Sonic was in the zone. He gracefully dashed off the quarterdeck with the ship’s helm in pieces behind him, the mizzen mast clunking down as he jumped. He was spoiled for choice as he found himself on the main deck. From below, the last of those robots with tiny swords barreled upstairs with blades drawn. From above, jetpacks with guns were aiming right at him.

Easy enough to manage.

He opened with a slide right into the swordsmen. He swerved and screeched between those skinny-ass legs before they could even tell what was happening. The rattle of bullets clattered all around him as the sword-bots were ripped to shreds, crumpling to the floor as Sonic breached their formation. He’d made it right past the main mast and was right up to the foremast- *perfect.* With the gunners still spraying around him, he *shot* up the mast in a great spiraling tornado.

In a second flat he was already above them, and they were *just* close enough for what was coming next. Sonic flashed a grin before spinning right into the fray, bonking the first bot right on its tiny skull. The burst of fire sent him back up into the air- a chain that let him knock out three more bots before the last thought to use its gun. Joke’s on them- Sonic brough his best toy that day. A flash of blue across his crystal ring and he was rocketing faster than light- faster than a bullet, and the last bot was gone.

It had been a hot minute since he fought pirates! Just a shame they’re not more of a challenge- Whisker really wanted to ape Eggman’s style to a T. He was glad he talked himself into wearing that wetsuit underneath his crimson vest and shorts- the indigo garment kept him way drier now than he was before. Ripping over the water had never been so stress-free.

It was a different pirate gang who were using these guys this time- probably bought them in bulk from some shady old guy in a top hat. The three extra galleons must’ve made these guys think they could take on the Ocean Tornado- it’d be a shame if they absolutely couldn’t!

Confident in having utterly flushed out *this* boat of its cogs, Sonic followed his ears as they intercepted the crackling of large flames. The next closest ship was rapidly succumbing to a hold fire as it blasted its way up the tween deck straight to the masts. Robots flailed about aimlessly this way and that to evade the flames, but even those climbing the masts were blown away as an inferno *roared* up out the ship’s hull. And there she was- Blaze landed atop the main mast. Even as it started to teeter, she stood strong like solid stone. Her marble-white body suit was untouched by the elements, shielded by her great red coat which flowed in the wind. And even as it fell over, she left off with the grace of a butterfly, no doubt dashing for the Wave Cyclone below.

*Damn*, she was good.

He couldn’t see the last boat where he was standing, so his eyes moved over to the real target of the hour. He’d later learn they called it the Setting Dawn- and even from this angle, it was a mistake that was made. Despite it being a sub, it had a crane arm and a pirate flag sticking out the top. Two tiny guns stuck out on opposite ends of the exposed deck, and a periscope was turning about in a panic as it saw Tails zeroing in.

Tails had brought along an old invention of his- the Sea Fox drill-sub. Even for an oldie, Sonic found it badass. You couldn’t find him dead driving it by himself, but Tails was practically a torpedo with a brain driving such a beast. Tails wasn’t wasting any time- he was going right for the enemy sub, drill spinning and all. The pirates were *trying* to make an escape dive, but they were already too late.

The Sea Fox punched into its hull like a metal spork through a soda can. The Fox’s drill sent plates and scraps spilling all over- before he suddenly stopped. It was time to pull out… letting the huge ass hole he dug show to the world. The sub’s cockpit swung open for Tails to stand up, megaphone in hand.

“*Now hear this*!” Was all Sonic could understand before the nearby fire and megaphone’s garble overtook his ears. Tails was talking about how the pirates are screwed and should just give up, no doubt. That was that- which was fine, Sonic could say. He *was* getting rusty just being cooped up on that boat. He just wished there was *more* excitement rather than just-

Tails’ speech suddenly cut short. Sonic eyed a figure erupt out from the water. Beside him. A crimson figure had leapt onto the sea fox- and they had a knife.

Sonic grabbed an errant sword and sailed across the ship’s rails. He was tearing down the hull and then racing over the waves. His legs raged against the turbulent tides, his wake splashing behind him like a trail of dynamite. He could see more jetpacks drift down to aim right at Tails- and himself. He felt the first shot graze his arm- and the sting that followed. He could feel a bit of blood slide down his bicep. He didn’t care. Didn’t care about the second bullet that grazed his chest either- that part of him is plenty scarred already.

He *always* had room for more scars.

Tails, meanwhile, was not in a great place. His *heart* would have told him a single hull breach wouldn’t convince them to surrender, but his head reasoned it would at least have given them *pause*. He couldn’t help but be a *little* freaked out as the knife lingered around his neck! His new friend was pulling at one of the straps of his overalls to boot, staining his shirt with salt water as she did. The shaky, tired breathing of his captor against his face betrayed a *degree* of hesitancy on her part, but one wrong move…!

The captain was fast approaching to boot, and his face communicated *no* distress despite the chaos around him. He was an otter, from what Tails could tell… and he was dressed the part of a pirate. A stereotypical *pirate* pirate- the jacket, the eyepatch and everything. Something told Tails he was in for a soliloquy…

“Hold him *right* there, Blade.” He smirked as he drew his sword. One hard slash of *that* cutlass, and Tails’ head would be rolling across the steel… “You’ve bitten into a *big* apple this time, young man…”

“In my defense, you *did* attack first-!” Tails’ jab was blunted by a vicious jostling by Blade. The scarlet shark’s shiv still slunk around his neck, even closer now… “A-And not to critique your business practices, but I’m sure some actual Eggman ships would’ve lasted longer against open fire…?”

“That’s *enough* of your lip!” The Captain’s sword found itself *distressingly* close to Tails’ eyes. So close that it was getting messed up in his vision. Both pirates were focused purely on vectors for stabbing Tails should he make gross movements. A convenient distraction while his *fine* movements lead his fingers down to his pocket…

“This is *Shellbreaker’s* water, boy. And we don’t give privileges to *snowflakes*.” The Captain’s smirk inched to a mild scowl. “You *think* you’re special just because of your *friend*. *You can think* ***again***.”

“”Snowflake”? Funny choice of words…” Tails’ hand was now nice and snug in his pocket, from which he could now feel the machinery climb up his arm. He could feel the plating assemble itself around his wrist and down his hand. He could feel the barrel lock into place on his palm. “I don’t know if I’m that special, to be honest! If you ask me, I see myself more like *an*-!”

Tails heard a sudden surge of splashes from behind as Sonic raced up to the scene. A flash of blue and a rush of wind, and Shellbreaker was knocked right on the head. The captain staggered back with a scream of dismay, only for Sonic swing around again to tackle him across the deck’s sizeable length.

“…ice… berg.”

Blade had already leapt up in surprise and loosened her grip on Tails- the perfect moment to whip is hand free and shoot her from behind. It was his newest model for the Energy Baller- the last one was too clunky. Being a low-energy plasma pulse, the volleys it shoots can only destroy robots- but that doesn’t stop them from being *sufficiently* painful. Blade was zapped right in the torso and was stunned with a shriek, leaving her wide open for a proper tail swipe right to the head. She collapsed back into the water, and Tails took the chance to run.

He spotted a hatch down the deck opposite to Sonic’s brawl and made a beeline right for it. If he could get inside and fight his way to the bridge, he might be able to shut down the all robots at once-!

Tails was nearly on top of the hatch before it began to creak loose. It suddenly swung backwards and slammed loudly onto the floor. And from the opening spilled out a huge mass of muscle, shell and fuzz. A bearded yeti crab gentleman ascended to the deck with enough speed to shock Tails to his bones. He took the liberty loomed over the frightened fox with a side-tooth. Tails swiftly whipped the Energy Baller forward- only for a clawed hand to slam itself against it. Tails yelled out in pain as his hand was grabbed- The crab’s claw swallowed Tails’ paw as it balled around it, and it felt like his hand was being squeezed under a dropped fridge…

Sonic, meanwhile, was pulling no punches. Eyepatch here was damn good with a sword. *Sonic was better*. He could see them all coming- every swing, every thrust, every bluff. Just a parry, dodge, spin and a thrust, and Shell Boy was already scrambling away. Sonic had him on the ropes and wasn’t going to stop- not until he felt a vicious sting square on his back. Blade hadn’t *just* struck him with her knife, but right across the old crystal wound to boot. He couldn’t take pain like that- he was stumbling back to the floor. He had just long enough while tumbling about to see the jetpacks hovering over him before having to roll away from Blade’s vicious downthrust.

Sonic was *officially* rolling on the floor now. The pirates were striking thee steel in a spearfishing frenzy, and all Sonic could do was keep himself zipping out of the way. These two didn’t realize, however, that he was the guy in control! He didn’t even mind the deep knife scratch into his left calf- it takes more than a single slash to break *his* legs. A single leg sweep was all he needed to send Shellbreak- you know what? That’s too long, his name is Shelby. Sonic’s sweep knocked Shelby right off his feet and forced Blade to jump.

He was clear to get up and run. It was time for these two to see some *real* swordsmanship- or at least it would’ve been if the jetpacks weren’t pointing their guns right at him. Even then, it wasn’t *that* bad. He could just spindash away and… Tails was trapped. He was stuck in the arms of an angry snowman who’s ham hands were on his arms *and* tails. Maybe Sonic could…?

“*Thank you*, Bristles…” Shelby propped himself back up with a snarl, sword in one hand and his head in the other. “Go extra rough on that hairball for me, won’t you? Rip him in half if you need to! *Now*…”

The pirates were zeroing in on Sonic from every angle. The stings from all his cuts were starting to really settle into *pain*, too. His head was starting to get heavy, and his knees were starting to buckle. He didn’t get it- how was he this winded this fast…?

“Must be real *fun* in whatever fantasy world you’re living in, Mr. Hedgehog.” The Captain snarled. His whiskers were bent, his eye bruised, and his teeth barred.

Sonic frowned. “Really like coming in with a loaded gun, huh?” He shook his head. “Dude, you should’ve known this would happen. I’m the guy who’s blown up bigger things with less. Maybe think next time before you pick fights with the guy who can outrun the-!”

“You know where *we* were during the Metal Virus, right?”

Sonic’s voice froze. His heartbeat changed its note.

“How we *deluded* ourselves into thinking our ship was safe from it all? And then it turned out they could just *walk* underwater, and we didn’t even know until they had already ripped through the ship’s floor? We had to hope against hope that we’d die drowning before we died to them! You remember that, right?”

Sonic was stiff from the neck down. His eyes were staring forward at attention. His feet practically dug themselves into the floor.

His breath was sharp.

Shellbreaker shook *his* head. “Of coursenot. That would mean giving a shit about real people.”

Sonic blinked. “…I… don’t …you *seriously* think-?”

“You get to run around all day pretending to be a hero, beating up robots and stopping the bad guys, *and* you get to hang out with the rest of the elite when the show’s all over~!” The Captain let out a fake laugh to the heavens. It didn’t last long before he fell back to a furrowed brow and a sword to Sonic’s face. “It’s high time someone burst your bubble, *hedgehog*. I know you’re a fraud! The whole *world* knows you’re a fraud- you just get the privilege to ignore it!”

“Captain.” Blade suddenly spoke. Her voice was ragged, and her tone audibly annoyed. “We gotta pull out, *now*. That hole’s not going to patch itself.”

“Not before we shiv this asshat!”

Sonic found the Shellbreaker’s sword slowly crawl down from in front of his face to in front of his throat. Sonic could hear Tails begin to panic and shout… though he’d be lying if he said he could make out the words. “Run”, maybe?

“We’re putting you in your place, Sonic.” The Captain spat. “Any last words?”

Sonic gulped.

“…it’s not too late for you to change-?”

Fire exploded from behind in a rising maelstrom that shredded the jetpacks above. The eruption startled all three pirates *just* hard enough to stay their blades.

Sonic blinked.

“…I mean, say hello to my little friend …?”

Blaze flew over the ship’s deck before launching herself straight to the ground. Flames roared from her feet as she slammed down, sending Blade and Shelby even further away in their panic. She rose up amongst her pyre and stood strong, towering over the others. Her brilliant magenta jacket continued to be her heroic cape, all while her amber eyes shot solar rays down at the ruffian gang.

“My boyfriend isn’t interested in your poetics.” Stated Blaze. “You can save your grievances for the jury of your peers. You may now count your sins!”

Blaze noticed Blade rushing her with her blade, despite the blaze. Blaze evaded Blade’s blade and managed to pull her into the blaze. Blaze roundhouse kicked Blade to the floor, and Blade’s blade became Blaze’s blade as she snatched it from her hand.

This commotion had thoroughly distracted big Mr. Bristles, the awe and shock of the sight loosening his grip *just* enough for Tails to wiggle the Baller’s barrel right at his knees. A three-shot volley shocked Bristles all over and sent shivers straight down his spine. The tremors and pain broke his grasp over Tails completely, after which he gladly took the chance to tail-slap the crab in the kisser. When the crabby corsair stayed standing, Tails went in for another round. Flying up this time, Tails gave Bristles a kick *straight* to the nose, and *this* was enough to send the lug down to the floor.

Sonic, meanwhile, noticed that Shelby was running away. Baby blue bastard had somehow dropped his sword and was now racing back to the hatch. Sonic just had to start on his good leg and he beat the goober to the finish. Sure, it was a pain to run with his cuts, but hey, misery builds character.

“Looks like the real world’s caught up with *you* now, huh?” Sonic crossed his arms and quirked an eyebrow. “Call me a sock puppet all you want, but I can’t say I’ve seen *you* fighting badniks or saving people. Maybe then, you’d have more friends to back you up-!”

“*This isn’t over*!!” Shelby suddenly whipped out a remote from his coat sleeve and began furiously mashing the keys. Sonic knew what it was right away, but it was already too late to stop him. The gizmo began beeping loudly, and Sonic could soon see the last galleon chugging up to the Setting Dawn’s side. The boat anchored itself close to the ship, and pointed its starboard guns at them all. “*You let us go or we* ***all*** *go down*, *capiche*?!”

Sonic’s brow raised higher. “…dude, that’s not even a pirate thing you just said-“

“Don’t care!! Try anything funny and we *all* sink!!”

“No, we won’t.” Blaze cut through the tension as she walked back onto the scene. Her pose was straight and her face was stone-cold. She had her arms out in a disarming splay. “You’re not going to throw your life away like this. You know that, and we won’t allow it. I understand how terrified you must be, but you have to understand that-”

“*D-Don’t come any closer*!!” Shelby scooted away from Blaze in a cold sweat. “I’ll push the button! *I’ll do it and you can’t stop me*!!”

The Captain’s terror seeped into the air and sent his remote right there with it. “*I’m the one in charge here*!! It’s ME who’s gonna take this ship down, not you!!”

Sonic looked back at the nearby ship and its guns. It was drifting closer, letting him see the cracks in the wood and rust on the metal. All the while those cylinders of death slowly lingered in front of them. The boat was at least fifty feet away as it adjusted its aim- before the main deck erupted into shards and flames.

The claps of cannon fire roared through the boat’s hull, and the roar of the resulting booms blew what remained into confetti. It was a controlled demolition from the center to the stern to the bow, launching flailing badniks and broken masts into the air for precious seconds before they plummeted down back to the mortal realm.

Sonic shielded his face as felt the wind of the calamity slam harshly against it, and the others were did the same. The show only ended when the last gun had plopped into the sea and the last splinters had began shamefully sinking below the churning waves.

From out of the smoke and fire, the Ocean Tornado entered center stage.

“*Mari-Gram for the Boys*~!!” Chimed Marine, her voice carried aloft by butterflies. Her adjustments to the ship’s intercom were… robust, so say the least- it was *not* hard to hear her over the fire. “Thought I’d deliver you a *twelve-pack* of our company-best lead’n steel cannonballs- just had to cut through a spot of *traffic* to get there!!”

Marine, being Marine, was standing brazenly on the bow. Her emerald bandana was *just* a bit offset from her hair. Her matching midriff shirt was stained with sweat. The arms of her grassy jumpsuit-for-pants, tied into a belt, swayed in the wind- which was definitely blasting from the vents she put in the floor.

Her cackling crackled through the air as Sonic turned back to face poor, poor Shelby. He could *see* the color leave the otter’s face as his entire musculature went limp, the remote dropping from his hands and his soul dropping out of his chest.

Sonic twitched his ear. “…you were saying?”

“***GUYS!!***”

The ship’s entry hatch slammed open once again as an unassuming lemming of lilac fur raced up to the scene. “I’ve read up on the maps again and I think I know how we can get out of here-!!” He got a good look at the scene of the Captain falling to the floor, Blade dropping her knife in surrender, and Bristles lying down with his back to sky. “…I-I uh…”

Sonic mustered the heart to walk up to the poor guy, looking him right in those big alarmed eyes. “You give up?”

“…w-we give up…”

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“…and with *all* those guys tied up, I’d say this is streak-win number *twenty-three*!” Sonic scratched another X next to the last twenty-two on the notepad, before *skillfully* tossing back to its cup. He basked in the glory of swiping the booth for himself yet again, leaning back and letting the cushions hold *all* his lazy glory.

The Ocean Tornado’s long room was a cozy little spot… by “cramped piece of boat” standards. Not just the booths but a big-ass kitchen and no less than *three* bathrooms (which was a waste of space, really. Sonic could totally share the one Tails and Marine were using. What? He was clean! Sometimes!)! It usually helped him ignore the fact that he was surrounded by eight trillion gallons of dark watery death at all times. Usually.

“Guess I should say sorry for hogging all the thunder. I’m just too good of a badnik-beater to-!”

“I would like to point out that Marine had to save us...” Blaze interjected, teacup still up to her face. “After *I* had to save ***you*** after ***you*** tried to save Tails.” She took her sip and then placed the saucer back on the table beside her- all without breaking eye contact. “I’m going to bring that up for *every* x on that tally at our next function…”

“I mean-!” Sonic felt his back *stiffen* just a little. “Y-You didn’t *need* to worry about me…!” He flashed a faltering smirk as he rubbed his arm. He could feel the stings of those shots flash right back onto his skin. “Just needed to wait for him to uh… *trip* a little and I could’ve tornado’d us all out of there!”

“Totally saved your butt, mate.” Marine cracked a smile. “Yoos’d be fishfood if it weren’t for my new artillery, don’t lie!”

Sonic twitched an ear. “Didn’t look that different from your old stuff to me…”

“To *your* untrained eye, it isn’t! But *I* was able to balance the lead to tungsten in these bad boys’ alloys for minimum drag and *MAXIMUM METAL-MUNCING* ***FORCE***!!” Marine sprung up so much as to nearly jump on the table, sending shudders through the booth and sending poor Blaze reeling. “It’s my *greatest* work so far!”

“*Marine*…” Blaze growled, hair still on end. “…we *both* agreed on the “don’t scream in my face” rule…!”

Marine’s smile slanted. “I was screaming into *space*, Blaze! It’s totally different~”

“Marine’s right, you know.” Tails swept onto the scene with a tray of salmon in hand. “After seeing how graceful they are it honestly makes *me* rethink all my fancy bombs. Metallurgy’s no joke, and she knocked it out of the park!”

Sonic could see Marine’s posture shift.

“Wh-? I mean, *yeah*! See? *This* guy gets it!!” Marine’s face slowly pivoted as her eyes fell on the salmon- then to Tails. “…t-though I won’t say it’s anything at *your* level-!”

“You can cut that off right there.” Tails huffed. “Trying to match some vague idea of “my level” isn’t important, Marine.” He shot a finger up to space as he talked. “What’s *important* is that you bring ideas to the table even *I* wouldn’t think of. *That’s* why you’re here. And I don’t see our team working as well without you.”

Tails was looking up into space as he made his speech, but Sonic wasn’t missing out on the *slight* quivering on Marine’s lips. It was hard to tell under the harsh lights if she was *blushing* or if it was just Tails’ salmon reflecting off her fur. Either or!

“…o-okay then…!” She finally stammered. “…g-guess I just never thought to- you *actually* see me that way?”

Tails nodded. “I tell no lies.”

“Blimey…! Well, I think…!” Marine’s stance slowly regained confidence. “*I* think there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you! It’s about how we’ve-”

A muffled buzzing broke through the room. Marine fell silent and Tails began to fidget as he went for his left pocket, pulling out that distinct green pager.

Tails’ lip quirked. “Oh yeah, time to water Cosmo.” And just like that, he was swooshing around to the exit. “Gonna have to work on some navigation, too. We’ll talk about it later-! Oh, and Blaze is *also* right, by the way. Outdoor voices are for boasting to larger crowds anyway. I’ll be back-!”

Sonic was the only one who could see Tails really ascend out of the scene. After that, it was just him and a visibly deflating Marine. The poor lass didn’t really say much of anything after that. It was Blaze who looked back to him.

“…uh… yeah!” Sonic said to neither of them in particular. “Still think we’ll make the date?”

“Well, we may have had our *third* delay this trip, but…” Blaze answered, her ears perking up. “I am certain we will still arrive come next morning.” She let out a small, soft smile. “…we’ll be home.”

“Yeah…” Sonic smiled back. “…home.”

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Sonic couldn’t have picked a better spot if he tried. The cool, soft grass brushed against him tenderly through the cool evening winds. The air was crisp and fresh. And that *moonrise*… it wasn’t something he could even describe. The only thing he could think as he saw it breach the ocean horizon is that it *was*. It was beautiful, and that was all that mattered. He could’ve sat around to bask in that glow all night… but a pang of thirst and an empty cup eventually knocked on his door. No biggie- he’d just need to remember where he parked.

He of course waved back to Big and Espio on the way back uphill. He could see more commotion further back into the Mystic Ruins, and heard the laughter of happy chao through the leaves. He *tried* to flag down Charmy, too, but he was too busy practicing those Super Ninja Moves to even notice. Sonic didn’t mind- he was a grown man now, he could be trusted with those bombs.

Sonic couldn’t stop grinning as he made it back to the *real* party. Tails’ workshop had been lacking people for way too long, and *now*, tonight, they had to break out the outside tables. Tangle, Whisper, Silver and Rotor were all sharing a pitcher, cheering and smiling. Just to the right of them, Sticks and Shadow were messing with the radio.

*Inside* the shop, he was finally home. Blaze and Tails of course, but also Knuckles, Rouge, Lanolin, Vector, Sally and Nicole, Antoine and Bunnie- all here, after so long. He couldn’t have been happier.

He simply needed to sneak over to the kitchen and get to that three-gallon jug from that car-sized fridge, is all. He could see Marine had snuck in some of her shrimp piles under the carrots again- she never listened to things like “sanitation”, did she? Sonic could relate!

…was it 11:59 already? Damn, he was *that* close to missing the New Year. Time flies when you’re having fun! He took his swig and booked it back to the living room, *just* in time for that clock strike twelve. He jumped *right* into the roar of cheers, *flying* nearly up to the ceiling on the wings of a new day. He took a hearty chug with all the others and ran right into Blaze’s embrace.

The thing is, none of that happened.

The second Sonic was out of the kitchen, the air itself seemed to vanish from the room. The chatter, cheering and clanging all just… *stopped*. He couldn’t even hear wind outside or the static from the TV speakers. Instead, all he got was everyone standing around him. *Staring* at him.

They were all looking at him with cold, blank faces. The color started to drain from their fur. And those *eyes*… those dull, glassyeyes. And yet he could still feel some weird… *sting* come from them.

His stomach turned a little. He could feel sweat pooling around his hands and his cup. He felt his lips start to move, before he realized he could speak.

“…hey?” His lungs were not helping him talk smoothly. “…h-hey, calm down, it’s just apple-!”

His heart stopped.

He could see it.

It was all over his hand. It was crawling up his chest. It was sliding down his legs.

He tried to throw his cup to the floor, but the metal already had frozen his flesh. He tried to scream, but it was already tearing up his lungs. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t sweat. Not even the water came to his eyes.

He looked back up to see them all trudging towards him. Their big, red, pupilless eyes surrounded him as they shot right through him. Nausea welled in his innards as he saw those horrific scowls, *beaming* with hate. He could feel their silent screams of unbridled malice rattle his hollow shell- not even his bones remained beneath the steel.

He got a good long look at the metal eating *their* flesh. Those serrated claws. Those lethal, jagged spikes. Those hideous teeth. Less than nothing behind those dim, dead eyes. He could only stand and watch as Tails bared his fangs. The only things Sonic could feel were a sharp pain in his neck and the shattering of glass.

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He jolted up from bed, only *just* holding a scream. He had to stop himself from shredding his way through the thin covers or hitting the mattress so hard to launch Blaze into the ceiling. He immediately swiped his hand in front of him- no glimmering reflections of light from the porthole. He then slid the covers off him to look himself over from chest to paw. No shimmers. No reflections. No metal.

He is too energized and caked in cold sweat to sneak his way back to sleep. He cautiously slithered his way off the bed, double and triple checking to check on poor Blaze. For a mercy, she didn’t seem to stir. She may be a heavy sleeper, but Sonic had been… loud in the past. He wasn’t taking his chances. He creeped across the floor plans with anxious steps as he swiped his shorts, vest and boxers to hastily dress himself in the dark.

He wasn’t going outside with his junk hanging out.

The moment he was out of the room, he was booking it upstairs. He walked as fast as he could without making noise. He shuffled straight to the top deck and went straight to the starboard railing.

He was gonna vomit. He leaned over the rails *hard*, waiting and waiting for his guts to finally let rip… but with a few more whiffs of the salty air, his stomach slowly settled. His breath could finally slow, and he slowly began to calm down as he raised his head back up to face the morning expanse. Staring down the line where the two blues meet, the first morning glow creeping into the horizon, was more beautiful than any painting in the world. He wiped away a tear and let out a sigh.

Even after all the other nightmares he’d gone through until now… that one stung.

They had almost *lost* this early morning glow. The fresh air, the beautiful flickies, the green hills- they nearly lost it all. And it was his fault. It was *all* his fault.

He wasn’t letting it happen again. He *wouldn’t*. Once they were back to land, he was taking charge. He’d be a new hog! He won’t let anyone get stuck in his-

“Hey, Sonic…”

Sonic jittered a bit as Tails stepped up to his side. His tails were wagging softly as he joined in on the lean party.

“Got insomnia too?”

“Y-Yeah. Couldn’t get back to bed after a…” Sonic squirmed. “…weird dream.”

“Sea anxiety, huh?” Sympathy showed on Tails’ soft smile. “It’s okay! I get you.” After that, he couldn’t help but chuckle. “Man, do you remember the *first* time we got this big girl out on the water?”

A slight shudder shot Sonic’s spine, but he still found himself smirking. “…yeah. Yeah, I don’t know how I handled that either…!”

“You never stopped being *you*, that’s how! Whisker didn’t stand a chance- especially with what we ended up with on *this* beauty~” Tails stroked the railing with a grin, and then his ears perked up with a revelation. “…speaking of, I’m shocked you didn’t even ask to take the Wave Cyclone first yesterday- you just *tore* through those waves yourself!”

Sonic chuckled. “Blaze needed it. We know she hates getting wet.”

“Putting words in my mouth again?” Blaze grunted. She was still setting up her hair, visibly half-asleep. “Neither of you have actually changed…”

“Er- s-sorry!” Sonic stammered. Blaze was one of two people who could sneak up on him like that. “…jeez, you’re up early…”

Blaze let out a sleepy laugh. “I tease. And yes, I don’t rise at *this* hour without reason. Let’s head to the bow- I want us *all* to see it.”

As the three jaunted up to the face of the Tornado, they could see an unmistakable stretch of land breaking the wine-dark blue. The shroud of morning mist obscured the initial silhouette, but as the Tornado crept ever closer, the fading clouds and rising sun unveiled nothing short of a wonder.

Tails gasped. Sonic stared. Blaze smiled.

“This is the Sol Empire. We’re home.”

The sun’s rays shined down on a city pulled straight from the rainbow’s end. Rising above the stoney outer walls were stacks and stacks of those solid, blocky houses and dizzying spiral towers. Glorious arches and curtain-like bridges connected the carved cliffs with a seamlessness only found in nature. Grand cloth flowed in the wind like a single majestic mane. Blues, pinks, greens and golds exploded across the great construct, and perfumed clouds circled the skies.

Sonic would have thought he was dreaming if he hadn’t just woken up. Blaze had let him know all about what to expect. He *still* didn’t expect it. Cities aren’t *allowed* to be as beautiful. Or natural… “…wow. Just wow!”

“It’s *beautiful*…!” Tails beamed. “It all has to be at least two hundred years old-!”

“Seven in some spots.” Blaze corrected with a sly wink. “We have employed a policy of preservation for areas all over the city. Waste not what not, as you say~”

Tails nearly passed out right there. “…that. That’s just- that is *incredible*!”

“The biggest beaut where I’ve ever set up port, it is!” Marine boasted. Her chin was on her hands as she let her teeth shine.

“It is great responsibility to make sure it stays that way.” Blaze added. “There are hundreds of thousands of people here… and many more among our allies. And the allies of our allies…” A note of unease slipped its way onto her lips. She gazed at the capital with a weak smile- before she shot over to Marine. “Wait a minute. Aren’t you supposed to be at the helm-?”

The whole boat curtly halted with an ugly screech as the rocks hit her bow. The four all screamed as the floor flew from under their feet, saved only by the great railing up front.

Sonic was lucky he only slammed onto his chest. Being winded was anything but new, and he could still laugh as he saw poor Marine fall face-first onto Tails’ stomach.

Looks like they had hit land.