

Null

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Null

by [PaP](#)

Summary

When cruelty looks like kindness.

Chapter 1

Shadow passes a salvaged bottle of water without provocation or comment. It's almost pristine, a striking contrast against his smudged glove and crisscross cut arm.

"Oh, my." Rouge smiles despite her bruised jaw, accepting the gift with a husky murmur into the dust, "Thank you, my love."

Rolling his eyes at the velvety undertones of jest, he ought to slip away. Wouldn't he, normally?

She's gazing up at him from her place on a chunk of concrete, nursing her tired legs.

Timidly, he lowers his head toward hers, as if her eyes are asking him to.

Calmly, she moves in turn, meeting his cheek with the tenderness of her mouth.

His angular frown quivers, crumbling into soft confusion. Yet he quietly smirks, as if he isn't at all frightened.

She takes her time before pulling away, allowing enough distance to remain that she could easily kiss him again, but somehow, she doesn't. She seems to know better than to push so hard.

Heart pounding, stomach clenching tightly, Amy stands in the ruined remains of a doorway with further provisions in her arms, intending to hand them out to the survivors, sensing that she's intruded on something sacred. Fixated on seeing something she shouldn't be seeing.

Eyes suddenly fall on her, shattering the intimacy of the moment.

She smiles politely, apologetically, as Shadow jerks away and Rouge sighs with good-natured disappointment, because it's too late to disappear.

"I wish I could have with Sonic whatever it is you have with Shadow."

"Hon, you gotta stop dwelling on—"

"What's so wrong with it?"

Rouge breathes against Amy's shoulder blades, tending to a wound otherwise out of reach.

The silence continues for several moments longer before the hedgehog murmurs, "You're gentler than you look," into the fluorescent gloom of the makeshift medical, far from sterile. "Thank you for helping me with this. Not a lot of ladies around to, um..."

"Taking your clothes off in front of me is no better than undressing with one of the guys, you know."

"Yeah."

The bat glances upward, her focus snagged by a green eye from over a pink shoulder.

A smile, in profile. "Thanks for reminding me to be coy, here."

A wink. "You're welcome."

"Can I harass you about you being madly in love with Shadow some more?"

"Why bother?"

"Because you get to see me with my clothes off."

"I... concede to that much."

"Not enough?"

"Don't flirt with your surgeon. I need to concentrate."

"Hey." Amy looks ahead, again, and a bit aside, at an empty bottle. "That booze really hit my head."

"And quickly, too. Lightweight."

"I might pass out soon. But it helps with the pain."

"You're too young and promising to be talking like that," Rouge mutters through sharp, pretty teeth, her deft fingers working a needle and thread over supple flesh, stained. "I'll forgive you because of the context but don't let me catch you self-medicating."

"You're concerned."

"Uh-huh."

"You love me, don't you?"

"Ugh."

"Okay, okay. Let's talk about you and Shadow."

"Ugh," the bat repeats in exactly the same tone, sweat on her brow.

"Why not?" The hedgehog giggles at that. "You guys are so weird and cute, together. I envy you so much, it's crazy!"

"Shadow and I are a dead, broken horse."

"Aw! Don't say that!"

"Keep still, you."

"Sorry. Ouch."

"There is nothing going on between Shadow and I."

"Actually, missy," Amy slurs whilst watching her boots swing back and forth from over the edge of the berth, "there is a whole lot of something going on between you two..."

"I have such patience," Rouge says in monotone.

"I want... Sonic to look at me the way you look at Shadow. And... I want Sonic to look weak when he's alone with me, or... when he thinks he's alone with me, like... Shadow does with you."

For a little while, nobody says a word.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm usually quiet."

"But... this is different. I think?"

"Honey, are you willing to die for Sonic?"

"Oh, of course, without hesitation!"

"Even if it's totally unnecessary, because of how much stronger he is, than you?"

"Well, I guess so. I mean, I love him. But... Sonic isn't *stronger* than me, as such... At least, not anymore."

"Even if he'd ridicule you, resent you, for the fruitlessness of your sacrifice once you're gone?"

"Ridicule me? Resent me?"

"Even if he'd be unable to understand why you did it for him? Even if your passing would leave him broken?"

"Broken?"

"Blaming himself, since that is all that could make sense. Holding himself accountable for appearing weak and in need of someone weaker, a mere mortal, to stand and face death in his place, because he was loved. It's nonsense."

"Rouge?"

"To him, a senseless tragedy, all over again. His trust... Because of that something you so envy and its terrible implications."

The hedgehog's heart is pounding. Her stomach is clenched.

"Are you still so willing, honey?"

"I don't know."

"Shadow is the Ultimate Lifeform. But I'm willing to die for him, to leave him behind, to himself, lost and alone in all the guilt and the shame and the regret. I must sound so arrogant for assuming so much." The bat hesitates, then recollects herself with a smile. "And if I do die for him, someday, then it'll be the most perverse and selfish thing I could do for him. But I'd do it, anyway."

Amy shivers when Rouge leans in close, breaths hot and stinging, perfume heady.

"That is how much he means to me. I wouldn't wish that sort of feeling on anyone."

The hedgehog chokes on a breath as the bat cuts the thread with her teeth.

"I feel terrible."

"You were rather drunk."

"Ah, *very* astute!"

Shadow seems to dwell somewhere between concerned and amused. His expressions are so complex and subtle that it's hard to read him at most times.

Amy huffs through her quills, which are a mess, as she glares about the large room filled with multi-coloured animals eating and talking with far too much noise and movement. "I hate people."

"Only for the next few hours."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Better freshen up soon. Faker will be most disappointed."

"Oh, would you stop calling him that? Neither of you is a fake. Honestly. Boys!"

The dark hedgehog watches the pink hedgehog poke at food. "Vector's handiwork."

"Oh?"

"It was his turn to take kitchen duty."

"That explains so much."

The corner of Shadow's handsome mouth curves noticeably upward.

"I'm sorry. That was mean. It's the hangover that's making me mean."

"Indeed."

"I really do appreciate breakfast. Vector is a sweetheart underneath his thick skin."

"Lunch..."

"Huh?"

"It's lunchtime, actually."

"Right. And I appreciate your company." Amy drags her glass over with a tiny, wincing chuckle. "And your gentle criticisms."

"You could have taken your food privately, in your quarters."

"And make people worry? Nah."

"People are already worried about you."

"Because I look about as surly as you do on your worst days?"

"Not as surly as my worst, but quite surly, yes."

She leans forward, patting his arm fondly. "You're rather spry one-on-one, you know that?"

"You're hardly a worthy opponent in your current state," is his silky reply as he endures the petting.

She leans back into her own seat once more, tentatively retracting her hand as she catches sight of Sonic from across the crowd.

Her hero, hurrying over with a smile bright as the sun. Brighter, still. Blinding. Beautiful and perfect.

She smiles dimly in turn, so feebly, overwhelmingly grateful that he is alive and that he knows her and that she loves him as much as she does.

"Hey, you two!"

Shadow nods curtly, then takes his leave, leaving behind a vacant seat.

"Uh, see you around?"

"Don't mind him. I've been quite tedious."

"Nah, he's just missin' Rouge."

"I hope so."

"Anywho!" Sonic casually sits before Amy, kindness in his emerald eyes. "How you holdin' up, tiger?"

She keeps smiling her dim smile despite the pain and her efforts at trying to remember her conversation with Rouge, because it seems so distantly important, somehow, as Shadow turns a corner and disappears.

Chapter 2

"You don't seem so happy."

"Oh, I was at the time. The unhappiness came later. Before then, we took a walk."

"That sounds nice."

"It was, yeah. We wandered a bit. Found an intact hotel. Can you believe it?"

"Jackpot."

"Yeah, Eggman really did leave us a mess. Anyway. Nobody was manning the place, of course, so we roleplayed the whole thing. Got ourselves a room."

"Roleplayed!"

"It was cute, you know?"

"Then, what's with the frown?"

"Let me finish."

"Alright. How was the room?"

"Nothing fancy, but it was nice. High up. Had a view. He carried me upstairs all the way."

"Then what happened?"

"We sat on the bed."

"Okay."

"We... kissed. I got on top of him as he lay back. He seemed so ready for me. I felt ready. Until..."

Rouge watches the tiny amount of excitement that had arisen, drain steadily from Amy's face.

"Then, we... snapped out of it."

"Snapped out of it?"

"I felt him inside me and it did nothing."

"I... holy shit, kid."

"We didn't keep it going for very long," admits the hedgehog with a sigh. "And the truth is, I realised why. I knew why I felt... nothing. I had to make us stop."

"You must be utterly devastated."

"Actually, I'm not. I'm just a bit shaken. I wasn't in love, anymore, and much of my life's purpose is now gone. But for some reason, I'm okay."

Black coffee. Bittersweet and strong. It makes Rouge think of Shadow.

"It was too late for us, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"Too many years. I grew out of it. But due to my persistence for so long, he'd grown into it. In a way, I manipulated him."

"I... had no idea."

"Neither did he. He was hurt when I said it. It... hurts me a lot less than it should. I suppose I'll fall apart in a bit but for now, it's nice to talk to someone. Keep this to yourself, won't you?"

"Honey..."

"I'm not quite ready to face our friends."

She looks up, bathing in steam, and studies the sorrowful tranquillity of Amy Rose.

"And it could be worse. Judging from our brief chat at breakfast this morning, we're still talking. Still friends. He is too good a man to drop me. And I do love him very, very much."

"Just not that way."

"Right." The hedgehog meets the bat's cold, searching eyes. "Not that way."

"That's very sad."

"Mm. It's a symptom. I'm getting old, you know."

"You're not getting old."

"I'm not getting any younger. Years of it, and I find, now, I've grown tired of chasing. It was too late by the time he started chasing me. I'd already run out of steam by then."

Rouge's characteristic ears lower by a vulnerable fraction. They're the most honest parts of her.

"I feel way older than I look, inside."

"That's the sadness talking, not you."

"The sadness. Right." Amy scoffs quietly. "It came and it stayed. Will it go away?"

"Yeah, for a while. It'll come again, too, and it will leave, then it will come back. Over the years, it'll be relentless and painful each time."

"That's very bleak."

"You'll manage, somehow," mutters the bat. "You just have to."

The hedgehog lifts her tin cup, sipping delicately at the aromatic tea Espio had thoughtfully introduced her to, oblivious to the wisdom of Rouge's first-hand experience. It's like Amy is tasting civilisation itself after the world almost ended. It helps calm her nerves.

The bat gets over herself enough to clear her womanly throat, leaning against the bare brick support adjoining the little set of steps.

"It's funny in a sad way, you know. Not just sad. But mostly sad. And a little funny."

"What is?"

"Life. How we bother planning for anything." An intricate, delicate frown soon emerges. "How you can plan things in your head, a whole life together, imagining it all. Since you were a girl... Then, at the last minute, the rug gets yanked out from under you and you fall. When will you hit the ground? When you inevitably do, how will you stand up again? What'll the damage be?"

"You're a strong, passionate young woman." A smile, almost sincere. "If love is what you're looking for, then keep looking. You'll find it."

"And in the meantime, I have to accept that Sonic loves me, and I love Sonic, but we aren't in love like I thought we were and that night we almost spent together is as far as we'll go."

"Take your time. Let it sink in slowly."

"Yeah. Why not? Denial doesn't change anything. And besides, it's like you said – I'm still young."

Together they watch the sun set over the ruined cityscape. A fractured skyline.

"Hey," says Amy, after a while of companionable silence.

"Hmm?"

"Am I beautiful?"

Rouge raises a brow. "What?"

"Do you think I'm beautiful?"

"Me? Oh. Well." The bat chuckles huskily. "Shit, honey, of course."

"You aren't just saying that to make me feel good about myself, right? You mean it. Don't you?"

"You're very beautiful, Amy."

"So he said." The hedgehog seems to be looking for her reflection in her tea. "But now, I'm not so sure, myself. I feel like a very ugly person."

Rouge bites her plump lower lip.

Amy sniffs.

"I mean it."

She looks up, at the sunset.

"You're beautiful. On the inside and outside, too."

"Thanks. I need to tell myself that."

"Every day if it helps."

"Right." She sniffs again.

More companionable silence, for a while.

"You know..."

"Yeah?"

"Sometimes, in the right lighting... kinda like this sunset, here, for instance..."

She feels strong fingertips wander across her cheek, brushing her quills aside.

"You're actually quite breath-taking."

Amy's green eyes swivel upward, shyly meeting with those of Rouge. "You think so?"

"It's a little hard not to stare."

"Thank you. That's... very encouraging to hear."

"Be encouraged, then. You'll pick up your momentum again soon enough." The suave bat leans in to give the hedgehog her full, alluring attention. "Don't let this experience convince you otherwise. Okay? You're very beautiful and you can have just about any guy you want. Most of the girls, too."

"I'm... not so sure about that, but it's very nice of you to say so."

"You make heads turn wherever you go. And people like you. Arguably, they adore you."

Amy takes a humble sip of her tea, blushing rosily. It's so apt.

Satisfied, the bat settles once more into that companionable silence, again lifting up her coffee. She readies herself for a congratulatory sip.

"Am I sexy, though?" The question, worded so bluntly, may as well have been a blow from the hedgehog's hammer in battle.

The bat hisses in the wake of spilling her coffee all over her lap. "Aw, shit!"

"Sorry! That's my fault!" Amy leaps nimbly to her feet, taking Rouge's cup away with a look of alarm and sympathy. "Are you alright? Did you burn yourself?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine! Just... embarrassed, mostly."

"I'll get a towel. Hold on. I'll be back in a—"

"Wait."

The hedgehog skids to a halt a few steps away, turning back with surprise. Both of her hands are full of hot beverages she forgot to put down in her haste.

"You make my blood boil," Rouge murmurs huskily into the onset of evening, as if inspired by the steaming cups themselves.

"What?"

"You asked me a question. And that's my answer. You make my blood boil."

Amy closes her eyes. When she opens them again, it's like she's seeing for the first time.

The bat sits there on the steps leading to a destroyed museum with her lap wet, the denim fabric dark and clinging to her muscular, parted thighs.

The hedgehog stutters. Drops the tin cups. They bounce harmlessly at her boots, with noise.

As if woken by the commotion, Rouge bows her head quickly, peering at the spreading spillage through heavy lashes. Realisation. "Shit."

Coffee and tea seep into cracks.

"Listen, honey, I—"

"I'll be back shortly."

"But—"

"Give me a few minutes. I'm sorry about this."

"I... Okay."

Amy isn't sure how to interpret that tone.

"Thanks."

She begins back away.

"It's getting cold, out here."

"You've been quiet."

"I'm usually—"

Shadow frowns more deeply when Rouge clamps her mouth shut.

Just like the medical. Unsterile and naked. Those perky breasts were locked away underneath a simple bra. A nasty cut marred a powerful back, needing to be stitched shut. The strap got in the way. Had to take it off. Absolutely necessary. And so brave. Amy had gone on so long serving others that she hadn't even noticed the sting – overrode it until it was forgotten, until someone pointed at the blood soaking through her shirt. Then it hurt. Those perky breasts.

"What's the matter?"

"I... I don't want to talk about it," Rouge says, through pretty teeth, grimacing.

Shadow exhales slowly, then nods. "Alright."

The bat tries to focus on the screen. She's smart enough to make sense of the data but she just can't concentrate.

The hedgehog worries as best he can.

She can feel his concern, his innocence, and it burns.

Amy brought back a rag, apologised again, and got on her knees at the lowest step. Her head, windowed by legs wide open. She didn't dare to look up.

"You should go to bed, soon."

"Hon, don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Fuss over me. I'm a big girl."

"I don't mean to make you feel small."

"I know, my love. I know."

Shadow crosses the room with ease, his hand settling on the place between Rouge's wings. Tender flesh he knows so well. Yet he knows so little.

She involuntarily shudders.

Amy apologised repeatedly from between firm thighs. She only stopped apologising when she laughed a little to herself and she tried to smile afterward, to pretend that this wasn't weird at all. Why was she on her knees?

"Honey?"

"Yes?"

"Could you think badly of me, for anything I've done?"

Amy extended her hand, as if to give over the rag. She didn't account for a larger hand reaching back to capture her wrist instead. A snare.

Shadow does this thing with his fingers. "Do you really think I could?"

"Hngh." Rouge arches beneath him as the stress in her muscles protests. "That's really unfair, hon."

He smirks, powerful and in control, for a change, where nobody else can see them. To him, it isn't entirely sexual. Mostly, it's a massage.

She knows, yet her body interprets his touch differently and it is a special form of torment.

Amy could have easily broken free. But instead she surrendered, and watched with wonder as her hand, still gripping the rag, was guided.

"I'm a pervert, you know?"

"I know." Shadow keeps doing it. This thing with his fingers.

Rouge cannot read what's happening onscreen anymore. She doesn't bother to try. "No, honey. I mean it this time."

"What, exactly, do you mean?"

"That I should look at myself in the mirror and feel sick."

"Really? That's absurd."

"Why? Are you just so used to me, by now, that I can't repulse you anymore?"

"Perhaps." He deepens his touch with a fraction of his power, power that could strip away a mountain if he wanted. "I don't feel repulsed when I look at you."

She closes her eyes with a groan.

"In fact, I never have."

Amy's lips parted to admit a sharp exhale. The rag, her hand with it, was being pressed against a firm, supple inner thigh, dampened. The layers of fabric did nothing the limit the muscular sensations at all.

"Perhaps I, too, am sick."

"I've always liked to imagine you as a kinky bastard. A little lower, please."

"Like this?"

"Oh, honey, just like that."

Pinned there by the larger hand, Amy hesitated, then saw her fingers uncurl of their own accord. Slowly they spread, capturing hidden flesh.

"Do you feel better, yet?"

"You shouldn't be helping me feel better."

"Odd thing to say to an old friend."

"Friend! Don't call yourself my – ohh..."

Amy was squeezing. She watched the larger hand retreat from her own, leaving her to definitively choose for herself, and she chose to keep squeezing.

"I'm helping you because I care for you."

Amy's heart pounded. Her stomach clenched. The way that thigh felt to her. Didn't it hurt, to be squeezed so hard, with a grip that could bend solid steel? Did she worry about causing pain? She wasn't sure. She just kept squeezing because, to her, it felt—

"Good..."

"Mmm?"

"Feels so, so good."

"That is my intent." Shadow's breaths tickle the back of Rouge's head. "I won't make you talk about whatever it is that's bothering you."

"I should say thank you for that."

"As for this..."

She blindly reaches for something, anything, to brace herself against. As his intensity increases a little further, she doesn't tell him to stop.

Amy's hand finally relaxed again, leaving an almost definite bruise to form. Green eyes between open thighs, wide open, drifted toward another face. She found something there. Something that changed her own expression.

Sprawled chest down over a salvaged old mattress, mindful of her aching leg and twitching back, Rouge stares at Shadow's sleeping figure in the neighbouring bunk – a vague shape in the dark – and wonders what was in her own eyes earlier today. How she must have looked.

To make Amy Rose, blossoming within her womanhood, seem so excited, yet afraid.

Chapter 3

Amy is down in the dust with the Chaotix, helping the survivors in rebuilding a house.

Vector's burly forearms embrace a stack of bricks beneath his chin. He easily carries them onsite, whistling jovially. He enjoys being so impressive, a source of awe. Most of all, he loves being useful to others – even if it is for free. What does money matter, anymore, anyway?

Espio sets individual bricks neatly in place, his golden eyes closed, his expression placid. He works by touch alone, without error.

Charmy zooms about the carcass of a home, dispensing precious refreshments, childish advice to bemused adult listeners, and laughter that uplifts them all as they toil in the smog of Eggman's failed empire.

A war-forged leader gifted with a meticulous eye, Amy directs the workers with a strong voice and kind words, developing her patience. Benefiting from her strength as well, she scuffs her gloves on sharp corners and braces her slender body against heavy loads.

"Showin' me up, are ya?"

"Sharing your thunder, I like to call it."

The massive crocodile gives the hedgehog a playful thump on the back as they pass each other.

Sonic watches from a distance for a few moments more, smiling, unneeded, before he disappears.

"Your wound has reopened."

Amy lifts her head, puffing quills out of her sweaty face, to peer over her shoulder with brilliant green at the blood on her back. "Oh, would you look at that." She then turns to Espio.

His eyes are still closed.

"You really are a ninja."

In his soft, deep voice he murmurs in his soft, sagely way, "Was that ever in doubt?"

"Maybe it's your tea."

"Ah," he says, amused, "maybe it is."

She grunts as she returns to her work.

"You cannot feel the pain?"

"I just switch off to that sort of thing."

"I see. That is quite a skill."

"It's for survival. And confidence."

"Do you lack confidence?"

"No, sweetie, it's for them."

His eyes remain closed, but he tilts his head very slightly.

"These people. Our friends. I can't afford to look weak."

"Can't you?"

"It's been war after war. Most of my life I've been running around, getting kidnapped and fighting back. And over the years, I've tried so hard to be more than the distressed damsel and it's gotten to the point where I have to be competent, vigilant, and stoic—"

He hears her struggle with herself.

She pants, disappointed, lacking in sleep. "All the time." Her voice breaks a little at the end.

"You are very strong. But being invincible isn't like you. It isn't like anyone."

"Sonic is pretty close. But then, we thought he was dead. As for me, I..." Amy wipes her brow on her arm. "I don't know about me. What am I even like, anymore? Who am I? What do I want?"

"You are Amy Rose," Espio replies pleasantly. "Friend, fighter, foremother of a new era – hopefully peaceful. And you're so much more."

She leans against the bricks. The cut in her back, open and irritated with sweat, prickles and stings. She finally notices it.

The noise and the movements continue around them, despite their pause.

"Amy."

"Espio."

"You were always strong."

"I was a liability. Clumsy and selfish and stupid and immature. I had to grow up."

"You have."

"I had to get stronger, wiser, and I had to control myself."

"You've shaped your mind, soul and body into a beautiful young woman under much discipline."

"It's not enough."

"I assure you, Amy, you have always had this strength in you. And I sense that you will continue to bloom over many years from now."

"Thanks, sweetie, you're too kind."

"But you are not without your limits."

She turns her tired head, again, to see that his eyes are open, staring intently at her.

His colour sometimes changes in hue. He looks a little darker than usual. It's the only thing that indicates his otherwise concealed emotions. "You need to be more considerate of yourself."

"You're right."

"Please get that wound attended to."

"It's just a shallow cut."

"It was deep enough to require stitches. And with our dwindling supplies and makeshift facilities, you do not wish to risk an infection."

She pushes back from the incomplete wall and clumsily strolls toward him.

He turns a noticeably lighter shade when moments later, her lips meet with his cheek.

Returning with another pile, Vector spots this from over his bricks, his whistle faltering. "Wha-?"

The hedgehog quickly parts from the chameleon. But it was evidence enough.

The crocodile's keen detective mind snaps to a conclusion. Vector smirks, hinting of his many teeth, and lumbers past the two without comment. Whistling.

"Hey," Amy says as if to ground Espio, who seems to be struggling with his shyness. "Do you have any of that tea left?"

"I..." He recovers smoothly, gently, returning to his normal shade. "I do, yes."

"Could I please have a cup with you, when the day is through? If you don't mind."

"Of course. I'd be happy to."

"Thanks. It's delicious and you're very soothing to be around."

"I'm glad I can be of some relief to you."

"Great. Let's get a few more hours in, then we'll have tea and talk. Just the two of us."

"And then you will attend to your injury, minor though it may be."

She laughs, stumbling back to her work, hands held high in a placating gesture. "Alright, alright."

Smile dissolving, he allows his worry to darken himself, again, when her back is turned.

Blood seeps through the fabric of her shirt.

Shadow sits back on a rickety chair, his head tilted upward, and he stares at the sun without fear of going blind. He bathes in light, filtered through dirty glass. He absorbs it like a black hole. It's pleasant. He's almost in the mood to doze.

"I still think this is the cutest little assignment you could've picked," begins Rouge conversationally after a time, sauntering about the plants in the greenhouse like a woman in search of the right pair of shoes. But something about her is off. Something, unspoken, is wrong. She hides herself well, but not well enough to hide from him.

"Would you relent?" he mutters back, plainly audible to her ears. "Nothing about me is cute."

The bat chuckles huskily to hide her emotions, stroking the tender leaves with clever, wandering fingertips.

"And you should behave. This is my sanctuary."

"I know. You said you wanted the greenhouse assignment because plants don't talk."

"Correct. Their silence doesn't aggravate me. It's very nice, actually."

"Evidently. But I wonder, do you talk to the plants when you're alone with them?"

He growls distinctly in reply.

"See? It's terribly sweet."

"Don't you have work to do? Reconnaissance? Medicine? Something?"

"I'm taking a little time out of my busy day to spend with you. Be grateful, you brute. I could be taking a bath."

The hedgehog sighs, now. "I am grateful."

"Relax. I know. I'm only playing."

"I know," he repeats, weighed by the gravity of so few words. "You have been a bit strange these past few days. I have considered the possibility..." Gradually, he hesitates.

"What possibility?" she asks in her deep, powerful voice, her seductive trail leading back to him.

"That I may have offended you."

She says nothing as she takes the next few steps to effortlessly breach his diamond bubble of personal space. She simply steps into him, because he allows it.

He feels the familiar warmth of her hand on his chest, caressing his luscious white tuft of hair. Privately, although not too privately, he enjoys being touched by her, in this way.

"You've done nothing to offend me, my love."

The sincerity in her voice draws his eyes slowly down, finding hers gazing coldly back at him. When did he first discover so much comfort in such scrutiny? He does not recall, but it seems ancient.

"I am no good at talking about my feelings."

"I know." He sits straighter in his chair, his hand settling over hers, keeping her in place over his beating heart. "And I don't mind. But I don't like seeing you unsettled about anything."

"And I don't like to make you worry." She smirks. It's flirtatious. "But I love it when you worry about me. So we're at an impasse, I suppose."

He feels her fingers drag through his fur. His brows are in his usual frown, but that frown subtly changes its shape in tiny degrees, depending on his reactions to the world around him. Currently, he seems relaxed, but cautious. It's always a little hard to tell, even for her.

"Wanna grab a drink with me, later?" she asks, to put him at greater ease.

"What about your bath?"

"I don't care about my personal stink if I'm sufficiently sozzled. You can help me with that." A wink.

A scoff, genial. "How crude."

"You know it, baby. So?"

"Well... A drink would be nice."

"Can I help you tend to your plants in the meantime?"

"You could help me gather some water."

"Consider it done, handsome."

"And, please, don't make fun of me for my 'green thumb' or whatever it is you called it."

"Alright, alright. It's just... you're so tender when you handle them. And they're thriving, thanks to you. It's cute."

"Rouge..."

"It is. Don't argue with me."

"Whatever. They're very delicate assets. We need them for food. Actually, you weak mortals need them for food. I'm doing you all a favour."

"Blah-blah-blah. Admit it. You like these plants."

"I admit to nothing."

"Are you drunk?"

Rouge turns dazedly on her heels. "Hmm?"

Amy stands in the narrow, bare passageway, brow quirked, fatigued. She seems so large for some reason. And the tea she shared with Espio is losing its calming power.

"What was that you just said?"

"Are you drunk right now?"

"I... might be. Why?"

"You are drunk."

"A bit. But why the interrogation?"

"This poses a problem for me."

"I, uh, don't see the problem."

"My cut reopened earlier –"

"Again?"

"And I was hoping for a surgeon."

"Oh. What a bugger, then."

The hedgehog nods very slightly, a bit tense. "On your way to your bunk?"

"I was." The bat reaches for her head, running her hand through her fur, between her ears, attractively flushed. "But if you want my help, I might have a steady enough aim. I'm only a little drunk."

"Why isn't Shadow with you?"

"I told him to get back to his plants. I wanted to be alone. He eventually relented."

"I see."

"Can I fix your stitches?"

The fluorescent gloom, the contaminated haze.

Perky breasts.

Hot, stinging breaths.

"Probably not a good idea. I'll see if someone else might—"

"Sorry."

The women continue to stare at one another.

"I wasn't expecting you."

"That's... quite alright."

"After what happened down by the museum, I figured you'd avoid me for months. Not days. And those stitches were done well. They should've held. Both times, actually. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been busy with reconstruction. And I wanted a bit of space to think, away from you."

"That makes sense, yeah."

For a while, neither of them speaks.

"You wanna ask me how I feel."

"I... Err, something like that?"

Amy's jaw flexes, as if to steel herself.

"What did you think?" Rouge asks very quietly, her heavily lidded gaze surprisingly alert for someone who has had a bit to drink. She rarely gets outrageously drunk, nowadays. Seems too wasteful. "What do you think?"

"I thought, and I think, many things."

"That isn't very comforting. What did you – do you – think about me, us?"

"Let's stick to the present tense."

"Alright."

"I think this has changed the way I see you. Our relationship – our friendship – has changed. And I have no idea what to do about it."

"I must be the biggest creep in your eyes, huh?"

"No."

"You probably want little, if anything, to do with me."

"That's not the case, either."

"Maybe I'll just end up your surgeon from now on. A mere convenience. A tool."

"You sound so bitter."

"I've been a tool for too many people, too many times. An object. I'm almost used to it by now."

"I feel sorry for you."

"Hey, that's funny." The bat sucks in air, swaying. "I feel sorry for me, too."

The hedgehog thoughtlessly steps forward and steadies the larger woman between firm hands.

"Whew. Maybe I shouldn't be your surgeon right now." Rouge makes an amused little noise, then grows a little slack in Amy's capable grasp.

The hedgehog assesses the bat closely, waiting.

"Amy?"

"Rouge."

"I'm sorry."

The hedgehog's expression softens.

"It wasn't right." The bat shakes her head slowly. "Taking advantage of you the way I did."

"I didn't stop you."

"Doesn't really change what I did, does it?"

"I responded instead."

"Doesn't make me less of a villain, though," Rouge whispers after a boozy exhale. "Shit, honey, I'm sorry. I mean it. I'm sorry."

There is mutual hesitation.

"Why'd you do it?"

"I... I dunno. You're beautiful and my blood was boiling."

"Is it boiling, now?"

"Yes."

"Does it boil for me, often?"

"Yes."

"How long have you felt this way?"

"A few years, now. Since you saved my life, the first time. Left an impression on me, I guess." The alcohol is the primary reason for so much honesty. Guilt is secondary.

"I understand."

"This makes things worse, doesn't it?"

"Do you have any idea what's been going through my head, since the museum?"

"Did I just make it worse?"

"Yes. So much worse."

"I'm such a dumbass."

"You're just devastating, sometimes without meaning to be."

"And I'm sorry for that."

"I know."

"Are you mad at me?"

"I'm not angry. Just... frustrated."

"Sexually?"

"Maybe. I really, really have a lot on my plate trying to keep this ship afloat and I don't need these thoughts distracting me."

"Shit. I'm very glad. I mean, I'm glad you aren't mad. Not glad for distracting you. Sexually. Or... maybe I am, a little bit? It's kind of flattering."

"Ugh."

"And I've seen you angry before. You're... frankly terrifying when you're angry."

"I'm working on my temper. You surely have noticed."

"I, uh, wasn't insinuating that you fly off the handle very often, nowadays." Rouge is still the taller of the two. Although at their age, it may just be the boots. She doesn't use her height to her advantage right now. "Hon, listen..."

Amy feels the slackened shoulders in her grasp. Steadily, she tightens her grip. Squeezing.

"We don't have to let this affect our relationship. We can pretend it never happened."

She squeezes, still. Until it begins to hurt.

"If—" The bat winces. "That's what you want."

The hedgehog keeps squeezing. Causing steadily worsening pain.

Rouge grits her teeth. She has an impressive threshold.

"I can't get it out of my head."

"Stop." But even she has her limits. "Please."

"I made love to Sonic." Amy is far more powerful than she looks. Far more dangerous than she seems. "And I felt nothing."

The bat's fangs gleam under artificial light. "Ow..."

"But then, you."

"M-me?"

"You made me feel something." The hedgehog's green eyes are frightened. She maintains her grip of iron. Unyielding. "Of all people, it was you, in that situation, after I couldn't make love to Sonic – after I opened up to you. I felt something for you. Because of you."

"I'm sorry."

They're both trembling.

"Do you see why that's so messed up?"

"I said I'm sorry."

"Now I'm devastated. You have devastated me."

"I'm sorry, okay!"

"It's not okay."

"It... It might not be all my fault."

"Excuse me?"

"Think!"

"I've done enough thinking!"

"Just think a little more, please." Stubborn, prideful tears of ache well in Rouge's eyes. She is in no mood to fight back. But she doesn't enjoy being abused, either. "Maybe you're gay."

"I've wondered that same thing, thanks to you."

"Or you're, uh... into both?"

"Could be. I thought of that, too."

"Maybe Sonic just didn't do it for you."

"Sonic just didn't do it for me. And that, right there, is the crux of everything. Something I thought I could overcome on my own. And then you happened."

"You... can't blame me... for that."

"My whole life's purpose, gone. And I'm left with you."

"You... You seemed okay with it before. You said—"

"That was before you made me feel something he couldn't," Amy hisses, as if afraid someone will overhear something scandalous. "And I am not in love with you, so why do I feel this way?"

Clinging onto dignity, the bat tries to shrug. "What... do you want me to do?"

"Make it stop."

"How?"

"I don't know. Just stop it."

"Hon, I can't do that."

"Don't say that."

"Too honest?"

The hedgehog realises that she brought their faces far too close together.

Rouge realises this as well. Despite the pain, there's a flicker of excitement.

"You stink of booze," is the defeated observation between their lips.

"Is... having a thing for me... really so bad?"

"No. It isn't bad at all. I have nothing against it. I'm not prejudiced like that. But why you? Why do you make me feel like this?"

"Because... I'm very handsome and charming?"

"I won't get any answers from you," Amy admits with a sigh. "Not when you're like this. Maybe not even when you're sober."

"I gave you my answers."

"And they don't solve my problem."

"Could you... please let me go, now?"

The hedgehog realises, then, that she is hurting the bat.

Rouge gasps, relieved, as the hands around her shoulders quickly release her.

Amy takes a step back, conflict in her expression.

"Thanks, kid."

She opens and closes her mouth, reaching for it, appalled.

"You're really burly for someone so slim." The bat is not nearly as upset as she should be.

"What else?" whispers the hedgehog, through her fingers.

"Huh?"

"What else am I capable of?"

"I don't understand."

"The first time, I... I bruised you, didn't I?"

A thigh, firm but pliant.

A hand, expanding with greed, squeezing with intrigue.

Wet fabric.

"Oh. Only a little."

"I'm... abusive?"

"You don't have to be."

"Holy shit."

"I think you need to calm down."

"Why aren't you upset? This – I'm – terrible!"

"What, you expect revulsion or fear?"

"Yes!"

The bat only smirks, rubbing her arms, swaying slightly. Seductive. "I've been alive for a while now. I've experienced it all."

"But–"

"Don't worry about it. You're a good person who has had some bad days. Like today."

"What... is happening to me?"

"I think you're just maturing."

"But I'm an adult."

"You never really finish growing up, though, do you?"

Amy lowers her hands, then lowers her gaze to her hands. The gloves are dirty.

"You'll always change. Some things stay the same, but you aren't written in stone. You'll discover new things about yourself all the time."

"If this is what I'm becoming..."

"You are not becoming abusive. Not unless you allow yourself to."

"I hurt you. I'm so, so sorry – I hurt you."

"I'm fine. You just got a little rough back there. Nothing I can't handle."

"I don't wanna be abusive."

"Kid..."

"I'm a monster."

"No, you're not."

"Monster."

"C'mere."

"No wonder I felt nothing for him. I'm screwed up and... broken, inside. He's too good for me and I'm too bad."

With a melodramatic groan, Rouge lurches forward.

The hedgehog squeaks, pinned securely against voluptuous flesh, dizzy in the heat of perfume and sweat. The cry of desire and fear, welling in a tight throat, involuntarily squeezed out.

"I've got you."

"I hurt you!"

"I'm fine."

"I'm sorry!"

"Easy, hon. I'm not mad. It's okay."

"It's been so hard! S-Sonic... Why...?"

"I know, honey." The bat guides the onset of tears into her shoulder and chest, caressing quills. "Shh. I know."

The famous and sober Amy Rose crumbles pathetically in Rouge's drunken arms. Bleeding.

Chapter 4

"Hon, I'm still a little drunk, but... I think I've sobered up enough to try."

These words echo in Amy's head, like a desperate bellow in the belly of a cavern. The way out seems so far out of reach, a pinprick of light. She isn't sure what 'out' even means, anymore. Didn't it – he – used to be Sonic? Who or what is she even reaching for? How long as she been in this cavern, bellowing? How to get out? How to get out?

Currently, Rouge keeps herself quiet, keeps her hands steady. Her eyes are focused on completing these stitches. Breaths hot and stinging on naked flesh.

The hedgehog doesn't know how much time has passed. Remains dull like this until a murmur at her back stirs her from wakeful sleep. Too unsettled to have been meditation.

"I'm finished."

"Thanks."

Both women sound unenthused.

"Try to take it easy on yourself for a while, okay? Give yourself time to heal."

"I'll stick to the lighter stuff."

"Good girl." The bat withdraws slowly, peeling off latex gloves and tossing the bundle into a little bin, the used needle included. She supposes the time will soon come where she will be forced to recycle. It's a grim prospect.

Amy reaches for her clothes, similarly discarded on a nearby surface.

Rouge tries to ignore the lithe, supple flesh in her peripheral vision.

The hedgehog dresses clumsily, as if numb.

"Would you like me to walk you back?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine."

The bat pops open a little container filled with pills. "Alright, then." Without water, she takes two.

"Headache?"

She is startled to find green eyes, bloodshot and tired, upon her. "No."

"Are you in pain? Those... were painkillers, weren't they?"

"Yes." Aquamarine gaze, heavily lidded, reveals nothing. But residual alcohol talks. "And yes."

"Are you injured?"

"That's up for interpretation."

"What do you mean?"

"Depends on whether or not you're the poetic type."

Amy sits forward, one knee drawn beneath her chin, leaving her other leg dangling over the edge. "Where does it hurt?" she asks quietly.

"It hurts inside."

"I see. Then you know those pills won't help you."

"Right. The pills don't do a damn thing."

"Then why take them?"

"Because," says Rouge through a sigh, "I believe in modern medicine, honey, and I believe in it a lot more than I believe in psychology."

"Don't you want help?"

"Call me old-fashioned, if you want to, or call me stupid. Either way, I'm unwilling to get the help I need."

"But you do want help."

"What does it matter? Even if I swallowed up my pride and tried, all the psychologists are gone. I'm all alone with the pain inside and so are you."

The hedgehog blinks slowly, contemplating the cavern, the bellowing, the pinprick of light high above the nothing.

"Time to get some sleep, now." The bat limps closer, waving a large hand toward the door, gesturing for the other woman to get moving. "Do not break your stitches. I won't do this little favour again."

"And if I need stitches someplace else?" Amy's green eyes follow Rouge's advance without any visible emotion, despite the evidence of tears.

The bat reaches for the hedgehog with that same gesturing hand, grasping a slender, yet muscular shoulder. "That's a different favour."

"Ah-ha."

"Come along, you."

Amy allows herself to be guided onto the soles of her scuffed boots. "You know something?"

"Maybe," grumbles Rouge, offering a gentle push toward the door.

"You're a good surgeon."

"I'm not terrible."

"Where did you learn to stitch?"

They stand outside the makeshift infirmary, its crudely painted doors swinging shut behind them. One of the many rooms in a greater makeshift burrow. A hiding place out of reach of the sun, below the city ruins.

The bat seems to be contemplating whether or not to humour the hedgehog's question.

"Is it strange, that I want to be around you some more?"

"You're clearly very confused."

"Yeah. You do that to me. Not that I'm... angry."

"Solo adventures."

"Hmm?"

"I taught myself to stitch on my solo adventures as a child. Before you and I met."

"What was your childhood like?"

"Crappy, honestly. Since I was a kid on the streets, I was always hungry, always dirty, and I had nobody around to hold me when I cried or keep me warm and dry when it rained. Nobody to patch me up when I got hurt. So, I had to adapt."

Amy is visibly concerned by how casually Rouge said all of that. "You've mentioned your mother. Did you run away from home?"

"I ran from a prison. Not a home. I don't remember it well – I was so small – but I know I wasn't happy, there. Sometimes I see a big, scary man in my dreams and I'm pretty sure he was my father. Don't recall my mother at all."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I'm being poetic, again. Anyway, my momma was the woman who adopted me when I was just a scruffy little urchin, disposed to picking pockets. I tried picking hers, she caught me by the scruff of my neck and I expected a beating, but suddenly, I had a home."

The hedgehog intently watches an unusual surge of emotion flood the bat's cold aquamarine eyes.

"I haven't seen or spoken to her in years. Dunno if she's still alive. Dunno if Eggman got to her."

"I think... maybe you got swept up in running a club, working for GUN and saving the world with Shadow."

"No, honey. Truth is, I'm no good at keeping attachments when they become inconvenient to me. I prefer to remain free."

"Isn't being in love with Shadow, inconvenient?"

Rouge's plump, glossy lips part sensually, showing her curved fangs in a grimace.

"Sorry. That was unfair."

There is no response.

"I'll leave you alone, now."

Still, no response.

"Goodnight, sweetheart." With a downturned gaze and polite nod, Amy quietly walks past the larger woman, expecting a hand to seize her once again by her wrist.

The bat makes no move beyond her gemstone eyes fluttering shut.

As the distance between them grows, so does a strange sensation.

The hedgehog doesn't understand it – this feeling of disappointment.

"You're late."

"How can I be? I don't keep regular hours, honey, you know that."

"And you know what I meant."

"My love, I'm sorry I worried you, again." Seated on the edge of one of two beds, Rouge kicks off her boots whilst smiling fondly at him. "What's that you've got there?"

Shadow has something in his hands, shielded behind his careful fingers like a bird in a cage. With a smirk he mutters, "A pet project."

She grunts with interest, wiggling her feet.

Stepping closer, he carefully sets a tiny pot on the crate that serves as a bedside table for the both of them, the delicate yellow flower adding a beacon of cheer in the space between their pillows.

"Aw."

He sits opposite her, now, his fierce eyes resting kindly upon the little flowering plant. He already took off his shoes some time ago. His socks are torn. It's so intimate, being with him in this way.

She caresses a leaf.

"It won't provide food. It serves no purpose to the Resistance. Nurturing such a thing would be a waste of time and other resources. I should let it live or die on its own."

"But."

"But..." He shakes his head, angular quills jostled by the motion. "I suppose the war has made me soft. I saw it growing through a crack in the pavement outside. Surviving. Struggling. Helpless but defiant. And I both admired and pitied it."

"I told you, you're cute."

"Humph."

"Congratulations, babe. You've officially adopted this little guy."

"I hope you don't mind. It will require care and attention. Not much, but still."

"I'm delighted, actually."

"It is very nice, isn't it? Having some colour in this dreary hole."

She stretches her leg, running the back of her foot against him.

He doesn't mind the contact. Watches her fingers play with sunny petals.

"You should read to it."

"Oh, yes?"

"Like you read to me. In your softest voice."

"Do you suppose it will appreciate my poetry?"

"If your poems can soothe this rugged treasure hunter, why, I'm sure they'll do wonders for our little friend, here."

He chuckles quietly as she flops back onto her bed, her hand poised at an odd angle so as to continue petting the plant. He hopes that this small effort helps, somehow, in dealing with whatever pain it is she drags herself through.

Chapter 5

"Knucklehead's got me on another scouting mission this morning."

"I see."

"We can stay hopeful, right?"

"I sincerely hope so."

"Haha. Anyway. Just giving you a bit of fuss before I head out. Wanna keep your calm, sexy face in mind so I'll be less flustered when Knucklehead chats me up over the comm. Hard for a lady to keep herself together, you know. Can't help imagining his heated expressions. Need you to keep me level." Quite the opposite is truer, sometimes.

"I'm sure." Shadow shows his appreciation with a smirk, his hands busy with sifting soil.

Rouge's cool eyes drift fondly over the orderly setup, noting privately the lack of pots. Without comment she pulls out an empty, coarse sack from amidst the things, folding it neatly.

"You don't have to do that."

"I know." She tucks the abrasive fabric underneath her arm as she turns to wink at him. "But I want to."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, my love."

He brushes his forehead against her cheek as she settles beside him. "Stay safe."

"I will." She nuzzles him back, a silent goodbye.

"Be kind to Knuckles."

"Cruelty is far more entertaining." Then she's gone.

Amy feels guilty to stand back like this and order the workers around, but Espio reassures her with a calm smile from his place a few paces away, quietly stacking his bricks.

"Finally!" bellows Vector in jest, cracking the cartilage of his enormous hands. "Don't gotta share this thunder, today!"

"That's right, big guy. Show off a bit extra on my behalf, okay?"

"You got it, lady!" The crocodile then flexes his impressive arms, towering over the other animals. "Prepare to be impressed."

The hedgehog is about to toss back a playful comment, even though she is tired and it hurts to be alive despite the void inside, but it is at this moment that Charmy crashes into a ladder.

Heads turn in unison.

Thankfully, the rickety ladder is unmanned, as the bee has entangled himself with it, dragging the entire thing away from the emerging structure.

"Oh, crud."

"Hey, guys! Guys, look!" Having grown over the years and developed astonishing strength in the process, the young bee buzzes around the worksite, always willing to baffle and entertain. "I'm a chimera! Weee!"

The hedgehog forgets her stitches, hurrying over to catch hold of the ladder in passing. She sinks the heels of her boots into the ground, putting a stop to the emerging calamity. She supposes that she isn't quite useless, after all.

Charmy hovers rigidly above her head, like a kite. Laughing maniacally.

Espio moves like the wind, vaulting weightlessly up the ladder. His expression is meant to be stern, but Vector's unhelpful, booming laughter is infectious.

The bee squeals in protest as the chameleon, in a display of almost motherly patience, frees Charmy's helmeted head from between the rungs.

Duty duly performed, Espio swiftly dismounts, landing effortlessly at Amy's side, embracing the squirming bee.

The hedgehog sets the ladder in its prior place, grinning back at the chameleon from over her shoulder. "Chimera?"

Espio sagely shakes his head. "Charmy is a strange child."

"I was one with the ladder! The ninja way!"

"That is not the ninja way." The chameleon releases the bee.

Amy fondly pats the Espio's shoulder, green eyes following Charmy's wandering flight. "That was rather early."

"Sooner than anticipated, yes."

"Mm. I love having you three around."

"Oh, yes?"

"You add light to an otherwise dark reality."

"If the tomfoolery helps." The chameleon graciously inclines his head. "Then we are glad to be of service."

"It does, sweetie." The hedgehog breathes in deeply, the dry, poisoned air burning her lungs. "It really does." She sounds very distant, now.

Sonic doesn't oversee their progress, today. He's still out there, somewhere – running.

Amy searches for him, anyway, like she always does without really thinking about it. All of her senses remain, in some way, attuned to his comings and goings. Maybe it isn't what it used to be, but hopefully it's something in all of the nothing.

"Well, honey, I hope you're seeing this."

"Heh. I've seen plenty of it before."

"I don't think so. Not like this. This is especially beautiful."

"You say that every time."

"Am I getting dull, handsome?"

"No. It's funny, that's all, how you keep finding beauty in city ruins like it's actually any different every time you look."

"The city is a bit like a person. Falling apart, sure, but beautiful all the same. A little different, every time you see their face, the way they carry themselves. Still recognisable. Even if only vaguely. Aging and changing."

"You're very strange." Knuckles' deep voice sounds delicious over the comm.

Smirking against the fractured skyline, Rouge perches on the edge of a rooftop, her legs crossed, keeping the folded fabric carefully pressed against her side. A breeze stirs her ears, which are always alert no matter how relaxed she otherwise seems, listening for the tiniest sound of danger. She rests her wings.

"So..."

"So?"

"Did you try those breathing exercises I told you about?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because?"

"Because!"

"Didn't you respect my advice?"

"Wasn't really your advice, was it?"

"Rouge, c'mon."

"Just saying. Since you got it from a book, it's somebody else's advice. Some stranger. Could be a creep. We don't know."

"Considering Shadow's love for books, I thought you'd be more trusting."

"Just because you got those breathing exercises from a book?"

"And something to do with my good intentions, surely."

"Right. Breathing exercises are therapeutic."

"That's the point."

"That's stupid."

"Why are you so stubborn?"

The bat raises an articulate brow. "Like you aren't?"

The echidna makes a weary sound. "Fair enough."

"You and your self-help books."

"I'm a leader. I have to be in control of myself in order to control others."

"That's a little crude. I like it."

"You know what I mean."

"Don't you know what I mean?"

"What do you mean, then?"

"I like it when you order me around."

"It's not about... You do?"

"It's very sexy."

He shyly rubs his cheek, the heat of his blush seeping through his mitt, searing his palm.

"Oh, honey, if only the whole gang knew."

"Huh?"

"You're growing into a bit of a bookworm. It's very endearing, really. I may tease you relentlessly, but still. That's why I do it. And it'd be great if everybody else was teasing you, too. Picture it."

"You tell another soul that I read anything beyond mission plans or intel and I'll clobber you."

"Like old times?"

"Like old times."

"But with breathing exercises?"

"Rouge."

"Do you do those before or after you clobber me?"

"Lay off."

"Aw."

"You read, too."

"I do, yes. And I rather enjoy it."

"Don't act like you're too cool for books. Too cool to, eh, learn... from books."

"I'm naturally suspicious. But books are great."

"Then you should try those breathing exercises."

"Babe, listen. Nothing turns me on more than learning how to better control myself."

"Highly doubt it."

"Doubt if you want, that's your prerogative."

"Then why not give the breathing exercises a try? They'll probably help you."

"Because I'm full of shit and you're too much fun."

"You make no sense, sometimes."

"It's a female thing, probably."

"It's a you thing. I understand most women fine."

"Whatever."

"Whatever yourself. You can afford to stagnate in your ignorance. Be reckless, then."

"Ooh."

"As for me? I'm a leader. Gotta be smart and knowledgeable and controlled and... stuff."

"And stuff."

"Right. Whatever you wanna call it. I call it stuff."

"I call it hot air."

"Yeah, because I – as your leader – have to soar above all hardships."

"Aren't you clever!"

"Sure am. I may be a pretty face on the outside, but underneath? I've got a big brain and a deep soul. Not that I expect you to appreciate my virtues."

"I'm such a brute. How could I? And all those big words!"

"Mock me if you want, but at the start and end of each day, you look to me for leadership. Books talk a lot about being... leader-like. Sometimes in the abstract. I mean, the book might be about something else – cooking or whatever – but you learn more about being a leader, anyway."

"You learn stuff."

"Right. Taking initiative. Giving yourself tasks."

"Following instructions given to you by a book, you mean."

"Hey!"

"Very leader-like." Suddenly, she pushes herself off of the edge, plummeting a few feet before catching air in her wings.

He catches his breath, audibly.

"You okay, honey?"

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Startled, are you?"

"N-no. Makes the cam feed go wonky."

She soars, then, high above the destruction, eyes upon the rubble and the metallic carapaces and the corpses passing below. Eggman remains unseen. "How much longer you want me out here?"

"Another hour, then return to HQ."

"Right, boss. Just gonna make a quick stop along the way back, okay?"

"Something for Shadow, I assume."

Rouge feels her smirk morph seductively into a fanged grin. "Jealous?"

"Hardly."

"Don't forget to breathe."

Quiet, irritable muttering.

"Thank you for sharing with me, again, today. And thank you especially for your company. Honestly, I'm not sure what I'd do without your help."

"It's my pleasure. I'm very happy to see you more relaxed."

Amy brings the aromatic tea before her nose, sighing into the steam that wafts over her face.

Espio smiles quietly, modestly, seated before her in the sparse room.

She has closed her eyes. "I was wondering..."

"Mm?" He gazes calmly at her.

"Could you teach me about meditation?"

"I certainly can. And I would be happy to."

"Something to... turn my mind off."

"When would you like to begin?"

"How about tomorrow? We can meet after lunch. If that's okay with you, of course."

"My friend, this will do just fine."

"Thank you, sweetie."

From a short distance away, Vector leans over the stacked crates whilst trying to remain hidden from view. "What're they sayin'?"

"Isn't this kinda invasive?"

"It's for a good cause, Charmy."

"You're not usually the spy." The bee clings to the crocodile's muscular back so as not to buzz. "And probably because you're pretty bad at being subtle."

"Quiet. Tryin' to listen, here."

"You'd suck as a ninja."

"Shh!"

"But if you're swapping roles, does this mean I get to be the head detective?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?"

"Can I wear your headphones?"

"No."

"Your chain thingy?"

"Hrrm. 'Kay."

"Sweet!"

Vector's huge finger delicately presses itself to Charmy's lips.

"Mmph!"

"Ya make a worse ninja than I do."

The bee quietens down until the crocodile feels it is safe to remove his finger. "What're we spying on them for, exactly?"

"I dunno," Vector whispers back in his gravelly tones, purely to mess with Charmy. "You're the head detective, now. Ya tell me."

"Ah! I choose... a murder plot."

Eyes, somewhere between amber and brown, fondly swivel in their sockets to peer into youthful abandon. "Murder?"

"Murder!"

"Um. Right. Sure thing. Talk me through it."

"We're on the case, duh! Gotta figure out if they're plotting murder." The bee strokes his chin in thought, eyes narrowed. "And if so, then the murder of who."

"Do our friends look murderous to ya?"

"Murder plots are entertaining. Obvious killers are cliché."

"Fair enough. Who'd be the most likely target?"

"I didn't think that far, yet."

"That's fine, kid. We're detectives, the very best. We bide our time, gatherin' evidence, chasin' leads, until the time is ripe for a grand reveal." Albeit amused, the crocodile searches tirelessly for affectionate gestures and flirtatious intentions, wishing he had better hearing. Years of loud music have, evidently, taken their toll. "Then we do our cool poses."

"We're not gonna make an impulsive deduction based on scarce evidence and our gut feelings?"

"That'd be more fun, wouldn't it?"

"Sure! They're totally plotting murder. And their target is..."

"That guy who took my muffin last week."

"You're still mad about that?"

"Miss Vanilla worked real hard to bake 'em. It's not like bakin' muffins is easy business, with the world as it is. That guy oughta pay."

"By dying?"

"Harsh world, kid. Harsh rules."

Although it's all a game of pretend, Charmy thinks on Vector's words.

"I hope you've saved up on kisses to mark my heroic return."

"I wouldn't want to risk overexciting you."

"So thoughtful. Here, honey."

Shadow turns from his plants, his expression grateful as Rouge hefts the laden sack from over her shoulder, gently setting it between them with the sound of scraping clay and plastic from within. "You remembered."

"Of course." The bat wipes sweat from her brow, breathing. "How could I forget putting a smile on your lovely face?"

"Was it heavy?"

"Nah, just a bit awkward to fly with, is all."

"This is very kind."

"You needed the supplies. I'm happy to be your supplier. Win-win."

The hedgehog opens the sack, then reaches inside, carefully extracting one of the smaller pots from its brethren. "These are remarkably intact."

"I did a bit of digging around one of those plant nurseries and found a storage room. Had to kick the door down, but Eggman hadn't gotten to it, so..." The bat leans against a countertop, winking. "Voila."

"And you found seeds."

"Yeah, although I'm not sure how many of them are still viable. The sachets have neat little instructions on their backs."

Shadow rises to his full height, gazing at Rouge with his abrasive, intense expression of fondness.

"You sure I couldn't handle a few kisses?"

"I'm... reconsidering."

She flutters her lashes, earning a scoff.

"Take a seat, won't you? Keep me company."

She easily lifts herself onto the wooden surface, minding his things.

"Anything new happening in the world?"

"Nope. No signs of Eggman activity, no new survivors, no foreign settlements..."

"How dull."

"You said it. But I had fun chatting with Knucklehead all the same."

"How is he doing?"

"You could just ask him yourself."

"I could, yes."

"He's doing fine. Managing to shoulder all of his responsibilities." The bat watches the hedgehog unpack the new pots. "I think he gets lonely, though."

"Even when surrounded by his friends and allies, he finds himself alone with his burdens."

"Quite."

Shadow sets about organising the pots in order of size, placing them strategically about the greenhouse so as not to obstruct his movements.

Rouge settles into the silence very comfortably, content to watch him.

He eventually proceeds to organising the sachets of seeds.

She idly traces his body with her eyes, following his movements. Her muscles are tired. Almost as tired as her mind.

He finishes his work, then assesses his new inventory with pleasure.

She considers moving to his chair instead, where she could probably doze. She feels most at ease when in his company. She blinks.

In the space of that moment, his fingers, suddenly caressing her cheek, are a reminder that she feels most electrified when in his company, as well. It simply depends on how he treats her.

Her lips flutter against his glove, uncaring of the flecks of dirt.

"Thank you," he whispers, before closing the remaining distance between them.

She somehow stays in one piece. She ought to liquefy and dissolve against his mouth. But she supposes that life doesn't work that way. Life is cruel and indifferent to the suffering of the living and the absence of the dead. Death is the kinder alternative.

Moments later, he pulls away, cradling her head in his hand.

She focuses on breathing. The kiss was brief and chaste, but it leaves a burning imprint on her forehead. It's a struggle not to greedily try for more.

He doesn't torment her further, letting her go.

She is left weak and wanting. It hurts to deny herself. A way out, a way out.

Chapter 6

Amy considers going to the Chaotix. But for some reason, she doesn't want to. She stares up at the ceiling and realises that she doesn't want to do anything with anyone.

There's a constant electronic buzz.

"So much for meditation." She wonders if anything will help.

There is no allure in wasting away the day in bed.

She considers masturbation, then decides against it. Her fantasies about Sonic seem even more of a charade, at this point, which leads to ruined, guilty orgasms. She sinks deeper into hopeless despair when touching herself to thoughts of Rouge.

There must be somewhere to go. Something to waste. Something, somewhere else.

Amy sits up slowly, stiff and sore, before getting herself dressed. No one knows how she sleeps in the nude. She supposes she is lucky that she has never had to greet a terrified face at her door with an emergency at an ungodly hour.

There are many productive ways to waste the day. Many places where space can be wasted. Many wasteful uses for her nimble young body and unhappy mind.

She starts with reviewing their dwindling inventory, making a mental note to inform Knuckles of their pressing needs.

He gets a bit frazzled with everything else he has to think about and coordinate.

She then proceeds to check on a few of the civilians, asking them questions about their living conditions. She keeps a little notepad and pen with her, scribbling down their comments and criticisms. It's old-fashioned but the people find it comforting.

There hasn't been hot water for the past three days, is the most common complaint. But a more surprising issue is the lack of condoms.

"I've got needs, you know?"

"Duly noted."

Tails' workshop is her next stop.

She surprises him without any difficulty as he tends to become deaf when focused on his work, stretching over his back to embrace him.

He looks up, peering comically through the multi-layered lenses of his high-tech goggles.

"Hello, you."

He forgoes words, offering instead a mild-mannered, boyish grin. He is blissfully aware of how irresistible he is becoming. "Hi."

"How are you doing today, sweetie?"

"I'm fine, thanks. And you?"

"I'm fine, too."

"That's good."

"Yeah. What're you working on?"

He refocuses on his work, stooped over mechanical carnage spread across an old desk. "I haven't quite decided, yet. Might be a weapon. Might be a maintenance device."

"It looks cool. Could it be both?"

"Thanks. And it probably will be." The teenager switches between lenses with metallic clicks. "I can't quite escape such a thing, I suppose."

"Don't be so sombre." Amy fondly strokes his back. He still remains her baby brother figure, no matter how gangly and handsome he becomes.

The fox allows a pause, then says carefully, "I got word from Sonic, yesterday."

"Oh? What did he say?"

"He found another settlement, someplace far away from here."

"Didn't bother to pay attention to where he was running to?"

"You know Sonic."

"Heh. Is he making friends?"

"He's trying his hand at networking, yeah. Hopeful that at the very least we'll be able to establish some sort of trade with the outside."

"Yes, we could use the supplies. Could you get through a word to him, for me?"

"Need something specific?"

"Condoms."

"Please don't ever tell me that, again."

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself."

"Of course not." Tails fiddles with wires. "Understandably, you don't want to personally have a talk with him about condoms."

"How much did he tell you?"

"Enough. I'm sorry for what happened."

"Don't be. We're okay."

"If it makes you feel better, he also asked about you."

"He did?"

"He's worried."

"About me?"

"Yup. He's been waiting for you to call, to check on how he's doing. He misses how you used to nag."

"Did he actually use that word? Nag?"

The fox suddenly pulls up his goggles, leaning back, resting comfortably against the pink hedgehog.

"Don't be cute."

He gazes up at her, upside down, smiling.

"I asked you a very serious question."

"Sonic said nag, yeah."

"That man is in so much trouble when he gets home."

Tails' smile falters.

"Are you mad at me?" Amy asks quietly.

"No." His eyes are like a clear summer sky. "Are you?"

She kisses his head. "I'm not mad."

"Sonic tells me just about everything. You know how it is."

"I know."

"It's a lot to get used to, though. For me, I mean."

"Sweetie."

"You and Sonic... I really believed, you know?"

"I did, too."

"And so did he."

"Took him a long time to have faith."

"Is that what this is about?"

"I'm sorry." The pink hedgehog sighs, cradling the fox against her powerful, wiry frame.
"That came out wrong."

"He loves you."

"And I love him. Very much. But not like... I used to. Does that make sense?"

"I understand."

"This will be strange for a long time. Maybe it'll never normalise."

"Can I ask why your love for him changed?"

Feminine fingertips traipse a pattern through sunny fur.

"I'm not taking sides and I know it's personal."

"Tails, sweetie."

"Amy?"

"I don't quite know the answer."

"Oh."

Amy's green eyes are so warm and safe. She gazes down at Tails with the burden of wisdom only known to big sister figures.

He feels no shame in making himself smaller, better accommodating her embrace.

"We've been fighting battles for a long time."

"Are you saying you're tired of fighting?"

"That's the closest thing to an answer that I can find."

"Yo, Espio!"

The chameleon looks up, raising a brow at Vector's raunchy grin.

"Where's your girl at?"

"Don't be crude. And don't ignore what I have told you in relation to that matter."

"And they say chivalry's dead." The crocodile sniggers, dusting off his hands on his hide.
"But seriously." He becomes suddenly sober. "She okay?"

"I assume so."

"It's not like her to skip out on a big project without sayin' a word. She didn't tell ya what's up?"

"Her business is her own. I respect her privacy."

"Did you guys fight?"

"No."

"Did you say something stupid?"

"What?"

"Don't be insensitive, Charmy, this is grownup stuff."

"I know some grownup stuff! Like, girls are really, really weird about the things we guys say, right?"

"That's kinda true."

"Especially when there's a girlfriend and her guyfriend says something he thinks isn't dumb but she thinks otherwise." A dramatic shiver. "Suddenly, he's in trouble. Then the mystery is figuring out why!"

"Wow. That summarises my relationship with every girlfriend I've ever had."

"See? I know these things."

"Ya should write a book."

"You think so?"

"If ya can sit still for long enough, ya little scamp."

"I can write an abridged version of my lengthy and complex thoughts."

"You are both mistaken." Espio nimbly reaches upward and catches a bottle of water, which the bee had attempted to toss at the chameleon's head.

"Ooh, ninja skills!"

"You ought to stop drawing to conclusions."

"Uh, we're detectives."

"Amy and I are friends. As I have said. And we get along wonderfully, as friends. We did not fight."

"Friends who like to spend loads of time alone, together!"

"Charmy, please."

"Dude, you definitely did something to make her mad at you. So, you have to think of, like, a poem or something to make it up to her!"

"That's adorable."

"Do not encourage him."

"Roses are red, your surname is Rose, I like you a lot, so I wrote you some prose! Mwah-mwah-mwah! PS. I am not a poet. I miss you. Please talk to me."

"Go to your room."

"What?! Why?"

"Cause Espio said so and he's embarrassed."

"Abuse of parental privileges!"

"Does seem a bit harsh, actually, don'tcha think?"

"Please don't second-guess me in front of the boy."

"I'm too wild and rebellious to be grounded!" Charmy throws the next bottle with greater force. "Heeya!"

Vector is less nimble. The bottle harmlessly bounces off of his head and into his hand, but he draws upon his fatherly patience to withhold a biting comment directed at the bee.

"Screw being grounded! I have a house to help fix!"

"We are kinda short-staffed without Amy's help and a bunch of the guys called in sick, so."

The chameleon folds his arms, turning his darkened face away from the crocodile. "I have no power in this family."

"Aw, don't be like that, Espio. We love ya and we respect ya plenty."

Before Charmy can comment further, Vector's enormous hand smothers the words.

Rouge fusses with herbs. She loves the smell of the leaves when she rubs them between her fingers.

Busy at the opposite side of the greenhouse, Shadow enjoys having her around. It's pleasant to glance backward, between taller rows, and find the woman contentedly tending to his plants.

"Honey," she says eventually.

"Yes?" he pleasantly replies.

"Would it be a problem if I took a few sprigs and shoved them in my bra?"

"Can I ask why?"

"To help me freshen up."

He sighs and supposes that it is still rather enjoyable not to be alone.

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a no."

"Bummer. So, when are you gonna introduce our flower to these guys?"

"When our flower is ready. Needs to grow a bit, first."

"Aren't you being a bit overprotective?"

"Perhaps."

"I trust your expertise, honey, but the little guy gets lonely in our room."

"Can I tell you the truth?"

"If you want to."

"I'm not quite ready."

She giggles without malice.

His smile deepens. "What's so funny?"

She makes her way seductively toward him. Still giggling.

"I don't see the joke."

She recovers by leaning against his side, draping an arm around his shoulders, bringing her head softly against his.

"I'm the Ultimate Lifeform," he reminds her in a stern tone.

"There's no joke."

He doesn't look up from his busy hands, careful to keep his expression at least partway professional.

"You're just so beautiful, that's all."

He fumbles, dropping the plastic teaspoon he'd appropriated as a tiny spade for the more delicate operations.

She captures it within her careful grasp before it can hit the countertop.

He watches her place the spoon back into his hand.

"I'm sorry, Shadow."

He misses her arm when she takes it away from him. He never knew how cold he could feel. Or maybe he's felt this cold before, but he buried the memory under all the warmth.

"That was wrong of me to do."

"You've... told me I'm beautiful, before." His voice quivers. "I don't mind it."

She grits her teeth, stepping back, cursing herself.

Before he can ask her to stay, she has already left.

"You."

Amy turns in time to be shoved against the wall.

"You little bitch."

The stitches protest.

Alcohol on breath.

Immediately ready to defend herself, she hesitates from pushing back because of the shimmering tears in Rouge's eyes.

"Why'd you have to say it?"

The hedgehog knows what the bat is referring to.

"I don't need this shit on my mind, okay? I don't need you putting thoughts like that into my head. They... They hurt. Why would you want to make me hurt?"

Amy silently raises her hands, setting them carefully on Rouge's trembling shoulders.

"Don't dismiss me," one woman snarls into the other's face. "I could make you hurt, too."

"You already do."

The bat crumbles. "Is this revenge, then?"

"I'm so sorry."

"Screw you."

The hedgehog tries to imbue her expression with compassion, but she is so tired of it all.

"You said you were jealous. But you had your chance with Sonic and you gave it away. As for me, well..."

Amy keeps Rouge steady as the bitter tears fall like the spit dribbling from a plump mouth.

"I'll never be able to have Shadow."

"Why not?"

"You know why, you dickhead."

The hedgehog follows the bat's eyes, in spite of the drunk, defiant wandering.

"Because he's too good for me. Too... pure. Too precious. Innocent."

"You love him so much."

"Shut up."

Amy finds it in herself to smile.

Rouge's ears are flat against her head. Her brows are torn.

"You're handsome even like this."

"What does that matter?"

"It probably doesn't."

The bat finally meets the hedgehog's calm gaze with a bloodshot glare.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I mean it. I'm sorry."

"Whatever." Rouge sniffs moistly, then wipes her nose on her arm. "I'll never live this damn thing down."

Amy kisses her.

The bat is slack, unresponsive, as if unaware.

The hedgehog quickly ends it, withdrawing with a whimper, her eyes shut, the back of her head slamming against the wall as she asks herself why she does anything.

"That was nice," Rouge says, in a quiet voice.

"I'm so stupid." Amy sighs between them. "And I called you devastating. Oh, what is wrong with me?"

"I came here to berate you a bit, then maybe kick your ass."

"Go ahead, I deserve it."

"But now I wanna tear your clothes off."

"You can still do that. Make my punishment more humiliating."

"I mean, I want to have sex with—"

"I know what you meant."

"So?"

"Even I have enough sense to tell you that's a terrible idea."

"I wonder what noises you'd make."

"Me, too."

"Shit."

"Mmhm."

The bat timidly places her hands on the hedgehog's slender hips.

"Don't."

"What does it even matter, remember?"

"I don't want to feel that regret, again."

"You think I'll end up another Sonic, to you?"

"In my mind, he drives me wild. But when I got to touch him in person..."

"Your expectations of the poor guy were impossible to meet, kiddo."

Amy opens her eyes a little, peering with some irritation at Rouge's smirk.

"Blue's cute, sure, and he's charming. But you'd built him up in your head. Turned a nice guy into a god. But he's not a god. He's a man."

"But I should've felt something."

"Maybe you got freaked out by the reality of how imperfect he turned out to be."

"Maybe you're right."

"Maybe we should kiss some more."

"Maybe we should part ways with our respective dignities intact."

"Maybe I want to do shameful things to you."

"Maybe I'd like that."

"Then again." The bat dips her head, rubbing her forehead against the pink hedgehog's chin.
"I might puke on you."

"Have you puked on a girl, before?"

"Once. I didn't get any action that night, suffice to say. She threw me out her apartment. It's funny now but I felt like crap that night."

"Aw."

"You wouldn't throw me out like that, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"I feel kinda special about that." Rouge nuzzles Amy again. "I like you, honey. Despite it all."

"I like you, too. Let's get you cleaned up."

"Okay."

The water is as cold as the complaints.

"We need to get this fixed," Amy mutters, keeping Rouge upright at the basin. It isn't actually necessary. It just feels nice to be supportive.

"I know. Makes my nipples super hard, though."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It's the only fun thing about a cold shower."

The hedgehog gets a very intimate close-up of the bat's face without cosmetics.

Rouge glares at herself in the mirror. "Damn, I'm getting old."

"No, you aren't."

"I'm aging, honey, and I don't have all the time in the world left to me. But he does. I could have any man, for now, but one day I'll reach my expiration date. But the one I want... I don't dare. Even though he'll outlive us all. He'll never expire."

"Would it really be so bad?" Amy asks softly, her eyes tracing a tanned muzzle. "To be with him the way your heart yearns to be?"

"It'd be terrific. For a while."

"Then why deny yourself the chance?"

"Because I'm terrible. A succubus that sucks the life out of my lovers."

"That seems rather extreme."

"I cannot do long-term, meaningful relationships."

"Is that what Shadow would hope for?"

"It's what he deserves. A woman, or a man, who loves him and honours him."

"Don't you kind of do those things, already?"

"As a friend. As his best friend. It's different. Nothing more. I can't."

"You can."

"I don't dare to. It's selfish to even consider it." The bat leans a little further forward on the sink, a little closer toward her reflection. "He's perfect. And I'm not. And he'll end up alone in the end. He has an eternity to think about that. I'd only make it hurt more."

The tap has been turned off so as not to be wasteful.

"I really like the way you look when you're natural."

"It's too revealing, for me."

"That's a pity." The hedgehog runs her thumb very slowly across the corner of full lips.

"Let me take you."

"What good would it do?"

"You're a real heroine. Always thinking about what good anything does."

"You're my friend. I wouldn't want this to do any more harm than it's already—"

Rouge's teeth are as sharp as they seem, sinking into Amy's hand.

The pain is received as unexpected pleasure, causing the hedgehog to gasp.

The bat's eyes are bloodshot gemstones, lustful and cunning and angry and sad.

Amy feels Rouge's tongue lap at the blood, hot and wet.

The bat then lets go.

"Chaos..."

"I'm gonna torment you until you give in."

The hedgehog is the unsteady one, now, dragging her bleeding hand over the front of her shirt, arousal quickening her heartbeat.

"Call it revenge."

"You bitch..."

"Thanks for the help. I'll see you around, honey."

Amy stumbles toward a stall as Rouge saunters hazily for the door.

Chapter 7

"Hey."

Amy looks up from her checklist in time for Rouge to kiss her, consuming every thought, alighting every nerve, clipboard and pen falling to the floor.

The bat's mouth is incredibly soft, yet bruising. There's a vague, fruity sweetness to her lips. She imbues herself with passion, this fraction of her body weaponised.

The hedgehog is utterly enraptured, never having been kissed this way, before. This isn't anything like Sonic.

It lasts. For an eternity, it lasts.

Gently, Rouge parts from Amy, allowing space for them to breathe.

"Oh," is all the hedgehog can say, open-mouthed, delighted.

The bat smirks.

Amy blinks back some of the haze.

Rouge bends down, retrieving the clipboard and pen, rising gracefully once more to place each in fumbling fingers.

"That was... mean."

"I know."

"Kiss me again."

"I could do that."

The hedgehog glances between seductive, aquamarine gemstones and taunting, glossy lips.
"Don't be cruel."

"I'm being kind. Would you prefer that I take you apart? Undo you, sweetly?"

"Yes."

The bat's amusement shifts toward intrigue.

"I'm one big, throbbing knot."

Her fang emerges, sinking into puckered flesh.

"I've been pulled tight. I'm taut. About to snap."

"Keep talking like that. I like it."

"Yeah, you do. You're winning, if you're certain this is the war you want to fight with me."

"What's my prize, when I do eventually beat you? What will my victory over you be, heroine?"

"Possibly my surrender." Amy carelessly tosses the clipboard and pen onto a nearby crate, stepping closer, drawing her nimble body against Rouge's curvaceous heat. "But until I lose to you, I'm gonna fight back."

"Fuck," the bat whispers, unusually hoarse. "When the hell did you become so sexy?"

"I tried everything to win Sonic, too. And I discovered a lot about myself along the way." The pink hedgehog reaches around her target, dragging powerful hands, calloused beneath gloves, down the muscular slope of a back, beginning from the base of folded wings and ending above the tail. "I realised I'm a woman, as formidable as you."

Rouge's snowy brows have risen with excitement. Blood floods her muzzle, staining it rosily, as is fitting. Her lipstick has left her mark on Amy's mouth, begging to be kissed again.

In the pause that follows, the women keep their faces close, their bodies pressed, breathing.

"What're you waiting for?"

The bat blinks, communicating surprise and uncertainty at the bold, penetrating question.

"You're hesitating. I thought you wanted me."

She realises that she is locked within two of the most powerful arms in the world.

"All that talk about tormenting me. The things you'd do to me if I let you. The sport of tempting me, because I am so sorely tempted by you. Knowing that I want you, too." The hedgehog's green eyes are warm, dangerous. Her embrace might as well be iron. "But you didn't think it'd actually get this far, did you?"

Gripping the collar of a shirt in trembling fists, Rouge mewls when Amy kisses her with lips that are tender and hungry, filled with the frustration of inexperience and disappointment due to years of neglect and unfulfilled desire. Years of it, which amounted at first to a failed night with Sonic that took virginity and a dream as its price, now amounting to this. It's so unfair.

The kiss goes on forever.

"Holy—!"

The bat and the hedgehog jerk apart to find some random civilian staring at them, carrying an open box filled with smaller items.

"Dude," he exclaims, eyes wide, "nice!"

"Piss off," Rouge mutters, the chill of it causing his grin to swiftly vanish.

"Sorry to interrupt. Just gonna drop this off real quick..." He slips past, setting the box quietly down, and slips out again, calling from over his shoulder, "But this is a public space, you know."

Relatively clearheaded again, Amy sighs, loosening her grip.

The bat reluctantly releases the hedgehog's shirt as those strong arms fall away.

"This was for the best," says Amy, sedate.

With a scoff Rouge turns aside, running her sharp claws through her fur. "Shit, I need a drink, again..."

There's a momentary, silent pause.

"What happened to us, just now?"

"Just a little biological magic. Chemistry, they call it."

"Ah. It's going to be a problem. This... chemistry, between us."

"A very nice problem. Did you hear yourself? Damn. Amy Rose has serious game."

"It was like an adrenaline rush in battle. I was myself, but... stronger, more attuned to my body and my senses."

"And your head?"

"It was full of you. What I imagined you to look like under your clothes. The things I was thinking about doing with you, and to you, had that guy not stopped me. And after you consented to all of it, of course."

"I'm giving you my consent," the bat murmurs, "to all of it."

The hedgehog swallows, looking her opponent over, up and down.

"I could show you what I look like, naked. Would you be okay with showing me, too?"

Amy seems about to give in to the offer, but stops herself with a groan, reaching for the clipboard and pen instead of Rouge's willing hips.

"So, what, are we just going back to making each other wet without relief?"

"I can relieve myself. And I'm sure you have no difficulty in that department."

Unoffended, the bat tosses her head back with a husky laugh, then sighs.

The hedgehog returns to checking the inventory of the day, noting any changes. After a few minutes, she glances at the other woman.

Rouge is perched on a crate, thoughtfully staring at the low, dirty ceiling.

"Don't you have work to do?"

"I do, but I don't feel like doing any of it. In fact, I don't feel like doing much of anything, at all. Aside from banging your brains out. Or somebody's brains out. I'm not picky. And I could do with a handful of jewels right now. I mean literal jewels."

"I understand."

"You understand." The bat turns to the hedgehog. "Hon, are we depressed?"

"I think so. I'm not qualified to diagnose you but I feel pretty miserable most of the time."

"The sort of sadness that doesn't go away over the years. It just scabs over. Bleeds a little at random, or when you pick at it, or when something happens to tear it open."

"Yeah. I thought mine came when Sonic made me feel nothing, but maybe it came before. Maybe it was there in all the time I was running."

"Why doesn't this shit just kill us, already?"

"Because life is shitty and we're told to push through and be grateful. To find the beauty in everyone and everything even when there's no colour, no sound, no texture, no scent, no taste. Just sadness."

"That's why I like sex so much. And diamonds. The thrill, the euphoria. Sometimes, it's all I can feel, aside from my misery."

"Sonic was my cure. Now he isn't, anymore."

Chapter 8

It's early in the morning.

Panting breaths and broken moans permeate the temperate air of the brittle greenhouse.

Rouge scrabbles for purchase on a wooden surface, her bowed head surrounded by an assortment of plants in pots of various designs and sizes. The little plastic spoon is on the countertop, poised below her open mouth, catching some of her sweat and spit. She's beyond words.

Behind her stands Shadow, his firm arm outstretched, fingers sinking into her muscles, massaging her lower back with gestures and pulses. Watching her fall apart, he seeks to mend her as well, pumping into her desirous flesh his otherworldly energy, bringing her to orgasm repeatedly. He doesn't entirely understand. He knows she enjoys what he's doing but he isn't made to be a mortal man. In some ways, she is as alien as half of himself.

She will feel horribly guilty when it's over and at a more socially acceptable time she will look for a bottle and she will find someplace to be alone where she will think of all the awful names attributed to predators such as her and she will hate herself because she'll know that this won't be the last time because she won't allow it to be. This is the closest thing to a release she can steal from him. A way out, except it's just a wall she keeps smashing into. She tells herself she's better than this, because after all, she loves him too much. But then she acts like this is what she needs to survive.

He doesn't feel arousal at the sight of her ecstasy. His curiosity is intellectual and emotional. Generally speaking, he is innocent. He just wants to help her, somehow, and maybe this helps. He still isn't sure.

She sinks her nails deeper into the wood and pulls herself up when her legs momentarily buckle.

"Ugh, I can't do this."

Espio opens his eyes, discovering Amy's irritable expression, replying to it with serenity and patience.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." She apologetically sighs. Shrugging. "I'm so grateful for your help, but this isn't working for me. My feelings are too... turbulent. My body is restless but all I want to do is do nothing or..." She hesitates.

Do nothing, or touch herself, or touch Rouge.

"It took me many years to, as Charmy would say, 'figure this stuff out' for myself." The chameleon's deep, soft-spoken voice is so very soothing, but not soothing enough. "Please,

don't feel as if you need to push yourself to excellence so soon. Some things take time. You know this as well as I do, blossoming flower."

"I guess I was hoping for something of a quick fix." The hedgehog shakes her head with disapproval. "How arrogant and insensitive of me."

"Don't beat yourself up. Would you like to take a break and try again, later?"

"No. I think I'm done for today."

"Alright. But if you feel ready to try again tomorrow, you know where to find me."

"Thank you. Really. You're such a lovely person and a great friend."

"Likewise."

They gaze fondly at each other for several intimate, silent seconds.

"I'm gonna head out, then."

Espio doesn't mention the building site, leaving it up to Amy, not wishing to pry into a clearly difficult and private situation. He remains seated in his meditative pose as she untangles her slender limbs.

She shifts onto her knees, leaning over to peck his cheek before getting up with a womanly grunt.

He blushes furiously but manages a pleasant smile without embarrassing himself, golden eyes gazing up into her downcast green.

"Take care, sweetie, okay?"

"You, too. Please, be kind to yourself."

"If I felt I deserved it," she mutters, but he hears her. She puts on a fierce face, one that can easily be mistaken for heroic determination to face anything and everything that comes her way. She has a reputation to maintain even if she finds herself caring less for it.

His brows lower with worry as she turns and carefully walks out of his sanctuary, closing the door behind herself, leaving him to ponder her wellbeing within the quiet solitude of the otherwise rarely visited storage space. The outdoors had proved to be too distracting for her, but he isn't sure the indoors will provide much more solace for her body, soul and mind. Not when she is the eye of her own storm.

"There she goes," Vector whispers, peering from around the corner in a way that unintentionally projects his lengthy snout within potential visibility, had she been paying attention. "She looks kinda intense. Wow. Must've been pretty heated in there."

"The passion! Murder and romance!"

"Lucky guy. I'm so happy for him."

Charmy gathers his wits quick enough to yank the crocodile back by his headphones, the bee weighed down by the chain he is permitted to borrow for this investigation. "Dude, stealth."

"Right, right, sorry."

The detectives wait for her steps to dissipate before turning to grin at each other, as if she might overhear their expressions of glee.

"I feel like a ghost." Rouge giggles to herself, after talking to herself, sprawled out on the surgical table with her eyes rolled back, staring at some poster of anatomy plastered on the wall from upside-down. "I hate myself. I shouldn't be me. And I hate this place. I shouldn't be here."

Their lack of an actual doctor is going to be very detrimental to them all, someday, if Eggman ever does come back. But not many injuries happen during peacetime, now that most, if not all, of the robots have been cleared out of the city.

"The smell. The memories. This is bullshit. All of it." She plays with a pill between her fingertips. "I miss my life, when I was a person and not this ghost. I used to be a treasure hunter," she tells the poster. "I was also the owner of a successful nightclub. I had a great apartment in a nicer part of the city. Shadow and Omega lived with me. We were happy."

There is nobody else around to listen to her, but she talks, anyway.

"Or we were happy enough. Definitely happier than we are, now." She groans, scratching her stomach. "Why did it all have to change?" She pauses for effect, then exclaims, "I feel stuff, and I'm not even a little bit drunk, yet. Hmm. That reminds me. I'm about to hit my quota for the month. Dammit."

The pill bounces off the wall once tossed.

"Damn it all."

"I m-miss my mom," the anonymous teenager explains, "and my d-dad," whilst sobbing into Amy's comforting chest. "I wanna g-go h-home."

She bends over him, every teenager's big sister figure, here, and uses her big sisterly voice to say cliché things such as, "They're in a better place."

This, of course, assumes that 'they' were not turned into two of the robots currently lost in the wilderness beyond the city, wandering without their master, killing the wildlife or capturing helpless, lesser animals to drag them to some desolate shell of a non-functional factory.

Refusing to mention this possibility because it is disheartening, the hedgehog tries to convince the teenager to be happy to be alive. To be grateful for whatever they can consider

some small mercy. But it sounds patronising, deceitful, even to her, especially to her, because she is alive, she has saved so many lives, and yet she is unhappy.

Their meeting is inevitable. Anticipated.

Amy braces herself for Rouge to do something daring and flirtatious, brave enough to respond in kind.

The bat simply stops in the passageway, warily staring at the hedgehog, and waits, too. As if faced with a predator of equal stature.

Amy frowns.

Rouge frowns, as well.

"Have you had a nice day, so far?"

"No."

"Me, neither. Have you been busy?"

"No. You?"

"I wouldn't say mine has been productive."

The bat allows her hip to tilt a bit, posturing herself more casually.

"Hmm." The hedgehog sways on her heels, echoing her girlhood with the gesture. "That's an idea."

"What is?"

"Ah." Amy stops swaying, green eyes steady and bright. "Wanna come to my room?"

Rouge takes a powerful step closer. "Interesting."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"How about tonight, around seven?"

"It's a date."

"Cool."

Another step. "It's funny how the world just keeps on going, isn't it? Keeps turning all by itself."

A smile. "I wouldn't call it funny. It's what keeps us alive."

"Alive." The distance grows smaller. "How people keep living their lives without us doing much to participate in anything. How small and unimportant we are. And yet we may notice each other. We can fixate."

The smile broadens. "Even if we're small and unimportant, we're inspiring to others. We're heroes."

"We were heroes, honey." A final step brings their noses together.

The smile vanishes.

"Now we're just symbols and metaphors, stand-ins for what isn't really there, implying things without truly replacing them. Without Eggman, we're just like everybody else, only we're famous."

The hedgehog reaches for the bat, gripping her arms in vices.

"Careful. You might hurt me."

"I'm not like that. I don't want to be."

"It's your choice."

"Are you trying to make me angry? Does this... excite you?"

"I'm trying to incite something in you. And I'm saying that I could spend the whole day in bed with you, keeping you to myself, and the world wouldn't end. At worst, we'd inconvenience someone, maybe hurt each other."

Chapter 9

"Bold move on your part." Rouge's cool gaze wanders appraisingly over the furnishings and walls of Amy's room, comfortably personalised and tidy. "Inviting me over for the night. My, my. Nice place you've got here."

"Thank you." The hedgehog latches the door, quietly, then follows the bat's casual meanderings at a safe distance. "And I assure you, my intentions aren't tawdry."

"Too bad. I notice only one bed. You don't have a roommate to dampen or liven up the fun, unlike most of us."

"I'm a key figurehead in the Resistance. I get certain benefits because of it."

"How unfair. Still." Rouge invites herself to Amy's bed, perching on its edge with grace that almost rivals Blaze. Regal, catlike movements. A predatory edge. "You and I are effectively alone, together." One long, muscular leg drapes itself over a bent knee. "If your intentions with me aren't tawdry, then what do you intend?" Buttons have been undone, baring mounds of tanned flesh.

"I thought we could talk."

A pale eyebrow rises at that, curious and mildly disappointed. "Talk?"

"Yeah." Green eyes flicker with amusement. "Talk."

"About what?"

"About our feelings."

"Um, no."

"I'd like to get to know you better."

"I'm not much inclined to talk unless the conversation gets sexual."

"I thought you might say that." The hedgehog steps toward her desk, bending to open the large, rectangular compartment beneath one of its sides, reaching in. "So, I got us a little something from a friend, to help loosen your tongue. Was a bit awkward to call this favour, since I've been so scarce lately..."

"Hon, my tongue can be very loose, but it has its preferences."

With a huff, a large bottle of something vaguely cloudy is set on the desk, sloshing.

"Is that booze?"

"Indeed, it is."

"Vector?"

"Uh-huh."

"That stuff is vile. Fantastic."

"I've got cups if you want to bother with those."

"Nope." The bat eagerly gestures. "Bring it here."

Amy refrains from chuckling, lifting the sizeable bottle and joining Rouge on the bed, taking a seat at her side. The cap is unscrewed, allowing the pungent aroma to seep outward. "Want the first sip?"

"I'll allow you the honour. But I warn you, that shit is strong."

"I trust you to take care of me when I'm on my ear, okay?"

"Sure! I'm super keen to see you hammered, for a change."

"Then I'm about to make a fool of myself. Here goes." The hedgehog's powerful arm bends easily and she tips her head back, taking a swig.

"Perfect."

Her expression twists and she swallows with a hiss, wiping her lips on her arm and passing the bottle to the grinning bat.

"Well?"

"It's horrid."

Rouge tries the homemade alcohol, tolerating its potent, burning bitterness with surprising ease, swallowing with only a minor wince.

"I didn't ask him how long he's had this batch sitting around." Amy accepts the bottle again, taking her second sip, better prepared. She growls as it goes down, shuddering, passing the bottle back. "I think there's a little sediment in the bottom."

"That's okay." The bat takes her second sip and makes a popping sound with her mouth.

"We'll die before we get that far." She sounds a little less velvety than usual. "I doubt we'll have a coherent conversation for long."

"Feelings are rarely coherent." The hedgehog has the bottle again, her gaze drifting upward as she flexes her arm.

"Sometimes, I let Shadow touch me, just so I can get off. He doesn't know it, though."

"Touch you? Like, how?"

"We discovered it by accident after a mission went south. I was stressed and he wanted to calm me down. He put his hand on mine and sort of... pushed himself inside of me. But not literally. His essence."

"Wow."

"I was seeing stars. It was incredible. I got a taste for it. For him. That touch started the whole thing, see."

"The whole thing?"

"You'd say I fell for him."

"I sure would, yeah."

"Heh. I dunno. I've loved him dearly for a long time. But that touch changed things between us. Made him more than just a friend. He became, suddenly, almost accessible to me, almost available. Like other men, but... special. Better."

"Ultimate Lifeform!"

"Damn right, honey. Since then, well..." Rouge is slumped back-to-back against Amy, the bottle continually drifting between them with some spillage. "I've taken advantage of him over and over, again, so many times. I've lost count by now."

"You feel guilty."

"Of course! I'm such a... Frankly, I'm a piece of shit, 'cause he doesn't understand and I don't dare admit what he's actually doing to me whenever it happens. I just let him get me off and go right back to business as usual."

The pink hedgehog nods sympathetically.

"Hon?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Do you think I'm... a creep?"

The nod clumsily changes direction.

"That's a no, right?"

"Yesh. I mean, yes."

"Well, you're wrong."

"I am?"

"I am a creep. Actually, no. I'm worse than a creep. Way worse." The bat scoffs at herself. "I'm a pervert of some sort. A sexual predator."

"Sexual predator."

"This isn't funny."

"Did you hear me laughing?"

"My point is that I don't honour him, like you said I do, like I said I do, when we were in that stupid bathroom."

"Hey! You bit me back there! Wait. Not back there, like, my butt or whatever, but back in the bathroom. You animal!"

"Shuddup. This isn't about that."

"It hurt."

"Lemme finish."

"I bled a little bit..."

"What do you want me to do? Apologise? Like I should apologise for every damn thing I do when I look at my reflection? Like, how I should apologise to myself for being alive and such a perverted, sexy waste?"

"Apologies are overrated. Half of them don't get you forgiveness, anyway, and if they get refused, there's no receipt to get your dignity back."

"Want me to kiss it better?"

"Kiss what better?"

"Your hand, silly."

"Oh! Yeah. I like kisses. Kisses are nice. Tee hee. Kisses. Kisses for fishes."

The drunk women lean against each other, enjoying a moment of dizzy silence.

"Shit, we're pathetic."

"You gonna kiss me better or what?"

"Hmm. Gimme your hand."

Amy clumsily tosses an arm over her shoulder.

"The hand that I bit, woman. Goodness."

"Which one was it, again?"

"The other one. You only have two." When the appropriate hand presents itself, Rouge turns her face toward it, placing a firm, noisy kiss on the fingers.

"You can do better than that."

"You're taking advantage of me."

"Yesh."

The bat grasps the hedgehog's hand whilst balancing the bottle between her thighs, planting brief, hard kisses that travel further upwards.

"That's nice."

"You like that?" Rouge mumbles between presses of her lips.

"I just realised..." Amy giggles. "I should've taken my glove off."

"I can take it off for you, if you want."

"Yeah."

The bat peels the fabric away, baring the hedgehog's calloused flesh. "Gonna leave lipstick marks, 'kay?"

"Kay." Amy eases the back of her head over Rouge's other shoulder, smiling up at the ceiling. "You're a good kisser, you know?"

"Mmhm."

"I wanted to talk to you about that. Because I think that talking about feelings helpsh people to resolve conflictsh. Aaah, shit. I have to think that way because I'm a violent person and I could seriously hurt people with my hammer, if I let myself go. Then, what'd people think of me? 'You pink maniac, Amy Rose!' 'Stop trying to rape Sonic!' 'You can't force him to love you!' Why, they'd be scared, duh. Like Sonic was. He ran away from me for so, so long. It hurt me so, so bad. Sometimes, I just wanted to hurt him, too. Isn't that wrong?" The pink hedgehog barely registers the bat's seductive nibbling. "I hurt you, once. More than once, but one time in particular. You stopped sparring with me after I accidentally fractured your wing. I told you it was an accident but I don't think you believed me. I don't think you were listening at the time. And we were just starting to become good friends. I thought you'd avoid me forever but then you forgave me and now we're here."

Rouge doesn't entirely listen, nibbling giving way to the hot lapping of her tongue.

"See, you can't force people to love you. I've had to learn that lesson over, and over, and over, and over. Sometimes, you want someone to love you in a very specific way, because you're not satisfied – shatisfied – with the love they give. So, you think you can change their mind by force, because you're so strong and... Wait." Amy frowns. "My hand is wet."

"Mmm..."

"What are you doing?"

The bat sucks on a thumb.

"Oh."

Wet sounds.

"That's hot." The hedgehog shudders. "I... I was gonna say some other stuff about feelings, but screw that." A breathy sigh. "Chaos. Now, you're getting my brain all confused. You and your feminine wiles. You beautiful bitch. I'm so stupid. I want this. I want you to... undo my knot. That knot Sonic left me with. He had no hands to untie me. And there's this... throbbing between my legs, again. Is that a feeling? It is, isn't it? But not an emotional feeling. Does it still count?"

Rouge feels fingers play blindly with her facial features, innocently flirting with her fangs.

"Who's taking advantage of who, now, huh? Or, am I taking advantage of you, taking advantage of me? Or... is it the other way 'round?" Amy eases into a low moan. "Shit, what you're doing to me, right now, is oddly arousing."

The bat allows that hand to cup her face, pants passing between caging fingers.

"Can we, um, maybe move? I don't mind the foreplay, but this angle is awkward for my arm. Just put the bottle down someplace safe, first, please. And move slow or someone might fall over." The hedgehog feels her friend comply, allowing a wet hand to fall into a warm lap, but green eyes end up distracted by a small patch of dark mould growing on the ceiling. "Gotta get that sorted out or I'll breathe in spores. Then maybe they'll grow inside me. Living in my mucus. Ooh! Maybe... I'll turn into a mushroom? What'd my life be like, then? Even more depressing? Can mushrooms get depressed?"

Rouge slides against Amy from behind, licking her ear once before breathily whispering into it, "You were supposed to get comfortable."

"Shit!" The hedgehog turns to smile lopsidedly up at the bat. "Sorry. I forgot."

"Oh, honey." Aquamarine gemstones become strangely sad, unusually soft. "You're the cutest thing."

"I am?"

"Can I tell you something secret?"

"I think so."

"I'm getting stage fright."

"You are?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I'm gonna fuck you so good."

"That sounds great."

"But will I be good enough? Will you feel something? Or will I be another Blue?"

"Sonic's not a lady. If it helps, I don't know what my standards are, since I've never done this with a woman, before, so..."

"You don't have anyone to measure me against, really."

"You're my first."

"That's so sad."

"I am sad."

"Hey. Me, too."

The friends simultaneously collapse together, holding onto each other as they laugh.

Amy remembers her strength, easily pulling Rouge down onto the mattress, where they embrace more tightly, more earnestly, until the laughter dies down.

"But you'll know if you end up feeling something."

"Yeah. Probably."

"Then you'll tell me, won't you?"

"Tell you what?" the hedgehog whispers against the bat's lips.

"If I'm not pleasuring you." Rouge seems fragile and feminine and open, like some tragic princess in one of Amy's childhood storybooks, with the softened illustrations. "If you don't feel something. If all I give you is nothing. You'll let me know, right?"

"Would you want me to?"

"Yes. I wanna make you feel so many things. I wanna make you beg for them all."

"I'm actually gonna have sex with another woman, aren't I?"

"If you want to. 'Cause I do."

"And that woman is you. I... I want to have sex with you, too. What's happening to me? What's happened? What would Sonic say, if he knew? What'll Tails think, if he finds out? My reputation. Gotta be stoic all the time and I... I think I've grown to hate it."

"That hurts."

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault."

"I know what people say about me. I don't care. So, why does it hurt, when you...?"

"I'm an asshole."

"Sometimes. Would it really be so bad?"

"Shit. Shit."

"Huh?"

With a whimper, the hedgehog kisses the bat.

Chapter 10

Sitting on the edge of the bed, stooped over, Rouge retches into the bucket provided, which Amy fortunately happens to have in her room as a bin of sorts.

The hedgehog strokes the bat's shoulders, still far from sober, herself.

"Pathetic."

"Huh?"

"Pathetic!" is the metallic wail of a face hidden in the tin, followed by another wet retch.

"Just, uh... let it all out."

"Why aren't you – heurgh – puking, too?"

"I dunno. Maybe you snuck in a few more chugs than I did? Maybe my metabolism burns booze? Maybe it's a talent? Maybe it's age?"

"Dammit, I suck!"

"No, you don't. You had performance anxiety, remember?"

"Are you gonna throw me out?"

"I told you already, didn't I?"

With a final retch, Rouge grows slack under Amy's soothing hands, too embarrassed to lower the bucket.

"C'mon, let's get you cleaned up."

"I hate myself."

The hedgehog has a rag on standby – it's actually an article of clothing she doesn't mind sacrificing for this purpose – which she quickly applies to the bat's face after coaxing the bucket away. "That's a good girl." With tenderness, Amy wipes Rouge's muzzle, meeting inebriated humiliation with tipsy kindness. "Easy does it. There we go."

"Mmph."

"You're doing great, sweetie."

Large hands cling to the bucket, heavy lashes fluttering self-consciously.

"You know what we should do?"

"Mmph?"

"Have a sleepover. You and me. No sex. Just sleeping. Maybe some talking. But mostly sleeping."

The bat nods against the rag.

"We can sleep and talk this whole thing off, okay?" After a few more wipes, during which the hedgehog clumsily rearranges the fabric to find clean parts to sully in the process, the rag falls away, tossed into the bucket. "I have a little water for you to wash out your mouth and then I want you to relax and lie down for me, okay?"

"Kay. I'm sorry. Shit, this was meant to be fun and I screwed it all up."

"We're fine. You didn't do anything wrong. I'm not mad at you."

"You should throw me out, like she did. I deserve it. I'm so disgusting."

"Nonsense. Gimme the bucket."

Rouge reluctantly complies.

Swaying a bit, Amy carefully sets it down, but within reach. She then stretches for an old canteen on a cord that dangles attractively off the corner of the basic frame supporting the mattress.

This canteen is special because Sonic gave it to her years ago as a memento from that time he took her and Tails camping in the wilderness for a long weekend. It was a wonderful weekend.

She remembers how she quietly touched herself in her sleeping bag one of those nights, gazing at the roof of her tent the way she gazes at ceilings whilst she masturbates, imagining his prone body seductively spread in the underbrush, surrounded by pine cones. An experimental shake indicates that there is, indeed, some water left in the canteen. She likes to keep something refreshing nearby.

"Thank you for being so nice about this."

"You're welcome." She untangles the cord and opens the canteen, bringing it to the bat.

"Swish a little water around in your mouth. If you don't wanna swallow, I'll hold out the bucket for you."

"I don't wanna swallow."

"Then I'll get the bucket."

"I want to love and be loved."

"That's what we all want."

"Except for the psychos."

"We're all a little bit psychotic, though, aren't we?"

"Maybe."

Amy strokes Rouge's ear.

"Why did I have to feel this way for someone like him?"

"Because you can't have him, because you won't allow yourself to take him."

"This is bullshit."

"Life is bullshit. Beautiful, precious bullshit."

The bat's head rests on the hedgehog's modest chest, a tanned arm flung over a flat, firm belly, one muscular leg draped over a slender thigh.

They are in their underwear, because Rouge got ill before they could fully undress. They didn't get much farther than kissing and some fondling. The fire is still there, but it has died down and mostly, they feel cold.

Amy supposes she is a bit frustrated, disappointed, sad and angry. But more than anything, she's so tired. Tired of everything, everyone. Tired of herself.

"I wanna try again, with you, sometime. If you'll still give me another chance. Shit, I don't expect it. But I... I want to."

"Is your blood boiling?"

"It always is, when I'm with you."

"Maybe it's something serious. Or maybe it's not."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you considered that maybe you don't just wanna bang me? Maybe you're looking for a stand-in. For a symbol. A metaphor."

"A replacement."

"Sort of?"

The bat sighs, momentarily nuzzling at a breast, shielded.

"I can't be Shadow for you."

"I know."

The pink hedgehog kisses a silky head.

"None of my lovers can. But I like to imagine they're all him, anyway. My head likes to play pretend and my body knows no different."

"But your heart isn't fooled, is it?"

There's a moment of silence.

"I hate myself."

"I love you."

"Yeah." Rouge clears her throat, faintly raw, then draws Amy closer. "Thanks for that, kiddo."

"Is he worried, with you gone?"

"I vanish from time to time. He trusts me to keep myself safe."

"Good." The hedgehog reaches for the bat's hand, threading their fingers together. "Then I can hold you like this all night and maybe through the morning, too. If you don't slip away in secret."

"That sounds nice. Not the sneaking away part, although that does sound very much like something I'd do. I've snuck out of lovers' beds, before."

"Will you sneak out of mine?"

"You didn't kick me out, so probably not. Technically, though, we're not lovers."

"Maybe when we're sober. It'd be better sober, anyway."

"You're okay with trying again?"

"I guess I am. We can think of this as two adults expressing ourselves differently. Then it's more exciting and less fatalistic."

"I'd kiss you right now if I hadn't puked, before."

"Am I really so romantic?"

"I guess you are."

Amy opens her eyes and wonders why there's a body pressed against her, then recognises Rouge.

"I feel like death," the bat grumbles, already awake, watching. It'd be creepy if she weren't so lovely a sight to wake up to. Smiling.

"You stayed."

"Surprise."

"I love you." The words are spoken like a confession. Like something new. With teenage blushing.

"You do? How nice."

"You love me, too. You're beautiful."

"I'm happy you think so. Do you remember the puking in the bucket?"

"Yes."

"Shit, I'm such a nuisance. I'll clean that up for you in..." Aquamarine eyes gently close when a powerful hand drifts along a tanned cheek. "A while."

"Thank you for staying."

"Thank you for the invite. Thank you for letting me stay. Been a while."

"Since what?"

"Since I cuddled with someone without the excuse of sex, and talked."

Fragments continue to piece themselves together, forming a monologue to be recalled in the mind.

Pregnant Pause

"I'm not ready to sleep, yet. So I guess I'm gonna talk.

I sometimes wonder if there is a purpose to anything. What if we're all just making stuff up, you know? No god, no salvation, no damnation, just nothingness and our imaginations desperately clawing to fill the answerless void. What if ours is the only justice there is? What if we're the machination of all injustice, as well? That's terrifying, because that renders us entirely responsible for our moral compass and the consequences thereof. Maybe we tell stories to help us sleep, so we feel less alone and less in control. I find myself most bothered by my thoughts when I'm lying in my bed, awake. I tell myself stories all the time. Don't we all? Amy?

Oh. You're still awake. Just drunk as hell, huh? Sorry. I'd hate to talk to myself. You're a good listener, actually. Thanks for this. And listen to me go! I'm still coherent!

Anyway. I hate myself. This seems selfish, doesn't it? Because hate is as powerful, if not more so, than love. I mean it. Despite what people say. People say a lot of things. I say, hate motivates you to do things you'd never think yourself capable of. And I say, hate reveals more about yourself than love ever will. You fraternise the most with the things you like the least. By that, I mean you think obsessively about stuff that pisses you off. You could think about nicer things. Things that give you hope and happiness. But that's not nearly as satisfying. Instead, you're occupied with anger, grief, worry, resentment. Wondering about how you're gonna pay the rent or when your husband's gonna get home so you can deck him with that frying pan like you've been aching to do for years because fuck it, you loved him and he promised not to screw somebody other than you. If marriage vows aren't promises, then what's the damn point? You like marriage and all that, don't you, Amy? Can't say I do. I think it's stupid. And I'm unlovable. And lonely. So why should someone else have something I can't? I'm not like you. Well, actually, I suppose you're very lonely but you're so easy to love. Even I...

Hey. Are you asleep yet? You're very quiet. Tell me to shut up if I'm talking too much.

As I was saying. Sometimes, I jerk off until it hurts. Am I being honest? Is this a bit of myself I'm sharing with you or did I just make that up for shock value? How much of this is me and how much of this is authored? You're probably wondering what the fuck would make me say something so personal. Well. I dunno. I'm drunk. Drunk people can't be helped. I drink because it hurts so much to stay sober all the time. And I want pleasure. I crave it. But because I am such scum, I also inflict pain on myself. Punishment. Kinky shit, right? And that's so self-centred, I know. I must love myself a whole lot, to hate myself as passionately and sincerely as I do. To do these things, I've gotta have motivation. Except depression would rather I just plummet until I break my back, leaving me incapable of picking myself back up again, a dead weight, a burden on society. Not that anybody cares. Not really. Amy, you care. I think. Don't you?

Grunt if you're still listening 'cause your eyes are closed. Ah, there you go.

I should talk to Shadow. About my feelings. This bullshit that's inside of me, wanting to spill out and swallow him whole. But I'm scared. I admit it. And I don't know how to talk about my feelings and my inner bullshit. I'm a universe, you realise that? A whole universe of thought. Isn't that amazing? We're all individual little universes in a bigger, grander universe. And we can hardly connect with each other. Shadow is not like the rest of us. He's superior. He's the closest thing to god that I can think of. Do you really believe I could look Shadow in the eye and say, 'Honey, I think I'm madly in love with you and also I'm molesting you or maybe I'm raping you, in a way, but it's complicated'? Amy, I'm so screwed. I dunno how to do this. I dunno what's happening or where I am or what's gonna happen to me or where I'll be.

Sigh if you're awake. Good. I'll be pissed if you leave me alone with myself. Please. But I don't want your pity.

Whatever. I'm just rambling at this point. I wonder... Amy, if you and I swapped lives, would you live mine better? Because I'm living into the ground at this point. Straight down. Gonna fall into space from the bottom of the world. Or the top. Or sideways. It's all relative to a globe. Float away. I'm terrified of being so untethered. I used to look at the night sky and feel fear because of how big and dark it is. Stars aren't cute, comforting little friends. They're balls of fucking fire, lighting your way into oblivious cold. Kinda like this hopelessness I feel when I think about myself and my life and my prospects. I'm too screwed. Too screwed up. Too screwed down. Too screwed sideways. Oh, I know only how to be alone with myself and how to suck the joy out of the people around me. I'm such a pathetic waste of a person. This sack of skin. Beautiful, isn't it – aren't I? Tell me I'm right or tell me I'm wrong. Give me definitive answers. Tell me something. Don't leave it to me to speculate. I can't. I don't want to. Amy, you know things. I think you're secretly very wise, but nobody's taken you seriously. Why would they?

You're warm and I like having you near me, like this. You're like a star. You can cause pain but it's nice to look at you. I'll go blind, not too long from now. And then, what'll you do with me?

Listen. We're all helpless and we're all alone. My momma taught me to be self-sufficient and aloof. She was an abrasive, loving woman. She wouldn't tolerate you very well, but then again, I became close to unbearable, too. And I've remembered that we need to steer our own damn ships because there's no strong, brave mermaids to guide your swim and who the hell can read the star signs, anyway? But there are sirens. I'm a siren. I'm gonna drag you into the rocks, baby, and I'm gonna fuck you until I kill you. But not literally. That'd be messed up, wouldn't it, Amy? Amy. Amy!

Chaos, you're so pretty.

It *hurts*.

Amy...

Squeeze my breast if you're still alive. Yeah. I thought so."

Chapter 12

"We should probably get up."

"Yeah. But what's the point?"

"You could apply that logic to just about everything."

"Ultimately, yes."

"Hmm." Amy is smiling. She has extended her other hand, tracing the crevice between Rouge's breasts. "Getting up to pee is a point."

"Oh." The bat nurses her headache with a pretty frown. She also nurses the firm, modest swell of a backside within her greedy hand. Thankfully, this room is dark. "Damn. I think you're right. Good point."

"My wisdom shines again. Hey."

"Yeah?"

"D'you remember what you called me, last night?"

"A star?"

"And a universe. You can use the bucket, if you want."

"Eew. But hell, I might. Thanks."

The hedgehog sighs, as if content.

"Shit." Rouge tugs at cotton. "What makes you so forgiving?"

"It's a combination of apathy and fatigue, I'm afraid."

"Depression is hot on you, though. Seriously. You'd let me do just about anything to you, because of how little you care for yourself."

"That's a very ugly way of putting it."

"I'm a very ugly person, really. But my bark is worse than my bite. You're quite safe."

"I'm not helpless."

"That's part of what makes you so arousing. You could bend me, break me. Sometimes, I can sense how you want to. But you could also keep me safe."

Amy grazes her teeth over a shoulder, then withdraws enough to speak against it, murmuring, "Sweetie, I've got a question," through a soft breath.

"Shoot, babe. Like I've got answers."

The hedgehog wiggles her finger around. "Do your boobs give you backache?"

"I have a very strong back."

"I noticed. Do they get in the way when you're trying to do stuff? Like when you bend over to tie your shoelaces."

"I avoid shoes with laces for that very reason."

"One more question. This one is a little rude."

"I'm very rude. I won't get offended."

"Are they real?"

"Is anything real?"

"Whoa. But really, I'm curious."

"What do you think?"

"I think they're real. But then again, how would I know any better than what I think? That's what it means to be a person. We think what we know and we know what we think and none of it amounts to much, at all."

"Then I'll allow you to keep thinking my boobs are real and we'll leave it at that."

"Now you're leading me to think I'm probably wrong and not just possibly wrong."

"Hello, life."

Amy is in the shelter of a wing, folded about her shoulders like a cloak.

Despite the pain, Rouge smirks. It's an affectionate expression, combined with a silky sigh as she watches the hand at play within her chest. "This is so pleasant. It's weird."

"I keep thinking, though. About how we said some things. We can't unsay what's already been said."

"Quite. What happens, now?"

"I dunno. I was hoping you'd tell me."

"You didn't think we'd get this far, did you, honey?"

The hedgehog shakes her head very slightly, quills in disarray, a certain staleness in her mouth.

The bat reaches upward and treads her brows. "Damn it all," she mutters, still smirking, still cradling the other woman's backside in another hand. Nipples are erect and skin perspires.

"Until we've got stuff figured out, I'm gonna get up."

"You sure?"

"No." After giving Rouge's breast a gentle squeeze, eliciting a throaty rumble, Amy hefts herself upright, yawning, stretching. "But the need to pee wins out."

Through cool eyes the bat watches the hedgehog move to stand over the bed, admiring her wiry, lithe strength. "Beauty really does come in different shapes and sizes, you know?"

"I told myself that, too. You're welcome to stay here, if you'd like." Amy stretches again, her muscles lengthening with her upheld limbs, her bracing thighs. She winces upon the cacophony of cartilage.

"I'd like to, if you'll be around."

"Aw."

"Yeah, yeah."

Green eyes wander from their vantage point, wandering over copious tanned flesh. "You remind me a painting I saw in a hotel, once."

"The same hotel you tried and failed to bang Sonic in?" A kinder bend to those white brows. "It seems you're a sucker for a hot mess, honey, and so am I."

"Yeah."

"You handling this okay?"

"I guess so. Wow. This whole thing is crazy. You?"

"I'm managing, because I have to." The flexing of a honed body, littered with crisscrossing battle scars. Long legs readjust.

"How are my stitches?"

"They're healing pretty nicely."

"Sweet."

"Wanna waste the day, together, or do you have something important to do?"

"You said some things about symbols and metaphors and a world that keeps on turning without us. I don't like what you said."

"But it got you thinking, didn't it?"

"Yeah. My usefulness, nowadays, is limited. I'm like a ceremony. I don't feel like being more useful than that. I'd rather stick with you."

"Stick your pretty little mouth between my legs, whilst you're at it. Speak your philosophy into my cunt."

"I really, really want to."

"My blood." Rouge gingerly rolls over, having the space to do so. "Ugh, my fucking head."

The hedgehog proceeds to get dressed as quietly as possible, as if to avoid disturbing the beautiful, almost naked woman spread across her bed, limbs slack and relaxed, reminiscent of a body happily exhausted and well spent. A painting of satisfaction. The image is enough to promote the fantasy of teenage giddiness and pride – the thrill of surviving a conquest with someone wanted by everyone.

This is the feeling of being chosen, selected as worthy, and made special because of it. As if self-esteem and self-worth can be rubbed off of one thrusting body and onto another, or transferred through fluids during an orgasm. It's something given, something earned, something that may require begging and instructions uttered in whimpers or screams. In tiny, panting fractions of a whole, one takes something away from oneself to add to another. It should be equal. And this exchange is a fantasy, entirely imaginary, because it never happened and it never will.

The reality, however, is that the bat is trying not to move too much because of her hangover. She has her aching head submerged into a pillow, breasts crushed into the mattress in a way that is uncomfortable, the blanket piling at her hips to bare her folded wings and the toned plane of her back to the air, which is cold. The strap of her bra feels too tight. She is awake but hates it. She hates just about everything and everyone, right now. Mostly, though, she hates herself.

"I won't be gone long. Please, don't rush yourself."

She doesn't answer. She's embarrassed because she couldn't perform last night. She just couldn't. She was thrust back into the arms of an ex-girlfriend from years ago, a humiliation that never quite lost its sting even if it has gotten funnier with time.

"I'll get you some painkillers from the medical. I know you keep keys in your pocket. Don't mind if I borrow them." Amy slides her belt into its buckle. "When you're ready, head straight for the shower. Maybe I'll see you there. Maybe we'll touch. Maybe we'll fuck. After that, we'll meet, here. For more touching and fucking. Or we can just talk. That's okay, too."

A muffled sound.

"I love you."

Rouge peels her eyes open, lifting her head slowly to turn and blearily study the other woman. A sigh passes full, soft lips, because there's no joke, only a familiar punchline.

"That's what you're afraid of." The hedgehog is stepping into scuffed old shoes. "That one day, you won't be a replacement, anymore. That your symbolism will end up solidifying into something more."

"And then, what'd you call me?"

"My girlfriend."

"How high school of you. Gonna take me to the prom? The scandal."

"It's not just your fear. I'm a little scared, too. But we're adults and we're expressing ourselves and we're doing alright. We'll be fine."

The bat gingerly lowers her head again, nuzzling into the pillow, hiding her face from the world and a lover that isn't actually a lover, at all, and yet there is talk of a relationship. It's so bittersweet to imagine what their first night together might have been. It's so unfair. And it's irrelevant. What the hell does anything amount to, in the end? The urge to pee, to shit, to eat, to drink, to love, to fuck, to sleep, to kill – birth and life and death and denial?

"I'm scared, too," Amy had said to Rouge.

Laden Interlude

"You wanna know something really sad? Everybody looks up to me, now, but I only got into this hero gig in the first place because of Sonic. I was a little girl when he first saved me and I fell for him, instantly. Just like that. Whoosh. I wanted him to love me back, of course. I wanted him to give me the time of day for a date or a hug or a kiss or something, but he never slowed down long enough for me to do much with him. Or to him. Anyway. I had to get faster just to keep up. Then I had to get stronger, so I could earn his approval, or pin him down for a date or a hug or a kiss or a wedding. Then I had to develop my smarts, to figure out how to win his heart with romantic gestures, even if only once we were married. I discovered my hammer along the way to realising I wasn't good enough and that I wasn't a natural flirt. I don't blame him, as much as it wounded me, as much as I contemplated violence in turn.

I look back and I now see. I had a really fucked up idea of how love works. He was a prize, sweetie. A trophy. To be won. To be taken. But it was hard and I didn't accept no. I didn't give up. That's what kids are taught. Not to accept no. Not to give up. That's a really cruel lesson. In time, I had to ascend from 'token damsel in distress' to 'somewhat competent and sometimes useful female sidekick' before he'd willingly invite me to fight alongside him. What an honour it was. Eventually, I became Amy Rose with the subtitle of 'adorably badass heroine and cute to boot'. Eventually, I could call myself an equal. All because I refused to be told no and I refused to give up. It was always hard, though, and it consumed me.

Who am I? Everybody knows who I am, of course. I'm Amy Rose, beloved role model to little girls. Amy Rose, servant of the common people. Amy Rose, always organised and efficient and hardworking. Amy Rose, kind and loving and playful and friendly. Who am I? Why, I'm Amy Rose and I belong to the public. I'm anything they want me to be. Everything they need. I'm Amy Rose as perceived by ordinary men and women and their children, too. And nobody knows me. The real me, smothered underneath this damn reputation and years of struggle spent putting my image together to win a man I loved exclusively for most of my life. My future. My purpose. And he's gone. I didn't do all of this to save lives. I did it all for him. And then I had him but I let him go or I threw him away. Now, what am I supposed to do with myself? Who am I, now? Nothing. I'm nothing. Just a symbol. A metaphor. An image. As real as my reflection. I don't see much reason to keep being there for everybody else since my motivation is missing. I'm forced to face the fact that I'm selfish. I'm a fraud. I started off a hopeless romantic that got drunk off of a dream, now I'm awake and sober and miserable, living a perpetual nightmare. And I have to be strong. Stoic. Available. But I'm not.

I'm Amy Rose. I touch myself so often, I've grown bored of my own hands. I'm attracted to a woman. To you. I like to sleep in the nude. I want to make the pain stop.

I used to be jealous of you, Rouge. I mean, I was a girl and you were a woman, so there wasn't any competition, then, but it wasn't just because you made heads turn with your looks and lured the hapless with your charms. You were also strong and smart and independent and self-sufficient. You had the makings of somebody I could look up to and admire, if you

weren't so selfish and mean. Then, slowly, you began to defrost. You became kinda nice. I was... forced to like you, eventually. You seduced me, too. And now, I consider you a dear old friend and I trust you with my life. And I want to have sex with you. But I'm scared I'll feel nothing. That I'm condemned to my own hands. These boring, calloused hands.

It'd be easier if I didn't overthink. Sonic is actually very similar to you. But you're just too different for me to reconcile. I can't replace Sonic with you like you might replace me with Shadow. By the way, that in and of itself is ridiculous. No offence. Ah. You're a bad symbol, a horrible metaphor. Sonic never meant to eat me alive. It's not as if he wanted to. But you're the sort of woman who might get a kick out of devouring me, slowly. I should be more careful. But I like the danger. I should send you away. But I'd rather surrender. What are we fighting this sensual war for? Because it feels damn good. And is it possible I might win? What would that mean? A girlfriend? Would I be able to put my thumb on you and say, 'Mine. Stay down. Stay here.' Is that what this is?

You've asked me if it'd really be so bad. Rouge, have you considered losing to me? And by 'lose' I mean 'surrender'. What then? What'll happen if I overpower you and you end up liking me, truly? Oh, it's silly, I know, but... I think I could reach your heart. I think. I mean, you have a heart. And given enough time, you might grow to see me as more than a plaything, a deceptive replacement. Maybe I could be your girlfriend. It's not impossible. Right? I'm formidable. I'm sexy. I asked you and you said so, yourself. You didn't lie about it. Your boiling blood.

I want to scream, sometimes. Not to say something in particular. Just to make some primordial noise. It's not very ladylike but fuck societal expectations. Wait. I don't mean that. Fuck some of those expectations but there are necessary expectations and I'm so fucking tired of being expected to be so perfect! Can't a girl have faults? Shit. You get to strut about like a total slut but I have to be on my best behaviour. You're so damn lucky. Nobody expects this of you. It's like a curse. When you do something heroic, it's magnificent. When I do something heroic, it's just Amy Rose being 'Amy Rose,' again.

Rouge. Do you think that I'd make a good girlfriend? Not necessarily for you. But good for someone. I don't have to be alone, do I? Sonic isn't all there is. I know I can be violent and scary and I sometimes lose my temper. But I've gotten better. I'm more patient, now. I know this strength can be used for nice things, too. I can pick you up and carry you around when you feel tired. I can force open steel doors and I can crush machines with my bare hands to keep you safe. I can be delicate and careful and sometimes I like to picture myself making love to you. There's a difference between lovemaking and fucking. Do you know that difference? Have you felt it? I'm so interested in you. Your history. What made you this way.

Rouge. I want to say you've ruined everything but that's simply untrue. It's like you said. Sonic was my god and I don't worship him anymore. It hurts. You're exciting and different and you're making my bed warm. There's a pit and I'm falling. You can fly. I can't. What happens to me after I shatter?

And I look at you and think, wow, you're so pretty and that almost makes all of this okay."

Chapter 14

"What do you have to say to that little monologue? My blood and guts, shaped into words. Not that I said those things to help get me laid. I didn't say them to help myself at all, really. I just wanted to speak."

The sagging pillow slowly topples over, shattering the illusion of Rouge.

"That's what I thought." Amy's sighs, chin in palm and eyelids lowered pensively. "The futility of everything." Her bare feet sway back and forth over the edge of her bed. "Say. What if she doesn't come back, homunculus? Or, hear me out... What if she does come back, and this turns out to be even worse of a mistake than we thought it'd be? What if I thoroughly enjoy every moment of my ruin? What if it ends as something wonderful?"

The pillow remains silent, as if it really is the vessel of all knowledge, the holder of all the answers, the conqueror of the unanswerable.

"And this is why pauses are dangerous." The hedgehog giggles at the absurdity. "They give you time to think and rethink. Pauses are moments to reflect, you know. And it's us miserable people who obsess the most with ourselves. We're the most reflective and our mirrors are biased because they're cracked. We just don't take enough care, I guess. Then again, how can you look elsewhere, when it's the impression of your fist that you leave behind? You're full of glass and it hurts. That's all there is. It's what you know. You're all you know."

The pillow could still resemble the bat, if she were absurdly drunk and had let herself go, somewhat.

"What if I draw a facial expression on you? We could make this a thing. You could be my therapist. Who needs a real professional when you've got a pillow and an active imagination! You can punch a pillow but you can't punch a therapist, am I right? That was a joke. Laugh."

The pillow sinks a little further when the hedgehog playfully nudges it.

"Wow. I'm not very funny, am I? Not even to myself." More quietly, she mutters, "Especially not to myself." She returns to a conversational volume. "Oh, sweet pillow. Do you think I should try burning some incense? That could help. I might have hot lesbian sex, today. Did I tell you that, already? Isn't that lucky? Shit. It's understandable if I'm a little nervous. Yeah?"

The pillow becomes concave after a rather savage blow.

"Say something comforting, dammit." She gesticulates, then, as if to encompass all of society's problems within her hands. "See, if people just communicated properly and without passing judgement, then we'd be less afraid and our little universes could actually connect within the grander scheme of things!"

The pillow almost looks like it is bowing to her.

"I'm gonna need a lot of incense, huh? Whoo, boy. I'm sweating. Drunk me was all, like, rearing to go – boobies, yay – but now I want someone to tell me I'm gonna survive whatever happens next. So, I'm telling myself, it'll all be okay. But that reassurance won't last long, because I inevitably ask myself, what if she doesn't like me? What if I'm bad in bed? And what if I feel nothing?"

Just then, there is a knock on the door.

Amy takes in a sharp breath, exhales, seizes the pillow, fluffing it into orderliness and setting it neatly in place before getting to her feet, smoothing out her appearance in turn. "Right. Here goes."

The pillow is the unseeing witness to the few steps it takes to reach the door, the way she momentarily rests her head against it, as if reconsidering again or recollecting herself, before pulling the door open.

"Hey."

As lustful hormones and chemicals of pleasure surge throughout, the hedgehog moans an inarticulate greeting into the bat's mouth. This marks the temporary death of her universe – the death of the Amy Rose who was filled with questions and doubts and inhibitions. Before she resurrects, she revels in her demise and wraps her arms around luscious curves, fingers sinking into a shapely rear and grazing along a sloping back.

Rouge is pulled further into the room much the same way as a fish is caught within the tendrils of a beautiful sea anemone. She kicks the door shut behind herself and staggers to keep their lips together, dragged like prey toward the bed. Her claws roam quills and wiry muscles, seeking, exploring.

Upon making contact with the edge of the mattress, the hedgehog displays her strength in possibly the most enthralling way, lifting the bat off of the ground and depositing her onto the bed in one fluid motion.

Rouge is very glad for those painkillers as her head is forced down, Amy's fists moving to grip her shoulders and squeezing until it hurts.

The hedgehog straddles the bat.

Rouge is afforded a little more air as Amy tears herself away, withdrawing in whimpers, sitting back.

A tee-shirt emblazoned with the name of some mediocre pre-war rock band is hastily wrenched off and tossed away. Lithe, thrumming flesh, toned by years of exercise and combat, flexes with enthusiasm, arms reaching down.

Having requested a little time away to preen, lipstick is now pointlessly smeared. A gasp announces dismay and arousal as the crisp shirt, a fashionable piece, is thoughtlessly wrenched apart, buttons spilling like loose change, baring quivering breasts and erect nipples.

Stuttered appreciation.

Aquamarine slits emerge beneath dark, heavy lashes. "Surprise."

The hedgehog eases herself upright once more, surveying her work with relish. "We're all animals," she announces.

The bat pulls an amusingly tortured face below a suggestive roll of slender hips.

"We dunno where we're going but we know what we are. Horny, desperate animals."

"Are you trying to tell me I should ditch the bra more often?"

The firm, abrasive texture of denim presses into the heat between the Amy's open thighs, provoking her to bite her lip and to thrust faster, harder, jostling Rouge's breasts.

"Have fun riding me, honey." The bat runs her fingernails slowly over the hedgehog's stomach, claws skittering over vulnerable skin, huskily humming with appreciation. "But I expect you to last."

"Damn you." Amy is wearing a skirt with the pretty flowers on it. It pools about her clenching legs to obscure Rouge's lower body.

The bat sneers, imbuing such an unflattering expression with irresistible charm that sets her apart from the shady men with cigarettes who bide their time in downtrodden bars.

The hedgehog bends, again, into another kiss. Lost in a turbulent sea wrought with mutual frustration and disappointment and desire.

"Ooh." Charmy buzzes over Vector's shoulder, the bee wearing the crocodile's golden chain like a struggling, glamorous actress with a boa. "Getting to the next level of inventiveness, I see."

Espio smiles fondly from over the pan at his station. "Shall I intervene?"

"Nah, let him play. Nobody's been poisoned."

"Yet."

"So it's harmless."

"For now."

"Muahaha."

With a cheerful, oblivious snort, Vector brings the knife down, slicing two juicy halves from the ripe lemon.

Chapter 15

Eyes serenely shut and fists tangled maniacally in quills, Amy chases her breaths as she floats, sprawled out, helpless and doll-like in the ebb and flow of her lingering ecstasy. She wants to laugh and she wants to cry. She settles for a slack-jawed gape, instead, her tongue writhing.

Rouge presses her burning back against the cold wall, drawing her long legs inward and hissing her satisfaction. She entombs the sensitivity with a wet, meaty slam of her thighs, almost going foetal where she sits, forehead falling to her knees.

Moments pass, until a primordial cry halfway dies in a throat, coming out strangled and soft.

A plump, glossy lip curls to bare white, gleaming teeth.

"I'm still alive?" the hedgehog whispers, barely sounding like herself.

"Seems like it," is the bat's husky reply.

"Oh, god. Barely. It's like I'll break apart if I move too much. Like soggy bread in a pond."

"As for me, I'm gonna come back to you the next time I need a good lay. Damn. Inexperience doesn't always account for shit, does it?"

"I'm so glad you enjoyed this, too..."

Rouge sounds like a distant thunderstorm. It reverberates within her chest. A primordial cry of her own. She blindly drags her hand over the bed, finding Amy's arm.

The hedgehog allows the bat to untangle a naked hand, setting it down on the bed, nails grazing over a pulse to capture the clammy palm.

"You felt something."

"Over and over, again, yeah."

"I'm happy for you."

Amy opens her eyes slowly, her foggy, electric gaze swivelling over to fondly settle on Rouge's bowed, flatteringly bedraggled head.

"At least my experience amounted to giving you your something."

"You were wonderful. Thank you."

"You, too, hon. And you're welcome."

The hedgehog gives the bat a playful tug.

"Mm?"

"I love you."

"I know. You keep saying that."

"Do you mind?"

"If it comforts you, then say whatever you like."

"Okay. I've got a question."

"Shoot. Like I can answer."

"Wanna cuddle?"

Rouge answers with her body, expanding to fit alongside Amy, her cheek finding rest on a salty chest, fingers drawn over for closer assessment, still caught, now kissed.

"You're hot," the hedgehog notes quietly, before kissing the tanned hand again.

"I know." The bat doesn't need to wink, because her voice does it for her.

"Well, yes, that, too. But you're literally hot. You're burning up. Like you've got a fever."

"Mm. That's because you put me through my paces. Little bombshell. Firecracker. Making me feel my age."

"You're not old."

"I'm old enough."

There's a little exhale of displeasure.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No. I just... I'm sorry."

"Why? What for?"

"I've hurt you, again."

"Oh, this?" Rouge suddenly realises just how naked she is when Amy stretches her arm a little further, trailing feathery kisses over bruises. "No matter."

"It does matter. Does it hurt?"

"A little. But that's fine with me."

"Are you a masochist?"

"Maybe. Are you a sadist?"

"Possibly."

"That's okay with me." The bat offers a daring nuzzle against the hedgehog's breast, vulnerable and exposed without a shield. "I'm sturdy," lips utter around a nipple, traced with the tip of a tongue. "And besides, I like a little kink in the sack." Hot air condenses over the swelling of blood under hardening flesh. "Makes things extra fun. And if you're still game, I plan to have much more fun with you. Over, and over, and over, again..."

A shudder makes the kisses go crooked, their trail uncertain yet determined, feathery softness giving way to dragging, plunging insistence.

"Yeah, that's right. You're like a... Fuck, I dunno. A damn werehog or something. You change when I rile you up. I like it." Rouge says all of this whilst attending to Amy's breast. "And you howl, too."

"Oh, sweetie," the hedgehog growls against flesh. "You'll be the death of me."

"What a sweet way to die, don't you think? Hmm." The bat feels the torso shift below her, tightening. "So much for cuddling."

Shadow stares at the yellow flower like it's the sun, unafraid of going blind. It represents some sort of fragile bastion against loneliness, yet it is another reminder of Maria's passing. There are reminders wherever he looks.

An empty pot waits, like an open grave.

But he isn't ready, yet. He doesn't want to do this alone.

Knuckles turns another page, the book spread over his desk, eagerly absorbing knowledge second-hand. It's a productive distraction from the Master Emerald, his legacy, his home, abandoned for the sake of the people. Thus compromised, he hopes to be the best leader he can be.

Vector keeps his voice and the volume of his headset down whilst Charmy dozes on the scales of his back, the crocodile's lengthy snout crinkling cutely beneath Espio's wise, patient hand.

Still traumatised and rarely willing to leave the safety of the makeshift workshop, Tails thinks endlessly whilst putting pieces together and taking them apart. There is maintenance to be done but not enough spare parts or tape to fix everything.

Sonic doesn't feel too well, but even if he has to struggle with every step, his homecoming is assured. It has to be. His friends are missing him. He just has to keep going and he'll get there, eventually.

"He's ours."

The platypus nurses his erection without acknowledging that it is there, thankfully hidden from view beneath the radiant keyboard. He keeps himself busy with his work, unsure of his allegiance yet hopeful to please, distracted as he is by the enormous, human hand continually caressing his narrow shoulders, wrinkling his fabulous jacket. Beads of sweat permeate his stressed brow. At this rate, he may prematurely age. How disastrous that would be.

"Soon, Starline." Eggman looms behind his lackey's chair that can swivel for dramatic effect, but does not. His face sinisterly splits below the moustache. "Soon."

My point is that the world continues to turn and it doesn't matter what we think or what we do or what we feel, because time marches restlessly and we're just dragged along, man. Fuck. This ride doesn't come with a barf-bucket.

Chapter 16

Our words hurt. Our words heal. Sometimes it's intent. Sometimes it's perspective. What is cruel versus what is kind.

"I need to return to the world for a bit, honey." Rouge's skin is a supple canvas as she moves, a work of art in motion, littered with blossoming bruises. She steps into her boots, satisfied eyes on Amy's stationary surrender, aquamarine savouring the newfound knowledge within the green, echoes of unearthed bones and seashells of this repetitive, willing defeat. "As much as I'd love to stay here, people will start to ask probing questions, eventually."

The hedgehog is seated at her desk, nude and poised like a statue of marble, besmirched with lipstick, eyeshadow and a perpetual sweaty sheen. A vessel, broken by the rocks in pursuit of an answer to a call for help, cast over the frothing waves. She's smiling in a way that stirs memories of a pink head rising and falling between open thighs, calloused palms grazing their inners like the stroke of a rag, fingers bent to capture and squeeze.

"You're making it hard for me to leave you."

"Am I?"

"Harder, still."

"Only because I'm making you hard."

The bat shrugs, then leans in, delivering a soft, almost domestic kiss to a cheek. "Guilty as charged, beautiful."

Amy blushes without noticing, tracing the archway of a folded wing, gentle and still so curious.

"I suggest you make an appearance, as well. Before people wonder where you've gone." Rouge kisses her again, lips falling on the curve of that smile. "Or what's happened to you."

"I couldn't begin to tell them if they asked."

"You little flirt."

The hedgehog's jaw churns very slightly, as if chewing on something sweet. Her eyes are like a forest dappled in sun and shade. A forest in which it is very easy to misstep and end up hopelessly lost.

"You're quite dead, already, you know that?"

"I'm a zombie. Or something stitched together by Frankenstein."

The bat rises to her full height, caressing the underside of a chin before turning and sauntering for the door, sure to add a bit of additional sway her backside. "You will be missed."

"My funeral better be well attended. And you can do my obituary, if you want. It could say something like, 'Amy Rose – nobody really knew her.'"

"Morbid!"

"One last thing, before you go."

Rouge stands in the doorway, gazing back from over her shoulder.

"I love you."

Silence.

Amy giggles in the wake of wiggling snowy eyebrows.

It's a look that says, 'Of course you do.'

"Well, look at who's decided to show up, boys!"

Amy waves as she positively strolls toward the Chaotix. She's just short of whistling a merry tune or humming jauntily to herself. She directs an impressed nod toward the growing house. "Mind if I chip in?"

"Be our guest," Espio says pleasantly.

"We need all the help we can get!" exclaims Charmy, buzzing overhead.

She goes right back to politely bossing people around and thrusting her body into physical labour, stitches sufficiently healed. They did not come undone and the wound did not reopen despite the hours in which Rouge had Amy on her back.

Vector inclines his snout thoughtfully, his friendly grin hiding the busy clockwork of his mind. The burly, intelligent crocodile cannot resist a good mystery and automatically goes into his undercover investigative mode, determining from the chameleon's bodily language that Espio accepts no responsibility for the hedgehog's good mood, let alone her return.

Amy is unaware that Vector is studying her closely. Her ignorance is bliss.

"Need anything while I'm out?"

"No, thank you."

"Alright, then."

Shadow asks no questions, already aware that Rouge has acquired a fresh sexual interest. When she draws close to him he breathes in her scent and closes his eyes, instinctively turning his head, granting her access.

Whatever pain she feels, she is careful not to bleed, this time. She rubs her muzzle against his, murmuring, "I'll see you later, my love." This 'later' could mean days from now. She's like a stray cat, wandering from doorstep to window, or a balloon that gets caught in the treetops only for a brief time before drifting someplace else, her string always out of reach. Not quite domesticated, not quite wild.

He acknowledges her with a subtle sigh. Even though he receives the most of whatever she is willing to share, her empty bed testifies – like a gentle reminder – to the fact that she stays with him for however long she desires, but is liable to leave him without much notice, if any. He is a safe place for her to reside, but he is not her home. He's only the closest thing to a home she knows. "Stay safe."

"I will, hon." She drifts away, departing, her perfume filling the void she leaves behind.

Eyes slowly opening, he numbly returns to his work.

A yellow flower keeps him company, along with the other plants. His silent audience.

The pot waits, beckoning.

"As I was saying..."

"Are you listening to me?"

"Not really."

Knuckles huffs into the mic, unimpressed.

"I was just enjoying the monotonous drone of your voice. Very alluring."

"I am not monotonous."

"You were, just now." Rouge soars past a crumbling skyscraper, her reflection soaring alongside her, vanishing and reappearing in the broken panes of glass. "The words themselves didn't matter, so I ignored them."

"But if I did that to you, you'd freak out over it."

"Of course, honey. I'm a lady."

"No, you're not."

"So you say. But I've got the equipment to prove it, if you'd like to take a look." She grins when he splutters, giving her the advantage. "Anyway, we womenfolk hate to be ignored. You zone out at your own peril when I'm talking to you."

"As if I would ever zone out."

"As if you could, good boy." The bat's voice oozes into his skull, sweet and rich.

Despite a masculine grunt, the echidna watches the camera feed with longing that's so earnest, it's stereotypically feminine. "How's the air?" He has been cooped up indoors for far too long. It's unnatural.

"Smoky and warm. My lungs are burning and my eyes won't stop watering."

"When the atmosphere clears..." He doesn't finish that thought.

Fall and touchdown. Bend and break.

Chapter 17

Amy surfaces with a noisy gasp, surging upright, eyes fixated on phantoms that are huge and fading.

"Mmph." Rouge stirs in the space beside her, rising more slowly, wiping the sleep away.
"Hon...?"

The hedgehog's gaze drops, falling upon her naked body. Her chest is visibly tensed, belly churning with emotional breaths

"Amy?"

She twitches under the bat's arm, draping itself over her shoulders like a snake, almost invasive, but not quite.

"You okay?" is the husky whisper, respired into an ear.

"Yeah."

"Bad dream?"

"Just a bad dream," Amy mutters, doubt and anxiety etched into her attractive features. "I'm fine."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"I want your dreams to be sweet. If you're gonna bother dreaming at all, why shouldn't they be?"

A distant sigh.

"Do you wanna talk about it?"

"It's nothing, sweetie. Go back to sleep."

Rouge guides her lover's head to her shoulder, cradling a slender, slackened body more closely to herself. It's protective and touchingly sincere.

"I saw Sonic in my dream." A quiet, eventual confession.

"Okay."

"He was looking at me, saying nothing, and his expression was strange. I ran to him, and then I walked, and then I stopped. I didn't get any closer, until he came to me."

The bat rocks slightly back and forth, to still the trembling.

"I saw myself in his eyes and I didn't quite recognise myself." The pink hedgehog grips the blanket in her calloused, boring hands. Her universe is alive, again. "How many Amy Roses can there be?"

"There's only one. There's only you. You're all there is."

"Yet I'm so torn. And it's too late for me. I don't wanna go back to the way things were, before you taught me this."

A tender brush of a hand through quills, exposing the glimmering trails of tears.

"Who am I? I'm Amy Rose. I'm me. This is me."

"Hon..."

"This is what I've done, what I've amounted to, what I've become. A symbol. A metaphor. A fraud. A slut."

"Fraud?"

"Oh. I never did tell you, did I? You weren't there. Only a pillow. It was your symbol, see? Your metaphor. So silly. So... futile."

"Babe, I want to help you, but I don't know what you're—" Rouge is pulled roughly into a kiss, salted, eyes widening with surprise, then narrowing with pleasure.

Moments later, Amy peels herself away. "Take me. Don't hold back."

"Not even a little?"

"Oh, god, no." She's smiling without mirth as she whispers, "Fuck me until I die."

The bat swells, wings flaring.

"Murder me. Over and over, again. Make me scream."

Her glassy fingernails, like claws, scrape the hedgehog in a ravenous, predatory sweep, leaving red lines on skin, seeking purchase on a nimble back knotted with lean, subtle muscle.

Fire within veins, heart wrenched by spasms, Amy drags them both down, into the depths of a dark, frothy sea, to drown.

Rouge doesn't know her fangs are showing.

Espio gazes into his tea, serene.

Opposite him, Vector is singing softly into his coffee, nodding to music that fills his head.

"Hmm..." Charmy squints at his little notepad, filled with hastily handwritten notes, pen wagging with thought. "Too dark, perhaps."

"What are you up to, strange child?"

"Just compiling my wisdom and making edits along the way, father figure guy."

"Indeed?" The chameleon lowers his cup, impressed. "Is this some sort of a journal of self-reflection?"

"Nah," answers the bee with a scoff. "It's so I can publish the lot as a book, later, then profit off the sales whilst making the world a better place. And then it'll get a movie adaptation, but people will say my book was better."

"Vector, this is your fault."

The crocodile doesn't hear a word.

"Glorious." Eggman is busy grooming his moustache over the discord of screaming animals. "Simply glorious, don't you agree?"

"Why, of course, Doctor," coos Starline, glancing between Sonic's blip and a crossword puzzle. The platypus had hoped that serving his idol as the diligent lackey with a killer fashion sense, stuck in a chair that can dramatically swivel but rarely does, would be a bit more personally rewarding than this. "You are the epitome of glory, sir." If it seems like he is being passive aggressive, that's because he is, but only somewhat. There is still genuine reverence in that articulate, sophisticated purr. He is in love, after all, and he is exactly where he most wants to be –under the thumb of his inspiration.

But trouble has arisen in their paradise. It's a little hard to remain impervious when the love of one's life does not reciprocate. It's like being a doting housewife with a busy, insensitive husband who sometimes lashes out, sometimes barely resembles the kind young man in family photographs, but hasn't forgotten how to irresistibly charm when he sees fit to bother. So she stays, sharing his dreams, getting gradually frumpier as time goes on, wondering if this is really it, if she can ever do enough to earn his devotion in return.

Starline sighs. If he could only sleep, he might not overthink.

"Imagine the world, stamped with my face. This moustache, wrapping around the whole fucking thing."

"Quite." After a moment of thought, a smirk creeps seductively along a bill, another curvy letter in red ink filling another tiny square in black. Games help to alleviate tension.

Screams twist into metallic screeches, then waver as static, before attaining merciful silence. The twelfth batch of this hour has thus been processed. Dazed, shining.

"Sonic. Ho-ho-ho!" The man grins into the mirror, held up by a slave in mercury. "When that blue prick is finally finished, taking all his stupid woodland friends down with him, I will rebuild my empire and remake this world in my image." All of this has been said, before, multiple times. "Ah, with your help, of course, Starline."

"Thank you for remembering me, Doctor." Gorgeous eyes like amethysts roll behind chic, circular glasses, a gesture that communicates affection, unease and tedium.

"This world will be cold, gleaming, perfect metal." Eggman chuckles ominously. "Soon, my glorious face will be emblazoned everywhere! I'm going to give Sonic a nice spray of paint when he comes back to me. Why, I think I'll slap my insignia right on his chest. Brand him as mine, too."

"My ass hurts."

"What was that, Starline?"

"Oh, nothing, Doctor!"

Chapter 18

There's nothing to fear.

Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.

Amy is alive, again, staring at her reflection in a sink filled with water. Her breaths come out slowly, come in slowly, then leave her again. Breathing exercises.

Knuckles would be proud, if he knew, but didn't know too much.

"Hello?"

She blinks, shattering the illusion that she has met herself in person, turning to smile at Cream, a very practiced smile. "Oh, sweetie, I didn't notice you standing, there.

The rabbit is beautiful and promising. Still growing into herself. Dignified and sweet.

"Hi." The hedgehog's wet hand settles on a cheek, offering a big sisterly caress that leaves behind a streak of cold. "Been a while, huh? You and your mom are so busy. Sometimes I am, too. How are the little ones?"

"They're precious. Are you alright?"

"Yes."

Big brown eyes, like the earth, like chocolate, patiently penetrate the distant darkness of the green. "Amy, I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetheart."

Cream moves to join Amy at the sink, embracing her like a little sister would. Not that much littler, anymore. Vanilla herself is tall and it is likely that, someday soon, her daughter will also be soft yet statuesque. "Then please don't patronise me."

"You're right. Sorry."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"I can't. Not because of any lack of trust. I trust you with everything. But couldn't know how to begin. What to say. If I try to tell you, I can't."

"Then could I do anything to help you, in any way?"

"Hold me like this for a bit longer, sweetie." The hedgehog is so strong and hard, kissing the rabbit's velvety forehead. "This is helping."

"Is today the day?"

Shadow glances at the empty pot-grave, then shakes his head in silence.

Beside him, Rouge leans voluptuously forward, playing with yellow petals in some absurd proximity to a mother and child. "Honey," she says quietly, "something is on your mind."

"Something is always on my mind. My mind is like tinnitus. It never stops."

"Eternal, endless noise."

"Yes."

The bat knows that she is the cause. But she pretends not to, hoping that they will move past this, somehow, someday, perhaps soon, maybe a decade from now. So long as he is with her, she can continue to pretend that everything is fine. She can thrust her anger and her despair and her lust onto, into Amy Rose, then treat Shadow with shackled love and flirtatious, deceptive irrelevance, as he remains her sole lingering connection within this world. The closest universe, a universe she will never penetrate. She just has to accept this. Remember not to have hope.

He touches fragrant herbs, carrying their fragrances with him, on the fingers of his gloves.

Rouge can smell it. Fingers pressing against her lips, almost invasive, spreading outward to trace the handsome shape of her face. Pleasure flickering through her, like a dripping tap, has her stuttering. "H-honey..."

He knows so little, but knows so much. He lacks understanding, but perceives everything. Perfect senses bear witness to her faint sighs and swelling moans, pinning her bodily against a glass wall with chipping wood in-between the pains, breaking her shuddering reflection.

It crosses her mind more than once to tell him. She considers stopping this from proceeding any further. She's hating herself already as she keeps herself from sliding down, raking her nails up his silky, fluffy chest to cup his face adoringly. "Beautiful," is all she says as she falls down the pit, hits the ground, shatters, like soggy bread on the surface of a pond, picked at by primordial fish from below. She loses herself to animalistic sounds, uttered into his dirtied gloves.

His eyes burn.

Give the audience what they want.

"Dammit," Vector mutters whilst scowling at his foot, clad in a cotton sock, deprived of a shoe because he dropped a few bricks and Espio insisted that they check for broken toes.

Charmy knew better than to giggle, because he loves his family and that sometimes counteracts boyish cruelty. He still has some growing left to do. And he recognises what is transpiring between the kneeling chameleon and the seated crocodile, the bee keeping his distance, respectful.

"I don't wanna."

"Take it off."

"This is silly. I'm fine. Everythin' is wigglin' just fine."

Espio seizes Vector's foot with incredible gentleness, stripping it free of its sock, beholding fresh, blossoming bruises.

"This is so damn embarrassin'..."

"Wiggle again," the chameleon commands in his dulcet tones, ignoring the crocodile's flushed rolling of eyes.

"As if I'd lie to ya. There. See? Nothin' broken."

Espio continues to cradle Vector's foot, uncaring of the uncleanness. Relief, rather than repulsion, graces handsome features, softening them. But he touches the bruise, dragging his thumb carefully over it, as if to somehow erase it.

"I wish ya wouldn't worry so much."

"And I wish you would be more careful."

"Meh."

"Exactly. We're at an impasse."

A grin gradually dawns along a lengthy snout. Vector scoffs fondly to himself. "Can I have my foot back, now, or are ya gonna kiss it better?"

"Oh, you wish."

Charmy hides his gag.

"You're tense," Rouge whispers into the space between Amy's shoulder blades.

"I was thinking."

"Mm?"

"Sonic's been gone a while."

"He's always been that way. Free as the wind." The bat leaves unvoiced the implication, 'But you know that better than anyone.'

The pink hedgehog sighs into the nest of her folded arms, receiving an impromptu massage with gratitude, among other emotions.

"I'm sure he's fine. Having another adventure, solo."

"I should call him."

Rouge is careful not to comment, using her hands instead.

Amy flexes, encouraging more pressure.

The bat smirks against skin.

The hedgehog almost purrs.

Rouge is okay with the wordlessness of this exchange, even if something anxious radiates off of Amy like sickly sweet perfume. If there is one thing the bat can do, which the hedgehog may need in order to survive this, it's the sensual show of providing a distraction for the body and the mind. Performance and entertainment.

Momma would be proud on the one hand, and ashamed on the other. Momma didn't mind the girlfriends and the feminine one night stands. It gratified her dislike of men, to see how her daughter could use and shun them. The bitter, barren, beloved spinster.

Give the audience what they want.
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Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.
Give the audience what they want.

There's everything to be afraid of.

Chapter 19

Sonic is back, is the general consensus, but he's not looking so good.

Amy greets him dutifully and she cradles the strange metallic stain of his cheek, picking at it, searching tired and dulled eyes.

He says he's not feeling well and that he must've caught something at another settlement. They fed him strange food and they gave him strange water and he's felt impotent since then.

She suspects he felt impotent before then, but smiles reassuringly, showing her strain.

Stories are told and people pretend to understand their moral lessons, Rouge says later, strangely reluctant to let Amy touch her.

What's the matter?

It's a failure to listen, to think.

No, that's not—

But I don't know what to say, sometimes.

I'm sorry.

The women notice, in unison, the metallic speck on Amy's clavicle as she rolls over, into the light of a candle.

Honey...

What's that?

And Tails should be happy but he's not. The guilt broils inside when he pulls a blanket over Sonic's tired, collapsed body. Some baby brother I am, huh? So much bigger. A baby brother, still.

Vector's scales gleam after being washed with vaguely muddied water and Espio reads a book to avoid too much looking, something akin to staring.

Charmy is currently writing a will. Morbid, but necessary, father-figure-guys. One never knows when one will go, or how, or where. Do we believe in heaven, anyway?

It comes strangely, this masculine caress along the chameleon's demure tail, the crocodile rumbling his affection furthermore.

Don't mind the kid.

Indeed, I don't.

Difficult age.

He's older than you remember.

Yeah, it's just 'cause he's so small.

But Cream brings her mother tea and Vanilla rewards her daughter with a gentle peck.

Oh, mother.

My child?

I'm counting my blessing. You.

My sweet girl.

So many orphans. I think it anew every day.

Yes, it's a tragedy that keeps on.

It's so unfair. I worry we're not enough.

But we keep on, too. We must, for them. Are they asleep?

Last I checked. They're sleeping or they're pretending.

Let's hope they're honest and dream peacefully.

Alone, Shadow wonders about mortals and those boundaries he may have crossed, before. Nothing to do with killing, but maybe something to do with death. He'll make it up to her tomorrow. Invite her to plant their little Maria flower, together, in one of the nicer little pots. He thinks Rouge will like that.

Shall I activate it, sir?

Eggman answers by laughing in that grating, endearing way of his, squeezing Starline's elegant shoulders until it hurts, throbbing below.

Sir?

Static screams and mercury gurgles will rise, suddenly, in metallic explosions and twisting bodies, coming together and breaking apart in a flood!

I'll take that as a yes, then.

Yeeessss.

But the platypus' finger hovers, cunning eyes rising, too, to watch lenses of round glasses gleam like two suns. Beholding madness, genius.

I'm so tired and I want it to be over.

BirthDeath

Sympathy for the monster.

Turned toward the sea, floundering.

Wanted to love and got hurt trying.

Spying for that distant island that faith is supposed to reveal, hope only knows.

Now gone.

There's no warmth despite the salty taste of it.

Told to try, try, try again but honestly just fuck the effort.

Desperate for it to mean something to someone, somewhere.

Shaking crooked limbs and kissing dry mouths.

Before the impassive audience, recite.

Don't.

Was gonna say more, saying nothing.

Stop.

It's a god damned poem that fails.

They said there'd be treasure, buried beneath a cross.

They said.

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