

Chapter 13: Condemned

“**Y**our Majesty, please calm down.” Prophecy placed a graying-furred hand on the distraught ground squirrel’s shoulder.

“But...my baby girl is out there...in trouble...I should be helping look for her!” Sally moved to the window, gazing out at the Knothole night, her thoughts troubled. Of course, she knew intrinsically that she had to stay behind...for the welfare of her unborn child. But the waiting and uncertainty didn’t make it easy.

“Be at peace, Your Majesty. The Promised One must fight her own battles. There are many roadblocks on the path of life. This is but the first for her. A test, if you will.”

“But...Prophecy...She’s never had to fight Robotnik...She grew up in a time of peace... She’s never had to fight for freedom...How can she possibly know what to do?...I’m going to lose my baby to the robotisizer!” Sally wrung her hands in worry.

“Have faith in the Mother...She knew what She was doing when She chose Her Promised One...”

“...Okay...” The ground squirrel didn’t sound convinced. Sighing, she continued to stare out the window, silently willing the other Freedom Fighters to successfully rescue her firstborn. *Serenity, please...PLEASE...be safe...*

Like a caged wild thing, Serenity paced the length of the cell, fighting the panic that threatened to consume her. The walls were closing in on her, the atmosphere got thicker by the moment. She fought to control her shaking and hyperventilating; her face was hot and tingly. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She was a free spirit...and free spirits do not do well in cages.

Get a grip. Daddy would have never panicked like this. The purple hedgehog forced her breathing to slow, swallowing several times as her rational mind tried to take control of the situation. Slowly her emotions came under tenuous control again.

Reni paused in her pacing, looking up at the tiny slice of night visible through the barred slit-window – which was too narrow to spindash and escape through - near the top of the cell. No stars were visible through the constant smog shrouding the city, but she kept reminding herself that they were still there...as a means of holding onto what little hope remained. Though the panic had subsided somewhat, the tears had not stopped, although she still attempted to control them. The only light in the cell came from the blue-white glowing bars and the grate. Chains jangling, she climbed onto the concrete slab that served as a bed, straining to see more out the tiny window. The majority of her cell was below ground level; her eyes came to just above the level of the grimy street. It had started raining, which meant that the filth in the street had mixed with the runoff, and was draining into the cell and onto her where she pressed herself up against the bars. She didn’t seem to notice, however, continuing to stare out into the street. There was a small sill under the window-slit, and she rested her chin and arms on it, sighing heavily.

Some Promised One I turned out to be. I watched helplessly as you were maimed, Daddy...unable to do anything...and now...now I sit here in this dreary cell, awaiting the inevitable. I tried spinning...but these chains just WON'T break...I tried dashing the bars, but all they did was burn me. I doubt anybody even knows where I am... Her tears splashed into the grimy runoff water. *Every minute that goes by takes me closer to the robotisizer...Oh Daddy...what am I gonna do?* She sunk down onto the slab, tears flowing afresh. After several minutes, she got back up and resumed her pacing at the end of her clanking leash.

Serenity had crawled under the concrete slab bed and wedged herself there when her tears threatened to put her to sleep. Hours later, she awoke to the sound of approaching SWATbots. Bracing herself for the inevitable, she resolved to make it as hard for them to retrieve her as possible. She curled up tighter, flaring out her quills to lock her into the crevice. The purple hedgehog princess heard them deactivate the bars when they entered, but she remained tightly curled as they tugged at her. She had forgotten, however, that they were robots...and robots are not deterred by spines. Robots are also persistent, and they pulled at her until her cramping muscles forced her to relax, and that's when they were able to extract her from her hiding place.

They pried open her curled form, detaching the chains from the wall. They removed enough of the links from the chains on her legs so that she was only able to hobble forward in front of them. Reni grabbed at the wall in desperation, planting her hobble-chained feet firmly and refusing to budge. However, the SWATbots were much stronger than she was, and they were able to pry her off the wall, after which they chained her arms behind her, so that she could not attempt a stunt like that again.

Sighing in defeat, the purple hedgehog relented, hobbling forward with as much dignity as she could muster, although she often fell because of her inability to move her legs more than a shuffle. The SWATbots said nothing, but drove their shock-spears into her back cruelly, dragging her back to her feet. She said nothing in return, determined to take her sentence in proud silence...

Muffled noises could be heard from one of the vents in the holding facility, as the robian hedgehog lead Peace and Antoine toward the cell the princess was allegedly trapped in. He held the computer, Nicole, in front of them. She was currently displaying a holographic schematic map of the vents around the detention building they were now sneaking through, with a marker of their progress, and a marker of their destination. The progress marker slowly closed on the destination marker, and the little group paused above the region of the cell. Antoine, not surprisingly, was quaking in fear. Peace just bit her lip, hoping nothing went wrong with the plan.

"Hmm..." Uncle Chuck scratched his metallic chin, puzzled. "That's odd."

Antoine's shaking increased, as he made little squeaky fear-noises.

Peace gulped. That didn't sound good. "What's wrong?"

Uncle Chuck didn't say anything for a while. Finally he responded. "The cell is empty."

Peace and Antoine both gave a start. "W-what?!"

The robian looked pained. "She's gone. The bars have been deactivated, and there's no heat signature from inside. We... We're too late."

"No..."

"Zhen she iz..."

"Unless the other team was more successful. There's not much we can do but try to meet up with them and hope they were able to do what they set out to do. That's our only hope for Princess Serenity at this point..."

Bunnie, TJ, Dulcy, and Surge hid in the shadows of an alley adjacent to the robotization facility. A look of determination passed between Bunnie, Surge, and TJ, as they prepared to leave cover.

"Good luck, guys!" Dulcy called cheerfully as the group left the alley and ran the short distance to the building, again crouching in the shadows. The dragoness then took to the skies and flew to the skylight on the top of the building to act as backup as the three smaller mobians climbed into a vent on the side of the building...just in time, as a hovercraft drifted past, searchlights sweeping the area they had just been in. The hovercraft was followed shortly thereafter by a cluster of spy-eyes.

The three Freedom Fighters made their way along the vent until they came to the grate directly above the sinister machine. Looking down, they could see that the door in the glass tube was open wide, eager for a new victim. They could also see the tyrant at the controls of the nightmare device. His grin was wide and satisfied; he chuckled ominously to himself as he adjusted the various dials and controls. Bunnie crouched by the grate, flash-bang smoke-bomb held at the ready in her organic hand.

Tails, Jr. tried to concentrate. This was important. His friend's life might depend on it. He squinted at the panel in the vent. He'd read about this sort of thing, and his dad had given him a crash course in it just before they left, but he wasn't as good at it as Tails, Sr., and he hadn't been paying complete attention. He was worried about Reni.

Surge's expression was all determination. He was NOT about to let his girlfriend become a mindless robotic slave. The electricity began to gather in his quills...

Suddenly there was activity at the doorway of the hall, as a familiar purple shape was shoved into the room...

On the roof, Dulcy began to charge her ice-breath.

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