

Chapter 6: Growing Pains

“**A**AGAIN! TELL IT AGAIN!”

“Shh...Ren...Not so loud...especially not so loud *in my ear!*” Sonic winced, twisting his finger inside his left ear as his daughter, now twelve years old – and hyper as ever – pranced about excitedly. Her two best friends, the six-year-old Tails twins, shadowed her every move.

Wherever the trio went in the hidden village, they caused smiles on the faces of the townscreatures. Every mobian that remembered the days of the coup remembered the way the fathers of the three youngsters used to act almost the same way.

“Yeah, Uncle Sonic, tell it again...”

“Please?” All three children chorused in unison, their eager eyes on the smirking king.

He caught the look Sally shot him. “What can I say, kids just love hearing me tell the stories.”

“Yeah, but you are giving them the wrong idea about the war. Kids, it wasn’t nearly as all fun and games as he makes it sound...A lot of mobians were irreversibly changed...Some of us never came back at all...”

“C’mon Sal, you make it all dreary and doom-and-gloomish...” the cobalt king elbowed his queen playfully in the ribs. “Anyway...So there I was...surrounded by...had to be about fifty SWATbots...”

Sally sighed, rolling her eyes. “It was *fifteen*...”

Sonic shot her a mock glare, “Who’s telling this story? As I was saying...”

The children’s eager young eyes were glued on the smirking blue hedgehog’s face, hanging on his every word.

One of Serenity’s ears swiveled backward suddenly, torn unwillingly away from her father’s tale by a slight whimper. At the slightly louder repetition of the sound, she reluctantly turned her full attention toward whatever-it-was.

What she saw appalled her. With a quick, “Scuse me, Daddy...” She was on her feet and instantly at the scene of the crime. Hands on hips, she cleared her throat. “Ahem...”

“Oh...h-hi P-princess...S-sorry to interrupt tha s-story...” A rather brawny young rabbit stammered uncomfortably, trying to hide something...or someone...a scrawny rat child glared shiftily at the world from beside him.

“Never mind that...I heard cryin...who you torturin this time, huh?”

“Oh...nobody...important.”

“You know what I think ‘bout bullies...” Reni looked absently at her nails, “Now c’mon...don’t make me get heroic on ya...who’re ya pesterin?”

Reluctantly, the bullies stepped aside, revealing a quivering white...well, Serenity wasn’t quite sure of the species. She walked over and helped the girl up, glaring at the bullies as she helped the young mobian walk. “Lissen up...”she said, glaring at the bullies, “Don’t let me catch you tormentin anyone ever again, or you won’t get off as easily next time, ‘kay?”

The bullies nodded and scattered.

Serenity turned to the rather embarrassed-looking white creature, trying not to appear to notice the smell that was now coming from her. *That explains the species...*“You okay?”

“Y-yeah...thanks...” The skunk adjusted her pink dress. “I knew I shoulda stayed in the woods...”

“Nonsense. C’mon and meet my friends!”

“You mean you don’t mind my...”

“Hey...You can’t choose yer species. I just try to keep those idiots in line. You can be my friend if you want. The name’s Serenity, but just call me Reni.”

“F-friend?”

“Yeah. Come meet my Daddy! What’s yer name, anyway?”

“S-snowdrift.”

“Well...Welcome to the gang, Snowdrift...mind if I call you Drifter?”

“No...I...guess not...I’ve never had any friends before...”

“Sheesh! Where have ya been? It’s easy to get friends here...”

“They called me Stinky Girl...”

“Oh, don’t pay any attention to those two idiots back there...Hard ta believe that brute is Bunnie’s kid...Yer not stinky...”

“But I...”

“Nevermind...Meet my daddy...He’s the greatest!”

Sonic winked. “Hiya!”

The ten-year-old skunk’s eyes grew round. “Wow...Sonic’s your DAD?!”

Reni puffed out her chest. “Yup!”

“Wow...I...”

“C’mon, sit with us and listen to Daddy’s story! These two are my best friends, TJ and Peace, Uncle Tails’ kids...they’re twins.”

The two kitsunes waved happily.

The albino skunk suddenly glanced around nervously. “I...can’t. I live in the forest with my grandpa...I just came to deliver something...I havta get back!”

“Aww...do ya really have to?”

“Yeah...Grandpa keeps a tight schedule.” Serenity looked at her strangely. “It was nice meeting you...” Snowdrift called over her shoulder as she disappeared into the trees.

“Wait! Could you come back and play sometime?”

“I...dunno...Maybe...”

Serenity watched the tree line for a time after the white skunk vanished into it. Shrugging, she turned her full attention back to her father, who was grinning at her. “Playin hero again, eh? That’s my girl...” *Just be glad you don’t have to do more than put a bunch of bullies straight...* He reached out to ruffle her spines affectionately before returning to the story. “...So...There I was...surrounded by about fifty SWATbots...”

Elsewhere, a door was heard slamming shut, a half-robotized gray fox left standing outside forlornly, metallic shoulders drooping as her bushy gray tail blew about in the breeze. “Come on, Tails, please let me in...”

“No!” came the half-sobbed response. “Please...leave me alone.”

“But...It’s been six years! You shouldn’t still be grieving!”

The kitsune poked a tear-wet face out of his dwelling. “Who are you to say what I should or shouldn’t be doing? Sure, she was your sister, but...I...I can’t just marry you like that! I...I understand your tradition, but I...I wasn’t raised with that belief. In Knothole, we marry when both creatures love each other equally. We don’t...I mean, it isn’t our custom to marry a relative when a mate dies...” His eyes met those of this new gray fox, and filled with immense pain and grief all over again. He turned away to hide the refreshed tears.

“But...It’s to honor her that I come to be your new bride!”

“Please...Liana...even the sight of you gives me pain...You...You look so much like her...” He half-closed the door again, this time more gently. “Just...Just leave me alone...I can’t accept your offer...”

“But...What about the children? They’ll need a mother’s loving care...”

“I can do that...What makes you think I can’t?!” He rounded on her again, face tortured.

“I’m just saying—”

“Just...Just go away, okay? I...I’m just not ready for this...this kind of commitment again...Not when...well...I...just...*please*... go away...” he finished in a small voice, closing the door, a bit gentler this time.

“D on’t wolf your food, sweetie, you’ll choke.”

Serenity managed the slightest of acknowledging glances to her mother over her plate, piled high with way too many pizza slices, before continuing her ravenous munching.

“Reni, slow down! This is not how a princess is supposed to act during dinner!” Sally admonished in irritation.

Between slices, the young purple hedgehog mumbled something that might have been an apology, muffled by chewing. “Can’t ‘elp it. It’s pizza.” she said matter-of-factly after swallowing, as if that was a perfectly reasonable reason for a lack of etiquette.

Queen Sally rolled her eyes, and turned to her king for help. Sonic shrugged and launched himself at another plate of his chilidogs. Sally sighed and threw her arms up in the air in exasperation. “You’re no help. I can see where she gets her *impeccable* manners.” Serenity and Sonic gave simultaneous guilty grins. Father and daughter both consciously tried to curb their rudeness while maintaining their rate of consumption.

After the meal was finished, Serenity immediately began cavorting around, asking her father to tell the stories again. Naturally, he obliged her, glad for a chance to again bask in his past glories.

“You are soooo cool, Daddy...I wish I coulda been a freedom fighter...” Serenity mused wistfully. “You had all the fun...”

The cocky grin on the hero-king’s face faded as Sally shot him a look. Sonic placed his hands on his daughters shoulders, “Plumcake, your mother and I think there’s something you need to see...”

“W hy’d we have to come *here*? There’s hardly anythin but buildings an’ streets, an’...stuff. An’ they’re *ugly* buildings an’ streets...Where’s the trees? Where’s the flowers an’ rocks?”

“Come on, Sweetie, it’s not like you’ve never been to downtown Mobotropolis before.”

“Not *here*, Mom. Downtown isn’t nearly this spooky an’ ugly!”

“Well, she’s got you there, eh Sal?”

“You’re a LOT of help, Sonic!” Sally said, rolling her eyes. “It’s around here somewhere...”

“Mom, I’m bored. Where are we going anyway?” Serenity said petulantly, crossing her arms.

“Just a minute...Ahhh...Here we are!” The ground squirrel pointed across the street to a building that had once been one of Robotnik’s factories.

Serenity looked up...and wrinkled her nose in distaste. “You took us to a museum?!” She turned back toward where the twins were hovering and made a gagging expression, one finger pointing down her throat. They giggled. She turned back to her parents. “Mom, I got MUCH more important things to do today...Like practicin my run...No time for a stuffy ol’ museum!”

“You like the stories your father tells you, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but...that’s DIFFERENT!”

Sally smiled cryptically. “Hm. Not *that* different. Just humor us on this one, okay, Sweetie? We need to show you what really happened.”

“Hmph! Oh, okay fine. If it’s THAT kind of a museum I guess I can handle it.”

Despite her initial bellyaching about the museum, Serenity actually enjoyed it quite a bit, marveling at the artifacts from the era that had become known as the Years of Darkness by some. She saw it as a chance to imagine herself in her father’s shoes, and ran around pretending to be smashing the deactivated robots and various machines, much to her mother’s chagrin.

“Aww, coooool! Daddy, these the things you were always bashin?”

“Yup!”

Sally sighed. *Great. This WAS my idea...* “Serenity, honey, please come back. You might break something! This IS a museum, you know, not a place for your active imagination to run wild...You’re making our tour guide nervous!”

Serenity, as hyper as she was, still had the sense to not cause grief for her parents in a public setting, so she obediently came back. She tried to keep herself, and her imagination, under control for the rest of the tour. She knew her parents were trying to get something important across to her by this trip, but she was far too excited about all the sights and objects from the time of the freedom fights to try and figure it out.

“Now, as you follow me into the next room,” the tour guide was saying, as Serenity strained to see past him and the closed steel doors behind him, “You will see the object of torture that...Your Highness, please be patient and wait for my speech to end...As I was saying, this is the device that has put fear in the hearts of most children that come here...” the guide said,

pointedly looking at the undeterred princess that was trying to squeeze past him. Sally reached out and pulled her daughter back by the tail, keeping a firm hold on her, much to the relief of the guide.

Serenity didn't hear much of what the tour guide was saying as the doors opened to reveal... "OH COOOOL!!" The young princess said, squirming out of her mother's grasp and darting past the sputtering guide, her two best friends following. Disregarding the decorative museum rope that was supposed to keep little children *back*, she squirmed underneath it and placed her small purple hands right up against the glass tube, looking at it in wonder.

Upon entering, Sally put a hand up to her forehead, groaning. This was not going AT ALL how she'd planned it...

Before either of her parents or the guide could stop her, the irrepressible purple hedgehog princess had opened the glass door and scrambled inside, marveling at being so close to the very last of the infamous instrument of torture on the planet. It gave her such a rush of excitement that she didn't think about the possible consequences. This was amazing! She was actually inside the feared robotisizer! And it wasn't hurting her! (Okay, so it was not attached to a power source, so it couldn't hurt her, but...that wasn't the point!) "Look guys, I'm in the 'Botsizer! Teehee!"

"Reni! Get out of there, now!"

But she didn't hear the panic edging her mother's voice. "Hey, Teej, close the door! Hee hee!"

"Reni, I don't think..." Peace started. The kitsune was only six, but she still had a bad feeling about this... "That looks really dangerous...I...I think you shou' come out..."

"Mmm...Didn't miss anything, did I? I saw a snack bar." Sonic waltzed in, licking chili sauce off of his face. He suddenly looked up, saw his daughter in the robotisizer, and his instincts automatically took over. "Reni! Get out of there!" Without thinking, he smashed the glass containing the insanely giggling Serenity, scooped her up, and deposited her beside her scowling mother.

The young princess looked from one face to the other, her mother glaring and tapping her foot; her father with a somewhat anxious look on his face, as he tried to get his heavy breathing under control. Reni looked at the floor, and in a small voice, said, "I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"I'm sorry to end the tour so abruptly, sir..." Sally said, turning to the tour guide, "But we're going home." She looked pointedly at her cowering daughter. "Now."

"Yup...I'm in trouble, alright..." Reni muttered to herself, trying to slink away and disappear. Unfortunately, her mother once again had a firm grip on her small tail.

Back in Knothole, Serenity made her way quietly to her room, crawling under her bed. She felt terrible. It was one thing to annoy her mother...But to make her father angry...her father – whom she respected and adored – she had let him down; embarrassed him in front of everybody in the room! She began to cry quietly, the remorse for her thoughtless actions at the museum

escaping to the floor with each tear that fell from her eyes.

“Reni.”

She sniffed. Not wanting to face him after...that, she didn't say anything, just stayed under her bed, sobbing.

“Reni, honey, I'm not mad.” There was a sudden weight above her as he sat on her bed. “Please come out of...wherever it is you're hiding.”

“You...You're not?” A small spiky purple head emerged, looking up at her father with pitiful liquid sapphire eyes.

“How could I be? After all my stories, we shoulda realized you'd act like that after seeing it in person. I really did over romanticize the war, you know that?”

Was *he* actually apologizing to *her*, when she was the one that had caused the scene? “Daddy...I...I'm sorry...I shouldna...” She said, emerging the rest of the way. She stood there, looking at her feet, suddenly unable to meet his eyes.

“Shh...C'mere. Don't cry. The only reason we took you there was to give you a better idea of what it was *really* like to live during the freedom-fighting days. Obviously, it didn't exactly work.”

“Sorry...” she said, climbing into his lap.

“No. Don't apologize. I should be the one apologizing. I made you think it was all fun and games to fight Robotnik. Truth is, it wasn't. I made it seem like all our missions were successful and glorious. We lost about as many as we won, you know that?”

“But...You were always so brave...I wanted to see what it was like...”

“Yeah, sure I was brave. I had to be. But one thing I never told you...I was often scared, too. And when I saw you in that...that...” His eyebrows knitted for a minute or two, before he was back to comforting his child. “Well, anyway, I just reacted. That was kinda how I lived those missions, you know, just reacting when I thought someone I cared about was in danger. Sal always warned me that it was better to plan, but I always thought it better to ‘think on my feet.’ That caused me to start to be hasty...the way I was today.”

“But...I shouldna gone into that thing...right?”

“Well, yeah, but...I think they shoulda destroyed it anyway. The thing is still real...and therefore, still dangerous, even though I know it wasn't plugged in. I tried to get them to destroy it when they found it, but they insisted on putting it in their Freedom Fighter Museum. I said, ‘Build a fake.’ But they wouldn't have any part of it. They wanted authenticity. I still think the world would be better off if they did get rid of it...”

“But...you're the king...can't you order them to have it destroyed? If you really think it's that important...”

“It's not that simple, Plumcake. I...I don't like ordering people around...it's not my

style...” he said, as if that would explain everything.

“But...”

“However, I do think Sally’s right. You DO need to know what really happened...without me always glorifying it.” His grin was crooked. “I think we could arrange for a video presentation...that might work out better for you than the museum idea...”

It was a documentary. The video showed all the various side-effects of the Freedom Fighter’s war on Robotnik, including the efforts being taken to reclaim the areas of pollution scattered over the entire planet. It showed recovered surveillance video from Robotnik’s own collection of the prison cells where condemned mobians waited their turn at the robotisizer, surveillance of the robotization process in action – complete with the screams of pain from the victims, video from the factories where the resulting robians were forced to slave their lives away, and various videos from the villain’s attempts to ruin the lives or murder the mobian resistance leaders (Including several death traps evaded at the last minute by Reni’s revered father...some of which had left him not exactly in one piece.) The documentary also included several eye witness accounts of atrocities preformed, documentation of children left orphaned and alone when their parents were taken away, and interviews of robians who had regained their free will (and half-robians who had escaped before the process was complete) who spoke of the horrors of the robotisizer’s effects.

At one point during the video, Tails’ twins were escorted out of the room when the action got too intense for them, but Reni refused to leave, saying, in a surprisingly mature way, that she had to see all of what the video contained. After it was finished, she got up and went to the shelter of her father’s arms.

“I’m sorry, honey, but...”

“I know, Daddy...I hadta see it...You didn’t tell me you were ever hurt on those missions...”

“Heh...Who wants to hear about *those* times? You always wanted to hear stories of the war, and I liked to tell them...but only the ones where I was the shining hero you wanted me to be...” Sonic grinned, somewhat self-consciously.

Deep in the middle of the Great Forest, several miles from Knothole, there was a secluded cabin. It was home to a reclusive old healer and his young granddaughter. The youngster’s parents had abandoned her on his doorstep at an early age, ashamed by her alleged ‘deformity.’ The grizzled old spotted skunk snorted. Just because Snowdrift, as he’d come to call her, was not the color of a ‘normal’ skunk, didn’t mean she was ‘deformed.’ He’d taken her in, but he’d also made it clear to her that if she were to live with him, she’d have to earn her keep, mainly by being his connection to the rest of the world by running his errands for him. He was far too busy to waste time taking things into town himself, so he sent a willing Snowdrift on his messenger duties instead.

The front door banged shut. *Ah...here she is now...* he thought to himself.

“Granddad! You’ll never guess who I met in the city today!” To Snowdrift, who had hardly ever been anywhere else, Knothole was a large city. “It was like...there were these bullies, and...”

“Shh...Snow, not now dear. I’m busy.”

“Aww...Yer always busy...”

“Look Snowy, honey, if you’ve got some new friend in town...”

“I won’t let it distract me from my duties, I swear!”

“That’s not what I was going to say.” The old spotted skunk sighed, “I have to keep an eye on my patients...to make sure they’re okay...”

“I know. But...Granddad...Those two scare me...They...They’re not...right...somehow...”

“Now, Snowdrift, just because they don’t look like us doesn’t mean they’re evil...I would have thought you’d know that by now...after your parents abandoned you because you were different...Did that affect the way I treated you?”

“Well...no...”

“Then I suggest you don’t judge them just on the fact that they are overlanders, okay?”

The young albino skunk looked up at her grandfather. “Okay...but...I...Nevermind.” *I just don’t trust them, especially that big one...he’s got a scary look in ‘is eyes...even though he’s in a coma...his eyes still scare me...*

“Why don’t you run along and play with yer new friend, okay? I have work to do.”

“Okay!” Her fear of the two strangers in her grandfather’s intensive care unit forgotten, she ran back the way she had come, her bright pink eyes shining at being with her new friends again so soon.