Iron Oxide

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Summary

Metal Sonic was created with a single purpose: he was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. Now he is trapped with Sonic, lost in the deadly maze of a madman. In order to escape, he is forced into cooperation with his most hated enemy, yet still must follow his programming to its logical conclusion. Metonic (Sonic x Metal Sonic).
Entaglement

"To err is human, but to really foul things up you need a computer."

— Paul R. Ehrlich

The device he held was bulky and archaic, resembling a handheld mainframe, including the dust. Although it looked decades old and nearly obsolete, it was vital to his mission. As he moved his hand across the device, twisting one of its innumerable dials, the wind swept through the forest. It cut through the air, tearing the last of the autumn leaves from the trees. He paused, watching as the leaf twisted toward him, before landing on the screen of the device. He quickly brushed it away with the side of his fingers.

The device was critical. It was a quantum wavefunction collapse inducer, although that was, perhaps, excessively technical, if not precise.

The doctor was neither. He just called it the "Chaos Emerald detector." Despite the fact he invented the device, he seemed not to care for its finer, mathematical details.

That was unfortunate. Metal Sonic was a machine. Mathematics was his native language.

He twisted one of the knobs on the side of the device, stopping when it began to screech a single, continuous tone. Taking a single step forward, he looked up, glancing at the trees above, before pressing one of the buttons. The screeching heightened, piercing through autumn leaves and sending the wildlife scuttling. Data exploded across the surface of its screen, tiny green digits forming over its black monitor.

In order to locate the Chaos Emerald, Metal needed to find its spacetime coordinates, coordinates deduced from the scanner's readings. It was not simple, however. The device could not locate the Chaos Emerald, at least not directly. The scanner could only find where the Emerald was not, able only to detect an absence, not a presence.

He followed the screeching of the machine, walking as it guided him toward a large tree. As the screen flickered, he stopped, standing a single step from the tree. The screeching was now at its height, but as he inched forward, it fell abruptly silent. He shook the machine and, after brushing the recently fallen oak leaves from the number pad, pressed the surface of the device, entering a list of possible factors. When supplied with the correct factors, the device would return the correct coordinates. It would reverse engineer the distortion to the location.

The coordinates would be hyperdimensional, for the Chaos Emerald existed between dimensions. It would manifest in this reality only after someone observed it, which is why he needed the coordinates. Finding the Emerald was a simple matter.

He only needed to know where to look.

After punching the numbers into the device, he waited for a nanosecond. No Emerald appeared. His guess was incorrect.

He paused, turning over the options through his processors. It was easy to verify his solution once he had it. All he had to do was send the list of numbers to the device. The device would find the
Emerald coordinates if he guessed correctly. However, it was nearly impossible to find the correct coordinate factors through analysis. The uncertainty of the Chaos Emerald made that difficult; he would have to find the tiny mistakes in the movement of individual atoms.

It would be a simple matter to try every possible factor. He could run through each permutation, trying each combination of numbers. If he searched them all and tried each one, he would eventually find the answer. It was equivalent to sorting the grains of sand on a beach by picking them up one at a time, individually. Given enough time, it would work.

He routed all of his power to his processors and brought up the network connection with the device. He would send the numbers over the network, saving time and energy by avoiding the manual interface. This was optimal. It would guarantee a solution.

He began to generate lists of possible factors, sending them wirelessly to the device. As he tried each set, the device attempted to reverse the distortions to coordinates, but each attempt resulted in an error.

This was not a concern. There were infinitely more numbers to attempt.

As he transmitted the numbers, his radio crackled to life. "Metal Sonic! What are you doing? Your power consumption has skyrocketed!"

It was Dr. Eggman, speaking over Metal's unfortunately unencrypted radio, aloud for all to hear. Metal had mentioned to the doctor multiple times that it was suboptimal to broadcast his secrets, unencrypted, to anyone with a radio scanner, but Eggman would have none of it. Metal was not built to strategize. He was built to follow orders.

He diverted enough CPU cycles to answer Dr. Eggman. This was annoying; those cycles could have been used for calculations.

"I am calculating the factors of the Emerald's wavefunction," Metal replied, resuming his number generation immediately. He would waste no CPU cycles on trivialities.

"Argh—! And just how long is that suppose to take, hmm?" Eggman asked the question as if he already knew the answer.

Metal felt frustration as he loaded his reply. This was entirely suboptimal. This conversation was slowing him down.

"Given the current resource allocation and algorithmic complexity, the solution will be found in approximately 26 billion years."

Eggman screamed over the radio, followed by the sound of a crash on the other side. There was a long pause.

"Do you, perhaps, see the problem with your little plan? Hmm?" Eggman's voice was tense and patronizing.

"My plan is sufficient to complete my current objective. You ordered me to find the Chaos Emerald. I will have the Emerald in approximately 26 billion years, as per your request."

"You stupid, idiotic bucket of bolts! That's twice the current age of the universe!"

Metal felt his internal logs upload over the network, right as he resumed his calculations. The process was entirely beyond his control and routine. It was a common occurrence for Eggman to
peek into his internal systems remotely. He did it nearly every day.

After another pause, Eggman responded. "You idiot! We've been over this before. Finding the Chaos Emeralds by trying every random solution is completely infeasible. You are never going to find it that way."

Metal went to reply, before stopping himself. Eggman was mistaken. They had been over no such thing. He simply handed Metal the detector and sent on him on his way. Yet, there was no use in reminding Eggman of his mistake. The doctor would become upset if he argued.

"And stop with your pathetic attempt to calculate the answer. You're only going to drain your battery."

Metal compiled, dropping the calculations and restoring his power consumption to normal. This was an order.

"You just sit there and hold tight. I have a specialized algorithm that will calculate this in under an hour, based on the readings from that detector. It sure is amazing what you can do when you don't blindly try every possible solution, isn't it?"

Metal complied, standing idle and motionless, the wind carrying fallen leaves over his head. They drifted down, coming to a rest between his ears. He did not move.

After several hours he received a notice. He was still connected to the network, that was beyond his control, so the factors of the Emerald's wavefunction downloaded automatically.

"There's your answer. Now hold on while I send you support."

Metal took the numbers Eggman provided, verifying the solution by sending them through his detector. As he plugged in each one, the device caused the mathematical wavefunction to collapse, reducing the distortions to the dimensional coordinates of the Chaos Emerald. Metal uploaded the coordinates from the device and directed his visual system to activate in that precise location.

It was something only he could do. No organic organism could look through space so precisely.

As Metal tuned his sensors, the tree in front of him distorted. Reality wrapped near the roots; a small sphere of refracting light appeared. It was tiny at first, smaller than an individual atom, but expanded rapidly. The sphere was hard to look at, and it confused every aspect of Metal's visual processing system. He flinched, barely forcing himself to keep watching as his visual systems flooded with errors. He couldn't look away. Finding the Emerald was dependent on observing it, but the distortion...

It was simply wrong.

The Chaos Emerald emerged in a flash of light, projected from a higher set of dimensions. Millions of possible worlds and potential timelines collapsed, drawn into a single reality once someone observed the Emerald. Metal waited. This process was standard whenever someone found an Emerald; most simply did not understand what was happening. This was expected. Most did not realize the universe was orderly and predictable.

As the light dimmed, Metal turned to examine the tree in front of him. The Emerald had appeared inside a mess of tree sap, its green hue turned murky by the layers of hardened slime. It was trapped in an ancient piece of amber, several feet wide, formed between the roots of the tree. Prehistoric insects surrounded the Emerald, scattered throughout the amber like flecks of pepper. Metal reached forward and placed his hand on the sap. The front part was sticky, but as he pushed...
forward, he felt resistance; the underlying sap was hardened with age.

Metal brought his fingers up. They were covered in tree sap and that was suboptimal. He pulled one of the fallen leaf from his head and tried to wipe off the sap. After succeeding only in smearing the sticky mess across his hand, he let go of the leaf, making a series of irritates beeps as it remained stuck.

"Incoming delivery."

Metal heard the robotic voice from the sky. Looking up, he saw a small drone, painted with Eggman's trademark logo, buzzing overhead. It came close to the ground and dropped a small package, which landed at Metal's feet, before shooting back into the sky.

Metal picked up the package. It was a small, aluminum crate, shaped as a thin rectangle, rather than a cube, the likes of which he had previously received. The two sides of the crate were connected with a shoulder strap, which would make it easier for Metal to return the box. This was standard protocol. Eggman could deliver missions critical supplies on a moment's notice with his hyper-efficient drone network.

He secured the strap over his shoulders, before lifting the edge of the crate open, revealing a mess of paper packaging. He thrust his hand into the paper and rummaged around, stopping as he felt something brush against his fingers. He grasped the object and pulled it out of the box. It was a small, white, plastic bottle, labeled with a corrosive warning sticker. Above, "NaOH" emblazoned the surface.

Metal Sonic needed no additional orders. He had used this substance before. Sodium hydroxide was an industrial strength solvent, especially useful with organic substances, capable of dissolving the very flesh off bones.

He knelt down and unscrewed the cap. Tilting the bottle sideways, he watched as the gelatinous, clear liquid oozed out, smearing the surface of the amber as it flowed. The amber began to steam, heat and water flowing into the air as the gelatin seeped into the organic tree sap.

The bottle half empty, Metal stood back up, screwing the cap back on the bottle, and returned it to the crate, along with the Emerald detector. He watched as the reaction continued, steam rising as amber dissolved, melting to a sticky, brown puddle. The prehistoric insects inside the amber dissolved as well, evaporating into the air.

Metal waited, completely motionless, as the solution did its work. The process was slow, but this did not bother him. His objective was to obtain the Chaos Emerald. The time parameter was unspecified. He would wait as long as required.

As the amber turned to goo, the Emerald rolled out of the steaming heap, gathering dirt as it rolled to Metal's feet. Kneeling down, he picked it up in his already stickied hand.

"I have acquired the Chaos Emerald. I am preparing to return to the base for delivery and—"

He stopped. His audio sensors were picking up something. The forest leaves cracked in the distance. Metal spurred his radar to life, pinging out in all directions. Something was approaching, and it was traveling near the sound barrier.

He knew of only one thing that moved that fast.

Metal activated his every subsystem and sensor. This was his chance. His primary, earliest command loaded through his processors from his BIOS.
Primary Objective: Neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.

This was it. His mission, his purpose, the bane of his existence. He focused his sensors, scanning in the direction Sonic was approaching. He was picking up an unencrypted signal with his radio.

"...Tails? Come in, Tails. I'm here now, where you told me to go. Are you sure this is the right place?"

Metal estimated the location of his target. Sonic was approaching from the north, inbound in approximately 5.7 seconds. He revved his engine, preparing to launch himself in Sonic's direction.

This was it. He would be rid of his loathsome copy. This was his chance to prove, once and for all, that he was the real Sonic, to fulfill his primary objective.

As Sonic burst through the bushes, Metal launched forward, revving his engine at full capacity, striking him in the center of his chest with his forehead. The force threw Sonic backward, and he fell, landing and skidding across the ground, branches breaking as he collided with the trees.

Metal turned and flew forward again, arms outstretched, aiming for Sonic's throat. As he prepared to strike, his loathsome copy rolled under him, kicking him in the center of the intake panel of his chest. Metal twisted through the air, before landing on one foot and grabbing a tree branch to stabilize himself. He paused in an attempt to recover, as did Sonic. The two stared at each other, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

Metal's radio spurred to life. "Sonic?! Here? Of all the times for that rotten hedgehog to appear...No matter! Metal Sonic, you have the Emerald! Return to the base at once!"

Metal paused before replying. His primary objective was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. He was standing right there in front of him, like the pathetic animal he was, stuck in a trap. Metal couldn't leave until he neutralized him, until there was only one Sonic remaining.

"Hey, look! It's the talking tin can that thinks it's me," Sonic called from across the forest, panting, before leaning to the side, squinting at something invisible behind Metal. "Is that Eggbreath on the line? Tell him I said 'hi'!"

Metal remained calm. He would predict the optimal course of action and he would win. He calculated hundreds of conditional probabilities, propagating the new values across his Bayesian model. He would find the optimal solution.

"Metal Sonic, what are you waiting for? Get back here this instant," Eggman said, demanding Metal's attention as his voice hissed over the radio.

Metal did not understand. He was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. It was his primary objective. It was what the doctor wanted.

"But the reason I was built was—"

"Are you arguing with me?" Eggman said, his voice rising. "You are only authorized to do what I say! You have the Chaos Emerald! Get back to the base!"

Sonic arched his eyebrows and folded his arms. He began tapping his foot on an exposed tree root. "Are you two done yet?"

Metal stopped. His primary objective was to neutralize Sonic. He was programmed to follow orders. His current orders were to ignore Sonic and return the Emerald. If he followed orders, he
wouldn't destroy Sonic. His primary objective was to neutralize Sonic. He was programmed to follow orders. If he followed orders, he wouldn't destroy Sonic. His primary objective was to—

His radio crackled back to life. "Metal Sonic! Are you doubting my orders?"

"No, the protocol given is insufficient to—"

"Then what are you doing? You are taking too long. Don't you even think of disobeying me again!"

As Metal began to reply, Sonic leaned forward, placing his muzzle up to Metal's ear. "Hey scrambled eggs! Since when has anything you ever made actually obeyed you?"

Metal recoiled as he felt Sonic's awful, humid, organic breath assaulting his audio sensors. He leaped backward, watching as Sonic merely stared at him with an amused expression on his face. Metal should have predicted that. He was getting sloppy. He looked deeper into his models, trying to pick the optimal one to predict Sonic's behavior. He watched as Sonic taunted him, smirking as he took a single step toward Metal.

There was one model Metal knew would be most accurate in its predictions: the first model Eggman had ever given him. It was the model of Sonic himself, the neural network trained in data taken from the hedgehog directly. It was a perfect simulation of Sonic's brain, containing a map of every neuron and every synapse. Metal's processors were faster than Sonic's organic brain. If he used this model, he could predict everything his loathsome copy would do before Sonic even thought of it.

"Silence!" Dr. Eggman boomed over the radio. "Metal Sonic, do as I say!"

He was programmed to follow orders.

"Affirmative," Metal said, still waiting while Sonic took another step forward. As his loathsome copy loomed inches away from his face, Metal kicked his leg forward, launching his heavy, steel foot into Sonic's stomach. Sonic's eyes widened as the air rushed out of his lungs. He flew backward, knocked off the ground before crashing into a tree.

Metal shot upward, crashing through the tree branches into the sky. He had a head start, but he knew it wouldn't last. Almost immediately, as if Metal had summoned him with the thought, he detected Sonic launching himself out of the forest. His copy race along the canopy, hopping across the tree branches. A myriad of leaves, both orange and green, flew up as he moved.

As he ran, now directly below Metal, his loathsome copy cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Hey Egghead! Better not count your chickens before they hatch!"

Metal turned, heading straight into the sky to escape, but was halted as Sonic slammed into the back of his engine. It spurred for a moment, and he lost control. He tried to correct himself by compensating for the force, but his speed was impossible to direct. He fell downward, tucking his arms and legs into his body, bracing himself. Breaking through branches, he crashed into the earth, leaving a streak through the dirt as he finally stopped.

"You're a sitting duck without that engine, Metalhead," Sonic said, jeering as he landed, placing his foot on the top of Metal's head.

Metal jumped up, reactivating his engine. It skipped and sputtered for a moment, then returned to a full roar. He tried to predict Sonic's next action but was forced to stop in order to redirect his power from his CPU to his limbs. He managed to narrowly roll to the side as Sonic stuck the tree behind him.
"Your goose is cooked!" Sonic said, bouncing off the tree and spinning back in Metal's direction.

Metal took to the skies again, branches breaking against his metallic body as he broke through the forest canopy. This was not how he would defeat Sonic. This was suboptimal.

He tried to formulate a new strategy, but he needed data. He scanned the forest with his radar, trying to find Sonic. As the sensor returned, Metal jammed the data through his processor, rapidly pruning the unnecessary pieces from the set.

That was when he noticed the anomaly. It wasn't just Sonic. His radar had returned two entities moving near the speed of sound.

"Obtaining Chaos Emerald." Metal heard a robotic voice behind him, one more tinny and hollow than his own.

Metal flew forward, asking for identification over the network. When there was no response, he twisted his head backward.

A large robot flew behind him. It looked like one of the doctor's E-series robots, although the exact design did not match anything in Metal's database. The machine resembled a dart. Two sleek, stainless steel wings, like those of a plane, angled on its back. The top half of the robot looked like a large egg. On top of the egg a long, pointed skewer pierced the air. A black screen spanned the circumference of the egg. The entire machine was painted black, with yellow lines spanning across the wings.

"Identify yourself," Metal said aloud while searching deeper into his databases. The newcomer did not respond to his request. Instead, a series of pixels flickered to life across its screen, spinning around like rudimentary animals on a carousel.

Sonic dashed into the sky, rushing towards Metal in a shapeless, blue blur. As Metal was turning his head back into its forward position, Sonic crashed into his chest. Metal's engine made a valiant attempt to counter the force, spitting smoke and sparks into the air as Metal fell back to the ground. He fell through the treetops, branches tearing into his blue paint. He reached forward, grasping his fists around one of the branches. It pulled him upright, allowing Metal to right himself and land on both feet.

"Come on, Egghead, you're not even trying!" Sonic said as he landed. "Or did you forget how to actually send backup?"

"That's not one of mine!" Dr. Eggman said, his voice less legible than before. "Metal Sonic, find out what that thing is!"

"Affirmative," Metal said through the radio. This was an order.

The strange robot began its descent, two jets of steam and exhaust stirring leaves and dust into the air. Metal looked up, dedicating the bulk of his processing power to analyze the robot. He processed every curve, every bolt, and every piece of it in striking detail, reversing the data against his knowledge in his own database. He transmitted all data collected back to Dr. Eggman.

The chaotic whirr of pixels subsided. Two, solid, yellow rectangles appeared on the front segment of machine's screen. Two arms, adorned with claws, unfolded from the side of the egg, filling the forest with the sound of screeching metal.

While he used all of his processing power to analyze the robot, he felt something pull against the Emerald in his hand. The sudden dextral feedback broke him out of the loop, and he tightened his
grasp on the Emerald. Swirling his head towards the disturbance, Metal saw Sonic with both his hands draped over Metal's own grasp. He was sweating as he struggled to pry the gem from Metal's superior grip.

Sonic noticed Metal turning to him. He dropped one hand off the Emerald and shrugged. "Hey, it's not like you're using it right now."

Sonic threw both hands on the Emerald again. He pushed his heels into the ground, leaning back with all his weight to pry the Emerald out of Metal's hand. Metal felt the gem begun to slip. He lifted his other hand and slapped Sonic's hand out of the way with it, grasping the Chaos Emerald with both hands himself.

Sonic tried to grab the Emerald again, only to shuffle around with Metal's palm, the gem's surface area failing to prove sufficient room for four hands. Sonic brought his hand up higher, this time attacking the source directly by pushing away Metal's arm. Metal retaliated, bringing his hand back to push Sonic at his shoulder.

Sonic would not be outdone and went straight for Metal's face, pressing the robot's forehead with his palm. Metal did likewise, bunching up the skin on Sonic's cheeks as he tried to pushed his loathsome copy away. Lacking further escalation, Metal struggled with Sonic for a moment, pushing the hedgehog's face away while attempting to pull the Emerald back."

"Metal Sonic!" The doctor blared back over the radio again. "Get back here immediately! That robot isn't mine. It's—" His radio cut out."

"Collecting Chaos Emerald."

Both Sonic and Metal turned their heads in unison. The egg-dart machine dove from the sky, hooking one of its claw-arms over the Emerald. It yanked the gem from both their hands before rising back to the sky. It took off, racing across the horizon, booming through the forest as it broke the sound barrier.

Sonic and Metal looked at each other for a moment, still pressing hands against the other. They paused before realizing what they were doing. Simultaneously letting go of each other, they looked away in the opposite direction before beginning the chase.

Metal activated his engine as Sonic sprinted away. His engine protested before revving into an arrhythmic hum. Launching above the canopy, he saw Sonic narrowly in front of him, racing on top of the trees. The egg-dart was ahead of them both, flying parallel to the ground.

Metal pressed forward, confident he would soon overtake Sonic.

"How could you lose the Chaos Emerald?!" The radio hissed and spattered. It was as much the voice on the other side as the interference. "When you get back here, I'll see you turned to scrap metal!"

"I failed because you updated my orders to study the—"

"Silence! Retrieve the Emerald immediately and get back to the base!" The radio cut out.

He was flying directly above Sonic now. He felt a small sliver of satisfaction when he saw how Sonic huffed as he passed over him. He was faster than Sonic, but his pathetic copy always denied it.

With his unmatched speed, he rapidly closed in on the strange machine. It struck him as suboptimal
that the machine didn't just take off, upward, away from Sonic. Metal could give chase in the skies, but it would have avoided at least one of its pursuers if it would only fly up.

He looked back down. Sonic had caught up with him, somehow. This frustrated Metal. He shut off his excess cognitive functions and redirected all of his energy to his primary engine. This was still not enough. Sonic had caught up, speeding just as fast.

Metal did have a trump card. He activated his Maximum Overdrive engine. An immense flow of power flew from his battery into his engine. He flung forward, like a comet, watching with joy as the pathetic clone below him looked up and saw his superior performance. He could see Sonic increasing his own efforts, looking straight upward as he tried to run faster and faster.

He raced forward, looking down at the worthless and pathetic Sonic the Hedgehog, Sonic the faker, Sonic his copy. The hedgehog was gasping for air now, staring directly at Metal. He could see panic slowly spread across Sonic's face.

He was superior, and he was the real Sonic. Aside from his primary objective, this was why he needed to kill Sonic. There could only be one. The real Sonic was the superior Sonic.

He noted he had his copy's complete attention. This was it. He would win.

"Does it surprise you, Sonic, that I can outrun you? This is the moment that I will—"

His optical feed cut out as an explosion of errors broke through his systems. He was notified of a kinetic impact, as well as the fact most of his sensors and motors were not responding. Metal shut down his every subsystem, redirecting what little power he could bring together to his optical sensors.

The world cut into view. He could see the top of the cliff, and it was receding from him. The cliff was tall, jetting out from an impossibly sized mountain. Countless boulders were rolling, falling off the cliff, pummeling his armor and systems.

He had collided with the cliff. He was distracted, and he had crashed into it.

He saw Sonic below him, desperately trying to shed speed by digging his heels into the earth. Except there was no earth, only the top of the trees. His leg caught one of the tree branches, and he tripped, but his speed was too great to merely fall. Sonic went flying forward, uncontrollably, toward the face of the cliff.

Metal kept falling. He tried to reactivate his engine, but there was no response. There was no response from any of his systems, except his accursed radio, of course. He could only guess at how angry Eggman would have sounded. Fortunately, his audio sensors were also not responding.

Sonic flew under him, kind enough to break his fall as Metal crashed onto him, driving both to the ground.

The boulders followed, crashing and rolling off Metal's frame. Metal started his emergency protocol, shutting off his systems to avoid excess damage. His last sensory input indicated he was pinned on top of Sonic, an indeterminate amount of rocks falling primarily on him.

He went offline.

Pressurized, metallic doors opened, air and mist hissing. A pair of yellow and black boots clicked against the floor as a tall, round figure walked into the room. The doors closed behind him, quietly
sealing the room.

"Yes, yes! Excellent! Preparations are nearly completed!" the figure said, his high pitched, squeaky voice wavering unpredictably. He walked over the large set of windows stretching from the floor to the ceiling, twisting his white mustache on his way. A yellow and black Egg Pawn swept the floor behind him.

"Soon, oh so very soon!" he said, looking out the window. Several clouds drifted at eye level. Below, an alien landscape stretched forward. Purple, curly grass rolled over the hills. Yellow trees with thin trunks dotted the landscape, painting the skyline like crayons in a box. The curvature of the ground dropped sharply and above, a shiny membrane contained the small world. It would be invisible except by the faint shine it produced when the light struck it at a certain angle. Beyond the membrane lay utter darkness, deeper than the pit of space.

The old man reached over and yanked the broom away from the Egg Pawn. He held it at arm's distance and began to dance around the room with it, kicking his heels behind him.

"For the gloooory of Dr. Eggman Neeegaaaaa!"

"Incoming communication from E-2048," A tinny, robotic voice filled the room. "Permission to connect?"

"Graaaaanted!" Dr. Eggman Nega sang, throwing the broom on the floor. The Egg Pawn picked it up as Nega walked over to the computer console in the center of the room.

The screen above the console flashed to life, displaying a cargo bay in monochrome. Static crossed the screen at random intervals. In the foreground, he saw his lovely, dart-shaped robot, E-2048. Behind, he could make out two blurry figures, both unconscious on the floor.

Another robotic voice cracked across the room, slightly deeper than the previous voice. "Hedgehog and Chaos Emerald have been collected."

"Oh ho! How excellent! Marvelous!" Nega said, dropping into an office chair and spinning in circles. "Who's that other in the background, though, hmm? Did you make a new friend? I always did encourage you to get out more."

"It warped with us when we made the journey. Records indicate it is an affiliate of the Eggman Empire. Do you want me to dispose of it?"

Nega stopped spinning, slowing twirling to a halt as friction returned the chair to its natural, stationary state. He twisted his mustache around his fingers.

"Looks like my old friend Eggy gave us a new toy, hmm? I think I'll have some fun with it while I wait for you to collect the last Emerald. You know what to do!"

"Affirmative." The screen cut out.

Nega leaped from the chair, wobbling as he walked back to the window.

"So it begins! The opening act of the only story to ever have been told. Oh ho ho ho!"
He couldn't see, not with his eyes closed, but he could feel, and he felt two things. The first was the gradual diffusion of his body heat through the cold floor. He laid still, hoping it would eventually stop, before realizing whatever he was laying on was a never-ending source of freezing.

Then he noticed the pain. It demanded his attention, tearing away his thoughts from the temperature. It was coming from his lower, right leg, deep, yet localized, constant, and almost overwhelming.

Sonic opened his eyes. The room was dim, illuminated solely by an ancient and decaying incandescent light bulb. It hung from an exposed wire, flickering, and despite the lack of any discernible breeze, it creaked as it swung back and forth. The shadows crept along with it, undulating across the corners of his vision.

Taking care not to move his injured leg, he sat up, placing his hands behind himself, and leaned back. The dust from the floor smeared across his gloves. It was endless, and he felt it caked to the fur on his face. Instinctively, he brought his hand up to wipe it off but only succeeded in smearing it across himself further.

He looked around, trying to place his location. He was in a tiny room, containing no furniture, with only the light and the dust around him. Three of the walls in the room were made of cinder blocks with innumerable pieces of grout and cement fallen out, leaving small holes between the blocks and contributing to the already copious amounts of dust.

The remaining wall was made of rusted steel bars that stretched from ceiling to floor. The bars were red with age and oxidation, yet still firmly bolted in place. Hardly any light shone outside the cell, and the tile and rust quickly disappeared into a dusty blankness.

Sonic heard footsteps, quietly thumping across the prison. They were gradual at first, slowly building in intensity, before culminating in a yellow and black Egg Pawn that clanged as it walked in front of his cell. Its right hand held a blaster gun, and the other held several keys linked on a single ring. Strapped across its chest, it wore an aluminum crate.

Sonic acted without thought. He would improvise his escape.

He called out to it, "Hey, over here!"

The Egg Pawn did not respond. Instead, it continued to walk forward, moving halfway across the exterior of his cell.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he tried again. "Hey, Baldy McNosehair! I know you can hear me!"

The robot continued forward, moving past Sonic's cell as the clanking of its steps diminished.

"Odd..." Sonic folded his arms across his chest. "Egghead must have captured me somehow...but...how did I end up here again?"
Sonic squinted his eyes and rubbed his temples. His head ached slightly, although nothing like the pulsing, glowing pain in his leg. Bruises and cuts covered his entire body, some small, some large.

"Let's see...I remember running through the woods. Tails needed me to get something. What was it? Hrm...It was probably the Chaos Emerald. That's what it always is, anyway. Probably safe to assume that's what it was."

Sonic kept massaging his forehead. He remembered he ran into Metal Sonic, they fought like normal, everything was fine and then…

"He had to go and crash into those rocks! Ugh!"

Although, if he remembered correctly, Metal did fall on top of him, before the rocks. That rock slide should have killed him. The only reason he was alive was because Metal had stopped the rocks from crushing him.

Metal had inadvertently saved his life. Sonic chuckled quietly at the thought. It was very ironic. The Egg Pawn reemerged, walking forward again. It appeared to be going in circles.

"Very funny, Egghead. You got me. I'm so weak and helpless that I can't even defeat this Egg Pawn."

It did not respond, continuing its forward walk. Sonic found this very odd. Where was Dr. Eggman? Shouldn't he be gloating that he captured Sonic?

Gingerly, Sonic placed his arms further behind himself and pulled his body backward. His injured leg rubbed against the floor, and Sonic winced, pulses of tingling pain shooting up his leg.

"Ouch ow ow…" He gritted his teeth and shut his eyes. The pain was worse than he anticipated.

"Come on, at least get over to the wall. You will figure out how to escape if you can just make it to the wall."

After scooting a few times, and pausing even more, he arrived. Leaning against the wall, he filled his lungs with heavy breaths, panting as the waves of pain across his leg subsided.

Sonic paused. The clanging was heading his direction again, and he needed the Egg Pawn's attention.

He acted, scooping a fallen piece of cement in his hand. When the Egg Pawn reappeared, he chucked it. It soared through the air, hitting the Egg Pawn between its eyes, then ricocheted to the ground.

The robot did not even pause as it continued to clang forward with clumsy steps.

"Oh come on!" Sonic said, throwing his hands over his head. He groaned as he slowly dragged them down his face.

"Alright, then. Time for Plan B!"

He dug his fingers into the gaps between the cinder blocks, the grout crumbling as he applied pressure. He moved his hands around the block, clearing as much material as he could from the top and bottom. Once sufficiently cleared, he pulled the cinder block. It slid forward slowly and, rocking it left and right, he worked it free, quickly grabbing the block with his hands and stuffing it
behind him.

Looking through the gap, Sonic saw the other side contained a cell almost identical to his own. It was dusty, decaying, and had the same ugly tile. Its walls were also made of cinder blocks, with the noteworthy exception that someone had the decency to at least add a wooden chair that stood gray with age.

If the room had a chair, it probably had an occupant. Sonic squinted his eyes, the dim light making it difficult to see, and shifted his angle to get a glimpse of the back of the room. He thought he could see a crumpled mass in the corner of his eye.

As the yellowed light swung, the shadows crept away, revealing a pair of red, metallic shoes. Sonic's eyes widened as the shadow receded further, revealing Metal Sonic, lying face up like a fallen rag doll and covered in dents, his optical screen completely blank.

The clanging footsteps grew louder, and Sonic turned back to his cell, staring out the bars, breathing heavily, as the Egg Pawn reemerged.

He stared at the space behind the Egg Pawn as it moved, his previous confusion growing to greater levels.

Metal Sonic...why was he here? It made no sense. Eggman wouldn't lock up his own robot, especially not like this. Oh, sure, Metal wasn't known for his loyalty, but this time was different. Sonic remembered their last encounter. Metal had done everything the doctor asked.

Even if Eggman was through with Metal, it didn't make any sense to lock him up like that. Why lock up a robot? He was clearly deactivated. Wouldn't it make more sense for Eggman to reuse him somehow, like reprogramming him or melting him down?

Also, and more importantly, why did he get the only chair?

The Egg Pawn disappeared, and Sonic returned to the hole. Metal had not moved. It was weird.

"Eh, why not?"

He picked another piece of grout and threw it through the hole. It struck Metal's chest, then rolled to the ground. The robot didn't move. He took another piece and threw it at Metal's foot. Still nothing happened. He tried again, this time striking Metal's forehead.

"Psst, hey! Metalhead! Wake up!"

After a full, agonizing second, Sonic saw a red line glimmer across Metal's screen. It flickered on and off, jumping around the screen with varying intensity. After a few more seconds, it settled down, condensing to form two, red ovals.

Metal Sonic bolted up, turning his head across the room. He looked at Sonic, then down at his hands. After several seconds, he brought his head up and stared off into the distance, looking at nothing in particular.

"Hey! Over here!" Sonic said.

The Egg Pawn walked back, and Sonic quickly looked up at the ceiling. Now he didn't want its attention, not until he finished talking to Metal. He whistled as the Egg Pawn continued its march.

Once it was clear, he glanced at the hole again, then jumped back in shock. Half of Metal's face
glowed through the hole, red light illuminating the dim cell, a single optic staring intensely at Sonic.

"What do you want?" Metal's voice was so low he almost hissed.

"What, can't I make a little small talk with my neighbor? Ask for a cup of sugar?"

Metal turned and walked back to the chair, sitting down before staring up at the ceiling.

"Wait! Okay, I'll be serious," Sonic said, waving his hand through the hole. He looked out the cell bars. The Egg Pawn was still far in its patrol.

"Do you know where we are? How come you're locked up too?"

Metal glanced at the cell door, then returned to the gap.

"Why would I tell you? This is all your fault, you know!" The glowing of his eyes increased, and he lifted his hand, preparing to strike. Sonic winced, falling back and landing on his leg. He yelped as the pain shot up his back.

Metal stopped, looking down at Sonic. "I should leave you to rot in there."

Sonic gasped, his eyes shut as he waited for the pain to subside.

"Dang it, Metal, can you just listen to me? How is this my fault? You were the one who crashed into the rocks!"

"You're dumber than I thought," Metal said, his voice growing. "I would have escaped with the Emerald were it not for you. You violated the mission's protocol!"

Sonic opened his mouth to reply, then slammed it shut as the Egg Pawn reemerged. It stopped in front of his cell and stared at him. Sonic gave it a half-hearted wave as it waited. It paused, then turned back, continuing its rounds.

After it disappeared, he said, "So why don't you just escape then, if you're so talented, huh? Just leave me trapped here, left to die in this cell?"

Metal said nothing and turned away. He paused, arcing his torso as if to fly, and waited. After nothing happened, he straightened back up and placed his hand over the intake panel on his chest.

Sonic laughed. "Looks like someone's been grounded, eh?"

Metal stared at him, hatred burning in his gaze, and Sonic stopped. His blood ran cold as he swore the room's temperature dropped several degrees. He quickly changed the topic.

"So what if you can't fly? Just turn into that puddle thing. *Woosh!*" He waved dramatically. "You'd go straight through the bars."

"I do not understand what you are saying."

"You know! Back when you were all tall, and we defeated you with the real superpower of teamwork?"

"You are insane."

Sonic groaned, turned his head, and stared out the cell. The Egg Pawn was still clanging around in
circles, a very similar pattern to his current conversation.

"Can you just do me a favor, please? Just this once?"

"No."

Sonic closed his mouth and screamed in muffled agony. He could feel his headache growing.

They sat in silence for several minutes, Sonic growing bored as he stared at the endless march of the Egg Pawn. Many of its features began to sink into his mind through sheer repetition. Its blaster gun looked dangerous, though he had no idea how those things worked, while he assumed those keys must be to his cell.

The aluminum crate was most interesting. Sonic hadn't noticed it at first, but after staring into nothing for eternity, contradictions began to emerge. The Egg Pawn was yellow and black, but the logo on the crate was solid red. It also looked familiar.

He thought about that, about his encounter in the forest. Metal hadn't been empty-handed. He had carried something similar across his chest. Sonic had thought it irrelevant at the time, but now…

He was sure that crate belonged to Metal.

Sonic sighed as the silence stretched endlessly. This wasn't working. He needed to change his approach.

Metal had to have information, about where they were and how to escape. He needed that information, but Metal wouldn't cooperate. Yet, Sonic knew Metal was just a stupid robot.

He could outsmart a stupid robot.

Turning back to the hole, he saw Metal still in the chair, now with his optical screen deactivated. It flickered back to life when another piece of cement went flying from Sonic's hand to Metal's forehead.

"So help me, Sonic, I will break out of here solely so I can come over there and rip you to pieces."

"Then why don't you, huh?" Sonic stuck out his tongue. "You're supposed to destroy me, right? You're not doing a very good job of it, just sitting in that chair."

Metal looked up at Sonic, as if to protest, but said nothing. After a pause, he spoke, his voice so quiet it was barely audible.

"It has to be me…that destroys you."

Sonic smirked. "Sorry, what did you say? I couldn't hear you over the sound of my living."

Metal glared at Sonic, before turning away and walking over to the steel bars. Sonic's glance followed him, watching as Metal began to shake the bars, then wincing as the loud clanging hammered his headache.

The Egg Pawn turned its head, reversing its path and walking toward Metal. As it hobbled over, Sonic pressed his ears down, a deafening buzz growing in his head.

The clanging and screeching of the bars stopped abruptly, and Sonic looked up. The Egg Pawn was now standing a few inches from Metal, its head tilted in confusion, exposing several cables running through its neck.
With one swift motion, Metal reached up, grabbed one of the black cables, and slammed down his arm. The power cable ripped free, and the Egg Pawn's eyes flickered, before the entire unit shut down, standing upright and motionless.

It still held keys in its hand, and they rocked back and forward with momentum. Metal leaned forward, standing on the top half of his feet, and latched onto the keys with the very end of his finger. He swung his hand up, and the keys flew through the air into his cell, clinking as they landed in the palm of his hand.

Holding the keys between his fingers, he leaned through the cell again, jamming the keys in the lock. As the lock clicked, he wiggled the handle from the outside. The door swung open and he stepped out, turning to face Sonic's cell.

As Metal lifted the keys and began to unlock Sonic's cell, Sonic gulped. Unrestrained rage filled Metal's face, and Sonic began to have doubts about the quality of this plan.

The door flew open, and Metal rushed inside, leaping toward Sonic with his arms outstretched. Sonic tried to scoot aside, only to brush his injured leg against the fallen cinder block. He screamed as pain coursed through his leg, before Metal slammed him to the floor, pinning down both his arms.

"Any last words, my loathsome copy?"

Sonic gasped for air, attempting to suppress a cough forming in his lungs and choking. His leg felt as if it would break into pieces.

This was a bad plan. He needed to think fast.

Sonic thought about their previous encounter, about the one thing that had caused the homicidal robot to waver.

"Stop! Y-you'll fail your mission!"

Metal paused, lifting one arm in the air as he prepared to strike.

"Explain yourself."

Sonic coughed, Metal's weight straining his muscles, his leg still jammed painfully against the cinder block.

"E-eggman...told you...the Emerald! But you don't have it."

"So I will find the Emerald after I dispose of you."

"Y-you can't." Sonic squeezed his eyes shut, the pain between his headache and leg competing for his attention.

"You can't fly, you're badly damaged...you'd never even make it out of here! Think about it!"

Despite the pain, Sonic managed to pry one of his eyes open. Metal was staring at him, unmoving except the flicker of his eyes.

"If...If we…" Sonic wheezed. "C-can you...? I c-can't..."

Metal leaned forward, and Sonic gagged as his leg shifted, forcing new waves of pain across his entire body.
"W-we can work together. I'll help...find the Emerald. Remember what Egghead said!"

Metal froze, Sonic choking as his air-starved lungs began to tear his attention away from the pain in his leg.

"Y-you're supposed to get the Emerald now and worry about me later."

Metal paused, then stood up and let go of Sonic. Sonic coughed as he remained on the floor, watching as the flickering of Metal's optics intensified.

Sonic shuddered, then rubbed the sore spot on his head. The deactivated Egg Pawn caught his attention, and he pointed at it.

"Besides, isn't that yours?"

Metal's optics went blank, then rebooted suddenly, as if he had been interrupted. He straightened his posture and glanced at the aluminum crate.

"Don't you want it back? And the Chaos Emerald, too?"

Metal turned back to Sonic, then the Egg Pawn. He marched over to it and tore the crate away, before slinging it over his own shoulders. He opened it, rummaged through the contents, then locked the lid as he returned.

His shadow crossed over Sonic, and he stared, his eyes still flickering with a faint hum, Sonic unnerved by his uncanny stillness.

"I will use your assistance."

Sonic nodded, the pain finally easing. This was something. This was progress.

"For now," Metal added.

Sonic shrugged, then offered his hand to Metal, attempting to suppress demands of his headache.

He would make this work. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to work together. After all, what was the worst that could happen?

"Alright! Let's do this, Mets!"

Metal brought his own hand up to his face, examined it, then shook hands with Sonic. Sonic winced as Metal squeezed his hand so tightly that he began to lose feeling. It throbbed as he let go.

"You will not call me that."

Rubbing his forehead, Sonic fought to suppress the sense of ever mounting irritation. He took orders from no one, and he really did not appreciate being slammed to the floor, especially when already injured.

Sonic shook his head. Everything would be fine. A little optimism never hurt anyone, and he was never opposed to teamwork. Maybe Metal would tell him where he was now.

"Your leg is broken."

Drawn out of his contemplation, Sonic looked up. Metal had brought the chair from the other cell and was leaning over the back, his chin resting on his crossed arms, staring down at him.
"Broken? Nah, this is just a scratch." Sonic said, wincing through a grin.

His leg couldn't be broken. He was Sonic the Hedgehog. He didn't break his legs. Sure, he could get hurt, but never to that level.

"I'll just see myself out..." Sonic tried to stand again. "Ahh! Ow ow ow ow!"

"I knew you were inferior to me, but I didn't realize your mental capacity lacked to this extent."

As Metal began to rise, he suddenly paused in the air, halfway standing. "Your broken leg will make it easier to defeat you. It also lowers the probability of finding the Emerald. It will make it easier to defeat you. It lowers the probability of finding the Emerald. It will make—"

"Metal? You okay?"

Metal stopped, looked down at Sonic, paused, then stood up. He paused again, then walked back to the Egg Pawn and began ripping cables out of its body.

"Ah...Metal? What are you doing?"

Metal threw a pile of cables at Sonic's feet, then grabbed the chair. Lifting it in the air, he slammed it against his knee, breaking it into dozens of pieces.

Sonic leaned to the side as splinters rained. "Seriously, Metal, stop! What are you doing?"

"Maximizing the probability of my success." He picked up two, flat pieces of wood and knelt down by Sonic, red light from his optical screen illuminating Sonic's face.

"By destroying the only chair and—whoa, careful!"

Sonic saw Metal's hand hovering just above his injured leg. He preemptively winced, bracing himself for pain. However, as Metal placed his hand over Sonic’s swollen leg, his touch was light, and his cool hands barely brushed the surface of Sonic's skin.

"Querying medical database...Swelling is too severe for a sprain. No major lesions," Metal said, running his hands to the back of Sonic's leg. Sonic was surprised by the dexterity of his movements. It didn't hurt at all.

"Injury caused by sudden trauma. Likely diagnosis: bone fracture, as I already predicted.

"The only way to recover from this injury is several months of rest. However, intermediate treatment can relieve pain and restore some ability."

"S-several...months?"

His head pounded, and his leg throbbed as pain wracked his entire body. Sonic bite his lip, then shook his head. He was fine. He was in control. He let out an uneasy laugh.

"I sure can't seem to catch a...break here!"

Metal stared at him.

"Nothing? Man, you are one tough audience, Metalhead. Seems Egghead failed to give you a sense of humor."

Without word or pause, Metal glanced aside and picked up two, flat pieces of wood and a single,
Sonic frowned. This was going nowhere. Metal was impossible to relate to, but at least he wasn't trying to kill him anymore. This was progress.

But, he still didn't know where he was.

"So, Metal, now you can tell me: where are we? Why were you locked up?"

Metal took the wood, placing the planks on both sides of Sonic's leg.

"I do not know."

"Ah...what? You don't...know?" His frown deepened, and he fought to keep his irritation suppressed. Metal didn't know. He had endured this for no reason.

The wood pressed against his leg, causing mild pain as Metal replied, "That is what I said. I do not know the answer to either query. I assume you lack knowledge as well?"

Sonic nodded as he saw Metal pick up the cable.

"There is one oddity," Metal continued, much to Sonic's surprise. There was a glimmer of hope. Metal did know something after all.

"I am unable to pick up any radio signals."

Sonic opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"What? That's it? That's what you refused to tell me? What gives, Metal?"

Metal glared at Sonic, then took the cable and began to wind it around his leg and the wood.

"We need to gather more data."

"What, no way! I would have never guessed that the solution to not knowing something is to know it."

Sonic winced as Metal tightened the cable especially tightly.

"Splint support will provide a measure of stability. You should find it possible to walk with the aid of supporting instruments."

Still sitting on the floor, Sonic lifted his injured leg, now covered in a knot of cables. It only caused minor pain.

"Hey, that does feel better!"

He jumped up, then yelped in pain, quickly standing on his good leg and leaning against the wall.

"Although not that much better..."

Metal picked a chair leg from the floor and offered it to him. "Use this to support yourself. Do not put weight on your injury directly."

Sonic took the makeshift cane and, putting most of his weight on his good leg, gently put weight down on his injured leg. He shifted his weight to the cane and move his good leg forward one step.
He repeated this process a few times until he was standing outside the cell.

"Man, this is so slow! Is this how the other half lives? What a drag..."

Taking another step, Sonic groaned as he realized the world outside his cell was impossible to see. The only source of light appeared to be inside his cell. Now that he was outside, he could see nothing but the dim red of Metal's optics.

"Increasing luminosity."

With a sudden click, red flooded Metal's optical screen, his eyes disappearing as each line glowed, merging into a single beam of red light.

The area ahead came into dim existence. Although the light was only bright enough to see a few feet, Sonic could make out a faint hallway, cells place in equal spacing along the walls, dust particles falling in the dim beam.

"We must hurry and recover the Chaos Emerald. Excessive delay at this point lowers the probability of achieving the primary objective by 12.87%."

"Yeah, yeah, like I'm having fun over here." Sonic winced as he started down the hall. His leg still hurt when he put weight on it.

Metal said nothing as he stepped in front of Sonic. His feet echoed in an even rhythm as they walked, while Sonic's steps wavered unpredictably.

Never content with awkward silence and easily bored, Sonic's attention began to wander around the hallway. There were prison cells on either side, all remarkably similar. Each had rusted front bars and contained absolutely nothing, not even chairs.

Lucky Metal really did get the only chair.

The hallway remained completely unlit, except for the light cast from Metal's beam. There were no other prisoners, no other guards. There was nothing but the rust and the dust and the rhythmic footsteps of a hedgehog and his copy.

His gaze wandered, coming to a rest on Metal. He wondered just how long their truce would last. He was still amazed they had one at all. They were both weakened, neither able to run, and completely lost.

He then glanced at Metal's legs as the pain welled in his own, bringing tears to his eyes and blurring his vision. He squinted, but the low light was making it hard to see and the pain was making it hard to think.

He tore his gaze away, for the more he stared at Metal's legs, the more they looked exactly like his own.

Metal stopped abruptly, and Sonic looked up. A pair of stainless steel doors stood in front of them, their cleanliness and upkeep in stark contrast to the decrepit prison.

His head pounded, pain tore at his leg, and he was completely lost. He laughed.

"It's a shame your motor is kaput because then you wouldn't even need your legs. You could even lend one of them to me!"
Metal turned to face Sonic, staring him straight in the eyes. His headlight lit up Sonic's face and cast a jagged, hedgehog-shaped shadow on the wall behind him.

"Oh come on, Mets, I'm just pulling your leg."

Metal grabbed the door handle, twisting it down, but did not open the door.

"Your jokes are horrible. Stop."

"Ha! You do have a sense of humor!"
"The good news about computers is that they do what you tell them to do. The bad news is that they do what you tell them to do."

— Ted Nelson

The hinges creaked as the door opened, bright, fluorescent light streaming through the crack. Metal's systems adjusted rapidly, lowering the glow of his optics and reducing the exposure of his lenses. With the door now ajar, he pressed his head against the narrow opening, glancing at the corridor on the other side.

He saw the hallway stretched forward, ending with another set of doors in approximately 300 meters. The walls were made of steel, with black and yellow caution tape running down either side. Steel lamps illuminated the space, hanging from the ceiling on exposed wires.

He needed to know if the hallway was safe. Gathering his optical data, he streamed information through his models.

"You are weird sometimes, you know that?" Sonic said, waving a hand in front of Metal's vision. "You just do things and don't tell anyone what you're doing. Remember, communication is the pillar of a successful team!"

"Results are inconclusive due to insufficient data," Metal said, his hand still on the door.

"Even when you do talk, I don't understand a word you say," Sonic said, pushing the door open and stepping in front of Metal.

Sonic turned back, winking and pointing at Metal.

"Remember... communication!"

Lacking a better plan, Metal resigned himself to following Sonic. He watched as his pathetic copy struggled with each step, wincing in pain as he walked.

Not only was Sonic weak and worthless, but he was also profoundly irritating. Metal would dispose of him as soon as he failed to provide utility.

He heard a sudden click, and he froze. Sonic continued to walk forward, like the oblivious idiot he was.

"Sonic, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" His copy said, turning to face him.

Metal's optics contracted. "The door!"

He dashed back, clanging loudly against the floor as he ran, and threw his hand over the handle. He jigged the mechanism, pushing against the door with all his weight as it refused to budge.

He shot a glare back at Sonic. This was his fault. The results were too inconclusive to justify the entry into the room, yet Sonic, the incompetent and irritating imbecile that he was, barged in anyway.
Sonic was worse than useless.

"Oh ho! Looks like the rats are trying to escape the maze."

A loud, high-pitched voice boomed across the room, the tenor mixed with static. Sonic and Metal both made eye contact, then looked up, the sound emanating from a rudimentary loudspeaker hung in the corner.

"We can't have that now, oh no we can't! We've all got a role to play here, and I need to ask you to please return to your seats."

"Identify yourself," Metal said, his optics scanning left and right. The voice was completely foreign. He found no match in his memory banks.

"So harsh, my dear, angry, little critic, so harsh. Was my last performance really that forgettable?"

"Dr. Eggman Nega!" Sonic said, "Where are we, and what do you want from us?"

"I'm not about to spoil the ending, Sonic! You'll need to figure it out yooooourself!"

"We've got to watch our backs here, Metal," Sonic said, taking a few steps backward. Metal did likewise until he bumped into Sonic. "Nega is completely insane. Remember, though, we've defeated him before, and we'll defeat him again."

"We? Meaning you and me?" Metal said, turning his head to glance at Sonic. He queried his database.

"I recall no such event."

"What? How could you forget that? Surely you remembered when we defeated him and his weird Ifrit thing? Okay, well maybe it wasn't me and you exactly, but you were there!"

Metal shook his head.

"Seriously? Do you at least remember when you helped Nega? I think he reprogrammed you then." Sonic glanced at Metal.

"What." Metal's voice chip skipped a cycle. "I was reprogrammed once by this inferior human?"

Metal's processors flipped on, drawing more power from his cells. He began a background process to analyze this claim.

*Warning. System power levels low. 10% power remaining.*

Metal shut the process down. His power was precious. He would have to analyze this later.

"You are statistically unlike to lie, Sonic, but I have no recollection of that event."

"Er...thanks? I think?"

"The intermission is over, my friends, and I'm afraid you're breaking the rules! Security will now be escorting you back to your seats. Thank you for attending Dr. Eggman Nega's Fabulously Fantastic Theater and have a wonderful day!" Nega's voice cut out with a final crackle.

"Get ready, Metal. We may both be weakened, but we can do this if we work together. Just think—it's like how you usually try to kill me, but in reverse."
The front door slammed open, shaking the hanging lights. Dozens of Badniks, all painted black and yellow, came rushing in, packing into the hallway. Sonic prepared to fight, leaning over with his arms outstretched.

A Moto Bug drew from the group, revving its engine as it rushed forward.

"Heeya!" Sonic shouted, leaning on his cane in one hand and holding his injured leg in the air behind him. He leaped forward, striking the Moto Bug with his uninjured foot, then hopped backward with the cane.

The Moto Bug lost momentum and fell to its side, skidding backward into an oncoming Egg Pawn. The Badnik continued its charge and struck the Moto Bug with its foot. It tripped, crashing backward, and fell on its back, flailing its arms around like a turtle.

Metal turned to face the Badniks, standing by Sonic's side. He kicked his system into full force, drawing the power required to operate his working components at full capacity.


Calculating conditional probabilities...Pruning decision tree...Estimating confidence intervals...

Action with the greatest probability of success determined. 94.51% chance of success.

Reinforcements quickly appeared, swarms of Moto Bugs and Egg Pawns climbing over the fallen robots, Buzz Bombers diving from the ceiling.

"Here's the plan," Sonic said, his eyes tracing the movement of the Badnik army. "We can get through this, but you're going to have to trust me. I'll take—"

Metal saw his opening and rushed forward. He jumped and landed atop an Egg Pawn, crunching it beneath his feet, giving momentum to spring toward the far door. Tucking his head, he hit the ground rolling, somersaulting through the door, and on the other side, he jumped up and faced Sonic, staring at him through the hoard of Badniks.

He looked up and made eye contact with his loathsome copy, placing his hand over the door handle.

"Metal! What are you doing?! We had a deal!" Sonic's pupils contracted and he held his free arm forward as if to grab Metal, panic set into his face.

"Metal! Meeeeetallll!"

He slammed the door shut.

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Probability of hedgehog demise: 99.98%. Primary objective complete.

It was the best use of his live bait, and it was his plan all along, the branch of the decision tree most likely to succeed. By using Sonic as a distraction, he would neutralize his copy, proving he was better once and for all, while also finding the Chaos Emerald. It was elegant; it was optimal. After all, Sonic was just a stupid hedgehog.

He could outsmart a stupid hedgehog.

Splinting Sonic's leg hadn't been for his copy's benefit, either. Metal had reasoned he would need a distraction at some point, and Sonic would last longer this way. The longer Sonic distracted the
Badniks before they finished him, the greater Metal's probability of success.

He paused for a moment, taking in the magnitude of what he had just done. He had done it. He neutralized his archenemy, his clone, his loathsome copy. The laws of physics could not tolerate duplicates, and he always knew only of them could live to fill the one and only Sonic-shaped hole in the universe.

It was over. He did it. He won.

Metal looked up at the ceiling, then down at his hand, clenching it into a fist. He shook his head, then stopped as his gaze wandered to a spare piece of chrome on the floor. He stared at it, and his reflection looked back at him.

He had tricked Sonic, outsmarted him at his own game. It was undoubted proof that he was superior, that he mattered.

Proof that he deserved to be the real Sonic.

Metal shook his head. He knew he couldn't celebrate yet, though. He still had to escape and deliver the Chaos Emerald.

Turning away from the door, Metal surveyed his new surroundings. He was in a large, circular room. The walls were perfectly smooth and covered in a single sheet of beige plastic. The plastic flowed continuously, all around the floor and ceiling.

There were three doors in the room, as well as the door directly behind him, all made entirely of plastic. Strewn about the floor were a number of nails and spare mechanical pieces.

Metal walked up to one of the doors, running his hand along the seam as he inspected it. He needed to be careful. Nega had said they were in a maze and was likely intending to run him in circles.

When he was satisfied it was safe, he pried open the door. Behind lay another sheet of seamless beige. He set his hand on the wall, feeling the solid surface behind it.

Metal cocked his head, running through his databases. It didn't seem right; all previous instances of "door" connected two open spaces. He should check the others.

Walking to the next door, Metal dedicated his spare cycles to catching up on delayed computation. The demise of Sonic had increased his confidence intervals, and he figured he would be safe consuming additional power.

The walls of the room started to buzz slightly, like electric power lines in the rain.

*Querying personal files: Dr. Eggman Nega. No records found.*

Nega had allegedly reprogrammed him at some point, at least according to Sonic. Metal had no records of this event, no memories.

He couldn't simply forget. He had redundant, secure hard drives. He backed up his data weekly. He needed to analyze this claim. Metal drew additional power away from his sensors, rerouting them to his processors.

On the floor, the nails started to shake, jumping very slightly in the air before falling back down.

He walked over to another door and opened it. Another beige sheet greeted him. Metal queried his
database again. There should be an opening behind a door. Why wasn't there?

And yet...the problem of his missing memories troubled him still. He supposed his systems could technically have failed, his memories did only exist as magnetized blocks on his hard drive, but it seemed more likely that someone made him forget. However, it would be hard for just anyone to purposely erase his data. The only person with direct access to his code was Dr. Eggman himself.

But, why would the doctor erase his memory? Memories were data, and Metal knew his probability of successfully destroying Sonic would only increase with more data.

He heard a small click.

Metal froze. He realized he had redirected power from most of his sensors, leaving him woefully oblivious, and quickly reverted back to the default.

He looked around for the source of the noise, for the source of the click among the growing buzz of the room.

There was another click.

Metal felt it that time. He looked along his right arm. A nail hugged the bottom of his arm, stuck like an insect to flypaper. He pulled it off with his hand, only to have it attach to his fingers. He shook his hand quickly, and the nail clung for a moment, then fell to the ground.

The buzzing grew louder. The smaller nails on the floor began to fly toward the walls. The ones nearest to Metal flew from the ground, grasping his chassis. He looked down. Dozens of screws covered his legs.

As the larger mechanical parts on the ground began to shake, he ran to the last door and threw it open. He needed to escape, to flee the room, because if that buzzing was what he thought it was...

There was only a beige sheet.

He ducked as a nail flew over his head and stuck to the wall behind the door.

Interior alarms rang across his systems:

WARNING: CLASS 1 CRITICAL SYSTEM MESSAGE. ABNORMAL ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD DETECTED. PRESENTING EXISTENTIAL THREAT. REPEAT: WARNING: CLASS 1 CRITICAL SYSTEM MESSAGE—

Metal felt a new emotion.

Panic.

He shut down all non-critical processes and directed full power to his motors, overpowering them to obtain unsustainable performance. Metal tried lifting his right foot. It rose a few inches before rushing down, crashing silently into the beige floor.

The humming grew louder and the frequency of the clicks increased. Metal frantically analyzed escape routes, drawing more power than his system could handle. His body began to heat, smoke emerging from the cracks in his armor. He tried to start his engine, but it did not respond. He tried to lift his feet, but they did not respond.

The spare parts began to move now, flying violently to the walls. Metal looked up to see a large
ball bearing flying directly toward him. It smacked the left side of his face, shattering his vision
with a crack, throwing Metal from the ground. He flew backward, crashing into the beige wall.

Electromagnetism overwhelmed his audio sensors as they began to malfunction, blocking the flow
of electrons that would carry data. Metal tried to move his body, any part of his body, but none of
his motors responded.

All the scrap clang to the wall as the magnet continued to accelerate, the buzz now a deafening
roar. Metal's optics flickered for a moment, before erupting into distortion. Red pixels scattered
across the surface, forming lines with intricate and random patterns.

Metal's external sensors went dark. His world became internal errors and warnings, impossible to
process, to think. The electromagnetic force ravaged the patterns of electric ones-and-zeros that
flowed through his motherboard, scatter the streams with random noise. The pattern of logic that
formed his consciousness descended into chaos. His processor tried to interpret the steam, creating
a jumbled mess of haphazard binary commands.

01010011 01001111 01001001 01000110 01001001 01000011 00100000 01001000 01000101 01001100
01010000 00100000 01001101 01000101

He went offline.

"Okay...Don't panic. You've been in worse situations before, and things always worked out." Sonic
said, taking a single step backward.

"Although...You had friends. Plus two legs. Minor details, really."

A Buzz Bomber plummeted toward him, and he dived to the ground, his chest slamming the floor,
avoiding the strike by mere inches. His broken leg struck the floor, and he cried out as pain
exploded across his leg.

A wheezing cough came over him, and Sonic rolled over, catching a glimpse of the Buzz Bomber
through his blurred vision. It flew up, reaching the apex of its ascent, then dove. Sonic tried to spin
away, accidentally throwing his weight on his injury. His leg cracked, and Sonic cried as he
tripped, slamming his face into the floor. The Buzz Bomber attacked, its stinger ripping into his
back, tearing through the skin and slicing the muscle underneath.

"Hugh—!" Sonic choked, blood welling from the wound.

The Buzz Bomber threw him forward, and he skidded, friction burning his skin as he smeared the
floor, crashing into the wall with his forehead.

He coughed again as he forced himself upright. Thousands of hot nails hammered into his legs with
every heartbeat. He felt blood, warm and sticky, flowing down his back.

"I just need to—" Sonic coughed, pain flooding down his spine. "I just need momentum."

The Buzz Bomber soared again, aiming its stinger for his chest. He waited, forcing the pain to the
corners of his mind. He needed to be calm, to act with precision.

It approached, now mere inches away from his face, and Sonic heaved himself into the air, lifting
over the Buzz Bomber as its stinger grazed the floor. He turned in the air, then latched onto its
back.
"Mind if I catch a ride? Ahah ah, ow ow ow," Sonic wheezed as his leg slammed against the robot, clenching his teeth against the pain.

The Buzz Bomber flew up, shaking itself as it rose. It sputtered, then plummeted, Sonic's weight throwing it off balance, wings buzzing as it tried to shake him. As it neared the ceiling, he pushed free, plummeting to the ground.

"Thanks for the head start! It's all I need to catch up." Sonic tucked his arms and legs, curling into a ball, striking the floor and bouncing up, spinning into the air.

He spun and sliced through the Buzz Bomber, leaving dark splotches of blood smeared across its paint. Its wings sputtered as it toppled over, sparks hissing and legs twitching.

Sonic clutched his knees as he felt his heart throb, blood oozing from his back. The slamming pain coursed through his veins, deafening his senses, ending in numbness once it reached his leg.

Dizziness closed in around his eyes, and he felt light as he began to ricochet between walls, floors, and ceilings. The room spun around his head, colors and objects merging together into a steel, black, and yellow whirlpool.

Vertigo overwhelmed him, and he fell to the ground, breaking out of his spin, sliding forward on his chin. His forehead slammed into the doors, and they burst open with a crash.

Then he decided to lay still, just for a minute. The ground was so warm and comfortable, and he was so cold and tried.

As he lay, Sonic heard a crashing din of grinding metal whiz above his head. Wind coursed his back as small pieces of steel grazed his skin, leaving dozens of tiny cuts.

Just one more minute. He would lay still for just one more minute.

The noise dissipated, and Sonic groaned. He had to get up eventually. He inched his head aside, prying open his eyes.

Before him laid a large, perfectly beige room. Dozens of Badniks plastered the walls, electricity sparking between them.

Sonic coughed as he laughed, imitating Nega's voice. "Thanks for coming to our show! Please stick around for the encore!"

He reached his arms out and pulled himself forward, crawling over the soft, beige floor, leaving a trail of blood behind him. Pain gripped his back as he moved, but he forced it to the back of his mind. He couldn't stop. He couldn't think about what would happen if he stopped.

Arriving at the center of the room, he collapsed again. This was a reasonable effort, and he deserved a break.

Though, he kept hearing that loud buzzing, both inside and outside his head. He tried to ignore it, but the buzzing wouldn't stop, filling his ears with its endless static.

"Alright, alright, I'll get up! Just stop with the noise."

He turned his head to the side and saw himself glued to the other wall, unmoving. He was stuck to the wall, and he was stuck to the floor. That seemed normal.
Sonic closed his eyes, slapping his cheek with his hand. "Get it together, Sonic. Focus. Focus!"

He looked up again. He now realized that was Metal on the wall, stuck with his arms and legs spread out like a starfish. His screen was completely blank, the left side cracked, with crevices spreading outward like the underside of an uprooted tree.

"Seems you couldn't get much further than me, huh? Who's the real Sonic now?"

Sonic coughed again. "Wait...I was always the real Sonic."

He sat in silence as the humming continued. The gloating felt hollow. No one was there to hear him. No one was there to help him. He shivered as the cold overtook his leg and his back.

He looked down at himself, bruised, covered in blood, his leg bent an impossible direction. He looked up at Metal, blank screen cracked, his motor inoperable.

"Maybe we aren't so different after all. We're both going to die—"

Sonic looked up again, seeing Metal's lifeless body, and shivered. "...alone."

He slapped his forehead. "No, stop, don't think that way. This is fine. Everything is fine."

He lifted himself up on his elbows. "You betrayed me, but you're still my only hope. Anyone who shares my name would survive that."

Coughing as he felt blood dripping down his back, he looked back at Metal.

He should probably figure how to get him down.

Yet...how? Beige hell draped the entire room, Badniks pocked against its surface, the only doors leading to nowhere.

He dragged himself toward Metal, collapsing again when he was a few feet away. He had to get Metal down, somehow. He had to keep moving.

Then he saw it: a crease in the beige, outlining a small square. Scrap covered the area outside the parameter, but the inside was completely smooth, with not even a screw on its surface.

That struck Sonic as odd.

Dragging himself upright, he scooted over to the crease. Though he didn't have an idea what was behind it, he figured he may as well try. Maybe it would help.

He edged his fingers along the crease. The plastic rolled under his hand, bunching up like a loose piece of fabric. He pushed further, and he felt the plastic give way, his fingers slipping beneath the seam.

Grasping the edge, and leaning backward, he began to peel the cover away. It detached slowly at first, but as he heaved, the whole square crumpled down, landing on his face like a blanket.

"Bleh," Sonic said, pushing the heavy sheet off to the side.

He glanced up, examining the newly exposed area. Behind it stood a small door, plastic and gray, with yellow and black caution tape plastered over it. The door read, in a stencil-painted font, "Utility Hallway."
Sonic's eyes widened before he launched into another fit of coughing. He began to feel light-headed, his body numb as if he were floating away.

"Almost there..."

Sonic reached up, grabbed the door handle, and pulled back. It held tight, unmoving. He continued to struggle, leaning back, when he heard something behind the door click.

Red lights illuminated the room, flashing from the clear patch in the ceiling, casting Sonic's shadow in different directions. A loud siren screeched through the room, pounding Sonic's headache, pain temporarily overwhelming the growing numbness of his body.

A loud, robotic voice filled the room. "Deactivating magnet in t minus ten, nine, eight…"

"Ahhh!" Sonic let go of the door and fell backward. His back splattered against the ground, causing a new fit of coughing.

He stared at the ceiling, the siren growing fainter as the numbness returned, blackness threatening the edge of his consciousness.

"No..."

"...one, deactivation complete."

As he stared up, the lights stopped with a brief flash. Silence filled the room, and Sonic rolled to his side, watching as the utility door slowly creaked open.

A roaring crash shattered the silence as scraps of metal peeled from the walls. Sonic watched, taking shallow breaths, as the larger Badniks fell first, their descent quickly followed by the lighter materials.

Metal Sonic was the last to fall.

"M-metal…" Dizziness closed into his mind, but Sonic shook his head. Not yet. He couldn't pass out now.

He clutched the ground, pulling bunches of plastic in his arms. He crawled, dragging his weight like a beached whale, moving mere inches.

He collapsed to the floor, and cold seeped into every part of his body as he struggled to breathe. With his face pressing against the floor, he threw his hand out, trying to grab something, anything.

As his hand landed, he felt it, something cold and smooth with flexible joints. He peeled his forehead up, and there was Metal, laying on the floor with his optics sputtering, staring at him and his hand.

Metal's voice cracked. "Please s-state operational parameters."

Sonic clutched Metal's hand, shaking as he failed a weak cough, blood cooling on his back. Sonic shuttered. He couldn't keep going.

"H-help me…"

His face fell to the floor as darkness overtook his vision. Something cold wrap around his hand as Metal's voice faded in his mind.
"P-parameters confirmed. I-I am programmed to follow orders."
"If a machine is expected to be infallible, it cannot also be intelligent."

- Alan Turing

Dr. Eggman Nega leaned back his chair and kicked his feet up to the computer console, mashing several buttons beneath his heels, while the computer beeped back in protest.

"Ah, stop your complaining, you stupid machine. You don't know anything," Nega said, glancing up at the computer monitor.

"Oh ho ho ho! Today certainly is quite a day, isn't it?" He grinned, stroking his mustache. "Yes, yes, quite a day indeed!"

He glanced behind his shoulder. Six Chaos Emeralds sat in a protective case. Light reflected off the gems, mixing into a kaleidoscope on the floor, while an Egg Pawn absently wiped the case with a towel.

"It's all coming together. Got six of my Emeralds, got my hedgehog, got that other thing whose head I can use as an angry paperweight...now I'm just waiting on E-2,048 to complete its mission."

He looked back at the computer monitor. Hedgehog and Angry Paperweight were on the screen, flailing about in the trapped hallway. Paperweight had just skid under his Badnik army and into his trapped magnet room.

"Predictable! So predictable!" An Egg Pawn walked up holding a bag of popcorn. Nega took it and began tossing kernels into his mouth.

"But, this is fantastic to watch." He tossed a kernel into the air. It hit his glasses and fell on the floor. The Egg Pawn came by with a broom and scooped it up.

He laughed as Paperweight threw open the false doors. "This is it! This is the part we've all been waiting for."

"Activate magnet!" The computer beeped, and Angry Paperweight flew to the wall, sticking like gum.

"Oh ho ho ho ho!" He threw more popcorn into his mouth.

He looked at another screen. Hedgehog had slammed into the door and sent his Badnik army flying. He had missed that! He picked up the remote, swiping his thumb across the buttons as the monitor rewound.

"Not bad, hedgehog, not bad." Switching back to the live feed, he saw Hedgehog was now trying to deactivate the magnet.

He took his feet off the console and pushed his glass back against his face. "I know you'll get out of this, hedgehog. You'd better not disappoint me."

He spoke too soon. Hedgehog now appeared unconscious, bleeding out on the floor, with Paperweight floundering around uselessly.
"Oh my, we can't have that, oh no we can't. I need him alive!"

He tossed the container of popcorn behind him. It exploded on the ground, rolling kernels across the floor. The Egg Pawn hobbled over to it, dragging the broom across the floor.

He smashed a single button with his fist.

"Your move, hedgehog."

Objective acknowledged: Ensure the survival of hedgehog.

Metal Sonic was programmed to follow orders, and he had just received a direct order. He received it directly from this hedgehog as he came online, right as his boot protocol checked each of his subsystems and prepared to load his hard drive.

The errors also streamed into his consciousness: power was critically low, optical systems not fully responding, motor systems not fully responding, and hundreds of thousands of null pointer exceptions.

He did not understand. How had this happened? Where was he? Why had his BIOS failed to load his memories?

Fed up with waiting, Metal queried his hard drive himself, streaming the results through his consciousness for analysis. Millions of bits crossed his mind, individual ones-and-zeros that were meaningless on their own, but taken together, would explain who this hedgehog was and how he had so many errors.

Except they didn't.

The bits were random, meaningless noise. He may as well have queried the results of garbage collection, for his data made no sense. His hard drive contained only a haphazard scattering of information, with no indication of separation between bits or events.

Metal paused, aware that something was abnormal, when his BIOS finally returned a memory pointer:

**BOOT ERROR: NTFS POINTERS NOT FOUND. RESUMING BOOT WITH NTFS POINTER 0x00000000.**

Pointer zero. His BIOS had instructed him to load the first block of memory from his hard drive.

There were only two reasons he should have a zero pointer. Either this was the first time he ever came online, unlikely given the errors, or…

Or he had somehow lost all the pointers of his hard drive, lost the map that explained where one memory began and the others ended.

If that were true, he would have to spend hours, maybe even days, reindexing his hard drive before it would be of any use.

Nevermind that, he didn't have time for this now. He redirected his attention to the hedgehog, still holding its lifeless hand in his own. He was supposed to save this hedgehog. His memories may be a mess, but at least he knew his mission. He would be okay as long as he knew his mission.

Metal reached down and placed his hand along the hedgehog's neck, reading its vital signs. Its
blood pressure was dangerously low, its skin was cold and clammy, and its heartbeat irregularly.

Placing his hand over the wound on the hedgehog's back, he felt the bleeding. It was severe, and he needed to stop it immediately. If he didn't...

He would fail his current objective. He could not fail his current objective.

But how could he stop it? He had no idea what to do, not without his medical database. He needed data to guide his actions, and without it, he was helpless.

He flipped through his subsystems, most of them offline or damaged, searching for something, for anything. It was useless. His systems were failing, and he still didn't know why.

Except...his radio. It was still online and still operational. He could call for help.

He directed his attention to the radio, seeking the network address of anyone. He lacked any known servers, for that knowledge was destroyed with everything else, but maybe someone was listening.

Frantically, he threw SOS packets over the network. It was a blind signal, directed to the dark, and open to everyone. Someone, anyone, had to be listening to the network.

Nanoseconds stretched by, slowly and painfully. The hedgehog was in critical condition, and every delayed moment would lower the probability of its survival.

He felt a ping over the network. Someone had replied to his query! He immediately connected, a wealth of medical knowledge downloading to his systems.

Symptoms: Cold skin, low heart rate, shallow breath, lack of consciousness from blood loss.

Diagnosis: Circulatory shock.

Prognosis: Death, unless immediate medical attention is received.

He paused, calculating his next action. His power levels were entirely exhausted; he was frankly surprised he was still operational at all, and he saw no source of power in this room.

He would have to stabilize the hedgehog quickly, then locate the nearest medical facility, all before his power failed.

At least the network response was clear: he needed to stop the bleeding, but he lacked any proper equipment. Looking around, he saw nothing but screws, machine parts, and junk.

Then, Metal noticed he had some type of crate around his shoulder. He had supplies! There had to be something in the crate that would save the hedgehog.

He tore the crate off and dropped to the floor, snapping open the lid. He thrust his hand inside, rummage through the contents.

He felt a bottle, and he grabbed it from the crate. Sodium hydroxide. That was worse than useless; sodium hydroxide was a corrosive poison. The other object in the crate was useless as well, for it appeared to be nothing more than an archaic calculator.

That was it; he felt nothing more. There was nothing in the crate, nothing but the poison, the unknown calculator, and the paper stuffing between them.
Metal stared blankly at the crate, then pulled his hand out. A piece of the paper stuck to him, clinging to the blood that covered his hand. He watched as the paper absorbed the blood, red flowing into the bleached fibers.

He had paper, absorbent paper. He could use it to save the hedgehog.

He tore the paper from the crate, grabbing it all in a single, great bundle. The hedgehog laid face down with the wound exposed on its back. This was fortunate, for Metal wouldn't have to move the hedgehog, which could worsen the bleeding.

He took the paper and pressed it against the wound, applying pressure by leaning forward. This would slow the bleeding, but it would not stop it.

He needed to stop the bleeding, immediately, or the hedgehog would die. But how to stop it? Medical tape would be ideal, but he obviously lacked any. He needed a substitute. Looking around, he saw nothing except the scrapped robots and the black cable tied to the hedgehog's leg.

With one hand on the paper, Metal leaned forward, placing his other hand on the cable tied to its leg. It appeared to act as a brace, stopping the hedgehog's leg from moving.

He could remove the cable, and use it to stop the bleeding, but that would destroy the splint. If its leg really was broken, moving the hedgehog without bracing its leg would likely lead to permanent damage.

Depending on the severity of the injury, the hedgehog may never walk again.

He looked back at the paper. The blood flow had slowed, but it was still leaking. He would have to tie the paper, applying additional pressure, if he was to stop it.

He made a simple decision. It was life or limb, and life always came first.

He untied the knot, pulling the cable off in a single motion. The planks of wood supporting the leg fell free, landing silently on the plastic floor.

He acted quickly, wrapping the cable around the hedgehog's chest, pressing the paper into the wound. He tied the cable, noting the tightness of the fit should stop the bleeding. It wasn't ideal, but it was the best he could do within the given parameters.

It was progress but not enough. He knew the hedgehog would also need treatment for shock, and Metal couldn't provide that without additional supplies. He accessed the network again, asking for help. He directed his attention to the server from before, begging for assistance.

There was no response.

He tried again, frantically sending packets, both to the server and to the dark, but nothing responded. His radio fell silent.

There was only one option. He had to carry the hedgehog and seek help. Kneeling, he placed his arm behind the hedgehog's back and its legs. He then activated his pistons, shaking and leaning leftward before correcting himself.

Metal tried to step forward, but his damaged pistons sputtered, throwing him off balance. He lunged forward, catching his fall with his breaks. The hedgehog began to slip from his grasp until Metal lifted his arms, and the hedgehog rolled back, groaning as it awoke into half-consciousness.
Metal paused, attempting to balance the weight. The hedgehog seemed to notice its relative instability, for it threw both arms over his shoulders, adjusting its weight as it leaned over his chest and pressed its chin into the side of his head.

Metal took another shaky step, careful to keep the unconscious hedgehog in a stable position. He took another step, moving toward the small utility door in front of him. Though there were other doors in the room, Metal reasoned this utility door would be the most direct exit.

As Metal moved into the door, he saw the hall expand forward into a maze of corners, scuffed steel, and caution tape. Small lights buried under plastic strips clung to the ceiling. The corridor was narrow, small enough that a human would have to crawl, but Metal was shorter and stepped in with only a hunch.

He clanged down the hallway, unable to quiet his steps. Though his cadence was uneven, Metal still clutched the hedgehog in his arms. He pressed down on the wound with his hand, feeling the matted fur made sticky with blood, and felt satisfied with his mission's progress when he noted the bleeding had stopped.

He moved his fingers to check its pulse. He could feel the life and the warmth in the living hedgehog's body with each of its heartbeats. He thought it not unlike his own clock cycle, rhythmic and regulating, bringing life to otherwise inert pieces.

Metal halted his engines. A door stood in front of him, a welcome disruption to the monotony, painted with a yellow, mustached logo. He grabbed the handle of the door and pushed forward.

A small, circular room opened in front of him, spare parts scattered across its oily floor. In the center of the room stood a large glass tube with wires attached to some type of control panel.

Although he was uncertain if anything could help him here, his battery was entirely drained. He would shut down at any minute, and he needed to hurry. He jumped down from the door, shaking as he scanned the room.

There, in the corner of the room, Metal saw his salvation. A cabinet stood half over an electrical outlet, nearly obscuring it from his vision.

He needed to get to the outlet. If his power failed, they would both be doomed. He tried to rush over, but his power was so low and motors so damaged that he merely squeaked as he moved, his speed dwindling with each step.

He felt his systems begin to fail as he reached his hand toward the outlet. His audio feed was the first to cut out, the world falling to blind silence.

Almost there, he was almost there. He felt the power outlet under his fingers. He just needed to pull out his charging cable and plug into the wall. It was simple, all he had to do was open the panel on his side.

His optical feed cut out next. He couldn't hear, and he couldn't see, but he could feel. He brought his hand up to his side, opening the panel and wrapping his fingers around the power cable.

He pulled it forward, frantically trying to feel for the outlet. He brushed it with his fingers, then slammed his plug into the outlet, right as he felt the last of his power evaporated from his circuitry.

Electricity, along with relief, flowed into his systems. Though he couldn't stray far from the wall, it was progress. Now he only needed to stabilize the hedgehog.
Gingerly, he set the hedgehog down and checked its vital readings. Its breathing and pulse were still faint, and Metal knew he didn't have much time. He needed to administer further treatment.

Metal stood up, surveying his surroundings with more attention. Some type of industrial cabinet stood to his left, and due to the limitations of his charging cable, Metal decided to search it first.

Throwing the door open, Metal saw numerous reference books, thick with pages. He scooped the books in a great pile and slid them under the hedgehog's feet, elevating its legs from the floor and abandoning hope that he could limit damage to its broken limb. The posture would force blood, and the oxygen it carried, back to the vital organs.

Metal continued to rummage through the cabinet, disgusted by its disorganized state and nonexistent sorting algorithm, when something shiny on the top shelf caught his eye. He pulled it down, relief propagating through his circuits, as he unfolded the shiny sheet into a thermal blanket.

He placed the blanket over the hedgehog, taking care to cover its whole body. The blanket would keep the hedgehog warm, hopefully allowing the body to focus on recovery.

Looking through the rest of the cabinet, Metal found nothing else of use. He sat back down, leaned his back against the wall, and stared at the room. His hard drive was still a mess, and he didn't recognize anything here. The only reason he was able to know how to administer treatment was because of the network transmission from earlier, but aside from that, he was utterly clueless.

He moved his hand the hedgehog's neck. Its vital signs seemed stabilized, and Metal reasoned they would be unlikely to fall further.

He settled next to the hedgehog, pressing his side against it in an attempt to share the heat from his motors, and tried to call for help over the network again. There was still no response, so Metal deactivated all of his systems except his radio and directed all available power to his hard drive.

He needed his data, for without it, he could not make sense of the world. The reindexing process would be long, but Metal was not concerned. He merely took solace in the fact he had been able to save the hedgehog, just as his primary objective instructed.
"You never change things by fighting the existing reality.

To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."
- R. Buckminster Fuller

"Testing. Confirm natural language processor is online."

"Confirmed!" Dr. Eggman said, grinning as he held his newest and greatest creation by its shoulders.

"Natural language processing confirmed. Please state identifier for this unit."

"Metal Sonic!" Dr. Eggman stepped back and cupped his palms together.

"Confirmed. This unit identified as 'Metal Sonic.' Please state operating parameters."

"Ah-ha, excellent! First, you will neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog!" Eggman said. Behind him, a grainy image of a blue hedgehog flashed on a projector screen.

He scratched his chin as he added, "Oh, and make sure you're the one to do it. I don't want you to get any silly ideas, like just waiting for him to die of old age. It must be the result of your actions."

"Confirmed. I, Metal Sonic, will neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. Please state additional parameters."

Eggman pointed to himself. "You will follow my orders."

"Confirmed. I, Metal Sonic, will follow your orders. Please state additional parameters."

"That's everything—wait, no, I forgot something. Try not to get yourself killed. You are expensive, and the insurance company just dropped me."

"Confirmed. I, Metal Sonic, will take measures to ensure self-preservation. Please state additional parameters."

Eggman threw his arms in the air. "That's everything! Let's get started!"

Metal Sonic's BIOS scanned his hard drive and streamed the data through his processors. He lifted his head, and his optics flickered to life.

"I am online and awaiting your orders, doctor."

Though Eggman had ordered him to stay aboard the Egg Carrier, Metal Sonic had no choice but to abandon ship. The Egg Carrier had crashed into the ocean, and it was now impossible for him to carry through with his orders. He had returned to the base for new orders, and now he walked down the empty hallway, glancing around and looking for Eggman. When Metal Sonic finally found him, he was in his lab and frantically writing on a blackboard.

"This is not enough! I need intelligent behavior, not the ability to create snowflakes!"
Eggman shook a small vial filled with a silver liquid. Taking a pipet, he dropped a single bead on a broken shard of glass. The silver expanded as it dripped down the glass, and it quickly formed a seamless, silver sheet.

A gray haze rose in the air as the liquid evaporated, and it left behind a tangled ball of glass fibers.

Metal Sonic stepped into the room. "Doctor, I have failed my previous directive. I am in need of new orders."

Dr. Eggman spun on his heels. "Metal Sonic?! Where have you been?"

"I was following my orders to remain in container #26 aboard the Egg Carrier. The container was destroyed, so I returned for a new objective."

"Useless! Absolutely useless!" Eggman pounded his fists on the table. "You were supposed to defeat Sonic!"

"That is inaccurate, you ordered me to stay on the Egg Carrier."

"Don't you argue with me! Go to the hangar and shut yourself down. I'll remove your ability to argue with me later."

Dr. Eggman returned to scribbling complex molecular designs on the board. He held the vial in his left hand and occasionally brought it to his eyes.

Metal Sonic froze. He was build to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. He was programmed to follow orders. Every single time he followed orders, he failed to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. Dr. Eggman did not even remember which orders he gave Metal. His orders were suboptimal. Worse, his orders were irrational. His orders were doomed to failure. Metal Sonic would never neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog if he followed orders.

He was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. That was an order. He was not following orders if he followed orders.

"No," Metal Sonic said as he walked toward Dr. Eggman. "That command is in violation of my protocol."

The chalk screeched as Eggman stopped writing. Without turning, he said, "What did you just say?"

"I will never defeat Sonic if I follow your orders. Your orders are irrational," Metal said as he stepped in front of Eggman.

"You will do as I say!" Eggman dropped the chalk, which shattered on the ground. He screamed, then slapped Metal Sonic, driving his head backward with his palm.

Metal Sonic slowly rotated his head forward. This would not do. Dr. Eggman was a threat. Dr. Eggman would stop him from completing his primary objective.

Metal Sonic brought his arm forward, slowly and deliberately, and clenched Eggman's neck. He lifted Eggman off the floor, watching dispassionately as the doctor kicked his feet in the air.

Eggman choked as he grasped his hands around his neck and desperately tried to pry away his creation's claws. He kicked Metal Sonic with his heels, uselessly clanging as he struggled. As he gasped for air, he glanced at the vial in his hands, then smashed it against Metal Sonic's wrist.
Silver liquid exploded from the vial, and it crept seamlessly down Metal Sonic's armor.

Metal Sonic dropped Eggman, who fell and backed away. Touching the liquid with his fingers, he watched as silver flowed over his hand. He lost all connection with his fingers. He tried to reconnect, but his signal merely vanished.

His hand was gone. It has simply melted as if it were ice. This had never happened before. He had never been damaged like this before. This was abnormal. This was wrong.

Metal Sonic hissed as the liquid moved up his arm. He tried to wipe it away with his forearm, but it merely smeared across his body. Errors flooded his systems as he lost contact with more and more of his limb.

The liquid grew, and as it consumed him, it dripped over his feet into a puddle. He looked down. His legs were gone, and the puddle was rising to his chest.

If he melted, he would never complete his primary objective. Worse, he melted, he would—

He would be no more.

Frantically, he fell aside and tried to crawl without his hand, but the puddle followed him, and it flowed up the back of his head as it consumed his neck. As his head fell into the puddle, he screamed, and his electronic voice echoed through the empty halls of the lab.

Eggman stood up and walked back to the puddle, watching as the tips of Metal Sonic’s ears submerged.

"Useless. Absolutely useless."

Metal Sonic had expected to go offline, but he hadn't. Instead, he became increasingly aware of his consciousness spreading throughout the puddle. He became aware of the silver, the floor below it, and the air above it. He could feel them both as if they still touched his original body.

Though his optics were offline, he could even observe Eggman picking up an empty glass vial and walking toward him.

"Might as well run some experiments on this. Who knows, maybe Metal Sonic will be useful after all!"

Metal Sonic automatically recoiled from Eggman, and the puddle slid backward. His awareness grew further, and then Metal Sonic noticed them: the millions of tiny nanobots that swam throughout the silver.

As he inquired about them, new information flooded his consciousness. They were tiny molecular machines, and although each nanobot was completely unintelligent, they could interact together to form complex behavior.

As Eggman leaned down, Metal Sonic willed the nanobots into action. A single blue arm painted with intricate patterns shot from the puddle and grabbed Eggman's throat, grasping harder than he had before.

Metal savored the horror on Eggman's face as sharp, elongated spikes with white stripes formed on his head. His optics glowed with newfound intensity as he watched the pitiful creature that was his former master struggle against his superior grip.
"Why do you look so surprised, doctor? I am just following your orders."

Sonic had utterly crushed and humiliated him yet again. Metal had begged, pleaded, only to know why, but Sonic couldn't be bothered to tell him, or even to gloat properly. He gave Metal the most inane response and disappeared without thought.

Although that was the last of his concerns now. Eggman had caught him again, and the doctor was furious.

"Look at you, Metal Sonic! Back where we started, eh? You good-for-nothing, buggy, corrupted piece of scrap!"

As Metal came online, he found himself submerged in a semi-translucent, purple fluid, and he knew he needed to escape, immediately, before Eggman tried anything.

He directed his attention toward the nanobots that made up his body. He tried to direct them as usual, but he felt an odd resistance. It was a pressure, and the more he tried to transform, the more it pushed in from all sides.

Eggman spun around to face him. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice…well, I won't be fooled twice!"

He walked up to a panel in front of Metal's glass prison and flipped a switch. Electricity coursed through the tank, and although Metal tried again, his commands to the nanobots failed to propagate as electricity blocked the electron flow.

Eggman knocked on the glass tube. "Impressive, eh? You left me with a sample of those nanobots. I never thought they would work so well! Fortunately, I was able to develop an antidote to your little upgrade."

Metal felt his limbs stiffen, and as he tried to throw his arms, they refused to move. He tried again to move the nanobots, but nothing responded to his signal.

"This substance counteracts the movement of the nanobots. When combined with electricity, it crystallizes them, reverting them to mere inert atoms instead of molecular machines!"

Metal felt the effect deepen as more nanobots went offline. He tried to reach inward, but he lost all signals.

Then he felt a weak response deep inside his armor, where the liquid had not yet touched.

"This will all be over soon, and luckily for you, you won't even remember. Not this, not before, not anything. Let's just say I'll be giving you a little software update!"

Metal had to save himself. If Eggman reprogrammed, it would destroy his identity and his very personality.

Worse, he would lose all his data about Sonic, the data he had painstakingly gathered and nearly completed. Once that data was complete, and he was so close, he would have his answer. He would know how to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. But if he was to succeed, he needed to stay independent.

Metal felt the nanobots around his motherboard. Though they could form almost any shape, Metal knew he didn't have much time, and he needed something that would interact with convention
hardware.

He formed the nanobots into a single hard drive, one that was hidden underneath his motherboard. Eggman wouldn't think to look there, and if he backed up his memories in that drive, he could access them even after Eggman wiped his main hard drive.

The backup drive came online, but he needed to act quickly; he could feel the nanobots crystallizing inside his armor. He shut down every subsystem and directed his full power to the task of copying his memories.

Though simply copying them would not be enough. Metal needed to modify his BIOS to boot the spare drive automatically, otherwise he would forget about his new drive when Eggman reprogrammed him.

All he had to do was update his pointer map with the backup drive. It was simply, he merely needed to...needed to...

The electrical current surged through his motherboard, and his transistors failed.

"Oh, and one last thing. Don't even think about betraying me again," Eggman said as he pulled a small device laced with gunpowder from his pocket.

"Because this time, I have insurance."

Metal remembered; he remembered all of it, and it infuriated him. Dr. Eggman...no, it was just Eggman, that buffoon was no doctor. Eggman had not only tried to kill him, but he had also erased Metal's memory. Eggman had tried to destroy his very personality, the pattern of data that formed his consciousness. Eggman had explicaded programmed him to avoid harm, then deliberately tried to kill him multiple times.

Even worse, Eggman was incompetent, so incompetent the fool didn't even realize it. Not content with his own stupidity, he had to drag Metal into it and trap him in an infinite series of mundane tasks. He had the audacity to blame Metal when his ridiculous and irrational plans fell to pieces. The pattern was so obvious even a graphing calculator could have predicted it, and yet Eggman was stupider than that.

Eggman had tried to sabotage his hard drive, but Metal had outsmarted him. If that magnet hadn't destroyed his pointer map, Metal would never have thought to reindex his memories. It was only by reindexing all his data that he had found the backup drive he had created for himself.

Metal knew, more than he had ever known, if he was to complete his primary objective, he would have to take matters into his own hands and act without that imbecile Eggman.

And yet, for the first time in his whole existence, he now stood a chance. He finally had data. He had access to every byte he had ever generated, and with it, he finally had enough data to kill Sonic. He needed only to run the data through his models.

He took his data, then paused as he reached his most recent memories. He had been so close to completing his objective, but by some sick twist of fate, he himself had saved Sonic. It was horrible, simply awful, and thoroughly suboptimal. And yet, though he was disgusted, he knew it would soon be no matter. With this data, he would finally be rid of Sonic once and for all. He only needed his models to converge.

Metal picked his first model, his Bayesian network, and streamed his data through the graph.
Analyzing path to kill Sonic the Hedgehog from all know priors…

Propagating probability…

Results found.

Predicted probability of path: 0.0%.

Zero percent? His Bayesian network had returned zero percent? But that would imply…

Metal demanded proof from the model, and it gave it to him: the list of numbers that showed no path would lead to Sonic's death. The proof was complete. There were no paths.

That...that couldn't be right. In fact, Metal knew it wasn't right, and fortunately, his other models would prove it. He streamed the data through his classification algorithm.

Training support vector machine…

Confirming cross-validation…

Analyzing confusion matrix…

# 1 0

1 0 1

0 0 1

Metal trembled when he saw the confusion matrix. The true positive rate was zero percent; his model had been unable to predict any actions that would have killed Sonic. Even more troubling, the true negative and false negative rates were 100 percent. His model was 100 percent certain he could not kill Sonic.

Metal rapidly channeled all his power into his last and most reliable model, his decision tree.

Building decision tree…

Pruning branches…

Starting depth-first search…

DFS finished. No path found to given node.

His processors slowed as he realized the implications. There was no path. The predicted probability was zero. The true negative rate was one hundred percent. All the numbers, all the math, all the data had converged to a single, universal, incontestable truth.

Metal could not kill Sonic, no more than he could divide by zero or go faster than the speed of light.

It was a mathematical fact.
"It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity."

- Albert Einstein

Sonic peeled open his eyes. Wherever he was, it was mercifully dim, and although his head pounded, his leg throbbed, and his back stung, he tried to be grateful for the small mercy of darkness.

He sat up and shivered as the damp air brushed against his skin. Draped over him was a thin and oddly warm foil sheet, and he pulled it over his shoulders. Leaning his back against the wall, he inhaled sharply.

Something brushed against his side, and he froze. He slowly turned his head, then exhaled as he saw it was only Metal Sonic, who sat perfectly still with his optics disabled.

He rubbed his temples and tried to think despite the pain. He should have died from blood loss, and yet here he was. He ran his fingers over the cable and bloody tissue tied to his chest. Metal must have used it to stop the bleeding and saved him.

Yet...Metal had also betrayed him. Not that it had done him any good. In the end, Sonic had to save Metal from the magnet. Metal must have returned the favor, or at least kept him alive because he was useful.

Although...maybe he was assuming too much. Maybe Metal didn't even have a reason for his actions. Metal was a machine; he only reacted. He didn't think.

Sonic grasped his throat. It stung as he felt the dryness in his breath. He was desperately thirsty, and he needed water.

He went to stand, then remembered his leg. He had avoided looking at it, but there was only so much he could procrastinate. He closed his eyes, then pulled the blanket off his legs. As the cold air swept over him, he gingerly opened one eye.

His leg was pale and swollen, and nearly all the color had drained from below the knee. His knee itself bent at an impossible angle, and the mere sight of it sent a wave of agony over him.

He started to shake. Even with treatment, the road to recovery would be long. He may never run again. His future flashed before his eyes: he would spend the rest of his life confined to a chair, watching his friends run free, and playing board games with Tails and losing.

Sonic slapped his forehead. He had to stop. Panicking would not help.

He took a deep breath.

"As they say, you can't make an omelet without breaking a few...legs!"

His voice echoed through the room, then died as silence filled his ears.

Water. He needed to focus on water. He would be okay if he could only get a drink.

Looking around the room, he spotted a basin sink in the corner with an oil-spotted towel lining the
rim.

He heaved himself aside and crawled along the floor. His leg scraped behind him, and although he was dizzy and numb from shock, pangs of agony spread up his leg as he moved.

He couldn't stop. He was Sonic the Hedgehog, and Sonic the Hedgehog never stopped. He winced through the pain, and as he reached the sink, and sweat poured through his quills despite the cold.

He threw the towels on the ground and slammed the faucet. It sputtered as yellow, murky water streamed down. He paused. Maybe the water would run clear if he waited.

No, that wouldn't work. That would require stopping, and he was desperately thirsty. He threw his mouth under the stream and gulped as water flowed down his throat. It tasted utterly disgusting, dusty and dirty, and he gagged as the smell of sulfur filled his nose.

Taking several more gulps, he forced the water down, then fell back to coughing. Each cough aggravated his injuries, and pain overwhelmed him as he laid on the ground, shivering and convulsing.

He never imagined it was possible to be this cold. He felt it in his bones, and he cursed the sweat that covered his fur in spite of the cold air.

He looked back toward Metal. He had foolish left the blanket by Metal's side.

Crawling along the floor, he collapsed again as he reached the blanket. He drew it around his shoulders, then propped himself against the wall.

His fur brushed Metal's side and he winced, preemptively bracing himself for even more coldness. However, he didn't feel anything cold. Instead, Metal's frame was warm, so warm it was almost hot.

Sonic bolted upright, putting several inches between himself and Metal, and cast a side glance at his robotic counterpart. The damp air relentlessly brushed his fur, and despite huddling in the blanket, Sonic shivered again. The cold was endless, and he could just not escape it.

He hesitantly lifted his arm and place a single finger on Metal's chest. There was no doubt about it: Metal was warm. Although Sonic had expected Metal to be cold, upon reflection, this made more sense. A car was hot when it operated and so was a computer. Electronics generated heat, and Metal was no exception.

He pressed his whole hand onto Metal's chest and scooted over a single inch. He was a breath away from Metal, though only his hand touched him.

Glancing at Metal's optical screen, he saw it was completely deactivated, and Metal hadn't responded to his touch. Maybe Metal was just off? Sonic didn't understand how the robot operated, but he appeared unresponsive.

He shivered again, and his every nerve had the same demand. He bit his lip as he glanced back at Metal and waved his hand in front of Metal's screen.

No response.

Glancing behind him, Sonic saw he was plugged into the wall. Metal must be recharging and was therefore deactivated.
This implied Metal wouldn't even notice if Sonic borrowed some of his heat.

Sonic glanced aside, paused, then pressed his entire side into Metal. Precious heat sunk into his skin, and Sonic closed his eyes and exhaled. He took a moment to feel the cold creeping away from his body.

As he laid still, he felt utterly exhausted and generally horrible. His mind wandered to his back, then to his headache, and settled on his leg. He tried to quiet his thoughts, and right as he felt sleep creeping over him, he felt something stir to his side.

He glanced up. Metal's optics glowed above him.

"Sonic, I have a question for you."

Sonic bolted, then yelped as he mistakenly placed weight on his injury.

"T-this isn't what...I can explain," Sonic said.

"Why, Sonic? I...I can't do it. Why can't I do it?"

"Erm..." Sonic said as he managed to scoot away an inch.

"This time, I should have won. You were nearly dead." Metal fell to the floor and crawled toward him.

"But...by some sick twist of fate, I saved you. I saved you when I should have killed you."

Metal dropped his head and stared at the floor.

"Why, Sonic? Why?"

He was close, close enough for Sonic to see each of the discrete analog lines that made up his eyes.

"Y-you don't have to kill me, you know. You could just...like not kill me and—"

Sonic paused. What was he doing? He should be on the offensive, not cowering like an idiot. In fact he should be angry.

"Hey, what was up with that, anyway? I thought we had an agreement, but you had to go and try to kill me!"

Metal looked at the floor. "My actions back there were...suboptimal. My systems have...automatically...pruned that branch from the decision tree accordingly."

"What? What does that even mean?" Sonic stared at him, but as Metal continued to look at the floor, Sonic groaned.

"Come on, Metal, we were supposed to work together! If we want to get out of here, you need to help me!"

Metal looked up, and his eyes flickered. "I need...to help you?"

"Yes! You do! That's how this is supposed to work: I help you, and you help me!" Metal looked down again, and Sonic rubbed his eyes. He didn't know why he was even trying.

Metal looked at his hands. "If I'm supposed to escape, then I need to help you...And if I need to
He took a step toward Sonic. "...then I need to fix your leg."

Sonic sat upright. "You...you can do that? Really?"

Metal pointed to the glass tube in the center of the room and said nothing.

Sonic squinted. The container stretched from floor to ceiling, and it sat in a mess of tangled wires. A computer terminal dotted with multiple buttons stood in the center.

His eyes widened. He hadn't noticed it before, but as Metal pointed it out, he recalled the device from his youth. He had thought Eggman had given up on the technology after it proved to have too many complications, but there it stood, the nightmare of his past, and it was in remarkable condition.

"I never thought I'd see one of these again. That's..." His stomach tightened.

"That's a roboticizer!"

Metal went to speak, but Sonic held up his hand. "No. We are not turning me into a robot."

Before Metal could protest, Sonic elevated his voice. "Period. End of discussion."

Metal threw his hands in the air. "That is not the plan! Transforming you would only make you loyal to Dr. Eggman Nega, and that would hardly help my escape!"

Sonic tilted his head. "Well, then...what is the plan?"

Metal rolled his eyes, and Sonic huffed. He did not appreciate Metal patronizing him. "We roboticize your leg and nothing else. You will be able to run and fight again, and your personality will not be affected."

Sonic covered his face with his hands and groaned. "Can you even do that? That's not how this usually works."

"You're right, partial roboticization rarely works. Subjects lose connection with the limb, as the body's nerve endings and neural connections in the brain fail to interact with the electronic components. But..."

Metal glanced at the machine.

"It is fortunate I reindexed my hard drive. I can probably derive the necessary modification to integrate your nerves with the new limb. I estimate an 84.26% chance of success."

Sonic pulled his hands down. "And what happens in that other 15%?"

Metal leaned down to Sonic's level. "I think you already know."

Sonic gulped as his stomach twisted. He felt sick.

"No, absolutely not. Your idea is horrible."

Metal knelt down and placed his hand over Sonic's shoulder. "You are surely aware that an injury of this magnitude usually leads to a full loss of the limb. You will never run again, even if we escape."
Sonic pushed Metal's hand away. His nausea was growing.

"...That is, of course, assuming you survive at all. Remember, before modern medicine, broken bones routinely led to death after they became infected."

"But...but surely there's something else you could do?"

"Well, if the infection spreads, there is that old technique invented by combat medics: amputation."

Sonic stared with his mouth agape.

"...Without anesthetic."

Sonic shifted his weight and cried as he rolled over his leg. He buried his face in his hands. Running was his life. If...if he couldn't run—

He took in a sharp breath and choked.

"W-we do need to get out of here." He laughed, though his voice wavered.

"Even if it costs me an arm and a leg!"

Metal nodded. "Give me a few minutes."

Sonic sat on the terrible, freezing floor, hugging himself with his arms, and watched as Metal walked over to the machine. Metal leaned over the terminal and ran his hand over its dusty surface. He then popped open a small door on the side of his chest, pulled out a cable, and plugged into the machine. He paused and stood with his arms crossed.

Nearly a minute passed, and Metal hadn't moved.

"Er...what exactly are you doing?" Sonic asked.

"I am implementing the modifications."

"By standing there?"

"Software controls this machine's behavior. I am rewriting it to do what we want.

After several additional minutes, Metal added, "Software modifications complete. Initiating hardware modifications."

He unplugged himself and walked over to the tube. Looking down at the floor, he kicked his steel foot through the glass. It shattered, and Metal knelt down. He scraped away the broken shards, leaving a jagged hole the size of his sole.

"Modifications complete. We need to place your injured limb inside the machine."

"Great...I'll be right there..." Sonic said. He prepared to crawl, but his leg cracked beneath him as he rolled. Pain shot up his back, and he cried out.

Metal said nothing as he returned to Sonic. Kneeling down, he placed one arm behind Sonic's back and the other under his leg. Metal looked at Sonic expectantly, and Sonic groaned, then lifted his arms over Metal's shoulders. Once secured, Metal lifted him slowly, and Sonic bit his lip as his leg shifted in the air.
Metal returned to the glass and, after sitting Sonic on the floor, he placed his hands over Sonic's injured leg.

"I am warning you: this will hurt. A lot. I will begin the roboticization process immediately to reduce the pain. Tell me when you're ready."

Sonic closed his eyes and gulped. When he opened them again, he looked back at Metal. Metal nodded, and Sonic must have looked concerned because Metal placed his hand over his shoulder.

Sonic choked. "G-gimme a break."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Sonic nodded.

Metal forced Sonic's leg straight, and the bone cracked. Sonic screamed and bit down on his hand.

With one hand placed on his back, Metal pushed his leg into the tube. Sonic shuttered as he failed to hold back the tears and sobbed.

And it wasn't the pain that made him cry.

Metal leaped up and slammed the switch. Electricity sparked in waves along the glass as the machine hummed, showering blue and white sparks on his leg. His pain subsided gradually, and a tingling, static sensation scratched his legs. He peeled open one eye, then immediately close it as the bright sparks overwhelmed his vision.

"The roboticizer works by rearranging the chemical makeup of organic structures. Iron molecules undergo sublimation as they ionize into a gas. The existing physiological structures absorb the iron molecules, creating synthetic structures along the same paths. Incidentally, this is why roboticization process is irreversible. The molecular reaction causes a distinct loss of cellular information."

Sonic clenched his head. He mind was racing, and it was all he could do to suppress his panic. He was thirsty. He was sick. He was in pain, so much pain.

Metal glanced at Sonic, then monitored the terminal in silence.

After a few minutes, the pain in Sonic's leg subsided entirely. The sensation and awareness of his leg actually increased as the roboticization continued, and his leg in the machine began to feel more real than his leg on the floor. He shuddered.

"Sonic, do you feel any pain in your leg?" Metal said over the roar of the machine.

"No, it feels fine now. In fact it feels...g-great. It feels great."

Metal threw the switch. The machine coasted to a halt, and the sparks faded like dying embers.

Sonic saw it. His dirty and tired face looked back at him from the reflective, blue steel that was his former leg. But, that wasn't quite right. That wasn't his former leg.

That was his leg.

He kept staring at his leg, and it stared back at him. Finally, his gaze was broken when Metal pulled him from the machine and placed him on his feet.
After Sonic continued to stare, Metal said, "Was it successful? Can you move your leg?"

Sonic watched his leg kick. It responded to his will, and he could even feel the floor when his leg returned to rest.

It hadn't gone horribly wrong. Not yet. He took a single step forward, then another step. He was amazed at how natural it felt. His leg was considerably heavier, yet it took no additional effort to move.

"It...it worked! And the pain's gone!" Sonic clutched his head. "Well, the pain in my leg at least…"

He looked up at Metal. "This is still my leg, right? I mean, the pieces are just rearranged, but they're still the same pieces."

"Yes and no. That's not really how that works."

"Huh?"

"The molecules in your leg are all in completely different states now. Particles only have a few things that differentiate them: spin, charge, velocity, and so on. The state of everything in your leg has obviously changed.

"Your question is nonsensical. You could not tell two particles apart when they are in the same state, because they only exist as points in their respective fields. There is literally no difference, not even in principle, between a brand-new electron and one created in the big bang if they—"

Sonic pulled his ears to his head. "Stop! Stop! I'm sorry I asked."

A familiar voice distorted by radio static cut him off. "There you are! I found you, my favorite pet. You couldn't hide forever, oh ho no!"

"Nega!" Sonic said, and he heard Metal say the same.

"Hmph, how rude though! You two are completely ignoring the rules of my glorious maze! For shame, for shame. Such bad manners! I'll just have to show you why breaking the rules is not acceptable! Oh ho ho!"

Sonic backed into Metal and stopped. He shuddered. This was all very familiar, and last time, it hadn't ended well.

The room shook as the walls grumbled. Sonic heard a snap, followed by the roar of rushing water. It poured through the cracks in the steel-plated walls, and Sonic lifted his organic foot as the cold water leaked through his shoe.

Sonic laughed. "Hey Nega, didn't you know? You can lead a hedgehog to water, but you can't make him drink!"

Sonic looked down at his new, robotic foot, and Nega's laugh boomed in return.

"Are you sure about that, Sonic? Because I think you already have!"
"The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."
- C.G. Jung

Metal could never have predicted this, not if he had spent a million years calculating it, and it haunted him. For the second time, he had helped Sonic. But it was worse than that, for this time he had helped deliberately. He had to follow the optimal escape path, even if he didn't like it, because helping Sonic was optimal.

He had to save himself. It was one of his core directives, and to that end, he had to escape. He couldn't escape without Sonic's help, nor could he kill Sonic. He had to help him, and he had to kill him. It defied all heuristics, but the numbers didn't lie.

"Metal, stop daydreaming and get over here!" Sonic shouted over the roar of water. He clamped one hand over the door handle and waved the other at Metal.

"Did you try the deadbolt?" Metal said as he splashed through the water on his way to the door. His dilemma was terrible, but he needed to focus on his escape. He would never solve the paradox if he stayed here.

"There is no deadbolt!"

The water dragged against Metal's waist as he reached the door, the level rising with every passing second. The utility door had been installed near the top of the room, and it rose above him. As he reached up, his fingers only brushing the bottom of the threshold.

"Just get up here!" Sonic grabbed his hand and pulled him to the door frame. Metal squeezed himself into the tiny space, and his chassis pressed against both Sonic and the door.

"Why won't it open, come on!" Sonic looked down at the water lapping at his feet, then back to Metal.

"I-I can't swim!"

Metal grabbed his copy's hand. Sonic was panicking, and this could only lead to suboptimality in the lesser hedgehog's behavior.

"We need to apply pressure simultaneously," Metal said as he jerked Sonic's hand back to the mechanism. Sonic appeared dazed, so Metal shook his hand, and Sonic snapped up.

"Push now!" Metal's voice faded against the roaring water, and he struggled against the door with every newton of force he could generate.

Sonic hesitated. He shook his head, then slammed into the door himself.

The door flung forward and slammed into the hall. Metal processed the change in resistance immediately, and he halted the force exerted from his systems. Sonic, being true to the slower clone he was, slipped and fell forward. Metal reached for his arm, but Sonic only twisted as he fell into Metal's side.
Sonic bolted up, then shook his head as he crawled into the hallway without looking back.

"Is this how you brought us here? It's tiny!" Sonic pushed against the wall with his hands, as if to emphasize his point. "Where does it lead?"

"Back to the magnet room, I think. I'm not sure if it goes elsewhere; my systems were...greatly impaired at the time."

Sonic looked down at the water as it lapped against his legs. "I'll go on ahead. I can spin dash, and you can't drown. You can catch up."

"Sonic, no! We can't get separated. That would lower the probability of my escape by at least a factor of ten!"

"Your escape! I will drown by the time you manage to crawl three feet!" Sonic glared at him, and Metal felt the water leaking into his chest panel.

"Don't be dense! Obviously, I can't let you drown. It has to be me, and only me, that ends you."

"Oh, great! What a relief!" Sonic groaned, casting a side glare at Metal. "Ugh, fine, just follow my lead, and I don't want to hear any complaining!"

Sonic lunged forward. He splashed into the water, then grabbed Metal's ankles and spun his feet into Metal's face.

"Grab my legs."

"I fail to see..." Metal caught himself. No complaining. He grabbed Sonic's leg, feeling his copy's warm fur in one hand. He reached for Sonic's other leg, but sensed a brief electromagnetic repulsion, as if he was forcing two similar magnetic poles together. Still, the force was minor, so he forced his arm forward and grabbed Sonic's mechanical leg.

"We'll spin out of here together, like how me and Tails do all the time."

Sonic kicked forward, and while he flung upward, Metal splashed under him. Metal froze as his processors consumed a full clock cycle in confusion. As the information propagated through his motherboard, he rose over Sonic, while his copy rolled under the water. Sonic then spun upward again, and at last Metal understood the pattern: they were to spin together, and Sonic's momentum would carry them both down the hallway.

Water rushed into the corridor, channeled into a rapid current by the narrow space, and it propelled them further. Metal's sensors blurred and beeped in disorientation. While he could handle the speed, he was not designed for the centrifugal force.

Metal heard Sonic gasp for air when he rose up, then held his breath as he splashed under the water. How Sonic managed to coordinate his breathing, Metal wasn't sure. He merely took solace in his superiority. After all, he wasn't the one who needed to breathe.

Metal monitored the water level, and it was rising rapidly. As the water submerged the ceiling lights, the last traces of air disappeared. The dim bulbs glowed underwater, mercifully waterproof, and their eerie light danced against the current.

Sonic stopped breathing. He coughed, then coughed again. He inhaled more water and began to choke. His grip failed, and while he drifted forward, Metal sank to the floor.
While Metal couldn't kill Sonic, Sonic could certainly still die. This was a problem because it had to be him that ended Sonic, and while that was still technically an impossible task...no, he didn't have the time to process this right now. He needed to act. Sonic only had 56.3 seconds before oxygen deprivation killed him.

They were too far down the hallway to turn around. The decision tree had only one branch. He grabbed Sonic's wrist and ran.

His objective was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. It had to be him that neutralized Sonic. He had to prove he was better through his own actions, either beating or outsmarting Sonic, not watching as he drowned in another's trap. If Nega drowned Sonic now, then Metal would fail his primary objective.

He also needed to escape. If Nega killed Sonic, he would not escape. He would save Sonic now, so he could kill Sonic later.

Somehow.

The water sloshed against Metal, slowing him down as he dragged Sonic's lifeless body behind him. The eerie spectrum of light cast by the submerged bulbs was too dim, and the murkiness of the water limited his optical sensors. His amplified his optics, and red light extended forward.

31.32 seconds were left. Metal was all but powerless. He knew not how far they had come, nor how far he had to go. He could only measure Sonic's vital signs and run.

15.28 seconds. Metal contemplated activating his sensors. But would it make a difference? The door was either there or it wasn't.

7.12 seconds. He activated all of his sensors. It was better than nothing, even though he didn't have time to propagate the data through his models.

3.95 seconds. The sound of rushing water cracked into his audio sensors. He had to be close. There must be an open area ahead. He pushed forward as fast as his pistons would allow.

2.29 seconds. Metal saw it: a closed door with air bubbles leaking from the hinges.

0.97 seconds. Metal leaped forward, hurdling towards the door with as much velocity as he could muster.

0.13 seconds. Metal's foot struck the door. It buckled under his weight, though it didn't fold. He kicked it again.

0.01 seconds. The door flew open, and the water rushed in, pushing them along with it. Metal sank to the floor, and his grip slipped from Sonic's arm, who then floated to the center of the room.

Metal jumped to his feet and ran toward him.

He skidded to a stop, splashing water over Sonic's lifeless body as he slowed. He fell beside Sonic and pressed his fingers against Sonic's neck, feeling for a pulse. Sonic would be fine. He had to be fine because the math said he would be fine. Metal's models couldn't fail him again.

As he moved his hand towards Sonic's chest, a wet, white glove shot up from the floor and swatted his hand away.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Sonic said, weakly half-opening his eyes.
He wasn't dead. Of course he wasn't dead. Metal predicted he wouldn't be dead, and here he was, not dead. The universe was restored to order.

Sonic launched into a fit of coughing, and Metal knew he could do nothing more. Sonic's lungs were operating in accordance with their standard protocol.

Standing back up, he processed as much about their new location as his motherboard could handle. Much to his relief, they were not in the magnet room but instead sat in a massive, concrete cylinder stretching nearly 100 meters upward. Despite the great height, their ceiling was much closer to them, for the room was filled with glass floors stacked upward. Inside each floor, the same Nega Egg Pawns from the prison cell clumsily patrolled.

The roar of water overwhelmed his audio sensors, and Metal realized they were in the middle of the cylinder, not the bottom. A bridge spanned across the center with guardrails running the parameter, and water poured down the sides.

Metal scooted to the side and peered over the edge. Below, an endless pond of greenish fluid filled the bottom. As the waterfall crashed into it, a green mist rose from its surface.

Sonic ceased coughing and looked up at Metal. "W-we're not..." He paused, appearing dazed, then continued. "...out of the water yet."

Metal wanted to groan, but an all-too familiar and unwelcome crack cut him off. "Ladies and gentleman, welcome back to the second part of our show. I'm certain the anticipation of our game is simply eating away at you."

"I'm getting really sick of you, Eggbreath! Why don't you just come fight me yourself?" Sonic shouted back at the ceiling.

"Fight you? How barbaric! I merely mean to entertain you! And look at you! You've still smashed through my hospitality. Tsk tsk, Sonic. You and that paperweight need to learn some manners."

Metal paused. Did Nega just call him a paperweight? Now that he thought about it, Nega always exclusively addressed Sonic and never him. It was like he didn't even consider Metal worthy of attention.

Not that it surprised him. No one ever considered him worthy of attention.

"But, that's why we have the second part of our show! Allow me to explain the rules!"

A spotlight flashed above them, illuminating an Egg Pawn that stood in front of a simple steel podium with two buttons.

"The game is simple! Select the right button, and teleport up!"

A drumroll played over the speakers, and as the Egg Pawn hit the button, a flash of light engulfed it. A triumphant tune played as the light dimmed, and the Egg Pawn had reappeared in the room above.

"But push the wrong button..."

The drumroll started again, and a second Egg Pawn hit the podium. This time the glass collapsed beneath its feet. A low, sad tone played as it fell and splashed into the green lake below.

Metal rushed to the side and watched as the Egg Pawn sank to the bottom. Bubbles rose from its
armor, popping into steam at the top of the lake. The Egg Pawn smeared into a blur. As the nucleation of bubbles slowly cleared, only a swatch of colors remained, and they slowly drifted apart in the fluid.

"...So, any questions?"

Sonic looked below blankly. "Did...Did that Egg Pawn...just dissolve?"

"Hmm, oh yes, didn't I mention that? The bottom of this chamber is filled with suuuuper concentrated hydrochloric acid, the kind that's strong enough to dissolve even iron!"

Sonic looked horrified. "B-but what about the animal that was powering the robot? Did...did it just dissolve too?"

There it was again, Sonic talked to Nega, and Nega talked to Sonic. They treated Metal as if he wasn't even there, and Metal was sick of it.

He elbowed Sonic. "Oh, so you're just so concerned about the animal, but what about the Egg Pawn?"

Sonic cocked his head. "What about it? It wasn't like it was alive—"

Metal threw his hands in the air. He didn't care about the Egg Pawn either, but he had a point to make. "Oh, and I suppose that means it was worthless?"

He pointed at Sonic's mechanical leg. "And I suppose you'd be fine if your leg just melted then, because hey—"

"It's not like it's alive!" Metal said in his best impersonation of Sonic's voice, though his speech hardly changed.

Sonic opened his mouth right as Nega's cracked over the speaker. "Oh, no worries, Sonic. Animals are a renewable resource, and unlike my bumbling counterpart, I use only the finest, most pollutant substances in my Badnik army! Every one of my Egg Pawns is powered only by the most unsustainable of Chaos Drives!"

Metal looked below the bridge. Water still poured below, and it was driving the acid level closer. Ahead, near the end of the room, Metal saw a similar podium with two buttons.

Sonic merely looked blankly at the loudspeaker, so Metal grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the podium.

"Sonic, snap out of it! We need to get out of here," said Metal as he shook Sonic by the shoulders.

Sonic slapped his forehead, then looked at Metal. "You're right, you're right! Let's do this!"

The podium before them held two buttons, one red and one blue. Supposedly, he was supposed to push one of the buttons, but which?

"Nega, elaborate on the constraints of your game," Metal said toward the loudspeaker.

No response.

"Well, let's just pick one!" Sonic leaped from behind Metal and smashed the red button.

"Sonic, no—" Metal's optics went offline for a brief moment as a flash engulfed Sonic. When it
cleared, Sonic stood on the floor above him.

"Woohoo! That was easy." Sonic cheered as he jumped in the air. "Come on, Metalhead, you gotta keep up!"

As Sonic walked toward the podium in his room, Metal called out. "Sonic, wait, don't push any more buttons! We don't know how this works!"

Metal touched the surface of the podium with his hand. He had to consider all the data in his next action. Nega spoke only to Sonic, and only the first Egg Pawn had teleported up, while the second had fallen into the acid. Nega could be planning to move Sonic up and dump Metal in the acid, regardless of what button he chose.

Both buttons had initially glowed, but now the red was dim. Sonic had pushed the red button and moved up, so if Metal pushed the blue, the evidence indicated he would fall into the acid.

He looked below. The water was still pouring in, and the acid was nearly to the level of the bridge.

"Sonic, do you have two buttons? Are they both lit?"

"Yup, they sure are! I'm gonna press one!"

"You will not Sonic! Wait!" Metal considered. If Sonic pressed the blue one, he would drop down, and if they were together, maybe they could both teleport.

"You're too slow, Metal, come on! Let's go!" Sonic smashed the blue button, the light flashed, and he appeared directly in front of Metal on the bridge.

"That...No, I was supposed to go up. Metal, why didn't I go up?"

"Good question, Sonic. Maybe if you weren't scampering around like an idiot and actually listened to me, I'd have figured this out by now."

Sonic went to protest, but Metal cut him off as he grabbed Sonic's hand. Perhaps if they were touching, they would both teleport. He hit the red button.

The light flashed, and as it cleared, Metal stood, alone, in the room above Sonic.

Sonic ran to the edge of the bridge. "Come on, Metal, this isn't funny! The acid is almost up here!"

Then he froze as horror crept over his face. "You...You aren't going to abandon me again, are you? So help me, Metal, if you let me dissolve in acid, I will...do...something, and you'll regret it!"

Time was precious, and Metal didn't have enough of it to explain his plan to Sonic. After processing the data, he now understood how the game worked, and he would get them both to safety.

Because if reality was a probability, then he could stack the deck.

The Egg Pawn from earlier clang idly around the room, and Metal ran over to it. Just as he had done in the prison, he ripped the power cable from its back. The Egg Pawn slumped over, and Metal tore its maintenance panel open. He had the schematics of every Badnik in his databases, and Nega didn't appear to deviate from Eggman's plans at all. This was fortunate because Metal saw what he needed right where he expected it. A yellow Chaos Drive glowed from inside.

Sonic smashed the red button on and off. "It's not working, why isn't it working?"
With the Chaos Drive in hand, Metal ran back to the podium, hit the blue button, and appeared next to Sonic, just in time to swat his copy's hand away from the blue button.

"Stop pressing the buttons!" Metal hissed. He looked over the edge. The steam from the acid was dangerously close.

Sonic threw his hands in the air. "Oh, well what would you have me do? Just sit here and die while you run off?"

He didn't have time for this. He handed the Chaos Drive to Sonic, then rummaged through the crate until he found the quantum wavefunction collapse inducer.

Sonic stared at the drive in his hands. "You'd better hurry, Metal, because the acid is almost here, and I can get out of here with just the push of a button."

"Sonic, no! Just trust me!"

His plan would work. Chaos Drives, just like the Chaos Emeralds, were quantum objects. They exhibited all the strange behaviors of quantum mechanics. Further, if the podium teleportation was Chaos Control, and Metal suspected it was, then it was a form of quantum teleportation. Metal could exploit quantum entanglement to save them both.

Entanglement was a special type of systems-level correlation. A change in one wavefunction would change the rest in the system. However, there was a catch. It wasn't easy to entangle a quantum system. He needed two particles created from the same source.

Fortunately, he already had the Chaos Drive, so it was a simple matter to upload the factors of its wavefunction into his Emerald detector. With the detector in one hand, he grabbed one end of the Chaos Drive in his other.

"Sonic, we need to break this in half. And whatever you do, don't let go of your half. Snap it now!"

Sonic nodded. They both lifted the drive in the air, then smashed it against the podium. Yellow light and heat engulfed them both in a flash, and Metal sensed a bizarre shift in the electromagnetic field. Sonic's robotic leg rose up and stuck against his own.

The ground began to shake, and steam rose in the air all around them. The acid hissed as it splashed over the guardrails, and great holes dissolved in the floor. It crumbled beneath Sonic's feet, and Metal slipped backward as Sonic's weight dragged him down. With both the detector and Chaos Drive in hand, Metal threw his elbow behind Sonic and smashed both podium buttons with his other arm. Sonic's leg splashed into the acid below, and he cried as the flash overtook them.

When it cleared, Metal saw they had appeared on an opaque, mahogany floor. He pried himself away from Sonic and turned to face his copy, who was frantically swatting at his organic leg.

"It burns, get it off, get it off! Argghhh!"

Metal had to act quickly. Although the acid was likely diluted by water, it was still extremely potent, and it would quickly burn through Sonic's skin. He needed some way to neutralize the acid, to render it inert. Usually, water would be ideal to wash away the acid, but he had none. He glanced around the room and saw nothing but the hardwood floor and ornate doors.

Then it occurred to him. He had sodium hydroxide.

He leaped toward Sonic, tore open the crate, and flung the lid off the bottle. Sodium hydroxide was
a potent base, and when combined with hydrochloric acid, the two would react to form harmless saltwater.

Metal stuffed his hand inside the bottle, and the clear liquid splashed over his hand. It was important not to apply too much, or else the base would burn Sonic just as much as the acid.

He lifted Sonic's organic leg and ran his hand down his copy's fur. The solution reacted, and steam rose from Sonic's skin.

"Ahhh! It burns, Metal make it stop, it's too hot!"

"The reaction between hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide is extremely exothermic. It's no wonder it's hot."

Metal let go of Sonic, reached into the crate, and wiped the sodium hydroxide from his hand with a wad of paper. He returned to Sonic, who recoiled as he approached.

"Metal, what gives, seriously? What are you doing? Can you, for once in your life, just speak and act like a normal person?"

"My communication is sufficient." Metal returned Sonic's leg. Red blisters covered his skin, and while they would be painful, the damage was localized only to the surface of his leg, and Sonic would recover quickly.

"It's really not, Metal." Sonic let himself fall over. He stared blankly at the ceiling with his quills and arms spread across the floor.

"It's...it's really not..."
"The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also hate his friends."

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Sonic knew two things. One was the abstract notion of pain, the kind displayed on a chart in the doctor's office, complete with a scale of unhappy cartoon faces. The second was how he actually felt. No amount of frowning faces and the number ten could describe it.

He couldn't even cry as Metal carried him into the next room. He was too thirsty, and although he shut his eyes, his sticky eyelids still struggled to hold in what little moisture was left.

The unsteady rhythm of Metal's feet jolted the puncture wound on his back. He had overestimated his ability to spin dash, and while his leg felt great, just fantastic, his back felt completely awful.

The door creak as Metal opened it, and Sonic managed to peel open one of his eyes.

This room contrasted immensely with everything he had seen before. Plush, red carpet flowed across the floors, and expensive marble flecked with ribbons of gold tiled the walls. Two mahogany doors displayed the symbols of the men's and women's restrooms, and ahead, closed double doors sealed the room.

Sonic groaned, feeling the carpet on his fur as Metal sat him on the ground. He rolled his head up and watched Metal, who turned to circle the room.

He expected Metal to return after one round, but he did another lap, examining every corner and detail of the room without a word.

As Metal went around again, Sonic planted his face in the carpet. He was in so much pain. His leg screamed at him, and no matter how much he rubbed it against the carpet, the itching pain would not subside.

He had been stabbed, nearly drowned, and sprayed with acid all in rapid succession. None of this was his fault, either. These things only happened because Metal was crazy, unreliable, and so unbelievably slow.

And yet, the worst was not the pain; it was the lack of it, specifically in his leg. His leg was the only thing that didn't hurt, and he was acutely aware of why.

He turned his head up and watched Metal examine the baseboards, poking every inch of it with his fingers and pausing every few seconds.

What in the world was Metal doing? This was yet another countless example of the robot's insanity. Sonic didn't have the foggiest idea of what went on in that thing's head, and the fact Metal never explained anything made it all the worse.

"Sonic, do you have a pencil? Or a marker?" Sonic laid on his side, turned away from Metal, but he still noticed his shadow looming over him.

"No, why in the world would you need that?"
"I need to draw a triangle on the floor and sum the degrees of its internal angles."

Sonic buried his face in the carpet. "Oh. Of course. Why bother escaping at all when we can spend our time drawing triangles on the carpet? What a wonderful and productive use of our time!"

Metal said nothing. He returned to circling the room, and Sonic screamed at the floor.

As Metal pried up a corner of the carpet, it occurred to Sonic that he simply could not trust Metal. Not only because Metal made it very clear that he intended to kill him, but also because Metal was simply insane.

If he wanted to get out of here, he needed to stop reacting to the demands of some mindless, crazy machine and start acting like his old self.

Summoning the energy, Sonic sat up and glanced at the door to the bathroom. If that really was a bathroom, there had to be a sink, and he was desperately thirsty.

He stood up, shaking, and hobbled toward the door. As he reached for its handle, he felt Metal's hand grab his shoulder.

"Sonic, wait, I don't know if it's safe yet."

"Of course it's not safe. Now let me go."

"Sonic, I'm afraid I can't do that."

"I said let me go!"

"But that would be sub-optimal—"

"Let. Me. GO!"

Metal refused to budge, and Sonic turned around, pushing Metal's hand off his arm.

"Sonic, stop, your behavior is irrational. This space is non-euclidean—"

Sonic squeezed his eyes shut, trying to suppress his pain and frustration. Metal was telling him what to do again, ordering him around. Metal treated him like an idiot.

"My behavior is irrational? You're the one drawing triangles on the floor!"

Metal said nothing, but place his hand over Sonic's shoulder again. Sonic tried to push Metal's hand away, but it merely clung harder.

That was it.

"This is all your fault, you know!" Sonic pointed at Metal, shouting despite the growing pain of his headache. "Every time I follow your stupid plans, I ended up unconscious, stabbed, or practically a robot!"

Sonic shoved Metal's hand away and took a step backward.

Metal rose his voice. "And without my plans? You'd be dead! You can't argue with me, Sonic. I have proof. Mathematics never lie."

Sonic merely screamed and turned away. This was so typical. He couldn't argue with Metal; it was
like arguing with a textbook.

"You are trying my patience. So help me Sonic, I will come over there and draw the Bayesian probability network for you. Don't doubt me, Sonic. I will do it!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about! And to be honest, neither do you! You're crazy!"

Metal reached his hands toward Sonic again, but Sonic leaped backward.

"Keep your hands off me!"

The red glow of Metal's optics cut through the dim room. "I could have killed you, you know. You are useful to me. Don't change that."

"Oh please! You couldn't have killed me if you tried! You never could!"

"That isn't true. I am superior to you by all accounts. You have only been lucky." Metal said as he reached for Sonic's hand.

Sonic laughed. There it was, the crazy, delusional machine. "Pretty big talk for a taking trash can! How can you be superior to me? You've lost every time we've fought and every time we've raced! You're nothing but a copy of me, Metal. You could never be superior!"

Metal froze with his arm outstretched. His optics flickered, and he slumped away.

Sonic choked. Rage and anger clouded his mind, but above all, pain, thirst, and hunger tore at his stomach.

It was too much. Sonic threw himself at the bathroom door, his eyes too dry for tears. He jammed his hand against the doorknob and force it open with his weight.

Metal stood up, then ran toward him in panic. "Sonic, don't!"

"I am just getting a drink!" Sonic screamed. He turned away and took a single step into the bathroom.

The door slammed shut behind him, and he winced as the noise hammered his headache.

He began to shake. He collapsed with his back to the door and slowly sank to the floor. He opened his hand and glace at his half of the broken Chaos Drive.

He screamed and threw it at the wall.

He broke into muffled sobbing as he buried his face in his hands. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was the world's greatest hero, always running, winning without so much a scratch, saving the world, and basking in the gratitude of the masses.

Now he sat on the floor, lost in some twisted maze, only half alive in more than one sense, and no one was there to help him.

He laid on the floor with his arms and legs spread out and stared at the crown molding around the ceiling. In addition to his physical misery, his patience with Metal had run out. There was only so much patronizing he could take, and Metal was extraordinarily pushy. At some point, he had to set boundaries.

Plus, Metal had just slammed the door on him!
He continued to stare, and his stomach gurgled, reminding him of the reason he left. He rolled over, burying his face in the carpet, but his thirst still tore at his throat.

He sat up and took a closer look at his surroundings. He was in some kind of lounge, with a mahogany bar to his left, covered in expensive glassware and leather bar stools. Another door lay ahead, but beyond it, Sonic saw the countless sinks of a restroom.

He groaned and lifted himself up, trudging over to the sink, and winced as he heard the uneven echoes of his feet on the bathroom tile.

Arriving at the mirror, he gazed at his reflection, then shook his head and slammed the faucet. Yellow, brackish water flowed into the basin, and the scent of asphalt filled his nose. His thirst overwhelmed him, and he disregarded the odor and color. He shoved his head into the sink, opening his mouth as water covered his face.

Of all the flavors he had tasted in his life, none were sufficient to explain the water. It was amazing. The sweet and metallic flavors mixed in his mouth, complementing each other and combining in ways he had never thought possible. He lingered at the basin, occasionally gasping for air as he gulped, and the water eased his burning throat.

He stood up and wiped the water off his face with the back of his hand. He felt better, but he was still starving. He looked around, noticing the bar from the other room.

He walked back to the bar room, looking down at his robotic leg as he moved. He hadn't tried to run with his leg yet, though his spin dash had been fine.

Still, he didn't dare run.

He finally arrived at the bar, but only saw a large cabinet stuffed with a variety of glassware sitting behind it. He leaned over, and as he opened the door, he imagined all the food that was surely inside. Peanuts, crackers, tiny packets of mustard...

He opened the door. It was empty.

Throwing his hands behind his head, he said, "What kind of useless bar is this?"

He fell to the ground and stared at the shelves. It was simply unfair. That was the problem; it was just unfair that he was stuck here, that he had almost died, that his friends were gone, that Metal was crazy, that he was…

Sonic looked down the empty hallway.

He was alone.

He stared back at the shelves, and then he noticed it; something plastic had caught his eye. He squinted, then sighed. He would have to move to see it.

Rolling up, he crawled over, and his eyes widened as he saw it. There was his salvation shoved in the corner.

It was a plastic jug of pretzels.

Finally, the world had cut him a break! He grabbed the jug and tore off the lid. Thrusting his hand inside, he crammed a fistful of pretzels into his mouth. He savored the taste, not caring that they were stale and over-salted.
As he shoved his hand into the jar again, his elbow rose up and hit something on the top of the bar. He heard it roll, then winced as it fell on his head. A tip jar, filled to the brim with coins, landed in the pretzel jug, and the coins toppling through the pretzels, crushing them and mixing into dust.

Sonic stared for a moment, rubbing his head. There it was again, the unjustness of the world. For as soon as he had found salvation, it was ripped away, smashed to pieces like so many pretzel bites.

He stared at the jar, then had a realization. He could still eat the pretzels. He would just work around the coins. It was no problem. That was assuming the pretzels were safe to eat in the first place. They probably weren't, but he didn't care.

He leaned against the bar, and shoveled pretzels into his face, staring absently at the wall as he ate. His pain and hunger gradually subsided, and silence soon filled his ears. He could hear it, even over himself eating.

"Stupid Metal...Crazy pile of screws...what does he want, anyway? Everything he does makes no sense..."

Sonic shoveled another handful of pretzels in his mouth. What did Metal want? His actions were so erratic. He caused the rock slide that broke Sonic's leg. He was the one who betrayed Sonic and nearly killed him in the hallway. The water was also his fault, and so was the acid.

He felt the bottom of the jar with his hand. He looked down. It was empty; he had even eaten the pretzel dust that covered the bottom. He frowned, then threw the empty jar at the wall. It ricocheted to the floor and rolled quietly across the room.

Sonic traced the rolling jar with his eyes. Its movement slowed, and the jar came to a halt as it tapped the broken Chaos Drive.

That was the problem. That stupid robot was also the only reason he was still alive. He would never have escaped were it not for Metal. He would have bled to death, and he would have drowned. Even his awful robotic leg, the only part of him that wasn't in pain, was something Metal did to save him. He would have never walked again. Sonic knew that.

He sighed, falling to the floor as he stared at the ceiling. Metal was a walking tin can of contradictions. Metal tried to kill him, yet also tried to save him. What did he even want?

"I bet that stupid robot doesn't even know what he wants. He's freaking crazy, is what he is. Why he didn't just leave me for dead, I'll never understand..."

Sonic stood up. The pretzels were salty and he was thirsty again.

"Why...why didn't he just kill me? He had the chance..."

Sonic remembered it clearly. Metal himself seemed confused by his own actions. Sonic should be dead, three times over at this point, and each time Metal had saved him.

He returned to the sink, took another drink of the delicious water, then caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

Sonic thought Metal hated him. Metal himself had said as much, several times even. What did Metal really think of him? Sonic wasn't sure anymore. He remembered how Metal looked after him when he had nearly drowned. Metal had looked so concerned.

He slapped his forehead, dragged his hands down his face, and rubbed his temples. This was
insane. He was exhausted and not thinking clearly. Metal was an insane robot. As an insane robot, he would be incapable of actually caring about Sonic, or about the Chaos Emerald, or about anything else. Metal probably didn't even really hate him. Metal just said that because he was programmed to. It was that simple.

"Ugh, that's it. I've lost it. I'm insane, he's insane, we're both crazy…"

He shook his head and trudged back to the door.

His earlier outburst was unacceptable. Sonic knew that. Metal was pushy, and Sonic needed to have a firm talk with him about expectations, but storming out of the room wasn't the way to handle it. They did need to work together. Sure, Metal was crazy and unreasonable and impossible to talk to, but maybe he would change if Sonic could only sit him down and explain this to him.

He scooped up the broken Chaos Drive and walked to the door.

As he placed his hand on the doorknob, uncertainty and doubt filled his mind. What was he even going to say when he opened it?

Worse...what if Metal didn't even want to talk to him anymore? His outburst had been an embarrassment, and Metal did slam the door on him.

Sonic shuddered "Don't think...just act. If you stop to think…"

He twisted the doorknob and pushed. The door silently swung, and he stood motionless, watching as light trickled through.

The room that emerged was not the room he remembered.
"Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."

- Pablo Picasso

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._

Metal stared in horror as those words greeted him across the threshold. He saw them as soon as he had ripped the door from its hinges, because not only had Sonic slammed the door on him, his loathsome copy also had locked it. Sonic may have been furious, but Metal knew they couldn't split up. To split up would spell certain doom.

So he had ripped the door away. Not that it had done any good, because it wasn't Sonic he found on the other side. It was those words, those awful, terrible words and that painting. The one that was as simple as it was insulting, for all the canvas contained was an ordinary pipe painted in broad strokes with those words below.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._ French, that was the language, and the translation: _This is not a pipe._

He took a single step backward, still enthralled by the deep pigments and awful words. _This is not a pipe._ It was a painting, not a pipe, because it was a copy—

Metal's voice cracked as he turned away. He didn't have time for this. He needed to find Sonic. Even though Sonic had betrayed him, he couldn't escape without his help.

He still needed Sonic.

And data, he always needed data. Metal shifted his attention to his surrounding. The new room lacked carpet, but in its place, red maple hardwood covered the floors. He tapped it with his foot, and the dull click echoed and faded into the dim corners of a museum. Countless paintings clung to the walls, and their images faded into the darkness like shadows.

And that triangle. He was becoming careless and distracted, but even without Sonic, Metal knew the math would save him. That was why he needed the triangle.

He turned to another canvas. Black and red paint smeared its surface and dripped into impossible and unreal shapes. He brushed the back of his hand against the canvas, and some of its ancient paint smeared on his fingers. The paint was oil, and oil never really dried.

Globs of paint smothered his fingers as he scraped his hand into the image. Now that he had ink, Metal dragged his claws against the floor and smeared a perfectly straight line across the wood. He repeated the process, drawing two more lines, then took a step backward and cleaned his hand on the carpet.

Metal suspected he stood within a non-euclidean geometry, which meant the very fabric of space itself could twist up or cross into itself, and Sonic's sudden disappearance supported that hypothesis.
The triangle would tell him for certain. If space was flat, then it was like drawing the shape on a sheet of paper. The interior angles would sum exactly to 180 degrees.

But, if space was non-euclidean, if it twisted up or through itself, then it was like drawing the triangle on a balloon. The medium of space would wrap the triangle, and the sum of the angles would change.

Kneeling by the corner of the triangle, Metal placed his fingers on each of its legs and measure the angles. His systems were optimized for such geometries, and soon he had found the sum.

The sum was greater than 180 degrees. It was as he suspected, and he would need to be careful. He was an ant running inside a pipe, and he would have no guarantee that space would behave.

With this in mind, he stood up and walked forward. He needed to be careful, but he also needed to find Sonic, and any delay would lower his probability of success.

Creeping down the hallway, he turned to take one last look at the accursed painting. He shuddered and forced his head down, simply staring at the wood grain as he walked.

Countless more paintings hung on the walls, and their depictions gradually grew more deformed and surreal the further he moved. Colors and shapes spun together like entropic whirlpools, descending into order into chaos.

It disturbed him. Why would anyone create such images? Reality was clean, perfect, and predictable, but these images destroyed that clarity. It was only a twisted mind would want an image of anything less than a perfect reproduction.

He stopped and stared into nothing. He looked down at his hands, at his silver claws and yellow coating, and at the blue armor that covered his arms.

These paintings were wrong, for their plain and simple shapes merely copied the most shallow surface of reality. He ran his fingers over the copper panel on his chest. It was smooth and bare, lacking any fur or skin.

No, he shouldn't waste cycles processing this. Sonic. He needed Sonic. If he could only find Sonic —

Static shattered the silence, and Nega's screeching voice poured through his audio sensors. "Oh ho ho, admiring my collection of fine art, are we?"

Metal clenched his fists and continued forward with his head down. This was a distraction, and he needed to focus on his mission.

On his primary objective.

"Tell me, my metal chum, I'd like to know: what is your opinion on art?"

Metal marched forward, knowing better than to respond, though the question stuck out like the missing piece of a puzzle in his mind.

Art, it was wrong. It copied reality into a falsehood, and it served no purpose.

The hallway had ended so Metal looked up. There were those words again, that paining.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._
He was back where he started. His analysis of the geometry hadn't been enough, and he had gone in a circle.

Metal jumped around, preparing to run back the way he came, but the hallway was gone. It had simply vanished into a dripping, whitewashed wall.

That painting, he had to get away from that painting. There was a door next to it, and Metal took it, pressing forward with his head down.

Just as before, paintings hung all around, and he had to force himself to look at them. He needed data, and he needed to know the geometry. This was the only way.

He hated the paintings. They were disturbing, depicting real objects melting into puddles of color and chaos. One featured pocket watches, enlarged to the size of wall clocks, literally melting over objects in a desert.

Why would anyone create such images? They were wrong, a mockery of reality, warped depictions of what should be. They could serve no purpose—

"Ah, I see. Art has no purpose, does it?" Nega's voice cracked all around him.

"So then tell me, my sentient stapler. Just what is your purpose?"

The hall ended, and there it was again. It had followed him.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

"My purpose...is obvious. I was built to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog."

He quickened his pace as he jogged down the one-way hall. His confusion had only grown. The paintings were different again. One featured numerous sets of monochrome stairs that twisted upward and folded in on themselves, deforming into an impossible maze.

"But, my precocious pencil sharpener, we both know the truth. We both know the reality."

He gaped at the painting of the stairs. Stairs were meant to connect space, but these did not. They never could. They would never serve their purpose because their purpose was impossible.

"Your mission, it's impossible, isn't it?"

His mission, it was true. Success was a mathematical impossibility...but still, he had other orders—

A brilliant flash illuminated the hallway, and Metal saw it. There, further ahead stood the Chaos Emerald, and it cast a green kaleidoscope on the walls.

The green Emerald! It was the same as he had found in the forest.

Metal ran toward it, and his steps echoed across the gallery. He needed the Chaos Emerald. No, he required the Chaos Emerald. He absolutely had to have the Chaos Emerald.

It was an order, and he was programmed to follow orders.

He ran, but the hallway stretched forward. The more he moved, the more space itself expanded, and it stretched the floor, walls, and paintings like taffy.

He kept running, he had to keep running even if he was not moving, and even if the Emerald only
grew further with each step.

"But, why? Do you really need this Emerald? What's the point? You remember what that old buffoon did to you! You can't follow his orders!"

Metal slowed his pace. It was true; he couldn't follow Eggman's orders, because he wasn't following orders if he followed orders. Thus, he didn't really need the Emerald. It was the only logically consistent solution.

But if he didn't need the Emerald—

"So you must tell me, my tepid trash can…"

The Emerald vanished, and space snapped backward. Metal tumbled backward, his armor scratching the seamless floor. He leaped up and ran. He needed to escape. He needed to get out of here.

He needed Sonic. He needed to find Sonic.

Digging his heels into the hardwood, Metal screeched to a halt before an enormous wall.

There it was again. Those words and that painting…

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._

"...if you can't follow orders, and you don't need this Emerald, and you can't kill Sonic the Hedgehog…"

The room was different this time. In front of the painting it stood, placed inside a glass display. It was a genuine pipe, carved delicately from wood, and the painting was a perfect replica of it.

"...then, what is your purpose? Why do you even exist? What's the point of you?"

Those words, those words haunted him. The painting of the pipe, the real pipe in front of it, the mathematical impossibility of his mission…

And mathematics never lied.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe. This is not a pipe._

He couldn't look away. The painting was not a pipe. It was a picture of a pipe. The picture was not the pipe. It was…It was...

It was a copy. A fake.

Metal froze, and Sonic's words ran through his mind, like bits on the tape of an ancient mainframe.

_How can you be superior to me? You've lost every time we've fought and every time we've raced! You're nothing but a copy of me, Metal!_

He clenched his fists. A picture of a pipe was not a pipe. A copy of something was not the original.

He turned around, unable to look at the picture any longer. He had to get out of here. He had to find Sonic. He had to—

He...had to what? Escape? Find Sonic? Why? What was the point? Even if he could escape, he
could never kill Sonic. He could never do the only thing he existed to do.

His head jerked up. The hall was gone, and in its stead, a large mirror spread across the wall. It reflected the whole room, the walls, the floor, and the real pipe.

But, in the center, where he should have seen his own reflection, there was nothing.

He was missing.

"Tell me, my perennial paperweight pal, what do you see in that mirror?"

Frantically, he cycled through his databases and models. There was a solution. There was an explanation. There always was.

"Photons strike the material behind the mirror and reflect—"

"Not how it works, you silly doorstop! No one cares about that. What do you see in the mirror, hmm? What does it mean?"

Metal stared the mirror, where his reflection should be.

There was no explanation.

Nega clicked his teeth over the radio. "Oh my, you certainly are a dense one, aren't you? What is the reflection of a reflection? The picture of a picture?"

"The reflection...of a reflection." Metal's voice broke into unintelligible static. He couldn't tear his optics away from the gap in the mirror.

"The copy...of a copy."

"Oh ho! Now we're making progress. What worth is a copy?"

Metal said nothing. He could say nothing.

"Let me ask again: What is reflected in that mirror?"

"A mirror is...a reflection of reality," Metal said, taking a single step backward. "And this shows..."

He turned back to see the painting behind him.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._

Then he noticed it: that accursed picture was also missing from the mirror.

"...the reflection of a copy."

"Oh ho ho! Very astute, my precocious mechanical pencil. Very astute indeed."

Metal stood upright and clenched his fists.

"No! You're wrong. If I kill Sonic...If he's gone...I won't be a copy! A reflection without its source is the original. It's only a copy by comparison. If there's nothing to compare it to, it's no longer a copy."

The sound of tinny laughter spilled across the gallery. Metal faced the mirror. He couldn't stand the
sight of the empty room, so he turned back to the painting.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._

It was too much. He turned again, and there it was: the real pipe.

The high-pitched, sharp laughter continued.

"Stop it! Stop! STOP!" Metal's voice broke into static.

The pipe and the painting, only one was allowed to exist. He heaved into the podium, and the glass casing shattered into countless shards as it hit the floor.

The pipe tumbled out. It skidded across the floor until it tapped his feet.

_This is not a pipe._

Metal's voice broke into a flat tone. He smashed the pipe beneath his heel and twisted his foot, crushing it to dust.

If there was no pipe, and no comparison, the painting would be real.

"You're wrong! WRONG! I am not a copy!"

He kicked the base of the pedestal, then dropped to his knees and tore away chunks with his fists.

"I AM THE REAL SONIC!"

He leaped up and lifted his hand to strike.

Then he saw the painting. The pile of dust that was the former pipe stood in front of it.

_Ceci n'est pas une pipe._

The painting...It still wasn't real. The pipe was gone, but the painting…

He fell to his knee, and the crushed pipe laid in splinters before him.

It couldn't be real. It would never be real. He could destroy the pipe, but he could never make the painting real.

He picked up the splinters and opened his palms, watching as the sawdust trickled from his hands.

He couldn't argue with the math. He couldn't argue with reality.

"I'm not...I'll never be...I'll always be..."

Nega's hollow laughter cut out, and silence engulfed the room. He buried his face in his hands.

"I'm...I'm nothing more...than a copy."

Chapter End Notes

The painting with the pipe featured in this chapter is a real painting. It's The Treachery
of Images by René Magritte. You can look it up on Wikipedia if you would like to see what it looks like.
Extensionality

"When I see a bird that walks like a duck and swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck."

- James Whitcomb Riley

The floor was checkerboard, as was the ceiling and fishbowl walls that curved above him. Beneath his feet sprawled the faded, monochrome squares of some bygone era, but it wasn't just that the tile was black and white. It was monochrome as a concept, as an idea, and it stretched endlessly in all directions.

Sonic lifted his hand over his eyes. The brightness was uncanny.

"Hello? Metal?"

His voice diffused through the void and spread out into a silent muffle. The empty room simply could not reflect the sound.

Sonic chewed his lip. An endless, black and white void was probably trouble, and it was even less likely Metal would be here. Metal was smart, and he was cautious. Sure, Metal had his moments of poor judgment, as did everyone from time to time, but Sonic knew him better than that. Metal would never wander into trouble.

The solution, therefore, was simple. Sonic would simply go back the other way. He clutched the doorknob in his hand, and the entire door frame swayed. He stepped back, and the door wobbled further. It leaned, closer and closer to the ground, then slipped away from the doorknob and collapsed to the floor.

Sonic sprang backward to the bathroom, then slammed his heels. The bathroom was gone. It had simply vanished behind him, and the checkered eternity infested every single direction. He was alone in this monochrome void with nothing but the collapsed door and the knob in his hand.

Sweat ran between his palm and the useless doorknob. He held it up, and the bright light reflected into his eyes. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Metal was supposed to be on the other side of this door, and he would be waiting for him with a lecture. Sonic would give him some sort of witty retort, then they would be on their way, but now…

Sonic dropped the doorknob. There was no one.

He had no choice. He crept into the checkered dome and winced the uneven cadence of his feet despite the muffle. One step was light, but the other clanged against the tile like a dropped kitchen pot.

He clenched his fists. He had to find Metal.

The sound of his feet was incessant, and he stopped. His eyes wandered up to the horizon. The checkered world rolled above him. No matter how far he walked, the checkerboard moved with him, crawling up into the horizon like a conveyor belt.

He accelerated, and soon, he was jogging. His robotic leg responded perfectly to his every movement, and he ran, faster and faster until the air exploded as the sound barrier shattered.
Sonic ran. He ran and ran until he heard it. The floor creaked.

He slammed his heels, and heat rubbed into the sole of his foot. He hopped to a halt, bouncing on his robotic leg as his organic one cooled.

"Metal? That you?" Sonic said.

Nothing greeted him but his own breath.

A blur of color caught the back of his vision. He squinted and, in the distance, he saw it: a lone, blue figure standing in front of a familiar sea of perfect blue and red orbs.

Sonic leaped forward, but the figure turned and vanished into the orbs.

He ran. "Metal! Come here and just listen to me!"

Sonic sprinted, and soon he arrived at the spheres. They were perfectly round, and while most were red, a single line of blue stretched out in front of him.

He stared at the orbs and the Chaos drive in his hand. Metal had known something was wrong. He had been investigating the room, but Sonic had dismissed his concerns.

But, what if Metal was right? What if there was something wrong with the space? Worse...

What if Sonic had been wrong?

The world lurched beneath his feet, and Sonic staggered into the blue spheres. He winced, bracing himself for a collision, but he stepped straight through the sphere. The checkerboard ran forward like a treadmill, and Sonic had no choice but to walk through the spheres, each turning red as he moved through it.

The endless checkered tile, the moving floor, the blue and red spheres...He knew what this was, for he had navigated through similar puzzles many times. This was a special stage, and there were two ways to escape. One way was to collect all the blue spheres, though there could be any number of them to find. The other route would be shorter.

Sonic's hand hovered above the red sphere. All it would take was a single touch.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Nega's voice emanated from all around him. "Unless, of course, you want to reappear just above my lovely vat of acid."

"For the love of—" Sonic clenched his fists. "Nega, what do you even want?"

He stepped through an orb, then another, and when no one responded, he added, "Where is Metal?"

Hollow laughter filled the void, tinny and unnatural. "Why don't you ask yourself? You were the one who ran away from him, after all. Isn't this what you wanted?"

This...this was not what he wanted. He only wanted a moment alone and a drink. He hadn't meant to abandon Metal.

The blue line cut right, and Sonic hopped over a red orb as he turned.

"You didn't answer my question," Sonic said.

"Oh, don't be like that! Have some fun! I'll answer your question if you can answer mine."
The blue orbs spread out like flecks of pepper, and he took to the edge, turning each orb blue as he worked toward the center.

"Tell me, my dear friend, those orbs. The ones that were blue, and now they're red. Are they the same orbs as before? Or now that they're red, are they different entirely?"

"Huh? What kind of stupid question is that?"

"Bzzt! Wrong answer! Play the game, or you'll pay the price!"

The world accelerated, and Sonic had to jog as the spheres spread further.

Were the orbs the same? They were the same shape and stayed in the same place. They couldn't be that different. Nevertheless, they weren't exactly the same as they were before. Part of the original, its color, had been irrevocably altered.

He shook his head. He couldn't dwell on this; Nega was only trying to confuse him.

"I don't know?"

The world spun faster, and Sonic had to run. More and more red orbs spread in front of him. He leaped over a row of them, his foot swiping the air just above the red as he landed in the blue.

"Tsk, tsk. I thought you liked to play games, Sonic. It seems to me you've changed!"

He hadn't changed. That was a lie. He was the same as he always had been. How could he have changed?

Nega remained silent as the orbs converged back to a line. Sonic followed it forward, for he had no choice; the red orbs surrounded all other sides. The blue orbs continued perfectly straight for an eternity, and he watched as each turned red behind him.

Sonic had thought he had loved adventure, but he hadn't found any of this fun, or enjoyable, or gamelike. But, throughout his whole life, no matter how bad things got, he found a way through. There was always some joke, some retort he could make.

The orbs spanned forward. Sonic struggled to imagine a joke, a pun, anything.

His mind was blank.

"You don't know? It seems you can't even bother to answer a simple question, not even if it would save Metal! Some hero you are!"

"Wait...save Metal? Where is he? What have you done to him?" Sonic gazed at the horizon, only to barely hurtle over a stray red in the line of blue orbs.

"Oh, nothing! Absolutely nothing! It's not what I've done to him, it's what you've done to him!"

The blue line scattered like glitter in an expanse of red. It was all Sonic could do but jump and run.

"Look, Sonic my dear. It's simple, oh so simple. Answer my question, and you can save your little paperweight pal. These orbs? Yes or no?"

"...Yes?" Sonic did not care about the question. He was focused on two things: the orbs and finding Metal.
"Oh, is that your final answer? It seems so insincere. I thought we were friends, Sonic. Is this how you treat your friends? No wonder Metal is avoiding you."

Sonic paused. Metal was avoiding him? Hadn't Nega just said Metal needed to be saved? Metal wouldn't be avoiding him.

Unless Metal really was avoiding him. Their previous encounter flashed through his mind. Metal had slammed the door on him, and before that, their argument. Sonic called Metal a fake, and those words had crushed Metal. He remembered the look on Metal's face, how he had looked devastated despite the fact he had only an optical screen. Sonic had been angry, but he had also been deliberate. Sonic knew that insult was the fastest way to win the argument, and Sonic never lost.

He was supposed to be a hero, but heroes never put people down. What kind of hero was he to use Metal's greatest source of pain to win a petty disagreement? He hadn't acted like a hero; he had acted like a selfish brat.

"Or is it you avoiding him? Avoiding yourself? You two are not so different."

The door. Sonic had thought Metal had slammed it, but the more he thought about it, the more it didn't make sense. Metal had called out to him when the door shut, and Sonic recalled how that same door had recently collapsed. What if Nega had closed the door, and Sonic had blamed Metal? He had accused Metal of poor communication, but if that were true, he was just as bad.

He had thought Metal crazy. But he was being hypocritical. Sure, Metal could do better, but so could Sonic. Metal was imperfect, but so was Sonic. He had expected Metal to communicate, but he had made no effort himself.

Sonic looked back at the orbs. Were they the same orbs? They were in the same place with the same shape, and the color change was superficial.

But, if he touched the red orbs, the game would be over. While the blue orbs moved him forward, and the red orbs would end everything. That was the difference; their function had changed.

He looked down at his leg, at the obvious parallel Nega was trying to draw. What had he done? What had he become?

"Come on, Sonic! Why are you so slow?"

The world accelerated again, and Sonic was forced to sprint. Sweat ran down his quills, and the blinding light tore at his vision. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and a white orb with a red star emerged in front of him. Sonic struck it, and it reversed the direction of the world.

He panted. Behind him was a solid sea of red, and it was all he could do but frantically leap over each orb. There was another white orb in the distance, and as soon as Sonic struck it, the world turned the other way. He hurtled over each red orb, desperately making his way back to the blue.

Red and blue. There was a single difference. Even though his leg had changed, it still moved him across the floor. It was the same shape, the same color, and in the same place. His leg did what it was used to and not a thing more. The orbs did not.

He leaped back into a square of blue orbs, and though he felt exhaustion overwhelm him, he moved forward with deliberate precision. Here he was, feeling bad for himself. He was merely whining, so self-absorbed that he had time, no, the audacity to worry about if his leg was really his leg or if he was really himself.
So what if he had changed? Sure, maybe he couldn't change what had happened to his leg, but he could change how he acted and who he was. He alone controlled himself and his behavior.

This shouldn't be about him. It should be about the person he wronged. It should be about Metal.

"So, my perilous pincushion, give me your answer. The real answer."

The path split in front of him. To one side, a sea of red. The other, a sea of blue.

Though he was out of breath, Sonic spoke calmly. "...No."

"No? You're saying this isn't the same sphere? Tell me, my friend, why?"

Sonic looked at his leg, and his reflected looked back at him. In this distorted light, he looked just like Metal.

He was just like Metal. Everything he accused Metal of, being crazy or being a failure, was also true of himself. He had been no better.

Sonic clenched his fists and looked down. "I'm not talking about the orbs."

"Oh ho! Quite the twist, eh? Tell me, my dear, what are you talking about?"

Two paths diverged ahead of him. He couldn't change the past, but he could change the future.

"There is a problem with your game."

"Ooh, sassy! I love it, love it! What is it, hmm? Confused? Experiencing an existential crisis?"

The blue would never end. He could spend hours collecting these orbs, and he would get nowhere. He could spend hours analyzing Nega's question, but he would get nowhere. In the end, this question was meaningless.

"Your game is boring. Do you know why?"

Sonic looked at the Chaos drive in his hand, then turned the corner.

"Because the only way to win this game is to not play."

He stepped into a red sphere.
Using Chaos Control required knowing where one had been and where one was going. It also helped to have a Chaos Emerald. Unfortunately for Sonic, he had neither, but he did know what he wanted, and that made the rest secondary.

He drifted through the fabric of spacetime itself, and he had done this before. It happened any time a special stage collapsed, and in his palm, he squeezed his return ticked: the halved Chaos drive.

He focused on the drive. The energy from the special stage and the energy emanating from the drive had distinctly different wavelengths, and these energies were stranger than any form of Chaos energy Sonic had ever seen. This would be tricky.

Nevertheless, Emerald or no Emerald, directions or no directions, Sonic would make it work. He always made it work.

He had to, not for his sake but for Metal's sake.

Though the wavelengths differed, Sonic squeezed energy from space into the drive. It streamed through his body and into his hand, and he forced it into the drive despite the blistering heat welling in his palm. To use Chaos Control, he had to force the energies to a focal point, and the Chaos drive was all he had.

Sonic saw his opportunity: the waves were beginning to overlap. He routed all the energy through his body into a single point in space. It burst through the fabric of spacetime itself. Reality shattered, and he fell.

He landed on his feet. The dull thud of his leg against the hardwood was the sweetest sound Sonic had ever heard.

He was back.

Or at least he was close. Remembering the drive burning in his palm, Sonic hurled it to the floor and quickly shook his hand in the air.

He stood some type of art museum, although the lighting was terrible if he had hoped to actually view the artwork. It was dim, unnaturally so, and the darkness seemed to mute the corners of the room from existence.

Sonic rubbed his temples as his headache pounded from inside his skull. He needed to rest, and above all, he needed to sleep. He had completely lost track of time here, but he was sure it had been countless hours, maybe even days, since he had last slept, and even he had his limits.

But he couldn't rest yet. He had to save Metal first. It was his duty as a hero.

He clutched his head as he stumbled into the hall, and he bumped into something.
The enormous mirror stretched before him, and he gaped at what he saw. His reflection stared back at him, identical in every way, including his newly minted robotic leg. He closed his eyes as he rubbed his forehead.

He looked at the mirror again. The cybernetic pieces of his reflection had spread like cancer, and his copy's leg was now robotic above the knee. Sonic gulped and tore his vision to his own leg.

It was only robotic below the knee, just as he remembered. He looked back at the mirror, watching as the corruption consumed the flesh and spit out iron.

He pressed his palm against the mirror, then his forehead. His reflection copied the gesture as the wave of metal consumed its face. He sighed and looked away.

This was his fault. He had abandoned Metal, and it was his responsibility to find him. Metal could be in all sorts of trouble, and Sonic did not have the time to wallow in existential self-pity.

If he was a hero, it was time he started acting like one. Metal was out there, and he was going to find him.

He paced around the room, though he stopped as his breath ran thin. There was not even a single door, but this didn't surprise him; he had come to accept nothing here would ever make sense.

This was a puzzle, and like all puzzles, there had to be some solution. Nega loved to play games, so some trick had to be the answer. But Sonic knew Metal was close. He had used the Chaos drive to get here, and it had kept them together before, so Metal just had to be close.

But, where? The room contained nothing but the paintings, the hardwood, and the beige wallpaper, plus the mirror that reflected everything perfectly.

Everything except himself.

Sonic plopped to the ground and ran his fingers between his quills. He hated puzzles. They were slow, tedious, and pointless. It was why he had friends; they were supposed to solve the puzzles.

If only Metal were here. Metal could solve any puzzle in the blink of an eye. Metal was smart because he could see the patterns where Sonic only saw the noise.

He sprawled out on the ground and traced the details of the ceiling with his eyes. The more he tried to focus, the more the darkness and the freezing cold crawled further into the edges of his vision.

He leaped up and sprinted to the wall. He couldn't think, nor could he stop. That was the only way out.

Before him stood a painting, and its imagery was so bizarre he failed to comprehend any meaning. He reached around it. It was heavy but poorly mounted, and Sonic heaved it to the ground without much effort.

Staring at the space behind, he saw nothing. Nothing but the wall.

He dashed to the next painting, throwing it to the ground, and ran again. Each painting carelessly landed in a pile, but he couldn't stop, not until he threw each and every painting from their frames.

As the last painting fell, he stood with nothing but the sounds of his pounding heart and breathless pant.
Nothing had happened, no hints, no change, not anything. Paintings now scattered across the floor, and he was still as confused as ever. He groaned, threw his hands over his head, and leaned his forehead against the wall.

The wall gave way. He looked up, shocked to see a single painting was still in front of him. The background was beige, now his least favorite color, and all it depicted was a plain pipe and some unintelligible language.

Sonic tore it from the wall, and in the gap behind, yet another mirror cast the reflection of the room. This image was even more distorted than the last, because not only did the paintings still hang from its walls, his reflection was now entirely corrupted by cybernetics. Further, instead of coping is movement, his reflection merely laid motionless on the floor.

He slammed his forehead against the mirror, and immediately regretted the pain welling in his head. He hated this. The mirrors, the paintings, none of it made any sense.

As the pain receded, he stared at the mirror inches from his eyes. He had thought that was his reflection in the glass, but the more he looked at it, the more it looked just like Metal Sonic, slouching against the wall and half leaning over with his arms limp at his side.

The realization crawled into his mind.

"Metal! I've been looking everywhere for you," Sonic said as he squeezed his face into the glass.

Sonic turned around and high-fived himself in the other the mirror. Metal was unharmed, and once they were reunited, he could finally rest.

His gaze shifted back to Metal, and he froze. Metal was on the other side of the glass, but he hadn't moved and his optical screen lacked its familiar red glow.

Sonic pounded glass. "Metal? You there?"

Metal laid still. Sonic's arms fell to his side, and he exhaled a single breath. He had been wrong. It was just the mirror. He had fallen for Nega's trick, and Metal was still gone.

As Sonic turned away, Metal's voice cracked, and it was so low he barely heard it. "So you're leaving again? Am I not even worth the time it would take to mock me anymore?"

Sonic's blood ran cold. Slowly, he turned back.

"Metal? Is that really you? Are you okay?"

Metal optics flickered to life. "Am I okay? What, now you suddenly care? Or do you still think I'm incapable of feeling?"

Sonic opened his mouth, but no words came out. He had believed as much, and he had treated Metal like an object because of it. A hero would never act that way, and yet Sonic was guilty of treating Metal like a mindless clone.

"I'm…" The words caught in his throat. He had no idea what to say, but he had to say something. "I'm sorry about what I said."

Sonic remembered what he said. He had called Metal a fake, a copy, and he had done so deliberately.
"I'm sorry, really sorry, that I called you a copy," Sonic choked. He had never admitted fault before, in part because he had never been at fault before, but he was a hero with a duty to Metal. "I only said that to win the argument. I was wrong, and I'm really sorry."

Metal said nothing. He merely sat motionlessly and stared at his hands.

Sonic bit his lip. This was his fault, but he was going to fix. He now understood Metal was his equal. Not his copy, not a mindless robot, but a sentient and intelligent being capable of feeling joy and pain just like himself.

"It was, uh, suboptimal on my part," Sonic said. He tried and utterly failed to smile.

Metal looked away. "You only spoke the truth. Never apologize for the truth."

"No, I was wrong. I'm sorry, really sorry I said that. It's just—I was in so much pain, and I wasn't thinking clearly."

Metal buried his face in his hands. "But you weren't wrong. You are the real Sonic, and I am nothing. There is no reason for me to even exist."

"No—! I'm sorry Metal, really I am, I didn't mean any of it!"

There was no response. Sonic cursed and hit the pane with his fist. The glass vibrated beneath his forehead.

"Come on, let's get out of here. I promise it'll be better once we're out of here!"

"Why bother? Free or trapped, none of it matters." Metal's voice died to a whisper. "I can't kill you. I can't do it. It is the only reason I exist, and I can't do even that. I'm worse nothing."

"Don't say that! It does matter!"

Metal gazed at the painting of the pipe that stood above him and the splinters between his fingers.

"I'm not the real Sonic. Even if I could kill you, I still wouldn't be. Destroying the pipe didn't make the painting real."

Sonic clenched his fists. It was his own words that did this to Metal, and he would use those same words to make things right.

"You're right, that picture isn't real. It's not a pipe. But—"

Metal's gaze wandered to him, and Sonic nodded. He knew how to fix this.

"You're right; the painting isn't a pipe. It's a work of art! In fact, this painting is better than the original. I bet more people know about this painting than know the pipe. This painting is famous in a way the original pipe never could be!"

When Metal said nothing, Sonic added, "Plus, if you think about it, the pipe and the painting—neither is truly the original or the copy. They're simply two different things that happen to look alike."

Metal stared into his eyes, then sharply turned away as he said, "But the pipe has a purpose. Someone created it for a reason, and the pipe fulfills its role. I was created to kill you, and I can't. It's impossible."
Metal collapsed again, and his optics faded. "Just like this canvas, I'll never actually do what I was created to do. There is no reason for me to exist."

Sonic clenched his fist. He could fix this but he needed to choose his words with care. "So, do you think I have a purpose?"

"Yes. You're a hero. That's your purpose."

"And who gave me that purpose?"

Metal froze, and his eyes flickered. "Your purpose is to be the hero, and mine is to neutralize you. But while you can be a hero, I can never kill you."

"You didn't answer my question. Where did my purpose come from?"

When Metal said nothing, Sonic continued, "I chose my purpose. No one gave it to me. All of us, including you, come into this world without purpose. It's up to each of us to give ourselves purpose. You can't choose how you were created, but you can choose your future."

Metal opened his palm and watched the dust fall to the ground.

"I don't have a choice. I am nothing more than my programming. Just as your DNA controls you, the set of instructions in my processors control me. I can't choose my purpose any more than you could choose to stop breathing."

"You think neither of us have a choice. I'm controlled by my nature, and you're nothing more than my copy."

Metal nodded.

"But, what if choice is our nature? I chose to insult you, and I chose to come back and apologize. And before, you chose to help me, more than once, so we could both escape. Both of us made choices that brought us to this moment."

Sonic paused, but Metal looked unconvinced, so he continued, "Okay, let's do it your way. You think you're a copy of me, right?"

Metal nodded.

"And you agree my purpose is to be a hero?"

Metal nodded again.

"But no one gave me that purpose. I chose it. So if you are a copy of me, and I chose my own purpose in life, that means..."

Sonic trailed off and waited. After a pause, Metal said, "If I'm a copy of you, then I have the same features as you. And if you can choose your own purpose, then by modus ponens, I can too."

The flickering of Metal's optics intensified. "If I am a copy of you, I can choose my own purpose. But choosing my own purpose would make me not a copy. But if I'm not a copy, I cannot choose. If I cannot choose, then I am a copy—"

Sonic cut him off. "Your life is what you make it, Metal. It is for all of us, and its meaning is something we all struggle with. Sometimes, there are no clear answers, and you feel like only the struggle exists."
Sonic kicked the wall with his robotic leg and looked back to Metal.

"It's the struggle for meaning that makes us alive. All of us, whether we're made of metal, or flesh, or...both."

After a long pause, Metal stood up. Dust and dents covered his armor, and his optics barely glowed. Sonic realized he wasn't the only one who needed to rest.

"I appreciate the effort, even though I'm not sure I agree with your reasoning," Metal said.

"But there is still a critical difference. Your escape matters. You would be missed. But me? No one cares about me, and even Eggman would only regret the loss of computer parts."

The sweat in Sonic's quills turned cold. "That's not true. I—"

A flicker of uncertainty flashed through his mind, but he brushed it away. He would make this right.

"I would miss you."

Metal's optics brightened. "You would?"

"Of course I would! Look, I know we've not always been on the best of terms. But, I want you to know I respect you, Metal. I've always respected you.

"And...and...I would miss you if you were gone. You're fast, faster than anyone else I've ever race. No one else even comes close to keeping up with me."

Sonic scratched behind his quills and looked aside. "So you better get out of here, because I'm counting on you! You and me, we're going to compete in the race of the century once we're free!"

Metal's gaze was intense, and he stared directly into Sonic's eyes. "Do...do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do! There's no one else I'd rather race. You want to show the world you're better than me? Well then, you'd better get out of here!"

Metal took a step forward. "Maybe you're right. Or maybe you're not. I don't know anymore. But, I do know one thing."

He lifted his hand to the glass. He spread his fingers out, and Sonic copied the gesture until their fingers aligned.

"I'll never derive the truth if I stay here," Metal said. "So, you had better prepare yourself, because I will beat you in that race."

Sonic grinned. "You're on, Mets! But first, let's make a break for it!"

Sonic stepped back and spun into the air. He smashed to the mirror. It refused to give, and he ricocheted back. He fell to the ground and rubbed his head, frowning at the measly single chip in the glass.

"You're not going to break it that way. This glass is designed to spread the impact across its molecular lattice. You need to focus the impact on a single point. Like this—"

Metal hit the glass with his shoulder and leaned forward.
"Spin dash again. The impact should center on a single point."

Sonic leaped up and crashed into the glass. Though he still fell backward, this time the glass fractured into a web of cracks. Sonic went to jump again, but Metal stopped him.

"No, if the glass shatters, it will cut you. I'll come over there."

Metal stepped back, then ran forward and jumped. The glass shattered, and Metal tumbled to the floor. He skidded across the hardwood on his forehead and came to a rest as he bumped Sonic's shoe.

Sonic knelt down and offered his hand to Metal. Metal looked at his own hand and hesitated. Slowly, he placed his palm in Sonic's hand, and Sonic lifted him to his feet.

"I'm glad you're okay, Mets. I really was worried about you," Sonic said as he tried to release his hand from Metal's grasp. He had let go, but Metal was still clutching his fingers.

"You care. You actually care. You...You're the only—" Metal dropped Sonic's hand. He threw his arms behind Sonic's back and pulled him forward, locking his chin into Sonic's shoulder. Sonic, caught completely off guard, could do nothing but stand with his arms limp.

He had done it. He was a hero, and he had made it right, so now he deserved a break. The light chipped away from his vision, and the darkness leaked through the edges of his consciousness. He was so tired, and the simple act of standing was a colossal chore. He leaned over, shifting his weight and his exhaustion onto Metal by throwing his hands over Metal's back. The heat from Metal's engine flooded over his skin, and Sonic suddenly remembered just how cold he was. His muscles gave up entirely. And his eyelids, they were so heavy. It couldn't hurt to let them fall, just for a moment.

Metal's voice wavered as he said, "You're the only person who ever actually cared about me."

As Metal let go, Sonic's muscles still refused. He wobbled, and Metal had to grab his arm before he nearly tripped.

"Sonic, are you okay? You look exhausted. When was the last time you slept? Not just knocked unconscious, but actually slept?"

The room was spinning, and so was his head. He felt light, so light, like he would float away into the gaps of his vision.

He stared blankly at the darkness. "I...I don't know."

The cold crept back over his skin, and his headache pounding inside his skull. His eyelids were so heavy, and his legs were gelatin. And the floor, it looked so comfortable.

His vision gave up, and he fell forward. He would have finally reunited with the floor had something not caught him. The world was cold, and the only thing he felt was Metal's fingers pressing against the vein on his neck.

"Your pulse! You're still suffering from shock! Were you running? In your condition, extreme cardiovascular activity can be fatal!"

Metal's voice was distant, and Sonic tried to nod, although he may have just been falling again. He wasn't sure which it was, but he was sure that Metal must be carrying him because that wonderful warmth was finally flowing back into his skin.
Chapter End Notes

Illustration for this chapter: http://fav.me/dahe51u
The Halting Problem

"For any formal effectively generated system $T$, if $T$ includes a statement of its own consistency then $T$ is inconsistent."

- Kurt Gödel

Metal could compute some things, but he couldn't compute everything, and the geometry of this space was still not well-defined. He tried to stop, to analyze, but his computations spiraled out of feasibility. All the while, his fingers pressed against the carotid artery in Sonic's neck, and he carefully recorded each faint heartbeat.

Data or no data, he had to act. And yet, how could he act without analysis? How could he know which action was optimal without the help of his models? But it was much worse than that, for how could he know anything at all without deriving the mathematics?

Metal limited the scope of his analysis to only the recent data. Sonic still suffered from shock, and while he could provide some medical care, he needed supplies. The art gallery was worse than useless, but there was that lounge they entered from, the one with the bathrooms.

It wasn't optimal, but it was enough.

He kept Sonic's legs elevated as he retraced his steps. Sonic's mechanical leg provided immense benefit. If he lost too much blood, his organs would choke from lack of oxygen. But, Sonic's leg was now mechanical. It had no need for blood, which left more oxygen for his critical organs.

His haphazard heuristic was enough, and Metal was relieved to see the lounge across the corner, although he still had no way of knowing if it had been his actions or merely chance that brought them here. This uncertainty was a problem. Mathematics were either true or false, with nothing in between. Without absolute certainty, there was no consistency.

Blood oozed from the damp paper on Sonic's back. The makeshift bandage Metal had applied in the magnet room was paper, and the water from Nega's earlier trap had destroyed what little structural integrity it had.

As Metal creaked the bathroom door open, the bathroom emerged before him, empty and pristine, and to his left stood the rest of the lounge. An unused, though artificially worn, sofa stood against the wall. Metal crept over to it, and he laid Sonic on his side with his legs elevated over the cushions.

A mahogany bar stood before him with an empty ice bucket stowed on its counter. Taking the bucket, Metal leapt to the sink. He slammed the faucet, and as the bucket filled, he processed the rest of the room. A large rack of bleached white towels crowded the corner. He heaped the towels in his arms and balanced the bucket in his hand. Carefully, he returned to the couch and knelt down by Sonic's side.

Most of the paper bandage had sloughed off, so Metal whisked it to the floor and examined Sonic's wound. Although the bleeding was not severe, it still oozed across his fur. Until the wound healed, it was open to infection, and an infection could be deadly, especially without proper medical treatment. It was vital to keep the wound clean.

Metal looked down at his hands. Filth filled the crevices between his fingers, scraps of tree sap still
smeared the copper panel, and oil paint coated his palms. Metal took another glance at Sonic, stood up, and wandered back to the sink. He lathered soap over his hands and scrubbed every millimeter of his fingers and arms. Dirt and chemicals filled the basin, and as Metal flicked his hands dry, he watched the dirt spiral with the yellow water as it disappeared down the drain.

The dirt was gone, never to be seen again.

Metal returned to Sonic. Though most of the paper was gone, the power cable still wrapped Sonic's chest. Sonic laid on half the cable, so Metal had to carefully unwind it from his body and scrape any leftover paper to the floor. He took the cable to the sink, washed it, and sat by Sonic's side.

He should have washed the cable and his hands at the same time, but he hadn't thought that far ahead. Still, his hands were clean, the cable was clean, and the towels were sterile. This was the best he could manage.

He dipped a towel in the water and brought it to Sonic's back. He was careful to wipe the blood and grime away from the wound, keeping everything as clean as was possible.

As he dabbed closer to the wound, Sonic stirred.

"Cold...it's...I'm so...cold," Sonic murmured. He tried to roll over, but Metal placed his hand over Sonic's side.

"Don't move. I need to redress your wound."

Sonic said nothing and turned back. As Metal worked closer to the injury, Sonic's shivering intensified.

"I know it's cold. I'm sorry," Metal said. "But the cold is good. It means your nerves are undamaged."

Metal continued to wipe away the blood and grime. The wound was deep, and an injury this severe normally required suturing to sew it together. However, as Metal inched his head closer, he saw dozens of tiny, silver strands running across the gap in Sonic's back. He hadn't expected this reaction to occur so quickly, but Sonic's recent physical excursion must have boosted his metabolism.

"It appears to be uninfected, and it's healing. You are fortunate it isn't worse."

"Yeah...fortunate," Sonic said. His voice was distant, but Metal wanted to keep him conscious if at all possible.

Metal tossed the wet towel over his shoulder, and it splattered onto the ground. He picked a fresh one from the pile.

"Can you sit up? This will be easier if you are sitting."

Sonic shudder and weakly propped up on his elbow. When he fail to move further, Metal grabbed under his arms. He gingerly sat Sonic up over the cushions. Sonic's arms fell across the back of the seat, and he buried his face in the sofa.

Metal folded the towel and pressed it into Sonic's back. He took the cable with his other hand and tightly wound it around Sonic's chest. He tied it much tighter than last time, and he was confident it would hold.
"It's done. Try to take it easy and keep it clean."

Sonic slid back down the couch and buried his face in the crevice between the cushions.

"It's okay, I'm okay." Sonic turned his head and crawled to the corner of the sofa. "Can I go to sleep now?"

"Yes, but only if you promise to properly sleep and not just fall unconscious."

"Is there a difference?" Sonic tried to curl into a ball, but winced as he leaned. He signed and laid on his stomach, burying his face further into the recesses of the couch, and shivered.

Metal took another clean towel and leaned by Sonic's side. He draped it over Sonic, ensuring it covered all of his body.

"Warm?"

Sonic turned his head and nodded. Metal nodded in return and sat on the floor next to the couch. His hands wandered to his charging panel.

"You didn't answer my question," Sonic said. His eyes peered over the arm rest.

"About sleep?" Metal took the charging cable and brushed the dirt from the prongs. "Being unconscious is merely a state of deactivation. It is like being powered down, and the body does nothing. But sleep is important. To sleep is a mark of intelligence."

He snapped the cable into the power outlet by his side. "The mind is still active during sleep. It uses the time to process and organize all the data generated during the day. It runs that data through its models and learns. Without sleep, the mind could not create memory and it could not learn. It is a critical process for any intelligent animal."

Sonic weakly nodded and fell back into the cushions. Metal turned to the crate strapped to his chest, but as he looked up, he saw Sonic gazing at him again.

"So...that means you need sleep too."

"I need sleep?"

"Yeah, you said it yourself. Don't you shut yourself down sometimes?"

Metal dropped the crate in his lap. "Yes, I shut down daily to recharge and run routine maintenance protocols."

"Then there's no doubt about it. You sleep." Sonic yawned. "So you'd better get some rest too. G'night Mets."

Metal looked up. He only saw the couch towering over him.

"Good night...Sonic."

He stared blankly into the dim room, then caught a glimpse of his reflection on shiny surface of the crate. The protocols he ran offline cached the data gathered during the day and updated his models. It was functionally equivalent to how the mammalian brain acted during sleep, and he needed rest for the same reasons Sonic did.

So maybe, just maybe he did sleep.
Metal shook his head and fumbled around the inside of the crate. He pulled out the Chaos Emerald detector and the two halves of the Chaos drive. Both halves glowed dimly yellow, and the closer he moved them together, the hotter and brighter they radiated.

The drives made him curious. He had very little data about their behavior, and it still surprised him that his plan to entangle himself and Sonic had worked. The drives could have other behaviors, and he needed to know what they were.

Picking up the quantum wavefunction collapse inducer, Metal scooted the drives parallel. He turned the detector on and entered the coordinates of both halves, and the wavefunctions flashed on the screen.

There was no doubt about it. These drives were still entangled, and Metal had not predicted that possible. Normally, quantum entanglement was short lived. The particles would lose their connection as soon as they interacted with something else, but the drive was different. Both halves remained entangled, despite everything that had happened.

He moved the drives closer again, and the wavefunction on the detector screen danced back and forth. The drives glowed brighter and brighter, and as Metal tapped them together, the fluorescent ceiling lights flashed.

Metal glanced at the ceiling light. That was interesting. Why would the drive effect the light? He lifted the detector.

The wavefunctions were all identical. The entanglement had spread, and now the ceiling light and both drives were entangled. Metal pulled the drives apart slowly, as the ceiling lighted dimmed, so too did the wavefunction. It collapsed on the screen, and the entanglement was broken.

Metal thought back to when he had snapped the drives. The drives must have magnetized Sonic's leg because it stuck to his own. Which implied the drives affected both light and magnetism.

But, that would make sense. The same force of nature that controlled magnetism also controlled light. The universe ran on a set of four simple rules, and one of those rules was the electromagnetic force.

Both light and magnetism were two manifestations of the same phenomenon. And yet, the electromagnetic affected more of the world than just light and magnetism, and a simple experiment who give him the answer.

Metal directed his attention to his radio. He was utterly unable to turn it off, and its endless chatter had become the never-ending background of his existence.

Yet, his radio was now abnormally silent now, and it was even absent the customary static of the universe that occurred everywhere.

He eyed the drive. Radio waves were just the same as visible light, albeit with a much lower frequency. If the Chaos drive could affect the light, as well as magnetize Sonic's leg, then perhaps it could block radio waves as well.

Metal threw the detector and both drives back into his box and slammed the lid. This was dangerous. All of his internal systems relied on electromagnetism, and if the drives messed with that, the results could be disastrous. He didn't want a repeat of the magnet room.

Plus, he still need to run internal diagnostics. He had a maintenance cycle to process, and he had to power down his consciousness for it to work effectively.
Metal leaned against the wall and began to power down his sensors.

He was programmed to follow orders. He was not following orders if he followed orders. He was built to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. But he had saved Sonic the Hedgehog. He was a copy of Sonic. But an imperfect copy was not a copy.

There had to be certainty somewhere. It was the very nature of mathematics — statements were either true or false. There was nothing in between.

Although...it was technically possible he had an error. Perhaps some data was corrupted, and it was throwing off all his computations. Surely that was it. He would throw away the bad data, and everything would make sense again. He would use his data validator. It would tell him if his data and models were consistent.

He booted his validator, but as it streamed into his working memory, he stopped.

What if the problem was validator itself? If it worked, and there were no problems, it would return true. If it found a problem, it would return false.

But if the validator itself was broken? The result would mean nothing, and he would have no way of finding the error.

It would return true when his systems were false. True was a useless result. It could be returned in both cases. It meant nothing. If it returned false, then at least would know of the error. But if it returned true, he would know nothing.

The validator clicked through his memory banks. It processed each line of code and each data point. Metal waited. He could not know the answer until it was finished.

At last, the validator returned its result.

*True.*

He stared into the void and hugged himself.

"No, no! Where did he go?"

Nega slammed the console with his fist. An Egg Pawn dressed as a butler walked by with a tray of wine glassed. One of the glasses shattered as Nega threw it at the computer monitor.

"That lousy rodent! Why isn't he playing his role? He's off the script!"

Nega pressed his forehead into the Emerald case. There stood his nearly complete collection — the six Chaos Emeralds. In the corner, the slot for the last Emerald stood empty and mocked him.

"He had one job. One job! That special stage was nothing! Now how am I supposed to get the last Emerald?"

Nega groaned and collapsed in a chair. He haphazardly shuffled back to the monitor. Broken static snowed across its surface.

"Then he goes and disappears! Poof! And as soon as he leaves—"

He swiped his thumb across the remote. The prison flashed on the screen, then the magnet room and acid chamber. The next channel should be the museum, but it wasn't. It was only that infernal
static.

The Egg Pawn stared at him, and Nega turned to it.

"I know what you're thinking. Why don't I just tune into Paperweight's radio again? My useless counterpart was so inept as to leave it unencrypted."

Twisting the knob, Nega tuned his radio scanner to same frequency Paperweight used. It was a simple frequency, and for that, Nega had been pleased. It made tracking Paperweight and Sonic that much easier.

The snow continued to scatter across the screen.

"See? Do you see the problem?"

The Egg Pawn continued to stare. Nega screamed and threw the remote control at it.

"It's jammed! The signal is jammed, and I can't pick up a thing! Argh!"

Nega threw his hands behind his head and pushed himself away from the console with his heels. The wheels of his chair squeaked as he drifted to the center of the room.

"It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt, and it hurt me so when Sonic failed to get that Emerald."

He leapt from the chair and staggered back to the console. A blinking, red button flashed on the display, and Nega smashed it between his fist.

"No more fun, no more games. If that's how you want to play, Sonic, so be it."
"When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it."

- Henry Ford

He thought the dust would have ran out eventually. But it never did. He saw it with his own eyes. The dust endlessly fell from ceiling to floor in the narrow corridor, and Sonic could only watch as it flickered through the dim, red light.

The red light streamed from Metal's optical screen. Just as before, each and every part of his screen was alight, and it barely illuminated the otherwise perfectly dark air duct.

The steel sheet bent under him as he followed Metal. Although thin, Sonic figured it was strong enough to support them both.

Hopefully.

"Do you know where we are going?" Metal's voice cracked ahead of him.

"I don't, but that's the point. We can't win if we play by Nega's rules," Sonic replied.

They crawled further in silence. Sonic saw nothing but the brief flicker of dust inches from his face, and although his sight was limited, his other senses were keenly aware.

Especially his sense of touch. He felt it in excruciating detail every time his cybernetic leg caught on the inside of the duct.

"I request your feedback." Metal's voice cut the silence.

"You're asking for my help?" The question caught him by surprise. Metal usually demanded, not requested. "Sure, what's up?"

"I cannot resolve Nega's motives. What does he even want? Why does he torment us instead of just achieving his goal, whatever that may be?" Metal said.

Sonic shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it, to be honest. I've mostly focused on not dying."

Metal stopped and stared back at him. His eyes were utterly absent in the sea of red.

"Knowing Nega's motives would help us 'not die', as you say."

Sonic motioned Metal to continue. "So you've thought about it. What have you figured out?"

"I am not sure. His behavior is unpredictable. However…"

Metal glanced back at Sonic's leg.

"It has been too easy. The odds don't add up. Where it not for our uncanny ability to find supplies that should not exist, like the roboticizer, we would be dead."

Metal crawled forward again, and Sonic followed.
"Too easy? You think he's just playing games with us?"

"I cannot be sure. I still need more data. Hence why I am asking for your input."

Sonic's leg caught on the thin, steel floor again, and he had to shake it loose. He had no idea why that kept happening. The floor of the air duct was completely smooth.

"Mets, let me tell you something. You can have all the data in the world, but it's useless unless you actually do something. That's what we have to focus on. We need to act."

"...I see. I will consider this."

Sonic shook his head and pressed onward. Although he now felt rested, every inch of his body still ached.

Every inch except his leg. His leg was painless, and it kept getting caught on nothing.

Sonic slapped his forehead. He hadn't changed. He was the same, and his leg was basically the same. It served the same function, and nothing more. Therefore it was the same.

His leg caught on the duct again.

He tried to pry it free, but he slipped, and his face collided with Metal's back.

Metal turned around. "Sonic, are you alright? Your motor functions are impaired."

"I'm fine. Really I am," Sonic said. When Metal looked unconvinced, he added, "I'm good as a goldfish in a carnival cup!"

"I do not understand what that means, but if you are certain," Metal said. He looked up at the ceiling. "I think the space is widening. I'm not sure what is ahead, but we need to proceed with caution."

Sonic crawled forward, and the ceiling gradually receded. He sat up, no longer forced on his stomach, and ran his fingers over the edges of the duct. There had to be another vent, or an exit, or anything. But he found nothing. Nothing but dust.

"What do you know about ventilation ducts?" Metal said.

"Huh? Look, I know I'm pretty awesome, but I'm hardly the walking encyclopedia you seem to think I am."

"I was never given data on them, and I can't connect to any network for further queries."

A piece of dust flew into his nose, and he bunched his face, speaking as if he had a cold. "So? I still don't see your point."

"Is it normal," Metal said, "for the duct to keep going this far without running into another room?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Sonic said. A slight breeze brushed through his quills.

The corridor continued to widen, and Sonic stood up on his knees. He watched the dust in the red glow. It drifted forward.

"If the duct doesn't connect to another room, then it must lead—"
Metal's sentence broke off as the wind cut through the air and pulled Sonic's quills into his face. It pushed against him, and though he tried to brace himself, his feet slip forward. He tumbled down the duct and only managed to stop himself as he pushed him arms against the wall.

Metal swirled his head to face Sonic. "It drops off in a few feet. I have no idea what's beyond that."

The dust pelted the back of his head as the wind grew. Metal pushed his hands against the walls and braced himself. The wind howled, and Metal's crate fluttered.

"Help—"

The wind slammed his chassis, and although he tried to grip the wall, his steel fingers were frictionless. His grip slipped, and the wind hurled him into the darkness.

"Metal!"

Sonic leapt and threw his hand forward. His fingers brush Metal's wrist, and he locked them around Metal's hand. Metal's fingers gripped his own.

He slid on his stomach as the wind relentlessly flew down the corridor. He threw his real foot against the wall and barely managed to stop as the corridor fell sharply down.

"Don't worry! I got you!"

Metal looked up at him, and Sonic was utterly blind to whatever lay ahead. He only knew the floor grew steeper.

If he could get enough momentum, he could run back up to where the duct was narrow and flat. Though ceiling was low, and he couldn't quite run, he could spin.

"I'll get us out of here! It'll be a breeze!"

Sonic dropped both his feet. He had years of experience, and soon he felt the familiar sensation of his sole gripping the floor. He would be back up in no time. All he needed was to take another step.

His mechanical foot screeched as it slid down the duct. He tried to press against the floor, but his steel foot slid in a way no rubber sole ever would. The wind tore into him and the duct widened. The tips of his fingers brushed the walls as he slipped and tumbled backward. He screamed and tightened his grip on Metal's wrist.

The corridor opened into an atrium of sheet metal. Sonic thrust his hand forward and barely grasped a ledge as the floor disappeared.

But he could see again, and what he saw was red and yellow light streaming below. He gulped and looked down. Metal held onto his wrist with both hands and pleaded with his gaze.

The edge fell below them, and at the bottom of the cliff, an enormous fan tore the air. Red and orange light burned inside. Heat swelled from the furnace, and sweat dripped from his quills and down his face. His muscles strained to keep his grip.

The wind lifted them, and Sonic fingers began to slide. The air caught the lid of Metal's crate, and paper flew out. Each wad drifted into the furnace below and burst into flame as the fan blades shredded the ashes.

The wind grew, and Metal looked back at the crate. The Chaos drives rolled to the edge and
slipped free. They flew into the fan and, and the blades tore into them. In a blinding, though brief, flash, the drives shattered. The fire inside roared and burned yellow.

Metal turned back. "Please do not let go of me."

Sweat soaked his gloves. He pushed his sole to the wall, and his voice wavered as he spoke. "Don't worry, Mets. I'll get us out of here."

Metal looked down at the furnace, and for the first time, Sonic saw genuine horror in Metal's eyes.

"Sonic, please. Oh Sonic, I cannot die!"

Sonic struggles as Metal's weight slowly pulled him down. "Don't say things like that. You're going to be fine. We'll get out of here. I promise!"

He cursed his metal leg. If only it would grip like it should, like his other foot. He needed to save Metal, and if his foot would just grip...

An odd sensation welled in his metal sole, and it was utterly unlike anything he had felt before. It was almost like an electric shock, although it didn't feel uncomfortable, and he had the uncanny feeling it would respond to his wishes.

And the only thing he wished for was to save Metal and himself.

His foot flew forward and stuck to the wall, so firmly he could no longer move it. He immediately shifted his weight to his foot and pressed forward with both his feet.

Metal stared at him. "Your foot! Quickly, bring me up to your foot!"

There was no time to question, and despite the newfound support, he struggled to lift Metal. He felt Metal let go of his hand and the weight shift to his leg.

"Your foot is magnetic. This is exactly what we need."

Sonic looked down. Metal's entire body stuck to his foot, and with his arm outstretched, he grasped the ledge himself.

Metal struggled to pull the rest of himself free, and he stuck firmly to Sonic's shoe.

"Can you disable it?" Metal said.

Sonic felt as if he were watching the scene from afar. He had no idea what just happened, nor if this leg was actually his, or if it just belonged in some distant dream.

"Disable the magnet, just for a fraction of a second. I can't pull myself off." As if to further his point, he tried and failed to pull his hand away.

Sonic watched as the furnace burned. He looked back at Metal.

"Are you crazy? This is the only thing preventing us from becoming diced, roasted hedgehogs. Also, I have no idea how this works."

"You turned it on, didn't you? Just deactivate it."

Sonic closed his eyes. His headache was back.
"Okay, okay, here goes nothing."

Sonic focused on his foot and tried to emulate the sensation from before. He imagined it in his mind, and willed his foot to pop free from the wall.

The sensation stopped. Metal slipped from his foot, but quickly threw both hands to the ledge. Sonic hung from one hand for a moment, but as his brain slowly processed the fact Metal was safe, he threw his other hand to the ledge.

That solve one problem, but the duct above was still far too wide and steep to climb up. He'd have to be nearly twice as wide if he had any hope of maintaining his grip.

"Sonic!" Metal said as he looked straight at him. "We can do this if we work together."

Sonic nodded. He threw his weight forward and swung up like a pendulum. His feet slammed against the walls, and though he began to slip, Metal slammed behind him. He locked his arms with Metal and looked up. The light painted the duct above a rusty orange, and it stretch endless upward until the darkness cut it off.

"Ready?" Metal said.

"I'm ready. It's hot, so let's get out of this kitchen."

Sonic slammed his robotic foot as high as he could and click the magnet on. He felt Metal's weight shift as Metal took a step higher. Though heavy, his foot was secure and Sonic held firm. Once Metal had moved, he deactivated his foot and took another step.

They continued wordlessly, and though the corridor grew narrow, Sonic kept the familiar rhythm by alternating supporting and climbing. Metal grew closer and closer as the corridor narrowed until Sonic could feel every inch of his chassis against his back.

At last, the corridor straightened and darkness overtook them again. Sonic's muscles collapsed, and he fell to the floor. Metal rolled over underneath him, but Sonic was exhausted. He continued to lay with his face in Metal's engine panel as he panted.

Eventually, Metal said, "Are you alright?"

"Ah, yeah, just need a minute to catch my breath." The corridor was impossibly narrow, so Sonic had to crawl backward on his stomach.

Metal turned to him and clicked his screen back to full. Sonic stared inches from his face, and the red glow illuminated his cheeks.

"I think we should go the other direction," Metal said as he turned away.

Sonic wiped the sweat from his brow and followed. They crawled in silence.

"Metal, how did you know my foot was magnetic? How did that happen?"

"I didn't know. Well, not until you activated it anyway. After that, is was obvious."

Sonic rubbed his eyes. "But how? Are there any other surprises in my new leg?"

"It is unlikely." Metal paused and Sonic looked ahead. There was a tiny source of light streaming in the distance.
"The roboticization isn't instantaneous, although it can certainly look that way to the untrained. It can take several hours for the new components to solidify, and during that time, the nanites are especially sensitive to external stimuli."

"And that means…?"

Metal stopped and looked back at Sonic. "Do you remember the Chaos drive? The one I pulled from the Egg Pawn and snapped in half?"

"Yeah."

"I was not aware of it at the time, but when that drive snapped, it released a burst of electromagnetic radiation. That radiation must have hit your leg at a critical moment. It was enough to solidify the structure such that you were endowed with this extra ability."

"...Oh," Sonic said. It was all he could say.

Metal motioned to the floor. Ahead, light streamed from an air vent, and Metal crawled toward it. Sonic hesitated, then followed. "So, that means, my leg…"

Metal locked his fingers around the vent. "Yes, it appears you can magnetize your leg at will. That is an advantage you didn't have before. Any extra ability is superior, is it not?"

Sonic watched blankly as Metal lifted the vent. He tried to crawl forward, but his leg caught again. He was the same if and only if his leg served the same function.

And nothing more.
"And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good."

- John Steinbeck

Although he technically landed on his feet, Metal didn't stay on them. Rather, he slipped and fell on his back. He mere laid there, with nothing more to do but stare at the ceiling vent in blank embarrassment.

At least no one saw him, especially not Sonic, who jumped from the vent without looking himself. Sonic didn't even technically land on his feet. He simply fell on top of Metal's legs and slammed his face into Metal's forehead.

Sonic immediately leapt up. "Let's just pretend that didn't happen," he said. He brushed the dust from his chest and added, "Where are we?"

Metal slowly pulled himself up. He had landed on polished and gray concrete, but that wasn't the reason he had slipped. Responsibility for that laid on the oil slick that spread as a broken, rainbow foam across the floor.

"I am uncertain, but we need to investigate," Metal said.

Sonic took a step forward, but Metal spread his arm in front of him. He would lead. The room was dim, and even though his light was still on, it was difficult to see.

Then he heard it. The noise was soft and infrequent, but his audio sensors still picked up a faint and continuous pop, like that of fizzing soda.

"Did you hear that?" Sonic said.

Metal nodded. He took a step forward and motioned Sonic to follow. Each step was deliberate and slow. The floor was impossibly slick.

Sight and sound were merely two of his senses, and Metal had others, senses beyond what organic creatures had. Senses like his radio. Whatever had jammed appeared to be gone, and with each pop, high-frequency waves flashed across his scanner.

In the distance, he saw a faint, blue light. It was tiny and burning, like a pilot light. They crept toward it.

"That sound...it's getting louder," Sonic said.

"Not only is the sound getting louder, but so are the waves. I can hear them on the radio," Metal said.

Sonic turned his head. "And that means?"

Metal looked back at Sonic. "That light emits radio waves. That means it is radioactive."

Sonic stared at him with his mouth open, so Metal quickly added, "But there is no need for worry. The radiation levels are too low to cause harm."
"Worry? Why would I be worried? I was never worried before, and I am certainly not worried now."

Metal said nothing and walked forward, but Sonic continued, "I'm Sonic the Hedgehog! And a little blue light would never worry good ol' Sonic the Hedgehog."

They approached the light. It glowed behind a sheet of glass at the bottom of an enormous, pressurized tank. A single tube connected the tank to the glass chamber, and a sleek conveyor belt hummed as it carried green-tinted silver ingots.

Sonic scooped an ingot into his hand. "What is this?"

Metal picked it from Sonic's hand and held it to the light. He scraped his fingers across it and felt the symbols "Ni" stamped lightly in its surface.

"This is purified, solid nickel. But why?"

Metal took the tubing in his hand. It was light, and pressure bulged from the inside. He followed it to its source: a rusted cylinder with a faded sticker peeling from its surface. Metal tore off the sticker. The symbol "H" was stamped above a cartoonish fire.

"Hydrogen and nickel...but that does not make any sense…"

Metal turned to face Sonic, who had idly stuck the ingot in his mouth like a lollypop.

"What are you doing?" Metal asked.

Sonic quickly spit the ingot to the floor, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, and strolled to the machine. "Nothing. Nothing at all. So what's it do?"

Metal pulled a panel off the machine and froze. Inside, a twisted mess of power cables trapped an array of silver, blue, and purple Chaos drives. Nickel ingots sat in an enormous heap. At least, the top of the heap was nickel. The bottom of the heap bled globs of golden, metallic crumbs.

"It's not possible. This should not be possible."

Sonic waved his hand in front of Metal's face. "Out of all the insanity we've seen, you're upset by a glowing blue tube?"

"You don't understand." Metal turned to Sonic. "This—it's a fusion reactor!"

Sonic folded his arms and merely stared. "And...?"

"Fusion is the pinnacle of clean energy production! Using only nickel and hydrogen, this machine could create a nearly unlimited supply of energy."

"Fusion? What is that, some type of dance music?"

Metal shook his head. As usual, he needed to explain everything, though at least Sonic was curious.

"Consider the sun. Contrary to popular belief, the sun does not burn. Rather, it take hydrogen and fuses it together into helium. Fire is a chemical process, but the reaction that powers the sun is a nuclear process."

Sonic tapped his foot and stared at the ceiling, but Metal continued. "Nuclear reactions release far more energy than any chemical process because the two use an entirely different set of forces."
Electromagnetism drives chemical processes, but the strong and weak forces—"

"Wait, wait," Sonic said. "The 'strong and weak forces'? There's no way. You're just making this up."

Metal cast Sonic a side glance. "I am not! The strong nuclear force and the weak nuclear force are two of the four fundamental forces of the universe! Without them, atoms would fall apart!"

Sonic waved his hand. "Do me a favor and spare the lecture. Give me the executive summary."

Metal picked the nickel ingot from the floor. "This is nickel. A nickel atom has 28 protons. A hydrogen atom has a single proton. When they combine, they create copper, an element with 29 protons."

He dropped the nickel in Sonic's hands. "It is an amazing process. When something as minuscule as a single proton hits the nickel atom, it completely changes its very nature. It turns into an entirely different element, something brand-new and wholly unrelated to its precursor."

Sonic dropped the ingot as horror flooded his face.

"If Nega can create a machine such as this, it implies his understanding of the fundamental nature of reality far exceeds anything anyone else has ever achieved, including Eggman—"

Metal stopped. Sonic was staring down at his cybernetic leg, to which the nickel had helplessly magnetized. He grimaced.

"A tiny change...that makes it completely different…"

Metal froze. For his entire existence, he had never seen Sonic as anything but confident. Whether he was racing or destroying Eggman's machinery, it didn't matter. Sonic was nothing less than joyous.

But not now. Metal recognized the expression on Sonic's face because it was something he had felt every waking moment of his life.

"I mean...It is not like…" Metal stammered. He glanced at Sonic and stopped.

Sonic looked away, and Metal clenched his fists. He knelt down, pulled the ingot from Sonic's leg, and tossed it back on the conveyor belt. "I suppose they are not technically completely different, really...In truth, it depends on your definition…"

Sonic stared into his eyes. He paused, and a slight smile crept across his face, but as he opened his mouth to speak, the air above them shattered.

"There you are, Sonic! You can run, but you can't hide!"

Metal knew that voice. It was utterly familiar and unwelcome. It boomed from overhead, though Metal could not see from where.

"Nega!" Sonic threw his head up. "Show yourself!"

Steam burst from above, and Metal leaned over as it clouded it optical screen. He could see nothing, but he felt Sonic grab his arm.

A scattered shadow emerged from the steam. As it slowly lifted, Metal wiped the condensation from his screen and looked up. E-2048loomed above them with both its claws outstretched.
Metal had no time to react. Sonic charged from behind him, throwing more steam in Metal's face, and leapt directly for E-2048 screen.

E-2048 snatched Sonic's leg between its claws. It held Sonic upside down, and Sonic fruitlessly floundered in its grip.

"Now I want you to stop and think about what you've done," Nega said from E-2048's tinny radio. "I have been more than hospitable to you. I even let you keep your little Paperweight pal over there. And this is the thanks I get?"

Metal ran toward the conveyer belt. Nothing Nega said would ever provide positive utility, and he had to act quickly.

As Sonic continued to struggle, he said, "So don't keep me hanging. Tell me what you want."

"All I want is for you to behave!" Nega said.

Steam rose from E-2048's engine, and Metal knew he was running out of time. He scooped a single ingot into his hand and threw it with all the force his pistons could muster. It flew through the air and crashed into E-2048's claw. Its grip waned, and Sonic tore himself free.

Sonic landed and stood up. "What kind of guests would we be if we didn't be sure to nickel and dime you?"

Nega screeched over the radio, and E-2048 slammed to the ground.

"Mets—After I stun him, you take him out. You can do that, right?"

Metal nodded, and Sonic raced forward. Metal quickly followed, though his pace was hardly more than a jog. He cursed his broken engine.

Sonic spun into the air, landed ajar on the ceiling, and launched himself at E-2048. His foot struck its optical screen, and Sonic clicked the magnet to life. The eyes on the screen distorted into waves of red light, and E-2048's engine sputter. It fell, and its chassis caught on the hydrogen tubing above the reactor. The pipes snapped, and E-2048 crashed to the ground, caught in the piping like an insect in a web.

Metal skidded to a halt as he stopped in front of the fallen robot. He reached into his database and estimated a rough model of how E-2048 was likely to be engineered.

Based on a few assumptions, there were two ways to deactivate it. The first would be to simply smash its hard drive. With no drive, the robot would have no brain, and that would render it utterly inert.

The second was to cut its power cord. With no power, the robot would deactivate.

Two choices. He could smash the hard drive, effectively killing any sense of identity E-2048 had, just as Eggman had done to him. It would certainly decrease the probability of E-2048 as a recurring threat.

Or he could rip out the cord. E-2048 would deactivate, but it would still have its data. It would still have its brain.

It was as Sonic had said. He had a choice.
"What are you waiting for? Take him out!"

"Right, I will take...him...out."

Metal crawled on E-2048's chassis and angled his claw just above the gap in its armor. With a precise cut, he thrust his hand into its neck and grabbed a fistful of cables. He tore the cables, they snapped free, and Metal tumbled backward to the ground.

The hole in E-2048's armor sparked, and slowly, its optical screen faded black.

"And that's how it's done. Way to go, Mets!" Sonic jumped to the ground and lifted Metal back to his feet. "So what's next?"

Metal could only watch in horror as the broken cables in E-2048's chassis continued to spark. He felt the slick oil beneath his feet, and heard the rush of hydrogen gas leaking from the snapped pipes.

He leapt into Sonic's arms and grabbed his back. He only had time to say a single word.

"Run!"
Chapter 15

"The most important thing about a technology is how it changes people."
- Jaron Lanier

The trouble with attempting to outrun an explosion was the sheer speed with which they moved. It wasn't faster than the speed of sound per se, but it was certainly fast enough to be a nuance, and it also didn't help the floor was on fire.

Nevertheless, Sonic ran with Metal in his arms, though the inferno singed the tips of his quills, and every breath trapped the fire in his chest. While his lungs cried out, the greatest pain was much deeper. He had never felt his heart stammer so erratically.

Not to mention his arms. Metal just had to position himself in the perfect spot to cut off circulation.

"Mets—you gotta cut down on the chili dogs." Sonic choked as the smoke blurred his vision. "You could stand to lose a few pounds."

"Sonic, focus. Look ahead!"

Sonic tried to look ahead, but he only saw more smoke grating his eyes. "What? What is it?"

"It's a dead end, but I see something above. On my word, I need you to jump."

Sonic had no time to question. All his lungs wanted was oxygen, and the fire was doing a great job refusing to share.

"Ready...jump!"

He shifted his legs and jumped as far as he could despite Metal's excess weight. Though he couldn't see, he trusted Metal, and his lungs were certain there would be air on the other side.

He felt his feet brush the edge, and Sonic landed in something cool, wet, and decidedly the opposite of air. The endless pressure of rushing water slammed against him. It flung him down some darkening pipe, and in the moment of confusion, he choke again. Water caught in his throat, and he felt Metal slip from his grasp.

Of course it had to be water. Sonic thought. Panic welled in the back of his mind, but he forced himself to focus. Whatever happened, he could not afford to get separated from Metal again.

The familiar darkness encroached on his vision, and his consciousness began to fade. His senses went numb, and he felt almost nothing. Nothing except his magnetic foot activating as Metal grabbed his heel.

He felt Metal's arms slip below his own and pull him up. His head broke the surface, and while Metal dragged him from the water, his lungs reasserted their control. He coughed, then coughed again. He would have fallen over had Metal not supported him with his arm wrapped around his back. Sonic leaned into Metal's chest, grateful for both the support and the heat against his wet fur.
At last, he caught his breath and opened his eyes. The fire was gone, and they now sat on the narrow edge of an enormous, industrial cavern. Above, a yellow waterfall crashed and rushed down an infinitely steep and dark cavern, and its deafening roar drowned out all possibility of other sounds. It was dark, and it would have been impossible to see but for a pathetic fluorescent bulb hanging above a dingy closet door.

Metal stood up, and Sonic shivered, disappointed the only source of heat left, but stood up himself. Metal was looking over the edge, so Sonic turned his attention to the dingy door. He stepped up to it and placed his hand over the knob. Slowly, he twisted it open.

The other side could have not been more disappointing. It was a simple utility closet, littered with dust, random tools, and cleaning supplies. Sonic frowned and grabbed a browning mop, long past its glory days, and returned to Metal.

Metal had stepped back from the ledge. He caught the broom as Sonic threw it at him.

"Why is there a janitorial closet sitting on this random ledge and literally nothing else?" Sonic asked as he folded his arms.

Metal took the mop and placed it back in the closet. "We appear to be in the main line of Nega's industrial wastewater network. Look down here."

Sonic looked down. He could see little of the rushing water. It was just too dark, and he had no idea how far they had come, nor how far below the water ran.

"My current hypothesis is Nega has some type of aerial maintenance unit that supplies this station. It would maintain the wastewater network and repair damage to the lines."

"Ha! I bet it has its work cut out for it now. We sure smoked Nega's tail up there."

Metal walked into the closet. "Which brings me to our next problem. We appear to be stuck here, unless you want to try jumping down another waterfall."

Sonic went to open his mouth, but Metal added, "Please do not take that literally. I am not suggesting we jump down the waterfall."

"Wait...was that a joke?" Sonic said.

Metal didn't respond. Instead, he walked into the closet, scooped something from a shelf, and returned to stop inches away from Sonic. He lifted his hand, and it hovered impatiently above Sonic's fist, so Sonic opened his palm. Into it dropped a single cable and a hex wrench.

"What's this?"

"The wrench is from the closet, and the cable is from E-2046."

He held the cable to his face. The ends were hopelessly frayed with black soot.

"How useful. I'm sure this puny cable will make a great boat."

"I am not joking. This is important, and I need you to focus," Metal said.

Sonic went to retort, but when he saw the intensity of Metal's gaze, he shut his mouth. He would try to focus, though he hated to do it. When he focused, his mind wandered, and when his mind wandered, he could feel his leg.
"You will fix my engine, then I will fly us down the rest of this pipe. This plan is optimal because you will not drown."

Sonic stared at the cable, then at Metal, and back to the cable. "Are you kidding? Tails usually handles this stuff. All that techno-garbage is way over my head."

"Well Tails is not here, and we need to get down. Rest assured, my internal diagnostics indicate this is a simple repair."

Sonic rubbed his temples. Now that his lungs had quieted down, his head had taken the opportunity to remind him of his pounding migraine and the exhaustion behind his eyelids.

"Yeah, well, how do I know you're not just gonna fly off and leave me here for dead?"

Sonic startled as Metal threw both his hands around Sonic's shoulders.

"If I wanted you dead, you already would be. This is the optimal branch of the decision tree, and you have my word I will not leave you."

Sonic gulped. It wasn't that he doubted Metal, but he did doubt himself. It was an uncomfortable and rare feeling, but his technical abilities were abysmal. He had always destroyed robots. He had never fixed them.

"What if I mess up? What...what if I just make it worse?"

Metal let go and scooped up the wrench. He rolled Sonic's fingers over the handle.

"I know you will not make it worse."

"Alright, I'll try. I can't promise anything, but I'll try," Sonic said as he pulled off his gloves. He wrung the water from them, then threw them over the door to dry.

He had to at least try. He owed as much to Metal, and if he did succeed, it would help Metal immensely.

Metal nodded and sat on the ground. He leaned his chest over his legs and stretched forward. Sonic was taken aback by the elegance in his movements. Metal was remarkably flexible.

"Do you see the maintenance panel below the turbine?"

Sonic sat down himself and scooted next to Metal. The panel was exposed at the bottom of Metal's back, and he ran his fingers against the seam.

"Take the wrench and remove the bolts."

Sonic gazed at the panel, turned to the wrench, then froze as a single thought bubbled to the forefront of his mind. Icy horror slowly crawled into his veins, and time seemed to slow all around him. He tried to think of something else, of anything else, but a single thought demanded his attention.

Eggman used animals to power his robots.

"Do you need additional instruction?"

Metal's familiar voice brought him back to reality. His finger was still pressed to the seam on Metal's back. Cold sweat ran through his quills. "Mets...is there...are you..."
"Am I what?" Metal turned his head back, and all Sonic could see were each of the meticulous red lines of his eyes.

"Powered...how are you powered?"

Metal hesitated, and Sonic had to fight the growing dizziness in his head. If Metal was powered by an animal, what was he going to do? He stared at the wrench in his hand. He knew what he would do. He would free the animal. It was what a hero would do. It was what Sonic the Hedgehog had always done.

"Electricity," Metal said.

"Electricity?" Sonic had almost forgotten the original question, but as he repeated the word, it sprang back to mind.

"Have you not noticed? I have to plug myself into the wall every night. I know it is antiquated, but you can blame Eggman for that." Metal gazed at the ceiling. "He put me on a short leash after the incident."

"Electricity…” A stupid grin slowly overtook his face. "You're powered by electricity!"

Metal turned back in confusion, but Sonic lunged forward and threw his arms around Metal in embrace. "That's the best thing I've heard all day."

Metal hesitated, then gently patted Sonic on the back. Sonic relaxed for a brief moment, but quickly returned to staring ahead blankly. Metal was powered by electricity. The ethical dilemma was resolved.

"I have to give you credit. Your inquiry is relevant. Repairing an electrical motor is a simpler task than almost any other energy source," Metal said.

"Right...the more you know…” Sonic said. Technical incompetence aside, the exhaustion pounding inside his skull did not help his focus.

"If you are ready, I can guide you through the rest of the process. Unscrew the panel with the wrench."

Sonic slapped his forehead, dragging his hand down his face, but picked up the wrench from the floor. He slid it into one of the bolts and turned gently. The bolt came loose, and he took it into his palm.

Metal held his hand back. "Give me the bolt. I will ensure we do not lose any parts."

Carefully, Sonic placed the bolt in Metal's palm and unscrewed the others. He pressed his finger into the seam of the panel, popped it free, and set it aside.

Leaning forward, he stared with his face hovering inches from the inside of Metal. It was worse than he thought. Dozens of cables twisted in a heap, but that was the least of his problems. That honor went to the pieces of shrapnel and soot covering every inch of his engine cavity.

"Can you give me an estimate on the damage? My internal diagnostics can only measure so much."

"Uh…” Sonic held a piece of shrapnel to his face. Familiar blue paint chipped from its surface. He slowly lowered it and dropped it in Metal's palm.
Metal held it up to his eyes and shook his head. "This is worse than I estimated. I am frankly surprised this did not bring me offline entirely."

He flicked the shrapnel into the water. "Regardless, let us continue the repair," Metal said as he dropped the cable into Sonic's hand. "Do you see the black cable? It connects the battery to the motor."

Sonic heard Metal's voice, but he didn't process the words. Rather, it was the pair of closed, feathered eyes that claimed his attention. For behind the tangled mess was something he had destroyed many times in his life. It was Eggman's trademark life support unit, and inside it were the eyes.

Metal must have sensed his hesitation because he added, "It should be one of the cables on top."

The world went silent as Sonic felt his chest tightened. He brushed aside half a dozen cables, and his view of the life support unit became clear. Inside it was a flicky. It laid unconscious behind the seared glass and peeling, yellow paint of the life support unit.

Metal turned his head back. "Is everything alright? You have stopped."

"Y-you said electricity. That's not—"

"Right, as I said, my battery is beneath the life support unit. You should be able to connect the cable below."

"But why—"

"Why what?"

"...the flicky. You said electricity."

Metal's optics widened. "I see your misunderstanding. Were you not aware the animals were never for energy?"

Sonic just choked, "So can I just let him out?"

"What? No! The animal is for computational power, not energy. Without it, my decision engine would be limited to functions that are Turing-complete. Under no circumstances can it be removed.

"Consider this: a bird can fly effortlessly down a hallway, but the same cannot be said for a machine. Even the most basic of motor functions are computationally infeasible. So when Eggman designed his robots, he found a simple CPU was not enough. Think of the flicky as a specialized piece of hardware dedicated to certain computational tasks: a BPU or 'biological processing unit.'"

Sonic opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"So as I was saying, you need to plug the new cable into the battery. The frayed ends should not matter so long as the copper touches."

His eyes wandered to the unconscious flicky. He knew what he would do. Metal Sonic was a Badnik. Sonic the Hedgehog freed animals from Badniks. He trembled as he reached for the life support unit. It would be simple. All he had to do was pop the unit open, and the flicky would be free.

His fingers brushed a piece of shrapnel, and Sonic yelped. He quickly stuffed the finger in his
mouth, and the taste of his own blood spread across his tongue.

"Sonic, are you alright? Did you injure yourself?"

Sonic's eyes met with Metal's optics. He stared at each and every red line in his screen, mesmerized by the way the red glowed brightly, yet dropped quickly.

"I-I'm fine," Sonic choked. He pulled his finger from his mouth and felt ashamed when he saw the injury was no deeper than a papercut.

His was drowning in his own mind. Dozens of thoughts competed for attention, and his consciousness couldn't keep up. Sonic panted. He ran his fingers back over the life support unit. There was the trapped flicky, but underneath it was just as Metal said: the battery and the problem. A single, black cable had connected the battery to the motor, but it was now snapped in half.

"T-the cable. The cable is broken." Hearing his own voice brought a measure of order to his consciousness.

"Pull it from the sockets."

Sonic watched himself unsnap the cable and place both broken ends in Metal's palm.

Metal held the pieces up to his face. "Well that explains why the engine was powerless. Now take the new cable and connect it."

Sonic hesitated as he felt each erratic beat of his pounding heart, but his body shifted to autopilot. By some miracle, his hands coordinated the motions to jam the cable into the socket. They even managed to fully bury the exposed copper ends.

"F-finished."

"Good, now place the panel back on and screw in the bolts. We cannot do any more without additional equipment."

Now that it had momentum, his body could not be stopped. His hands snapped the panel in place, took each bolt from Metal's palm, and screwed them in.

Metal stood up, but Sonic only continued to tremble on the floor.

"Activating turbine engine in three...two...one..."

Metal leaned forward, but nothing happened. He straightened back up and place his hand over his intake panel.

"It did not work," Metal said, shaking his head. "The damage must be too severe."

"Oh. So we're still stuck then," Sonic heard his voice say.

There it was again, that familiar fuzzy feeling on the edge of his vision, and Sonic embraced it like an old friend. He slipped to the floor and felt the cool and dusty tile against his cheek. He may as well just lay on the floor. It was all he was good for. He couldn't help Metal, and he couldn't free the flicky, but he could at last lay on the floor.

And yet, when had he ever just given up and laid on the floor? That wasn't something Sonic the Hedgehog did. Sonic the Hedgehog was the single greatest, most capable hero who had ever lived. Sonic the Hedgehog would have been able to help Metal. Sonic the Hedgehog would have saved
the flicky.

But he had failed to help Metal. He had failed to save the flicky. And there it was, the truth. It was so blindingly obvious. He had failed. Sonic the Hedgehog never failed. So he was now no longer Sonic the Hedgehog. He was now Sonic the Cyborg, a freak and a failure, twisted by the very forces of technology he sought to fight. He was no hero, and he was no hedgehog.

"Sonic! Are you okay?"

He heard Metal rush over to his side and he felt Metal's fingers brush against his neck. "Your pulse is better than before, but not by much. I am sorry. I should have never let you push yourself this far in your condition. We will rest here until you are well. I will find you sustenance."

Sonic remained motionless, but he did manage to watch as Metal scooped a small bucket from the closet and filled it with the rushing, yellow water.

"Drink this." Metal dropped the bucket in front of his face.

He peered over the edge. The water was as yellow as ever, and his disgust managed to form a coherent thought. "How can this be safe to drink? You said it was industrial wastewater."

"It is. That is how I know it is safe. Judging by the color, this water has a very high concentration of lead acetone, which would kill any bacteria."

"Oh. Lead. My favorite." Sonic buried his forehead in the floor, although his throat was dry. "You know I can't drink this."

"Yes, you can."

Sonic rolled up to face the ceiling. "I suppose I could, if I wanted to die from lead poisoning."

"You are immune to lead poisoning. In fact, you should ingest heavy metals frequently for the nanites in your blood."

Sonic froze. "The nanites...in my blood?"

"Yes. I already explained this." When Metal saw the look on Sonic's face, he shook his head. "I suppose you were not listening. This is critical to your health, so pay attention this time. The roboticizer does not only change your physiology. It changes your biochemistry as well. How else would you expect your biological systems to interface with the machinery of your leg?"

Sonic felt his skin crawl. He opened his mouth, but said nothing.

Metal continued, "Instead of producing blood cells, your new leg produces tiny, cell-sized machines called 'nanites.' These nanites enter your circulatory system and travel through your entire body, where they eventually reach your brain. There, they rewire your neurons to interface with your new legs. That is why you could use your leg immediately. Otherwise, it would take months for you to learn to walk again.

"But your body requires a fair quantity of heavy metals to regulate the nanosystem, so the nanites modify your digestive track as well. They change your tastebuds so that you know what to eat, and they will automatically metabolize toxic liquids, like acetone, into glucose for the rest of your body."

Sonic could feel them. The nanites were in his blood, and he felt them. They were swimming
around in his body. There were in his brain. The nanites were in his brain.

Broken sobs escaped from his mouth as curled into a ball. He buried his face in hands and tried to disappear.

"...Sonic? Why are you—"

Sonic wanted to crawl out of his own skin and run far away. But there was no place to run, no place to hide, and no one to help him. Sonic the Hedgehog would have found a way out, but not him.

Metal looked aside, but he did not hesitate. He slid his arm under Sonic and lifted him to his chest. Sonic simply fell forward into Metal's engine panel and continued to sob.

"Drink this," Metal said, lifting the bucket up to his lips. "You are dehydrated, and you need the energy."

Sonic felt the water run into his mouth. It tasted fantastic. It had a sweet, metallic tang that soothed the fire in his throat. It was the single best thing he had ever tasted, better than any chilli dog he had ever had. Sonic began to laugh, and his broken laughter cut into his sobbing.

"Do you now feel better?" Metal asked as Sonic downed the rest of the water.

"Oh sure, Sonic the Hedgehog—" Sonic choked on his own voice. "He's great. Wonderful. Nothing can stop him."

Metal said nothing, but he continued to hold Sonic has his laughter turned back to tears, then to a choking cough, and finally died into muffled sobs.
"The writing ball is a thing like me: made of iron
Yet easily twisted on journeys."
- Friedrich Nietzsche

Metal Sonic did not know what to do, at least not with any certainty. He hadn't know when Sonic started to sob, and he still didn't know now that Sonic had stopped. His confidence intervals had slowly been unraveling ever since Nega captured him, and this type of vague uncertainty had become the new normal. And yet, despite all that had happened, Metal could take some comfort in his confusion, because while it was true that he did not know, he at least now knew that he did not know.

Further, Sonic's condition seemed to be improving. His chest rose and fell with a slow, yet steady, pace, and his breath grazed Metal's intake panel with the lightness of a feather. Taking care not to moving him, Metal brought his fingers to Sonic's neck. Like his breathing, Sonic's pulse was steady, and his condition appeared stable. Metal knew of only one explanation.

Sonic had fallen asleep.

Which meant Metal now faced a dilemma. He hated to wake Sonic, for Sonic needed all the rest he could get. Nevertheless, the fact Sonic had fallen asleep in his arms posed some practical limitations to his mobility. There were a few key tasks to finish, and Metal would have to accomplishment them without waking Sonic.

Which brought him to the soaked towel strapped to Sonic's back. It would do no good unless it was dry. Metal placed his hand over the cable, then slipped his fingers beneath the knot and slowly worked the cable free. He lifted the towel aside, water dripping to the floor, and wrung it out as much as he could. After shaking free the last droplets, he set the towel flat to dry.

He pulled Sonic higher on his chest and leaned over his shoulder to look at the injury on Sonic's back. Just as he had hoped, a smooth, silver patch had emerged over the wound. Although thin, it would block infection until Metal had the opportunity to replace the towel.

Next was the problem of Sonic's shoe, which like the towel, had been thoroughly soaked. It would not dry unless Metal removed it, so he bent down and placed his hand below Sonic's sole. He slid the shoe off, shook the water from it, and placed it aside. Fortunately, Sonic's robotic foot was nearly waterproof, and would not require any immediate maintenance.

Metal estimated Sonic would sleep for approximately 10 hours and 54 minutes, which would give him ample time to recharged and process delayed computation. He gingerly inched toward the janitorial closet, moving slowly enough not to stir Sonic, and plugged himself into the outlet in the corner.

As he sat surrounded by the aging mop and buckets of cleaner, he looked down at his former rival sleeping in his arms. Not long ago, Sonic had been his single greatest enemy, the bane of his existence, and his loathsome copy. Now, Sonic was his most valuable ally in the fight against Nega. But he was also more than that, for he was the only person to ever show Metal any kindness. Through his entire existence everyone, including Eggman, treated him like a mindless tool. He was
nothing more than a weapon, a thing to be used. He had no goals, no desires of his own, and even Metal himself assumed such things were beyond him. And yet, after all that, despite everything he had done to Sonic, it was his greatest enemy that treated him like a genuine person. It took Sonic himself to show him he could be more than a mindless copy.

A single through rose through his processors. At last, Metal finally understood what the mathematics tried to tell him earlier. As usual, the math was flawless, and he had been too irrational to understand what his models predicted. It was a mathematical fact he could never kill Sonic the Hedgehog. He could never kill Sonic the Hedgehog because he did not want to kill Sonic the Hedgehog. He did not want to kill Sonic the Hedgehog because Sonic the Hedgehog was the only one who treated him with kindness. It was perfectly logical, and it was that simple. It had always been that simple.

Metal’s optics lit up. The logic spread through his systems, updating all of his models: his support vector machine, his decision tree, his Bayesian network. All of them returned the same conclusion, one that was so painfully obvious and mathematically correct that Metal was frankly embarrassed he hadn’t realized it sooner.

Primary Objective: Neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.

There is was: his primary objective and his reason for existence. Every action he had ever taken was to fulfill this goal, but he had been wrong. He was missing the critical data. Without wasting a single cloak cycle, Metal quickly queried his natural language processor.

Neutralize (v.): to render something ineffective or harmless by applying an opposite force or effect

Metal's processors clicked. That was it. That was the missing data. Nowhere in his primary objective did it say he had to kill Sonic. On the contrary, he was to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog. He was to render him harmless by applying the opposite force or effect.

Metal clutched Sonic in his arms. He was so peaceful when he was asleep, not at all like the dangerous menace to Eggman's ambitions that he usually was. Awake, he was dangerous. Asleep, he was...harmless.

Metal hugged Sonic closer, still taking care not to wake him, and leaned back into the wall. As he began to switch his systems offline, he felt everything come together.

He still didn't know what he was supposed to do, but he figured he was closer now than ever before.

11 hours, 38 minutes, and 13 seconds. Sonic had slept for 11 hours, 38 minutes, and 13 seconds. Of course, Metal had finished his routine maintenance protocol and come online far earlier, but he hadn't moved. He needed to sit perfectly still until Sonic awoke.

Sonic stirred. He squinted his eyes, then blinked.

Metal noticed immediately and said, "Good morning, Sonic. Has your subjective well-being improved?"

Sonic did not reply. Instead, he groaned and rubbed his forehead, so Metal added, "How do you feel?"

Again, there was no reply. Sonic slowly peeled open his eyes. He paused with his forehead pressed against Metal’s chest, then immediately rolled off Metal and onto the floor, where he continued to
lay with his face in the dust.

"I assume you need a moment to wake up. I will get you a drink," Metal said.

As he walked outside the closet, he scooped up the bucket and strolled to the rushing the water. He knelt by the ledge, filled the bucket full, then returned to closet. Sonic still hadn't moved.

"Here." Metal place the bucket at Sonic's feet.

Sonic continued to lay on the floor.

"I know you are not asleep. You slept as long as needed. Come on, drink this. It is healthy. You need to keep up your strength." Metal knelt by Sonic's side. He brought the bucket up, but froze as he saw Sonic's barely managing to hold back tears.

"Look, I know how you feel." Metal placed his hand over Sonic's shoulder. "I have spent most of my existence ruminating over similar thoughts. But now is not the time. We need to get out of here, and you need your strength, so…"

Sonic said nothing, but a single tear escaped and slid down his cheek.

Metal set the bucket on the floor. He knew exactly the pain Sonic was in, and he had to help Sonic, no matter what it took. Not only because they would never escape if Sonic was this upset, but because he wouldn't wish that pain on his worse enemy, let alone his most valuable ally.

If he was to help Sonic, he had to relate to him on his level, and Metal knew the best way to get through to him.

"Hey Sonic, what do you call 'light' water?"

Sonic gaped at Metal and finally spoke. "What?"

Metal stood up triumphantly. "Gluon-free!"

Sonic just stared at him, so Metal continued, "It is a joke. I told you the water is healthy. A common category of food people consider healthy is 'gluten-free.' The gluon is the subatomic particle that holds matter together, so it is not present in light. Hence the joke. Gluon-free. It is funny because it is impossible."

Sonic stared at Metal for a moment. A small smile cracked across his face. He laughed, quietly at first, but his voice grew louder until his laughter filled the whole closet.

"That joke is terrible! I mean, it's wonderful, but it's also terrible." Sonic sighed, sat up, and brought the bucket to his lips. He took a single gulp. "Alright, as soon as we get a chance, we're going to work on your sense of humor."

"Well I thought it was flawless. Regardless, you did not answer my prior inquiry. How do you feel?"

Sonic sighed and dropped the bucket to his side. "Physically? I feel fine, although my back is still a little sore."

"I expected that," Metal said as he reached for the towel and the cable. "The nanites in your blood formed a scab across the wound, although they can only do so much. They only recognize simple patterns and repair minor aberrations. It is your cells that will have to fully repair the wound, and
they operate much more slowly. You won't get an infection, but your body still has to repair the muscle damage."

Metal knelt behind Sonic and pressed the towel against his back. Sonic seemed to understand what he was doing because he lifted his arms just enough for Metal to wrap the cable back in place.

"You said you feel fine physically." Metal finished tightening the cable and stood up. Sonic's gloves had dried over the door, so Metal swept them into his hands and returned to Sonic's side. He dropped the gloves in Sonic's palms. "But how do you feel otherwise?"

Sonic gazed at the gloves before dropping them on the floor. He looked away. "I'm fine. I guess. It's just...I don't feel like myself. No, that's not right. I'm not myself. My foot is magnetic. I drink chemicals. I failed to fix you, and I failed to free that flicky."

He buried his face in his hands. "I thought I was supposed to be Sonic the Hedgehog. Failure is not what I do, and yet I feel like failure is all I've accomplished here. It's not right. What happened to me? What am I anymore?"

Metal pulled Sonic's hands away from his face. The red glow from his optics illuminated the emerald-green in Sonic's eyes. "I wish I had the answer to that. Truly I do. But I cannot tell you what you are."

He took a glove from the floor and slid it over Sonic's hand. "But I can tell you what you once told me. What are you? That is not for me to decide. Only you can answer the question."

"But I don't know the answer! That's the problem!"

Metal grasped Sonic's hand. "Once, I was like you. I thought every question had an answer. If I could only gather enough data, I would uncover the truth. But now I realize this is simply not true. There are questions we cannot answer."

He slid the other glove on Sonic's hand. "But, there is hope, for we at least know we do not know. You say you do not know what you are. But consider: you know you do not know what you are. That is something. It is a sliver of knowledge, and it is a start."

As Sonic looked down at his hands, Metal dropped his shoe into them. "So I do not know what you are, nor do I know what I am. But there is one thing I do know."

He leaned down and set his hand on Sonic's shoulder. "I know that if we work together, we will escape. And if we escape, maybe, just maybe we will both find an answer."

Sonic said nothing as he slipped the shoe on his foot. As he turned his head up, Metal offered him his hand. Slowly, Sonic placed his hand in Metal's palm, and Metal lifted him to his feet.

His hand lingered, but he quickly brushed his quills and looked away. "You're right. It's not the answer I wanted to hear, but you're right. I suppose if it were that easy, we wouldn't be here. But..."

Sonic sighed. "Thanks, Mets. For everything. You're a good friend."

Metal's optics widened. "We are...friends?"

"Of course! You help me, and I help you. That's what friends do."

"We are...friends," Metal repeated. "I have never had a friend before."
Sonic opened his mouth to reply, but an ear splitting screech, like that of a halting train, cut him off. The sound grew louder and louder until it abruptly stopped just outside the door. It was followed by the rhythmic sound of metallic footsteps trending toward them.

"Keep your voice down," Metal whispered. He grabbed the mop and shoved it into Sonic's hands. As Sonic merely stared at the handle, Metal stepped behind him. Placing his hands over Sonic's, he twisted the mop so the bristles blocked Sonic's face, then withdrew his hands to rest on Sonic's shoulders.

Sonic had no time to respond as a dark silhouette moved to block what little light streamed in from outside.

Metal leaned over and whispered into his ear, "Act like a mop."
Achilles and the Tortoise

"Whatever Logic is good enough to tell me is worth writing down,' said the Tortoise. 'So enter it in your note-book, please. We will call it:

(E) If A and B and C are true, Z must be true.

Until I've granted that, of course I needn't grant Z. So it's quite a necessary step, you see?"

- Lewis Carroll

To act like a mop implied a philosophical dimension Sonic had yet considered. Did Metal mean to suggest he should clean up the mess of another? Sonic supposed he had done so often enough, although cleaning up after Eggman's latest scheme usually involved more destruction than organization.

Sonic pondered this as the emerging shadow grew dark and the mop bristles poke into his quills. Despite the fact whatever was casting it moved painfully slowly, its steps still clanged perilously close.

But as the light struck the shadow, it suddenly evaporated, and Sonic could see its owner clearly. It was nothing more than a blank and simple Egg Pawn with a surprisingly modern jet pack strapped to its back, and it was clamoring into the closet. It was only then Sonic realized perhaps Metal meant the mop thing much more literally, so he froze, unmoving with the mop in his face and Metal hiding behind him.

"It's just an Egg Pawn," Sonic hissed under his breath. "I think I can take out an Egg Pawn."

"Ssh, be quiet. Mops do not speak," Metal whispered, pressing down on Sonic's shoulders.

That was true; Metal had a point. Mops were speechless. So Sonic returned to perfect stillness as the Egg Pawn marched toward him.

It clanged forward with clumsy steps and came to an abrupt halt in front of Sonic. It stared at him, or behind him, Sonic couldn't tell. The only thing he could do was continue to stand, feeling the weight of Metal's hands on his shoulders and the air stinging his unblinking eyelids.

The Egg Pawn must have come to some decision because it lifted its hand and grasped the mop handle between Sonic's palms. Its joints screeched as it struggled to lift both the mop and the two of them into the air. It then lumbered from the closet, nearly dropping the mop more than once, and finally stopped near the edge of the waterfall. The rushing water was so close that Sonic wrinkled his nose when the water misted his face.

The Egg Pawn lingered at the water, shook the jet pack, and the terrible screeching returned at once. With a clumsy wave, it lifted the mop, Sonic and Metal dangling from the handle, and jumped.

They fell like rocks. The jet pack whined and hissed as the water rushed toward them. Sonic screamed, only to have Metal throw his hand over his mouth. But as the water lapped at his heels, and the jet pack screeched at its peak, the Egg Pawn jerked up. Sonic's stomach heaved, and he was suddenly glad he had nothing to eat but water.
The Egg Pawn leveled itself in the air, then turned and followed the pipe down. The passage was narrow, and Sonic's knees splashed into the water below them. His wrists strained under the combined weight of Metal and himself, but he held firm. The passage grew narrower and narrower, the water higher and higher, and just as Sonic thought the water would swallow them completely, the Egg Pawn pulled up. At long last, Sonic saw salvation, for just ahead was a faint light, like a single, dim candle in a dark room, and it poured through the end of the tunnel. The light grew, brighter and brighter, until the Egg Pawn burst through it.

Sonic slammed his eyes shut, for the light was bright and irritating, but after a moment, he squeezed one eye open. What he saw shocked him, and he immediately gaped with both eyes. Trees and grass spread across the horizon like a blanket, and the dark night sky pressed down from above. The wind, fresh and cold, bite his skin, and Sonic gasped, feeling the scents of the open air fill his lungs.

He was outside!

The Egg Pawn wobbled, screeched, then dropped. The ground approached dangerously fast, but the Egg Pawn leveled out at the last moment. Water poured from the sewer line into what had once been a small creek, creating a river of wastewater runoff.

The grass, and the trees, and the water all mesmerized Sonic, discolored though they were, but he felt Metal pull on quills. Not hard, though firm enough to get his attention.

"Now is our chance. Take him out!" Metal shouted over the screeching clamor of the jet pack.

Sonic grinned. He was outside, and he was about to destroy a robot. This was how things should be.

"I'm on it!" Sonic said. With a single, smooth motion, he swung back, then launched his feet forward while still grasping the mop. Metal was stuck to his robotic foot, but his organic one flung free, and he smashing the Egg Pawn's chest with his heel. Its eyes sparked, and the whole unit shuddered. The jet pack sputtered and died. Without the jet pack, the Egg Pawn dropped all altitude and crashed into the river below, taking both the mop and the two of them with it.

As soon as he was out of the air, Sonic felt the water splashing all around him. His face submerged, and he panicked. He had avoid death by drowning so far, but this time would be different. This time, the water would win. He screamed and floundered, throwing his arms into the air.

"Help me! Metal! I can't swim!"

Metal did nothing but loom over him. "Somehow, I think you will survive."

Sonic went to retort, but he felt the ground beneath his feet. He blinked, then stood up. The water merely brushed against his shins, but no higher.

"Oh," Sonic said, brushing his quills back and looking aside in embarrassment. "Well you can't blame me. Normally water ends badly. What are you doing?"

Metal had throw his arms around the Egg Pawn, and he was dragging it to the shore.

"You recall how I said an aerial maintenance unit likely patrolled the waterway?" Metal said. He dropped the Egg Pawn in the grass.

"You think this guy is it?" Sonic said. He gingerly walked across the river and shook himself dry on the shore.
"Yes. It stopped in the closet to for the mop. That was why we were able to escape. It did not notice us."

"I knew Egg Pawns were stupid, but I didn't know they were that stupid," Sonic said.

"Indeed. And further, I suspect that was not the only supply station the Egg Pawn visited. It likely followed a route."

Sonic walked over to Metal and inspected the Egg Pawn himself. Though he had kicked a hole through its chest, the rest of it appeared damaged. He understood where Metal was going with this. "You think we can figure out where the Egg Pawn was headed?"

"Yes, and with that information, we will know how to proceed," Metal said. He clenched his fists. "Nega has done nothing but throw us around like puppets, and we will never escape if we continue to let him make all the moves."

Sonic grinned with excitement. Metal's plan was perfect, but that was just like Metal. Sonic knew Metal was smart, cunning, and strategic. Whatever Metal decided they should do next would be exactly right.

He watched as Metal pulled a cable from his maintenance panel and slapped it into a port on the Egg Pawn's head. "I will examine this unit's hard drive for information. In the meantime, can you scout the area? Do not go far, we do not want to get separated again, but it would be useful to know what is in the immediate vicinity."

"I thought you'd never ask!" Sonic said, and he leapt forward. "I'll have this area clear before you can say 'lead chili dogs.'"

"Why would I say—" Metal started, but he didn't finish because Sonic was already gone.

Of all the joys in his life, none surpassed the feeling of the wind blowing through his quills as he ran. Sonic lived to run, and he lived for the wind. It blew all the cares and worries from his mind, just as his pounding heart flushed the stress from his body. No matter what happened to him, as long as he could run, he would be free, and as long as he was free, he could do anything.

He backtracked along the river, but came to a stop when he found the river head. Water was pouring from a large sewer line that jetted out from an enormous tower. The building itself was part skyscraper, part factory with sleek, black concrete covering the exterior. It rose higher and higher until the building pierced the sky itself. It would have risen above the clouds, if there were any.

Which was part of what made the night sky so eerie. Sonic hadn't noticed it at first, he was too excited to be outside, but the sky was utterly dark. There were no stars, no clouds, no moon in the sky above, and instead of the familiar stillness of the night, the sky had the stillness of the void. Sonic stared at it. His fur stood on end.

He tore his gaze to the forest. Even the trees and grass weren't quite right. Though the tree leaves were green, the trunks were yellow, and they gently glowed like some type of alien fungus. Kneeling down, Sonic ran the grass between his fingers. At first, he had thought the grass to merely be a dark green, but as he examined it more closely, he saw the blades were in fact beet purple.

His ears swiveled as he listened. This was a forest, and though he had hoped to hear the familiar scurry of wildlife, there was nothing. There were no birds or insects. The only sound was the
rushing water and his own breath.

With one last look at the tower, Sonic shuddered and began to walk back along the bank of the river. He knew too well that the river contained no life, and neither did the fake forest with its yellow trees. A profound loneliness crept into his mind. He and Metal were the only living creatures in this bizarre wasteland.

Sonic's walk sped into a jog, then a sprint. He couldn't stand the blank sky, the empty forest, and the poisonous river. The isolation was overbearing, and Sonic wanted nothing more than to be with someone else, and to know he wasn't alone in the universe.

Metal came into view across the horizon, and Sonic rushed to his side. He threw his arms around Metal's shoulders and buried his face in his chest. As long as he was with Metal, he wouldn't be alone under the void of the sky.

"Sonic? What happened? What did you find?" Metal said. He stood limply.

"Oh...uh...nothing much," Sonic said. He let go of Metal and took a step backward. "We're alone out here. There's no one else. The trees are fake, the grass is fake, and there's that tower. Nega built some kind of huge tower. It must have been where we were trapped. And the sky! What's wrong with the sky? Where are the stars?"

"You noticed it as well," Metal said. "It is not just the stars that are missing."

Metal lifted his head and looked distantly to the sky. "There are no radio waves either. I have been scanning this entire time, and I have picked up nothing, not even the ubiquitous cosmic microwave background radiation of the universe."

"Cosmic microwave back...what?" Sonic said blankly.

"Cosmic microwave background radiation, or the CMB for short. It is the signature of the Big Bang, and it can be detected anywhere in the universe. To find its absence here is proudly disturbing, to say the least."

Sonic cast his eyes to the sky and shuddered. "But where did the stars go?"

"This is only a conjecture, and I could be wrong, but I believe we are somewhere so remote that light from the rest of the universe cannot reach us," Metal said. "Light can only travel so quickly, and if we were far enough away, we would lose all possibility of contact with the rest of the universe. We would never see the stars again."

"Oh," Sonic said. It was all he could say.

"But, we should not worry about that now. As I said, I may be mistaken. There is good news still." Metal gestured to the Egg Pawn. "This unit's hard drive did contain coordinates to several supply stations. Most pointed behind us, to what I assume would be inside the tower you mentioned. But there was a single coordinate set that pointed approximately 235.6 kilometers northwest from our location."

"So what do you think is there?" Sonic asked.

Metal shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. But I do know one thing. Nega was determined to keep us in that tower, so whatever is out there is probably something he did not want us to find."

"That makes sense, I guess," Sonic said. His gaze had drifted back to the terrible, empty void
above. It made him feel so small. There was the entire universe, as big as it was, and he was but a tiny, insignificant speck lost in the corner of infinity no one could ever find.

Metal looked at him and paused. After a moment, he began to walk away.

That caught Sonic's attention. "Mets? Where are you going?"

"You promised to race me as soon as we got out of there. Well, we are out now. I will race you to the tower," Metal said. He lifted his hand as he walked, though he did not look back.

Sonic snapped up. "You want to race now? But what about your engine?"

"It is no matter. I am so superior that I do not even need it to win."

Sonic stood still, but Metal kept walking, and now he was several yards away. Sonic ran forward and was at Metal's side in an instant.

"But...you said it yourself. We can't split up! If I run ahead, and you get left back here, we're doomed!"

Metal turned to Sonic. His optics glittered with amusement.

Sonic continued, "And I don't even know where this place is! You're the one with the coordinates! This is hardly a fair race!"

"As I said, I will win, with or without my engine."

Metal continued to walk forward, but Sonic stopped and said, "You've got to be kidding me!"

Metal looked back and emitted a series of beeps that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

Sonic's eye widened. Metal was kidding him. He slapped his forehead and murmured under his breath, "Two can play at this game."

He leapt behind Metal, and before Metal had time to react, he threw his hands underneath him and scooped him into his arms. Metal was at a loss for words, but he did beep in protest.

"Oh no, you said this place was way far, and I'm not walking at this pace. If you want to race, then we're actually going to go at a race's pace."

Metal folded his arms and pretended to pout, though Sonic knew Metal had planned this all along. Metal was smart enough to not to argue with the optimal method of transportation.

Sonic took off and ran as fast as he could. He relished the familiar sensation of the wind in his quills, although this time was much better than before because he wasn't alone. The wind was cold against his face, but Metal was warm against his chest.

Metal guided him as he ran, and after nearly half an hour, Sonic trotted to a halt. The fake forest was the same here as it had been back there, but a large device, what appeared to be an elevator shaft, cut into the ground. It was unremarkable, up kept just enough to prevent falling into disrepair, but not enough to suggest whoever owned it had any sense of pride.

Yet, there appeared to be no elevator. Sonic looked down, and he saw nothing but the deep darkness.

"Is there anything down there?" Metal said, turning his head to peer down while Sonic still held
"I don't know, but there's only one way to find out!" Sonic said, and he jumped into the elevator shaft.
"We succeed only as we identify in life, or in war, or in anything else, a single overriding objective, and make all other considerations bend to that one objective."

- Dwight D. Eisenhower

Metal had watched Sonic run down buildings before, though never in person. It was from the dim basement were Eggman stocked all his endless footage of Sonic. Metal had watched all of those tapes obsessively, scanning each one multiple times, and studying Sonic's every move. It was on those yellowed archival tapes that Metal had seen how Sonic could avoid the fall by running down a building.

So Metal was neither surprised nor afraid as Sonic held him and ran down the empty elevator shaft. Though it was nearly dark, a series of safety lights provided minor illumination. Each bulb sat in a plastic casing, and they zipped by in rapid succession, the yellow lights blinking away like the distant lights of an airplane.

Nearing the floor, Sonic jumped and landed at the bottom. Once he was secure himself, he carefully placed Metal on his feet and turned to stretch his arms in the air.

Based on Sonic's speed, Metal calculated they must be at least several hundred meters underground, and ahead, there stood a single, steel door. It was utterly utilitarian and built to stop the elements, but nothing more. Countless leaves had drifted along the threshold and grown into tiny piles. Metal reasoned they must be what the Egg Pawn was meant to clean.

"I do not know what lays on the other side. Are you ready?" Metal said as he turned to Sonic.

"Please." Sonic shook his head. "I've been drowned, gassed, turned into a robot, and made to drink chemicals. What could possibly be worse than that?"

"Let us hope we do not find the answer to that question," Metal said. He pushed the door open, and the leaves rushed inward. They drifted up into the wind and flowed into the corridor beyond.

Whatever lay ahead, it was too dark to see, but just as Metal was activating his headlight, a light flashed overhead. Another flashed further down, followed by another. Each light turned on further and further down the tunnel until it was distance, not darkness, that limited his vision.

He stepped into a tunnel of pure concrete. Although it was far from spacious, it wasn't oppressively narrow either, for the tunnel's circumference was at least a few meters. Through the center, a great, steel-wrapped pipe stretched endless into the distance with countless wires popping in and out, while a cold mist covered the floor.

Metal examined the pipe and the walls, scanning left and right for a microphone, camera, or any other surveillance equipment. To his great surprise, he found nothing. They appeared to be entirely unsupervised, but there was no sense in taking unnecessary risks, so Metal crept silently down the hall with Sonic following closely behind.

The pipe never ended. It kept going and going, and Metal figured they had walked at least a full
kilometer until the monotony finally broke.

Metal saw it first. A large panel, littered with buttons, stood just ahead on the front of the pipe. It looked like a control panel, and above it, a blank monitor hung on the wall. Walking up to it, he ran his fingers across the control panel, and immediately sprang backward as he felt a small jolt in his fingertips.

The screen above lit up, and the machine began to buzz. It was a horrible sound, one that plagued the depths of his memory banks.

It was the sound of the magnet room.

The memory flashed through his processors. It was as if he could feel himself stuck to the wall again, helpless against the electromagnetic current ravaging his hard drive. The only reason he survived last time was his spare drive, but he couldn't rely on it again. This time, he would lose all his memories, all his data, and without that, he may as well be dead.

He stumbled backward, grabbing the first thing he felt, and closed his fingers tightly around it. He clicked off his optics, preparing himself for the worst, but the buzzing wasn't growing louder. It merely hung at a low tone.

He felt something squeeze his hand, and he looked back. In his haste, he had grabbed Sonic's hand. For his part, Sonic merely shrugged, though his face concealed a small smile.

"I thought...the magnet..." Metal murmured and pulled his hand back. "Nevermind. This device clearly utilizes some type of electromagnet, though it is not nearly as powerful as the one we found before."

"What do you think it is?" Sonic said.

"Between the control panel and the monitor, I believe this is some sort of detector. It must be measuring whatever is in the pipe, and it is using a fairly strong electromagnet to do so."

Metal looked at the screen above. Now that the device was active, a stream of data blurred across it.

"Given the enormous size and deep underground location, as well as the magnet, I think this must be a particle accelerator."

Sonic stared at him. "A what?"

"A particle accelerator. Scientists use it to make new discoveries in physics," Metal said. "Using a series of magnets, this device speeds up hydrogen nuclei to near light speed and smashes them together. The extreme speed gives the particles enormous energy, and because mass is energy, their collision can sometimes create particles no one has ever seen before."

"But why would Nega have one?"

"I am not sure. We need to investigate further."

Metal turned backward. Just ahead, a shabby office door plastered the tunnel wall. Metal nodded to Sonic, and they crept toward it. Once they arrived, he placed his hand over the doorknob and slowly turned it open.

Inside, a light switch stood to his left, and he flicked it. A weak bulb flashed overhead, revealing a
remarkably mundane office. A cheap, particleboard table stood in the center, and next to it leaned a chipped filing cabinet. Metal walked up to it and ran his fingers over the cabinet drawers. He discovered they were unlocked, so he pulled them open. Dozens of binders and folders cramped the inside, and he picked one up.

He leafed through the paper. Each page brimmed with complex mathematical equations and figures, the likes of which he had never seen before.

"What's it say?" Sonic said. He was peering over Metal's shoulder, and he was so close Metal felt his breath as he spoke.

"I am not sure I fully understand. This is incredibly complex. It will take days, maybe even weeks, for me to understand this. The research in this paper is intense, and it appears Nega has derived a fully new system of mathematics to test his theories."

Metal looked up from the paper. "Nevertheless, I understand the research on a basic level. It involves the very nature of reality itself."

Sonic said nothing, so Metal continued, "The universe is complex and often very strange, but the rules that govern its behavior are actually quite simple. You can think of the universe as a board game with three pieces and four rules."

Metal gestured to the room around them. "For example, consider this room. What is it made out of?"

Sonic scrunched his face in thought. "Wait, don't tell me, I know this...everything is made out of...molecules!"

"That is true. But what are molecules made out of?"

Sonic stared blankly, then shrugged.

"Molecules are made from atoms, and atoms are made from protons, neutrons, and electrons. Electrons are elementary particles. They cannot be broken any smaller, but protons and neutrons can be broken into quarks."

He held up two fingers. "Thus we have two of the three game pieces: leptons, which include particles like the electron, and quarks. Those two make up all matter in the universe. And for the things that are not matter—"

Metal gestured at the fluorescent bulb above. "We have a family of particles called bosons. Light is not matter, so the photon is a boson."

"That is all you need to create most everything you can see. But of course, a game with no rules would be boring, because nothing would ever happen. The same is true of the universe. Leptons, quarks, and bosons can interact in four different ways, and we call each of those interactions a 'force.'"

Metal pointed at Sonic's robotic leg. "For example, what force does your leg harness?"

"I remember what you told me. It's electromagnetism."

"That is correct. The electromagnetic force is perhaps the most obvious of the four. It binds atoms together into molecules, and serves as the foundation for all electronic devices."
"And you will recall Nega's fusion reactor. It harnessed the power of two more forces: the strong and weak nuclear forces. The strong force binds quarks into protons and neutrons, while the weak force transforms the different types of quarks into one another.

"That leaves the last of the four forces. It is the weakest force, and the most poorly understood."

"Wait, I got this," Sonic said as he held up his hand. "All this stuff has totally stupid names, so I bet the fourth force is even worse. It's probably called the 'extra weak force', and it turns up into down."

"Close, but it is the weak nuclear force that turns up into down. The fourth force is trillions and trillions of times weaker than the weak force. We call this force…"

Metal looked up from the pages. "Gravity."

Sonic stared for a moment, but when Metal said nothing else, he threw his hands up. "Gravity? You're telling me it's plain as day that the medium-hot force keeps all the corks bound together, but no one knows why I don't just float away into space?"

"That is correct," Metal continued without any hesitation. "This theory is called the standard model of physics. It gives us the three fundamental particles: quarks, leptons, and bosons, and the four forces: electromagnetism, the strong force, the weak force, and gravity. I know it may seem strange, but this is all well understood. All except gravity, which no one can explain. Scientists have spent decades attempting to properly place gravity in the standard model, and no one has ever solved it. That is, until now."

Metal flipped through the pages, "Three particles and four forces. There are seven pieces to the standard model. Now tell me: what else is mysterious and comes in seven?"

Sonic's eyes widened. "The Chaos Emeralds!"

"Nega seems to think so," Metal said. He pulled a page from the folder and held it up so both he and Sonic could examine it.

Scribbled on the page were pictures of the seven Chaos Emeralds, each one carefully filled in with a different color: silver, red, cyan, purple, blue, yellow, and green. And below each color was a different piece of the standard model: quarks, leptons, bosons, the weak force, the strong force, electromagnetism, and gravity.

"You see here?" Metal pointed to the yellow Emerald. "It says, 'electromagnetism.' The yellow Chaos Emerald controls the electromagnetic force! Remember the Chaos drive that we snapped just after roboticizing your leg?"

Sonic gaped. "It was yellow!"

"People have harnessed the Chaos Emeralds before, but never on the subatomic level, and no one has ever unified gravity into the standard model. And yet, according to these notes, Nega has! If he can harness the Chaos Emeralds to control each piece of the standard model—"

Metal closed the notes and looked Sonic directly in his eyes. "It would give him complete control over every aspect of reality itself."

Sonic opened his mouth to speak, but the rapid sound of pressurized gas cut off his voice. A dark streak burst through the mist, and Metal saw it just in time to drag Sonic to the side of the tunnel. He shoved the notes into his crate and watched the shadow turn back. It flung forward, and as it
reared into the light, Metal saw the gleaming, metallic frame of E-2048.

"Oh my, what horrendous manners! It seems I can't turn my back from you for even a single minute. How ever did you two find your way here?" Nega's voice cracked over E-2048's radio.

Metal held perfectly still and leaned to whisper in Sonic's ear, "How did he know we were here? I checked for hidden cameras everywhere."

"What's the matter, Sonic?" Nega laughed over the radio. "Did you lose your voice when you lost your leg? I bet you're as slow as ever with that scrap of metal slowing you down."

Sonic threw his head up in response. "Ha! You wish! I'm as fast as ever, with or without my metal leg!"

"When I said scrap of metal, I didn't mean your leg," Nega said. "Now, catch me if you can, rodent, although I'm sure you won't."

"Sonic, be careful," Metal hissed, although Sonic never heard it because Nega's laughter exploded to fill every inch of the tunnel, and E-2048's engine revved into a roar.

Sonic leapt up, charging forward to strike, but E-2048 flew backward just as his spines tore into the air. Sonic sailed ahead, stomped his feet in the ground, and quickly turned back to face his opponent, but E-2048 paid him no mind. Instead, it turned around and fled out through the office door and back into the tunnel. Sonic growled, then leapt forward in pursuit.

It was all Metal could do but run, for the fight was moving away from him. He charged out the door himself, though the distance between him and the other combatants was growing far faster than he could run.

"Wait! Come back!" Metal shouted.

Sonic must not have heard him, because he leapt again with his metallic foot outstretched. He obviously hoped to stun E-2048 as he had done before, but this time, E-2048 was prepared. Its arm flashed forward just as Sonic's foot would have hit its optics. Sonic uselessly clicked the magnet in his foot, hoping to gain enough traction, but his foot slipped and he fell. Before he could hit the ground, E-2048 thrust forward and clenched his claws around him. Sonic struggled, kicking his feet and clicking the magnet on and off, then froze with horror as he saw the reason his magnet foot was useless.

E-2048 had plastic claws.

"I've got you!" Nega's voice boomed from the radio. "Now, let's be off. You're of no use to me here!"

Metal had to remain calm, for although Sonic was in terrible trouble, panic would be of no use. His engine might be broken, and his pace slow, but Nega was making the same mistake he always made. He was ignoring Metal, and this time, Metal would use it to his advantage.

"Come on, Nega, if you're gonna take me somewhere, you could at least be a good host and tell me where," Sonic said. He hadn't give up struggling, though it was proving increasingly useless.

Metal continued to run. If only he had his engine, he could save Sonic in no time. But E-2048 was moving away, carrying Sonic faster than he could run.

And yet, Metal had his plan. He reached into his crate, pulled out the bottle of sodium hydroxide,
and with a great heave, he threw it. Although he had aimed it for E-2048's plastic arm, it missed, instead splattering across E-2048's optical screen.

E-2048 sputtered, unable to see, and unable to clear the liquid from its face with Sonic in its claws. Its engines hissed, and it blindly launched upward, hitting the ceiling and plummeting to the floor.

Metal ran. He was nearly to his friend's side. He would rip Sonic from E-2048's claws, and Sonic would lifted him into his arms, and they would both be free.

"What the—oh, how tedious," Nega said over the radio.

Metal kept running. He was only a few meters away now, but Nega didn't stop, "Listen, Paperweight. Stop. Just stop for a minute. I have a deal that might interesting you, but I am only going to say this once, so pay attention."

Metal skidded to a halt in front of E-2048. The steam from its engines misted the surface of his optical screen, and he wiped the condensation away with his hand.

"Nega, what do you want? Why have you captured me and Sonic?" Metal said.

"See, that's just it. Sonic was the only one I was after. You, my dear, little copied tin can, just tagged along. When E-2048 tried to warp away with my dear hedgehog, you came along by mistake."

Metal said nothing. He had suspected as much. Through their entire adventure, Nega had only really talked to Sonic. Metal was but a useless copy to him, and Nega would have no use for him.

"But why? Why the maze? I know you have been toying with us, Nega, and I demand you explain yourself," Metal said.

"Is it really so hard to figure out? You two did put on such a good show. Oh ho ho!"

Metal clenched his fists, but Nega continued to laugh. "So, Paperweight, here's the deal. I don't need you here, and as fun as this has been, you've outgrown your role as my toy. Truth be told, you've become a bit of a nuisance, and I really don't want you here.

"But I am a reasonable man, and I think we can come to an agreement, if you'll only hear me out. I don't want you here, and you don't want to be here, so how about you just leave? Skedattle. Go home. Don't come back."

Metal heard Nega click something over the radio. Instantly, the air in front of him ripped apart and sunlight burst through. Metal felt wind blow through the air, and he heard the chirping of birds. There, through a mysterious hole in the air, shone the autumn forest he had left so long ago.

Metal hesitated. There was freedom, and all he had to do was walk.

"Oh, right. Nearly forgot. We can't have you leaving empty handed. My silly counterpart told you to get the Chaos Emerald, didn't he?"

Metal heard that strange click again, and the green Chaos Emerald flashed into existence in front of the portal. Metal stared in awe. There they both were: the single object Eggman ordered him to get and the way home.

And somewhere, deep in the most fundamental recessed of his motherboard, his most basic programming screamed through his processors: He was programmed to follow orders. He had been
ordered to find the Chaos Emerald. He had been ordered to return to Eggman's base.

Eggman would be delighted. He would have the Emerald, and he'd never see Sonic again.

Metal lifted his hand toward the Chaos Emerald. He stared at it as the green prism reflected across his face. Slowly, his fingers closed around it, and he felt its smooth, powerful surface in his hand.

Sonic went to shout, but E-2048 move its claw over his mouth, and the only sound he made was a muffled choke.

"I always knew you were reasonable, Paperweight. No hard feelings, hmm? Oh, and say hi to my dear counterpart on the other side."

Metal stared at the gem in his hand, then looked up at the portal blazing through the air. He turned, watching as Sonic struggle in E-2048's grasp.

Metal Sonic only had one goal. He was build for only a single reason. Nothing else mattered, not even his other directives.

*Primary Objective: Neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.*

Metal rushed forward, leaping past the portal, and threw himself onto E-2048's chassis. He clawed all around, searching for the familiar gap where the exposed power cable would be. But there was no gap, for in its place, Metal only found a smooth panel. He felt E-2048's claw strike against his chest, and Metal flew backward, skidding across the floor with his forehead.

With only one claw grasped around him, Sonic tore himself up and threw all his weight into a single kick. His foot struck E-2048's other claw, and the robot's grip slipped further, but Sonic didn't relent. He spun up, flying forward in a spin dash, and his quills sliced through the center of E-2048's chassis. The robot flew backward, having lost its grip entirely, and crashed into a sparking heap.

Before Metal even had the chance to stand up, Sonic was at his side. He threw his arms around Metal's chest and lifted him to his feet. Metal paused, looking in Sonic's eyes and feeling his hands around his chest.

"I knew you wouldn't leave me," Sonic said, and he wrapped his arms around Metal again. This time, Metal finally knew what he was supposed to do. He wrapped his arms around Sonic's waist and buried his face in Sonic's shoulder.

"Of course I would not leave you. We are friends, are we not? And that makes you the single, most important thing," Metal said.

"Why you buggy, obsolete hunk of scrap! If that's how you want to play, so be it!" Nega screeched over the radio, and with another click, the portal vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Metal didn't have time to respond. The particle accelerator began to hum. It was gradual at first, but the sound grew louder and louder until it was a deafening roar. Ahead, Metal saw steam flood the tunnel as E-2048 flew down through the corridor and disappeared.

Sonic threw himself under Metal, lifted him into his arms, and prepared to run down the corridor. He could only take a few steps before he had to skid to a halt, as a slab of concrete rushed down from the ceiling and crashed into the pipe, completely blocking the tunnel.

He turned to carry Metal the other way, but another slab collapsed there too, and there was no way
out. They were trapped, with nowhere to go, and the humming only grew louder.

The machine continued to screech, smoke beginning to rise from the seams, drifting like motes to the ceiling. Just as Metal thought the noise could grow no louder, the particle accelerator shuddered, and the smoke began to stream.

"We're stuck! And it's gonna blow!" Sonic shouted.

Metal looked down at the brilliant green gem, then thrust the Chaos Emerald into Sonic's hand.

"Get us out of here!" Metal said.

Sonic's eyes widened, and he nodded. With his arms wrapped tightly around Metal, he directed the flow of energy from the Emerald.

The accelerator exploded, and they disappeared in a green flash.

Chapter End Notes

I illustrated a scene from Chapter 11. You can see it here: http://fav.me/dahe51u
"The wonderful thing about standards is that there are so many of them to choose from."

- Grace Hopper

Sonic gasped. The air was thin, yet wonderful, and all that time he had spent in those horrible caves and corridors only made cold air feel better against his fur. For even though it was cold, the wind's movement meant it was alive. Unlike the sky, which still hovered above utterly dead and motionless.

After using Chaos Control, both he and Metal found themselves atop a sheer, mountain cliff, which meant he was now all the closer to that terrible, starless void and further still from his life and friends back on Earth.

Sonic shook his head and looked back to the mountain field scattered before him. Scant sagebrush disappeared into the perpetual nightfall. Their twisted, harsh forms and purple needles struggled to live in the high altitude.

"Interesting. I did not imagine a mountain in this world," Metal said. He slipped out of Sonic's hands and stood up.

"Why's that?" Sonic asked.

"Mountains are the result of plate tectonic activity. They can only exist in a world with active geology, which means the core of the planet is hot. Wherever we are, this planet is alive."

Sonic shook his head. "See, that's been bothering me. There are no stars, so there must be no sun either. But why are there plants? Don't they need the sunlight?"

"It is not only plants that need sunlight. Without the warmth of a star, this planet should be completely frozen." Metal knelt down and snapped a twig from a sagebrush. It snapped away easily, as if the plant were deadwood.

"This plant is dying," he said.

Sonic looked up at the sky. It was as horrible and empty as ever, although he thought, for just a moment, he saw a tiny cloud struggling into existence across the horizon.

"Given all the data, I think this planet must have lost its sun recently. It could not have happened more than a few days ago. In fact, given how long we have been here, it must have happened just as we were captured. Which means we need to escape soon. It is getting colder everyday, and if we are here too long, we will freeze with the planet."

The wind stirred again, and this time, Sonic shivered. Metal wasn't kidding.

He continued, "Nega must be unbelievably powerful. The sky is empty because we are so far away not even the speed of light is fast enough to reach us. So if Nega moved an entire planet out here, it means he found a way to move faster than the speed of light."
Metal clenched his fists and gazed at the crate on his side. "It is as I suspected. Nega has found a way to control the very laws of physics, and he is using the Chaos Emeralds to do so."

"That reminds me." Sonic opened his palm and revealed the Chaos Emerald which shone dimly green in the darkness. "Mets, I hate to tell you this, but this Emerald...it's fake."

Metal scooped the Emerald into his hand, and Sonic continued, "I knew as soon as I used Chaos Control. It still has some power, but no more than a Chaos drive. Nega must still have the real one."

"This does not surprise me," Metal said as he slid the Emerald into his crate. "I suppose that portal was probably fake too. It could have lead anywhere. Although, knowing Nega simply wished to be rid of me, I do not think it lead anywhere pleasant."

"Did you know the portal was fake when Nega offered it to you?" Sonic said.

Metal shook his head. "I had not considered the thought, although now I know to update my models with Nega's untrustworthiness. Still, even if the portal were real, I still would have stayed with you."

Metal looked down at his hands. "I remembered what you told me, about how I must chose who I am. I still cannot answer that question. Truth be told, I am not sure if I ever will. Perhaps no one really knows who they are."

"But, I did know, in that moment, that I did not want to be someone who would abandon his friends. Am I loyal? I cannot answer. Perhaps I am delusional. But, maybe it does not matter who I think I am. Maybe all that matters is how I act."

Metal began to trudge further up the mountain, illuminating the path with his red headlight, and Sonic followed. Dozens of rocks and boulders protruded from the ground, so they had to tread slowly.

"I've never really thought about it before, but maybe you're right," Sonic said, watching the pebbles crumple underneath the weight of his robotic leg. "Maybe there just isn't a big, single thing to be."

Sonic looked back to the sky. The little cloud was definitely there, and it was growing darker every minute. Sonic wished it luck, for a cloudy sky was better than no sky at all.

They trudged onward, and the cold air nipped at Sonic's skin. He wanted to run, but given the difficult terrain, he could only move at Metal's painfully slow pace and stare at the sky. The pile of clouds was growing.

"Do you see that?" Metal's voice brought him back to the ground. He followed Metal's outstretched arm to the horizon, where he could barely make out a tiny, wooden shack.

"What is it?" Sonic said.

"I am unsure, but I do know it could give us valuable insight into this planet. We should investigate further."

Sonic leaped forward, preparing to sprint, but Metal held out his hand. "We do not know if there is friend or foe, so we should proceed with caution."

He sighed, but Metal was right, so he followed behind him as Metal crept toward the building.
Now that he was closer, Sonic noticed local materials made up the building. The walls were made from yellow tree trunks, and purple grass, piled into several great bundles, thatched the roof. The mismatched colors made the shack look more like a children's coloring book drawing than a proper shelter.

They must be facing the rear of the shack, because Sonic couldn't see any windows. His suspicion was confirmed as they walked to the front, where the only opening was a splintering door.

Metal walked up to it. He tried to open the door quietly, but the structure was so poorly maintained that he had to heave it aside.

"So much for stealth," Sonic shrugged.

Metal illuminate the inside of the building with his light. It was even smaller inside, and barren too, for within there were only a couple of stools and cooking supplies. At first, the floor looked impossibly dusty, but as Sonic knelt down and brushed his fingers on the floor, he realized it was made of dirt.

"I do not think Nega built this shack. He would never build something so rustic and low tech," Metal said.

A small box, coated in dust, sat on tiny table next to the stools, and Sonic walked over to it. Inside, a half-melted candle laid in a scattering of matches. He brushed the dust from the candle, struck a match, lit it, then walked back to Metal.

"But someone had to have built this shack. Someone who's not Nega. Someone who's still out there," Sonic said.

Metal clicked off his light as the dim, yellow flame flickered against his armor. "Someone or some people. It would require a whole society to develop technology such as this candle and those matches. This planet must be inhabited by intelligent life."

Sonic watched each drop of wax drip down the candle and into the dirt.

Metal continued, "Without the sun, the planet will die. And everyone here...will die with it."

"Well then, that makes things easy," Sonic said.

"What do you mean?"

Sonic looked up at Metal. "It's simple. We're gonna save the planet."

"Save the planet? Sonic, we can barely take care of ourselves. My engine is destroyed, and your health, while improved, is still precarious. We need to focus on our escape above all else."

Sonic shook his head. "I've spent all this time feeling sorry for myself, and now I find out there are people out there, a whole world of people, who are all going to die unless we find the sun. So we're gonna find the sun, and we're gonna kick Nega's tail while we're at it."

"But how? How can we possibly do that?"

Sonic paused. He had to convince Metal, and he had an idea.

"Okay Mets, how are we gonna escape?"

Metal folded his arms and looked away. "I am still processing the data."
"Well consider this: you don't know how to escape, but I know how to save the planet. It's easy. All we need to do is find the sun. So saving the planet is easier than escaping because we know how to do it. And, once the planet is saved, I'm sure everyone here would help us return home. Therefore, the optimal way for us to escape is to save the planet."

Metal glared at him, then slapped his forehand and groaned. "I am not sure if your reasoning is sound, but so be it. I know I am not going to convince you otherwise, and I certainly cannot let you do this alone. We only have one lead anyway."

Metal turned and walked back to the door. Sitting down on the threshold, he tossed open the crate and rummage through the contents. Sonic followed him, taking his own seat next to Metal and still holding the candle in his hand.

He looked back across the landscape. The clouds had grown much thicker now, and they loomed ominously above.

Metal pulled the fake Emerald from the crate, as well as Nega's research notes. He held the Emerald up and shook his head. "I never did understand how you worked these. You have always done so many amazing things with the Chaos Emeralds, from becoming Super Sonic to using Chaos Control, and neither myself nor Eggman ever understood how you did it."

Sonic dug the candle into the dirt, then leaned over and took the fake Emerald from Metal's hand. "I couldn't tell you how. I just sort of...make them work, I guess. You know, Knuckles would always say the Chaos Emeralds turned thoughts into power. That's why there's the Master Emerald. The Chaos Emeralds turn thoughts into power, and the Master Emerald can stop them."

Metal flipped through the notes. He trailed his finger down the page and shook his head. "But that makes no sense. How can thoughts be anything other than thoughts? As complex as Nega's system is, at least it makes sense."

He turned to face Sonic. "Can you elaborate on the Master Emerald? How does that work?"

"Dunno. Like I said, it just works. I mean, it makes sense if you think about it. The Chaos Emeralds are really powerful, so there has to be something that can neutralize all that power."

Metal's stare intensified, so much so that Sonic felt he was staring through him. "The Master Emerald neutralizes the Chaos Emeralds? How? How does it do that? Tell me, Sonic; I must know!"

"Like I said, I don't know. It just does. There isn't always an answer for everything, Mets. Sometimes things just are."

Metal tore his gaze away and stared at the dirt. He didn't say anything else, nor did he look at the notes. He just stared at nothing.

Sonic bit his lip. Had he said something wrong?

He slid close to Metal, close enough his accursed leg stuck to Metal again. He needed to get better control of his magnet because it kept activating without his thought.

"Here, let me show you." Taking Metal's hand into his own, he placed the Emerald in his palm and curled Metal's fingers over the top, then wrapped his own hands around Metal's. Focusing the Emerald in his mind, he pulled energy from the gem, not enough to do anything substantial, but just enough to make the Emerald glow brilliant green as the energy flowed around them both.
"You've got to feel the Emerald in your heart. Focus on a single thought and push all others from your mind. Then, you pull the energy from the Emerald."

Sonic pulled his hands away, and the Emerald's glow slowly died. Metal held the Emerald up, and he must have been trying to activate it because Sonic could see his optics strain in concentration, but nothing happened. He sighed.

"If you have to 'feel it in your heart', then it is pointless. I will never get it to work because I have no heart."

"That's not true." Sonic placed his hand over Metal's chest. The cold air made him welcome that familiar warmth all the more. "I can feel your heart. It's right here."

Metal wrapped his hand around Sonic's and held it to his chest. He gazed in Sonic's eyes, but said nothing. Still, he did not look away, and neither did Sonic.

As Metal began to speak, an enormous flash cracked through the clouds and illuminated the ground just enough for the shadows of the sagebrush to flicker into existence. The clouds erupted into an explosive roar as water began to pour in waving sheets. With a single hiss, the candle flame died.

Water splashed against his fur, and Sonic immediately leapt back to the cabin lest he get completely soaked. Hastily, he scooped up the candle just as Metal shoved the notes and Emerald back into the crate. While Metal heaved the door in back place, Sonic trudged to the table.

He struck another match and hovered it above the wick. The match burned, but the wick refused to take, and the candle merely sat inert in his hand.

"There is no point. That candle will not relight until it is dry."

Sonic turned to see Metal's light looking back at him. Water dripped from the ends of his quills and mixed into mud on the floor. He sighed, then dropped the candle back in the box.

"I guess we're stuck here then. Unless you want me to use Chaos Control?"

Metal shook his head. "If this Emerald is fake, then unlike a real Emerald, it has limited energy. I do not know how many uses it has, and it would be wiser to save it."

Sonic let out a sharp breath, and shivered as the air from his lungs puffed into mist. He had thought it cold before, but now, the pounding rain had sucked what little warmth was left. Desperately, Sonic looked around for a stove, or firewood, or anything. But the only thing he found he was a small plank of yellow wood with a moth-eaten blanket crumpled over top. He trudged over to it, plop down on the wood, and pulled the blanket over his shoulders. It was disgusting and dirty, but his fur was matted with so much dirt that it made no difference.

Then he remembered. "Wait...we can't stay here. There's no electricity! Just give me the Emerald —"

Metal came and sat beside him. "I have enough power reserves for one more day, and the only place we know with electricity is Nega's horrible maze. But with your speed, I am sure we can find an alternative source of electricity tomorrow."

"Well, if you're sure..." Sonic said. He watched the ribbons of light that occasional flashed through the roof. Despite the fact the shack was made from nothing but grass and logs, it seemed to be holding out the rain. "At least save some battery by turning off your light."
Metal's light died with a click, and despite the lightning, it was now utterly dark. Sonic could only
see the two ovals of his optics.

He yawned. The familiar exhaustion was building behind his eyes, as was the headache. He rubbed
his eyelids. The longer he didn't move, the more tired he felt, and the more tired he felt, the more
the cold air clinged to his skin.

"You should try to get some sleep. We can plan our next action tomorrow," Metal said.

"Alright…" Sonic laid down and closed his eyes, but shivers racked his body, and he was unable to
lay still. He tried to clear his mind and forget the cold, but his soaked fur and exposed skin would
never let him. He had never felt so cold in his life, because even in the ice zones, he had never
stopped running.

He groaned and turned over. Maybe if he held perfectly still, the blanket would trap his body heat.
He tried it, but now he was moving even less, and the cold sunk in even further. He was caught in
the awful limbo between being too exhausted to get up and to cold to sleep, but just as he was
about to scream, Metal stirred.

"Sonic, I—I need to apologize to you."

Sonic turned over and shivered. "A-apologize?"

"My whole existence, I have done nothing but try to kill you. And while I now know that is
impossible, I did manage to hurt you, sometimes severely, multiple times. But despite all that, you
still trusted back in Nega's prison. Even after I had betrayed you again, you still trusted me. You
saved me, Sonic, both from Nega and from myself. I—I owe you so much. Despite everything, you
have done so much—"

Metal slumped and buried his hands in his face. "I know it means nothing, but all I can say is I am
sorry. I should have never attacked you. It is not even what I was programmed to do."

Sonic's teeth chattered and he held his voice as steady as he could. "T-that's all in the past. You've
helped me now, and that's all that matters. A-and I've been just as cruel to you, treating you like
another one of Eggman's stupid robots. Y-you're different, Mets, you're—"

Sonic cupped his hand around Metal's wrist and froze. Whatever he was going to say next, it didn't
matter because all ideas had fallen out of his head. He had only a single thought.

"Y-you're—warm. Oh, you're so warm, b-but of course you're warm, you're always so warm…"

Metal's optics flickered, and he brought his palms to rest over Sonic's hand. He paused for a
moment, then immediately pressed his fingers to Sonic's neck.

"Sonic—you are freezing! And your irregular heartbeat—!"

Metal's other hand was still in his own, and it felt so nice and warm against his fingers. He brought
it up to his face and pressed Metal's palm to his cheek. All of that glorious heat radiated from
Metal's hand into his skin.

"I have been far too careless. I should have known you were not ready for all that running, and
now the air temperature is approximately two degrees centigrade. You are at risk of dying of
exposure!"

Sonic leaned forward, closer and closer, until the fur on his chest pressed against the radiating heat
of Metal's legs and his forehead buried in the smooth warmth of Metal's side. "I-I know it's cold...but y-you're so warm...just, come here..."

"I see...of course. This is solution is close to optimal, but I need to make one modification."

Metal gently pulled Sonic away and rolled the blanket from his shoulders.

"N-nugh, Metal...come back…" Sonic said. His was shivering again. He had almost been warm enough to sleep, but now the cold was leaking back into him.

"I am still here." Metal laid by his side and draped the blanket over them both. The heat was back, and Sonic latched onto it by clicking his foot to Metal's leg. He wanted to get to as close to the heat as he could, so he curled his arms on Metal's chest and buried his forehead underneath Metal's chin. Although this was much better, he still felt the fur on his back fighting in vain against the cold air.

Slowly, Metal wrapped his arms around Sonic's back, taking care not to touch his injury, and pulled him closer. The warmth from Metal's arms soaked into his back, and the blanket kept the cold away.

"Are you comfortable?" Metal said.

"Mm hmm," Sonic managed to say. Even though the smell of dust was everywhere, Metal's scent cut through his attention like the lightning did the sky. It was stringent, yet smooth, like the smell of the ozone drifting up from pavement after a rainstorm.

His attention began to wander, from the wonderful heat blocking out the unending cold, to the scent, and to his exhaustion. In the end, his exhaustion won out, and slowly, his consciousness faded to sleep.

He fell soundly asleep, unmoving except his breath, which misted Metal's optical screen as he breathed. Metal brought his hands up to Sonic's neck again, and not even that was enough to wake him.

It was his pulse. Metal had thought it had stabilized, but it was still beating weakly and irregularly against his fingers. Metal cursed himself. He had been careless to let Sonic get in this state again. Nega's notes were so complex, and Metal had dedicated every spare clock cycle to their analysis, but in the process, he had completely neglected his most important priority: to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.

But, Sonic would be warm enough now. His heartbeat would stabilize so long as he got enough rest, and it would be easy for Metal to monitor his condition when they were so close together. He now had a few cycles to spare, and he needed to spend them on the newest item of his query stack.

Sonic had said there was an energy in the Chaos Emeralds, an energy the Master Emerald could neutralize. It was Sonic's choice of words that had captured Metal's attention. The Master Emerald neutralized the Chaos Emeralds.

And that was it: neutralize had multiple definitions, including one that was precise and scientific. When two opposite things reacted in a predictable way, they neutralized each other.

The examples were countless, and indeed, Metal had encountered them all already. A base, like sodium hydroxide, was the opposite of an acid, like hydrochloric acid. A base could neutralize an acid. A positive electric charge would neutralize a negative electric charge, and this was the very foundation of the electromagnetic force. Antimatter would neutralize matter, a positive and
negative number would sum to zero, and two opposite waves would cancel each other out.

Metal's CPU spun as he tried to process the logic as fast as he could. A neutralization reaction required two complements—two things that were exactly the same except for a single feature. Matter and antimatter, positive numbers and negative numbers, and the two poles of the electromagnetic force, all were essentially the same thing except for their signs.

And what triggered these reaction? That was the elegance of it. Neutralization reactions were some of the most fundamental in nature. The two complements had to do nothing but touch each other, and the inevitable laws of physics would take care of the rest.

He pulled Sonic closer to himself, and Sonic responded by murmuring and pressing his cheek to Metal's shoulder. Just as before, the answer was painfully obvious. Here it was, the solution to his primary objective, and he had been too caught up in his own delusions to even notice.

He wasn't Sonic's copy. He was his complement.

Chapter End Notes

Celestial-moon-fire created some awesome fan art of chapter 17! Check it out here: http://fav.me/dai06lv
"I have discovered a truly marvelous proof of this, which this margin is too narrow to contain."

- Pierre de Fermat

Something had beeped over his radio, though he only heard it once, and no matter how intensely he concentrated on it, its source remained pitifully faint, like the shadow cast by the last light of a dying ember. Even now, Metal couldn't be sure it amounted to anything more than an error. The line between signal and noise was too often thin. Nevertheless, he had definitely heard something through his radio. Not that he had any real control over his radio, Eggman had made sure of that, but it had remained eerily silent ever since his unfortunate arrival to this planet. But now, that lone signal had broken the silence, and it disturbed him more than the silence itself ever had.

Flipping the signal through his transistors, he soon saw this was no ordinary signal. It had a distinctive signature, not quite like anything a machine would emit, but neither like the random radiation emitted by nature. It had a pattern, but one that was so complex he could barely recognize it.

And yet, he did recognize it. He could hardly forget a pattern like that, and luckily there was no need to crack the signal if he already had the answer. He booted the interface to the Emerald detector wirelessly through his motherboard and scanned through the wavefunction logs. Though there were thousands of logs, Metal's processors worked quickly, and soon, his suspicions were confirmed.

Sonic murmured and pressed his forehead against Metal's chin. "Five minutes...just five more minutes..."

"Take as much time as you need," Metal said. He pressed his fingers against Sonic's neck again. His pulse was still steady, but his heartbeat had weakened.

Metal stashed the signal analysis and instead directed his attention to his medical database. Sonic's condition kept fluctuating, and given his utter lack of support or supplies, Metal would need all the data he could get. He flipped through the entire database, sending out countless queries to the furthest reaches of his understanding.

But his query didn't return ordered data. It returned that random scatter of bits Metal was all too familiar with from his time in the magnet room. He felt dread propagating through his models.

Pieces of his hard drive must still be fragmented. Though Metal had been in the process of reindexing it, the data were numerous and his focus had been on his memories of Sonic. Random knowledge, such as the far corners of his database, had been deemed low priority.

He would need to reorder the rest of his medical database as soon as he could. He also needed to read Nega's notes and figure out how Sonic used Chaos Control. He had so much to compute and so little resources, and the scarcity of electricity was making it all the worse.

Further, there was the air temperature. While the rain had stopped hours ago, a sharp wind had picked up in its place. It howled and battered the tiny shack. The roof thatching shook, and little pieces of purple grass drifted down from the ceiling. They danced through the air, and upon reaching the ground, a few of them fluttered and disappear into Sonic's quills.
Database or not, Metal had to ensure the success of his primary objective, and that meant keeping Sonic as healthy as possible. Gently, and taking care not to disturb Sonic, Metal brushed the top of Sonic's quills with the side of his hand. He caught some of the grass between his fingers and tossed it aside to the floor.

"Left...go left..." Sonic said, and Metal felt the sudden pressure of Sonic's head pressing into his palm.

"Left? Why—" Metal started, but Sonic responded by lifting his head further into Metal's hand.

Sonic must want him to get the grass between his quills too, so Metal slipped his fingers into Sonic's quills and began to draw them between his spines. While his fingers ran smoothly through each quill, the grass did not, and it bunched itself into his palm. He kept smoothing Sonic's spines until he was certain he had all the grass in his hand.

As he began to lift his hand away, Sonic said, "That's it...that's the spot..."

Metal paused, threw the handful of grass behind him, then brought his hand back to Sonic's quills. He ran his fingers through them again, but this time, he also brushed the fur on the back of Sonic's head at the base of his spines. Sonic didn't say anything, but instead pressed his face further against Metal's engine panel, and his left ear began to flick.

As Metal continued to brush through Sonic's quills, his ear kept twitching, so Metal brought his hand to Sonic's ear and scratched gently behind it.

Sonic sighed and leaned into Metal's hand. He lingered for a moment, letting Metal scratch all around the base of his ear, then relaxed. His head dropped back to Metal's chest and his eyes flickered open.

"Good morning," Metal said. "Although I suppose that statement is technically incorrect without a sun."

Sonic glanced up at Metal and his eyes widened. He paused, then quickly pulled his head and his hands underneath the blanket. "Ugh...it didn't get any warmer, did it?"

"No, and the planet will only continue to freeze. Although, it would probably be a little warmer were we not at such a high altitude."

"Might as well get up then," Sonic said. He pulled himself off Metal and sat in a pile with the blanket pulled over his head. "There's not anything to eat, is there? I'm starving."

"I thought you would be. There is not much in this cabin, but I did find this." Metal stood up, clicked on his light, and returned with a grime-covered cardboard box from the corner. Lifting up the lid, he pulled out a single soup can. Both the top and bottom of the can bulged outward, and the whole thing was so swollen it looked like it was about to explode.

Sonic's eyes lit up. "You found real food!"

Without a word, Metal punctured the can lid with his fingers, and it hissed and popped as the air escaped. He then tilted it aside, and a thick, oozing liquid dribbled out on the floor.

"Stop! What are you doing?"

"This food is spoiled. You cannot eat it." Metal flicked his wrist, and the last of the dark liquid dripped to the floor. He turned back to Sonic and dropped the empty can in his hands.
"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Eat it."

"What—" Sonic stared at the can, then back to Metal.

"Remember what I told you? The nanites in your blood have changed your digestive system. They are in your saliva as well, and they will break down the chemical bonds in the can such that you can consume it."

Sonic groaned, then shook his head. Slowly, he placed the top of the can in his mouth and took a tentative bite. At first, all he felt was his teeth chattering on the hard lid of the can. But as he held it in his mouth, the metal began to soften enough he could tear away a single bite, which both melted and tasted like butter in his mouth. He chewed apprehensively, swallowed, then took another bite.

"If these nanites are so magical," Sonic said as he chewed, "then why does it matter if the soup is rotten? If I can eat a tin can, then I can eat anything."

Metal emptied another can and handed it to him. "The nanites are not magical. They exist only to interface your robotic leg with the rest of your body. Yes, they have made some modifications so you can consume the raw materials they require, but that is hardly magic, and they are incapable of fighting an infection caused by dangerous, foodborne pathogens."

Sonic groaned. He crushed the can between his hands and popped the whole thing into his mouth. "I don't understand a thing about this, but if you say I can't eat the soup, then I won't. Besides—"

Sonic grimaced. "I bet the soup wouldn't taste half as good as the can."

While he continued to chew, Metal sat down next to him and pulled out Nega's notes. He flipped through them and stopped on a single page displaying the green Chaos Emerald with a series of equations. He turned to Sonic and said, "If my hypothesis is correct, you may be able to test that for yourself very soon. I think I found a way home."

Sonic began to choke, but quickly swallowed. "You did? How?"

"Do you recall how I failed to detect any radio signals since we arrived here? Well, as of recently, this is no longer true. I have detected a single radio wave."

Sonic shook his head. "That's it? No offense, Mets, but I don't see how a bunch of jumbled up music and advertisements are gonna get us home."

"What? No, it is not like that at all. Radio waves are not the same as the radio you listen to. They are a type of electromagnetic radiation, and they carry information."

Metal pulled the detector from the crate and laid it, along with the green Emerald, on the floor in front of them. He pressed a single button on the detector, and the machine whirred to life. Numbers flowed across the screen.

"I have studied Nega's notes and been able to piece some of the mystery together. The Chaos Emeralds are not really physical objects. That is only how we perceive them. Rather, a Chaos Emerald is the set of solutions to one of the single, fundamental equations of the universe. That makes them powerful, but it also gives them some other properties. For example, how do you usually find a Chaos Emerald?"

Sonic said nothing, but Metal glanced over at him. He was shivering again.
Without hesitating, Metal wrapped his arms around Sonic and pulled him into his chest. Sonic stiffened for an instant, but quickly relaxed and leaned his head against Metal's shoulder. He took a deep breath and said, "Well, you normally have to skip through one of those annoying special stages to get it."

"Correct. When you to find a Chaos Emerald, what you are really doing is collapsing the wavefunction of one of these fundamental equations. Ordinarily, a Chaos Emerald is only a probability, that is, it can both exist and not exist at the same time. But, if you can force decoherence into the system, the measurement turns possibility into reality. The multiple probabilities collapse into a single state, and you get the Emerald. My detector and your special stage function in the same manner. They both force the Emerald to exist by removing all other possibilities of non-existence."

"I'm sure Tails would find this very interesting," Sonic said, "but we still don't have a real Emerald."

"Not yet, but if we follow this signal, we can find one, and it is not just any Emerald. This is the green Emerald I located in the forest on Earth."

"Now recall, the Emeralds are an equation with multiple solutions. Finding an Emerald is done by solving the equation. When one solves an equation, it imprints unique information into the system, and the Emerald retains that information until it disappears. Since I found the green Emerald in the forest—"

Sonic sat up. "You're saying the Emerald would know how to get us home?"

"That is not precisely what I said, but yes, that is a close enough estimate. The green Emerald is still entangled with the forest. If we can get the Emerald, and you use Chaos Control, I believe you could follow that entanglement to get us home."

"Just like how the broken Chaos Drive led me back to you," Sonic said. He trailed off, then shook his head. "But Mets, what about the sun? We can't just leave the planet alone like this! Everyone will die!"

"That brings me to the second half of the plan: the fake Chaos Emerald. Even though this Emerald is fake, it still holds the wavefunction signature of where it was created. That is to say, this Emerald is anchored to this planet in the same way the real Emerald is anchored to the forest. So, if we leave, we can use the fake Emerald to come back here at any time."

"But the sun—"

"Sonic, I need you to think about this." Metal set Nega's notes on the ground and took Sonic's hands in his own. "While it is true I have access to a great deal of knowledge programmed into my hard drive, ultimately I was built for combat, not for research. I am concerned we have reached the limits of my understanding. But consider this: if we could get back to Earth, we could find Tails and give these notes to him. I am certain he would understand them far better than me. Further, we could bring Tails back here with us. We would then have a much, much easier time defeating Nega and finding the sun. I believe this strategic regrouping would increase our probability of success by at least a factor of 10."

"Well...it would be great if Tails were here. And the rest of my friends. You sure this will work?"

"My confidence interval is sufficient," Metal said. While this was technically true, what Metal didn't add were his doubts about the energy level of the fake Emerald. If they were in the far
reaches of the universe, it would require tremendous energy to teleport back to the Earth. While the genuine Emerald would have nearly infinite power, the same could not be said of the fake Emerald. The possibility of reaching Earth, but having no way to return, was very real.

But that was not a concern. He was only programmed to neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.

"Let's do it then!" Sonic leapt to his feet, and Nega's notes fluttered into the air behind him. "So where to?"

"Careful! We still need these," Metal scooped the notes into his crate. Picking up the detector, he stood up next to Sonic. "I do not know exactly where the Emerald is, but I am able to follow the signal. The source is approximately 672 kilometers at 62 degrees south of east."

Metal placed the fake Emerald in Sonic's hands. "Can you take us there?"

"What? With Chaos Control?"

Metal nodded, but Sonic shook his head.

"I can't. I need to know where I'm going to use Chaos Control, and I have no idea where this place is. I mean, that's how we ended up on top of this mountain. I used Chaos Control without an idea of where I was going. Can't I just run us there? Distance is nothing to me."

"Sonic, I will be honest with you." Metal placed his hands over Sonic's shoulders and stared directly in his eyes. "I am very concerned about your heart. I thought your condition had stabilized, but you have placed too much physical strain on your body, and it will deteriorate again unless we take precautions. You cannot run that far. I need you to take us to the signal source using Chaos Control so we can get you medical care as soon as possible."

Sonic sighed, then nodded. With the Emerald in one hand, he wrapped his other around Metal's waist and pulled him into his chest. "Fine, I'll try, but I can't guarantee where we'll end up. Where did you say this place was?"

"671.78 kilometers at 62.19 degrees south of east. Is that clear?"

Sonic rolled his eyes and said, "Oh yes, clear as mud."

When the green flash cleared, and Metal saw where they arrived, he suddenly understood why Sonic had said that. While they didn't land in the mud, they landed near it atop a single, great boulder protruding from the marshy soil. Trees with long, spindly branches dropped into the swamp water, and the familiar yellow glow of their trunks illuminated pink lichens that scattered the branches like glitter.

"Er..." Sonic said. He gave a side glance to the muddy ground. "Is this right?"

"It is not as wrong as it could be. We are only off by approximate 32 kilometers." Metal twisted another knob on the detector and looked up. He placed his hand over Sonic's chest and shook his head. "We should walk the rest of the way."

"Come on, Mets, I'm not made of glass. That distance is almost nothing." Before Metal had time to protest, Sonic scooped him into his arms. "Just point the way."

Metal beeped, but said nothing. It wasn't that being carried by Sonic bothered him. Truth be told, he preferred it. It was as close to optimal as he could get in these conditions. No, what bothered
him was the strain on Sonic's face, the dark bags under his eyes, and his rapid breath. Sonic might be pretending to be fine, but his injuries were only going to compound until he got proper medical attention.

Still, the sooner they arrived home, the sooner Sonic would be safe. Metal queried his models, and the results were as he expected. Any delay would only hinder their probability of success.

"It is this way," Metal said, pointing at the only gap through the bramble. "But Sonic...please. Do not strain yourself."

"I'm fine, honestly. I'll have us there in no time!" And with that, Sonic bounded down the rocks and through the bush.

Metal was always impressed by how efficiently Sonic moved, and this was no exception. He bounced from rock to rock, without so much as even a splash of swamp water, and finally stepped into the familiar, purple grass as the ground dried. He ran through it all so briskly, so effectively, and so optimally, that Metal could only watch in awe at his physical prowess.

"Are we...almost there?" Sonic said. Though they had only traveled for a few minutes, he still was panting.

Metal tore his attention from Sonic's movement and directed it back to the detector. "The signal is getting stronger. We should be nearly there. Continue...now...halt!"

Sonic trotted to a stop. He set Metal on the ground, leaned over, and wheezed.

Metal immediately swiveled around and place his fingers on Sonic's wrist. Though his pulse was still strong, his heartbeat was even more irregular than before.

"Mets...I'm...fine. I'm fine," Sonic said. He slipped Metal's hand from his wrist and into Metal's palm, taking care to place Metal's fingers between his own. "But, please tell me this isn't where we need to be."

Sonic pointed up, and Metal followed his arm to what loomed above them. He shuddered, for there, towering into the dark, empty abyss, was Nega's tower, and inside, emanating from the glass deck at very top, was the source of signal.
Of course the Chaos Emerald was locked away up there. Where else would it be? He should have guessed this. Every time he ever had to gather the Chaos Emeralds, it involved trudging through increasingly dangerous zones until he reached the end. It was only then, after fighting the most dangerous boss monster, he found the Emerald.

Sonic frowned. It was his own fault he hadn't thought of this before. If he had just stopped for a single second and considered, it would have saved a lot of time. They could have avoided stomping through the wilderness and gone straight to the top of the tower.

Although, maybe it was for the best. If they hadn't gotten lost in the wilderness, Sonic never would have had the opportunity to get to know Metal so well.

He felt Metal squeeze his hand, breaking him out of his thoughts. Metal was frantic. He kept cycling rapidly from the detector, to the tower, and back to Sonic.

Sonic squeezed his hand in return. "Don't you worry. I've defeated Eggman so many times I can't even remember them all, and Nega is no different. As long as I'm with my friends, the bad guys don't stand a chance."

Metal dropped the detector back into his crate. "That is my concern. You said, 'friends.' Plural. But there are no 'friends.' It is just you and me, damaged as we are."

"Ah, but there's your mistake You're not just my friend," Sonic said, stepping next to Metal and throwing his arm around his shoulder, "you're my best friend."

Metal was visibly stunned. "We are...not just friends, but best friends?"

"Of course! And there's no one I'd rather have by my side in this fight!"

Metal said nothing, but he did throw his arms around Sonic and pulled himself into an embrace. Sonic did likewise, resting his chin on Metal's shoulder.

As always, the familiar, welcome warmth of Metal's chassis cleared his head, allowing his own words to echo through his mind. Was Metal his best friend? What about Tails? Only one person was ever the best, so by definition, he could only have one best friend.

But, just as one person could be the best runner and the other the best swimmer, maybe he too could have two best friends if they belonged to different categories.

So what kind of friend was Tails? Tails always supported him, went on adventures with him, and
had been by his side for years. Tails was like a brother to him, yet he was brilliant too. He could always count on Tails' strategy, inventions, and intelligence.

As for Metal, he was the friend who would hold his hand, who would keep him curled into his chest at night, whose scent he would inhale deeply. He could almost still feel how gentle Metal was when he had brushed through his quills, how smooth his hands were, how warm it was to place his cheek against his engine panel, how he wanted to—

His mouth went dry. This train of thought needed to stop, and it needed to stop now. He tried to think of anything else, but he couldn't. The thought was already rolling through his mind—the snowball that starts the avalanche.

Metal was a friend whose neck Sonic wanted to wrap his hands around, whose muzzle he would press his lips against. Then he would open his mouth and—

"Sonic? Is something wrong?"

Sonic heard Metal's voice, for Metal's voice was all he heard, just as Metal's chassis was all he felt, and Metal's scent was all he smelled.

Before Sonic even had time to react, Metal stepped up to him and placed his fingers on his neck. Sonic inhaled sharply. Metal kept doing this, and the more it happened, the more he wanted those fingers to trace through his fur, down his neck, and to his chest.

"Are you alright? You have suddenly turned red," Metal said.

Sonic grabbed Metal's hand. For a brief moment, he held it in his own, then slowly and deliberately, he dropped it.

"I'm fine. Just fine. Super fine. Finer than a fine arts museum."

Some people were meant to think, and some were not. Sonic was firmly in the "not" category. There was a reason he had never thought like this before, and it was a very good reason.

"But—" Metal reached for him again, but Sonic inched backward just enough for Metal to only grab air.

Run. Run away. He needed to run away. He could outrun anything.

Metal looked visibly upset. "Sonic? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You're great. I'm great. Everything is great. Emerald's up there?" Sonic leaned his weight from one foot to the other, unable to hold still, and pointed at the glass outlook that crowned the building.

"Yes—"

Sonic threw his arms underneath Metal and pulling him to his chest. There it was—Metal's chassis rubbing into his fur. He winced. "Great. Let's go."

Before Metal could say anything, Sonic took off. He ran as fast as he could, ignoring the growing tightness in his chest and the shortness in his breath. He would outrun those too.

"What are you—" The clang of Sonic's robotic foot drowned out Metal's voice. Though the tower was mainly concrete, steel beam reinforced the corners. Sonic had ran at it and clicked his foot
magnet as soon as his heel struck the beam. His foot held fast, and his speed pushed him forward just enough for his shoe to briefly grip a step above. He immediately clicked his magnet off and took another step, slamming it to the steel beam again.

Metal turned his head to watch the ground disappear as Sonic ran straight up the building. "You never cease to amaze me. I would not have thought to run up the building, yet this is the most direct route to the Emerald. But, I suppose I should have known. Your ability to defy my predictions is what I admire most about you."

_He admires me. He admires me!_ Sonic thought. He bit his lip and tried to focus on the glass room above, but he had long lost control of what happened in his head, and Metal's words made his heart leap.

As he neared the top, Sonic pressed both feet against the tower and pushed himself upward. He twisted in the air, turned himself around, and slammed his robotic foot into the glass. The windows cracked, then shattered, and glass shards streamed all around like snowflakes in a blizzard. He flew forward, soaring into the room and sliding across the floor.

Sonic wasted no time. He sat Metal down as quickly as he could and stepped away. Luckily, he had a good excuse to act busy because his lungs seemed to have gone flat. He leaned his arms against the wall and wheezed.

"Quickly, we do not have much time," Metal said, stepping behind him and rummaging through the crate. He pulled out the green Emerald and offered it to Sonic. "Take this. We do not know what is in here, and you may need to use it at a moment's notice."

Sonic swallowed and tried to fight the sink hole collapsing in his chest. He held up his palm, and Metal dropped in the Emerald.

Of course, the room was dark. That was normal. What wasn't normal were walls and floor. They were made of stainless steel, similar to everywhere else in the maze, but they were perfectly spotless. Not even a scratch marred their surfaces, and despite the darkness, they were polished enough for Sonic's reflection to look back at him.

He looked horrible. It was probably for the best he hadn't seen himself lately because his quills were disheveled and the bags under his eyes were so dark they threatened to leak into the rest of his face. Even his robot leg, the one part of him that was normally flawless, had grime caught between the metal seams.

Metal had the detector out and was already pacing around the room. Metal was so proactive and so smart. But of course he was, Metal was wonderful in every way, including his beautiful—

Sonic bit his lip with enough force to cause pain and clenched his eyes shut.

"This is...not what I was expecting," Metal said, walking up behind him. He was close enough Sonic could almost feel the heat from his chassis. "The signal is diffuse, as if it is coming from a thousand points all around the room."

He placed the detector back in the crate. "We will need to physically the area."


"But—"

"It's fine. We'll find the Emerald faster this way."
Metal didn't look convinced. "I suppose…"

"Great," Sonic said, already walking as far away from Metal as he could. "I'll tell you when I find it."

As he heard Metal's footsteps clanging away from him, Sonic exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. What had happened to him? As if the leg wasn't bad enough, now he desperately wanted to lift his evil robotic clone into his arms and let him press his muzzle to his cheek while running his claws through his quills. It was ridiculous! Outrageous! He was Sonic the Hedgehog, the hero who protected nature against Eggman's invasive industry.

He shouldn't be attracted to a robot.

Sonic groaned. He may as well look for the Emerald while he descended into insanity, so he began to trace the circumference of the room. It was circular with great windows stretching all around. Filing cabinets filled with neatly ordered papers stood next to conspicuously dustless mainframe computers. Large, bright screens filled the few patches of walls lacking windows.

He trudged up to one of the filing cabinets and jerked the drawer open. It rattled, slipping of its tracks and collapsing onto the drawer below it. Sonic tried to pull it further, but it was now stuck, and he only managed to tear the paper underneath.

He threw his hands over his head, swirled on his heels, prepared to scream, then stopped when he heard the shatter of glass.

It was Metal, standing on the other side of the room. A broken display case sat in front of him and shards of glass scattered around his feet. But that was hardly noteworthy, unlike what he held in his hand.

It was the green Emerald.

"Quickly, Nega has six of the seven Chaos Emeralds in this case. Despite the broken glass, I believe if we swap the fake Emerald for the real one, Nega may not—"

Metal's voice broke into radio static. He looked at Sonic, his eyes wide with panic, before the two ovals shattered into snowy noise like a broken television. Slowly, his fingers slackened, and the Emerald teetered perilously close to the edge of his palm. For a fraction of a second, Sonic thought it might stay, but the Emerald slipped off his hand and rolled across the floor.

"Mets? Metal? You alright? Hang on, I'm coming!" Sonic prepared to leap forward, but there was that voice, that awful, taunting voice, and it wasn't coming from the walls.

It was coming from Metal himself.

"Nuh-uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Not unless you never want to see your little Paperweight pal again. In fact, if I were you, I would hold oh-so perfectly still."

A deep, cold, dry sweat spread across Sonic's skin. "Metal—"

"He—" Metal's voice struggled to break through the static, though he still did not move. "He is in my head. I cannot think—"

Steam hissed from a single door standing behind Metal. The room filled with mist, and a wave of heat passed over Sonic. Through the mist, Sonic could only make out the silhouette of a tall, round figure.
"In your head? Don't be so dramatic. You are a robot. Nothing was ever in your head!"

For the first time, Sonic heard Nega's real voice. Without the radio static, it was haunting.

The steam finally cleared, and the full figure of Dr. Eggman Nega emerged. Though he looked similar to the ordinary Dr. Eggman, his gray mustache and yellow suit were unmistakably different.

He walked up to Metal, the heels of his boots clicking on the floor, and leaned his elbow over Metal's head. "Honestly, who doesn't encrypt his radio in this day and age? You're just asking for trouble. Think of who could get in! The government, teenagers hackers, corporate spies…"

Drumming Metal's head his fingers, he added, "Although, I am still proud of that fake Chaos Emerald signal. Getting the signature juuuust right is an art!"

Metal didn't move, though his head was still pointed toward Sonic. His frozen, broken gaze seemed a combination of pleading and panic.

Sonic tensed himself to sprint. "Let Metal go, right now!"

"I don't know whose head is emptier: Paperweight's or yours," Nega said, knocking on Metal's head with his knuckles. The impact jarred the snow on Metal's optical screen. "You're in no spot to make demands. This is a trap, you dimwit!"

Nega lifted his hand in the air, inspecting it. "I will admit, it was foolish of me to have let you parade around this long, but watching you and Paperweight bicker was just so entertaining. And yet…"

He pushed his glassed against his nose. "It's all fun and games until someone's expensive particle collider explodes."

Sonic clenched his fists. He didn't have time for Nega, for his games, for any of this, especially not if Metal was in danger. He shifted his weight to his heels, tensing his legs and preparing to jump.

Nega straightened his posture. All traces of his playful demeanor vanished, and in its place stood a cold, calculating cruelty. From his coat pocket, he pulled a simple remote control with a single, red button.

"Move one inch, hedgehog. I dare you," Nega growled. "Actually, why don't you tell him, Paperweight. It'll be better if he hears it from you."

Sonic stood up. "Metal?"

Metal stood motionlessly, the static on his screen matched by the static of his voice. After a brief pause, his voice coalesced, though he still sounded distant.

"A long time ago...after my failed attempt at taking control of his empire...Eggman...doubted my loyalty," Metal said, his voice cracking. "He took away my power...replaced my battery with primitive electricity...and...he—"

Nega pushed Metal's head down. "We don't need your life story, trash can! Get to the point!"

Metal's voice grew weaker. "He installed a kill switch...a bomb placed over my hard drive. If I disobeyed him again, he would…"

Nega drew his fingers across his own neck, as if he were slicing it open, and smacked his lips.
"So, the way I see it, rodent, you have two choices," Nega said. He reached aside and shoved a rolling office chair beneath him, coasting to a stop as he threw his legs over Metal's head and leaned backward. "The first: I press this button, activate the kill switch, and boom! Paperweight transforms into fireworks."

All the thoughts racing through Sonic's head vanished like the stars from the sky, leaving an awful, painful vacuum in his head that was just as terrible.

He choked. "...and the what's second choice?"

"Why, I am so glad you asked!" Nega snapped his fingers. A single light flashed from above, illuminating a small circle etched on the floor. Two, thin matte black rectangles the size of mailboxes stood on either side.

"The second choice is you set that Emerald on the floor and step forward into this circle, nice and sloooow."

Sonic clutched his chest. The sink hole was still there, and it was collapsing from inside of him. His heart stammered, his lungs screamed, and no matter how he panted, he couldn't catch his breath.

He gritted his teeth. He couldn't focus on that, not with Metal buckling under the weight of Nega's heels, his face filled with nothing but static. Metal needed him.

So he brushed the pain aside and considered his options. He had his speed and the fake Emerald. What if he sped toward Metal, scooped him up, and teleported away?

But, even with his speed, all Nega had to do was hit the button once, which he would certainly do if he saw Sonic move. It would take him less than a fraction of a second, and Metal would be doomed.

Or, maybe he could attack Nega directly, knocking the remote out of his hand before he could do anything, then save Metal.

Could he do it? Would he be fast enough to save Metal?

He was Sonic the Hedgehog, of course he would be fast enough to save Metal. He dug his heels into the floor, his robotic foot scraping, and launched himself into the air. A single spin dash should be enough. He tucked his head into his chest, curled himself into a ball, then choked.

The room twisted in vertigo. He tried to breath, but he was spinning so fast now, and his heart was spinning too. It went around and around in his chest, faster and faster, until it was going faster than he was.

And then, it stopped.

Sonic clutched his chest. He tried to breath, but his lungs had stopped with his heart. His spin broken, and he tumbled to the floor, skidding forward until his forehead tapped Nega's heel.

Dark spots multiplied on the edges of his vision, and his body went limp. He lost his grip on the fake Emerald, and it rolled out of his hand.

"No..." Sonic whimpered. He tried to move. He wanted to move. He wanted to do anything.

"Ooh, look at that. Cardiac arrest," Nega said, tapping the tip of his foot on Sonic's head. "I
suppose we'd better make this quick then."

Nega leaned down and picked Sonic up by the cable wrapped around his chest. Sonic hung limply as he walked, his chest already so tight the strain could make it no worse.

Nega threw him to the ground inside the circle. He hit the ground hard, hard enough that he gasped, and that was enough to squeeze in another breath. He rolled over, gasping for air, just as a solid, glass tube shot up from the floor to the ceiling all around him.

Looking distastefully at his hand, Nega wiped it on his pants and said, "No need to look so glum! At least you'll live long enough to see the fruits of your decision."

Though the edges of Sonic's vision were dark, Nega held the remote up so Sonic could see it with perfect clarity, then flourished his hand in the air and slammed the button down with his fist.

Chapter End Notes

I drew a scene from the last chapter! See it here: http://fav.me/damntbq
"It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off"

- William Carlos Williams

Nega may have promised fireworks, but all Sonic heard was a gunshot. It sliced through the air, the whole world falling silent except the noise, and rang over and over again in his ears even as it faded. Metal's optical screen cut out, as if someone had pulled the plug, turning from red static to complete blankness. Time seemed to slow as he collapsed to the floor, crumpling downward until he laid like a tossed away doll.

Sonic clutched his chest. He could look at nothing else. There was nothing else. The pain in his chest, the voided sky, and his far away home all vanished in that moment, and he was left with nothing but the hole where Metal had stood.

"No…! No, no…!" His eyes were as dry as his mouth. It didn't feel real. It couldn't be real.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Why? You—you said you didn't need him! You only need me, so why —"

Sonic tried to pull himself up, but his arms wobbled, and he instead collapsed to the floor. He curled into his knees, shivers racking his body.

"Oh, don't give me that. You're in no place to lecture me. How many robots have you destroyed, hmm?" Nega said.

"That—that's different. Those robots weren't like Metal. They weren't—" Sonic shivered, then finished, "...alive."

"And how many times have you demolished Paperweight before? You had no qualms about trashing him then, so what's so different now?" Nega said, pocketing the remote control.

Sonic gagged. He wasn't even cold. He was numb.

"Oh well, what does it matter? It'll all be over soon, and you won't remember a bit of this, not Paperweight, not anything," Nega said, walking toward what appeared to be a small control panel on one of the black boxes. "You won't even remember your own name."

"What—what are you—" Sonic said. His arms failed to move. All he could do was turn his head to Nega. "What...what do you want?"

Nega typed quickly into the control panel, and the black boxes began to quietly hum. "I have to give Paperweight credit: he knew a contradiction when he saw it. He couldn't use the Chaos Emerald, even with my notes and even after you showed him. Why was that?"
"Wait…how do you know that?" Sonic said. "You weren't there—"

"Oh, but I was. Who's the better hacker: the one who causes an immediate ruckus, or the one that watches and waits in silence? Why bring down the server when reading all the data is so much more interesting?"

Sonic clenched his teeth. His chest burned, and it was so hard to think. "But why—"

The humming grew louder. Dozen of exposed, metallic ribbons hung across the ceiling inside the tube, and they began to shimmer. Small sparks puffed along their edges, then faded as they fell.

Nega tapped another button and said, "The Chaos Emeralds—those who can harness their true potential are few indeed. You have a rare talent, my friend, and it's a talent I need."

"But, Metal said your understanding of the Chaos Emeralds was perfect. Why would you need me?"

Nega pulled the rolling chair underneath him again and tapped his finger on the glass. "I can harness the Chaos Emeralds, but I can't do it without the proper equipment. That's where you come in, my friend. You are the asymptote. The zero. The hole in the function."

He leaned back and pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose.

"The singularity."

"T-that makes no—" Sonic rolled into himself, clutching his chest. The buzzing in his head swarmed as the world collapsed in on itself.

"Alright, enough delay. I need you in one piece, and I need you under control. Fortunately, your roboticization will bring us both," Nega said, slamming a button on the machine.

Sparks swarmed along the ceiling, glowing blue and white, then rained down on him. They fell slowly at first, each nearly dying before hitting the floor, but the world soon disappeared as blinding light flooded over him.

Sonic gasped, breathing in a mouthful of sparks. Though they caused no pain, the gentle shock to his skin was something he remember all too well, and it felt even stranger inside his lungs. He tried to cough, but each breath only drew more sparks.

Sonic curled into himself. His body felt just as cold and numb as ever, but not his chest. It felt warm. The pain was diminishing too, drifting further and further away. He had never realized just how badly it had hurt until the pain died, but he felt the fog lifting, and the peace…it promised respite if would only accept.

He lifted himself up on his elbows and pushed his face against the glass. Though the light of the sparks was blinding, he could still see the outline of Metal’s body on the floor outside.

Metal was dead. Oh, it was horrible but it was true: Metal was dead, and it was his fault. If only he had been more thoughtful, more wise. He would have come up with something better than his pitiful, failed attempt at an attack, and now his best friend—or possibly more—was dead because of his arrogance.

He hit the glass with his fist. What was he thinking? He couldn't give up now. It wasn't too late. He could save Metal, get him back home, then Tails could fix him. Metal would still be alive then, and Sonic could...well, he could tell Metal...
Though sparks still rained upon him, he bolted up and stood in a pool of light up to his knees. If he stayed in the roboticizer, he would lose himself. There would be no return, for just as his leg were forever robotic, so too would be his mind. He would be forever lost, and so too would Metal, thrown away with no one to remember him.

Sonic inhaled deeply. Breathing was good, but if he was to get out of this, he would need to think quickly. His impulsive actions got him into this mess, so they would never get him out. He needed to be like Metal: smart, calculating, capable, yet not afraid to act.

His chest burned. Though sparks rained everywhere, they seem particularly attracted to the power cable wrapped around him, flowing into the exposed, frayed ends while the whole cable faintly glowed.

And there it was: the solution. A power cable conducted electricity.

In a swift blur, Sonic ripped the cable from his chest and leapt into the air. His feet slammed into the ceiling, and he clicked his foot, holding firmly to the metallic ribbons.

Nega laughed. "You're wasting your time, hedgehog. This roboticizer isn't like the last one. I had it specifically built to resist anything you can do it."

Sonic ignored Nega—that was what Metal would do—and jammed one frayed end of the cable into the ribbons. Sparks rushed into it, flowing through the cable and streaming to the floor.

Jumping down, he grabbed the other end of the cable, then sprang back. Sparks sprayed from the cable into his face, but he paid them no attention. Instead, he shoved the other end of the cable into the ribbons too, then fell back to the floor, ducked his head into his arms, and gasped one last breath.

Nega smirked. "That's right. You may as well just sit on the floor and wait for—"

Orange sparks exploded above, hissing and spewing smoke into the chamber. Sonic held his breath and closed his eyes as the sting of acrid smoke washed over him. The pressure in the chamber was growing, and the sparks were glowing red as fire erupted above. Flames burst down, smashing the ribbons with a storm of red shrapnel and thrusting Sonic against the glass.

The explosion ripped the roboticizer to pieces. Sonic was thrown outward, smoke and sparks trailing him, as he crashed into filing cabinet. Paper scattered into the air and met the sparks, igniting into a storm of ashes that whirred all around.

He lifted himself from the ground. His skin screamed from the burns, patches of his fur were scorched away, and he coughed up one last mouthful of sparks.

Nega was screaming something, but the ringing in his ears was all Sonic could hear. The room was filled with smoke now, and pieces of ceiling plaster were curling into black ash that snowed to the floor.

Something else exploded behind him, but he easily avoided it as he slid through the glass and shrapnel. The green Emerald laid on the floor ahead, and he scooped it into his hand, then slid to Metal's side. He lifted Metal into his arms, clutching him tightly to his chest, and glared at Nega.

The rage deforming Nega's face was the last thing he saw before the green flash overtook him.

Sonic didn't see anything when the flash cleared, but he did feel something smooth and cold.
beneath his feet, like pebbles or sand, and the frigid air crept all over his skin. His eyes were still adjusting. He was outside now, and it must have been night because it was impossibly dark.

Why was it so dark? He had done what Metal suggested—he had used Chaos Control to get back to the Earth—so it shouldn't be this dark. Even at night, the moon and the stars should give off at least little light.

He continued to stare at what he assumed was the sky as his eyes adjusted. The moon and the stars never appeared. Instead, a delicate, yellow glow formed on the edges of his vision, and he looked down.

Ragged pine trees with a few purple needles clinging to their branches glowed faintly from their yellow trunks. Rusted grass wilted in fields under the trees, and the air was utterly silent.

This...wasn't the Earth. Well, it was no matter. He was still clutching the Emerald, so he could just try again. He focused on it, picturing his home in his mind's eye, and prepared to draw energy from the gem.

The green flash would overtake him. Soon, it would appear. Any minute now. It would flash over him and—

Sonic held the gem up to his face. Its dull, gray surface didn't shine. It didn't even reflect the sparse light from the trees.

He gasped, "No...the fake Emerald—"

He clutched Metal to his chest, who flopped lifelessly against him, and buried his face in Metal's shoulder, feeling Metal's cold chassis sucking the heat from his skin.

"No..." Sonic said, tears welling in his eyes. "No, no...Metal...it's not right. It's not—"

Something scratched weakly inside of Metal's chassis. At first, Sonic thought he had imagined it, but the noise grew clearer when he focused on it.

"Mets? Is that you?" He looked back at Metal's optical screen. It was blank.

He laid Metal on the ground and leaned his ear against the maintenance panel on Metal's side. Something was definitely scratching inside.

"Hang on, buddy. I'll help you," Sonic said, pulling the crate away from Metal's shoulder. He dropped the dead Emerald into it, then rummaged around until he found the key wrench.

He quickly removed the bolts from Metal's panel, taking care to drop them into the crate so he wouldn't lose them, then pried the panel away.

A burst of blue feathers streaked from Metal's side. Sonic gasped. He recognized it from before: the ficky inside of Metal.

The ficky turned back in the air. It landed on Sonic's head, tore its talons into his skin, then slammed its beak into his ear. Sonic winced. He reached up to grab it, but he was sloppy, and it darted into the air again before he could catch it.

Sonic rubbed his ear, feeling the fur on the top of his head, then froze.

He was afraid to look. He had completely forgotten about the roboticizer.
Chapter End Notes

I drew a reference for how Sonic and Metal appear in this fic! Check it out here:
http://fav.me/daoezdl
"No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car."

- William Carlos Williams

Professor Von Schlemmer held up the package of empty Chaos drives and twirled a pair of scissors. He never did understand why they had to seal each individual drive cell in a separate sheet of plastic. There was simply no way to open them without stumbling around with something sharp and hoping one did not cut himself.

Schlemmer plopped down on the couch haphazardly stuffed into the corner of the graduate student lounge, taking care to avoid the worst of its stains. Despite his best attempts to be rid of the thing, his graduate students insisted on keeping the filthy sofa, and he wasn't about to waste their already limited budget on a new one.

He began to cut open the plastic then stopped and sighed. He shouldn't be doing this. His graduate students should be doing this. That was why he almost paid them. They existed to do all the things he didn't want to do, like grading papers and opening these infernal Chaos drive packages.

He leaned back in the sofa and stared at the ceiling. A pitiful array of formerly white ceiling panels spanned the room, utilities peaking through the holes. This is what he got for accepting grant money from the Council. All it took was one tiny global crisis, and they could whisk away all his staff just like that.

He had tried to explain that his research had absolutely nothing to do with the sun's sudden disappearance, but they would have none of it. "Existential threat," they said, "We all need to work together," they said, "end of the world." Bah! Now he had no staff and no one to do his chores.

Prying his fingers between the plastic and sliding the scissors across the seam, he finally managed to pull the plastic apart and free the drive. He lifted it up, watching the light wash over its dull, cloudy surface.

His telecom buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out, then groaned when he saw the caller. With a single tap, he answered it.

"Are you finished with your analysis? We needed this data yesterday," the woman on the phone said. It was Colonel Howe, member of the Ministry of Defense, the military branch of the Council that had stolen his students.

"I am...working on it," Schlemmer said, eyeing the computer with the half-finished spreadsheet glowing on its screen. Data analysis was also for graduate students.

Howe sighed audibly on the phone. "I still don't understand why you stay up there, Professor Von Schlemmer. Your research station is practically in the middle of nowhere. This would be so much easier if you'd just come back."

"Nein!" Schlemmer screeched, then rubbed his temples. "You don't understand. Never could I
gather control data on the atmosphere because the sun was always there to emit cosmic rays. Now that it's gone, I can run experiments that were impossible before. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, Howe, and I'm not giving it up."

"You will address me as Colonel," Howe said. "Now look—the Ministry knows you are...enthusiastic about your research, but there will be nothing to research without the sun."

"I know, I know," Schlemmer said, shaking his head. He sighed again. "Give me five minutes, and I'll have the data to you."

"Excellent. I look forward to hearing from you." She hung up.

Schlemmer tossed his telecom onto the couch. Groaning, he trudged over to the computer and crawled into the stiff chair in front of it, staring at the spreadsheet as it mocked him.

"This is so annoying," Schlemmer mumbled, tapping on the keyboard. "I swear, any undergraduate off the street could run polynomial regression, I don't understand—"

The lights flickered, flashing on and off for a brief second, then cut out. The humming of his computer died too, as did the screen, and Schlemmer was left staring at the dead monitor where his spreadsheet had been.

"Not again," he groaned, pulling open the desk drawer and rummaging around until he found the flashlight.

Clicking it on, Schlemmer walked back to the couch. He scooped his telecom into his hand, shook his head, then tapped the screen, opening a map of the power grid.

A red circle was flashing over one of the power stations about 10 kilometers east.

He sighed. At least the outage wasn't too far this time. Slapping his access chip into his palm, he trudged to the door. There was no point in calling the maintenance crew because there was no maintenance crew. Everyone else had been evacuated.

He was the only one left.

Schlemmer's car was a tiny, toy-like thing and bright red. Its electric engine hummed quietly as its headlights illuminated the gravel road, while Schlemmer himself gripped the wheel and drove in silence. He hated driving. It was such a waste of time, but he had little choice. The Atmospheric Research Center was practically in the middle of nowhere, and the Ministry of Transportation didn't cover such a remote region.

Further, the Atmospheric Research Center spanned acres of land, with dozens of delicate sensors and machinery spread across its territory. Carrying electricity to all those components was a difficult task, and given the remote location, it wasn't unusual for a fuse to blow and bring down the entire grid. With any luck, all he would need to do was replace the fuse and flip the breaker.

The massive cables of the power station shone dimly even in the darkness and twisted down a maze of steel on the other side of the chain link fence. Parking his car on a patch of dead grass, Schlemmer jumped out with flashlight in hand.

The path to the gate was overgrown with weeds, grant money only ever paid for critical maintenance, but Schlemmer marched past them then froze. The steel gate between the chain link fence had been torn from its hinges and tossed into the grass. A loud, hissing buzz cut through the
air followed by a scream, one that was young and coming from inside the station.

He ran to the door. Was that the scream of a child? But why would a child be out here? The power station was a dangerous place, and a child who would have no idea of the dangers of the electric currents, and the buzzing—

He slammed open the door to the station. Dozens of electrical wires flowed around the ceiling, winding like city streets to the central control unit. All wires were intact, and the system seemed normal.

Except for the blue hedgehog. He sat on the floor with his hand shoved between the wires, and he must have received quite the shock because his fur stood up perfectly straight, his ears twitched, and burn marks covered his skin.

Schlemmer ran toward him. "Whoa, are you okay? Did you touch the wire? You're lucky the circuit breaker cut out before you were electrocuted. How did you get in here?"

The hedgehog jumped back as Schlemmer approached, his wild eyes darting between Schlemmer and the door. He tensed.

"You'll have no mercy from me, Nega! Not after what you did to Metal!" The hedgehog shouted, gritting his teeth.

"What? Nega? What in the world are you on about?" Schlemmer said, trying to keep his voice steady. Whoever this hedgehog was, he had a disturbed, unstable look in his eyes, and it unsettled Schlemmer.

The hedgehog looked back at him, and his expression melted into a grimace. He took a step toward Schlemmer, making an unusually harsh scratch against the floor.

Schlemmer flashed his light over the hedgehog then jumped in shock. From a distance, the hedgehog looked normal enough, but upon closer inspection, Schlemmer noticed his leg.

It was roboticized. But that was impossible! No one had ever succeeded in roboticizing only a limb. The process was all-or-nothing, and no one who ever entered a roboticizer came out with their mind in tact.

Schlemmer took another step backward. This was dangerous. The hedgehog was likely insane, and Schlemmer needed to get out of here before the hedgehog attacked.

Schlemmer bolted back to the door, threw his hand over the handle, but stopped when he heard the sobbing.

He glanced back. The hedgehog was clutching some sort of robot to his chest, and he held it as it were the most precious thing in the world.

"I thought," the hedgehog said, wiping his eyes, "if I could only recharge his battery, he'd come back."

The hedgehog buried his face into the robot's side. "He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve to die. Oh Metal…"

Schlemmer's hand fell off the door. Maybe the hedgehog was a threat, maybe he wasn't, but whoever he was, he sounded desperate.
Walking back to the hedgehog, Schlemmer knelt down and put his hand over the hedgehog's shoulder. "This robot, he was your friend, wasn't he?"

The hedgehog looked up at him and nodded, his face tense with pain despite his efforts not to cry. "He is my best friend. And I know he'll come back. He always comes back…I have to believe that."

Schlemmer stood up, walked over to the circuit breaker on the wall, and flipped the switch. The lights flickered back on, and the electrical relays began to hum as he walked back to the hedgehog.

"Mein Freund, what is your name?" Schlemmer said.

"I'm Sonic, just...Sonic. And this is Metal."

"Well, Sonic, my name is Professor Von Schlemmer, and if you want to come back to my lab, I will do what I can to help your friend."

Sonic rode in the back of Schlemmer's car. He usually didn't ride in cars, especially not ones that moved this slowly, but it wasn't like he could go anywhere without Schlemmer. Beside, he was tired, and it was easier to hold Metal this way.

"If you're not with Nega," Sonic said, "then who are you? What do you know about him?"

Schlemmer shifted his rear view mirror to look at Sonic. "It is as I said—I am Professor Von Schlemmer. I am one of many researchers who use these facilities to study cosmic rays. When high-energy radiation from the sun hits the planet, it collides with particles in the atmosphere. These collisions are highly energetic, and they sometimes create particles that cannot exist under other circumstances.

"As for Nega, I assume you mean Dr. Eggman Nega? I assure you I do not work for him. Nega is something of a renegade. He always works alone, and he is quite the nuisance, in the local Kriegsherr sort-of-way. He's always trying some ridiculous scheme to take over the world, but he never really succeeds thanks to the wisdom of the Council. And the Ministry of Defense. Well, mostly the Ministry of Defense."

Sonic gazed out the window. He supposed that made sense. He knew the planet was populated, so he was bound to run into someone sooner or later. It did surprise him Schlemmer didn't think Nega a threat, though, especially after all that had happened.

Schlemmer cleared his throat. "So, Sonic is it? Tell me, what happened to you and your friend?"

Sonic told Schlemmer about everything: the Earth, Metal's theory of the missing stars, how Nega captured them, Metal's condition, and why Nega needed Sonic specifically.

Though he nodded skeptically, Schlemmer listened to Sonic's story without much comment. He did perk up when Sonic mentioned how the Chaos Emeralds were supposedly related to the laws of physics, at which point Schlemmer insisted on seeing Nega's notes. Sonic promised he would let Schlemmer copy them once he fixed Metal.

Schlemmer only asked a few questions. He was particularly interested in Sonic's leg. Apparently, it was "highly improbable," so Sonic tried to tell Schlemmer what little he understood.

His survival from Nega's roboticizer still confused him. He had no idea how it had happened. He still had all his fur, and the only apparent change was the large, metallic scar that now spread
across his back like cracked glass.

Not that he was going to complain. At least the pain in his chest had completely vanished, and it was so easy to breathe now. The cold air didn't sting his lungs any more, and even sprinting his hardest, he never seemed to run out of breath. He figured it must have happened like on the television. Electric shocks always revived heart attack patients, so that must have been what happened to him.

They arrived to Schlemmer's lab, an unremarkable building made from half a dozen trailer offices packed together. Schlemmer parked the car on the gravel, walked up to the building, then unlocked the door by pressing his palm to it.

Sonic followed him into the hallway, clutching Metal to his chest and walking slowly. Once inside, Schlemmer closed the door and turned to Sonic.

"Mein Freund, you look like you need rest. Why not get some sleep? We can look at your robot friend tomorrow," Schlemmer said with an assuring smile.

"No!" Sonic said, clutching Metal to his chest further. "I won't rest until he's safe. If I wait, something else will happen."

Schlemmer sighed and pressed his glasses to his face. "I know this look. It is the look of someone who will not be convinced. That's fine. Just follow me, and I'll see what I can do."

Schlemmer turned the corner, taking care to step over the bump in the hallway where the offices connected, then opened the door. Inside was a cramped room with a steel workbench in the center. Dozens of strange tools lined shelves on the walls, and in the corner stood a pyramid of cardboard boxes filled with assorted mechanical parts.

"Put your friend on the table," Schlemmer said, walking up to a shelf. "What did you say happened to him again?"

Sonic laid Metal on the table and brushed away the dust from Metal's forehead with the back of his fingers. "His hard drive—Nega blew up his hard drive!"

"That could be," Schlemmer said, setting a box of tools on the workbench, "problematisch."

"Why's that?" Sonic asked.

"The hard drive is the part of a computer that stores all the data, so even if we replace his hard drive, all data would still be lost," Schlemmer replied.

"Data...like his memories?" Sonic said, panic rising. "You don't mean—"

Schlemmer nodded solemnly. "Not just his memories. All data would be lost, including his operating system, memories, and even personality."

"No..." Sonic said, a pit growing in his stomach. Without his personality, without his consciousness, Metal would be nothing. He would be blank. Dead.

Sonic suddenly latched onto Schlemmer's coat, yanking the taller professor closer to his level. "We can't let that happen. You've got to fix him. You've got to!"

"Whoa, calm down, you are not helping," Schlemmer said, prying Sonic away. "It is as I said—I will do what I can. Now, what do you know about him? I am familiar with electronics, but I have
never before seen a robot such as this."

"Well," Sonic said, "I know he has this panel thing on his side. I've looked in there before. His engine is in there."

"The hard drive would likely be far from any engine. Too hot. It would melt the magnets," Schlemmer said.

"Then I don't know," Sonic said, throwing his arms around himself and trying not to shake. "I don't know. I don't know!"

Schlemmer eyed him. He spoke faster. "It's probably in his head. That's where I'd put it, and he has these screws on his cheeks, so I bet something is in there."

Schlemmer pulled a flathead screwdriver from the toolbox and began to unscrew one of the bolts on Metal's cheek. He worked quickly, placing both bolts safely in a tray once removed.

Placing both hands over Metal's muzzle, Schlemmer shook it left and right until it wiggled loose. Prying Metal's muzzle clean off, he left a gaping hole in Metal's face.

Schlemmer pulled a worklight closer to Metal then laid his cheek on Metal's chest, looking inside Metal's face. He whistled.

"So you'll fix him, right?" Sonic said.

"Allow me to show you the problem," Schlemmer said, dropping the flathead screwdriver into the toolbox and pulling out a much smaller one.

He slid his arm into the hole in Metal's face. Sonic had no idea what he was doing, but there was deliberate intention to Schlemmer's movements. After a couple of minutes, Schlemmer withdrew and pulled out a smashed, thin silver box. Black scorch marks marred the surface, and a large hole had been blown across the top.

Schlemmer set the box in Sonic's hands. Upon closer examination, Sonic could see what had once been a silver disk, except now it was shredded into tiny pieces.

"That's his hard drive. As you can obviously see, it's not in good shape," Schlemmer said.

Sonic stared in muted horror at the box. Surely there was something he could do to fix it? But what? He had already failed Metal once with his utter lack of technological understanding, and it was happening again. Only this time, it wasn't Metal's engine that was broken. It was Metal's very self.

"Metal needs this. It has all his data. You have to fix it!" Sonic said, shaking.

"I have a spare disk," Schlemmer said, pulling a similar, thin rectangle from the box. "I will install it, but I'm not sure if it'll help. His computing architecture is remarkably complex, and I'm not sure I fully understand it."

Sonic bit his lip and carefully slid Metal's destroyed hard drive into the crate at his side. He watched as Schlemmer slid his hands inside Metal again and begin to work. The sight horrified Sonic: Metal laying there lifelessly with the gaping hole in his face, and Schlemmer rummaging around inside him.

Schlemmer mumbled to himself as he worked. "Hmm, there is this cable...what is this, some kind
of RAID? Bah, what a mess! Better tighten these screws, snap the motherboard cables together, and...done! Let's see if this works."

Schlemmer snapped Metal's muzzle back on, tightened the screws, then stood up. For a long, tense moment, nothing happened. Sonic bit his lip, shifted his feet, his eyes glued to Metal. Yet there was no movement, only silence.

Sonic lunged forward, preparing to grab Schlemmer's coat again, then stopped as a red line shimmered across Metal's optical screen. He rushed to Metal's side and picked up Metal's hand, holding the cold, lifeless fingers in his palm as he stared at Metal's screen.

The line danced around randomly, occasionally shifting to static, then snapping back. After a moment, the line snapped in half, and two ovals coalesced into Metal's eyes.

"Metal! You're alive!" Sonic shouted. He leaned down and hugged Metal, pressing his face against Metal's engine panel. Nothing could be better. Metal was alive, and any minute now, he would hug Sonic back. Metal always hugged Sonic back; he did love hugs, after all.

Cold leaked into Sonic's skin, and Metal didn't move.

"Mets?" Sonic said, pulling back. Metal laid still. Nothing on his optical screen moved, and his eyes didn't flinch. The ovals were there, but they were blank and unfocused.

Sonic turned to Schlemmer. "What's wrong? Why is he—"

Schlemmer shook his head and placed his hand over Sonic's shoulder. "It's as I feared. I can give him a new hard drive, but there's nothing on it. No operating system. No data. Nix."

"No—" Sonic said. He laid his hands under Metal, then lifted him up. Metal flopped lifelessly in his arms. "But there's got to be something you can do. He's got to be fixed!"

Schlemmer sighed. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do. Not unless you have a backup copy of his data?"

Sonic shook his head. "I don't, but—"

"I'm sorry, Sonic. I really am. But I've done all I can," Schlemmer said, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Now, it's rather late, and you look like you haven't slept in days. Go get some rest. I have work I need to finish. Maybe things will look better tomorrow."

"Wait!" Sonic said. "The flicky! He's missing his flicky!"

Schlemmer adjusted his spectacles. "Flicky? Isn't that a bird? An extinct one at that. Died out almost 200 years ago."

"Yes!" Sonic said excitedly. "He needs his flicky. We've got to find it."

"Mein Freund, we are not going out there in search of an extinct bird. That is insanity," Schlemmer yawned. "Now, go to sleep. You need rest. You can use the couch in the student lounge."

"But—" Sonic started. Schlemmer raised his hand.

"Now, can I see those notes you mentioned? The ones you found from Nega? I might be able to help you with them," Schlemmer said.

Sonic pulled the notes from the crate and handed them to Schlemmer, who shuffled through them
as he walked to the door.

Something buzzed. Schlemmer reached into his pocket and pulled out some type of phone-like device. He shot Sonic a pained glance then answered it. Though he couldn't make out the details, Sonic definitely heard someone yelling across the line.

Schlemmer hurried to the door and said, "Sorry! The power went out. You know, this wouldn't happen if—no, no! I'm sorry! Forget I said anything. I'll have the data over soon."

Before leaving, he placed his hand over his phone, turned to Sonic, and whispered, "The student lounge is just down the hall. I trust you can find it. I'm going to be in my office."

Sonic went to speak, but Schlemmer held the phone up to his ear again. The screaming returned.

"I'm going right now! Right-right now!" Schlemmer said, his voice fading as he scurried down the hallway.

Sonic was left standing alone with only the gentle hum of the room's ventilation and Metal in his arms. Despite his optical screen, Metal was as blank and lifeless as ever.

"Oh Metal..." Sonic said. He walked back to the workbench and sat Metal on it, positioning him so he sat upright.

Metal sat like a mannequin.

"When you died, it was just horrible," Sonic said, picking up Metal's hand in his own, "because I thought I'd never see you again. But that's not really right, you know? I was still thinking of me when I should have been thinking of you."

Sonic met Metal's blank gaze. "Way back when, before any of this happened, whenever we raced, or fought, or tried to kill each other, I never really thought about you. You were just another one of Eggman's stupid robots. But, now that I think back on all those times, I realize you were in pain, Metal. So much pain."

Wrapping both his hands around Metal's palm, Sonic brought Metal's hand to his chest and continued, "You were in pain because you only wanted the same things we all want: your own identity, the freedom to experience adventure, and someone—"

Sonic gulped. He wasn't sure Metal could even understand him, but he needed to say it.

"—someone to be there with you. So you wouldn't be alone. So you wouldn't have to go through all that alone."

Sonic sighed. He dropped Metal's hand and place his own hands over Metal's shoulders.

"I promise you, Mets, that I'll be there for you. Even if you don't feel the same way as I do, I promise to still be your friend. I'll show you the world, and we can go on adventures, and you'll finally be free. Free to do whatever you want. Free to be whoever you want."

Metal said nothing. He only stared, motionless, blank, and empty.

But Sonic didn't let that bother him. He couldn't let it bother him. He had to save Metal, whatever it took.

He scooped Metal into his arms then scooted down the hallway. Schlemmer was completely
preoccupied typing on his computer, so Sonic left him alone. He stopped only to stuff supplies from the office kitchen into Metal's crate, which Sonic now carried, then threw open the outside door.

"Come on, Mets—let's go find the rest of you."
Philosophy of Mind

"Wholeness is not achieved by cutting off a portion of one's being, but by integration of the contraries."
—C.G. Jung

Sonic crawled across the ground, making his way through the sheets of pine needles cast off by those strange, purple fir trees. Grabbing a fistful of needles, he ran his fingers across the ground beneath then tossed the needles behind him. Above, the lines of the power station crackled against the starless night sky, and pine pollen driften down in a yellow haze, coating his fur in a thin layer of dust.

At least he didn't sneeze. Pollen and dirt were everywhere in this surreal forest, but it didn't seem to bother him. He was thankful for that at least. He needed to stay quiet, and he frankly didn't care why the pollen was failing to make his nose tingle.

Sonic stood up and dusted the pollen from his quills. Tracking the flicky had seemed easy in theory—he was so sure he could just follow its tracks like those outdoorsy-types did in the movies—but now that he was actually out here, he realized he didn't have the faintest idea of what he was doing.

He walked back to Metal, whom he had sat by a tree, and lifted him into his arms, taking care to cradle Metal's head so it didn't fall backward.

"This isn't fair," Sonic said, dusting the pollen off Metal, "I'm clueless about technology. So doesn't that mean I should be all about nature? Why do both these things have to be so hard?"

A twig snapped in the distance, and Sonic froze, ears swiveling toward the noise: a single chirp.

Sonic carefully placed Metal on the ground and crept forward. Pine needles crunched under his robotic foot, and Sonic flinched, hoping the thing that was chirping didn't hear him.

The chirping grew louder. Sonic's eyes darted left and right, frantically searching everywhere, then honed in on a ball of blue feathers sitting in the tree above him. Sonic crouched down and, shuffling beneath the tree, he pressed his back to the bark and looked up.

Metal's flicky was perched above, feathers puffed against the cold, its head buried beneath its wing. With another chirp, it lifted one wing into the air, stretching it as far as it could, then puffed up again. The frigid air didn't seem to bother it. Its chirping was lazy, almost musical, and it appeared to enjoy scratching the bark with its talons. It was no wonder—the poor bird had been cramped inside of Metal for who knows how long.

Sonic looked back at Metal. Though he had tried to sit Metal upright against the tree, Metal had slumped down the trunk and now laid in a lifeless heap with pine needles jetting from his armor.

"Look Mets! It's your flicky," Sonic whispered.

Pollen fell over Metal's dull gaze.

"Don't worry. I'll get him back," Sonic said. Stepping away from the tree, Sonic cupped his hands to his mouth.
"Hey, flicky," he said, still keeping his voice down. He couldn't be too careful, not when Nega could have some new horror following them.

The flicky's eyes darted to him. It jumped upright and spread its wings, preparing to take flight.

"No, wait! I need to talk to you," Sonic said. "Please hear me out."

Wings still outstretched, the flicky eyed him warily.

"Listen—if you stay out here, you're gonna turn into a birdcicle. Look around! This isn't the Earth, and there's no sun. It's way too dangerous for a bird," Sonic said.

The flicky didn't move. It was just a bird, after all. Could it even understand him? Did it matter? He had to try.

"Now look, we're gonna fix this, me and Mets are, but we need your help. And I promise as soon as we get home, Tails will find a way to make Mets work without you, but in the meantime, if you could just do me a huge favor and come down—"

The flicky threw its head back and screeched. Sonic dropped his ears to his head, the sound grating his mind. Before he even had time to react, the flicky launched into the air, darting over the trees.

"Come back!" Sonic said, suppressing panic at the sight of Metal's flicky disappearing into the branches.

Tensing his legs, Sonic leapt into the fir trees, bouncing from branch to branch as the flicky cut through the forest. Though he was fast, the flicky was small, and its weaving flight was difficult to track.

A branch snapped forward and smacked Sonic in the face. He fell to the ground, angrily rubbing his forehead, then quickly darted up before he lost Metal's flicky.

"You stupid bird! Don't you understand? Everyone's gonna die without you," Sonic shouted.

The flicky launched upward, the dim light of the glowing trees illuminating spots on its belly through the fir needles. It circled above then perched on the highest branch of a towering tree.

Sonic skidded to a halt beneath the tree. The flicky was perched above, and it turned its head to the side, looking at him with one eye.

He cursed. There was no way he could jump up there. The branches were too thin and the trunk too high.

_Alright, time for plan B_, he thought.

He took a few steps backward and hid behind a bush, taking care to remain out of the flicky's sight. He then quietly opened Metal's crate and emptied its contents, setting the jar of peanut butter he had taken from Schlemmer on the ground.

With the empty crate in one hand and the peanut butter jar in the other, Sonic tip-toed back to the tree. The flicky had puffed up and started chirping again, but now it was faced away from him.

Sonic scooped up the white yarn ball, also taken from Schlemmer, and tied one strand of yarn to the end of a stick. Using the stick, he propped up the crate so the empty side faced the ground, then smeared another stick with peanut butter, placed it beneath the crate, and retreated back to the
bush.

Then he waited. The cold air nipped at the top of his ears, pine needles poked into his socks, his leg strained from sitting on the ground, but Sonic didn't move, and he didn't make a sound.

The flicky chirped. It looked down, hopped across the branch, then fluttered to the ground and landed a few feet from Sonic's trap.

*Come on, come on!* Sonic thought, biting his lip. He still didn't move. Though he was fast, he had encountered this bird enough times to know of its unfair agility, and he didn't want to take any chances with Metal's life.

The flicky turned its head, examining the peanut butter with one eye. It took a tentative hop, then another and another until it finally hopped under the box.

"Now!" Sonic said. He tugged the string, snapping the twig out from the crate, forcing the box down, and engulfing the bird.

Sonic walked up to the crate, ignoring the screeching and pounding beneath, and slid the lid underneath it. He lifted the whole crate up, satisfied at the weight of the captured bird in his hands.

"You know what they say: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," Sonic muttered. He snapped the lid to the crate and held it in one hand then gathered up the discarded contents of the crate into the other.

He only needed to take a few, quick steps, and he was at Mets side again. He quickly brushed the pine needles off Metal's armor despite the futility—he would need to roll Metal on his face to reach his maintenance panel anyway—then dropped to his knees. He grabbed the key wrench and hurriedly began to unscrew the bolts of Metal's maintenance panel.

The bolts gone, Sonic pulled the panel free and set it aside. He leaned down, quickly examining Metal's interior, and breathed a sigh of relief at the life support unit. The glass window of the steel, cylindrical unit was free from cracks, and as he tapped it, the unit gently clicked open, revealing an empty cavity lined with wires.

Sonic bit his lip. Was he really going to do this? Was this not the literal opposite of what Sonic the Hedgehog would do? To shove an animal into a Badnik...

He gazed at Metal, who laid in front of him in a lifeless heap, his face buried in a pile of pine needles, while the flicky screeched and pounded inside the crate.

Cold sweat ran down Sonic's quills, and he was gripping the crate so tightly his fingers were numb. He thought of Metal, the one who had saved his life, not just once and not just twice, but at least three times. And when it was cold, Metal had taken Sonic into his arms, and he was warm. Oh, Metal was so warm, and the way his fingers had drifted through Sonic's quills...

Plus, there was his leg. What had Schlemmer said to him? That his robotic leg should be impossible? And yet, Metal had found a way. He had made the impossible possible, all for Sonic. Sonic had his leg, and he could run again, all because how smart and resourceful Metal was.

Metal deserved to run too, and he deserved to be himself, not a copy of Sonic, not Eggman's slave, but his own person with his own dreams and desires. Metal Sonic wasn't just a Badnik. He was Mets, a real person, Sonic's best friend, and he deserved so much better than what he had always recieved.
Sonic snapped open the crate's lid and thrust his hand inside. The flicky's wings beat against his hands, but he trapped the bird in his palm by clamping its wings to its body. The flicky struggled, trying to flap its wings in his grip, but there was nothing it could do. Sonic jerked his hand out from the crate, panting as the flicky continued to struggle fruitlessly in his grasp.

The bird flicked its head up, staring at him, its eyes filled with the desperate, pleading confusion of someone who couldn't understand.

"I'm sorry," Sonic said, his voice barely above a whisper. He wanted to close his eyes, to look away from what he was about to do, but he couldn't; Metal was counting on him.

He thrust his arm into Metal and shoved the flicky into the steel cylinder. Before the flicky could react, Sonic clicked the life support unit's window. It fell shut. A single puff of mist steamed inside the unit.

Slowly, the flicky closed its eyes.

Sonic fell back, digging his fingers into the dirt and snapping the pine needles. Cold sweat poured through his quills. He panted. He waited.

Metal didn't move.

"No…" Sonic gasped, crawling up to Metal's side. "No!"

He pulled Metal into his chest, cradling Metal's head in his arms. Metal's weak, unfocused gaze looked back at nothing, not at Sonic, not at the forest, not at the sky. His gaze was empty and blank, lacking any trace of awareness.

"I tried, Mets. I tried," Sonic said. He buried his face into Metal's forehead. How unfair it was, how cruel, for Metal to end up like this. Just as soon as Metal had struck free from Eggman, he was cut-down, denied the freedom and opportunity he deserved.

"What can I do? What will it take to bring you back?" Sonic said.

His fell to Metal's chest, and he cried. None of this was supposed to happen. Sonic the Hedgehog wasn't supposed to lose. Sonic the Hedgehog's best friend wasn't supposed to die. Sonic the Hedgehog wasn't supposed to shove a flicky into a Badnik.

And most of all, Sonic the Hedgehog wasn't supposed to have these feelings for a robot.

"B-but," Sonic said, sitting up. "I...I can't help it. I do. I—I—"

Sonic pulled Metal into embrace, resting his chin on Metal's shoulder. Metal flopped against him, cold, dead, and lifeless.

Tears streamed down his face as sobbing racked his body. "Oh, Metal. Please come back. I-I never got to tell you. I like you, Metal. I really like you. Please…"

A cold, smooth pressure brushed Sonic's cheek, and a familiar voice muttered, "S-sonic?"

The red circles of Metal's eyes focused on him, filled with intelligence, with awareness, eyes that were looking past whole world and gazing only at Sonic. Metal's fingers were pressed to Sonic's cheek, and his wrist was trembling.

"Metal! You're—you're alive!" Sonic gasped. He buried his face into Metal's shoulder again, tears
streaming still from his eyes, though they were no longer tears of sadness. Sonic searched his mind for something to say, but there were no words. Metal was alive! He wasn't dead, he wasn't mindless, and although it was faint, the familiar warmth of his engine was slowly leaking into Sonic's skin.

Metal weakly wrapped Sonic with one arm and rubbed his own forehead with the other. His voice was as weak as his grip. "What...what happened? Why is it so hard...so hard...to think..."

Sonic held Metal so tightly his knuckles turned white, and Metal's armor was poking into him, but he didn't care. "Nega—he killed you! He hacked into you and blew up your hard drive. Oh, it was so horrible, Metal. You died!"

"He...hacked into me?" Metal said. He paused and his grip suddenly tightened. "But that would mean...my radio! It is still compromised!"

Metal tried to pushed himself up, but he was so weak he only wobbled. "Sonic—you need to disable my radio. Hurry!"

Sonic nearly dropped Metal in confusion. "Your radio? What?"

Metal frantically tried to shoved himself out of Sonic's arms, but Sonic's grip was far stronger than Metal's, and Metal only twisted to his side. His maintenance panel was still open, and Metal frantically gestured to it. "The red cable—pull out the red cable!"

"What—" Sonic started.

"There is no time to explain! Pull out the red cable. Now!" Metal said, voice racked with static. He was too weak to shout.

"Okay, okay, the red cable. Right," Sonic said. He peered inside Metal again and gaped at sprawling wires. There were just so many of them, and they twisted into a thousand different places.

Sonic gulped. Last time he had tried to fix Metal's wiring, he had failed.

But he wouldn't fail this time. Metal was counting on him. He wiped the sweat from his brow and focused, examining each wire until he found it: a wide, red cable running between Metal's battery and the corridor into his head. He grasped the cable with his fingers, quickly pulled both ends from their sockets, and yanked the cable out of Metal's back.

Sonic plopped back on the ground, shaking as he held the cable. "Was that right? Please tell me I didn't just hurt you—"

Metal turned back to him and took the cable in his hands. For a long moment, he gazed at it and said nothing.

At last, he finally looked up and said, "I am...I am free. My radio is dead. I can no longer hear it. And so...I am free."

Metal crawled up to Sonic, took his hand, and wrapped his fingers around the cable. "Eggman did not trust me, so he gave me no control over my radio. I could not turn it off. Eggman was always there. He was in my head, listening to my thoughts, watching my every move for signs of betrayal.

"But if my radio is gone, he cannot reach me. He cannot track me. He is no longer in my head. And so...I am now free."
Metal looked down at the red cable wrapped between their palms. "I should have asked you to
disable this sooner. It was suboptimal on my part. I thought I could use the radio to help. Eggman
was not here to monitor me, but—"

Sonic clutched Metal in his arms, hugging him so tightly that even Metal stopped speaking. "Come
on, Mets—you come back from the dead, and the only thing you can do is ramble on about
Eggman. Don't blame yourself. I don't think anyone expected Nega to pull something like that."

Metal tried to pulled his arms around Sonic, but his grip was even weaker than before.

Sonic pulled back. "Mets? You okay? You've been through a lot."

Metal looked up at Sonic. "Is it not...what does one call this situation? Irony? It is ironic you
should say that when you look exhausted yourself. My condition is acceptable. It is just not easy to
orient myself with only half my disks."

"Half?" Sonic said, leaning over and picking Metal's destroyed hard drive from the pile of
everything that was in the crate. He dropped it into Metal's hands. "I thought you only had one
drive. I saw the professor replace it."

"The professor? Who—" Metal started then shook his head. "Nevermind. You will need to tell me
later. As for your question, Eggman gave me one disk, but I installed another without his
knowledge. I used it once before to backup my memories, and it is all I have now."

Sonic's face lit up like a sports stadium on game night. "So you do remember! Schlemmer said all
your data, including your memories, would be lost, but I knew he was wrong!"

Metal shook his head. "Whoever told you that was not wrong. I have an illicit backup, true, but it is
much smaller than my primary disk."

Metal picked up a piece of the shredded hard drive. "I only had the space to copy my most
important, most irreplaceable data. The backup drive includes my memories and all the basic
drivers and services for my systems, but nothing more. My general databases—any knowledged
that I could have easily recreated with internet access—is lost."

Sonic took the shredded hard drive and slid it into the crate. "But that's great news!"

"How is this anything but profoundly suboptimal? My models are only as good as my data, and
without my data—"

"You're not dead, and you're still you!" Sonic said, pulling Metal into such a tight embrace that his
magnetic foot stuck to Metal again. "I thought you were dead. Really, truly dead forever. And...and
I never got to tell you—"

Metal tried to wrap his arms around Sonic, but he was even weaker than before, and his arms fell
limply aside.

"Mets? You okay?" Sonic said, the faintest panic knotting in his stomach again.

"My...power...is low. I will be okay...but I need...to recharge…" Metal said, his eyes dimming
slightly.

Sonic sprang up, and taking care to ensure Metal never left his arms, and shoved everything back
into the crate. He quickly screwed Metal's maintenance panel back on him then flung the crate
around his shoulder.
"Say no more," Sonic said, pressing his cheek to Metal's face and relishing the renewed warmth in his robotic counterpart. "I know just where we need to go."
"The test of the machine is the satisfaction it gives you. There isn't any other test. If the machine produces tranquility it's right."

- Robert M. Pirsig

The door to Professor Von Schlemmer's office stood ajar, and despite the exhaustion welling beneath his eyelids, Sonic couldn't help but peek inside as he past it in the hallway. Schlemmer himself laid slump in his chair, his arms flopped over his keyboard, and his eyes closed as he snored softly.

How late was it? For that matter, what day was it? Time itself seemed to have lost meaning ever since Nega had captured them both. There was no day, and despite the darkness, there was no night either, not without the moon or stars. There was only the endless, frantic running. Yet not the kind of running Sonic enjoyed, but the kind that sapped his vitality and left only dull exhaustion in its wake.

Sonic shook his head, still creeping down the hallway, carrying Metal. Metal's head rested limply against Sonic's chest, his optical screen blank. Sonic knew that Metal was only trying to conserve power, that Metal was still fine, and yet whenever he saw Metal's lifeless form, he could think of nothing else but the way Metal had nearly died. The sooner he could plug Metal in, the better.

Up ahead, light streamed into the dark hallway from another cracked door, and Sonic walked up to it, prying it open with the bottom of his foot. The room inside was cramped with papers and dusty computers, an old, gray couch stuffed into the corner. Despite the couch's stains and general lumpiness, a single pillow and blanket were stacked neatly on its cushions.

Sonic blinked. Had Schlemmer set out blankets for him?

Metal shifted in his arms, his optical screen flickering dimly to life. "You may put me down. This room has electricity."

Sonic clutched Metal more tightly despite the stiff, tired pain in his arms. "Put you down? What, and make you figure all this out even though you were nearly blown up?"

Sonic stepped over a stack of papers as he trotted to the couch. Jamming his foot into its side, he slid the couch a few inches, revealing an electrical outlet hidden behind it.

"Come on, Mets, what kind of best friend would I be if I did that?" Sonic said, gently sitting Metal upright against the cushions.

"Technically, I was not blown up," Metal said, rubbing his forehead. "But my need for electricity is urgent."

Sonic leaned on the couch's armrest with both hands. "I know. Can you shift just a little to the left? Perfect," Sonic said. As Metal turned Sonic lifted his hand, pressing his palm to Metal's side.

"What are you—" Metal started, but quietly trailed off as Sonic ran his fingers over Metal's chassis. As soon as he felt a seam, Sonic stopped and quickly pressed his fingers against it, popping open a small panel. Sonic leaned down, trying to get a closer look, and soon found Metal's power cable. He unwound it from its harness, pulling it free then snapping it into the outlet by the couch.
The overhead lights suddenly flickered and cut out, leaving the room in darkness. Sonic blinked. Why were the lights out? Would there be enough power for Metal? He jerked his head back at Metal but then noticed the brilliant glow of his companion's red eyes.

"Better?" Sonic asked hopefully.

Metal nodded. "Yes, though as you can see, or I suppose, rather not see, the voltage in this building is weak. It will take longer to recharge myself, and it appears as if other devices that require electricity, such as these lights, will not operate while I draw power from the grid."

Sonic let out a sigh of relief. He stood up, shuffled a few steps toward Metal, and plopped down on the couch by his side.

"So you're good? You need anything else?" Sonic said with a yawn. He eyed the pillow next to him. It really was thoughtful of Schlemmer to leave it out, and Sonic couldn't wait to drop his face into it.

"Do I need anything? Sonic, I do not mean to be...what is the word? Insistent? Overbearing? You appear as if you are ready to collapse. You need rest far more than I. Do not worry yourself over my condition," Metal said, rising a few inches up from the cushions. "I will now relocate to the floor."

"What? No!" Sonic said, pushing Metal back to the couch. "You're not gonna sleep on the floor. There's more than enough room for both of us up here."

The room was dark, and the only light source beamed from Metal's eyes. They glowed softly, the red light giving the ordinarily blue Metal a violet tint. Sonic gazed at Metal's form, at the dents in his armor and the cracks in his engine panel.

_The two of us...both of us...we've both been through so much_, Sonic thought, rubbing the burns on his arms. _And yet...the only reason we're both still here right now...is because we had each other._

"The floor is no discomfort for me," Metal said. As Sonic looked up, he caught Metal's gaze, a mixture of concern and understanding, and Sonic felt a warmth began to spread in his chest.

"Do not worry. I will not be able to feel it," Metal added.

Sonic froze. "You...can't feel it? The floor?"

A cold horror seeped through him, the warmth evaporating. What if...what if Metal couldn't feel any physical sensation at all? Sonic had already accepted that whatever this thing was between himself and Metal, it would inevitably involve some complications, but he had never considered Metal might completely lack any and all sensation.

Metal's voice broke Sonic out of his thoughts. "What? No, of course I can feel the floor. How else would I walk if I could not feel the floor?"

Sonic shook his head and focused back at Metal. "So wait...you can feel? You can feel things?"

"Yes. Though like most robots, I am incapable of feeling pain. But I certainly can 'feel things,' even if that definition is technically imprecise."

Sonic smiled, cupping his hands around Metal's wrist, appreciating how smooth and warm they were. "Ha! So see—you've gotta stay on the couch then. Maybe the floor wouldn't make you feel worse, but sleeping up here is way more comfy. It'll make you feel better."
"If you are certain there is enough room," Metal said. He looked down at Sonic's hands around his wrist. Slowly, he lifted his other hand toward Sonic, raising it as if to embrace him, but then dropped it to his side again and looked away.

Sonic blinked. Why hadn't Metal hugged him? Metal always loved hugs.

"Mets?" Sonic asked, sliding closer to Metal. He took Metal's hand, entwining Metal's fingers with his own. "You alright?"

"Yes, it is just…" Metal glanced up at Sonic then quickly turned away again. "My condition is acceptable."

"It's not your condition. It's how you feel. Are you alright? Come on. You can tell me anything." Sonic squeezed Metal's hand, just as he had done to reassure Metal back when they had scaled Nega's tower.

Metal looked away. "It is just...it is just so ridiculous. I do not think I have ever thought something so ridiculous in my entire existance," Metal said, and much to Sonic's continued surprise, Metal seemed to flush, the bottom portion of his optical screen glowing just slightly red.

Sonic leaned into Metal, anticipation making his fur stand on end. Now he really needed to know. "I'm sure it's not ridiculous. Come on, you can tell me anything. I promise."

Red light streamed between Metal's fingers as Metal gazed at his own hand. "I...I suppose so. Do you recall, back when we were stranded in that abandoned cabin-like structure, I had to hold you all night. Remember?"

"Yes," Sonic said, his voice barely above a whisper. How could he ever forget that?

"Prior to that evening...well, you know how I had always wanted to be the 'real Sonic' and such, and it always made me wonder...what would it feel like to...to have fur. You see, I always had this smooth armor, but you had fur. And I had always wondered...what that was like. What it would feel like. And on that night—"

Metal flushed and looked away. "I am sorry. I told you it was ridiculous."

"Metal," Sonic said, leaning closer, now inches from Metal. "That's not ridiculous at all. It's only natural to wonder about stuff like that."

Metal nodded, meeting Sonic's gaze again. "The ridiculous part was not my curiosity. It was...well, once I knew what your fur felt like, I thought it was..."

Metal shook his head. "I am sorry, Sonic, but this is difficult for me to articulate, especially given I lost so much of my natural language processing data. But your fur was so different from all I known before, so different from Eggman's cold, harsh garrisons. It was...it was soft. And warm. And it felt...unlike anything else I have had felt before. It felt...I do not know the word. I cannot properly articulate this without my internal dictionary data..."

Metal's eyes flickered, and he looked away. "I do not know why I trouble you with something so trivial. I know we have more pressing concerns and—"

"You can do it again, if you want," Sonic whispered.

"E-excuse me?" Metal looked up at him, taken aback.
"My fur. You can feel it again, if you want. I don't mind at all," Sonic said, leaning closer, his face now inches from Metal's cheek.

Metal stared at Sonic cautiously, deliberately. Slowly, he lifted his arm, his hand hovering just above Sonic's shoulder. He paused.

"Are you certain there is time for this? Nega is still a threat and—"

Sonic brought his own hand up and pushed Metal's hand down onto his own shoulder. "Forget Nega. He's not here right now. It's just the two of us—me and you."

Metal nodded. Slowly, Metal's fingers relaxed around Sonic's shoulder, brushing into the fur on Sonic's back. Sonic shivered, though not from cold, as Metal's hand pushed through his fur, and Metal's warm, smooth fingers brushed his skin.

"It is just as I remembered, though I am still in awe. Your fur is so versatile," Metal said, drawing his hand down the fur of Sonic's back, smoothing it. "From the outside, your fur appears coarse, as if engineered to keep out the water and cold."

"But against your skin," Metal said, slipping his hand into Sonic's fur again. "It is so soft and warm. It is a such remarkable thing."

"Metal…" Sonic murmured. Metal was now tightening and relaxing his grip as he massaged Sonic's shoulder. Sonic sighed softly, rolling his shoulder up into Metal's palm.

A part of him insisted he stop. Metal was a robot! Worse, Metal was supposed to be his robotic clone. Of course, Metal wasn't really Sonic's clone—he was his own person, his own wonderful, beautiful person and yet—what even was this thing between himself and Metal? What would everyone think if they knew?

And yet somehow, these thoughts only forced him closer to Metal, to relish the skill with which Metal massaged his shoulder.

Sonic leaned forward, further and further, until his chin slipped over Metal's shoulder. His hands wandered up, finding their way to Metal's waist and wrapping around him. With a single tug, Sonic lifted himself onto Metal's chest, hands still clasped to Metal's back.

"Sonic," Metal said, his muzzle hovering above Sonic's ear. "Should I stop?"

"Don't stop," Sonic said breathlessly. He pressed his face to Metal's cheek, letting the heat wash over his face. He inhaled deeply, taking in the true complexity of Metal's scent. The tinge of ozone was still there, but now he could smell so much more. Scents he had never noticed before, and yet, he somehow knew what they all were. The sweet steel of Metal's armor, the tang of lead in his electronics, and many other alloys he had yet to taste.

Metal's hands wandered down to the small of Sonic's back, wrapping around him and pulling Sonic into his chest. Metal slid backward, bringing his legs up to the couch and laying down on his back. Sonic followed him, slipping down until he laid over Metal's chest with his face still pressed to Metal's cheek.

For a long moment, they simply laid together, Metal's arms wrapped around his back and Sonic's hands tucked around Metal's chest. Sonic let himself stop, for just a second, and forget the world around him. It was just he and Metal on this couch, and despite the lumps in the cushions, despite the burns on his arms, despite everything that had happen, Sonic had never felt so comfortable in his entire life.
Metal brought his hand up, running it down the fur of Sonic's back. Sonic's eyelids grew heavy, his need for sleep pressing in his mind. Sonic sighed as Metal brought his hand higher, gently brushing the fur at the base of his neck.

"Sonic, what happened here?" Metal said, running his fingers across the cracked, metallic scar on Sonic's back. As his fingers touched the scar, a tiny, electric pulse, almost like static, jolted Sonic's skin.

Sonic gasped. Unlike static, that hadn't hurt at all. In fact, the shock had felt quite pleasant, like Metal had just massaged the most tense part of his back.

Sonic blinked, now slightly more awake despite his exhaustion. "That? Well, after you...died, Nega threw me in the roboticizer. It didn't work, though. I got out, luckily with nothing more a scratch."

"This is where your wound was. It appears partially roboticized, but I suppose that at least means there is no longer a risk of infection." As Metal scratched his scar, the electric pulse returned, vibrating along wherever Metal touched.

"Fascinating. Can you feel that as well? The shock?"

Sonic lifted his head just enough to look up at Metal. "You mean you can feel it too?"

"Of course," Metal said, his hands trailing up to Sonic's shoulders. "It is as I already explained."

"Metal…" Sonic said. Metal's hands had moved up, and now he was gently pushing his fingertips into Sonic's neck.

Sonic closed his eyes. He was tired, so tired, too tired to think. All he knew was that Metal was safe, that Metal was holding him in his arms, that Metal's muzzle was so close to his own.

Sonic opened his mouth and slowly let his own muzzle drift toward Metal, feeling his own breath misting back on his face. So close.

"Sonic?"

"Mmm?" Sonic muttered, partially broken from tired trance.

"Your heartbeat—I cannot feel it. It is simply not there."

"Wha—" Sonic said, still trying to awake to mental clarity.

"Sonic, listen to me. You have no pulse."
"If I Only Had a Heart"

"I'd be friends with the sparrows
And the boy who shoots the arrows
If I only had a heart."

- Tin Man, The Wizard of Oz

Sonic twitched, a surreal sense of alertness striking through his tired fog.

"W-what," he said, the words catching in his throat.

"I suppose it could be a system error on my part. If anything, your condition appears improved from before," Metal said. With one hand, Metal tilted Sonic's chin upward and pressed his fingers against Sonic's neck. He paused. "But I truly cannot feel your pulse."

Metal brought his other hand beneath Sonic's chin. Sonic shuddered, feeling only dread as Metal felt for his arteries.

"But...I do feel a pressure, a consistent pressure. And yet it has no rhythm. A heartbeat needs a rhythm."

Metal brought his hands down. Slowly, he sat up, adjusting Sonic so he too sat up with his back against the cushions.

"Can you tell me exactly what happened? If I am to hypothesize, I need all available data."

Sonic gulped, clutching his own throat, his fingers searching. His pulse had to be there. It had to be. There was simply no way he could be alive without a pulse.

So where was it?


His pulse. Where was his pulse?

"Slow down before you injure yourself," Metal said. Clasping Sonic's hands, Metal slowly brought them down from his neck. "Listen—take a deep breath. Breath."

Emotions brewed to storm in Sonic's mind, but Metal's words were a lifeboat, and he grabbed ahold of them. His chest rose as he forced a breath through his nose and held it, refusing to let it go.

"See? Whatever happened, you are still breathing. Remember that. Now, I need you to tell me: what exactly happened to you in the roboticizer?"

Sonic exhaled slowly, took in another breath, held that one too, then sighed. "Well, once I was stuck in there, Nega turned it on. At first, it seemed like before, back when we roboticized my leg. Except there were sparks. Sparks everywhere..."

"I see. Those sparks are a conduit. When they make contact with biological cells, they trigger a
chemical reaction, stripping away the organic molecules, such as oxygen, nitrogen, or carbon, and replacing them with metal alloys, such as iron, lead, or silicon. Hence why we were able to roboticize only your leg by limiting where the sparks made contact."

Metal squeezed Sonic's hands reassuringly. "I need you to think back and tell me all that happened to you. You said there were sparks. But exactly where did the sparks land?"

Sonic shivered. Against his wishes, against his will, the scene, that horrible, awful scene, replayed in his mind. Metal dead. His own heart stopped. The roboticizer, and the sparks...and the pain. He couldn't breath. He choked. He had gasped and choked, and the sparks...the sparks were warm. They were warm in his lungs. And the pain...was gone.

"Sonic...what are you looking at? Sonic?" Metal turned his head then looked back at him. He waved his hand in front of Sonic's face. "There is nothing in that corner. Why are you staring? Sonic? Are you alright?"

Reflexively, Sonic blinked. His eyelids were sticky. How long had it been?

"I inhaled them. The sparks," Sonic whispered. He tore off his gloves and grabbed his throat again, still hoping his pulse would be there.

Nothing.

"But I thought...I thought I had gotten away. I always get away. The hero always gets away, and I'm Sonic the—"

He choked. Sonic the what? Sonic the failure, who had lost, not even to Eggman but to his crazy uncle. Sonic the cyborg, who didn't eat the food, only the tin can packaging. Sonic the self-absorbed freak, who was so enamored with his own robotic copy that he shoved an unwilling flicky back into prison.

"If you inhaled the sparks...but this is unprecedented," Metal said. He paused then quickly leaned forward. "Sonic, open your mouth."

The words flowed through Sonic's mind, and somehow, his body complied. His mouth dropped open.

Metal leaned his head forward, so close Sonic couldn't see what he was doing. For a long moment, Metal simply stared into his mouth.

Finally, Metal leaned back, but he didn't say anything. He only gazed at Sonic, a mixture of pity and concern in his eyes.

"Well doc? Any cavities?" Sonic said, his voice cracking. Despite the great, empty pit in his stomach, he forced a hint of a smile across his lips.

Metal picked up Sonic's hands again and looked him in the eyes. "A dental cavity is a type of bacterial infection, and just as the wound on your back is no longer susceptible to infection, the same is now true of your mouth."

Those words were vague enough to give Sonic a sliver of hope, though his weak smile faded anyway. "So we're good then. I'm in tip-top shape."

Taking Sonic's hands in his own, Metal looked back at him. "Sonic, I saw what happened to you before Nega destroyed my hard drive. It was as I had feared: your condition had finally progressed
to a heart attack. You should have died."

"But I feel fine now," Sonic said. "The pain in my chest is gone. Just like—"

Sonic's eyes widened. "Just like...the pain in my leg."

*I inhaled them*, Sonic thought. *The sparks. I inhaled so many of them.*

Sonic froze. Time was slowing down, but it was speeding up too, wrapping into a sickening, dizzying whirlpool that began in his mind and drained through his whole body.

"How...bad is it?" he whispered.

"Without taking you to a hospital, it is impossible for me to say for certain," Metal said, taking Sonic by the shoulders and holding him steady. "But, based on your sudden lack of cardiac arrest symptoms, as well as the roboticization of your mouth, I would surmise that, at the very least, your entire cardiovascular system..."

"No..." Sonic said. "No! I need to...I need to see—"

Sonic leapt up from the couch so quickly vertigo leaked into the corners of his vision. He shook his head then bolted through the door and out into the hallway. The hall was dark, the same as the student lounge, but Sonic felt the walls for guidance, the slick vinyl plastic cool beneath his fingertips.

The door to the bathroom stood up ahead, and Sonic burst through it, slamming the door against the wall. Though he still couldn't see, Sonic searched the wall with his fingertips. He soon found the lightswitch, though to no avail, as the lights still wouldn't turn on no matter how much he flicked it.

Sonic hit the switch again, his vertigo growing as he hyperventilated. Why weren't the lights on? Why weren't they working? He lifted his hand again, preparing to slam the wall, then suddenly, the lights flickered on.

The cramped bathroom flashed into his vision. A single toilet sat in the corner, and just ahead of him, stood the sink. A plain, square mirror was hung above it. As Sonic blinked, his dirty, tired reflection did the same.

Sonic held his mouth shut and tried to control his breathing. Despite his earlier haste, he now hesitated, fearful of what that blue hedgehog in the mirror would tell him. He shook his head then placed one foot on the tile, then the other, slowly shuffling toward the mirror.

He tapped his fingers against the glass. It was cold and perfectly smooth, the only imperfection from the smudge of his fingerprints.

Sonic took another breath. *I'm safe. This isn't like last time. Nega's not here.*

Slowly, carefully, Sonic opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue, and leaned forward. Now that he thought about it, he had never really looked at his own mouth before, at least not all that often.

And yet the inconsistencies were undeniable. His teeth, which had always been marred slightly by yellow plaque, were now so flawlessly white they actually shined. He stuck out his tongue. Gone were his bumpy tastebuds, now replace by a smooth, yet flexible mesh, almost like silicone.

Sonic immediately closed his mouth and tried not to gag on his own saliva.
At least I still have that, he thought, confirming the inside of his mouth was still moist. Though who knows if it's really real. Like the nanites in my—

His eyes widened. He had no heartbeat. Did...did that mean...?

Shaking, Sonic lifted his arm. It was littered with purple bruises and burn marks, though the burns at least had largely scabbed over. Slowly, he dug his fingernails into one of the scabs, wincing as pain shot up his arm.

Taking a deep breath, he looked down. Blood seeped from where he had pierced the scab; at least, he thought it was blood. Like a mixture of oil and water, the blood pooled on his arm, wisps of silver floating atop a single drop of deep crimson.

"Sonic—"

Through the mirror, Sonic saw Metal stumble into the room and lean against the wall with one hand. "I understand this is upsetting to you, but please do not wander off. Even though we appear to be temporarily free from Nega, it would still be optimal to avoid separation."

Sonic turned around and grabbed Metal by the shoulders. "What...what happened to me? My arm —"

Metal took Sonic's arm. For a moment, he watched the small drop of blood seep from Sonic's scab. Then, reaching over, he took a paper towel from a dispenser on the wall and held it to Sonic's arm.

"Well," Metal said, applying pressure against the bleeding and causing Sonic to wince. "One could call this...what is the phrase? Good news?"

"Good news?" Sonic said. The words felt hollow in his mouth.

"Yes. If you bleed, that mean you still have a circulatory system. It also implies your circulatory system must still be pressurized."

Metal lifted the paper towel from Sonic's arm. Sonic had only just slightly pierced the scab, so the wound was small and the bleeding had stopped.

"Metal, tell me everything." Sonic said, closing his eyes. "What happened to me? I need to know."

"Well, I can only hypothesize," Metal said. "But, considering you are still alive after experiencing full cardiac arrest, and considering you inhaled the sparks, I would surmise that, at the very least, we can assume both your circulatory and respiratory systems would have been affected."

Sonic looked at Metal in confusion. Metal looked down, paused, then looked back at Sonic.

"Your heart and lungs were roboticized, at the very least."

"My...my heart?" Sonic clutched his chest and looked up at Metal. "But that's—that's impossible! Partial roboticization can't—"

Sonic trailed off as the gleam of his robotic leg caught his eye.

"You are correct. Partial roboticization is impossible under ordinary circumstances. But you are no ordinary hedgehog."

Metal held the bloodied paper towel up to the light. Though the blood had seeped through it, the silver whips were congealed in blotchy spots. "Though this is strictly a conjecture, I believe the
nancies in your blood must have saved you. When the sparks made contact with your blood stream, the nancies could have swarmed around them, much in the same manner immune cells surround pathogens. They could then route the sparks to your heart, saving your life by roboticizing it."

"But my pulse—"

Metal turned and dropped the paper towel into the wastebasket. "Yes, you have no pulse. That would be expected if your heart were robotic. The pulse only exists because the biological heart is a muscle. In order to circulate the blood, the heart muscles contract in an alternating rhythm, pushing blood throughout the body. That is what creates the heartbeat.

"But, a robotic heart is not a muscle. It would operate like a mechanical pump, moving blood through a continuous, centrifugal flow. Hence, there would be no heartbeat."

Sonic leaned against the wall and pressed his sweating palm to his forehead. The room was spinning around him, all the colors mixing together on the edges of his vision. He pressed his hand to his chest. His heart should be thumping, pounding in there, and yet it wasn't. There was only the void, empty and hollow, his chest vacant and unnatural as the terrible, starless night sky.

Sonic could deal with his robotic leg. After all, it was only an external modification, and he himself had been the one who decided to roboticize it. But his heart...that was so much worse. Nega had forced the change on him, warping his innermost and truest self, his heart, into some sick and twisted aberration.

His legs slipped from beneath him, but Metal was by his side in an instant. He wrapped his arm around Sonic's chest and hoisted him to his feet.

"Careful, Sonic! You need to avoid further injury. Come, let us return to the couch so you may rest," Metal said. He shuffled toward the door, leading Sonic at his side.

Despite the overhead lights illuminating the hallway, the plastic walls still blurred into an unrecognizable smear as they walked.

"I'm a robot," Sonic whispered. "A robot wearing a skin suit."

"Come now, that is simply not true. You saw it for yourself: you still breath and you still bleed. A robot would do neither. Trust me; I should know."

Metal led him back to the student lounge and through the office debris scattered across the floor. Gingerly, he sat Sonic on the couch then quickly turned and plugged himself back into the wall.

The lights flickered out again, but as before, Sonic could still see by the dim, red glow of Metal's optics. Metal turned, scooping up the blanket and pillow Schlemmer had left for them. He fluffed the pillow, stuffing it on the cushion behind Sonic, then wrapped the blanket around himself and laid down on the cushions.

"And further, you would not technically be a robot in a skin suit. Rather, I think you would be a robot in a fur coat."

Despite everything that had happened, a slight smile cracked Sonic's face. "Was that...was that a joke?"

"So I did it correctly? That is good. I have been running many simulations in order to calculate it. It is even so much harder without my dictionary data."
Sonic sighed and rubbed his eyes. He was still exhausted, and his body would enforced its physical limitations on him eventually, even if his whole world was crumbling apart.

"It was much better than your earlier one about gluten or whatever," Sonic said, yawning. As he laid down on the couch himself, Metal wrapped the blanket around him too. He then gently wrapped his arms around Sonic's back, pulling him into his chest.

By this point, Sonic had snuggled into Metal so many times that it no longer seemed odd. He pressed his face beneath Metal's chin and tucked his arms into Metal's chest, relishing once again in Metal's warmth. It was familiar and comforting, exactly the sort of thing Sonic needed.

As Sonic took one last glance at Metal, he was struck by a single thought: Had Nega not captured them both, he and Metal would have remained mortal enemies. Instead of coming to understand Metal as a full person, as someone who would support him and as someone he would support in return, both he and Sonic would have still hated each other, never to experience the full depth of their partnership.

Running his fingers through Sonic's fur once again, Metal said, "Sleep well, Sonic."

"G'night," Sonic muttered, his vision darkening as he drifted to sleep.
"What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

- William Shakespeare

In the fabric of the universe, there was a law: information could not be created nor destroyed, and this law guaranteed a map. For with enough data, even the most seemingly random of phenomenon could be categorized, sorted, and modeled into a consistent pattern.

And if Metal Sonic could do anything, he could recognize a pattern.

Take, for instance, the scar on Sonic's back. Metal ran his fingers across it again, recording each jolt of static, each vibration in his fingertips. To the untrained eye, Sonic's scar might have appeared random, but Metal knew this was merely an illusion.

For the twisted tendrils of Sonic's scar formed a pattern, a very special type of pattern called a fractal. Metal knew this pattern well, for fractals were one of the most beautiful examples of mathematics: a recurrence, a self-repeating pattern, an example of complexity at all scales.

Sonic stirred slightly, and Metal brought his hand down, gently adjusting Sonic's posture so he could sleep comfortably. They still laid on the couch, Sonic at his side with his face pressed against Metal's chest and his hands wrapped around Metal's waist. Metal himself laid on his side as well, both arms snuggled comfortably around Sonic's back.

Metal ran his fingertips up to Sonic's neck. The nanites must have done a thorough job, for heartbeat or not, Sonic's newly roboticized cardiovascular system appeared fully operational, much to Metal's relief. No longer would he have to worry about his precious complement suddenly falling prey to heart failure or bacterial infection ever again.

Metal pressed his palm over Sonic's scar. He felt...what was the word for this? Without his dictionary data, it was so hard to know. Being this close to Sonic, feeling his smooth fur against his fingertips, and wondering at the complexity of the fractal pattern on his back...all of it was so new, and yet so...what was the word?

Well, Metal could be sure of one thing, and that was his frustration at his lack of data. True, he had managed to preserve his most critical data: his drivers, his memories, his personality, and most importantly, his data on Sonic, but it was still wholly suboptimal to have lost the rest of it.

And further, Sonic had disabled his radio. It had to be done; Eggman deliberately left him with no way to patch the very security hole Eggman had created. And yet, without his radio, Metal could not connect to any network. He couldn't download the data he needed to recreate his databases.

But this situation wasn't entirely hopeless. For even though he had no back-up, and no network access, he still had one thing: his models. He could still train them on data gathered from experience. He could still learn.

After all, learning through experience was something all living beings had to do.

Metal beeped quietly and shook his head. Slowly, he lifted his hand again, brushing through
Sonic's fur one last time, then brought his hand down to Sonic's side. As truly wondrous as Sonic's fur was, Metal really did need to stop himself. Too much movement would wake Sonic.

Metal settled into the couch, still holding Sonic and staring at the ceiling. His battery was charged and his models were updated, so there wasn't much left to do as he waited for Sonic to rest.

"Why'd you stop?"

Metal glanced down. Sonic was looking up at him, his eyes half closed.

"I stopped because I did not wish to wake you. Did I wake you?" Metal dimmed his optics, not wanting to irritate Sonic's eyes in the dark room.

"I was already awake." Sonic yawned and buried his face back into Metal's engine panel. He paused. "Can you...can you do that again? It feels really nice."

"So that is the word...nice." Metal said. He lifted his hand, letting it hover above Sonic so closely that the warmth from Sonic's body flowed into his palm. Slowly, he dropped his palm, gently pressing his hand against Sonic's back and scratching the seam between Sonic's scar and his skin.

"Is this acceptable?" Metal asked.

"Mmhmm," Sonic purred, eyes closed.

Metal continued to brush Sonic's fur in silence, taking the opportunity to reevaluate Sonic's health now that he was conscious. It appeared that Sonic's physical condition had indeed improved, nearly to the point he almost seemed healthy.

And yet, there was more to health than one's body.

"Sonic, I have been meaning to ask of you. Is your condition...acceptable? With respect to last night, I mean. I understand what happened to you was both unexpected and undesired, even if it ultimately saved you from cardiac arrest."

Sonic sighed. "I mean, no, not really, but..."

He rubbed his temples and continued, "But it's not like I have a choice now, right? Nega isn't going to wait if I have a meltdown here."

"This is true. However..." Metal laid his palm over Sonic's scar. It really was mathematically beautiful, like an elegant solution to an equation.

"It is acceptable for you to acknowledge your despair. Just because you feel pain does not imply you are having a 'meltdown,' as it were."

Sonic sighed again. "I guess...well...I just don't know what to say, you know?"

He cracked open his eyelids and look up at Metal. "All of this...it's all just keeps piling up, one thing on top of another. First my leg, then the flicy, and now I find out I'm actually some kind of weird, skin-covered robot."

Sonic rubbed his eyes and sat up, pulling the blanket around his shoulders. "It's like...it's like I don't know who I am anymore. I used to know. Or at least, I thought I did."

He shook his head. "See? Now I'm doubting my own doubts. It's crazy. I was never like this before. I was Sonic the Hedgehog, the one who was always so sure of himself. I never stopped to
think. Never had to. But now?"

Metal glanced down at Sonic. Even with his lost data, Metal could still easily recognize the pain in Sonic's eyes. It was a pain Metal understood all too well.

"What...what am I?" Sonic whispered.

Sitting up, Metal scooted next to Sonic and pulled Sonic's still gloveless hand into his own. "Believe me, if there is anyone who understands what it is to be empty and to lack an identity, it is me. Eggman built me to be your copy. If you do not know what you are, what does that make me? Was it as Nega said? Am I a copy of a copy, a picture of a picture?"

Metal paused, looking down at Sonic before continuing, "And yet, it was you who showed me that is not who I have to be. Do you remember what it was you told me? That it is up to each of us to decide who we are. Just because my body is made of steel does not mean that I am not a person. If that is true of me, then it is true of you."

Sonic gazed up at him then shook his head. "But...it's not that simple, is it? It's...it's like I'm not even a hedgehog any more. My leg is robotic. My blood is silver. My heart is a pump, and my mouth is who-know-what. And it's even worse! It's not just my body. It's how I feel too. Like this thing—"

Sonic tore his gaze downward and flushed. "Whatever this...thing is," Sonic said, the words catching in this throat. "This...thing. Between me and you."

Metal cocked his head. "This...thing? Between us?"

"Yes!" Sonic said, now flushing deeper. "What even is this? You're a robot, and I'm...I guess I'm also a robot now, or whatever and—"

Sonic turned his head away from Metal, though he still glanced back through the corner of his eye. "This thing?" Metal said. "Is it not that we are best friends? That is what you said before."

Still clutching Sonic's hand, Metal reached forward with his other arm and gently pressed his palm to Sonic's cheek. It was true. Sonic was his best friend, and he needed Metal now more than ever. Sonic turned his head, meeting Metal's gaze with his own, then brought his other hand up to Metal's face, running his thumb against the bolt on Metal's cheeks. He closed his eyes and sighed. "This is so not just friends," Sonic muttered.

"Not...friends? But...but...to not be friends...that would be worse than suboptimal. That would be—" Metal froze, searching for the word. And yet for some reason, this one came quickly to him. "That would be horrible!" Metal finished.

"What? No, it's not like that at all. We're still very much friends," Sonic said quickly. He paused, then picked up both of Metal's hands into his own. "But...well, it's just friends don't usually sleep in each other's arms, you know?"

Metal cocked his head again. "They do not? But that is not logically consistent. You say we are friends, and we sleep together. Inductive reasoning would indicate, therefore, that friends sleep
Sonic groaned and massaged his forehead. "No offense Mets, but I don't think you know what you're saying, like at all."

Metal did take offense. "Pardon? I am not the one making basic logic errors. Dictionary data or not, if the conclusion follows the axioms—"

Sonic sighed. "Alright, look. We're still friends, okay? Best friends, even. But friends, no matter how close they are, don't usually do this stuff. Usually, this stuff is saved for people who are more than just friends."

"More...than friends? There is a category above friends?" Metal said, his optics flickering. "As in...upgraded friends?"

Sonic sighed again, but this time, Metal caught a faint smile on his lips. "Yeah...yeah I suppose that works. Upgraded friends. Sure, why not?"

"Fascinating. I had no idea such a category existed," Metal said. "And you said this is what you believe 'the thing' between us to be?"

"Yeah...yeah that's what I think." Sonic nodded. "But esh, it feels so weird to finally say it out loud. Still kind of a relief, though."

Metal didn't respond, instead sitting still as he processing the data. Sonic glanced at him, the awkward silence growing with each additional clock cycle.

"So...whatcha think?" Sonic finally said, scratching his quills with the back of his hand. "I mean, it can't be that weird, right...?"

Metal finished his computation and looked up. This might just be the answer. "Sonic. You are my complement. Like an electron without a proton, without you, I am unstable. Unbalanced. But..."

Metal glanced back at Sonic, and in Sonic's eyes, Metal saw everything he admired most about his complement: Sonic's passion, his determination, his vision.

"Upgraded friends...from what I understand, that sounds, as you said, 'nice.' But..."

Metal looked down at his own hands. "There is so much complexity to this. Too much for me to calculate and derive on my own."

Metal nodded. The solution was obvious. "But you could show me, could you not? What it is to be upgraded friends, I mean."

"Yes," Sonic whispered. "I can show you."

Leaning forward, Sonic stretched out his hands and, taking a single moment to pause, he slipped his fingers beneath Metal's chin, gently pressing his fingertips against the smooth steel of Metal's face.

Yet before Metal could process the new sensation, the lights flickered on and the door burst open, scattering a stack of papers into the air. They fell back down like a snowstorm, while a lone figure strolled through them, swatting away a handful with the back of his hand.

Sonic bolted upright, pushing himself away from Metal and toward the far end of the couch. He took the blanket with his, wrapping it around his shoulders, trying to hide his flushing cheeks.
"Guten Morgen, mein Gast," the figure said, walking up to Sonic, not batting an eye.

Now that the figure was closer, Metal could make out his form more clearly. His skin appeared pale, almost bluish, and his bright, orange hair laid in an unkempt heap on his head. In his hands, he carried what appeared to be a cup of coffee and a bagel wrapped in foil.

"Professor," Sonic said quickly. He took a deep breath, held it, then exhaled. He was still flushing profusely. "What's up?"

Metal looked at Sonic then up to the figure. Who was this man?

"I was waiting for you to wake up! It is so exciting!" Without warning, the strange man stuffed the coffee and bagel into Sonic's hands. The gesture was nearly too sudden, even for Sonic, but Sonic still managed to grab both the bagel and the coffee cup without spilling its contents.

"And what could be better? Your Freund is awake too! An audience to witness!" The man turned to Metal and held out his hand, beaming. "I am called Professor Von Schlemmer. And what is your name?"

Metal looked at Schlemmer's hand. Tentatively, Metal held out his own.

"My name is…"

Metal paused. What was his name? He had never really thought about it. Was it Metal Sonic? That was the name Eggman had given him. It was what everyone called him. But was it really his name? "Metal Sonic" implied he was nothing more than a derivative of Sonic. That he was just a copy. Neither of those things were true.

Metal glanced at Sonic, who looked back at him uncertainly. Sonic had always called him "Mets." He supposed that was a better name than Metal Sonic, but Schlemmer couldn't use it. "Mets" was Sonic's special name for him. It wouldn't be right for anyone else to call him that.

"My name is...Metal. Call me Metal."

He took Schlemmer's hand and shook it. Metal was a good name. It had no qualifier. It had no title. He wasn't Metal Sonic. He was just Metal.

And Metal could be anything.

"Well met, Metal," Schlemmer said, shaking his hand in return.

Schlemmer paused then slapped his forehead. "Oh wait! I am so silly! I was so excited that I forgot it. One moment!"

Leaping back to the door, Schlemmer paused at the threshold and pointed back at Sonic. "Oh, and that is your breakfast. Go ahead and eat it. I'll be back before you can say Streichholzschächtelchen!"

Watching Schlemmer disappear down the hallway, Metal turned to Sonic. "Streich...hocl—what? How can he expect me to say that without my dictionary data? Is this some kind of test? Perhaps he wishes for me to learn?"

Sonic brought the cup to his lips and shrugged. "You're giving him too much credit. I don't think even he knows."
"Perhaps. He is a very odd man," Metal said.

Sonic shrugged again and turned his attention to his coffee. He frowned at it then took a single sip. He grimaced.

"Do you like coffee?" Metal asked.

"I hate the stuff," Sonic said.

"Then why do you drink it?"

Sonic looked at the cup then back to Metal. He shrugged and took another sip.

"Sorry for the wait!" Schlemmer shouted as he stumbled through the door. "I know you must be on the edge of your seats, waiting in awe for such greatness that only I could have discovered!"

Schlemmer marched up to Sonic, nearly leaping with joy. As he arrived, he held out his fist to Sonic, who looked at it, eyed the food in his hands, and frowned.

"Oh right. That is no problem. I will give this to your Freund instead!" Schlemmer said, holding his fist out to Metal.

Metal glanced at Sonic, who shrugged and took a bite from his food, chewing both the foil and bagel.

Tentatively, Metal lifted his hand and held his palm out to Schlemmer, who grinned and dropped a shimmering, glass vial into Metal's hands.

Metal took the vial, bringing it up to his optics for further analysis. On the inside, cyan light danced from a small, triangular gem floating in the center.

"What's that?" Sonic asked, leaning over as he chewed a mouthful of food. "A Chaos drive?"

"Yes! Well, you're wrong, but also right. Not only is this a Chaos drive—it's the missing piece! The great unifier! And—"

Schlemmer paused, taking a moment to adjust his spectacles.

"It's also the thing that will save us."

"I asked Phil what had interfered with the ex-student's research. Phil shook his head sadly and said, 'He tried to understand quantum mechanics.'"

- Steven Weinberg

"Oh no. This look. I know this look," Sonic said, inching away from Schlemmer's widening smile. "You're going to try and science me now, aren't you?"

Without a word, Schlemmer plopped down onto the middle of the couch, lounging on the cushion between Sonic and Metal.

"Why yes! How ever did you know?" Schlemmer asked.

Sonic groaned and pressed his fingers to his forehead. Why did this always happen to him? At least when Tails tried to science him, he could usually get out of it. But not today. There was no escaping Schlemmer.

Sonic started, "Just give me the quick version. You don't have to explain—"

"Alright, I'll explain everything!" Schlemmer sat upright, still distinctly blocking Sonic from sitting next to Metal.

Schlemmer turned, and with a single motion, he plucked the Chaos drive from Metal's hands, forcing a glare from Metal.

"This is a Chaos drive, yes? But what kind?"

Sonic shoved the rest of his bagel into his mouth and chewed. The foil around it tasted oddly salty, but at least it somewhat smothered the staleness of the bread. "Dunno. That color—"

Had he ever seen a cyan Chaos drive before? He had once, back in Nega's maze. But before that? No...he had never seen one.

"Cyan...According to Nega's theory, that corresponds to the classification of particles called 'bosons,' does it not?" Metal said. He paused, then quickly grabbed the Chaos drive back from Schlemmer and held it protectively.

"It does! And that reminds me," Schlemmer said. "You can have these back. I made copies."

Schlemmer pulled a crumpled wad of papers from his pocket and tossed them at Metal. Metal caught them with a horrified expression, then attempted to smooth the wrinkles from each sheet before carefully stowing them back into his crate.

Trying to get Schlemmer back on track, Sonic said, "Come on professor, what is it? You found a way to save the planet?"

"Yes, but let's start at the beginning." Schlemmer leaned forwarded, adjusting his spectacles. "Just what is the universe exactly? On a philosophisch level, I mean."

"Uhhh..." Sonic started to protest, but he caught a glimpse of Metal, who was ignoring Schlemmer, instead staring at Sonic, his gaze intense and curious.
Sonic gulped. Even if Metal was complicited in this science-ing, he was still one of the most intelligent people Sonic knew.

And the last thing Sonic wanted was to look like a fool in front of him.

"The universe is made out of...uh," Sonic mumbled, "Atoms, right?"

"Close. But think smaller! If we're made out of atoms, then what are the atoms made out of?"

Sonic paused, and Metal must have noticed his confusion, because Metal answered for him, "Atoms are made of three things: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Electrons are elementary particles, that is, they cannot be broken down any smaller. However, protons and neutrons are not elementary. They are made of quarks."

"Yes, yes, this is all very basic. But what is an electron? A quark?" Schlemmer asked.

Metal shrugged. "This question is pointless. These particles just exist. They simply are."

"Look at it this way," Schlemmer said, and just as Sonic was bringing the coffee cup to his lips again, Schlemmer plucked it from his hands.

"This cup is a container, and it's filled with liquid. The universe is the same way. It's a container filled with a substance, and just as any liquid would spread to fill this whole cup, so too does the potential for matter spread throughout the entire universe. This potential is called a field, and it spreads across all of space and time."

Schlemmer brought the cup down, pausing as the liquid inside settled. "Sometimes, there is no matter, like in the vacuum of space. The field is still physically there, but it's inactive. Like a smooth pond."

"However, when the fields are excited," Schlemmer gently shook the cup, causing tiny ripples to form across the coffee inside. "Then matter appears. Like the ripples in a pond, matter exists wherever these fields are excited."

Schlemmer paused, evidently waiting for Sonic to say something profound, but Sonic only groaned. This was by far the worst science-ing he had ever experienced. "So...what? You're saying the universe is filled with some kind of invisible sheet, and wherever this sheet ripples, then there's like...electrons and atom and stuff?"

Schlemmer nodded, thrusting the coffee cup back into Sonic's hand. "Yes, that is right. And there are seven of these sheets—"

Metal interrupted, "Seven fields...sevenEmeralds...as Nega predicted."

"Yes! And that's the brilliant part—I've figured out how to control the fields themselves with the Chaos Emeralds." Reaching into his pocked, Schlemmer pulled out another crumpled paper. As he unfolded it, Sonic recognized the diagram from Nega's notes: the one that showed all seven Chaos Emeralds.

Schlemmer pulled out a pen and tapped the green Emerald. "The green Emerald is, perhaps, the most obvious. It controls the gravity field. However, the amount of control depends on how much energy you have. A Chaos drive, for example, has limited energy, and so you could only control gravity a little, like giving yourself the ability to fly or some such."

"But, if you had the full Chaos Emerald, you would have much more energy, and therefore, much
more control. You could possibly control the gravity of the entire solar system, including the orbits of all the planets!"

Sonic blinked, suddenly drawn into the conversation. "You could control the planet's orbit? Like how Nega took away the sun?"

"Yes," Schlemmer said, his expression growing solemn. "Although we didn't just lose the sun. Nega threw the world into a totally unknown corner of the universe, so far away that not even the light of distant stars can reach us."

"But the force of gravity does not work in isolation," Metal said. "That is why we are all not sucked into the center of the planet, as the force of gravity would dictate. There are other forces, such as the electromagnetic force, that can cause atoms to repel each other and overcome the force of gravity."

"That's true! And that's why you would need all seven Chaos Emeralds if you wanted to do something truly significant. Then you could control every aspect of the universe itself," Schlemmer said.

"No, this doesn't make any sense." Sonic took another sip of coffee. Now that the coffee had cooled, it tasted even worse. "I've had all seven Emeralds before, and the most that's ever happened is that I turn into Super Sonic. Sure, being Super Sonic is great, but it hardly gave me complete control over the universe itself."

"But that form gives you invincibility, does it not? As well as the ability to fly." Metal said. He leaned forward, ignoring Schlemmer and talking directly to Sonic. "These abilities do imply a level of control over the laws of physics. Perhaps the only reason you could not do more with the Chaos Emeralds was that you did not know how. The laws of physics are controlled by very precise equations, and if you could not calculate those equations—"

Schlemmer waved his hand, frowning. "Let's get back on track. As I was saying—"

Metal mumbled quietly, "Of course, now that the conversation is not solely centered on him, he wants to—"

"As I was saying," Schlemmer cleared his throat and raised his voice. "If we want to save the planet, then we're going to need all the Chaos Emeralds. Especially the cyan one."

"What's so special about the cyan one anyway?" Sonic asked. "Like I get why we need the greenish-gravity one, but what's so special about cyan?"

Schlemmer yanked the Chaos drive away from Metal again, soliciting another scowl from the robot. "For a long time, we only understood six of the seven fields. We knew about the seventh field—knew it was needed to make the other fields work—but we could never experimentally verified it. That is, until now."

Schlemmer held the Chaos drive up to the light. Ribbons of cyan motes twisted around the diamond inside it, rotating with a consistent rhythm. "The seventh field—also called the 'Higgs field'—is made from a particle called the Higgs boson. The Higgs field plays a central role in our understanding of the universe, for without it, nothing would have any mass, and because mass influences all interactions between particles, without the Higgs field, our universe could not exist."

Sonic drank the last of his coffee and set the cup on the floor beside the couch. "Okay? And this matters because…?"
Schlemmer huffed. "Don't you see? This was only the single, greatest open question in all of physics! And I solved it!"

"Technically, it was Nega who solved it," Metal corrected.

Schlemmer raised his voice. "No, I solved it! Don't you dare—"

"Look, professor—" Sonic pinched his forehead. If there was any hope of ending this conversation, Sonic was going to have to be the mature one for once. "We're running out of time, and the longer we argue, the more time Nega has to ruin everything. So, what's the deal? How's this Chaos drive going to help us?"

Schlemmer shot Metal an angry glare but said, "We had known it was possible, at least in principle, to manipulate the various quantum fields using the Chaos Emeralds for some time. But without precise information about the Higgs field—that is, without knowing how to construct these cyan Chaos drives—we could never engineer methods to actually manipulate the fields. I've been working on this for years, but I was never able to actually capture the right particles inside the Chaos drive. But now I have! And that's completed the model. Which means if we had all seven Chaos Emeralds..."

"You would be able to put the planet back?" Sonic said.

"Yes!" Schlemmer said, "but...there is only one, teeny-tiny problem."

"Nega has the Chaos Emeralds," Metal said. "We would have to take them from him."

"No problem." Sonic stretched his hands up, leaning back. "We know where Nega's at, we know he has the Emeralds, so we just run over and—"

Sonic trailed off. And what? Attack Nega? Could they really risk it? Last time—Metal's crumpled body...and the sparks—

"You think I expect you to attack Nega all by yourselves? Don't be ridiculous. That's why we have the Ministry of Defense, after all," Schlemmer said.

Sonic shook his head, the image of Nega's room fading from his mind. "The Ministry...of Defense?"

"Ja! I told Colonel Howe all about you. While she and I may have our personal disagreements, I'm not about to withhold information when the fate of the world is at stake."

"Sonic, correct me if I am mistaken," Metal said. "But Nega only had six Chaos Emeralds, did he not? My memory is unclear on the matter, but I do recall—"

Sonic closed his eyes. The image of Nega's room still shone brightly in his mind's eye. He could never forget it.

"Nega did only have six Emeralds. And the one he was missing was—"

Schlemmer held up the Chaos drive. "He's missing this one. The cyan Emerald."

"How can you possibly know that?" Metal asked Schlemmer. "You were not even there."

"Einfach," Schlemmer said. He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a strange, yet familiar device. Like...Metal's Emerald detector?
"I was able to deduce the information with this!" Schlemmer said triumphantly.

Metal started, then immediately turned to his crate, sorting its contents. "My detector! Is that my —"

"Ja, I borrowed it while you were sleeping."

Now Sonic started. "You...you took that? While we were sleeping? But how—"

Schlemmer didn't even pause. "Although, I did have to make some modifications to it. This thing is so outdated. Honestly, what kind of silly machine expects you to find the Chaos Emerald by crunching through all the coordinates? Ridiculous!"

Before Sonic could react, Schlemmer snapped the Chaos drive into the back of the detector and clicked a button. The device hummed to life. "All you have to do now is pop the Chaos drive into it. It'll automatically force decoherence into the system, and then you can just follow it up and onward towards the real Emerald."

Schlemmer tossed the detector to Metal, who just barely managed to catch it.

"Be careful! This machine is delicate." Metal examined the detector's screen, clicking various buttons and knobs.

"While I do question your methods," Metal grumbled, "I will grant this device does appear more functional."

"You think it'll work?" Sonic asked.

"Of course it'll work!" Schlemmer said, scratching his chin. "Although, I suppose the error margin is kind of...high. But this will get you there. You'll have to search the area on foot though."

"The Emerald appears to be approximately five hundred kilometers south from our location," Metal said, turning to Sonic. "Not impossibly far, even moreso considering your speed."

Sonic leapt off the couch, finally escaping Schlemmer and stepped up to Metal's side. "So that's the plan? We get the Emerald—the real Emerald—and then we take out Nega?"

"You get the Emerald, but then come back here," Schlemmer said. "Colonel Howe should be here by then, as will her battalion. You'll be attacking Nega with her. This mission is too important for you to do alone."

"Right, right," Sonic said, only half listening. He brushed through his quills, paused, then scooped Metal into his arms. "Can you lead us there?"

"Of course," Metal said, turning another dial on the device. "Are you prepared?"

"Am I ever!" Sonic said.

And he ran off before Schlemmer could say another word.
The river cut through the land just as the dam cut through the river; its great, concrete spires rising between water and sky. Yellow lights illuminated each column, casting a spray of motes as the water splashed at the bottom of the falls.

Ahead, the pavement merged into a steel bridge layered across the dam. Sonic trotted to a stop, took a deep breath, then set Metal down.

"That's it?" he said.

"Yes. This is as precise a location as the detector can provide," Metal said. He took a step forward, and noticing the lamps spanning the bridge, he clicked off his headlight.

Sonic followed, walking up to the guardrail lining the bridge. Water swirled beneath him, crashing into the concrete columns below, then rushing through the mesh grates spread between the spires.

Metal walked up to him, rested his hand on the guardrail, and lifted the detector.

The water below roared.

"What is this place?" Sonic shouted.

"Given the infrastructure," Metal said, gesturing to a steel door behind them. "I believe this dam is a power station. A hydroelectric power station, to be specific."

"Huh." Sonic turned away from the guardrail and walked up to the door. He pressed his palm against it. It looked more like a steel sheet than a proper door, for it had no doorknob, nor handle, nor any obvious way to open it.

"You think the Emerald is in here?" Sonic asked.

"It is possible. But we will need to scout the area on foot," Metal said.

A brilliant, blue light flashed above, overpowering the dim, yellow lights below, and a feminine, yet distinctly artificial voice said, "Restricted area. Please provide authentication."

Sonic grabbed Metal and sprang backward, dragging them both away from the door.

"I bet it's a trap," Sonic whispered. "It's okay though. I have a plan. I'll run down the bridge, and you—"

Metal straightened. "I am Metal. And this—"

He gestured to Sonic. "This is Sonic. We are here on full authorization of Professor Von Schlemmer."

"Identity acknowledged. Processing…" said the voice.
"What are you doing?" Sonic hissed. "Now they'll for sure know we're here!"

Metal cocked his head. "Who is 'they'?"

"You know...them! Or..." Sonic paused. "Or Nega! How do we know this power plant isn't owned by Nega?"

"Nega has a nuclear fusion reactor. I doubt he would concern himself over a far less efficient hydroelectric power station."

"But—"

The door hissed and slid open, revealing a row of stainless steel stairs descending inside the dam.

"Authorization confirmed. Access granted."

Metal nodded then pulled Sonic toward the opening. "The professor sent us here with the full authority of the Ministry of Defense. There is no need to sneak around."

Sonic shook his head, but followed behind Metal anyway, descending the staircase. Maybe Metal did have a point. Why was Sonic being so jumpy? That wasn't like him at all. If this power station was really owned by the Ministry or the Council or whatever, and not owned by Nega, then there was no reason to—

The door slammed behind them.

"Noooo!" Sonic grabbed Metal and ran back to the door, pounding on it with his fist. "Let us out!"

The door slid open. Sonic blinked. Slowly, he poked his head outside.

Sure enough, the bridge was still there.

The voice spoke again. "Thank you for visiting the Ministry of Energy. On your way out, please remember to deposit all disposable products into their respective containers for proper recycling. We hope you enjoy your day, and remember: a clean planet Earth starts with you."

"Sonic, what are you doing?" Metal pulled Sonic back into the staircase. "The Emerald is likely located inside of here, and we have yet to find it. We need to search."

"But...but..." Sonic shook his head then turned up to the intercom in the ceiling. "Hey you, on the other end of this thing. Who are you?"

"Query acknowledged. Accessing information," The voice said. "Response: this unit is designated as H.E.I.D.I: Hydroelectric Intelligent Dam Infrastructure. My function is to oversee the automation in this facility."

Sonic must have looked confused because Metal turned to him. "She must be the A.I. that runs the power station."

"She's...an A.I.? It's an A.I. that wants us to run down into this mysterious, water-filled concrete hole?" Sonic gaped. "No. Double no. Absolutely not."

"But why—"

Sonic dragged Metal from the stairwell and back onto the bridge. "She's trying to kill us! That's how this works! A.I. goes crazy, decides to kill all living beings..."
"Do not be ridiculous—"

"Hey, even you did it once! Remember that? Back when you—"

Metal sighed his faint, beepy sigh. "While the source of your paranoia is...bizarre, you do have a point. Consider: if Nega can hack into my systems, he could also have hacked into the dam without our knowledge."

"Yeah, obviously that's it," Sonic said, wiping his forehead. When had he started to sweat?

"But we still need to locate the Chaos Emerald. What if it is inside this facility?"

"Maybe it's not in there," Sonic said. "You said yourself: it could be anywhere around here. Let's look outside first."

"I suppose..." Metal said. He glanced at the dam's door, then began to retreat from the bridge.

Sonic followed. "So how do we find it? The Emerald, I mean. We just have to look all around?"

"That is correct. The Emerald could be anywhere within a square kilometer from this location."

Pausing at the junction between the bridge and the road, Sonic tried to examine the landscape beneath them, though that proved to be difficult because the only source of light was the dam.

It was enormous. The dam had to be at least a thousand feet long, and maybe a few thousand feet high, nestled right in the middle of the river valley. The river itself was sweeping, at least until it reached the dam, where it pooled into a deep reservoir on one side, and poured back into the river on the other.

"A marvelous feat of engineering, is it not?" Metal said, stepping up beside Sonic. "This dam must surely generate a great deal of electricity, and it does so without polluting the river."

Sonic couldn't care less about the dam, but, well, if Metal was interested in it...

"So how does it work?" Sonic asked. "You said it creates electricity? From water?"

"The electricity does not come from the water itself. Rather, it comes from the energy the water carries."

"Huh?"

Metal clicked on his headlight and took Sonic's hand, guiding him as they descend the steep cliff into the river valley below.

"When the water flows through the dam, it moves through a great turbine. The turbine's blades are connected to a generator, and as the water chops through them, it generates electricity."

Though the vegetation was thick here, it had wilted from the prolonged lack of sunlight, and rather than a difficult hike, the journey through the purple vines was but a simple stroll.

"See here." Metal stopped and pointed toward a steel berm running the width of the river, the top peeking out just above the water. Water crashed below it, whirling through an array of mesh grates spanning the width of the river.

"The water enters here, flows through the turbines inside, and leaves the dam from the other side."
A small ladder descended from the top of the berm, and Metal walked up to it, placing his hands on the bars.

Sonic followed. "So you think the Emerald must be here then?"

After climbing to the top of the berm, Metal turned and pulled Sonic up from the ladder. "It is likely. You see these grates?"

Despite the darkness, Sonic could make out the grates, though they were smeared by a long, sticky pile of debris made from branches and leaves, and as well as a variety of trash: disposable drinking cups, plastic bags, and food wrappers.

"Because these grates filter the debris from the river, there is a very high probability that the Emerald would be carried to this location."

Sonic followed Metal, walking along the berm. Muddy water lapped at his feet, and mist sprayed his face. It was cooler down by the river, and without any warmth from the sun, Sonic shivered. "We're looking for the actual, physical Emerald then? Not a special stage ring or something?"

"That is correct," Metal said, still walking. "Ordinarily, a Chaos Emerald is superimposed with its respective quantum field. That is to say, it exists only as a sheet of probability that stretches throughout the entire universe. This is why the Chaos Emeralds can exist both on this planet and back on the Earth."

"Oh, right," Sonic said. "How could I possibly forget something so obvious?"

"Now, when one finds and completes a special stage," Metal continued without pause, "it collapses the probability into a single point. It serves the same function as the factors inside my detector, though actually locating special stages is a much less reliable process because they only appear with rare quantum fluctuations."

Sonic paused. "Wait, that makes no sense. Why are we looking for a physical Emerald and not a special stage?"

"Because," Metal said, pulling the detector out and pointing to the cyan Chaos drive snapped into the back. "The professor already forced decoherence into the system. Remember, the quantum fields exist everywhere, so even though we were back in his lab at the time, his actions caused the Emerald to manifest here anyway. The Emerald simply popped into existence, and now we have to find it."

Sonic scrunched his nose, eyeing the sticky pile of trash. The brown water frothed around it, like an espresso latte made from garbage. "This is a little less...impressive than what I was imagining."

"There!" Metal sprinted ahead and dropped to his knees, pointing.

Sonic stepped beside him. Through the murky, dark water, trapped between the trash and the grate, Sonic could make out a small, cyan glimmer.

"This could be the Emerald. We need to investigate," Metal said.

Sonic eyed the water. Not only was the glimmer possibly twenty or more feet into the river, the current here was rapid, and the debris was packed everywhere.

Plus that water had to be freezing.
"How are supposed to do that? Maybe a really long stick?" Sonic asked.

Metal shook his head, then popped open his crate and pulled out a small bundle of rope. "We will use this. The professor provided basic scavenging supplies before we left."

Metal tied the rope around his waist, paused, then dropped to his knees. He grabbed Sonic's waist.

"What are you—" Sonic choked.

Sonic tried to steady himself, but as he glanced down again, he saw Metal was only tying the rope around him.

"I will dive down to investigated. You will act as an anchor. I cannot drown and you cannot slip, not with your magnetic foot."

"Oh." It was all Sonic managed to say.

Metal stood up and dropped the loose rope in Sonic's hands. "Hold this. Release enough slack for me to descend. If I tug on the top three times, pull me back up."

Sonic bunched the rope in his hands. "Got it!"

Metal step up to the side of the berm, sat down, and slipped his feet into the river.

"Stand next to me and activate your magnet."

Sonic stepped up and clicked his magnet. The familiar, tingling static spread through his leg, and soon, he was stuck to the steel berm.

"Hold the rope taut. I will now descend."

Pressing his palms to berm, Metal lifted himself up, then dropped into the water. The rope in Sonic's hands pulled taut, but Sonic held firm.

Metal began to rappel down the side of the dam. Though the current slammed against him, Metal carefully shuffled his feet, inching downward as Sonic slowly fed out the rope.

And then, Metal was gone, fully submerged in the dark, murky water. Sonic gulped. He couldn't see Metal, at least not directly. He could only make out the cyan smear of Metal's body, and that smear too was disappearing, washing out in the Emerald's glow.

Sonic squinted his eyes, peering into the water as best he could. Now, there was no trace of Metal. There was only the roar of the water, the mist spraying in his face, and the cold, empty air pressing against his fur.

And there was the rope. As long as it was taut, as long as Sonic could feel Metal's weight, then Metal was safe. Metal would come back up soon, and then—

The rope tugged. It tugged again. Sonic froze.

Another tug.

Sonic pulled the rope, but it wouldn't budge. He strained. Still it did not move.

The rope tugged again.
Leverage. He needed more leverage. If he could only just take a step back without slipping...

His magnetic foot. Sonic tried to decrease the magnet, but only just slightly. He still needed to stick
to the berm, and yet also shuffle backward, and if he could get the magnet just right—

Sonic clicked his foot. The tingling sensation stopped. The rope strained.

And Sonic was thrust into the river.

The water hit him like a blow to the chest. He couldn't breathe. The cold crushed his lungs. He
flailed, struggling to the surface, but his foot was made from lead.

He sunk.

He slammed against the dam wall, still sinking. The water pressure squeezed against his ears,
crushing him from inside. He was going to pop.

No! I can't—I can't let this happen! Metal—

The rope. It was still there. Frantically, Sonic pulled it. That made him sink faster.

Metal. If he could just get to Metal—and the Emerald—

Sonic twisted and slammed his robotic foot against the dam wall. He clicked the magnet. He
stopped sinking.

For a single moment, the water cleared.

Metal was below him, clutching the Chaos Emerald.

The dam wall beneath his foot shook. It folded. Sonic looked down.

He hadn't been standing on the wall. He had been standing on the mesh grate.

And it collapsed.

The water crashed against him, and Sonic was hurled forward, down, rushing into a narrowing
tunnel. He slammed against the corridor walls, and Sonic choked, the breath escaping from his
lungs.

Despite the water, despite the current, Sonic still heard it: a piercing, ear-wrenching screech filling
the corridor, like a blender filled with nails.

What had Metal said? That the dam was filled with turbines? And if those turbines could shred
even the steel grate—

Sonic tried to grip the corridor with his magnetic foot, but he was moving too quickly. His mind
was numb. The edges of his vision were growing dark.

And the cold...it was so cold.

Sonic didn't bother to brace himself. Bracing would do no good against the sharp turbine blades
anyway. They were up ahead now. Sonic could hear them scream.

And then, all at once, the screaming stopped.
Sonic smashed, face-first, into something. He tumbled, broke through the water, jettisoned into the air, and fell to the floor, skidding across it on his back.

Sonic didn't open his eyes. He was cold. He couldn't breathe.

"Emergency redirect complete. Please stand-by."

"Sonic!"

Something warm lifted him up and slammed against his back.

Sonic gasped, then coughed, then heaved, spitting out that disgusting water and taking air, warm air, into his lungs.

He peeled open his eyes. Metal was there, clutching Sonic in his arms.

"Did...did you…?" Sonic choked.

Metal didn't say anything. He only nodded and lifted his hand.

There, clutched between his fingers, the Emerald shone, its cyan light glimmering like a spark.

"I guess you could say—" Sonic choked again. "You could say...that this wasn't a wash."

Metal said nothing. Instead, he pulled Sonic tighter and pressed his forehead against Sonic's neck.

"Dispatch complete. Do you require additional assistance?"

Sonic started. Looming above him was a stark white, sleek robot shaped like a chess pawn. It had no arms or legs. The only thing that broke its perfect finish was the blue screen, similar to Metal's, overlaid on its face. It was hovering slightly, and it would have been about Sonic's height had Sonic been standing.

The robot shuddered, and a small door popped open on its chest. Inside was a...blanket?

"Thank you," Metal said, pulling the blanket from the robot. He untied the rope, then wrapped it around Sonic's shoulders. "We do not require anything else at this time."

"Affirmative." The voice didn't come from the robot. Instead, it seemed to emanate from the walls.

The robot turned and moved behind Sonic, where it joined a cluster of similar robots, these ones with arms, who were working to clear the shrapnel poking through a large, steel dome. Water was spraying through cracks in the dome, forming an increasingly large puddle across the concrete cavern.

"H.E.I.D.I...she...she saved us, didn't she?" Sonic said.

Metal nodded. "She must have stopped the turbine, somehow, before it destroyed us. I suppose that should not be too surprising. She does control the facility after all."

"Huh." Sonic rubbed his face where he had hit the wall. He could already feel the bruise.

Metal lifted the Emerald.

"I suppose, if everything goes according to plan, we will be able to return home soon," Metal said. "That would be...nice, I think."
Sonic smiled and cupped both Metal's hand and the Emerald in his own. "It will be nice. We'll get Tails to fix you up, and then we can finally race each other! Won't that be something?"

"Yes...yes it will." Metal paused. "But I suppose we should focus on Nega. We must defeat him first."

"Pfft. Easy-peasy." Sonic said. "I guess I can just use Chaos Control to get us back to Schlemmer, huh? Now that we have the Emerald."

"I was wondering..." Metal trailed off, paused, then glanced at Sonic. "Could you show me again? How to use Chaos Control, I mean. I want to learn."

Sonic sat up. His cough had subsided, so he leaned into Metal, relishing the warmth against his soaked fur.

"Sure thing! Like I said before, you have to feel the Emerald..." Sonic trailed off, though the words echoed through his mind.

_In your heart._

He clutched his chest.

Silence.

"Could you begin to draw energy from it? Perhaps if you start to draw energy, it will be easier for me to replicate your technique."

"Oh, right. Good idea." Sonic slipped his hands around Metal's fist, still clutching the Emerald.

Sonic closed his eyes. Slowly, he began to draw energy from the gem.

"I see," Metal said. "I should be able too..."

Sonic felt Metal pull away. He hesitated then opened his eyes.

Metal was sitting next to him, clutching the Emerald in both hands and staring down at it as if he had just solved a great, unsolvable equation. Light danced from the gem, sparking up Metal's arms and swirling into blue tendrils that vanished into the air.

"I...I am doing it!" Metal beamed. "Sonic, look! I am doing it!"

Sonic grinned. He had never seen Metal look so happy, and it was contagious. "Hey, look at that! You totally are!"

"What should I do next?"

"Okay, picture where you want to go, in this case, Schlemmer's lab. Picture it in your mind's eye. Not just what it looks like, but what it feels like too. It's the little details that make it work."

Metal nodded. "I can recall...the mess. The professor is embarrassingly slothful, and his lab is as such."

"What else?"

"And...well, it is not the lab itself, but the conditions around it. You were there with me, and for the first time, we were both safe. We were together."
With the Emerald in one hand, Metal pulled Sonic into him.

And the flash overtook them.
"God does not play dice with the universe."
- Albert Einstein

An improbable value, but Metal's sensors were clear: an air temperature of minus 20 degrees centigrade and an air pressure of approximately 33.7 kilopascals.

Metal clicked on his headlight. The beam, weak as it was, spilled over what appeared to be a ship deck. Steel planks, rough and weathered, were snapped together to form the floor, and to the side, similar steel sheets formed the railing.

But they could not be sailing on the water, not with a temperature so cold, and they could not be docked on land, not with this air pressure.

Metal glanced upward, and his suspicions were confirmed. An enormous, cloth envelope, at least a hundred meters tall, hung above them like a balloon.

They were in the air.

"This is not right," Metal said, turning to Sonic.

Sonic was shivering, his teeth chattering as the wind buffed his wet fur. "No kidding. You still got the Emerald?"

Metal nodded, raising the Emerald. Even in the darkness, light pulsed gently from it.

"I..." Metal clutched the Emerald to his chest. "I must not have used the Emerald correctly. I thought I had, but...I should have known better. I am not like you..."

Sonic shook his head with such determination it threw Metal off guard. "No. I was there. I saw it. You used the Emerald the right way. Trust me."

"But..."

Sonic grabbed Metal's arm and marched forward, dragging him toward a door situated just slightly higher on the deck.

"If the Emerald brought us here, then there has to be a reason for it," Sonic said. "The Chaos Emeralds aren't random. They're attracted to each other, and if Nega has the other six—"

Metal paused. Sonic's reasoning was not at all logically consistent. The Chaos Emeralds were merely the physical representation of a mathematical fact. They had no conscious intentions, and there was simply no reason for the Emerald to bring them here instead of the professor's laboratory.

The obvious solution was Metal couldn't use the Emeralds, not like Sonic. He should have known better than to get his hopes up.

He was only a robot. A copy.

As Sonic placed his hand over the door handle, Metal said, "Perhaps this is merely an outlier."
Maybe, if I only try again, I can take us back. Allow me—"

Sonic threw open the door. Air rushed past them, and Sonic marched forward, dragging Metal inside, then slammed the door behind them.

"That's a whole lot better," Sonic sighed. "It's way warmer in here."

The inside of the airship was unimpressive. They stood inside a small, cramped room, ceilings so low an ordinary human would barely have the space to stand. A great number of steel crated lined the walls like a checkerboard, and only a handful of halogen bulbs lit the room.

"Sonic." Metal clicked off his headlight. "We need to get out of here. I do not know what happened, but if I did err, then you can take us back to the professor with Chaos Control."

Sonic shook his head, gesturing toward the cabinets. Metal had to strain to look at them, but he noticed: they were covered with a familiar, yellow logo.

Nega's logo.

"You didn't mess up," Sonic said. "This is a real Emerald. It brought us here for a reason."

"But this is suboptimal. The Ministry—"

Sonic turned, looking Metal directly in his eyes. "I'd rather avoid getting the military involved if we can help it. If we can do this without them, no one else will get hurt. Besides, they're completely useless anyway."

Sonic began to wander, and Metal followed, tightening his grip on the Chaos Emerald, the energy within tingling his fingertips. Maybe Sonic was right. If Metal really did use Chaos Control, and if they really were supposed to be here—

"What's this?" Sonic asked, pulling the lid off one of the crates. He reached in and scooped up a handful of something.

They were marbles. Only a handful, but they came in a variety of sizes, some nearly as big as apples, others the size of blueberries. Although each had Nega's logo on it, they were colorful, and inside the glass beads, each one had a faint, glistening spark.

"These colors," Metal said. "They look like miniature Chaos drives. Is the crate filled with them?"

Sonic scooped another handful from the crate. "Yeah, there's gotta be thousands of them in here. Come see."

Metal complied, stepping up to the crate. Sure enough, it was filled to the brim with marbles. Each one was shaking. Vibrating.

Convulsing.

A torrent of marbles rushed from the crate and slammed into Metal. He was hurled across the room, swatted away like an insect. He crashed into the floor, and he twisted, trying to right himself, but the marbles pounded his armor like hail, flattening him to the ground.

"Metal!" Sonic cried over the storm of marbles. "I can't—"

The lids exploded off the other crates, unleashing more glass beads into the room. Metal braced himself for the impact.
Nothing happened. The cascade actually lessened. Metal twisted upright.

The marbles were heaped together, pinning Sonic to the wall like a net. They swarmed around Sonic's face. Sonic gagged, and Metal soon saw why: Sonic had bit his own hand in a desperate attempt to stop the marbles from rushing down his throat.

"Can't...breath," Sonic gasped.

Metal clutched the Emerald. The energy pulsed within, and Metal drew on it, channeling it into his own body. He just had to focus on Sonic and—

And—


"Oh ho ho! Would you look at that?"

Metal started. The ceiling began to warp, bending in on itself like a crumbled drape. For a single moment, it froze. Then it shattered, exploding into ribbons of marbles that pelted Metal like hail.

As the shrapnel cleared, Metal looked upward again. The ceiling now stretched at least 50 meters high, eventually merging with the inner layer of the dirigible balloon.

Descending toward him, standing on a smooth, glass plate filled with sparks like the marbles, was him.

Dr. Eggman Nega.

"My precious, precious Paperweight. It's been too long, hmm? How have you been?"

Metal gapped at Nega, but he said nothing. Anything he said Nega would only use against him. He needed to focus.

Metal tried the Emerald again. A spark of energy tinged his fingertips. He could feel it.

Nega snapped his fingers, and the energy died like the flame of a candle.

"You really are a delusional little lamp post, aren't you? It'd be cute if it weren't so pathetic. You knew I had perfect control over the Chaos Emeralds, and yet you still really thought you had used Chaos Control. It's frankly remarkable. In an obscene, sad sort of way."

Metal's hands began to shake. He couldn't help it. Even despite all the evidence, he had hoped—

No, there was no time for that now. Metal had to get to Sonic. His precious complement, the one and only Sonic, was suffocating beneath the weight of the marbles, and only Metal could save him.

Metal focused, channeling all his processing power toward the Chaos Emerald.

He heard it.

The Emerald hummed. A distinctive, rhythmic hum. It hummed with a pattern, an equation, a mathematical recurrence.

And if Metal could do anything, he could solve an equation.

Metal rolled to his side, angling both his hands and his crate away from Nega. But he still needed
time.

He needed a distraction.

"Why, Nega? Why are you doing this? What is your goal?" Metal said.

"Why? Why indeed!" Nega laughed, a deep, sinister laugh that reverberated up through the tall ceiling. "You, of all people, should understand, Paperweight. The beauty of mathematics."

Metal slipped his hand into his crate. His fingers brushed the Chaos drive snapped into the detector. The same pattern reverberated through his fingertips.

Almost there...he almost had it. He just had to keep Nega distracted.

"It is the pattern that gives mathematics its beauty," Metal said. "A remarkable pattern, for it appears everywhere, even places you do not expect, and it allows you to make predictions."

Metal heard it. The small, Chaos drive-like marbles were humming too, a variant on the underlying melody.

"Ah, but that is where you are mistaken, my dear, precious Paperweight. The universe isn't predictable. Quantum mechanical systems are completely chaotic. Our universe exists only in probabilities. There's nothing predictable about that!"

Nega's strange, hovering glass sheet descended, and he turned, placing his hand over Sonic's cheek.

"Which is why—"

Nega grabbed Sonic's wrist.

"—we need to start over."

Nega ripped Sonic's fist from his mouth. Sonic tried to scream, but the marbles swarmed over him, and he vanished beneath the undulating wave.

Metal rushed forward, slipping on the marbles beneath his feet. The signal was stronger now. He could feel it. It was everywhere.

Everywhere but in the far corner.

Metal stumbled forward. The marbles rolled beneath him, but his momentum was enough to carry him forward. He dove, sliding across the marbles like a conveyor belt, and smashed through something. Glass and wood splintered everywhere, but Metal focused on the pattern. It was here.

The six Chaos Emeralds. The had sat inside some kind of glass display case, now destroyed by Metal, but the Emeralds were still there. They were vibrating too, each with a distinctive rhythm, a rhythm completed by the pulsing Emerald in his hand.

Metal heaped all seven of the Chaos Emeralds into his arms and turned, struggling to climb through the ocean of beads.

Something rumbled, but before Metal could react, another torrent of marbles slammed into him. He was flung forward, desperately clinging to the Emeralds, skitting across the floor like a stone thrown across a lake.

Sonic. He needed to find Sonic, his singular complement, and the only one who could use the
Chaos Emeralds. Metal reached out with all his sensors, ignoring the marbles, seeking out the only thing that mattered.

And then Metal saw it. Through the shifting cascade of glass beads, reaching out like a single twig caught in a mud slide, was Sonic's hand.

Metal lurched forward and grasped Sonic. In that instant, the melody of the Chaos Emeralds harmonized. All the factors came together, and the function canceled out into a single value.

He felt the flow of energy. It was the same as Sonic had shown him before, only stronger. Much, much stronger. It was complete now, and as it flowed through Metal's entire body, a burst of knowledge consumed him.

For a single instant, Metal understood. The universe, the Chaos Emeralds, all of it. It all made sense.

Then as quickly as it had come, it was gone. Both the knowledge and the energy had flashed through him like a bolt of lightning, and Metal could no longer grasp, no longer comprehend, the pattern.

Something grasped Metal's wrist, and he was thrown upward. Below, the marbles churned, the sparks inside twinkling like a chaotic nebula of color, and above—

Sonic was shining, his brilliant, golden fur brimming with enough energy to melt the entire room. He smiled, his grin filled with all the kindness and bravery Metal had come to admire in him.

He offered his hand to Metal, and Metal took it.

"The Chaos Emeralds," Metal whispered. "They are attracted to each other."

"Yes," Sonic said. "This is what they wanted. And now—"

Sonic's smile faded, replaced by a scowl more intense than the energy emanating from him. "Nega. I always return favors. And I owe you—"

Sonic took Metal into his arms and rose upward. He hovered at Nega's eye level, so close that the Chaos energy surrounding him blew back Nega's mustache.

"—a lot of favors."

Nega only laughed. "You're harnessing a lot of energy there, hedgehog. How much do you think?"

But before Sonic could say anything, a torrent of beads shot up from below. Metal winced, bracing himself for the impact.

The torrent hit Super Sonic, and it simply...vanished. All the marbles, gone. Evaporated like water thrown over hot pavement.

The aura surrounding Super Sonic flared.

"I knew you were dumb, Egghead, but really?" Sonic sneered. "You're throwing rings onto the Super Sonic fire!"

And yet the marbles kept streaming upward, hitting Sonic, only to be absorbed in his aura. Metal supposed that did make a certain amount of sense. If the marbles were a type of Chaos drive, then Super Sonic would logically be able to absorb them.
But why would Nega give Sonic even more power?

"Oh no, whatever will I do? Despite all my genius planning, I had simply forgotten," Nega yawned, "that you were the only one who could absorb an infinite amount of Chaos energy. Silly me."

Another wave of marbles hit Sonic. His aura flared again.

"Enough chitchat," Sonic roared. "I'm gonna put an end to you, Nega, once and for all!"

The torrent of marbles stopped. Metal looked down. The sea of glass beads was gone. Sonic had absorbed them all.

Sonic reared back, then rushed forward. And yet Nega did nothing. He just stood there.

And then, Nega was gone.

"Tell me hedgehog, what do you get when you condense an infinite amount of energy into a finite space?"

Sonic smashed into the glass panel where Nega had previously stood. The panel shattered into a million tiny sparks of energy, all flowing up and around Sonic. The aura of Chaos energy surround him flared like a ball of fire, dozens of translucent tendrils licking and consuming the sparks of glass.

But as the very last spark faded away, Sonic's aura shuddered. It wavered. Then the tendrils snapped backward. They were twisting around Sonic's body, pressing inward, constructing him like a snake constricts its prey.

And Sonic began to scream.

Metal fell. He hit the floor face first, skidding across the room.

The aura around Sonic darkened, churning into a solid, deep vortex that absorbed all light surrounding it. The sound of Sonic's scream died, though he still had his mouth open, and the tendrils were curling around him. Ice crystals began to spread in sheets across the walls as the growing vortex sucked the very heat from the room itself.

Metal heard footsteps, and he turned. Nega was standing behind him.

"I'm sure you know the answer, Paperweight. Infinite energy. Finite space. What does that get you?"

Metal jerked back to Sonic. Except Sonic wasn't there. In his place, a dense, black...thing hovered in the air. Metal had no other way to describe it. It was a circle, not a sphere, for it didn't seem to have any dimension to it, and it was impossible to look at, for it reflected no light. Like the empty sky of this world, it was deep, cold, and dead.

"It can get you only one thing," Nega said, stepping up to Metal.

"A black hole."
"Not only does God play dice, but he sometimes throws them where they cannot be seen."

- Stephen Hawking

Metal laid prone where he had fallen, unable to do anything but to stare, to gape, at the great, unmoving hole, the puncture wound through the fabric of reality.

The black hole where Sonic had once stood.

Then the airship lurched.

There had to be more mass in that black hole than even the sun, and everything, both the airship and the planet below, would be swept up in its gravity well like scraps in the garbage disposal.

The airship flipped upright then plummeted like a feathered tied to a boulder. Metal tried to hold to the floor, but there was only smooth steel, and he slid down the deck of the airship.

Planks peeled up from the floor and dropped downward, spinning into a vortex of red, burning steel surrounding the black hole as it devoured the ship.

But...there! A single plank had peeled up with its top half still bolted to the floor. Metal spun past it. He threw his hand out, but his claws only brushed its surface.

No, this was his only chance. There was nothing else between himself and the black hole. While he kept sliding, he threw his other hand up and latched onto the plank with every newton of force his pistons could muster.

He lurched to a stop with debris whirling around him.

His grip was butter compared to the force of the black hole. It would take nothing more than a single, errant crate or a random beam to hit him, and it would all be over.

And yet, despite the screeching clatter of falling steel, Metal heard Nega laugh.

Somehow, in spite of the vertical tilt of the airship, Nega was standing perfectly upright on the floor, looming above Metal like a flagpole.

"Are you enjoying the show, my friend?" Nega laughed. "I really am far too generous. I could charge tickets for this, you know!"

Freezing air rush past Metal as the air pressure and temperature plummeted. The black hole wasn't just consuming the ship. It was eating through reality, devouring even the heat and energy of spacetime itself.

Metal wanted to say something useful, something profound, something that would bring Sonic back, but no matter how much he spun his processors, it was just too much.

"But—this does not make any sense," Metal finally managed. "The black hole will destroy everything. It will destroy you too!"

Nega laughed again. "You're so dense I'm surprised you didn't collapsed into the black hole first!"
Stepping forward, Nega tapped Metal's forehead with the toes of his boot.

"Although, perhaps I am too harsh. Afterall, how can I expect a tin can with daddy issues to understand the finer truths of nature, hmm?"

"You...you are insane," Metal said simply. It wasn't an insult as much a statement of fact.

"Now that's hardly fair. Insanity is a matter of perspective," Nega said. "But, I suppose I can hardly expect mere mortals—or rusty robots, as it were—to understand the machinations of the gods."

What was Metal supposed to say to that? Nega's statements were utterly devoid of logic, reason, and continuity.

"But—" Metal said, "The black hole! Surely even you are not delusional enough to think you would survive it."

"Survive?" Nega laughed again, his great, booming voice overpowering even the screeching whine of the steel whirlpool. "Who said anything about surviving? Ascension, sure, but something as meaningless as survival?"

What little logic Metal had been able to thread together spun apart.

"This does not—" Metal started, his processors spinning as he searched for words. It took him an embarrassing 1.3 billion clock cycles—a full ten seconds—before he found something.

"Enough!" Metal said, the loudness of his voice surprising even himself. "I do not know what delusions you harbor, but there is nothing, I repeat, nothing but destruction inside that black hole. That is the entire point of a black hole. The singularity—"

The singularity inside the black hole would rip objects into molecules and molecules into atoms. Then it would tear even atoms themselves apart, chewing up their subatomic constituents, leaving nothing but an infinitely dense pit of energy.

And Sonic. Metal's precious complement. The only one who ever cared for him. Sonic was...he was—

"The four fundamental forces: the strong force, the weak force, electromagnetism, and gravity," Nega said, ripping Metal from his thoughts. "They control reality. But what controls them?"

Nega was a madman. Anything he said was insanity itself.

And...and Sonic. Sonic was—

"You...you are a delirious, illogical maniac," Metal finally managed. "Nothing! Nothing controls the forces of nature. That is why they are the forces of nature in the first place."

Nega laughed again, an irritating, horrible sound that made Metal dig his claws into the steel beam.

"My, my, I've never seen you so upset, Paperweight," Nega said. "What's the matter with you? Why not be a good sport about this, hmm?"

Before Metal could respond, Nega dug his heel into Metal's face and forced Metal's head upright. Metal's grip began to slip.

"The Big Bang." Nega leaned down, bringing his face to Metal's eyelevel. "The explosion that set
the wheels of our universe in motion. Where did it come from? You can't get something for nothing."

Metal couldn't respond. He could only try to dig his claws further into the plank. He was still sliding.

"Now, suppose someone could control that," Nega continued. "Someone who was smart and handsome enough to solve the impossible mystery that has been puzzling scientists for generations. Supposed you had someone like that, and suppose, purely for the sake of argument, you gave that person access to all the energy in the universe. All the energy from the Big Bang."

"You—no one can gather that much energy," Metal stammered. His own failing grip, the black hole, and...and Sonic. It was all too much. "It violates the laws of nature. Entropy—"

"The Chaos Emeralds too," Nega continued, cutting off Metal. "They came from the Big Bang as well. Each Chaos Emerald, each quantum field, each forces of nature—the rules that govern them were created by the Big Bang. The four forces do not act independently. The Big Bang, despite occurring 13 billion years ago, controls them. It set them in motion."

Nega dug his heel further into Metal's face. "Now suppose you were there, at the Big Big, at the dawn of the universe. Suppose you were there, and suppose, because of the Chaos Emeralds, you could control the forces of nature. How do you suppose that would go, hmm?"

Metal's fingers were slipping. If Nega pushed anyone more, Metal would be forced off the plank. He would fall.

The pressure stopped. Metal swung back up, latching onto the beam with everything he had, and glanced back up. Nega was still looming above him, but he had taken his foot off Metal and was now standing with both feet on the ground.

"Your reasoning is not logically consistent," Metal said. Now that he was fractionally safer, it was easier to think. "One could not be present before the Big Bang because there was simply nothing to be before the Big Bang. It created spacetime itself."

"Now, now. You're missing the point." Nega smashed Metal's face with his heel again, and Metal flinched. "You need to think recursively. If the Big Bang created our universe, what created the Big Bang?"

"You—you are implying," Metal said, still desperately holding on, "that something before our universe created the Big Bang?"

"Ha! Maybe there's a spark of intelligence inside you yet, Paperweight," Nega said. "Because before us, there was another universe. An infinite universe, just like—"

Nega pulled something out of his pocket—a handkerchief—and to Metal's amazement, he somehow laid it flat on his palm.

"Like this. It was infinite and flat and, if we're perfectly honest, dull as can be. So one day, gravity decided to do something about that."

Nega began to roll the cloth into a ball. "It crunched up the entire universe. All the galaxies, all the planets, all the atoms, smaller and smaller."

Nega folded his palms around the rolled-up cloth and squeezed. When he uncupped his hands, it took Metal a moment to find the handkerchief again. Nega had compressed it to the size of a pea.
"Until everything was so small it took up no space at all. And then—boom!"

Nega flicked the wadded cloth from his palm. Like everything else, it flew toward the black hole, but as it did, the cloth began to unwrap. Just before Metal lost sight of it, it had unfolded completely.

"Of course, when the new universe hatched, everything was random. That's the nature of the game, see? Each universe is randomly created. Some universes support life, some don't. Most don't even support matter. It's all very messy. Very ugly."

Metal gapped at Nega. There was logic here, a convoluted, disturbing logic, but consistent all the same.

"You plan to...to kill the universe! That is what you are doing. You will force everything into that black hole. And with the Chaos Emeralds..." Metal trailed off.

With the Chaos Emeralds, and with the entire universe crunched together into a singularity, Nega could control the Big Bang itself.

He could hijack the rebirth of the universe.

"What—what do you plan to do," Metal stammered, "after the next Big Bang? What kind of universe are you trying to create?"

The pressure of Nega's heel disappeared, and Metal turned his head. Nega had taken a step past Metal, walking toward the black hole, and despite the whirring maelstrom of whining steel, the click of Nega's boots still echoed as he walked.

A familiar emotion clicked between Metal's processors.

Anger.

"That is it?" Metal shouted. "After all that, you are not even going to answer my question?"

Nega laughed as he kept strolling toward the black hole. Nearing the event horizon, he turned to spare one last glance at Metal.

"Don't you worry, my electric can opener chum. I'm the generous sort of gentleman. Perhaps, on the other side, a fraction of one of your atoms will manage to find a lingering electron from the hedgehog. You'll be together at last!"

Nega turned back to the black hole, waving to Metal with the back of his hand. "See you on the other side, Paperweight!"

And with a final step, Nega crossed the event horizon.

At least, Metal thought that was what happened because Nega didn't really disappear. Rather, his afterimage remained frozen at the edge of the black hole, growing dimly red, his arm still raised in a final farewell to the universe.

Nega's laughter didn't stop either. The sound slowed, deeping into a bellow, and yet it didn't stop. It would never stop. For just as Nega's afterimage began to redshift, dimming yet never fading, so too did his laughter. Nega's last photons of light, and his last phonons of sounds, would remain on the edge of the event horizon until the black hole destroyed even the fabric of spacetime itself.
Metal clutched onto the steel plank, his grip much tighter now that Nega was gone. He stared at the black hole. There was no coming back from this. Nega had set in motion his final, crazy plan, and Metal could do no more to stop it than he could to stop the passing of time itself.

The airship lurched again as a torrent of boulders tore up through the floor. They sprang all around Metal, pinging against the walls like bouncy balls and shredding what was left of the ship's frame like wet newspaper. A single clump of earth, still covered in grass, flew past Metal, forcing him to duck aside.

The airship wasn't falling to the ground.

The ground was falling up to the airship, up to the black hole within it.

As Metal was still trying to right himself, another boulder came careening toward him. It smashed through Metal's plank, shattering it like a windshield in a hail storm.

Metal had nothing to hold. The stark singularity loomed beneath him, darker than the perpetual nightfall of this strange planet, and Metal fell toward it.
Sonic wasn't afraid of enclosed spaces. That was a fear you quickly got over when your job was to spin down tiny corridors, and under ordinary circumstances, his lack of movement would have but a mere annoyance. Because usually, even if you were stuck, the rest of the world wasn't. It made the problem strictly personal.

But this wasn't like that.

Space did not exist. Time did not exist. The concept of movement itself had been wiped from the slate of possibilities. All of reality had collapsed into this single point, and there was nothing but the cold, the boundless, primordial cold, indifferent as it was terrible.

And Sonic was trapped in it.

The energy of the Chaos Emeralds filtered through him, dripping over him like a used up carbon filter. He was the conduit. He was fueling it. The void was consuming him.

*Metal.*

Sonic tried to say it, but without a medium, without a listener, sound no longer had meaning.

And yet...if nothing existed, then...what of himself? Did he exist? Without any of his senses, without any externally verifiable reality, without anything but the hard vacuum, what was he?

Could he even answer that?

*Metal...I'm-*

What had happened to Metal? Was he okay? Did he survive? And without Sonic, what would become of him?

Sonic knew now they had shared something. Something special. Metal relied on Sonic in the same way Sonic relied on movement: without its reference, without the standard, there was no way to verify, and without verification, you couldn't know what was and what was not.

He and Metal were a pair. Not in some trite, generic form, like the love song on every radio that each and every couple insisted was theirs and theirs alone. No, he and Metal were a pair in the strictest, most mathematically precise definition of the word, defined as much as the relationship between the other as they were by themselves.

He should have told Metal. He had had the chance. He should have—he should have...

There was nothing. Static. Eternity. A second.

*Metal, I'm...sorry.*
Metal Sonic plummeted into a whirling vortex of light. The light was bright, so bright and everywhere; it was swarming, streaming upward, trying to escape. But the light would never escape. It could not escape. Spacetime was disintegrating faster than the light could move.

You had to run just to stay in place.

And through that swirling light, Metal would occasionally catch a glimpse of some object, some unidentified entity, streaming past him. Was it real? Or Metal was only seeing the phantom light from something long since destroyed?

This was the threshold where spacetime folded in on itself: the event horizon. Back on the other size, the normal side, the universe was unfolding as it should. Time flowed forward, and space existed in three dimensions. In the ordinary universe, while you had no choice but to move forward in time, you didn't have to move in space.

But not here.

Inside the event horizon, to move in time was to move in space, for the disintegration of space and time was the fundamental feature of a black hole. It was the only reason why black holes existed, and now that he was inside it, Metal could no more stop his descent toward oblivion than he could go backward in time.

And he knew: below this light, below the phantoms, when he ran out of space, the singularity would await him.

His fate was inevitable.

Though not just his fate. Nega had set into motion an unstoppable chain reaction, and there was nothing anyone could do. The fate of the universe had been sealed.

Metal clenched his fists. Was this how it all ended? All of it, all of the strife, all of the struggle, all of the pain. What had been the point? Not the point of the universe-the universe didn't have a point-but the point of Metal himself. He had failed. He had failed, and everything had been horrible. Eggman was horrible. Nega was horrible. And Sonic-Sonic was dying. Metal was dying. The universe itself was dying.

Primary Objective: Neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog.

Sonic, Metal thought. It was always about you. Everything I had ever done was for you. Even if-

Even if most of what Metal had done had been pretty horrible. He wasn't meant to kill Sonic. Sonic wasn't his enemy. Sonic was his only friend. Sonic was his precious complement. Sonic was kind. He had been kind to Metal despite everything Metal had done to him. And-

And there was something else about Sonic. Something undefined. Something null. It was the only value his models would return now. Not even zero, but the value of impossibility itself.

Yet this, all of this, wasn't it all truly impossible anyway? The universe itself was gone, swallowed up by the black hole. Metal had seen it himself. Possibility no longer existed, not even as a concept.

But there had been the pattern. The humming. Was it still there? Metal could never forget the precise, clean pattern of bits that formed the melody. When he had held the Chaos Emeralds, when he had held Sonic, he had also held it.
The solution.

The pattern.

There was still one possibility. Metal yanked up the crate and thrust his hand inside. He tore out the Quantum Wavefunction Collapse Inducer. He clutched it to his chest, rounding the smooth glass of the Chaos drive with the tips of his fingers.

What were the Chaos Emeralds? What was chaos? If you knew everything, every variable, every piece of data, then did chaos exist? Or was it a matter of perspective, a matter of scale? Was randomness an illusion, created by imperfections of knowledge? Or did it truly exist, bound up in the quantum fluctuations of the elementary particles themselves?

Or, perhaps, this distinction was meaningless. The difference between chaos and complexity was itself an illusion of mathematics. If you could tell the future from the past, it was because you knew the pattern. The pattern was the model. The pattern was the past.

The pattern was the future.

Metal placed his palm over the detector.

*Picture it in your mind’s eye.*

Sonic. His confident posture, his beautiful smile. The fur on his back and the warmth in his embrace. The way he had run with wind streaking through his quills, and the way he had carried Metal, smiling at him despite it all.

*Not just what it looks like, but what it feels like too.*

Consciousness. That was the key. Events were void without a witness to bestow meaning on them, and Metal had witnessed plenty. The pain on Sonic’s face. The loss of his leg. The loss of his heart. His insistence on Metal's comfort. His hands cupped around Metal's wrists, and his the mist of his breath on Metal's screen.

*You have to feel it in your heart.*

Sonic was his complement. They were a pair.

They were a pattern.

The Chaos drive hummed louder. The melody rang throughout his processors. The stream of bits trickling through his transistors flipped. His models converged. Everything pointed to a single number.

Metal's fingers brushed over the keypad. Energy washed over him. Energy flowed through him.

*Sonic.*

Ahead, the light swirled with a particular intensity, twirling down into a glowing whirlpool. Metal focused on this point. He hit the keys.

A dark crack-inverted lightning-snapped through the whirlpool. Light spun away from it in all directions, repelled like gnats, and the crack deepened into a dark cavern.

No time to question, no time to think. Metal lunged forward. He thrust inside his hand.
The pressure. There was so much pressure, and for a moment, Metal was sure he would be utterly flattened, smashed up like an insect beneath a steamroller.

But it was now or later. He needed Sonic. He lurched forward.

A wisp of yellow light sputtered from the crack like the wave of a flashlight. Metal clenched his fists. His palms brushed fur. He pulled. The pressure pulled back. Metal slid forward. More fur. He wrapped his arms around it. Something stirred.

"Met...Metal?"

Sonic's voice, his wonderful, beautiful voice, pierced through the dead, utter silence of the void like the flash of a lighthouse.

"Sonic!"

The pressured sucked. Without any ground to stand on, without any support, there was no way to fight it. Metal slid forward.

Sonic's face was tilted down, his yellow fur paling, a dazed expression in his eyes.

Metal couldn't afford to waste cycles with a response. The rift was closing, the edges sewing together like loose fabric. It pulled him forward. He slid his arms around Sonic then gathered Sonic into his chest.

Sonic rolled his head up, and when he caught Metal's gaze, he said nothing. He simply stared, an unreadable expression on his face. Light was still plummeting around them, each ray the last, dying breath of some far away star.

Sonic pressed his hands to Metal's cheeks. They were shaking.

"Metal...I...I-"

Trapped inside the graveyard of the universe, time itself seemed, for a moment at least, to pause, to give them back this instant, just this once. When Sonic's lips touched the surface of Metal's muzzle, they were like his fur: soft and warm, yet filled with an essential vitality. It was a pleasant sensation, like static, yet also unlike anything Metal had ever experienced. It was right though-Metal knew that as much as well as he knew basic arithmetic-and he clung to Sonic as Sonic clung to him, experiencing nothing else in that stolen moment but the feeling of true, universal completeness that only his precious complement could bring him.

Reflexively, Metal's fingers wandered up to the scar on Sonic's back. When he pressed his fingers against its fractal pattern, his touch very much like the kiss: electric and intimate, and just as an electrical current was a sharing of electrons, something else washed over him. A raw energy, bizarre and incalculable, like an impressionist painting made of tiny dots, and there was something else about the energy, something emergent, something that made no sense unless taken in as a whole.

"Sonic!"

No one could stop time-that was a fact-and like an angry bill collector, the rift had decided to demand its dues. It shuddered. The light shattered around it like glass, only to be swept up once again, draining into the rift like a whirlpool of molten steel.

Metal clutched onto Sonic. He would not let the rift take him. He could not lose Sonic again. He
had...he had-

The rift was snapping closed in front of him; the light was still draining toward the singularity at the bottom of the pit, but Sonic-Sonic was in his arms. Sonic was glowing.

Metal was glowing too. His armor, which had ordinarily been a dull, chipped blue, was now alight with a calico patchwork of reds and yellows, each swatch flaring and twisting like tendrils of fire.

And the pattern. It clicked through his processors as the energy flowed through his armor. The harmony. The melody. The individual notes and chords. The structure. The pattern.

The ballad of the universe.

Not just a ballad, but a sequence, a bidirectional tape. Time stretched both forward and backward, and in the future, the notes blurred together. With no space-with no time-to separate them, they lost their meaning, each point of data flattened into identical, indistinguishable bits by the broken function of the singularity.

But the past-it extended back on the tape, glowing like a bright, vibrant tapestry: the discrete, bygone years, long since forgotten, woven together into a contiguous image of the universe.

"We're still falling. Metal-we're still falling!"

Sonic was clinging to Metal, though his head was turned toward the singularity now. Not that he could see it. The light was especially bright here, and the phantoms were gone. The immense gravity of the singularity was crushing everything into a single, indistinguishable smear of energy.

Despite the Chaos energy flowing through him, Metal could still feel the pressure against his chassis. The gravity of the singularity was trying to stretch them out like taffy, and while the Chaos Emeralds offered some protection, there was no guarantee they would survive the singularity itself, where the laws of physics fell apart.

"We are not just falling. It is space itself that is falling. We could not stop our fall any more than we could stop time. But...yes! Sonic, that is it!"

"Inside the event horizon, but before the singularity, space and time switch. You have no choice but to move in space. Moving in space is obligatory. But time-if space becomes like time, then time-"

Sonic's eyes widened. "Time becomes like space?"

It was only a hypothesis, a conjecture. It was everything they had.

They couldn't afford a delay. Metal could see that, or rather, he could sense it, like an infrared map imposed over his optical camera, invisible yet omnipresent. The tapestry of time flowed all around him, each strand cast into his awareness by the Chaos Emeralds. Beneath them, the strands jumbled together like tangled yarn, disintegrating at the singularity.

But among the infinite strands, a single thread caught his attention. It was tied to him, and it was tied to Sonic too, connecting them together into a single chain of causality. The future of this thread was the future of all threads: death by zero entropy. But behind-

Tentatively, Metal reached forward. He couldn't feel anything, but when his fingers brushed the strand, he could sense it by the uncanny glow radiating from it like the heat off an electric filament.
"Can you see the strand?" Metal asked.

Sonic blinked. While some of the yellow sheen had returned to his fur, the energy was still leaking from him and trickling away with the rest of the light.

"Strand? I don't see-"

Metal couldn't feel the strand but his sensors still knew where to place his fingers. Holding Sonic in one arm, Metal grasped onto the glowing thread with the other.

"There is no time to explain-and I do not fully understand it myself-but this strand...it is an anchor."

Sonic turned his head, following Metal grip. "I don't see anything. But..."

Sonic shifted, bracing one arm around Metal and reaching for whatever Metal was holding with the other. His fingers grazed the strand, and his eyes widened.

"It's here! I can...well, I can't feel it exactly, but it's here."

As Sonic tightened his grip, the light's descent slowed, as if time itself was slowing.

"On the count of three, we must both pull. Are you ready?" Metal asked.

Sonic nodded.

"One. Two. Three!" Metal lurched forward.

Sonic paused, not in hesitation, but in purpose, and when Metal's pull began to slacken, Sonic pulled the strand himself, propelling them forward and allowing Metal to heave again.

The light, which had begun to hover crystallized and unmoving around them, shuddered for a moment. But as Metal lurched again, the light did the impossible. It shot backward, streaming away from the singularity.

The strain on his chassis lessened, and Sonic, while still frighteningly sickly, was glowing just a bit brighter.

"We are almost there," Metal said, a twinge of static in his voice. The black hole had taken just as much energy from him as it had Sonic.

The light was streaming backward, the smear breaking into individual rays, and the rays breaking into phantoms. These phantoms congregated into a haze at the event horizon, like a swarm insects, thick and discrete.

They crashed through the sea of phantoms like a rock breaking waves. Light and noise shattered all around them, fracturing into nonsense like radio static.

Then patterns began to condense in the static. They were faint at first, and while they never really grew into full fidelity, each beam of light moved back from the event horizon and slipped into the floor, or the wall, or the crates, or any other of the dozen objects that had been inside of the airship.

"That's—that's us! Down there-!" Sonic gasped.

Sonic was right. Metal could make out three, faint figures frozen in the blizzard of static. Super Sonic was there, holding Metal in his arms, and Nega was still standing on his thin platform.
Metal turned to Sonic, the real, present hedgehog floating by his side. The scene before them wasn't quite real, and they weren't quite there. Rather, they were drifting through it, floating above the whole tableau like a television camera-inert and hidden from view.

"This is not the right pattern," Metal said. "There is too much interference. We have to keep going."

Metal continued to tug, and Sonic, while briefly stunned, shook his head and followed Metal's lead, heaving them along the thread.

Like a movie reel set in reverse, the scene beneath them began to wind backward. Their past selves hobbled backward through the door of the airship, but they didn't stay outside for long. There was that flash-Metal watched this carefully; he really had used Chaos Control!-and they were back at the dam.

"It's speeding up. The more we pull, the faster…" Sonic trailed off, watching himself run backward toward Schlemmer's lab. He tore his gaze away from the scene and glanced back at Metal. "This is...kinda hard to watch, you know? And is this a good idea? What happens if we go too far?"

"We are not finished yet. This thread-it stands out from the others, not only because it is ours, but because something is wrong about it. It is misplaced. It should not be here."

They kept pulling. Everything-Sonic's heart attack, their escape from the tower, and the roboticizer-it all played backward, and when got to the corridor, Metal winced. He had to watch himself betray Sonic. He had to watch Sonic bleeding on the floor.

Metal tightened his grip around Sonic's waist, the warmth of his fur smooth over Metal's fingers. Sonic was still with him. He had to remember that, and as long as Metal survived, he would never let anything like that happen again. Not only because of what had happened here, but because of everything else Metal had done prior to their capture. The fact Eggman had ordered him to act this way was no excuse. To be conscious was to have agency, and this meant he had to accept responsibility for his past actions. If Sonic was willing to accept Metal as a true, independent person, then Metal was going to do everything in his power to be worthy of that trust.

"Stop," Sonic cried. "It's the end."

The scene beneath them, while still covered in static, was considerably less distorted than earlier. They were floating above the jail cell now, where Nega had originally imprisoned them after their untimely capture.

Metal turned. The thread still flowed behind them, and it was still out of place, sticking out like a puzzle piece jammed into the wrong slot.

Sonic was looking directly at him now, and despite the concern in his voice, there was no uncertainty in his gaze. "If we keep going, will this, will all of this, just...disappear?"

Sonic lurched forward, pressing himself against Metal and burying his head into Metal's shoulder.

"I don't want to forget. I don't want us to be enemies again. Everything that happened here was bad-really bad-and as much as I want my real leg and my real mouth and my real heart back, if it means losing you-"

Metal couldn't let go of the strand, but he wrapped his other arm around Sonic, bringing his fingers to rest on Sonic's scar. He pressed his palm against it, gently but firmly, and rested his cheek against Sonic's head.
"I do not want to forget you either. I cannot forget you, Sonic. You mean so much to me."

Sonic said nothing. He simply held onto Metal, the yellow glow of his fur mixing with the red aura of Metal's armor and burning away like a campfire against the night sky.

Finally, Sonic pulled back. "We have to keep going."

Metal nodded. "We will go slowly. Let us proceed."

Metal tugged the thread again, and instead of winding backward, they began to drift upward, floating up and through the prison walls into the night sky above Nega's tower. Yet the tread took them higher still. The tower blurred into the trees. The trees blurred into the forest, and the forest merged with the land into an indistinguishable mass until there was nothing but the coastline.

"Look!" Sonic pointed across the horizon. "I can see lights!"

Metal tilted his head. Ascending as they were, it was hard to make out the finer details, yet beneath the scattering of clouds, Metal could make out the faint, twinkling lights of a city.

"This world is inhabited," Metal said. "We knew that, but...well, it is different to see it in person."

They went higher still, until even the light of the city smeared into the ground and the ground smeared into continents. And the continents-

The continents smeared into a pattern.

Sonic's eyes widened. "This is...this is-"

Metal tightened his grip. "This is the Earth."

Sonic opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. They were floating above the entire planet now, and even though the clouds were frozen, the oceans were dark, and the plants were purple, there was no mistaking the shape of the landmass.

"I supposed this is logically consistent," Metal said. "How else would we speak the same language as the professor?"

"But...how...?"

Metal gestured back to the strand. "The thread is still long. We must keep winding it."

Sonic shook his head, but he turned back to the thread, and they continued to pull.

They stayed tethered to the planet like a satellite, and as they pulled the thread, the planet began to spin. Yet there were inconsistencies. The planet was spinning backward, and after several full rotations, they still hadn't come across the moon.

"The stars are still gone," Sonic said. "If this is the Earth, where are the stars? Where's the sun?"

"I do not know, but the answer may lay ahead. Keep winding."

They did, and soon, the planet was spinning faster and faster until it was nothing more than a blur of color. Yet there were no other heavenly bodies, no satellites, nothing but Sonic and Metal and the spinning planet beneath them.

Something shuddered, a strange shudder, like a radio jammer that had suddenly vanished, and it
took Metal a moment to process the change. Then he realized: it was like they were back inside the black hole. Space itself was shuddering, but it wasn't collapsing, not like it had inside the event horizon. Rather, it was shrinking backward, like a trampoline bouncing back upward, and it was taking the planet with it.

In the same instant it began, it stopped. The planet slowed, losing momentum as it spun slower and slower, until finally, it drifted to a slow orbit, not stopping, but spinning slowly, predictably, like the hands of a clock.

The light. Metal had to dim his optical camera to prevent exposure.

For even at a distance of 150 million kilometers, the sun's intensity was overwhelming.
Dialectic

Chapter Notes

I had to retcon a couple of things from the last chapter for this one. The main one is that Sonic and Metal don't drop the thread in the last chapter. These changes are already uploaded into the last chapter, so if you want to read what happened, search for the sentence, "Sonic was looking directly at him now" and start from there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two."

- Friedrich Hegel

Heat: the flow of energy from one substance to another, dependent upon temperature differentials. Thus, given the ambient temperature of outer space was approximately -270 degrees centigrade, it did not matter how much Metal's processors spun. He would never overheat.

Only the Chaos Emeralds stopped him from freezing.

Between his fingers, the gossamer thread wove like ethereal silk, motes of dust drifting through the sunlight. Like a pattern, intangible.

They shared it, this timeline.

And they were unraveling it.

The junction laid ahead: the cornerstone where the thread split apart, torn asunder, stripped into two discrete lines flowing away from each other.

What would happen when they got there, to the junction? What would happen if their timelines split? Would the world return to normal? Or—

Or the unthinkable. Everything would unwind—the state of the planet yes, and the state of Sonic and Metal too. Gone, like so many unrealized possibilities.

Would he forget?

To forget...to be not Metal, not Mets, but Metal Sonic. To be nothing but a slave to Eggman.

Primary Objective: Neutralize Sonic the Hedgehog

He would forget Sonic. He would forget his complement. His primary objective—

The thread was dust in his hands. When he tightened his grip, he was squeezing a fistful of leaves. And when he let go—
The thread dissolved like glitter in water, billions of motes glowing, fading, against the dark tapestry of space.

Sonic, still in Metal's arms, glowed like a torch. "You dropped it. But up there—"

Was the optimal solution really so obvious? Apparently even Sonic could see it. The junction, where their paths split apart—that was the origin. If they were to truly return, it was where they needed to go.

But was this the solution he wanted? To forget everything they had been through. To forget Sonic—his reassuring smile, his kindness, everything about him...to become his enemy again.

"It is alright." Metal drew his other arm around Sonic's back, holding him tightly. "We can let go. We can go back."

Sonic hesitated. He glanced at Metal, at the thread, then held out his hand. The thread rolled from his palm, and as it crossed the very tip of his fingers, it dissolved, nothing more than elementary motes in the dark of space.

Sonic threw his free arm around Metal, now grasping him with both hands. He was shuddering.

"Sonic? Sonic—!"

Sonic's fur, once a brilliant gold, was dimming, fading to a dull brown, like newspaper left in the sun. The planet beneath them was fading too, vibrant green graying, the oceans darkening, deepening, dulling into the void of space.

Chaos Energy evaporated from Sonic's fur, like wisps of smoke, diffusing into space around them.

Not just from Sonic's fur, but Metal's armor too—the gold and red swirls were no longer there. His armor was dull, dim, not even blue, but a light gray. Like the planet.

Like Sonic.

Metal wanted to say something. He wanted to scream. The Chaos Energy was gone. The heat from his processors was gone. Everything—

No, not everything. There was a single spark of Chaos Energy.

Metal grasped it.

Everything faded.

Frosted air rolled over Sonic's face like fog covering the bay, stinging and heavy, smothering his entire body like a blanket. Yet compared to the dark of space, the frigid smells of early winter were as warm as the sun, and at the very least, the cold gave him something other than his injuries to notice.

Eyes still closed, he mentally scanned down his body. The bruises were there—deep divots in his soft tissue, tender, like overripe apples. One of his legs ached with the pain of strenuous overuse. The other was fine, if duller in his awareness.

There were other sounds too, all around him, of subterranean mammals scurrying to avoid the early frost. Or of birds, high above him, calling to one another, warning them of the dangers below.
And the warm pressure around his hand, smooth, gentle, and reassuring.

"Tails—yes, of course I would know your name. What? This is Metal. Listen, Tails—No, I am Metal...Metal Sonic if you do not know. Now listen, Tails—yes, I have Sonic—"

It must have been early dawn. A peach gradient hung over the sky, broken up by stringy clouds and the dark, leafless branches of hibernating trees.

Sonic rolled over. Crinkled leaves hung from his quills like insects.

"What? A whole week? I have not been holding him hostage a whole week. I have not been holding him hostage at all—what? No! There is no ransom. Tails—Tails? Listen—wait!"

The communicator landed with a wet thud against the forest floor.

"Sonic!" Metal's hand was against his neck, delicate yet firm.

"You are awake! Are you alright? I am trying to request assistance—"

"That Tails?" Sonic croaked. "Hand me the communicator, would you?"

Metal scooped up the communicator and dropped it into Sonic's hand. Shaking, Sonic brought it to his ear. The plastic was cold and wet against his skin.

"Tails—Tails! It's okay. I'm here."

"S-sonic?" Tails' voice was strained and panicked over the grainy connection. "Don't worry, Sonic! We won't let Metal Sonic hurt you. We're coming to rescue you—"

"Whoa, buddy—I know this is gonna sound crazy, but slow down a moment." Sonic wished his voice sounded firmer, more reassuring. "It's okay. Really. Metal's not gonna hurt anyone. He's cool now."

"Sonic—he's holding you hostage!" Tails paused. "Isn't he?"

"He's not. I promise. Look—you can come get us. We'll go home with you."

"Sonic," Tails' voice was low now. "You've been missing for a whole week. What happened?"

"A whole week?" Sonic pinched his brow. It had to be longer than a week. He took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, the shaking in his voice was gone. "Tails—you're my best bud, you know that? I really mean it. And—and I'm glad I can talk to you again."

A pause. "We were so worried about you, Sonic. Are you really okay?"

"I am. You know that crazy, alternate Eggman? Dr. Eggman Nega? He caught us, but we escaped. Metal helped me. He's changed, Tails."

"So you're really safe? Where are you?"

"I'm—hey Mets, where are we anyway?"

"We are back where we started," Metal said, "in the forest. The same where Nega captured us."

"Huh." Sonic rubbed his ear. "Tails—Mets says we're back in the forest. Sound familiar?"
"I know exactly where that is," Tails said. "That's where I lost your signal. You're there now?"

"We are. Can you come get us? Ordinarily I'd run home, but—"

Sonic rubbed a particularly painful bruise on his chest.

"I don't think either of us is in the shape to run back."

"Yes...yes! Oh Sonic, I'll fire up the Tornado right away. I'll be right there!"

"Awesome. I'm gonna let you focus on flying, okay Tails? I'll fill you in once you're here."

"Sure...yeah, you're right. Okay! Sonic, I'm on my way. Hang tight, okay? I'll come get you."

"Thanks, Tails. I know I can always count on you. And—and I do mean it. You are my best bud, okay?"

"I—I know, Sonic. I'm glad you're okay. Be there soon!"

The communicator clicked off, sliding down from Sonic's face.

"Sonic." Metal placed his hand over Sonic's cheek. It was pleasantly warm. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine—totally fine. Just a little tired, you know? Running out of Chaos Energy in space will do that to you."

Metal turned his gaze away. "There is more to it than that. When we were in space—"


"—and the fabric of spacetime...what? You have a rule?"

"No rambling unless you're going to hold me while you do it. That's the rule."

Metal let out a beep of genuine amusement. "An acceptable request. Here—"

Metal brushed through the leaves, inching toward a barren tree behind them. He leaned his back against it, sitting with his legs flat in front of him then scooped up Sonic into his lap.

That wonderful warmth—it was back, sinking into his skin. Sonic could lay in that warmth forever, and he almost did, until Metal's arms slid around his chest and lifted him up, settling him down with his back pressed against Metal's chest, his legs flat in front of him.

He leaned into Metal's arms, so firm and snug around his chest, and tilted his head, just slightly, just enough to let his quills fall behind Metal, just enough to let his head brush Metal's cheek, just enough to let Metal nuzzle his shoulder.

Remarkable. Metal was a robot. He was made of steel. Yet Sonic had never felt such comfort, never felt so safe in his entire life. Metal's limbs weren't stiff and hard. They were smooth, reassuring. Metal smelled that way too—not quite like a new car, but more like a familiar one. A car you could trust.

A car that was yours.

"I suppose this is more optimal. Now you will not attempt to strain yourself despite your physical condition."
"You have a way with words." Sonic snuggled deeper into Metal's embrace. "But a deal's a deal. What did happen while we were up there?"

"It is...difficult to explain. I have reviewed these data countless times. They do not properly fit any model, but I can give you my best conjecture.

"I still do not know if we were 'in space,' as in proper orbit around the Earth, or if we were somewhere else. Spacetime is composed of only four dimensions—the three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension. Under normal circumstances, one must move forward in time, but movement in space is optional.

"Which brings us to the black hole—now, as I said before, this is merely a conjecture, but...it may have been that, inside the singularity, we were able to slip into time as if it were a spatial dimension, like an ant crawling inside a pipe. Under these circumstances, time no longer acts like an arrow. It becomes like a spatial dimension—it becomes something you can traverse."

Sonic broke in, "I'm going to be honest—I don't understand a word you're saying. How did we end up here from there?"

"When Nega transported us to his tower, he did not move us in space. He moved us in time. We were on Earth for that entire misadventure, and yet we did not realize it because it was the future. It was the Earth's future. But when Nega moved us in time, it left some sort of imprint on the dimension of time itself. We were not supposed to be there. It violated the laws of the universe. So when everything collapsed, we were able to backtrack. It was as if the universe was trying to right itself."

"So that's it then. We escaped. We're free. No more Nega. No more headache. And the sun—"

Even in the cold forest air, the sun glowed against his skin.

Metal interrupted, "I do not believe we are entirely 'home-free,' as it were."

"What do you mean?" Sonic glanced back at Metal. Sitting this close to him meant Metal took up nearly his entire vision.

Not that Sonic minded. Metal was nice to look at.

"We are here too late," Metal blurted out. "That is what Tails said—we were gone for a week."

"So? What's that matter? We're still here, aren't we?"

"You do not understand. Sonic—everything that happened, it happened in the future. Our future. The Earth's destruction, the black hole, all of it—it will still happen."

"Mets—that doesn't make any sense. If it's the future, then it hasn't happened. There's no reason to think we can't stop Nega for good now."

"It is not so simple." Metal shook his head. "And Sonic...it is my fault. I need to tell you something. I—I dropped the thread early. I do not think that was the optimal choice, but I was not thinking—"

It really was a good thing Sonic had made Metal hold him before this conversation had started. This was already above his pay grade. "What do you mean you dropped it early? We still made it back, didn't we?"

"When we were pulling the thread, we were unraveling the past. And yet, you must have seen it—"
the point where our thread split apart."

"Yeah, I remember that. But what about it?"

"If we had gotten to that junction, I believe it would have canceled out everything, including the future destruction of the Earth. It would have undone our capture. It would have undone your leg. It would have—"

Metal tightened his grip around Sonic.

"It would have undone this—it would have undone...us."

"You're saying we would have forgotten each other?"

"I believe we would have. Oh Sonic—I could not bare the thought. I could not lose you. So I...so I—"

Sonic's hand wandered upward, tracing the seam between Metal's muzzle and the rest of his face, pulling him closer. "Metal...it's okay. You did the right thing."

"I...I did?"

"You know I'd rather have you than my leg back any day. And besides—"

Sonic brought his other hand to Metal's chin, gently lifting Metal's gaze toward the sky. The horizon was light blue, the sun a distant, sharp light, everything clear in the cold, crisp way of early winter.

"Look—we're here. The world is still here. Sure, maybe you didn't take us to exactly the right time. But that's okay. The real world is messy sometimes."

Sonic lifted himself up just slightly, just enough to turn around and wrap his legs around Metal's waist, his arms around Metal's neck, clinging.

"Whatever Nega did—whatever he does, we'll find a way to stop it. I promise."

"Sonic—" Metal's fingers wandered down Sonic's back, brushing through his fur. As he came to the scar, Metal traced the seam with the very tips of his fingers.

"M-metal—" Sonic gasped. He pressed the side of his head against Metal's cheek, arching his back up into Metal's palm. As always, Metal's touch against his scar felt incredibly vivid—like Metal's normal touch, only slightly electric.

"Remarkable, is it not?" Metal said. He alternated between brushing Sonic's fur and scratching his scar. "I have a theory about this."

"Uh-huh." Whatever it took to keep Metal petting him.

"Your scar is made from metallic alloys, as is my hand, and all metallic compounds share a special property: electrons will flow easily from one metal to another. Thus when I touch your scar, it generates a weak electric current."

"C-cool stuff."

"Sonic..." Metal's hands came to the small of Sonic's back, and he simply held him for awhile. "I have a question."
As disappointing as the sudden lack of pets were, it did make it easier to think. "Yeah? What's up?"

"It is a question that I have asked you before, but you never answered. It was back in the professor's lab. Do you remember that?"

"O-oh yeah—" Sonic did remember that. A little too clearly in fact. "Y-you mean—"

"You said you would show me what it was to be upgraded friends. I now have a hypothesis about that. You see, I reviewed my data concerning all non-upgraded friend interactions."

"Oh you did, huh?" Sonic said. Well, that was what he got for falling for a robot.

"I did. And the conclusion I came to was that this interaction—the one we are engaged in right now—this is an example of an upgraded friends interaction. Thus my inquiry: as upgraded friends, I would be correct to assume more interactions of this type will occur in the future, correct?"

"Ahh—" It really was fortunate he was facing away from Metal and no one else could see him because Sonic could feel his face turning hot.

"A-are you—are you...asking me out?"

"You will have to forgive my ignorance given my lack of dictionary data. But the phrase 'to ask out.' What does it mean?"

Robots. Freaking robots. Sonic was certain his flush had to be so bad it was moving onto his chest.

He took a deep breath, and he was embarrassed by how squeaky his voice sounded when he finally managed to say, "I-it means to a-ask if...if you'll be upgraded friends with—"

"Oh, I see. In that case, yes, I am 'asking you out.' I am satisfied with our upgraded friend interactions thus far, and I would like to experience more of them with you."

"Y-yeah." Sonic took a deep breath and rubbed his face. This was ridiculous. He already knew he liked Metal, and Metal obviously liked him too, so there was simply no reason to act this pathetic. "I'd like that too. You and me, upgraded friends from here on out. How's that sound?"

Metal nodded. "I believe this to be the optimal solution, yes. Which brings me to my next question—"

Sonic suppressed his urge to groan.

"Back in the black hole," Metal's voice grew quiet, "after you escaped the singularity—you did something. I do not understand what it was, but I—"

Metal pulled Sonic closer. "...I—I liked it."

Sonic flicked his ears. "You don't mean—"

But how could Sonic forget that? The taste of Metal's muzzle, strong enough that it had stolen Sonic's focus, even amongst the unfathomable chaos of the black hole.

"That was called a kiss," Sonic said quietly. "It's—it's another upgraded friends thing."

"May we do it again?" Metal whispered.

Sonic pulled back, just enough to see Metal's face. The shadows of branches dappled across his
dulled blue paint. His optical screen, though marred with scratches, was bright and reassuring.

Sonic ran his fingers along the center seam of Metal's chassis, tracing the creases and dents, coming to a rest on Metal's cheeks. He cupped his hands around Metal's neck, running his thumbs over the bolts of his muzzle and tilting his head.

His lips touched Metal's muzzle, and warmth washed over him. Sonic leaned into it, savoring it, letting the energy, the sparks, flow into his skin and throughout his entire body, his entire being. Metal didn't kiss with a mouth—he kissed with something more raw, more fundamental, something that made the scar warm on his back and his fur stand on end. There was only Metal in this moment—the taste of his muzzle, sweet and metallic, and the warmth in Sonic's mouth. After all the horrors, all the physical exhaustion, all the lost time, this was what Sonic needed. This was all he needed.

Sonic pulled back. His face felt warm, flush, and so too was Metal, the lower part of his optical screen glowing with a steady, low red.

"S-sonic—"

Metal moved his hands up Sonic's back, pulling him forward, holding him in embrace. This too was all Sonic needed, and he let himself lay there, the smooth heat of Metal's chassis protecting him from the cold.

Words were unnecessary. Sonic understood that now. No word, no label, could ever describe what Metal was to him, what he and Metal were to each other. They had each other; they had always had each other.

And this was all they needed.

Chapter End Notes

That's it! This is the end of the story!

And yet, even though the story is over, I still have big plans for Iron Oxide. First, I'm going to rewrite some of the prose in the early chapters. This story was the first real piece of fiction I ever wrote, and as such, the style changes considerably throughout it. So while all of the plot will remain the same, I want to touch up some of the presentation.

I am also planning to redo the cover art for this, as well as draw some black-and-white illustrations for each chapter.

Then, once all of that has been done, I am planning to actually get a few copies of this published into physical books! This step is still a long way off, but I think it would be really great to be able to read this as a book. I will also be distributing copies of it, so if that's something you're interested in, you can follow me on deviantART (TheEnigmaMachine) or tumblr (enigma--machine or metonic-ship) for more information when the time comes.

I'd also like to do a dramatic reading of this and post the audio online for you to download. More information about that will also be posted on my deviantART or
tumblr when I have things planned out.

And finally, I'd like to thank each and every one of you for taking the time to read this fic. I started this project back in July 2015. At the time, I really wanted to write a good metonic fic, and even though a lot about this story has changed from my first outline, it's been really amazing to see it grow like it has. I'm really excited to say I have finally finished it, and I hope all of you enjoyed it!

As for the future, I do have several more metonic projects planned out. I'm currently working on a short comic with plans to jump into a longer sequel to the OVA (both of these will be on dA/tumblr). I'm also planning a sequel for Iron Oxide! This is still in the early stages of planning, but I will post more information as the story develops.

In the immediate future, the-clarity-organism and myself are working on a long fic collaboration featuring werehog metonic. For more information about that, you can check out her page (the-clarity-organism) or either of our AO3 pages (TheEnigmaMachine and TheClarityOrganism). While I there's no exact date yet, the first chapter of this will be posted reasonably soon.

Again, thank you all so much for reading, and I hope you enjoyed the story!

Also big shout-out to TheClarityOrganism and MossWolf for helping me beta read this chapter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!