

Chapter 3: Future's Promise

A gust of polar wind howled through Knothole, searching for any creature unfortunate enough to be caught out in the storm. Nothing moved in the secluded valley. Every creature was safe in their homes, warmed by cozy fires and surrounded by family and friends. Winter had a firm grip on the Great Forest and its inhabitants, causing a general feeling of reticence and sedateness. It was the eve of the Winter Solstice, and every creature celebrated by taking it easy and staying inside with friends and family. Well, almost every creature...

Sonic sat up abruptly, awakened from a light nap on the couch in the main room of the hollow stump he and Sally called home. Ears straining, he listened. There it was again. A whimper issued from the bedroom where an extremely large-bellied Sally slept fitfully. The Blue Blur was instantly on his feet and beside her a moment later, hovering concernedly. "Sal?" he whispered, reaching a hand out tentatively before withdrawing again. "You okay?" Sally slept on, mumbling and turning over. The hedgehog sighed, moving to the window. *Get a grip. She's fine. But...It's just this baby...I'm way past nervous!* He sighed again and returned to the couch. Several minutes later he started pacing about the room, unable to sleep. *It could come any time now...Man, I am sooo not ready for this!*

A soft knock at the door nearly caused the cobalt hero to leap out of his spines. Whirling, he faced the door, ready to defend his mate from imaginary foes. "Sonic?" He relaxed at the familiar voice of his best friend. He opened the door, sucking in a breath at the coldness of the wind.

"Tails, what are you doin out in that storm?! It's freezing!"

"I couldn't sleep. Laura's visiting her sister, and I was gettin lonely." The fox looked absently at the ring on his left hand as he entered. "I still It's hard to believe we're gonna be married in the spring!" The kitsune turned and contributed his weight as the two friends shoved the resisting door closed, shutting out the frigid, screaming wind.

"Hey, I know how ya feel. Trust me, you'll get used to it. At least you don't haveta deal with bein made king!"

"I guess the bouquet thing really did work!"

Sonic snorted. "That's just superstition! I still say it was a coincidence." The hedgehog suddenly remembered his mate, asleep in the other room, and looked contritely in her direction. *Still asleep. Good. I'd hate to wake her in her condition...*

Tails followed his gaze. "She's okay, right?"

"Oh yeah. Just tired. That baby's due any day now..." Sonic trailed off, looking lovingly in the direction of the dozing ground squirrel. "I just hope it ain't tonight. There'd be no way to get her to Dr. Quack's in this storm, even with my speed. I-" His next statement was cut off by another knock at the door.

"Good evening, Your Highness. I am truly sorry to disturb you this late at night and in such a dreadful storm..." The newcomer bowed, her large, spotted, tawny ears almost brushing the ground.

“Please, it’s just Sonic. I don’t care for that title and honorific stuff. Ain’t you that new resident...?”

“Only temporarily, good sir.” The serval’s golden eyes sparkled. From far south in the Mysterious Cat Country, she had come north as part of a delegation of dignitaries and ambassadors. When she had heard of Queen Sally’s pregnancy, she had voluntarily stayed behind, explaining that she was skilled as a midwife, and could help with the baby. “I was awoken by a strangeness in the air and thought I should check on Her Royal Highness.” The strange feline was also rumored to have amazing precognitive abilities. “How is she, if I might ask?”

“S-Sal’s fine, just restin.” The hedgehog was taken slightly aback by the sudden appearance of the mystic wildcat.

“If I may...”

“S-sure. C’mon in.” Sonic quirked an eyebrow quizzically, exchanging glances with his two-tailed friend, who shrugged. “Uh, what’s yer name, anyway?”

The mysterious serval floated in, moving with surprising grace and fluidity. “I am called Prophecy, the Mystic Serval. Forever at your service, good King.” Sonic just rolled his eyes at the reminder of his title, and followed her into the room in which Sally was resting. The ground squirrel was awake and smiling tranquilly at her three visitors.

“Sal?”

“I’m fine, dear.” She smiled at Prophecy. “Hello.”

The serval bowed again. “It is quite an honor to be your midwife, Your Highness. How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing okay, honestly. There is a slight pain in my belly. Ohh!” The Queen’s eyes grew wide. “I think. eyaaaaghhhh!”

Prophecy took Sally’s hand as the squirrel was forced to squeeze her eyes shut. “It is time, Your Highness.” the serval said, her eyes growing misty.

Sonic was instantly on his feet and hovering concernedly. “Sal? Do you need anythin? Should I go get Dr. Quack?” He paused to think for a minute. “Yeah, that’s what I’ll do...Be right back, Sal! Tails, would’ya wait here and get Prophecy whatever she needs?”

“Sure thing, Sonic.”

“Sal, I’ll be right back. Hang in there!” That said, he darted out the door and into the biting wind.

Though the wind howled and moaned around him, driving snow and sleet deep within

his sapphire quills and chilling him to his swiftly beating heart, Sonic felt calmer out here. Safer. Out in this storm, he could concentrate on the task he'd set for himself: getting to the hut of the resident healer as fast as he could. Of course, he *knew* he could get there and back before the child was born; there was no doubt about *that*. However, this gale presented him with an interesting challenge that he could put all his effort into mastering, thus saving himself from the uneasiness that had been plaguing him inside his stump all night.

He pounded his fist on the door of the clinic. "Yo, Dr. Quack! You in there?!"

Yawning, the goldenrod-colored avian came to the door, rubbing sleepily at his eyes. "Not so loud, Sonic..." he said, pointing in the direction of the adjoining hut that housed the medic and his family. "You'll wake the kids...What is it?" He'd caught the anxious look in the hero's eyes. "Is it time? Is Sally...?"

"Yeah. C'mon!"

"Hold on, Your Highness." The duck said, evading a grasping, gloved hand. "I won't be any help without my stuff. Wait here, please." With that, he disappeared into the house, leaving the nervous father-to-be pacing in the hospital part of the hut. "...And please don't pace in my clinic!" the duck added as an afterthought.

"Hurry!" the hedgehog called after the medical mallard, not slowing a step of his pacing.

Several minutes later, the bird was back, clutching his medical bag and throwing on his white lab coat. "OK, I'm read-ieee!" he squeaked as he was yanked out the door by the speeding 'hog. "Warn me when you're going to do that!" the duck said, rather breathlessly, when they arrived back at the stump a few minutes later, Sally's screaming rising above the cacophony of the winter blizzard. They entered the house in time to see a slightly flustered looking Tails staggering under a basin of steaming water.

"How is she, Lil' Buddy?"

"Dunno," the fox said, somewhat breathlessly. "Prophecy keeps me busy fetchin her hot water."

"Here, let me help you with that. Don't want you to throw your back out." The sandy-colored duck took hold of one end of the tub and helped the staggering vulpine carry it toward the bedroom. "How is our new midwife doing?"

"Okay, I guess. I...I think she knows what she's doing...but...her eyes have gone all weird." Tails finished in a whisper as they entered the room where Sally was grasping convulsively at the arm of her mate.

"It's okay, honey, I'm here-Oww! Uh, Sal, your fingernails are digging into my arm."

"S-sorry..." The ground squirrel managed, releasing the blue hero's arm. Sonic began rubbing his bruise absently. Sally's screams abated somewhat, the contractions slowing, giving her a much needed respite. Silence spread through the room; the only sounds were the heavy breathing of a very tired ground squirrel and Prophecy's incoherent mutterings.

Suddenly, the serval turned from her medicines, her normally tawny fur gleaming golden

as the rays of the summer sun, her graying headfur now a blinding silver as she floated several feet above the floor. She addressed the assembled Mobians in a far-off, otherworldly voice, her eyes a swirling mass of greenish-gold glitter. "Friends and goodbeasts all...Hear me and heed the words of Prophecy, Mystic Serval, Speaker for the Spirits of the Elements and the Great Mother Mobius Herself." It was clear this was not merely Prophecy herself speaking. Some higher power was making itself and its message known to the four animals gathered around the mysterious wildcat.

*"When forthright shines
The Heart pure gold,
Swiftly flows the royal blood,
On violet feet that fly like wings.*

*From a soul True Blue
The Promised One shall spring,
Clad in shades of brilliant lemon and purple,
Her eyes so bright they put the sky to shame.
Emblazoned upon her arm
The Rainbow Mark of Truth.*

*In the wake of loss most tragic,
The way to Freedom shall she lead.
Through days of dark despair, a light shines forth,
A blazing ray of hope and glory.*

*Arise! Challenge those who
Threaten your throne!
Though enemies may destroy
That which you value most,
Fight back! Show them what it means.
All those who choose the darkened path,*

Beware the Ultraviolet Flash!"

Her message complete, the serval drifted gently back to the floor, her fur and eyes resuming their normal hues. She stood there blinking in bewilderment for several minutes.

"Ooookay...That was weird..." Sonic said, voicing the approximate thoughts of each animal in the room.

"Oh dear..." said Prophecy, slowly coming out of her daze. "I did it again, didn't I?"

"Quite alright. We understand that your gift takes you when it will. I-eyaaaaghhhh! Here we...go again!" Sally managed to pant out as another contraction began.

"Push, Your Highness, push and breathe." Prophecy was back at her task, helping the laboring squirrel to bring her child into the world. "Push, breathe...push, breathe...push, breathe..."

After what seemed like hours, the door to the bedroom was opened, to the accompaniment of a newborn's caterwauling. Sonic and his ever-faithful companion had been exiled to the main living quarters of the stump to allow the doctor and midwife more room to work. "Sonic, come meet –"

Almost as soon as the door was opened, the cobalt 'hog was instantly beside his mate, once again hovering concernedly. He smiled down at the bright-purple infant, a hedgehog like himself.

"Aww..." Tails was heard commenting.

"Like I was saying," continued Dr. Quack, "Sonic, meet your new daughter."

"D-daughter?" The hero echoed dumbly. He had truthfully been expecting a son. "Oh...right. Daughter." He recovered quickly, the grin never leaving his face as he tenderly brushed aside the shock of still-soft spines that fell across the infant's sealed eyelids. Sonic looked up at his smiling wife. "You okay, Sal?"

"I'm fine, honey." Sally said, yawning. "Just tired." She looked down at her baby. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yeah..." The new father said, dazedly grinning at his child, her new fists pawing at the air. The baby yawned suddenly and quieted, drifting into sleep.

"Her eyes should open in about a week. Y'know, the oddest thing happened at the instant she entered the world." Dr. Quack said, removing his gloves. "I noticed that the storm out there died down immediately after her first cry."

"'Tis a sign. Of what I do not know." added Prophecy, ignoring Sonic's derisive snort at the mention of omens.

"Look at this." Sally said softly, gently caressing a curious birthmark on the infant's left arm. "The Rainbow Mark of Truth?" the squirrel mused, echoing the line of Prophecy's mysterious prophecy. There was a bright ring of rainbow fur encircling the newborn princess's upper left arm, just below her shoulder. The baby sighed in her sleep, prompting a sigh from her mother.

"What are you gonna name her?" Tails broke in.

"Well, we had a few ideas, but none seemed to work. I liked Alicia, my mother's name, for a girl, but Sonic didn't really seem to care for it much. So we just decided to leave it and see what came to mind. I still like Alicia."

"I don't. Not for MY daughter. She's gotta have something, well, you know, unique!"

"Well, I can see we aren't going to agree on anything tonight. Let's just leave it for tomorrow." Sally yawned, gazing fondly down at the child. "She looks so serene, doesn't she?"

“YOU look serene, too, Sal.” Suddenly, the azure hedgehog snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it!” he exclaimed softly. “The perfect name!”

Sally quirked an eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

“Serenity!”

Sally looked at her mate. “That’s the best idea you’ve come up with yet.”

“I try.”

“Alright. It’s settled, then. We’ll call her Serenity. Serenity Alicia.”

Sonic sighed. “Fine.”

“Princess Serenity Alicia Acorn...”

“Hedgehog.”

Sally sighed. “Yes, of *course*. Princess Serenity Alicia Acorn Hedgehog.” Sally locked eyes with her mate, slightly annoyed, though the loving look he gave her and the child instantly melted the exasperation. “I love you, Sonic.”

“Likewise, Sal.”

The two new parents simultaneously gazed out the window as Dr. Quack, Tails, and Prophecy exited the stump, the excitement over for the night. The snow was falling soft and silent; the storm had abated. In the east, the sky had begun to lighten. A new year was beginning, a year heralded by the birth of the planet’s future ruler. Both parents had high hopes. A child born the morning of the Winter Solstice was said to herald years of peace...and serenity.