### The Lost Prince

**Summary**

So it turns out Sonic is the Lost Prince of Mobotropolis. That's a thing. When the kingdom demands him home for a celebration, Sonic and his friends have to deal with the fallout, while Sonic's family begins to realise they maybe never knew him at all.

### Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“I should have thought things through; I’m holding out, not giving an answer. I want to do right by you, but I’m finding out cheating gets it faster.”

The fall of Robotnik came without warning.

According to Princess Sonia’s plans, it was supposed to be just another ordinary raid. Slightly higher in danger, considering that they were going after one of Robotnik’s major bases, but they hadn’t even expected the tyrant to be there, let alone constructing one of his greatest schemes.

The mission scrapped within moments, the Sonic Underground began fighting their greatest battle yet. Music filled every corner of Robotnik’s base; a steady rock ballad rather than the unfocussed jam of chords their battles usually emitted. Sonic leapt around the battlefield, singing and slamming through notes even as he spindashed and kicked countless SWATbots without quarter. Sonia and Manic remained still behind their instruments, but pink laser fire shot in all directions, and the ground shuddered, rocks and boulders attacking everything in sight as the music carried on.

As the song wound down, Sonic stood before his siblings, the beat steady and building as Robotnik stepped up in front of them, Ultimate Annihilator in one hand, poised and threatening. Stalemate – neither side could possibly attack before the other retaliated.

But then a single, clear note rang out, and finally—finally— Queen Aleena’s beautiful voice joined the ballad, and the Council of Four was united.

The day, somehow, had been won.

Sonic dropped his guitar, and wondered if it would ever feel like it.

“Sonic Hedgehog!”

He stopped before he had really even managed to move, closing his eyes as his foot fell back to the floor. Every day, he would try to go for a run. Every day, he would make time for it. And every day, he’d be brought up short by the irritated voice of his sister.

“Just where do you think you’re going?”

He considered telling her the truth: he had no idea where he was going. That was the great thing about going for a run – he never had any idea where he would end up until he got there. But the last time he’d tried to tell her that (Tuesday), she’d yelled at him about irresponsible behaviour. He could, he supposed, lie to her and say he had a problem to solve, but whenever he did that (Wednesday, Friday), she found out he was lying and ripped him a new one. There was always his fall-back plan
of ‘nowhere’, except that when he tried that (Monday, Thursday, Sunday), she told him idle hands were Robotnik’s workshop and gave him another six things to do.

All this passed through his head in less than a second, and in the time it took him to open his eyes and turn around, he had decided to try Saturday’s plan of attack again. “Sonia, Sis’, I love ya, but if I don’t get out of here in the next five minutes, I swear to every music lovin’ god out there, I am gonna snap and spindash this entire freakin’ building to the ground.”

“Sonic, don’t be ridiculous! There’s way too much work to be done for you to run off right now!” she cried, folding her arms under her chest and tapping one foot in aggravation. “You’re a prince of the realm now! You have responsibilities! Half of Mobius is covered in Robotnik’s junk, the aristocrats are panicking, and the underworld is taking advantage of the chaos! We need immediate action!”

He bit back the urge to ask what actions, exactly, they were doing so ‘immediately’. But the last time he’d tried that (Thursday), she’d started listing the obvious with each task involved in cleaning up the palace and trying to contact all the Resistance leaders, which didn’t answer his question at all and made them both angry. He took a deep breath and tried a different tack.

“I know, Sonia, and I promise I’ll be back to help you guys out with all that in just a little while, but right now I’ve gotta go,” he said urgently. And he really did. His muscles were aching from all the inactivity. He could feel his fingers shaking with pent up energy. Sonia and Manic—heck, nobody except Uncle Chuck—had ever understood how hard it was for him to keep still for too long. Nobody ever realised just how long a second was. How small buildings were. Uncle Chuck had always known that, somehow. He was the only one. And he was gone now.

“You can play later! Right now, Mother needs someone to –”

“I need someone to run a security detail through the city,” a voice interrupted, and they both looked around, what might have been identical smiles on their faces, if Sonic’s muscles weren’t so jittery and tight. She smiled back at them, then focussed on Sonic completely. “There are still many of Robotnik’s creations scattered across the world, but those here in Mobotropolis are the greatest threat to us.”

Despite the concern such a statement probably should have prompted, Sonic’s entire body seemed to light up, a grin splitting his face. “Getting rid of all of ’em might take me a few days, though.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” protested Sonia. “It would be better to leave that until all three of us could go out with you, and –”

“No, this is something that must be done now,” Aleena said firmly. “Sonic, I trust you will take thorough care of this threat to our great city. Do not, under any circumstances, assume an area is clear because it appears so on the surface. I charge you to investigate all areas of our city and eliminate all robotic threats, no matter how long it takes.”

Sonic looked like he could have cried for joy. “Understood, your highness. I won’t return until it’s done!” He bowed deeply, throwing Sonia a nasty look from the corner of his eye. “Later, sis’,” he added, then disappeared, only a vacuum blowing in his wake to show he had been there at all.

There was a pause as Sonia stared at the spot he had been, clearly struggling to understand, and another small shape stepped from the shadows as Manic moved forward, absently tapping his sticks against his leg.

“Yo, Mom, no disrespect meant or nothin’, but what was all that about?” Manic asked finally. “I
thought this whole Council of Four thing meant that there was supposed to be like, four of us, working together and all.”

“Sonic has trouble working in a team as it is,” continued Sonia. “How are we supposed to teach him how to do that if we let him to run off on his own all the time?”

“One thing you must learn, my children, is that there are many different kinds of teamwork,” Aleena said calmly. “Although it is true that the Council is made of four different members, equal in power, each of those members is unique, and to force them to do another’s task would harm not only the forced party, but the rest of the Council as well.”

Sonia and Manic exchanged blank glances. They were quickly learning their mother had the annoying habit of talking like this – long winded and slightly confusing, but there was usually a point in there somewhere.

“Sonia, you are a diplomat, with a powerful political mind. Your voice will guide us in the darkness. Manic, you are our heart and soul; you hear what the people need and fear and inspire us to act. I bring knowledge and experience, the magic that binds our souls together,” Aleena spread her arms, then stepped forward to take her children’s hands and lead them over to a window, where they could look out over the city. “Your brother is a warrior; our sword and shield. To confine him to the work we shall do would blunt his edge, and weaken his steel. Such is the Council of Four, in which we each will do our part.”

For a moment, they just looked up at her, before Manic leaned back and met his sister’s gaze behind the Queen’s back. They exchanged looks, then went back to watching the city with their mother.

“Run you little parasite!” roared Eggman. “Run so you can watch your whole world burn!”

Too preoccupied to give him the satisfaction of a response, Sonic just did as directed and ran. The factory was already collapsing – Eggman’s newest launch base, once again trashed beyond recognition because he’d—again—made the mistake of hatching a scheme to blow up the world or… something. Sonic wasn’t really sure what his motivation had been, this time. Eggman always insisted that his plots would create a better world… but only after they’d destroyed this one. All Sonic really knew or cared was that Eggman had broken into the Station Square astrology laboratory and stolen some hunk of rock that he was now using to power a laser currently aimed at Mystic Ruins. Mostly, as far as Sonic could tell, because it would really tick Sonic off. Jerk.

But now Eggmanland was collapsing, because they’d had three standoffs in the Generator Room, some big spiral room that seemed to have something to do with exhaust, and, of course, the control room. And for some reason Eggman had never learned to watch where he was shooting when Sonic was on the other end of the gun.

A flash near the top of his vision made him look up, just as a large beam gave in to the pressure of its weight and started crumbling. His eyes flicked to the place it would land, quickly calculating just how long it would take both it and him to get there, then grit his teeth. Naturally, they’d probably reach it at the same time, but he didn’t have time to stop or slow down.

“Speed up it is,” he muttered, and pushed his legs up another few hundred miles an hour. While he
easily cleared the beam, he was now going that little bit too fast to properly judge distances and time spans. An entire panel blasted out in front of him a second before he reached it, and he had to twist, spinning on one leg, to avoid the explosion of steam that had thrown the panel. He overbalanced, hit the ground on one hand, and then sprang back up and around to keep running, only to immediately have to jump to avoid the sparking remains of a robot he’d left behind on his way in.

A chiming bell made him glance up as he sideways-dashed to avoid a burning hunk of… something big and black and smelling vaguely of steak, but he didn’t stop.

“Warning,” a calm, polite, female voice announced. “In exactly one minute, this building will become uninhabitable due to internal explosion and fiery, painful death. Please evacuate the premises immediately, and stop ruining Doctor Eggman’s glorious plans. Thank you.”

He grinned at the farewell chime as he spindashed through a robot that hadn’t caught on to the whole it’s-over thing, but the second he landed, he pushed himself harder still. His ears popped as he crashed through the sound barrier, and he threw his fists out in front of him, refusing to care what ran into them now. He was going so fast that anything he hit would be trashed anyway, and he just didn’t have time to waste.

A split second glance told him speed of sound or not, he’d still have to slide under the door closing up ahead. He could go faster, but he’d need the extra energy in a few seconds. He immediately dropped, wincing at the friction on his leg, but just ducked his head to clear the door and rammed all four limbs and his spines down to slow him before flipping up to a stop on his feet.

Tails, standing with his hands in a tower control panel’s guts, smiled at him distractedly. “I’m done here – the laser is completely disabled, but I can’t reach the Anarchy Beryl, and if we don’t have that, Eggman could just do this all over again.”

Sonic nodded, rushing over stare at the panel. “I can’t sense those things, where is it?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to a spot on the tower, before immediately yanking his hand away. Sonic had already drawn back his fist and now slammed it right through the metal. His fingers hit something powerful and not-quite-right, and he grabbed it, cringing as the powerful energy clashed against his chaos, but yanked it out anyway. Tails nodded. “Now we’re good to go.”

“Warning,” the female voice announced. “There is thirty seconds before –”

Sonic shoved the Beryl into Tails’ hands and grabbed him up, pulling him close to his chest. “Try and breathe normally.”

“Ri-” The rest of his confirmation was lost in the wind as Sonic took off at a hundred miles an hour and hit the sound barrier in five seconds. He pulled Tails’ head closer to his shoulder and narrowed his eyes as he started pushing eight hundred. When he’d been younger, this kind of speed would have been his greatest thrill, and he’d fought hard to get this fast. But now, he knew he was already injured from his fight with Eggman, the force wasn’t great even for his body, and he was carrying Tails, who simply wasn’t designed for this kind of speed. If they weren’t in a building about to explode, it might have been fun, but it was also incredibly dangerous and he knew it.

They were on the third floor when his mental clock started counting down from ten. They weren’t going to make it. He clenched his teeth, looking for the clearest patch of open wall he could see.

“Close your eyes!” he yelled, and felt Tails curl tight against him, both tails scrunched into his side. He took a deep breath, jumped into the air, curled into the tightest ball he could manage while holding Tails, then twisted the air around him and rocketed into the metal and straight through the
Once he could feel clear air in his quills he pulled himself straight and stared around. It was nearly dawn, but the lava pools were glowing just bright enough for him to get a vague sense of the ground below. They’d shoot over the lava, but they’d also go over the safe ground, straight into the moat. He tsked and glanced down at Tails, then huffed out a breath. The little guy was only semi-conscious, gripping Sonic’s shoulder with one hand as if to keep himself steady. No way he’d be able to fly both of them right now.

Then the counter hit zero, and even Sonic’s mind went silent for a second before the shock wave hit him and sent him flying just that bit further. Not far enough, but –

Something hard and metal hit him in the back and he grunted, flipping upside down from the force, then blinked and grinned. A metal panel, about a metre square. “Sweet,” he said, and let go of Tails with one hand to grab it. He flipped them around again, repositioned it under his feet, and got ready to surf.

The walk back home was mostly silent and slow, and they watched the sun rise with the quiet satisfaction of people who knew what a gift it was to see another one.

By the time they reached the Mystic Ruins, they were mostly dry again, and Sonic was starting to stretch his limbs, implying he was almost ready to run. Rather than kick his tails into gear and prompt their usual celebratory race, however, Tails stepped a little closer in order to grab Sonic’s arm and inspect the blood still dripping down his hand.

“Nasty fight,” he observed, turning the limb to see the deep scratch marks on his wrist. “If your body was bad enough to be affected by punching through metal.”

“Yeah. Egg-Mantis. Really nasty teeth.”

“Yech. Can you believe some people eat mantis? It’s a delicacy in some parts of the world.”

“Yeah, I’ve had it before. Don’t believe them when they say it tastes like chicken.”

He chuckled, but let Sonic’s arm drop. “I’m gonna have to have a look at that after you have a shower. Then I think we should get some sleep.”

“I’m all for that,” he said, and Tails looked at him quickly, concerned by the admission. He shrugged. “That last run, and the surfing… you know how water is sometimes…”

He frowned. When they’d first met, Sonic admitted he didn’t know how to swim, and a particularly bad adventure—during which he’d nearly drowned a few times and been crushed because he couldn’t move fast enough under water—had upped the ante until he got a mild case of aquaphobia. He could fight it off most of the time, to the point that he quite enjoyed what he called ‘waterskimming’—running so fast that when he hit the water he just slid straight across the surface—but sometimes, if he was tired or stressed, it could still get to him. It worried Tails, because unlike his own fears of failure or thunder storms, there wasn’t much anyone could do to reassure Sonic there was nothing to be afraid of. The guy couldn’t swim and he sank like a rock. Up until recently, when he’d learned to combine jumping and his homing attack to move upward, deep water really had been dangerous.
But there was nothing they could really do about it, so they continued on in silence for a few minutes until Workshop Hill came into view, and then exchanged smiles, picking up speed as the promise of home, food and sleep called to them.

“So, should we tell Station Square about this one?” asked Tails. “I guess we need to take back the Anarchy Beryl.”

“Well, I don’t want it hanging around. Feels funky,” Sonic said, scrunching his muzzle and shaking one hand at the thought. “You do whatever tests you need to and then take it in.”

“Mm, thanks,” he said, pulling the Beryl out to look at it. “But I was more curious about whether we should tell them what Eggman was up to.”

Sonic glanced at him, and he returned the look sideways.

“Big, nasty laser that’s still in space, even if he can’t use it right now?” he reminded him. “I mean, I’m pretty sure he mainly designed it to threaten us, but he could have used it to wipe out any city on the planet. The president might get mad if he finds out we knew and didn’t tell him.”

“So tell him, if you’re worried,” he said, shrugging. “It’s there, sure, but Eggman can’t use it, so who cares? It’s just more space junk that Eggman’s probably already forgotten about.”

“You know, Sonic, there’s some stuff you tell people because they ask, and some stuff you tell people because they’d want to know. I really – oh.” He blinked as they rounded the cliff-face, the path up to the Workshop coming into view.

There was a strange creature walking up the steps with the purposeful but still curious expression that people often wore when going to Workshop Hill for the first time. Sonic tilted his head as they continued around the cliff, watching the visitor’s movements. “That’s a mixe.”

“Like from Mobius?” asked Tails, and he nodded. Mixes were creatures that weren’t recognisably any one species – they were most often born due to inter-species breeding, especially if a few superclasses had been crossed along the way. While they were pretty common in places like Mobotropolis, the capital of the non-human territories, this far out they were practically non-existent – humans tended to think they were aliens, making it too much of a risk for everyone involved. This particular one was a dull yellow, with four arms and a vaguely toad-like body, but also two long ears that stuck straight up on his head. Tails frowned, scratching the back of his neck. “I don’t know any mixes, do you?”

“I don’t recognise him,” he replied, and Tails jumped into the air, flying ahead while Sonic continued walking at the same lazy pace. Tails reached the crest of the hill just as the mixe was starting to look annoyed with knocking at the door without an answer.

“Hi!”

He spun around with a yelp, blinking rapidly as Tails dropped back to the ground. “Y- you –”

“Sorry, we only just got back. Are you looking for me?”

“I – well – I – Are you Tails the Fox?”

He nodded, his tails flicking around his feet as if to prove the point. “Yes, can I help you?”

“I have two missives for you,” he said, digging through his bag, and Tails paused, suddenly noticing the way the mixe was dressed. Full clothing, like a girl or human, but no shoes. That kind of fashion
was rare outside of Mobius too. But then the mixe looked up again, and so did Tails to avoid looking rude, only to balk as two envelopes were thrust against his chest. “Queen Aleena sends her rega- oh, my gosh!”

Tails finished taking the envelopes before looking around to see what the mixe was staring at. But it was only Sonic, who had just crested the hill and was pretty much ignoring them as he headed toward the house. Used to people being impressed by Sonic’s ability to stand in a room, Tails went back to the letters. “Queen Aleena? Who’s Queen Aleena?”

Sonic didn’t even pause as he continued past. “Queen of Mobius, all the non-human territories. Real pretty lady,” he added, then opened the door and disappeared inside.

“Oh, okay,” Tails said, then looked up at the mixe, who was still gaping after Sonic. He waited a few seconds, then sighed and clicked his fingers impatiently. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Wh- that – was that Sonic Hedgehog?”

“Sonic the Hedgehog, even,” he said, then waved the envelopes. “Why is the Queen of Mobius sending me letters?”

“Sh- She – Sonic Hedgehog?” he repeated incredulously. “Here?”

“Mn,” he said, and then folded his arms. It wasn’t that he couldn’t understand people being impressed by Sonic – heck, he’d once been such a fan that he’d stalked him for two days before Sonic decided to take the initiative and talk to him. But he wished people could forget him long enough to continue conversations they’d been having before he showed up.

“But – but he – why?”

“He lives here. Sometimes,” he added absently.

“He live… oh, my gosh. I – Sonic!” he cried, and then turned, about to rush into the house, but Sonic appeared in the doorway before he could, now gloveless, eating an apple, and fixing him with a very direct look. Tails liked that look. It was the one Sonic gave the President of Station Square, and any GUN soldiers that tried to give them orders.

“Yes, I am Sonic the Hedgehog, Sonic Hedgehog, and a few other names that pretty much amount to the same thing,” he said, then tilted his head and smiled. “And you’re a mailman. Got any mail for me?”

“No, but –”

“Any parcels, telegrams, messages or bills?”

“No, but –!”

“Then maybe you should go home,” he suggested. “I’m sure your family misses you too.”

“Oh, but –”

“Dude,” he said, raising an eyeridge, “do you really want to push this?”

The mixe gaped at him for a few moments before suddenly stepping back. He turned to look at Tails, but almost immediately shook his head and began hurrying away. They watched him disappear down the hill, and then Sonic went back to his apple and inside. Tails followed with a shrug.
“Why would the Queen of Mobius be sending me letters?” he wondered, as they walked into the kitchen.

“Couple of possibilities,” he said, and then stuffed the apple in his mouth so he could start pulling out the ingredients and tools for chilli dogs. Once he’d set the onions and chopping board down, he took out the apple to keep talking. “Whether you live there or not, you’re not human, so you’re a mobian, so you’re one of her subjects. All hail the queen.”

“Hm,” he agreed, opening the envelope without his name actually on it.

“The other reason is that you’re the famous Tails the Fox, with the IQ of three hundred, saviour of worlds and Sonic the Hedgehog’s oh so awesome best friend. Maybe she wants your help with something.” He glanced at the two envelopes. “Maybe it’s both. Who knows? Maybe you’re being contracted into royal service.”

“Hah! Maybe I’ll get a title! Sir Tails the Fox: Royal Mechanic!” he cried, then chuckled and tossed the second letter aside as he shook out the first. “Okay, let’s see. ‘My dear and future friend, it is with great pride that I announce the return of our beloved Kingdom of Mobius. My children and I have battled long and hard to return our great city, Mobotropolis, to its former glory after the damage done to it by the evil Doctor Robotnik. Now, we celebrate thirty months of freedom, and would like you to join us.’ Dramatic,” he observed, looking up to meet Sonic’s gaze. “You helped kick Eggman out of Mobotropolis, didn’t you?”

“Uh huh. Me, the royal family, and the Mobian Resistance.”

“Uncle Chuck was part of the Resistance, wasn’t he?”

He nodded again, his mouth occupied with his apple, and Tails looked back down at the letter, his smile fading. He’d only met Chuck the once, just after he started following Sonic around, but he remembered the visit fondly. “Uncle Chuck was a good person. I wish I could have seen him again before he was robotocised.”

“Yeah… robotocisation’s the absolute worst,” Sonic agreed, glaring at nothing before huffing his anger out in one breath and returning to his chopping. “What’s the rest of the letter say?”

“Mm… a lot of nothing, to be honest. They want us there as Mobian citizens, for this big festival that’s happening in a couple of weeks… The royal children will be officially introduced, and the Queen will be reopening a bunch of buildings… They’ll ‘recognise’ all their allies of the Robotnik war… don’t mention any names, though. Maybe they’re still tracking them down, like you and Knuckles. Maybe that’s why that guy was so weirded out to see you?”

“Nyegh,” he said vaguely, then finished off his apple and tossed it out the window, into the compost heap below.

Tails looked up at the strange response, then frowned and looked back at the letter. He sat back, holding it at arm’s length. “You know, I’m not sure how I like being called part of their kingdom. I haven’t lived on Mobius for years, and even then, Westside Islanders don’t usually call themselves Mobians.”

Sonic looked at him from under his brow as he pulled a large pot down from the cupboard, but didn’t say anything.

“And what does she mean, they’re going to return? Are they going to start making laws? Telling people how to live and stuff? You don’t think they’re going to make us like the humans, do you?
With mandatory schools, and everyone having to live with their parents until they’re old enough, in proper houses…?” He put down the letter and put his hand to his chin. “I mean, it doesn’t really fit our kind, does it? Not when parents abandon their kids so often, or vice versa. And… what does a monarchy do, exactly?”

“Depends on the kingdom,” Sonic said as he put the pot—now full of water—on the stove, “We could go find out.”

“What, go to this festival?” he asked, and Sonic nodded. He winced, glancing back at the letter. “I don’t know… Go back to Mobius?”

He shrugged and pushed the onions aside to start chopping the chilli. “It’s your call, dude. I didn’t get an invite.”

“Which is also weird,” he said, then shrugged and stretched his arms up over his head. “I think I’m going to have a shower while you cook.”

“What about the other letter?” Sonic asked, pointing at the addressed envelope.

“It can wait. I can feel Eggman oil in my fur,” he said, and Sonic shrugged.

“Fair ’nough. Dogs’ll be done in about twenty minutes, though.”

“I’ll be ready!” he said, and hurried through the house and up the stairs.

He let the bathroom door slam shut behind him and spun the taps, already hopping to untie the buckles of his shoes. He frowned as he pulled them off and set them aside, his eyes rising to the window. “Mobius, huh…?”

Technically, the island chain he’d spent the first five years of his life on was a part of Mobius. Westside Island, which had been home to his tribe, was the second closest island to the mainland, but he didn’t exactly miss the place.

In hindsight, he knew that his tribe hadn’t been the nicest group. They didn’t like people with unusual traits or abilities, and after Robotnik took over, having a high IQ was the last thing you should be proud of. They’d bullied him mercilessly, called him a freak and a mutant, and until he met Sonic, he’d never had anyone or any reason to argue.

He travelled with Sonic for a whole year, slowly learning that his intelligence was something to be proud of, and his ability to fly made him special – not a freak at all. The only problem was that after he was kidnapped, and they both nearly died several times on the Floating Island, Sonic had a sudden crisis of conscience and refused to let Tails follow him around anymore. Sonic had left, but Tails refused to go home. He’d spent time travelling the other islands, and getting himself in more—slightly less dangerous—danger, until Sonic showed up again.

The last of the suds washed down his fur and into the drain, and he just watched them go before slowly turning the taps off. They’d spent a year apart, so it was only to be expected, but he could remember noticing just how different Sonic was when he came back. Nothing drastic, but… but he had changed. Looking back on it, Sonic had changed a lot since then, too, but…it all started with that year he spent with the Resistance. And when he came back, the first thing he suggested was that they leave Mobius. Neither of them had ever looked back.

Did they really want to go back? Even just for a visit? It wasn’t like they were avoiding Mobius – in fact, for all he knew, that was where Sonic went on his walks around the planet. Really, it was more that Eggman focussed on the human territories these days, and personally, Tails just found human
scientists and their research that much more interesting than the magic-obsessed Mobian ones.

But even so, did he really want to go back to that place? Where two tails made him a mutant, and an IQ of three hundred put him on the same level as Eggman, with all associated evil connotations?

He shook the water out of his fur and stepped into the drying space. It was stupid to think like that and he knew it. He knew he was a good person – a hero, even. His intelligence helped him build machines to fight people like Eggman, and his tails had saved both him and Sonic more times than he could count. Heck, he was a hero! He was Sonic the Hedgehog’s best friend and a super genius and one of the only two people Knuckles actually trusted, and heck, that really did mean something!

Fixing his mirrored reflection with a triumphant look, Tails finished towelling himself off and pulled open the cupboard to grab a fresh pair of socks and gloves. He could and would go to Mobius. He’d go, and check out this festival, and this queen, and if they tried to make him into something he wasn’t, well, then, he and Sonic would just leave and make their own world, just like they’d been doing for years.

He left his sneakers where they were and padded back down the hall and stairs, into the kitchen. As he’d suspected, the chilli dogs were waiting, and Sonic was just finishing off the last of his, though there was a full plate of steaming ones on the other side of the table, practically drowning in cheese. Tails grinned and snatched the first one up, plonking himself in his seat as he took the first bite.

Ahh, heaven. Sonic made the best chilli dogs, no mistake.

Once the first one was gone, he picked up the second and looked over to see what Sonic was doing. His smile faded at the slightly dark expression on his face, before he realised Sonic had opened the second letter and had clearly finished it unimpressed.

“What’s up?” he asked around a mouthful of cheese.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” he said automatically, still staring at the letter.

He rolled his eyes, made a point of swallowing it, and tried again. “What’s up?”

“Something I’m too tired to care about today. M’gonna go catch some clean,” he said, and tossed the letter onto the centre of the table before glancing at Tails and giving him his best ‘big brother’ look.

“Dude, chew. You are a sapient fox, not an unevolved duck. Seriously.”

“Quack,” he shot back, and this time Sonic rolled his eyes, before he stood up.

“Don’t read at the table,” he said with even more big brother hypocrisy, before disappearing in a vacuum of air. Tails waited until he heard the bathroom door close, then picked up his last chilli dog and the abandoned letter.

“To Tails the Fox, or whomever lives in the Workshop of the Mystic Ruins,” the letter began, and Tails snorted. Close enough. “I’m sorry if you’re not the person I think you are, but I’m afraid all I have to go off are a few pictures and second-hand government reports. According to them, you know Sonic Hedgehog, and to be perfectly frank, it’s him I’m trying to find.

“My name is Sonia Hedgehog, and if you really do know Sonic, I’m sure you know all about me, so I won’t waste time introducing myself. I still don’t know why my brother left us all those years ago, nor why he hasn’t contacted us in that time, but the fact is, he needs to come back. Now.

“Mother, Manic and I have done all we can, but without Sonic, the Council of Four can never be complete, and Mobius needs us. It’s time we prepared to face the world again, and combat its
problems. We can’t do that without Sonic. Even with Mother, unless he comes back, all of us will be powerless, and we can’t hope to change anything like this.

“The monarchy needs its prince. Again, I don’t know why he left, but it’s time he stopped being so selfish and came home.

“Mr. Fox, my brother and I have looked all over Mobius for Sonic, and no one has seen him for years. The Guardian of the Floating Island is being strangely unhelpful, and none of my contacts have heard from him. If you do know Sonic, give him this letter. Tell him we need him. Tell him to come home and do his duty.

“Tell him we love him.

“Thank you in advance, and I look forward to seeing you at the festival,

“Yours sincerely, Princess Sonia Hedgehog of Mobius.”

For several long seconds, Tails could only sit and stare at the letter, his half-eaten chilli dog halfway to his mouth. Then he set it down and read the letter again. And a third time.

It still didn’t make a lot of sense.

“Brother… prince… brother?” he shrieked, then leapt over the table and scrambled for the stairs, barely looking where he was going until he suddenly found himself in front of the bathroom door, listening to the sound of water running through the pipes. He stopped, staring at the painted wood, and remembered to breathe.

After a few moments, he leaned his head forward until it hit the door, and closed his eyes. After a second, he took a step back and let his hands drop to his sides. “Wait. Think about this rationally.”

It was a letter. Okay, Sonic hadn’t looked too amused by it, but why did that mean Tails should take it seriously? Sonic couldn’t have siblings, that was just… And besides, Sonic? A prince? What kind of stupidity was that?!

He paused as the mental image came to him, and he could almost feel his logic cringe. It fit really well, actually. Sonic would be the kind of king you read about in stories: a king that really, truly cared about his people, and would fight for them even beyond death. Tails could see that.

But… if it were true… and Sonic had never told him – if he had never found out, then… did Tails really know Sonic at all?

Well, yeah, obviously, his logic responded irritably. You’ve only spent the last three years with him, and a year before that. He probably just never mentioned the whole prince thing because Sonic saw all government figures as a bit of joke. He’d even waved off the whole being-King-Arthur-thing and —from what Tails could gather from Sonic’s patchwork stories about that adventure—had turned tail and run from it the second he could.

Maybe he was running from it in the real world, too…

Tails took another step back from the bathroom door, lifting the letter again to glance over some of the words. “Come home and do his duty,” he murmured, and then turned around, walking a few steps until he could see into his bedroom and the window beyond. Sonic wasn’t big on duty… Surely his sister knew that…

He slowly moved into the room and over to his bed, then sat down with the letter dangling between
his knees. He heard the water turn off next door, but didn’t look up until Sonic walked in and sat on the bed beside him, still rubbing down his quills to dry them.

“Which part freaks you out the most?” he asked bluntly, and Tails grimaced.

“I’m not freaking out, I just…”

“Just what?”

“You have a brother?” he demanded. “How come you never told me? Is he like you? Cool and fast and a hero?”

He laughed, shaking his head as he sat back. “I have a brother, yeah. And a sister. They’re both slow – they have powers, but not like mine. And yeah, they were heroes, but I think they got over it. Like a phase,” he added with a grin, and nudged Tails’ arm playfully. “Became royalty instead. At least, they were goin’ that way, last time I was there.”

Tails looked at him curiously for a few moments, noting that Sonic had neatly sidestepped the question of why he’d never mentioned them. In the end, though, he decided it would probably come out in its own time and asked, “Are you going back?”

“Dunno. Figure I should,” he said, then scrunched his muzzle and shrugged. “Not for a while, though. I’m tired.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, and they both looked out the window. “When you go, I think I’ll come with you.”

“Well, you kinda have to,” Sonic pointed out with a grin. “I didn’t get an invitation, after all.”

Not for the first time, Knuckles glared at the print out his ancient communications centre had given him, scrunched it up in both fists, and then turned to punch in what had become his standard response.

‘He’s not here. Stop asking.’

One of the many secrets Sonic and Knuckles kept between them was their shared knowledge of Mobian Royalty. When he was growing up, Knuckles had often been visited by Queen Aleena, who told him stories about her family and kingdom, and in hindsight, he knew she’d been hinting that one particular member of her family would become very important to him in the future. But the first time he met Sonic, the hedgehog grumbling about being punched in the eye hadn’t clicked with the countless stories Aleena had told him of her hedgehog son.

Mostly because princes, he was pretty sure, didn’t carry around Chaos Emeralds, wing-walk on ancient bi-planes and occasionally turn into golden-furred demi-gods.

It wasn’t until he showed up on the island again, this time with his brother and sister in tow, that Knuckles got a hunch about hedgehogs and royalty. Unfortunately, Eggman’s new henchmen had managed to convince him Sonic was after the chaos emeralds.

That was slightly more humiliating, he acknowledged, especially when Sonic saved him from one of
his own traps and immediately asked what the heck. He managed to bluster his way through by saying it was *Tails* he’d trusted. Without Tails, Sonic may well have gone evil and wanted to steal his emeralds, after all. That made it easier to pretend that he’d just been pretending not to recognise him.

In all honesty, he still wasn’t sure why he hadn’t. There had just been something so different about him, when he was with his siblings…

After a while, he realised Sonic wasn’t telling his siblings about Tails, or any of his previous adventures, and while it would have made good blackmail material, they weren’t very good friends back then and he felt his silence was fair trade for Sonic not telling his siblings (or, at least, his very pretty sister) that Knuckles should have known better.

They ran into each other a few more times, but on the rare chance he got to talk to Sonic alone, all he ever said about his past was that now he was doing what he always should have been doing. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Eventually Sonia came up to the island alone, head over heels for joy because they’d apparently beaten Robotnik and found their mother… but it was all tempered a little because Sonic had disappeared only a couple of weeks later. That had scared them all a little. Like Sonia, Knuckles assumed Robotnik had taken his revenge by kidnapping Sonic.

At least, that was his theory, until one day Sonic landed head-first in the dirt at the base of the Master Emerald shrine.

“Wh- how – what are you doing here?” he’d cried, as Sonic yanked himself out of the dirt and spent a few seconds getting his bearings back.

“Oh, no, Knuckles, don’t worry about me, I’m fine,” he’d sarcasmed. “Just fell three hundred feet outta Buttnik’s latest battle cruiser. No biggie.”

“Oh. Right. Yeah. You alright?”

Sonic rolled his eyes and then turned around to peer up at the sky. Knuckles followed his gaze in time to see a far-off ship become covered by an explosion, and Sonic smirked.

“Just fine. So, dude, what’s up? How y’doing? Keepin’ chill?”

“What? I – you – where have you been for the last six months?” he demanded, waving his arms. “Your sister’s going nuts!”

“Huh? Oh, Sonia, yeah. I figure she’s given up on me,” he said carelessly. “I’ve been wandering around, exploring the human territories, beating up on Robotnik… Me and Tai- oh yeah, Tails…”

He frowned, pulling back the cuff of his right glove to reveal a bulky watch. He pressed a button on the side and raised it to just below his chin. “Yo, buddy. How you doin’?”

“SONIC!”

Knuckles raised his eyeridges, frowning. The voice had changed a lot, but it was still recognisable. He wondered how they’d met up again.

“Oh, thank goodness! I saw you fall, but I couldn’t get to you in time! Are you okay?”

“Yup. Fell into the Floating Island. Wanna come pick me up, or should I just meet you somewhere?”
'I'll fly low over the Emerald Shrine in about two minutes. Can you get there in time?'

They both looked up at the shrine, only two metres behind them, and Sonic grinned. “Yeah, I can probably make it. See you soon, li’l buddy.”

He covered the watch again, and then looked up to meet Knuckles’ gaze. His smile softened but didn’t really fade. “I’m doin’ what I’m meant to be doin’. People that matter stay with you, and if you try to avoid them, they have a real funny way of showing up. Same with places and things you need to do. That’s how I met up with Tails again, and I’m bettin’ it’s the reason I fell into your island.”

“What, like fate?” he asked dubiously, and Sonic grimaced.

“Fate is what you make it. But yeah. If you’re meant to do something, then you can’t not do it. I decided to choose my own destiny, prophecies or no, and my feet haven’t found their way back to any dumb castle to sit around and get fat in yet. So I figure I’m where I’m meant to be.”

Knuckles stared at him for a few seconds, then slowly nodded as the sound of a propeller engine reached their ears. “You want I should tell Sonia you’re okay?”

“Nah. Mom knows I’m not dead,” he said, and started jogging up the shrine stairs. “See you next time, Knuckles!”

He grunted, but otherwise watched in silence as Sonic ran the rest of the way up the steps, leapt up onto the emerald and then jumped impossibly high just as his bi-plane swooped down over the shrine. He snagged a wing with one hand, twisted in mid-air, and landed on his feet, where he stood up as if it were solid ground. Knuckles sighed to watch him, but couldn’t help smiling as both Sonic and Tails lifted their arms in a farewell wave.

Maybe, he thought as he turned away from the radio, which was beeping insistently that he should pick up a call from Sonia, it would have been easier in the long run to tell the princess what Sonic was doing these days. But for some reason, he didn’t so much mind keeping Sonic’s history to himself.

“Warning!” the comm-unit yelped, and he turned, raising an eyeridge at it. He’d almost forgotten he had defence systems – most of the people that tried to get on the island these days could bypass them without even trying, after all. “Incoming craft detected. All weapons primed for firing.”

He grimaced, moving back to the station. Weapons were so… old school. He switched on the visual, his brows lowering at the craft that appeared. “Talk about old school.”

The egg-shape clearly defined it as an Eggmancraft, but it was dark and dirty, the way his designs hadn’t been for years. Stolen tech, then. Probably someone from Robotropolis. It tilted slightly as it came closer, showing off a garishly painted symbol, the centre of which was the Royal H. He sighed and picked up the still screaming radio, resigning himself to repeating history.

“Pilot, identify.”

Chapter End Notes

Music reference:
Get it Faster - Jimmmy Eat World - 2001
It never took long for adrenaline and shock to wear off, and after a good night’s sleep, Sonic was pretty much back to top form. But rather than immediately start making plans for Mobius, he told Tails to take his time researching the Anarchy Beryl, while he himself fell into standard relaxation patterns – also known as reading and sleeping more than Tails personally considered healthy.

The second night, he’d combined the two by falling asleep on the couch with a book over his head. Sitting on the other couch, Tails had fallen into a light doze himself, sitting half-awake and staring at Sonic’s globe on the table without thinking about much of anything.

The sound of a door opening made him look up, and then blink when he noticed how dark it had gotten. He frowned, reaching for the clock on the table, but didn’t even manage to pick it up before a heavy thump was followed up with a cheerful, “Oh, isn’t it romantic?”

The book jumped, and Sonic’s hand slowly rose to pull it down his face just far enough for him to glare at the door. Tails hid a smirk – he loved these moments.

“A kingdom, a festival, a far off place and celebrations with fireworks and candy and music for days!”

Sonic carefully put the book aside and began crawling off the couch, at that special slow speed he seemed to do everything when avoiding Amy. Tails’ smirk began spreading over his lips.

“And it’s all to celebrate the Hedgehog kingdom, which makes it practically intended for two young hedgehog lovers!” Amy Rose slid into the doorway with a flourish, her arms held up over her head and one leg bent at the knee. She heaved a dramatic sigh and clasped her hands together. “It’s as if the stars themselves are calling us! Sending us a sign! Oh, let’s answer them, Sonic! Let’s go to Mobotropolis and show the stars we hear them!”

She flung her arms out, then blinked, suddenly realising she couldn’t see him. Her smile immediately switched to a frown and she set her hands on her hips. “I know you’re here, Sonic. My heart is never wrong!”

Tails gave up the fight and let his grin show. “Hi, Amy.”

“Where is he, Tails?” she demanded, striding over to glare down at him. “Tell me!”

Hiding behind the couch now, Sonic frantically shook his head, holding his hand up to his mouth in a silent plea, then crawled out of sight. Tails shrugged at Amy. “He said he was going on a walk.”

“He went for a walk?” she cried, and Tails flinched back into the couch as she yanked out her Pico-pico Hammer. “Where did he go? He better not have gone to Mobotropolis without me! Ooh, if he has, I’ll – whoop!”
With that strange unerring accuracy only Amy could manage, the hammer slipped from her fingers and went flying across the room. It landed with a thump, and Sonic appeared right beside it, clearly having jumped out of the way on instinct. He froze, then slowly looked around, cringing as he met Amy’s gaze. “H-hey, Amy…”

They stared at each other for a long moment, Sonic terrified and Amy clearly debating which way to react to his appearance. Personally, Tails was hoping for abject joy because it would both be absolutely hilarious and not put him in harm’s way of a hammer.

But in the end, Amy just heaved in another deep breath, clapped her hands together and skipped over the table to Sonic’s couch. “Did you get a letter too? I got mine this morning, telling me all about the festival in Mobotropolis! My parents used to tell me stories about Mobius all the time! They said it was beautiful!”

Sonic scratched behind his ear, glancing at Tails, who shrugged.

“Mobius was kinda pretty,” he admitted. “Like the Mystic Ruins, but less likely to change from one day to the next.”

“South Island was really cool,” agreed Sonic, a smile building. “Green Hill Zone.”

“That’s where you’re from, isn’t it?” Amy asked curiously. “Ooh! While we’re on Mobius, you should take me to your hometown! I want to meet all your childhood friends!”

“Well, for starters, this is Tails,” Sonic quipped, but she just rolled her eyes and set a hand on her hip.

“I mean your childhood friends. From when you were little!” She hurried around the couch and grabbed his hands in both of her own. He grimaced and leaned back, but she just followed the movement, pulling his hands to her chest. “What’s South Island like? Does it have beaches? I bet it has lots of speeding pads, doesn’t it?”

“No, not really. Loops, though.”

“Oooh! This is so exciting! Let’s go first thing tomorrow morning!”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tails said, waving his hands. “Amy, the festival isn’t for two weeks.”

“So?” she demanded, and released Sonic’s hands only to throw her arms around his neck. He sighed and rolled his eyes, but Tails couldn’t help but notice he hadn’t dodged it, either. Amy smiled dreamily, nesting her head on Sonic’s shoulder. “It’s a holiday! It’s romantic! Lovers always take their time on holidays!”

“Amy,” said Sonic, peeling her hands away. “Tails and I –”

“Well of course Tails is coming with us,” she said, frowning at the very idea he might not, then turned and waved a finger at Tails. “But you have to give us some time alone or I’ll never forgive you!”

“Amy,” Sonic said again, firmer this time. “Me and Tails just got back from trashing Eggman. He’s got tests to run, and I’ve gotta catch up on some sleep. I’m not goin’ anywhere for a couple days.”

Amy shot him a quick glance, then looked at Tails, who smiled and shrugged helplessly. The truth was what the truth was. She frowned, peering at Sonic appraisingly, then huffed and stepped back, putting both hands on her hips this time. “You! I can’t believe you went on an adventure without me! You’re always leaving me behind! You’re so mean!” she snapped, then turned on her heel, folding
her arms over her chest with another huff.

Sonic winced, smiling despite himself as he spread both arms imploringly. “Amy…”

“Hmph!”

Tails chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Actually, Amy, we were thinking about going sometime next week. Sonic has to meet up with his family before the festival and see what this stuff about the Council of Four is… why are you looking at me like that?” he asked Sonic, who was gaping at him, caught somewhere between the urge to strangle him and run very far away.

“You have a family?” Amy squealed. “Oh my god, this means I have in-laws! And I’m going to meet them soon! Ah, I’m so nervous!”

Sonic slapped a hand over his eyes and groaned, while the rest of what Tails had said seemed to filter through Amy’s head.

“Council of Four…? The invitation mentioned them – don’t they have something to do with the queen?” She glanced up at Sonic, confused. “Why do you care about the government?”

“Because he might have to,” explained Tails. “It sounds like his sister isn’t really giving him much of a choice. But I guess it comes with the royal birthright anyway, so – seriously, Sonic, what?”

He just slapped the other hand to his head and turned away, groaning even louder, while Amy’s eyes widened.

“Royal… sister… birth… Oh, my god,” she said, and Tails blinked, suddenly realising he might have let his mouth run away with him again.

“Oh. Um. I guess if you never told anyone, you never wanted anyone to know you were prince, huh?”

“Tails, I swear sometimes…” Sonic snapped without turning around, while Amy gasped and clapped her hands to her mouth.

“You’re a prince?”

Now, academically, Knuckles was aware that they’d all grown up a lot in the last couple of years. Mentally, physically… they were different people than they’d been back when their main focus was kicking Robotnik out of Mobius.

But he’d never really thought about it until now, when he found himself staring at the holographic image of Sonic’s pretty little sister.

Sonia had always been… regal. It was in everything she did – she was a spoiled princess and it showed, even when she was decked out in a flight suit and aiming an oily turret at a SWATbot. And Knuckles had… well… he had been fond of Sonia.

Now, he found himself focussed on very particular areas of the princess, namely the diamond of uncovered fur on her chest, framed by that ever-present medallion and the way she had folded her arms. Just to keep himself from staring—reminding himself that he saw Rouge and her much better
endowed assets all the damn time—he instead looked at the other ways she had changed.

She was taller, he thought. More shapely – focus, Echidna! Her long quills had been braided back with her hair, into something vaguely reminiscent of a cat-o-nine-tails. And the practical, sporty dress was gone, replaced by slinky fabric and even longer gloves and boots. His eyes drifted to the slit up her skirt, showing just a hint of thigh. What was it about clothes that made bodies so much more intriguing…?

“So are you coming?”

He blinked, jerked back to the conversation, and had to take a second to remember what they were talking about. He frowned. “No.”

“No? What do you mean, ‘no’?” she demanded.

“I mean ‘no, I’m staying on my island’. I have a duty, Sonia, I can’t just drop it to catch up on two years of Mobian gossip.”

“A duty?” she repeated, scoffing loudly. “Knuckles, this is a royal event! The Mobian Government is being officially reinstalled! It’s a little more important than your hunk of rock!”

Suddenly, it was a lot easier to focus on her face. “I guard the Master Emerald. I keep all of Chaos from breaking loose!”

“You keep an island in the sky by watching a piece of glowing rock,” she snapped, and he pulled back.

“Okay, that’s it. Nice talking to you, Sonia,” he growled, and began to turn away until she barked at him.

“We’re not done here!”

“Oh, yes we are,” he shot back, glaring over his shoulder. “My glowing piece of rock needs polishing.”

“Guardian Knuckles, I am Princess and Vizier of Mobius, and that makes me your ruler. I am ordering you to –!”

“Shove it out your ear!” he shouted, and stalked out, wishing the hovercraft had a door he could slam behind him.

He was expecting it, but he still glared when the pilot edged up the path toward the shrine an hour later, holding a portable transmitter in front of him like a shield. At his look, the pilot stopped to quake a little at the bottom of the steps, before inching his way upward.

When another two minutes had passed and he hadn’t even gotten halfway, Knuckles rolled his eyes and strode down to snatch the transmitter away from him. He stalked back up the stairs and sat down again before turning it on.

Sonia had moved behind a desk, and was sitting with her fingers laced in front of her mouth, gazing worriedly into the middle distance. She did a small double-take, then sat forward, spreading her hands toward him.

“I’m sorry.”
“You’re not my princess,” he said shortly. “I am Guardian of the Floating Island – an island that barely passes over Mobius once a year. Even if it were part of your kingdom, I still wouldn’t obey orders just because you gave them.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have,” she said, and lowered her eyes, long lashes almost brushing her cheeks. Knuckles felt his indignation fading into sympathy as she continued, “It’s just – it’s just that it’s been so hard the last three years. I mean… everything that happened, and… and no one knows where Sonic is or what happened to Robotnik or… oh Knuckles!”

He flinched as she buried her face in her hands, quiet sobs hidden behind her fingers. “Sonia…”

“It was just all supposed to be so easy!” she cried. “We’d take back the kingdom and everyone would be happy again! But – but we – some people don’t even want us here, and the aristocrats are just being so selfish! And the thieves are just running riot and Manic’s so depressed and Mother doesn’t tell us anything and – it’s all just a mess!”

He grimaced. He hated it when girls cried. He really hated it when pretty girls cried. “Sonia, come on, it – stop – stop crying. Please. It’ll… it’ll all be okay?” That was what you said in these situations, right?

“And this is our last big chance to prove we’re worth having! That we care, and that people should believe in us! But how are they supposed to believe in us when we don’t even know where Sonic is? It’s just like he doesn’t want to be found! And the overlanders are just being so horrible and pushy!” She flung out her hands, her eyelids fluttering to hold back her tears. “I need support, Knuckles. The support of all our allies. And I thought, if anyone could help me, Knuckles… it would be you. If there was one person I could always depend on… it was you.”

He shifted his weight back, shoulders straightening slightly. He swallowed, glancing off to the side, where he could see the Master Emerald from the corner of his eye. It gleamed, pulsing against his senses, telling him it was safe.

“I… could probably come down… for a while…”

Sonia’s smile was so broad it almost looked like she’d never really been crying.

Somewhere between the ‘I should have known’s and the ‘well, you were always my prince, I just never knew you were a prince!’s, Sonic disappeared, leaving Tails to agree that Amy could stay at the Workshop for the week, until they went to Mobius. He refused to be ashamed at giving in so easily, because her hammer was very big, scary, and pain inducing.

While Amy busied herself in the kitchen, making a celebratory dinner, Tails eventually found Sonic in the basement, sitting at the piano that had been there since before they moved in. He was playing a soft tune one-handed, his eyes lost somewhere in the distance, and didn’t glance around as Tails sat down beside him.

“Sorry about telling Amy about… well… everything,” he said, but Sonic just hummed in the back of his throat.

“Should’ve told both of you before. Dunno why I didn’t.”
“Because we might treat you different?” he suggested, but Sonic just snorted.

“Tails, little buddy, when I first met you, you honestly told me I was a hero and could do no wrong, and Amy still thinks I’m the best thing since sliced bread,” he pointed out. “Exactly how could me being a prince make any difference?”

“Because princes don’t risk their necks saving mutant foxes and silly girls that get themselves in trouble on purpose.”

Sonic didn’t answer straight away, his brow furrowing a little. “No… I probably wouldn’t have,” he murmured, and Tails glanced at him quickly, surprised by the dark tone. But Sonic didn’t say anything more, just lifted his other hand to the keys and pushed down in what Tails guessed was a chord or something, then started playing a full-blown song, though it was still quiet.

“Why’d you leave Mobius?”

“Same reason I left Camelot,” he said absently, more focussed on the keys. “I’m a hero, y’know? A crown’d just slow me down.”

“Yeah, but… you didn’t just leave the crown. You had family. A brother and sister,” he said, and shifted uncomfortably, twisting his fingers. “I…”

“I love my siblings,” he said shortly, and once again, Tails glanced around at the tone. “But there was more going on there than just them. And our family doesn’t do things by halves. I couldn’t leave the crown without leaving them.”

He hesitated, fingers rising to touch the keys. Sonic was always hard to predict, but when he got in these moods, it was even worse. He wasn’t sure how far he could push his questions. “Wh-why did you want to leave?”

“I’m sure you’ll notice when we go back,” he said, and then looked around, suddenly bright and cheerful. “Wanna learn how to play piano?”

“Sure!” he said, reservations forgotten for the moment. He loved it when Sonic tried to teach him. Sure, he was kinda hopeless at music, but Sonic was a master, and pretty patient when it came to this stuff. He shifted closer as Sonic played eight notes, rising from low to high.

“You remember how I told you about scales and octaves?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the cool thing about pianos is that you can actually see them. See, all the keys are just these eight notes, on a sliding scales of octaves. And the black ones are flats and sharps. Halfway to the next note.”

“So it’s like a math puzzle.”

“Sure, why not?” He showed Tails how to position his fingers, smirking when Tails realised his stubbier fingers had no hope of reaching as far as Sonic’s, and eventually got him playing a series of notes that sounded like a really simple version of what he’d been playing before. Once he was confident, Sonic went back to the lower keys and threaded his own notes through, bolstering it into a stronger, more recognisable tune, though Tails still had no idea what it was.

“You don’t play music much,” Tails noted, glancing at Sonic’s fingers before quickly focussing back on his own.
“Oh, you’ll see me do it plenty over the next couple of weeks,” he said, his smile dry. “It’s kind of a thing, in my family. Though the piano’s more Sonia’s thing than mine. I’m guitar. And vocals.”

“You mean I’ll get to hear you sing?” Tails asked, grinning, and Sonic glared at him playfully.

“Lay off, little buddy. Just because I don’t kick your butt that often doesn’t mean I can’t.”

Tails just grinned. He couldn’t picture Sonic singing well, for some reason. His voice always sounded kinda strangled these days, and besides, even though Tails had never actually heard him do any more than hum, Sonic always got really defensive when people talked about singing ability. He had to be hiding something.

They continued in silence for almost a minute, before Sonic let his fingers fall, and Tails pulled his back, both of them looking at the keys thoughtfully. Tails was still smiling, now curious about the world Sonic had left behind, but Sonic’s eyes were back in the middle distance.

“Hey, Tails.”

“Mm?” he prompted. Maybe he’d also find out how Sonic got his powers. And why he hated using guns. And –

“I’ve had fun, the last few years.”

Tails’ train of thought slammed to a halt, leaving his mind blank for a moment. Then he looked up at Sonic, who didn’t meet his gaze, but stood up and began clambering out from behind the piano stool.

“What?”

His only response was to ruffle Tails’ hair, and then disappeared up the stairs, a slamming door and Amy’s shout of annoyance telling him Sonic had left the building.

Tails looked back at the piano, and wondered exactly what they were getting into.

The Guardian Unit of Nations had been created to protect the United Nations’ international interests. According to all official documentation, that meant they dealt with international terrorism, drug trades and the occasional supervillain.

As an agent of GUN, Shadow had yet to deal with terrorism or drugs. He did deal with Eggman, who was generally considered a supervillain, but mostly his job seemed to be rescuing stranded soldiers and fetching priceless artefacts from well-protected places. So he wasn’t all that convinced of GUN’s mission statement.

With that in mind, he was slightly confused by their newest assignment. “Why does the president care about the non-human territories?”

“Are you asking me or our superiors?” asked Rouge. They were speaking over the intercoms of their separate jets, with Rouge barely visible in the screen due to the fact she was lounging in her chair with a magazine. “Because they are two very different answers.”

Shadow just glared at her image silently, so she sighed, but didn’t move any further into frame.

“Shadow, I know you’re not this naïve. You know, what, around ten Mobians? Of those ten, you
The Eggman, a human, held the entire Mobian race hostage, ruining countless lives. Following human logic, someone needs to pay for that. During his dictatorship, at least half the population joined the resistance—a militia specifically trained to combat Robotnik’s forces, which is something even GUN has difficulty with. So what we have is a super-powered militia with an inbred mistrust of humans, trained to combat Eggman and organised under a queen that can see the future. Think about that for a few moments.”

Shadow did. Then he looked back down at his orders. “How are we supposed to gain their trust?”

“That’s what we get paid to figure out.”

He grunted, annoyed, but lowered his eyes back to the dossier. It was difficult for humans to get to Mobius, given the political situation, and all Mobian online networks were highly internalised, encrypted, and impossibly firewalled, making GUN’s information extremely limited. Even the photographs they’d managed to collect of the royal household were taken from spy satellites, cleaned up but still slightly grainy.

Each one was labelled, so he quickly found images of the queen and two of the royal children. As the attached information had said, they were hedgehogs—purple, red and green—and all fairly attractive, though the queen was only beautiful in an aloof, distant way. Everything, from her impossibly long hair to the way she held herself, marked her as something to be admired and adored from afar.

Her children were almost the opposite in that way: even Shadow, who didn’t normally notice that sort of thing in Mobians, knew the girl was clearly the type of pretty thing boys flirted with and fought over. She had curves and eyes that sparkled even in the grainy photographs, and impossible as it was, it looked as if she were constantly posing for the photographs like a model. The boy was tall and muscled for a hedgehog, always smiling, and if the images were any judge, he spent most of his life working with his hands.

Shadow flipped through the photographs again, then frowned and put them down to rifle through the dossier. Then he checked the orders. Then spread all his papers across his desk and stared at them, and finally stepped back with a scowl. “I’m missing an image.”

“Let me guess,” Rouge said lazily. “You don’t have a photo of the Lost Prince.”

He looked at the screen, but she hadn’t put down her magazine.

“He’s called that for a reason, you know. He hasn’t been in Mobotropolis almost since the final battle. GUN doesn’t know much about him,” she explained. “The Mobians think he might have been killed by Robotnik, but given the queen’s lack of concern, GUN doesn’t hold much stock in that. They believe he’s probably just off having adventures or living in a forest cabin somewhere.”

“That could be useful.”

Rouge finally looked up, a tiny smile on her lips. “Oh?”

“We need some way to endear the Mobian people to us,” he pointed out, raising an eyeridge. “We have the ability to find missing people, and they happen to missing one of the beloved monarchs.”

“So you’re going to find the Lost Prince and take him back to Mobius by force?”
“If necessary.”

Rouge continued watching him, amused, then shrugged and went back to her magazine. “Sure. It’s not a bad plan. How were you planning on finding him?”

At that, Shadow looked back down at the dossier. There was very little information on the Lost Prince – just that he had been the fighter, and most probably the oldest triplet, making him crown prince, which explained why Aleena was holding off on introducing her children to society without him. He furrowed his brow as he flipped through the pages, unable to find any real lead. Mobius was a big place, taking up a full third of the planet, and aside from the Mobian fear of humans, there was no guarantee he hadn’t entered human territory.

“If I might make a suggestion, it’s relatively common knowledge that Sonic fought in the rebellion,” Rouge said lightly, and Shadow looked up, intrigued.

“The Faker?”

“Mmhm. And now he’s a travelling hero, with friends all over the world,” she commented.

“You think he would know this prince.”

She raised her head again, looking at something off screen, then turned her head to smile at him. “Well, it is part of our mission to find out his stance on this whole Mobian dilemma, regardless, so it wouldn’t hurt to speak to him, don’t you think?”

“I thought you were handling that side of things.”

“I am. But that doesn’t mean I have to talk to Big Blue,” she pointed out. “I actually find it’s easier to find out things about that hedgehog without talking to him.”

He narrowed his eyes at the dossier again. He didn’t like dealing with Sonic. Sonic confused him, irritated him, and had the annoying habit of making him enjoy himself. But he was prone to heroic acts, and you didn’t get much more heroic than reuniting a royal family. It was possible he would actually help Shadow track the prince down; maybe even convince him to come willingly.

“Hmph.”

With Sonic’s past coming back to haunt him, the intrigue of a kingdom with essentially no information worth finding online, and Amy Rose constantly distracting him with tales of fairy-tale romance, Tails had completely forgotten about the Anarchy Beryl they had liberated from Eggman.

When he remembered (at three in the morning, three days before they’d planned to head out for Mobius), he leapt out of bed with a shout and launched himself downstairs to study. Sonic found him five hours later, hunched over blue prints and muttering equations.

Sonic yawned, still not entirely awake. “You know Station Square barely noticed that hunk of rock went missing. No one’s freaking out about not having it around.”

“I am,” he said, waving at a spot a foot to Sonic’s right. “It’s stolen property and we’re in possession of it! That’s illegal!”
“So give it back,” he suggested blearily.

Tails looked up, staring at him like he was insane. “I don’t know how it works.”

“Which is what really matters here,” Sonic acknowledged, and started back into the kitchen, only to pause and step back, turning his head toward the windows. “Hey, d’you hear something?”

More to fend him off than anything, Tails lifted his head to listen, but his frustration soon turned to concentration, one ear turning properly toward the window. “Amy didn’t buy us a new microwave, did she?"

Although he had been in the middle of a stealthy slide up to the window, Sonic paused at that to give Tails a direct look. “What happened to our old one?”

“It –” Tails stopped, then grinned shamelessly. “It gave its life for a laser demagnetiser.”

“I just bought you that – oh, forget it,” he said, looking back out the window. “I see heat shimmer.”

“And if we don’t have a new microwave, that’s the sound of a stealth craft engine,” Tails agreed quietly. “Is it landing?”

“Yeah, I can’t see the shimmer anymore,” Sonic whispered, but then blinked, straightening slightly. “Oh, wait, I think it’s just –”

Before he could finish, the door blasted off its hinges, and Tails spun around, grabbing dummy rings as he prepared for a fight, but Sonic pulled him back with a calming hand on his shoulder. As the dust cleared, revealing their guest, Tails lowered his rings but didn’t relax in the slightest.

“Shadow,” Sonic greeted evenly. “How’s it going? Did I tick off GUN again, or is this a social breaking and entering?”

Shadow responded with a glare as he stepped up onto the broken door, and Tails looked at it sadly. “You know, you could have knocked. I liked that door.”

“You know, you could have knocked. I liked that door.”

“Yeah, that was kind of a jerky thing to do, Shads,” Sonic commented. “I know we don’t have the most stable relationship, but you gotta learn violence is not always the answer. Or an appropriate greeting.”

“I’m here on a priority two mission from GUN,” Shadow said coldly. “Niceties are not required.”

“Are niceties ever required from GUN?” asked Tails.

“It’d be news to me,” Sonic said, then crossed his arms and settled his weight back on his hips. “So, Shads – mission?”

“You have probably heard about Mobius,” he said, and Sonic smirked.

“One or twice.”

“I meant,” he ground out, glaring, “that you have probably heard of Aleena’s plans to officially re-establish Mobius as a united world power.”

“Yeah. We’ve heard about it,” he said. “We’re planning to head out in a few days to join the festival.”

Shadow raised an eyeridge. “As a supporter of the queen’s actions?”
Despite himself, Tails looked at Sonic sideways, and it was only because he knew him as well as he
did that he noticed the very slight aggressive shift in his stance. But Sonic almost immediately
noticed his attention and smiled, unfolding his arms and setting one hand on his hip instead.

“Aaw, c’mon, Shads, you know me better than that – I’d go just for the party.”

“Hmph. Regardless, GUN is attempting to form an alliance with the royal family, in the hope of
cutting off any ill-will against the human nations generated by Eggman’s former dictatorship,” he
explained, glancing around the workshop almost absently. “To enable this alliance, I am going to
reunite Queen Aleena with the Lost Prince.”

“What?” Tails cried, whipping around again. “How did you know Sonic was the Lost Prince?”

Sonic groaned, and Shadow froze in the midst of his inspection of the latest Tornado, blinking twice
before his eyes shifted to look at Sonic. As the hero lifted a hand to rub his forehead, Shadow’s head
turned as well, so he could stare properly, and Sonic lifted three fingers in a sarcastic wave.

“Yeah. Thanks again, Tails,” he said irritably, and Tails blinked.

“What? He just said –”

“I was operating under the assumption that as someone who fought in the Resistance, you would
know the royal family,” Shadow said, before he suddenly began to smile nastily. “I had no idea I
was in the presence of a crown prince.”

“Hey, triplets means that’s up for debate,” Sonic snapped, while Tails flinched.

“Crown?!”

“Debate!” he said firmly, then glared at Shadow. “And don’t play dumb – like Rouge didn’t tell you
the second it came up in conversation.”

“Rouge knew this?” he asked coolly, and tilted his head, clearly making a mental note to talk to her
about it later. He paused, then moved on, stepping forward. “Sonic the Hedgehog, chaos-touched
soul and the hero of our world, Crown Prince of Mobius. It’s very romantic.”

“Yeah, it’s a real fairy-tale. Camelot had nothing on reality,” he snarked. “I have so not been awake
long enough to deal with this.”

“Then let’s cut the comedy. You will come with me to Mobius. You will make nice with your
mother and tell her than the United Nations are excellent peacekeepers and have helped you in the
war against Eggman.”

“Or,” Sonic suggested, dropping his hand to glare at him, “I could point out all the times they’ve
tried to arrest or perform experiments on me. Don’t count your flickies before they’re rescued,
Shadow.”

Shadow tilted his head back again, and after a few more moments, Sonic sighed and refolded his
arms. “Look, takin’ me back there isn’t gonna make anyone play nice. Mom knows where I am and
what I’m doing.”

“She does?” asked Tails, and he nodded.

“Yeah. Which is why Sonia’s letter bugs me;” he said, then added, “One of the reasons, anyway.”
“I don’t care about your family problems, or whether you write home for the winter,” Shadow interjected. “You’re coming with me to Mobius.”

“Dude, chill out. We’re going, okay? I’ll even say it was your idea,” he snapped back. “But Tails is working on something. Once he’s done with his experiment, we’ll come along and thank you for the ride. Your jets are faster than ours.”

“I am not waiting around for you. We leave in an hour.”

Sonic’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I don’t come gift-wrapped.”

“I will get rope to arrange it, if necessary,” he shot back.

“I don’t need to hear about your kinks,” he quipped, then turned slightly, dismissing him. “You want me, you’re waiting.”

“Tch. I should have known you wouldn’t cooperate,” Shadow muttered, drawing one arm behind his back in an almost gentlemanly show of concession. Immediately suspicious, Sonic looked at him again, but wasn’t at all prepared for Shadow to suddenly whip out his favourite laser-pistol, already primed and pointed directly between Tails’ eyes. The fox yelped, and Shadow smirked. “But I imagine you’ll do as told.”

“Shadow!” Sonic yelled, but didn’t move when he noticed Shadow’s finger twitching on the trigger. “You put that thing down now!”

“It’s true, you are faster than I am. Faster even than my trigger finger. However, you are two feet away, the gun barrel is an inch from Tails’ fur, and my finger is already holding the trigger,” he pointed out smugly. “If you really need to, we can test exactly how fast you move. But I suggest you remember that getting you to Mobius is my mission, and I do not fail missions.”

Sonic glanced over at Tails, who only swallowed, eyes fixed on the glowing generator within the barrel.

“I don’t need Tails alive to knock you out and drag you there,” Shadow added. “Make up your mind, Faker, before I do.”

“I’m sorry, Sonic.”

“Dude, just like the last three times you apologised, it’s still not your fault.”

“I should’ve moved. I could’ve fought back. I –”

“I didn’t have to hold up my end of the bargain after he lowered the laser.”

Tails looked up at Sonic from under his hair, wringing his hands, but Sonic didn’t meet his gaze, just continued frowning at the front of the craft.

He was right, of course. Sonic didn’t have to follow through on anything, and it wouldn’t be unlike him to respond violently to violent threats. But it wouldn’t have been like Sonic to go back on a promise… even one made at gun point. And they were going to Mobius anyway.
Still. The weird mood Sonic had been in since they got the letters seemed to have turned south now that they were on their way there, and Tails was very good at blaming himself. With Sonic tapping his foot—an annoyed habit Tails had actually thought he’d grown out of—even Amy was watching her words, keeping a wary eye on his mood to judge what she could say.

Shadow, piloting the craft, apparently didn’t seem to care. He had been silent ever since take-off, either deep in thought or very into the groove of flying.

After another few minutes of silence, Amy jumped out of her chair and hurried over to the co-pilot’s seat, where she could look out the window. Tails hesitated, shooting another glance at Sonic before getting up to join her, though his eyes flicked to Shadow’s flight monitor for a time check, and was surprised to see it quickly change views away from the passenger monitor.

He wasn’t all that familiar with GUN aircraft, so for all he knew the monitor always switched between monitoring various control levels and internal cameras for security. But it did give the creepy impression that Shadow had been watching them.

Then again, Shadow was generally creepy, so Tails put it aside and joined Amy in watching the water below.

They’d been flying over Central Ocean for almost two hours now, meaning they would be getting close to what was generally considered Mobian territory soon. They were still about a day and a half from Mobotropolis. But already, the rings floating on the surface of the water were getting less frequent, the energy they were made from condensing into larger phenomena, like the warp ring Shadow was currently manoeuvring around. Beyond it was a tiny island, and in the far distance, a boat.

Amy tilted her head curiously, and her eyes widened as they came closer, where she could make out the shape. It looked like it was made of patchwork and wood, sections piled on top of each other in the weirdest game of jenga ever imagined. “Oh my god! What is that?”

Shadow glanced at it, then grunted and went back to flying. Tails grinned at the chance to explain something. “It’s a Mobian fishing boat. Every time one crashes, other fishermen take part of the boat and add it to their own, on the ‘Lightning doesn’t strike twice’ myth.”

“How do they stay afloat? It’s way too top-heavy, right?”

“The Naka Theory of Aquaphysics,” he said brightly. “If the water has a large enough surface area to support the object’s weight, and the object remains in motion, it won’t sink. If it stops, it drops. But, of course, this all depends on —”

He continued rambling, completely unaware that everyone had stopped listening. Amy went back to watching the boat gliding along, amazed by the way it stuck together, and so neither of them noticed straight away when Sonic stepped up behind her, almost close enough for his chest to touch her back.

“Weirdest boats ever. They have doors that don’t go anywhere and sometimes, the floor just drops straight out from under you,” he said, making her jump. He smiled at her glance. “Besides, no way something like that should be able to stay upright, let alone swim.”

“Boats don’t swim,” she pointed out carefully, and blushed a little when his lips only twisted into a wry grin. She hesitated, then turned back to the water, twirling her hands together. She was slowly starting to realise Sonic only really pushed her away when she was being really forward. She’d managed to get him to agree to a date just by asking… even if he had been kind of sleep deprived at
the time and hadn’t actually shown up for it. Sometimes, she thought that if she just reached for his hand, he might –

Before she could finish the thought, Sonic sidled up beside her, brushing against her side as he peered down at the ocean. “You know, it’s actually kind of a good thing Shads forced us to come with him. If he hadn’t, we would’ve had to use one of Tails’ two-seaters.”

“You don’t like wing-walking anymore?” she asked curiously, and then blushed properly when he looked at her. This close, they were almost…

“We would’ve been flying for days. You don’t like it that much,” he pointed out.

“No, but I would’ve been with you,” she said, and looked away before he could roll his eyes. “And besides, it would have been worth it! We’re going to meet your family! That’s worth a week of travel!”

“Why?” he asked blankly. “They’re just people.”

“They’re your people,” she corrected, and looked at him again, unconsciously lowering her voice. “Even if you don’t see them anymore, they helped make you who you are. That makes them important to me.”

He just stared at her for a second, until his eyes dropped to where Shadow was watching from the corner of his eye. With a loud cough, Sonic dropped back to lounge in the co-pilot’s seat, one leg thrown up over the arm as he said, “So, Agent Diplomat. Rouge I get. Why’re you involved in the Mobian government? Aren’t you all Ultimate Lifeform, neither human nor mobian nor monster or machine?”

“Little is known about Mobian politics, except that they were ruled for thirteen years by a human dictator and the human territories did nothing to prevent it or help them,” he pointed out. “Even after that, if a Mobian lives in the human territories, they are commonly treated as… less than human.”

“Tell me about it,” groaned Amy. “Do you know how hard it is for me to get an apartment anywhere in the United Nations? Most landlords won’t give me the time of day. One even said it was because I’d drop fur everywhere. Do I look like the type of person that would drop fur?”

Shadow ignored her. “Things are getting better thanks to your influence, but if the situation were reversed, the humans would already be planning war. Rouge and I have been ordered to calm the situation to the best of our ability.”

“And what if you hadn’t found the prince?” asked Sonic, his grin smug as ever. “Or if Sonia gets all high-and-mighty and wants more than a word of good faith and her darling brother back? Or I tick her off and make things worse, which is totally possible, just quietly.”

“Then our job would have been to remove ourselves from the situation and ensure you and your friends stayed out of the coming fight,” he said shortly. “Rouge is currently handling that side of the mission – finding out why you—Sonic the Hedgehog, not the Lost Prince—are not on Mobian soil and who you would fight for in a war. Mobians scare humankind to a certain extent. You are a
Sonic frowned, but then nodded thoughtfully. “So basically, putting aside my backstory for a second, our job is to play damage control?”

“Essentially.”

“Without Knuckles chomping at the bit? Please, this’ll be a piece of cake!”

Fists hit the table with an almighty crack, and it immediately split down the middle, Knuckles leaning over the damage with teeth bared. “Say that again, mane-for-brains, and I’ll hand you your head back on a damn platter!”

“You’re putting everyone on the planet at risk!” Cyrus Lion: Royal Technician, advisor, and friend to the royal family, objected loudly. “It’s a well-known fact that chaos power is unstable and damages the entire planet. You using it as a – a levitation device is just – it’s unconscionable!”

“It’s my duty, it’s my destiny, and it’s my home. Chaos is a part of our world, it doesn’t harm anything, it just changes it. It’s natural.”

“It’s dangerous.”

He opened his mouth to respond, fist rising in anger, but a brush of strong magic against his senses cut him off, and he straightened up with a scowl. “Your majesty,” he said evenly, without looking away from the lion.

“Guardian,” Queen Aleena greeted, before nodding to Cyrus. “If you wouldn’t mind excusing us a moment…?”

He scowled, but pushed off the remains of the table and stalked out, slamming the door shut behind him. Knuckles continued glaring after him for a moment, then looked awkwardly down at the ruined table. “Sorry. I’ll uh… I’ll make you a new one.”

She just chuckled and moved around to stand opposite, her hands folded over her skirts. Knuckles found himself reluctantly grinning back, rubbing under his dreadlocks and feeling like a four year old caught playing with the poison mushrooms immediately after being told not to.

“You have grown very strong, these past years,” she noted playfully. “I assume such accidents are common on your island?”

“Not that many tables to smash,” he confessed. “But yeah, I’ve made a few ruins a little more ruined…”

“My daughter once possessed incredible strength, but she hid it well. She never used it in anger, and rarely in practical matters,” she said, sweeping a hand along the edge of the table. “She believed—in fact, still believes—that being a lady was far more important than showing her power.”

“Sonic was strong?” Knuckles frowned, trying to remember whether he’d ever seen her actually do anything without her keyboard. She definitely didn’t seem to be now. But then, Sonic never seemed strong either, and when he put his mind to it, he could lift some pretty sizeable weight. Maybe it was
a family thing.

“Well, it’s a moot point now. Something Sonia does not discuss – she does not discuss most of that which happened through her days with the Resistance. Another aspect of appearing, at all times, a lady. A trait her current beau finds quite charming, I believe,” she added dryly.

“Yeah, Manic was telling me about Stripes,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “When do I get to meet this guy, anyway? I’ve been here a full day now and I’ve barely seen anyone. 'Cept Mane-for-brains.”

Despite herself, Aleena grinned quickly, before tamping it down to an indulgent smile. “Most of the Household is preparing, in their own ways, for the festival. Sonia and her current consort are among the aristocrats, convincing them to donate resources or at the very least join the festivities next week.” She sighed, flicking it off with a wayward hand. “That, or begging them not to spend the entire time complaining about the expense to the media, at least. One never knows how the aristocrats will feel come a new day.”

“Thought Sonia thought of herself as an aristocrat,” he said, and she raised an eyeridge, but said nothing. He hesitated, kind of aware she was trying to tell him something, but Knuckles had never been one for subtlety. He glanced down at the table, lifting one hand from its fold to gesture at it. “So Sonia’s not strong anymore. What’s the deal with that?”

“Deal?” she repeated, apparently innocent.

“How did she lose her powers?” he clarified. “It’s not like you all have. You’re still magic. Sonic’s… Sonic, and –”

“If you’ll forgive my ignorance, Guardian, I’m afraid I don’t understand,” she said, still gazing at him with that ‘honest’ confusion. “What do you mean ‘Sonic’s Sonic’?”

“He’s… well, he’s…” He floundered for a moment. All of their friends—Sonic’s, not Knuckles’, of course, because he didn’t have friends—were unusually well-powered even for Mobians, but Sonic and his links to chaos were in a class of their own. Knuckles grimaced, irritated by the lack of description, and finally said, lamely, “He hasn’t lost any power since leaving here.”

“Oh,” she said, as if he had just pointed out something mildly interesting. “Sonia and Manic lost their powers shortly after Sonic left us. Manic’s were, of course, entirely dependent on his medallion, which lost its power when not in concert with its siblings, if you’ll forgive the many-layered pun. It could only be expected.”

“What about Sonia?”

She just gave him a mild smile. “Sonia rarely showed her true power even during the Resistance. And now she has entirely other priorities. That too should have been expected.”

He frowned again, shifting his weight. There was that feeling again, like she was saying something he was supposed to hear between the actual words. But there was another feeling too. A much more recognisable one, though he’d never been all that comfortable admitting to it; just acting on it.

“Sonic’s not going to bring back their magic. Even if he does, you can’t keep him here. He won’t stay.”

For a long moment, they just stared at each other, Aleena’s smile still filled with that same perfect innocence. He started to wonder if he’d missed the point of what they were not-saying.
“You know my son very well, don’t you, Knuckles?”

“Better than most,” he admitted, and it was as far as he’d go. He refused to consciously think of Sonic as his best friend.

“I’ve never spent much time with him,” she said, and finally that smile dropped into something sadder, more thoughtful, as she glanced down at the table. “I spent most of his life avoiding him for the sake of prophecy, and now he avoids me for the sake of the world. There’s a poetry in that, but I’m afraid I am too close to appreciate it.”

Knuckles didn’t say anything. The conversation had definitely slipped away from him again, but that familiar urge was still strong enough that he managed to clamp down on the desire to comfort the pretty lady.

She seemed to notice, because when she looked up again, it was to murmur, “I thought you were Guardian of the Master Emerald. But you protect people too, don’t you, Knuckles?”

He stiffened, automatically taking a step back from the table. “Sonic doesn’t need protecting.”

“No,” she said, her lips returning to that innocent, knowing, irritating smirk. “I suppose he doesn’t.”

Knuckles shifted his weight onto his front foot, then back, before abruptly spinning on his heel and marching out of the room.

He had no idea why the royals wanted him here, but he was pretty damn sure he’d just been played. Badly.

Chapter End Notes

Music reference:
Keep it Down - Smash Mouth - 2001
Chapter Notes

Hey... Brother, do you still believe in one another? Hey, Sister, do you still believe in love, I wonder?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Although it had been relatively early morning when they left the workshop, they were still only just reaching ‘official’ Mobian land when Shadow landed for the night.

“Since when do you need beauty sleep?” teased Sonic. “Thought we’d be flying straight there.”

Shadow glared at him as he finished his landing routine. “Regardless of my needs, this is a stealth jet that was not designed for extended flight. I need to refuel and recharge the engines, and for that, I need power rings.”

“Good luck finding them. They’re pretty sparse on these islands,” he said with a smirk. Shadow extended his hand, and Sonic raised an eyeridge in silent question. When it didn’t garner a response, he said, “I’m flattered, but I don’t really feel like waltzing.”

He ignored that. “Give me your radar.”

“Hm?”

“That radar you use to find emeralds. It can also be calibrated to find power rings. Give it to me.”

“I don’t have it, Shads.”

“I’ve got it,” Tails interjected firmly. He handed it over with a warning look at his best friend, then pointed to the button on top. “Two presses will turn it on. Turn it a quarter to the left to set it to find power rings. Press down and turn it all the way to the right to lock onto Sonic’s power signature when you need to find us again.”

Shadow gave him a dark look that was slightly less heated than usual and strode out of the jet. They gave him almost a minute to be out of hearing before Amy heaved a loud breath of relief.

“Does he have to be so creepy all the time?” she demanded. “We’re doing what he wants!”

“Maybe that’s what’s wrong.” Tails suggested with a grin. “He was expecting more of a fight!”

“And if the fact that that’s the most plausible explanation doesn’t tell you something about Shadow, nothing will,” Sonic said, and then glanced at the dark navigation unit, contemplating his options.

From what he’d seen of it before Shadow had shut it down, they had about another six hours of flying time before they’d reach Mobotropolis. Even if they did stop for the night, there was something he needed to try before they got there.

He heaved an internal sigh and looked back at Tails and Amy. “Why don’t you two scrounge some food from the storage bay and set up camp? There’s something I gotta do. I’ll be back in…” He did a
quick calculation in his head, factoring in his own reluctance. “…about six minutes.”

“You’re not going to bug Shadow, are you?” Tails asked warily, and Sonic grinned.

“If I said no, would you trust me?”

“No.”

“Then why ask?”

While Amy giggled and Tails rolled his eyes, Sonic winked and ran out, only pausing long enough to get his bearings before sprinting into the woods. He ran for maybe a minute, getting enough distance that there was absolutely no chance they’d hear him, even if they tried to follow, and slid to a stop in a small, rocky clearing.

He hesitated, almost convincing himself it wasn’t worth doing. He hadn’t tried it in over two years, and even if he had, he didn’t have his medallion, and…

…and he was making excuses and he knew it. If it didn’t work, then all he’d waste was time. If it did work, then he’d be starting off on a good foot with the siblings, and heck knew he’d need that after ditching them the way he had.

“Ugh. I hate feeling co-dependent,” he muttered, bouncing on his toes, but let himself think back anyway, back to the days when he’d relished it. Back to the days when he woke up every morning and asked what Sonia had planned for them. Back to the days when he wouldn’t go to bed without asking Manic how his day had gone. Back to the days when he wouldn’t answer ‘out’ if people asked where he was going, and always asked the same of his siblings. He’d always had to know where they were. What they were doing. How long it would take. He’d had to know. Because they were family, and family took care of each other. He’d wanted to take care of his family.

His bouncing had taken on a steady rhythm, and he could hear a tune, just out of range. With one last breath, he opened his mouth and took the first step out of the life he’d built himself.

“Hey Brother… there’s an endless road to rediscover…”

Lying on his back under a float car, Manic Hedgehog frowned as he realised he’d begun daydreaming, and turning his wrench a lot slower than he needed to. When he couldn’t bring himself to speed up again, he looked at his hand, watching the steady, rhythmic way it was moving, almost like a drum beat.

As he watched it, he could almost hear the guitar it was matching, a single plucked note, setting a starting bass line. He blinked, and then he heard it… a rough but steady voice from nowhere and everywhere at once.

“Hey Brother… there’s an endless road to rediscover…”

“That voice,” Manic breathed, eyes widening. It was different, but so… so familiar.

“Hey, Sister. Know the water’s sweet but blood is thicker.”
“Ohh, if the sky comes falling down for you, there’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do.”

“Sonia, what—”

She ignored the call, scrambling out onto the balcony where she could stare up at the stars. She almost thought that if she looked hard enough, she would be able to see the vocalist she couldn’t possibly be hearing.

“Hey, Brother, do you still believe in one another?”

She grinned broadly, gripping the railing tight. It was only now, staring at them through the gap in the clouds, that she realised she hadn’t actually been able to see the stars from the city before.

“Hey Sister, do you still believe in love, I wonder?”

_________________

“Ohh, if the sky comes falling down for you, there’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do.”

When there were no returning voices, Sonic furrowed his brow, but knew better than to stop now. He clenched his fist and raised his voice, sure he could feel a connection, even if there was no response.

_________________

Deep in the palace walls, Aleena paused, her eyes seeing far beyond her computer to the child she could hear, separated from them not only by distance but everything she knew he could be. She leaned back in her chair and let the music flow past her.

“What if I’m far from home? Oh, Brother, I will hear you call. What if I lose it all? Oh, Sister, I will help you out, ohh.”

_________________

Manic pulled himself out from under the float car and ran for the hangar doors, ignoring the amazed technicians around him. The music was loud enough for everyone to hear now, the magic that hadn’t touched their city for years echoing through the hangar like a chorus.

He swung out onto the runway and stared up at the stars, impossibly visible even through the light and smog of the city.

“Sonic,” he said, grinning like a madman. “It’s really him. Sonic’s coming home!”
Sonic let his eyes drift open again, the music and magic fading as he felt himself give up. “If the sky comes falling down for you, there’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do.” And with that, the last of the magic dispersed, and Sonic stared up at the stars, sensing vaguely that his siblings were doing the same. He rubbed his collarbone, the weight of the medallion he hadn’t even seen in years pressing against his chest, then took a deep breath and turned away.

Shadow stared back at him.

“G’yahhh!”

Shadow tensed, but otherwise didn’t react as Sonic dashed halfway across the clearing and up a tree. Sonic, on the other hand, had to take a second to calm down before even twisting around to point at him furiously. “Don’t do that! You creeper! Why would you sneak up on someone like that, huh?”

Rather than dignify that with a response, Shadow merely glanced at the radar for a moment before asking, “What was that?”

“You surprised me,” he snapped, dropping back out of the tree. “It’s a perfectly natural reaction.”

“Not your cowardice,” he said. “That power you used just now. It was a kind of chaos I’ve never felt before.”

Sonic made a point of dusting off his arms and straightening his gloves, contemplating the consequences of playing dumb. In the end, though, he decided it wasn’t worth the hassle and shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s chaos. More like magic, far as I can tell.”


“I resent the implication that I know how it works.” To be fair, he didn’t know how most of his powers worked, and if he’d had any interest in figuring them out, the music would probably be the last one he’d invest time in. It had been fine when he used it on a daily basis, but in hindsight, using music for everything from influencing people to beating up bad guys really seemed kind of ridiculous, even by his standards.

“I could hear music,” Shadow said emotionlessly. “From nowhere.”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged, trying very hard to sound as if the whole thing should be obvious. “And?”

Shadow continued staring at him stoically, giving no sign of whether he was buying any of it. In the end, he glanced at the radar again. “It registered in the same range of chaos as a collection of power rings. But it felt like no chaos I’ve experienced before. What did it do?”

“Jeez, Shadow, how many questions have we got left here?” he asked, rubbing the back of his neck. “I was mostly just letting the sibs know I was coming, you know?”

“With singing.”

He shifted his weight to the other hip. “What, you do it another way?”

“Magic,” Shadow paused to let it sink in, “singing.”
Oh, man. He was never going to live this down. Bluster was getting him nowhere. He needed to get out of there. “You know, I’m really not sure how you’re not getting this. Luckily, providing exposition is not one of my character traits,” he said, and then raised a hand in casual farewell. “I’m going back to the jet. Good luck with the rings!”

And with that, he ran for it, praying to anyone that would listen that Shadow would be too weirded out to mention the whole thing to Tails.

Ugh. Now that was not something he was looking forward to explaining.

Rouge was just finishing off cleaning her bomb cannon when her communicator tingled with the special high-pitched signal she’d programmed for her partners.

Knowing exactly where Shadow was likely to be right now, she smirked, but answered anyway. “How is your hunt for the Lost Prince going, Shadow?”

“You knew,” he said coldly. “You didn’t tell me.”

“Of course not. Sonic never told me officially; I just asked and he didn’t deny it. So officially, I didn’t know. And I keep secrets when there’s so little benefit in telling,” she said, beginning the process of putting the cannon back together. “Besides, you never asked.”

She could practically hear his glare. But she didn’t get a verbal response for over thirty seconds. “This complicates matters.”

“Only as much as Sonic complicates any matter,” she said. “At least you’re dealing with someone you know. And, point of fact, you probably even know why he became the ‘Lost’ Prince. I can hardly imagine Sonic staying in one place long enough to rule it. So there you have it: half your mission accomplished.”

He grunted non-committedly, and Rouge focussed on her cannon while she waited. Shadow never called her unless he actually wanted something, even if that something was just to put his own thoughts in order. He’d come out with it eventually.

“Do you know anything else about Sonic’s past?”

She smirked again. He was trying, bless his artificial heart, but he still didn’t know how to phrase his questions. “You know, I am on a mission to find out that sort of information, Shadow. I don’t know why he left Mobius… yet,” she added, glancing back at the cave behind her.

“What about his abilities? Are the royal family known for any special powers?”

Interesting question. But, again, not a useful one. “The queen is a natural seer, and magic’s always been thick in that family’s blood, but nothing on the level we know Sonic’s capable of. Why? Did he do something particularly unusual?”

Shadow paused again, and she knew she’d hit the right question that time. Everything Sonic did was unusual. You had to keep a certain level of perspective when using words like that. “Shadow, you know better than I do that magic and chaos are closely intertwined at the best of times, and that Sonic is chaos-touched. You may be the ultimate life form, capable of chaos powers most of us can only
dream of, but you were *created* to be that way. He wasn’t, and doesn’t have your—” She just barely stopped herself from saying ‘limitations’. “—defined skillset.”

“You’re saying that he may have some lesser powers,” he surmised. “Related to chaos, but corrupted by magic.”

Corrupted wasn’t a word she would use, but sure, why not? “Now, as for why he would or wouldn’t use them, that is a secret you and I need to learn to complete our missions. And, speaking of, I think the next phase of mine is about to begin. Mind if we continue this little conversation later?”

Another grunt was the only answer she got before the communicator abruptly switched off, and she smiled indulgently, sliding the firing pin into place and tucking her cannon away. That done, she stood up and sauntered back into the cave, where an armadillo and his flying fox friend were slowly coming back to the land of the living. The fox continued tugging fruitlessly at his binds, but the armadillo noticed her entrance and frowned at her blearily.

“Rouge? Rouge the Bat?”

“Oh, I’m so glad you remember me,” she said cheerfully. “We did only meet the once, so I wasn’t sure. Now, just to make sure I’m as well-prepared as you are, you would be Mighty the Armadillo and Ray the Flying Fox? Sonic’s old friends?”

The two boys exchanged glances, then nodded. She beamed.

“Excellent! So now, which of you is going to tell me what I want to know?”

“No, you don’t look fat in that cat suit,” Mighty said dryly.

She let out another indulgent smile, but didn’t bother rising to the bait. “I have to say, I’m a little surprised you fell for my little trap. I thought children growing up in the wild knew better than to drink from random bottles they found on the beach.”

“We live on c-chaos-touched islands,” Ray pointed out slowly. “Random items are all over the p-"..."

Which, she had to admit, was true, and why she’d even bothered with the trap in the first place. “Fair enough. Shall we continue on?”

“Yes, you can pull off that breastplate,” Mighty said with a smirk. “Normally I’d call it tacky, but on you, it’s all class.”

She levelled him with a long look. “You and Sonic share a dangerous sense of humour, don’t you?” she asked. “But I suppose that should be expected, if you grew up together.”

Again, they exchanged glances, open confusion in their looks. She hesitated, judging it for what it was, and then continued, “I’ll get to the point. The first time people started mentioning Sonic was about six or seven years ago. It all started on South Island,” she said. “From what you said when you visited a few months ago, he lived with you before that, here, on Wild Island. So, why did he go after Robotnik, and why didn’t you go with him?”

Mighty’s frown deepened. “You tied us up for this?”

“I’m waiting,” she reminded him pleasantly.

“A friend of ours was turned into a Pilot,” he explained. “That was proof enough for Sonic that
Robotnik was trying to take over South Island, and reason enough to stop him."

Ray nodded. "We didn’t go with him b-because I was s-scared."

"And we’re not really the hero type, besides."

Rouge considered that for a moment. It was unusual – Sonic’s heroics were catching, to the point that even villains and cowards had a bad habit of wanting to save the world if they hung around him long enough. "So even though you grew up with Sonic –"

"Where the heck did you hear that?" asked Mighty, raising an eyebrow. "He came from the Mainland. He just stayed with us for a little while so he could get his head on straight."

“What?"

“Look, miss, can we get these ropes off?” he asked, kicking his legs a little to show the bindings on his ankles. “They kinda chafe.”

“Everyone knows Sonic came from Christmas Island,” Rouge said, ignoring him. “The first time he went to Mobius was for the war three years ago."

“I don’t kn-know where you heard that,” Ray said slowly. “He grew up on the m-m-Mainland.”

“Yeah. Came out to us when we were, what? Eight, nine?” he asked Ray. “I mean, sure, from what I’ve heard, he visited Christmas Island a few times. Knowing him, he probably likes the pretty.”

“Someone p-probably asked where he c-came from once and he said where he’d just b-been,” Ray pointed out. “That short t-term m-m-memory of his.”

“Short attention span, you mean,” Mighty corrected, before shrugging at Rouge. “It makes sense.”

She stared at them blankly, both hands on her hips and upper body thrust forward. This was not what she’d been expecting to learn, and made her job slightly more complicated. After a few moments, she pulled back and asked, “So why did he come out here the first time?”

They shrugged again. “Dunno.”

“He n-never t-talked about it,” said Ray.

“We always figured it was something to do with Robotnik, though. And maybe his parents.”

Ooh, parents. Finally, a lead. “Why?”

Mighty sighed, and this time it was Ray to wave his bound ankles. “C-could you untie us, m-Miss Rouge? We’re happy t-to answer your q-q-questions, b-but…”

She considered for a moment, weighing the rumours she’d heard about Mighty’s strength versus the easy-going personality she’d seen all those months ago. In the end, she decided it was probably worth the risk and knelt down to untie Ray. “So what can you tell me about why he came out here?”

“Not much. He was pretty freaked out, though – ran across an ocean and didn’t notice,” Mighty said bluntly. “I figure even he’s gotta have a good reason to do something like that.”

“Why do you think it had something to do with his mother?”

“Don’t all heroes have that kind of back story?” he asked, grinning cheekily. “Some dead lover or
family to inspire them into action?”

“That’s n-not f-funny,” Ray admonished, but gasped gratefully as Rouge finished untying him and moved to help with Mighty’s bindings. “It was just little things he did and said. You n-notice st-stuff after a while.”

She didn’t answer straight away, considering that against what she knew of Sonic as they finished letting Mighty out. The moment he was free, she took several quick steps backward, knowing she probably had limited time left. “One more question, boys.”

“I don’t suppose it’s ‘how can I make it up to you?’”

“Oh, come on now,” she teased. “You know I mostly tied you up to teach you a lesson about accepting strange drinks from nature.”

Mighty didn’t look impressed, so she spread her wings, ready to make a quick getaway if she had to. But there was one last question she needed to know, before she could properly process what they’d said so far “When you visited us in the human territories, I noticed you kept looking at Sonic like he surprised you… why?”

They both blinked, then looked at each other, having what she recognised as the silent conversation of old friends. They were still having it as Ray asked, “Why do you want t-to kn-know? Why are you asking all these qu-questions?”

“Is this about GUN?” asked Mighty. “Is Sonic in trouble?”

Rouge smiled, folding her arms under her chest. “Not with GUN. And even if he was, are you saying he couldn’t handle it?”

They continued watching her for a moment, before he sighed and shrugged again. “Sonic’s a nice guy. Friendly, too.”

“Happy,” added Ray.

“The kid we knew? Both originally and then when he came back after visiting the Mainland?”

Ray spread his hands, as if presenting the fact for her. “He wasn’t.”

Whether it was luck or something else, Shadow was gone for most of the night, and grumpy when they woke up to get going again. Apparently there hadn’t been enough power rings on the island, meaning he’d had to resort to back-up fuel tanks, and he seemed to be taking it as a personal offence.

So, much to Sonic’s relief, there was no discussion about anything that had happened overnight, and after they got flying, Tails and Amy were too busy chatting about how Mobius was different to the rest of the world to discuss much of anything else.

But even that faded after a few hours, as they began flying over settlements. By the time they reached the outskirts of Mobotropolis, everyone in the jet was silent, just staring at the city below.

Eventually, Tails swallowed and said, “Wow. It’s… it’s um…”
“It’s unbelievable,” Amy finished for him. It wasn’t a compliment.

According to the stories, Mobotropolis had once been a beautiful city, filled with light and greenery. The people had all been healthy and well-off, and—according to the stories—it was basically a land of happy sunshine and roses. But even if those stories were true, it wasn’t a city Sonic had ever known.

With his machines and pollution, Robotnik had made the city dark and depressing for everyone, and that was the city Sonic had lived in. Robotropolis was a giant industrial area that people made their homes in only because they had nowhere else to go. Sonic wasn’t surprised to find that two and a half years of hard work hadn’t gone very far into making the city any different. Robotnik had put thirteen years and an untiring robotic workforce into making it what it was.

All that had really changed was that the worst buildings were now covered in huge, gaudy flags coloured red, blue, green and purple. The piles of rubbish seemed to have been cleaned up, but the off-channels of the various waterways were still a thick green and brown, lined with dead trees. Every now and then, they could see pockets of beauty, clearly cleaned up with a lot of hard work, but they were few and far between.

“This was Eggman’s base of operations for over a decade,” Shadow said, apparently uninterested.

“You mean…” Tails stepped around Sonic to lean against the windscreen, peering down as best he could. “If we didn’t stop Eggman all the time… this is what the world would be like.”

“Debatably,” Shadow said shortly. “From reports I’ve read of the Robotnik days, Eggman has grown smarter but more insane over time.”

“I’ll pay that,” Sonic agreed. “Things made a lot more sense back in the old days—no theme parks or killer robot chefs—but he sure didn’t know how to do the reality-warping stuff he does now.”

“So this, add a rollercoaster and a rip in the space-time continuum,” Amy summarised.

“We can’t let this happen,” Tails whispered. “We just can’t.”

“We won’t,” she shot back defiantly. “Station Square, the Mystic Ruins… nothing will ever turn out like this again.”

“Not while we’re around,” Sonic promised, and she beamed at him, before something in front of the craft caught her eye, and she pulled back.

“What – what the heck is that thing?”

Shadow was steering them towards a huge building that looked almost like a giant, blue-black metal egg, but with towers and antennae coming out all over. It towered over the rest of the city, somehow a silent threat against the quiet. After a moment, Sonic sighed and stood up, resting his hand on Tails’ shoulder as he leaned forward. “That was Eggman’s headquarters.”

“According to my navigation system,” Shadow said, reaching for the radio. “it’s now the royal palace.”
The palace was, to put it mildly, in uproar.

Things had been strange since the night before, when, according to night crew, magical music like they hadn’t heard in almost three years had echoed through the hangar. The Thief Prince had been swept up in it, but he hadn’t started it, and rumours were flying that it had been the Lost Prince calling home.

Everyone that had been working in the hangar at the time had been utterly inspired, becoming incredibly passionate about… well, everything. When the morning crew had come on in the early hours, they’d had to almost literally kick the night crew out to send them home.

Then there was the Thief Prince and Princess of the Rebellion… the Thief Prince had been in the middle of fixing up a hover float for the Festival, but he’d completely abandoned it after the music faded away, rushing off to meet with his sister. They’d had a very loud, energetic discussion that the palace staff hadn’t been able to make heads or tails of, and then rushed out of the palace.

It was unusual for either royal to leave the palace without telling anyone, even more so for them to do it in the middle of the night. Still, the palace staff trusted them, so it wasn’t until morning court began and neither royal child had returned that people started to worry.

And then, just to make matters worse, the queen called off court with barely any warning and walked into the hangar.

Again, it wasn’t exactly unheard of. The guards thought it might be a habit instilled from the war, as although Aleena usually split her time between her study and the council chambers, she still liked to visit the less regal areas from time to time, talking with those who actually did the dirty work and ensuring the palace was running smoothly. But this time, she didn’t even glance at the technicians she usually chatted with, and completely ignored the security detail that had been debating sending out a search party for the royal children. She went gliding past them with a vaguely amused smile and right up to the communications tower.

The guards looked to Heronette, the steward that had finally made the call to start worrying about the missing royalties. “She does know they’re gone, right?”

“Well, I… I think so, I mean… she… it…”

Up in the tower, the com-tech paused what he was doing and looked at Aleena with wide eyes. “Your majesty.”

“Oh, please,” she said, waving him down before he could get up to bow. “Don’t mind me. Carry on with what you were doing.”

Slightly panicked, the com-tech looked to his security officer, who just raised his eyebrows and gave him a pointed look that clearly said “the queen just told you to ‘carry on’, and yet you’re not carrying on. Why?”

He turned back to his switch board, and then nearly had a heart attack when it lit up with a alert. He stabbed at his keyboard, frantically picking out what was going on, then swallowed a whimper. The royal children were missing, there was an unidentified craft approaching, and the queen was standing behind him. Crud.

He connected his radio with a worried look at his security officer. “Pilot, this is Crown-01, you are approaching the Mobian royal palace and we have no flight arrivals scheduled. Please identify.”

The transmission buzzed at first, then came through crystal clear – better than any of their own radios
usually did. “This is Shadow the Hedgehog, Agent of the Guardian Unit of Nations, requesting permission to land.”

“Negative, Agent Shadow,” the com-tech said, checking the arrivals register. “The overlander representative is not due until Friday. Please check your clearance and try again before we blast you.”

“Ove-” There was a short pause as someone spoke in the background, and then a cough, before another voice came over the radio. “Dude, that’s lame. Diplomatic relations wait for no man, hedgehog or machine. Just adjust the calendar and let us in.”

The com-tech blinked, then looked at his officer again, who just stared back. In the back of their minds, they’d maybe expected the princess, or at least a hostile response, but this was just… weird.

And then, just to add to the confusion, Aleena chuckled.

“Let them in,” she advised when they looked at her. “Agent Shadow has precious cargo I am very interested in.”

The com-tech blinked, and he didn’t have to look to know the new look he was being given by security was something along the lines of “your queen gave you an order, technician!” So he went back to the radio without another moment of hesitation. “Roger that, Agent Shadow, you are clear to land. For some reason.”

“Sweet!”

“Roger. Preparing to land. Over and out.”

He made a face at the radio, then switched to the loudspeaker. “We have incoming overlander vessel, Agent Shadow the Hedgehog of the Guardian Unit of Nations. I repeat: all staff prepare for incoming vessel. Please clear the runway. Security staff, please take positions. Landing crew, prepare Bay Four to be occupied.”

As he switched to speak to the steward staff, Aleena turned and headed out of the tower, smiling broadly as she made her way to the landing zone. Aside from trying to keep out of her way, no one gave her much thought as she went, too busy with their individual preparation routines.

Less than thirty seconds after the doors opened, the jet swooped in, and there was an audible hiss from every flight technician and mechanic in the hangar. The jet was sleek and ostentatiously secretive, confirming thoughts they’d had of overlander design, but it was also incredibly well-crafted. Not only did it hover and make an almost silent vertical landing, its exhaust smelt more like steam than fuel, and the shutdown process only lasted a minute. The technology was enviable.

The guards and steward staff rushed forward, but everyone froze when Aleena stepped up to stand at the front.

“Your majesty, I –” the head guard said, but she just waved him off.

“I’m fine, Han. I have full faith in your ability to protect me from behind,” she said, and then focussed all her attention on the jet hatch. “And this is a greeting I must perform myself.”

He prepared to argue, but had no time as the hatch slid back into the jet, revealing a small figure that made many of the surrounding staff gasp in recognition.

The colouring was wrong, and he had clearly grown up, but the black hedgehog jumping down from
the jet wasn’t just familiar. It was the hero of the rebellion… their Lost Prince.

But even as he straightened up and met the queen’s gaze, neither royal made any move toward one another, or even seemed to react to their long lost relative. In the back, some staff whispered about true royal decorum, while others wondered if this was why the prince had left in the first place.

Eventually, the prince bent from the shoulders in a confused sort of bow. “Queen Aleena, I presume.”

“You presume correctly,” she said, and behind her, most of the staff exchanged perplexed glances.

“It is… a pleasure to meet you,” he said, sounding slightly surprised at the concept. “I am Agent Shadow of the Guardian Unit of Nations, representative of the President of the United Federation.”

“Oh no!” one of the guards blurted out. “He has amnesia!”

The other guards blanched, and all of the stewards winced. Decency, professional stoicism, and general pride made the exclamation embarrassing, but the technicians and other hangar staff all shifted nervously. Maybe this was why the prince and princess had gone missing – they’d known the Lost Prince was returning, but that something was wrong. Maybe they’d gone out to try and help him, only to run into trouble with the overlanders. Without a word, they began working themselves up into a panic, until they heard the distinct sound of snickering from inside the jet.

That made them all look up and around, only to realise Aleena looked amused, and the prince was… vaguely annoyed.

“Excuse me a moment, your majesty,” he said, and then spun around, violently snatching at something inside the jet and dragging it out into the hangar, at which point the snickering became all-out laughter. The hangar staff all gaped as the prince snarled into the face of what appeared to be a strangely coloured but otherwise perfect doppelganger.

“Shut up, Faker. This is your fault!”

“I know!” the doppelganger said, cackling. “But you just put so much effort into being scary! And they get it wrong every time!”

“If my mission didn’t rely on you…” he snarled, but then stiffened, glanced over his shoulder, and huffed. He turned around again, still gripping the doppelganger by the upper arm as he bowed again. “As a gesture of our hope to see your kingdom flourish, the Guardian Unit of Nations has located and returned the Lost Prince to his homeland. May your empire prosper,” he added almost thoughtlessly, and then shoved the doppelganger forward.

He stumbled once, but came to a stop less than a foot from the queen and looked up at her with a broad, easy grin. He lifted two fingers to his brow in a casual salute and winked. “Hiya, Mom. Long time, no see.”

Aleena’s smile only broadened, and the hangar staff exchanged mystified glances, staring between the blue and black hedgehogs.

Heaven knew the royal triplets had changed a great deal in the last year, with the children that had stayed in Mobius shooting up in height and filling out to almost unrecognisable degrees. They knew the Lost Prince would have changed a great deal, which was why they had so easily accepted the different colouration and fur styling. But with two of them…

The two hedgehogs in front of them had almost identical bone structure and body shape. While the
prince of their memories had blue fur, it was much lighter than that of the boy in front of them, and either way, the black one’s expression and stance was much more familiar to those that had known the angry, impatient prince. And yet, the blue one seemed to recognise the queen, and she him...

It was confusing.

Without even saying a word, Aleena stepped forward and drew the blue hedgehog into a tight hug, relishing it for a moment before nodding over his shoulder to the other. “Thank you for bringing him home so soon,” she said, and then pulled back to look at what they now had to assume was their prince. “Oh, my dear Sonic. Your eyes are so clear… you found yourself in those battles.”

“I had a little help on the search,” he said, gesturing behind him. “Yo, Tails! Amy! Get out here.”

Slowly, a young yellow fox poked his head out, followed by a pink hedgehog girl, both peering out with nervous curiosity. The prince threw Aleena a quick look, untangled himself from her hold, and then jogged over to pull the fox down, where they could see he actually had two tails. He drew them around himself as Sonic pushed him forward.

“Mom, this is Tails, my best buddy and the smartest person you will ever meet,” he said proudly. “His brains save my butt at least once a month.”

“For which he has my fondest gratitude,” she said. Dumbfounded, the fox stared up at her in silence, and Aleena chuckled. “It is a great pleasure to finally meet you. I have seen much of your exploits.”

“Y-you have?”

“Sees the future sometimes,” Sonic reminded him, and Tails squeaked a little. While this was happening, the pink hedgehog—a cute girl maybe a few years younger than the prince—had crept up behind him and was clearly working up the courage to speak. She flinched, however, when Sonic grabbed her hand to pull her forward. “And this is Amy Rose. She’s helped me out a lot.”

Aleena started to nod, only to stop almost immediately and say, “You are touched by future fates. Are you a seer?”

“Uh…”

“She does tarot,” Sonic said blandly. “Used it to find me on Little Planet, once. It was how we met.”

“You remember that?” Amy asked, but completely missed his look when she realised she was still standing in front of the queen. “Oh! Um. It’s, um, it’s a pleasure to meet you, your majesty – I mean highness – I mean, it’s an honour, your – I mean –”

“Chill, Amy,” Sonic advised, and she blanched.

“Sorry!”

Aleena just smiled kindly before returning to Sonic. “You can never know how thrilled I am to see you again, my son. I want to hear all about your adventures, and your friends, but that is for later.”

Sonic frowned, then nodded once and stepped aside, gently pushing Tails and Amy back with him as Aleena returned her attention to Agent Shadow. “We welcome you to our kingdom, and thank you for your Nation’s aid in returning our son home to us, whatever your lack of decorum.”

Shadow straightened slightly, shifting his weight at the veiled rebuke. “Your majesty.”
“We are certain the long flight is to blame, no doubt made in an attempt to return our son at due speed,” she said. “Surely, you will want to rest after such a journey. Our steward, Heronette, will show you to the guest suite. Heronette, if you could also make up rooms for Master Tails and Miss Rose?”

Heronette blinked, having been hidden behind a row of security personnel, but quickly moved forward and curtseyed low. “Of course, your majesty.”

“Excellent. Agent Shadow, you will take rest, and we will speak of civil matters in the evening,” she said, before turning to Tails and Amy. “Forgive me, children, I do wish to speak with you, but it has been years since I’ve seen my son.”

“Oh, yeah, no,” Tails said quickly, glancing at Sonic. “Um, we can –”

“We’ll go with Shadow,” said Amy. She shot him a look that stalled any objections, despite the fact he seemed more interested in watching the queen than anything.

Heronette quickly moved forward to curtsey to Shadow, which was probably the only reason she noticed Sonic subtly pull back his glove to show a bulky watch on his left wrist, and saw Tails nod slightly. But she made nothing of it as Aleena laced her arm through Sonic’s, and they began walking out of hangar.

Instead, she smiled at their visitors. “Welcome to Mobotropolis! Did you have any bags?”

As they walked through the halls, Heronette did her best to distract them from their surroundings, chattering on about how good it had been to see Sonic, how odd it was that Shadow looked so much like him (Tails and Amy exchanged grins at Shadow’s annoyed grunts), how it was even stranger that the Overlander representative was Mobian (another, vaguergrunt), and how they would have to forgive her blathering, it was a bad habit, she was just so excited, oh, was she still going on?

It was a good tactic, and on anyone else, it might have worked. But Tails, Amy, and Shadow had all spent a lot of time in various factories, power plants and chemical engines, usually scanning their surroundings for weak spots. No amount of distraction could stop them from noticing the palace was actually a non-functioning power plant.

“Oh, now you might like this,” Heronette said cheerfully, pushing open a door. “The Princess has put a lot of work into this area.”

Amy gasped, clapping both hands to her mouth. “Oh, it’s beautiful!”

If you were into that sort of thing, Tails added to himself as he peered into the hall. It was huge for a Mobian structure – twenty feet across and twice that in height, with plush red carpeting and deep wooden walls, lined with intricate paintings of mobians of various species and ornate doorways, each one engraved with gold carvings.

“Very impressive,” Shadow noted quietly, and Heronette giggled, clasping her hands over her chest.

“I ain’t it? The truth is, we’re still rebuilding, but Mobius is a very impressive place. The Princess believes the palace needs to reflect who we are as a people, which is why she had all the engravings done in solid gold. The paintings were all done by students of the reopened Art wing of
Mobotropolis University.”

“Reopened?” Amy repeated curiously, and Heronette paused, her smile slipping a little.

“Well, yes. They were all shut down during… you know,” she said, then coughed and gestured for them to continue down the hall. After a few steps, she began chattering again, about the art and wall hangings, but although Amy made a good show of being impressed, Tails and Shadow both stared at the back of Heronette’s head, preoccupied by her slip.

It was kind of weird, when Tails thought about it. The palace was in Robotnik’s headquarters, but it was like Heronette was doing her best to forget he’d ever existed. And this lavish hallway was almost creepy after almost twenty minutes walking through abandoned factory halls. Like they’d stepped through a portal and no one had noticed.

“This is the guest wing,” she said, pushing open a heavy oak door that looked exactly like all the other doors they’d passed, leading onto another fancy hallway, this time decorated in green and bronze. “You’ll have to forgive us, Agent Shadow. We thought you’d be an Overlander, so the only rooms we have made up right now are for overlanders. And we didn’t think you’d be coming until Friday, so it’s a bit of a mess. But proper rooms should be ready for you by dinner,” she promised, and led the way down the hall.

“You keep saying that word,” Tails said quietly. “Overlanders. You mean humans, right?”

She glanced at him, surprised. “I guess you could call them that.”

“Why overlander? We’re the ones who live on floating rocks,” Amy pointed out, and she laughed.

“Well, sure! But we’re the ones that can rise up from underneath! Show them what happens to those who walk over us!” she said, and either ignored or didn’t notice their uncomfortable looks, continuing down to the last door in the hall.

She pushed open the door and stepped back, allowing Amy to go through first, who squealed and clapped her hands. “Oh, it’s wonderful!”

Tails peeked past her, blinking in surprise, and then followed her in. This time, he actually did agree. The room was sparse but elegant, with heavy, over-stuffed furniture and red drapes hanging all over the walls. An open door on the other side of the room led to an even fancier bathroom, which Amy was cooing over already. Most impressive was that the whole ‘suite’ was probably about the same size as Amy’s entire apartment back in Station Square.

“It’s not finished.”

Surprised again, Tails looked around at Shadow, who lifted one hand from his folded arms to point at the wall. Sure enough, hidden behind the drapes, every wall but one was still metal and piped. The furthest one looked like they’d begun to cover it with plaster, but stopped halfway through.

Still lingering in the doorway, Heronette coughed and smoothed down her skirt. “As I said, we weren’t expecting you until Friday.”

And yet it was fully furnished, Tails noted, exchanging glances with Amy. Who furnished a room they weren’t finished building?

“So, anyway, Liam—he’s our head of household—he’ll be along shortly to take care of anything you need,” she continued brightly. “If you need anything in the meantime, there’s a button over there that will get the finest food and drink from our kitchens, and the green button will summon one of the
servants for anything else you need. Welcome to Mobotropolis, and I’ll see you again soon!”

“I’ll bet,” Tails said, as Amy called farewells and Heronette ducked out, closing the door behind her.

There was a pause, Amy’s arm dropping from its farewell wave at the same time as her happy smile. She and Tails looked at each other again, before Shadow suddenly snorted and strode over to the wall behind the bed. He gripped the drape and, in one swift movement, yanked it from the wall.

“Oh, ugh…” Amy murmured, and Tails grimaced, backing away from the bed.

“Why would they still have that?” he wondered. “It’s creepy.”

“No doubt the good doctor hung it himself, when these were his chambers,” Shadow said with a smirk. “That’s why this room was made up, when they weren’t expecting anyone for days ahead. That’s why it was never finished. Because they can’t bring themselves to get rid of everything this stands for.”

The drape had been very well placed, and it was a testament to Shadow’s observational skills that he’d known which one to pull down. But behind it, covering almost all of the wall above the bed, was a huge portrait laid into the metal wall, of a much fatter, sleazier, and more disgusting but still recognisable Doctor Ivo Robotnik: the Eggman.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Hey Brother - Avichii 2013
Chapter Notes

Every word’s a new regret if you say it right, right? Every wound can be forgotten in the right light.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a little amusing to note that even though Aleena was queen, and there were guards all over the place—mostly former Resistance members that Sonic had known since he was six years old—she still checked the exits and corners of every room she walked into. It was a habit Sonic himself had, but he spent most of his life fighting. He wondered if it was a family trait, or if everyone that had been in the Resistance did it.

“Would you like a drink?” she asked as they walked into a relatively small (comparatively speaking – it was still about the same size as Tails’ actual workshop) room that was filled with comfortable looking chairs and piles of cloth. “Or… what was it… a chilli dog?”

He laughed. “I’ll take whatever you’re having, Mom.”

“Even tea?” she asked, moving over to a phone on the wall. “I adore a good cup of tea, but Manic hates it and says all men should.”

“Manic doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Bet he says the same about flowers.”

“Mm… it’s a little sad to know that most people from Mobotropolis cannot appreciate that beauty,” she said, before the phone’s monitor lit up with an uptight-looking pig.

“Your majesty. How may I serve?”

“Tea, Liam, if you wouldn’t mind. With two cups, brought to my sewing room.”

“Of course,” he said, inclining his head, before Aleena turned away and the screen went blank. She gestured for Sonic to take a seat as she did so herself.

“So, was I wrong about the chilli dogs?”

“ Heck no! If you had ’em handy, I’d be all over that. But I get the feeling we don’t have time to wait on them being made,” he said, and she smiled tightly.

“We may be slightly more pressed than I would like, yes.”

“That why you kinda chewed out Shadow back there?”

“Unfortunately, that was more politics than timing,” she said regretfully. “Personally, I would be quite thrilled to never have another Mobian bow to me; to be able to watch boys be boys in my presence, and never hear another stilted line of rehearsed deference uttered to my face. But I am not my government, just its figurehead.”

He frowned, setting his chin on his fist. “You know, I figured it’d be something like that. How’s
Manic handling the royal life?"

“He is not,” she admitted. “He keeps himself busy enough to have reason not to attend official functions or luncheon. Sonia enjoys the game, however, so the aristocrats cannot openly argue my children fear the throne. One of life’s small graces.”

Sensing a topic for later discussion, Sonic just gazed at her silently, before a polite knock cut off any further conversation. The door swung open soundlessly, and a fox with a long scar running down the side of her face entered, holding a silver tray with a tall teapot and two cups. She paused, her eyes widening slightly when she saw Sonic, but quickly dropped into a curtsey to cover it before hurrying over to place the tray on the table between them.

“Thank you, Felixanne,” Aleena said, and she curtseyed again, glancing at Sonic from behind her hair.

“You’re welcome, ma’am.”

After another second, Sonic coughed and leaned over, extending his hand. “Hey, I’m Sonic.”

She jumped, but then nodded, her eyes flicking between Sonic’s hand, face, and mother repeatedly. Aleena smiled and took pity on her. “Felixanne actually knows you personally, Sonic. You saved her life once.”

“Huh?”

The girl blushed, twisting her hands into the bottom of her tunic. “From – my house was being destroyed after my parents were arrested. You pulled me from the rubble,” she said softly. “You – you took me to Sanctuary.”

He blinked, then smiled. “Really? Sorry, I don’t usually forget people.”

She stammered a little, then ducked her head, curtseyed to Aleena once more, and hurried out of the room. Sonic rubbed under his quills, confused, and Aleena gave him a soft smile.

“Felixanne—and indeed many of our people—hold you in such high regard as to occasionally forget the boy behind the hero,” she noted.

“Yeah, I get that… One of the reasons I try hard to remember people these days is because I was kinda forgetting the people behind the victims,” he said, and pulled one foot up onto the chair, lounging back as Aleena began pouring tea. “When I was here, I didn’t save people; I saved the world. Even when I was pulling people out of burning houses, I was doing it to spite Robotnik.”

She glanced up at him. “And now you think such is not enough?”

“Don’t tell Amy this, but…” He glanced at the door, as if he could still see Felixanne through the wood. “She taught me it really wasn’t.”

“Miss Rose?”

“Yeah. She’s annoying and clingy and really violent,” he said, then smiled, his shoulders rising a little as he continued, “but she’s a really great person. She never forgets why she does what she does. She’ll give up a mission to stop and chat with the people she rescued, or lose everything to keep the people she cares about.”

Aleena said nothing as she set one of the cups of tea beside his elbow, watching his expression.
“Some people might call it selfish, or flighty, but the truth is she’s really passionate about everything she does. It’s kind of amazing…” He trailed off, then suddenly coughed and picked up his tea, flicking his free hand as if waving the topic away. “Anyway. The first time I rescued her, she was just another victim that had gotten in the way of my fight with Eggman. But then she showed up again, a few months later. And I slowly started to realise that she was more than that. And if she was, then everyone was. Everyone who gets caught up in this thing is a real person, and they deserve to be remembered.”

“A noble ideal,” she said, and sipped her tea before adding, casually, “Miss Rose sounds like a wonderful girl.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, then blanched, his tea slopping over the edge of his cup before he recovered. “I mean, not that I notice. I think all my friends are great. She’s kind of annoying actually, she has this idea that we’re… it… just ignore anything she says, for the most part.”

She hid her smirk behind her teacup. “Mm…”

“So Mom,” he said loudly, looking down at his own cup. “Why’re we on a tight schedule, but still sipping tea? What’s the… non-rush?”

“We are waiting to be interrupted,” she said, with the knowing smile only a seer could manage. “After your call last night—”

“heard that, huh?”

“It was lovely,” she said, but then continued, “—Sonia and Manic were rather… inspired by your song. And Sonia decided that if you were indeed returning, then a symbolic event was needed to emphasise it. She thought the best symbol might be the destruction of a working robotocisor.”

Sonic closed his eyes for a second, then nodded once. He’d thought all the robotocisors in the Mobian territories would have been destroyed by now, but he’d also thought Eggman had moved on from using animals to power his machines, and he’d just met the wisps. “So there are still working robotocisors around?”

“Many. If you don’t mind, it’s something I’d like to discuss with your friends, later.”

“Sure. But, anyway, Sonia?”

“She and Manic felt it would be more appropriate if they brought the robotocisor back themselves, and intended to do so today,” she said, and then sat back in her chair, looking at him wearily. “I am not confident of their success.”

“Please, they would’ve needed help in the resistance,” he said, rolling his eyes. “After two years of palace life? No chance. So what are we waiting for? Do you not know where they are, or…”?

She smiled, then held up a hand with three fingers. He frowned, then snorted when she began counting them down. On the last, she pointed to the door just as it opened, and none other than Knuckles the Echidna stepped in. Sonic balked at the sight of him, and Knuckles stared back in return, before huffing out an annoyed breath and setting one fist on his hip.

“I thought I could sense you. You always have to make an entrance, don’t you?”

Sonic allowed himself another second of surprise before asking, “What are you doing here?”

“Sonia ‘asked’ me to come to this festival thing,” he said, and then glanced at Aleena. “Speaking of
Sonia, you do know she’s missing, right? The stewards and Mane-for-brains have been going nuts trying to decide whether to tell you or not.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, pressing a hand to her cheek. “I hope she’s not in trouble.”

Sonic gave her the look that deserved, and she looked at him with wide eyes. “Sonic, I hate to ask this of you so soon, but…”

“Uh huh,” he said, getting to his feet. He looked at Knuckles. “Are you a glorified emerald radar or can you find lost hedgehogs, too?”

“Found you, didn’t I?” he snapped. “Besides, I talked to one of the maids that overheard their planning last night. I know where they are.”

“Cool. Let’s pick up the gang and go rescue a prince and princess,” he said, and Knuckles raised an eyeridge.

“Gang? You brought Tails along?”

“And Amy and Shadow. Tell you on the way,” he said, and then tossed a wink over his shoulder at Aleena. “We’ll have tea later, I promise,” he said, before snatching Knuckles’ wrist and dashing out of the room.

“Don’t say it.”

“Didn’t say anything.”

“But you were thinking it. Don’t say it.”

Manic kicked his feet a little, testing his bonds again. What he was thinking (and not saying) was that coming to the Badlands had been a dumb plan. It was the area around Mobotropolis, mostly cliffs and weeds, but it was also home to many of the still-functioning Robotnik sites. For two years, they’d let it be, because it didn’t interfere with the city or travellers, and all the sites did was dig up rock in search of relics that weren’t there. But after their musical visit from Sonic last night, they’d both been too hyped up to think straight, and heroics had sounded awesome.

Heroics, when neither of them had been in a battle for over two years and never gone up against an entire mining site alone and basically unarmed. Now they were both thinking a little clearer, it really did seem as idiotic as it should have sounded in the beginning.

Especially because robots weren’t the only thing out in the Badlands. There were also the anarchists: a group of rebels that took the royal family as something of a personal insult. Sonia and Manic had been in the area maybe an hour before they found themselves surrounded at gun point.

“So you got like, a plan, or something?” Manic asked, staring around the small tent they’d been shoved into, tied up back-to-back and barely able to move.

“Of course I do!” Sonia snapped, but then paused, her fingers unconsciously ticking against his own. “I’m just… working out the finer details.”

“Oh, yeah? Like how the heck we’re going to get out of these ropes?”
“You know, if you were the big strong man you pretend to be, you’d keep your quills sharp and it’d be a non-issue,” she said, and he rolled his eyes.

“Well, if you would stop pretending to be such a prissy little princess all the time and actually use that super strength of yours, you could just snap them.”

“I don’t have super-strength anymore,” she pointed out. “Unless your ability to lock-pick with a stick came back?”

“Hey, that was skill, not magic!”

“Oh, yeah? Then why can’t you do it anymore?”

He turned his head, trying to glare at her, but she refused to turn her own head to see it, so it was pointless. He tapped his feet and went back to glaring at their surroundings. “So what is your plan?”

“I admit, it does sort of rely on us getting out of these ropes first,” she muttered. “Can you see anything sharp around?”

“No. I don’t see anything but this tent,” he grumbled, and they fell silent for a few moments, before realising they weren’t the only ones being quiet. They both straightened in their binds, slowly becoming aware of the silence outside.

From the moment they’d been tied up, they’d been surrounded by the angry noise of triumphant, happy anarchists. They’d cheered, made speeches, shouted and made plans… the last eight hours had been a constant buzz in their ears. But now it had gone quiet.

“Get him!” someone shouted, and then the noise exploded again, both of them flinching despite themselves. It wasn’t happy noise. It was a fight.

“What’s going on out there?” Manic wondered, before Sonia shoved him.

“Don’t worry about that! They’re distracted – let’s get out of here and figure out the ropes later. Lean back against me and we’ll try to stand on three, okay?”

“What are we gonna do, hop out of camp?” he demanded, but joined her in struggling to his feet. Unfortunately, they’d barely made it a few inches up when the knotted-up entrance to the tent burst open, two bodies flying in to crash against the dirt, startling them both into falling back down.

Manic gaped as the bodies resolved themselves into two people: one, a knocked-out anarchist, and the other a young, athletic blue hedgehog with red sneakers. He bounced to his feet to grin at him.

“Yo, sibs, long time no see.”

“What? Who is that?” Sonia demanded, twisting her neck to try and see.

“Holy…” Manic whispered, and the blue hedgehog laughed before jerking his thumb at the anarchist.

“Gotta say, though, I was kinda expecting things to have changed a little in the last two years. This whole damsel in distress thing is totally outdated, bro.”

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?!” Sonia yelled, but the hedgehog’s grin only broadened as he casually walked over to stand beside Manic, where he could lean down and look into Sonia’s face sideways.
“How you doin’?” he asked, and she squeaked. He chuckled and stepped back to kneel down and start untying their bonds. “So, happy as I am to see you guys, we’re gonna have to cut the reunion short. My friends are fightin’ the good fight out there, but we’re more used to robots than flesh, so I’m not wanting to risk this going on too long.”

“S- Sonic?” Sonia breathed, her voice a little weak despite herself.

“The one and only,” he said, and removed the last of their ropes with a flourish. “Like I said though: reunion later. You guys okay to walk?”

He didn’t wait for a response before hauling Manic up, and almost did the same to Sonia, except that she yanked away from his hand and rolled to her feet, fists out defiantly. “Where have you been?”

“Is this really the time?” he asked, and glanced at Manic, only to roll his eyes when he didn’t see shared exasperation. “Okay. You guys hang out here and worry about pointless stuff, I’ll go help my friends. Give me a shout when you’re ready to leave, okay?”

“No!” Manic gasped. “No, no, let’s get out of here. Like, yesterday!”

“Now, that’s what I wanted to hear!” he said, and gestured for them to follow as he stepped out. “Yo, guys! We’re outta here!”

Before leaving, the royal siblings peeked out of the tent at the fight, but they weren’t able to see too much. It looked like the anarchists had grouped into three large huddles, and were occasionally throwing or dragging each other away. But, as they watched, a yellow canidae with no tail but some weird propeller on his back jumped into the air to meet Sonic’s gaze.

“What did you say?” it called, absently kicking at someone trying to reach for him.

“I said, let’s move it! You need me to get Amy?”

The canidae flew a little higher, peering into another group, but before he could answer, the third group broke open and a familiar red echidna dove out, rolled with the landing, and came up running for them.

“Knuckles!” Sonia and Manic cried as he slid to a stop in front of them.

He nodded to them, then looked to Sonic. “Can we go now?”

“Hey! Tails, let me down, I wasn’t done yet!” a female voice shrieked, and they looked around to see the canidae lifting an angry pink hedgehog high above the crowd. Sonic grinned and jerked his head, to which the fox nodded and began flying away.

“So, Hedgehog,” Knuckles said, glancing at the anarchists, who had now focussed on them. “Any chance you don’t want to show off?”

He snorted. “Get my sibs out and I’ll give our friends something to remember us by.” And then, he disappeared, a sudden vacuum making both Sonia and Manic gasp, before they were yanked out of their shock by Knuckles’ hands on their wrists.

“Let’s go.”

Letting himself get dragged along, Manic watched over his shoulder as what he could only describe as a blue wind rushed past the first wave of anarchists twice over, relieving them of their weapons and then knocking them all sideways. As they reached the cliff edge, Sonic slid to a stop in front of
the pile of anarchists, shaking his finger at them all.

“Now, boys and girls, what have we learned from this experience?”

But whatever they’d learned was not for Manic to hear, as he suddenly found himself shoved off the cliff and into thin air. He panicked as he began to fall, but didn’t even have time to scream before he hit hard metal, and looked up to find he’d actually been pushed into the open hatch of a waiting jet, the canidae and pink hedgehog already inside and watching.

Beside him, Sonia groaned as she pushed herself to her knees, and they exchanged glances before looking up to where Knuckles was still visible on the cliff, glaring over his shoulder.

“Would you hurry up already?” he demanded, a second before Sonic leapt over him to land inside the jet like it had been less than a foot drop.

“Hey, Knux, I’m waiting on you!” he said cheerfully, then turned toward the front of the jet. “Let’s fly, Shads.”

“Roger that,” a dark voice replied as Knuckles landed heavily beside them and the hatch shut tight. “Mobotropolis Tower, we are inbound. ETA fifteen minutes.”

“Wait, what?” the girl asked, looking around in surprise. “We’re going back? What about whatever the prince and princess were doing?”

Manic slowly got to his feet, looking around the jet curiously. It was odd – sleek and streamlined, but everything was too large, as if designed for the tallest mobians, rather than the usual four foot expected height. But that only made the mobians inside it more noticeable, and he stared at them, avoiding his brother as long as possible.

The canidae—a fox, now he looked—actually did have a tail – two of them, even. That was odd enough for Manic to take several seconds before realising he was a kid, and looking wary. Slightly older but more curious was the pink hedgehog, who was…

Despite himself, Manic had to look twice. She was pretty. Really, really pretty. Jade green eyes, carefully brushed down spikes, red dress and boots that just emphasised how cute she was… He swallowed, blushing as he realised what a pretty little girl had just helped save his butt. So embarrassing.

But that train of thought only took him back to the hedgehog that actually had rescued him, and he nearly glanced at him before choosing to move on to the pilot, instead. It was yet another hedgehog, but this one was black with red, tan and white markings, and was currently ignoring them, glaring out the windscreen instead.

Something in the way the black hedgehog sat reminded Manic of his brother, and he surrendered to the inevitable, turning his gaze toward what he’d been waiting almost three years to see.

They’d seen photographs of him before—in the files their mother kept secret from them—but they’d never even suspected he was Sonic. When they’d seen the photos, they’d seen his bright eyes and easy smile, and thought it couldn’t possibly be their grumpy warrior brother. In fur pattern and facial structure, he looked like Manic, but just like his photos, his fur was darker than they remembered, and his eyes seemed a paler green. More than anything, he seemed too casual, and… and even just standing in front of them, he seemed too… happy to be their Sonic.

Honestly, the black hedgehog up front suited their memories much better. He radiated annoyance, sat heavily in his chair and weighed each movement before he made it. But his fur was all wrong, and
the colouring was completely different. For that alone, Manic looked at the blue one again.

“S-Sonic?”

Settling his hands on his hips with a deep breath, Sonic met his gaze with those eyes that were both too light and too deep to match Manic’s memory. “You okay, bro?”

“Is that really you?” he whispered, and Sonic tilted his head with a smirk.

“Come on, man, I know two years is a long time, but there’s no need to look like –”

“Sonic!” Sonia cried, and launched herself into his arms with a sob. “Where have you been!”

“Hey, hey, no need to get all upset!” He laughed, but hugged her back, only freeing an arm when Manic shoved his way into the hold as well, both of them clinging tightly. “Manic! Come on, guys, be cool, would ya?”

“No way, bro!” Manic laughed, just holding tighter. “After three years, we’re allowed to be totally clingy!”

“Two years,” Sonic corrected, but didn’t push them off.

Over his shoulder, Manic noticed Knuckles walk over to the other two rescuers and grinned. “I knew you knew were Sonic was, Knuck’! You were holding out on us!”

“I didn’t know he was coming,” Knuckles said, setting a hand on his hip. “But when he showed up, I figured it was time we came got you.”

“How did you know we needed help?” asked Sonia. She pulled away from Sonic but still held his shoulder as she smiled at him. “How do you always show up when our lives are in danger?”

Sonic smiled wryly, but didn’t say anything, gently pushing Manic back and turning all of them around to face the others. “Sibs, I want you to meet my friends: Tails, Amy, and that’s Shadow at the controls.”

“It’s so great to meet you!” the girl gushed, and dashed forward to grab up Sonia’s hand in both of her own. “I can’t believe this! I’ve seen you in heaps of magazines, I had no idea you were the princess, let alone Sonic’s sister!”

Sonia laughed. “It’s nice to meet you too! I love your hair!”

“Thanks!”

She just lit up when she smiled… Manic shook himself and looked to the fox, who was fidgeting, looking anywhere but at him. Poor kid. He looked like he was barely ten years old, and already fighting… After a moment, Sonic jerked his head at Knuckles, who rolled his eyes and roughly shoved the fox a step forward.

“Tails is kind of a genius, and the best mechanic I know,” Sonic told Manic, obviously trying to break the ice. “You still work with machines and stuff?”

“Yeah, all the time. Hey, I could like, show you my workshop when we get back home,” he said, and ducked his head to try and catch the kid’s gaze. “I’m working on some hover floats at the moment, but I’ve got an old jet I’m fixing up on the side. Maybe you could give me a hand or something! I bet I could show you a few tricks.”
Knuckles gave him an odd, incredulous look, and Tails glanced at Sonic, but got no response beyond a mild grin. The little fox slowly nodded as he went back to Manic. “That’d… be great, your majesty.”

“Whoa, hey, ‘highness’. No majesty on this ’hog. Besides, it’s just Manic to my friends,” he said, and grabbed the kid’s hand to shake.

“Okay,” Tails said, but he didn’t smile, and after a few seconds, he set his shoulders and gripped Manic’s hand tighter, his look almost defiant.

But before Manic could make too much of it, Amy threw herself around Tails’ shoulders to grin at him. “Hi! You’re known as the Thief Prince, right? Can you really pick pockets without people noticing?”

He blinked, then blushed and nodded. “I don’t, like, do it anymore, though. These days I’m more of a technician, you know?”

“That’s so cool. And totally romantic! You really were rags to riches – it’s like a fairy tale!”

“Well, I guess, yeah, kinda.”

Sonia ducked around them all to move toward the front of the aircraft. “And you’re Shadow, right?”

The black hedgehog glanced at her, then nodded once. “Your highness.”

“Oh, no, you can call me Sonia,” she said, but he didn’t smile.

“Given our respective situations, that’s probably an unwise decision.”

“Situations?”

Sonic coughed to get her attention. “Shadow is an Agent of the Guardian Unit of Nations. He’s here for the United Federation.”

“The…?”

“He works for the overlanders?” Manic cried. Tails and Amy looked vaguely uncomfortable, but Sonic just shrugged and Knuckles nodded.

Sonia just stared at him. “But you’re a mobian!”

“That’s incorrect, your highness,” Shadow said coolly.

“Oh yeah, aren’t you technically an alien?” asked Sonic, and Shadow looked over his shoulder to glare at him for a few moments before turning back to the controls.

“Well, you are,” Amy muttered, then grinned at Manic. “It’s easier not to ask. Don’t worry about it too much – you’re not missing out. Shadow likes being all formal and stand-offish with everyone.”

“We just know him too well to buy it,” Sonic added, and trotted up to collapse into the co-pilot’s seat sideways, grinning at Shadow. “Now get us home fast, Shads. I’m starving and you need to play nice with Mom.”

Shadow’s eyebrow ticked. “You were the one to drag me out here.”

“You wouldn’t let us borrow your jet!”
“I didn’t trust you to come back.”

“Aww, Shadow, would you miss me?”

While Shadow gave Sonic a dark look, Sonia and Manic exchanged glances and quiet nods. It might have been a joke, but they were with Shadow on this one. And they sure weren’t letting Sonic out of their sight again, either.

With Sonia deep in discussion with Amy about shoes or makeup or something, and Manic busy reassuring the head guards that they were both fine and yes, Sonic was back in town and yes, had indeed stuck around after rescuing them, Sonic, Knuckles and Tails trailed behind, Shadow bringing up the rear with heavy, watching eyes. They were trying their best to ignore him as Knuckles explained how he’d gotten to Mobius.

“Why would Sonia guilt trip you into coming down here?” Tails wondered quietly. “Sonic I can understand, what with the whole prince thing, but why you?”

“I don’t know, Tails. Something weird’s going on in this city, I can tell you that,” said Knuckles. “No one seems to know anything. Not even Sonia and Manic. They’ve got no idea what you’ve been doing, or about how the world works with Gaia and chaos energy.”

“And the city doesn’t seem much different, either,” Sonic noted. “I woulda thought they’d get some things cleaned up. But it still looks like it did when I left, just with some wall hangings all over.”

“Literally, in some cases,” said Tails. “They act like Eggman’s gone, but at the same time, it’s like they don’t want to change too much in case he comes back.”

Sonic glanced at him, folding his hands behind his head, and Knuckles looked at him sideways. “You should tell them.”

“Hm?”

“What happened to Eggman. You should tell them.”

“No way,” he said firmly. “I’m not telling them I just let him walk outta here.”

Tails raised his eyebrows. “They don’t know Eggman’s alive?”

“They don’t know I let him go,” Sonic corrected. “They just assumed he was gone by the time I caught up.”

“How could they not know? He broke the planet apart!”

“How did the moon become whole again?” a voice interjected, and they glanced back at Shadow. He raised a pointed eyeridge. “The Ark’s laser shattered half of the moon, and yet every full moon, we look up at the sky and see it whole. How could this be?”

He frowned, fidgeting a little. “I assumed you fixed it. Or Sonic.”

Shadow made an amused grunt, and Sonic snorted. “Dude, I barely know how to teleport with Chaos Control. My ability to heal is still wonky and mostly limited to poison. How am I supposed to
have regrown half a moon?"

“People make up explanations for things they don’t understand,” agreed Knuckles.

Tails looked at them thoughtfully for a few moments, then slowly nodded and went back to watching Manic. Sonic and Knuckles exchanged glances before Sonic shrugged and continued, “Okay, so let’s go with the theory that Sonia actually has a plan for us both being here. She doesn’t know about chaos, thinks your powers extend to digging holes and reading those freaky pool things up on Angel Island, and I think she thinks my powers are all wrapped up in the medallions, which means I shouldn’t have any except my speed.”

“Maybe not even that. She’s not strong anymore.”

Sonic paused a little before answering, his eyes flicking back toward Shadow, before he shrugged and said, “They seemed more freaked out by me being here than me still moving fast.”

“They wanted you here for a reason. Do they want you to take the throne or something?”

“No way. That would mean kicking Mom outta the top job,” he said. “Sonia wouldn’t do that.”

“You sure? I know you guys are all really loyal and all, but it’s been a while since you’ve talked to your sister. You’ve sure changed since you left here,” he pointed out, and Sonic hummed.

“Yeah, I’m not buying it. It just seems too… I dunno… too Mom.”

Shadow, Knuckles and Tails all looked at him, not sure what he meant, but he didn’t get a chance to explain before a new voice cut through the quiet.

“Hey! Sonic! I heard you were back!”

They turned, Sonic smiling as he recognised the lion that had just stepped out of a side passage. “Hey, Cyrus! The party’s at mother’s…”

“…and the musicians are down the hall,” Cyrus finished, giving Sonic a low-five before stepping back to look at him properly. “Man, you got short!”

“Hey, hey, it’s called aerodynamics!” he said with a laugh. “You just got lanky!”

“And you got yourself another brother,” he added, glancing at Shadow. “Could’ve sworn the queen only had three kids.”

“You’re hilarious,” Sonic drawled, but grinned and turned toward the others, pointing them out as he went. “These are my friends. My best buddy Tails, Knuckles, Shadow—who is not related to us, shut up—and Amy up the back there. Guys, this is Cyrus Lion. I’ve known him since I was like, five.”

“Oh, my god!” Amy cried, rushing back to stand in front of him, her hands bunched up under her chin. “You’re Sonic’s childhood friend! You must have so many stories!”

“Amy…” Sonic groaned, but she ignored him, leaning forward to meet Cyrus’ shocked gaze.

“We need to talk, okay?”

“Uh… okay?”

“Anyway,” Sonic said, pushing her sideways and out of the way, only for her to laugh and grab his
arm instead. Behind him, Sonia and Manic exchanged surprised glances, but Sonic just sighed and gestured to Tails with his free hand as he turned and started walking again. “You remember me telling you about Cyrus, right? We used to build hover boards together when we were kids.”

“You mean I built hover boards,” Cyrus corrected, though he smiled as he took Tails’ hand to shake. “You watched and used words your uncle taught you to make it sound like you knew what I was doing.”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to…”

“He’s Royal Technician now,” Knuckles interjected, glaring at Cyrus from the corner of his eye. “They’ve been working on cracking Robotnik’s encrypted files.”

“You mean you haven’t already?” Tails asked, then blanched and drew back behind Knuckles, blushing. “I mean, um…”

“It’s not that easy,” Manic said over his shoulder. “He’s got layers of security, and everything’s guarded by protocols that make the palace attack people who trip a firewall.”

Tails hesitated, glancing at Sonic, and then asked, “Do you mind if I take a look at it?”

Sonia, Manic, and the guard all smiled wryly, but Cyrus grimaced. “I don’t know, Tails, it can be real dangerous. I’m not just talking about firewalls that shut down the computer or blow up the keyboard – these ones shoot lasers at the computer chair.”

“I won’t trip them,” he said. “I promise.”

“Sonic says Tails is a bit of a techno buff,” Manic explained with that special sort of grin intended for watching a child out of their depth. Curiously, Knuckles was starting to gain the same kind of smirk. “You could at least let him watch.”

Cyrus hesitated, then looked at Sonic, only to immediately balk at the unconcerned expression on his face. He stared blankly even when Sonic noticed and smiled, his eyes only widening in further disbelief.

“Your majesties,” the guard interrupted, after a few seconds of awkward silence, “it is nearing one o’clock.”

“Oh!” Sonia clapped her hands. “Of course. Could you tell mother we’ll be a little late? We need to clean up. Amy, you simply must let me lend you a dress.”

She blinked. “A dress?”

“Of course! I have just the thing! Manic, you’ll take care of the boys, won’t you?” she asked, grabbing Amy’s hand in her own even as she pointed at Knuckles. “If you’re coming, you need to dress properly this time.”

“Dress properly?” Sonic repeated, looking at Knuckles. “What for?”

“Lunch,” Knuckles said, somehow making the word sound more like a death sentence.

Chapter End Notes
Music Reference:
Spotlight (Oh Nostalgia...) = Patrick Stump 2011
Track Five: There's a girl

Chapter Notes

I bide my time while biting my tongue. Hold closed my mouth so song is unsung. Get to the meat of it already! With buried secrets, the ground is heavy.

That's just the way things used to be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they walked through the corridors, the walls going from gold to silver, Amy noticed the artwork getting a lot less intricate, until eventually even the silver stopped, and the walls became metal again, just cleaned up and with carpet under their feet. She paused, bouncing on it thoughtfully, and Sonia glanced over her shoulder.

“Amy?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m sorry, I was just thinking this hall is a lot different to the last one,” she said, and Sonia smiled.

“Oh, well, yes,” She waved at the doors a little further on. “This is our personal wing. We don’t really have to show off for anyone here, so we don’t really bother.”

Amy tilted her head, intrigued, but trotted after her so they could continue walking. “Show off?”

“I say show off, but really it’s more like a costume,” she explained. “We’re royalty, but Sonic, Manic and I didn’t grow up that way, so we have to overcompensate in the way people see us. So all the public halls are big, lavish and beautiful, and when we go out in public, we’re all dressed up in jewels, but in private…” She stopped to open a door, though she didn’t go in. After glancing inside, and seeing the complete mess, every surface covered in clothes, discs, food, empty cups and plates, Amy guessed this was Manic’s chamber. Sonia grinned at her expression and closed the door, gesturing for them to continue. “Honestly, it’s mostly for the aristocrats, and they’re the ones we have to win over first.”

“Oh… okay.” They went into the next door along, and Amy blinked again. Despite the metal walls, this room was almost more lavish than the gold hallway, with velvet drapes and huge, squishy furniture, and an attractive tiger lounged on the couch, though he stood up at their entrance. Amy half-wondered if attractive people came with the royal suites, and if she should find out where Sonic was supposed to be staying before he found himself a beautiful handmaiden.

“Oh, Sonia, there you are. How did the mission go?” the tiger asked, setting aside the tablet he’d been reading from.

“Never mind about that; you’ll never believe what’s happened, Stripes!” she said excitedly. “Sonic’s back!”

“Sonic?” he repeated, eyebrows rising behind his sunglasses. That only drew attention to them, making Amy wonder why he was wearing them indoors, until she noticed he had a cape, as well. Who wore capes? “So that song last night…?”
“It really was him! It’s so amazing! And he’s just as fast as ever! I couldn’t believe it!” she cried, but then gasped and turned to Amy. “Oh, and this is one of his friends, Amy Rose. Amy, this is Stripes D’Tigre.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said, and he bowed slightly, looking at her over the glasses and putting paid to the idea they were prescription. Seriously. Who wore sunglasses inside?

“You, as well. I’m sorry, but…” He quickly focussed back on Sonia. “That’s wonderful about Sonic. Did he mention your letter?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter! He’s back! Oh, I have to hurry and get clean – I completely forgot about lunch. I’m really sorry to do this to you two, but could you get to know each other without me?” she asked, and then touched Amy’s arm. “Just wait until I get out of the bath – you’re going to love the dress I have in mind for you!”

She blinked, and then nodded uncertainly. Sonia just grinned and hurried through a door at the back of the room, leaving her alone with Stripes, who shifted his weight uncomfortably.

“So…” she said, folding her hands behind her back. “You’re… Sonia’s… boyfriend?”

He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a nervous laugh, and they both pretended not to feel as completely awkward as they did.

“So, this is our main connection to the old computer system,” Cyrus said as he swiped a card through a reader. After begging off lunch, he, Tails, and Knuckles had gone back into the openly-factory section of the palace, though piles of boxes and equipment stacked around the place had strangely gone a long way to making it feel more reclaimed than the done-up areas.

The room they stepped into was little more than a monitoring station, with three high-backed chairs that definitely hadn’t been there in Robotnik’s day. Tails immediately pulled out his mileselectric and took a seat, while Knuckles leaned back against the wall, waiting for the entertainment.

“We disabled all the lasers in here,” Cyrus continued blandly, “but to be honest, we haven’t gotten much farther than we already had during the Rebellion. Basic coding, some encrypted files… we’re still looking for the controls to the higher levels of the –”

“Security system: open. Welcome, O Glorious Rotund One,” the computer chirped, and Cyrus swung around with wide eyes. Knuckles smirked, but Tails didn’t look up, tapping at his handheld while he waited for the computer to finish loading. “What would you like to do today?”

“Open all accounts!” Cyrus blurted out. “Disable lasers.”

“Voice code not recognised. Lasers online. Please enter passcode to –”

“Disable voice controls,” Tails said absently. “Override… um… Knuckles, what was the old override?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re asking me?”

“Oh… right. Um…”
“Lasers firing,” the computer said, something behind the wall whirring furiously, but without the functioning guns, there wasn’t much it could do. “Please enter passcode to override.”

“Override… oh, forget it,” Tails muttered, and quickly tapped something into the computer. The whirring stopped in seconds.


“Thanks for that,” Tails said, and continued tapping away while Cyrus gaped at him. As he did, a giant green hologram of the palace flickered into existence above his head, turning in place for a few seconds before flicking to a diagram of the room they were in, and then slowly leaking out to show the hall and all its attached rooms. Bright gold dots showed for a moment, before about a third flickered to red. As they watched and Tails typed, all of the gold turned red.

The computer chirruped back to life. “Disabling all main lasers for this section. Would you like to confirm or fire?”

“Confirm,” Tails muttered, but it seemed more for their benefit as he continued typing.

“Disabling all main lasers for this floor. Would you like to confirm or fire?”

Cyrus made a quiet choking noise, his eyes dropping to Tails. “What are you, ten?!”

“Eight,” Knuckles corrected, a slightly smug edge to his tone. “IQ of three hundred or so.”

Cyrus almost whimpered, but Tails apparently hadn’t heard or was ignoring them, because he didn’t react, still typing.

“Disabling all security measures. Would you like to confirm or die?”

Without looking, he tapped something into his handheld and Eggman’s voice echoed around the room.

“Confirmed you worthless piece of junk! Why did I program you if you’re not even going to do what I tell you?!”

The computer couldn’t react fast enough. “Security measures disabled.”

Finally, Tails looked up at the hologram, only to go back to the monitor a moment later, and the hologram started flashing through the layout of different rooms and floors before abruptly changing to a large, shimmering X.

“Well, now I’ll feel comfortable sleeping,” Tails said cheerfully, swinging his chair around to smile at Cyrus. “I was a little worried the walls were going to fire on me. You know you only had like half the lasers offline, right?”

“No,” Cyrus said weakly. “We thought we had them all.”

“Oh. Well, now you do! I can get you a print out of their locations if you want to recycle them.”

“Yes please?”

Tails blinked, then looked at Knuckles. “I’m not using big words, am I? Only he looks really confused, and I don’t know if it’s possible to get simpler than I am right now.”

Knuckles just grinned.
On the other side of the palace, Manic found himself feeling just as lost and confused as Cyrus.

He wasn’t really surprised Sonic had finally shown his face again by rescuing his siblings from impending doom. It was kind of how they rolled. He also wasn’t too surprised to discover Sonic had made friends while he was away – he actually found it kind of hilarious that Sonic had tried to replace them by finding a brother- and sister-figure in Tails and Amy. Shadow was interesting, but then, Sonic had always been a little bit in love with himself, so of course he’d go out and find a doppelganger.

In fact, if he was being completely honest, Manic wasn’t even surprised that their reunion had been cut off as quick as it had, with the lunch meeting and Cyrus… things tended to happen in short bursts with Sonic, he should have remembered that.

But walking around the palace, showing his brother and Shadow the general layout of the refurbished sections, the mechanics’ showers he and Sonic had ducked into for a quick wash to keep the female members of their family happy, and now, finally showing him the bedroom Sonia had set aside for him last year…

Even with a new friend in tow, Manic had not expected talking to his brother again to be so hard.

“So yeah. All yours. Whaddaya think, bro?” he asked, after Sonic had spent a few seconds looking around in silence.

“Pretty cool,” he said, but left it there, and Manic winced. What happened to his brother that couldn’t shut up?

He cleared his throat and tried again. “Yeah, so, like, the bathroom’s over there – you’ll totally trip out, bro, it’s like, the size our whole van used to be, and you don’t have to share it, or anything. And give it a couple days, Liam—that’s the Head of Household guy—will totally fill your closet with clothes. Won’t even have to measure you, it’s freaky. And –” He stopped as Sonic walked over to the balcony and pulled open the doors to step outside. When he went through without a word, Manic threw up his hand. “And you could, like, totally ignore me. That’s cool, too.”

Without Sonic to focus on, he instead turned to Shadow, who was leaning in the doorway and looking around with a strangely assessing gaze. When he realised Manic was watching, he turned that intent stare on him, but didn’t say a word. Manic mentally backpedalled as he looked away again – Shadow might have come across as grumpy as Sonic had back in the day, but he was a million times creepier.

Thankfully, Sonic came back in before either of them could speak, setting one hand on his hip.

“Anyone else live here, or just you, Sonia, and Mom?”

“In the palace? Nah. There’s gotta be like, fifty people that live here, and a couple hundred that work here. Just on different floors,” he said. “Why?”

“No reason,” he said vaguely. “You said something about getting dressed?”

“Yeah. So, like I said, lunch is kind of a big thing,” he said, gesturing for the other two to follow him out and down to his own room. Sonic snorted as they went in, but didn’t say anything, so Manic didn’t bother apologising for the mess. He was kind of proud of it, in a way – it had taken a long
hard fight before the cleaning staff had stopped trying to get in every day. “It’s like, mini-court. It’s supposed to be open to anyone, but the only people that rock up are the aristocrats. And always the most annoying ones. So we gotta dress up and look all together and man, it’s so lame.”

“What’s the point?” he asked, grimacing as he mis-stepped and had to dance around a half-eaten pie-pan. “Ugh, seriously, dude, it’s not that hard to finish eating.”

“I was busy,” he said vaguely, pulling open his cupboard. He looked at both Sonic and Shadow’s narrow limbs and immediately ruled out half his wardrobe – he hadn’t been their size since his last growth spurt last year. “Like I said, the point is that it’s supposed to let anyone who wants in to see us, in a casual setting. But the aristocrats all act like it’s their right to be there, and they kinda give off this vibe like everyone else shouldn’t be. And we’re not allowed to tell ’em to take a hike, ’cause it’s like, some royal rule that we don’t turn anyone away.”

“Cool idea, lame result,” Sonic agreed. He picked up the sword Manic had found in the basement last week (and discarded when he realised they weren’t as easy to wield as the sticks he’d played with as a kid) and winced at the gravy that had sloshed over it when he’d chucked the pie aside. He looked around, spotted a vest hanging over the back of a chair, and wiped it clean. “You have to go every day?”

“Every day,” he confirmed. He noticed a blood-red jacket he’d never worn and grinned. It had been made for him early last year, before he’d really bulked up, so it’d be a little long, but otherwise perfect. “Hey, catch.”

He hadn’t been paying attention, but true to speed, Sonic spun around and caught the jacket perfectly one-handed, the other swinging the sword away to make sure it didn’t cut the cloth. He then propped the sword up against the chair and held the jacket out in both hands to look at. He made a face, and it was Shadow to note, “It has epaulettes.”

“Whoa, way to go, Shadow,” Manic said cheerfully. “I had no idea what those things were called until Liam told me.”

“I have to wear this?” Sonic asked, and Manic nodded.

“Like a little tin soldier. Welcome to royalty.”

“Oh, my excitement,” he deadpanned, but obediently set about putting the garment on.

“You’ll need proper boots too. I think I’ve got some red ones in here, but no promises.”

Sonic made a strange sort of growling noise, but didn’t comment, so Manic turned back to the cupboard. “And for you, Shadow, I think –”

“No.”

He looked back, but Shadow just met his gaze evenly. “I will not be wearing anything like that.”

“Quit while you’re ahead, bro,” Sonic advised as he lifted his cranial spines free of the collar of the jacket. “Call it a cultural difference and be glad he’s fond of gloves.”

Manic blinked, but one more glance at Shadow’s blunt stare had him quickly turning back in search of boots for Sonic instead. Once he’d found them, he tossed them over and began dressing properly.

“So… um… you guys look pretty similar, huh?” he prompted when the silence started stretching, but Sonic only grunted. A glance over his shoulder showed his brother was struggling with pulling the
jacket straight over his spines, while Shadow had begun inspecting a few of Manic’s tools, so he grimaced and made yet another attempt. “Man, if I hadn’t seen you first, Sonic, I would’ve sworn Shadow was you, no mistake.”

“Yeah, we get that a lot.”

He hesitated, not really sure how to continue the conversation. He couldn’t work out their relationship – they were civil, when Sonic wasn’t dancing that thin line of semi-playful teasing that so irritated his more serious friends. But when they’d been walking around the palace, Sonic had mostly ignored him, while several of the glances Manic had given Shadow were to find the stranger watching Sonic with an almost dangerous focus.

If it had been anyone but Sonic, Manic’s hackles would have been up in protective mode. But… surely Sonic knew what he was doing, right? “You guys been friends long?”

Shadow slowly lifted his head, but didn’t turn, while Sonic distractedly answered, “Uhh… no, recent addition.”

“How’d you guys meet?”

“Some people thought he was me and there was some stuff that went down. We got to know each other in the aftermath.”


“Dude, if you really want to tell my brother your whole backstory, you go right ahead, but I am a little preoccupied right now,” he said irritably. “Why are there so many buttons? Who could possibly need eight buttons on their torso? You don’t – you don’t even see half of them! This is a stupid jacket.”

Fastening his cummerbund, Manic turned around with a grin to watch Sonic struggle. He hadn’t really noticed, but he was pretty sure that jacket had more buttons and press-studs than the rest of his formal wardrobe combined. “What do you mean?”

“It’s stupid to have four buttons just to keep this stupid inlay straight, is what I mean,” he snapped.

“Nah, bro, I mean… what backstory, Shadow?”

Shadow just met his gaze silently for a few seconds, then turned away. “Nothing of relevance. Sonic’s explanation is close enough.”

“Ohhh… kay…” Manic turned around to grab his own jacket, at least partly to avoid the other two catching his annoyed expression. This was like pulling teeth. But before he could try again, Sonic continued, his tone teasing again.

“Don’t take the sulk personally, bro. Shadow’s a complicated guy.” Having finally defeated the inner buttons, Sonic started on the outer ones. “He’s had a rough year. And a lousy childhood. You gotta give a guy some leeway, right Shads?”

Shadow glared at him, but Manic offered up a sympathetic smile, praying for middle ground. “Hey, we had lousy childhoods too. Sometimes you gotta wade through the sewerage to find the good score, right?”

“Wow. Now there’s a metaphor I never thought I’d hear again,” Sonic said blankly. “Talk about a nostalgia trip.”
“Hey, it’s a good metaphor!” Manic said with a laugh, and quickly crouched down to swap his sneakers for boots. “Isn’t it kind of weird though, Shadow? Workin’ for the overlanders?”

“They pay well,” he said shortly. “And they have interesting missions.”

Sonic looked at him from under his brows as he unbuckled his sneakers. Manic noticed he hesitated with every movement, and never once looked away from Shadow until the boots were buckled on and shoes tucked away in that weird way Sonic had always been able to do.

Suddenly remembering that Sonic had always hated swapping shoes, Manic didn’t comment, just turned and grabbed a pair of gold-edged gloves from the cupboard. “Here. Last of the costume, I promise.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Hey, it’s for like an hour, suck it up.”

He groaned but obediently swapped them over, shoving his own gloves behind himself, same as his sneakers. He then finished straightening the gloves, buckled his cuff-links, and stood straight, hands outstretched for full inspection. “Happy?”

“Hey, I’m not the one we’ve gotta get approval from. Come on, let’s see how Sonia’s doing. You sure you’re okay like that, Shadow?”

Rather than answer, Shadow just turned on his heel and walked out. Sonic shrugged helplessly and they both followed him out, Manic pulling out his earrings as they went.

It was weird. All kinds of weird. Shadow was creepy, and Sonic was being even more mysterious than usual. And his attitude was all weird. The Sonic Manic remembered was always getting into some stupid argument with someone, or preaching good morals and angry optimism, but ever since they’d left Knuckles and the kid behind, Sonic had been all… laid back. Almost passive. It was weird.

But maybe he was just tired, Manic reminded himself as he knocked on Sonia’s door. He had to snap back to normal eventually.

It was Stripes to open the door, and Manic automatically pulled a polite smile into place. He and Stripes barely tolerated each other, but had a silent agreement to play friendly in front of other people. “Hey. Sonia and Amy Rose ready to go yet?”

“Wh- Stripes?” Sonic asked blankly. “Aren’t you that guy from that resort we stayed in that one time?”

“O-oh, S-Sonic,” Stripes said, and Manic blinked, then stepped back with a hopeful grin. Looked like Sonic finally had something to say.

As Sonic moved into the room, brow furrowing as he looked Stripes over, the tiger coughed and shifted his weight uncomfortably, glancing over both shoulders. “Um… it’s um… it’s good to see you, I heard you were back.”

“Yeah. You’re in my sister’s room?” he prompted, and Stripes coughed again.

“Well, yes, it… I mean, it… uh… You see, Sonic, I’m staying here. In the palace. With Sonia, at present.”
Sonic’s eyes narrowed as he took in everything, lingering on the lack of shoes and crumpled cape. “At ‘present’? Meaning not normally. Meaning…?”

“Y-n-no. Well, yes, but…” He paused, but then drew himself up, rolling his shoulders back defiantly. “Sonic, I do care for Sonia. A great deal. We’re… courting. After a fashion.”

Manic looked to Sonic expectantly, but the eruption didn’t come. Instead of freaking out, Sonic just continued staring for several long seconds, until anything he might have said was cut off by Sonia’s pleased gasp.

“Oh, Sonic, you look amazing! Manic, well done!” she cried, and they both leaned around Stripes to see her hurrying out from behind a dressing screen, now dressed in a fluffy, sparkly, wide-skirted dress and too much jewellery to be healthy. She all but pushed Stripes aside to grab Sonic by the hands and pull him around, where she could hold him at arms’ length for a full inspection. She then squealed and hugged both brothers. “It’s perfect! Liam will need to make you a full suit, of course, but you really do look like a soldier prince, it’s just… oh, my gosh, Sonic, you are just… oh, my gosh. Amy!” she called back toward the screen. “Amy, you have to come see this!”

“Coming!” Amy’s voice called. “I’m just trying to work out these heels. I don’t wear them a lot!”

The first thing they saw when she came out was sparkles. Blue glittery sparkles, on a delicate white princess dress, which draped off of perfect, athletic shoulders all the way down to the floor. Manic whistled, and Amy giggled, right up until she looked up, when she abruptly cut off and just stared straight back. “S-Sonic?”

“Doesn’t he look amazing?” Sonia cried, hugging Sonic’s arm. He jumped at the contact and looked at her, blinking rapidly as if he’d been startled.

“You look so…” Amy was still staring, her hands slowly rising to her chest. “Like a…”

“He looks like a prince!” Sonia said proudly. “You know, when we were younger, I used to look at my brothers and think there was no way either of them could grow up to look like proper fairy tale princes, but just look at them! I swear, Sonic, if we can get you a sword and a white pasha, I don’t think there is a single thing we could do to make you look more the part. It’s just incredible.”

Manic chuckled, and then laughed when Sonia noticed Shadow and gave a look of frustrated helplessness. While she struggled with that, he went back to Amy, who had finally looked away to fuss with her dress and hair. “Hey, chill, Amy, you look radical. Seriously.”

“I… I don’t know, I… maybe I should stay behind.”

“Don’t be silly. But we should get going,” Sonia said, apparently deciding not to comment on Shadow, and turned to look at Stripes over her shoulder. “Will we see you at court this afternoon?”

He flinched, then nodded. “Uh, yeah. Probably. Yes.”

“Great! Then come on, everyone!” she said, and promptly marched Sonic out of the room. “Mother and luncheon await!”

“Really, I can go find Tails and Knuckles,” Amy stammered, her eyes on Sonic’s back as she cautiously edged out after them. “I’m not like a… you know… princess, or anything.”

“No way, Amy! You’re a guest of honour!” Manic insisted. “Totally need to be there.”

She hummed and patted at her dress again, eyes flicking over to Sonic’s back every few moments.
Which was understandable. Manic had seen Sonic fumbling with the buttons, so the transformation wasn’t quite so impressive, but he had to admit his brother really pulled off the heroic prince look well. Even with all his muscle and bulk compared to Sonic’s skinny frame, he still felt a little unimpressive next to him.

They walked in relative silence for a minute, until they were halfway through the tunnels back to the dining hall, when Sonic suddenly asked, “What happened to Bartleby?”

Typically, Sonia didn’t miss a beat. “You didn’t even like Bartleby,” she said evenly. “And you admitted Stripes was a good guy after he agreed to help the Resistance.”

“He seemed like it. But seriously, what happened to Bartleby?”


“Sonia’s ex-fiancé. Real peace of work. My sister’s got a type, if you couldn’t tell.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sonia said, just loudly and pointedly enough that Manic knew she’d heard him. “Stripes and I enjoy each other’s company, whether you like it or not.”

“I didn’t say anything about Stripes,” Sonic snapped, and Manic felt Amy straighten beside him, even as he felt himself relax a little. That tone was a little more like the Sonic he remembered. “You can date whoever you like. It’s just that the last time I saw you, you were pretty in denial about Bartleby.”

“Things change. People change,” she said, and Manic rolled his eyes. It was a lame excuse, but the one she always used, even with people who knew different.

Sonic just turned his head forward to open the last door before the public corridors again. “And others don’t,” he muttered, before leading the way out.

Sonia prickled, and was clearly ready to demand “And just what is that supposed to mean?!” when they caught sight of a group of people milling around the dining hall. She cut herself off and quickly snatched Sonic’s wrist, pulling him back so he was part of the group as she said, “Alright, just so everyone’s aware. Luncheon is just as much a political arena as the official court sessions. Amy, Shadow, we’ll try to protect you as best we can, but the aristocrats may ask about you, and if we don’t know the answer, you will be expected to respond. Just try to be polite, and if things get uncomfortable, just try to bring us back into the conversation. Sonic, remember how you used to talk back to Resistance leaders, and act like everyone with a pedigree was an idiot? Don’t do that. They are often idiots, but they’re idiots that have a lot of sway over the general populace, and are our financial backbone. Please show them some modicum of respect, or at least be polite. I know it will be hard, but try.”

He raised an eyeridge, smirking slightly. “Sure. I can try.”

She frowned at him a little longer, then shot Manic a quick look. “Don’t let him be a bad influence on you.”

Manic just grinned back, especially when he caught Sonic’s wink.

“Okay, fine,” Sonia said, apparently willing to take whatever she could get. “But everyone stays silent until we’re seated, alright? Just walk straight past them all, no matter what they say.”

Sonic made a face, but apparently agreed, because he didn’t say a word, even as she turned on her heel and began marching down the hall. They all followed her in silence, Manic keeping his eyes
dead ahead even as they reached the crowd, but the expected deluge of impatient aristocratic babble barely lasted two seconds before cutting off with an audible gasp.

“Is that –”

“I don’t believe it.”

“But who’s that –”

“One of them has to be the Lost Prince.”

“Sonic…”

Despite himself, Manic looked at Sonic sideways, but his brother just smiled easily, tipping a lazy salute at the crowd without pausing his stride. It was somehow both incredibly awesome and slightly creepy, so Manic shifted his gaze to make sure Amy was doing okay. She was still moving, but her eyes were wide and she was keeping her head down, as if looking up would give the aristocrats permission to pounce. Shadow was slightly worse, from a public relations standpoint, given the way he was watching the aristocrats like they were strange creatures in a zoo.

But they made it into the dining hall without incident, and once the door closed behind them, Sonia smiled like it was a great accomplishment. The three servants that were waiting inside looked awkward for only a few moments before bowing, and one of them hurried out to notify everyone they were almost ready to go.

“Well done, guys,” Sonia said, and looked over the table with gleaming eyes. Manic couldn’t blame her—the table had been commissioned just after the end of the war, but it hadn’t been finished before Sonic had disappeared. Today would be the first time they’d be able to sit at it properly.

On first glance, it seemed like a large square table, set with twenty seats. It was only on second glance that you realised the four corners had been shaved off and cornered in gold, their chairs larger and intricately decorated for each member of the Council of Four. For thirty months, the fourth place, with its delicate sapphire engravings and plush blue cushions, had sat unoccupied.

Taking the hint before Sonia could even speak, Sonic collapsed into the chair, setting his elbows on the armrests and fixing his siblings with a blunt look. “So do we get to eat, as well as look pretty for the crowd? ’Cause I’m kinda starving.”

“Of course we eat. Amy, why don’t you sit over here beside me, and Shadow, go next to Mother’s chair, on the… left, if you would,” Sonia directed. “She’s the amethyst waves, of course.”

Manic relaxed into his jade-decorated chair and grinned at Sonic knowingly. “Eating’s your best defence against talking,” he confided. “Let the aristocrats rant, and every time they ask a question you don’t want to answer, just shove a fork in your mouth.”

“Politely,” Sonia interjected firmly. “Remember to be polite.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving her off.

Meanwhile, Sonic had caught the eye of one of the two remaining servants—Gem, if Manic remembered correctly—and was smiling warmly. “Hi, by the way.”

Gem blinked, looking slightly panicked, while the other—Rory, Manic was pretty sure—only blinked twice before recovering. “O-of course, your majesty. Are you ready to receive your guests?”
“Uhh…” Sonic glanced at Manic and Sonia, confused, so Sonia took pity on them both.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, and then shot Manic and Sonic nasty looks. “Polite!”

“Sis, chill, we got the memo!” Sonic told her, but she still glared at him until Gem and Rory opened the doors and let the crowd in.

Given how they’d freaked out in the corridor, Manic had expected the aristocrats to immediately jump on Sonic and Shadow, demanding to know what was going on, but for the first time in almost two years, the whole group was silent as they filtered in. They stared at Sonic, shot Shadow confused glances, and didn’t say a word as they took their seats. The silence continued until Aleena made her entrance a few moments later, and stood in front of her chair with hands folded in front of her.

“Ladies and gentlemen, once again we thank you for joining us in this casual affair,” she said, and Manic glanced down the table, unable to hide his smirk at Sonic’s incredulous look. “Normally, it is custom to begin our meal with little ceremony, but there are overlanders in the room we have little patience for. Ladies and gentlemen, may we introduce Agent Shadow, of the Guardian Unit of Nations. He is ambassador for the United Federation, and by extension, the human contingent.”

Every eye in the room locked on Shadow, but he didn’t look uncomfortable. He met the gazes evenly, daring even one of them to comment. None of them did.

“Beside the Princess of the Rebellion is Lady Amy Rose, who is part of Agent Shadow’s entourage. Although she lives in the human territories, Lady Amy is one of us. If we might be so bold, we would call her representative of those of us who live beyond the borders,” Aleena continued, and then turned her gaze to her direct opposite, where Sonic was still slouched. But rather than mention him, she just smiled brightly and sat down. “The Council of Four welcomes you to luncheon. Let us begin.”

Although no one said anything, or made an obvious movements, it felt like there was a collective face-fault, like everyone had tripped over the lack of acknowledgement. Sonic quickly picked up his water glass, burying whatever reaction he had in it, and the servants moved forward, professional dignity refusing to allow them to care.

Finally, Lady Felinae, who was a construction mogul and usually the bane of Manic’s existence, worked up the courage to speak. “I understand now the reason morning court was cancelled at such late notice. The royal family has had quite a morning, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Aleena said with a smile. “But as you can see, the royal children all returned successfully, and we understand Agent Shadow’s reasons for his impromptu arrival. The timing was quite fortuitous, in the end.”

Okay, now she was just being coy. But Manic couldn’t help smirking at Felinae’s annoyance, especially when Sonia pounced on her lead.

“Yes, it was quite a reminder to both the Thief Prince and myself,” she said airily. “We’re far better suited to project management, truth be told. I daresay we’ll not be attempting such foolish endeavours again. Much better to leave that work to the professionals.”

“We were trying to get a robotocisor from the Badlands,” Manic explained, before anyone could interject. “But we’ve been out of practice at heroics for way too long. We got cornered by some anarchists, and y’know… But like Sonia said: totally a reminder we needed. I forget about the anarchists sometimes, y’know?”
Ratsby, one of those aristocrats who lived off investments and therefore was allowed to spend almost all his time finding important conversations to listen to, lifted his gaze. “You do not usually feel the anarchists worthy of note, milord?”

“Note, sure,” he said, “I’m just not used to them tryin’ to get their point across by tying me up.”

A few people around the table chuckled, but Ratsby continued gazing at him intently. “The anarchists captured you? What did they intend to do?”

“They didn’t say, even when we asked,” he said. He hated talking to guys like Ratsby. Felinae he could handle – she was nasty and selfish, but she was at least practical. When she acted like he was being stupid, it was because she was trying to get more money or resources out of him for construction projects. Ratsby talked down to him just because he hadn’t gone to school or read the right books. Manic was pretty sure Ratsby would never like him, and he’d long since given up on trying to get the guy’s respect. Instead, he just tried to get through conversations with him as quickly as possible. “Mostly they just gloated.”

“How then did you escape?”

“Agent Shadow flew us out,” Sonia said, and raised her glass in an impromptu salute toward him. “As Mother said, his timing was quite fortuitous.”

Several aristocrats looked around at Sonic, but to all appearances, he was completely focussed on his food and not paying the slightest bit of attention. Manic couldn’t figure out whether he was avoiding conversation or just keeping his head down like Sonia had asked.

It became even more noticeable as the conversation continued. Somehow, Sonic managed to be both the centre of attention, with everyone at the table closely watching him for anything resembling a response, and also the one thing nobody wanted to directly mention. Several aristocrats almost made it, but when the moment came to say ‘Lost Prince’ or ‘Sonic’, they would pause, awkwardly wait for Sonic to look up or acknowledge them, and then abruptly decide to mention Shadow instead.

Which should have been weird, Manic figured, except that he knew how aristocrats thought. Shadow wasn’t wearing clothes, didn’t have a ‘lord’ in his title, and was even physically smaller than most people at the table. No matter how dark his blank stare was, he probably seemed like easy pickings. The fact he only gave short, direct responses to questions, never engaging in conversation or even changing his expression, didn’t put anyone off.

Except Sonic and Amy, who were watching him more and more closely as lunch continued, expressions weirdly apprehensive. If Manic was any judge, that was probably as good a sign as any that things were going to go bad soon. He was halfway through thinking up a plan to distract everyone when Sonic suddenly gave a loud, satisfied moan.

“Wow, this avian mecanlow is incredible.”

The whole room froze.

Manic, along with everyone else, slowly turned to look at him, but Sonic just leaned back in his chair to grin at Gem. “Seriously, is the food always this good here? I mean, okay, I haven’t had this stuff in years, but either my memory’s screwed up, or this is just about the best mecanlow I’ve ever had. Who’s the cook?”

Horrified by the extra attention, Gem almost dropped the pitcher she’d been in the middle of picking up, though her fingers clenched around it the moment it started to slip. Rory wasn’t doing much
better, with mecanlow sauce he’d been pouring for Amy dripping all over the table, and the last waiter had only just managed to stop himself from spilling wine on an aristocrat’s knee. After several long seconds, Gem recovered enough to whisper, “The ch-chef’s name is Growth V-Vinyid, your majesty.”

“Growth… Growth… you know, I don’t think I know him. Where’d you find him, Mom?”

Everyone’s eyes snapped to Aleena, who smiled serenely as she reached out to guide the third waiter and the wine over to her goblet. “Master Vinyid was part of the original staff. His recipes are exquisite.”

“Seriously. Should’ve come with a warning label,” Sonic agreed. “Any other meals I should watch out for?”

“Well, it is a little rustic, but his red ant oatmeal with cream is utterly divine.”

“Red ant oatmeal… now that takes me back,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “I haven’t had red ant oatmeal since I was a kid.”

“It must be difficult to come across outside of Mobius,” she commented, and he nodded.

“They don’t even make it off the mainland. That’s one good thing about coming back – the food,” he said, and looked over at Amy. “You’ve probably never had proper mobian food, have you? The old traditional stuff?”

She blinked, startled when everyone looked at her, too, but managed to stammer out, “I’ve h-had red ant oatmeal before. When I was little.”

“It’s a family dessert,” Sonic said, as if to justify her having not had it since then, and then looked back at Aleena. “We should have some tonight. To celebrate us being together again.”

“An excellent idea,” she said, raising her goblet toward him. “Word will be sent to the kitchens.”

Manic looked across the table at Sonia, who stared back for a second, before they both glanced around at the aristocrats. It wasn’t clear whether the tension of the room had gotten better or worse, but something had definitely shifted. A few of the aristocrats were looking slightly ashamed, while others, like Felinae, were watching Sonic curiously.

Naturally, she was the first to speak. “And where have you been, to not have access to mobian food, my prince?”


“Protecting our borders, I assume.”

“Protecting a lot of things,” he said. It somehow didn’t sound as short as it should have.

“Well, that is good to hear,” Ratsby commented. “I would hate to think you’ve been wasting your time when you should have been here, taking your place as Crown Prince.”

Glancing at Sonia was the only reason Manic noticed Amy stiffen, which made him look at Shadow too. But Shadow was still watching Sonic intently, and Sonic himself only paused for a moment before saying, “Triplets mean that crown’s up for debate,” he replied. “But ‘wasting’ time is a pretty personal opinion. Something in particular you were expecting me to do?”
“Sonic,” Sonia hissed, and he turned his vague smile on her. She gave him a chilly one in return before nodding to Ratsby. “As has been previously discussed, Lord Craven, the Lost Prince was performing necessary security, as per the queen’s orders.”

“Ah, yes. Of course, your highness, but as also previously discussed, that order was given quite soon after the rebellion ended,” he said evenly. “Some might even say too soon.”

“Some being you,” Manic said quietly.

“And many of my contemporaries,” he pointed out. “Many of whom are here, yes?”

“Regardless of what may have been, had different decisions been made,” another aristocrat began slowly. Lady Feathersby, who campaigned for rodentia rights, if Manic remembered right. Sonia had more to do with her than he did. “I presume the Lost Prince will now be taking his rightful place, and the Council of Four will be joined in truth?”

“Indeed,” another agreed. “This luncheon gives me great hope. I imagine we will soon see a great many changes in the kingdom.”

“Perhaps the rabble in the poor quarter can finally be addressed?”

“And what of the anarchists? Having done such wonders for our borders, the prince should have no difficulty putting down problems inside them.”

Sonic shifted in his chair slightly, though his smile stayed in place. “Uh, I’ve only been here for a couple hours, but I didn’t know they were causing you problems. Or have you been chasing robotocisers in their territory, too?”

Sonia visibly twitched, and Manic paused, watching the aristocrats carefully not react. It was Lady Felinae who said, “I wasn’t aware anarchists have territory, your majesty. Are they not terrorists against the empire?”

“Well, of course,” Sonia interject quickly. “But they aren’t so effective as to be considered a threat to –”

“Oh,” Ratsby said over her, eyes intent on Sonic, “do you have other ways to deal with them, Lost Prince? I have heard a few rumours about your past allegiances, after all. I always assumed they were baseless.”

“My allegiances,” Sonic repeated, and then chuckled. “Well, I dunno about that, but if it makes you feel any better, I did just get back from knocking a few of them upside the head.”

“Of course. We wouldn’t want there to be any confusion about your support for your mother’s reign,” he said, and Sonic joined him in a laugh that wasn’t in the least bit amused.

“Right. Sure.”

“And once that is done,” Felinae piped up again, “we will no doubt see great leaps in the rehabilitation efforts.”

Another aristocrat hummed. “They have so stagnated without a Crown Prince to drive them.”

Manic had spent the better part of a year cataloguing his brother’s expressions in search of meaning behind an arrogant grin and gruff statements, which was probably the only reason he knew they had about two more sentences before Sonic snapped. His bottom lip was pulled back further than the top,
and he was keeping his hands out of sight, which meant they were probably clenched tightly. It was almost reassuring to see that old, familiar anger, hidden so carefully behind a mild look.

But, surprisingly, Sonic just took a short breath and pulled out a hand to pick up his glass, taking a long drink before turning his attention back to the aristocrats with a slightly more structured smile. “Well, much as I appreciate the votes of confidence, I literally only flew into town a few hours ago. I still haven’t caught up with Mom and the sibs yet, let alone had a chance to check out the city and what needs doing,” he said, and gestured expansively with his drink. “Besides, we’ve got other priorities right now, right? What about this big festival? Talk about a morale trip! What’s the plan there, huh?”

And that would be his cue, Manic realised. “Oh, yeah, it’s gonna be wicked,” he said excitedly. “Kicking off and ending with fireworks, lots of music, markets, celebrations. Basically the party of the millennium.”

“And we have the ball next Friday, of course,” Sonia added. “Where you and Manic will be formally introduced.”

“And given rank,” one of the minor aristocrats interject mildly, and Sonia nodded at him.

“Yes, and rank. But it all begins with the night festival parade on Sunday. Maybe Manic and I can take you on a tour of the route tonight. It’s really beautiful, going all the way through the city.”

“Beautiful, if you don’t mind the trash,” one of the politicians noted with a smile.

“Speaking of trash,” Manic said loudly, and then leaned over to look at the aristocrat beside Sonic. “Yo, Marcus, any word on the river haul? What are the chances of it getting started before the weekend?”

Marcus was a small-time aristocrat that owned several refuse plants, and he stiffened at the sudden attention. “Oh, um, not fantastic, Manic, sir. We’ve got the trawlers, but we’re having a few issues staffing them. Pay disputes.”

“Seriously?”

He tried to focus on Marcus as the conversation turned back to work, but Manic found himself watching Sonic instead. His brother was frowning at something in his lap, and looking almost regretfully at his plate. But before Manic could figure out whether he was upset about the food or the conversation, Aleena stood up, interrupting their discussion.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for your time, and look forward to continuing these discussions at court. Prior to that, however… Lost Prince, Lady Rose, I would speak with you, if you have finished your meals,” she added, pointedly polite.

“Sure,” Sonic said, and Amy nodded quietly, both of them getting up and following her out the side door, relief and gratitude in every step.

Before he left, Sonic set whatever he’d been looking at down under the lip of his plate. It was only because it was Marcus who had been sitting beside him, who had the habit of picking up and inspecting everything people tried to throw away, that Manic got to see it was a fork. Bent at a right angle, from a tightly clenched fist.
“You know, I know it’s not politically sound, but I really wanted to punch that guy with the whiskers in the face. Is that wrong?”

Aleena smiled but didn’t comment as Sonic sat down less than a metre from the chamber door and began swapping his boots for sneakers. “From my understanding, that is something of a common theme among those who meet Lord Ratsby.”

“And no one has yet? Because if it’s seriously that bad for everyone, I’m thinking it’d be a public service, y’know?” He tightened the straps faster than either Aleena or Amy could track and started in on the jacket buttons. “Are they always like that? All of them?”

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “How did you fare, Miss Rose? I noticed you ate very little.”

Amy started, then blushed and fiddled with her skirt. “S-sorry, I didn’t… the food was lovely, I just… I don’t think…”

“I do apologise that our first meal together had to be so formal,” she said gently. “Luncheon is a matter of tradition, and that makes it far more formal than it was ever intended to be. Sonic, I regret to say that I will require you attend all luncheons you are in the city for, though Miss Rose, you are free to take lunch however you wish.”

Sonic huffed but didn’t say anything, and Amy just stared at the carpet a little harder. Aleena looked between them for a moment, then delicately cleared her throat. “Sonic, I am quite impressed. You handled yourself very well – far better than Manic did on his first formal luncheon. Almost as well as your sister.”

“Yeah, well,” he said vaguely, standing up to strip off his jacket properly, “I had a couple weeks of practice. O’course, Camelot let me get away with a whole lot more, but Lamorak always gave me an earful about it later.”

Aleena paused, watching him curiously, but he didn’t meet her gaze this time, folding the jacket over one arm and yanking off a glove. “So there a particular reason they all seem convinced I’m gonna change the world just by being here?”

“That too is a common theme,” she said, watching Amy fastidiously not look at Sonic’s bare hands. “I had thought you would be used to it – from what I understand, you have been taking on problems and finding solutions for them since you were very young.”

“Yeah, but no one ever expected it,” he grumbled. “Except a couple people in the Resistance, but they were nutjobs already.”

“I suspect it is more that no one ever told you what they expected, my dear.”

He grimaced but didn’t respond to that, instead focussing on pulling on and adjusting his normal white gloves. That done, he was officially back to normal, and huffed out another breath. “So. What now, Mom?”

“I’m afraid I must prepare for afternoon court. You are of course welcome to join me, but I suspect you may prefer to reacquaint yourself with the rest of the palace and city,” she said, and stepped forward to kiss his forehead. “Thank you for coming home, my son. We’ll speak more soon.”

He frowned again, but quickly pulled a smile over it and nodded, both he and Amy watching as Aleena turned and headed out for court. Once she was gone, Sonic turned to his friend with a more
authentic smile. “So, you wanna ditch the dress before or after we find the guys?”

“Before,” she said quietly. “I… I don’t belong in this at all.”

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
There's a girl - The Ditty Bops 2004
Amy could still remember the first time she’d heard about Sonic.

She’d been seven years old, and he’d just rescued South Island. Everyone was talking about the amazing hedgehog that could run faster than sound, and how he’d been the first to stand up to the evil Doctor Robotnik and win.

She couldn’t stop thinking about it. Something about his name just stuck in her head, and she thought about him constantly. Soon, she was dreaming about a blue hedgehog, and even though no one had ever told her what he looked like, she knew it was him.

She bought the tarot cards on a whim, thinking they might help her find the source of her dreams, and soon enough, they told her to go to Little Planet. Yes, she was captured for her trouble, but she finally met him: Sonic the Hedgehog. And he was every bit as cool and handsome and brave as she’d dreamed he would be.

So she’d always known Sonic was good looking, and she’d always recognised that he had an incredible presence to him that made everyone flock to him. It wasn’t even just her – she’d collected a dozen magazines that had done photo spreads on him, and every mobian woman she’d ever met agreed he was handsome.

But that beauty had always been… approachable.

No matter what Sonic said or did, he was always someone you could walk up to on the street and talk to.

“When Tails said you were a prince,” she explained as they walked back to the royal wing, “I just thought it was kind of romantic, you know? Like, of course you’re a prince, you’ve always been a prince! You’re handsome and brave and wonderful! Of course you would be royal, too.”

For once, Sonic didn’t groan and roll his eyes at the compliments; he just continued watching her silently.

“And when we first met Sonia and Manic, they didn’t seem like a prince and princess, you know? I mean, I’ve seen Sonia in a million magazines, and she’s always been so beautiful, but who cares? When we rescue somebody, they’re just another person. And so I didn’t think, you know? They were just… just your brother and sister, and that made them cool, but that was it,” she said. “But then, you came in dressed up like that. And Sonia and Manic were dressed up too. And the three of you together, looking the way you did… You looked like a prince. A real prince, that’s supposed to be king, and who… who wouldn’t even look twice at someone like me. Princes ride white horses and rescue princesses from towers, not… not silly fangirls in borrowed dresses and shoes they can’t
Sonic waited a beat, but when she didn’t continue talking, he grabbed her arm and forced them both to a stop before holding out his other hand. “Take ’em off.”

“What?”

“The shoes,” he said. “Hand ’em over. No one can see your feet under that skirt anyway.”

She blinked, and then sighed. “You know that’s not what I –”

“Hey, I thought you knew me enough not to get worked up over what I look like,” he shot back. “So if you’re gonna worry about how me wearing a dinner jacket is gonna affect what I think of you, I’m gonna worry about the kind of shoes you’re wearing. And I don’t know if you noticed, but I have this thing about being able to run. If you can’t even walk in what you’re wearing, I’m gonna have an issue with it.”

For a moment, she looked ready to argue, or get annoyed with his point of focus, but in the end she just kicked off the heels and stepped back. Sonic scooped them up and added them to the pile of clothes he was carrying before continuing down the hall. She couldn’t help but smile as she hurried to catch up, and he slanted his eyes toward her.

“You still don’t believe me about Camelot, right?”

Still amused by the whole shoe thing, she gifted him with a lofty look. “You mean do I think you got magically swept up into a storybook just in time for you to skip the one date I’ve ever gotten you to agree to?” she clarified, then huffed playfully. “Let’s pretend I do.”

He snorted. “Thanks. It’ll make this easier,” he said, and then paused, obviously choosing his next words with a surprising amount of thought. “Okay, so, in Camelot, I was a knight, and then they made me king. I was never a prince there, and when I was made king, it was because of the things I’d done, not because of who my family was, or whatever.”

“Because you pulled a sword out of a stone?” she asked, and he shrugged one shoulder.

“The legend says I could do that because I was the chosen one, but I dunno, you know? Anyone could pick up Caliburn, and he could’ve left me any time he wanted,” he explained. “No one knew the royalty bit of the story before Caliburn reminded them at the end, and he was pretty clear in saying he was only choosing me then, not before. Because I’d saved the kingdom.”

“Oh,” she said slowly.

“I ruled Camelot for two weeks, before they found that world’s version of me to do the job properly,” he said, holding up two fingers. “At the end of it, everyone was kind of glad to see me go. I wasn’t really very good at kinging.”

She blinked, surprised. “You weren’t?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t really do diplomacy. I figure you should do what’s right, no matter what some lame politician says about it. And I figure that if something can be done straight away, it should be. So as much as everyone agreed with what I wanted to do, they all got annoyed when I just said ‘we’re doing this and we’re doing it now’. The court burned out under me really quick,” he explained, then added, “But before I went to Camelot, I kind of always thought that if I ever did have to come back and do the king thing, I wouldn’t have any problems. Turns out not only would I have major problems, but I’d hate it more than I hate swimming.”
She stared at him for a few seconds, then asked, “Why?”

“Kings can’t do what I do,” he said bluntly. “They save kingdoms, not people. They keep things running. The only thing I want to keep running is me.”

She hummed quietly, and they walked in silence for a few seconds, before she said softly, “But you are prince. And you might have to be king. And if you become king, then… what happens to us? All those times I chased after you, and all that time, you were…”

They’d reached the royal quarters, and slowed to a stop outside Manic’s door, not looking at each other as the words hung between them, slipping around all the other things they never said.

Eventually, Sonic took a deep breath and turned his head to face her. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen, Amy. Never have. But if I have to choose between being a prince and being a friend, you know which side I’m gonna come down on.”

She hesitated, then slowly peeked at him from under her eyelashes. When he only gained a slightly nervous edge to his expression, she closed her eyes with a fond smile, accepting the statement for what it was.

Then she threw her arms wide and launched herself at him. He yelped, the clothes in his arms going flying as he scrambled to catch her and stay upright, and she burst into crocodile tears. “Oh, Sonic! I just don’t know what I’d do without you! I’d just miss you so much! It’s not fair!”

“A-Amy…!”

She yanked herself away again and lifted her fists up under her chin, pulling a defiant expression into place. “I’ll just have to work hard and become the best royal consort I can be! So no matter what happens, I can stay by your side!”

“Uh – but – Amy –”

“That’s settled then!” she said, and spun as best she could do with the voluminous skirts. “Just as well! I’m going to go get changed, okay? Be ready, because I want to find Tails and Knuckles as soon as we can!”

And with that, she flounced off, grinning as soon as she was sure he wouldn’t notice. No matter what he was officially, he would always be her Sonic. Her prince, first and foremost. And she could live with that, even if she didn’t feel ready to live that life. And now she wasn’t worried about him leaving her behind, she could really get behind the knowledge that he looked incredibly good in clothing. She’d have to find more ways to get him into it.

By the time she came back, Sonic was lounging against a door opposite Manic’s, and barely dodged when she lashed out to grab his arm with both hands and start dragging him down the hall. “I was thinking, you looked amazing in that outfit. You should wear jackets more often. Maybe some pants, too. Have you ever worn pants?”

“Yeah. And no way am I wearing them again. They burn easy with friction,” he pointed out, but she scoffed it off as details, warming to the idea. There were plenty of fabrics designed to deal with chaos physics. Or, at least, she was pretty sure Tails would be able to make some if she asked.

When they arrived in the main hall again, it was to find Manic waiting for them, stripped down to his open jacket and boots and fiddling with his earrings. He smiled as they came close. “Hey! I was wondering where you two had got to.”
“Hey bro,” Sonic greeted. “Sonia still at lunch?”

“Nah, man, she goes to court with Mother most days,” he said, finishing up with his earrings. “I told her she should skip it so we could all hang out, but she said something about keeping an eye on Craven and his big mouth, so we prolly won’t see her until like, four.”

“Craven?”

“One of the aristocrats. Likes to think of himself as a journalist, but he’s really just a rumour-monger,” he explained. “So anyway, I was supposed to be workin’ on a hover float this afternoon, but I am like, all for ditching that if you guys wanna hang.”

“We were going to go find Tails and Knuckles,” Amy said brightly. “But we didn’t have any plans after that.”

He blinked, raising his eyes toward the ceiling as if he’d forgotten about them. “Oh yeah. Knowing Cyrus, they’re probably still messing around with the security system – poor Tails is prolly bored out of his mind. I should have warned the poor kid before we let him go off with Cyrus,” he said, and gestured for them to follow him as he set off down the hall. “I was so seriously amazed Knuckles went along with them, too. He and Cyrus haven’t exactly been hitting it off, if you know what I mean.”

“Knuckles not getting on with an anti-magic technology-freak?” Sonic drawled. “Who ever would have guessed?”

Amy nudged him, but grinned back when he winked at her. Manic glanced at them, obviously not getting the joke, and added, “Well, yeah, but I wouldn’t’ve picked him for a baby-sitter, either.”


Sonic snorted, but didn’t actually comment. He had a sneaking suspicion Knuckles had gone along to watch Cyrus get shown up by an eight year old, since they all knew there was no chance Tails would get a crack at an Eggman system and not tear it to shreds. Personally, Sonic had never really cared too much about how old someone was, compared to what they could do—he’d become a one-hedgehog army at nine, after all—but people like Cyrus tended to make assumptions, and Knuckles always loved it when he wasn’t the one making mistakes. He’d probably have a real ball hanging around Tails over the next week or so.

His thoughts were brought back to the present when Manic turned around and began walking backwards, so he could smile at Amy directly. “So um… since I probably shouldn’t go like, delvin’ into Sonic’s story without Sonia… can I ask about yours?”

She blinked. “Mine?”

“Yeah. You looked really awesome with that hammer this morning. You’re a soldier?”

“Oh, well, uh…” She blushed and covered her cheeks with both hands. “I don’t know about that!”

“The way you fought off those anarchists was really slamming! Where’d you learn to fight?”

“Um… boxercise,” she mumbled, and then glared when Sonic snickered. “Well, it’s true! You wouldn’t teach me!”

He just laughed harder, but she was kept from reacting too badly by Manic’s voice. “So, what, were you learning for self-defence? I know hangin’ out with my bro can be seriously bad for your health if
“You can’t defend yourself.”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t worried about anything like that. I know Sonic will always rescue me if I need it!” she said brightly. “I learnt boxercise to lose weight, and I learned how to fight for myself!”

“Wow, seriously?” he asked, and she shrugged modestly.

“A girl has to know how to defend herself from all kinds of threats, not just the ones Sonic deals with!” she said, and ignored Sonic’s expression with long practice. “It was kind of hard learning from humans, though. They have really different exercise regimes. It’s the long bodies, you know?”

“I still can’t believe you live with them. Aren’t you scared?”

“Of humans?” she asked, then laughed. “Of course not! I really like living in human cities. They’re always bustling, with lots of people everywhere! And humans do some really interesting things, and their festivals are amazing! Oh, we went to this one festival once, in Soleanna – do you remember that, Sonic? When the duchess lit the fire on the boat, and it spread out like wings?”

“Yeah, that was really beautiful,” he agreed.

“And the TV… ugh. I always miss human TV when I leave for a while,” she said with a sigh. “I’m going to miss so much of the Bold and the Restless…”

Sonic rolled his eyes but smiled, unable to complain now that she was back to normal. Besides, she was distracting Manic, leaving Sonic free to look around. Eggman’s style had changed a lot in just a couple of years, so it was a heck of a nostalgia trip to wander through dark metal and grease.

It made him think about what else had changed. The schemes, the focus, the methods… in a lot of ways, Eggman was a completely different kind of villain. Aiming bigger and shallower, at the same time. There had to be some kind of reason for it, but Sonic had never really spent a lot of time thinking about it, up until now… Maybe if he –

“This is crazy!”

The sudden shout made them all jump and exchange glances, then immediately break into a run, following the yelling.

“No! No, this isn’t possible! I have looked through every single schematic we’ve found of this place! I have spent weeks—literal weeks—combing the ducts of this place to find every secret it has to offer!” As they rushed out of the hallway into a large, open computer room, it was to find Cyrus standing over Tails in front of a massive green hologram of the palace, with Knuckles sitting off to the side with a nasty grin. Taking it all in and connecting the dots, Sonic slid to a stop and folded his arms, while the other two kept running forward until Manic could snatch Cyrus around the shoulders and drag him away.

“Hey, whoa, Cyrus!” he cried. “What the heck, man?”

“Tails! Are you okay?” asked Amy, but he just blinked at her.

“Yeah, I’m fine. And a little less concerned about the Mystic Ruins turning into this place. If this is all he can muster when he’s on a roll, then I say bring it on!”

“Would you quit acting like this is a joke?” Cyrus yelled, and Manic yelped as he was forced to lurch to the side to keep his friend back.
Tails winced, raising his mileselectric like a shield. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“However you meant it, you’ve sure said some nicer things,” Sonic noted dryly. “But I take it you cracked this egg?”

“Huh?” Manic glanced at him, then back at Tails, who was shrugging casually.

“I’m used to way more advanced stuff, and you know what I think of Eggman’s designs,” he said. “I broke down some old firewalls, found a whole heap of secret files, and opened a bunch of levels that had been closed off downstairs. I was just telling Cyrus about the engines, and he, well…”

“This place doesn’t have an engine room!” Cyrus insisted. “It’s a palace! It doesn’t need an engine room! It can’t fly!”


“Shard,” Knuckles corrected, and everyone but Tails and Sonic looked at him blankly. His smile was downright creepy. “These days we call those things Chaos Shards. Totally different.”

“Anyway,” Sonic said, shooting him a look before going back to Tails. “You’re saying this is a Death Egg?”

“Yeah. But old and clunky enough to be a prototype. Honestly, I don’t think it would have gotten off the ground, but it’s got all the parts,” he said, and pointed to some highlighted areas on the hologram. “But like I was just telling Cyrus, all the engines and stuff has been locked off for like, ten years.”

“Death Egg?” Manic repeated, and he turned to look at the hologram too, then down at Tails’ handheld. “Wait. What… what is that?”

“This? It’s my mileselectric,” he said, lifting it up. “It was originally designed as a navigation and communication unit for my bi-plane, but after one thing and another, I’ve had to modify it like, a bajillion times. Now we just kinda use it for everything.”

“Can we please focus, here?” Cyrus snapped furiously. “He found full schematics of everything – every base we’ve ever seen! Even those ones we haven’t been able to get into! Designs for weapons and robots I’ve never even heard of! And he shut down the entire security system, even for those floors we’ve spent years trying to get onto! I have guards scouring the top level of the palace!” he cried, and then ended on a shriek, “and he’s only eight years old!”

“This? It’s my mileselectric,” he said, lifting it up. “It was originally designed as a navigation and communication unit for my bi-plane, but after one thing and another, I’ve had to modify it like, a bajillion times. Now we just kinda use it for everything.”

“—outsmarted in two hours by a freaking eight year old!” Cyrus shrieked, and then stumbled out of Manic’s arms to collapse against the monitor.

There were a few seconds of silence to allow Manic to deal with that, before Amy turned and slapped Tails over the back of the head. “Way to let them have a little dignity, Tails.”

“What?” he asked, but he was looking as close to smug as Tails ever did. “The stuff I deal with is usually way more complicated than this. Seriously, Sonic, if you’d told me how much trouble they
were having, I could’ve come by and fixed this years ago!”

“You weren’t hacking when I was here last,” Sonic reminded him.

“Wait, what?”

They looked back at Manic, whose expression had suddenly become oddly sharp and focussed.

“What do you mean, ‘last’? You’ve been back to Mobotropolis since the war?”

Something in the back of his mind told Sonic to tread carefully, but he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“No…”

“So… so when you say…” He paused, eyes flicking down to Tails and then back to Sonic. “You knew Tails before then?”

“Yeah, so?”

“I thought –” Manic’s glance was a little longer this time. “I didn’t know you knew each other before.”

“Oh, yeah. We’ve been together so long I almost can’t remember life without him,” Tails said, his voice taking on a strange quality that was both smug and altogether too innocent. “You know, a lot of people even call us brothers.”

And with that last word, Sonic finally noticed the massive warning sign crashing against the back of his head. Two occasionally insecure little brothers with mild cases of hero-worship, neither of which had known about each other until very recently, in one room, with a clear opening.

And he’d just walked right into it.

Thankfully, Cyrus unknowingly cut through the issue with a loud, irritated sigh.

“Sorry. Sorry, Tails,” he said. “I’m not… I’m not really angry with you, it’s just… we’ve wasted so much time, trying to finish breaking into this place. We could’ve been researching. Experimenting. Who knows? We might have even brought them back by now.”

“Brought them back?” repeated Amy. “Brought who back?”

“What do you mean, who?” He looked at her, brow furrowing. “The Mobian Tragedy.”

“Tragedy…” Sonic repeated, his arms unfolding as he refocussed. “Wait, are you talking about robotocisation? Mom never figured out how to fix it?”

“No. It’s not just magic, so her powers weren’t enough,” Manic said slowly, dragging his attention away from Tails. “She could bring them back for a while, like us, but not even she could change what had been made into machine.”

“Science has to do that,” said Cyrus. “But we’ve been too busy trying to make sure the place we were living was safe. All of them—my father, Farrell, everyone—all we could do was lock them up. They’re waiting for –”

“Where?” It was so dark and flat, Sonic almost didn’t realise he was the one who’d said it. But he didn’t even think, just demanded, “Where are they?”

Manic just looked at him, and Cyrus frowned. “Sonic, I don’t think –”
“Tails?”

True to form, his little buddy was already tapping at his handheld for an answer. “There’s a weirdly high electro-magnetic signature coming from basement one, near the generators.”

Sonic only waited to check the answer against Cyrus’ slightly panicked glance before turning and sprinting from the room.

It wasn’t that he’d assumed they would have fixed the robotocised people. He knew it had been one of those near-impossible feats, since not even Eggman seemed to know how to turn someone back. But with everything his mother was supposed to be able to do, he had always figured they would have been able to do something.

But from the way Cyrus had looked at him just now, not only had they not done anything, they’d done something so bad they didn’t want Sonic to know about it. Something worse than just locking them up.

Gritting his teeth, Sonic gave up on the hallways and dove into the air ducts. It wasn’t as fast as the proper corridors, but he knew the way to the generator best from the paths he’d taken during the war, and this way, he wouldn’t run the risk of hurting anyone as he ran past them. With that, he made it to the generators in less than a minute, and then yanked open the door so he could check the surrounding rooms.

There were only two. One was a maintenance office, which he ignored. The other was a heavy metal portal, with the words ‘Robotics lab – no unauthorised entry’ written on it in heavy black paint. From memory, the room had once been a garbage room, filled with abandoned experiments and spare parts. Somehow he doubted the paint was a holdover. He kicked in the door.

Then he stopped, everything he’d been trying to forget for the last six years slamming into him like a freight train.

“Oh, no…”

Robotic figures lined the walls. There were countless tables, each one with a cyborg strapped to it. Everything was hooked up to wires and machines, beeping in perfect tandem. A heartbeat.

If you could call the state they were in ‘alive’.

The cyborgs had all been de-weaponised. Arm cannons had been removed, leaving scabbed over amputations that would never heal. Laser eyes had been detached, false flesh stitched into place and pulled over the gaping holes they had occupied. There was a whole cupboard labelled ‘joint servos’; more than two-thirds of the people in the lab were missing limbs, and those that had been more machine than flesh were bolted to the tables to make sure they couldn’t move.

The scent of blood, rot, and oil was overpowering.

“Finally remembered them, did you?”

Sonic spun around, teeth bared and fist raised, but stopped himself when he saw who had spoken. He recognised the pig standing behind him from his days with the Resistance. “Hamlin?”

“The great hero remembers me,” he said scathingly. “Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot your title. The Lost Prince. Not so lost anymore, I see. I’m kind of surprised you found your way down here so soon.”

“What happened here?” he demanded. “Why are they like this?”
“What else were we supposed to do with them? We didn’t have the full power of the Council of Four, so we couldn’t fix them,” Hamlin snapped back. “But I guess you didn’t think about that. You never did. All you cared about was playing the hero; let other people clean up your mess. Well, this was the best we could do. What do you think?”

He growled, clenching his fists, and Hamlin made an odd noise in his throat, folding his arms over his chest.

“Or maybe the better question is what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do to clean up this mess you left us with?”

Sonic snarled, feeling his spines and hackles rise. “You son of a –”

“What?” Hamlin demanded. “What, you thought that was it? You come in, play prince, beat Robotnik, and then get to run off into the sunset, only coming back when you feel like it? No! You were our prince, we counted on you! We’re still counting on you! You’re not a child anymore, Sonic. Grow up and take some responsibility. It’s time you finished what you started.”

“What I started? I didn’t do this!” he cried, throwing a hand out behind him. “I never would have let this happen!”

“Oh, but you did,” he said. “When you left us, you didn’t leave us any choice. This was all we could do to stay safe from the robotocised men and women you abandoned. We couldn’t defend ourselves, so this is all we had left.”

Normally, Sonic wouldn’t rise to the bait. Over the years, he’d realised that sometimes he couldn’t live up to the things people expected of him. He could only do what he could do, and if that wasn’t enough, well, then… at least he’d tried his hardest. Normally, he could accept that, and ignore whatever anyone else said. But this wasn’t the normal kind of problem. “What could I have done, Hamlin? What do you want me to do?”

“Only what you told us you’d do,” he said, and went back into the corridor, heading for the maintenance office.

“I didn’t promise you anything,” he said darkly, but Hamlin didn’t even turn around, just opened the door and started in.

“You always said you’d save us. So go on, Prince. Save the world. We’re waiting.”

And with that, he slammed the door behind him.

No matter how tense their relationship could be on occasion, it was a simple fact that when it came down to the wire, Sonic, Tails and Knuckles were a team. So when Sonic had dashed out, so fast they barely saw the blur, it had only taken a heartbeat before they followed.

But although they were still two of the fastest people on the planet, neither Knuckles or Tails had any chance of keeping up with Sonic in a full sprint, so they were forced to follow Tails’ schematics into the service sector and head down to the generator that way.

“Have you ever seen a robotocised mobian?” he asked Knuckles, who shook his head.
“Just holograms. And what Sonia and Manic told me.”

“Me either. I’ve seen enough pilots to last me a lifetime, though.”

Knuckles nodded as they reached a stairwell and he vaulted the railing. Badniks were a nastily common kind of pilot-robotocisation, though unfortunately not the only one.

After Knuckles had hit the ground, three stories below, Tails continued, “Sonic said it was different to real robotocisation, but he didn’t tell me how.”

“The real stuff’s not an easy fix like pilots,” he said. “Sometimes it completely turns people into robots. Other times, it just transforms bits of them – like giving them a telescopic eye or robotic arm. No matter what, they can’t think for themselves. Their minds are always gone.”

“I wonder if that’s why they haven’t fixed it yet. The body can be transformed by science, but the mind would have to be techno-magic, at the very least,” he said, and then pointed to a door up ahead. “According to the designs, that should be the battery zone.”

“Which means the generator and Mobius’ dirty little secret should be in there, too,” he said, and charged through.

It was a long corridor, but Sonic was visible at the end, closing a massive steel portal behind him. He was unusually sombre, and watched them coming with wary eyes, all smiles gone.

“Sonic?” Tails prompted as he dropped out of the air. He knew better than to try and touch when Sonic looked like that, but he held out an arm as he walked the last few steps. “You okay?”

Sonic didn’t answer, just glanced at a nearby maintenance door, then shook his head and said, “I’m gonna take a run around the city. There’s something I gotta see.”

“Something you didn’t see in there?” asked Knuckles, and both Tails and Sonic looked over their shoulder at the metal portal. The ‘Robotics lab’, according to what was painted on it.

“Is that… it’s where they’re keeping all the robotocised people, right?” Tails asked, but he hadn’t even started reaching for it before Sonic stopped him.

“Yeah, it is. Come on, let’s get out of here,” he said, and tugged at Tails’ arm until he started flying, obediently following Sonic back to the stairs. Knuckles took a little longer, eyeing off the maintenance door, but eventually joined them without a word.

“Tails, when you were showin’ off earlier,” Sonic said, “did you find anything about robotocisation?”

“Uh… no. I mean… I said it was really easy, but the truth is it really did take me the whole two hours to crack as much security as I did,” he said, blushing through his fur. “I was pretty focussed on finding the blueprints and security of this place, not getting any real information. Sorry.”

“Hey, that’s cool,” he said, but he was unusually focussed on the path ahead. He didn’t even glance around when they reached the stairs, and Tails was able to fly beside him as he made his way up. “D’you think you could?”

“Yeah, probably.” He paused, watching his best friend for a minute. “Um… Sonic?”

When he didn’t even pause, Knuckles rolled his eyes and lashed out, grabbing Sonic by the arm and yanking him to a stop. Surprisingly, Sonic’s immediate reaction was a roundhouse kick, but
Knuckles grabbed the offending leg with his free hand and squeezed, narrowing his eyes when Sonic hissed and twisted in pain. “Yeah. You wanna think about what you just did?”

“Jeez, Knuckles, come on! You surprised me!” he complained. “Let go!”

“You gonna tell us what’s going on?” he demanded.

“What d’you want from me, Knucklehead? Robotocisation sucks!” he cried. “I want to know if Tails can fix it!”

“Yeah, okay,” Tails said, dropping out of the air again to spread his hands and get between them, forcing Knuckles to drop Sonic’s leg, if not his arm. “But that doesn’t explain why you’re acting all weird. What happened down there?”

“Sonic –”

“Yeah, okay,” Tails said, dropping out of the air again to spread his hands and get between them, forcing Knuckles to drop Sonic’s leg, if not his arm. “But that doesn’t explain why you’re acting all weird. What happened down there?”

“Sonic –”

“You gonna tell us what’s going on?” he demanded.

“What d’you want from me, Knucklehead? Robotocisation sucks!” he cried. “I want to know if Tails can fix it!”

“Yeah, okay,” Tails said, dropping out of the air again to spread his hands and get between them, forcing Knuckles to drop Sonic’s leg, if not his arm. “But that doesn’t explain why you’re acting all weird. What happened down there?”

“Tails –”

“Sonic,” he shot back, and his friend groaned.

“I dunno, okay?” he cried, and wrenched himself out of Knuckles’ grip to walk to the railing and back again. “It’s just... This place, y’know? Mobius, it’s always been bad juju. I knew that. I knew that coming back. And I haven’t been here five hours, and I’ve already had to save my siblings from their own stupidity, fend off jerks that want me to be what I’m not, almost scared one of my actual friends into not speaking to me, you and Manic are… and just now, I got told mobian torture was unavoidable because I wasn’t here! It’s been a rough couple hours, y’know?”

Tails winced at the loud tone, but Knuckles frowned. “Mobian torture?”

“I’m exaggerating,” he said, lifting a dismissive hand, but then lowered it with a scowl. “No, I’m not. Not if they were online. To make them safe – to make sure they don’t attack or whatever, they removed bits from robotocised mobians. Took off parts of their faces and bodies.” He leaned back against the stairwell railing, his hands flexing as he rocked his weight back and forth. “Cyrus let them do that. I can’t believe he let them do that.”

They stared at him silently for a few moments, and Sonic let out a long breath.

“I need to see the city. I need to know they’ve done something. They can’t have just been waiting around for me to come back, that’s just...” He shook his head, glaring at nothing, then suddenly looked up and around. “Where’re Shadow and Amy?”

Used to the quick topic changes, especially when he got the feeling they weren’t quite as abrupt as they sounded, Tails only frowned worriedly for another moment before saying, “Amy stayed back in the computer room with Cyrus and Manic. You know she can’t keep up with us. I haven’t heard from Shadow since you went to lunch.”

“And last I saw he was still at the table. He’s probably snooping around court,” he muttered absently, then nodded once and looked to Tails. “See what you can find out about robotocisation. Knuckles, I hate to ask, but could you keep an eye on him and Amy for me?”

“You think something’s gonna happen?” he asked, but Sonic shrugged.

“Not so much. But until I’ve scoped things out and had a chance to talk to Mom, I wanna keep what we do on the down-low. And with how they can both run their mouths off—”

“Hey!” Tails objected, earning a grin from Sonic.
“—I’d feel better with someone to run interference.”

He nodded, but Tails scowled, folding arms defiantly. “I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

Rather than verbally respond, Sonic and Knuckles just fixed him with matching blank stares. He blinked, then collapsed over his arms with a sigh. “Okay, I don’t.”

“So what are you gonna do?” Knuckles asked Sonic, who shrugged.

“Like I said: I’m gonna check out the city. There’s gotta be more goin’ on here than just me.”

After Sonic had run off, followed by Tails and Knuckles, Cyrus, Amy and Manic stood in awkward silence for a few seconds before Manic offered Amy a weak smile. “Uhh… sorry… about that. Kinda came out of nowhere.”

“You mean the guys rushing off like that?” she asked, then grinned. “That I’m used to.”

“I could go get them,” Cyrus offered, jerking his thumb in the general direction of the generators. “It’s not like we don’t know where Sonic was headed.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said quietly. “He looked like there was something he needed to do.”

Manic hesitated, but as Cyrus watched, his eyes drifted back to Amy and he seemed to change his mind about whatever he’d been ready to say. He cleared his throat and rocked back on his heels, hitching a nervous smile into place. “Okay, so like, um, maybe you wanna maybe do something instead? With me, I mean. I – I could show you around the city? We could, you know, get coffee… or… something…?”

Cyrus raised an eyebrow, surprised. In over three years of friendship, he’d seen Manic ask a girl out once, and that had been after Sonia had spent a week prodding him into it. Amy looked reluctant though, lifting a curled hand to her chest.

“Um, is – is that okay? I mean… you’re a prince, aren’t you? You have all those duties and I’m just –”

“Just? You’re like, a representative from the outer kingdoms!” Manic said, and winked reassuringly. “I bet if I asked Sonia, she’d totally say it’s my ‘duty’ to make sure you have a good time!”

She hesitated another moment, then smiled and nodded bravely. “Okay then; that sounds great! Sonic hasn’t told me anything, so you have to be a proper tour guide, okay? Don’t hold anything back!”

“No way,” he promised, and shot Cyrus a nervous grin before leading her out of the room. “So, uh, where do you wanna start? The palace, or should we head out to the city proper? Uh, see ya, Cy’,” he added absently, and Cyrus lifted a hand in silent farewell, impressed by his friend’s sudden display of guts.

Once he was alone again, Cyrus turned back to the computer monitor, considering the flashing input request. Both the hologram and program had shut down when Tails pulled out his handheld, but now
he knew how to access it, there was nothing stopping him from exploratory coding.

He would need to explore the newly opened systems at some point. Not to mention the physical floors they now had access to. Of course, there was also the work he’d been planning to do before Sonic showed up – the holographic content system they’d be using during the festival wasn’t quite up to spec yet, and it needed to be perfect before Sunday night.

But just like always, Sonic was creeping into the forefront of Cyrus’ attention. Sonic, and what he’d probably do after he saw the robotocised mobians. Or at least what he’d do after he’d finished knocking Hamlin out for whatever the Head of Robotic Security said to tick him off… Chances were, whatever he said would be worthy of Sonic punching him, but they’d probably still have to play damage control to keep Hamlin from causing a stir.

If Cyrus had to guess, he’d say that once Sonic was done downstairs, he’d run. He’d go to all the places he’d known the robotocised mobians had been stored and locked away before he’d left. He’d check the old Resistance haunts, to see what had happened to them. And eventually, he’d wind up where he always did, when things got too hard. A club. He’d lose himself in chilli dogs and music.

And wasn’t that just how the city needed to meet its Lost Prince again – panicked, angry, and trying to avoid dealing with anything.

Cyrus sighed and shut down the computer, already running a list of possible bars through his head. “Not even back five hours and I’m already cleaning up your mess. Welcome back to Mobius, Sonic.”

By the time they had reached the market square, Manic had decided girls as pretty as Amy shouldn’t be allowed to be as nice as she was. It seemed way too good to be true.

She’d been shy at first, especially when they passed some guards that had saluted and called him ‘Thief Prince’. She’d stumbled through apologising for not calling him by his title from the start, until he reassured her that Manic was fine. She’d smiled, and all he could think of were sunflowers as she said, “Well, then, you can call me Amy. I mean, everyone does, not just people I ask to, but still! I guess what I’m trying to say is that I hope we can be great friends.”

From there, she seemed to have gotten over her nerves pretty quickly, rambling on about how, come to think of it, she’d only really started going by ‘Amy’ since Sonic had first called her that, the second time they met. That was also when she’d met Tails, come to think of it. But wow, was that eighteen months ago now? How time flew.

Manic was happy to listen, interjecting only occasionally as she effortlessly carried the conversation without actually saying anything that important, until she abruptly stopped and clapped her hands as she turned to him.

“But enough about me! What about you? You’ve lived in Mobotropolis your whole life, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I have,” he said blankly, then scrambled to find something a bit more intelligent. “Home-grown city boy… except I saw most of it from underground until a few years back.”

“I’ve always lived in towns, but I’ve never lived in a proper Mobian city,” she said thoughtfully. “I wonder if it’s different from a human one. The people here sure seem… quieter.”
He blinked, and then looked around, wondering what she was talking about. The streets seemed normal to him – people rushing around from place to place, only stopping or lingering once they were inside. But then, he had been raised in this city, and he remembered that some of the places he’d visited with Sonia had been a lot different. The people of Mobodoon and some of the outer baronies tended to fill the streets even in the middle of the day, which he’d always thought was weird.

Maybe Amy was from somewhere like that.

“So where did you live?” she asked. “Before you knew you were a prince, I mean. Do you ever go back to visit?”

“Visit?” he repeated, then grinned and shrugged. “Sometimes, but it’s not exactly somewhere you’d like to go. I used to live in the sewers.”

“Really? That’s so gross!” she said, but she was laughing, so he just shrugged again. Amy laced her hands behind her back and nudged his shoulder with her own. “You were a thief, right? That’s what the magazines say – that’s why they call you the Thief Prince.”

“Yeah. Not that I – I mean, I don’t do that anymore,” he said quickly, but she continued smiling.

“Do you miss it?”

“What, stealing?”

“Yeah!” She spun on her heel to walk backward where she could continue watching him, her eyes sparkling with interest. “I bet it was super dangerous, right? Must have been really exciting!”

“Uh, well, I – uh…”

“Oh, was that a weird thing to say?” she asked, tilting her head. “Sorry, it’s just that… now that I’ve met Sonic, and we’ve gone on all these exciting adventures… when I think about going back to my normal, boring life, I get really sad, you know? I guess it’s not very ladylike, huh?”

“No!” he said, then blushed and added, “I mean, of course it is – well, not, I mean… it’s not weird. I just… most people don’t like, ask me that kinda stuff.”

She blinked curiously. “Really? Why not? Wasn’t it a really big change to go from being a thief to a prince?”

“Well, I mean… yeah,” he said, then grimaced and looked at his shoes as they scuffed against the pavement. “But it’s not somethin’ I’m s’posed to be proud of, you know? Stealing from people… it’s wrong.”

“That doesn’t mean you should pretend it didn’t happen!” she said, shaking a finger at him. “And just because stealing is wrong doesn’t mean being able to is a bad thing. I bet you used it for all sorts of useful things, didn’t you?”

He nodded, but kept his head lowered, avoiding her gaze. She seemed to take that as a hint he didn’t want to talk about it, because she turned around again and began looking around at the buildings, leaving Manic to his own thoughts.

It wasn’t like anyone had told him not to talk about it, but it had always kind of been implied. Knowing how to pick locks and pockets had been a great skill to have in the Resistance, but princes weren’t supposed to know that kind of stuff. Princes weren’t supposed to be former thieves. Princes
weren’t really supposed to be anything like him, really…

“I don’t…” He began, and hesitated when Amy glanced back at him. “It’s not the stealing I miss.”

“No?”

“It was… it was never really about stealing. It was about getting away with it,” he explained shamefully. “It was like… it was like a game. If you pocketed something and no one noticed, you’d won. Y’know?”

“And you miss the game,” she surmised, and he lowered his eyes to the ground, embarrassed.

“Don’t get me wrong, I totally prefer what I got over what I had, but –”

“But you miss the game,” she repeated, and then giggled. “You really are just like Sonic!”

“I… wha?” He looked up to stare at her sparkling eyes. “N-no. Sonic doesn’t steal.”

“It’s not about stealing!” she said, playfully pushing his shoulder. If she noticed his blush, she ignored it, still smiling at him in that wonderful way she had. “It’s about the game! Sonic’s the exact same way – we can be in the middle of an exploding factory, leaping over a pit of lava, and he’ll still be keeping score about how many tricks he can do before he lands! It’s so weird how you’re the same!”

“Sonic… what?” Manic shook his head, trying to match that image with his grumpy brother and failing. “No. No, that’s different. Sonic does that kind of stuff to annoy Sonia or… whoever. Stuff like that isn’t fun, it’s totally dangerous!”

“Danger can be fun,” she said. “Come on, be honest! When you were getting the better of Robotnik and his robots, it was at least a little fun, right?”

“Uh… well… it…” He blushed again. Could this girl get anymore incredible? And here he was obsessing over his brother! Way to look cool, Manic. “It… Yeah, a little.”

She giggled again, wrapping both her arms around one of his and sending his mind blissfully blank for a second. By the time he came back, she was asking him another question. “- if you don’t talk about being a thief so much, then how come people call you Thief Prince? Wouldn’t Prince Manic make more sense?”

“Oh, well, y’know,” he said, and cursed his ability to always look lame when he most wanted to be cool. “That’s different.”

“What? How?”

“It um… it’s like this old rule that royalty used to have, you know?” he said, and tried to pull himself straight and regal looking. “I haven’t been like, introduced to society yet, so they’re not supposed to know my name, y’see? Me and Sonia figure it probably used to be about protecting kids from the public until they were old enough to deal with them, but now it’s just because’ve tradition or something.”

“Uhh, no offence, but that sounds sort of dumb,” she said, and he laughed.

“Yeah, it kinda is. But the good news is that now Sonic’s back, it’s only a matter of time before we get introduced,” he said. “Couple of days and I’ll be Manic again.”
“Prince Manic,” she corrected playfully.

“Heh. Yeah, Prince Manic. And Sonic’ll be Crown Prince Sonic,” he said, and immediately hated himself for bringing up Sonic again. Worse still, Amy’s smile faded at the reminder, and her arms loosened around his.

“Which will make him King Sonic eventually,” she said softly, before suddenly lifting her gaze to his. “But that’s not set in stone, right? It could be you or Sonia that get the throne?”

“Well… yeah, I guess, but there’s no way it’d be me,” he said with a weak laugh. “They don’t make street rats king.”

“Sure they do,” she said, and tightened her grip on his arm again. “All the best stories end that way.”

He chuckled again. “Well, either way, I’m just looking forward to people calling me by name again. It’s totally weird, only being known for what you are, not who.”

“Oh, totally,” she agreed, and then took a deep breath, obviously signalling a subject change. “So where are we going? You said something about coffee, right? Do you know any good cafes? I could really go for a nice cup of tea right now!”

“Tea? You drink tea?”

“Sure, doesn’t everyone?” she asked with a laugh, and he shook his head before putting a hand to his chin to think.

“A cafe, huh…? Well, I don’t know about the tea there, but there is one place that we could go. It just reopened like, a couple weeks ago and I’ve been meaning to check it out.”

“Sure, let’s try it!” she said cheerfully. “What do you know about it?”

“Not a whole lot. But I do know that before it shut down, it was where I met my sibs,” he said, and then winced through his laughter. “We may have actually been the reason it had to shut down, but I’m sure they won’t hold that against me!”

“Ooh! How you met Sonic? Now this is a story I have to hear!”

“Uh, okay, but I guess before I go into that, I should ask you how much he’s told you about our magic and stuff,” he said. “Because if he hasn’t told you, it isn’t gonna make any sense.”

“Magic?” She tilted her head curiously. “I don’t think he’s ever called it that before. What kind of magic?”

“Heh… well, um… okay, so, have you ever heard the saying that nothing can touch a soul like music?”

During most of the war, Mindy had been your typical young aristocrat. She’d grown up privileged and pampered, knowing that all she had to do was pay tribute and she would be able to live the high life forever.

She’d never even thought about wrong or right until her best friend became an outlaw—the rebel
princess, no less—and she was forced to choose between her and the life she’d always known.

She’d picked Sonia over her cushy life, and would do it again in a second, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t grateful that the war was now over and she could go back to designing fashion accessories. She was, however, much more interested in politics now, which was why she and many of her contemporaries came to afternoon court — Sonia was always there in the afternoons, and having her there made it feel much more accessible.

Not that they could really talk to her. Court was held in the council chambers, a large semi-circular room that Mindy had heard used to be an experiment chamber of some kind. The queen sat in the flat front part of the room, advisors and scribes spread out behind her, and Sonia (and Manic, on the rare times he came) sat in the first row of the first set of seats that spread out in front of her in the semi-circle. Everyone else that attended sat in the other seats, calling out comments when they had them, until they were called to the centre of the room to have their requests heard.

It wasn’t exactly easy to talk to Sonia, but Mindy had learned the trick. You just had to be brave enough to fight your way through the stuck up snobs that always wanted to be near the front and plonk yourself down in the seats that were set aside for her brothers.

Today though, Sonia seemed distracted even as Mindy sidled up beside her, staring blindly at the sea of people and apparently barely listening to the goings-on. That was especially weird, given the number of times the older aristocrats had mentioned the Lost Prince today, implying he would come back and do something soon. Usually, that was enough to get Sonia out of her chair and into hot debate about what could and couldn’t be done without him.

“You know, Sonia,” she whispered into her friend’s ear, “I think the only option here is fluoro green hair.”

That got through. Sonia flinched and jerked around to look at her. “What?”

She giggled into her hand and leaned into Sonia’s shoulder in a gentle tease. “Oh, Sonia-honey, relax. I was just trying to get your attention!”

“This is hardly the time!” she hissed, but she was grinning all the same. “We are in the middle of court, Mindy.”

“Oh, like you’ve heard anything they’ve been saying in the last twenty minutes.”

“I have. They want to…” She trailed off, glancing over to where a mayor from East Mobius was reading off a list of town requests. “Um…”

“It’s a farm report, dear,” Mindy said, and raised her eyebrows at Sonia’s blank expression. “What has gotten into you? Did you bump into Bartleby again?”

As it always did at the mention of her erstwhile paramour, Sonia’s expression immediately darkened, and she swung around in her chair to face her. “Of course not. That coward hasn’t shown his face for months.”

“Well, can you really blame him? After that speech you made, half the aristocrats were scared to breathe, and everyone knew who it was really aimed at,” she pointed out. “Don’t get me wrong, Sonia, I’m flattered that you wanted to thank me for helping you during the war, but you did spend quite a bit of time calling everyone who didn’t a coward.”

Sonia stared at her for a moment, then sighed and looked away. “I know. Manic pointed it out to me after the fact. But Bartleby deserved it,” she said, raising her voice as high as she could without
going above a whisper. “He had dozens of chances to change sides. After Robotnik arrested him, he really should have at least run away. But he kept paying tribute! Went off to that country house and acted like nothing had anything to do with him!”

“Darling, you won’t hear me arguing that,” Mindy said bluntly. “After all the weeks I spent in Sanctuary, protecting those kids? Do you know how many spiders I had to fend off? Ugh.”

Sonia smiled, but Mindy stopped her before she could turn away again.

“So, Sonia, I can’t help but notice that someone has been lingering in the doorway to the antechamber you and the rest of the royal household come through for court,” she said, nodding to the Queen’s Portal, where a dark figure was quietly watching the proceedings. “And I’ve been hearing the strangest rumors in the crowd. They’re saying there were a few new additions at the luncheon today.”

Sonia looked at her sideways, a tiny smile on her lips, and Mindy gasped.

“No! It’s not him!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said daintily, and Mindy gripped her arm with both hands, eyes wide.

“Oh, honey, you do not get to play games! They’ve been saying Sonic came back. If your brother is finally back in town, you do not get to play coy,” she insisted, and Sonia’s quick grin was all she needed to know. She gasped again, tugging at her friend’s arm as she stared at the shadowy figure a little harder. “That’s amazing! Why isn’t he coming out? What’s he like? Is he as cute as he used to be?”

“I don’t know! He’s my brother, I don’t look at him like that!” she said, and hesitated, glancing at her mother quickly before taking Mindy’s hands and drawing her out of the chairs and away, down toward the back aisles. “Besides, that’s not Sonic back there. It’s a very strange hedgehog that he brought with him – an ambassador from the human territories. Sonic’s probably spending the afternoon with Manic.”

“Oh, Sonia, that’s fantastic! Congratulations!” She quietly squealed and shoved her way into Sonia’s arms for a bouncing hug. “I’m so happy for you! So have you talked to him much? Where’s he been? He’s staying, right?”

“Not really, I’m not sure yet, and he better be!” she said, though her smile was a little shakier. “Mother said something about defending the kingdom, but I’ll talk to him tonight and figure it all out.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Mindy said, and hugged her again for comfort before holding her out by the shoulders. “So, does this change your plans? Oh! This means the boys really will be introduced at the ball! Which reminds me, you still haven’t promised to let me make your dress! It’s an absolute crime we didn’t get to have our debutante together, and I haven’t forgiven you for buying a dress off the rack, you know!”

Sonia giggled, but it faded as she thought about the upcoming ball. It was scheduled for Friday, over a week away, which gave them plenty of time. But what little Sonic had said so far hadn’t exactly bolstered her confidence. She’d expected Sonic to be reluctant to be a proper prince; that it would be difficult to impress the importance of his situation on him. But while he had been casual and unprofessional, Sonic had been surprisingly… well, respectful of the whole thing. The way he’d managed those aristocrats had been astounding. Manic still struggled to keep that much
composure.

It was nothing like what she’d remembered her brother to be.

She gave Mindy another brave smile, but then gestured for them to return to court. Sonic hadn’t been what she’d expected, but he couldn’t have changed that much. She’d work it out. She’d work it out, and he would take his place as prince, and probably heir to the throne. Then Manic could be happy again and she could properly focus on getting the empire back on track.

Now Sonic was back, things would be fine.

They had to be.

Music reference:

Polite Dance Song - The Bird and the Bee 2009
Track Seven: Sing

Chapter Notes

I am not the singer that you wanted but a dancer. I refuse to answer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In a lot of ways, the city really had changed.

Pausing by an acid-pitted fence, Sonic stared in at a dirty but identifiable park playground. He hadn’t known what a park was until he was nine. There had been woods, and fields, and the city. But now there were parks, and this one even had a play castle.

The grass was struggling to grow, and the bushes were brittle, suffocating in the smoggy air, but there were trees. Probably transplanted from outside the city, but trees all the same.

He walked in, staring up at the three tall buildings fencing the space in. Each one was painted in what had probably been bright colours for about a week, before the first acid rain. Sonic smiled at the red, blue and purple streaks, somehow knowing they were supposed to complete the royal quartet the green began.

But grass couldn’t grow in a city choked in oil. They’d been so busy covering up the hole they hadn’t noticed the wood rot was still there.

Shallow fixes. Sonic knew it was a bad habit he had himself. In all his adventures, he always left behind broken bases and robot remains, only cleaning up the ones he missed if he had time to hang around. But at least the remains got put to use – Tails almost never had to buy materials for his inventions, and Eggman had certainly learned the value of recycling, these last couple of years.

“If only he had back in the day,” Sonic muttered to himself, his fingers trailing over the dying bushes. It would take a lot more than a few transplanted trees to change Mobotropolis anything more than a glorified city dump. There was rubbish everywhere, toxins still leaked into the earth and water, and the air felt thick with smog. It wouldn’t be easy to clean up, Sonic knew, but just covering everything in a thick coat of paint wasn’t going to do anything.

And maybe that was why the city streets were still so quiet. He’d expected there to be more people around, enjoying the freedom to loiter and laugh. But he’d run through a dozen empty streets, and every one of the new parks he’d found had been empty. Not a single kid. Not a single family.

He wasn’t sure what the point was in making a city beautiful if no one wanted to spend time in it.

“Hey look! Someone’s in the garden!”

He looked up just in time to see a baby mixe get pulled away from a window, and a teenage girl take his place. She frowned at him, so he smiled back, lifting his hand in a wave. “Hey, good afternoon!”

She stared at him, glancing back inside for a second, then shifted closer to lean out over the sill.

“What are you doing out there?”

“Exploring,” he said, trying to look inviting as he strolled toward the building. “It’s been a while
since I’ve been to the city, you know?”

Ego aside, Sonic knew he was charming. Girls liked his cocky smile, and this one was no exception. She giggled, pushing some hair back from her face in that universal cute-flirt way that they had. “Exploring Robotropolis? Don’t be silly.”

“Who’s trying? There’s always new things to be found,” he said, and gestured to the park. “And this kind of place has all kinds of secrets.”

“Secrets?” The little mixe jumped up beside her. “What kind of secrets?”

“Oh, well, nothing you probably haven’t found already,” he said, and the boy pouted.

“I’ve never been in the garden!”

He blinked, then sighed softly, glancing around the park. Should’ve figured. “Did you only just move in?”

“No, I was born here,” the girl said, and reached down to pick up the baby and set him on her hip. “Our father has lived here since before the war began.”

“No one goes in there,” the boy said, as if pointing out the obvious.

“And certainly no one explores,” she added. “No one explores anything in this city. There’s nothing to see worth the risk.”

Sonic shifted his weight onto the other hip, planning fast as he peeked up from under his brows. “What risk?”

She just shrugged. “You must be a tourist. Are you here for the festival?”

“You could say that,” he said.

“Well, let me give you some advice,” she offered. “Robotropolis isn’t much for sight-seeing. Stick to the indoors. Everyone does.”

“How are y’supposed to have adventures if y’do that?” he asked. “Don’t find too many dragons indoors, y’know.”

“Dragons?” the boy asked, pushing at his sister to see better. “You’ve seen dragons before?”

“One or two,” he said with a grin. “Come on down, I’ll tell you the story.”

“I don’t think so,” the girl said, but she was laughing as she reached for the window latch. “Good bye, Dragon Slayer.”

“Okay, don’t come down,” he said quickly, before she could close it. She paused, and he tried another, warmer smile. “I’ll tell you from here. You just stay there and listen. For your brother, at least.”

She hesitated, looking at the baby with a quiet frown. “Why do you want to tell us?”

He shifted his weight again, not really sure. When they’d said no one ever came into the park, he’d somehow known they weren’t exaggerating, and that hurt, in its own way. All this effort, all this greenery, doomed to stand abandoned until the acid and pollution won out.
He had to see it used for a good time at least once.

“Because that’s what trees do. They have stories for the telling,” he said. “They’d never forgive me if I didn’t translate.”

She paused, meeting her brother’s gaze for a moment, and then sat down on the window sill, rearranging him to sit on her lap. Sonic grinned and spread his hands in a gracious bow.

“My lady, my lord, I present to you the tale of Sir Gawain: Guardian of the Dragon’s Mountain.”

Cyrus blinked, then scrubbed at his mane, wondering exactly what he was supposed to do about this.

He’d expected complications when he went to find Sonic. But of all the possible scenarios in his head—not finding him, finding him getting into a fight with a band of undercover anarchists, finding him telling a bunch of aristocrats where to stick their money, finding him moodily chewing his way through more chilli dogs than seemed anatomically possible—the one he’d never considered was that he would be hanging out in the middle of a park with a bunch of kids, he and the kids’ parents laughing as he told them a story.

“So there I am, cutting and slicing my through everything that comes at me,” he was saying as Cyrus pushed his way through the crowd at the park gate. He didn’t think he’d seen this many people out on the streets in years, crowded around the fence to watch, and there were a dozen more watching from the surrounding windows. “I’m thinking this is simple. Piece of cake, you know? So I say to Merlina, ‘this is too easy! Haven’t you got a challenge for me?’ And yeah. Turns out she did. I turn the corner, cross a bridge, and this mountain rises up in front of me. It’s beautiful, shrouded in mist, flowers everywhere, except—and this was weird—right in front of the bridge. It’s all open space, right? Very little grass, even. But what do I care, it’s just grass. I take three steps and bam!”

The kids all jumped as he clapped his hands and stomped his foot, then leaned forward at the same time he did.

“A dragon drops out of the sky.”

“Whoooa!”

“Really?”

“What kind?”

“What did it look like?”

Sonic hissed a breath in through his teeth, shaking his head. “It was huge. Bigger than these buildings. And it was mad. But Merlina said I had to get past it to get to the magic sword. So I took my blade in hand and I charged toward the beast. I’d like to say I killed it in one fell swoop, but, uh…” He winced at the parents, as if apologising for not looking cool in front of their kids. “It was a dragon. It roared, and it was like the world itself was running out from under me. I was thrown back, oof! Against the bridge.”

“No way!”
“You were okay though, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I’m Sonic the Hedgehog! I’m always okay!” he bragged, then dashed back, snatching a dead branch from one of the trees and swinging it around to point at the kids. “Only now I had something to prove. I ran forward, fighting the dragon’s roar with every step, and swung my trusty blade. Once, twice, three times! The dragon reared back, and that’s when I saw it – a horn, larger than this playground, right on his head. Made of sparkling quartz. The dragon’s pride.”

As ridiculous as it was, Cyrus had to smile, folding his arms over his waist as he watched. Times like this, he remembered why he always missed Sonic when he was gone.

“I leapt up, above the mist, above the dragon’s horn,” Sonic continued, demonstrating by effortlessly leaping up the slide behind him, and then higher still, right onto the top of the playground, where he slashed his branch-sword through the air. “And I brought my blade down, hacking, slashing, tearing my way through, until the quartz fell free. It slammed to the ground—” He dropped down himself, emphasising the fall as he came down only an inch from the kids and slammed his branch against the ground between them. “—and the dragon’s pride was mine.”

The kids all hissed and cooed, impressed, and Cyrus glanced over to see the parents exchanging amused grins. Sonic, however, barely seemed to notice them, looking around at the kids with wide eyes.

“The dragon flew off, but my quest was not yet over. Do you know what I had to do?”

“Get the sword!”

“That’s right. I ran, faster than the wind, up the mountain, until finally, I came upon a stone, covered in moss. And in its top, there was a beautiful silver sword with a golden hilt. I looked at it, and I knew, this was what I’d come for,” he whispered, but his voice still carried. “I went to take the sword, but Merlina stopped me.”

There was a dramatic pause, and even Cyrus found himself shifting forward in anticipation.

“She warned me… this was no ordinary sword. Only the brave of heart and true of soul could take it. Only one who was willing to do what needed to be done, regardless of the consequences, prepared to be the blackest of knights in the name of right, could wield it true,” Sonic murmured, meeting the gaze of each individual child listening. “I thought of all the people who needed help. Merlina, who had run from the dark king. The townsfolk who were imprisoned for simple taxes. The heroes who were bent under his will. I took the sword in both hands… and without a breath… I drew it out!” he cried the last, standing up with a flourish of his branch, and the kids all cheered. He spun in place and held the branch up high. “For I was Sonic, the Black Knight, and I would stop at nothing to see my people safe!”

The cheering got louder, and even a few adults, Cyrus included, applauded, until Sonic suddenly swung his branch back around to point at the kids.

“And now, my young lords and ladies, squires of the square, I hereby charge you with a mission,” he said, and the kids all leaned forward, all wide eyes and intrigue. He winked at the parents before refocussing. “I charge you, all of you, to eat well, sleep early, so that you may rise, strong and refreshed to protect this land from the monsters that do it ill. The dragons of drudgery, the beasts of boredom! Who’s with me?”

“Yeah!”
“I don’t hear you!”

“Yeah!”

“Then go, my squires! Do your best! Go!” he announced, and as one, all of the kids leapt up and rushed to their parents. It was chaos for a few seconds as kids dashed in all directions and adults were yanked off, everyone else in the square laughing at the sudden madness and the helpless looks on the parents’ faces.

As things calmed down, Cyrus turned back, and wasn’t at all surprised to see Sonic watching him, leaning on his branch with an amused grin. As he walked forward, Sonic touched his brow in what could have been a salute or a mind-blown gesture. “Now how long have you been there?”

“Long enough to hear you conquered a dragon by cutting off its horn. What’d it ever do to you?” he asked, but he was grinning as he walked over.

Sonic still shrugged playfully. “It was in my way. What’s up, Cy’?”

“Well, for one thing, an old friend came back to town today, and I’ve seen him for maybe five minutes, tops,” he said. “I know that’s a long time for you, but for the rest of us, it’s kind of minimal.”

“So I’ve heard,” he said. He stopped before he could even open his mouth to continue, his attention shifting over Cyrus’ shoulder.

“Great story,” a young woman said as she stepped up beside him. She glanced at Cyrus, offered a small smile, then went back to Sonic. “Do you do this often?”

“Only to get pretty girls down from towers,” he said, swinging his arms out as he dropped into a graceful bow, then looked up with a wink. “The rest of the stories come from the trees.”

“So you said,” she noted. “It was cute, that bit at the end. If I’d tried that with my little brother, I’d get laughed all the way home.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, pushing a bit of hair behind her jaw. “I can’t really imagine not wanting to see you.”

Cyrus gave her a sharp look, but his head whipped around even faster when Sonic chuckled. Even more unbelievable, he pushed the branch out from his body, swinging it in a mockery of bashfulness as he ducked his head and looked at her from under his brow. She smirked, giving him a long once-over with her eyes. “Especially first thing in the morning.”

Cyrus nearly choked on the air, but Sonic just laughed softly, glancing away and back again. “Well, in that instance, it’s not really a bad guy I’m fighting, huh?”

“Sonic!” Cyrus snapped, and both he and the girl jumped, as if they’d forgotten he was there. The girl looked at Sonic again, before her eyes widened and she stumbled back.

“Oh, my gosh… You really are S…? As in… The L… oh, my gosh!”

Sonic just bowed again, his grin softening when she started to look panicked. “It was nice talking to
you, m’lady.”

She blinked rapidly, but eventually his smile won out, and she relaxed a little, dropping into a curtsey herself. “Th-thank you for the story, your majesty.”

She left with only a small glance back at him, and Sonic made no secret of what he was watching as she walked away, before he grinned at Cyrus. “What? I didn’t see your name on her.”

“Since when do you flirt?” he demanded. “With girls, no less?”

“Uh, since I got the time?” he suggested, but his attention was already wandering again, as he smiled and nodded to the parents that were giving him exasperated looks as their children ran all over the park, playing, exploring, and trying to find branches that matched Sonic’s own. Everyone else was starting to wander away, now that the show was clearly over. Sonic watched it all with a look of quiet satisfaction. “Besides, it was just talk. I’ve got enough girl problems already.”

“W- well, it’s hardly the time, anyway,” he said, and then gestured to the park. “What are you doing out here? You’ve gotta know the palace will want to make a huge deal of you being back. You can’t just –”

“Sonic! Excuse me, Son- I mean, your highness!”

They both turned, and Sonic grinned easily at the boys running up to them. They couldn’t be more than eight, and they shoved at each other as they came to a stop, both trying to claim the best spot in front of the prince.

“Hey, hey, it’s just Sonic, guys,” he said. “And how’d you know my name?”

“You said it before,” one of them pointed out, and he laughed shamefully.

“So I did. And here I never believe my friends when they tell me all the bot-smashing scrambles my brains.”

They both grinned, and one of them puffed out his chest. “Well, even if you hadn’t, my dad was in the Resistance,” he said, before the other one pushed him out of the way.

“And you saved me once! From a SWATbot!”

“Can we really call you Sonic?”

“No,” Cyrus reminded Sonic, but in typical fashion, he was ignored.

“Sure you can. It’s my name.”

The boys grinned at each other, then up at Sonic. “That story you were telling the kids—”

“With the sword?”

“—was that true? Can you actually use a sword?”

He laughed and lifted his branch again, twirling it around before extending it out toward them. “Yeah, I can. Had to learn it on the run though – real swordsmen train for years. Mostly, I rely on speed and luck to get me by,” he admitted. “Why, you guys lookin’ to get in on that action?”

This he was asking a pair of eight year old children. But then, Cyrus reminded himself with a deep patience-bringing breath, Sonic had toppled an empire at thirteen and now travelled with an eight
year old super genius. If he’d ever heard of ‘age-appropriate’ activities, he’d certainly never paid attention to them.

“Absolutely!”

“Swords are so cool!”

“Could you teach us?”

Sonic opened his mouth, but already seeing the carnage—not to mention the newspaper headlines—Cyrus quickly stepped in, shoving Sonic aside a few steps. “Sorry, guys. Hate to interrupt, but I really do need to talk to the Lost Prince a second.”

“Aww!”

“Hey, don’t mind, guys,” Sonic advised, tossing them the branch even as he let Cyrus drag him away. “It’s totally something you can start learning on your own! Just stick to branches first, okay?”

“Sonic, you are going to give your PR team a coronary,” Cyrus muttered, and Sonic snickered but obediently turned and walked alongside him as he lead the way out and across the street to a dark alley. “You can’t just go around flirting with normal people and offering to teach kids sword fighting. Princes don’t do that stuff.”

“Oh, come off it, Cyrus,” he said with a scoff. “You’ve known me since I was five and you never cared how I acted before. Well, you did, but only because I ticked you off.”

“And you still do,” he muttered, and pushed him back against the alley wall in a silent command to stay, taking a few steps back himself to lean against the opposite side. “Sonic, you’ve been gone a long time, I get that. But you need to understand that this isn’t the place you left. It –”

“Yeah, thing is, Cy’, I think it’s the exact same place I left,” Sonic interjected, and Cyrus did a double-take at the harsh tone. But he was still smiling that same old smile. “I think the only thing that’s changed in three years is that Mom’s in charge and you’ve put up a few posters to hide the trash.”

Cyrus hesitated a second, judging the expression, then scoffed and shoved his thumbs in his pockets, leaning more heavily against the wall. “You think it’s so easy to change after thirteen years of oppression?” he asked. “Robotnik had over a decade of a never-tiring robotic workforce. We’ve had three years and a city full of people that have forgotten how to work. Construction takes time!”

“Construction, sure, I get that,” he said, but then flicked his hand back toward the park. “What about people? Y’know, the stuff that actually makes a city?”

“What about them?”

Sonic twitched slightly, as if he wasn’t sure what he’d just heard. “Wh- I was running around earlier, and I barely saw anyone on the streets. No one hangs out outside. There’re music clubs all over the city, but they’re all hidden away and sound-proofed. It took me an hour of telling stupid stories to a bunch of windows before I got that crowd. An hour for kids to come outside and play in a park that was right next door to their house.”

“Yeah, well, thirteen years of fear’ll do that,” he snapped. “Or have you forgotten what it was like, here? Have you forgotten all the rules? The laws? The consequences? You remember how we got arrested just for having hoverboards in the streets, Sonic? You remember that?”
“Yeah, I remember. I also remember that it ended three years ago.”

Cyrus rubbed his forehead, struggling to rein in his frustration. “Not everyone gets over stuff as fast as you.”

“Gets over –?!” Sonic aborted some movement before Cyrus could properly see it, turning and walking a few steps away. He took several deep breaths, then turned back, pointing two fingers like a gun. “The royal family literally won the day by rocking out. Every day should be a darn party in this city!”

“Yeah, well, our lead guitarist suddenly up and left!” he yelled, but Sonic actually laughed in his face.

“Dude, don’t even!” he said. “Drums lead a band, not the guitar.”

“You were the face of the Sonic Underground, Sonic!” he shouted, and then stabbed his fingers against Sonic’s chest. “Heck, before that! Before we knew who you were. You were the one the Resistance relied on. You were supposed to lead us out of the war, no matter how it ended! We were counting on you!”

“I was just another part of the Resistance. One in a hundred,” he argued. “And no one ever said anything about the after.”

“Because we weren’t sure there was going to be one! You were the only one that could see it, and that meant that you were all we could see,” he said, and clenched his teeth when Sonic rolled his eyes. “I’m serious, Hedgehog! You left when we needed you most! This is what we could do without you. You don’t get to blame us for what we couldn’t do.”

“But you get to blame me for it?” he demanded. “Dude, perspective.”

“No, Sonic, I’ve had three years to get perspective,” he argued. “You’ve been off playing in the overlander territories, doing whatever you felt like. We’ve been taking care of the entire Mobian Kingdom. Don’t lecture me about perspective.”

Sonic opened his mouth, then stopped and grinned for a second before saying, “Mobius isn’t as big as you think it is, Cy’.”

“It’s a million people who needed guidance when the one they wanted to follow wasn’t there to give it,” he ground out. “Damn, Sonic, you’re so – you’ve always been like this, you don’t care about anyone but you. Well, it’s about time you did. Like it or not, Sonic, you’re a prince of this realm. Possibly the prince. It’s time you grew up and started taking responsibility for this place.”


“Then take it!” he yelled, then immediately stopped, realising what he’d said and who he’d said it to. He jumped to correct himself, but Sonic was already nodding thoughtfully. “Sonic. Sonic, I just meant –”

“No, no, I think I got it,” he said, and then spread his hands, walking slowly backward. “You’re right Cy’. I should take a little… action. See you later.”

“Sonic!” he cried, but it was too late. Sonic had already disappeared, only a blue blur and the taste of fresh wind left in his wake. He fell back against the wall again, cursing himself for an idiot. “This will not end well.”
At first, Amy had kept talking, interjecting with comments about what she knew of Sonic’s powers (though Manic realised pretty early on he had to have her fooled on a couple of things – Sonic wished he was strong enough to punch through metal!). But by the time they got their coffee and settled down, he was onto the medallions, and the music, and she trailed off. After a while, she stopped talking altogether, just staring at him.

“It could get pretty amazing sometimes,” he said, tilting his cup back and forth rather than look her in the eye. “I mean, sometimes, it was just like with a bunch of really good musicians, right? You can just pick up the beat and run with it. Only everyone could sing along with it, like we all knew the lyrics. Even the crowd, y’know? Other times, we didn’t even have to have our instruments out, or be anywhere near each other. Music’d just come up outta nowhere, and we could hear each other, no matter where we were.”

Amy hesitated, fiddling with her cup, “And… this power, it… it could make people… do things?”

“Nah, nothing like that. It was just like uh… like motivation, y’know?” He grimaced. “I dunno. Mom and Sonia can probably explain it better. All I really understood was what I could do with my drums. Rock the earth.”

Her eyes flicked to his medallion and back up. “You can’t anymore?”

“No way. The power only works when we’re all in harmony—pun totally intended—and since Sonic’s been gone…” He tightened his grip on his cup, smile fading. “He wasn’t even wearing it. Hope he hasn’t lost it, or anything.”

“Sonic doesn’t lose things,” she said definitely, but the surety dropped almost immediately, and she went back to looking a little awkward. “So, um… when you first found out about this… power… didn’t it seem a little…?”

“Crazy?” he asked, and snickered, draining the last of his coffee. “Yeah, I totally get what you’re sellin’, Amy. If I hadn’t been doin’ it myself, I totally wouldn’t’ve believed it. You gotta see it in action, though, it’s like nothin’ else.”

She gave a shaky smile. “Sorry. I do believe you, Manic – I’ve seen much stranger things. But it is a little… out there.”

“Yeah, I know. Still, it was how we fought. With music and magic and lasers. And it worked pretty well, y’know? I mean, like, obviously,” he added with a grin.

Amy nodded, glancing off to the side for a moment, then took a sharp breath and leaned forward. “So! You said you met Sonic in this place, right? You said it had something to do with your magic? Tell me about that!”

“Oh, right, yeah. That’s how we got on this topic, huh?” He laughed, and then flagged down a waitress again, gesturing for two more drinks. “Well, so, it was before we knew anything about anything, right? Sonic was the only one in the Resistance, he had his speed, but that was about it. Then, one night, he got visited by the Oracle of Delphius—you remember I told you about him?—anyway, the Oracle said some spooky stuff, told him he was a prince, and had a family, and all that jazz. And he told Sonic that if he wanted to find us, he had to listen to the song in his heart.”
“The song in his heart,” she repeated slowly, and Manic grinned.

“Yeah, corny, right? But he did, and he started playing this song. Me and Sonia heard it, and joined in. And that’s how we knew that there was something out there – something we knew we had to find. I dunno about Sonia, but all day, all I could think about was this song. And then, that night, me and Farrell – my old… a guy I used to work with… anyway, we were coming back from a job when I heard this riff. A guitar riff – it’s a, uh, like a chord, you know what that is? Anyway, Farrell couldn’t hear it, but I knew it was callin’ me.” He paused, checking her expression. “Does that sound as crazy as I suddenly realise it does?”

“Mm… no,” she said, leaning her cheek on her palm. “I’ve never had it with music, but I know how it feels to literally follow your heart.”

“That’s really cool,” he said, making a mental note to ask her about her story later. The really corny part of him wondered if she’d followed her heart to Mobotropolis. But he quickly shook his head and moved on. “So, like, I follow the sound, and I wind up here. See where they’ve got that round rug over there? With the dots on it? That is really cool, because it’s where the stage used to be, and the three dots are where the spotlights were.”

He’d already decided to come back here with Sonia and Sonic during the festival to give the owners a proper thank you for such a tribute. But as Amy looked over at the rug, he wondered if there was anything else he could do. He really did find it touching that they’d remembered.

“And so I walked in, and there was Sonic. Playing this guitar, just… just jamming. And I knew I was supposed to be up there with him. I’ll always remember the grin he gave me… I don’t think I’ve ever felt more welcome in my life,” he added quietly, but when Amy looked at him, he rushed on. “We’d barely started jamming when Sonia walks in. And you gotta believe me, it was weird. I was total street trash back then, and here was this high-class chick. Nothin’ about Sonia fitted into the slums back then. But all she said was ‘You guys are great’, and she does this jump, right, I swear, it was from like, that table over there. She flipped over all these, and landed, perfect, in the third spotlight, behind a keyboard. And there we were. The Sonic Underground, together at last.”

“Did you sing together again?” she asked, and he shook his head.

“Nah, not that time. That time, it wasn’t magic, it was just… music. The real us,” he said, and stared at the rug, thinking back to it. The Sonic Underground had always had two different sounds – the stuff they played with magic, and the stuff they played for themselves. The second had always been more fun to play – more true to who they were. But it had also tended to be harder, more emotional, and much less inspiring. They’d kept it hidden away from everyone, and never talked about it. The only time anyone ever heard them play as them was that first night. He shook his head again, jerking himself out of the thought. “Problem was, we picked a bad night. The club got raided. SWATbots everywhere.”

“Raided?”

“Oh, yeah, um… I guess if you never grew up here, you wouldn’t know,” he said with an embarrassed laugh. “It was illegal.”

“Clubs?”

“Music,” he corrected, and laughed again at her stare. “Music, laughter… whatever. I think the official line was like, gathering in large numbers for the purposes of enjoyment. I guess it was a sign of rebellion, or somethin’.”
“That’s crazy!”

“Well… yeah, except we’re pretty sure the Oracle had told you-know-who about us, when he first tried to take over,” he said. “If you knew three hedgehogs with magic instruments were gonna be your downfall, you’d probably outlaw it too!”

She frowned, but nodded slowly. “I guess… So… what happened next?”

“Uhh… maybe it’d be better to skip right through to sayin’ we ended up on the run together,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s where the cool stuff starts.”

It was so easy to talk to her. Soon, Manic realised he’d told her the whole story about their first mission together, and then the one about how Sonic showed them Sanctuary. And then about getting the van and how he’d finally learned to drive… They left the café after a while and started walking around town, Manic pointing out the places they’d done interesting things. Hours passed, and he barely noticed. For the first time in two years, Manic talked himself out, about the whole war and everything they’d done during that amazing year.

But all too soon, it was five o’clock, and he realised they had to get back. He couldn’t really skiv off work completely, and he figured Aleena would probably want to talk to everyone properly, now she didn’t have official responsibilities.

“So like, um… wow, sorry, I totally spent the whole time talkin’ about myself,” he said, after they’d begun to head back to the palace. “Totally didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, no! I loved it!” she said cheerfully. “Sonic never talks about Mobius, let alone what he did here; it was great to hear about it all!”

“Heh. Yeah, he was always kinda quiet on the whole history thing. Kinda bugs me, sometimes,” he admitted. “But, so like, uh, you. What’s your story? Or is that not cool of me, only asking when we’ve got like, ten minutes? Maybe we can wait until next time?”

“Well, it would probably only take about ten minutes!” she said with a laugh. “But sure, we can do it another time – we’ve got at least a week, right? And I had lots of fun, Manic. Thank you!”

He blushed and scuffed his foot against the ground. “I should be thankin’ you. It’s been a while since I’ve had someone to talk to, you know?”

She tilted her head in silent prompt, and he shrugged. “It’s gonna sound totally whiny, but… I dunno. Ever since this whole prince thing happened… the only people I really call friends are… well, Cyrus. Even Trevor, our friend from the Resistance, he’s always been more Sonic’s pal than ours, and everyone back at the palace, even the guys I work with all the time, they’re like… they think of me as prince first, you know?” He looked down at the ground again, then sighed and forced another smile. “Heck of a change, goin’ from being a street rat to a prince. But some things stay the same wherever you go. Not a lot of friends in either job.”

She took his hand and stopped walking, forcing him to stop and turn to face her. For several seconds, she didn’t move, just gazed into his eyes, before she abruptly let go of his hands and instead wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. “I’m sorry, Manic.”

Aaaand… there went the last of his ability to think. All he had the brain power to do was lift his arms and hug her back, blinking dumbly.

Man, she was warm…
After a few more blissful seconds, she pulled back, and they were only a few centimetres apart. He stared at her, at those gorgeous jade eyes, and realised this was it. He could kiss her. He would kiss her. All he had to do was move a little forward and –

And then an explosion tore apart the silence, and Amy jerked away from him as they both looked around for what had happened. A massive plume of smoke was rising up into the smog, and Manic inwardly cursed bad timing.

“I’m… I’m real sorry, Amy, but –” He stopped as he realised she was no longer there. “Amy Rose?”

“What are you waiting for?” she cried, and he spun around again to see her halfway across the street, a massive red hammer in her hand. He blinked, wondering where she’d gotten it from and how she’d moved so fast, but she just gestured for him to follow. “We have to go see what that was! Let’s go!”

And then she was running. He stared after her, fighting off an inane grin. “Now that is one amazing girl,” he muttered, and took off after her.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:

Sing - My Chemical Romance 2010
Track Eight: Where's your head at?

Chapter Notes

Don't let the walls cave in on you, you turn the world away from you. Where's your head at?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“…and while no actual explosion was reported by nearby residents, authorities are stumped as to what else could have caused such massive destruction in such a short amount of time.”

Looking at some very familiar holes in the ground, and the fact that despite the smell of gun powder in the air, the four destroyed warehouses seemed to have collapsed in on themselves more than anything, Tails decided he knew exactly what could have caused such massive destruction, though he wasn’t entirely clear on the ‘why’. But he remained silent, half-hidden behind Knuckles and Amy at the end of the ‘royal crowd’. Sonia and Manic were at the front, staring out over the destroyed buildings in disbelief and occasionally speaking to a tall, thin mouse in full safety gear beside them.

The reporter was still talking, and Tails listened with half an ear as he continued his visual assessment. “So far, no anarchist comment has been made, but palace authorities are downplaying the possibility of their involvement. Most anarchist protests are staged productions, and as you can see from the scene behind me, there are no anarchist players in sight. Security footage has been identified and will be analysed by palace authorities, but Chief Emergency Attendant Trevor Mouse is currently treating the incident as accidental. More information as it is uncovered.”

“Ten rings says security footage shows blue blurs,” Knuckles muttered, too low for anyone but Tails and Amy to hear.

“I drop rings, I don’t give them away,” Tails joked, but then added more seriously, “I wonder why he did it.”

The other two shook their heads, watching the emergency crews work. Amy and Manic had arrived early, apparently having been only a few blocks away when it happened, but Tails and Knuckles had only found out because Tails had been neck-deep in the palace’s computer systems, and so received an alert for all security detail to be on high alert. Their lives being what they were, they’d figured it would be something important, and so hurried out to find Sonia, who allowed Knuckles to come along. Tails had just pretended he didn’t hear the implication he wasn’t invited.

Now they were all here, however, the three of them weren’t really sure what to do. Sonic had clearly been involved, but he was nowhere to be seen. Aside from ‘stop bad guys, save innocents’, his motivations were hard to guess at the best of times, and none of them wanted to mention his involvement when no one else seemed to realise he’d been here.

“My warehouses!”

They all looked around as a heavy-set mixe practically fell out of a hovering car and sprinted to the guards’ barricade. Surprisingly, they stepped aside, and the man ran until he was caught by the tall mouse that had been speaking to Manic and Sonia. “Whoa, hold up there, Lord Head! You’re not gonna save your buildings by getting hurt!”
“My warehouses! All destroyed!” he cried, clinging to the mouse’s arm. “Trevor, you know what was in those!”

“Yeah, I do, Lord Head, and my guys are seeing what we can recover,” he said, and gently pushed him back. “But you rushing in and falling over the debris isn’t going to get anything out faster.”

“Who did this? Was it the anarchists? Some terrorist plot?!”

“Hey, whoa, now,” Manic said quickly, stepping up with both hands raised to calm him down. “No need to go throwin’ accusations around, Lord Head. So far this just seems to be an accident.”

“An accident?” he screeched. “An accident that targeted my four warehouses specifically?!”

“Kodak, you’re getting all this, right?” the reporter mumbled to his cameraman, and Tails rolled his eyes despite himself. Human or mobian, reporters were all the same.

“This was no accident! If it were an accident, the stock in those warehouses would have shot this whole district sky-high!” the mixe shouted. “This, young Thief, was a display! A message! And I demand a response!”

Sonia sighed, folding her arms under her chest. “What would you have us do, Lord Head? We have no proof the anarchists were involved, and even if we did, we wouldn’t know where to find them to retaliate.”

“Well, if it is not the anarchists to be held responsible, then who will be? Someone did this!” he said furiously, slinging his arm at the damage. “Unless you, Thief Prince, claim this was some – some – city demolition work! Tell me, what great waste of space will you build in its place? Will I see profit?”

Manic gaped at him blankly for a second, then looked to Sonia, who scowled, but neither of them could answer before another voice broke through the crowd. “No less profit than you saw from the warehouses while standing, I’d wager.”

Everyone turned to watch Aleena sweep through the crowd, and there was a short gasp as the crowd recognised Sonic strolling along behind her. He ignored the reaction, only winking at his friends before refocussing on the lord. Aleena seemed not to notice the interaction as she stepped up between Sonia and Manic.

“Lord Head, did you not use all four of those warehouses for storage purposes?” she asked, and he glanced at her, then went back to staring at Sonic. Aleena’s smile almost seemed to grow, which Tails had to raise an eyebrow over – he was used to people being distracted by Sonic, but most of their friends tended to find it annoying. Aleena seemed almost pleased, as if… as if she’d wanted him to be a distraction… Huh.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the reporter suddenly blurted out, “Channel M has witnessed history today as the Lost Prince makes his first public appearance in –”

“Hey, yeah, question,” Sonic called abruptly, and he zipped around to stand in front of his family, taking even more of the crowd’s shocked attention. “Why does this whole area stink of gunpowder?”

The lord blinked at him for a moment. “Pardon, So- uh –”

“Sonic’s good,” he said absently, before continuing, “Gunpowder. Munitions. Weapons. Why is that all I can smell?”
He glanced at the mouse, furrowing his brow in confusion. “You know why, sir.”

“Sonic,” he corrected. “And no, dude, I don’t.”

The head safety guy looked at Sonic as if that was surprising, and the lord shifted before saying, “I stored… weapons in those buildings. During the… war, I held them there for the… Resistance.”

“Yeah, no, that I know,” he said, waving it off. “I helped you move some of ’em in there, and I was a big fan of your explosives. What I don’t get is why they’re still here. You plannin’ another rebellion or something?”

Now that got a reaction. “How dare you!” he cried. “I would never go against my queen! You know that! I was practically open in my support of Queen Aleena even during… that time.”

Sonic just smiled, open for further explanation.

“To accuse me of being an anarchist…! I will not have such nonsense, especially from you, Sonic the Hedgehog! I remember –”

“Hey, you can say my name!” he said brightly, but then stepped in close, his smile dangerous. “And I can say yours: Wereshore Head. You’re still hanging on to weaponry designed for guerrilla warfare two and a half years after the war ended with a terrific bang that included you saying, and I quote: ‘Finally, it’s over’. Strange, isn’t it?”

There was a sudden, almost unnatural silence, and Tails and Knuckles exchanged confused glances. Amy shifted her weight onto her hip, the first of the entire crowd to shift her focus onto the lord, the heavy silence waiting to hear his response.

His brow furrowed. He swallowed twice. Moved his weight from one foot to the other. “I was… keeping them for… the guards?”

“Okay, yeah, except that you kept them out here, nowhere near the barracks,” he pointed out. “And it’s not like they’re really appropriate, you know? Guards don’t really need weapons that can be hidden under coats. People are supposed to see them packin’ heat. It’s an authority thing.”

“I… we…”

“Lemme guess,” Sonic said, and Tails recognised a look that usually meant he needed to come up with a really good excuse for blowing up the kitchen if he ever wanted Sonic to bring him power rings again. “You were just keeping them in reserve. Just in case.”

Tails frowned. Just in case of what…?

“Just in case the ol’ doctor comes back, right?” Sonic explained, ignoring the flinch that rippled through everyone surrounding him. “Y’know, if it were me, I woulda really enjoyed getting rid of that stuff, or putting them to better use. Like, I dunno, getting together a militia to get rid of the SWATbots in the outlying areas, or maybe put down those pesky anarchists you seem to have such a thing against. Y’know, anything but just leaving them lying around, collecting dust and rust, so they’d be useless even if the doc’ did come back.”

Lord Head blinked rapidly, then looked over at the warehouses, as if the idea had never occurred to him. “I… I couldn’t just get rid of them… they were important for so long, I –”

“It does imply a certain lack of faith,” Aleena noted quietly.
“Your majesty, I – I would never dream…!” He began babbling, spreading his hands toward her. “It – the storage was – I only mean to say –”

“Oh, we are not in the least offended,” she said, and Sonic smirked, teeth glinting slightly in the evening light.

“Just disappointed?”

“Well,” she said, glancing at him. “Maybe a little.”

Lord Head nearly fell over himself in his apologies, and Sonia abruptly swept back into the conversation, taking the lord’s elbow and turning him slightly away from Sonic. “Well, moving on, Lord Head, I think the important thing here is getting this disaster cleaned up. As you suggested, this is an excellent opportunity for the city to help its citizens and, as the Lost Prince mentioned, potentially recover some very useful munitions for the royal guard. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement that will make good of this horrible event.”

“Forget the weapons, sis, I’m thinkin’ redevelopment,” Manic added, jumping in with a broad smile. “Lord Head, how do you feel about apartments?”

He blinked again. “My… my estate has always been in commercial –”

“No way, man! We have so gotta talk rent schemes. This place is like, prime real estate for city workers. You ever heard of shared asset agreements? They’ll totally blow your mind.”

And with that, he was off and running, suddenly talking lofts and government-sponsored rent work, and the poor Lord Head was dragged along by the two siblings talking a mile a minute, still lost in the derailment. The reporter immediately turned to his cameraman with wide eyes. “Tell me you got all that.”

“Every word, Sepia. You want to summarise?”

“Hold on, let’s see if we can get –”

Aleena shot Sonic a quick, unreadable look before immediately moving forward to catch their attention. “Gentlemen. Might we be of assistance?”

“Your majesty!”

She guided them away, leaving Sonic alone with the head emergency worker. Knuckles exchanged glances with Tails, then marched forward and roughly yanked one of Sonic’s spines.

“Argh! Hey, ow! That’s attached, you know!” he cried, slapping him away. “What’s your problem, you psycho?”

“You’re calling me psycho?” he snapped, and pointed at the destroyed buildings. “You’re in the city for less than twelve hours and you blow something up!”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘blowing up’,” Tails noted as he and Amy joined them. “Maybe imploding. It just looks like he destroyed the foundations and they collapsed in on themselves.”

“What he said,” Sonic muttered, rubbing his quills. “Seriously, man, ow…”

“Quit whining,” Knuckles said irritably. “Is there a reason you’re destroying private property, or did you just feel the need to complicate more lives than mine?”
“Wait, hold on,” the emergency worker said, holding up his hands as if to stall them. “Sonic, you did this?”

They all looked at him, surprised at the interjection, until Sonic laughed and lifted both palms up in a helpless shrug.

“What – why?”

“We-ell… it was kinda a spur of the moment thing…” he said, still grinning. “ Mostly to see it happen, really.”

Tails slapped a hand to his head. “Sonic, those warehouses belonged to somebody!”

“He wasn’t using them,” he said, and Tails opened one eye in time to see that dangerous glint back in Sonic’s eye. “And he definitely wasn’t using those safety blankets he called weapons.”

“I think it’s a good thing,” Amy said, moving closer to Sonic’s side. “I spent the whole afternoon walking around this city – it’s about time they let go of the war.”

“Amy,” Tails groaned. Sonic did not need the encouragement.

“Whoa, whoa, wait,” the emergency worker said. “Sonic. You destroyed those buildings to get rid of the *Resistance armoury*?!” he asked, then leaned back on his hips with a shocked laugh. “Geez, Sonic, I know you’ve always been the direct type, but you probably could’ve just told him to ditch them!”

“Wise up, Trevor. If he hadn’t gotten rid of them in two years, he wasn’t gonna,” he said, and then folded his arms, looking up and over the city beyond. “Just like the rest of this place. You ask me, this whole city’s in need of some demolition.”

Amy nodded, and Tails touched his forehead. Hedgehogs. Why was their fall back solution always ‘smash it’? Worse, when he looked at Knuckles, it was to see some annoyed understanding.

“They are kinda stuck in the past. They could do worse than having to start from scratch.”

“Knuckles.”

“What? You help blow up bases all the time.”

“Bad guy bases!” he objected.

“And GUN bases?”

“That’s different!”

“Nope,” Sonic said, shaking his head, and they looked at him. He shrugged and gestured to the wreckage. “GUN are scary because they’re a whole lotta firepower set on protecting people from things GUN can’t actually beat. That place was a whole lotta firepower in a city filled with paranoid nostalgia. Same thing, really. I just cut things off at the pass.”

Tails stared at him, but when he put it like that… he sighed and had to concede the point. It was Knuckles to question him next. “So is this a thing? You gonna blow anything else up tonight?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, but no. I think Mom’s gonna chew me out, and I think she wants to talk to us.”
“Hold on, hold on,” the emergency worker said, grabbing Sonic’s shoulder to pull him around again. “Back on the buildings. Did you really destroy these?”

“Yeah,” he said blankly. “So?”

The mouse pulled back with an odd frown. “Are you gonna be doing it again?”

“Probably,” Knuckles answered for him.

He looked almost pained as he asked, “Do you know which ones?”

“No,” Sonic replied honestly. “But wherever it is, I promise, no one will get hurt.”

“That… you know what?” he asked, stepping back with a reluctant grin, “I don’t wanna know. I gotta get back to work anyway – you should come down to the station sometime, Sonic. We can hang out, and you can tell me how you went from being a hero to destroying cities for fun!”

“Sounds like a plan!” he agreed, and the mouse laughed before walking away, the others watching him warily.

“Is it okay that he knows?” asked Amy. “I don’t want to have to break you out of prison again. Especially not when they actually have a reason.”

“Trevor’s cool,” Sonic said lazily. “I wouldn’t go tellin’ Cyrus, and I’d rather skip the lecture from Sonia, but the worst Trevor’ll try to do is shoot me if he sees me doing it.”

The other three gave him the look that deserved, and he grinned. “He’s a lousy shot,” he said, as if that was all that mattered.

“Sonic.”

They all paused, turning to face Aleena as she glided over to them, the reporters looking stunned behind her. She folded her hands in front of her skirt and raised her eyebrows in a pointedly polite look. “I trust we are finished here?”

“We were just talking about that,” he said. “Looks pretty good. For today.”

“Excellent. This… event… is an excellent segue into that discussion I was hoping to have. It was quite the coincidence that I ran into you on my way here. Might we return to the palace together?” she asked, and then looked at the others. “I would ask you all find your own way back, but I’d appreciate you joining us upon arrival. I’ll tell the stewards to expect you.”

“Sure,” Knuckles said, and the other two nodded nervously.

“O-of course, your majesty.”

“Excellent. Sonic,” she prompted, and he peeled off a sarcastic salute before winking at the others again and heading back through the crowd. Aleena nodded to them all, and then followed.

Tails looked at Knuckles and Amy, then let out a long, steadying breath. “Anyone else feel like this festival is gonna be a whole lot more eventful than we thought?”
Aleena’s car was, unsurprisingly given how long she’d been on the run, fairly inconspicuous. A simple grey car, with wheels and no particular trimmings on the outside. Inside, the only sign it was anything special was just that was chauffeured, with thick glass separating the front from two backseats that faced each other. Sonic sat on one, leaning his elbow on the top of the backrest to prop up his head, while Aleena sat opposite him, her hands folded in her lap and feet crossed at the ankles.

They were silent until the car got going, just watching each other think.

“So,” Sonic started. “How you wanna play this, Mom? I pretend this city doesn’t creep me out and you pretend I didn’t just destroy a few buildings?”

“We could,” she acknowledged. “We could also pretend that I didn’t bring Robotnik here sixteen years ago and that you do not continue to let him do as he wills, but I feel neither game would serve us well.”

His eyes flicked over her for a second, before he laughed and lifted his hand for a moment in concession. “Okay. So cards on the table. How come Sonia and Manic are in the dark about… y’know… everything?”

“They know so little of the world,” she began, but he just snorted.

“How are they supposed to know anything else if you won’t tell them?”

“This from you?” she asked, and he inclined his head a little, taking the jab. She let it sink in for a moment, then lowered her eyes and sighed. “I propose something that I have not in a very long time. I wish for us to be honest. True honesty. No illusions, no pretence. Between us, alone, at this time… I wish for honesty. May we do so?”

He narrowed his eyes, then nodded once. She licked her lips, keeping her eyes on her hands.

“I visited a couple once, ten, maybe eleven years ago. They had a foster child. They loved him very much, and he them. They were killed soon after, leaving him with a friend,” she said quietly. “I call you my son, but in truth, Sonic… your mother died a very long time ago, didn’t she?”

Sonic didn’t move for a second, just staring back at her silently. He didn’t talk about his parents. Didn’t think about them. He wondered if she knew the challenge she was making. He let his hand drop, and shifted to face forward, arms folded over his chest. “Yeah. She did.”

She nodded, closing her eyes as if pained. When she opened them again, there were tears in them, but she smiled bravely. “Then I will not disrespect her any longer. My apologies.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry too,” he said quietly. “For what it’s worth, if things’d been different… I could’ve done worse.”

She didn’t answer straight away, and after a moment, she instead looked out the window. “Looking at that which I have wrought upon my kingdom, I wonder. I am no mother, even to the children that would call me so. And I was not the ruler you could be, Sonic.”

“Mom –”

“I am not asking you to stay,” she said, before he could start. “I am stating a fact. I allowed Robotnik into my kingdom to prevent a future I have only aided in coming. I believed the horrible things my visions told me, and in doing so, I accepted my fate. I could not see beyond what I was told. A mobian flaw, if I might be so trite as to name one.”
Sonic shifted back onto an angle, propping his head on the heel of his hand again. “Obvious aside, what’s the problem? You screwed up – it happens. It’s part of being sentient.”

“Rulers are supposed to be an ideal the people live for,” she said. “Do you know, in all my years, I have met only two mobians that do not tend to believe what they’re told? Two. You are one. My husband was the other.”

“Your husband?” He raised an eyeridge. “To be honest, I kinda forgot you had one. No one ever talks about him.”

“No, I imagine not. In the end, he was called a coward, though in hindsight, I suspect he was the first victim of my folly,” she said, and then smiled slightly at the window. “He had faith and hope and humour… things I never understood the value of until they were gone. I know you can never think of him as a father, but you have inherited his goodness. You are quite like him, although you never met. It’s extraordinary.”

He paused, judging her mood, then coughed and rubbed under his quills before going still again. “You know, there’s an anarchist ghost story that says he was sacrificed in an ancient ritual that summoned Robotnik.”

She huffed out a sad laugh, shaking her head. “Not entirely incorrect. He heard tell of a human scientist that could save us from the future I saw. He went to find him, and bring him back. No one ever heard from him again.”

“Geez, I’m sorry.”

“As am I,” she said, and then took a sharp breath and looked at him. “Anarchist ghost story, hm? Perhaps there is some truth to those rumours of your politics.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, well… They preach total freedom and choice. No laws, no government, no one ever telling you what to do… on paper, they sound pretty awesome.”

“On paper?”

“I’m not so big on the whole ends-justifies-the-means thing,” he said. “They do some scary stuff.”

“And you wouldn’t do that which you know to be wrong,” she murmured, and he shrugged.

“Depends on your definition. I’ve been the bad guy before,” he said. “Speaking of, I figure I should probably ask this, what with you being able to see the future and knowing who my friends are before they came here – you know much about what I’ve been up to?”

“What you’ve been up to?” she repeated. “You mean, such as the fact Robotnik lives and calls himself Eggman, with some ludicrous desire to build a theme park in his image? Or perhaps you refer to grander things, such as the God of Chaos, or Gaia?”

He glanced away and back, grinning despite himself. “All’a the above.”

“I am aware, yes,” she said. “Though I confess I have learned less from my own visions and the magic personnel on my staff, and more from that which the human governments tell me. They are often quite curious to know my thoughts on Sonic the Hedgehog, and if I claim responsibility for him.”

He raised his eyeridge again, silently asking the question, and she spread her hands in response.
“I believe the only one you would allow to claim responsibility for your actions is you. I have not told them who you are to me,” she said.

“Figured that. But considering Sonia sent a letter to Tails tellin’ him he was a part of your kingdom, I wasn’t sure what you actually thought.”

She paused, her eyes flicking to his before returning to the window. “You do not consider yourself a part of the kingdom?”

“Like it matters what I think? GUN only cares because they’re worried you think you can tell me to go blow up the White House.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said slowly. “But if truth is told, I find myself more concerned with you destroying my cities than targeting theirs.”

He grinned. “That’s cool. Doesn’t answer the question though.”

“No,” she agreed. “But at present, it is the only answer I have. When your friends join us, I would like to speak more about your actions with the warehouses. Before you start,” she added, holding up a hand to halt his objections, “I do not hold them accountable for that which you decide to do. I have a request of them, that is all.”

He narrowed his eyes, but nodded silently. As the palace came into view outside the window, Aleena took another breath and turned to face him properly again. “Mobius is vulnerable right now, Sonic. I worry for it. I hope you understand how far appearances can lead us.”

“Can’t say I ever cared about them, but sure,” he said, and flicked his hand carelessly. “If you’re asking me to still call you ‘mom’, I was planning on doing that anyway. And I’ll play nice for the aristocrats.”

“My thanks. If I might also ask one other thing,” she said, and reached into a pocket to draw out a small silver medallion, carved into a perfect two-headed guitar. She held it out, but he didn’t immediately take it, just watched it slowly rotate with the car’s momentum.

“Haven’t seen that in a while.”

She nodded. “I know why you left it behind. I am not asking you to take it back for good. Only while you are here.”

He stared at it for a long few moments, then silently reached out and wrapped his hand around it. At first, he just held it in his palm, both of them watching the city lights reflect off it, before he nodded once and tied the red string around his neck.

Aleena smiled, leaning back against her seat. “Thank you, Sonic. It means more than you know.”

Aleena’s office, according to Tails’ schematics, had originally been designed as water storage for the Death Egg. So although it was large, with multiple air vents that were actually water pipes, there were no windows, and very few ways for people to get or listen in without drawing attention to themselves.
Which, they figured, was probably the only reason Shadow was waiting for Tails, Knuckles and Amy when they arrived back at the palace, and joined them with only a short conversation to clarify, “Sonic had something to do with the collapsed buildings the palace staff were discussing.”

“Yes.”

“And Aleena accepted that?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Of course you are,” Tails muttered, and no one else bothered to comment as they found a steward and got directed through.

As expected, Sonic and Aleena were already there, Aleena seated behind her desk and Sonic lounged sideways in one of the chairs on the other side, but they had clearly cut off their conversation just before the door opened. It was only because Tails knew him so well that he noticed Sonic relax slightly at the sight of them.

“Come in,” Aleena said, rising to gesture at the chairs and couches around the room. “Please, sit down.”

Once they were inside, another steward appeared apparently out of nowhere with a trolley carrying six cups, a massive teapot, and some tiny sandwiches. He set them out, apparently oblivious to almost everyone’s reactions, and then stood back with the other steward, both bowing to Aleena.

“Will there be anything else, your majesty?”

“No, thank you. I will send for anything else we need,” she said, gesturing to her intercom, and they bowed again before heading out. As soon as the door shut behind them, she came out from behind the desk, and Sonic stood up. A second later, both his and the other desk chair were turned around, closer to the couches, and he was lounged again, already chewing on sandwiches, while Aleena picked up a tea cup and sat down in the newly turned chair.

Knuckles grabbed a couple of sandwiches himself and perched on the arm of the couch. “So now we’re all here, anyone want to finally tell me what the hell’s going on in this city?”

“Knuckles!” Amy hissed, glancing at Aleena, but she barely reacted to the language.

“I would say that perhaps the better word is ‘empire,’” she said. “And to answer your question, I’m afraid we must first cover other topics, to ensure all present are aware of the circumstances. Please, Amy, Tails, do sit down. This will not be short.”

They exchanged glances, then looked at Sonic, before hesitantly sitting on the couch Knuckles had claimed. Shadow stepped up behind the other one, folding his arms over his chest and looking directly at Aleena, who met his gaze evenly.

“Agent Shadow, I know you work for the Guardian Unit of Nations, and by extension, the United Federation. It is only out of respect for what you have done, both for yourself and my – for Sonic that I allow your presence here now. I would not tell an agent of the Guardian Unit of Nations that which will be revealed here. Do you understand?”

He paused, tilting his head slightly. “Are you ordering me not to tell my commander about this?”
“No. However, should the President of the United Federation ask me about that which we discuss today,” Aleena said slowly, “I shall deny everything. I am indeed trusting you, but I know of the precariousness of your position within the Guardian Unit of Nations, Agent Shadow. I will not hesitate to use it.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, but didn’t verbally answer, just shifted his weight. Aleena turned back to Knuckles.

“Guardian, although I did not object to your calling, I would like you to know it was not by my hand that Sonia brought you here. I know your duty, and would not ask you abandon it without cause.”

“That just about makes you the only person in this city that does,” he snapped. “They think the Master Emerald—that all chaos emeralds—are just magic rocks! Sonia thinks my duty amounts to keeping my damn island in the sky!”

“But how is that possible?” asked Tails, glancing at Sonic and Aleena, before he remembered who he was looking at and shrank back against the couch. “I mean… um… it’s just…”

Shadow let him stammer for a few more seconds before taking over. “Mobians are powered by chaos energy. It’s not plausible that they aren’t aware of everything that’s happened to the Master Emerald this past year.”

“As for Gaia… The darkness merely seemed like clouds over the moon. We did not see Gaia rise as it was night and, to be blunt, we are on the other side of the world. The creatures were presented as the result of an explosion at an old factory. No one thought to ask otherwise.” She met each of their gazes evenly for a beat. “Chaos is tightly controlled on the mainland – even power rings are rare. Most non-magic users do not have the power to sense changes in the chaos or mystic energies, and even if they did, they do not notice that which they do not want to see.”

“Clearly,” Shadow commented, and she smiled thinly.

“No, Agent Shadow, whatever do you mean?” she asked. “What danger could there be that was
worse than Robotnik? What world is there beyond the Mobian borders? Surely, if we remain on
guard here in the city, ever vigilant of the fact he may return, then nothing could harm us. Why
should we notice dwarf planets being dragged across the sky, dark energy creatures appearing at
night, or even a prince choosing to leave us? We have other priorities.”

The others glanced at Sonic, but he was watching Aleena, slightly confused even as Shadow said,
“Vigilant of his return? You ignore his actions across the rest of the world.”

“We ignore his presence even in this city, Agent Shadow,” she corrected. “Or do you think my
people acknowledge how little this place has changed in thirty months?”

They all exchanged glances at that, and Aleena shook her head with a soft sigh.

“They claim to have moved on, but he still rules this city as if he never left. My empire is filled with
still-functioning robotocisors, SWATbots roam the outlying territories, and as you saw today,
countless people remain armed and ready, expecting another reason to rise up against a tyrant,” she
said wearily. “Sonia believes the people do not trust us, and Manic does not trust his own judgement
enough to disagree. But the truth is that the only mistrust they have is in my ability to protect this
kingdom, let alone my empire, should Robotnik or any other human invade our lands.”

“Could you?”

They looked up at Shadow, who was staring at Aleena intently, searching her face for something
they couldn’t name. “If Eggman were to return, could you fight him?”

For a long moment, she didn’t respond, before her eyes slowly dropped to her lap. “If my armies
were reformed, or my sorcerers had morale, then yes. I could lead them to victory. As it is, however,
while I wish Sonic could be here with us, I do not regret allowing him to leave, if it keeps other
forces away.”

Although he didn’t seem to move, Tails noticed Sonic’s quills soften very slightly, losing the last of
the tension he’d been carrying since seeing the Cyborg Prison. Knuckles, however, folded his arms
more tightly over his chest.

“So why call him back?”

Everyone looked at him without turning their heads, and he raised his eyeridges in point. “He keeps
you safe by not being here. So why get him to come back?”

“I did not ask,” Aleena pointed out, but he didn’t even blink.

“But you let it happen. You had to have known that eventually, they’d go looking for him. You
never stopped them. You wanted him back here. Why?”

Tails blinked twice, realising he was right. It was always weird when Knuckles came out with these
nuggets of insight. He was so dense most of the time, and so gullible, but every so often he’d just…
see things. Sonic had once described it as bull-headed clearness, and Tails figured it was because
Knuckles was rarely interested in people’s layers – he saw the first thing and ran with it, whereas
most people saw the second and third and tried to fit them all together for a full picture. But it was
still weird.

They looked back at Aleena.

For a moment, it looked like she was going to bring up family, but one look at Sonic and the hint
faded away. Besides, only Shadow would fall for it – blood didn’t make a pack. She folded her
hands in her lap, then sighed and said, “For all my power as queen, my own position is as precarious as Agent Shadow’s. The aristocrats speak loudly, the middle classes are caught in old nightmares, and the lower classes would thrive should the anarchists do as they wish.”

“Anarchists… they were those guys we rescued Sonia and Manic from,” said Knuckles. “What’s their deal?”

“Anarchists are a political group. They have always existed, and likely always will,” she explained with a small smile. “They believe laws and governments are an endangerment to free will, and so try to destroy them.”

“Thing is,” Sonic interjected mildly, “what with everyone being so anti-establishment back in the Robotnik days, they gained traction. And weapons.”

“Indeed,” Aleena said wearily. “What was once a group of people who did little more than complain is now an armed force which carries out attacks on guard posts and rules the Badlands that border the city. They would like to see all royalty thrown back into exile.”

“So basically,” Tails said, holding out his hands like a scale, “you have rich people stopping you from doing anything inside the city, and scary people stopping you from doing anything outside.”

“And so we remain. Unchanging, forever frozen, waiting for a return I pray will not come,” she said.

“I still don’t see what this has to do with Sonic,” Knuckles said stubbornly, and Sonic shrugged his agreement, but everyone else made the connection. Tails frowned, even feeling a little betrayed on Sonic’s behalf.

You didn’t hang around with Sonic for long without seeing it for yourself. He had this way about him that made you want to watch and follow, just to see what he’d do. If he spoke to you, you believed what he told you. If he gave you an opportunity to do something, you wanted to do it. You wanted to be a part of whatever he was doing. It didn’t matter if five minutes ago, you’d never thought you could do anything worth noting. Sonic believed you could do it. So of course you could.

He didn’t know he did it. Or at least, Tails was pretty sure he didn’t. If he did, he’d sure gone out of his way to not take advantage of it, what with how much he’d been refusing to let people actually fight alongside him lately.

But Aleena wanted to take advantage of it… she wanted to use him. Like a symbol. Like a – like...

“Royalty is a symbol. Something for a kingdom to fight for and aspire to,” Aleena said quietly. “For good reason, my kingdom does not currently trust my judgement. My princess is too involved in politics, and my prince too unsure of himself. I need someone to be what we cannot. I need a figurehead.”

Sonic stiffened up again, but Aleena quickly turned toward him, palm out and calming. “It is not what you think.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “’Cause it sounds a lot like you expect me to sit on a pedestal and look pretty.”

“Only metaphorically. In actual fact, I would much prefer you to be very dirty. All of you.”

That stopped them all. “What?”

“Today was the first time anything drastic has been done. Violent though it was, it forced action
upon the aristocrat involved. Upon the city itself. I suppose what I am dancing around saying is that I would not be averse to something similar happening again.”

There was a long pause as that sunk in, Amy and Tails exchanging glances, before Sonic asked incredulously, “You want me to wreck stuff?”

“I shall give no such order,” she said. “I cannot, without the aristocrats objecting.”

“But if a whole bunch of old buildings and war-related stuff happened to get destroyed, you wouldn’t exactly go sendin’ the guards out?” Sonic guessed, and she smiled serenely.

“Regardless of certain unstable buildings that are unfortunately structurally sound, I do have one other royal charge for you, Lost Prince,” she continued. “I am once again charging you with security detail.”

He smirked. “After what happened last time? Sonia’s gonna love that.”

“Yes, well, this time, I am going to be slightly more specific,” she said, giving him a sideways glance. “I ask you to clear as much of the city and surrounding Badlands of robotocisors, robotocised mobians, and other elements of Robotnik’s influence as you can before the ball next week. Amy, Tails, Guardian… I know of your skills. I know what it is you do, against the Doctor, and for your own reasons. If you have time, I would ask only that you use those skills to help Sonic in this quest.”

“Oh, great,” Knuckles snapped. “You know, Tails is the only one who actually thinks of himself as a sidekick.”

“Partner,” Sonic corrected, and Tails blinked, then grinned, while Knuckles rolled his eyes.

“I have better things to do,” he said. “I should be back on my island.”

“Aw, come on, Knuckles,” Sonic wheedled, and ran over to nudge him in the side. “Run around, smash a few robots, find lost things, save the day a couple times. It’ll be fun!”

“Hmph.”

“Well, I’m in!” Amy announced, and she bounced to her feet, fists raised and ready. “Helping people and not having to worry about Eggman destroying the world? And spending time with my darling –” She cut herself off abruptly, pointedly not looking at Aleena, and coughed. “What’s not to love?”

“Ugh,” Sonic said, and Tails snickered before standing up too.

“I’d really like to help, but first I want to finish my research. If there’s a way to derobotocise people, I’m going to find it,” he said, nodding defiantly. “After that, though, I’m in!”

“What about you, Shads?” Sonic asked, glancing over his shoulder. “Want to come bust a few robot heads?”

“As charming as your team bonding is, I will have to decline,” he sneered, then pulled himself up with a nod to Aleena. “My duties to the Guardian Unit of Nations take precedence, with all due respect.”

“Understood, and expected,” she said. “But I do thank you all. Now, if you’ll excuse me for just a moment, I will retrieve a map so that I might show you areas of importance.”

She set her tea aside and stood up, gliding to the door as apparently only queens could. Once she
was gone, Tails collapsed back on the couch, only to then immediately lurch forward and grab a few sandwiches. “No offence, Sonic, but she really puts my fur on end. I know we talk to important people all the time, but there’s something about Queen Aleena I just can’t get used to.”

“Whaddaya mean?” asked Knuckles. “I’ve seen you talk to that president guy, and that weird duchess from Soley-whatsit. You’ve never been like this around them.”

“She’s magic. Like, proper, in-the-bone magic. It’s kinda weird,” Sonic explained, joining Tails in snagging more food, but Amy shook her head.

“She’s probably the only one we’ve met that’s not a little scared of us,” Amy said, before reaching for the teacups with a business-like hand. She shoved the first one at Sonic, who rolled his eyes but took it, as did Tails when he got his. “Well, except for Duchess Elise, but she’s just strange. Queen Aleena keeps her decorum.”

“More like she never lets you forget what she is,” Knuckles muttered, and Sonic paused, chewing thoughtfully as he considered.

“Yeah, that too.”

They all looked at him, and he leaned back a little. “What?”

“I don’t know,” Tails said slowly. “I just thought… that’s your mother. Shouldn’t you be… more…?”

“Respectful?” suggested Shadow, and Sonic glanced over his shoulder at him, surprised.

After a moment, he shrugged and turned forward again. “I respect her, sure. Kind of. Mostly. But either way, even if I was up to bein’ the good prince, Knuckles is right. She knows she’s a queen and she makes sure you know it too. Sonia does the same thing – I love her, don’t get me wrong, but even when I was living with her twenty-four-seven, I don’t think there was a day that went by when she didn’t ooze ‘I am high class and accept only the best’.”

“Really?” Tails scratched his cheek awkwardly. “She seemed really nice. Bossy, but nice.”

“Oh, yeah, she is. That’s the thing. You never forget they’re like that, so when they talk to you, it can go one of two ways – they’re either talking to you even though it’s beneath them, or they’re talking to you because you are the best,” he explained. “That’s why so many guys fell for Sonia, back in the day. Because she made ’em feel awesome. Ain’t that right, Knuckles?”

Knuckles went so stiff he nearly fell off the couch, then blushed right through his cheek fur and leapt to his feet. “Shut up! I was fourteen!”

“And so very in love,” he commented, then grinned and ducked before Knuckles' fist could ram through his skull. “What? At least you remembered who she was! That first year, I think I had to introduce myself to you like three times!”

“Shut up!” he ordered again, and this time Sonic had to dash backward to avoid the lunge. “You’re different with that medallion on!”

“Medallion?” Amy repeated, looking up. As soon as her eyes landed on Sonic’s collarbone, she gasped and leapt to her feet, startling the boys out of their fight. She ignored that and ran over, literally shoving Knuckles out of the way so she could stare at the necklace before gazing up at Sonic with suddenly sparkling eyes.
“Uhh… Amy?”

“Is it true,” she asked slowly, leaning in even past the point that Sonic had to lean back himself, “that there was a band called the ‘Sonic Underground’?”

“Oh, no,” Knuckles groaned, while both Tails and Shadow looked on with varying levels of confusion.

Sonic’s only response was his left ear flicking before Amy’s smiled broadened. “You can sing.”

“No, he can’t,” Knuckles deadpanned.

Sonic leaned around Amy to glare at him, but wasn’t given time to actually comment before she grabbed his hands and leaned even closer still. “Sonic?” she asked. “Sonic, will you sing me something?”

“And will you give me time to leave before you do?” Knuckles deadpanned.

Sonic shook Amy’s hands off so he could push her away and smirk at Knuckles nastily. “Bet you’d like it if Sonia sang for you. Maybe toss in some magic in there, get a duet going?”

Knuckles glared back like it had been a threat, and Tails blinked curiously. “Magic?”

“Oh, it’s so romantic, Tails!” Amy cried, flinging her arms out to catch Sonic again. He dodged, but she still managed to grab his arm and yank him back against her chest. “Manic was telling me all about it! When the Sonic Underground plays, it inspires people and motivates them! And sometimes, everyone listening will be able to dance along, or sing! Like a musical!”

Tails frowned, and Shadow raised a pointed eyeridge. “Mind-control.”

“No!” Sonic and Amy cried at the same time. Sonic grimaced at her, but then added, more quietly, “We could never make anyone do or say anything they didn’t want to.”

“Except by irritating people into submission,” drawled Knuckles.

“Oh, like you didn’t want to help anyway.”

Knuckles rolled his eyes, but then nodded to Tails. “It was harmless. Which is why I didn’t think that would be the reason they’d want him back here, despite what else they might use him for.”

“He is standing right here. And since when are you all concerned about what people want me around for?” asked Sonic, but Amy huffed.

“Oh, don’t start talking shop again! We can do that when the queen returns!” Amy insisted. “Sonic, Manic said you could play guitar, and that you were the lead singer. Please play for me?”

“I don’t sing anymore,” he insisted helplessly. “I’m all out of practice, it wouldn’t sound any good anyway.”

“It wasn’t bad,” Shadow commented, and everyone swivelled around to look at him. He met their gazes with his best emotionless stare. “I heard him sing last night. It wasn’t horrible.”

Sonic’s left ear twitched madly, and Amy turned big, sparkling eyes back on Sonic, while Tails found himself mildly annoyed. “I’ve been bugging you about singing for a year now and you just let Shadow stumble across it?”
“Oh, dude, do not get jealous of that!” Sonic snapped, but anything he might have said in response was cut off as the door opened again, and Aleena stepped through. She paused, and everyone froze, especially Amy, who suddenly seemed to realise she was wrapped around the arm of the queen’s son. It certainly didn’t help when Aleena gave a strange, soft smile, her eyes running the length of Sonic and Amy’s combined figures.

“Uh. Hi, Mom,” Sonic greeted, and gracelessly shoved Amy back a step. She half-sat, half-fell onto the couch and began staring at her knees like that might block out everything around her. Sonic tried to look innocent. “So, I guess you want to go over plans for this whole clean up thing, huh?”

Aleena hesitated another moment, then lifted the rolled up map in her hands for viewing. “Indeed. I have here a map of the surrounding areas, marked with problem areas. I thought we might go through them, if you were not otherwise occupied.”

Sonic’s ear flicked again, and Tails and Knuckles exchanged smirks. There were lots they didn’t agree on, but seeing Sonic squirm was not one of them.

“Nope, totally free and unattached and ready.”

“Mmhm,” Aleena noted, and only the fact she was queen made the look on her face different from Tails’ own.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Where's your head at - Basement Jaxx 2010
From the moment I found my voice, I knew that I had no choice. The only way that I'd learn from love is if I found it on my own.

It took hours to completely calm Lord Head down, and then get him to agree to Manic’s on-the-spot plan to redevelop the former warehouses into affordable apartment blocks. Eventually, Sonia had to sit down and go through the numbers, proving that if all the apartments were rented out, it would take less than a year for Head to start making money back on the investment. After that, he was unsurprisingly complacent.

Sonia kept smiling until they were a block away from his office, at which point she calmly wandered into a side alley and began kicking a dumpster into submission.

“Why – is – this – happening – now?!” she yelled, as Manic strolled in after her, amused by the reaction. “Why – do – all – aristo – crats – have – to – be – so – difficult?!”

“I dunno, sis’, what is it about high-breeds that they gotta do that?” he asked playfully, and she spun around to glare at him.

“I’m serious! Sonic came home today; this is supposed to be our big moment of success and you and I just wasted an entire evening sucking up to an idiot that has always claimed to be on our side!” she cried. “He was accusing us of destroying his buildings! Why would we even do that?”

He sighed, folding his arms and tilting his head back to think about it. “Publicity, maybe? For the festival?"

“What?"

“Well, it’s like Sonic said: the war’s over, the Resistance should be done… let’s like, get rid of what was and move on to what is, yeah?”

“Like Sonic says!” she spat. “Sonic, who suddenly shows up after three years and then mysteriously disappears again just long enough to cause a political catastrophe!”

“Oh, hey, c’mon, Sis’, you can’t be sayin’ he did that,” he said.

“So you don’t think the timing’s at all strange? That he suddenly returns and then less than eight hours later, four warehouses suddenly collapse in on themselves for no reason?”

“It’s… weird,” he admitted, “but think about it, sis’, I mean… how would he even do that? There was no explosion – I talked to Trevor, and he said the foundations were shattered. If I had my drums, I maybe coulda done that, but even at his fastest, Sonic couldn’t bring down a building.”

She stopped, staring at him for a moment, then threw up her hands and turned away, frustrated. “And how is he still fast? We lost our powers, why hasn’t he?”
He shrugged. “I never had any aside from the drums.”

“Lock-picking with sticks.”

“Skill,” he shot back, but it was an automatic response, and they both paused after it, thinking. It really didn’t make sense. Manic set his hands on his hips, scuffing his foot against the ground. “He’s different, too.”

She looked up, and he shrugged again. “I dunno. I mean, we’ve barely seen him, right? Maybe I’m wrong. But he seems different. Quieter, or somethin’. Not as full-on.”

“Age can do funny things,” she said slowly. “We’re not the same people we were three years ago.”

“Maybe. I dunno. I dunno, maybe he’s just tired after the trip here,” he said, then turned back out of the alley. “Let’s go home, I’m starvin’.”

“Yeah.”

They went back out onto the streets and walked in silence for a few minutes, Manic unconsciously checking dark corners and side alleys as they went. But as he did, he started to notice people lingering in them. Not thieves, either, but normal people, standing in pairs or threes, whispering excitedly. They would watch Manic and Sonia as they passed, but then immediately go back to whispering.

It was weird.

Mobotropolis was never a bustling city – not like Kazakistahn or Mobodoon. People mostly stayed inside because of the pollution in the air, and barely anyone came out after dark. For there to be people on the streets after eight without a party or something was… weird.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sonia said suddenly, and he jumped, making her frown. “What?”

“Uh… Nothing. Sorry. Just… lotta people out tonight.”

She looked around, but they were currently on an empty street, aside from the people they’d just passed in a side alley, so she just shrugged and carried on. “I’ve been thinking about what we can do to introduce Sonic into royal life. You know, responsibilities and stuff. We’ll have to build him up to court, and we all know he wouldn’t be much use in most of the things you do, but I was thinking that perhaps we could put him on a project.”

“Like what?”

“Like… like a clean up project, or something. He was always a bit of an environmentalist, so maybe we could put him on something like that. Do you have anything pending in that area?”

He blinked again, then leaned back on his hips, considering. “Clean up, uhh… well… kinda. I mean, there’s the amphitheatre. But that’s mostly done already; it’s just like, construction and stuff.”

“That’s right,” she said, touching a finger to her lips. “That motion you’re trying to pass through court.”

“Yeah. Felinae’s stallin’ me on the location,” he said wearily. “Which is dumb, because no one objected when I started cleaning it up.”

“I don’t know, Manic. Sonic might be with her on that one,” she pointed out. “It was his home,
once.”

“His home was under the garbage,” he argued. “I didn’t demolish that. I didn’t even touch the house – we’re just, like, building on top of it.”

“Hmm.”

“Aw, come on, Sonia, don’t you start! I did a total renovation on the house, totally fixed it back up to top shape! And the amphitheatre will be great – grass, and trees, and people playing music? Everything we ever stood for!” he cried. “And – and – and think about it! All the clean up is done, the dirt’s ready to be filled; all I need to do is get that motion passed and hey, if Sonic helped, we could totally have it all finished before Sunday!”

“Sunday?” she repeated curiously.

“Yeah, I mean… it’d be a heck of a place to kick off the celebrations,” he said, his tone wheedling. “Just think of it… The three of us… christening it with a welcome back performance…?”

“You’re right,” she said quietly, staring at him. “It would be a message to the whole city… the kingdom. That we’re back and making a difference. No more junk… just green and music. A promise.”

“Yeah, exactly! So…? What d’you think?”

She took a moment, just looking at him quietly for a few seconds. It was a good idea, but at the same time, there was a good reason the aristocrats were stalling them this time. Of all the places to build his great amphitheatre, Manic had chosen the Dump: the camouflaged former home of Uncle Chuck – inventor, Resistance spy, and Sonic Hedgehog’s beloved adopted family. A lot of people were concerned that if they went ahead with doing anything more than removing the rubbish and cleaning up the house, they would be desecrating a monument of the lower classes.

But Manic had always insisted that they didn’t need monuments frozen in time. He said that if Uncle Chuck really had been so important, then they should build him a statue, name a day after him, something like that, rather than leave his home to rot under its own camouflage.

Besides, the trash had been a massive contributor to the city’s active pollution.

Still…

“If you can convince Sonic,” she said slowly, “I’ll help you out with the aristocrats.”

“Yes!” Manic pumped his fist in the air and then grabbed Sonia around the shoulders in an excited hug. “Thanks, sis’! Trust me, this place is gonna be rockin’!”

“Sure, sure,” she said with a laugh. “So tell me, little brother, what exactly could Sonic, patron saint of making it up as you go along, possibly do to help a construction project?”

By the time they got back to the palace, dinner was long over, and the night shift were nestling into their routines, though there was a current of energy in the air that was different from most nights.

Manic generally liked the people who worked night shift in the palace. For one thing, they were
night owls, making them his kind of people, and there were not only less of them, but they were
generally more relaxed, too. The guards, for instance, just nodded as he and Sonia passed, where the
day shift would have been on their feet and saluting.

He still wished they’d just say ‘hi’, or call him by name, but he’d take what he could get.

They swung by the kitchens for some food, and found out from the three people still on duty that
Sonic was apparently with his friends in the guest wing. They were all too amused when the girl
who had apparently just gotten back from delivering the party some warm drinks could barely keep
from fangirling in front of them. She tried, very hard, but apparently Sonic was adorable when he
slept, which you wouldn’t think to look at him when he was awake, not that she would ever think of
royalty as adorable or handsome or oh, gosh, was she still talking?

Manic only managed to keep from laughing until they left the servant’s quarters.

“Sometimes I think only a certain breed of girl joins the hospitality profession,” Sonia noted as she
led the way to the guest wing.

“And isn’t it great?” he asked. “But imagine that, Sonic sleeping! Around people!”

“Truly, a sign of the end of days,” she drawled.

But despite their jokes, when they found Sonic in Knuckles’ chambers, he was indeed stretched out
on a couch, legs tucked under one of Tails’ tails and apparently dead to the world. Tails himself was
tapping away at his handheld again, ignoring everyone, while Knuckles and Amy were in the two
armchairs. They had been reading, but they both looked up when Sonia and Manic entered.

“Hi Manic! Princess,” Amy said cheerfully, getting to her feet. “Please, come on in!”

“Oh, we wouldn’t want to intrude,” Sonia said, staring around at the homey scene. She hadn’t
realised people actually spent time together like this outside of paintings. “We were just coming to
collect Sonic.”

“He’ll wake up soon,” Amy said. “Please, come in while you wait. We ordered hot chocolate before,
but obviously Sonic isn’t having any, and Tails is being Tails, so he won’t mind you taking his.”

They glanced at the fox, but he still didn’t look up at his name or the attention. They exchanged
glances, and Manic shrugged. They might as well hang out while they ate dinner.

“Thanks.”

“Here, let’s bring the table over so you can eat properly,” Amy offered. “Knuckles, make yourself
useful.”

“Why do I have to do it?” Knuckles grouched, but he put his book aside and got up, obediently
picking up the table and moving it closer to the couches. Amy hurried after him with the chairs, and
Sonia smiled gratefully as she set down her plate.

“Thanks, you didn’t have to,” Manic said, and Amy waved him off.

“It was nothing! Right, Knuckles?”

“Hmph.” He went back to his book, and Amy rolled her eyes before remembering the hot chocolate.
She grabbed two mugs off the coffee table and put them on the table before waving at Manic. “Sit,
sit!”
“Thank you again,” Sonia said as she sat down. “And as I said before, Amy, please – call me Sonia.”

She grinned and curled back up in her armchair, this time with her own mug of chocolate, and turned toward them. “Did you only just get back? You must have been talking to that lord for a really long time!”

“He was being difficult,” she explained. “But we got it sorted in the end. You were speaking with Mother this evening, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, she was asking us to help clear out some dangerous territory,” she said. “Well, actually, she was telling Sonic to do it, but she asked us to help!”

Manic paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Dangerous territory? Like the Badlands?”

“Um, yeah, and um… something about some old warehouses,” she said. “Tails has the map, but it’s not really worth the effort it’ll take to drag him off that thing to ask.”

“That’s… kinda scary,” Manic said. “Are you guys gonna be okay?”

“Sure! We do this sort of stuff all the time!”

He blinked, then looked at Sonia, who stared back. Yeah, they’d helped rescue them earlier, but that had been a quick hit and run. Spending a long time out there was different. Sonic was one thing, but…

Their silent discussion was cut off by a loud yawn, and they looked around to see Sonic stretching one arm over his head out from where it had been buried in his quills, eyes still closed as he asked, “Mmm… What’s up?”

“Sonia and Manic are here,” Amy reported. “We gave them your drink, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled, shuffling further down the couch. Then he paused and opened one eye. “Who?”

“Your siblings are here,” Knuckles said without looking up from his book.

“Siblings?” He opened the other eye and looked around, blinking at the sight of Manic, and then Sonia. It took a second, but then he abruptly jerked up to sitting, accidentally kicking Tails’ tail against his back in the process.

“Ack! Ow!” Tails objected, jerked off his handheld, and the two boys stared at each other, apparently both startled thoughtless for a second, before looking up and around, Tails flinching when he noticed Sonia and Manic. “H- oh. Hello. Sorry, I didn’t notice you come in!”

“Evidently not,” Sonia said with a smile, and saluted Sonic with her stolen mug. “Forgot about us, did you?”

He shifted slightly, hands pushing against the couch as if he wasn’t sure whether to sit up properly or not. “I didn’t forget. I was just doing other stuff.”

“Today, or the last three years?”

The others paused, even Knuckles looking up from his book at the perfectly audible reprimand, but Sonic only paused for a moment before smiling warmly. He relaxed back against the cushions with a
playfully offended glance. “Hey, come on, Sonia. No swingin’ barbs when I’m barely awake.”

“You’re right; I’m sorry. I guess it’s just I’ve barely ever seen you in this situation before!” she teased. “Since when do you sleep so early?”

Knuckles and Tails both snorted, and Amy smiled wryly, but although neither Sonia or Manic got the joke, Sonic ignored it with good grace. He just refolded his arms behind his head and buried his feet back under Tails’ newly resettled tail. “So how’d things go with Head?”

“Meh. Okay, I guess,” Manic said vaguely. “But it did kinda inspire something else we wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?” he prompted around another yawn. His eyes were sliding closed again.

“I dunno if anyone told you yet, but uh… one of the things I do these days is like, restoration projects, and stuff. And um… with you here, there’s one I’ve been kinda puttin’ off finishing that I thought might be kinda cool to do,” he said carefully. “An amphitheatre. Lotsa open ground and grass, all on layered steps, with some lights and stuff everywhere. What do you think?”

“Sounds pretty cool,” he said, obviously forcing his eyes back open again. He blinked at nothing for a second, then took a sharp breath and shifted so he was leaning a little on his shoulder and looking at them.

“Yeah, it totally will be, only…” He hesitated, fiddling with his dinner for a second. “Only I was um… I was thinking I might build it where the dump is.”

Sonic furrowed his brow slightly. “You mean over Uncle Chuck’s place?”

“Yeah… I mean, if that’s no good with you, then –”

“Hey, hey, don’t mind,” he said, smiling wearily. “I was just checkin’ to make sure we were talking about the same place. I think it’s a great idea. Clear up all that junk and make a rockin’ place for people to hang out? Two birds with one stone.”

Manic blinked, then smiled broadly. “Crashing! I totally didn’t think you’d go for it!”

“Who’s Uncle Chuck?” asked Amy, and Sonic shrugged vaguely.

“A guy I lived with for a few years. He was a big player in the Resistance, and hid his house-slash-base under a pile of trash – that’s why it’s called the Dump.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with it?” asked Sonia. “It is your home.”

“It’s where I worked outta for a few years,” he corrected. “And Uncle Chuck woulda loved the idea of an amphitheatre. He used to tell me about these meetings scientists used to have in places like that.”

“Oh, like the old style of lectures?” asked Tails. “Where one guy would stand at the bottom, telling everyone his idea, and everyone else would comment and shout him down?”

Manic made a face. “Sounds like court.”

“He said it was fun, believe it or not,” said Sonic. “Sharing ideas, or something. But hey, what do I know? Scientists are weird.”

One of Tails’ tails, which seemed to roll and wave around when he wasn’t paying attention to them,
slapped against Sonic’s leg, hard enough to make a noise. Manic was expecting at least a glare from Sonic, but if anything, he hid a grin, and neither of them mentioned it. Manic frowned, abstractly justifying it with Tails’ age and mutation, since the kid probably didn’t have a lot of control over his tails, but… Sonic giving someone that kinda slack sounded kind of… wrong.

“So how long does this sorta thing normally take?” Sonic asked, jerking him out of his annoyed musings. “You need to clear out the junk, demolish the house, then, what, let the earth settle or something?”

“Uh… well, we uh, we already cleared up the junk, and we’re keeping the house as a greenroom, and we poured the dirt on a while back, but since it’s a rebuilding effort and no one technically owns the land, we have to like, get approval to actually build –”


“Well, technically Mother has the final say,” he explained, “but we have to like, announce it first, so the aristocrats can tell us what a waste of time and money they think it is. If they complain loudly enough, we don’t get to do it.”

“Sounds stupid.”

Sonic shrugged, smiling vaguely, and Tails gave him a strange sidelong look before going back to his handheld. Again, and despite himself, Manic found himself distracted by the interaction, his attention suddenly drawn to their positions on the couch. It had literally taken weeks before Sonia and Manic had even seen Sonic sleep. Months before he’d nap in their presence. And they were family.

But then, maybe Tails hadn’t been lying when he said some people did called them brothers.

“Manic?”

He blinked and looked over at Sonia, who gestured with her food. “Project timelines? You were in the middle of explaining.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, blinking again to force himself to focus. “So if we can get the approval sorted out, then I was originally thinking it would take like, four days to do the digging and build the steps and stuff, but with you here, I was thinking… y’know… maybe we could do it ourselves?”

“We?” Sonic repeated with a grin.

“Yeah, you know… we. The Sonic Underground we.”

“Why do I suddenly get the feeling my family thinks of me as a bulldozer?” Sonic asked the room at large, and Tails snickered while Knuckles smirked lazily.

“Probably because you are one.”

“Touché,” he acknowledged, then smirked at Manic. “Sounds like a plan, little bro. But you know Mom’s got us busy on security detail, right?”

“Yes, I was meaning to ask about that,” Sonia said slowly. “Security detail. Are you planning a repeat performance? Should we expect another vanishing act?”

“Relax, sis.,” Sonic said, rolling his eyes. “Mom’s given us actual targets. I won’t be going out past Stripes’ resort.”
“Hmm,” she said coolly, and Manic grimaced before pointedly changing the subject.

“That’s cool, I mean, Sonia and I still have our normal jobs to do, too. I was figuring we could work on it in the afternoons. All three of us working together, with your speed? I’m thinkin’ we’ll get it done before Sunday, easy.”

Sonic slowly nodded, then pulled his legs out and swung them down to the floor so he could sit up. As he moved, a glint near his collarbone caught his siblings’ eyes, and they both grinned.

“Your medallion!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Mom gave it back to me this afternoon,” he said. “Pretty sure it doesn’t work yet, though.”

“It will probably take some time to recharge,” Sonia agreed, but then clapped her hands. “But this is fantastic! Oh, you know what we should do? We should go play together!”

Knuckles quietly groaned, but Amy sat up, suddenly bright eyes and smiles. “Ooh! Really? Can we watch?”

“Uh, it’s been a while since we jammed, Amy,” Sonic said. “Might want to give us some… y’know… practice time.”

“What? But Manic said you guys played together perfectly the first time you ever met!” Amy cried, and Sonic shifted his head slightly to stare at Manic, as if horrified that he’d said such a thing.

After Manic stared right back for a second, silently pointing out that they had, Sonic switched back with a weak grin. “Yeah, but back then I was playing the guitar all the time. I haven’t even picked one up in years.” Without seeming to move, his hand suddenly appeared on Tails’ nearest tail, and the boy himself stiffened, a click coming from his jaw as if he’d had to close it quickly. Knuckles smirked again, but Sonic continued smiling at Amy as if nothing had happened. “Come on, Ames, even I’m not that good. These guys might be ready to jam, but I’m all outta practice.”

“Ohh, but—!”

“Not that we don’t want to play for you, Amy,” Sonia interjected quickly, “but to be honest, it would be nice to just get some sibling alone time, you know? Catch up on things with just the three of us.”

She blinked, then gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. “Oh, of course! I’m so sorry! Sonic, you should have said something! No need to hold back when I’m being rude, you know that!”

“Really?” he deadpanned quietly, and avoided her slight glare by standing up. “So, how about we go do that then? Manic, where’s your drumkit?”

Sonia smiled broadly and stood up. “Oh, this is wonderful! Has Manic shown you the music room yet?”

“Music room?”

“Aw, man, I completely forgot!” Manic cried, slapping his forehead. “Bro, you have gotta see it. It’s awesome.”

“I’m up for it,” he said, and his siblings grinned, gathering their food and drinks, while Sonic turned to Knuckles.
“We good to head out at dawn?”

He shrugged. “Fine with me.”

“Oh, you’re kidding!” Amy whined. “Another early start? Don’t you boys know how to sleep in?”

They ignored her, knowing she’d either deal with it or find something else to do in the morning. Instead, Sonic looked at Tails as he turned and walked backwards. “Remember to go to sleep at some point, and call me if you find anything.”

“Will do,” he reported.

“Do what?”

“Call you,” he said.

“And the sleep thing?”

“I will call you,” he promised, but by that point Sonic had reached the door, and Manic was able to grab his arm and drag him out without an answer.

“Good night guys! Thanks for letting us hang out!” he called, and Sonia grinned, saluting them all with her mug.

“And thanks for the stolen drinks! We’ll see you in the morning!”

“Night!” Amy called, before Sonia pulled the door shut behind them.

Sonic rolled his eyes, but then smiled and turned to his siblings, who grinned back, before Sonia jumped on him with an awkward hug that was the best she could do while holding a plate and mug. “It’s so good to have you back! We really did miss you!”

“Aw, it’s good to see you guys too,” he said, and slung an arm around her shoulders to pull her around to his side as they walked. “So hey, what’ve you guys been up to these last couple years? How’s the royal life treating you?”

“Meh,” was Manic’s blunt assessment, and Sonic grinned while their sister rolled her eyes.

“It’s a lot different than we expected,” she explained. “When you’re not one, you think that being a princess is about… I don’t know… sitting around drinking tea and looking pretty.”

“And some people in court say it should be,” Manic interjected. “If there’s a prince.”

“Hey, that’s us!” Sonic said brightly, and Sonia elbowed him with a laugh.

“A prince that wants to sit in court all day.”

“Oh. Not up to the task, Manic?” he asked, and Manic grinned.

“A prince that doesn’t have ‘professional thief’ on his resume.”

“They’re really taking all the fun outta this.”

“Yeah. We spend so much time arguing with people about what we should do that it’s like, not even funny,” Manic continued. “Technically, we can do whatever we like, but we also know it’s gonna be talked about.”
“And that we’re going to have to explain ourselves to a room full of arrogant traditionalists,” Sonia added, and Sonic made a face.

“What, you mean like, I turned left instead of right because there were chilli dogs that way, or…?”

“Sometimes, but not usually that much,” Sonia said, and she curled her arm under his back spines to lean into him, relaxing. “Manic has to make a public announcement every time he goes to the Lower Third, though, because some of the Court Ladies think he’s ‘encouraging the criminal element’.”

“You’re joking.”

Manic shook his head. “And every year, we have this road trip me and Sonia have to do, where we go and talk to the mayors of all the major cities. No matter what’s going on.”

“At least there’s a purpose to that,” Sonia argued, “Everything else is just petty.”

Sonic frowned. “So why let ’em get away with it? Tell them to step off. Or get Mom to.”

“Oh, if only it were that easy,” she said wistfully.

“Yeah, turns out? Royalty ain’t that powerful,” Manic explained. “Aristocrats own most of the land, they just pay us taxes. And it turns out that people listen to their landlords when they want to keep a roof over their head. Go figure.”

“And as much as you didn’t think you were being serious before, you weren’t wrong when you suggested some people are waiting on a new war,” Sonia continued. “People are still scared, and we haven’t been able to reassure them. Some people would be happy if we just went away.”

“But not everyone,” Sonic assumed, and they both shook their heads.

“Most people like us. More people like you,” Sonia added with a gentle nudge. “You being back will quiet a lot of nonsense, let me tell you!”

He made a soft noise, like a half-hearted chuckle, before he said, “But they haven’t scared you off yet, so you must be doin’ okay, right?”

“We’re managing,” Sonia agreed, but then let out a soft breath. “Somehow. To be honest, that’s why I asked Knuckles here. And why I asked Tails to come, though I admit, I thought he’d be older.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted the royal family and its allies to look like a united front,” she explained. “I wanted us to look strong. And we will, but… I don’t know, it seems like a silly idea, now.”

“Because…?”

She looked at him sideways. “Sonic Hedgehog, do you really not see it? You’ve been doing who knows what out in the overlander territories for three years—”

“Two and a half.”

“—with an eight year old, a girl that—while very lovely—seems to have the attention span of a flea and close to the same amount of self-control, and a doppelganger of yourself who works for the overlanders—”

“Shads is new,” he said. “And we don’t work together so much as around each other. Occasionally
through each other.”

Sonia paused, meeting Manic’s dark look with a worried one of her own, but decided to leave that one aside to continue, “And Knuckles has become so… surly and violent, it’s… we might present a united front, but we’ll also look insane!”

Sonic nodded slowly. “Yeah, but… this world is kinda crazy. That’s what makes it fun. And who better to face that with than crazy people?”

They both looked at him, and he smiled, reaching out to grab Manic around the shoulders too. “Look, guys, I know life’s been kinda tough for you, pretty much since I met you both. But you’re way too bogged down in maybes and what should be. The best thing about life is how unpredictable it can be. Rolling with the punches.”

“Sonic –”

“No, Sonia, chill for a second,” he said firmly. “Screw what the aristocrats think. My friends are my friends, and there is no one I’d rather face the world with than them. Give me a week to do what Mom’s asked us to do, and I guarantee you that by the time your big ball thing comes around, you’ll totally get what I see in these guys. I promise,” he said, and hugged them both before reaching up to ruffle Manic’s hair. “For this week—just this week—I want you guys to stop stressing so much. Don’t care about mights and coulds. Just do what you want. ’Cause this festival is all about change, and nothing starts until you take action.”

“But what if –”

“Nuh uh,” he said firmly. “No worries. If you have time to worry, then run.”

“Run?” Sonia repeated. “Run where?”

He rolled his eyes, but Manic grinned before he could answer. “That’s seriously the dumbest thing you’ve ever said.”

“No way, I’ve said way dumber!” he said brightly, and then quickly switched from holding their shoulders to instead grab their wrists. “But my point still holds. Come on!”

And with that, he yanked them both forward, running just a little bit faster than they could themselves and forcing them to try and keep up. Sonia yelped, and Manic yelled, both of them dropping all of their remaining food and drink, but had no choice but to start running.

The commotion caused a few guards and passing servants to poke their heads into the corridors as they ran, but soon enough, both Sonia and Manic were laughing helplessly, and Sonic grinned. Finally, something that felt happily familiar.

A flare of dull chaos sparked against his senses, making Shadow pause for a moment on the technical platform he was currently balancing on, three metres from his target.

He had learned not to be surprised by flares of chaos energy around Sonic. But they were usually sharper, like a blade strike. This had felt more like a ball, and slightly less impressive for it. But, just
as he had when he’d seen Sonic singing along to a song from nowhere, he simply filed it away as one more thing to investigate about this place.

Speaking of which… he narrowed his eyes at the gap between his perch and the balcony ahead. Normally, three metres was nothing. He could jump that high straight up, and with his rocket shoes, he was fully capable of reaching far greater distances.

But doing so silently was another matter. And he wasn’t yet sure whether Aleena could sense chaos, so he certainly didn’t want to use Chaos Control, just in case she would notice it. So he instead leapt forward, grabbing a small inlay in the metal work to leverage himself into a swing that allowed him to reach the balcony fence. When his shoes hit the metal with a slight clang, he dropped into a crouch to grab the fence and froze, listening for movement.

After several seconds passed, he lowered himself onto the balcony proper and slipped up to the doors, making use of his dark fur to blend into the shadows behind the curtains.

As he’d hoped, the balcony did lead into Aleena’s personal chambers, and she was sitting at a table with the map she had made with Sonic and Knuckles earlier than evening. She was sipping tea as she traced the marked areas she’d asked them to visit, her expression distant.

Almost compulsively, Shadow touched his inhibitor rings, reassuring himself they were there. Aleena was… oddly alluring, lulling him into a calmer state every time she looked at him, and so he couldn’t take the risk she might do so now. He was here to find out more about her and her son, not reveal his own secrets.

A dull flash of light to her left made Shadow step back from the glass a little, and his eyes widened as the flare faded to reveal a strange green creature in a long purple robe. It had a small trunk and what looked like antennae, but other than that he couldn’t pick its species. Stranger still, whatever he’d used to appear had not been chaos control.

Aleena didn’t look around as she said, “I’m afraid I haven’t another tea cup, though you may help yourself.”

“Many thanks, my Queen,” the creature said. Its voice was male. Old, too, but still confident. A magic user was Shadow’s guess, though he wasn’t familiar with much beyond chaos. As he watched, the creature waved one spindly three-fingered hand over the other, making a cup appear from nowhere, and walked—slithered? There was a reptilian tail poking out of the robe—over to her teapot before taking a seat in the chair on the other side of Aleena’s table. Finally, she looked up, and he smiled like a father. “I hear the Lost Prince has returned. How is young Sonic settling in?”

“You ask me to judge a boy I barely know?” she asked, and he tilted his head. “Ah, a bitterness I have not heard in eleven years. Am I to assume your reunion did not fare well?”

“As well as should be expected, I suppose. I am not his mother in anything but blood, and even then, I look at him and realise he inherited nothing from me.”

“A statement worthy of debate,” the creature said vaguely, and Shadow had to agree. There was a lot about Sonic that he saw in Aleena, but he strongly suspected neither hedgehog would recognise it in themselves. And Shadow would never admit it out loud, anyway.

Aleena just smiled tightly, her eyes on her map. “Dealing with him is difficult. In some ways, it’s almost as if he understands his role perfectly, but I worry that he knows.”

“Knows what?” asked the creature. “Which of our many secrets do you fear him discovering?”
“Most of them,” she said, and Shadow shifted closer to the glass again, curious. Aleena tilted her head forward, some hair falling from behind her crown to hide her face from view. “But I also fear he will not learn any of them. Is that strange?”

The creature hummed thoughtfully. “Sonic is a creature of chaos, blessed and cursed in ways that not even I understand, your majesty. If there is one thing you should be certain of, it is that where he walks, he will not leave things unaffected.”

“Of that, I am well aware,” she said quietly. “I’ve had so many discussions with the humans. They’ve sent me security footage, photographs, told me of his adventures in such detail, and yet… somehow I never believed them, until I saw him today. He has such power. And I worry to mention it. I worry he doesn’t know the power he wields, but at the same time, nothing could scare me more than to think that he does.”

Shadow shifted again, because everyone wondered that about Sonic. He’d thought that of all people, his mother should have known the answer.

“Before he was ever conceived, I had visions of Sonic’s power,” she said quietly. “I knew it would be more than anything I’ve ever experienced. That was why I agreed for Robotnik to come to my court. Why I allowed him to build the power he did. He was supposed to make Sonic safe.”

It was only with very great control that Shadow remained still at that, and even more so as she continued, “Robotnik was supposed to control my son’s power, but instead he inspired it. He drove him onward to gain more. If I had not brought that fiend here, Sonic might… things could have been different.”

“As I have told you before, child, there are things that must happen,” the creature said coolly. “You may blame yourself for the things Robotnik has done to your empire, but the power Sonic wields is not something you could have avoided.”

“I disagree,” she said, and lifted her head, shoulders back. “I know the past cannot and should not be changed, but if I had not called Robotnik here, or caused the revolution, then what cause would Sonic have had to use his power? When would he have pushed himself to move fast, to seek the Chaos Emeralds? When would he have had cause to fight gods?”

“You underestimate a young boy’s desire for adventure,” he argued. “But perhaps that is another matter. So instead let us follow your questioning with more. If he had not left Mobius to fight, then when would he have had cause to learn about the healing power of chaos? When would he have learnt the redeeming qualities of selflessness and friendship?”

“My tutelage,” she argued stubbornly. “I would have taught him so.”

“You are so certain?”

“Regardless!” she cried. “If not for Robotnik, then that Shadow creature would never have been resurrected, and Sonic would never have learned of the true powers of chaos.”

“Again, one could debate such a statement. But even if that were so, he would also have never seen the dark road chaos leads to, or the true path of anger and confusion.” He tilted his head curiously. “Why do such possibilities plague you, child? Do you regret the man your son has become?”

“I regret –!” She stopped, then sighed and sat forward, setting her cup down on the map. “I regret many things, Oracle.”

Oracle… interesting.
“I do not know Sonic,” she said bluntly. “I know only that he does not think of me as family. He will do as he wills, and I may not be able to alter his path.”

The oracle gazed at her quietly for a few moments, apparently judging her in the same way Shadow was himself. “You fear his reaction should he realise you are trying.”

“You yourself disliked the medallions, my friend,” she pointed out.

As the oracle inclined his head in acquiescence, Shadow frowned, thinking back. He was almost certain she was talking about the necklace Sonic had been wearing earlier. They were implying it would have some kind of effect on him, but –

“What was has already been. You cannot change it, but you had your reasons,” the oracle said calmly, cutting off Shadow’s thoughts. “You feared Sonic for the creature he could become, based on visions that you now know you misunderstood. You crafted the medallions to ward off the monster that you foresaw – to protect your people and your son. It was an admirable goal, whatever the method.”

“The medallions used his power to gift his siblings,” she muttered. “They contained him. You know how he feels about freedom. He will not forgive this.”

“Perhaps. Your actions had consequences. You should remember this.”

“Thank you for the lesson,” she said, and Shadow raised an eyebrow, surprised at the sarcasm. It had sounded almost catty. “I fear I learned it too late.”

“Or perhaps you are still learning it, my queen,” he said. “It is something your other two children have yet to learn also. Much will occur in the coming week, and much will result of it. You should be prepared for this palace to fall.”

She looked at him quickly, and so did Shadow. “My palace or my empire?”

“Potentially both,” he warned. “But remember, your majesty, fear can be a far greater enemy than those with physical form. My only advice, so that we might not repeat history, is that you learn from the humans. When all is dark outside, much light can be found within.”

He paused, and Shadow stiffened as the oracle’s eyes flicked up toward him. But they fell again just as quickly, and he chuckled. “Or perhaps I too am falling to mobian flaws. Remember, your majesty… things will happen. And for all our power, we should not make judgement on events that have yet to occur.”

Or, Shadow thought to himself as he slipped back out onto the balcony proper, past events he didn’t have the full story on, yet.

“And finally, here we are!”

As Manic waltzed into the room, spinning in place with his arms out wide, Sonic couldn’t help but grin. The room itself didn’t quite deserve the grandeur, but whatever.

For something that wasn’t particularly decorated, the music room had a surprisingly nice feel. It was
still metal walls, and the only floor they’d put down was a huge collection of pillows and a wooden stage in the middle of the room. But it was filled with guitars, pianos and a variety of drums, though only one full kit.

Sonic chuckled as he entered, hands on his hips and shoulders relaxing. “No kill like overkill. Think you guys have enough instruments?”

“Nah, there’s still some space over there,” Manic said playfully, and Sonia grinned.

“To be honest, most of them aren’t that good. They just look like it,” she said, and beckoned him over to look inside a grand piano. She opened the body and Sonic cracked up, applauding the lack of hammers, strings, or anything that might allow the piano to actually make noise.

“People mostly gave them to us as thank-yous,” Manic said, gripping a guitar neck and pulling it up, straight out of the body. The strings stretched, still connected at both ends. “Some of them were just like, toys or decorations, but some of them come from people who actually were trying to make us instruments but didn’t like, know what they were doing, y’know?”

“This is awesome,” Sonic announced, tapping at the keys of a baby piano that clunked in response, each ‘note’ returning the same flat sound. “Did any real craftsmen come out of the woodwork?”

“Sure. That’s how I got those,” Sonia said, pointing to a huge, perfectly lacquered redwood grand piano near the stage, and a keyboard that was folded up and leaning against it. “And Manic has his drum kit over there, and you, Big Brother…” She led him over to a guitar stand, where an electric guitar and electric bass were slotted in neatly, and an acoustic guitar was on display behind them. “Personally, I think the bass is the prettiest.”

He picked it out and held it up to the light, where he could appreciate the long, slender neck and intricately shaped body. He smiled at the six strings and brought it down to pluck each one, listening for the tune, then shook his head and held the bass back out to look at it again. “Nice.”

Evidently hearing the reverence in his voice, Sonia just smiled and nodded. “Wanna play?”

“Sure. Gimme a sec’,” he said, putting down the bass to grab the acoustic guitar instead. He strummed a few quick chords, then switched out for the electric, testing the strings before nodding. “Got an amp?”

“Custom stage, bro,” Manic said proudly, and tapped the wood platform near a small black circle that, on closer inspection, turned out to be an adaptor. “Built it myself.”

“Sweet.” Within another blink, he was sitting on the stage, guitar plugged in, and was tuning it. Sonia and Manic exchanged grins, but went to their own instruments without a word.

“So you told Amy you were out of practice?” Sonia prompted.

“Yeah. Music’s a Mobius thing,” he said, but then looked up at them and picked out a complicated tune completely blind. “And I wanted her off my back.”

“Why?” asked Manic. “I know she’s not your type, bro, but seriously. Amy Rose is slammin’.”

Sonic looked at him, making sure to keep his expression unreadable. It was Sonia to tease, “Ooh, that sounds like a crush!”

He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck as he jumped up onto the stage to head for his drums. “She’s cute. And really nice. I’m… kinda thinkin’ about asking her out.”
“Oh, yay! That’s great, Manic!” she said, and then grinned at Sonic. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it normally is to get this boy interested in girls. I’ve been trying to set him up for a year now and it never works.”

“Huh,” was all Sonic said, casually plucking at his guitar. He ran his eyes over Manic again, then lowered them to the strings.

Sonia smirked knowingly as she set up her keyboard. “Speaking of relationships… how has that been for you, Big Brother? Someone you want to tell us about…?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, come on. All that time out in the wilds of Mobius and you didn’t meet anyone?” she wheedled. “Not even just for fun?”

“Just for fun?” he repeated, glancing at her from under his brow. “Y’know, a couple years ago, I’m pretty sure you would’ve knocked my block off for sayin’ stuff like that. Is that what you’re doing with Stripes? Playing?”

She met his gaze for a few seconds, then looked away with an awkward shrug. “Maybe. Happy endings don’t always wait for you, so… why not enjoy what you can get?”

Sonic didn’t answer, just watched her avoid his gaze. Manic looked a little surprised at his lack of apparent reaction, but honestly, if it had been about anything but romance, Sonic knew he probably would have agreed. He was still working out how he felt about that. And besides, hearing it from Sonia was kind of weird, and probably worth looking into a bit more.

“So,” Manic said, after a few more awkward seconds passed. “You’re on security detail again, huh? Where you headed first?”

He blinked, then nodded and went back to his strings. “Knuckles and I figured we’d check out that mine you guys were headed for this morning. See if we can scrounge up that robotocisor.”

“What about the anarchists?” asked Manic. “They’re gonna be pretty ticked.”

“Then we’ll just beat ’em up like we did today,” he said. “I might be outta practice with music, but beating bad guys is kinda my thing.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

“Ah… might tell you another night,” he said with a wince. “Let’s just give it a night to settle, what do you say?”

Sonia nodded. “Sure. We can do that.”

He smiled and focussed on his guitar for a few beats, letting himself fall back into the groove of music and Mobius. It was a little harder than he remembered, and felt awkward, but as the other two looked down at what they were doing, and just went with the music, it got easier. Eventually, it reached the point where, three years ago, one of them would have started singing, the magic taking control of the song and letting them speak through their music instead. But this time, there was no magic involved. This time, it was just them and their instincts as talented musicians.

So when Sonic opened his mouth, it wasn’t to sing, but to ask quietly, “How’re things with Mom?”

Manic started enthusiastically, but stopped before he could actually say anything and hesitated. Sonia
hummed as she thought the question through, and Sonic smirked.

“Kinda like things with the kingdom?”

“She’s wonderful,” said Sonia. “But you know how when the three of us first met, it only took a week or two to feel like family?”

He shrugged, letting them make of it what they would.

“It’s not that easy with Mother,” Manic said uncomfortably.

“Not that we blame her,” Sonia said quickly, “I mean, she didn’t even know us before we defeated Robotnik, when we were all essentially grown up. She didn’t have time to become our mother.”

“We just kinda thought it’d be like it was with you, y’know?” Manic rolled through a full set before settling into a harder beat that the other two picked up without thinking. “Especially with… you know… how much she said she loved us, we thought…”

Sonic raised his eyebrows, then slowly nodded. On the rare occasion they’d seen visions or holograms of her, Aleena had almost always told them she loved them. But one thing he’d learned early on was that there was more than one kind of love. “I guess no one ever told you guys it ain’t always like the stories.”

Sonia frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well… Okay, look. I had my foster parents, and I had my Uncle Chuck,” he explained. “I loved them all, but it wasn’t the same kind of relationship. You didn’t think of Lady Windemere as your mother, did you?”

“No… but now you mention it, it is kind of the same as how I feel about Mother,” she said. “But as you say, I always thought with a real parent, I’d feel… closer. More trust. I never expected there to be this distance.”

“Yeah, that kinda sucks,” Manic agreed, and then huffed out a wry laugh, tilting his head toward Sonic. “We’re getting it on both sides, y’know? Physical distance from you, emotional from Mom… and neither of you ever tellin’ us anything!”

“Hey, hey, guys, easy on the burns, I’m not wearing sunblock!” Sonic said, offering a weak laugh before pointing out, “Besides, who says she’s got anything to tell? She was in hiding for thirteen years, sure, but it’s not like she was all tight with the Resistance or anything. From what I hear, she spent most of her time meeting up with people to give ’em cryptic-heck messages that they usually told us about in that last year.”

“I’d still like to know, I think,” Sonia said quietly, and Manic nodded.

“And you definitely have a story. And all these friends you made – Sonic the loner suddenly gets surrounded by tag-a-longs,” he said, his tone tightening for a second before he cleared his throat and tried again. “You gonna tell us about them?”

“Nah, probably not,” he said with another laugh, then shifted back on the stage, pulling one foot up under his guitar. “Tell y’all about Knuckles if y’want. You know he has the memory of a goldfish? I’ve met him for the first time at least three times now.”

“Ha ha,” Sonia deadpanned. “Come on, Sonic, you have to tell us something about what you’ve been doing! Where have you been?”
“Around,” he said vaguely. “Everywhere.”

“Except here,” Manic added, and Sonic gave him a patient smile that he returned with a pointed look. “What, dude? You came outta nowhere, became more important to us than anything for a year, then disappeared again. I think we’re like, totally allowed to want a reason.”

“If it’s any consolation, I do that to a lot of people, not just you.”

“Sonic,” Sonia said impatiently, and he snapped.

“What?”

They both pulled back for a moment, then smiled wryly. “Now there’s the brother I know,” Sonia said, and he frowned.

“What?”

“You’ve been actin’ kind of weird,” Manic pointed out. “All nice and junk. We were wonderin’ where our grumpy big bro went.”

Sonic just looked at him for a moment, then sighed. He didn’t really have a good way to respond to that without outright telling them the reason he was ‘grumpy’ now was because they were seriously starting to tick him off. He looked down at his hands, watching them go through the motions because that was easier than finding an answer. But after a few seconds, he started to feel that feeling from just out of reach again. The magic from nowhere. Only this time, he could feel it pulsing against his collarbone, the medallion pulling and pushing in equal measures.

He could let it out. A proper song, from nowhere and everywhere, demanding to be played. But it would be a risk. For all that a song could say things he couldn’t, he also didn’t have any control over it. There was a fifty-fifty chance that the song would get his siblings on side, or that he’d start a fight he couldn’t come back from.

But then again… maybe he was already on that track anyway.

Without any conscious decision, his hands started moving faster, strumming harder and heavier, the magic reaching out to catch his siblings and drag them into it too. Really, he had no choice but to resign himself to it, and let the music go.

“I can see all the footsteps left behind every second I gave,” he sang. “Every song was a snapshot of my life; I needed something to say! I started out in a last slow motion scene, watching everyone change. Made a map of the one-way road from here; I had no reason to stay.”

Sonia and Manic both looked at him quickly, but he kept his eyes on the strings. It was different to the songs they used to play, and Sonic’s voice felt hoarse from disuse, so it was easy to look like he was concentrating, even though they all knew they could have played it blindfolded.

“I am awake and alive! There is something calling me. More than a moment in time, it’s a dream I’m following on my own—”

“Oh my own,” they echoed absently, and Sonic couldn’t help looking up. He caught Manic’s gaze despite himself.

“—on my own! More than a moment in time, it’s a life of leaving home…”

If Sonic had told them, upfront and bluntly, that he didn’t see a good enough reason for him to be in
Mobius after the war ended, Sonia probably would have lost it, and Manic would have gone into a funk worse than any of Shadow’s. There would have been hours of lectures and emotional guilt and Sonic knew he wouldn’t have handled it. But somehow, by singing it, he could make them see it his way. They probably still wouldn’t like it, but if he was lucky, they’d at least accept it…

Whatever. As long as the song didn’t start telling them about the other stuff—Eggman, or Super Sonic, or GUN’s real objectives… stuff he knew they couldn’t handle right now—he could deal with the fallout.

Besides, so far Manic was doing okay, just a little hurt. Sonia, on the other hand, was clearly waiting for her chance to bite back; ask what was so great out there that he couldn’t do here.

He met her gaze as he sang the last verse, trying to make her understand, “The day that I found my voice I knew that I had no choice. The only way I’d ever learn from life is if I found it on my own…”

She narrowed her eyes, and he noticed Manic watching him just as intently, even as they joined him for the final chorus. There were questions there. Confusion. They didn’t get it. In fact, he was starting to think they were confused about more than why he’d left – maybe even just how he was acting. Who he was now.

If he was lucky, he might be able to get away with leaving it here, tonight. But tomorrow… by the next time they saw him… there’d be questions.

They were going to try and figure him out.

“More than a moment in time, it’s a life of leaving home…”

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
A life of leaving home - Yellowcard 2011
Halfway through a particularly tricky part of the Marble Zone (and if one more travel brochure told her to enjoy the volcanic steam baths while she was there, she was going on a rampage), a vibration under Rouge’s glove forced her to pause and find a perch on one of the moving platforms, high above the lava pit. She made sure there was nothing about to fall from the ceiling, then activated her communicator with a grin.

“Shadow. Twice in less than two days, I am feeling privileged.”

Shadow ignored that. “What have you found out about the Faker?”

“That the tabloids and I need to stop taking what he says at face value,” she said, and glared down at the volcanic gloop below her. It was infused with chaos of course, making it semi-safe to be near as long as you didn’t touch it, but that was little consolation when she was running low on rings. If Sonic really had come through here instead of taking the ferry around, she decided, she was officially signing her witness statement about his insanity. “What about you?”

“He has a family.”

“You don’t say,” she drawled.

“He has a history. A past. He’s different.”

“I hardly see how. Unless, of course, you don’t think it’s fair for your rival to have as much of a backstory as you. It did make you special for such a long time… but don’t worry, Shadow, you’re still more interesting to me.”

Shadow actually made an audible grunt in response to that, and she silently giggled before changing the subject. “By the bye, do you know South Island is a damn maze? There’s a million paths through Green Hill, but only one way out of it to get to Marble Garden. And this place has more traps than Eggman’s bases.”

“Why go through it, then?”

“Now, Shadow, what is the point of being an incredibly hot super spy in a cat suit if I don’t get to stretch my legs a little?” she demanded, then sat back on one hand, the other still raised near her lips. “So, Agent Shadow. Did you call me just to sulk about Sonic being more than your younger, more flexible rival, or is that an aside on the way to something meaningful?”

She grinned when she practically heard his vein pulsing. He was so much fun to wind up.

“What do you know about robotocisation?”
She tilted her head back, considering whether he wanted the facts or the truth. “Enough to know I
didn’t want it to happen to me, but I was almost never at risk of it. Despite the propaganda, it wasn’t
really used outside Robototropolis that much.” She heard his silent prompt for more information and
shrugged. “I never saw a robotocisor up close, but in hindsight, and knowing the machines he did
have, I doubt they were designed to cope with environmental factors. Having them anywhere outside
the major cities like Robotropolis or Kazakistahn probably would have just ended up with them
being destroyed by the weather.”

“There are more major cities than this one.”

“Yes, but SWATbots were never the brightest bolts. This was before Eggman A.I. was
commonplace – the bots were smart enough to make decisions about arresting people, but they
would just keep them locked up until someone ordered a robotocisation day,” she explained. “Why
do you ask, anyway? I would have expected our beloved monarch to have destroyed all those
machines years ago.”

He grunted non-committedly. “They never found a way to reverse robotocisation. In exploring the
castle, I found over a hundred mindless cyborgs.”

She stiffened, immediately sitting up straight and focussing more on the communicator. “Do you
need backup?”

“No. Even you would not be at risk here,” he said, and she sat back again with a pout, mildly
offended. He went on regardless. “The cyborgs are non-responsive. Even the ones who seem to be
mostly flesh. And even if they were not, any harm they might cause has been nullified.”

“What do you mean? Have they fallen into disrepair? Run out of power?”

“The ones that are mostly robotic seem to be hooked up to a generator. The others are kept alive in
the same way coma patients are.” He paused, then added, “Their cyborg parts have been disabled,
for the most part. Eyes detached, servos removed, feet disconnected. They are no danger to anyone.”

“Except to my stomach. That sounds disgusting, Shadow.”

There was a long pause, and she raised her eyebrows, surprised by his lack of scathing response.
Could it be he actually agreed? Well, well… so the big, bad Shadow had a heart after all. She
considered teasing him for it, but he cut her off before she could. “Did you ever see a
robotocisation?”

“No,” she said, rolling her eyes with the knowledge it was a change of topic, not a furthering of the
old one. “I never stayed in town long enough – I never even saw the good doctor outside of a
television screen before that whole ARK debacle, anyway.”

“But you knew about robotocisation.”

“Well, everyone did,” she pointed out. “And there were some robotocised servants in every town.
No one wanted to end up like them.”

He went quiet again, and she tilted her head, looking at her glove as if she could see him through the
communicator. She knew he hadn’t called her just because he needed a friendly voice after seeing
those mutilated cyborgs. There had to be a reason he was asking these questions – something he
wanted to know about robotocisation, and the people affected by it. “Did you find someone
important?”

“No. I don’t recognise any of these people,” he replied, then explained, “From certain things I have
overheard, it’s apparent the Faker had an interesting reaction to finding out they were here.”

“Well, you know how he is. Any crime against free will has him riled up, and you don’t get much worse than taking away even the *option* of free will,” she pointed out. “Define ‘interesting’.”

“Are you sure he’s who people think he is?” he asked, and she bit back an irritated comment. She cared about Shadow a lot, but she really hated how he would avoid answering questions. “Is it possible that the Mobian people just decided he should be the third royal child because he suited what they wanted?”

“Anything’s possible, Shadow,” she said, but then sat back again to consider. “Why do you have doubts?”

“His reactions to the royal family are nothing like I ha- not as I would expect from family.”

She smiled, knowing she wouldn’t have gotten that slip in person, but didn’t comment. Mentioning Maria was playing dirty. “Rumours say he only knew them for a short time. But mostly… honestly, Shadow, this is Sonic we’re talking about. I can’t imagine him being the most attentive sibling or son in the world.”

“You have seen him with Tails.”

“Yes, and I’ve also seen him leave Tails behind for months at a time. They run into each other more than search each other out – and remember that Sonic completely ignored that armadillo and flying fox we met for well over two years. If people don’t come into his life, he lets them stay out of it.”

“Family is different.”

She was very tempted to ask what he knew about it, but knew he would take it the wrong way. For all that he looked and sounded like a mobian, Shadow was human in the way he thought and viewed the world. He didn’t understand how mobians saw blood, family and what the dogs called ‘pack’. He didn’t know what it meant when she called him and Omega her companions.

To Shadow, and all humans, family was something important – some irreplaceable bond of immediate love and camaraderie. They were always so horrified when mobians abandoned their children, or vice versa, when ultimately all it meant was that they hadn’t formed a bond – that they didn’t see any reason to stay together. Humans were weird about blood, Rouge had long since decided. And Shadow was worse.

“Then perhaps you should stop thinking of this as a conspiracy and think of it like a family spat,” she said patiently. “If there’s conflict between family members, there must be a reason. Why did Sonic leave, and why is he behaving the way he is now? What did the family do to put him off?”

He went quiet again, and Rouge nodded as if he could see her. “It began before any of us realise,” she prompted. “He grew up on the mainland, but no one knows where or how. It’s only gospel that all three siblings were raised by foster parents –”

“You think he knew his mother?”

“I think that nobody hides from their past unless they have something to hide from,” she said bluntly, and then stood up, stretching out her free arm and wings with a yawn. “He’s been to Mobius since the return, but he’s never spoken to his family until it was literally forced upon him. He never talks about his time on Mobius, to the point that the entire human population—and myself—assumed he was from an outlying island and had never been to any of the major cities. He fought Robotnik at his most depraved and yet, even to this day, has never so much as hurt the man. There is a story there,
Shadow, and it is our job to find out what it is. For me, it’s about retracing his steps on the outside to learn how he became who he is now. You have the unique opportunity to see him among people who don’t know who he’s become. Who are so blissfully unaware that they probably don’t even know about Super Sonic. You get to see who they think he is—who he was.”

“What he ran from,” he surmised.

“And I’m betting it wasn’t the fame and fortune of princely life,” she pointed out, and then peered down at the lava below. From high above, she could see the pattern in the rising and falling blocks, and calculate the thermals that would allow her to just glide over it all. She smirked and threw herself off her perch to begin. “So, there are two possibilities – one is that his family did something he couldn’t abide, but his oh-so-infrequent sense of loyalty wouldn’t allow him to actually stand against them. The other possibility is that someone blackmailed him into leaving, which may also explain why he’s never killed Eggman.”

“Sonic’s not a killer.”

“Fine, hurt him, whatever. You get my point.”

“Yes,” he said softly, almost thoughtfully. “I think I do.”

It should have been gloriously slow going, waking up.

Tails had gone to bed at a somewhat reasonable hour, his mileselectric running out of power at around midnight and forcing him to consider giving in. But travelling for over twenty-four hours and the emotional drain of… well, Manic… had taken its toll. He’d crawled into his wonderfully squishy guest bed and promptly conked out.

Mobotropolis’ pollution cover meant the city was dark, even in the morning, and the climate control of the palace was nice and cool. When he half-woke up to Sonic’s hand on his shoulder, asking him if he wanted to come smash robots, it was all too easy to mumble a negative and snuggle back under the blankets, vaguely planning to sleep until he absolutely had to.

But then Amy woke up, maybe an hour later.

“Tails!”

“What?” he yelled, jerking upright. He stared around frantically, the shock confusing him into forgetting where he was for a moment, until he saw Amy, Sonia and Manic in his doorway. Then his weariness hit him and he slumped over. “Amy?”

“Sonic didn’t leave already, did he?” she demanded. “Sonia and Manic can’t find him and Knuckles isn’t here either!”

“They were gonna leave at dawn,” he pointed out around a yawn. “What time is it?”

“They were going to let me come with them!” she cried. “I can’t believe they didn’t wake me up! Ugh! Why do they always leave me behind?”

“Cause dawn is too early for psychos,” he muttered, lying back down.
She made an odd noise halfway between a huff and a shriek, then demanded, “Where’s the radar?”

“Why need it? Your ‘heart is never wrong’,,” he mumbled into his pillow, then lifted his head slightly to say, more audibly, “Shadow never gave it back.”

“Oh. Great. Now how am I supposed to find them?”

“What radar?” asked Manic.

“Tails has this radar that can find things, including Sonic.”

“Really? Now that would’ve come in handy a few years ago!” Sonia joked. “Can we have one?”

Tails yanked the covers up over his head and tried to drown them out. He liked his hedgehogs independent and with a healthy respect for a fox’s distaste for early mornings. This whole clingy, needy hedgehog thing was something he was not awake enough to deal with.

He made a mental note to ask Sonic how he handled it, when he came back, and then gratefully fell back asleep.

One arm braced on the window, holding up his head, the other stretched out so his wrist could hook over the steering wheel, Sonic looked the very image of a relaxed, confident driver, even as they went up a driving track barely wider than the car itself, deep into the canyons that bordered the city.

Knowing how little driving Sonic actually did, and comparing the look against the determined focus of his own driving, Knuckles decided, once again, that he hated the blue idiot.

But it wasn’t so bad. After quietly stealing the jeep from the palace hangar, they hadn’t spoken much, and Knuckles had relaxed back against his seat, feet up on the dash and half-open eyes focussed on the middle distance. So far, Sonic had only spoken once, in that flippant, offhand way he did sometimes when he was trying to hide how important something was.

“You know, you don’t need to stick around,” he’d said. “I’ll deal with Sonia if you need to get back to the island.”

“I can fight my own battles. Even against a girl,” he’d snapped, and Sonic only glanced at him once before going back to the road.

“Just sayin’,” he said. “No one’s expecting anything if you don’t wanna give it.”

Knuckles had just grunted and gone back to the passing landscape, and neither of them had spoken since. That was almost half an hour ago, and now they were deep into the canyons, out of sight of the city or pretty much anything else.

There were, however, signs of life if you knew what to look for. Unconnected fence posts on ledges above. Scraps of cloth tied to dead trees. Markings. Track points. Knuckles eyed off what he would call an ideal crow’s nest and asked quietly, “I’m not inclined to hunt people.”

Clearly not having been paying attention, Sonic’s head jerked up, and he gave him an odd look before turning back to the road. “Good for you?”
“Not even those who stand against royalty,” he added meaningfully, and Sonic raised an eyeridge.

“What, you mean anarchists?” he asked. “Okay, but uh… you bringing it up for a reason? Someone ask you to, or…?”

“Just wanted to make sure that’s not what we’re doing here.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I said I wanted to trash robots,” he said. “They don’t bother us, I ain’t gonna bother them.”

“Even though they want your family gone?”

He shrugged. “They’re entitled to an opinion. Heck, if they wanna take up arms and do somethin’ about it, power to ’em.”

Knuckles stared at him for a long few seconds until Sonic chuckled, dark humour in his tone. “I’ve toppled kings before. I’ll fight them, because this time, I’m willing to believe in Mom. But I ain’t no hypocrite. They can think whatever they like, and until they actually do something, live and let live.”

“You’re a very strange prince.”

“Says the Guardian who smashes his emerald to protect it,” Sonic noted, and Knuckles only didn’t punch him because they were on a very narrow strip of road and crashing was not in his plans this morning.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Just pointing out some similarities.”

“Similarities? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

For a second, Sonic didn’t respond, just kept staring at the road ahead, though his hand slipped down to touch his medallion. He let out a very quiet breath, and then shook his head with a strange, humourless smile. “Oh, you know… nothing much.”

‘Dead to the world’ was a bad descriptor, because that usually meant you wouldn’t be woken up for anything. But it sure felt like he had been as Tails slowly became aware of a soft tapping on his door.

Tails opened his eyes and glared at the sheets. Maybe if he pretended to be dead… his tails would still move. Darn.

“Tails?”

He grumbled to himself, but crawled around to poke his head out and peer at Cyrus, who had stopped in the middle of a step and was now looking at him with an expression caught somewhere between disbelief and horror. Tails decided not to take offence to it and shook his head until his ears came free of the sheets.

“Hi.”

“H-hello,” Cyrus said, and finished taking the step to stand at what looked disturbingly like army-
attention. His hands kept curling into fists and out again. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

The longer Tails stared at him, the more awake he felt, and with that came guilt. It was a palace, yes, but he was in someone else’s house. Everyone was already awake. He was lounging in bed. This was probably really lazy and offensive. “Uh… um, sorry! I – I didn’t realise – I’m getting up –”

“O-oh, no, it’s fine, you’re fine,” Cyrus said quickly, his hands jerking up to stop him, “I just… I um, my guys finished their inspection of the opened areas just now.”

Sensing this had more to do with anyone coming to find him than his laziness did, Tails stopped panicking and went back to staring. “That’s… good?”

“They um… they found lots of… lots of disabled security and… and engines in the walls and… and a cockpit,” he said, sounding helpless. His hands were still moving up and down, like he was juggling an invisible set of knives. “This building can fly.”

“Yes,” Tails said, still staring. “It’s a Death Egg.”

“Buildings… I… we’ve been living here for years, and studying it for longer and I didn’t know that,” Cyrus said, looking anywhere but at him. “And no one recognises these engines. We don’t know how it works. You worked on it for two hours and… Tails, I… I’m sorry I can’t get over the fact you’re a kid. I really am. You’re small and fluffy and look like you should be playing tag, not working on computers, but the fact is… I need your help. I really, really need your help.”

Tails blinked. Then blinked again. A very small, horrible part of him was smirking because darn straight he was small, fluffy and one of the most brilliant minds on the planet! He was also a hero and Sonic’s best friend, and wasn’t going to be beaten by a royal household. But the bigger part of him, which was usually nice and kind to a fault, which had felt horrible when Sonic had given him that look last night and told him he didn’t have anything to prove, squirmed because he’d been a real jerk yesterday.

“Sorry,” he said finally. “It really wasn’t as simple as I made it look, it’s just that I’ve been studying plans like these for years, and I recognised code patterns.”

Cyrus finally looked at him, then sighed and moved forward to kneel in front of the bed. “That’s still more knowledge than we have. I understand computers and engines. But they need to run off electricity and fuel. I don’t think these do. I don’t understand how this place is supposed to be powered.”

“Do you need to?” he asked. “You’re not gonna make this place fly.”

“I still need to know. I need to know these things are safe enough for me to remove without destroying the building. And if they aren’t, then I need to tell Manic, and we need to start moving out of here,” he explained. “Or if they are safe, then I need to know if they can be utilised. This building sucks up a stupid amount of energy, and it’s not sustainable. If we can use his engines safely, then… think of the savings. Not just for us but the whole planet. Limitless, clean energy – think of the possibilities!”

Tails pursed his lips, debating whether he should point out that chaos-energy also lead to things like Radical Highway and computers that could be hacked with quasi-physical interfacing. In the end, he just shook his head apologetically. “I’m sorry, I would, but I have some other research to look into. I have to –”

“Robotocisation, right?”
Tails looked at him again, and Cyrus smirked.

“Come on. I’ve known Sonic forever. I know what he’d have you looking into.”

“He doesn’t have me doing anything!” he said, shoving himself to his knees. “I want to find out for myself!”

“But he asked you,” he pointed out. “Or he at least gave you the idea. He reacted badly to the Cyborg Prison, right? The only thing Sonic hates more than robotocisation is people hurting robotocised people.”

Hurting… Tails furrowed his brow, confused. “What?”

Cyrus paused, then leaned back on his heels. “Didn’t he tell you what was down there? I mean, I expected him not to have said anything about Amber and Red, but the Prison is right there…”

It took everything Tails had not to ask who Amber and Red were. But it must have been on his face, because Cyrus started to smile. “Of course he didn’t. You didn’t ask, and Sonic never tells…”

It was true. Tails hated it, but it was fact that Sonic never volunteered information. And it burned, every time you remembered that.

“So, Tails, I’ll make you a deal,” Cyrus offered. “You help me with these engines, and I’ll tell you why Sonic left Mobius the first time.”

Tails clenched his back teeth, refusing to be swayed. Sure, he was curious. He’d never thought to ask why Sonic avoided Mobius, especially not that first year when it probably mattered the most. And he knew Sonic wouldn’t tell him about the Robotics Lab, or why it had hit him so hard. Or what these Amber and Red people had to do with it.

But it wasn’t his business. If it really mattered, he knew Sonic would tell him. And right now, all that mattered was that robotocisation was a horrible thing, and they hadn’t worked out how to reverse it. That was all Tails needed to know.

Cyrus seemed to see the debate going on in his head, and sighed. “I’ll also give you all our hand-written research on robotocisation, which never went online for security reasons,” he said, so utterly toneless that Tails knew he’d probably been planning on handing it over anyway.

Still…

“You said ‘also’, right?”

Working with Sonic was always easier done than said, and in the field, he and Knuckles easily traded off point with only vague comments. It was all work they’d done before, Sonic homing attacking his way through a crowd of barely-functioning SWATbots, Knuckles smashing through collapsed walls and gliding over pits to find places for Sonic to jump to. They knew the dance.

So even though they would deny it later, they’d actually had a fairly enjoyable morning, racing through the mine tunnels, slamming their way through dozens of rusting SWATbots and digger robots, and keeping a lazy eye out for machinery. They hadn’t found any robotocisors yet, but Sonic
had said he wasn’t that surprised. This close to the city, anyone arrested would have just been brought straight to the city prisons. But just as they were nearing a point when Knuckles was starting to think about lunch, he spotted a ledge high above the mine they were currently clearing, and a machine that would have once been in pride of place. The ledge leading up to it had long since crumbled from the damp, so he whistled to get Sonic’s attention. “Up there!”

Sonic slid out of a spin dash to follow his pointing finger, then grinned and started running for him. At the last moment, he hopped up into a ball, and Knuckles caught him, swung with the momentum, and then bodily pitched him up and through the machine like it was hot butter. Sonic bounced off the wall, flipped in midair, and landed on the machine just after it collapsed in on itself.

He took a few seconds to inspect the wreckage before setting his hands on his hips and stepping forward to look down at Knuckles. “Nada but diamonds. It’s a coal compressor.”

“What? No robotocisor?”

“Nope. But like I said, I’d be surprised if we found one,” he said, and then looked around the cavern, his eyes finally focussing on the last robot, which was still drilling away at the wall, completely unaware that everyone else had been destroyed. “I gotta say though, it’s been one heck of a productive couple hours. Good work us.”

“Yeah, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I hate getting dragged into your messes, Sonic, but I do love the exercise,” Knuckles agreed, stretching his shoulders. “So are we done here? Ready to head back to town for food?”

“Ooh, tough call. The Dead Forest is only like twenty minutes from here, but… food,” he said longingly, and Knuckles snorted, almost turning away until Sonic suddenly changed his tone, “Hey, catch.”

“Huh?” He looked up again, then yelped and had to scramble to catch the skull-sized diamond Sonic had just thrown at him. He barely managed it, then glared. “Are you nuts!!”

“Pretty sure we’ve had that discussion before!” he said cheekily, but he was clearly busy gathering up more. “I figure we could use these when Rouge shows up to help out Shadow. They might keep her from going all superspy and bugging us.”

“Yeah, that’s a nice daydream you’ve got going,” he grumbled, but just put the diamond away and went over to smash his fist through the last robot while Sonic finished up and jumped down. “But as long as it’s just you she’s messing with, I couldn’t care less.”

“United front, Sonia says. Having you here will make us look strong and together and what the heck d’you think she was smoking when she thought you’d help with that?”

Knuckles tossed a scrap of robot at his head, but still came back to take some of Sonic’s armful of diamonds. They shared them out and put them away as he asked, “Did she actually say that? About the united front thing?”

“Yeah. But she said it backfired on her, since you’re not fallin’ all over her,” he said with a grin. “I figure she was going to use your devotion to her and call it devotion to the royal family.”

“Hah! No.”

Sonic snickered, and they turned to head back up out of the cave. “So what happened there, huh? Rouge spoiled you for other women?”
Knuckles stiffened up so fast his dreadlocks fanned out behind him for a second, before he realised Sonic had kept walking and had to hurry to catch up. “I’m not – she’s not – that crazy thief-woman is –”

He noticed Sonic’s smirk too late and threw a punch that only Sonic could avoid. “Shut up!”

Sonic cackled, but only until he finished his over-exaggerated dodge and returned to walk beside him again. “Seriously, though – Sonia not burn the homefires, anymore?”

“She’s definitely hot,” Knuckles replied, and when he noticed Sonic’s grin turn awkward, he leered. “Some would even say smoking. Especially in that dress she wears around the palace, with that cut out on the chest. That slit up the leg really shows off her muscle, which makes me think about how she could use –”

Sonic flailed his hands wildly. “Okay! Still my sister! Stop talking now!”

Knuckles grinned evilly for a few moments, then admitted, “She doesn’t have what I liked anymore.”

He waited a moment, making sure Knuckles wasn’t going to keep describing his sister in ways he just didn’t want to think about, then asked, “Like what?”

“She used to have a real vision of the future… Hope, and pride… respect for what she didn’t understand,” he added dryly, then shrugged. “She’s different now.”

Sonic turned his head forward again, considering that for what it was. “It’s weird, huh? A year of SWATbots, betrayals, fighting… and it’s politicians that break her.”

“I believe it,” Knuckles grouched. “That idiot Cyrus almost broke me.”

Sonic chuckled but didn’t answer, just hopped into a light jog and gestured for Knuckles to keep up. They rushed the rest of the way out, running, gliding, and air-dashing their way out of the caves. Once they reached daylight, they slowed, and Sonic stretched with a loud, obnoxious yawn.

Knuckles looked around thoughtfully, gauging where they were and the movement he could feel through the earth. “All we’ve seen today are robots.”

“Good observation,” Sonic noted, and ducked Knuckles’ fist.

“Where’re the anarchists? Those crazies that kidnapped Sonia and Manic? I know they’re around here.”

“Thought you didn’t want to hunt ’em down,” he said mildly, then shrugged before dropping into leg-stretches. “It’s too early for anarchists. They’re all a bunch of night-owls. To be honest, and not that we would’ve had trouble anyways, but they were so easy to knock down yesterday because they were tired. Fifty rings says they hadn’t slept yet.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause from what I saw yesterday, I don’t think they’ve changed at all since I left ’em,” he said bluntly, and grinned at Knuckles’ double-take. “Come on, man. You ever heard one of their speeches? Anarchy sounds awesome. No one in charge, everyone just living how they want to live, not answering to anyone? Seriously, can you really see me not signing up to that?”

“You’re a prince,” Knuckles pointed out, and Sonic shrugged.
“Like it matters? Besides, I didn’t know that at the time,” he said, and started trotting back to where they’d left the jeep. “We were all members of the Resistance, all fighting to bring down the bad guy. Just when people talked about after the war, the anarchists didn’t want a queen.”

“So you left when you found out she was your mother?”

“Nah. Though it was close enough that some people prolly think that,” he said, jumping into the back to paw through their supplies for water bottles. When he found them, he tossed one down to Knuckles and cracked the other open to drink. “Like I said, their speeches are awesome. They were just a bit more violent than I wanted to be, even back then.”

Knuckles watched him as they both drank, judging the look and words. It was easy to forget, what with how cheerful and friendly he was now, but Sonic had been a lot different then. To the point that even with all the jokes Sonic cracked about it, Knuckles knew he’d had good reason not to recognise Sonic the second time they met.

As he knew him now, Sonic was a hero that saved the world on a regular basis – sheer power wrapped up in a friendly trickster. He laughed, smiled and joked, and even when he got serious, and you knew there was no force on this world or any other that could stop him, he still felt safe. At the end of the day, no matter what happened, you could trust Sonic with your life, heart, and soul. He was a good guy.

The Sonic that had come to the Floating Island with two siblings and mission had been a good guy, too. But he hadn’t been safe. He hadn’t been nice. He’d been cold, angry, and dangerous. When Knuckles had nearly fallen off his island, and had been dangling by a weed with Sonic standing over him, he’d looked up and honestly wondered if Sonic would let him glide away, or kick him unconscious before he could. These days, Knuckles was confident in the knowledge that Sonic would never have let him fall, but… at that time, with that Sonic, he’d had reason to think otherwise.

To scare off that Sonic, the anarchists must have really crossed a line.

Water bottle empty, Sonic packed it away again before climbing into the front seat, and after a moment, Knuckles followed suit. But Sonic didn’t immediately start the engine, just stared at the nothing between the wheel and windscreen, before saying, “When I left, the anarchist leader said something. I never really thought about it before.”

Knuckles shifted a little to look at him, wondering how long this weird mood Sonic was in would last. Having gone the entire morning so far, it wasn’t necessarily a bad one, but it was weird.

“He said I should be careful picking sides based on morals. At least the anarchists had been honest about what they expected me to do.”

Which didn’t make any more sense than pretty much any of Sonic’s random statements all morning. Knuckles groaned, scratching restlessly under his dreadlocks. “Are you talking about how everyone’s acting like you’re the answer to everything, or is this a different thing?”

“Dunno. Dunno,” he said again, and then shook his head and started the car, shoving it into gear and heading out with sharp, jerky movements. “On a scale of one to Eggman, how crazy is it that I think it’s a whole lot easier when all I have to deal with is crazed gods bent on world destruction?”

He shrugged. “It’s a hell of lot more straight-forward, anyway.”

“No kidding.”
“It’s under here somewhere, I… ah.”

Tails looked up at the sound of a computer booting, lights flickering to life around them. Cyrus crawled back out from under the crates he’d been fiddling behind, and smiled at the activity. “There we go. Guess this is it. The control board.”

“Looks like it,” Tails agreed, and set his binder aside to instead pull out his mileselectric. Most of the morning so far, Cyrus had kept up his side of the bargain, finding the Resistance’s notes on robotocisation and giving Tails a rundown of what he knew. His knowledge was pretty superficial – mostly along the same lines of what Tails had figured out from Sonic’s stories. The binder, on first glance, only had a little more, but it did have notes about where in Robotnik’s files the real information was kept. He’d look at it more later, after helping Cyrus out.

But what was really getting Tails down was that the more he heard about robotocisation, the less confident he was in his ability to understand it. Biochemical techno-magic was not Tails’ specialty. He was a mechanic. A techno-magic mechanic, yes, but he focussed on the tech, not the magic. And biochemistry was a whole different kind of science.

“The control board looks like the only part of the system hooked into the rest of the palace,” Cyrus said, shifting some crates over for them to sit on. “But my guys were pretty confident it controls all that stuff we couldn’t identify.”

“Well, only one way to find out,” he said, hooking his mileselectric into the board. He quickly bypassed the authentication protocols and logged into the main file system, running through the list of applications as only one who was used to Eggman’s naming conventions could. “Yeah, this is it. This was intended to be his main switchboard – it hooks into everything, from the air conditioning to the water control. But if we were going to access them, we’d need to switch the systems over to the chaos engines, and they’re… the only things he didn’t finish. Weird. Looks like he either gave up or benched the project.”

Cyrus sat down beside him and read over his shoulder. “Just looks like numbers to me. It’s not even binary.”

“It’s shorthand, with some leet-code thrown in,” he explained absently. “See this number? This is the folder he keeps all the chaos engine controls in. Three-H-four-zero-five-three. Chaos-E.”

Cyrus’ lips moved, working it out in his head, and winced. “You’re kidding.”

“It’s his sense of humour. He’s kinda twisted, if you didn’t notice,” he said, and flicked through the files until he found what he was looking for. After a few moments, he managed to pull up a holoprint of the Death Egg, and then isolate the power systems. He and Cyrus looked up at it, tracing the exhaust pipes to the engines and then down into what—in a normal engine—should have been the fuel tank. Tails frowned and expanded it, confused by the size and shape, then went back to files in search of schematics.

What he found didn’t help.

“It’s a chaos trap.”

“What?”

Tails glanced at him, not really sure how to explain it. “Chaos traps are used in organic harvesting –
pulling energy from living beings. It’s the basis of what we call pilot-robotocisation,” he said, and then grimaced, because not only was it a really complicated process that he barely understood, it was also incredibly creepy.

“Pilot-robotocisation? Is that different from the normal kind?” he asked, and Tails nodded.

“Pilots are still whole inside the machine, trapped but safe. SWATbots don’t use them, but… imagine a SWATbot with a little hole in their chest where their battery is. You put an animal inside and the energy that animal would normally use to move powers the SWATbot instead,” he said.

“You can also use it with cybernetic enhancements. Plug the power into the nervous system, so it’s physically attached, but the actual robotic device is removable.”

“That’s what we used to think robotocisation was,” Cyrus said slowly. “That you were still fur and flesh underneath. Like you could just take it off.”

“Really? From what Sonic said, I figured everyone knew it was –” He stopped at the look on Cyrus’ face. “He said that because of something you were gonna tell me, huh?”

He hesitated, then shifted back on his crate like he was heavy. “Don’t ask Sonic about this. You’re going to want to, but don’t.”

Tails blinked, then nodded, shifting to face him properly.

“In the early days of the war, that was a theory that was pretty strong in the rebellion. That it didn’t matter if you were captured and robotocised – you’d still be you underneath, and people could just take the metal off and you’d be free again,” he said. “It was still scary but… people weren’t really worried. So, to prove them all wrong, Robotnik did an experiment, and made a video of it. Apparently, it was broadcast all over the city live, when it happened, and then it became something that got played to people who were arrested. Warning them that there was no escape.”

Cyrus’ eyes had turned back to the hologram, but they were distant, seeing through it to his memories. “Robotnik wanted to prove that once you were robotocised, you couldn’t be saved. So he robotocised two people… and then he took off their cybernetics. Piece by piece. At first, it was just scary, you know? He took off an arm, she didn’t have an arm anymore. He took off her telescopic eye, she just had an eyesocket. But then he took out her eyesocket, and… you never forget that scream. And the blood, it… it’s been seven years and I still dream about that blood.” Cyrus paused, then laughed humourlessly and threaded a hand through his mane. “Sonic and I saw it when we got captured once. About three years after it happened. Sometimes I wonder what would’ve happened if Sonic hadn’t seen that video.”

“Mobian torture,” Tails murmured, remembering Sonic’s expression from the night before. “He got mad, huh?”

“Not just mad,” Cyrus said, and drew in a deep breath. “See, what I didn’t tell you, and what I didn’t know at the time was that… I mean, Sonic had just shown up, you know? When he was five. And he looked like Uncle Chuck – blue hedgehog, you kind of make assumptions. But… it turns out, before he came to Robotropolis, Sonic had foster parents. Red and Amber Rat. They’d been arrested and… and that was them on the video.”

Tails didn’t know how to react. He blinked twice, then looked at the hologram. Seven years ago… Sonic would have been about his age. A little younger, maybe. Tails had never known his parents, but if he even tried to think about something like that happening to Sonic, he… he couldn’t. His mind rebelled at the idea. Not just for logic reasons, but because it just refused to imagine it.
A quiet noise behind him jerked Tails out of his shock, and he coughed, forcing his mind onto practical matters. “So, that’s why he left. After seeing that video, he left Mobius. That must’ve been when he met Mighty and Ray.”

“I’ll… take your word for it,” Cyrus said, and then forced a smile. “Yeah. Yeah, so that’s the story. Um… so you said chaos traps are the basics of what it would be if things weren’t like that?”

“Yeah,” he said. It was hard moving on from that. Hard not to immediately call Sonic on the communicator and talk to him, just to hear his voice. But he had to. He forced himself to focus on the hologram. “Yeah, but the thing is um… um… this one. This one wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” he asked, and it was so prompt and immediate that Tails knew they were both taking refuge in the science. He nodded gratefully.

“It’s too big. Chaos traps need to be small and contained, because chaos is naturally unstable. By limiting the size, you can contain the power level,” he said, and spun the schematic to show it from the top-down. “This is three metres across, minimum. Now, you might make the base this size if you were working with a large creature, but in that case, you wouldn’t have as many power strippers – these podiums here,” he added in explanation, pointing to the eight poles standing around the trap. “This was clearly designed for something with enough power to charge this entire ship. It would be incredibly unstable.”

Cyrus nodded thoughtfully, peering at the hologram. “How much energy would that take?”

“I couldn’t give you a number,” he said. “But given that even the baseline mobian has the same power as thirty power rings, and thirty power rings can power the original Tornado for a day… a lot.”

“What’s the Tornado?”

“Weaponised bi-plane. With a rocket propulsion addition,” he added, and Cyrus narrowed his eyes for a rough calculation.

“Big number. You couldn’t fit that many people in that space.”

“No. Which is why I think it was designed for one person with a lot of power, but…” Tails pressed his fist to his mouth, shaking his head again. “But that kind of power level is almost unheard of.”

“Almost. But not unheard of,” a new voice interjected, and they both spun around, shocked. Shadow didn’t acknowledge their surprise as he stepped out of the darkness behind a stack of crates. “I can even think of a power source readily available now.”

“But not when this was built,” Tails argued, absently wondering how long he’d been listening. Probably since before they’d even come in the room. “And besides, it still wouldn’t work. Not for longer than a few seconds, max.”

“Unless he had a focus,” Shadow replied, as casually as if he’d always been a part of the discussion. “Gerald used chaos traps in his experiments. He was only ever moderately successful when he used conduits and focus pools.”

“Gerald?” Cyrus repeated, but Tails only nodded slowly, thinking it through.

“That was why the Prototype had the shrine, even when there were no emeralds. It was a focus point. And you have your rings… yeah, that could work,” he said, and isolated two of the power strippers, which were slightly larger, but hollow at their top. “These two were designed to hold
something. If you had something that could focus the chaos energy through these two, and then feed them down… yeah. Yeah, that would work. It could then feed through the power lines, separating it out to each of the engines at a constant rate and it’d be… as stable as chaos can be. Assuming the actual tech could support the theory.”

Cyrus looked from the schematic, to Tails, to Shadow, and back again. “Okay, pretending I know what you guys are talking about, you’re saying this could theoretically work. Then why doesn’t it? Why didn’t he finish the job?”

“Because he had nothing to power it,” Tails explained, and sat back slightly, staring at the code. “This was built almost fifteen years ago. He didn’t know about the things that would’ve had that kind of energy, back then.”

“The Guardian’s emerald?” Cyrus suggested, but Tails shook his head.

“Different kind of power source. Chaos traps only work on living beings,” he said, and looked at Shadow. “He didn’t know about the Ark, or you, and so that just leaves—”

“It leaves something only a seer could have known about, fifteen years ago,” Shadow said, and then turned on his heel. “Thank you for the insight. You are proving quite the fount of information.”

Tails froze, and then cursed, clenching his fists under his chin. “It’s not the same! And he couldn’t have known!”

Shadow didn’t respond, just continued striding out of the room and into the darkness of the hall beyond. Tails glared after him, then huffed and turned forward again, glaring at the schematics. “He couldn’t have. It was eleven years before it was even possible!”

“Care to fill me in?” Cyrus asked cautiously, and Tails glanced at him before huffing again.

“Not really. It’s too much of a long shot,” he said. “Shadow’s just grasping at straws.”

“Okay…” he said, glancing back over his shoulder. “You guys don’t seem to get on too well.”

“I don’t usually have much to do with him,” he said, going back to his handheld and the schematics. “I mean, he’s helped us out a couple of times, and I fix his weapons that GUN doesn’t know about, but it’s usually Sonic that actually deals with him.”

“How long have they been…” Cyrus narrowed his eyes, considering, before adding a tactful, “friends?”

“A few months now. All things considered, we know pretty much everything about him there is to know, but I still don’t get what goes on in his head,” he muttered. “I don’t even know why he’s here.”

“Isn’t he an ambassador?”

“That’s why GUN would have sent him; not why he’d come,” he said, and looked down at his handheld again. After a moment, his eyes widened, before he groaned and slapped his forehead. “Of course. He just wants to know where Sonic got his powers from. Duh, Tails.”

“Sonic’s powers?” Cyrus repeated. “Isn’t it just magic, like his mother?”

He shrugged vaguely. Amy insisted there was a big difference between chaos and magic, but personally Tails was pretty sure ‘magic’ was just chaos no one had figured out yet. He didn’t really
“So why does Shadow care where he got those powers from?” Cyrus prodded. “If they’re friends, then –”

“Friends is pushing it,” Tails corrected. “Mostly, I think trying to work Sonic out is a hobby of Shadow’s. It might give him an insight into some other stuff, I guess.” He paused, staring at the chaos trap for several long seconds. Eggman couldn’t have known, could he? But then why have… it didn’t make sense… “Okay, you know what? Forget that. Let’s talk chaos engines.”

With Sonic and Knuckles too far gone to chase down, Shadow (and therefore the radar) unable to be found, Tails being Tails, and Amy well aware that Sonic would be coming back this time, meaning going looking for him and potentially getting lost wouldn’t actually help her situation, she had instead decided to spend the morning with the royal siblings.

But when she had suggested this, they’d both winced apologetically.

“You’re like, totally welcome to come along an’ all,” Manic began awkwardly, and Sonia took up the reigns.

“But we have to go to court. We’re trying to get through Manic’s motion on the amphitheatre.”

“It’ll be seriously boring,” he said. “Like, four and a half hours of listening to lame speeches and arguments about words type boring.”

She’d laughed it off and come along anyway, but as it turned out, they hadn’t been exaggerating even a little. It literally was four and a half hours of people standing around talking about nothing much at all, with occasional breaks to argue semantics. The worst point was probably when she jerked out of a half-awake doze only to realise half an hour had gone by and the man at the podium was still defining what he considered ‘fresh water’.

Worst of all, by the time they finally broke for lunch, Sonia and Manic hadn’t even had a chance to talk about their amphitheatre!

As the royal siblings got up, saying something about talking to the Master of Ceremonies, Amy stayed behind, unable to believe what she’d just sat through. Four and a half hours of her life had just disappeared in a whirlwind of petty arguments and –

“Excuse me, miss.”

Her head jerked up and around, only to find a dark-furred ferret standing beside her chair, smiling pleasantly with one hand in his pocket. He extended the other one in greeting. “Inque Stayne, how do you do? Hope you don’t mind me introducing myself, only you looked a little lost, all here on your lonesome.”

She blinked, then smiled and took his hand to shake. “Not lost, but I don’t mind – I like meeting new people. I’m Amy Rose.”

“Rose a last name or a descriptor?” he asked cheekily, and she giggled, apparently inviting him to sit down beside her, given how quickly he did so. “Could be either one, you see. Y’sure are as pretty as
She waved him off playfully, not interested in flirting when there was no way word could get back to Sonic, and Inque touched a hand to his heart as if wounded. “Nothing? Not even a ‘stop it, you’? Am I losing my touch, or am I just not aware of competition?”

Oh, he was good. So she did the same thing she normally did when boys she wasn’t interested in tried to flirt – gave him a tolerant smile and explained, “There’s no competition, because no one could compare to what I already have. Sorry.”

“Ah, well, can’t blame a boy for trying. So, my dear Rose, I’ve never seen you in court before. Did you find it as enthralling as the rest of us?” he asked dryly. “I know I was certainly on the edge of my seat during that thrilling debate over shop front laws.”

She looked at him sideways, trying to decide why he was still talking to her. He didn’t really seem the friendly type, but usually boys that she refused to flirt with lost interest after she disengaged. Deciding she was probably wrong, and he actually was the friendly type, she shrugged cheerfully. “It passed the time. And I guess it was interesting to see how a queen spends her day.”

“You didn’t know?” he asked, and she shook her head.

“Everything I know about royalty comes from fairy tales! Queens don’t usually feature unless they’re evil,” she pointed out, and he laughed, but something about it made her stop smiling pretty quickly. She suddenly realised that had probably been a little insulting. “But Aleena doesn’t seem like that at all. Queen Aleena. Her majesty. She seems really nice. Smart. I mean, wise. Is that the word?”

“I wouldn’t know, she doesn’t talk to me,” he said playfully, then tilted his head. “But what with you sitting in the Lost Prince’s chair, I’m guessing she’s had words with you, huh? And you’re a hedgehog… relative, I’m guessing?”

“No, no, I’m not related,” she said, blushing at the idea. “Just staying in the palace for the Festival.”

“Lucky you,” he noted. “What did you do to swing that gig?”

“I’m a friend of So- I mean, the Lost Prince,” she said, then made a face. “It sounds so weird calling him that.”

But Inque apparently didn’t care, his eyes having gone wide and his smile rather fixed. “The Lost Prince, you say. He really is back then. I heard the rumours, but… well, rumours.”

Again, she realised a few seconds too late that she probably wasn’t supposed to say that. “Um…”

“How interesting,” he said, turning his head slightly as if filing the information away for later. “So you met him outside the kingdom? One of the outer kingdoms, perhaps?”

She licked her lips and leaned back. This didn’t feel like pleasant chit-chat anymore. “Y-you could say that.”

“And you’ve been travelling with him ever since?”

It was starting to feel a bit like an interrogation. “N-not really.”

“But friends for a long time.”

“Well… um…”
“Stayne,” a sharp voice cut in, and they both looked around to see Manic striding toward them. For the first time, Amy realised just how bulky Sonic’s brother was – he wasn’t on Vector’s level, but his biceps were solid, and they flexed as he set his fists on his hips, frowning at Inque. “Nice to see you outta the airducts, man.”

Inque’s smile snapped up into an innocent grin as he shot to his feet. “Thief Prince, a pleasure as always. I was just getting to know the little Rose here.”

“Yeah, I bet. Don’t you have a tabloid to write somewhere?”

Amy paled. Tabloid. No wonder he had seemed off – he was a reporter! She hated reporters!

“Well, now you mention it,” Inque said smoothly, stepping down to Manic’s level. “A couple of little birdies saw you and an unknown lady out on the town yesterday afternoon, just before that little incident with Lord Head’s warehouses. A young lady matching our dear Rose’s description. Now, given how rarely you leave the palace, let alone with a member of the female population, I naturally wanted to verify it. And here she is! Such a beautiful girl your brother brought home, yes?”

Manic just scowled. “Leave Amy alone, Stayne. Find someone else to gossip about.”

“My, how protective you are!” he said cheerfully. “Championing a lady, or defending a future sister-in-law?”

“Yeah, like Sonic’s gonna settle down with a girl any time soon,” he said, and then folded his arms over his chest. “I’m not gonna tell you again, man. Get outta here.”

He smiled vaguely and shrugged, lifting both hands in the air. The one that had previously been in his pocket had a voice recorder clutched in it, and he made a point of clicking the record button off once he’d finished gesturing. “Can’t blame a boy for trying. You both have a good day now. I’ll be seeing you.”

And with that, he turned and sauntered away, heading up through the aisle to join the crowd milling around the exits. Manic sighed and winced at Amy apologetically. “You okay?”

“Sorry,” she said, rubbing her shoulder. “I didn’t realise he was a reporter.”

“Rumour-monger. That guy like, wishes he was good enough to be a reporter,” he said with a grin. “Don’t worry about it – Sonia’s gonna be announcing Sonic’s return this afternoon anyway. That should keep you outta the headlines and bury any lame story Stayne’s got planned.”

She still looked at her hands, feeling guilty and a little bit played. Manic hesitated, then coughed. “So, like, me and Sonia finished talking with Clarion about the court schedule, which means we’re supposed to go to luncheon now… you gonna come with? You didn’t seem too cool with it, yesterday.”

“Oh, um,” She twisted her fingers in her lap, awkward. “It was just… different than I expected. I might miss it, if that’s okay. Maybe go find Tails.”

“That’s cool. Hey, if you like, I can show you the kitchens. You can get first pick of food down there, and the cooks’re like, totally awesome.”

She hesitated, then nodded once. “Thanks, Manic.”
On the way to the kitchens, they ran into a dust-covered Knuckles, who reported Sonic had just left him to go get cleaned up, and then offered to take Amy the rest of the way. Manic thumped him on the shoulder in thanks and headed out, amazed his brother had remembered (and then actually done something about) his responsibilities with luncheon.

“Hey, bro,” he greeted as he swung into Sonic’s room. “How was your morning?”

Sonic was sitting on the bed, switching shoes, but he glanced up with a smile. “Pretty good. We cleared a mine – prolly gonna head into the Dead Forest tomorrow.”

“Amy was kinda ticked you left her behind,” he noted, and Sonic snorted. “She’ll deal. ’Sides, it freed up her morning to hang out with you,” he said lightly. “You said you like her, right?”

“Well, yeah, she’s slammin’, but I had to go to court. That’s not like, the most romantic of dates, if you know what I mean,” he said, and flopped down on the bed beside him. “And I don’t think you really left her behind for my sake.”

He shrugged. “She could do worse.”

“Wow, that’s a ringing endorsement, right there.”

“Said with all the love in the world, little bro,” he said with a wink, then zipped up his boot and reached past Manic to the coat he’d left hanging on the end of the bed. “But I wasn’t sure what we’d find out there. I don’t think she’d do too well against robotocised mobians.”

“Yeah…” Manic paused, taking a few seconds to drink in the sight of his brother back home. It was kind of weird to look at him, in its own way. For three years, he’d had this picture in his head of how Sonic would be. Subconsciously, he’d almost thought he’d be exactly the same – short, chubby, with dark eyes and a burning anger. When he’d allowed himself to imagine it, he’d thought about how similar they’d always been, and imagined Sonic growing up to a blue-furred, green-eyed version of himself. Maybe with a bit more muscle, since Sonic had always been stronger than him.

The guy who’d shown up didn’t look anything like that. He was still shorter than Manic by a couple of marks, but where he’d once been chubby and compact, now he was lean and streamlined, all leg and quills. The quills had gotten really long, actually – nowhere near Sonia’s, of course, but still long enough to get in the way if he lay on his back. And his eyes were so bright – almost like he’d gotten contact lenses. But Manic had a feeling it probably had more to do with magic and fresh air than anything scientific.

But the anger…

It was still there – he let bits of it slip through every now and again. Snapping at them last night and the general feel of his movements now… But he hid it a lot better than he ever had as a kid. He hid a lot of things better now, Manic figured.

“A lot of stuff happened to you, these last couple years, huh?”

Sonic looked up from his fight with the buttons to meet his gaze, but he didn’t immediately answer, once again proving how he’d changed. He blinked slowly, then shrugged and went back to the coat. “Two years is a long time.”
“Yeah… you’re okay though, right?”

Sonic smiled fondly, but he waited until he was finished with the coat before looking up again. His gaze was strangely assessing for a few seconds, before he shrugged again and pulled out the gloves Manic had given him. “I’m thinking maybe you worry a bit too much about me, Manic. Maybe turn those eyes of yours inward, huh?”

He frowned, pulling back a little. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean that I’m not the only one who’s had two years to grow up. I’m just the only one stealing the spotlight,” he said, and then winked. “Now come on – you gotta get ready too, right?”

“Dude, I’ve been in court all morning,” he said, gesturing to his fancy vest, boots, and trousers. “All I gotta do is take out the earrings.”

“What? Where are all your buttons?” he demanded, then shook his head in mock annoyance. “I do not understand clothes. At all.”

“Hey, I just wear what they tell me to,” he said as he led the way out. “So what did you find this morning? Didja get the robotocisor?”

“Nah. I’m thinking that if there’s gonna be one, it’ll be on the far side of the Dead Forest. This was just a coal mine,” he said, waving it off. “So you were in court all morning, huh? In my experience, it doesn’t get much more boring than that – what were you doin’ hanging out with all those stuffed shirts?”

“Mother and Sonia are stuffed shirts?” he asked with a grin, and Sonic laughed.

“Hey, hey, I was being general. If you wanna go gettin’ personal…”

They continued chatting, Manic explaining how he’d been trying to get his motion passed and how they’d run out of time, until they reached the main hall. There was a cluster of aristocrats gathered around the door—and Stayne, Manic was not impressed to notice—but the boys only exchanged a shared glance of resignation before striding on through.

Sonia was already there, sitting with Stripes, who looked slightly less terrified at Sonic’s appearance than he had yesterday. For his part, Sonic just tipped them both a two-fingered salute before wandering over to his seat. “So how’s that work, anyway? With who comes? There’s only twenty seats around the table—not counting ours—but Stripes is here and there’s more’n that outside anyway.”

“Well, we can invite whoever we like,” Sonia explained as Manic sat down. “As long as they enter with us, then they’re guaranteed a seat. Then it’s essentially first-come, first-serve. The servants ensure only enough people to be seated come through the door, but other than that, it’s whoever gets to the door first.”

“Sounds a whole lot less polite than it should,” he noted, and she smiled wryly.

“We pretend not to hear any arguments that happen outside. How was your morning?”

Sonic gave another vague answer—Manic was starting to realise he was pretty good at them—as one of the waiters hurried off to tell Aleena they were ready to start the event.

When Stayne wasn’t one of the people to be brought in—he’d long since been blacklisted by the servants, like most reporters—Manic found himself watching the airducts. Stayne had been in the
Resistance, apparently—reconnaissance, no less—and these days used those skills to dig up dirt. If he hadn’t been one of Stayne’s favourite targets, Manic was pretty sure he’d like the guy, but as it was, it felt like he spent half his life keeping an eye out for the little jerk.

But his attention only really lasted about ten minutes, because that was how long it took for the aristocrats to stop tip-toeing around Sonic’s presence.

It started out fairly innocently, with them just commenting on his return, and how nice it was to see the Council in full. But it didn’t take long before they started asking where he’d been, what he’d been doing, and why it had taken him so long to come back. Sonic had started out fairly polite and vague, joking about how he’d had a couple of parties in the human territories he had to go to, ‘and you know how they can drag on!’, but his patience quickly thinned. His answers got progressively shorter and less witty as the aristocrats started repeating themselves.

Manic knew he or Sonia should have jumped in, or at least tried to redirect some of their attention, but when he glanced at her, he knew they were both thinking the same thing. They were kind of hoping he’d snap and tell the truth— that they’d finally find out what he was really doing out there.

Aleena, on the other hand, seemed to be mostly staying out of it, only speaking when the aristocrats were a little too blunt, or didn’t cover the implied ‘you should have been here’ well enough.

But not only did he seem well aware of what his entire family was doing, Sonic somehow managed to avoid revealing anything but the fact he was running out of ways to politely tell people to step off. But after yesterday, Manic was watching, and so winced when Sonic stopped using his fork to instead pick at things with his fingers, guessing they’d lost another utensil to his brother’s anger.

“Now, really, sir,” Lord Callus snapped finally, halfway through dessert. “I must protest your reticence!”

“I see just fine, but thanks for the concern,” Sonic said, and Manic glanced at Sonia, not sure whether he’d misunderstood on purpose.

“Your loyal subjects have a right to know where you have been!” he cried.

Not for the first time, Sonic’s immediate response was to just look at him silently for several long, tension-filled moments. And then came the slow smile, which on someone with sharper teeth probably would have looked dangerous. “You point them out, and I’ll be an open book.”

There was a beat of shocked silence, before Sonia’s spoon clanked against her plate. “Sonic.”

He turned that dark smile on her, and completely ignored the look she was giving him. “Yeah?”

But before she could respond, Callus had recovered and half-risen from his seat. “I hope my lord prince is not implying I, and my fellows here, are anything but loyal. If you’re accusing me of anything, my lord, I should remind you of the many things you in turn could be—”

“No!” Manic yelped, and then rushed to follow up when everyone looked at him. “No, no, actually, I uh, I think it’s the other word that’s the problem,” He paused for just a second, thinking fast. “See, uh, me and um, us—siblings, I mean—we’re not… like, proper princes yet. ’Cause we haven’t been, you know, introduced and stuff. So I mean, technically, we’re like, not even on your level, so you can’t be our subjects… so… yeah.”

He swallowed hard, trying to remember what he’d just said and run with it. A quick glance told him even Aleena was watching him, her eyes curious, while Sonic was completely unreadable. “It’s… like, you know, something that’s actually been like, a weird thing we’ve been like, dealing with.” If
he said ‘like’ one more time he was going to punch himself. “Kinda awkward, y’know? Everyone’s always sayin’ how we’re all the Council of Four and… and like—” Damn. “—that’s supposed to make us in charge and all, but… I mean, officially speaking, we’re just kids. No rank, no rights… but we couldn’t really say anything, because… well, we kinda have been in charge anyway, you know?”

Callus slowly sat back down, and Manic could have punched the air as he practically saw the tension in the room lower along with him. Sonia was looking at him like she could have kissed him, so he tried a tiny smile and continued, “That’s why next Sunday’s really important to us, ’cause, well, then we are gonna be princes—and a princess, sorry, Sonia—with like, actual responsibilities, and subjects, and stuff. No more faking it ’til we make it, because… well, we’ll have made it. You know?”

There was a long pause, everyone just staring at him, before Aleena let out a soft noise that was something like an audible smile. When everyone turned their gaze on her, she inclined her head to Manic and stood up. “Hopefully that clears the matter up, somewhat. And as much as we do hate to leave on such a note, there are matters to be attended to before court resumes. Lost Prince, if you would step into the antechamber?” she asked, gesturing to the door.

Sonic obediently stood up and headed out without so much as a hint of expression, and Aleena only nodded in polite farewell before following him out. Manic wondered if he was going to get one of Aleena’s carefully measured speeches, or if she was just giving him an excuse to get out of there.

Sonia cleared her throat as the door closed, recapturing everyone’s attention. “Well said, Thief Prince. I’ve already had my debutante, but it was hardly official, given that I was there for maybe five minutes before having to go abduct an airliner. I’m really looking forward to it. Lady Belle, do you know what you’ll be wearing yet?”

And slowly, luncheon went back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Break Me Shake Me - Savage Garden 1997
I wanna scream at the top of my lungs. I just found out there’s no such thing as the real world; just a lie you’ve got to rise above.

At a sudden splash, Bobby Seal and Camilla the Chicken flinched and spun around to watch as a white bat burst out of the water and snatched the nearby rock so tightly that claws ripped through her gloves and into the stone grooves.

It wasn’t that unusual for people to go swimming in Lost Labyrinth, especially since Sonic had come back and cleared it out again, but Bobby and Camilla had been sitting by the water’s edge for hours and this was the first time they’d seen the bat.

“You alright there, hon’?” Camilla called, but the bat was too busy struggling to get her breath back to even look up.

“I begin… to see why… he doesn’t swim,” she panted, and then slowly pulled herself up and out of the water. Once she was out, she twisted around to collapse back against the stone, and Bobby frowned, wandering over to peer down at her.

“Y’all didn’t come through the Labyrinth, didja?” he asked. “It’s dangerous down there!”

“Thank you… so much… for the advice,” she ground out.

“Now, now, hon’, Bobby’s only tryin’ t’help,” Camilla said gently, but they couldn’t take it too personally. Anyone foolish enough to go through the Labyrinth and good enough to somehow survive was bound to be a little testy. “You hurt at all? You need first aid?”

She silently held up a power ring in response, and then collapsed again, taking a few moments to breathe and recover. Bobby shrugged and went back to Camilla and their fishing rods. “You just let us know when you’re ready to talk, girl, and we’ll get you fixed up.”

The bat rolled her eyes, but took another minute before rolling onto her front and then pushing herself up. “One question before we start. Why, in the name of all things, are there arrow-shooting gargoyles in that final passage?”

“Why, I’d think that was obvious,” Camilla said blankly. “The same reason the water rises the moment you step on the right stones. It’s a trap, hon’, you’re not supposed to survive it.”

“That’s why we’re surprised y’all came up from there,” Bobby pointed out. “Most people ain’t breathin’ when they do.”

She just stared at them for a moment, then pinched the bridge of her muzzle and tried again. “Why are there traps in that passage?”

“Because someone once thought they were necessary,” Camilla explained, still blank. “It’s the basement of an ancient city we’re sittin’ in, hon’, I don’t think they wanted people comin’ up through
Who are you, anyway?” asked Bobby. “Why would you wanna be coming up through that passage?”

“My name is Rouge. I’m tracing the route Sonic the Hedgehog took when he first fought Eggman,” she said irritably, and they exchanged glances.

“Y’all a travel agent or just stupid?”

“Travel agent?”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Camilla said, going back to her fishing. “What was it one of ’em said, Bobby?”

“Experience the thrills and dangers of bein’ a hero, all from the safety of our tour,” he said, and snorted. “Yeah, we were fishing bits of that guy outta the Labyrinth for weeks.”

Rouge sighed and rubbed her muzzle again. “I’m a government agent. And a friend of Sonic’s. I’m trying to find out more about his original journey. Normally I’d be a lot more tactful about this, but I’m cold, wet, and just spent ten minutes dodging things that shouldn’t be possible underwater. You two look old enough to have been here when it all happened – do you remember him passing through?”

“Oh, I remember Robotnik’s little takeover of our island,” Bobby said darkly. “I remember playing battery in a nasty burrowbot that drilled holes in everything.”

“Don’t remember much of a hero, though,” Camilla added, staring into the water without any expression. “There was this scared kid that ran through, crackin’ us open and chasin’ ol’ Robotnik. But I don’t remember no hero.”

Rouge just stared at them for a long moment, so Bobby took pity on her with a smile. “We’re just being honest, Rouge. Everyone talks about how heroic that boy was when he came through here. How he saved us all. And don’t get us wrong, he did do that, and I’d thank him if I saw him, a thousand times over. But back then, he weren’t no hero. He was just chasing down a demon from his own head and I don’t think he even realised what that meant to the rest of us.”

“Why do you say that?”

He leaned back on one hand, considering for a moment. “He came back through here a month or two ago – ran the Labyrinth again, warned off the ol’ doctor from starting trouble again. The entire time he was here, he was grinning like a loon, jumping all over the place, getting into all sorts of tight spots. He and the doc even stopped and traded insults every so often, like they were playing a game or something. After he kicked Robotnik back to wherever that crazy lurks when he’s not causing trouble, he came back and went through every nook and cranny until he was sure everyone was safe. He didn’t do that, the first time,” he said slowly. “First time, he didn’t stop and he didn’t come back. He just ran straight on through and when he’d gotten through one area, he just kept going to the next. He didn’t smile, didn’t joke. Kid didn’t even pause when he got hurt – just got back up again and ran. Most of us didn’t even see him. That ain’t a hero – that’s a machine on a mission.”

“I saw him. I was there at the end – in Robotnik’s factory,” Camilla murmured. “After it all ended. Poor kid looked lost.”

Rouge didn’t respond straight away, setting a hand on her hip as she panted. After a few moments, she lifted the other to push the wet fur off the back of her neck and said, “You’re implying that
there’s a difference between what he was fighting then and now. Which has nothing to do with Eggman himself.”

“I reckon most people fightin’ somethin’ for years on end ain’t still fightin’ the same war they started out on,” Bobby pointed out. “It ain’t nothin’ unusual.”

“True, but you just said Sonic was lost in the beginning,” she argued, though the annoyance was leaving her tone as her breathing began to even out. “Soldiers that fight for long periods usually end up going cold, not – not the other way around.”

“Some people find themselves in the doing, hon’,” Camilla said.

At first, Rouge just continued to frown at her, before she came over and sat beside them, legs folded beneath her. She tucked her power ring behind her hips and closed her wings, obviously attempting to put on a much calmer, elegant image than the one she’d emerged from the water with. When she smiled at them, they almost could have believed it.

“Why do you think he was fighting, back then?”

“We wouldn’t know,” said Camilla. “Boy didn’t talk to anyone.”

“But the two of you clearly understand war,” she pressed. “You understand soldiers, and –”

“That boy ain’t no soldier,” Bobby snapped, and Rouge paused, then inclined her head.

“And you know why he isn’t one. So you might have some insight that I’m missing.”

They exchanged glances. The old, weary glances of people who have seen and done too much to remember details. But the thing about age was that even without the details, memories and stories lingered, giving meaning to things young folk couldn’t understand. Camilla smiled and reached out to pat the girl’s shoulder. “Sometimes, hon’, people bury parts of themselves in other things, other people. And when they lose those things, they lose bits of themselves. Lose enough, y’might realise y’ain’t got nothin’ left ’cept the will to find ’em again.”

“To find… what you’ve lost?” she asked, and Camilla nodded.

“That’s what that boy was doin’, if y’ask me,” Bobby agreed. “Tryin’ real hard to find what he don’t have no more.”

Rouge glanced at him, then back to Camilla for a translation. She chuckled.

“Sometimes, you come out the end and you realise what you were searchin’ for ain’t there. When I saw that boy at the end, lookin’ all lost and alone, I knew that’s what he was thinkin’. That he wasn’t getting back what he lost, no matter what he did. Some folk… they get to that point and they just fall down. Break. There ain’t nothin’ for ’em, so they don’t go on no more.”

“That boy, though,” Bobby continued with a wise nod. “He found somethin’ else worth havin’.”

“Or maybe just let go of what weren’t,” Camilla pointed out, and Bobby nodded again, this time in agreement.

And Rouge just watched them quietly, her eyes dark as she thought the idea through.
Sonic and Aleena stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, letting the argument go unsaid, since they both knew how it went.

Sonic had crossed a line, calling the aristocrats disloyal, but he felt he’d been pushed up to it by everyone obsessing over his past. He was going to have to tell everyone the truth eventually, but that would mean telling everyone about Eggman, Chaos, and everything else Aleena had helped keep quiet for the past three years.

And right now, neither of them were feeling all that apologetic.

“You will be expected at luncheon tomorrow, as well,” she said finally. “I do not expect a repeat performance.”

“Whatever,” he said. “Anything you need me from me before then?”

Her eyes flicked down to his medallion, then back up. “No, thank you.”

“Okay,” he said, and then turned on his heel and ran for it.

Five minutes in, he regretted not switching his shoes before going, as he wasn’t even out of the business district and he could feel the soles burning. He winced when it actually bit through to his foot and jumped, separating himself from the pavement and working off some momentum by bouncing off buildings instead. By the time he hit ground again, the sole of his right boot was completely gone, and he had to stamp twice to put out an ember on the other one.

“Ain’t that just a kick in the head,” he muttered, lifting his foot to check out the damage. Luckily, he’d noticed before he could actually injure himself, but the shoes themselves were completely done in. Even the top of them was ruined – the leather cracked and torn over the toes and heel. “That’s what I get for runnin’ angry. Oh well.”

He limped into a nearby archway and pulled out his sneakers to switch over, grimacing when he realised he’d damaged his socks a little too, and would need to get new ones sooner than expected. Which was easier said, here on the Mobius mainland – he hadn’t carried mobiums in years. Maybe he could ask Manic… right after he apologised for wrecking the guy’s boots. Yeah.

He sighed and looked around, then blinked as he realised where he’d ended up. The Robostyle mall.

Back in the Robotropolis days, this had been one of the creepiest establishments, in Sonic’s opinion. It was three floors of shops, completely staffed by robotocised mobians and droid robots. Even if the staff had been completely flesh and blood, it had been way too expensive for Sonic’s wallet, and Manic had told him once the security was too tight for the thieves to get in, but Sonia’s crowd had all shopped here.

He looked at the door beside him, staring at the massive chain wrapped through the doorhandles. Apparently, the mall was shut down now.

He took a few steps back to look up at the building itself, noting the boarded up windows and graffiti-covered walls. Then he came back and peered through the dark glass doors.

Empty. Not even any sign of people camping out. Which was weird, because in his experience, big empty buildings were the place to go when you couldn’t pay rent. Surely the city guards weren’t policing that kind of thing…
He hesitated, then walked backward again, this time yanking off the fancy coat while he was at it. The windows were all boarded up from the outside, implying that someone was trying to keep something in, not out. It also meant that they’d be easy to pry off.

He tossed the coat at a trash can and flexed his newly-freed spines, rolling his shoulders as he judged the best path up the wall. That decided, he nodded to himself, got ready, and shot off, sprinting a few metres up the wall before leaping onto a pipe, depowered sign, and then finally the window ledge itself, where he only just managed to grab the wooden cover before losing momentum and nearly falling right back down again.

“Smooth, hedgehog,” he muttered, then braced himself on the ledge and yanked the cover up and off. “Okay, let’s see what you’re hiding…”

He threw the cover down to the ground and peeked through the glass. It was dark inside, only tiny shafts of light making it through the window cover and past his own silhouette. But he could see the glow of a security camera down the hall, and there was an early green light visible from a doorway at the very edge of what he could see.

“Still got power, huh? Which means this window is probably alarmed… oh well, not like I’m winning any awards for stealth these days,” he said, and without any further ado, he slammed his foot through the glass. Surprisingly, there was no responding screech of an alarm, even though he paused to wait for it, but he only shrugged to himself before clearing enough glass for him to swing safely through.

As he straightened up, he did a quick count of the security cameras in the hall, as well as each of the shuttered storefronts. All clothing, mostly with West Mobian names he couldn’t pronounce. A typical mall hallway, he had to say, and turned to where the green light had been coming from, only to find it had been replaced by a flashing red one. As he walked forward, he heard a roller door gently sliding open, and another familiar noise that took him a couple of seconds to place.

The heavy clang of a SWATbot foot.

“Ohh, nostalgia!” he cried, and zipped down the hall to watch as no less than three SWATbots emerged from a storage closet with a blinking red ‘security’ sign. He clasped his hands to his chest with a happy gasp, then spread them out toward the robots in welcome. “You look just as clunky as I remember you! And you even have – look at your arm cannons! That’s so cute! Oh, and your programming still needs verbal confirmations, that’s just adorable!” He shook his head fondly, touching his chest as they announced him Priority One: Hedgehog and shot lasers in the place his head had been a moment ago. “Just when I was thinking there was nothing on Mobius that could get me all teary eyed…”

And then he smashed them.

Like a lot of buildings in the CBD, Trevor was both vitally aware of the issue that was Robostyle mall and completely unable to do anything about it.

As head of the Emergency Response Unit, his main job was responding to crises around the city. Burning buildings, accidents, et cetera. But despite the size of Mobotropolis, emergencies didn’t actually happen that often. Or if they did, people tended not to report them, because despite the one
letter difference, this city was totally still Robotropolis, and that meant you did not tell authority anything, especially when you needed help.

So in their down time, the ERU was supposed to go through the old government owned buildings that had been locked down in the days following the war. But unfortunately, the ERU were government funded, which meant they weren’t supposed to do anything without approval, and since approval took a long time to get… Honestly, it was just easier to spend their time helping the redevelopment projects.

Trevor knew that it had once been Sonic’s job to clear out the SWATbots from the city, and that he’d done a good job getting them off the streets. But he’d ignored most of the buildings and then done what Sonic did best: disappeared.

Honestly, Trevor hadn’t been surprised.

But that did leave places like the Robostyle mall, where there was always an idiot kid trying to break in and prove he was tough.

In the last hour or so, he’d started getting reports from a few concerned parents who had probably had to talk their own kids down from it in the past. Nothing serious, just a few exasperated calls. But then, as he was packing a small team up for the extraction, another call had come in, reporting ‘… noises’.

That’s how they phrased it, and all the information they could get out of the caller, before they hung up. “There are… noises coming from inside the mall.”

So he’d decided to screw official clearance, he was taking the whole squad and they were going to put down that mall. He’d started worrying about it on the way over – Robostyle had been filled with SWATbots and Security Guards. He was running a high risk of losing some of his crew in there, and even if they all came out okay, he’d still have to answer to Manic and Sonia for taking the risk. But the speech he found himself rehearsing pointed out that they were all warriors – former Resistance members and used to danger. Risk came with the job. Stay together, stay safe, and they’d all be fine.

That’s what he kept repeating to himself, right up until they actually arrived at the mall, where a small crowd had formed around each of the locked up entrances. He slowly got out of the car, gaping up at the building.

There were indeed noises coming from the building. Or rather, a noise. A song.

“Oh, nostalgia, I don’t need you anymore! ’Cause the silent days are over and the beat is at my door!” And then there was a loud smash, like breaking glass, before something like a guitar strumming covered the sudden silence. “And they might try to tell you how you can live your life, but don’t – don’t forget it’s your right to do whatever you like, you like, you can be your own spotlight!”

This time the crash was closer, and the doors of the main entrance bucked, like something had hit them from inside.

“Uh… cap?” one of Trevor’s men prompted. “Should we uh… what um… what equipment are you thinking we need?”

He glanced at him, then back at the building. He was pretty sure he knew that voice, even if it sounded different. “Yeah, just give me a minute,” he advised, and then walked forward, toward the crowd around the main entrance. A few people noticed him and moved aside, but most were caught up in just gaping at the building, and he had to push through to the front.
There were heavily chained glass doors, which he himself had locked down three years ago. They were all but shattered now, only held in place by their plastic coating. Leaning against them on the other side were two crumpled and sparking SWATbots, and just visible in the dark afternoon light was their wayward prince, either dodging or dancing with a security drone’s lasers across the entrance hall. The music was welling up around him, and he didn’t seem at all aware of it despite singing along at the top of his lungs.

“Huh,” Trevor said, and went back to his truck. He got the bolt cutters and a rifle, slung them over his shoulders, and then strolled back to the doors. At the last second, he turned and addressed the crowd, “Everybody, please stand back. This is an Operation of the Crown, and highly dangerous. ERU, please ensure no civilians enter the premises.” He waited for a few members of his crew to exchange awkward glances and salute, then went back to the chained doors. The bolt cutters made quick work of the chain, but he opened the doors slowly, ready to unholster his rifle and fire the second the SWATbots showed any sign of life.

Luckily, they didn’t, and so he just stepped over them and continued through to the entrance hall, where he could see just how busy Sonic had been.

SWATbots, drones, and robotic retail assistants littered the floor and hung over the railings of the floors above. Lights were flickering everywhere, sparkling electrical wires hanging out of walls and security cameras lying in pieces under their attachments. As his eyes drifted back to Sonic, the prince spin-dashed through the drone in mid-air and dropped to the floor with arms spread, singing to the boarded up windows above.

“’Cause I had a little bit of a bad luck. No wonder this crumbling world’s stuck – a little sweetness keeps just outta reach.” He lowered his head, noticed Trevor, and grinned, pointing at him. “’Cause compassion is something that they just don’t – just don’t teach! ’Cause you can be your own spotlight!”

“Ey-yo, ey-yo,” he sang back, without really thinking why. He never had, never did. Like a lot of things that happened with Sonic, he felt it was better to just go with it. “You can be your own spotlight.”

“You can be the star, you can shine so bright now,” Sonic advised, and he inclined his head in response.

“Ey-yo, ey-yo, you can be your own spotlight.”

Sonic laughed and clapped his hands, apparently breaking his own spell, as the music dwindled down into nothing. “Hey, Trev! What are you doing here, man?”

Not for the first time, Trevor wondered if Sonic realised what had just happened. But that way led to headaches, as he’d often told Cyrus, so he pushed it aside and gripped Sonic’s hand in the offered shake. “Official business, Hedgehog. Got a call about some weird stuff going down here, and whaddaya know, here you are!”

“You callin’ me weird, Mouse?” he asked, but then turned a proud look on the trashed mall. “But yeah. Thought I’d check it out, and before I knew it, I was clearing the place out. I left a couple of SWATbutts behind, huh?”

“Yeah, but we had them under control,” Trevor replied lazily, then tilted his head. “Do you think you’ve got all of them now, though?”

“Yeah, pretty sure, but… y’know how it is.”
“That I do. I’ll get my guys to do a canvas and make sure though,” he said. “Gimme a sec’.”

He trotted back out to where his crew were now struggling to hold back the crowd, all of which were straining to see inside now the music had stopped. His second in command raised an eyebrow at him, and he smiled wryly.

“I’m starting to think that the longer Sonic’s here, the more work we’re gonna have,” he said, earning a worried look.

“The Lost Prince? Is he okay? Why the heck would he go in there a-”

“Oh, come on, he’s Sonic the Hedgehog!” Trevor said with a laugh, clapping his second on the shoulder. “I’m gonna try to keep him busy for a couple of hours – you take the A Team and do a full circuit of the building, make sure his ego’s the worst thing in there, okay?”

“I heard that,” Sonic commented, and Trevor turned to watch him stroll out of the entrance. The crowd sucked in a collective breath at the sight of him, and he turned a brilliant smile on them before bowing low. “Yes, it’s true, ladies and gentlemen, I have gotten better looking. Also faster, cooler, and funnier. Just ask my friends.”

Trevor bit back a laugh, because he had always been able to hear the irony in Sonic’s voice, and nodded to his second before turning to Sonic. “Maybe you should tell the people what you’ve been doing just now, huh?”

He blinked, once, then carried on without missing another beat. “Following my mother’s directives of protecting this fair city,” he said grandly, and Trevor had to cover his mouth, pretending to look thoughtful and serious to avoid letting anyone see his snickers. Sonic turned his own, far better, innocent look on the crowd. “I started today with this building, clearing it of Robotnik’s evil security. Unfortunately, this long and arduous battle has made the building quite structurally unsound, so please, good people of Mobotropolis, stand back for your own safety.”

“Mm, mm,” Trevor agreed, nodding and tightening his fist against his mouth to punch away the grin. If nothing else, Sonic had certainly gotten hammer. “And now, good prince, we should be off.”

“Yes. Important things to discuss,” he agreed, reaching out to take Trevor around the shoulders. “Royal concerns of… stuff.”

They glanced at each other, realised they were both about to break, and so Sonic hitched his arm lower around Trevor’s side and set off at a run.

Once upon a time, Cyrus had told Trevor he and Sonic were a bad influence on each other. In Trevor’s personal opinion, Cyrus was a stick-in-the-mud.

They wound up at one of their old bars, and once Sonic put him down, Trevor turned a suspicious eye on his friend. “Do you have any mobiums?”

“I could pawn these for them,” he suggested, holding up his oil-stained but otherwise very expensive looking gloves for inspection. “Or you can buy us a few rounds as thanks for me totally doing your job for you back there.”

“Egh. I’ll claim it on expenses,” he said with a sideways grin. “Occupying the royal pain in the neck has to be considered work-related, right?”

“Dude, how can you call me that? I am wounded! Wounded, dear sir!”
“Uh huh.”

Since it was barely three o’clock in the afternoon, the room was pretty empty, except for people Trevor knew had quickly become regulars after the war. They looked at Sonic as he passed, but only a few stared, and when they sat down at the bar, the bartender only smiled warmly.

“Welcome back, Sonic,” she said. After a second, Trevor placed her as Cookie – the same woman that had been running this place for the better part of ten years. “Heard a rumour you were in town.”

“How are ya, Cookie?”

“I could complain, but no one’ll listen,” she said, and then nodded to Trevor. “Chief. Little early for you to be off work, isn’t it?”

“I have overtime pending,” he said cheerfully. “Can we get two sparklings?”

“No problem.”

Once she was gone, Sonic leaned his head on his fist and grinned at him. “Chief. Wow. How’d that happen?”

“Sonia wanted to thank me for all my hard work in the Resistance,” he said, holding his head up like it was something special, only to immediately drop it when he added, “But Cyrus said I’d only cause problems in the palace. And I’m good with a lot of little things, so they decided I should head up a response team.”

“Response? So, like, when bad stuff goes down, you answer the call?”

“Basically. We’re ambulance, fire fighters, enforcers, and rescue services,” he said, ticking them off on his fingers. “Jacks of all trades, masters of none. You’d like it.”

But Sonic didn’t look convinced. “You keep busy?”

“In this city?” He snorted. “Your work yesterday was the first major incident we’ve had all year. And I should thank you, man – what you did today’ll keep my full staff busy all night. Clearing out a building is slow, tedious, and essential work.”

“Yeah, how come it was still up, anyway?” he asked. “I know I was supposed to clear out the bots in the city and missed a few, but dude – two years and you never finish the job?”

He made a face. “Politics, man. I just do what I’m told.”

Sonic snorted but didn’t say anything as Cookie came back with their drinks and a bowl of herb-covered wedges. “Sorry, Sonic, full kitchen’s closed until five. I’ll bring you some dogs then.”

“Cookie, you know the way to a man’s heart,” Sonic told her with a charming smile. She winked and headed off again, and Sonic looked into his water, watching the bubbles rise. “So what other places did I miss?”

Trevor shrugged as he drank, unconcerned. “I’ll get you a list if you want.”

“Thanks, man.”

He peeked at him sideways, eyebrow rising. “You okay, Hedgehog? You seem kinda down.”

“Ah, it’s just Mobius,” he said, then cleared his throat and swivelled on his stool. “So what’ve you
been up to? Aside from running that call-in shop?"

“Got me a girlfriend. Thinkin’ I might ask her to marry me.”

“Dude, no way!”

“Yup. Her name’s Candy. Sweet as her name and real cute, from her face to her heart.”

“Score. Congrats, man. But geez, marriage? Since when are you thinking about stuff like that?”

Trevor grinned. “Hey, come on. I’m seventeen – not getting any younger. Gotta strike while the body’s hot.”

Sonic made a point of leaning back and looking him over, judging this proclaimed ‘hotness’, then gave him a sympathetic wince. “You’re right. You’re fading fast. Get a ring on it now.”

Trevor shoved him off his stool, and they both laughed, relaxing far easier than time would say they should.

Chatting was easy. Without even thinking about it, Trevor launched into the story of his last two years, letting Sonic stay as quiet as he wanted to. Unsurprisingly, the only information Sonic actually volunteered was vague, mostly related to the food he’d eaten or places he’d been. He did start talking more as the bar filled up, but Trevor got the hint and paid their bill, allowing them to take to the streets in companionable silence.

Eventually, Sonic thumped him on the arm, near his elbow. “Thanks for the break, man.”

“No problem,” he said without looking at him. “It was good talking anyways. Most people don’t listen, y’know?”

“I hear that.”

They continued quietly until they reached the top of the Lower Third, the part of town they’d both grown up in. It hadn’t changed much, still clean as a whistle but darker and scarier looking than even the slums. It was a rough look brought on by the people who lived here – as Chuck had once called it, ‘too poor to paint, too proud to whitewash’. Trevor sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“It’s hard, y’know? The uppers know they’re here, and that they want to work, but they’re not used to paying for quality,” he explained. “So they pay what they think is fair, and it’s barely enough to buy food, let alone rent. But when it all started, at least, people worked properly, figuring they had to prove themselves first. All it did was tell the uppers that they’d do the work for pittance.”

Sonic grunted, folding his arms behind his head. “And no one up at the palace would know. Even Cy came from higher up than this.”

“The only people who do know are the servants, and they’re too scared to say anything. They get good pay and cushy work. They’re not gonna risk it.”

“Yeah, figured.”

They left it there, just watching the surroundings as they walked. After a few minutes, they reached the Dump, and Sonic let out a long breath, staring at the house that had once been hidden under several layers of trash. It looked a lot smaller, uncovered by anything but dirt and hemmed in by construction fences.
“Stuff that needs doing should just get done. You shouldn’t have to debate it for a million hours.”

“Hey, I’m with you,” said Trevor. “There’s a reason Cyrus has me where I am, remember.”

“Yeah, so what am I supposed to do?” he asked. “You and me can see the problem, but I know that if I even try and get involved, all I’m gonna do is tick everyone off. And the way Sonia’s goin’ on about it, I put even a foot outta line and the whole kingdom’s gonna come crumbling down on her head.”

“Dunno, man. But I ain’t a prince,” he pointed out, and Sonic rolled his eyes, then shoved him, earning a laugh and a shove back. Once he’d stopped chuckling, Trevor spent a minute looking at the Dump, then said, “What about Manic?”

Sonic glanced at him. “What about him?”

“He’s not an upper.”

“He’s a thief,” Sonic pointed out. “He sweats when he screws up, not to get paid.”

“Yeah, but… he’s still a bit closer to home. And he’s had a few years practice at that talking thing. Tell him.”

“You tell him.”

Trevor just gave him a look, but Sonic grimaced. “Yeah, maybe. I dunno, he’s weird.”

“Still on the hero kick, huh?”

“Oh, so much.”

“Well, you built the pedestal pret-ty high…”

“Shut up. I deserve it,” he said, and flicked his quills back with a cocky grin. “How else can everyone see all this awesome in one glance?”

Trevor just laughed at him. “I’m just sayin’, you know? Aside from the fact he doesn’t do anything without someone telling him he can, Manic’s pretty on the level. More’n Sonia, anyway.”

“S’not hard. You know anything about what happened with her and Bartlebreath?”

He frowned. “Who?”

“Bartleby Montclair. You remember, her fiancé back in the day. Mink. Fop. Would spend a day in front of a mirror if he could?”

“Ohh… yeah, him,” he said, then grinned. “Yeah, um, she kinda made this public speech telling him —without usin’ names, of course—he was a huge coward and needed to do some serious crawling to get back into everyone’s good books. He went into hiding, instead.”

Sonic groaned, and Trevor laughed again.

“She’s been riding pretty high, these last couple years. Too high to see much of anything, if you ask me. I dunno what you can do about the kingdom, but *she* needs a good reality check.”

“Awesome,” Sonic deadpanned.
“Then there’s Aleena, and you ask me, she’s the one who needs to do some crawling. You know, I’m Chief of Emergency Response – pretty high up, all things considered. I’m lucky to see her more than twice a year. You think about how everyone around here feels about that.”

Sonic rubbed his forehead, then nodded twice. “Uh huh. Y’know, Trev’, you’re really making my day, here.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” he said brightly. “And now, I can round out the quartet and tell you all about what’s wrong with you!”

“Oh, you wanna? You wanna go there?” he asked playfully, slapping his chest and leaning back on one leg. “Come on, Mouse, hit me. Bring it if you got it.”

He grinned, shifting his own weight back and spreading his hands. “Oh, you wanna know? You stepping up?”

“Yeah, come on!”

“Okay. You ready? You ready for this?” He kept up the game for a beat, shifting his weight like a dancer, but then straightened up, his smile fading into an apologetic look. “You built that pedestal too high, man. The only way you’re getting down is to fall hard.”

In a movement almost too slow for him, Sonic dropped his stance, and instead turned his gaze back to the Dump. “Sounds about right.”

In Shadow’s experience, Chaos Traps were generally clunky things. At least, the big ones were. Very dependent on the architecture they were housed in and the noxious acid that could easily kill the creatures they were siphoning.

The Prototype, which he remembered only vaguely, had been flooded with that acid. Without Black Doom’s blood to stabilise and empower it, the giant lizard had needed that liquid just to avoid losing control of its inner chaos while still having enough energy to move. Without it, it would have just lain there, helpless, generating enough Chaos to blow up the ARK and half the planet.

But, he supposed, both the Prototype and its Chaos Trap had been built with technology from fifty years ago. This was newer. And say what you would about his practicality, there was no arguing Eggman’s ability to manipulate chaos efficiently.

Shadow ran his hand over one of the metal pillars, fingers easing into the grooves as he imagined them flaring with siphoned energy. Disconnected from any power source, the Trap looked harmless. Simple metal pillars, each topped with a glass ball, standing around a raised platform. He stepped up onto it, moving until he was in the very centre.

He had never been like the Prototype. He had never been confined to a Chaos Trap. It was Black Doom’s blood that gave him the power to draw on Chaos energy, and his very existence that used it. He had been created as a companion, not a tool – he existed so that his chaos could grow and develop, becoming strong enough that one day he might have been able to heal Maria properly.

The Prototype had shared some of his abilities, it was true. But it had not been a companion. It had been a tool. A weapon. It had been a vile, dangerous thing; just aware enough to loathe everything
with the unfortunate luck to come into contact with it.

It had been nothing more than a living battery, trapped in an archaic version of this very machine.

Shadow knelt down so his fingers could trace grooves at his feet. If he knew the doctor as well as he suspected, the grooves hid shackles, built in and hidden beneath the floor. Such an odd concept—anything powerful enough to warrant a Trap this size should have easily been able to break free of a shackles. But then, the Prototype had been chained as well… Pointlessly, given Chaos Control, but… shackled nonetheless.

Of course, if a creature was raised in chains, why would it even think to break free of them?

The Prototype had powered the ARK. It was a reasonable assumption to believe that this trap had once been intended to power the… Death Egg, Tails had called it. Less than a third of the size of the ARK, true, but still larger than most things Eggman built. Shadow could think of only two beings with enough natural chaos to do so: himself, and Sonic the Hedgehog.

But Sonic had only been a baby when this was built, if born at all. And as Tails had said, Sonic had only recently begun to tap his chaos powers. How could Eggman have known that he would be an appropriate power source?

His eyes flicked up to the ceiling, as if he could see through it to wherever Aleena was. Judging from the discussion he’d overheard last night, she’d seen some kind of… vision. Some idea of what Sonic would become. For whatever reason, she’d called in Eggman to try and prevent it.

Was this the solution she’d expected?

Did Sonic know about it?

And how had Eggman known it would work? Had he remembered the Echidna legends of Chaos and made the connection to Aleena’s vision? Had he seen the child Sonic had been, a mere baby, and known the demi-god he would become?

Or hadn’t he? Had Eggman simply guessed that Sonic would lead him to Gerald Robotnik’s ultimate creation? Had he actually planned to use Shadow himself in this monstrosity?

Either way, the gamble was… hard to believe. It didn’t sound like the doctor.

Eggman didn’t take chances like this. Not on such long-term possibilities. He took short-term calculated risks.

So how had he known, just from Aleena’s visions, what Sonic would become? There was nothing else like him. Knuckles had the capacity to come close, Shadow was sure, but he was an echidna, from a long line of Guardians of Chaos. Sonic came from a line of… royalty. Public speakers, with a little precognition thrown in for flavour.

Didn’t he?

All questions worthy of investigation, Shadow decided as he stepped out of the trap and moved over to the wall console, fingers trailing through the dust.

He didn’t really understand science, even that which had created himself. But he understood enough to know why he had been so impressive back in the day. Stable chaos was unusual even now, which was why rings were so valuable despite how common they were. Collecting them safely was a fool’s errand. Even Shadow himself needed his inhibitor rings to maintain a steady level of chaos energy.
That was what the medallions did, at least as far as Aleena knew. Truth all told, they were probably designed as conduits and filters, to allow the transference of living chaos to automated systems, but somehow Shadow doubted that was what she’d been told. She probably believed the medallions had been designed to keep Sonic’s chaos in check. To keep him stable and sane by sharing the power out between three siblings.

Shadow’s inhibitor rings kept his power stable and that was it, but he was an artificial creation. He was, ultimately, built on laws, logic, and order. Sonic was… different. He lived according to whim, freedom… chaos. If his medallion was designed to stabilise the chaos inside him… control it…

What would happen to him personally?

Shadow lowered his eyes back to the machine, turning the thought over in his mind.

It was possibly the most interesting question he’d considered yet.

“Sonia, I think you need to see this.”

Sonia blinked as Stripes held out a newspaper, less than two breaths after Manic had closed the portal door behind him. They were in the court antechamber, having only just finished up for the day, and although Stripes had left a few hours earlier, Sonia hadn’t expected to see him straight away, let alone with news.

“What is it?” Manic asked as she took it.

“The afternoon edition of Mobotropolis Eye. They didn’t waste time after your announcement regarding Sonic’s return,” Stripes reported, setting his hands on his hips. “It’s a little more tabloid than their usual style, but apparently Inque Stayne was selling to the highest bidder this afternoon.”

Sonia groaned. “Oh, well now, that’s just great.” She flicked the newspaper open and scanned the front page, Manic stepping up to read over her shoulder. Most of the page was taken up by the headline ‘Lost Prince Found!’ and a picture of Sonic from the night before, mid-accusation. What little text the page contained was devoted to announcing his return, and quoting Sonia’s official statement from court a few hours ago.

Continuing on page three was an article titled ‘Royal Shakeup’, announcing that Sonic was clearly taking an aggressive stance against the aristocrats. The confrontation with Lord Head was the main piece—“Probably got written last night, and they were just waiting for confirmation to release it,” Sonia pointed out when Manic noted how much detail had gone into it—but there was a bit about luncheon, and some speculation about why he had returned at the same time as a representative from the Overlanders.

Pages four through seven were dedicated to a profile on Sonic as remembered by the populace, leading on to discussions about how his return would affect Sonia and Manic’s work. The last section of that was a poll and a rehash of some old opinion pieces about who would be named successor to the throne. Surprisingly, the poll was fairly even, with Manic actually edging Sonia out by a whole two percent.

He was still stuck on that when Sonia folded the paper with a loud sigh. “And I don’t suppose anyone’s seen the prodigal son?”
“In palace or on TV?” Stripes asked wryly. “Because Channel M is having a field day. Do you know he apparently spent yesterday afternoon entertaining children in the West Street Park? And today he went on a rampage through the old Robostyle mall.”

“Oh, even better,” she said, and slapped the newspaper into Manic’s stomach before starting past them. “We’d better see what Mother has to say about all this.”

“You really think she’s gonna have anything to say?” asked Manic. “I mean, it’s not like, he’s come out and actually said anything important.”

“No, but it is publicity, and it means the media is going to be all over it, and us, and no, I didn’t know where he went yesterday, did you? And that makes me nervous.”

Manic grimaced but followed her out of the antechamber and toward their mother’s study, reopening the newspaper as he went. “Stayne went pretty easy on us about the lunch. Mostly just talking about how Sonic’s refusing to… is ‘pandering’ some kind of East Mobius thing? Can a hedgehog pander?”

Stripes visibly bit back his smile. “To pander to someone means to cater to their whims.”

“Uhh…” Manic reread the sentence. “And we do that for the aristocrats?”

“It’s propaganda, Manic; ignore it,” Sonia advised impatiently.

“But they’re the lords of the land. Aren’t we supposed to follow their advice?”

“Do you really think they always have the people’s wellbeing in mind?” asked Stripes.

Manic looked at him thoughtfully for a few seconds, then went back to the start of the article, reading it with fresh eyes. He’d always known that they did a lot of stuff to keep the aristocrats happy, and Sonia had always implied it was their only option. But this article was mostly about how Sonic was apparently trying to make the aristocrats unhappy. And yet it didn’t sound like a bad thing, except when it talked about how apparently he and Sonia wouldn’t like it. Apparently that could lead to a royal… “What’s schism mean?”

“A schism is a break,” Sonia explained, which Manic decided to focus on instead of Stripes’ amused glance. “Usually it’s used to talk about political infighting.”

He considered it in context. “So Stayne thinks that what Sonic’s doing is gonna like, break up the Council of Four?”

“Essentially.”

“Oh.” Now he understood why Sonia was annoyed. “But he won’t.”

“But it might seem that way, because we don’t necessarily like what he’s doing,” she pointed out. “And if people think we can’t even agree with each other, how are they supposed to support us as a government?”

Manic looked back down at the newspaper, and the photo that splashed across the top of the page. He and Sonia were standing together on one side, while Aleena was on the other. And there was Sonic in the middle separated from all of them as he stood with his new friends. He winced at the symbolism and flipped through the pages to find the poll again, trying to figure out why he’d be higher up than Sonia.

By the time they got to the study, all he’d worked out was that people thought Sonia liked arguing
with the aristocrats too much to be queen, which was kind of funny in its own way. But he didn’t bother commenting, especially not since he’d only just finished coming to that conclusion when they walked in the door.

Aleena was seated behind her desk, another copy of the newspaper spread open on her desk as she accepted tea from one of the more recognisable servants. A young fox-girl with a long scar down her cheek. She started at the sight of them, but quickly curtseyed, and Aleena nodded to them in greeting before recapturing her attention. “And now?”

“Heading back, m’lady,” she said, and Aleena nodded again.

“Excellent. Thank you, Felixanne.”

She curtseyed again and hurried out, but Sonia waited until she would definitely be out of earshot before gesturing to the newspaper. “We made headlines.”

“Indeed. I look forward to tomorrow evening’s release, since Friday tends to be the most scandalous of the week,” she said dryly. “I take it you aren’t pleased?”

“At least it’s reliable reporting,” she said, and took a seat in one of the chairs opposite Aleena’s own. “Mother, they’re practically saying he’s going to declare war on the aristocracy.”

“I don’t believe Sonic has the patience for the political battlefield,” she pointed out.

“Of course not, but even before he was prince, Sonic was one of the most influential members of the Resistance! The people love him!” argued Sonia. “If the aristocrats think he’s going to fight them, then—”

“—then perhaps they will remember how little power they have over him.”

Sonia stopped, then blinked, and Aleena turned her smile on Stripes. “Lord Stripes, would you pardon us? My children must attend a short lesson.”

“Of course, your majesty,” he said, bowing even as he shot Sonia a glance over his sunglasses. He had a polite smile before he rose again. “I should attend to a few matters from my village, regardless. I’ll see you at dinner, Sonia. Your majesty, Thief Prince,” he added in polite farewell, then walked out. The guards silently followed him out, and closed the doors as they went.

Manic bit back a sigh as he dropped into the chair beside Sonia. It wasn’t that royal lessons were boring – they were actually just Aleena giving one of her confusing speeches, and expecting Sonia and Manic to repeat it in normal words. He hated them because even though they only ever happened in private, they were yet another example of Aleena refusing to talk to them like a normal person. Let alone like family.

“Do you remember, children, when I told you that each member of the Council of Four has a different role to play?” she asked, and Sonia nodded.

“Of course. You’re the mind, with experience to guide us, Manic is the heart, to know the people, I’m the voice, to be diplomatic, and Sonic is the sword and shield, to keep us safe.”

“That’s why you let Sonic go on security detail,” added Manic. “And why you didn’t like, freak out when he left.”

“Indeed. Because whatever role we may wish him to take, your brother is not a politician,” she pointed out. “He will never be able to play the court room, and he will never earn the support of the
“And that’s fine, out there,” Sonia said, gesturing to the world beyond Mobius. “But this is Mobotropolis. We’re not at war anymore!”

“Are we not?” she asked, her eyes widening slightly. “Is not every day a battle to reclaim what we lost? To gain the love and respect of our people once again?”

“Yes, but that’s not a physical fight, it’s not the same.”

“No. But that does not mean he cannot face our enemies,” she argued, and took a sip of tea before continuing. “Consider: you have both expressed frustration with aristocratic concerns before. However, you cannot act on this frustration, or even comment on it, because the aristocrats have financial power over the city. We cannot risk them making things difficult for us. However, Sonic has the love of the people, due to his past acts. As much love as the aristocrats have fear.”

Sonia frowned, and Manic took a second to think about that. “So like, even if the aristocrats all said he was lame, everyone’d just say, like, I dunno… whatever, he’s a hero?”

Aleena gave that special smile she did when he’d gotten something right, but Sonia frowned. “That’s not a good thing. They’ll make him an enemy. They’ll reject everything he says. Kings can’t rule a court when their whole court is against them.”

“No, but Sonic is not yet a king,” she said gently. “So even should they focus all their attention on him, what difference does it make? He is not a politician – he makes no laws. That is your area, Sonia. And just think how much easier it will be to make change when the aristocrats are too busy with Sonic to object to your suggestions.”

“Hey, yeah!” Manic said excitedly. “They’ll spend all their time complaining about Sonic, so when we talk about stuff that actually matters, they’ll be way too distracted to get involved!”

“Please, as if that’s any way to do politics,” snapped Sonia. “Razzle dazzle and underhanded trickery. Manic, you’re a prince, not a thief.”

He flinched, and Aleena gave her a patient look. “Sonia, consider your recent experiences. What is it that the aristocrats themselves do when they do not like our actions, but have no true reason to object?”

“Of course they…” She stopped, then gaped at her. “It’s not the same…!”

“Only last night, Lord Head groundlessly accused Manic of destroying his warehouses to make a scene you would have been forced to respond to,” she pointed out. “Had Sonic not been there to distract him, what do you believe might have happened? Would you not have been forced to give him compensation, or act according to his demands?”

“If only to get him to shut up,” Manic added, and Sonia turned wide eyes on him for a moment, then sat back in her chair, blinking rapidly.

“This is… not how government should be run!”

“Says who?” asked Manic. “I dunno about you, sis’, but of the kinds I’ve seen, I way prefer the idea of playin’ ringmaster to tyrant.”

“Mother,” she said firmly, looking to her again, “I have studied our history. This is not how the Hedgehog Family governs. We provide a leading example that encourages people to do what is
right! Not trick our people with showmanship!”

“And we shall continue such traditions,” said Aleena. “I never suggested you should follow Sonic’s example.”

Sonia opened her mouth again, but stopped, and then lowered her gaze to her knees. Aleena smiled kindly. “Sonia, you are the Princess of the Rebellion. You learned much in the Resistance about using resources as they were given to you. Would you forget such lessons now?”

Sonia’s hands twisted in her lap, thumbs pressing against each other desperately. Manic watched her for a few more seconds, then turned back to his mother. “D’you think Sonic knows what he’s doing? Messin’ with the aristocrats, and stuff?”

Aleena paused only a second before answering, but it was long enough for him to see the slight hesitation in her eyes. “I believe your brother is well aware of his place on our Council. And I believe he will continue to do that which he believes to be best for our people.”

Manic glanced at Sonia, who met his gaze from behind her hair, but neither of them said anything. It didn’t feel like there was anything they could say. Not to Aleena, anyway.

A quiet beep drew their attention to the intercom on the wall, and Manic rolled out of his chair to answer it. “Yeah?”

“Thief Prince. Her majesty the Queen requested to be notified when the Lost Prince returned to the palace. He is currently in the hangar.”

“Ah, thanks, dude.” He released the button and turned back to the others. “So what’re we doing, here? Are we mad at Sonic? For the aristocrats or like, whatever,” he added.

“Do as you will,” Aleena advised. “Feel as you do.”

“Right,” Sonia said, and got to her feet. “Well, I’m going to go see Sonic. Find out what else he’s been up to.”

Manic grunted. “I’ll come with. Mom, are you like, eating with us tonight?”

“No, I have some work to do,” she said. “However, I will be here, should you wish to speak with me.”

They both nodded and headed out, but they waited until they were out of the guards’ hearing before exchanging glances.

“So what d’you think?” he asked, and Sonia sighed, wrapping her arms around her torso.

“I don’t know, Little Brother. Neither of them ever tell us anything important. And how am I supposed to present a united royal front if the best we can expect from Sonic is that he’ll spend at least half his time annoying the aristocrats?”

“It’d be easier if he was acting normal,” Manic agreed. “Or even telling us what’s going on with him. He’s so weird now. And that kid, Tails? Acting like he’s Sonic’s family? How are we supposed to deal with that?”

She shook her head, annoyance quickly rising. “And Knuckles is being nothing but a brick wall. Those human files we found are more reliable than any of them.”
“You’re kidding, right? Those files that said Sonic could fly?”

“You know what?” she asked suddenly, “I don’t care if Sonic’s ready or not. I don’t care how weird he’s acting. He is going to tell us something about the last three years, or I will sing at him until he does.”

Chapter End Notes

**Music Reference:**

- No Such Thing - John Mayer 2001
- also Spotlight (Oh Nostalgia...) by Patrick Stump as previously referenced
Track Twelve: Dressed up like Dreams

Chapter Notes

I opened my eyes, and managed to find some clarity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It wasn’t as if Sonic wasn’t used to attention – people noticing him everywhere he went. But at least out on the islands, the worst he’d get was a few folks coming up to shake his hand, get a picture or autograph… maybe follow him around for a while. They still treated him like a person.

As he trudged through the hangar, Sonic watched with tired eyes as guards leapt to their feet to salute, technicians froze in the middle of what they were doing to watch him pass, and everyone else went deathly silent the moment he came within five metres of them, waiting awkwardly until he was out of easy hearing distance to start again.

He felt like a… he didn’t even know what he felt like.

Looking at a pair of saluting guards that he was positive he owed money from a poker match three years ago, Sonic once again found himself debating going to find his siblings. He knew they’d probably want to hang out – at the very least, Sonia would want to yell at him about lunch. But he so wasn’t in the mood. He kind of wasn’t in the mood for any of this.

“Faker.”

Sonic turned with a small start, surprised that he hadn’t noticed Shadow sneaking up behind him. “Shadow. What’re you doing down here?”

“My jet is here. I don’t trust these technicians,” he said shortly, and Sonic shrugged. “I don’t think they’d get how it works enough to do anything to it. It’s Chaos-engine, right?” he asked. “You heard what Mom said last night – Chaos isn’t a big thing here.”

“Hmph.”

When Shadow continued looking at him, Sonic raised his eyeridges, leaning away a little. “Something on my face, or you just mesmerised by my winning good looks?”

Shadow didn’t immediately respond, though his eyes slid down to Sonic’s medallion for a good two seconds before rising again. “You have been fighting Eggman for a very long time.”

Sonic glanced around to make sure no one was listening in, then shrugged again and started walking toward the palace proper. “Six years, give or take.”

“He has done a great deal of damage to the planet. And to you personally,” he pointed out, keeping pace. “I have killed for far less.”

“I know my memory’s not the greatest thing on the planet, but yeah, I remember that much,” he said lightly. “I’m guessin’ you’ve got a point.”
“I wonder if there is anything you would kill for.”

“You bring up such happy topics,” Sonic drawled, and rolled his eyes. “To be honest, Shads, it’s not somethin’ I dwell on. If you’re wondering whether I’ve ever gone for the killing blow, then yeah, I have. Usually on things without blood to get in the quills, though.”

Shadow narrowed his eyes, but said nothing as they passed the servants and guards around the doorway. Once they were in the hallway, out of easy hearing distance of the door guards, he asked, “Somehow I doubt you’re concerned about hygiene.”

“Who cares about hygiene? It’s all about the style, baby; I like my hair light,” he said cheerfully, then cocked his head. “Why the fascination? Oh, man, you’re not going to get on my case about Eggman, right? If you are, keep in mind that I am so going to get worse than anything you can dish out from… well, everyone.”

“That’s true,” he said quietly. “He destroyed your empire, enslaved your people, and ruined your life. The lives of all the people in this city.”

“And so it’s my job to end his?” he asked.

“You do not think the robotocisor is worth death? You do not think your parents’ fate was worth punishment?”

Sonic stopped walking so abruptly that he nearly overbalanced, but Shadow only took one more step before turning to face him, expressionless but focussed. “Or are you going to pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“How…” Sonic paused, then smirked, setting his hands on his hips. “Whatever. Doesn’t matter. Look, Shads, what’s happened has happened, and there’s no gettin’ away from it. But I don’t let Eggman control my life or decide what I’m gonna do with it. Simple as that.”

Shadow eyed him thoughtfully for a few seconds. “So why involve yourself with him at all? Why did you return here to fight him?”

“Because I decided to.”

“For what reason?”

“Plenty of reasons, why do you care?” he demanded, but Shadow didn’t answer, just staring at him silently for several long seconds. His eyes flicked to the medallion again, and Sonic shifted his weight, suppressing the urge to cover it up. “I know it’s a pretty necklace, but I don’t think guitars are really your style if you want your own.”

Shadow’s eyes returned to his, his brows furrowing very slightly, but he said nothing. Sonic waited another two seconds, then turned on his heel and continued walking, allowing Shadow to follow or not. He was surprisingly unsurprised when Shadow did indeed continue only a few steps behind him.

When they reached the next hallway, it was to see Sonia and Manic entering from the other side. At their determined expressions, Sonic inwardly twitched, Shadow’s presence at his back feeling a bit like the proverbial hard place, but he pulled a smile into place anyway. “Hey, sibs! What’s shakin’?”

Sonia waited until he was within only slightly raised speaking distance to say, “The Robostyle mall, apparently. Felt like going shopping, did you?”
“Yeah, but I was short on cash, and it turns out the security there is really harsh on shoplifters,” he said, winking at Manic, but he only got a worried look in return. He stopped walking as they came close, setting his hand back on his hip and shifting all his weight to one leg. “Oh-kay, uh… you guys particularly fond of the SWATbots in that building, or have I done something else to tick you off?”

“You know what you’ve done to tick us off, Sonic Hedgehog,” Sonia snapped, but then stopped, looking over her shoulder to the guards stationed at the door they’d come through. Like all the security Sonic had seen guarding doorways, they were doing a pretty good job of not noticing there were any hedgehogs around, but Sonia still gave him a direct look before turning on her heel and striding over to a side door. She opened it to reveal a service hallway, silently gesturing them through.

Only once they were inside did she seem to notice Shadow. “Agent Shadow. Forgive me, I know you were probably speaking to my brother—”

“Yeah, actually, you know what?” Manic piped up, “I don’t mind him being here.”

Sonic and Shadow exchanged accidental glances, then frowns as they realised what they were doing. Sonic folded his arms and turned his attention back to Manic. “He’s a pretty lousy conversationalist, just so you know.”

Manic raised his eyeridges, rocking back on his heels. “I’m just thinking maybe your… friend here can start us off on like a uh… easy topic?”

“Shadow and easy topic,” Sonic murmured playfully. “Two things that don’t really go in the same sentence.”

“Manic,” Sonia said quietly, before he could start, “remember we might not be as alone as we seem. Let’s take this to the music room, hm?”

“To talk about Shadow?” Sonic asked incredulously. “What’s there to say?”

“Probably nothing that should be said out in the open, right bro?” he asked playfully, and Sonic tilted his head, not following.

Shadow, on the other hand, took the direct route of asking, “Do you wish to know why I was the one to bring Sonic here, or where I come from?”

“Yeah, okay, let’s start with those,” he said, and then turned a surprisingly firm look on Shadow. “Cause I gotta say I find it really weird that when Sonic finally shows up again, it’s with a guy that looks exactly like him, acts the way he used to, and works for Overlanders. Especially since neither of you want to tell us anything. With all the crud we go through, it makes a guy wonder.”

“Wonder about what?” Sonic asked, before he blinked and snorted. “Oh, man… You don’t think he’s like a clone or something, right?”

“Like that’d be the weirdest thing that ever happened to us?” he asked, but even Sonia gave him a slightly awkward look. Obviously, they hadn’t discussed the topic before coming.

But, to her credit as a politician, she rallied behind him amazingly. “It is a little bit convenient that you go missing for three years—we only had Mother’s word that you weren’t lying dead somewhere, remember—and when you finally show up again, it’s with a man who looks more like you than Manic does and is loyal to the overlanders. With all the emotional trauma Robotnik put us through, it’s an understandable caution.”
“I am not a clone,” Shadow growled, and Sonic glanced at him quickly. He wasn’t entirely sure what Shadow had gone through during the whole Black Doom debacle, but he’d seen enough worryingly familiar looking androids to guess. Thinking quickly, he decided near-honesty was better than letting the conversation continue.

“Sibs, seriously, chill. There’s only one Shadow, and he sure as heck ain’t cool enough to be my fake,” he said, and slanted a grin at Shadow to make sure he got the reference. When he got a deadpan look in return, he went back to the other two, confident he’d achieved the distraction he was going for. “And he’s old, besides. He was around way before I was. Right, Fossil?”

“Watch it,” Shadow growled, and Sonic waved him off.

“The point is, it’s no conspiracy. He’s only here because the humans figured you’d lower the hostility slightly if a non-human played the part, and I only came with him because he offered me and my friends a ride.”

Sonia narrowed her eyes as she looked between them. “You seem a little more familiar than acquaintances.”

“Well, yeah. Stuff happened,” he said vaguely.

“Stuff?” Manic repeated. “Like what stuff?”

“Stuff. You know. Mistakes, redemption, martyrdom, the whole scene,” said Sonic. “Then there was this drama with this other guy that looks like me, and then Shadow’s family had that hissy fit, and y’know, at the end of all that kinda fun, you don’t just exchange passing nods.”

Shadow’s head turned so slowly it could have creaked, but he said nothing, and Sonic grinned. Tails had started taking all his half-sentence recaps in stride – it was kind of fun to have a more reactive audience.

“That’s not good enough.”

He kept his grin in place as he looked back at Sonia, but it was a near thing. “What isn’t?”

She hesitated, looking between them again, then held up her hands. “Okay, fine. Agent Shadow, I apologise for taking up your time, and our suspicions. Though I hope you can understand them,” she said, before lowering her hand to clamp down hard on Sonic’s arm. “But I’m afraid we really do need to speak to the Lost Prince in private, so please excuse us.”

“Hm,” was Shadow’s only response, and Sonia bowed her head before grabbing Manic’s hand and dragging both her brothers down the corridor. Sonic winced at the tight grip, but slightly creepier was the distinct feeling of Shadow’s eyes on his back, right up until they turned out of sight.

“You gotta quit snowblindin’ us, bro,” Manic muttered. “It’s not cool.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t answer, waiting until they had reached the music room and Sonia had let go of his arm. While Manic shut the door and Sonia got herself into prime snarking position, Sonic took a few steps away from both of them, thinking fast about what he should and shouldn’t tell them.

On the one hand, there was a big part of him that didn’t have time for secrets. He wasn’t ashamed of what he did or hadn’t done in the past. There was nothing he’d ever done that he wouldn’t do again.

On the other hand, trekking back through old stories, and dealing with his siblings’ combined
issues…? Ugh.

But, then, the issues were gonna happen anyway, so…

“Okay,” he said, turning around.

Manic blinked, exchanging glances with Sonia. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he said again, and then grinned, lifting his hands in a shrug. “You wanna know what I’ve been doing these last couple years? Okay. I bugged out of the Mobian Kingdom a couple weeks after we ended the war. Went back to the islands, ran into Tails again, and went back to doin’ what I’d been doing before I came back to Robotropolis: fightin’ any good fights that needed doing and collectin’ power rings for fun.” He paused, considering, then shrugged again. “I’ve been doing it ever since.”

“What fights?” Sonia demanded, and he glanced at her quickly before turning around to take another few steps.

“Any fights. Clearing out bots, there was this tournament—couple of those, actually—a bunch of races, raised some chao, Angel Island tends to get messed with a lot, uh… oh, well, there was the whole thing with Shadow, and… then Blaze rocked up—Princess from another dimension and really awesome, but that started messy—” He trailed off as he turned around again, rocking his weight on his heels. “You know. Stuff.”

They stared at him, then each other. Sonia’s arms dropped out of their fold, then rose to her hips before falling again. “And you say you were… you’d been doing… you were out there before the war?” she asked, still shifting her weight awkwardly. “You never told us that.”

“Never told us anything,” Manic corrected under his breath.

“You let us think you’d been raised in the Resistance,” she continued. “That you’d spent most of your life in this city!”

Sonic shrugged. “Actual time spent, at that point, I had.”

“Sonic, you don’t just…!” Sonia cut herself off, hands lifting toward her head, but she only took a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing. “We’re your siblings, Sonic. We love you. We want to know… We want…”

Manic watched her struggle for a few seconds, then turned back to him with a curious look. “Okay, so like… since you’re finally telling us stuff, how about this? That whole thing about you being an anarchist… It’s come up a couple times since you left. Were you? Before we met?”

He chuckled. “Does it matter? Overthrowing the government isn’t exactly pencilled into my day planner.”

“It’s not a joke, Sonic,” Sonia snapped, but he just gave her a lazy look in return.

“Politics is your thing, Sis. I got better things to spend my time on.”

“Like what?” she asked coldly. “You’re a prince. Maybe even the prince. Politics—”

“—isn’t my jam,” he said loudly. “Trust me, I tried it. I sucked at it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”
“That I suck at being king,” he replied. “And Mobius isn’t just a kingdom; it’s an empire. Heck, half the people in it think it’s a world. I ain’t touchin’ that.”

The three of them just stared at each other for a few moments, until Manic turned and walked a few steps away, obviously getting some space to think. Sonia folded one arm over the other, fist rising so she could chew on the thumb of her glove.

“When we thought we’d met our uncle, and we talked about who would rule after the war,” she said finally, “you kept saying ‘we’ll work something out’. You implied you would be in charge.”

He shrugged. “So did you. You don’t see me wigging out because you’ve changed your mind.”

“An anarchist wouldn’t want to be king. They don’t believe in kings,” she continued. “So maybe we’re asking the wrong question. Forget what you were. Let’s talk about now. You don’t want to be king, you say you spend all your time fighting, and here you are, doing nothing but disrespect the aristocrats—our court. You’ve been here two days, and all you’ve done is disrupt the way things work around here.”

Manic turned around to watch, and Sonic glanced at him quickly before turning his attention on Sonia, both amused and frustrated by the topic. It was just so incredibly stupid.

“Sonic Hedgehog,” she asked slowly, “are you an anarchist?”

His smile widened. “Okay, let’s recap: I say politics aren’t my thing, that I’ve just been doing my own thing out on the mainland for two years, but I call out some jerks for being jerks, and you think I’m planning to tear down Mom’s throne? Sonia, sis, you got some logic, but I ain’t followin’ it,” he said, and pointed at her. “Try this one on for size – I do what I feel like doing. So yeah, if I think an aristocrat’s messing with the people I care about, I’m gonna get in his face, same as I would anyone else. It’s not about politics, it’s about doing what I think is right.”

“And what if you don’t have all the facts?” she asked. “What if we don’t agree with what you think is right?”

“Then you can try and stop me,” he said simply. Both of his siblings pulled back a little, looking unnerved, but Sonic just continued smiling lazily. It was an argument he’d had with people before, and would probably have again. The only unique part of it was what they’d say in return.

After a few moments, it was Manic to step up to the challenge. “What about the Council of Four? What about us?”

“You need me, I’ll be here,” he said. “But there’s a big difference between need and want and you two haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Or maybe you’re too self-absorbed to notice the difference!” Sonia snapped back. “Forget politics, what about family? What about us?”

“You were like, the first person to think I could be more than a thief,” Manic added. “You don’t think I need you around?”

Sonic raised an eyeridge. “So what? You’re gonna spend your whole life looking to me to tell you what to do? Yeah, right.”

“That’s not the point!” cried Sonia. “We’re supposed to be a team! We’re supposed to work together in things! How can we rely on you when you don’t even… Sonic, do you even…” She trailed off, just staring at him for a long time before trying again. “I believed in us. In the Sonic Underground. I
believed we’d be together forever. Didn’t you?”

Despite himself, Sonic hesitated. Because he had, once. He’d thought the Sonic Underground was it. When the Oracle told him about his family, and he met them in that club, he thought for sure he’d found it all: his family, his future, his purpose… But as the months went by, he’d realised it wasn’t enough. And now…

“You can’t put this all on me,” he said bluntly. “You found Tails, Sonia. So you knew how to find me. Don’t go tellin’ me I’m the only one who wasn’t trying to keep our family together.”

“Don’t change the subject!” she snapped, but then took a step back, staring at him for a few seconds. “But I guess that is the subject, isn’t it? It’s all about you, and whether we can keep you entertained.”

He didn’t bother to respond to that, though he did check Manic’s expression to see if he’d get any support there. Unsurprisingly, it looked like the opposite.

“Well, I hope Mobotropolis can do that for you, Sonic Hedgehog, because I’m not going to,” she said, and turned on her heel, already reaching for the door. “I don’t want to see you before we meet at the Dump tomorrow. If it’s in your schedule to be there. Good night.”

And with that, she strode out. Sonic waited a beat before looking over at Manic, who only paused a moment before following her, never meeting his gaze.

As the door slid shut behind them, Sonic took a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning around again. He looked over the instruments surrounding him, and then wandered over to Sonia’s piano, fingers brushing against the keys.

It was all in his head, but he could feel the weight of his medallion, cool even through his fur. He knew why he’d left them – knew he would do it again, and he didn’t feel bad about it. But at the same time, he felt like he should.

Same as he’d always felt like he should be angrier at Eggman. Like he should want revenge, but didn’t.

He sighed and slid onto the piano stool, fingers searching out notes without his active attention. “I could be… a better person, but I choose not to,” he mumbled, then chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m as selfish as a suicide—wait I take that back. I didn’t mean to say it quite like that.” And with that, he lifted the other hand, and grinned as he pushed himself into the song.

“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, I took all of my memories and threw ’em in the ocean. And just like that, they drowned on impact, in a flurry of nightmares dressed up like dreams. I opened my eyes and managed to find some clarity.”

They marched through the halls in silence for a long time, Manic watching his sister carefully, but her expression never changed. She was blank and stoic, and the weird thing was, Manic wasn’t sure how he expected her to look.

Surprisingly, she led them to the casual dining room, where Cyrus, Stripes, and Tails were already waiting. Manic tried to get irritable at Tails’ presence, but between how exhausted the kid looked and his own mixed feelings, he couldn’t really manage it. He just nodded to Cyrus and dropped into the seat closest to the door.
“Good evening,” Stripes greeted them, getting up to pull out the chair beside his. Sonia sat down with a smile and he leaned down to kiss her cheek before asking, “How did it go with your mother?”

“Oh, you know,” she said, waving it off. “If it’s all the same, I don’t really want to talk about it or Sonic right now.”

“Sounds painful,” Cyrus noted. “What’d he do this time?”

“You don’t listen so good, do you?” Manic asked, and he grinned back.

“When someone’s complaining about the great Sonic Hedgehog? I’d record it,” he said. Manic noticed Tails glancing around at them all, but the kid didn’t say anything and Cyrus was continuing besides. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s one of my best friends, but if he wasn’t a prince I’d knock him upside the head with a wrench. Especially now that I know he knew about chaos energy and never told me.”

“Oh, yeah, that stuff you were talking about,” Manic said, shaking his head slightly. “Like chaos emeralds, right?”

“It’s amazing. I’ll be doing a full report to the court after the festival, but if it’s even half as powerful as this palace implies?” He laughed despite himself, shaking his head. “It could change the world. The concepts behind the technology are beautiful.”

He launched into a rundown of everything he’d learned that day, but Sonia and Stripes soon had matching glazed expressions, Tails had lowered his eyes back to his lap, and Manic just let the words run past him without hearing anything. His mind was still on the conversation with Sonic, and all the things he now realised he’d taken for granted over the years.

The worst thing was that he wasn’t even that angry with Sonic. Disappointed, maybe, but… He had to smile to himself as he realised he was echoing his mother’s words from the night before. Not upset, just disappointed.

After a couple of minutes the serving door opened, cutting off both Cyrus’ rant and Manic’s thoughts. They all straightened up as none other than Knuckles led the way through, the usual dinner servants following behind with their carts. Amy trotted in behind them, carrying a large platter that she proudly placed in the middle of the table.

“Mint and rosemary roast,” she said grandly, apparently not noticing everyone’s confused stares. “I spent all afternoon on this, so I hope it’s good!”

“You… what?” Sonia asked blankly. “You… you didn’t spend all afternoon in the kitchens, did you?”

“Oh of course! It was great!” she said, and then turned to the servants, who were both looking awkward as they tried to blend into the background with everyone focussed on them. “Okay, direct me. How do we serve up?”

They both stiffened, and Manic blanched as he noticed one of them glance in his direction before quietly saying, “You… you can sit down now, Miss Amy. We’ll take it from here.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind –”

“Please,” the other one said softly.

She hesitated, but then silently turned and walked over to sit in the spare seat between Manic and the
one Knuckles had claimed. Once she was down, everyone turned their attention to the roast, perplexed.

It wasn’t like none of them had ever cooked before—Manic himself was reasonably proud of the fact he knew how to combine a certain kind of mouldy cheese and offal meat to make something vaguely tasty—but more that none of them had done it since moving into the palace. He liked the kitchen staff, but he’d always been a bit too scared of the Head Cook to actually talk to them.

He started to turn to her to tell Amy how amazing she was, but Knuckles interrupted before he could even open his mouth. “Sonic went out again?”

Manic winced, and Sonia sighed impatiently. “No, but he won’t be joining us. He’s too busy for us, apparently.”

“Sounds like Sonic!” Amy said cheerfully, smiling at the servant as a bowl of soup was placed in front of her. “I swear, he’s always rushing off somewhere and never telling you where. If I didn’t know how much he likes lazing around, I’d think he couldn’t sit still for two minutes.”

“He has the attention span of a flea,” agreed Knuckles.

“No kidding. Do you know, the first time I met him, he literally didn’t say a word to me before disappearing? I mean, okay, he had a few things to do, but he could have come back and made sure I was okay!”

“To be fair,” Tails said dully, as if he was forcing himself to take part in the conversation, “he was kind of busy making sure Little Planet escaped.”

“He could have come back!” she insisted. “Do you know how hard I had to work to find him?”

Knuckles snickered, and Manic glanced at him. It was probably the first time he’d seen Knuckles laugh since he’d arrived in Mobotropolis. Amy, however, glared at him as she picked up her spoon with obviously injured dignity. “It was hard, okay? You try finding a world traveller with just a tarot reading to guide you!”

He raised a pointed eyeridge, and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, why do I even talk to either of you?”

Manic exchanged reluctant grins with Sonia. It was kind of hard to even try to be angry with Amy around. Cyrus obviously agreed, because there wasn’t any of his usual irritable tone when he asked, “So who’s Little Planet, and why did they need saving?”

“Oh, no, Little Planet’s a planet,” Amy explained.

“Moon, technically,” Tails interjected, but everyone ignored him.

“It appears every so often over Never Lake, but it’s always there, just invisible. Something to do with time streams, or something,” she said, making a face. “I didn’t get much of a chance to find out anything about it, since I was locked in a cage most of the time I was there.”

“You what?” asked Stripes.

“It was my first adventure – getting kidnapped is a rite of passage,” she said, and then smiled wistfully. “I met Sonic on the way there.”

“Rite of passage, huh?” muttered Knuckles. “How many times does it happen before you get to the next one?”
She shoved him hard, making him slosh soup everywhere. “I’m not taking anything from a guy who got tricked into being a bad guy – how many times, Tails?”

Tails shrugged, focused on his food. “Four, I think?”

Cyrus and Stripes both looked up, startled, while Sonia frowned. “It was only twice, and it wasn’t like he didn’t have a good reason. The second time he wasn’t even really a bad guy, he just did what he had to in order to protect the most people.”

Knuckles fumbled his spoon, sloshing more soup again, while both Amy and Tails stared at Sonia for a few seconds before turning back to Knuckles.

A slight flush rose up under the short fur around his muzzle, and he glared at them both in silent challenge for a long couple of seconds. It was quickly broken by a snort from Tails, who immediately slapped a hand over his mouth in a failed attempt to hide it, while Amy sighed in a disturbingly Sonia-like fashion.

“Really, Knuckles?”

“Shut up,” he warned her. It didn’t actually sound like a proper threat, though. More like the kind of warning Manic would give Sonia when she was teasing him about girls.

And since he could sympathise, Manic decided it was time to rerail the subject. “So you guys know each other pretty well, huh?” he asked. “I thought you lived all alone on that island, Knuck’. How’d you guys all meet?”

“Tails I met one time that Sonic invaded my island and brought the kid with him,” Knuckles said between mouthfuls. “Amy I met…” He stopped, spoon only just out of the bowl, and looked at her.

She stared back for a few moments, looking blank. “Was it the time with Illumina? Or… didn’t we come to your island before that? It was before Chaos.”

“Illumina was after Chaos,” Tails piped up.

“It was around two years ago, anyway,” Amy said decisively. “And apparently it wasn’t very exciting, or we would remember it. Which is unusual for us. We get into a lot of weird situations!”

“What kind of weird?” asked Manic, and she waved her spoon vaguely.

“Oh, you know. Fighting bad guys, extreme tournaments, people from other dimensions showing up…”

“Sonic attracts trouble, and we get dragged into it,” Knuckles summarised. It sounded a lot like he was more trying to be annoyed than anything. “Except Tails, who makes his own with those machines.”

“Oh, come on!” he said, jerking out of his tired funk to sit up straight. “Name one time my inventions have caused a problem that didn’t get solved inside my workshop!”

“How many times have you almost gotten yourself killed testing a mech?” Amy shot back.

“That’s different, it’s part of the scientific process! And I always carry rings to be safe!”

“Rings?” Stripes asked, and Sonia chuckled.

“Power rings, I guess. I’ve only ever seen them once, but they’re pretty incredible. They can protect
“you from getting hurt.” She leaned over to look at him curiously. “Are they common outside Mobius?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, they’re pretty much everywhere, once you leave the Mobius mainland,” he said, shrinking back down in his chair. “Anywhere there’s a sufficient level of chaos energy.”

“Or humans with too much money,” Knuckles added, and Tails shrugged his agreement.

“You said they’re like pure energy if used right, right?” Cyrus asked, then whistled, impressed. “Can you imagine that? Pure, clean energy just lying around for the taking. All you’d need to do is collect it and harness it…”

“Wonder why they aren’t on Mobius,” said Manic. “Don’t we have any of this uh… whaddaya call it, chaos energy?”

“All living beings have it,” Knuckles said. “But I see less of them in heavily polluted areas. Maybe Mobius is just too far gone.”

“Maybe.”

“Could these power rings be imported?” asked Stripes. “Call me crazy, but clean energy sounds like a great idea. And a whole new industry.”

Amy and Tails winced, while Knuckles snorted. “And a great way to get yourself killed.”

“They mostly show up in places with a bunch of chaos,” Amy reminded them. “Places with a lot of chaos are… weird.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sonia.

“Floating rocks, man-made objects warping into funny shapes, contained tornados, random spikes and bottomless pits…”

“Even in human cities, collecting rings is usually kept to the professionals,” Tails said quietly.

“Or people like us!” Amy added. “But we can handle ourselves.”

She said it so proudly, so confidently. Manic leaned his head on his fist and just gazed at her for a little while, completely mesmerised. “So that’s what you do for a job? You collect rings?”

“Yup. And I also help out at a self-defence class,” she said. “There’s this cafe in Station Square I work at sometimes too, but it’s really only when I feel like being around people I don’t know.”

“You’re like…” He grinned. “Seriously, Amy, what can’t you do?”

She giggled and gently pushed his shoulder. “Oh, there’s a few things!”

She had the prettiest laugh… After a few seconds, Sonia cleared her throat and asked Stripes about how things were going with his village, but Manic kept his attention on Amy. No matter how frustrating talking to Sonic again was, the fact he brought Amy back with him was almost enough to make up for it.
Despite her initial mood, Sonia felt dinner ended on a good note. The conversation had been enjoyable, if a little silly on occasion, and the food was excellent – both elements she put down to Amy Rose’s influence.

She watched the girl now, as the servants frantically refused her offers to help clean up. Amy was so odd, but… very sweet, at the same time. And Manic was clearly becoming more smitten by the hour. If Amy noticed his attentions, she was doing a very good job of pretending not to, and Sonia wasn’t entirely sure whether it was in her interests as a protective big sister to bring it up. After all, they’d only met the girl two days ago, and it wasn’t like it wasn’t time for Manic to get into this kind of a problem. But if Amy was stringing him along…

Maybe she should ask someone, before anything got out of hand. But she didn’t dare ask Agent Shadow—he creeped her out, especially after Sonic’s ‘explanation’—and Knuckles had never been the brightest bulb in the basket, especially about romance. Tails was probably too young to…

Her thoughts trailed off as she looked at the little fox. He and Knuckles were standing by the door, waiting semi-patiently for Amy so they could all head back to the guest wing together.

No one treated Tails like a child. Not even the reports she and Manic had found. They’d all read like he was at least a young adult, if not close to their own age, so she’d always assumed that the photographs they’d seen of him just made him look a lot younger than he was. But here he was, eight years old, and all his friends acted like he was just as old and responsible as them.

Cyrus certainly seemed to respect him. Even admire him. And Tails had known Sonic for years…

“Tails,” she said, slipping away from Stripes’ hand on her waist. “Are you busy this evening?”

He blinked, then glanced at Knuckles quickly before going back to her. “Me?”

“I was wondering if we could talk,” she said.

“Uh…”

“Sonia?” Stripes called. She turned to look at him, and he lowered his head to peer at her over his sunglasses. But he only paused for a few moments before pushing them higher on his nose, hiding his eyes. “I have some more work to do tonight. I’ll see you for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Sure,” she said, and he nodded, then muttered something to Cyrus before heading out.

Well used to such odd behaviour and preoccupied besides, Sonia went back to Tails, gesturing for him to lead the way out after Stripes. He hesitated, exchanging a glance with Knuckles, but went without a word.

He’d been quiet through dinner, and remained silent as they walked through the halls. But where he’d kept his gaze down for most of the meal, he was now watching her carefully. Almost warily. She tried her best to ignore it, planning what she would say and ask him, but all her mind kept coming back to was ‘tell me everything I don’t know about my brother. Then tell me about Amy and what’s happened to Knuckles over the last three years’.

“This is my study,” she said when they reached it. “I don’t come in here that much, so sorry about the mess.”

Truthfully, she knew it wasn’t that bad, but it was the polite thing to say. Either way, he grinned nervously as she opened the door. “Can’t be anything compared to my workshop. I usually only tidy up because it’s too dangerous to have loose paper and Sonic in the same house.”
“He visits you a lot, I take it?” she asked, but apparently that was the wrong thing to say, because he balked to the point of tripping, tails puffing out like wire brushes. She hesitated, then gestured to the couches, pretending not to notice his nervousness. “Please, sit. I um… I thought it might – that you might like to know why I sent you a letter when I wasn’t sure you actually existed.”

“Oh, um… yeah, honestly, I’d forgotten about that,” he said, but quietly moved over to sit down, hunching over his knees as he pulled himself up and back. She went to close the door, but thought better of it when she saw how closely he was watching her, and so left it open a crack before heading over to join him.

“I guess you’ve already figured out, if we haven’t told you already, but Manic and I had no idea where Sonic went when he left Mobius,” she explained. “As a people, Mobians don’t have much contact with the o-human territories, so we don’t hear much news about the things that happen there.”

Tails looked at her sideways. “Or the outlying islands, huh?”

“They have little to do with the mainland,” she said dismissively. “I suppose I should have taken more interest, but… it’s been hard enough understanding the scope of Mobius as an empire without factoring in all the self-managed islands. There are so many.”

“Fifty-seven,” he said. “Plus the dimensional moons, and some people think Angel Island is part of Mobius, though Knuckles says it’s its own thing. Even without them, Mobius is made up of seven countries, including the central kingdom, each with its own government that pays allegiance to Queen Aleena as empress.” He noticed her stare and grinned again. “I did some research when I found out Sonic was prince.”

She blinked, then pounced on the opening with as much of a casual nature as she could. “When was that?”

“When I got your letter. He said he’d never told me because it didn’t really matter,” he said, and there was only a very slight hint of annoyance in his tone. It actually sounded more like exasperation, as if he were used to it. “Really, I was more weirded out finding out about you and Manic. The prince thing is just a title, but I always figured he was either an orphan or abandoned.”

“Abandoned?” she repeated. “Why would you think that?”

“Because most kids are, off the mainland,” he said simply. Like it was no big deal. “It’s pretty rare to have an actual family, so I always kind of assumed.”

She stared at him for a few moments, then sat back, wondering how she’d missed that detail in cultural studies. She wondered if Tails was making light of a widespread problem, or if it really was an acceptable practice. The culture shock she’d had during the Resistance days had taught her not to assume anything about how other people lived, but still…

But that wasn’t why she was here, she reminded herself with a quick shake. She tried an encouraging smile. “Well, now you know about us, what do you think? Are we what you might have expected?”

He winced and pulled back again, like he didn’t think he should answer. “Um…”

“You’ve known Sonic for years, right?,” she asked, trying to keep her tone light. “Knowing him, what would you have expected his family to be like?”

He looked down at his knees for a few moments. “I don’t know. But… from what I’ve seen, it’s
like… bits of Sonic. I see bits of Sonic in all of you.”

She paused, then furrowed her brow, intrigued. “Really?”

“You’re all really different, but… but at the same time, I see how you’re like him,” he said, voice trailing off as his shoulders hunched again.

“Even Mother?” she prompted, and he nodded.

“Especially her.”

She stared at that. If there were two people she thought couldn’t be more different, it was Sonic and Aleena. “I… suppose I’m too close to the situation to see it.”

“No, I think it’s just that Sonic doesn’t let most people notice that side of him,” he said. “He hides it, I think.”

Sonia paused again, considering that possibility against what she knew of Sonic. The brash, arrogant hedgehog hiding a heart large enough to carry the world under quick jokes and a bad attitude. And then there was Aleena: stoic and calm, regret and responsibility wrapped up in queenly kindness. But every so often Sonia caught glimpses of a woman beneath that, cunning but helpless; angry on a deep level.

Now she thought about it, she realised they were probably both hiding quite a lot of themselves. She suddenly wondered if she really knew either of them.

“I think Mother knows what Sonic’s been doing, these last three years,” Sonia said quietly. “She has… files. Reports. I think she talks to the overlan- human governments. Manic and I found a bunch of encrypted reports and video logs, which is how we found out about you, but they’re pretty coded.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, and she glanced at him.

“They use these words to mean different things. And I can’t figure it out,” she explained. “They say Sonic turns ‘Super’, and talk about ‘gods’, and ‘aliens’. I know they must all mean something, but I have no idea what.”

Tails was silent, and when she glanced at him again, he quickly turned his head away, as if hiding his expression. She figured it was because he was trying to hide how stupid he thought it was and had to grin herself. “I know, it’s so ridiculous. But that’s what they say. Anyway, they also mentioned you a lot, and your workshop was mentioned in a few of the files. That was why I contacted you like I did – you were one of the few people who seemed like a reliable connection to Sonic.”

His fingers drummed against the couch, eyes narrowing slightly. “My workshop…”

“It was a flight path,” she said, slightly confused by the reaction. “Showing a path you’d apparently taken to get to something they’d codenamed ‘Eggfleet’.”

He nodded silently, and she frowned, but tried to cover it up by laughing. “Which reminds me, do you know what the human obsession with eggs is? They use that code word a lot. Eggfleet, eggbot, eggman…”

His eyes immediately widened, and he bit his lip, fingers clenching into the couch. Again, it was an odd reaction, but she decided to pass it off as him just trying not to laugh. It was a pretty stupid code
He laughed weakly, and she gazed into the middle distance, mind returning to the comparison of Sonic and Aleena, and then to the question of what she really knew about her brother. She’d lived with him, twenty-four hours a day, for a year. She’d thought she knew him.

They were quiet for several minutes, lost in their own thoughts. Sonia had no idea what Tails was thinking about, but she looked at him anyway, as if his face might help her understand things. In the end, she asked, “Sonic really never talked about Mobius? About us?”

He blinked, startled by the question, then shrugged. “Sonic doesn’t talk about the past unless it’s relevant to the present. And to be honest, the stuff he did here was…I mean, in the grand scheme of things…you know…it wasn’t that special.”

“What?”

He winced but continued. “I already knew about Robotnik, and robotocisation, kind of, and Sonic tries not to get involved in politics, so he wouldn’t have ever had reason to talk about being prince,” he said slowly. “The only unusual thing about it was you being his family and this magic stuff, and…well, I mean, when I think about it, I don’t remember any time when it would have been important to know.”

She quashed the urge to be offended and asked, “But aren’t you mad he never told you?”

“He…” He stopped, then lowered his gaze back to his knees. He was quiet for a long time, and normally Sonia would have prompted him, but not only had everything Tails done so far make him seem like the quiet type, but he was obviously thinking about it. She noticed his tails came forward to wrap around him, and he started fiddling with the fur of one. “If he was going to tell me, it should’ve been when he first came back, I think. And…I don’t think I would’ve been okay with it, back then.”

“Why not?”

He glanced at her sideways, shoulders hunching, so she smiled gently. “It’s okay. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I – I wasn’t…” He winced, then sighed. “It’s just kinda…it…I guess, uh…I met Sonic when I was really little. Only four. But he was still the first person I remember not looking at me like I…” His hands fisted in his tail fur, and Sonia pulled back slightly in realisation. She’d been guilty of this herself.

“Only looking at your tails?”

“Yeah. And…and back then, being smart and interested in machines meant you were like…” He glanced at her again before finishing, “like Robotnik. And that was bad, obviously. So…I wasn’t just a freak, I was maybe evil, too.”

“Oh, Tails,” she sighed, and he shrugged, accepting it as it was.

“Sonic was the first person who didn’t think like that. He thought it was cool that I knew how machines worked. And he didn’t even care about my tails until I used them to keep up with him. But it wasn’t like he was pretending they weren’t there, I mean, he gave me my nickname. He just didn’t ever think I was a freak. They were just…there, and he had better things to worry about.”

Sonia nodded slowly, remembering Manic’s face when Sonic told her he was a thief, and then how
his expression had changed when he realised Sonic didn’t care. She remembered the weeks that followed, as they got to know each other in the monastery. How Manic always watched Sonic when they talked about his life on the streets, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It never had.

Until Sonic left them.

“I think, if Sonic had told me about you guys when he first came back, I would’ve worried about it a lot,” he confessed. “Maybe I would’ve always wondered what you were like. Maybe I would’ve always been wondering if I was as cool as you, or if I was smart enough, or… you know.”

Or if Sonic really ever cared, she thought, echoing thoughts she hadn’t yet acknowledged. If she had ever really been enough. “If maybe he was just using you to replace something he already had.”

He peeked at her from under his brows, then nodded and lowered his eyes back to his knees. She sighed softly and pushed a hand into her hair and back. “But he met you first. He didn’t know he had us.”

“I know. But I wouldn’t have, back then. And Sonic didn’t do feelings in those days,” he said, making a face. “He wouldn’t’ve been able to deal with me freaking out.”

She snorted humourlessly. “As if he could deal with it now.”

“He’s changed a lot,” he said, almost defensively. “He doesn’t talk about it unless it’s super important, but I think he understands emotions better than anyone I’ve ever met. Back then, he just didn’t know how to handle feelings. I guess they weren’t cool enough,” he added with a quick, shameful grin. “Sonic never used to do anything if it wasn’t cool.”

“He thought. I certainly remember him having a few lame moments,” she said, and he laughed, apparently despite himself.

“He’s seriously gotten worse. He likes puns. And he makes these speeches about team work and believing in yourself. Seriously lame,” he said, but there was a warmth to his voice that almost made Sonia jealous. She couldn’t ever remember hearing someone talk about her like that. “The weird thing is that he’s so comfortable with being lame that it actually makes him cooler.”

She smiled softly. “You guys are really close, huh?”

“He’s like my big –” He stopped himself with a gasp, glanced at her nervously, then coughed. “I mean, um, he’s – I’m – uh –”

“You guys are like brothers,” she finished for him. She definitely felt jealous now, but made a point not to let it show. “That’s great. Really.”

He flushed, but didn’t say anything, even though she gave him almost a minute. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him properly, to see what his expression was, so she looked over at her desk as if she could see the files hidden in her computer. To avoid thinking too much about the brother she didn’t feel like she had, she focussed on the things she’d read. “The reports we found say he was involved in some things that caused a lot of destruction.”

“It’s not his fault!” he cried, but when she glanced at him, he winced again and added, “Usually. Or at least, there would be a lot more destruction if he wasn’t there.”

He sounded so defensive she had to smile. “So I guess you think it’s worth it?”

“Of course!” He took a moment to consider her expression before continuing, “But that’s not what
“It’s about, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” He hesitated again, looking more like he was trying to make sure of what he said, this time. “When you talk about whether something’s worth something else… the things that are important to me probably aren’t as important to you. So we have a different idea of what things are worth, right?”

She frowned but nodded. It was a lesson she’d had trouble with in the Resistance, but she liked to think she’d come to grips with it now.

“I meet a lot of people, travelling around with Sonic. And they all have different ideas of what’s important. We’ve met a lot of government people who say a few lives aren’t worth a city block, for example,” he pointed out, glancing at her as if worried she might take offence, but continued anyway. “And there are other people who say nothing matters but human life. The whole world could implode, but as long as all the humans got off in time, it would be fine. I guess there are mobians who probably think the same of Mobius and its people.”

“There were mobians who left during Robotnik’s tyranny,” she said. “They didn’t care about what was happening here, as long as they weren’t affected. You mean like that?”

“I guess,” he said awkwardly, then shrugged and pointed to his nose. “I use lethal force when I fight in a mech. I have missiles and guns, and I can’t promise they’ll never hit a living being. Heck, I’ve thrown bombs at people before—”

She blanched at the eight year old confessing to what she hoped was only attempted murder.

“—but I know that it’s for good reasons. I only feel bad when I’ve done all I can do and still fail. But Sonic’s different,” he said. “Sonic believes in one thing: freedom. Everything else comes second. Life is an important second, but he doesn’t see it the same way I do. To me, sentient life is more important. Then flesh, then plants, and then the world. Sometimes I don’t think Sonic really sees a difference between them.”

Sonia just stared at him for a long time; held his gaze and tried to find the exaggeration. But the longer she watched his eyes, the more she thought about what he’d just said, the more… right it sounded.

“Sonic says, sometimes, that ‘all you can do is what you can do, and that has to be enough’,” Tails continued, his eyes becoming slightly unfocussed, and then lowering to his hands. “You can’t obsess over woulda-shoulda-coulda. You can’t be upset when something is beyond you. I shouldn’t be upset just because I don’t know how to do something…” He paused, then smiled and looked up at her again. “I can only keep trying.”

“What—?”

“I’d forgotten that. Thanks,” he said, and then pushed himself off the couch, looking far more cheerful than he had all night. “I better get to bed – I wanted to go out with the others tomorrow and they’re leaving at dawn. It was nice talking to you, Princess.”

“Oh!” she said, blinking rapidly. The conversation seemed to have left her behind very suddenly. Somehow it had changed track and ended without her noticing. “Yes. You too?”

“Good night!” he said, then turned and quickly trotted out the door.

Sonia stared after him for a long time.
For some reason, she felt incredibly small.

Chapter End Notes

**Music Reference:**
Dressed up like dreams - Backseat Goodbye 2008
You made yourself a bed at the bottom of the blackest hole, and convinced yourself it's not the reason you don't see the sun anymore.

The sun was rising sluggishly over the morning smog as Sonic raised the hangar doors, only vaguely listening to the complaints of the night crew as Knuckles, Amy, and Tails jumped in the car they’d stolen yesterday. Even as he chuckled at the commotion behind him, Sonic yawned and winced at the ache in his shoulders, wishing it could be a better day.

He hadn’t done much during the night, just played songs as they came to him and thought about Mobius. He hadn’t come to any great decisions, and wound up going to bed with too much on his mind.

It hadn’t made for a restful night’s sleep, and he’d been relieved when dawn came, giving him reason to wake up Knuckles. For some reason, the fact Amy and Tails were both awake and waiting for him had been comforting, though he still didn’t really feel like himself.

But hey, he reminded himself with another yawn, yesterday had started well before going south. Maybe today’s lousy start would make for a good day in the end.

“Lost Prince?”

It took him a second, but he turned, and then smiled at the girl coming toward him, a large box in her arms. “Felixanne, right?”

“Y-yes,” she said. “Y-you remembered?”

“Like I said, I don’t normally forget people. Not anymore, anyway,” he added with a grin. “You’re up early.”

“The Princess of the Rebellion mentioned you would be going out today,” she said, and held out the box. “She asked me to make sure you had this.”

He blinked, then zipped over to take it from her, juggling it into one arm so he could open it.

“Food?”

Felixanne nodded shyly, and he cocked his head, surprised. “Is it poisoned?”

“L-lost…?”

“Sonic, my name is Sonic,” he said irritably, then stopped himself and chuckled apologetically. He was not going to be the guy who took stupid things out on the people around him. “It’s just that last time I talked to her, she was kinda ticked off. And now she’s giving me a packed lunch?”

“Breakfast,” she corrected quietly. “She would like it very much if you would attend luncheon, if you can. The Princess of the Rebellion said to tell you that… while she does not understand, she
does know she wants two brothers, not one.”

Sonic met her gaze for a few seconds, judging the words he knew had to be a pretty close quote. Then he pawed through the box a little, weighing the contents and the message together. It was a guilt trip, no mistake, but he figured it was one he could live with. He smiled and closed the box, then used his free hand to softly punch Felixanne’s shoulder. “Tell her thanks. I dunno about lunch, but I’ll meet her at the Dump as soon as I can.”

“Your majesty,” she said, curtseying.

“Sonic,” he repeated, as the car drove up behind him. He tossed the box in the open back and then jumped up into the front seat. “My name is Sonic, Felixanne. I’ll see you later.”

She curtseyed again, and Knuckles snorted as Tails put the car into gear. “Fighting a losing battle there, Blue.”

“Whatever. Let’s get out of here,” Sonic replied, tossing one last wink at Felixanne before they headed out. He glanced back at her just before they turned out of sight, then sighed and sank back in his seat.

Tails glanced at him absently. “What’s in the box?”

“Food. And an olive branch.”

“A what?” asked Knuckles.

“Peace offering,” Amy translated, then looked at Sonic worriedly. “Did something happen? Is that why you weren’t at dinner last night?”

“Kind of. It’s nothing,” he said, waving it off. “Things’re just kinda messy right now.”

“Sonia was asking me about you last night,” Tails added, frowning as he noticed how few people were on the street they were turning onto. “Did you know she knows about Eggman?”

They all stared at that. “What?”

“She thinks it’s code, but yeah. Apparently the queen’s been talking to some humans, and Sonia found a bunch of files she’s recorded. I hacked into them this morning while I was waiting for you to get up,” he added absently. “There were about twenty of them, but I think Sonia only found maybe five. They were way less locked down.”

“What did they say?” asked Amy.

“They were just about stuff we’ve done. The ones Sonia saw were about Chaos, the ARK, the first Extreme Gear tournament, the Gaia thing, and an earthquake Sonic and I helped out with a couple months ago,” he said, then made a face. “Either the humans have been keeping a lot from her, or the queen’s very careful about what she writes down, because they were all pretty light on information. They didn’t even mention the world splitting apart – they just talked about a global natural disaster!”

Sonic hummed thoughtfully, while Amy laughed. “Well, I guess that’s kind of what it was. Eggman just made it happen a bit sooner than it should have.”

“I never really understood that one,” Knuckles said. “I get the whole Gaia thing, but how did Eggman affect it?”
“He basically used a massive amount of energy to kick-start the planet,” Tails explained. “Like a taser.”

“Seriously? How? Even with the Chaos Emeralds, you would’ve needed the Master Emerald to keep them working together long enough, right? And I barely knew about this whole thing, so I know it wasn’t used.”

“Yyyyyeah, I might’ve helped out a little there,” Sonic admitted with a grimace. “I was dumb, got caught in a trap while I was Super Sonic.”

“Tch. Of course it’s your fault,” Knuckles drawled, and Sonic twisted around to scowl at him.

“One time to your how many?”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me, Knucklehead!”

“You wanna start something?”

“Not while we’re driving, guys!” Tails snapped, and they both looked at him, then slouched back down with matching pouts. Amy tried to smother her giggles and failed, but Tails just rolled his eyes before looking at Sonic. “So, where am I going?”

“Oh, yeah. Take the west gate. We’re headed to the Dead Forest.”

When he didn’t have to go to court, Manic’s day often started later than his family’s. He didn’t really like seeing the world before nine. But, much to his annoyance, his Friday morning began with someone ringing the bell on his door very insistently, and when he finally dragged himself up to answer it, it was to find Paige, the royal secretariat, on the other side.

“Thief Prince, thank you for seeing me,” she greeted cheerfully, and then immediately turned to her clipboard. “As you stated you did not wish to attend court today, several members of the wider court have tasks they wish to bring to your attention.”

“What…?” he asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Lord Cyrus has requested a meeting with the Palace General, that’s scheduled for nine. Then Major Porquin would like to speak to you regarding a complaint lodged against the Lost Prince by one Sergeant Hamilton – he states it’s not urgent, but feels it should be brought to your attention. I’ve put that in for eleven.”

“Why me? I’m the Thief, not the Lost Prince,” he yawned.

“I’ll add that question to your agenda. That pushes it out to three points,” she said, swiping her finger across her clipboard. “General Hilton would appreciate your inspection of the palace guard – apparently they’ve been acting somewhat unusually these last few days. That’s at eleven-thirty. Then Major Weire would like to know if you intend to finish your hover float, or if he should assign men to it over the weekend, so I’ve allotted him a meeting at twelve-thirty. You will have to keep that short, however, as her Majesty has insisted both yourself and the Princess of the Rebellion ensure
Manic yawned at her again, pointedly, but she just continued smiling. And she had reason to, Manic knew. For someone most people in the kingdom didn’t know existed, Paige had a ridiculous amount of control over the royal family. If the secretariat scheduled you in for an appointment, you made that appointment. She could wield guilt better than Sonia did a gun.

“It is now eight o’clock,” she said brightly. “The Palace General will be served tea.”

Which meant if he wanted food, he needed to get it before the meeting. And he’d be expected to look quasi-presentable.

So he rolled his eyes and trudged off to the bathroom without another word.

“Good morning, your highness!” she added cheerfully, right before he slammed the bathroom door.

Not that she knew it, right that second, but Sonia wasn’t having a much better morning. After a restless night, spending hours lying awake and thinking about Mobius, its people, and the whole world outside it that she’d never seen, she’d come to breakfast to find Stripes was upset with her.

She knew it probably had something to do with last night. She probably should have gone to see him after talking with Tails, but she’d been too preoccupied to deal with any insecurities he had, so she didn’t think it would have helped. And so he was all formal and distant, calling her ‘Princess’ and acting like they were acquaintances rather than lovers. Normally, she would have taken that as a hint he was planning to head back to his village soon, but that wasn’t an option with the festival on. So she had to look forward to an entire week of him trying to make her feel guilty for not putting him first.

So she handled it as she always did – she ignored him, focussing on her coffee and the Council’s morning agenda.

One of the servants bowed as she poured juice into Sonia’s glass. “Her majesty Queen Aleena requested that I remind you the delegates from the outer kingdoms will begin arriving today.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, frowning slightly. “Has Liam made rooms ready?”

“The last of the rooms are expected to be finished by noon.”

“Great, thanks,” she said. “Please ask Liam to meet me before luncheon, if he can. I want to go over the plans for the formal breakfast on Sunday.”

“Of course,” she said, and bowed again before moving away.

Sonia glanced up, found Stripes was still pointedly ignoring her, and would have gone back to her agenda if the door hadn’t swung open.

“Morning,” Manic grumbled as he stumbled into the room.

“Your highness,” Stripes greeted stiffly, and Sonia rolled her eyes but smiled at Manic.
“Morning, Little Brother.”

He gave her something that was probably supposed to be a smile, but looked like a grimace. The only actual smile he managed was when a servant handed him a cup of coffee, and Sonia tried not to smirk. “I take it you’re not up by choice?”

“Paige. Paige.”

She giggled. “You have a task list, then?”

“So many meetings,” he sobbed, then dragged in a breath and got over it. “What about you?”

“Morning court, since I’ll miss the afternoon,” she said, lifting her agenda.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Manic slowly becoming more alert, if not more talkative, before the door opened again. They all glanced up, expecting Cyrus or maybe one of the higher servants, and did a double-take when it was Agent Shadow to step through.

Seeing him in the dining room made Sonia realise, somewhat awkwardly, that she’d never seen him eat. Even that first day, when he’d attended luncheon, she’d been too focussed on Sonic to see if he actually ate anything, and he hadn’t attended any meals since. Come to think of it, she had no idea what he’d been doing these past two days.

She wasn’t sure what concerned her more – how much she’d been ignoring an extremely important diplomat, or that he was, on the whole, just an all-round creepy person that she didn’t want to pay attention to.

If he was at all concerned about her lack of attention, or the awkward conversation from last night, he didn’t show it, silently walking over to stand by her chair.

“Your highness,” he said evenly. “I understand you have a library in this palace.”

“Uh – yes,” she said, blinking rapidly at the strange statement. “Of course. Why?”

“I would like access to it.”

“Oh!” She shook her head, then forced a laugh. She’d forgotten that the library was generally kept locked – no one went in there that often, after all. “Certainly, Agent Shadow. I’ll take you there on my way to court, if you don’t mind waiting until after breakfast. Would you care to join us?”

He looked around the room, noting Manic and Stripes as much as he did the buffet. “I’d rather not,” he said, and then inclined his head before turning on his heel and walking out.

Even Stripes stared after him, until Manic shuddered melodramatically. “So creepy.”

“Uh huh,” Sonia agreed, suddenly cautious about what, exactly, Shadow was doing every day. What exactly did the Overlanders he worked for want?

“You’re tracing Sonic the Hedgehog?” Keen, the bartender squirrel that was currently Rouge’s best friend due to her extremely well-priced mojitos and willingness to serve them before ten in the morning, raised an eyebrow. “Why in the world would you want to do that?”
“To find people,” she explained as she reached over to get the drink. “See who saw him, who spoke to him. Did you know him?”

“Know him? That cheapskate owes me twenty rings and a dance!” she cried, then leaned on the bar with a fond grin. “He and Tails came back a few months ago, when Eggman was causing a bit of trouble, then Sonic spent the next week lounging in a hammock on the beach. Laziest superhero ever. He’s lucky he’s cute.”

Rouge prompted her with a leading smile, and she gave a surprisingly expressive shrug given she was still leaning on the bar. “Sonic first came to Westside back when my parents ran this joint. He’d just saved South Island, so everyone thought he was better than sliced bread, and he spent most of his time taking advantage of it, to be honest,” she said lazily, then smiled. “Then he met Tails. I think Tails grew up around here, but I’m not really sure. Anyway, they spent months just hanging around collecting rings before Robotnik came along. Then boom, bang, they were off saving the world and that was the last we saw of Sonic before he showed up again this year.”

“Only Sonic?” she asked. “Not Tails?”

“Tails came back here for a little while, long before that,” she said vaguely. “Apparently Sonic ditched him or something. I didn’t really ask, and they’re back together again now, right?”

“Hm…” Rouge sipped her drink, glancing over her shoulder at the empty room in an attempt to look disinterested. The girl was a good lead, but she was walking a line between being Sonic’s fangirl and his friend, and Rouge had spent far too much time around Amy to take risks with girls like that—they tended to get protective. She had to be careful how she handled her.

Keen hesitated, then pushed herself off the bar to instead start filling the sink with soapy water. “So you really made it through that path? I’ve had plenty of people come through here saying it’s impossible.”

“Flying makes it easier,” she explained. “Once I got out of the underwater labyrinth, anyway.”

“Are you going to follow his path over Westside?” she asked. “There’s a tour that runs every week or so, if you’re interested—it’s a lot less dangerous here than South Island.”

“Hm, maybe. I’m not sure how useful it will be… and I really should be getting on to Mobius proper.”

“Oh, you’re going to the festival?”

Rouge glanced at her, and she grinned as she turned off the water. “I hear it’s gonna be pretty cool. I’m thinking about closing down for a couple of days and heading over.”

“You’re interested in the royal family?” she asked, but Keen made a face.

“No, I’m interested in a good party! I hear that town definitely knows how to rock,” she said, then shrugged. “But I guess I am a little curious. I want to know who these royal kids are! And it’s kind of intriguing, the idea of a Lost Prince. It could be anyone!”

“Well, it’s gotta be a hedgehog,” she pointed out, and Keen laughed.

“True. Hey, it might even be Sonic himself! Now there’s an idea—hero of everything and everything else, Prince of Mobius and destined to be king! And he spent most of the last time I saw him trying to scam free food,” she said, and Rouge chuckled, shifting back to face her again.
“Why do you think he does it?”

“Scam free food? Wouldn’t you, if you could?” she asked, and Rouge had to give her that, saluting her with her mojito.

“I do, when I can! But I actually meant the heroics. Why do you think he decided to up and save the world?”

“I dunno,” she said thoughtfully, dunking a few glasses under the water. “Usually he just says ‘because I can’ or something… he even says it to the newspapers and stuff! When I asked him, he just gave me this cheesy pick up line about how he does it because pretty girls look better without metal accessories. I told him he was gonna have to work harder for his chilli dogs than that, and he said something about that’s what his good looks are for.”

Sounded about right. “Did you give him anything for that?”

“A slap over the ears,” she said with a wink. “He may be cute, but he’s way too young to be making passes at me.”

She laughed and let that one sit for a few moments before trying again. She was starting to think Keen was deliberately missing her cues. “But don’t you think it’s strange? If he was going to save the world, shouldn’t he have started at home? I heard he came from the Mainland.”

“Oh, I know he did,” she said, and then glanced around the empty bar before stepping over to lean close, conspiratorially. “Can I tell you something? You have to promise you won’t tell the papers.”

Finally. Rouge made a show of glancing around as well before leaning in close too. “What?”

“The first time Sonic was here, I met his father.”

Rouge didn’t have to pretend to look amazed at that one. From all her research, the queen’s husband was very, very dead. “Are you sure?”

“Well, Sonic didn’t say so, but what else could he have been? He was an older blue hedgehog, and he kept calling him ‘sonny’.”

As in the diminutive for Sonic? she thought but didn’t say, instead nodding for her to continue. Father or not, an older mobian that was familiar enough with Sonic to give him a nickname was the best lead she’d gotten so far.

“I was waitressing for my parents and they ran into each other. Sonic was really excited to see him, and his father kept telling him to come home, but Sonic kept saying he couldn’t,” she said, lowering her voice as if someone might hear. “The way he was talking? It was like he was scared to go back. Can you imagine that? Sonic the Hedgehog, scared!”

Rouge narrowed her eyes. Knowing Blue as she did… she honestly couldn’t. But then, she couldn’t imagine Sonic being a grumpy and self-absorbed, either, but that was definitely the impression she’d gotten from talking to other people from these islands.

“But he did go back,” Rouge said finally. “He was part of the Resistance when Robotropolis fell.”

“I know! But who knows? Maybe one of those spin-dashes scrambled his brains.”

She was definitely beginning to think that was a possibility. “Sonic’s father… you didn’t happen to catch his name, did you?”
“Oh, probably,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But that was years ago. I remember him as Sonic’s dad, not his name!”

Damn. “Maybe a guest book?”

“Good idea, but no. We’re a tavern, not a hotel,” she pointed out.

“I guess so,” she said, and made a show of looking vague. “Still, it is sweet, that he came looking for his son. The sorta guy you’d want to know.”

“Oh, no, they literally ran into each other – they had no idea they were going to meet. His dad was here for a reason… because… um… I think he was trying to inspire people. Yeah, get them to join the mainland Resistance. That was it,” she said, and went back to her glasses. “Heroes, you know? Must run in the family.”

“Must!” she said, and focussed on her drink. If he’d been here to garner support, he would’ve talked to the island leader. Who definitely would’ve kept a record. Now she getting somewhere.

“Dead Forest,” Knuckles said, as he slammed his fist into the dirt. Fire burst up around his knuckles and out, cracking the earth in a powerful earthquake that knocked anyone not smart or quick enough to brace themselves off their feet. “Last I checked, that should mean ‘non-living’!”

“Like you’ll be in a minute!”

That was the threat, but Amy swung around and met it with her hammer, while Sonic flipped up out of his ball and glared at Knuckles. “Whaddaya want from me, Knuckles? Last time I was here, this place was empty!”

Which was clearly no longer the case. They’d reached the Dead Forest early that morning, and with a few quick scans, Tails had found six mechanical hotspots both above and underground. According to Sonic, the Dead Forest had once been Robotnik’s preferred testing ground, a broad empty wasteland dotted with trees that seemed to be dead, despite their continual growth. Underground, there were huge growths of glowing purple crystal with a strange power resonance, and Knuckles had announced the whole area had a very low level of mystical energy. None of them were particularly surprised Robotnik would have used it in his experiments.

Unfortunately, they discovered after about an hour, it was also an anarchist camp.

Sonic had tried reasoning with them, explaining they were just there for the robots and robotocisors, but, as Tails had groused while avoiding the first volley of gunfire, that had translated into crazy person as “I, your prince, am here to assert my authority and do what you weaklings could not.” So it was perfectly understandable that they’d taken it as a challenge.

Especially when Knuckles responded to their threats by punching the leader in the face.

Luckily, the fight was wearing down pretty quick, because although they were holding back and the anarchists were using lethal weapons, it was pretty clear who were the better fighters.

In fact, it was getting so quiet that Tails took the time to take out his mileselectric and check their progress. “If it helps, even with the fight, we’ve managed to clear out four of the six hotspots.”
“The SWATbots kept getting in the way!” Amy cried defensively, and belted another anarchist across the wasteland. “You’d think us taking time out from kicking their butts to destroy any robots we came across would be a hint we’re good guys.”

“Yeah, you’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Sonic asked the anarchist he was currently playfully dodging.

The rabbit snarled in response and snatched out a taser. “Arrogant dog!”

“Hedgehog,” he corrected, and twisted out of the way of the attack before snatching the weapon right out of his hand, turning it off, and then rapping the rabbit on the head. “Closest relative is the mink; nowhere near a canine. Learn your biology.”

“Why you –”

“Oh, shut up!” Knuckles snapped, and threw a rock that hit the anarchist directly between the eyes and knocked him down.

Sonic watched him fall, and then looked up with a pout. “Hey.”

“You shut up too!”

He sighed heavily and set his hand on his hip, looking up and around at their remaining opponents, who had finally stopped charging to just circle them warily. There were about ten left, in various states of hurt, but if Sonic was being honest, he didn’t really want the fight to continue. Holding back wasn’t easy, and he knew he was hiding a few more bruises than he wanted to admit to, so he could only imagine how badly Amy and Tails were doing. He could guess Tails wasn’t in that tree just because he needed to concentrate on his handheld.

Besides, he was supposed to be meeting Sonia and Manic, even if he did end up skipping lunch.

He met the gaze of the leader, who was nursing the black eye Knuckles had given him and aiming a power rifle at Sonic’s head. “Yo, guy. Parlay?”

“Par-what?” he ground out.

“Parlay. Can we talk?”

“Why should we talk to you?” he demanded. “You’re here to take what’s ours.”

“The robotocisor?” asked Tails. “You want to keep it?”

He blanched, his rifle lowering for a moment. “What? No. What are you, crazy?”

“You’re here to take our home!” another anarchist yelled, this one a mixe with purple feathers. “You think you can just come back outta nowhere and do what you like, but we’re not gonna take it!”

The other anarchists cheered and raised their weapons again, but faltered a little when Sonic only looked impressed. “You’re actually fighting for that. That’s really awesome.”

“Sonic, no sympathising with people trying to kill us,” Tails warned, and Sonic waved him off.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but look, guys, we don’t care about this place. I sure don’t, and the guys back in the city don’t even know about those crystals underground, so most people figure this place is as
dead as its name,” he said bluntly, and the anarchists exchanged glances, obviously having difficulty not believing him.

“W-well then, you’re obviously trying to take us back to the cities!” the leader snapped. “We’re not lemmings, we’re not going to follow your rules just because you were born special!”

Sonic blinked, then twisted around to look at Tails, but both he and Knuckles shot him down with firm looks.

“Trying to kill us!” Tails reminded him, and he huffed out a breath before turning back to the leader.

“Seriously guy, power to you, but we don’t care about that either.”

“We’re just here to clear out the robots,” Amy continued for him. “We didn’t even know you were here.”

“Like we’re supposed to believe you!” another shouted back, and Knuckles scowled, cracking his knuckles.

“All this talking’s driving me nuts. Let’s finish this already.”

“Just try it – we have you surrounded!” the mixe pointed out, pulling Knuckles’ glare back to him.

“Doing you real well so far, isn’t it? How many of your jerks have I dropped?”

“We’re ready for you now though – less of us means more room to fire.”

“Just try it, buddy!”

Sonic winced, starting forward with hands raised. “Hey, whoa, Knuckles –”

“Everybody stop!” the leader yelled, and the anarchists all pulled back a little, watching him warily as he lowered his own rifle and took a step forward, meeting Sonic’s gaze again. “You say you’re not interested in our land, or who we answer to… so why clear out the bots? Why now?”

“Why ever?” he replied blankly. “I just got into town two days ago, man. This was the second closest bot-infested area around.”

“The diamond mines over east being the closest?” he asked slowly. “So next you’re heading to…?”

“Gray Mountain, I guess,” he said with a shrug. “If my sibs give me the time. They’ve got plans,” he added with a roll of his eyes, and the leader paused, considering him for a few moments.

“Why the sudden interest in ’bots?” he asked. “You people have let them run riot out here for three years. Why care now?”

“You idiots don’t listen,” Knuckles snapped. “We only got here a few days ago!”

“Sonic hasn’t been on Mobius for years, and the rest of us never lived on the Mainland,” Tails interjected. “We don’t know about the people in the cities, but we never had a chance to come out here before.”

“But smashing ’bots is kind of what we do best,” added Amy. “So now we’re here…”

The leader frowned, narrowing his eyes, but Sonic could only shrug helplessly. “It’s kinda my thing. I mean, don’t get me wrong, Mom did ask me to, and my sibs’d be all thrilled and stuff if I could
bring home a robotocisor for them to ‘splode in some kinda fireworks show, but yeah. Mostly it’s just for kicks.”

“But…” He lowered his rifle down to his hip. “If we were to let you continue, you would return to Robotropolis and tell them we were here.”

“Nope.”

“What?”

“Wouldn’t do it. What’d be the point?” he asked blankly. “Best case scenario, Mom says ‘whoop-de-freakin’-doo’ and no one cares. Worst case, the aristocrats get all riled up an’ come out here with guards shooting. Way to start another war! And dude, I just don’t have time for that.”

“Who would?” Amy added, and Sonic shrugged.

By now, most of the other anarchists had lowered their weapons as well and were exchanging confused glances. Eventually, one small, vaguely cat-looking girl stepped forward with an odd look on her face. “Where have you been, the last three years?”


“We care,” the leader said quietly. “You were one of us. You could have changed things.”

“Yeah right, whatever,” Sonic said, rolling his eyes to try and keep the irritation out of his voice. “So does this mean we’re fightin’ some more, or what? Only I want to get this place cleared out and I’ve got other stuff to do today.”

The girl and leader looked at each other, then back to him. “Solar will want to see you.”

“Then he can come and find me,” Sonic snapped, and the others looked at him quickly, surprised by the harsh tone. He ignored it. “I ain’t goin’ to him.”

“Okay,” the leader said, and stood down, gesturing for the others to as well. “But so you know, we’re going to be watching. Even one thing we don’t like, and we open fire.”

“Whatever,” he replied. “We cool for now?”

He nodded, a tiny smile creeping over his lips. “We’re cool. Good to have you back, Sonic.”

He scoffed but otherwise ignored that, gesturing to Tails. “Come on, guys, we got stuff to do and less time to do it in. Lead the way, little buddy.”

It was kind of frustrating, how rarely fun meetings were.

Manic needed to remind himself of the ‘rarely’ qualifier every time he went into these things, because sometimes, Palace General meetings were fun. Most of the Palace General were people he’d happily hang out with anyway, like Cyrus and Trevor. They usually even got work done while still having fun, snickering over arrangements that needed to be made and snarking about new discoveries or requirements.
But today, even if it had just been the three of them, Manic doubted he would have enjoyed it. Cyrus was gushing about Tails again, and this time the rest of the staff were getting in on the act.

“With the extra space, we’ll be able to move more of the staff internal,” Liam was saying, taking rapid notes. “I’ll also need to hire more janitorial staff for upkeep, of course.”

“I’ll send runners to the Grey Quarter then,” Facilitate, the woman responsible for everyone’s pay, noted absently. “There’s always plenty of people looking for work.”

“Might be worth going out to some of the nearby hamlets, too,” Kitchen-master Growth pointed out. “There may be some younger blood out there, and I could always use more goodwill among the farming communities.”

The head of security, Lord Patch, waved a lazy hand for attention. “Take your time on the hiring process. Even if we are confident of the lasers being disabled, my people will need time to ensure a clean sweep.”

“Yeah, I’ll second that,” Cyrus agreed. “There’s way too much stuff going on in this place that my guys had no idea about. I want to finish working out those chaos engines before any civilians step foot on those floors.”

Manic tried not to roll his eyes when Patch asked for more information. Luckily, the fanboying was kept to a minimum as Cyrus recognised his audience. “They’re not connected to a chaos source, but Tails says the engines alone can be dangerous if they’re not handled correctly.”

“Chaos source?”

He paused, apparently trying to decide the best way to phrase it. “Chaos energy is a very clean, natural source of energy, but highly volatile. Every living creature has a small amount of it, and it can also form in the shape of crystals or rings, which some of the people living on the outer islands use to power their machines.”

Manic’s eyeridges rose as both Patch and Growth started looking edgy.

“Robotnik used chaos energy,” Patch said darkly. “He was brought to the court to advise her Majesty on it.”

“I was on her Majesty’s staff at the time,” Growth added. “That overlander was supposed to use it to create a barrier against some future threat.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s what these things do,” Cyrus said, lifting a hand to forestall any further nerves. “According to Tails, they could make this place fly.”

“Fly?” Paige repeated, her head rising from where it had been bent over her notes. “The palace flies?”

“Not without a chaos source.”

“Not that I want my house to get up and fly,” Manic said, lifting a hand, “but I got a little lost when you were talking about this last night. What exactly is a chaos source? And what would we do with it if we got one?”

“Well, a chaos source could be anything. The guardian’s emerald, for example. A person, even,” he said. “There’s a machine downstairs near the generator, called a Chaos Trap. We would put the source in there, and with the proper syphons, it would transfer the energy from the source into the
“This machine is powered by people?” Patch demanded, and Cyrus lifted his hands as if to ward off his anger.

“I was mostly using it as a hypothetical. Mobians are one of the few things on the planet that have a natural chaos output. But the Chaos Trap downstairs is too big for a normal person’s output. Tails didn’t say as much, but I got the impression that anyone with enough of an output to power the Trap would be so full of chaos energy that they probably wouldn’t be that functional anyway.”

“I don’t understand,” Facilitate confessed. “When you say ‘functional’…?”

“I mean… coherent,” he said awkwardly. “Everything I know about chaos says it’s dangerous in high levels, and the things Tails has taught me recently only support it. In a person, that much energy would probably warp their minds. They’d be distracted, constantly. Unable to focus. Heck, I’d be surprised if they could even talk.”

She tilted her head, intrigued. “So, if used properly, this machine could help such a person. Syphoning off the excess chaos so that they become coherent again.”

Manic looked at her, eyeridges rising slightly. “Yeah, but what kinda life would they have, stuck in that machine forever?”

“Better that than being trapped inside yourself,” Growth argued. “That excess chaos would be almost as bad as robotocisation.”

Patch frowned at him, but said nothing, and Manic sat back in his chair. It was all moot, of course, since no one like that actually existed, but… an interesting thought, all the same.

“So,” Tails said, after they’d found the robotocisor and were struggling to load it into the back of the jeep. It was a lot bigger than they’d expected – almost twice Knuckles’ height alone. “Those guys back there said you were one of them?”

“Those guys back there,” Sonic grunted, struggling to pull even with Amy and Knuckles shoving, “are delusional. I never signed on to anything.”

“But you knew them?” Amy prompted, and he grunted again.

“Maybe. I didn’t recognise any of them. But to be honest—” He paused as they finally managed to get the robotocisor high enough to balance on the lip of the tray, panting. “—I don’t remember a lot of people from back then. Amy, get up here,” he said, reaching down to help her up.

Once she was up, they moved to opposite sides of the robotocisor, stabilising it as Knuckles started lifting the other end.

The problem with moving the machine wasn’t its weight, per se. Knuckles could lift a lot heavier things. But putting them down again was another story – the machine was simply too big in size for any of them to wield it safely. Tails was insistent that the machine stay as undamaged as possible until he had a chance to study it, which was why they were forced to manoeuvre and leverage it rather than just pick it up and drop it. The conversation was put on pause as they finished getting it
into the jeep, but once it was in there, weighing the back down so much Tails wasn’t entirely convinced they could drive back safely, Amy continued.

“You seemed to remember the name Solar at least. Is he another childhood friend?”


“So like Shadow?” Tails asked, smirking as he strapped the machine down.

“Kinda.” He jumped out of the jeep and looked out across the forest. They’d left a lot of broken bots behind them today. He wondered how the anarchists had been managing to live out here without running into them all the time.

“Hey. What’s up with you?”

He blinked and turned his head to find Knuckles leaning against the jeep beside him, frowning slightly.

“What?”

“You look lousy,” he said again, then pointed to him. “We didn’t work that hard today. What’s up with that?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You do look really tired,” Amy agreed as she jumped down to stand on his other side. “Did you sleep okay last night?”

He shrugged. “Haven’t been napping as much as usual since we got here, does that count?”

“Hedgehogs. Spend more time sleeping than not,” Knuckles noted, and both Sonic and Amy scowled at him.

“Okay, we’re good to go,” Tails called before they could start defending their right to nap. “I want to ride in the back here to make sure everything stays tied down, so Amy, can you drive?”

“No problem,” she said, still glaring at Knuckles as she held out her hands for the keys.

“I’m gonna run alongside,” said Sonic. “Show you who’s tired, Knucklehead.”

“He thinks he’s tough!” Knuckles shot back, clambering into the front seat. “Even though baby needs an afternoon nap!”

“I will hammer you out of this car if you don’t knock it off,” Amy warned him as she got up herself, but she twisted around to look at Sonic. “Are you sure you’re okay to run? I can knock out Knuckles if it would help!”

“Hey!”

Sonic chuckled and waved her onward. “I’m fine. Let’s go,” he said, and then immediately took off. Half to shut Knuckles up and half to help out, he built up enough speed to blast a clear path through the trees and broken bots to get them back to the road safely, but once he was there (and definitely out of sight), he had to stop, hunching over a little while he waited for them to catch up.

Jokes and stubbornness aside, he had felt better. He’d have to make a point to get his full eight hours
of sleep tonight.

He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders as he straightened up, willing himself to get back in the game. He took a few steps across the road, shielding his eyes as he peered back toward the city. This far out, you could see the cloud of smog that covered it; how it blocked out the sun and kept everything in eternal darkness.

He wondered how anyone could live like that. But thinking like that only made him feel more tired, so he turned back in the direction he’d come from, searching the wasteland for his friends.

Instead of the jeep he was waiting for, something else caught his eye, and he immediately stiffened when he recognised it.

Out of speaking distance, and almost out of sight, a bear was watching him, half hidden behind a boulder. Despite the distance, Sonic could still recognise him – could probably have picked him out of a crowd of hundreds, even though it had been years since they’d spoken. Solar the Sun Bear: the closest thing the anarchists had to a second in command, and the guy that had nearly convinced him to join the cause.

They’d been kids together. He was the second person Sonic had met after moving to Robotropolis, and the first one he’d hooked up with after coming back.

Back then, Sonic had admired Solar’s personal motto: “Never strike first, but always strike last.” It had seemed honourable and defiant. Something worth aspiring to. Even at thirteen, Solar had been driven and organised, for all that he didn’t have much of a long-term plan.

Back then, it had seemed like everything Sonic needed.

Chuckling at the memory, Sonic lifted his hand in a half-hearted wave, unsurprised when Solar didn’t move to respond. He’d known he wouldn’t. Solar always expected Sonic to come to him.

“Well strike first,” Sonic muttered, and then turned to begin strolling back to Mobotropolis.

He was good at leaving the past behind him.

---

Oh yes, he thought later, staring up at the uncovered Dump. He was great at leaving the past behind him. Right up until it caught up with him.

It wasn’t so much that he had strong emotions about the place. He’d worked out a lot of anger the first time he’d come back after Uncle Chuck was robotocised. Now, it was just a building he’d stayed in for a few years.

But seeing it without all the camouflage, bare and small but clearly covered in technical equipment, felt very… significant. Particularly given the morning he’d had. He found himself remembering small moments with Chuck, and some of the bigger conversations.

Sonic never regretted. Never wished he could change things. But sometimes…

A sudden flash made him flinch and look around, and then laugh as he noticed a couple of camera men and reporters hiding behind the construction fence and dumpster bins. He gave them a playful
“Slow news day, guys?”

Most of them blanched and tried to dodge out of sight, but one grinned and called back, “Absolutely crawling! Care to tell the Mobotropolis Eye how you feel about coming home?”

“This isn’t home,” he said, pointing to the Dump. “This is going to be an amphitheatre, and it’s gonna be awesome. Later, kids.”

He then moved forward, reaching for the lever that opened the door and slipping inside as fast as he could without looking like he was moving any faster than normal people. He didn’t want them thinking he was running away – even if he kinda was.

“Should’ve gone back to the palace with the others,” he muttered, but even if there was any going back, he figured he’d probably done the right thing anyway. “Egh. Sibs’d probably make a big deal out of me ‘coming home’ too.”

He wandered through the rooms, noting the clear signs of Resistance clean-up. Everything useful and easily transportable was gone. The furniture mostly remained, but the cushions were gone, along with all the books and homey touches. A lot of Chuck’s tech was in pieces or burned – it would have been set to self-destruct the second Chuck saw the SWATbots coming, and the Resistance would have burned any of the remains, just in case.

It was easy to bypass the bedroom he’d slept in, but he lingered in the doorway to Chuck’s. It was the only room in the house that hadn’t been stripped.

Compared to the rest of the messy house, this perfectly untouched room felt… odd. The bed was dusty but neatly made. The cupboards all carefully shut tight. There was even a pair of slippers tucked next to the bedside table. Waiting for Uncle Chuck to come back.

Seemed even the Resistance had their soft moments.

As if any blue hedgehog could have survived Robotnik’s prisons after South Island.

The sound of the entrance door swinging open was warning enough for Sonic to blink himself out of dark thoughts and pull away from the bedroom. By the time Manic’s voice reached him, he’d shaken it all off and started heading out to meet him.

“—don’t go making assumptions. Being someone’s boy isn’t the same as liking them, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Oh, please, Manic. Everyone in the Resistance knew and loved Uncle Chuck. He was a hero!”

“That doesn’t make him a good parent.”

“No,” Sonic agreed as they all stepped into the main room from their respective entrances, “but he was a great uncle.”

“Sonic,” Sonia greeted, her eyes wide as she took him in, and Manic shifted his weight back on his hips, obviously cautious.

For a few moments, they just gazed at each other silently, waiting to see who would bring up the night before. But in the end, Sonia merely wiped her hands over her skirt and gave him a firm look. “You missed luncheon.”
“Yeah, but I brought you back a robotocisor,” he replied, like it was a travelling gift.

For a moment, it was still tense, but she eventually managed a very small smile, relief just visible in her eyes. “That doesn’t completely excuse you, but I’ll take it.”

“Good to know. Manic,” he added in greeting, and Manic jerked his head in return.

“How’s it hangin’ bro? You look wiped.”

“Just a little tired,” he admitted. “Fun day back at the homestead for you guys?”

“Oh, yeah, it was great. Meetings. All day,” Manic touched a hand to his forehead and sighed, then gestured to Sonia. “Court?”

She groaned. “I finally got clearance to do the amphitheatre, but they knocked me back on equipment hire.”

“Oh, you’re joking!” Manic said, but he didn’t sound surprised. Sonic blinked rapidly.

“Wait, what?” he asked. “Equipment?”

“Yeah, you know, to like, move dirt and junk,” Manic explained, waving at the ceiling. “It’s all owned by the contractors, so we have to make formal requests to hire it.”

Sonic stared at him blankly, not following, and Sonia sighed. “We present our needs to the court, and the building companies submit their bids – how much they want for how long. But today they told me I hadn’t given them enough notice and so no bids got put forward. Even if they put them forward in morning court tomorrow, we won’t be able to get anything until Sunday, which is obviously too late.”

“No such thing with me around,” Sonic said automatically, but then frowned. “Isn’t that kinda dumb? We’re offering money, right? And isn’t doing a royal job kind of impressive? Don’t they want any of that?”

Manic shrugged. “They know we want the job done, and they’re the only ones who can do it. We gotta put up with it.”

For a long few seconds, Sonic only looked at him, letting that sentence sort through his mind. Then he abruptly shrugged and moved on. “Whatever. We’re not giving up, right? So what can we do in the meantime?”

“Clean up and preparation,” Manic said, and Sonic blinked as his brother suddenly focussed, his whole face seeming to change as he pulled a set of blueprints out of his bag and moved over to spread them across the table. “It’s pretty simple. The house is going to be the greenroom for the amphitheatre, so the steps are like, rising up over it. We’re building a wall over here, but we’re not like, changing the house itself, just cleaning it up and making everything work again. Then we dump a load of dirt over it to craft the steps, plant a bunch of grass, get some mood lighting up in this joint and bam, amphitheatre.”

Sonic could only stare at him for a second, impressed by the change, before giving himself a quick shake and focussing himself. “So aside from the house, what are we doing?”

Manic stabbed his finger against the specifications, not noticing the distraction. “Flattening the ground outside and laying the foundations. Whichever team we contract will prolly take care of the wall itself, and actually filling in the steps, but with you here we should be able to get the wooden
structure and base concrete laid.”

“Cool,” he agreed. “But house first?”

“House first. All furniture out, full clean, I’ll fix the plumbing and the wiring, and then a fresh coat of paint. The carpet still looks good, so the paint should be enough.” He looked up at him with a smile. “You would’ve seen the skips outside, yeah? The green one is for anything we can use again. The red one’s for electronics that need to be scrapped, and the blue one’s for everything else. You and Sonia okay to start shifting junk?”

Sonic looked over to his sister, and then did a double-take as he noticed her sympathetic look. He rolled his eyes. “It’s just a house, sis. Come on – I’ll take the bathroom if you’ve got the beds.”

She nodded silently, and he zipped off, trying not to notice her glance at Manic like they knew something he didn’t.

The afternoon passed pretty quietly after that. The bathroom didn’t take long to clean up – the Resistance had mostly cleared out the cupboard, and the water had been turned off, so he only really had three years’ worth of dust to clean up. He caught an hour’s nap in the bathtub, then headed out to the main living area.

Manic was draped over the kitchen bench, hanging down behind the oven, so Sonic wandered over to make sure he didn’t need help.

“Yo, bro,” Manic greeted as he peeked over. “Finished already?”

“The bathroom at least. You need any help here?”

“Nah, I’m just replacing washers and gas pipes,” he said, waving his wrench as if that actually told Sonic something. “No offence, but you’d only like, get in the way if you tried to clean up the kitchen while I’m here. Could you maybe start on the front room?”

“Sure.” He didn’t move though, just considering his brother for a second. “You like this stuff, huh?”

“I dunno if I like it,” he said. “It’s all mechanics. Something I can do, and I’m good at it.”

Sonic glanced down at what the work for a second before shaking his head. “I mean the renovation type stuff. Making old stuff into new.”

“Oh. Uh…” Manic paused, pushing himself up to fold his arm over the stove top, where he could meet his gaze more comfortably. “I dunno about that, either. I mean, it’s really cool when you finish a project, and you’ve got this new thing, right? And this place—your uncle—they deserve to be remembered, you know? Honoured. So yeah, this kinda thing is rad. But some of the other stuff…”

When he trailed off, Sonic didn’t bother prompting him, which garnered a weird look before Manic continued. “I dunno, man. It’s all wrapped up in politics, and that stuff just doesn’t sit right with me. It’s like… we never just do stuff. Even when it needs doing, ’cause you gotta get everything signed off and approved. No one likes living in garbage, right? No one likes all the prisons we’ve still got around the place. Everyone wants stuff to change. But no one agrees on how it should be done. And I just like, I can’t do the court thing. I don’t know the words, can’t… can’t stand up to people like
Lady Felidae and the rest.”

“Who?”

“She’s one of the building moguls,” he said with a grimace. “She’s totally out to get me. Or at least all the money she can wring out of Mother.”

He chuckled, and Manic grinned, but then shrugged like it didn’t matter.

“So I dunno. It’s just kinda… the whole thing kinda makes me…” He sighed, waving his wrench again as he searched for the right word. “Angry? Sad? Totally over it all? I dunno.”

Sonic nodded slowly, taking a few steps back so he was properly out of the way. “So you think it’d be cool, if you didn’t have to fight with people to get it all done.”

“Yeah, something like that. But hey, wishes and fishes, right?” he asked dryly, then leaned back down to start working again. “I’m dreaming small to start with. Maybe when we finally get the aristocrats on board with the whole ‘let’s actually change what needs changing’ thing, I’ll be able to just get to work after a couple of meetings with the big wigs. That’d be slammin’.”

“Yeah,” Sonic agreed thoughtfully, and settled back against the cupboards to think for a few seconds. Soft grunting alerted him to Sonia coming down the hall, dragging a chest of drawers behind her, and he turned his head to watch her come through the room.

“Nice to see you hard at work,” she panted, and he smirked but didn’t move.

“C’mon, sis – where’s all that super strength gone? You too pretty to use it these days?”

“Shut up.”

“You know what?” He pushed himself off the bench and headed over to stand on the other side of the drawers, but didn’t actually start pushing. “We should go out.”

“Sorry, you’re not my type,” she drawled. “Are you helping or not?”

“Yeah, but then after this, we should totally spend a night on the town. Seriously, when was the last time either of you went clubbing?”

Manic pushed himself back up to stare at him, then at Sonia. “Clubbing? You mean like, dancing and drinking and stuff?”

“We can’t do that stuff anymore!” Sonia laughed. “We’re royalty, we –”

“—need a night out,” Sonic finished for her. “I may be tired, but you guys? You guys need a break. When we’re done here, I say we head back home, have a quick wash, pick up some friends, and then go out to Cookies. Whaddaya say?”

“Cookies?” Sonia repeated. “Sonic, that place is in the Lower Third! Manic can’t just –”

“Manic totally can,” he insisted. “He’s a prince, and a guy, and he needs the type of fun you can only get in a place like Cookies. And so do you, Princess.”

They hesitated, exchanging glances again.

“It’s one night, guys,” he pointed out. “One night of dancing, drinks, and mingling with some old friends. It’s not gonna change the world.”
Music Reference:
When it rains - Paramore 2007
所需的文本内容在这里。
instructions,” he said, and then scowled, grip tightening until juice began seeping into his gloves. “And I have no idea how it works. I thought that if I had the actual machine in front of me, I could make sense of the notes and research, but it’s all… useless. There are no design specs, no… Just heaps of research on what it does.”

“Yeah, well… much as I hate to say it, buddy, the Resistance was lookin’ into this for thirteen years before you and never found a thing,” Sonic pointed out. “I know you don’t think much of ’em, but are you really surprised you can’t do better in what, a day and a half?”

“Kinda,” he said, and Sonic snorted. Tails ignored him, frustration taking over. “My only explanation is that someone else designed it. Eggman’s too lazy for this kind of brilliance! I can work out Eggman’s newest machines in the time it takes me to open them, and this is old! Outdated! I should’ve been able to fix this faster than his security system!”

Sonic picked up the fruit basket and walked back to the couch with a fond smirk. Tails glared at him in return. “It’s not fair! I can hack anything Eggman can make, I can disarm any bomb he builds, but the one thing that would really make a difference, that would actually save affected lives, and I can’t do a thing! It’s like he did it on purpose! Just to make sure I know how utterly useless I am when it matters!”

He flopped back with folded arms and a pout, and Sonic waited a beat, sitting down quietly before asking, “Feel better?”

“No,” he said sulkily.

“Are you done, though?”

“With the research or complaining?”

“Complaining.”

“Yeah,” he grouched, and Sonic grinned.

“Cool. ’Cause you know Eggman and Robotnik aren’t really the same person, right?”

He stared at that. “Uhh…”

“In here,” he said, tapping his head. “Eggman changed after he left Mobius. It took him a couple of years, but by the time that whole thing with Chaos happened, Robotnik was pretty dead.”

Tails blinked, not following at all, and Sonic shrugged. “Eggman’s a nutcase, and evil, no mistake… but he’s a villain that has to deal with me. He has to think and build fast, and that makes him sloppy. You’re used to dealing with Eggman designs that get made and built in weeks. Months, maybe. If the stories are to be believed, Robotnik started working on Robotropolis before I was even born. And he’d probably been designing the robotociser for years before that,” he pointed out. “Those initial designs you’re looking for? They’re not gonna be on Mobius. They’re probably back wherever he came from. The human territories somewhere.”

Tails frowned at him for a few seconds, then sighed heavily and looked away. “I don’t think I can fix this without those design specs.”

He shrugged again, focussed on picking an apple out of the pile. “I always figured Mom could do it. And I still figure magic or chaos or something’ll do the job. We’ll work it out.”

“Deal with it, kiddo. So anyway, we’re all going out to this club I know. You in?”

He made a face. “What kind of club is it?”

“Don’t worry, minors are okay,” he said around a mouthful of apple. “Strongest drink they’ve got is nectar.”

“Well… yeah, okay. I could use the break.”

“Smart man,” he said, nudging his arm. “Think we can drag Knuckles out?”

“To a club? A dance club?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, you’re right. Not without Rouge, anyway,” he agreed, then shrugged. “Ah well, I’ll ask him anyway. Hell might freeze over yet.”

Tails snorted but didn’t answer, just settled back against the couch to finish his orange. As lousy a few days as this had all been, hanging out with Sonic like this still made everything feel like it would be okay.

Hell didn’t freeze over, and so Knuckles bid the group goodbye when they left the guest wing. Aside from not being overly fond of bright lights and loud music, the fact Cyrus had turned them down to do more chaos research was giving Knuckles many different varieties of bad feelings.

He didn’t get it. The idiot had made it very clear he didn’t approve of chaos energy, but now that it was built into machines, rather than a natural gem…

“Idiot,” he muttered, crossing the main hall for the servant’s hallway instead.

Not that he could talk. He was a guardian of chaos, and here he was, spending over a week in a city that didn’t have any. Sonic and his friends were the first sources of notable chaos he’d encountered since getting here, and even they were…

His conscious thoughts trailed off as he focussed on that. Normally, Sonic was one of the strongest chaos sources he could sense, aside from the emeralds. But now he thought about it, he couldn’t feel Sonic’s usual spiky presence. Trying for it, he could still tell where Sonic and the others were – they’d already made it to the hangar. But he had to focus.

He’d known Sonic was tired, but he was obviously hiding it better than Knuckles thought, if that was his chaos level.

Or… A glint of silver flashed over his mind’s eye, and a memory of three years ago, of that same glint of silver and a hand reaching down to pull him from death. He frowned at the thought, then shook his head. The air pollution was getting to him.

He stopped by the kitchens, and was happy to find that Amy spending time with them yesterday had apparently made him a welcome intrusion, but not one that needed to stick around. He was given a towering plate of food and allowed to head on his way.

Those kitchens, he had to admit, were almost worth the rest of this place.
As he headed back to his room, he wondered how long he would have to stay, now Sonic was in town. He’d already been here so long – he really did need to be getting back to the island. It did feel like he should be here, at least until Mane-for-Brains stopped messing around with chaos energy with Tails, but it wasn’t like he was doing anything useful.

According to Sonia, the streets were oddly crowded for Mobotropolis. Tails and Amy didn’t believe it, since they barely passed a dozen people per block, but that only amused Sonic more.

To them, the groups of three or four people lurking in every dark corner, quiet sounds of conversation and the pumping of machines underground felt like the standard dark alleys of your average city. But as much as Sonic wished he didn’t, he could remember the days when seeing anyone on the streets after dark was a bad sign.

Which had given rise to places like Cookies. He led the way to a huge iron pipe with a crack large enough for Big the Cat to fit through. Something heavy was pounding inside, and you could feel the heat pouring out of it. Manic visibly relaxed as he smiled at it. “Man, I cannot believe Cookies is still a thing.”

“Yeah, I ran into her yesterday,” Sonic said as he led the way inside. “She only runs the upstairs bar these days, though.”

“Aw, I would’ve liked to have said hi.”

“Um,” Amy piped up, even as she followed Sonic. “What… is this place?”

“It’s a club,” Sonia explained. “One of our old hangouts, actually – when we were part of the Resistance. Three floors of music, food, and drink. You’ll love it.”

Manic nodded enthusiastically. “The only downside was the bouncer never let a thief out without a search.”

“Crying shame, that is,” Sonic called back to him.

Manic laughed as they all followed Sonic down to a metal grate pathway that emerged out of the drain water, lit by tiny safety lights. They continued on, the pounding getting almost unbearably loud, until they came to the source: a huge water pipe that cross-sectioned with theirs, the waterfall cutting off their path completely.

Sonic only glanced back at Manic once before they went to opposite sides of the waterfall and grabbed the matching handles that were almost hidden in the darkness. As they pulled them down, a huge metal sheet swung into place, separating the waterfall to create a pathway through.

“Careful, it’s slippery,” Manic yelled over the pounding water, and they all hurried through. On the other side, he and Sonic pushed another set of handles, and the sheet slid away again.

Once they were far enough away to speak, he caught Amy and Tails’ confused looks and explained, “Music was illegal, and technically so were parties and bars. Cookies survived the war because of that waterfall.”

“Only place to never get raided once,” Sonic said, sounding oddly proud. “But I gotta say, I was
kinda weirded out when I heard it was still behind this. Why not move it upstairs, y’know?”

Sonia shrugged. “Not many people have, yet. Why fix what isn’t broken, I guess.”

“That’s a theory,” Sonic acknowledged, and left it there.

Slowly, the pounding was replaced with the loud, cheerful sounds of music and conversation, and they began to see people hanging around the lights. The closer they got, the more even Sonia seemed to relax, her confident stride turning into more of a slow trot. Almost a skip. Amy and Tails couldn’t help stare at the change, but if Sonic noticed it, he didn’t say anything until they neared the end of the hallway, guarded by a massive rhino with biceps that almost literally bulged.

“Yo, Tony! This place still know how to party?”

The rhinoceros narrowed his eyes, tilting his head slightly. “Well, well, as I live and breathe. Three royal piglets come out to play?”

“Hedgies,” Sonic replied with a charming grin. “The correct diminutive is ‘hedgies’. Or hoglets, if we’re getting technical.”

“You think you can come here and give me sass, boy? You think I care who you are?” the rhinoceros boomed, unfolding his arms and making everyone but Sonic lean back slightly.

“Yeah, well,” Sonic said. “The things is, once you’ve seen a guy with a piñata stuck on his horn, sass comes pretty naturally when dealing with him, y’know?”

The rhinoceros glowered at him, then shifted his gaze to Manic, who immediately snapped on an innocent grin.

“Hi… Tony… how you been?”

“You straight as they say these days?”

“As an arrow,” he promised.

The rhinoceros’ eyes lowered to the pockets of Manic’s jacket, and the bag on his hip. Then they slowly did a survey of the rest of the group, before returning to Sonic. “This ain’t exactly a royal soiree, y’know.”

“Oh, snap,” Sonic deadpanned. “My night is ruined. Can we go in now?”

He continued scowling for a moment, then shifted off to the side, revealing a door behind him. “No skivving free drinks,” he said, and pushed open the door. Manic grabbed Amy’s hand and yanked her through, and Sonia hurried after. Tails was the only one left behind to see Tony slap Sonic upside the spines as he passed, making the hedgehog stumble. “Good to see you ain’t changed.”

“You know, I think you’re the first person to say that,” Sonic noted as he smoothed his spines back down, glaring playfully.

“Wont’ be the last. Y’know, you keep flashing that attitude around, and maybe things might calm down a little. Hope for the monarchy, and all that.”

Sonic shrugged as he reached out to pull Tails through the door. “You have a good one, Tony.”

He gave a small salute before closing the door behind them, and Tails looked up at Sonic, unsurprised to see his smile fading. “Old friend?”
“I wouldn’t go that far,” he said. “Tony’s borderline anarchist. Had some weird ideas, before I met Sonia and Manic. Less weird afterward.”

Tails nodded slowly, but didn’t say anything as they walked the last few steps out of the tunnel. They had to push past a few people, but eventually they joined the others on the mezzanine of the bar proper, and finally looked down at what the city hid so well.

It was a multi-story circular hall, the middle level they were on one of three balconies overlooking the main floor below. A raised stage in the middle was the centrepiece of the club, where a loud vaudeville band was currently blasting trumpet music for the overcrowded dance floor. Surrounding it were six different bars, each one boasting a different type of delicious food or drink.

“Before I left Mobius that first time,” Sonic said as he leaned on the railing, grinning down at the crowd, “this was my favourite place to hang out.”

“It looks like so much fun!” Amy cried, clapping her hands. And it did. It wasn’t the busiest club any of them had ever seen, but it was more people than Tails had seen since arriving in Mobotropolis, and everyone was laughing, dancing, talking, or just obviously having fun. And the music, obnoxiously cheerful as it was, filled every inch with energy.

They just gazed around for a few moments, taking it in, before Sonic abruptly straightened. “Ooh,” he said, and then disappeared, only a few shrieks and the shifting of the crowd telling them he’d sprinted through it and apparently down to one of the bars.

“Sonic!” Amy cried, too late, but hadn’t even moved when she realised Manic was still holding her hand. She blinked at it, then up at him, and he smiled shyly.

“Um… Wanna dance?”

“Uh…” She glanced at Tails, who raised his eyebrows, and then over in the direction Sonic had disappeared. There was no sign of him in the crowd. She huffed, then spun back to Manic, holding her chin high. “Yes, Manic, I would. Let’s go!” she said, and promptly began dragging him toward the nearest set of stairs for the dance floor.

Tails and Sonia just stared after them, then back at each other, realising that left them alone. After an awkward moment, Sonia smiled and gestured after them all. “Want to go check out the band?”

“Sure… I guess,” he said, and tried not to look as awkward as he felt. They’d talked the night before, and it had been okay, but she still kind of made him feel nervous. Like she was trying to find answers to questions he didn’t know.

But as they walked through the crowd, Tails forgot to be worried about her, shifting closer to her side. Hanging out with Sonic over the years, he’d kind of gotten used to the way people would pretend not to stare, but walking with Sonia was different. The people that noticed her did the normal double-take, but while Sonic’s fans always tried to be too cool to care about his presence (while secretly trying to watch his every move), this crowd actually stopped and watched her walk past. Sonia pretended not to notice it, but she’d regained the confident strut from before, and thrust out her chest like it was leading her. She was wearing an outfit Tails had never seen before—jeans and a sparkly, wide-sleeved shirt that showed off her shoulders and stomach—but with the way she held herself, he suddenly realised that she could have been wearing the dust-covered cleaning clothes from earlier and still would have made everyone else feel undressed.

Beyond his tails, Tails had never thought much about how people looked. Amy said he was too young to understand, but even she only cared enough to brush her quills down and change her dress
every so often. Sonia was on a whole different level. Whenever she stopped moving, she’d shift into what he could only think of as a pose, and for the first time, he wished he could do it too. It felt like armour.

They reached a spot that seemed empty even without people backing away from them, where they could just see the band. For a few seconds, they stood awkwardly, before Tails reminded himself Sonia was just a person and forced himself to relax. “So, do you like this kind of music?”

She blinked, startled, then laughed. “I like all music! But this isn’t my favourite. Big band instruments have never really appealed.”

“Big band?”

“Oh, uh, brass. Trumpets, trombones,” she explained, pointing them out. “Keyboards and guitars are much more my style.”

“I don’t know much about music,” he admitted. “I only know what Sonic plays, really.”

“Lots of guitars, then.”

He shook his head. “Just the one. He tried to teach me trumpet, and he started showing me piano before we left.”

“Piano?” she repeated. “Really?”

“Yeah. I think I like it better, but I’m not as good at it,” he said. “That’s your instrument, right?”

Almost unconsciously, she reached up and touched her medallion. It was a perfect cut of a keyboard, rounded into a semi-circle. “Did Sonic tell you that?”

“Yeah! And even before he did, he does this thing, when he plays piano – always mentions your name. I think it reminds him of you.”

She blinked, then turned forward, gazing at the band quietly. Tails didn’t mind – he’d never really thought much of the habit before he learned about Sonia, but he could understand why it might be special to her. Besides, ignoring the crowd was proving a bit harder than he’d thought. The mood of the club was shifting as more people became aware of them, people becoming more focussed, almost concerned by their presence. The people around them were openly staring now, and being quite blatant about the fact they were talking about Sonia. To her credit, when she noticed, she just smiled and moved into a particularly flattering pose, even as she looked down at Tails. “Let’s go find the others.”

“Y-yeah…”

Unfortunately, it seemed the dance floor was much the same. Amy and Manic were just coming off it as they came close, both looking awkward. As soon as they were close enough to speak, Manic sighed and pushed his hands back over his quills. “And this is why I don’t go out very often.”

“I have to admit,” Sonia said, looking around at the crowd, all of who quickly looked away before she could meet their gaze, “at least the upper classes are polite enough to include me in the conversation when they judge us.”

Amy and Tails exchanged awkward glances, but couldn’t really say anything. It wasn’t their problem, and they certainly didn’t know how to handle it.
Just when they thought it couldn’t get any worse, the music suddenly stopped, as if to emphasise the problem. After a beat, the crowd seemed to realise that was strange and looked around, an audible gasp rippling through them all as a familiar blue hedgehog jumped up on stage. In typical fashion, Sonic was just amiably chatting with the band, apparently completely unaware of the fact his actions had stopped the whole club in its tracks.

Then, without any obvious warning, the accordion player shoved her instrument into Sonic’s torso, and the band all laughed at whatever he said in return. They spoke for another few seconds, until Sonic shrugged and tried a few awkward notes that earned yet another laugh, until he either stopped messing around or found his rhythm, settling into a rocking tune and sounding altogether too practiced for someone who rarely played instruments. After a few beats, the band started swaying along with it, obviously finding the rhythm, and the former accordion player began to sing.

“A gargantuan hole in the bow,” she began, “will the ocean to enter allow. Oh, but more the sin than letting it in, is it’s letting our good fortune out!”

Tails and Amy exchanged glances again, this time confused, as around them, the crowd seemed to settle a little, the return of the music apparently calming them down even as they continued to stare.

“The nest to the storm did succumb,” a girl with a violin sang back, “as the crow hid his fear in the rum. But the mast, it broke and threw out the bloke and well, now, he’s surely my chum!”

Manic snorted, as did many of the people around him, as everyone in the band whose mouth wasn’t occupied by an instrument joined in. “’Cause this ship’s going down! All on account of the weather. Though we’ll drown, there’s no need to frown, ’cause we’re all going together!”

The trumpet and all the other instruments were lowered as Sonic spun on his heel, dancing across the stage with the two singers, all three of them grinning as they swayed together. The crowd began swaying too, caught up in the music.

Sonia huffed out an amused breath, folding her arms over her waist. “He’s still got it.”

Tails blinked. “Hm?”

“Sonic,” she said, gesturing to the stage. “Give him a spotlight and watch the world change.”

“Bet you that by the time this song’s over, no one gives a damn that we’re here,” Manic agreed, and then reached out to touch Amy’s wrist again. “Should we try again?”

“Oh, but… I…” She gazed up at the stage, obviously wanting to keep watching, but a single glance at Manic apparently broke her resolve. “O-okay.”

As he pulled her back onto the dance floor, where people were slowly beginning to move again, Tails watched with a curious look, before going back to Sonia. “Is this that magic Manic told Amy about the other day? The music that can influence people?”

“I’m never sure,” she said, still staring up at her brother. “This doesn’t feel like it, but… something like this.”

“And I won’t say ‘woe is me’ as I disappear into the sea. ‘Cause I am in good company and we’re all going together.” The band drifted into another solo for Sonic, though he was talking to the band under the music, earning grins and laughter due to whatever he was saying. As the girls came together for another verse, they were both struggling not to giggle throughout it.

“I was sinking down into the brine when a curious sight caught my eye: Seaman Shaft had found
him a raft and was making a speedy goodbye! At the risk of sounding absurd, I have always been good as my word. So a sea-pick I lanced into his eye and I knocked his butt overboard!”

Sonic was probably the only person on stage not to burst out laughing at that, though he grinned all the same, and lead the way into the chorus while everyone else was recovering, “Cause this ship’s going down! All on account of the weather. Though we’ll drown, there’s no need to frown, ’cause we’re all going together!”

“And I won’t say woe is me,” a single voice rang out, all the instruments and other singers fading away. Tails and Sonia were one of the few still watching the stage, and so able to clearly see that it was Sonic. “As I disappear into the sea… Because you’ve all been so good to me and we’re all going together!”

The band joined in for the last note, leading up into a crescendo, before one of the other metal horns immediately picked up a new, bouncier tune, and the violinist swung her bow like a sword, launching into new lyrics. “Our Chaozin cook, he grabbed he could took. He said ’no storm is stoppin’ me!”

While the band and club rallied around the new song, Sonic handed the accordion back to the girl, leaning in to speak into her ear. She grinned back, giving him a thumb’s up, and he jumped off the stage with a wave. A second later, he was standing beside Tails, one hand over his torso and a slightly pained look in his eyes. “Sonia. Beloved sister. Beautiful lady. Tell me you have money I can use.”

She blinked, then smirked and set a hand on her hip. “Was that you trying to sing for your supper?”

“Little bit,” he confessed. “But I have to wait if I want Keys to buy me dinner. And I’m starving now.”

Tails snickered, but Sonia just sighed and lifted a hand in exasperation. “I suppose I can help you out. Your song was, after all, excellently timed.”

“Huh?”

She just winked and beckoned him to follow her over to one of the bars. “You never pay attention to what’s happening around you. People were getting all worked up that we were here, and then you started playing. And this happened,” she said, gesturing to the dancing crowd as they squeezed into an empty space at the bar. “I’m never sure whether to call it a coincidence or just wonderful timing.”

Sonic just winked at Tails, who narrowed his eyes, not sure what to make of it. Sonic was clearly working up into one of his odd, unpredictable moods. He wondered how Sonia would deal with it.

“Princess! Welcome!” a large chicken behind the bar stepped in close to hear her. “How can I help you?”

She smiled like he’d just made her day. “A tofu dog for me, a chilli dog for the black hole beside me, and…” She glanced down at Tails, who flinched, then jumped to answer.

“Ch- chilli dog is fine.”

“With cheese,” Sonic interjected. “And three sparkling waters with mint.”

“Was I asking you, Sonic?” the chicken asked, and Sonic grinned.

“You know you love me, Flight.”
“Hmph. Princess?”

She giggled and looked down at Tails again. “Do you like sparkling mint water?”

He nodded, exchanging amused glances with Sonic. If Sonic had been ordering for himself, it would have been some complicated fruit drink that probably came with an umbrella – mint was Tails’ preference. “Yes, please.”

“Then sure, that sounds great. But can you make it five glasses, and can we take a table?”

“I’ll bring it out,” the chicken promised, and Sonia handed over some green notes before leading the way away from the bar. Tails slipped up beside Sonic as they walked.

“So that was you singing? After the big deal you made of it, I thought you’d sound like a dying cat!”

“Hey, hey, you know me. I’m always modest,” he said, flicking his hand up near his cheek. “I just didn’t want it to sound like I was bragging, y’know?”

“Yeah, that totally sounds like you,” Tails shot back. “But Sonia was right, it had a really weird effect on people. Before you started, everyone kept staring at us! But as soon as you started playing, it was like they totally forgot there was anything weird going on.”

“Was there something weird going on?” he asked, glancing at Sonia. “Did something happen?”

“He means us coming to the club,” she said, exasperated. “Most people aren’t used to royalty walking around with the common people.”

“Which is lame,” Sonic said, “and why tonight is important. Having fun like normal people is task numero uno!”

“Well, you’re going to have to help me,” she pointed out as they finally found a clear table and sat down. “It’s been a while. Manic has Amy, but you two are all I’ve got.”

“Manic and Amy?” Sonic repeated. “Oh yeah, where’d they go?”

“Dancing. And hopefully a little more,” she said, grinning cheekily for a second before relaxing. “I hope it works out. He really likes her.”

“Wait, what?” asked Tails, and Sonia’s smile turned a little patronising.

“Don’t worry about it, Tails. You’ll get it in a few years.”

That nearly got his hackles up, but Sonic spoke over him before he could snap. “Speaking of, how come you left Stripes behind? He too upper class for this joint?”

She scoffed, leaning back in her seat. “Probably. And besides, he’s in a mood.”

“Huh?”

“It’s… complicated and stupid. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay, cool. Can we talk about Barnaby yet?”

She gave him a deadpan look for a few seconds, then glanced at Tails. “That’s a discussion for different company.”
Tails’ scowl deepened, but Sonic lifted his hands in surrender, obviously agreeing. Before the conversation could continue, the chicken from the bar showed up with their drinks and food. As soon as he’d set them down, he ruffled Sonic’s quills the same way Sonic himself did to Tails’ head fur.

“So where have you been, Hedgehog? You know there’s a rumour going around that you died in that final battle?”

“Sorry to disappoint!” he quipped, pushing the hand away. “I’ve been out in the real world for a few years. But I’m catching up with some folks now, which reminds me – Desiree still hang out around here?”

“Desiree? Sonic, she left town before you did!”

“Oh, you’re kidding me!” he cried, then paused, apparently noticing the mint leaf in his glass for the first time. He plucked it out and dropped it in Tails’ glass, even though Tails had literally just raised it to his lips. He ignored the spluttering that caused as he asked, “What about Gareth?”

“Yeah, he tends the juice bar,” the chicken reported, jerking his head to the left.

Tails was still snuffling, but even he and Sonia looked around instinctively. It was hard to see, but from memory, there had been a bar in that direction. Sonic nodded and took a long drink before standing up. “Thanks. Tell Cookie her club’s as awesome as ever, but she should go legit. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“What about the dogs?” he demanded, and Sonic paused just long enough to grab his chilli dog before giving a peace sign and disappearing back into the crowd. All three of them stared after him, before Sonia smiled up at the chicken.

“It’s nice to know some things haven’t changed, right?”

“From memory, Princess, it was always you walking away from him before,” he pointed out, then gave a short bow. “It’s good to see you out again. Let me know if you need anything else.”

He strode off, and Tails looked back at Sonia. “Who are Gareth and Desiree?”

“I have no idea,” she said, picking up her tofu dog. “I didn’t know most of Sonic’s resistance friends, though. I’d guess one of them.”

A few minutes later, Manic and Amy had come off the dance floor, both panting a little but looking pleased. Tails tried to mentally demand what Amy was doing with Manic, but she either didn’t notice or care, just sinking into the seat opposite him and accepting her drink with a grateful smile. “It’s been a while since I had a dance partner that got tired before I did!”

“Hey, come on, I’m all strength,” Manic said with a laugh. “Give me a car to bench-lift and I’m fine. Stamina’s just a little three years ago.”

She grinned and began chattering away about the club, music, and anything else that caught her attention. Sonia happily joined in, and Manic looked like you couldn’t have distracted him with a bomb, but Tails found his attention wavering. It wasn’t that he didn’t like going to clubs, but usually he was with people he liked, or at least people who didn’t make him feel like the eight year old he knew he was.

So instead he watched the crowd, making ratios in his head to amuse himself. There were more mixes than single-species mobians, by about four to one. Of the single species, rodentia and reptille
Far outnumbered the mammals, and avians were maybe two percent of the clientele. Not surprising, given the pollution. Avians were more susceptible to respiratory difficulty, so it would be hard for them to live healthily in this city.

Maybe that was why this bar had stayed underground – for the cook’s sake. Chickens were harder than your average avian, but it was certainly easier to breathe down here than it was aboveground. But then, that didn’t explain why the entrance was still so concealed. Probably something to do with the same reason the palace staff hadn’t taken down that picture of Robotnik.

He settled back in his chair, unimpressed. Whatever.

“Manic.”

They all flinched as Sonic suddenly appeared behind Manic, one hand on his shoulder, the other holding a notebook and pen. Manic had been drinking, and so promptly choked, until Sonic whacked him on the back.

“Die on your own time, bro. You do construction stuff all the time, right?”

He nodded, still struggling to breathe. “Uh huh.”

“Cool. So, say you were to hire a bunch of people to do the amphitheatre stuff we need doing. How much would you pay ’em?”

“I dunno. The lowest price put to bid for the shortest timeframe,” he said blankly. “It’s not like, hard and fast or anything.”

“Yeah, but estimate-wise. Say they could finish the job before Sunday night. What would you expect?”

They all stared at him, and then Manic, who made a strangled, frustrated noise, and then said, “How many people are we talking? What equipment?”

“Say five,” Sonic said, rolling his wrist vaguely. “Plus a digging thinga-ma-jiggy, one of the ones that push stuff around, and a carrying whats-it. You know, the things that scoop up dirt and move it.”

Manic let out a long breath as he did the mental calculations, then grimaced and snatched the notebook. Squinting in the strobe lights, he wrote down a few numbers, and finally circled the total.

“Why do you –”

“Thank you,” he said, and disappeared. They exchanged blank stares, Sonia slowly straightening in her chair.

“What… was that?”

“He… wouldn’t be…” Manic twisted around to look in the direction Sonic had gone. “He couldn’t, right?”

“No way,” she said. “There’s no way he could’ve found someone.”

“Found someone for what?” asked Tails. “What does the theatre need?”

Manic glanced at him, slight annoyance flashing over his features before he could rein it in.

“Landscaping. Shifting rubble and real trash. Building it, basically. We thought we’d have to wait for Monday at the earliest.”
“I thought you wanted it finished this weekend,” Amy noted, and Tails shrugged.

“People usually do what Sonic asks,” Tails agreed. “When he asks nicely.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

They both shrugged this time. Knuckles usually did it anyway because they’d goad him into it, no one ever expected much of Shadow anyway, and if Sonic wasn’t bothering to be nice or joking about it, both Tails and Amy knew better than to argue. It wasn’t really much of an issue.

Besides, Sonic was back before they could really answer, tapping the notebook against his knuckles. “Can you do ten percent extra for the weekend?” he asked, and Manic gaped at him.

“You… Sonic, what are you doing?”

“Haggling for the thrill of it,” he deadpanned. “Gareth and his crew are kinda flaky, but they’re good for once-off jobs. I’m calling it a favour.”

“S- y- you can’t do that!” Manic cried, spreading his hands at him. “Sonic, the contractors we use went through massive long approval processes just to get the right to make bids on our jobs!”

“Then they should make themselves available on weekends,” he argued. “And at short notice.”

“No! We can’t just like, pick people off the street!”

“I’m not! I’m picking them up in a bar!”

Amy giggled, and Manic looked a little panicked as he cried, “It’s not how the industry works!”

Sonic said something too quietly to be heard over the music, then raised his voice as he refocussed. “Look, do you want the amphitheatre for Sunday night or not? These guys will do the work tomorrow, and if I go hang out with them tomorrow night, they’ll even spread the word about the new kick-off point for Sunday. It’s a sweet deal, we should take it!”

Just to see how she was reacting to it, Tails looked at Sonia, and was surprised to see she was just watching, eyes flicking between her brothers appraisingly. Manic shoved a hand through his hair, stared wildly around the bar for a few seconds, then fell back in his seat, defeated. “Sure! Why not? Ten extra. I’ll even project manage.”

“Way to go on the decision-making, bro’. Very forceful,” he said, and slapped Manic on the back before vanishing again.

“Well, with that out of the way, I’m ready to dance again. Come on, Tails,” Amy said, and Tails barely had time to flinch before she had lashed out and was dragging him up over the table, forcing him to either fly or put his foot in their drinks. He dropped back down just as quickly though, glancing around to make sure no one had seen.

Luckily there was a dance circle forming, and Amy was content to shimmy on the sidelines, so Tails was allowed to just clap along as he watched the more skilled dancers and thank his lucky stars. No one paid the slightest bit of attention to him, which was just the way he liked it.

By the time they got back to the table, Sonic had returned, this time with a raccoon and tanuki that he was introducing to his siblings. “—Gareth and Tetsuya. Oh, and hey, this is Tails and Amy,” he added as they walked up.
“Hey,” the tanuki greeted them, while the raccoon shook Manic’s hand.

“Always wanted to meet the Thief Prince. Thanks for the job. I was just telling Tetsu here – all we need is one big job, and the work’ll take right off, you know?”

“You haven’t been getting any?” Sonia asked, shooting Sonic a look, and Tetsuya shrugged.

“To be honest, there isn’t much to go around. You know how it is, Princess. Everyone’s waiting for a plan.”

Sonic was still smiling as he leaned over and said in Tails’ ear, “If I have to hear something like that one more time this week, I’m gonna explode.”

“If you decide to take it out on another building, can I put my vote in for the palace?” he asked, just loud enough to be heard over the music, and Sonic laughed.

Back at the table, Gareth was gesturing toward the stairs. “Hey, so, can we talk about this project some more? Sonic was kinda vague on the details.”

“Sure,” Manic said as he stood up. “Let’s go upstairs, it’s like, way too distracting down here.”

With a wave at the rest of them, he led the way back toward the stairs, and Sonia watched them go before turning on Sonic. “What have you signed us up for? They haven’t been working, and you give them our first project together? Are you nuts?”

“It’s just pushing dirt around, it’ll be fine!” Sonic insisted. “And like he said, it’s not that they’ve been overlooked, there’s just nothing going on.”

“Sonic –!”

“Guys! Enough business!” Amy interjected, reaching out to grab both their arms. “We’re out on a good night! Let’s all go dance!”

“Yeah! Now that’s a plan!” Sonic agreed, and slung his free arm around Tails’ neck. “We came here to party! Let’s rock and roll!”

“This music doesn’t sound like rock and roll to me,” Tails pointed out, even as he was dragged back out on the dance floor. “How do you even dance to this?”

“Same way you dance to everything, Tails!” Sonic announced, and broke free of Amy’s arm to spin away from both of them, up onto his toes with a hand on his head, before kicking out his foot, heel to toe, and then went into another spin, ending with arms spread and a cocky grin. “With style.”

“Such a ham,” Sonia observed, only to shriek when he grabbed her up and dragged her into a fast, almost dangerous looking foxtrot, but she quickly caught up, grinning broadly. “Sonic Hedgehog, you’re crazy!”

Amy clapped her hands, but only got a few seconds before Sonic and Sonia broke apart, Sonic snatching up Amy while Sonia grabbed Tails’ hands, both of them forced into twirls and dances they barely knew. Despite himself, Tails found himself laughing, and just going with it anyway.

As always seemed to happen, they gained an audience, and while Tails always expected Sonic to soak it up, he was surprised when Sonia did too, throwing cheeky smiles and extra flare to her movements. Tails was grateful when Amy suddenly shoved away from Sonic with a laugh, allowing Tails to pull back too. “Will you two just have a dance-off already?”
“Aw, I dunno,” Sonic said, setting a hand on his hip as he grinned at Sonia. “I don’t think my sister’s up for that kinda challenge.”

“Oh, okay, not bad,” Sonic proclaimed as she came to a stop, arms up in the air and basking in the applause. He held out both hands as he walked forward, as if to calm the masses. “I’ll grant you that was pretty good. For someone who hasn’t heard real music in two years.”

“Yeah!” the crowd called, and Sonia scoffed, folding her arms over her chest. “And you can do better, Mister World Traveller? How much dancing have you done in the wilds of the outside?”

They traded off twice more before Sonic declared he had to concede for chivalry reasons, promptly got smacked for the insult, and was allowed to disappear off the dance floor. Amy and Tails followed once it was clear Sonia had enough people to occupy her attention where she was.

By this point, Tails had worked out what he was doing, and so didn’t bother following. He had no interest in being pawned off on someone Sonic thought he’d hit it off with. He waited instead, listening to Keys just long enough to be sure Sonic would have thought he was distracted, then went searching.

After a few minutes, Tails eventually found Sonic in the shadows of the highest balcony, leaning on the railing with his head balanced on his folded arms. Knowing he’d hide it if he was asked about it, Tails just quietly joined him, holding onto the railing and peering down at the crowd.

“I’m gonna bail,” Sonic said finally. His voice was a little shakier than it had been downstairs, and Tails didn’t think it was from how loudly they’d had to speak over the music. “Can you tell the others for me?”
“Sure,” he said, and glanced at him. “So, tell me the truth. Did you want to come out tonight just so you could set up that thing with Gareth?”

Sonic didn’t move straight away, but he eventually rocked his head to the side so Tails could see his grin. “Little bit. Though dancing with Sonia was a great bonus.”

Tails laughed, but how tired Sonic really looked made him stop pretty quickly. “You really look like you could use a power ring.”

“I wouldn’t say no if you’ve got one,” he said, and pushed himself upright. “Keep an eye on Amy for me, will ya? I’ll see you back at the ranch.”

“Okay,” he said quietly, and watched him go, unable to shake the feeling that something just wasn’t right.

“With all due respect, your majesty, this is a terrible idea.”

Aleena smiled serenely, and Paige just barely managed to rein her panicked flailing into a polite offering of the newspaper. “Today should be about damage control, not risk.”

“The captain returns to go down with his ship,” Aleena read as she took the newspaper. “The Lost Prince proclaims Mobius a lost cause through song. My, my.”

“I appreciate that you wish the Lost Prince to be a part of the royal court,” Paige said carefully. “But today is not the day to introduce him to it. I guarantee you the court will be filled with reporters and gossips; every eye will be on him, there will be no room for mistake.”

“How very true,” she said, and continued down the hall, reading as she walked. “Oh, look at this. Three separate articles. And half the opinion columns. Oh, my.”

“They went to a nightclub, your majesty,” Paige said, desperately trying to make her understand. “Royal children have no place in such undignified establishments – especially not among the common people. Perhaps, if they had hired it, with exclusive access, then –”

“Paige, if I may,” Aleena interrupted, “I feel I must interject.”

Paige fell obediently silent, and Aleena gave her a very particular smile. It said Aleena knew exactly how close to panic Paige felt, that her professional demeanour was fooling no one, and she certainly wasn’t impressing her queen. It was incredibly humbling.

“I spent the better part of thirteen years running through the underworld, as did my sons. All three children spent a great deal of time and effort on developing establishments such as nightclubs as part of morale building during the final year of the war,” she pointed out calmly. “Please keep that in mind when you use phrases such as ‘undignified establishments’.”

The servants striding along behind them had to admit to being impressed at the way Paige rallied under the rebuff. “Have we not spent the last thirty months trying to remind the citizenry that the war is over?”

“You imply, with that statement, that we should pretend it did not occur,” she noted. “That we are
not the people we were during that time.”

“You’re saying you condone this behaviour?” Paige asked incredulously. “The Lost Prince made a deal—forced the Thief Prince to engage in business—with a fourth class digger! He tricked the princess into dancing with a *milkman*!”

“So this article suggests,” Aleena agreed. “Oh, look, a quote from the man in question. It seems he was unable to believe who she was, until he was later told.”

Paige grit her teeth but didn’t say anything. The queen was clearly in one of her ambiguous moods, where it was impossible to know what she was thinking and even harder to convince her of anything. Still, she’d announced her decision to have Sonic at court today, regardless of his plans, and they were on their way to the casual dining hall, implying she was going to put her foot down with him in some way or another. Paige would take what she could get.

When they entered the hall, it was to find Sonic, Amy and Stripes all eating already, with Sonia standing at the head of the table as she gushed about how much pain she was in. “—haven’t danced like that in years! I just want to go back in time and tell past me not to wear heels! What was I thinking?” She stopped when she realized who was coming through the door, and straightened up with a broad smile. “Good morning, mother! You don’t usually breakfast with us.”

“Good morning,” she greeted, and nodded to Sonic, who saluted her with his fork. Amy, who had shrunk back in her chair almost as soon as the door opened, smiled nervously and folded her hands in her lap. Paige had to give the girl points for respecting the queen’s status, and felt a sliver of satisfaction when Sonia’s smile disappeared at the sight of the newspaper. Aleena held it where they could all see the headline. “I’m afraid I am not here to eat with you.”

“Oh, no,” Sonia murmured, pressing a hand to her chest. “I didn’t even think… Mother, I am so sorry.”

“I think perhaps we should wait for Manic,” Aleena said, and started moving around the table. Sonia sank into a seat beside Stripes, and Aleena took the chair she’d been standing behind. “Where is your brother?”

“Sleeping late, when I went past his room,” Sonic said around a mouthful of eggs. Paige gave him a long look, then turned and strode over to stand against the wall behind him, where she wouldn’t have to look at him directly. In many ways, he was very similar to his mother, and that was a little infuriating, given his attitude.

Stripes hesitated, glancing at Sonia, then cleared his throat and nodded to Aleena. “If it pleases you, your majesty, I believe I should excuse myself.”

“Oh?” Aleena prompted.

“This seems a family matter,” he said, and she inclined her head.

“Indeed it does. Thank you for understanding.”

He got up and bowed, and didn’t so much as glance at Sonia before marching out of the room. Amy shifted awkwardly before starting to get up. “I guess I should —”

“Please stay, if you would, Miss Rose,” Aleena said, her voice gently commanding. “You will be mentioned in this discussion, and I would have you know about it.”

She dropped back into her chair in silence, looking very small. Sonic looked at her sideways, but
didn’t say anything, and Sonia only offered her a tiny smile before glumly pouring herself a coffee. After maybe a minute, the door opened again and Manic stepped through, looking tired, though he froze mid-yawn when he saw Aleena. His eyes flicked to the newspaper in front of her, and his entire body seemed to slump. He took the last few steps to his chair like a walk to the gallows.

“Now we are all here, I hope you all understand why I felt the need to speak with you,” Aleena said quietly. “As you can see, your outing last night made the paper. As did the amphitheatre, but that is a lesser article on page four, rather than the headline. And it is quite a headline. ‘The captain returns to go down with his ship.’ Initial thoughts, Sonic?”

“Some people take lyrics way too literally?” he suggested, and she narrowed her eyes before going back to the article.

“The Lost Prince continues to send shock waves throughout Mobius this week, leading the Sonic Underground in a return to their roots in the underground nightclubs of Mobotropolis,” she read. “The unprecedented outing marked the prince’s third public appearance, one of many shocking activities since his return on Wednesday night. The prince’s unorthodox behaviour has many royal critics wondering if his actions are representative of a new path the palace wishes to take, or if this is confirmation of the Lost Prince’s rumoured ties to anarchist groups.”

Sonia and Manic both looked at him worriedly, and Amy started twisting a napkin in her lap, looking awkward. Sonic picked up his drink and sat back in his chair, the very image of confidence. “And people keep telling me the world doesn’t revolve around me.”

“Oh, no, not just you, Sonic,” Aleena said, flicking the paper slightly. “In a far cry from her usual aloof style, the Princess of the Rebellion spent several hours on the dance floor. Dressed in a shirt to display her flank, the princess danced with numerous patrons, many of whom later confirmed they had never met any of the Sonic Underground before.

“I didn’t even recognise her, at first,” one dancer reported. ‘I always thought the royal family were too good to talk to someone like me, so I thought it couldn’t be her. She was too normal. Princesses don’t dance with milkmen.’” Aleena looked down the table at Sonia. “Paige is quite concerned about that.”

“I didn’t know what any of them did for a living,” she said, blushing bright red. “I just thought they were good dancers.”

“Hold on, are you seriously upset about that?” asked Manic. “You’re telling us off for hanging out with normal people?”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then read another paragraph. “Possibly the most concerning aspect of the night was the Thief Prince engaged in discussion with several men known by authorities for their outspoken beliefs against the palace. Although witnesses claim most of the discussions to have been ‘harmless shop talk’, at least one group was contracted to work on a last-minute palace project. Critics are divided on whether this should be considered a back-alley deal, or if it is much-needed outreach to a previously ignored sector of the Mobotropolitan populace.”

Manic stared at her for a second, then gaped at Sonic. “Gareth’s anti-royal?”

Sonic met his gaze evenly, but didn’t comment before looking back at Aleena. “Anything else?”

“Indeed. There’s a reference to a society article in the back of the paper,” she said, and paused to rifle through the pages and find it. “Ah, here we are. It’s a debate over which prince was courting the pretty young thing they arrived at the club with.”
Amy squeaked, and Manic cringed. “Oh boy. Sorry, Amy.”

Aleena smiled kindly before going back to the paper. “But let us return to the front page. The final paragraph rather sums it up, I think,” she said, and then read, “Thirty months of troubled recovery following thirteen years of terror has certainly given Mobius a lot to think about. The return of the Lost Prince, the true hero of the rebellion, is giving us more still. Is this a turning point for the Council of Four, finally making good on their promise to lead Mobius into the light? Or has the prince’s return heralded the beginning of the end? Whatever the outcome, the patrons of Cookies tell us that at least we are finally ‘in good company, and all going together’. Very stirring.”

“Yeah, that’s why I sang it,” Sonic deadpanned. “I’m not seeing the problem.”

Paige bit her tongue, and looked to Aleena, who gazed at Sonic quietly for a moment before folding the paper and setting it down. “No?”

“We went to a club,” he said. “Manic hooked up with some guys that were looking for work, and they agreed to do it. Sonia let loose for the first time in two years. And yeah, I joined the band for a song about going down with a ship, but I didn’t pick the lyrics. We had a fun night out, and the media ran with it. That’s what reporters do.”

“You don’t see a problem with them suggesting you might be planning the downfall of your mother’s kingdom?” she asked mildly, and he shook his head.

“I’m not. And I don’t care what people say about me.”

“But they suggested it,” Sonia said darkly. “Which means people will be thinking it.”

“And since when is it a bad thing to let people think?” he asked.

She tsked. “Don’t be childish. You know that’s not what we mean.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I do,” he said, and sat back in his chair, arms folded over his chest. “You ever think that maybe the reason people don’t trust you is because you don’t talk to them?”

“What are you talking about? I spend half my life talking to people,” Sonia argued. “Mother literally spends ten hours a day overseeing politics.”

“That ain’t talkin’ to people. That’s politics. And you talk to aristocrats, not people,” he said. “And from what I hear, you don’t talk so much as walk on eggshells.”

“And what would you know about it?” she demanded. “Today was going to be the first day you’ve even been to court. You don’t know what it’s like!”

“Oh,” Aleena interrupted, and Paige blinked, the words filtering through. “Sonic, you were planning to attend court today?”

He and Sonia looked over, then back at each other, before he sighed and sank down a little in his chair. “Yeah, kinda.”

“Excellent,” she said, lacing her hands over the newspaper. “You understand, of course, that given this article, and others like it, court today will be far more aggressive than usual, and you will likely be the centre of attention quite regularly.”

Standing behind him, Paige couldn’t see Sonic’s face, but one of his ears flicked in and out of view. It looked almost like a tick.
“Hey, you know me; I love the spotlight,” he said cheerfully. “Bring it on. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Let's Dance to Joy Division - The Wombats 2007
also This Ship's Going Down and To the bottom of the sea by Voltaire 2008
Manic finished piling supplies into his truck, then turned, one hand still on the flatbed as he frowned at her. “You sure you don’t want me to come?”

“Don’t be silly,” Sonia said, folding her arms over her waist. “You hate court.”

“Yeah, but it’s like, really gonna suck today, and it’s Sonic’s first time,” he said, watching her carefully. “You might need someone in your corner.”

She smiled fondly, but didn’t bother entertaining the idea. “You have to meet the workers. Make sure they know what they’re doing and follow all the plans. And tell them to go home if things go badly with the royal contractors,” she added with a grimace.

“It will,” he said darkly, and she gently kicked his ankle.

“Then you better get as much done as possible before I get kicked out of court.”

He winked, and they both looked over to where Sonic, Knuckles and Amy were walking up, Sonic carrying a huge crate of cleaning supplies stolen from the janitorial staff.

“I still think this is a horrible idea,” Amy was saying, waving a finger in point. “I went to court the other day. It’s boring. And you have the attention span of a flea.”

“I can at least manage the same as a five year old,” Sonic retorted. “And besides, I’ll be fine. I spent two weeks in Camelot; it’ll be like riding a bike!”

“Camelot? I can’t believe you’re still trying to sell that story!” she cried. “I’m never going to believe you.”

“Since when have I been creative enough to come up with stuff like that?” He shoved the crate into the back of the truck and stepped back with a loud breath. “I swear that thing’s heavier than it should be.”

“Weak,” Knuckles commented, and Sonic punched his arm. That only made him laugh. “Really weak.”

Manic ignored the interaction, turning to Amy with a hopeful smile. “Do you want to come out to the site this morning?”

“Oh, well, I was going to go out to Gray Mountain with Knuckles, but…” She hesitated, glancing at Knuckles, and he shrugged.

“It’ll be faster on my own. Caves are my thing,” he reminded her.
“If you’re sure…” she said slowly, then smiled at Manic. “Then yeah, it certainly gives me something to do!”

“Great!” he said brightly, then coughed and leaned his weight back. “I mean… that’s cool. Cool, thanks.”

Sonic slammed the back of the flatbed shut fast enough to make Manic flinch away from it, but he was still smiling as he lifted a hand and turned away. “You crazy kids have fun. We goin’, sis?”

Sonia frowned at the back of his head, then shrugged and nodded to the other three. “We’ll come to the site after luncheon. Knuckles, call in if you have any problems, okay?” she asked, then hurried after Sonic to grab his arm and start pulling him out of the hangar. “Come on, it’s upstairs.”

Shadow was halfway through the highly glorified actions of Revalt the Hedgehog when his communicator buzzed. Without looking, he flicked his wrist to activate it and went back to reading.

“Shadow, it’s Rouge.”

He grunted to acknowledge her. It wasn’t that Revalt was particularly interesting, but the gaps between the lines were proving fascinating. It was amazing how the writer completely glossed over the fact he betrayed his friends, killed several potential allies, and started developing a death wish six months into his campaign.

“I need you to do some digging for me,” Rouge continued. “I have a name, but no information to go with it. I suspect he’d be in Mobius somewhere. Possibly the palace.”

Shadow grunted again.

“Have you met a Charles Hedgehog yet?”

He paused, the name ringing a bell, and abruptly closed his book. “Charles or Chuck?”

“I don’t know, both? Chuck is short for Charles, isn’t it?”

He ignored that, trying to remember. “I haven’t met him. The name is familiar.”

“He would have been in the Resistance. Apparently he was close to Sonic, though I’m not sure how close, yet,” she said.

Charles. Chuck. Uncle Chuck. The building Sonic and his siblings were working on. “He was Sonic’s guardian, when he was young. I believe Eggman robotocised and then destroyed him during the war.”

“Ooh,” Rouge commented quietly. “Now that is interesting. I wonder if that’s why Sonic went back…”

“Unlikely. The robotocisation occurred after Sonic met his siblings,” he said, moving over to the data bank to pull up more recent histories. “Reading between the lines, it’s implied Charles was destroyed in an act of fury and revenge after one of Sonic’s larger wins.”

“Reading between the lines?” she repeated.
“Mobian history is what I believe the humans call ‘creative non-fiction’,” he replied. “When read as written, its heroes were people of unimaginable strength and power, overcoming petty annoyances that the people really could have dealt with alone.”

Rouge chuckled. “That does sound familiar. Well, that’s disappointing. He was my only lead,” she complained. “I can’t find any reason for Sonic to be out here. Just that he was in a bad mood or, even more cryptically, that he was on some great mission of self-discovery!”

Shadow ran his eyes down the list of facts about Charles Hedgehog, but his mind was flashing back to that last day on the Ark, when he’d asked Sonic who and what he was. ‘Just a guy that loves adventure’. He hadn’t bought it then, and he certainly didn’t buy it now.

“Perhaps there’s nothing to be found out there,” he suggested. “Until recently, I believed Sonic had no past to speak of. That does not happen when someone spreads their story around anyone who will listen.”

“True… it still feels like a failure,” she muttered sulkily. “Alright, I’ll come to Mobius. But I’m not going to Mobotropolis just yet. Do you have any places of interest I should explore?”

He scowled very slightly. “My attention has been focussed on a single city.”

“Well, thank you for your assistance,” she said irritably. “Fine, I’ll dig out some old posters. So how are things for you? And our little boy blue? Has he revealed any princely traits? Overwhelmed you with musical ability? Displayed a deep-seated if well-hidden urge to murder all humans in their sleep?”

“On that front, all I’ve seen is to confirm we’re wasting our time. Sonic seems to hold less interest in revenge than he should,” he said. “His place in the kingdom, however, is proving… intriguing.”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “If I were him, I would not have returned here either. Though not for his reasons.”

Rouge was quiet for a few seconds. He almost expected her to ask why not, but when she finally spoke, it was perhaps a more relevant question. “Then why did he? You said it’s probably not family loyalty.”

“I’m not sure. I’m beginning to wonder if he really had a choice in it at all,” he said slowly. “I am not certain what the royal family would do if he attempted to leave again.”

They both considered that for a few moments, before Rouge hummed. “I’ll finish up out here and come join you as soon as I can. Be careful, Shadow.”

“Hmph,” he said, silently wishing her the same, and turned off his communicator. He had more history to find.

Entering the court chambers was a little strange, but Sonic dealt with it the same way he did everything – by acting like he didn’t notice. He just smiled and gestured for Sonia to take a seat ahead of him, before setting his hands on his hips and looking back at the door.
The room was full—overfull—with people in every seat and standing like sardines in the back. They had all been talking, but the second he followed Sonia through the chamber door, silence had fallen like a wave, and now they were all just muttering to themselves. He could feel them watching him.

Weirdly, his hand twitched for a gauntlet, and he found himself missing Gawain. The knight had been a melodramatic dork, but his loyal presence had been kind of comforting when everyone was looking to him for answers.

“All rise for Her Royal Highness Queen Aleena of Mobius,” a voice echoed across the chamber, and he couldn’t help turning his head to watch everyone stand. The practice had weirded him out in Camelot, too.

Aleena swept through the door and took a seat on the throne, and something thudded twice, signalling everyone to sit. Sonic stayed standing out of habit until Sonia yanked him down beside her.

“Let it be known that her majesty’s court was convened on Saturday—”

“Sonic, would you please try and be professional?” Sonia hissed, pulling him upright against the chair. He hadn’t realised he was craning forward to try and stare at the herald, amazed by how close he sounded to a foghorn as he read out the formal announcement, so he smiled awkwardly and sat back. She frowned at him until the herald was finished, then looked around as a tall, lop-eared rabbit stepped up to a podium. “Okay. That’s the master of ceremonies—it’s his job to introduce all the new topics, and control the crowd. If you do speak, and get in trouble, just gesture to him by tapping your two smallest fingers against your hip. He’ll get you out of there.”

He stared at her. “You have hand signals? What is this, baseball?”

“He is kind of the umpire,” she admitted.

“Ladies and gentlemen, court is now in session,” the MC announced, shuffling his papers. “As is typical for a Saturday, we only have four hours, and I remind everyone that court will be closed from Monday for seven days. We will be convening tomorrow, but again, only for a short time, so please keep your briefs short and to the point. As always, our first order of business is finalising cases from yesterday. Discussion Gamma-six-alpha-quad-ib-two, Princess of the Rebellion, please come forward.”

It took everything Sonic had not to giggle at her name. He managed to keep silent, but Sonia still whacked his leg, clearly biting back her own grin.

They made it through most of the ‘wrap-ups’ that way, ignoring the people still staring at them by focussing on the speakers, Sonic always finding something worth noticing about them, and Sonia pretending not to know what he had seen when it was possibly offensive. It wasn’t fun—court hadn’t even been fun in Camelot, when he’d been able to tell people they were boring him. But he got the feeling it was better than most of the time Sonia spent in this place.

But then came her turn. “Discussion Gamma-six-alpha-quad-ib-two, Princess of the Rebellion, please come forward.”

“Knock ‘em dead,” Sonic said, and she smiled at him before rising to her feet and moving down to the speaker’s box.

Once she was settled, the MC glanced at his papers and asked, “Regarding the motion to build Charlesspy Amphitheatre over the remains of the operational centre of Charles Hedgehog
“I do,” she said. “I once again refer the court to item four, the survey done amongst former
Resistance members, which confirms no culturally sensitive attachment to the building, and item two,
the report by Doctor Midori Greenleaf, which identifies the potential value of an amphitheatre to the
citizens of Mobotropolis, and its significance in location.”

“The court has found in general favour,” the MC replied, reviewing his notes apparently more out of
habit than need. “At question is the construction of the amphitheatre itself. Any objections raised?”

“I have an objection,” a voice called, and everyone looked around at a slim, well-dressed elephant
standing in the crowd. “I hear the crown has already hired contractors. Without a finalised permit!”

Sonia narrowed her eyes slightly. “We were made an offer and accepted it.”

“Without the review of the court,” another voice called. This time it was a tiger, leaning aggressively
against the railing of the council pit stairwell. She flexed her hands as she continued. “Rumours say
these were no royal contractors. Is it true the Thief Prince hired a group of unregistered tradesmen for
a crown project?”

Sonia took a breath and smiled. “Gareth’s Grounds are a registered business. While it’s true they are
not under royal contract, there was nothing stopping them from making a bid.”

“A bid to which no one else could respond,” the tiger snapped. “This was not due process. The
accepted procedure for a royal contract is that royal contractors may present bids at court. None of
the contractors were given opportunity. I submit to the court that this was an illegal deal and any
construction should cease immediately with full penalties paid to the injured companies.”

Sonic gaped as several members of the audience applauded. “I’m sorry, what?”

Silence immediately fell, and Sonia looked back at him with hard eyes, warning him to stay seated
and shut up. He ignored her on both counts, getting up to step down into the open area. “Did I hear
the legalese right just now? You want to get paid because you didn’t get a chance to sell
yourselves?”

“Sonic!” Sonia hissed. He held up a hand to ward her off, still staring at the tiger expectantly.

She shifted her weight, then lifted her chin defiantly. “That would be correct process. The law states
that royal contractors should be given opportunity to present their bids. We weren’t.”

“Yeah you were,” he said, and she balked, apparently confused by his argument.

“Uh… No, my lord, we were not.”

He bit down on the urge to snap that he wasn’t her lord, taking another step forward. “Yeah, you
were. Yesterday. Sonia told me – you guys knocked it back, saying you didn’t have time.”

“Precisely,” she said. “We were not given sufficient time to prepare bids. It –”

“Meanwhile Gareth—who’d never done a royal project before in his life—came up with one on the
fly,” he snapped. “And you, who apparently hangs out in these fancy chambers, doing this stuff on
the regular, couldn’t do the same?”

“Sonic, sit down,” Sonia hissed at him, but he barely heard her.
“And while we’re on the topic,” he continued, “you are one of these royal contractors, right? You’re not just complaining for the fun of it.”

“I am Lady Felinae, of Felinae Forms,” she said imperiously. “Most frequent contractor for the royal family’s rehabilitation efforts… your majesty.”

And that, right there, made Sonic stop.

He’d just been confused before – asking questions because he didn’t understand how the heck this woman could be demanding the things she was. Now that she’d gone all patronising, she had his full attention. He finished walking over to lean on the speaker’s podium, all casual interest as he raced through his memories of Arthur’s bursar. The annoying jerk had taken great pleasure in lecturing him with stupid legal nonsense on a daily basis while Sonic played king.

Yesterday, it had been useless knowledge he didn’t really need to remember. Now it was ammo.

“Right,” he began, smiling sweetly. “Well, y’see Felinae, all’a those contracts you took for us before? Proof of prior knowledge. Which, I’m betting you know, is uh…” It took him a second to remember the correct wording, “justification for action.”

Felidae blinked. He didn’t let her recover.

“We wanted the work done today. It needs to be done by tomorrow night. You don’t work weekends. You’ve made that part of your contracts before, yeah?” he guessed. He didn’t know if it was true or not, but from everything he’d heard so far he was betting it was a safe assumption. “You don’t work weekends, so that puts you out of the running. In fact, none of the companies we usually employ work weekends, and they sure as heck don’t have the kind of turnarounds we were asking for. The fact you all turned down the option for bids yesterday kinda proves that, am I right? So, working on prior knowledge, it was pretty safe for us to assume you weren’t gonna meet the needs of the contract.”

“Th- that’s… exactly so,” Sonia said, quickly recovering to take over. “And as such, standard processes did not apply. Special circumstances were in effect, and that means that the crown was well within its rights to seek external contractors. Gareth’s Grounds approached with a bid that met—and indeed exceeded—the requirements of the contract, and as such were accepted.”

The crowd began murmuring quietly, shifting like this was unexpected, and the elephant from before stood up again.

“The deal was struck in a back-alley,” he called out. “Even in special circumstances, external contracts must be agreed to in a public setting!”

“It was a night club,” Sonic corrected coldly, “filled with a couple hundred members of the public that were all crazy aware royalty was there. Y’don’t get more public than that.” He paused, then smirked and flicked a wrist to gesture at their surroundings. “Unless you think this cosy, locked up little room with what… fifty? Sixty? suits like you make things more… public.”

There was another ripple through the crowd, and he could feel Sonia tensing up behind him. He ignored it, just staring down the elephant.

“It’s not how things should be done,” Felinae snapped, and something inside Sonic snapped right back.

He stood up straight and walked forward, ignoring the way she and several other members of the crowd pulled back. Once he was in the very centre of the open space, he stopped, and just took a
moment to let the ringing in his ears go down a bit. Him exploding never helped anyone.

Then he lifted a finger and pointed to the row of reporters he just knew were somewhere in the back there, even as he kept his eyes on Felinae. “All the little red lights on, kids? Everyone have the microphones ready? Because this only gets said once.”

“Sonic,” Sonia tried, but he was way too far gone for her. He could feel something heavy on his chest, burning into him. He could barely even think past an angry fog that had been building in his brain. And Felinae was still looking at him like he was out of his depth.

He was not putting up with this.

“I’m gonna give you all a little lesson on how work works,” he said brightly. He could hear Sonia hissing at him to stop, and the whole court was rippling in confusion, but he didn’t care. He was so far beyond caring. “When you take a job, you get paid for services rendered. Or, to put it another way, since it doesn’t seem to be gettin’ through to you guys, you get paid because you do what you’re told to do. It’s not a hard concept. A lot of people do it. But hey, you still don’t seem to be getting it, so I’ll break it down into a little more. See your queen back there? Pretty lady, sitting in the big chair? She knows how it works!

“Her job is to sit there and listen to the people. Because that’s what this is. This court room. It’s the kingdom telling their queen what they do and do not want. Services ordered, work performed, y’following me here, Lady Felinae?” he demanded. “So let’s turn it around, yeah? The kingdom wants stuff done. It wants service, and it’s willing to pay for it. And yet, here we are, and you’re telling us we should pay you for you to not do the job? How exactly does that work?”

“Your analogy is flawed.”

Sonic snapped around to look at the elephant, who immediately flinched back, but rallied impressively after only a few moments. “The queen does not… The queen has final say over her subjects, regardless of payment. That is not work.”

“That’s right!” another, more nervous-looking mixe called out. “And b-besides, the queen pays for work through taxes she gets for that listening you were talking about, so –”

“No.”

All three contractors balked at Sonic’s short response, and he shifted his weight, honestly amazed that a royal court could have things so stupidly wrong.

Aside from being a pain in Sonic’s neck, the bursar of King Arthur’s court had been a very stressed raccoon that tended to get very high-pitched and panicky when Sonic tried to hand out the kingdom’s money to people on the street. The lecture on what taxes were, what they were used for, and the fact that they weren’t actually his to spend had been frequent, to the point that by the end of his stay in Camelot, Sonic could quote it with him, much to Percival’s exasperated amusement. “Taxes pay for royal projects, sure, but they don’t go to the queen. They go to the kingdom. That’s why Sonia’s the one doing the talking on this amphitheatre thing – because she’s not the queen. She’s vizier – speaking for the kingdom. Mom’s barely had anything to say all day today, even when stuff was bought, sold, and traded – she just sat there and listened, because listening is her job. That’s not what taxes are for.”

“Then what, pray do tell,” Felinae demanded, “is she paid in?”

He stared right back, because this really should have been obvious. “Uh… loyalty?” he suggested,
and when that was only met with blank silence, he scoffed and took another step forward. “Loyalty. I mean, yeah, the pay’s been a little sparse lately, but that doesn’t change the currency.”

That got a reaction. The crowd audibly rippled, a good portion of the crowd breaking out in excited whispers, but Sonic kept his gaze locked on Felinae and the other contractors. Something in him had broken, and he wasn’t quite sure what he was doing anymore, but he knew it was important. He knew this needed to be done.

“Royalty is paid with the loyalty, trust, and respect of their kingdom,” he said. “The kingdom pays with love and respect and in return, they are loved and cared for by royalty. Royalty doesn’t give them the streets. It doesn’t allow them to live on land, that’s their right. What the kingdom chooses to build on that land is the kingdom’s decision. Things like taxes and laws and rules – they would happen whether there was a queen or a president or some guy with a big top hat makin’ promises. Yeah, the people allow royalty to make decisions sometimes, but that’s just more trust they’re giving. If royalty betrays that trust, they get torn down.”

He could hear the hiss of indrawn breath and clenched his teeth in response.

“What, you think we don’t know that? You think we don’t know that we’re here because of our people? That’s why we’re here! In this court, in this city, in this empire! Everything the royal family does is for its people. Because the people love and trust the royal family, we return that love. We look out for them. No matter what it takes, or what it means, that is all we are here for. We take care of our people! We protect our people! That is what we do. That is what I am here to do!”

There was a sudden rush of cheers and applause, but Sonic couldn’t hear past the fog in his head. He swung his arm out, slashing through all the stupidity he’d seen since coming back to Mobotropolis, and then lashed out to point at Felinae directly.

“I don’t care what you think you’re doing here. All I can see is that you’re playing some sick game with money and you don’t care how it’s hurting this city. And I’ve had enough – if this is your game, then I’m stepping up to the plate, and I warn you, I don’t play nice. When people I care about are on the line, I do whatever it takes to win. I do whatever it takes to protect them. I am going to see them all safe, and I am going to see them all happy. So I’m asking you, Lady Felinae, because I believe in a fair chance. Are you sure you want to play this game with me?”

She didn’t move, but he could see the answer in her eyes. He held her gaze as he stepped back, returning to the speaker’s podium. Only once he was there, and felt small hands grab at his arm, did he break out of the strange fog he’d been living in for the last few minutes. He blinked, looking around to find Sonia staring at him with wide, tear-filled eyes, and suddenly everything came flooding back in. He was suddenly aware of the cheering and applause, as well as the heavy tension all around. He stared up at the court proper, noting that a good third of the audience were watching him like he was about to attack, while almost half were acting like he’d saved them all from Chaos itself.

And then he actually remembered everything he’d said, and nearly choked on his own air.

He… had not meant to do that.

Sonic slowly turned to meet Aleena’s gaze, not entirely sure what to make of the expression on her face. She held him there for a moment, then quietly turned her head toward the MC, tapping her chair three times with her two smallest fingers. But it wasn’t until Sonic turned his head toward him that the poor guy seemed to break out of whatever trance he’d fallen into.

“Order!” he yelled, banging his gavel. “The court will resume order! Order!”
Slowly, the noise died down, and the MC cleared his throat like this had all just been a vaguely annoying distraction.

“The court acknowledges my lord Periwinkle’s objection. Are further objections raised?”

The silence was thick enough to saw through. The MC tilted his head toward Lady Felinae. “My lady Felinae? Have you objections?”

“I think…” she said slowly, stepping back, “that my complaints have been… heard to my satisfaction, Master of Ceremonies.”

“In that case, has the crown any comment?” the MC asked, glancing back toward Aleena, who smiled slightly.

“We believe all that was required has been said.”

“Then I return the floor to her royal highness, the Princess of the Rebellion,” the MC said. “As to the matter of the construction of the Charlespy Ampitheatre, what say you?”

Sonia’s hand was shaking in Sonic’s, but her voice was strong and confident as she said, “Construction will commence today, led by an external company known as Gareth’s Grounds. We anticipate initial work to be completed before sundown tomorrow.”

“Very good. Then I ask her highness to step down, and we shall proceed to the next case.”

She nodded, and forcibly pushed Sonic until he stumbled back to their seats. Once they were sitting down, she grabbed at his arm again, so tightly that it actually hurt, and turned into his shoulder. He tilted his head toward her, but everything she tried to say seemed to cut itself off in a stammered breath.

“Lord Reed, please come forward,” the MC announced, but when the aristocrat in question stood up, he only took a few steps toward the centre of the floor before abruptly stopping. He paused, then pulled back again.

“I would like to withdraw my case… pending further… review?”

“Are you certain?”

“Y-yes, Master of Ceremonies.”

“Then we proceed to the next case. Lady—”

“I withdraw!” another aristocrat called out. “My claim is no longer relevant.”

The MC paused, looking around the room a moment, then turned toward Aleena. “May I propose a short recess, your majesty? I suspect the court may need a few moments to reorder its cases.”

“We will allow this,” she said. “We will require a new agenda once all relevant cases are recompiled.”

He inclined his head, and began closing the court. Sonia yanked Sonic out of his chair and started dragging him toward the inner chamber.

He cringed and let it happen. He’d really stepped in it this time.
Halfway down a blocked tunnel, Knuckles paused as something shivered its way down his spine.

It wasn’t chaos. It wasn’t something moving in the earth. It wasn’t even that weird sense he had sometimes that told him something valuable was nearby. It was something else, something like a…

Something important had just shifted.

He hesitated, looking at the dirt and metal scraps around him for a moment, then carefully pulled up one of his gloves to reveal the communicator Tails had given him last year. He tapped in the right signal and waited.

“Hey Knuckles, what’s up?”

“Are you alright?” he asked, not entirely sure why he was bothering to ask. He sounded fine.

“Increasingly frustrated with Eggman, but mostly okay. Why? Did something happen?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I thought I felt something. Sonic’s still in that court thing, right?”

“As far as I know.” Tails paused, his worry almost audible. “Should I go look for him?”

“Maybe,” he said, then grimaced. “No, it’s probably nothing.”

“Knuckles…”

He shook his head and pulled himself up onto his knees. “Stop messing around with the robotocisor for today.” He didn’t know why he felt on edge, but he wasn’t in the mood to take chances now. Tails obviously heard that in his voice, because he didn’t even bother asking why or objecting on principle.

“Okay. I guess I could look into the anarchy beryl instead. I keep forgetting about that.”

“The what?”

“Anarchy beryl. This stupid rock Eggman was using to power his latest giant weapon. Or at least, that’s what the humans that were holding it called it. They say it’s some kind of relative mineral to a chaos emerald, but I can’t find a connection. Have you ever heard of it?”

“No,” he said, and rubbed at the back of his head. “Look kid, whatever you do, just be careful. Something weird’s going on here, and whenever something weird is going on, you and me usually end up in the blast zone.”

“Yeah, okay. You gonna come back to the palace early?”

“Yeah, I might. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Over and out.”

Knuckles watched the connection drop, and considered calling Sonic. It was stupid, he knew. If it had at least been a flare of chaos or something, he could have worked out why he was suddenly worried, but it wasn’t. It was actually more like… like a sudden… movement.

That’s what it was, he realised. Like when he was chasing down a shard and it abruptly decided to
shift itself out of reach, just because it could.

He grunted and went back to digging, wondering why he would get that kind of feeling now. There weren’t any chaos emeralds on Mobius for him to be sensing, and the Master Emerald was still in one perfect piece on his island. So some other form of energy must be on the fritz. Probably Sonic, he reminded himself irritably. Always getting into trouble and dragging everyone along for the ride. Like Knuckles didn’t have better things to do. In fact, if he was smart, he’d call Tails back and demand he take him back to his island.

But he knew better. Every time something happened, it didn’t matter what Knuckles did, he would always end up getting pulled back in. Or things would go a thousand times worse. Like when the whole world got shattered. Nice work there, Sonic. Stupid idiot. Letting himself get captured and used like a giant hedgehog battery. Nice to know Knuckles had to keep an eye out for that kind of stuff too now. Honestly, he was a Guardian of the Master Emerald, it was not his job to keep an eye on crazed hedgehogs, but here he was…!

His fist cracked into something hard and he yelled out, yanking it back to shake off the pain. “What the –!”

It was… He narrowed his eyes, leaning in closer, then used his other hand to reach out and scratch more of the dirt away.

The silver chaos emerald sparkled back at him, completely invisible to his mystic senses, but there.

“Huh,” he said, and pulled it out of the earth.

The second they were inside the chamber, Sonic shook off Sonia’s hands and moved over to the far wall, folding his arms and tapping his foot. Surprisingly, she didn’t follow, but rather just curled her fists against her chest and stared at him with wide eyes. After a minute of awkward silence, the chamber door opened again, and Aleena stepped inside.

“Mother…” Sonia breathed. “Mother, I… we…”

“That was quite the introduction,” she noted, and Sonic looked away.

She’d warned him. Only two days ago, she’d basically told him to quit challenging the aristocrats, and here he’d just run all over them.

“They will be more prepared next time,” Aleena continued quietly, “but it was effective, for all it shouldn’t have been.”

He glanced back, surprised to see Sonia nodding.

“It was incredible. Did you see their faces? For the first time, it was like… it was like they understood!” She turned to face him. “How did you…? You didn’t just put Felinae in her place – everyone in that room heard exactly what you were saying! All the minor nobles, did you hear them cheering? The love I felt in that room…! Oh!”

She spun around with a happy gasp, and Sonic raised an eyeridge. “You’re… not angry?”
“All that was required was said,” Aleena replied, and he frowned at her. She tilted her head a little, peering at him over her nose. “Not quite in the context I expected, but perhaps a safer one. Lady Felinae is not the worst of our problems, but she is an exemplar of the grander scheme of things. There are worse people you could have declared war on.”

He scowled and looked back down at the floor, not sure how to respond. While that was what he’d done, it wasn’t what he’d meant to do. He didn’t know what he’d been intending to do. It had all just… happened, somehow. He felt like a mess.

A shining light made all three of them look up again, and Sonia gasped as none other than the Oracle of Delphius appeared in the space between them. He smiled around at them all, ending with a wider smirk at Sonic. “We meet again, young prince of the realm.”

He nodded back. “Hey, Orc. Still haven’t worked out doors, huh?”

“I find doors such an unnecessary complication,” he said, and then turned to bow his head for Aleena. “They say that undisturbed treasures gather dust and stale air. I see you are making good use of the fresh breeze.”

Sonic scowled again, catching the metaphor for what it was, especially when Aleena smiled thinly.

“It was not strictly intended.”

“You should beware the way the dust shifts. You never know what may be knocked loose,” he advised.

“He’s right,” Sonia said, pulling her hands down to wrap around her waist instead. “We might have scared some of the aristocrats silent, but that was one heck of a bluff. Pointing out that the only reason we have any power at all is because of the people could backfire very badly.”

“Only if we cannot prove worthy of their trust,” Aleena argued. “This has made the festival all the more important, my children. We must earn our people’s respect.”

“Absolutely,” Sonia looked over at Sonic, then down at the floor. “We’ll need to make examples. More public appearances. Less structured—less orchestrated—moments. This is… like last night. This is why you weren’t angry, Mother. It was what we needed to do!”

Sonic glanced at her, then up at Aleena, not buying her poker face. She might have been a seer, but if she’d seen this coming, he’d eat his gloves. But with how excited Sonia suddenly looked, he couldn’t bring himself to call her out on it.

“We need to talk to Paige,” Sonia announced, and hurried over to take Sonic’s hand. “If we’re going to take advantage of this, we need to restructure next week’s plans. More travel, different appearances, the whole thing. And with all the diplomats now in town, that will need to be very carefully organised. Come on, we don’t have much time before court will return.”

And with that, she bowed to the Oracle and then pulled Sonic out into the hallway, not even noticing Aleena’s shifting expression.

Once the door had closed behind her, Aleena allowed her smile more leeway as she released a soft breath. “When you told me I should be prepared for my kingdom to fall, I did not expect it to be at my son’s feet.”

“I imagine not,” the Oracle agreed carefully. “Because I did not say it would.”
She looked at him curiously, and he raised an eyeridge.

“You should remember lessons hard learned, your majesty. I would counsel you not to make assumptions just because you see hints of an outcome you would wish for.”

“No,” she agreed, and turned back to the door her children had just run out of. “This time, I will not be taking chances.”

“It’s weird. I must’ve been here a hundred times when I was a kid,” Gareth noted as he and Manic paused to consider the progress the team had made over the morning. Most of it was preparatory – measuring and gathering materials. Now that they were actually getting ready to build, it was starting to feel a bit more real. “Never realised just how big the area was. All that trash, y’know? It all blended in to the city.”

“Takes losing something to like, know what you had,” Manic pointed out, before gesturing for him to follow him into the house. “Doesn’t have to be a good thing. I totally never noticed how gross the sewers were until I was breathing fresh air on the regular.”

Gareth glanced at him, a small smile creeping around one side of his mouth. But he didn’t say anything until they were through the gutted ops centre and into the main room, where Amy was scribbling in a notebook at the table. “Now we’ve got everything set up, it’s probably time to talk about why none of this is going to work, long term.”

“Oh, yeah, great timing, dude,” Manic drawled as he collapsed into a seat near Amy. “What’re you talking about?”

He shrugged, pulling a pair of toothpicks from the seemingly endless supply in his hip-bag, “The dirt here won’t grow jack. It’s too polluted. Even if we lay top-soil, I give it a year before the toxins creep up and the grass dies.”

“Three months,” Amy interjected. “You’re forgetting the oil in the air.”

Manic glanced at her, then tilted his head back at Gareth, who shrugged again and offered him one of the toothpicks. He hesitated, not sure what Amy would think, but eventually took it and put it between his teeth the same way Gareth did his own. He rolled it over his tongue for a moment before asking, “What if you lay concrete down first? It’ll be a barrier for the top-soil, so we just have to worry about the air pollution.”

“Any plant will struggle in this city, no matter where you put it,” Amy said bluntly, and Gareth nodded.

“You’re a gardener?”

She tossed him a quick wink. “Of course Amy Rose grows roses!”

He chuckled, then went back to Manic. “She’s right. We can lay concrete, use stone instead of wood for the steps, the whole shebang, but oil clings like a mother. I’m not getting anything to grow here for a year, minimum.”

“Bummer,” he said. “But I’m bettin’ you’ve got an idea.”
“Egh, less an idea, more a workaround,” he said, flicking his toothpick. “You want this place all green and pretty by tomorrow night? You’re gonna have to use carpet.”

“Huh?”

“Fake grass. Some of your buddies out in the hills use it to make it look like their money still gets them a garden,” he said. “Don’t feel right, but you gotta be touching it with flesh and fur to notice.”

“Lame, but whatever. If it’ll get the job done,” he said, and Gareth looked at him sideways.

“Next problem: your buddies don’t exactly hire guys like mine. I don’t have that kinda stuff on hand.”

“And y’wonder why you’re not gettin’ work,” he drawled, just to make him grin. Once Manic had stopped worrying about the politics of the whole thing, he’d discovered he actually really liked Gareth. He kind of reminded him of Farrell, only twenty years younger. “Could you source some?”

“Source, he says,” Gareth snickered. “Hey, Amy, d’you know I’ve only met one type of person who uses the word ‘source’ instead of ‘get’? Generally, they’re the type that’s actually replacing the word ‘steal’.”

“Whoa, man, careful,” Manic said, and took out his toothpick to stab it at the air between them. “Wouldn’t want word gettin’ out that I’m some kinda thief prince or somethin’.”

Amy covered her giggle with her hand, and Gareth returned her earlier wink with one of his own. “I’ll keep it on the down-low. But yeah, I can rustle some up for you. It’ll be more than the grass would’ve cost, though.”

“Price-gouging. Should’ve seen it coming,” he joked, but Gareth’s retort was cut off by the sound of the front door. They looked around in time to see Tetsuya step into the main room, brow furrowed and tail swishing uncomfortably behind him.

“Hey, Gareth. You know what’s going on out here?”

“Oh, what now?” he asked, leaning back in his chair. “The boys screw up the measurements or something?”

“No, it’s not us. Maybe you ought’a come see.”

The other three exchanged glances, then got up and hurried after him. He opened the front door but didn’t make any moves to step outside, and Manic whistled lowly.

A few reporters had shown up yesterday, intrigued by Sonic’s return and curious to see his response to the Dump being renovated. And this morning there had been a couple of people milling around—obviously interns, just waiting on the off-chance something interesting happened—but now, the whole fence was lined by people. Reporters were piling out of vans. Civilians were clinging to the fence in interest. Low level aristocrats were setting up one of their weird viewing camps. Even Trevor’s guys were out there, casually patrolling and keeping anyone from trying to do anything stupid.

“Well,” Manic said. “Smart money’s on something going down at court.”

“You going to talk to them?” asked Gareth.
He hesitated. His inner Sonia was telling him he needed to – they were obviously here for a reason, and if you didn’t give them something, the press tended to make up their own stories. But at the same time, he didn’t know what had happened at court, and so talking about it would definitely just end with him putting his foot in his mouth.

He ran his eyes over the crowd, trying to find a familiar face that he could trust to tell him what was going on. He didn’t know most of Trevor’s guys, and while he could probably rely on the aristocrats being happy to tell him everything, it wouldn’t be worth the hassle. Not for the first time, he wished he’d converted a few communicators into mobile phones so he could just call in.

Luckily, before he had to take the risk, one of Gareth’s guys trotted over. “Hey, you been listening to the – oh, sorry. Your highness,” he added to Manic, who frowned at the weird look on the guy’s face before glancing at Gareth.

“Have I been listening to what?” he asked, and the guy hesitated before continuing.

“The radio. Our music got interrupted by a news report. Word is, Sonic – I mean, the Lost Prince… he um… He well, none of us know exactly what happened.”

“He still on Mobius?” Manic asked sharply, and the guy nodded.

“It’s just hard to explain. I’ll get the radio.”

While the station the guys had been listening to had gone back to music now that they’d made their report, it didn’t take long to find another station discussing it. They settled on some kind of talkback show, where the host was taking great pleasure in only giving his callers a few minutes of air time and using most of those minutes to needle them, regardless of their opinion.

Those opinions varied between “It’s scary. What exactly is he going to do to people who don’t agree with him? To people he doesn’t think are loyal to the crown?” and “It’s exactly what we need. We should’ve had this kind of talk years ago.”

Eventually, the host took a break from calls to remind everyone of the topic at hand. “The Lost Prince has announced his intentions now that he’s back in town. During a debate about the announced Charlesspy Theatre in the Silver Quarter, the prince took the floor and declared his intentions to defend his people from any and all threats.”

Sonic’s voice took over, obviously digitally enhanced to drown out a lot of ambient noise. “No matter what it takes, or what it means, that is all we are here for. We take care of our people! We protect our people! That is what we do. That is what I am here to do!”

“He is intending to protect people, but critics have noted he said this in response to a construction magnate, who wouldn’t normally be considered a national threat. So what do you think? Stirring speech from a promising monarch, or harrowing threat from a dangerous source? Call in now, and we’ll be right back after a few commercials.”

“Huh,” Gareth said, as Tetsuya narrowed his eyes and Manic sat back in his chair.

Amy, he noticed from the corner of his eye, was looking lost. She always seemed to get that way with reminders of the suckage that was being royalty. He smiled and reached over to touch her hand. “Hey, it’s okay. Trust me. The press’re just like, trying to stir up trouble. We can totally handle this.”

“That’s not what worries me,” she said softly, and Tetsuya grunted his agreement.

“Gotta wonder what he was saying that in response to. What’s he consider a threat? Would’ve been
nice if they’d played the whole speech.”

“And spoil the story?” Gareth deadpanned. “You want that kind of information, you’re going to have to find a video feed of court.”

“Where’re we gonna get that?”

“Exactly.”

Manic drummed his fist against his knee, aching for a pen or a pair of sticks to help him think. He’d get the full story if he went back to the palace, but he still probably wouldn’t be able to tell Gareth and the crew.

And either way, the others might be worried, but Manic could feel something like hope stirring in his chest. Because no matter why he’d said it, Sonic had said ‘we’. And ‘our’. As in… them. The royal family. He’d been talking like he used to, back in the Sonic Underground.

It was kind of hard to focus on anything else when he had that to think about.

But the sound of the front door opening once again derailed his thoughts, especially when it almost immediately closed again. By the time they looked up, Sonia was staggering into the doorway, trying to tame her windswept hair without falling over.

“Sis?” Manic prompted, getting to his feet. “You okay?”

“Fine, fine,” she said, even as she tilted sideways and had to step quickly to catch herself. “Sonic ran us here. I haven’t gone that fast in a while, that’s all.”

“I was hoping we would’ve beat the paparazzi here,” Sonic said as he stepped up behind her. “They haven’t made things too hard for you, right?”

“Only just started showing up in the last hour,” said Tetsuya. “No problems yet.”

“What’s it all about anyways?” asked Gareth. “We just heard part of some kind of speech you made. Something about protecting people?”

Sonic groaned, laying a hand over his eye, while Sonia moved over to tug Manic out of his seat. “I need to talk to you for a minute.”

He glanced at Sonic. “Just us?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Sonic replied shortly, and Manic blinked, then shrugged and let Sonia start leading him toward the bedrooms.

“What happened?” he asked her quietly. “Things get out of hand, or what?”

“Manic,” she whispered, almost breathlessly, “you can’t even imagine.”

They got the story, kind of. Sonic admitted, in bits and pieces, that he’d reacted badly to the aristocrats complaining about Gareth’s team getting the job, and wound up basically telling the whole court to either step up or sit down.
He didn’t seem particularly happy about it, but from what they could gather, most of the aristocrats had chosen to sit down. Not that Gareth could blame them – he had never personally gotten on Sonic’s bad side, but he’d been there the day Solar did. He wouldn’t want that look directed at him either.

“So anyway,” Sonic continued, “now Sonia’s decided that we’ve gotta make this big production outta showing how we’re ‘on the side of the people’ or something. Which is stupid, but whatever.”

“How’re you gonna do that?” Gareth asked slowly.

“ Heck if I know. All I know is that my plan to spend most’ve the next week clearin’ ’bots is screwed, because we’re gonna spend it flying out to the surrounding towns,” he said, throwing up a hand. “Like that’s gonna make a difference, right?”

Gareth considered him for a few moments, then looked over at Amy. She was watching Sonic quietly, apparently nervous about something, but Sonic hadn’t met her gaze once. He wondered what the story was between them, then shrugged to himself. “Never know, Hedgehog. So, we still on for tonight, or does this mess up that too?”

“Tonight, definitely. They even try to say no an’ I’m rebellin’. I think they’re debating this afternoon in there,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the bedrooms before bringing his hand up to scratch at his quills. “Either way it’s a shame. I could really go for smashing a few swat-butts right now.”

“Stress relief for the super-powered,” he drawled. “Well, if you do manage to stick around, I could sure work some of it off. Got a few tonnes of dirt I need tilled and you used to be better than any machine I ever saw.”

Sonic gave him a dry look, but he obviously got the joke and so didn’t comment. Gareth glanced between him and Amy once more before getting up. “I’m gonna go explain to the boys. Let me know if you’re good, yeah?”

He grunted his agreement, and Gareth started heading out. He didn’t have to go far – Tetsuya was waiting for him outside the front door, a few of the guys hovering behind with expectant expressions. Gareth ignored them, rolling his toothpick over his teeth as he gazed over the ever-growing crowd and considering everything with all the gravity it deserved.

“So boss?” Tetsuya prompted. “We got a job, or what?”

“Yeah, we got a job,” he said thoughtfully.

“What kind?” he asked. “Solar’s waiting on word.”

Gareth narrowed his eyes a little, thinking back to a bad night that could have gone worse, and made his decision. “The hell with Solar. We’ve got a job. A real job. And we’re gonna show this town why it should’ve been hiring us these last three years,” he said firmly. He spat out the toothpick and turned to his boys. “So I don’t want to see any of you slackers hanging around! We’ve got frames to lay and dirt to shift, now move it!”

Back inside the house, Amy watched as Sonic shifted forward in his seat, arms folding over the table
and brow furrowing.

He still hadn’t looked at her.

She hesitated, then slowly reached out and touched his arm, letting him notice it before curling her hand around it properly. He eventually turned his head toward her, but didn’t look up, and she lifted the other hand to hold his shoulder as well. It was as close to a hug as she dared right now.

“You seem mad at you,” she said quietly.

He didn’t answer at first, brow furrowing a little deeper for a moment before he nodded once. “I don’t like getting angry like that. I don’t like thinking like that.”

“Do you regret what you said?” she asked.

Again, he paused before speaking. “I threatened some stupid woman just because I didn’t like what she was saying,” he said eventually. “Yeah, I think she’s hurting Mobotropolis, but what did I really help by sayin’ that stuff? How am I any better?”

“Because you did it to defend people,” she reminded him. “You got angry for the people of Mobius. That means something.”

“Yeah, but… it’s not how I do things,” he pointed out, and she took a deep breath, unable to really argue that.

Because it wasn’t. Sonic didn’t bother getting angry, most of the time – he generally thought that anger was wasted energy that could be spent running. Arguments, words… they were pointless. Actions were more important.

“It’s like I used to be,” he murmured, jerking Amy’s attention back to him, even as he stared holes in the table. “It’s like I was when I was here.”

Something about his expression made Amy’s grip tighten a little, as if she needed to keep a better hold on him. But only a few more moments passed before he suddenly looked up at her properly, his eyes hard and somehow distant despite his direct gaze. Neither of them moved for almost thirty seconds, Amy surprised by the unfamiliar harshness, and Sonic spoke before she could recover.

“Manic’s got a thing for you.”

She blanched, but Sonic didn’t even acknowledge it, just continued roughly.

“He’s workin’ up to askin’ you out. You should think about it,” he said, and then shoved himself out of her hold and up to his feet. “M’gonna go help Gareth.”

“Wh…” The words failed her. Amy could only sit there, gaping silently, as Sonic zipped away and out the door. She wasn’t sure why he’d said that, or if it was true, or what to think if it was. Why would he tell her that? What would –

“Sonic, bro, we gotta –”

Amy flinched around as Manic charged into the room, Sonia close behind, but they stopped when they realised she was alone. He stared at the empty room for a few seconds, then threw up his hands. “Lemme guess – he ran off.”

“No, he’s just outside,” Amy said softly, and the siblings exchanged glances before coming over.
“Are you alright, Amy?” asked Sonia. “You seem upset. Did Sonic do something?”

“Oh, no… well, yes, but…” she trailed off, awkwardly glancing up at Manic. He was staring back, big blue eyes soft with concern, but that didn’t mean anything… did it? They were friends, after all… it didn’t mean anything more than that.

And even if it did, why would Sonic have told her? And why then? When he was so upset with himself, to change the subject to that, of all things…! She pressed her hands together, not sure how to feel.

“I… I guess I’m just worried…” she said slowly. “Worried about how Sonic’s going to handle all this. It’s not really his thing, you know?”

A broad… fond… smile slipped over Manic’s face, making something heavy drop into Amy’s gut. “Man, you’re like, such a good friend to my bro! Nah, don’t worry about him. We’ll sort him out.”

“Exactly,” Sonia agreed, reaching over to gently squeeze Amy’s shoulder. “None of us were expecting what happened this afternoon, but… this is how we were born to be. How we were always supposed to rule Mobius, really. Sonic picking fights and us working out the damage control. It’ll be fine.”

“For now, we just gotta pin Sonic down so we can like, do the damage control,” Manic continued with a humourless laugh. “So uh…” He hesitated, glancing up at Sonia, and then winced. “I’d really like to like, stay and reassure you an’ all, but we really do gotta go deal with Sonic. You okay to hang here for a minute? I’ll be right back.”

“Oh… oh, yeah, no, go,” she said, waving her hands. “I’m – I’d really rather just – I think I should probably just go back to the palace. Find Tails. You know.”

“Ooh… can you wait like five minutes?” Sonia asked with a wince to match her brother’s. “Really, with that paparazzi storm out there, I don’t want you going alone. I’ll take you back as soon as we’re done with Sonic.”

Amy nodded, but her attempt at a smile didn’t get very far. Luckily, neither of them seemed to notice too much, as they only shot her another apologetic grin before hurrying out.

Alone again, Amy looked down at her hands, and didn’t have a single clue how to feel.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:

The only difference between matrydom and suicide is press coverage - Panic! at the Disco 2005
Track Sixteen: Pressing on

Chapter Notes

There's only one thing left to do: drop all I have and go with you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It didn’t take long for them to form a plan. Simply put, they needed to give the problem aristocrats some time to stew, so they couldn’t risk anymore public appearances today, but to not hold luncheon would be to essentially admit they were hiding.

Luckily, Sonia remembered they’d really dropped the ball with the visiting diplomats so far, of whom there were just enough to crowd out most of the problem aristocrats. Holding a ‘diplomatic luncheon’ would solve all their problems.

It took a little longer to convince Sonic to go along with it, since he didn’t see the difference between diplomats and aristocrats. Manic had to actually name a few of them before he came around.

“D’you remember Ifyoucan, from the eastern resistance?” he asked. “Or Renee, from Alles? They’re part of it. And dude, you’ll love Skip. He’s from Downunda and totally sucks at the whole diplomacy thing. You two’ll get on great.”

“And once lunch is over, you can come back here,” Sonia said, gesturing back toward the work site they were just outside of. “Start off that whole ‘working for the people’ thing with some actual work, and then you’ve got your party this evening. A safe public appearance with no diplomacy required.”

Sonic didn’t look happy, but he agreed, and even took Manic back to the palace early so they could round up the diplomats. Tossing and catching the keys to Manic’s truck one-handed, Sonia smiled as she watched them disappear, not entirely certain why she was suddenly feeling so confident.

The last two days hadn’t been how things were supposed to be done. Visiting nightclubs, making business deals with the lower classes, actively working to scare aristocrats, planning and strategising on the fly… it was all extremely dangerous. But for the first time in over two years, Sonia actually found herself believing that things would work out.

Maybe, she realised as she turned to head back into the house, it was because it kind of matched the predictions Aleena used to make about the Council of Four. She would be spending her afternoon talking to friendly aristocrats like Mindy and Stripes, practicing the spiel they’d be feeding to the media once the shock of Sonic’s threat wore off. The voice. Manic would probably spend the rest of the afternoon with the diplomats, hammering out details for which people they would visit on the Royal Tour this week. The heart. Aleena would remain in the palace, managing the staff and ensuring there was no disruption. The mind. And out here, drawing the eye of the media and the people and working the front lines… Sonic. Their sword and shield.

The Council of Four, finally working together as one.

Once she shut the door behind herself, she couldn’t help squealing happily. “It’s happening!”

“Sonia?”
She leaned over to see Amy still sitting at the table, writing in her notebook again, and grinned broadly. “Hi, Amy. Ready to head back? The boys went ahead, so we get the truck.”

“The boys…?” Her shoulders dropped in a strange show of relief, before she smiled and stood up. “Okay. No problem, let’s go.”

“Luncheon today is going to be diplomats from the visiting kingdoms,” she said as Amy tucked her book and pen behind herself, just as Sonic could do. She made a mental note to ask how that worked later before refocussing. “Technically, you, Shadow, and Knuckles are diplomats too, so you’re all welcome! It’s going to be a lot less stressful than the last one you came to, I promise.”

“Oh… thank you, but no,” she said. “I – I have some things to think about.”

Sonia’s smile slipped slightly, and she reached out to touch Amy’s arm. “Look, Amy, whatever Sonic said to you, I promise you it’ll be fine. I know it sounds like I’m just reciting lines here, but really. This is what we were born to do.”

Amy tried to smile back, but it was wobbly at best. Sonia hesitated, then squeezed her arm and began leading her out of the house. “Come on, we have the whole drive back to the palace to chat. Why don’t you tell me what he said, and I’ll decide how much punishment he needs for upsetting you.”

Amy laughed weakly, but stayed otherwise silent until they’d gotten in the truck and been driving for almost a minute. Even then, she seemed to debate explaining herself before finally opening her mouth to speak. “Since you’re triplets, what happens to the other two after it gets decided who’s going to be king or queen?”

Sonia blinked, mildly surprised. It wasn’t the last thing she’d expected Amy to be worrying about, but it came pretty close. “Well, our situation is a little different to most. Quite a few of our ancestors have been twins or triplets, but rank usually gets decided very early in life so it’s not so much of an issue,” she explained. “However, we’ve presented ourselves as part of the Council of Four pretty much since we discovered we were royalty, and I don’t expect that to change much even when Mother passes on the crown.”

“So what does that mean?” she asked. “All three of you are going to rule together?”

“In a way,” she said. “I think Mother has a plan, and we’ll probably hear it on Friday, during the ball. If I had to guess, I would say that although one of us will have the formal crown, the other two will have just as much say in how things are done.”

“So… no matter what happens, you’ll all still be here? In Mobius?”

“Of course!” She smiled kindly at Amy’s worried look. “You’re worried about Sonic, aren’t you? Because he left before.”

She shifted awkwardly in her seat, and Sonia shook her head. “Honestly, I was worried too. He’s always been impulsive, and a little irresponsible. But I think that all that travelling was good for him. He’s different than he used to be. I think he learned a lot out there, and that he has a lot to teach me and Manic, as well,” she said, thinking back to how Tails had spoken of him. That belief that all life was important. She needed to remember that. “It will definitely be an adjustment, but I really do think he’ll be great here.”

“Yeah, but…” Sonia could see her gesturing helplessly from the corner of her eye. “Is this it? You’re all going to be here, in one city, forever?”

“We’ll have tours, and go around the empire, certainly,” she said blankly, not quite understanding
Amy’s concern. “And once things are a bit more settled, whoever isn’t the actual ruler will probably start making international journeys to the overhuman territories. All told, that will probably be me. But yes, we’ll mostly be here.”

Amy went quiet again, and it took Sonia a few seconds to figure out why. But eventually, she remembered that Amy and Tails had never known Sonic was a prince until recently. They might never have spoken to him if they’d known the truth, let alone become close enough friends to follow him back here to the palace. She was worried that was going to change! “Oh, Amy, don’t worry. It doesn’t matter where you come from – friends are always welcome in our palace,” she said warmly, then chanced a quick grin at her. “Besides, I know of at least one boy who wouldn’t mind it if you stuck around for good!”

She felt more than saw Amy flinch, and so spared another glance at her. Amy, if anything, looked even more worried than before. Sonia frowned. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just…” She hesitated, then groaned and flicked her hands again. “Sonic said that Manic… likes me. Is that true?”

Sonia blinked, and then rolled her eyes. No wonder Amy was like this. She was going to throttle her brother. “I was hoping Manic would be the one to tell you that…” she said. “Don’t let it get to you, Amy. It’s not like those old stories, where just because somebody says they love you, you have to love them back. Even if Manic was king, you could still turn him down. And if he forced the issue, you would tell me, and I’d beat him up.”

Amy’s stare was visible even from the corner of her eye, until she suddenly let out a startled laugh. “Oh, no, that’s… that’s not what I was worried about. I can’t imagine Manic doing something like that. He seems really nice!”

“He really is!” Sonia agreed brightly. “I’m not just being a big sister here, I swear, but Manic is honestly one of the sweetest guys I know. And he’s not one of those people that fall in love all the time, so don’t worry about that, either. He really does like you.” She hesitated, tilting her head a little. “You didn’t notice? I thought he was being a little obvious.”

“No, I didn’t… I hope I didn’t say anything stupid,” she said, and then sighed, looking out the window again. “It’s just… you see… This is so…”

“It’s weird, I get it,” she said. “I mean, love is hard enough already, let alone with the whole royalty thing. And believe me, I know all about how a crown can get in the way of a relationship.”

Amy looked at her curiously, but she avoided the gaze for a few seconds, stretching her fingers over the wheel.

“I mean… of course, I guess I’m probably not on the side you need to talk to,” she admitted. “I’d suggest Stripes, but he’s in such a mood lately… and I definitely do not suggest you model any potential relationships after us. That is a kind of mess no one needs in their life. My best friend, though… Mindy. She’s super sweet, and she’s kind of been right by me through all of this, so she would at least have some insight if you wanted to talk about it. She’s also much less of a sister to Manic, so… less bias,” she added with a laugh, which Amy awkwardly echoed.

“Yeah… yeah, that… might help. Thanks.”

She smiled warmly, and then looked back at the road, trying not to feel triumphant. Another potentially great step forward for the day.
Unlike Amy, who lived in her head as much as the real world, Sonic wasn’t much for introspection. He preferred to just live in the moment, reacting to things however he felt like reacting to them at the time.

But that didn’t always work out for him, as his morning in court had proven.

So as Manic found him a new jacket and boots, and then rounded up a bunch of people that Sonic actually remembered from the Resistance, along with some other people he didn’t know but who seemed kind of cool, Sonic decided to give the whole thinking-about-things a shot. There was a lot he needed to think about, after all – being here was dredging up memories, and his family was always a complicated thing, and the whole royalty thing had been way simpler when it was either a storybook or just… not something he thought about. None of it was getting any easier by ignoring it.

He managed all of ten minutes before giving up on thinking and just focussed on the group instead.

It was weird to see old Resistance folks playing at diplomacy. Renee he could understand – she was from Alles, and they all had that same snooty style that made them a perfect fit amongst the aristocrats. Ifyoucan, who had been partially robotocised and was a master swordsman besides, was a weirder fit, but he managed.

But the most hilarious thing was that they’d somehow convinced Shadow to come along in his diplomat role, even if he wasn’t exactly ‘engaging the international community’. Mostly, he alternated between staring at the diplomats and frowning at Sonic, who grinned lazily back because he knew how much Shadow had to be hating this.

It wasn’t that bad, though. The group seemed to excel in not talking about politics, instead focussing on more practical problems. They discussed the altered plan for the festival, Sonia’s new strategy for the week (Sonic barely hid his cringe as he discovered just how much time he was going to spend flying and schmoozing), and general reconstruction efforts. Even better: they had so much command over the conversation that the few aristocrats that had managed to sneak in could barely get two words in around the shop talk.

Maybe that was why Manic took the lead this time, mostly trading with Aleena in leading the discussion, while Sonia was able to focus on her food and Sonic was left blissfully alone.

It was good, but… With everything that had happened in the last couple of days, it was also weird.

Weirder still, Aleena didn’t make any excuse to leave early, instead making it all the way through lunch to dessert, and so Sonic found out how these things were supposed to end. With coffee and then a polite but firm promise to continue all discussions later. And then the aristocrats were politely ushered to stand up, bow to the remaining party, and sent out the door.

The diplomats, meanwhile, stood on their own.

“Sounds like we all have a busy week ahead,” Skip—the diplomat from Downunda—said as he came around the table to shake Manic’s hand. “If you have some time this afternoon, I think we’d all appreciate a more detailed rundown of tomorrow night’s agenda.”
“Sure thing, man,” he said. “I’ll get Paige to set it up and like, come find you all. Give me an hour or so?”

“Easy.”

“Will you be joining us, Agent Shadow?” asked Renee. She was staring Shadow down like it was a challenge, but it barely registered on him.

“It sounds like a mobian affair,” he replied coolly. “I have my own work.”

Sonic covered his smirk with his fist, but Renee’s eyes only narrowed slightly before she shrugged.

“As you wish. Sonic,” she said, turning her attention to him, and he looked up with a grin. “It was, as ever, a pleasure to see you again. We shall have to catch up when you visit Annes this week, non?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’ll be sweet.”

She giggled and winked before joining the others in bowing to the royal family as whole. Although Shadow didn’t bow, he did nod, and gave Sonic one last long look before filtering out of the room with everyone else.

Sonic raised an eyeridge, not sure what he’d done to bug Shadow this time. “What was the about?”

“Catching up with Renee?” Sonia asked. “It’s this thing people do, when they haven’t seen old friends and acquaintances for a while. Or family members? They get together and tell each other what they’ve been up to since they last saw each other.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” he deadpanned, and she smirked.

“I know it’s an unfamiliar concept to you.”

Yesterday, that would have grated another of his last nerves, but today Sonia just looked like she was teasing, so Sonic gave her a mock glare in return and left it there.

“That went well. Congratulations on organising that so quickly,” Aleena said quietly. Sonic, Sonia, and Manic all turned their attention back to her, surprised by the comment, and she smiled. “An excellent response to this morning’s events. And Manic, you engaged the meeting with flawless grace. I was very impressed.”

He straightened in his chair, a crooked grin playing on the edge of his lips. “Thanks. It was actually pretty easy today.”

Sonic noticed Aleena’s eyes flick to him, but she didn’t comment before nodding to Sonia. “I approve of your plan for the week ahead, as well. A royal tour will complement today’s revelations excellently. If you are unable to make it back to the palace each night, please report back via communications.”

“Of course,” she said cheerfully. “It would be good to get your feedback anyway.”

“Indeed. Thank you, my –” Aleena paused, then smiled a touch more broadly as she focussed her gaze on Sonic again. “Sonic, Sonia, Manic. I am ever more confident of this festival’s success. And now, we all have things to attend to this afternoon. Good luck to us all.”

Sonic raised his eyeridge again, hearing something between the lines but not able to translate. But
everyone else was standing up and heading out, so he didn’t bother wasting time worrying.

“I better go find Paige,” Manic said wearily. “Man, and I was so gonna ask out Amy today.”

“Aw, look at our baby brother, all grown up and wanting to go on a date!” Sonia cooed as Aleena disappeared out the door. “Don’t worry your spiky green head! Responsibility is very attractive in a man.”

Not to Amy, Sonic didn’t say, shoving his chair in just a little harder than necessary. He instead started heading after Aleena – it was the way he knew best to get out of the palace. “I’m gonna get back to the Dump. I’ll see you guys at breakfast?”

“Of course! Oh, and Sonic?”

He paused, watching quietly as Sonia and Manic exchanged glances.

“Thank you,” Sonia said finally. “I know it’s been kind of strained since you got back, but I really think we’re getting there. I think we’re on to something here.”

“Yeah, it’s been weird, but like, kinda awesome,” Manic agreed. “Tomorrow’s lookin’ pretty cool, and… yeah.”

Sonic hesitated, but there didn’t seem to be a lot he could say to that, so in the end he just nodded. “Yeah, sure. No worries.”

And then, before it could get more awkward, he ran for it.

There were many mistakes Sonic could admit to having made in his life. Most of them, he knew full well, could have been avoided if he’d stopped to think before making them. This was one of them.

“Okay, dude, I am officially here to work. Direct me.”

Gareth’s grin was probably the first sign of his downfall.

His afternoon began with moving dirt from one end of the site to the other, because he was faster and more manoeuvrable than the truck loader. Then he was tilling it, because again – faster and more manoeuvrable. By the end of that, he was literally covered in dirt and oil, and not even his ego could make it look good.

“Our crown prince, ladies and gentlemen!” Tetsuya laughed as Sonic tried to shake the worst of it out of his quills.

“Oh, you think you’re funny,” he replied, and then dropped into a spin-dash, successfully covering Tetsuya in a wave of freshly-tilled dirt. The rest of the watching crew cackled, especially when it was done and Tetsuya had to shove his way free of the pile.

“Now that’s landscaping!” one of them shouted, while he spat out dirt.

Jokes aside, Sonic did feel several layers of gross, but Gareth didn’t give any of them time to clean
up, instead ordering the crew to start shoring up the dirt with more wood. Surprisingly, he set the youngest one of the crew on gofer duties, and presented Sonic with a hand-saw.

“You want me chopping planks?” he asked, hefting it curiously. “Seriously? I could probably speed things up by playing runner.”

“Nah. With these kind of steps, we need clean edges. So I need you to use that speed of yours to make these planks smooth. And besides... they say Red Rat was a pretty good carpenter,” he added, his tone just that little bit too light, and Sonic stiffened. He made sure to keep his expression even as Gareth slanted a careful look toward him. “I guess we’re just interested to see if that’s got anything to do with you.”

For a solid two seconds, Sonic considered punching him.

To his credit, Gareth seemed to know exactly how much thin ice he was treading on, tail sweeping the dirt and ears leaning backward, but he didn’t back down from their locked gaze. As ticked as he was, Sonic had to respect that, so he lowered the saw out of the way and stepped in close, voice quiet as he said, “No worries, Gareth. Just point me at the wood outside your head and I’ll go to town.”

Gareth slowly nodded, but couldn't quite raise his head back up as he gestured to the boards they both knew had been piled up since the morning. “Have at.”

Sonic smiled thinly. Like he’d said to a room full of aristocrats and reporters that morning, he could play games too. “How much are you looking for, Gareth?”

“I uh...” He swallowed, then took a breath and squared his shoulders. “Just... keep cutting lengths three metres long. I did the calculations this morning – we should pretty much break even.”

Sonic let some more teeth show in his smile. “Cool.”

Again, they just stared at each other for a second, before Gareth coughed and slunk out of it, edging around him to instead head over to the crew.

Sonic just rolled his eyes and got to work. He would get a lot worse if and when Solar showed up, so he should have been expecting it, but geez.

Still, all things considered, the afternoon went pretty well. The crew were cool, and the crowd milling around the fence were pretty easy to ignore. The amphitheatre slowly began to look more like it was actually meant to, slick and professional despite their small numbers and quick work. As the little sunlight they had disappeared and they started working by floodlight, Gareth and Tetsuya began disappearing for short breaks, always returning with people that carried crates or insulating boxes. Sonic’s grin only got wider as he realised this was tonight’s party getting set up.

“Hey, nice work, y’highness,” Tetsuya teased as he finished off the final plank. “Who knew royalty could work so hard?”

“Yeah, yeah, keep talkin’, Tanuki,” he drawled. “I bet all that ‘supervising’ you were doing really took it out of ya.”

“It’s a hard job, but someone’s gotta do it,” he said, and then laughed and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “But in all seriousness, Gareth sent me over here to say you’re done. Why don’t you go grab a shower while we finish setting these?”

“What, and ruin my rugged workman good looks?” he asked. “I notice you’re lookin’ a lot cleaner
than I left you. Don’t you know dirt’s the new black?”

Tetsuya’s grin widened. “Maybe for daywear. The party’s gonna start soon – you gotta dress for the occasion, man.”

“Aw, and here I thought Sonia was the only one who wanted me to be a pretty prince in public,” he said. But he knew he’d feel better without all the dirt and sweat ruffling his fur, and so stepped back to stretch. “But cool. Am I allowed to know who’s on the invite list?”

“Mostly everyone’s already here,” he said, and they glanced back at the large group that were slowly spreading out across the stage and steps, opening the crates and boxes to reveal a ridiculous amount of food and drinks. “Cookies’ staff, a couple old friends.” He hesitated, then admitted, “We decided not to send any invites out to badlands.”

Sonic did a double-take. “No kidding?” he asked, and Tetsuya shrugged.

“That was the plan, but it changed around noon, y’know?”

“ Noon?” he repeated blankly. That would have been around when he… ah. When they heard about what he’d done in court. He settled his weight back on his hips, waiting to see if Tetsuya would bother explaining the obvious.

He slanted a look at him, then shrugged again. “Even if… you hadn’t helped us out,” he said slowly, “Working today was good. It’s the first time we’ve had a real job, and looking at it now, I think we’re all proud of it. We want to see it used.”

Sonic nodded, silently prompting.

“It’s kinda making me a little excited for this festival thing. And you know that wouldn’t fly well with Solar and his guys,” he said. “If they were here… ugh. it’s been a good day, y’know? We don’t want to ruin that. Tonight should be a party, not a politics thing.”

Sonic just stared at him quietly for a few seconds, then stepped around the hobby horse to grab him by both shoulders. Tetsuya flinched, eyes wide, but Sonic made sure his face was completely deadpan as he said, “Tetsuya. I mean this in the most manly possible, but... if you say that again, I’m gonna have to kiss you.”

He blinked rapidly, caught off guard, but quickly recovered with a snort and shoved him off. “Yeah, yeah, save it for your mirror,” he said, before smiling softly. “But in all seriousness… thanks. For setting this up, and helping out, and… y’know, everything. It means a lot.”

Struck by the echo, so similar to his sibling’s parting statement earlier, it took Sonic a few moments to respond. But really, just like then, there wasn’t much to say in response. So he just smiled, winked, and ran for it.

There was a party getting ready for him. And he did hate to keep people waiting.

In contrast to Sonic’s afternoon of hard work and ridiculous banter, Amy’s afternoon had been
painfully slow.

While Sonia had offered to call Mindy for her right away, she’d decided to search out Tails instead, needing something familiar to ground her while she sorted her thoughts into specific things she needed to worry about. He, of course, was no help. He was preoccupied with a weird, shiny rock that didn’t seem all that interested in obeying the laws of gravity, and responded to all her questions about Sonic with a vague ‘Well, you know what he’s like’.

So she instead settled in an armchair in Tails’ suite, watched him tinker, and worried that maybe she didn’t know what Sonic was like. Which was stupid, and she knew it, but it was easier than trying to work out what he’d meant by telling her about Manic.

The one thing Amy knew above all else was that she loved Sonic the Hedgehog. Whether he was a hero, a vagabond, or a prince, she knew she would always love him. And she’d always thought that he cared about her, even if he wasn’t able to commit, or even admit he felt anything. They were destined for each other; she was sure of it.

But here on Mobius, there was a lot more going on than just the two of them.

Manic was one problem. And even if he hadn’t been, there was a kingdom to think about. A whole empire, really.

She would always love Sonic, and she wanted to be with him no matter who or what he was. But childhood fantasies aside… did she really want to be a princess? A future empress? Would she and Sonic be able to be themselves, to enjoy their lives, while leading all those people? What would they have to do? What would they have to act like? She wasn’t sure if she could handle it if Sonic had to become someone like Aleena.

She definitely wouldn’t be able to handle it if she was expected to act like Aleena.

Sighing for what felt like the millionth time, Amy turned her gaze back to the window.

Sonia had told her to talk to this Mindy person, but Amy doubted she’d actually be able to help her work through this. Mindy might have been Sonia’s friend, but that wasn’t the same as being a lover. She needed someone who really understood.

There was Stripes, of course… he would have been the logical choice. He was Sonia’s boyfriend. Or… close enough, anyway. But as Sonia had pointed out, he was apparently in a bad mood and honestly, Amy hadn’t liked him that much. Maybe it was the sunglasses, but there was definitely something about him that bothered her.

If Knuckles had anything resembling a romantic bone in his body, he might have been a better option. He’d apparently had a crush on Sonia, but that was in the past. So he would have some perspective. But he was useless when it came to girls. And talking. And everything useful. She rolled her eyes at the thought and moved on.

There was that other person… the one Sonic kept asking Sonia about. Bartrand. Barnaby. Bobby? Bartleby! Sonia’s ex-fiance!

Her eyes widened. Yes. Yes, he would be the perfect person to talk to! He’d apparently known her before and during her time with the Resistance, so he would have known her as a person, and then a fighter, and then seen her change into a princess! And he left, but if Sonia’s attitude was any indication, there was something still there, so…!

“Tails!”
“Uh huh?” he grunted, not looking up from the mirrors he was aligning.

She leapt out of her chair and grabbed him by the shoulders, not even caring when it sent his entire experiment set up flying. “Tails! I need you to find someone for me! Or tell me where to find them! It’s really important!”

“Wh- what?” He turned his head to stare at her from the corner of his eye. “What are you talking about?”

“Ugh, would you listen?” she demanded. “I need you to find someone for me, because I really, really, really need to talk to him. Bartleby Mont-whatever. Sonia’s ex-boyfriend!”

He didn’t move. “Why…?”

“Because I need to talk to him!” she insisted. “Come on, you can find him, right?”

“I… guess?” He hesitated, then reached out to grab his mileselectric from where it had fallen. “I’ll need to hack some palace files, but I guess I could. Do you need it right now?”

“Yes. Right now.” She probably wouldn’t do anything tonight – it was almost dinnertime and Mobotropolis seemed to basically shut down after dark. But she had a plan and she needed to act on it. “Come on, hurry up! Then we’re going to get dinner. And sleep. And tomorrow, we’re going to find him!”

“Why?” he asked again, even as he pulled up his hacking software. “And why do I need to be involved in this?”

“What kind of a question is that? This is for Sonic, Tails!”

He groaned again, obviously unimpressed with this non-answer, but Amy didn’t care. This would help them understand how Sonic was acting, and what she could do about it. And she would do anything for her Sonic, whether Tails wanted to help or not.

Despite his original plans to head back early, finding the Chaos Emerald had convinced Knuckles to stay on Gray Mountain for the whole day, searching for… something. But all he found were old robots and older war relics, and in the end he decided he was too hungry, sweaty, and tired to keep searching when he didn’t know what he was looking for.

“You probably don’t want to go in there.”

Knuckles stopped with his hand on the door to the casual dining hall, scowling at Cyrus as he came down the hall with an arm full of rolled up blueprints. “And why is that?”

“Well, you’re supposed to be, for one thing,” he said. “Manic’s in there with a bunch of diplomats from the surrounding kingdoms, hashing out plans for the week ahead.”

Knuckles pulled back like the door was burning. Even if he hadn’t been covered in dirt and sweat, that sounded like the last thing he wanted to be part of. Cyrus smirked.
“Your other option is dinner with Sonia and the queen in the official dining hall, briefing the palace leaders on what we’re supposed to be doing during the festival. I got to skip out because I’m planning to miss most of it, exploring the sections of the palace Tails opened up for us. You, on the other hand, should probably know about that stuff, Guardian.”

He ignored that. He knew he was supposed to be pretty important to these people, but he also knew his job. It did not include dealing with stuff like this. “Where’s Sonic?”

“Didn’t he tell you? He made a deal to spend the night out at the Dump at some kind of party,” he said, not sounding surprised that Knuckles didn’t know. “I don’t know where the rest of your friends are. Shadow was apparently at the diplomatic luncheon, but Tails was supposed to be in the hangar all day and I couldn’t find him.”

Good, so the kid had stopped tinkering with the robotocisor when Knuckles told him to. He glanced off to the side, mildly annoyed that Sonic wasn’t around where he could check on him, but that was Sonic. Never where you wanted him to be.

“I’ll get dinner from the kitchens,” he decided, but didn’t immediately move, instead shifting his gaze back to Cyrus. “Did anything else happen today? What started all this diplomatic whatever?”

“A miracle happened,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Sonic actually did what he was supposed to do. He went to court, got the aristocrats to shut up, played nice with the diplomats at lunch… I’m honestly amazed the moon didn’t shine blue tonight,” he added, smile slipping slightly in his obvious confusion. “It’s a little strange, actually. The royal family seem pretty happy though. But I think the rest of us are a little on edge, just waiting to see what happens next. Hopefully Sonic keeps playing ball, but you know him.”

Knuckles frowned. He did know Sonic. Better than most.

And that worried him.

“Hey, speak of the devil!”

Sonic grinned as he stepped up onto the amphitheatre stage. While most of the party were spread out across the steps and through the house, Cookies’ musicians had done the same thing they always did when confronted with a stage: they set up shop. Most of them hadn’t brought their instruments, but there were a couple of guitars and Pixiestix had created a drum set out of upside down buckets, so it was close enough.

“How are the acoustics up here?” he asked, and Keys shrugged.

“Pretty lousy right now. But Gareth was saying you’re gonna get carpet in tomorrow – that should help with some of the reverb.”

“I’m gonna pretend I understood that,” he said cheerfully, and the band laughed.

“And you call yourself a musician!”
“No, I call myself a super hero,” he said. “Music’s just for fun.”

The party was a lot bigger than he’d expected – when he and Gareth had been haggling, he’d expected it to just be the crew and (because he wasn’t an idiot, whatever Shadow’s lingering stares implied) probably a few of Solar’s groupies. But instead, as Tetsuya had said, half of Cookies had shown up, along with a lot of his old friends from the Resistance days. Which was kind of cool, really. It was nice to see the old crowd, and it never took long before he remembered why he’d liked hanging out with them back in the day. They joked about the media crews still hanging around outside the fence, kept out by Tony and a few of Trevor’s guys, or talked about what they’d been up to in the last few years. A few of them complained about the flood lights, heard Tetsuya’s plan for the proper lighting fit out, and promptly decided they were going to get it set up right then and there, just so they wouldn’t have so many lights shining in their eyes.

They were impulsive, practical people. Sonic could have dropped to his knees and applauded.

“Wow… and I thought you looked tired last night,” Keys commented as he walked over to join them. “Sit down before you fall down.”

“I’m fine. Gareth was working me pretty hard this afternoon,” he said, but took her up on the offer to sit down. “Didn’t get much of a chance to talk to you. How you been, Keys?”

“Not much changed all told,” she said, but then smiled and gestured to their surroundings. “This is nice, though. I think the last time I was outside for this long was back in the war – one of your concerts, I think.”

“That sucks.”

“S’how it is,” she replied. “But hey. This festival’s supposed to be mostly held on the streets, and you’re making such a big show of shaking things up. Who knows how I’ll feel this time next week?”

He made a face, not sure whether he liked that kind of statement or not. Luckily, she didn’t linger on it, instead giving him a knowing grin. “I spent a while talking to that friend of yours, Amy. She’s a nice girl.”

“Yeah, she’s great,” he said, glancing off to the side. “Manic wants to ask her out.”

“Really? That’s gonna be awkward,” she noted. “What with that massive crush she has on you.”

“Ooh!” Pixiestix cried, drumming her main bucket. “I smell a love triangle!”

“Between two princes, no less!” Strings cackled. “Quick, someone run over there and tell the reporters! Just think how much they’ll pay us for the story!”

Sonic rolled his eyes, sensing a setup as Keys winked and leaned over with a finger raised. “That’s right, we’re officially blackmailing you. If you don’t want our inside story getting leaked all over the news tomorrow morning, you… will show us just how rusty you’ve gotten on guitar!”

He snorted. “Oh, no. Whoever would have seen this coming?”

“Probably only a psychic,” she said cheerfully, and blindly stuck her hand back toward Pick, who happily handed over his guitar. “So, Hedgehog, what’ll it be?”

“Well, far be it from me to cause my family a PR headache,” he drawled, taking the guitar. “Any requests?”
Keys grinned, nestling her chin in her palm. “Start us off with an old Sonic Underground classic, like *Face Your Fears* or something. Then we’ll see what you can really do.”

Sonia, on the other hand, was already busy with her own performance. After the highly successful luncheon, she’d spent an hour calling some old aristocrat friends and reassuring them that everything was absolutely fine. With them, she’d essentially developed and rehearsed the line the rest of the palace were going to be repeating to anyone who asked.

The Palace General looked sceptical, but Aleena’s approving smile kept her confident as she fed it to them.

“It’s quite obvious that Sonic doesn’t have formal training as a politician, and quite frankly he isn’t suited for it anyway, but the Palace stands behind his perhaps poorly phrased intentions,” she said cheerfully. “The royal family fully believes that we exist to support and protect the citizens of our empire. Now reunited, the Council of Four intends to take up specific and specialised roles to best ensure that happens. Her majesty will of course remain as head of the court, and I, as Grand Vizier, will continue to work with our financial and political partners in pursuing the empire’s legal strategies. Manic intends to redouble his efforts in the construction and operation of our major cities, while Sonic will refocus his previous efforts of security and protection from international matters to more internal pursuits. This joint effort will no doubt result in a stronger and more confident Mobius.”

There was a long pause as the Palace General waited to make sure that was the end of the speech. Unsurprisingly, Lord Patch was the first to speak up, “May I ask what is meant by ‘security and protection’?”

“Sonic won’t be taking over the Guard,” she assured him. “Or become formally involved with the Emergency Response Unit, either. He works independently.”

“Doing what, exactly?”

“Protecting the people of Mobius,” she replied smoothly, but he just raised a pointed eyebrow.

“From what?”

“Anything that should threaten them,” she said.

“With all due respect, ma’am, that’s frighteningly vague,” Facilitate said, and she smiled.

“Exactly. We’re going to spend the next week reassuring the common people that Sonic isn’t here to hurt them. Everyone else can wonder exactly who he’s protecting them from.”
In the casual dining hall, Manic found himself in a similar conversation, though after a full afternoon of planning and carefully worded conversations, the diplomats were a lot more blunt.

“It’s gonna be a hard sell,” Skip said, gesturing vaguely with a fork that still had a spear of asparagus on its end. “Today was the first time I’ve seen Sonic up close, but I can tell you now, that whole aloof authority figure thing isn’t going to fly in Downunda.”

“He is not normally that quiet,” Renee said with a laugh, before losing her smile and turning a more serious look on Manic. “But while I am not concerned about using Sonic to reassure the populace, I do think you have potential problems here in Mobotropolis. Anarchists are not the type to turn down an opportunity to strike when people are watching.”

“And if they think Sonic was threatening them…” Annabelle was from the southern end of Mobius, her accented drawl only exemplifying her concern. “I don’t know, y’highness, I just think you might be askin’ for trouble.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Ifyoucan. Everyone looked at him, but his one visible eye was staring into his wine, obviously deep in memory. “I respect Sonic, and what he stands for. But I remember how he looked at me when he thought I was an enemy. I would not like to make him one again. I have known some of the people you fear, Renee. They are not more courageous than I.”

“Courage for nothin’,” Annabelle argued. “I’m worried about how stupid they are.”

“So what?” asked Manic. “You think we should like, cancel the whole festival just because some anarchists might try something?”

There was an awkward pause, several diplomats exchanging glances, before Johnny, the huge buffalo from the western kingdom, spoke up. “We’re all here, Manic. We all came, we all agreed to be here. Obviously we support the festival. But it is a huge risk. In the last thirty months, nothing like this has happened before. We’re all just a little confused as to what brought it on.”

“I…” Manic hesitated, sitting back in his chair to think, before he was hit by a sudden flash of annoyance. Mostly with himself. He shifted forward again, lifting a hand to slash through the air and all the stuff he was scared to say. “You’re totally right. It’s not like anything we’ve done before. But like, that’s the point. We’ve been so busy fighting and getting nowhere. You go out into the city, and it looks like the same place it was three years ago, y’know? This festival is about getting past that, getting out of it. And yeah, that’s like, a total risk. But I think it’s worth it. With the Council of Four all acting together? I totally think we can make it through.”

Back in the amphitheatre, Sonic had gotten the hang of the guitar they’d given him. It was one of the portable electric ones he’d loved back when he lived with Chuck – easy to carry and capable of some great sounds, as long as you didn’t mind keeping it fairly quiet.

But after three songs from the Sonic Underground days, and having attracted a crowd of party-goers that sang and clapped along to the ones they knew, Sonic was no longer interested in keeping things quiet. The party was big and happening, the food had been great, the drinks were flowing, and he was all about keeping the mood high and tight. That called for some real noise.
“Okay, okay,” he said, getting to his feet. “Enough playing around. Let’s get serious, here.”

“Serious?” Keys asked, and he winked.

“You wanted to see what I’ve really got?” he asked, and then put two fingers in his mouth to whistle as loud as he could. It worked wonders – the crowd immediately silenced, turning their attention to him, and he took a second to give them all his best imperious look, soaking in the drama. “Ladies and gentlemen, congratulations! You have found the Lost Prince! Sonic the Hedgehog: the greatest guitarist on this planet!”

Half of the crowd cheered while the rest of them laughed, which was exactly what he was going for – getting to be a melodramatic ham was half the fun of being a frontman. He held out a hand in mock-anger.

“Oh, wait, was that – no way did I just hear you laugh at me. Are you all doubting my skills?”

“Yes!” he heard Tetsuya yell from somewhere up on the steps. The crowd laughed again, especially when Sonic made a show of stumbling back in shock.

“Are you kidding? I saved this place through the power of my guitar!” he cried. “The people—the people of Mobius—they believe in my skills. And I would never let the people of Mobius down.”

“You’re all mouth, Hedgehog!” another one of the crew shouted.

“A challenge!” he cried, pointing toward the voice. “For the people of Mobius, I must defend my honour. Are you ready?”

His crowd laughed and cheered, and he set his stance, grinning out at them all.

Sonic considered himself a hero, and he would never give it up for anything. But this… the thrill of the performance, the energy, the smiles… it was a small crowd, but it was everything he needed. He let himself sink into it, his fingers itching for a melody he’d never heard before but knew by heart.

He gave in and let his fingers fly, the music slamming out louder and deeper than the guitar should have allowed, and somewhere across the city, a drum and keyboard answered. He grinned and stepped into the song.

“Rolling around at the speed of sound, got places to go, gotta follow my rainbow!” he sang, shaking his head once to clear out the last of his conscious thoughts. “Can’t stick around, have to keep moving on. Guess what lies ahead? Only one way to find out!”

Across the city, as the music blasted into the palace and over the surprised Palace General, Sonia set a hand on the table and flicked her hair with a confident smile.

“We must keep on moving ahead. No time for guessing, follow our plan instead! Trusting in what we can’t see; take our lead, we’ll soon be free!”

Aleena smiled quietly, but didn’t join in as she heard all three children come together for the chorus. “Follow me, set me free. Trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, follow –
follow me. Set me free, trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, prove it to you—”

“—follow me,” Manic finished, spreading his hands as he looked around the diplomats. “Danger is lurking around every turn. So trust your feelings, y’gotta live and learn! I know with some luck that we’ll make it through. Got no other option, only one thing to do!”

Somewhere, he didn’t know where, he knew Sonic was grinning out at a crowd. “I don’t care what lies ahead.”

Sonia shrugged in a mockery of helplessness. “No time for guessing, follow our plan instead!”

“Find the next stage, no matter what it may be,” Manic finished off. “Take our lead, we’ll soon be free.”

“Follow me, set me free. Trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, follow – follow me. Set me free, trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, prove it to you. Follow me!”

Sonic closed his eyes, letting the guitar do the work. As always happened, he was kind of aware of something spreading out with the music, seeping into the world around. As Knuckles had said, it wasn’t control. It wasn’t even influence, really.

But it was a kind of power.

When he reopened his eyes, that power made him look up, over and through the crowd to the amphitheatre itself. There was something different under their feet. Something beautiful, something needed. It would be perfect by tomorrow.

He smiled and began to sing again, “Surprises are hiding out in front of me! Uncover their secrets and then we will soon be free!”

The Palace General and diplomats all clapped twice after the guitar solo, and Sonia couldn’t help laughing happily before the chorus began again.
“Follow me, set me free. Trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, follow – follow me. Set me free, trust me and we will escape with our city. We’ll make it through, prove it to you. Follow me!”

“Follow me,” Aleena added softly, while in lieu of his drumsticks, Manic flipped his knife and fork, burning off some of the momentum of the song.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Follow me!”

“Rolling around at the speed of sound, got places to go, gotta follow my rainbow…”!

Completely unnoticed, Shadow stood in the dark on the far side of the construction fence, away from the media and curious onlookers. He had been incredulous but fascinated when the music began, but now he was barely paying attention, instead focussed on the ground stretching out between himself and the brightly lit amphitheatre.

When he’d first arrived, it had been rough dirt, scattered over old and cracking cement, slightly greasy with the same oil that coated everything in this city.

Now, thick green grass edged a wide, gold cobblestone path, leading the way from the road behind him to the base of the amphitheatre steps. It hadn’t quite reached everything – some patches would need a gardener’s extra attention, and there were a few gaps, but even Shadow could see how you cover those with ticket or snack stalls. Most of it was strong and healthy, almost exactly like the impossibly well-kept grass in the most chaos-ridden areas of the Mystic Ruins.

As the song began to slow down, obviously coming to an end, Shadow looked back up at its main singer. Sonic was bright and shining in the flood lights, completely lost to the energy of his cheering crowd. Even across the huge distance, Shadow could swear his medallion glinted.

“Interesting,” he murmured, and then turned to head back to the palace.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Pressing On - Relient K 2001
Track Seventeen: Break down!

Chapter Notes

[(badly) translated] I don’t care what kind of form I take, I don’t even care if I break!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Walking into breakfast, Knuckles did an absent check of the room before focussing on the buffet, too hungry to care about much beyond the food. It wasn’t until he’d taken a full four steps inside that his brain actually caught up with what his eyes had registered and he had to stop and look again.

It was still early, so it wasn’t altogether surprising that neither Manic nor Amy were present yet. But at first glance, Knuckles had assumed it must have been an unfamiliar diplomat slouched in the chair between the usual early crowd of Sonia and Cyrus, which made absolutely no sense, because when he looked around again, it kind of looked like Sonic.

It took a full five seconds of staring before he decided it actually was Sonic, and then another three before he realised how strange it was that he hadn’t immediately recognised him.

It wasn’t even in that odd way that everyone occasionally mistook Sonic for Shadow and vice versa – overlooking colouring and quills in favour of the more subtle similarities. It was just something…

Knuckles blinked hard, trying to figure out what exactly had confused him so much.

“What.”

He blinked again. Sonic had lifted his head just enough to flick the fingers that had been holding it up in an irritable gesture, obviously demanding an explanation for Knuckles’ staring. He grimaced and shifted his weight back, folding his arms over his torso. “You look even worse than yesterday.”

“Great. Because I feel even better than I look,” he deadpanned. “What d’you care?”

“Don’t mind him,” Sonia told Knuckles with a quick grin. “He’s been like this since he woke up – we’re pretty sure he’s hungover.”

“I told you, I didn’t drink anything,” Sonic snapped back. “And even if I did, I don’t get drunk, so I don’t get hungover, either.”

“Sure, sure. Drink some coffee, it’ll make you feel better,” she said, and he rolled his eyes.

“That’s a stupid thing to say to someone you think is hungover. Coffee just dehydrates you more.”

Cyrus looked up from his cereal with a bland look. “So drink some water and chill out. Headache or hangover, your bad mood is driving me crazy.”

“Talk to the hand, Lion.”

Knuckles hesitated, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. It definitely was Sonic – he looked like him, sounded like him… the mood was strange, but Tails had mentioned he’d been annoyed and getting worse for the better part of two weeks now. Even so, Knuckles still found himself looking at Sonic and somehow… doubting it was really him. Maybe it was just how he was sitting – while Sonic
always slouched, this morning it looked less about lazy comfort and more about being able to glare at the world effectively.

With one last wary glance, Knuckles started heading for the buffet again. Whoever it was, he absolutely believed at least part of the bad mood was from a headache. Probably-Sonic looked lousy, with deep shadows under his eyes, and although there was a plate of food in front of him, it didn’t look like he’d done more than pick at it half-heartedly.

It was almost enough for Knuckles to wish they were the type of people to be concerned about each other. But they weren’t, so…

“So, Knuckles!” Sonia interrupted his thoughts with a bright smile. “Do you think you’ll be ready to meet some of the visiting diplomats today? They’re all so interested to meet you, and it is the start of the festival tonight!”

He glanced at her as he accepted a plate from one of the servants. “Maybe. I was going to head into the desert on the far side of the mountains today. That’ll take time.”

“Surely you can take a day off from that,” she said. “This is important, Knuckles. You are at least going to be there for the opening tonight, aren’t you?”

He hadn’t been planning on it, unless Aleena showed up to ask him herself. But with Sonia right here and gazing at him so imploringly…

“This is our big moment. Everyone in the city will be watching. We need all our allies there, supporting us,” she said softly. “It would really mean a lot to us. To me.”

He twitched, but was saved having to answer by Sonic snorting.

“Yeah, because everyone in this city knows what a hero our boy Knux is,” he drawled. “Come on, Sonia, even most of the Resistance didn’t know about half the people who helped us out during the war. No one’ll care if Knuckles is there or not.”

“I’ll care,” she said, shooting him a dark look. “Besides, just because there’s a lot of people who don’t know, that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t. Knuckles was a hero and he should be treated like one!”

“Says you,” Sonic argued. “He screws up as much as he saves the day.”

“Ohh-ho, Sonic, do not get me started on people screwing up, because I will list all the times you got me and Manic kidnapped.”

“What? Listen, Princess—”

The budding argument cut off with Cyrus’s pointed sigh. “Three whole years I went without this lovely banter—”

“Two years,” Sonic growled.

“—why did I miss it, again?”

Sonic scoffed and dropped back into his slouch, while Sonia snatched up her coffee and took a dismissive swig before recovering to smile at Knuckles. “But you’ll be there tonight, right? The festival officially starts at five thirty. We’re going to do a practice run-through at one, after Mother gives her official sign-off on the new location.”
“At one?” Sonic repeated. “Are we skipping lunch or something?”

She raised an eyeridge at him. “As you would know if you’d actually listened all those times we went through the plan for the week, it’s been cancelled until Friday. You and I will be travelling for most of the week, and Manic will be busy with official functions, while Mother can hardly be expected to host on her own. Keep up, would you?”

Knuckles’ eyes narrowed even further as Sonic made a face at her. They had been sniping at each other since their reunion, but just like Sonic seemed different today, so did the argument. Not that it was a bad thing, in this case – they were still snapping at each other, but it didn’t seem as… serious, maybe. It was more like he remembered them bickering when he’d first met Sonia back on Angel Island. Again, he found himself watching Sonic, trying to figure out what was different about him.

“While we’re talking about plans,” Cyrus interjected slowly, “does anyone know what Tails is going to be doing this week? I barely saw him yesterday, and I kinda forgot to ask when I did.”

“Dunno,” said Sonic. “He and Amy were gonna be helping me and Knuckles clear out some places, but this whole travel thing put the kibosh on that for me, so… Why?”

He shrugged. “I could use his help with the palace. He knows more about the technology than I do, and it would just be nice to have a pair of properly qualified hands.”

“That sounds like a great idea!” Sonia enthused. “I really think Tails would be an amazing addition to the royal household, and this is just the thing to get him involved!”

“Addition?” Knuckles repeated, but only Sonic seemed to notice, meeting his wary glance with one of his own as Sonia clasped her hands together.

“Oh, and if Amy could accompany Manic to his functions, how wonderful would that be? We could integrate them both almost seamlessly into the family, during this week of celebrating change – we won’t even need to make any fuss at all! It’ll just be part of the new regime!”

Knuckles’ frown deepened, and he looked around at Sonic again. He wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. But Sonic just shifted slightly in his chair and looked away, while Sonia touched her chin thoughtfully.

“I wonder if Amy had a chance to talk to Mindy yesterday. I should try and catch up with her; see how she’s feeling about it all. Does anyone know what she’s doing today?”

“Tails said they’re going out somewhere,” Knuckles supplied slowly. “Going to find someone, I think.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Oh well, we have time.”

“It’s probably not a bad thing to leave it a while, either,” Cyrus interjected. “I never actually ran my plan to go through the ducts past Manic, and if I’m gonna be risking a kid along with me, I should probably get something in writing.”

“And he should probably be the one to invite Amy out, too,” she agreed with a strange grin. “Between one thing and another.”

“Good luck to him,” Cyrus muttered, picking up his juice to salute the air. “It’s about time.”

Confused, Knuckles could only stare for a second, before he was suddenly distracted by Sonic shoving his chair back.
“I’mma go for a run. Try and shake some of this ache,” he said, looking around at Sonia. “You said we’re meeting at one? At the Dump?”

“Yes… but if you could make it twelve-thirty, so we can all do a walk through, that would be better,” she said, and he nodded once.

“No problémo. See y’all on the flip side,” he said, and then disappeared in a flash of blue.

Knuckles watched it fade from sight, trying to remember the last time he’d heard Sonic say ‘problémo’.

The estates on the outskirts of town were a strange contrast to the rest of the city. While they were still dark and oily, nestled under a smog sky, looking through the massive gates revealed huge open grasslands and perfect gardens. Tails wondered how the nature survived until Amy pointed out that most of them were probably fake.

“That guy Sonic and Manic hired to build the amphitheatre was talking about it. All the rich people around here use carpet that looks like grass. I bet the trees are the same.”

“But that’s a gardener,” Tails pointed out, squinting at a lone figure wandering around the flower beds. “Why would they water fake plants?”

She made a vague noise. “All I can tell you is that real plants wouldn’t look like that in this city.”

“Huh…”

They went back to staring.

The Montclair estate was even more open than the places they’d driven past on the way, with huge glass windows you could see from the road. Tails could kind of see how it would have once been beautiful, and compared to the rest of the city it was impressive. But the low-hanging, greenish-black clouds made everything look a little unhealthy, so the beautiful expanse just seemed… off, somehow.

“The Montclairs were a fairly small house before the war,” Tails said absently, the research he’d done last night seeming important for some reason. “They’re financial aristocrats rather than landowners, known for investments and political networking. They managed a lot of Eggman’s investments, so he let them keep most of their money where he would’ve just taken it from other aristocrats. The Lord and Lady died about six years ago, leaving Bartleby as the sole heir.”

“You mean they actually helped Eggman?” Amy asked incredulously. “Seriously?”

He shrugged. It did seem odd to him, especially if he’d been as outright evil as Sonic and the barely-recovering city seemed to imply. But Sonic was always saying that everyone had their reasons. And the Montclair family were known for political strategy. Maybe that’s what it had been.

“You want to talk about weird, how about the fact that apparently everyone knew Bartleby was playing both sides during the last year of the war?” he replied. “It says in his file that Eggman knew Bartleby’s first loyalty was to Sonia, but the Resistance knew he’d do anything Eggman told him to.”

“What if Eggman told him to hurt Sonia?” she asked, and Tails shrugged again.
“I don’t think it came up.”

“So weird…”

They paused again, staring up at the estate. Amy was just working up the motivation to start climbing the gate when it suddenly clanged, making them both flinch back and away as it silently swung forward.

“Uh…” Tails looked at Amy sideways. “Did you do something?”

“No…? You?”

Something buzzed with soft static, and a voice called, “Oh, do stop standing there! Come in, come in. I have breakfast prepared. The honeyed mango is quite enticing and I hate to leave it waiting!”

They stared at each other blankly, but there didn’t seem to be much alternative. They started up the driveway.

Ho there! You look like you’re far from home!”

Rouge flinched, then cursed herself for being distracted and turned around. There was a mixe walking towards her—some strange combination of sponge and fish, if she had to guess—carrying a massive net and smiling broadly. Thankfully harmless, she decided, but that didn’t change the fact she should have been paying more attention.

“Closer than I’d like to be,” she said, and turned back to the harbour.

She had made it to the Mobius coastline and landed in the Seelie Kingdom a few hours ago, a shoreline province mostly known for its industrial exports. Apparently, it had once been the international hub, where people had come to get to the Islands. Whether that was true or not, it had been where she’d come to leave Mobius, stowed away on a fishing boat three years ago.

She shoved the memory away before it could distract her again.

The harbour was a ship graveyard, filled with rusting boats of all sizes and a polluted crust thick enough that kids sometimes dared each other to try and walk on it. The city behind was bustling though, factories and workshops chugging away and making everything feel alive, if not particularly healthy. Just like she remembered.

“You wouldn’t be from Madame Screech’s brood, would you?”

Rouge twitched, then slowly turned her head just enough to glare at the mixe. He grimaced and lifted a flipper-hand in immediate apology.

“Just asking, miss. You being a bat and all. Seemed like a reasonable question.”

“And do you always make assumptions about where people you’ve never met are from?” she snapped, setting a judgemental hand on her hip. “What do you know about Madame Screech, anyway?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “Absolutely nothing, miss.”
She continued scowling for a few seconds, then flicked her gaze down at the net in his hands. “Who are you? Some kind of fisherman?”

“A treasure hunter, miss,” he said, and tried for an encouraging smile as he lifted his net. “My name’s Castor. I make my living out of this harbour – searching the wrecks for little bits of history. My wife runs a little antique store in the city. A lot of it’s garbage, to be sure, but you’d be amazed what people consider treasure if you buff it up right well.”

The tension easing out of her, Rouge ended up with a smile and angled her body a little more toward him. He had just been trying to make conversation, not pick at past horrors. “What kind of garbage?”

“Oh, you know… things that were important twenty years ago. Silver picture frames, candelabras, clockwork. Found a whole wooden table the other day – don’t know how it survived the rot, but I’ll clean it up and get it sold,” he said. “Sometimes it’s just metal scraps and copper wire. Apprentice smiths pay good money for rusted metal they can bang away on.”

She chuckled. “I’ll take crystals over copper, thanks all the same.”

“To each their own,” he said playfully, and threw down the net to begin untangling it. “So if you don’t mind me making more assumptions, are you just passing through on the way to another kingdom?”

“Mm-hm. Taking the load road to Mobotropolis.”

“You’re a little late,” he said. “That big festival they’re holding starts tonight.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage without seeing opening night,” she said absently. For someone without proper fingers, Castor was making quick work of the knots in the net. It was oddly hypnotic. “Besides, Mobotropolis isn’t the only place that will be celebrating, I’m sure.”

“True, true. If you want to stick around here, you’ll probably find some of the older folk having their own quiet parties. Reminiscing about different times,” he said. “Or, if you’re feeling as cynical as I think you might be, you can probably head to the bars on the dock and join the commiserators reminiscing about more prosperous times.”

“There you go with those assumptions again,” she said, tilting her head curiously. “What are the commiserators upset about?”

“Oh, you know how it is,” he said, flicking a flipper-hand. “Whoever’s in charge is that much worse than the old one.”

She stilled, letting that echo through her mind for a moment as she decided the best way to reply. “People here miss Robotnik?”

“People here miss the economy from Robotnik,” he corrected with a quick grin. “He ordered a lot of metal from our plants. These days, orders are a little light.”

“I suppose they would be,” she said, glancing back at the city. “Did a lot of people lose their jobs?”

“Sure. Whole factories shut down.”

“But… weren’t most factories manned by robots during Robotnik’s days?” she asked. “ Couldn’t you just replace them with people?”

“The robots still run,” he pointed out. “Why get rid of good tools? They cost less than people, too.”
She didn’t really have a good argument, and so just hummed thoughtfully. Castor refocussed on his net.

“But you find people old enough and you get those who remember how we were before the war. We used to be all about the harbour – people coming and going. I was a fisherman, once… spending days out on the ocean, trawling for big catches. Nothing but blue ocean and bluer sky – sometimes it felt like I was the only one alive…” He shook his head. “But ah, maybe I’m making pretty memories out of hard times. Time changes everything, and memory changes with it.”

“True,” she said slowly, cautiously, “but the things Robotnik did… how could anyone have… agreed with it?”

“Oh, I don’t make judgements, miss,” he said. Finally finished with his untangling, he picked up the net again and walked over to bundle it into a small boat that she’d previously assumed was just another wreck. “All I can tell you is that people here had lives before Robotnik, they had lives during Robotnik, and they still have lives now, after Robotnik. Some of them were probably better than others. Who’s to say what’s best?”

She didn’t answer at first, not sure how careful she needed to be. It was just a conversation, but tact and diplomacy were important when one wrong word could ruin a future operation you didn’t know about yet. But ultimately she decided it was safe enough to say quietly, “A lot of robotocised people would probably have quite strong opinions about it.”

He laughed like she’d made a joke. “If they could have any. Which they can’t, whereas there’s a whole lot of people here who can.” He straightened up and moved over to the rope that was keeping the boat tied up to the dock. “Besides, there was no robotocisor here, miss. Never was. So maybe it didn’t matter then, and maybe it doesn’t now.”

She made sure to keep her expression mildly curious, but turned her gaze back over the harbour just in case. She wasn’t sure what Castor would see if he looked too closely, and besides, “Maybe you’re right.”

“Ah well. Who knows what’ll happen. The Seelie Kingdom has our own king to worry about – he’s probably got a bigger say in what happens here than Mobotropolis does,” he said, and jumped down into the boat. “I should get going. You’re welcome to come out on the hunt if you’d like to continue chatting, of course.”

“I’ll pass, thank you,” she said. “I have things to see and do… but thanks for the conversation. It was… enlightening.”

“A pleasure, miss. It helped pass the time during a prep chore,” he said, touching his brow for a moment before blinking. “Oh, you said you like crystals, didn’t you?”

“Hmm?” She turned her head in time to see him bend down and rummage in a storage box. When he straightened up again, she couldn’t help the way her eyes snapped wide. He was holding out the blue Chaos Emerald, covered in slime and gunk, but just as beautiful as ever.

“I hauled it up a couple of days ago, but crystals don’t sell too well out here. You can’t break them or use them for anything, and this one’s too big for jewellery. Maybe you’d like to buy it? A souvenir of your time in the Seelie Kingdom?”

She continued staring blankly for a few seconds before forcing herself to blink and nod. “That would be lovely. How are you at haggling, Mr Castor?”
He grinned, and they got down to business.

Bartleby was a mink. A tall, blonde, and… Tails suspected there was a better word for it, but all he could think was ‘floppy’ mink.

“Welcome, welcome, such a pleasure to meet you, welcome!” he said, his hands flipping all over the place as he ushered them out of the massive entrance hall and into a room that had nothing but couches and fancy decorative eggs on red velvet cushions. “You, of course, are Sonic’s friends, so the society pages tell me. The lovely Miss Amy Rose, and I’m afraid they haven’t yet reported your name…?”

“Oh, Tails,” Tails said blankly, and Bartleby laughed daintily.

“How scandalously appropriate!” They didn’t even pause to look at the eggs as he kept striding on through to yet another room, this one filled with shockingly real—and healthy—plants and marble statues. “It’s been quite astounding how little those horrid vipers have told us about you, but then I suppose they have been distracted by the possibilities of a single-species romance. I think they were quietly concerned about it, to be honest, and here arrives Miss Rose to solve the issue of pure-bred lineage! Quite the feat!”

Tails balked so hard he tripped, while Amy gaped at the back of Bartleby’s head. He didn’t notice, still gesturing expansively as he chattered on, leading them around to yet another apparently pointless room, this one a long, empty hall lined with massive paintings of various imposing Mobians, though two of them were pretty obviously Bartleby’s family. Again, Bartleby didn’t pause his stride, though he did flick a hand toward one of the family portraits.

“My own family is rather pure-bred itself, though grandpapa did come from the islands, where I’m sure you know it is so much easier to find people of one’s own species. Now that we’re established as a proper Mobian family, Mumsy and Papa were quite encouraging of me integrating myself into Mobius’s rather eclectic gene pool. They were never particularly supportive of my love for Sonia, however – I suppose she was somewhat beneath me, at the time. If only they had known her true heritage! What a coup they would have thought it then!”

This time Amy was the one to stumble to a stop, appalled. But Bartleby hadn’t stopped walking, and she had to hurry to catch up as they passed into a dining hall bigger than either of the two eating areas in the palace, complete with a ridiculously long table. Tails couldn’t decide whether the three lavish place settings in the middle of it all helped or just made it look a little sad.

Also, he noticed as they walked toward the settings, there was an open door on the left that led through to the entrance hall. Meaning they’d just walked through two extra rooms for no reason. He scratched his cheek as he and Amy headed to the prepared seats on the far side of the table, and Bartleby all but glided into the one set on the other side. He already felt weirdly off-balance.

Daintily gripping the top of his plate cover, Bartleby sat down and unveiled his meal in one smooth and overly elegant movement, before unfolding and placing his napkin in his lap. Amy and Tails exchanged awkward glances before scrabbling to uncover their own plates and grab their napkins. It felt a lot less dramatic than he’d made it look, but at least the food looked good.

“Did… did you know we were coming?” asked Amy, as she tried to mimic the somehow beautiful
way Bartleby had picked up his spoon. He looked like a conductor.

“Noat all!” he said cheerfully. “Oh, well, that’s a galling lie, I confess. A little bird told me you might be dropping by, but nothing was confirmed of course, and regardless, you were standing outside my gate for quite some time beforehand. I was given more than enough notice, I assure you.”

“A little bird?” Tails repeated suspiciously, but Bartleby only smiled and delayed answering by taking a polite bite of fruit as if to build up the suspense.

“A socialite never reveals his sources, my dear Tails. Else wise he loses them!”

Which was something Tails had heard about snitches and detectives, not ‘socialites’, whatever they were. He ate some fruit, because that was easier than trying to make sense of Bartleby. Amy followed suit and let the awkward silence extend a few seconds before speaking.

“This is delicious,” she said nervously. “Did you make it?”

“Oh, dear, you are common!” Bartleby laughed and flicked his wrist as if to disregard the thought. “Of course not. People of our station need not bother ourselves with such trivialities as kitchenwork. It would be most unbecoming.”

“Our station?” she repeated.

“I see I will have much to teach you,” he said. “But fear not. I shall consider it the first of many duties we will no doubt have to face together.”

She blinked rapidly, her spoon falling back to the plate. He continued blithely.

“As to how I knew there were indeed romantic intentions, why, your presence at my doorstep is proof enough. In recent years, I have had little to no interactions with the court at all, as I have been entirely focussed on building up my estate in the new economy. Therefore, no one from the royal household would have reason to visit me for professional purposes. The only connection I have is my engagement with Sonia, and so therefore, you must be visiting me in that capacity.” He finally
paused just long enough to take another polite mouthful of fruit, chew, and swallow, before he continued just as briskly. “If you'll forgive me saying so, given your obvious lack of awareness regarding social graces, it was very wise of you to visit me with an escort at such an early juncture. It allows us to get to know one another in private before we begin our public partnership, while also stating your intentions with appropriate grace. Well done.”

While Amy gaped, Tails finished chewing his mouthful and sat back in his chair, trying to figure Bartleby out. He was either a complete jerk or really smart. Maybe both. Also, while all the words had made sense, even in the order he put them, Tails still had absolutely no idea what Bartleby was talking about. It was worth investigating.

“So,” he began, picking the words carefully just in case Bartleby ran off with them like he had everything else so far, “are you saying that until Amy came to see you today, you thought the newspapers were just making things up about her?”

“Oh, I certainly believed she was a real person, and probably part of the royal household, but I would have thought her initial associations to be with Sonic,” he said with a vague flick of his spoon. “And with no offence meant to your paramour, Miss Amy, in the time I knew him best, it was quite the common assumption that the finer side of life escaped him entirely. If he had any interest in romantic endeavours, given his circle of acquaintances, it was thought he must have more… oh, what is the phrase… particular tastes. No, that isn’t right at all. Oh well, it is obviously neither here nor there. And I, however, was of the opinion that he was just determined to the point of irregularity. He is a Hedgehog, after all, with all the focus and single-mindedness that family has. A trait he shares with my darling Sonia, though her point of interest allows for a more manageable personality. Again, no offence to your intended – though I’m sure you are quite aware of his failings.”

There had been an answer somewhere in there, Tails was sure. He tracked back over the monologue to find it. He also kind of felt like Bartleby had insulted Sonic more than once, and maybe been implying something, but that was all excess to the point he tried to focus on.

“So it was only because Amy came here to meet you that you decided she was more than a friend?”

“As I said,” he replied, as if he hadn’t buried it in a wall of blather.

“Because the only reason we’d visit you is because you used to go out with Sonia?”

“Go out?” he repeated, lip curling slightly before he managed to cover it with a patronising smile. “Ah, I suppose I should resign myself to such crude phrasings – I doubt royal life has done much to curb Manic’s vocabulary, let alone Sonic’s. No, Master Tails, I did not ‘go out’ with Sonia, nor did we ‘date’. We courted, as children, and became betrothed as soon as she reached an appropriate age.”

Amy seemed to break out of her shock, because she suddenly blinked and shifted forward in her seat again. “Did it bother you when she joined the Resistance?”

“Bother me?” he repeated, one eyebrow rising. “Well, I suppose one could say so, yes. After all, one hardly encourages their beloved to give up everything including oneself to become an outlaw in a hopeless war. But, given circumstances… I could hardly have expected anything else, could I? Even then, I had no illusions about what Doctor Robotnik would have done to her had she not.”

“But you didn’t join her,” she said. “You loved her, didn’t you? Why didn’t you follow her?”

He laughed. “Give up all this, not to mention our advantages, to swan amongst the muck and reek and get in the way of soldiers in a battle I was convinced we would lose? You must be joking.”
That was… one way to put it, Tails noted, while Amy just began to stare a little desperately.

“So you just broke up with her? Just like that?” she demanded, but Bartleby blinked like she was the one saying something strange.

“Broke up? I never ended our engagement. Nor did she. We are still happily betrothed – where on Mobius did you get such an idea?”

Tails and Amy both stared at him for a second, exchanged confused glances, then went back to him. “She’s dating that guy Stripes.”

For a moment, Bartleby stared right back, before he abruptly chuckled and went back to his meal. “Ah, of course. Forgive my amusement, but with every sentence, I realise just how much I have to teach you. You see things with such common eyes,” he said, and paused to take another few mouthfuls before speaking again. “Of course Sonia has an association; just as I pass the time with Mamselle Figeur. One must maintain side prospects while one’s full attentions are needed elsewhere. It keeps up good habits.”

“Good… habits…?” Tails repeated, while Amy made a face.

“Please understand,” he said with another patronising smile. “Amongst people of our status, there are in fact three kinds of romance. The first is less of a romance and more of a contract; a political union of two people meant to better both their situations. The second is about what I suppose you might call ‘love’, or ‘enjoyment’. The two kinds may be kept entirely separate. I believe, back in the days before the Hedgehog line, it was considered quite gauche to marry for something so pithy as ‘love’. Rather, you were expected to marry for politics and have a proper romance with someone entirely different,” he said, and then picked up his teacup apparently just to gesture with it. “These days, it is much preferred to aim for the third kind of romance, which is what I am lucky enough to have with Sonia: a relationship built on mutual trust, respect, and affection in both the personal and professional arenas.”

“Wh-” Amy stalled, struggling to keep up. “What does that have to do with…?”

“Of course I still adore Sonia with all of my heart and soul, and once we have the capacity to devote ourselves to each other we shall reunite. But in the meantime, I maintain my skill in the art of romance and social graces with Mamselle Figeur, as Sonia does with this D’Tigre fellow. What is an appropriate metaphor, I wonder…? Oh… it is rather like… like playing squash when one does not have the appropriate space for a tennis match.”

Tails clenched his eyes shut, because he was just getting even more lost. Amy, however, seemed to be following along just enough to look worried.

“Are you… sure?” she asked nervously. “I mean… I talked to Sonia. She doesn’t seem to think you’re still engaged. Like… at all.”

He paused, looking at her seriously for the first time. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Like… when I – when she was suggesting people for me to talk to about being… involved with a prince? She didn’t mention you at all. And – and Sonic’s been trying to bring you up all the time, asking why you aren’t at the palace, and she refuses to talk to him about it,” she said awkwardly. “Have you even talked to her since the war ended?”

“Not since a little after the ball to celebrate our victory over Doctor Robotnik,” he said slowly. “But that has little to do with the issue at hand, surely.”
“You don’t talk to someone for two years and you think you’re still engaged?” asked Tails. He wondered what colour the grass was in Bartleby’s version of the universe. “And Cyrus said she gave some big speech about you a few years back, calling you a coward, and no one’s seen you since. That kinda says something, doesn’t it?”

“Well… well, I admit, that’s…” He hesitated, lifting his teacup again to apparently give himself some time. “The speech was a political manoeuvre, I understood. I suppose… perhaps I should have made some attempt to clarify things in private, but… oh. Oh, dear.” He lifted a loose fist to his chin, eyes sliding off to the side in thought. “That is quite the situation you propose I have found myself in.”

Amy looked around at Tails, who threw his hands up and went back to his fruit. He could have been neck-deep in anarchy beryl experiments right now, but no. Amy had dragged him out here to talk to someone even more delusional than she was.

At least the food was good.

Once upon a time, the Library of Mobotropolis had apparently been a thing of beauty, with a copy of every piece of written literature known to the Mobian people, including more than a few human texts. It was a huge campus, stretching out from a central depository that you apparently had to search just to get a vague idea of where you actually wanted to look.

For all Sonic knew, it still had all the books and stuff, but he’d never known it as something people went into. It was just a massive fortress, locked up and heavily guarded. Once, when he’d just come back to Robotropolis, he’d perched on the top of the building opposite and watched one of the few Robotnik-approved scientists get escorted inside by a particularly huge SWATbot. He’d stayed there for hours, watching and waiting, but the guy hadn’t come back out. He had no idea whether he ever had.

Now, he was in the same spot, gazing down over the buildings. Trevor had given him a list of places in the city still crawling with SWATbots, and this was apparently still one of them. All that knowledge, all those stories, locked up and out of reach.

“Not for much longer,” he muttered as he stood up.

There was a massive square of boards on a building on the far side of the compound, like you would normally use to cover a window. Only if that was what it was, this window must have been two stories high. It seemed like a good enough entry point as any. If he went through that window, he could use it as a navigation point – do a circuit through the first floor of all the buildings going clockwise, and go up to the next level when he came back around. It was impossible to reach without getting past the central depository too, which was still locked up tight, so that meant even if he missed a few bots, the general populace wouldn’t be able to get in and get in trouble before Trevor’s guys did a full sweep.

That decided, he clenched his fist to remind himself to be careful of environmental damage. Paper shredded and burned easier than metal busted.

And then he set off.

He hadn’t strictly meant to come here. Sure, it was one of the places Aleena had identified, and Trevor had told him about it, but he hadn’t really intended to do anything but run, this morning. He’d
just needed to get out. To get away from people and things that made his whole body ache with…

Something.

He didn’t know what it was. He didn’t want to know. Didn’t want to think about it.

It had been a good night, last night. Singing and hanging out. He hadn’t noticed the time passing as he led the crowd in one song after another. They’d left so late that it was early, and he’d all but collapsed in bed feeling…

Good wasn’t the word for it. He hadn’t been satisfied, or content, either. But… accomplished, maybe. Like he’d done something he’d been putting off.

But he’d woken up feeling worse than he had all week; tired and sore and achy and all he really wanted to do was run out to the coast or something. But he didn’t have time. He had to be back at the Dump after lunch, and then they’d be doing the whole prep thing for the parade, whatever that was going to be, and…

He stiffened his spines as he crashed through the boarded up window, and grunted when he felt them saw more than smash. Cleaner, sure, but not nearly as satisfying. He did a wide circle through the wood out of some near-forgotten habit before flinging himself inside and doing a quick check on the layout.

It had been a massive window once. Stained glass, he was guessing. Now it was just frames and boards, but there was still an epic staircase right in front of him. There were two security closets on either side, both blinking red. He smirked and got ready as the doors slid open.

There was no point thinking about what he wanted to do, or trying to guess at what was going to happen tonight. It was going to happen whether he thought about it or not. He’d be there. He’d do what he needed to do. He could only focus on what he could do now, and what he could do now was beat up on some SWATbots.

That was easy. That was fine.

He tried to block out the guitar chords racing through his head. It wouldn’t help, especially when he could just guess at the lyrics he refused to sing out loud. They weren’t something he needed to admit just now.

Right now, he was the Priority One Hedgehog. For good reason. It wasn’t because he was a prince or a musician or anything like that – it was because he smashed robots like they were paper. He’d been doing it since he was nine. All on his own, if he had to. Before Tails. Before Knuckles. Before Sonia and Manic and the kingdom and the empire and the whole of it. It was something he did. Something he could do. There didn’t have to be a reason or a purpose or –

He caught himself singing under his breath and clenched his jaw shut, focussed on avoiding the lasers and not letting them near the stacks of books he was starting to notice.

There was no reason behind what he was doing right now. Just robots.

“Break down!” he ground out. Whether he was talking to the bots or himself, he decided he didn’t really care.
After breakfast, they had moved into yet another room, equally impressive, though this one was a bit more obvious in its purpose. It had a pool table in the middle of it for one thing, and a collection of smaller board games set up on tables around the room. Tails peeled off to inspect them, too frustrated to continue pretending to care about the conversation, while Bartleby led Amy over to a small couch in the corner.

“So you thought you and Sonia were still engaged?” Amy prompted as they sat down. She’d gotten a lot more confident now that Bartleby had lost some of his. “Even though you were on opposite sides of the war?”

“I don’t know if I would quite phrase it like that,” he said. “Especially given how things turned out. I would like to go down in history as enabling the Resistance access to Doctor Robotnik’s inner circle. By maintaining his confidence in me, however tenuous it was at times, I was always invited to the great parties and political events. Whenever Sonia or her brothers chose to take advantage, I provided them information and they may not have otherwise gained. I did not, you will note, ever provide Doctor Robotnik with equal return on his investment in me.”

Amy winced as she tried to sort through it all. “Tails said E- uh, Robotnik, kind of knew you were really working with Sonia.”

“Oh, he definitely knew. I was a calculated risk, and, in hindsight, quite a safe one,” he said. “Sonia and her brothers rarely came to me for assistance. Whereas my family’s financial backing aided Doctor Robotnik many times, and he used me as a pawn quite successfully at least once. I didn’t think too much of it at the time, but today… well, you have given me much to think about.”

She grimaced, but only gave him a few seconds of silent sympathy before prodding for more. “But if you didn’t think that was important, then why haven’t you spoken to her? It’s been years.”

“Yes, but we have had other issues to occupy our attentions, and I had thought we were performing a strategic manoeuvre, meant to establish her power base in the new political environ. An unwise assumption, perhaps,” he added quietly, while Amy resisted the urge to slap him into using words she understood.

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?”

“What – how could not talking to the person you want to marry be some kind of strategy?” she demanded. “It doesn’t make sense!”

He hesitated like she had confused him for a few seconds, then leaned back in his seat with a curious look. “May I call you Amy?”

“Um… sure. I can call you Bartleby, right?” she checked, and he smiled.

“Amy, in the interests of that clarity I seem to have been lacking, may I confirm that you are indeed in love with Sonic Hedgehog, and would in fact be inclined to marry him, given the choice?”

“Of course!” she said, jerking upright. “He’s my everything! I’ve been trying to get him to marry me almost since the day we met!”

“Good, good. That dedication will serve you well,” he said with a soft chuckle. “They are… The Hedgehog royal family, as a whole, are both very easy to love, and very difficult to be in love with,
“I…” She faltered, noticing the distinction a little too late. “What do you mean?”

“It is possibly the second thing I noticed about Sonic, after realising he was an utter barbarian,” he said, rolling his eyes. “He shares with Sonia a kind of passion that drives him. There are things that matter to him more than anything, things that he would give up everything to achieve, and which he allows nothing to get in the way of. And I do mean everything. His own happiness. The people who matter to him. They will never be as important as that thing that drives him.”

Amy paused again, because… it did sound like Sonic, but… “You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“Oh, well, that is a matter of a perspective, perhaps. I mean it only as a difficulty on the road to love as others may see it,” he said. “If I may wax lyrical for a moment—”

Somewhere on the other side of the room, Tails snorted.

“—Sonia’s passion and determination is a fire within her which I have been drawn to since the day we met. Her focus is inspiring, and her unwavering devotion to the empire as a concept is… well, I must say I have become quite the patriot since her lineage was unveiled,” he said with a quick grin that almost changed his whole face before he hid it behind another dignified look of contemplation. “Before Sonia became a princess, she was… never quite whole. She never found a cause she could completely devote herself to, and so everything was fleeting. I don’t think she noticed, but I daresay it made her feel quite lost, at times. I had thought, perhaps foolishly, that once we were married, my estate could be the cause she dedicated herself to. That she could throw her whole being into the role of Mrs Montclair, and that finally she could be happy. I suspect many of my contemporaries were expecting the same.”

While part of Amy wanted to object to the idea of anyone devoting themselves to being nothing but a wife, she tried to focus past it. “But she became the Princess of the Rebellion instead.”

“Indeed. Sonic appeared, and the truth was revealed, and Sonia found her true cause. It made her more beautiful than ever, but alas… with her cause found, all other concerns became secondary.”

“Including you,” she surmised.

“Oh, very much so,” he agreed. “I flatter myself to think I even registered on the scale of things she needed to concern herself with during the war.”

There was a beat, and his eyes slid off to the side again. “I wonder, suddenly, if that flattery was a self-defence mechanism of its own. That I fooled myself into thinking I was of political importance so that I might still be important to her.”

“Oh… oh, Bartleby,” Amy said softly, but he had shaken off the melancholy before she could even start to reach out, and began his monologue again with an even brisker tone than ever.

“Once the war was over, she had proven victorious, her mother was reinstated, and Sonia could have become two very different people. One is that she could have returned to her life as an aristocrat. It would have been quite becoming for a princess to quietly demur to the life of an innocent flower, to devote herself to an aristocrat while quietly supporting her mother and brothers from behind the scenes,” he said bluntly. “To play that role, she would have been best served either immediately marrying one of her mother’s oldest and—to be frank—weakest supporters, or she could risk a political gamble and return to me.”

“A political gamble?”
“Well, given my own situation being somewhat precarious – everyone knew that I had ‘straddled the line’, as it were. To immediately return could have been construed as a concession to those who had been more blatantly supportive. It may have been seen as a compromise to those whose allegiances were still in flux,” he pointed out. Amy didn’t quite get it, but she nodded anyway and he continued. “The other role was far more suited to the illustrious fighter the Princess of the Rebellion had become known as. She would establish herself as a power to be reckoned with. A political island, strong in her own right; the leader she had always been during the war, who could guide our government back to its golden age. But to do that, she needed to be a solo power. She could have no affiliations beyond her family.

“I assumed she had begun this strategy when she made the grand speech Master Tails mentioned earlier,” he continued, losing some of his grandeur to thoughtfulness again. “It was such a stirring oration. It spoke of honour and duty, of serving not queen or government but values and the empire as whole. It named treason and betrayal where due, but offered forgiveness to those who wished asked for it. She was a goddess, that day. A goddess of Mobian law and order, beautiful and terrible. I was in her sway, as were countless others, I am certain.”

Amy clasped her hands to her chest, swept up in the romance of it all even if she didn’t really get what he was talking about.

“But every goddess must have a sin to stand against, and that day, she sought to strike down those who stood against her empire,” he said, and then smiled wryly. “And there I was, a sinner to sin against. No names were named, of course, but it wasn’t hard for anyone to connect my highly public actions with those things she found such fault in. It was a masterstroke, distancing herself from me and establishing her political position in one brilliantly worded speech.”

Amy’s hands dropped a little as the romance faded into whatever horrible world Bartleby seemed to exist in, where feelings didn’t matter but opinions did. It also felt weirdly familiar, though she didn’t know why – it just… kind of reminded her of how Sonic had looked at her yesterday, before telling her about Manic. 

It made her hurt in a strange way.

“And so, thinking that had been the intention, I did as I felt was necessary,” Bartleby continued quietly. “I removed myself from the royal household and as much of court as I could. I focussed on building up my estate without government ties. I continued supporting Sonia in the social arena, but I tried to be subtle so as not to draw attention to it. I had thought… I had thought it a rehearsal for when I would become prince consort. When I would be able to fully dedicate myself to being her husband, without letting it appear as if I were undermining her. I thought it quite the ploy.”

“Why?” she asked softly. “Why would you think that was what it was?”

“Uh, Amy?” Tails suddenly spoke up, and they both looked across the room to where he was giving her a blunt look. “Why would you think Sonic wants to marry you, when he literally runs away from you half the time?”

“That’s different!” she cried, leaping to her feet with fists clenched. “We’re – I mean, he and I – Sonic is –!” She mentally flailed for a few seconds before stomping her foot. “It’s different!”

“I suspect otherwise,” said Bartleby, and she whirled around to gape at him. He let himself reveal that face-changing grin for a little longer this time. “Some may call it foolish, but I would argue it is the only way to safely love a Hedgehog. By which I of course mean Sonia and Sonic, not yourself, my dear Amy.”
“Huh?”

“It is as I was saying,” he said gently. “Sonia and Sonic both have that same trait where no one shall ever matter to them as much as the cause they dedicate themselves to. Anyone who chooses to love them as we do, if I might make that assumption, must content themselves with the knowledge that they shall never matter to them as much as the cause matters. We shall always be second at very best.”

“Well… you could put it like that,” she said awkwardly. Sonic would always choose the world. And freedom. And…

And…

And now, if he dedicated himself to Mobius…

She quietly sat back down again.

“It is not an easy thing to know, and I suspect there are many who would not be able to accept it,” Bartleby said. “But if one loves as we love, then one can take solace in knowing how important our loves are. For all that has happened, I still adore Sonia. I shall always adore her, whether this was all a strategy or a misunderstanding on my part. And you must decide if you will always adore Sonic, despite all his many flaws, knowing that you may never be first in his thoughts.”

“You say that like we don’t matter to him at all,” Tails said, and they looked over at him again. He was frowning, arms folded defensively over his chest. “Just because he doesn’t say it, or because he would choose saving the world over being with us, that doesn’t mean Sonic doesn’t care about his friends.”

“Of course not,” Bartleby agreed. “But that takes some confidence to believe under stress. And when one wishes to dedicate their whole selves to a whole person, then usually one would expect something in kind. At best, Amy and I can hope for the knowledge that we will be enough to return to when each major victory of their cause is done. Perhaps it is difficult for one who has never been in love to understand, but it is a sacrifice. And it takes a great deal of self-belief.”

He continued scowling, but turned back to the board he’d been looking at, and Amy slowly lowered her eyes to the carpet, thinking it through.

It wasn’t that she was shocked – while she’d never actually thought about it consciously, everything Bartleby was saying was simple fact to her. It was something she’d accepted a long time ago. She would give up the whole world for Sonic, and she didn’t care whether he would do the same for her. She couldn’t afford to care, because that would make her doubt, and she just wasn’t interested in doubting things between her and Sonic. Maybe that was selfish. Maybe it was pathetic. Maybe it was even crazy. But she’d always been okay with that, because love made you crazy at the best of times, so what else was she supposed to be?

“I had intended, this week, to make my dramatic return,” Bartleby said quietly, and when she looked up it was to find him staring out the window. “I would see her be fabulous and powerful as one of the great Council of Four, and then come crawling back at some aristocratic function. I would publicly dedicate myself to the Hedgehog Kingdom, and to Mobius, and then beg her to let me come back to her. In those exact words, of course, so as not to undermine her even accidentally. I would be servant to her empire, and to her. I had such a vision in mind for how it would go.”

“You could still do it,” she suggested. “You never know… they’re kinda hard to predict. Or at least, Sonic is. You just have to catch him off-guard, sometimes.”
Bartleby glanced at her, then smiled. “Perhaps. I shall consider it. There has been… a great deal of change, these last few days. Sonic has the court in quite an uproar.”

“Yeah. Yesterday basically changed everything, even if I don’t really get it,” she said, and Bartleby chuckled.

“He appears from nowhere and immediately causes a typhoon. How nostalgic.” He stopped, then frowned and tilted his head. “Not to change the subject, but Amy, if you were so convinced Sonia and I had no engagement, why ever did you come to visit me this morning?”

“Oh. Right. I… well, I guess… you see,” She twisted her hands into her skirt, lifting her shoulders awkwardly. “I guess I wanted to hear about how things were with you and Sonia. I wanted to know what… or maybe just whether it was Sonia becoming a princess that made things change between you.”

“In a way, it was,” he said blankly. “Did you not know Sonic was a prince? Has it changed things between you?”

“Not him being a prince. I’ve loved him when he was a criminal and when he’s been a time-travelling superhero,” she said with an attempt at a grin, but it dropped away pretty quickly. “But ever since we’ve been here, it’s been weird. Mobius is this whole big thing. And they all think Sonic’s gonna stay here, which should be just crazy, but every day it’s like… I don’t know. And then there’s all that stuff you were talking about with politics and like, strategy? And sometimes, like yesterday, it’s like Sonic gets all of that stuff and thinks he’s a part of it and… I don’t know if I can be.”

For the first time, when Bartleby paused it was because he was actually looking at her, considering what she’d said and judging his response. “You aren’t certain that Sonic would bring you into that world, or that you would willingly stay in it?”

“Both?” She winced. “Yesterday, Sonic was… I don’t know. But I’d want to be with him no matter what, but the idea of being… what did you call it? A consort? I’ve only been here for less than a week, and I already know I can’t do the stuff I’d be expected to do.”

“Ah… yes, well, that is something you will need to contend with if you are to become Princess,” he said delicately. “The three royal consorts, whatever their rank, will need to be a rather large part of the royal household. There will be soirees to organise, charities to manage, social politics to conduct. Such are the responsibilities of a monarch’s spouse, and I can’t imagine it would change whether one of the three children is crowned head of the empire or if they rule as a united force. Their spouses will still be expected to be the emotional backbone of the government. It has always been that way, and so anyone looking to fill that role should be prepared to take on its responsibilities.”

She sighed, lowering her eyes back to her knees until he quietly reached out, tucking his finger under her chin to lift it. He was smiling kindly.

“If I may say, Amy, in just the short time I have known you, I already believe that you are more than up to the task. However much I will need to teach you about social graces,” he added blandly. “You are quite boorish at the moment, but it is a challenge we shall overcome together.”

She twitched, not sure how to take that when he’d almost been sweet for a second there. She found herself shifting back defensively out of habit. “I’m sorry, why would be doing anything together?”

“Well, this chat has quite inspired me, and your perspective is nothing if not motivating. I believe I shall continue with my aforementioned plan,” he said, and then smiled at her winningly, like the
politicians back in Station Square. “And so, when I am announced intended Prince Consort, and you are declared Prince Sonic’s intended princess, it will be my duty to help you integrate, and together, we shall be an unstoppable force in social politics. I look forward to working with you!”

“You are just…!” she began, before she noticed the dry edge lurking around the corner of his mouth and stopped.

He paused another beat, as if making sure she was waiting for him, then continued, “And if not, then if you would be so kind as to pity me my heartbreak while the empire celebrates its deserving princess’s independence… I would consider teaching you what little social skill I have not near enough fair payment for your kindness.”

She stared at him for a long minute, weighing up all the nonsense and important things he said all morning, and then made her decision. “You are a horrible, arrogant, narcissistic idiot. And I’m going to hug you a lot.”

“I prefer incorrigible, but when in private, I would appreciate it a great deal,” he said, and she lunged across the couch to wrap her arms around his chest. He was a lot softer than he looked, and his arms fit around her back quite naturally. Maybe it was all the silk clothes on top of what smelled like very well shampooed fur. Whatever it was, she lay her head on his shoulder and held on all the tighter for it.

“Thanks for talking to me, Bartleby.”

His soft chuckle rumbled against her chest. “I hope it just the first time of many, Amy.”

Across the room, Tails rolled his eyes and tried not to gag. If this was what the whole romance thing did to you, he was swearing off it for life.

Chapter End Notes

**Music Reference:**
Break Down! (live band style) - BeForU 2006-ish?

…I couldn't find an official version of this song in the Live Band style. If you can, please let me know so I can update it from this fan uploaded version

Also, I repeat: my translation ain't great.
“So uh… this like… this didn’t look like this when I left yesterday.”

Standing a few feet away and not entirely sure what to do with his hands or tail or basically anything, Gareth nodded quietly. He’d never found himself at a loss for words before, but it wasn’t like he could have explained anything even if he could remember how his tongue worked.

At the start of the party last night, he’d had a mental list of things they needed to do today: get and lay the Astroturf, clean off and put down a fresh layer of concrete, give the wood a nice lick of lacquer, set up the lightning. After they’d all decided to pitch in and get the lighting sorted out last night, he’d figured that had put them ahead enough that they’d probably be done by a little after lunch.

In the back of his mind, he’d kind of known something was different when he’d turned in for the night. But it hadn’t been a conscious thing. So when he’d come out this morning and found everything…

They’d still needed to lacquer the wood, and there were a few patches of grass he wouldn’t have been happy with if he’d laid it himself, but…

The finished amphitheatre looked gorgeous.

It was clean. And green. And healthy, and he could swear the air tasted different.

He and the boys had barely been able to concentrate, so they’d only just finished when Manic and none other than Queen Aleena arrived for their inspection. The queen had been a little bit more than his brain could take at that point, and he was feeling some weird mix of awe and terror that made speech completely impossible.

Especially when Aleena looked around at him with that small, soft smile. His knees felt kind of weak.

“I compliment you on your fine work, Mr Raccoon,” she said. “The handiwork here is stunning, to say nothing of the finished product.”

“Uh-hh,” he managed, then swallowed and tried again, “th’nk you. Y’majesty.”

She inclined her head, graciously overlooking how incomprehensible he must have sounded as she turned her attention back to the theatre. “I especially like the lighting along the seating. It gives it an almost fairy-like quality.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was goin’ for in the design,” Manic said with a grin. “From what I hear, places like this could be used for like, plays and stuff as well as like, science or whatever. You did a kickin’ job on the setup, Gareth.”
He managed a grunt that almost sounded normal for him, only to melt again as Aleena glanced around.

“Does it dim, or are there further controls? I imagine sometimes you would like to have all the focus on the stage, and not the audience.”

“Y- yeah. I mean, yes. Your majesty,” he spluttered, then swallowed again and dug his nails into his palms in the hope of regaining something resembling self-control. “There uh, there’s um… in the house – set up. A lighting rig. Makes it, you know. Spotlights. And all.”

Heaven help him, he’d been a full-fledged, flag-waving anarchist back in the day. What the hell was wrong with him, getting all star-struck by royalty?

She was just so beautiful… and… here. In front of him. Talking to him like he… geez.

Manic was starting to grin, but he didn’t comment, instead swinging around on one heel to face his mother. “Yeah, Gareth said his guys couldn’t hook the full thing all up, but I’ve got a plan for a sweet set up in the Ops Centre of the house. Like, absolute control. Spotlights on a rotator so you can light up anyone in the audience or the stage. But I wasn’t plannin’ on gettin’ to that this week. Mostly it’s just dimmer switches right now.”

“Very impressive,” Aleena commented, and Manic beamed while Gareth just barely managed to keep himself to a soppy grin.

“Well, we uh, we… good workers, us,” he said. “Not much on the electric, but uh… lands- landscaping. Anytime, you can – yeah.”

He was pretty sure there had been a sentence in there.

“They’re good guys,” Manic said, slanting another smirk his way. “I’d totally use ’em again. Not sure I’d like, throw down with Lady Felinae to do it, but y’know.”

“I think it best you leave such confrontations to your brother,” Aleena advised, and then inclined her head toward Gareth. “Thank you, Mr Raccoon. You may return to work. The Thief Prince will be in contact regarding your payment tomorrow morning.”

Gareth opened his mouth to answer, realised he could probably get away with a nod, and promptly hurried off to find his former-anarchist dignity wherever he’d left it that morning.

The second he was out of easy hearing distance, Manic started snickering. “He’s like, the biggest, toughest guy on this lot and you just like, totally spooked him with a smile!” he quietly crowed. “You gotta tell me how you do that.”

“Perhaps one day,” Aleena murmured. “But I doubt it is a skill you would carry well. Or would truly want. I have never known you to keep others at a distance.”

“Yeah, I guess not, huh?” he asked. “I’m the heart, right? Keepin’ people close is my jam.”

“Exactly so,” she agreed, and then turned back to the theatre. “I believe this shall be a great testament to that. You have created a wonderful space.”

“Egh, I just, y’know… project managed,” he said, stuffing his hands into his vest pockets. “But seriously, this looks way different than it did when I left yesterday. And Gareth was sayin’ that like, because of all the pollution and stuff, no way he could get any grass to grow. But if that ain’t real grass, I’m eatin’ my drum sticks.”
“Hm,” was her only response, and Manic looked up at her from under his hair.

“You know… back durin’ the war, me, Sonia, and Sonic brought that garden temple back to life. Made plants grow and water flow and everything. Power of music,” he said. “And there was that song last night…”

“Yes,” she said softly. “It seems the Sonic Underground has finally returned, with all the power that entails.”

“But we weren’t together last night. We weren’t workin’ together as a band.”

“No, but you were all working toward the same goal, in your own ways,” she reminded him. “For all that you were performing different tasks, you were working in harmony. And that is where your true power lies.”

“I guess…” He rubbed under his quills, feeling awkward.

It wasn’t that he was uncomfortable, exactly, but it was pretty unusual for him to get real one-on-one time with his mother. Sonia was normally around to guide the conversation, just letting him come along for the ride. So maybe he’d always kind of figured Aleena didn’t really think he was suited to this whole… royalty thing. He was a thief and a street rat. He was the absolute opposite of what a prince was supposed to be. He’d figured Aleena didn’t see a lot of point in teaching him what he was supposed to do as a prince of the empire.

But standing here with her, now… it didn’t feel so bad. She wasn’t judging him. She actually seemed kind of proud of him.

Maybe he could push this a little.

“Do you like, know how it all works? The whole magic music thing?” he asked, and she glanced down at him, obviously surprised by the question.

“How do you mean?” she asked. “I am no magical theorist, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Nah, I mean like…” He paused, trying to figure out what he wanted to ask. “So like, before I met Sonic, right? I didn’t have any powers at all. I was just a normal kid. And when Sonic was off doin’ whatever, I didn’t have any powers either. I mean, not that I’m fast or strong or whatever, so I’m always kind of lame in that way, but –”

“Manic!”

He stopped, and then did a double-take at her offended stare. He hadn’t said anything wrong, had he? “What?”

“Manic,” she said again, quieter but more firmly, “none of my children are ‘lame’. You have a different skill set than your siblings, but it is no less powerful or impressive.”

He blinked, heat rising in his cheeks, but he forced himself to focus. He wasn’t fishing for compliments, he was trying to figure this whole thing out. “Well, yeah, but I gotta have my drums –”

“I am not talking about your power over the earth,” she said shortly, and then sighed and glanced away, looking over the theatre before returning to him. “Magic and physical strength are not all that matter. Manic, you have an ability to see value wherever you look. In both people and things, in the darkest and roughest of moments. You can connect with others, you feel their pain, you see them for what they are. That is a kind of power that is… it is something leaders across all of history have
claimed to have, but something very few actually know. And it is a strength that the Sonic Underground—that our Council of Four—cannot operate without.”

Manic gaped at her blankly, even pulling back as she lifted a hand to his cheek and held him there.

“It is undervalued, but cannot be overstated. I am sorry that neither I nor this world have not shown you the respect we should have, my child. Please do not follow our example. You are invaluable, Manic. You must remember this.”

There was something in his throat, blocking his airway. He blinked back a slight burning behind his eyes, swallowed twice, and then struggled to remember what he’d been asking about. He – he hadn’t been looking for compliments. He uh… he um…

He forced himself to turn his head out of her hand and focus. “Th-thanks, but um… Yeah, s-so anyway, I, uh… it’s – it’s like Sonia. How she’s like, super-strong, but not like, all the time? And she says that even when she was strong, if she like, took off her medallion it all went away,” he said. His voice was still cracking slightly, but he tried to work through it. “But Sonic is like – he’s like – y’know… he’s still fast and all, even without us, so…”

Aleena slowly straightened, eyeing him warily for a moment, then inclined her head. “The Sonic Underground is power in harmony, so you wonder why power remains for one of you when the other two lose your magic?”

He nodded once. “And it’s like, I get that the whole earthquake thing is supposed to be like, big and scary enough to make up for the no superpowers thing, but I dunno, you know? Sonia’s got her Sonia-spin as well as her strength, but even if Sonic’s supposedly just all speed and all, he seems way more powerful. It just seems kinda…”

“Unbalanced?” she suggested, and he nodded again.

“Totally.”

She smiled, shifting half a step closer to him. “And so soon after I comment on one of your great gifts, you display another,” she said softly, before raising her voice to something more lecturing. “That imbalance is perhaps one of two things, though as I am no magical scholar I cannot say for sure. I have only theories. The first is that it reflects your strengths – the roles you will come to have as you grow into the Council of Four. Sonic needs to be quick and strong, to fight the battles, while Sonia must be imposing to stand up to those who would undermine her. Your strength is a softer skill, and so your more aggressive powers are hidden, only brought out when truly necessary.”

He rocked back on his heels, considering that. It kind of made sense, but… “What’s the other theory?”

She hesitated, and when she next spoke, her voice was almost too low to be heard, as if she wanted to be completely sure it wouldn’t carry past them. “Power, like energy, cannot be destroyed. The medallions and the harmony between you pass magic throughout the Sonic Underground, but when those things do not exist, then the power cannot be passed on in harmony. It can only build in one place.”

“Like a dam,” he said. “The harmony like, builds up against the block.”

“Precisely.”

“And so, gettin’ a bit of harmony back’s like opening part of the dam up?” he asked. “Some of the water starts leaking through, but not all at once?”
Her smile widened again, and she nodded. He narrowed his eyes, thinking about it, then asked, “So what’d happen if we didn’t have the medallions? If the dam didn’t get opened?”

Aleena immediately lost her smile, and Manic frowned.

“That bad, huh?”

She hesitated again. “Perhaps there are some theories best not tested, and questions not answered, don’t you think?”

He hummed in the back of his throat, pulling his head back a little at her expression. “I… guess so…”

Slinging his second rifle over his shoulder, Trevor licked his lips and reminded himself—again—that cursing Lord Patch wouldn’t even make him feel better, let alone actually improve his situation. This would be his fourth night without proper sleep, and he didn’t have enough men. That wasn’t going to change with a bad attitude.

So he closed his car’s weapons storage and chained it, planning scenarios instead.

He was about ninety percent sure it was Sonic that had tripped the silent alarm, so at worst he had to find how the idiot prince had gotten in and make sure no one could follow him. But that other ten percent did allow for the possibility of it having been a civilian, and his mind was whirling with the consequences of that. Who knows how long it had taken the alarm to trip. Then he’d spent twenty minutes arguing with Patch, ten minutes convincing his crew he didn’t want them giving up their downtime or leaving their other duties, another fifteen minutes to actually get here, and half an hour casing the outer walls, making sure no SWATbots could easily escape their unintended prison. Palace records said there were at least fifty-two SWATbots inside the Great Library of Mobotropolis, all set to shoot non-registered visitors on sight.

If this wasn’t Sonic, this wasn’t a rescue. It was a retrieval mission.

“Don’t focus on it,” he told himself as he stepped back from the car. “Just get the job done.”

He stepped out of the alley, paused to let a car pass, and then faltered as he realised that he not only recognised it, but it was slowing to a stop in front of him. It was one of the royal trucks – the laser-proof ones Sonia and Manic used. He checked his watch, trying to remember the schedule he’d been emailed that morning. The parade check was supposed to happen in less than an hour. What the heck was Manic—?

His eyebrows almost hit his hairline as the door opened and none other than Sonia climbed out.

“Princess?”

“Hey there, Trevor,” she greeted, tugging her dress straight. “I was in a meeting with Lord Patch when you called in.”

He blinked rapidly. “Oh… kay?”

“What’s the situation?” she asked. “How far have your men gotten in?”
Trevor blinked again. If she’d been with Lord Patch, surely she knew… wait. Of course she didn’t. Sonia was too high-level to be told about staffing issues. At best, Patch would have told her there was a situation at the Great Library of Mobotropolis and that the ERU was handling it. She was probably just checking in because he wouldn’t be the only one assuming it was Sonic. He saluted to start his report. “I’ve scouted the outer wall and confirmed no immediate threat of breach. I’m beginning my infiltration now.”

“You – what do you mean, you?”

“I mean that this is a solo mission, your highness,” he said, lazily professional. “The Emergency Response Unit is currently engaged with three other situations in addition to Business As Usual, and so I am all that’s available to respond to this one. I called in to Lord Patch to request reinforcements, but as I’m sure you know, the palace guard are preoccupied with ensuring the safety of the palace workforce and visitors during the festival period. He uh… he can’t spare the staff on… a possibility”

Trevor wasn’t bitter about the implications. Who said he was bitter?

But whether his tone came across or not, Sonia was still staring at him blankly. He shifted his weight back and forth, not particularly concerned – he played at being proper, and he didn’t really think of Sonia as a friend, but they had spent a lot of time in grimy bolt-holes together, piecing together plans in hopeless circumstances. She knew what it was like to make bad decisions in worse circumstances.

And if she tried to chew him out, then he’d smile, nod, and do it anyway. Sonic and Manic would have his back if it went south.

“So you mean to say you have no backup?” she asked. “All of your staff are at other incidents?”

“I’ve got fifteen in the Robostyle mall,” he said. “Ten on bot-recovery, five covering the entrances. Ten are at Lord Head’s warehouses. Five are at the Du- um… Charles… Charles um…”

“The Charlesspy Amphitheatre,” Sonia supplied, and he rolled his wrist to acknowledge it.

“And the rest are either off-duty or holding down the fort back at base,” he reported.

“Off-duty? What, don’t they want over-time?” she asked, and he smiled wryly.

“Princess, the festival starts tonight. Then we’ve got seven days where even Cyrus is expecting an anarchist attack. And with no disrespect intended, if the ‘Lost Prince’ is going to keep clearing out our problem buildings, my crew are going to remain under pressure until he leaves or gives up—”

“—and Sonic isn’t leaving again,” she said quickly, and Trevor’s smile widened, his head shifting slightly before he could stop it. Whatever helped her sleep at night.

“With all that in mind, I’m not letting my guys overwork themselves right now. There’ll be plenty of time for that later.”

“It sounds like you need more staff,” she noted, and he shrugged.

“Maybe. But I don’t have the time or resources to train them, let alone figure out which of them I can actually trust. I hand-picked my crew, and even now there’s some people I wouldn’t let in this building,” he said, jerking a hand toward the library. “I trust them with my life, but maybe not national treasures.”

Sonia frowned, glancing up at the building, then back at Trevor. “You can’t go in there alone.”
“I asked Lord Patch for reinforcements, and he can’t give them,” he said evenly. “With all due respect, your highness, you’re welcome to give me another option.”

Her eyes narrowed, and for a moment they just stared at each other. In the end, he was the one to speak first, deciding to risk a lack of propriety for answers. “What are you doing here, your highness? We’re not sure this is one of S- uh… the Lost Prince’s security measures.”

“Trevor?” she prompted, her eyeridges rising pointedly, “You’re already toeing the line with all this formal talk. Don’t treat me like an idiot while you’re at it.”

He laughed despite himself, then shrugged. “Well, it might not be! I’m hoping it is, and I’m pretty sure it is, but there’s always a chance, you know?” He shrugged again, a bit more forcefully to draw attention to his weapons. “That’s why I’m taking these. If it’s not Sonic, then I’ll be going up against fifty SWATbots and who knows how many security drones without backup. It pays to be prepared.”

“Yes, and again: you shouldn’t be going in there alone,” she said, and then paused before holding out a hand. “Give me one of your guns. I’m coming with you.”

“Excuse me?” he asked blankly, and she gestured a little more aggressively.

“I’m coming with you,” she repeated. “If it is Sonic, then I want to chew him out for taking such a huge risk when he has a royal engagement in less than an hour. If not, then I am not leaving one of my people to the mercy of those monsters. Give me one of your guns.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, your highness,” he said, even as he pointedly did not think of the lower third and all the people Sonia didn’t normally seem to give a damn about, “but even if I was willing to risk the Royal Vizier in a potential battlefield situation, you’re not exactly um… dressed for the occasion.”

They both looked down at her slinky dress and the high heels underneath it. She set her hands on her hips and scowled as she looked back up.

“Both of my brothers have gone into battle in hoop skirts,” she reminded him. “And I work a pair of heels better than either of them.”

“I dunno, Princess, Sonic’s got the legs for it,” he joked. She flicked her hair, smirking defiantly, and Trevor paused to consider. Cyrus would kill him. Most of the Palace General would kill him, actually. But Sonia had been the best shot in the City Resistance for a while there, and she did look very determined. “Is this an order, your highness?”

“You bet your butt it is,” she said, and he snorted.

“Well, far be it from me to defy a direct order!” He hauled one of the guns back over his head and handed it over. “I’m counting on you to be in a fit state to tell the palace that if anything goes badly.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you, Trevor,” she said, and did a quick check of the gun, its sights, and ammo chamber before locking the safety back on and slipping it into place on her back.

Trevor shook his head, altogether too amused, and started leading the way over to the library wall. “One of the reasons I’m pretty confident this is Sonic is because there’s no easy way into the grounds without breaking in or scaling the walls, and I couldn’t see any signs of either. Normal people would have needed climbing gear that would have left a trace.”

“With all the tourists in town, it’s not impossible that it could be someone that can fly,” she pointed out, and he inclined his head as he unhooked his own climbing gear.
“Or someone dumb enough to go urban exploring in Mobotropolis but smart enough to cover their tracks,” he acknowledged. “Hopefully either of those possibilities leave room for the person to know enough to get out when they realised the SWATbots were onto them.”

She hummed, and that was the last they said before climbing up and over the balustrade. Once they were up, they both crouched down and slipped up against the far side to peek over into the courtyard. If he wasn’t on the job, Trevor might have been impressed with how easily Sonia was slipping back into the habits she’d had to learn fast only to give them up the second she could, but as it was he was just thankful he wasn’t dealing with a liability. She was the one to point out the clean circular cut on one of the window-boards on the far side of the courtyard.

“I’ll bet my best dress on that being a spin-dash.”

“No music, though,” he noted. “And I don’t think the sound-proofing in here’s good enough to cover sounds of a battle.”

“How long would he have been at it for?” she asked. “Are we sure he’s still here?”

He shrugged. It was nearing on a couple of hours since the alarm had sounded. Back in the old days, Sonic’s solo missions never lasted that long, simply because he didn’t have the stamina and wasn’t game enough to take on that many SWATbots. But from the little time they’d spent together, even if Sonic hadn’t talked a lot about what he’d been doing, Trevor had gotten the distinct impression he didn’t exactly consider SWATbots a threat anymore.

“Let’s go find out.”

They rappelled down the wall and darted from statue to dead tree, making their way across the compound to the broken entrance Sonic had created. Once they were inside, Trevor’s shoulders relaxed even as his hands tightened on his weapon. Even just this stairwell was littered with robot remains.

Sonia knelt down over one pile, carefully shifting a broken piece to inspect how it had come apart from the rest. “Looks more like a cannon hit it than a saw, but I think these are quills marks.”

“To be honest, I never really paid attention to how Sonic fights,” Trevor admitted. “He was too fast and I was usually focussed on my own stuff.”

“Mm.” She stood up, hefting the gun at the ready. “We better do a sweep.”

“Stick close by, Princess.”

Given the size of the campus, it took them a good fifteen minutes to make a full circuit of the first floor, and they weren’t doing much more than a cursory check of the main rooms. But by the time they started climbing the stairs to the second floor, they were both much more confident and relaxed — even if it turned out they weren’t looking for Sonic, whoever had come through here could clearly take care of themselves. They’d only had to fire their guns a few times, finishing off some SWATbots that had been wrecked but not completely put out of their misery.

It was enough that when they reached the second story landing, Sonia looked at him directly, obviously intending to start another conversation. “Are the ERU really struggling to keep up with things?.”

He hesitated, glancing down the halls on either side of the landing less out of professional caution and more in an attempt to avoid her gaze. That wasn’t a question he wanted to answer without Manic and a few data sheets to back him up. “Are you… are you asking me in an official capacity, your
“Trevor –” Sonia stopped, then sighed harshly before taking a deep breath and obviously rephrasing it. “As your Royal Vizier, administrator and advisor to the queen, I am asking you as Chief of the Emergency Response Unit, and one of my most trusted and reliable advisors on the security of our capital city. As a former comrade, I ask you to stop acting like I’m going to have you arrested for speaking out of turn.”

He snorted. “Well, no offence meant, Princess, but it’s been like, six months since I’ve spoken to you – more like eighteen since we did it casually. Call it a habit?”

She gave him a dirty look but didn’t comment, and he shrugged.

“To be honest? Yeah, Sonic doing stuff like this is a bit more than we can handle. He said it himself – he moves too fast for a kingdom to keep up with him. But I’d rather he was doing the heavy lifting and us always failing to catch up than it not happening at all,” he pointed out. “This stuff needs to happen. We just aren’t in a position to y’know, support the effort right now.”

“So wouldn’t more staff help? I understand you don’t have time to train them right now, but you didn’t sound very enthusiastic about it even as a possibility.”

He paused again, leaning up against a doorframe. This was really not a conversation he was equipped for right now. But if he remembered Sonia right, she could be just as impatient as her brother when she wanted to be. He wouldn’t be getting out of this one without a straight answer.

“Do you remember why the ERU was formed, Princess? When we were initially put together, clearing out Robotnik’s presence is what we were meant to be doing,” he reminded her slowly. “The fire fighting, the guarding, all that was just supposed to be time-filler in between missions. The idea was that we’d get phased out as Robotnik’s presence was… y’know… removed.”

She nodded blankly. “At which point we’ll set up an official police force, fire brigade, and paramedic unit. That’s still the plan.”

“Don’t you think adding more people to my force kind of… implies we’re not gonna do all that?”

She frowned at him. “No. We still have every intention to dismantle the unit once they’re unneeded. But we need to respond to the situation that’s in front of us right now.”

“Princess…” He glanced away again, trying to avoid the whole situation, then decided to point out the obvious. “This situation’s been in front of us for years. We just haven’t been given the clearance to do anything about it.”

“If Sonic had been here –”

“Yeah, and so what’s gonna happen if he isn’t?” he asked, then winced at her look but continued. “Okay, maybe he doesn’t leave, but what happens if he starts focussing on the outer baronies, or the other countries? What if Aleena names him heir apparent? I don’t care what he says, there’s no way the official Crown Prince is going to be allowed to risk his neck like this.”

Sonia frowned, her fingers stretching absently on the gun he’d given her. “That… then… Manic and… the Sonic Underground has power, Trevor, we can still lead your… we…” She stopped, swallowing hard as an increasingly worried look slipped over her features. He set his shoulders and committed himself.

“And even if this keeps happening, think about the resources you’re applying here. Half of my
‘crack team’ of elite response workers—trained to deal with fire, terrorists, and medical emergencies—are currently clearing rubble and working security patrols on a building site,” he pointed out. “You don’t need more ERU. You need junkers and a police force. A few of my guys to supervise and keep an eye on sticky fingers, sure, but they don’t need to be the ones doing the heavy lifting after a situation’s declared safe. And they sure as hell don’t need to be keeping an eye on the general populace. They’re trained and ready to fight killer robots, not idiot kids trying to prove they’re tough.”

Obviously clinging to something in her mind, Sonia shook her head. “A police force would be just as lost for work as you are. Like you said: nobody reports crimes in Mobotropolis, so the only ones we even know about are thefts, and they’re all done by the thieves so…” She stopped again as she apparently heard herself, and Trevor couldn’t help the sly smile spreading over his lips.

“I don’t think you mean to say that only professional thieves thieving makes it okay.”

“Sh- shut up,” she said, staring at nothing.

“But even if you were, Princess? Just think about all the crimes we don’t get to hear about.”

“They… those kinds of things don’t…” She pulled the gun in close to her chest. “They do happen, don’t they? We just don’t hear about them.”

Still darkly amused, Trevor cleared his throat, shifted his weight, and gestured toward the left hallway. “Maybe let’s focus on finding Sonic before we try tackling the empire’s economic and social infrastructure, huh?”

“I think thirty months is more than long enough for a Royal Vizier to go without debating the empire’s economic and social infrastructure,” she said, but didn’t stop him from moving past her. It took maybe a minute before she followed, but although she still looked worried she didn’t say anything. Which was just as well – the further into the second story they went, the more half-functioning ’bots they found. All of them were safe enough—weapons destroyed and mobility cut off—but they were still working well enough to comment on Sonia’s status as a priority one hedgehog and make general complaints about intruders in ‘Doctor Robotnik’s library’. Apparently Sonic had started getting sloppy as he continued.

They eventually found the prince himself on the third floor, tired and sweaty but apparently unharmed, sitting slumped at a desk and staring at the remains of a particularly trashed SWATbot. He raised an eyeridge at Sonia’s presence.

“Hey, Sis’. Slumming it with the books or the bots?”

“Oh, don’t even go there, I am so not in the mood right now,” she snapped, striding over to poke her gun in his face. “You said you’d meet us at the Dump at one, and then you go risking your life without telling anyone? What if something had happened to you, huh? We had to find out from a tripped alarm, Sonic! And I only found out because I happened to be with Lord Patch when Trevor reported into the palace!”

“Aaaand your point is?”

She rolled her eyes and turned away, allowing Sonic to focus his smirk on Trevor. “Hey, man. Are you everywhere in this city or just stalking me?”

“Mostly just stalking,” he said, but Sonia whipped around again.

“He’s being run off his feet having to clean up after you!” she snapped. “If you just told people what
you were doing, we could plan support! Backup! But instead you keep running off half-cocked and...

“Says the girl with a gun in her hands and a pair of two-inch heels on her feet,” Sonic interrupted, and she growled.

Trevor waited, but judging by their expressions that as far as the exchange was going, so he shrugged to himself and slung his gun back over his shoulder. Apparently everything was as close to fine as Mobotropolis ever got… though Sonic did look even more exhausted than he had the other night. “You all good, Hedgehog? You look pretty tired.”

“Said the pot to the kettle,” he replied, heaving himself to his feet. “I’m good. Just needed to work off some steam so I could focus on what matters. What’s your excuse?”

“Egh, work,” he said with a grin. “But now I’ve confirmed it was you tripping the alarms, the ’bots aren’t in any shape to get out of the compound, and it’s still too hard for your average street rat to get in, I am able to report that we’re safe to move on with our lives,” he announced, and turned to salute Sonia again, much to both her and Sonic’s disgust. “Princess, I’ll send in a full report to Manic in a few days, but so you know, I think it’ll be safe to hold off on coming back until after we’ve finished clearing the Robostyle Mall and Head’s warehouses.”

“And whatever other mess Sonic gets everyone into,” she added dryly, and Sonic’s eyeridge rose again.

“Yo, Sis’, you know this is what Mom asked me to do, right? You don’t get to whine at me.”

“I’m not whining that you’re doing it, it’s how you’re doing it that bothers me,” she pointed out, but then sighed and turned to lead the way out. “Let’s get going. Now I know you haven’t gotten your head shot off by a SWATbot, we might as well go and meet Mother and Manic a little early.”

“Isn’t it nice to know she cares?” Sonic asked Trevor, who chuckled but didn’t bother responding. As they headed out, Sonic stepped up close beside him to quietly ask, “We’re not the only ones lookin’ worse for wear. What’s up with Sonia?”

“Hah. While we were looking for you, we started talkin’ about some real stuff, like what my team are up to and what it means for the city,” he explained under his breath. “I think her mind’s a little bit blown with reality right now.”

Sonic glanced at his sister’s back, frowning. “Nice work, I guess?”

He shrugged, and they walked in silence until they were out in the courtyard. Once there, Trevor rolled his shoulders with weary satisfaction and nodded to Sonic. “Thanks for keeping this place secure when you cleaned it out. Makes my life a little easier. Why’d you come here, of all places?”

“Why anywhere?” he asked lightly. “It’s all a mess we gotta fix at some point, right?”

Trevor noticed Sonia glancing back at that, but she didn’t say anything, even when Sonic tilted his head toward her.

“What about you, Sonia? I’m not buyin’ that you came all the way out here for the chance to chew me out.”

“I always want to chew you out,” she said. “I spend most of my time mad at you, after all.”

“Can’t disagree with that,” he admitted, even as he and Trevor exchanged glances.
Sonia, however, didn’t meet either of their gazes until they were back over the wall and she was dragging Sonic into her car. Trevor was left alone, back to feeling overtired and a little worried, but he dealt with it the same way he always did: he packed up his gear and went back to work.

“What’s with the car?” Sonic asked as they drove through the streets. “Do princesses not ride motorbikes anymore?”

“Not in this dress, they don’t,” she said dryly.

“But it’s all the style for a potential battlefield.”

“Of course!” She smirked, but it was weak and quickly turned into a regretful shake of her head. “I actually haven’t ridden my bike since we took back the palace. It’s not exactly a good look for a princess.”

He just looked at her, letting the silence speak for itself, and she grimaced.

“Look, it’s important for me to act like this, Sonic. Manic is never going to get the aristocrats onside, and Mother isn’t in a position to meet with them in anything but the most formal settings. I need to be someone they think they can talk to.”

“Yeah, sure, but are you sure it’s worth it?” he asked. “I mean… if those idiots in court were showing you respect, I hate to see what they’re like to people they don’t respect.”

She huffed. “It was court. Court is all about a no-holds-barred fight for your own interests.”

“Even when it screws over everyone else?”

“Some would say especially then.” She paused, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. “And anyway, it’s like you said: royalty is here for our people. We give up our own interests for the sake of what they need.”

“And your people need you to not ride motorbikes?” he asked doubtfully, and she smiled.

“My people need me to be the proper princess they can admire. And while that means I don’t get to ride motorbikes, at least I get to wear a lot of pretty dresses! And makeup. Sonic, you will not believe the makeup I have access to now. It was all banned during the war, so I didn’t even know it existed, but oh my gosh, fur dye,” she said. “It is so subtle and so brilliant. I don’t know how I lived without it.”

“Oh, yeah, now that makes it all worth it,” he drawled, and she grinned broadly. It wasn’t funny, but sometimes you needed to make fun where you could find it.

But by the time they reached the Dump, all faux-amusement had faded, and after Sonia had put the car in park, they both just sat there, staring out at the crowd, the guards, and the reporters. It still wasn’t that many people compared to what Sonic was used to, but it was more than Sonia had ever seen out in the open when attendance wasn’t kind of compulsory. And nothing was even happening yet – it was literally just an open-air building that was getting final touches.

There was something depressing about that being enough to get people excited.
Sonia’s eyes swept over the grounds, lingering on the ERU team standing guard and the visible differences between aristocrat, tourist, and average Mobotropolitan citizen. She was a little horrified to realise how easy it was to pick each one out.

This was their city. These people that were so easily divided and defined. This was their kingdom, their empire… this was the world she was supposed to be responsible for.

“Sonic… is it going to be okay?” she asked softly. She wasn’t really sure what she was asking about, but she needed to know. “Is this… is this salvageable?”

For a long moment, Sonic was silent, his eyes flicking over everything she was seeing. The corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile. “Everything’s salvageable,” he said. “Some things just take more work than others.”

She looked at him sideways, and he glanced back before reaching out to put his hand over hers on the steering wheel.

“Sometimes you gotta fail before you can succeed,” he pointed out. “You gotta get things wrong, so you can see how to get them right. But sometimes, if no one’s there to tell you when you’re bein’ stupid, you don’t know when you’re screwing up. That’s why you and me are so good together, Sis’. I tell you when you’re being lame, and you call me out on bein’—”

“—an arrogant, self-absorbed moron with no sense of personal safety or forward thinking?” she suggested, and they exchanged bland looks before breaking into matching smiles.

“Something like that. And maybe that’s what I’ve been for a while,” he admitted. “But we’re back together again. We can get on each other’s case and stop each other from screwin’ up so much. You, me, Manic… even Mom. We’re family. We’re the Sonic Underground. When we’re in harmony, there’s literally nothing we can’t do.”

As she stared out the window, letting the words roll through her mind, she felt the tell-tale prickling behind her eyes and bit her lip, trying helplessly to hold it back. But in the end, she abruptly shoved away from the wheel and turned, lashing out to grab Sonic by the shoulders and grab him into a hug. He sighed, as reluctant and put upon as ever, but closed his arms around her like the supportive big brother he liked to pretend he wasn’t.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Sonic,” she whispered, tears slipping down her cheeks.

There was only a slight pause before his arms tightened, and she clung closer still.

Like most urban cities, Mobotropolis looked a lot better under cover of darkness, which was probably one benefit to the fact the sun couldn’t be seen for more than a few hours every day. The first few times they’d been out after dark, the improvement was pretty minimal, dim lights and street lamps just making it a bit harder to see the smog, piles of rubbish, and oil everywhere. But the city workers had been busy, and by the time Amy and Tails got back to the palace, there were bright coloured flags, burning torches, and actual people on the streets.

“Wow,” Amy said quietly, as they passed a stall advertising fried food, and another with drinks. “This place almost looks… normal.”
“Within a given scale of ‘normal’,” Tails added, eyeing off some of the groups of people. He suspected the ones that actually looked impressed were the natives. There were a lot more mobians around that looked unnerved, checking their watches or staring around like they couldn’t quite believe where they were.

He and Amy were nodded into the hangar by a pair of weirdly-relaxed looking guards, and were even more surprised to find Knuckles and Shadow lingering near Shadow’s jet and not even glowering at each other. Knuckles jerked his head in greeting.

“Where’ve you two been?”

“We went to meet that guy Sonic’s always asking Sonia about,” Tails explained. “He’s kind of a weirdo, so he and Amy got on great.”

She whipped out her hammer, but Tails quickly ducked and so she just glared at him for a few moments before lowering it to the ground. “What about you? We didn’t expect to see you today, let alone with…” She trailed off with a meaningful glance at Shadow, who ignored her. Knuckles shrugged.

“Sonia roped me into meeting some of the diplomats this morning, and we got talking. Turns out they’re not all idiots.” He paused, glancing at Shadow, then added, “And there’s something strange going on, here. Beyond the whole… Mobian thing. When was the last time either of you saw Sonic?”

“Um… yesterday?” Tails frowned warily. “Why? Did something happen?”

“Not that I can tell,” he said. “But there was something weird about him this morning.”

“More than usual,” Shadow added, though he was still glaring off in the other direction. “I suspect it has something to do with that medallion of his. He’s been acting unusually for him since he began wearing it.”

“And like I’ve said a hundred times already, I’m not talking about how he acted,” snapped Knuckles. “There was something weird about him.”

“That is too vague a descriptor to be of any use,” Shadow replied blandly. It sounded like an argument they’d already had several times.

Tails set his fists on his hips, looking between them curiously. “Sonic being weird and acting weird is kind of the same thing. I’m pretty sure he’s sick and trying not to tell anyone. That’s why he left the club early the other night, and we know he hasn’t been sleeping as much since this whole thing started. The polluted air’s probably not helping, either.”

“Why would you think it’s about his necklace?” Amy asked Shadow. “Isn’t it just like a magic music thingy?”

“And a symbol. So he says,” he said evenly, and Knuckles scowled.

“Whatever it is, it makes him look different,” he said bluntly. “I always thought it was something to do with his chaos. But today was pretty extreme even by the old standards – it’s gotta be more than that.”

“But it’s a place to start,” Shadow argued. “It was the catalyst to the change.”

Doubtful, Tails made a face to match the disgusted curl of Knuckles’ lip. “I think that might be a
coincidence. Chaos is too powerful to be affected by a piece of jewellery, and even Sonic admitted this city makes him uncomfortable. With how much pressure everyone’s putting on him about the whole royalty thing, and him being sick on top of all that? He’s probably just out of sorts.”

“Out of sorts?” Knuckles repeated, turning to stare at him incredulously. “Sonic?”

“It’s… possible,” Tails said, well aware of how strange it was for him of all people to be telling anyone Sonic had limitations.

“This discussion is pointless,” Shadow said, finally slanting his eyes toward them. “The parade starts in twenty minutes. It will be the first time we’ll see him presenting himself as part of this ‘Sonic Underground’. I suspect that will tell us more than any vague theory.”

They all stared at him for a second, then exchanged glances. Tails shrugged. “He’s got a point. Does anyone know where this parade thing is supposed to go? We should try and find a good vantage point.”

“I know it ends at the amphitheatre,” Amy piped up. “We could go there?”

“That will be too late,” Shadow said bluntly. “We would be better served watching its progress from the beginning.”

“Ugh, I hate following things around,” Tails groaned, even as he pulled out his mileselectric and started hacking into the palace systems again. “It’s always so slow. At least if I’m waiting in one spot, I can get things done in the meantime.”

But Shadow did have a point, and it was a good one. Even if he was acting strangely, things happened quick with Sonic, so it was a bad call to wait around for something to come to them. They found the planned route, belatedly realised they could have just asked someone, and then hurried off. They were a little late, but honestly that just made it easier to find, because the parade music was obnoxiously loud from the moment it began.

In further contrast to their previous experience with Mobotropolis, the townspeople were absolutely flooding out of their buildings and into the street. The group had been planning to take to the rooftops to follow the parade anyway, but the closer they got to the music, the more they found it was the only way to really make any progress – there were too many people converging on the parade street, all shouting and dancing, looking altogether too… happy for the city they’d begun to get to know.

“Maybe music really is magic here,” Amy noted once they were on the first rooftop, and Knuckles snorted.

“You think this is weird, wait until you see real Sonic Underground music. They’ll be in a full dance number by the end of the night, you just watch.”

“It does seem a little strange,” Tails murmured, leaning over to better see just how packed the street below had become. “I didn’t even realise there was this many people in this city. Where have they been this whole time?”


They all stared at him, and he sneered.

“It’s what they do. Look at them. You can’t pick a face in the crowd. A lone mobian hiding in their home while music plays outside speaks of rebellion. Something to be noticed and judged. So they
come out and hide in the noise. They’re cowards. All of them.”

“Uhh… you do know we’re mobians, right?” Amy asked, but he didn’t acknowledge her, instead running for the edge of the building to continue their path toward the parade. She scoffed. “God. What is his problem?”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a list somewhere,” Tails quipped, and then skipped into the air to start flying. “Come on, let’s get going. I don’t want to miss seeing this ‘real’ Sonic Underground music.”

“I do,” Knuckles deadpanned, but he followed anyway.

They eventually found the parade a good two blocks away from where it would have started. It was pretty small compared to the ones Amy had seen in the human territories – only about six floats in total, but waves of people were marching all the same. The first and last floats were obviously where all the music was coming from, while the second was a grand stand with what Knuckles identified as the Palace General—the people who apparently ran things—and an announcer who was loudly rattling off names and continuously welcoming everyone to the ‘Festival of Free Mobius’. Next was a large group of what they all recognised as members of the Palace Guard, completely surrounding the third and obviously most important float.

It was completely loaded down with instruments, but more importantly, it was the float that carried the Council of Four.

Somehow, despite the fact she was standing behind her children and barely moving, Aleena was the first thing Amy noticed about it. Straight-backed, beautiful, elegant… Aleena looked immensely powerful and Amy couldn’t figure out why. Maybe it was the way she was waving to the crowd – one arm raised to its full length, barely shifting as she gracefully rotated first one way and then another, quietly gazing out over her people. It wasn’t possible, but even from above, Amy felt like she was somehow meeting every single person individually with that same calm, reassuring gaze.

Or maybe it was how she was dressed. Aleena usually wore white dresses that covered her body from neck to toe and trailed behind her, but today her dress was loose and short enough to show her heeled boots, with a cloak over her shoulders and what was recognisably an armoured corset. It, like the wrist gauntlets that were glinting in the parade light, were shining gold, but somehow Amy was sure they could stand up to any weapon in Rouge’s arsenal. Similarly, she carried a golden sceptre in her free hand. It looked more like a microphone than anything, but something about Aleena’s absent grip made Amy think of her hammer, and she was completely certain Aleena knew how to use it like a weapon. She looked beautiful and terrifying, ready to walk into glorious battle at the slightest provocation.

God, Amy thought quietly. How the heck had anyone ever taken a kingdom away from that woman?

The next most easily noticeable member was Manic, and that was mostly because he was running back and forth from one side of the float to the other. They were too high up to hear anything, but it was obvious he was cheering and calling out to specific members of the crowd, waving like he knew each of them personally. Surprisingly, he wasn’t dressed in the finery he usually wore for official functions – instead he had a jacket that was even more torn and metal-studded than his normal vest, and was wearing jewellery everywhere, including a hip-pack and something strapped to his leg, both of which visibly showcased several drum-sticks. If she’d seen him in Station Square three years ago she might have crossed the street to avoid him, actually.

In contrast, Sonia was in one of her usual slinky dresses, though she’d taken more care with her hair than usual. While Aleena’s was still spiky, betraying the quills it hid, Sonia’s was soft, smooth, and
braid back until you could barely tell she was a hedgehog. She wasn’t moving much either, just holding her arms up and out like she was presenting herself to the world. It was a pose Amy herself had pulled more often than she liked to admit, but Sonia somehow made it look beautiful and natural. Like she was a some kind of beautiful treasure to be admired. Amy sighed to herself, wondering if she would ever be able to pull it off – not that she was sure she’d want to. It reminded her of the conversation she’d had with Bartleby earlier in the day, and she winced. It was what a princess was supposed to do and be.

If Sonic became king, it would be… If she wanted to stay by his side, Amy would have to…

She swallowed hard and forced herself to look at the last and surprisingly least noticeable member of the quartet.

He wasn’t dressed up. He hadn’t combed his quills or done anything unusual. He was just Sonic, in his sneakers and gloves, waving and occasionally cheering to the crowd. Just smiling broadly, only ever taking a few steps, never moving too far away from his mother and sister. He was handsome and charming and looked exactly the same way he always did, just…

Where he always should have been.

“Oh, no,” Amy murmured.

“Huh? What’s up, Amy?” asked Tails. “You see something?”

“Uh, no! No, it’s fine,” she said quickly, glancing at him before her eyes inevitably went back to the boy moving ever out of her silly little girl’s reach. “Just… thinking…”

Tails stared at her for a few seconds, then shrugged and headed over to the next building. They couldn’t stop if they wanted to keep up with the parade.

The thing was, it was actually pretty boring for the most part, as parades generally were if you tried to follow them. Amy legitimately wondered how the people involved—especially the ones on the floats—weren’t getting bored to tears. It wasn’t until the amphitheatre was actually in sight (from the rooftops, at least) that anything happened at all, and even then it was just Sonic, Manic, and Sonia moving over to the instruments they’d been ignoring.

“Oh, here we go,” Knuckles muttered, and the rest of them looked around in surprise.

At first, you couldn’t even hear them under the music being played on the floats combined with the increased cheers of the crowd. But slowly, the float music began to fade away, and a clear, beautiful voice cut through the noise.

Aleena had lifted her sceptre and was singing a wordless melody into it, proving it didn’t just look like a microphone. Once everyone could focus on that, they heard the quiet beat of Manic’s drums, and the rhythmic off-time of Sonia’s keyboard. Sonic stood behind with a guitar hanging from his neck, quietly tapping a beat against his leg and watching Aleena walk forward.

“So you thought you had to keep this up,” she began, voice soft and gently soothing in contrast to the previous high energy of the parade. “All the work that you do, so that we think you’re good. And you can’t believe it’s not enough. All the walls that you built up are just glass on the outside.”

Sonia lifted a second hand to the keyboard, and somehow the sound spread upward and outward, louder than before.

“So let them fall down. There’s freedom waiting in the sound. When you let your walls fall to the
Tails had been leading the way, flying overhead while the others had to run to jump the gaps between buildings, but he paused as Sonic lifted his hands and started strumming, and Amy slowed to a stop to join him.

It was… strange.

Even now that the beat and volume had picked up, heading more into soft-rock than the folk it had begun with, it still should have been too quiet and calming to match the cheering crowd that had been dancing to raucous pop music only minutes before. And yet it somehow seemed perfectly natural – the crowd below were happily swaying along, clapping their hands in time to Manic’s drums. The atmosphere was changing. The joyful chaos of the parade easily shifting into a warm glow of community that just… did not match the city it was happening in.

“The Sonic Underground,” Knuckles called, and both Amy and Tails jerked around to find him looking back at them from the edge of the roof, ready to jump to the next. “The power of harmony, they say. This isn’t the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen them do.”

“Do I want to know what is?” asked Tails, but even if it had been loud enough for Knuckles to hear over the music, he was already gliding away.

The float below them was already moving on, and they had to hurry to follow in time to see Sonic step up alongside his mother, leaning in to join her for the second chorus.

“We’re here now, oh…. this is where the healing begins! Oh, this is where the healing starts!” they sang together, Sonic’s slightly rougher voice adding a depth and strength to Aleena’s crystalline soprano. “When you come to where you’re broken within, the light meets the dark!”

“This is crazy,” Tails muttered once they had stopped again, yanking out his mileselectric and stabbing at it to pull up his analysis apps. “Do you feel that?”

“It’s like a campfire in my heart,” Amy murmured, clutching at her chest. She could barely look away from Sonic. “He’s so wonderful, isn’t he?”

Tails grunted irritably. “Amy, focus! This is a whole new kind of power that I’ve never encountered before! Empathetic resonance! Through music! It’s incredible!”

Down on the float, Sonic had twisted around Aleena, and they were now staring at each other as they sang, “Sparks will fly as grace collides—”

“—with the dark inside of us,” Sonic sang alone, before Aleena took over, her hand lifting to graze his cheek.

“So please don’t fight this coming light—”

“—let this bond come cover us,” they sang together, and then Sonia and Manic joined them for the next line. “This bond will cover us!”

Even Shadow stumbled to a halt at that one, twisting around to glare at the float below. Knuckles kept going with only a glance, but Amy and Tails only walked over to join Shadow in watching the parade continue on.

“You will share any findings you gain from your analysis tonight,” Shadow informed Tails, who barely looked up, too focussed on his work to recognise who was making demands.
“You’re welcome to anything you can hack from my systems,” he said. “Look at this! It’s on the same scale as a chaos reading, but thirty-seven percent more stabilised! I wonder what kind of abilities this has! If I could capture this, turn it into some kind of sonar pulse, I bet this could have amazing results!”

“Tails, shut up, you’re ruining the romance of the moment,” Amy said. She looked after Knuckles, then hurried along the rooftop to keep pace with the float. “I can’t believe Sonic’s never sung for me before! It’s so wonderful!”

Shadow frowned, then looked back down at Tails. “It has a recordable energy signature?”

“Yeah. But like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” he said. “And before you get all paranoid, I’m already checking to see whether it operates on a cognitive frequency, and it doesn’t look like it. It’s not mind control. Like I said, it looks way more like a chaos reading than anything.”

“Is it a chaos reading?”

“No way. It’s too consistent,” he said, and then blinked, apparently remembering who he was talking to. He pulled the tablet into his chest like a shield and stared at him, eyes wide and shoulders hunched. “It uh… does seem to be making people more relaxed though, huh?”

Shadow scoffed and turned away to skate after Amy, leaping to the next building like it was little more than a missed step. Tails, on the other hand, looked back down at his pseudo-big brother, who had properly taken over from his mother with a song that had quickly become a much harder rock song, easily amping the crowd back up to the energy it had been before. He somehow didn’t need a microphone to reach the same volume they’d had before.

“At the dead end I begin to burn the bridge of innocence, satisfaction guaranteed, a pill-away catastrophe!”

“Let’s go!” the crowd chanted back, and Sonic pumped his fist before slamming it down into the next chord.

It wasn’t that Tails had never seen Sonic perform before. He often puttered around on instruments when he was lazing around the workshop, and you couldn’t get him in a club without seeing him show off on the dance floor for at least a couple of hours. But there was something… strange about seeing him like this. Playing to a crowd, cheering them on, dancing and playing and shining in the lights as he came ever closer to a stage all but built for him.

Tails glanced down at his readings, noting that they were steadily increasing even without Aleena doing anything more than clapping and singing along with the chorus. But the parade was carrying on ahead, the Festival of Mobius leading up to begin, and his friends were already two buildings ahead of him.

He left his mileselectric running to pick up the signals and jumped into the air, refusing to be left behind.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference:
Walking Disaster - Sum 41 2007
also Healing Begins - Tenth Avenue North 2010
It was nearing midnight, and the palace was a long way from the amphitheatre, yet the soft sounds of the queen’s elegant vocals, cutting beautiful lines through the rock melodies of the instruments, swept along the wind.

Hanging from a balcony, Shadow scowled over his shoulder at the pillar of light the noise came from. The festival had been going for hours, songs intercut with long speeches introducing members of the royal household and diplomatic community, explaining plans for future rehabilitation and heaping praise on people from the war. If Shadow had been the type to bother with political nonsense or social events, it might have been at least entertaining, but really all it did was draw attention to how it should have been done years before.

But for now, it served as a perfect distraction. Both for those it intended to distract, and for his own purposes. He hauled himself up over the railing and sneered at the door in front of him. “Typical.”

It was open, and the gold light spilling out in front of him was almost inviting. It might have been suspicious, but everything he knew told him the Hedgehog royal family were too arrogant for such games. This was a balcony on the thirty-second floor of the normally heavily guarded palace, only accessible if you could scale flat walls. He ducked through the portal and into the queen’s chambers, glancing around just in case Aleena proved willing to place traps.

But it was as expected: nothing. Aleena either couldn’t fathom someone sneaking in while she was out, or simply didn’t care if they did. He scoffed under his breath and got to work.

Normally, Shadow left the espionage part of their work to Rouge. He wasn’t much for investigations or even conjecture – he preferred an enemy that he could fight or something tangible that he could steal. But Mobius—Mobotropolis—required a lighter touch. This was an old problem, with layered complications. If he acted rashly, not only could he start an international war that he wasn’t certain ‘his’ side could win, but he could risk the full wrath of Sonic the Hedgehog.

Most days, the idea wouldn’t have bothered him. When Sonic didn’t have the Chaos Emeralds or any particular grudge, Shadow considered himself more than the blue idiot’s equal. But given time, his friends, and the backing of an empire with magic… that queen and her strange powers…

Shadow felt he had reason enough to approach this carefully.

“What secrets are you hiding, your majesty?” he muttered as he rifled through cupboards and dresser drawers. He’d spent most of his time in Mobotropolis trying to get the measure of the woman – spying on guards and servants, reading both the library’s version of her family’s history and what little he could find and access of Eggman’s old files. He found it hard to believe any of it.

The people seemed to love her—love the entire royal family—but only in the most abstract sense. Everyone who worked at the palace thought they were wonderful, but no one seemed to know them
beyond the roles they played. All the history he could find—including Eggman’s records—spoke favourably of the entire royal line; all their flaws simply character quirks or eccentricities. Even prior to becoming royalty themselves, the Hedgehogs had always been popular and closely aligned with the government; advisors and guardians, occasional consorts and always friends. When they eventually rose up and took power themselves, they became the perfect ideal of storybook royalty: generous idealists who were willing to fight for ‘the Right Thing’, regardless of the personal sacrifice required.

But even if all of that was actually true, it was almost impossible to find concrete records of their abilities beyond the political space. Just vague stories and job descriptions. Much like Aleena and her mysterious children were becoming.

It was infuriating. GUN had done the research. The reports said Aleena had some kind of precognition, but it was a little hard to believe, given what had happened. Shadow had yet to see her display even an inkling of mundane foresight. Instead, her only ‘power’ seemed to be that… presence she had.

Shadow huffed as he shoved another fruitless drawer closed and moved back toward the main chamber. That concerning presence… Aleena was awe-inspiring in the most literal sense. Standing in front of her, even he felt slightly more at ease. As if it didn’t matter what she wanted or asked, he only needed to help her, and then everything would be alright.

He wasn’t sure yet whether it was a true manipulative power or just something cultivated through royal training. Sonic had something very similar, which implied it was an actual mystic power of some kind, though his was perhaps differently manifested. Sonic never gave the impression that he wanted or needed your help. He was simply reassuring in the sense that you looked at him and believed that everything would surely be alright.

Not that Shadow would ever vocally admit to feeling anything of the sort. In his mind, Sonic was an annoyance and potential threat, with too much power and not enough sense.

Which was… perhaps concerning, given what Shadow had begun to suspect. Particularly after that display on the parade float.

“This bond shall cover us,” he muttered bitterly.

There was a kind of dark irony in Sonic—who always preached freedom, choice, and friendship to literally anyone unfortunate enough to be in his vicinity—being manipulated and controlled by his own family from before he’d even been born.

Shadow’s eyes flicked downward as he remembered the chaos trap downstairs. He still wasn’t certain that Aleena knew about it, or what it had been built for. But if she didn’t, then he couldn’t quite figure out what she’d brought Eggman to her empire for. If Mobius truly had no concept of chaos, then what could a techno-magic engineer that specialised in artificial Chaos Control do for her empire?

He was missing something. There was a side to this story that he wasn’t seeing yet.

Something like static electricity shot up his spine and he jerked around to see a flare of light in the middle of the room behind him. He snatched out one of his guns and dropped into an attack stance, gritting his teeth as the light faded to reveal that same strange green creature from the last time he’d been near these chambers.

Its lips curled up in a dark smirk as it met his gaze, hands rising to press its fingertips together. “Be at
ease, young one. I am not much for interference.”

Shadow narrowed his eyes, but slowly straightened up, though he kept his weapon aimed and ready. “Who and what are you?”

“Two questions with one answer,” it said, and then bowed over its hands. “I am the Oracle of Delphius. Do not bother asking for a name; if I ever had one, I am far too old to remember it now.”

It… he, Shadow decided as he slowly began circling the old creature for a more defensive position, seemed suspiciously unconcerned to find Shadow in the queen’s chambers. He also didn’t radiate any chaos-energies, despite his teleportation. He was something new and unusual, and Shadow’s free hand hovered behind his hip, prepared to pull out his second gun the moment it was needed.

“You may try to shoot me if you wish,” the Oracle said with a wry smile. “I think you will find it difficult to land a hit on someone who knows where the bullet will land. In the back of the chair, two inches from the left edge, as it happens.”

Shadow scowled. He disliked Rouge’s jokes but tolerated them – a strange creature sneaking up on him when he had been trying to find information was not worth that energy. “What do you want?”

“Very little. It is not within an Oracle’s nature to want much, as we already know that which we will get,” he said. “But it is my task to ensure that the things that must happen do, and the things that must not, do not. You may be of little consequence in the grand scheme of things, but it is little consequences which can impact so many grand designs.”

“If you are an oracle, I’m sure you can see how quickly my patience is fading,” he snarled. “Why are you interrupting my investigation?”

“Because there are things that must happen, and they will not happen if we must rely on you finding the information you seek on your own,” the Oracle lazily flicked his wrist, and one of the chairs between them glowed an ominous purple before sliding back from the table. He sat at it, folding his hands over his stomach. “You are not particularly good at figuring things out.”

His snarl was a little more blatant this time, and he very pointedly straightened the arm still holding the gun. “If you’re trying to stall –”

“A little less than seventeen years ago, a young queen had a prophetic dream,” the Oracle said lightly. “She dreamed of a boy with red eyes and more power than any mobian had ever seen. He looked over a decimated city and seemed accomplished.”

Shadow’s gun lowered slightly.

“She dreamed again, of a boy with red eyes and too much power, staring over a different city. Again, and again, and again she dreamed. Destruction and devastation. Caused by powers she did not understand. And then a wise, all-powerful oracle told her that the night before, she had dreamed of her own progeny.” He smiled, leaning back in his chair. “She decided to take responsibility for that destruction. She thought, as so many do, that she could prevent it. Such is the naïveté of seers who see only fragments of a definite truth.”

Shadow slowly walked forward and around to stand on the other side of the table, watching warily. “She made Sonic what he is?”

“And there, you make the same assumption she did. Did I say all her dreams were of the same boy?” He peered out from under his cowl, smirk curving around his trunk. “There are many with great power, and red eyes are no great rarity, my ruby-gazed child.”
“I am no ‘child’,” Shadow snapped. “And I don’t belong to anyone.”

“I don’t make it a habit to get involved in arguments, but let me give you something to consider in the long, cold nights ahead of you: you are wrong, on both counts,” he said, but then closed his eyes and tilted his head away. “In small recompense for those nightmares, let me say this plainly: Aleena has never given Sonic power. She gives him things that may resemble it, to the point that she herself doesn’t know otherwise. Songbirds enjoy pretty gilded cages, after all.”

Shadow hesitated, fingers twitching on his gun as he considered what he’d heard so far. “What are you saying?”

“Much more than I’m telling, if I’m doing my job right,” he said, and opened his eyes again. “A young queen and her dashing prince set out to save their unborn son from himself. And so events were set in action that needed to happen. A world was ruined, a child scarred, and more than one planet saved, once time had its way. And now there are more things which must happen, involving boys with red eyes and too much power. In such a way is history written.”

“Make up your mind,” Shadow said coldly. “You said I was of little consequence, but now you’re implying I’m going to have something to do with some big event.”

“That depends on how you choose to interpret my words,” he pointed out. “Understand this, young one: an Oracle does not exist to tell those he advises what to do. He only acts as a counsel, speaking of history in both its past and future sense. I have seen many paths, and I know enough to know which are more likely, but none are yet set in stone. This is for the actors to decide.”

“So why are you here?” he demanded. “Why are you talking to me?”

“I have told you that.”

In two nearly invisible steps, Shadow had lunged forward, shoving the gun over the table to point directly in between the Oracle’s eyes. “Enough riddles. Tell me what you want me to know.”

The Oracle gazed back at him, quietly amused, for several long and silent seconds. Just as Shadow’s finger curled into the trigger guard, he opened his mouth again.

“Twins and triplets are frequent in the Hedgehog line; it is a matter of biology. But history rarely speaks of the siblings, you’ve surely noticed. This is their way. One to take the attention, to be charming and attractive, to be the one history is written about. Others exist to guide the hand that writes. To make the decisions, to take the actions. It is yet unknown which of the current generation will take which role,” he said quietly. “Much like Aleena herself, you give the queen far too much credit. She is a seer and a figurehead. Her actions have consequences, but she is not so wise as to understand them.” The Oracle leaned forward in his chair, trunk pushing up against Shadow’s gun. “I wonder if you, young lifeform, are so wise yourself.”

Unnerved by the action, Shadow hesitated, then asked, “What are the medallions the triplets wear?”

“Not what Aleena thinks they are,” the Oracle said. “Perhaps ask the young fox. He knows more than he knows.”

Shadow grunted in question, but the Oracle abruptly vanished in a burst of light, only to suddenly reappear near the balcony. Startled, Shadow swung around, his finger jerking tight and causing a laser to score off the wall over the Oracle’s shoulder. He swallowed, forcing himself to relax, and then scoffed.

“So much for oracles. You said the ‘bullet’ would hit the chair.”
The Oracle chuckled and lifted a hand as if in farewell. “I did. I did not say it would be you who fired it, or when. Something to consider, young one.”

And then, in another flash of light, he disappeared completely.

By the time the festivities wrapped up and everyone staggered back to their homes, it was almost time for early risers to be thinking about getting up. Sonic and Sonia had a brief and sulky discussion with the technicians and administrators in the hangar before sighing in something close to unison and deciding to just catch a few hours’ nap in the jet before they flew out. Manic snickered at them both and bragged about how he was going back to his nice, warm bed to sleep until noon. But he hoped they enjoyed their international road trip.

He had to duck Sonic’s swipe and run from the hangar to avoid Sonia’s hoarse shouts. It was awesome.

Less awesome was waking up maybe five hours later to Paige’s insistent calls and finding out he had an early morning meeting with the Palace General on the Southern balcony, rather than the late brunch he’d been hoping to swing with Amy Rose. He dragged on a coat because to hell with the Mobotropical wind when he was exhausted and staggered after Paige’s overly excited footsteps.

He stopped short as the door opened and warm sunlight spilled over his feet.

“Wh…at?” he breathed, gaze snapping up to the sky.

The clouds were still there, thick and heavy, but not only were they more of a grey than the sickening yellow they normally were, but there were large, open patches of actual blue sky. He could see the sun.

“Good morning, Thief Prince.”

He slowly dragged his eyes down to see the Palace General. They were all smiling, even Lord Patch, and Master Growth even had his eyes closed, positively basking in the sunlight. Cyrus made a point of bowing low, and when he straightened up he was beaming.

“We have reports from Lord Marcus. The river trawl had to be relocated, because his initial starting point was completely clear of trash, this morning. Look down on the streets! There are people. The road to the Dump is… the buildings closest to it are sparkling clean. Not even oil stains. Manic…”

Manic stared at him, than back up at the sky. Something was pricking behind his nose, his eyes blinking rapidly.

He’d grown up under the dark, polluted skies of Robotropolis. The sewers had been his home, his life. The first day he’d spent outside the city, he’d panicked at every bird song, and the first time he saw a truly clear sky he froze, terrified of the expanse. This should have just been weird, but somehow, in some way…

He clenched his eyes and jaw shut, pushing back whatever weird emotion was hitting him so hard. He forced it into a smile instead, nodded once, and then reopened his eyes and stepped forward into the sun. “So those are the cliff notes, totally. Gimme the deets, guys. What the ever-livin’ hell? How’s our city really doin’?”

On the streets of Port Mobius, Sonic and Sonia did a double-take as they noticed each other playing with their medallions, and immediately dropped their hands before exchanging awkward grins.
“Copyin’ me, Sis?” Sonic teased, and she shoved his arm.

“You wish, Sonic Hedgehog. Now could you at least try to be dignified for the next five minutes?”

“Princess, dignity isn’t a look; it’s a state of coolness. And no one is as cool as me.”

“You keep telling yourself that. One day, someone might believe it!”

He made a face at her and they went back to looking around the city and waving to the people they passed. It had been a hard morning so far – they’d managed to catch a few hours of sleep, but it hadn’t really been enough after the night they’d had, and they’d started their tour with a meeting with the local baron.

He’d been… an interesting experience, as Sonia put it.

“The economy is our greatest difficulty; it causes real morale issues,” he’d told them, gesturing with a golden goblet of wine that Sonic had to blink at several times before he could accept it as anything but a hallucination of his poor overtired mind. The baron honestly looked like he’d walked out of one of those stereotypical paintings of arrogant royalty, with velvet clothes and too much jewellery, bolstered by lavish food and surroundings. “If the lower classes would just contribute to the community, things would be much easier for everyone.”

The problem, Sonia eventually figured out, was that Port Mobius was a fishing town, and—like a lot of labour-intensive economies—it had been revolutionised by Robotnik’s regime. Machines and robotocised people had done all the work that had once been done by flesh and blood, for no cost beyond their upkeep. Real people just couldn’t compete, even now that the robotocised workforce was gone. That left a lot of people out of work. They could still catch enough fish to survive, since they weren’t picky like the actual companies were, but they didn’t really have money to spend in stores and contribute to the ‘economy’.

“So who’re you sellin’ all your fish to?” asked Sonic. “I mean… if the people aren’t buyin’, where do the companies get their money?”

“Most of our income is through exports. Cities such as Mobotropolis are a life-saver for towns such as this,” the baron said cheerfully.

“Right… and I’m bettin’ you didn’t get that fancy outfit from around here, either.”

“Of course not! My personal assistant buys all my clothing from Alles!”

Sonic had looked to Sonia, trying to figure out what he was missing. “So… dude. How are you ‘contributing’ to your own community? Your big guys sell to people outta town, they buy stuff from outta town, they don’t pay anyone from in town—”

Of course they do. Our industries have a proud administrative workforce!”

Sonia hummed. “What kind of percentage of the barony do you think works in administration?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t have the exact numbers on me right now…”

“Like I said, you don’t pay anyone from town,” Sonic said again, getting frustrated. “—so where exactly is your town supposed to get the money you want ‘em to ‘contribute’ to your community, huh?”

“I hear what you’re saying,” the baron said with a smile that kind of made Sonic want to punch him.
“And I agree, there are certain moral issues in using machines when the flesh and blood workforce need employment. But machines are faster, cheaper, and more efficient. Think of the sacrifice you’re asking the leaders of our industries to make, not just from a monetary standpoint, but in time and quality.”

The conversation went around in circles, even Sonia beginning to get visible frustrated while the baron started avoiding even looking in Sonic’s direction in some weird display of courageous avoidance, until Sonic eventually gave up and stormed out. Mostly because breaking something wouldn’t be any more effective than the argument as a whole.

Sonia and the secretary that was supposed to be keeping an eye on their time caught up with him a few minutes later.

“I’m thinking taxes,” Sonia announced. “Lots and lots of taxes on the use of robotic workers. The redistribution of which will go to school programs focussed on mechanical upkeep. What do you think?”

“Ask me if I care about any of it, Sonia,” he snapped back, and she gave him a bland look.

“That’s what I just did, Sonic. Besides, diplomacy is about compromise.”

“Diplomacy can take a flying leap off Robotropolis Tower. I got better things to waste my time on.”

“Mobotropolis Tower,” she corrected, but she was grinning as she said it.

They headed down to the docks, Sonic waving vaguely at the people that were stopping to stare, take pictures, and follow them. The secretary kept reminding them of the time, and that they were supposed to be in the next town by one, but since they were in a town he actually remembered from the Resistance days, Sonic had people he wanted to see.

The Queen Aleena showboat was moored in pride of place on the central dock, though it looked a lot cleaner and prettier than it had the last time they saw it. It made him look out toward the ocean, wondering how Moby Deep was doing.

That old whale had done a lot for him, in hindsight. He should have visited long before now.

As they approached the boat, an amphibious mixe scrambled down the gangplank, looking as pale and nervous as someone with dark green skin could. “L-lost Prince! Princess of the Rebellion! W-welcome to the Queen Aleena!”

“Yo,” Sonic greeted. “We’re lookin’ for Captain Squigee; he around?”

“Um. No, sorry. He – he went to Mobotropolis for the celebrations. I’m First Mate Baleen. I’m taking care of the Queen Aleena in his absence.”

“First Mate? Does that mean the Queen Aleena’s got a crew now?”

She beamed, back straightening proudly. “She does indeed. And a full staff for hospitality and entertainment purposes. The captain did a lot of work to make her back into the pride of Port Mobius these last couple of years.”

“That’s way past cool.”

Sonia nodded, stepping past Sonic to look up at the ship. “We hate to be a bother, but would it be possible to get a tour? Last time we saw her, she was looking a little rundown. I’d love to see her in
“O-of course! Please! Um – please, this way!”

They met a lot of the staff, ended up taking a bunch of photos with them, played a song with the house band, and it all turned out a lot more fun than Sonic had expected. By the time Sonia’s secretary hustled them off and back to the jet, Sonic was in a better mood and Sonia was making plans about how to support hospitality and tourism as recovering industries.

They sat side by side on the jet, Sonia scribbling notes and Sonic watching the world pass by below the window. It was… weird.

Maybe he was just tired, but even though it was a completely different situation, Sonic was reminded of those first few days at the monastery, just after he had met his siblings and they’d been forced into hiding. They’d spent day after lousy day learning ‘teamwork’ and ‘harmony’ in simulated situations that Sonic would never had expected to live out. He’d been angry and frustrated, every day, but then he and his siblings would go back to their dorm and just spend time together. Just… get to know each other. Hang out, play music, share theories about their mother and the war.

His eyes slid around to peek at Sonia.

These last few years, it had been easy to remember the annoying things. The co-dependence, the sulkiness, the resentment. Sonia’s snobbish attitude and Manic’s constant need for positive reinforcement. The way Sonic and Sonia squabbled, disagreeing on every little thing, trying to one-up each other and prove they were the elder, better sibling.

He’d forgotten how much fun it had been. How much he actually liked working with her.

She noticed his gaze and raised an eyeridge in return. “Can I help you with something, Sonic Hedgehog?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he drawled, and leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out and folding his hands over his torso to look as arrogant as he could manage. “I was just thinkin’ about this whole Grand Vizier thing you got goin’ on. Kinda like the royal secretary, ain’t ya? You gonna answer my mail, too?”

Her spine straightened, eyes going wide, and for a second he thought he must have really screwed up. She almost looked on the verge of tears again. But then she blinked rapidly, licked her lips, swallowed, and then visibly forced herself to shoot back a biting grin. “And lose all the fun of watching you make a mess of your diplomatic relations? Not a chance. My plan is to let you run your mouth off so everyone figures out what a moron you are, and then sweep in and dazzle them all with wit, charm, grace, intellect—”

“Humble modesty,” he interjected dryly.

“—political nous,” she corrected. “I’ll finally be recognised as the star of the Sonic Underground.”

“Keep the dream alive, Sonia. What’d you tell me earlier? Eventually, someone’ll believe it?”

She flicked a hand as if to disregard him, before her smile softened and he winked back. After another moment, she returned to her notes, and Sonic closed his eyes in search of a few more winks of sleep, easy and comfortable beside his sister.

In the light of a dim but sun-lit noon, Mobotropolis looked like a completely different city.
People were on the streets, and they didn’t even look guilty – more nervous and proud, like they were doing something impressive by being outside. You could even hear a few people laughing, though Tails suspected they weren’t from around here. Maybe not even from Mobius proper.

Bartleby had given Amy some money (so she’d learn ‘how to operate in civilised society’), and she spent a solid portion of it buying them all a late breakfast from one of the stalls. It was greasy and mostly batter, but fruit seemed impossible to find and they were all tired enough that it felt like comfort food besides. Only Shadow turned it down, which none of them were surprised by, and they found a withered park to eat it in, watching a couple of local kids explore as if they’d never seen it before.

Knuckles, speaking around the fried whatever-it-was he was still eating, was the one to start the conversation. “Sonic’s powers are different when he's with the Sonic Underground. Mostly speed, and that guitar of his.”

“Manic’s is a set of drums that has power over the earth – he can cause earthquakes and levitate stone. Sonia uses a keyboard that actually transforms into a laser rifle,” Knuckles continued. “She also used to have this attack, where she could spin like a tornado. Aleena told me she was strong, too. Strong like me. But I never saw that.”

“What about the Queen?” asked Shadow. He shook his head again and shrugged. “No idea. I only met her a couple of times before this week. I saw her do some basic magic – levitate stuff, light flashes, short-range teleportation. The strangest thing was when she carved a message into some rocks using a knife. It was like she was just using a pen.”

“Environmental cleansing?” Tails reported, as they all looked up at it. “I've seen Super Sonic do it a couple of times on accident.”

“Doctor Gerald Robotnik was ultimately concerned with Chaos Healing,” Shadow reminded them. “This seems similar.”

“Except it’s on an environmental scale rather than a personal one. I guess it makes sense that Sonic’s family could do it when they work together.”
Amy hummed, toying with her food. “So why didn’t they before?”

“During the war?” Knuckles shrugged. “They had fatter eggs to fry.”

“What about after? It’s been years,” she pointed out. “I know Sonic wasn’t here, but they had the Queen. Couldn’t she help?”

Tails made a face. “If she’s at the same Chaos level as Sonic, then sure, but… I don’t think she is. None of them seem that powerful to me.”

“But it’s not Chaos, it’s magic,” Knuckles pointed out, much to Tails’ visible disgust. “Maybe it’s specific magic to the triplets.”

This time it was Amy to look doubtful. “I don’t know. When magic gets specific like that, and it’s about three people, then blood or whatever is what matters. Since they’re all family, it should all be the same. Besides, Queen Aleena feels like magic, but Sonic never really has.”

“Maybe that’s why he seems different to me,” he shot back. “Because he’s getting all magical. None of this feels like Chaos. It’s too…”

“Controlled,” Shadow interjected, and they looked up at him. It was a loaded word coming from Shadow, let alone given the topic. He gazed back at them heavily. “Chaos is, even when we call it Chaos Control, inherently chaotic. If this is Chaos, it’s Controlled Chaos. Manipulated and managed to the point of being unrecognisable.”

“Wow. Way to make something positive sound super sinister,” Amy observed, and he closed his eyes, turning his head away.

“Hmph.”

“That would be a lot of control,” Tails said slowly. “For you and Knuckles to not recognise it…? That seems… unlikely.”

Shadow opened his eyes to glance at him sideways. “You’re saying it’s impossible?”

“I’m not saying anything. It’d make more sense than ‘magic’ does,” he said, ignoring Amy and Knuckles’ looks. “I just… don’t know what could do that.”

“Does it matter?” asked Amy. “I mean, Shadow’s creepy way of describing it aside, who cares? Who cares what the royal family’s powers are as long as they’re using them to help people? Look around us! In just one night, this place has become a thousand times better than it was. Why are we worried about how it happened?”

Knuckles frowned but didn’t say anything, and even Tails winced awkwardly. She wasn’t wrong—the city did seem a lot better today, and normally they didn’t worry about where power came from as long as it was given freely.

Which…

He hunched his shoulders, craning his neck to look at the sky. The grey clouds were broken and drifting, hiding the eggshell blue from the space directly above them. But even so, it looked more like a rainy day than the polluted waste land it had been yesterday. He scuffed his feet against the ground, thinking of the oil-soaked dirt, and how much nicer it would be if it was magically cleansed the way the sky seemed to have been. People outside the park were audible. Talking, chatting, living lives that he hadn’t seen before.
It was so much nicer, just from one night of ‘magic’ music – if that had been what caused it all.

Magic music that was apparently only possible because Sonic was here to help make it.

That Sonic hadn’t wanted to be here to make.

His tails flicked forward, and he started absently fiddling with the fur on one of them. Thinking about it, it was easy to understand why everyone here was so bitter about Sonic leaving. He could have done this three years ago, before he left Mobius. He could have come back at any time and done it. He could have… he could have done lots of things, and he hadn’t.

Why?

“So you’re fine with this?”

Tails blinked and lowered his eyes again. Shadow was staring at Amy, his expression unreadable.

“What?”

“You don’t mind the possibility of Sonic the Hedgehog being used—his Chaos manipulated and controlled—because it helps people. You accept that?”

Tails blinked rapidly, then looked at Amy. She gaped back.

“Okay, that – that is not –! Where did you even… I don’t –”

“I expected otherwise,” he said, and then turned on his heel and walked out of the park.

Amy turned to the other two, her eyes wide and frightened. “That’s not what’s happening. Right?”

Knuckles looked to Tails, who stared back in shocked silence.

It was a huge jump in logic on Shadow’s part, but even so, Tails couldn’t help wondering… Was that even possible?

The sands were bright, glittering gold as they stepped off the jet, and Sonic whistled lowly. He hadn’t realised they’d been flying fast enough to cross into a new kingdom.

Ifyoucan bowed slightly as they walked toward the crowd of waiting people, unsmiling from under his hood.

“Good afternoon to you both,” he greeted. “I thought I had perhaps over-estimated my strength by flying here so soon after last night's festivities, but I see now I had it far easier than you. Did you sleep at all?”

“Whatsoever, we’re cool,” Sonic said, reaching out to shake his hand. The cool metal of Ifyoucan’s robotocised arm gave a weak grip that Sonic would have liked to have been surprised by, but he remembered how ashamed Ifyoucan had been by his condition. “Remind me the name of this place?”

He chuckled softly. “The territory is known as The Icana Desert, but my countrymen would be loathe to call it such. The Azcan people greet you.”

“An’ I greet ’em back.”
“The Desert is occupied by several different nomadic tribes,” Sonia reminded him. “Their leader, for want of a better word, is the Chief of Chiefs… who doesn’t seem to be here?” she added to Ifyoucan, who grimaced.

“We do not currently have one. This is an issue I wished to bring to your mother’s attention. Our previous Chief of Chiefs, Arewenot, has retired, and his daughter, Canwebe, is reluctant to take up the role.”

Sonic and Sonia exchanged glances, Sonic raising an eyeridge. “How come?”

“I have not questioned her. Many have asked me to challenge her, and I would not want to encourage their enthusiasm by seeming to meet her on common ground.” He paused, then coughed a little pointedly. “I would also not wish to impose on either of you to speak with her on the matter.”

They looked at each other again, smirking this time. Sonia flicked her hands in silent question, but Sonic was far more grandiose as he spread his arms and bowed to her with a flourish. “Hey, far be it from me to get in between two girls and a good ol’ gossip. Have at, Princess.”

“So kind,” she drawled. “Such a gentleman.”

“That’s me!”

Ifyoucan didn’t visibly react beyond a slow blink before extending his arm toward the camp behind them. “Please, follow me. This is what is known as the Chieftain Camp, where we gather for grand events such as the Festival of Mobius, and the crowning of a Chief of Chiefs. Canwebe is in her tent.”

They headed into the camp, the secretary peeling off to talk to Ifyoucan’s assistant, but while Sonia focussed on the walk, Sonic’s attention was immediately caught by the tribes. In all his years travelling, something he never tired of was seeing all the different ways people lived. The humans had their massive skyscrapers, glass and metal keeping them safe through busy digital lives, but they also had igloos and grass huts to support days of hunting and gathering. Mobians lived in pollution-choked cities of concrete, scurrying back and forth to hide from things that scared them, but here in the Desert, they put up thick cloth tents and gathered around campfires, smoking meat and trading cups of sweet liquid.

He smiled as they walked through the tents, distracted by a group of people trying not laugh at something. He glanced at Sonia, then slipped off to join them. They snapped to attention as he approached, but were pretty obviously still struggling to keep serious.

“Hey, dudes and dudettes. What’s the joke?”

Their grins were guilty but honest, and Sonic decided he liked them.

Behind him, Sonia frowned as she noticed he’d disappeared, then sighed and shook her head. “Attention span of a gnat… if that’s our future king, the world is doomed.”

Ifyoucan smiled. “Perhaps not as doomed as once feared, your highness. I believe the Sonic Underground will do great things for our world.”

“You know, so do I,” she said, but still rolled her eyes to the heavens. “I just think we’d be a bit greater if he could focus on his actual responsibilities for five seconds. Before we go in, what can you tell me about Canwebe?”

He bowed slightly to acknowledge the question. “She is the only child of Chief Arewenot, and has
been trained since childhood to take up his mantle. She is fair and even-handed, only ever passing judgments after both sides have been heard. I believe she will make an excellent Chief of Chiefs.”

“So why doesn’t she think so?”

“I have not –”

“I’m just asking for an opinion, Ifyoucan.”

He hesitated, then grimaced and ducked his head to better hide behind his hood. “Canwebe has always been reluctant to make her personal opinions known. She did not oppose my tribe joining the Resistance, or any others, but neither did she support us. She advised her father not to be seen to give us any resources or supplies, for fear of Robotnik’s wrath.”

Sonia blinked, then inwardly cringed. Years ago, just after Sonic had disappeared, she’d made a speech that had been intended to celebrate those who stood up to Robotnik, but had actually done a lot to call out everyone who hadn’t. In hindsight, she’d been pretty scathing to leaders who had purposefully flown under the radar to avoid reprisals. “Is she going to accept any advice I give her?”

“I could not say. I may be wrong about her concerns,” he pointed out, and Sonia sighed again.

“Well, at least I know what our topic of conversation will be. Let’s get this party started.”

Ifyoucan bowed again and stepped past her to lead the way into the tent.

It turned out that Canwebe was a tall and thin coyote with pale fur but short, bright red hair and sharp yellow eyes. She had been sitting at a low table in the middle of the tent, but she stood up as Ifyoucan bowed Sonia inside. As formal meetings went, it was probably the most relaxed introduction Sonia had ever experienced – Ifyoucan gave both their names, and they offered perfunctory bows before he all but fled the tent. After another only slightly awkward moment, Canwebe gestured for Sonia to take a seat on the cushion opposite her.

“Welcome, your highness. Or… is it majesty? I am afraid I’ve never learned the difference, and to be honest, your rank means little in the desert.”

Sonia smiled and walked over to the cushion, but didn’t sit down since Canwebe was still standing. “So then I guess it doesn’t matter! For the record, highness is a member of the royal family that isn’t in direct line for the crown—or married to them. Majesty is. So my mother would be majesty; my brothers and I should just be highness, for now.”

Canwebe gazed at her quietly, her yellow eyes revealing nothing. “For now?”

“Once an heir is formally announced, that will change,” she pointed out.

“I had thought it fairly decided,” she noted, and Sonia smiled knowingly.

“To quote my brother – nothing’s over until it’s over.”

“Indeed,” she said quietly, then abruptly turned away to reach for a decanter and two glasses on another table in the corner. “To business, then. Ifyoucan tells me you’re doing the rounds of select parts of the empire to show the common folk that you managed to locate your missing brother. I still have yet to see him.”

“You’re hardly common, though,” Sonia pointed out, and Canwebe glanced over her shoulder before returning to what she was doing. She finished pouring as Sonia continued, “He’s out in the
camp, talking to people. I won’t be surprised if he ends up getting into a play fight with someone. I apologize in advance for any and all bruised pride.”

“He is entitled. Ifyoucan’s tribe often tells of how the Lost Prince is one of their own.” She put the two drinks and decanter on the table between them, and they both sat down. “But if you do not believe me common enough to see proof your brother exists, then you must have another reason for coming to speak to me. Forgive my bluntness, but I assume you are here to ensure I do not take up my father’s place as Chief of Chiefs.”

Sonia paused as she picked up her glass. “Forgive my bluntness, but I assume that’s because you think I don’t want somebody who didn’t actively support us during the war leading your people?”

Canwebe jerked her head in acknowledgement, and Sonia smiled wryly. “That’s a fair assumption, but no. I honestly don’t care about that. Part of the fun of being a politician is arguing with people who don’t agree with you. With all due respect, Chief Canwebe, I look forward to calling you an indecisive desert flea.”

It was supposed to be a joke – the kind of pithy, dry humour she regularly flung around with her political friends. She’d figured that even if Canwebe was a desert leader, she was still a politician and would take it as intended. But her expression stayed blank and serious as she gazed back in silence.

Sonia inwardly winced and outwardly tried again. “I stand by the things I said at that time. It was not me and my family that won the war; it was a joint effort, brought about by our supporters. We stand —successful, free, and alive—because we stood together against Robotnik. The ones who supported him will and should live the rest of their lives thinking about the world they could have created with their support. They need to carry that knowledge, and that guilt. I don’t—I will not—absolve them of that guilt.” She took a moment to settle her blood pressure before continuing. “But there is a difference between someone who supported Robotnik and someone who protected their people by not taking sides. Most of the people in my mother’s court made it through the war by paying taxes, keeping their heads down, and not picking fights. If I hadn’t found out my heritage, I might have become one of them. So it would be pretty hypocritical of me to hold it against you for refusing to join the Resistance when all of your people were in danger. I don’t hold it against you, Chief Canwebe.”

“You say that now,” she said. “But it is easy to say things, and you are the Princess of the Rebellion. Your allegiances are clear. Mine were not. How long will it take before you decide that those who are not with you must be against you?”

For a long moment, they just stared at each other, Sonia quickly running through all of her possible responses and judging them against how the conversation had gone so far.

A week ago, she realised, she would have backed down. Would have apologised for how she had previously presented her politics, and soothed the obviously ruffled feathers. But today… today she had her proud, arrogant brother with her, even if he wasn’t in the room. Today, she had someone who believed in her, who would back her up when things went wrong. She could afford to take risks and pick fights for the things she believed in.

“I don’t believe you are against us,” she said evenly. “You may disagree with me and my words, Chief Canwebe, but I believe you have your people’s best interests at heart. I believe that makes you the best choice to lead your people, even if puts us in personal conflict.” She leaned over the table, pointedly putting her untouched drink down beside the decanter, “But let me be clear: if you ever stop putting your people first, then I will have many things to say, and you will have reason to dislike them.”
“And what will happen then?” she asked, her mouth barely moving to change her blank stare. “What wrath will you bring down upon us, should your whims decide I am not fit to lead?”

Sonia pulled back slightly, recognising the quiet, threatening implication. Canwebe drained her cup, and then set it down beside Sonia’s full one.

“Please don’t misunderstand. This is not about words. If it was about words, I wouldn’t be afraid to speak for my people. It’s the leash you hold that frightens me.”

“The leash?” Sonia repeated. “There’s no leash. You may not remember, but your father should be able to tell you that the Hedgehog line has never tried to directly control –”

“Let me tell you a story, Princess.”

She balked, but otherwise only pressed her lips together and nodded once. This conversation was proving more annoying than she would have liked, but she was willing to do what it took to get through it.

“I once visited the central kingdom on a mission for my father,” Canwebe explained softly. “The why of it doesn’t matter, though it should be noted that it was a Resistance member I spoke to in the city, not a member of court. On my way out of the kingdom, my travelling party was attacked by a pack of SWATbots. We were still on the road after curfew. It would have been fine in the long run – I had diplomatic immunity, and would have only needed to make up a plausible excuse for being in the area, which I had. But before I could attempt to provide it, a group of Anarchists attacked the SWATbots.”

“You were rescued by Anarchists?” she asked incredulously, and a bitter smile edged over Canwebe’s lips.

“I say again: the Anarchists attacked the SWATbots. They split into two groups – the smaller one continued the attack, while the larger group took me and my party away. It didn’t take me long to realise they intended to kill me as a Robotnik sympathiser.”

“Wait, what?” Sonia blanched to the point of almost jerking backward off her cushion. “But you –”

“That was what their leader accused me of,” Canwebe clarified. “He was… clever, that bear. He told all his followers that I must have been in the city to speak with Robotnik. He told them how we paid our taxes with spices and seeds, and twisted the truth until I was little more than a drug dealer supporting the tyrant’s stranglehold on our world. Everyone would be better off if they killed me. That was what he told them.” Her smile broadened, lip curling in disgust. “And then he leaned close and whispered that I shouldn’t worry, because my father and every leader of every nation would soon be joining me.”

“Oh my gosh,” Sonia breathed. “How did you escape?”

“I didn’t. The smaller group dealt with the SWATbots and interrupted the leader,” she said, and then folded her arms over the table and met Sonia’s gaze directly. “Sonic the Hedgehog was among them.”

Sonia made sure to keep very still, but she knew her eyes widened, and she swallowed hard. Canwebe didn’t wait for her to comment.

“They were close, he and the leader. I could tell by the way they talked. But they disagreed on my fate. The leader fed him the same story as the others, about how I was supporting Robotnik, and it was my trade that kept the aristocrats happy and pliant. Sonic the Hedgehog looked at me, and the
disgust was clear on his face. I saw my death in him.”

“But Sonic wouldn’t –!”

Canwebe cut off her protest before it could really start. “He didn’t. He insisted we be let go. That they weren’t like Robotnik. He said they didn’t kill innocents. The leader claimed we weren’t innocents, and so instead, Sonic argued that we weren’t worth the bullets.” She leaned a little further over her arms. “We weren’t worth the bullets, Princess.”

Sonia swallowed again. Sonic wouldn’t have killed them. She was sure of that. He wouldn’t have let it happen. He was saying what he needed to in order to get them away from those murderers.

But…

But if the story was true, then… he’d been with them. He’d been one of them.

She felt sick.

“My people and I barely escaped, that day, and it all came down to the whims of Sonic the Hedgehog,” Canwebe continued quietly. “In that instant, when Sonic looked at me, I knew I could have died. He could have led my anarchists against my people and killed them all, because I didn’t support his cause. And that was when he didn’t have anything but the word of a madman. You and your mother, Princess, are not mad. So I wonder what will happen should you tell Sonic the Hedgehog that we stand against you.”

It took a moment, but Sonia forced herself to recover. She forced herself not to deal with the churning of her gut and the whirlwind in her head. This was only one side of the story. It probably wasn’t what it sounded like. And even if it was, it had happened before… everything. Before the Sonic Underground. Before they’d grown up and become the people they are now.

She took a deep breath and folded her hands in front of her to match Canwebe’s posture. “Perhaps what I should tell you is just more pretty words, Chief Canwebe. Maybe I should tell you that it will never happen, and we will never become tyrants. Sonic—the Sonic I know—is a good man, who would never have let anything happen to you that day, whatever you may have seen or thought. And I would like to think that even at my worst, I have never been so bloodthirsty as to do anything like that horrible anarchist suggested.”

“Pretty words indeed,” Canwebe said quietly, and Sonia nodded.

“Here are some less pretty ones: as I sit here now, in front of you, I believe with all my heart that anyone who thinks the way that man did should not be a leader. My brother made a speech the other day – he pointed out that we lead because we serve our people, and if we stop doing that, then we should be torn down. Right now, today, I believe he’s right,” she said firmly. “Our family doesn’t need people who will blindly follow our orders; we need people who will stand up and protect their people. We need people who, if they disagree with us, will have the courage to tell us so. Who, if we ever become like that anarchist, will stop us. Those are the kinds of leaders we need. And if this conversation has shown me anything, it is that you are that kind of leader, Chief Canwebe. So take it as useless, pretty words if you will, but I look forward to arguing with you about what will best serve our people.” She paused, racking her brain for old cultural studies lessons, then added, “Long may you lead your people to clear waters.”

At first, Canwebe just stared back at her in silence, until that small, twisted smile crept back over her lips. And then, slowly and carefully, she shuffled back from the table and off her cushion to kneel on the floor. She pressed her palms flat against each other, pushed them out in front of her, and then
bowed so low that her forehead almost touched the floor. “Your highness. If those are your pretty words, I would be honoured to remind you of them in time.”

And because no one was looking, Sonia grinned triumphantly before hiding it behind her own deep bow. “The people of Mobius welcome your service, Chief of Chiefs.”

It took a while to peel Sonic away from the tribespeople. They were dancing, sparring, and cooking, and Sonic was apparently in some kind of heaven. On the upside, Canwebe seemed relieved by Sonic’s broad smile and the way he let the tribe guide him, though both she and Sonia were a little shocked to see him go toe-to-toe with Ifyoucan with a sword in his hand. On the other hand, it was getting late, and Sonia desperately wanted a hot bath, palace food, and her nice, warm bed.

None of which she felt like she should have without having a serious talk with Sonic first.

But pull him away she did, and when everyone bundled back into the jet, Sonic didn’t even complain about Sonia dragging him to the back, away from everyone else. He just waited for take-off, then looked at her sideways.

“How’d it go with the head honcho?”

“Considering the circumstances, not too bad. She’s going to take up the title. She gave me a lot to think about, though,” she said slowly. “The lines of command are a little muddier when it’s a kingdom under our empire, rather than a lord under our kingdom. I think we’re going to have to learn how to manage that relationship a little better.”

Sonic watched her quietly for a few seconds, then smirked. “And…?”

“And what?”

“And somethin’ else is buggin’ ya. That ain’t a political problem that’s causin’ all the stress in your spines, sis’.”

She hesitated, then sighed loudly and shifted a little closer to him. “Did you recognise her?”

“The honcho? No, should I have?”

“Apparently you’d met before,” she said. “When you were with the Anarchists.”

He balked for several full seconds, then frowned and glanced at the window, as if they could still see the camp far below and away. At first, he just seemed confused, but then something seemed to hit him and he jerked again, his frown deepening. “Oh. That was her?”

“You remember?” she asked, and couldn’t help adding, a little bitterly, “So you were an Anarchist.”

“Hey, I never said I wasn’t. But I never signed up or anything. I was just hangin’ out with their boss,” he said, then smiled wryly. “Which should’ve been a warnin’ sign all on its own. Anarchists are all about tearin’ down leaders, yet they’ve got some. Funny how y’don’t notice that in the moment.”

“Sonic, this isn’t funny,” she hissed. “If the press—if the aristocrats—got wind of this –”

“There’s a whole lot worse in my history if they wanna go lookin’ for it, Princess,” he said bluntly. “And like I said, I never signed up. They wanna go lookin’ for an anarchist in me, maybe they should remember that my time with those idiots ended with me knockin’ one of ’em for six and
“takin’ out a stockpile of their guns, yeah?”

She blinked, and Sonic sighed loudly, glancing back at the window.

“If that head honcho back at the camp is who I think she is, then I was only with the Anarchists for like… maybe another week after that? If that,” he added vaguely. “All told, I spent maybe two months with them before I went back to Uncle Chuck and the Resistance. It ain’t no thing.”

“It is a thing, Sonic. It’s the kind of thing that could ruin us,” she said. “Canwebe didn’t want to take up her post because of what happened with you and the Anarchists that day.”

He scoffed, obviously not believing her. “Yeah, right. Like they could scare off anyone.”

“They didn’t scare her; you did! I need a story, or things like this could completely destroy any credibility you have! We’re taking a risk with our stance right now, this could completely change the context – it could make you out to be some kind of murdering psycho!”

“Murdering psycho, huh?” he repeated quietly, and Sonia pressed a hand over her eyes.

“It’s an exaggeration, but the press could run with it. We need a defence.”

He didn’t answer, just watching the darkening window. His expression had closed off into that same mysterious look he’d worn his first night at the palace, when she’d hardly believed he could be her grumpy big brother. It was quiet and complicated, completely unreadable and hurtful in ways even she didn’t quite understand. It wasn’t the Sonic she knew.

It didn’t go away when he closed his eyes and breathed out through his teeth.

“I’ve been fightin’ Buttnik since I was nine, Sonia,” he said, almost too quietly to be heard over the engines. “It doesn’t matter why I started, aside from the obvious. The point is, I’d been doin’ it on my own, my own way, and… I dunno. By the time I was twelve, I was startin’ to think I maybe hadn’t been doin’ it right.”

Sonia’s eyes widened as she realised what was happening. Sonic had never, in all their time together, ever opened up about his past. She focussed on keeping her breathing even and steady as he continued, still not looking at her.

“So I came back to Mobius, and maybe I was lookin’ for someone to tell me how I should fight. Maybe they could tell me how to live, you know?” He paused, then smiled and shook his head. “That’s when I met Solar. Solar the Sunbear. He’s got a lot to do with everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Music references:
Pompeii - Bastille 2013

People have been asking, so now at the end of every chapter is all the songs referenced (with the exception of Escape From the City, because... well. It's the Modern Generations mix, by the bye). When I couldn't find an official youtube link, I found the closest I could. I hope you enjoy them!
So it turned out coming to Translyvan had been a mistake.

Rouge hissed as she dodged under another swing of the sword and had to twist awkwardly to get her leg up and out to attack. But she didn’t have the angle to turn into a proper Tornado Kick and had to compromise with just slamming her heel into the man’s side and then scrambling to regain her footing as he went sprawling across the concrete. She leapt into the air, desperate for distance, but the bear had already recovered and lashed out with his whip, catching her ankle and slamming her back into the ground.

“Who uses a whip?” she snarled, and yanked her foot hard, both pulling her assailant off balance and giving herself the momentum to twist up and snatch a bomb from behind her back. She snapped off the cover and threw, but the sword swung and sliced it in two.

Which was an incredibly impressive show of both skill and stupidity, as the steel sparked against the iron casing and promptly lit the gunpowder inside. Both Rouge and the swordsman grunted as the explosion burst out, throwing them several feet back. The whip was still around Rouge’s leg, but her opponent had lost hold, so she kicked it up and behind herself, dragging out another bomb as she took to the air properly.

“Check out the real reason they call me a bombshell, honey,” she growled, and let loose.

The bear swore and dove for cover behind the upturned tables. Which was fine. While he hid and the bombs exploded, she grabbed the whip from her ankle and spiralled into a proper Tornado Kick that splintered his makeshift cover. He yelled in instinctive reaction, but she was already looping the whip around his neck, and didn’t even hesitate before stomping her heel down on his knee and then yanking on the whip until he gasped for air.

Soon, the only sound was his weak choking and the deafening silence of an ended battle. He dropped his sword and lifted both hands in surrender.

“You are lucky my partner isn’t here,” Rouge advised him, and threw the whip at his face. He immediately broke down in sobbing coughs, but Rouge didn’t move, her foot still grinding into his flesh and another bomb already in hand. “Who the hell are you?”

He held up one hand again, struggling for breath. She waited.

“S- Satellite. My name is Satellite,” he croaked. “I’m a mercenary. And you are obviously well above my pay grade.”

“Obviously,” she agreed. “What do you want with me?”

He looked up at her like that was a dumb question, which—given how close they were to the Dark Forest—it was. But she wanted to hear him admit it. He eventually smiled wryly past his coughs.
“Madame Screech has had a bounty out on bats with white fur and retractable wings for about three years.”

She narrowed her eyes, then slammed her foot down even harder to make him hiss in pain. “You listen to me. I am Rouge the Bat. I am a master thief, and the Guardian Unit of Nations’ top agent. I am the only mobian in their employ because I am the only mobian they trust. My partner is Shadow the Hedgehog, the ultimate life form. My companion is Omega, a weapon of mass destruction that would destroy citadels if I asked. I can hold my own against the Guardian of the Master Emerald. That is who I am. I do not belong to Madame Screech.”

The man ducked his head and lifted his hands a little higher in point. “Didn’t understand even half of that, Miss Rouge the Bat, but I get the point.”

“That was a message you can take back to your employer, old man.”

He ducked his head again, and she shoved away from him.

She should never have come back.

Visiting Transylvan had been a challenge to herself to prove she wasn’t afraid anymore. She’d landed her jet on the outskirts of the Dark Forest and walked, trying to pretend she wasn’t shaking, into the nearest city. She’d ordered the same meal she’d ordered the night she decided to leave and choked it down, all the while pretending she was fine.

Then, thankfully, a sword had settled on her shoulder and a gruff voice had told her to come along quietly.

On the upside, the battle meant that she could probably—and was going to—walk out of the destroyed cafe without paying for her meal. It also gave her an excellent excuse to run away while telling herself it wasn’t because she was terrified to be here.

Ten minutes later, she’d almost made it back to her jet before the same gruff voice called out to her. “Do you really know the Guardian of the Master Emerald?”

“Just because I don’t like to kill people doesn’t mean I won’t, Mr Satellite,” she called back. “Do yourself a favour and walk away.”

“That’s some pretty esteemed company you keep, Miss Rouge. I hear he’s been seen with the Lost Prince of Mobius recently.”

Oh, come on…

So close. She was so close to just getting out of here and… ugh. Why did he have to mention Sonic?

She stopped walking, turning her head to look at him from over her shoulder. “So?”

The mercenary slowed to a halt under her gaze, cautious despite his casual tone. “And who did you say you were an agent for? The Guardian Unit of Nations? They some kind of overlander organisation?” he asked. “I bet they’re real interested in what’s going down over here, huh?”

She narrowed her eyes. He looked a mess, as any ordinary mobian would after going up against her. Both his clothes and fur were singed, and he was shuffling more than walking, the damage she’d done to one leg apparently balanced out by some injury on the other. He was pretty small for a bear, but brawny, and she was a little impressed with how hard he’d made that fight with just a sword, a whip, and no powers. Especially given his age – he had to be in his late thirties at the least, more
likely forties. He’d caught her off-guard, but she had a feeling it wasn’t his battle skills that made the old man truly dangerous.

“I propose a trade, Miss Rouge,” he said. “I tell you what your bosses want to know, and you tell me where the Lost Prince has been all these years.”

“Two assumptions in one breath,” she noted. “What do you think my bosses want to know, exactly?”

“Let me add some more to sweeten the deal, then. You be upfront with me and I’ll also tell Madame Screech I found proof her little protégé died in the East Ocean two years ago.”

She paused, then slowly turned around, pointedly drawing another bomb out from behind herself. But this one wasn’t lit, and she just casually held it in one lazy hand. “For the record, Mr Satellite, what my bosses want to know and what I want to know are not the same thing, and one is far more valuable to me than the other.”

“I bet,” he agreed. “The Lost Prince is Sonic the Hedgehog.”

“Colour me shocked,” she drawled, and he smirked.

“The first time he came back to Mobius, my sleuth took him in. I know all about why he left the first time, why he came back, and I got some good ideas about why he left the second time, royalty be damned. We got a deal, Miss Rouge?”

She paused, rolling the bomb back and forth across her palm. She didn’t like him, but she’d made worse deals in her life. She flicked the bomb back into subspace. “If you leave the whip where you stand, I have some power rings in my jet that’ll heal up those injuries. But just remember I have more bombs and will use them. This way, old man.”

It took maybe another thirty seconds, but in typical fashion, once Sonic began explaining, he didn’t bother hesitating. He locked his eyes on the bottom of the window, away from her gaze, and started talking so quickly that she had to struggle to understand some of the words.

“Okay, I know I said I wouldn’t go into details, but some details might be needed, come to think of it. Because otherwise I’m gonna sound like a pushover and dude, no. Not when it comes to Solar. So, long story short, I left Mobius the first time because I watched my parents get killed on a video that got broadcast to people on the regular,” he said, his tone light, casual, and too quick to give her space to react. “Kinda didn’t deal with that all too well, but whatever. Left Mobius, went out to the Islands, made a life out there. Ended up getting into some scraps with Robotnik and eventually decided that I needed to come back here and deal with him properly.”

Sonia blinked hard. It was obviously barely a fraction of the truth, but it was still more than she’d ever known and sorry, but had he started that by saying he’d seen his foster parents’ recorded deaths? “Sonic –”

He rushed on before she could get any further. “Side note, Power Rings are awesome. When I’m not on the mainland, I kinda rely on them for energy, it may or may not be a kind of addiction, point is, I get used to having them around. Mobius mainland doesn’t have them so much. So when, on my first day back on the mainland I get into a fight with a pack of SWATbots, run outta rings, don’t have any
left, barely escape alive, and then realise I’m going after the guy who literally tore my parents’ faces off, I’m not doing so great. Low on power, low on confidence, low on resilience, that’s me. Cue Solar and his dad showing up and blasting a SWATbot that had been about to get the drop on me. Super heroic. Very cool,” he said, giving the window a thumbs up but still not even glancing at her reflection. “Again, reminder, my head? Kinda screwed up at this point. Hero and paternal figure, double whammy, take one look at a freaked out kid and offer him a bed and some food. Hook, line, sinker, I’m on it.”

“I bet,” Sonia said faintly, because that was all the time Sonic gave her before he kept going.

“Satellite, the dad, super cool dude. Still really respect him. Turns out he’s the leader of this group of people that fight Robotnik. They’re all about freedom and choice and doing what’s right for you, not what some dumb law says you need to do. They train people to protect themselves, they protect others, it sounds stylin’.”

“That’s a nice way to describe anarchy,” she noted, and he huffed out a humourless laugh.

“Ain’t it just? Meanwhile, Solar is bein’ all nice and charming and bringing me food, making sure I’m okay, asking about where I’ve been but letting me not tell him stuff when I don’t want to. He even made up this story about his mom that I found out later was total bull-hockey, but wow did it make me think he understood, you know? That net, man, so tempting. So good. I would’a strung myself up on it,” he said with another laugh that was dark and full of teeth. “So I was basically on board. I start goin’ on missions with these guys. They’re pretty simple. Steal some food, hit an outpost, hijack a weapons shipment, whatever. No biggie. Compared to what I’d been doing before, it was all so simple that I could’ve done it all in my sleep.”

“What were you doing before?” she asked, but he held up a hand and shook his head to disregard it.

“Not the point right now, Sis’. The point is that one day, Solar says we’re going out beyond our usual territory to patrol a road. And that’s weird, I mean, we don’t normally ‘patrol’, but sure. It turns out lucky we do, because we end up rescuing this caravan of people from a SWATbot patrol. Canwebe’s caravan, not that I knew her from the next guy at the time. At first I’m thinking it’s all good, all sweet, these guys seem pretty well-stocked, we might get some supplies outta them in thanks, whatever. Then Solar tells me that these guys are Robotnik supporters. And if we let them go, then they’re just gonna help Buttnik again. That’s when he tells me – That’s when Solar tells me we need to kill these guys.” He paused, taking a deep breath, then smiled even more broadly, until it almost looked painful. “Gotta tell ya, it blindsided me. I mean, I’m thinkin’… what? Sure, SWATbots aren’t the brightest bolts, so it’s not impossible that they just didn’t recognise some Robotnik supporters, but even so, these guys are nothin’. They’re just a bunch of guys in jeeps and robes. I could’ve taken them all out in seconds. Not exactly a threat, you know? And then it hits me. We had no reason to be out that way that night. We didn’t normally do patrols, we didn’t care about roads or caravans unless we were doing a hit. This was a hit.”

“The whole thing was planned,” Sonia surmised, and Sonic pointed at her without looking.

“It had to be. Solar had just cooked up this story to make it seem like a coincidence, thinkin’ I wouldn’t notice. But he’d planned to catch these guys and he’d planned for all of this to happen, and now he was trying to convince me these guys needed to die. I’m pretty sure he was expecting me to kill them, too.” He paused again, then folded his arms over his torso and moved a little closer to the window, looking down at the clouds below. His reflection was still amazingly difficult to read. “He’d been so awesome to that point. I still don’t know how we read each other so wrong, you know?”

“Oh, Sonic,” she breathed, and he shook his head a little before clearing his throat to continue.
“Anyway, so I figured out pretty quick that if I didn’t do it, he’d get on one of the others to do it, so I tried to play along – point out how they were harmless, how we’d have better targets some other time, how it would just be drawing attention to us… I dunno, maybe Solar realised I wasn’t going to end up on side, because eventually he agrees, and apologises to me. Says he’s sorry to have put me in that situation, when I obviously wasn’t ready. Like I’m some –” He stopped, finally letting a real and incredulous expression cross his face with his scoff before he hid it back behind his quieter expression again. “Like I couldn’t have steamrolled him and the whole crew we were with the second he tried anything. But I figure now that was more about him still seemin’ in control to the other guys. Now, I figure that was important. Him bein’ in control. Him bein’ in control o’me, maybe. That was – that was important, I think.”

Sonia pulled back a little, the reality of the situation finally settling on her shoulders. But once again, Sonic didn’t give her time to properly process, instead flicking his hand like none of it mattered.

“So that’s it. That was the story of how I met the Head Honcho. No big deal in the end. The caravan left, we went back to camp, Solar spent the rest of the night apologising to and for me and that was it. Night over.”

She shifted her weight from one hip to the other, not really sure how to respond. It was the most she’d ever heard him talk about his past. And it wasn’t happy. Or over. She needed to know more.

She just… it was surprisingly hard to find the words. “Solar sounds like a real jerk, Sonic.”

“Yep,” he agreed. “But he’d been awesome to me when I needed it, and I really didn’t want him to turn out to be total scum. I wanted to believe he really was sorry. So I gave him a chance. One more chance.”

“It didn’t go well,” she guessed, and he finally looked up and around to meet her gaze with a wry smile.

“It could’a gone better.”

A crackle of radio from the front of the jet made them both turn and look at the crew, reminding them they weren’t alone in the aircraft. It wasn’t much of a crew – Ifyoucan’s entourage had actually been bigger than theirs. They had their pilot and the secretary, and a single guard that Sonic had honestly asked Sonia if he was sleeping while they were on flight. It wasn’t like they needed much protection, all things considered.

The secretary was looking back at them, but judging from her expression she hadn’t heard anything yet. She was probably more concerned by the fact they were obviously having a serious conversation when nothing in particular had seemed to go wrong on the trip. The pilot was now talking weather on the radio—something about a lack of cloud cover, from what little they could hear—but had obviously been focussed on flying beforehand. The guard still looked asleep, which was probably the most suspicious, but he was further forward than the secretary, so Sonia wasn’t too worried.

She still took Sonic’s arm and drew him the last few steps back into the emergency cargo section, both of them gripping straps for balance as they shifted position.

“I remember… sometimes the Resistance would talk about killing,” she said quietly. “Even when it was Robotnik, I remember you would get upset. I’m sorry. I didn’t realise how strongly you felt about it.”

“Ugh, don’t…” Sonic grimaced, leaning his head back to better roll his eyes at the ceiling. “It’s not the same, Sonia. People die in battle, it happens. I’m not all soft about it. That stuff you talked about with the Resistance was its own weirdness, about revenge and… stuff. What happened with Solar
“was… not.”

“So what was it?”

He swung his weight on the straps, looking off to the side as he avoided answering for a few seconds, before he closed his eyes and apparently surrendered. He shrugged in a would-be careless gesture. “There was this factory. Dedicated to makin’ those creepy body suits the doc’ used to wear. It was mostly run by robots and robotocised mobians, but there were a couple of flesh and blood guys that oversaw it all.”

“Okay…” she said slowly, not seeing the connection. “Was this a target, or…?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t a big hit. When Solar first mentioned it, we all thought it was mostly fun, you know? The emperor’s got no clothes, and all that. More of a statement than anything.”

Sonia nodded, mildly impressed despite herself. From an aristocrat’s political viewpoint, destroying someone’s wardrobe was actually quite a good manoeuvre. It was a blow to the pride, if nothing else. Hitting them where it hurt, in a way.

“So we were gonna blow it up. Thing is… our explosives weren’t that powerful. If we put them in the right places, we could take down the building, but with luck, anyone inside would have time to get out.” Sonic cleared his throat again, glancing back at the crew and then down at his feet before continuing. “Solar didn’t want that happening.”

“What…?”

“It was easy enough,” he said. “There were only two entrances aside from the main hangar door, and that was one of the explosion points. So just put a sniper trained on each door… they would never have a chance.”

Sonia stared at him. “He didn’t want you –”

“No. No, I’d already messed that up with refusing to kill the honcho,” he pointed out. “No, I didn’t have to worry about killing anyone that was still ‘alive’, as Solar put it. I got a different job. See, robotocised mobians, they don’t have the sentience to know how to save their own skins. They would’ve just been stuck in the exploding building as it collapsed on them. Doomed to be crushed by the building, or just suffocate from the smoke. Would’ve been a bad way to go, right?”

Sonia’s eyes slowly widened, and Sonic inclined his head, acknowledging her growing fear of what he was telling her.

“So it’d be a mercy to kill them first, right? To just take a pistol and shoot each of them between the eyes while the explosions went off. And besides, what kind of existence is that anyway, being robotocised? You can’t even think. It’d be better to be dead, right?” His eyes flicked again, not quite settling on anything in particular. “The worst part is that he almost got me with that line. He asked me if I’d rather be dead or robotocised, and I…” He stopped, his fist gesturing vaguely at nothing before setting on his hip. He still didn’t look at her. “That Cyborg Prison Mom set up in the palace basement, Sonia, I just can’t…” He cut himself off again, clenching his eyes shut before he apparently continued despite himself, through gritted teeth. “What choice do any of them have? It got taken away from them, and we’re just… making decisions about…”

“Sonic…” Sonia let go of the straps with one hand, but couldn’t quite bring herself to reach out. He looked somehow angry and fragile at the same time, like he’d explode if anyone touched him. “Sonic, we… I know it’s not the right thing, but… they were dangerous on their own. Some of them
were programmed to hunt down anyone who had been in the Resistance. We had to do something. But now we’re back together again, we… maybe the Sonic Underground can…”

“Yeah, maybe. Maybe,” he repeated, more quietly, and then let out a harsh breath, turning his head away. “Maybe anything is possible, right?”

“I have to believe that there’s a chance, Sonic,” she said. “I have to believe that.”

He glanced at her, then scoffed and looked away again. “Anyway. Solar didn’t believe in that chance. So to him, it was a mercy to just kill them outright. So he handed me a gun and said ‘that’s your job’. He said that I may not have to been able to save my parents, but I could save these victims. Bad play, that one,” he said, obviously trying to regain his more light-hearted, careless tone. “He’d almost had me, but that one kind’ve switched me right back. Brought me back to reality a bit. So I tell him no. I’m not doing it. He says I’m the only one who can. I’m the only one fast enough to get in, do the job, and get out without getting hurt in the blast. So I tell him it’s not getting done. He says I’m condemning them to die in the explosion, instead. He calls me heartless. Says he could understand why I wasn’t comfortable killing the living, but was shocked at how cruel I could be about robotocised mobians.”

“Oh, no,” Sonia breathed, because she could almost hear the argument herself.

“Oh, yeah. By the way, that’s the first time he mentions to me that there are flesh and blood people involved. That he’s got guys that are going to be shooting people as they run out of a burning building. I raised my objection to that there, and he tells me they deserve it. For running a clothing factory, they deserved to die.” His expression had been hardening, fractured glass barely kept in check by the constant chatter of his furious explanation, but he abruptly lifted a hand and scratched his eyeridges, hiding it away. By the time he lowered his hand again, he was once again calm, cool, and completely unreadable. He even smiled a little. “The fight kind’ve spiralled from there. I ended it. Badly, in hindsight – punching Solar in the gut and then trashing every weapon I could find while most of the camp tried to stop me maybe wasn’t the best impression to leave. But yeah.”

“Oh, Sonic,” she sighed, and he finally looked up to meet her gaze again with a smile that might have been casual if it had come after any other conversation.

“And that’s how I left the Anarchist cause. So yeah. Don’t worry about my politics on that front. Don’t think they’d even want me back if I was willing.”

For a long few moments, she could only stare at him, before she couldn’t help but weakly laugh. He was just so pointedly flippant. “I really would’ve preferred you just having an academic debate and deciding it wasn’t for you, you know?”

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, and she laughed again, then reached out and yanked him into a hug. He held her back without complaint, even returning her tight squeeze, and she sighed.

“Oh, Sonic,” she said again. “I’m so sorry he was a jerk.”

“Yes, me too.”

She grimaced over his shoulder, remembering how suspicious Sonic had always been of guys that seemed so nice to her without any apparent motivation. Stripes… wow, his whole response to Stripes was suddenly making so much painful sense. “Ugh, men suck, Sonic.”

He pulled back to give her a blank look, and she laughed.

“Well, it’s true! Even you suck sometimes,” she pointed out, lightly shoving at his shoulder before
returning her grip to the straps. She fiddled with them for a moment, then said, “Thank you for telling me. I think I understand a few more things a little better now.”

“Yeah, well…” He coughed and turned away, swinging from the straps. “Figure I make your life hard enough as it is, y’know?”

“Yeah, you do… But with this… We don’t have to tell Manic and Mother. Any of it. Not if you don’t want to. And the aristocrats and paparazzi can bite me. I’ll make it work without telling them anything.”

He looked at her sideways, brow furrowing slightly, before his lips quirked up in a smile and he nodded once. “Thanks, Sis’. You’re alright, sometimes.”

“You too,” she said, and they fell silent, just waiting out the ride together.

At a soft blip on his monitor, Tails glanced first at it, then pulled back his glove to check his communicator. Sonic’s jet had reached the hangar – he was back in the palace.

He hesitated, fighting off an urge to go find him. They hadn’t really spoken in the last couple of days, and with everything that had happened… but… at the same time… His eyes slid back to the cyan Chaos Emerald he’d found that day, and the Anarchy Beryl that was finally giving him some tangible results.

After Shadow’s dramatic little accusation, none of them had really been able to settle. Restless and irritable, Tails, Amy, and Knuckles had gone out to one of the danger spots Aleena had highlighted for them to work out some frustration. But without Sonic, Tails hadn’t really felt up to smashing bots, so he’d just sat in the back of the jeep and read over his notes on robotocisation again while Amy and Knuckles pounded their worries into tree-lobbing robots that had long since run out of trees to lop.

Tails had been ready to tear his fur out over his inability to figure out the harddrive takeover when he’d looked up and seen a tree lopper robot trying to get into the jeep. It was just one little worker robot, so Tails had made quick work of it, which turned out to be particularly weird given that when it fell apart, a Chaos Emerald dropped out of its insides.

“Huh. I found one too, the other day,” Knuckles said when Tails showed them his find. He pulled out the grey emerald to hold it near Tails’ newly acquired cyan with a concerned frown. “It was just sitting in the dirt – I didn’t even sense it, and I’m only just sensing anything with two of them together like this.”

“Wow, that’s so weird!” Amy said, leaning down over them. “They usually make such a huge impact, and they’re normally way harder to get a hold of.”

“Unless they want to be collected,” Knuckles noted, and Tails raised an eyeridge.

“You know it’s creepy when you talk about rocks like they’re sentient, right?” he asked, but Knuckles just gave him a bland look and so Tails decided to skip that disagreement. “Amy’s right, though. Normally when there’s a Chaos Emerald, there’s a lot of Chaos Energy messing with the environment. But this place is…”
They all looked around at the logging yard. There were more boring places in the world, but not many. Now that the robots were gone, it was basically just a massive field of sawdust and dead logs. Not even a bounce pad or a ring to give any sign a Chaos Emerald had been affecting it.

“I told you I’m not sensing anything from the emeralds,” Knuckles pointed out. “Are your machines picking anything up?”

“Uh… they weren’t before,” he said, and pulled out his mileselectric to double-check. He had to hold the Chaos Emerald right up close to the sensor to get so much as a faint reading. “Well, that’s not normal.”

It wasn’t normal. And it still wasn’t normal now that Tails was back in his guest suite at the palace, running tests that confirmed it was indeed a real Chaos Emerald, just putting out a ridiculously muted energy signature.

He sat back in a chair and just stared at it for a long time, wondering what was going on. Normally, if something weird was happening with the Chaos Emeralds, the best people to talk to were Knuckles or Sonic. Knuckles because he was Guardian of the thing that basically controlled all the emeralds, and Sonic because he was…

He was…

Sonic was also showing signs of muted Chaos Energy.

For reasons he wasn’t really consciously aware of, Tails had pulled out the Anarchy Beryl and looked at it. It was still the same – still a weird silver rock that somehow seemed like liquid mercury in a solid form. He hadn’t been able to get anything special out of it. It had barely any readings – he couldn’t even figure out how Eggman had been using it as a power source. It mostly seemed like a natural conduit of some kind. Energy passed through it, but it didn’t really output any itself.

Mind blank, Tails had brought the two stones in to touch one another. They’d barely made contact when, without warning, a beam of solid light shot out of the Anarchy Beryl and slammed into and through the dresser on the other side of the room. He snatched them apart, disrupting the beam as his communicator buzzed to life.

“Tails, what the hell was that?!” Knuckles demanded. “I felt that!”

“Uh… not sure yet,” he said, staring at the damage. “Gimme a couple of hours to figure it out.”

“You better not be screwing around with those robotocisor notes again –”

“Nope. Everything’s fine, Knuckles,” he said, and switched off his communicator before he could argue.

It was, he discovered as he hooked up his mileselectric and ran through some experiments, not a complete lie. Things were… fine… ish. The Anarchy Beryl was just even weirder than he’d thought. Not just a conduit, but almost… parasitic. It absorbed Chaos Energy.

He shook his head as he stared at his readouts. No wonder Sonic had claimed it felt weird. No wonder he hadn’t been able to sense it the way he could a Chaos Emerald! The Anarchy Beryl was basically a little black hole for Chaos powers! Sucking everything in and then, when it overloaded, discharging it in a refined form!

It was kind of fascinating. If his friends hadn’t been so personally attuned to Chaos, he would have even been really excited to discover it. It sucked in Chaos Energy, refined it, made it stable. Even
when the beryl exploded, the power output was concentrated and clean like one of Shadow’s Chaos Spears. Pure, perfected power.

He had to dismantle every electronic device in his, Amy’s, and Knuckles’ guest rooms to do it, but he whipped up a small Chaos Motor and hooked up the two stones, and discovered he could output a steady, reliable stream of energy. Perfectly stabilised. No spikes of energy, no immediate signs of wear, and he was already theorising different ways he could manipulate it for vehicles, weapons, and health packs. With Anarchy Beryl, he could probably make a portable medic robot that would be completely safe for even a human to use!

Chaos Healing. Like Shadow, but –

And with that thought, Tails’ excitement had died off. It was that thought that had Tails staying where he was even when he knew Sonic was back in the palace.

Tails had never bothered to really look into the science of Shadow’s existence, even if he knew the basic theory. Shadow was alive and sentient, none of them doubted that, but he was still technically an artificial creation – he’d been more built than born. And he’d been made for a specific purpose: to heal Maria Robotnik’s terminal illness. All his powers over Chaos, all his strength, all his abilities, all of that… it was all just a side effect of being designed to channel Chaos Energy to heal.


But… the original prototype of what Shadow was had been a mindless monster, kept in chains and controlled through a gigantic Chaos Trap.

A larger, less perfected version of the Chaos Trap Tails had found schematics for in this very palace.

He rubbed the back of his neck, staring through the Anarchy Beryl to the comparisons he wasn’t quite willing to make.

Gerald Robotnik had made the prototype and the Chaos Trap. He had made Shadow.

His grandson had made this palace. He’d made the Chaos Trap downstairs…

Something about that train of thought was making Tails very, very frightened.

His hand slowly slipped around to cover his mouth, not quite connecting the thoughts that were worrying his subconscious.

The Chaos Emeralds were muted. Even Knuckles couldn’t sense them when he was literally holding them in his hand. Only by bringing them into proximity with each other, where they could resonate and build power, made their power levels tangible.

So… was it the Anarchy Beryl? Was there more of it? It would explain why it was so hard to find natural Chaos deposits out here on the mainland. If Anarchy Beryl was in the ground here, sucking out the natural Chaos, then… sure. This particular Anarchy Beryl had been found in the human territories, but… if it was more common here… threaded throughout the very ground… It would certainly explain why there were no rings or Chaotic Phenomena. It wasn’t a bad theory.

Was that why he was nervous? Because his friends were so intrinsically linked to Chaos, and they were in a place that naturally drained Chaos Energy? Was he worried for them?

Knuckles hadn’t been acting weird yet. Amy could still use her hammer. On a whim, Tails pushed himself out of his chair and whipped his tails into gear so he was hovering over his experiment. Even
this close to a pure beryl, it didn’t feel like a strain.

He dropped back to the ground and slumped into his chair again, just staring at the experiment.

Why was this scaring him so badly?

The old bear had been enamoured of Power Rings, watching his flesh knit back together and fur regrow until all his wounds were little more than old scars. He’d also stared over her jet and taken another, longer look at her before holding up his hands like he needed to surrender all over again.

“I apologise for ever thinking you were one of Madame Screech’s brood, Miss Rouge. Clearly you wouldn’t be caught dead with that cheap collection of murdering thugs.”

“Oh, good line of thought, Mr Satellite. Keep that up,” she advised, and he very intelligently did, not mentioning Transylvan’s famed league of assassins, or the matriarch that ruled over them with velvet-gloved claws of rusted iron.

Instead, he told her all about himself. Satellite the Sunbear was a mercenary that had been travelling the northern kingdoms since the war. Prior to that, he’d been the supposed leader of a group of Anarchists that operated on the boarder of the Central kingdom.

“I suppose ‘supposed’ is because Anarchists don’t have leaders?” Rouge questioned, and he laughed darkly.

“You’ll find the Anarchist cause is full of little ironies like that. No, I was the supposed leader because by the end of it, my whole sleuth would’ve killed me if my son had so much as suggested it. I said the words – Solar gave the orders. I left because I didn’t like the orders and I’m no idiot.”

He then proved it by not wasting a lot of time in starting his side of the bargain, telling Rouge that he had indeed known Sonic. He and his son had stumbled across him when he was down on his luck and needed a friend. It was, he explained, right after Sonic had come back to Mobius for the first time, before he’d found his feet on mainland ground.

“It was an odd thing to experience, let me tell you,” Satellite said, shaking his head like he still couldn’t believe it. “When he was in a mood, that kid had power comin’ out his ears. Everyone knew it to look at him. None of us were surprised when we found out he was magic. And when he told me he’d gone up against four of Robotnik’s armies on the island and won each time, I believed him, no question. But the kid didn’t know what to do with himself. We pointed him at targets and he could flatten them in minutes, but he looked at the Robotnik Empire or even one robotocised mobian, and he just floundered. Didn’t know how to handle any of it.”

Once again, it hadn’t sounded like the Sonic she knew, but as Satellite continued talking, Rouge started to understand. Not because of any insight he gave, but because they were sitting beside her jet on the edge of the Dark Forest, staring out over the Transylvan expanse.

This was where Rouge had grown up.

Madame Screech had called all the bats under her command her children, and none of them questioned it. They didn’t dare. She raised them all to follow her orders. To become master thieves and assassins, to rule the whole kingdom of Transylvan from the shadows, whatever the real king
claimed. The girl Rouge no longer was had been Screech’s favourite. Sharp, smart, skilled… and absolutely terrified of her mother.

One day, on orders, they went to investigate a concert the local Resistance was hosting – the Sonic Underground on tour. They were supposed to find out whether it would be worth trying to bend them to their cause, or whether they’d just end up making an enemy of the Resistance in the end.

Ever the faithful servant, that girl had gone. She’d stood in the crowd, prepared to pick one of the band to dote and fangirl over so she could corner them and ingratiate herself, but it all fell apart once the music started. The girl had stood there, silent and staring, as songs of freedom, choice, and true friendship rushed through her like a wave.

That night, she’d realised she’d never known any of those things.

A week later she’d been in the Seelie Kingdom, hiding from everyone and everything she’d ever known as she tried to escape and find herself a new life.

Rouge didn’t consider herself the same person as that girl had been, even as she admitted the girl had been powerful in her own way. Nor did she consider the girl that had run away to be the same. Because while she ran, and for her first few days in human territories, she hadn’t been strong. She’d just been scared and alone, for the first time in her life.

She still hated being alone. The communicator on her wrist was a constant reassurance.

She’d been scared for a long few months, randomly stealing anything she considered pretty or valuable, mostly just to prove to herself she still could. And then GUN caught up with her, and made her an offer.

Become an agent, they’d said. She would be ostensibly free to do what she wanted, with missions she was within her rights to turn down without fear of reprisal. And in return, she would get… something to belong to. People to tell her what to do, where to go. Just like the Brood, only without Screech.

Oh yes. She could definitely understand why Sonic would have fallen in with a group like the Anarchists. And she wasn’t surprised to discover he’d had to learn the same things she’d discovered with GUN.

“I figure it’s a hard lesson to learn, that not everyone who says they care about you does,” Satellite said as they watched the moon pass by overhead. “It nearly crushed me. I never expected anything from his mother, but I’d raised Solar from the day she handed him over. Thought we were one of those perfect stories you hear about sometimes – a family that makes a pack. Truth is, Solar’s just really good at actin’ like he gives a damn.”

“Hm,” she said. There wasn’t much else she could say.

As the story continued, Rouge was even less surprised that it hadn’t taken Sonic long to jump ship. For all the destruction and chaos he caused, however irrational and unpredictable he could be, Sonic had some very specific and clear-cut lines he didn’t cross. The most obvious one was that if he could win a fight without killing someone, he didn’t see any particular value in finishing his opponents off. There was no need for death or even humiliation beyond a snarky comment and the shame of the loss.

The idea of seeking someone out just to kill them…

The idea of killing someone who couldn’t fight back. And then calling mercy…
Rouge was more surprised by how restrained Sonic’s response had been.

“When it was all over, and it turned out Sonic was a prince and all that, Solar got real nervous,” Satellite continued, after the story was done. “You ask me, that’s when he really lost it. No one knew what Sonic was gonna do, but Anarchists don’t exactly play nice with royalty, and given how Sonic left… well, it was a fair guess that our days were numbered. I said we should just split up. Go and make a difference as best we could in normal society. But Solar… Solar was talking plans. Kidnap, ransom… consulting with Madame Screech’s brood on assassination,” he added with a sly smile that Rouge didn’t return. “Luckily, before he could actually follow through, Sonic became the Lost Prince, and well, I’m guessing that’s where your side of our bargain starts.”

“Hm. There’s not much to tell, really,” she said mildly. “In the human territories, I started hearing about Sonic almost as soon as the war was over. He went right back to saving lives and stopping evil. Mostly small time things to start out with – saving people from natural disasters and the like. I think the first thing I heard about was when he single-handedly saved an inter-dimensional island full of mystic birds that contain enough power to generate a world-shattering doomsday robot. It took him about two days, I think. Little things like that.”

She looked at him sideways to make sure she’d gotten the gobsmacked reaction she’d been kind of hoping for, and then continued just as vaguely. “It was enough that humans decided mobians were probably worth paying attention to, which is how I got hired with the Guardian Unit of Nations. It’s a special force trained to combat terrorists, super villains, et cetera. But we always step back if we know Sonic’s involved – we’d just get in his way, after all. Like when the giant water monster Chaos destroyed an entire city and attempted to flood the whole world. I didn’t even have to leave the office,” she said lightly. “I met Sonic when the man who eventually became my partner blew up part of the moon and then proceeded to try and crash an international space station into the planet to destroy all life in the human territories. That was fun. But it does put everything I ever went through on Mobius in perspective. Its foibles are a little below my care-level these days… imagine how Sonic feels about them,” she added in a pointed deadpan, and then turned her head to look at him properly. “Or, to put it another way, as long as your murdering thug of a son doesn’t start threatening the entire planet, I don’t think he has a lot to fear from Sonic the Hedgehog.”

Satellite stared at her blankly for a few seconds, then asked, “You aren’t screwing with me, are you?”

“Not in the slightest,” she said. “The next time I dealt with Sonic, it was because one of those terrorists I mentioned built a robotic version of him which gained enough sentience to overthrow its master and try to take over the world. Almost managed it, too. I think the most interesting thing he’s done recently is save what, seven? Six? Whatever. A lot of minor planets and their entire alien race from being turned into giant batteries for an intergalactic theme park. Sounded interesting but far too much hassle, if you ask me. But heroes will hero, I suppose.”

He blinked twice. She gave him a moment to doubt, and then leaned over to smile dangerously. “However, Mr Satellite, I would add one little thing to all this. The humans are well aware of just how powerful Sonic the Hedgehog is. To be perfectly honest, he scares them more than I think he worries your little boy. By the time this festival is over, they’re also going to be aware that he’s prince of all Mobius. They’re going to have to scramble to get in the royal family’s good books, you know? So if they find out about your son and his little paranoid schemes… they might take it upon themselves to try and do something about that.”

She shifted in closer still, until their muzzles were only an inch apart. “I learned a very particular set of skills here on Mobius. I use them in my current role. And I am the nicest member of Team Dark, who will be assigned that mission.” She let her smile slowly widen, tilting her head back to look at
him from under her eyelashes. “I wonder if you’ll try and stop us, Mr Satellite.”

For a long moment, Satellite didn’t even move, just staring in silence. His expression didn’t change when he finally did speak, “I don’t care what happens to Solar. He made his bed. But my sleuth still answers to him. What do I have to do to keep them safe?”

She chuckled, then reached up to pat his cheek. “We’re going to Mobotropolis, Mr Satellite. We’re going to pick up my partner. And then we’re going to deal with your son without GUN ever knowing a thing about it.”

“You got yourself a deal, Miss Rouge,” he said, and she winked before abruptly expanding her wings and taking to the air, the easier to get in the jet.

“You best go get your whip. And be aware that all of my weapons will be targeted on you the entire trip. Let’s get moving.”

When they’d come back the night before, Sonia and Sonic had been in weird but kind of matching moods.

Manic hadn’t been sure whether to put it down to the jet lag and lack of sleep or something else, but whatever it was, he’d been surprised when they both wanted him to hang around while they ate a quick dinner and reported back to Aleena. While Sonia explained what had happened throughout the day, Sonic had stood at Manic’s side, close enough to brush his arm with every restless movement. They’d both gone to bed early, without explaining anything.

It hadn’t been a bad thing, and neither of them actually said anything beyond Sonia saying ‘it feels like a night for family’ and Sonic not arguing. But he still found himself sleeping restlessly, and wound up getting up early.

Sonic was just stepping out of his chamber at the same time Manic opened his door, and for a moment they just blinked at each other, before Sonic raised an amused eyeridge.

“Is this a sign of the end times, or have you just not slept yet?”

“Ha-ha,” he deadpanned, then paused, awkwardly glancing off to the side before gesturing vaguely. “Couldn’t sleep. But since I’m up… so, like… you and me, we haven’t had a lotta one-on-one time yet,” he said slowly. “You wanna do breakfast?”

At first, Sonic just looked at him, those too-bright eyes flicking over his face like he was looking for something. Then he grinned and the next thing Manic knew, Sonic was standing beside him and lightly punching his shoulder. “You’re not my usual type, but sure. It’s a date.”

He couldn’t help laughing as Sonic grabbed his wrist and started dragging him down the hall. “Dude, bro, do you like, always have to make it weird?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. Makes life way more interesting,” he said. “Which is also why we’re gonna raid the kitchens rather than ask anyone to get us stuff. No lettin’ the cooks see us.”

“What? Why?”
“It’s a challenge, bro! Live a little!”

Turned out, it was a challenge. A hard challenge, because Manic was out of practice, but still really fun. Sonic, he discovered and then belatedly remembered, wasn’t much for stealth in the sense of no one noticing anything, but he was really good at moving so fast that no one actually saw him swipe stuff. They just felt the strong wind of him passing and yelped when things they’d been holding were snatched away. Manic, on the other hand, took advantage of that as a distraction to grab things from the benches and tabletops before sneaking back out.

Not his best work, given that he’d needed to rely on Sonic to go unnoticed, but fun all the same. The two of them laughed as they hurried through the servant’s hallways toward the balcony Manic had met with the Palace General on yesterday.

“So what’s the score?” Sonic asked, leaning over to poke at his hip-bag. “You get anything good?”

“Bread, cheese, not really,” he said with a grin. “We’d’ve gotten way better if we’d just asked for it.”

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that?” he asked, and pulled a muffin out from behind his back with a flourish before biting into it and talking around a mouthful. “Life’s only satisfying if y’work for it!”

“Way to make something fun sound like a chore, bro,” he complained. “Stealing isn’t work.”

Sonic scoffed around the muffin but didn’t comment, immediately taking off some of the playful edge. It almost felt pointed. Manic grimaced awkwardly and tried to recover.

“So like, I dunno if you noticed yesterday, but all that singing we did? Totally transformed Mobotropolis. You’re gonna love it,” he said, and sped up into a trot. “I spent most of the morning out on the balcony. Can you believe that? There was like, real sun and fresh air and everything!”

“Yeah?” Sonic shoved the rest of the muffin in his mouth, grabbed Manic around the waist, and then ran them the rest of the way, so it was only another couple of seconds before they were stepping out into the sunlight.

It was a little weaker than yesterday, the clouds having spread out to cover more sky more thinly, but there was still a clean breeze wafting in from the east, and you could see and hear voices from the street below. Sonic’s face went weirdly blank as he looked out over it all, and Manic grinned.

“Kind of a mind-trip, huh? But totally rad. I like, completely forgot we could do this kinda stuff.” He turned and hurried over to the railing, where he could lean over and watch street merchants setting up for another day of the festival. “Like that temple we fixed up? With all the plants and whatever? And this… y’know, it’s like… this was just us playing together. Imagine what we’ll be able to do once our medallions are workin’ properly again. I bet we could clean this whole city up. Maybe we could even… I dunno, I just… the possibilities, right? Think of all the people we could help. All the stuff we can do!”

“I see it,” he said, and walked over to join Manic on the balcony. “I see it now.”

Feeling something warm and familiar swelling in his chest, Manic looked up at him with a smile to match. This was more like what he remembered. Sonic might have been more distant and harder to read than ever before, but he was still Manic’s big brother. He might have had friends Manic didn’t know about, might have had a whole life Manic hadn’t known, but he was still the same strong presence, able to just stand by Manic’s side and bolster him up just by being there.

“We can like, actually save this city, can’t we?” Manic asked softly. “We can totally do it. The three of us, working with Mother? Long as we’re together, we can do anything.”
Sonic nodded so slightly that it was almost unseen, but without looking, he reached out and slung an arm around Manic’s shoulders, leaning into his shoulder. Another moment and he closed his eyes, brow furrowing as if he had a headache, and Manic raised a concerned eyeridge.

“Bro?”

“Nothin’,” he said, and when he reopened his eyes it was with a broad grin before he abruptly yanked Manic into his hip in the same playfully rough way he’d done when they were younger. “You’re right. The possibilities are never-ending! Tell you what: you should come out to with me and Sonia today. At least to one of the two stops. We should give the medallions a try.”

“Yeah? Crashing!” Manic cheered, and then went back to looking down at the city, content to just lean against his brother’s supportive side and think of everything they could do now they were together again. “I’ll work somethin’ out with Paige and meet you in the afternoon. This is gonna be tight!”

As it turned out, meeting up with his siblings in the afternoon was… definitely going to be tight.

Paige had originally had plans for Manic’s entire day, including a tour of the markets, some grovelling to the tech team he’d forced to finish the float he should have built, joining Cyrus on a walkthrough of the newly opened palace areas, and catching up with Lord Patch to hear about some complaint he had about Trevor. All of which was news to Manic, who still hadn’t managed to find enough time to ask Amy out on a date and was really starting to get annoyed about it.

Frowning at the updated schedule Paige had thrust on him, Manic didn’t bother looking up as he stepped out of her office and started toward the hangar. He was still expected to do everything except the market tour. That had been postponed to tomorrow, which was even more frustrating since apparently tomorrow was when Sonia and Sonic were going to Sanctuary, and Manic had really wanted to be a part of that one. He wondered if he could still swing a visit in. They were going to be there for most of the day, just finishing off with an evening in Stripes’ village, so maybe he could –

“Well, keep it away from me then! I don’t like fleas, either!”

“Did you seriously just compare this thing to a blood sucking parasite?”

“Well… actually… mineral/vertebrate issue aside, it’s not the worst comparison in the world…”

“Tails, don’t encourage him. It’s a rock. It’s not going to do anything unless we make it.”

He looked up, blinking at the sight of Amy, Knuckles, and Tails walking down the hall toward him. They seemed completely oblivious to his presence, focussed on a hunk of metal Tails was holding out.

“Hey guys!” he called, and all three of them jumped, looking up and around like he’d startled them. Amy kicked Tails’ ankle and he quickly hid the rock behind his back like it was a secret. Manic raised an eyeridge but decided not to comment – he didn’t exactly enjoy dealing with Tails at the best of times, after all. “Feels like it’s been ages since I saw you! Hope you haven’t been like, bored or anything while we’ve been workin’.”

“O-oh, no, we’ve… we’ve had our own stuff,” Amy said awkwardly. “Um… how – how have you
“Busy. It’s a shame, I’ve like… been meaning to talk to you, Amy, y’know?” he said, and then hesitated, rolling his shoulders and shifting his weight as he tried to work up the courage to just ask her out. Sure, it was kind of awkward in front of the other two, but… Tails was an annoying brat, and Knuckles was a guy. He’d understand, and who the hell cared what Tails thought. Still, it…

“Um… um, so like, I um… tomorrow, I’m gonna be goin’ around the city markets, and stuff, and um… it’s like… this publicity, outreach thingy… but it should be kinda fun, too, so uh… I mean, I’ll totally get it if you don’t want to come, but uh, I was like, I was just wonderin’ if…”

All three of them were staring at him like he was an idiot. He was also becoming distinctly aware that every hallway had guards that he generally ignored most of the time, but kind of knew they had ears and eyes and were probably also judging him as an idiot. They wouldn’t say anything, but that didn’t change what they were probably thinking.

He’d asked her out once. He’d nearly kissed her. She was a beautiful, amazing, kind girl and wouldn’t laugh at him even if she turned him down. He could do this.

“D- d- d’you maybe, if you had time, tomorrow, I mean, would you maybe like, wanna like—” He needed to just stop with the likes, please. “—please? To the market? As like… as like my… Officially, I mean?”

They didn’t stop staring at him. But after a second, Tails’ eyes widened, his brow furrowing like he was offended, and when he turned to look at Amy it was downright accusing. She glanced at him sideways, then looked the other way, before she cleared her throat and spread her arms out like she was stretching them.

“That’s um… that’s real sweet of you to ask me, Manic!” Amy said. “I’d love to come with you! It would be really great to know what royal duties are like!”

“Amy!” Tails hissed, but she didn’t even try to meet his gaze.

“No, yeah, it’d be really great to talk to you,” she said, her fingers flexing as she twisted her whole body from left to right in the most adorable show of nerves. It was actually really reassuring, actually, realising that she was feeling just as awkward about this as he was. “I’d really like us to talk and… well, just get on the same page, you know?”


“Great,” she said, obviously ignoring Tails and now Knuckles staring at her.

“Crashin’. Yeah. I’ll um… see you guys. Later,” he added lamely, and then hurried on and away, grinning to himself. Success!

As he ducked past the pointedly oblivious guard, Manic heard Tails immediately start in, “Amy, what are you –”

“Tails, just shh,” she snapped back. “I need to do this.”

Manic let himself celebrate with a hidden fist pump before taking off at a light jog. First he got to hang out alone with Sonic over breakfast, and now he’d just scored himself a date. Even if the rest of the day was stupid busy, there were way worse ways to start a morning.
**Music references** (aka, how to ruin your favourite Sonic lyric-based rock song of all time): Endless Possibilities - Jaret Reddick.
Track Twenty-one: Dance to Forget

Chapter Notes

Come now, dance with me - stuck on replay

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With Tails and Knuckles neck deep in chaos theory and happily freaking each other out with the potential of a rock that could vacuum up chaos energy and spit it out, Amy had eventually decided her time was better spent elsewhere. Science was boring and she had more important problems.

Namely… what the heck she was going to say to Manic tomorrow.

She sighed, bracing her hands against the edge of the sink and staring at the mirror. It was one thing to turn down a guy—she’d had to do it more than once, this past year—but turning down a guy that was the brother of her one true love? That felt… really awkward, somehow.

God, it would be so much easier if Manic was a jerk. But he really seemed like a nice guy. If she wasn’t one hundred percent devoted to Sonic, she might have maybe entertained the idea of dating him. He seemed nice, and sweet, and he had that nervous charm thing going on, and sure, him being a thief was exciting, but that was… well… that was about it, really. It was all nice, but…

Nice wasn’t what she wanted. Not when she could have wild, and crazy, and frustrating, intoxicating…

No one was ever going to compare to Sonic. Not in her mind.

But saying that to a guy’s face… a nice guy’s face… ugh! No! She was not that mean!

“Oh, my god!” she whined, bouncing in place. “How am I gonna do this?”

A soft knocking sound made her look over at the open bathroom door to the suite beyond, and for a moment she panicked. Surely that wasn’t Manic now, right?

The knocking stopped, and she slowly crept over to peer out and over at the main door. After another few moments, she heard another knock, and then the door cracked open just enough for someone to speak through the gap.

“Amy Rose? I’m sorry for the intrusion, but I heard you were in the palace today and hoped to speak with you,” a voice called. It took her a second before she placed it as Stripes – Sonia’s supposed boyfriend. “The staff told me you were in here.”

“Oh! Um, hi, yeah, sorry!” she called back, and jumped out of the bathroom, quickly closing the door behind her and then hurrying away so it wasn’t obvious where she’d been. “Sorry, I guess I didn’t – um, come on in!”

He slowly opened the door wide enough to peek around it, and then smiled. If he wasn’t wearing those stupid sunglasses it might have been sheepishly charming. “Good afternoon, Amy. I hope you don’t mind me bothering you.”
“No, no. I mean, you’re not bothering me!” she said, and gestured for him to come in properly. “I just guess I’m surprised to see you! You haven’t been around much these last couple of days!”

Or at all. She’d mostly only seen him at meals to begin with, after the weekend he basically disappeared altogether.

“Yes, I’ve been… busy,” he said as he stepped inside and shut the door again. Only then did he pause, and then grimace and apparently correct himself. “Well, no, I’ll be honest, since that’s what I came here to be: I’ve been avoiding Sonia.”

Amy blinked. “You’ve been… avoiding Sonia? Why? I thought you two were…” She trailed off, because even though Bartleby had been a jerk and she and Tails had only spent a single day with him, she’d kind of preferred him over Stripes. But that was beside the point when Sonia was actually dating Stripes. She was so not going to get in the middle of that train wreck when she had her own on the tracks.

He smiled wryly, folding his arms behind his back. “Yes, well, that is one of the things I’ve been meaning to speak to you about. Not to state the obvious, but between the tabloids, Manic's hopeless attempts at being subtle, and your attempts at whatever it is you’re attempting, you’re clearly in line to become Mobius’s newest princess,” he pointed out. “Given my own situation, I thought we should trade notes.”

“Oh! Oh, I…” She covered her mouth with her hands, blush only intensifying. “It’s not – I mean…”

Stripes chuckled softly and swept his way across the room to the couch, where he sat down with a flick of his cape. Amy hesitated, then decided that had probably been a hint and followed after – though she took one of the armchairs instead. He kind of made her uneasy.

“It’s not that I’m… trying to become a princess,” she said slowly. “Seriously, that whole side of it seems really scary.”

“But exciting,” he said with a sly look over his sunglasses. “You don’t have to be embarrassed about it, Amy. I was the child of a minor aristocrat, and I’m now the mayor of a village that’s always been a retreat for royalty. I understand the draw of the high life!”

She winced and didn’t answer. What was she supposed to say to that? ‘Thanks, but I actually preferred the idea of marrying a penniless hero that crashes on his friend’s rooftop for naps’?

“But that’s why I thought I should talk to you,” he said. “That draw might be really attractive, and let’s be honest, so is the family, but if you chase after that blindly, you’re going to be hurt. Whether you’re going for Manic or Sonic—honestly, I can’t tell—you have to remember that they’re real people outside their crowns. And let me tell you from personal experience, being in a relationship with one of them can be… a challenge.”

She blinked slowly. “Are you and Sonia not happy together?”

“Happiness is not the point,” he said bluntly. “Anyone who’s ever told you love is overwhelming is living in a fantasy world.”

“Um,” she said, because that was kind of an affront to a solid chunk of her personal worldview.

“Sonia is a beautiful, intelligent, strong woman,” he continued. “I love her dearly, and there is a lot about her to admire. But she’s also mobian. She has her flaws, and honestly, those flaws are truly damaging to our relationship. The biggest one, which she’s never even tried to address, is that she always puts her own needs ahead of everyone else’s. The whole family’s like that, so if you’re
wanting a relationship with one of them, you’re going to have to be able to put up with it.”

Amy pulled back slightly, because… wow.

Just… wow.

“Um,” she said again. “I don’t… I don’t know Sonia, Manic, or the queen very well, but um… aren’t they heroes? They like… saved the whole world, once?”

“Of course!” he said with a laugh. “And it’s very easy to get distracted by that, but the truth is, they weren’t saving the world. They were getting back their thrones.”

Well, technically, yes, but… “Sonic left pretty much as soon as he could,” she argued, and he grinned over his sunglasses again.

“Sure. And now he’s back. All set to become the king of the people, if the media reads it right,” he observed. “Just like Manic stays out of the spotlight, but the man runs this palace. Sonia acts the perfect princess, but she’s a shrewd politician and she will tear you apart in seconds if she needs to. I don’t blame you for falling for it, but you need to realise that the down-to-earth personalities they have are a big part of the roles they play. Roles they play to maintain their power.”

For a few seconds, Amy was just stunned. She’d heard plenty of people get Sonic wrong before, but this was beyond the pale. And he was talking that way about his girlfriend. “Do you even like Sonia?”

Stripes jerked back, shocked, then burst out in startled laughter. “Oh, of course, sorry… this is all coming across really blunt! I’m not saying it right at all—”

“I’d wanna hope not!”

“—I love Sonia,” he said firmly. “I do. But this is what I’m trying to tell you: I love her in spite of a lot of problems. The Hedgehog royal family are hard work. Even to just be friends – you can ask Cyrus! I swear that half the reason he’s stuck around so long is because he gets paid to do it!”

Seriously: wow. “Friendship isn’t something you get paid to have,” she said furiously. “Loving someone is never a chore!”

“But it’s not always easy, either,” he said. “And this is what I’m trying to say, Amy. The fancy palace, the ceremony, the rock star show. They’re great consolation prizes, but they are a reward for the sacrifice we make. I understand, out in the wilds of wherever you were, Sonic probably seemed really normal and fun, and he probably made his siblings out to be exactly the same, but that’s not what they’re really like. It’s a front.”

“Ex-cuse me?” she snapped, and he held up a hand to stall her.

“They’re nice people, and like I said, I love Sonia. And I respect her brothers. But if you’re coming into this expecting a fairytale, and to live happily ever after, then you’re not going to be happy. You’re going to get hurt,” he said again, would-be kind. “I’m not trying to warn you off, but just… understand. Whatever nice things they might say, no one is ever going to matter to any of them except themselves.”

“Oh, my god,” she said, and shoved herself out of the chair to walk away, because otherwise she was going to get out her hammer.

“It’s true. And whichever Hedgehog you’re going after, you won’t matter to them either,” he said
insistently. “The fancy palace, the clothes, the respect, the beautiful—or I suppose, in your case, I
don’t know, handsome?—lover, these things come with having to put up with your lover being
selfish and inconsiderate.”

“She’s selfish,” she repeated breathlessly. Of all the words, in all the languages…

“I know it’s a little more acceptable when it’s a man,” he said, his tone softening into something
that might have been considered gentle in any other conversation, “but in a way, doesn’t that just tell you
what this family is actually like? I mean, if Sonia is willing to ignore me, who is actively courting
her… If the women in their family who profess to love love above all else can be so inconsiderate of
her lover’s feelings, then what can you expect of the men?”

Amy’s fingers stretched, but she managed to keep herself from calling on her hammer. She was
pretty sure he was trying to be nice, here. He was probably trying to say the exact same thing
Bartleby had said, it was just coming across a whole lot different.

Because he didn’t get it. He didn’t get them.

“Take what happened this week, for example. Any day of this past week, but for the sake of
argument we’ll talk about… oh, that night you cooked dinner for us all. Sonia completely brushed
me off to go and talk to that child scientist—”

“You mean my friend Tails?” she snapped, and he waved a vague hand.

“If Sonia really respected me as her partner and consort, she would have brought me along with her
to talk to him. But she practically ignored me even when I called her. If she really cared, whether it
was a business meeting or just meeting a friend of the family, she should have brought along her
consort. But she doesn’t think of me as part of the family. I’m just nice arm candy for when she
wants it.”

“You know, I was there,” she said. “I sure as heck don’t remember you even hinting at wanting to
go along with her. In fact, I don’t remember you even talking to Tails that whole night. Why would
she think you were interested in coming along?”

“It’s not about being interested –”

“Yeah, it is!” she said. “You’re putting all this blame on Sonia for not inviting you along, and I’m
guessing that’s what you’re complaining about with her being busy—y’know, working—all week
and not including you, but it’s not like you even hinted you wanted to be involved. That’s not her
being selfish, that’s her assuming you don’t want to have to deal with her work.”

Stripes smiled patiently. “That’s a very sweet way to look at it, Amy.”

“What are you talking about?! Sonia is a princess! She has work. A job that she needs to do,” she
said shortly. “You don’t get to complain about her doing that job! If you don’t think she’s paying
enough attention to you, not involving you enough, maybe it’s because you’re not trying to be
involved in what she’s doing!”

“Amy –”

“No, okay? No,” she said firmly, and pressed a hand to her chest. “I have been chasing Sonic the
Hedgehog for years. I have and will again chase him into exploding volcanoes because I want to be
involved with what he’s doing. And if he becomes king, and has to stay here, and be a ruler and all
that… that scares me a lot, but I’m still going to be here, and I’m going to help him where I can!
Because I love him. I love him more than anything in this world – I would choose him over the
Stripes sighed like she was being irrational, but even though it was a reaction she was more than used to (Sonic rolled his eyes at a lot less than that) it only fuelled her anger. He was supposed to be Sonia’s boyfriend! He needed to get this!

“I would! In a second! And yeah, I know Sonic would choose the world over me, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care about me at all! How self-absorbed would I have to be to blame him for that?!”

He just stared at her blandly for a few seconds, then swallowed and licked his lips before holding up his hand again. “I’m sure that sounds very sweet and romantic to you, Amy, but it’s not healthy. You can’t keep chasing someone who doesn’t care –”

“Of course he cares!” she snapped, and he paused, shifting his hand to push his sunglasses closer to his eyes.

“Maybe. But obviously not as much as you do. You’re obviously putting a lot of yourself into this relationship and he isn’t putting anything. That’s not what a relationship is supposed to be.”

“Says you,” she said, folding her arms with a huff. “You just don’t get it.”

“Amy, relationships are about give and take. It’s supposed to be an equal footing, otherwise one person becomes subservient to the other! That’s not a healthy way to be!”

“He’d just be…he’d be…”

He’d be bored. He’d be boring. He’d be angry and useless and…

…and he knew that. He knew what he’d be like if he couldn’t do what he did. What he’d be like if he became a king.

Oh, god, that idiot. No wonder he was trying to push her toward Manic. No wonder he’d struggled to look at her after that day in court.

But that only made her more irritated with what Stripes was trying to say. Sonic didn’t care about her, ha! She went back to glaring at her current opponent.

“Know what Sonic’s like, and that’s why I’ll always chase him! Because I love everything he is, and I want to be a part of it! I want to see the world, I want to help people, I want to stop evil. We want the same things! We just prioritise them a little differently!” she pointed out, and then leaned back to scowl at Stripes properly. “You obviously don’t have that. Sonia wants to help her kingdom, and I bet it would be royalty or not. You want to be royalty, without all the hard work and effort that goes into it! So obviously you don’t get her, and that means you won’t get her. You don’t deserve her!”

“Hold on a minute,” Stripes said, shoving himself to his feet. “You don’t even know me –”
“And you don’t know me, or Sonic, or probably even Manic, but you still came in and started lecturing me about how I should love them!” she said furiously. “Sonic gives himself to the whole world, and he always will, so I know that if I want him—and I want him more than anything—I have to take him. If you really cared about Sonia the way you say you do, you’d be doing the same thing! You would be going out with her, talking to the people she talks to, and if she didn’t ask you along, you’d go on your own! How dare – how dare you stand here and talk about her not putting in the effort when you won’t even do it yourself?!”

“Hey! I’m trying to help you!” he snapped, but she stomped her foot again, fists clenched and held away from her body so she wouldn’t be tempted to use them.

“You’re trying to get sympathy!” she yelled. “Oh, poor me, my girlfriend won’t drop everything to make me feel secure! Have you even once talked to her about how you feel? Huh?”

“I shouldn’t have to,” he said. “And neither should you. If they gave the slightest –”

“If you really gave the slightest flying fig you would’ve said something!” she said. “If this relationship actually mattered to you, you’d fight to make it work. But you don’t and you aren’t, you just want all the benefits and none of the pain!”

“You’re delusional,” he said. “You know that? Making up some fantasy relationship when he doesn’t care about you at all. You’re just plain nuts.”

“Maybe I am! But it’s what I want!” she snapped back. “And I will always fight for what I want.”

Apparently lost for any response, Stripes just stared at her, his expression openly disdainful. Amy met it straight-on, angry and irritable but knowing full well that to look away now would be to give up the argument. And this was an argument she would never, in her whole life, allow herself to lose.

“Since you obviously need other people to give you everything, I’ll give you one more piece of advice. The door is behind you,” she said bluntly. “You pull it open and walk out.”

For a few seconds, Stripes just continued staring, before he suddenly scoffed and turned away. “Crazy witch.”

“Entitled jerk,” she snapped back. “Don’t let that stupid cape get stuck in the door.”

He glared at her over his shoulder, but he did leave, slamming the door so hard that the plaster around the door visibly shook. But she didn’t care. He was gone.

She huffed again and refolded her arms, only to almost immediately pull them apart so she could get to her communicator. “Tails!”

“Uh, yeah, Amy, we’re kind of busy –”

“I don’t care. I need to hit something,” she said. “You can keep freaking out about lame science after you take me somewhere that has robots to smash.”

There was a long pause before he spoke again, sounding appropriately careful, “Uh, sure, Amy. Come back to my room and we’ll um… we’ll find you something.”

“Good,” she snapped, and slapped off the communicator. Her hammer needed a workout.
It had been a long morning in Alles. Politics were not Sonic’s jam.

“Two down, four more kingdoms to go,” Sonia said cheerfully as she dropped into the seat beside him. “I think that went pretty well though, don’t you?”

“What part of that went ‘well’, to you?” he asked incredulously, and she grinned.

The Allesians were… deceptively simple people. It was kind of like dealing with Rouge, actually. They dressed everything up in expensive and beautiful scenery and gave you five seconds to look away before whatever it was they were hiding tried to eat you alive. Heck, their Prime Minister was a leopard who wore a feathered cloak, a fish-scale breastplate, and a look that just dared people to ask about them. Sonic didn’t think he could be blamed for asking where the mink-fur muff was.

“I am sure I have no idea what you mean,” she replied smoothly, even as her smile widened dangerously.

“Yeah, probably too warm for it, huh?” he asked. “You know, I hear dinosaur leather’s all the rage if you can catch it. But they don’t really suit the look you’re going for, huh?”

She paused, then gave Sonia a sidelong look. “I was not aware our Lost Prince had such an eye for fashion, your highness.”

“Isn’t he just full of surprises?” she asked brightly. “It turns out he has an eye for all sorts of things! Can’t get a thing past him!”

“C’est… magnifique.”

Sonic twitched and looked over to where Renee was trying not to wince. Weren’t politicians at least supposed to be good at hiding their scorn? “Ouais, je suis génial.”

Sonia blinked, then folded her arms behind her back and fixed the Prime Minister with a very particular and broad smile. “And an ear for things too! But enough about us. Let’s get down to business, shall we? I was hoping we could talk about your exports to the Central Kingdom.”

As Sonia swept the Prime Minister off to talk economics, Renee wandered up alongside Sonic with raised eyebrows. “I do not remember you speaking Allesian last time you were here, Sonic Hedgehog.”

“I don’t speak Allesian,” he said dryly. “I know enough of pretty much any language to get a date and a chilli dog. Usually not in that order. What’s her deal?”

“Without wasting an hour to explain all of it, I do not think she was expecting you to address her uh… interesting choice of wardrobe today,” she said. “Despite all my warnings, Madame Prime Minister was quite convinced you are uh… a fast pair of feet and a handsome smile.”

“She should’ve tried leading with that, then,” he pointed out. “Flattery gets you everywhere.”

She chuckled, gesturing for him to follow her toward the door. “It is one thing to notice a predator, my friend,” she said playfully. “It is an entirely different thing to imply they only go after the easy catch.”

“Please. Dinosaurs are easy,” he said with a flick of his hand. “You just gotta watch the teeth and stay out of their way when they’re charging.”
Renee laughed. “You are a political minefield, Sonic Hedgehog! Come. Let Sonia talk her economy. We shall lay charges amongst the Allesian elite!”

‘Laying charges’ apparently meant going to find some very specific people, and all of them had the same polite but not-so-subtly aggressive attitude as the Prime Minister. Most of them were business tycoons or old army—people who would have gotten through the war without their lives changing too much—and it was pretty obvious that even the military types expected him to be a bit more of a dumb soldier than he’d even been back in the day. They were all caught off-guard when Renee told him what they did outside of politics and he expressed even the slightest hint of interest.

“I… confess I wasn’t expecting you to know much about gold trading, votre majeste,” one of them said delicately.

“Oh, I don’t.” he said. “But, y’know, I mean, business is business, right? You got a product, you gotta sell it. And I mean it’s gold. You get it outta the ground and make it all pretty before you sell it. I didn’t figure Alles was much of a mine site, so I was just wonderin’ where you got it all from.”

“Well, now you mention it, we do have several mines out in the country. We have to fight the wine-makers for the land, though – they claim our work disrupts their soil.”

“For obvious reasons. You use robots to mine or what?”

“Ah, yes, uh…”

Renee almost looked smug as she stepped into the conversation again. “Monsieur Ferronnerie has been going through quite the struggle with his labour force these last two years. His company skirted around the robotic revolution.”

Sonic glanced at her, then back at the suddenly far more nervous politician. “That’s… cool. So what, you kept up a mobian workforce?”

“Not for over a decade,” Renee said mildly. “They require such high salaries in return for the dangerous conditions they work in. Roboticised people, they are much less problematic, non, Monsieur Ferronnerie?”

Sonic made sure not to react, though he did level the aristocrat with a slightly more direct look. He swallowed hard in response.

“Oh, well, yes, but obviously I only bought them to appear a willing member of the tyrant’s regime,” he said quickly. “The moment he was deposed, I of course began implementing strategies to restructure my workforce.”

“Implementing strategies?” Sonic repeated. “That doesn’t exactly sound like you gave ’em up the second you could, if you catch my drift.”

“Ah,” he said again, and shifted his weight back without actually answering the question.

Nothing came of any of those kind of conversations – it wasn’t like Sonic could have done anything. But they were all like that. Renee seemed to enjoy them in her angry, twisted way, but mostly they all just left Sonic tired, cranky, and hating people a little bit. Sonia rejoined them just as he was about to snap at a woman complaining about how artists demeaned the city by selling their wares on the streets, so he honestly didn’t know what she was so pleased about now.

Still, it was done. He could only hope that the next four kingdoms weren’t going to be so stupid.
“Alles was never going to be easy,” Sonia pointed out to him as their jet shot into the sky. “It’s been a bit of a pain in our side for years. Because their main source of income has always catered to the aristocrats, they barely had to change when Robotnik took over. It was just that the labour force that changed. Us coming in and outlawing robotocised mobians was actually more of a blow to their economy than Robotnik was to their freedom.”

He frowned. “That’s a real sunny picture of Robuttnik and all, but I don’t give a flying flip about the economy if the alternative is robotocised mobians still bein’ enslaved. I got the impression they didn’t give up the workforce so easy.”

“They really didn’t,” she said. “To the point that we’re mostly convinced there are still operations using robotocised mobians that we just don’t know about. After all, whole families—whole communities—were robotocised, other people died for resisting… there are probably dozens, maybe even hundreds of people that were robotocised and have never been identified. We have no way to know.”

“This sucks,” Sonic said, kicking the seat in front of him, and Sonia nodded.

“Yeah, it does. But with the right leadership, I honestly think we’ll be able to root them out and fix things.”

He slouched a little further down, folding his arms over his torso and scowling at the seat in front. “Great. And then what do we do with them? Put them offline, remove their weapons, lock them up in the basement?” he snapped. “That ain’t fixin’ anything.”

She glanced at him, her smile fading, before her eyes flicked down to her notes and then further away, and she shifted uncomfortably. “Once the festival is over, maybe… all four of us can go and see the Oracle of Delphius. He might have a solution.”

“Sonia, if the Orc knew anything, he would’ve told us. He would’ve said something before I ran out,” he said irritably. “He’s a cryptic creep, but he don’t keep secrets when they matter. And this matters. This…” He stopped himself and turned his head away, knowing it wasn’t Sonia he was angry with. It wasn’t even the Allesian aristocrats, or Eggman, or anyone.

Except maybe himself.

He knew why he’d left Mobius. He didn’t regret it. And even if he did, the things he’d done on the islands and the human territories were so much bigger than all of this… this stuff. It had been the right thing to do.

But one stupid night of singing had cleaned half of Robotropolis of the toxic gunk that coated it. One half-baked rant in court had problem aristocrats scrambling for cover. One awkward conversation with Sonia had…

All those weeks he spent lounging under trees and sleeping in flower beds, while robotocised mobians were tortured for the safety of everyone else. While idiot politicians and shady business deals kept a million good people poor, downtrodden, and weak. While Mobius itself rotted under thirteen years of pollution that he could have helped clear up in what… two weeks? At the outside?

All because he couldn’t handle sticking around a little longer.

It sucked. He sucked.

“We gotta do something,” he said furiously. “I’m sick of hearing about this stuff. I’m sick of knowing it’s going on. We gotta fix this.”
“I’m not arguing, but if this was an easy job we would have done something already,” Sonia said bluntly. “Diplomacy takes time, Sonic.”

“To heck with diplomacy,” he snapped. “Politics aren’t going to help those people we’ve got locked up in the basement and it sure as shellfish ain’t gonna help people still enslaved in a mine.”

“No, but… Sonic, even all three of us together at our most powerful couldn’t reverse robotocisation,” she said slowly. “We couldn’t even free someone’s mind for more than a few minutes.”

“The three of us. There are four of us,” he said. “Four of us who basically tore down an empire in one night. Who cleaned up half a city in another, without even tryin’.”

Sonia frowned, obviously not following, and Sonic sat up in his chair, clutching his medallion while the other hand flicked out to knock against hers. “We got the magic to change the whole freakin’ world, Sonia. The four of us together. It’s about time we proved it.”

Watching members of the palace was far less enlightening than Shadow had hoped, and Aleena was turning out to be the worst of all of them.

The Palace General had been frustrating, if only because they were so very… professional. They’d been entirely focussed on their (mostly administrative) work. Meetings, orders, documents… and when he’d looked at those documents, it was to find most of them were memos or employment contracts about their staff. Even Manic had done very little but discuss very boring plans for city or palace rehabilitation.

The Palace Guard were more interesting on a technical level, but only because it was intriguing to see how Mobians trained for war. As Rouge had pointed out, they used a lot of guerrilla tactics, mixed in with hours of routine and ceremony. The Emergency Response Unit forwent the ceremony to instead focus on efficiency and thoroughness, but aside from some vaguely intriguing grumbling (if he had felt so inclined, he could tell it would be fairly easy to draw divides between the working and higher classes to split the empire), it hadn’t been enlightening.

For all that they focussed on Sonic when he was present, none of the leaders of the country mentioned him when he wasn’t. None of them gave any insight into his powers and abilities, or what they could do when used.

So after lunch, he had turned his attention to the queen, and she was as useless as her chambers and documents had been. She simply sat in her office, working through a pile of legal documents that seemed to mostly involve land disputes. Apparently there was a standoff between some country named Alles and another called Transylvan. Again, if he had been so inclined, Shadow knew he probably should have paid more attention to the empire’s geographical makeup, because that probably would have been useful intel in case of war.

As it was, it was just more useless information that he didn’t need.

Not that he was entirely sure what information he did need. Or why. He didn’t care about any of this. He didn’t care about Sonic. Didn’t care about his chaos being manipulated and used. Why would he give even the slightest damn if it kept that blue hedgehog away from him and his?

And yet, he remained where he was. Just watching. Waiting.
So he noticed when Aleena’s pen stopped moving, and she raised her head to stare at nothing. He narrowed his eyes, even drawing back as he felt something foreign and powerful sweep past him, making his quills bristle slightly on instinct. But Aleena didn’t say anything or turn to look at the duct he was hiding in. She just continued watching empty air for a minute before abruptly standing. She very obviously pressed a hand to her chest, and then nodded once.

“And so we shall, my son,” she murmured, and began striding for the door.

Shadow leaned forward to watch her leave, and then hesitated, wondering what the wave of power had been, before immediately twisting around to leave the ducts and try to find her again. This finally felt important.

The country was bounded by rocky mountains that were too high to let any sea air through, so it was a land of rock and sand, only kept alive by the massive river that cut through it. Sonic had only been to Tashistan once, and honestly he didn’t remember much about it beyond the vague fact that Sonia had lost her memory there.

He didn’t know the diplomat here, and so begged off getting any kind of tour while Sonia spoke to the local king or shah or sultan or whatever they had. After the morning he’d had, he wasn’t in any mood to play nice before Manic showed up.

Instead, he headed out onto the streets and into the festival they had set up. It was a lot more vibrant and lively than the Mobotropolis version.

Despite himself, as Sonic trotted through the crowds, all but ignored by everyone but the shouting merchants—each one insisting he was clearly a man of refined taste and surely the only one who could appreciate the quality of their products… if you ignored the last person they’d noticed, and the next one too—and surrounded by light, colour, and the smell of good food, he had to smile. This was life. This was how things were supposed to be.

But where there was city life, there were thieves. Sonic paused to watch a guy in wide pants and a hood shuffling through the crowd, occasionally bumping into people with profuse apologies and blaming his ‘bad leg’. After at least four separate accidents, Sonic casually moved over to walk alongside him, pretending not to notice the guy stiffen.

“Need a hand? You seem to be havin’ real trouble walkin’,” he noted.

“O-oh, th-thank you, kind sir, but no, I am fine.” His voice was young. Way too young to be pulling the old beggar scam. Sonic had to appreciate someone who worked outside the box.

“Nah, s’no worry at all. I can tell how hard this whole thing must be for you. What with a bad leg, this hot weather, all those wallets you’re helping people get rid of…”

The guy peeked at him from under the hood, and Sonic gave him a mild smile in return.

“They’ve gotta be gettin’ hard to carry, am I right?”

His back slowly straightened out of his hunch, and his next steps were less of a shuffle than a stride.

“Are you going to arrest me?”
“Hadn’t planned on it. But I’d give up while the gettin’ is good, if I were you. Maybe find a new kind of employment, huh?”

He paused, eyes narrowing slightly, before he grinned. “You have changed, I must say.”

Sonic blinked, and the guy pointed toward an alley across the road. “Let us talk in private, yes? As you say, this heat and my bad legs don’t exactly lend themselves to crowds.”

Sonic hesitated, then nodded and followed him over. Once they were hidden in the heavy shadow between the two buildings, the thief pulled back his hood to show he was a desert wolf that seemed… vaguely familiar. Sonic raised an eyeridge and shifted his weight back on one leg as if that would help him see better.

“Do we know each other, guy?”

“Not well, though I like to think I was a friend to your sister once,” he said. “My name is Raphie. I helped Sonia when she could not remember her name. I do not begrudge it, but in a way, the act cost me my legs.”

“Huh?”

He smiled and lifted the hem of his trousers to show rotobocised feet and ankles. Sonic blinked again as the memory slowly returned.

“Ohh… yeah. Sorry, man, I don’t usually forget people,” he said, and extended a hand. “No way I could have ever thanked you enough for what you did back then.”

“Just as I and the others of our kingdom could never thank your family for what you did for us,” Raphie replied, and he clasped Sonic’s offered hand with a warm smile. “I confess I am surprised you are not forcing me to return what I have earned this day.”

“Egh. Like my bro used to say: it’s a game. You take what you can and we try to stop you. I ain’t gonna begrudge you winnin’ a round,” he said, smirking. “Not these days, anyway. We’ll see if I grow outta the phase. But seriously, man – last I saw you, you were joinin’ the Resistance and makin’ a name for yourself. What’re you doin’ working the streets?”

Again, Raphie lifted his trousers like that was an answer, and Sonic tilted his head in confusion. He wasn’t following. After a moment, Raphie sighed and gestured to the far end of the alley. “Do you have time to take a walk with me? If you are in truth confused why I cannot work in my state, then I think there is something you need to see.”

“Yeah?” he asked warily, and Raphie nodded once.

“Yes. Come.”

The backstreets were a lot quieter than the main ones, with only a few scruffy-looking people lingering in doorways to watch them pass. As they hurried through them, slipping between buildings and shadows on a path to the west of the castle, Raphie tried to explain.

“You probably remember that Robotnik struggled with Tashistan toward the end of the war. There were many in the resistance, particularly here in the capital. Once you had taken back Mobotropolis, we were easily able to defeat those who remained loyal to the tyrant and take back our kingdom,” he said quietly. “But that rebellion was borne of anger and fear. Fear which did not fade once our oppressors were gone. It merely turned on the robots that plagued our land.”
"How d'you mean?"

"All robots were ordered destroyed. They were torn apart and melted down in grand ceremonies, held once a week in the grand square," he said. "Even those who did no harm, those who simply worked menial jobs. Destroyed. It was a good thing – it created many jobs for those of us who had never been educated, who had no skills or family to support us. But the ceremonies were violent. I am not ashamed to say I was frightened."

Sonic’s eyes dropped toward Raphie’s hidden legs. "All those bolts and metal plates burning must’ve hit pretty close to home, huh?"

He smiled humourlessly. “It was a hint of what was to come. When they were no more robots, there were still the robotocised. The ones without sentence, they were easy to deal with. They had been locked up. Taken offline. But those of us who simply wear the scars of that regime… we are not so easily hidden, yes?"

“Oh for…” Sonic tried not to glare, since Raphie wasn’t at all to blame for any of this. “People have a problem with you having robot legs?! You got hurt by the war, that sucks! But it doesn’t mean anything! It’s not like you turned evil.”

“No. And before the end of the war, I even thanked these legs for the speed and strength they gave me,” he agreed. “Even now – I do not have education, I do not have cleverness. But I had thought I would be very good at some of the work that is available. My legs do not tire, and I can move very quickly. But they also remind people of the things done to us. I do understand why my kingdom would prefer not to remember those times. Many days pass where I too resent what I cannot run from.”

Sonic scoffed but didn’t otherwise comment, and Raphie tilted his head, still smiling vaguely.

They walked for another minute or so in silence, before they finally reached the mouth of an especially dark alley. Raphie stepped up to the corner of it so he could peek sideways around the corner without making it obvious, but Sonic didn’t bother with subtlety. He folded his arms and stood rock-solid as he stared down at the two guards stationed in front of a heavily bolted door at the other end of the alley. They both straightened at what had to be a perfectly visible silhouette, but Sonic didn’t move.

“We goin’ in there?” he asked Raphie, and he grimaced.

“Yes. I had hoped to sneak around the side, but –”

“Why bother? There’s a door right there,” he pointed out, and then surged forward.

In the back of his mind, Sonic knew that normally he would’ve at least tried talking to the guards before resorting to force. Being snarky casual against aggression was kind of his thing. But after the morning he’d had, the ache in his bones and the vague pressure in his head that hadn’t gone away in days, and what he strongly suspected was behind the door, he didn’t feel any particular need to play nice. He was at the end of the alley before the guards could even flinch, dropped the first with a solid kick to the gut and the second with a back-handed strike to his temple. Even with the helmets and armour they were bother wearing, hits at a hundred miles an hour had the second guard immediately out cold while the first may as well have been. Gasping for breath, he could only watch, wide-eyed, as Sonic carelessly searched their pockets and came up with a keycard and ring of keys before Raphie had even started trotting down the alley.

“That was… more direct than I was expecting,” he said with a laugh, and Sonic grunted as he started
trying to match keys to the door lock. Raphie leaned over to point out the right ones, then glanced down at the twitching but still technically awake guard. “There is also an electronic lock inside that requires a code. It would have been better to keep a guard in condition to speak.”

“Long as it’s not made of diamond or emerald, I really don’t care,” Sonic said bluntly. “This is a robotic prison, right?”

“It is, yes.” His eyes narrowed slightly. “I had hoped you did not know places such as these existed.”

“Yeah, I know about ’em. There’s one in the palace,” he said, and finished unlocking the door to yank it open and stride inside. “But like you said: this is somethin’ I gotta see.”

Sure enough, there was another locked door, this one sealed with a card and code combination lock. He flicked the card he’d found over his shoulder and gestured for Raphie to step back. There was no point without the code. He leapt up into a rapid spin and threw himself at the door.

Again, normally, he would have just homing attacked until it broke. But just like at the library, on the first strike he felt his spines cut instead of slam, so he went with it. It was a technique he’d all but forgotten how to use, defying gravity through the friction of his spines sawing through metal like so much butter. It was easy to fall back into the old skill: a straight cut, right down the middle, and then end with a solid kick to the very centre of the door that made the two halves split and then crash open.

Sonic dropped back to the floor and was walking through before the doors had even hit ground. But the moment he was inside, he felt everything around him slow down, his eyes drifting over hints and clues that told him a lot of things he didn’t want to know.

It wasn’t as bad as the palace prison. There was no rotting flesh, because… there was no flesh. Everyone in here was fully robotocised, armoured plating covering every inch of their bodies.

No beeping heartbeats, no bloody cloths. Just line after line of robotocised mobians bolted to the floor, hooked into nutrient drips that almost looked like power cables.

Most of them couldn’t move their heads, but the ones closest to the door looked at him with their expressionless eyes.

He met each blank gaze with his own, fists curling uselessly by his side, as Raphie stepped up beside him.

“Pretty lucky that they’re all robotic,” Sonic said quietly. “Makes things nice and clean.”

“That is no coincidence,” Raphie murmured. “It was considered a mercy.”

“A mercy,” he repeated breathlessly, but Raphie didn’t know the memories he was dredging up and so continued.

“For both those who had to see, and those who were destroyed,” he explained, his voice steady despite how quiet he’d become. “You see, I can hide my legs. And I have kept my mind. But the argument that was had on behalf of those who did not was that—”

“—it’s better to die than live as a half-robotic slave,” Sonic finished. “So why’d these guys survive?”

“The bullets could not penetrate the metal of the first they tried to destroy,” he said. “And lasers just bounced off. And when they tried to take one apart… It seems that despite the plating, there is still flesh inside, and even robotocised, the man screamed. I have never forgotten that scream.”
Sonic swallowed. He remembered. “So they gave up, huh?”

“Yes.”

He quietly nodded, looking back around at the robotocised mobians around him. He could feel something vibrating, and the pressure in his head was becoming almost unbearable. He almost compulsively grabbed at his medallion, rubbing his thumb over the back of it to try and distract himself from whatever it was going on inside him.

“I do not expect miracles from you,” Raphie continued. “But I wanted – I needed to know that Sonia does not know of the things done here. I wanted to know that she does not agree with this. My people… we are so much happier, and better off, but these people… and the people that are gone now…”

Sonic could barely separate his clenched teeth to admit, “None of this should ever be forgotten.”

For some reason, Shadow had expected to track Aleena down to the Chaos Trap, but he instead caught up to her on the stairs leading to the battery zone. There was nowhere to really hide, but Aleena only glanced back at him, acknowledging his presence, before continuing on in silence. She didn’t otherwise pause, even when they reached the final floor and began walking toward the robotic prison.

The door to the maintenance cupboard slammed open, and a frazzled-looking pig practically fell out. “Your majesty! I didn’t – I had no idea you were visiting, I would’ve –”

“My dear Hamlin,” she said quietly, still focussed and walking toward the door at the end of the hall, “if you would be so kind as to summon Master Magicae and Doctor Cratis? Please tell Doctor Cratis we will require all of his staff at their earliest convenience.”

Shadow frowned, exchanging glances with the pig, but that was as far as any demand for explanation went, as the pig merely bowed and moved to head back inside before he noticed Aleena reaching for the door.

“Your majesty, please – I – the lab is not… I mean…”

“We will thank you not to try and tell your queen where she may and may not go,” she said, and flicked her wrist. In what was the first display of legitimate magic Shadow had seen her use, the door’s massive lock slid open all on its own, and the portal opened, washing them all in a wave of rotten air from the sickness inside.

Hamlin hesitated, but then bowed again and hurried back into his office As Aleena strode into the prison, Shadow could hear the pig calling someone, probably obeying orders. Unconcerned by the subservience, Shadow instead followed to watch Aleena carefully move between the tables until she reached the centre of the room.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he side-stepped beside the door.

“With all due respect, Agent Shadow, you are allowed here as a courtesy,” she said. “Do not question this.”
“I’ll question a lot of things when I need answers,” he said, but otherwise only turned his body defensively as he settled in to wait.

Ignoring him, Aleena closed her eyes and slowly lifted her arms, hands trailing until they were hanging in front of the amethyst-looking jewel on her torso. As Shadow watched, it began to glow, and then shine, and from somewhere beyond his hearing, Shadow became aware of a strumming guitar and… maybe a piano, he wasn’t sure. It was a rocking beat, and although her hands remained steady in front of the now shining jewel, Aleena began to rock her weight back and forth in time with it.

Shadow’s fur prickled, the rings on his wrists burned, and he clenched his teeth against a pull on his chaos. Not that he had to fight very hard – whatever the power was, Aleena wasn’t looking for his energy. So as much as he felt suddenly inclined to fight back, he stayed where he was and watched with narrowed eyes as her power slowly built up into something both visible and audible. The now almost familiar power of the Sonic Underground’s music began to surge.

“It seems like a lifetime ago,” she began singing softly, “that I felt the warm sunshine’s glow. No, it doesn’t reach down below; shadows become my light, here where the monsters hide.”

In the Tashistan Palace, Sonia had literally been in the middle of a sentence when a sudden wave of power lashed over her, and she gasped at a sudden burn against her collarbone. She slapped her hand against her medallion, and the shah blinked at her.

“Princess Sonia? Is everything…” He trailed off as music began rising up from nowhere, and he, along with Sonia, his wives, and the servants around them, all looked up.

Sonia swallowed. She wasn’t feeling any urges—no need from the deepest depths of her heart to join in—but she could feel the power and pain of it.

“I think something very important is happening,” she breathed, and slowly stood up.

Unable to stop himself or concentrate, Sonic snapped the cord on his medallion, lifting it up near his head as he sang along with the sudden music in his soul.

“I hate these metal bones. The bones and gears creak in my chest – my chest forever cold, a cold and maddening descent.” He moved further into the room as he sang, ignoring Raphie's nervous calls for his attention to instead listen to the soft soprano he was singing along to. “I danced to forget!”

Manic had been saying goodbye to the technicians when he had to grab at his medallion, holding it
off his chest like that would stop the sudden burn of power. Without thinking, his head jerked around so he could look at the floor, as if he could see through it to where he somehow knew the power was coming from.

“What… what is…”

Everyone in the hangar slowly turned toward the open door, many moving toward it as if they would be able to see the source of the music and magic they could all feel. But Manic kept staring at the floor. There was real power coming from somewhere down there. Something strong, dangerous, and terrifying in its rawness.

“Mother,” he whispered, and started running for the stairs.

Aleena twirled in place, forming a one-person waltz to the music that was nearly deafening around Shadow’s flicked back ears. The crystal on her torso was almost shining too brightly to look at, but Shadow had already backed up against the wall and he wasn’t willing to look away. Not when something so obviously… something was happening.

Aleena was drawing on Chaos power to fuel this strange song of hers. Obviously it was Sonic’s energy she was stealing, wherever he was, but…

The output felt so familiar.

Like something he was supposed to have done once. It felt like home.

Fighting off mental images of the girl he’d never saved, Shadow grabbed his rings with both hands and hunched, watching the dance continue.

Raphie, on the other hand, found himself unable to help looking away as Sonic ground his knuckles into his temples, his voice almost croaking as he continued to sing.

“This is my penitentiary. Fractured apart from the world where I want to be…! Lock the door, throw away the key, then let my dance resume… down here in this pitch black room!” He lashed out with one leg, heel slamming down on a lock that snapped under the force to release a robotocised arm.

“Normal is just a dream for all the ghosts like these!”

He could hear his mother. He could almost see her in his mind’s eye, reaching out across the distance between them. Some part of him knew he shouldn’t reach back, but also that it was too late. And besides… he’d been selfish for long enough. He spun and kicked another lock open before extending his hand out toward her as they sang their chorus together.

“I hate these metal bones, the bones and gears creak in my chest!”

Thirty months. Almost three years, he’d let these people—his people—down. He’d left them to struggle alone against fear and anger and…! These robotocised people had been hurt and killed and
tortured because he…!

Maybe – maybe those three years had needed to happen. Maybe he’d needed to go out and build up his power. Maybe he’d needed to learn more about Chaos. Maybe, maybe, maybe, but who the hell knew for sure?

“Come now, dance with me,” Aleena called, “as the song plays.”

“Come now, dance with me,” he replied. “Stuck on replay.”

Maybe he and Aleena could have done this three years ago if they’d really tried.

Maybe they both could have stopped any of this from happening if they had just tried harder.

Despite the distance, they danced together, moving between tables and damaged people that slowly, one by one, began to open their eyes and breathe again. From the corner of his eyes, Sonic could see lights flickering, and hear the soft beeps of hard drives coming back online, but his focus stayed on the dance he and Aleena had been doing for too long, until the music faded away, and they stood alone, just staring at each other.

“I hate my metal bones,” he murmured, and she nodded.

“The bones and gears creak in my chest. My chest forever cold—”

“—a cold and maddening descent,” he admitted. “Descending down so far—”

“—fall farther ’til there’s nothing left.”

“We’re left here in the dark, the dark.”

They paused, and then sang the last together, “We’ll dance to forget.”

And then, as the last lights flickered to life, the spell faded, and Sonic dropped to his knees.

“Son-” was all he heard before blackness covered his vision.

Back in Mobotropolis, Aleena stumbled and fell against the nearest table, but managed to keep herself upright with effort. The light from the crystal faded, and without any further warning, the now awake and aware robotocised mobians began to scream.

Chapter End Notes

Music references:

Dance to Forget - Unplugged - TryHardNinja (yes, I do recognise the irony in a fanfic referencing a fan-song about Five Nights at Freddy's completely out of context. I do not care.) The chapter title is probably the original version, though.
The way I loved you - Taylor Swift
It felt a little melodramatic to think it, but the screaming was like fingers digging into Manic’s very soul.

He’d made it most of the way to the basement stairs before the song ended, and met Amy, Knuckles, and Tails just as he stumbled into the servants’ hallway that led to them. Knuckles hadn’t even looked at him, just charged straight past, and the other two hadn’t paused for much longer.

“Something feels very wrong to Knuckles,” Amy explained as they rushed after him. To Manic’s horror, Knuckles hadn’t bothered with the stairs, just vaulted the railing and dropped down several stories of stairwell, and Tails used his tails like a rotor and flew after him the way he’d been doing when they first met. Amy had to grab Manic’s wrist to keep him moving as they ran down the stairs like normal people. “And honestly, that song… even to me and Tails, it… it didn’t feel like normal magic or chaos or anything.”

“It was pretty powerful magic,” Manic agreed. While it was going, the power of Aleena and Sonic’s combined song was like a huge, spiky wave of energy, pulsing in and out in a rhythmic beat he couldn’t quite catch up to, despite the music’s tempo. His medallion still felt like it was on fire, and his hands were throbbing like he’d been using his drums for too long. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. But I know it came from Mother. And I think Sonic’s involved too.”

“Definitely,” she said, but anything more was cut off as the quiet of the basement was broken with those ear-splitting screams. The two of them stumbled to a halt, shocked, but only long enough to exchange glances before picking up their pace again.

Manic didn’t often come to the Cyborg Prison. He hated that it existed. But that was where the screaming was coming from, and when they got there, it was to find Aleena in the middle of it all, looking exhausted but triumphant. Knuckles was visibly restraining himself from grabbing her.

“What did you do?!’ he yelled, barely audible over the pained screams. “What did you do to these people?!”

“Oh, my god,” Amy breathed, hands over her mouth as she stared around.

Manic followed her gaze. Row after row, tables and beds and cages filled with poor robotocised people that had been de-weaponised and made safe. But those de-weaponised people were the ones screaming like they had the first time their cyborg ports were removed.

Not even that… some of the others… even the ones that were fully robotic looked like they were convulsing in their binds. Around them, eyes were open, expressions alive and hurt and scared and…

“They’re all awake,” he realised softly. “You gave them back their minds.”

“Doctors and the court sorcerer are coming,” Aleena said, as well as she could over the noise. “You need not worry.”

“Not worry?!?” Knuckles repeated. “Look around you!”
“A temporary matter,” she replied. “Pain is part of the healing process.”

Manic frowned, unable to really weigh that up against sounds and sights he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to scrub from his mind. But then Amy abruptly pushed past him to reach the nearest screaming person, reaching out to grab shoulders and lean in.

“Hey, hey, shh, I know it hurts, but please, you need to breathe, come on!”

And suddenly, reality slammed its way past Manic’s shock and horror.

These were real people, in real pain, and they needed help. And – and they hadn’t come in here alone. Tails. Tails was just a kid, he – Manic balked as he looked around and found Tails was already on the other side of the prison and had somehow broken open one of the cupboards filled with removed parts.

“We’re not done talking about this,” Knuckles snarled, then suddenly spun around. “Shadow! Do you have an emerald?”

Manic flinched and twisted to follow his gaze. Sure enough, Shadow was standing behind the door, unmoving as he watched from under heavy brows. He blinked slowly before meeting Knuckles’ gaze to shake his head.

Knuckles tsked and snatched out a large grey… jewel? Manic didn’t quite get a good look at it as Knuckles threw it to Shadow.

“I don’t care if this isn’t your problem, or what you do, you need to help,” he snapped, and then looked over at Tails. “Tails – what’s the plan?”

“I can reattach the lost limbs, but I’m no doctor,” he said briskly, holding up a robotic arm. “If they’ve taken out the ports, I can’t help.”

“Doctors will be here in due course,” Aleena reminded them, and both Tails and Knuckles glanced at her before obviously accepting it as fact.

“Is the change permanent?” Knuckles demanded, and she nodded.

“We have done what was required.”

“Yeah, I bet you have,” he snarled, and then physically shoved past her. He went to one of the few whole people that had been completely robotocised without weapons, and so had been merely bolted to the wall to keep them from moving around. Knuckles literally punched the concrete until the holding braces buckled and he could rip them off, and the poor person crumpled to the floor.

Knuckles hunched over to touch their back even as he barked, “Amy!”

“On it! Manic, we need a room where you can’t hear all this noise!” she said as she rushed over to take Knuckles’ place.

“Uh… um. R-right,” Manic stammered, glancing over at Aleena. She inclined her head, but still he paused, reeling a little. Shadow was holding out the emerald in one hand, the other still curled around one of the golden bracelets he wore, but he seemed focussed. Tails was sorting limbs, obviously preparing to get to work. Knuckles had moved onto the next locked-down person to free them. Amy was… Amy was waiting for his help. Meanwhile, he was wasting time and making things worse. He snatched his sticks out of his hip-pack to keep himself grounded and pulled himself together. “Right. It’s not perfect, but on the other side of the generators there’s like, an old storage room. Nothin’ in there but crates. It’ll give people space to think. Tails, I’ve got a room to work in, but it’ll like, take
me a minute to clean out.”

“Anywhere you can get me is good!” he called back. “I can’t really think to work like this.”

Manic hurried over to help Amy pull the… oh, man, the poor robotocised guy she was holding was trying to cry. That’s why he was convulsing. Manic set his jaw and helped her pull him to his feet. “C’mon, this way. I’ll show you where it is and then I’ll call some people to come help you take care of ’em.”

Despite the screaming and tears and horror, Amy smiled bravely, and Manic realised he’d never been so out of his depth.

But he couldn’t afford to falter now. He needed to get these guys set up, and then he needed to talk to the diplomats – get them to talk to their people back home and find out if the same thing had happened in the other prisons. Then there’d be damage control. They’d have to figure out if it really was permanent. If it was, they’d need to announce it. There would be an empire-wide search, people looking for family members, identification, figuring out how much these poor people remembered, getting them help, adjusting them to what might be a completely different world than they remembered…

He couldn’t screw this up.

The first thing he became aware of was… noise. Angry, buzzing noise. His ears flickered from it, but it took a long time for him to parse it as a language he didn’t understand.

The next thing was the ache.

It wasn’t pain. Pain had a source, a… a sharpness to it that he would have been able to pinpoint. This was just… all over everything felt like burning lead, pounding with what he could only hope was the beat of his heart. But after a few minutes, he got used to it enough to recognise a hand on his arm, hovering in that awkward way of all people who didn’t know how to touch a hedgehog’s back.

Sonic groaned and clenched his fist, half just to reassure himself he still had the extremities.

“Sonic! Sonic, are you awake?”

The angry words abruptly stopped.

He grunted first, confirming the existence of vocal chords, then forced his mouth and tongue to function too. “No. This is not what awake looks like. Ugh.” He dragged his arms up and forced them to push him upwards. It took a couple of tries, and the hand on his arm helped, but he slowly managed to get himself onto shuddering hands and knees. Belatedly, he realised his eyes had opened in the movement. It had taken a while to notice because his vision was grey around the edges and he was having trouble focussing.

Wow, he hadn’t felt this lousy since the first werehog nights.

“Oh, man, anyone catch the number of the black hole that hit me?”

know what you did, but you did it!”

Too many words. Way too many words. Sonic lifted his hand and flailed for silence, but it must have looked like a demand for help because suddenly there wasn’t just one set of hands but about three, grabbing at his arms and pulling him to his feet. It hadn’t exactly been his plan, but he was always happier standing than on his knees so he didn’t particularly object, just blinked rapidly and tried to focus on staying upright and regaining his vision – in that order.

Unfortunately, his eyes caught up before his inner ear, so he was still swaying in place as he recognised the squad of nervous-looking guards holding flamethrowers. “Hey there,” he greeted, and moved his head as quickly as he could without losing his balance to see yet more guards helping hold him upright. On the other side was a yellow dog. Raphie. Sonia’s kind-of-friend.

The memories filtered through a little too quickly for his throbbing head. He’d come to the robotic prison with Raphie. He’d learned that in this country, the only robotocised people that had lived were the ones they didn’t know how to kill. He’d… Aleena had called, and Sonic had answered, their joined power reaching up and out and…

He lowered his eyes to the floor. Some very scared and clearly sentient faces stared back at him. They were attached to bodies that were still bolted to the floor, but…

Holy heterophony it had worked.

He blinked slowly, double- and then triple-checking he was in enough control to fake arrogance, because he sure as heck wasn’t feeling the self-assurance right this second. He lifted a pointed finger to start the charade. “Yo, dudes. I know I only just rejoined the land of the living and all that, but if I’m guessin’ things right, a whole lot of people just got a chance for happy ever after and yet they’re still stuck to the floor. I ain’t happy about this. I ain’t happy about those guns, either. Someone better have some real good explanations.”

For a moment, no one spoke, before a guard with several gold stars on his uniform stepped over one of the robotocised people to stand directly in front of Sonic, levelling him with a dark look. “Captain Furlowe reporting, sir. Field Team Leader for Tashistan’s central guard. With all due respect, Lost Prince, you have used physical violence to break into one of our country’s most highly restricted areas with a known thief. When my team and I arrived, it was to find you unconscious, and these robots claiming to have regained sentience. We have no evidence and no proof that their claims are true, and if they are, we have no evidence or precedence to say this is a permanent change.”

“And that’s all well and cool, guy, an’ I’m gonna overlook you callin’ these people ‘robots’,” Sonic snapped. It was getting easy to sound put-together, even if he still felt like every inch of his body weighed a separate tonne. “But I’m awake now, and if it’s really been over an hour, you kinda got proof enough to take a risk and let ’em off the floor. Chain ’em up, lock ’em up, fine, but you treat them like the living beings they are or we’re gonna have a problem.”

Raphie’s hands on his arm tightened, but Sonic didn’t look around, instead staring down the guard.


Sonic didn’t look. He couldn’t afford it right now. He just watched the guards in front of him glance down, and then around at each other. He let them have guilt and hesitation for another five seconds before snapping, “You want I should force the issue, man? ’Cause you better believe I’m gonna.”

He wasn’t entirely sure how he would, given he was only just managing to stand upright, but if it came to it, he would absolutely find the reserve.
For a few seconds, the team lead just stood there, eyes flicking between whoever had spoken and Sonic’s face. In the end, the lead clenched his jaw and snapped off another begrudging salute. “Sir. B-team, fire primed and ready. So much as a robot finger moves to cause harm, we’re lighting up. C-team, you heard your future emperor. Find us some bolt cutters and wrenches and get to work.” He paused, looking over Sonic and Raphie again. “A-team, please assist his majesty and his friend on their way back to the palace.”

Sonic laughed darkly. “No way, buddy. I am stayin’ right here until your C-team’s done.”

“With all due respect, sir—”

“Shelve the respect, but I ain’t leavin’ ’til these people are out or the guns are gone,” he said. “Try and make me leave. I dare ya.”

The team lead stared at him silently for a few more moments, then nodded and turned away. “Then with all due respect, sir, please move to the side of the room. You are in the way. A-team, help C.”

Trying to make it look like Raphie was more forcing than helping him over to the wall, Sonic went, and then leaned back against it, letting it take more of his weight. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure this felt exactly like that time on the Egg Space Fleet, when he’d had all the super sucked out of him. Only that time he’d had the Dark Gaia stuffed back into him to hold him up. Sure, turning into the werehog hurt like crazy, but at least it came with a burst of adrenaline and whatever it was that bulked him out.

This just felt lousy.

“You really did it,” Raphie whispered, and Sonic opened one eye he hadn’t noticed closing to look at him. He smiled weakly back. “You gave them back their minds.”

“Not just me,” he said, and then blinked, remembering he’d torn off his medallion. He patted his chest, making sure it hadn’t just been his imagination, until Raphie held out the necklace for him to take.

“You dropped it when you collapsed. I thought I should keep it safe, in case the guards turned mean… Ah, not that they were exactly nice before you woke,” he said with a grin.

Sonic smiled vaguely back, taking the medallion and tying it back around his neck. It still felt a little too warm, but right now it felt like more support that he desperately needed. “I guess I get it. Even at our strongest, when it was just me, Sonia, and Manic, we could only give ‘em back themselves for a couple minutes. No reason for anyone to think it could happen for real.”

“But this time is ‘for real’?”

He hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Me and Mom, workin’ together like that… if it ain’t permanent it’ll last a good long while, at least.” Enough time for people to get out of mines and rebel against slavers. Enough time for them to run. But that was only if they could run. If most of them were locked up like this… or… He rubbed his face, abruptly remembering the people in Mobotropolis. He really hoped they’d been knocked unconscious. Not that he could worry about that right now – there were people in front of him that weren’t doing much better. “Your town ain’t exactly good people when it comes to robotocised folk, though. This ain’t gonna be easy.”

At first, Raphie just stared at him, before he nodded and turned back to watch the guards. “This is more wonderful—more than I ever dreamed when I brought you here—but I suspect you may have suggested exactly what they will do. These people will be locked away for the crime of being
“Yeah… you’re gonna have to get ’em out,” Sonic said bluntly. “The sooner the better. Outta this town. Outta the kingdom if you can.”

“Can you help?”

“Dude, I’d love to,” he said honestly, “but that was a total bluff earlier. I ain’t got it in me to take on a flicky right now.”

Raphie flinched back to gape at him, but quickly firmed up and nodded again. “Will Sonia –”

“Maybe, man, I dunno,” he said, and then rubbed his face again. Impulsive and stupid. He should’ve made sure they were free before he did anything. Should’ve made sure they had a way out. He wouldn’t have made this mistake three years ago. Not when it was more than him on the line. Granted, when the song started, he hadn’t exactly been in control… He hadn’t exactly planned to—hadn’t known he could—do this. So there was no way he could’ve prepared better.

But… ugh. It was so hard to think. Everything felt jumbled.

He needed to talk to Sonia. Maybe Manic, too. Sonia would have some kind of plan in the making, and Manic would be able to come up with an idea of how to get the people out of the prisons now they had their minds. Sonic just…

He couldn’t think. He just leaned his head back and watched a robotocised mobian sit up under his own will for the first time in who knew how long, and then fail to cry at the action because he couldn’t anymore. Sonic took a deep breath and made sure to watch what he’d been too self-absorbed to make possible two and a half years ago.

Knuckles didn’t really know why barking orders came naturally to him. He was a loner. He’d grown up alone. And even when he was with his fr- When he was with the others, none of them were really ‘leaders’, though they tended to follow whatever Sonic was doing. So there was no reason for him to feel capable to step up and tell anyone what to do when he needed to.

He put it down to his heritage. What little he’d seen of the Echidna Tribes told him that the Guardian had once been the leader of their people. So it was probably part of the job description.

Besides, it was easier than facing the fact that aside from telling people what to do, there wasn’t a whole lot he could do to help. Not in this situation. People were hurt, and it was going to take a lot of smarts to help them. There was nothing to punch, no one to stop… there was only one person he could confront, and she was using some kind of soothing magic alongside a group of sorcerers to keep people calm and in a minimum of pain, so he wasn’t about to stop her right now. Knuckles moved over to where Shadow was still standing near the door, holding the Chaos Emerald and watching.

“You aren’t helping,” Knuckles noted coldly, and Shadow scowled.

“Nor can I. I know very little of Chaos Healing. What’s your excuse, Guardian?”

“Hey, I take care of the Master Emerald,” he shot back. “I can use the Super Emeralds if I have to.
This is something else. Give me that back if you can’t use it.”

Shadow hesitated, turning the emerald over in his hand, then looked at him, directly and defiantly. “No.”

Knuckles narrowed his eyes, cursing himself for an idiot. He shouldn’t have handed it over without some kind of guarantee, and now that he had he couldn’t easily get it back. Not in these cramped quarters, and not without getting in the way of everyone doing legitimate work. But it didn’t really matter. If the emeralds really were presenting themselves to them, it usually meant they were trying to come together. In the end, they’d end up with the person they were supposed to be with.

So he took a breath and turned to stand alongside Shadow, joining him in watching the bustle.

The screaming had mostly stopped, the people in that much pain and horror having long since knocked themselves out—or been forcefully knocked out by the doctors—but the ones still awake were sobbing as best they could. The ones that weren’t somehow damaged had been moved out first, Amy taking them all to the room Manic had found for them, and apparently there was some kind of mind-doctor in with them. Tails and some of Cyrus’s technicians had set up in yet another room, replacing things that could be easily put back on, leaving this room just for the people Mobius had maimed in their quest for safety. It was filled with magicians and doctors, working together to replace the ports and wiring they’d removed.

Aleena was with them, showcasing more of that magic she never normally bothered to use. He watched her for a minute, eyeing the set of her shoulders and the lines of her face. She looked the same way Sonic always did after a big fight – exhausted and refusing to show it because then people would know she was mortal.

“We were heading out when I felt it happen,” he said quietly. “It felt like something pulling at all the chaos in the world and ignoring mine.”

“Don’t be naive,” Shadow snapped. “She was calling on a single source and you know it.”

He grunted. “I heard the song. I’ve never seen her start one. How –” He cut off as the portal door opened, and they both looked around warily. Manic nodded to acknowledge their attention as he stepped inside before glancing over at the crowd.

“Hey. How’s it goin’ in here?”

They gave him the look such a question deserved and he grimaced. “Sorry. Seemed like the only thing to say. I just got through talkin’ to the diplomats. Apparently it’s like this in like, every city that had a prison. Most of ’em didn’t even know until we told them to check. Prolly tells you something, huh?”

Knuckles raised an eyeridge, not sure what that was supposed to mean, but Manic avoided his gaze, still watching the magicians and doctors work.

“Sonia and Sonic’re still in Tashistan. Sonia’s at the castle, dealin’ with the Shah, but apparently Sonic was at their Cyborg Prison when this whole thing went down. She hasn’t spoken to him yet. I uh… I was gonna head over there before all this, but I…” He rubbed under his quills, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t… I mean, it’s like… I dunno what to do, y’know? How’d this even happen?”

“Magic and chaos,” Knuckles said bluntly. “Two of the most powerful forces in this world combined to do the impossible.”
“Chaos?” he repeated. “You mean like Cyrus and Tails have been talkin’ about? Like the emeralds – I mean, the shards you had on your island? It could do this?”

They just stared at him for a moment, then each other. Shadow put the emerald behind himself and Knuckles folded his arms over his torso.

“Aleena had a lot to do with it. She used the chaos energy in a way it’s not really meant to be used,” he said. “We’re not sure how. I don’t understand magic.”

“The gem on her dress seemed to glow,” Shadow observed. “It probably has some connection to those medallions.”

“The medallions?” Manic asked, reaching up to touch his own, but Knuckles rolled his eyes.

“It wasn’t the magic of harmony that did this, Shadow. This had nothing to do with Manic or Sonia, and they’re a key part of that.”

“Wait –”

They ignored Manic, Shadow entirely focussed on Aleena’s movements. “You heard his voice as well as I did. They made that song together. They did this together. That has all the harmony you need.”

“Harmony is about working together,” snapped Knuckles. “Not siphoning power from someone else.”

“And so why do you think ‘harmony’ is what any of this is?” he asked. “When has it ever been anything else?”

“Hold on, both of you!” Manic interjected, actually stepping between them to force their attention. “You heard his voice as well as I did. They made that song together. They did this together. That has all the harmony you need.”

“Harmony is about working together,” snapped Knuckles. “Not siphoning power from someone else.”

“And so why do you think ‘harmony’ is what any of this is?” he asked. “When has it ever been anything else?”

“Hold on, both of you!” Manic interjected, actually stepping between them to force their attention. “What are you talking about? Sonic and Mother did this, yeah, I felt that, and the medallion got all hot and stuff but it wasn’t like normal. Like Knuckles said, this wasn’t the power of harmony. It was music, yeah, but not like we use it.” He paused, lowering his eyes to the floor for a moment before he looked up again. “Are you saying that was like… like Mother and Sonic were using chaos energy? They were using someone’s chaos energy?”

“Sonic’s chaos, and Aleena’s magic,” Knuckles explained. “That’s exactly what we’re saying.”

“Sonic’s chaos?” he repeated. “That… that massive amount of –” He stopped, his hand flattening over his medallion. His eyes flicked in all directions before coming back to Knuckles. “Sonic’s got chaos energy? Like… like lots of it?”

They both stared at him, until Knuckles remembered that Sonic had never talked to his siblings about the powers he’d already had before meeting them. Sonic had never told them about Super Sonic, or the true Chaos Emeralds, or even that he and Knuckles had known each other before the triplets came to his island together. Following his lead, and with time constraints being what they were, Knuckles had never bothered to explain any of it either. Of course they didn’t know.

“Like… dangerous amounts of chaos, maybe?” Manic pressed, and Shadow scoffed.

“People who don’t understand power shouldn’t use it. Whether she understands it or not, Aleena used his chaos power to do this. The question we’re asking is how.”

Knuckles continued watching Manic’s worried expression for a moment, then turned his attention back to the queen. “It wasn’t just Sonic’s power. Chaos alone couldn’t have done this – she used
some of her own magic for it as well.”

“But she siphoned it off,” Manic insisted, despite the glances he got in return. “She used some of Sonic’s chaos energy to help these people.”

“If that’s what you call it,” Knuckles muttered, eyeing the closest mobian and the silent tears rolling down their cheeks.

In typical fashion, Shadow didn’t even acknowledge he’d spoken. “A lot of it,” he corrected Manic. “It felt like more than I’ve seen him use without an emerald to aid him.”

Manic hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Um… so that’s… okay. Okay. Uh, puttin’ that aside for a second – things down here, they’re all… copacetic? You don’t need anything else? Rooms, resources, whatever?”

They both went back to staring at him again, and Manic clicked his fingers before punching his fist into his open palm. “Slamming. Um… I’m gonna talk to Mother for a second then get outta your way. You need me or anything, or whatever, just find one of the techs or the comms guys – they’ll get you sorted. Yo, Mother, can I talk to you a sec’?”

As she pulled away from the magic to face him, Knuckles glanced at Shadow, who looked back with narrowed eyes, just as suspicious of the sudden reaction as he was.

“Is the power of harmony chaos?”

Although she’d been in the middle of closing the door, Aleena froze for a second, letting the question run through her head a half-dozen times before she could allow herself to react. She quietly finished shutting the door and then reached over to the security panel to activate the dampening, ensuring that if Agent Shadow or the Guardian did choose to listen in, they’d have a harder time hearing.

They’d gone up to Manic’s workshop, which was the closest of their private rooms to the hangar and therefore the basement stairs, but she hadn’t really known what he wanted. She wasn’t particularly surprised by the topic – she had a feeling that if she wasn’t feeling so drained she would have felt much more prepared.

As it was, she could only turn around to face him, standing awkwardly in the middle of the mechanics-littered room, twisting his fists around his drum sticks as he stared back at her. She carefully folded her hands over her skirts and met his gaze. “Why do you ask?”

“Knuckles and Shadow, down there, they were like, they were saying that song just now was you usin’ magic to like, manipulate chaos,” he said quickly. “Sonic’s chaos. That’s what they said. That like, all that power was you usin’ Sonic’s chaos or somethin’.”

“I wouldn’t describe it as such,” she said quietly, calmly, though she kept watching him. “It was a merging of our two powers.”

“But it was chaos,” he said. “It was Sonic’s chaos. That weird feelin’, all that power, that – the trippy – the stuff, that was chaos?”

“And magic, yes,” she confirmed. “You seem upset.”
“Sonic’s got chaos energy?” he asked, hunching forward. “All this time, he’s... he’s had all that chaos energy, all this time?”

She paused, then nodded once. “Yes.”

He stilled, and then almost immediately spun away, separating his sticks only to start tapping them together in a nervous rhythm. When he turned around again, he didn’t quite look at her as he asked, “So like... like I asked... I mean, the other day, you said maybe Sonic still had powers when me and Sonia didn’t because... You said the harmony is like lettin’ water outta the dam, right? So, like... so like, is... is the power of harmony chaos, or what? Do we like, get our powers by siphonin’ off Sonic’s chaos?”

Aleena slowly straightened, once again reminded of her youngest child’s quiet gifts. She took a breath, then inclined her head. “In a way, yes.”

“In a way ain’t –” He stopped himself, tapping his sticks together in agitation before calming back into a more controlled beat. “You... So today, you used some of that. Lots of that. More than me and Sonia could ever’ve...”

“More than you ever have,” she corrected softly. “Not more than you ever could.”

He hesitated at that, then swallowed and asked, “You didn’t like, empty the dam, right?”

“You are worried about Sonic’s health,” she realised, and then smiled. “I am certain he is fine, my son. Tired, and drained, yes, but fine. We have done what we should have done many years ago.”

“But you didn’t,” he pointed out. “You didn’t do this years ago, Mother. I mean – I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be like, disrespectful or nothin’, but –”

“It is a reasonable question, and one we will need to answer,” she said. She paused, feeling herself sway a little, and grimaced slightly. She’d been putting on a good show for the staff downstairs, but the spellwork really had drained her. “I’m sorry, my son, but I must sit. Do you have a chair in here somewhere?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I – hang on,” he said, and rushed to clear a pile of sheets and spare parts that eventually revealed itself to be hiding a chair. Once he’d emptied it, he shifted it over to where she could easily drop into it, and then overturned a bucket so he could sit in front of her. He only gave her a few seconds to breathe before pressing again. “Mother... If you could do this... all that time...? Why now?”

She sighed softly. She didn’t really feel strong enough for this conversation, but such was a requirement of both royalty and parenthood. “Your brother is a very powerful individual, Manic. I have known this since before he was born. I had hoped to raise all three of you with the knowledge and understanding of how to use that power for good, but... I miscalculated quite severely,” she confessed. “With time and training, I am certain the three of you could have accomplished far greater feats than what Sonic and I achieved tonight. But you did not have that time or training, and so Sonic’s chaos is... immature. And still growing. If we had attempted what was done tonight two years ago, I do not think we would have been successful.”

Manic took a moment to consider that, even stopping his drumming to just hold his sticks under his chin instead. “So what we used to be able to do... givin’ people back their minds for a few minutes... that was the best he could do back then?”

“And under the circumstances,” she said, and thankfully he didn’t seem to notice her evasion.
He tapped his sticks against his mouth thoughtfully. “So… me and Sonia. We were never… We weren’t ever like… special.”

“You have always been special, Manic,” she said, and reached out to brush back his hair. “You will always **be** special.”

He smiled weakly. “But the powers were all Sonic.”

“In a way,” she said again, and then gestured for him to move closer, shuffling forward on her chair. Confused, Manic dragged his bucket forward, only to flinch and stare as she threaded her fingers through his hair to brush it back properly. It was something she’d always wanted to do, but never dared for one reason or another. She regretted leaving it so long as his eyes only grew wider and she was able to softly pet his head and ear. “The skills that you and Sonia have when in harmony with your brother may come from chaos energy he builds, but they are uniquely your own. They are not something he gave you, like a gift. They are something the three of you made together.”

For a long few moments, Manic didn’t even react, just sitting and watching her as he thought things through. In the end, he said slowly, “Cyrus kinda said… he said that like, if someone had too much chaos energy…”

“Too much chaos can be very dangerous, yes,” she said softly. “It is why I always intended for the three of you to master the power of harmony.”

“And… and what you did today, takin’ some of it… It wasn’t **natural**, but…”

“No. But it was something that needed to be done,” she said, and he nodded slowly.

“He’s okay though, right? Sonic’s like… he’s okay?”

“He will be,” she promised. “If you are worried… you were going to fly out and spend the afternoon with your brother and sister, were you not? Perhaps you should go now; see for yourself.”

“Yeah, but that was before all this happened,” he said. “I can’t like, **leave**. Not when there’s all this work to do.”

“There is work to do, yes,” she agreed, and shifted her hands to hold his face properly, to meet his gaze. “But the work you do cannot always be done alone. I believe your siblings will need their brother today.”

“Need me?” he repeated. “Sonic and Sonia don’t –”

“They do, Manic,” she said softly. “We all do. You just need to see it for yourself.”

Again, he could only stare at her for a minute, before lowering his head with a small smile. “If you really think you’ll be okay…”

“Go. You have spoken with the people you need to, arranged what you can… and I have Sonic’s friends to help me, and all of the Palace staff. Your brother needs his siblings.”

He nodded, and she wished desperately that she knew her son well enough to hug him like the mother she’d never really been.
Hanging around watching the guards unbolt the robotocised mobians for over an hour wasn’t exactly
Sonic’s idea of a good time, but what he would never tell anyone was that he kind of needed that
long to feel like he could stand up without having the wall to support him. He would take falling out
of sub-orbit unconscious over whatever this drain was any day of the week.

It also sucked because he knew it wasn’t over for the robotocised people yet. They were just going to
be locked up again, in a different kind of prison, unless he and Raphie could break them out. And
even if they did get free, then they’d have to learn to cope with their new lives. The new world.

Still. He caught the eye of most of them at least once. A couple even managed to slip far enough
from the guards to reach him. One even grabbed his arm, which freaked out the guards, except that
she wasn’t doing it for violence.

Most couldn’t think of anything to say. They just looked at him. One breathed out a thank you.
Another, that looked lost and helpless, could only ask, “Am I alive?”

“Yeah,” Sonic murmured back, and gripped the guy’s shoulder. “You really are.”

He looked down at Sonic’s hand, then back up. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“It will,” Raphie promised. “That body will feel like your own in no time.”

Once the guy had been marched away, Sonic glanced at Raphie sideways. “That true? Your legs feel
like your legs?”

“Most days,” he said. “Some days… not at all.”

He nodded slowly, and didn’t mention it to anyone else who came up to them. When the last
robotocised mobian was released, Sonic pushed off the wall and followed them out, Raphie trailing
behind, just glaring at the leader when he tried to tell him to stay behind. They’d cordoned off the
alley and the path to the trucks they were loading the prisoners into, but there were huge crowds out
on the streets gawking. Sonic looked over them absently as the last prisoner got loaded in.

“With all due respect, Lost Prince,” the leader said evenly, “there is simply no room for you in this
transport. You must return to the palace.”

“I must do nothing you tell me,” he replied coolly. “But g’wan into your little hotwheel, I ain’t got
any need to ride along.”

He waited long enough for the door to shut and the truck to drive off. As the remaining guards
stepped up, obviously intending to ‘escort’ him back to the palace, Sonic casually reached out and
grabbed Raphie by the shoulders.

“We don’t need wheels,” he said as a warning, and Raphie had time to frown before he was scooped
up into a bridal carry and Sonic ran after the truck. He was vaguely aware of the guards yelling
behind him, and a few screams from the crowd as he dashed through them, but he didn’t care – he
was not letting those trucks disappear into nowhere.

“I was serious earlier, Raphie,” Sonic called over the wind, once he’d found a safe pace to follow the
trucks unseen. “I’m countin’ on you to spring these guys outta whatever cell these losers stick ’em
in.”

“I would be glad to,” he replied. “But I do not know where I would take them! I do not even know
what these people will need! Do they eat? Do they sleep? Will they need work?”
“All stuff you gotta figure out, man. All stuff we all gotta learn. As for where you go, all I can guess right now is outta this country. Maybe head to the Icana Desert, or Transylvan. Those Dark Woods’ll hide anyone who can take care of themselves.”

“As will the endless dunes,” he agreed. “Neither will be easy, but both at least afford freedom.”

“I got some friends in the Desert that might be able to give you a hand, if that’s your plan,” he said, thinking of the nomads and Ifyoucan. He doubted they’d give the robotocised people a free ride, but Ifyoucan would at least give them pointers for desert life. And from what Sonia had said, their Chief of Chiefs was a pretty reasonable person. But there was no way to know.

Eventually, they followed the trucks to a warehouse on the side of town. It was boarded up tight except for the front doors, which was where they were loading everyone. On the rooftop of the closest building, Sonic set Raphie down and they both hunched at the edge to watch. There were guards at the door with clipboards, and the robotocised mobians were marched in a single file, obviously being counted.

“Like cattle,” Raphie noted. “This is a holding pen.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t built for it,” Sonic said, and pointed to the windows. “Everything’s boarded up from the inside, which means that with the right tools, it’d be easy as to unblock those windows. And with those legs, I’m bettin’ you know that robotocised limbs make for some pretty kickin’ tools.”

“Yes. But these people are afraid, and there will be watching guards.”

“Yes… they’re gonna need prompting to make any kinda move. That’s what you’re for,” he pointed out, then frowned as he looked over the guards. In some distant part of his mind, he knew that normally he would have just charged them. There were dozens of what he suspected were trigger-happy guards, but they were nothing against him. But for some reason, the thought of doing that, even if he wasn’t still feeling bone-dry exhausted, felt really, really stupid right now.

Besides, even if he didn’t think it was a stupid idea, he needed to get back to Sonia, and they needed to get back to Manic and Mobotropolis. What he and Aleena had done today was just the tip of the iceberg. There was way more he still had to do to fix things.

And these people… they were going to need a leader. Someone to look out for them, to be there for them. Like, physically. They were going to need Raphie. And they wouldn’t rely on him if they didn’t know he was instrumental in saving them.

Again, some small part of his mind nigged, finding some issue with his own thought process that he couldn’t pinpoint. He turned away from the warehouse to rub his face, wondering if he was just tired and how long it would take for him to get the heck back on track.

Sonia. Sonia would help him focus.

“Okay, look,” he said, shaking his head to clear it. “I gotta check in with my sibs, and we’ll work something out. You gotta stay here and keep an eye on this place. When you get our signal, you move in and get these people out.”

“Your signal?” Raphie repeated. “What signal?”

“You’ll know it,” he promised. “And hey – once you’re settled, you get word to Mobotropolis. I wanna know how you’re all doing.”

Raphie blinked at him, brow furrowed, but Sonic didn’t really have time to explain, or (if he was
honest) any idea what he’d say if he did. He just winked and lightly punched Raphie on the arm before standing up.

“You’re a good guy, Raphie. Stay that way,” he said, and then turned and started running for the castle.

“You just left him there?” Sonia demanded, and Sonic shrugged.

“Yeah. He’ll handle it.”

“Sonic!”

“What was I supposed to do?” he asked, but then paused as he noticed the door behind her opening. He’d interrupted a political explosion when he’d returned to the castle, finding Sonia and the Shah’s entire court debating how to handle the robotocised people being ‘brought back to life’. After practically tackling him in relief, Sonia had decided the argument would probably continue whether she was there or not and asked for a private room so she could speak to him in private. They’d filled each other in before officially moving on to their own version of the same argument.

As he and Sonia watched, a servant stepped through the door, quickly followed by another one pushing a trolley. They both seemed surprised and a little embarrassed to have caught the siblings’ attention but said nothing, simply unveiling several large bottles of water, glasses, and a bowl of nuts. They quickly bowed and hurried out again without so much as a word.

Sonic rolled his eyes but took the offer, moving over to grab one of the bottles and drink from it straight. “What was I supposed to do?” he asked again. “I break all those people out, save ’em twice-over, prolly hurt a bunch of Tashistani guards and start a war, then what do I do with them? Bad enough me and Mom gave ’em back their minds without a plan, now I’m s’posed to send ’em out into a world that’s terrified of them without anyone to look after ’em?”

“Oh, for…” She bent harder into her hand. “You hurt my brain so badly sometimes.”

“Again: you’re the ma’am with the plan,” he said brightly, saluting her with the bottle. “I follow your directions, Princess.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, but let him leave it there for a few minutes while he drank and she thought. In the end, she lowered her hand and walked over to pick up a glass and snatch the next
bottle away from his reaching hand to pour herself a drink. “How are you feeling? You look terrible.”

“Hey, you ain’t lookin’ a million bucks either,” he snapped. “It’s been a heck of a day, Princess.”

“Don’t be an idiot, I’m trying to be worried about you,” she said irritably, and shoved the bottle into his chest. “Exactly how much power did you and Mother put into that song? Do you even have anything left?”

He shrugged and took a long drink before answering. “I’m gettin’ there.”

“Getting there. Very reassuring,” she said, and took her own sip before reluctantly continuing, “Aside from me just being worried about you in general… if we really are going to create an opening for Raphie, we might need you at better than ‘upright and willing’.”

He glanced at her curiously. “You got a plan?”

She shrugged. “It’s not much of one, but you’ve had worse. I just… I don’t know if you’re up to it,” she said softly. “You really do look exhausted, Sonic. You’ve looked tired all week, but this is something else.”

Sonic hesitated, then rolled his shoulders and stood up straight, digging deep from the arrogance he’d been faking when he first woke up. “Sis’, my exhausted is the top of anyone else’s game. Bring it if you got it.”

Considering she’d wanted to spend her afternoon smashing up robots, and hadn’t been at all prepared to be anyone’s emotional support, as Amy sat in the open hangar door, gazing out at the cloudy Mobotropolis sky, she decided it had been a very bad day. However, as bad as it had been, she’d watched two people find each other after years of being robotocised, and too many to count marvel as they stood up under their own power and just walked across a room…

It had been a bad day, but it had set up a lot of excellent tomorrows.

She’d heard the footsteps, but she was still a little surprised when she noticed someone sitting down beside her from the corner of her eye. She looked around, straightening a little when she saw it was Tails—she would normally have expected him to fly over given that he would have been coming up from the basement—and Cyrus.

At first, she didn’t say anything. Tails was obviously exhausted, but Cyrus looked almost hunted. He pulled his legs up and folded his arms over the top of them, his eyes sightless as they looked out at the clouds. Ultimately, she decided he needed a minute and instead focussed on Tails.

“How was your room?”

“How was your room?” he reported. “There weren’t that many people that still had ports, and the doctors couldn’t do anything other than be methodical about putting ports back in, which slowed down the assembly line in our room. That gave us plenty of time to get some technicians that were comfortable taking on the job. I think the prison is still a mess, though.”

“I bet,” she said. “I can’t imagine what anyone was thinking, breaking people down like that. I guess
they never thought about how they’d put them back together again.”

“We never thought we would be able to.”

They both looked down at Cyrus, though he hadn’t raised his head from his arms. He was still staring at nothing, buried in himself.

“We did so many tests. Diagnostics. Scans I’d never even heard of. Magicians casting spells that just felt wrong. There were surgeries… we even tried physically removing the nerve conductors. All we ever did was rend them brain-dead.” His fingers curled into his sleeves, shoulders hunching. “There didn’t seem to be any way to bring them back. We thought they were lost. They weren’t… they were dead. That’s how I thought of it. My father was dead.”

“Your father?” Tails repeated, as Amy pressed her hands to her mouth.

“Oh no… Cyrus, I’m sorry.”

He shook his head slightly. “There were these… the first week in court was about robotocised people. The whole thing. There were these long debates. People were getting hurt. There were places we’d had to completely lock down because weaponised robotocised people were just blasting any flesh that moved. It was dangerous. And when we experimented on the safer ones and realised there was nothing we could do, everyone just asked if… I thought shutting them down was the best solution…” He blinked slowly, his eyes staying closed for several seconds before reopening. “Manic and Sonia… it was the only thing they’ve ever stood their ground on: not letting anyone kill the robotocised people. They insisted that even if it hurt for now, there was always hope. I almost thought about defecting that day, I was so angry with them. Especially when they said we should just take out the ports instead, I kept seeing Amber Rat, and I…”

Tails turned his head to meet Amy’s gaze, but she had nothing to offer either. Neither of them could even attempt to relate to what Cyrus was going through. He didn’t seem to notice, however, still speaking into forever.

“My father… he was weaponised pretty heavily. Laser eye, arm cannon, blades in his torso. Judging from what was coming into Reattachment, he would’ve been prioritised pretty low. Not exactly a quick win.” He licked his lips and swallowed hard, and then finally looked around at them. “What am I supposed to say to him when he’s fixed?”

Tails winced, lost for ideas. And for a few seconds, Amy couldn’t think of anything either. But in the end, there was only one thing to say. She leaned past Tails, extending a hand to grip Cyrus’s arm, and looked him straight in the eye. “You tell him you’re glad to see him. And then you tell him about all the amazing things you’ve done since you last spoke. That’s what you tell him, Cyrus. And then you look forward to seeing him again.”

He stared back at her, wide-eyed, as tears quickly welled up. But he looked away before they could fall and shifted to bury his face in his hand. Sensing he didn’t really want comfort, Amy pulled back again and turned her attention to Tails, who was still sitting between them, visibly awkward.

She folded her hands around her legs and tried to look casual as she asked, “Any word from Sonic yet?”

He blinked, then flinched. “I haven’t even tried contacting him!” he cried, and Amy sighed.

“I guess I can’t really blame you for forgetting. We’ve all been busy.”

“Yeah, but with how this all started, it’s a pretty big thing to miss,” he said, but had barely lifted his
wrist to reach for his communicator when he stopped and lowered it again. “I haven’t talked to
Knuckles, either. He seemed pretty mad.”

“Mm… and not just about the robotocised people. He was upset right from when we first heard the
song.”

She noticed Cyrus looking up again but didn’t draw attention to it. If Tails noticed, he didn’t say
anything, busy pulling out his mileselectric. “The songs are weird, and that one I could actually feel. I
wish I’d had time to analyse it.” He pulled up some kind of scanning software and frowned at the
readings. “I have it running work on Anarchy Beryl at the moment, so it would’ve taken a while to
switch readings, but still. I really want to figure out this whole magic music thing.”

Amy raised an amused eyeridge. “Because you just wanna know or because of what Shadow said?”

“Both,” he admitted. “Especially with what happened today. That was a lot of power. If Shadow’s
right, then… I mean…”

“I thought you were looking into robotocisation,” Cyrus interjected quietly, and Tails glanced at him,
then grimaced.

“I can do all three at once. Besides, Knuckles told me to take a break, and then the robotociser got
blown up, so I’m working on theory right now,” he explained. “Most of which got blown to heck
today. My theory says that as long as the motherboard still connects to the frontal lobe, free will
shouldn’t be restorable. But I mean… chaos does whacky things at the best of times and this whole
magic music thing is another issue entirely. I’m working blind.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “It’s magic. Magic isn’t supposed to make sense.”

“Magic is just science we don’t understand yet,” he insisted. “Especially this magic. I mean, it’s on
the same wavelength as chaos, it’s just…” He suddenly stopped, staring at his readings, and the other
two looked around at him.

“Just what?” prompted Amy.

“Um,” he replied, blinking twice. He pulled up another window, and stared at the different readout
on that. “Huh.”

“What?” Cyrus asked, leaning over. “What are you looking at?”

“I uh… nothing, yet, just…” He flipped back to the other window, and then returned again. He tilted
the mileselectric, narrowing his eyes at the readings, then showed it to Cyrus. “Okay, I know you
don’t have context or whatever, but on a pure data analysis perspective… are these similar?”

Cyrus let Tails flick the two for a moment before shaking his head. “No. The first one is more…
Actually…” He took the handheld and flicked between them himself. “Hang on…”

“Oh, my god, don’t start geeking out,” Amy groaned, flopping back on her hands. “This has been
way too hard a day for you two to go all science nerd on me right now.”

Ignoring her, Cyrus shifted a little closer to Tails so they could share the mileselectric. “Can you
transpose this onto the other one?”

“Uh, yeah, one second…”

“Great. Now adjust the scale on graph one? Shorter timeframe.”
“Uh huh… yeah, that’s what I was seeing. And then if we extend the range –”

“Lower the output, too, so there’s less variant noise.”

“Right, right…”

“Oh, my god,” Amy said again, and stood up. “I’m going to find Knuckles.”

The boys ignored her, staring at the graphs. She rolled her eyes and left them to it – Tails might have had the only communicator that worked with all of them, but Knuckles would at least have something more interesting in his head than science.

Maybe.

If she was lucky.

Oh, to hell with it – she’d go to the kitchens and help make sure everyone dealing with the robotocised people remembered to eat.

The last thing she heard as she walked away was a typical Tails-the-science-geek gasp. “It’s anarchy beryl output!”

She scoffed and kept walking. If she couldn’t relax with her friends because they were busy freaking out about rocks, at least she would make herself useful.

Chapter End Notes

Music References:
New person, Same old Mistakes by Tame Impala - 2015
I could really use the win.

Like most of the kingdoms’ main seats of power, the Tashistani palace was surrounded by high walls with barbed gates. Guards patrolled the courtyard, ignoring the ever-present crowd that watched for a hint of royalty. Between the day’s festival, knowing Sonic and Sonia were in town, and then everything that had happened with the robotocised mobians, the crowd was even larger than usual, people gazing up at the palace expectantly even though it had been silent for hours.

Which was, Sonia reminded herself as the bewildered house staff obediently pulled the doors open to let them out, exactly what they’d been hoping for.

She tossed her hair back and strode forward, but once she was in centre place at the top of the stairs down to the courtyard, she set a hand on her hip and looked back at her brothers, pretending to ignore their audience-to-be.

Their plan was risky. And until the moment before Manic arrived, she had literally been about to call the whole thing off. Sonic’s fur was still damp with sweat, and there were definitely bruises under his eyes, but he smiled back at her as arrogant and confident as ever. Manic had shown up in Mobius’s fastest jet only a few hours after Sonic had returned to the palace, and he’d been riding high on some kind of desperate enthusiasm. He’d grabbed Sonic’s arms almost the second he was off the plane and started babbling questions about whether Sonic was feeling better now, or if his ‘head was less… y’know’, now that ‘it’ wasn’t ‘so much of a thing anymore’.

Honestly, Sonia had almost wondered if she was concerned for the wrong brother.

But the three of them were together now, and as Sonic had insisted, together, the Sonic Underground could do anything.

She still couldn’t help checking him one last time. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“You ask me that again and I’m outta here on principle,” he snapped, while Manic grinned.

“I’m guessing that’s the best we’re gonna get, sis’.”

“You’re both incorrigible,” she sighed, but otherwise turned back to the crowd. They’d all started whispering nervousy, and even the guards were watching, clearly worried about yet another change to the expected schedule.

The Shah hadn’t been happy when she’d told them they were going to hold an impromptu performance for his people. But he hadn’t been happy about a lot of things since Sonic and their mother had changed the world all over again, disrupting the calm and ordered world he’d built up without robotocisation. And even before then, he’d spent most of the afternoon complaining about the implication that the empire would start taking more of an active interest in his kingdom. And Sonic had told her what Raphie had told him about the partially robotocised people. So honestly,
Sonia was kind of pleased about just how much chaos they were about to sew in this perfect little terrified kingdom. If anyone deserved what the Sonic Underground could really do, it was the Shah.

“If this doesn’t work,” she noted quietly, still gazing out over the people, “we’re going to have to help those people old school resistance style. And I am so not dressed for the occasion.”

“Chill, Princess,” Sonic said, and stepped up beside her, one hand raised to cup his medallion. “I got this. We got this.”

“Yeah, we do,” Manic said, his tone weirdly determined, and they both turned to look at him. But he didn’t otherwise comment, just lifted both his hands to frame his medallion against his chest.

Every time they’d tried it since Sonic first left, neither Manic or Sonia had been able to grasp the magic surrounding their medallions. But this time, Manic’s fingers curled around a ball that wasn’t there, the string around his neck slipped away into nothingness, and the medallion itself hovered between his hands as he pulled it out and away from his body. He took a deep breath and then threw it out in front of him, casting a wave of blinding white-green light that exploded into a drum kit.

Every member of the watching public and guard hissed in recognition, but the three siblings just looked it over appraisingly.

It wasn’t the same kit they remembered. It was bigger, for one thing. Not just in scale—though it had expanded to suit Manic’s taller frame perfectly—but there were more drums than Sonia was entirely sure he could use. And there were no stands, no braces. The set hovered around him even as he stepped back a foot.

“Powers preserve,” someone whispered, and Sonia had to stop herself from turning around again. It was important that they looked confident and determined right now.

She swallowed, met Sonic’s gaze for a moment, and then followed Manic’s example. Medallion rising in a wave of magic, she flung her arms wide to reveal a full-length keyboard with two layers. It, like the drumkit, hovered in front of her, and she knew that if she grabbed it the right way, it would hook over her shoulder in a deadly rocket-launching laser rifle.

“Well,” she said softly, running her hands over the keys of the main keyboard, “nice to see how we’ve all grown up.”

Sonic snorted, but then took a deep breath that looked a lot more steadying than he’d probably intended. And then he finally expanded his own medallion into his ridiculous three-headed guitar. It was probably the least changed of their instruments: it had only elongated into a more standard guitar shape and broadened out to give him a bit more space between the necks. He barely hesitated, grabbing it out of the air and then slinging the strap around his body so it hung from his neck.

He nodded to them both. “Alright, kids. Let’s get some attention.”

“Dude, I have been like, literally waiting years for this moment,” Manic said, grabbing a pair of drumsticks from his pack and spinning them around his fingers. “I got a beat all wound up and ready. You think you can keep up, sis’?”

“Please,” she said. “Let me show you how a real musician plays to the crowd.”

She glanced back at Sonic one last time, her mind caught on the tremors she’d felt when she hugged him, and how he’d downed three bottles of water and still looked dehydrated. She didn’t like the bruises under his eyes. She didn’t like a lot of what had happened over the last two days.
But Manic had spoken to their mother, and he seemed more optimistic than he’d been all week. And they had their instruments. They were together. And most importantly, whether she liked the situation or not, Raphie needed them to distract this whole city.

She pressed a few unlabelled buttons, setting a tone for her keys, and abruptly started picking out a quick set of high notes designed to snatch and hold attention. Almost immediately, the few guards that hadn’t turned at the light show swung around to face them, and beyond the gates, the whole crowd gasped. But she didn’t pause, and the boys only let her go for two bars before picking up the beat, Manic with his drums and Sonic with his hands.

It wasn’t the kind of music they used to play. It was hard, and almost creepy, but it felt right. It encouraged the audience to clap along, especially as Sonic began slinking forward, his eyes dead-straight on the crowd.

“What, no welcome?” he asked over the clapping. “No welcome back for the Sonic Underground?”

A couple of people immediately cheered, and a few more started clapping along, even stamping their feet with the beat. Again, Sonic let it go for another couple of bars before suddenly slamming down on a riff that shot a bright white light into the sky that exploded into a firework.

And with that, he had everyone’s attention, and the song could really begin.

Across the city, Raphie hadn’t really been paying attention to much of anything. He’d spent the late hours of the afternoon curled on the edge of the building Sonic had left him on, watching the guards on the front door and completely lost for ideas about how he was supposed to get a hundred robotocised people out of what was essentially a prison, let alone lead them to a new kind of future.

But then, almost in the back of his mind, he started to hear an uneasy kind of music drumming against his brain. A rapid beat, urging him on to move, to do, to take whatever action he could.

And then, a burst of light crashed against the sky over the palace.

“The signal,” he realised. “Sonic’s signal.”

“Ohh,” a voice from nowhere sang, “what’s become of you and me?”

Below, the guards on the door shifted, and Raphie realised this was it.

It was a good two stories, but Raphie vaulted the edge of the roof, knowing his robotic legs could take it, and he dashed across the street to hide behind the boxes he’d thought were too small to shield him from the guards. But their attention was caught by the sudden music, one of them even tapping his foot. They didn’t even glance around.

And then, the guards in the hallway were all staring at the walls, listening to the impossible music. One or two were even dancing to that creepy, hypnotic beat.
“I can’t help this feeling anymore. I will go anywhere. Maybe you’ll see!”

And then, suddenly, the music blasted, more voices joining the singer to shout, “We are!” and Raphie sprang back into action again, crouch-running across the hall to the next door and toward the people he knew he could save.

“We are the shaken! We are the monsters underneath your bed! Yeah… believe what you read…!”

Raphie didn’t know the words, but he found himself mouthing along as he easily avoided guards and ran ever closer to the back room that he knew held an army of people in need of a leader.

“We are mistaken, we are the voices inside your head. Yeah, believe what you see…”

Time almost seemed to slow down as the song went on, giving him space and making him impossibly fast as he darted past soldiers and snatched keys, only having to fight once to kick unconscious the final, lone guard in front of the main warehouse floor.

When he opened the door and slipped inside, the music seemed to pause, and a hundred robotocised faces turned toward him, scared but somehow knowing.

He swallowed, and then clenched his fists and stepped forward.

“We’re getting out of here. All of us, together. We’re going where no one can hurt us again. Are you all ready?”

The music came back as they all lifted their fists in unison. “We are!”

Sonia had forgotten this. She’d forgotten how reality would shift and glitch when the music and magic was stronger than sense. She didn’t really know whether the gates had been opened or if the crowd had yanked them down. She didn’t really remember moving out into the street, into the mass of roiling, jumping dancers. She hadn’t seen Sonic scale the town fountain to stand on for his guitar solo. It made no sense for her keyboard to still be playing that same creepy lead, Manic’s drums leading the eternal clap, when both of them were in the crowd, dancing and encouraging everyone to play along.

She didn’t know how she knew to turn at exactly the right moment to meet the Shah’s heavy gaze from his private balcony and blow him a kiss.

The music and magic had this city now. They wouldn’t even notice the robotocised mobians escaping.

And they were escaping. She could feel it. Somewhere across the city, Raphie was leading every single one of them out the windows they’d pried open. He was directing them down dark alleys and into shadowed corners, snatching sheets and robes from washing lines and storefronts, covering them up and gathering supplies for the new life they would lead.

It made her feel so alive. So vibrant, so defiant! Maybe they could keep this up. Maybe they could distract the whole empire like this. Maybe everything would be fine as long as the music never stopped.
As Sonic jumped down beside her, and Manic pulled away from his side of the crowd so the three of them could stand together, Sonia looked down the crowded main road, knowing that far away, as his new family escaped through the back gates of the city, Raphie was looking back to them. She took a deep breath and leaned into her brother, hooking her arm under the guitar he’d thrown back over his shoulder.

“We are,” she sang, letting the energy start to disperse, “we are the shaken.”

“We are the monsters,” Manic sang back, and Sonic grinned weakly, looping his own arms over their shoulders.

“We are the shaken.”

“Underneath your bed.”

“Yeah,” they all sang together, slower now, “believe what you see…”

And with that, the music faded away, their instruments glowed and then shot back into their medallions, and Sonia had to subtly grab at Sonic to hide how his weight suddenly buckled. But all three of them kept smiling for the crowds.

“Dude,” Manic hissed from the corner of his mouth, “you cool?”

“Ice cold,” Sonic grunted back, still grinning broadly as the crowd applauded. “Now would one of you please go play royalty for the nice people?”

Keeping her smile in place, Sonia leaned forward, using her free hand to gesture grandly to the crowd, “Manic, dear brother? Make a point of being here for a reason other than the three of us coming together to perform a very distracting song?”

He blinked at her for a second, then flinched and nodded. “Oh! Yeah, like, yeah,” he said, slipping out from under Sonic’s arm to step forward to the crowd. “Yo, guys, Tashistan knows how to party! That was tight!”

As the crowd all cheered, Sonia quietly shifted to get a better grip on Sonic, taking more of his weight while still making it look like a casual familial hug. She tightened her grip on his hip and quietly asked, “Ice cold, huh? Because it feels like you’re burning up.”

“Shut up, I’m fine,” he said, lifting his free hand to wave at the crowd.

“This was too much in one day,” she said, pretending to giggle.

He slanted a dirty look her way before turning back. “Too much politics, maybe. I told you I’m fine.”

“You’re seeing a doctor the second we’re back in Mobotropolis,” she replied cheerfully, and when he shifted his arm to yank painfully on her hair, she pinched him in response. Neither of them stopped watching Manic as he shifted into proper political mode.

“So, there was totally a reason we decided to come out here to perform, for the first time in almost thirty months, as the Sonic Underground,” he said. “Tashistan is like, in a lot of ways, it’s like the goal, you know? You guys totally came back after the war. You pulled together, you built yourselves back up. I mean, look at this festival you guys had today! I’d never believe this was the same city I was in three years ago, SWATbots roamin’ the streets, robotociser in the palace – your Shah’s really turned this place around, and he could not have done it without all’a you.”

The crowd cheered proudly, and Manic paused to let it die down before glancing back at his siblings,
checking them for the encouragement. When they both nodded for him to keep going, he swallowed, squared his shoulders, and turned back.

“But we know all this came at a cost. Nothing’s free, right? We lost a lotta people on the way here. We all like, we all made sacrifices, yeah? We all… we all made choices that maybe… maybe sometimes we wish we hadn’t. There was a lotta stuff we learned. A lotta stuff it would’ve been nice to know three years ago,” He paused again, his head turning slightly but not quite enough for him to look back at Sonic and Sonia before he looked back up. “If we’re gonna keep growing, keep going, keep getting better, we’re all gonna have to maybe like… change some things. Change the way we think. Change the way we look at people. We can’t be like, living the same lives we have for the last fifteen years. We all gotta stand up and make new choices. Better choices.”

“Not that I’m arguin’ or whatever,” Sonic mumbled into Sonia’s ear, “but what the heck is he talkin’ about?”

“I don’t know, probably the Cyborg Prisons; keep smiling,” she advised just as quietly.

“You guys have been like, leadin’ the way for us in recovery,” Manic continued. “I hope we can continue to look to you guys as we all grow and change into the strong, kind, stylish people Mobius should be known for. Remember,” he added, voice suddenly rising into a triumphant shout, “we are the shaken, we are the monsters, we are still here!”

And as he threw his fist into the sky, the whole crowd did too, shouting, “We are!”

Sonia’s smile slipped, Sonic’s arm tightened a little around her shoulders, and they exchanged confused glances, but didn’t say a word.

The whole performance had turned out a little more aggressive than they probably should have gone, Sonia realised a little late, but… that was kind of the point, she reminded herself. This was fine.

Yeah. This would probably be fine.

After shoving Sonic into the back of their jet and ordering him to sleep (which, unsurprisingly, was one of the few directions she’d ever given him that he followed without comment), Sonia and Manic made sure to follow royal protocol to the letter in bidding the Shah and his entourage farewell.

“Thank you for your hospitality on such a difficult day,” Sonia added, curtseying a little more deeply than their respective stations actually required. Now that the magic wasn’t influencing her quite so much, she kind of regretted blowing him that sarcastic kiss. “You and your kingdom truly are a model for us all in this time of transition.”

She got the cool response she probably deserved, but they got out unscathed. Manic held up a hand to his own entourage as they headed toward the jets. “I’m gonna like, ride with these guys for a while. Follow us to the next waypoint and I’ll switch over so we can go back to Mobotropolis.”

“Of course, your highness,” his security head acknowledged. “We’ll leave you to strategise.”

'Strategise' was a pretty nice way of saying ‘regroup’, but hey. They retreated to the back of the jet and waited for take-off before continuing their conversation.
“I don’t understand,” Sonia admitted once the cruising engines were employed. “You’re saying our powers come from Sonic?”

“That’s what Mother said. I don’t think she like, knows why he’s cursed though,” he said softly. “But she said she knew it before we were even born.”

Sonia frowned, leaning forward to look at the seats where Sonic was still slumped and dead to the world. “Cursed? I don’t know, Manic – having superpowers doesn’t sound like much of a curse to me.”

“Only because we haven’t seen it get really bad yet,” he insisted. “Cyrus said this chaos stuff could totally warp someone’s mind. Like, total vegetable-town. That’s why Sonic was actin’ so weird before.”

She raised a doubtful eyeridge, but Manic just shook his head and leaned forward, voice becoming more urgent.

“Seriously! You didn’t spend a lotta time with him before he got the medallion back on, but I saw enough to know. He was all like, quiet? And sometimes, when you’d say stuff to him, he’d just, y’know… look at you. And when he finally did answer, it’d be like… totally not on topic. I didn’t realise it then, but… yeah. I bet it was because this chaos stuff was affecting his head.”

It wasn’t much of an argument, but Sonia had to admit she knew nothing about chaos, and Manic had spoken to their mother about it. She didn’t have much choice but to believe him. She sighed and sat back on the cargo pallet, folding her arms over her body. “But the medallions share the load between us? Make it safe?”

“Yeah, supposedly. Kind of a risk, but…” He paused, glancing away for a second before coming back to her with determined eyes. “I dunno about you, but if it keeps Sonic safe and healthy, I am totally willing to take that hit.”

“Well, of course,” she said, annoyed that he’d even imply she might not. “I just think it seems odd that with everything that’s happened, all the things the Oracle of Delphius ever told us, all that time we spent training with the monks… how has no one ever told us this before?”

“They probably didn’t know,” he pointed out. “I mean, come on. Most of our training was like, basic. Physical stuff, and the whole working together thing. That’s just standard team building whatever, right? We basically had to work out the medallions on our own.”

“That’s… true…”

“And if Mother doesn’t even know where the curse comes from, why would anyone else?” he asked. “I’m bettin’ she never even told anyone about it. You know how like, secretive she is. She totally would’ve made this out to be some expected magical power just so no one would ask questions.”

She pursed her lips, because as much as she didn’t like it… “The aristocrats would absolutely make an issue of it. They’d say he wasn’t mentally stable. If you know your history, you could even trace that back to Revalt for some good old skeletons in the family closet. It’s just asking for another rebellion,” she muttered, and then sighed. After what he’d told her last night about that jerk Solar, it felt like all she was hearing lately was more lousy things that her stupid elder brother had been dealing with on his own. All these things she’d never even thought to notice. “Okay. Okay, I understand. I just… I had no idea.”
“Hey, yeah, I… guilt like whoa, I get it,” Manic said, reaching over to grip her shoulder. “All those times we got jealous over the whole speed thing? Tellin’ him off for not thinkin’ straight?”

“Ugh,” she said, rather succinctly, in her opinion. “But I suppose at least now we know. And now that the medallions are back, we can help. Still, we pushed him way too far today. After what he and Mother did, we absolutely should not have done that performance.”

“I dunno, maybe it was a good thing,” he said, and when she looked at him he grimaced. “What? He’s been out there for years, soakin’ up all this power, right? His brain’s probably mush under the pressure. Maybe droppin’ the power level to like, minimum is a good thing. Like a hard reset, y’know?”

Her frown deepened, but Manic just spread his hands like she was being irrational.

“Power’s basically electricity, right? This is an actual thing in electronics. Sometimes, you gotta let a battery go completely dead—” He broke off at her immediate scandalised reaction, holding up a finger. “—bad choice of words, but y’know—sometimes, stickin’ a battery in a freezer so all the power drains out actually makes the charge work better when it comes back. It’s a thing.”

“Our brother is not an electrical device!” she snapped. “You saw him, Manic! He was barely able to stand after that song!”

“And if you plug a battery in right after it’s been in the freezer, it ain’t gonna do anything, but when it recharges, it’ll be better than ever!” he shot back, like it was obvious.

For a minute, they just stared at each other, before they both gave up and looked away. It was a scenario they’d been in several times over the last few years: uncharted territory, where neither of them knew what was right, wrong, or just plain crazy. All they could do was follow their mother’s direction.

And their mother’s direction so far on this topic had been to mostly hide it behind vague theories of magic and prophecy.

Sonia lifted a hand to her forehead and tried to move on. “All that aside… I think our plan is working. Sonic’s been putting every leader we have on guard, which has opened up some complicated discussions I’ve been wanting to have. And what happened today was a huge step forward, even if we now have a whole new class of citizens to deal with. How were things on that front when you left?”

“Not great, but it could’ve been worse,” he admitted. “I saw a couple of people that were free and… well, like, as healthy as you can be in that condition. They were mostly just in shock. But grateful to be able to move again.”

“Not great, but it could’ve been worse,” he admitted. “I saw a couple of people that were free and… well, like, as healthy as you can be in that condition. They were mostly just in shock. But grateful to be able to move again.”

“It’s going to be a big project, finding everyone and reuniting families,” she said softly. “And honestly, I’m not sure we have time to devote to it. Not with the political upheaval we’re forcing on everyone. If we’re going to get the aristocrats and kingdom leaders in line, we can’t afford to drop the pressure on them. But this deserves attention.”

“I know, right… Maybe I can take the lead?”

She shook her head, cutting the thought off before it could even properly form. “You need to look into redevelopment. We were talking about it before the festival, and between the fact that we have the amphitheatre as a proof of concept and Lord Head still squawking over his warehouses, not to mention the Mall and the Library draining Trevor’s resources, we can’t afford to be seen abandoning
“Maybe Sonic then?” Manic suggested, but she just kept shaking her head.

“I need him as a tangible threat, which means he needs to keep doing what he’s doing. If he stops, the common people will lose confidence in our strength, and the aristocrats will regain power through financial fear.”

“We can’t just like, ignore it!” Manic argued, and she turned a blunt look on him.

“I know that, Manic. I’m just pointing out our lack of time and resources! Something has to give!” She sat back again, closing her eyes to better fight off tears of frustration. This was what royalty did. This was what they should have been doing for years, and could have if they’d just been working together. Once she was confident the tears wouldn’t fall, she reopened her eyes to gaze at the ceiling. “Trevor’s right. We need more people.”

“How are more staff gonna help?” he asked. “The ERU aren’t gonna be able to take care of the robotocised mobians – they’re soldiers and stuff.”

“That’s not what I meant. Yes, we need to start hiring more staff, and the ERU are drastically overworked and okay, the entire public sector needs bolstering, but you and I can’t run that right now,” she said. “We need more support internally. More of us.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure, I’ll get right on that cloning machine. Who knows? Tails is supposedly so great; maybe he can build us one.”

“Shut up,” she said absently, only to immediately frown because… actually… that had kind of been the idea in calling Tails to court. She’d expected him to be older, but she had kind of intended to make him part of the Palace. And she’d brought Knuckles in to be a visible show of political strength, but he had reportedly been doing a lot to clear out some of the badlands. And while she hadn’t expected Amy, she was shaping up to be an excellent addition to the Household. “Sonic’s friends might not be a bad idea. The robotocised mobian issue would be the perfect project for a royal consort, after all.”

“For a what?” Manic asked, jerking upright. “You mean Amy? Dude, sis’, I only just asked her out on a date this morning!”

She blinked. She’d been mostly leading up to a complaint about having to use practically-strangers in place of Stripes being useful, but… “You did? What did she say?”

He blushed, fidgeting awkwardly, and Sonia grinned. It was a tangent, and silly, and not at all what they should have been talking about, but they both kind of needed the distraction. Besides, she could totally justify it as being a political manoeuvre, or something. Totally. Bolstering the royal ranks. Sure.

“Okay, this date is now my absolute first priority. You must tell me everything.”

“He’s not picking up.”

Knuckles watched from under his brow as Tails paced back and forth, staring at his communicator.
like that would make Sonic respond. “Can you tell if he still has it on him?”

“No. But I’m sure he would – I don’t think he takes it off,” he said, but he looked up, brow furrowing anxiously as he glanced around his suite. “But, I mean, there are heaps of reasons he wouldn’t answer. He could be busy. He could be napping. He naps all the time. He basically only stops napping to save the world, and the world isn’t in danger right now. He is. He’s in danger. From his family. Oh, man.”

“Tails,” Knuckles said waringly, and he stopped, then pointed at him.

“But he’s not. Because I might be wrong. It’s just a chart. Correlation is not causation. And I had to manipulate it to make the two data sets match. And I only have one data set from the music stuff. So I am probably overreacting,” he said. And then he turned and did another circuit back and forth before adding, “But I might not be. Energy doesn’t just happen. It has to come from somewhere. And Sonic has been visibly weakening while he’s been here. And Shadow seemed convinced before we even had any data. He’s been running around spying on people. And there’s that Chaos Trap in the basement. That’s proof right there!”

“Tails,” Knuckles said again, through gritted teeth, and Tails held up his hands.

“Except it’s not proof, because it’s an Eggman machine. Eggman built it. Eggman didn’t even finish it! And he built it like, years before he knew what Sonic was capable of. He built it before Sonic was even born! It’s clutching at straws. It’s crazy.” Another circuit to build his panic back up and he continued, “Of course, if he was working with someone that could see the future… who might want to use Sonic’s chaos… I mean, it’s not impossible. And she used it today. She used his chaos today. That’s… I mean, it’s circumstantial, but it’s evidence. Kind of. It –”

Knuckles’ patience finally snapped. “Tails! Stop!”

He spun around to face him again, wide-eyed and panicky. “But Knuckles –”

“No! Knock it off! You’re giving me a headache!” he growled, and then sat back with his arms folded the better to keep from hitting anything. “You’re making a whole heap of assumptions here. That rock of yours can manipulate chaos energy, so what? Yeah, it kinda looks like whatever it is that the medallions are made out of, but so does a bunch of other stuff. And so what if the music looks like the same kind of power? I don’t get magic, but I know what it feels like, and I can tell you it doesn’t feel like chaos.”

“Because it’s refined and –!”

“I said shut up!” he ordered, glaring at him, “And besides, even if you’re right, and all of this is some big conspiracy to use Sonic’s chaos, it’s still his family! Why would they want to hurt him?”

“I don’t know!” he cried, flailing his arms. “Why would anyone want to hurt Sonic?”

“Because he’s a freaking idiot who needs hitting around the head!” he yelled, before realising that hadn’t actually been a legitimate question and he probably shouldn’t have answered. He carried on anyway. “But his family don’t think so. I know Sonia and Manic. No way they’d do anything to hurt him.”

“Then what was this afternoon?” Tails shot back. “You said yourself that Aleena used Sonic’s power—too much power—to do that song-spell-thing!”

“I know what I said!” he snapped. “And I still don’t like it! It wasn’t natural, but…!” He got up, turned around, and bodily kicked the couch he’d been sitting on across the room. It hit the wall with
a loud bang and the sound of cracking wood, but it wasn’t nearly as satisfying as he needed. He wanted to smash something. He wanted to tear something apart with his knuckle-spikes. He wanted to get into a big brawling fight with Sonic until they were both black, blue(r), and completely out of energy. Without the option for any of it, he just growled and turned back to Tails. “It’s like Amy said. Who cares if that blue idiot gets all his energy drained if it means hundreds of people get their minds back? Worthy sacrifice!”

“That’s not what she said,” he insisted, but they both faltered anyway, because like it or not…

There were hundreds of people in the basement still in pain, traumatised, and hurt in ways neither of them could possibly understand, but… at least they had their minds back. They could move under their own free will. They could think for themselves. That was a good thing. And cleaning up pollution—saving a sick planet—they couldn’t deny that was important. And this city… this empire… it needed help. Help Sonic could give.

But the cost… Sonic’s energy, Sonic’s freedom to just leave any time he felt like it… that didn’t seem fair. Or…

For Knuckles, it felt legitimately wrong. On a base, instinctive level, this felt like something he should put a stop to. If this was all the manipulation of chaos, then it wasn’t how it was supposed to be used. The stone Tails had shown him earlier put him off-balance, and he didn’t like how different Sonic seemed with the medallions, so if they were actually anarchy beryl too, then he really hated them, but…

“What if he doesn’t care?”

Knuckles looked up, and Tails stared back at him, suddenly looking very small and young.

“He… he knew coming back was a bad idea,” he said quietly. “He told me. He knew bad things would happen. But he came anyway. What if… what if I tell him everything, and it’s all true, and he doesn’t care?”

“Then he’s a bigger idiot than I thought,” Knuckles said gruffly, but Tails didn’t even react.

“What are we supposed to do if he stays here with these people, Knuckles?” he asked. “What are we gonna do if he becomes King of Mobius?”

He knew Tails was mostly just asking on a personal level, and that the answer was simple. Whether he was a king or whatever, Sonic would never stop being Tails’ best friend. He’d expect Tails to move into the palace and become the royal scientist or whatever. Sonic might change, but his friendship with Tails never would.

But that wasn’t really the question they had to answer.

The question, really, was a lot bigger than that.

What if Sonic the Hedgehog wasn’t there the next time Eggman hatched some crazy scheme in the human territories? What if he was too busy ruling an empire to investigate when Eggman claimed to turn over a new leaf and go into interstellar capitalism? What if the world broke apart, or a god started going crazy, or time splintered, and Sonic was too tied into providing magic for his family to gather the Chaos Emeralds and deal with it?

Who was going to step up? Shadow? Who had to be conned or paid to do anything that didn’t directly benefit him? Knuckles, who needed extra energy to transform and had a more specific job besides? Tails? Amy Rose?
And who the hell were they to just expect Sonic to take care of it? What made them any different to this kingdom, who were all so disappointed when Sonic didn’t solve their problems?

Knuckles hesitated another second, then threw up his hands and turned around again. “I’m going to smash robots!”

“Wh- Knuckles, it’s pitch black out there! It’s going to take us an hour to get to the Barrackfield by car!” Tails objected, but he just flung another hand back at him, already stalking toward the door.

“Don’t care! Smashing!”

“B- I – ughh…! I just left Cyrus to talk to you before, we can’t leave!”

“Let Mane-for-brains cry about it; I don’t care.”

“But…! Are we at least gonna find Amy first? Where’d she even go?”


“Knuckles!”

As stealthy and impressive as they were, even human-made jets were still very large aircraft, and Mobotropolis was altogether too protective of its airspace. Since Rouge didn’t particularly want to join the palace party just yet, she’d had to land on a rooftop on the edge of the city and call for Shadow to join her.

He hadn’t sounded particularly impressed with her timing. “You were going to take the long way around.”

“And I still am,” she said as she opened the hatch. “I just need your assistance on this particular part of the detour.”

“I highly doubt your detour is more important than my mission.”

“Let’s just say they might intersect a little.” She jumped down onto the rooftop where she could look over the city she’d heard so much about. Right now, it just looked like any other city, only with the sickening sweet smell of rotting garbage and a thick mugginess to the air. “I’ll get you right back to the champagne and caviar schmoozing as soon as the job is done. But this task may end up needing a few skills and abilities you have.”

Appealing to Shadow’s ego didn’t always work, so she assumed he must have been at least a little frustrated with however his own job was progressing that his only response was a vague grunt and turning off his communicator. Satellite looked at her curiously as they waited. “What does this partner of yours have that we would need?”

“A few things,” she said. “Mostly, he’s just powerful. If this goes badly and we end up fighting all of your former comrades, Shadow can take on an army, which means I won’t have to smudge my makeup fighting people I don’t have to. But there is one other very useful aspect that I’d like to take advantage of.”

“Which is?”
“Oh, I’ll let you see that for yourself,” she said with a smirk. “Consider yourself a test sample.”

He’d frowned but not commented, and true to form it only took Shadow a few more minutes to arrive. He skated straight up the side of their building and vaulted the edge before landing, in the typically showy style Rouge very much approved of, with one hand on his hip and a scowl already in place.

“Sonic?!” Satellite gasped, and Shadow glared at him while Rouge grinned.

“Lovely. No, not in the slightest,” she said cheerfully. “Allow me to introduce my partner, Agent Shadow the Hedgehog of the Guardian Unit of Nations. Any resemblance to do-gooder superheroes is entirely coincidental and somewhat baffling given the difference in fur. Shadow, meet Satellite the Sunbear. We’re going after his son.”

Both men looked at her sharply, but she ignored Satellite to focus on Shadow’s narrowed gaze.

“Who is…?”

“Leader of the Anarchist movement. I assume you’ve heard about them?” she asked, and he inclined his head.

“I don’t think murder, even of a terrorist element, will endear us to Mobian royalty,” he observed, and she shrugged.

“I hadn’t intended on murder, though that may be an outcome I’m not entirely averse to,” she said, “From what Mr Sunbear has told me, the kid is stupid enough to start a civil war, and at one point he thought he could manipulate Sonic into committing murder. Regardless of how Mobius feels about it, that makes him a loose end GUN will appreciate us tying up, don’t you think?”

Something shifted on Shadow’s expression, hinting at intrigue. But his only other response was a side-glance at Satellite. “Speaking of loose ends. Why do you have one?”

“Because I should have killed the dumb kid myself,” growled Satellite. “He took my sleuth from me.”

In typical fashion, the only hint Shadow gave that he wouldn’t have understood any of that was a quiet grunt, and Rouge smiled, turning back to the jet. “If nothing else, he’ll be able to get us into their camp in case someone notices black and red fur over your heroic good looks for once. And he’ll be a handy scapegoat when Sonic inevitably objects to our dirty tactics. We didn’t do anything – this was an issue between anarchists.”

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Satellite grumbled, scowling at her, but Shadow only watched him carefully for a few moments before silently following Rouge up and into the jet.

Once they were all seated and buckled in, Rouge started take-off procedures and shot Shadow a warmer smile. “How is your mission going?”

“We have a problem,” he said. “But not the one we expected. The situation is complex.”

“Hm. Well, it is Mobius. And I do hate a Mobian problem,” she said, going back to the controls. “How long do we have before Sonic or his cheerleaders get involved?”

“They are distracted right now. And even if they weren’t, Sonic isn’t due back in Mobotropolis until tomorrow night. We have time,” he said, and then paused before adding, “When he does return, there will be issues to be addressed.”
“Oh?”

“The robotocised mobians were given back sentience,” he said, and when her hands hesitated on the controls, he lowered his voice to ensure Satellite wouldn’t hear his next statement, “through forced manipulation of Sonic’s chaos. By the queen.”

Rouge paused, her eyes wide but expression otherwise unreadable, before she blinked rapidly and went back to her work. “Oh,” she said again, and pulled the jet into the air. “We’re going to have to deal with that.”

“Hmph,” Shadow acknowledged, and turned his attention to the sky.

The first waypoint was the edge of Translyvan, at one of the few fancy hotels that had survived Robotnik’s reign. They’d barely been able to prod Sonic awake enough to guide him into a room, where he promptly passed out again, but Sonia took a few extra minutes to say goodbye to Manic before calling her mother for the evening report.

Aleena looked almost as exhausted as Sonic, but her back was straight where she sat behind her desk. But she did pour what seemed to be the last cup from a very large carafe of tea as she asked, “Aside from the obvious, how were things in Alles and Tashistan?”

“As you might expect,” Sonia said, grimacing slightly because no one else was around to see. “I wasn’t able to make much headway with either of them, but they’re both very clearly aware that they’ll have to rethink their diplomatic strategy if we continue to bolster our position. Shah Fakhur actually suggested reopening free borders between the Central Kingdom and Tashistan.”

“Excellent. Isolationism within kingdoms is hardly helping the situation,” Aleena noted, taking a long sip before looking up again. “And Alles?”

“That’s a much more complicated situation, but I’ll be curious to speak to Renee again after what happened today. Sonic made quite the impression on certain Allesian aristocrats she was suspicious of even before your... song.” She grimaced again, not quite sure whether that was the best way to phrase that strange, powerful spell that had restored the robotocised people’s free will. Music or no, it hadn’t felt like any song she’d ever performed. But she forced herself to move past it by focussing on the politics. “I won’t be surprised if the Allesian economy suffers again, but they won’t be able to blame us without admitting to using robotocised workers. With any luck they’ll just accept their losses and hire the –” She stopped herself from saying ‘living’, and then bit back on the words ‘flesh and blood’. They’d have to find better language for all of this. She pressed a hand to her temple and sighed. “Either way, they’ll have to start paying wages. So I consider it an inevitable improvement, no matter the short term damage.”

“Indeed. You and your brother have been making truly impressive progress with such short meetings,” Aleena said quietly. “Well done, Princess Sonia.”

She smiled despite herself and the situation, always pleased with her mother’s praise.

Aleena hesitated, taking another sip of tea before setting it down and almost appearing to fidget with the cup before asking, “How is he, by the way?”

“You mean Sonic?” Again, Sonia stopped herself, pausing to consider the situation at large. Her
mother was so good at speaking in double tones. Was she asking because of what Manic had said? Did she know he would have told Sonia about where their powers came from? And if she did, did that mean she was really asking about him, or was she asking about this… chaos… curse… thing?

Or did she somehow know what Sonic had told Sonia last night? About his history with the anarchists and that psycho murderer? Sonia wanted to take that whole thing to her grave, but she knew it would come back to bite them, and probably soon. These things always did.

Or was Aleena actually asking about the other overlander in the room? The fact that this was Sonic’s first diplomatic mission, and he was in no way built for politics, but their entire political strategy was built around him right now? Was Aleena actually asking how Sonic was holding up against the pressure?

Did she want Sonia’s opinion on whether Sonic would be able to handle being named heir apparent?

Or was Sonia just tired and stressed and making an awful lot out of a simple question?

“I think he’ll be ready to take on the Transylvan High Druid after he gets a good night’s sleep and a solid breakfast,” she said slowly, eyeing her mother’s holographic expression. “But tomorrow afternoon’s trip to Sanctuary will be a welcome relief for us all.”

For a long moment, Aleena didn’t so much as shift, just gazing back at her quietly. In the end, she just took a deep breath and nodded once. “I’m certain it will be. And how are you doing, my darling? You seem tired.”

“It’s been a long few days,” she admitted. “But we’re on the downhill stretch now. Tomorrow afternoon will be wonderful, and then I’m going to start looking forward to the ball! It’s been so long since we’ve had a proper function, and this one will be so important!”

“Indeed it will. But don’t let that distract from your current duties,” she warned. “Your current work is just as vital as the ball will be.”

She nodded. Despite all the announcements and work that would go on, the ball would probably be her big chance to unwind. The next few days weren’t going to be easier. “Of course.”

Aleena paused, just looking at her again for a few seconds, before smiling. “Well, it has been a long day for all of us. I’ll let you retire. Thank you for checking in.”

“Of course. Good night, Mother.”

“Good night, my daughter.”

The hologram switched off, and Sonia sat back in her chair, just staring at the transmitter. Without thinking too much, she picked it up again and scrolled through her contacts, wishing there was someone she could call. It had been such a long, hard, complicated couple of days.

Week.

Month.

Years.

And all her careful planning was just… not doing her any good.

She sighed, expanding a contact to stare at the adjoining picture.
Here she was, same as she’d been three years ago, jumping from plan to improvisation to battle-ground strategy, worried and exasperated by her brothers in equal parts, with no confidence in the people she called her allies and no idea what her mother was thinking.

She was even gazing at Bartleby’s picture on her transmitter, wanting and refusing to call him (the arrogant, pompous jerk), because she’d learned too many times that he couldn’t be trusted.

She huffed and tossed the transmitter aside, then pressed her hands to her eyes the better to stem the tears before they could fall. Then she pulled them away with a determined breath and stood up. “Enough. I’ll feel better after I eat something and get some sleep.”

Even if Sonic was sick with this chaos thing. Even if they were somehow siphoning power from him unconsciously. Even if their mother knew and had been… it was for his own good, it had to be. And Manic was finally asking out a girl who would… maybe be a good consort. She’d be great at charity work at least, Sonia was sure of it. So who cared if Stripes was being an idiot and Knuckles had changed and Tails was a child and the people she’d thought were her friends were too caught up in her being their princess to tell her she’d been doing a lousy job as Vizier and her mother was an eternal mystery and she still had three more complicated leaders to meet and…

Things could only keep getting better from here.

She would make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Music References

Monsters – Matchbook Romance (2006)
As dawn rose over the camp, leaving only a few weary-looking guards on the edges, Shadow slowly stood up and looked around at the other two.

“Seems the time to strike.”

“Pace your pashas, Pretty Boy. I didn’t see Solar,” Satellite said quietly. “Didn’t see any of the inner circle.”

“And if we watched this place for a whole night and didn’t see any of the ringleaders, we’re not in the right place,” Rouge surmised, but Satellite shook his head.

“This is too big to be anything but Home Camp,” he said. “But a whole night without them strutting around making a show means they’re not here. And Solar never scuttles out from under his rock unless he’s got something planned.”

They looked at him for a moment, then each other. Complications were something they didn’t need.

Having woken up feeling slow and heavy but otherwise fine, Sonic had spent a little too long blinking at his surroundings and piecing together vague memories, trying to figure out how he’d gotten from the Tashistani Palace to what looked like an Eastern-style motel. So when his communicator started vibrating, he wasn’t exactly paying a lot of attention as he switched it on.

“Hey, Tails.”

“Oh, Sonic, thank goodness! I’ve been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday!”

“Dude, chill, I’m rockin’ the royal roadtrip,” he reminded him, and started the process of crawling out of bed. He really did feel heavy, to the point that he kind of wanted to check a mirror and see if he’d gained weight or something. “How’s tricks?”

“Forget the tricks, how are you? Are you okay?”


Tails made a noise that sounded a little like he was cutting himself off, and then a mumble, before he groaned. “I need to talk to you. I found out some stuff about – are you alone right now?”

He frowned, glancing around the room. It looked like your average bedroom, which meant it
probably led on to a suite, which meant there were probably people nearby. But he couldn’t hear anyone. “Close enough, why? What’s goin’ on?”

“This is serious, Sonic, I have to talk to you privately.”

Foot tapping in growing annoyance, Sonic folded his free arm over his torso and scowled through his glove at the communicator. “And you’re seriously tryin’ my patience here, li’l bro. If you got somethin’ to say, then say it, ’cause I got better stuff to be doin’.”

Only once it was out of his mouth, and he heard Tails’ silent response, did Sonic realise how much of a jerk he was being. He grimaced, shifting in place, vaguely aware that he should feel guilty over talking to his best friend like that, but he was actually only uncomfortable at best. That… wasn’t the kind of guy he wanted to be.

But before he could even try to say something to soften the blow, Tails said, “I think the medallions are doing something to you. I think they’re dangerous.”

“You’re wrong,” he said, without even thinking about it, and Tails grunted.

“I’m not! You’ve been getting more and more tired since you started wearing that thing! I think it’s made of Anarchy Beryl and I think it’s absorbing your chaos and Knuckles agrees with me –”

“Yeah, right. If Knucklehead agrees with you, that’s always a good sign you’re on the wrong path there, li’l buddy.”

“Sonic!” he cried, and once again, just for a moment, Sonic realised he was being a jerk. This was his best friend and he was obviously worried. And Sonic was also maybe being an idiot, because Tails was smarter than he could ever hope to be and they were talking about chaos, which Tails studied and Knuckles kind of… took care of. In a spiritual sort of destiny kind of way. Even if they were being stupid and ridiculous, ignoring them outright was pretty much the epitome of dumb.

He shuffled his feet, looked around the room again, and decided reason would have to triumph here. “Tails, the medallions are just magical artefacts. I know you don’t like that, but it’s what they are. They use the power of harmony –”

“They use your chaos!” he interrupted. “They’re made of Anarchy Beryl, which is a conduit for Chaos Energy, and they’re using your power to give your family a refined kind of chaos. Which means they’re sucking it out of you.”

Which… made a kind of sense. He would maybe buy that. But still. “So?”

“So?! What do you mean so?”

“I mean, so what? It’s still harmony. Still team work. When me and my sibs work together, there’s nothing we can’t do. I’m stronger with them than –” He stopped himself before he could say ‘I ever was with you and Knuckles’, not least because he wasn’t altogether certain it was true, and it was definitely another jerk move. He quickly covered by continuing, “We’re stronger together than apart. An’ when me an’ Mom are workin’ together, there ain’t nothing that can stop us.”

“You’re changing, you know you are!” Tails cried desperately. “Listen to yourself! You aren’t even being grammatical!”

“Dude,” he said, giving the communicator a blank look, “if all you got is a complaint about my language skills, then you ain’t got nothing.”
“‘Ain’t got nothing’ means I have something, by the way! You taught me that!”

Sonic twitched, because he was right, but that wasn’t the point. “Look, li’l buddy: I can trip rhymes with every single line, running with words like you never before heard. Knowing the rules, I kick ’em all out, so I can run with style in every bout. You might be saying that I’m speaking ‘wrong’, but that’s just because you ain’t comin’ on strong. And wrong or right, I wanna have fun, so if this is all you got, then know what? We’re done.”

“What?” Tails demanded, but Sonic just rolled his eyes and slapped off the communicator.

He was pretty sure he’d feel bad about it later, but right now he was hungry, sluggish, and he was pretty sure he and Sonia were supposed to be doing a lot of travelling today. If he was going to be having dumb arguments, he would need to save them up for her.

Though he did pause, hand absently rising to touch his medallion as he remembered the way Aleena had called to him yesterday… how much he’d needed his siblings after so many years of not needing anyone… And Tails was right, too – he hadn’t used this kind of slang in ages, disliking the messy aggression of it. And he’d just completely blown off someone who usually mattered to him more than anyone, and who had just been trying to help him.

That… was not the kind of guy…

He scowled and shoved it away. He had more important things to deal with. He had a job to do.

With everything that had happened yesterday, Amy was a little surprised when the attendant Heronette approached her while she was eating breakfast and asked if she’d thought about what she would wear in the market. She’d thought for sure that Manic—heck, everyone—would be preoccupied with the people downstairs for days.

But Heronette just grinned. “Of course! We’re all very excited about your first official outing,” she said. “It’s hardly complete, but we’ve already begun building a rudimentary wardrobe, and if you’ll forgive my boldness, I have a few ideas about what you might like to wear today.”

Amy gaped for a few seconds before she managed to gain enough self-control to lower her spoon and attempt some dignity.

“Um… o-okay, but… what about the robotocised people?” she asked awkwardly. “They still need help.”

“Oh, yes, of course, but we haven’t officially announced that yet,” Heronette reminded her. “And until we do, then it’s very important to keep up appearances. And if you don’t mind me saying so, Miss Amy Rose, in the right outfit, I think you’ll have just the kind of appearance the mobian people need right now!”

Which was… vaguely insulting, but okay. Amy blinked and wished that she’d spent more time talking to Bartleby. Or even Stripes. Someone who could have told her how she was supposed to react to stuff like this.

Heronette took her back to her suite, and Amy was a little disturbed to discover the wardrobe she’d been ignoring since they arrived had several dresses, all in what seemed to be her size. In any other
situation, she might have been thrilled to try them all on and parade around in the different fashions, but as it was she was mostly just weirded out. Luckily, Heronette didn’t give her much time to think, chattering on about how it was important not to look too eager or flirty, so a casual, effortless style would be best. But obviously, she still needed to look feminine and graceful – something appropriately girlish would be best, and suit that slightly unpolished edge she would have to eventually buff out.

“Unpolished…?” Amy spluttered, while Heronette rifled rapidly through the wardrobe and ignored her.

In a whirlwind of words and fabric, Amy found herself in a more grown up version of something she may have worn she was a kid: a blue sweater and yellow tennis skirt, with white boots and a metal flower chain in place of her headband. It wasn’t exactly her style anymore, but she didn’t really object. Mostly she just felt a bit confused.

The worst thing was when Heronette took her out to the front hall, which she’d never actually been to before. Manic was waiting for her with a few other people, and he blushed as she walked in.

She really, really wished she’d had time to talk to Bartleby about Manic.

“Whoa, Amy, you look great.” He grinned nervously, rubbing under his spines. “Uh… a-anyway, um… So, like… oh. This is Paige,” he added, gesturing to a woman that Amy couldn’t specifically place as any one species beyond ‘mammal’, or maybe ‘librarian’. She nodded to Amy from behind sharp glasses as Manic shuffled in place. “She’s like, got the schedule we gotta follow.”

“Schedule?” Amy repeated. “I thought this was just a trip to the market?”

“Oh course,” Paige said briskly, “and you are of course free to roam as his highness wishes, but time is a factor and there are a few specific vendors it would benefit us all for you to visit. The palace staff have identified six in particular, Thief Prince, that you should speak to while milady Amy Rose browses.”

Amy blinked rapidly, but Manic just took the clipboard Paige was offering and looked over it. “What’m I supposed to be talkin’ about?”

“The important thing is to talk to them,” she said blankly. “Obviously, yesterday’s events are still confidential, and specific details of the Lost Prince’s work are probably best unsaid. Personally,” she added with an almost pained grimace, “I would suggest you avoid reconstruction and the idea that the Palace may be open to external contractors in extreme circumstances, but I have been informed by the Palace General that we are not currently concerned with appropriate professional channels and procedure.”

For reasons Amy didn’t really understand, Manic snickered. Paige seemingly didn’t notice.

“Also, despite my reservations, neither the ERU or Palace Guard will be protecting you today,” she said, shifting her weight in a way that made it particularly clear how unimpressed she was with that fact, before levelling Amy with a look that was probably supposed to be respectful. “Our sources have told us that milady Amy Rose is quite skilled in martial matters, and given your own abilities, it was decided you would be better served unguarded.”

“Seriously? Like, totally unguarded?” he asked, glancing up. “Not even a tail?”

“A what?” asked Amy, and they both glanced at her. Manic grinned guiltily.

“Usually, when we go out, we get stalked by one of the Palace Guards. You don’t even like, notice
they’re there, but they are.”

“You mean… even when we went out before…? To the cafe?” she asked, and he nodded.

“They were around, yeah. Sorry I didn’t say anything. Didn’t want to like, freak you out or whatever.”

“Oh, my god,” she said, and Manic laughed while Paige pursed her lips.

“Yes, well, similar to the night you went to that… establishment in the Lower Third, circumstances have dictated that obvious freedom should trump security,” she said. “We do, however, ask that you take all precautions, your highness.”

“Yeah, yeah, got it good,” he assured her, and looked over the clipboard one last time before ripping off the first page and handing it back. He folded up the paper and then turned to Amy properly, pulling back his shoulders and grinning again. “So, like uh… shall we?”

Oh, this day was not going to be easy. But she’d never been one to shy away from a challenge, so when Manic gestured for her to lead them to the massive doors and the servants obviously waiting to open them, she took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped forward.

As the doors swung open, she was greeted not only with the sickly sweet musk of the Mobotropolis air, but also the sight of the courtyard, several guards, and a crowd of people at least five heads deep, just gazing up at her like they were all waiting.

“Whoa… more people than usual,” Manic noted. “And would ya look at all those people on the street, Paige? This is incredible!”

“Indeed,” she said coolly. “It would appear this festival, and the return of the Council of Four, has achieved its goals.”

“Well, we’re not done yet,” he said proudly, and stepped up beside Amy, offering her his arm with a blush that shone right through his fur. “So uh… like… shall we, milady?”

She hesitated, looking from his arm to the crowd to Paige to Manic’s expectant grin. There had been, she knew, much worse ideas. She took his arm and stepped out and down the steps.

The first afternoon they’d gone out, there hadn’t been that many people on the streets, and honestly, Amy had been a little too wrapped up in the excitement of learning about Sonic’s past and his family to notice if anyone stared. The nightclub had been pretty bad to start with, with everyone looking at them like they were animals in a zoo. But it was nothing compared to the way the crowd gawked as they walked out into the courtyard and out the gates.

They parted, openly awed, but Manic just laughed and waved to them all, calling out casual greetings and thanking them for coming out. Amy clung a little tighter to him and tried to focus on not tripping over her feet. Thankfully, once they were past the main cluster of the gate, the crowd eased into little more than a normal busy street, but she was still painfully aware of people staring at them as they walked.

“So um…” she said nervously, “what – what’s this whole thing about? It seems a bit more important than just a city stroll.”

Manic shrugged his free shoulder. “Sonia always says everything’s important when you’re royalty. I think I’m just like, goin’ out to talk to people, but according to people like Cyrus and Trevor I’m actually like, proving the Empire cares, or something. I dunno, it’s totally messed up. I just kinda do
what I can and what I’m told, y’know?”

“It seems like a lot of pressure,” she noted, and he laughed.

“Yeah, but Sonic always says pressure is where the Sonic Underground shines!”

She giggled despite herself. “That does sound like Sonic! An adventure’s no fun if it’s too easy! And life is definitely the greatest adventure there is!”

“The greatest adventure? Sonic said that?” he asked, and huffed. “Man, he gets weird when he’s not wearing his medallion.”

She tilted her head, but he didn’t elaborate, just gesturing to the crowd. “I mostly like comin’ out cause people are cool, and I like pretending that just comin’ out, grabbin’ a drink or some food or window shopping… I like pretending that’s still normal for me, y’know? Like I’m still kinda normal,” he added quietly, looking almost ashamed for a moment before perking up again. “But it’s actually super important. Once, back durin’ the war, we almost lost the whole thing because Mom hadn’t been seen in years, and when royalty don’t get seen for long enough, it’s basically like saying they renounce the throne, or whatever.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Sonia says it’s got something to do with our ancestor – the guy who actually made us kings. Bit of a hermit, apparently, and so they like, made laws to force him to deal with people,” he explained. “I’m not like, official or anything yet—still the Thief Prince and whatever—but me comin’ out and actually talkin’ to people is still kinda helpin’ the cause.”

Amy nodded slowly. It didn’t make a lot of sense to her, but she could kind of see why it might to other people. Human leaders always made a big deal about public relations, after all.

“But um… if I’m being like, honest?” Manic added awkwardly, ducking his head to peek at her through his hair. “Today ain’t really about official business for me, you know? I uh… It’s just… really cool that we can get some time together, you know?”

She forced her smile. Oh, god, why did he have to be so nice? “Absolutely. There’s something important I’d like to talk to you about.”

“Totally, me too,” he said, but then glanced at the crowd and offered her an apologetic smile. “Might have to wait until people get a bit more used to us bein’ out here though. You mind if we check out some of these stalls first?”

“No, sure, lead the way,” she said, and as he lead her onward, she sighed and tried to refocus. She knew it was just because she was worried about what would be expected of her once she and Sonic were married, but it was proving ridiculously easy to get distracted when Manic talked about royal duties. She couldn’t believe something as simple as going for a walk could be such a complicated thing! But then he’d suddenly swoop off and remind her that he was kind of thinking of this as a date, and she had to worry about that, and…

Ugh.

It took them a few more minutes to get to the markets, and although they weren’t that busy compared to what Amy was used to, Manic still seemed impressed with the turnout. So she didn’t comment, instead just browsing the stalls. She was surprised to find herself surprised that they weren’t that different from normal market stalls. She didn’t know why she’d expected anything else. They were just the same kind of clothes, jewellery, and food that you would find in any old store. The only
difference was that at a normal market, she would have expected more… *hand-made* wares. Humans especially loved to use natural materials for market products, like shells and wood. Knitting was the current vogue in Station Square’s crafty sector. But here, everything looked like it could have come out of a machine.

“So, where do you like, normally work?” she heard Manic asking the vendor behind their current stall, as she lifted a necklace into the light. It was glittering silver on a purple string, obviously modelled after the medallions the three royal siblings wore.

“Just out of my home, though I intend to rent out a store in the Mobotropolis Mall when it’s available again. I lost my father’s storefront a few years back.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Rents got the better of me after I had to start paying for the upkeep of my workers. I’d been using robots provided to me by the state.”

Amy glanced over in time to see Manic grimace. But the vendor shrugged philosophically.

“I suspect they were implanting surveillance equipment into the pieces, so it’s probably a good thing that I ended up having to get rid of them. But that meant I had to start making everything myself, so my output obviously went down considerably. I’m working my way back up.”

“Crashing,” Manic said, his spines relaxing slightly in a tiny show of relief. “How’s that like, going for you?”

“Slow,” he admitted. “I service the middle classes, and no one really has the money to spare on luxuries anymore. But business has been excellent this week, with the tourists. They have more money and less understanding of the exchange rate,” he added in an undertone, and Manic obviously couldn’t help laughing.

“They were never good at guarding their bags, either!”

The vendor laughed as well, and Amy smiled before going back to the jewellery. She didn’t really get the joke, but she had a feeling Manic was doing a good job at… whatever it was he was doing.

Amy let his conversations with the vendors fade into the background. They all seemed to follow the same trend: things had been tough for various reasons, but they were hopeful for the future. Some of them asked if Sonic was really back, and one person worked up the obviously difficult courage to ask how Sonia was responding to ‘what the Lost Prince had done so far’. But most of it was just… shop talk. Amy instead focussed on the stalls and goods, happily unnoticed, until she wandered away from Manic’s current discussion to a busy watch stall.

Unlike most of the market, the items on display seemed to have a more steampunk vibe to them, with decorative gears and copper to distract from their obviously high tech functionality. Amy lifted one that had a traditional clockwork face but opened up to a touch-screen, the sign boasting that it could ‘call, message, and plan your diary with just a few words!’ She felt like Tails would have appreciated it.

“Oh, my gosh. You did not tell me she was so cute!” The voice cut through the rabble of the crowded stall, and Amy felt more than saw someone step in close her. “Excuse me, sweetie, but no way are you Amy Rose.”

She blinked and looked up. Beside her was a girl around Sonic’s age, wearing gaudy but obviously fashionable clothes in black and bronze, with pale fur and an absolute shock of red hair. She flailed
her hands to stop Amy from even opening her mouth. “Oh, my gosh. This is like, oh, my gosh! I am so betrayed. How could they keep you from me? Hi, it is so nice to finally meet you. We are so going to become best friends.”

“Mindy, darling,” None other than Bartleby Montclair elegantly shuffled his way through the crowd to step up from behind her. He inclined his head in greeting to Amy before giving the other girl an almost condescending smile. “Please. Not everyone has your overbearing cheerfulness. Give the poor girl space to breathe.”

“Bartleby!” Amy said brightly, “I’m glad I got to see you again! And this is…?”

“Oh, wow, like, total space-case me,” the girl said, lightly knocking herself on the head before giggling. “Hi again, I’m Mindy LaTour. Sonia’s my best friend, and between her and this loser I have basically heard nothing but gushing about you for like, three days.” She hurried forward to take Amy’s free hand in both of her own as she leaned in to exclaim, “But neither of them told me how adorable you are! And since we’re obviously going to be like, bosom buddies, that is just a crime!”

Amy couldn’t help laughing, even as she looked to Bartleby for an explanation. Obviously, this was the Mindy Sonia had suggested she talk to, so she was a little surprised to find them together and apparently pretty good friends. “I don’t know about that, but it’s really nice to meet you – I’ve heard about you too!”

“Oh, yes, I do know about you,” Mindy replied, lightly knocking herself on the head before leaning in to hiss, “You, me, and a bottle of wine must happen one night soon. If even half of the things I’ve heard about you are true then you are like, both my hero and my utter arch-nemesis, and I am so here for it!”

“Forgive me, Amy, but I confess I told the incorrigible Mindy here about your Neolithic taste in men. She –”

“I do not blame you a bit!” Mindy overrode him, flicking her hand back to better hold him off as she leaned into Amy again, her tone deepening to almost a growl as she continued, “That boy was fun to look at when he was chubby and cute, and now he’s all quills and leg and mmph! A gift and a crime to all women with eyes. But I have to know how you got him interested, though, I mean… he had like, no time for girls last I talked to him.”

“Mindy, darling,” Bartleby said again, touching his hair in exasperation. “Consider your surroundings before engaging in such topics, would you?”

“Oh, shut up. If the Mobotropolis Eye is allowed to be thirsty for hedgehogs, so am I,” she said, but she did step back, and Amy covered her mouth to hide her giggles. She’d already decided she liked this new girl.

“You two look like great friends!” she noted, her grin widening at Bartleby’s almost offended glance.

“Oh, not at all,” he said imperiously. “We are business partners.”

“And, you know, he was basically engaged to my best friend for like, ever,” added Mindy. “We had to learn to put up with each other. But mostly I only like him for his money.”

“Must you always be so uncouth? Mind your breeding, Mindy,” he shot back, but she ignored him.

“Bartleby’s my main investor,” she explained, and then gestured to their surroundings. “Without him, I never would have been able to start rebuilding my daddy’s fashion label, and none of this would
“This?” Amy repeated, glancing around the stall. “Wait, is this your shop?”

“Uh, yeah it is,” she said proudly. “Aside from being me, I am also the heiress to LaTour Fashion, and the designer of literally everything in this stall—I am all about the accessories—so welcome to my little shopfront!”

“That’s amazing!” Amy said, looking it over again with new eyes. “You really designed everything here?”

“All the accessories – the clothes next door are mine too, but I leave their designs to more skilled hands, though I do make sure I have a little bit of a say. I am determined to rescue this city from the colour purple,” she said firmly, like it was an actual life or death mission.

Amy laughed. “I have to admit, I hadn’t noticed any purple, aside from the banners!”

“Lucky for you! I swear, every woman and her pet chow has been wearing white and purple since her majesty took back the throne,” she said, rolling her eyes. “And it’s like, have some individuality, you know? Earth tones are like, the style.”

“Mindy is very passionate about visualisation and ideals,” Bartleby noted with an arched eyebrow. “Hence these garish cogs on everything.”

“Oh, shut up, you were so into it when I asked you for funding,” she said. “So, Amy, you like watches?”

“Not really,” she confessed, opening her hand to show the one she was still holding. “But I do like this style! The clockwork really stands out compared to everything else I’ve seen today.”

“Which is totally what I was going for, thank you so much for noticing!” she said cheerfully. “It’s just like, Mobius is so tech-dependent, you know? And I get it, I mean, I spent months in Sanctuary at the end of the war and I swear I will never leave civilisation again. But while I was there, I mean, you couldn’t not see how everything was done. People were cooking by fire and hand, all the machines had mechanical parts you could see –”

“Utterly barbaric,” Bartleby interjected, but both girls ignored him. Amy was fascinated by the intensity of Mindy’s eyes.

“It was all really visible, the way everything just fit together,” she continued. “People getting back to hard-working, naturalised roots. It really made me appreciate how the whole world is supposed to work, but we’ve been creating all these boundaries and complications. But really, all of us are a part of this amazing ecosystem, all little cogs in a giant cosmic machine, working towards something we’re just too small to see!”

“Oh, wow!” Amy gushed. “That’s such a beautiful idea!”

Although Bartleby grunted in disgust, Mindy grinned. “That’s what I thought! So I thought, you know, we should visualise that so we can realise it. And how better to do that than fashion? So I’m like, all about browns and greens as a colour palette these days, and cogs are like, so representative, so of course all my accessories have to have them. Speaking of which, you must let me show you around, I am finding you the most perfect piece before you leave.”

“Now, now, Mindy, Amy is hardly here for casual shopping,” Bartleby said pointedly, before glancing over their heads and into the crowd. “Where is that Thief? Has he no idea of how to
“Chaperone a lady?”

“Oh, did you see me with Manic earlier?” Amy guessed, glancing over her shoulder. “He was talking to the person running the stall across the street. He’s pretty busy.”

“Oh, my gosh! Samuel gets a royal visit and I don’t?” Mindy gasped, and then scoffed. “The insults just keep coming.”

“You’re hardly in need of royal interest,” Bartleby reminded her, but she just scoffed again.

“I haven’t seen my girl since last week, and they have been hiding my new best friend from me—that’s happening by the way and you can’t stop it—” she added to Amy, before going back to Bartleby, “I have the right to be personally offended by this lack of acknowledgement.”

“Please stop speaking where reporters can take you out of context, darling,” he sighed, and Mindy waved him off again.

“Whatever. The point is, any good thief should keep a better grasp of their valuables. If he’s going to let this absolute gem of a girl wander off, I am going to steal her away from him,” she said, but then gave Amy a pointed look, her eyes flicking up and down her outfit. “And does this girl need stealing or what? I mean, that outfit just screams Palace tailoring.”

“Oh – excuse me?” asked Amy. It felt less insulting than it probably should have, though she suspected she wasn’t the target. “This was made just for me. At least, I think it was…”

“Oh, it totally was,” Mindy still didn’t sound impressed. “But Liam has such a close-minded style! This is so not you! Maybe you like a year ago, but even just having talked to you for five minutes, I can tell this is not your style.”

“Really?” Amy looked down at herself. It certainly wasn’t something she’d pick out for herself—not anymore, anyway—but it wasn’t bad. “I don’t know, I kind of like it. I used to wear something similar.”

“Used to being the operative word, honey. I used to wear polka dots on a daily basis,” she said. “No. Those colours are all wrong. You belong in defiant colours, not this nice-girl blue. For you, I demand bright red, black, pink, maybe even—ugh—purple. And I hope you appreciate what I sacrifice I’m making in saying that you would look good in purple. But Liam, of course, would never dress anyone but blood-royals in the royal colours, so let’s just forget that! Ugh. So passé.”

“Hey, the skirt is yellow. I thought it was all about the earth tones this season!” Amy teased, even as the three of them—without anyone specifically gesturing for it to happen—began moving further into the stall. “I don’t think red, pink, and black come from the earth!”

“Well, that rather depends on how dark your humour is, doesn’t it?” asked Bartleby. “Blood and flesh are natural parts of the world, aren’t they?”

“First of all: ew, Bartleby,” said Mindy, before she grimaced. “Second, you’re not entirely wrong; just gross. Third, fashion comes and goes, but we must always be true to ourselves. If that means throwing everything in the face of conventional appearances, then all the better. We are an empire of revolutionaries! Be who you must to make this world a more beautiful place to live!”

“Oh, dear me. Must you be so dramatic?” Bartleby sighed, but Amy just cheered her on.

“But she’s right! I mean, everyone’s an individual, right? If we all just did what we were told, then we’d all be the same, and life would be so boring!”
Mindy grabbed her arm to hug it into her side. “Exactly. We are not under a tyrant anymore. We are not robots, nor are we at risk of becoming one. We have four loving, wonderful leaders who are all unique, and we should follow their example!” She threw Bartleby a mocking look. “How’s that for an out-of-context quote, Bartleby?”

“Such subtlety,” he drawled.

They continued through the crowded stall, Mindy excitedly pausing the conversation every so often to show off either a specific piece or introduce one of her staff members. Amy couldn’t help noticing that even though the staff were perfectly polite and professional in front of Mindy and Bartleby, as soon as their backs were turned, they had a tendency to roll their eyes. Apparently Mindy’s rapid-fire speech and her banter with Bartleby was common enough to be a bit of a joke.

She was also discovering confirmation of what she’d begun to suspect over the day they’d spent together: Bartleby complained constantly, but he secretly enjoyed everything he was complaining about. Mindy, on the other hand, was just… there was no other word for it but effervescent. Amy wasn’t sure she could take either of them for too long (she was usually the obnoxiously cheerful and outgoing person in a group), but Mindy was so passionate that it was hard not to get wrapped up in her enthusiasm. After everything that had happened in the last week, the two of them felt like the most wonderful kind of change.

Amy had no idea how much time passed before she looked up and noticed Manic quietly leaning against a pole at the front of the stall, just watching the three of them with a soft smile. She blushed and tried not to cringe – it would have been sweet if she was actually interested in dating him, but as it was it was mostly just awkward.

“Oh, Manic!” she said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wander off!”

“Hey, yo, it’s –”

“Thief Prince Manic Hedgehog!” Mindy overrode him loudly, making almost everyone in the stall freeze and then turn around. Apparently Amy wasn’t the only one who hadn’t immediately noticed him, because a lot of the crowd gasped.

“Oh, dear,” Bartleby sighed, while Mindy blinked, realised what she’d done, and then laughed even louder.

“Oh, please. As if anyone’s surprised that my pieces attract royalty! He’s practically part of the furniture in my regular stores. Don’t mind us anyone. Your highness, it’s such a pleasure to see you again!” she said, and bustled over to capture his arm as she had done Amy’s and dragged him out and behind the stall, out of sight. Amy and Bartleby hurried after, emerging into the dingy alleyway that had been created behind the roll of stalls. It was visibly empty, aside from the various crates and boxes, but they still paused to make sure no one had followed them. Only once they were sure did Mindy turn back to Manic with a mocking stare. “Seriously. Samuel gets a royal visit and I’m only included because Amy Rose happens to wander into my store?”

“Hi Mindy,” Manic said wearily, and then looked up at Bartleby and nodded. “Hey.”

“Your highness,” Bartleby replied smoothly, and there was a hint of a smirk when Manic made a face at him. “I see you’ve hardly grown in graces since the last time we spoke. What kind of man allows such a lovely lady as Miss Amy Rose go unchaperoned on these ghastly streets?”

“Yeah, obviously you ain’t seen Amy in action,” he said, glancing at her with a grin. “If anything, she’s the one who’s like, chaperoning me!”
She giggled, and Bartleby rolled his eyes. “That’s hardly the point. It is a gentleman’s prerogative –”

“Oh, my gosh, Bartleby, just stop,” Mindy said, and Amy covered her mouth to keep from laughing outright.

There was a slight pause, both Mindy and Bartleby looking at Manic as if expecting him to join the banter, but he just shuffled awkwardly in a sudden show of nerves. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and said, “So um... I didn’t realise you two were like, into the whole market thing.”

“Um, yeah?” Mindy gestured back the way they’d come, to the crowd they’d left behind. “What, you thought you guys could hold the biggest retail event in Mobian history and I wouldn’t want to be involved? Puh-lease! Also, what a chance to showcase my merchandise to people outside the aristocratic circles! How bad of a businesswoman do you think I am?”

“Oh, I – I didn’t mean –”

“And quite aside from all of that,” Bartleby cut him off, “a little birdie mentioned you may be coming out, and we felt it behoved us to chance a meeting.”

“Be-what-ed?” he asked, and Bartleby sighed as if explaining himself was a chore.

“Behoved, you cretin. Benefitted.”

“Bartleby’s trying to run into Stripes,” Mindy explained, “You know, so they can have a proper stand-off and he can look all manly in front of Sonia.”

“I beg your pardon!” Bartleby snapped, but Mindy ignored him while Amy was caught between giggles and demanding more information. She wasn’t sure why she’d gotten excited at the thought of Bartleby showing off for Sonia.

“And I am also ‘implying’ that there was a certain something that happened yesterday, concerning certain people who have been shall we say indisposed, and –” She stopped, then sighed loudly and shook her head. “To heck with the stupid code words. Simple question, Manic: am I getting my daddy back?”

And just like that, all humour disappeared from the conversation. Amy wasn’t entirely sure why – she kind of felt like she’d gotten lost right along with Manic. But he, on the other hand, seemed to suddenly understand her perfectly. His jaw hardened even as his eyes softened, and Mindy folded her arms around herself almost protectively. It was weirdly awkward, all of a sudden.

Bartleby delicately cleared his throat to force the conversation onward. “It’s hardly a new question, one must admit. But it is in fact the question that brought us both to the market today,” he said, his
tone so carefully flippant that Amy could almost see the tenterhooks. “Of course, nothing can be confirmed or denied. At least not until time and science have proved something worth commenting on. But it is a question the whole world would like to know the answer to.”

“Is your father in some kind of trouble?” Amy asked Mindy quietly.

She glanced at her, then laughed and flicked her wrist in a forced careless movement. “Oh, it’s the same old story. You’ll get so sick of it by the time you leave Mobius, I’m sure. Daddy and I defected to the Resistance in the last year of the war.”

“Rather publicly, no less,” added Bartleby, slanting a look at Mindy before going back to Amy. “They went to Sanctuary, but her father was captured and robotocised quite soon after.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Amy said softly, reaching out to her, but Mindy just smiled again and shook her head, eyes flicking skyward.

“Like I said: same old story as everyone. That’s most of the reason Sanctuary exists, am I right?”

“Sanctuary?” she prompted, and Mindy gasped, regaining some of her momentum.

“Oh, my gosh, you wouldn’t know! Yeah! Like, oh, my gosh. Sanctuary is like, part village, part orphanage, right? It’s where we used to take all the kids who lost their parents during the war.”

Manic grinned, obviously relieved about the shift in topic. “Mindy totally rocked it there,” he said. “A lotta kids used to think of her like family. You know Mom’s serving girl? Felixanne? She was one of Mindy’s little sisters.”

“She’s still my girl!” she said cheerfully. “But anyway, so most of the village is disbanded now, but there are still some kids there, who’re too young to take care of themselves yet. They’re growing out of it, though, which is cool.”

“Oh, wow,” Amy said, before the name finally sparked a memory and she looked over at Manic. “That’s where Sonic and Sonia are going today, right?”

He nodded, his smile slipping a little. “Yeah. I wanted to go with them, but… y’know. Stuff.”

“Yeah, stuff,” Mindy said, quickly becoming serious again as she gave him a direct look. “So, that stuff? How much stuff is it?”

While Manic grimaced, Amy noticed Bartleby doing an amazing job of hiding his fond smile as he said, “Ever the linguist, Mindy darling. So concise and yet so vague.”

“Bartleby, sweetie, I know we have to play coy and stuff, but you need to shut up before I hurt you,” she said, before going back to Manic. “So?”

“It’s… a lot of stuff,” he said slowly. “Mother is pretty sure it’s a lot of ongoing stuff.”

If Amy hadn’t already guessed they were talking about the robotocised people in the palace basement, Bartleby and Mindy’s reaction probably would have seemed strange. Bartleby blinked once, and Mindy took a deep breath, rocking back on her heels. “Oh. Okay.”

Amy shifted her weight, kind of hating the conversation. She knew that the royal family had to be careful of reporters, and she did understand why they might want to keep what happened yesterday a secret for now, but… it also seemed kind of dumb. Especially with someone like Mindy, who was obviously personally affected by it. Not to mention that Amy really wanted to comfort her, but had
no idea how to do that without saying anything openly. It was so frustrating! “Um… I… me and my
cravings were helping out yesterday afternoon. There’s a lot of stuff to be done, and people need a lot
of help, but… I think things are gonna be okay.”

Mindy smiled, and Bartleby inclined his head. “Of course they will be. And I’m certain you will be
instrumental in such a cause, my dear Amy.”

“Me?”

“Of course. It is, after all, exactly the sort of charity work one in… your position should engage in,”
he said, and then turned to lift an eyebrow in Manic’s direction. “Which brings me to my purpose in
attempting to catch your attention today. I assume, of course, that the illustrious Monsieur de Tigre
will be taking the lead once there is something of substance to be discussed?”

“You mean Stripes?” Manic asked blankly. “Take the lead in what?”

“You know!” Mindy cried, surging forward again. “You know, finding people? Talking to them?
Helping them readjust? Making sure they have somewhere to live after being –” She stopped,
glancing around the alleyway before lowering her voice. “I don’t know where my daddy is, but once
I find him, he will have a home to come back to. A lot of people in his situation won’t.”

“Yeah, obviously, and we’re gonna have to like, deal with that,” Manic agreed. “I’m just not getting
what Stripes has to do with that.”

“But it’s exactly the sort of charity work a royal consort should undertake,” Bartleby pointed out. “I
had hoped to make something of a contribution to the cause – quietly, of course, so as not to
overshadow Monsieur de Tigre, and only once there was a cause to be had. But still.”

“And LaTour Fashion is totally making a massive contribution,” Mindy added. “Publicly. With like,
giant novelty cheques and me in unflattering outfits as I work with people on the street. And that
cheque won’t order itself, so when should I be doing that?”

Manic huffed, shifting his weight from one hip to the other. “Seriously? You guys think Stripes is
gonna do that stuff? He like, barely manages his own village!”

“But such charity work is the remit of a royal consort,” Bartleby noted, raising an eyebrow with a
slight smile. “Surely he understands his responsibilities?”

“Responsibilities? Dude, he’s just dating my sister, it’s not like, a job.”

“Oh, dear,” Bartleby said, folding one arm over his chest, the other rising so one finger could tap his
cheek. “I hope that is just your uncultured naïveté, Thief Prince, and not something Monsieur de
Tigre has convinced the palace staff of.”

“Huh?”

“It would be quite the problem if that were the case. Why, one might think it was a man’s civil duty
to remind Monsieur Stripes of the position he is so enthusiastically usurping.”

“Oh, my gosh, Bartleby,” Mindy groaned. “Tone it down, boy.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. “However, it occurs to me suddenly
that I would like to hold a little soiree. After all, with all those foreign leaders in town, it’s only right
that the Mobian aristocracy have a little gathering to discuss matters of global importance.”
“Wait,” Manic said, holding up a hand. “Bartleby, you… this is all like… we can’t be talkin’ about this stuff yet. And you know Sonia’s gonna be like, super –”

“Yes, I do think that would be appropriate,” he continued cheerfully. “But, of course, it would be inappropriate to not have some royal presence, so naturally we will need the royal consorts present. Amy Rose, you will do me the honour of attending, of course?”

She blinked rapidly, completely lost. “Um… sure?”

“Hey, whoa, whoa, hold – hold up, I –” Manic blushed through his fur and flailed both hands. “I uh – Amy, I –”

“Oh, do shut up, Manic,” Bartleby said absently. “Yes… yes, Mindy, darling, please do excuse me. I would like to hold such an event tomorrow night and that means I have a ridiculous number of things to do.”

Mindy scoffed. “I bet. Make sure you don’t overdose on all that testosterone.”

He ignored her, instead bowing low to Amy. “Thief Prince, Amy Rose, it has been, of course, an absolute pleasure. I will be in touch.”

He hurried off, leaving the three of them to stare after him. Amy blinked again, pointed the direction he’d just gone, and then asked, “What was that?”

“That was a private school boy in heat,” Mindy said, rolling her eyes. “It’s only taken like, four years but he’s finally realised he messed up big time with Sonia, and that he’s going to have to make up for it. Starting with a cockfight to see who has the bigger social chequebook. But oh well, we’ll get a good cause out of it no matter how it ends. So, Manic,” she said, turning back to him, “Seriously. How long do you think we have before the stuff becomes a thing?”

He opened his mouth, looked over at Amy, and then closed it again. He grimaced, then shrugged and shook his head. “I guess it’d be like, as long as it takes for us to find someone to like… make it a thing.” He glanced back at Amy again, then away completely, rubbing under his quills. “I like, get why you’re wantin’ answers, but I don’t got any for you right now. Give us some time, y’know?”

For a long few moments, Mindy just stared at him, her expression unreadable. But then she smiled and raised her eyebrows. “Y’know, Manic, some would say you’ve had a lot of time already,” she pointed out. “But I get it. I’ll wait. In the meantime, Amy, honey,” she added, tone brightening as she took a step forward to touch Amy’s arm. “You, me, and a bottle. That’s happening and you can’t stop it. I’ll set something up when Sonia’s back in town, okay?”

“Sure thing,” she said, and Mindy winked, then waved and trotted back toward her stall, leaving the two of them alone in the alley.

Manic shuffled his feet awkwardly, and Amy folded her arms behind herself. Having Bartleby call her a royal consort seemed to have broken something, so it was probably as good a time as any.

“So um… how about we go get a drink and have that talk?” she suggested, and he grimaced again.

“Yeah, like… I… I guess so.”
Now that he understood what Anarchy Beryl actually was, Tails’ experiments were going a lot better. He wasn’t, however, sure he understood why Eggman had used it in his latest scheme. As near as he could tell, Eggman hadn’t had a Chaos Emerald to use, just Power Rings. But while he didn’t have a ring on him to compare, his simulations showed that their chaos wasn’t absorbed as effectively. So Eggman had been using an inefficient power cell.

He was a lazy engineer, but he was never inefficient these days. He couldn’t afford to be.

It just didn’t seem like him.

“Great, is everyone I know gonna start acting weird?” he muttered, sitting back in his chair.

Although Tails was getting effective results when he did work, after his call with Sonic, he was struggling to settle to anything. He couldn’t bring himself to go back downstairs and help re-attach limbs, because he was too worried about Sonic. But he couldn’t really focus on the Anarchy Beryl because he was too mad at the whole thing. And Knuckles was no help at all, having already stolen their preferred jeep and headed off into the dawn light to clear out some factory on the far side of town. And he had no idea where Amy had gone.

Tails drummed his fingers on the desk, and then sighed and pushed himself up to standing so he could wander over to the window.

The view mocked him. Industrial buildings as far as the eye could see, cables, wires, and pipes all snaking back into the palace. A whole city to power this non-functioning Death Egg; a Death Egg that Tails couldn’t understand the point of.

Eggman had never used this monstrosity. Not as anything but a palace. So why?

Did it just end up not being something he needed?

Say Shadow was right, and Eggman had somehow known about Sonic’s power, and built this Death Egg with the intention of raising Sonic as some kind of living battery. Aleena escaped with the triplets before he could do anything, so he built all those power lines instead. Sure, that made sense. Connect them up, siphon from the city, you could power this thing for a day. Use it to wipe out an invading army or whatever.

But that just felt too… strategic. A long-term plan. Eggman didn’t make long-term plans.

Tails pursed his lips, remembering what Sonic had told him only a few days ago: Eggman and Robotnik weren’t the same person. Eggman didn’t make long term plans, but Robotnik hadn’t had Sonic to deal with, so he could afford to make plans over months and years.

Okay. Fine.

He’d built the Chaos Trap, probably for Sonic. If Shadow’s paranoia was right, Robotnik had learned about Sonic’s power from Aleena. Less fine.

But then Aleena had taken Sonic and run away, ruining that plan… Like maybe she’d never actually been willing to go along with it.

It didn’t make sense. Not that Aleena wouldn’t have gone along with it – as much as Tails was coming to dislike her, she didn’t seem evil. So of course she’d protected her kids. But Robotnik wouldn’t—couldn’t—have counted on her to just willingly hand over Sonic, no matter what she thought she was doing. Eggman was a cheap engineer, but he understood people in a way Tails couldn’t quite figure out. So it seemed odd that he’d just assumed Aleena would let her son be used
like a battery.

Maybe he’d tricked her somehow. Probably pretty easily – Eggman could trick a lot of people when he wanted to. Only Sonic never fell for it, and even he'd made mistakes.

Tails glanced back at the Anarchy Beryl, lying harmlessly beside his mileselectric.

It absorbed and refined chaos. The medallions were made from Anarchy Beryl, and Tails’ working hypothesis was that it was splitting Sonic’s power amongst the three medallions. After all, Anarchy Beryl made chaos transferrable. Usable. The medallions would have been perfect anchor points for a Chaos Trap.

But Aleena had wanted them to be made, and she still let her children wear them. Why? To give Sonia and Manic power? Sure, except she didn’t seem that interested in using them. So why…?

Turning back, Tails slowly walked over and picked up the lump of rock, then dropped it just to watch the slow, gravity-resistant fall.

The medallions were about Sonic, he was sure of that. Sonic’s power, Sonic’s mind. With the medallions, Sonic was being controlled. That was what Shadow had said. Sonic’s chaos was being controlled.

In the last few years—heck, in the last few months—Sonic’s chaos had multiplied several times over. His power had positively spiralled. When Tails had first met him, Super Sonic wasn’t much stronger than Knuckles, could barely fly properly, and had kind of struggled against the Death Egg. Now, an ordinary Sonic could probably take on the water god Chaos and his only concern would be not drowning in the surrounding water.

According to Sonic, that was why the humans were so quick to judge him, and believe he could turn evil. Because they were scared of what he could do. It always made Tails so mad, because he knew Sonic, and he knew that as long as you weren’t a bad person yourself, you had absolutely nothing to fear from him.

But Sonic never got mad about it. “It’s natural, isn’t it? To be scared of something that could kill you?”

“But you would never hurt anyone!”

“C’mon, buddy, you know that’s not true. I beat up that knucklehead on the regular, and I think of him as a friend!”

“You know what I mean. You’d never hurt anyone who didn’t deserve it!”

“Sure. But what makes someone deserve it? I don’t know until I see it. So how’re they supposed to?”

Tails frowned, picking up the Anarchy Beryl again.

Had Aleena seen how powerful Sonic would become? Had she just been scared, and wanted to use the Anarchy Beryl to mute his strength?

Maybe. It refined Chaos. Made it steady, easier to predict… safer. Even Tails had thought it would be good to use it in his engineering, and he’d grown up using raw chaos. Anarchy Beryl would make his designs much more stable.

Wait. Stable…?
As in…

His eyes widened, even his mind going blank as the simple truth hit him.

“She thinks it makes him stable. She thinks he’s crazy, and trying to keep him sane!”

How *dumb* could a person get?!

—

“Um, the lady at the counter said this was like, their best tea ever.”

Amy smiled as Manic awkwardly set the cup down in front of her. It was a deep red, and smelled like flowers, but there was definitely some spice in there as well. She could already tell it would be delicious, and decided she was definitely dragging Sonic back here.

Until she remembered that was probably not the sort of thing she should be thinking about when she was trying to let his brother down gently.

It was a small cafe in the closest thing Mobotropolis seemed to have to an expensive-looking district. It was clean, with fake plants everywhere, and the buildings were filled with windows. Most of the cafe spilled out onto the sidewalk, but they were squirreled away in a booth in a dark corner, and the manager had even put up a kind of wooden partition that made them harder to see.

Which was… you know… kind of helpful and kind of really awkward.

“So uh,” Manic sat down opposite her, gripping his water glass with both hands. He smiled nervously. “I like, uh… yeah, so I don’t know how to start this conversation. Sorry. I’m like, so lame at this stuff.”

She tried to smile again. “Then would you prefer I go first?”

“N-no, I mean… I should… I mean… I totally need to explain,” he said. “I just… I know it must be super weird, people throwin’ around words like ‘consort’ and stuff, when we’re… like… I mean this is only our second date, and –”

“Uh, no,” she said quickly, waving her hands. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

He flinched, but then smiled, lifting a hand to rub under his quills. “Yeah, sorry, I… like I said, I’m not great at this stuff. Never like, learned the rules or whatever.”

“It – there aren’t *rules*, Manic, it’s just –”

“Yeah, no, I… yeah,” he said, and they both paused, just staring at each other. It took a minute, but Manic abruptly surged forward, like he just had to blurt everything out. “So, here’s the thing, yeah? I like you, Amy. That’s… yeah. I like you a lot. I know we’ve only known each other a couple days, but you’re super pretty, and fun, and brave, and nice, and I… I like you.”

“I like you too, Manic,” she said slowly, “but –”

“No, I get it,” he cut her off, holding out a hand to stop her. “It’s a whole thing, right? Even if Sonic had told you about the whole royalty thing, which I totally get he didn’t, it’d be freaky. And we have only two—*you know*—and suddenly everyone’s talkin’ about consorts and now Bartleby with the
whole responsibility thing, and before I was one I totally never realised that the whole royalty thing is like, actually a job, and y’gotta move so fast even when nothing really happens. I get it. It’s a lot.”

“Yes,” Amy admitted, “and it does scare me a little, but –”

“Yeah, no, hold on, if I don’t say all this I’m gonna lose it,” he said, grimacing apologetically. “Because I mean… I don’t know what I’m doin’ here. Like, anywhere, actually. But especially here. Because I’ve never really… y’know… dated a whole lot. I mean, dating wasn’t really a thing thieves did, and then I was all like, preoccupied with the Resistance, and then there was the whole prince thing. And I mean, I don’t get a chance to meet a lotta girls I actually want to spend time with.”

Amy smiled kindly, tilting her head in faint amusement, but she couldn’t even open her mouth before Manic cut her off again.

“I’m not like, I’m not lookin’ for sympathy or whatever, I’m just sayin’ that I know I’m gonna screw up sometimes. And y’know, with all that other stuff, of dealin’ with reporters and aristocrats, and bein’ treated like a royal consort before we even talked, I know that’s a lot of stuff. So, y’know, I… I mean, I’m gonna get it if you think I’m… if you think I’m not worth all that stuff. Just the last week has been crazy for you, so I will totally understand if you don’t want to give this a shot,” he said. He took a deep breath, fiddling with his water glass for a moment, then looked up at her directly. “But I really like you, Amy. I think you’re a cool person. I’d… really like to get to know you better, and… I’d like to see if we can be a thing.”

Amy swallowed hard.

Why did he have to be so nice? Why did he have to be sweet? Why did he have to be so soft and hurt and lovely?

Why couldn’t it be Sonic saying all those things to her?

For a moment, she remembered what Stripes had said. What a lot of people had said. She was delusional. She was living in a fantasy. Sonic didn’t love her. And she did know that he would probably never marry her, and he would never ‘settle down’ willingly, and he would always be running off to save someone else. There were a lot of reasons to give up on him.

Meanwhile, Manic was lovely. He really was. And he obviously liked her. For some girls, that would be enough.

But Amy wasn’t ‘some girl’.

“Honestly…” she began slowly, “the reporters and things don’t bother me, Manic. I’ve been dealing with them, and with gossips, and worse, for years.”

“Huh?”

“I am… scared. I’m scared of the aristocrats. And the expectations. I could never be queen. Not like your mother.”

“Hey, that’s cool, I don’t think anyone’s expecting that,” he said with a nervous grin. “It’s not like I’m ever gonna be king, after all.”

“You don’t know that,” she said, lowering her eyes to her tea cup. “And it doesn’t matter anyway, because… Manic, you’re really nice. I really do like you! But the truth is, I already have someone I love. I have someone I love more than anything else in the world.”
He flinched. “But… what?”

“He’s been my whole world for years now. Ever since we met,” she said softly. “He’s my destiny. I know I’m not his—not like he’s mine—but we are destined to be together. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. So… I’m really sorry, Manic, I think I might have led you on. But I can’t be your girlfriend.”

She glanced up in time to see the heartbreak warp his expression for a few moments, before it shifted, his brow furrowing and jaw clenching as something else occurred to him. He blinked, glancing off to the side, then looked back at her.

“But you were like, thinking about it, yeah? I mean… that’s why you’re all worried about bein’ queen. And you agreed to be royal consort at Bartleby’s thing. So you were thinking about it,” he said. “So… what… I mean… I must’ve said something to put you off, right? What – I can fix it!”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said. “All of that has nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it does, I mean…” He hesitated, scrubbing at his quills. “Unless this guy’s from one of the lesser kingdoms. I… I didn’t realise there was… I don’t know any princes, so…?”

This was starting to get even more painful. “Manic… it’s Sonic.”

“What?”

“The man I’m in love with is Sonic,” she said bluntly. “I’ve loved him from the moment I knew about him. He’s my everything. He’s –”

Amazingly, Manic cut her off with a sudden relieved laugh. She jerked back, and he winced around his breathy chuckles, holding up an apologetic hand. “Oh… oh, gosh, Amy, I’m like… oh, I’m sorry. I just… wow. You scared me for a second there,” he said, and she blinked, no less confused. He grinned. “Sorry. I’m bein’ a total jerk. It’s just… Sonic’s not… y’know…”

She huffed, because she could get that. “I know he’s not really the type for relationships. I don’t care. I’ve been chasing him since we met, and I’m never going to stop.”

“No, I mean… that’s real sweet and all, but,” His grin edged toward an awkward grimace. “I lived with the guy twenty-four hours a day for a year, Amy. He never once even looked at a girl.”

Oh.

That old chestnut.

Amy suppressed an annoyed sigh, straightening her shoulders. She’d heard that one before too.

“He was a little busy trying to save the world, find your mother, and keep the two of you safe,” she pointed out. “Besides, it takes more than a pretty face to turn his head! You gotta be strong and determined, too. Luckily, I’m nothing if not determined!”

Manic hesitated, the last of his smile straining to stay in place. “I mean… yeah. And that’s… really awesome, but –”

“Sonic’s focus is one of the things I love about him!” she insisted. “When he has something he needs to do, nothing can distract him for long. That’s how he’s saved the world so many times, and so quickly! It’s not his speed, it’s his drive! He’s so amazing…!”
She could—and had before—gushed for hours about the wonders of Sonic the Hedgehog, but Manic was starting to gain that embarrassed, almost pitying look she’d seen on a lot of people who doubted their relationship. She huffed again and folded her arms.

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. Sonic and I are destined to be together. I’ll follow him wherever he goes. Even here. And that’s scary, because like you said, this whole royalty thing is a big deal, and I’m never gonna be like your mother, and Sonic’s so different here, and maybe that’s the medallions or maybe it’s just being here with all the magic and expectations or whatever, but y’know, it’s still a thing I’m gonna help him with. Sonic is worth all that trouble, and so even if it’s scary, I’m going to stick with it,” she said firmly, and then softened, because Manic’s pity was morphing back into confusion. “I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I’m super sorry if I was leading you on. But you’re Sonic’s brother, so I really want to get to know you. I want to know everything. I just… hope you understand that it’s for Sonic’s sake… not… not yours,” she finished slightly lamely, but it was all she really had left.

For a long few moments, they were both silent, just staring at each other. Manic’s expression had twisted up and in on itself until it was completely unreadable. His eyes were narrowed, his brow furrowed, his mouth slightly open, but she couldn’t pick any real feeling from his eyes. He was just staring at her like he couldn’t figure her out.

But it felt like there was nothing really left to say, so Amy hesitated, giving her untouched tea one last regretful look, and then stood up. “Um… I’m gonna go back to the palace. I think I want to go help the robotocised people again. I don’t think that’s part of being a royal consort that I’ll mind at all. But thank you very much for today, Manic. I really do enjoy spending time with you.”

She hesitated again, then grimaced and hurried off, leaving him alone in the booth.

Chapter End Notes

Music Reference: Distance & Space - Something More (2017)

(sid note - had never heard of these boys before today, so... new music for everybody!)

End Notes

This fic. This... bloody fic. -sigh-

This fic never leaves me. But it's unfinished, and likely will be for a long time. I go through stages of poking at it, because I know how it goes, and ends, and everything about it... I just never get there. So I'm posting it here as part of the 48, in case people are interested, and in search of some inspiration. I hope you get some fun out of it too.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!