Resistance

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/662574.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Sonic the Hedgehog - All Media Types, Sonic the Hedgehog (Video Games), Sonic the Hedgehog (Comics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Miles &quot;Tails&quot; Prower/Fiona Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Miles &quot;Tails&quot; Prower, Fiona Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Action/Adventure, Suspense, Romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Resistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resistance

by Miles_Depth

Summary

Tails, AKA Miles Prower, and Fiona Fox fight their way through a world that has turned against them and their kind. Some Violence, Language and suggestive adult content. Not your average FanFiction.

Notes

None of the Sega & DiC characters are mine, I don't in any way claim that they are. They ideas and dialog however are mine and not representative of Sega or DiC and their opinions or views.

Ideas and characters such as Mara are mine and I ask people to respect them. Again ideas and dialog in this story are mine and represent my work using copyrighted characters.

This story has no set direction or plot. I pick up right where I leave off every time and stop when I feel like I have completed a chapter. Please feel free to chime in and makes suggestions.

Resistance takes place in a fictional world of my own devise. I ignore most precedents in terms of world and setting provided by Archie, Sega or DiC in favor of creating my own. I wanted to write a story about how the characters would act in a war against Julian Kintobor (Robotnik) in a more familiar setting where humans are still part of every day life. The timeframe is set not that far into the future and yet should in many ways seem older (think 90's era infrastructure with tech from 100 years from now). Populations of people depending
on their location will act differently. This is also true for characters based on their past and current situations. In short what I am saying is that people may seem OOC, but that is because I am interpreting how they would act given the world and scenarios I am putting them in. I don't like to build a world around predefined notions about characters because it forces too many things. All of the characters will retain their core personalities as you will see in the end, I have only given them the means to go beyond what they might do in a normal FanFiction.
The kit sat at the table thumbing for the next page in the morning paper. It was a poorly edited local bit, but the news was still news. He didn’t need reminding that a war was going on, but when you’re this far from home, sometimes you can be left out of the loop.

The front three pages were littered with shoddy details on more bombings on the eastern seaboard. Sonic’s handy work no doubt, the fox thought to himself. The government’s overtones were obvious and quickly covered up the meaning behind the targets only condemning the rebels for more senseless killings and destruction of property.

The shorter than average human girl behind the counter watched him with apprehension as he wrapped his hands around the still warm cup of coffee and lifted it to his lips. It was dark, but far from rich, and left a thick after taste of what seemed like motor oil in his mouth. Even in the small towns were their kind was still permitted it was obvious the humans were averse to associating with the Mobians. The fear in the girl’s eyes suggested that she thought she was in real danger.

This town in particular appeared to have seen some of the worst of the fighting after Julian and his associates were elected. Their iron fist quickly closed around the Mobians with little warning. It was only after too many humans got caught in the crossfire did Julian’s strikes become more surgical. The media hadn’t always been on his side and the initial backlash was tremendous. However, to Julian and sadly to the majority of the population, it was just the cost of getting things done. It was not easy to win a war when the opposing side was willing to get their hands a lot dirtier.

The pup dumped the rest of the tar like liquid into his mouth and tossed the paper back onto the uneven splinter ridden plywood table in front of him. He shouldered the pack that was sitting on the chair next to him and slid his black leather gloves on back over his paws, fastening them tight so that his tendons shown through the matt black fabric. Slowly approaching the girl at the counter, he was careful not loose eye contact with her. She needed to stay quiet, but it didn’t need to be done the hard way.

“What do I owe you for the coffee and paper?”

“I know who you are,” she proclaimed through a meek voice while stealing glances down at his two tails. “I have seen you on the news.”

The Kit smiled at the thought of being famous, but this was what he was afraid of. He reached into a pocket on his combat vest and produced a note of the largest denomination of currency and set it on the counter between them.

“Will this cover it?”

Her eyes widened at the sight of so much money, but she didn’t say anything. Money was next to useless to the Mobians aside from buying the most basic of goods. They had all the weapons they needed and everything else they could simply steal. Tails produced another note of the same amount and put placed it on top of the first.

“Do you know my name?” He asked.

“Miles Prower,” she responded quickly, eying the money still.

“And how about yours?”
She hesitated for sometime before responding, “Mara.”

“Well Mara,” Tails began, “It’s nice to meet you. Now that we both know each other I was hoping we could come to an agreement.”

The girl looked back at him inquisitively.

“Perhaps,” Tails said as he produced a third bill, “We could agree that a fox with only one Tail was here today?”

Mara slid a hand across the counter and hastily grabbed the money while looking out across the diner to make sure no one else was around. The kit turned to leave, but she spoke again.

“What are you here for? The only time I ever hear anything about you is after someone is dead.”

“No one that didn’t deserve it,” Tails said without turning back to face her.

“No one here deserves anything you got for them, fox.” She replied in a cool almost smug voice.

Tails spun around and slammed his fist into the counter, letting his teeth show over a quivering bottom lip. Mara recoiled backwards in both fear and surprise.

“You don’t think I know what any of this is like!” he growled as he motioned to the deteriorating state of her diner. “Having your home destroyed, people you love killed, or even things worse than that. I am not here to make trouble for any of you.”

For a moment he thought he spotted some pity in her eyes, but it was quickly washed away in tears of fear. The girl seemed to break down in front of him. Great he thought, and now I have to deal with this. Tails walked around to the other side of the counter slowly approaching Mara as she backed herself into a corner and curled into a ball. Cautiously he reached down and placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back to her feet. He walked her back into the front of the room and sat her at the same table he had been sitting at. Pulling up another chair he waited for her sobs to dissipate before speaking.

“You are braver than you look kid. But my guess is living in a place like this will do that to any of you.”

She sobbed again and the water works doubled but her voice came out somewhat defiant all the same, “What’s it to you?”

Tails raised an eyebrow, “Well I didn’t kill them did I?”

“No, but you may as well have,” she nearly spat. “You brought this war to our town.”

Tails wanted to laugh, but that wouldn’t be fair to do.

“We didn’t start this, your government did. They bombed this place to hell and didn’t give two shits that you or anyone you knew was here. I suppose that’s our fault too.”

She didn’t respond, only stared at him with ripples in her eyes and tears slowly falling down her cheek.

“You and I, we are not so different. I bet your parents are dead too.”

She shot an angry look at him that only confirmed the fact.
“My parents died in the first attack, back when no one even saw it coming. But we were labeled as terrorist, so excessive force was deemed ‘acceptable’,” Tails said as he picked up the pot of coffee and poured her a drink, “and anyone who was caught in the crossfire was just another casualty of war. But those are just words, it was still murder.”

“I know it’s easy to blame us,” he went on, “but do me a favor and think about it from our side... And I mean the side you know, not that shit that’s written in the papers. Only people like you really know what happened.”

Mara nodded in agreement, “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I lost my temper, it’s me who should be sorry. People see me and they are afraid because of what the wanted posters and news casters say, not because they know me.”

Tails grabbed his trench coat from the hook by the door and threw it on. Two tailed foxes tended to stick out in a small town.

“You are welcome back any time,” Mara said as he reached for the handle.

Tails only nodded as he pushed the door open and walked out into the dull black sky and faded yellow glow of the street lamps. His target was a few blocks away, but his feet were in no hurry to get there. Even so early in the morning people were out and about, more often than not not stumbling around drunk. Most passed him by with a few extra feet between them, not thinking too much about the vulpine with a burnt sienna muzzle. Others stopped and did the appropriate amount of staring before moving on.

The young fox eyed a copper in his patrol car down the way but didn’t may much mind to him. He didn’t need to draw any suspicion to himself by ducking down an alley way. With his hands buried his pockets and the collar on his coat high, he just kept walking until the car pulled up next to him.

“Aye buddy you got papers?” The copper said as he rolled down the window.

Tails brought himself in a stumbling manner to face the cop and with as little coordination as he could muster reached inside his jacket for some false documents. With luck he would appear like some drunken scum wondering the street. He was certain his sagging eyelids would help play the part. The copper yanked the documents from his hand and gave them a quick look over.

“What are you do’n out here this time o’night.”

The kit just stared at him blankly, they both knew it wasn’t a serious question.

“Oh get lost you drunkard,” the cooper said as he flung the papers back into Tails’ chest. “I don’t want to see you around here no more.”

Once he gathered up his papers, Tails kept on walking even though he could feel the copper’s eyes buried into the back of his scull like two ice picks. After he rounded the corner, he knew it was the last he would see of him. Small town coppers were too used to nothing happening to lift much more than a single finger. They just liked to feel important but rarely liked to do any real work.

The steel factory loomed in the distance, its silhouette barley traceable against the early morning sky. After Sonic had begun to make a mockery Julian’s dominion in the populated cities, their need for materials was being outsourced to places like this, where ‘mishaps’ went more unnoticed. In truth it was one of the best things to happen for the resistance yet. The further away they were from the dominions control, the more lax security was.
When he arrived at the cheap woven aluminum fence that encircled his target, the kit ducked into the shadows behind a wooden shed removing his small pack from underneath the trench coat he was wearing. He clipped a holster to his belt and donned pair of combat glasses. The HUD came to life on the lenses slowing bringing details of the world around him to life. When he pulled out his pistol the HUD registered it as both loaded and chambered. After he attached the silencer he placed it in the holster before producing a small aerosol can. With just a few quick sprays the fence melted revealing a much easy route then going over the barb wire at the top.

The steel factory was sparsely lit with same faint yellow lamps the lined the streets, making it easy to move around the building unseen and unheard. However, all of the entrances still had guards posted. Tails had already scouted out the whole facility and knew that whoever had the south east guard post had drawn the short straw for tonight.

Tails was crawling along the ground towards the guard’s hut. The faint sound of late TV shows could be heard emanating from within. This was always the hard part, and for more reasons than one. This poor sap was either about to die or wake up with the worst headache of his life. Tails tried to tell himself that this guy had already picked his side when he signed up for security with the cronies, but this far outside of their reach more than likely this guy just needed the money.

With his back pressed firm against the guard house Tails fumbled for the wires that snaked into its innards. The HUD in his glasses showed the wire with the current and with a quick flick of his knife the TV went quiet and the lights went out, but to his surprise nothing followed. When he stood up he found the guard asleep in his chair.

“Lazy ass,” the kit muttered to himself.

Tails walked up to the door and threw it open. The guard snapped awake but he was already staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. He wanted to scream, but he thought better of it when Tails pressed a single finger against his lips.

“Keys,” Tails said softly.

The guard cautiously reached for his belt and unclipped the keys.

“Thanks,” the fox replied as he tore them from his hand. “Now I need you to stay quiet.”

Like all security guards this one wore bullet proof everything. Bullet proof however, was hardly coinciding with pain free. The guard saw what was coming, but before he could yell for help there was high pitched tink followed quickly by low pitched thunk. In these close of quarters a shot to the head while wearing a helmet more often than not resulted in a nice big concussion with a large bruise. This case was no exception.

Tails slid the door to the guard house close behind him as he left. Now all he needed to do was blow the place up. His fur stood on end still, right down to the tips of his two tails, bristling in the cool morning wind. With a new surge of adrenalin the two tailed fox made for the door.
Justice

Tails fumbled with the keys. There were far too many for him to count and probably only one or two that were going to work on the door. After twenty or so keys one finally slid into place and turned and with it the door knob. The inside of the factory had a metallic smell, one that found its way into his mouth and seemed to linger. There was almost no light except for the pale glow of the red lamps for the night shift. The red helped humans keep from losing their night vision, but it only enhanced the foxes.

Everything was unsurprisingly quiet. The night shift had ended and Tails knew he had at least another two hours before the morning crew would be arriving. Lucky for them, they would have the day off.

All of the intel Tails had on this place hardly did it justice. It was still a rat maze. Rolls of steel and other materials were piled high, changing the layout and making it difficult to get a bearing. What the kit needed to find was likely near the center, the furnace. Tails already knew there were dozens of larger paths that lead right to it, but those were for the likes of vehicles and were often monitored. He wanted to stay in the shadows so he kept to the shelving and small fenced pathways.

It was close to a half hour before he found the conveyer system that led him to the furnace. Large blocks of steel waited to be heated and then rolled out into armor plating and other smaller components. The best weapon the freedom fighters had was their ability to infiltrate and cut the supply of essential materials for bots of at their source.

The controls were simple enough according to the HUD in his glasses. A safety button had to be held in while the start button was pressed. The machine came to life like a giant out of a long sleep and slowly the lumps of steel began move towards the orange heat of the furnace. Tails fumbled around inside is pack searching for the grenade he had brought, but before he could do anything with it he heard footsteps. When he turned he could see the shadow of someone’s approach.

A burley voice called out, “who’s there?”

Tails went to duck for cover, but there was not much left.

The shift foreman emerged, and Tails did not like what he saw. The man was at least three times his size towering well above six feet and made of nothing but muscle. When the man saw the fox, he picked up the first thing he saw, which just happened to be a twenty pound monkey wrench. He wielded it with ease, as if it weighed nothing.

“What do you think you are doing you little piece of shit?” The foreman bellowed as he looked down at the thermo grenade in Tails’ hand.

Tails frowned, he knew this was not going to be easy. Despite the large weapon the swing came faster than Tails could have anticipated. He stepped backwards as the iron grazed his whiskers and passed only hairs away from the tip of his nose. The follow up attack came from directly overhead as if he was trying to split the fox in two. Luckily for Tails, the wrench only found the ground with a deafening clank.

Quickly Tails placed his foot on the end of the wrench to keep it on the ground. However, it didn’t take him long to realize his mistake. With one swift motion the foreman flung the fox off the end of his weapon like he were a mere toy.
Tails hoped that whatever he hit on his way down would be soft, but he had a feeling that he wouldn’t have any such luck inside a steel factory. He didn’t. Tails struggled back to his feet, but was not able to turn around quick enough to see the next swing. It caught him square in the chest and sent him sailing through the air and into the conveyer belt. The blow had to have cracked at least three of his ribs, possibly more.

“Not so tough are you?” The foreman laughed as Tails struggled to all fours, gasping for air.

The pain was near intolerable, but the fox bared his fangs and cringed as he reached out for anything in his grasp to defend himself. This time he was in lucky. His hand stumbled across a long thin object and he quickly grabbed what felt to be the handle. With a flick he brought what he soon discovered was a welding torch across his unsuspecting attackers face. Had it bit lit the resulting injury would have been more than lethal, but the torch was cool at left nothing but a bright red welt. The fox quickly followed the attack up with a lightning fast strike to his opponent’s groin. The man fell to his knees in pain, dropping his weapon as he did so. He was now at Tails height.

“Not so big are you?” Tails said as he flipped a switch on the welding torch causing it ignite in a blinding light.

He didn’t like to play dirty, but sometimes he needed to even the odds a little. Tails walked towards the man who was now cowering in fear, still reeling from the blow. But he continued and walked past him and found the thermo grenade he had dropped. Before the foreman realized what was about to happen, Tails had welded the pin of the grenade to one of the large blocks of steel on the conveyer. Now there was no removing the grenade from the conveyer without an explosion. Tails knew even a man as large as the one sitting on the floor behind him was not going to be able to move one of the two ton blocks of steel.

“How long before this reaches the furnace,” Tails asked as he turned around.

“About five minutes,” the man answered through labored breathing.

“Is that enough time for you to get out of here?” Tails asked.

The man nodded. “What’s it to you any way?”

Tails shrugged, “Contrary to what they tell you, we don’t like to kill people. I could have if I wanted to,” Tails remarked as he pulled a silenced berretta out of the holster on his hip. “Wouldn’t have been much a fair fight though.”

“I would hardly say it was with that cheap shot,” The man replied as he got to his feet.

“You hit a little too hard,” the fox answered as he looked down at his bleeding chest. “You are not going to want to be near this, so grab anyone else who is still here on your way out.”

The man nodded again and broke off into a sprint.

Tails realized it was his turn to do the same. This time he ignored sticking to the shadows and ran headlong down the forklift pathways. As he neared the door he entered through, Tails stole a glance at his watch. Only four minutes had past, but he didn’t want to cut things close.

As he reached the exit the fire alarm began to blare and lights strobe. Tails knew the alarm would help get everyone else out and make for a nice clean escape.

There was an ever slightly brighter glow of orange in the sky when Tails opened the door, but the world was still bathed in darkness. As he trotted past the guard house he remembered the
unconscious man inside. Tails sighed to himself. He knew better than to just leave him there.

The fox quickly flung open the door grabbed the unconscious guard by his armor and dragged him towards the fence. Tails reached for the aerosol can in his pack and quickly cut himself a new hole. Just as he pulled the guard through the fireworks started.

At first there was just a terrible screeching noise as the medal twisted and bent, but then there was a blinding light and a plume of fire erupted out of the top of the building. Tails could feel the heat and hastened his pace as he dragged the man across the street. When Tails glanced back at the guard house he had pulled his new friend from it was engulfed in flames.

Tails had nearly had enough of dragging the armored man. After two blocks the HUD in his glasses highlighted a taxi parked on the corner. He approached it slowly from the rear and came up alongside the driver side. The fox removed his pistol and softly tapped the end of the barrel on the window. The driver turned and immediately donned a bewildered look. Tails threw the guard in the back seat and then proceeded to get in himself, keeping his weapon trained on the driver so that he would not drive off before he was able to get in.

“Drive,” Tails said with a hint of pain in his voice, once he had the door shut.

The cabby obliged and put the car in gear. He had the sense not to ask where.

Tails finally took a moment to look over his wounds. A large blood stain was clearly visible on his combat vest, despite the fact the fabric was black. He knew this was going to need some attention, but he didn’t have too many places to go.

When the kit looked up he recognized the area. It was only a few blocks from Mara’s.

“How about another 500?” he asked the driver reluctantly.

The driver raised an eyebrow as if asking what for?

“Don’t radio in the two Tailed fox that commandeered your cab with an unconscious solider, and consider this a token of my appreciation.”

The cabby hesitated, but nodded his head again. Tails tossed the wad of money on the front seat and got out.

He didn’t even look back to see the cabby leave, medical attention was his priority. The only option he seemed to have was Mara’s. He wasn’t sure if she could be trusted, but if he let his wound get any worse he would have bigger problems. His chest felt like it was on fire and he could feel the blood running down his side. No doubt a rib had broken through the skin.

The adrenalin rush was gone and every inch he had to drag himself was one more he spent in dire pain. Each step was like a knife being pushed slowly into his lung, only making it harder to breath.
He had found his way into the back alley behind Maras and pushed on the back door only to find it locked. Tails threw his shoulder into it, but quickly regretted his choice as his chest exploded in more pain. He reached for his belt and found a set of lock picks and quickly set to work.

The door succumbed to his efforts in a matter of minutes, creaking as he slowly pushed it open. The kitchen lights were on, but Mara was nowhere to be found. He found the stairs to the apartment above the diner and followed them.

When he found the bathroom Tails let himself in and quickly removed his vest. What he saw in the mirror was repulsive to say the least. A fragment of bone was sawing away at the delicate sinew that covered his chest. The kit reached for the medicine cabinet but the HUD in his glasses came up with next to nothing. The rubbing alcohol would sterilize it, but there was nothing to help dress the wound or set the bone.

The fox closed his eyes and cringed in anticipation for what he was about to do. He splashed the liquid onto his skin and recoiled so violently from the pain that he dropped the bottle in the sink and fell to his knees. He could feel himself losing consciousness, whether from blood loss or pain it was hard to tell.

A hand reached down from behind him, found the crook of his arm, and slowly began to pull him back to his feet. It was Mara. She gently backed the fox up to the tub and made him sit on the edge. Tails still bore his fangs with his arm clutched against his side.

“What did you do?” Her voice said calmly.

Tails couldn’t find the energy to speak. He could barely pick his head up enough to meet her gaze.

“If you want my help you are going to have to let me see it.”

Tails slowly removed his hand, but to his surprise Mara seemed unfazed by the severity of his injury.

“That had to hurt,” She said in a quiet comforting way. “You’re going to need to come lay down.

With her help, Tails managed to get back to his feet and follow her down the small corridor to an equally small bedroom. The kit didn’t even wait for her permission to lie down, but rather hoisted himself onto the mattress and slowly lay back. Mara seemed to show no objections to his actions.

“This is going to hurt,” she said bluntly as she stuffed a folded towel in his mouth. “You’re going to want to bite down on that pretty hard.”

Tails closed his eyes and clamped down on the towel, but there was no preparing himself for the amount of pain that followed. He could feel Mara’s hands pushing the bone back inside his body, a feat that took considerably more force than Tails would have been able to willingly apply to himself. As she continued to press, the world slowly went black.

When he came to, Mara was standing over him using the towel that had been in his mouth to wipe the blood from her hands. Tails glanced down at his chest to find his injury nicely bandaged. When he went to sit up, a hand weighed down on his shoulder keeping him in place.

“Not a chance. I have never seen a broken rib that bad; you’re going to need to give it a rest for day or two.”

The kit bore his teeth in frustration, but didn’t say anything. He was grateful for her help.

“What happened anyway?” Mara asked with genuine curiosity on her face. “I heard an explosion.”
Tails grinned a little with satisfaction.

She noticed. “So that’s what you were here for then. The steel factory,” She said with a sigh. “It was the last thing holding this town together. Without it there won’t be many jobs left… Why?”

Tails took a deep breath, testing his strength before trying to speak. “Where do you think that steel goes?” he asked rhetorically. “It goes into the security drones used to senselessly murder innocent people. It goes into the war machines that cause nothing but pain. No good comes from that place.”

Mara nodded in agreement, but Tails could still see the sadness on her face.

“Where did a waitress learn first aide?” Tails asked.

“My parents, they were both doctors before we moved here and opened up this place. I helped with some of the first war victims.”

As Mara took a step back Tails finally took notice of all her features. He hardly ever paid attention to humans and had little concept of their age or level of attractiveness. Her darker auburn hair wrapped around soft cheeks bones. The depth and pain in the blue eyes staring back told him that she was older than he originally thought, perhaps older than he was. Her build was slender, but her hands were rough from work.

Tails smiled, “You’re not really a kid are you.”

“Not any more than you are.”

Tails went to ask another question, but the bell on the diner door downstairs rang. Tails went for the gun in his holster, but Mara had already turned to leave and he didn’t stop her. She didn’t seem concerned.

A few minutes passed before Tails overheard the voices down stairs.

“Shit,” he swore under his breath. He recognized one of them as the copper he ran into earlier, his accent was one of a kind.

Tails fought the pain and pushed himself out of bed. As he crept closer to the stairs he could begin to make out parts of their conversation.

“So yer sure ya haven’t seen this two tailed fox?” The coppers voice asked.

“I think I would know if a two tailed fox was in my diner.” Mara answered convincingly.

“Just thought I would check with only diner that’s open this time o night. Can’t be too carful with these terrorist running around.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I will be sure to let you know if I see him though. Can I get you anything for the road officer?”

“I’ll take a cup of that shit you call coffee I spose. And a slice o pie if you got any.”

“Of course,” Mara replied politely.

Tails was impressed, she was a good liar. He couldn’t hear a trace of hesitation in her voice. Slowly he crept down the stairs and peered out from the shadows of the kitchen.

“Ohhh, and I’ll while I am here I may as well collect the protection money you owe me.”
Tails could hear Mara sigh. “It’s not the end of the month yet.”

“Well you know my offer still stands. There are other ways you could pay up,” the copper said as he gently brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. “One that we both might enjoy,” he continued as his hand moved down the buttons of her blouse.

“I have your money, don’t you worry.” Mara replied as she retreated towards the kitchen unbothered by the copper’s overt comments. “Just let me grab your coffee and pie.”

Mara met Tails eyes as she walked to the refrigerator. The look on her face reeked of disappointment, but she didn’t miss a beat as she went about preparing the coppers food.

When she returned to the copper she handed the man his food and tucked one of the bills Tails had given her in his front pocket.

“That should keep us squared up through next month right?”

“I spose. Where did you get this kind o cash?” He asked with an inquisitive look on his face.

“You just give it right back, you’re my best customer,” Mara replied with a smile.

The copper laughed and walked out the door. Mara kept up the act for a bit, wiping down tables and washing dishes, in case anyone was watching.

When the girl returned she had the look of an angry parent. Tails grinned with amusement as he leaned against the bottom step.

“What the hell did I tell you?” she said sternly. “You’re going to tear your stiches and start bleeding again if you move around too much.”

Tails headed back up the stairs with Mara only a step behind him. He could feel her eyes buried in his back as she followed him closely. He felt guilty for putting her in this position. If that copper had found him here, she was as good as dead whether she knew he was here or not.

As Mara helped Tails back into her bed Tails spoke, “You know there is probably still about two grand in my combat vest. You should help yourself.”

“You don’t need to pay me off, I am doing this because I want to.”

“I thought it might help with your copper problem.”

Mara frowned, “You heard that then. He is nothing to worry about, I can take care of myself. Paying him will only keep off me for so long anyway. Since my parents died he has been extorting me for one thing or another.”

“I could take care of him for you,”

“That’s sweet of you,” Mara said with a smile, “but someone else worse than him would just take his place. I will be fine. You on the other hand won’t be if you don’t get some sleep.”

“I never got a chance to thank you.”

“You just did,” Mara replied as she turned to leave.

“Just one more question.”
Mara stopped in the doorway, but still shut the lights off.

“Why did you help me?” Tails asked.

Mara paused for a long while before responding, “Because you were right before, you’re not the enemy. You could have left me in tears, in fear of you, but instead you told me how strong I was. I fight to stay alive, just the way you fight to keep yourself and the people you love safe and I know you can’t always do it by yourself. For once in my life I felt like I had something in common with someone. If I didn’t help you, how could I expect someone to help me?”

Mara took another step but then stopped again. “And you are right about one other thing, the wanted posters don’t really do you justice.”
Caught

When Mara shut off the light, Tails world went dark. He was alone with his pain. The fox could feel exhaustion dragging him toward sleep, but the agony of breathing kept him lingering. It was what felt like hours before the blackness of nothing took over his racing mind. The only thing left from the real world was the intermittent jingle of the bell above the diner door downstairs. Not once did it wake him, but yet he still felt as if he heard it.

Tails knew he was tired, but it was unlike him to sleep for so long. When he finally opened his eyes it was to a level of daylight he hadn’t expected. It was well past noon with the sun shining clearly in the sky. The kit slowly moved to roll out of bed, but found Mara perched at the edge, asleep, doing her best not to disturb him.

Tails began to feel a little guilty for taking up so much space. His moving didn’t go unnoticed either, as she too quickly awoke and sat up.

“I am sorry I didn’t mean to wake you,” Tails said apologetically.

“It’s fine, you are probably hungry. Let me get you something.”

“I will be fine, I need to get out of here.”

“What’s the rush? You can’t go anywhere like that.” Mara replied motioning to Tail chest. “Honestly I am surprised you can still breath. You never did tell me what happened.”

“Someone got in the way but put up one hell of a fight. I have never been hit so hard in my life.”

“It looks that way. Stay here this time. I will be right back,” Mara replied as she got up and exited the room.

Tails fumbled around for his combat glasses. Mara had taken them off and put them on the nightstand. When he put them on he expected to see a message, but his inbox was empty. Tails sighed and took them back off. No one knew where he was or if he was all right so they were not going to risk trying to contact him.

The fox went to get out of bed again, but the pain in his chest reminded him why he was there in the first place. It felt as if the man who gave him these wounds was tap dancing on his ribcage. Being helpless was not something he was accustomed to.

Mara wasn’t gone long before she returned with a muffin and coffee. She set the items down on the nightstand next to him and promptly slumped down in the chair in the corner of her room.

“Isn’t your diner open during the day?” Tails asked as he reached for the muffin.

“Not usually, most of my customers are here for dinner or breakfast. Not many people bother to go out during the day, so that’s when I sleep.”

Tails nodded as he answered her question with food still in his mouth, “I do most of my work at night too, but that’s for a different reason.”

Mara giggled at his lack of manners, “You are going to get crumbs everywhere if you do that.”

Tails abruptly closed and covered his mouth.
Mara laughed harder, “Relax, I am only kidding. At this point crumbs would be the least of my problems with the amount of blood on my sheets.”

Tails looked down in surprise. He had never realized how much blood he lost. The sheets were stained a dark crimson that bled right through to the mattress.

“I don’t think you know how luck you really were,” Mara said looking at his taped up wound. That cracked bone did a lot of damage. If I hadn’t stopped the bleeding, you would have been dead in another ten minutes.”

“I did say thank you right?” Tails asked.

Mara giggled again, “Yes, you did. Now why don’t you go get yourself cleaned up while I clean this up. And mind the stitches, you can’t afford to be missing any more blood than you already are.”

Tails pushed himself to the edge of his bed and slowly transferred his weight to his feet. He took his time getting to the bathroom where he found his combat vest, still dripping in blood. He tossed the garment in the tub paying no mind to the gear it stored and began to run cold water. He knew better than to take a warm bath with the amount of bruising he had sustained. Tails slid off his black nylon cargo pants, which had his holster as well as the bulk of his extra ammunition.

The cold water stung as it rose. His instincts fought him as more of his body became submerged, but it was not long before his deep breathing calmed his chills. Slowly he undressed the bandages on his chest to find seven stiches up the side of his torso. The wound still oozed, but Mara had done as good of a job as he had ever seen. Tails leaned back in the tub letting the water wash over his head. For a moment the world went quiet and only the feint echoes of noises seemingly far away could be heard.

Amongst the iridescent sounds of life bellow water, Tails could make out Mara’s footsteps as they approached and then faded. A more terrifying banging in the distance caught his attention, prompting him to resurface. The noise was loud as if someone was trying to knock down her front door. The fox quickly got out of the tub and found his gear. Once he had it back on he fished his vest out of the tub.

It was the coppers again. Tails could make out his accent, but this time he was far from friendly.

“Where did ya get this?” he screamed.

“What do you mean?” Mara asked clearly confused.

“Where did you get this bill?”

“Someone paid me with it,” She replied. “What’s the big deal?”

“Shit,” Tails said to himself.

“The big deal is that this bill was stolen three months ago from a bank outside of Capital city.”

Tails couldn’t see the look on Maras face, but he knew she was in a tough place.

“So,” she replied coolly. “Not my fault if someone pays me in hot cash.”

“It is when the person that stole the cash just blew the shit out of the only good thing this town had left in it.”
“And you still think I would just let a terrorist walk in here,” she answered.

“Ya, actually that’s exactly what I think. Search the place, see if you can find anything else.”

Tails could hear two extra pairs of footsteps, apparently the copper did not return alone. Every part of him wanted to stay and help Mara, but starting a firefight in her diner was only going to get the both of them killed. Tails needed to get out and fast.

The kit threw open the bathroom window and reached up for the gutter. He knew this was probably just the type of activity that would rip his injury open again, but he had no choice in the matter. He used every ounce of his remaining strength to hoist himself onto the roof.

The tar was hot sticky after baking in the hot sun and began to clump up in his fur, but he laid still with his back pressed against the roof until he could hear his would be captors.

They opened the bathroom door but found nothing. He heard one stir the water in the tub.

“Waters cold, he’s been gone a while,” One of the coppers called out.

“Got something in here,” Another responded. “Some pretty fancy tech.”

The kit swore under his breath again. He had left his HUD on Mara’s nightstand. Tails knew these coppers didn’t stand a chance of cracking the biometrics on it, but if it made its way to Capital City all the info on it would be theirs.

They had no reason to suspect that he had been there recently, so the fox took his chance and quietly made his way to all fours and crawled soundlessly across the roof. With a small transfer of his weight he shimmied down a steel drainpipe and found himself in the back alley behind Mara’s with no one in sight.

Tails peered around to the front of the building taking note of the van parked out front. He could still hear the three of the coppers inside, one of whom was interrogating Mara.

He hated to do this to her, but this was too messy of a situation to be in without an advantage. Even amidst the gash on his chest, not getting a chance to say goodbye to the girl that saved his life was what hurt the most.

The fox moved quickly to the rear of the van and up alongside to the driver seat. He glanced in the window to find it empty with the keys in the ignition.

Tails couldn’t believe his eyes. Without a second thought he quietly opened the door and crawled in. The van started right up and he pulled away silently. He watched as Mara’s diner grew smaller in the mirror. No one had even noticed.

“Fucking armatures,” Tails said under his breath.

He didn’t spend long on the main roads, police vehicles were tracked and easily spotted. Instead he pulled into an alley, got out and put a round in each of the tires.

Without his HUD communication was not easy. The pay phone at the far end of the ally might work, but everything he did was going to be monitored and the call was going to be tracked in a matter of seconds.

The fox went for a piece of gear in his combat vest to scramble the call only to realize that it had been shattered and submerged in water. It would have bought him some more time, but now he had
next to none.

“Screw it,” the fox said out loud.

He picked up the receiver and dialed hastily. An operator picked up.

“Mark 30, call is hot,” Tails said as soon as his call was confirmed.

“Mark 30,” the operator acknowledged.


“Roger success. Disregard cleanup, area is too hot. Future rendezvous will be provided when clear. Mark 20.”

“Cleanup necessary,” Tails replied defiantly.

The operator paused for a moment before replying, “Negative, mission complete. Mark 10.”

Tails slammed the phone back into place. He wasn’t going to let some small town coppers be the end of his career. The fox knew he had been sloppy and let his guard down, but he felt even worse that he wrapped Mara up in all of this. He knew better than to let his feelings for someone to get in the way, let alone a human. Yet here he was defying orders for what he believed in, something he routinely berated Sonic for.

Tails stared back at the police van at the opposite end of the ally. The kit had an idea, but he knew it was not one of his better ones. There was a lot that could wrong, but for a change he found certain death almost comforting.

It was over an hour before someone showed up. Tails was appalled; Capital City coppers would have been there in fifteen minutes flat. The poor son of a bitch copper they sent to find the van didn’t seem to have a clue about what to do with four flat tires. He spent some time walking around the vehicle, even turned it on, but in the end got out and threw his arms up in the air in defeat.

Most coppers were made from the same cloth. They were left over from the military, vicious bastards that would shoot a Mobian in broad daylight and call themselves a hero after. Small town coppers were a mixed bag, some were in it for the pay, others like the fat piece of shit he was after, the power trip.

The copper got back into his cruiser, but it took a moment to realize there was a fox was sitting next to him. Tails pressed his Beretta firmly against the copper’s leg in order to introduce himself.

“I want to start of by being honest,” Tails said as he pulled the trigger.

The man screamed in agony as the bullet went clean through his leg. While he was howling in pain Tails removed his enemies weapon from it’s holster and tossed it out the window.

“Things will get much worse for you if you don’t drive me to your station.”

“Which one,” The copper asked as he tried to calm himself.

“The one with the copper that’s got the accent,” Tails answered.

The copper nodded and backed out onto the street.

“How long?”
“Just over ten minutes,” the copper replied reluctantly.

“Make it five.”

Tails could see the hesitation in his new driver, but he still found the courage to put his good leg down hard on the accelerator.

When they pulled into the station, Tails reached behind the man and grabbed his cuffs. He wove them through the steering wheel and attached them to his prisoner. As he got out of the car Tails reminded him, “You honk that horn, and I promise I won’t leave here without thanking you. You understand?”

The driver vigorously nodded his head.

Tails headed for the front door of precinct. There was no sense in hiding when he was in plain sight. If anyone was watching the cameras they already knew he was there. However, he had a funny feeling a small town like this didn’t employ too many coppers.

He pushed the front door open slowly and deliberately, baring his ceramic white fangs and letting his two tails fan out behind him. The first copper to lay eyes on him nearly pissed himself as he dropped his coffee and ran for the back door. The next one didn’t make such an equally smart decision.

Tails was faster, a lot faster. He placed a shot that hit the man right in the palm of his shooting hand. The copper fell to his knees caressing his bleeding appendage. He glanced at his pistol, which lay just out of reach, but thought better of it. When the copper got to his feet he too bolted.

The commotion had already gotten the attention of the two other coppers at their desks. One had a confused look unsure if he should remain still or try and do something. After a few more seconds of locking eyes, the copper joined the first two in an escape out the back door.

Now it was just Tails and the last one. His build and tats suggested ex-military. The man didn’t even look scared and that bothered the fox. He had something up his sleeve that was letting a smirk of cockiness show through on his face.

“Desk gun,” Tails thought to himself in a nick of time.

The coppers desk exploded into thousands of wood shards as Tails dove behind a desk of his own. He could hear the cocking of the gun followed by a quick set of footsteps as the man tried to get the jump on him. Tails planted his feet on the ground and pushed his back into the desk hard. The bureau slid across the linoleum floor like it was on butter and Tails could feel it connect with his unsuspecting enemy.

The man bent over the desk as he collided with it. Tails reached up and dragged him over to his side. He had forgotten about the gun though. The copper quickly got to his feet and brought the butt of his sawed off across Tails’ face. When Tails turned back he was staring down the business end of a 12 gauge.

Without thinking the fox sidestepped the shot grabbed the barrel with his right hand and drover his left fist into the man’s elbow, shattering the bone in his arm. The copper screamed in pain. With his enemy’s arm limp, Tails spun the gun, racked it and pressed it against the copper’s armor. In the brief moment before Tails pulled the trigger he could see a look defeat cross the man’s eye, something he was no doubt unaccustomed to. The room, as well as Tails, were drowned in a red mist. The coppers armor was worthless against such a weapon.
The fox’s ears were still ringing and if he didn’t know better possibly singed by the blast that had nearly removed his head. He had probably been closer to death before, but not by much. Tails threw down the copper’s weapon and walked towards the back of the station. There was no sign of the man that had stopped him the other night.

Faint voices could be heard as he rounded a corner. They grew louder as he approached a door labeled interrogation room. The fox kicked it in gun drawn, but was surprised when he found no one. Instead there were TV monitors taping the footage of the room on the other side of a one-way glass window.

“Sound proof,” Tails said out loud amused with his luck. “Poor bastard missed all the fun.”

It was the copper he had been looking for. He was questioning Mara about Tails’ HUD, which was right there on the table in front of her.

“I told ya,” blared over the speakers in the recording room, “we can doo this the hard way, or the easy way. Where did the fox go? How long have ya been helping him?”

Mara remained quiet and defiant in stature. Her hands were cuffed to the table, and by the looks of it for good reason. The coppers face had several red welts that resemble handprints.

“Fine, have it your way,” The copper replied as he slammed her face against the table. “This way works for me too.”

Tails didn’t like what he saw. The copper went strait for the buttons on her blouse, and quickly moved on to the belt on her jeans. Mara began to scream in terror as she fought with all her strength. It was hopeless though; he was too much for her. Tails knew things were going down hill fast when the copper went for the buckle on his own belt.

Tails had seen enough.

“What the fuck?” The copper screamed when he heard the door open.

When the pathetic excuse for a man looked up he was staring at the two tailed fox he had failed to identify earlier that morning.

“Caught with your pants down?” Tails asked with a smirk on his face.

Before the copper could say another word, Tails fired his silenced Beretta. The copper’s head snapped backwards and he fell limp against the blood-covered wall.

Tails found the keys on his lifeless body and freed a terrified and shaking Mara. She could hardly stand to look at the fox, whether because she felt embarrassed or because Tails was covered in blood he couldn’t be sure.

Mara’s sobs followed one after another, each louder than the previous, but Tails didn’t have time to talk. He put an arm under hers and pulled her to her feet. With his other free hand he picked up his HUD and put it on. Details flooded his vision and a message appeared in his inbox. He would have to read it later.

As he walked out of the interrogation room Tails grabbed the data disk for all the cameras in the building. Kintobor would know it was him, but at least this way they might not know about Mara.

As they walked out of the interrogation room, Tails pulled Mara’s head into his shoulder. She didn’t need to see what happened inside the station. As it is he looked bad enough.
Tails found his driver right where he left him. Unsurprisingly the copper was not excited to see the blood stained fox. The look on his face was of pure horror and fear. Tails opened the door to the cruiser, put Mara between them and then got in himself.

“Can you still drive?” Tails asked the copper.

“Where are we going this time?”

“Any where but here.”

Tails didn’t have to tell the man to drive fast this time.
Tails had the copper drop him off clear on the other side of the shanty town. When Tails un-cuffed his prisoner the man looked back at him as if he was surprised to still be alive.

"You did everything I asked," Tails said. "You didn't put a fight either. Just don't do anything stupid now."

"I just assumed I was dead after you walked out of the station like that," he answered motioning to the bloodstains that covered the fox. "I don't hear of many people that survive an encounter with the infamous two tailed fox, Miles Prower."

"I didn't ask anyone to put up a fight," Tails responded solemnly. "Who would you chose if it came down to you or me?"

"You just walked in there, that was hardly a choice for them."

"All of them had a choice, just two made the wrong one." Tails said as he got out of the cruiser. "And sorry about the leg, that was a bit out of line and unnecessary."

The copper shrugged, "All is fair in love and war," he replied. "I am just glad you knew what you were doing, nothing but muscle. It will heal up fine in a week or two. Just hope she was worth it kid, you really stirred the hive with your little break out mission."

The copper drove off before Tails could even respond to that. If they hadn't captured his HUD he might never have gone back, but knowing now what would have happened to Mara made it difficult to have wished he had done anything differently.

Tails found the girl sitting on the curb, crying into her hands. He sat down next to her, but said nothing.

"Go away!" She screamed.

Tails didn't move.

"I said go away," Mara screamed even louder as she shoved him.

He let it go.

"How could you do that? Just kill them like it meant nothing."

"Do you really want to know?"

Mara didn't seem to have an answer for that, but she did finally pick her head up and stared into the fox's eyes.
"No," She replied reluctantly, "I don't. I… I just don't like it when people die."

"Mara, I could have let him live, but scum like that doesn't learn. Next week it could have been someone else in that room. When I saw what he was about to do to you, I didn't even give it a second thought."

Mara seemed to mentally retreat for a moment, recoiling at the memory of her time alone in the room with the copper.

"Why did you come back?" She asked. "I thought that when they never found you that you were gone for good."

Tails smiled, "You saved my life, I thought I might return the favor."

"You saved more than my life," She admitted. "He would have…"

"No need to worry about him anymore," Tails said cutting her off.

Mara reached over with her hand and ran it across the fox's muzzle, "So much blood, what happened?"

"You don't want to know," Tails said as he pushed her hand away.

"Is that why you covered my eyes?"

The fox nodded.

Mara couldn't quite figure the fox out. He had killed a man right in front of her, but still bothered to try and hide it from her. It was strange to see how familiar this was to him. Years of pain were in those nods; as if each one were an admission for a life he could never give back.

"Why do you do this? I mean why not just…"

"Live a normal life?" Tails responded sarcastically. "There is nothing I would love more. Unfortunately Kintobor decided a long time ago that wasn't going to happen for me."

"Did I at least say thank you yet?" Mara asked with a small smirk on her face.

Tails laughed, "You just did."

"Now what?" Mara asked reluctantly. "I don't suppose I can go home?"

Tails shook his head, "It wouldn't be safe. What I did to get you out of there is going to put you right at the top of their most wanted list. They may not know why to want you, but the fact that I did ensures that they do as well."

"So now where do we go?"

Tails had been thinking the same thing since they got out of the coppers cruiser. As it is they shouldn't have stuck around for so long, but Tails had a feeling there wasn't a copper brave enough in this city to come after him anymore.

The data pouring through the HUD was more or less useless. Nothing was known about the area he was in, there was no nearby hideouts or known friends of the Freedom Fighters.

A deep long whistle from a block over caught both of their attentions. Tails spun around to face the
direction of the sound. It was a train that had just begun to pull out of the steel mill, no doubt taking whatever was left to some place where it could be used.

"Ever been on a train before?" Tails asked.

"No. Why?"

"First time for everything I suppose."

Tails grabbed Mara's hand and led both into a sprint across the block full of run down warehouses and old shops. Even at their quick pace it was easy to see no one had lived in this part of town for years. Plants grew out of the windows and most buildings seemed to be missing their roofs.

They both stopped when they were within an arm's reach of the train. It was barely lumbering along, but slowly picking up speed. A sharp blast from the whistle pierced the air again and the two of them shielded their ears.

"Now what?" Mara yelled over the blast.

"Patience," Tails responded after the sound had subsided.

His HUD was scanning the numbers etched on each section of the train for a hideaway car. They were rare, but the Freedom Fighters managed to sneak a few in every now and then. Tails began to walk against the flow, letting the boxcars glide past him.

After what felt like a hundred cars had past, a green glow outlined an old rickety boxcar near the end of the line. Tails smiled at his fortune.

"I can't ever recall having so much bad luck followed by so much good luck," Tails said out loud.

"What is it?"

"It's a hideaway car," the kit said as he grabbed Mara's hand and pulled her up onto the latter just below the door.

With a stern kick the door gave way and slid backwards to reveal an ordinary looking box car with crates littered about. Tails held out his hand and helped Mara step inside before sliding the door closed again.

"What's so special about this one?" Mara asked.

"Not sure yet. My HUD hasn't picked anything up. It's in our system, so that means there is something in here that should be useful. Take a look around, see if you can find anything."

Mara walked off towards the front of the car rummaging through the mostly empty boxes.

"It won't be in the crates," Tails called out. "Nothing we do would ever be that obvious. Check the floorboards."

Mara turned her gaze towards the dust-covered floor. The wood was water logged and rotten with age, but it still held together. Every few steps she knelt down and tapped the board only to discover the same dull thud. After a few more failed try's Mara's knocking finally produced a sound that was not like what she had heard before.

"I think I found something," Mara called out as she pried at the floorboards with her fingers.
The girl pulled with all of her weight and one of the timbers finally gave way sending her backwards onto her rump. She sat, still breathing deeply, waiting for her strength to recover. Tails emerged from behind a box and glanced down into the dark space bellow the floor.

"Not bad," Tails said. "Looks like we will be able to eat at least, for a day or two anyway."

The fox reached inside and pulled out a few tins and placed them at Mara's feet. She did not appear amused with their selection of food.

"I think I miss my diner already. Canned beans, something called spam, and more canned beans."

"Nothing is as bad as you think it is," Tails said as he reached back inside the floor. When his hand remerged with a small hatchet in tow he looked every bit as confused as she did.

"Is that not normal?"

"I don't know," Tails admitted. "Normally they would leave a weapon, but this seems kind of pathetic. This is an old hideaway though, very old."

"Doesn't Kintobor find them?"

"Sure, but they can't ever find them all. We have people working for us to make sure they stay in the lineup. We hack into their system and report them as already empty when they are in line for unloading and already full when they are up for loading. They just get skipped over," Tails said as he sat down next to Mara and leaned against a crate.

He eyed the axe and a faded inscription that read "in case of emergency".

The kit flung the weapon across the car and watched with a small amount of satisfaction as it buried itself in the wall.

"Is everything you do always this lonely?" Mara asked seeing the fox's restlessness.

Tails nodded. "Small price to pay for freedom though."

"Let me see your stiches," Mara demanded as she took note of what looked to be very fresh blood on a blood covered fox.

"I am fine."

"Like hell you are," Mara said as she knelt over the kit. She reached for the zipper on his combat vest and slowly removed the garment.

"Tails, this isn't good. You tore three of them."

Mara spent a few moments going over the gash before continuing, "But as long as you don't tear the rest I think you will be okay."

"We have a three day ride, I don't plan on doing too much."

Mara sighed as she sat back down next to the fox. It had been a long day for her, one with far less sleep than she normally got. The orange glow in the sky told her it was would almost be time for her to get up if today were a normal day, but her body had other plans. She leaned her head against the soft fur on Tails' shoulder and closed her eyes.

Whether it was because he had fallen asleep himself or a conscious decision Mara didn't know, but
Tails slowly let his head fall until it rested against hers. Mara had never been this close to anyone before, not just in a physical sense, but an emotional one. She had spent her entire life running from her parent's problems only to be left to raise herself. She never had time for anyone else but herself, and up until recently never saw a problem with that.

The hypnotic clack of the train slowly sent the two of them off into a deep sleep as the train continued on to its final destination.

Mara wasn't sure how long she was asleep when Tails awoke with a start.

"What is it?" She asked in a groggy voice.

"Shhhhh, listen," Tails responded.

Mara listened for a moment, but she couldn't hear anything over the train.

"Son of a bitch," Tails said out loud as he got to his feet.

Mara followed the fox to see what all the fuss was about.

"Tails you are scaring me, what's wrong?"

"The whirring noise, I have heard it twice now. I think it's a drone."

"I didn't hear anything,"

"Take my word for it," Tails snapped, "My hearing is better than yours."

The kit stopped when he reached the door and ripped a small black box off the wall.

"How could I have been so stupid!" Tails screamed as he threw it against the floor smashing it to pieces. "It looks they found this car too. They put that in here just waiting for someone to come along and use this car. This was a trap probably set a couple of years ago."

"Can't we just jump?"

"We would be sitting ducks for that drone."

Tails began to pace back and forth more quickly.

"I still haven't heard the drone," Mara insisted.

"You are not supposed to. You can only hear them when they are right overhead."

Almost as if on cue the train car shook just a little extra while the brief sound of rotor blades cutting the air could be heard.

Tails could see a worried look wash over Mara's face.

"It's okay," Tails said trying to calm her down. "They probably want us alive, and the closest stop is a day away from here. We have some time to think."

"You are not used to looking after someone are you?" Mara asked in a sympathetic tone. "You would have never made that mistake by yourself."

Tails looked up at her, "This is not your fault Mara, it's mine. I… I should have never broken you out
of the copper's station. It goes against every piece of my training and judgment."

Tears began to well up in Mara's eyes, "Then why did you?"

"Because for the first time in a long time I cared about someone without knowing exactly why."

The tears in Mara's eyes stopped as she stared into the fox's eyes searching for any hint of dishonesty. She wanted to take a step closer to him, to embrace him, but she knew better. He always seemed to push her away when she got too close. Mara looked on as the kit slumped against the wall and slid down until he was resting on the ground. It was as if uttering those words had drained the energy from him.

"You're not giving up are you?"

"No, just getting some more sleep. No point in wasting time worrying. Whatever we decide to do, it's going to require some rest."

Mara nodded as she sat down next to Tails leaning her back against the same wall. It was weird trying to sleep knowing you were on your way to die, but yet at the same time oddly comforting. Mara leaned over and placed a soft kiss on the fox's muzzle.

"That's in case I don't see you again," Mara said with a smile.

Tails briefly opened his eyes. Mara could see all of his feeling swimming right on their surface. The kit was confused, but that she understood. She had always dreamed of one day finding a strong man to care about, but maybe she felt desperate and that this fox would be the closest she would ever come. Her whole life she was told that his kind was the enemy, nothing more than animals. That's not what she saw though. Sitting next to her was the one person she had met in her life that seemed to see the world for what it was. Nothing the two of them could ever have would be normal, but somehow she was okay with that.

Mara leaned her head against Tails' shoulder again, listening to the steady beat of his heart. All of her problems seemed to fade and before long the two of them were asleep again.
Chapter 5

Mara's eyes slowly opened as the early morning sunlight filtered through the old train car's side paneling. The fox she had been leaning against was no longer next to her, but rather across from her sitting against an empty crate with a tail on either side of him and a rusty hatchet in his hand. She found his gaze already fixated on her as he contemplated, but what she could not even fathom.

They stared at each other for a few moments before Mara broke the silence, "is it true what they say about you? Can you really fly?" she asked staring down at the fox’s two tails.

The kit grinned, "That's got to be my favorite exaggeration. I can at most slow my fall or hover for a second."

"Well I guess that's better than nothing,"

Tails shrugged as he twirled the rusty axe he had found in his hand as if it were a plaything, "Mara, I feel like I need to tell you something."

She stared blankly back at the kit.

"The reason we are not supposed to get involved with anyone is something we are told, but everyone inevitably learns it the hard way. You are not the first person I have gone back for," the Fox admitted.

"What happened the last time?"

Tails struggled for a moment,"…I don't want to talk about it, but I swore it would be the last time I let my feelings get in the way."

"But you saved me,"

Tails nodded, "I knew it was the right thing to do, but the consequences tend to be high."

"And you don't think they were high for me helping you? Look where I am now, look what happened to me."

"So then you understand how hard it is to fight what you know is right with what is right for you," Tails responded as he tossed the axe into the air. He let it fall between them expecting a dull thud when the blade hit the ground. Instead it resonated and Tails lifted an eyebrow in surprise.

"What is it?" Mara asked.

"Seems like there are a few more things bellow these floor boards," the kit said as he removed the hatchet and raised it above his head. He brought the blade down and cleaved the decaying beam in two. With Maras help Tails pried loose one end of the board to discover a matt black case that stretched out under much more of the floor.

Tails quickly set to work hacking at the floor until he was covered in wood chips and the black case was removable. With a flick of his forefinger he reengaged his HUD and let it scan the box. It recognized the serial number, but the contents were still unknown.

The box was locked with two three-digit locks on either end. Luckily his HUD supplied the required codes and the locks popped readily open. Mara peered over his shoulder as he opened the steel
container. Tails eyes grew large when he discovered the contents.

"This might help," Tails said eagerly.

"It’s just a bunch of pieces," Mara added.

"Pieces to a really big gun. I have never even seen one of these outside of a training manual. They are very rare," Tails added as he picked up the barrel and stared down its rifled bore.

"Can you really shoot down a drone with that?"

"Only one way to find out," The fox replied as he slid the receiver into place.

The Barret .50 cal the kit had constructed was well past his height in length, making it a very unwieldy weapon for the fox to handle. Tails slid a loaded magazine into place and pulled the bolt back letting it slam forwards chambering the first round.

"This should be fun," he added with a smile on his face.

"You have an odd idea of fun," Mara said as she shook her head in disapproval.

Tails chuckled to himself as he walked up to the door of the train car and slid it open. The ground rushed by bellow and light flooded in. The wind caught his fur and flowed through his Tails reminding him that nothing about what he was about to do was going to be easy.

The Drone circled around into his vision, just a small spec in the sky. If it saw them it made no immediate move to engage them. More than likely it wouldn't try anything until they attempted to leave the train. Tails brought the weapon to his shoulder, knowing that he had just one shot before he pissed it off. However, he could hardly have ever conceived of a more difficult shot. The train was moving at a steady fifty miles per hour now making the wind impossible to predict. His target bordered on a mile away as it hovered at a distance keeping pace with the train.

"You are going to want to cover your ears," the fox yelled over the gushing air. "This is going to be pretty loud."

Mara scrambled into a corner and brought her hands to her head trying her best to look away, but so much rested on what was about to happen that she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Tails steadied his breathing pulling in air at regular intervals until his veins were filled with ice and he was as steady as he had ever been in his life. He slowly pulled back on the trigger keeping it just shy of its fire point until he lined up the shot.

The woof the weapon let out was deafening to him, but even more impressive was the power. The recoil sent him searching for balance as he struggled with the weight of the weapon. The shockwave alone kicked up the layer of dust on the floor of the car which was quickly sucked out the open door.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the shell casing bounce soundlessly across the floor. The ringing in his ears seemed to slow the time and dull the world, but he knew it was just his mind trying to process everything after the blast of the weapon. He focused harder and brought his attention back to his enemy.

The drone seemed unfazed. If he had hit it, he hadn't done much more than get its attention. It was now on an intercept course with their car. Tails lifted the weapon back to his shoulder and peered through the scope again. If it had a pilot it would have made choosing a target a lot easier, but this helicopter was nothing more than a UAV with twin chain guns. He brought the cross hairs over the
engine, which sat just under the rotors and pulled the trigger. The armor piercing round connected with the target but did little to slow it down even as smoke poured out of the side. Tails could make out the chain guns spooling up as he lowered the scope.

"Duck!" he yelled as he dove.

A barrage of bullets nearly cut the train car in half as the drone passed over head. The roof began to crumble under its own weight and the floor had nearly disintegrated between him and Mara.

Both of them were thrown to the floor as the train's wheels screeched, no doubt a bullet had clipped the break line. Tails struggled back to his feet just in time to move out of the way of another barrage of bullets. This time an entire corner of the train car was shaved off and fell to the still moving ground beneath them. The fox raised his weapon again firing two quick shots but finding nothing but the open sky with both. He knew that unless he could get on solid ground landing another shot was going to be near impossible.

He slung the weapon across his back and leapt over the gap between him and Mara. The girl was shaking in fear as she hid in the corner. The drone had seemed to ignore her in both passes. Tails grabbed her hand and brought her to her feet.

"Listen to me," He shouted.

She looked up.

"We need to jump, can you do that?"

She took a look out the door and shook her head no.

Tails frowned, he wouldn't enjoy doing this, but there was no choice. He picked Mara up and tossed her out the side of the now much slower moving train. The girl landed in a cloud of dust as she rolled along the embankment. Tails quickly followed after her.

The landing was not as bad as he anticipated and the fox came to a stop after two rolls. Springing to his feet he searched the sky for his enemy. It had neglected to take another shot while they jumped from the train and was now circling for its third time. Tails ceased the opportunity and set to work acquiring his target. When it was in his cross hairs the fox fired. He could see the shot connect as a shard of metal was torn from the fuselage.

It struggled for a moment to right itself as it stalled out, but nothing seemed to deter it from getting in weapons range again. The kit fired again just as the drone opened up with its mini-guns. This time his shot clipped the tail rotor. The UAV spiraled out of control sending a torrent of bullets in random directions.

Tails could hear the engine rev as it tried to recover, but it had lost two much altitude in its wild decent. It struggled to pull up, but gravity had already run its course. The drone smashed into the ground rolling twice before it struck the still moving train causing a car to jump the track.

"Shit," Tails swore out loud.

He spun around to find Mara who had luckily had enough sense to move away from the train. She was off in the middle of the field when she turned after hearing the crash, just in time to see the train buckle and jackknife.

Tails stood still as he watched the first car skidding sideways towards him. At the last possible moment he ducked underneath it just as it began to roll. The next car had already rolled and was
plowing through the ground at a terrifying speed. However, the fox was lucky enough to be able to
roll to his left to avoid the car all together. The last car however presented the most problems. It was
mid roll with no way of getting underneath or around it. Tails gritted his teeth as he threw his
weapon with all his might over the car and ran head long at it. With as much force as he could he
jumped, and then proceeded to vault off the edge of the train car while twisting his tails. Wound like
a rubber band he let them go allowing him to glide momentarily in the air just long enough for the
wreckage to pass beneath him.

The fox landed on all fours and slowly stood up having already seen the rest of the cars had
separated and rolled off the track elsewhere. The kit dusted himself off as he walked over and picked
up his weapon. Tails took a moment to get his bearings amongst the twisted maze of debris.

A frantic voice called out, "Miles! Miles!"

Tails didn't respond but rather laughed at himself for never telling her not to call him that. Slowly he
walked toward the voice. As he rounded an overturned freight car he could see the girls looking
between the wreckage, not doubt for what little she suspected was left of him.

"Miss me?" Tails asked with a grin on his face.

Mara turned in surprise.

"I… I thought you were dead for sure."

"Takes more than a few run away trains to kill me."

She embraced him with all her might lifting him off of his feet. Tails was surprised by the girl's
strength.

"Come on," he said as he wriggled free, "we need to get out of here before another drone shows up.
Our best bet is the tree line."

Mara followed his lead as he walked into the tall grass, "Miles, I can't believe me you threw me out
of that train."

"Call me Tails. All of my friends do." the fox said.


Tails stopped in his tracks as he stared dead forward.

"What is it? I am sorry I didn't mean to be so girly, it's just such a funny name since you have
two…"

Tails waved a hand and silenced her. He reached for his holster and retrieved his beretta. "Do you
know how to use this?" the fox asked as he offered the weapon to his companion.

Mara backed away and shook her head frantically, "No, no, no."

"Fine, plan B it is. You're going to have to trust me here. No questions."

Mara nodded.

Tails walked around behind Mara and placed the weapon in her waistband and covered it up with
her shirt.
"Keep that hidden at all cost."

"Why?"

"Because you are going to be my prisoner and prisoners don't usually have weapons."

"Prisoner? Wait what?"

"You can't smell it, but we are in wolf territory. Lupe and her thugs do not take kindly to strangers. They will kill most humans unless they are of some use. Even then, you don't want to know what they do to them when they don't."

Mara gulped, "And what about you? What will they do to you?"

"They know who I am, probably not much. They don't like the freedom fighters though. They refused to take anything lying down and return brutality with brutality. That's not how the Freedom Fighters operate so they went their own way. They give Mobians a bad name."

Tails let Mara walk in front of him as they entered the forest, keeping his weapon pointed in her general direction.

"Mara, just remember that I am on your side. Don't be sacred and don't do anything rash."

She acknowledged him with a slight lowering of her head.

The two walked for what seemed like hours through the thick forest. Tails didn't have clue as to where they were going, but he knew that didn't matter because he was relatively sure that they were going to be found.

A snapping twig caused both of them to jerk their reads to the right, where their eyes found nothing.

"Not bad kid." A voice called out from behind.

Tails turned weapon still raised to find a wolf dressed in fur tight black leather that hugged the contours of a female complexion.

"Destroyed that drone and the train all at the same time. The legend lives up to his name," Lupe said in an almost impressed voice as she approached the fox.

Tails grinned, "Lupe, it's been a while."

"Let's skip the formality shit," she spat. "What are you doing here with her?"

"Well in case you hadn't noticed my ride had a little accident," Tails replied snidely.

Mara began to grow visibly more nervous as more wolves appeared and surrounded the two of them.

"As for the girl," Tails continued, "she is my prisoner."

"I figured. She must be real important for you to go into a copper station guns blazing. That's not usually your style, but I commend you all the same. They say you put down all of them."

Tails wanted to roll his eyes in disgust, but for a change Kintobor's media was doing him a favor.

"So what if I did? Ruin any big plans of yours?"
"Hardly."

Lupe walked over to a fear stricken Mara. No doubt a scared grey wolf such as Lupe was a horrifying sight for a human.

"And what have we here? A pretty girl this one," Lupe suggested as she brought a paw to Mara's face and turned it side to side. "Hard to believe you could want her just for her parent’s crimes."

"What?" Mara yelped.

The statement threw Tails for a loop too, but he knew better than to let it show.

"I just do what I am told. They told me to get the girl, I got the girl."

"Such a good little kit you are, always doing what you’re told."

"So how about some help?" Tails suggested. "I will owe you one."

"Oh you hear that boys," Lupe laughed. "The infamous Miles Prower is offering me a favor if we help him."

The wolves cackled in their deep voices.

"Let’s get one thing straight pup, you're in no place to ask for a favor. We could easily kill her, take that mighty fine weapon of yours and leave you for dead. You're going to have to sweeten the deal a lot more if you want to get out of this alive."

Mara was now sweating profusely. With their kalashnikovs trained on the two of them, the wolves were still closing in, tightening the circle around them even more.

Tails knew better than to show any fear, they fed off of it, but he had a feeling Mara was showing enough for the both of them.

"What about this?" Tails asked as he offered the Barret to Lupe. "What does this get me?"

"That might get you your life," Lupe replied as she took the weapon from him and motion for another wolf to pat Tails down, "but not hers."

"I can't go back without her," Tails replied as a wolf ran a paw down the inseam of his pants.

"That's too bad because I think you're out of things to offer."

Tails grinned, "Maybe."

The fox spun in one fluid motion kneeling the unsuspecting wolf in the face, grabbing Lupe by the throat and removing his pistol Mara's waistband. Before any of the wolves realized what had happened he had the barrel of his gun pressed firmly against the side of her skull with his other arm still around her neck. He stood behind the wolf with his body pressed close to hers to prevent any of the wolves from getting an angle on him.

"Your move," Tails said coolly into Lupe's ear.

Lupe snarled but knew better then to test the fox, "What do you want?"

"Have your pups put down all their guns."
"Do it," Lupe yelled.

The wolves cautiously set down their weapons.

"Good, now you with the rope," Tails said as he eyed one of the larger wolves, "tie up your friends. And I don't want to have to double-check your handy work so make it real tight."

Everyone waited in silence until the wolf had completed his task. His comrades were seething with embarrassment having just been tied up by one of their own.

"Mara, pick up one of their guns."

She looked back at him with deep teary red eyes as if she were about to defy him, but bent over reluctantly and picked up one of the assault rifles.

"Now shoot him in the foot." The fox continued.

Both Mara and the only free wolf looked at him in shock.

"Do it!" Tails yelled.

The wolf looked on in horror as Mara closed her eyes and fired the weapon blindly in his direction. The shot missed finding the ground two feet to the left of her target. The other wolves couldn't help but laugh at her girlish nature despite being restrained, which only seemed to make Mara mad. She raised the weapon again and plugged a shot into the wolf's foot. He howled and fell to the ground after hoping momentarily on one foot.

Mara threw the weapon down in disgust with herself.

"Now why don't we go for a little trip Lupe," Tails said as he pushed further in towards the woods. "And I hope I don't have to tell any of you not to follow us."

Mara quickly picked up her pace to keep up with Tails and his new prisoner.

"You sly little bastard. She isn't your prisoner is she?"

"What gave it away?"

"I thought for sure after what vids were saying about her that you lot decided to snatch her up."

Tails didn't respond.

"Wait a second you don't even know who she is do you?" Lupe laughed, "You stupid fox. You didn't pull her out because they asked you to, you went in and got her because you couldn't let her go. Oh this is too good, the great Miles Prower has yet another weakness. Didn't learn your lesson the first time?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tails replied.

"Right, then why do I smell her on you? Better yet tell me how that worked exactly? Did she roll over afterward and tell you sweet things just like the last one?"

Tails brought the butt of his gun down across the back of her head hard. "Are you sure you want to keep talking?"

"I'll quit when you tell me where we are going."
"Perhaps if you took us somewhere that would be a little sooner."

Lupe growled at him again but trotted off in a westerly direction.

Tails glanced over at Mara who was still sniffling, "Don't worry he will be fine. I should hope it takes more than a bullet to the foot to kill one of Lupe's wolves."

"Don't ever make me shoot anyone again," Mara said silently. "I don't care if it is just in the foot."

"I won't make you do it again," Tails responded, "but I can't promise that a situation won't call for it again."

"Such a pathetic girl. Can't even stand the sight of guns can you?" Lupe added.

"Don't give her shit for being a decent person," the fox quipped.

"Look at you coming to your lady's defense. You are just as pathetic and week as her."

"And yet here you are with a gun to your head."

Lupe stayed quiet.

It was another three hours before they broke through the forest. There was small town in the distance, one well outside of Kintobor's grasp. If they were lucky they could get some help here.

"This good enough?" Lupe snapped.

Tails released the wolf, but not before taking back the rifle he had found.

"You got lucky this time fox, I won't be so nice next time."

"Neither will I," Tails replied as he shoved her back towards the tree line.

The wolf bound back into the forest, howling for the rest of her pack to rejoin her.

"Come on Mara, it's just a little further now. We should be safe here."

"Just like we were on the train," Mara asked.

Tails laughed a little, "Yeah, just like that."

"Wont those wolves come back for us?"

"They won't just walk into a town, not for us anyway."

The two of them walked into the first tavern that they could find. It was a dingy place on the edge of city, but there were far more people there than Tails would have anticipated. It didn't matter though; none of them would bother him. People this far outside of Kinotbor's realm new better than to get in the way. Most of them had real lives filled with work and couldn't be bothered with the Mobians. They may not have it easy like those in the cities, but what they had was real, they were as close to free as one could be.

Tails sniffed at the air as he walked across the restaurant. His fur tingled, there was something familiar here, but he could not place it. The scent drew him in and warmed his body in an odd way.

When he and Mara sat down at an empty table at the far side of the room all eyes were on him as he
leaned the Barret against the wall next to him. It did take long before a nervous waitress hurried over and asked, "What can I get the two of you."

"Steak, rare," Tails said immediately, "and water."

The waitress turned to Mara who seemed unprepared, "Uhh whatever he is having."

Tails wasted no time after the waitress left the two of them, "So who were your parents really?"

A look of shame overtook Mara's face, "They were good people… they defected, but not before they helped Kintobor design something hideous."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not sure what it was," Mara admitted, "but they knew what he was going to do with it and took the last piece of the design with them. They took me and we disappeared. Moved almost every month for two years of my life. Eventually they settled down and opened that diner. No one ever came looking for us and it seemed like were safe until the war started. I don't think Kintobor even knew he killed them… not that he would have cared."

Tails leaned back in his chair, "So that's what the copper meant. They had no idea who you were until they DNA tested you. They probably think you have the last piece of that research. I am going to have to get you back to Knothole, you might be able to help us."

"Funny," a soothing voice other than Mara's said from the corner of the room, "I recall someone saying those exact words to me once."

Tails went rigid with fear. That scent, he finally knew what, or rather who it belonged to. As he turned his head over his shoulder he could make out a red tail with a splash of tan on its tip sticking out from one of the booths. He would never forget that bright red fur or the tail it covered.

The vixen got up slowly letting her tight suit show off her finer features. She walked casually over to his table and sat down, "Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend?"

The only word Tails could mutter was "Fiona."
Dreams

If there was a surprised look at the table, it was on Tails' face. Mara seemed rather intrigued by the notion of meeting what she assumed to be a colleague of Tails. However, little did she know that nothing could have been further from the truth.

Tails had run into Fiona on plenty of occasions since they first met and the result was always the same. He was the one that woke up in an empty bed feeling alone. He swore to himself each time that it would be his last, but in every way she was irresistible to him.

Seeing that Tails was not going to introduce her, Mara took the initiative, "I am Mara," she began. "I can only assume that you are Fiona."

Fiona smiled one of her big girly glamour smiles; letting her canines hang well over her lip. "Has Miles mentioned me then?"

"Not really, he doesn't really seem to talk about what he does too much."

The smile disappeared, "Oh," she replied. "That sounds more like the Miles I know."

"Fiona, what are you doing here?" Tails interjected.

"What am I doing any where that you happen to run into me? I am looking for you. Orders are orders. I was told that you would have something that I need to return."

Tails sighed, "You're looking at her."

"I figured as much. We don't have to do this now if you don't want I was kind of hoping for a quieter night," Fiona said in a minimally seductive voice tugging at her silver collar.

"Can't you just leave her alone?"

"I can, but I can't make any promises for my friends."

"I'll take care of them," Tails responded.

Fiona smiled, "I am sure you will, you always do."

Now the only surprised look belonged to Mara. Nothing seemed to make sense in her head except for one thing.

"You two have some history then?" Mara asked clearly already knowing the answer.

"He hasn't told you much has he honey? I bet he has mentioned some other girl he has saved though."

Mara nodded her head in reply.

"You're talk'n to her. But our relationship is… well it's a bit different than what you two have I think."

"But I don't get it, Tails implied that you were dead," Fiona laughed, "Trust me honey, sometimes I wish I was."
"What do you mean?"

"He didn't tell you anything did he? Miles and I don't play for the same team sweetie. He saved me alright, but he just didn't keep me safe. Next thing I know I am face to face with Julian Kintobor himself. A girl will say just about anything to keep on living, or at least I did," Fiona explained as she tugged at her collar again.

Mara's eyes widened as she started to put things together.

"So you work for Kintobor? But you're a Mobian, why would he want you?"

"Why would he want a Mobian? Surly to go places only Mobians can. Even if everyone knows about me now I am still the best damn copper they got."

"But why? Why would you sell your people out?"

"So I can keep living honey. Miles couldn't save me, but I managed to save myself with my tongue. I would like to think my looks had something to do with it, but Kintobor doesn't really pay attention to anything like that."

"But you spy for them right, you still help them don't you?"

Tails still sat there in silence as Fiona laughed at Mara's innocence. "I can't do any of that, my life," Fiona said as she tugged at her collar again, "hangs in the balance. Kintobor isn't stupid. He wouldn't just let someone like me walk onto his side without proving themselves. This collar of mine is more than just a collar, it’s my life line. For all I know Kintobor could wake up in a bad mood press a button and this room would need redecorating. I have never once given him a reason to push that button."

"What about right now?" Mara asked. "You're just talking with us."

"He only told me to find you, nothing more, nothing less. He is a pretty reasonable guy when it comes down to it."

"Reasonable!" Tails said as he slammed his fists down on the table. "How many Fiona? How many of our agents have you locked up, killed or… or I don't even know what you do with them."

Fiona shrugged, "I lost count a long time ago honestly. That whole part of me went numb. After you have seen some of things I have seen…” Fiona paused for a second. "He has made me watch some twisted stuff, but I had to stand there like it didn't bother me, I still do. I don't like what I have to do anymore than you, but I do what I have to do to stay alive, same as you."

Mara finally got why Tails never wanted to talk about Fiona. It was worse than her being dead. She was now someone that he not only couldn't spend time with, but possibly couldn't forgive.

The waitress appeared with their food and set it on the table in front of them.

"Will your new friend be needing anything?" she asked.

Fiona stood up and replied, "No thanks, I was just leaving."

"Leaving so soon?" Tails asked.

Fiona giggled, "I am at the only hotel in town, room 103. Don't keep me waiting."

Mara eyed the state of her steak in equal parts disgust and surprise. She prodded the near red meat
with a fork and watched as the juices flowed out. When she picked her head up she found that Tails' had been captured by Fiona's exit. His eyes never left her red tail until it disappeared out the door.

"She is pretty I take it?" Mara asked. "I can't say that I know an attractive Mobian when I see one."

Tails turned back to face her with red in his cheeks, realizing how that must have looked to her. "Very," he plied reluctantly.

"Well she doesn't quite smell pretty," Mara said as she shaved off a piece of her steak, "even you smell better."

Tails sighed, "...It's that time of year, maybe to you she smells bad. To me... she is irresistible," Tails stopped. He knew Mara didn't need to hear that. The look on her face told him as much.

The fox found his fork and dug in. He hadn't eaten anything so real in such a long time. Mara on the other hand seemed to have trouble stomaching such a rare cut.

"You can get something else," Tails said as he eyed her struggling with her food.

"Honestly," she replied, "It taste great, it's just getting past the thought of it. That aside, I think you need to tell me a little more about her. Are we in any danger?"

Tails almost started laughing, "You have no idea."

Mara frowned.

"Don't worry, she isn't cruel, far from it. She may have found us, but she is giving us time. We have an unspoken agreement of sorts."

"Oh yeah? What exactly does that enTAIL," Mara asked emphasizing the tail a little too harshly for Tails liking.

"We don't turn each other in. She is on the Freedom Fighter's wanted list, while I am on Kintobor's. Neither of us rats on the other and we go our separate ways."

"So then we are clear?"

"Not exactly," Tails replied. "You complicate things, she will have to report us as being here, but she won't do that for a while."

"So when are we leaving?" Mara asked with a sigh.

"Tomorrow morning. No need to rush things. It's a four hour flight from Capital city anyway. It will be a while before any agents catch up with us."

When the two of them were done with their meals, Tails placed a large bill on the table and got up. "We are going to need to find someplace to stay. I think we have a contact here, so it shouldn't be too hard."

"What about the hotel?"

"We can't make things too easy for them."

"Why did she mention it then?"

Tails didn't respond. Instead he just opened the door of the tavern and let Mara walk through.
The two stood outside for a moment while Tails got his bearings. The message icon in his HUD was still flashing, letting him know that he still had not read a message sent over a day ago. With a blink he activated the message and its contents strolled across the screen. It was short, and should have made Tails feel better, but it didn’t.

Disregard operator. Mission critical asset now in play. Clean up at all cost.

Mara wasn’t a person to them, just an asset. Tails was finally starting to see things the way Sonic probably did. Orders were well and good, but if they lacked moral fiber, how could anyone with a conscious stand by them.

"Come on, I think I know a pretty cool cat that lives around here."

"That’s some old lingo,"

"Well he is actually a cat,"

"Oh, that makes more sense."

Tails walked at Mara’s side as they passed by tiny country houses with whitewashed picket fences. It was interesting to see how normally humanity functioned when it remained untouched by crime and politics.

A tire swing hung off a tree in one of the yards that they passed. For a brief moment Tails retreated 17 years in his mind back to his childhood. One of the last clear memories he had of his parents were of them pushing him on a tire swing. What seemed like just a short time after that they were dead. A raid by Julian and his associates caught his parents at the wrong place at the wrong time. They were shot dead without so much a second thought, leaving a five-year-old fox to fend for himself.

It took weeks for him to wrap his mind around the fact that his parents were never coming back. But even to this day no one could explain to him why they had to die. There existed inside Tails a small unspoken promise to avenge their death, to do whatever he could to stop others from feeling the same pain he felt.

As Tails walked by a storefront window he stopped to observe his appearance in the reflection. What stared back at him was not a pretty site. His fur, normally a dark orange, was matted and stained red with dried blood and tar. His face had almost a dozen small scratches on it and his clothes were covered in dirt from rolling out of the train. It was a small wonder people stopped and stared at him. Mara didn’t look much better. Her jeans were ripped on both legs and what was left of her blouse was soaked through with mud.

Mara caught on to what Tails was doing, "At least we match."

Tails laughed, "I have never felt so pretty."

The two of them met up with Cat at the end of a dirt road. The mountain lion was older and had seen his fair share of the war. Scars marred his face and patches of fur were missing inexplicably across his body.

"Miles, glad you are okay."

"So am I," Tails responded.

"And the young lady?"
"I am fine as well."

"Good, if you two would follow me I have a rather nice place not too far from here."

The old barn was on the edge of a family farm. From the outside it looked rundown, but when Cat opened the door to the plush interior it had both Mara and Tails gasping in amazement.

"Wow," Mara said stunned. "How did you do all of this?"

"I have a lot of free time out here and I don't like let my paws sit idle. No sense in not hiding in comfort if you can. Come on, let me show you to your rooms."

The first floor was wide open with a bar and kitchen in the rear and seating in the center. A wooden staircase wound around a pillar up to the loft twelve feet above them. The two followed the cat up the stairs and down the hall to a closed door.

"There should be two beds all made up for you. Someone already gave me a heads up that you might be on your way in this direction."

"Oh yeah?" Tails asked. "Who was that?"

"Command, they put out an alert after you fell off the grid, you might try giving them a call."

"I'll take it under advisement," the fox replied.

"I don't suppose you have a change of clothes," Mara asked.

"Of course. The best way to hide people is to disguise them. You should find everything you need in your room."

Mara opened the door to a tiny room with four beds on either side of the room. The two at the far end where made up with bland sheets and plane white pillows.

The room was simple enough, but a large crate near the door caught Tails attention.

"What's in here?"

"Hopefully any weapon you might need. Help yourself to whatever you like. Although nothing quite as nice as that fine piece of equipment," Cat said as he eyed the kits' Barret.

Tails popped the lid to the ten by four foot container. He was sure his look could have only resembled one produced by a much younger version of himself inside of a candy store. The case was lined with every conceivable type of weapon he might need. The fox closed the case.

"Hopefully I won't need any of that."

Cat nodded in agreement. "Bathroom is down the hall, you two look like you might need a shower."

"I am well past needing," Mara responded in delight.

After leaning his rifle in the corner, Tails paced around the room as Mara dug through the closet searching for a new outfit. It was her turn to be overjoyed with the choices laid out before her. After an unnecessarily long time she disappeared down the hall.

When she left, Tails flicked the switch on his HUD. His eyes darted around the screen composing a short message, Have package. RTB.
The HUD struggled for a while as it scanned for an unused frequency. Even this far out anyone could be listening.

Tails was sitting on the edge of his bed when Mara entered the room again. She looked like a new person, radiant and rejuvenated. However, she was quick to plop herself down on the other bed without so much as a word. He couldn't tell if she was upset with him or just tired, but his questions were answered when her breathing grew short and her eyes closed.

Tails made a move for the door, but the boards creaked as he walked. He could hear her shift as she turned to face him.

"Where are you going?"

"Out, I am not used to being asleep at this time of night," Tails said as he continued towards the door.

Tails tried to hide the shame on his face, but he had a feeling Mara could still see it. He wasn't sure why he felt guilty, but walking out the door was one of the hardest things he had done in a long time.

The hotel was a two-mile walk under a sky blazing with stars. But Tails barely picked his head up enough to notice them. He didn't bother knocking when he reached Fiona's room, instead he just let himself in. It was empty, but the water was running in the bathroom. Soon enough Fiona emerged wrapped in a towel, leaving little to Tails' imagination.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to show up."

Tails didn't respond, he still felt ashamed for giving into her again.

"And I can see you are still carrying that," Fiona said eyeing the familiar looking berretta in tails Holster.

"And you that," Tails said as he motioned her Desert Eagle .50 on the hotel dresser.

"You know I like the big ones," She replied with a playful smile. "Try being the only female copper and see how hard it is to get respect. Then add in being a Mobian. Cary a big gun and people respect you, kind of like how I respect you."

Even just being in the same room with her was enough to remove his inhibitions. The shower she had just taken did little to remove her pungent smell, drawing Tails in close to her.

He moved in and lifted a hand to her collar, "Fiona let me try…"

"No," she responded firmly. "I like my head where it is. I know your smart baby, but I just can't let you mess with it."

Tails brought a paw to her face and leaned in to kiss her, but she stopped him with a finger to his lips.

"You didn't even have the decency to clean up," Fiona giggled as she grabbed Tails hand. "Come here."

She led the kit into the bathroom and stood him in front of the mirror as she more closely examined his current state.

"What did you do? Dirt, blood, and is this tar? This will take all night to get out."
Fiona carefully removed Tails' vest revealing his newest scar.

"You will have to tell me about this one, I haven't known too many people capable of doing that to you."

Tails felt his body shutter as the vixen ran her hands across his chest. Her body was pressed up tight against his back and he didn't need to look in the mirror to confirm she wasn't wearing a towel any more.

He could feel her hands releasing his belt causing his pants and holster to fall to the floor.

"Come on, let me rinse you off baby," Fiona said as she nudged the fox into the waiting shower.

Whatever resistance to her seductions the fox had planned was gone. Fiona's fingers massaged his fur, gently working out many days worth of dirt and grime. Her touch was gentle and stimulating which seemed to cause Tails to slip mentally as he fell deeper into her spell.

He wasn't sure how or when they ended up on the bed, but she was on top. Whatever guards Tails still had in place he finally released, letting his former self step into the moon light once again. He took control of the situation, rolling the two of them so that he was on top, letting his instincts run free. Fiona whimpered with delight seeing the more dominant fox she remembered. The kit tried to contain his excitement as they shared each other's warmth, but his panting soon matched in time with hers.

Tails caught his breath as Fiona curled up next to him exhaling softly. Her warmth amongst other things was intoxicating. For the first time in what could have been months, Tails felt like he was safe. The way that Fiona draped her arm around him, pulling him close, seemed to suggest that she shared in that illusion. The two of them led lives where nothing was certain besides an untimely death and having someone else to share that pain with was a necessity.

The tired fox took a deep breath filling his nose with the vixen's scent one last time before he closed his eyes to the sound of her soft mews. The dream was the same as it was every time he was with Fiona, a bitter memory of his failures.

Tails stepped from one reality into another as he awoke to the sound of the busy streets of Capital city. Combustion engines roared interrupted only by intermittent honks and the whales of far off sirens. He rose from his bed leaving Fiona to yawn as she tugged at the covers. The kit walked over to the mirror where a more youthful version of himself stared back at him. A fox without the pain and suffering in his eyes, he was young, invincible and ignorant.

Tails smiled at himself in the mirror, baring his pearly white canines with pride as he stole a glance at the young vixen that was still in bed. Her bushy tail protruded from the sheets, wagging slowly with satisfaction. Tails reached for his pants and clipped on his holster. After, he returned his tech 9s to their respective homes.

Fiona sat on the edge of the bed pulling on her own clothes, tail still moving side to side. She took her silver berretta from the nightstand and checked the action.

"I owe you one," she said breaking the long silence between them.

"You mean you wouldn't have come back for me?"

A smile curled around her muzzle, "not sure I would have been bat shit crazy enough to pull it off."

Tails chuckled as he turned around to face her. "As I recall you didn't exactly just sit there and
watch. I think you might have put a hole or two in a copper yourself."

"Well I couldn't just let you have all the fun."

A siren whooped close by outside and Tails stepped over to the windowsill.

"Shit, we got company."

"How much?" Fiona asked just before an auto cannon round ripped through the window frame tearing a hole in the wall and shattering the glass.

Tails sighed, "That much."

"Two or three SWAT bots?"

"Three by the looks of it and a dozen or so coppers."

"Oh? We must be real special to get this kind of attention.

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside their room.

"C'mon," Tails said, "It's time to get out of here.

When the hurried pitter patter stopped at their door, the fox did not wait for his guest to introduce themselves. Instead he kicked the door with all his strength as he shot the dead bolt. It swung outward knocking two of their heavily armored foes into the wall. The armor weighed the coppers down, keeping them from getting up before the two foxes found the places where their armor ended and their soft flesh began. Together, they painted the hallway red.

The loud pops of gunfire had already brought people out of their rooms to see all the commotion, but everyone ducked back inside when they saw the Mobians and dead bodies.

Fiona and Tails made a dash for the end of the hall where they could make out the sign for the stairwell. Tails ducked into the tight space first, leading with both his weapons in outstretched arms. The coppers were already inside, but the foxes had the advantage of being three levels up.

The kit let lose a few rounds from each weapon, forcing the coppers to duck back. Fiona moved up behind him until she stopped to squeeze of few rounds so that Tails could advance.

When they were on the second level, Tails did the unthinkable. Climbing up onto the railing, he dove off rolling as he hit the ground. The coppers never saw him coming. Before they could get a bead on him the fox was on top of the first man, clawing away his weapon and grabbing him by the neck. His colleagues showed him little respect as they plugged him full of holes in an attempt to wound the kit.

Tails drew his weapon over the now lifeless man's shoulder returning fire. With nothing to hide behind but their armor the coppers succumbed to hail of well-placed shots.

The fox loaded new clips into each of his weapons while he waited for Fiona to make her way down the rest of the stairs. Together they tore into the lobby, firing at nearly everything that moved while the unsuspecting coppers ran for cover.

He reveled in the bloodshed, letting his inner beast operate without restraint. The fox was different when he was with Fiona, wilder. They made quite the team too, moving in perfect synchronization without so much as a word spoken between them. They fancied themselves bullet proof and acted
accordingly. Pops and cracks echoed from wall to wall they fought their way through the open space.

Tails felt his back press up against hers, and together they spun 360 degrees trading targets. When Tails side of the room came up again, nothing but crumpled bodies remained. He was confident that Fiona was looking at a similar scene.

The two of them exited out the rear of the building and into the back alley. No one was in sight and the two stopped to take a breath, smiling at each other. They quickly made their way to the street and put as much distance between them and the hotel as they could.

Tails hadn't seen it, but he heard it. The thunderous sound of a rapidly accelerating vehicle wrenched their attention to the left. Before one could say anything to the other, they both dove in opposite directions as van smashed into the wall, separating them. As Tails got back on his feet he found a copper was already on him. Fiona's screams set his concentration astray and with one swift motion from his enemy the kit’s weapons went missing from his hands.

The copper wrapped a steel plated glove around the fox’s neck and began to squeeze, but Tails found enough weight to put into a kick. The bones in the copper's knee crumbled under Tails' combat boots as the joint bent well past its breaking point. The hold on him was released and even through the mask he could make out the copper's cry of agony.

The fox wasn't done. An uncontrollable rage swirled around inside of him searching for an outlet. As the man fell to the ground, Tails grabbed his skull and smashed it against the side of the van until the copper's screams stopped. Blood dripped from the seams of the mask as the kit turned his attention toward Fiona who was still on the other side.

Tails sprinted around the van only to have the door slid shut in his face. He pounded on the vehicle with all his might as Fiona's muffled screams turned to helpless whimpers. The van's tires spun as it backed away from the wall and out into the street. Tails looked down on the ground and found Fiona's silver beretta. Through teary eyes he emptied the clip, watching as the bullets bounced helplessly off the armor plating.

The fox fell to his knees when he heard the click of his empty weapon and watched as the van carried Fiona off into the depths of the city. The only thing he had ever loved since the war had started was gone.

The feeling of sickness welling up from his stomach forced him to close his eyes. The world went black and Tails awoke to a dark empty room. The warmth of Fiona's body was missing, as was she. Nothing really ever seemed to change.
Tails found his way out of bed in the dark and retreated to the bathroom to find his clothes. Even in the shadows he could see a ring of dirt and blood in the shower. Tails flipped on the lights and looked in the mirror; he may have appeared clean, but he felt far from it.

With his gear back on, the fox checked his gun to make sure it still had a round in the chamber. Fiona was infamous for messing with his head in the smallest of ways. On his way out Tails tossed some cash on the dresser. No doubt this place was dirtier in more ways than one than it had been when got there. He did not envy the person who would have to clean it up.

It was still early in the morning but Tails wasn't sure when Fiona had left. He knew that meant that she had already radioed them in and the clock was ticking. Tails cursed himself for jeopardizing Mara's safety just so he could satisfy some selfish impulse; he needed to get the two of them out of here. The sky was still several shades of black, but only the brightest stars out shone the sliver of light advancing on the horizon.

Mara was already awake when he got back. The girl was sitting up on her bed reading in the dim lamp light.

"Enjoy yourself?" she asked nonchalantly after too much silence between them passed.

Tails could barely face her before, but now he couldn't even stand to look in her direction.

"I can never decide if the highs are worth the lows," the fox replied as he walked over to the window.

"Tails?" Mara called out.

The fox turned around to meet her gaze, but he knew despite his best efforts they were flooded with guilt.

"It's okay," she continued. "You and I, we were never going to work. We come from two different worlds. But you and Fiona have something special."

"Special is a funny word for it,"

"No it's not. If you two defy all odds just to spend time together, that has to be more than just desire."

"Maybe," Tails replied. "But you don't know what I am like when I am around her. I like the person I am now, without her, when I am around you. But at the same time the only moments I feel like I am truly alive is when she is next to me."

Mara walked up behind the kit and placed a hand on his shoulder. Tails shied away from her touch as he made his way over to his own bed.

"I loved her," Tails admitted. "I thought that suddenly my life had turned around and maybe things weren't so bad. Then Kintobor took her from me just like he took my parents. Except now I have to watch as she destroys the lives I am sworn to protect. What kind of person am I?"

Mara sat down next to him, "Don't question yourself. It's not worth your breath or your thought," Mara said sternly. "You walked back into my diner that night because you knew in some small way that you could trust me when you needed help the most. You know people better than they know
themselves. Look in the mirror and tell me what type of person you see."

Tails laughed, "You don't want to know."

"Then what about Fiona, what type of person is she? Is what she does really representative of who she is?"

Tails wrestled with the question, "No," he replied reluctantly. "But how can you love someone you can't be with, who turns you into a person you are afraid of?" Tails asked as he let himself fall backwards onto his bed.

Mara didn't respond, but Tails didn't expect her too. The question wasn't rhetorical, rather just a question that had no answer.

Mara let herself fall backwards next to the fox. The two lay on the bed together in silence as they stared up at the ceiling tracing the grains of wood in the endless maze.

Tails felt different around Mara, more down to earth as the beast inside him lay dormant. With her he was safe on an emotional level, knowing that he wouldn't have to worry about what it felt like to be alone the next day. At the same time her beguiling nature dulled his edge and made him soft. How many mistakes had he made because he cared about her. Tails had always deepened on Fiona to take care of herself because he thought she could, but he knew how that ended up. Was he just over compensating with Mara now?

Tails closed his eyes and let sleep find him. He knew better, but having your heart ripped out again hurt just the same as the first. Only time and rest seemed to make the pain fade.

Cat burst in the door, "You piece of shit, you didn't tell me Fiona was in town."

Tails eyes snapped open and he was on his feet. Daylight flooded the room.

"Son of a bitch," he screamed.

"Yeah!" Cat retorted, "my thoughts exactly." Cat threw open the weapon crate and grabbed an M-16 with plenty of spare mags.

"I hope you're ready to roll kid, cause it's going to be the fourth of fucking July here in no time."

Tails was cursing himself under his breath. Where had his common sense gone? He knew better than to stick around that long. And for what? Sleep? Self pity? He pulled himself together; he would have to have this conversation with himself about his emotions later.

He was sure Fiona had to be confused too. No doubt she didn't expect him to actually find him here. But now that she had, it was war, both of them knew that.

The fox walked over to the crate and ran his eyes down the selection again. He pulled out an F&N 5-7, slid a clip in and handed it to Mara.

"I thought you said I wouldn't have to shoot anyone again,"

"You don't," the fox replied curtly, "But I would like for you to still have the option in case you change your mind."

She accepted the gun with a slight tremor in her hand.

Tails walked back over to the corner of the room and grabbed his Barret just as chopper echoed
overhead. Two loud thuds followed that shook the entire house.

"Cat!" Tails called.

"Yeah I heard em."

"You got anything bigger than this shit."

"Maybe, but you're gonna have to give me a second."

"Not sure we have that kind of time here," Tails said as he approached the window.

Fiona was out front barking orders at her agents. It was odd to see a Mobian in command of human forces, especially when those forces had nothing but disdain for their kind. Her men were surrounding the house. It was obvious she had no intention of making this easy for him.

Fiona looked up at Tails through the glass. She smiled before raising her desert eagle and pulling the trigger. Tails didn't bother to move, he knew she was just showing off. The round clipped his HUD clean off his head causing it to shatter into a dozen pieces. Tails grinned back at her as he felt his instincts coming out from hiding. It was one of their stupid games, who could get the closest shot without killing the other. Tails always lost at this one. He could never bring himself to shoot at her the way she did him.

Tails brought the Barret to his shoulder and found Fiona in his scope. His .50 cal round was a bit bigger and tore the radio out of her hand sending a shockwave through her body. The vixen returned an annoyed glare.

The kit stopped dallying when he realized the SWAT bots were online. They had finally unpackaged themselves after being dropped off by the chopper. Tails found himself in one of their sites and ducked as an auto cannon round tore through the barn opening up a huge hole in the both the ceiling and the wall. The other bot disappeared around the corner to the other side of the building.

"Cat!" Tails yelled again.

"Yeah, yeah I got something," the mountain lion replied as he rolled a SMAW round in the room.

Tails looked at it for a moment before asking, "What the hell am I supposed to do with that."

"I don't know, be creative, I don't have the launcher."

Tails gripped the round spinning it around in his hand until he found the fail safe. He ripped the chip out hoping that without it, the missile would still detonate without its launcher. The fox took one look out the window before heaving the projectile. It was a perfect throw, landing right at the bot's feet.

Dialing his scope way back the fox leaned out the window and took a quick shot. The armor-piercing round split the SMAW rocket open and it erupted into flames engulfing his mechanized foe. Tails frowned when he found that he had only seemed to wound the SWAT bot. But he knew an immobile one was better than nothing. The bot retaliated with another auto cannon round. This time it removed an even larger portion of the building's facade causing Mara to scream and retreat into the corner by the door.

"Did you take care of it?" Cat yelled from down the other end of the hall.

"Kind of," Tails responded.
"Well they are 'kind of' inside, so watch yourself," Cat replied over the bark of his M-16. "Meet me out front in two minutes. If I am not there, I am dead and you are on your own kid."

Tails returned to the crate while he threw the strap of his Barret around his shoulder. It would be useless inside. His hands found an old HK-53 and gave the bolt a slap letting it slam shut. The holes in the wall had reduced their cover to next to nothing and Tails let loose a stream of bullets forcing the coppers back into cover behind their vehicles. The kit approached the broken wall keeping below what was left. Leaning out he returned every shot the coppers squeezed off two fold. Fiona was still out front directing traffic when she stopped and took another shot clipping the fox’s ear this time.

"Bitch," Tails screamed as peppered the ground at her feet forcing her to jump behind her SUV.

An odd pop echoed from the other side of the room but Tails ignored it as he slid another magazine into his weapon and emptied it. When he turned around Tails found Mara face to face with a copper holding a bleeding foot in one hand and his pistol in another. Tails walked up behind the man, removing his berretta with his free hand, and quickly put the copper out of his misery.

"You can't hesitate!" Tails yelled at her as the man bled out on the floor between them. "They won't."

Mara nodded her head still cowering in the corner.

"Thanks though," Tails added as he slid his berretta back into his holster. "That's twice now you have saved my life."

He grabbed Mara by the wrist and rang down the hall leading with his HK in his other hand.

Another copper made his way up the stairs and Tails knocked him over with five or six shots. Tails kicked his gun down the hall as the man squirmed in pain. His armor may have saved his life, but by the looks of it not much pain.

"Stay here and watch him," Tails said as he jumped onto the railing and slid down.

The room was full of agents waiting for him just as he suspected. The fox didn't waste any time introducing them to the fresh clip in his gun. When he hit the floor he rolled behind a fat wooden support beam. Most of the coppers had taken up defensive positions at the other end of the barn behind the bar and were unloading their weapons without reprieve. Tails rolled to the next pillar as his enemy's rounds shredded the first. It was impossible to return fire against so many enemies. Tails ducked lower as shots began to make their way through the second wood beam.

Then one of the coppers made a mistake. Tails could hear him pull the pin on a grenade from across the room. The fox flipped his weapon around grasping it by the barrel, ignoring the searing pain as it burned his hand. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted it as it flew through the air.

"Didn't even bother to cook it," Tails said to himself as he swung his weapon like a bat.

The nade collided perfectly with the stock of his gun sending it right where it came from. The agents panicked as they made an effort to leap away, but it was already too late. The room was bathed in a blinding white light and a furious crack that even put a ring in Tails' ears. The kit chuckled to himself as he watched the agents who were still conscious struggle to fight the disorientation. Most of them fell to their feet vomiting as their minds were overloaded with sensory input.

"Mara!" the fox screamed while he dropped the now empty HK, "Time to go."

He could hear her quick footsteps as she raced down the stairs. Her eyes widened as she looked
across the room, "how did you…?"

"Story for another time," Tails replied as reached for the door while he drew his beretta.

Mara ran into the waiting day light first, but stopped just a few steps outside. Tails soon learned why.

"Going somewhere?" Fiona asked.

He and Mara were surrounded by at least a half dozen men. Tails kept his pistol trained on the velvet red fox. Tails had to admit even in her Capital City copper uniform she looked stunning. The two preformed an awkward dance as they kept each other in their sites while Tails kept Mara in his shadow. Then Tails smiled and holstered his weapon and dropped his barret to the ground, "That way wouldn't be any fun."

"Couldn't agree more," Fiona said as she too returned her weapon.

Tails was unable remember the last time the two have them had gone at it like this, and she had only gotten better. She led with a quick jab to Tails side, but he traded the blow a shot to her thigh. Before he could react he was looking at the toe of her boot which caught him square in the jaw as she did a backward summersault. The vixen giggled with satisfaction as her men laughed right along with her.

Tails opened his mouth stretching and testing the muscle while straightening his neck with his hands. No way was he losing to a girl, least all Fiona. She came at him again, this time with a strong haymaker. Tails was ready though, and countered the entire attack simply by placing the palm of his hand in the crook of her oncoming arm. He followed up with a strong knee to her stomach and smiled to himself when he heard her expel all the air in her lungs. Tails wasn't done though; he clasped his hands together forming a bigger fist and brought it down hard on the vixen's back as she stood there doubled over gasping for air. The blow sent her face first into the ground. Nothing he did would even leave a bruise, but it would hurt like hell.

Tails wasn't surprised to see all of the agents now had their loaded guns trained on him. If he was going to die at least he had the satisfaction of beating the shit out of Fiona beforehand. A loud horn sounded and several cracks of gunfire sent the coppers running for something to hide behind.

Tails turned around to find Cat fast approaching in a small open top jeep. Tails grabbed his Barret and tossed it the vehicle. Mara had already found the front seat so Tails leapt right into the back.

When he looked up he found a mounted .50 cal. The fox reached for a tether and connected it to his vest as Cat revved the engine and dumped the clutch.

The ground where they had just been exploded in a shower of dirt. The other SWAT bot had decided to intervene on the copper's behalf. They may have been slow but their auto cannons packed one hell of a punch.

"Thought you were going to take care of those!" Cat screamed over the engine.

"Been a bit busy,"

"I noticed. You just couldn't leave without saying good bye to your girlfriend could you?"

Tails spun the mounted gun around letting loose on the bot before it could get off another shot. As well armored as they were, they were not match for an onslaught of armor piercing rounds. The SAWT bot quickly fell over as smoke poured out of the fresh holes.

"Happy now?"
"No," Cat replied. "I don't think your friends want to leave us alone."

Tails looked back behind them only to find that Fiona and her goons were hot on their trail. He didn't lift his thumb from the trigger as Fiona pulled out into the front in her SUV, no doubt the beating she got right in front of her men had set her temper off. The kit could hear Cat growling at Mara in the front seat, "Take the wheel!"

"Wait what? I can't drive stick…"

"Figure it out," the mountain lion barked back at her as he leaned out the door less vehicle. Cat slung his M16 around one hand while holding onto the frame with the other. He joined Tails in unleashing an endless torrent of lead on their enemies.

It was good to be fighting with a vet. Tails didn't lack experience, but the ice cold nerves of someone who stared death in the face for nearly twice as long as he had was a welcome addition.

Tails gritted his teeth as he turned his weapon, aiming lower at the more vulnerable tires on Fiona's SUV. The rubber shredded under the force of the .50 cal and the vehicle swayed as Fiona struggled to keep control of it. In the end it swerved too far and rolled into an adjacent van sending up a cloud of dust as the vehicles tumbled in unison.

Fiona wouldn't be happy with him for that. Tails was already mentally checking off another victory for himself in their far too realistic game of cops and robbers.

"Hey Guy's," Mara yelled over the gunfire. "I think we got a problem." The gearbox made a grinding noise as Mara shifted into fourth. Tails stole a glance over his shoulder to find that they were quickly running out of road. The coppers had already formed a blockade at the bridge's entrance.

"Shit," Cat said, "We are going to need to find another way around."

Tails looked down at the rest of the gear in the back of the jeep. A rail gun caught his eye and he wasted no time picking it up. The kit couldn't figure out how to hold it, but he put it on his shoulder all the same. Cat stopped shooting long enough to yell, "That's not meant to be fired from your…"

It was too late Tails already had one of the vans in his sights and he squeezed the trigger. Suddenly he had a whole new concept of power. The Barret had been one thing, but if he hadn't been tethered to the car the recoil would have knocked him right out the back. His shoulder was burning in pain, but he had managed to find his target. The projectile spit the copper's vans in half sending each piece careening off the cliff on either side of the bridge.

Tails dropped the weapon and looked at the mountain lion who seemed to be yelling at him, but no audible words left his mouth. The fox realized the world was in silence. The thunderous crack of the railgun's projectile splitting the air at a speed several times that of sound had plunged the three of them into deafness.

Cat shoed Mara out of the driver seat and proceeded to ram through the debris. Tails spun back around taking up the machine gun again. As the arch of the bridge passed over his head Tails focused on landing his shots on the windshields of his enemies who were quickly closing the distance. However, the agent's vans were too well armored and the rounds did little more than crack the glass.

Just as the last round snaked its way up through ammo box and into the .50 cal, the ground beneath Tails feet began to shake violently, sending him to the floor. Had he been able to hear he might have
noticed the flurry of explosions tearing the bridge apart in front of them.

Cat downshifted into third and the V8 roared. He was giving it everything, but the jeep was still shaking uncontrollably jarring them all to the bone. Tails looked on as he saw Mara screaming, or at least he thought she was screaming, while holding on tight, bracing herself against the frame of the vehicle. Cat was still stone cold with eyes fixed on the road and hand on the gearshift.

As they plowed through a plume of smoke the shaking stopped and an open expanse of road greeted them as it stretched out into the horizon beyond. As he got back to his feet Tails took a look out the back of the car to find nothing but billowing flames as the bridge collapsed in on itself and plummeted into the depths of the valley bellow.

Silence faded to ringing and the world slowly began to prod his missing sense. The breaks began to screech as their car came to a stop. Lupe stood on the side of the road bowing theatrically at the waist. Cat returned the gesture with a wave and what appeared to be a wink. Mara was yelling her thanks far too loud, proving that her hearing had not yet returned. Tails saluted the wolf before un-tethering himself and hopping down out of the back.

"Cut it kind of close there," Tails said as he walked up to the wolf leader with a huge smirk on his face. "It's no skin off my back if any of you die. Way I see it now you all owe us."

Tails snickered, "Yeah I suppose we do."

Mara was still shouting, trying now to apologize to the wolf she had shot the day before, but he appeared to be made of stone and did little more than growl in response.

"I will at the very least apologize to you two for making her deaf, she is quite a racket."

"Oh that wasn't your fault," Cat added. "Miles here had the balls to fire a railgun without even mounting it. The only thing I can imagine hurting more than Mara's ears is Tails' shoulder."

"What did you say," Mara asked still too loudly as Tails brought a paw to his shoulder massaging his injury.

"So what will it be?" Tails asked. "What can I do for the Wolf Pack today?"

"Consider this one a freebee. I have been looking for an excuse to blow that bridge up for months. You just made it a whole lot more fun to watch."

Cat laughed, "Glad we could help."

Tail started towards the car, as Lupe responded to the mountain lion, "Cat, you may not be a wolf, but you are always welcome with us."

"I am sure I'll catch you around Lupe," he replied with another subtle wink.

The fox hopped in the driver seat, "I'll drive for bit Cat, I think you deserve a rest."

The mountain lion jumped into the rear, behind Mara and leaned against the back of her chair.

Tails put his foot on the clutch and put the car in gear. Before long he had the car up to speed, breathing easy as the wind rushed through his fur. He looked over at Mara who was holding her arm out the side of the car letting it float through the air. When she got bored, Mara began to rummage
around in the vehicle's glove box. Eventually she produced several audio discs, none of which seemed to catch her eye until she arrived at the last one. She paused as she looked at the record in amazement before sliding it into the disc player.

A guitar rift tugged at Tails' ears which had finally stopped ringing. He had never been a fan of music, but the melody was mesmerizing. The song sounded and felt ancient, but that didn't stop Mara from singing along with it.

**This is a note that the following song lyrics do not belong to me. Lyrics: Metalilca - Nothing Else Matters**

"So close no matter how far," She began.

Too Tails surprise Cat picked up the next verse in a rather stunning voice, "Couldn't be much more from the heart." He never would have expected his raspy accent to carry a tune.

"Forever trusting who you are," Mara replied before joining with Cat for the chorus, "and nothing else matters."

"Never open myself this way," Mara sang as she stared at the fox with a smile on her face.

"Life is ours we live it our way," Cat called out in his deep voice as he embraced the tone of the song.

"All these words I don't just say,"

Even Tails half heartedly joined in for the second, "and nothing else matters."

Then Mara leaned her head against the fox's shoulder following his gaze into the distance as she whispered loudly into his ear, "Trust I seek and I find in you."

"Every day for us something new," the mountain lion replied from the back of the car.

"Open mind for a different view,"

This time Tails put some gusto into the next, "and nothing else matters," matching their pitch as best he could while putting arm around Mara. A smile found its way onto his face as well, he was having fun. Fun that didn't involve Fiona or letting the other side of him run free.

He let the two of them finish the song, joining in for the parts he learned. Their voices could not have been more different but somehow melded to form an enticing harmony. Time seemed to pass more fluidly as the bumps in the road dissolved into laughs shared by friends.
Moonlight

Mara awoke to a jolt as the car found a pothole on the road. They had spent the better part of the last thirty-six hours in the jeep as they navigated their way through road after road. It was dark again and she struggled to find where night ended and the ground began. Tails had turned off the headlights.

"Sorry about that, but I can't miss them all." Tails said when he saw she was awake.

The fox’s eyes glowed a dark yellow in the shadows as he stared out into the abyss.

"How can you see anything to miss in the first place?"

The kit smiled with content, but he had a feeling Mara couldn't even see that.

"The stars provide more than enough light for me to see."

Mara glanced up at the heavens above. She had never been far enough outside of a city to see so many stars. They stretched out across the sky in an endless variety of brightness, blotting the darkness so frequently that the their colors ran together. Even on the best nights in her small town, Mara hardly ever managed to see more than a dozen when she took out the trash early in the morning.

"Beautiful aren't they," Tails suggested after noticing her captivity in the twinkling lights.

"I never knew there were so many."

"You have probably never been this far from home."

"I have never had a home," Mara admitted, "But you are right. I have never been this far from… where are we exactly?"

"Can't tell you," the fox responded.

Mara couldn't tell if he was serious. The reply was quick, sincere, but yet ever so playful. It was as if he wanted to tell her or at the very least wanted her to ask why. She took the bait.

"Why not?"

"Because," Cat responded from the back, "If you ever get caught, you won't be able to tell them where here is after they break you."

There was a flicker in Mara's eye for a moment when she realized where they were going.

"Knothole," She said quietly, almost to herself.

Tails looked over at her impressed, "You have heard of it? You have to travel in some pretty interesting circles to become acquainted with that name. Kintobor will squash even the slightest notion that we have a base of operations. Needless to say he has brainwashed the media and subsequently the people into thinking he has a firm grasp on the 'situation' and no such place has ever existed."

"And he succeeded," Mara added. "Most people think it is nothing more than a conspiracy theory."

"And yet you didn't. Why?" Tails asked now very curious.
"My parents. For the longest time they talked about finding it, insisting that it might be the only place we could all be safe. They asked around, but people just called them crazy, even the Mobians who walked into our diner gave them an odd look. They worked high up in the government, so they knew it was real, but eventually they just gave up. Asking too many questions about a subject like that is a good way to draw unwanted suspicion."

"No Mobian would be caught dead talking about Knothole," Cat spat. "That is if they even knew it existed. Most don't."

"So then who does know?"

"Just the resistance," Tails answered. "And like Cat said, none of them would ever utter a word about it. The only reason we are even talking about it is because you have received a personal invitation of sorts."

Mara sighed, "and let me guess, it has to do with my parents."

Tails' and Cat's reluctance seemed to answer her question.

"I don't know what you all think I know, but let me tell you it will be disappointing."

"Maybe," the fox replied, "but they haven't even let me in on why they want you so bad. Chances are they know more than you do, but that won't change their minds about wanting to talk to you."

Mara squirmed in her chair uncomfortably, "How much longer am I going to have to sit in this damn thing? We have been driving for ever."

"Not too much longer now," the mountain lion replied.

As Mara's vision adjusted she soon realized that what she had long assumed to be a road was in fact a desert, its surface dried over and crusty. The barren wasteland was as flat as could be for miles on end in every direction accept the one they were traveling in. Leaves cast a silhouette against the littering of stars in the night sky, as what appeared to be a tree line loomed in the distance.

"How? In the middle of a desert, trees?"

Tails grinned baring a canine, "You will see soon enough."

He wasn't wrong. It was an oasis in the truest sense of the word, an abandoned mine lay at its center. The moon reflected perfectly off of the water's surface a hundred feet down. Her own town had a quarry not so different. She could recall taking a trip there a few times to throw rocks over the edge and listen with eager anticipation for the inevitable splash.

Tails pulled the jeep underneath a large canopy of foliage alongside a few other vehicles that had seen their fair share of wear and tear. The fox cut the engine and proceeded to hop out of the vehicle, taking his time to stretch out and yawn.

"There is nothing here," Mara said as she looked around.

"Which is exactly what we want it to look like," Cat replied. "This place doesn't stay off the radar because we hang signs up everywhere."

"Now for the fun part," Tails said as he shouldered his barret.

Mara followed the kit as he approached an old tree. It was gigantic and well over fifty feet in
circumference. Tails leaned down placed his hand on a rock that was bigger than he was, searching it's edges until there was click. The rock losened and opened up like a hatch.

"Ladies first,"

Mara took a look down into the bark hole with no intention of being the first to enter, but luckily Cat made it easy for her.

"Don't mind if I do," he said as preformed a swan dive into the bleakness. Mara could hear his chuckles as they echoed off the wall.

"It's just a slide," Tails said. "Nothing to be scared of."

Mara took a step up to the edge and before she could change her mind took another until there was nothing bellow her feet. The fall was short and then she found herself floating down a never-ending tube. Her mind was racing with fear and excitement as it painted colors on the imaginary walls she couldn't see. She was always certain that she could see light around the corner only to discover there was no corner at all. At last a blindingly bright room exploded before her as she slammed into a pile of pillows. Cat grabbed her and promptly pulled her onto her feet. The room was bare save for the metal door with no handle on the opposite side of the room and the white florescent lights that hung on the ceiling.

Tails laughter could be heard and it grew in strength up until he too immerged from the tunnel, albeit upside down.

"Welcome to Knothole," the fox said from the ground staring playfully up at his two companions.

A metal door swung open and two armed guards walked in followed by what appeared to be squirrel but with a considerably smaller tail. She was shorter than Tails by a good half foot placing her just above 4 feet. However, what she lacked in height she made up for in stature and what Mara could only assume were good looks. Flowing red hair twice as bright as her own fell just past the squirrel's shoulders in subtle twist and curls. A royal blue vest wrapped tightly around her chest was adorned with a sigil and a multitude of military markings.

"Is this her?" The squirrel asked.

"No, it Mary fucking Poppins," Tails responded.

The squirrel shot him an angry look with much contempt, "Your on thin ice as it is you might want to watch your self."

"Or what? If I hadn't done what I did, you wouldn't even have her right now, they would."

"It doesn't change the fact that you disobeyed a direct order!"

"When was the last time anyone got in trouble for that around here," the fox replied as he walked past the squirrel, letting his shoulder firmly bump hers on his way.

The frustration in her face was obvious, but she contained her anger and turned back to Mara.

"Allow me to introduce my self. I am Sally Acorn, and to most, the one in charge."

Mara had always assumed the one the media called Sonic was in charge, especially after Julian had pronounced the Acorn family 'exterminated'."
"I thought you were… uhh dead," Mara said as she reached out her hand.

Sally accepted the gesture and shook firmly, locking eyes with the girl as if trying to sum her up all at once. "A lot of people would have you think that, but like a lot of others around here, it's just my parents that are missing."

"I am sorry to hear that, I know the feeling though,"

"Yes, we are all quite aware of your parents were," Sally answered as she nodded to the guards and Cat. The three left the room, shutting the door behind wasn't sure whether to be scared or not. She towered over her potential opponent, but Tails had shown her that Mobians were a force not to be trifled with.

"But," she continued, "are you?"

"I already told Tails everything I know. They were working on something for Kintobor, when they realized what he was going to do with it, they stole the final piece and split town. I never knew more than that."

"Walk with me,"

Sally opened the steel bulkhead and stepped through waiting for Mara before slamming it shot and spinning the lock. The hallways were hardly more inviting than the room she had just been in. It was obvious time was spent to build a more habitable space in such an unforgiving area, but no one had really taken the time to decorate anything. The same plain color stained the walls while nauseating lights flickered intermittently down the hallways as far as she could see.

"I suppose its only fair that I tell you what your parents were working on. I am assuming that some part of you wants to know correct?"

"I… I don't know."

Sally sighed, "We don't blame them for anything, in fact if they hadn't done what they did, this war would have been over a long time ago. They are heroes to most of us. What they did however fail to do was find the resistance. They did a good job of disappearing. Without that missing piece we have nothing to protect us from the inevitable day when Julian replicates your parents work."

"I don't get what they could have discovered," Mara said in some confusion. "They were just doctors, they helped people."

"True," Sally said as she guided Mara to her left and down another hallway. "But they were each the best in their respective fields. Your mother was probably the best biochemist Julian ever got his hands on while your father's work in nanotechnology bordered on propelling the world hundreds of years ahead in science. Together they found a way to safely replace living organic tissue with customized synthetic components seamlessly."

Mara tried to process all of that, but she couldn't figure out the significance.

"In here," the squirrel said as she motioned Mara inside of a room. The office was small, and every inch of available wall space was covered with news clippings and maps that been drawn on a hundred times over. In front of the desk sat two chairs, one of which already contained a familiar fox.

"Have a seat."

"I don't follow," Mara admitted as she sat down next to Tails. "What does all of that mean?"
"It means that they discovered a way to replace any part of a person with a synthetic component. The theory was simple, a network of cells, veins, bones and nerves already existed so why couldn't they be converted into components that you would find in a machine. Think about the possibilities and life extending capabilities. However, Julian found another use for what would have been probably the greatest medical discovery of all time."

Mara stared at Sally unsure of what she should have been taking away from her story. "What did he find?"

"That he could turn any living thing into a machine that he could control. Once something is synthetic it responds and interfaces the same way a computer does. He could program an army of whatever and whomever he wanted. The only thing he was missing was your mom's discovery, the thing that tied it all together."

"No shit," Tails said looking at Mara in surprise. "Your mom designed the inhibitor. I will be damned."

Mara stared at the two of them confused now more than ever. "The inhibitor? I don't have any idea what either of you are talking about."

"Look," Sally said more sternly now. "This whole process only worked if the person was alive. The second you start changing things around inside someone's body, they tend to die. Imagine if I just turned your lungs into tin cans, you would probably have some trouble breathing. But if you could isolate that part of the body selectively until it was integrated with other living or synthetic components then there was hardly a problem at all. We are talking about something that happens on a cellular level. Each cell is cut off from the others while it transforms and then is reconnected when complete. All of this is happening near instantly, but one misplaced copper molecule in someone's brain, even for just a second, is all the same as a bullet if there is nothing protecting them."

"So your saying that without ever my mom made, it isn't possible to turn people into robots."

"Not working ones anyway. A robot with a bad brain is as useless as a computer without a CPU. And you can't just go replacing parts to fix them either. Everyone is genetically unique making the parts that would be required to fix them equally unique."

"So if you already know all of this why even bother bringing me in? What good am I?"

Sally leaned back in her chair as she steepled her fingers together, "Now that is the question isn't it? You might not know it, but we spent years looking for you all because of one tiny shred of evidence left behind by your parents."

Mara stared at the squirrel waiting in anticipation has she hung on her words.

"Nicole, if you would be so kind as to show our guest the file."

"Yes Sally," The computer on the desk responded.

Sally turned the monitor so that both Tails and Mara could read the text. Nearly all of it was incomprehensible save for four words.

"Um...%èböxe...xg";ô2&L
It was Mara's turn to lean back in her chair, but she did not do so in amusement.

"Whether it was encrypted or corrupted this is all we could get after your parents scrubbed their drives. We only assume that Julian was able to recover at least as much. As soon as your DNA hit the system more red flags went up then we have ever seen. Half of Capital City is mobilized and we don't have the faintest ideas what they intend to do with that kind of power. Kintobor wants you and it doesn't look like anything is going to stop him."

"But that message doesn't even say how I am involved. It could just be a coincidence."

"It's true," Sally admitted, "but if Julian has what we have then it still looks like you should know something. So I am going to ask you one more time. Do you have any idea where the inhibitor is?"

"No!" Mara stated firmly. "If it were anywhere it would be either my diner or their old lab."

Sally smiled again, but it was more sinister this time, "My thoughts exactly, which is why you two are going to find it."

"What!" Mara and Tails said in unison as they both got to their feet in protest.

"Have you lost your mind?" Tails asked. "Her parent's lab is in Capital City."

"Which is the last place they would ever think to look for her. My sources tell me there is a laboratory assistant position opening up at the same facility. Make sure she gets the job."

Mara was on the verge of tears and Tails was swelling with anger.

"No way!" The fox screamed as he slammed his fists down on the desk before him. "This is suicide at best. It's not fair to ask her to do this!"

"And I am supposed to protect her, feed her and entertain her all in exchange for what exactly?" Julian is scouring the country for her and I'll be damned if he is going to find this place in the process. I already have Sonic running interference in Coastaries. That will keep Kintobor looking elsewhere for a while. If she wants our help, she needs to earn it. Until then she is just a name in a file to me."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Tails asked plainly.

Sally's anger flared again as her face grew a few shades darker, "It should be me asking you that right now. I already warned you once."

"Save it!" Tail spat. I have been your poster child for years, following ever order to a tee while Sonic does whatever he wants whenever he wants. What do you do to him when he gets out of line? Nothing.... Except for join him for a sleepover of course. Don't think I never noticed you sneaking out of his room. Is that what it takes to buy immunity around here, a sleepover with the princess?"

Sally was beyond livid as she struggled to hold back a clenched fist, but Tails didn't stop there.

"What would your dad say if he knew you couldn't keep your hands off the one person he told you to stay away from? You got a thing for the bad boys don't you?"

Sally's restraint melted right before Mara's eyes and squirrel lunged across the desk letting her knuckles collide with the kit's face. Tails fell backwards looking more stunned than hurt.

"Like you are one to talk," the squirrel screamed as she stood over the fox. "How did things with that
tramp work out again. Don't you dare give me shit about spending time with bad boys when that bitch is as bad as it gets."

Tails removed himself from the floor while rubbing his jaw and staring the squirrel down.

"Will you two stop it!" Mara yelled. "What the hell is wrong with you? If someone should be pissed here it is me."

Both of the Mobians sat back down but didn't dare break eye contact with one another.

"I'll do it," Mara added in a voice that lacked any indication of confidence.

"What?" Tails asked as he broke away from his staring contest.

"That's good," Sally responded, "because I was never really giving you a choice."

"Oh come on Sally. Did you even think this one through?"

"Yes as a matter of fact I did. And if you have any better ideas I would just love to hear them. As of now only a human is going to be able to walk into that lab and I am running pretty low on sympathetic human supporters lately."

"I wonder why?" Tails muttered under his breath.

Sally ignored him and continued, "Whatever her parents left behind involves her somehow, so it stands to reason that she is in a unique position to see things that we can't."

Tails sighed, he couldn't help but agree with her there. "Okay fine. Even if we can get her into the city how are we going to get her the job? Mara, do you know any chemistry? Biology perhaps? Familiar with nanotechnology? Some physics? Do you know Latin at the very least?"

The two Mobians looked at Mara waiting for a response.

The girl shook her head, "I never had any time for that after my parents died."

"Fine," Sally said, "Imprint her."

"You have to be shitting me right? As if sending her right into the heart of the enemy wasn't risky enough you want to imprint her? You realize we could really fuck up her memory right?"

A new look of worry crossed Mara's face, "Wait what?"

But both Sally and Tails ignored her.

"You tell me what's more risky, sending her to do a job she knows nothing about right under Julian's nose or risking a small amount of memory loss?"

"Have you completely lost your mind? She could forget everything, including oh I don't know… any clues about the inhibitor. The whole thing would be pointless."

"Not if she can still be an informant. That might be all we need anyway. For all we know Kintobor is a head of us."

"That is of course if she can still function and be sociable. You have seen what happens when this doesn't work."
"Could you two stop pretending like I am not sitting right next to you! This is my life, don't I get a say in any of this?"

Sally transferred her angry gaze from the fox to Mara making it perfectly clear what the answer was.

"Well can someone at least tell me what imprinting is?"

"We plant knowledge right into your brain using subliminal images," Tails answered. "It sounds safe, but it is anything but. The mind doesn't work like a normal muscle, you don't feel it getting overworked from too much exertion. If your noggin can't keep up then it starts overwriting old memories and other learned processes."

"It's safe in small doses," Sally added trying to comfort the girl, "but…

Learning anything I need to learn can't be done in small doses can it?" Mara asked already knowing the answer.

Tails shook his head, "unfortunately no."

Mara sighed, "Can we at least do it one subject at a time."

"That's the only way we know how to do it," the fox replied.

After a few moments of silence Sally spoke again. "Then it's settled. You two have one week before her interview. Her not getting the job is not an option on this one. Get going!"

"Interview? How did I get an interview already?"

"Your resume was exceptional," Sally said with a sarcastic grin on her face. "Now you just need to live up to it. Tails show her around but make sure she doesn't get too comfortable. Mara has a lot of work to do if she ever wants a shot at coming back here."

Tails shook his head in disapproval, "This whole fucking time you had all of this planned and you didn't bother to mention it to me. What was the point of this conversation again?"

"My amusement."

Mara watched as Tails' clenched his teeth, no doubt holding back more than sour words. "Come on Mara, I don't know about you but I could use something to eat."

The kit didn't waste any time turning to leave the room. Mara soon found herself in the tasteless hallways wondering aimlessly along at Tails' side as they passed by corridor after corridor of doors and off-white walls. There were no signs or any indications of where they were going. She could only assume this is what it felt like to be a rat in a maze.

Mara soon learned that the décor wasn't the only thing in Knothole that lacked taste, the food was nothing more than oatmeal with a side of salted pork. She prided herself on her cooking skills, even if they were not all that good. Her customers certainly never complained.

"You guys really live it up down here don't you," Mara remarked as pushed the soupy concoction around in its bowl.

"It can be a little hard to get supplies out here," Tails answered as he eagerly wolfed down his food.

Mara knew better then to let the food go to waste, but that didn't stop it from not sitting well in her stomach. Although she knew that could have easily been because she hadn't actually eaten anything
in over a day.

After a bland meal in an equally bland room, the two filed back out into the halls. Mara knew the place was big, but she hadn't seen a single other Mobian since they left Sally's office.

"Where is everyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well this place is huge, aren't there more of you?"

"Not really," Tails responded solemnly. "There might be a hundred people here at any given time. We come in get our orders and get right back to work. Add in the life expectancy in a job like this and there are plenty of people who just don't come back. Ten years ago you wouldn't have been able to move in these hallways. Today… well you can see for yourself. Julian is winning this war and has been for a long time."

Mara had never truly stopped to think about things from the Mobian's prospective until then. So many of them had died, but no one seemed to notice or at the very least care. How the world was okay with that she wasn't sure.

"Here you go," Tails said as he opened a door with not so much as a number on it. "It's not much, but you won't be here long. Bathroom is two doors down if you need it."

The room was bare except for a bed in the corner and wardrobe next to the door.

"What about you, where will you be?"

"In my room. It's the third door on the right after you go down the first hallway on your left going back the way we came. Get some sleep, we don't have a lot of time to get you ready."

Mara nodded to the fox as she shut the door, clinging to his gaze as long as she could.

Tails found his way back to his own room. It was bigger with more amenities. Success had its perks. But he was hardly interested in any of that. Driving for twelve hours at a time while not demanding physically was a mentally draining task. Tails removed his combat vest and let it fall to the floor with no regard for where it landed. He never even got around to removing the rest of his clothes before he collapsed on his bed.

His eyes opened again when he heard a knock at the door. He hadn't actually fallen asleep, but he knew considerable time had passed, as he had spent much of it listening to the ticking of a clock on his wall. Its mechanical precision was hypnotic.

Tails sighed as he lifted himself from his bed. He thought by now he would have earned some sleep.

Mara stood at the door and the redness on her face suggested she had spent some time crying, but Tails could hardly blame her for that. He had never seen Sally ask so much from one person with so little regard for their life.

"I can't sleep," she admitted. "And I don't really know who else I can talk to."

Tails motioned for the girl to step into his room and she quickly obliged. When he shut the door a pair of hands spun him around. Tails could feel Mara stoop to his level as she planted a hurried kiss on his lips. It lacked conviction, but that didn't change what it was.
"Sorry," Mara apologized, "I just needed to know what that felt like."

Tails didn't respond right away, instead he reached for the light switch. He would have been lying to himself if wasn't at least a little curious himself, but the confusion was something else. It felt strange, rushed, and his mind struggled to process something that he would have normally treated very differently.

"And?" he asked inquisitively as he walked over to the glass door leading to his balcony.

"I am not really sure yet," Mara answered with a look on her face that only confirmed the fact.

Tails couldn't help but laugh, "Then I assume that isn't the only thing you had on your mind."

"No, far from it."

"If it's about our assignment," Tails said as he opened the sliding door and walked out into the moonlight, "my hands are tied on this one."

"No, I think I am okay with it now."

Tails would have never expected to hear her say that.

"I realized I have been trying to live my entire life like there is not someone responsible for my parent's death. You swore vengeance, I just gave in and continued hiding. Now I have a chance to do something about it, but I just don't know what I should be feeling," Mara said with a somber look on her face as she followed the kit out into the early morning air.

"You could start with determination," Tails replied as he put his hands on the railing and looked into the distance. "None of this is going to be easy."

"I know," Mara responded as a fresh look of overwhelm consumed her. "But if I did this, found my parents research, then my life could mean something. I could help all of you while completing what they set out to do. It might not be revenge, but it's good enough for me."

As Mara finally removed her gaze from the fox she realized where she was standing. Tails' balcony had been cut right into the side of the mine. She looked over the ledge and found the moon's reflection bouncing playfully off the water's surface just twenty feet below. The girl then followed the walls of the quarry back up to the sky where they faded into the night.

"This is beautiful," she remarked.

Tails nodded as he turned his attention back to Mara.

She leaned in and kissed him again, this time longer. Confusion quickly flooded his mind as the fox struggled with what to do. When he was with Fiona everything had been instinct, automatic, but now his brain was stuck doing all the thinking. Tails knew that even if he wanted it to, this was never going to work. He gently pushed her away.

"I thought maybe I just didn't feel it before," She said in apologetic tone.

"Me too," Tails added reluctantly. "Me too."

The kit returned inside and found his bed again. Even if the girl couldn't replace the vixen he loved, he knew by now that Mara would be there right next to him when he woke up and that strangely meant more to him than anything.
A thick combination of smoke and dust clouded the inside of the vehicle. Every inch of her body was swollen with pain, but she managed to brace herself on the roof long enough to unclip her seat belt. Fiona promptly fell out of her seat and crumpled onto the ceiling of her now upside down SUV. Taking a breath to calm herself, she reached for the handle but found the door jammed. It loosened after a few stern kicks and the vixen was able to crawl out on all fours gasping for air. Gasoline fumes prodded her nose and the small telltale crackling sound told her there was a fire somewhere.

After finding her feet, she put a hand on the car to steady herself as she walked around to the other side. The fox’s head was throbbing and the world seemed to shake with every step she took. The passenger door was jammed to, but rather than pry it open she shielded her eyes and put a .50 cal round through the already cracked bullet proof glass. The window shattered and the vixen reached inside to remove her fellow copper.

The man was well toned and big, easily three times her own weight but she pulled him out all the same. Fiona put a finger to his neck only to have him push it away.

“Gonna take more than a car crash to kill me,” the man said.

Fiona sighed with relief as she offered him a hand. Finding agents that would listen to her was difficult; finding one that trusted her, near impossible.

Jake seemed to be as equally disoriented as the fox as he struggled to maintain his balance. Together they looked on as the remainder of their squad chased Tails’ jeep into the distance, kicking up a trail of dust in their wake.

“Got your ass kicked again boss,” the agent said only half sarcastically.

Fiona didn’t acknowledge him. She was well aware of what happened and the last thing she needed was someone reminding her.

“We should have just shot him, god knows how many of us he put down,” Jake added.

“Julian’s orders were for…”

“The girl to be taken alive. He made no mention of the fox. I read the briefings too. You’re not going soft, are you?”

Fiona glared at her partner, “We will see how soft I am when they catch up with him. Our team should be able to cut him off at the bridge.”

The vixen managed a grin, but it faded when she heard an explosion. The freedom fighters had managed to cut through their barricade.

“Doesn’t look like you’re go’n to be get’n a break today.”

“Shut it, Jake! Where is our air support?”

“RTB*, you told them we had things under control.”
Fiona wanted to kick herself. She had never actually planned on finding Miles. What were you still doing here? I gave you plenty of warning. It didn’t matter though she should never have underestimated him, Fiona had learned that plenty of times before. Yet her confidence and pride still got the better of her.

Now all because Miles decided to stick around I have to go home having gotten my ass kicked and possibly empty handed. I would have been happy with one or the other but not both.

More explosions erupted in the distance and slowly the bridge disappeared into ash and flame.

“Definitely empty handed,” she said out loud.

The two agents looked on as what was left of their comrades fell to their untimely demise beneath the crushing weight of the bridge.

“Shit…” Jake swore. “That just ain’t right.”

“And what we do is?”

Jake shrugged as he turned to follow Fiona back to town. “You think they are alive?”

“Well I certainly wouldn’t blow up a bridge if I was still on it.”

“I meant our team.”

It was Fiona’s turn to shrug, “Perhaps a few, but I don’t think they will be joining us any time soon.”

“You’re tell’n him this time. I took the heat the last time.”

“I know… I know.”

“He goes easier on you anyway, so maybe he won’t lose his head like he did with me.”

The fox stared at her partner with anger filled eyes.

“Errr. Yeah sorry I guess it would be you losing your head wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would!” she snapped. “This is the inhibitor we are talking about! You remember what we had to do the last time he…”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah I remember. I am still trying to forget. Been to the bottom of more scotch bottles than I can count just to get rid of the screams, but they are still there.” Jake said as he shook his head.

“Radio,” Fiona said with an out stretched hand.

Jake unclipped his receiver and handed it to the fox. He watched as she took a breath, preparing herself before pressing the call button.

“Foxtrot reporting in. Package has eluded capture. Requesting evac. Over.”

“This is actual. Come again Foxtrot.”

Fiona left out the first part, she wasn’t going to repeat that again out of sheer self pity. “Need evac and transport for two. Over.”

“Roger. ETA* 45 Minutes. Actual Out.”
Fiona had learned long ago that emotion was a weakness in Kintobor’s world. She had little doubt that’s why he toiled night and day to turn his enemies into machines devoid of anything but his will. However, she couldn’t help but feel some guilt as the realization her team’s death set in. Her squad may have hated her, but they were still like family in a twisted way. She would buy them drinks, they would call her an unworthy bitch and everyone would have a good laugh. Fiona never needed them to like her, just listen to orders, and they all did that. It was just one more reason to hate Miles, but she still couldn’t get over her girlish crush. The fox needed him and if last night was any indication he still needed her.

“Fucking Prick!” Fiona screamed as her frustration peaked.

Jake looked on raising a brow as kids in a nearby yard ran in fear of the battered, bruised and foul-mouthed fox.

“Every time, he can’t just settle for winning, he has to embarrass me. My entire fucking team is gone, just like the last time. Julian is not going to be happy.”

“I am still here,” Jake reminded her.

“I know and I am beginning to wish that you weren’t.”

“That’s not very nice.”

Fiona smiled letting her teeth show. Jake was a one of kind human. They got off on the wrong foot, but later they proved to be the most effective team Kintobor had. The career driven kid saw being paired with a Mobian as the worst possible thing for him, but after they raked in more Mobians in their first month than the entire department did that year he began to warm up to her. She could never tell if he was just using her, but it didn’t matter as long as he took orders from her.

“…and.”

The vixen shot him a look hoping it would be enough to keep his mouth shut. It wasn’t.

“Maybe if you actually tried to kill him you wouldn’t have these problems.”

Fiona stopped in her tracks, “What did you just say to me?”

“Oh cut the high and mighty shit, boss. Everyone knows you and him had a thing back in the day. Hell, I would probably have trouble killing someone from my past, too.”

“That’s not the problem…”

“Bullshit it’s not the problem. The only time I have ever seen you miss is when you’re aim’n at that fox. Tell me that’s a coincidence.”

Fiona could have opened her mouth, but whatever would have come out would have been a lie. When you work with someone as long as she had worked with Jake, it was impossible for the other person not to know when you weren’t telling the truth. He had picked up on her tell inside of three months and it made working with him considerably less fun.

The two coppers stepped into the same tavern Fiona had been in just the previous night. The patrons eyed the two agents dressed in all black cautiously, in particular the Mobian. No doubt Fiona’s reputation preceded her, but it had to be a rare sight to find someone such as herself with a Dominion seal stamped on her uniform.
“God I could use a drink,” Jake proclaimed out loud as if their presence wasn’t already spooking the locals. Fiona reluctantly followed her partner to the bar, where he just so happened to choose a seat next to a young coyote. The Mobian was too concerned with his food to notice the six foot two armor clad man pull up a seat next to him.

Jake pulled off his mask setting it on the bar in front of him revealing his sharp jaw line, brown eyes and short dark hair. Fiona could already see what was going to happen next; Jake was not a fan of going home empty handed.

It took a while, but the Mobian finally noticed the glowing green lights emanating from the HUD inside Jake’s helmet. The Coyote’s vision tracked up a steel plated arm until it reached a faded Dominion sigil painted on the shoulder. The poor thing fell right out of his seat as he tried to back away. With a beer in one hand, the agent stood over the young Mobian, glaring down in contempt. When the Coyote’s back reached a wall he began to whimper as tears flowed out of his eyes, he was no more than fourteen.

Fiona put a hand on Jake’s shoulder, “Not now Jake.” The order was soft but stern.

He wasn’t going to have any of it, “You’re going soft, boss. We can’t go back with nothing, you know that.”

It wasn’t the coyotes calls for help or the water works that were bothering Fiona, she had seen all that before, but rather her partner’s current lack of awareness. Maybe he couldn’t hear the hammers being drawn back on pistols or the bartender quietly racking a shotgun, but she could.

“Jake,” She said firmly. “Not now!”

The man retreated from the Mobian, leaving the young fellow sitting a pool of his own fear. The coyote couldn’t even bring himself to move from the corner where he lay shaking in fear.

The two returned to their seats and Jake upended his beer into his mouth.

“What gives?” he asked, clearly very agitated at her decision making.”

“Have you looked around recently? Thought about where we are?”

Her partner took a moment to scan the room. It wasn’t hard to see hands resting on loaded and ready weapons.

“I thought we might try actually making it back home before someone kills us,” Fiona added.

“Shit,” Jake swore as a look of realization overcame him, “I forgot everyone out here has a gun. Thanks boss, next one is on me.”

The fox nodded, “It’s not like the cities that’s for sure.”

It wasn’t long before the coyote returned for what was left of his meal. The Mobian approached apprehensively, unsure of how the agent would react. Jake caught him in the corner of his eye.

“C’mon, I ain’t gonna hurt ya. Not today anyway,” Jake said as he planted a gloved hand on the kid’s head and mussed up his fur.

Fiona could hear the tension in the room subside as safeties were reengaged and the bar tender returned his gun.
“Going soft on me,” She asked.

The agent laughed as he put his hand the air signaling for another round of beers, “Hardly. No reason to start a shoot out when I could be sipping on a beer.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Fiona said as she raised a fresh pint of lager. The two clinked their glasses together and raced each other to the bottom, slamming the empty mugs on the bar at nearly the same time.

“For a girl you sure as hell know how to drink.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t treat me like a girl,” Fiona suggested as she wagged her tail with pride.

Jake just rolled his eyes in response.

Whether it was the alcohol or just her imagination she couldn’t tell, but something seemed off. The faint drone of a two-stroke engine could be heard in the distance. More joined the first and slowly a chorus of exhaust notes filled the air.

“That makes more sense,” she said out loud to herself.

“What does?” Jake asked as he started in on his third beer

The stench of pine and wet fur began to hang more heavily in her nose and suddenly the bridge blowing up when it did seemed like less of a surprise.

“I hope you’re done drinking, I think we are about to get into that shoot out you wanted.”

Jake turned to look out the window as a dozen ATVs pulled up to the bar. He wasn’t the only one to notice either. Fiona could hear all of the patrons ready their weapons again.

“Oh,” Jake said with a frown on his face. “This should be fun.”

Lupe casually walked in the door followed by the rest of her pack. Each one was armed to the teeth.

“What a surprise!” The wolf leader said mockingly. “The two of you hung back while the rest of your copper friends died. Did you enjoy the show?”

Jake turned back toward the bar, downed his remaining beer and plopped a wad of cash on the counter. “Now that you mention it,” he replied, “I wouldn’t mind a refund. Timing was all off and I like my fireworks set to music.”

Lupe burst out laughing, “A copper with a sense of humor. Where ever did they find you Jake?”

“What do you want Lupe?” Fiona asked.

“Oh come on isn’t it obvious? Both of you. The dead or alive part is your choice though. Sally put a nice price tag on your head.”

“Yeah her and everyone else,” the vixen replied tugging on her silver collar.

“Now hold on y’all.” Jake called out. “Before we get this show started why don’t we let these nice people who have no business with any us go?”

Lupe eyed the room filled with customers. Some had panicked looks while others were stone cold and devoid of emotion all together.
“I am not stopping anyone,” She barked.

The restaurant cleared in a matter of second as people ran for the door. Even the tougher looking folks knew better than to stand in the middle of this fight. The only exception was the coyote that couldn’t quite grasp what was going on. Jake picked him up by the scruff of his neck and turned in the direction of the door. With a stern kick he sent the Mobian running to safety.

“Now where were we?” Jake asked.

“You were just about to surrender as I recall,” the wolf leader answered with a grin.

Jake smiled back at her.

“Just like Rainstone?” He whispered to Fiona as he put his helmet back on.

There was only one other person in the world Fiona would be have preferred to be in this situation with, and she knew that fox was well on his way back to knothole by now. However, what Jake lacked in common sense he often made up for in equal lack of fear. She had lost count of how many times the man’s brazen shot everything tactics had gotten them out of a tight space.

“Just like Rainstone,” the fox answered.

Both agents went for their guns at the same time. Fiona got off one shot before she dove behind the bar. Jake on the other hand ran head long for a table drawing all of their fire while squeezing off shots himself.

The fox never wore armor, it just got in the way, but seeing her partner run through a hail of AK-47 fire reminded her it had its uses. She rose again, running behind the bar, aiming each shot carefully. Two wolves hit the floor dead before the pack realized she was on the move again.

Liquor bottles exploded behind her as she gained more attention. Jake immediately leaned out from behind his overturned table and began discharging his weapon. The wolf’s ranks were thinning, but it wasn’t enough.

Fiona fumbled for Jake’s radio and hit the transmit button, yelling over the gunfire. “Actual, This is Foxtrot. LZ* will be hot, I repeat LZ* will be hot.”

“Roger foxtrot. ETA* expedited to five minutes. Pilot has been advised. Over.”

The fox made a sprint the kitchen door, diving as she hit it. Jake was already on the other side.

“Nice of you to join me.”

The kitchen was small and dark, but at least it had a back door. Fiona put a new mag in her Desert Eagle while Jake emptied his Sig Sauer blindly through the wood paneled door. A sharp howl confirmed he had connected with something. They both ducked behind a large metal stove as the door was ripped clean off by the wolves automatic Kalashnikovs. The agents knew they wouldn’t last much longer if they stayed there.

The vixen took aim at the deadbolt on the back door and pulled the trigger. The lock shattered amidst a shower of splinters and the egress swung open revealing the morning sun. Fiona could hear could hear the spinning rotors of their evac in the distance, but the LZ was still a good quarter of a mile away. A few shots whizzed by them as they ducked into the thick brush in the field behind the tavern.
The roar of the two stroke engines coming back to life spurred both of the agents into a race for their destination. They could see the chopper circling the open clearing, but the ATVs were catching up quick and the only thing the coppers could do now was run. There was no time to turn and shoot as so many moving targets.

Fiona reached the helicopter first, clawing open the door as fast as he could. Jake was still quite a ways behind her, no doubt being slowed by his armor. The fox yelled and motioned for him to hurry, but it had little effect on his pace.

The ATVs entered the clearing and with them, a new wave of bullets. Fiona could see one tag her partner in the back, but he did little more than flinch in response. With an outstretched hand she pulled Jake into the helicopter and he collapsed on top of her, panting as he tried to catch his breath.

“Get us out of here!” Fiona yelled, but nothing happened.

The fox pushed her partner off of her and looked into the pilot seat only to find a blood-spattered windshield.

“Shit,” She yelled as she struggled to remove the lifeless man.

“Fiona!” Jake yelled as bullets continued to bounce off the armor plating and around the cockpit.

The vixen looked out the reddened and shattered side window to see Lupe sighting in an RPG.

“Door,” she yelled back at her partner as the wolf pulled the trigger.

Jake reached up and wrenched open the door on the other side of the chopper, allowing the projectile to fly right through the cabin and into the field. Fiona smiled out the window at the wolf leader as she jammed the throttle and collective* levers all the way forward. The bird promptly vaulted into the air sending her partner crashing back down to the floor. Soon enough they were out of small arms range and the metallic rain ceased to be a nuisance.

“Just like Rainstone,” Jake called while he laughed on his back through labored breaths.

Fiona never saw the humor in almost dying. It had lost its entertaining value the second Kintobor had snapped the collar around her neck and became a very real reality.

Chapter End Notes

HUD – Heads up Display (Think goggles that tell you about everything you see)
RTB – Return to Base
ETA – Estimated Time of Arrival
LZ – Landing Zone
Memories

Mara awoke to the sound of a splash. Her neck stiffened as she tried to move her head away from the edge of the armchair she had fallen asleep in. The girl had spent the night watching the fox toss and turn as her own thoughts bounced around in her mind. So many things weighed on her mind, including her feelings for the Mobian. She had wanted to feel love just once in her life, but now it made less sense than ever. However, before she made sense of anything exhaustion caught up with her. She wanted to apologize again, she knew now that nothing between them would ever work.

It was morning, but there was no sun to be seen, as it hadn't risen high enough in the sky to look down into the bottom of the quarry. Cool air nipped at her bare skin when she stepped through to the outside. When the girl peered over the edge she found the kit swimming in the metallic blue water bellow. Mara couldn't remember the last time she had been swimming.

As she climbed onto the railing the fox who had been floating on his back opened his eyes, "I don't think you want to…"

She had already decided what she was going to do and that was jump. Mara hung in the air momentarily before gravity took over and she plunged downwards toward the water. Even the twenty-foot fall seemed to take an eternity as the red rock on the wall became a blur.

The water stabbed at her with cold daggers and even before she surfaced she was screaming out in pain. With chattering teeth she pulled her head above water, trying her best to breathe deeply.

"I tried to warn you," Tails said treading water next to her.

The chill had taken Mara's breath away, she could barely make a sound to respond to him, "So-o-so cold."

"The nights are always cold and the sun only hits it for a few hours a day. Come on," the fox said as he swam over to the rope latter he had hung over the side of his balcony.

He helped Mara back on the terrace and tossed her a towel. She couldn't help but shiver in the cool breeze.

"Well I wasn't expecting this," a voice called out from inside Tail's apartment.

Mara frowned; she recognized the tone. Sally emerged from the shade.

"Did you fall in or did he finally get sick of you and throw you in?" She asked.

Mara didn't answer, instead she found the ground with her gaze.

"Miles, go get her some dry clothes. Perhaps something a little more appropriate for the rest of her stay here."

Tails trotted off without so much as a word.

"Why don't you call him Tails?" Mara asked meekly.

"The same reason Julian doesn't," the squirrel replied with a grin, "It pisses him off. As for you." Mara looked up and met Sally's gaze.
"What were you doing here?"

She didn't know how to answer that question because she still wasn't sure herself.

"That kid is confused enough. The last time he got too attached to someone I had one of my best agents floating around in the wind for close to a year. The shit he pulled..." Sally trailed off. "My point is I don't know what your intentions are, and I don't know what he sees in you. So tell me if there is something I need to know before I send the two of you into hell itself."

Mara shook her head vigorously.

"Good, because it's both of your lives that are on the line here, not mine."

Tails emerged again holding plain black khakis and a tight fitting dark green tank top. Mara stepped back inside to change out of her wet clothes.

The girl that stared back at her in the bathroom mirror was one that she had never met. Her face was tired, bruises ran up and down her bare arms and the small lively spark that used to be in her eye had been replaced with a hollow understanding of what the world was truly like. A far cry from the innocent girl in an apron and jeans she used to be.

When she stepped back out into the Tails room Sally nodded, "Much better. Rotor said he will have everything ready in a couple of hours. Until then, see that she learns something useful."

"Anything else?" Tails asked mockingly.

"Yes, find somewhere to stow that attitude of yours."

Tails growled in anger but he let the squirrel walk out of the room without uttering a word.

"What's her problem?" Mara asked still stealing glances of herself in a mirror.

"That's another long story."

"I'll be honest, I don't like her taking out her issues with you out on me. I think you owe me this one."

"Fine," Tails said as he moved towards the door, "but we are not going to waste time."

Mara followed him into the hall watching as he struggled to form the words to start his story.

"After Fiona was... captured, I lost it. I was bent on revenge before, but I sunk to a new level. I disappeared entirely, no one, not even Sonic could find me. I spent the better part of a month just waiting for a glimpse of Julian. Eventually I found him, learned everything there was to know about him, what he ate, what he wore, where he went. The man was practically a ghost unless you knew where to look."

Tails paused as he gathered his bearings in the hallway. "This way," he motioned before continuing. "He became an obsession. The man was and always had been untouchable to us. Yet there I was practically sharing his life from a distance, waiting for him to slip up. I have to give him credit, he never so much as took a piss alone."

The fox led Mara into a long dark room. Their voices echoed inside the cavernous space. When he flipped the lever for the lights, a shooting range appeared before her.

"So?" Mara asked, "What did you do?"
"I waited longer," Tails said as he checked the pistol he had given her the day before. "I figured the man was not impervious to mistakes, and I was right."

The fox put the gun in her hand and provided no further instruction. Mara pointed it down range with a shaky hand leaning and looking away as she pulled the trigger. She flinched with the pop and the proceeded to glance at where she had been aiming. Having hit nothing she turned to Tails hoping for some advice.

"What are you scared of?" he asked. "You're pointing it at the enemy not yourself."

"She focused herself again, inhaling deeply until the tremors in her hands were gone. She squeezed and the gun came to life again. The bullet clipped the edge of the paper, tearing a small pea sized hole in it.

"Better," the kit commented, "now all you need to do is aim."

Mara frowned. How did I get caught up in this?

"Square your hips off and don't try to crush the gun, just hold it. The harder you try the more you're going to miss. Look down the sights find what you're aiming at and stop thinking."

Stop thinking, Mara laughed to herself. She wished that was possible. The silhouette was still wobbling in and out of her sights, but rather than try to line it up she just let it happen. The shot found the target this time.

"Easy right?"

"For you maybe." Mara replied reluctantly. "So what did you do to him? Julian. When you found him?"

"Keep going and so will I."

She focused again while keeping Tails voice in the back of her head.

"One day a month Julian would take a small side trip on his own. It was a lab of some kind. There was no getting inside for me, but there was still a chance to corner him."

CRACK

"Better, try not to flinch as much. So I decided to have a chat with the man. The small stretch of ally between his car and the door was nice and quiet. Trust me when I say he wasn't happy to see me."

Another shot was followed by Mara sighing in frustration.

"I told you not to try so hard." The kit said before continuing. "Our conversation was cut short because Fiona decided to interrupt. I had no idea she had been working for him, that she was still alive even."

BANG

"There you go. I hadn't seen her follow him and she had her gun on me from behind. Kintobor just stood there and laughed. I wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad. Everything I had done up until that point was for her, but there she was working for the man I was trying to kill. Nothing made sense and I grew weak as I wrestled with what was going on."

POP
"Nice, again. If I was an emotional wreck before that moment I am not sure what I was during it. At some point I got it in my head that the girl I loved couldn't possibly be the same as the one with me in her sights. She was dead to me, and in some ways that's still the truth. Fiona isn't the same person any more. Julian saw me struggling with how to handle the situation and went for the door thinking I wouldn't risk my own life just for his."

BANG

"One more time. He was wrong though. I put a bullet right in his ass, probably couldn't sit down for a week. I never thought the man would have been capable of jumping before then either."

CRACK

"But he is still alive." Mara said.

"Yeah he is, all because I let my emotions get the better of me. Shaky hands don't aim so well. He made it to the door before I could find my aim again."

"And what did Fiona do?"

"She wasn't so good at aiming either, but that was on purpose. She smiled at me, as if we were still friends before she pulled the trigger on that hand cannon of hers. I didn't stick around long enough to give her a second chance or change her mind."

"So what does that have to do with Sally? How could she be mad at you for trying to kill him."

"She isn't. Sally is mad at me for failing to kill him. Julian doesn't just sit around after someone nearly murders him. Inside of a month thousands of Mobians disappeared. We don't even know what happened to them and we never found the bodies. You asked me the other day why there were not more people here. Now you have an even better idea."

"So she blames you for that?"

The fox nodded. "I tried to put myself back together once I knew Fiona was still alive, but part of me was worse off knowing that she was probably involved with whatever Kintobor was doing to my friends. Sally seemed to agree there too and hung the fact that Fiona betrayed us around my neck."

"But Fiona didn't have a choice."

Tails shook his head this time, "Everyone has a choice but sometimes the price is just too high for some. To Sally, Fiona's choice should have been obvious."

"Your damn right," The squirrel said as she walked into the room. "Who can possibly be so selfish that they capture and kill their own kind just to save their own life? And I thought I told you to teach her something useful!"

Tails frowned. "Considering she could barely hold a gun yesterday I didn't think this was that bad of an idea."

"Maybe you should give up on thinking then?" Sally said snidely as she walked up and pulled the gun out of Mara's hand. While she locked eyes with the fox Sally emptied what was left in the clip into Mara's target down range.

The girl stood there with a gaping jaw as every single shot landed in the center. Sally then trust the weapon back into Mara's hands. "You see, easy."
"So did you just come down here to show off?" Tails asked.

Sally smiled, "The opportunity was there, why pass it up? Just remember I am keeping an eye on you."

"Glad to know you have nothing better to do."

"And why don't you keep all of the personal details out of this adventure, let's not forget what got us into to this mess in the first place."

"Oh you mean Kintobor? That guy I tried to kill?"

"No, I mean your fragile emotions."

"You roped Mara into this, the least I can do is tell her how much shit she is wading into before you push her in anyway."

"Well now that she is neck deep could you take her to Rotor, he wants to prep her."

"What happened to a couple of hours?"

"I had him speed it up; you know how I can be persuasive."

"I know how you can be a bitch, yes."

Sally glared at the fox for a long length of time before turning to leave.

"Have you ever tried being nice to her?" Mara asked.

"I gave up a long time ago. She used to be like a big sister to me. I guess there are some things where apologies just don't cut it anymore. I can't say I blame her too much."

"Come on," Tails continued as he hit the switch on the lights. "Let's go see how many safety protocols Sally had Rotor skip over to get this setup so quickly."

The fox laughed when he saw the nervous look on her face, "Relax, I am only kidding. Although… I wouldn't put it past her."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"I didn't think that it would."

Mara soon found herself lost in the long corridors again. The maze of hallways intersected at regular intervals, but it was too easy to get turned around when everything looked the same. There were no maps, markers, or obvious point to get ones bearings.

"How do you know where you're going?"

"Memory. We don't want there to be maps of this place, so we never made any. It was all done so a lone drifter couldn't come in here and size the place up and sell the information. It takes months to learn where everything is."

The lab they walked into next was enormous. The walls were lined with racks of test tubes and bright lights while tables were positioned randomly around the room with some staggeringly fancy technology in varying stages of disassembly. At the far end of the room stood a large grayish walrus in a stark white lab coat. He glanced over his shoulder but quickly returned to his work.
"Rotor," Tails called out.

"Tails," he answered. "Did you bring the girl?"

"Yes, her name is Mara."

"Very good. Have Margret sit in the chair there."

"It's Mar…"

Tails waved his hand to cut her off, "Trust me, that's as close as you are going to get."

The fox helped her into the dentist like chair. It was comfortable, but she couldn't help but feel like she was not about to enjoy whatever was going to happen next.

The walrus was not pleasing to the eyes she decided. His thick skin was wrinkled over, causing his features to distort and shift as he moved. Much of his face was often buried in a fold of blubber, making her wonder how he managed to see. He approached carrying a multitude of wires.

"Don't worry, these won't hurt a bit, Mary. It is Mary right?"

Mara nodded.

"Excellent," he replied as he attached the electrodes to her temples. "We are going to do our best to make sure you don't lose your memory."

"That's… uhh good. Thank you," she replied unsure if it sounded even remotely sincere.

After a dozen or so more wires where attached to her body the Walrus returned with a set of leather restraints.

"I am sorry to do this Madeline, but it's for my own safety. The last human we tried this on didn't react so well."

Mara could see Tails press his face into the palm of his hand. Obviously he had been keeping that from her and never had any intention of telling her. The kit had told her everyone had a choice, but she was struggling to see hers at the moment. She knew she could scream and Tails would save her, but what then. Sally had shown her no kindness. If I don't help the Mobians where will I go? What chance do I have on my own?

The walrus clipped on the second strap and already she could feel herself sweating. Why didn't I ask more questions? What are they about to do me?

"Now Tails, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to get a baseline on her. Can you hold up those cards on the table next to you?"

The fox reached down and held up a piece of scrap paper with two letters scribbled on it, Na.

"Ohh I know this one, that's uhh salt." Mara answered somewhat enthusiastically despite her predicament.

Rotor furrowed his brow, "Close enough I guess. The next one please."

Pb

"No idea," the girl responded.
"That should do I suppose. Now Mallory, when I put this helmet on don't be scared. You probably won't be able to hear us and you definitely won’t be able to see us."

Mara closed her eyes as a curiously confusing helmet with dozens of wires weaving in and out of drilled holes was lowered over her head. Almost at once her senses were gone and the world seemed small and very confined. Never once and she felt as alone as she did in that instant. A voice called out loudly, reverberating through the helmet itself.

"Mara, just relax it will be over before you know it," a familiar voice called out from the ether.

Her eyes were darting around the inside of blackness searching for anything, but still emptiness remained. All at once the goggles came to life, nearly blinding her with a white screen, or at least she thought it was white. A hypnotic tone began to be pumped into the helmet and suddenly she lost all of her concentration. The only thing she could seem to do was stare at the light. Every so often she could make out an image, but only for a split second before it faded like the colors when she rubbed her eyes on a sunny day. The pulse in her ears increased and she slipped entirely into a trance where time seemed to stand still.

She couldn't be sure how long the screen in front of her had been dark or when the pulsing sound had ceased, but slowly her conscious mind returned to her. Her head throbbed in pain as if she had spent the entire night drinking. She went to lift her hands to the helmet only to discover them stuck in place. She could feel the room shifting, or perhaps it was her. Slowly the real world returned to her as the helmet was removed. An orange two tailed fox stood in front of her holding a bucket.

"You're probably going to feel like…"

Mara felt her insides churn as her equilibrium caught up with her state. What little she had eaten was now on its way up. Tails put the pail in her lap just in time.

"Quite remarkable this girl," Rotor called out from the other side of the room. Not even the slightest indication of brain damage. She must be quite capable mentally."

Mara was not quite sure how to take that. She had never bothered to study; instead she just picked up where her parents had left off with the diner. Perhaps if everything Sally said about my parents was true, I should be at least a little intelligent.

"Did you even look at who her parents where?" Tails asked as he continued to eye Mara as she hung her head over the bucket.

Mara could hear the rustling of some papers, "No, I have that here somewhere though. Ahha I found it. Ohhh, yes this explains it. She is probably well equipped to handle this type of information. Show her the cards again."

Mara looked up from the bottom of the pail, despite feeling even worse. The kit was holding up the same card she didn't know before.

"What makes you think I am going to know it now? Lead."

Mara didn't know how to react. The world fell of her tong as if she didn't intend to say it.

"Show her another one," Rotor said now studying the girl more closely.

Tails flipped to another card. It was more complex.

KNO3
"This makes no sense how am I supposed to know something I have never even seen before." Mara said before pausing for a second. "Potassium Nitrate."

The look on her face must have been interesting because Tails immediately started to giggle, "Cool, isn't it?"

"How am I doing this?"

"All of this is in your head now. You don't remember learning it, so it takes a while to surface."

"So you're saying I have no idea that I know any of this."

"That's correct my dear," Rotor answered. "It works like recall. Until you see it or hear it, your brain isn't even aware of anything having to do with what we just taught you. Show her another one Tails… go to the last one."

The card had nothing more than a drawing of interconnected circles of varying sizes. Mara studied it for a moment before announcing, "Benzene."

Tails seemed to have an impressed look on his face, which led her to believe that she was correct.

"It's such a relief to see this worked so well," Rotor said as he loosened the straps on the chair. "Get some rest my dear. Your mind will need time to recover from something like this."

Tails helped her out of the chair, carefully placing an arm under hers. Walking still seemed slightly foreign to her, but slowly the rhythm returned and only her migraine remained. When Tails pushed open the door to his room Mara caught a glance at his clock.

"How long was I in that thing?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask," Tails said slightly ashamed. "Sally stopped by…"

"I bet she did," Mara interrupted angrily.

"She made Rotor throw in a bit of biology too. Nothing too much really."

"How long?" Mara asked again slightly annoyed looking out Tail's balcony where an orange glow illuminated the ravine.

"About ten hours."

"And that's safe?"

"Well you seemed to be doing alright, so Rotor gave it the okay."

"I don't feel alright."

"That's normal," the fox replied as he set Mara down on his bed. "Just get some sleep you will feel fine when you wake up."

"And you stayed there the whole time."

"Of course."

"Thanks," Mara replied. "I have never really had a friend before."
"First time for everything," the fox said with a smile on his face.

Mara sprawled her body out on the fox's king size bed, pulling the sheets up over her head. She could hear the door to the room open and close as Tails left. She knew she was alone again, but for once in her life it didn't feel that way.
Her nerves were frayed after a five-hour flight in a blood-stained pilot seat. The landing could have been better too, but after only ten hours in a sim a bent tail rotor didn't appear all that bad. If the flight seemed long, the walk to Julian's office was an eternity. Jake despite his condition was tagging along at her side, his head held a little lower than normal. He knew what was coming too.

"You don't need to be here for this," Fiona told him.

"Like hell I don't. You saved my ass today. I'll be damned if am not there to save yours."

"I am a sinking ship, Jake. No need to go down with me."

"I'll take my chances, boss." He replied curtly.

Fiona smiled despite the grim circumstances. She never anticipated making a friend in her line of work, but there was no other word for a man who was willing to risk his life when he could just walk away.

The guards posted at the door to the helipad stepped out of the way without so much as a word. The fox's velvet red tail was all the identification they needed. The guards may have seen her as nothing more than a pet, but she could never help but laugh at the leash they were attached to. Fiona could go anywhere and do anything, but they had to watch a door day in and day out.

The building was smack dab in the middle of capital city and Julian’s office sat in the pent house overlooking the busiest downtown district. It was high profile for someone who ran the country, but he didn't like to be far away from the action. So much of his work was carried out in the city’s infrastructure.

It was too late in the evening for his receptionist to be there. The entire place was empty. The two of them let themselves in and took a seat. They had learned the drill long ago. Fiona sat there in silence knowing that every breath she took could very well be her last. It was five minutes before the door behind them opened again and the two agents promptly stood up, "Sir," they said in unison.

The bald man walked around behind his desk, stopping at the window to stare out into the busy streets below. Break lights glowed a dark red admits the gradually darkening purple sky. An orange mustache poked out from both sides of the man's oblong head reminding them what color his hair would have been if he were to have any.

"So," he began his deep raspy voice. "Why don't I have the girl?"

It was a rhetorical question. Julian knew the answer, but he wanted one of them to say it anyway.

"I underestimated him again, sir," Fiona said plainly.

"And how many times does that make this?"

She wasn't sure, so she didn't answer.

"We were able to pull ten of your men out of the wreckage. I wouldn't count on their continued assistance for quite some time," Julian said as he turned around tossing a small device on his desk. Fiona had seen this coming.
As the politician sat down in his chair it was easy to see how he had gotten elected. His stature was stern and he carried himself proudly. He was a man of the people, but most rarely ever saw through his veil of lies. What he appeared to be was only skin deep, but any good politician knew that's all that mattered.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked looking down at the small remote that sat between the three of them.

Fiona nodded without so much as a hint of distress in her eyes. She would never forget that little box. She had never shown that man one ounce of fear in her life and today would not be the day.

"I put that in a drawer four years ago and almost forgot about it. That was until today. You, Fiona, have brought me closer to realizing my dream than any human. Ironic, isn't it?"

"No, Sir," she responded.

His vision narrowed as he raised his bushy eyebrows, stretching out his subtly puffy red cheeks, "and why not?"

"It would only be ironic if you thought none of this could have happened without me. Admitting that would mean…"

"Admitting that I have been wrong about you and your kind. Yes, yes it would. But surely you can still see the humor."

The humor, she laughed inside her head. Nothing I have done for the last five years of my life has ever been funny. But she nodded in agreement anyway.

"Do you know why I got this out today?"

"Because I fuc… screwed up." Fiona said correcting herself. Julian had a distinct distaste for fowl language. He was a politician and words could be as much his enemy as a savior.

"Hardly," he responded as he leaned back in his chair twirling the device in his hands. "You have made your fair share of mistakes before. How many times has Miles gotten away?"

She still didn't know the answer, so again she stayed quiet.

"But that's not what this is about. I was never able to catch him, I hardly expected you to. This has always been about finding the best person for the job. You told me that you could be the best and you proved it. Captain?" Julian asked turning to Jake.

Her partners muscles tightened as Kintobor's gaze shifted to him, "Yes, Sir?"

"Go ahead and take this," Julian said as he handed the agent the remote.

Jake didn't hesitate, but the weight of the situation shown clearly in his eyes. It may not have been obvious to anyone, but Fiona was on the verge of tears. Julian was a sick man and she didn't put asking Jake to murder her past him.

"Do you remember when I called you in here the first time?"

"Of course," her partner responded now carefully palming the device.

"What did you say to me when I showed you your new C.O?"
"I thought you were kidding, Sir. That it was a joke."

"I believe your words were 'you're fuck'n kidding me' right?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Strong words for a strong man in a weak position. What else did you say captain?"

"That I could do better,"

"Better than what?"

Fiona remembered rather vividly what her partner had said. Hardly a day went by where his words didn't echo inside her head. Not that she held it against him, why should he have been excited to work with her.

"Better than some piece of shit Mobian cunt, Sir."

"And what about now, do you still think that?"

Julian was a master of cornering people with their own words, shoving them back down their throats in such a smug way. His opponents never stood a chance in any of the elections. If Jake admitted that a Mobian was better than him now it would set his career back years. If he said yes, then what use was Fiona?

Her partner struggled for a moment, not with the words but rather the consequences of them.

"No, Sir," he finally admitted as he set the device back down on the desk.

"No captain, I want you to hold on to that. When the day comes and you decide you can do better… well I think you know what to do."

Jake stared at the man as he picked the remote back up. "She saved my life twice today, Sir."

"Would your life have needed saving if you were in command?"

There was the question that everyone already knew the answer to. Fiona tensed up as she waited for her partner to answer.

"Sir, that's impossible to say for sure. For starters I wouldn't have even found Miles or the girl, so I would have never had a chance to need saving. If you're asking me if I would have done things differently, the answer is yes, but she knows Miles better than anyone. That fox has nearly killed me three times, so I don't pretend to be better."

"I am not asking you to pretend Captain. I am asking are you better?"

"No," Jake replied bluntly.

"Then get out of my office!"

Her partner picked up his helmet and left the room without so much as a deep breath or a rolling of the eyes. Julian did go harder on him, but that may have been because he expected more from a human.

Kintobor waited until the door was shut before he continued, "I won't quite ever understand what you did to him."
"I trusted him," Fiona replied bluntly.

"Amazing how far it can take you, isn't it?" the man said before pausing. "Do you trust me?"

"You have held up your end of the bargain. I am still here breathing so I have never had a reason not to."

A knock came at the door and a shorter man stepped in. Julian's nephew was equally zealous but twice as obnoxious.

"What is that thing doing in here?" the long nosed man asked. Despite being relatives a resemblance could hardly be found between the two. "How many times have I told you. If the media catches you with your pet they will string you up by your balls."

"Do you see the media anywhere Colin?" Julian asked calmly.

"No but…"

"Who does the media report to Colin?"

"You but…"

"So tell me Colin, do I have anything to worry about?"

The short man did not respond. Another person had fallen victim to their own words and cock sure attitude.

"That's what I thought," Kintobor said to his unnaturally scrawny publicist before turning back to Fiona. "I think it goes without saying that you should try harder not to disappoint me when so much is on the line. All your partner has to do now is press a button and he has your job."

Fiona acknowledged the sentiment with a short tip of her head.

"Wait for me outside, there is something I would like to show you. But first I have to deal with this clown. I am quite sure he doesn't have much to say though."

I would like to show you something, she thought. My least favorite words. Nothing good has ever followed them. I wonder who wandered into his grasp this time. Some poor Mobian no doubt and now I have to go throw the switch on another one of Julian creations just to see what it will do.

She headed for the door and even before she reached the handle Julian started in on Colin.

"Let me be clear, you may be my nephew, but if you ever mention my balls again I will run yours through a cheese grater until you have decidedly less of them!"

The screaming muffled as the entrance to Kintobor's office shut behind her. Jake was standing in the reception area eying the small remote in his hand.

"Hey boss," he said quietly.

"Thanks," Fiona said even quieter.

"For what?"

"For not selling me out."
"Was nothing to sell. I owe you a lot."

Fiona forced a smile as she glanced down at the device her partner was holding.

"Don't worry," he said seeing her eye it. "I won't be the one to press it."

"Until he tells you to."

"He wouldn't."

"Of course he would. This is Julian we are talking about."

"I… I still don't think I would."

"Don't lie to yourself. You know what the other choices are."

"Would you if it was me?" Jake asked curiously.

Fiona went to reply but found her tongue tied on the words, "I… I don't know."

The door opened at Colin stepped out, lifting his nose in disgust at the vixen. She would love to have smacked the smug look of his face, but she didn't need to provoke anyone else today.

"I don't understand why he keeps little pieces of shit like you lying around." The short man remarked as he strode by.

"I could say the same about you," She replied without meeting his gaze.

"Do you know who you are talking to?"

"Some whiney little bitch," Fiona replied with a big grin on her face.

"I'll have you…"

"What? Killed? Tortured? Go ahead. Go tell Kintobor you want to kill his favorite pet. He is right in there." Fiona said as she pointed back toward the office door.

Colin said nothing and instead locked eyes with the fox that was barely shorter than he was. He made a move to strike her with the back of his hand, but Jake caught him.

"She hits harder than you do," her partner said still holding the man's wrist. "I don't think you want to start a fight you're going to regret."

Colin tugged his arm away and continued on his way back down the hall without another word.

Julian entered the hall nodding to the two of them. They both followed the rotund man down the hall and into an elevator. Without his sport coat on it was easy to see that his suspenders where being stretched to their limit. Yet his roundness never seemed to detract from his mystique that pulled people into his command. Even Fiona had been taken back by the man's candor. He was ruthless, but never with his demeanor or words.

Nothing was said on their ride into the subbasements bellow the building. People may have bustled around on the visible floors of the building taking care of the duties of his administration; it was below street level where what Julian saw as true progress was being made. They stepped out into the cool glow of the florescent lighting and continued to follow the man.
"While you two have been tracking down the solution to our problems, it seems our scientist have made some progress of their own."

A glass lab door slid to the side and the trio walked in. Scientist bustled around at all hours making calculations, mixing strange concoctions and talking to themselves in shallow whispers as if no one could hear them. Fiona had convinced herself that all evil in the world came from here and she knew that Jake did not feel too differently. The two agents wore emotionless faces, but already the grim work that had been underway began to present itself.

Bodies from Mobians, and even a human or two lay on metal slabs covered in blood stained white sheets. Metal limbs dangled from beneath the linen, reflecting a distorted view of the world on their oxidized metal surface.

"As it turns out, the inhibitor is only a small piece of the process. There is also another factor that we failed to consider. We have always assumed the subjects should be anesthetized for this to be most effective, but as it turns out this removes one of the most important components of success. A being’s will to live can, apparently, allow patients to live through the entire process," Julian said as they walked through a much thicker steal door.

Fiona cringed at the notion. What Kintobor just described would have, in his eyes, made her a perfect candidate for roboticization. She never saw a difference between that and dying, especially up until now when the result was always the same. What lay in a cage before them however, was in fact a living Mobian robot. It was a feeble thing, clunking around without purpose or grace.

"This was the first success. Scientist found that because he was awake his adrenals spiked boosting his body's own ability to adapt faster. The subjects in the next room we pumped full of epinephrine and had significantly better results. I can only imagine the perfection that will be achieved once we get our hands on the inhibitor. Would you like to see one made?" Julian asked.

Neither of the agents wanted to see tests where the subjects were alive and awake. It was never pleasant, but Julian's question was not really an offer but rather an order. The two looked on as a fresh subject was wheeled into the room. It was a young raccoon with fear-laden eyes. He clawed madly at the steel cage, cursing everyone before he was subdued with cattle prods.

The scientist worked as if the three of them were not there, mindlessly loading their subject into a glass tube before his strength returned. What followed was gut wrenching, but Fiona had already learned to suppress her gag reflex. The raccoon turned near inside out as its innards were woven into metal, wiring and circuitry. His screams grew loader and more crazed until they stopped abruptly as he drew his last breath. A red glow replaced his once shimmering black eyes and the flailing stopped. The creature stared blankly out at them seemingly devoid of a conscious.

"It's a mixed bag really," Kintobor went on. "There is no way to predict their mental state when they come out of it. Some are feral; others are worthless husks like the one you saw earlier. They don't seem to accept any type of a rudimentary programming, but this still a huge step forward, making the inhibitor all the more important."

Fiona approached the motionless robot. Its eyes followed her, but it made no additional movements of any kind. This has to be worse than dying. She tapped on the plexiglas, but still the creature remained motionless.

"And what do you do with them now?" Fiona asked doing her best to seem interested.

"Tests. There are still a lot of variables that may give us more insight. Now if you two would be so kind as to help me."
Kintobor was not someone who asked for help, so Fiona already knew that whatever came next was going to be worse. The large man walked up to another secured door and placed his palm on the panel next to it. The lock disengaged and he motioned the two of them through, "After you."

Fiona let Jake step through first. The room was completely dark and when she turned back to look for a switch, the door snapped shut behind them with Julian still on the other side.

"Son of bitch," she sighed.

Something in the corner of the room rattled as it skittered quickly across the floor.

"What was that?" Jake asked as he drew his weapon.

"Well he did say some of them were feral right?"

"Yeah, but wouldn't he have those locked up somewhere?"

Fiona eyed her partner, "Yeah, in here. He tests everything, and today that includes us."

The two of them reached for their flashlights while they were slowly circled by glowing ruby colored eyes. When a beam caught an oversized wolf it shrieked and shied away behind a crate.

"Not a fan of light are they?" Jake remarked as he looked down at the remnants of a florescent glass bulb underneath his boot.

A quick set of metallic footsteps approached loudly from behind her and before Fiona could even turn her gun cold hands were wrapped around her body dragging her to the ground. She tumbled with creature, trying to pry its impossibly strong grip off of her, but it only tightened. She threw an elbow only to have the joint ignite in pain as it found the creature’s metal frame. It let go and retreated into the darkness after a loud crack from Jake's Sig echoed about the room. Whatever it may have been was far from dead.

"Did you hit it?" Fiona asked as she frantically got back to her feet.

"Yeah, but I don't think it did anything."

More footsteps echoed behind Jake and he turned and emptied his clip. The bullets ricochet off the wolf's thick hide bouncing mercilessly around the room. The bot drove it's shoulder into Jake's midsection bringing him to the ground. Fiona casually walked up to the creature as it slashed at the armor on her partner's chest. She left little room for error when she placed the barrel of her Desert Eagle on the wolf's skull and pulled the trigger. It collapsed lifeless onto Jake as its head exploded in a shower of sparks.

"I always told you bigger is better," Fiona said as she helped remove the steel carcass from her partner.

"Yeah, yeah whatever."

More footsteps clanked in the shadows and the two spun their lights around trying to catch a glimpse of their enemies. "How many of these things are there?" her partner asked.

"Can't see a damn thing, it's hard to tell."

Their enemies had reserved themselves to the shadows waiting for their prey to make mistake.

"Screw this," Jake said as he holstered his pistol. "You want me?" he yelled as he smashed a fist
against his battered armor, "Come get me."

A mangy lynx obliged as it bound at him, lowering its shoulder just like the wolf. Jake charged back close lining his smaller opponent. He was on top of the bot in no time, leaping onto its chest, sinking his combat boots into the lynx steel armor. With a strong kick to its jaw he dislodged its head entirely sending it skidding across the floor.

Fiona had problems of her own as a rabbit joined the fray. It lunged at her with a strong right cross and bounced backwards immediately after she dodged it. She raised her weapon to fire, but her opponent was quick. Her first shot found the darkness while the next did little more than glance off.

"Oh yeah, how is the big one treating you now boss?" Jake laughed as he struggled to remove a rabid vole from his back.

Without so much as looking she fired a shot in his direction and waited for the inevitable clank of rodent hitting the ground.

"Show off," her partner muttered.

"Just keep an eye out for the rab…"

A closed steel fist caught her squared in the jaw and knocked her weapon right out of her hand. She frantically searched the darkness with her flashlight for her gun, but it was gone. Amidst her desperate search another blow sent her to all fours. She could feel a pool of blood in her mouth. This time a large foot found her abdomen and she collapsed on the floor recoiling in pain as she balled up to protect herself from another blow.

A bang echoed on the room and Fiona opened her eyes in time to see the rabbit's corpse hit the ground next to her. Only one lifeless eye stared back at her and where the other would have been, exposed circuitry sparked as it short-circuited.

A steel plated hand pulled her back to her feet and held her until she found her balance.

"Thinks that's all of 'em, boss," Jake said as he held out her gun.

Fiona returned the pistol to her holster and felt around inside her mouth for any missing teeth.

"I suppose we deserved that," Fiona admitted.

"Could have been worse."

The door slid open again as Kintobor's silhouette stood in the doorway awaiting their return.

The two agents strode back into the lab keeping their mouths shut. It was obvious he wanted to make a point.

"So, how were they?"

"Annoying," Jake said finally noticing he claw marks on his armor. "They may hit like a sack of bricks but they aren't much brighter than one either.

"They were blind with rage," Fiona added. "Ruthless, but stupid."

"Nothing the two of you couldn't handle I see. It's good to know there are not any suitable replacements for you yet."
Fiona spat a large helping of blood on the ground, staining the stark white linoleum floor. "Nope, keep looking," the fox replied as she moved past the fat man back towards the elevator.
A surge of adrenalin pulsed through her body as her eyes snapped open. Something was wrong; nothing felt like it had when she had fallen asleep. The atmosphere was different, mustiness hung in the air clawing unforgivably at the back of her throat. The sheets were not the silk material she had previously wrapped herself in nor was the bed the same. Mara crawled towards the side of the three foot wide cot in the center of a windowless room and placed her feet on the ground as her mind continued to run rampant with fear.

There was a dim incandescent bulb hanging from stray wire that disappeared into the darkness above. As her eyes adjusted they landed on the nightstand where Tail's berretta lay, waiting. Mara's mind raced for answers.

Where am I? Where is Tails? Was he here? How did I get here? What should I do?

She tried to calm herself with a deep breath as she processed the situation. Nothing she had learned from the stupid imprinting was going to help her now. She called out, "Hello. Is anybody there?"

The only response was her own voice as it echoed helplessly around her prison. There was a metal door on one side of the room made up of walls that vaulted twelve feet in the air and then stopped short of a ceiling she could still not see. She approached the threshold cautiously, but turned back when she remembered the gun. She fumbled with the magazine release as she checked to see if it was loaded. Mara pulled the slide back and chambered a round before tucking the gun into her waistband.

The door was big and rusty. It barely budged even as she pulled on it with all of her weight. When it did move it scraped the ground creating a horrifying sound that would have surely let anyone else know she was there. Small lights emanated from the wall just a foot off the floor barely providing enough vision to see down the hallway in either direction. She could make out a pair of footsteps racing towards her. Mara squinted until she could make out the silhouette of a man running.

"Hey, you! Stop right there!" a voice echoed down the hallway.

Mara stayed still cowering in fear of the figure. He was big and covered in Dominion armor. Mara began to backpedal towards the door.

"Hey, I told you to stop!" the man shouted in a grizzly voice as he raised a gun.

Mara ducked back into her room as he fired a shot at her. She let out a yelp as she covered her head and fell to the floor. When she looked up the man was standing in the doorway blocking her only escape. He approached slowly.

"Nowhere to go now is there?" the voice told her.

She continued to back away scooting herself across the floor using her hands and feet until her back came up against the wall. A feeling of helplessness nearly overwhelmed her almost causing her to relive herself, but then she felt Tail's berretta press into her spine and she reached a hand behind her back to find it. The man didn't seem to notice as he continued to approach with authoritative footsteps. The soldier knelt to her height lowering his gun as he gazed into her eyes through his mask.

She could feel her hands wrap around the molding on the grip on the gun. The unsuspecting armored man threw up his hands when he discovered it was him who was looking down the end of a gun.
Mara slowly got to her feet as she pulled the hammer back on the pistol. The man backed away trying to calm her down.

"Now don't do anything stupid. Just give me the gun."

Mara shook her head in reply as she edged herself around the side of the room until the door was directly behind her. She swung it shut as she left. On the outside, she found a deadbolt and promptly slid it into place.

Why didn't they lock me in?

She didn't think on it long. Wherever she was, she didn't want to be there. Mara began to sprint down the hallways as fast her legs would carry her, but it quickly broke into more hallways. She chose at random every time, left, left, right, left, right until she had to stop and catch her breath. It was another maze, but this time it was in the dark.

Gun still in hand she proceeded around the next corner, but she had been breathing so loud she never heard the other person approaching. She ran headlong into another Dominion soldier. Something inside of her took over and she pointed the gun at him yelling frantically.

"Don't!" she yelled as the man raised his own weapon.

She fired once when he didn't stop. It clipped him in the shoulder and he staggered backwards in pain. She fired again when he showed no signs of retreating, and then again and again. The man fell over limp when the glass on his visor shattered. Mara lowered the gun and attempted to control herself.

What have I done?

She tried to tell herself that it didn't matter, but she felt sick. Mara would have heaved right then and there, but there was nothing left in her stomach from all of her time spent being imprinted. The girl wanted more than anything to break down and cry, but the world was still racing and she was struggling to keep up. I don't have time for this, she told herself. It was hard to clear the bile that was lurking in the back of her throat, but she put one foot in front of the other until she passed the dead man.

The hallway opened up into another large area, with only minimally better lighting. Sparsely populated shelves were staggered about the room creating yet another maze. Mara couldn't be sure, but she felt as if she was being watched. Spinning as she navigated her way through to rows of shelving, checking each open space for anyone and anything. A small gust of wind swept up behind her and she turned to meet it finding nothing but an empty passage way. A shadow flickered to her left startling her. Even before she brought the gun up Mara pulled the trigger in desperation, causing the shot to miss and pierce a large tin can on the shelf.

Nothing was there though. She knew she wasn't alone, but now she was well past scared. Yet something jumped out of the back of her mind as her eyes ran across the label on the container which was now leaking liquid through a dime sized hole, C4H10. It was butane. She new well enough that it was flammable. However, she knew a few other new things as well.

A lighter sat on the shelf next to the canister. Mara quickly pulled it apart until she found the flint and put it in the puddle of the highly combustible liquid. She placed the barrel of her gun in the pool of lighter fluid, closed her eyes and waited. Mara wasn't sure why she closed her eyes, but her instincts told her it was the right thing to do. In fact she had no idea why she had just done any of what she did.
Her senses focused as her breathing clamed. She could hear someone approached quickly, but she
waited until she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her finger squeezed the trigger and the heat of the flame
exploded as she withdrew her hand. He enemies grip released her when the flint burst into a blinding
white light that illuminated even the inside of her eyelids.

Someone screamed, "Son of a bitch, what the hell did you just do? I can't see shit."

Mara didn't turn around she broke into another sprint ducking in and out of shelving until she found a
new hall way. A green exit sign glowed above a door at the end. A glance over her shoulder
revealed a figure stumbling into the hallway still holding its head as it struggled to find its balance.
She reached for the door, but a black bag found its way over her head. Mara kicked and screamed,
lashing out at her attacker, but he was too strong.

Her back hit a chair hard. Whoever it was had taken her gun and lashed her hands together after
marching her up a flight of steps.

"Got ourselves a smart one here," a nasally voice proclaimed. "Where is Miles?"

Mara didn't answer, but the other person did with the back of their hand. She let out a whimper but
stayed quiet. Memories of her time with the copper came flooding back. Mara wanted nothing more
than to never be in that situation again, but here she was.

How far are they going to take this?

"Where is Miles?"

"I don't know," she spat back.

This time it was a closed fist to her stomach. It knocked the wind right out of her and she coughed
trying unsuccessfully to inhale.

Her captor waited until she regained a steady breath before asking, "Where is Miles?"

She didn't answer again.

"Knothole. Do you know where that is?"

"What makes you think I would tell you if I knew?"

"How about this?" The voice answered as the man fired a shot into her leg.

She screamed as loud as she had ever screamed before. Her leg was burning in pain and her entire
body recoiled as the fire seemed to spread.

The man pressed the gun against her other leg. "Would you care to try and answer that again?"

"Sure," Mara said. "go fuck yourse….

The man pulled the trigger again and her other leg went numb with same soreness that she had felt
the first time. She took deep breath after deep breath trying to calm herself containing the urge to
scream again. Nothing made any sense.

How did I get here? Where is here?

Then it hit her, perhaps she never left.
"Last chance," the man said as he placed the gun on her forehead. She could feel the heat of the barrel burning her through the satin fabric. "Where is Knothole?"

She wanted to call out and have them stop this madness, but somehow death seemed easier or at least pain free.

"Fine kid, have it your way."

There was a click, but no pain followed. A hand reached up and removed the cloth from her head. A cobalt blue hedgehog stood in front of her holding Tails' silver berretta, quills down flowing with his body. Sally was standing next to him with a somewhat impressed look on her face. A familiar kit sat behind the two of them on a table leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and a concerned look on his face. Mara's eyes immediately raced down to her legs where she found no blood or holes.

"Rubber bullets," the nasally sounding hedgehog said as he tossed the pistol back to Tails. "Hurt like hell don't they?"

Mara nodded.

"She did better than you," Sally said elbowing him.

"Woo lets slow this train down a bit. She didn't make it through the door. I made it through the door."

"You didn't have you chasing you," Sally snapped back with a smile on her face.

The entrance she had been dragged through opened and the two dominion soldiers walked in without their helmets. A familiar mountain lion stared back at her. The other was one of the Sally's guards that she had seen the other day. Everything was starting to make more sense.

"Sorry I couldn't tell you Mara," Tails said as he leapt off the table. "They sprung this on me last night."

"Cuz, you know you couldn't tell her anyway. The whole point of this is to see how she handles herself." The hedgehog replied. "She is rutty smart little bitch too. I still can't see straight."

"You can thank the imprinting for that," Sally added.

"You guys imprint her? I haven't seen someone think on their feet that quickly before. What was that anyway?"

"I don't know," Mara replied. "But I do know I would like someone to untie me now."

Tails walked up behind and tugged at the knots until they fell lose. Mara finally stood up clenching her fist. A rage was building inside of her that she had never felt before and it was searching for an outlet. The smug face of a certain hedgehog seemed as good as any.

"No hard feelings," Sonic said, "everyone has to go through this before we put them out in the field."

Mara stepped into a punch with all her weight behind it, but her fist found nothing but air. The hedgehog vanished right before her eyes.

"Going to have to be a little quicker than that if you want to hit this hog," his voice called out from behind her.

She turned around to find him standing next to Tails.
"Sonic," Mara said with a bit of contempt in her voice.

"The one and only."

"Mara, I know you are upset," Tails started, "but we had to be sure we can trust you. If you get caught, you know enough to put us in a tough spot."

"Something tells me Julian hits harder," Mara suggested as she felt the side of her face.

"He does," Sonic answered. "A lot harder, but your heart is in the right place kid."

"All you had to do was ask," Mara said as she began to break down into tears. "I wouldn't tell them anything. Why did you have to let me think I killed someone? Why did you have to put me through all of that!"

"Get over it kid," The hedgehog replied. "We all have to deal with things we don't want or expect. I was just risking my ass for you. I ran all up and down the coast creating false trails for you and my cuz here. Not my ideal way to spend time, but I did it anyway."

"What do you mean up and down the coast?" Sally asked as she crossed her arms. "I said drop the screen in Coastaries, not the entire western seaboard."

"Relax Sal, it spreads them out, makes it tougher for them to figure out which on is real," Sonic replied as he approached the squirrel.

"No you oaf, it makes it very easy to figure out that there is no real trail! And when they do that they are not going to waste time at all. If they had just found one solid trail they and followed it until the end and they would have wasted a lot more time."

"Sally, relax, I think I know what I am talking about here. Those goons won't even know where to start.

"If they even bother to start! Now they will know it's a ruse. Why can you just for once listen to me and do the things I ask?"

"Pants aren't big enough for both of you to wear are they?" Mara quipped.

Sonic and Sally both stopped their bickering and stared at the girl while Tails stood behind her trying to contain his laughter.

When no one said anything Mara continued, "Sorry I didn't mean to interrupt. By all means continue arguing, or perhaps you would like to shoot me again?"

"Hey," Sonic snapped. "You're gett'n out of line. Do you know what kind of risks we're taken for you?"

"Hopefully something a little bit bigger than me walking into my parent's old lab in the middle of Capital City."

Sonic walked up to the girl meeting her gaze until he was just inches away from her face. His metallic looking quills shimmered in the feint light, each one sharper than the next. There was no more fear left in Mara, they had rung it out of her and now only disdain and frustration remained. Mara knew what the hedgehog was capable of and that provoking him was probably a bad idea, but she didn't care.
"You ungrateful little…" Sonic began

"Ungrateful!" Mara snorted. "Tell me again what am I supposed to be grateful for? Your hospitality?" she asked glancing over at Sally. "Perhaps scarring me so badly I nearly pissed myself. Or should I be grateful that you shot me! Oh wait I know, I should be grateful that you are sending me on a suicide mission to save all of you. Or is that last one supposed to be you?"

Tails stepped between the two as he gently backed Mara away from his friend.

"Sonic, go easy on her. She isn't used to this."

"Well, tell her to it's about time to grow up. Good luck keeping her in line little cuz. And don't go letting her get you killed. I can't stand to lose any more friends," Sonic said as he turned toward the door. "I have had enough of this. I'll see you later Sal."

Mara could see Tails glance suggestively at Sally who seemed to take the hint.

"Where do you think you are going?" The squirrel asked.

"We are done here aren't we? She passed the test right?"

The hedgehog disappeared out of the room while Mara massaged the bruises on her legs. He was hardly the Mobian she pictured. Mara had always imagined a Robin Hood, but he was nothing more than punk.

All arrogance and pride.

"Sorry about him," Sally said in an unusually sincere voice. "He can be a really big pain in the ass sometimes but Sonic is still one of the best people I know. I am pretty sure he is just upset that you almost got away from him."

"It's okay," Mara sighed.

"I know I was hard on you before too, but I see now that may have been unfounded." Sally added before turning back to Tails. "As for you, keep training her. Whatever you have been showing her has obviously done some good."

Mara walked up to the large glass windows that lined one side of the otherwise bare room. They looked out into the labyrinth she had just been wondering through. It was bigger than she ever knew, and how she found her way almost exactly to the end with only one wrong turn was beyond her.

"You did well," Cat said towering above her in the armor. "No one has ever locked me in the room before."

"Caught me off guard too," the dog added. "No one has ever got to the end that quick either."

"Got lucky I guess," Mara said as she traced her route again.

"Lucky… I doubt it, there are too many turns," Sally said as she glanced over at Tails with a stern look on her face. "You didn't did you?"

"Just that room," he replied reluctantly. "I knew you were going to do this to her eventually. I thought she could use a handicap."

"What did you do?" Mara asked as she turned to Tails.
"Did you ever really feel lost?" He asked her.

"I was scared out of my mind but, no, now that you mention it. I just followed my gut instinct."

"I might have snuck a little something extra in your chemistry lesson," Tails said with a smile.

"Thanks… I think."

Sally shook her head, but with a smile, "Still was a damn fine show if I ever saw one. If you do even half that well when it's for real, we just might have a shot at this."

The squirrel followed by her guard and cat turned and left the room leaving Tails and Mara. The girl took one last glance out into what used to be an arena of fear and smirked ever so triumphantly.

"Want to get something to eat?" she asked.

"Thought you would never ask," The fox replied.

The two of them filed into the stark hallways, walking abreast as they talked.

"I have spent my whole life reading about Sonic in the papers. They play him off as some type of evil ruthless Mobian who kills for fun. Most people took that to mean he was valiant. It was easy to read through Julian's lies some times. But now I can't help but think that a lot of that might be true."

"It isn't," Tails assured her. "Sonic isn't your average hero. He doesn't like to let his soft side show because he thinks it means he is being weak. He has saved more Mobians and Humans alike than anyone I can think of. Try and give him a chance, he just doesn't have patience like you or I."

"I wonder why?" Mara remarked sarcastically.

The meal was the same as before but it tasted almost twice as good with her doubly empty stomach. She even managed to get a second helping before a badger in a chef hat chased her away. Now all she needed was a nice long shower followed by an even longer nap. Mara tagged along blindly as the kit lead her back to his room. She was seemingly unaware of where they ever where in the complex.

When Tails opened the door a draft of cool air wafting in from the outside greeted them. Sonic stood on the balcony, quills bristling in the gentle breeze. They both stepped out onto the deck.

"Mara right?"

She nodded.

"Cuz, you want to give us a see?" Sonic asked without removing his gaze from beyond the quarry.

Tails stepped back inside and slid the door shut and disappeared from sight.

"I suppose I owe you an apology. I forget sometimes that not every has been dealing with this their entire life. You had this situation thrust on you and no one but Tail seems to care. He's a good kid, but he leads with his heart too much. I know I am an arrogant ass, but that's my armor. No one is going to be around to tell you good job for doing what's expected of you. At least if I pretend like people care about who I am and what I do, I can feel good about it at the end of the day," the hedgehog paused before continuing. "Sally, she hides behind her blood line and her intellect. That girl is just as scared as you, but she knows she has to be tough for everyone else. Tails usually wears honor as if it were bullet proof, but you have seemed to change that. Everyone has something."
Mara stared at the hedgehog following his unyielding gaze into to nothing. Her entire opinion of the Mobian had just been flipped upside down. Sally and Tails were telling the truth.

"Thanks," Mara replied almost too quietly.

"Look kid, if you want to make it through this make sure you find your armor and when you do, don't take it off. It may be heavy, but I promise you the world hurts a lot more without it."

"I already have it," she replied.

Sonic raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Belonging," Mara said with a sense of purpose. "My whole life I have lived by myself for myself. I have never felt like I have been a part of anything until Tails showed me what all of you have gone through. Seeing that it's not so different than my life has given me a new perspective. I want to help you, all you have to do is let me."

The hedgehog smiled and patted her on the back with a gloved hand, "Then I'll thank you now so I can hold you to it later."

Mara watched as the Sonic she always imagined left the balcony.

"What about now?" Tails asked as he replaced the hedgehog at her side, distant stare included.

"You were right," Mara admitted as she took another deep breath of the oasis air. "He isn't who I thought he was, but then again none of you have been. Everyone is wearing too much armor."
Machines

Fiona sat at her usual table staring anxiously out the window next to her with her hand wrapped firmly around a warm cup of coffee. She couldn't help but admit playing for the wrong team had its perks. Food had never been anything special to her, but now the sweet flavors of a restaurant meal was something that seemed impossible to give up. The bitter smooth taste of coffee washed down the salty sweet taste of bacon causing the fox to smile at the subtly finer things in life.

Jake strode past her smirking at her through the glass as he headed for the door of the diner. He emerged on the other side with a manila folder in hand.

"Don't you ever get bored of this place?" he asked as he tossed the parcel on the table and took a seat.

"Don't you ever show up on time?" Fiona asked as she reached for the folder.

Jake was in his plain clothes, but even outside his armor he still towered over the vixen. He signaled playfully to the waitress for a coffee, doing his best to let his muscles show through his tight fitting black tee.

"When are you going to say something to that girl?" Fiona asked, rolling her eyes at her partner's immaturity.

Jake shrugged, "If I had known I would be coming to this place every morning for the last four years of my life I probably would have gotten down on my knee and proposed to her on the first day. Now it just feels like a weird game."

A game, Fiona thought to herself. I might know a thing or two about that.

"The usual?" the waitress asked as she handed him a fresh cup of coffee.

"You know me too well," he replied with a suggestive smile.

Jake waited until the girl disappeared behind the counter before starting, "Julian wants more test subjects."

"Of course he does," the fox replied before taking another sip of coffee. "What happened to the ten we gave him last week?"

"Well if I had to guess," Jake said before pausing as he visibly tried to repress a memory, "those things under the white sheets might have been them. Granted I couldn't tell, it was like he put them in a blender with some spare car parts and set the damn thing to frappe. Not to mention the four we put down."

Fiona cringed as she recalled her recent tour through Kintobor's lab. The man was twisted beyond belief. It was obvious that it was starting to get to Jake too. The dead humans were new and had clearly rattled a man who had become used to disposing of Mobians, which he mostly likely saw as nothing more than animals. When your own species is on the menu it's easy to begin questioning things. The humans hadn't been granted any mercy either; the pair of them wearing their skeletons on the outside amidst a tangle of organs and copper wiring.

Perhaps now he will know what I am living with. Not that he will ever admit that it bothers him.
"Jake, I am still eating," Fiona reminded him.

"Yeah, sorry boss. Just that stuff doesn't go away, you know."

Trust me I know, she thought.

"So, what's the plan?" Fiona asked.

"Whoa I haven't pushed that button yet. You're the brains, I am the balls, remember?"

The vixen shook her head lightheartedly in reply. "Fine we can probably round up a few vagrants and resistance fighters in the outskirts near the old mill."

"Poor bastards just keep going back there don't they? They never seem to learn." Jake sighed.

"If they want to make our job easy, let them," Fiona replied.

The waitress reemerged and put Jakes usual French toast and eggs in front of him.

"Anything else for you Jake?" she asked.

"Not today."

"Alright well you two enjoy your meal," the girl replied with a wink in Jake's direction.

"Well at least you're almost taking her out to breakfast," Fiona remarked.

"Cross'n the line, boss," Jake said glaring at her with a smile on his face. "A nice girl like that deserves better than some government lap dog such as myself. Besides, I don't even have the time."

"Right, I forgot you are married to the job."

"Pretty much," Jake grumbled.

"Don't worry, I know the feeling. This job is the only thing that keeps me alive."

"And away from our two tailed friend?"

Fiona narrowed her gaze.

"Oh, so I am not allowed to give you shit about him? I see how it is."

"The difference is, what we had was a little more than a game."

Fiona pushed what was left of her breakfast towards the center of the table and continued to sip on her coffee.

"So I am supposed to feel bad for you?"

"If you want to," Fiona replied. "My only point was that perhaps you shouldn't waste so much time. At least I got to spend time with Miles before I had to turn my back on him."

"Fair enough," Jake replied as he scooped the last bite of his meal into his mouth. "But what do you say we quit talking about this mushy crap and go do our job?"

"I would say that's the best thing you have said all morning," the vixen said before pausing. "Your turn to pay."
"It's always my turn to pay, you don't make any money."

"Because Kintobor gives you my paycheck."

Jake smiled as he put a fifty on the table, "And what a generous tipper you are."

The two of them made for the door and stepped out onto the busy streets of Capital City. Despite having lived there for years, Fiona still received confused and insulted looks from the locals. Her only saving grace was the dominion badge that hung from a chain she wore around her neck. The iron fist imposed over a cityscape was a rather fitting sigil for Julian's private army. Dominion agents were more than coppers; they operated above the law with very little in the way of compassion. The fox tended not to stray too far from her partner if she could help it. She didn't want or need confrontations.

Fiona followed Jake across the street and into the city's central tower.

"We have a bunch of new recruits," Jake said after they passed through security.

"Great," Fiona said rolling her eyes. "Just what I need. Let's make them your responsibility."

"Nope. They won't ever learn to respect you unless you make them."

The fox made the frustration she was feeling plane on her face as she stepped into the elevator. "They aren't going to respect me either way."

"Give 'em a chance boss."

When the elevator opened Fiona walked down the hall and threw open the door to the locker room.

"Welcome to foxtrot, boys," she said in as a serious of a voice as she could muster.

She had the room's attention. Most of them were still in towels and far from being ready. A few looked confused as if they hadn't heard of foxtrot or perhaps just didn't actually think it was real. Others just rolled their eyes like this was some type of punishment for them.

"Chopper leaves in ten. Anyone not on it is missing out on today's fun."

A few were still having trouble adjusting to the fact that she was in the men's locker room, but seeing as she was a Mobian and there was no women's version she could have cared less.

"So uhhh he is in command right?" a kid with a blond crew cut asked as he pointed to Jake.

"No sweetie, I am, and if any of you lot have a problem with that, Julian's office isn't too far away. Feel free to tender your resignation with him."

"Oh man, when my friends said I was gonna get some tail if I landed this job, they weren't kidding," the kid answered. Everyone laughed except for Jake and Fiona. The two of them just walked up to their respective lockers instead. While Jake pieced together his armor Fiona zipped up her combat jacket and clipped on the belt with her holster.

"Big gun for a girl," the kid quipped as Fiona slid her pistol into place.

"Bigger than yours I can see," Fiona responded as she looked the kid over as he stood there still in his towel. Now he was the only one not laughing. When Jake finished donning his armor he grabbed his assault rifle and headed for the door. The fox followed him, wagging her silky red tail. If they wanted something to look at, she was certainly giving it to them.
Fiona sat in the helicopter patiently next to Jake while her men showed up one by one. She drew a number on their backs as they boarded.

"No time for names, boys. Do me a favor and don't forget your number."

She was near fed up when the crew cut kid ran out of the door still fumbling with his gun and helmet. He proceeded to drop both as he boarded. Fiona painted a nice big 'R' on his back.

"Don't want to confuse you with all the numbers Rookie, so I'll keep things simple for you."

The men laughed as the kid took his seat. Fiona proceeded to bang on the fuselage signaling to the pilots that they were clear.

Once they were airborne, the vixen began, "Perhaps some of you are not familiar with how we do things around here. This isn't some run of the mill copper division. This is foxtrot. There is a reason this is the best unit and it's because I don't tolerate fuckups."

Most of the men nodded but a few still couldn't seem to understand why they were sitting there taking orders from a fox.

"So does anyone have any questions? Or have I made it clear enough that you will do what I say when I say it?"

"Uhh yeah, I got one," the rookie asked.

Of course you do, Fiona thought, there is always one.

"Am I the only one here confused about why we are taking orders from a Mobian?"

A few others muttered in agreement.

"I don't know are you? Is anyone else wondering that?"

No one responded.

"Looks like it. Anything else?" the fox replied.

"Yeah just one more I guess. I am assuming in order to get his job we have to bend over for you right? Or do you do that for him," the kid asked as he looked to Jake.

Fiona almost felt like laughing because the last person to insinuate that Jake was sleeping with her ended up in the hospital with two broken legs. The official report read car crash, but anyone who saw what happened learned firsthand just how strong her partner was.

Jake got up and ripped the kid out of his seat by his armor. He dangled him out of the open door and asked, "Do you enjoy flying?"

The kid shook his head.

"Such a shame I am offering free lessons."

"Relax man, it was just a joke," the kid said panicking as he looked down at the ground thousands of feet below.

"Oh well if your just kidding then it's no big deal," Jake said as he threw him back into his seat.
"Apologize."
"Sorry, sir," the kid said.

"Not to me you rookie, to your CO."

The kid went white with the prospect of having to apologize to a Mobian, "Sorry uhh… ma'am? Won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't, private," The fox replied.

After some static, the voice of one of the pilots erupted into the radios in their head, "Lots of movement in the LZ. Hostiles looked armed; this is going to be a hot one. Over."

"You heard the man," Fiona yelled. "Keep your shit tight and don't stand in the open. Remember only use lethal force if necessary. The primary mission objective is prisoners. You have stun guns for a reason, gentlemen."

Sure enough, there was movement and a lot of it. Fiona hadn't expected to run into so many resistance fighters, but it appeared they were here in force. A dozen of them appeared to be well armed and they were scrambling for the barn. The LZ was an open field that had become a junk yard where resistance fighters loved to scavenge for parts.

When they hit the ground Fiona immediately started barking orders, "Find some cover, they have plenty of snipers."

Bullets whizzed by burying themselves into the armor plating on the chopper behind her. Most of her team made for a dumpster while she and Jake dove behind an old and what she hoped was an empty fuel tank. The fox watched with frustration as the rookie stood out in the open opening fire blindly with his weapon yelling, "Come on you cowards."

"Rook, get behind some cover!" Fiona yelled.

"Why? Ain't this what we got armor for?" he replied as he continued to empty round after round at enemies he couldn't see.

"I'll get him," Jake said as he went to stand up.

"Nope, my rooks, my problem." Fiona said as she took off towards her agent.

She tackled him to the ground just a bullet grazed the pad on his shoulder.

"Oh get off me you crazy bitch," he swore as he stood back up.

Before the fox could do anything else, a sniper round found its way into the side of his helmet and a splash of red exploded onto his visor. Fiona couldn't do anything for him but watch as his lifeless body crumpled to the ground. A feeling of helplessness washed over her, but she knew better than to stand in the open and quickly raced back to her partner who was still trying to ascertain their enemy's position.

"And I was just starting to like him," Jake said as she took up her spot next to him.

Fiona wanted to laugh, but this time it just didn't seem all that funny. The kid had been nothing but I pain in her ass from the second she met him, but that didn't mean she needed him to die on her.

"You got a fix on them yet?"

"Yeah, one is in the barn, other, top of the silo."
"Alright lay some cover down on the silo, and I’ll take the rest of the team to knock on some doors."

"You got it boss," Jake said as he stood up letting loose a torrent of fresh brass.

Fiona made a run for the rest of her team. Even with Jake's suppression fire, a round clipped a strand of her auburn hair. They wanted her dead, that much was plain. The vixen formed up with the rest of her team and hit the com on her radio, "All but one of you are coming with me. Number nine, you stay back an support Jake."

The vixen leaned out from behind the dumpster and plugged a few rounds into the barn's window before breaking out into an all out sprint to the big red doors. Her team follower her lead, falling in line behind her.

"Alright," Fiona began as she grabbed the first agent, "Five, you are going to flash this place. One, six and seven are looking low, everyone else high. There are a lot of lofts in here so watch your tails. If it doesn't have a gun, don't shoot it."

Since the rookie had gotten himself killed no one had bothered to second guess her. The first man in the line rolled a flash bang in the front door and waited patiently for the loud pop. On cue her team burst through the entrance ignoring most of the already incapacitated Mobians in favor of those who had been smart and dug themselves in. Shots rang out from all sides as they pushed inside.

Fiona raised her pistol and fired two shots at a large bear at the opposite end of the room. A round tagged him in the shoulder causing him to spin and fall to the floor. Her team meanwhile was doing a nice job of cleaning up the lofts, only a few resistance fighters seemed keen on fighting until their last breath. Most laid down their weapons when they saw they were outnumbered and outgunned, but that didn't stop a rather portly swine from leaping out from behind a bushel of hay. He was wielding a 12 gauge and pointing it in her direction. Before Fiona could even spin to take the shot, a stun dart latched onto the pigs gut and brought him down in a series of convulsions. The fox looked back to find one of her men nodding to her.

"Keeps your eyes peeled, they could be hiding anywhere in here," Fiona shouted.

A streak of black swept past the fox's peripheral, sticking to the shadows and out of sight to her men. They lacked the sense she had. Fiona ducked admits the hay bales, keeping her gun close. The panther struck quickly, but Fiona had been ready. His fist fell on her forearm and she retaliated with leg sweep brining the beast to the floor. However, the fight was far from out of him. Before Fiona could center a shot the Mobian was back on his feet slashing at her in close quarters with his claws. Just as he tackled her to the floor her fingers found the trigger and she pulled it once. He held her down a moment, trying desperately to sink his claws into her neck, but it wasn't long before he coughed up a large helping of blood. The strength seemed to fade out of him as he collapsed onto the floor clutching his side.

The panther lay there on his back breathing deeply through the blood pooling in the back of his mouth. Fiona turned to leave him in peace, but the Mobian tugged at her boot. "Don't let them take me. I would rather die."

The vixen glanced around to make sure none of her team was looking before kneeling down over the sleek black cat. She held her pistol to his chest directly over his heart but kept her finger off the trigger. Death was something that she could never come to grips with, but she saw no reason to deny it to someone in his position. What awaited him if he lived was far worse.

The panther reached up with a trembling hand wrapped his paw around hers and closed his eyes. After one more deep breath he pulled the trigger with his thumb. With the loud crack of her Desert
Eagle, the panther went limp and a pool of blood began to spill out from underneath him.

The vixen returned her weapon to its holster and re-joined her team as they continued to search the barn. Killing someone when they held a gun to her was one thing, but watching life slowly fade out of someone always seemed to drag a piece of her with it.

After rummaging the barn found a few younger Mobians that had buried themselves under brush, cowering in fear. They were too young, younger that she was when she got caught. Fiona couldn't bring herself to be the reason that they were going to be tortured and inevitably killed.

"Leave these," Fiona said pointing to a group of cubs and pups. "Kintobor doesn't have any use for them and neither do we."

One of her men pulled out his sidearm and approached the whimpering pups.

"I said leave them," the fox screamed in a fiercely stern tone.

The man lowered his gun and stared at her, "We are supposed to be cleaning these things up."

Fiona thought she had gotten used to how people saw her and the Mobian population, but the way her agent was able to dismiss them as living persons baffled her.

"This may be war private, but you still don't kill innocent children! While you are in my unit you will follow my command!"

Jake stepped into the room just as the agent with an eight on his back was approaching her. Her partner's presence seemed to ease the tension in the room.

"Sniper bugged out. Don't know where he went, but it looks like you got enough in here. Should probably start bagging these before they wake up or more show up."

"You heard the man," Fiona shouted, "but these young ones are off limits."

While her men began to zip tie paws together and shroud prisoners for transport, Jake took his place at her side.

"Not bad, as usual. Only lost the loud mouth and I think we will survive without him."

"They are all machines already, Jake," Fiona said.

"What do you mean?"

"Every single one of them would have happily killed those pups without a second thought or a shred of remorse. I have done plenty that I regret, that I would voluntarily never do, but I have to carry that with me. It's like it doesn't even faze them, it's as if they are…"

"Machines," Jake finished her sentence for her. "The best soldiers are. They don't ask questions, they just take orders and do what needs to be done. That's why you are here. To make sure they do what needs to be done and no more."

Without the rookie, the helicopter ride was a lot quieter. No one spoke, maybe because they didn't have a reason to or maybe because there was just nothing to say, but Fiona was finally getting sick of the lack of respect for life. She was going to show some even if no one else was.

"How many of you knew him?" she asked.
A few glances were exchanged as the soldiers looked at each other though their helmets trying to
gauge the vixen's seriousness.

"Most of us… Ma'am. We all trained together in boot camp," the number nine agent responded.

"And did they teach you that kind of cowboy shit in basic?"

"No ma'am, Pat always had a thing for flare and disrespect'n orders."

"Well you can see where that got him," Fiona said solemnly as she looked down where the kid's
body lay. "All of you can hate who I am and what I am, but I hope it's clear that I am on your team."

The man who had been talking nodded, "Shame the kid couldn't figure that out."

It was Fiona's turn to nod.

There were plenty of additional guards on hand to gather up the prisoners when they landed. Most of
them went easily enough, but a few had woken up realizing where they were and what would likely
be happening to them. It was a cruel fate, one that Fiona had experienced herself and even though
she wished it on no one, she had little in the way of choices. Howls and screams echoed inside the
building as the Mobian's were physically forced into the elevator where they would disappear into
the bowels of the building never to be seen again. Fiona never asked where they were going or what
would be done with them. She knew the answer already, but the less she knew about the fate of
people she would have once called brothers or sisters, the better.

Most of her men were already back in the ready room stripping their armor off or cleaning their guns
when she sauntered in. Fiona unloaded her Desert Eagle and placed it along with her bloodied
combat gear back in her locker. For once she wanted to take off the dominion badged clothing she
wore and just be a normal person, but a Mobian walking around Capital City without good reason
was likely to end up dead. Kintobor had seen to it that she left her old life behind whether she
wanted to or not.

"Good work everyone," Fiona said when she shut her locker. "If you care to join, you can find me
and my partner at the Iron Soldier, drinks are on us."

The vixen found herself wondering down the hall and up a flight of stairs until she was again sitting
in the office of the man she loathed more than any other. He was already inside when she got there,
still sitting at his desk reading over research files on his terminal, the contents of the screen reflecting
off his small spectacles. It was quite some time before he spared her a glance.

"Do you need something?" he asked.

"I just assumed that you would have something to say," Fiona replied.

The rotund man smiled as he leaned back in his chair, "This time, not much needs to be said. I
understand we have fifteen new test subjects."

"Yes, Sir."

"And what do you think of your new team?"

"All but one seemed to be worth something."

"Ah Patrick no doubt, one of my compatriot's sons. A shame what happened. His father pushed so
hard to get him in the service, but I don't think he ever realized the consequences. I am sure I will be
getting an earful soon enough."

"Sorry, sir," the fox replied.

"It's not your fault, that idiot should have never been out there. I only did it to get his dad off my back. No doubt he will blame you though. I would stay sharp for a while if I were you. His father is not a man to trifle with."

"Understood. Anything else, Sir?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Give this a read," Julian said as he pushed a dossier across his desk. "It appears the girl might have turned up in Coastaries. Do what needs to be done."

Fiona picked up the file and nodded, "Of course."

More eyes than usual seemed to follow the fox as she walked alone on the streets of Capital City. Even though the bar was only a few blocks away, Fiona felt vulnerable for the first time in years. Either she was starting to lose her grip and go soft or the reality of who she was slowly becoming was starting to set in. She had always told herself that she would fight for every last breath no matter the cost, but she never considered what it would cost others. At first, when she was afraid for her life, the killing, capturing and torturing was easy. But now, when it seemed so effortless, even normal, it was starting to scare her.

Jake was already at the bar when she arrived. A cold glass of lager sat at the seat next to him waiting for her, sweating beads of condensation as if it too were nervous. Fiona placed the folder down between them and took a swig.

"Was starting to think you weren't going to show up. What do you got for us now?"

"Fresh intel on the girl. They seem to think she is in Coastaries."

"And you don't?" Jake asked as he began looking over the file.

"No. I am not sure who Julian has in running his ops over there, but all that is too obvious for the Freedom Fighters. It's just a ruse. Too many loose ends to be real."

"And what did Julian say about that?"

"He didn't say anything because I didn't tell him. He told me to do what needs to be done, just like he always does."

"So then where we off to."

"Nowhere."

"What do you mean nowhere?"

"Where do we always find Miles?"

"In the last place we would expect to."

"So where do you think he is going to be hiding that girl?"

"Knothole."

"Maybe, in which case there is nothing we can do, but my guess is that he might be a little closer to
"home this time."

"Oh come on boss, you don't think he would be that stupid do you?"

"That," Fiona said as she pointed toward the manila folder, "is nothing but smoke and mirrors and I refuse to waste my time chasing a shadow. If I wanted to hide that girl I would be doing it in the last place Kintobor would think to check and that's right under his nose."

"You know em best, boss," Jake said while he raised his glass to a face wrought with doubt.

"Anyone else show up yet?" Fiona asked as she looked around the rest of the bar.

"No one ever shows up the first night."

"Yeah, just thought this time things might have been different."

After a few long moments of silence a man a couple of years older than Jake and a healthy five o'clock shadow pulled up a seat next to the two of them. Jake eyed the man before asking, "What'l it be?"

"Whatever you guys are buying is fine with me."

Jake waved his hand and a new round of drinks appeared before them.

"What's your name private?" Jake asked as he slid a beer in his direction.

"Well for today, it was number nine," the agent answered as he raised his glass, "but my friends call me Louie."

Fiona smiled, one is better than none.

She and Jake raised their glasses to meet his before indulging themselves. Two beers quickly became three and what was once a silence between them soon turned into funny stories and knife juggling competitions. For just a few hours Fiona forgot about all of the bloodshed, the lives she had taken, the pain she had caused and felt what it was truly like to live. She knew it would only end with a harsh dose of reality the next morning when she awoke with a throbbing headache and the realization that her life was still not her own, but that tiny glimpse of the world she wanted to live in always seemed to be worth it.
Hello all, this chapter contains an OC that is not mine, but is used with permission. Darky the fox is property of NauTii-DarkSide, who can be found on Deviant Art.

Tails looked across the private train car at Mara, who's look of restlessness suggested she was losing her mind. The girl had undergone yet another transformation, this time to what resembled a wealthy college grad. The look didn't seem to agree with her, nor her it. It was clear that Mara felt as if she was wearing skin that wasn't her own, and in many ways she was. The outfit consisted of a bleach white blouse covered by a navy suit coat wrapped in a dark lavender scarf.

"Beats the last train we took," he said trying to take her mind off of what undoubtedly seemed like a never-ending journey.

Mara lifted her gaze from the gold bracelet she had been fiddling with and found the gaze of the two tailed fox who had been staring at her for quite some time.

"No one is shooting at us," she remarked unenthusiastically.

"I could fix that if you like," Tails reminded her with a smile on his face.

Mara chuckled, "I think I prefer boring over bullets."

"Good," the fox replied, "because ideally your new life will be a lot more of the former than the later."

"My new life…" Mara sighed as she looked down at herself again.

"Not a fan of the look?"

"It's not that. I am not even sure I would know how to pretend to be the person I am dressed as. The girl I see when I look in the mirror had a rich father who gave her everything she ever wanted… and I wouldn't know the first thing about what that feels like."

"If all else fails just act like you are better than everyone else," the kit suggested. "If you believe it, so will they."

"Who says I am better than anyone else?"

"No one. It's all about impressions. Capital City is filled with people who don't look any further than what is on the surface. If you want to get anywhere there, you have to lie, cheat, or dazzle your way to the top. Most of the time it takes all three."

"So that's why you dressed me up like this? To make people think I am better than I really am?"

Tails sighed, "Mara, it's not about that. Remember you are here to fool one person and one person only. If you are going to pass off as one of the most elite scientists in your field, you're going to need to look and act the part."
A knock at the door forced Tails to retreat to the top bunk and draw the curtain shut, obscuring him from view. He listened as Mara accepted their dinner from one of the crew.

"Is your boyfriend always asleep?" the man asked curiously as he pushed a car into the their room.

"My boyfriend?" Mara asked nervously. "Oh that's not my boyfriend, it's my grandfather. All he does is sleep. Here is something for all of your trouble," Mara said as she tucked a large bill in the man's red jacket pocket.

"Thank you, miss. You have a nice trip now."

When Tails heard the door shut, he hopped back down. "Do you know why he thought I was your boyfriend?" Tails asked.

Mara shook her head as she took the sterling silver lid off her plate of food.

"Because that's what you told him two days ago the first time he asked."

The color drained from Mara's face, "Oh no, I am so sorry… I just can't keep track of all these lies."

"It's okay, you are not suspicious enough for him to think about it much. Money helps too. Flash enough of it, you can make them look any direction you want. Just promise me from now on you will stick to a story like it's actually the life you have been living since you were born."

"Lie better, I get it," Mara said as she began eating her food.

Tails took the cover off his steak and inhaled deeply, smelling the delicious cut of meat before shaving off a piece.

"I take it you don't usually travel first class?" Mara asked as she eyed the fox's slightly strange behavior.

Tails laughed, "I am lucky if I can ride in a freight car. No self-respecting conductor would ever knowingly let a Mobian on his train."

"So I am your ticket to living a life of luxury?"

"Hardly," the fox replied. "I am in every bit as much danger as you are, if not more."

"Thanks for reminding me… not that I planned on forgetting."

The kit eyed the girl cautiously for a moment, "Speaking of forgetting, have you had any memory lapses since the last session of imprinting? We have never pushed someone as hard as your before, but you absorbed it all like a sponge."

"How would I know if I forgot something if the memory isn't there for me to remember in the first place."

"Your brain has a map to all of your memories and where they are stored. When you got to recall one and you don't find it or find something else entirely, you will know. You might feel lost for no reason or that something you can't quite place is missing."

"Nothing like that yet," Mara answered in between a bite of food, "but then again I can't exactly find much of anything you put in my head."

"And you won't until you use it and your brain maps it. Before long physics and nanotechnology
will be as easy to you as making blueberry muffins."

When their plates were well past empty, Tails glanced down at his watch, "Not long now."

Mara struggled to look out the window, past the reflections, "This doesn't look like a city to me," she remarked as open fields and rural houses floated by.

"It's not. There will be too much security at Station Square. We are getting off one station out and driving the rest."

"And I take it you will be getting off the same way you got on?"

The fox frowned, "Yes… unfortunately."

As the train began to slow Tails pulled out the large chest he had used to sneak onto the train. He opened it and removed its false top revealing a space large enough for him to fit. Anyone who bothered to open it would only see neatly packed clothes.

"Do you remember everything I told you?" Tails asked as he stepped inside.

"Yes, yes. Walk right to the car. Talk to no one. Don't let anyone see inside the car."

"Good. And let's try not to drop me this time," the kit added as he ducked down into the container.

Mara replaced covered him up with the false drawer and Tails' world went dark. He listened as the locks to the trunk were snapped shut followed quickly by the high pitched scream of the train's breaks. He never enjoyed being so cramped, but reminded himself that he had been in tighter spots for a much longer period of time.

The sounds of the station soon filled his ears as they exited the train. Tails could feel Mara struggling with the weight of the case as she stepped out onto the platform. Hurried footsteps soon became a never-ending background noise, drowned out only by intermittent sounds of food vendors and boarding announcements. The fox breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the distant honking of taxis waiting for fare. However, this respite was short lived. He could feel the trunk shifting side to side as Mara walked down what he assumed were stairs.

Just so long as she doesn't…

After a brief feeling of weightlessness, the fox found himself pinned to the false ceiling for a moment before being slammed back into the bottom. The process seemed to repeat as the trunk rolled down the steps, each one adding to the pain and frustration he was feeling.

Drop me, Tails thought when the trunk final settled in an upside down position. She is going to get me killed one way or another.

What was no doubt somewhat of a commotion quickly garnered the requisite amount of attention. The fox could hear voices approaching.

"Miss, are you alright?" someone asked.

Is she alright… what about me?

"Oh yes, I am fine. Just clumsy is all."

At least we both agree on that.
"Do you need a hand? That is quite a large piece of luggage for such a small girl."

"I think I'll manage, my car is just right over there."

"Oh, then allow me."

Tails could feel the case hoisted into the air by a set of strong and steady hands.

Mara called after the man, "Thanks, but I would prefer to…"

"Miss, this is my job, relax. I help hundreds of people on and off trains every day. This car here you said?"

"Yes, that's the one," she answered reluctantly.

The trunk touched down once again, but this time in a much gentler fashion. At least Tails could be thankful for that.

"The Trunk seems to be locked, Miss. Do you mind if I just put it in the back?"

Yes you mind! Tails wanted to scream.

"I can get it from here," Mara insisted.

"It's quite alright," the man replied as he opened a car door. "I'll just put it in the…"

"Shit," Tails swore softly into the shadows. He felt helpless.

"Uhh Miss, you have a Mobian in your car."

"Of course I do," Mara snapped. "He is my driver."

"I see but…"

"But what? Do you think my family got to where they are today because we pay people to do jobs that could be done for free?"

"Well…"

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Mara asked. "People are always so quick to judge our use of free Mobian labor."

Wow, Tails thought. She went all in on that one.

"I'll just put your luggage in the back Miss,"

"Yes, thank you that would be lovely."

Tails could feel his prison slide across the thick leather in the back seat.

"All set, Miss. Sorry for the trouble."

"It's alright, you wouldn't be the first. Here, something for all of your help."

"Thank you for understanding, Miss."

The door shut and the car quickly pulled away as the latches on the case were being undone. The
pale light of overhead street lamps soon greeted Tails as Mara freed him.

"Sorry," she said nervously, "I didn't mean to drop you… again. I even tried to keep him from opening the car door."

The fox did his best to maintain his composure, "It could have been worse. You did a good job of getting control of the situation back."

"I'll say," a voice came from the driver seat. "This one seems to know how to handle herself. Should have seen the look on the poor guys face."

"I just did what you told me to," Mara said with a guilty look on her face. "Acted like I was better than everyone else. It felt strange to see how he melted under my gaze. For a moment I even believed I was."

"I would keep on thinking that if I were you," the driver said. "Won't get very far where we are going if you are some sweet little girl. People will walk right over you."

Mara finally took a moment to size up the Mobian who was driving the car a fox slightly shorter than Tails sat in the driver seat. His fur was a dark khaki bordering on brown. Glowing orange eyes stared back at her through the rear view mirror.

"My friends call me Darky," he added seeing her gaze in the mirror.

"Mara," she replied.

Tails looked out the heavily tinted windows as they merged onto the highway. Other cars glided past them, taillights streaking in the night. There was no need to call any more attention to themselves by speeding.

"What's in the trunk?" Tails asked remembering that it was locked.

"Lots of toys for some of our boys north of town. Thought it best not to flash the wares."

"You are one crazy fox for making these runs."

"Look who is talking. Besides, they still haven't caught me."

As the city came into view Mara couldn't be bothered to tear herself away from the window. The dazzling lights of one of the most spectacular skylines in the world had captivated her, as it did everyone.

"The city that never sleeps," Tails said matching her gaze as he looked over her shoulder. "Even in the earliest hours of the morning there is no shortage of people… or light for that matter."

"I have never seen anything like it," she admitted. "Everything is so big."

"Just wait until you see the bridge,"

"What bridge?" Mara asked as they came around another bend.

A large suspension bridge loomed in the distance. Traffic flowed methodically under its giant arches. It was the lifeline to the city, a symbol of pride to anyone who lived there. As they crossed the threshold to the city, Tails' senses doubled down, looking for threats where he knew there were likely to be none. However, a pair of headlights seemed to linger on them, as if they were watching, which did not sit well with either of the kits. He turned around to look out the back window to
discover the tell tale signs of a copper's cruiser.

"How long has he been there?" Tails' asked.

"Too long for my taste," the driver replied.

"But he hasn't done anything?"

"Nope. My car is clean, but you know how these black sedans are popular with the local gangs."

"Get off at the next exit."

"Already ahead of you."

Their car switched lanes and found the exit ramp only to be followed by the cooper in question. When they hit the stoplight, the cruiser's lights started up and the small side street was soon bathed in blue pulsating light as the copper pulled up behind them.

"Why is he stopping us?" Mara asked.

"Probably the tint," Darky responded. "They don't like it when they can't see who is driving."

The three of them watched as the officer got out of his car and approached their vehicle. Darky cracked the window an inch and held out a stack of banded bills. The man quickly took them and deposited them inside his jacket. However, that didn't seem to be reason enough for him to leave. He tapped on the glass with the bottom of his torch, motioning for the window to be lowered further as he watched himself in the windows reflection.

"Loose him," Tails said with a small grin on his face.

"With pleasure," the other fox replied as he stepped on the gas and dumped the clutch. Even on the moist pavement the tires burned, kicking up smoke and the effervescent smell of hot rubber. The V8 roared, echoing loudly as the vehicle bolted down the street leaving the copper standing there in shock.

"Gonna want to buckle up," Tails said to Mara as he hopped into the passenger seat.

Traffic lights of every color streaked by in a magnificent display of color that only Christmas time could compare to. The wail of the copper's siren could be heard in the distance as he struggled to catch up.

"How do you want to play this?" Darky asked.

"Do what ever you have to do to get us there. They can't get their hands on Mara, or even know she is here for that matter."

The khaki colored fox reached for the hand brake and Mara began to shriek as their car continued on its journey, only sideways. Tails braced himself against the door as they turned hard onto a side street.

They had nearly cleared two entire blocks before the lights appeared behind them.

"Time to play with a him a little," Darky said as shifted into reverse and gunned it. The wheels spun to fight inertia and Mara screamed again as she flew into the back of Tails seat. At the last possible second their driver spun the car back around and threw the shifter back into second leaving the copper driving in the wrong direction.
Another cruiser pulled onto the street in front of them, lights already ablaze.

"They are not going to make this easy, are they?" Tails asked rhetorically as he looked in the glove compartment.

As Darky cut onto the street the copper emerged from, Tails pulled on all black leather gloves and hoodie that was easily three sizes two big for him. A chick check in the mirror confirmed there were now two sets of flashing lights behind them.

Tails looked on as his partner reached for third and the engine barked up a backfire as it continued to propel them at a frighteningly increasing speed. When the speedometer reached 120 Tails could see Mara close her eyes. On these small streets no mistakes could be made at such a velocity. Not even the craziest of the coppers would have ventured to keep up.

Darky slammed on the break and clutch as a car pulled out in front of them, opting instead for the highway onramp as he swerved to avoid it. Weaving in and out of traffic was helping, but the highway let the copper's catch up.

"You got anything nice and flashy?" Tails asked as he put on an all black ski mask.

"Center console."

The fox found a nice chrome revolver that, combined with his outfit, did nothing but suggest he was a local thug. The kit leaned out the window making sure to let the glint of his gun catch their headlights. The first cop to see it backed off immediately, but the second pressed forward with renewed vigor. Tails fired, and the .44 round tore a hole in the soft rubber of the copper's cruiser sending him swerving back and forth across the highway before plowing into the sidewall.

"One down," Tails said as he sat back inside the car, trying to reorganize the large gold chain that was hanging from his neck.

Darky shot off the next off ramp leaving easily a foot or two of clearance between them and the road before slamming back into the pavement sending a shower of sparks in all directions. Mara seemed to be past screaming and was now simply staring forward like a deer in headlights, glued to the intersection before them. They slipped through the red light and flowing traffic as if it were not there at all. The copper on the other hand had no such luck as he slammed into another car, rolling until his cruiser wrapped itself around a light post.

"All clear," Tails said as he looked through the side mirror at the newly formed wreckage with a smug look on his face.

Their car slowed down to a more normal speed and began to blend in with traffic again.

"It's just up here," their driver said as he pulled onto a one way.

Mara had finally seemed to snap out of her trance and began to take in her surroundings. Towers surrounded them on all sides as high-rises soared into the night sky, their peaks obscured in the wash of street lights. The brown fox fumbled for a remote in his pocket and a large door opened up revealing a private parking garage. The kit pulled their car inside and found a quite space at the far end of the lot amongst the multitude of other high end cars.

"Thanks for the ride," Tails said as he got out of the car, still wearing the hoodie. "Glad they sent you."

"Likewise," the other fox replied.
"You're not getting back in?" Mara asked as she pulled out the large trunk.

"No, I think I will take my chances."

The pair of them walked to the elevator and hit the call button. After a few moments of waiting it opened. The lift moved swiftly to the sixtieth floor where Tails poked his head out and checked either end of the hall before rushing Mara out.

"Down here," he said beckoning her to follow.

Tails rapidly produced a key from his cargo pants and slid it into the door at the end of the hall. Nothing could have prepared them for what was on the other side of the door. A room with stunningly polished tile and vibrant colors opened up before her. The furniture was of style and quality the two had never experienced. However, what was truly the most remarkable feature was the view. The city sprawled out before them in a sprinkling of lights, buildings and silhouettes. Mara nearly dropped the case as Tails shut the door behind them.

"This is… mine?" she asked.

"For as long as you work here."

"Where… how did you get this?"

"I already told you, enough money can get you anything."

"But how do you have this kind of money? How did you buy this here?"

"There are more ways to fight a war than with just guns," Tails said. "If Kintobor knew about what the Acorn family owned he would not think himself possessing the upper hand so firmly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the Resistance owns more of this city than you could possibly understand. Shell corporations, lackeys, non-profits, they are all just names on paper, but they can all own something just as easily as they themselves can be possessed. Money is no object to the Resistance, it is just a tool to meet our end. We have one of the most comprehensive networks of obscured ownership ever devised."

Mara spun around the room barely paying mind to any words that left the fox's mouth. She finally settled down when she let herself fall backwards onto an oddly shaped suede couch.

"Don't get too comfortable," the fox said as he eyed the girl. "There is still plenty of work to be done."

"Like what?" she asked. "Look at this place, it has everything? I could never had dreamed of living somewhere like this."

"It doesn't have food," Tails suggested as he opened an empty fridge in the kitchen.

"Well, we can just… eat out," Mara said as she realized that would not be possible for one of them. "Fine, I will go look for something to eat."

"Thanks," the kit replied, "and pick up a paper while you are at it.

"A paper? Why?"
"Just do it."

"Alright, alright." Mara said as she closed the door behind her.

Tails continued his inspection of the apartment in her absence. It was without a doubt one of the nicest places he had been, but he couldn't help but notice that there was hardly a place for him. The small study would have to suffice as a bedroom. However, the thought of being trapped in one place for weeks at a time did not seem appealing to him.

It was close to a half hour before the girl returned with two large shopping bags filled to the top with food. She set the bag on the counter and Tails immediately began to rummage through them, grabbing a box of cookies and the paper he had so desperately wanted.

After finding a seat in the living room he set to work on opening his snack and looking through the classified section. His eyes became tired as he scanned ad after ad. The Resistance was notorious about communicating through them, but it wasn't his comrades he was interested in finding.

"You don't even want the front page," Mara asked after noticing it still on the counter.

The fox shook his head as he continued to read. A smile crossed his face when he found what he was looking for. It was obscured on the last page of the help wanted section. Need sitter for twins, knowledge of fairy tales required.

The ad listed a number, but Tails didn't need to call it, he already knew who would answer if he did.

"Fiona," he said quietly to himself.

Tails reached for a phone, but not to call her.

"Hello, this is the Capital Times ad department, Peggy speaking. How can I help you?" the person on the other end asked.

"Yes, I would like to cancel and advertisement I placed," Tails said.

"Of course, which one would that be?"

Tails read her the ad in question.

"Certainly, Sir. I see you have paid for a whole year, where will I be sending the refund for the remaining balance?"

"What address did I leave you?"

"10 E Newbrite St. Apt 40."

"That's the one," Tails said before hanging up.

Mara looked at him curiously, "What was that about?"

"Nothing," Tails said with a slightly guilty look on his face. "Nothing at all." The fox leaned back in his chair taking another bite out of a cookie, relaxing as he looked out into the city staring back at him.
Tears

Fiona threw the long faced rat into the back of her squad's van, causing the rodent to trip over himself as he stumbled in his cuffs. For a change Fiona didn't feel so bad about locking up her own kind. This particular thief and his crew had been looting weapon caches and selling their plunders to the local gangs. She knew she owed Kintobor nothing, but Capital City was her home now and nothing seemed to make it more unsafe than idiots wielding automatics. Fiona could hear them jetting up and down the strip in their fast cars, firing madly into the night sky as if it somehow made them kings of the city.

The fox turned around to find her partner dragging a funny looking weasel out of the abandoned warehouse followed closely by number nine, who had clearly apprehended what could only could have been a twin of the first weasel.

"That's the last of them, boss." Jake said as he heaved the short nosed rodent into the back of the van with the rest of his friends. "Should see the hardware these little shits were pack'n."

"I saw," Fiona replied. "Enough to start a small war."

The fox turned back to the rat, "Haven't you lot learned that crime doesn't pay?"

"Com'n from ya bich tha when an sol us all ou," he spat back at her through his broken jaw and shattered teeth.

"Let's get something clear, it wasn't the pathetic low life scum such as yourself that I sold out. It was my friends and family, all of whom were looking out for people like you rather than trying to make a quick buck. You almost make me look good you selfish bastard, and that's saying something."

The rat wasn't even sure how to respond, stuttering for words but coming up empty. Louise helped the other weasel into the back with as little compassion as Jake had shown his brother. Then the vixen slammed the door on their gloomy faces while she tried to find her characteristic grin. It had eluded her recently and she didn't feel the same with out it.

"You alright, boss?" Jake asked as he walked towards the front of the vehicle. "Going harder on yourself than usual."

"What's your price Jake?"

A look of confusion overcame her partner as he struggled to find the meaning in her question.

"How many innocent human lives are you worth? When would you sell out?" She asked as she got into the passenger seat of the van.

"I… I have never really thought about it," Jake replied as he shifted the car into gear.

"And I hope for your own sake that you don't ever have to," The fox replied sharply,

"Don't beat yourself up for being strong willed."

"Selfish, the word is selfish, and I am not. I just lacked the foresight to see the toll this would have on me. I never thought it would have changed me so much," Fiona said as she tugged on her silver collar.
Fiona put her feet up on the dash and stared whimsically out the window watching as people went about their lives, imagining what she would do to trade places with one of them. She and Jake spent the rest of the hour long ride back to headquarters making small talk, doing their best to avoid the heavier subjects that had been creeping up more frequently. To their surprise Julian was standing in the loading bay in his usual red tailored suit when they arrived. Fiona and her men stood at attention to greet the man.

"So these are the vermin smugglers?" the round man asked rhetorically as he adjusted his spectacles to examine his new prisoners. "I expected… better. No matter I have something special planned for all of you."

The Mobians looked blankly back at the fat human, not giving him the satisfaction of seeing them tremble in fear. Fiona respected them for that.

"So quiet," Julian chuckled. "Not for long, I can promise you that much. Each one of you will sing me a song before the day is over."

And they did, one by one.

Julian started with the rat, which didn't seem to surprise either Fiona or Jake, who had once again been summoned to 'oversee' the test. The two of them stood in the corner of the room while scientists in white lab coats poked and prodded the Mobian with menacing devices until at least twelve wires were connected in one way or another to each of his limbs. The rat had managed to hold his tongue so far, which was impressive given the amount of pain he likely endured during the process.

After the men retreated Julian began to pace back and forth in front of the smuggler who was strapped down to the elongated chair. "Where did you get the weapons?"

"Stole 'em," the rat responded nonchalantly.

"From me?" Julian asked as if he was slightly hurt by the sentiment.

The Mobian grinned in response, ceasing the moment to fill his face with a smug look of satisfaction. Julian nodded to one of his associated on the other side of a glass window before turning back to him.

"In the old days, you could lose a hand for stealing," Julian replied with an equally sinister smile.

Finally the Mobian broke and let out a blood curdling scream as the wires attached to his left arm pulsed with energy. The hair on his arms became singed and fell off as the flesh slowly wove itself into metal all while the bones split open revealing newly formed circuitry. The rodent, amidst his sadistic cries for help, looked on in horror as his arm was transformed from living breathing tissue into cold lifeless mechanics. The wires leading into his arm fell out leaving the rat's new metallic limb still attached to the rest of his completely normal body. When the Mobian caught his breath he wiggled his fingers and for a moment appeared to be amused at the thought of having a robotic limb. However, his look quickly returned to fear when Julian began pacing again.

"Who were they for?"

The rat didn't answer.

"You are going to lose that other arm too. And your legs for that matter. Not talking isn't going to help."

The Mobian remained defiant even as Kintobor nodded his head to the man in the other room for the
second time.

More shrieks erupted as the skin peeled back on the rat's other arm. The process continued one limb at a time until just a flesh torso remained.

"Any last words?" Kintobor asked.

The Mobian seemed to be calm, delirious from pain, but couldn't be bothered to respond.

"Worthless," the fat man muttered as he signaled the man in the control room again.

Soon the rat joined the ranks of lifeless husks, staring blankly out into the room with empty eyes.

"Bring me another!" Kintobor bellowed, unsatisfied with the results.

The show seemed to repeat for each of the smugglers, that was until he got to the twins.

"Twins," Julian said with a smirk words could not describe. "Nearly genetically identical, ohhh the possibilities…” he laughed madly.

When the two were finally wired, Kintobor asked, "Which one of you would like to go first?"

Neither responded as the weasels looked at one another trying to figure out who might sell out the first.

Fiona stared at them as she masked her true emotions. In her mind she was wishing that they were dead, even if that meant killing them herself. She couldn't stand to watch a man so mercilessly torture people just for his own amusement. For a moment, Fiona locked eyes with one of the Mobian's, his eyes seemed to be begging for mercy, but it was a gift she could not grant him.

These experiments had gone well past a point of fascination for Kintobor, entering into the realm of obsession in which there was no line he was not willing to cross or consequence he was afraid of. When the twins finally stopped screaming one of them licked ferociously at the air with his teeth, while the other sat idly in his chair. Despite being genetically identical, one had seemed to fight ever so much harder for life, if what he was now could be called that all.

Brothers no more, Fiona thought as the scene of two eerily similar robots clawed at her from the inside.

Kintobor seemed oddly delighted with the prospect of these two new toys as he giddily babbled to himself about what to do with them next. Fiona had seen enough though, and by the looks of it Jake wasn't doing very well either. She turned to leave, but it was as if Kintobor could see out the back of his head.

"Going so soon?" he asked without turning around.

"Are we still needed?"

"You tell me? Do I have the girl yet? Why haven't you been out to Coastaries?"

"Those leads all dried up, would have been a waste of time."

"So you suspected that would happen."

Fiona nodded even though he couldn't see her. He was smart enough to know that she knew what she was doing.
"I assume you have some idea where she could be then?"

"Some idea," Fiona admitted, "but nothing to back it up."

"I must admit I don't think you would be quite as helpful in a different form," Kintobor replied, almost complimenting her. "The capability of rational thought diminishes sharply with this process."

Fiona didn't want to respond to that, how could she, it was a trap either way she answered it. She opted instead to let the man continue.

"You have my word, Fiona, that if you continue to prove yourself useful you will not have to meet this fate. However, there are obviously things outside of my control, such as the promotion Jake has tucked away somewhere, which I hope he is not taking light heartedly."

Jake met the man's gaze almost accepting his unspoken challenge, "I think I still have a thing or two to learn."

Julian laughed, "So there is some smarts in you after all. Carry on you two, but don't keep me waiting on that girl for long. There is not much left to try without the inhibitor now that we can selectively roboticize individual elements of the host's body."

The two agents graciously accepted their dismissal and walked quicker than normal to the lift.

"I think I need a drink," Jake stated as the doors shut and the elevator started to move.

"Is there ever a time when you don't?"

Her partner chuckled as he thought about his answer, "When I am sleeping I suppose."

More and more of their team had finally started showing up at their dive. Today two through five and Louise had managed to make it. Even if most of them came for the free drinks it put Fiona's mind at ease. Jake wasted no time ordering them a round, and even less time gulping it down.

A few of the other soldiers eyed him suspiciously.

"What exactly does he do with them?" number two asked.

The smallest hint of a smile faded from Jakes face as he accepted another beer from the bartender, "You don't want to know."

"The way you're drinking, I think I might," number four added.

Jake shook his head, "It's beyond messed up and god knows if I could un-see it I would." Jake paused a moment before taking another large swig, "and I have certainly been trying."

The men laughed at first, but then went quiet as they saw their captain mentally retreat into a memory that they had no place in. It was the closest Fiona had ever seen him to admitting that he was on the wrong side. After a few more drinks, the gloominess surrounding him faded and he livened up, just as he always did.

As the night progressed so too did the potency of their beverages. Fiona for a change had made a conscious effort not to keep up with her partner, who was near putting himself under the table. Even the other members of their team had taken to cutting themselves off and stumbled out of the bar in search of their homes. She had never gone as far as to stop him, only be there to take him home. Jake had his demons and he dealt with them the way he wanted to, it was not her place to judge him.
When the bar was near closing, Fiona gathered her strength as she slid an arm under her partners, propping him up with all her strength. Thankfully she didn't have far to go. Jake had been nice enough to procure her an apartment in the same building as him, which was a large step up from the closet she had been given in Kintobor's office.

"Come on Jake," she muttered as she pushed him up the steps, "I need you to help me here just a little."

He did nothing but giggle like a little girl as he stumbled up to the landing. When she got him to his room it wasn't surprising to see that he was incapable of finding the lock with his key. Fiona snatched it away from him and opened the door.

"You haven't been this bad in a long time, what's with you?"

"What's with you!" he asked pointing a finger nearly prodding her nose.

The fox sighed as she pushed the man into his room causing him to fall to the floor. Fiona decided that she didn't care and shut the door behind him. Before she took so much as a step she could hear his deep breathing.

Is he asleep already?

Feeling guilty Fiona turned back and let herself in to find that her partner had indeed already faded into what she hoped, for his sake, were pleasant dreams. She knew there was no moving him, even if she could drag him, getting him on this bed would be impossible. Instead she fetched a pillow and put it under his head. Satisfied that her now incapacitated partner would be better off, she left to find her own room.

When she opened the door a cool breeze greeted her, flowing through an open window as it moved the curtains about playfully. Rather than go for the lights she opened the door on the bureau next to the entrance, fumbling around the small gun she kept hidden there. When her hands found it she went for the switch and spun around as the room became illumined.

"Won't do you much good," a voice called out from the shadow in the corner of her room.

She lined up the shot pulled the trigger only to hear the click of an empty weapon. Fiona tossed it back in the drawer and slammed it shut.

"How did you find me?" she asked as she walked over to where Tails sat.

"You didn't make it hard."

Not that Fiona would admit it, but she was strangely glad that he was there despite still being upset with him. He stood up as she approached, but nothing prepared him for the cold sting of her hand across his face. The kit rubbed his reddened cheek looking at her as if he was demanding an explanation.

"That was for making me look bad," she stated firmly.

Tails frowned, "And I was just supposed to let you take the girl? Do you have any idea how valuable she might be? What could happen if Kintobor got his hands on her?"

Fiona wanted to laugh, she knew better than anyone besides Julian himself. To her surprise she found herself fighting back tears, "Of course."
It wasn't hard for Tails to see the sorrow on her face, but it was obvious he was having his doubts on whether to believe it or not.

"He… he is so close, Miles," she said with a snuffle as she conjured up the look on the weasels' faces. "The things he does…" Fiona found herself retreating from the fox, as if she was all of the sudden scared of him judging her. He took a step closer, reaching for her shoulder but she turned away to face the wall.

"One thousand seven hundred and fifty two!" she nearly screamed through another tattered breath as she struggled to keep herself from crying.

"What?" Tails asked confused.

"One thousand seven hundred and fifty two," she said again more calmly. "You asked me not too long ago how many people I had…" Fiona stopped. She couldn't finish the sentence.

The vixen turned around to see the look of horror on the fox's face. It was what she had always been afraid of. Even if she didn't look it, she was a monster.

"I may not have done them all myself, but I feel… responsible," she said as a tear finally fell down her cheek. "The people I dragged away to the bottom of a prison cell, to be tortured, all just to save myself... they are nothing more than a number in my head now. The cost," Fiona said through a sob, "is finally starting to catch up with me."

The look of fear slowly vanished from the kit's face as he came to grips with what she was dealing with.

"I wake up every day wishing I could just put a pullet in his head and end this farce."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because," Fiona responded with a new look of guilt, "his life is linked to mine. If he dies, so do I," she answered tugging on her silver collar as tears finally began to flow down the side of her face. "He made sure there was no easy way out, and that his life was every bit as important as my own. Do you know what that feels like?"

"Fiona…" Tails said with apathy in his voice, almost pitying her.

She wanted to slap him again, but instead she embraced him for what felt like an eternity. It took him a moment to wrap his arms around, but once he did she let herself melt into him. Fiona basked in his warmth letting it dry her eyes. When she finally stopped crying she pulled herself away and looked into the kit's eyes. Buried deep below the surface they seemed to be filled with an assortment of painful memories. Her mouth found his and before she knew it her back was against a wall.

She spun him, still embracing, to the other side of the room where she reached out blindly for a light switch. The last thing she needed was anyone seeing them together. She found herself breathing deeper as the kit continued to kiss her softly. She pushed him backwards onto her bed as she moved to unzip her black combat vest.

"Fiona," Tails said again as he sat upright, "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?" Fiona said as she sat next to him, leaning in for a kiss.

He was strong in all things but his resistance to her. She knew that and wasn't afraid to take advantage of it. She pulled the hoodie off of him and leaned him back on the bed, stroking his
muzzle gently. It was fun to watch the look of innocence and guilt that had been mashed together to form his new persona slowly fade from his face as he became the fox she remembered. His eyes narrowed and gradually his embrace became ever so slightly gentler.

Clothes continued to come off until the two found themselves intertwined with only their fur between them. Fiona could barely keep up with the kit as she got lost in the passion. Her breaths became quicker now, almost to a flutter, until the two tumbled back down onto the bed.

The vixen curled up next to the two tailed fox under her sheets, resting her chin on his shoulder. Her anxiety was gone. When she was close to him there was nothing to be afraid of, not even herself. His breathing was still heavy and she smiled as she felt the rise and fall of his chest and a heart beat that seemed to be slowing. Fiona purred softly with content in his ear. She wanted to feel guilty for indulging herself, for continuing the delusion that she could actually live this life, but that could wait until tomorrow or at least until the fox next to her fell asleep.

Fiona held onto Tails longer than she could ever remember, but she had nowhere to run to this time, so she saw no reason to let go. More than hour had passed since the fox's panting had turned to snoring. She bid her time looking at the ceiling she could only barely make out. Her thoughts had drifted back into the same shallow things she thought about every day, the same haunting memories that kept her up every night. Finally Fiona let Tails go, edging herself to the side of the bed and sitting upright. To her surprise he called out nearly unintelligibly from a restless sleep before waking.

"What is it Miles?" she asked him calmly as she reached a hand out to comfort him.

"You're... you're here," he said in surprise, rubbing his eyes as if he couldn't trust them.

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

The fox looked back up at her struggling for the words to describe his feelings, "You're never there."

"Still having that dream?" she asked genuinely concerned even though she already knew the answer. "It's okay baby, I am still here."

"I am sorry if I woke you," the kit said as he too sat up.

"You didn't wake me," she answered reluctantly with a saddened look on her face, "I don't think I have slept in the last five years."

He smiled back at her, "have you even bothered to try?"

What kind of stupid question was that? Of course I have.

"To sleep? Of course."

"Lay down and close your eyes," Tails said.

"Honey, I know how sleeping works."

"No you don't," the fox insisted.

She obliged his odd request, returning to the warm spot she had left next to him.

"Now what?" she asked.

He could feel the kit's paw's on her temples, slowly massaging her head in small circles.
"Now you sleep," he said in a soothing voice.

She couldn't be sure what it is that he had done, but it almost felt as if her body had seeped into the mattress. This was nothing like the exhaustion that eventually overcame her every night. Fiona couldn't feel or think a thing; she was floating blissfully into nothing until there was nothing.

Then there was a pounding, one that seemed to echo inside of her head.

"Fiona," the voice called out.

The pounding returned, this time louder.

Then the voice came back, "Fiona are you in there?"

Slowly her consciousness found her body again.

"Jake!" she said softly to her herself.

What are you doing here?

She glanced over at the time, it was already an hour after she was supposed to meet him for their morning breakfast. Without even thinking she pushed the two tailed fox out of her bed. He rolled grumpily onto the floor behind the frame and out of view of the door.

"Stay down there!" she told him sternly.

She reached for her vest, but opted for the bed sheet instead when she heard Jake slide his key into he door. He stood there for a moment staring at her, "Somebody slept in," he said jokingly until he looked around the room.

Fiona followed his gaze, seeing for the first time the disarray of her apartment.

"What the hell happened in here?" he asked. "Are those claw marks?" Jake inquired as he pointed towards a wall above her bed?

Fiona had always been good at keeping a straight face, but this was a new challenge, "I think I had a little too much last night is all."

"So then this is yours?" Jake asked as he picked up Tails' hoodie.

Before she could say anything, Tails was already on his feet gun drawn. Jake, despite what having had to be one hell of a hangover was just as quick. The two were staring each other down.

"Wait!" Fiona screamed stepping between them, struggling to hold the sheets around herself while throwing her arms in the air.

"Are you shitting me Fi?" Jake asked still pointing his gun at Tails.

Fi, he must be upset.

"Jake, just hold on a second," Fiona said as she turned to Tails. "Miles, baby can you put your gun down?"

He shook his head.

"You have to trust me," she said turning back to Jake, "both of you."
"It's him or me, Fi. Your choice," Jake said almost as if he didn't care what the answer was. The look on his face was wrought with betrayal.

"Miles, sweetie, go put some pants on," Fiona insisted.

The kit hesitated for a second before lowering his berretta, "Fine."

She turned back to Jake, motioning for him to lower his gun as Tails disappeared into the bathroom. "He won't hurt you, Jake, but I can't let you hurt him either, I couldn't live with myself if you did."

"How could you?" Jake asked hurt. "Do you know what Kintobor would do if he found out you were..."

"Yes of course I know!" Fiona nearly screamed. "But that's only a problem if someone tells him." Jake put the Sig back in his holster eying the fox with contempt, "You want me to lie to him?"

"It's only lying if he asks."

Tails reemerged having found the majority of his clothes. He sat back down in the chair he had been waiting in the night before. "Can I trust him?" the kit asked.

Jake and Fiona both replied with the opposite answer at the same time.

Tails laughed as he raised an eyebrow, "So which is it then. Yes or no?"

"Jake," Fiona nearly begged. "I need you to understand."

"Understand what exactly? That you have been sleeping with the enemy? I understand that just fine. What I don't get is what you are asking me to do right now."

As the vixen struggled for the words Jake continued, "I am not going to tell Kintobor if that's what you're getting at. If I wanted you dead I could make that happen myself."

The look of worry finally began to wear off Fiona's face.

"How long, boss?" How long has this been go'n on?"

We are back to boss, that's a start.

Fiona shrugged her shoulders.

"Tell him, or I will," Tails called out from the corner of the room.

The vixen turned red with embarrassment, "three years."

"And you never thought to tell me?"

"How could I?"

"I thought we were friends, boss?"

"We are," Fiona started, "I was never sure how you would take and this just seemed like too much."

Jake smiled, "You're probably right, but maybe its time you trust me a little more, especially after last week."

Fiona nodded, "I am sorry, Jake."

"Good, because I am hungry."

The vixen chuckled at her partner, "I owe you."

"No, you and I, we are even, but him and I," Jake said locking eyes with Tails, "We are far from even."

"What do you need from me?" Tails asked.

"The girl."

"That's not going to happen and you know it."

Jake didn't seem all that surprised, "Fine, Knothole."

"Be realistic," Tails suggested.

"Ahh forget it," Jake mumbled, "But remember, you owe me fox."

"I do," Tails admitted.

"I'll give you two a minute, but just don't keep me waiting all day. A man needs his food. And damn it, Miles, I really hope I don't run into you again for both our sakes."

Fiona's heart rate finally began to slow as Jake closed the door behind her. The constant surge of adrenalin was keeping her on edge, making her feel twitchy as if her fingers were on fire. She pulled back on her vest and pant's before looking back at Tails, "Now I need to go."

The kit nodded back to her.

"It probably wouldn't be a good idea for you to be here when I get back."

"I wont be," Tails replied. "I need to go to work myself."

The vixen left her apartment, trying to close the door behind her as if it was the start of a normal day. She was good at lying to herself, but this was harder. As she turned the key it felt instead as if the world was rotating while she remained in place. How much longer would it be before she stopped pretending to be a person that was slowly killing her?
Tails continued to sit in the corner of Fiona's room, contemplating what to do next as he watched the lock on her door turn into place. He had never intended to be there long, but once again the vixen had gotten the better of him. The waterworks were a new trick, one that he was beginning to think wasn't a ploy at all. It seemed that for a change Fiona needed him more than he needed her, but that didn't stop the fox from cursing himself. Inevitably she always caused him to surrender to his other side, where control was secondary to instinct. He pitied himself knowing that he could be no better than the animals the dominion pretended his kind was.

"What did she mean he is so close?" the fox asked out loud even though no one was there. He had meant to ask her, but between her tears and his temporary lapse in judgment it had slipped his mind. The kit however, did decide that the night had not been a complete waste.

She didn't run away this time.

Sure, he had cornered her, but that would not have stopped her in the past. Something was different. For the first time he awoke from his dream feeling as if nothing more than a nightmare had occurred instead of reality itself. Previously he had always awoken from his dream to find that his life was still as empty as they day he lost her. Fiona always disappeared in the dream, but seeing her there next to him when he opened his eyes lifted his spirits in ways he thought not possible.

Perhaps what was most distracting though was Fiona's relationship with her partner. They were friends to say the least. It seemed odd given the circumstances, and the fox couldn't seem to wrap his mind around how a human who hunted Mobian's for a living could at the same time be so close with one. They were even going to breakfast together.

Tails sighed, realizing that another man had the missing part of the relationship with the vixen he loved. Fiona had never bothered to show him that level of companionship, not that she ever had been given the chance. The fox cursed Julian again for taking her away from him.

The kit looked out the open window into the small back alley illuminated by a noon sun. Tails frowned. He couldn't just walk around Capital City in broad daylight. Night time was bad enough as it was. The sewers, aside from their obvious drawbacks, were hard to navigate with his HUD, but since Fiona had broken his in one of their little games he was left without that as well. He could add replacing it to his list of things to do for the day.

Tails found his way out the way he came in, the window. The fire escape that traversed back and forth made it all too easy to get to the roof tops. The fox did his best to move quickly, jumping from ledge to ledge as he traveled between buildings. He could only go as far as a block, but that's all he needed. Another fire escape took him down into a dark alley where he disappeared into a service entrance for the subway. Unlike sewers, the tracks ran in very predictable directions. All he had to do was dodge the trains.

For the better part of a day Tails wandered around in the city's underbelly alone. Occasionally, a single blinding light would open up in the darkness and the kit would have to press his back against the wall as a subway tore past. The notion of seeing daylight again became bleak as the kit checked his watch. After navigating miles of tunnel Tails headed up another service entrance until he found himself standing only a block away from Mara's apartment. Keeping to the shadows the fox crossed the street, and let himself in the back stairwell.

Tails slid inside the apartment quietly shutting the door behind him. Mara was already back, relaxing
on one of their oddly shaped couches.

She lifted her gaze to greet him, "Where have you been?"

Tails scratched at the back of his head, "Spent most of my time just trying to get back here. It's not easy getting around for me."

"I doubt getting around for you is hard," Mara said with a big grin, "but I could see how getting back might have been hard. Let me guess, Fiona?"

Tails stared back at her with a rather cross look on his face, locking eyes with her as she smiled wearing a smug look that seemed to suit her new attire. Tails took a seat in the chair across from her.

"Yes," he finally admitted.

"Don't act so guilty, she makes you happy."

"I wouldn't if it wasn't so damn reckless."

"I thought you liked dangerous, I am surprised it doesn't make it more fun."

Tails chuckled at the notion, "It's not just my life on the line here. I don't think you want me to get caught."

"No, Mara admitted, but I do think you want to know how my interview went."

The fox raised an eyebrow as he stared at the girl over their unnecessarily low coffee table, "How did you do?"

"Hired me on the spot."

"Really?" Tails responded genuinely surprised. "Why?"

"Well, to be honest, the interview was going pretty bad at first. So many of his questions were about procedure and previous lab experience. Nothing seemed to be triggering my recall."

"So what did you do?"

"Just made it up as I went along. Part of me thinks he could tell. I mean this guy didn't even care that I was smart… or attractive. All he seemed to want was for someone to do his work for him and make him look good in the process."

"Typical…" Tails remarked.

"Then I noticed there was a chemical equation on his desk, so I picked it up without asking. He immediately demanded that I give it back, so I did, but not without making a few changes first."

"You solved it?" the kit asked with a smile.

"You bet! Should have seen the look on his face. He didn't believe it at first. Kept rechecking and rechecking it. Then he asked me how I did it so quickly and I just shrugged. Long story short," Mara said as she held out a dominion lab badge, "I got this and I start work tomorrow! Forty five thousand credits for a lab assistant! Can you believe that?"

"Well that almost sounded too easy."
"To you maybe. I was sweating bullets. He was a creepy old guy with no personality staring at me through his glasses as if I was a waste of his time."

"Well, you showed him."

"Yeah, I did."

"Here," Tails said as he tossed her a set of keys from his cargo pants.

"What are these for?"

"I need you to give me a ride," Mara looked at him oddly.

"Not to Fiona's, don't worry. Although it may as well be."

"What do you mean?"

"Need you to take me to the Upper East Side. I have to find an old friend."

"Whose car are these to?"

"Yours, enjoy."

The girl didn't know how to react. She had been given so many things lately, it was obvious she had run out of ways to say thank you.

"Don't worry, it's not stick," the fox added.

Mara giggled, "This feels so weird. I never thought I would own a car."

"C'mon don't you want to try it out?"

The two left the apartment, one more eagerly than the other. Mara's impatience was obvious as she tapped her foot repetitively on the elevator floor, waiting for it to hit the garage.

"Which one is it?" Mara asked as she stared at all of the cars before her.

"This one," Tails said as he approached an all white sport coup.

Mara stood at the rear of the car mouth opened wide, "This one?"

"Your daddy's rich remember?"

The grin on Mara's face was as big as Tails could ever remember seeing it.

The engine roared to life, echoing loudly off of the walls of the cement garage. The smile on the girls face grew even bigger.

"If I didn't know better, I might actually think you like this car."

"No, I don't like this car, I love this car."

The fox seemed to have brought something out of her he was never really sure she had. The wheels spun, screeching loudly as Mara pulled out of the parking garage, sparing no expense with the accelerator. For the first time since he had met her, Mara looked like the young women she was. She
dialed back the sun roof and let her newly dyed hair frolic about in the wind. The new Mara was hardly recognizable.

When they finally arrived, Mara pulled over to the curb and Tails hopped out. It was a dark one way street with no one in sight. The kit stepped out of the car and put his hood up to hide his face.

"Wait," she called out before Tails could shut the door. "How do I get back?"

"Even streets run north and south, odd east and west," the fox replied.

"That's it?"

"You are going to need to learn your way around this city sooner or later, the best way to do that is to get lost. Don't be late for work in the morning," Tails said with a grin on his face as he shut the door. Even through the tinted glass he could see a look of frustration on Mara's face. The car slowly pulled away and turned out of sight.

Should have turned left, Tails thought to himself as he watched her.

There were few places a Mobian could go in capital city and feel even remotely welcome, but the Upper East Side was well regarded for being nearly lawless and subsequently a safe haven for well connected Mobians. Tails burred his hands deep in his khakis to keep his paws from showing. The hood on his sweatshirt was pulled low and over his face.

"What are you do'n round here little man?" one of the thugs asked as the fox approached.

"Little," Tails snorted quietly to himself.

Tails fought the urge to bare his canines as a smile curled up the side of his face. Tails continued to walk towards the group as if he had no heard them.

"You deaf," one of them asked as he walked up to the fox brandishing a colt .45.

Tails pulled a hand out of his pocket and twisted the weapon until one the man's fingers snapped. The idiot had the audacity to hold it sideways, only making it easier for his hand to be twisted to a breaking point. The thug fell to his knees screaming in pain as the weapon dropped from his mangled hand. The kit kept ahold of him, contorting the man's wrist so he couldn't move without it snapping like a twig.

The others began to back up when the saw the fur on his paw, realizing that Tails was no kid, but rather a Mobian.

"What do ya want?" the thug asked as he looked into the fox's glowing eyes.

"Where is Tucks," Tails replied.

"What do you want with some junkie?"

Tails twisted his hand harder causing his prisoner to yelp again. For whatever reason, the man didn't understand he was not in a position to be asking questions.

"Okay, okay. Couple o blocks ova. He is near the shelta."

The fox finally let go and the man pulled his hand back, cradling it before looking down where his gun lay. Tails put a boot on top of it.
"I hope you are smarter than that," Tails said looking down at him.

The gangster got up and joined his friends in a sprint down the alley. They were probably going to find some backup, but Tails didn't care, he didn't plan on sticking around long.

Tucks was right where the man had said he would be. Tucker, was an average looking guy with more problems than most, least of which were the drugs. He could always be found tucked into a ball on some street corner begging for money. However few knew of his true talent and source of income. The lanky man with scrappily long blonde hair was a provider of hard to come by information and goods.

"Spare some change," he asked looking only at Tails' boots.

The fox dropped a thick wad of cash in the tattered hat he was holding out. The change in weight caught Tuck's attention and he proceeded to look inside the fedora before changing his gaze to the fox standing over him.

"Ahh, my favorite fox," he proclaimed. "What can I do for you?"

"Need some tech. Think you can get it for me?"

"What is that I might be after?"

"HUD, military spec."

"That's not going to be easy."

"Which is why I came to you. It needs to be clean too. I can't have the dominion tracking my ass with one their sub protocols running on there."

"Of course, but its going to cost you."

Tails dropped more money into his hat, "Not a problem."

"It never is with you."

"You know who to give it to. He will see that it finds me."

Tucks nodded, "I do, but now that you mention it, that might be a problem. Been hearing lots of rumors about Naugus' gang dragging in a fox earlier today. Did it in broad daylight too. Might be that is our friend."

"What?" Tails said in shock as he grabbed the man by the shoulders dragging him to his feet.

"Memory is a bit fuzzy though," Tucks said.

The fox shook his head in disgust as he reached in his pocket for more money. All junkies were the same, just looking for away to stay afloat. As long as you gave them enough to go sailing, loyalty was a near meaningless term.

"Naugus and his boys carted in some fox earlier today. Black shroud over the head and all but they only had one Tail. Me thinks your friend Darky could have bitten off more than he could chew when he got involved running guns for them," Tucker replied as he began to count the money.

"Sounds like a deal went bad."
Tucks nodded in response.

"You know where they are holding him?"

"Maybe," Tucker responded suggestively.

Tails had reached his limit and slammed the man backwards into the brick wall. "Do you have any respect? That fox brings you half the intel and tech you sell. Do you really want to lose him!"

"Relax man. They got em in the same spot they take everyone."

"Was that so hard?"

"This wall is, yes," Tucks responded glancing down at where the fox's hands rest on his shoulder."

Tails let him go and the man quickly returned to the ground, slumping over and holding out his hat waiting for someone else to pass. Even for someone called Tucker, his nick name seemed to fit all to well.

Where Darky was being held was by no means a place Tails had intended on going, but he wasn’t about to lose a friend if he could do something about it. The Breaker Casino was the city's one and only, making it a destination location for high profile celebs and the working class elite. More than that it was owned by Ixis Naugus, a man banished from Julian's cabinet after they had a falling out. Like Julian, Naugus did not look favorably on Mobians, but tolerated them so long as they were beneficial to his agenda. Ixis had devolved into nothing more than a crime lord, but nothing short of the best one the city had ever seen. His reign of control over parts of the city was so daunting that Julian didn't even bother to contest it.

From two blocks away, the building nearly blinded him with its plethora of neon lights blinking neurotically into the night sky. There was no walking into the Breaker Casino's front doors; it had its name for a reason. Plenty of people left with more than just a broken bank account. Ixis was a cautious man, as someone in his position had more than just a few enemies, not to mention Julian himself.

Tails veered down a side alley around the back. The loading dock was every bit as busy as the front entrance except the clientele was dressed a bit more casual. The night shift seemed to be arriving and the fox knew his time was now or never. With the hood pulled over his face, the kit padded along after a few of the waitresses acting as mussel. The guard at the door eyed him and put a hand on his shoulder, but Tails just bore his teeth and stared him down. The man let him pass without too much hesitation. If the guard had looked closer he would have seen a fox with two tails, something that anyone who knew better would have surely stopped.

Once inside Tails lost his entourage, slipping down a side hallway and into one of the kitchens. Even at this hour, flames roared on the grills producing savory smells that he only dreamed of being able to sample. Another side door led to a set of stairs where the kit descended further into what easily could become his tomb.

The commotion and bustle of the first floor was quickly drowned out by the humming of high voltage wires and a variety of machines that ranged from generators to industrial strength dryers. If Tails was going to find anything Naugus didn't want the world to see, it was going to be down here. Employees in bland off colored garments shot him glances as they went about their jobs, but most didn't seem to mind his presence. It's when Tails began to approach the only door at the end of a long open hallway that things started to get a little interesting.
No longer was the staff wearing tasteless uniforms with their names embroidered on the breast, but rather fitted suits. A guard leaning against a wall flipping a coin methodically into the air wasted no time zeroing in on the fox.

"Hey! You!" he shouted as he caught the coin.

Tails picked his gaze up enough to look the man in the eyes. His hair was slicked back and gleamed in the florescent light as if it were made of wax.

"Me?" Tails asked innocently.

"Yes you! What do ya think you're doing down here?"

The kit didn't really have time to explain things, so instead he took off his hoodie, letting his two tails show clearly. The man took a step back in surprise, but it was too late. Tails wrapped the garment around his neck, dragging him to the floor. It only took a few seconds before the overdressed guard passed out, his breathing now so light that it was barely audible. Luckily the man never even let out a scream as he clawed at his own throat gasping for air. The kit looked around for any witnesses before opening the door, dragging his new friend with him.

It was another stairwell that ran even further underground. Tails knew that if it had a guard in front of it, they didn't want just anyone going down there. The fox leaned the body against the inside of the door, hoping that he would stay out of the way enough to go unnoticed for a while. A damp smell arose from the depths bellow, one that seemed to offend his nose. At the bottom another door greeted him and the fox stepped through.

This time the hallway was dark, with dim lights sporadically placed throughout. It reminded him of the freedom fighter's training grounds with the exception of the smell. Something reeked of death or worse. The door closed behind the kit, echoing loudly down the hallway. A guard quickly poked his head out of the security room, yelling frantically when he saw the two Tailed fox.

"We got company!"

They were packing heat, most of them sub-machine guns. Tails didn't need to look around to know that he had no cover, but neither did they. He was already looking down the sites of his silenced berretta. The first shot found his target in the chest, causing the man in a pressed shirt and tie to spin around and drop his weapon. The kit's feet were covering ground now quickly, and by the time the next man entered the hallway, Tails was already in the air with his feet pointed in the guard's direction. The force knocked the man backwards, causing him to trip over the person who was bleeding out on the floor. Before his opponent could find a weapon or balance Tails grabbed a fist full of his shirt and lifted his head off the ground.

"Where is the fox?" Tails asked as he placed the warm barrel of his berretta on the man's forehead.

The guard looked confused by the question, "What do you want with…"

Tails brought the side of his gun across the guard's face, "Where is the fox?"

"Last door on the left," the man said as he winced with pain.

"How many more of you?"

"Two or three, but…"

Tails cocked back his arm and hit him as hard as he could. The man fell limp as he was knocked
unconscious. The fox dragged the two men back into the security room for all the good it did. Not even a blind person would have failed to notice the blood streak trailing across floor.

Monitors lined the wall of the security room, but oddly enough none showed any egresses or hallways. Each camera seemed to be trained on the inside of a room, most of which were vacant. A few had some poor sap strapped to a chair and blind folded.

Cheater's, Tails thought as he looked at their attire, or assassins.

Either way they were not very good at what they did. Nor did they respect the consequences of upsetting one of the most feared men in the city. Cheating Naugus out of money was one sure way to get a meeting with the man. Trying to kill him on the other hand, was just plain stupid. Darky was not on any of the screens, which meant the room he was in was off the grid. That didn't bode well.

Naugus' dungeon was a maze of hallways and doors with stains blotched onto the off white walls. There was no way to cover every angle or see into the dim shadows. Gun drawn the kit continued to wonder down the hall, wondering if anyone else had heard the commotion.

"Put it down," a voice called out from behind him.

Guess so.

Cold steel pressed firm into the kit's skull leaving little for him to imagine about what was being held against his head. Tails let his beretta fall to the floor as he waited for the next request.

"You alone?"

The fox nodded.

"What is the like of Miles Prower doing here?" the man asked nervously.

Tails capitalized, sensing the guard's hesitation. In the blink of an eye the kit spun around knocking the weapon clean out of his hands before he could pull the trigger. Slowly his opponent back pedaled before turning to run the other direction. Tails reached for his knife, ripping it from the sleeve on his combat vest. With a flick of his wrist it went sailing silently through the air. There was no scream, just the thud of a body making contact with concrete.

After cleaning up what he hoped would be his last mess of the night, the fox finally found his way through the maze of hallway and arrived at the door in question. He knew there wasn't much time left. By now an alarm had gone off somewhere and this was quickly going to turn into a one way trip. Tails reached for the handle and opened it slowly, checking as much of the room as he could before opening the door all the way. What lay on the other side however, he could not have anticipated.
Debts

Fiona paused when she reached the window in front of her table at the diner. Jake was too busy flirting with the waitress to notice. Her partner was smiling as he regaled some story of his with over animated gestures. As he did so, his gaze ventured out the window and he finally took note of the fox staring at him. With a small wave he motioned for her to join him.

"What took you? Food is getting cold." Jake said as she took her seat across from him.

"Thanks," Fiona whispered again, just loud enough so that he could hear it.

"Don't mention it, you order the same thing every day, it wasn't hard to figure out what you would want."

"Not for the food, for…"

"Yeah I know what you mean," Jake said changing tones subtly. "Don't worry about it, boss. Everyone has their secrets. Yours just happened to have tried to kill me on occasion, but all is fair in love and war right?"

Fiona didn't respond.

"At least I know why you wouldn't let me give you shit about him before. I am nearly as pissed at myself as I am you for not seeing this sooner. Granted I can't really blame you for never letting go of the person you love."

The fox continued to sit there in silence as she contemplated her partner's words.

"Don't act too happy, boss. I am practically letting you get away with murder here."

"Happy," Fiona remarked, "is something I would be if I could have the life I wanted. The one where I am not chained to a tree," she nearly yelled as she tugged at her collar again.

"And dead is likely what you would be if you had that. I would have dragged your sorry ass down to one of Kintobor's labs by now and you would be nothing more than a stainless steel toaster. Even with that boy friend of yours," Jake boasted with a big grin on his face.

He had a way of making her laugh. Jake's sincere sarcasm could always lighten her mood.

"And you would still be some pathetic rookie without me, so I guess we both can be thankful I am a sell out."

Jake crossed his arms and stared back at her with a smile, "A rookie, you think so?"

"What's on the docket today?" Fiona asked between bites, ignoring his question.

"Nothing, we are on standby again."

"Well that beats just about everything else."

"Yup, nothing like getting paid to sit on your ass all day. Now only if I was allowed to do it with a drink in my hand. Better yet while I am on a beach."

Fiona rolled her eyes, "Easy enough for you to say. I can't go anywhere but HQ or my apartment."
You should have seen the looks I got when I was sitting in the park last week."

"Well, boss, you're kind of different."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"No problem. Besides, Kintobor wants you to keep running down leads on the girl in your spare time."

"Well then that's going to include you."

Jake sighed, "I figured."

Fiona continued to pick at her breakfast while Jake stared just over her shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked noticing his odd gaze.

"That guy was here when I arrived this morning, which means he as been here reading that paper for almost two hours now."

"So?"

"So, he never looked at me once while I was sitting here, but since you sat down I have caught him looking this way a dozen times," Jake whispered as if he was scared the man might over hear him.

"I am different remember?"

"I know, but it just seems odd," her partner replied as he continued to stare at the mysterious man.

Fiona turned her head and glanced at the person in question. Nothing about him seemed out of the ordinary.

"And here he comes," Jake said as Fiona took a sip of coffee.

He was wearing a charcoal suit with navy pin stripes and carrying a brief case in his left hand, as was typical for man people who lived and worked downtown. The man stopped when he reached their table and pulled up a third seat, making himself at home.

"Can we help you?" Fiona asked rather abrasively.

"Me?" the man asked. "Heavens no, not me. But my boss, you can help him. He would like a word with the two of you."

"Oh yeah?" Jake replied mockingly. "And who 'pray tell' might your 'boss' be?"

"Mr. Ixis Naugus sent me to acquire the two of you. I was assured that you both be here by 8:00 A.M.".

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"You should be," the man replied as he drew a gun from with in his suit and slid it under the table, pressing it firmly again the inside of Jake's leg.

Fiona took another sip of coffee as she closed her eyes and tried to pretend none of this was happening.
Just another normal day, the fox thought to herself.

"I know you're not serious right now," Jake said sternly staring aggressively back in the man's eyes.

"On the contrary my friend," the mobster said as he cocked the hammer of pistol into place.

"That's real low, man."

"Now, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way."

"Well obviously you don't know me very well," Jake began, "because if you did you would know how much I loooove the hard way."

The man never even saw it coming. Jake reached out with lightning speed, grabbed the back of the man's head and smashed his face into the table. A gun shot cut through all of the conversations and screams erupted as people began to flee the diner. Her partner was standing now, some how unscathed by a bullet that must have missed by mere millimeters. Jake had already relieved the man his weapon and proceeded to wait patiently for the mobster to find his accented tongue.

"Naugus said you would be trouble," the suit said as he held his hands to his nose in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. "Which is why I brought some friends with me."

More suited men, all wielding guns of their own stepped in behind their comrade.

"Jake," Fiona said as she watched her partner visualize his next move. "We don't need to die right now."

Her partner lowed his weapon and the mobsters quickly secured and cuffued them both with zip ties. Fiona had already been a deer in a head lights, but as soon as she felt the plastic tighten around her wrist she went rigid with fear. She hated being captured, it brought back foul memories that she wished she could forget. Although there was some irony in it, now for an odd turn of events, she and her partner were being thrown in the back of a van. Fiona couldn't be sure why the men even bothered with the black cotton shrouds. It was obvious where they would be taken.

"Thanks for all the help back there, boss," Jake called out from somewhere else in the vehicle.

"You looked like you had it under control."

"Shut it you two. No talking," one of the men growled.

"Oh yeah? And which one of you pretty boys is going to stop me?" Jake snapped back.

"I am not going to warn you again."

"What's the point? We already know you are taking us to the..."

Jakes words were cut short as he his breath fell short and he shook uncontrollably for a moment.

"Jake?" Fiona asked.

No response came.

"What did you do to him?" the vixen yelled at the top of her lungs. "I swear I'll..."

Suddenly what happened to her partner began to make more sense. A red hot bolt of electricity plunged into her leg causing her to lose control of her entire body. The pain quickly spread causing
what was left of her world to fade into nothing.

It felt as if she had been set on fire. Her body was reeling in pain, but her mussels were too sore to move. The black bag was still over her head, blotting out her vision. However Fiona's sense of smell was still keen enough to pick up on the more pungent smells in the room. It was obvious that the cattle pro had temporarily impaired both her and Jake's ability to control their bladders, but she didn't mind that seeing as it was more of a problem for them. What she was worried about were the other scents lingering, the rot, decay, and left over smell of burnt flesh which hung heavy in the air.

"This one looks like it's coming to," one of her captors said.

It, Fiona repeated to herself in her head. That's all I am to them.

"Good," a crisp English accented voice responded, "I have been waiting quite some time to talk to her."

The voice seemed so familiar to her, but she couldn't place it. Soon the shroud was lifted from her head and she was face to face with a man only ever seen in photos.

"Ixis," the vixen said softly, being careful to hide all of her fear. Like Julian, he too seemed to feed off of it.

"Fiona," he replied as he pulled up a folding chair right in front of her. He sat down uncomfortably close. Close enough that he could lean over and touch his nose to hers. The man began to stroke his greying beard as he looked her over.

The vixen struggled against the zip ties and the rope that kept her bound to her seat.

"Going somewhere?" the man chuckled.

Jake finally began to stir as Fiona growled baring all of her teeth in contempt.

"Now, now, no reason to be cross."

No reason! Pray to whatever you call god these restraints hold.

"What do you want Ixis?" Fiona asked with anger in her voice.

"I want a lot of things, Fiona. The better question is what do I want from you and your friend here?"

"An ass whooping I hope," Jake replied in a groggy voice, "because that's all you are going to be getting from me."

"Wait your turn, Jake. I wasn't speaking to you."

"Oh well my apologies then. I had no idea we were all being civil about this. In that case why don't you just take these cuffs off and we can talk about this like gentlemen."

Naugus looked over at one his suited men and nodded. The mobster proceeded to bring a close fist across Jakes face.

"Girl!" Jake screamed. "You, hit like a girl!"

Fiona looked on as the man wound up and stuck her partner again.

"Maybe you should just tap out now before you get tired, kid," Jake said with a smile on his face.
The man screamed in frustration as he whipped out a shortened cattle prod. Jakes smile quickly vanished. It seemed that not even he was willing to tempt getting hit with that again.

"Now, where were we?" Naugus asked.

"Why do you want me?" Fiona inquired with a sigh.

"Right, right. Where to begin? Let's start with last week shall we? Did anything significant happen last week?"

Fiona racked her brain. Why does he want me? What did I do?

"You didn't go on any fun missions?"

Oh shit. Out of all the people in the world…”

"Patrick," the fox replied solemnly.

"Oh, so you do remember him."

"I never forget anyone I work with?"

"Do you always let them die?"

"She didn't let him die you sorry piece of…” Jake began.

Naugus put up his hand and his guard raised the cattle prod again.

"I want to hear it from her."

"Hear what?" Fiona asked sarcastically. "That your son was a complete moron and got himself killed? Or that it was somehow my fault?"

"I want to know why my son had to die. Why he had to serve under a Mobian and an incompetent fool."

"Your son brazenly disregarded direct orders in a very real combat situation,"

"And what did you do about it?"

"Tried to save his life," Fiona said as she looked down at her feet. "I was right there when it happened. I pulled him to the ground trying to get him to cover… but he just got back up. He thought he was invincible…”

Naugus was staring into her eyes with a piercing gaze. There was revenge burning behind them.

"And what did you do?" Ixis asked as he turned to Jake.

"Me? I just take orders."

"And dangle people out of helicopters?"

A brief smile came to Jake's face, but it disappeared when he remembered where he was.

"Kid said some things he shouldn't have. I was never going to drop him."

"Liars, both of you."
"Call me a liar all you want," Jake replied. "But as for her, she is telling the truth. I watched her with my own two eyes try to save that stubborn kid of yours. She put her own life on the line to save someone that by all accounts should have been worthless to her."

"So then what was he to you?"

"To me?" Jake asked, "Just another rookie, one that was pissing me off no less."

"If you want someone to blame Ixis," Fiona said with a small but confident voice, "blame Kintobor."

"Oh I do. I am rather confident he put him in harm's way just to spite me. I admit the kid had his issues, but he was still my son and I will be damned if I will let his death go unpunished. Julian will get his soon enough. As for the two of you, we have talked long enough for today. We can continue this tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Jake asked. "You know when people like us go missing, someone tends to notice."

"I am sure they do. I am not particularly worried that anyone will find you here though… or for that matter ever again. Have a good night."

The guard in the suit smiled at them before turning to follow his boss out of the door.

"So…" Jake began, "you got a plan right?"

Fiona exhaled deeply, "Not unless your cuffs are any looser than mine."

"That's what I thought."

"Kintobor never told me Ixis was his father. Perhaps at least he will bother to come find us."

"Like he cares."

"He should if he wants to find that girl."

"You have seen how close he is, I think even he knows he might never need her."

"I don't know about you, but I am not particularly keen on dying down here, just a little positive thought might not hurt every now and then."

Jake grumbled in silence, while Fiona tried to repeatedly to slide her wrist out of the zip ties, but they were to tight. The skin was beginning to go raw as the plastic chaffed against her. The chair sat to high up for the fox's feet to touch the ground and rolling it onto the floor would accomplish nothing besides senseless pain. Her partner had already tried unsuccessfully to break the metal frame that made up his seat, but it seemed that Naugus was a step ahead of them.

Finally the thick air overwhelmed her and dragged her eyelids down. It was late now, and her body cried out for rest. Fiona almost started to laugh at the thought of being able to so easily fall asleep in such circumstances.

When her eyes opened again, it was to the sounds of soft footsteps, which could be heard approaching the door. Slowly, the handle twisted and the door swung inwards at a snail's pace. It was too soon for Naugus to be back. Fiona's face lit up when she saw Miles standing in the door.

The kit approached them with a giant grin on his face. He looked far too smug, as if he himself was the one who captured them.
"Jake," Tails said coolly as he sat down in the chair across from him. "How nice to see you again."

"Miles," Jake replied through gritted teeth.

"How was your day?" the fox asked nonchalantly.

"Been spending it here at the casino with all my buddies in their fancy suits, free face massage included. Although I am pretty sure I told you I didn't want to see you again."

"It's a good thing you saved that favor huh?"

Jake didn't respond.

"Looks like you could use it right about now if I am not mistaken."

"You slimy piece of shit,"

Tails laughed, "This one is practically on the house because she's here," the fox replied as he motioned to Fiona. "But we're even in my book now."

"Hey!" a guard yelled. "What's going on in here?"

Fiona looked on as another suit stumbled into the room completely unaware of their new guest. Leaning back in his chair as if he had half been expecting it, Tails fired a single shot over his shoulder without so much as a glance. The bullet stuck the man in the neck. It was an ugly sight as the guard tried desperately to plug the hole and keep his blood from leaking out. He tried to scream, but all he did was spit up a red vomit and fall to the ground foaming around the mouth.

"I could always take her and leave you," the kit suggested ignoring the man who was still twitching in the doorway.

"Fine," Jake muttered doing his best to act unimpressed.

Tails reached around behind Fiona and untied the rope. With the flick of a bloody blade he cut the plastic zip ties that were tearing into her wrist.

"Here," the kit said as he held out one of the guards Glocks. "You are probably going to need this."

Fiona took it from him, checking it over before tucking it in a pocket.

"What are you doing down here anyway?" Jake asked as Tails set to work on freeing him.

"Thought Ixis grabbed a friend of mine. Turns out he did, just not the same fox I was expecting."

"Oh so we are not friends?" her partner inquired.

Tails laughed again. "Let's start with acquaintances."

After Jake stood up and the kit held out another weapon, "Promise not to shoot me?"

"There are a few people in line before you for that."

"Good enough for me I guess," the fox replied as he tossed a matching Glock to Jake.

"Just like old times baby?" Fiona asked in her seductive voice as she brushed up against the kit.

It was obvious Miles was fighting the urge to let himself go and run free with her. "Afraid not. I need
to get out of here. And I don't think it would be a good idea for either of you to be seen with me."

"Wait," Fiona called after him.

He stopped and turned around again. The vixen embraced him, pressing her lips against his for a brief moment. "Thanks," she whispered in his ear before letting go.

"You two gonna need a room? I could step outside."

"Jake," Fiona said glaring at her partner.

By the time she turned back to face Miles, he was gone. The two of them ran to the door but the hallways were empty.

"How in the…" Jake said with his mouth gaping.

Fiona giggled, "You still underestimate him don't you."

"Now what?"

"Now we get the hell out of here," the vixen responded as she readied her pistol.

There was a rushed sound of footsteps echoing off the walls, growing louder as the moments passed. The two of them raised their weapons waiting for the first enemy to walk into their sights. A pair of suits walked around the corner wielding automatics, but bullets filled their lungs before they could find either of the dominion agents in their sight. The others retreated as their comrades fell, returning down the hallway from which they came.

Fiona ran after them, hoping that they would lead her to an exit, but it only ended up being more guards. The vixen ducked in a doorway as a torrent of bullets ripped the cement off the wall near her head. Leaning out from cover, she brought one more of them down with two quick shots.

"Jake," Fiona called out wondering where her partner was.

Several loud reports echoed down from her side of the hall and when she looked back her partner was holding an MP5 in each hand. They had belonged to the two agents they had already killed. Most people couldn't control two automatics the way he was, but she had learned long ago that Jake was not most people. He continued to empty the magazines down the corridor, cutting down anyone foolish enough to step away from cover.

"I got you covered. Move up!" he yelled.

Fiona nodded as she ducked low and ran quickly towards her enemies. The guards had been too busy hiding in cover to notice the fast approaching fox. By the time the first man noticed her, Fiona's claws were already in the side of his face as she raked a paw across his nose. Grabbing his suspenders she held him on in front of her, using his body as a shield while the other suits tried desperately to shoot her. When his dead weight became too much to bare she dropped him in favor of the doorway he had been standing in.

Jake had managed to bring down all but the one who was running for the door at the end on of the hall. "I am out," he shouted while his weapons clicked confirming the fact.

The vixen leaned out from her cover and squeezed off a few shots, the third of which clipped the guard in his shoulder sending him to the ground. Slowly, both her and Jake approached him, rolling the man onto his back. The suit was breathing deeply with a look of terror on his face.
Fiona put her gun in his mouth, "Where is Naugus?"

The man shook his head in reply.

"I am not going to ask you again."

"Tird flur," the mobster answered, struggling to form the words with the warm steel in his mouth.

"The third floor?" Jake clarified. "You're kidding me right?"

The man shook his head again.

"There must be almost forty floors in this building and he is on the third?"

This time the guard nodded.

Jake picked the man up by the collar of his shirt, relieved him of his spare magazines and threw him in one of the nearby prison cells, slamming the door shut after him.

"What do you want with Naugus, boss? Shouldn't we just worry about getting out of here alive?" her partner asked.

"That's what you should worry about, I am going to run this little errand on my own."

"No way I am I going to let you do that."

"I am not giving you a choice."

"Like hell you're not."

"Jake," Fiona stated firmly, "get out of here. That's an order."

"This isn't some mission where you can boss me around, this is as personal for me as it is for you."

"This has nothing to do with personal," the fox remarked as she opened the door to the stair case. "Just do me this one favor."

"You know if you don't come back to work tomorrow I will be marching right back in here with one hell of a debt to settle."

"I would expect nothing less," the vixen smiled back. "But I have a feeling that won't be necessary."

On the next floor a few more suits decided to greet them. In their haste they hadn't even bothered to put their bullet proof vest on underneath their jackets. The Kevlar shown clearly even in the dim light.

"Put 'em down," one of the men shouted at the two of them.

"I don't think you guys want to do this," Jake replied. "It doesn't end well for you."

There was no response. No doubt they felt comfortable in their two to one odds, but chances are they had never gone toe to toe with Kintobor's finest.

There was a brief moment of silence between them all while each person took in the surroundings. The hallways were much bigger, lined sporadically with heavy steel machinery, thick pipes filled with who knew what, and dim overhead lighting.
The fox seemed to get their attention as she put her hands up in the air, as if to surrender, the Glock still in her right hand.

"What are ya do'n boss?" Jake asked. "I ain't go'n back in that room."

She smiled right before she pulled the trigger. The light above her exploded and everything suddenly went dark. The mobsters immediately began to unload their weapons as the dominion agents ducked behind cover. The intermittent muzzle flashes played with her head as the silhouettes danced around randomly. Fiona took a long breath as she prepared herself. As soon as she heard the welcome sound of an empty weapon she rolled out from cover, brought herself to a knee and fired. It was their turn to light up the room.

The suits thought they were safe in the darkness, but they had forgotten that one of their enemies was a fox. The shadows were her friend, not theirs. The vixen's first shot found one of the mobster's head and he fell backwards in a shower of blood. His comrades never even knew they were down one. Jake had managed to put several shots into one of the man's legs, causing him to scream out in pain as he wriggled on the floor. The remaining two continued to fire blindly in the dark, as if their strategy was still going to work.

After Fiona clipped one in the shoulder and both got a little smarter, turning in unison to run down the other end of the hall, occasionally firing over their shoulders. Shots continued to ring out, echoing down the long open hallways until it was Jake's turn to scream in pain as he fell forward. Fiona doubled the speed of her pursuit, reaching out, claws drawn and ripped them both to the ground. The anger that had welled up inside her had finally found an outlet. Their armor may have stopped bullets, but it did little to prevent her nails from finding their flesh. Bouncing from one to the other, swinging her arms with all her fury, she showed them no mercy. The vixen went blind with rage as instinct took over, shredding the men until they ceased to move.

When her vision steadied and the adrenalin faded she picked herself up, looking down at her accomplishments, but not with pride. It was no wonder people thought of Mobians as animals.

Jake caught up with her, clutching his upper left arm. He looked down at her with a small amount of shock. Perhaps it was the blood that stained her clothes and face, or the ravaged bodies that lay on the floor next to her, but Fiona was confident Jake had never worn that look before.

"What in the…"

"I thought they killed you," Fiona remarked still looking down at her handiwork.

"Remind me never to piss you off again."

"I didn't mean to."

"I am not sure how you don't mean to do that."

"My instincts just take over," the fox replied with a hint of remorse in her voice.

"C'mon boss, no time to feel bad about it now."

The next set of stairs led up into the back of the kitchens. The staff quickly got out of the way of the blood stained dominion agents as they pressed their way through to the Casino floor. None of the security was armed, or at least if they were, they were smart enough not to pull a gun. People everywhere had stopped what they were doing to watch the two of them walk across the lobby.

"I won't be long, Jake." Fiona called out as she veered off towards the elevators. "You get yourself
out of here."

"Don't make me come back here boss, heads will roll if I have to."

The fox wagged her tail in response signaling her approval. It was nice to have someone that cared.

Fiona frowned when she found there was no three button the elevator.

If that piece of shit lied to me I swear I will go back down there.

However, the solution dawned on her rather quickly. She proceeded to press the two and the four buttons at the same time. The doors promptly closed at the elevator began to move. The trick was an old one she had seen before; dumb enough to fool anyone who wasn't look for a third floor or even a dumb person who was.

When the doors opened it was not to hallways or gambling rooms, but rather one large extravagant office. Naugus was sitting at his desk in front of the large glass windows of the casino. Lightening bolts danced in the night sky as the heaven opened up with rain. The man had always looked sinister, but in this light she was truly afraid of him.

"I was worried you might find your way up here," he began.

"You worried correctly," Fiona responded, gun still in hand as she approached his desk.

"What is that you wish to discuss?"

"What makes you think I am not hear to kill you?"

"I know you better than that. You wouldn't have risked your life just come up here and kill me. You need something and I happen to know what that is. Please take a seat."

Fiona was taken aback.

How could he possibly know that.

"You want your life back," he added. "Can't say I blame you."

Fiona removed any trace of surprise off of her face before responding, "I believe we have a mutual problem. I am willing to wipe the slate clean if you are."

"An interesting proposition. I would never have expected such tact from a Mobian. What's in it for me?"

"The better question is what isn't in it for you. You can take what ever you want. All I need is my life back and for you to leave me alone. I am sorry about your son."

"What do you need from me?"

The vixen tugged helplessly at the collar around her neck.

Ixis nodded in response, "I figured as much. That is not going to be easy but I will look into it. You would be surprised what I can turn up."

Fiona turned to leave, but Naugus stopped her, "What exactly will you be doing for me in the mean time?"
"You're going to need to trust me. I believe you are a patient man if I recall correctly?"

"Indeed I am. Years of bidding my time basking in that fat man's shadow only to be cast out has leant me the gift of persistence. I'll see to it that you don't find any more trouble on your way out, but I only assume it goes without saying that I don't tolerate failure any better than Julian."

"It does... even though you just said it," Fiona remarked as she stepped back into the elevator.

Fiona knew she might have just made a mistake that could easily cost her everything. Julian and Ixis may have been enemies, but there was still a sense of collusion between the two. Kintobor allowed Naugus to operate unimpeded in exchange for information and money. Revenge was a powerful motivator though. If Ixis was serious, then this may be her only hope of removing the leash that bound her to Julian. Fiona smiled as she walked through the revolving door of the casino and into the rain. People looked on in curiosity as the fox closed her eyes as she turned her darkened gaze to the grey clouds above. The rain tickled her face and slowly rinsed away the blood. She may not have been free yet, but it felt as if some of the life she never wanted had finally begun to wash away.
Oneway

As she turned the car down another one-way, the rain finally began to fall. It was just a trickle at first, but it quickly turned into a downpour that required the wipers. The methodical swish of the rubber across the glass did little to stem Mara's frustration of being lost.

"The even streets run north and south," she mumbled mockingly.

When she finally emerged from the tiny ally, she found herself on another busy street, one that she recognized, however, that was only because she had been driving in circles. Mara sighed again as she became more frustrated with her inability to navigate this strange new city.

The flashing lights plastered to the side of the casino seemed even brighter in the rain. The neon colors reflected blindingly off the puddles that had now accumulated in the streets, obscuring the painted yellow lines.

"The Breaker Casino," she read out loud for the second time that night, tracing the blinking lights down the sign as the words illuminated one by one. Mara contemplated stopping to ask for directions, but Tails had specifically told her not too.

As the girl brought her attention back to the street, she found a man standing in the middle of the road directly in front of her. Her foot hit the break and the car skidded to a stop on the wet pavement, tires screeching in agony. As the wipers pushed the water out of the way, the person finally came into view. Despite coming to a halt less than an inch from him, the stranger did not seemed concerned. His face was stern, and despite the dark tint on her windshield his eyes seem to lock with hers. He was over six feet and well built, but dressed in nothing more than a tight-fit black tee and blue jeans despite the weather. Although it was not his attire that bothered her, it was the gun in his right hand. He put a hand on the hood of the car to brace himself as he moved toward the passenger seat. Mara contemplated driving away, but her fear seemed to keep her grounded. The handle jiggled as the stranger tried to enter her vehicle, but she had locked it long ago. The sound of a gun barrel being tapped on thick, cool water covered glass finally convinced her fingers to find the unlock switch.

The timbres of the rain hitting the asphalt grew louder for a moment as the muggy atmosphere poured through the open door.

"Thanks," the stranger said all too sincerely as he got in.

Mara could do little besides stare at the weapon in his hand. Her fear of guns had subsided little and she had no idea what was going to happen next.

"Oh," the man said as he followed her gaze. He proceeded to tuck the Glock into his waist band before he continued, "forgot about that. Don't worry I am not going to hurt you. I just really need to get out of here. You don't mind giving me a ride do you?"

"I might," Mara replied, "if I actually knew where I was. I have spent the last hour and a half driving around senselessly."

The stranger chuckled for a moment, "They purposefully make this area real tricky. The roads will almost always dump you out right back here so you have to drive past the casino again. Head up to the next light and take a right."

Mara transferred her foot to the accelerator and coasted the car through the torrent of rain amidst the
flashes of lightening. She did her best to ignore her new passenger, but her eyes would not stop peaking at him no matter how hard she fought it.

"You must not be from around here."

"That obvious?" Mara answered rhetorically. "I just moved here."

"This isn't a good place to get lost. Trust me."

Mara nodded as she stole another glance at him. A blood spot shown through just bellow his left shoulder. "Are you bleeding?"

"Yeah… sorry about that. I didn't get blood on anything did I?"

Mara ignored his question, "Do you need me to take you to the hospital?"

"Nah, we have plenty of docs back at the station. They will fix me up just fine."

"You're a cop?" she asked now suddenly less concerned with his well-being.

The stranger nodded, "Yeah, the name's Jake."

The tenseness Mara was feeling nearly doubled. This man was not some common thug, he was worse. The only thing keeping her from getting out of the car and running was the fact that he had no idea who she was.

"Sarah Collins," Jake stated out loud as he titled the dominion lab badge that had been sitting on the dash to catch the light from stray a street lamp dangling ominously overhead in the night sky.

Mara sunk further in her chair nearly gulping as her new friend analyzed her I.D. Does he recognize me?

"Pretty name for an equally pretty girl. Although, you look familiar, have we met before?"

"Not unless you grew up out west too." Mara replied masking any hesitation in her voice.

"A country girl huh? Wouldn't have pegged you for one."

"What happened? Did you get shot?" Mara asked splitting her attention between the road and Jake's shoulder.

"Yup. Take a left here," Jake added before continuing. "Like I said not the kind of place you want to get lost."

"Is that why you're running?"

"Nah, I am just following orders. If it were up to me, a lot more people would be needing hospitalization by the end of tonight."

"Like the person that shot you?"

Jake laughed again, although only half-heartedly. "No, I think he is past needing a hospital. My partner saw to that. I have never seen her do anything like so violent before," Jake answered as he recalled a frighteningly fresh and disturbing memory.

A woman walked out into the crosswalk at the next stop sign pushing a baby stroller in front of her.
Mara braked as she waited patiently for the woman to cross the street.

"You have got to be kidding me,"

"What?"

"This is a setup for some street con."

Before Mara could inquire further a loud thud startled her as someone tried to smash her window with a crow bar. Jake smiled in amusement as the thief cursed wildly at the unbreakable window and watched as he pulled out a chrome revolver to up the ante.

"You hear me in there, bitch?" the hooded man screamed through the tinted glass. "I will shoot your ass if you don't open this door."

"What should I do?" Mara asked staring at the baby stroller that was blocking her escape.

Jake rolled down his window and held out a gleaming gold badge so the gang could see it. Mara, too, took note of the dominion sigil imprinted in blood red. He wasn't just a normal cop, he was the kind specifically tasked to hunting her down and here she was giving him a ride. Although, the true irony was in the fact that he was actually saving her.

The gangster put his gun away and quickly retreated into the shadows followed closely by the women with the stroller.

"No backbone," Jake muttered under his breath.

"Thanks," Mara said as her nerves recovered from the scare.

"No problem. Your car did half the work anyway. Probably bullet proof right?"

She finally found a reason to smile, "My daddy wanted to keep me safe. I guess he was right about something for a change."

"Smart man. Take a right here."

"But the sign says left to Pine Brooks Burrow."

"It's reversed. Those hooligans are probably responsible. Keeps people confused so they can run their charade."

"So…" Mara started as she turned onto the new street, "what do you do?"

Jake almost burst out laughing in response to the question, "Whatever my boss tells me to do."

"Sounds like fun."

The grin disappeared, "Not anymore…"

There was a silence between them for several traffic lights until Jake asked, "What about you?"

"Not sure yet. I start tomorrow."

"Whoa, you're real fresh from the farm then?"

Mara chuckled at the notion. Even if her story was a complete fabrication, there was still quite a bit
of truth in that statement. She had grown up in a very small town and never had the fortune of visiting such a large city. She may not have been raised in the farmlands like she claimed, but she may as well have been.

"Yeah, I am, which is why I am so lost."

"What are you doing out here then?"

"Friend asked me to give him a ride," Mara responded as she looked back over at the man. Enough light finally shown on his face for her to get a clear look. She couldn't help but admit he was everything she wanted in a man. Jake was strong, not just in appearance, but also in stature. Strangely enough she could feel a vulnerability just underneath his surface, but he refused to let any of it show. The features on his face were equally rugged, drawing in her gaze even though it belonged elsewhere. He caught Mara looking, and for just a moment her eyes met his before she tore herself away awkwardly away.

"Some friend he must be leaving a country girl like you out in the middle of the worst part of town in the middle of the night."

"I am not too happy with him right now," Mara admitted with a small smirk on her face.

"You can just drop me off at the station," Jake said as he too broke away from her stare.

"Alright," Mara responded before pausing for a few seconds. "Where is the station again?"

Jake laughed. "Right at the next light… Are you even going to be able to get home?"

She frowned in response, "Yes…probably… maybe… I don't know."

"Where do you live?"

"On 6th, in the high-rise."

"Real swanky for a government girl. I'll show you the way back and just grab a cab. Least I can do for you."

Mara couldn't believe she had let her guard down so quickly. Had she really just told him exactly where she lived?

*If he finds out who I really am I will never hear the end of it from Tails.*

After a few more turns Mara and Jake were tucked comfortably away on the small one-way leading past her complex. The garage door opened as she approached and she soon found herself parked in the same spot she had been in a couple of hours ago. The sound of the car doors echoed loudly as they were opened and shut by the car's respective occupants.

"I'll just ask the door man for a cab," Jake said as he reached for the lobby button. "Thanks, again."

Mara could feel herself about to do something stupid again, "I could probably fix that up if you want."

Jake looked at her through the reflection in the stainless steel doors as they closed, slightly puzzled by her proposition.

"Your arm… I am a doctor too you know."
Why am I lying? I know I have to, but now it's just to impress someone who might sooner kill me.

"If you say so," Jake hesitated, "I am not trying to impose or anything."

"You probably saved my life, it's the least I can do."

Mara could only hope that Tails was still off doing whatever he had intended to do when she dropped him off while she slid her key into the door. It was funny to watch Jake's reaction to her apartment; she only assumed it's what her face must have looked like when she saw it for the first time.

The man whistled in amazement, "Haven't actually ever been up in one of these before. Your daddy must really love you."

*He is dead no thanks to people like you.*

"Yes," Mara replied as she repressed her thoughts. "Have a seat over here."

Jake sat down on the couch while she proceeded into the kitchen rummaging around for supplies.

"Alright," Mara called out as she walked over to her new friend on the couch carrying an odd assortment of items. "You're going to need to take your shirt off."

Jake's look seemed to suggest that he was now a little nervous about her skills as a physician, "Are those chop sticks?" he asked looking at the items she began to lay out on the coffee table.

Mara smiled back at him, "you want me to take the bullet out right? I don't keep forceps lying around. It's fine if you still want to go back to your station."

He hesitated for a moment before slowly removing his shirt. The wound stood out more clearly on his subtly tan skin. She did her best to ignore the rest of him: muscles that looked like they were carved from stone, but that proved difficult as an unbearably strong attraction seemed to draw her to him.

"You do know what you're doing right?" he asked.

"Of course," Mara replied as she did her best to look a little offended. "It did say M.D on my badge didn't it?" She proceeded to dip the utensils in the vodka before offering her guest the bottle.

"Thanks," he replied, taking a healthy swig of the clear liquid.

She wished she had ordered more take out in her life as she pressed the two wooden skewers into the bullet hole on Jake's arm. The practice would have finally been useful for something other than eating in a Chinese restaurant. He winced in pain and let out a small grunt as she felt around for the small projectile. It came out without too much trouble and only a minimal amount of screaming on her patient's part.

"That wasn't so bad was it?"

"Easy enough for you to say."

"I thought dominion agents were supposed to be tough," Mara quipped as she threaded a needle.

She couldn't tell if he took it personally. The look on his face seemed to suggest he hadn't expected sarcasm from her. The muscles on his body seemed to tighten as if a display of his physical strength would somehow fix everything. Jake's face scrunched up again as she began to stitch the hole in his
arm back together. Mara had to admit it was difficult to keep a level head around him. As Mara struggled to hold him still she noticed her hand was hardly large enough to wrap around even one quarter of his bicep. He would easily be any girls dream.

*He is hunting you,* Mara reminded herself.

"There. All done.," she proclaimed as she snipped the thread trailing from his arm.

Jake had barely bothered to move his gaze from her eyes the entire time. Only when she finished did he bother look down at the work she had done.

"Not half bad, doc. You had me worried for a while."

Mara managed a small smirk in response to his sincerity, "Don't mention it."

Maybe it was his turn to do something stupid, but she went along with it all the same. One of his large hands found her face, caressing her cheeks gently for a moment before pulling her in closer for a kiss. There was a numbness that slowly took her over as time seemed to stand still. For once, she had no problem being trapped in a moment for what felt like an eternity.

At last it came to an end and the euphoria began to fade as she found herself catching her breath. She pulled away slowly, savoring as much of his touch as she could.

*What am I doing?*

"I… I need to put all of this away," Mara said while her face quickly reddened with embarrassment. She gathered up the items on the table and returned to the kitchen.

Jake, too, stood up and followed her, but at a distance, "I am sorry, I should never have done that."

Mara didn't respond, she couldn't. He was everything she had wanted since she was a little girl but could never have. His shadow loomed over her as she set everything down on the counter. For the first time in her life she felt truly small. She nearly had to look up to the ceiling just so she could look at him nervously, "don't be."

Perhaps, she decided, he can read my mind, she thought as he picked her up off the floor as if she weighed nothing. The floating feeling she felt earlier returned as it was compounded by her body was no longer being connected to the ground, but rather suspended in the air in Jake's arms.

Mara couldn't decide what was worse, the fact that it must have been incredibly obvious she was enjoying kissing him or that she enjoyed it in the first place. Her lips found his for the second time that night and for the second time she lost herself in something she couldn't explain. When her feet found the ground again she opened her eyes. Her face was flush and a warmth she had never felt enveloped it.

*Why?* She asked herself, *does it have to be you?*

"You're too pretty for a country girl,"

Her face turned an even deeper red, competing only with the crimson stains on Jake's shirt. "Sounds like you have never been to the country."

The silence between them lasted too long. They both knew what was happening but didn't know what to do about it.
"I know it's late," Jake started, "but I could really eat... could I buy you dinner?"

Mara burst out laughing, trying unsuccessfully to catch her giggles with her hands. It was Jake's turn to change colors as his pale cheeks finally showed signs of life.

"You're a soldier," Mara said as she prodded a finger into his chest.

The look on his face suggested that he didn't know what to make of her statement.

"Surely you must know that Rome wasn't conquered in just one day."

Smiling now, Jake took the hint, "I'll take a rain check on that then."

She nodded back at him as he turned for the front door.

"Have a good first day tomorrow, Sarah," he added as he opened the door. "And... just be ready to see things you might not necessarily agree with."

Before she could reply the back side of her apartment door was staring blankly back at her leaving her alone with an odd assortment of confusing emotions that were having trouble finding a home. The giddy schoolgirl feeling of having crush seemed to overwhelm her stomach with butterflies. For a moment she closed her eyes and as she tried to imagine what it was like to kiss him again.

"You have been busy," a voice called out from behind her.

Chills ran down her body as her skin leapt into the corner of the room to hide. It was only Tails, but she had had no idea that he was there. Suddenly a new wave of guilt washed over her. It was like being a child with a hand caught in the cookie jar. She finally understood what he felt like running around with Fiona.

"I was just helping him out,"

A smirk crept up the fox's muzzle as he pointed to the top button of her shirt, which was now undone.

_That sly sneaky bastard_, she thought playfully to herself.

"Yeah," Mara admitted with a sigh, "maybe things went a little far."

"You don't recognize him, do you?"

She looked back at the kit wondering why she should.

"You're lucky he doesn't remember you."

"Why? Who is he?"

"Fiona's partner," Tails responded as he walked over into the kitchen where the vodka bottle rested.

Mara's eyes widened as she recalled the morning she spent fearing for her life at Cat's barn. All the men had been wearing armor, but only one stood as tall as the man she had met tonight. Now she felt sick as her stomach turned upside down not only with guilt, but genuine trepidation as well.

"Let's have it," Mara conceded.

"Have what? the fox asked as poured himself a drink.
"Your speech about me being reckless."

Tails laughed at the thought, "Look at who I sneak out to spend time with. I am the last person who can give you that speech. It's your life on the line, it's up to you what you want to do with it."

"So you are not going to tell me how stupid I was for bringing him here?"

"Nope," the kit replied as he tipped a small serving of the clear liquid into his mouth. "Seems like you understand that just fine yourself."

"So, what should I do?"

Tails shrugged, "Go out with him… or don't, it's up to you. Just don't give him any reason to look any closer at who you really are."

"Have I told you how helpful you have been lately?" Mara suggested as she bathed her voice in sarcasm.

The fox's grin returned, "Just avoid Fiona at all cost. She will recognize you and I am not exactly sure what she would do with you. Jake on the other hand seems to be too blinded by love to see anything more than a smart and pretty girl, but that doesn't mean he can find out either. He will turn you in just as fast."

Mara gulped. She found that hard to believe. Jake had tried to play the part of a tough soldier, but all he resembled was a lost boy. Sure he was strong, but his sense of purpose seemed fake. He was no longer sure what he stood for in life, not sure what he wanted. That however only made him more unpredictable. Perhaps Mara was his ticket to whatever it is he imagined that he wanted.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Tails asked staring at her as she faded into her own thoughts.

It took her a moment to take-in the question, "As ready as I will ever be."

"Do you remember everything I told you?"

"Yes… I am there to learn. I need to act like I am going to be working there the rest of my life because there is no way I will find what I am looking for on the first day."

"Right, don't even bother snooping around, there is no reason to get any one suspicious. Just pretend your back at home running your diner."

Mara let out a loud sigh as she struggled to remember the simpler times. Sure she had depended entirely on herself, struggled every month to make ends meet, but life then was so much less complicated than the web of lies and deceit she lived now. For all she knew the girl Jake loved was the Sara he saw and not the Mara she was. More pain seemed to be on the horizon, and there was nothing she could do to avoid it. Revenge in her parents name was beginning to become too petty of an excuse to ruin her own life, but what other choice did she have.

Mara took the bottle off the counter and upended it into her mouth, taking a healthy swig. The vodka burned all the way down and she coughed as her eyes teared up. Jake had made it look easy.

The haze of the alcohol set in and soon enough it numbed her thoughts enough to let her sleep. Leaving the fox alone in the kitchen, she set herself down on the king size bed in the master bedroom, sprawling her body out in the center. Mara didn't bother to bury herself in the sheets, remove her clothes or turn out the lights. Sleep is all she wanted, it was the one place she could escape the infinite number of questions that hounded her mind as she struggled through someone
else’s life.

*Perhaps tomorrow will be easier.*
Fiona was taking her time finding the way back to her apartment even though it was raining. No cab seemed willing to stop. All of them yelled something about the stench of a wet fox in their cars. It didn't bother her though; the time to herself might allow her to think for a change. Her footsteps were slow and heavy as her boots filled with water from the overflowing puddles. The dark corners of the upper east side felt like home. After all it is where she had spent her childhood, although she doubted anyone would recognize her, not anyone who could recognize her was left. She had seen to so many of them personally it nearly caused her to double over and gag in the gutter.

"Things are going to get better now," she tried to reassure herself with a tiny whisper that lacked any hope of confidence.

She wished that were the truth. Ixis was just as dangerous as Julian. All she had succeeded in doing was putting herself in the middle of a fight between the two most powerful men in the country. Undoubtedly who ever won, she still in some small way lost. Sure Naugus had promised her one thing, but his reputation proceeded him and his ability to honor the terms of his deal was questionable. If there was one thing to be certain, it was that there were terms to her deal, but only the ones he thought were there.

"And now all I have to do is get rid of Julian. That should be easy," Fiona laughed at herself mockingly. "Why can't I ever just keep my mouth shut?"

It was getting difficult to keep track of the overreaching promises she made just to keep herself alive. Maybe desperation played a factor, but that was starting to seem like a poor excuse.

"Whatcha do'n round here foxy woxy?" a voice asked from the ally she was walking by.

Fiona didn't even break her stride as she continued past the hooded figure.

"You hear me? I am talk'n to you," he pressed as he picked up his pace to follow her.

Fiona let a canine drop down from her lip, the ceramic sheen catching what little light there was.

"Think you're a tough girl huh? Works for me, we get paid well for the tough ones."

We? Fiona mused as she expanded the horizon of her senses. This thug wasn't alone. The stench of the wet unwashed humans assaulted her nose from nearly every direction. And I bet they could all get in cab.

"Don't think you will get much money for me," she responded with a chuckle as she tapped the dominion badge that dangled around her chest. No doubt they were collecting bounties from Julian. Mobians were few and far between, and he always needed more for his experiments.

"Awe shit, two in one night, you have got to be kidding me," the thug responded as he stopped trailing her.

"So you met my partner?"

"And the dumb bitch that was giving him a ride. Since when do shits like you get to be dominion agents?"

Fiona ignored him as she continued on her way home.
"How do I know you didn't just take that off some dead copper?" The sound of the hammer on his chrome .44 could be heard as it was cocked back into place.

The vixen exhaled deeply in frustration, "Trust me when I say you don't want to do this."

"And why not?"

"Wouldn't be very fair, there are only five of you," she responded with her back still to him.

The hooded man began to laugh.

"Just remember when this all over," Fiona said as she wrapped her paw around the synthetic grip on her new weapon, "that you asked for this."

It should have been easy for the man to get the jump on her, but he, just like everyone else, always underestimated her speed. His first shot rang out, echoing off the walls of the brick buildings like a cannon. By the time he missed his third shot, Fiona pulled the trigger on her Glock. It may only have been a 9mm, but it still tore the pistol clean out of his hands. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't kill him. A Mobian shooting a human in the middle of capital city would garner too much attention for Julian. This had to be done tactfully.

The hooded man stumbled through the wet streets, falling into a deep puddle as he reached for his gun, but the fox was already on him. She grabbed the back of his sweatshirt and pulled him back to his feet. It only took a moment for pure terror to overwhelm him. Fiona had never taken the time to clean herself up and was still covered in fresh bloodstains. He had picked the wrong fox to mess with.

The splash of other footsteps could be heard as his possy rushed to support him. Such a shame that he was the only one with a gun, the rest would be easy. He fought like a trapped rodent, swinging blindly with his arms hoping to remove her grip. A scream of trepidation mixed with anger rose up from behind her. As the sound of a crowbar cutting through the air reached her ears, she spun her prisoner, trading places with him. The blow caught him in the jaw and a gush of red erupted from his mouth along with what looked like a few teeth. The person in her hands went limp after having been knocked out cold.

Fiona dropped the near lifeless man with one hand while she used the other to catch the next swing. The crowbar stopped in its tracks with its wielder trying desperately to pull it away from her. The vixen locked eyes with her new enemy as she ripped the weapon away from him. As he backed away she threw the cold piece of steel into the gutter. Before he could react Fiona lashed out with a quick jab that sent the thug to his knees with his hands clutching his stomach in pain. As she spun she brought the heel of her foot into the side of the man's head sending him to the ground. He moaned in discontent, as he lay near motionless in the street while the rain continued to fall.

Finally! she thought to herself, as the other three gangsters emerged from the shadows to save their comrades. One leapt at her with a vicious tackle, but she ducked low and the man went sailing over her. While Fiona wasn't looking, one of her remaining enemies managed to bring a two by four across her back. It stung, but did little to disable her. The vixen turned to face her new opponent. It was not just one, but two scraggly haired women. The girl with the wooden plank came at her again, but it was too heavy of a weapon for her. Fiona easily sidestepped it letting it find the ground in a dull thud. With a forceful downward kick she cracked the board in two. Undeterred the women continued to swat at her with the splintered board until the fox drove a fist squarely into her gut. A gush of air rushed out of the woman's lungs and she fell to the ground gasping. The other helplessly threw blind punches and slaps all of which Fiona shrugged off.
The man who had tried to tackle her finally found his feet again. She could feel him standing over her, wet and seething with anger. Fiona pretended as if she had no idea he was there as she continued to whimsically block the pathetic attacks made by the scantily dressed girl.

His second attempt at subduing her was by way of a rather large bear hug, which might have been enjoyable had he not been trying to squeeze the life out of her. With a backwards kick she found her captors kneecap, causing him to howl out in pain. She spun, driving her hand in-between his collarbone and shoulder, causing half his body to go floppy with lack of coordination. As he struggled to regain control of his limbs, Fiona brought what felt like the hardest punch she could ever remember throwing across his round face.

There was a brief moment of pain as her knuckles met his cheekbone, but that receded as she found a sense of satisfaction watching him fall backwards into a puddle unconscious and bleeding out of a gash on his lip. Fiona turned back towards the one remaining girl only to find that she had wised up and ran down one of the side allies, the sound of her high-heeled shoes clicking with every step she put between herself and the vixen.

The fox looked around at all of her foes as they squirmed on the wet ground in pain. A small sense of pleasure crept up her muzzle in the form of a smile. Had she known this could have been so much fun she might have wondered down to this part of town more often. However, she had better things to do than gloat. As she continued down the sidewalk towards the subway station a few more blocks away, Fiona tried recall to how exactly she planned to get rid Julian. Walking in his office and putting a bullet in his head as she long dreamed of was simply not an option, not until the collar was off anyway.

The rain subsided as she walked underground, leaving only the sound of trickling drips as water leaked into the rundown station. At this time of night everything was all but abandoned, but she called herself lucky when the train pulled up as she reached the bottom step. The empty dilapidated train car was as inviting as anything else in this part of town, which was to say that walking the rest of the way home was starting to seem like a better idea.

Before she could think anymore about it, the subway's doors slid closed behind her leaving her alone to watch her shadow dance on the ground as the flickering yellow lights passed by the windows. The car barreled around corners without concern or worry, unlike Fiona as she contemplated what little choices there were for removing the man who haunted every moment of her life. Her eyes drooped shut as her back pressed up against the stiff plastic chair. The sounds of screeching steel and rattling chains filled the air, breaking her concentration.

"My mom told me that you aren't supposed to be in this city," a small voice called out amidst the racket.

Fiona lifted half an eyelid to grab a look at who was speaking to her. A short kid with messy dirty blond hair sat in the seat opposite her. His feet swung helplessly back and forth as he reached his toes out for the floor that he couldn't touch.

"Did she?" Fiona responded as she closed her eyes again.

"Mmmhmm. She said animals don't belong in the city and that Julian is our only hope to fix everything."

An unsatisfying smile crept along the side of Fiona's face. Only Julian could find away to make his propaganda so believable that an unknowing child would spout it on a train, to a Mobian no less.

"And what do you think?" the vixen asked as she continued to stare into the darkness behind her
eyes. "Do you think I should be allowed to live in the city with you?"

The kid seemed be stuck on the question. Fiona could hear the swooshes of his legs swinging speed up.

"I like animals," was all he managed after several seconds of deliberation. "but my mom says I am not supposed to cause they killed my Dad."

She let the smiles on her face subtly fade. It could be difficult to remember that as much as they tried to remain non-violent, the freedom fighters still inflicted a healthy amount of casualties on Julian's forces. Fiona knew as well as he did how much it hurt to have a parent taken away. In fact, she knew twice as well.

"My Dad died too," the fox replied as she finally opened her eyes to meet the child's gaze.

"Did animals kill him?"

Fiona wanted to laugh at his innocence, but how could she?

You could say an animal killed my Dad, she thought as Julian's face formed in her mind's eye.

"No, some bad people did."

"My mom says bad people always get what's coming to them."

If only that were true…

"Where is your mom?"

The kid shrugged his shoulders seemingly unconcerned. "What's that?" he asked pointing to the collar on her neck.

"Just my necklace," Fiona responded as she tugged on the solid metallic collar, again reminding herself that her life was not her own.

"It's not very pretty."

Her grin came back, "I know. I don't like it very much either."

"Why don't you take it off?"

"I am not allowed," Fiona admitted as she struggled to put it in terms he would understand.

"My mom doesn't let me do tons of stuff either…"

"What about this one? Have you seen one of these before?" Fiona asked as she held out her dominion badge for him to see.

"Mmmhmm, my dad had one of those."

The fox nearly gasped as her eyes widened in surprise.

"Are you a dominion agent too?" he asked.

Fiona nodded still at a loss for words. She stared at the blood red insignia on her badge admiring the color choice; hardly any other shade would have been more appropriate. Although the hue of her
badge wasn't the only thing that was giving her pause, this conversation, the boy, it all seemed all too familiar. It was as if she was hearing all of this for the second time, but couldn't remember the first.

"My mom says I'll be big and strong like my dad someday and that I'll be the best agent the Dominion has ever seen. I will be able to get my own badge, just like my Dad's."

"Sounds like you're planning on winning the whole war all by yourself," Fiona remarked as she let the stamped metal sigil fall back to its resting place around her neck.

"Mhmm, it only takes one person to make a difference."

The vixen chuckled at his optimism, which in contrast to her pessimism, was like night and day. Perhaps he was too young to know better, but Fiona couldn't help but wonder if he was right.

Who is in a better position to end all this than me? Maybe one person is all it takes.

The inertia of the slowing train car caused her to brace herself as the Station Square stop approached. As she got up Fiona followed the child out onto the crowded platform. He was as much an enigma as she could ever recall meeting. Perhaps it was just the virtue of a child that inspired him to talk to her, but she couldn't help but feel like there was more.

He weaved in between pedestrians as he galloped up the stairs. Fiona tried to keep up, but her efforts only earned her scowls and even more disgusted looks than normal. She reached out and grabbed at his shoulder only to have her hand find nothing. Fiona swore that she passed right through him and in her confusion slowed just long enough for him to get away. By the time she reached street level he was gone. No matter which way she turned her head there was no sign of him.

What was that? She asked herself the sound of the city began to flood her conscious. Did I just imagine him? Fiona couldn't help but question. She had always been aware that this job was going to take a toll on her, but at no point did she ever anticipate hallucinating.

It was still another hour before the vixen found herself back in her apartment. She could not have asked for or imagined a more eventful night. The blood and the filth all washed off easy enough, but the warm water and soap did little to cleanse her mind. It still swirled with confusion and apprehension, which only served to keep sleep at bay. Fiona tried to relax as she remembered what Tails had shown her the night before. Breathing deeply, she brought her paws to her head and massaged away the stress that seemed to be trapped just beneath her skull. Perhaps it wasn't as soothing as Tails' touch, but it seemed to be working.

The fox found herself sitting at her usual table, more rested than normal. Even if she was still at square one with all of her problems, at least her head was clear. Fiona lifted her eyes as Jake took a seat. It was too early for him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Don't act so happy to see me…"

She glanced up in the corner of the HUD in her glasses for a read out of the time, "I haven't seen you up this early all year."

"Well I haven't exactly gone to bed sober in a year."

She chuckled, "And your arm?"

"Is fine. And your conversation with Naugus?"
"Was personal."

"Well I guess I won't tell you about my night either."

"Oh, you mean about the girl you met?" Fiona responded as she sipped on her coffee and looked down at that morning's paper.

Jake stared back at her dumb founded.

"Are you keeping tabs on me?"

Fiona shrugged. She knew there were only so many dominion agents the thugs she ran into the night before could have been talking about.

"I always thought you were supposed to offer the ladies a ride."

The look on his face went from sour to defensive rather abruptly.

"She just happened to be driving by when I walked out. It could have just as easily been some fat guy whose car I commandeered."

"Was she cute?" the fox asked now slightly curious as to why he was taking it so personally.

His eyes narrowed as he stuck a free hand in the air to get a waitress's attention, "Perhaps. So what if she was?"

Fiona's smile grew as she met her partner's eyes, "And…?"

"She is a lab tech who just moved here. Works in our building too I think. Not a half bad doc to boot," he responded as he lifted the sleeve on his black tee revealing a nicely stitched wound.

"A lab tech? Why would they hire such a young female lab tech for our building? Poor thing probably doesn't know what she is in for."

"I tried to warn her, but I don't think she had any clue what I was talking about. I mean how do you tell someone about the kind of stuff he does down there and expect them to understand?"

"You don't," Fiona remarked as she recalled the first time she had to watch one of Kintobor's experiments. "There is nothing that can prepare any sane mind for that."

"I am probably going to drop by when we get to work today to make sure she is alright."

"So that's why you are up so early."

Jake rolled his eyes as a waitress set his cup of coffee down in front of him, "Why is my personal life on the table when yours is so much more interesting?"

"Don't be jealous," the vixen quipped with a large grin on her face.

Her partner's eyes narrowed as he locked eyes with her, "of your little one night stands, I don't think so."

"Just remember who saved your life last night."

"Hey, you heard him, we are even now. He owed me," Jake nearly shouted as he prodded his own chest proudly with his index finger.
"If that's what you have to say to yourself now that your mommy isn't around to tell you how big and stro…" Fiona trailed off as the words seemed to run out of energy in her mouth.

"What?" Jake asked as he looked at the fox with a small amount of concern. "Fiona?"

"Nothing… just reminded me of something that's all. Come on lets go find that girl friend of yours," she interjected doing her best to change the subject.

"She isn't my girl friend."

"But you're taking time out of your day to go see her?"

Jake glared at her again.

"So, what's this person's name that isn't your girl friend?" the fox asked as she got up from the table while Jake put some cash on the table.

"Sarah."

Fiona could feel Jake's uneasiness as he walked along next to her. It seems that she finally had found a subject that he was genuinely afraid of. The walk across the street to HQ must have been an eternity to Jake, who seemed to living in fear of any more questions from his partner.

"What's so special about this girl?"

"What's so special about Miles? Is it the two tails?" Jake asked as they strode across the lobby.

It was Fiona's turn to roll her eyes.

When they got in the elevator, Fiona reached for a button that was far out of the ordinary.

"Why sub level 3?"

"I want to meet her, only fair since you got to meet Miles. You were going down there anyway right?"

A nervous looked seemed to creep up on his face.

"Oh relax I am not going to bite her, I am just curious to meet the girl who changed my partner's mind."

"What do you mean change my mind?"

"I mean every girl you have ever talked to has never been good enough for you. Why this one?"

The doors opened and the two agents stood there looking at each other in silence.

"After you," the fox said as she motioned out into the open lab.

It was still early in the morning, but all types of things already seemed to be under way. Men with thick glasses sat in front of computers running calculations, while others hovered over Petri dishes with syringes. It wasn't hard to spot the one and only girl in the room, someone Fiona was certain she had never seen before until she took a few steps closer.

Jake gave a nervous wave when the girl looked up from her station. However, that paled in comparison to the look of fright on her face. It didn't take the vixen long to figure out that it wasn't
Jake she was afraid of, but rather her. Even through the perfume, the fox's nose picked up on who she really was. The disguise was decent, but it wasn't going to fool her.

Rather than pounce on her right then and there, Fiona waited to see how things played out. This was a bold move by the resistance. Stashing the one person they were looking for right in the very building Julian worked in was incomprehensibly dangerous and devious all at the same time. The girl did her best to hide her fear, as she called out to them nervously, "Hey, Jake."

"Thought I would come check up on you," he replied tensely.

"Don't listen to him," Fiona interrupted with a grin on her face. "I made him come down here so he could introduce me to the girl that helped him out last night. I am his partner, Fiona."

"Sarah," the girl responded bashfully, still hardly letting her gaze wander from the fox's blue eyes. "And I am rather glad he was along for the ride."

"Oh yeah?" the fox asked.

"Just some thugs," Jake responded. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

It was funny how everything could come down to one little decision. All the vixen had to do was slap cuffs on this girl and drag her up fifty floors. But that was the easy way out, an out that had not light at the end. Fiona knew she had spent too long floating along aimlessly in a treacherous river. Rather than paddle and change course she had set her mind on riding it out. With a new found energy and determination to restore what little life and sense of purpose she used to have, the vixen smiled subtly at the girl. Who was Fiona to question someone hired by Julian's staff?

"Well I'll leave you two alone," Fiona said while she patted Jake on the back. It was amusing to her how blind Jake was. Their one and only target for the past week he readily fawned over, but for that she could not blame him.

As the fox left her partner with his new friend she saw the color slowly returned to the lab tech's face. No doubt Mara remembered their little conversation from the tavern. A Mobian with a velvet fur and a dominion badge was a surly hard thing to forget.

There was no reason to scare the girl. Julian may have wanted her, but he could wait, Fiona had other more important things to focus on. The second he got Mara would be the second Fiona lost any of the minuscule amount of control she had. For once it felt like she had all the power, and when you're on a leash, that's not a common feeling.
The short girl with dark colored hair walking into the apartment appeared to be upside down. That however was only because Tails was lounging about in an arm chair with his body contorted in a position that did more than convey his boredom.

She smiled as she locked eyes with him temporarily, "I can see you have had another productive day."

"You try being locked in here all day. I am nothing more than a glorified baby sitter."

Mara scowled back at him as she looked around at the mess he had created, "You might want to hold onto your other job. House work is clearly not one of your skills."

The kit flipped over so that he was now right side up. He fumbled for the remote and turned the TV off.

"Here, this was sitting at the door for you," Mara said as she flung a box across the room in his direction.

The fox caught the small parcel wrapped in plain brown paper. There was no name on it, not even an address. He gave it a brief shake before realizing it was what he had ordered last week. Without any more hesitation Tails slid one of his razor sharp nails through the tape and opened the box. He could feel Mara's gaze over the top of his shoulder as he pulled out the new HUD.

"What's that?" Mara asked.

"A replacement for something Fiona broke…" the kit mumbled as he balanced the delicate HUD on his finger tips.

It was a much newer model than he had expected. Rather than cover both eyes, the small piece of tech slid over his ear and extended a slim glass frame out over his right eye. It was just a sliver and almost invisible to anyone that wasn't looking right at him. With a few blinks, he had it up and running. He had asked Tucks to wipe it, but it seems this piece still had an OS on it.

The kit proceeded nervously, taking note of the solitary message in the HUD's inbox. Tails knew better than to open it, but he couldn't help but feel compelled.

"I am out front, don't keep me waiting," was all the note contained.

The text dangled in front of his cornea, hanging there as he tried to figure out where it came from. Perhaps the most concerning part was that whoever had sent him the message knew exactly where he lived. With that in mind he knew, at the very least, the person waiting for him was not Julian. If the Dominion had zeroed in on him, the building would be surrounded and his door would be being flung off its hinges by a swat bot.

Tails walked over to the drawer in the coffee table and pulled out the pistol he had given Mara earlier that month. He tossed her the weapon, "If I am not back by morning, call this number."

The kit scribbled hastily on a piece of scrap paper.

"What is it?" the girl asked him with a renewed look of concern on her face.
"Hopefully, nothing," Tails responded as he walked towards the window. "Stay here and keep the door locked."

Shimmied down the side of the building was starting to get old, but it was the only way to get it in and out without being seen. The fox continuously looked over his shoulder, keeping an eye out for anyone passing by in the cramped alley below. There was no sign of his mystery correspondent.

When his feet hit the ground, Tails made for the main road, peering out into the street, lit faintly by the yellow tinted lamps overhead. A black limo was parked with the engine idling. A man in a pin striped suit was leaning against the car casually flipping a coin in the air. He looked far too familiar.

The suit opened the passenger door and motioned for him to get in.

At this point, he didn't see too many options. Naugus had somehow figured out where he lived, and not talking with him would only piss him off more. The fox approached the vehicle with apprehension, never letting his gaze leave the guard's eyes until he felt the soft leather of the car's back seat pressed up against his fur.

"How nice of you to join me," the grizzled old man said through his white beard. "I can see you got my gift."

The kit nodded as the door was shut behind him.

"You probably have a lot of questions. Perhaps how I found you?"

Tails continued to nod.

"Let's start with why I am here. I feel rather embarrassed actually," Naugus said as he handed the fox several sheets of schematics. "I need your help."

Tails began to audibly chuckle as he looked the documents over. He had seen them countless times. In fact, they were sitting on his desk at home.

"Fiona," he muttered under his breath, "what have you done this time?"

"It can't be done," Tails said bluntly. "It's nearly perfect in design."

"Everything has a flaw."

"Not this," the fox replied as he brought his thumb and fore finger to his eyelids, gently massaging them as he struggled for more words. "It may as well be one solid piece of metal with an explosive core. It has more safeguards against tampering than you could possibly imagine. There is no way to disable it; to even take it off for that matter."

Ixis leaned back further in his chair with a rather large look of displeasure on his face.

"What do you want with her?" Tails asked as he bore a fang.

"Wrong question."

Tails sighed. "What does she want from you?" he asked reluctantly.

The old man smiled as he looked back down at the blue prints in the fox's hands, "What about the trigger mechanism?"

"No," Tails nearly screamed. "I am not going to help you kill her. You don't think I haven't poured over these, looked at them from every angle. If this could come off, I would have taken it off by
now. Just leave her alone."

The old man began to laugh, "It's funny, that's all she wants. Well that and for me to leave you alone as well. However, I don't do things for people without something in return. She named you as a recipient of something from me, so that means you're on the hook as well."

"Don't take me for some dumb bitch that makes a deal with someone they know damn well not to trust," the fox commented rather bluntly. "I don't want anything you are offering."

"That's so sad. You know the price for reneging on one of my deals."

Tails leaned over until his nose nearly touched Ixis', "You got nothing on me."

"That's where you are wrong. Don't think that I don't know it was you who freed Fiona and hurt a few of my people along the way. This your chance for me to look the other way. This is my olive branch."

"Do I need to tell you where you can shove it?" Tails asked rhetorically as he got out of the limo.

"You are as good as dead, you know that? You and your girl." Ixis shouted after him.

Tails froze after a moment, and my girl?

The door behind him shut and the limo pulled away into the night.

"Mara," he whispered to himself with a fright laden voice.

The thing about being a fox was the heightened senses. Humans may feel an adrenal rush, but what he got was such much more than that. Everything got sharper as his heart sunk into his stomach, an anchor of emotions pulling it down. His ears twitched as he isolated the flick of a safety being moved into the fire position and before he could even think about what to do Tails was already looking down the sights of his own gun. The man was hiding in the shadows near the garage, no doubt waiting for some signal from Ixis and a clear shot. The only sounds that followed the muzzle flashes were of the thug's body hitting the cool concrete and the clatter of brass shell casings rolling down the sidewalk. The night forged on, despite the dead man. The ambiance of the city enveloped Tails as he lowered his weapon, when he realized that he was alone once more. No one had heard or seen anything and he was in the clear for the moment.

The fox's feet moved swiftly as he burst into the back stairwell with no regard for staying hidden. His heart was racing as his breathing struggled to keep up with his pace. He could never recall having climbed stairs so fast.

"Mara," he nearly screamed as he burst through the door to her apartment.

A startled look ran across her face as she dropped the apple she had been eating. The girl who had previously seemed unconcerned with the situation went for her gun which lay within reach on the kitchen counter.

"You're alright," he said through labored breathing.

The girl nodded her head as she continued to chew, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

Then it hit him, "Naugus doesn't know a thing about you. How could he? If he did, then everyone would."
"What? Who is Naugus?"

"Fiona…” Tails said out loud now with even more concern.

"Naugus is Fiona?"

"No, she is the other person he is going to kill."

"Who is Naugus and why is he going to kill Fiona?"

Tails was pacing back and forth as his mind raced, "Get your keys, we are going for a drive."

Mara frowned as she rolled what was left of her snack into the sink. She followed him with quick feet towards the door, grabbing her keys from a hook on the way out.

Tails hadn't been this irate and confused since the day he found out Fiona was still alive. He almost felt betrayed all over again.

"Why can't you think things through?!" the fox shouted as they rode the elevator down.

His companion eyed him cautiously, looking as if she was unsure whether his comment was directed at her or not.

As they pulled out of the parking garage, a pair of headlights came to life. The car was parked rather inconspicuously on the one-way behind their building.

"Great…” Tails said sarcastically.

"What?"

"Someone might be following us."

"Why?"

"Don't worry about it. Put your right blinker on, stop at the stop sign for a solid two seconds and then take a left."

The fox's eyes were glued to the side mirror waiting for their new follower to signal his turn. A smile came to his face when a yellow light illuminated on the right side of his car, pulsing to an unheard rhythm. When Mara turned left, so did he.

"Gotcha," Tails said out loud with a small amount of satisfaction.

The kit wasted no time pulling the hood of his sweatshirt low over his face. Leaning out the window he lined up a shot. The bullet silently glanced off the windshield and into the night sky. Having given away his intentions, Tails' enemy was in no mood to make things easy for him. The driver immediately became aggressive, swerving to make future shots difficult.

When the lane next to him opened up, their follower sped up and pulled along next to them, preparing to pit them.

"Punch it," the fox yelled into the interior of the car.

He had forgotten how fast the car was that they had gotten for her. The engine roared thunderously as the acceleration sent him reaching for balance as he struggled to hold onto both his gun and the car itself. The thug made an attempt to keep up, but that only forced him to drive in a straight line. The
fox capitalized, sending two shots into the front right tire of the vehicle tailing them. At such a high speed, the resulting accident was spectacular. The car careened off the road, splitting a light pole in two before smashing into a brick facade.

Mara began to slowdown as if to stop, but Tails was quick to comment, "Don't stop. We don't need any more attention for the night."

After a few more turns, the pair found themselves idling outside a much smaller apartment building. Mara's face seemed to light up as she took in her surroundings.

"Jake lives here!"

The kit stared back at her blankly before getting out of the car.

"Stay here and keep the car running, we might need to get out of here in a hurry."

As he reached for the door, Tails realized that there was a better way to play this.

"On second thought, how would you feel like paying Jake a visit?"

The girl in the car stared back at him, confused.

"I don't care what you tell him, but just make sure he ends up outside Fiona's apartment."

Mara nodded in reply before turning the car off.

When Tails looked up again, he was underneath the fire escape that ran up to Fiona's apartment. With a few quick steps, a leap, and some twirling of his tails the fox found himself with a firm grip on the staircases' metal frame. Even from a floor below the kit could hear voices inside of her apartment.

"I thought I made things pretty clear about our agreement," an old rickety voice proclaimed. "I haven't noticed any news about how Julian is no longer president recently."

"And I told you to be patient," a familiar vixen's voice replied.

"Either way it seems that you have some existential factors working against you."

"And what might those be?" Fiona asked as Tails was finally able to peer into the window.

He didn't like what he saw. She was more than outnumbered. At least six of Ixis' body guards were in the room with him. To make matters worse they had made sure she was nice and comfortable by tying her to a chair. His new HUD was also hard at work analyzing the room, outlining and examining all of his opponents' weapons. It even picked up on pistols tucked away under suits, reading out to him their caliber and whether they were chambered. No matter which way he looked, there were lots of glowing red outlines of guns.

"Well it seems your friend doesn't want to play ball even after I gave him a nice gift and offered to look the other way on all the wrongs he has caused me."

"I told you to leave him alone!" the vixen snarled.

Naugus chuckled in his deep accented voice, "You two are so funny, always looking out for each other but hardly ever capable of doing anything yourselves. He told me the same damn thing when I asked him to help you."
"What did you do to him?" Fiona barked, emotion rising in her voice as she tore at the restraints.

Most of Ixis men were calm and collected, but a few looked on nervously as their boss continued to goad the fox.

"Oh, I didn't do anything to him," Naugus laughed villainously. "I am sure he is just 'fine'."

Tails felt as if Ixis had set him up with a perfect entry line, but he knew better than to be hasty. Even if Fiona could free herself it would still be seven on two and only one gun between them. The fox watched as the vixen nearly caused the chair to fall over as she tried desperately to lash out at her captors. They only looked on and laughed.

"So now we must discuss your punishment."

"My punishment..." Fiona said softly. "You blithering idiot. I can't overthrow a dictator in one week with a bomb strapped to my head. If you want my help, get this damn thing off of me."

Naugus got to his feet as turned away to look out the window towards Tails. The fox quickly removed himself from view, now relying on only his hearing to paint the picture.

"I suppose a few broken bones will suffice for now."

A knock came at the door followed rather quickly by a voice Tails had been counting on, "Fiona, do you have time for a favor?"

Let's see how good you are Jake, Tails thought to himself. Mara would kill him if she knew that he was only using Jake as a pawn in a scheme to rescue Fiona. As far as the fox was concerned, a Dominion agent was expendable.

Whispers shot around the room asking what should be done. Tails glanced back in the room in time to see Naugus nod to one of his men.

"Fiona, I know you are in there. I need your help on this one."

A thug in a plain charcoal suit approached the door slowly before putting his face to the eyehole. Wrong move, Tails thought, Fiona isn't tall enough to look through the eyehole.

Tails nearly burst out laughing when the door was kicked in, knocking the man five feet backwards into the room unconscious. This was followed quickly by three shots that tore through the next closest suit.

It's now or never, the fox thought as he rolled through the curtains in the open window emptying rounds from his own weapon into one of the gangsters. He knew he was taking a gamble by relying on Jake not to 'accidently' shoot him, but it was the least he could do for putting him on the spot in the first place.

To Tails' surprise Fiona was quick to join them. She launched herself into the air with a small jump, leaning backward in the chair and letting it crash to the ground. When she came up it was with a large splinter of the wood frame, which she promptly pit into the gut of one of the suits.

When Tails turned around, he found himself staring down the barrel of an old Colt. He blinked and what seemed like his entire life flashed before his eyes. However, when he opened them again, the man had spouted several red fountains of blood on his chest. As he collapsed, Jake came into view, looming over the now dead man with his sights plainly trained on the fox. Hurried footsteps could be
heard making their way to the door. Without breaking eye contact, Tails raised his silenced Berretta, firing it blindly to his right. The collapse of the final thug left only one unwelcome guest, Ixis, who was now standing bewildered in the middle of the room.

"Miles, its funny how I keep running into you after I told you I didn't want to see you anymore." Jake said as he holstered his weapon. "And just so you know, now we are even," he insisted.

Tails smiled back at him, "If you say so."

"Excuse me boys, I don't mean to interrupt your moment," Fiona said seething with rage as she stood impatiently waiting for one of them to free her hands.

The kit walked over to the vixen, and for the second time that week released her from restraints with a flick of his knife. Before he could even say anything Fiona was already sprinting full bore at Naugus. Luckily, Jake had seen it coming, planting one of his massive hands on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

"You come into my home!" she bellowed as she struggled to break free of her partner's grip.

Tails walked up behind her and placed a hand gently on her other shoulder. She seemed to melt under his touch, calming almost immediately. Fiona turned to face him, looking for a moment as if she forgot he existed, "You're alive."

"You didn't think this idiot could kill me, did you?"

The vixen quickly embraced him with all of her strength.

"Now you know what it feels like," the kit quipped softly into her ear.

After a few moments, Fiona turned her attention back to Jake, "How long were you standing at that door?" she asked with a guilty look on her face.

"Long enough to know what you're willing to do to get that thing off your neck. You're playing a dangerous game, Fi. If Kintobor found out, he would…"

She put her hand up to stop him, "I know, you don't need to say it."

Tails almost felt like asking, but he knew it was better that he didn't know the answer to some questions.

"Do I need to ask you not to say anything?" Fiona asked.

"As long as my ass isn't on the chopping block, your problems with Julian are between you two, not me."

Tails made a move to interject into their conversation, "Fiona, you know trading one scumbag for another…"

"Save it, Miles," she responded rather quickly as if she had been expecting him say something. "I don't need you to lecture me about my life. I am all grown up now."

"No, I won't save it. How many times are you going to risk your life with some reckless stunt like this?"

All the fury in her eyes came beaming back at him, "Like you wouldn't know anything about risking your life? The only reason I am alive is because pieces of shit like this are the only ones who can
The kit remembered being hit with a monkey wrench by a large burley man in the not so distant past. He thought that would have been the hardest hit he would have to take in his life, but the blow the vixen just delivered hurt at least twice as much. The attack seemed to skip right past his ribcage and go right for his heart, nearly causing the fox to reach for his chest in pain.

"Fiona," Jake replied rather sternly also feeling somewhat insulted by her statement. "I may be no fan of Miles, but I don't think he deserves that."

The vixen lifted her nose, ignoring the two of them as she turned her attention back to the problem, who was now cowering on the floor in the corner of her room.

"Now, now, there is no need for any of us to get violent any more. I am sure we can make a deal," Naugus said with hesitation.

"A deal," Fiona said as she nodded, subtly mocking him. "He wants to make a deal."

When she turned back around to smile her sarcastic smile as if she had won a big victory she only found her partner looking at her slightly disappointed. The shock of the missing kit took a moment to sink in.

"Where... where did he go?" Tails heard her ask while he sat just outside her window, leaning against the wall as a small film of water began to cover his eyes.

Jake looked to his left and right in equal shock, but rather than act surprised this time, he just chuckled.

The fox wished the vixen's remarks were the reason he left, but sadly they were not. The gentle footsteps of another human approached the room and entered.

"Jake, I heard gun sho...," a deep, but girlish gasp, interrupted her own sentence as she entered the room.

"Sarah," Jake said quickly with a high level of concern. "You don't want to come in here."

The girl shook her head in agreement.

"This might take me a while to clean up..." Jake admitted reluctantly. "Can I give you a hand tomorrow instead?"

"Of course," Mara replied before placing a small kiss on the agent's cheek.

Tails was starting to see the advantage of having a human partner. They could walk around without fear of persecution or suspicion.

After she had left, Tails found himself standing next to Jake again. It took both him and Fiona a moment to realize, but neither seemed surprised. It was better for everyone if no one saw Tails and Mara together.

"I thought you had left," Fiona remarked in a tone meant to hurt.

"You're the only one who has ever left," Tails replied faintly, as if he didn't have the energy or courage to say it.

The vixen paused as she absorbed the words, turning to face him again. Tails could feel himself
shrinking as she approached, something that he did not often do. With a faint smile Fiona reached out and took an all too familiar silenced Beretta from Tails.

"Still looks as good as the day it fell out of my hands," she remarked as spun around to face Ixis. "Tell me Naugus, what kind of deal can a dead man make?"
Fiona wasn't sure what to expect. She found herself sitting on the other side of Julian's desk, her thoughts running wild with what might happen next. Sure she had been in the seat at least a hundred times, but never under such odd circumstances. In the past the fox had always done as she was told and rarely took matters into her own hands, especially when that concerned Kintobor's enemies, of which there was not shortage of.

The slap of the paper hitting the desk brought her back into the present, where a large man loomed over her from the other side of his desk.

"On most day's I know what's going to be in that," he spat, but not angrily. "Hell, I write half of it sometimes."

Fiona looked back at him, now even more nervous.

"How many times have I told you I don't like surprises? Do you know what kind of mess this creates for me?"

This was normal, the berating would be followed by more anger and then acceptance. It was part of his ego that he had to seem in charge and in control of the situation. The only part that concerned her was how and if he would accept what they had done. Jake was still waiting his turn outside, no doubt slightly more afraid now that Julian's tirade was becoming even louder.

"Honestly, did you think the city wouldn't notice its most famous crime lord was missing? Or perhaps you thought that it was a good idea for a half dozen of his thugs to turn up dead in your apartment? Do you have any idea how this looks?! What kind of position this puts me in?"

The vixen smiled, she knew how to play his game, "A good one I suspect?"

Kintobor's face contorted as the wrinkles scrunched up so tight she thought they might have been permanent fixtures on his face. However, with a deep breath they all disappeared as he started chuckling.

"I forget sometimes that you are nearly as twisted as I am in your own way."

Fiona wasn't sure if that was meant to be a compliment, but her insides started to turn with the notion of its possible truth. The idea of having something in common with the most horrifying person she ever had the misfortune of meeting was beyond disconcerting, bordering on disgusting.

"What did you do with him?" Julian finally asked bluntly.

The fox got to smile again, this time even bigger, "If I told you wouldn't that make things worse for you? Do you want to be an accessory?"

"Can you at least tell me if he suffered?"

With her grin even larger now, she knew there must have been far too much truth in his statement. What kind of person can be happy while answering a question like this? Although all the possible answers didn't bother her as much as she would have expected.

"He didn't have a lot to say, but I promise you he was not very quiet."
The rotund man's skin shook like jelly as he laughed himself into a coughing fit. After a few moments he found his composure, "Don't think you are off the hook for this. You can't just go making people disappear, no matter how much I hate them. There was still a lot of value left in him."

"He showed up to my home with every intention of killing me," Fiona reminded him. "He made it personal."

"I warned you that you needed to watch your back."

"You never mentioned anything about Ixis though."

Julian shrugged his large shoulders as if those particular details didn't matter.

"I told you what you needed to know, nothing more, nothing less."

"Just like you have told me everything about the inhibitor?"

Kintobor's eyes narrowed quickly. He didn't appreciate the subject being changed on him, but Fiona knew that this might be her only chance to squeeze him for more information on what exactly his plan was. The more she knew, the more she could prepare.

"And what might you need to know about that?"

"You want me to turn up this girl? I need to know how she is connected to all of this aside from the fact that she was unlucky enough to have parents that helped design it."

The cogs were clearly turning in the man's head as he leaned back in his chair, weighing his options.

"Tell me," he started, "what exactly do you know about it?"

"Only that it is the key roboticization, a protein that allows you complete the process with near perfect precision."

"So you do read everything I give you?" Julian responded now slightly more amused. "And how do you hide the genetic construct of a protein?"

"On a disk, a hard drive, perhaps even a drawing."

"All are options," Kintobor admitted as he typed away at his terminal. "But none are as good as this one," he said as turned the monitor so the fox could read it.

Fiona's jaw seemed to come unhinged as she read the full contents of a file that she had long considered permanently redacted.

"I thought this file was too corrupted to read?"

"The funny thing about persistence is the results you can get through employing it. Four years ago all I had were four tiny little words and a name. Now I have this. Is this what you wanted to know? Will this help you find her?"

The vixen nodded as she struggled to take everything in, taking a mental picture of the words on the screen.

"Then stop wasting my time and get out of here," he barked. "Oh and I assume you have something nicer than that to wear if need be?"
Fiona looked back startled by his request, "What's the occasion?"

"Now that Naugus is out of the way I think I can safely entertain some of his guest. I am having a gala tonight where I will be announcing Roboticization to the world. I would appreciate you taking the lead on security. If his people don't want revenge, you can be sure the Freedom Fighters won't waste a chance to put another bullet in my ass."

The fox nodded as she left the room. Nothing he said was a suggestion, or even a request but rather an order in disguise. No doubt getting rid of Ixis had made something easier for Julian, but what she still couldn't be sure of.

"Your turn," Fiona said with a big grin on her face as she strode past Jake. It was almost a joke between them, not that they would ever let Kintobor in on it. She had better things to do than wait around for her partner. Fiona had to be sure of something before she went and did anything too brash. The words of the document Julian had shown where still floating in front of her.

In some ways everything just got easier, but the prospect of handing Mara over to Julian weighed heavily on the fox. Her days were numbered, she knew that from the beginning, but once he had the girl, would he need her anymore. He would raise up an army of metallic slaves to finish off what was left of the resistance and at best the vixen could live out the rest of her life alone knowing that she had been nothing more than a traitor and coward. It felt as if she had been staring down some dark expanse her entire life, but for the first time there was small shimmer of light in the distance, so feint it was easy to lose sight of.

Colin edged his way into the elevator before the doors could close. Lifting his nose high he preceded to divert his gaze.

"Don't you get bored of pretending you're better than everyone else?" Fiona asked.

The small smug look that existed disappeared and Fiona laughed as she saw his face contort in the reflection of the elevator doors.

"You are dead," he replied plainly. "Maybe not today, but after tonight you will be useless. You will wither away while we kill what's left of your kind."

"Dead? Me? I don't think so."

"Tell me, Fiona, do you plan to live for ever? Perhaps that explaining what Julian see's in you? Will be you be joining him in his merged state?"

The shock must of have been plain on the fox's face. The short man quickly tried to retract his statement, knowing he had said too much.

"So that's what tonight is about?" as things started to make more sense. "Julian is going to make himself immortal with his new machine. How clever and unoriginal."

"You lack the insight to see the greater picture."

The vixen raised an eyebrow, surprised again that Colin was foolish enough to concede that there was more.

"Bigger than immortality?" she asked as she locked eyes with him, imposing her aggressive stature upon him.

As the human who was only a few inches taller than the thin cut fox backed into the corner he made
the mistake of reaching for a pistol hidden beneath his jacket. Colin hardly ever concerned himself with how good Fiona was at what she did. In the blink of an eye the weapon his missing from his hands as it skidded across the marble floor of the elevator. He wanted to move, but couldn't help but look cross eyed down the barrel of the vixen's much larger gun.

"Mines a little bigger, wouldn't you agree?" she asked as she pressed the cold steel of her Desert Eagle's barrel against the bridge of his nose.

He nodded with what little room she spared him. The lift slowed as a tone played on the speaker. When the doors opened a pair of scientist looked on at the scene playing out before them. With out tearing her gaze away from Colin, Fiona razed her free hand and shoed the lab rats away, "get the next one boys."

When they were alone again she continued, "Do you still think you are better than me, Snively?"

He hated that name, but the squirming that usually arose when she said it didn't appear. The man was frozen with fear.

"I didn't hear you?"

He shook his head this time.

"The funny thing is when I get off this elevator it could be stained red with what ever is inside your skull and no one would care. You might think I am dead, but you have had on foot in the grave since you moved here to work for your uncle. You are so pathetic that you can't even be seen in his shadow. I command more of his respect than you ever have, so maybe you should think about who you're calling dead."

The vixen lowered her weapon as the doors opened again to the lower levels. Colin collapsed to the floor hyperventilating as he struggled to cope with this new experience. Whether it was her words or being so close to death, it only confirmed what she already knew about him. The man was weak.

She turned around to look down at him with pity as the doors closed, not even giving him the gratitude of the smile she normally mockingly bestowed upon him. He had reached a new low in her book.

The girl she had turned to find working away at her lab station however, now commanded even more of her respect. If she knew what Julian knew there is no way she would be risking her life, but the fact that she remained she was still here.

"Sarah," the vixen called out, startling the girl as she sat typing experiments observations at her terminal.

"Fiona," she replied with some hesitation, "how are you?"

The fox tugged at her collar, doing her best to subtly remind the human of her unchanging predicament.

"Right, sorry," the girl apologized.

"Don't pity me," Fiona snapped back, doing her best to suppress the bite that was in her voice. The girl still cowered in the fox's presence. Sighing, Fiona continued, "I know you didn't mean it like that. Forgive me I am always on edge."

"Do you need something?" the timid girl asked.
"That depends Mara, do you trust me?"

Fiona couldn't help but laugh as the girl fell over backwards in her chair.

"You would do a little better not to act so surprised when someone accuses you of being someone you are not supposed to be."

Still searching for a way out, the girl retreated underneath her desk.

"Mara," Fiona said softly, "Do you honestly think I didn't know it was you the day Jake introduced me to you?"

She poked her head out and looked up into the fox's big sky blue eyes.

"Jake is about to come down here and invite you to a dance," Fiona continued. "I was hoping you could help me find something to wear tonight."

The girl looked more confused than ever, "Then why scare me? Why tell me that you know who I am?"

The vixen smiled as she picked up a nearby syringe, "That would be for this part."

As gently as the fox could manage, she stuck the pointy end of the needle into the girl's arm and drew a small amount of blood. Fiona had always known the girl was smart, but she put things together much quicker than she had anticipated.

"How could I have been so blind?" the girl almost began to cry. "I have spent hours trying to synthesize something that has been inside of me all along. It must have been the only way for my parents to hide the inhibitor…"

Fiona reached a hand down and pulled the girl to her feet. After she was standing the fox put the vile of blood in the girl's hand making sure she had a firm grip on it before letting go of the tiny glass tube.

"Can you make sure Tails gets that?" Fiona asked softly.

Mara nodded as she tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, "Why are you doing this?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"The only thing I know about you is that you are selfish, you don't do anything unless it helps you."

Fiona wanted to look hurt, but it was true, "Do me a favor?"

The girl stared back at her as if to ask, "what?"

"Don't leave without dancing with Jake."

Fiona had just given the Resistance the Holy Grail to their survival, so there was no reason for either Mara or Tails to stick around. Jake had become too smitten with the girl to let go easily and life was hardly kind to him. Her partner looked out for her day in and day out, the least she could do was keep his heart intact for a few more hours.

"Hello ladies," a gruff voice interjected. "Fiona, I didn't expect to find you down here. You missed it, you should have seen Snively, he wet himself in the elevator."
"Did he?" the fox responded doing her best to act surprised.

Finally noticing Mara's reddened face quickly changed tacks, "Sarah are you okay?"

"Fine, just my allergies," she said glaring at the vixen as if she was the source of the problem. Well I suppose I am, Fiona thought.

"How would you feel about a party tonight?" Jake asked her while his face slowly flushed with color.

Mara split her attention between the two agents standing before her. Fiona took a step backwards out of Jake's peripheral and nodded to the girl, reminding her of the promise she never got a chance to make.

"Sure," she responded with a concerning amount of hesitation, "but I think I am going to need to go shopping for a new dress."

"Good, then you can help me find something too." Fiona added before Jake could express his excitement.

"He invited you too?" Jake asked somewhat surprised.

"I am in charge of security."

"Yeah, but he doesn't normally trot you out in front of the public without some kind of reason. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"He gave me his word, he hasn't broken it yet."

Fiona was lying through her teeth. She trusted Jake enough to tell him how she felt, but he didn't want him to be concerned. After her conversation with Snively in the elevator, the prospect of becoming part of what was no doubt going to be a live demonstration of roboticization was becoming very real all too fast.

"If you don't mind Sarah," Jake said as he turned back to Mara, scratching the back of his head in hesitation, "I thought we might take your car. It's a little more appropriate for the venue."

The girl smiled a little, "No problem. Besides I am used to driving you everywhere now."

Fiona shot her partner a look as if to display her disappointment in him.

"Don't look at me like that Fi, it was just the one time…. And maybe another after that."

Now Mara was staring at him as well.

"And a few more after that... What do you guys expect? I don't have a car."

The vixen gave him a pat on the back as she left them. The more time they spent together the more it gave Mara a chance to forget about the bomb that had just been dropped on her. The remaining hours of work seemed to drag on, only amplifying the time the fox spent thinking about how many ways her plan could go wrong. The girl was right, she only did things to help herself, but at least this time Fiona could help the ones she loved at the same time.

"Took you long enough," Mara said as the vixen walked into one of the highest end shops she had ever seen, "I have been waiting here for almost a half hour."
"I don't have a car either," the fox remarked.

The store manager was extremely quick to approach them, "I am sorry ma'am, but we do not allow you're type in this establishment."

Mara reached in her pocket for a wad of cash and was about shove it his face when the fox pulled out the dominion badge from inside her vest. The store manager's face went white as he apologized profusely, "excuse me, I had no idea. Allow me to extended our employee discount to you and your friend."

Fiona proceeded to walk past the man, hardly bothering to nod her head in thanks. Mara spent the better part of two hours trying on dresses, but Fiona knew what she wanted the second she laid eyes on it. It was a long slender black dress that had enough flair to turn heads but yet be perfectly bland at the event she was attending. The shopkeeper grimaced as Fiona took out her combat knife and cut a small hole in the back of the dress just below the waist for her tail. She could tell he wanted to say something, but was too scared of the badge around her neck to make so much as a squeak.

The changing room in the back was filled with mirrors and soft white light. Fiona wasted no time removing her clothes and slipping the garment over her head. The thin soft fabric seemed to meld with her velvet red fur. Staring at herself in the mirror she wished Tails could see her like this. The two had never been on a date, at least not one that didn't end in a shootout.

Stepping back out into the store she quickly gathered more attention than she had expected. "That looks amazing on you," Mara said, mouth slightly open in amazement.

Even the shopkeeper agreed with a small tip of his head. The other patrons who had been quick to ignore her were now stealing glances while the vixen had her head turned.

A small genuine smile found its way up the fox's muzzle as she wagged her bushy tail in excitement. A compliment on her looks was something she hadn't received in what felt like years. Living in a world of humans meant the only she ever heard the opposite.

"So," Mara began it a much quieter voice, "tell me again why you are helping me?"

Fiona shot glances around the room to make sure no one of significance was around.

"I have a plan of sorts. If it works we all live."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Well… I will definitely be dead… or worse."

Mara visibly shuttered. No doubt she had seen first hand some of the experiments performed on Mobians, "death would be better."

"You don't have to tell me. I am honestly surprised you haven't run yet, now more than ever."

Mara chuckled in a warm half serious tone. "I feel like I have a family here. As scared as I am every day, knowing I have people looking out for me is new. And Jake…"

Fiona nodded, "I am not sure what he sees in you, but it must be something really special. He won't ever shut up about you. Jake has had my back every day for almost four years, there isn't a person I trust more in this world."

"You're not making this any easier," Mara said with water pooling in her eyes.
"Don't talk to me about easy," the fox replied.

"Just help me find a dress..." the girl said now feeling slightly depressed.

Fiona continued to stare at herself in a nearby Mirror wanting more than anything to keep the life it felt as if she had just put on.
The rolling thunder echoed of the skyscrapers provocatively as it sunk its deep tones into the city’s atmosphere. Tails followed the hedgehog’s gaze as it found a distant flash of lightening, which caused the bellies of the clouds to erupt in a purple glow. Storms this close to the coast were an odd sight, but it seemed all too fitting for tonight’s venue. As the cumulonimbus swallowed the top of another building, a cool wind filtered its way down the deserted alley, carrying with it the stench of rain.

“Any reason we are meeting out here?” Sonic asked with trepidation in his voice. The hedgehog had a stern distaste for getting wet.

The fox shrugged as he brandished his silenced berretta, plugging a round in to a pad lock on a warehouse door. It swung open with only a small screech while Tails motioned for Sally and their blue-quilled friend to step through. It was quiet inside; each raindrop that found the roof resonated like a drum on the aluminum planks.

“That didn’t take long,” the kit remarked as he shut the door behind them.

“You said this was a priority, I hope you are not kidding,” Sally responded.

“I take it you two are all the support that I am going to get.”

“Don’t act too disappointed their cuz. We are the only ones who could make it here in the time frame you provided. Besides, you have had your shot at Julian, I want mine.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” the squirrel replied hastily, “we still need Tails to tell us what the hell is going on.”

“I wish I knew,” the fox said as we walked over and joined them in the pale light filtering through a dust-covered window. “I got wind of Kintobor putting something together tonight. Something public with a surprise announcement.”

“What’s your source?”

Tails shifted eyes rapidly sorting through the data on his HUD until he found Mara message.

Hey dad, sorry I will have to miss our call tonight. Turns out our company is having a big party. I guess the president will even be there. Perhaps there will be some big announcement? Wish you could be there. We can catch up tomorrow.

Love,

Sarah

“Smart girl,” Sonic muttered. “Where is she?”

“Beats me,” Tails answered. “Looking for a way out of the city if she is smart. After I got this I
didn’t have time to go looking for her.”

“She will be fine on her own,” Sally remarked. “We have bigger things to worry about. Do we know what his announcement is?”

“How many things would Julian come out of hiding for? Did he find the inhibitor?” Sonic asked with increasing concern.

“No,” the fox replied hastily, “but from what Mara has been telling me it makes little difference. His tech is more advanced. He can now roboticize limbs or organs specifically with near perfection. Poor girl couldn’t sleep for a week after she saw it first hand.”

“But why the big show if he has the tech already?”

“Because it’s not perfect yet,” Sally answered. “He needs funding from the private sector. Ixis’ rich friends are a perfect group to get money from. With him gone, they are easy pickings. More money, more research.”

“But what’s in it for them I wonder?” Tails asked as he paced back and forth?

“You said he could roboticize organs by themselves. Immortality, or at least something close to it probably fetches a pretty penny. How many people in this city do you think would pay to extend their lives?”

“Could we forget motive for a second,” Sonic suggested sounding frustrated. “We need to kill this prick, that’s why we are here. We are only going to get one shot at this, so let’s make it count.”

Tails nodded in agreement as he brought up a projection of a floor plan, “The whole thing is taking place right down town in Station Square. He has the entire ballroom booked at the banquet hall. Security there is going to be a nightmare.”

“But the building is old,” Sally pointed out. “Even if there is more security those old buildings almost always have flaws in them. Which floor is it on?

“The second has the dance floor, so we can assume that’s where he will be. The parking garage bellow is going to serve as our best entry point,” Tails said as he spun the holographic map. “Everything down there is almost self contained. If we move quietly, take out the patrols one by one, we will be in before they even know we were there.”

“Sounds like a plan, but I don’t like digging,” Sonic retorted. “That looks like its underground.”

The kit smiled, “I have spent a little bit of time wondering the old subways. There are a few things down there that are not on any maps, not even ours.”

Sally looked back at him slightly impressed. Tails reached out and poked a point on the holographic map, “an old maintenance tunnel runs right under the garage. There is an access shaft right here.”

“Then what are we doing in here?” Sonic asked now slightly impatient.

The fox sighed as he motioned to the floor beneath his feet where a rusted manhole barred the way to the subway tunnels beneath, “after you.”

Both Sonic and Sally shot him looks that suggested they were not amused with his smart-ass behavior. Neither however, were they amused with wandering around in the dark for what seemed like hours. The dingy tunnels hadn’t seen life in years, but no one was going to complain if this
worked half as well as they hoped.

Tails had to give it to the Dominion, they knew their weaknesses and planned accordingly. Even the bottom most level of the parking garage was crawling with everything from full-fledged agents to run of the mill coppers. While none of them had bothered to seal what was likely unknown point of entry, they still managed to be in an inconvenient place. Loud *THUNKS* could be heard echoing through the structure, informing the trio that the humans would now be the least of their problems.

“They didn’t spare any expenses on this party,” Sonic commented as Tails held the access hatch open. “SWAT butts always make things more fun.”

Sally shushed him, “remember, we don’t need to let them know we are here,” the squirrel readily reminded him. “Perhaps we could try to keep this quiet?”

In the blink of an eye the hedgehog that had been standing next to her vanished in a blue blur. The only indication of his new location was the sound of a feint snap and a soft dragging noise. It didn’t take Tails long to find Sonic, or the dominion agent sprawled out on the ground with his head facing the wrong way.

While there was no shortage of security, the quality of the agents’ sweeps left a lot to be desired. Perhaps they felt they had received assignments from the bottom of the bucket, and their effort seemed to reflect as much. The agents’ flashlights wagged back and forth as the beams of light were carelessly tossed from side to side, hardly ever straying from the path of its operator, leaving the shadows untouched and welcoming.

Splitting up was never something Tails had planned on, but he had become too engrossed with stalking his prey, whom was still very unaware of his presence. The well-armored man was clad from head to toe in steel plating, making his steps heavy. Sneaking up on him would be easy, but keeping him quiet would likely prove more difficult. The kit wasn’t sure at what point he had freed his knife from its sheath, but its weight had finally become noticeable in his hand as he continued to follow in the giant’s footsteps. The blackened steal gleamed in what little light there was, reflecting the image of a fox that seemed older than his true years would suggest.

Armor always had its gaps, creating easily exploitable areas. This dominion agent could have easily survived every bullet in Tails’ gun, but in the end it was the silence of blade that overcame his armor. The knife slid in with hardly any effort, causing the man to jump forward. No doubt he wanted to scream, but Tails gave the blade a small twist, ensuring there was not enough oxygen left in the his lungs for him to do so. Blood began to trickle down the shaft of the blade, dripping onto the floor as the agent clawed madly at the fox while trying to remove the knife, but his actions only sped up the inevitable. Tails used all of his strength to lower the man quietly to the ground, while dragging his body behind a parked car and out of site.

The kit looked down at the red stain on his blade with distain. He didn’t like the things his hands had accomplished, but this man’s blood was hardly the first to soil his gloves. *What’s one more life?* Tails asked himself as if he didn’t care, knowing full well nothing was further from the truth. Only when he was younger was he ever able to turn a blind eye to death. Now it just ate away at him.

When the fox finally picked his gaze up from the fallen agent, his eyes found Sally. She was waiting with her back pressed up against a van for a plain-clothes copper to walk by. He wore nothing but his uniform and a gun, leaving him more than vulnerable. With a quick spin, the squirrel swept the man’s legs, bringing him down to her height. Before the copper could make a noise she drove a blunt hand into his throat causing him to gasp. Cupping her hand over his mouth she waited for him to fall asleep while she locked eyes with the man. He tried to pry her grip away, but even Sally had strength greater than that of most men. When he finally became motionless the Mobian looked up with a
playful grin on her face, nodding for the fox to join her.

“One level down,” she whispered, still smiling. “How many more to go?”

“Just two,” Sonic said as he appeared behind the kit. “And only half as many guards.”

“What about the SWAT bots?” Tails asked over the sound of another oversized metallic footsteps.

“One step at a time little cuz,”

The problem with SWAT bots was their newest upgrades. Thermal sensors that were so effective they could spot life forms through most walls. Luckily for the freedom fighters, the thick concrete parking structure seemed to inhibit their ability. That however, did not mean that they could move up to the next floor without disabling them first.

While Tails and Sonic preferred to fly by the seat of their pants approach, Sally always had a plan. “Nicole,” she whispered to the small handheld computer, “work your magic.”

“Of course Sally,” the dry semi feminine robotic voice relied.

Within seconds the heavy footsteps ceased and Nicole spoke again, “I have successful forced a reboot of the SWAT bots core systems. You have two minutes.”

Two minutes was hardly enough time to do much of anything with, let a lone clear the rest of the garage. Tails sighed, knowing full well that it beat a barrage of auto canon fire. The hedgehog had already disappeared, not bothering to wait around for orders that he could figure out himself. The fox meanwhile formulated a plan of his own, moving his feet as rapidly as he could to run up the ramp to the next level. The pitter patter of his boots on the ground turned the head of the guard in his path. Before Tails could even get a shot off, a cobalt blue hedgehog materialized behind the man, one of his infamous Silenced MK23s in hand. The copper never got a chance to queue his mic before the solitary sound of an empty brass shell casing echoed about as it rolled down the incline. Sonic was careful to grab the man’s body before his hardened armor clattered on the cement.

There was no time for thank yours. The kit continued to run past the downed guard and vault onto the now disabled SWAT bot. The mechs were intimating pieces of machinery, standing well above ten feet. Following the guide that flashed across the HUD, Tails opened up an access panel, removing a select few microprocessors. It’s entire weapon and tracking system would be unusable. Only the raw video feed would be of any use to the person monitoring the bot.

By the time the fox got to the next SWAT bot it was already too late. The crisp red eye was beginning to come back to life as the machine powered up. The fox sprinted faster, but he was too slow, even for such a lumbering machine. It seemed as if Tails was staring down the barrel of the auto cannon for an entire minute before the sparks erupted, but not from the gun. The kit shielded his eyes as the white lights and molten metal bounced playfully off the ground. When it hit the ground Sonic was standing on it’s back, quills still raised. The bot looked as if it had lost a fight to an oversized weed whacker.

The vast majority of people were scared of Sonic because of his speed, but plenty forgot that the hedgehog brought with him a full set of knives far sharper than those found anywhere else. His quills, when combined with his velocity could tear through even the most solid compounds. Tail’s stepped up onto the mech’s back as he looked down at the hole in it’s armor which extended all the way to it’s now exposed power core. This time, the machine would be staying down.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Tails said as he looked at his friend. “When one of these goes
offline, they are not likely to ignore it.”

“Then lets speed this up,” Sonic replied sarcastically as he drew his second MK23 from its holster.

Between Tails and the lobby door bodies sprinkled the floor sporadically, some unconscious while others had taken the big sleep. Tails had yet to even make it up to this level and yet it was cleared of all the guards. Sonic’s speed hardly ever ceased to amaze him while his lack of subtly however, did. The hedgehog stopped between the two dominion agents slumped against the wall behind them, a streak of red showing their downfall.

Turning a blind eye to the men as she caught up with them Sally began, “lets try to keep this clean, it seems as if they still don’t know we are here. No reason to put Julian in a panic just yet.”

Sonic smiled as he opened the door to the back of the lobby. The quietness of the parking structure faded as the crossed the threshold into the historic building. Chandeliers dotted the celling, emanating a flat white light as music from the dance floor above them poured into the large open room. As Sally walked past both Tails and Sonic she reached down and removed her old Colt .45 from its resting place. The weapon was beautifully ornate beyond any practical purpose, but the squirrel clung to the weapon like it was the only thing that mattered to her. It had been her fathers, one of the few things that she still had left of his. Every time she pulled the trigger, it was hard not to notice the look of vindication that would casually sweep across her face, almost as if the death of her enemies was enough to bring her father back for just a few fleeting moments.

It had been four years since the kit had a chance to fight by the side of the one he loved. It was a weapon seldom used, but watching Sally and Sonic reminded him just how powerful love could be. They moved cohesively, two bodies with one purpose and never unanimated moment. The two spun ferociously letting loose a swirl of high-pitched gun shots that could barely be heard over the thump of the bass. At first Tails was beginning to wonder if anyone was going to notice the trio, but a pack of well armed Mobians in the center of station square was only bound to go unseen for so long.

Feeling almost left out, the kit let two cut a path before him as he let the unusual music wash over him. It reminded him of the strangely exotic music that played at Ixis’ casino at all hours of the night.

Now Playing *Spectrum* by: *Zedd*

Any use of lyrics are in regards to this song. They are not mine.

Highly recommend that you give this song a listen if you havent heard it already.

“…no one can blind us any longer,” the muffled voice called out as watched his two friends dispatch more of the guards. Those on the balcony above them had finally taken notice, but Tails raised his berretta, centered the bead and let it sing a song of its own. The suit had been reaching for the alarm, but only a splash of his blood found the already red button.

The fox turned back to watch Sonic lower the quills on his back as Sally spun over him, bring her foot across an agents face and sending him to the floor. The squirrel wasted no time turning her gun on the defenseless copper, perhaps smiling a little as she squeezed her index finger. The last remaining Acorn had lost was left of compassion long ago, leaving only a void which revenge and self preservation seemed to fill. The hedgehog at her back ducked low as he spun with remarkable
speed, letting loose of series of muzzle flashes that pinned a suit to the wall, his hand still fumbling for the safety on his weapon as tumbled slumped towards the floor.

“Even if they were ready for us,” Tails thought, “They were not ready for him. No one ever is.” The kit continued to walk up the stairs, following the trail of maimed or otherwise incapacitated Dominion agents.

When Sonic heard the inevitable click of the firing pins of his weapons hitting an empty chamber, he flicked his wrist while releasing the magazines sending the empty cartridges into his nearest enemies face. In an effort to dodge the objects the guard forwent his chance to shoot the hedgehog, quickly finding the price of obeying his rudimentary instincts too high. Sonic brought his forearm into the side of the man’s head, knocking him out cold in one blow.

Even with the music still playing the fox was entranced enough to know an out of place sound when he heard one. Sonic seemed to notice it too, and the look on his face suggested that he already knew what had happened despite not having seen it. When the hedgehog finally did turn around, it was to Sally clutching her chest as her blue velvet vest turned an odd shade of crimson. The young Mobian fell to her knees revealing her shooter. The man had been plastered to the wall with a barrage of bullets not but twenty seconds ago, but it had seemed his will to cling to life was higher than anyone could have anticipated. The guard had already lowered his gun, no longer having the strength hold it. Sonic raised his freshly reloaded SOCOMs, but Tails caught him, “What’s the point? Shooting him more won’t make him any more dead. Help Sally.”

As if the kit saying her name suddenly reminded him of who she was and what happened, Sonic snapped back to reality. “Sally,” the hedgehog said softly with more concern his voice than Tails could ever remember hearing. Sonic let his quills fall as he knelt over her, brushing the back his hand against her cheek while he propped her up with the other. “Don’t you die on me, Sal.”

The statement seemed kind of mute as the squirrel coughed up blood while more red liquid poured out of the wound in her chest. Tails knelt at his friend’s side and put a hand on his shoulder, “get her out of here.”

“But what about Julian? Sally would never forgive me if she found out we let Julian get away just try and save her.”

“It’s her or him,” the kit suggested. “You have a chance to save her.”

“A chance…” the hedgehog echoed still unsure of the right course of action.

“Could you live with yourself for not doing everything you can to keep her alive? I will take care of Julian,” Tails said plainly and confidently.

“But the last time you…”

Tails cut him off, “I won’t miss, not this time. Besides take it from someone who knows, losing the person you love hurts more than any amount of revenge could ever fix.”

Sonic for the first time seemed to notice the song that was still playing, “wearing your heart like stolen dream. Opening skies with your broken keys… I will never let you go.”

The words seemed to visibly resonate inside Sonic’s head as he nearly sobbed at the thought of letting Sally go. Finally he scooped her up in his arms as he turned back to Tails, “don’t let me down little cuz.”

With a feint smile the fox nodded as he looked down at the dyeing squirrel, “maybe we can go back
to being friends after this. I miss having a big sister,” Tails said with so much sincerity it almost brought tears to his eyes. She and Sonic were the only ones who had been there for him after his parents died. Having blinked just long enough to clear the water pooling his eyes, Tails found his friends missing, leaving him alone in a lobby stained with blood.

As the bass continued throb, the kit looked down at his weapon, sliding his thumb up to the magazine release. The clip fell to the floor with a small clatter as he reached with his other hand for a fresh one. The lyrics continued to tug at him, “lying inside a quite drama.”

Tails smiled as he put his hand on the large doorknob, preparing himself for what might lie on the other side. “This drama has been anything but quiet,” he remarked sarcastically as he leaned against the large door.

The room opened up into modern day rave complete with lights that made it impossible to see faces or discern enemies. However, one thing did stand out amongst the rest. A vixen only slightly taller than him stood just a few feet away in a slim cut black dress. The thought of Fiona in a dress had never occurred to him, but now it was hard to remove from his mind.

“Breathing you in when I want you out,” the song returned. “Finding our truth in a hope of doubt.”

The vixen stared back at him as if she hadn’t been expecting to see him that night. Even in a room filled with hundreds of humans her scent pulled him towards her. Fiona’s beauty perplexed him for one to many moments, causing him to forget why he was there. He had always known he loved her, but in this moment it seemed they were the only ones in the room. Even amongst the growing doubt he was beginning to feel, he still felt calm and collected as he stared back into her eyes.

“We’ll run where lights won’t chase us, hide where love can’t save us. I will never let you go,” the voice interrupted his thoughts again.

How long had Tails dreamed of running away with her? But the lights did seem to chase them here. Spot light after spotlight seemed to blind the kit even as the music was cut. The room went from black to a bright white in a matter of seconds. Hiding would not save him, but perhaps love would.
Chapter 23

The fox seemed to fade into the background with her black dress. Even with the lights flickering about in different colors she walked around almost unnoticed. While this was a far cry from the glares she normally got, some part of her missed the attention. As Fiona inhaled deeply through her nose she couldn’t help but notice the stench that hung in the air. The room was thick and humid with the perspiration of all those on the dance floor. It seemed that this party was not for the elderly snobbish types, but rather the youthful adults with more money than sense. Although that didn’t surprise the vixen, this was exactly the type of crowd she would have expected to find at Naugus’ casino.

She pushed her way through the crowd, edging her way between the tightly packed patrons who couldn’t be bothered to move out of her way. It wasn’t often that Julian went out in public, and for the moment she had to make sure no one was going to try anything funny. Jake, and most of what made up security detail had long ago been distracted leaving just her to patrol the growing sea of people on the dance floor. It didn’t matter though, so long as no one got to Kintobor before she did.

It wasn’t often that Fiona minded being short, but being forever stuck in a crowd of people who towered over her was starting to get to her. Luckily for her Jake made dwarfed most other men, making him easy to pick out. Through the small gaps in bodies, the fox spotted her partner dancing with Mara.

She kept her promise, Fiona thought not having seen her since earlier that day. The girl was risking her life by sticking around any longer. It would only be a matter of time before the Dominion wised up to the Freedom Fighters trick. However, Fiona knew first hand that love could make people do strange things.

Even with Tails in the city, the nights were just as lonely as they had been before he showed up, maybe even more so. Knowing he was so close was a thought that was burned in the back of her mind, reminding her of all the thing she wanted in life, but couldn’t have. In a room of hundreds, she was alone.

There was a fleeting moment earlier in the night where man offered his hand to her an attempt to get her dance with him. She had paused, unsure of what to make of the gesture, her face alight with optimism and joy. But like all things that seemed too good to be true, it was. He pulled it away at the last second, bursting into laughter with his friends as they disappeared back into the crowd. The butt of another joke, the vixen whispered to herself as she held back a clenched fist. It went without saying that hurting Julian’s guest was not allowed, but sometimes Fiona felt like making exceptions to the rules.

Working her way back to the edge of the room, the fox wondered aimlessly around. She still wasn’t sure when Julian was going to show up, but she doubted that anyone did. The man kept his schedule book under lock and key. Fiona turned quickly when she felt a large hand grasp her shoulder.

“Jake,” she said slightly startled by his touch.

“Take a load off boss. Pacing around won’t make this place any more secure than it already is. You have half the city’s coppers on patrol.”

She smiled back at him trying to find some emotion. As the song changed her partner reached out his hand just as the other man had.
“Come on, I will even dance with you,” Jake said playfully.

Again, she hesitated, but found her courage, reaching out until her hand was smothered in his. He pulled her back into the crowd as the beat began to pick up.

“What about Mar-Sarah?” The vixen asked as she cleared her throat, doing her best to cover up the slip in tongue.

“She will be fine without me for a while I think.”

The fox’s partner twirled her around with ease, causing her tail to lash out and hit those near by. Fiona paid them no mind even as the two of them began to draw a small crowd. Whether the people were fascinated by a human dancing with a Mobian or the display that she was putting on for the growing number of onlookers was hard to say.

“I know about the little stunt you have planned for tonight,” Jake said softly as the vixen moved closer to him.

“Oh yeah?” Fiona said as she spun away.

“Fi, don’t do this,” her partner nearly begged as he tossed her blindly into the air.

The momentary loss in gravity was exhilarating, and her partner’s request touching, but it didn’t change what she had to do.

“I am sorry Jake. I have to do this. I have to set things right.”

“I can’t let you,” he struggled to reply. “Even if you succeed, everyone will think I am a traitor too, that I was some how in on it. If you fail…”

“When was the last time you saw me fail at anything?” Fiona asked teasing him as she continued let her body flow with the beat.

“You still haven’t found that girl.”

The vixen burst out laughing, she couldn’t help it. The reality however, was that the situation wasn’t funny. She wanted more than anything to tell him the girl he loved was at the top of Kintobor’s most wanted, but she couldn’t bare to break his heart even though it would likely be broken shortly. Fiona wanted to prepare him for the pain, to be there and comfort him, but at the same time she didn’t want to be the source of anymore discomfort than she already was.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Fiona answered still smiling as she stole a glace at Mara who was now sitting in the corner of the room.

“You still haven’t found that girl?” Jake asked feeling hurt and maybe a little betrayed. “I have spent the last four years looking out for you…”

He was trying to guilt trip her, but her mind had been made up for quite a while.

“Jake,” Fiona said softly as she reached a hand up to his face, still very aware of everyone that was looking at them. “You have been the only one who has ever looked out for me and I know that’s what you are doing now, but I can’t live this life anymore, not like this.”

He was quick to remove her hand, almost forcefully. The man was hurt, and Jake’s case that was not
something easily accomplished.

“We can find another way, just don’t do it like this!” he nearly shouted.

She wanted to embrace him, to tell him everything was going to be alright, but not even she was sure of that. Too many things were in motion to stop now.

“Jake, I know this feels like a knife in the back, but…”

“You’re damn right it does.”

“Come with me,” she blurted out.

Jake nearly stopped in his tracks, despite the fact the two agents were now the center of attention.

“And do what? Be a traitor? Like you?”

It was a low blow, but she let it go. It was true after all.

“I am finally going to do what’s right instead of what’s right for me.”

“I don’t care. And don’t think I won’t stop you,” Jake said as the song ended. “You may have been the best damn partner I could have ever hoped to have, but I won’t let you do this.”

Before she could respond he had already muscled his way through the thick wall of people gathered around them. Suddenly the weight of a hundred eyes bore down on her as the room began to shrink. The loss of a friend hurt. The fox tore after him, pushing through the people gathered in front of her.

She paused when she reached the outside of the crowded. Jake was standing in between Mara and another man. By the look on her partner’s face the man in the flashy suit may have said a few things to Mara that didn’t sit well with Jake. Don’t do anything stupid Jake, the vixen thought as she walked slowly toward the confrontation.

“I said apologize!” Jake shouted.

This sounds oddly familiar.

“Shove off buddy, I don’t have to apologize to anyone,” the thug said as he turned back to talk to Mara.

Jakes face turned at least three different shades of red in just a few short second as he struggled to control his rage. Fiona was able to catch his arm just as he cocked it back to hit the man.

“Is there a problem here you two?” the fox asked as she flashed her badge.

Jake smiled a little. No doubt he would understand the angle she was playing, after all they had worked together for four years. “Yeah,” he replied in a gruff voice. ‘This prick thinks its okay to hit on my girl.”

“Free country ain’t it” the mobster retorted.

“Plenty of other girls here,” Fiona suggested.

“You offering?”

This one is quite sharp. Now I can see how Jake lost his temper, but two can play this game. Fiona
smiled playfully back at him as she twisted a strand of her red hair around a finger. She had learned how to fake nearly every emotion there was. Flirting was child’s play. The thug quickly rethought his obviously fake advances as he disappeared to another part of the building.

“Thanks, boss,” Jake called out solemnly as Mara dragged him back out on to the dance floor. The tone in voice suggested he meant it even though he was more than upset with her.

She returned his comment with an equally feint smile. However, a large silhouette began to move about on the elegantly dressed stage at the far side of the ball room, stealing her attention away. Heads turned one by one as the lights came on, realizing that they were about to come face to face with a man seldom seen in the flesh.

“Good evening,” a deep voice boomed as the stage lights exploded into existence. “Welcome to the party. I hope all of you are enjoying yourself.”

The crowed erupted into cheers. It was considered an honor to be in the same room as the president, but that’s not why these people were cheering. All of them were slimy crooks who came for the festivities and free booze. It made no matter to Julian though, they had money and that’s what he needed. Ixis had kept them under his thumb for nearly all of Julian’s term, shrinking his administration’s budget every year.

“Excellent,” Kintobor replied in an almost maniacal voice. “I won’t take much of your time, I promise. However, I do think all of you will be interested in what I have to offer.”

The large man reached down to the glass of water on his podium and took a sip.

“No doubt some of you may find life too short. And I agree, it most certainly is. For the past four years, my administration has been hard at work on break through research that can extend ones life almost indefinitely.”

A murmur traveled through the crowed as whispers evolved into conversations. They feel silent when Julian continued.

“But rather than sit up here and you, I would like to show you.”

Fiona looked on as more stage lights came alive, illuminating the back of the stage where another unfortunate Mobian sat strapped to a chair. The ferocious mountain lion was strapped down, wires pouring out of his body, just like all of the others. No doubt this creature had been selected because of his strength, he was quite the specimen.

“Like with all things we began our testing on animals before moving onto human trials..” Julian said as he motioned to his victim. With a feint nod off stage, Fiona cringed. The crowed was about to get more than they bargained for.

“I should warn you,” Kintobor interjected as the wires began to glow, “this process can be graphic, so those of you who are feint of heart should look away.”

The fox audibly chuckled to herself when no one bothered to heed his advice. The room quickly filled with gasps as the lion belted out a furious roar. Every transformation was different, but equally gruesome.

By the time half his fur had melted away a large portion of the audience had finally decided to overt their gaze, and continued to do so until the Monbian’s cries for help ceased.

“As you can see,” Julian began has he walked back to the center of the stage where his creation sat,
“The body can be transformed into something more permanent.”

He let that thought sink in with his now captivated audience before continuing, “Transformations can be completed at the cellular level, so we can target what ever you like. Perhaps you would like to keep your heart young and healthy? With Roboticization, you can lock it in time, ensuring it will never fail you. Or better yet,” Kintobor said with a smile on his face, “How about an iron clad liver. Imagine drinking to your hearts content without the worry of alcohol poisoning or even a hangover. The possibilities are endless.”

The crowed applauded the marvel with overwhelming support.

The fat man walked around next to the Mobian, posing for a quick picture before doing the unthinkable. With a quick flip of a latch he released the restrains holding the mountain lion to the chair. Fiona instinctively reached for her gun, half expecting the creature to tear through anything and everything. Instead it got up, slowly taking in the room as it scanned its surroundings. Now it was Fiona’s turn to be impressed and scarred. Had he perfected to the inhibitor, or was this some kind of trick?

“But possibly the greatest feature of this technology is to tame the untamable,” Kintobor said confidently as he place a hand on the lion’s shoulder.

The clapping quickly turned again into cheering and Julian lapped it all up. His grin grew big as he stood next to what ordinarily would have been a very dangerous Mobian. “Please be sure to tell all your friends. I am looking for investment partners. Together, we can change the world.”

“Another,” someone in the room shouted. A few calls of, “more,” answered the first.

For just a moment Julian’s gaze found Fiona and she panicked. He knew better than anyone that she would not get into that chair alive. However, in no possible reality did she ever anticipate what would happen next.

“Very well,” he answered. “I hadn’t anticipated an encore presentation, but I am not one to disappoint my people. Perhaps we should try a human this time?”

The crowed seemed to agree.

“Any volunteers?”

Almost immediately the crickets outside could be heard chirping.

“I assure you, the processes is not nearly as painful as it looks.”

Still no one stepped forward.

“Well you leave me little choice, I will have to do it myself,” as he removed his red suit coat and sat himself down in the chair.

Scientist in white lab coats immediately rushed over to him, injecting him with all types of things. When they were done copper leads lined his left arm as the large man sat there calmly.

Jake stole a look back at Fiona as if to ask, “What is he doing?”

The fox had no answer for him; she only shrugged her shoulder in response.
While once rowdy, the onlookers had grown quite as they watched the wires attached to their president’s arm glow blue. It was obvious that he tried, but even Julian gave into the pain. His scream however, was not primal, but rather almost one of enjoyment. He seemed to thrive on the agony and the powered.

When it was done he stood up, holding his left hand high for the world to see. No longer was it a cool tan, but rather a dull grey.

“Some of you may ask why?” Julian shouted into the still quiet room. “Let me show you.”

The ordinarily week man proceeded to smash the podium with his bare hand, turning into nothing more than splinters.

“There is no limit to what can be accomplished.”

He had given new meaning to the iron fist displayed on his Dominion soldiers, now proudly embodying all it stood for.

The crowed erupted again in awe of his display.

With a wave of his hand the music resumed and the room was again plunged into darkness and with it, the chatter on her radio. Something was going on in the parking garage, but no one could make heads or tails of it. Two SWAT bots were down and all of echo could not be reached on the radio. This was starting to sound like the freedom fighters. You fool Miles, don’t get yourself killed.

Fiona quickly headed for the front door as she threw up a few hand motions to alert her team. “Alpha, do you copy?” Fiona asked.

“Affirmative,” the call came back.

“What’s going on down stairs?”

“Nothing, the lobby is all clear. Nothing to… hold on a second.”

“Alpha?”

No one responded.

Adrenalin began to course through her body. Miles was good, but there was no way he was this good. It was too quick, to precise. There were more of them. Sonic, Fiona thought. “Shit!” she nearly screamed, but no one heard. The hedgehog was ruthless. She had been fortunate enough to avoid him for most of her life, only narrowly escaping him the few times they met. She wasn’t ready for him, not that there was much she could do to be ready for him.

“Julian,” Fiona said into her com after switching frequencies.

“Go ahead,” his brutish voice responded.

While she had every intention of killing him, she had to make sure she got her collar off first. What good was freedom if she couldn’t enjoy it? Sonic would happily waltz in here, put a bullet in Kintobor’s brain and call it a night. If that happened she was as good as dead.

“I think you might want to get out of here. Sonic could be here.”

“Oh goody. Do show him in.”
“Excuse me?”

“I was hoping he might show up, I have a surprised for him.”

Why? She had to ask herself. The plan she had made was falling to pieces right in front of her.

Almost everyone ignored the solitary gunshot. Most people probably barely heard it over the music, but Jake had seemed to be able to pick it out. Almost immediately he put himself between Mara and the door while he put his radio in his ear.

“Boss, what was that?” his voice quickly followed.

She shrugged again as she turned back towards the door, waiting for it to open.

It was only a few seconds before Miles immerged alone. He stopped to stare at her, almost in disbelief that she was standing in front of him. Then she remembered the dress. *Silly kit. What are you doing here alone? Won’t any body let me try to fix this?*

Fiona wanted to be frustrated with him, but the dull smile that she usually wore was still on her face. *Miles, baby, you just walked into the lion’s den.*

A spotlight found the new guest, causing him to bring a hand up to his face to shield his eyes.

“Ah, Miles, how nice of you to join us,” Kintobor said as he walked out onto stage. “Everyone, meet the infamous Miles Prower. No doubt here to kill me.”

Fiona’s men quickly surrounded the two tails fox. His eyes flashed from side to side as he looked for a way out, but there was none to be had. The frustration was clear on his face as he looked at her, almost pleading. *I can’t show you any mercy, not in front of Kintobor.*

“What do you say everyone? Do we have time for another test?”

A resounding yes seemed to be the answer as the crowed clapped.

“Fiona, if you would be so kind as to retrieve you kin.”

She reached for her gun, but the kit lunged forward faster than she was expecting. The blow sent her side ways, knocking the gun from her hand. However, his disobedience was short lived. Three soldiers brought him to the floor with heavy hands. The vixen got back to her feet, looking at him remorsefully as she took her old berretta from his hands. *What good is a life of freedom I can’t spend with you?*

“Bring him here,” Kintobor commanded.

“No, Tails!” came a scream from the dance floor.

The entire room went quiet again. Fiona had recognized the voice, but still turned in disbelief. Had Mara not realized what she had just done? *Only his friends call him Tails you fool.*

Jake looked as if he had seen a ghost. His grip quickly tightened on her shoulder as he put the pieces together.

“Jake, stop you are hurting me,” the girl squealed as the soldier refused to let her go.

*Can anything go right tonight?* Fiona found herself asking rhetorically.
“What have we here?” Kintobor asked. “Someone who knows Miles by his pet name in my midst? A spy? No, no, you’re just a girl. Ah yes, wait a moment, I know who you are. Hello Mara.”

“Shit,” the vixen swore under breath again.

“Do you know how long I have been looking for you?”

She didn’t respond.

“Oh this night just keeps getting better and better. Colin, if you would be so kind to show her up on stage.”

The short man hopped off the stage and wriggled his way through the crowed to relieve Jake of the girl. Her partners eyes locked momentarily with the president’s nephew’s as the two men sized each other up.

“No, Jake! Don’t let him do this!” Mara screamed as he finally let her go.

It was heart wrenching to watch. There was no doubt he felt betrayed, but to watch him hand her over so willingly was painful. Had he not loved her only moments ago? Although, what choice does he have? As it is he has a lot of explaining to do.

Everything was going to hell and there was nothing Fiona could do about it. The fox she loved was about to be executed, that is if he was lucky. Her partner had just handed over the inhibitor, the one thing standing between Julian and world domination. How could things get any worse? I need a way out. Come on Fiona, think.

The only person she could depend on in the room who was of any use at the moment was Jake. Even if he said he would stop her, she knew deep down he would stick with her. Now all she needed was the proper motivation.

“Jake,” Fiona whispered into her mic. “Save the girl.”

She had never expected it to work. Her partner broke out into a full sprint and tackled the scrawny man to the ground. That seemed to cause more than enough distraction more Miles to capitalize. In just seconds he had disabled the three men holding him down in a grizzly display of his might. Blood quickly stained the floor as the wounded soldiers staggered backwards, seeking shelter from the fox’s blade.

Soon everyone started to panic as the twin-tailed fox roamed free among the crowed, clutching a blackened steel blade in his right hand. People dashed for the doors as they ran in fear for their lives, nearly trampling to death what was left of Fiona’s security force.

When the civilians had dispersed she spotted him again. The kit was holding her Desert Eagle, its barrel trained squarely on Kintobor as he approached the stage. The vixen looked over her shoulder to check on Jake, but he was too busy dealing with some of the other guards. Mara was struggling to make herself useful, doing little more than distracting the enemy while Jake wrestled them to the ground.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” the fat man asked him. “Kill me and you kill her.”

The kit smiled as he turned the gun towards Fiona, “I am going to do what I should have done a long time ago.”

She had never seen him aim at her like this before.
“Miles, baby, don’t do anything stupid,” she said timidly, while retreating slowly.

“I am impressed Miles,” Kintobor called out over the speakers. “I never thought you would have enough balls to kill her.”

The fox put down two steps forward for every one of hers backwards. A look of fire lit his eyes, and for the first time in a long time Fiona was scared. She thought about razing her gun to meet his, but there was no need to provoke him.

“What are you waiting for, lets get this over with,” Julian added, egging him on.

“Fiona,” Tails said with the feint hint of a tear in his eye. “Do you remember that game we always play?”

*There are so many,* she thought to herself. But considering the circumstances, she knew exactly which one he was talking about. The vixen nodded in reply.

“I think it’s about time I won.”

Fiona closed her eyes as she tried to remember what freedom felt like. There was a small peace to be found with accepting that the deep breath she had just taken very well might be her last.
The world slowed down as the fox sunk low, ducking in-between the oncoming heard of people. They ran in fear of him, in fear of the monster Kintobor and his media goons had made him out to be, in fear of the senseless killer he appeared to be. As of late, there seemed to be far fewer days where Tails wasn't covered in blood. His blade gleamed red and he almost chuckled to himself as he thought how foolish it was of them not to check for more weapons. He was the second most feared Freedom Fighter and yet they still treated him like a kid.

His eyes found Fiona's gun only for a moment before someone kicked it across the floor. Its silver breach disappeared into the thick of the forest of legs but the fox was quick to dive after it. The scared human's seemed to part as he walked between them, each one too scared to come with an arm's reach of him. Baring a fang he put on look that did nothing more than perpetuate the beast that the humans had made him out to be.

At long last he stood over the weapon he was hunting for. Fiona had finally taken hers Beretta, leaving him little in the way of selection. The Desert Eagle was heavier than he expected, but given its size it made sense. The balance felt entirely wrong compared to his old pistol, which now seemed like a child's toy. It's wonder she could hit anything with this.

Gun in hand, Tails made his way towards the stage where the fat man stood proudly, as if he was certain the fox would not kill him right then and there. Sure if Julian died, so did Fiona, but the man showed no trepidation. Looking down the sites he found Julian, his round belly a hard target to miss. Mara's cries for help were distracting, but not enough to tear his vision away.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" he asked with little hesitation. "Kill me and you kill her."

It was obvious now that Julian knew more about Tails than he would have preferred. Fiona had always assured him that the Dominion knew nothing about the two of them, but in reality it was starting to look like they were just using her to gain leverage on him should they ever need it. I'll show them, the fox thought as he put a grin on his face.

Ixis had promised Fiona the solution to all of their problems if they let him walk out of that room alive. She had attached a myriad of other requirements, but the man, unlike his guards was allowed to leave. Having not seen him for days, the kit had assumed that he had duped them again. However, the information that was in his now in his HUD seemed to suggest otherwise. Fiona's collar was glowing red. As he stepped closer each of the internal components shone in another color. Glowing in an off orange was the trigger device, the one piece that the Tails had sought to remove since the day he learned of it.

"I am going to do what I should have done a long time ago," the fox replied.

Under normal circumstances he would have taken the device apart, but there was no time for that. His hand felt heavier as he turned the barrel of Fiona's gun on her. A look of surprise came over the vixen as she began to back up. Tails followed her, closing the gap while keeping the small orange spec in the site of his weapon.

"Miles, baby, don't do anything stupid," she suggested almost sarcastically as if she couldn't believe what he was doing.

The kit tightened his grip on the gun, trying to keep a straight face. Never had he been so confused on what emotion to display. He could feel a smirk lurking just bellow his face's surface, but the pain
of the void growing in the pit of his stomach was too much to let it free. Fiona's life was in his hands, along with virtually every other Mobian's.

"I am impressed Miles," Kintobor said into the mic on stage, "I never thought you would have enough balls to kill her."

Tails continued to approach the vixen, halving the distance between them even while she retreated.

"What are you waiting for?" Julian barked. "Let's get this over with!"

The kit allowed his upper lip curl as he bore a fang in the rotund man's direction. Calming himself before looking back at the other fox in the room, "Fiona," he said trying his best to mask the emotions that were seemingly overwhelming. "Do you remember that game we always play?"

It was a silly question to ask, but he needed her to know that he wasn't trying to hurt her. If this all went wrong, she was dead. Tails couldn't let her die thinking that he held any of this against her, or that he was trying to kill her. All he had ever wanted to do was free her, and it came down to this.

The kit continued to hold the weapon steady, keeping the glowing orange target just above the notch at the end of the iron sights.

It took a while for Fiona to nod, but at least she did, not that it did anything to put the kit's mind at ease.

"I think it's about time I won," he replied with as much of a smile as he could muster.

The vixen closed her eyes, too nervous to stair death in the face. Tails couldn't blame her. Even if he was trying to help, glaring at the one you love for the last moments of your life could not make it any easier.

Jake had finally managed to spare a moment from his fight, glancing over his shoulder at the events unfolding. Mara's gaze soon followed his and the two both yelled their partner's names in unison. It made not difference though, Tails mind was closed and the screams were but whispers, he was too focused on what he was about to do.

He squeezed the trigger slowly, until the gun responded with uproarious bark forcing his hand backwards. Tails was almost scared to look, but the worried look on Kintobor's face told him everything he needed to know. Fiona stood there, shaking nervously as she ran a hand along the fur on her neck. She shivered as the cool air and the touch of her paw nipped at the freshly uncovered skin. Feeling only her own body where once the bitterness of cold steel resided caused the vixen to open her eyes. Fiona's gaze quickly found the shattered remnants of the collar on the floor next to her. She stared at it in disbelief for a few moments until she found the Beretta which was still in her hand. She tested the weight for a moment, getting to know the weapon that she hadn't used in years. Finally a wry smile returned to her face as she spun on her heels to face Kintobor.

"No, this can't be," Julian rambled. "Fiona," he pleaded. "Think of everything I have done for you."

The man quickly began to back pedal as she raised the weapon and let loose a flurry of shots. The high-pitched gunfire was quickly drowned out by the clank of the lead on Julian's robotic arm, which he had hoisted in front of his face in just a knick of time.

"Everything you have done for me!" she screamed back at him as she fired her weapon again. "You made me your personal slave, forced me to torture and kill my own family and friends! You made me a monster! Now it's time to face your creation!"

Julian tripped backwards as another round bounced buried itself in his hardened limb.
"Don't just stand there you fool," Julian barked at the metallic mountain lion idling at his side, "Kill them."

In an instant the seemingly human beast sprung off the stage, splintering the vintage wood dance floor underneath it's weight as it put itself between Fiona and her target. She let lose two more shots, aiming for the lion's head, but the small 9mm did nothing but ricochet aimlessly around the room. Realizing there was nothing she could do Fiona, began to step backwards towards Tails.

"Sweetie, I think I am going to need a little help on this one."

The fox grinned as he raised his new weapon, "No problem."

The first two shots caught their enemy in the shoulder, causing it to stagger backwards as sparks dispersed from the joint. However, he quickly recognized robots did not feel pain. The lion dashed forward as if nothing had happened and before Tails could get another shot off he felt a closed steel fist connect with his chest. The air gushed out of his lungs as the blow sent him backwards.

He could hear Fiona yelling, but he was too busy coughing up blood to pay any mind to her. Thick metallic footsteps slowly lumbered in his direction. The mountain lion had the look of a certain cat he knew, but was far too young to be the same. Tails fumbled for the gun, raising it to meet his target, but a kick every bit as hard as the first punch sent him into the wall at the back of the room.

The fox's vision wobbled back and forth as he struggled to find his equilibrium. The lion did not seem concerned with anyone else but Tails until a new barrage of bullets tore at its back. Jake joined in with Fiona in peppering the robotic Mobian until it was forced to acknowledge them. Spinning around, it ran head long at Jake, no doubt seeing him as the bigger threat of the two.

Somehow Jake managed to catch the first jab with his bare hands, but even as strong as he was the machine was stronger. The mountain lion yanked it's metallic hand away, dragging the Dominion agent right along with it. Quickly picking himself back up Jake swung a clenched fist into the robots torso, clearly forgetting what his opponent was made of. He yelped in pain as shook a now bleeding hand. The bot seized its chance, knocking the agent to the floor with long winded hay maker.

Tails was still struggling to his feat, but did not fail to notice his friend's plight. Fiona's gun was still an arms length or two away, well out of reach for the kit in his current state of delirium. Reaching for the sheath on his combat vest, he loosened a knife still damp with blood. With a quick flick of his wrist he sent it sailing across the floor as he yelled for his friend, "Jake!"

The mountain lion loomed over the agent as the blade skidded towards him. Fiona continued to plug shots into the machine, but they did nothing. Just as the robotic Mobian was about ready to unleash another attack the dagger reached the man. With one fluid motion Jake collected the knife, leapt from the ground and drove the sliver of steal into his target's torso. The bot's armor may have been thick, but Tails' knife was made of even harder stuff. A wound that would have normally produced a shower of blood produced little more a temporary short circuit as Jake wiggled the blade around in search of more circuitry and wires to destroy. The agent backed away as the lion attempted to remove the knife from its side.

Fiona had other plans however. She leapt with all of her might, driving both feet into the bots chest, forcing it to topple over. Rebounding quickly she forced the end of her Berretta in its mouth and pulled the trigger until the gun clicked. While it was clear what she had done damaged their foe, it did not kill it. Sparking now, the machine was quick to rise, batting the vixen across the room with more force than any of its previous blows. When she hit the wall the fox stayed still showing very little signs of life. Seeing that downed one of the resistance fighters, the bot quickly turned its attention back to Jake, whom seemed to be thoroughly enraged.
Having nothing to fight with the man simply dodged the incoming attacks, screaming in rage as he did so.

"Jake," Kintobor said coolly over the mic, "I had such plans for you. But it seems I let you grow too close to that animal."

Julian's words only fueled Jake's fire as he ducked under another punch. With the bot's arms adrift the agent seized his chance and went in low for the tackle. The two hit the ground with a loud thud. Jake reached for the knife, driving it in even further. However, the lion was quick to roll over on top of the agent, pinning him to the ground. Jake struggled to free himself, but the sheer weight of the machine was too much for him to move. The bot raised a fist to strike the man, almost savoring the look of fear in the human's eyes. At the same time Tails placed the barrel of his new gun squarely on the back of the lion's skull as he whistled to get its attention.

It was difficult to say whether there was a definitive look on the robots face as the kit pulled the trigger, but there were defiantly some elements of surprise mixed in with failure. A shower of sparks quickly covered Jake as he brought his hands to his face in an effort to shield his eyes.

The two tailed fox turned his attention back to the fat man residing on stage. What was once a confident man had degraded into a nervous looking second rate politician. Without thinking Tails raised his gun and fired.

Julian's attempt to block the shot may have saved his life, but nearly cost him his arm. The .50 cal round in Fiona's weapon tore a quarter-sized hole just above his wrist. The kit squeezed the trigger, again sending another round into the man's robotic arm, causing it to drop to his side as he growled in pain for a second time. Kintobor's finger's twitched as he attempted test the mobility of his limb. The next shot clipped him in his opposite shoulder, only grazing the skin.

"Just shoot him," Jake said from beneath the lion.

How long had Tails dreamt of this exact moment? The kit glanced over his shoulder to where Fiona still lay motionless on the ground. Even before he pulled the trigger he knew revenge would be infinitely less sweet with out her. However, the weapon produced little more than click when the hammer met the firing pin.

Julian who by now had nearly shit himself finally took his chance and broke out into a full sprint for the door behind the stage, recklessly tripping over equipment as he did so. Tails lowered the weapon as he watched his target elude his grasp for a second time. In his efforts to escape the fat man had bumped the DJ station causing it to start up again. Tails couldn't help but chuckle a little as he approached the agent who was wriggling underneath the dead weight of the robot.

"That's it laugh it up while Fiona is over there dyeing."

The kit wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry, so he did both at the same time. Turning, he pulled her in tight for an embrace that seemed to cause her noticeable discomfort. Slowly pushing him away she removed a hand from the side of her chest, "I think I'll have a scar to match yours," the vixen said with a small smirk.
"I don't mean to interrupt this touching moment," Jake said irritably, "but I could really use some help."

The kit leaned over and removed his knife from the cold metallic body. Together, both of the foxes managed to push the mangled remains of the robotic Mobian off of the former Dominion agent. Before he could even get to his feet a short muffled scream echoed about the room. The three of them looked over to see Colin clasping his hand over Mara's mouth as he dragged her out a side door with a gun visibly pressed against her neck.

"You two go get that fat prick, I'll take care of him," Jake commanded as he let the empty magazine fall from his Sig Sauer, as he reached for a new one.

As Fiona's partner took off after the president's nephew the song switched to another track leaving the two foxes in the middle of dance floor littered with bodies.

"Remember this song?" Fiona asked as she held a fresh clip in an out stretched hand.

"How could I forget?" Tails replied as he took the spare mags from his vest and swapped the vixen.

**Now Playing: Fade into Darkness By: Avici**

Any lyrics used bellow are not mine.

"Just like old times?"

"Just like old times."

The two took of sprinting in the door Kintobor had disappeared into. The long hallway broke out into the back of the building by the loading bay, where the fat man could be seen barking orders at soldiers who had been lounging about. Even outside the song still filled the air. Tails let the lyrics fill his head as the world went silent save for the beating of his own heart and the panting of the fox next to him.

"Looking up, there's always sky. Rest your head, I will take you high," the voice emanating from the speakers proclaimed.

The back ally way was dark even with the dull moon and sky full of starts. The fox's slipped into the shadows, every step they took in unison.

"We won't fade into darkness. I won't let you fade into darkness."

With the Deagle out stretched in his right hand Tails put a paw on Fiona's shoulder. Instinctively she opened up on the guards, forcing them to retreat behind parked cars in search of cover. Unlike the agents inside, these wore the thick steel plated dominion armor. However, they, like so many others still feared for their lives.

"Why worry now, you'll be safe. Hold my hand just in case."

Tails rushed the first guard that stepped out from cover, watching with a small amount of pity as the breach of his gun opened up and ejected a smoldering brass casing. By the time the weapon snapped back shut the man in front of him was dead. Armor or no armor, it made little difference with Fiona's weapon.

"This world can seem cold and grey. But you and I are here today and we won't fade into darkness," the voices in the song called out.
Seeing their comrade fall to the ground dead, the agents responded by opening up with automatics. Bullets tore by the kit as ducked behind a near by dumpster. The vixen was waiting there for him already.

"I have a gift for you," she said with a cynical smile as she handed him a small ring with a pin attached to it.

Tails examined it for a second before raising any eyebrow in surprise. Fiona had always been sneaky, but this was almost too cruel. However, she had learned the trick from him in their earlier years together.

The van the agents were hiding behind burst into flames as one of their grenades exploded. The two foxes ignored the men as they ran about screaming while on fire. The man they wanted had opted to go back inside, ducking into a side entrance half way down the block. Only a handful of guards remained in-between.

A feeling that had escaped Tails for so long finally seemed to re-surfacing. The beast inside of him was finding its way back to life. Without thinking he let loose two more rounds that promptly sat another man down. For just a moment the shadow on the wall seemed to morph. Instead of a fox with a gun, Tails saw something more grotesque, fangs and claws ripping into a soldier's shadow splashing imaginary blood in all directions. However, as quickly as it appeared the translucent blacks shapes retreated into solidity.

Fiona continued to plug away at the remaining soldiers. One of the rounds found it's way into the soldier's helmets and a splash of red darkened his visor as the man fell backwards, lifeless.

Tails didn't even have to look over at the fox next to him to know that she was on the same wavelength. Taking a gun away from an armed agent had become second nature to the kit years ago. Leverage was the key, grabbing the end of the barrel he forced it in a safe direction. While the man on the other end of it concerned himself with maintaining control of the weapon Tails launched a series of attacks that ignored the steel plates on the man's chest. Twisting the agents arm until the gun fell to the pavement, the fox proceeded to swap opponents with the vixen behind him. Spinning elegantly the pair traded places as they continued to pummel the men until they were too battered to lift so much as a finger in resistance.

Straitening their clothes as they entered the new building, the pair of foxes scanned the room. As the door closed slowly behind them the tune faded, "...we won't fade into darkness." That sentiment however, did not seem to be true. What was left of the natural light disappeared as they moved towards the center of the storage room, leaving only the blackness for Kintobor to hide in.

The chuckling boom of his voice picked up as it echoed about the room.

"Very clever." Kintobor began. "I'll admit I never saw it coming. To think I almost trusted you Fiona. What a mistake that would have been."

"Save it," she snapped back at him. "I lived as your precious little pet long enough. I may never get my dignity back, but knowing your dead will make every day just a little better."

"Well you see," Julian said as he trailed off. "I had this whole thing planned out for Sonic, but the little runt never showed though. Seeing as you two have me in this predicament I may as well put my plan to good use. Enjoy."

The overhead lights snapped on and one of the crates next to the kit exploded as SWAT bot tore through the plywood like tissue paper. Two more erupted out of other boxes scattered about the
room. To compliment them Fiona's team, Foxtrot joined the fray, minus her and Jake of course.

Together the foxes stood against an army that would have given twelve freedom fighters pause. There was no exit, no reprieve, no cover, just death. The kit looked over at the fox he loved to find her face devoid of any hope.

"Louis," she said softly looking at one of the Dominion Agents. "it doesn't have to be like this."

"Should have thought of that before you decided to be a traitor, boss," the agent replied in a gruff voice.

Fiona tuned back to Tails an planted a soft kiss on his muzzle, "I love you, baby."

Just hearing her say the words made death palpable. The kit himself had only ever whispered them to her when he sure she was asleep. Perhaps it went without saying, but part of him wanted to return the favor. However, the look in her eyes, which were only inches from hers, seemed to suggest that she had a plan. His body reacted to hers and before he knew it another lump of hot lead exploded out of the barrel of his gun. It found one of the guards and he doubled over in pain.

The bots were always slow to respond. The big mechs were effective outdoors where they were more mobile, but inside their small turning radiuses and cumbersome weapon system made them less than adequate. The two rolled behind the closest one, ducking out of the way of assault rifle fire. One step at a time, the bot attempted to crush them, but it was too delayed in its efforts. As he danced around beneath it, 'Tails' HUD illuminated a wire tucked just behind one of the panels in its leg. Another loud crack from the Desert Eagle opened the small door, Fiona quickly followed with another shot from her Berretta, severing the cable. The SWAT bot froze in place, now unable to move.

"What's your plan Fiona?" Tails called out to the fox who had pressed herself up against the bot's other leg as her former team continued to try to turn the pair of foxes into Swiss cheese.

She giggled, "When have I ever had a plan."

Tails sighed to himself. For a moment there he had been hopeful that he could get out of this alive. Perhaps it was under Julian's orders, or just the hive mind of the bots working for their programed goal, but all at once the other mechs took aim at their comrade.

"Time to go," Fiona said as she grabbed the kits hand, nearly pulling his arm of his socket as she wrenched him across the room. The SWAT bot exploded in fiery shrapnel, which quickly consumed the room in smoke. The pavement came up fast as the burst of air threw the foxes to the ground. Rolling quickly to his right to avoid more incoming fire, the pair of them was once again separated. It had all the makings of his nightmare.

Almost as if on cue, there was a scream that could have only belonged to Fiona. Without thinking the kit was moving, ignoring the onslaught of bullets traveling in his direction as he ran blindly through the thick smoke in search of what he knew he could not live without. An agent had flanked them and was now pinning the vixen to the ground underneath steel boots. Fiona squirmed, but there was no way for her to get any leverage. If there was ever a time for redemption, it was now.

Just like Tails, the agents had HUDs that saw right through what no human or Mobian eyes could. His head veered to the right as he tracked the fox through the smoke, raising his riffle and firing. The first round missed, but the next went clean through the muscle in his forearm. Tails howled in pain, but the surge of adrenalin gave him everything he needed to get an advantage. Suddenly the room
moved slower, and the guard's actions were laid out in front of him for Tails to read. Spinning to the left dodging the incoming bullets, Tails snapped off a shot and hit the man square in the shoulder. He stumbled backwards, reeling as the .50 cal round buried itself into his armor. Having the weight removed from her Fiona was quick to sweep the feet of her captor. She clambered on top of him, twisted the gun in his hands until there was a snap and turned the weapon on him. The armor piercing rounds chewed through the steel plating in no time. Getting back to her feet, G36 in hand the vixen looked back him and nodded.

Another auto cannon round tore past the two as it crumbled the wall behind them. Under normal circumstances the exit would have been welcome, but the two knew they had come too far to give up now. Tails didn't have to ask his new partner to cover him, it was understood. She fired frantically into the smoke, taking aim at the other muzzle flashes that cropped up from time to time. With only four rounds left in his gun, Tails needed to be closer, he couldn't waste them.

Red outlines appeared in the glass sheet in front of his eye, tracing the figure of an agent as he peered out from behind a crate at the far side of the room. When he stuck the rest of the torso out to return fire against the foxes, Tails pulled the trigger. It was funny to think about how an action as simple as squeezing a finger could create an outcome so permanent.

An alert flashed in his HUD, letting the kit know a SWAT bot had locked on to him. With a quick jump he propelled himself forward as the heat of yet another blast singed his fur. His body seemed to have no limit for the pain the universe was putting in his path. Perseverance or a quick death were his only two options, and life always seemed so much sweeter despite the injuries that were often sustained while living it.

The warehouse was crumbling around him. If these bots kept it up they would bring the whole place around on top them. As he ran toward the mech, it opened up with the machine gun on its opposite arm, spraying lead in every direction. Ducking and dodging the kit placed his well being into the hands of fate as he continued his dash into cover.

"How about a show down?" Fiona asked through panting breaths as she slid across the smooth concrete floor next to Tails.

With no weapons capable of penetrating the armor plating on the large mechs, they were not left with a lot of options, "Funny, I was just thinking the same thing. I'll take the one on the left."

"You got the goggles, you call it."

When the warning message popped in his HUD, Tails knew that he was once again in the sites of a SWAT bot.

"It's now or never," the kit said as he rushed towards his target.

His heart was pounding, as he pumped his legs in search of the strength for the jump he needed to make. With what energy remained, he vaulted into the air landing squarely on the shoulder of the mech. When the screen flashed red he leapt again watching as the SWAT bellow him fired its auto cannon around just as it was hit by a high explosive shell fired by the other bot. The machines always seemed willing to sacrifice themselves if they felt like they could kill even just one Mobian, making tricking them into shooting each other surprisingly easy. Tucking himself into a ball, he allowed his body to bend backwards until his feet were again perpendicular with the ground.

The foxes hit the ground guns drawn, standing with their backs pressed against one another as if they were about to square off in an old west show down. Instead they spun, emptying what was left of their magazines into the agents who were trying desperately to surround them while the wreckage of
the two SWAT bots disintegrated around them.

When they were done only three Dominion agents remained. They formed a barrier between the Mobians and Kintobor, keeping the fat man behind them as if there was something they could actually do to save his life now. The foxes took off in their direction, closing what little distance there was before the men could reload their weapons.

With no more ammo left in his gun, the kit finally decided to let the full gamut of his instinct run free. All of his inhibition fled in fear of the beast breaking free. His claws pried the first man's helmet off with just a few swipes. Tails' knuckles quickly found the human's face, turning it several different shades of purple with just a few swings. Fiona had managed to rip the chest plate right off the agent she was tangoing with. He lunged at her with a timid jab, but the vixen was too fast for him. Her claws tore into his skin, leaving trails of blood in their wake.

The only man left was the one whom she had called Louis. He stood in front her, brazenly daring to take the two of them on himself, despite witnessing the incomprehensible odds from which they had just risen to overcome.

"Louis," Fiona said sternly as she wiped a splotch of crimson liquid from her muzzle, "get out of here."

"No," he replied firmly as he raised his weapon.

"Upset you that not all your men respect you as much as Jake?" Julian snickered from the agent's shadow.

"Louis, don't throw your life away, that's an order."

"That's what I would be doing if I walked out on my duty."

The vixen nearly burst into tears laughing, "You don't owe this fat piece of shit anything. Your duty is to protect the innocent, yet he only seeks to corrupt the feeble minded and control the week. You will not be any less of a man tomorrow if you walk out of this room now. However, if you stay," she paused, "there will be no tomorrow for you."

The man rocked uneasily on his heels as he contemplated whether to make his move.

"Shoot her," Julian screamed as he cowered behind his Dominion Agent. "Shoot her or I'll kill you myself."

Even through the helmet, Tails could make out a small grin on the man's face as he turned around and thrust his weapon into Kintobor's arms. "Go ahead. She's right, you're not worth it."

The fat man fumbled with the weapon as the Dominion Agent strode towards the exit. Raising it to his shoulder as if the two foxes were not standing next to him Julian desperately attempted to discharge the weapon only to hear the disappointing sound of nothing.

The pair exchanged uneasy glances about what was to be done next. Tails however, felt that Fiona had far more unfinished business with her former boss than he could. Kintobor may have taken everything from him, but that paled in comparison to having ones life stolen. Fiona had been forced into a existence that he still couldn't fathom and yet she persevered. What little vindication the man's death at her hands would offer, the kit was more than willing to seed.

As she approached the fat man, Fiona knelt down and picked up one of the agents side arms. Even as death approached him he refused to give in and beg for his life. That is not to say he was not
afraid. His face was twisted with disgust as he tried to come to grips with his failure and misfortune. He was so close to realizing his dream, only to have it shattered in front of him at the last moment. It was a fate that Tails rarely wished on anyone, but for Kintobor he often made the exception.

"This won't be the last of me," Kintobor muttered as Fiona placed the gun on his head.

"If you say so, sir," she responded almost as if out of habit.

The report echoed around the room as if the sound were stuck in a loop. Some moments were so profound they seem stop for entire minutes just so that everything could be taken in. Blood smeared the walls and what was once Julian Kintobor collapsed to the ground underneath his own weight. Fiona dropped the weapon next to him, breathing deeply as if some great weight had finally been lifted off of her shoulders.

Tails walked up behind her, pulling her away from the man that had caused the two of them immeasurable amounts of pain and suffering.

"I love you too," he finally said knowing full well he could not have picked a worse time. Placing a paw on her muzzle he leaned in and kissed her. There was nothing to keep them apart any more.

Heavy footsteps and the low voice of a man humming could be heard from the hallway as the doors opened.

"And we won't fade into Darkness," Mara sang into Jake's ear as he carried her through the entrance. The two did a double take as they observed the room and it's recent redecoration. The smoldering wreckage, the bloodied bodies of Dominion agents, and the remains of fallen dictator were all noteworthy, but it was the foxes embracing amidst it all that made it most odd.
The only thing louder than the beat of his heart was his breathing. Even the footsteps that echoed off the concrete walls fell silent in comparison. Step after step Jake pressed onward as he bolted up the stairs.

He had almost caught the little bastard in the elevator, but the door shut before he could get his hand in. Instead he only got a glimpse of Colin Kintobor sneering back at him through crack. That image alone fueled the first twenty floors. However, Jake wasn’t sure how he was going to do the next thirty.

The girl he had so desperately cared about betrayed him, and yet he ran after her. How can I trust her after this? He had no answer, but yet his body continued to move as if propelled by a divine force. Spy or not he was determined to save her. Even as he realized who she was his mind wrestled over her intentions. People could put on disguises, but it was hard to fake a personality. She could pretend to be daddy’s girl from a well off family, but in truth she would always be a poor girl with a big heart.

He wanted to kick himself for not seeing it sooner. Every time they were together there were tiny clues that didn’t add up, but he dismissed them. Not once did she ever think she was above someone else, a feat not even the waitress at his favorite diner could accomplish. But why did she help the Freedom Fighters?

Once he asked himself the answer seemed self-evident. Why would a girl like that sit around and do nothing about it? We have been slaughtering them by the thousands for years. The more Jake thought about who she was, the faster he ran. There were too few people like her left in the world and he wasn’t about to let that smug brat change that.

Face it Jake, you love her. He had been afraid to admit it to himself, but what else could carry a man up fifty flights of steps in just a little over two minutes. Maybe he was throwing his life away because he couldn’t help himself. Why else would he give up everything he had spent his whole life building? But do I love a lie?

He slowed for a moment as he pondered the question, only to speed back up when he realized he had already answered the question. The girl he had fallen in love with was still hostage. She may have lied to him about her name and her allegiance, but no one could lie so well as to fake her level of compassion.

Jake threw open the door to the roof. Colin was already standing there, smug look still intact. When he took a step closer, the long nosed man pressed his gun tight up against the girl's neck.

"Sar… Mara," Jake called out after correcting himself, "it’s going to be alright."

"How nice of you to reassure her, but it only makes you a liar."

"Where do you think you are going Colin?" he asked looking around at the general lack of exits.

"Back to the lab. With just a drop of her blood I will have everything I need to finish Julian's work. The world will be mine soon enough."

"And just how to you plan on getting there?"

"Always so slow Jake?"
The hum of a chopper could be heard in the distance and it was then he realized that Mara and her captor were standing on the edge of a helipad. Jake decided to test the man and take a step closer.

"Uh uh ahh, not another step Jake. I would hate to have to kill such a pretty girl. I only need her blood remember."

"Then take what you need and leave her," the agent replied sternly, "and so help me god I will let you live."

"Do you really feel like you are in a position to make threats?"

"Do you?" Jake asked as he squeezed his pistol's grip a little tighter. "She's the only thing between you and me. You kill her and," before pausing and chuckling for a moment, "well lets just say I will finally put all those interrogation tactics you cram down our throat to some use."

The weasel-faced man did not blink, "You don't scare me."

"Ha," Jake laughed as he took another step closer, "Don't kid yourself, everything scares you."

Colin pulled the hammer back on his gun, trying to make his point, "Not another step,"

"Or what?" Jake asked as he proceeded to take additional.

"I will kill her."

"Will you?"

A bead of sweat rolled down the balding man's head. His hands began to visibly shake as he held the weapon against Mara. Surprisingly she wasn't screaming, only staring back at Jake with her emotion filled eyes. They were flooded with a single message, sorry. He wanted to tell her there was no need to be, but there were more pressing matters to attend to first.

"No answer, Colin?" the dominion agent asked as he ventured forward another foot. "Just let her go and we can all walk out of here alive."

"No," he replied defiantly.

Jake was three feet away and Mara was still alive, breathing slowly, as if she had already given up hope. The look of despair she wore was only trumped by regret.

Deciding that he valued his life more, Julian's nephew lowered his gun and took his hand off the girl. She appeared confused for a moment, looking back at her captor to see if this was some kind of jape. Mara stepped away, keeping Colin in her field of view as she backed up towards the only person she could trust. However, she quickly learned Colin was relying on that. The short man made his play raising his weapon. The girl instinctively ducked out of the way, leaving Colin with a clear shot at Jake.

There was a loud crack, and when Mara looked up she was surprised to see who was left standing. Jake was holding his Sig in an outstretched hand, the barrel smoking as he continued to point it at the short man. Colin on the other hand floundered on the ground as he gripped his side in pain. Blood began to pool underneath him as he searched for words that barely made it past his yelping.

"Damn it Jake," he said under his breath. "You were always such an ass."

The agent approached the wounded man, bending down and picking him up by the collar of his
shirt. Some flying lessons might be in order, Jake thought as he walked the helpless runt over to the edge.

"Jake," Mara called out. "Just leave him, he doesn't need to die."

"You here that? You don't need to die," he told Colin as he looked down at the street below. "Your lucky someone in this world can still find value in your life."

Slowly he let the sad excuse for a politician back down to the ground, but not before that same politician found a stun gun in his jacket pocket. Jake had forgot how much he hated them. His body convulsed and his gun fell from his hand as he struggled to fight his contracting muscles. Colin didn't let up until the agent was on the ground shivering in his own sweat.

It didn't take a strong man to take advantage of the situation. Jake felt kick after kick to his ribs as he tried to block the blows, but his body wouldn't respond. Each jab sent him closer to the edge he had just moments ago been holding his soon to be killer over. He could hear Mara screaming frantically for him to get up, but it was no use, the blackness of the streets below loomed before him.

Jake clung to life with just his fingertips. Where he had found the strength or coordination to hold himself up was still a mystery. He didn't need to look down to know there was nothing to break his fall.

"It appears love is your weakness, Jake," Colin said as he looked down at him. "How fitting for a man made of principle. I will be sure to thank Mara for saving my life."

"You always were a coward."

"Tell me Jake. How delusional does one have to be to talk out of place when he is about to die?"

Ignoring Colin, he looked passed him towards Mara. She was the reason he was hanging on to the ledge, but also the reason he would never let go of it.

"Not sure Snively, you tell me?" Jake asked using Julian's pet name for him.

"Jake, look at you, just hanging there. What use is all that strength now?"

"You're afraid to do it aren't you? Be a man!" Jake screamed.

"Do you honestly think you can goad me into doing something stupid with petty name calling? Or do you just want to die faster?"

"He probably wanted to give me enough time to get his gun," Mara suggested.

Even from where he hung, Jake could see the look on Colin's face. It was beyond priceless up until she pulled the trigger and the man fell forward off the ledge.

"Sarah," he called out, "I could use a little help."

The petite girl hardly weighed enough to move half of him, yet she helped him up one arm at a time.

"Mara," she replied having finally pulled him securely onto the helipad.

"It might take a while," he responded trying desperately to catch his breath.

"Take all the time you need, I suppose I owe it to you."
"We are more than even now."

"You would not have been in that mess if I had just let you drop him. I always try to see the good in people. No one deserves to die, or at least that's what I used to think."

Seeing the tears forming in her eyes, the agent scooped the girl up in his arms, "Please don't cry Mara."

Jake brought his spare hand to shield his eyes as a spotlight from the helicopter hovering above found the two.

"I think it might be time to go," she whispered back to him.

He didn't bother to rush because he knew they wouldn't shoot. By now, no one of authority was left alive to give the order. As the agent carried the girl back to the elevator he relished his small time in the spotlight. It followed him as if he was important. Jake tried to imagine a crowd in front of him, cheering him on for some heroic act. However, he had made his choice and he knew that had little chance of happening anymore. Perhaps he could be content with just Mara's approval.

After stepping into the elevator Jake turned around and gave a small bow to the men in the helicopter. Perhaps they had not seen the whole performance, but if they had there was little doubt he could ever call this city home again. I hope you are worth it, he couldn't help but think as he adjusted the girl in his arms.

As they descended the thump of the bass filled the small enclosure. Mara was still sobbing in his arms, but a certain glow returned to her face when she heard the song.

**Now Playing: Fade into Darkness By: Avici**

Any lyrics used below are not mine.

"Mara," Jake said waiting for her to look up at him, "You did the right thing."

"That doesn't make killing someone feel any better."

He had no response for that because he knew it was true. He was much younger than she was when he figured that out. However after a while that part of you just goes numb. Empathy was a weakness in his trade and if he wanted to succeed, abandoning it was his only course of action. That is not to say he was left without a heart. Fiona had shown him that it was possible to care for people and still do what they did. She had called it respect, but deep down they both knew it went beyond that. Their friendship went past anything he had ever had, losing count of all the times he had placed his life in her hands. If there was a silver lining in all of this, it was that he got to help two friends when they needed it most and that brought warmth he hadn't felt in years.

"Try not to think about him, he would have done the same to you."

"I know," she replied with a sniffle, "Tails tried to tell me as much about a different man, but I can't turn it off like you two can."

"And you never should. When you do, part of you leaves never to return."

"Jake," the girl in his arms asked hesitating before she spoke again, "I am sorry I kept all this from you for so long."

"You did what you had to. To be honest I am not sure what the old Jake would have done if he had
found out. Most likely something this one would have regretted."

When the doors opened to the basement tunnels, the tired agent pressed forward, the subtle reverberations of the music still following in his footsteps.

"Why worry now you will be safe," Mara sang along with the song as brushed a hand across his face.

Whether he didn't care or was simply not afraid he could never be sure why the explosion that shook the building didn't startle him. To his surprise it didn't seem to have much effect on the girl in his arms either.

"What do you think that was?" she asked.

"With those two foxes running around here your guess is as good as mine."

Mara giggled, "Yeah, they are a handful aren't they?"

Despite the pain and his shattered dreams, the agent still found it within himself to smile. It was so pleasant to find someone who shared his sense of humor.

"Let's go see what they got themselves into shall we?" Jake asked as two more loud blast attempted to turn him away.

"Alright," the girl responded before returning to the song, "And we won't faced into darkness."

Jake didn't bother to embarrass himself by trying to carry the tune too, but he did find himself humming along to it by the time he reached the door.

The room was full of ash and cinders and a breeze from a gaping hole in the wall wafted the debris about in a whimsical way. Nearly a dozen men from his team were dead on the ground, each one in a more grizzly fashion than the next. What remained of the skeletons of SWAT bots loomed over them ominously watching from their faded eyes. Only the foxes remained alive, but too entranced in one another to notice the return of their former partners.

Jake cleared his throat, alerting the two that they were no longer alone. The smile on Fiona's face was no longer the cynical grin she had worn for years. Instead she brimmed with happiness knowing that once again her life was her own.

"I am sorry to interrupt," Jake said as he stumbled towards them, "but I don't think we should be sticking around here too much longer."

"Oh relax Jake, when have I never not had a plan."

The kit standing across from her looked surprised, "That's not what you said five minutes ago."

"Well since you took it upon yourself to ruin all of mine, the only plans I had for most of tonight was not to die. Now that we have got that taken care of, I think I can salvage what is left of my original. If he kept his word, Ixis is waiting for us around the corner."

That was one man Jake would have been okay without meeting again. He was a slimy fellow that out not to be trusted, yet his partner continued to put her faith in him.

"Can we trust him?" he asked.

"Not much choice at this point. Beside he owes me."
"Not really, the only thing you did for him was not kill him."

"That and hand him Capital City on a silver platter," Fiona replied as she took a step towards the door. "He owes more than he will ever be able to repay."

Jake had to pick up his pace to keep up with the group. His muscles still twitched uncontrollably every now and then, causing him to wince in pain.

"I can walk you know," Mara suggested as if she could feel his discomfort.

The agent ignored her as they made their way through a quiet alleyway. Just as Fiona has said, there was an all black limo parked on the corner of one of the side streets, it's windows tinted a shade so dark it was hard to tell where the paint stopped and the glass began. The driver hurried out of his seat to open the door them.

Tails and Fiona were the first to enter, leaving Jake to hesitate for a moment.

"We came this far didn't we," Mara said quietly in his ear.

Ducking his head down he slid the girl into the back seat, following shortly there after. When he found himself seated the door was shut behind him. In the seat closest to the front sat one of the few men Jake feared.

"I wasn't anticipating so many extra guess, I am afraid we may not have enough drinks to go around," Naugus joked.

"Just get us out of here," Jake nearly begged.

"Of course, of course," Ixis replied as he tapped on the glass divide between him and the driver.

The limo quickly pulled out into the street, gliding effortlessly past the incoming police cars. The black state car looked like nothing more than one of Julian's guest fleeing the area.

"Happy?" Fiona asked.

"That depends, is he dead?"

"There's a bullet in his head."

"Good, that certainly beats his ass," the man replied as she shot a glance at Tails. "And I take it everything went according to plan?"

"Yes," Tails responded while the vixen answered, "No."

She looked at him strangely.

"I promised you a way out of your collar didn't I?" Ixis asked. "Your friend here was the only one who could make that happen. I only got my hands on the rest of the schematics a couple of hours ago. I take it you found them?"

"There weren't exactly any instructions. I had to improvise a little, but as you can see it worked well enough," the kit responded.

"Wait, you two put this all together behind my back?" Fiona asked.

"Hardly," Naugus answered as he rolled his eyes. "I knew Miles would be crashing your party
tonight. I assumed he would know better than most what to do with information and lucky for you he did."

"What did you give him?"

Tails tapped the small HUD in front of his right eye, "something I didn't have before."

"Sometimes that is all it takes. I hope this means my end of the bargain has been fulfilled."

"When you get us out of the city," Fiona snapped, still somewhat irritated with his deceptive nature.

The aging man nodded in agreement, "Then let this be the end of our journey."
The glass was so smoked that the kit could barely make out what was on the other side, but his sense of direction had yet to fail him. The shadows of tall well-lit buildings loomed just on the other side of the car's translucent windows.

"Where are you taking us?" he asked Naugus as he raised his empty pistol.

Weapons as big as this one were scary whether they were loaded or not, especially when the person on the other end didn't know any better.

"I am taking you were you need to go, Tails." Ixis said calmly.

The others began to press their faces against the glass in an effort to understand the fox's frustration. Jake was the next to spin around in anger.

"This is hardly out of the city!" he screamed.

"Relax, all of you," the old man insisted.

"Relax?" Fiona asked as the tone in her voice suggested she was about to do anything but, "how can I relax when it looks like you are about to drop us off right on the Dominion's door step?"

Ixis sighed with a tiny amount of frustration, "Surely all of you are smart enough to know that every bridge and out of the city has been shut down by now. There will be mandatory searches of every car for weeks while the city's coppers go on their foxhunt. I was quite certain that at least you would understand what I am doing," Naugus said as he eyed Tails, "after all I got the idea from you."

"What idea?"

"Hiding in plain sight. You took Mara here the last place the dominion would ever expect to find her. That is what I am doing with you."

"We don't want to hide!" Tails scowled.

"And who says that you will be?"

"You know we can't just walk in through the front door any more," Jake commented sarcastically, "or at least I don't think we can."

"Walk, run, shoot it makes no difference."

"How does it make no difference?" Fiona asked in astonishment. "What good does it do to walk into the most fortified building in the city when everyone who works in there wants to kill us."

"Because, it's the easiest way out."

Tails cocked back the hammer on his gun, "Perhaps you could do a little more explaining then."

"Very well then," Ixis said slightly offended. "If you can't drive out of this city what other way might one try?" he asked as he pointed a finger to the sky.

"You want us to fly out?" Mara said in a giddy voice, asking what the others were too irritated to suggest.
"Precisely my dear, but your friends here don't like the idea because they haven't thought it all the way through."

"I don't think I would be caught dead in one of those choppers, we wont make it more than a few clicks before we are nothing more than fireworks." Tails replied.

"He isn't talking about a helicopter," Jake said with a smile.

"Very good my dear boy, I thought you might know."

"Know what?" Fiona asked now more curious than ever.

"There are a few things Kintobor never told you, boss. I never bothered to fill you in because I didn't think it was that big of a deal. There is an elevator in his office that takes you down to an underground tunnel system. It's ancient and most of it has been sealed off except for the segment between HQ and the military base."

"And now we are talking about walking into a mili base?" Tails asked baffled by the pair's optimism.

"Yes," the agent replied, "because the tunnels end up right in Julian's private hanger. There is no security, no guards, no cameras, no anything to keep us from using it because that's all supposed to be on this end."

Tails eyes widened as he lowered his gun. He finally realized the genius behind Naugus' plan, "They are all on the foxhunt. No one is left at home."

A smile twisted up the side of the bearded man's face, "Indeed. I do hope a few of you know how to fly."

The kit smiled, it had been a while, but few things made him happier than sitting in the cockpit of an aircraft.

The breaks of the limo screeched as the vehicle came to a stop in the buildings loading bay.

"How are we going to play this?" Jake asked as he reached for the handle on the door.

Tails smiled as he offered his hands out for Fiona to cuff, "the only way we can."

It didn't take Fiona or her former partner long to understand what he was getting at. Soon enough Jake had scooped up Mara and was marching her in front of him with pistol at her back.

"I am sorry about this," he whispered to her as they got out of the car.

"Oh, don't worry its not the first time I have had to do this," she replied surprisingly enthusiastically.

The agent tried to hide his look of amusement, but it still shown rather evidently on his face.

The now cold steel of Tails old weapon did not feel pleasant against his back. The cuffs around his wrist were just for show and still lose enough to slip out of, but any pesky guards wouldn't bother looking twice. Anyone watching the security feeds was only going to see the most well known pair of dominion agents marching in the two most wanted felons. Even amongst the confusing chatter on the radio, their reputation might be enough to fool the guards at the first checkpoint.

Jake walked up to the door, keeping the small girl in his sights as he swiped his access card. The panel flashed red and beeped authoritatively at him as it pronounced his access was denied.
"Well I guess now we know the answer to that question," Jake muttered.

The doors however were quick to slide open as a security officer walked out with a look of disbelief on his face, "What in the hell?"

"You're tell'n me," Jake said nonchalantly. "This bitch nearly threw me off a building."

"They said you two went rouge," the officer said as he kept a hand on his holstered weapon, eying the pair of agents.

"Hardly," Fiona growled as she gave the kit a nice shove while wearing her notoriously wry smile. "Never thought I would get my hands on this one though. Guess he isn't as tough as everyone says."

"No one radioed this in, I had no idea you caught them."

"No on does. Lost my com in a bit of a tussle and haven't had a chance to call it in."

"I see," the guard replied as he looked over their condition. "Just give me a second to get all this checked out."

"Pete," Jake insisted, "did I mention I almost got thrown off a building? I just want to get rid of this little witch and go find my favorite bar stool. All we need are two holding cells not bureaucracy."

"Fine," he replied reluctantly as he moved out of the way, "put 'em in cells three and four."

"Thanks," Fiona replied curtly.

The five of them walked down the strangely bare hallways. This was one building Tails had could not recall ever wanting to see the inside of. Everything about the demeanor of his surroundings rubbed him the wrong way. He had never been in a place that felt so wrong. Fiona on the other hand seemed to be almost at home, leading the way as the security officer escorted them through blindingly white corridors.

When they reached the cells, Pete stopped for a moment, staring at the vixen.

"What is it?" she asked trying to sound like her usual annoyed self.

"Your collar," he said finally realizing his mistake, "Where is it?"

Before the man could get a hand on his weapon Tails had freed his paws and cold cocked him.

"Put him in here," Fiona said as she threw open the door to one of the cells, "and grab his access card and radio."

"Where do you think everyone is?" Jake asked as he dragged the man's body across the recently waxed floor.

"Out looking for us," the vixen suggested.

Tails twisted the dial on the radio, scanning the frequencies for anything meaningful.

"…possible sighting on east 3rd and Raymond…. Unit 18 responding…”

"They have no idea we are here," the kit announced with a big smile on his face.

"For now," Fiona snapped, "We are hardly inside the building."
Not a single Freedom fighter had ever made it inside Dominion HQ and back out again. Not even Sonic was brave enough to attempt what had long been considered a suicide mission.

"I swiped my badge," Jake reminded him, "that's going to raise a flag somewhere. I'll give it five minutes before this place starts to get a little hot."

"Then what are we still doing here?"

The three of them followed Fiona down the hallways as she navigated them through the building. She produced the guard's security badge and swiped it at the next security point. The light flashed green and the door hummed with electricity as the magnetic lock disengaged.

"There should be sentries here," she noted as they passed through another checkpoint undisturbed. "They must really want us."

"All units be advised," the dispatcher announced over the radio, "a suspect in question has attempted to access HQ, please standby for orders."

The kit held the device to his ear as he tagged along behind the others.

"Security footage confirms that all four subjects have entered Dominion HQ. Internal security forces have been alerted. All units please respond, this takes priority."

"I told you," Jake said over his shoulder.

"Enough blabbering you two, the elevator is just around the corner."

The vixen swiped the guard's access card through the reader and the lift promptly opened. Fiona and Mara stepped into the elevator just as two more guards burst through the double doors at the end of the hall. Jake was quick to greet them with rounds from his weapon, forcing them to fall backwards and retreat for cover.

"C'mon, Fiona barked at him," as the elevator doors began to shut.

The agent dove inside just in a nick of time. Riding up to the penthouse took less time than he expected, but Tails had a feeling this elevator wasn't servicing a lot of floors this time of night. The ding of the bell announced their arrival to what he could only hope was where they needed to be.

It felt weird to be in the hallway of the Dominion HQ building. Paintings lined the halls and proud men with chubby faces stared back at him, each more distinguished than the next. The oldest photos all black and white, were well over a century old. In the presence of the previous rulers the kit suddenly felt the need to be reverent and respectful despite the fact he stood in Julian Kintobor's home. He stepped lightly on the red velvet carpet that nearly matched the sheen of Fiona's fur as it led them down the corridor to two large cherry doors.

"In hear," she called out as the fox walked into his office.

A person's workspace could tell you a lot about them. Julian's was odd mix of organized chaos. Everything seemed to have a place except for the disarray of papers on his desk. A variety of books lined the shelves, each, by the looks of the binding, an original.

"Now what?" Jake asked out loud as he searched the room.

"What do you mean now what? You're the one who said they knew about this so called elevator," Fiona snapped.
"He never told me where it was, just that it existed."

"Great…"

"Oh c'mon Fi, it can't be that hard to find an elevator."

The two agents set off on a tirade of destruction. Flipping over every conceivable object looking for a secret entrance or switch. Mara soon joined them as she rummaged through the dead man's desk, feeling around for hidden places.

Tails however continued to stare at the bookshelf. His HUD only illuminated Julian's terminal as a point of interface. It did not seem to detect any other objects in the room. The kit had hoped that Naugus might be kind enough to have stored what they were looking for on it again, but he was not so lucky this time. If you were as twisted as Julian where would you hide a button?

"Are you just going to stand there? Those guards will be up here any minute," the vixen barked at him in her frantic state.

Tails ignored her. The early morning sun began to rise on the city, illuminating the walls of the office in a crimson hue. His eyes continuously returned to the same book, one whose sole premise centered around trivializing life as secret group of higher powered individuals controlled nearly every aspect a person's existence. Kintobor struggled daily to control even the thoughts of his subjects, what better place to hide one's secrets. Two plus two does not equal five the fox reminded himself as he tried to tug Orwell's 1984 out of it's resting place. The book gave slightly and the shelf promptly slid sideways revealing their long sought exit plan.

Everyone else arrived at his side, doing their best to ignore the smug look on his face. What they assumed would be casually placed in the room was in fact a rather difficult object to find. Tails however, was not sure that he liked the fact that he was so easily able to see into a mad man's mind. He hadn't even thought to try another book. It was almost as if there was no other choice.

"You can gloat later," Fiona commented as stepped into the enclosure. The space was small, barely big enough for the one man it was meant for. The two foxes were pinned against one another as they made room for the large agent who hoisted Mara above his head. Reaching out with a paw, the kit tripped a switch and the bookcase returned to its prior position, leaving the room almost as it appeared before they entered.

When the doors opened again it was not to a well-lit office space, but rather a dingy brick lined tunnel. Banks of lights were strung together by a solitary power cable, which lead the way into the depths of the under ground. The popping in his ears suggested that they were well below the subways. No doubt the tunnel's designer had intended for them not to be discovered by accident.

By way of the crow the base was at least a mile from the down town structure, stationed an island in the bay. However, the tunnels were far from a straight shot, and even at their quick pace the group spent twenty minutes navigating their way through the leaking passageway. They were rewarded with a spiral staircase that ascended into the darkness above. At the top a single steel door bared their way. Tails gave it a push, but it did not budge. Throwing his weight into it did little to move it either.

"Out of the way small stuff," Jake said sarcastically.

The kit growled in frustration, but let the large man at the door. With one good heave it nearly fell from its frame.

It almost seemed too easy. They had just broken into one of the most secure compounds in the entire
country. Now, in front of them were the prized gems of Kintobor's air force. To Tails' knowledge only fifteen of the Saber fighters existed in the world and two were sitting in front of him. He didn't bother to wait for anyone else to say anything, and instead walked promptly up to the closest aircraft.

The jet was bigger than he imagined, fueled and ready for a war. He placed a paw on the latter and Fiona was quick to call out, "I can fly this."

"I am sure you can, but I can do it better."

"I have been in a sim for over forty hours on one of these."

"Hardly compares to the real thing, trust me. Hop in back."

The kit bound up the latter and grabbed the flight gear. Most of it was designed for someone bigger than he was, but it would have to do. With the flick of a few switches the instrument lights began to come alive and the oxygen flow into his mask. Glancing over at Jake and Mara gave him some pause about whether the two would be up to this task.

"Are you sure they are going to be alright?" the fox asked as he watched the former dominion agent try to fit the girl with a helmet.

"Just hold still," Jake nearly screamed as he fastened the straps.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" Mara asked as she fiddled around in the copilot seat. "I mean how do you know what all this stuff does?"

"Don't touch any of that!"

"Yeah, they will be fine," Fiona said with no reassurance in her voice.

"This is a VTOL* right?" Tails asked of the vixen now seated behind him.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing? I told you to let me fly this thing!"

"Relax," he replied coolly.

While Tails had not had the fortune of flying one of these new Saber fighters, he had read enough about them to know what they were capable of. Flying was still flying after all.

Just as the canopy closed a bullet smacked against the glass putting a small crack in it. Soldiers began to surround them as they opened fire with their rifles.

"Guess we are out of time."

He wasn't sure who had alerted the base to their presence, but it made little difference now. They would have surely figured it out when they took off. If they could make it out of the city alive at least they would have a head start.

"Get us out of here!" Fiona screamed.

Tails looked over at the two humans who were still buckling themselves into their fighter and far from ready. He could not leave them behind, not after they had come this far.

"Hold on," he said into his mic as the engines began to spin up, "this is going to be tight."

Tails could feel the pulse of the engines directly through the throttle in his left hand as he inched it
forward. With his thumb he shifted another lever and redirected the thrust down toward the ground until the craft’s wheels left the ground. Twisting the yoke gently he spun the fighter away from the hanger’s opening and towards the soldiers who were pouring into the bunker through back entrances.

"What are you doing?!" Fiona asked.

"Buying them some time," the kit answered as he found the trigger for the Gatling gun. Men dove for cover as a stream of armor piercing rounds poured out of the wing, shredding everything in their path. Still hovering just a foot or two above the ground, Tails retracted the landing gears.

"Are you crazy!" the vixen screamed, "if you can't hold this steady we are done!"

The sound of the other jet starting up created a defining roar, even inside the cockpit. Jake wasted no time getting the jet up to speed as he pulled out of the hanger at near take off speed.

"I am clear," the man's city accent came over the radio.

"Can we go now?" the nagging fox behind him asked.

With a smile on his face the kit pulled back on the stick as he flipped the plane back around. He didn't bother to tell Fiona what he was about to do because she would have only yelled at him. The kit jammed the throttle all the way forward engaging the afterburners while adjusting the exhaust direction to propel the plane forward. By the time they left the hanger they were nearly traveling at the speed of sound.

A glance back over his shoulder revealed the structure collapsing in on itself. The vacuum created by an object leaving an enclosed space that fast had caused the flimsy aluminum to buckle under the negative pressure.

Through the reflection in the glass he could make out the fox behind him, she was scared. Deep breathing and glazed over eyes were uncharacteristic of the vixen.

"You okay?"

"No," she replied after a few seconds. "Could you stop showing off! You don't need to impress me anymore."

"That's not showing off," Tails answered. "That's just me flying."

It was a half hour before the pair of foxes were flying alongside their former partners. They had put nearly a thousand miles between them and the city, but that didn't mean they were out of trouble yet. Mara gave reluctant wave as she glanced at them all while she struggled keep her stomach down.

"She doesn't look good," Fiona remarked on their internal com.

"She is as fresh as they come. What do you expect?"

The two sat in silence until a blip appeared on the radar, "Boogies, at seven o'clock."

"That was quick," Tails muttered as he began to second-guess this entire plan.

Peeling off from the formation his hand found the throttle and gave it a smack forward. Most pilots didn't know how to handle a head on confrontation at a rapidly decreasing range. Sure enough a tiny puff of smoke erupted from its underbelly as a missile tore through the sky.

"We have a lock," the vixen panicked from the back seat as she read over all of the instruments, "and
it's closing fast."

"That's what I am counting on."

With a swift adjustment in their flight path, the oncoming rocket was unable adjust its alignment fast enough to connect with them. Instead it sputtered out of control as it tried unsuccessfully to turn and follow them. Rather than give the enemy pilot the option to perform the same maneuver, the kit found his thumb on the trigger of the Gatling gun as he aligned his target in the ridicule. It only took two rounds to stop the fighter's engines. Plumes of smoke billowed out the back as it lost altitude.

"How long have you been able to fly like this?" Fiona asked now somewhat curious about piece of the fox's past she had never known of.

"Long before I met you."

"Miles, I could use some help over here;" Jakes called out over the radio. "Can't seem to shake this guy."

It was only seconds before Tails had maneuvered his plane behind the enemy's. The Sabers were top of the line, far faster than the measly Migs they were up against.

"Fiona, you want to get me…"

"Yeah, I am on it. I'll have your lock in a second," she replied already knowing what he was going to ask. "There, everything is armed and ready to go.

No doubt the missile lock had caused their target some alarm. He began to viciously swerve and bank as he pulled away from Jake in an effort to save his own life. However, the red diamond in Tails' HUD had already caught up with the green square confirming the solution. Once the missile was on its way there was no way to outrun it, only confuse it, but there was little hope of that.

Just before the Mig turned into a giant fireball the pilot had enough sense to eject.

"Thanks for that," Jakes voice crackled over the radio.

"I'll put it on your tab."

"Miles, baby, we got more incoming, CBDR**. Their radar signatures look like Sabers, a whole squadron full of them."

"Shit," the kit replied as he put the plane into a dive. He needed to lead them away from Jake who didn't have the skills to deal this.

"Get the hell out of here Jake," he screamed into his mic, "I will take care of these guys."

"Like hell you will. I can see the radar too. We have a better chance if we work together on this."

"I just hope you know what you are doing."

The Migs had been easy but any pilot, even a bad one, could fly a Saber and look good while doing it.

"I'll figure it out as I go,"

"That's Jake for you," Fiona commented over their internal com, "cock sure of himself at every turn."
The squadron split off into three groups of three, trying to corral the two renegade pilots into a confined air space. Tails would have none of it, as he laid on the air brakes hard and came up behind the first sortie.

"Line 'em up Fi," the kit yelled out.

He could hear her clicking away on the controls as she developed three separate hard locks for their Saber's sidewinders. With the press of a single button three missiles took flight as they dropped from the belly of the fighter. In mere seconds the group scattered as they all tried desperately to evade the incoming ordinance. One of the pilots reached for his flairs, another banked hard while the last ejected at the last moment.

The only enemy to make through unscathed was the one who had been smart enough to drop flairs for the heat seeking missiles. But his days were as short lived as his comrades. Jake strafed the jet with his auto cannon, cutting across the fox's field of view in a spectacular show of guts. The 30mm rounds nearly ripped the plane in half.

"Yee haa," the agent screamed over the public frequency as the enemy fighter burst into flames. "These guys don't got shit on me."

"And you call me a show off," the kit mumbled.

There were still six fighters out there, all of which had turned on their stealth systems, causing them to disappear from radar. It had become a classic dogfight where each pilot would have to rely on LOS*** rather than the fancy tech that was crammed in their jets.

The next group of fighters was on to his tactics and set up a trap accordingly. One of the pilots purposefully strayed farther from his wing mates in hopes that someone would take the bait. Tails knew better, but it seemed that Jake did not. Swooping in behind his Saber the enemy crafts lined up shots. However, Tails ceased the opportunity to make them the prey. Rather than go for a hard lock and let them know he was on to them, he switched back to his guns and let a couple hundred rounds fly. Planes, much like birds could not fly with clipped wings and the fighter on the right spiraled out of control.

Seeing that his partner had been shot down, the other Saber tried to bug out before the Kit could get another clean shot. Tails had yet to encounter pilots with as much skill as the man in front of him possessed. Everything he did broke the rules of any standard training, purposefully cutting turns well past the threshold for acceptable g-forces. Ordinary pilots would have blacked out in the steep banked curves they were flying, but yet this man persisted, cutting his throttle at random points before entering into steep inverted descents that made even pair of foxes nauseous.

After their target braked hard the pair lost him as his aircraft drifted by overhead.

"Lost him," Tails said through his com.

"Now he is on our six."

"Then let's see how good this guys really is."

Devils Canyon lay just a couple miles south of where they were, a few seconds journey in their subsonic jets. The kit had flown it almost every day for one summer for the sheer thrills.

Rather than slow down to enter the rocky formation, the kit decided to raise the stakes by nearly doubling his speed. When the first turn came up he could have sworn the tip of his Saber's wing shaved the granite walls. But no matter how hard he tried, his enemy only tried harder, closing the
distance between them at an alarming speed. Tails could only assume the vixen behind him had her eyes closed as their jet hurled through the ravine, following the rivers sharp and sudden bends.

"What do we have left?"

"One sidewinder and the auto cannon," Fiona's response came promptly.

Tails flipped the switch on his console to arm the missile and took aim and the fast approaching arch. The explosions crumbled the rocky bridge causing it crack. Just as the kit began his approach it gave way and began to fall into the riverbed bellow. He could hear Fiona screaming in the back as he hit the afterburners again. Only narrowly did their fighter pass through the rocks unscathed, but the same could not be said for their enemy's. As he circled the canyon from above, the remnants of his rivals Saber lay strewn about the rapids as smoke rose from the gorge.

Only four enemy craft remained, one of which was now Jakes tail. It didn't take the kit long to line up the shot held down the trigger until an alarm warned him he was out of ammo. Once again the Gatling gun on the wing of his Saber tore through steel, ripping the metallic bird from the sky.

"I am going to owe you a lot of drinks aren't I?" Jake asked over the radio seemingly unimpressed with himself.

Tails was too worried about his next targets to respond. They were closing fast from the east and he didn't have a weapon to speak of. Mara was too inexperienced of a co-pilot to get Jake the hard locks he needed to shoot these Sabers out of the sky. The only thing the kit could hope to do was outsmart his foes.

"Watch yourself, Jake," Tails said over their frequency.

With a twist of his wrist he brought the aircraft low well under the hard deck**** and any radar ceilings.

"Fiona, get up here," Tails commanded, "but make sure you leave your mask on."

The vixen complied as she unbuckled herself from the flight chair. She had learned to trust him, no matter how absurd the request. It was a small fit between the pilot seat and the glass, one that no human could have made. With one final wiggle she found herself sitting on the kit's lap, tail lapping gently against his face.

"What's your big plan," she asked. "We are nearly bingo on fuel and I don't even think we have a bullet left in that cannon you seem to like."

"Just need to be a little creative," he suggested as he maneuvered their fighter behind one of the unsuspecting enemies. The Saber had a near zero radar presence under the right circumstances, so long as they couldn't see them, there was little chance of their enemy knowing they were there. Slowly, the kit inched their plane underneath the other fighter where he slowed until he matched its speed.

"Do you want to wear it like a hat until we can make a run for it?"

"We would never make it."

"Then what are we doing?"

With a big grin Tails asked her to take the stick while he reached over his head and ripped the ejection cord for her seat. The back half of the canopy floated into the air and the seat took off as it
violently shook the craft. Both foxes looked on as it collided with the Saber above them. The enemy pilot struggled for a moment as he tried to regain control, but the damage had been done. The copilot seat was wedged firmly in his fuselage, which was now leaking fuel. After just a few more moments the stream of flammable liquid caught fire. Had they known what happened, the pilots may have had enough time to eject, but the resulting explosion engulfed the entire plane before they even had a chance.

"You never seem to run out of ideas do you?" The fox in his lap asked as she stared at the fireball suspended in the sky above them.

"Pretty sure I am out of them now. Two boogies left and considering we just used your seat as a missile I think it's safe to say we are out of weapons."

"Perhaps," she replied as she looked down at the Desert Eagle resting in the kit's holster, "but maybe not." Without telling him what she was doing she plucked the pistol from its home and slid a new clip into the empty weapon.

"Were you holding out on me?" he asked, watching her as she took aim out the open canopy in the back. "I could have used a few rounds an hour ago."

"You never asked," Tails muttered something under his breath that was inaudible over the com. The real problem however, was the two remaining Sabers that had zeroed in on him. They were now on his six and no matter how hard he tried to shake them he couldn't. The lock tone began to pulse until it reached a solid note alerting him that he only had moments before his aircraft was destroyed. Tails punched the throttle forward as he pulled the plane into a steep climb as he performed one barrel roll after another. The spinning twisted the heat signature of his jet, forcing the missiles to follow erratically winding as they struggled to climb after him.

All at once he cut the throttle and let the fighter flip all the way over so it's nose was pointed at the earth. Still spinning, he plunged towards the two explosive devices, narrowly escaping their touch as they flew past still following his jet trail into the upper atmosphere. Once they passed they collided in a fiery explosion as they tried desperately to correct their course after realizing their target had changed direction.

As he dropped back down to the enemies' altitude Fiona took aim at one of the Sabers and let a round loose.

"Baby, if you want me to hit one of these things we are going to have to get closer."

As he settled in just a few hundred yards from the enemy fighter the other promptly showed up on his tail, letting lose with it's Gatling gun. The kit yawed the fighter side to side as he dodged nearly all of the rounds save for one that put a hole in the tip of his fighter's wing. Fiona quickly changed targets and sent two rounds at the enemy behind them, one of which shattered the glass on the pilot's cockpit canopy. Flying at subsonic speeds meant that almost immediately each shard of glass became a new projectile that showered the inside of the jet with tiny razors. Neither of the pilots ejected as the plane plummeted to the ground, confirming that both were likely dead.

"Just one left," she remarked as both her and Tails searched the sky for the aircraft. In all of the commotion it had disappeared from both sight and radar.

"Do you see him?" Tails asked.
Before Fiona could answer the tone lock returned.

"Now I do," the vixen replied with a look of horror as she gazed over her shoulder.

"Shit," Tails nearly screamed as he reached for his own ejection cord. He had never wanted to do this. When Fiona lost her seat she also lost her parachute. As soon as his half of the canopy had pulled away he held onto the vixen with all his might. He swore to himself that he would not let go. The chair jetted into the atmosphere as it slammed the two of them down into the frame with a bone crushing force that seemed to go on forever.

When he felt as if he could take no more of the g-force, everything subsided and a feeling of weightlessness set in and they entered freefall. Their Saber had become nothing more than orange cloud of fire. Tails felt disappointed with himself. He never had to eject before, but then again he had never been outnumbered like this.

The air rushed through his fur and the vixen in his lap howled in fear. It was becoming obvious that heights were not her thing. He wished could say something to calm her but his words would be lost in the wind before they found her ears. Without any warning the parachute attached to the seat deployed, wrenching the two backwards up into the sky with so much force Fiona slipped from his grasp, causing her to release a high pitched yelp as she tumbled into the open sky.

***Now Playing Skyfall by Adele***

Never have I written something and then stumbled across a song that fit so well. Give it a listen; perhaps you will see what I mean.

Tails had no time to think, nor did he bother to even try. He un buckled the straps on the chute faster than he even though possible as he dove after. The altimeter in his HUD ticked by with alarming speed as the ground rushed up to meet him. Entering into a dive he felt his body surge forward picking up speed even quicker.

Having seen him jump after her, the vixen had enough sense to splay out her limbs slowing her fall and giving the kit time to catch up. He nearly collided headlong with her, struggling to grab onto the fox's body as they bounced off one another. Tails pulled her in tight, whispering into her ear, "I won't ever let go of you again."

Her body was riddled with distress, shivers running up and down as she struggled to breath. Tails knew this was the end, the reserve shoot was still attached to the chair and there was no going back for it. He had promised himself he wouldn't let go and he had no intention of breaking it even if it cost him his life. There was no better death than that of one in a lover's arms.

As he looked over Fiona's shoulder at the earth bellow him however, he wondered if both of them would have to die. He could hear her crying, and couldn't blame her. They had come so far only to quite literally be shot down in the end. This wasn't about dying; it was about dying without ever having lived. He knew that he owed her the life that he let slip through his fingers. The life she was entitled to before it was stolen.

Tails spun the vixen so she was above him as they fell. The lake beneath them should provide enough cushions for her, but it would likely break him. From this altitude hitting water would not feel any different from landing on concrete. Tails closed his eyes as he wound his tails tighter than he could ever remember. Twisting until it hurt, he held them in place till he felt the mist rising up from beneath him.

"I love you," the kit whispered in her ear as let his tails loose. He felt himself slow momentarily, but
it did little to lessen the exasperating speed at which they were falling.

The water stung like a thousand knives in his back. His scream was immediately muffled by the water he inhaled and the world around him went black.

He stood alone in an empty abyss, wandering around in an area devoid of even a sense of direction. Emptiness stretched out as far as his eyes could see.

"Is this what is like to die?" he asked out loud half expecting a response, yet none came.

"No," a voice called out from behind him.

When he turned to face it, the fox he loved stood there staring at him with eyes filled with tears. She was the younger red furred fox he had met all those years ago.

"Fiona, what are you doing here? Are you - are you dead too?

She didn't answer his question. It was as if she was ignoring everything he was saying. A weight grew heavy on his chest almost as if someone were standing on him. It was disconcerting, but so too was the fox in front of him.

"No! You don't get to do this," she screamed at the top of her lungs. "You don't get to save me and then die! That's not how this was supposed to work!"

"Fiona, I just wanted to give you a chance to live the life you deserved. I took you away from your home and promised to show you the world. The only thing I did was hand you over to Julian who took everything away."

"Get up right now!" the vixen yelled even louder. "You are not allowed to be dead," she sobbed.

Tails approached the distraught fox cautiously, embracing her once she came with in arms reach. Her touch was cold and uncharacteristic. As he pulled away he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in her eyes. He was not the same fox either, but rather the younger version of himself that had fallen in love with her.

Her paw lashed out and caught the side of his muzzle as she slapped him.

"Damn it Miles!" the vixen screamed in anger, "wake up!"

The kit reached up to rub his enflamed face. Nothing made sense anymore. Why were they younger? Why could he still feel pain? Why had Fiona hit him?

This is a dream, he thought to himself.

Upon that realization his eyes snapped open and sunlight flooded in. The kit rolled over and emptied his stomach of the seawater that had been sloshing around inside of him, coughing feverishly as he did so.

Before he could even fill his lungs fully with air Fiona had wrapped her arms around him, cradling him as tenderly as he could ever recall being held. Slowly he brought his own paw to his face where she had struck him in his dream. He winced when he touched the spot.

"I am sorry, baby," she said looking down at the red mark on his muzzle. "I am not sure why I hit you."

He didn't care; it very well could have saved his life. The only thing that helped him make sense of
his dreamscape was feeling the bite of her hand on his face. Few things had ever been so emotionally confusing yet so bitter sweet. Sitting up he could see where the vixen had dragged him ashore. His fur was filled with sand, but never had he welcomed such a gritty reminder that he was alive.

"Don't ever do anything like…" Tails put a finger on her mouth to silence her. He didn't want her to finish that sentence because it was a promise he could not make, let alone keep. Instead he pulled her closer and planted a gentle kiss on her lips. To this, she had no objection.

The thunderous crack of sonic broom opened up above them as two jets tore by, one chasing the other. It was impossible to tell who was who as the aircraft twisted in a magnificent display acrobatics. However, just as there was in all duels, there was a looser. In the end one of the crafts felt the piecing blow of armor penetrating rounds. The fighter sputtered in the air as it tried to stay afloat, but flight was a function of physics that required speed. Without it's engines, the Saber was doomed to crash, and crash it did.

The victor banked hard as the pilot turned back in an easterly direction towards Capital City. It did not take both of the foxes long to realize who had won the battle and more importantly who had lost. Together they hobbled up a sand dune and looked out into the open expanse where the burning wreckage lay in the distance. The vixen was distraught with the loss of her partner.

"Jake," she cried out as she broke into a sprint towards the crash site, leaving a trail of wet footprints for the kit to follow.

Tails had no choice but to let her run ahead. His legs would not carry him faster than a snails pace. When she reached what remained of the plane, she stood at the edge of the flames trying to discern if anyone could be living inside the inferno.

After what felt like an hour of walking Tails reached her side. She had been staring intently into the orange glow since she arrived. Slowly, he pulled the vixen away from the flames that threatened to lick them both. There was no saving anyone.

"Fiona," he called out trying desperately to reach her over her sobbing. "There is nothing we can do." It pained him more than he cared to admit to see the two of them die, but in every happy ending was there not also a sad one? Mara had been as much a friend to him as anyone else in his life. She deserved better than this.

Slowly the weights that held Fiona in place melted away under the heat of the fire and the kit was able to nudge her towards the now setting sun and away from the blaze that had engulfed what remained of the cockpit.

"Come on Fiona, we need to get going," Tails said as he limped through the sand. She was quick to put a hand under his arm and share the weight he could not bare. The prairie stretched out before them, a wasteland full of dried dirt and weeds. It was a lonely place, but the foxes knew they had each other. "We have a long walk home."

*VTOL – Vertical Take Off & Landing, A type of plane than can take of and land vertically without the use of a runway.**

** CBDR – Constant Bearing Decreasing Range, aka intercept course.

***LOS – Line of site.

**** Hard Deck - minimum operating altitude for flight missions.
The squirrel glared at the fox from across the desk as Fiona placed her recently polished boots on Sally's desk. The vixen had a habit of fully testing the boundaries of a new relationship.

"You're lucky I let you breathe the air in this room!" Sally yelled before breaking into a coughing fit. The squirrel brought a paw to her bandaged chest, doing her best to calm herself. The hole, blood stain and all still resided on her blue best, perhaps to serve as a reminder.

Sonic placed a hand on her back, gently massaging her shoulders to help take her mind off the pain.

"Take your feet off my desk," Sally asked as she struggled to control her frustration. "Please."

The vixen reluctantly returned her feet to the floor.

"And you," the squirrel continued as she transferred her gaze to Tails, "Where do you get off bringing her here without asking any of us?"

Sally began to cough again as she raised her voice. To be fair, she had spared them the brunt of her anger. When the two foxes first arrived after their week and a half long walk through the barren wastelands she was the first to greet them. Tails had never seen her so visibly mad that she was speechless. The squirrel simply walked out of the room fuming and remained out of site for days before finally asking the two of them to come down to her office.

"C'mon Sal, the doc said you were supposed to take it easy remember?" the blue hedgehog reminded her.

"Tails," she began again after some deep breaths, "You know better than this. We didn't let you bring her here five years ago, why would we now?"

"Because I am the single most wanted fugitive?" Fiona answered for him, "even more than your boyfriend."

"She has nowhere else to go," Tails added. "And she can be trusted."

"You could have taken her anywhere but here. The only thing she is known for is turning on her handlers. Why would we want her?"

"You always have a choice," Sonic said continuing Sally's thoughts. "Fiona, you could have put a bullet in Julian's head the second he put a gun in your hand, but you didn't."

"Guess what I had to live for all those years of working in Kintobor's shadow?" the vixen asked rhetorically. "Myself! Because people like you can never give me the time of day. I wasn't good enough for you back then so why should I have given my life just to make yours easier?"

Both Sonic and Sally stared blankly back at her. Perhaps something she had said hit too close to home for them.

"I am sorry," Fiona said as tears broke the surface of her eyes. "I never knew all the things he would make me do. No one is sorrier about the people I hurt," Fiona gulped as more tears streaked down her cheeks, "and all the people I killed than me. I still see their faces, hear their screams, and even feel their presence. You don't have to live with that, I do. But I am not sorry I took them away from you, I am sorry for them and them alone. I could have been on your side, but you were too proud to
have me."

The pair still looked on at the distraught fox, unsure of what to do with her.

"You," Fiona said with a trace amount of disdain as she picked her head up and brought her stare to the hedgehog. "You should understand better than anyone."

Sonic did not reply and instead waited for her to elaborate.

"Why weren't you there that night? You could have waltzed in there killed him with your bare hands all before anyone even knew you were there. But you never showed."

Both Sonic and Sally continued to remain silent.

"You saved her," Fiona said pointing to the squirrel as she remained focused on the hedgehog. "You had the chance you had been waiting your whole life for, but instead you chose to save her. You can call me selfish, but in some small way you made the same choice. You chose saving the one you loved, the one person you knew you couldn't live without instead of saving the rest of them."

The cobalt blue hedgehog's gaze narrowed on the vixen. It was obvious he did not like what she was insinuating.

"All I wanted was my life back! The one where I had the one I loved. Had I not been there to help clean up your mistake all of you would be dead by now. I may have killed my fair share of Mobians, but that blood would be as much on your hands as mine."

Tails tugged at her, trying to calm her down. It was obvious that she was still in a small state of shock. She hadn't been the same since they fell out of the jet. While she tried to play it off and pretend even Sally was quick to notice something off about her. A timidness that had never been present in the fox would appear sometimes.

"But," Fiona replied in a more neutral tone, "I get it now. I would have done the same thing. It took falling out of plane, but I get it. Suddenly you realize you can't live without the other person otherwise life would seem meaningless. I sat there for almost three minutes doing CPR on your sorry ass," she said with a refreshing amount of sarcasm as she turned towards Tails. "I simply refused to believe you were dead. The fact that you could even die had never crossed my mind until you decided to be you and sacrifice yourself. I had always thought you were invincible... but now I get it."

There were words on the tip of the hedgehogs tongue, but it appeared as if he was having second thoughts about speaking them. With nothing to say in response, the squirrel placed a paper on the desk between them all.

"The only way I am going to even entertain the thought of you staying here is if you can help us," Sally said as she pushed front page article in the foxes' direction and ignoring everything the fox had said.

Tails picked it up and scanned the headline, Ixis Naugus Helps City in Time of Need, Vows to Pick Up Kintobor's Torch.

"He is two steps away from president now. A few more words in the right people's ear and he will be in control of everything," the squirrel continued.

"So?" Tails said not understanding her unnecessary concern, "It's just talk. Ixis has his own agenda, he could care less about what Julian was trying to do."
"So, he is still a threat and needs to be taken care of."

Fiona hesitated, "I gave him my word we would go our separate ways. He saved our lives."

Sonic stepped forward, "Just tell us what you know about him, we will take care of the rest."

"He is smart," Tails responded quickly, "Smarter than Julian and every bit a self made man. It wasn't but five years ago I was buying black market goods off him. Since then he has built himself an empire."

"You won't find him unless he wants to be found," Fiona added. "I learned that the hard way. "If you have him in your sites, then you are probably in his and have been for far longer."

"We were hoping he would never be a problem," Sally replied, "but you two gave him the keys to the city. With so much ambition, there is no telling what his plans are for us."

"I would just leave him be," the vixen responded, "He does not take threats lightly."

"With Julian out of the way we can finally come out of the shadows, but until people like Ixis are far fewer, our days are still numbered. Besides, he still might be the least of our concerns," the princess said as she removed the article from Tails' hands and gave it to Fiona. "Because you have more expertise in this particular area I thought you could look at the cover photo and tell me if anything stands out."

Tails looked over her shoulder as the two poured over the photograph. It was nothing special, just Naugus waving to reporters as he left Dominion HQ. But Fiona was quick to spot something that he couldn't see. She almost shook in fear as she lowered the paper.

"You don't think…"

"I do," Sally answered, "one of my more reliable sources tipped us off."

Then the kit's eyes stumbled across what they were talking about. On each of his hands Ixis was wearing some less than stylish bracelets which were barely visible underneath the cuffs of his suit jacket. They were bland and barely polished and bore a striking resemblance to the collar that Fiona had worn for years. Such a large device around his neck would be too noticeable for public, but the tiny devices around his wrist would almost always be concealed with the attire he wore.

"But he is dead…" the vixen said hesitantly, "I put a bullet in his head myself. Julian is dead damn it!"

"I believe you," Sally responded, "for a change that is. Someone else is pulling the strings here. Naugus appears to be a willing puppet, but his agenda is not his own."

"If they got to Naugus," Tails began, "then we can assume they are even worse than he is."

The squirrel nodded, "That's why we need to get rid of him. Since Ixis seems unwilling to help himself, we are going to have to step in. If you want to prove yourself, help us get him and I will at least try to pretend like I don't hate every fiber of your being."

"Not much of an incentive," Fiona mumbled.

"Not being killed has worked well in the past. If that works better, we could try that," Sonic proposed.
Taking the hint the fox nodded, recognizing the fact that she didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

"Colin," Tails suggested as he continued to look at the paper in Fiona's hands.

"Is dead, or at least that's what your friends had to say on the subject."

Fiona sat back down slowly at the thought of her partner. His death still seemed to pain her nearly as much as Tails brush with the afterlife.

The kit plucked the newspaper from her hands and slapped it back down on the table in front of the squirrel, "Then who in the hell is that?"

Sally paused a moment while she studied the figure standing in Naugus' shadow. It was a short man whose face was partially obscured, but Tails had little doubt of who it was. The fedora he wore made him seem as if he was part of Ixis' crew, but few who were, were as short as this man. His nose seemed smaller in the photo, but the resemblance was uncanny.

"That," Tails said confidently, "is Colin Kintobor. I don't know how he is alive, but he is standing right there in plain sight. If you want to find your puppeteer, you might want to start with him."

In the wake of Kintobor's death, the papers had never bothered to mention the sudden disappearance of his nephew. There was no news of his body being found splattered across Capital City's streets or even any indication that he was missing at all. The Freedom Fighters had assumed that no one had noticed or even cared, but perhaps there was more to it than that.

"Well that changes things," Sally said quietly to herself.

The squirrel dawned an expression that suggested she was worried, which is something Tails had not seen in a long time.

"Why don't you two get out of here for a while," she added in a very calm voice, as if there was not bad blood between them anymore. "We are going to need to rethink a lot of things."

The fox put a hand on Fiona's shoulder who had been decidedly less vocal since Sally brought up Jake.

"C'mon Fiona," the kit said as he led her out of the room.

When he was sure the foxes were out of earshot Sonic was quick to ask Sally, "Why didn't you tell them?"

"Why didn't I tell them why Colin is even more dangerous than his uncle? Or why didn't I tell them that their human friends are still alive?"

"Either?"

"They have enough distractions for the moment. Besides, the last thing I need is two Dominion agents walking around this place. People barely trust me as it is for letting her in here. Could you imagine what they would have to say if I let another human in here?"

"Sally," Sonic said gently, "you have been too hard on him. None of this was his fault."

"No, but a lot of it is hers and he willingly throws himself in the way."

"You were the closest thing he had to family for years," the hedgehog answered solemnly, "Don't
you think it's about time you acted like it?"

The squirrel turned her burning gaze on him. It contained the depth of her anger and frustration, but Sonic had learned to walk amongst its fury long ago.

"You're starting to sound too much like my father you know that?" Sally answered as she crossed her arms.

The two foxes walked down the halls, navigating the nauseating confines of the Freedom Fighter's base of operations. There was an unspoken silence between them that lasted until they made it into the mess hall where the two found a table in a distant corner. All of the Mobians in the room shot the two eerie glances, but neither paid them any mind. Fiona had never expected anyone to like her in her new home.

Cat approached the two as they chatted quietly, carrying with him a box. The mountain lion eyed the vixen nervously; still very much afraid of the fox she used to be.

"Not sure how," he growled, "but someone managed to get this shipped here for you, Tails."

The kit looked over the box with a lot of suspicion. Whomever sent it had to have gone through a lot of work to find someone who could actually deliver it.

"Who's it from?" he asked as he took the knife from his vest.

"No idea. Just came in yesterday, no note or noth'n."

Tails pried at the wood planks until the nails came loose and he could free a board. Just as he was about to reach inside and reveal the mysterious contents, Cat turned and walked away.

"Don't you want to see what's inside?" the kit called after him.

"None of my business," the cat replied sourly as he eyed the other fox at the table.

"I don't bite," Fiona said with a sigh.

The mountain lion trotted off all the same.

"Well more for us then," Tails said quietly as he pulled a brown bottle out of the container. "What in the hell?"

The bottle of rum had an oddly cartoony version of a two tailed fox stamped on the front. No doubt made in his likeness, this fox was dressed in full pirate gear complete with a parrot on his shoulder. The words stamped above his head read, "Two Tails Rum, for the Pirate in us all."

"Let me see that," Fiona said hastily as she plucked the beverage from the kit's hands. It wasn't long before she began to chuckle.

"It's not that funny," Tails said.

"Yes it is," she responded, "but not for any reason you would know. Is there a note with it?"

Tails reached inside the box, feeling around until his paws found a piece of parchment. The only word on it was 'tab'. Handing the note over the vixen he watched as she twisted the bottle in her hands eying the craftsmanship.

"I remember Jake and I used to talk about what we would do if we could have any job we wanted,"
she continued. "He told me that nothing beats drinking a well made rum on a tropical beach and for that reason wanted to own his very own distillery on his own island. I told him he was crazy, but now it looks like it might be me who is the crazy one."

"Tab," the kit laughed. "I told him to put all the favors on his tab. Looks like he is paying me back."

"That sly bastard," Fiona said almost angrily, only with a heartwarming smile on her face. "All this time I thought he was dead, but instead he is living his dream."

Fiona pulled the cork out of the bottle as she grabbed two glasses from the end of the table. The spicy smell of the gold colored liquid was tantalizing. After pouring the pair of them a drink she raised her glass, "to dreams come true."

Tails gladly clinked his glass against hers. Perhaps he wasn't relaxing on a beach, but he had gotten back the one thing he had always wanted, the one thing that haunted his own dreams.

"To dreams come true," he replied before upending the mug.

"Not bad," Fiona replied as she held the bottle up to the light. "But I suppose that shouldn't surprise me. If Jake was good at anything else, it was drinking."

After a few more drinks he found himself back in his room curled up on a couch, the box of liquor now a bottle shorter than when it was delivered. Fiona was asleep in his lap. Something was gnawing at him, so he nudged her until she woke up.

"What is it?" she complained as he got up and walked over to the sliding door on his balcony.

His whole life he had laughed at death like it were some cruel joke. But now the fox had a new appreciation for it. He was not anymore scared of it than he had been, but now he knew it was always looking over his shoulder, just waiting for him to slip up again. Some people often spoke of profound realizations when confronted with their fate, but he had accepted it long ago leaving him with nothing more than a traumatic experience. A brush with death was simply more chilling than he could have anticipated.

Climbing up onto the railing of his balcony he looked down into the water below. Wandering through the desert had done his insured leg no favors, but it held steady as he balanced himself. Every part of his body fought with him as he leapt off the edge, letting fate and gravity once more temporarily rule his life. It felt as if he was tumbling through the sky all over again, and for a moment he was afraid. However, the kit refused to let his fears master him. As the water approached he closed his eyes and put his hands in above his head. The wind in his fur and the sweet smell of fresh water brought back a sudden rush of adrenalin, but his nerves remained calm even after the icy blast of water.

When he returned to the surface Tails looked up to where Fiona stood looking over the railing. She was smiling at him, not because she was amused, but because she was happy. After a moment she disappeared out of site, leaving the kit wondering where she was going. Then there was the sound of rapid footsteps and the vixen vaulted over the barrier and into the night air. She flailed about with a giddy laugh up until she landed next to the two tailed fox, splashing him with chilly water.

Despite the coolness of his surroundings Tails felt a warmth that he could not describe. Having been through so much, the comfort of finally feeling at home was relieving. Fiona playfully splashed him with the shimmering liquid, which he quickly returned with interest. While he didn't look it, he felt young again and acted accordingly.
No longer were they joined by just love, but also a concurred fear. The two foxes bathed in the midnight moonlight as they treaded in the glowing water. Fiona and Tails looked into each other's eyes knowing that while it felt like the end, it was really just the beginning.
Chapter 28

Mara let the warm sand filter between her toes as she lifted her feet out of the beach. The girl inhaled deeply, breathing in the salty breeze as the ocean tumbled against the shore with gently rolling waves. Exhaling she could feel what little stress remained in her system dissipate even further. Her parent's, who believed work was the only way to live one's life, had clearly never been to the island of Jotiga. The warm sun continued to bake her pale skin, but she basked in it, welcoming every bit of comfort it had to offer.

"Your drink, miss," a man's voice said from behind her.

Turning around she slowly opened her eyes to the bright light. A short tan man in a bleach white suit presented her beverage on a corkboard tray. The pina colada was complete with a swirly straw, tiny umbrella, and served inside a coconut no less.

"Thank you," she replied as reached out took a hold of frozen beverage.

Mara had pictured herself a lot of places in the future, but where she sat now was never one them. Her dreams had never even been this kind to her. She tried to tell herself if there was a person in the world that deserved it, it was her, but that only made her feel selfish. However, after taking a sip of the tangy drink and looking out into the turquoise ocean, Mara decided that perhaps she was okay with that.

"Just where I left you," a familiar voice called out from her other side.

"Jake," the girl said eagerly as she jumped up from her chair to give him a hug.

He, much like her parents, needed something to keep his hands busy, but having nearly purchased the island in its entirety meant there was hardly a shortage of work. Mara quickly rattled her hands around him as she jumped into his arms.

"Glad you could find time for me," she said trying to make him feel guilty.

"You know I am right over there," he said pointing to the building belonging to his newest business.

"And I am all the way over here, relaxing."

He set her back down in the chair, "Well then don't let me interrupt."

The former Dominion agent sat down next to her as he put on a pair of sunglasses.

"I do see why you like it over here though," he added as he stared at the place where the ocean melted into the sky. "I don't think I could ever get sick of this."

"Remind me again," Mara began, "how you bought this island. I thought you said they froze your accounts."

Jake chuckled, "They did, for all the good it would do them. A little bit of money goes a long way here. You remember how we got out of the country right?"

"Yeah, the Saber."
"Well what if I told you that you could have one seventy-five percent off the market value. Wouldn't you want one?"

Mara looked at him kind of funny unsure if his question was serious.

"A lot of governments did. I simply handed it over to the highest bidder."

"How much are they worth?" she asked as she took another sip of her drink.

"Ten billion credits give or take. I only got two though."

The girl’s jaw hit the ground. She knew he had sold the plane, but never at any point realized what it was worth.

"Sabers were the prized jet of our nation. The technology in them is light-years ahead of what everyone else has. I am already a traitor, so why not add selling state secrets to the list."

"Won't they hunt you down?"

"They can try, that is if they even know where to start looking. We are half way around the world with new names, new lives. and our own sovereign nation. Not to mention, Fiona taught me a thing or two about disappearing. If she wasn't chained to Kintobor she could have vanished off the face of the planet."

Mara nodded in her head in agreement, letting him know that she trusted him. After all he had gotten them this far without any problems.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Jake said as he rummaged around his cargo pants searching for something, "I got this today. It was addressed to you. You didn't tell anyone where we are, did you?"

He produced a small envelope and handed it to her.

"Who could I have told? I didn't have anyone left to tell."

"Then who the hell knew where to find you?"

Mara slid a finger under the seal and tore the parchment from its container. The handwriting was eloquent, all written with a fountain pen.

Dear Mara,

It has come to my attention that you and Fiona's old partner are both still alive. I was relieved to learn that you were not only able to successfully complete your mission, but also find a new life for yourself.

While I am sure you are very happy where you are, know that I intend to uphold my promise. Should you ever want to return to Knothole, you will be welcomed with open arms. The Acorn family wishes to extend its gratitude for your willingness to help in a time most dire.

Please also inform Jake that despite his previous allegiance, he has allies should he need them. As he will no doubt learn, it is difficult to battle the world a one, no matter how much money one has.

Sincerely Yours,

Princess Sally Acorn
"What does it say?"

Mara could hardly believe what she had just read. Not only because Sally seemed to be polite, but also because she had found her. Tails had told her the Acorn family was well connected, but they were practically on a deserted island. The girl handed the letter over to the large man sitting next to her and let him read it.

"I'll be damned. How in the hell did she find us?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I learned a long time ago not to underestimate them."

Jake laughed quietly to himself as he stood up, "Me too. C'mon enough lounging around, you're going to get burned again."

Mara sighed as she stood up and followed him back to their apartment complex which was a short walk down the sand laden street. Gazing up to the top of the highrise, she could see the towels she set out to dry on the penthouse balcony flapping in the wind.

The doormen hardly paid the two any mind as they crossed into the open-air lobby, stopping at the bar to get refills.

"Look," Mara said quietly as she pointed, "A Mobian."

Jake followed her finger to the far end of the bar where an older hedgehog sat. Intrigued the man pulled up the seat next to him, "Don't think I have seen you around here before."

"I would suspect not," the groggy old voice responded. "I may still be old, but you will only see me if I want to be seen."

"The name is J…" he said as he attempted to introduce himself before being cut off.

"Jake, yes I know. I understand you own this place now. I like what you have done with it so far. I have been living here for years, and I don't think it has ever looked this nice."

"I am sorry have we me…"

"No, we have not met. I still however, know exactly who you are, where you come from and who you used to be."

Mara tugged at his sleeve, obviously concerned about the Mobian who could blow their cover, but he ignored her. Not many people outside of the resistance network could know who he was before. Nor were there many hedgehogs left in the amongst the Freedom Fighters.

"Sir Charles is it?" Jake asked already feeling confident that he was right.

"Chuck will do just fine. They were right about you, smarter than you look. You must have been quite the agent."

Seeing that the Mobian was no longer a threat, Mara quietly took a seat next Jake at the bar, "How do you two know each other exactly?"

"We don't," they replied in unison.

Chuck let Jake continue, "There are not many Mobians left in the resistance network unaccounted for. Sir Charles was a master tactician for the Acorns as well as a renowned scientist. Julian told the world that he was dead to make it seem like he was winning the war, but every Dominion agent was
made to remember a list of kill on site targets. Chuck was number four."

"I made it wall the way to four?" he asked slightly amused. "And I can only assume my nephew is still number one?"

The two humans nodded in reply.

"Julian did me few favors in my life, but perhaps the best thing he did for me was to proclaim me dead. It allowed me to walk away. I had overstayed my welcome and my years were finally starting to show. With Sally's leave, I came here to spend the rest of my days. Life is simple, slow, and above all relaxing."

"So you're how Sally knew were to find me," Mara asked rhetorically.

"Indeed I am."

The idea of having a resistance contact so readily available immediately peeked the former agent's interest. "Would you be able to send something back to Knothole?"

"If it is important I suppose I could arrange for it," the hedgehog replied. "What did you have in mind?"

"I owe someone a few favors, I thought a care package might be in order."

"I don't suppose you plan on filling it with this do you?" Sir Charles asked as he raised a glass of brown liquid. "I do believe you perfected the recipe. Can't say I mind the label either. I knew the fox, but he was just a kit when I left."

"That's exactly what I had in mind."

The hedgehog smiled, "Less important packages have been sent for worse reasons. I will make sure he gets it. Now do tell me what a lovely young couple such as yourselves plan on doing on a tiny island like this for the rest of their lives."

"Same thing you are," Jake replied as followed the hedgehog's gaze out to the beach, "watch the ocean, drink, and relax. I felt as if I have had enough excitement for two lives and have little need for anymore. How about you Mara?" he asked as he prodded her with his elbow.

The girl nodded slowly. Words could hardly express how she felt. There were still nights she woke up screaming. Her mind had never come to grips with killing Colin. Even if he deserved it, the short pointy nosed man haunted her dreams, forcing her to relive a moment she would sooner forget. Sitting in the sun with out a care in the world did, however, make it easier to bear.

"Jake, Mara," Chuck said as he took a moment to look at them both, "you came to the right place."

Chapter End Notes

If you have made it to the end of my story, I would greatly appreciate any feed back you have to offer, for better or worse.

Thanks,
M.D

Bonus Content

The following is a random assortment of music that likely had an effect one way or another on the writing of this story. Listed in no particular order for your optional enjoyment.

Metalica: Nothing Else Matters

Metalica: The Unforgiven

Zedd: Clarity

Zedd: Spectrum

Avici: Fade into Darkness

BT: Every Other Way

Wax Nostaligc's remix of the Local Natives: Who Knows Who Cares

Adele: Skyfall

Of Monsters and Men: Dirty Paws

Of Monsters and Men: Little Talks

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!