentle this time." She planted many kisses on his face before he could push her off.

Sheptilah reached down and grabbed the woman by the roots of her hair and threw her into the side of the building.
The witch took off her pink coat and let it drop to the ground. "Are you okay, Ivo?"

Eggman sat up. "I'm fine." He rubbed his throbbing temples. "Don’t further engage her."

Katella stood up and balled her hands into fists, seemingly unhurt by the heavy impact. "Hey! How dare you touch me!"

Sheptilah stepped between her and Eggman. "Lay a hand on him again and I will decapitate you." She smirked. "It's my job as an Egg Boss to protect him."

“What did I just say!?” Eggman stood.

"Who are you?" Katella was sizing up the woman as all good hunters do.

"I'm the resident witch." She put her hand on her hip and looked Katella over.

"More like the resident corpse.” She pulled her gun from its holster and fired it at Sheptilah. The beam was too fast to dodge completely so Tilly was merely grazed at the shoulder.

"Stop!" Eggman yelled, but it fell on deaf ears.

Sheptilah ran in a zig-zag motion like GUN had taught her with her hair growing to absurd lengths as she did so. In a flash Katella was being crushed by the silvery tendrils. She dropped the gun and it hit the ground with a clatter. The huntress was always prepared and managed to cut herself free with a pocketknife.

She lunged at the surprised witch and sliced at her face.

Sheptilah grabbed her by the wrist before the knife could be plunged into her eye and flipped Katella onto her back. The witch straddled her and punched at the redhead's face. Katella hissed and made several cuts to Sheptilah's arms with the knife.
"We need your help!" Sheptilah winced at the burning cuts. "So stop messing around."

Katella threw her weight and rolled over on top of Sheptilah. The witch let up a tendril of hair and pulled the knife away from the other woman and threw it into the ocean.

"I should beat the life out of you and sell your remains to the highest bidder." Katella grimaced. She pummeled at the witch's face with her bare fists. "Animals like you belong in a cage."

"I'll show you an animal!" She howled. Sheptilah shapeshifted her teeth into many rows of razor sharp fangs. Katella was mid-punch when the transformation took place.

"What the ...?" Katella scrambled back, holding the wrist of her injured hand. "What are you!?"

"I'm your worst nightmare." Her face further contorted to where the grotesque lamprey mouth took up her entire face, skin twisting around it like it was being sucked into a vortex. Sheptilah sat up and crawled on all fours slowly toward the other Overlander.

"Tilly, stop!" Eggman yelled.

The witch looked over at him when he called to her and the distraction was enough for Katella to kick the woman in the jaw. Sheptilah rolled across the outcrop and yelped in pain.

Eggman ran behind Katella and squeezed her with his mighty arms. "Stop this right now!"

"I like when you play rough!" The redhead smiled. She kicked him in the shin with her heel causing him to drop her.

Before Katella could do any further damage Sheptilah strangled her with her hair.

The witch panted heavily, sweat coating her brow. "Remember this moment, Katella." She dropped the woman.

The huntress was mortified, gasping for air.
"You don't deserve mercy." Sheptilah tried to steady her breath. "Lay one finger on him again and I will kill you and bind your soul to the smallest stone and drop it into the deepest ocean so that you cannot ever find peace in the afterlife."

Katella backed up.

"Go hunt those wiccaphages and do not return until you find something. Now!" Sheptilah pointed to the ship.

Katella was shell-shocked and obeyed the demand. She ran to the safety of her ship and took off within a minute.

Sheptilah went to Eggman and healed his leg. "Are you alright?"

"Thanks. Thanks..." He was a little frazzled. He saw her cuts, though mostly superficial, weren't healing.

"It must've been a steel blade, he thought. "Come inside, I'll clean you up."

Tilly sat topless on the kitchen counter holding a towel to her bare chest while Eggman cleaned her wounds and applied bandages to them. Metal stood by and supervised.

"I should've killed her." She stared at a spot on the wall.

"You showed considerable restraint." Eggman squeezed one of the wounds to check for any debris and to draw more blood for study later, but he did not let Sheptilah know this.

She winced in pain. "Ow..."

"I'm sorry." He wiped the blood away with some cotton balls, finished wrapping her arms up and
then tended to the thin cut on her cheek.

"It'll be healed within the hour," she said, "You don't have to bother with that one."

"Nonsense." He applied a small bandage to her cheek. "It makes you look tough!"

She smiled shyly. "I'm sorry for everything."

"Don't be," his expression was bittersweet, "Thanks for sticking up for me."

“My pleasure, Doctor.” She grinned. "It's my job to protect you."

“Alright, you're all done here.” He felt turmoil churn in his stomach; guilt for wanting to drain her for all she's worth and for putting her in the situation with Katella in the first place.

Sheptilah pulled him in for a hug and laid her head in the crook of his neck. He realized she was trembling. She gripped his jacket, holding on for dear life.

This woman really, genuinely likes me, he thought. My only flesh-and-blood friend in this whole world.

“Tilly?” He kept his hands on the countertop.

“Had I known I wouldn’t have been interested in her or joked about it.”

“Listen.” He stroked her hair with one hand. “It’s okay.”

“I should’ve known. I should’ve…” Her breath hitched.

“Come on. Don’t cry on my leather jacket. It’s dry-clean only!” He wrapped his other arm around her. “It’s okay.”
“I couldn’t tell. I didn’t know. We’re bonded and I had no idea.”

“Because I’m really good at hiding things, honey. It’s just how I am.”

Her heart skipped a beat when he called her that. Honey. Sweet, sticky honey.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Tilly.”

She pulled back and looked at him with wet eyes. He let her rest her cheek against the palm of his hand, using his thumb to wipe away a tear.

Something overtook him and he pressed his lips to hers. She let her grip loosen before tightening around him again.

He deepened the kiss. He ran his fingers through her hair, enjoying the scent of the herbs she brushed through it every morning. He recognized lavender and oranges, but little else.

He peppered her jaw with tender kisses, slowly moving to her neck.

“Mmn.. Ivo…” Sheptilah huffed. “You’re emotionally compromised. Maybe we shouldn’t-”

He grabbed a corner of the towel and slowly pulled it down but didn’t get very far.

“Excuse me.” Metal Sonic said.

The sudden noise startled the woman. She broke into a fit of giggles.

“I’m sorry.” Ivo returned the laughter and lifted her back up. “I forgot he was there.”

“Unbelievable.” MARI beeped from the gauntlet.
“I’m sorry, I got carried away.”

“Don’t be.” She smoothed down her hair and jumped down from the counter. She snapped her fingers and was now back in her simple black dress. "Thank you for patching me up." She handed him the towel. He put the bloody cotton balls in it and put the bundle aside.

"Please stay the night," his mouth was a tight line, "I'm worried she might come back."

"Of course. I call dibs on the sofa!" She grinned.

"Well, I don't think I'm going to sleep tonight so we should just watch a little TV." He suggested.

He decided to throw the bloody cotton balls and towel away and the turmoil immediately eased.

For the next couple of hours they watched a few programs together in the dark. Although she couldn't understand most of it she still enjoyed the marvel that was moving pictures. They dozed off together somewhere between an infomercial for an egg cuber and a sponge that supposedly sucks up anything liquid.

Every once in a while she reached for his hand and loosely clasped on a few of his fingers. At first he didn’t reciprocate but after a few tries he finally held her hand properly, fingers interlocked.

Soon after Tilly fell asleep with her head on his thigh and his hand on her shoulder.

Metal protectively stood in the corner and went into sleep mode. Orbot came in and saw the two humans were sleeping soundly. He turned off the TV and brought out a cozy blanket and threw it on them.

For the time being things remained peaceful.
Majestic

Eggman woke to find he was alone. At some point the witch had awoken before he did and went back to her hut. His loneliness and guilt returned in full swing and decided to ease the emotional pain with material gain.

Sheptilah's reward for taking out the trash, so to speak, was a brand new iron cauldron. Truthfully he wanted to avoid going back to the ziggurat for the old one at any cost. Throwing together scrap iron and shaping it into a giant pot took no real effort on his part.

When he delivered the thousand-pound monstrosity she was confused by its cream color.

"Is this a giant ghost pumpkin?" She cocked an eyebrow, "Or a giant egg?"

"No, this is a cauldron-crucible hybrid."

"A crucible?!" She laughed. "I'm not going to be smelting."

"Where do you want it set down?" It was hooked under the little Egg Mobile he flies in and it was straining the vehicle.

Sheptilah pointed to a spot next to her hut that was recently cleared. Eggman gently set the cauldron down and got off of the mobile.

"This baby is iron on the inside and coated with porcelain on the outside." He patted the side of it hard. It was so thick it made no sound. "The porcelain coating is so you can touch it."

"That's so thoughtful," she smiled, "Do you know why our cauldrons are iron?"

He shook his head.

"It's to trap the magic in so it can cook itself and not fly off everywhere." She leaned against it, "Thanks for this. I'm eager to get started on making the staff." She could barely contain her
"What else do you need for it?"

"I have the rings, the pearl, the metals," she counted off on her fingers, "All I'm missing is the permafrost."

Sheptilah opened a portal to the cave where the Blossoming Snow still lay at rest. She stepped into it and removed a large chunk of ice from the wall with magic and ran back through the portal.

"C-cold!" She shuddered, "But now I've got ice!" She held the piece up proudly. "Stay here, I'm going to go get Amy!" The witch placed the ice in the cauldron and ran off to get the pink hedgehog.

She soon returned with a very out-of-breath Amy.

"Maybe I should just move in with you." The hedgehog sighed, beads of sweat sparkling on her forehead.

Sheptilah ran into her hut and pulled out the large chest with all the items in it.

"One golden apple," she held up the gold statuette of a red delicious by the stem and dropped it in, "Five golden rings," she named off the items one by one as they went into the pot.

"Eternal fire." She snapped her fingers and summoned a small flame to her fingertip and dropped that into the mixture.

"And finally... witch blood." She held out her arm and rolled up her sleeve. With her other hand she reached into her headspace and pulled the boline from it.

"Does it say how much you need?" Amy was nervous.

"Just enough." The witch added what she needed. Amy noticed she was all bandaged up but didn't
ask about it.

The items in the pot began to spark and bubble.

"There," Sheptilah put the lid on it, "Now it's gotta sit for a month or two before it's done forming itself."

"We have to wait that long?" Eggman furrowed his brow. "Well, that gives me time to do other stuff."

"Hey, is this place open yet?" A male gogoba of small stature walked up to the group, "You still take random items for trade, don't you? I got a bum leg and would like you to fix it." He patted his messenger bag that hung off his shoulder.

Sheptilah put the weapon behind her back and smiled innocently, "Uh, sure! One moment; follow me." She instructed the gogoba. He limped inside with her while she wrote this stuff down in her grimoire.

Meanwhile outside of the hut Amy and Eggman were speaking quietly.

"What happened that she's all busted up?" Pink eyebrows were knit with worry.

"She got in a fight with Katella. Sheptilah won. It was pretty bad," he rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

"What provoked the fight?"

He shook his head, "Katella deserved it. That's all you need to know."

Amy cocked an eyebrow in response.
The gogoba ran out of the hut and shook his leg. "It's like new!" He shuffled a little and did the Charleston. Sheptilah came out behind him and clapped joyfully at his reaction.

"Thank you! Bye!" The chinchilla-like furry ran off and clicked his heels together in between hops.

"So... how was your date." Amy wiggled her eyebrows mischievously.

Sheptilah's smile became a tight frown. "Nothing happened because we have work to do."

"Yeah, I saw the items were at my doorstep by the time I got back to my house." Amy frowned.

"Amy," Eggman stooped down a little, "Tilly and I are friends and that's more than I deserve."

Amy shrugged, "That's fine, as long as you're both happy, I guess."

Sheptilah nodded, hair bobbing. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see what it was. A few more people looking for magical help walked up to the hut.

"I'll get going." Eggman was feeling uncomfortable.

"Thank you again!" She waved to him and then turned to care for the visitors.

He couldn’t get her off his mind. Instead of getting any actual work done he decided to exercise. His workout clothes were not much different from his swimming clothes and fit him much more loosely than before.

An hour on the treadmill followed by twenty minutes of cool-down stretches wasn’t enough of a distraction. Orbot and Cubot would come into the gym now and again to bring him a sports drink or a fresh towel.
He applied chalk to his hands, shoulders and neck in preparation for weightlifting. With a reliable robot behind him as a spotter he lifted four and five hundred pound weights with little effort.

“More weight.” He demanded of the robot. It obliged, bringing the weight up to seven hundred. It still was no challenge.

It wasn’t until he had to lift two thousand pounds of combined weight that he struggled a bit. The burning in his muscles felt cleansing.

“Boss?” MARI spoke.

“What?” He spat.

“I read your dossier. I think you should go for it.”

“Huh?”

“Go for it. Monitoring her vitals when she’s close to you is easy. Knock it out of the park, man.”

“MARI- stop being disgusting. Who even allowed to you access that data on the gauntlet?”

“You did, sir.”

“Ugh. Doesn’t matter; I can’t bother with that kind of thing.”

“She’s nuts about you. How often does that happen?”

“It’s too risky.” And I am in no way good enough.
“Then you should at least tell her you have no interest in pursuing her. You’re leading the poor creature on.”

Sheptilah packed some sweets she made for Eggman into a basket and went to his lair. She was greeted at the door by Metal Sonic who looked at the basket suspiciously.

"I told you she's a friendly." Eggman came up the hall and gently pushed Metal aside.

"I wanted to make sure you were feeling okay after yesterday so I brought you some candies and cakes." She held up the goodies.

"A witch after my own heart." And arteries, he thought.

They sat across from each other in the dining room and snacked on the foods. Honey bread, pineapple candies and peach cakes spiced with cinnamon made the room smell like a bakery.

"Obviously I grew the pineapples and peaches myself with the aid of a lot of magic," she nibbled on a piece of cake, "But I had to trade for the flour."

"I can't wait to see what you can do when you get your hands on cacao pods," he grinned. "This is really good."

"Thank you." She blushed.

He felt guilty again, the back of his neck burning and his stomach in a knot.
He took a sip of coffee, "Can you help me with my garden? Stuff keeps dying out there."

But he certainly didn't feel guilty enough to stop asking for favors.

"Sure, I'd be happy to."

After they finished eating he brought her to a dying young white willow tree whose branches hung limply in the breeze. The plants around it were wilted and equally sad-looking.

"Ivo, I think your problem is you're trying to plant a tree on stone." She tapped her chin thoughtfully, "Tree roots need to spread out." She stretched her arms for emphasis.

"White willows tolerate seaspray and sun well; that's why I chose it. It shouldn't be dying."

"When was the last time you had the soil tilled?"

"Last week," he sulked, "I think I just got a sick tree."

Tilly touched her stone and pulled magic from it. She laid her hand flat against the tree, giving it the energy. In a moment the tree shot up dozens of feet and branched open like an umbrella.

The flowers at its roots perked up and multiplied into a small field of colorful shapes swaying in the ocean breeze.

"Oops," Tilly backed up, "I gave it too much!"

"Well, that's one way to fertilize a garden," he stepped over a bunch of white cosmos, "I'm going to have to do some major weed whacking to get this back under control."

The tree suddenly burst into flowers with a loud WOOSH!
"I just wanted it to perk up a little and it exploded," she bit her lip, "I hope you don't have any pollen allergies."

"If I did I would be dead right about now. If I wake up to a jungle tomorrow you better come by with a machete and fix it." He chuckled. "That healing magic could make you live forever, couldn't it?"

"Maybe, but why would you want to live forever?" She turned to him.

"Why not?" He bent down and picked up a daisy and put it behind her ear. "I'm pretty sure life is more fun than death."

"Everyone I've ever loved is On The Other Side." She shrugged.

He grabbed her by the hands and started a waltz, "Let's not talk about death. MARI, some mood music, if you please."

"Hmm," the AI wondered aloud. She decided on some slow Latin guitar music.

They danced together with him in the lead for a while to the quiet music playing from his gauntlet.

"So you're lucky to have me as a friend, huh?" She smirked at him.

"Oh, yes," he dipped her, "My darling, I don't deserve a second of your time."

The witch smiled, her slightly crooked teeth making her appear more youthful. "It's not a waste when I'm with you. You're always full of surprises. What if I said I wanted to be more serious…?"

She wanted nothing more than to make love to him among the blooming flowers in the moonlit garden.

The guilt washed over him again. He looked off at the sparkling ocean rolling in the distance. He decided he couldn't trust himself around her anymore and needed to get rid of her. There was a long
"What's wrong?" She looked him over. "Why are you upset?"

"Sheptilah… " He exhaled sharply. "I know how you feel about me but you do know that a leopard cannot change its spots, right?"

"I know I could never change you," she gripped his bicep gently, "I wouldn't want to. I like you for the good aspects of your personality." She lifted her leg a bit so that her thigh touched his. "Is it safe to say you have romantic interest in me, too?"

He inhaled sharply and looked at her for a moment before pushing her away. "You're a stupid woman."

"What?" Her eyes were wide. "Ivo… "

"Maybe stupid is a strong word. You are naive. Don't bother with your feelings for me or anyone else." He looked away.

"Ivo, why are you acting like this? You pulled me into a dance and now you're telling me I'm an idiot?" She held one arm across her chest with her hand on her shoulder.

He looked up at the moonless night sky. "It would just be you self-harming if you let your feelings get any further."

MARI stopped the music.

"Self harm?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't understand. I know you're not the most celebrated man in the world but you're decent enough to me and my familiar."

"When I first learned of your healing capabilities my initial thought was to lock you in a box and bleed you dry." He swallowed hard. "I even keep a dossier on information about you so I don't forget details."
"Bleed me dry?" She took a step back. "You were going to kill me?"

"No, not kill." I might as well confess everything, he thought. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"The idea was to keep you alive and compliant enough with drugs or anti-witchcraft runes; or, if it came to it, keeping Shadow captive somehow."

"You were going to hurt my familiar? Your own family?" She spoke through a clenched jaw.

"It wouldn't be the first time I hurt my own family. Just ask my niece." He shrugged. The confession only made his heart heavier and chest tighter.

She ran her fingers over her throat, remembering the first and last time he threatened her life.

"I've been scheming for a while to figure out how to get a sample of your blood for testing and when you were all cut up yesterday I thought that it was my golden opportunity. I decided against it."

He waited for her to say something but she didn't. A lone tear rolled down her cheek.

"Even back at Stratosphere I played like I was a sad, lonely man to win your favor so you would trust me. I didn't think you'd actually see romantic potential in me, of all people." He wouldn't look at her.

"Not that long ago I even started sketching out devices I could keep you trapped in so I could squeeze every last bit of magic out of you. If it wasn't for that damned Oracle Stone having the capability to explode and kill everyone I would've already ripped it off your chest."

Her breath became labored. "I figured at first you had that thought but after everything we've been through in these last few months you still had abusing my powers on your mind? You were going to do inhumane things to me…"
He could feel her staring daggers into his back.

"I'm telling you this because I respect you enough to tell you to seek romance elsewhere. Like I said back at your house, I do not deserve your friendship, time or protection."

"Was anything you did for me genuine or did it have some subtle flavor of self-serving for yourself?"

"Everything I've ever done was for my own benefit. Always."

"Except this."

"Yes," he sighed, "Except this."

She pulled the flower out from behind her ear and flicked it away. "So why now? Why would you tell me this now instead of keeping it to yourself like you should have?"

"Katella said some horrible things about you to your face but you still kept cool because you knew I needed her help. It was only when you defended me from Katella's amorous wrath I realized how much you've put up with and forgiven and risked just for my safety."

"You're the one person on this whole goddamned planet that genuinely cares about me without really expecting anything in return for it. I like you and respect you enough to tell you this so you won't waste anymore time or energy on me. Move on and find someone better. You're young, vibrant, beautiful, smart, all that. Go find someone better."

She had no words. She simply opened a portal to the Blossoming Snow and stepped through. Eggman felt the icy rush of arctic wind blow against his back and he turned around to catch see she left without her sealskin cloak.

He sat in the flowers. He felt numb and empty and realized his mistake too late.

She then jumped from the arctic to GUN and went straight to Shadow’s dorm. He immediately understood her anguish and embraced his cosmic sister tightly.
Sheptilah awoke with a start. She had fallen asleep under a full moon but awoke to a waxing, pale yellow one. Was I asleep for days? She wondered. That's when the realization hit her: the lunar eclipse was this month, not next month.

She had fallen asleep outside under the lunar eclipse and completely absorbed the blood moon's energy. The cauldron continued to bubble nearby as if nothing had happened.

She looked down at her hands and saw her skin was vibrating slightly. Her chest heaved with fear of the raw, animalistic power that now filled her stone. The nails on her hands and feet extended into points and she felt her jaw change shape to accommodate the extra rows of sharp teeth in her mouth.

"No, no, no!" She cried to herself. "Oh gods, no."

"Sheptilah!" She heard Amy's voice call from nearby. "Tilly!" The hedgehog pushed through the brush.

The witch scooted back, covering her mouth with her hands. "Don't come any closer, Amy!"

"I've been looking for you! You're missing the lunar eclipse!" The hedgehog panted, trying to catch her breath. "Sheptilah?"

"No, I didn't miss it," there was a low, involuntary growl that came from the witch's throat. "Leave!" The primal urges were rising now with increased fervor and Sheptilah was afraid she'd kill the little pink hedgehog.

Amy froze in place. "Tilly… ?" Her blood turned to ice. Sheptilah's eyes were no longer lavender but instead a horrifying gold, glowing like twin suns on the horizon.

The woman slinked away deeper in the woods and hoped she wouldn't run into anyone else.
Thousands of miles away at GUN, Shadow's fur stood on end. His ears were completely stiff and swiveled in all directions.

"Is something wrong?" Rouge looked over and saw him acting strangely.

"Something is wrong with my witch." He absentmindedly scratched at the white tuft on his chest.

"Do you want to go check it out?" Rouge was concerned.

"... No." He decided that if it was dire enough she would summon him. "She's probably angry about something."

Sheptilah was wilder now, hair dragging behind her covered in woodland debris and mud.

She ran around on all fours; her legs having taken the shape of that of a dog or a cat but her arms remained the same, causing her to move unevenly across the ground.

Her breath was heavy and strained. Strangely enough she wasn't feeling a bloodlust like she anticipated but instead she craved affection.

She ran great distances and jumped between trees to try and ease the rush of energy but it was no use.

She had no choice but to obey her trembling body.

She fled to the lair, flying across the water and climbing up the outcrop. She stepped on the hot, bubbling lava without injury. She quickly raked her elongated fingers through her hair to get the grime out of it. With every last bit of willpower she focused on her body and returned to her natural shape.
She ran her tongue over her teeth and flinched. She still had rows and rows of razor-sharp fangs in her mouth and cut her own tongue.

"Here we go." She said to herself. She brushed off her dress and entered the lair.

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Eggman had been keeping to himself for months now; not even speaking to the Egg Bosses. He was in one of his labs surrounded by large piles of used paper each with intricate weapon designs. When he wasn't killing time lifting weights he was modifying Metal Sonic to be impervious to wiccaphage attacks.

His work designing the Syzygy cannon, the 'big sister' of the Eclipse cannon, was nearly complete. He foolishly kept drawing Sheptilah in the margins of his blueprints, thinking about her and frustrating himself knowing he'd have to redraw everything from scratch.

The last time he had seen her was in March after he broke her heart and ruined his own chances at happiness. It was already June. *If I had only kept my damned mouth shut,* he thought.

Sheptilah entered the lair and skulked around, following the smell of Eggman's cologne. On all fours with her nose to the floor she must have looked hysterical. Like a wolf tracking prey, she silently approached him.

"Doctor," she said through gritted teeth, "I came to see how you were doing."

He was slightly startled by the sudden speaking of another but didn’t flinch.

"You disappear for weeks on end and return when I have no time for you. I'm very busy." He did not look up from his work.

She struggled to maintain her shape. Her lower half was warm but her upper half felt freezing and she desperately wished for a sweater. She went up to him and gently squeezed his shoulders. "Unfortunately, you will have to make time for this."
He nearly jumped out of his skin at her touch. He kicked off the leg of his desk to turn his chair around and looked at her. Her cheeks were dewy and flushed, her fingers twitching and her hair a little frizzy.

"What happened to you?"

"Unfortunately I was exposed to a lunar eclipse. I woke up about halfway through it. Amy was supposed to remind me of when it was but I suppose she forgot."

"Why are you talking with your jaw shut? Wait, the eclipse was **tonight**?"

"Yes." She lifted the hem of her dress and straddled him in the chair, which wasn't difficult as there were no armrests.

He felt a rock form in his throat. Her body was a little different from when he last saw her. She had gained a good amount of weight and filled out nicely, with some extra padding here and there. She looked much happier and healthier than when he first met her.

"Is this a joke?" He frowned. "It isn't funny."

The witch's fingers began to turn into claws again so she quickly wrapped her arms around him to hide that fact.

"This is no joke. I would never do something so cruel. I need your help. See, the red moon makes a Nannaeic behave like their true selves. For most of us it meant being violent."

Eggman swallowed hard.

"Please help me. You're the only person I trust to help with this. I don't want to be alone right now. I just need to be held."

"Can't you go prowl for somebody else?"
"Ivo, please." Her voice breathy. She leaned forward and pressed her cheek to his. "Please. I don't trust anyone else to be this close to me."

"Sheptilah." He put his hands on her hips, initially intending to push her away but instead they just lingered there.

"My energy has to go somewhere," she kissed his neck, "It can't fly off freely. It may hurt someone. Trying to keep it in is hurting me right now."

This was torture for Eggman. Not since Lucinda has someone captured his black little heart like this and he was afraid it wasn't really him, but the bond. She already explained to him a while back that anything they felt was their own; but he didn't entirely believe her.

He turned his head away.

The man lives and breathes artificiality; creating robots that pretend to be alive and lying to the whole world that he is this big, confident and powerful Overlander. However, the very concept that his own personal feelings weren't real shook him to the core.

He worried that this same thing affected the witch, that she didn't really like him but rather the bond was forcing them into love; especially after confessing all of the heinous things he had planned for her.

*You cannot unring a bell.*

"I wanted to tell you how I felt for a while, now. I just… didn't have the courage to."

He had the urge to cover her Oracle Stone with his hand but knew it would hurt them both.

"I can't." He sighed and pushed her away. He then put her dress back up where it belonged. "I can't, Sheptilah. I can't help you. This isn't you. You *don't* want this." His hands shook.
"But I do, Ivo. I've just been terrified to tell you how I feel. I've wanted to be with you for a long time, now. I want you to be more than just my friend."

"Don't be stupid. This is *me* we're talking about. You hate me, don't you? You'd regret it." He swallowed. "*We'd* regret it." He gently brushed her hair out of her face with his hand.

"Are you playing hard to get or are you being sincere?" A low growl came out of her throat, but she still kept her teeth together. "Because I'm happy to play along if not."

"I'm being sincere. The answer is no."

That was that. She gave up on trying to maintain her form and dismounted. The energy bouncing wildly inside her changed again. She became more like a wraith than a monster as the ends of her hair became transparent and floated like that of a ghost. Her hands and feet were stained purple like they were dipped in ink, but were thankfully no longer clawed.

She crouched on the floor, facing away from him.

"Is it… because I look like this?" She looked over her shoulder at him. "Are you afraid I'll hurt you? I wouldn't."

"A little; but the main reason is because I don't trust that you won't hate me more after the fact." He tried to calm himself by breathing in and out very slowly.

"If you change your mind I will be waiting in your room." She dissipated into a white form not unlike the wiccaphages and slipped out of the lab.

He paused for a minute to think. What would happen if he didn't help her? She did say it was hurting her but what did *that* even mean?

His room wasn't far from the lab he was working in. He quickly shuffled over and stood outside the door and hesitated. He could see there were beads of condensation on the outside. Ivo looked down and saw a slight vapor escaping from under the door.
"Sheptilah?" He quietly called. "Tilly?"

The door slid open. Inside the room was misty and freezing cold. She turned her head to face him and he saw her eyes were golden and bright. They resembled an oncoming vehicle on the highway, threatening to run him down.

"Your room is different than I remember. Your bed is much larger and your room is more… homey."

He stepped in and shut the door, "I wanted to share my life with someone special. Specifically I wanted to share my life with you, so I tried to make my home more comfortable. I guess I was a fool."

"You are a fool. You've been sharing your life with me since you found me." The smoky vapor started to take the shape of wolves circling the bed.

She seemed calmer and more in control. What he couldn't see is she had a death grip on the mattress; her nails were curved claws that extended two feet into the bed. She shifted her position so that she seemed relaxed.

"I mean in a more domestic sense. Remember when you asked if I shared romantic feelings? I did-I do."

"Then come to me and take what’s yours."

"What did you mean by sharing the energy?" He hesitated before making his way to the bed and sat on the edge, taking off his gauntlet.

The witch drew her knees up. "It means that I need my excess energy to go somewhere."

"Will it hurt me?" He took off his jacket and let it fall on the floor.
"Just the opposite." She smiled. She made a noise like she was choking; her energy shifting again. Everything was calm for a moment and she lifted her normal-looking hands from the mattress and sat up. He reached for her hand and took it, pulling her to him.

"Hmm, you look really good," she smirked, "But I think I like you better more rotund. More to hold."

"Really, now?" Ivo snorted. "It sounds like you’d want me no matter how I appear."

"I've wanted to do this with you for a long time, now. Since we were at Stratosphere." She took the lead and began a slow waltz.

"You made me so happy that night. There were other days when I ached for your touch and I desperately wanted to be intimate with you at the worst times. I just need you in my arms for a while."

"Why didn't you say anything? I would've happily obliged."

The magic shifted causing a wave of visible purple sparks to dance across her flesh and into his. She jumped back and spun, the skirt of her black dress elongating as she did so until it touched the floor. The top of her dress became a bodice that glittered like the Milky Way. She resembled a princess wearing the night sky on her gown.

"You're so beautiful." He said breathlessly. His words tore at her in a way she didn't anticipate they could. Three little words but they were able to pierce the toughest emotional armor she had left.

"This is how you see me." She lifted the hem of her dress to reveal the underside was a void that contained a rainbow galaxy. "An enigma."

Thick, thorny rose vines crawled up the walls, sealing them in the room. "And look at yourself," her voice seemed multilayered and it echoed, "This is how I see you."

He looked down at himself and saw he was now wearing a golden tuxedo with a pink rose tucked into the lapel. On his head he bore a large crown with a disc behind his head that resembled a halo.

"You are my sun." She held out her hand. "Don't let me go, Ivo."

He reached for her, his fingertips lightly touching hers. She curled her fingers in to pull him closer and they began to waltz. The furniture in the room vanished and the architecture changed. They seemed to be standing in a large castle made of glass or crystal, but Eggman knew it to be an
illusion and he did not fear falling through the delicate floor.

She held him tightly, her face in his chest against his heartbeat as she whimpered from fear and anticipation of the next shift in energy.

"It's happening again," she looked at her palms, "The energy is shifting."

Sheptilah put her hand over her Oracle Stone and pulled out a large orb of raw, glowing energy.

"Be not afraid," she warned, "Fear will make it hurt. Trust me and you will be alright." She pressed the energy to his chest and slid her hand across his pecs. The intense rush of magic flooding his body nearly killed him, but due to the healing nature of the power it kept him suspended between both planes of existence. The rose on his lapel burst apart, it's infinite petals raining from the ceiling, coating the floor in a thick, fragrant cushion.

The magic was amplifying all they were both physically and emotionally feeling at that moment into a strange euphoria.

"Shh." She hushed him. Something shifted inside of her again, causing her to grip him again with all her strength. "Close your eyes," she said between pants, "Close them."

“I want to see you. I don't want to look away."

“Please close your eyes.” She begged as she took wide steps away from him. She leaned backward, her spine popping.

Eggman didn't obey but he wish he did. Slices appeared along the length of her torso and her rib cage opened like bird wings with a loud, sickening crack, exposing her internal organs.

Eggman screamed. "Sheptilah!" He could see the Oracle Stone branched out and was wrapped around her heart, lungs and liver like tree roots.

"No! I'm not afraid of you but I am afraid for you!" He trudged through the rose petals that made his legs feel heavy. He groaned with exertion, reaching for her. The walls of the castle began to
fracture, their reflections becoming distorted in the shards. "I'd go to the end of the world for you!"
He stumbled.

Her stone thrummed. She screamed in anguish, the noise causing the fractures to climb up the walls faster. Shards of glass tumbled around them like shooting stars.

He summoned all of his strength to crawl to her, the shards cutting him as he did. He gripped the hem of her dress and pulled her down to her knees. He forced her rib cage shut with his hands and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly.

"I'm here! I'm here! Please don't be afraid." His voice wavered. "You're the only person on this godforsaken planet that matters to me and I can't live without you."

Larger shards fell, threatening to cut them to ribbons. A rumble above him alerted him to a pane about to fall. He leaned forward and protected her with his body. He expected to be impaled but felt nothing.

Silence.

She had stopped screaming. He opened his eyes to find they were laying on his bed, tangled in the blankets and safe. She reached up and removed his glasses.

"I love your eyes..." She said softly. "They bring me comfort. They remind me that the light is never gone and even in the darkest times there will be a spark."

"You're my spark..." He leaned down, kissing her deeply. "My queen."

The rest he could hardly remember- it was too much for mortal men to attempt.

He woke up slowly. He tried to sit up but found himself laying in the ripped bedsheets. Next to him Tilly slept quietly, laying on her side and facing him. He gently brushed her hair out of her face and was relieved to see she was not injured.
When his eyes focused he saw some of the damage to the room. He rolled over and saw there was a mess of rose petals on the floor along with some down feathers sticking to damp spots.

He was expecting to be badly hurt but felt no pain. In fact, he felt energized and euphoric. He quietly got up and grabbed a change of clothes and made his way to the bathroom. The shifting of weight caused Sheptilah to roll over with a groan before waking up.

Ivo was in the bathtub recovering from the previous activities for ten minutes before she got up. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to remember the entire experience but was coming up empty.

Sheptilah, bleary-eyed and unsteady on her feet, came in soon after and quietly shut the door behind her. He looked over to her and smiled as she got into the water with him. After a moment her vision focused and she was fully awake. The bathroom was remodeled with a generously-sized tub, a new sink and a mirror that was actually a screen with a built-in camera.

"How are you feeling?" He sighed as she laid her back against him. He again brushed the hair out of her face with his fingertips.

"I don't know." She admitted. The hot water felt amazing on her sore body. "Please don't tell anyone about this." She sounded sad. "It has to be a secret."

"Stupid question, but may I ask why?"

"Shadow and Thunderbolt would kill us both," she let a wry smile form on her face, "And so would GUN."

"I can imagine Tower coming down to personally execute me for this." He drew her into a hug.

"But think of the look on Sonic's face if he found out," she giggled, "All contorted with horror."

"I think Orbot and Cubot need therapy, honestly." He leaned forward and chastely kissed her cheek. "I feel fifteen years younger and excited to be alive."

"I feel like I died a week ago." She frowned. "I've never been sore like this before. Too much
energy coursing through me at once, I guess.”

"Let's not do the lunar eclipse thing again. I still feel the same about you as I did before but I think once per lifetime is more than enough.”

"Yeah, I understand." She tilted her head back and looked at him. "I feel stronger about you, though. I'm going to hold onto this feeling until the day I die.”

"Me, too."

"I have to confess something," she hesitated, "Never mind. Don't worry about it." Her voice trailed off.

"Boss?" Orbot broke the quiet by sticking his head into the bathroom. "Are you okay? You've been in the bedroom for three days."

"Three days?" The two humans spoke in unison, then looked at each other.

"Three days!" Orbot held up three red fingers. "You have so many missed calls from a few of your Bosses. I didn't know what to tell them except that you were ...busy."

Cubot poked his face in, pushing Orbot down on the top of his head. "Hey, boss? Your room is a mess."

Sheptilah groaned and ducked her head under the water out of embarrassment.

"How bad is it?" He was afraid to find out. He didn't really look around too much when he came to.

"Did you, by any chance, uh," Orbot searched his data bank and chose his words carefully, "Fight?"

"Did you win?" Cubot asked earnestly.
"Oh, I won." Eggman scratched the back of his head. "We danced the nights away. Just start repairs on my room right away."

Sheptilah's head breached the water and she gasped for air. "Are you done embarrassing me?" She frowned at the robots. It was one of the few English sentences she could say flawlessly.

"Sorry, miss!" Orbot put up a placating hand. "I'll get started on the repairs." He grabbed Cubot and hustled out.

"Did you win," she mocked, "I can't believe this."

"When your rib cage flew open I was pretty damned sure I was going to die," he laughed, "Oh my God did I think I was going to die."

She inhaled deeply and went back under the water. She could still hear his laughter.
Sheptilah wouldn't look Eggman in the eye for several days. Whenever he tried to see her at her hut she would duck out, having Amy cover for her. Nothing is more amusing than watching a grown adult shape-shift into a shoe to avoid someone.

She wouldn't say a single thing to anyone about why she was acting so strange.

When Shadow stopped by to interrogate her on why she was missing for half a week he found her in her bed under the covers, refusing to come out.

"You were gone for three days." Shadow chided her. "You didn't call or text. What were you doing for three days in the lair?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Her muffled voice was higher pitched than usual.

"What happened?" He was growing frustrated.

"The lunar eclipse. I was exposed to it and it turned me into a monster. For three days." She peeked out from the comforter.

"So Eggman had you in the lair for three days? What, like, in a cage?"

"Kinda." She blinked.

"But then why didn't we hear from him?" Then the realization dawned on him and his face turned up in a sneer. "You didn't."

She bit her lip and stared at him nervously. “Remember how I said it made you more animalistic and the whole thing about desires?”

"Explain," he narrowed his eyes at her, "And don't lie to me."

She made a sound like a high-pitched squeal and gripped the edge of the comforter so hard her knuckles turned white.


Still no answer from her.

"Sheptilah!"

"You said not to lie to you so I'm not talking." She retreated back under the blanket.

"Why are you acting like a child?"

"Because I feel like I'm being treated as such," she sat up abruptly, "Fine. You want to know what happened? We made love. For three days." She held up three fingers. "And neither of us remembers most of it but at some point my rib cage flew open, okay? It was horrifying and I don't want to talk about it."

Shadow inhaled sharply and his mouth was open as if he was going to say something but instead just looked at her, dumbstruck.
"His room looks like a demon tore through it. There's claw marks in the steel walls. Deep ones." She trembled with shame.

Shadow's ears were pinned back with horror.

"And now he wants to go on a date!"

The hedgehog sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at his knees.

"Your rib cage flew open?" He turned to look at her with a sour expression. "And he wants to go out on a date?"

Sheptilah threw up her hands. "I don't know!"

Shadow shuddered. "That man's got issues."

"I wish it never happened." She sulked. "I'm so embarrassed I could die."

"I'm gonna level with you," he flexed his fingers, "That's disgusting that you two did that together but you're an adult and he seems okay so I am not going to report this to anyone. However, if I never hear any more details about it it would be too soon."

She hung her head with shame.

The hedgehog scoffed. "This is just what we need. Please. Please tell me you couldn't possibly get pregnant."

"Shadow, I don't have a uterus until I shape shift one." She furrowed her brow. "And I don't have one right now. That and we used what he called protection. Some weird, stretchy thing."

"A condom?"

"Yes, that."

"Small miracles." He sighed with disgust.

She gasped. "Surveillance footage!" She suddenly jumped up. "I have to make him delete it!"

"There's footage?" Shadow dragged his hand down his face. "Of course there is." He resigned to his chaotic life.

Sheptilah hopped out of the bed and hurriedly put on her shoes. "I'm gonna kill him."

"I'm gonna kill you." The hedgehog spat.

"You can do that later." She ran her hands down her dress to smooth out the wrinkles and ran out the door. She came back a second later to hug Shadow and kiss him on top of the head. "Please don't tell anyone. I'll be right back!"

She was gone before he could respond to her, but was now wondering where that mouth had been and shuddered again.

"Ivo!" She tapped her foot impatiently. "Let me in!" She was outside the lair ringing the bell
repeatedly.

The door slid open. Eggman was standing there with a smug look on his face. "Are you back for more?"

She raised her finger accusingly. "You need to delete the footage." She was out of breath from running over there as fast as her Overlander legs would carry her.

"I already did," he cocked his head, "Days ago."

"Wha..." She panted. "Oh."

"Are you okay?" He looked at her with a worried expression.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and bowed her head.

"Come inside," he gestured, "I have some hot chocolate and cookies. We can talk about it."

The lair was quiet and dim. Eggman was watching some telenovelas on his flatscreen in the living room with Orbot and Cubot sitting beside him, completely entranced with the show. She found comfort in the warmth of the mug of hot chocolate and sipped it slowly, drumming her fingers along the cup.

Eggman popped a fudge cookie in his mouth and chased it down with a swig of his own drink.

"Carmelita, you fool," Orbot sighed softly, "Sebastián doesn't care about you at all. He is just after your money."

"How do we know this isn't all a dream sequence?" Cubot shook his head. "They pulled that back when fans were mad at Cristóbal's death."

"Shh!" Eggman scowled at them. "I haven't caught up with the series!" He shooed off his robots and scooted closer to the woman.

"So what's bothering you?"

Sheptilah kept her eyes on the half-finished drink that had gone cold. "I'm horrified, embarrassed, mortified, ashamed." She listed off many adjectives.

"Why?" He sounded hurt.

"Shadow knows and he's upset." She put down her cup and covered her face with her hands. "I'm horrified, embarrassed, mortified, ashamed." She listed off many adjectives.

"I've known you can shape shift into weird shit for a long time," he put a comforting hand on her shoulder, "I still like you. A lot."

She looked at his hands then up at his face; he was sincere.

"Shadow says you've got issues for wanting to go out with me." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Maybe I do." He leaned in close. "So what?" He drew her into a kiss, caressing her upper arm as he did so.

She broke the kiss and turned away from him, embarrassed.
Eggman frowned. "You don't want to make love again?"

"We made nightmares, not love."

"You are entirely too dramatic. It's run its course though, hasn't it? Everything will be vanilla from now on, yes?" He knit his brows together with concern.

She turned to him, cheeks red. "That is true."

He got off of the sofa and scooped her up into his arms. "Shall we?"

She swallowed hard.

"If that's okay with you?" He raised his eyebrows.

For a moment she forgot how to breathe. She nodded sheepishly, completely at his mercy. "Yes, I'm yours."

He carried her bridal-style to his room and gently laid her on the bed. "You're safe here with me. I promise."

"I keep thinking about the weird stuff that happened."

"We've been through weirder things." He peppered her jaw and neck with kisses, finding it difficult to pull away from her warm, supple skin. "You smell so good," he said breathlessly, "You always do but right now you smell really good."

She chuckled nervously and turned away.

"Why are you so shy? Are you uncomfortable?" He frowned, backing away a bit.

"I've always been timid in this kind of situation, but I'm not uncomfortable." She chuckled nervously. "Every time feels like the first time."

"We don't have to do this, Tilly." He swept her into his arms, snuggling her close. "We can just... lay here."

He felt himself falling down an emotional well that he knew he could never crawl out of. Damned brain chemicals ruining my life, he thought. There goes the oxytocin.

"Thank you for understanding..." She slid her palm across his cheek, removing his glasses. They gazed lovingly at each other, marveling at how beautiful the other was in all their flawed ways.

"You've got faint freckles." She said in a quiet voice, tilting her head slightly and stroking his cheek with her fingertips. "I never noticed... I love... I love them..."

"I've always noticed your freckles. They're so prominent; I want to kiss them all."
Her heart fluttered. "Me, too." She pulled him to her and kissed him deeply.

She warmed up to him, slowly allowing his touch to wander across her body. Soon they were quietly making love, mumbling soft words between their movements. When they were done he cradled her in his arms and buried his face in her neck.

"Ivo." She reached for his hand.

"Yes?"

She pressed his fingertips to her Oracle Stone. He flinched expecting a shock but none came. The gem felt cold and smooth like a pearl.

"I thought you said it would hurt to touch it." He held her closer.

"Well," she rolled over so that she was facing him, "Touching the stone won't hurt you if I really trust you."

"You still trust me even after everything." He sighed.

"Yes," she grinned, "Because you're my sun."

"And you are my moon." He smiled warmly.

Their breathing slowed as they rested in the afterglow of tender lovemaking. She inhaled the smell of him on his pillow, senses heightened from the rush of endorphins. "Your bed always smells so good. I love your scent."

"Speaking of the moon… we should probably go there and see what those wiccaphages did to the core of it."

"You would take me to the moon?"

"Well, yeah. I have lots of space ships. We could even leave right now if you wanted."

She groaned, "Nah, I don't wanna go anywhere that dangerous without Shadow." She paused and then, "Shadow! I left him back at my house! He's waiting for me." She jumped out of the bed and pulled her clothes on.

"What are you going to tell him?" Eggman propped himself up by the elbow.

She hastily tried to smooth out the wrinkles in her dress. "I don't know." She slipped on her shoes and ran out the bedroom door only to come back in a second later and kiss him on the cheek.

"Be good." She winked.

"No promises." He stuck out his tongue playfully.

"Bye!" She said as she jogged out the door.
Sheptilah made it back to her hut in record time. Shadow stood at the door with his arms crossed, tapping his foot. He resembled the angry parent of a child who stayed out past curfew.

"It happened again, didn't it?" He sneered.

She hung her head and sighed. "Yeah."

"Gross."
Days after the excursion to the lair Sheptilah invited Shadow to her hut for training.

"Why do you nap so much?" Shadow sat in Sheptilah's lap as she brushed his spikes with a wide-toothed comb. The forest was quiet except for a few cicadas chirping. Dots of sunlight filtered through the trees providing dim illumination.

He himself was falling asleep because of how relaxing the sensation of having his spines cleaned felt.

"Because I can be back home as I remember it." She placed the dead spines next to her on the ground. "Honey, I don't understand how you can pull this back into a ponytail. I've seen Sonic walk around with his mop tied back and I just can't figure out how it's done without magic."

"It's not easy which is why I mostly just let my spikes do as they please."

"How do you even sit with a tail like that? I guess I just have a hard time understanding how Mobians do anything."

"How do you walk without a tail? Where's your balance?"

"That's a good question," she tapped her chin with the comb, "How in the Hell do humans get around without falling over?" Sheptilah continued to groom him. When she was done his spines felt lighter and healthier.

"I think it's your toes. Anyway, what do you even see in the Doctor?" Shadow sulked. "I don't understand it."

"You know, he asked me the same thing and I said it was because he's tall." She patted the top of Shadow's head. "It's actually pretty sad. He's one of the few people in my entire life that actually treated me like a normal person; I guess that's why. Unlike the doctors at GUN, Ivo has stopped harassing me for a blood sample."
"They're still after you?"

"I'm surprised Tower hasn't summoned me and forced me to give it up. Shadow, maybe healing Mrs. Cabbot was a mistake." She began to scratch Shadow just under the ears.

"It wasn't a mistake; you've made that family so happy," he leaned his head back, "A little higher… ah."

"I guess it's selfish of me to keep my blood to myself. I sometimes lay awake at night thinking about all the people dying of complex and incurable diseases who only receive palliative care because that's all there is for them. I think, yeah I could heal them in a second. They'd get back to their families who wouldn't go into serious debt trying to prolong an ending life.

"And then there's children who get cancer or are born with illnesses like your Maria. Accidents and natural disasters, medical negligence… Clove wouldn't have been drafted into Eggman's army if her sister wasn't dying. Nephtys' face could've been repaired without the use of cybernetics.

"I'm just… afraid. I'm afraid of what it could do. Wouldn't it put millions of doctors out of work? Stop the genuine advancement of medicine because there's a magical fix now? What if the population explodes in several generations because people live even long and have stopped dying as frequently?" She stopped scratching his ears and rested her hands on his shoulders.

"Tilly." Shadow leaned back and looked up at his witch whose face was deeply lined with worry. "There's only so much your magic can do in regards to healing in the first place. You can't regrow limbs and you can't cure away mental illness or disabilities. We will always need good doctors to help with that.

"But in the end it is your body, your blood and your magic. You don't have to do anything."

"I guess you're right." She went back to scratching the base of his ears. "These are so cute. Hebat's ears weren't visible so I couldn't enjoy them. She was sort of like Knuckles in that regard. You know there's ears there, but where exactly remains a mystery."

"If you tell anyone about this I'll kill you." Shadow yawned.

"No, don't fall asleep! We have to practice your magic!"
"If you don't want me to fall asleep then don't scratch my ears." He yawned again, which in turn made her yawn.

"Sleepiness is contagious." Sheptilah stood and brushed the leaves off of her clothes.

Shadow tilted his head. "Why do you wear so much black?"

"Amy tells me it's the color of witches. In my culture, it's the color of royalty."

"I must be really royal," he looked down at his own fur, "In our time black is the color of mourning."

"Red is our color of mourning." She shrugged, "Which makes sense because every time I look at Ivo I get sad!" She laughed to herself.

He chuckled politely. "He does wear too much red. He looks like a tomato."

"A very tall and mustachioed tomato." Sheptilah stuck out her tongue. "It's time to practice. See that boulder over there?" She pointed to a large rock.

"Yes?"

"Make it levitate."

Shadow held his hands out and concentrated on focusing his energy to his fingertips. His spines slowly began to rise upward. His eyebrow twitched and beads of sweat formed on his face.

"Tilly, it's just not happening."

"Open your eyes." She shouted. Why did it sound so far away?
He did so and saw that the boulder was not levitating but he was. He looked down and felt his heart nearly leap out of his throat when he realized just how high he was. He yelped and fell only to have Sheptilah catch him in her arms.

"Okay, so you can get the magic flowing but you have trouble with aiming it. Maybe if you name your magic it'll help. Sort of like when you yell Chaos Spear and the like." She put him on his feet.

"Maybe the problem is my magic and the Chaos energy inside me are incompatible and it doesn't work correctly."

"We all have our own magic," she smoothed down his spikes with her hand, "And our own way of using it. Try again but with your eyes open this time."

He shook off the tension and focused once more on the boulder. How does Silver do it? He thought. Telekinesis is a kind of magic, right? If only the magic wasn't invisible...

Wait. That's it! He remembered Silver's telekinesis is electric blue.

"Sheptilah, why is your magic invisible?"

"It's not, I just make it so it's invisible. Fancy decorations waste energy." She held out her hands and formed bright purple flames of energy. She then made it flash a rainbow of colors before dissipating it.

Shadow thought for a moment and chose to imagine red magic. It formed around his hands in the shape of billowy smoke. He imagined it stretched out to the boulder and enveloped it. The magic followed suit and completely engulfed the large stone.

"Now raise it." Sheptilah grinned.

Shadow was excited to see the magic working. He slightly raised his hand and the boulder was lifted a foot off of the ground.
"You're doing it!" Sheptilah cheered. "So good!"

"Please don't distract me," he furrowed his brow, "Okay, gonna set it down now." He lowered his hands so that the stone was back in place.

The witch was hopping up and down. "Yes! Soon you will move mountains!"

"Very small mountains, maybe." He couldn't help but grin. "Anthills."

It became a habit for Sheptilah to sleep in Eggman's now overgrown garden. You can take the woman out of the wild but you can't take the wild out of the woman, he would joke.

At least once a week she'd make a point to stay at GUN overnight just so she could sleep up against Shadow's face in the form of a cat. While on her astral plane she would teach him things about his new magic abilities. Time moved differently when in dreams so she could squeeze an entire month's worth of lessons into one night.

Sometimes she would even sleep in the lair when she felt the iron didn't bother her so much.

Eggman's alarm clock shrieked at six in the morning every day without fail. Sheptilah groaned and rolled over under the blankets, trying to muffle the sound by shoving her head under a pillow.

"Why do you wake up so early?" She valued her sleep more than most things.

"Because I have stuff to do." Ivo sat up and turned off the alarm. She felt him lay back down and snuggle up to her.

"Cute." She brushed her hair out of her face. "I know this is a sore subject but has Katella contacted you?"

"Only to say she hasn't found any live specimens yet, just evidence of where they've been."
"What all did she do to you?" Tilly rolled over to look at him. "If you wanna talk about it." I want to know if I should've killed her, she thought.

He snuggled up closer. "She was really rough; liked to wrestle and fight. Sometimes she'd jump out of nowhere and tackle me. I was okay with it for a while because it was exciting but she didn't have respect for personal boundaries or the word 'no' because she took it as rejection. If you didn't drop everything to be with her when she wanted you you were in big trouble. She always got what she wanted to matter what.

"I once had the nerve to turn her down for sex because I wasn't feeling well due to having a cold. Well, she decided to 'convince' me by wrestling me into submission and that's when she broke my arm in three places. Supposedly it was an accident."

"I'm sorry." Sheptilah frowned.

"Oh, it gets better," he yawned, "She tried to force me to marry her and Sonic actually saved my ass by calling my mother."

"Sonic saved you?"

"Yes! My mother destroyed Katella and she was screaming 'I don't want a battle axe like that for a mother in law.' In retrospect it was hysterical seeing my mom get into it like that." He smiled a little. "I doubt Sonic even remembers that. He was really young back then."

Sheptilah lightly rubbed the tip of her nose against Ivo's. "I'm sorry you felt you had to call Katella in the first place."

"It is what it is; plus I have you as my bodyguard." He kissed her cheek.

She giggled when his mustache tickled her. "Yes and I'm not afraid to play dirty."

"Have you really forgiven me for what I said I planned on doing to you…?" He cupped her cheek with his hand and ran his thumb back and forth across it.
She looked at him for a moment, blinking slowly. "No; I'd be a moron to do that. I choose to look past it. It probably also makes me a moron, but maybe less of one."

"Fair enough." He drew her into a kiss. "I have to get back to work building the Syzygy Cannon; you should probably go check on your magic staff thing."

"It should be done any day now." She sat up, her hair a frizzy mess.

"I have been thinking," he got out of bed and dressed, "We shouldn't go to the moon. I'm going to send a robot there to check it out instead."

"That's a better idea." Tilly laid back in bed. "An even better idea is me going back to sleep."

"Get up! You slept for five thousand years; you should be well-rested."

"Nuh uh." She pulled the covers over her head. "It's nice and warm in here."

He pulled the comforter off of her, exposing her naked form to the air conditioned space.

"Ah!" She yelped. "Cold!"

"What's on your mind, Shads?" Sonic lifted a cup of crushed ice to his lips, tapped a few pieces into his mouth and began to chew on them.

They were in his hut waiting for Sticks and Amy to arrive so they could try out new video games.

"I can't talk about it." The black hedgehog scrolled through his phone. "Must you chew on ice? That's bad for your teeth." His ears kept involuntarily swiveling toward the annoying sounds coming from behind him.
"Dude," Sonic walked around the sofa and sat next to Shadow, "I don't have many vices. I don't smoke, I don't drink and I certainly don't mess around with drugs."

"It's your mouth, not mine." Shadow said. He knew better than to argue with Sonic about anything.

Sonic leaned in toward Shadow's ear, chewing as loudly as he could.

With each crunch the black hedgehog became increasingly enraged.

*Crunch.*

Shadow's ears twitched ever so slightly.

*Crunch.*

He clenched his jaw and crossed his legs.

*Crunch!*

Shadow did his best to ignore Sonic but it was just not happening. He picked up a cushion and smacked Sonic in the face with it.

The blue hedgehog yelped. "I bit my tongue!" He said between laughs.

"You deserve it!" Shadow hit him again with the cushion.

"Boys." Amy shook her head and clicked her tongue at their behavior. She walked in through the door after the assault but knew that Sonic probably did deserve it.

"Don't start a wrestling match without me!" Sticks took a defensive stance. "That's just not fair!"
"Sonic was chewing on ice right by my ear." Shadow tattled.

"What have I told you about chewing ice?!" Amy scolded.

"Let me have my one thing!" Sonic wailed.

"Hey, where's your witch?" Sticks pointed at Shadow.

Shadow rolled his eyes. "I don't know; she's probably at her house."

Just then there was a very bright burst of light that flooded through the windows, briefly coating everything in blinding whiteness.

Evidently the staff was finished and Sheptilah took it for a test drive.

"My retinas!" Eggman's voice howled.

"Or she could be right on the beach." Shadow sighed.

The staff was as long as Sheptilah was tall. Its silver body was slim and decorated with small reliefs of her mothers holding up the pearl in the center which was nestled in a pale pink blooming rose-shaped setting.

She had healed the man's eyes and leaned up to kiss him when out of the corner of her eyes she saw the kids approaching and recoiled.

The Mobians ran out to greet the Overlanders. Tails flew in overhead and landed near Eggman.

"Woah, it's beautiful!" Amy's eyes sparkled. "So pretty!"
"Want to hold it?" Sheptilah held the staff out. "Only Shadow and I can use it so there's no danger in you touching it."

"Can I?" Amy took the staff and marveled at how light it was despite its size.

"Please don't shoot things like that off into the sky! You could blind a pilot and send a plane crashing down." Tails scolded her.

"I'm sorry," Sheptilah rubbed the back of her head with shame. "I didn't know it was going to be that strong. It wasn't even full power."

"Incoming call from Ulala, Doctor." MARI chirped. "It's about that bright light she saw. I will tell her it was just a practice shot."

Shadow's phone beeped. He took it out and looked at the screen: it was Tower asking what that bright light was since he was in the vicinity of its origin.

Sticks went up to the pearl and sniffed it suspiciously. It didn't smell like a rose therefore the paranoid badger couldn't trust it and hissed. Things that don't behave the way they look were never to be trusted, according to her.

"You pissed off GUN again," the black hedgehog smirked, "And apparently a space DJ." He texted Tower back that it was the witch testing her weapon.

"Tower can kiss my ass," Sheptilah waved a finger, "Until he leaves me alone about my blood I don't even want to hear his name."

"How is Ulala? Tell her I said hi!" Sonic waved at Eggman's gauntlet.

"Someone tell the blue pineapple I do not work for him," MARI spat. "I'm connecting you to Ulala now, Doctor."

"Hello, Ulala," Eggman spoke into his gauntlet, "Sorry about the bright light."
"What was that, anyway?" There was a noise that sounded like CD cases being shuffled together, "I do have news otherwise. Our people haven't spotted a darn thing in regards to those yucky wiccaphages. Just a weird increase in oceanic quakes."

"Hi, Ulala!" Sonic yelled into the gauntlet, "It's me, Sonic!"

"Hi, Sonic! Got any song requests?" Ulala's voice was cheerful.

"To Another Galaxy by TGP!" Sonic was practically hanging off of Eggman's arm.

"TGP? Oh, Tokyo Ghetto-" Ulala was cut off abruptly.

"Yeah, don't say it!" Sonic chuckled. "But I like that song."

"Thanks for the update, Ulala," Eggman shook Sonic off of his arm and glared at him. "Go away, fanboy!"

"Really, Sonic?" Amy shook her head disapprovingly. She pointed the staff at him.

Sheptilah took the weapon back from Amy and balanced it in her hand. "How am I supposed to walk around with this thing? It won't fit in my headspace."

"How did your moms carry it?" Tails asked.

Tilly shrugged, "Like a walking stick."

"Maybe the grimoire says something about it?" Shadow reached for the staff.

"Good point," Sheptilah let her familiar hold the weapon while she pulled the royal grimoire out and flipped through it as it floated before her.
"You are way too short for that weapon." Sonic teased.

"Thousands of years of information and not one goddamned thing on the Lunar Staff. Looks like I gotta lug it around the old-fashioned way." She put her grimoire away.

"What can it do?" The blonde fox looked it over apprehensively. "Besides kill wiccaphages?"

"Whatever I want it to, I guess. There's almost no information about it in my book."

"You know, if it was anything like that shining light we saw just now I'm wondering if other people wrote about it." Eggman crossed his arms, "And that bright light was only a fraction of the power but it was seen all the way from space… You can't just seal a bunch of monsters in the moon and nobody notices; even in a desert."

"I know where this is going," Shadow smirked, "You're going to visit some museums and paw through untranslated archives, aren't you?"

Eggman nodded.

"Can I come with you?" Amy's eyes were wide. "Oh, please? I love that ancient stuff!"

Sheptilah looked over at Eggman and raised her eyebrows.

His shoulders dropped and he hung his head. "Fine, but we're probably not leaving the island for a few days."

"I thought we were planning my birthday party." Sonic shook his head.

"Oh, that's right!" Tails' ears stood straight up. "I almost totally forgot your birthday is in two weeks." He coughed. *Gee, I hope I'm not getting sick...*
"And Shadow's birthday is four days before that." Eggman reminded them. Shadow glared at Eggman with such hatred the man was worried he might be set on fire.

"How old are you gonna be, Shads?" Sonic teased.

"Seventy." He replied flatly. *In reality I'm going to be twenty,* he thought, *when did I get so old?*

"Old man! I need you to come with me to the movie theater so I can get senior discounts on my ticket," Sticks went up to him, "But if you ask me you don't look a day over fifty."

"Gee, thanks." Shadow forced a smile.

"It's also Ivo's birthday." Sheptilah grinned, "Same as Sonic."

Eggman's mustache perked up when he heard she remembered.

"So we'll just throw a big block party," Amy spread her hands, "I think defeating the wiccaphantes might be a slight bit more important."

"We still need the rest of the Chaos Emeralds," Sticks spat, "We've got what, like, four of them now?"

"Three," Shadow corrected her, "Dubai is still fighting us tooth and nail on it. We may actually have to go steal it and replace it with a fake."

"So that means we still have a couple more to grab," Tails scratched his head, "Great, just when I thought we were getting closer to being done with everything."

"Incoming call from Katella," MARI chirped.

"Katella!?!" Tails and Sonic yelped in unison.
"Oh, I forgot to mention her," Amy's ears drooped, "Yeah, she's around looking for the wiccaphages."

"If she's calling me that means she probably found one." Eggman muted the call. "Which may or may not be a good thing."
"Katella isn't going to be a problem." Sheptilah smirked.

"Why do you say that?" Sonic looked up at the smug Overlander.

"I destroyed her. Briefly." She shot a knowing glance at Ivo.

"What?!" Sonic's spikes stood straight up.

"She got better." The witch shrugged.

Sonic looked to Eggman who simply nodded at the blue hedgehog who shifted uneasily.

"Anyway, I better go see what she wants." Ivo looked at his gauntlet. "Tilly, if you don't mind?"

Sheptilah opened a portal to the lair for him. He stepped through alone and felt the air shift as she closed it.

"Katella hurt him again, didn't she?" Sonic chose his words carefully.

"She tried," Tilly tied her hair back into a high ponytail with a glamour, "And like any good witch I defended my friend."

Sonic looked out over the water and frowned. He was aware of what had happened with her breaking Eggman's arm but he was so young at the time he didn't understand the true scope of what occurred.

He remembered the fear Eggman had, though he went by Robotnik back then, when that man otherwise carried himself as an invincible tyrant. He was in a suit with his arm in a cast and sling while Katella stood next to him in a white gown holding onto the injured arm as a threat.

Sonic couldn't call the police on Robotnik, so what could he do? Being only five or six at the time he remembered that when you're in trouble… you called for your parents. He immediately phoned for Mama Robotnik who came to the rescue.

"I'm glad you're on our side." Sonic's brow was turned upright and an uneasy smile graced his lips.

"I would do it for any of you. You are all family to me and I love you and this island very much." She kneeled down so that she was at eye-level with the Mobians.

"We love you, too," Amy embraced the Overlander, "You're everyone's big sister here."

"Aw." Tilly hugged her back. Amy turned and pulled Sonic into the hug who in turn pulled in Tails.

"Alright!" Sticks caved despite not being asked to join the hug and put her arms around the witch's neck.

"I have so many siblings now," Tilly squeezed them, "Tails, you're the softest of them all." She stroked the top of his head.

"That's only because I don't have any prickly parts." He said sheepishly.
"I'm kind of glad Knuckles isn't here or he might crush my insides," Tilly chuckled, "He is way too strong."

"Say 'cheese'." Shadow snapped a picture of the group before they could respond, leaving everyone with a wonky face.

"Shadow!" Amy squeaked.

Sheptilah shook off the Mobians before they could knock her over. "I gotta go babysit Eggman while he talks to Katella. I'll see you tonight a GUN, Shadow."

The black hedgehog nodded. "See you then."

"I've caught one." Katella looked worn out on the screen. "It's half-dead but I'm bringing it by."

"How did you capture it?" Eggman leaned forward in his computer chair.

"It's in bulletproof glass. The acid it spits doesn't dissolve it but if it regains strength it could break out." Katella straightened her hair. "Damned thing nearly killed me." She sent him photos of the trapped creature.

"Bring it to my arctic base." He typed away at his computer. "I'll send you the coordinates now."

"Will that white-haired woman be there?" She tried to keep her composure but was clearly nervous.

"Yes," Eggman tented his fingers, "Along with most of my other Egg Bosses; so you need to behave. Call me when you get there."

"Hmph." Katella said before disconnecting the call.

The office door slid open and Sheptilah appeared. "Did I miss the call?"

"It just ended." Eggman turned to her. "She caught a live wiccaphage."

"Huh, I guess you were right to hire her after all." Tilly smiled. She leaned the staff against the wall and approached him.

He motioned for her to come sit in his lap by patting his thigh. She obliged and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I'm glad to have you around." He brushed her hair out of her face with his fingertips.

"I'm happy to be here," she sighed softly, "What do you want for your birthday?"

"World domination." He flashed a cheesy, toothy grin.

"I'm serious! Maybe I can take Sonic's form and you can boss me around all day?" She giggled.

"No, that's too weird. Way too weird; I don't want my girlfriend to also be Sonic The Hedgehog." He shuddered with disgust.

She crossed her legs and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Well, let me know. In the meantime I'm going to be staying at GUN tonight. So far they haven't noticed the random cat walking around. I guess they assume it's someone's pet but it's the only way I can get around without being harassed."
"I'm going to need you up at the arctic base. Katella is transporting the wiccaphage there."

Sheptilah threw her head back and groaned. "We gotta go back up there? That's going to suck."

"You can get us there with a portal," he rubbed his nose with the back of his fist, "Can't you?"

"Yeah but I don't fit into my old uniform anymore. I got chubby, remember?"

"So wear whatever," he shrugged, "You're a Boss whether you've got the uniform on or not." His eyes dropped down to her chest and he caught himself staring at the gem.

"I saw something," he pointed at it, "When your rib cage was open briefly, I saw that the stone had roots. They expanded into your organs."

"I know," she giggled, "GUN has known for about a year now, too. They took x-rays of my body. We've known about the roots since forever. That's how it stays in place."

"I… but… I just assumed it was a cabochon." His mustache drooped.

Sheptilah shook her head a little. "No. It's in there good and tight. Kind of like how teeth have roots but you only see the top part."

"Yeah, that's a good point. Something about the stone bothers me, though. I don't trust it." He peered at it suspiciously.

"Is Sticks rubbing off on you? It's just a rock. A magic rock but a rock." She kissed his cheek. "It's not going to hurt you."

"You're right." He yawned, "I think I'm going to have a snack and some coffee; I've been working on that Syzygy weapon all day. I think it's about half-done at this point."

"If you are tired you should sleep," she inhaled deeply, enjoying his cologne, "That's my motto."

She jumped down from his lap and made her way to the staff and held it. "I'll go to GUN early then; maybe I can squeeze some more training in."

"Tilly," he said, "Don't let them take your blood. Remember what GUN used to be and what they did to Shadow; there's no guarantee they won't do the same to you."

"I know," she spoke quietly, "I know…"

Just as predicted, the same blonde doctor that verified Mrs. Cabbot's health was still hounding Sheptilah.

"You don't understand," he spoke rapidly as he chased her down the hall, "This is a matter of global health. We could cure everything from cancer to the common cold."

"I already told you no in several languages," Sheptilah huffed, "Please stop asking." She turned into Tower's office. The president was fondly looking at a worn-out black and white photo of Maria Robotnik.

Sheptilah shut the door and turned the lock on the knob to keep the doctor out.

"Sir," the witch held a strong grip on her staff, "I am asking you for the last time to stop bothering me for a sample of my blood."
"Haven't you ever heard of knocking?" He looked up at her coldly.

"I apologize for my rudeness," she spat, "But this is really starting to bother me."

He slipped the photo back into his pocket and leaned forward with his elbows on his desk, hands tented.

"There are people, even children, dying slow, agonizing deaths not unlike Mrs. Cabbot was. Providing affordable cures like what your blood may hold-"

"That's just it!" She tapped her staff on the floor for punctuation. "Affordable. You would hold a panacea ransom, wouldn't you? When this is all over what's to stop you from chaining me up somewhere and bleeding me dry? What's to stop you from having me cloned or forcing me to give birth over and over again just so you can abuse any offspring's magic?"

Tower opened his mouth to speak but she continued her monologue over him.

"Sure, first it's a sample of my blood. Then maybe it's a sample of my brain or a sample of my bone marrow. Oh, then maybe a sample of my ovaries and you'll try to help yourself to a sample of my Oracle Stone."

She was so angry her chest was heaving from exertion.

"I and my people were helpful and open to healing others, but I am still telling you no. I do not trust you or your organization and I will never, ever trust a military force of this magnitude with unsupervised access to something as precious as my magic."

Tower blinked, absolutely stunned. He stared at her for a moment before laughing. "You have many concerns about me and my organization yet Doctor Eggman is your lover."

"What?" She was shocked. "What are you talking about?" Her heart was pounding in her chest harder than a hummingbird beats its wings.

MARI, still actively running on the phone in Sheptilah's pocket, silently alerted her creator that he was mentioned.

"Do you really think we wouldn't have a sharp eye on him at all times? Especially with you and Shadow being there this often?" Tower's face became serious again. "Well, whatever keeps him under control."

"I… think it says a lot that I trust Doctor Eggman more than I trust you." Her cheeks prickled with embarrassment.

"Does it? Or maybe it is you we cannot trust." Abraham stood and walked around his desk so he could be face-to-face with the witch. "You do not scare me nor do you intimidate me." His voice was slightly nasal from an encroaching head cold he was suffering.

"Then you are not paying attention." She spat. "I need you to understand that Eggman and I are most likely going to die together in order to end the wiccaphage threat once and for all. So forgive me for having a little fun while the precious time left to my lifespan ticks away."

Eggman himself was listening silently on his gauntlet. She's almost fluent in English, he thought. Aside from a few mispronunciations, she's completely understandable. What Sheptilah couldn't successfully say the Oracle Stone filled in for her.
"Think a little harder about what you are doing by withholding the gift you were blessed with, then. You can heal people now, but perhaps you should ensure that you can still do that long after you've died."

"I've caught up with five thousand years of history," she steeled herself and straightened her posture. "Things were better when we feared the sun's wrath and assumed the planet was a disc. Things were better when we were truly ignorant."

"Ignorance kills." Tower's mismatched eyes stared daggers into her. "Willful ignorance kills in greater numbers. You are being selfish, not cautious. You used to throw your blood around like it was nothing and suddenly you are paranoid over it."

"Sir, I ask you one last time: please do not browbeat me over this. It is my body, my blood, my power."

"I want you to think about all of the babies born with holes in their hearts, ichthyosis so bad that their skin splits open and bleeds at the slightest touch, all the people dying of organ failure for no reason other than they drew the short straw in the genetic lottery."

"Think about the millions of people who are HIV positive through no fault of their own who are ticking time bombs. Spina bifida, sickle cell, et cetera. Through your inaction you are allowing them to suffer."

Tower maintained a cool disposition and tight composure.

"I won't let you emotionally blackmail me." Her face was crumpled in agony. Sheptilah choked back sobs. Her chest ached and knees buckled.

"Then you will have to live with the guilt alone. Tower walked to the office door and opened it so the doctor could enter. Just as he did so Shadow teleported into the room.

"What's going on?" The hedgehog was concerned. He felt intense suffering and knew it could only be his witch and he somehow knew where she was.

"Shadow!" She yelped from being startled. "I'm sorry."

"What happened now?" Shadow looked between Tower and Sheptilah.

Sheptilah straightened up. "The usual."

"Sir," the hedgehog tried to be as polite as possible, "She has already said no several times."

"Think of how many Maria Robotniks we could save. All we need is one drop of blood." Tower narrowed his eyes at Shadow.

"How dare you use her like that," Sheptilah said, "Especially since one of your own personnel was the one that ultimately killed her. She didn't even get to die of NIDS because of GUN."

"Maria was my friend," Tower spat, "My dear friend. When I took over GUN I vowed to never let that sort of thing happen again. We are here to protect the people of this planet."

Shadow distinctly remembered Tower, while acting as president, pointed a loaded gun at him and threatened to shoot.

"What's to stop you from creating another Biolizard? Who's to stop you from killing another Gerald
Robotnik when the research becomes unpalatable?" She was visibly shaking from anger.

"You have a lot of nerve taking the moral high ground knowing full well that people are going to die without your help." Tower sneered, "Along with being romantically involved with Eggman, of all people."

Sheptilah smiled. "You want blood?" She spoke through clenched teeth.

Shadow's eyes were wide and ears pinned back.

The doctor nodded sheepishly.

She bit her tongue and let the blood pool in her mouth unseen. She smiled again, tight lipped. She walked up to Abraham and held out her wrist with her palm up and open as if she offered her veins.

Without warning she spat a glob of blood at him, landing squarely on the bridge of his nose. Abraham let out a sound not unlike a deflating balloon from pure disgust.

The doctor ran up to him and wiped a sample of the material into a handkerchief and fled out of the room with it for immediate processing.

"You got it." She flashed a sharp, self-satisfied bloodstained grin.

Shadow wasn't sure if he was mortified or proud, but either way he rushed his witch out of the office before Tower could call for security.

The president wiped at his face with a tissue and immediately noticed his cold was cured.

"You're going to get yourself arrested." Shadow pulled her into his dorm and shut the door. "I can't believe you did that. What were you thinking!?"

"I asked him if he would force me to give birth over and over again so they could bleed my children dry or if they would clone me to do the same. He laughed at me but never denied that they would." She crossed her arms defiantly.

"Ti-ti," he huffed, "How do they even know about the whole… thing with Eggman?"

"Apparently they don't trust me still and have been spying on us. I don't care that they know, though. Once he dragged Maria into this I couldn't stand it anymore." She wiped the blood away with the back of her hand, "I gotta go to the Artika base tonight. Katella is bringing a live wiccaphage there and she should be arriving at any time."

"Sonic told me about her after she left," he frowned, "Everything."

"Don't worry about it; it's been handled." Tilly bent down and kissed Shadow on the cheek, "I'm sorry if my actions are going to get you in trouble. I'll stay away from here for a while until he cools down."

He rubbed his palm where she kissed.

Sheptilah's phone beeped.

"Ah, looks like we're leaving now." She sighed. "I'm sorry."

Shadow hugged her, wishing he could go along but was afraid to bother Tower or Cabbot for
permission. "Be safe. Text me when you get there and back."

"I will." She felt around for a knot to open.

"And wear your warm boots." He warned.

"I always do." She found a snag and began opening a portal to the lair.

"And wear a hat! You can't get sick but you can still freeze to death."

"Thanks, dad," she mocked, "I love you, too."
The creature was dead by the time Katella made it to the Arctic. With the use of robots Eggman had taken samples of it for analysis.

Tundra, Katella, Akhlut and Metal Sonic watched closely as the creature's body was processed.

It was prodded with samples of different materials to test its caustic limits.

"Looks like it eats through ceramic as well but not as fast as it eats through iron." Eggman pondered this. "Stainless steel is typically acid-resistant but it goes through it like a hot knife through butter."

"It looks like Teflon is the most resistant material." Akhlut said.

"Polytetrafluoroethylene," Eggman explained, "It's a kind of plastic. Plastics in general are resistant to acid, but not all kinds of plastics."

"The acid it spits is hydrofluoric acid, specifically," Katella spoke up, "According to my ship's sensors. I was able to track it down looking for high concentrations of that chemical when I found its tracks. I procured this specimen in Avalon."

"So how were you able to even contain it?" Sheptilah turned to the redhead.

"Simple; I used Amphomag which is a commercially available acid neutralizer; it works on hydrofluoric acid." Katella huffed, "For an alchemist you don't know much, do you?"

Eggman chortled. "Hydrofluoric acid wasn't fully understood until the seventeenth century and wasn't first used until a little before then. Sheptilah is over five thousand years old but missed everything from the thirtieth century BCE up until last year."

"Wait, how old are you?" The huntress was flabbergasted.

"Five thousand two hundred and thirty three; roughly." The witch replied with a blasé tone. "I slept through most of it."

"You don't look a day over two thousand." Tundra joked.

"You're funny." She smiled at the walrus. She pulled out her phone to text Shadow that she was alright. She had no hope of spelling any of the words correctly so she simply told him that some 'plastiks' are 'asid-proof.'

Eggman properly disposed of the specimen by burning it to a crisp and kept some samples under glass to further build his tracker. He paid Katella and had her leave the base under armed guard immediately after.

Over an intimate dinner he admitted to Sheptilah that MARI had been spying on her for a while.
She sipped her hot chocolate. "I kind of figured. Once I really started learning how to use my phone I saw that program was always running in the background."

"You aren't mad?" He cut into his steak with a sharp knife.

"No," she finished her drink with a big gulp, "You show your affection in strange ways; this being one of them."

"I heard that you spit on Tower." He carefully chewed his food, enjoying the flavor.

"He kept harassing me for a sample of my blood. I wasn't going to give it to him but then he had the nerve to bring up Maria, as I'm sure you heard. I lost it at that point and spat my blood in his face like a lizard. Shadow rushed me out of that office in a heartbeat." She chuckled, "I'm so out of control."

"I have never been more attracted to you than I am right in this moment," he looked at her with awe. "You spat blood in the GUN president's face."

She blushed and pushed her hair behind her ear. "Oh, stop. Don't encourage that behavior."

The master bedroom of the Artika base was gloriously beautiful. The bed was the focus of the room; large and white with very fluffy pillows and comforters in a sleigh frame. Flanked by two empty nightstands, it looked as if it was carved from snow. A wood burning fireplace that sat across from the foot of the bed was lit and crackled softly.

A TV was mounted above the fireplace displaying the Eggman Industries logo. A door to the en suite was on the other wall next to sparsely decorated bookshelves.

The walls were a hazy, icy blue and the crystal light embedded into the ceiling was shaped like a snowflake.

"I suppose now that GUN knows there's no point in sneaking around." Ivo dropped his bag on the floor.

"This room is gorgeous! The room you had me and Shadow stay in was absolutely pitiful compared to this one." She flopped across the bed and sighed. "It's like a cloud!"

"I've got a surprise for you." He pulled a small white box out of his pocket.

She sat up and rested the staff on the edge of the bed. He approached her and held out the box for her to take.

She held the box in her hands for a moment before opening it. Inside of it was a silver ring with a small green gemstone embedded directly into the band.

"So," he said, "Don't get the wrong idea. This isn't a marriage proposal. However, I know things have been really bad for you since... forever. I figured a small gift might cheer you up." He grinned.

"What is the gemstone?" She slipped the ring onto the pinky finger of her right hand.

"Olivine. *Lunar* olivine. The moon has a lot of that gemstone in generally poor condition and I've kept a few of the higher quality ones over the years."
"This is a gemstone from the moon?" She jumped to her feet and marvelled at the tiny but glistening gem. "It came from all the way there? That's amazing!"

"The gem itself is a magnesium iron silicate, so if it interferes with your magic you don't have to wear it."

"No, it's not going to interfere. It's too small and it's not pure iron." She hugged him tightly. "Thank you."

He returned the gesture. "I kind of enjoy spoiling you." He pressed his lips to hers and pulled off her cloak.

"You're cute," she shuddered from the cold, "I've had people offer me entire kingdoms in exchange for my hand."

"I've gotta step up my game." He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his lap.

"You still haven't told me what you want for your birthday," she unzipped his coat, "I assume you want something unique."

"What do you give the man who has almost everything?" He kissed her neck.

She wrapped her legs around his torso and pulled her cloak up around them so they could be cozy. They kissed deeply, stealing each other's body heat for warmth.

"Maybe we should do this under the covers or in front of the fireplace." He muttered. "Wait, I don't have condoms. We can't do this."

"I can make my uterus vanish; it's not a problem."

"Well..."

"Ivo," she sighed, "Can you see yourself spending the rest of your life with me?"

"Honestly, that depends on how long the rest of my life is."

"What was it people call it now? Friends with benefits?" Sheptilah raised an eyebrow. She stepped down from his lap.

"That isn't what that is," he spoke softly, "I'm just being careful."

She pulled her cloak back on and turned to him, smiling gently. "I understand that you want a family someday but I don't. I can't risk having children that will be abused for their stones, so I would never 'trap' you by 'accidentally' becoming pregnant."

"Your race will die with you." He leaned forward. "If I were you I would have as many children as I could with as many different people as I could. Genetic variety, you know?"

"Your own little army of magicians." She sat down next to him.

"A dozen little Eggmans rolling around each with a glorious mustache of their own; even the girls." He joked.

"Would you give them names like Yolka, Shelly and Omletta?"

"Yes and little Tamago," he stroked his mustache, "The youngest of the twelve but with the
"bushiest mustache of all time."

"You'd have to make huge vehicle to transport them all in. You could call it the Egg Carton." She laughed.

"See? It's perfect. They'll have little Orbots and Cubots of their own and uncle Shadow can babysit."

"Yeah, I can't see Shadow agreeing to watch twelve kids." She rested her head on his shoulder.

"So? He can get Rouge and Omega to help." He shrugged.

The laughter died down and there was uncomfortable silence for a moment.

"I love you, you know."

"I know you do." He held her hand. "I'm pretty sure you have the capacity to love anyone and anything. If you can love Sonic you can love anyone."

She dragged her other hand down her face. "Not like that." She looked at him with her brows knit together.

He looked at her, slightly confused.

"Ivo," Sheptilah's eyebrows shot up, "I love you." She was oddly calm and her emotional state was neutral. "I've wanted to tell you since before the eclipse that I'm nuts about you. I've said it before but I don't think you understand..."

He sighed heavily. "Tilly," he squeezed her hand, "You mean a lot to me, too."

"Where I am from, or rather when I am from, when you love someone it means you accept them wholly. I trust you and I care about you and I can accept that you don't feel the exact same way. Given your last relationship was with Katella I can absolutely understand your mistrust of me. Honestly, when I first came into your life you assumed I was going to take everything from you."

He felt a lump form in his throat.

"I know it's not just about the contraceptives. You've never really been cared for unconditionally, have you?"

"Not really." He dropped his gaze. He hated being read like a book.

"The ziggurat tried to trick you but you saw through it immediately. It showed you a whole, unbroken family that loved you. It felt so alien to you you absolutely realized it couldn't be true."

"Yes." He bit his lip.

"You've been very patient with me, you know. You may not realize it but you have. Patient, accommodating, understanding... so please don't feel like you need to lie anymore. I know you feel like you're just waiting for the other shoe to drop." She pressed the palm of his hand to her Oracle Stone. "I'm always barefoot!" She flashed a cheesy smile.

"It's funny," he pulled her closer, "The sun and the moon look like they're the same size from the perspective of the planet. The sun is millions of times larger and further away, making it seem so small and close; but it's not. It's not even a big star in of itself; it's only a medium sized one. You seem to have the same perspective of me as Mercury does to Sol."
"We have a story about the sun and the moon. The moon is a mirror and the sun is a burning lantern. The mirror was jealous of the lantern's light and sought to chase it. Sometimes the mirror became jealous enough that it crossed in front of the lantern, taking the light away from those of us on Zanu if only briefly.

"There was a second version of the same story. The sun and the moon were lovers that could only meet so often and they followed each other across the sky endlessly. When the moon was full it was at its happiest, but began to miss the sun again and the light waned. Sometimes the sun would rise when the moon was still visible because it's the closest they could get. A solar eclipse would be the only time the lovers could be together.

"The moon was always angriest during a lunar eclipse because Zanu was directly between it and the sun. That was how the ancients explained our strange behavior during the eclipses."

"Why are you telling me these parables?" He looked at her.

"Because we are neither of those. I will not take your light away and nothing will come between us. Alchemically, we may be the sun and the moon; but we will always be who we are: individuals. I will not hurt you and you may never trust me fully, but I will still follow you across the sky." She took off her clothes and got into bed. "Let's go to sleep now. I know you're exhausted."

Eggman dug into his bag, pulled out his pink onesie pajamas and changed into them. He crawled into bed and snuggled down under the covers and sighed softly. He tapped some buttons on his gauntlet and turned off the lights. Orbot, Cubot and Metal came in soon after and each went into sleep mode nearby.

He drew Sheptilah in close and put his arm around her.

Ivo thought about everything he learned today and mulled it over. A mismatched pair, they were. A witch and a scientist, a primitive woman and a super-advanced man, an animal lover and a robot lover.

*It's weird how things work out,* he mused to himself. *I guess it's like magnets where opposites really do attract.*

His priorities were shifting. No longer was it only about world domination but instead world preservation and maybe, just maybe, finally moving on from his ridiculous pipe dream and settling down once and for all, living out the rest of his life in peace.

"I know what I want for my birthday."

"What is it?" She nuzzled him.

"To live in this one moment forever." He lightly kissed her on the forehead.

She smiled. "Is that all?"

"And all of my robots coated in Teflon." He grinned.

She clicked her tongue. "You're funny."

"For whatever it's worth I can see us spending the rest of our lives together. I would probably be alone otherwise. Until now I never really noticed how nice it is just sharing a space with someone else and finding comfort in that." He closed his eyes. "And if I ever do have children I would kill anyone that even thought about hurting them."
"Would our kids have white hair or brown?"

"White hair but brown mustaches." He nodded.

"What if we adopt?"

"If we adopt a child then they will spontaneously grow a mustache. Mine is so fabulous that others just spawn around it."

She shape-shifted a gigantic version of his onto her own face. "It's contagious!"

"Quickly, we must operate!" He was laughing so hard he felt tears form in the corners of his eyes. She wiped the mustache off with her hands. "Good night, Ivo."

"Good night, Tilly."

The next morning she awoke to the sensation of his hand running over her hip.

"Good morning." He smiled.

"Is it six already?" She yawned, "It's so early."

"I was thinking about what you said… I do trust you." He pulled her closer.

They made love slowly, sleepily and quietly.

*It's so strange,* she thought. *If you had told me I would be in this position months ago I would have laughed in your face. Now it just seems so perfectly natural.*

“İvo, I love you so much. I’m yours now and forever.” She lifted her head, beckoning him to kiss her. “And no one else’s.”

The only thing on his mind was enjoying the moment before it was inevitably quashed by the reality that is their chaotic lives. He worried, in the back of his mind, that even if they did end up starting a family that they’d have to constantly be on the run from GUN seeking to arrest him.

If they succeeded he would die in prison. Like grandfather, like grandson.

That's no way to live.

*Maybe she could declare her own country at the ziggurat,* he mused to himself. *She can make it so like on Bygone Island they have no jurisdiction. It'll be a kingdom of just us.*

“And I’m yours.” He kissed her deeply. “I don’t want to be with anyone else.”

“Do you love me, too?”

He was surprised by the question but could not find an answer. He quieted her by kissing her tenderly.

"You do realize that your robots are in sleep mode but I'm not?" MARI spoke. "I may be 'blind' but I am certainly not deaf."
"MARI!" Eggman yelped. "What's wrong with you?"

"Maybe I'll remix the gross noises humans make," the AI mused, "It would make a disturbing version of Abba's *Fernando*. This is your wake up call; it's six a.m. now."

"I hate you so much." He reached for the gauntlet on the nightstand.

'No, you don't." MARI corrected him. "You love me very much and think I am the coolest."

"I'm never having *actual* kids," Eggman muted MARI, "My robotic ones are annoying enough."

"I'm going to go take a shower. You going to join me?"

"Sure, why not." She sat up and covered her navel with her hand so the semen wouldn't drip. They ran across the freezing cold floor to the bathroom and immediately turned on the hot water.

"Remind me to install a heated rug in this room." He said to himself.

"I like this outpost a lot. It's quiet and there's little iron but it's so cold." She complained as she washed herself off with olive-scented soap.

"What are you gonna do with your ziggurat?" He scrubbed himself off as well.

"That's a good question; I don't know. Restore it, probably." Sheptilah shrugged. "I have no idea."

"It is still in the middle of nowhere. You could probably just leave it as-is and create another one somewhere closer to civilization. Make it a hospital for very complex diseases or something." The hot water cascading over his body felt wonderful.

"That's a good idea," she smiled, "I'm rubbing off on you!"

"Dear God, you are." He laughed.

Katella flew her ship through space to another solar system on the other end of the galaxy to collect more alien life to sell on the black market. She was alerted by the strange message she had waiting for her on the computer.

It was a pre-recorded video of a man that seemed to be Ivo but he appeared older. His mustache was white instead of its usual reddish-brown. He was accompanied by MARI and a green hedgehog not unlike Sonic who chose to wear a black leather jacket and sunglasses indoors.

She listened to the message intently, disappointed at first that it wasn't Ivo himself calling to ask for her back.

"The witch will be yours to do with as you please when I am done experimenting on her. As you may know, she is the last of her kind anywhere in the universe. We understand that, according to your historical texts, you collect such creatures and sell them to the highest bidder." The white-haired man spoke gravely. "I'm sure she'd fetch quite a good sum to the right buyer."

The green hedgehog smiled, revealing his teeth were all filed to sharp points. MARI simply stared straight ahead, emotionless.
When she learned what the message was truly about a sinister smile spread across her face. She'd get her revenge on the bitch that tried to kill her but chickened out at the last second, leaving her alive and humiliated.

"That witch will burn at the stake," she said to herself, “Oh, she will burn. ”
"Amy, I have my doubts." Sonic scratched his spines.

"I have to learn to fly to be a real witch, right?" Amy held her store bought broom between her legs and she crouched with it steadied between her knees.

"Regina didn't fly on a broom." He reminded her. "Neither did Wendy."

Tails was flying overhead to provide air support. Sticks and Knuckles remained on the ground with Sonic.

Sticks walked up to Amy and plopped a helmet onto her head. "You're gonna need this."

"There's magic in all of us," she adjusted the helmet. "There's magic in all of us…" She repeated the line Sheptilah told her every day.

"You can do it, Amy!" Knuckles clapped and cheered, "I believe in fairies!"

"That's Peter Pan," Sonic shook his head, "Ames, you can do it."

"Who is Peter Pan?" Knuckles furrowed his brow. "I don't know any Peters."

"Shh, guys." Amy shut her eyes tight and concentrated. A minute or two passed but nothing happened. Her jaw hurt from clenching it so hard. The pink hedgehog sighed and loosened her grip but didn't see the broom's bristles twitch.

"Maybe you should wait for the fairy-witch." Sticks huffed.

"I can do this!" Her frustration channeled from her chest to her fingertips and sent the broom flying but without her on it.
"Hit the deck!" Sonic cried as he dropped to the ground.

The besom flew into her house and bounced around the walls causing things to fall over and break.

"Woah! Come back!" Amy cried. The broom returned to her and floated safely beside her. She hesitantly mounted it. "Slow… slowly... " She chided the object. "Good."

She rose up a few feet before the broom flew off at light speed and took Amy screaming with it.

Tails chased after her but couldn't keep up.

Thunderbolt initiated a group chat with all of the active Egg Bosses. The view from her office window in the brand new lair was stunning as it was situated on the edge of cliff.

"As you should know, Doctor Eggman's birthday is coming up. We will throw him a surprise party to show our appreciation." She spoke smugly from behind her impressive desk.

"What if he's planning something already?" Akhlut shrugged.

"I want to get ahead!" Thunderbolt slammed her hands down. "And we're throwing the party at my new lair. June twenty third at noon in my time zone! Be there or be sorry!" The chinchilla disconnected from the call leaving the others to linger

"Who is going to be the one to tell her Eggman is seeing the witch...?" Clove frowned.

"Not it." The others said in unison.

They couldn't keep their hands off of each other, much to the dismay of the robots. The thrill of a new relationship meant that everything about it was fresh and exciting. Each new discovery of what they liked and didn't like made things between them interesting and fun. Sheptilah sat under the white willow in the garden with Ivo's head in her lap, hand-feeding him pineapple chunks.
"I could get used to this," he grinned, "More fruit, darling."

"Whatever gets you to eat more fruit." She dropped another piece into his waiting mouth.

"I feel like a Greek god." He chewed noisily. "Hmm, but you probably knew them as the Mycenaeans."

"Not a clue, honey." A warm breeze rustled the leaves above them, scattering the sunlight that filtered through them like reflections off of a disco ball. The salty ocean air smelled clean and inviting as the sea threw itself against the outcrop.

"Amphomag is expensive," he watched the beams of sunlight broken up by motes of pollen, "I'm sure I can synthesize a large amount for our purposes, find the wiccaphages and douse them with it. We don't have to die."

"What then?" She leaned in, her hair resembling a silver veil.

"We can run away to a private island in the Tropic of Capricorn, frolic on the white beaches and make love all night. Our tanned, oiled-up bodies bringing some color against the sand as we lounge about lazily."

"Or we can repair my ziggurat." She held another chunk of pineapple between her index finger and thumb, juice threatening to drop onto Ivo's face. "Seeing as how I'm naturally brown-skinned."

He leaned up and wrapped his lips around the fruit, lightly sucking her fingers as he laid back down.

Her cheeks flushed crimson. "I've created a monster."

"Yes, you have." He grinned mischievously.

He suddenly frowned. "But then there's the issue of Shadow."
"Can't be an island paradise of just us," Tilly smiled, "My familiar will always need me and I will always need him."

"Boo. I've been enjoying the intimacy without fear of getting killed or hurt."

"Don't talk about Katella," Tilly gave him another piece of pineapple, "She won't bother us again."

"I've missed out on so much of my youth," he absentmindedly swallowed the chunk without chewing, "You're going to outlive me, right?"

"I have maybe another hundred and fifty years to go, yes," she popped a piece of pineapple into her mouth, "But I can extend your life as well. I do have nearly unlimited healing powers."

"That's right, but won't you still look about the same while I'll be old and decrepit?" He imagined himself stooped over a walker with his still-hot girlfriend feeding him and changing his adult diapers, though certainly not simultaneously.

"No! I age, too; just not when I'm in stasis, of course. I age a little slower but my healing powers would keep you somewhat fresh-looking as well."

"I want to be two hundred years old surrounded by a ton of grand and great-grandkids wearing a hat that says 'foxy grandpa'."

She leaned down and kissed him, rolling her tongue over his and enjoying the fruity taste that still filled his mouth.

A sudden whoosh of air made her open her eyes. She saw a familiar pair of red and white sneakers connected to thin blue legs.

"Sorry to interrupt but Amy needs your help!" Sonic panted. "We have to go to her house!"

His voice cutting through the romantic moment startled Eggman in such a manner that he
accidentally bit down on Sheptilah's tongue.

"Nnn!" Tilly whined. She pulled her tongue free, some blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

Eggman rolled off of Tilly's lap and spat out the blood onto the ground and looked up at the hedgehog.

"What's wrong with Amy?" Tilly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"She tried to fly on a broom but it took off with her on it and she might get hurt!"

"Why the Hell would she try to fly on a broom?" Tilly cocked an eyebrow.

"Come on," Sonic pulled her by the wrist, "She could get really hurt!"

Tilly teleported Sonic and Eggman to Amy's house and looked up. Amy was rolling around overhead holding on for dear life with a very frantic Tails attempting to catch her.

"Amy, let go! I'll catch you!" Tails shouted.

"I'm scared, Tails!" She cried.

"It's okay! Let go!" The fox urged her.

Amy let go and was sent spinning in the air for a moment before Tails caught the very nauseous hedgehog.

The broom, without its rider, was confused and barreled back toward the ground faster than a bullet. The Mobians ducked down to avoid being impaled but as it zoomed by Eggman simply held his arm out and effortlessly grabbed it with his hand.
"Nice catch!" Sticks admitted. "Gimme that broom." The badger took the object and bent it until it snapped, cursing under her breath the whole time.

Tails landed with Amy and passed the hedgehog off to the witch to be cured of her motion sickness.

"Ames!" Sonic hugged her while she was still in Sheptilah's arms. This caused some of the spines on her head to dig into Sheptilah's rib cage. "What happened?"

"Sonic!" Amy blushed, "I don't know; I think the broom was fighting me."

"Why would you try to fly on a broom?" Tilly winced as the spines jabbed sharply and put the hedgehog down.

"It's what witches do." Amy rubbed her head.

"Thanks, buddy!" Sonic praised Tails. "Good catch."

Sheptilah bent down and picked up the ruined broomstick and looked it over. "Why would you not use one you made yourself?" The remains of the object rattled in her hand as she dispelled what magic was left in it.

"What? It's what I had laying around." Amy sighed.

"If you want to fly on something it's best if you make it yourself out of objects of natural materials." Tilly explained, "Or at least buy one from another witch."

Amy burst into tears, "I'll never be a good witch! I can't even get the basics down!"

"Don't cry," Sonic comforted her, "You are a good witch. You're a great witch, Amy."
"There's a learning curve," Eggman offered an explanation, "If it means anything you're ahead of Shadow in his magic."

"Nuh uh." Amy sniffed as she pulled off her helmet.

"Actually, since you've been on…" Sonic chose his words carefully. "Leave, Eggman, Shadow hasn't had a whole lot of work to do anyway so he's been coming to the island a lot to practice his magic with Amy."

"Oh, great," Sticks piped up. "They government is gonna weaponize magic! That's the last thing we need. I'm taking all of the iron I can get my paws on."

"What about the witches who work with iron? Techno mages?" Eggman teased.

"You're right!" Sticks jumped up and down. "What's their weakness?!"

"Most people are weak to suckerpunches," Knuckles flexed.

"They're not going to weaponize magic, I won't allow it." Tilly stood defiantly with her hands on her hips. "I'll help you with your flying," She spoke to the pink hedgehog, "Try not to do anything like this again by yourself, though."

"I'll meet you back at the lair later." Eggman called to Tilly.

"Actually, you should stop by my hut later." The witch smiled. "Come on, Amy," Tilly urged the hedgehog to follow her back to her house.

"I am going to go back to lifting weights." Knuckles flexed.

"Yeah, I have to go finish my wicccaphage tracker and keep an eye open for updates on the Dubai Chaos Emerald. See you later, Sonic!" Tails bid him goodbye and flew away.
"Wait, I'm coming with!" Sticks chased after Tilly and Amy, leaving Sonic alone with Eggman.

"So," the blue hedgehog dug his toe into the sand, "I guess that uh... the date idea Amy cooked up worked."

"No." Eggman said.

"Well," Sonic shrugged, "That isn't what I saw."

"My personal charm, vast wealth, immense intelligence and attractive looks are what hooked her." The Overlander brushed imaginary dirt off of his shoulder.

"Shadow is going to be mad." The hedgehog warned him.

"Shadow knows but doesn't approve, obviously."

"Ah," Sonic furrowed his brow, "So that's what was bothering him, I guess." He put his arms behind his head and locked his fingers together. "Don't be stupid with this one."

"What do you mean, you overgrown pincushion?" Eggman squinted at his enemy.

Sonic looked at him knowingly. There was a weird moment of silence between the two before the hedgehog spoke up again.

"When we all first met her she was skittish and weak. We saw her attempt to warp from your lair to the shore and she only made it halfway before she fell into the water and was overturned by the waves. It wasn't graceful.

"Now she's out here picking up the pieces; even establishing her own little seelie court. She made herself a home trading life-saving magic for junk. Don't screw this up."

"You're too optimistic, hedgehog," Eggman frowned, "She and I are going to die, don't you know that? Our days are numbered. We're just passing the time, so to speak. With any luck we won't take
Shadow down with us."

Sonic grinned mischievously, "You? Just die? Impossible. That would be too easy!" He then gasped softly when Eggman's words fully sunk in and lowered his arms.

"Now you're understanding the situation." The Overlander stooped a little to be more at eye level with the small Mobian. "You can't cheese your way out of this one. I'm doing my best to make sure it doesn't come to everyone blowing up like a hydrogen bomb, but I'm not confident it will end well for us at all. She had an entire kingdom attempt to fight them and they all died trying."

Sonic shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Well, the Eggman I know is unkillable and too stubborn to just give up." He gave Eggman a thumbs up, "You got your brains and your technology on your side. The space parasites won't know what hit them! This is the future and we're going to show them what's what!"

Eggman paused for a moment before straightening his posture.

"One day you are going to be hit with the cold, hard reality of life and it's going to hurt. Enjoy your youth and innocence while you can, Sonic The Hedgehog."

"What are you talking about? Sincere optimism and a strong love for life is not innocence, and even if it was it wouldn't be ignorant to hold onto those things well into adulthood. You're going to trick yourself into giving up if you keep thinking like this." He felt anger flare up in his heart and his face became serious.

"When you hit a wall you gotta get up and go over it. When you hit the ground you have to shake it off and get back up on your feet. You only get one life in this whole universe; don't let it go so easily! There's still so much to do! You gotta live and make more robots for me to destroy."

Eggman rarely saw this side of Sonic but when he did he knew that there was no way to convince the hedgehog otherwise.

"And when you do make it out in one piece, victorious and thriving, you had better take care of that witch or I will personally come by and kick your butt." Sonic stomped his foot, "Ooh! I'm all fired up now!"
"Don't hurt yourself," the Overlander couldn't help but chuckle, "Your spines are all bristled. Maybe we can throw you to the wiccaphages and poke them to death."

Sonic adjusted his stance and rubbed his index finger under his nose. "I'm gonna go for a run, smell you later, Egghead." And with that he sped off like a bolt of blue lightning.
The scientists soon found that witch blood was impossible to test.

Under the microscope the blood was normal in appearance except that all of the cells were four times the size they should be.

"Macrocytosis," the doctor noted, "But the plasmocytes, phagocytes and miscellaneous skin cells are all enlarged." He was speaking into a recording device so he could transcribe his discoveries later.

"Blood is unreactive toward hydrogen peroxide at any percentage, soaps and bleach. Chemical analysis of the blood shows an unusually low percentage of iron and some presence of a chlorophyll-like material."

Tower opened the door to the lab and demanded that someone clean the blood off of his face.

"I can't get it off no matter how much I scrub! I have a video meeting with the Dubai Jewelry Museum director in an hour!"

"We can't get any of it off of our equipment, either." The doctor shook his head. "You'll have to bring the witch back here to help remove it."

"How are you unable to dissolve this tissue? This is one of the best equipped labs in the world." He huffed. "It's just blood."

Eggman felt claustrophobic in Sheptilah's hut. Shelves and boxes were overstuffed, barely holding random assortments of items like old books, bundles of cloth, jars of small things.

She had evidently painted notes on the walls in a combination of Nannaeic, English and Latin and some appeared to be cooking recipes, decorated with filigree around the edges to mark off individual subjects. Every square inch of the place was covered in something, be it paint, ashes or pots full of magical concoctions.

Except the tiny kitchenette. It was somehow kept tidy and spotless.

Along the ceiling in one corner was a patched-together curtain of silks and beads that reached the floor. This gave her some privacy as her bed was behind it. The four post bed itself was carved from a large slab of wood with a sun, moon and stars topping each corner. On it was an overstuffed mattress and puffy comforter.

The room smelled of sandalwood incense and saltwater.

"I want to put in a fireplace here," she gestured to a wall, "And maybe put in my own bedroom with an actual door elsewhere."

"Where is your bathroom? " He looked around nervously.

She pulled a wood panel aside, revealing a hidden water closet that had only a toilet in it.

"So where do you bathe?"

"The ocean," she shrugged, "Saltwater is good for your skin!"
"Why do you allow yourself to live in such squalor?" He pouted, his mustache drooping.

"Squalor? Everything here is mine." She closed the panel and went over to her bed and flopped back on it. "It's all mine. I made most of this place with my own two hands."

"Wouldn't you rather have nice things like a hot shower and a brand new comforter? A big home to keep everything in instead of having it all over the place?"

"Ivo, I can't live in your lair; the iron makes my body hurt." She shook her head.

He sat on the edge of the bed next to her, surprised by its softness. "You deserve better than this."

"No, you think this place is overstuffed and sad. Your home is so huge and clean because it's minimalist. Mine is tiny and full of actual, literal junk."

"I expect your hut actually gets up on giant chicken legs and walks around, Baba Yaga." He smirked.

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. "I am the resident witch, not Baba Yaga. I don't live in a forest."

"A forest, a jungle, what's the difference? Climate. The difference is climate. You are a Baba Yaga whether you like it or not. You even have the tons of white hair."

"I'm not Slavic; I am what you would call a Persian. Sahira, which is Arabic for 'witch', is what I am. However if you were so inclined you could also call me a djinn." She squinted.

"I don't think you're a genie," he laughed, "You don't live in a bottle!"

"Oh, no. Djinn is just another way to say fae folk, or fairies. I guess I am a fairy, I don't know. Amy and I have been discussing it lately. The allergy to iron is a big thing to them. To me, in my time, fairies were little bug-like creatures that caused devastation and illness just because they could. I took it as an insult but I suppose things have changed and so has historical context. She showed me pictures of beautiful people with insect wings."

"Ah, well, if it makes you feel any better scientists classify and reclassify animals all the time." He brushed the hair out of her face with a finger, a habit he couldn't break.

Thunder rumbled outside followed by heavy rain pounding against the roof.

She smiled, "Yes, so I suppose I am a fairy; I don't really see myself as one but it doesn't bother me so much now to be called one." She pulled him to her and pressed her warm lips to his.

He laid down next to her and slid his hand under her pillow only to be pricked by something: it was one of Shadow's spines.

He held up the dead spike. "Shadow shares this bed with you?"

"Sometimes he sleeps here, yeah." She took the object from him and dropped it on the floor. "I wash my bedding before he comes over. Don't tell him I told you this but his tail wags in his sleep."

"Oh my God that's so cute." Ivo snickered.

"It gets better," she whispered, "He makes snuffling noises, too. When he's having a bad dream he curls into a ball. I'm not surprised he's left pricklies all over the place."
"I love when you speak English. That accent of yours is so sexy." Ivo teased.

"Tch," she clicked her tongue, "I'm not exotic."

"You're the last of your race, you cannot get any more exotic than that. Literally," he ran his hand over her bare hip, "However, I'm not trying to exotify you in a creepy way. I just like the way your accent sounds. Sometimes you fuse your vowels and put emphasis on weird parts of words. When you pause to think of the word you want to use you look up and it's so cute." He smiled, "And the way you drop the 's' when you pluralize words sometimes."

"Oh, the esteemed Dock-otorr Eggu-mann lohvs my acksenn," she said, "How zweet!"

"If your accent had a flavor it would be warm cinnamon." He flirted.

"Ooh, cinnamon!" Sheptilah giggled. “I don’t know what to say except… I feel like I was made for you.”

“Hm?”

“Like… I was meant to be found by you because you are my destined soul mate.”

“You believe in that stuff?” He said with a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, I do.” Her gaze dropped to his lips before being cast to the side. “It’s okay if you don’t feel the same way.” She frowned. “I’m used to it.” She curled up in the fetal position and sighed.

“Darling, what’s wrong?” He touched her shoulder.

“Nothing,” she lied, “Nothing at all.”

Her phone rang from under the bed. She reached down and saw on the screen that it was President Tower calling.

"What the Hell does he want?" She picked up, "Hello?"

"Sheptilah! How do I get this blood off of my face?" He sounded anxious and annoyed.

"Slow down," she frowned, "You're speaking too fast."

"Witch blood does not wash away." She concentrated on speaking correctly. "I will come get it."

"Come get it?"

"I said I will come get it. I will be there in a moment but I want an apology." She looked over at Ivo who shrugged.


She sighed with disgust. "I don't like speaking English. I will be there. Meet me at the vestibule." She hung up the phone and sat up. "I will be right back." She snapped her fingers so that she was now redressed and teleported to the fortress.

Tower, with Apollo the fox as his guard, was waiting at the gate.

She arrived not long after and painlessly drew the blood back into her body.

"Thank you." He said stoically.

"I hope you understand why I reacted the way I did." She crossed her arms.

"I suppose manners aren't something you've learned yet, given you're so primitive," He turned to leave, "So I understand perfectly."

"Primitive!?!" She stomped her foot. "You must be under some incredible pressure as the head of a military organization this massive but you still should know how to treat people one-on-one!"

"Does it matter, Sheptilah?!" He turned to her. He looked her up and down and saw her disheveled look and reddened wrists. "You're too busy scrambling eggs to really care."

She paused for a second; her serious expression gave way to uncontrollable laughter. "Scrambling eggs! That's hysterical!" Her stomach hurt from laughing so hard.

Apollo cracked a smile at her reaction; a smile he hoped Tower didn't see.

"Scrambling eggs," she wheezed, "You're an asshole but that one got me. Oh my gods I'm going to tell him that right now." She gasped for air. "Oh, I needed that."

She swallowed hard to steady herself. "I love the big idiot, okay? I don't really have time to care what anyone thinks about it."

"Does he love you?" Tower smirked.

"Hm, probably." She shrugged. "It's his loss if he doesn't." She teleported away before he could respond.

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn, sir, but did you really have to refer to it as scrambling eggs?" Apollo couldn't keep back his laughter anymore and snickered.

Tower shook his head. "I thought of it a week ago and have been waiting since to use it."
Sonic laid in his hammock staring out the ceiling and doing math in his head to help him fall asleep. It wasn't the noisy weather that kept Sonic awake as he found some solace in the white noise, it was the nightmares. The horrific images had come back in full swing leaving the poor hedgehog unable to relax.

"Pi is three-point-one-four-one-five-nine-two-six-five-three-five-…" He rolled over, making the hammock creak. He sighed with disgust before sitting up. He sped over to Tails' house to make sure the thunder wasn't bothering him.

Tails was curled up in bed wearing noise-cancelling headphones. Sonic tucked him in, lightly kissed the top of his head and sped off to the witch's hut.

He stopped at the door when he heard voices.

"Ivo, do you love me?" Sheptilah asked.

Sonic's ears stood straight up. He snuck to the window and peeked into the candlelit hut. Eggman was redressed and standing before Sheptilah with one hand rubbing the back of his head.

"What?" He stalled.

"Do you love me?" She repeated in English.

Sonic's eyes grew wide and followed Eggman as he paced around the room.

"Why do you ask?" He grinned nervously at her.

"Curiosity."

Sonic peered further over the windowpane to get a better view, erroneously believing the darkness of night would hide him.

"Define love," he flashed a crooked smile.

_Just answer, you idiot!_ Sonic thought. _It's like pulling teeth!_

Tilly crossed her arms and sneered. "It's okay if you don't."

_Thank the gods Amy isn't here_, the hedgehog bit his lip, _she'd have busted in by now and killed him._

"Oh, ho ho," he ran his fingers through his mustache, "Of course I love the idea of being with-," he turned to the window when movement caught his eye, "Sonic!?"

Busted! The hedgehog ducked out of view.

"You love Sonic? " She cocked an eyebrow.

"No! Look!" He pointed to the window at seemingly nothing.

"Stop stalling," she pouted, "Yes or no."

"I'm not stalling; I'm telling you he was right there…" Eggman tapped his foot. "Sonic, come out."
Sonic raised his hand sheepishly and waved. He stood up and smiled nervously. "Am I interrupting?"

Eggman gestured smugly at Sheptilah.

"Oh, you really weren't stalling." She admitted. "What brings you here?"

"Can't sleep, zombies will get me." Sonic pouted.

"Night terrors again?" Ivo sighed.

Sonic nodded.

"Come in," she opened the door for the Mobian, "You're dripping wet."

Sonic shook the rainwater off of his spikes not unlike a dog and stepped into the hut.

*Thanks for saving my ass,* Eggman mouthed to him.

The hedgehog shot him a glare.

"I haven't fully organized the spells necessary to get my hut up and running but I can do most of it." She cleared off a space on her table and snapped her fingers.

"Leather cord." She commanded. A drawer opened somewhere and a spool of black braided leather cord flew to her hand. "Rose quartz," she beckoned a large chunk of the mineral to her other hand and placed both items on the table.

"Betony, chrysoprase, malachite, frankincense oil and star of Bethlehem." All of the items came to her except for the last.

"House, star of Bethlehem, please."

"Um…" Sonic looked around.

"Are you trying to summon three Magi?" Eggman laughed. "Frankincense and the star of Bethlehem?"

"Shh!" Tilly tapped her foot. "House, bring me star of Bethlehem."

After a moment something rattled and came flying to her: a Star of David on a gold chain.

"No, House! This is the star of David, I'm not asking for this. What I want is a kind of plant."

"You're talking to your house?" The hedgehog's ears were pinned back.

"It … understands you?" Eggman was nervous. "So do the walls have ears, too?" He was a little ashamed of what just occurred if the house was sentient.

"She wants *ornithogalum umbellatum*." MARI chirped.

"Try asking for-" Ivo began but was interrupted by Sheptilah breezing by him.

"I know where it is, the house is just being difficult." She jumped up and grabbed some of the little white flowers from a shelf and returned to the table.

She combined the items with magic and made a small black amulet affixed to the leather cord for
Sonic to wear around his neck before going to sleep.

"Normally malachite is a toxic mineral by itself but when combined like so it's harmless; unless you swallow the stone. You might choke on that." She winked playfully.

"It smells nice." The hedgehog smiled as she put the necklace on him.

"That's just a bonus. Nice smells make it easier to sleep. You won't dream at all with this on but you will still be just as rested when you wake up." She patted the top of his head.

"Thanks," he ran his thumb over the gem that was hidden under his neckerchief, "I hope it works."

"Well, if it doesn't I'll try something else." She shrugged. "Now go home, it's really late."

Sonic nodded and sped off back out into the rain. The breeze he caused with the displacement of air blew out some of the lit candles.

"So your house... understands you?" Ivo walked up to her.

"Not really," she put the Star of David chain away, "Not like a person would. It's just one of those apothecary spells. You walk in, say what you need and it comes flying at you. It's not fully set up." She rubbed an eye with the back of her fist.

"Are you okay?"

"Ivo, if you don't love me you can just say so." She tried to avoid eye contact by pretending to tidy up.

"Tilly," he stooped, "It's not that."

"Then what is it?" She tried to sound uninterested.

"I don't know how I feel. I've never been this stable with anyone or anything this long before." He reached forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "If it means anything, Sheptilah, I care about you a lot."

She leaned in and hugged him tightly. "See? Was that so hard? It's okay to be unsure."

"Yes," he stroked her hair, "It actually was that hard to admit it. I'm going back to my lair to finish up some work. I'm almost done with creating something to deactivate the implants in my Egg Bosses."

"Ah, you remembered." She smiled.

"Yes," he kissed her forehead, "I look forward to testing it tomorrow on some stunt dummies."

"That's a mean thing to call Orbot and Cubot."
Cool Kids

Hope and Team Dark were in a meeting room together with photos and illustrations of current tectonic plate activity highlighted on maps projected onto the wall.

“Two small quakes off the coast of Downunda, four off the coast of Japan and three scattered randomly throughout the Southern Hemisphere. I don’t like this.” Hope was four coffees into her notes. “All of the quakes are about a seven on the Richter scale.”

“The geologists and seismologists I’ve contacted have not gotten back to me yet, either.” She agitatedly tapped her empty styrofoam cup with her fingers. “According to the National Earthquake Information Center they record about fifty quakes a day. What makes these quakes weird is they’re not all occurring on fault lines and almost none of them have aftershocks.”

“Any tsunamis?” Rouge thumbed through some of the photos Hope had printed out.

“Nothing higher than a few feet by the time it came to shore; so no, not really.” The Overlander tried to sip her coffee only to realize the cup was empty and crushed it in her hand.

“Some satellite imagery, courtesy of NASA and our friend Ulala, shows some large white masses moving under the ocean near the surface but the photos are unclear and it looks like it could just be plastic continents. You know, those massive collections of plastic pollution that just rolls around killing whales.” Hope took a deep breath.

“I’m willing to bet the witch-eater things are hiding out in the ocean and these unclear photos are them. I also believe they’re causing the quakes now more than ever.”

“Show this to Tower. He can send some scouts out to see what these moving things really are. I don’t know about them being able to cause quakes, though. I hope it’s just a coincidence.” Rouge put the photos back down.

“I agree. The wiccaphages we encountered back in Soumerca and the ziggurat were really dangerous but even in big groups I’m not sure they could cause damage like that.” Shadow crossed his arms, “Then again… we don’t know how many are there or how they even survived so long in the core of the moon.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this but… talk to Eggman. His base is on the moon, right? Or at least one of them? I need footage and data from the core. The more information we have the better equipped we will be.” Hope tossed the crushed cup into a nearby wastebasket.

“Looks like I’m going back to the lair,” Shadow sighed, “Not like we have anything else to do around here; and get some sleep. You’re working yourself to death.”

“Yeah.” Rouge smiled. “We can have a girl’s day out! Or a girl’s day in, it’s up to you, Hope. My treat either way.”

“I’d rather stay in and keep working…” She looked at her unsteady hand and noted how she couldn’t hold her fingers still. “I do need a break, though.”
weighted plexiglass cube. Eggman put on his protective goggles and handed Sheptilah a pair. Orbot and Cubot watched close by while Metal Sonic was patrolling the island.

“Phase one.” Ivo said as he ran a small remote across the watermelon. “That should’ve deactivated it.” He pressed a button on his gauntlet. For a moment it appeared the bomb was inert when the watermelon exploded with a soft *plap*, the pureed fruit completely coating the inside of the cube.

“Congratulations, you just killed the chinchilla.” Tilly raised an eyebrow.

“Orbot, bring in the next big fruit.” He commanded.

“But boss, you’re already here.” Cubot shrugged.

Ivo grabbed Sheptilah’s goggles and threw them at the robot who ran off squealing.

Next was another watermelon Eggman labeled as ‘Nephthys’. The box was replaced and another remote key was used to try and deactivate the bomb. They eventually ran through sixteen whole watermelons with no safe results.

“Incoming call from the Artika base.” MARI chirped.

“Yes?” Eggman spoke into his gauntlet.

“Sir?” Tundra’s voice came through, “Two things: one, the oceanic quakes are getting worse and some of the ice sheets here are beginning to crack dangerously. It’s unclear if this is due to climate change or the suspicious quakes across the oceans. Second thing: Thunderbolt is throwing a *surprise* party for you at her new base tomorrow so you need to go there at some point. She is forcing all of us to go.”

Sheptilah picked up a chunk of destroyed fruit and began to munch on its delicious innards.

“What are you, a *rat*? Don’t eat food off the floor!” Eggman scolded her.

“I’m sorry?” Tundra was confused.

“No, not you, Tundra, I’m yelling at my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? Is that a downgrade or an upgrade from Egg Boss?” Orbot mused.

“It’s a promotion!” Ivo declared.

“Downgrade.” Orbot and Cubot said in unison.

“Am I interrupting something?” The walrus asked.

“No, just working on getting the implants removed safely, as promised. However, current experiments involving watermelons in place of brain-filled skulls are proving not so easy.”

“So you *are* going to keep that promise after all.”

“Am I *not* a man of my word?” He paused. “Don’t answer that.”

“I’m going to eat this fruit and you can’t stop me.” Tilly swallowed a mouthful of fruit, much of it sticking to her face.

“You are a grown woman! You look like a hamster.” He sighed.
“I am a hungry grown woman,” she stuck out her tongue, “But I decided that desert hamsters are the cutest rodents so I will take that as a compliment.”

“Sir?” Tundra tried to get Eggman’s attention.

“Yes, sorry,” the Overlander huffed, “I will humor the chinchilla because I know if I don’t she will kill us all. Goodbye.” Eggman hung up and turned back to Sheptilah who was still face-deep in a watermelon rind.

“What? Wasting food is bad.” She swallowed.

Ivo let out a disgusted sigh and went back to work.

Shadow pulled his phone from the charger and slipped it into a little gap in his spikes. He turned to leave his dorm when he saw Hope, Rouge and Boris in the doorway. Boris was holding a paper plate with a large chocolate cupcake and a lit birthday candle stuck in the center.

“Happy birthday!” They said in unison.

“We didn’t forget,” Rouge smiled, “We knew you’d want to keep it quiet, but we did bring gifts.”

Shadow smiled. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“We got you something special, too.” From behind her back Rouge pulled out a vintage-style turntable in a collapsible suitcase in a soft powder blue.

“And to go with it.” Hope pulled a small worn out vinyl record sleeve. It was The Chordettes’ greatest hits.

“The turntable is new but the vinyl is an original pressing. It’s a copy my mother gave me when I was really young,” Boris said, “I only listened to it once or twice and we tested it so it still works just fine.”

“This is so cool,” Shadow took the gifts, “Thank you so much. I listened to The Chordettes a lot when I was growing up on the ARK.”

“Happy birthday, old man,” Rouge embraced him tightly, “Now eat your cupcake! That is, if it won’t ruin your dentures.”

“Respect your elders,” he joked. He put the turntable and the vinyl on his bed and took the cupcake. “Thanks for not making it a big deal. I don’t like being reminded of how absolutely old I am.”

Hope hugged Shadow tightly, careful to not make him drop his treat. Boris opted to shake Shadow’s hand firmly in lieu of a hug, something greatly appreciated by the hedgehog. He blew out the candle but forgot to make a wish.

“Inside, outside, upside down!” Sonic sang as he strummed his guitar, tapping his foot to the beat. “You got me goin’ ’round and ’round!”
Tails was with him and began to sing along while playing the drums, “Backwards, forwards, sideways, too!”

“You've got me dizzy from lovin' you,” they sang in unison, “Don’t you know that I love you -”

The music was interrupted by Tails’ coughing fit.

“You okay there, buddy?” Sonic turned to the fox.

“I think I’m coming down with a cold,” he choked, ”Let's keep going. I think a bit of saliva just went down the wrong pipe, that's all.”

“We can practice later if you’re not feeling well,” Sonic strummed a few chords.

Tails tried to suppress the coughing but nearly caused himself to throw up when he did.

“Talk to the witch, dude.” Sonic took off his glove and pressed the back of his hand to Tails' forehead to feel for a fever. “Hm, you are kinda warm.”

“I don’t want to run to the witch to have every little illness cured for me. That’s a great way to kill any immunity I could’ve built up. This is how societies collapse, Sonic.” Tails coughed, “But I will see a doctor.”

“You’re so dramatic.” The hedgehog laughed. ”Helping you isn't going to bring the world to its knees.”

“It’s true, though. I'll be fine.” The fox frowned.

“I’ll make you some soup,” he took off his guitar and set it against the wall, “Even if it is ten in the morning.”

“Thanks, Sonic.” Tails moved over to the sofa. “Chicken noodle, please.”

“Coming right up!” The hedgehog chirped. “You want those little oyster cracker things?”

“Yes,” Tails stretched out, “Thank you so much.”

Sheptilah sat sidesaddle on her staff in midair while Amy floated next to her on her own broom. Amy’s broom was not very well-made, but it was hers and it worked.

“I’m so proud of you, Amy,” she smiled, “You’re the best apprentice a witch could ever ask for.”

“You’ve taught me so much.” The hedgehog laughed nervously when her broom bucked. “Thank you.”

“Someone has to pass on my knowledge after I’m gone. It’s important that my people’s accomplishments aren’t lost to time.” Sheptilah was uncomfortable sitting instead of standing on a flying object, but quickly grew used to it.

“We could translate the whole grimoire into English if you want, but it is a family grimoire and it would feel wrong to make it public domain.” Amy slapped her broom lightly to get it to behave.
The object obliged the chiding and steadied itself.

“So much would be lost if we didn’t … Eh, I’ll scry about it later.” She waved off her concerns.

They flew around the island, careful to not be too far apart, too high or too fast. At some points Sheptilah had to grab hold of Amy’s broom to give it a boost or steady it. The feeling of free falling and the cool breeze blowing through their hair was exhilarating.

“Maybe next time we’ll make it thicker like a walking stick.” Amy yelped when the broom briefly flipped her upside down, “Or maybe the thickness of Knuckles’ skull!”

“What did I say!?” Sheptilah smacked the bristles. “Behave!” The broom righted itself immediately.

“Why does your staff behave but my broom doesn’t?” Amy frowned.

“Who knows. I’m used to flying on rocks.” She laughed. “Let’s go back to my hut and try making another broom. I really do think a thicker handle will help.”

The duo flew back to the hut only to find there were dozens of potted plants strewn around the property along with bouquets of red roses and small gift bags.

“Someone must really like you.” Amy landed gracefully. “There’s a note on your door,” she pointed to a folded letter stuck in the door jamb.

Tilly dismounted from her staff and pulled the note out and unfolded it.

Dear Tilly,

I’m sorry about what I said, or rather what I didn’t say. Please accept this apology.

- Ivo

“Is he serious?” The witch frowned, “I told him I wasn’t mad.”

“Black Magic Dark Red roses!” Amy picked up a bouquet and shoved her face into the blossoms, inhaling deeply. “In flower language roses this dark mean love, longing, desire, regret and sorrow.“

“I don’t think he’s savvy enough to know flower meanings.” Tilly smiled, “How sweet.”

“What’s all this about?” Amy leaned over and peeked into a bag.

“I asked if he loved me and he didn’t have an answer and I told him it’s okay to not know how you feel and he kinda just… ran off.”
“He so totally does!” The hedgehog was bouncing on her heels, “I wish Sonic would do something nice like this for me.”

“Where am I gonna keep all these plants? I think I need a bigger house…” Tilly picked up a bouquet of pink roses and held them up to Amy’s face. “These match you perfectly!”

“Ladies.” A deep, familiar voice crooned.

“Ivo!” Tilly turned around and saw Eggman standing with Orbot, Cubot and Metal beside him. “And you brought your kids!”

She looked them over then swapped to English. “Oh, their colors are slightly brighter. You boys look fresh.”

“We just got Teflon makeovers.” Cubot posed as if he was a supermodel on the runway. “Work it, baby!” He cheered for himself.

“Fabulous!” Orbot clapped for his brother. “And wiccaphage-proof!”

Metal Sonic looked at his hand before turning his attention to scanning the jungle for threats.

“I see the flowers arrived on time,” the Overlander chuckled, “Uh, too much?”

Eggman’s clothes were different from his usual outfit. Today he sported a dark blue suit with a gray polo under the blazer and nice shoes with a fancy black fedora hiding his bald head.

“A little,” the witch blushed, “I told you I wasn’t mad.”

“I still felt… oh, hi, Amy.” He waved to the hedgehog. “Look in the bags, Tilly.”

Sheptilah picked up a small green one, inside of it were many seed packets. “Seeds!”

“Poisonous plant seeds!” He beamed, “But I meant the other bag.” He pointed to a blue bag with his chin.

She picked it up and looked inside. “Two tickets to the Metropolitan Museum of Art?”

“Oh! The Met!” Amy clapped her hands together, “How exciting! How romantic!”

“Make yourself scarce, sweetheart.” Eggman leered at Amy.

Tilly clicked her tongue disapprovingly at Ivo. She turned to the hedgehog and smiled sweetly, assuring her it was okay.

“Oh, sorry, bye!” Amy put the bouquet down, took hold of her broom and ran off.

“Don’t be rude, Ivo,” Tilly frowned.

“Sorry; I just want it to be us for now. There’s some exhibits you should really see. Some of your people’s art is on display and it needs translating. I was hoping we could leave now.”

“Where is the museum?” She tilted her head.

“New York city.”
“Where is that?”

“Far away enough that we have to use a warp ring. I did get you something cute to wear, it’s in my lair right now. When you’re ready meet me there and we’ll get going. I have a wonderful night planned for us.”

“Ivo,” she pushed her hair behind her ear, “What if I had something planned?”

“I know you don’t have anything planned.”

“Not a damned thing,” she scrunched up her nose, “Except it’s Shadow’s birthday.”

Oh.

“That’s today?” Eggman looked horrified. “I do have a gift but I thought that was tomorrow.”

“Yes!” Tilly shrugged, “You could invite him along with us as a last-minute thing.”

“Alright, fine,” he huffed, “I wasn’t planning on getting lucky anyway.”

She scoffed and flapped her hand at him. “Give me a moment.”

She shuffled past all of the potted plants and pulled her phone off of the charger, sticking it into her pocket. She left the hut closing the door behind her and picked up the staff.

“I’m not sure they’re going to allow you to bring that in with you,” he frowned. “Maybe leave it with Shadow.”

She thought about this but shook her head, “I can glamorize it to be the size of a pen, I guess. I’m not sure it’ll take to being shrunk, though.”

“Give it a try.” He urged.

Metal Sonic again scanned the area. Something was coming.

“Oh.” She concentrated. Before she can apply any sort of glamour to the staff Metal instinctively stood in front of Eggman.


“Stand down,” Eggman commanded, “Shadow is a friendly; for now.”

“What happened to your house? It looks like a florist exploded.” The hedgehog approached the group, “You’re dressed nice.” He looked Eggman over, “Funeral?”

“Ah ha ha, no,” Eggman feigned a laugh. “I’m taking my girlfriend on a date.”

“Ah,” Shadow turned to Sheptilah, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Actually, we’re going to the Met to watch a live dissertation on the Nannae. Since you’re her familiar, and it is your birthday, you should come too, Shadow.”

“A, so it’s my loss, too. Wouldn’t I be a third wheel?”

“No,” Tilly shrugged, “It’s okay.”

Shadow pondered this, “Sure, why not. If Sonic hears I’m here he’s going to ambush me and force
me to have a happy birthday. Going to New York City would be nice. You and I do need to talk, though.”

“About what?” Ivo cocked an eyebrow.

“GUN business.”

“Fine, come back to the lair with me and Sheptilah, she’s gotta get changed anyway.”

Shadow leaned against the office wall with his arms crossed while Sheptilah was in Eggman’s room changing her clothing.

“I do have some footage of the lunar core,” Eggman flipped through some photos on the big screen, “I just assumed these marks were from when I destroyed half of it.”

The core looked hollow inside, with strange scratches and deterioration on parts that should never have existed, even with the destruction.

“I never thought they could be chemical burns, but rather I assumed it was just molten iron that formed oddly from the sudden exposure to the thin lunar atmosphere.”

“Can your robots up there get core samples delivered to GUN?”

“Sure.” Ivo turned to the hedgehog and looked him over. “You think the wiccaphages were alive the whole time in the core?”

“Yes, and I have a hunch they were evolving.”

“Five thousand years isn’t long enough for any one species to evolve significantly without human interference.”

“These are alien parasites though and they had magic used on them.”

“Fair point,” Ivo tapped his chin with a finger.

“The one at the ziggurat was too smart. It talked to us, especially when it had Maria’s form.”

“But that Maria was holding a Chaos Emerald and the real Emeralds’ energy can’t touch the wiccaphages or it makes them explode. It was probably a magical projection.”

“That’s true.” Shadow admitted.

“I’ll send Metal up there to get some samples tomorrow. For now, he’s guarding the lair when I’m not home.” Eggman went back to typing on his computer.

“I want to talk to you about Sheptilah. Are you familiar with The Last Unicorn?” Shadow lowered his voice.

“The book or the movie?”

“Doesn’t really matter.”

“I’ve read the book when I was a kid.” Ivo sent the files from the lunar core off to Hope. “Cover to cover many times. It was absolutely worn to pieces. What’s it matter?”

“Sheptilah, like the unicorn, are both the last of their race. She even has the same white hair and
violet eyes. It’s striking, really. I must ask you, Doctor, are you King Haggard or Prince Lír?” Shadow’s ruby eyes were sharp as daggers.

Eggman leaned back in his chair and smirked. “Shadow, does that make you Shmendrick?”

A sleek insult. A magician not very good at his craft, much like Shadow who himself was not good with magic; a criticism that did not fly over the hedgehog’s head.

“Think about it. You have pretty much trapped her in a castle that overlooks the sea. Are you Haggard or Lír? What is your role in her life?”

Silence from the Overlander.

“What I’m asking is do you actually care for her or are you simply keeping her around because it makes you happy? Will you let her go if she needs to go or will you force her to stay? Will you prevent her from fighting the wiccaphages if it means she will die or will you fight at her side?

“I ask again, Doctor, are you Lír or Haggard?”

“Foolish hedgehog,” Ivo stood, “You can’t put real life into simple storybook allegories. I am neither Lír or Haggard; I am Ivo Eggman. Just like you are Shadow The Hedgehog and nothing else. We make our own stories with our own endings. Our lives are not a fable some exhausted weirdo is writing at their desk in the middle of the night pondering what the next twist is going to be.

“And for your information, I will fight at her side. Come Hell or high water, we will do this as a team. You, me and the witch; and we will be victorious.”

“Sonic talked to you, didn’t he?” Shadow let his arms drop and he lifted himself from the wall, a sly smile forming across his face. “You are right, though. I just wonder what your intentions are with my witch.”

“Miss Banana is my friend and my lover; but what happens next I do not know. My only intentions are to go day by day and finish the Syzygy Cannon. After that we will see.” Eggman smiled sincerely, “Why? Do you think I’m going to break her heart?”

Shadow shrugged. “She’s my sister and you are a known crazed tyrant; I have my concerns.” A pause, and then: “What is the Syzygy Cannon?”

Before Eggman could answer, Sheptilah appeared wearing the clothes he had set out for her. A tight, black thigh-length skirt, black pumps, white blouse and black blazer made her look sharp. Her blouse was three buttons open so that her Oracle Stone was not covered.

“Why do I feel like I should be tending to customers on an airplane?” She laughed. “I’m not so sure about the shoes but I like the jacket.”

“Shorten your hair a little,” Eggman suggested, “It may get caught on things.”

“Oh, right.” Tilly applied a glamour to make her hair a shoulder-length bob with a blunt fringe. “How about now?”

“It’s very cute.” Shadow said.

“So are we ready to go?” Eggman straightened his clothes.
“I would say so,” Sheptilah beamed, “I’m excited to find out what scientists think is true about my people. I’m sure it’s going to be hilariously inaccurate.”

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