Summary

A Sonic Advance 1 adapt. Robotnik's after the Chaos Emeralds again, and it's up to Sonic and company to stop him! As their adventure unfolds they must answer why Knuckles seems to have turned against them, and who their mysterious 'friend' is...

Notes

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Here it is! An adaptation of a game with no plot and crazy settings (coughSonicAdvancecoughcough)! As usual, critiques, questions, and comments can be sent to antithesis. Flames are okay as long as they're helpful (which they're usually NOT).

On a side note, this story is not my best work. I am not proud of this in the least, and for good reason. I started this story in July of '02, and it is now June of '03. I lost my motivation back in August, so if this feels rushed, pathetic, or anything else mediocre, that's why.

The universe is SegaSonic with some SatAM characters mixed in. Here's a tip: if it looks like a SatAM character, and acts like a SatAM character, and has the same name as a SatAM character, then it's a SatAM character. Also, if a robot or environment doesn't coincide EXACTLY with the game, sue me.

Okay, I am forcing my long-winded self to shut up now. On with the story!

-Prologue-

A silver convertible pulled up next to the palace. A large, egg-shaped human "hopped" out of the car, "ran" up to the door, and punched in a few obscure numbers on a keypad. The door silently slid open and the human slipped inside.

The hallway was dimly lit. The human counted off the doors until he came to the one he wanted. Keying in another code, he entered the room.

This particular room was lit by a spectacular green glow coming from a gem in the center of the room: the green Chaos Emerald. The human reached for the gem but was blocked by a force field. Scowling, he reached for a key card in his pocket. He swiped the card in the reader on the pedestal and entered yet another code.

Nothing happened.

The human began to tap his foot impatiently, a trait he had picked up, ironically, from one of his greatest enemies.

Finally the light on the card reader turned from red to green, indicating that the force field was deactivated. The human grinned. Turning around to face the security camera behind him, he made a face into the camera as well as a very rude gesture. He then seized the emerald and "ran" out the door to his car.

The streets were deserted. He placed the emerald between the two front seats and took off, yelling, "The great Robotnik strikes again!" His trademark laugh was heard clear on the other side of town.

He pulled onto the Speed Highway with no resistance. No one had called the police yet! "Like taking candy from a baby," he muttered, reaching over to the emerald.

It wasn't there.

Just then Robotnik heard someone behind him yell "Chaos Control!" *That voice,* he thought as
he turned around (as much as the car would allow) to get his emerald back from whoever that was. Before he could utter a sound, however, he froze.

Time had stopped for everyone except the shadow on Robotnik's car. It hopped off and tossed the glowing emerald from hand to hand. "Like taking candy from a baby," it muttered. "Rule number one, class?" it continued to the benefit of an unseen audience, "Always check the back seat _before_ entering the vehicle." It hopped over the divider between the opposing lanes of traffic and began running back into town. After a few seconds, the cars began moving once again.

-Chapter 1: Here we go again...-

The piercing ring of a telephone broke the morning silence. Sonic groggily pulled his hand out from under his bed covers and slammed it on the telephone handset. In the same jerky fashion he pulled it to his head. "Yauuh?" he mumbled, still half asleep.

"Is that you, Sonic?" a female voice asked from the other end.

"Whaa.. Oh, hey Sally," Sonic mumbled. "Wha..dywant..this early?"

"Early? Sonic, it's 9:00 in the morning!"

"So...?"

"So if you want to make a better impression on my father, you'll stop acting like a slack teenager."

"I'm still 18," Sonic mumbled in protest as he put his hand over the microphone. "Tails!" he yelled, "I need my-

"Coffee?" Tails asked, appearing in Sonic's bedroom doorway with a mug of heavily caffeinated, black coffee.

"Thanks, li'l buddy," Sonic answered. He took a long gulp, shook his head, and ran his hand through his head spines. Visibly and audibly more awake, he picked up the phone. "So, what's up, Sal?"

"That's more like it," Sally replied. "Something's come up and it looks like the intelligence department is going to take another fall. Father wants me to get you started on another mission. Can you meet me in Central Park in an hour?"

"I guess... what's the problem?"

"Can't say over the phone. I'll tell you when we meet. Later?"

"Yeah." Sonic hung up the phone and turned to Tails. "We're meeting Sal in the park at 10."

"You sure she wants me to come along?" Tails asked.

"I don't care if she wants you or not. You're coming, or I don't."

Tails shrugged and went off to get his vest. "Should we stop by the garden in the meantime?" he asked.

"Not a bad idea. I'll get the- hey! Where'd you get _that_?"

Tails had walked back into the room wearing a khaki vest covered in pockets. "What," he asked, "does it not fit me?"
Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, it looks okay, but why on Mobius do you have it?"

"Well, I would've gone for the 'utility belt' look, but... well... you try wearing a belt."

Sonic nodded. "I see."

In the middle of Mobotropolis' hustle and bustle, the Chao Garden was a nice, peaceful getaway. It was a park enclosed with an eight foot high cement wall and chao playing in it, but the isolation came at a somewhat outrageous admission price. Sonic and Tails happened to have gift memberships given to them because of their heroics over the past year or so.

While no one person "owned" any of the chao, members of the garden usually had one favorite that looked like them in some way. Tails was off in the corner talking to "his" chao about the aerodynamic properties of heel rockets or some other topic five miles over Sonic's head. He, on the other hand, was sitting under a tree with his chao, Juice, who was talking up a storm as well. "...and naturally Silver is tops in the IQ tests, but nobody but _nobody_ tops me in the races!"

Sonic chuckled. Juice had acquired Sonic's need for speed somewhere along the line, and everyone knew. Sonic's eyes wandered over to a small fountain where a small red and black chao was gazing forlornly into the water. Juice followed Sonic's gaze and commented in a more somber tone, "Morrill still hasn't gotten over it. He's been taking it pretty hard."

Sonic nodded solemnly. Morrill was Shadow's chao. Shadow had never actually paid admission to the garden; he simply ran over the wall as Sonic had done before he got his membership. Morrill and Shadow had grown particularly close toward the end of their adventure, and Morrill still missed Shadow terribly.

Sonic's thoughts were interrupted by a small tug at his ankle. He looked down to find a small gray chao holding a small envelope up at him. "You're Sonic Hedgehog, right?" it asked.

Sonic nodded and took the envelope. His name was typewritten on the front. He opened the envelope and found a short letter, also typewritten:

Sonic-

As you may well know but probably don't, the green Chaos Emerald was stolen from Acorn mansion last night by Dr. Robotnik. I have since recovered the Emerald and will return it to you when you need it.

What Robotnik wants the Emeralds for, I have no clue. What I do know is he has renamed his "Death Egg" spaceship the "Cosmic Angel" (go figure) and has scheduled it for takeoff from the Egg Rocket launch base the day after tomorrow. Reasons for the launch we can only guess at.

What you do next is up to you. Simply know that the fate of Mobius may once again rest in your hands.

-A friend

P. S: Check your watch; you need to get moving if you're going to meet Sally on time.

Sonic checked his watch: ten minutes to 10:00. Creepy. He glanced over the letter again. *So, Eggman's at it again,* he thought. *What else is new?* Calling Tails, he headed out of the garden.

"Leaving so soon?" Tails asked.
Sonic only handed him the letter in reply.

"I thought you might need this," Sally said, handing Sonic a tall cup with a moon and star logo on it. Sonic and Tails sat down on either side of Sally: Sonic sipping his hot coffee on one side and Tails peering intently at her handheld computer's screen on the other.

"Let me guess," Sonic began, "The green Emerald's been stolen."

"First," Sally said, "Tails, I'm surprised. I don't see you as one to shop at New Army. What's with the vest?"

Tails rolled his eyes. "It's to carry stuff. It was on the clearance rack and I had a gift certificate."

"Oooookay. Second. Sonic, the green Emerald's been... How did you know?"

"I got a letter handed to me at the chao garden," Sonic replied. "It's right... um... Tails?"

Tails reached in one of his larger pockets, retrieved the letter, and handed it to Sally. While she was reading, a tall dog in a black suit walked up behind the three of them. "Not planning any more treasonous plans, now, are we princess?" he asked.

Sally opened her mouth to protest, but Tails beat her to the punch. "Mr. Goldman? Great, you're just the person I wanted to talk to. You see, a couple of day ago I was..." He continued speaking, barely stopping for breath much less letting Goldman get a word in edgewise.

"That'd be Mr. Goldman, the intelligence officer," Sally whispered to Sonic. "He's always thinking the two of us are planning to overthrow the reigning monarch."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "He thinks _we're_ conspiring against you're _dad_?"

Sally nodded. "Sad, isn't it?" Sonic only took another sip of coffee.

"...so you may want to fix that security hole on your atrium server," Tails finished. "If you need me to talk to the King about it-"

"NO!" Goldman nearly yelled. "I mean- no thanks. I appreciate- er, the Sovereignty appreciates you're concern. Thank you for your time, citizen." He shot a look at Sally that said "I'll be back," then he walked off briskly. Tails slapped Sonic's hand and reclaimed his seat.

Sally glanced over her shoulder to make sure Goldman was out of earshot, then she pulled up a small video on her handheld. "You guys need to hear this. It's my father's morning intelligence report," she explained.

"Who stole the Emerald?" King Acorn thundered. "Goldman, I'm waiting for an explanation!"

"You're not going to like this, sir," Goldman said with a broad grin. He pulled up a video on a small TV. King Acorn was blocking the camera view, but Goldman continued to explain the video. "This clearly shows Sonic Hedgehog, whom your daughter spends _so_ much time with, taking the-"

The king brought his fist down hard on top of the small TV. "First off," he said slowly, "I don't like what you said about Sally. If Sonic was not in my full confidence, I would not let her within five miles of him. That brings me to point two, which is that this isn't even Sonic. See the spine shape and the tuft of fur on his chest? This is _Shadow_ committing the crime of which he has already been pardoned. That brings me to point three, which is that this is security footage from
TWO! MONTHS! AGO!

Sally tapped the "fast forward" button. "There's nothing here but Goldman looking like an idiot trying to find the right footage."

"Ah, here it is, sire," Goldman sputtered. The video clearly showed Robotnik swiping a security card and taking the emerald. Robotnik then turned to face the camera, at which point Goldman turned off the TV. "Um, you don't want to see that part."

The king was trying very hard to restrain himself. "Why was Robotnik waving at me? If Robotnik is going to wave at me, I want it to be through an OUTSIDE camera. How did he get inside?"

"Um... he got a security pass?"

"I can see that. HOW! DID! HE! GET! A PASS?!" the king yelled at the top of his lungs.

"I... well... I'd ask the security firm?"

"Oh, them. That software company YOU hired to manage security around here?"

"Um, yes?"

"I will."

"Oh, and, um, sir?"

"Yes?" The king seemed very close to the end of his fuse, and one could almost see steam coming out of his ears.

"Um, he wasn't waving."

The king exploded. "DO YOU THINK I'M STUPID?!" he screamed. "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THE SMART ONE HERE! YOU'RE THE HEAD OF _INTELLIGENCE_ FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!"

Sonic was cracking up laughing. "Dude," he said to Sally, "I had no idea your dad could yell like that!"

"Which is why you need to behave around him," Sally answered.

Tails, on the other hand, looked concerned. "Goldman hired Minitech to handle security?" Sally nodded, and Tails shook his head. "Their software is full of security holes, and they're running the Sovereignty's security... sad."

Sally shrugged. "We've got more important things to worry about. Namely, the Chaos Emeralds. I'll rest easier when they're in a safer place."

"So the GUN bases aren't?" Sonic asked.

"No. You saw what happened last night, didn't you? Now, here's a phone; call me every so often and I'll tell you where to look. I don't want to tell you more than I have to in case one of you gets caught." She handed a small, silver phone to Tails who promptly stuck in in a pocket seemingly designed for that purpose.

"Me, get captured?" Sonic asked, feigning offense.

"Can't be too careful," Sally replied. "Now, if you're going to get the emeralds, you'll need
security clearance." With that, she produced two pass cards, each with a prominent number one on them. "These will get you anywhere, so don't let me hear you abused them, okay?"

Tails and Sonic both nodded. If either of them were caught abusing privileges, it would spell doom for Sonic and Sally's relationship and the many waivers Sonic and Tails had that let them bend certain rules, such as being pedestrians on the Speed Highway and using random buildings as launch pads. Tails naturally stuck his card in one of his pockets, and Sonic slipped his inside one of his gloves. "Why do you think I get extra large?" he asked when Sally gave him a weird look.

Sally shrugged. "Okay. Now, for your first stop, you might want to go see Green Hill. I hear it's lovely this time of year. The Emerald's in a small outpost about half a mile left of the main gate."

Sonic nodded. He turned to Tails and said, "Race ya, buddy!"

"You're on," Tails shot back. In the blink of an eye they were off, Sonic running and Tails flying.

*Be careful,* Sally thought to herself as they disappeared into the distance.

-Chapter 2: Green Hill-

Green Hill park was a normal outdoor park. There were, well, green hills for kids to go wild on, lots of playground equipment, and since it was on the coast there was a steep cliff leading down to the beach. Most people were enjoying the fair weather on the new fishing pier built on the beach.

Upon reaching the park, Sonic took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and shook his head. "Man! It feels good to be out here!" he yelled.

Tails landed next to him. "Doesn't look like much is happening," he commented, scanning the horizon for killer robots and the like. Finding nothing, he turned to Sonic. "The emerald capsule is just over that hill," he said, pointing. "I'll go look around and make sure nothing's gone wrong."

"What makes you think anything has?" Sonic asked. "It's a beautiful day; the sun is shining, the birds are singing, and."

"And there's an emerald here that Robotnik wants to get his hands on," Tails interrupted.

"Killjoy," Sonic muttered as he took off in the direction Tails had indicated.

A small metal building surrounded by barbed wire-topped fences contrasted sharply with the lush landscape around it. Security cameras watched the surrounding areas like hawks, and the GUN logo was everywhere.

*I don't get it,* Sonic thought, *Are they trying to attract attention?* He pulled out his security card and swiped it through the card reader on the fence. The door popped open in reply. *Please,* he thought as he strolled up to the building. He performed the same trick on its door and ambled inside the dark building.

"Halt!" a guard yelled. The lights clicked on to find Sonic staring down the barrel of an assault rifle. "What are you doing here," the guard snapped.

"Security business?" Sonic said timidly, waving his card.

"How do we know you're not with Robotnik?" the guard said with skepticism.
At this point another guard chimed in. "Larry, it's Sonic Hedgehog! Why would he be working for Robotnik?" The second guard, short and round compared to the tall, lanky Larry, came into view and grabbed Larry's gun. "Besides," he continued, "you're gun isn't even loaded."

"The gun is always loaded, Bob," Larry said matter-of-factly.

Bob rolled his eyes. "What do you need, Sonic?" he asked.

"Um..." The shock staring down a gun barrel was only now beginning to wear off. "The... Chaos Emerald. Yeah, the Chaos Emerald." He turned to face Larry. "Don't. Ever. Do that. Again. Okay?"

"Sorry," Larry mumbled.

Bob walked back up with the blue Emerald. "Anything else?"

Sonic tossed the emerald from one hand to the other. Suddenly he seized the emerald in his left hand, swung his arm in an arc and yelled, "Chaos Control!"

Time froze for everyone but Sonic, leaving startled looks on Bob and Larry's faces. "Sweet," Sonic muttered. He turned to leave and slid his card through the reader to open the door.

Nothing happened.

Sonic mentally kicked himself. Time had stopped for everything, even the computerized lock on the door. He concentrated hard on the entrance to the park and muttered, "Chaos Relocate." In a flash of blue he teleported away.

Tails was worn out from flying, so he was walking along at an easy pace. "This is pretty nice," he thought. "The birds are singing, the kids are playing, the robots are humming." He froze. He glanced behind himself and saw a crab-like robot with an oversized claw slowly making its way towards him. Tails waited for just the right moment, then he attacked.

In a flash Tails spun in a circle, bringing his tails around in a whip-like fashion. The connected with the robot, sending it into a nearby tree and leaving it smoking on the ground.

"Didn't think I'd see one of these again," Tails muttered, inspecting the robot. Suddenly, a plate on the head of the robot exploded outward and a small, orange flicky flew out.

It glanced down at its former prison, then looked at Tails. "Um..." it said, feeling awkward. "There's a big robot down at the fishing dock, and... um... bye." It took off into the distance in a flutter of wings.

"Snap," Tails muttered under his breath. "Where's Sonic?" He scanned the horizon and saw Sonic on a distant hill. He waved, and apparently Sonic had seen Tails as well, for he waved back. Two seconds later Sonic appeared at Tails' side.

"Man, I love this thing!" Sonic said, fingering the Emerald.

"Just be careful," Tails said. "A flicky told me there's a robot down at the fishing pier. Should we check it out?"

"How'd the flicky know?"

"A Crabmeat tried to pull a fast one on me. I gave it the what-for and the flicky popped out."
Sonic rolled his eyes. "Eggman's _still_ using those old models? C'mon." He grabbed Tails' wrist and took off running towards the sea. When they came to the cliff, Sonic ran straight over the edge without stopping. He and Tails locked their wrists more securely, and Tails put his tails into motion. They flew like this for about ten seconds, then Sonic told Tails to drop him.

"Why?" Tails yelled back.

"Just do it!"

Tails reluctantly obeyed, ready to dive down and save Sonic from certain doom unless... Sonic aligned his feet just right and landed on one of the handrails to a flight of stairs going down the cliff. The metal strips on his shoes went to work, and Sonic "grinded" down the rail, gaining speed at an incredibly high rate.

"I know I could break my neck doing it," Tails muttered, "but junk! I want a pair of those."

There was panic and confusion on the fishing dock. Robotnik was driving a tank-sized robot up and down the dock, and the tank was wielding a mallet that was as big as itself. When the innocent bystanders saw Sonic and Tails coming, they gave them a clear path and cheered them on. Sonic, for one of the only times in his life, slowed down and _walked_ through the crowd. The whole time he was raising his hands and behaving like the superstar he was. This continued until Tails forcefully dragged Sonic towards the dock despite the few people in the crowd cheering "Tails!"

"Quit being such a ham," Tails scolded.

"Aww, loosen up," Sonic retorted. "This thing'll be a cakewalk. Gimmie a lift."

Once again Sonic and Tails took to the air. "Fly over it!" Sonic yelled. Tails did so, taking care to avoid the oversized mallet. "Now!" Sonic yelled, and Tails let go. Sonic fell straight for the cockpit dome on the tank, and at the last minute he went into a spin and shattered the glass dome.

He landed on what would pass for the hood and stared Robotnik in the eye. "I believe now is when you boast about how evil your latest plan is? I'm waiting..." He tapped his foot impatiently.

"Nice try," Robotnik answered, mashing a large, red button labeled "Eject."

Sonic jumped off the robot as the cockpit rose out of the tank and flew off. As it did so, the tank sputtered back to life and surged forward.

"Sonic!" Tails yelled from above. Sonic looked up, and Tails dropped the Emerald down to him. Sonic took aim and yelled, "Chaos Spear!"

The tank exploded in a blue and orange pyrotechnic display. The crowd answered in an enormous cheer.

"Don't get started yet," Tails said, handing Sonic the small phone. Sonic simply rolled his eyes and hit the speed dial.

"Hello?" Sally answered on the other end.

"Sal! Guess what we just did!"

"Let's see: you shattered the cockpit, Robotnik got away, and you blew up the robot with Chaos Spear?"
"Yeah! It was- wait, how did you know?"

"Smile, you're on TV. And you need to stop being such a ham."

Sonic looked straight at Tails and continued to speak into the phone. "You and Tails are against me! I knew it!"

"Yes we are," Sally replied sarcastically. "Now, your next stop is going to be a hidden GUN base that's farther down the coast. You remember where Robotnik's ground base was?"

"The pyramid?"

"No, the one before that."

"Oh... The one with the huge aquarium and stuff?"

"Exactly. And when you leave, use a teleport or a timestop. I don't want those paparazzi following you."

"Right. Talk to you later."

"Sure. Be careful."

"Will do." Sonic shut the phone. "Tails, let's go!" he said. When Tails failed to reply, Sonic noticed that he wasn't next to him. He finally found Tails at the edge of the crowd signing autographs. He waved to the people and walked back to Sonic.

"So, where to now?" Tails asked cheerfully.

"An old GUN base. And Sal said to teleport, so we _won't_ be able to sign autographs. Quit being such a ham."

Tails just shrugged. Sonic sighed, grabbed his buddy's hand, took the emerald in the other and yelled, "Chaos Relocate!"

-Chapter 3: Secret Base-

Sonic and Tails materialized three feet off the ground and landed with a crash. "Try getting us on the _ground_ next time?" Tails yelled as he and Sonic attempted to right themselves.

"So sue me," Sonic answered. "I'm still learning."

"That's more than I can say," Tails commented. He looked over the outside of the base. There were several windows with bars over them, and the occasional Robotnik logo painted over with a GUN logo. "How do we get in?" he said.

"Don't we have security passes?" Sonic said.

"Let me rephrase: where's the stinkin' door?"

"Oh."

Just then one of the walls of the base exploded, leaving a enormous hole ten feet off of the ground. The force threw out a relatively short GUN soldier. "LARRY!" he yelled after he had hit the ground.
"Bob?" Sonic asked in amazement. Tails left no time for Sonic to wonder as he grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the hole.

"We can get in from there," Tails said. He and Sonic locked wrists and slowly rose up to the hole. Tails, being on top, could see in first.

A guard (whom Sonic recognized as Larry) was pointing a bazooka in random directions. When he saw Tails, he dropped the bazooka and freaked. "AAA!" he screamed, "Who are you?"

"I'm Tails, I'm a kitsune, and I want IN!" Tails said. Larry simply screamed again and ran off.

"Should we split up?" Sonic asked once he and Tails were on the ground.

"Sounds good. We'll meet at the back entrance in half an hour. You got your pass?"

Sonic pulled his keycard out of his left glove. "What, you think I wear extra large gloves for fashion?"

Tails chuckled and ran down a hallway.

Sonic wasn't too keen on exploring the old base. He had too many bad memories of this place from his little adventure with the water monster Chaos. The sooner he met back up with Tails the better. In the meantime he walked around aimlessly, keeping a keen eye open for the Emerald or the possible badnik.

Suddenly a door slammed shut behind him. Knowing that didn't mean something good, he ran back to it: no handle. He looked for the nearest card reader: smashed. He pushed, slammed, and spindashed the door several times: still there.

"It's always the simple things that get you, Hedgehog," Robotnik said. Sonic bristled at the sound of his voice, then turned around slowly to see what his foe was this time. It was a mechanical walker with a spring for a foot. Under better circumstances, it would have been funny, but now... Sonic hadn't really fought a robot for at least a month, and he was feeling a little out of practice.

He decided to end it as quickly as the last one. He pulled out his emerald, but before he could give a command Robotnik shot the ground in front of him. The force knocked Sonic backwards and sent the emerald sliding towards the doorway.

In half a second Sonic was up and running, but Robotnik's trigger finger was slightly faster. He shot the area around narrow doorway several times, causing it to be completely blocked by rubble. Sonic was now left with no choice. If he climbed the wall of rubble, Robotnik would shoot him. He had to deal with the robot the old fashioned way.

"Bring it on, Eggman," he muttered.

Tails was seriously looking for the emerald, and he was having a difficult time doing that. The base was filled with dead ends, pumping machinery, and sliding doors. He was just about to give up and head to the rendezvous point when someone above him yelled, "TAILS!"

Tails looked up. There was a catwalk above him, and he thought he saw someone up there. He found the nearest ladder and climbed up. When he got there, the person was gone, but there was a small flash coming from the doorway at the end. He followed it and came to another ladder, which he climbed. At the top of this one, however, was something slightly different: a door labeled "Chaos Chamber." He quickly scanned his card, ran in, and was holding the orange Chaos
"Chaos Chamber." He quickly scanned his card, ran in, and was holding the orange Chaos
Emerald within two seconds.

"The sooner I get to Sonic the sooner I get rid of you," Tails muttered to the Emerald. As his
thoughts turned to Sonic, something clicked inside his mind: *Sonic's in trouble!*

No time to figure out _how_ he knew, Tails just knew! He tore down the nearest hallway and ran
through the base, guided by some unknown instinct. He ran without the faintest sense of direction;
he only _knew_ he had to go this way, then that way...

Finally he ended up in front of a locked door labeled "Training Room V." The card reader for this
door was conveniently broken. *How can I open the door...* Tails thought, glancing around the
room. Finally he remembered his Chaos Emerald.

"Chaos Emeralds fry electronics," he muttered excitedly. He pressed the emerald up to the lock
which began sparking and crackling in response. Finally Tails heard the lock spring open, but as
soon as it did _another_ lock, this time a dead bolt, sprung into place.

Tails pushed and pulled on the door in frustration, but to know avail. He tried his turbo-whirl
technique, but only gave his tails some nice bruises. In desperation he picked up the Emerald,
pointed it at the door, and yelled, "Chaos Spear!"

The Emerald only flickered.

Tails collapsed on the ground and moaned. Sonic was in trouble and there was nothing he could
do. He couldn't even use his Emerald-

"Out of the way, Tails!" someone yelled. Tails looked back to find Larry brandishing his bazooka.
Tails didn't think twice: he got out of the way as quick as he possibly could.

They call me-"

The building resonated with the sound of the explosion as the door in question was thrown into
oblivion by the bazooka. Larry lifted the muzzle of the gun to his mouth, blew away the smoke,
and said, "Larry-boy."

"Thanks!" Tails yelled as he ran through the doorway, pausing only to pick up the blue Emerald
lying there. *Sonic must've dropped this,* he thought.

Sonic and Robotnik were in a dead-locked battle. Both were constantly fighting; any let up on
either side's part would result in certain victory for the other. Sonic was constantly dodging
Robotnik's laser gun, but it was the same gun that held Sonic at bay. Unfortunately, Sonic was
beginning to wear out. *Whoo,* he thought to himself, *you're out of shape big guy.*

Suddenly, Sonic slipped on a small patch of oil and fell flat on his back, winded. He closed his
eyes in pain and refused to open them. "Not like this," he said quietly, fully expecting Robotnik to
shoot him. "Please not like this."

Robotnik by now was laughing like the crazed maniac he was. "Never thought I could do it, could
you?" he said. Sonic finally forced himself to open his eyes and stared down the gun barrel that
was pointed in his face. "Any last words?" Robotnik said.

Just then a large explosion shook the room. When the smoke cleared, Tails was standing at the
edge of the room holding one Chaos Emerald in each hand. "Drop the gun, Eggman!" he yelled.
"Do you want me to use _both_ of these?"
"Impossible," Robotnik answered. "No one can do two Chaos Spears at once."

"Are you sure? After all, I _am_ a kitsune, and they have been known to do some pretty crazy things, especially around Chaos Emeralds..."

"You're bluffing."

"Are you sure you want to risk it?"

"Yes," Robotnik spat, pulling the trigger. The laser bolt ricocheted off the empty ground. Before Eggman had a chance to figure out what went wrong, his "walker" took a direct hit from behind.

"Have a nice trip, Eggman!" Sonic yelled. Robotnik simply mashed his eject button again and flew out through a window.

Sonic fell on the ground in exhaustion, and Tails ran up to him. "Get these things away from me," he said, throwing the Emeralds on the ground.

Sonic raised his eyebrows. "They're not going to kill you Tails. Oi, if we're going to be carrying these, I should probably get my medallion."

Tails nodded and handed Sonic the phone. Sonic smirked and called Sally. "Hey Sal, we got the gem... Yeah, we ran into a little trouble, but we're all right... Yeah, we were gonna have to run into town anyway... No kidding! It's cute couples get in free night again? Sounds... Reporters? They don't scare me; I'll destroy them all! Muahaha!... Wait... Amy? You can't be serious... but... Tails...? But... Sally? Sally? Awww, here it goes!" He shut the phone and groaned, "Tails, how'd you like to go on a date with Sally?"

-Chapter 4: Twinkle Park-

Three figures walked toward the Twinkle Park entrance, all in trenchcoats. If anyone had taken a good look at them, he would have seen a scarlet fox, a gray squirrel, and a black hedgehog. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The fox and the squirrel were holding hands, so the gate man waved them through. The hedgehog placed some money on the counter and rolled his eyes.

"Um, sir?" the attendant said, "that's not quite enough. You need two more Acorns."

The hedgehog scowled in return.

"That won't work, sir, and neither will the sad puppy face."

The hedgehog groaned and pulled the money back into his pocket. He stood by the gate, hoping that someone would let him in...

He hadn't been waiting for five minutes when a hyper, young rabbit who was no more than eight came up to him and asked, "Do you need a date, mister?"

"Come on, Cream," another rabbit said with a slight southern hint to her accent. "Didn't I tell you not to talk to strangers?"

"Ah, let her alone, Bunnie," the other rabbit's date said in a thick accent. "She is seeing that ze young stranger is not to be having a date."
"Thank you," the hedgehog muttered as he and Cream walked through the entrance.

Once they were inside, Cream promptly began to introduce the hedgehog to her friends. "This is my aunt, Bunnie. And this is her boyfriend, Antione."

"Now, Cream," Bunnie scolded, "ya'll don't need to tell everyone that."

"And why should she not?" Antione asked.

The hedgehog seized the opportunity and left. "Bye, mister!" Cream called after him.

"I know I'm the last person you want to be with right now, Sonic," Amy Rose said.

Sonic only grunted in reply and fingered the medallion hung around his neck. It was an old echidnan relic Knuckles had found. It shrunk the Chaos Emeralds down to about a fifth of their normal size and stored them, allowing the wearer to carry them hands-free.

As Sonic and Amy approached the admission gate, the paparazzi showed up. Photographers from every supermarket tabloid known were there, some with headlines already in mind: "Twinkle Park's Cute Couple Spells Doom for Royal Relationship."

Sonic, does this mean you and Princess Sally are officially broken up now?" one particularly obnoxious reporter asked amid the endless sparks of flash bulbs.

"Okay, that's enough," Amy said loudly, pressing her hand against the nearest camera lens and pulling an exasperated Sonic out of the crowd.

"Thanks," Sonic breathed.

"Hey, I never realized how much of a hassle those people can be until they started following ME around after the ARK incident," Amy said. "Why do you think I don't buy those fan magazines anymore?"

Sonic thought for a little while. "Does this have anything to do with you not being in the crowd at Green Hill?"

Amy laughed. "I've seen you blow up robots before, Sonic. There's nothing new there."

"And this coming from the girl that gave me a bear hug, on national television, while I was on a date with Sally?"

Amy blushed. "That was at least 5 years ago, Sonic. People change."

Just then Sally dropped out of thin air in front of the two hedgehogs. "I think the reporters have had enough fun," she said. "Thanks for looking after him, Amy." Before Sonic could cry foul, she kissed him quickly on the cheek and took his hand.

"How did you..." Amy began. Sally simply pointed up to Tails, who was hovering ten feet above the group's heads.

Tails dropped to the ground. "So..." he asked, "what do we do next?"

"Bumper cars!" Amy yelled.

"Bumper cars!" Tails yelled.
"No!" Sonic yelled.

"That settles it," Sally said. "To the bumper cars!"

The black hedgehog walked through the park with a purpose. When he came to the edge of the food court he stopped and scanned the crowd for his two companions from before. He finally spotted the squirrel waving at him. He waved back, pulled out a Chaos Emerald, and muttered, "Chaos Relocate."

He instantly teleported to the squirrel's table. She was gray for the most part, with a light muzzle and teal streaks in her black hair. The fox with her was crimson and had his bangs combed in front of his right eye. He was a kitsune, a fox with two tails, but he usually kept them hidden inside his trenchcoat.

"Nice of you to show up, Shadow," the kitsune said to the hedgehog, fingering a small, white ball.

Shadow scowled. "Didn't have enough to pay admission," he said. "Had to get in with that girl from the chao garden."

The fox shook his head. "I told you to sell that typewriter, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"Well I suppose you have a better way to leave anonymous notes, Emech?"

"Never had that problem. I'm not as obsessed with remaining incognito as you are."

"Thank you, gentlemen," the squirrel said pointedly. "We're here to discuss the mission. Shadow, are Sonic and Tails doing okay?"

"They're doing fine, Dulcy. Sonic's a little rusty, but he's starting to get back into his groove. Tails is starting to interest me, though."

"How so?"

"Well, in the Secret Base, all I did was show him the Emerald. He holds it for a few seconds, then I hear him mutter something about Sonic being in trouble and he takes off. Boom. Next thing I know he's pounding down the door I didn't even know Sonic had gone through."

"Curious..." Dulcy drifted off, but Emech brought her back.

"I think I know what's going on here," he said.

"Great. Mr. Know-It-All to the rescue..."

"Shadow, stop it," Dulcy scolded. "Emech, you were saying?"

"Right. You have to remember that Tails is a kitsune. He's beginning to grow up, and some of his powers may begin to show through now. He could easily be slightly telepathic, and since he and Sonic are so close, he can sense when he's in trouble."

"Well, keep an eye on Tails," Dulcy said. "He's going to be your assignment in the next week or so. Shadow, you're doing good so far. Keep it up, and make sure that Robotnik doesn't have a chance to use the Emeralds."

"And I'm supposed to keep out of sight and not interfere, I suppose?" Shadow asked, his scowl still plastered on his face.
"Keeping out of sight is your decision. However, you are not to fight in this war yet. It's not your time. You still have much to learn."

"I assume those are the Master's orders?" Shadow said with disdain.

"Yes, and you would do well to obey them. Obedience-"

"Is the path to true freedom, I know. How many times have you guys lectured me on this?"
Shadow got up in a huff and stormed off. "Freedom," he spat. "All I ever do is what HE tells me to do."

Emech turned to Dulcy. "The Master wants him to learn humility, correct?"

Dulcy nodded. "Part of him wants to stay with us, and part of him wants to be with Sonic. The initial excitement he had when the Master first saved him is beginning to wear off. This is his moment of truth: whether he stays with us or whether he goes off on his own. Either way, it will be as the Master plans."

Emech nodded. "Personally, I hope he stays. I know he and I are at each other's throats half the time."

Dulcy laughed slightly, prompting a confused glance from Emech. "What?" he said.

"Oh, it's just-" Dulcy said with a smile before she interrupted herself. "Sonic!" she called across the eating area.

Sonic waved back and ran over to the table. "S'up, Dulcy?" he said quickly.

"Nothing much. You still up to your old tricks?" Dulcy said.

"Looks like it. Ol' Buttnik's got his old Death Egg back up and running and he's launching day after tomorrow."

"Yeah, so I heard."

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Figures you would. I only know 'cause some guy left a typewritten note for me at the chao garden... wait, did you leave me that note?"

Dulcy and Emech both smiled. "No," Dulcy said, "but I know who did. And before you ask me," she added, seeing Sonic's anticipation, "he has asked me not to reveal his identity until he is ready."

Sonic nodded. "So who is he?"

Emech hit his head (rather hard) with his hand while Dulcy just smiled. Unlike Emech, she had known Sonic for the past 6 years and was well aware of his spur-of-the-moment humor.

Sonic chuckled at Emech's reaction. "Take care you guys; Sal's gonna be wondering where I am. I told her I was getting chili dogs... you guys don't have any by any chance, do you?"

"The recruit ate the last one," Emech said.

Sonic sighed. "But I've only got one acorn..."

"A bag of chips isn't bad," Emech said. "Good for every occasion?"

Sonic shook his head and replied in a low, guttural voice, "No, give us a chili dog. You keep
"You're hopeless," Emech muttered to himself. To Dulcy he added, "But now that I see him, I do pity him."

Dulcy just raised an eyebrow and backed away.

After an hour of riding whatever rides came to mind, Sonic and company were exhausted. Sonic was sprawled on one bench while Sally talked to Bunnie and Antione on another. Tails, Amy, and Cream were off playing one of the novelty games that involved squirting a water gun at a moving target. Sonic would have been with Sally, but between Bunnie's southern accent and Antione's foreign accent, he was getting a headache.

"So how have you and Cream been doing?" Sally asked Bunnie.

Bunnie shrugged. "Oh, it's been good and it's been not so good. It'd be a lot worse if ol' Ant wan't around to help out."

"Oui, zat is true," Antione said. "Ze little Cream is extremely- how do you say it, hyper? She can run around in circles for an hour and not get tired. At least ze little girl is not easily saddened, oui?"

Sally nodded. She opened her mouth to reply but was silenced by a sudden explosion from the other end of the park.

Tails jumped into action and started hovering. "It's Eggman," he yelled back to the ground. "He's got some hovercraft thingie and he's down by the merry-go-rounds!"

"How far away is he?" Sally asked.

"About two minutes, and he's coming this way!"

"Go see if you can stall him! Amy, go with him," Sally ordered. She turned to Sonic and said much quieter, "It's a diversion. The light blue emerald is hidden in the underground here. There's an entrance over by the elephant ears. Go!"

Sonic just stood there. "Um... wanna say that again?"

Sally shoved him in the direction in question. "Just go get the emerald! I'll explain later!"

Sonic rolled his eyes and started running. Another chance for him to show off, and Sally's got him running off on some kind of recon mission. He found the entrance in question and tore down the stairs. At the bottom, he was confronted with the age-old dilemma: left, right, or straight. Tunnels ran off in every possible direction, intersecting with other tunnels and making for an extremely confusing grid. "Why does this always happen to me?" Sonic wailed. He pulled the blue Emerald out of his medallion and muttered, "Chaos See."

The world around Sonic faded and became translucent. He was now looking at what the Emerald in his hand "saw," which was limited to Chaos energy patterns. In other words, he could see where any Chaos Emeralds were in the area. Knuckles had told Sonic that the Chaos See ability could do much more than this, but Sonic hadn't taken the time to learn just yet.

Finally, Sonic saw an extremely bright blue light coming from his left. He dropped the Emerald, bringing reality back into focus. Stuffing the Emerald back into the medallion, Sonic ran left. The technique proved to be correct: he found the container and the Emerald without much trouble. As
he was heading back to the surface, he saw something familiar around a corner...

"Knuckles!" Sonic called. Sure enough, Knuckles came into view at a tunnel intersection several dozen feet away. He seemed to move a little stiff to Sonic, and he had on his old fighting gloves. "It's okay, man," Sonic continued, "I already got the Emerald here."

Upon hearing that, Knuckles charged towards Sonic, knuckle spikes extended, his face seemingly bent on murder.

Sonic brandished his medallion. "Don't make me use this!" he yelled. Knuckles apparently heard, for he quickly stopped and bolted in the other direction.

*Odd,* Sonic thought. *He's not normally like that...*

Tails had to make quick work of the robot. Robotnik was causing as much raw terror as he possibly could, and that included taking horribly aimed shots into the crowd of people. So far there hadn't been any deaths, but Tails didn't trust Robotnik to stay random. He was hovering up to Robotnik's level and trying his tail-whip move, but it was doing little more than annoying Robotnik.

That was where Amy came in. After she had gotten kidnapped by Metal Sonic Blue and taken to Little Planet, Knuckles decided she needed a way to protect herself. He had found an oversized mallet in the Sandopolis treasure room with low-level power crystals in it, crystals that had energy but weren't quite on the same level as the Chaos Emeralds. Amy, in keeping with her element, had covered the mallet with pink hearts and flowers. "The Love Hammer of Beatdown" as Sonic sometimes called it.

Dealing with Robotnik involved a simple strategy. Tails and Amy would attack from both sides. If Robotnik ever started ignoring Amy, she'd jump on the back of the robot and start talking about how cute Robotnik's head was (or something along those lines) until Robotnik got so annoyed he'd turn his attention to her in a frantic attempt to make her shut up. Tails would then use the opportunity to take a well-aimed spin attack at the hovercraft's engine.

Time was not on their side, however. With each spare moment Robotnik would fire into the crowd, causing random explosions and injuring so many people Tails had to stop looking. Amy saw what was happening as well, and as the battle progressed she resorted less and less to the annoying little girl technique, choosing raw Beatdown instead.

Then, as quickly as it had started, Robotnik fired up his engines and took off without warning, leaving a mess of chaos behind him. Tails landed next to Amy and the two walked up to Sally. "What's the count?" Tails said, deathly serious.

Sally bit her lip. "At least 15 minor injuries, mostly burns and broken bones, nothing really serious. About 7 people have third degree burns, they're heading to the hospital. One person was right next to an explosion. We already sent him to the hospital; think he's in critical condition. And then..." Sally looked back into the dispersing crowd.

Tails and Amy followed her gaze and saw Bunnie being lifted onto a stretcher, moaning. Cream was wide-eyed and in shock, and Antione was doing his best to comfort her. "Bunnie's got spinal damage," Sally said. "She can't feel her legs... or her left arm." Tails just stood in solemn silence.

"Does that mean she's paralyzed?" Amy asked softly. Tails was surprised for a moment that she seemed to grasp the seriousness of the situation. Sally nodded slowly.
Just then Sonic walked up. The fact alone that he was walking signaled to Sally that he knew what was happening. He leaned in close to her ear and said quietly, "I think we may have a Knuckles problem."

"I know," Sally said. "He shows up at all the Emerald sites one or two minutes after you guys get the Emerald. It's also at nearly the same time Robotnik starts terrorizing the area."

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Wonder what crazy story Eggman fed him this time." He looked around at the damage and the busy paramedics. "One things for sure, though," he said, "He's got to be pretty desperate to be willing to risk killing people to get one Emerald."

-Chapter 5: Ice Cap Mountain-

Sonic, Tails, and Amy were killing some time in the Ice Cap lounge, waiting for the ski lift to start operation. Tails and Amy each had hot chocolates; Sonic had his usual morning coffee. A television in the background was going over footage from last night's attack.

"Junk, do we have to watch this again?" Tails groaned. He turned to Amy and started to attempt a conversation when Sonic grabbed his attention.

"Look at this," he said quickly. He walked over to the TV and turned up the volume two notches.

"... were injured in the attack last night," the reporter, a blonde Overlander, was saying. "One of them, a Mobian wolf by the name of Lobo, was in critical condition until early this morning. Doctors have announced that he is beginning to recover and will be out of the hospital within two weeks."

"Robotnik got off easy this time," Sonic said.

"Another Mobian, known as 'Bunnie,' received spinal damage in the attack last night as well. After the attack, she complained that she could not feel her legs and left arm. Now, normally, this would mean paralysis for life. However, she has volunteered to be the test subject in a new treatment being developed by scientists Sir Charles Hedgehog and Alex Prower. We can only guess as to what this treatment is, though. Now back to you in the studio."

Sonic turned the volume back down and walked back to Tails and Amy. "Uncle Chuck's finally going to be able to test the Robotisizer, eh?" he said.

"What's the Roboto... thing?" Amy asked.

"It's a machine that basically turns flesh and blood into robotic counterparts," Tails explained. "Dad's been going on about it for ages; I hope Bunnie'll be all right."

Sonic waved this off. "Ah, she's with Uncle Chuck. What could go wrong?"

Tails smirked. "She's with my dad. Everything could go wrong." He got up and walked over to the jukebox at the far end of the lounge. He took out a couple of coins and flipped through the selection. "Hey, Sonic," he yelled, "they've got The K!"

"Sweet!" Sonic said. "Manic said we needed to practice."

Tails flashed a mischievous grin at Sonic and punched his selection in on the jukebox. Within two seconds loud rock music poured out of the box. Sonic and Tails each brandished air guitars and started "practicing" while Amy watched in amusement.
"Somewhere back there I left my worries all behind," Sonic sang. "My problems fell out of the back of my mind." He energetically played his "guitar" while he sang, and Tails piped in with backing harmonies every so often as he played his "bass."

"Pressing on, all my distress is going, going, gone. Pressing on, pressing on," Sonic and Tails sang. "To go back to where I was would just be wrong, I'm pressing on..."

Amy took a sip of cocoa in amusement. These guys were real clowns sometimes. When the two of them got together with Sonic's siblings, Manic, his brother, and Sonia, his sister, things really went off the wall.

Amy thought the mug she was holding felt a little weird. She took a good look at it and realized she had been drinking Tails' chocolate. Quickly she put the mug back on the table, hoping he wouldn't notice.

Sonic tightened the straps on his rented snowboard. "The Emerald chamber's in a cave at the bottom of this mountain," he said. "Amy, if you get there first, hoard off anyone that may come along with Beatdown until me or Tails gets there."

Amy nodded and brandished her ski poles. "What about Knuckles?" she said.

"Hold him off until we get there," Tails said, frowning. "I'll be keeping an eye on you two from up here."

"Last one there's a rotten Eggman!" Sonic yelled as he took off down the mountain. Amy gathered her resolution and followed. Tails watched them for about half a minute, then he took to the air. Normally, flying would wear him out in a few minutes, but if he paced himself he could glide more than fly, stretching his endurance to about fifteen minutes. *No sign of trouble yet,* he thought to himself.

Sonic tore down the mountain as fast as he possibly could. He especially loved snowboarding since the speed factor and the danger factor were multiplied as opposed to skiing. The wind whipped though his spines and pulled on his medallion. He noticed a dropoff coming up, and crouched in anticipation.

"Boo-yaa!" he yelled as he jumped over the cliff. He turned himself around to get a view of the scenery: the green trees, the clear sky, the glistening snow... A sudden flash from the base of the cliff caught his attention. Distracted, his jump was ruined, and it was all he could do to put the board down first. His balance was thrown off, and he fell face first into the snow, facing a small cave at the base of the cliff.

Amy soon appeared over the cliff. "Look out!" Sonic yelled, praying she wouldn't land on him. She noticed him at the last minute and landed her jump short and stopped not more than three feet from him, spraying snow into his already snow-covered face. Sonic spat the snow out in frustration and glared at Amy.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Just get in that cave up there," Sonic groaned. "You're wearing skies, you'll get there quicker."

Amy nodded and began climbing.

Sonic wiped the last of the snow off his face and looked uphill. In the clear sky he noticed a small object flying towards them. A sudden breeze was blowing some of the trees together, obscuring his view of the object except for quick glimpses. He couldn't tell what it was from where he sat,
but he automatically assumed the worst: Knuckles. "Hurry up, Amy!" he called desperately.

"I'm going as fast as I can!" she yelled back. Sonic looked back at Knuckles. He was coming too fast; they weren't going to make it. He brandished his medallion and readied himself. He was closer, closer, closer...

Tails dropped out of the sky. "Did you find it?" he asked.

Sonic heaved a sigh of relief. "Amy's on her way; I can't move," he said shortly.

Tails raised an eyebrow and tossed the phone to Sonic, then flew up to the cave. Sonic picked up the phone and did his best to sit up as he hit the speed dial button.

"Sonic!" Sally answered. "How are things going on the mountain?"

"Eh, okay," Sonic said. "Where ya at?"

"I'm with Bunnie at your father's lab. They're setting up the Robotisizer now."

"They are? Well, tell Bunnie she's in good hands."

"Don't do it!" Tails yelled from the cave.

"Oh, and Tails says not to do it," Sonic said.

Sally laughed. "Will do. So, have you found the Emeralds yet?"

"Um... yeah. We're at the cave right now, and Tails is showing me the purple one now."

"What about the yellow one?"

Sonic felt a pang of fear. "Say again?"

"Have you gone to get the yellow one yet? It's at the top of Mt. Runya... you _did_ know about this one, didn't you?"

"Um, on my way?" Sonic said quickly and hung up the phone. "Tails! Help me get this thing off!" he yelled.

Tails flew over to Sonic and handed him the Emerald. While Tails undid Sonic's snowboard, Sonic touched the tip of the Emerald to a small hole on the medallion. In a flash, the Emerald shrunk down to the size of a pebble and was locked in the medallion.

"The purple one's at the top of that mountain," Sonic said quickly, pointing. "I gotta go fast; you and Amy catch up."

Tails nodded, and Sonic took off.

Sally stared quizzically at the phone for a second before hanging it up. Knowing Sonic, he was probably too chicken to say that he had forgotten about the other Emerald, so Sally just let it slide. There was no news yet of an attack at Ice Cap, so she wasn't worried. Besides, they already had four Emeralds, and that guy who left the note had another one, so that left one Emerald with Knuckles (and therefore Robotnik) and one more up for grabs. Even if Robotnik could get his hands on the last Emerald, how would he be able to launch the "Egg Rocket"?

At the other end of the lab where Sally, Bunnie, and Cream were, two Mobians in white coats
were talking. One of them, a deep orange fox with a white muzzle and slightly taller, was grinning insanely and going down a checklist with pure excitement in his voice. The other, a blue hedgehog with a large brown mustache and whose quills were beginning to pale with age, was examining the items called out by the fox with a calm and steady hand.

"And the analytical engine," the fox said, "is it ready, Charles?"

"It's as ready as I can make it, Alex," Charles said. "Of course, this is the biggest test to date."

Alex nodded in approval. "Yes, it is." He turned to Sally and called, "Do you know where Bunnie is?"

"Room 218," Sally said, pointing.

"Thank you," Alex answered as the three of them strode out of the lab towards the room where Bunnie waited.

"Um, Charles?" Alex said hesitantly while they were walking.

"No," Charles answered flatly.

"But I really need to test these features out!"

"Alex, we're hoping to be able to de-robotisize her eventually. If we pack her legs full of extra overblown features, it might impair the process." By this point Charles was sounding fairly agitated.

"All I'm asking for is some rocket boosters... and some roller skates... and-"

"And a fishing rod and a pogo stick. Alex, we are not here to turn this girl into 'Inspector Gadget'; we are here to let her walk."

Alex feigned disappointment. "Can I at least give her extendible limbs?"

Charles threw up his hands in frustration. "Fine. Do that."

Alex glanced at Sally and clinched his fist in excitement. Sally just rolled her eyes. Charles and Alex were just like Sonic and Tails, except "Uncle Chuck" was more like Tails and Alex Prower was more like Sonic in terms of personality.

They made it to the room where Bunnie was laid out on an operating room table. She could move her head, but her torso as well as her arms and legs were strapped down tight to prevent her from aggravating her already serious injuries. Cream was seated at the head of the table looking extremely anxious.

"Question number one," Alex said sarcastically, "how do we get her _into_ the Robotisizer?"

"It doesn't matter if she's on a backboard or not," Charles said. "There's one in the closet over there; get it."

Ten minutes later Bunnie was propped up inside a glass tube on a grated platform. A faint light came from the complex machinery overhead. If it were not for Bunnie's strong confidence in Sally's confidence in the two scientists running the machine, she would have been scared stupid.

"Sugah-Sal, are ya'll sure this'n a good idea?" Bunnie asked nervously through the glass.

"Positive Bunnie," Sally said, trying extremely hard to hide her nervousness.
"Now, Bunnie," Alex said, "this is going to seem like something out of one of those old horror
flicks. I need you to stand still and move a little as possible, okay?"

Bunnie just stared at him. Sally raised an eyebrow and said, "You're kidding, right?"

Alex blushed, cleared his throat, and continued. "Um, just don't be afraid, and it shouldn't hurt a
bit. Charles?"

Charles rolled his eyes and pressed a sequence of buttons. The machinery began to hum and the
light began to grow in intensity. Everyone in the room felt their heart beat just a little faster. Cream
was holding Sally's hand so tightly Sally was surprised it hadn't broken by now.

"Here we go," Charles muttered. He flipped open a lid on the console and pressed the flashing
button beneath it.

The tube filled with purple light. The other lights in the room dimmed as the robotisizer pushed the
power grid of the building to its limits. Charles bit his lip, Alex wrung his tail, and Cream buried
her face in Sally's vest.

After a half minute that seemed like an hour, the light faded. Bunnie was standing on her own, her
legs and left arm turned completely metal. The glass tube began to retract into the ceiling as
Bunnie began to slowly move her new appendages.

"How is it?" Sally asked.

Bunnie clenched and unclenched her metallic fist several times before answering. "Ah guess I can
get used to it," she said softly.

Sonic ran as fast as he could toward the mountaintop. He was hoping- praying- that he wasn't too
late. He was running so fast, he didn't see the ice slick straight in front of him. Before he could
react he was on his back, winded. He slowly picked himself back up and attempted to slide across,
but only fell on his face several times. When he finally did get to the other side, he saw a security
container on a ledge above him emblazoned with the GUN logo.

*Here it is!* he thought as he climbed up to the top. *And I'm not too...*

The side facing away from the ledge was completely ripped apart. Apparently heavy firearms had
been involved, for the metal and the ground around it was scorched. On the ground about five feet
away lay one of Knuckles' shovelclaws. Sonic picked up the shovelclaw and looked at it, not
wanting to believe the logical conclusion behind it...

Tails flew up with Amy in tow. "Too late?" Amy asked.

Sonic nodded slowly and held up the shovelclaw.

"Knuckles did this?" Tails said, looking around. "No... he couldn't have. It's not his style to use
firepower."

Sonic threw down the shovelclaw and stomped on it. "That's it, we're going," he said shortly.

"Going where?" Amy said.

"The Floating Island."
"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Tails asked. "I mean, if Knux is really with Robotnik, or if he's got power madness-"

"Tails," Sonic interrupted, "I'd like to think I know Knux, and I don't think he's going to trust Robotnik after all the stuff he's pulled. I also like to think I know the Master Emerald a little bit, and I know for a fact that thing wouldn't let Knux get power madness. If either one of those is true, then it's the end of the world and we should all go home and cry. This whole situation screams fraud." Sonic looked towards the sky and took a deep breath. "Let's go."

-Chapter 6: The Floating Island-

Knuckles lay flat on his back on top of the Master Emerald. It was one of his favorite places to take quick naps, since the Emerald kept him in tune with the state of the island and rejuvenated him at the same time. The Emerald glowed softly, letting its power soak through the island.

With a start Knuckles’ eyes shot open. "Someone's here," he muttered. "...and he's not friendly."

Sonic hopped out of the plane as it's engine slowly died down, followed closely by Amy. "Looks normal," he muttered. "If Knux has gone crazy, his island sure hasn't."

Tails finished powering down the plane and climbed out. "Should we split up and look for him?"

Sonic shook his head. "Naw, that'd just make us more vulnerable. Let's stick together; he'll find us before we find him."

They began walking down the nearest path in silence. An aura of tension hung in the air around them as they expected Knuckles to jump out and attack them from every piece of underbrush they saw. After a few minutes they relaxed a little, and even started to talk out loud.

"So what did you mean when you said you knew the Master Emerald, Sonic?" Amy asked.

Sonic chuckled. "It's kinda hard to explain. It's... Tails, you always seem to do a better job than I do."

"Well..." Tails began. "The Master Emerald isn't quite like the other Emeralds. They're just normal, dead, and whoever wants to can just come along and use them. To an extent..." Tails trailed off but snapped back to reality a moment later. "But, with the Master Emerald, it's... well... alive. It can think for itself, it can give or deny its power... There's a whole story behind it; we should get Knux to tell it to us sometime."

"The craziest thing," Sonic added, "is that it can speak to you if you're using it. You remember back when Chaos was trashing Mobotropolis?"

Amy nodded. "The Chaos Emeralds were dead, so you had to use the Master Emerald to become Super Sonic, right?"

"Right. And the whole time I was Super Sonic, the Master Emerald was telling me all this stuff about where to hit, what to do... it was the freakiest thing that's ever happened to me."

"And it's like that with Knuckles too," Tails said. "The best way to describe it is that he and the Emerald can read each other's minds to a certain extent."

Sonic held up his hand and froze. The wind was rustling the trees slightly. Sonic seemed intent on one particular sound.
"It's just the wind," Amy said before Sonic shushed her. Slowly he moved ahead on the path, listening carefully. Quick as a flash he pounced on a spot of underbrush.

"Is it Knuckles?" Tails yelled.

Sonic reappeared on the path. "Nope," he said flatly.

Just then something jumped out of the brush on the other side and wrestled Sonic to the ground. Sonic yelled in resistance before he recognized his attacker.

"Kunx!" he said.

"You're getting better," Knuckles said with a smile. "But not quite." He got off of Sonic and looked at Tails and Amy. "Brought everyone with you today?"

"Yeah," Sonic said. "Robotnik's being his usual self."

Knuckles rolled his eyes. "Tell me about- wait." He closed his eyes and held one finger in the air for a few minutes.

"He's talking to the Emerald," Tails whispered to Amy. Amy just stared at Knuckles in wonder.

Knuckles opened his eyes and began pacing, still in a trance. "Someone's here, he's not friendly..." he said slowly. Knuckles looked hard at everyone present. "Guard the Emerald..." His eyes fell on Sonic's medallion. Sonic noticed this and grasped it for security.

"Which one...?" Knuckles continued. "There are five here."

"Knux," Sonic said, "do you have a Chaos Emerald on the island?"

Knuckles started for a second as he returned to reality. "What? Emerald? Oh, King Acorn gave me the red one to guard-" A look of horrible realization crept across Knuckles' face. "... and someone is trying to steal it as we speak!"

"Where is it?" Sonic said quickly.

"One of the towers in Marble Gardens. This way, I know a shortcut." Knuckles took off running, Sonic, Tails, and Amy in close pursuit.

"Why are we following him?" Amy asked Tails. "I thought he was the bad guy here."

"I don't really know," Tails answered. "I think there's more to this situation than meets the eye." He ran for a few more strides and added, "I just hope we all aren't being led into a trap."

They stopped running at the foot of one of the tallest towers in the Marble Gardens ruins.

"The Emerald is at the top of this tower," Knuckles said. "You should be able to get to it from that path over there. I'll try climbing."

"Don't need it," Sonic said quickly. "Tails, do you think you can lift me?"

Tails looked towards the top. "It's a long way. If I drop you-"

"I'll Chaos Control," Sonic interrupted. "Just do it."
"Good luck," Knuckles breathed as he started climbing the tower.

"Hey, what about me!" Amy yelled as Sonic and Tails took off.

"Take the path," Sonic said.

Amy stomped her foot in impudence. "Everybody always leaves me behind," she muttered as she began running up the path.

Tails could see the platform first, and he nearly dropped Sonic in response. "Um, Knux?" he yelled down, "you are _not_ going to believe this."

"What?" Knuckles yelled back.

Sonic and Tails landed on the platform. Sonic yelled out a string of nonsense that was an obvious attempt to keep from cursing.

"Why do you insist on keeping me in suspense," Knuckles muttered as he pulled himself onto the platform. "I do not think that..." He trailed off as he saw what Sonic and Tails had.

At the other end of the platform stood himself.

To all appearances it was a red echidna with a guardian crest. It sported fighting gloves and shoes identical to Knuckles'. But a close look at the eyes would have been disturbing at best, since while they looked normal at a glance, they lacked the depth that the eye of a living creature possessed.

"This cannot be real," Knuckles muttered.

The other Knuckles held out the red Emerald in its palm as if to say, "Come and get it, if you're tough enough."

"Bring it on," Knuckles muttered. He charged toward the impostor with one spiked fist forward. The impostor ducked and stuck out its foot to trip up Knuckles, but Knuckles dived over it and dug his spikes into the impostor's back.

The impostor made no sound except the whirring of machinery. It reached back and flung Knuckles onto the ground. Knuckles just got up and looked the impostor straight in the eye. It took the challenge and started charging towards Knuckles, but as it approached Knuckles held out the red Emerald.

"Not today," Knuckles said. He tightened his grip and yelled, "Chaos Spear!"

The force from the invisible energy blast threw the impostor off the platform and straight toward the horizon. Sonic started applauding. "That was smooth, Knux. Real smooth."

Knuckles was still serious as he handed Sonic the Emerald. "Keep this safe. If that's what I think it is it'll be-"

"Look out for the missile!" Amy yelled from her place on a nearby platform.

A deafening explosion echoed through the island. The platform Knuckles, Sonic, and Tails were on began to tip over and fall. With barely enough time to think, Knuckles glided off and latched onto a nearby pillar while Tails airlifted Sonic to the place where Amy stood.

"It was a robot!" Sonic yelled in disgust. "Robotnik made a robot of Knuckles!"

"Should I be flattered?" Knuckles said.
The robot in question now hovered where the platform once stood and pointed its arms at Knuckles. Sonic, anticipating what it would do, grabbed his medallion and yelled, "Chaos Spear!" The robot was a little quicker this time, however, and dodged the energy blast.

The diversion was enough, though, to throw off the robot's aim. The missile that had been intended for Knuckles flew into another pillar, causing even more damage to the island. It did allow enough time for Knuckles to climb to a surface where he wouldn't be a sitting duck.

Furious, the robot sped toward Sonic, spiked knuckles extended. Its intent was to slice Sonic through the heart. What it got was direct hit from Amy's hammer. The robot fell to the ground, and before it could get up Knuckles drove his spikes into its body, disabling it.

Tails ran up to it and examined the head. "I think there's a flicky in here," he said quickly, pulling off his gloves. "Do you have a screwdriver?"

"You're the one with the pockets," Knuckles said.

"What do you need a screwdriver for?" Amy said.

"If the flicky doesn't pop out in half a minute we have to take it out by hand or it'll suffocate," Tails said, feeling the head for a loose seam. "C'mon, that hammer hit had to do something to this- aha!" Tails pressed his finger into a small crack and felt with his other hand for his passcard. Working with all the precision of a thief picking a lock, he slowly nudged the card through the seam, trying to pry the skull off of the robot. After what seemed like hours, Tails finally managed to get enough of the metal to bend that Knuckles could get his hand under and peel it back.

Inside was a mess of wires and circuitry, centered around a glass tube holding a small bird-like animal. Its eyes were bulging and it was frantically kicking the glass. Knuckles seized the tube and threw it onto the ground, shattering it.

The flicky lay on its back for a few seconds breathing heavily, simply happy to get out of the tube. "Thank you so much!" it yelled.

"How was it being me?" Knuckles said casually.

The flicky rose and looked at Knuckles. "You? Honestly, I have no idea. The only thing I can remember are those infernal commands. 'MOVE FORWARD,' 'BEND OVER,' 'SCRATCH YOUR NOSE,' 'BRING THE EMERALD TO EGG ROCKET.'"

"Egg Rocket?" Sonic asked. "Do you know anything about it?"

The flicky cocked his head. "Well... I seem to remember something about a launch Thursday and I was supposed to take that Emerald there... and that's it."

"That's tomorrow!" Tails breathed.

The flicky cracked a smile. "Ah, don't worry. You people can take on anything. And I've got the headache to prove it. Now if you'll excuse me," he said, turning to face the setting sun, "I've got a songbird back home calling my name." With that, he flew off.

"Where's the phone, Tails?" Sonic said. "Sal needs to know about all this."

Tails felt his pocket and gasped. "It's not there!" He frantically scanned the ground for it.

"Is this it?" Knuckles asked, holding up a small metal object.
"There it is," Sonic said, running over to Knuckles.

A note was attached to the phone reading, "Thought you might need this. Next time don't leave it in the plane. -A friend."

"This 'friend' is starting to freak me out," Sonic said.

"So you've heard from him before?" Knuckles said.

Sonic laughed. "Tails, you explain." He opened up the phone and called Sally.

"Hey, I've been waiting for you to call," she answered.

"Ah, well, we went out to the Floating Island to check on Knux."

"And?"

"And it was a stinking robot duplicate of him running around all those places! He's been on the island for the past week!"

"I thought it was something like that. So what about the Ice Cap Emerald?"

"Oh, snap, I forgot to ask the flicky. I think he already took it to Robotnik."

Sonic could hear Sally groaning in the background. "Well, I still don't think he has enough to launch that rocket thing."

"Um... actually, the flicky that was in the Knux-bot said it's being launched tomorrow."

More groaning. "Well, I guess you know what you have to do. You've got what, five emeralds?"

"Yeah, five. Butt-nik's got one, and our 'friend' has the other, right?"

"Apparently. Okay, I've done some investigating of my own, and Egg Rocket is at the same place it was the last time he tried to launch the Death Egg."

"The old industrial area?"

"Exactly. I don't know what time it launches, though. If you guys miss that rocket-"

"Then we'll find some other way to get up there, Sal. I'll hitch on the next supply vessel that goes up, I'll find a rocket, we'll do something Sal."

"You can be so insane sometimes, you know that?"

Sonic laughed out loud. "Hey, a hundred miles an hour is where I'll begin. You just take care of Bunnie, okay? By the way, how is she doing?"

"She's doing fine. Charles and Alex are taking good care of her. She can move her new parts, but they have no sense of touch, so that's going to take some getting used to."

"Well, tell her I said hi."

"Will do. Take care of everyone, alright?"

"No problem."
"And keep a close eye on Amy this time!"

"Yes, 'mother."

"Well," he said slowly, "looks like we've got our work cut out for us."

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Chapter 7: Egg Rocket

The sun rose gently, giving the few clouds in the sky a ring of bright pink. Few robots scurried around the scaffolding surrounding the rocket, making last minute preparations. With a spark, the main engines roared to life, followed closely by the booster engines.

In the shadows of the twilight four figures quickly made their way to a door near the base of the rocket. "This walkway's going to break off any second now," Knuckles said, glancing around them.

Sonic tried the door. "Locked," he yelled over the roar of the engines. He pulled out his card and edged it into the door latch, trying to force the lock open.

"Try the lock," Tails yelled.

"I did, it's locked!"

"No, put your card through the lock. Just try it."

Sonic raised his eyebrow and scanned his card. Sure enough, the door sprung open. "Odd..." The four of them quickly dashed inside and shut the door behind them.

It was relatively quiet in the rocket, but not by much. The engines weren't deafening, only loud. "Do you think we're safe here?" Amy said.

Tails shook his head. "Naw, if Eggman's smart, he'll have made this a stage rocket. We need to get higher."

"Stage rocket?"

"It's a rocket that loses parts as it rises. When the bottom part's burned up all its fuel, it falls off. It helps the other engines push the load higher since there's not as much weight weighing them down."

"So the part where we're standing...?"

Tails nodded. "Where we're standing is going to be falling back to Mobius within ten minutes of the launch. We need to get higher."

"Works for me," Knuckles said. He ran over to the nearest wall, dug in his spikes, and started climbing.

"Doesn't work for the rest of us," Sonic muttered. "Wait, there's a ladder over there."

Sonic, Tails, and Amy began the slow climb up the long ladder. When they reached the platform at the top, they looked for the next ladder, and so on. Halfway up the second ladder the rocket gave a lurch and all four of them felt themselves being pulled downward at a spectacular rate.

"This is no place to be during a rocket launch!" Tails yelled.
A mechanical voice rang over the intercom. "T-Minus 300 seconds to stage one release."

"300 seconds?" Sonic yelled. The three of them tried hard to climb to the top of the ladder, fighting both gravity and the force of the rocket. The ladder seemed like it would never end, but after a minute Sonic, Tails, and Amy found themselves at the next platform.

"Five minutes doesn't seem so long now, does it?" Knuckles said. He led the group through a door at the far end of the platform onto a small floating platform barely big enough for the four of them. The platform was outside, and Sonic and Amy could see the fast retreating ground below them. Spanning the chasm was a small bar that led to another platform.

"I think this way is quicker," Knuckles said. "We climb across this bar here to that platform over there and go through the vacuum tubes."

"Tubes?" Amy asked with an edge of concern.

"Sure. You can spin, can't you?"

"Um..."

"We don't exactly have time for this," Sonic said, seizing the rod and beginning to shimmy across. Knuckles took a running start and glided after him. While Sonic made it across safely, Knuckles timed his glide wrong and began to sink below the platform.

"Tails, he's not going to make it!" Amy shrieked.

"Just wait," Tails said, holding his hand in front of her.

Knuckles noticed his situation long before Amy did. As he glided beneath the platform, he thrust up one of his fists and latched onto the bottom of the platform. Slowly, as if he was climbing across monkey bars on a playground, he made his way to the edge of the platform where Sonic helped him up.

"I don't think I can make it," Amy said softly. "I just know I'm going to fall."

"Then I'll go right behind you," Tails said, trying to reassure her. "If you fall, I'll come after you. At the very least we'll be able to get to ground safely."

Tails half-expected her to glomp him with a bear hug like she did with Sonic whenever he said something like that, but she only swallowed, tensed herself, and jumped up to the rod.

Tails knew better than to remind Amy not to look down, since that would only make her look down. He just followed her across the rod in silence, simply letting his presence reassure her. They made it across without incident.

At the platform Knuckles was beginning to take the cover off of the vacuum tube. "Once this thing opens," he said, "it's going to suck everyone inside. Just... Amy, just do a somersault and you'll do fine."

"Tails, go behind me," she whispered. Tails just nodded.

Sonic entered the tube first, demonstrating his trademark spin. This was old hat to him. Amy went next, trying hard to do the same thing. Tails and Knuckles followed, hoping that they wouldn't bump into Amy.

A voice sounded over the now-empty platform. "Section one separation in T-minus 30 seconds..."
Knuckles shot out of the vacuum tube at an incredible speed. He tried to spread his arms out to stop himself, but the floor was so slippery he still ended up sprawled against the far wall. He heard a loud hiss and a slam.

"Looks like you got out just in time, Knux," Sonic said.

Knuckles got up and looked at the tube. A large door had slammed into place where the opening once was. "Odd..." Knuckles said.

Just then the rocket made a loud lurch followed by the whine of metal on metal. "What the... huh?" Sonic yelled above the noise.

"The first stage is separating," Tails said. "Five minutes."

Amy hit the ground with her mallet. "No food, no rest, we just keep on going."

Sonic still retained his sense of humor. "Come, Amy," he said in a fake accent, "we're gaining on them!"

Tails picked himself up and went over to help up Amy. "You have seen that movie too many times," he said to Sonic.

"Look who's talking," Sonic retorted. "You're the one that saw it every Friday for a month!"

"Leave us alone, precious," Tails muttered.

"Gentlemen," Knuckles said from the other end of the room, "we do not stop until nightfall."

"Touche..." Sonic said.

The group began their long ascent up the ladders. When they reached the top, they found themselves at the bottom of a long shaft with no ladders in sight.

Sonic squinted at the ceiling. "Is there something up there?" he said.

Knuckles followed Sonic's gaze. "Hand me an Emerald," he said to Sonic. He took the Emerald and muttered, "Chaos See." His eyes began glowing the same shade of red as the Emerald he was holding. After a few seconds he returned to normal and handed the Emerald back to Sonic.

"There's a hatch at the top," he said. "And to get up there..." He began running to one end of the small room. Sonic, Tails, and Amy began following him to a small platform hovering a few inches off the ground. "Have fun," Knuckles said. He then ran over to the wall and began climbing.

"Loser," Sonic muttered. He hopped on the platform and looked around for a set of controls. "Ah, here it is," he said as Amy and Tails climbed aboard. Slowly the platform began rising towards the top of the shaft. "Not too bad," Sonic said. However, when the platform was halfway up the shaft, it abruptly stopped. "What?" Sonic yelled.

"It's as high as it goes," Tails said. "There's another one over there."

Amy looked and nearly toppled over. "It's a long way," she said. "A very long way."

Sonic smiled and began to say something, but Tails yelled at him before he could. "There is no way I am going to toss you over there you overweight nimskull!" Both of them cracked up laughing after that.
"What?" Amy asked, putting on her best the-joke-you-just-told-went-flying-over-my-head face.

Sonic just waved her hand and said, "Never mind." He moved to the far edge of the platform they were on, took a running start, and jumped over to the other platform. He wasn't able to jump quite far enough and was forced to grab onto the platform with his hands and pull himself up.

Amy gasped sharply when she saw this. Tails just put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Same thing as before." Amy gulped and nodded.

From the beginning Tails could tell she wouldn't make it. Her running start did more to slow her down than give her distance. When she jumped, she was more vertical than horizontal, leaving her to fall screaming between the two platforms.

Tails dived off the platform and pressed his arms to his side so he could catch up to Amy quicker. She had her eyes squeezed shut and her arms were flailing, making it extremely hard for Tails to grab a hold of her. As soon as he had her wrists he began sending his tails into motion. For the first few seconds all it did was slow their fall, but slowly they began rising until they reached the platform with Sonic.

"Don't scare me like that again!" Sonic said when they reached the platform.

Amy slowly opened one eye, then the other. "I'm... not dead?" she said slowly.

"No, you're not," Sonic said as he started sending the platform towards the top.

Tails had collapsed at his end of the platform and was panting heavily. Amy walked over to him and whispered, "Thanks." She opened her mouth to say more, but the words caught in her throat and she simply walked away. Tails just smiled. Slowly the platform stopped at the top of the shaft.

"Only one more stage," Tails breathed. The rocket lurched, and Tails added, "And five more minutes."

Knuckles chuckled and walked over to the wall, but Tails yelled at him to stop before he could drive his knuckles in.

"We don't know if this is well protected," Tails explained. "We're going to be leaving the atmosphere any minute now, and one small hole can grow when there's 500 PSI pushing on it."

"Five hundred- huh?" Knuckles said.

"Just don't make a hole that let's air out, or we're all dead," Tails said sharply.

"Chill out, guys," Sonic said. "It's my turn to find a way up." He pointed at the far wall. The corner between the floor and the wall was sloped like a skateboard halfpipe. At the end of the room where they were standing was a small treadmill and a set of handles. "Launch pad," Sonic explained. "It's like ol' Egg-Butt wants us to go that way."

"Careful," Amy said. "It could be a trap."

Sonic just laughed. "Bring it on," he said. "Besides, I gots my lucky shoes."

"You've got your soaps, Sonic," Tails said. "You'd need your energy shoes to get up to the top."

"Will you guys stop?" Sonic said, an insane glint coming into his eyes. "Don't bog me down, okay?" He hopped onto the the launch pad and pressed a couple of buttons. A blue light began
flashing from the floor, and Sonic began running as fast as he possibly could. After a few seconds he shot out of the device and up the far wall.

Knuckles was deep in thought. "Can't use an Emerald; Genius just ran off with them... there must be something else... aha!" He ran off to a corner and came back with a small cart. "We can ride in this... I think," he said.

Tails looked at the cart, and at Knuckles and Amy, and said, "Get in, both of you." Amy looked confused, but Knuckles nodded and led Amy to the cart. The cart wasn't very wide, so Knuckles sat towards the back and Amy sat in front of him.

"Hold on for dear life," Tails said with a smile as he charged the launch pad. "Those with weak stomachs may wait three minutes and the rocket will escort you back to Mobius. Thank you for riding Eggman Rockets, have a nice trip."

The cart, pushed by Tails, shot out of the launch pad. Once it started up the wall, Tails began twisting his tails to add momentum. They got closer and closer to the top, and Knuckles began to worry that they might crash into the ceiling.

As they got closer, however, they noticed that there was a small hole in the ceiling that they were lined up to go through. Tails gave one last push of effort, and they pushed through to a room that had slopes on all the walls. It strongly reminded Tails of a skatepark's bowl. He gently brought the cart to rest in the middle of the room.

"Hey, you made it!" a voice yelled from above them. They saw Sonic poking his head down a hatch in the middle of the ceiling.

"How did you get up there?" Amy yelled back.

"Simple," Sonic said. "You see the ceiling? It's got the same slope as the bottom of the room. It's like we're in one giant ball! Just run up the side and-"

"Sonic," Knuckles yelled back, "I've just about had it with this whole thing. Why don't you just be a good boy and throw me an Emerald, okay?"

Sonic's head disappeared from the hatch. Tails thought he heard him mutter, "Take the easy way, why don't you." In a second the red Emerald came flying down. Knuckles caught it and motioned for Tails and Amy to come over to him.

"You got any room for us up there?" Knuckles yelled.

"Not much, but yeah," Sonic answered. "Why do you-"

"Chaos Relocate!" Knuckles yelled, and he, Tails, and Amy instantly appeared at Sonic's side. Knuckles calmly handed the Emerald back to Sonic.

"Whatever," Sonic said. "Just help me with this hatch."

-Chapter 8: Cosmic Angel-

"Well, it's certainly flashier," Sonic said. They were inside a brightly lit room inside Robotnik's spaceship, the Cosmic Angel.

"Do you think he knows we're here?" Amy asked softly.
"Probably," Sonic said. "He's probably looking at us now on some computer monitor smiling his sadistic smile thinking of what insane torture he's going to inflict on us next."

"Don't forget he's probably got that Emerald up here with him," Tails said.

"So how about we split up?" Knuckles said. "Me and Tails can look for the Emerald-"

"No," Sonic said flatly. "There's no reason to split up."

"Especially when we're under attack!" Tails yelled.

Sure enough, several robots were flying toward the small group. Amy yelped and tightened the grip on her mallet.

"Get out of here; the room's too small," Knuckles yelled. The group ran as fast as they could towards the door. The other side brought new surprises, however, as it led to a catwalk only as wide as the door itself spanning a chasm that one did not want to fall down.

"Typical," Sonic muttered. "What do we do now?"

"Simple," Knuckles said quickly. "Now each of them has to come out the door one by one, and they can't surround us as easily."

The five robots flew out the doorway in perfect single file. The first one met Sonic's spines. The second one flew around and was answered by Knuckles fists. Two more found Tails and Amy, and the last one went straight for Sonic.

"Might as well have a little fun!" he yelled, running off into the distance with the robot in not-so-close pursuit. A small explosion told Tails, Amy, and Knuckles the robot hadn't lasted very long.

In the next room, Tails saw a computer terminal and ran over to it. "Is he... yes! He's running Gooey!" he said excitedly.

"He what?" Sonic said.

"You know that Minitech company I was telling Sally about? Their operating system is full of security holes, and I know all of 'em." Tails cracked his knuckles and started typing. "Access code root," he muttered, "identification RotorW, password... done. And... what?" Tails hit the screen. "What do you mean 'Access denied'! This hole-

"What's the problem," Knuckles said, trying to calm Tails down.

"I tried this method on the server at Castle Acorn two days ago and it worked! I don't see how it could have been fixed that quickly."

"Two days is a long time."

"Not for Minitech. They take a good week to come out with security fixes, and this hole was just made public two days ago. It's like Robotnik's got some special version..."

"Tails, we're sitting ducks here," Sonic said quickly. "Are you done?"

"Almost," Tails said. He pulled up a few more windows on the screen and announced, "I know where he's keeping the Emerald. Dumb egghead isn't smart enough to put that thing under password protection."
Within five minutes the group was standing on a wide catwalk. "See that thing attached to the bottom of that catwalk?" Tails said, pointing straight up.

"Yeah..." Sonic said. "Looks like a container or something... but how do we get up there?"

"Well, I could fly up there, but I'd need a small boost..." Tails winked at Sonic. Sonic nodded slowly and motioned for Amy and Knuckles to stand back. Tails stood in the middle of the catwalk and Sonic began running in a fast circle around him. The faster Sonic ran, the more Tails began to feel a small tornado coming.

Finally Tails jumped and began spinning his tails. The extra momentum generated by Sonic's tornado sent Tails flying straight upward. In no time he reached the container. In a split second he stopped spinning his tails and spun himself around. The whiplash of his tails shattered the container and Tails managed to catch the Emerald. He began hovering just before hitting the ground and landed safely on his two feet.

"That's six, isn't it?" he said calmly as he handed the Emerald to Sonic.

The small group walked silently through the bowels of the spaceship. Every so often Sonic or Tails would point out small things they remembered and little incidents that had happened at certain points. "You know what I miss, though?" Sonic said.

"The gravity room?" Tails said, smiling.

"Oh, yeah." Sonic smiled with a hint of nostalgia. "Nothing like having your innards turned upside down when the gravity in the room switches."

Amy covered her mouth and made gagging noises. Knuckles just rolled his eyes. "You're right, Sonic. There _is_ nothing like it."

Without warning another group of flying robots swooped toward the group. Knuckles, Tails, and Amy ducked out of the way while Sonic took off running. All of the robots followed him.

Amy got up slowly. "Wonder what that was all about..."

Tails nodded. "Usually they go for all of us. Wonder why they only went for Sonic?"

Tails was answered by the revving of an engine. Charging toward them was Robotnik, driving a small tank with a gigantic drill on the front.

"Oh, not AGAIN!" Tails yelled. "Can't you come up with something slightly more original, Eggman?"

"Don't retire a good idea," Robotnik answered.

"Didn't you and Sonic demolish this thing?" Knuckles whispered. Tails nodded.

"It's so big it can't turn very fast," Tails whispered back. "Jump over it or step to the side and then hit the engine."

Robotnik shifted the tank into gear and began speeding towards the group. Knuckles stepped to the side and scraped the side of the tank with his knuckle spikes. Tails lifted Amy over the tank and dropped her onto the back where she proceeded to hit the engine several times.

Needless to say, they made quick work of the robot. Robotnik seemed to have anticipated this,
since within thirty seconds he was ready with his hovercraft, dangling a large wrecking ball beneath it.

"Didn't Sonic tell me about this one?" Amy said.

"Poor fella's out of ideas," Knuckles said.

Knuckles climbed up a nearby wall and glided to the hovercraft. He latched onto it with one hand and began tearing it apart with the other. Tails ran around beneath the craft teasing the wrecking ball. Amy tried to hit the ball with her mallet, but it just bounced off and left her hands hurting. She retreated to the sidelines and watched Tails and Knuckles finish off the hovercraft.

Robotnik finally flew out of reach. Tails, Amy, and Knuckles stood together beneath him looking up at him. "Well...?" Tails asked after a minute of this.

Robotnik shrugged. "I guess I'm just out of ideas," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "All I've got is this red button here, but I'm sure you'll defeat whatever robot comes out of whatever door this opens, right?"

Tails caught the sarcasm. "I'd say that's the first sensible thing I've heard you say, Doctor. How's about us all going home now, eh?"

Robotnik frowned. "After I push the button," he quipped. The platform that Knuckles, Amy, and Tails were on tilted to the side, and the three of them fell down through the depths of the Cosmic Angel.

Sonic loved running, even if there were killer robots behind him. He zoomed over catwalks and across chasms, always one step ahead of the robots. A couple of times he looked back and glanced at them. They looked like buzz-bomber robots, except they had three or four rockets attached to them instead of wings. They had no stingers either; they were suicide robots.

Sonic just kept running. He told himself he'd have to dispose of the robots eventually, but he wanted to have some fun with them at first. He found a staircase off to the side and promptly grinded down the handrail with his soapshoes. As he hit the bottom, he nearly ran headlong into a wall. Acting on impulse, he ran a few strides up the wall, jumped off it, and began spinning. By this point, the robots were going too fast to stop themselves. Two of them ran into the wall, and the third one was shredded by Sonic's spin.

Sonic landed on his feet and pretended to dust himself off. "Easy come, easy go," he muttered. He was about to run back when he noticed a small glint on the ground. He leaned closer and saw that it was the green Chaos Emerald on top of another typewritten note. The first thing he did was put the last Emerald into his medallion. He then picked up the note:

"Your friends are in trouble. You may want this. Just be careful with it; you know what kind of damage it can cause. Don't go crazy on me or I'll have to kill you. And I will kill you. - A friend"

Sonic smirked. Whoever this "friend" was, he still had something of a sense of humor. If not humor then irony. Sonic tossed the note to the side and slowly took a few deep breaths. He had to concentrate with what he was about to do.

Slowly Sonic fingered his medallion. "Beyond the power of Chaos is Order," he said quietly. "So may the power of Order protect me now and keep my hands from harm." It was a quiet invocation Knuckles had taught Sonic after Sonic had heard stories of people using the Chaos Emeralds and becoming consumed with a lust for power.
As he held the medallion, he felt the combined energy from the Emeralds flow through him. In his mind's eye he tried to picture himself as what he would become. He tightened his grip and yelled, "Chaos... TRANSFORM!"

Tails, Amy, and Knuckles fell though the depths of the Cosmic Angel. Amazingly, they landed on a narrow platform that seemed to be made of gigantic blue bubbles. After they finished bouncing, Tails said with a smirk, "Well, we're alive."

"Not for much longer," Knuckles said, looking to one end of the platform. Attached to one end of the platform was another one of Robotnik's vehicles. This one looked like a large doughnut that encircled the platform. The top side, which Knuckles saw, was outfitted with several rows of spikes and two energy cannons.

"Tails, see if you can take a look at the bottom of that thing," Knuckles said. Tails nodded and tried to jump off, but once he reached the edge of the platform he was pushed back by an energy field.

"That can't be good," he muttered. As he said that, the robot gave a jump and began moving slowly towards the group. Knuckles and Amy were able to jump over the spikes to the other side, and Tails took to the air. No more than a dozen feet overhead, however, he ran into another force field. *Trapped,* he thought, *and Sonic's nowhere in sight.*

Sonic, now Super Sonic, hovered over the ground for a few seconds, trying to put his mind in the right frame. It had been at least a month since he had been Super Sonic last, and he had to make sure he didn't go overboard. Once he was sure of himself, he took off down the nearest corridor. When he reached a wall, he either turned or went straight up. He tried his best to get back to where he left Tails, but when he got there the platform was missing.

Not knowing where to go next, he followed the inkling in his mind and dived down. After all, if Super Sonic was invincible and could fly, what did he have to be afraid of? After half a second of flying down he saw Tails, Amy, and Knuckles trying to hold their ground against Robotnik's latest vehicle.

*Seriouly, Eggman,* Sonic thought, *how low can you go?* He dived down, determined to make quick work of the vehicle.

That was when he found out he couldn't fly through force fields.

Tails was the first to notice Sonic. He flew up as high as he could and yelled, "Where'd you get the last one?"

"A friend. Is there any way for me to get in here?"

"You'll need the shutoff. I have no clue where it is, but I think Eggman turned it on by remote."

"Where's he?"

"No clue either!"

Sonic thought for a second to choose his options. "Stay alive," he yelled back, "I'll go trash his sorry-"

"Go!" Tails yelled before Sonic could finish his insult.
Sonic turned and flew out of the pit. *If I were a rotten egg,* he thought, *where would I hide...* He saw a small tunnel that looked promising and flew into it. It opened into a large hallway with what looked like a giant robot at the far end. *Got you now,* Sonic thought as he sped toward the robot.

When he was halfway into the hallway a siren sounded. Suddenly Sonic felt himself being pulled toward the ceiling. The gravity change took him by surprise and he, despite his invincibility, crashed into the ceiling, now the floor.

Sonic looked up to see Robotnik coming toward him in a hovering car with a gigantic claw on the front end. Before he could react he was locked in the claw's grip, staring down Robotnik's face.

Robotnik laughed. "To be honest," he roared, "I never thought it would work. I always knew, deep down inside, that somehow you would get past my trap. And yet... here you are, trapped while your friends die."

Sonic opened his mouth to retort, but decided not to. He looked around for something, anything to use, but found nothing. He couldn't try to fry the claw, since it was obviously touching him with no adverse effects. He could Chaos Control... but he'd still be stuck. He couldn't concentrate enough to teleport...

Sonic concentrated all his energy on the small joint between the claw and the hovercraft and yelled, "Chaos Spear!" The joint exploded, sending the hovercraft and Sonic off in opposite directions. Sonic pulled out of the now-limp claw and sped towards Robotnik. Robotnik, on the other hand, went straight up towards the ceiling.

Again, Sonic heard the siren, but this time he was ready. He lined himself directly above Robotnik's hovercraft, so when the gravity changed, he sped towards it with full momentum. Robotnik apparently saw the writing on the wall and ejected just before Sonic obliterated the empty hovercraft.

Despite his enhanced state, Sonic was still dazed by the explosion. When he looked around, Robotnik was nowhere in sight. His first impulse was to chase after him, but an inkling in the back of his mind reminded him of Tails. Quickly he looked around the hall for the right control panel. He finally saw a large machine labeled "MTC Force Field Generator." He wanted to tear the thing to pieces, but decided instead to press the obviously labeled "Off" switch. He then hurried back to Tails and company.

Once the field had been deactivated, Tails airlifted Amy and Knuckles latched onto the wall. The spike ball had been gaining speed and was becoming next to impossible to avoid, so the three of them just let the thing speed to its heart's content. When Sonic arrived, he made quick work of the contraption and carried everyone to safety.

"So how does Super Sonic handle, Sonic?" Knuckles asked.

Sonic shrugged. "I'm a little rusty, but it's coming back." He turned to Tails. "Tails, you think you'd have any use for that force field generator?"

"What brand is it?" Tails said.

Sonic looked up and tried to remember. "Um... MTC? Does that sound right?"

Tails' eyes lit up. "I _knew_ it! It's a Minitech!" he said. "It's the same company that makes that Gooey software I was talking about."
Sonic began to tap his foot. "So do you want the thing or not?"

Tails raised his eyebrows. "Not sure how we'd be able to get the thing, but sure."

Sonic grabbed Tails by the wrist and sped through the spaceship until they reached the generator. Sonic stood and gawked at the size of the colossal object. Tails ran up to the small console on the front, fiddled around with a few gadgets, and in a few seconds he ran back carrying a small object not much bigger than a 24-ounce soda can.

"Is that it?" Sonic said, still gawking.

Tails nodded. "All that other stuff is just supplying and channeling power. It's not that important."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "So how are you going to power that thing?"

"A Chaos Emerald."

Sonic nodded, not quite understanding.

Sally was standing on the roof of Castle Acorn. Sonic had just called her, saying that she should head straight to the roof. So far she had been standing for two minutes with no results.

Sally rolled her eyes and groaned. "Sonic Hedgehog," she muttered, "what, pray tell, am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Do you see that star right there?" Sonic said.

Sally jumped and turned around. There stood Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, and Amy. Knuckles was tossing the red Emerald while Sonic twirled his medallion by its chain. "Look, quick," Sonic said again.

Sally, still slightly miffed at Sonic's unannounced arrival, looked at the star Sonic was pointing to. It seemed to glow slightly brighter before it exploded in a small, inaudible supernova.

"I seriously hope that was Egg Rocket," she said.

Sonic feigned hurt feelings. "What, do you think my aim was off? Of course it was Egg Rocket."

"And you hit the self-destruct button?"

"Actually no," Amy said. "By the time we regrouped, Robotnik had already pushed the button. All we had to do was get off."

"And the Chaos Emeralds?"

The four of them looked at each other and back at Sally. "We've got six," Knuckles explained. "Our 'friend' has the green one. He only loaned it to Sonic long enough for him to go Super. After all that was over, we look the other direction for five seconds and boom! The green one's gone, and all we've got is this note that says he needs it and he'll give it back when we need it."

"Was that it?" Sally probed.

"Yeah," Tails said. "We didn't even see the bum."

"I'd appreciate not being called a bum in the future, even though the term does suit me," a gruff voice said from the corner of the rooftop.
Everyone turned to look for the source of the voice. A black hedgehog in a dark trenchcoat was smiling sadistically, fingerling the green Chaos Emerald in his right hand. Slowly he walked towards the group, taking the time to look each one in the eye. After half a minute of silence, he said, "I must say I'm surprised. Most of the time they bust out with cries of 'Who are you?' by now."

"So who are you?" Sally asked, becoming more wary of her guest every second.

The hedgehog smiled again, the kind of smile that says "I know something you don't know and I'll never tell you."

"You're Dulcy's new recruit, aren't you?" Sonic blurted.

The hedgehog pointed at Sonic. "Bingo. You're still pretty sharp for a faker. And I'm afraid that will have to be enough for right now. We _will_ meet again, Sonic." With that, the hedgehog vaulted over the handrail and out of sight.

Tails stared at the ground. "I know him from somewhere..." he muttered, lost in thought.

"So can we trust him?" Sally said to Sonic.

Sonic nodded slowly. "I think so. If Dulcy's got an eye on him, he'll be okay."

"Good, because Father wants to see all of you now."

Amy jumped. "The... the king wants to see us?"

"Of course," Sally said. "Now come on, he should be through with his address by now."

As they were walking off the roof, Sonic stopped and thought for a second. "Wait a minute... he called me 'Faker.' Is... no, he's not. He can't be."

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- Epilogue -

"So in conclusion," King Acorn said into the television camera, "I would like to thank Sonic Hedgehog, Miles Prower, and Amy Rose Gardner for their excellent service as citizens of our Sovereignty. I would also like to thank the Guardian Knuckles of the Floating Island for his service as well.

"However," the king continued, his regal smile turning to a serious face, "I must say that damaging private property is illegal and cannot be condoned by this administration. I have talked with Chief of Security Goldman, and he believes that criminal charges should be filed against said parties. I must, despite my objections, agree with him.

"In the future, however, do not let this deter you from serving your country, for I will see to it that no good deed worthy of recognition will go unrecognized as long as I am in power. Thank you."

The King stared into the camera for a few more seconds until an aide said, "Okay... and we're off."

Sally led the increasingly dumbfounded Sonic, Tails, Amy, and Knuckles into the studio. The King had his crown off and was mopping his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Before you say anything," he said, seeing the looks on their faces, "let me say this: I, King Acorn, hereby pardon Sonic Hedgehog, Miles Prower, and Amy Rose Gardner from any criminal offenses, felonies, or misdemeanors they may have committed while sabotaging the Cosmic
"Angel. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Knuckles said with a smirk. "What about me?"

"You?" The king said, cracking a smile. "You've got diplomatic immunity." He got up and began to walk out of the room, motioning for the group to follow. They walked into what appeared to be his office. The king sat down behind a large desk, and the group sat into the five chairs conveniently positioned in front of it.

"Well, Sally," the king began when everyone was seated, "did I pardon Sonic from something good or just more wanton destruction of Doctor Eggman's devices?"

"Something good, you'll be happy to know," Sally said, pulling out a sheet of paper. "Intelligence has reported that Robotnik was planning to use the Chaos Emeralds to build a large-scale teleporter. For what purposes we have no clue. Also, Tails has made a few discoveries that you should probably know about."

"Tails?"

"Well..." Tails shifted nervously. "I'm probably just going on a conspiracy theory right now, but-well, I believe the security of our nation has been severely compromised."

"You mean Goldman hasn't been doing a good job? Tails, tell me something I don't know."

This response prompted light laughter from everyone in the room. "Well, sir," Tails continued, "Goldman hired Minitech to run the security systems here, correct? Sir, Minitech security is the brunt of many a joke online. Their software is riddled with security holes, and when one is discovered it takes them at least a week to release a patch to fix the hole."

"That's not what I'm worried about, though. You see, when we were on board the Cosmic Angel, I found a computer running Minitech software that was free of security holes."

The king scratched his chin. "Are you sure Robotnik doesn't keep his computers up to date?"

Tails shook his head. "This was a hole that was discovered yesterday. As far as I know, Minitech hasn't released a patch. I think Robotnik had... well, he basically had a clean version of their software."

The king nodded. "Are we running this same software? It could easily be that Robotnik is paying extra for a clean version."

"We're not. I tried the trick on the palace mainframe right after the hole was discovered and it worked. In fact, the hole from two weeks ago still hasn't been fixed."

"Very well," the king said. "I'll talk this over with Goldman, though I doubt this will fix anything. Keep your fingers typing, Tails. I'm trusting you to be my eyes and ears on this since... well, Sally can tell you about my experience with computers."

Sally blushed slightly.

"What about the Chaos Emeralds?" the king said.

"We've got six," Sonic said, handing the king his medallion, "and one of the Great Master's servants has the green one."

"Good. If one of Them has it, then I know Robotnik won't get it. I'm not so keen on giving these
back to G.U.N, especially if Robotnik has one of our keycards-

"That explains a lot!" Tails blurted. Immediately he shrank down into his chair and squeaked, "Sorry."

"Right. How about this: Knuckles, you did a good job with the red one, so you keep that. Sonic and Tails, you can each take one, and I'll find a place for the other three."

"Sounds like a plan," Sally said. "Were you going to give one to Amy?"

"No," Amy said flatly. "I'd lose it or wear it for jewelry."

"Very well," the king said. "That seems to be it, so everyone have a good night."

Everyone got up to go except Knuckles. "I need to talk Constitution," he said to Sonic.

"What was he talking about?" Sonic asked Sally once they were outside.

"Knuckles is trying to have the Floating Island recognized as an independent country. That way he can form alliances, trade with other nations, and keep from getting taken over by some rogue country with no respect for traditions."

A black hedgehog moved like a shadow down the darkened side street. At the end was a fire escape ladder which he began climbing. At the top was a tall lion dressed in a simple white robe.

"So how was your day, Shadow?" the lion asked.

Shadow walked slowly to the lion and kneeled down on one knee. "I'm still learning, Master," he said.

The lion smiled and motioned for Shadow to get up. "But are you willing to learn?"

Shadow turned his face away. "Part of me wants to, and part of me just... doesn't."

"But you do trust me, don't you?"

"I don't know. It's just... well, I still can't understand why if we have the power, and we know who the good guys and the bad guys are, why don't we just get the whole struggle done and over with?"

The lion laughed slightly. "Because it's not time yet. Just think, if I had decided to get it 'done and over with' two months ago, you would have been lost in darkness for all eternity. This isn't a situation where there's an easy solution."

"But why can't I fight with Sonic and Tails? I could have easily trashed that-"

"Shadow, I have no doubt that you could have. But you are still learning. If you had taken care of Robotnik yourself, Tails never would have found out about his computer and Amy wouldn't have grown up as much as she did. And besides, if you know the outcome and you always take the quick and easy way, where's the fun in life?"

Shadow smiled. "This is where that whole 'You'll know what you need to know when you need to know it' thing comes from, isn't it?"

"Right. I want you to serve me, Shadow. I want you to fulfill this purpose. But I want you to have fun while you're doing it!"
Shadow nodded and looked back at the lion. "I still can't tell you how thankful I am for what you did for me."

"Well, Shadow," the lion whispered, "let's just say I've got a plan that should make everyone happy, and having you die wasn't an option. Now if I were you, I'd stand to the far corner of this rooftop."

"Why?"

"You'll see." In a blink the lion was gone. Shadow slowly ambled over to the corner of the roof. After a few seconds Emech climbed up the ladder. He and Shadow exchanged greetings.

"She should be here any second," Emech said, looking around at the sky.

"Master said to stay in the corner," Shadow said.

Emech laughed out loud. "I don't care what the intellectuals say; Master has a sense of humor. Look out, here she comes!" Emech ran to Shadow's corner.

After a second a turquoise dragon was seen flying straight towards the rooftop. To the bystanders she appeared to be coming in at a very sharp angle, and with a loud dragon scream she crashed into the roof and slumped onto the ground, unconscious.

Emech walked over to the dragon's head. "Let's see... fainted dragon calls for..." He revealed one side of his trenchcoat and glanced down the line of tubes, vials, and packets strapped to it. "Aha! Sulfur matches."

He pulled out a small matchbox and held it close to the dragon's nose. Quickly he struck the match and made sure to get the first whiff of smoke in the dragon's breathing range. When the dragon smelled the burning sulfur, it woke up with a start. After it got its bearings it glared at Emech.

"Sorry, Dulcy," he said. "How else was I supposed to wake you up?"

Dulcy only breathed smoke out of her nostrils. Slowly she closed her eyes and concentrated, and a bright light began to glow from her body. Finally it flashed, and Dulcy the dragon was replaced with Dulcy the trenchcoat-wearing squirrel.

"I hope you enjoyed that," she said, pointing a finger at Emech. "Next time I can't say I'll be able to keep from roasting you."

"Fair deal," Emech said.

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