

Chapter 7: Rite of Passage

“**Y**ou LET me win...AGAIN!” Serenity whined as her father crossed the finish line several seconds behind her. “I wanna win on my OWN!” The eighteen-year-old purple hedgehog sighed and plopped down on the grass under one of the Great Forest’s huge trees. “I wanna do it myself...without you always slowing up for me...” She wiped impatiently at a tear. “I’ll never be as good as you, Daddy...” *Come to think of it...I seemed a lot slower than I usually am...have I completely lost what speed I had?!* She thought worriedly to herself.

“Reni...Plumcake...I’m sure someday you’ll come into your own...” Sonic sat down next to his frustrated daughter, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Serenity snorted. “Huh. Yeah, right...You were routinely beating ‘Butt-nik by sixteen...I can’t even go as fast as you when I’m eighteen! And I’ve been practicing nearly all my life! Will I ever be as good as you?” Her eyes showed a heart-wrenching discouragement. “I don’t even have anything to take my frustrations out on! I mean, it’s good that I don’t have to fight for my freedom like you did, but...I just feel so useless...And I’m not very good at being a princess either.”

“In other words, you feel like you’re living in my shadow, is that it?”

“NO!...Well, yeah...I guess that’s it. How can I ever prove that I’d be as good as you are if I got nothin to fight against...or for?”

Sonic sighed. “I...” He didn’t really feel he had any real way of reassuring her.

“I just feel so useless...What can I do that you can’t do better, Daddy?” Serenity sighed heavily, drawing patterns in the dirt with a plum finger.

“You can swim, can’t you?”

Reni snorted. “Yeah...but not that well...I only learned because you and Mom insisted that I learn for my own good. I never really liked the lessons...I never really liked the water, for that matter.”

“Yeah, I remember...You used to splash around like crazy...”

Reni’s grin was crooked. “Remember when I panicked and pulled you in?”

Her father put on a face of mock horror, his hands in front of his face. “Oh no! Not that again!”

Reni smirked and repeated what she had said during that first swimming lesson, pantomiming her panicky younger self, “No! Please! Not the water! Splash! Splash! Daddy!” She grabbed at her father’s shoe.

“Ahh!” He made floundering motions. They both ended up ‘crawling out and panting on the shore,’ laughing.

Serenity sighed and looked at her father. "I still wish I was able to do more..."

"It'll come, in time."

"Sure it will..."

"You're almost as fast as me!"

"Huh...Almost doesn't count...I wish..." Suddenly, she felt strangely ill.
"Daddy...I...don't feel too good...Think I'll go lie down..."

Serenity was worried. She hadn't ever felt this bad before. It was like someone had tied a knot in her insides...and there was a gross...squishy...feeling down--She got up and ran to the bathroom, knocking her mother and Prophecy over in the process.

"Serenity Alicia, what have I told you about running in the house?!"

"S-sorry Mom...I'll fix whatever I broke later, there's somethin' wrong with me..." she apologized distractedly, disappearing into the hut's bathroom.

Sally exchanged glances with Prophecy. "Do you think...?"

The Mystic Serval gave the ground squirrel a knowing smile. "Yes."

Suddenly there was a panicky squeal from the bathroom. "Aaaaahhhh!! MOOOOOM! Help me!"

The purple hedgehog's sapphire eyes were wide with fright as she let her mother into the bathroom. Serenity grabbed the ground squirrel's hand, desperately pleading, "Mom...w-what's happening to me? I'm bleedin..."

"Shh...It's nothing to worry about. It took a bit longer than we thought, and we were worried you might actually turn out to be sterile when it still hadn't happened on you last birthday..."

"What are you talking about...?!"

"Relax, Reni. It's perfectly normal. All girls get this...yours just didn't come when we expected it to..."

"Huh?" Serenity was by now very confused.

Sally tossed her daughter a strange pad and made for the door. "Put on some new underwear and that pad and then come and see me. "We need to have a little talk..."

“**W**HAT?! You mean I’ll have to deal with this for TWO WHOLE WEEKS?!”
Serenity’s mouth hung open. She collapsed, groaning on her bed. “Great...Just great...”

“Yes, but it only happens every two months...”

“Great...Just great...I HAD to be a girl...” She grumbled as her mother left her room, placing a bottle of pain killers on Serenity’s bed table.

“Take these if those cramps become too much...” *No wonder she’s been so moody lately...*

Just when Serenity thought it couldn’t get any worse, a caterwaul sounded down the hallway, in her parents’ room. *Oh no...She groaned and threw a pillow over her head. Not now, Alcor...not now...That baby just HAS to start cryin when I want some peace and quiet...An with MY luck...he’ll grow up to have no problem with HIS speed...She groaned, and squeezed the pillow hard over her head, trying to muffle out the sounds of her one-year-old baby brother’s howling.*

“It is time, your Majesty...”

“Hmm...yes...I know...”

“You’re mind is troubled?” It was stated like a question, but Prophecy’s green-gold eyes bespoke a deeper understanding of the queen’s pensiveness than a normal Mobian might sense.

“You KNOW she’s not going to like it...” Sally said quietly, sighing as she stared at Serenity’s closed bedroom door.

“But you said it yourself...It is the custom...”

“True...But she’s never liked official royal parties...and from her reaction a few hours ago...” Sally trailed off.

Prophecy raised a knowing eyebrow but said nothing

“However...We can’t just call off the Gateway Ceremony because she doesn’t feel like it...” All the guests HAD already been invited...The ground squirrel exchanged glances with the Mystic Serval and proceeded to her daughter’s door. Knocking on the rustic-looking wood the door was made from, she took a deep breath, waiting for the customary answering yowl of annoyance. “Serenity...”

At first there was nothing. After a second knock, Sally heard a groan from within.

“Go ‘way...” Reni grumbled miserably. “I ain’t in the mood to see anyone right now...”

“Reni...”

No response.

“Reni...Honey...It’s your mother...Mind if I come in?”

No response.

“Ok, I’m coming in anyway...I’d like to talk to you about something...”

A groan. Then silence. Then shifting noises were heard from within. “...Whatever.” Reni finally said as her mother entered. “Whadoya want, Mom? Can’t you just leave me alone with my misery?” Serenity was curled up, her knees protecting her belly, her face scrunched up in pain and annoyance.

“Reni...Sweetie...I know how you feel...I went through the same thing...But...” Sally sat on the bed beside her groaning daughter. “Now that it has happened...Well...” The squirrel honestly didn’t know how to break the news to her rather irritated daughter. She didn’t know how Serenity would take it. “It is customary...when a girl gets her first Blessing...”

“Blessing?!” Serenity snorted sarcastically. “This is NO blessing, mother...It’s more like a CURSE!”

“Well...I can’t really argue with you on that...but...It doesn’t change the fact...”

“What?! Would you just get to the point already? I’m waiiiiiiiiting!” The purple hedgehog was trying unsuccessfully to combat her annoyance by using one of the many sayings she’d picked up from her father.

“Reni...There’s going to be a...little get-together tomorrow night to celebrate your coming of age...”

“A...party...to celebrate *THIS*?!” Serenity winced.

“That’s right.”

“But...I don’t feel like it.” The purple hedgehog groaned again and rolled over, facing away from her mother, her quills grabbing the bedcover and pulling it over her. Irritably, she ripped the blanket off, leaving some quills in it. She winced again slightly.

“Plumcake, I’m afraid you don’t have a choice. It’s tradition.”

“I ain’t goin’.” Serenity said stubbornly, but her voice didn’t hold much force. “Jus’ leave me alone.”

“I’ll leave, but you still have to go.” Sally said kindly but just as stubbornly.

Reni’s only retort was a pained groan.

There was a knock on Reni's door that evening. "What?" she said, growling slightly.

"Aren't you coming down to dinner?" Her mother called through the doorway. "We got your favorite, pizza."

"I'm not hungry. Jus' leave me alone."

Sally was surprised by this. Usually, if someone even whispered the word 'pizza,' Serenity would come running, even from halfway across the village. "You sure, sweetie?"

"Yeah. Just leave me be..."

The squirrel turned away from the door heading back down the hallway. She called over her shoulder, "If you change your mind, it'll still be there waiting for you, though it may be cold."

"Uh-huh...whatever..."

Later that evening, the sound of shuffling could be heard in the hallway. Serenity stumbled into view, looking drawn out and pained. She looked furtively toward the kitchen.

Sally smiled. "I knew you'd change your mind. Your dinner is in the coldbox. You'll have to warm it up. We thought you'd be down sooner, but you weren't, so we had to put it away so Muttski wouldn't get it. It would do his circuits no good, but he still thinks like a normal dog, you know."

Reni nodded distractedly, gave the robotic dog a few pats on the head and wandered into the kitchen, trying hard not to clutch at her stomach as she got the pizza out and threw a slice in her mouth without warming it up. The robodog followed her, wagging his metallic tail and looking at her expectantly.

"Sorry, Muttz...not for you." She said, putting the rest of the pizza away and patting the dog on his chrome head before plodding back up the rustic steps to her room on the stump-house's second floor. The roboticized dog followed her and lay down protectively at the foot of her canopied bed as she resumed her fetal position on it.

"Come on, Reni. Don't be difficult...." Sally cajoled from outside the closed door of her daughter's room. "We're waiting."

"Hey! That's MY (and, of coarse, Daddy's) line!"

The ground squirrel's lip twitched slightly. "Even so...It can't be *that* bad, now can it?"

There was a snort from within. "YES it can...I look so STUPID!"

"I'm sure you look fine, dear...just come out, please?"

"NO! I said a long time ago I'd never be caught dead in a dress and I MEANT it....This

thing CHAFES, man...!”

“Serenity...”

“NO! I’m NOT commin out wearin this big ol’ thing, an’ that’s that! Why I even have to go to this party is beyond me! Why can’t I just suffer this two-week torture session in peace?”

“But...its tradition...”

“Aww...fergit tradition! I’m NOT goin!”

“Serenity Alicia Acorn Hedgehog...if you don’t open this door now, I will be forced to deprive you of the pizza at the party, and then for any after that for a WEEK!”

There was silence for several minutes inside the room after this threat. Then a heavy sigh was heard from within, and the door began to open slowly. “Fine...you win...I’ll go. But I’m tellin you right now, I WON’T enjoy it. And WHY do I have to wear such a frilly monstrosity, anyway? And DON’T say its tradition... Did you say there was going to be pizza?” Serenity emerged from the room, wearing a large frilly yellow dress and with her quills tied up in many lemon-colored ribbons. Her face was almost fuchsia with embarrassment, and her eyes glittered with a pent up rage that she was finding difficult to suppress. Her ears pinned back against her head, the purple hedgehog grumbled, “Don’t just stand there laughin at me...let’s just get this Gateway-Ball-whatever-the-heck-it-is over with so I can get OUT of this thing! I swear I’m DYIN in it!” She waved a hand in front of her face, panting exaggeratedly.

Trying to hide their smiles, Sally and Prophecy guided Reni down the stairs. The purple hedgehog cursed under her breath each time she tripped over the dainty, high-heeled shoes she was forced to wear for the occasion. Despite the ample dress, Serenity felt naked without her normal white-and-yellow shoes. But...they WERE getting fairly worn out...again...and wouldn’t really work well with what she was wearing. “Dang lousy...high...heels...gonna make me lose what speed I had when I sprain my ankles by wearin em...” She muttered as she was escorted to a palanquin. She groaned when she saw it. *Oh GREAT...it just keeps gettin better, don’t it?* “Look, it’s not like I’m getting MARRIED or anything, can’t I just run there?” *Yeah...RIGHT...in THESE shoes? You gotta be kidding!*

“Oh Reni...it’s just for one night. Can’t you humor me on this, please?” Her mother asked, brushing back Reni’s errant forelock, which, despite all attempts to tame it, refused to stay in her hair – er, quill – do.

Reni just sighed and plopped herself down in the chair. *I could get there MUCH faster on my own...not that I’d want to...*

“Your father’s already there to escort you into the palace...”

“Heh, what else is new?” Serenity quipped, trying unsuccessfully to lighten her mood. *He’ll probably laugh at my do...and I wouldn’t blame ‘im...I look SOOOOO STUPID!*

But, of course, he didn’t. He just put a hand on her shoulder and said gently, “How’s my little Whirlwind? You look beautiful.”

“Way past annoyed.” And then her blush deepened. “No I don’t. I look majorly DUMB!

I hate dresses! And I hate bein a princess even MORE!” She gave an exasperated sigh. “Oh Daddy, can’t you get me out of this party thing? I wanna go home an’ change back into NORMAL clothes!

“Heh. I hear ya there. They made me wear my wedding tux for this...Knew I shoulda got rid of that thing. Don’ worry, Ren, You’ll do fine!” Sonic winked at his annoyed and embarrassed daughter.

“Yeah right. I can’t even sneak out later to take a run...they made me leave my shoes at home! At least YOU still get to WEAR yours... What’s this thing supposed to be about, anyway? It can’t just be a celebration of...” She trailed off, embarrassed about talking about that particular subject with her father. “...girl stuff.” She finished awkwardly.

“Uhhh...You’ll have to ask your mother about that.”

“I DID. All she said was, ‘You’ll find out.’ and gave me this cryptic little annoying smile!”

By that time they had reached the palace ballroom. Fanfare was played as the royal father and daughter entered and made their way down through the isle formed by guests that had parted to let them through, bowing, as the Royal Herald announced their arrival.

Good grief...They really went all out with this, didn’t they?...Just my luck...Serenity thought darkly to herself. Please, oh please, Great Mother Mobius don’t let my friends be here to see me in this THING!

As she made her way into the expansive ballroom and toward the elaborately decorated throne that sat beside her parents’, she could see that her wish had indeed gone unheeded. There were the twins, flying enthusiastically toward her, with Snowdrift the albino skunk not far behind. Serenity groaned softly. *Kill me now.* She sank into the specially-draped throne, ears drooping in mortification. She slouched far down in the immense chair unhappily. *Can it GET any worse...No wait...I should know by now never to say that...* She was beginning to think that all the bad luck on the planet had an unnatural attraction to her. *Please let this be over soon...*

“Serenity, sit up. Think of the public image you’re giving to your future subjects!”

The purple hedgehog rolled her eyes. *When did Mom get here?...I didn’t even notice when she came in! Grumbling, she complied, hiding her face unconsciously with her hand. It’s been what...two HOURS? And STILL nothin’s goin on! Other than the fact that they keep letting people in...GEEZ...did they invite the entire population of Mobius to this shindig?! She fidgeted. Something happen...SOON! PUH-leese...!*

He mother then prompted her to stand as a young hedgehog bowed before her, and she was expected to curtsy in return. He was introduced to her as the crown prince of the small kingdom of Mercia. “Pleased to meet thy acquaintance, yon beautiful miss!” He said eloquently in the type of archaic Mobian Standard that was customary to Mercia, kissing Reni’s hand before bowing and stepping back into the crowd. Reni rolled her eyes irritably at his formalities.

As the youngster retreated into the crowd, he was heard nervously asking his father, a teal-colored hedgehog wearing a brown hood over his quills, “Father...Dids’t I say sommat wrongth? She did’s’t not look too pleased with me.”

“Nay.” Rob O’ replied. “Thou did’s’t nothing wrong, my son. Yon splendid princess must have sommat else on her noble young mind. Mind it not, youngling.”

Reni overheard some of the peculiarly worded conversation and mentally chided herself. It wasn’t the kid’s fault he had that accent, after all. It was just this...this DRESS! It was driving her mad. And she had never had much tact in official occasions like this.

As the night wore on and more youths – some nobility, some royalty from obscure little kingdoms outside the Acorn Kingdom, and some just from normal families – appeared to greet her, Serenity began to get a little annoyed...and suspicious. After what seemed like the two-thousand-and-fifty-third young male mobian was introduced, she turned on her mother, ears pinned back, and quietly exploded. “You...What are you trying to do? Marry me off?!” She hissed.

“Reni...”

“NO! Answer me! Is this just some way of ensuring that the monarchy continues?! I’m not ready for that! You hear me?! If I was ready for love I would have somebody in mind already!”

“Oh, Reni...that’s not what this is all about...it’s just...everyone wants to meet you! And this was the best opportunity for that...But...I assure you, honey, there’s more to this event than that...We’re just waiting for the priest to get here.”

“P-priest?!” Serenity squeaked. “What do I need one of them for?! For cryin out loud, this ain’t a marriage!”

“Ah...but you have been extraordinarily blessed by the Mother, young’un...we need the proper authority...” Prophecy cut in, resting a wrinkled but surprisingly strong hand on the nervous young hedgehog’s shoulder.

“B-but...YOU’RE here, Aunt Prophecy, isn’t that enough? I want to get this OVER with...whatever it is! You guys still won’t tell me what EXACTLY’S goin on here!”

Prophecy just smiled cryptically, “You will find out soon.” and said no more on the subject. Serenity sent a searching glare toward each of her parents, but they just smiled and said nothing.

“Arrrrraaggghhh!”

The ancient priest finally arrived, leaning heavily on a walker and going even slower than he had at Serenity’s parents’ wedding. The purple hedgehog heard her father remark softly,

“Huh. That old fella’s still around, eh?” genuine surprise in his voice. To her, he winked. “Good luck keeping patience with ‘im, Ren...he’s like molasses.”

Serenity groaned. “Great.”

Sonic’s lip twitched. “Heh. Know what ya mean.”

Prophecy stood up, motioning to Serenity to follow her, handing her a paper bag in the process. The purple hedgehog could feel something inside it, but Prophecy told her not to get curious about it, and that all would become clear in time.

The two of them followed the old black-and-white colored buck out the ballroom door and back to the palanquin. Serenity looked over her shoulder to see if her parents were coming too. They weren’t. She wished they were. She wished her friends were here...or anybody other than the two elders she was reluctantly following. She must have expressed her wishes...or Prophecy had read her mind...for the mystic wildcat gave her another of her infuriatingly cryptic smiles and said, “No, they are not here. This is something that you need experience on your own.”

Reni grumbled. “Do you ever NOT speak in riddles?”

Prophecy’s mouth simply twitched. “Prophecies work in mysterious ways, you know.”

Serenity rolled her eyes. “What’s THAT supposed to mean?”

“You will see.”

“Arrraaghh! Would you quit saying that?!”

Prophecy motioned for silence as they entered the temple. Serenity gave a start. *The TEMPLE?! Why are we HERE?!* She didn’t even bother speaking that thought out loud, knowing what Prophecy was likely to say.

The priest, now behind the alter, motioned Serenity forward, taking the bag from her hand and placing it in the depression in the middle of the stone. He nodded to Prophecy.

“Your Highness, please undress for the ceremonial bath.”

“**WHAT?!!**” Serenity exclaimed, mouth open, aghast.

Unperturbed, Prophecy guided her in the direction of a waiting basin.

“What...but...you have to be *KIDDING!*”

“I’ve bathed you many times before when you were young, it shouldn’t be that big a deal.” Prophecy said serenely.

Serenity sputtered, balking. “But...the priest...he...” She looked behind her. The deer was nowhere to be seen. Sighing, Reni capitulated, glad to be rid of the dress, but dreading putting it on again. As she stepped into the bath, she involuntarily drew in a breath. “This water is **COLD!!**”

Prophecy went about her business, bathing the complaining purple hedgehog. “It’s supposed to be.” she said mysteriously.

“But...WHY?”

“Tradition.”

Reni mumbled something about how dumb tradition was, but remained silent throughout the rest of the bath, pouting somewhat and shivering.

What seemed like an hour later, she emerged, dripping and miserable, her fur hanging loose and wet about her and making her look somewhat like a short-tailed spiky rat. She gave herself one disgusted look in the mirror and then proceeded to shake herself free of the water, spraying Prophecy in the process. The serval winced, like all cats, she was not happy about the water; however, she had grown accustomed to it from caring for Reni throughout her young life. Therefore, she said nothing, handing the purple hedgehog a towel.

Reni took one glance at the towel and shook her head. “You know how hard it is to get those things off of quills? I’ll cope with wet fur, thank you.” That said, she shook herself again and reluctantly allowed herself to be dressed in, not the dress as she’d expected, but a ceremonial robe she jokingly referred to as a “ceremonial *bathrobe*.”

Prophecy then led the still-dripping Serenity back to the alter stone. The purple hedgehog was fighting the urge to shake the water off again, at the same time clutching at the opening of the robe, paranoia making her make sure it was closed sufficiently as the priest waddled and shuffled back to the alter, still in his walker.

“Hurry up, bub, and get this ceremony done with...I want to get home before tomorrow...” She muttered under her breath, paying no attention to Prophecy elbowing her for quiet.

For all the preparations, and despite all the ritual oils and lotions the Mystic Serval had rubbed on her – which only served to make Serenity sneeze and feel uncomfortably greasy – the ceremony itself was deceptively short. The ancient hart priest mumbled several strange words and suddenly Prophecy was imbued with the same spirit of the planet that had taken her at the moment before Reni’s birth. The plum-colored hedgehog had heard the peculiar riddle that Prophecy had foretold at her birth before, but not like *this*! This time it was from the Mystic Serval’s own mouth again, and Serenity got the full effect of the wildcat’s prophetic ways.

As Prophecy returned to normal, Serenity stared bemusedly at the beloved rainbow-colored birthmark on her upper left arm with renewed awe toward it. *Is that true? Am I REALLY the Promised One? But...What can I DO? There’s no more threat to the planet and us...Robotnik is dead...right?* Suddenly, she was starting to doubt even that truth though. *‘In the wake of loss most tragic...’* What the heck was THAT supposed to mean?

*Though enemies may destroy
That which you value most...*

Those two lines had her worried as well.

“Come, Promised One...” Serenity was forced back to the present as Prophecy tapped her on the elbow, indicating she should step forward. Gulping, she did so. The ancient ungulate behind the alter abruptly plucked a quill from her head.

“What the...?! OWW!” She exclaimed. “What’dya do that for?!” she said, rubbing her head where the quill had previously been.

“Highness...Shhh...We know what we’re doing...” he whispered to her, unperturbed by her outburst. The old deer reverently placed the quill on top of the bag, which had been doused in something that smelled like...Instinctively she stepped back. The priest lit a match – also reverently – and dropped it just as reverently. At the same time, all three of them leapt backwards.

The three mobians instinctively shielded their eyes from the abrupt heat and light generated from the spontaneously ignited bundle on the alter. As she gazed into the rapidly-dying flames, Serenity thought she saw...no, it couldn’t be...she didn’t really believe in visions and omens...but still...

The scene her eyes made her think she saw in the flames was reminiscent of the stories she’d heard as a child of the days of the beginning of the war. But...instead of seeing a five-year-old version of her father fleeing the ravages of a burning city...she saw herself...

“Highness?” The priest said kindly, tapping the purple hedgehog on the shoulder.

“Huhwhat?” Serenity shook her head, coming back to the present.

“The ceremony is almost over, my dear...”

She looked up bemusedly. “Wha?” She said oh-so-eloquently.

Prophecy tried to hide the cryptic smile on her face. “You were staring into the ash from the offering for five minutes. See anything of consequence?”

“What? Huh...uh...no?” She had not intended it to sound so much like a question.

Prophecy’s lip twitched. “Mm-hmm...” But she said nothing more.

Serenity turned her gaze back to the waiting priest. “Ok...so...what else is there to this? I’m wai-” She was interrupted from the familiar phrase by Prophecy’s hushing.

The priest reached down into the remnants of the offering and came up with ash on his fingers. He reached out a shaking hand and smeared the soot across Serenity’s forehead. “May the Mother guide you–”

“– In the coming days of strife and heartache...” Prophecy finished cryptically.

Serenity recoiled slightly. “What?!” She looked at the wildcat strangely. She brought her hand up to her forehead and stared at the ash that came away on her fingers as if it was the strangest thing she had ever seen. She glanced at Prophecy out of the corner of her eye. “What ‘ZACTLY did you mean by that?”

Instead of an answer, the serval said, "You will need to be strong. Being the Promised One has its curses as well as blessings."

Serenity cocked her head, staring at the wildcat oddly. "...Whatever," she said after several minutes. "Are we done yet?"

The serval nodded. "We may return to the party now. If you will follow me to the dressing room so that we can get you back in your finery..."

Reni rolled her eyes. "Great...can hardly wait. Ok, fine...I don't know what yer hiding from me, but I get the feeling I don't wanna know...What was in that bag, by the way?"

Prophecy didn't turn around. "That which you would have thrown away. It was far too soiled for you to have worn again."

Reni had to think about that one for a while, and when she finally figured it out, she wished she hadn't. "You...burned my bloodied undies?" She made a face. "Oh that is just...Y'know what...never mind...I should'na asked..."

Back at the Gateway Ball, Serenity sighed heavily and plopped back down into the throne appointed to her, again in the 'way past annoying' dress. She gazed out mournfully at the unending line of youths still waiting to meet her and groaned, curling up slightly. Her abdomen was cramping again. *This is gonna be a LOOOOONG night...* She thought miserably. *I thought Mom said something about there being pizza here...I haven't even SEEN a buffet table in this place...* Just then, Alcor started crying again. Reni grumbled irritably, dropping her head to her knees in exasperation. *That brother of mine...He just HAS to start crying when I'm most uncomfortable...Couldn't Mom have left him with a babysitter?* As if to make the situation worse, the baby started clambering from his mother's lap into hers. Reni made a face, which prompted a giggle from her irrepressible baby brother. Serenity sighed, grumbling as he started climbing on her spines to sit on her head, jabbing her a couple times with his own semi-hard quills. "Oww! Hey, watch it, Alckie..." She muttered, annoyed.

The child was mostly hedgehog, like Serenity and their father, though he had some hybrid aspects reminiscent of his mother. His spines were a dark indigo, darker than Sonic's, with just a hint of purple that was only visible in the sunlight. Alcor's belly was fuzzier than his father or sister's, and he had a short, squirrel-like tail similar to Sally's. He had little auburn bangs that fell to either side of his face, framing it, but not falling in his eyes like Reni's forelock did. His ears still had some of the newborn-droopiness to them, though the right ear drooped more than the left. In the center of his forehead was a white birthmark, shaped vaguely like a five-pointed star, which explained his name, as the star Alcor was a prominent one in the Mobian night sky.

Serenity grumbled irritably. Her brother gurgled and shifted, settling into her quills. "Wen-Wen!" he said, gleefully drooling on her face. Reni mumbled something unintelligible, impatiently wiping the drool off her face, along with some of the ash and oil from the ceremony.

Abruptly, she scrunched her eyes shut, yelping out an involuntary, "Owww!" Alcor was chewing and pulling happily at her ear, his sharp little baby teeth painfully pinching the tender

skin on her ear. “Al-cor...” she whined, plucking the child off of her head, wincing as she gently made him release her ear. It flicked several times of its own accord, the pain slowly subsiding. Making a face, she held the baby out away from her.

“Wen-Wen...” The hoglet strained his hands toward her, lip trembling,

She refused to be swayed by manipulation. The purple hedgehog deposited her brother in his mother’s lap, and stepped carefully back, wincing, expecting a yowl. She sighed in relief when none came. The baby had settled contentedly back into his mother’s arms, gurgling. Serenity turned and snuck back to her seat, rubbing at her sore ear. *Great...The entire planet gets to see me humiliated by my irritating little brother...Not to mention his breath...* She made another face. *I bet he found another dead toad or something...He just HAS to go and chew on every dead amphibian he can find...And then on my EAR! I hope I didn’t get dead toad juice in my ear...* She shook her head briefly as if to dislodge anything that had gotten inside her ear. *Honestly...If I have to—*

She didn’t finish her thought, as a familiar smell entered her nostrils, driving away all thoughts of anything else. Her ears shot straight up, her nose quivering in anticipation. She hadn’t SEEN the buffet table yet...That didn’t mean it wasn’t there. The pizza had just been delivered. Reni let her nose lead her right to it. She had to employ a good deal of self-control to keep her from pouncing on it, thus embarrassing her further. Instead, she took a decent-sized plate of pizza slices back to her seat, all the while eyeing what she had left on the table. It was disappearing distressingly quickly.

Of course, it WAS there for everybody else, too. Not just her. She tried to relax and enjoy what she’d gotten. Besides, everyone knew her obsession for pizza...enough had probably been ordered for everyone that wanted it as well as providing for her insatiable appetite. *Sheesh...this shindig must have cost a flippin’ HEAP o’ Mobiums...*

“Go on!” One of his companions nudged him.

“What?! Are you crazy? I can’t do that!”

“Why not?” another asked, “We saw the way you were lookin at ‘er...Go talk to ‘er!”

“Well...B-but I couldn’t possibly...” The youth stammered, his maroon face turning even darker red than usual with embarrassment, “...Was it really that obvious?” He asked his grinning companions. They nodded. “Aww...Geez...” His blush deepened, his spines crackling with uneasy static. “Look...I-I-I...I just can’t...She’d never even notice me...I mean, c’mon, she’s the princess! What am I to her? Just a delivery boy wit’ no home...” He looked down at his boots.

“C’mon, Surge, she looks bored.”

“Oh, so now I’m supposed to be some kind of amusement? That’s REAL nice guys...”

“C’mon...She’s not gonna bite...”

“That’s what you think...She looks annoyed...”

“So?”

“B-but...I gotta get back to work! We ALL do! What’ll the boss think if...”

“Oh come on, don’t be such a scaredy-hog! Boss gave us some time off to enjoy ourselves at the party...Go on, Surgie...Say hi to the princess for us!”

“But...I just deliver the pizza...I don’t have the right to talk to – Hey, don’t call me Surgie!” The dark-red hedgehog said, reproaching the guilty party that used the undesirable nickname with a mild electrical shock. He balked as his work buddies pushed him closer to where Serenity slouched in her throne, looking pained, bored, and miserable. Soon, to his consternation, he stood right in front of her.

Serenity seemed to look right through him at nothing at all, irritably tapping her foot. She was bored out of her mind. She sighed, thinking, *Yet another guy that wants to meet me...When will this party END?!*

Surge looked around. To his horror, his work buddies were nowhere to be seen. Gulping, he tried to speak. “H-hello...Highness...” He managed to squeak out. *Sweet Mother Mobius, yer beautiful...!* The thought had ambushed him before he could stop it. His blush deepened even more.

Serenity shifted, appearing to notice him for the first time. “What? Oh...Yeah...Hi yerself...” She said without much emotion. Her eyes were starting to droop...Was this the party that never ended? Sonic nudged her playfully, and she glared at him. Turning back to the nervous youth before her, she said, “So what’s your name then?” She had not meant to sound so snapish, she thought to herself reproachfully. She watched tiredly as he hurriedly backed away from the throne, muttering apologies that he didn’t really need to make. She wanted to make amends, but...she was SO tired...Her eyes drooped closed...

Later, as the party-goers started to disperse, Serenity was gently woken by her parents. The three of them, with Alcor asleep in his mother’s arms, sat there for a while, watching as the last of the revelers left. Serenity had to keep being shaken awake, though she said nothing other than, “Daddy, What was that nudge for when I was talking to that kid back there?”

He winked at her. “I think he liked you, Ren.”

“Wha?” This took her a little while to comprehend because of her fatigue. She blinked a couple times, then promptly dropped the subject as she started to drop her head to her chest again.

Several minutes later, her parents gently roused her again as they helped her to her feet. She stumbled out the palace door after them, blinking furiously in the post-dawn light. *Great...an all-nighter...* She thought hazily, stumbling back into the palanquin. She was asleep again before they arrived home.

Deep within the Great Forest, in the hut of an old spotted skunk, there was celebration as well, though of a more subdued sort. While his granddaughter was celebrating her friend's Gateway to Adulthood in the city, the old healer had had a breakthrough. Or rather, his two comatose patients had. That very night, the two overlanders had opened their eyes for the first time in 28 years.

The ancient mottled black-and-white skunk's heart soared to see his patients sitting up in their bunks, eating the warm mash he had made for them. Twenty-eight long years had finally paid off! It was definitely a credit to his healing prowess.

It was true that there was something...unsettling...about them...They sat in their beds, not saying anything, almost...*broodingly*...or so it seemed to him. Indeed the large man's eyes WERE unsettling...red pupils in iris-less eyes whose eye-whites were not white but black...But he assumed it was some birth defect, and therefore unrepairable. He tried not to worry about it. After all, he HAD scolded his grandchild for judging by looks alone. He should not be such a hypocrite. He thought no more about the man's eyes as he tried to strike up a conversation with them, "So...How are you two feeling?"

"Fine." The big man mumbled, almost sharply.

"And you?" The skunk turned to the smaller man.

The short overlander just stared snootily down the length of his enormous nose at the healer-skunk, saying nothing. This short one kept glancing nervously at his large companion when he thought neither he nor the skunk was looking.

"So...what are your names?" the skunk pressed. Neither human said a word. Finally, Snowdrift's grandfather took this as a hint to leave his patients alone for a while. It could be normal. They might just be confused and frightened about waking up in a strange place with someone that did not look like them...overlanders were not known for tolerance for other sentient beings...

But there he went thinking prejudicially again! He must not succumb to hypocrisy. He decided to let the matter drop. Besides he had work to do. Where was that granddaughter of his? Surely the party was not supposed to last THIS long, was it? He stepped outside, watching as the forest grew gradually lighter as the sun rose on a new day, waiting for his protégé to return. He had things to teach her about the healing arts...

I nside the healer's hut, the large form of the reawakened Robot Master shook slightly with rage. How had he managed to let the Rodent defeat him? How many years had he spent locked in the prison of this comatose body? What had changed? He was confused, and that confusion irritated him almost as much as the Rodent. One thing was for sure, the world had NOT turned out the way he had planned for it to. Here he sat, in a body far weaker than it had been, with his aggravating nephew quivering in the other bed, in this crude hut, in the middle of this, this...*FOREST!* He shuddered, revolted by all the greenery.

He could be sure that all the furry creatures he had tried to enslave or exterminate were pretty much running the planet by now...All his pollution...all his robots...gone...wasted...Just because the Rodent had had the audacity to ruin his glorious Doomsday machine and send it shuddering and tumbling down on top of him and his good-for-nothing nephew. He glared at the small man, who cringed away. As satisfying as that fearful response was, it was also irritating. Why couldn't Snively do anything RIGHT? Like get them out of the way of the Doomsday machine before it crashed down on them? If it hadn't been for his metallically-enhanced bones and body – and his cushioning bulk – they might both have been killed.

Robotnik glanced at himself in the mirror. He frowned. He'd lost too much weight. He looked downright scrawny. How could he strike fear into the hearts of his enemies with this bony body? Sure, others probably still saw him as fat, but there was far less of it there than before. He took grotesque pride in his corpulence. And it was all gone! Because of that Rodent...and, of course, Snively's incompetence.

But...his bulk could be re-obtained, of course. His mustache on the other hand...It was GRAY! He couldn't have *that*. Oh-ho no...He could definitely not have that. He stood up and waddled – distressingly comically for his tastes – over to a dresser, searching for hair coloring. There was none. It figured. He'd have to get some soon.

The large man rounded on his smaller lackey when he heard him snickering, backhanding the slight form across the room, which thankfully had no other occupants. He wouldn't have done such a thing were there Mobians there, for fear of being discovered too early. However, to his satisfaction, the room was empty save the two of them, so their secret was safe for now...until he could regain his lost power. And he WOULD regain his power...somehow. The matter had to be thought about for a while though first. Hastiness was part of why they were in the predicament they were in right now. Had he waited and watched for some sort of weakness on the part of the Freedom Fighters...he might have been ruling the planet by now. But instead, he had gone with his at-the-time wonderful Doomsday device. Had he thought it through a bit more before rushing into it, he might have had his empire. But the Freedom Fighters were being too bold at the time. He'd wanted to stop them with one blow. In the end, it had backfired. Horribly.

He would not make that mistake again. For now he would tolerate the trees and huts and cheerful birdsong...till he had a foolproof plan to retake the world...and it would come to him...in time. He also decided to tolerate the gray hairs in his mustache...for now. It would help disguise him until he could make his escape.

For the time being he contented himself by beating on his hapless nephew, who had been snickering at the gray mustache. He grabbed the smaller man by the nape of his hospital gown, lifting him off the floor. It pleased Robotnik that he could still at least accomplish *that*. Snively made his usual stammering pleas for forgiveness as he squirmed in the large man's grasp.

Robotnik hissed at him. "This must never get out, you hear? Don't let any of our enemies know it's me! And don't go spreading rumors about my mustache! You hear me?! It's still red, got it?!"

Gulping, the smaller man squeaked out a stuttered acknowledgement. Robotnik put him down and returned to his bed to act the part of the convalescent.