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PROLOGUE: THE FORGOTTEN PAST

Sonny Hedgehog was born on Earth in the early 21st century, in the town of Hardly, Nebraska, population 1, 226. He and his mother and five sisters live underneath ta scraggly hedge beside the local burger joint, and subsist on burger scraps, milkshakes, and the occasional slug or bug that crawls their way. They are a poor but happy family. Unfortunately, Sonny's dad died when Sonny was just a few days old, after falling into a gurgling, festering vat of toxic waste dumped in a nearby pond.

Mama Hedgehog does her best to keep Dad's memory alive, however, regaling the kids with stories of his goodness, resourcefulness, and great agility.

"He was the fastest hedge-runner this town has ever seen!" she exclaimed as her family enjoyed tea and mealworms in front of a roaring fire. "I hope all of you will take after him," she said wistfully as she cast a loving eye upon Sonny. Sonny looked up at the framed photo of his father which stood proudly on the mantel. The firelight cast strange yet comforting shadows on the earthen walls and ceiling of the burrow. All at once, the face in the picture seemed to snuffle and wink.

"Did you see that, Mom? Dad winked at me! He's counting on me to be somebody great! Did you see, Mom, did you SEE?" said Sonny, jumping up and down excitedly.

"Sssshh, honey. I'm sure that wherever he is in Hedge Heaven, your father is looking down on us all and sends us his love." She gathered the dinner plates and

smiled at her son. *Never had terribly good eyesight*, she thought to herself. And yet there was something special about her son. Something she couldn't quite put her paw on...

There *was* something special about Sonny. Many somethings specials, as a matter of fact. During the first summer of his life Sonny grew handsome and clever, with thick, bushy brown quills, a headstrong personality, and a rambunctious sense of humor. His favorite trick was to frequent the local bowling alley and curl up in the ball return, awaiting the grasp of an unsuspecting bowler. "Yeeooww!" the bowler would shriek. "Must be that darned hedgehog again!" the bowler would yell, and the whole team would crack up at the practical joke.

And sometimes, Sonny would change his tactic. He would curl up ever so tightly and stay perfectly still as the bowler tossed him down the alley. At the last moment, right before he hit the head pin, Sonny would uncurl and scamper away, routing the bowler's perfect score.

Although he loved playing practical jokes on people, Sonny also loved people. While making the rounds for juicy tidbits and gossip, he would drop in on the ladies of the local quilting circle to offer a convenient pin or needle from his ample, portable supply. He spent the summer frolicking in the town park with the other children, donating quills so they could scribble designs in the sandbox. In time, he noticed that his playmates drew the same pattern over and over again while pointing at him: SONNY. In this fashion, over a few weeks, Sonny learned to read and write. He was some hedgehog!

But more important than anything else he did, Sonny ran the hedges. Every night, while everyone else

slept, Sonny sprinted from one end to the other of the long hedge outside the burger joint. Sometimes he ran so fast that he would rush by in a blur. He loved the feeling. Pure exhilaration -- a feeling like a dream -- that he could fly up from the ground and do great things.

One day, his dream began to come true. After downing a particularly big, greasy late dinner, the coach of Hardly's track team stepped out the door of the burger joint and started walking toward his car. When he glanced toward the hedge, he could scarcely believe his eyes, and wondered if he hadn't consumed one whopping Beef Gloppler too many. A blue streak darted in and out of the long hedgerow, streaking from one end to another. The coach drew out his stopwatch and tried to clock the object. "Impossible," he muttered to himself. "He's too fast to clock." This creature was the fastest runner he had ever seen!

In no time at all Sonny was on the team, competing in local, then regional track tournaments. And as the summer days lengthened, so did the line of trophies Sonny brought back home to line the burrow. The whole town was proud of him. The coach began talking about Sonny as an Olympic hopeful. And then nature, and his mother, called.

"Sonny, I know you want to be a great runner, and you will be some day! But first, you need to rest a bit. Don't you feel the chill in the air? It's nearly Fall. Soon it will be time to--"

-- Hibernate, Mom? Gee whiz, I don't have time to hibernate! Can't I keep practicing all winter?" he pleaded.

But Mom was adamant. Concerned that practice all year 'round during his first year of life would permanently stunt Sonny's growth, she insisted. She prepared the burrow for the long winter, lining Sonny's chamber with soft, dry

leaves and pine needles. The coach and olympic stardom would have to wait until Spring.

All over town, the mercury shrank lower and lower, hunching down in a thick finger of silver. Farmers put up their corn and oats. Families canned summer produce. And the hedgehog family withdrew from the light of day, safely ensconced in the burrow. Sonny read a comic book and listened to the rattle of brittle hedge branches whipped about by the wind. He felt fat and content from a meal of candied apples that the townspeople had generously invited him to take home from their Halloween party. He chuckled as he remembered carrying back an entire bushel on his back, neatly skewered on his quills.

Then suddenly, he had an idea.

There's really no reason why I have to stay sleeping all winter! I can just tunnel over a few feet and pop up on the far edge of the hedge. Mom'll never miss me! he thought, pleased at this stroke of cleverness. And so he began to tunnel. He tunneled five, then ten minutes, all the while thinking of the great track contests he would win in the Spring. As he counted his victories, his digging became more and more enthusiastic. And he grew more and more tired. *Just a short nap*, he thought. *and then I'll tunnel upwards.* So he curled up for a brief snooze.

One hour passed. Then one day. Succumbing to natural instinct, Sonny drifted deep into hibernation, beyond alpha, beyond beta, beyond even delta waves. He felt peaceful and secure. The quiet was wonderful. But like most peaceful times in the twenty-first century, it didn't last long.

Whirrrrrrrrrrr. Clunk. Clunk. Whirrrrrrrrr. Zip! Whirrrrrrrrrrr. The earth above him shook. The ground grew warm and then hot. Sonny awakened drenched in sweat and shaking. But not from fear. Everything around him was shaking. He looked up at the ceiling of his small cave and saw the earth churning. *Zow! Time to clear outta here,* Sonny thought, digging furiously to escape whatever it was that was plunging toward him. Quick, quick, quick, he panted -- *I must survive!* And then he felt something -- a rusty pipe just large enough to squeeze through. He scrambled through the pipe, his toes clattering on the metal. After what seemed innumerable twists and turns, he saw the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Relieved, he ran toward it and tumbled head over heels out of the pipe and into an immense room.

"Well, well, look who we have here! *Erinaceus europaeus!*"

A trim, kindly, mustachioed man bent over Sonny. Sonny had been called many things in his life, but never something so strange as this.

"Are you alright?" the man asked. "Wait a minute -- silly of me -- let me aim the LinguaScrambler'Um at you and see what you've got to say!"

Sonny was too dazed to protest as the man wheeled over an odd looking contraption that was somehow shaped like all the letters in the alphabet mashed up together. He pointed it at Sonny.

"My name's not Aceeus -- it's Sonny! And what's happening out there underground!" Sonny heard himself squeak in an accusing tone of voice. He had never spoken human before.

"Oh that. So sorry it disturbed you! That's my Cogwinder Retractable Particulant Corer. I'm using it to dig for emeralds. Found six. Looking for the seventh. Then my work'll be done!" the man explained, smiling and speaking

very quickly. He seemed to have a lot on his mind and few words to waste. he had already returned to an enormous control panel at the far end of the room, where red and green lights danced and ribbons of paper spewed from a printer.

Sonny was too amazed to say anything more. It was obvious this man was some sort of genius, or totally wack-o, or perhaps both. Sonny trotted across the gleaming floor of the lab, marveling at the dazzling array of contraptions lined along the walls, atop counters, and piled high on shelves.

"What are you doing with all this stuff? Who are you?" Sonny demanded, stamping his foot with impatience. The magnificence of the lab had not put a damper on his boldness.

"Curiosity! How I love curiosity! You have the makings of a top notch scientist if only you can hold on to this admirable quality!" the man proclaimed, now giving over his full attention to Sonny. My name, see here --" he pointed to the tag on the lapel of his starchy white labcoat - - "is Dr. Ovi Kintober. You can call me Dr. K. And my mission, my little friend, is to save the planet from destruction. And for now, that is all you need to know. Unless, of course, you can help me find They Grey Emerald."

The Grey Emerald? Six other emeralds? Saving the planet? During the long months of winter, with a diligence that nearly matched the intensity of Kintober's experiments, Sonny drew out some of the stories behind these seemingly disparate topics.

Kintobor, Sonny learned, was a brilliant nutrobiologist and former team leader of the government's

controversial Nuvolution research. The goal of the research was to somehow reverse the effects of accumulated centuries of pollution and restore Earth to its natural, pristine state. The Nuvolution team of biologists, physicists, botanists, and astronomers worked assiduously toward this goal for fifteen years. Then, on the verge of a breakthrough concerning the structure and behavior of free radical subatomic particles, funding for the work was cut. With their project doomed to oblivion, the scientists scattered. Many team members took lucrative positions in private industry. Others went mad with frustration.

But Kintobor abhorred such resignation to one's fate. Instead of bailing out, he sabotaged the government's security system and moved the lab -- lock, stock, and barrel -- to a former radioactive dumping site in northern Nebraska, several miles away from Hardly. He figured he had selected the perfect site; what better place to test his solution than underneath the nation's most notorious, top-secret toxic wasteland.

All things natural, all creatures left untouched and uncontrolled by humans -- this summed up Kintobor's concept of the beautiful and the sublime. And as an extension of this passionate philosophy, besides working to save the planet, Kintobor had another goal; to rescue any poisoned or struggling animal he managed to find in the course of his excavations. Dozens of bunnies, squirrels, ducks, and even baby piglets were among the regular group of guests residing in his lab. All were welcome to spend time gaining strength, resting, and eating Kintobor's excellent cooking. When fully recovered, they were encouraged to return to the wild. During this particular severe winter, the animals were only too happy to remain in

the lab until spring, a fact that was very good news for Sonny. Day after day he delighted in making friends and playing games with the other animals, and even teaching several to read and write. When Kintobor noticed Sonny's academic skills, a light flashed on above his head.

"Sonny," he said. "Vacation's over! A mind is a terrible thing to waste. Henceforth and forthwith, I'm making you my assistant. That is, if you accept, of course," he added. Sonny was thrilled at the prospect. Because although Sonny had never known his father, Kintobor reminded him of the kind face in the photograph.

The days flew by, with Sonny by Dr. K's side almost constantly. Sonny learned computer science, from building small, portable computers to programming the mainframe. He learned about physics -- the old laws as well as a few new theories set forth by Dr. K. His curiosity was boundless, and led him into every part of Kintobor's lab as he documented the results of each experiment. As the lab was vast, Sonny soon took to running at top speeds to perform all his duties. How odd, he thought, to find himself gradually replacing dreams of Olympic glory with a dedication to science and helping the other animals.

Still, he knew he'd never be a nerd like Dr. K. So partly for relaxation, and partly for Dr. K's amusement, he logged in several hours a day on the supersonic treadmill that Kintobor had built for him. Slowly, Sonny built his speed to 200, 400, then 761 mph -- the speed of sound. Then, impossibly, he crossed all known limits of acceleration and began running at the speed of light. Alarmed, Kintobor tried to slow the treadmill. Although he managed to gain control of the machine and bring his friend's velocity down slowly, a change had come over

Sonny. Instead of his unexceptional, grayish-brown color, most of his body had turned cobalt blue, and his quills stood straight back in a stiff mohawk.

"My word!" exclaimed Kintobor, who struggled to comprehend what had just happened. "I think you've gone blue from the Advanced Non-Concussive Cobalt Effect!" he said, helping Sonny from the treadmill.

"186 thousand miles per second! You're so fast, we should call you Sonic. SuperSonic, even. How do you like that!" he cried, dancing around the lab like a demented pixie.

"Yeah, I like that!" answered Sonny. "From now on, my name is Sonic! Now watch how fast I can help you get your work done!"

Sonny *did* speed up the pace and success of Kintobor's experiments. But with all his mental and physical agility, he was unable to find The Grey Emerald, let alone understand why Kintobor was so frantic over it. *What's the point to finding another emerald when we've already got six perfectly good ones*, he wondered to himself. That very same day, he stumbled upon the answer. Running through a part of the lab that was still a bit unfamiliar, he tripped over a thick mass of wires. *That's strange*, he thought. *Dr. K's always so tidy with his equipment*. he followed the cords and cables to a small room he hadn't ever been in before. There, in the center of the room, stood a large machine comprised nearly totally of slender gold rings. The gold surfaces looked though they had been crafted and polished with great care.

"Ah, I see you've found the Reverse Quantum BioFormulator. Excellent!" said Dr. K, who had hurried over to Sonic's side.

"Why didn't you tell me about this thing? And what do you use it for?" asked Sonic. He felt a bit hurt that Dr. K had kept the machine a secret from him, and fairly bristled with impatience.

"Did you ever ask about it?" Dr. K countered. "No! But now you are, so now you'll have your answer. But it's a long story, so let's have a bit of lunch," he suggested, pulling a few hardboiled eggs and muffins from a lunchbag he had stuffed in his pocket.

They pulled up chairs around the Reverse Quantum BioFormulator and began to eat. As usual, Sonic gulped down his meal in a flash. He was an old pro at fast food. Kintobor set a half-eaten egg on the counter near the machine and pulled a heavy iron key from his labcoat pocket. He walked over to a tall, lead-encased cabinet in the corner of the room, unlocked its door, and drew out a black velvet bag.

"These are the emeralds I told you about, Sonic," he said, carefully placing each on the black velvet.

They were truly incredible. Deep, brilliant colors with perfect, tiffany-cut shapes. Each must have weighed nearly a pound.

"They're perfect. Cut them myself," Kintobor boasted. "They contain a microlytic copy of all the inert energy of every gross and disgusting impulse or deed done by humans since the beginning of time," he continued.

Sonic gulped. "You mean they're evil?"

"Yes. Evil and highly unstable. Pure, chaotic energy," Kintobor sighed. "I transmorphed the chaos of the world into the emeralds, using the RQBF. Now the only thing remaining to do is to stabilize them with the Grey Emerald. Until we find The Grey Emerald, we're treading on very thin ice! If the emeralds are disturbed, in theory, they will double the amount of evil in the world. Stabilized, they will rid the world of evil and pollution. That done, I

plan to launch them into space where they can harm no one," he said.

Sonic's eyes grew wide. So this is why Kintobor was always in a rush. He was holding the fate of the world in his hands, reflected in the sparkling surfaces of the six emerald. Dr. K noticed the expression on Sonic's face.

"Don't worry," he said. "There aren't many forces that will push these beauties over the edge. The only problem I know of, I guard against by keeping them in this lead cabinet. That problem is, of course --" he didn't have to finish his sentence.

"Radiation!" screamed Sonic, staring up at the computer screen on the wall.

The next few moments brought unspeakable panic and confusion. The monitor glowed red with a display of the impending wave of radiation that had somehow penetrated the Earth's surface and was heading straight for the lab. Kintobor scrambled to stuff the emeralds back in the bag. Sonic raced to the lead cabinet and flung open its doors but in doing so, jostled the RQBF. Kintobor lunged for the cabinet, lost his balance, and spilled the emeralds onto the floor. The RQBF turned on and cast a weird, sickly beam of light first on Dr. K, then on the emeralds, then on the half-eaten egg on the counter top. Sonic took shelter in the cabinet and reached for Kintobor's arm to drag him inside.

Then everything stopped.

There was no explosion, no shattered bits of glass or twisted metal. Just silence. Sonic awakened in the pitch black of the lead cabinet. Dr. Kintobor was not inside with him. Sonic struggled to open the door, and peeped out cautiously -- in perhaps the only cautious act of his life.

There lay Kintobor, sprawled across the floor of the lab. But now he looked different. Hideous. Quite round, with no muscle tone. His labcoat now stretched tight across his enormous girth, his arms were spread wide, distended by the buckets of flesh encumbering his frame. But the most alarming transformation was not in his physical person, it was in a small, significant detail that Sonic had by now mostly taken for granted. The name on Kintobor's lapel pin was different. Sonic stared at it in shock.

"Dr. Ivo Robotnik" was his dear friend's new name. Then Sonic understood everything.

Moments passed. It's difficult to say how long Sonic stood staring down at his friend. He realized he had to try to rescue his animal buddies and leave the lab -- in a hurry! If what he thought had happened had *really* happened, Kintobor had absorbed the evil of the Chaos Emeralds as well as the disgusting shape of the hardboiled egg. He would awaken as the vilest, most evil personality on the face of the Earth, set to strike out at anything in his path.

Kintobor, or shall we say *Robotnik*, stirred.

"What are you gawking at, you ugly thing! Stand still so I can rip your quills out and turn you into an armadillo-bot!" Robotnik growled.

Sonic jumped back and rushed out of the room to the main lab. Scampering at the speed of light, he had just enough time to grab a PC and race toward his friends' quarters. But by remote control, Robotnik had already sealed the door to the animal habitat. Sonic bolted out the back door to the lab, then remembered the RQBF. He ran back to grab as many golden rings as he could. Then Sonic scampered away at the speed of light, Robotnik's curses echoing behind him.



CHAPTER 1: **THE GREEN HILL ZONE**

Sonic raced home, carrying the computer in his arms and the few golden rings he'd grabbed were slipped over his wrists. He hadn't realized that he'd been gone for long, or that he'd been in the lab that long, but when he grew closer to the hedge he called home he found that spring had come already. The sharp flowers sprung from the ground and the hedges were bright green. He knew his mom would be angry at him, and even if she wasn't he was mad enough at himself for both of them.

As he slipped into the hole and entered his home, he looked around, expecting to see his mom and sisters. But they weren't there. *Probably finding food*, Sonic thought, setting the computer down. *I'd be hungry too if I hadn't eaten all winter*. But as Sonic looked around he found that they couldn't have gone out looking for food, there was food *here*. "Where did everyone go?" he called out. *Maybe they're out looking for me*.

He sat the rings down next to the computer and grabbed a note pad to leave a message for them that he'd come back and was okay. But when he remembered they couldn't read or write anyway he tossed away the notepad and pressed his palm against the soft dirt of the wall. He would be right back, he knew that, he just had to stop Dr. Kint... no, Dr. Robotnik. Before Sonic left the hole however, he took another passing glance at the picture of his dad.

For a brief second, he could have sworn -- once

again -- that he'd seen the portrait move. It was a sort of nodding motion, as if to say "Do what you have to, but be safe."

"Don't worry dad," Sonic said, running out of the hole and passed the hedges. "I'll be back before they knew I came back the first time."

Sonic sped down the highway, back to Dr. Robotnik's base on the cliff overlooking the river. But he was too late -- Dr. Robotnik had moved the base already. He really was a genius, and when he split off to continue his work he'd stolen the entire lab but turning it into a mobile facility. Now he'd taken it once again, leaving a trail of debris in its wake.

Luckily, a trail meant Sonic could follow him, unluckily however the "debris" was more like broken ground and scattered parts of loose tech left over from the seismic activity. What used to be rolling green hills that stretched out beside the river was now choppy ground with machines littering his path. It's not like it was perfect though -- a long time ago it had been deemed "unfit to support life" and since then no one's walked through what became known as the *Green Hill Zone*. Dr. Robotnik couldn't have gotten far though, and even though these obstacles meant he couldn't move at top speed Sonic was still the fastest thing alive.

So... Sonic eyed the horizon, planting his feet firmly in the dirt. The soles of his shoes kept their traction, so even if he ran too fast, he'd be able to stop himself. Those shoes were the last thing he'd gotten from the Doctor before he became this twisted version of himself. Robotnik had told him "If you're going to keep running the way you do, you'll need to do it in style! All the greatest runners have

trademark shoes! One day, every Olympic Hopeful will be wearing a pair of *Sonic Sneakers!*"

I'll find a way to bring you back, Sonic thought, blasting off into the Green Hill Zone.

Great big pits of crushed ground created by the large stomping feet of the mobile lab led Sonic through the Green Hill Zone. The radiated spiky flowers blocked his view and the tall grass was always in his way as well, but the most aggravating thing he found were the short cliffs. They were always just short enough that they weren't really in the way, but always just tall enough that he couldn't keep his speed going as he had to climb up over them.

But as he followed the trail of debris he saw horrible things that had fallen from the lab.

Namely... robotic animals. Fish that leapt out of the crevices in the ground that went down to the water below; beetles with sharp claws bolted into their sides and a large wheel running through their bodies; crabs with bulging eyes and steel claws; and armadillos made with hinges to mimic the opening and closing of their lives counterparts. All of them were machines, with only a semblance of what they used to be barely showing through. It was enough to show Sonic what Dr. Robotnik had done... but that wasn't the worst part.

Robotnik had only gone bad a short time ago... but to have created these things... it just-it couldn't have been done this quickly! And as Sonic neared one of the small robotic crabs, he tried to think of why Robotnik would have done this at all... and why he would have done this when he was still a good man.

You always had your secrets, Sonic thought, crouching down to the crabs level. *But would you really*

have gone this far? The crab hissed at him, claws swatting at him. But Sonic could move faster than it so he didn't worry much. Instead, he looked over the exterior of the machine, and eventually found what he was looking for-- a maintenance hatch. He broke it open and studied the wires, valves, and switches inside. *There!* The release button.

The top of the crab popped open and the little creature inside scurried out. Turns out... it wasn't a crab at all, but instead a tiny squirrel. It scampered off, free at last.

Sonic stood, looking down at the robotic exoskeleton. *Did you build the machine first for something else? It doesn't look to be a strictly offensive device... maybe he only placed the animals inside after he became corrupted.*

Regardless of the circumstances, one thing was clear -- there were innocent animals trapped within those machines, and Sonic had to free them along the way to the lab. It was another thing to slow him down... but he couldn't just ignore this.

So, Sonic picked up his feet and powered forward, all the while keeping an eye out for the robots. Every time he saw one he'd use his super speed to zip around them and in an instant tear off the the hatch and press the release button, then he'd land on his feet and keep on running. Sometimes it meant doubling back just to make sure he didn't miss anything, but as he got used to the terrain he trusted himself enough to move faster and faster.

He picked up speed, launching himself over the short cliffs instead of wasting time climbing. Robot after robot crossed his path but they became easier and easier to deal with once he knew what he was doing. And soon, he reached the markers that bordered the Green Hill Zone, telling him he'd reached the end of the irradiated area. The high way was close by here, but it seemed the tracks went off in another direction. As this was the first time Sonic had

ever been this far out, he wasn't sure where either path led, but he knew he had to follow Dr. Robotnik, not some road.

That being said... it didn't seem like Sonic had to look much further.

"So you decided to stick around!" Dr. Robotnik exclaimed. "I've let the base go on ahead, autopilot and all that! Haha! But I noticed you've been on my trail. I don't like tag-alongs."

"Dr. Robotnik," Sonic hissed, looking around. Robotnik hadn't appeared yet, but he was lurking nearby. "Show yourself!"

"Oh *please*," Dr. Robotnik laughed. "With this new pudgy exterior, call me... *Dr. Eggman!*" He rose up from behind a large chunk of broken ground, hovering in some kind of floating mechanical sphere.

Eggman, Sonic thought, feeling pale. *There's less and less of the real you by the minute...* "You're Dr. Robotnik! No... You're Dr. Kintobor! Please! Stop this! Let the animals go, let me *help* you!"

'Eggman' laughed, patting himself on his large belly. He looked down at Sonic. "Poor little Sonic the Hedgehog, you're *fast!* but you're powerless. There's nothing to fix! I'll take these animals and stuff them in animatronic suits! I'll make those other scientists pay for what they did to me! Abandoning me and our work- *my* work! Especially-- Eh... whatever their names were! Yes! I'll show them! I'll them all! I'll show you first!"

Suddenly Eggman came charging at Sonic in his hovercraft. Sonic was fast enough to dodge, obviously, but he didn't want to hurt Dr. Robotnik -- he was still in there... somewhere. *I'll just turn this thing off the same way I did with your robots!* Sonic thought, jumping at the hovercraft. At super speeds he spun around the craft, searching for the access panel. As soon as he found it he got to work, pulling wires and tearing the thing apart.

"No! Get off!" Eggman screamed. "You're ruining everything!"

I know, Sonic thought sadly. *But it's for your own good.*

Eggman grabbed Sonic. "I'll stuff *you* in a suit!" He shook him, holding tight as Sonic struggled.

"I'm sorry!" Sonic shouted, suddenly kicking Eggman in the face. Eggman let go and Sonic jumped away. The hovercraft sparked, tilted and shook, Eggman fighting for control.

"You win *this* round, Sonic!" Eggman proclaimed dramatically as he started driving the hovercraft away. "But *next* time you won't be so *lucky*!"

Sonic started running after him, but even though he could catch up he heard something that diverted his attention. A beeping sound, and struggling noises. Deciding he had to investigate before he could go after Eggman, Sonic diverted his path back around to the chunk of ground Eggman had appeared from. There, he found a large container -- it shook and rumbled, like something was trying to escape.

What did he do? Sonic thought as he tried to find a way to open the container. He found a release switch on the top and turned it. The whole thing hissed as the body of it raised, then it split and the two sides flipped upward like wings. Then the container inside opened and all the little animals inside came running out.

He was capturing more animals. Sonic knew this because he knew the animals that were trapped in Robotnik's lab, and this wasn't them. That must have been why Robotnik stayed behind, to do more wrong...

Sonic looked over his shoulder, back the way he came, back towards home... Then he turned away and raced after Eggman. He'd catch up soon enough.

He ran and he ran and he ran, feeling sicker and sicker the more he thought about what was happening to his friend. Dr. Ovi Kintobor had been like a second father to him, he'd helped him, trained him to be better... but now he was flipped, a circus mirror reflection of his former self. Dr. Ivo Robotnik, a mind so fractured now he was basically delirious, calling himself Dr. Eggman. It was cruel.

Eventually his thoughts made him so dizzy Sonic stopped running. He looked out at the open fields, significantly less damaged than the Green Hill Zone due to the ground being more solid here and not overlooking a river, but there were clear dents from the mobile base and still a few scattered robots that Sonic kept an eye out for.

Why am I so dizzy? Sonic thought, still looking around. It didn't seem to be his thoughts that seemed to spin his head around, so it must be something else.

Then he spotted a light on the horizon. It couldn't have been the sun, there were hills behind it and the actual sun was still high above in the center of the sky. So in an instant Sonic zipped over to it, and regretted it immediately.

The bright light blinded him, turning everything white. He felt like the world was spinning around him, but like he was falling at the same time. It was like being stuck in a tornado of light and wind, throwing him around. It turned out he pretty much was, as he suddenly slammed into something hard. It bounced him around, throwing him into more things.

Once his vision started to adapt, he thought he was losing his mind. Diamond shaped blocks of different colors warped and stretched around him, spinning and crashing into him. Sonic shielded himself as best he could, but there's not much you can do to dodge in a tornado, even

with superspeed. So he tucked himself into a ball and kept an eye on what was happening, hoping to find a way out.

Instead, he found something else.

There, floating still amidst the chaos... was a chaos emerald.

Sonic worked to propel himself towards it, and reached out. As soon as he wrapped his paw around it the world vanished, throwing him into darkness.



CHAPTER 2: THE MARBLE ZONE

Sonic woke up in the field where he'd spotted the light, but he was still clutching the emerald in his hand. Had Dr. Eggman dropped it? Did he *know* he dropped it? Given that the emeralds were the physical manifestation of everything wrong with the universe, Sonic was surprised that the doctor would be so careless with them. Wouldn't this new, evil, Dr. Eggman want to use these emeralds in some way? Or did he no longer care?

Regardless, Sonic held onto it and sped off to the next destination on his path -- The Marble Zone.

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The Green Hill Zone wasn't the only area that had been cordoned off due to radiation. There were many places all over this world that had been tainted by the fallout of war and corporate greed, left to rot in whatever new ways the chemicals created. Sometimes these places looked nice, with green grass and blue skies -- all technicolored like some child's drawing -- but they were all just as toxic as ever. The government gave these places codes, numbers to designate them by in some file on some old computer in some lab somewhere, but it was the people who gave these places names.

And close to the Green Hill Zone, was the Marble Zone. It used to be a sprawling city, full of museums and churches and great big stone places like that. But that's all that was left it now, the stones. Well, the stone and the

moss that covers it. This place was somewhere people couldn't go anymore, the air no longer fit for their lungs. But Sonic and the other animals of the modern age were different. They were born into this, almost just as radioactive and mutated as the land. Some animals still lived near humans for food purposes, but they were also the only things that could survive out in these sectioned off zones.

And yet, as Sonic passed the marker signifying that he'd entered the Marble Zone, he noticed he didn't see a single living creature in the area. The whole place was just as bright and colorful as anywhere else, but nothing seemed to be living here. After a minute or so of running through the area however, he discovered why.

He came to a large crack in the earth, probably having broken apart from Dr. Eggman's mobile lab. At the bottom of that crack however, was no cave or river or anything like that, but instead a steady flow of burning lava.

"Eesh," Sonic scoffed. "No wonder no one comes around here anymore." He hopped over the chasm. "Still, not anything a good gift shop couldn't fix."

He carried on, jumping over the marble structures or just running around them. He couldn't see any sign of the lab still, or Eggman himself, but he knew he was nearby. After a while he found a few more scattered robotic animals with real animals trapped inside. It seemed Eggman was still at it. Why that was though Sonic had no idea, but if he had to guess, he figured Eggman didn't know either. His mind was so twisted from the chaos emeralds that he was obviously not thinking clearly.

At least he knew that if he kept up the pace, he'd reach Eggman eventually.

I can't be that far behind the mobile lab, right? Sonic worried as he continued running. He'd spent a lot more time than he'd have liked helping out the creatures stuffed into robots, but an enormous lab couldn't move very fast, right? He wouldn't thought he either passed it or was going the wrong way if he weren't literally following in it's footsteps. He was just jumping in, out, and over the great pits the lab made in the ground as it traveled, so Sonic was definitely going the right way.

Or at least he thought he was, but suddenly the tracks disappeared and the plains were flat, the marble structures becoming more scarce. Sonic put his hands on his hips and stopped dead, looking out at the horizon. *Where could that base have gone?* he thought. *Knowing Eggman... Knowing Kintobor, he'd probably built some flying mechanism into it. I wouldn't be surprised...*

He shook his head, figuring he'd just continue in the same direction anyway.

That is, until he saw another sparkling light not too far from him. He hurried over and the same dizzying feeling took over him as the lights began to blind him. Now that he knew what it was and what he was doing though, he let the chaos emerald take over.

Once again Sonic was spinning out of control, solid blocks of colored lights bashing into him and sending him flying in every direction. But he knew what he was looking for this time. He curled into a ball and rode the winds that spun him around, but kept his eyes open, watching for that glistening little speck amidst the chaos.

There!

He sprung out of ball form and kicked off a colored block, aiming directly for the chaos emerald which

remained still in the center of everything. But before Sonic could reach it, something big slammed into him, sending him spiraling further away.

Fine! Sonic growled, tucking back into himself. *I'll just have to try again!*

He tried several times, and every time he got close something pushed him away again. It was starting to get frustrating, considering that the first time he *didn't* know what he was doing, yet getting to the chaos emerald was fairly easy. This time it seemed like there was something he was missing. Was the first time a fluke?

Sonic grabbed hold of a colored block, but it disappeared in an instant. In fact, now that he was paying attention to it, every block that came into contact within him disappeared almost immediately afterwards. Other blocks kept appearing at random all around him though, popping up out of know where and swirling around the chaos emerald in a massive tornado.

Okay, how 'bout I just ride the storm? Sonic thought. He tumbled for a moment until he could steady himself in the air, then waited for a block to come closer. He used the moment before it disappeared to push off of it in the direction the winds were taking him. Working his way through like this, he moved from block to block in the direction they were all spinning, kicking off of them before the disappeared, and finally made it to the center.

Sonic grabbed hold of the emerald, and the lights enveloped him all over again.

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"I see you're still on my tail!" Eggman cackled. "That's fine, a love a good chase!"

Sonic lay on his back as he cracked his eyes open. He groaned in pain, then froze, realizing his hands were

empty.

"Looking for these?" Eggman taunted from above him. "I thought I lost these! So glad you could reunite me with them. If you find the others I'd be glad to take them off your hands!"

Sonic grit his teeth, looking up at Eggman who floated in his hovercraft. "Give them back," he said firmly, jumping to his feet. "Whatever you're thinking-"

"I'm thinking... hmmm," Eggman stroked his mustache. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and pointed at the sky. "I got it! I'll use the chaos emeralds -- and all the evil they contain -- and- and... *blow something up!*" He cackled maniacally. "I just need to rebuild that machine, and power it up again! Then I'll turn it on and show those fools who's boss!"

"I can't let you do that!" Sonic jumped at Eggman, ramming into the hovercraft. Eggman swatted him away however, and large spikes protruded from the hovercraft.

"I thought you'd try something like that!" Eggman laughed. "This time you won't get the best of me! I've got my plans, but you're in the way... it seems I have to skin *you* before I can skin *them*." He rammed forward, rockets on the back allowing him to move quickly.

Sonic jumped out of the way, but he wasn't expecting the machine to start blasting fire. He got caught in the flames for a moment, but he moved fast enough to put them out. The craft spun, Eggman staying stationary in the center, laughing in excitement as he anticipated Sonic's demise.

"I broke you're last toy," Sonic grunted, kicking off the ground. "I'll break this one too!" He slammed down on top of Eggman's open canopy, punching him in the face. Eggman reeled backwards and Sonic quickly started messing with the controls, snapping levers and pressing buttons.

"Enough!" Eggman shouted, punching Sonic. Sonic dodged again and instead Eggman punched his own console, denting it.

Sonic jumped away as the machine started sparking like it did last time. He would have kept fighting, now would've been the time too, but something stopped him. The way Eggman broke his own machine with a single punch. Those chaos emeralds didn't just mutate him or break his mind... they made him stronger.

He looked down at the two he'd obtained -- the two he'd stolen back from Eggman before jumping away -- and wondered what kind of power they really had. And by the time he looked back up, Eggman was already gone, running away to lick his wounds.

"I..." he tightened his grip on the emeralds, wanting nothing more than to crush them with his bare hands. But he knew that would mean destroying the one chance he had at bringing Eggman back. He stared off in the direction he knew Eggman had gone. "... I won't let it get any worse."

Sonic ran off after Eggman, next stop... Spring Yard Zone.



Eggman dropped out of the hovercraft as it fell to the ground. He kicked it and a panel exploded, sending a burst of flames out. Eggman huffed, crossing his arms. "That pesky hedgehog is getting on my nerves..." He shrugged, walking away from the broken machine. "But that's okay! I have plenty of other problems to take up my time!"

The hovercraft fell backwards off the edge of the mobile lab's hanger, tumbling to the ground, and Eggman walked through the lab. He stopped at the terrarium, looking through the window at all the little animals he'd

had trapped. He kept finding new ones. Sometimes, anyway. Other times he could've sworn he'd put the animals somewhere, but he kept forgetting where. He pictured the furry little buggers trapped in a cage, locked somewhere no one would find them.

He smiled and tapped on the window, all the little animals inside watching him with weary eyes. "Are you afraid of me?" he smiled. "Are you scared of the things I can turn you into? Ha! Hahaha! Ahhh... Don't worry." He patted the window and walked away. "You'll all find peace soon."



CHAPTER 3: **THE SPRING YARD ZONE**

Spring Yard. An old city in the center of Nebraska, just a few miles from Hardly. Massive nuclear reactors used to power the city, but most of them were shut down a long time ago. Since then, the city has been just as radioactive as the zones around it, which is why the people have called it the Spring Yard Zone instead of just Spring Yard. A few people even still lived in the city, squatters mostly, people who were already sick or had nowhere else to go. Otherwise, it belonged to the animals of the surrounding areas, those just as toxic as the land.

Sonic didn't feel like running through the entire city looking for Eggman, and besides that he didn't feel like this was where Eggman was headed. He always spoke of some of the bigger cities whenever he talked about his former colleagues, and while this used to be a massive city full of people, that was too long ago for it to be relevant to Eggman. There's no one here for him, so he wouldn't be here for anyone else.

What that meant though, was that Sonic now had no idea which way he needed to go. He'd tailed Eggman this far, but without a proper trail to follow he'd finally hit a dead end.

"Where to go from here?" Sonic wondered. It hadn't been that long since he'd started giving chase to Eggman back near Hardly, but looking at the sky now it was already getting dark. "Mom'll be worried... She'll know I've been home and didn't say anything... But they'll understand when

I get back that I couldn't stop, right?"

He looked over his shoulder, trying to convince himself he wasn't worried about being this far from home in unfamiliar territory.

"They'll understand," he told himself, looking back to the city. "I just need to find someone who can lead me to Eggman." He sped off to continue his search.

"... And you're positive?"

"Absolutely, there's no doubt here."

"... He's really resurfaced? You're *sure* it's him?"

"Yes general. Dr. Kintobor's lab was spotted near Spring Yard. Rumor has it he's headed here."

"And what of his research?"

"We don't know. The only information we have is confirming his last known location. Other than that, we only know that he's back."

"... Put us on yellow alert. I want to know as soon as he's in the area."

"Of course, general."

Tap *tap* *tap*

Slam!

"... Dr. Kintobor... the mad scientist... what are you planning?"

Street lights flickered below as Sonic ran along the steel grate catwalks that ran over them. He planned to stay to the rooftops so he could see more of the city at once, but he couldn't see much more here than he could on the ground. Everything was so close together, the buildings all towering over the roads far far below. And even ground

level wasn't technically ground level. There was an entire underground infrastructure that ran under the entire city. He'd considered going there for a moment, just to see what he could see, but he knew Eggman wouldn't have gone there.

But where would he have gone? Sonic asked, standing on the edge of one of the taller buildings. *Would he have just gone right by? But in what direction?* If he had to guess, it was probably as simple as just going in the same direction he had been before, but at the same time Spring Yard wasn't a straight shot from Hardly, not if you went through the Green Hill Zone and then the Marble Zone. Green Hill Zone was northeast of Hardly, but then it was east to Marble Zone, and then directly north to Spring Yard. Eggman seemed to be working his way *somewhere* northeast-ish, but not moving in a straight line.

Meaning, if Sonic wanted to stop him before he reached his destination, he had to get to him *now*.

Sonic stomped his foot hard on the concrete ledge that lined the roof. "Then again, you seem to be keeping an eye on me," he glared out at the city, really hoping Eggman was paying attention. "Hey Eggman! You here!? Come on out!"

No reply.

Sonic took a step back. "Staying away," he muttered. "... Screw it." He cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. "Has anyone seen an enormous flying laboratory!?"

Some furry little thing popped its head up from behind an AC unit behind Sonic. "That way!"

Sonic whipped his head around and caught the creature pointing southeast. It immediately ducked its head back into hiding.

"So I'm not the only animal that can talk to humans," Sonic smiled. "Thanks for the help!" He sped off,

following the creature's directions and hoping they were accurate. They had to be, they were all he had.

"Hey Eggman! You here!? Come one out!?"

Eggman chuckled, clicking off his speakers. His invisible drones tailing Sonic were sending back audio and visual so Eggman could keep track of him, otherwise he'd be too much of a nuisance. And if Sonic was a nuisance, Eggman couldn't get his work done! And he couldn't have that.

"I'll send something to deal with you," Eggman grinned, clicking a few buttons on his console. "See what you think of this!"

At the back of the laboratory's exterior a hanger door opened, and another of Eggman's hovercrafts floated out. Piloting it however, was a robotic version of Eggman. It flew off back to Spring Yard, while the real Eggman sat at the helm of his mobile base and watched from his screens.

Sonic jumped off the edge of a roof at the end of the city, dropping from building to building until he was back on solid ground, then he took off down the highway. He continued following the directions from earlier, heading southeast. As he ran though, he began to feel dizzy again. For a moment, he'd forgotten what caused that, then stopped dead in his tracks to search for the point of light that would lead him to the next chaos emerald.

Any more of these things would be a pain to carry though, Sonic thought, both of his hands each holding an emerald already. *I should've grabbed something in the city*

to help-WHOA!!

Suddenly the emeralds phased down through his hands.

He jumped back in surprise and shook his hands violently, wanting the emeralds to leave him. They forcibly ejected themselves from his palms, landing in the coarse grass by the side of the road. Sonic picked them back up and looked them over. They remained as solid as ever, sparkling in the moonlight.

He gripped them tightly, expecting them to either morph into his hands again or at least shatter. But nothing happened.

"Strange," Sonic thought. "But... if I can take them out whenever I need to..." He thought the same thought as before -- that carrying them would be more trouble than they were worth -- and suddenly they phased through his open palms again.

It gave him a sickly feeling, like suddenly evil disgusting thought or action were running through his head, but sealed behind a blurry glass wall. He could see them, but couldn't distinguish them, and the only thing keeping them away from himself was a frail wall.

"Just don't tap the wall," Sonic told himself. "Get the rest, stop Eggman, and they'll be gone." He sped off towards the next emerald. "Shouldn't take another day."

He reached for the point of light before him, letting it take him over.

Sonic opened his eyes already kneeling on a colored block of pure light, winds whipping around him. Everything spun around him, but this time none of it was in the same direction. Just as well, not only were the winds stronger but if the blocks didn't disappear with his touch

then they were more in the way than they were before. But at the very least, he could see the emerald at the center of the storm, he just had to get to it.

There's a strategy here, Sonic decided. The first time was like the prologue to a book; it told you what to expect, introducing you to the concept. The second time there had to be thought put into it, you had to make yourself understand the situation without just diving right in. This time was taking it to the next level.

So what was the strategy here? His first thought was just, don't get hurt, don't get hit. Those blocks of light hurt even for the brief moment they existed, but these weren't going to go away, which means they'll hurt more and for longer. But, if he used the same strategy as before, moving *with* the blocks, he might be able to catch ahold of them as they moved instead of them attacking him.

Putting his plan into motion, he watched the blocks in front of him and tried to match their speed, skidding his feet across the surface of the block while gripping its edge. Then he let go and launched himself with the power of the winds and his own increased speed. He flew through the storm, twirling back around and gliding the winds beside another block. He grabbed it easily, but he could see that the closer he got to the emerald the faster things moved.

But he tried to work his plan again, moving his feet and gripping the edge of the block, then letting go and flying. This time however, he hadn't matched the next block's speed and crashed right into it. It threw him sideways, and the winds carried him against his will. Once again he was forced to curl into a ball to save his life, but this time he couldn't even keep his eyes open more than a crack, as the pain of slamming into everything kept causing him to wince.

He growled in annoyance and yelped every time he hit anything, just trying to get his bearings. It all looked

like nonsense now, things flying in blurs around him with no rhyme or reason. Whatever pattern he thought he had was-

tink

"Huh?" Sonic mumbled. He opened his eyes, finding himself momentarily stationary at the center of the storm, his forehead having tapped against the emerald. The force of the storm had been slowly pulling him inward. Sure it caused some damage, but it did the trick!

Before he could react however, now that he was in the center the force had reversed, pulling him back into the storm. He swiped his arms out in front of him, reaching for the emerald as it slipped away from him. "No!" he shouted, having been so close. "No! It was right there! I had it!"

He focused, gritting his teeth and bracing himself. He'd only have a fraction of a second, but for Sonic -- at full speed -- that was an eternity. *I have all the time in the world*, he told himself. He stared intently directly at the emerald and paid attention to only the blocks of light directly behind him.

And the instant he felt his feet touch one of the blocks, he shoved off of it, launching himself back towards the emerald.

He snatched it out of the air, and this storm world fell away into blinding white light.

This time Sonic woke sitting at the edge of the city, leaning against the brick wall that lined the outer streets that led out of town. He brushed himself off, wondering how he got put back here. When he convinced himself to shove those thoughts out of his head, figuring that for now it would just be a waste of time knowing he wouldn't find an answer, he turned his attention to the third emerald he

now held in his hand.

The first had been purple, the second yellow, and this one was blue. Of the ones that Robotnik had had when he was Kintobor, Sonic was only missing three more; red, green, and teal. Neither he nor Eggman knew where the final emerald was however, the Grey Emerald.

Worry about that later, Sonic told himself, gripping this new emerald. It phased into his hand like the others and overwhelmed him with a sickly feeling. He'd before like the power of the chaos emeralds were locked behind nothing more than a glass wall in his mind, and with this third emerald... he felt the wall crack. Just a sliver, denting the surface of that wall.

It's fine, Sonic thought. *Soon enough I'll be rid of all of them.*

He grit his teeth and started running down the highway, but he didn't get far before he heard a familiar sound. The sound of the hovercraft's engines rumbling as the floating pod came flying towards him down the highway.

"Eggman!" Sonic shouted angrily. He charged forward, but as he got closer he noticed there wasn't a person sitting in the hovercraft, but a robot instead, modeled after Eggman. "... Couldn't meet me yourself, so you sent some robo-faker to slow me down?"

The robot didn't respond, probably incapable of doing so. But it did focus on Sonic and as soon as it was close enough, a large spike protruded from beneath it and it came crashing down on top of Sonic. Of course Sonic was fast enough to dodge, but only barely. This thing moved fast and caught him unprepared. Just so long as it moved in any kind of pattern-

Crack!

The machine crashed into the ground, breaking apart the street and sending Sonic reeling backwards. It

attacked again and again in succession, not wasting a second of movement. It jerked sporadically, creating jagged fissures in the ground. Sonic kept jumping back, trying to get a fix on what this thing was.

Finally Sonic figured he'd just work his tried and true tactic of jumping at it. He landed on top and tore and the controls, shoving the robot out of the way. It didn't really fight back, but trying to stay on top of the hovercraft was like trying to stay on the back of a bull. And when he broke the controls the whole thing started spinning and Sonic was forced to get off.

He skid across the ground and watched the thing go up in flames. It tipped over and hit the ground, blowing apart. Sonic dodged the shrapnel and ducked away from the flames, and eventually left it there in the middle of the broken street to carry on.

Headed southeast, towards the Labyrinth Zone, Sonic hoped he could at last stop Eggman before he caused anymore damage.



CHAPTER 4: **THE LABYRINTH ZONE**

Everyone knew about the Labyrinth Zone. They were a series of ancient caverns that ran under the mountain range in the center of Nebraska. Limestone bricks made up most of the structure, but large crystals grew through the whole thing, breaking it all up. It was a dangerous place to be in, and like most areas around here it was best to avoid it altogether, especially considering those crystals were only formed due to the incredible amount of radiation the mountains had absorbed. Humans were unable to survive in many of the Zones, but here would mean a slow and painful death for even some of the animals.

That's why Sonic chose to go *around* Labyrinth Zone instead of through it, considering going through those caves was entirely unnecessary. Eggman was headed somewhere passed those mountains, not into them. So Sonic would follow.

Or at least, that was his plan. Eggman however, planned something different. He'd laid traps for Sonic, mines. As soon as Sonic got anywhere near the mountain they started going off, blowing up around him. He had to keep moving, dodging each explosion and not stopping for a second. Every step caused something to go off around him, and eventually they led him directly into the mines, but the explosions sealed the exit off behind him.

He was going to have to work his way through the mountain if he wanted to get out.

Sonic held a paw over his hand, as if that was that supposed to keep him from breathing in whatever chemicals irradiated off the crystals. The cavern led downwards, deeper into the mountains, only the crystals lighting his way. At least the path seemed to be linear, only moving in one direction with no alternate paths to confuse him. In fact, the whole thing felt more like a long hallway carved out by someone who had nothing better to do than anything else.

He might've been fine if it were just that, but then he came to a collapsed part of the hall that was fully submerged in murky green water. He'd never liked water in the first place, but this was where he had to draw the line. A) he couldn't swim, and B) the water was *disgusting*.

But as pointed out before, there was nowhere else to go.

Sonic dipped hovered his foot over the water. He didn't want to get his shoes wet either, but if he were going to make it through -- if he were going to make it out of the cave -- he'd have to make some sacrifices. So he forced himself to step into the water, the loose ground sloshing beneath his foot. He wasn't quite sure what he was stepping in, but he tried not to think too hard about it. All he knew was it smelled like a clogged toilet and left it at that.

Okay, just move quickly through it, keep your eyes closed, hold your breath... Yeah, okay... And... GO!

Sonic remained still, staring at the water. "And... go!" He tapped his foot, the one still on dry land. "Yeah there's gotta be a better way."

He turned and started walking back the way he came from. Then he immediately turned back to the water knowing there wasn't any other way to go. He stared at the water, lightly kicking a pebble into it that caused a short

ripple. Deciding there really was no other way, he had an idea.

Sonic raced back a ways down the hall, stopping and turning back when he'd gone far enough. Then he ran full speed down the hall towards the water. He figured the best way was to just get it over with and dive right in, running through it all until he reached the end. Also it might not have an end. It might dead end underwater and he'd be trapped. He might go too far and not be able to come back. Also he might not be able to see anything. Also it still smelled horrible.

Sonic skid to a stop just outside the water's reach. He crossed his arms and sighed, not sure at *all* what he was supposed to do here. There were still crystals underwater, so he supposed he would still be able to see, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't know how much of the hallway was underwater.

What did change was that the more he thought about it, the sicker he got. And when he realized that that sickness might be being caused by the radiation, he figured he'd have to just go for it and hope for the best.

So once again he raced back and charged up, planting his feet firmly on the ground. He sped down the hallway, took a deep breath, shut his eyes... and crashed right into the water.

A heavy splash was silenced behind him as the water rushed into ears, and in an instant he was too far away to have heard anything anyway. He pushed his way down turns, feeling sluggish in the thick water. Having lived behind a rotten fast food joint his whole life he knew what it was like living in garbage, but this was a whole new level of wrong. It was like running through a dump that had been liquefied and cooled. The water got colder and colder the more into it he got, but the seaweed (at least he hoped it was seaweed) and the rot and the moss and the literal heaps

of garbage only increased.

He had almost no traction on the ground, but so long as he kept moving at super speeds he could practically flay through the water. And keeping a pained eye cracked open, he managed to make it to the other side of the submerged section of the hallway.

Sonic rocketed out of the water, launching himself down the hall and air-drying. He pulled the garbage out of his quills and pried the seaweed off his arms and legs, then looked at his shoes. They were intact, completely, already dry as well. Robotnik knew what he was doing when he made them it seemed, and despite the current circumstances, Sonic smiled. He allowed himself to take a brief moment to remember the good times, before he was running through ancient sewers.

But when that moment passed and he felt things dripping down his neck again he let out a sudden yelp as all of his nerves shook. He grit his teeth, clenched his fists, and forced his muscles to relax as he stepped out from under the leaking roof.

...

"Wait, leaking?" Sonic looked up at the water dripping from the ceiling. There shouldn't be water above him... and it shouldn't be dripping faster and faster by the second.

This time Sonic didn't wait for something to happen, and moved not a moment too soon. The ceiling broke and a flood of water can rushing down at him. Sonic fled from the rising tide as the remainder of the hallway became as submerged as the lower section. He came to a vertical chamber at the end of the hallway and jumped up to a low ledge as the water crashed into the wall on the far side.

But it wasn't done. The water continued to rise, and quickly. The way it looked, the vertical chamber used to be

a large staircase, but there were only bits of slanted platforms left. It would have to be enough though, the water had already reached him.

He jumped at the wall and pushed off of it, propelling himself towards the next platform. Even as he reached it the water had risen back to his feet. He jumped off the wall again to the next platform but the water was at his knees. It was swirling around him, knocking him off his feet. He held tightly to the wall to keep his balance but he couldn't stay still for long, he moved upwards as quickly as he could, but the higher he got the further apart the platforms became.

Sonic struggled to find his footing, finally seeing a window of light at the top of the broken stairwell. The waters pulled him under time and time again, and it was everything he could do to keep his head above the surface. He couldn't find the platforms anymore, by the time he reached one the water was already well passed it, pulling him along and under again and again.

Until finally... it stopped.

The water stopped rising, and Sonic held on for dear life to the edge of a platform. He risked standing on top of it, getting out of the water which was even with the top of the platform. It lapped over the edges, splashing his feet, but it was done rising.

Sonic breathed a sigh of relief, wishing he could relax at last, but he still wasn't out of it yet. The window of light at the top of the chamber was considerably closer now, all he had to do was reach it. So taking a moment to let his muscles rest, he looked up at the remaining platforms. Mapping out his escape route, he readied himself.

He jumped at the wall and kicked off, rolling across the next platform and moving right into another jump. Kicking off from wall to wall, he finally reached the top.

He rolled onto his back in the tall grass, on solid, dry ground at long last.

He'd made it to the other side of the mountain -- he'd made it *through* the mountain. Sonic couldn't imagine having to face something worse than that, but he knew that if Eggman would lead him here then he could have something worse up his sleeve.

So as much as I want a break, Sonic huffed, getting up and holding himself steady. *Then I don't have time to sit around*. He looked out southeast, hoping to see some sign of Eggman or his mobile lab. Of course, there wouldn't be, but he did see something else that he'd come to expect.

The next point of light that would take him to the next emerald sat in the middle of the field before him.



Drat! Eggman cursed, slamming a fist down on his console, denting it and sending a few sparks flying. *I REALLY thought I had him!* He stroked his mustache, watching the screen. "It seems you've found another one of my emeralds! I wondered where those things kept disappearing off to! I suppose it's a good thing you're so adamant about staying on my tail. You'll bring them to me yourself!"

Eggman laughed, clapping his hands as he turned away from the monitor. He skipped across the room and then down the hall, into another room. He pulled up a chair and sat beside the large machine. It hummed with electricity, but it wasn't working properly yet. The Reverse Quantum BioFormulator was still connected to the rings that had been dislodged and misplaced. It would work fine without them, but he couldn't risk someone reversing the connection. If someone got ahold of those rings, they could use the machine separately from the lab!

Patting the machine, Eggman clicked on the computer. "But I don't suppose it'll matter much," he decided. "Not until it's too late, that is." He smiled widely, his twisted grin reflected in the computer's monitor. "What a lovely face! Ha! Hahaha!"

Sonic woke with the green emerald in hand, the world still spinning around him. He was glad to be out of that storm world again, but as he got back on his feet he noticed something off. This wasn't the field he'd found the emerald in, it had taken him somewhere else. Last time the emerald had taken him back to the city's edge, but this time it took him somewhere completely different.

No, not entirely, Sonic realized, finally spotting the mountain range in the distance. He was quite a ways away from where he found the emerald, but it was only a couple of miles. If they kept teleporting him like this it might pose a problem later. He didn't want to know what would happen if they teleported him too far.

And besides all that, he could feel that wall in his mind take another hit as he absorbed this new emerald. He didn't want to know what would happen if the wall broke either.

So forcing those thoughts away, he turned to where the emerald had taken him -- a city, much like Spring Yard, but a lot more industrial. Great big machines and railways took up much of the space in the city, all wrapped around the towering buildings.

Star Light City, dubbed Star Light Zone because it was so close to the other radioactive areas nearby, but it was one of the few places in Nebraska that *wasn't* radioactive. People still lived here, leading happy lives like those Sonic knew back in Hardly.

Eggman would be able to hide his base here easily, if he were here at all. Sonic felt he could trust the where the emeralds were taking him though, but considering he had nothing else to go off of, maybe he was just kidding himself. Either way, if this was his only direction right now, he headed into Star Light City.



CHAPTER 5: THE STAR LIGHT ZONE

"..."

"General?"

"... What do you make of this?"

"I have no idea sir."

"This... *thing*, has been following him the whole way from Hardly. He blips out of existence some times, only to show up a moment later somewhere else."

"Is he just moving too fast to keep track of?"

"He must be. His natural speed is already incredible, but to move faster than light..."

"And what does that mean... exactly? If he's following Dr. Kintobor-"

"He's an enemy of Kintobor, that much is certain. I feel our furry little friend might be helping us without even knowing. Maybe he knows how dangerous the man is and is trying to stop him, or perhaps it's just natural animal curiosity. I don't know."

"Can animals even think like that, sir? Differentiate between good and evil? I mean, I know experiments were done to the inhabitants down there, but this... His actions look almost..."

"Human, yes..." *Shift* *Chair squeaking* *Tap* *Tap* *Tap* "Here, look at this. Our sensors have been mapping him for the last few hours. Yes, hours. He's made a lot of progress in such a short amount of time, making his way from Hardly, all the way to Star Light City..."

"General this is... wasn't this exactly what we were

looking for? These are the results we wanted... right?"

"Yes. And I can't wait to see the looks on their faces. I can't wait to see Kintobor's face, when he realizes he'd been the experiment this whole time."



Sonic smiled, grinding down the long rails, sparks flying behind him and air rushing up at him as he built up momentum. At the end of it, the rail clipped upwards and Sonic launched himself through the city streets. He didn't know who constructed this city, but it felt like it was built just for him. It was like the whole thing was designed with parkour in mind, so getting around meant running, jumping, and flipping through and around everything.

It was easy to get lost the lower you went, so every now and then he'd find a way to fling himself back into the air above the rooftops. He'd spin in place, getting a good look at everything all at once before falling back down and going to investigate anything he thought he saw that seemed off. A few times he could've sworn he'd seen Eggman's base, but it only ended up being some office building or building sized generator.

He asked around on the lower streets where the people walked if anyone had seen Eggman or his base, but it turned out none of them wanted to talk to a talking animal. Most people started running as soon as they saw him, others just froze up like a deer in headlights as soon as he'd say anything. Just as well, there didn't seem to be any animals around either, short of a few rats that scurried here or there.

On the bright side, the food here was good, and apparently free if you were a talking blue hedgehog and it was Tuesday. Chili-dogs were his favorite, he decided, if for no other reason than the look on the man's face when he

handed Sonic his food. He wondered if after all this was over he could bring some of this food home to his family.

He swallowed the last of his food. "Okay, no more screwing around," he put his fists on his hips and looked down at the city from one of the many skyscrapers. "If I were Eggman, where would I be?" He crossed his arms and tapped his foot. Eggman's moves were clearly sporadic, but it was getting impossible to figure out where he was headed. Sonic wished he'd asked where exactly Eggman's former colleagues actually were, then Sonic would just head there directly and get there before Eggman. But as it stood now, he'd basically have to just run at top speed aimlessly in every direction in the hopes that he'd eventually find Eggman's mobile lab. "And that's no good," Sonic sighed, dropping his arms.

Or apparently he only needed to wait for Eggman to show himself.

"You're really getting on my nerves!" Eggman barked, hovering behind him.

"There you are!" Sonic shouted back, preparing to attack.

"I'm done fighting you, Sonic," Eggman admitted, holding up a hand to keep Sonic from jumping at him again. "In fact, I've actually come to *ask* you something."

"Ask me something?" Sonic stood up a little straighter, confused. "Ask what?"

"Do you know where I'm going?" Eggman asked.

"Are you asking for directions?" Sonic asked slowly. "Or, are you asking if I just know where you're going? Cause I don't, by the way."

Eggman lowered his pod, coming a little closer to Sonic. "I'm headed to the main country," he answered. "America."

Sonic tilted his head, more confused than ever now. "You... really have lost it, haven't you. Dr. K- er, Robotnik,

Eggman... Dude, we're in Nebraska. We're *in* America."

Eggman laughed. "Not at all! It's what the people here believe, because it's what they've been told!" He lowered the pod again and stepped out, landing hard on the ground but at least on both feet. He stood in front of Sonic. "Years ago, a group of scientists got together and came up with an idea--" He walked passed Sonic and stood at the end of the roof, holding his hands out wide. "Let's douse a controlled group of civilians with radiation, and record the effects! Vats of radioactive chemicals were 'accidentally' spilled across designated areas, polluting the local population. But that's not all -- while the civilians learned to cope with their lesser brain-cells and withering bodies, the group of scientists lied to them. They wanted to know *exactly* how much they could get away with, and they convinced the entire control group that they lived in Nebraska!"

Turning back to Sonic with a huge grin on his face, Eggman folded his hands behind his back and finally said what he came here to say. "We're on an island, Sonic. South Island, to be exact. A little place no one would miss if they quarantined it."

Sonic shook his head. "You're delusional," he said. "Let me come back with you to the lab, and we'll try to figure out a way to reverse the effects--"

"No!" Eggman argued, clenching his fists. "I've never thought things more clearly! And you don't seem to understand! I was a *part* of that scientific group! They banished me here when I began my search for the emeralds, but I've found most of them... I just need to bring them to them, and use them to obliterate them! They'll pay for abandoning me here! Leaving me here in this radiation filled cesspool!"

Sonic raised his hands, trying to calm down Eggman. "So take me with you!" he offered. "I mean, hey!

I was your assistant, remember? Let me help you."

Eggman shook his head, turning back to the city. "You act like I'm some child in need of scolding. But though this new form may be hideous, and my actions may appear irrational, I assure you, I've never been more clear about what I need to do."

"And what *is* that?!" Sonic demanded.

"Burn this island to the ground," Eggman growled. He turned and started back for his hovercraft. "Then America, then the rest of the world."

"You can't do that!" Sonic argued.

"I can and I will," Eggman grunted, sitting back down. "It is clear to me now that even with the emerald's powers this world will never be rid of it's evils! So I will destroy them all -- the people, and the animals that suffer the consequences."

"I'm just going to follow you," Sonic warned. "I'll go wherever *you* go."

"I'm counting on it!" Eggman chuckled, his hovercraft rising. "I only have one more stop before the end. I'll see you at Scrap Brain."

"Scrap Brain?" Sonic muttered as Eggman pattered off. He already started going after him again, but once again something pulled him away from just keeping on him. He noticed the point of light in a different direction than where Eggman was headed.

Sonic paused for a moment, watching Eggman leave. Finally he decided to go after the emerald, dropping off the roof and leaving the city.

He couldn't be telling the truth... could he? Sonic wondered as he traversed yet another emerald's storm world. He couldn't believe that such an experiment could be done, not on that big of a scale. It was always said that

the chemical dump was an accident, that there was an explosion or something else just as tragic... but this was worse. If Eggman was correct -- which Sonic had no proof of yet -- then *everything* he knew was a lie.

At the same time, it *could* just all be in Eggman's head and he's not as sane as he pretends to be. Maybe Eggman didn't *know* how badly the emeralds had broken him. Maybe... maybe Eggman was just a shell, with Kintobor trapped inside trying to make sense of everything.

But one thing stood out to Sonic -- Eggman said he was a part of the scientific team that created this experiment. That the ones who did this were his colleagues... Was that true? Was any of it true?

Sonic felt that if even *one* thing Eggman said was in anyway a fact, then that meant there was a lot more at stake here. There were people being experimented on... there were real villains who knows how many miles away, just watching them, letting them suffer. There were animals just like Sonic whose lives were actively being toyed with.

And that's the thought that irked him most.

He remembered the furry little creature back in Spring Yard. It had spoken English. It had understood, and then responded, even motioned like a person would. Were there more like him? Were there more like Sonic? What abilities did these animals gain besides speech?

And most importantly... how much danger is his family in if he doesn't stop all of this *now*?

Sonic grabbed the red emerald, ready to give chase to Dr. Eggman one last time.

Eggman watched the viewscreens, looking out at the vast body of water. It was the Gulf of Mexico, and just beyond it were the shores of Louisiana. He stood at the

console in his mobile lab, finally sitting it down on the beaches of South Island. Sonic would find the truth for himself in Scrap Brain, and until then Eggman could wait. He'd waited years already, waiting until the moment he could get revenge on his colleagues, he could wait an hour or so longer.

Until then, Eggman tried to keep his focus on the future. The machine was as repaired as it was going to be, but he still worried about those missing rings. If someone found them, they could connect to the machine, and activate it remotely... Luckily the only person who could do such a thing was Sonic, but he couldn't know about that... could he?

Eggman walked back to the Reverse Quantum BioFormulator and studied it. Sonic had only just discovered it's existence before the explosion, and he knew he hadn't told Sonic much of how it actually worked. That being said, Eggman knew just how smart that hedgehog was. Sonic was smart when he was still playing with the children in Hardly. After learning with Eggman, Sonic could've easily deduced how the machine truly functioned... couldn't he?

No, that would be silly! Eggman decided, laughing at himself for being so naive. "It doesn't matter how smart that hedgehog is, he couldn't *possibly* figure out the complex inner workings of the RQBF!"

Still, if there was even a chance that *someone* could hack into it, he couldn't activate it until the last minute. But it wouldn't matter... he would get as close to them as possible, take the emeralds from Sonic, and destroy everything they'd worked for. Those fools... if only they'd listened sooner... if only they hadn't called him mad! If only they hadn't called him crazy! Insane! Delusional! Stupid! Stupid! *Stupid!!*

WHACK!!

The electrical wiring in the wall fritzed, the steel dented slightly.

Eggman shook his hand, still sitting in his chair. He chuckled quietly to himself. Mad, yes... but never stupid. "I'll destroy all of them," he said to no one. "But it won't be enough... I *must* destroy the animals they have tainted as well... This world must be allowed to start over."



CHAPTER 6: **THE SCRAP BRAIN ZONE**

Cold. Heartless. Loud. These are the words that came to mind when Sonic arrived at Scrap Brain. It was a manufacturing district made of machines that pumped out more machines to built machines that repaired and built more machines. It was self sustaining, and self defeating. The only things that needed power here were the machines that generated that power.

The whole site was originally intended to be something of a super power plant, designed to sustain multiple civilizations forever. Never ending power. But if you stripped it all away, they essentially tapped both ends of a paperclip to both ends of a battery, creating a closed loop. It fed itself, supercharging and heating itself. Everything else siphoned off the power to help sustain it, feeding energy back into it, taking it out, cooling it off, etc. But this wasn't just a battery connected to a paperclip, of course, it was several nuclear reactors, each forever on the verge of self destruct. It was abandoned a *long* time ago, left to it's own devices.

And Sonic had no idea what it was Eggman sent him here for. He *thought* Eggman was *meeting* him here, but he was nowhere to be found. Sonic figured maybe Eggman was either lying or that he forgot. It's not like Eggman was in the right frame of mind -- at least that's what Sonic assumed -- so he probably got distracted or changed his mind on a whim.

"And now I've lost sight of him again," Sonic

huffed. "Maybe he sent me here as a diversion." He shook his head, trying to work everything through in his thoughts. "No, he's not all gone. There has to be a reason why he sent me here." He dashed off into the manufacturing district of Scrap Brain. "I'll find it... whatever it is you want me to see."

Sonic zipped through and around every part of every facility on site, moving at top speed for longer than he'd ever gone before. To him it felt like hours, but in reality it was barely fifteen minutes. He found no sign that Eggman had been here or that he would come here at all, and he found nothing that looked like it was something Sonic wanted him to see.

All he found was old machines in disrepair, and other machines desperately trying to fix them. The whole site was a mess of oil stains, grease fires, fallen rusted metal, and black smoke that made the air reek of acid. Noises rang constantly, disorienting him. Sounds like chains rattling, steel beams falling, pistons firing and other noises he couldn't identify.

Eventually he found himself standing on top of a short building, the only actual building, an office building, located at the center of it all. Everything else towered above him, spreading out in a great circle of controlled chaos. And that was when Sonic thought he figured out what Eggman had sent him here for.

He wanted me to see this place for myself, Sonic realized. *Not some hidden message located somewhere in the middle of this mess, but the obvious; the entirety of Scrap Brain.*

This whole facility was a testament to how terrible Humans can be. It was nothing but a self sustaining *death*

machine. It would continue to spread outward, destroying and crushing and suffocating everything in its path, unless some outside force shut the whole thing down. Eggman wanted Sonic to see Scrap Brain as the reason for his going after his colleagues, the reason he was going to destroy all of Humanity.

At least, that's all Sonic could think of. At this point he was only guessing at what Eggman could possibly be thinking. But in the end it didn't matter. Looking at Scrap Brain -- the monstrosity that it is -- Sonic realized that whatever Eggman's motives were, clearly there was a bigger problem here. Regardless of whatever Eggman was thinking, Nebraska or South Island or wherever Sonic was now had been hit with a massive dose of radiation. And accident or not, it had a grand and terrible impact on the people of this area, and possibly the surrounding areas as well.

And *that* was Human error. Humans caused that. *Humans* hurt people and animals alike, twisting them into...

Sonic looked at himself, at his blue fur and quills. Eggman had said it was due to his speed that turned him blue, but the more he learned of Eggman's past, Sonic felt he hadn't known Kintobor as well as he thought he had. And the speed was due to his mutation via radiation anyway, so what he was now -- a blue speeding bipedal hedgehog -- was due to Humans screwing with nature.

He looked up at the swirling black clouds above him. *This world is too big for me*, Sonic thought. *I don't think I understand it at all*. He picked up his feet and started for the site's exit. *But even if Eggman is right... even if the Humans are at fault here... even if the animals didn't choose to be like this... Humans were hurt too, and I can't let Eggman hurt anyone else*.

It was time to end this once and for all.

As Sonic reached the end of the city, he headed for

the point of light that marked the final emerald, hoping it would take him to Eggman.

"So you've found your answers," Eggman chuckled, watching Sonic through the monitors. "*And* you've found me the last emerald!" Sonic disappeared for a moment in a flash of light. "They seem to be taking you closer to me lately, but that's fine. It's about time we hashed this out like civilized people!"

He walked away from the monitor and towards a separate console. "Of course," he sighed. "If you've found your answer than you -- as a virtuous being -- will be coming here to stop me. You will know the truth, but you will not understand it." He pressed a few buttons on the console and automated steel doors began slamming shut. "So I'll give myself time to explain." He activated the defenses. He knew Sonic would work his way passed them, but he only needed to slow him down long enough to talk. "And by then, we'll have reached the mainland... and it will at last be too late."

"He's stopped."

"So he has. Any sign of him moving soon?"

"He seems to have activated some kind of defense mechanism. All we know is that he's blocking us out. Jamming every kind of electronic signal, and he's boarded himself in. We have no visual in or around his base. It's like someone burned a hole in the map."

"... He's going on the defensive. And what about that blue speedster?"

"He blipped out again, but he's back, headed for Dr.

Kintobor's base. I kinda feel bad for the little guy."

"If Kintobor's on the defensive, this little guy doesn't stand a chance... any way we could assist?"

"You want to intervene? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of this whole thing? Er- sorry, I don't mean to question orders."

"You're fine. And you're right, I suppose. Still, it would be unfortunate if such a resounding success was shot down by a madman."

"... I could try some kind of EMP if you think that would help."

"If you would be so kind."

"I'll get right on that." *tap* *tap* *tap* *tap*
shut

"... And if our sensors are correct... it seems that creature has collected the last of Kintobor's 'emeralds'. Good, maybe he can show Kintobor just how useless they really are."



Sonic could see Eggman's base in the distance. It sat on the beach overlooking a large body of water. Sonic wanted to believe it was just a normal lake... but if what Eggman said was true then this was the Gulf of Mexico, and on the other side... the world Sonic thought he lived in.

He reached the base, looking up at the superstructure he'd called home for the winter. He'd finally caught up with it. Somewhere inside, Eggman was waiting. Dr. Kintobor, now Dr. Robotnik, now Dr. Eggman... Somewhere under all those layers of broken minds was his friend, and Sonic planned on getting him out.

He could feel the emeralds pounding in his head, trying to break that glass wall, but Sonic held his ground. He wasn't going to let them out until he needed them, and

after that he'd be rid of them forever. For now, he'd just have to deal with it. He hoped that maybe, he could use their power to free Kintobor... bring him back.

And if that doesn't work... Sonic shook his head, walking towards the base, anger in his eyes. *No, it will work... It HAS to.*

There is no other option.



CHAPTER 7: THE FINAL ZONE

As soon as Sonic jumped onto the mobile lab it started rising into the air. Sonic knew Eggman would be headed to the states, so he had until then to stop him. When he entered the main hanger however, the large steel door slammed shut behind him, trapping him. All around the room the lab's defenses were activated -- laser canons came out of the walls, targeting Sonic.

"How was your trip through Scrap Brain?" Eggman asked through the intercom system.

"Still no gift shop," Sonic shrugged. "Couldn't find a good place to eat. And the parking was just *terrible*."

"Ha!" Eggman laughed. "But what did you see?" His voice suddenly became louder, like he'd moved closer to the mic. "You saw the site, and the danger it presents, yes?!"

"Yeah," Sonic muttered, dropping the sarcasm. "But that's no excuse for what you've done, what you're *planning* to do."

Eggman sighed, disappointed. "I was afraid you'd think that way. I was hoping you'd understand... Hoping you'd know *finally* just how cruel Humans can be... Did you learn *anything* from your journey through the island? How many ruins were left to rot, uninhabitable by even the sick. Animals like you were the result of these actions, and not even *you* could survive in the world these people are creating!"

"So what!?" Sonic exclaimed. "You expect to just

hard reset!? Kill everyone off and start over with *your* twisted image!?"

"*YES!!*" Eggman shouted, slamming his fist against something hard. "The world must be allowed to start over! Without the terrible people who poison it!"

"I agree they must be stopped..." Sonic started forward, the lasers trained on him. "But not this way." He dashed ahead, outrunning the sudden hailstorm of laser fire.

"Come and get me," Eggman said. "Even *you* are too slow with everything in your way."

Sonic ran at full speed around the hanger, looking for a way out. *I don't have much time*, he thought, dodging lasers. *This has to stop now!*

"His mobile base is moving again sir."

"But that creature's inside."

"Do you want me to activate the EMP?"

"... Yes. Let's see what Kintobor does when his toys are turned off."

"Activating EMP..."

...

"... There. EMP deployed. Any second now his lab should fall apart."

"And there it goes. Excellent job. Let's just hope this *thing* can take down Kintobor without any further assistance."

Suddenly every laser malfunctioned at once, every door opened... and the entire base entered free fall. Sonic hung in the air for a moment, unable to move. Then there was a crash and Sonic hit the floor full force.

The intercoms hissed with static once but made no sound after that. Everything electronic had died.

"I... I don't know what happened," Sonic mumbled, trying to stand. "But... I guess it's a good thing." He charged through the hanger exit, finally entering the lab. "All that's left is Eggman, and he can't go anywhere now!"

"NO! NO! NO!" Eggman punched his computer repeatedly, furious that everything had suddenly shut off. "I should have *known* they'd be monitoring *me!!* I should have had a contingency for this!! BAAH!" His whole body shook with rage and he had to take a moment out of his time to recompose himself.

And it was a moment too long.

"It's over Eggman," Sonic said, standing behind him.

"... So it would seem," Eggman agreed, leaning over his broken computer. "You should've just joined me. Should've helped me."

"You're insane, Eggman," Sonic told him. "I thought a lot about it, and I've reached my conclusion."

"Oh?" Eggman turned to him, crossing his arms behind his back. "Do tell."

"You were a good person before the emeralds," Sonic explained. "I believe that... even though there seems to be evidence to the contrary. You already robotic suits made for the animals, and you were clearly planning on keeping them here anyway... and the lab's defenses... But After the explosion, it got worse, didn't it?"

Eggman didn't answer, he just stared determinedly down at Sonic.

"You became violent," Sonic continued. "Even if your actions didn't always make sense, you wouldn't have

used violence... and yet..." Sonic shook his head. "You threatened me. You threatened those like me... and you went after your own people too. Maybe some things you say are the truth, but you're not sane... that's just a fact."

Eggman waited a moment, then raised an eyebrow. "Are you done?"

Sonic grit his teeth.

"I appreciate the recap," Eggman taunted, waving his hand dismissively. "But you still haven't said this 'conclusion' of yours."

Sonic clenched his fists. "I'll always remember Dr. Kintobor as a man who was like a second father to me," he hissed. "But it's clear you aren't that man... And I don't think you can be again."

"Ha!" Eggman shook his head, grinning wide. "You're blinded by nostalgia..." He walked passed Sonic, standing in the doorway. "You've bested me this time... I'll agree to that." He paused for a moment, staring at the ground.

"You're not leaving," Sonic told him. "I *will* stop you."

"No, you won't," Eggman said firmly. "You'll let me go."

"And why is that?"

Eggman looked over his shoulder. "If you use those emeralds of yours... you can put things right on this island. You can show those fools I was right all along."

Sonic's eyes widened. "Set things right... would that mean-"

"I'm a different matter altogether," Eggman scoffed. "You can chose one or the other. Fix this island, help your kind... or you can throw them away for me."

"Throw them away?" Sonic asked. "I don't understand."

"You get one chance," Eggman said. "I have a

feeling it was *you* who stole those rings, yes? And I finally noticed the missing PC as well. You can use it to activate the RQBF remotely, and the emeralds will repair your island."

"It works via proximity," Sonic realized. "If I use it here it would fix you, if use it there it will fix the island."

"Exactly," Eggman chuckled. "Should'a led with that... It seems my mind really *isn't* what it used to be."

"Then come back with me," Sonic demanded. "We can use the emeralds to fix the island *and* you!"

"I'll be long gone," Eggman said, turning to face him. "I'm giving you the choice *now*... Sonny. Me, or your island. You can't stop me when I'm like this, you know that. You can't defeat me and force me back there. So make your choice."

Sonic couldn't think. He felt like either way was wrong.

"If you need any more motivation," Eggman continued. "It seems I've captured many of your friends -- a great deal of creatures all locked up and scattered around the island... The emeralds should fix that as well."

"Why do I get one?" Sonic hissed, looking at his hands. He couldn't pull them out yet, not if Eggman was still right there. He couldn't risk him stealing them. "Why can't I just fix you, then go fix the island?"

"I told you before that I was looking for them," Eggman answered. "They have a habit of scattering after being used. Like magnets, their energy repels each other."

Sonic was quiet for a long time, trying to come up with the right answer. Eggman looked down at him, sadly, and took a step back.

"I'm leaving," Eggman said, stepping into the hall. "There's an old biplane in the hanger, gas powered. Should be unaffected by whatever shut down the base. Use that... and go home."

Sonic could barely stand. He felt weak, powerless. He was so close... but, he just couldn't figure out the end... "Where will you go?"

"That's not for you to know," Eggman answered. "Not yet." He left, walking down the hall and headed off to wherever he was going. "Good luck!" he called back. "I mean it..."

Sonic let one emerald appear in his hand, the purple one, the first one. *I wish you never existed. I wish you hadn't started all this... I wish Kintobor never found you the first place...* He let it sink back into his hand, and headed towards the hanger.



Sonic flew his plane over the Gulf of Mexico, completely able to see the extent of his island, and the coast of the United States. Eggman had been telling the truth about it all. He flew over the island, watching each of the zones as he made his way back to Hardly 'Nebraska'...

He landed the plane outside the city, then raced back home.

As Sonic dropped into the hole beneath the hedges, he noticed that once again his family wasn't home. It was morning now, early... they should be here. He thought that they might be some of the animals captured by Eggman.

"Then it's time to set you all free," Sonic said, sitting down beside the computer. He saw the paw print he'd left here as a note. It hadn't been long, only a few hours... but his hand was already bigger than it used to be. He wondered if that was due to the radiation that continued to mutate him, or if it was because of the emeralds having lived inside him for so long. "Doesn't matter," he decided, booting up the PC. "I'll go back to normal too... time to set things right."

He opened up the RQBF machine program, and the rings began to hum with energy. Finally, he pulled out all the emeralds, and that glass wall in his mind was at last relieved of the pressure. The emeralds activated on their own, knowing exactly what they needed to do. They glowed, humming with the same energy as the rings.

In a flash of light, the same light that kept taking Sonic away, the world disappeared.

The Green Hill Zone was put back together. The great hills rolled to the horizon, the early morning sun shining just beyond.

The Marble Zone ruins stood once more, the city returning to it's former glory. The radiation fell away, and it could once again sustain Human and animal life.

Spring Yard was no longer a city of the sick and dying. The people there were healed, the animals returned to their natural forms.

The Labyrinth beneath the mountains was reduced to ash, the chemicals that poisoned it no longer a threat. It was all crushed beneath it's own weight.

Star Light City shined just as brightly as it ever had. It's people would never understand the pressure that had been lifted off of them, nor would they know it was there to begin with.

Scrap Brain was turned to dust. Nothing of those wicked engines remained, and the smog they created dissipated. All that was left were the lush green plains that used to exist there.

And finally, the animals that Eggman had imprisoned were set free. They were returned to their homes.

All acts of evil had been destroyed on the island.

All disease was cleansed. All wounds were healed.

The light faded from his eyes, and Sonic looked down at himself... and he was shocked to see that his fur remained blue. His quills still stuck up in a mohawk, and he still stood on two legs.

Then he heard something chittering behind him.

Sonic turned to see his mother and sisters, standing in the entrance to the hole. They looked at him, confused. It had been too long since he'd seen them last, but he still understood their language. He looked at the paw print he'd left behind, and made a new one beside it.

His mother looked at them. They were different, but still the same. His mother recognized them, recognized *him*. She held him tight, glad that her son was finally home.

Sonic told them about everything that happened. From the accident at Dr. Kintobor's base, to the Green Hill Zone, to the showdown over the Gulf of Mexico. His family barely understood any of it, but they hung on every word.

And when his story was over, Sonic stood -- something his family still hadn't gotten used to -- and walked back to the PC. "But... this is just the beginning," he told them in their language. "There's a lot more to be done. I discovered something in the files when I was looking for the RQBF program... Eggman had logged more areas like our South Island, and I have to go put them back together as well."

His mother pawed at his hand, telling him to stay.

"I can't," Sonic said. "I'm the only one who can set

things right, for *good*." He picked up one of the rings. "This can tell me when I get close to the emeralds again, and if I'm right, they go where they're needed. So... I have to leave again."

His mother bowed her head, stepping back.

"I'll come back," Sonic promised. He looked at the portrait of his father. "I always do."

Sonic gave his family one last hug, and crawled out of the hole beneath the hedges. Ring held tightly in his hand, he returned to the biplane.

Eggman had marked an area called West side Island.

Sonic decided to head there first.



Game Plan

Hirokazu Yasuhara

Program

Yuji Naka

Character Design

Naoto Ohshima

Novelization

Lincoln Reign



"... So, Dr. Kintobor was telling the truth about the power of these emeralds."

"He... the whole island..."

"That's about a decade's worth of work those emeralds destroyed... impressive."

"You can't seriously be *happy* about this! We're going to lose our jobs! Er- sir..."

"Sacrifices must be made in the scientific journey. One island with a 99% failure rate wasn't worth watching over anyway. To be honest, I'm surprised the island was still standing after all this time."

"... General, what are we going to do now that that creature is running free?"

"First of all we're keeping this under wraps."

"You can't *possibly* keep this a secret for long."

"You're right. But allow me to make things worse."

Click "Send him in." *Click* "As far as you're concerned, we're on *his* side."

"His side? Who's-"

Creak *Thud*

"Ah, Dr. Kintobor, how nice of you to join us."

