

## Chapter 2: Beginnings

That evening, back at the same clearing the pre-marriage party was held in the day before, another celebration was taking place. The scene was very similar to that of the day before, with one major difference: the grinning azure hero now had a crown on his head. The linked rings rested on a velvet-cushioned pedestal between him and Sally, now wearing her own crown.

Something orange darted behind the tree the new king was lounging against. Tails glanced out nervously, casting furtive glances into the assembled crowd.

“Hey, big guy, whatsa matter? Want a chili dog?”

“N-no thanks...” the fox trailed off, glancing again into the crowd.

“Suit yourself, more for me.” the hedgehog popped said chili dog into his mouth. “Why’re you so jittery, ‘lil buddy?” he asked after swallowing.

“I-it’s her, she looked at me, I just know it!” Tails indicated the same gray fox from the balcony earlier that day.

“So why don’t you go talk to her?”

“Are you kidding? I caught the bouquet, remember?!”

“And?”

“That means I’ll be the next one to get married!” the fox said in a frightened whisper.

“Oh come on, that’s just a story. ‘Sides, I bet it only works with girls.” Sonic caught the strange glance Sally gave him. “What?”

The ground squirrel didn’t answer. Instead, she turned to the nervous two-tailed fox. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. Go ahead.”

“Well...Okay, Aunt Sally.” he said, still using the childhood phrase. Tails gulped. “Wish me luck!” he turned back toward the crowd.

“Good luck, big guy. You’ll do fine!” Sonic gave him a thumb’s-up.

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Tails made his way haltingly through the crowds of celebrants, his eyes on only one. The pretty young gray fox was standing unobtrusively by the buffet table. However, as Tails got closer, he could see she was actually standing *behind* the table. He had no idea why, and at the moment discovering the reason was farthest from his mind. He was having trouble just putting one foot in front of the other. He wished he’d never left the safety of his friend’s tree...

Before he knew it, he was there, in front of the long, food-covered bench. Tails looked at the ground, bashful. “Uh, h-hi.” he squeaked, looking up, anxiety thick in his voice.

“Hi yourself.” she said softly, moving slightly behind a tree, as if hiding something.

“I, uh, think you’re, uh...”Tails trailed off. His tongue suddenly felt extremely dry and sticky. He abruptly blurted out the first word that came to mind. “...Tall.” Tails made a face and gazed at the ground again, biting his lip nervously. *Tall? Of all the epithets...cute, lovely, pretty, beautiful...tall? Oh man, she’s gonna hate me!* Tails felt his twin tails twisting together in anxious agitation. He tried to hold them still, kicking a pebble around in the dirt in embarrassment.

To the self-conscious kitsune’s complete astonishment, the gray vixen laughed. Not the cruel, deriding laughter Tails had been half expecting in response to his nervous blunderings; it was more of a bubbly happy sound. “Tall? Hee hee! Well, I guess to you I would be, wouldn’t I? Oh, come on, I didn’t mean it that way!” she said, noticing his ears, pink with embarrassment.

He looked up, an expression of half hope, half helplessness on his childlike features. “You mean, you don’t think I...? I didn’t offend you, did I?”

“Not at all! Come on, don’t look so embarrassed! It makes you look too cute! And I don’t mean...well what I mean is...” Now *she* looked embarrassed. “But you *are* cute...But not in a childish...well...You’re cute.” She finished, blushing as well.

“You mean...”

“In a mature sort of way...Aren’t you Tails?”

“Y-yeah.”

“I’m Laura. Laura the Gray Fox.” She extended a velvety-black paw. “I’m from a village on the other side of the Great Forest.”

Tails took the proffered hand tentatively, a bemused look on his face.

The two foxes spent several hours just talking, as if they were old friends finally reunited after many years apart...

“C’mon!” Tails said suddenly and somewhat childishly, tugging gently on Laura’s hand. “I want you to meet my friends!”

The gray fox looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Well, I...I really shouldn’t...I mean, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“They won’t accept me.”

“Of course they will!”

“But I’m different.”

“I’m different, too!” Tails motioned to his twin dorsal appendages. “They accepted me,

I'm sure they wouldn't have any problem with you."

"N-no...You don't understand..." Laura stepped timidly out from behind her tree. Galvanized steel glinted in the dappled sunlight, and Tails understood.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

The gray fox turned away and stepped behind her tree again. "I'm a freak..." She began sobbing softly, her metal legs and tail shining like a beacon of judgment.

"No your not! Please, just follow me. I'm sure nobody will mind."

"N-no, I should just stay here where nobody notices my-deformity."

Tails sighed. He knew someone his new friend just *had* to meet...But he was reluctant to leave her alone. He gulped and decided to take a bold step. "I don't think you're deformed. I-I think you're beautiful!"

Laura looked at him incredulously. "Really? Or are you just saying that?" She sniffled, mumbling, "That monster...I'll never be beautiful, and it's all his fault!"

"But Robotnik's dead! And you *are* beautiful! Please, just come with me and you'll see!"

"Well..." The gray fox looked skeptical, but reluctantly agreed. "Okaaay...But I still think they'll laugh at me..."

He pulled her to her chrome feet, and led her back toward the party. Laura hesitated somewhat when Tails brought her into the sunlight, then balked outright when she discovered where he was taking her: straight toward the new king and queen. "Wait! You didn't say we were going to see the Blue One! I'm really not worth it! Please!" And she twisted her arm free and stepped back into the shadows.

Tails looked at her, bewildered. "But Sonic's my friend. He'd never say anything bad about you!" It took some persuading, but Tails finally coaxed Laura back into the light and toward his friends. He heaved a silent sigh of relief to see Bunnie there, engaged in pleasant conversation with her fellow ex-Freedom Fighters. "Hey guys! I want to introduce someone to you...This is Laura."

"Uh...good evening, your highnesses." she said, bowing awkwardly. "I know I don't deserve the pleasure of making your acquaintances -Oh!" She had noticed Bunnie. "Forgive me, ma'am, but aren't you...I mean..." Laura was blushing deeply now. "I'm sorry. I, of all Mobians should know not to mention...Oops! Sorry."

The tawny, cybernetic rabbit was now approaching. Tails whispered something in one of her long ears. "Of coarse, sugah-Tails." she whispered back. Bunnie turned to the extremely embarrassed gray fox. "Honey, come ovah heah and sit with me. We need to have a little heart-to-heart." she said kindly, leading Laura to a secluded spot.

"What was that all about, big guy?"

“Uh...Well...”

“Never mind. That’s yer girlfriend, huh?”

“Uh...”

“Good choice.” Sonic grinned as his sidekick blushed.

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Later that evening, Laura strode proudly back into the clearing, a changed fox. Tails wondered what Bunnie had told her. Laura explained. “She told me my - uh - limbs weren’t a deformity at all. That Bunnie is really quite remarkable! Did she really use her robotic parts to help in the fight for freedom?”

“Yup.”

“Wow. I never thought...Well, anyway, she told me not to be ashamed of my legs and tail...that they were an asset; a token of the bravery it takes to live through such a traumatic event as I have...” the vixen trailed off pensively. “Bunnie really opened my eyes about the whole thing, though I had a hard time believing her at first.” She sighed. “I always thought I was a freak that nobody would want to be around...My sister and I tended to stay out of village business...lived our lives alone in our little hut...You’re really lucky to have such nice friends, Tails!” The conversation trailed off after that, as an expectant silence filled the clearing. Throughout the meadow, animals stopped talking and watched the darkened sky in excited anticipation.

The lights at the reception party were dimmed as the fireworks started, launched from a platform set up in the middle of a nearby lake. Any live sparks that landed would go safely into the water and not the trees. There was a chorus of “Ooh’s” and “Ahh’s” as the multi-colored blooms filled the sky, commemorating the planet’s freedom from the tyrant who had plagued it for years.

“Wow! Look at that one! It’s beautiful!” Laura pointed skyward.

“Not as beautiful as you.” The blush in Tails’ ears was masked by the darkness.

“You’re sweet,” Laura said. The partially robotized gray fox leaned over and kissed the surprised kitsune on the cheek.

His blush deepened. “Uh, thanks.” he said bashfully. Tails looked back at his best friend for encouragement. Sonic grinned and gave him a thumbs up, his arm around his bride. The two-tailed fox turned back around, tentatively putting his arm around Laura’s waist as the two leaned against each other, watching the aerial celebration in blissful surrender.

“Watch this,” the blue hedgehog said, “At the end of the finale...” he trailed off cryptically as blooms began exploding in the sky in rapid succession.

There was a thunderous crack as a scene was depicted in the sky. A cityscape reminiscent of Robotropolis appeared, exploding outward several seconds later in bursts of red,

yellow, and orange. “It’s not done yet. Keep watchin. I’m tellin ya, the best part’s yet to come...” The hedgehog’s grin was audible. Out of the center of the reds, oranges, and yellows appeared a splash of blue and brownish-red that resolved itself into a rough facsimile of the newlyweds’ marriage kiss. This was followed by two linked golden rings and a waving image of the Mobian World Flag, accompanied by the Mobian Freedom Song, “Freedom Fighters Forever.” Deafening applause filled the meadow as creatures both young and old celebrated the liberation of their world and the marriage of their new king and queen. It was the beginning of an era most Mobians had dreamt of for years...an age of peace.