

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna

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Knuckles battles mysterious new foes bent on stealing the Master Emerald!

Meanwhile, Punchy and Rainbow have discovered Rainbow's sister... But is she an enemy?

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1 - Escape From Angel Island!

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 1 - Escape From Angel Island!
Stage 1 - Tech Tunnels
Boss 1 - Conan

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
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For more info on GeneX, see 2BIT's other stories: GeneX - Tails the Fox, GeneX - A New Beginning, GeneX - Soleanna Struggle, and GeneX Generations.

"Angel Island.... This is my home. Floating high above the troubles of the world below... This island is both a haven, and a prison. But I can not leave. I have a duty, one which has consumed my entire life. It is my mission to guard the Master Emerald!"

The universe of GeneX Prime. Similar to many dimensions, but set apart by the appearance of animals with intelligence comparable to humans. These "furries" have long lived in relative peace with the humans, but not absolute peace. Fear, mistrust, and suspicion between the two groups have many times come to blows, but rarely on a large scale. The thing about rarities, though, is that they sometimes happen. Hatred and greed eventually reach a boiling point, and those with dark intentions may use that to set horrible events in motion. And this time, the event is war...

It was a rainy night. A light rain, but still enough to make Knuckles the Echidna wish there was a roof over his head. If not for the rain, sleeping would be easy. "It's quiet tonight..." Knuckles thought as he sat at the top step of the Master Emerald shrine. "...too quiet." Indeed, there was normally more to hear on Angel Island at night. This night, even the crickets were silent. It was as though they were anticipating something, and keeping quiet to avoid detection. Knuckles attempted to shrug this off. "I'm reading too much into it. It's just a quiet night." Try as he might, Knuckles could not shake the foreboding feeling he was having. As he sat there, tensely listening for anything unusual, the rain began to intensify, and the island grew darker. "Huh? The rain sure got worse fast..." Knuckles thought, standing up. He glanced around at his surroundings. "I've got a weird feeling... H-hey! What's that!?" In the distance, something was nearing Angel Island. It was tough to see any details in the dark, but it appeared to be... another island! "What!? Where did THAT come from!?" As Knuckles wondered about what he was seeing, an icy wind blew in front of him, forming a cyclone of hail! As he backed away from it, a pair of glimmering golden eyes peered through the hail! In a moment, the hail vanished as suddenly as it appeared, and in its place stood a fearful figure wearing a black robe and hood. It had a pair of large spikes on its back, and was wearing blood-red shoes. Knuckles recognized him immediately. "I've seen you... That night, on Shadow Arcangel..." Knuckles recalled looking down from a shattered window on the ship, seeing this figure talking to Tails just before he became Super Tails, but he did not know who it was. "Who are you, anyway?" he asked. The figure responded in his raspy voice. "I am known only as the Doomsayer!"

Lightning struck behind the Doomsayer as he spoke his name! Knuckles backed away a step as the Doomsayer continued. "Listen well! The world is on the path to apocalypse." Knuckles stared at him questioningly. "What do you mean!?" he asked. The Doomsayer ignored his question. "They are coming... You have little time. In fact, it may already be too late..." he said. Knuckles looked around. "What? Who's coming!? Is this about the Master Emerald!?" he asked. Once more, lightning struck behind the Doomsayer! "Silence! The time for questions has passed!" he growled. Knuckles didn't like his tone. "Hey, if you know something I need to know, speak up right now! Or else..." Before Knuckles could finish, three bolts of lightning struck around the Doomsayer as the creature yelled angrily. "DO NOT THREATEN ME!!" Knuckles jumped back as the lightning faded, leaving the Doomsayer unscathed. "W-what are you!?" he gasped, wondering how anything could survive getting struck by so much lightning. The Doomsayer had begun being engulfed by hail again. "I am a warning of darkness! Farewell!" The hail swallowed up the Doomsayer, and as it faded, Knuckles saw that the Doomsayer had vanished...

Knuckles sat at the top step of the Master Emerald shrine, wondering what the Doomsayer was talking about, when he remembered the island he saw! Looking towards it, he could see that it had come closer! In his distraction, he didn't notice several shadowy figures approaching the altar. Among them, hanging to the rear, was a chameleon, hornet and rhinoceros. "What's our role here, exactly?" said the rhino, adjusting the yellow derby on his head. "Hang back and obssserve, Crasssh..." said the black chameleon, "The massster'sss plansss for usss will become clearer in time..." While Knuckles was gazing at the island, he heard a voice at the bottom of the steps below him! "Good evening, Master Emerald guardian!" He quickly looked down to see a dark grey she-wolf, wearing a tight, black uniform with a red symbol on the chest! The symbol was an odd looking star, with thirteen points! The wolf's right eye was covered by overgrown hair, and she was not alone! There were several others around her, wearing the same uniform! Standing closest to the wolf was a black and brown jackal, holding a black & white sketch of Knuckles. "Oh... Red..." he muttered. The wolf introduced herself to Knuckles. "I am Fera." she said. Knuckles looked at all the uniformed animals at the bottom of the steps. "Hmmm... Nice outfits, but Halloween's not for another few months!" he joked. Fera frowned at him. "Dare not mock us! You will hand over the Master Emerald immediately!" she ordered. The jackal nodded. "Or, I could simply destroy you." he threatened. Knuckles glanced back at the Master Emerald. "You want the emerald, eh?" he said, lifting it up. Fera smiled. "That's it! Hand it over!" she said. Knuckles chuckled at her. "I don't think so!" He turned to jump off the side of the shrine, but Fera acted fast! "Stop him!!" she shouted, prompting a pair of uniformed bats to fly into his path! Knuckles stopped short. "Whoa! Where'd you come from!?" he shouted. Suddenly, rocks struck the bats from below, knocking them out of the sky! That is, they seemed like rocks, but why did Knuckles hear a splash? He glanced down to see a creature similar to a raccoon, but it was actually a coati. It was orange, with blue ears and blue stripes on its tail. "Quick! This way! You're no match for them alone!" he whispered, running for the bridge leading away from the shrine. Knuckles hesitated. "Who's that?" he wondered. The jackal pushed past Fera and began coming up the steps. "Enough! Let's kill him and take it!" he growled. Knuckles knew what he had to do. "Angel Island's gonna fall, but I better get the Master Emerald outta here for now!" He leapt off the side of the shrine and ran for the bridge! Fera pointed in his direction. "Don't let him escape! Agents of Despair, begin pursuit!" Before the uniformed animals could move, however, the island began to shake, taking them by surprise! As the Master Emerald began to fall into the ocean, Knuckles quickly headed for the Mystic Ruins while the enemies were distracted!

When Knuckles arrived outside the Mystic Ruins train station, he realized that he'd lost track of the coati that helped him. "I guess he's gone. I have to get the Master Emerald someplace safe anyway." he

thought, looking around. It had been a while since he'd been off the island, but not much had changed. "One of Tails's workshops is around here. I think the emerald will be safe there until I throw those thieves off my island!" Knuckles decided, walking in the direction of Tails's Workshop. It wasn't far, so Knuckles got there in no time. The door was unlocked, and Knuckles walked inside to find Tails busily working at his computer, with his robotic puppy, SPOT sitting beside him. Knuckles wasted no time with small talk. "Hey, Tails! Could you keep the Master Emerald here for a little while?" Tails turned his chair around to face Knuckles. "Huh? Well, sure. I guess. Why, Knuckles?" Before Knuckles could explain, a loud explosion was heard outside! "Whoa! What's that!?" Tails shouted. SPOT began beeping loudly. "Alert! Alert!" the robot shouted. Fera's voice was heard over a megaphone seconds later. "Listen up! Come out and hand over the Master Emerald, or we will be forced to destroy that building and take it!!" she threatened! Knuckles was shocked. "What!?! Those dirtbags! How'd they find me so fast, anyway!?" Tails was trying to understand the situation. "Destroy... My workshop!?! What's happening here!?" he wondered. Suddenly, SPOT began beeping more loudly! "Emergency!" the robot warned. "What's that metal mutt beeping about?" Knuckles wondered. Tails glanced at SPOT's monitor eyes. "SPOT detects a powerful weapon nearby... It might even be powered by a Chaos Emerald!" Tails gasped. Before Knuckles could say anything, Tails took action. "No time to waste! SPOT, open the emergency exit! We have to get out through the underground tunnels!" he said. "Acknowledged!" SPOT replied. The robot let out a few beeps, and a hatch in the middle of the floor opened up! Knuckles looked worried. "Underground... But your workshop!" he said. Tails frowned. "I know... But I can't ask you to give them the Master Emerald!" he said as he was digging through some drawers for something. Knuckles started down the hatch, but hesitated. "What are you doing?! Come on!" he shouted. Tails tossed something shiny to SPOT. "Hold on to the Tailband of Chaos, SPOT! Can't let any bad guys get ahold of that!" he said hurriedly. Without wasting another moment, Tails, Knuckles, and SPOT jumped into the hatch! As they did, they could hear explosions above them! When they hit the ground, Tails looked up to see flames engulfing the room above them! "We... We've gotta go!" he said, leading Knuckles into the tunnels beneath his workshop.

Beneath Tails's Workshop was an expansive series of tunnels, which Tails had been using to store some of his gadgets and parts. The tunnels were like a giant maze, and Knuckles was amazed that they were there. "Did you dig these tunnels yourself?" he asked. Tails shook his head. "I discovered these tunnels. I think some echidnas used to live down here a long time ago, but the tunnels were pretty much empty when I found them, so whoever dug them must've abandoned them for some reason." he explained. Knuckles thought about their situation for a moment. "Hey, Tails... Where are we going, anyway?" he asked. Tails glanced above them sadly. "The Tornado-1 was in my workshop's garage. If we had more time, I would've taken it, but now it's wrecked. So, we'll have to take the other, blue Tornado to get out of here. It's parked somewhere in the tunnels. In fact... SPOT! You better go start up the Tornado 3 so we can leave without wasting time!" At his command, SPOT ran off ahead of them to prep the plane. Knuckles scratched his head. "How long could it take to start up the Tornado?" he asked. "Those guys who attacked us will probably find the tunnels. We have to get out before they catch us! But, with my computers knocked out..." Tails said, trailing off. As they turned a corner, they were attacked without warning by laser fire! Tails and Knuckles barely got out of the way in time! Looking ahead, Knuckles saw that the shooters were Egg Pawns! "Eggman's robots!?! What are THEY doing down here!?" he shouted. Tails looked at him sheepishly. "Well... You see, I found some and started studying them. Eggman's a clown, but he's a technical genius, and I can learn a lot about robotics from him. I was keeping the robots under control wirelessly from my computer... But with the computer destroyed, the signal broke up, and since I erased Eggman's program from them, they're just going to do what they know how to do... Which is still shooting." he explained. Knuckles groaned with annoyance.

"What was the point of erasing Eggman's program, then!? Look at them!!" he yelled. The robots were still shooting, but they were shooting wildly and randomly. Without Eggman's programming, they only knew that they were designed to shoot, not what they were supposed to shoot at. "We'll just have to take them down, Knuckles. We can do it!" Tails said. So, without further discussion, they set to work! For the robots ahead, Knuckles ran out to distract them. "Hey! Glitched Pawns! See me? I'm your target!!" While Knuckles drew their fire, Tails spun his tails and flew over them, dropping to them one by one and kicking them down! Soon, the robots in front of them were defeated, but there would be more throughout the tunnels.

Tails led the way as they continued navigating the maze of tunnels, battling any glitched Pawns that got in their way. As they came to a four way intersection in the tunnels, some fresh faces approached them! It was a pair of dogs wearing black uniforms, just like Fera's! "Aha! You must be the enemy!" one of the dogs growled! "We're too late! They've found us!" Tails gasped. Knuckles raised his fists. "Well, well. If it isn't... whoever you are!" he said, realizing that he still had no idea who these foes were. Tails suddenly felt himself growing enraged. "You wrecked my workshop! Bad dog!" he shouted. "You should have given up the Master Emerald when you had the chance!" one of the dogs replied. "Now you won't get away! Prepare yourself!" said the other! Immediately, the dogs began circling Tails and Knuckles at high speed! Their speed took Tails and Knuckles by surprise, and before they could counter them, the dogs had run in and knocked them down! "Argh!! What is this!? EVERYONE'S as fast as Sonic now?" Knuckles growled. Tails started hovering in the air after he stood up. "They're not as fast as Sonic, Knuckles! Not even close! They're just... fast!" he said, doing his best to stay out of the dogs' reach. Knuckles glanced around at the dogs as they approached him again. "Hmmm... Their feet might be faster than their brains..." he thought, jumping out of the way as the dogs approached! The dogs were moving too fast to stop, and were heading for the same spot, so before they knew what was happening, they crashed into each other! "Grrrowww!!! Watch it!!!" one of the dogs yelled. "YOU watch it!!!" snapped the other. "Hey, dogs!" Knuckles yelled, getting their attention. Tails and Knuckles were right beside them, and immediately attacked! Knuckles punched one, while Tails whipped the other with his tails! The dogs fell over and hit the ground hard! Knuckles grabbed one of them by the collar and started shouting. "All right!! Now I want some answers!! Who are you guys, and what do you want with the Master Emerald!!" As he yelled, Tails tapped him on the shoulder. "Uh... Knuckles...?" Knuckles turned to Tails, still crazed. "WHAT!?" he shouted. Tails pointed at the dogs. "We knocked them out..." he explained. Knuckles looked, and sure enough, the dogs were unconscious. "Oh... Well, I guess we better just leave them, then..." Knuckles realized.

It wasn't much longer before they reached the runway where the Tornado 3 was parked. The plane was already running, and SPOT was waiting patiently beside it! Tails smiled excitedly. "All right! We're here! Now let's get away before those creeps catch us again!" To his surprise, a voice he didn't know responded to him. "Creeps? That's your best insult?" Someone suddenly dropped from the ceiling, landing between them and the Tornado! It was a brown raccoon, wearing a grey hat, a black cape, and a belt with a sword sheath attached to it! The raccoon drew the sword, which had a silver blade and a golden hilt. "Why not use our proper name? We are the Covenant of Despair!" Knuckles noticed that this raccoon wasn't wearing a uniform, so he had to clarify if he was with the others. "Covenant of Despair? Are those the guys in the uniforms? Are you with them!?" he shouted, approaching the raccoon slowly. Tails looked worried. "Careful, Knuckles! He's got a sword!" he pointed out. The raccoon glanced at Tails suspiciously. "You have something, too, haven't you? You can't hide anything from me!" he said, his eyes shifting from Tails to SPOT, then back to Knuckles. Knuckles crossed his arms. "Oh, really? And who are you?!" he asked. The raccoon grinned at Knuckles wickedly. "I am Conan, Master of Chaos!

The world's greatest treasure hunter!" he declared. Knuckles laughed at his claim. "Yeah, right! I would've heard of you, if you were so great!" he said. Conan frowned at him. "Spending all your time on that pitiful floating island? I think not! But that's enough of that. On to business! Turn over the Master Emerald! And I'll take whatever that fox boy is hiding, as well!" he demanded. Tails looked confused. "Hiding? I'm not hiding anything!" he protested. Conan pointed his sword at Tails. "You can't fool me! Give it up, or I'll carve the treasures out of both of you!" SPOT was watching these events, and flashed some text on his monitor. "Hostility detected. Retreat advised." In a moment, however, SPOT realized that he was being ignored, so he flashed another message on his monitor. "No one is reading this. Standing by to support Tails." Meanwhile, Knuckles had gotten Conan's attention. "I don't even care why you want the Master Emerald anymore! You're not getting it! But you ARE gonna leave, RIGHT NOW!!" he threatened. Conan pointed his sword at Knuckles. "All right, guardian! Make me!"

Knuckles charged at Conan, only to get pummeled by a few Chaos Spears shot from his sword! "Ah, did I forget to mention? My blade is the Chaos Sword! And to become a true master of Chaos, I will acquire every Chaos Relic there is... But right now, you're in my way. Big mistake." Conan growled. Knuckles chuckled at him. "That all ya got? A few energy spears from a rusty old sword? Okay, step aside, chump." he said, approaching Conan a little more cautiously now. "Ha! I can see that I've already softened you up a bit... Now, die!!!" Conan yelled as he attempted to stab Knuckles! Before Conan could hit Knuckles, SPOT jumped onto Conan's head! "Attack!! Attack!!" the robot yelled. "Get off of me, you artificial mongrel!!" Conan shouted, tossing the robot away before firing Chaos Spears at it! After taking those hits, SPOT began sparking! "Oh, no!! SPOT!!" Tails gasped before running to see if he could do anything for the robot. With Tails and SPOT out of the battle, Conan now resumed focusing on Knuckles, who had recovered by now. "Now, where were we..." Conan muttered. Knuckles attempted to punch Conan out, thinking he was distracted, but the raccoon simply stepped aside and zapped him with a few Chaos Spears in the back! "Ah, yes, that's right." he muttered. Knuckles turned around, rubbing his back a little. "Stay put, would ya?!" he grumbled. Conan snickered. "Why? And let you beat me? Come now, give up the treasure and this won't have to get any messier." he offered. Knuckles glanced at Tails frantically working to fix SPOT. The young fox had given up his workshop to help him. Lost one of his planes. Knuckles wasn't about to let all this be for nothing! He charged at Conan, attempting to dodge the flurry of spears that came his way, but not too much. The spears weren't his main concern. "You idiot! Fine! Die then!" Conan yelled, raising his sword to strike as Knuckles neared him! This was what he was watching for. Using what strength he had left, Knuckles quickly jerked out of the way as Conan brought down the sword, and then punched him hard in the chest, knocking him over!

Knuckles's attack had even managed to knock the sword out of Conan's hands! Conan scrambled to his feet and ran after the sword, but before he reached it, a beam was fired between him and the sword! Conan looked back to see that Tails had repaired SPOT, and they'd rejoined Knuckles! Conan leaned down, picked up his sword, and sheathed it. "That punch really hurt. It seems you really are as strong as you are dim-witted." Conan growled. "DIM-WITTED!?" Knuckles shouted furiously. Tails started to say something. "Well... uh... Oh! Never mind..." Knuckles glanced over at Tails. "What? What were you gonna say?" he wondered. Conan laughed at this. "Ha ha ha ha ha!! You ARE clueless! It may be a little much for me to overpower you, especially with your friend here, but I suppose it won't take much to outwit you!" he said, turning to leave. "I'll have that emerald later! Ta!" As Conan disappeared into the tunnels, Knuckles turned to Tails. "Do you think I'm dim-witted?" he asked. Tails avoided the question. "You know, I bet he's going to get help! Let's go before he gets back!" he suggested. Knuckles looked at him blankly. "Oh... Right... Let's go!" As they boarded the Tornado, Tails had a thought. "Uh... Knuckles? Where will we go?" he asked. Knuckles thought a moment. "I'm not sure... Maybe we should try that

second island that appeared near Angel Island!" he suggested. Tails looked at Knuckles with surprise. "A second island? Is that where the Covenant of Despair came from?" he asked. "Maybe..." Knuckles replied. Tails looked worried. "But... If that is where they came from, do you really think we should go there?" he wondered. "I don't see you coming up with any better ideas!" Knuckles growled. SPOT flashed some text on his monitor. "Perhaps we should find Sonic." Without reading SPOT's monitor, Tails responded to Knuckles. "I have an idea! Let's go find Sonic!" SPOT displayed another message on his monitor. "This monitor is useless." Knuckles disagreed with Tails's idea. "No way! There's no time to be looking for Sonic!" he insisted. Tails sighed with disappointment. "All right... Next stop, the second island! SPOT, open the doors!" At Tails's request, SPOT sent out a signal that got the doors at the end of the tunnel to begin opening. Once they were open, they were ready to go! "Tornado, take off!" Tails said as he began piloting the plane through the exit of the tunnel!

The plane flew out of the hole in the side of the cliff that Tails's workshop was on, and reached the ocean. Tails maneuvered the plane to gain altitude, then flew over his workshop, which was still burning after the Covenant of Despair's attack. "How could they do this..." Tails said sadly. Knuckles was looking around the area near the workshop. "They're gone. I guess they're all looking for us underground." he said. Tails began turning the plane towards Angel Island. "Let's not wait for them to get back!" he said. Wondering what the Covenant of Despair could possibly be after, Knuckles and Tails now began their new journey to find those answers...

To be continued...

2 - Shore Showdown

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 2 - Shore Showdown
Stage 2(Dark 1) - Shimmering Shore
Boss 2 - Shore Shot

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
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"I'm Experiment 1. I call myself Punchy the Echidna. I'm a fugitive. Pursued, just because of what I am. But... What AM I? Who AM I? My only memory is the Master Emerald. That's where the secret must lie.....so, I must claim it."

It was early in the morning. So early in fact, that some might call it late at night. Most would be asleep now, but Punchy the Echidna was wide awake. He was planning to go to Angel Island after Knuckles was asleep so that he could make off with the Master Emerald, but his friend Rainbow had delayed him. She insisted that it was too cold out, and Punchy needed some clothes to keep warm. So, Rainbow had dug out some old clothes stored in the temple she lived in. She knew that this might come up at some point, so she had found some boxes of clothes for boys in one of the many empty buildings of the underground Hidden Ruins she lived in. Punchy thought this was ridiculous, but decided to humor her to make things easier. Now, he had finally found some clothes he was okay with being seen in, so Punchy met Rainbow at the entrance of the temple. He was wearing a pair of tattered brown pants held up by a black belt, and just for the heck of it, a red and blue headband. "Those clothes are all so ancient, Rainbow! These were the only decent pants in the boxes!" Punchy grumbled, getting Rainbow's attention. "Really? Well, they suit you perfectly, One!" she said cheerfully. Punchy sighed grumpily. "Great. Can we go now?" he asked. Rainbow nodded. "Yep! Ready when you are! Let's go pay Red a visit, One!" Rainbow's habit of calling everyone by nickname still got on Punchy's nerves. "My name is STILL not One..." Punchy muttered, following Rainbow out of the temple.

As the pair began wandering through the underground ruins to the entrance to the sewer that served as its exit, a strange, distorted voice called out to them! "Stop right there!" Punchy and Rainbow looked around, but didn't see the owner of the voice right away. Suddenly, the sound of flapping wings drew their attention! A creature was flying towards them, its form hidden beneath a black cloak and a hood. All they could see of the creature was its black wings! In a moment, the creature landed in front of them, and Rainbow jumped back in fright. "Eeeek!! Who are you!?" she shouted. Punchy thought back. "Hey, I know you! You're Dimentime, right?" His guess was wrong, and the creature corrected him immediately. "I am the Deathbringer!" The name scared Rainbow. "Eeek!! Grim Reaper!!!" she yelled, hiding behind Punchy. "Punchy the Echidna! Prepare yourself! Your end is at hand!" the Deathbringer said, its voice changing as it spoke. Punchy was ready for a fight. "My end? I beg to differ! Rainbow, get moving! I have a feeling this one's gonna be tough!" he growled. The Deathbringer crossed its arms. "This is not an attack...yet." it said. Punchy looked confused. "Huh? Make up your mind!" The Deathbringer pointed

at him threateningly. "This is an ultimatum. Leave the United Federation, and never return! Or else, I will have no choice.... but to destroy you!" Punchy wasn't one to just sit there and be threatened. "Oh, yeah!? I'll fix you!!" He shouted, running to attack the Deathbringer! The Deathbringer jumped into the air and flew away before Punchy could hit it. It was so fast that by the time Punchy realized he missed, it was gone! "Huh? He's gone! How'd he do that!?" Punchy gasped. Rainbow was scared by these events. "What should we do, One? He sounded pretty serious..." she said. Punchy turned back towards the entrance to the sewer. "Bah! I'll tell you what we'll do! We're going to Angel Island, just like we planned!" Seeing that Punchy wasn't letting this worry him lifted Rainbow's spirits as well. "All right! If you say so! Follow me, One!" she said, running ahead!

Rainbow led Punchy out of the sewer, and continued running ahead of him towards the train station. Punchy was doing his best to keep up, but Rainbow was generally faster than him. However, as they passed the burger shop and neared the street that would lead to the train station, Rainbow suddenly came to a stop! As Punchy caught up to her, he looked around. "Hey, Rainbow? Why are you stopping?" he asked. Rainbow was gazing at a crowd of animals wearing black uniforms with thirteen pointed stars on them. She was fixated on a female purple echidna in the crowd. The echidna had yellow eyes and was wearing blue bands on her front two quills. "Is... Is that...?" Rainbow muttered. The uniformed group was facing a reddish brown weasel wearing an expensive looking black suit with a matching hat. The front of the hat displayed the same thirteen pointed star that was on the group's uniforms. The weasel's most notable feature was that his left foot was robotic. The weasel addressed the crowd. "All right, boys! Our mission starts now! Let's get moving!" A blue hyena in the crowd began laughing uncontrollably. "Eeeee hee hee hee! You forgot! It's not just boys!" the hyena said, glancing at the purple echidna. The weasel groaned at the hyena. "You know what I mean! Yeesh!" The hyena continued laughing. "Eeeee hee hee! Of course we do, Infin!" Punchy was watching the crowd curiously. "What's with the silly suits? Are they ballet dancers or something?" he muttered. Infin began leading the uniformed animals away. "Move out boys! AND girl!" he said, prompting the group to follow him. "Oh.... Wait!!" Rainbow gasped, starting to follow the crowd. Punchy ran after her and stopped her as the crowd wandered away. "What's got you all nervous, Rainbow?" he asked. Rainbow pointed in the direction the crowd was going. "I... I think I saw my sister with those guys!" she said! Punchy's eyes went wide. "What? You have a sister!? Great... Two of them..." he said, whispering the last part to himself. "I haven't seen my sister in so long, I thought she was gone for good! We've gotta find out if it was really her, One!" Rainbow pleaded. Punchy glanced at where the animals were going. "Hmmm... I think they're heading for the beach... Say, Rainbow... Is your sister anything like you?" he asked. Rainbow scratched her head. "I'm not sure. I haven't seen her in, like, ten years!" she said. Punchy frowned. "Hmmm... Ten years? I haven't lived that long... I guess we'd better check this out." he said, starting towards the beach. "But we're going for the Master Emerald right afterwards! Definitely!" he added. As they headed off, an orange dragon with red horns and red and black wings crept over to where they had been and watched them go. A black cat with a fluffy white chest wearing a red collar, red and blue pants, and yellow shoes emerged from the shadows to greet him. "What's up, Zeke?" the cat wondered. The dragon spoke with a labored breath that made him sound like he was chuckling. "Those echidnas following them... I wonder if we should alert... Someone." he said. The cat backed away slightly. "If it means going home, I'm all for it." he sighed. "Don't be such a scaredy-cat. If you don't prove useful to the master, well... He might have to make some adjustments..." Zeke cackled.

The uniformed animals had wasted no time getting far away from Punchy and Rainbow, and as they entered Emerald Coast, they couldn't be sure they were actually going the right way. Eventually, they reached a segment of the beach untouched by the tourists. High cliffs towered over the area, waterfalls

pouring down from them. The sparkling water and clean white sands were quite beautiful, but Punchy and Rainbow weren't there for sightseeing. Neither was the squad of GUN's Beetles that they found floating around as they arrived. "GUN's here? What would they want here!?" Punchy groaned. Two men were supervising the beetles. One was a black haired man wearing a black suit with a green tie and strange green sunglasses. Beside him was a taller man with light blue hair. He wore the uniform of a GUN sergeant, but with black armor over it, as well as a black cape. He had a noble bearing, and he was the first to spot Punchy and Rainbow. "Halt! Who goes there?" the sergeant said in a rather dignified voice. Punchy looked at the sergeant and let out a chuckle. "Hey! Check out the dope with the cape!" he laughed. The man with the green shades quickly got riled up. "That is no way to speak to Sergeant Drol... Experiment 1!" It no longer surprised Punchy that the GUN agents knew who he was. "Sergeant... I'm almost afraid to ask... What happened to Gunner?" Punchy muttered. Rainbow smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, One! This guy looks like royalty! I'm sure he won't give us trouble!" she said, though only she could understand her logic. Drol rolled his eyes at them. "Experiment 1... It is most certainly NOT a pleasure. I have heard of you from my superior. I am Sergeant Drol. GUN's Noble Knight!" he said. Drol's minion looked worried. "Sir, we mustn't waste time on the likes of these outlaws! Despair is here!" he said hurriedly. Drol sneered at him. "Silence, Agent 32. I know my duty! I was merely introducing those wretches to their executioner." Drol motioned to the nearby GUN beetles. "You! Robots! Deal with these peasants. I must be off!" he commanded. In moments, Punchy and Rainbow were surrounded by the beetles! "Awww... You're a nasty Knight!" Rainbow said. Drol turned to walk away. "I take my leave of you. GUN will be pleased with your demise. Come, Agent 32." he said. Agent 32 followed him hurriedly. "Y-yes, sir! Right away, sir!" he said. Punchy sighed with annoyance. "Well, at least he's quieter than Gunner."

Punchy looked around. The beetles seemed to be ordinary ones, with no visible weapons. "Wait a minute... It can't be this easy..." he realized. Suddenly, hatches opened up on the undersides of the beetles, and laser turrets came out! "That's more like it!" Punchy said as he attempted to dodge the lasers the robots began shooting! "C'mon, One! We gotta catch up to my sister! Avalanche 'em or something!" Rainbow suggested. Punchy nodded and concentrated on the sand around him. "Chaos Avalanche!" Using chaos energy, he lifted up chunks of sand. Unfortunately, the chunks of sand crumbled and fell back to the ground before he could use them! Punchy was forced to jump aside to avoid being shot. "Great... That complicates things..." he grumbled. Rainbow was growing frustrated as well. "Stupid bots! Take this!" she yelled, tossing a seashell at one. It bounced off, and the robot turned and started shooting at her! "Hey! You leave her alone!" Punchy shouted, running to the robot and punching it hard! The robot fell to the ground and exploded, but the others were focusing on shooting at only Punchy now! Punchy scrambled to get out of the way, but soon found himself cornered at the wall of a cliff. "Shoot... Wait! Don't shoot!" Punchy shouted, running to the left as the robots fired and hit the cliff wall. The impact of the shots knocked several boulders loose. "Hey... Why didn't I think of this in the first place?" Punchy said as an idea came to him. "Chaos Avalanche!" Once more tapping into the power of chaos, Punchy lifted several boulders from the cliff and hurled them at the robots! In no time, all the robots were destroyed! Rainbow ran over to Punchy when the coast was clear. "Yay, One! But we better hurry now! Follow me!" Rainbow started to lead Punchy away, but Punchy wasn't moving very fast. "Um... Follow you where? Which way do we go?" he asked. Rainbow pointed at footprints in the sand. "Not many people come here. Those footprints gotta be going the right way!" she said. Satisfied, Punchy started following more quickly.

After some time following the footprints, they were suddenly stopped by a strange energy blast! The blast created a small explosion close to Punchy! "Aaaah!! Where'd that come from!?" Punchy shouted,

looking around. As he looked, he suddenly spotted a familiar grayish shrew wearing a blue cape running towards him! "Dark One!" the shrew shouted as he reached Punchy and Rainbow. Rainbow smiled excitedly. "Hey, it's Mousy! He must've stopped whoever shot at us!" she said. Punchy sighed with relief. "Good to see you, Illusi..." he said. Illusi looked incredibly serious, and before Punchy could ask why, he fired another of the same strange blasts at Punchy! Punchy was knocked backward by the blast, but he quickly got up and started yelling at Illusi. "Wait a minute!! That came from you!? Why you little!!" Illusi began looking angry. "I can't waste any time! Dark One... I can't let you go anymore! You must be destroyed!" he shouted, snapping his fingers to summon a pair of Wrongs! The strange creatures flew over to Punchy and immediately began shocking him with bolts of lightning! Rainbow quickly retaliated by grabbing one and tossing it away! "Wow, those critters sure are light! Now for the other one!" As Rainbow attempted to stop the other Wrongo, the first one flew over and gave her a light shock! "What did I say when we first met? The Wrongs attack if you do anything wrong!" Illusi said to her. Rainbow glared at him. "Then why aren't they shocking you, Mousy! You call those flying donuts off, right now!" she yelled. Punchy knew that Illusi wouldn't call them off, so he jumped through the shocks and punched the Wrongo attacking him, causing it to vanish instantly! Before the other Wrongo could come after him again, Punchy punched that one out, too! "They're nasty, but it doesn't take much to destroy illusions!" he observed. Illusi snapped his fingers and summoned several more Wrongs, much to Punchy's annoyance. "Cut it out, Illusi! What's your problem!?" he yelled. Rainbow looked sad and confused. "Why are you sending your cute little circle things after us?" Illusi didn't answer, and simply watched as Punchy battled the second wave of Wrongs.

Once the Wrongs were gone, Illusi growled in frustration. "I need more Wrongs..." he said. Before he could summon them, however, Illusi was interrupted by a familiar voice. "Yoo-hoo! Illuser!" Looking in the direction of the voice, Illusi saw a ghostly being floating in the air. It had a white body, cyan gloves, a greenish muzzle and blue eyes with green whites. The creature had no legs, and a ghostly tail! Illusi stuttered with surprise as he saw the creature. "L-lospector! You!" he said. Punchy squinted at the unfamiliar creature in the air. "Huh? Lospector?! THAT's Lospector!?" Indeed, Lospector's form had changed since they'd last met. Lospector flew down to Illusi. "Did you know those black-suited fun lovers have been looking for you? Someone tipped them off that you were in Station Square. Who, oh who could that be? Hee hee..." he chuckled. Illusi looked at Lospector questioningly. "Why tell me this, Lospector? What are you scheming?" he asked. Suddenly, an unfamiliar voice was heard nearby. "Over there! There's the shrew!" A couple dogs wearing uniforms were running towards them. "No time to waste... I'll have to stop the Dark One later..." Illusi muttered, vanishing in his usual puff of smoke! Lospector frowned. "Aww, I was hoping he'd whip out that strange key of his. Well, better catch up with him! Illuser!!! Where are yooooou?" Lospector said, flying away. The uniformed dogs were staring at the area in disbelief. "H-hey... Did you just see him disappear?" one of them asked. "See who? I didn't see nothin'..." said the other. As the dogs started walking away, Rainbow glanced at Punchy. "What's going on with Mousy?" she wondered. Punchy looked thoughtful. "Looks like those shady characters are looking for him. But why? And why'd he attack me?" he muttered. Suddenly, Rainbow remembered something. "Oooh! Those doggies! They were with my sister! C'mon, One! Let's go after them!" she said. Punchy nodded. "Right! Looks like you made the right call following those footprints after all! Let's catch up to them!"

Soon, Punchy and Rainbow reached the destination of the uniformed animals. There was a small shrine on a portion of the beach far from the city. Sitting in the shrine was a stone tablet with writing on it. The uniformed animals were face to face with Sergeant Drol in front of the shrine. As Punchy and Rainbow arrived on the scene, Drol spotted them. "Looks like enemy reinforcements have arrived. No matter!" he

said. The blue hyena from before turned to look at Punchy and Rainbow. "Eeeeeee hee hee? Reinforcements? They aren't wearing Covenant of Despair uniforms..." he said. Punchy looked confused. "Covenant of Despair? What in the heck is that?" Behind Sergeant Drol was a tank-like vehicle with a large laser cannon. Infin had been looking at it intently, but now grinned as he realized something. "OK, we cleared out your basic robots, and it seems your friend back there will be pretty slow!" he said. Indeed, the remains of several beetle robots were scattered all over the sand. Infin pointed to the purple echidna in his group. "You! Grab the tablet and let's be on our way!" The purple echidna approached the shrine, and as she did, Agent 32 ran out to stop her! "No you don't, terrorist!" he shouted! Infin jumped in Agent 32's way and began struggling with him. Seeing this, Drol rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Scorpion Troops Shore Shot! Fire! Don't let a single one escape!" he said to the tank. Shore Shot immediately began driving towards the purple echidna who was just turning to leave the shrine with the tablet! Rainbow screamed at this turn of events. "Eeek! That thing's after my sister! One, we gotta do something!" she cried. Punchy nodded and ran between Rainbow's sister and Shore Shot. "Hey, bucket-boy! Pick on someone... who's still smaller than you..." he said somewhat feebly. Just then, Infin managed to knock Agent 32 over! "Well, this is working out! C'mon, boys! Time to vamoose!" he said, quickly leading his group away. "Eeee hee hee hee! Can we get breakfast on the way home?" the hyena said as he followed the group. Before leaving, Rainbow's sister stopped to tell Rainbow something. "Get yourself out of here! It's dangerous here!" With that, Rainbow's sister ran off with the others. "W-w-wait! Don't go!! Why's she running away from me?" Rainbow cried.

With the Covenant of Despair escaping, Drol had grown incredibly frustrated. "You infernal pest! This had nothing to do with you!" he shouted. Punchy grinned smugly at him. "Well, you did sorta try to have me killed earlier. I mess with people who try to kill me!" he said. Drol's eyes were filled with hatred. "It would have been wise to stay out of it! Shore Shot! Dispose of this fool!" At Drol's command, Shore Shot aimed its cannon at Punchy and began charging up power to fire at him! Seeing this, Rainbow grabbed a coconut that had fallen from a nearby palm tree and hurled it at Shore Shot! "Hey! You leave One alone!" she shouted! The coconut struck the cannon and caused it to move just enough to miss Punchy! "Whoa! Big laser...." Punchy muttered as the shot missed him. Drol was glaring at Rainbow now, but she didn't care. "He protected my sister! I won't let you hurt him!" she shouted. Agent 32 had wandered back to Drol's side by now, and tapped his shoulder hurriedly. "Sir! Despair is getting away!" Drol smacked Agent 32's hand away. "Enough! Shore Shot! Destroy them both! Immediately!" As the machine started moving towards Punchy, he noticed the remote control in Drol's hand. "Hey... That's lucky! I'll just go for Drol!" he thought, attempting to approach the sergeant. Unfortunately, Shore Shot was faster than Infin had imagined, and it drove between Punchy and Drol before he could get close! "Foolish peasant! I won't let you touch my remote!" Drol sneered. Shore Shot immediately began firing at Punchy and Rainbow, though without charging, its shots were smaller and weaker. As they ran to put some distance between themselves and Shore Shot, Rainbow had a suggestion. "C'mon, One! Use your avalanche again!" Punchy looked around, but the nearest cliff was too far. "It won't work! All I can get from here is sand!" he said. Rainbow started throwing coconuts at Shore Shot again. "I don't think these coconuts will stop it, One! We gotta think of something!" While running from Shore Shot's lasers, Punchy looked around. "Nothing but sand.... Then that'll have to do! Chaos Avalanche!" Punchy concentrated on the sand below Shore Shot, and using chaos energy, shifted the sand until Shore Shot fell into it! As the sand buried Shore Shot, it caused havoc in the robot's circuits, and the robot soon exploded!

As the sand thrown up by the explosion settled, Agent 32 was looking very panicked. "S-sir!! What do we do now?" he stuttered. "That's it for your robot! You're finished!" Punchy said. Drol did not look impressed. "Hmph! So I've underestimated you. It won't happen again. Come, Agent 32! We'll try to

catch the Covenant of Despair!" he said, running past Punchy. Agent 32 followed him hurriedly. "What'll we do if we DO catch them!?" he shouted. Rainbow grabbed Punchy by the arm and started pulling him. "Way to go, One! Now let's go after my sis!" she said. Punchy pulled back, refusing to go. "No, thanks! I've had enough of GUN for one day. Besides, I think your sister's got plenty backup!" he said. Rainbow looked out in the direction the Covenant of Despair had gone. "You think she was really with those people? B-but... They didn't seem nice..." she said with concern. Punchy crossed his arms. "I think she's made her choice. Let's go to Angel Island! I don't think we'd catch those 'Covenant of Despair' guys anyway." he said, walking away. "But One..." Rainbow whined. Punchy didn't stop walking. "End of discussion! We've got our own problems, anyway!" he insisted. Realizing there was no point arguing with him, Rainbow quietly began following him. As they left, someone peered at them from behind the shrine. It was Illusi, and he was glaring at them angrily. "Yes... You certainly do have problems.... Dark One..."

To be continued...

3 - Craziiness in the City

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 3 - Craziiness in the City
Stage 3(Hero 2) - Central Streets
Boss 3 - Alpha

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

"Mr. President!" GUN's Commander marched into the President's office, a look of urgency on his face. Behind him was a man with even whiter hair than his, and red eyes. He was wearing the uniform of one of GUN's colonels. Behind that man was a brown haired man wearing a black suit with a blue tie. His eyes were covered by a pair of sunglasses. The President looked up from his paperwork and greeted the officials in front of him. "Commander... And Gunner. Always a pleasure." he said. The GUN Commander wasted no time and got straight to the point. "Mr. President, your nation is in crisis once again." he began. "Those freaks must be stopped!" Gunner interrupted. The Commander glared at Gunner, who backed off right away. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I think the President would prefer an explanation first." he said. "Yes, sir... You idiotic suck-up..." Gunner grumbled under his breath. The President appeared curious. "What's going on?" he asked. The Commander explained the situation. "As you know, an anti-human group known as the Covenant of Despair has been active in the United Federation for some time. Recently, they have begun taking bolder actions. One such incident brought on significant casualties, including Col. Gunner's predecessor." he said. Gunner held back a mischievous grin and put on a more serious face as he interrupted again. "I warned you about trusting those furry freaks, sir! Now, it's war!" he said, secretly pleased with the prospect. The Commander was less enthusiastic about the idea. "Now, let's not be hasty. Open war would be even more hazardous to the people of this nation." he noted. The President looked distant for a moment, then stood up with a sudden resolve. "It seems to me the situation has already become hazardous. If the Covenant of Despair wants a war, then we'll have to oblige!" he said. The Commander looked shocked by the President's words. "Mr. President!" was all he could say. The President began heading out of his office. "Come, Commander. I'll need to be brought up to speed on all recent Despair activities! Let's move!" he said, leading the Commander out. Gunner's companion waved to them as they left. "Bye, sir! Wow, I can't believe I got to see the President!" he said excitedly. Once The President and Commander were out of earshot, Gunner laughed loudly. "HA! You see, Spy? This is how the higher ups operate. Spinelessly!!!" he declared. Spy frowned and nodded. "Y-yes, colonel..." Gunner smiled at Spy. "Ah... Colonel... I still love hearing that... But you know... If I were president, I'd have launched an attack on the freaks without delay!" he said. Spy smiled casually. "Well, I guess we get to take it easy until the President gets back to us! That'll be nice." he said hopefully. Gunner sneered at his spy. "Take it easy!? Me? You? Not until every last furry freak is banished from our world!" he shouted. Spy hung his head sadly. "I was afraid of that... What are your orders, Colonel Gunner?" he asked. "We can't do anything big right now. Have my unit keep an eye out for Sonic the Hedgehog and Kosmo the Morph!" Gunner ordered. Spy scratched his head in confusion. "I thought we were already doing that..." he pointed out. "Well, DO IT BETTER!!! I want those freaks stopped before they begin assisting the covenant!" Gunner

snarled. "Sonic? Assist them?" Spy blurted out. Gunner's eyes filled with rage and frustration. "THINK, Spy!!! For all we know, Sonic could be the ring leader of this circus!" he shouted. Spy realized that it was pointless to argue with Gunner. "Y-yes, sir! Off I go, sir!" he said hurriedly before exiting the office. Once he was alone, Gunner smiled unpleasantly. "Furry freaks.... Judgment day is at hand! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!"

Little did Gunner know, that one of the "freaks" he hated the most was in that very city, mere blocks away from the President's house! It was Sonic the Hedgehog, and he was simply planning to pass through Central City just to get some exercise, but as he neared the President's house, he came to a sudden stop! A familiar blue robot was wandering around not far away. It resembled Gamma, but was one of Eggman's more advanced E-X series robots: E-2X Alpha! Flapping small, blue wings beside Alpha was a red and black Chao. It was Char! "Hold it, nuts and bolts!" Sonic shouted as he approached them. Alpha jumped, startled. "Eeeeeek!! It's Sonic!!" the robot yelled. "Fancy running into you two here! What're you up to?" Sonic asked. Char laughed at Sonic playfully. "Hahahaha!! Wouldn't you like to know! C'mon, Alpha! We can't outrun him, but maybe we can outfly him!" he suggested. Alpha turned to Char, pointing to Sonic. "I wanna pet the spiky kitty!" he whined. Char chuckled at Alpha's childish tone. "Not now, Alpha! We gotta remember our mission!" he said. Alpha turned to Sonic and shook his fist at him. "Bad kitty! You won't get my lucky cereal!" he shouted before running off with Char! "Hey! Not so fast!" Sonic said, preparing to chase them. Before he could move, someone came up behind him and grabbed him tightly! "Ahh!! What's goin' on!?" Sonic shouted, glancing back at who'd grabbed him. It was Amy! "Sonic!! It IS you, right? Yes!! No imitation THIS time!!" Amy shouted with glee. She had a tendency to mistake any hedgehog she saw for Sonic, so she was thrilled to get it right for a change! Sonic quickly wriggled out of her grip. "Amy!! I'm chasing one of Eggman's robots! I don't have time for this!" he said with annoyance. Amy simply ignored him. "I knew our paths would cross again, soon! It's fate! So, let's go on a date!" she said. Suddenly, Alpha's voice was heard yelling nearby. "Can't catch me!! Ha ha ha hoo!!" Sonic glanced around, trying to figure out where Alpha had gone. "Aw, shoot!! Uh, I think they went this way!!" Sonic said, running off down the streets of Central City! "Hey!! Sonic!! Waaaaait!!" Amy shouted, trying futilely to catch up to the high speed hedgehog.

Sonic had gone the wrong way, and soon found himself dashing through the city streets at random, hoping to find some sign of Alpha. Soon, he came across another familiar face, who stood in his path to get him to stop. "Sonic! Sonic, my boy, slow down!" Sonic stopped and squinted at the old man, trying to remember who he was. "Professor... Pickle...?" he said at last. Sonic had last seen the professor far away, in the desert region of Shamar. Professor Pickle shook hands with Sonic in greeting. "I thought I saw you speeding about! How are you, old boy?" he asked. Sonic opened his mouth to speak, but the professor just kept talking. "I've been studying the secrets of the United Federation at the library here in town. Fascinating subject... Ancient echidna tribes... Chaos Reli--" Sonic was in too much of a hurry for this. "Um... That's nice... I'm kinda busy right now, professor. Can we chat later?" he said. The professor nodded. "Of course... I'll be at the library! We can discuss my research over a plate of cucumber sandwiches!" he said as Sonic sped off. "Yeah, thanks, professor... Now, I better keep heading after Alpha.... If he's even still in Central City!" Sonic grumbled.

After a while, Sonic came to an area of the city that was swarming with GUN's robots. "I guess I'm on the right track now. GUN must be looking for Alpha, too." he reasoned. As he started searching this part of the city, it wasn't long before one of the GUN Beetles fired at him! The shot missed, but it got Sonic's attention. "Hey! What's your problem!?" Normally, GUN beetles couldn't talk back, but these beetles

were custom made for the one who commanded them. "Sonic the Hedgehog! You are under arrest, by order of Colonel Gunner!" the Beetle declared! Sonic took a moment to process what the robot had told him. "Colonel... Gunner...?! Aw, how the heck did HE get a promotion!? After everything he's done!" he groaned. More Beetles were heading towards him now. "Give yourself up, or prepare to fight!" the first Beetle ordered. Sonic smirked at the robots defiantly. "Can't we talk this over?" he said sarcastically. The Beetles fired a few warning shots in response. "I guess not!" Sonic said. The robots surrounded him, ready to shoot. "Sonic is resisting arrest! Attack mode!" Just as the Beetles were about to begin attacking, someone came running towards them! "Leave MY Sonic alone!!!" Amy had arrived! She jumped to the nearest robot and smashed it with her hammer, prompting the other robots to start shooting at her! "Amy! Look out!! Those GUN robots work for Gunner!" Sonic shouted as Amy ran out of the way of the robots' shots! Once Amy was far enough, the robots turned back to Sonic, and while they were distracted, Amy ran out to hit another with her hammer! "I won't let any robots get between us! Leave them to me!" she shouted! Sonic frowned at this. Amy was liable to get herself hurt, so he couldn't waste any time! He quickly used his homing attack to jump from robot to robot, until all the robots in the immediate area were destroyed! "Show off!" Amy groaned. Sonic looked at her seriously. "Gunner and his robots are dangerous, Amy! You shouldn't antagonize them!" he said. Amy looked at him with confusion. "How are they any different from Eggman's robots?" she asked. Realizing she had a point, Sonic didn't say anything. "You're chasing that blue robot, right, Sonic? Well, I'm coming, too, then! Let's go!" Amy insisted. "Yeah, I guess with Gunner's robots around, I'd better take you with me..." Sonic muttered, leading the way at a lower speed so Amy could keep up.

As they searched the city for Alpha, they soon found that something else had been smashing some of the GUN robots in the area. Something very hot, by the looks of the charred robot remains. As they turned a corner, they found some canines wearing Covenant of Despair uniforms, including the jackal that was with Fera at Angel Island! The jackal was admiring the destruction of some nearby robots, but stopped to greet the hedgehogs as they arrived. "Sonic the Hedgehog, isn't it?" the jackal said. Sonic glared at the jackal. "What's it to ya? Is it really you the GUN robots are here for?" he questioned. The jackal shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe they are here for YOU. It matters not. Since you're here, I must find out where your allegiance lies." he said. Sonic scratched his head. "Huh? Allegiance? What are you talking about? And who are you?" he asked. "I am Anubis! I am an agent of Despair!" the jackal declared! Sonic smirked at his seriousness. "How charming." he muttered. Anubis pointed at Sonic tensely. "You must choose, hedgehog! We will wage war on the humans! You will either help us, or stay out of our way!" he warned. Of course, Sonic wasn't impressed by his threats. "I'm not very good at taking orders! Besides, what fun would it be to just stay out of it?" he replied. Anubis glared hatefully at Sonic. "I knew you'd be like this. You're just as impudent as that Master Emerald guardian! Fools, all of you!" he snarled. Amy raised her hammer. "Watch how you talk to Sonic! Or you'll be sorry!" she warned! Sonic glanced at her with concern. "Take it easy, Amy! You saw what he did to those bots..." he muttered. Anubis held a fireball in each hand. "If this will be your attitude, I will burn you to ashes!! No one will get in the way of the Covenant of Despair!" he growled. The two dogs looked at Anubis nervously. "Uh... Boss?" one of them asked. "Silence!" Anubis snarled. Sonic chuckled at them. "You guys sure are serious! Well, you don't scare me! Let's see what you got!" he said.

Anubis tossed one of the fireballs in his hands at Sonic, who effortlessly jumped out of the way. "Too slow!" he taunted. Anubis quickly tossed the other fireball, which was again easily dodged. Anubis's two canine companions attempted to tell him something. "Boss! You gotta..." Anubis threw a fireball at the dogs to shut them up. "Do not distract me!" he growled. Sonic was tapping his foot impatiently. "Can we hurry this up? I was in the middle of something when you started this!" he said. Anubis set his hands on

fire. "I agree, hedgehog. Why don't I turn up the heat?" He aimed his hands at Sonic and began shooting a continuous blast of flames at him! Sonic attempted to move out of the way when Anubis separated his hands so that he was shooting two blasts of fire! The fire started to surround Sonic, leaving him nowhere to go but up! He jumped as high as he could, and landed to Anubis's right! The jackal ceased the flames coming from his left hand and kept Sonic busy with fire from his right hand. As Sonic gracefully dodged the flames, Anubis was pointing his left hand at the ground and muttering something under his breath. As Sonic jumped away from the flames once again, a mummified hand reached up from beneath the ground and grabbed Sonic's ankle! "H-hey!! What's going on!?" Sonic shouted, trying to free himself from the grip of the mummy! Anubis grinned at the helpless hedgehog. "Now, prepare to..." Before Anubis could finish speaking, the dogs that were with him grabbed him by the arm. "Boss, you're supposed to be somewhere now! You can't waste any more time!" one of the dogs insisted! Anubis growled angrily as the mummified hand released its grip on Sonic and retreated underground! "You fools! You ruined my concentration! I almost.... Wait...." Anubis pushed back one of his sleeves a little, revealing a wrist watch. "Ah, yes. I have to go. Well, it can't be helped. You two kill this worm!" Sonic watched in confusion as Anubis ran off. "Farewell, Sonic the Hedgehog!" the jackal shouted in parting. Now, the two dogs raised their fists at him. Amy ran to Sonic's side holding her hammer. "Don't worry, Sonic! I'll help you this time!" she said. The two dogs seemed rather excited for the fight. "Heh heh! We'll surely get a promotion for this!" one of them said. "I wouldn't bet on it!" Sonic said, running toward them! Just before Sonic could hit them, they quickly moved out of the way and kicked Sonic from the sides! Sonic stumbled backward a little, surprised by the speed of the dogs. "So, you guys can move pretty fast, huh? Well, I can move pretty fast, too!" he said, quickly jumping away from another attack! By this time, Amy was running towards the dogs. "Take this!!" she shouted, swinging her hammer at one of the dogs! The dog tried to dodge, but failed, and was hit in the head! This simply angered the dog, who grabbed the hammer and attempted to pull it away from Amy! Meanwhile, the second dog was sneaking up behind Amy, but forgot about Sonic, who quickly smacked him away with a homing attack! "Hey! Fight fair!" he growled. Amy then managed to wrestle her hammer free and clobber the other dog! "Ooof!! Aw, Anubis is gonna barbeque us!" he whimpered, realizing Sonic and Amy together were too much for them. "Well, you could always get outta town, where he can't find you." Sonic suggested. The two dogs climbed to their feet and glanced at each other briefly before running away! "We gotta get a new job! At a candy store!" one of them shouted as they sped away. Amy stuck her tongue out at them. "Don't bother us again, losers!" she taunted.

As Sonic and Amy began searching the city for Char and Alpha again, it wasn't long before the GUN beetles found them! A rather large swarm of beetles surrounded them, but did not start shooting just yet. "Oh, great. These guys again!" Sonic groaned. In a moment, Spy arrived on the scene. "Oh, this is what the beetles were looking for. Hi, Sonic!" he said, waving. Sonic looked at him quizzically, and waved back slowly. "Hey... uh.... you.... Could you call off these robots? I'm busy chasing one of Eggman's robots, you see..." he explained. Spy looked around at the robots nervously. "Ummm... I'm not really authorized to command the robots. I'm just out to get Gunner his coffee. I'm following the beetles just in case the Covenant of Despair sees me..." he said. Amy sighed with annoyance. "It figures..." she said. Sonic decided to see what he could learn from Spy. "Just what is this Covenant of Despair?" he asked. Spy shrugged. "Beats me. They just seem to want to make trouble. And they're dangerous. Way more dangerous than Eggman, if you ask me. Look, the robots are holding their fire for a few minutes to let me get clear. If I don't move soon, they'll shoot anyway. Besides, I gotta get that coffee. Colonel Gunner may not be the best boss in the world, but he's my boss, so I gotta do what he says..." he said. Sonic crossed his arms. "Really? Even if you know what he's telling you to do is wrong?" he asked. Spy began backing away from the beetles. "You don't know him like I do. He's more clever than you know, and he'll

do whatever it takes to get his way. I thought he'd be fired after that business with Experiment 3, but he's too smart for that. He actually ended up promoted! I can't defy someone like that..." As Spy's voice trailed off, the beetles began aiming their guns at Sonic and Amy. "What do we do now, Sonic?" Amy asked worriedly. "Give yourselves up, or be destroyed!" one of the beetles said. Sonic put his hands on his hips. "Well, we're not gonna pick one of those choices!" he said.

Realizing that it would be too dangerous to fight the beetles with Amy caught in the crossfire, Sonic decided on the only other solution he could think of. He lifted Amy into his arms. "Hold on tight!" he instructed. Amy grabbed on to his neck as tight as she could, choking him. "Ack!! Not THAT tight!" Sonic managed to say. "Sheesh, make up your mind!" Amy said, loosening her grip. At this point, the beetles finally figured out what Sonic was going to do. "Suspect is attempting to run! Pursuit mode!" The beetles suddenly underwent a slight transformation, revealing wings and engines, giving them an appearance similar to small jets! Spy looked at the beetles nervously. "H-hey! Wait! You can't leave me alone here!" he whined. Despite the robots' speed upgrades, Sonic quickly left them in the dust, and with the robots off his trail, he thought about how he might find Alpha. "That robot's probably still somewhere in the city. The question is, where?" he wondered aloud. As they ran, Amy had an idea. "Look there, Sonic!" Sonic stopped abruptly and looked up where Amy was pointing. A trail of rings was leading up to a rooftop nearby. Sonic looked thoughtful. "Yeah, that'll work. Good thing I'm wearing the light speed shoes! But I can't take you with me if I go up that way..." he told Amy. She jumped out of his arms. "Don't worry about me! I'll catch up!" she said. Sonic headed for the start of the ring trail. "Catch you later, then!" he said before using the light speed dash to race through the trail of rings! Once he was gone, Amy ran for a nearby building. "I hope I can find an elevator somewhere..." she muttered.

The ring trail took Sonic straight to the roof, and upon landing, he began looking around for Alpha. It didn't take long to spot the robot, for it was flying around the rooftops a couple blocks away! "If he was on the ground, this would be a cinch... Hmmm..." Looking around the buildings leading to where Alpha was flying, Sonic noticed that there were ring trails linking several of the rooftops! "Well, that makes things easier... Where do these rings come from, anyway?" As Sonic began chasing them across the rooftops, Char and Alpha were nearing their destination. They soon stopped at a large but rather nondescript rooftop. There were no stairs or elevators that could be used to go between the roof and the interior of the building, which is probably the reason why Char and Alpha were the first to find the cyan colored gem sitting there! "Well, Alpha! We did it! We found the Chaos Emerald!" Char cheered. Alpha didn't look pleased. "Chaos Emerald? I wanted a toaster!" he protested. Char giggled at the random statement. "Right, Alpha. Well, we better call the doc and tell him the good news!" he suggested. Alpha focused his robotic eyes on the center of the building and projected a life-size hologram of Doctor Ivo Robotnik, AKA Dr. Eggman! "Hello? Char and Alpha? I hope you have good news for me!" Eggman said. Char pointed at the gem on the ground. "We found it, doc! We'll be bringing it back soon!" he reported. Eggman smiled at the news. "Excellent! Did you encounter any resistance?" he asked. "Flying monkeys were laughing at me." Alpha said. "Ha ha! There's no such thing as flying monkeys! But we did run into Sonic on the way, doc! We gave him the slip!" Char added. A look of frustration flashed across Eggman's holographic face. "Of course... And now he'll be a thorn in my side for the rest of the plan. Well, if that's all, get back to the land base as soon as possible!" he ordered. Eggman's hologram faded away, and Char and Alpha turned their attention to the Chaos Emerald. "Well, mission complete! I knew we'd find the emerald!" Char said cheerfully as he dropped next to it. Alpha turned away from the emerald. "Did you know we'd find it?" he asked someone. Char glanced over at where Alpha was looking and found that Sonic had arrived! "Aaaah!! Sonic!? How'd you catch us!?" he gasped. Sonic grinned at him. "You didn't really think you could out-speed me, did you?" he said. Alpha shook his

robotic head. "No, that's silly! I just thought I was faster than you!" he said. Suddenly, a noise was heard behind Sonic! Turning around, Sonic saw a hand reach over the side of the building! A second hand holding a familiar hammer reached up next, and soon, Amy climbed up from the wall! She crawled away from the edge, panting with exhaustion. "I.... said.... I'd.... catch up.... And I did! Now.... what's up?" she managed to say. As she climbed to her feet, Alpha pointed at the Chaos Emerald. "We found my shiny rock! Now let's all roll away!" he said, explaining the situation in his own way. Amy rose to her feet unsteadily. "Wow, that robot's still crazy! What's Eggman thinking, still using it?" she wondered. Char hovered beside Alpha, smiling knowingly. "A funny thing happened after your last fight with Alpha! His craziness made him more unpredictable!" he explained. Alpha raised his arms excitedly. "I want a rubber chicken for my birthday!" he declared. Char laughed loudly. "Hahahaha!! See? And when he fights, that craziness makes him hard to keep up with!" he said. Sonic looked skeptical. "He still can't keep up with me!" he said. Alpha jumped in place angrily. "You are rude! You didn't even offer me any toothpaste!" he shouted. Amy leaned on her hammer like a cane, still tired from apparently climbing up the side of the building. "You don't even have teeth... Do you?" she wondered. Char flew up high to get a better view of the action about to happen. "Ha ha! This should be interesting! Go get him, Alpha!" the Chao chuckled. Alpha began jumping around doing mock karate stances. "Alphie-fu time!" he said excitedly. Sonic found the situation somewhat humorous, too. "Heh heh heh! Bring it on!" he said.

Alpha jumped up into the air, using his jetpack to hover in the air just out of Sonic's reach. "I like you! Let's play laser tag!" the robot said, pointing his lasers at Sonic, who began stepping around the roof cautiously. "OK, pal. I'll play with you!" he said, humoring Alpha. Amy looked slightly worried. "Careful, Sonic! Who knows what that bot is thinking!" she said. "I do! I do!" Alpha replied, "That robot is thinking.... paper airplanes!" Before he even finished speaking, Alpha began firing his lasers at Sonic, who had to move quickly to avoid them! Next, Alpha dropped to the roof next to Sonic and attacked him with a spinning kick! Sonic was taken off guard and knocked over! "I got him!" Amy shouted, running to Alpha with her hammer raised. Alpha did a back flip just as Amy reached him, then pushed her aside with his laser hand, shooting at Sonic with it at the same time! Sonic quickly jumped away and then attempted to hit Alpha with a homing attack, but the robot suddenly rocketed up into the air, out of Sonic's reach! As he landed on the roof, Sonic skidded to a stop just before the ledge, slipping and falling on his back as he did! He sighed with relief, since he almost fell, and then quickly scrambled away as Alpha began firing lasers at him again! "That robot does improvise an awful lot... But I can do that, too!" Sonic said to himself, glancing over at the Chaos Emerald. Char had been laughing uncontrollably watching this fight, but suddenly stopped as he noticed Sonic running after the emerald! "Oh, no you don't!" he shouted, diving to the emerald and snatching it away before Sonic could grab it! "That would be cheating!" Char scolded. Alpha had been watching this, and now landed next to Char. "Hey! I wanna cheat! Give him the thingy!" he whined. Char looked at him blankly for a second, then dropped the emerald and hovered away! "Look out, Alpha!!" he shouted! Amy had approached from behind, and hit the robot on the head with her hammer! "Hi-ya!! Take that, you busted bot!" she yelled. Alpha was unfazed by the attack, and spun around quickly to push Amy down! "Laser tag! You're it!" Alpha shouted, aiming his laser at Amy! Sonic reacted quickly, running circles around Alpha at high speed! The robot spun his body around quickly, trying to keep up, but ended up losing his balance and falling over! Taking the opportunity, Sonic jumped into the air, preparing for a homing attack!

The attack hit hard, resulting in an explosion that sent Sonic soaring backward! Again, he skidded to a stop close to the edge of the building! "Next time, let's do this at a lower elevation..." he said. Char flew over to the explosion worriedly. "Alphie!! Are you OK!?" he yelled in panic. As the smoke from the explosion cleared, Alpha stood up. He was a little battered and smoky, but overall seemed fine. "Tee

hee! That tickled!" he giggled. "It figures..." Amy groaned. Sonic walked over to Alpha, assessing the damage he'd caused. "Ready to quit?" he asked. Char nodded, flying to the Chaos Emerald and picking it up again! "Yeah, I think we are ready to quit! Let's go, Alphonse!" he said quickly. Alpha glanced over at Char, looking rather pathetic. "All the world is blue again..." he whined. Char started flying off, and Alpha followed him. "Don't worry! You're blue, too!" the Chao said reassuringly. "Yay!" Alpha cheered. Sonic wasn't about to let them escape. Before they reached the edge of the roof, he dashed into their path! "Not so fast! Drop that Chaos Emerald!" he shouted. Char looked down at Sonic for a moment. "Hmmm... Right, you. Hahahaha!! I got it! Give us some smoke, Alpha!" he ordered. Alpha transformed his laser a little, enabling him to shoot out smoke, instead! In a moment, a blinding smokescreen covered the roof. "Hee hee! No smoking! I'm gonna go blow out some candles now!" Alpha chuckled as he and Char flew away! Sonic couldn't see where they were going through the smoke, but he could hear them for a little longer. "Wheeeee!!" Alpha shouted, apparently having some fun in his flight. Suddenly, Sonic could hear a loud thud. "OW!" Alpha shouted. "Watch where you're going, Alphonse!" Char said. After that, Sonic could no longer hear anything from them. "When is this smoke gonna go away!? I can't see to move anywhere!" he yelled in frustration. He could hear Amy reply from somewhere. "Never mind that, Sonic. That robot's long gone now. At least there are still six Chaos Emeralds left!" she said.

Once the smoke cleared, Sonic scanned the skyline for any sign of Char or Alpha. "Well, that Chao was right... Alpha has gotten a bit unpredictable..." he muttered. There was no sign of Alpha anywhere, and it was clear that Sonic wasn't going to be able to find him now. He thought about the situation for a moment. "Well, I guess Eggman's up to his usual tricks!" he said, turning to leave. "Yeah... Guess so. What should we do?" Amy wondered. Sonic stood still for a moment, pondering something. "Actually.... I'm more worried about that guy... Anubis. He was talking about starting a war.... with the humans. That doesn't sound good." he said. Amy began looking even more worried as she thought about it. "That's right... And I bet they have a whole army, too! This could get dangerous, Sonic!" she said. Sonic made up his mind on the spot. "Well, army or not, I can't just let them hurt innocents! Forget Eggman for now! Better see if I can find out more about those Despair guys!" he said, walking towards the edge of the roof. Amy ran over to him and tapped his shoulder. "Uhhh... Sonic? That's all well and good, but.... How do we get down from here!?" she shouted, realizing that there were no stairs or elevator accessible from the roof! Sonic looked down the side of the building. They were pretty high up, so simply jumping was out of the question. Sonic thought about his adventures in Speed Highway, where he sometimes had to run down the side of a building. An evil grin emerged on his face. "Hey, Amy, feeling adventurous?"

Upon reaching the ground, Amy smacked Sonic in the head with her hammer. "DON'T EVER PICK ME UP AND RUN DOWN A BUILDING LIKE THAT AGAIN!!!" she screamed. Sonic rubbed his head where Amy hit him. "Jeez, you try to do someone a favor... Well, see ya, Amy!" he said, running away! Amy stood in shock for a second before chasing after him. "Hey.... Sonic!! Wait for meeeeeee!!!" she yelled.

To be continued...

4 - Enter Troblusk City

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 4 - Enter Troblusk City
Stage 4(Dark 2) - Hollow Manor
Boss 4 - Shadow Chaos

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair has emerged from the shadows, and Knuckles, Punchy, and Sonic have each had a run in with the sinister group. As Sonic battles with Anubis, a motive of the organization is revealed: They plan to begin a war with humanity! In the meantime, Char and Alpha have tracked down a Chaos Emerald for the diabolical Dr. Eggman. With new evil schemes emerging by the moment, what will happen next is anyone's guess!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Station Square is a decent city. Though trouble has found its way there on a few occasions, overall the city is calm and peaceful. In every nation, some cities are better than others, and some are worse than others. Troblusk City is an example of the wrong side of the tracks. You can't walk five steps in that dark, petulant place without being within sight of a villain of some sort. Such a place, where the rule of law is nearly absent, was a perfect place for a certain black-furred outlaw to hide out. This black, two-tailed fox was slowly walking down the streets, wearing a pair of blue pants with a yellow stripe along the bottom of each leg. A pair of blue goggles rested between his ears and the strands of white hair that hovered over his right eye. His two tails ended in spiky tufts of white fur, and his left tail wore the Tailband of Chaos which granted him great strength. He may look like Tails, but he was Copter the fox. Much was on his mind as he passed by the immense clock tower at the center of Troblusk City. "Who are these Covenant of Despair weirdos I've been seeing around? What do they want?" he said to no one. Suddenly, he spotted a familiar adversary of his heading his way! It was a green porcupine wearing a police uniform. "Freeze!! Don't move, experiment!" shouted officer Razor, pointing his gun at Copter! "Huh? You again! Don't you ever get tired of pointing that gun at me?" the fox groaned. Razor was looking a little weary, which was understandable considering where he was working now. "Yes, this does get pretty old. So could you please come quietly this time?" he asked. "Sorry. I'm not interested in seeing Guard and those other GUN geeks again." Copter growled, recalling the time when he was a prisoner. Suddenly, a robotic voice shouted at Copter from behind! "Experiment detected!! Capture!! Capture!!" Copter looked around and found an assortment of GUN's robots surrounding him! Razor smiled smugly at Copter. "I should have mentioned! Those 'GUN geeks' have been watching this town! Now, surrender!" he warned. Copter looked at the enemies nervously. "Eep... Can we talk this over?" he whined. Another, more unexpected voice replied to Copter's plea. "Don't bother! These wimps are nothing!" At this moment, a large purple dragon flew over from behind the clock tower, blowing fire at a pair of GUN beetles as it arrived! Copter knew who it was immediately. "K-kosmo!?" he stuttered. As the

dragon landed, it began glowing with a bright, white light! "It's Experiment 3! Change target!!" the robots shouted, rushing the glowing dragon! The dragon proceeded to change shape, and as the light faded, a purple gargoyle stood in its place! "Boo!" Kosmo said as a hunter robot approached him. He jumped into the air, flying circles around the hunter for a moment before dropping down and kicking it hard, destroying it! When the smoke cleared, Kosmo quickly transformed into a purple version of Shadow, and used the speed of this form to take out the rest of the robots in a flash, leaving only a purple blur as he passed each exploding robot! Razor watched this in panic. "Aaaaah!! What's happening!?" he gasped. Within seconds, the last robot exploded, and Kosmo stopped in front of Razor before transforming into his normal form, which was a furry, purple creature with a hairless muzzle, red gloves, turquoise shoes, and a mohawk consisting of four strands of hair between his ears. His most notable feature was his glowing yellow eyes, which had black pupils and continued glowing no matter what form he was in. "Wanna be next?" he asked Razor once his transformation was finished. "Shoot! I need backup!!" Razor realized, running off as quickly as he could.

Kosmo laughed as Razor escaped, then started to leave before remembering Copter. "Oh, howdy." he muttered to him. "K-kosmo... You just saved me again!" Copter said, recalling the last time Razor almost caught him. Kosmo shrugged. "Just messing with GUN. You were just the bait! See ya!" As Kosmo ran off, Copter tried to chase him. "H-hey!! Wait!! Come back here, Kosmo!" he shouted. Kosmo ignored him and kept moving, so Copter just continued following him. Kosmo glanced back, glaring at him. "We're not buddies just because I helped you. Stop following me!" he shouted, continuing on his way. "Well, maybe I think I should keep an eye on you! Wouldn't want you going all psycho again..." Copter said, still following him. Kosmo stopped in his tracks, growling in frustration. "Psycho!? Come on! I just- You know what? I don't have to talk to you!" he said, leaning down to pick up some rocks. He then turned around and threw some rocks at Copter, who started backing away. "Hey! Cut it out!" he shouted. Kosmo threw one more rock before turning to leave. "Stop following me!" he said as he walked off. Copter hesitated a moment. "Hmmm... I wouldn't want him morphing and picking a fight with me, but I don't wanna just let him go this time..." he thought. Though Kosmo had helped him, Copter still couldn't be sure he could be trusted. "If only there was an easy way to follow him.... Hey, wait! There is!" he realized. Focusing on the energy of his tailband, Copter managed to activate its power, and vanished! "All right! I got it to work! I think... Well, time to test that..." he thought, following Kosmo once more. As they walked, Kosmo heard Copter's footsteps behind him. "I said.... huh!?" When he turned around, he could not see Copter. "Hmmm... Maybe it's my imagination..." he muttered, walking off again. Copter spun his tails and started flying to follow Kosmo. "Invisibility's working... Hopefully he can't hear my flying..." he thought. Whether Kosmo noticed him or not, their walk continued. Soon, they reached an even darker area of the city, which was heavily covered in dead and dying trees. In a clearing among these trees was a large, seemingly abandoned mansion! It was an extremely creepy place, but Kosmo sighed calmly once they arrived. "Home, sweet home!" he said to himself.

Kosmo entered the mansion and looked around. The entrance hall's only source of light was a couple of candles on a table by the wall to the left. The only apparent exit to the room, aside from the entrance, was a stairway leading to a balcony. The hall was a mess; it was cluttered with old junk and covered with dust. As Kosmo stepped towards the stairs at the end of the hall, he soon noticed that he was not alone. A few of GUN's beetles hovered down from the balcony, heading right for him! "What the... Those military dopes found my hiding place!" he exclaimed. One of the beetles fired a warning shot at his feet, which caused him to stumble and fall over! "Why you little... I oughta..." Kosmo grumbled as he stood up. "Kosmo the Morph! You are under arrest, by order of Col. Gunner!" the beetle said. Kosmo took a moment to process what had been said to him. "He... actually.... GOT PROMOTED!? Gah, GUN's full of

idiots!!" he shouted angrily. The rest of the beetles in the room suddenly revealed their guns. "Suspect appears hostile. Preparing to attack!" the apparent leader of the beetles said. Kosmo raised an eyebrow. "Is this thing serious?" he said, feeling the beetle was being particularly stupid. As the beetles started shooting, Kosmo jumped into the air, morphing into gargoyle form as he did! "It's serious!" he groaned as he flew away from the bullets being shot at him. "Must capture suspect! Dead or alive!" the beetles yelled. "Oh, yeah?" Kosmo grinned, beginning to transform his tail. "Don't hog all the robots this time!" said Copter, who had just appeared at the entrance! Kosmo had turned his tail into a mace, and had begun swinging it around. "Great. Everyone followed me! Looks like I need a new hideout!" he growled, hurling the spiked ball at the end of his tail at the nearest beetle, destroying it! Copter nodded in agreement at what Kosmo had said. "Yeah, you don't need GUN knocking at your door every day. Well, time to deal with these guys! Chaos Whirlwind!!" As Copter motioned his hand towards one of the beetles, a chaotic wind began blowing in that direction, knocking the beetle off course and into another beetle, smashing them both! Kosmo landed beside Copter and looked at his handiwork. "Nice one. That wraps this up!" In the time it took Copter to destroy two of them, Kosmo had already taken out the rest! Copter crossed his arms. "Show off! But if I know GUN, more are on the way." he said. "Yippie... Well, before I ditch this place, I have to go fetch something." Kosmo replied, heading for the stairs. "Mind if I tag along?" Copter offered. Kosmo groaned at his persistence. "Oh, if you must... But I'm not your babysitter. If GUN catches you, you're on your own!" he warned. Copter started following him. "They couldn't catch a cold! Let's go!" he said.

Kosmo led Copter through the halls of the manor, but it wasn't long before squads of GUN Beetles blocked their path again. "Those bots have the hallway on lockdown, more or less..." Kosmo grumbled. "We could probably take 'em, as long as they don't have backup waiting to smash through the ceiling or something..." Copter mused. Kosmo shook his head. "Too close quarters for my taste. And this place is full of secret passages that they may have gotten into. Might turn ugly." he said, placing his hand against a rather abstract painting on the wall and giving it a push, revealing it to be a secret door! "Let's head for the library." he suggested, leading the way through the secret passage. The dark corridor contained a cobweb-covered stairway that ended at another painting-door leading to the dusty, cluttered library of the manor. Not only that, but it was slimy, too! Copter and Kosmo gasped upon finding puddles of losol slithering around the room! "Uuumm... Those YOUR pets?" Copter asked. "No way! GUN must've brought them!" Kosmo snapped. Some losol were crawling up into the bookshelves, and having reached some books, seemed to be absorbed into the covers! Then, the books seemed to come alive, flapping around the room like bats! "Kosmo...? Let's get out of this room, okay?" Copter suggested. Kosmo morphed into a bat form and latched on to the ceiling upside down. "Plotting my course now... You might want to figure a way to avoid those slime puddles on the way to the door." he suggested. Copter made an annoyed face, when suddenly, a laser was fired between them from inside the secret passage! "Experiments!! You are under arrest!!" shouted a robotic voice! Kosmo started flapping frantically. "Planning phase over! Time to go!!" he shouted. "Chaos Whirlwind!!" Copter yelled, blowing as much of the Lost Ones aside as he could so that he could make for the door! He also blew Kosmo forward, knocking him into the wall with a splat! "Ow...! Warn me when you're gonna do that!" he growled. Copter opened the door hastily as GUN robots started swarming into the room. "Let's roll, Kos!" he said, pulling the bat-morph off the wall!

They emerged at another dark hallway. "Well, anyway... Where'd you stash your stuff, Kosmo?" Copter asked as they slammed the door behind them and started moving. "On this floor. My 'bedroom,' if you must know." Kosmo replied. Copter nodded. "Makes sense... Something's been bugging me, though. You could mess with GUN more directly if you wanted to. So why have you been following me around

and helping me out?" he asked. Kosmo laughed at him. "Following you? Jeez, I help you twice and you think I'm following you. I just happened to be in the neighborhood. And you're the one following me now. What's up with that?" he wondered. Copter didn't get to answer, as suddenly they heard laughter coming from a nearby room! "Hee hee!" Copter and Kosmo both glanced in the direction of the laughter. "You don't have a room-mate, right Kosmo?" Copter asked. Suddenly, the laughter was heard again, coming from behind them! Copter looked back and thought he saw someone running into a door a short distance away. "I think someone's following us..." he said. Kosmo looked where Copter was looking. "Great. What is it now, a ninja?" he wondered. "Hee hee!" The laughter came from the other side of the hallway this time, and was slightly louder. "Sounds like a kid..." Copter realized. There were doors all along both sides of the hallway, and every time both of them looked in one direction, the voice laughed behind them and crossed the hall to a room on the other side. This kept up for a couple minutes, until Kosmo decided to trip their stalker up. When Copter looked behind him, Kosmo simply walked in place a little, trying to make it sound like he'd turned. Just then, someone dressed in black dashed by the hall and entered a room on the other side! "That way!" Kosmo yelled, grabbing Copter by the arm and rushing after the stranger! They chased through the dusty, messy rooms of the mansion, barely keeping him in sight. As they ran, the stranger continued laughing as he tossed some junk he'd grabbed from the floor back at them! An old jack-in-the-box hit Copter in the head, knocking him over! Kosmo continued running without him, and once they were gone, Copter climbed to his feet. The jack-in-the-box opened loudly as he did, startling him. "Ahh!! Grrr... Keep chasing him, Kosmo! When I catch up, I wanna strangle him!!!" he yelled, rushing off in the direction they'd gone. He soon found himself back in the hallway. He could hear Kosmo shouting at the stranger, so Copter followed his voice. When he caught up with Kosmo, he found the stranger cornered at a dead end! "Got you now!" Kosmo growled. The stranger they'd been chasing was a fox dressed in a Covenant of Despair uniform. His fur was colored differently in different places. His head was yellow, his ears were blue, and his tail was green, with a tuft of cyan fur at the end. He had green eyes and wore orange shoes. Though his voice sounded childish, he was actually a teenager. "OK, why were you following us!?" Copter yelled. "Hee hee! You guys are funny lookin'!" the fox chuckled. Kosmo glared at the colorful fox. "You brought GUN here, didn't you!? I oughta..." he growled, stepping towards the stranger. As he did, the floorboards started to creak loudly, and Kosmo stopped moving. "Hey, what's wrong, Kosmo?" Copter asked, walking towards him. "No, wait, stop!!" Kosmo shouted too late! The floorboards beneath them snapped from their weight, and they fell through the floor! The colorful stranger was laughing uncontrollably as Copter and Kosmo tumbled into the room below, landing on a large table! When the dust settled, Copter and Kosmo shakily climbed to their feet before looking around. They were in the dining room, which was dimly lit by a few candles on the table. Foul-smelling food was sitting on plates positioned around the table. "Once again, thanks for all your HELP, Copter!!" Kosmo grumbled.

The colorful fox they'd been chasing jumped gracefully through the hole in the floor, then back flipped over Copter and Kosmo! He then ran over to the entrance to the room, where a pair of glowing red eyes were peering through the darkness. "Well, well. It's that shape-shifter. Experiment 3." said the owner of the eyes as he stepped into the room. He was also wearing a Covenant of Despair uniform, but with a blue thirteen-pointed star on it instead of the usual red. This creature was a sort of turquoise canine, with black ears, a gray muzzle, and a medium-sized tail. He wore blue gloves and gray shoes. His lightly glowing red eyes had black pupils, and he wore a somewhat sleepy expression. The colorful fox was hopping in place with a silly expression. "Shape-shifter you say? Think he can imitate me? Hee hee!" he said. Kosmo crossed his arms and glared at them. "Just who are you supposed to be?" he asked. Copter recognized their uniforms. "They're with the Covenant of Despair." he growled. The canine nodded slowly. "Yes, that's right. They call me Basker. It's a pleasure. Sort of." he said. The colorful fox

was excitedly jumping in place. "Hee hee! I'm called Patch! We have a bit in common, I think!" he giggled. "OK, and what are you doing here? Recruiting for the black-jumpsuit brigade?" Kosmo asked. "That's not why we're here. But you should consider it." Basker said calmly. He was very much the opposite of Patch, who seemed unable to contain his energy. "Despair's loads of fun! You get to beat up humans! Hee hee!" he said while hopping in place. Copter frowned. "Geez, these guys seem weirder every time I see 'em. You aren't considering joining them, are you, Kosmo?" he asked. Kosmo stood there with his arms crossed and his eyes shut, thinking. He was grinning at whatever he was thinking about, and it made Copter feel uneasy. "Kosmo? Seriously... Don't join these guys!" he insisted. Basker looked a little impatient. "Well, what's your answer? We know you are no fan of humans. Join us, and you can be rid of them." he said. Kosmo opened his eyes and glanced up at the hole in the roof. "Too bad. I don't have time for you kooks. GUN's probably gonna swarm this place soon, so I gotta finish here and leave, quick." he said. Basker stared at Kosmo calmly. "I am aware of GUN's presence. It is of no consequence. However, I can see that you need more time to think about this. Give him something to think about, Patch." he ordered. Patch hopped a few steps toward Copter and Kosmo, holding ninja stars in his hands. "Hee hee! Mull this over!" he said, throwing several of the sharp stars at them! Reacting fast, Kosmo morphed into his gargoyle form and flew up through the hole in the roof, followed closely by Copter, who barely dodged some of the stars as he flew to the next floor! As they escaped, Patch attempted to chase them, but Basker quickly grabbed him by the arm! "Lemme go! Lemme go!! I wanna poke holes in them!!" Patch whined. Basker tugged his arm roughly. "Patch, if you need throw knives, there are plenty of robots. We've no time." he insisted. Patch stopped attempting to run and frowned. "Awww. Why are we letting them go?" he asked. Basker released his arm and started walking towards the hole in the roof. "We still have our mission, and I believe that Experiment 3 may yet be persuaded to join us." he explained. Patch pulled out a switchblade and started playing with it. "Well, whatever. Hee hee! I guess we'll see those guys again!" he giggled.

After returning to the upper floor, Kosmo realized that chasing Patch had caused him to become somewhat lost. They had to retrace their steps to find their way to an area of the mansion Kosmo was more familiar with. Soon enough, they met with a problem. The GUN beetles from the library had gotten loose, and something seemed different about them now! "Hey, do those robots look a little green to you...?" Copter muttered. They were floating in a rather unusual fashion, as well, like gravity had lost its effect on them. Kosmo frowned. "Remember the slime that possessed those books?" he said. The GUN beetles, clearly possessed by the losol as well, had now noticed them, and started blowing jets of ghostly blue fire in front of them as they approached! Copter started to sweat. "I've seen that kinda fire before... It does baaad things to ya. Tell me they're not blocking the way we need to go!" he shouted. The ghoulish beetles were in fact blocking a fork in the hallway, and as Kosmo looked over the paintings and sconces on the wall, he got his bearings and nodded. "Yeah, we gotta turn that corner." he said. The beetles were heading their way, blowing those blue flames, so Copter thought to blow them back. "Chaos Whirlwind!!" The wind blew the fire back all right, and engulfed the beetles in the flames, turning them into possessed fireballs! "Come on, they shouldn't be flammable!!" Copter groaned. Kosmo morphed into hedgehog form and shook Copter's hand. "If I don't make it out, shoot Gunner for me, will ya?" he grumbled. Copter chuckled. "Sure, but who will avenge my death when your skeleton murders me?" he whimpered. Kosmo then leapt in between the beetles and yelled "Chaos Blast!!" The chaotic explosion incinerated the robots, and left behind scorched puddles of dead losol! Copter leaned against the wall, sighing in relief, and the wall opened up to reveal a secret passage that he stumbled into! "WHOA!! Where'd this come from!?! My poor tails..." he whined. Kosmo smacked his head upon seeing that passage. "RIGHT! That was there! It would've taken us RIGHT NEXT to my room!" he groaned in

frustration. Copter stood up shakily and glared at him. "Next time you take up residence in a sprawling haunted house, DRAW A MAP!!" he yelled.

Soon, they were at Kosmo's room, which was probably the dustiest room in the mansion, and the most empty. Aside from a few blankets in the corner, the most notable thing about the room were large cracks in the walls. Kosmo walked over to the blankets in the corner and pulled some things out from under them. "Let's see... Chicken bones... Newspapers... Sunglasses... Ah! Here it is!" Kosmo stood up holding a small object in his hand. "This is my only real possession. Well, besides the glasses. That's good for disguises." he said. Copter walked over to get a look at what Kosmo was holding. "It's a gold coin... Looks kinda ancient." he observed. Kosmo nodded. "Yeah. There's some writing along the edges of it in some form of old gibberish. Probably older than Bucky is." he said. "Where'd you get it?" Copter wondered. Kosmo shrugged. "I found it after I escaped Shadow Arc. Sometimes it glows. I think it might come in handy someday." he said. "Well, I guess we should go now..." Copter said, turning to leave. As he did, an explosion of light erupted from Kosmo's coin, startling them both! "Whoa!! What's goin' on!?" Copter shouted, turning back towards Kosmo. In seconds, the coin stopped glowing, and Kosmo blinked his eyes a few times to recover from the shock. "Wha... It's never flashed that bright before..." he muttered under his breath. "What's the matter, Kosmo?" Copter asked. Kosmo flicked the coin into the air and caught it. "Ah, it's nothing. Let's get outta here." As they headed for the exit, Copter hesitated. He heard a strange noise coming from the cracks in the back wall. "I know that sound... Kosmo! Something's coming!" Copter shouted, turning around to see what was happening. A strange, black liquid was oozing through the cracks in the wall! Kosmo looked at it with curiosity. "Not more sludge..." he grumbled, thinking it might be losol. Suddenly, the black liquid gushed out of the wall faster, and then rose from the floor, taking the shape of Chaos! The black Chaos had yellow eyes, and was familiar to Copter. It was Shadow Chaos, the creature Copter had encountered in the Chaos Shrine! "Hey... What's this thing!? What does it want!?" Kosmo growled. Copter thought back and remembered his fight with the creature. "I've seen it before... You! Monster thing! What do you want from me!?" he yelled, shaking his fist at Shadow Chaos. "It's not you he's looking at!" Kosmo realized. Suddenly, Shadow Chaos stretched its arms and threw its fists at Kosmo, knocking him a few feet backward! Copter turned in Kosmo's direction. "Whoa! You OK, Kosmo?" he asked. Kosmo stood up and shot a furious look at Shadow Chaos. "Got a bone to pick with me? Then show me what you got!" he yelled. Shadow Chaos jumped over to Kosmo and swung its seemingly elastic arms at him, knocking him aside again! This time, however, Kosmo didn't fall down. "Talkative thing, aren't ya?" he said. Copter ran over to assist Kosmo. "This thing's a real piece of work, Kosmo! Let's take it on together!" he suggested. Kosmo glowed with white light, attempting to transform, but abruptly shifted back into his normal form. "Well... It does seem that I'm more tired than I thought... Shouldn't have used Kosmogon form to help you earlier." he realized. Shadow Chaos took advantage of Kosmo's failure to transform, and slapped him aside with his powerful arms again! However, this gave Copter an opening to attack it with a tailband-powered tail whip! Shadow Chaos exploded into a black puddle, but quickly reshaped itself into its normal form. "Aw, that's cheating!" Kosmo grunted as he stood up again, "Well, I'm not getting knocked down again! Let's try Kosmosis!" A purple light shot out of Kosmo's eyes, similar to his Kosmos attack, but weaker. The attack wasn't powerful enough to explode Shadow Chaos, but it did knock it backward a bit. Shadow Chaos recovered quickly, and ran between Copter and Kosmo, spinning its stretched-out arms in order to smack both of them away! They were flung into the air, but both landed on their feet. "That kinda hurt... And it seemed like my tailband didn't hurt it any more than a regular attack would've..." Copter realized, seeing that Shadow Chaos didn't seem to be growing any weaker. Kosmo grinned at the creature. "Not bad, but it's time to end this!" As if in response to Kosmo's words, Shadow Chaos charged at him, flailing its arms violently! Copter flew over in an attempt to help. "Look out, Kosmo!" he shouted.

Kosmo prepared to dodge, but Shadow Chaos stopped to smack Copter out of the sky with its long arm! Copter fell onto the pile of junk Kosmo left next to the blankets. "Ow!! Those chicken bones hurt!!" Copter groaned. Kosmo was about to attempt to attack Shadow Chaos, but the creature already turned to him and started attacking again. Kosmo jumped aside and ran out of the way, putting some distance between himself and Shadow Chaos. The creature pulled its arms back to their normal length and pointed its hands at Kosmo. After aiming, it began firing globs of black fluid at Kosmo with speed similar to a bullet! Kosmo quickly ran out of the way. "Good at long-distance fighting are you? Try this on for size then!" Though he was now panting with exhaustion, Kosmo managed to force his tail to morph into a mace, which he threw at Shadow Chaos quickly, smashing the spiked ball into Shadow Chaos and causing it to break down into a puddle again! As his mace-tail snapped back to him, Kosmo morphed it back to normal and glanced at the black water on the floor. "OK... He wasn't so tough. I think I beat him... Let's get outta here, already..." he said, starting to head for the exit again. However, Shadow Chaos began quickly reforming after Kosmo took his eyes off it, and as soon as it was able, it fired its arms in Kosmo's direction! "Look out!" Copter yelled, running over as fast as he could! Kosmo turned just in time to see Copter run in the path of the attack. Shadow Chaos's arms smacked into Copter with such force that they splashed against his chest, but Copter stood firm. "Yeow!! That hurts... Lousy monster!!" Copter groaned. Shadow Chaos retracted its arms and backed away a step, making odd noises in frustration. Kosmo stared wide-eyed at Copter. "Hey! Why'd you do that!?" he asked. Copter glanced back at Kosmo. "Heh... Now we're even..." he said. Kosmo stepped out from behind Copter and faced Shadow Chaos. "That sneak attack was uncalled for! If that's the way you're gonna be, let's finish this!" he growled.

Rather than attack Kosmo, Shadow Chaos backed away towards the wall. Naturally, this confused Kosmo. "Hey! We're not done yet! Come back here, you coward!" he shouted. Shadow Chaos sank back into a puddle and started slipping back into the cracks. Suddenly, a voice came from outside the room. "Stop! Shadow Chaos!!" It was Basker! He and Patch ran into the room, but they were too late. The last of Shadow Chaos's liquid form slipped into the cracks, escaping into the darkness. Basker was panting, having apparently been running for a while. "Missed him..." he said unhappily. "Well, it isn't a total loss! We found these guys again! Hee hee!" Patch giggled, pointing at Copter and Kosmo, who were now cautiously approaching the Covenant of Despair members. "That's weird. Almost seems like you guys scared that monster away." Kosmo observed. "Well, those guys ARE pretty creepy." Copter pointed out. "BOO! Hee hee!" Patch joked. Basker glanced around the room, as though looking for something. "It seems Shadow Chaos is no longer here..." he said. "Is that the creature that attacked us?" Kosmo asked. Patch laughed at the question. "Hee hee! That's classified!" he said. Basker crossed his arms. "I'd ask what you two were doing here, but I don't think it matters. Our operations here are concluded. We must now return to headquarters." he said sleepily. Patch jumped towards the exit and ran out hastily. "Hee hee! Later, losers!" he giggled. Basker hesitated. "I am anxious to return to headquarters. You two are welcome to come along, if only to get a sense of how hopeless it is to oppose us." he suggested. As Basker started walking away, Copter and Kosmo exchanged puzzled looks. "So... Were they looking for that monster?" Copter wondered. "I don't know, but they've got me a little curious. Besides, I need a new place to hang out. Perhaps I should follow them." Kosmo said, starting to follow Basker and Patch. Copter watched him go with concern. "I don't know about this... Well, maybe I can learn more about these creepy weirdos if I visit their HQ..." he decided, running off to catch up to the others.

"Mister Master! We've arrived!" Meanwhile, at Shadow Arcangel, two new experiments were meeting

with their creator, the brown, lab coat wearing rat known as Bucky Stein. One of the experiments was a strange, yellow creature with a blue streak going down the center of her head, as well as blue hair hanging behind her head as well. She wore a light green sleeveless top, burgundy pants and had a forked tail with a band of blue fur ringing near the tip of each end. She had pink eyes, and was overall the most unique creation Bucky had produced yet. The other was a brown griffin. He had tan wings, a white crest of feathers on his head and a white tuft of feathers on his chest. He wore cyan gloves, yellow sneakers with red stripes, and had red eyes. He knelt before Bucky respectfully as he arrived, quite a contrast to his companion. "What is your will, my father?" he said. Bucky paused before turning his seat to face them. "You're late. We haven't got time to waste!" he said sternly. The female saluted him. "Understood, mister master. Better explain things to the baby quickly." she joked. The griffin looked at her in annoyance. "Quit calling me a baby!" he protested. Bucky rolled his eyes. "Fourteen! Fifteen! No bickering! You share the same mission!" he shouted. They glanced at him as he continued. "War is coming to our home. We could just sit by and ignore it... but this could be our chance. Our chance to step out of the shadows and reclaim our freedom!" he declared. The griffin looked uncertain. "Freedom... Is that really worth fighting for?" he wondered. The other experiment laughed at him. "That's why you're the baby, 'Fifteen.'" she said. "Cut it out, 'Fourteen!'" the griffin growled, raising his fists. Bucky shot a bolt of lightning between them to regain their attention. "Stop it! Your mission is simple. Go forth and observe all sides of this conflict!" he ordered. Fourteen crossed her arms. "What about the spies? Aren't Vortex and Zipp better for this job?" she pointed out. Bucky smirked at them. "Maybe I want you both to prove yourselves." he said. The griffin nodded. "Yes, father. We won't let you down." he said. "We'll split up and check out the Covenant of Despair and GUN!" Fourteen added. Bucky nodded. "Hmm... Don't overlook Sonic in all this. He's the wild card in this game. We'll keep in touch. Good luck, my experiments." he said. "Race ya, Fourteen!" the griffin said, speeding off. However, Fourteen hesitated in order to give Bucky a knowing wink. "Don't worry, mister master. I'll take care of everything." she said. Bucky nodded. "I have great expectations for you. BOTH of you." he said. As both experiments started to leave, Bucky turned to the controls of the Arcangel. "Time for me to go. The Covenant awaits..." he murmured.

Eventually, Kosmo and Copter found themselves in what appeared to be a throne room of sorts, deep within the Covenant of Despair's headquarters. Basker and Patch had taken them a long way, and they stopped to rest before going far into the large room. It was an elaborate throne room, giant columns along the walls reaching up to the high roof, unlit torches lined the path to the back of the room, with two lit torches in the center, burning with black flames. A large, black chair dominated the back of the room. It had various fearsome images carved into it, and was emblazoned with the Covenant of Despair's symbol, the thirteen-pointed star. As they wandered towards the throne, Conan watched them from the shadow of one of the columns to the right, doing his best not to be seen. His expression grew tense as he gazed at Copter's tailband. "What a revolting development..." he thought. Patch had left Basker's side and started goofing around near Conan, prompting him to sneak away to avoid being noticed. Near the throne, Basker turned to Copter and Kosmo. "We must wait a moment." he told them before walking in front of the throne, which was currently empty. "I guess we gotta wait for someone for some reason..." Copter muttered. To the left of the throne, a black and red hornet wearing a black leather jacket and a black helmet was looking at them. His helmet had a black visor that made his eyes impossible to see. "Heyyyyy..." he muttered, slowly flying towards them. "Psst! Copter!" he whispered. "Zipp?" Copter said, somewhat surprised, "What are you doing here?" Zipp's companions, Crash and Vortex, were hanging out by the columns at the left wall as well. Crash, a grey, green-eyed rhinoceros wearing a yellow bowler hat, was the first to join them. "Nice to see you again." he said. Kosmo's eyes widened as he realized

what their presence meant. "Oh... No... It couldn't be..." he groaned. Vortex, a black chameleon with two horns on his head, orange eyes, a jagged tail, and two red spikes on his back, confirmed Kosmo's fears. "Masssster, Kossssmo issss here." he said, looking up towards the ceiling.

From the rafters, Bucky jumped down, using his electric powers to slow his descent! "Let me see him!" He said, pushing past Crash and Zipp in order to greet Copter and Kosmo. "Ah, what do we have here? I must say, I never expected to see you both together." he said upon seeing them. "Bucky! Hey, why'd Vortex only tell you about Kosmo? What am I, chopped liver?" Copter asked. Vortex had emerged from the shadows to greet them now. "Hanging out with Kossssmo? If you had a death wissssh, Copter, you could have came to sssssee Zipp." he hissed. "Seems to me I just did. Hey, Zipp." Copter replied, waving at Zipp. "If only Crash hadn't confiscated my shotgun! I'd give you a proper welcome!" Zipp chuckled. Kosmo looked around at his creator and fellow creations with contempt. "You know what? I think I'll be leaving now!" he growled. Bucky blocked his path as he turned to leave. "By all means, don't leave on account of me." he insisted. Copter frowned. "All right. We'll leave because of Vortex." he said. "Ssssshut up." Vortex snarled. Kosmo backed away from Bucky. "Don't even speak to me... None of you! You, who created me and then caged me! I want nothing to do with you!" he said threateningly. Bucky crossed his arms and glared at him. "I'm not too thrilled to see you either. But I have my reasons for being here, so I'll just have to live with it." he said. "Just why ARE you here?" Copter wondered. Before Bucky could reply, Basker turned to call them. "Kosmo! Copter! Come, it is time!" Copter and Kosmo left Bucky and approached the throne. "Time for what?" Kosmo growled, "If it's about joining you guys, I don't think I want to." Basker motioned to the throne. "Tell that to our master." he said. Suddenly, the throne burst into black flames, and began forming the shape of a creature! As the flames faded, a truly fearsome entity emerged. It was hooded, much like the Doomsayer and the Deathbringer, but this one's hood had three red stripes going along the sides and top. His cloak had a red collar, and his gloves were a dark red color. His shoes were red and grey, and he had a grey tail with a red furred tip. His hate-filled eyes glowed red as well, and were the only part of his face visible under his hood. Copter and Kosmo backed away a step, shocked by his appearance. The being first looked at Basker. "Basker... The mission ended in failure, did it not?" he said, with a demonic voice as fearsome as he was. Basker backed away as well, keeping his eyes fixed on this fearsome being as he did. "True, master. However, I have brought the morph." he said, pushing Copter and Kosmo forward. The mysterious being glared down at them from his throne. "Welcome, newcomers. I am the master of the Covenant of Despair. They call me..... The Darkseeker."

To be continued...

5 - Cold Metal

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 5 - Cold Metal
Stage 5(Hero 3) - Frostbite Maze
Minor Boss 1 - Metal Sonic

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair, a mysterious group bent on destroying all humans, attacked Angel Island with the intention of stealing the Master Emerald. With help from an orange coati, Knuckles managed to escape with the emerald. Hoping to hide the Master Emerald, Knuckles visited Tails at his workshop, only to have the Covenant of Despair find him again! Tails led Knuckles into the tunnels beneath his workshop just before the covenant set it ablaze, and soon they found the Tornado 3. Now, Tails and Knuckles are flying over the Mystic Ruins with the intention of challenging the Covenant of Despair at the floating island they came from...

Now, on to the next chapter!

As the Tornado soared through the sky above the Mystic Ruins, Tails was looking in vain for the island Knuckles had spoken of. "I don't see it! Where is this second island, Knuckles?" he asked. Knuckles looked in the direction he recalled seeing the island. "Hmmm... WHAT!?! The island's gone!" he realized. Tails continued flying in the direction of Angel Island. "A whole island can't just disappear. It must have moved!" he said. "Well, obviously. But how can they move a whole island? Heck, how'd they even get it in the air without the Master Emerald?" Knuckles wondered. "I don't know, but now we need a new plan. Where should we go?" Tails asked. Before either of them could think about that, something hit the side of the plane hard! "Aaaah!! What just hit us!?" Tails shouted, trying to regain control of the plane as it began plummeting to the ground! "Tails! You gotta try to land this thing!!" Knuckles shouted. SPOT began beeping in a panicky fashion. "Danger!! Danger!!" the robot shouted. "You got that right, SPOT! We're gonna crash!!" Tails yelled.

Some time later, Tails and Knuckles awoke inside a small cage. "Ugh... What happened? Where are we?" Knuckles muttered, looking around. They were inside a medium-sized room with computers and monitors along one of the walls. Along the wall to the left of the monitors were several shelves lined with books and various bits of equipment. The table in the center of the room was littered with blueprints and tools. A familiar symbol on the walls made it all too clear where they were. It was one of Eggman's bases! "Huh? How did this happen?" Tails muttered, still somewhat dazed. Knuckles began shaking the bars angrily. "Never mind how! We need to get out of here!" he growled. Tails tugged him by the arm to get his attention. "Quiet! Someone's coming!" he said. Several shadows emerged at the doorway. "Good morning, everyone! Time for dinner!" said the owner of the first shadow as he entered. It was Alpha! "Dinner? Don't be silly, Alpha! It's lunch time!" said Char, who was next to enter the room. A frustrated

sigh was heard coming from the next person to enter the room. "There goes my dramatic introduction..." said Dr. Eggman.

Three others entered the room behind Eggman, but Tails and Knuckles paid no attention to them. They were too focused on the diabolical doctor in front of them. "Dr. Eggman! Hey! Let me outta here, right now!" Knuckles yelled threateningly. Eggman pulled up a chair and sat down in front of the cage. "Let you go? Not until you tell me what you were doing flying around MY airspace!" he said. Tails looked very confused. "Your airspace? What are you talking about!?" he asked. Eggman got up from his seat angrily. "Don't play dumb! After all, whose flying fortress shot you down, hm?" he yelled. Tails backed away from Eggman a step. "Oh... Makes sense... Hey! Wait! Where's the Tornado!? Where's SPOT!?" he asked. "In storage. Now, back to the main topic...." Eggman started to say. "Excuse me, doctor." someone interrupted. The speaker, an orange coati, emerged from behind Eggman. Behind him, a blue porcupine that resembled Sonic followed. He had yellow eyes, black gloves, and black boots. It was Spiny the Porcupine! "What are you doing!?" he whispered to the coati. Tails briefly glanced at Spiny. "Huh? Hey! Sonic's here!" he said. "WHO SAID THAT!? LEMME AT 'EM!!" Spiny yelled, trying to push past the coati without success. "I don't think that's Sonic, Tails." Knuckles pointed out. Eggman turned to his bickering companions. "Calm down, Spiny! It's an honest mistake." he said, "Those are two new associates of mine: Spiny the Porcupine and Ridley the Coati." Knuckles recognized the coati from earlier that day. "Ridley..." he muttered. "If I may, Doctor. It would seem to me that these two were not aware of our presence at the Mystic Ruins." Ridley said, pointing at Knuckles. "Also, that is Knuckles the Echidna, is it not? Perhaps we can make a deal with him. His treasure hunting talents could be useful." Eggman looked back at Knuckles. "Well, obviously. But why were you two flying around the Mystic Ruins in the first place?" he asked. "We weren't looking for you. We were going after the Covenant of Despair!" Tails explained. Knuckles nodded in agreement. "Yeah, he's right! Now, let us go, or I'll have to go through you!" he threatened. Eggman glared at Knuckles. "Watch that temper! Covenant of Despair you say? Hmmm.... Really, now..... Well, that changes things! Now, tell me, what would you say if I told you we're on the same side?" he asked. Tails scoffed at him. "Yeah, right! I bet this is just another one of your tricks!" he said. Eggman looked hurt. "Tricks? Would I do something like that?" he asked. Alpha raised his hands excitedly. "Absolutely!" he shouted. Eggman groaned at this. "Char, take Alpha for a walk." he said. The Chao led Alpha out of the room, calling him like a pet dog. "C'mon, Alpie! Here, boy!" Once he was gone, Eggman turned his attention back to his captives. "OK, so I haven't the best track record... But, really, would I be on the side of human-haters?" he reasoned. Ridley agreed. "Listen, now. We can all help each other, you know." he said. Eggman smiled. "Yes, if you help me, I'll find Despair's headquarters for you! And fix your plane, to boot!" he offered. Tails frowned. "I don't know about this..." he muttered. Knuckles shrugged. "Well, it beats being stuck in this cell. Besides... It doesn't seem like Eggman's lying this time..." he pointed out. "Well... Maybe..." Tails said without confidence. "What do you want from us, Eggman?" Knuckles asked. Spiny looked upset. "Y-you aren't really... Going to let them out!?" he grumbled. Eggman motioned to a robot behind him. It was an orange robot with a pink head and purple eyes, which resembled Omega. "Firma, open the cell." he instructed. "Acknowledged." Firma replied in a feminine robot voice. The robot walked over to a control panel and pressed a button. Seconds later, the door to the cage swung open. "That's better." Knuckles muttered, stepping out of the cage. Eggman shook hands with Knuckles. "Just like old times, pal! Now, I want you to head for the Blue Ridge Zone. There, one of my robots will lead you to a secret ruins that has recently been discovered there. Within, your treasure hunting skills will surely lead you to the Chaos Gauntlets. Bring those back to me!" he ordered. "Right... And if I bring back the 'Chaos Gauntlets'.... You'll return the Tornado?" Knuckles asked. "And SPOT?" Tails added. Eggman nodded. "Yes, and I'm even being gracious enough to let you keep the Master Emerald! Now, get going!" he said. Ridley waved to Knuckles and Tails as

they left the room. "Good luck." he said.

As they exited Eggman's base, Tails and Knuckles found themselves in an unfamiliar area. Oddly, they appeared to be in the middle of a city! "Huh? Hey, where's this base located...?" Knuckles wondered, looking around. He could see what appeared to be a police station a few blocks away. Seeing this, the two of them both looked back at the building Eggman's base was located in. Tails was shocked. "I don't believe it! Not only did Eggman build a base right in the middle of a city, but..." Knuckles finished his sentence for him. "He has a big, flashing sign on it! Doesn't he think he'll be caught here?" Eggman's base contained a large sign with his symbol on it, and the word "Eggtopia" written in big flashing lights. "That's what things are like here in Troblusk City." said someone behind them. They turned to see a young, yellow porcupine. He had blue eyes and blue shoes. "Hm? Troblusk City? Never heard of it." Knuckles said. Tails looked a little concerned. "I have. It's supposed to be this really dangerous city. Crime levels are so high here, it's no wonder Eggman was able to build a base unopposed." he explained. The yellow porcupine rubbed his eyes in disbelief when he realized who they were. "W-wow! You're.... You're Tails and Knuckles, aren't you?" he gasped. "You've heard of us?" Tails said with surprise. "Are you kidding? You're friends of Sonic! Everyone's heard of you! Even here!" the porcupine replied. Knuckles rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. We don't have time for autographs!" he said. Tails ignored Knuckles's remark. "What's your name?" he asked the porcupine. "I'm Tommy. My bro is Razor, a police officer here in this city. We actually live in Station Square, though." he said. "If you live in Station Square, then why are you in a dangerous city like this?" Tails asked. Knuckles was growing impatient. "Tails! We gotta go!" he groaned. Tommy answered Tails's question. "I was just visiting my brother. I'm waiting for my ride home now. But she's a taxi driver, and she has to put her passengers first." he explained. "Well, we're heading for Station Square now, too. Want to come with us?" Tails offered. "Taaaails!!!" Knuckles whined. Tommy ignored Knuckles. "Really? Is that OK? Thank you! I'll just call Mia on my cell phone and let her know I don't need a ride anymore!" While Tommy was tinkering with his cell phone, Knuckles pulled Tails aside. "Tails, you have a big mouth! We don't have time to baby-sit!" he said. "Good thing Tommy's not a baby, then. Look at him! He's about the same age as me!" Tails replied. Knuckles groaned loudly. "Fine, but he better not slow us down!" he said. Meanwhile, Tommy wrapped up his call. "OK! Bye, Mia! Man, she sure is jealous I got to meet you guys! Could you write an autograph for her?" he asked. Knuckles glared at Tails. "I hate you sometimes, Tails, you know that?"

Tommy actually proved to be a bit helpful, as he was able to lead them to the train station. Soon they reached Station Square, and began nearing Blue Ridge Zone in the north. Soon, Tommy was ready to leave them behind. "All right! My house is right around the corner! Thanks for taking me, Tails! You too, Knuckles!" he said. Knuckles sighed with relief. "Right.... Stay out of trouble, kid!" he told him. Tails waved as he and Knuckles left Tommy behind. "Bye!" he said. As they were walking away, an orange cheetah wearing a red jacket and red pants approached Tommy. He had green eyes, white gloves, and black sneakers. It was Chet. "Hey, there, Tommy! How's Razor holding up?" he asked. Before he could answer, a black coyote girl wearing a sleeveless purple shirt and short jeans ran up to them. She had brown eyes and blue shoes. It was Katie. "Eeeeeeeee!! Tommy, was that Tails and Knuckles I just saw go by!?" she asked excitedly. Tommy nodded. "Yeah! They brought me home! Isn't that cool?" he said. Chet looked at Katie with worry. "Uh, oh.... Katie's gonna...." Before he could say anything else, Katie started jumping with excitement. "Wow wow wow!! Friends of Sonic himself! Just think, if I hurry, I might be able to get an interview!" she shouted, running off after Tails and Knuckles! Chet watched her run off. "There she goes! Off on the hunt for news! Poor Tails and Knuckles..." he said. "Should we go after her?" Tommy asked. Chet started acting excited, too. "Yeah! I want to meet Knuckles!" With that, they both took off after Katie.

Meanwhile, Tails and Knuckles had arrived at Blue Ridge Zone. They hadn't been walking long before they encountered a robot. It was a light blue Gizoid, with a purple horn and yellow eyes. Eggman's symbol was on its chest. "You must be Eggman's robot." Knuckles said. The robot spoke with a chilling voice. "I am E-6X. Also known as Freeze. I am to show you to the ruins, where the Chaos Gauntlets are hidden." he explained. "All right. Lead the way!" Knuckles replied. "Follow me." Freeze instructed, jumping up to a high cliff with surprising speed! "Hey! Wait up!" Knuckles shouted. "There is no time to waste." Freeze said, running off. "He's no help..." Knuckles groaned. "Let's just head in that direction!" Tails suggested.

Freeze's trail eventually led them to a snowbound area to the west of the Blue Ridge Zone. Nestled in this cold, mountainous region was a huge ancient ruin. It was the ruins of a city surrounded by a large wall. Just outside the gate to this ruined city, Tails and Knuckles found a familiar face. "Rouge!? What are YOU doing here!?" Knuckles yelled. Rouge the Bat was examining the locked gate leading into the ruins, but turned around when Knuckles spoke to her. "Nice to see you again, too, Knuckles." she said sarcastically. Tails waved at Rouge politely. "Hi, Rouge! Are you here looking for the-" Before he could finish, Knuckles put his hand over his mouth. "Shut it!! It's none of her business!!" he yelled. Rouge smiled at them. "You must be here to find the Chaos Gauntlets, too. Sorry, pal, but this is MY mission!" she told them. "Mission?" Knuckles asked. "For the President. Not sure why he wants them, or how he knows about them, but he did promise some nice jewels..." Rouge explained. "If we're all looking for the same thing, why don't we help each other?" Tails asked. Rouge laughed at him. "Aw, how cute. Tails, you always were pretty naive!" she said. Tails looked confused. "What?" he muttered. Rouge rolled her eyes. "Oh, all right. I'll tell you what Shadow and I figured out." she said. Knuckles looked around. "Shadow's here, too!? I didn't know he was into jewels." he said. Rouge stomped her foot loudly. "Don't interrupt me, Knuckles! Here's what we found out. In order to get into the room with the Gauntlets, you need the three ancient relics that are the keys to the ruins. So, whoever finds them first gets the prize! Good luck, Knuxie! You'll need it!" With her explanation complete, Rouge flew over the gate and into the ruins. Knuckles shook his fist at her as she left. "Bring it on, Rouge! I can out treasure-hunt you any day!" he shouted. "I'm not so sure of that, Knuckles..." Tails murmured. Suddenly, a beeping was heard nearby. "Tails detected!" said the robotic voice of SPOT! Tails ran over to the robot excitedly. "SPOT! How'd you get away from Eggman?" he asked. The text on SPOT's monitor told his story. "I bit him. His robots chased me, but the malfunctioning one confused the others." Knuckles walked towards the gate of the ruins. "Great. You got your toy back. You play with it while I find those relics." he said. Tails ran after Knuckles with SPOT following. "SPOT can help us, Knuckles! SPOT, we're looking for the relics that open a door!" he said. SPOT beeped loudly. "Signals detected!" it said. "It works? OK, fine... You can come. If you can get over the gate." he sighed. "Wait, Knuckles! SPOT says the first relic is outside the ruins! Uh... That way!" Tails said, leading the way.

Soon, they arrived at the foot of a large, icy cliff. On a ledge halfway up the cliff, they could see a shiny object. SPOT's sensor indicated that it was probably one of the relics, though they really had no idea what the relics looked like and if they even gave off signals that SPOT could pick up. "Well, I guess I'd better try to climb up there..." Knuckles decided. However, this plan was interrupted by a laser being fired in their direction! Tails and Knuckles looked in the direction the laser came from and saw Metal Sonic heading towards them! "Hey, what's with Metal Sonic!? Why is he even here!? Eggman already sent Freeze!" Knuckles groaned. Tails shrugged. "Maybe Metal Sonic's on a different mission. Or maybe Eggman doesn't trust us, and Metal Sonic thinks we're up to something because we're not inside the ruins." he said. Metal Sonic made some robotic noises, which didn't sound friendly. "Well, he sure

doesn't seem happy to see us..." Knuckles pointed out. Metal Sonic confirmed this by firing another laser blast at Knuckles! SPOT quickly brought up a shield to block the laser, while Knuckles shook his fist at Metal Sonic. "Have it your way, bolts for brains! Tails, can you fly up and get the relic while I distract him?" he asked. Tails glanced up at the ledge. "It's a little high, but I'll try!" he said.

Metal Sonic started the battle by shooting several lasers at Knuckles, which he avoided with some difficulty. Knuckles attempted to get close enough to punch him, but Metal Sonic quickly ran out of his range before he could. "So that's how it's gonna be? Fine, then..." Knuckles said, kneeling down to scoop up some snow. Metal Sonic fired a few more shots at him, so Knuckles quickly moved aside. Then, he threw a snowball at Metal Sonic! The snowball smacked into his eyes, temporarily blinding him! "Ha! Direct hit!" Using the opportunity, Knuckles ran up to Metal Sonic and punched him in his metallic chest! As the robot fell over, it began shooting at random, knocking Knuckles aside and nearly hitting Tails as he was flying to the ledge! "Yikes! That was too close!" Tails yelled. He was nearing the ledge, but his tails were beginning to grow tired. "Uh oh... I'm gonna fall!" he shouted. Hearing his master's call, SPOT transformed its paws slightly, turning them into small thrusters that allowed him to fly up to Tails and carry him the rest of the way to the ledge! "Whew... Thanks, SPOT!" Tails said, resting a moment before picking up the relic. It looked like a small ice crystal, but with writing etched into it. The writing was in a strange language that Tails couldn't read. "Yep, this must be the relic." he said before shouting down to Knuckles, "I got it!" Knuckles had begun fighting with Metal Sonic again already, but looked up at Tails briefly. "Great! Now we just gotta deal with Metal Sonic!" While Knuckles was distracted, Metal Sonic jumped into the air and mimicked Sonic's homing attack to knock Knuckles over! He then aimed his laser at Knuckles's head. "Watch out!" Tails shouted as he and SPOT arrived back on the ground. "I know that!" Knuckles groaned. Metal Sonic made a few threatening noises before moving closer to Knuckles, still aiming the laser at his head. "Close enough!" Knuckles yelled, grabbing some snow and hurling it at Metal Sonic! Once again blinded, Metal Sonic fired his laser and missed! While Metal Sonic brushed the snow from his eyes, Knuckles stood back up and prepared to continue the fight.

As Metal Sonic began approaching Tails and Knuckles again, he started beeping. His eye monitor began displaying some text. "{Receiving command...}" it read. The text was too small for Knuckles to see from a distance. "Hey, what's going on?" he wondered, slowly lowering his guard. More text appeared on the monitor a second later. "{New directive: assist Knuckles.}" it read. "Hellooooooo? Metal Sonic?" Knuckles said, unsure of what was happening. Metal Sonic lowered his laser and made some robotic noises, somewhat friendlier than before. "I really wish Eggman hadn't taken away his ability to talk..." Knuckles groaned, looking confused. Tails cautiously approached Metal Sonic. "He's calmed down... Maybe he's received new orders from Eggman." he realized. Knuckles scratched his head. "Does that mean he'll help us?" he asked. Metal Sonic nodded to confirm this. "Oh... Good, I guess." Knuckles said without enthusiasm. SPOT ran up to Metal Sonic angrily, making a growling sound as he did. "What's with him?" Knuckles asked. "He's programmed not to trust Eggman's robots." Tails explained, walking over to SPOT. "It's OK, SPOT. Don't worry about Metal Sonic. We need you to lead us to the next relic." he said. SPOT began beeping as he attempted to locate the relic. "Signal detected." Looking at SPOT's monitor, Tails saw that the next relic was inside the ruins somewhere. "Looks like we gotta go in there now." he said. Knuckles started heading back towards the gate to the ruins. "Let's go then, Tails! And... uh... Metal Sonic. And... SPOT..." he said. Metal Sonic glanced at SPOT briefly before following Knuckles. As he did, SPOT began growling again. "Hmmm... Maybe I need to adjust SPOT's programming..." Tails muttered, following behind the others.

When they reached the gate, Metal Sonic used his laser to blast it open. Knuckles, having observed this,

had an idea. "Hey, what if instead of finding these relics, we just have Metal Sonic blast the door to the Chaos Gauntlets?" he suggested. Tails shook his head. "Rouge came here with Shadow, remember? If he can't blast through the door, it probably can't be broken." he pointed out. SPOT began beeping louder as they entered the walls of the ruined city. "Chaos energy detected!" he said, rushing to the first building directly in front of the gate. The door contained three indentations in the shape of the relic they'd found. "That must be the door to the gauntlets! Sure was easy to find." Knuckles said. Metal Sonic aimed his laser at the door and fired, only to have the shot bounce off and nearly hit Knuckles! "Aaaah!! OK, bad idea!" he grumbled. "Told ya." Tails said, "Which way to the relic, SPOT?" The robot looked around. The buildings within the walls of the ruins were arranged to form a giant maze, and navigating it might be tricky. After a moment, SPOT began walking to the right. Tails, Knuckles, and Metal Sonic followed, but before they could get far, several creatures swarmed out from inside the buildings! They were large jellyfish creatures made up of pure chaos energy, each with three glowing red eyes! They were Chaos Guardians, much like the foes Tails had encountered in the Chaos Shrine! "What are these things doing here!?" Tails shouted fearfully. "Maybe they're mad because Metal Sonic broke the gate!" Knuckles said. Metal Sonic immediately began shooting at them, but it had little effect. While the others were worrying about the Chaos Guardians, SPOT began running through the swarm in the direction of the relic! "H-hey! SPOT! Don't leave without us!" Tails shouted. "Heck with it! Let's just try to follow him!" Knuckles decided, charging through the swarm of guardians in SPOT's direction. Tails and Metal Sonic followed, ducking and dodging the flailing tentacles of the Chaos Guardians as they went! Metal Sonic fired several shots ahead of them, causing the guardians to move out of the way, allowing them to continue moving with less resistance.

Back at the entrance, Katie, Chet and Tommy tiptoed their way inside the ruins. "Okay... The coast is clear!" Katie whispered. "It's cold. Can't I go back and get my winter coat?" Tommy muttered, shivering. Katie looked around cautiously. "Tails and Knuckles are getting away! I gotta catch up with them!" she grumbled. Chet sighed. "Isn't being the first reporter to explore these ruins what you should really be all excited about?" he wondered. The three of them crept to the sealed door that the three relics were needed to open, and after a moment's thought, they started wandering to the left. "Um, aren't the footprints going that way?" Tommy tried to point out, but Katie shushed him. "I'm trying to concentrate, Tom! Shush!" she said. Chet frowned. "This better not end like when we tried to work out the corn maze at the Autumn Fair..." he whimpered.

It took some doing, but they eventually managed to elude the Chaos Guardians. Soon after, SPOT led them to a path leading to what appeared to be a dead end. It was a particularly icy area, and Tails and Knuckles found it somewhat difficult to keep from slipping. However, they could see the relic waiting at the end of the path, so they did their best to move forward. Metal Sonic seemed to have no difficulty on the ice, and was the first to reach the relic. "OK, Metal Sonic! Pick that up so we can get off this ice!" Knuckles said. Metal Sonic glanced back at him, making robotic noises that sounded confused. "The relic! Pick up the relic!" Knuckles yelled. Tails held out the other relic to show it to Metal Sonic. "This! The second one's over there! Pick it up!" he said. Finally understanding, Metal Sonic leaned over to pick it up, only to have SPOT snatch it first! Metal Sonic reacted with some angry noises, to which SPOT replied by growling. "Oh, brother..." Knuckles groaned, "You two behave! Or... we'll make you take a time out!" Tails chuckled softly. "It's OK guys! As long as one of us has the relic! Now let's go find the last one!" he said. Suddenly, some gaseous spirits emerged from the wall at the dead end! Their hands were disconnected from their bodies, and their sudden appearance scared Tails. "Ghosts!! Run!!" he

yelled, slipping on the ice and falling as he tried to run. Knuckles helped him up. "Don't be a coward! Those aren't ghosts! They're just some of those Lost Ones!" he pointed out. SPOT and Metal Sonic ran away from the ghosts, which were Lospirits, and stopped when they reached Tails and Knuckles. Metal Sonic took on a defensive stance, prompting Tails and Knuckles to look behind them. The Chaos Guardians had arrived, and were blocking the way out! With the ice making it unlikely that they could fight their way out, both Tails and Knuckles began to look worried. "Tails... If we get out of this... Remind me to punch Eggman in the face later!" Knuckles growled.

To be continued...

6 - Fight for the Chaos Gauntlets

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 6 - Fight for the Chaos Gauntlets
Boss 5 - Losohst Knights

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

While searching for the Covenant of Despair's stronghold, Tails's plane was shot down by Dr. Eggman! Tails and Knuckles were captured, and left with no choice but to search for the mysterious Chaos Gauntlets, hidden in a secret ruins near Blue Ridge Zone. After being led to the ruins by E-6X Freeze, Knuckles and Tails found Rouge the Bat, who was searching for the Chaos Gauntlets for the president! They learned from her that the gauntlets were sealed in a room which required three relics to open. Having lost track of Freeze, it was up to Tails and Knuckles to find the relics on their own. Near the first relic, they found Metal Sonic, who soon joined their search. As they located the second relic, they soon found themselves trapped by Lospirits and Chaos Guardians!
Now, on to the next chapter!

Knuckles glanced in both directions. The dead end they had reached was blocked by a few Lospirits, while the path they came from was teeming with the jellyfish-like Chaos Guardians. The ground was covered with slippery ice, but the enemies were airborne, so only Tails and Knuckles would slip. SPOT and Metal Sonic were unaffected by the ice, but there were too many enemies for them to fight alone. "How are we gonna get out of this, Knuckles?" Tails whimpered. The easiest direction to go would be through the Lospirits, but that direction led to the dead end. The Chaos Guardians would be impossible to pass safely, so Knuckles was left with only one option. "I'll get us outta this! Follow me, Tails!" he shouted, jumping towards the dead end! He landed on the ice, which was so slippery that he began sliding towards the wall at high speed! This, of course, was part of his plan. The ice carried him past the Lospirits fast enough to avoid them, and he used the momentum from the sliding to punch the wall with tremendous force! The old, weather-worn wall couldn't take such an impact, so Knuckles managed to punch a hole in the wall! "Quick, through here!" Knuckles shouted, leading the way as SPOT and Metal Sonic escaped through the hole. This left Tails, who decided he could never slide across the ice the way Knuckles did. So, as the Lospirits and the Chaos Guardians were closing in on him, Tails leapt into the air and began flying as high and as fast as he could! Luckily, the Lospirits were slow, so he could easily outfly them. In moments, he'd managed to fly over the wall and rejoined Knuckles and the others. "About time, Tails!" Knuckles grumbled, "While you were taking your time, your robot detected the third relic. Let's get going before those creatures follow us through the wall!" Tails picked up SPOT and examined the information on his monitor. "Right... We should go that way!" he said, pointing to the nearest turn in the maze. Already, the Lospirits were passing through the wall, so there was no time to waste! "That way it is! Try to keep up, Metal Sonic!" Knuckles said, running off ahead of the others!

Tails soon managed to pinpoint the location of the third relic using the information SPOT provided. It was atop a large pillar of ice that the ruins had been built around. Though they could see the pillar over the walls, they still had to navigate the maze in order to reach the pillar. As they were wandering the maze, someone was watching them from high above the ruins. It was Lospector, and he was accompanied by the Lospirits that Knuckles and Tails had escaped from. Lospector turned his attention away from Knuckles and glared at his minions. "Lospirits... More like LOSERspirits! What are you guys, frozen stiff? Seriously, I've never seen your kind move so slow." In his frustration, Lospector picked up a card from his deck and hurled it at the Lospirits! It burst into flame and exploded, taking the Lospirits with it! With the destruction of one of the cards, a new card magically appeared at the bottom of the deck. "My regular lost minions don't have the kind of oomph I want right now... I guess I'll try my luck with the cards." he said to himself, pulling one of the gold-backed cards from his mysterious deck. "Ah... Lucky me! And if I have this right, the next card's the same! This should be fun!" He returned the card to the top of his deck and resumed watching Knuckles, Tails and Metal Sonic, who had nearly reached the ice pillar. Lospector chuckled to himself as he thought about his plans. "Things sure have gotten interesting lately. With all those unlost dopes ignoring me, I get ringside seats to all kinds of hilarious shows. Only thing that bugs me is how... left out I've been. Well, they won't be ignoring me much longer... Heh heh heh heh..."

Meanwhile, someone else was also exploring the ruins. Katie, Chet and Tommy had gotten themselves lost while looking for Tails and Knuckles. "W-we should t-t-turn back! It's g-getting c-c-colder out here!" Tommy stammered. Katie kicked some snow in frustration. "My reporter's intuition told me to go this way! There ought to be SOMETHING worthwhile around here!" she growled. Chet sighed. "Maybe we should head back to the entrance and see if we bump into them on the way? Knuckles probably found whatever he came here for by now, with his experience. There's no sense wandering around lost anymore." he reasoned. Katie sighed in defeat. "You're right. Let's go..." As they started to turn around, however, they noticed a couple of Chaos Guardians had been following them! "EEEEIIIIYAAAAAAHHHH!!!" They all shrieked and immediately started fleeing in panic, seemingly causing the guardians to grow more suspicious of them and begin to chase them more furiously! Soon, they reached a slippery, icy path, and started to slide along it like hockey pucks, bouncing along the walls since they had been caught off guard by the sudden change in traction! As Chet smacked into one of the walls hard, it flipped over, revealing a secret door leading inside the ruins! "Aha!! Chet, you're a genius!" Katie shouted, shakily changing her course and grabbing Tommy as she headed for the doorway! Chet rubbed his nose as he crawled in through the top of the flipped entrance. "Really? I actually feel like my IQ just dropped a few points..." he mumbled in pain. As the secret door slid shut behind them, the Chaos Guardians stopped their pursuit and looked around in confusion before resuming their usual patrols. "So... going to the entrance is out, huh?" Tommy sighed. Katie smirked excitedly. "I think we've hit the jackpot! Let's check this secret room out!" she said, rushing ahead of the others.

Tails and Knuckles looked up at the pillar of ice within the ruins in awe. "It's like a small mountain..." Knuckles said. "I wonder what made the people who built this place decide to build around this thing?" Tails wondered. Metal Sonic was tapping his foot on the ground impatiently, similar to the way the real Sonic would. "I guess Metal Sonic is trying to tell us that Eggman would want us to hurry up..." Tails said. Knuckles spied a ledge near the top of the ice pillar. "I don't suppose you could fly up there?" he asked Tails, who merely shook his head in response. "I thought not. Well, I'd better start climbing!" While Tails and Metal Sonic waited at the bottom of the pillar, Knuckles began climbing his way to the ledge

where the relic was most likely located. Once Knuckles was about halfway there, things became dangerous once again. The Chaos Guardians had finally managed to track them down, and soon surrounded Tails and Metal Sonic! "Hurry up, Knuckles!!" Tails shouted as the guardians began to attack! The flailing tentacles of the guardians struck Tails and Metal Sonic quickly, but they were quick to recover. Metal Sonic began using the homing attack to attempt to keep the guardians at bay, while SPOT used its shield to protect Tails. With so many Chaos Guardians attacking, the shield didn't hold up long, and Tails and SPOT were both soon struck by the guardians' tentacles! "Aaaagh!! Leave me alone, you slimy creeps!" Tails yelled, using his large tails to block the attacks from the guardians. SPOT attempted to harm the creatures with laser blasts, but it proved useless. Making matters worse, Knuckles still hadn't reached the relic yet. "Hang in there guys! I'll get down there as soon as I can!" Knuckles shouted as he began climbing faster. "I'm trying..." Tails groaned, but he couldn't last much longer. After being hit a couple more times, Tails was knocked over, landing face-first in the snow! As he fell, he dropped everything he'd been carrying, including his Tailband of Chaos! However, as the tailband hit the ground, the Chaos Guardians looked down at it and immediately stopped moving!

Knuckles, noticing that it had become quiet down below, glanced down to see that the Chaos Guardians had stopped moving. "Huh? What happened to them?" he wondered. Remembering the relic, Knuckles resumed his climb and reached the ledge, where the final relic was waiting. "Got it. Now I'd better see if Tails is all right..." Rather than climb back down, Knuckles glided in circles until he was close enough to the ground to drop down. Tails was already back on his feet, but was resting against the wall. "That was close... I wonder why those creatures stopped attacking?" he wondered. Metal Sonic reached down and picked up the tailband, which Knuckles quickly snatched out of his hands. "Eggman won't be needing this!" he said, handing it back to Tails. With the tailband in his hands again, Tails came to a realization. "Maybe they stopped because of the tailband. Come to think of it... I saw these things in the shrine where I got the tailband!" he said. Knuckles picked up the relics that Tails had dropped and began walking towards the direction of the door to the Chaos Gauntlets slowly. "I don't know what these creatures' connection to the tailband is, but I suggest you keep that where they can see it until we get out of here!" he suggested. Tails began following Knuckles, aiming the tailband around like a weapon. "Easy, creatures... I have this tailband, and I kinda know how to use it!" he muttered. Metal Sonic glanced around at the unmoving Chaos Guardians for a moment, and then ran off into the maze on his own. "Where's he goin'?" Knuckles wondered. Tails shrugged. "Maybe he's spooked by those creatures... If robots can be spooked, that is." he said. Suddenly, SPOT ran off in the direction Metal Sonic had been going! "Hey, wait up, SPOT!" Tails shouted. "Ha ha ha! I get it! Those robots are having a race to get to the door! Sonic never changes, robot or not!" Knuckles laughed. Tails began running ahead next. "Last one to the door's a rotten Eggman!" he chuckled. Knuckles looked confused for a second before running off as well. "Wait a minute here! I'm the one with the relics!! You can't leave me behind!!"

Regardless of what order the others reached the door, it was indisputable that Knuckles was the last to arrive. In fact, it had taken him a good while to find the door, since he'd gotten lost in the maze. "Thanks for helping me find the way back here, GUYS!!" Knuckles yelled upon catching up. "Heh... Sorry, Knuckles..." Tails said, taking the relics from him and placing them into the indentations on the door. Once they were all in place, they started glowing! Seconds later, the door began glowing as well! "Oh, wow!" Tails gasped. In a moment, the glowing ceased, and the door slid open! "Great! Now let's go find those gauntlets!" Knuckles grinned, running into the building first! "Last one there's an ice cube!" he said, prompting the others to run in quickly! As they disappeared into the building, Rouge the bat dropped down from the sky. "No wonder I can't find any of those relics... They already found 'em! Hmph, if my

wings weren't frozen stiff, I'd have found them first!" she scoffed. As she peered into the dark building, she held up the walkie talkie she was carrying. "Shadow, come in. This is Rouge... Shadow? Hello!? Darn it..." The only response Rouge was getting was static, meaning that the walkie talkie was useless. "Figures I can't get in touch with him when I need him. I guess I'd better find him fast, before Knuckles leaves!" As she began flying off, Lospector peered out at her from behind a corner. "Shadow, eh? Heh, how interesting. Too bad I can't wait for them to get back. The fun's starting now, and I don't wanna miss it!"

Beyond the entrance hallway was a room covered in frost. Large support columns could be seen by each corner of the room, and the walls were covered with hieroglyphics similar to the ones on the mural in the Chaos Shrine. Knuckles, Tails, and Metal Sonic spotted the Chaos Gauntlets right away upon entering the chamber. They were sitting on a pedestal in the center of the room. Knuckles was the first to approach the pedestal. The gauntlets on the pedestal were made of solid gold, except for red gems on the wrist part and on two "knuckles" each. The back of the gauntlets were decorated with patterns similar to those covering the Tailbands of Chaos. "Fancy gloves... These must be it!" Knuckles realized, picking up the gauntlets. Tails walked over and held out his tailband, comparing it to the gauntlets. "Wow! They look like they were made the same way!" he observed. Knuckles frowned with disinterest. "Yeah, yeah, they're similar. Now let's get these back to Eggman's base and see if he keeps his end of the deal!" he suggested. Tails put away his tailband and looked around the room. "Hold on, Knuckles... There's something weird about this place..." he said with suspicion. Knuckles crossed his arms. "Like what?" he asked. Suddenly, a terrible scream was heard from further inside the building! "Like that! That scream came from back there!" Tails shouted, pointing to an exit behind the pedestal. "Let's check it out!" Knuckles said, leading the way as Tails and Metal Sonic followed him into the next room. This room was nearly identical to the room that contained the Chaos Gauntlets, but instead of a pedestal in the center of the room, there was a golden throne at the back of the room! Tommy and Katie were in the room, hiding behind Chet, who was staring up at a figure standing on the throne. It was Shadow Chaos! "Tommy!?! What are you doing here!?" Tails asked in confusion. Tommy turned to Tails and shrugged. "It wasn't my idea!" he said. Knuckles looked around the room. "I don't get it... How did these guys get in here!? The only way in was through the relic door!" he realized. Shadow Chaos was glaring at everyone in the room. "What's that thing!? It looks like Chaos!" Tails said. Katie turned to Tails and Knuckles and explained the situation. "Sorry about this. It was my idea to follow you. But we got lost and ended up in here somehow." she said apologetically. "And now this monster's giving us the evil eye... Good going, Katie." Chet growled. Knuckles grinned at Shadow Chaos. "Aw, don't worry about that thing! I can handle it!" he assured them. Suddenly, another voice came from above! "You can't handle anything now! 'Cuz I'm here!" Lospector dropped down between Knuckles, Tails, Metal Sonic, and the others, waving at Tails. "Hi, there, fox boy! Taken any good quizzes lately?" he asked. Tails thought back and realized what he was referring to. "Quizzes...? Oh! Lospector!" he gasped. Knuckles had forgotten Lospector, but it was obvious that he wasn't there to be helpful. "What do you want, ghost!?" he demanded. Before Lospector could answer, Shadow Chaos jumped down from the throne and punched Chet! Chet wasn't hit hard, but had been caught by surprise. "Hey! No fair!" he yelled. "Shoot! That creature's getting cranky!" Knuckles said, attempting to pass Lospector, who pushed Knuckles back. "Outta my way, ghost!" he shouted. Lospector drew two cards from his mysterious deck. "Let's see what my cards have to say about that! Read 'em and weep!" He threw the cards into the air, and started laughing as the cards became engulfed in shadows. From the shadows, two Losohsts emerged, but something was different about them. The hooded and cloaked creatures were wearing silver armor over their cloaks, and large silver helmets on their heads. Each of them held a large sword and a silver shield! "M-more ghosts!?" Tails stammered, worried. Knuckles was feeling too impatient for this. "OUT OF MY WAY!!!!"

he yelled. "Don't worry about us, you guys! I'll handle this creature!" Chet said, preparing to fight Shadow Chaos. Lospector chuckled at this. "Yeah, sure he will. OK, Losohst Knights, try to get those fancy gloves from them!" Lospector commanded. Knuckles held up the Chaos Gauntlets. "Oh, yeah? You want these? Maybe I should test them out on you!" Knuckles threatened. Tails shook his head. "Bad idea, Knuckles! You don't know what they can do! The results could be disastrous!" he warned. Knuckles glanced at Tails. "Disastrous? Oh, fine.... I don't need 'em anyway!" he muttered, tossing them to Tails. "Bring it on, ghosts!"

As the fights began, Tails called to SPOT, who had been quietly watching behind them. "This could get crazy, SPOT. Go protect Tommy and that coyote!" he said. While Chet began fighting Shadow Chaos using his claws, Knuckles and Metal Sonic stepped forward to challenge the Losohst Knights! The knights attacked first, swinging their swords at Knuckles and Metal Sonic, who both dodged. Knuckles attempted to punch the Losohst, but it quickly blocked with its shield and countered with its sword, which Knuckles had to jump to avoid! Meanwhile, Metal Sonic used the homing attack on the Losohst, but it countered by smacking him away with its sword! Luckily, Metal Sonic's metal body was hard enough that the sword could not slice him, but the sword did make an effective bat, knocking the robot away and leaving Knuckles alone with the two knights for the moment! "Look out, Knuckles!" Tails shouted, running over to help. However, Lospector blocked his path! "Hand over the gold and I'll get out of your way." he said. Tails attempted to tail whip Lospector, but the attack just went right through him! "Hee heh, that tickles! Now, c'mon, give me the gauntlets!" he insisted. Meanwhile, Knuckles was busy dodging the attacks of the Losohst Knights. As the knights backed him to a wall, Metal Sonic arrived. The robot was holding its laser again, and fired at the nearest Losohst! The shot bounced off its armor, but got its attention! Knuckles took this chance to run away from the wall so he'd have more room to fight. "We've gotta get through that armor somehow!" he realized. Metal Sonic nodded in agreement, and fired its laser at the Losohst's face, forcing it to raise its shield in defense! This gave Metal Sonic a chance to get close, but the knight quickly recovered and swiped its sword at Metal Sonic! The robot caught the sword in its hands, and struggled to push the blade away. Meanwhile, Knuckles dodged another attack by the other knight and punched it with all his might! Unfortunately, even with all Knuckles's strength, he barely managed to crack the armor. "This isn't working..." he growled. Suddenly, Metal Sonic managed to overpower the other Losohst and pulled away its sword! Before the knight could try to recover it, Metal Sonic thrust the blade into the creature's hood! The Losohst let out a sharp shriek before bursting into blue flames and vanishing! Tails jumped excitedly upon seeing this. "All right! You're a genius, Metal Sonic!" he cheered. Knuckles backed away from the knight he was fighting and reached out his hand in Metal Sonic's direction. "Toss that sword here!" he yelled. Metal Sonic hurled the sword, which Knuckles jumped away from rather than catching. "Yikes! I should've asked him to bring it to me!" he muttered. The Losohst Knight attempted to stab Knuckles before he could grab the sword, but Knuckles dove out of the way and snatched the blade! He then spun around and parried the knight's next attack before hurling the blade into the Losohst's unseeable face! Once again, the Lost One burst into ghost fire and faded, but this time took the swords with it!

Lospector let out an angry scream once his knights were defeated. "My knights!! My cool, silvery knights!! That was the best couple cards I've seen in days!!" he yelled. Meanwhile, Chet's attacks against Shadow Chaos had apparently irritated it, for it had started making snarling noises! "OK, that creature looks mad. Let's go stop it!" Knuckles said, glancing at Tails and Metal Sonic. Lospector grinned at him. "Stop it? Ha ha ha, right! I'd like to see you try! But, I've wasted enough time here. So long!" With that, Lospector flew out of the building through the roof. With him out of the way, Knuckles, Tails, and Metal Sonic began approaching Shadow Chaos. "Hey, you! Sludge monster!" Knuckles

shouted. Shadow Chaos hopped back onto the throne, and then waved its hand, sending a dark shockwave throughout the room! The shockwave hit everyone, and sent them all flying backwards! Knuckles was knocked the furthest away, and landed between the gauntlets' room and the room with Shadow Chaos. Knuckles slowly climbed to his feet. "That was intense... I'd better get back in there, fast!"

Knuckles barged back into the room while everyone else was still recovering from Shadow Chaos's attack. "What's the big idea!?" Knuckles shouted to the creature. Shadow Chaos remained perfectly still while Tails and Metal Sonic joined Knuckles. "What a weird creature... A black version of Chaos!" Tails said. "Well, aren't you the master of the obvious!" said a voice at the entrance to the room! Rouge the bat flew in and landed next to Knuckles. Katie watched from the back of the room, and couldn't help making an observation. "Get a load of her. Got enough makeup, batsy?" she said. Rouge didn't even look at her. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that." she muttered. With the appearance of Rouge in the room, Shadow Chaos began snarling again. "Oh, great. It's getting that angry look again. Brace yourselves!" Knuckles shouted. As Shadow Chaos raised its arm to attack again, another voice was heard in the room. "Chaos Control!!!" In a flash of light, Shadow the Hedgehog appeared in front of Shadow Chaos, startling it along with everyone except Rouge! "Holy smokes! It's Shadow the Hedgehog!" Chet said in awe. Shadow Chaos looked a little confused, but still angry. "Hmph.... Chaos... Blast!!!" Shadow caused a chaotic explosion, which knocked over the throne, and Shadow Chaos along with it! The creature was quick to recover, but decided it had had enough, and quickly dashed past everyone and out of the room! "Heh... Cowardly creature. Well, thanks for saving me the trouble, Shadow!" Knuckles said. Rouge chuckled as she walked over to Shadow's side. "Aw, come on, Knuckles. We both know you didn't stand a chance!" she said. "What was that!?" Knuckles growled. Shadow glanced back over his shoulder at Knuckles. ".....I'm not even gonna ask what you're doing with Metal Sonic... Hand over the Chaos Gauntlets!" he ordered. Tommy looked confused. "What's going on? I thought all you guys were friends...." he said. Shadow turned around and grinned. "Come on, Knuckles. Set a good example for the kid and hand it over." he said. Knuckles glared at Shadow with disbelief. "What!? No way! We got to them first!" he protested. Tails attempted to keep the peace. "Why don't we share them? I mean, do we really need both?" he suggested. Rouge rolled her eyes at him. "Yeeeeees, we do!" she said. Metal Sonic stepped forward and beeped at Shadow threateningly. Shadow grew angry at this. "We're taking both of them! Even if I have to beat them out of you!" he warned. Suddenly, a blast of ice was fired at Shadow from the entrance to the room! Shadow jumped back hastily. "What the!? Who did that!?" he yelled. The Gizoid, Freeze, approached Shadow with a very unpleasant demeanor. "The Chaos Gauntlets belong to Dr. Eggman now. Stand down, or I will put you on ice." he threatened. Tails tapped Knuckles on the shoulder while Shadow was distracted. "Uh, I hate to leave Shadow alone with Freeze... But I think we'd better go!" he said. Knuckles nodded. "You're right, Tails! Let's get moving!" he said, turning to Tommy, Chet, and Katie, "I suggest you and your friends get going, too, Tommy!" While Freeze and Shadow were exchanging insults, Knuckles led the others into the gauntlets' room. As they reached the hallway leading out, Sergeant Drol appeared in their path! "Outta my way!" Knuckles said. Drol stood firm. "I am Sgt. Drol of GUN, and I demand to know what you're doing here!" he said. Knuckles sighed in frustration. "Ask Shadow! So long!" he said quickly before pushing past Drol, followed by the others. Drol was shocked at this lack of respect. "What? Stop! You fool! I'll make you regret ignoring me!" he yelled, though no one was listening. Outside, Knuckles and company began heading for Station Square, when Knuckles was suddenly stopped by the sudden appearance of a ball of pink light! "What the... That light!?" As the light touched him, it flashed brightly, blinding him! "Agh!! Not now!!!" Knuckles groaned.

Once Knuckles's sight returned, he found himself standing before the Master Emerald shrine. A quick

look around made him realize that this was the Angel Island of the past. "This again... I thought I was through with this." Knuckles thought as he wandered towards the shrine. Chao were gathered at the bottom of the shrine's steps, and were gazing up at someone. The shrine was in ruins, and the Chaos Emeralds were gone. Yet, standing at the top of the steps was Tikal the Echidna! The Chao made some concerned sounds as they called out to her. Hearing this, Tikal started down the steps of the shrine. "Don't worry friends. I'm still here!" she said reassuringly. Suddenly, as she neared the bottom of the steps, she recoiled in pain. "Wh-what... Ah!?" She held up her hand and noticed that she could see through it! She backed up the stairs a bit, frightened, and as she did, her body returned to normal. "What happened? That was very strange... Like I was fading away! I feel... I feel as though I can no longer leave the Master Emerald!" As Tikal pondered this, some echidnas approached the Master Emerald shrine! Knuckles hid behind the shrine as they approached, and watched them from the shadows. One of the echidnas was a yellow female, wearing a small orange shirt, brown pants, and a red headband with blue at the front. Her headband held her multicolored quills up, and she had green eyes. The other echidna, who was in front of her, looked astonishingly similar to Knuckles! In fact, they seemed nearly identical! This echidna reached the stairs of the shrine first, and gasped upon seeing someone there. "Princess Tikal!" he shouted with relief. Tikal looked relieved to see them as well. "Oh... Survivors! I am glad all were not destroyed!" she said happily. The red echidna smiled. "We never expected to find anyone here, either. What happened last night?" he asked. Tikal hesitated to reply. "Well.... It's hard for me to speak of..." she said. The red echidna nodded in understanding. "Take your time. You are among friends. My name is Athair. And my friend here is Radia. She is of the Raisol Clan." he said. Radia bowed politely to Tikal. "I came to investigate the roars and screams heard in this area. You... you are not injured?" she asked. Tikal shook her head. "Um.... No. But I can't leave here. I can't explain why." she said. Radia stepped past Athair and approached Tikal. "Excuse me... I am curious about something..." she said, raising her hand to Tikal and shutting her eyes. Tikal was confused. "What is it?" she asked. When Radia opened her eyes, she looked shocked. "I cannot sense your heart... How can this be?" she gasped, backing down the steps. Athair sat beside some Chao and looked up at Tikal. "It would seem we have much to discuss. Tikal... Your majesty. Please, share your story with us." he requested. At this point, the vision began to fade, and Knuckles found himself looking at Tails. They were back in Station Square. "Knuckles! You're awake!" Tails said, relieved, "I had to drag you out here. I sent SPOT to Troblusk City with the Chaos Gauntlets. I lost track of Metal Sonic." Knuckles rubbed his head and looked around. "Sorry, Tails... I'm not sure what came over me...." he muttered. Tails grabbed Knuckles by the arm and started leading him away. "Never mind that! Let's get back to Eggman's Base!" he said. As Knuckles followed Tails to the train station, he thought about the vision he'd seen. "Tikal... What are you trying to tell me?" he wondered.

To be continued...

7 - The Despair Seal

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 7 - The Despair Seal
Stage 6(Dark 3) - Giant Jungle
Minor Boss 2 - Guard

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

On the way to Angel Island to once again attempt to nab the Master Emerald, Punchy the Echidna encountered the mysterious Deathbringer, who warned him to leave the country, or else! Then, as he left for the train station with Rainbow, she spotted her sister with the Covenant of Despair! They followed her to the beach, where GUN's Sergeant Drol and even Illusi the Shrew got in their way! Soon enough, they found the Covenant of Despair, fighting with Drol over an ancient stone tablet. Rainbow's sister escaped with the tablet, leaving Punchy and Rainbow to battle one of GUN's mechs! Convinced that Rainbow's sister was now long gone, at the very least, Punchy decided it was best to resume their original plans and head for Angel Island.

Now, on to the next chapter!

When Punchy and Rainbow reached Angel Island, they found it on the ground rather than in the sky. This seemed suspicious to them, but not quite knowing the connection between the Master Emerald and the island's flight, they decided to head up to the shrine anyway. There, they found a bat wearing a Covenant of Despair uniform standing guard. Leaving Rainbow to wait at the steps, Punchy went up to interrogate the intruder. The bat jumped upon seeing him. "Hey! What you doin' here?!" he yelled. Punchy sneered at him. "I'm the one who should be asking that! Where's Knuckles and the Master Emerald?" he barked back. "With any luck, at our headquarters... Well, the emerald anyway." the bat mused, "The guardian should be sleepin' with the fishes." he said, pausing to glance at Punchy. "Hey, uh.... You his twin brother? You look just like him!" Punchy rolled his eyes at this. "Enough! You tell me what happened here RIGHT NOW!" he snapped. "Hey! Mind your temper, One!" Rainbow called up. The bat snickered at this. "Yeah. Mind your temper, One!" he teased. "I am Punchy!! PUNCHY!! Now are you gonna talk?!" Punchy growled. The bat shook his head. "No. I ain't no stool pigeon." he said. Punchy growled and socked the bat in the gut! "Stool pigeon THIS!" he shouted. The bat grunted in pain, but didn't seem fazed by the attack. "Hey, what's your problem, One!?" he grumbled. "Stop calling me One!" Punchy warned. Rainbow was shaking a bit, getting worried. "C-calm down now..." she whimpered. The bat didn't share her concern, though. "Naw, don't calm down! I wanna see what ya do about it! Mr. One!" he taunted, as Punchy growled, growing angrier and angrier. "One, One, One, ONE!!! Onnnnnne! Ha ha ha! Look at you! You're such a baby!" the bat chortled. However, the laughing stopped in an instant when a rage-crazed hand seized the bat's throat! "I'll wipe that smirk off your smug little face!" roared Punchy, now having taken the frightening form of Dark Punchy! He socked and smacked the bat while Rainbow cowered at the bottom of the steps, only to be joined by the bat as Dark Punchy hurled him

down in her direction! "O-one! Snap out of it!" Rainbow cried. "Had enough, you slimy insect!?" Dark Punchy growled as the bat climbed to his feet shakily. He took a deep breath, then shouted "MOMMYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!" before flying off! Rainbow stared up at Dark Punchy nervously. "OooooK One... He's g-gone... Now... C-calm down... Please?" she yelped. Suddenly, Punchy reverted to normal, and sighed deeply. "Whoa, that was counter productive.... But kinda fun, too." he said. Rainbow looked at him quizzically. "I didn't completely turn into Dark Punchy. I was able to restrain him a bit." he explained. Rainbow sighed with relief. "Don't scare me like that, One! You gotta be calmer!" she shouted.

As they were turning to leave, and Rainbow was muttering about how they might as well look for her sister now, two strangers approached them! "Excuse us. Can we ask you something?" They turned to see a pink fox wearing a red shirt and blue jeans accompanied by a white fennec wearing black clothes, similar to a priest's. "What now?" Punchy mumbled. "I'm Evelyn, and this is Fred. We're here looking for the Master Emerald guardian." the fox said. "So am I." Punchy grumbled. "Never mind that. Perhaps you can help us instead." Fred suggested. Punchy shook his head. "No way! I'm not helping Red's pals!" he shouted. Rainbow scolded him. "Don't be mean, One! Let's find out what they need first!" she insisted. Evelyn nodded. "You see... We're really looking for a fennec named Gemini. A bunch of us were looking together." she explained. Rainbow remembered Gemini from Soleanna. "You mean Wanda?" she asked, using her nickname for Gemini. Fred and Evelyn stared at each other in confusion, but shrugged. "Anyway, in our search for Gemini, we lost our companions." Fred said. "Lost is hardly the word. They were kidnapped!" Evelyn interrupted. Rainbow frowned. "Kidnapped!? Who would do such a thing?" she gasped. Fred looked thoughtful. "Well.... He was a heavy man, with a big bushy moustache." he said. Punchy's eyes went wide. "That sounds like Dr. Eggman! Why would he kidnap your friends?" he wondered. "...they have an eggman here, too?" Evelyn whispered under her breath. "never mind that!" Fred replied, "We know not why this Eggman kidnapped our companions, but we need help to rescue them. We were hoping that the Master Emerald guardian might help us, but instead we found you." he explained to Punchy. "Please! Will you help us?" Evelyn asked. Punchy frowned. "I dunno... Sounds like a thankless chore...." he grumbled. Rainbow was more enthusiastic. "Don't joke around, One! Of course we'll help! Tubby can be so mean sometimes!" she said. "Thank you!" Evelyn cheered. "We will await you deep in the Mystic Ruins jungle. Our friends are being held near there. Safe journey, Punchy! Galaporta!" Fred said, waving a wand to teleport himself and Evelyn away! Punchy stared as they vanished. "He has magic... Why does he need us?? And wait, how'd he know my name!?" he stammered. Rainbow shrugged. "You must've told him and forgot. Let's go!" she said.

As Punchy and Rainbow made their way to the exit tunnel leading back to the Mystic Ruins, they suddenly found their path blocked as the Deathbringer swooped down in front of them! "Wha?! You again!?" Punchy growled, stopping in his tracks. Rainbow shook her fist at the hooded figure. "Go away and bother someone else, Grim Reaper!" she shouted. The Deathbringer stood there, glaring at Punchy. "You aren't paying any heed to my warning at all, are you?" it growled. "You'll be paying heed to my fist if you don't get out of my way!" Punchy warned. "Yeah, you tell him, One!" Rainbow cheered. "You think you are a match for me?" the Deathbringer said mockingly. Punchy raised his fists. "Maybe I do!" he growled, some small residue of dark energy falling from his gloves, left over from his earlier transformation. Most beings could not see this dark energy, but the Deathbringer gasped upon noticing it. "The darkness inside you is growing..." it muttered. "Huh?" Punchy asked, only to be taken off guard as the Deathbringer suddenly charged at him! "I'll kill you!!" it roared! However, before it could strike, an icy wind blew violently in the Deathbringer's direction, knocking it away! A strong rain suddenly started to pelt the island, and the voice of the Doomsayer called out, "Deathbringer!!" Punchy and Rainbow turned

to see the glowing yellow eyes of the Doomsayer cut through the sudden storm! The Deathbringer turned to him in a fury. "Don't try to stop me! He needs to die!" it yelled. "All this is pointless. He will die when the world ends." the Doomsayer said. "Uhh... Rainbow, you seein' double, too?" Punchy murmured. "Must be the Grim Reaper's brother..." she muttered. The Deathbringer panted a bit. "If it doesn't matter either way..." it sighed, "I'LL KILL HIM!!" Once again, the Deathbringer charged at Punchy, forcing him to shove Rainbow aside to keep her safe! However, the Doomsayer summoned another wind to catch the Deathbringer's wings and force it to land! "LISTEN TO ME!" the Doomsayer bellowed. The Deathbringer yelped, and then stared at the Doomsayer for a moment. "But, I..." it murmured. "Go. Now." the Doomsayer ordered. The Deathbringer paused, then flew away quietly. "Whew! That was close! Thanks, Reaper 2!" Rainbow sighed, rejoining Punchy. "What's all this about, anyway? Who are you clowns?" Punchy asked. "I am the Doomsayer. You need know nothing else." the hooded figure said. Punchy nodded. "Well, see ya then..." he muttered. "A word of caution... The Deathbringer will come for you again." the Doomsayer warned before vanishing in a burst of hail, seemingly taking the rain with him.

There was quite a lot to talk about as Punchy and Rainbow made their way to the jungle to find Fred and Evelyn. Threats on Punchy's life, the missing Master Emerald, and Rainbow's sister all made Rainbow think that they should probably reassess their priorities for the time being, but Punchy remained determined to find the Master Emerald after this next side trip. Having been kept waiting, Fred left them a sign pointing the way they needed to go, so Punchy and Rainbow headed into the jungle without Fred and Evelyn. "Not sure how we'll save their friends if we don't know who they are...but what the hey. We find Eggman, we free all hostages he's keeping, mission complete." Punchy said. This section of the jungle once had possessed massive trees, the likes of which make normal trees look like broccoli. Now, what remained were mostly house-sized stumps, except for a single massive tree at the center of the area. "Look at all these house-size stumps! It's amazing and sad at the same time." Rainbow said. Punchy nodded. "Who could have done this to the jungle?" he wondered aloud. "Who else?" came a disdainful voice nearby. They turned around to see Fera the Wolf, standing solemnly and surveying the destruction. "Humans did this. They destroyed this jungle, as they did many others." she said. Rainbow glanced at her, then at the giant stumps. They were hardly useful for their wood. "But, why?" she asked. Fera scoffed. "Why? I gave up on asking that a long time ago. Humans are hateful, destructive creatures. I can never forgive them..." she said, clasping a hand near her covered eye, "Instead, I will exact the world's revenge on every last one of them." She then started to leave, turning briefly toward Punchy. "Remember my name. I am Fera the Wolf." she said in parting. Punchy and Rainbow started towards the last huge tree in the jungle. "Boy, she has issues. Still, those humans got a lot of nerve..." Punchy said. Suddenly, a yellow Egg Pawn with wings and a jetpack ran up to them! "Halt! You are trespassing on the territory of Dr. Eggman! I, E-5X now place you under arrest! Come join the other prisoners at the Tree Fort!" the feisty robot shouted. Rainbow smiled. "Awww, what a cutie!" she said. Punchy chuckled. "Really blew the old budget on E-5X, eh, doc? So the prisoners are at the Tree Fort? All right, take us in!" Punchy said, figuring he'd easily be able to fight his way out. However, the robot suddenly jumped. "EGAD!! I just realized that I just finished stashing the keys to the fort for safekeeping!! Then... I erased their locations from my memory as a security measure..." he groaned. Punchy rolled his eyes and started walking off to look for the keys. "Come on, Rainbow..." he grumbled. "Report back here for jailing if you find the keys!" E-5X shouted.

So, they started searching the surrounding area for the keys. The aerial variation of the Egg Pawns known as Egg Flappers were patrolling the jungle, but there were enough ordinary-sized trees still standing for Punchy and Rainbow to sneak around without being seen. "Eggman's robots are pretty

dumb... But that's exactly why I bet the keys'll be a pain to find. Leave it to his robots to lock themselves out." Punchy grumbled. As they walked, Rainbow looked around skittishly. "One... Do you hear something? It better not be those Reapers again..." she mumbled. Punchy shushed her. "I'm trying to look for those keys, Rainbow. Just let me know if you see any trouble." he grunted. Suddenly, they both saw several robots appear out of nowhere, having snuck up on them with cloaking devices! They were Eggman's Newtrons, and while some clung to their lofty perches in order to start lobbing laser blasts at them, the others dropped down and transformed their bodies into rockets to charge at them! "Yikes! Do something, One!" Rainbow shouted, picking up a stick and running around in a feeble effort to bat the rocketing robots away! Punchy hastily evaded the lasers, then grabbed at the nearest rocketing Newtron! "Shoulda stayed invisible! Now you made me mad!" he growled, hurling the robot at one of the others clinging to the nearby trees! However, there were still several others left, and they quickly ganged up on him, making him jump and spin almost like he was dancing in order to dodge them! "Why do you hold back?!" shouted Fera, observing them nearby. Punchy glanced at her, only to have a laser blast kick up a cloud of dirt in his face! "AHCHOO!! W-well... I could Chaos Avalanche the rest of the jungle down right on our heads! Very productive!" he growled. Fera stepped in and raised her hands, generating dark energy which she soon tossed at the Newtrons as several small balls, smashing them to smithereens one by one! Punchy and Rainbow stared at her in surprised. "Gee, thanks Wolfie." Rainbow said. Fera scoffed, then handed Punchy a bracelet emblazoned with the Covenant of Despair's symbol. "This is something we use to train our dark mages: the Despair Seal." she said. Punchy stared at it. "Huh? Well, thanks, but I'm no magician." he said. Fera looked him straight in the eye. "I sensed a great dark power within you... Yet it appears to be beyond your control. With this seal, you may tap into this power at will. Use it well, and embrace the true power of shadows!" she said before walking off once more. Rainbow looked at Punchy nervously as he slipped the seal onto his wrist. "I feel kinda silly... But c'mon, wouldn't it be awesome for Dark Punchy to be playing for our team?" he asked. Rainbow shuddered. "I have a bad feeling about this, One..." she said.

They continued exploring the jungle, and found a gigantic tree stump that was hollowed out on the inside, looking like a small cavern. It looked suspicious, so they went to get a closer look, and found a GUN Agent standing around at the entrance to the cavern! He was dressed in the trademark black suit of a spy, with reddish hair and blue shades. He was twirling a big red key in his hand, which had a distinctive, Eggman-shaped handle. "That GUN stooge has one of the keys! All right, let's get him!" Punchy said, walking up to the agent. The man reached for his gun, but didn't pull it out of the holster right away. "Hey... What's the big idea? This part of the jungle is off limits to the public!" he said sternly. "Yeah, good for you. Gimme that key!" Punchy snapped. Rainbow peered into the cave inside the giant stump and noticed a big cage, holding a prisoner. "Hey... Who you got in there?" she asked. The GUN Agent stood in front of the cave and held out his arms. "None of your business!" he shouted. "Rainbow? Punchy?? Help! Get me out of here!!" Gemini's voice could be heard from inside the cage, and Punchy raised his fists angrily. "How'd she even get caught? Well, you're gonna let her go, and you're gonna give me that key!" he said threateningly. The agent shook his head. "You can't take her! She's to remain here, by order of Dr. Nammad!" he said. Gemini started to rattle the cage. "That doctor's crazy! He plans to experiment on me or something!" she shouted in a panic. The agent chuckled. "No, he's busy experimenting on that cool magic wand she had." he explained. Punchy stepped toward the GUN Agent. "That's it. Enough outta you, shades!" he growled. This got the agent worried. "Intruder is hostile! Guard!! Chase this guy outta here!" he called. The familiar green, scythe-wielding gargoyle swooped down from the sky and landed between Punchy and the GUN Agent! "Grrr!! I'll take it from here, Agent 64!" he growled.

Punchy groaned, backing away in order to gain some room to fight Guard. "For some strange reason, I didn't see this coming... Dang it!" he grumbled. Guard swung his scythe and pointed it at Punchy. "Grrrr... Leave now, or I will be forced to place you under arrest!" he warned. Punchy rolled his eyes. "You'll just do that later, anyway! Let's get this over with now!" he shouted. Guard charged at him straight away, slashing his blade and firing a beam from it as he did! Punchy fell over, but rolled aside before Guard could strike again, and quickly got back on his feet! While they were busy fighting, Rainbow snuck over towards the cavernous hollow in the tree stump being used as Gemini's prison. However, Agent 64 stood in her path, tapping his foot disapprovingly. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to stay back." he said. Rainbow pouted and sat a few feet away. "You black suit guys are so RUDE!" she grumbled. She then gasped as she saw Punchy's situation. Somehow, Guard had gotten the upper hand! He had Punchy pinned down, and they were grappling against his scythe, but it seemed like Punchy would need help to get out from under the gargoyle! "Ah! One! Hold on!!" Rainbow shouted. "He flew up and sucker-punched me! Stay back, Rainbow!" Punchy grunted. He needed a way out of this predicament. "Grrrrr!! Surrender!!" Guard growled. Punchy growled back and glanced at the Despair Seal on his wrist. "I could try it... But what if I can't control it? Meh... How much worse can things get if I'm losing to Guard?" he muttered. Guard raised an eyebrow. "Rrr? What are you mumbling about? Do you surrender or not!?" he growled. Punchy clenched his fists and concentrated on his rage. "...Not!"

The Despair Seal suddenly flashed, and Punchy rapidly transformed into Dark Punchy, startling Guard! Punchy then kicked the gargoyle off him very forcefully, leaping to his feet while Guard flapped his wings to hover in the air in front of him! "No! One, don't!" Rainbow yelped, covering her eyes. "This isn't good..." she whimpered. Guard growled. "I don't know what you've just done here... Grrrr... But I will not fall to your trickery!" he shouted, flying at Punchy only to be slammed in the gut by a darkness-charged punch! Guard tumbled to the ground, while Dark Punchy laughed at him. "Not so tough now, are ya? I don't even REALLY have to move..." he said, attempting to call on some dark magic. However, nothing was happening, and Guard got up during the pause. "What!? Aw, this dumb bracelet is inhibiting me!!" Dark Punchy growled, reaching to take it off, only to find that he couldn't even touch it! "Errrgh... No... It's letting YOU control me..." he growled. Rainbow scratched her head. "Wha...? Oh, yeah. Dark One's a different guy. So... One's controlling him?" she wondered. Guard attempted to slice his scythe at the distracted echidna, but Punchy swiftly grabbed at the handle! "Make us madder... I dare you." Dark Punchy growled, tapping Guard's chest and jolting him with dark energy! Guard stumbled backward as Punchy released his scythe, and Agent 64 stepped forward. "That's enough! Guard, we're getting out of here!" he said. Guard glanced back. "Grrr? Col. Gunner would never approve a retreat!" he pointed out. "Well, I would! Get us out of here so we can warn Dr. Nammad!" Agent 64 ordered. Dark Punchy sneered at him. "Better listen. While you can." he said. Guard looked back at Dark Punchy with disgust. "Grrrr!! I'll remember this!" he said, running over to pick up Agent 64 before flying off!

Rainbow looked up at Dark Punchy fearfully. "O-one...? You in there?" she asked. The Despair Seal flashed, and Punchy reverted back to normal. He then glanced at the ground and saw that Agent 64 left Eggman's key behind. "Good. Now we're getting somewhere." he said. Rainbow sighed heavily. "Stop doing this, One! My heart can't take it!" she groaned. Punchy shrugged. "You'll get used to it. This Despair Seal's gonna make life a million times easier!" he said. They then turned their attention to Gemini's cell. "Tell you what, I'll rip this open with my own strength." Punchy said. Gemini stood back as Punchy tore down the flimsy cage door. The white, pink sweater and blue jean-clad fennec then stepped out and stretched. "Freedom!! Finally!! Thank's guys! So, what brings you to the jungle?" she asked. Punchy motioned for her to follow. "Long story. I'll explain on the way." he said. Gemini shook her head. "I'll pass on that, then. I think I got enough. You need some keys. I need my wand back. We're both

stuck here for a bit, so we might as well explore together." she said. Rainbow nodded. "Good! And maybe once you find your wand, One won't feel the need to go all dark for a while! Let's get moving! Follow me, everyone!" she said, taking off in a random direction. Punchy and Gemini watched her awkwardly. "Does she have any clue where she's going?" Gemini asked. "I've given up asking that..." Punchy grumbled.

As they were leaving, they were unaware that Fera was observing them from atop the giant tree stump. She grinned to herself. "Ah, the first taste. That exquisite darkness..." she mused, turning to finally take her leave of the jungle for real. "Soon, that power shall belong to the Covenant of Despair..."

To be continued...

8 - Eggman's Tree Fort

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 8 - Eggman's Tree Fort
Boss 6 - Egg Retro

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After their detour to the beach, Punchy and Rainbow headed for Angel Island as planned. Instead of Knuckles, they found a Covenant of Despair guard, whom Punchy frightened off as Dark Punchy. Then, they met Fred and Evelyn, whose allies were caught by Eggman while they were searching for Gemini. Punchy reluctantly decided to help them rescue their companions. Along the way, he faced the Deathbringer again and met the Doomsayer, causing him to miss his rendezvous with Fred and Evelyn. Exploring the jungle on his own, he met Fera, and received the Despair Seal from her, which allows him to transform into Dark Punchy and back at will. He then found a GUN Agent and Guard the gargoyle, guarding a caged Gemini and a key to Dr. Eggman's Tree Fort. Using the Despair Seal, Punchy defeated Guard and rescued Gemini. Now, with one of the keys to the fort, they still must locate the others before they can rescue the hostages held by Eggman!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Punchy, Rainbow and Gemini began an expedition through the dark corners of the jungle. Climbing giant stumps, hurling stones at Egg Flappers, and shaking their fists at Rainbow as she glided across chasms they could never hope to clear. As soon as they found a third key, they quickly found a fourth, so their search kept them going for a bit until they had six of Eggman's goofy red keys. "Tubby sure doesn't want anyone getting into his treehouse." Rainbow sighed after all the searching. "Think that's the last of them?" Gemini wondered. Punchy crossed his arms. "I hope so! But if there are any more, that dumb robot probably stashed them closer to the actual fort..." he said, pointing up at the single massive tree in the center of the jungle, "...up there!" Rainbow and Gemini nearly collapsed. They had to climb that huge tree!? "Eggman!! This isn't funny!! If I had my wand, you'd be so TOAST!!" Gemini shouted. Punchy nodded. "Plus, we probably wouldn't need any stupid keys." he remarked. Gemini growled. "Well, we've been all over this stupid jungle and haven't seen any sign of it!! With our luck it's at the top of the tree, too! So let's go!" she grumbled frustratedly.

They made their way to the giant tree and took a look up its massive trunk. It'd be quite a climb to get to the top, and Egg Flappers were floating around along the way. Some large plants were growing on the tree trunk, which might hold their weight and ease their trip, but they'd still have to climb quite a distance. "I'm not built for climbing... Can you possibly carry me?" Gemini asked sweetly. Punchy glared at her, but couldn't get mad at the innocent face she was making. "FINE, you can hang on to my back. But Rainbow, YOU gotta climb!" he said, pointing to no one. "Hey, One! What's the hold up!?" Shouted Rainbow, who was already several feet up the tree! "HEY, you monkey! Wait for us! I can't protect ya

from robots from way down here!!" Punchy yelled, grabbing onto the tree while Gemini jumped on his back. They tried to climb away from the robots, but there were invisible Newtrons clinging to the tree as well, forcing Punchy to take drastic action. He tossed Gemini upward towards a large flower growing on the side of the tree, then leapt along the walls, punching and kicking at the robots as they appeared and started rocketing towards them like missiles! Punchy hit one head on, causing it to explode rather than break, flinging him upwards until he was caught by Gemini! "Gosh, we're lucky these flowers are so tough..." she muttered. Suddenly, they noticed teeth on the edges of the flower petals, and the giant flower started to close around them! "What the!? It's eating us!!" Punchy shouted. Rainbow climbed up next to the flower and simply pulled one of the petals back open. "C'mon, guys! It's just a flower!" she said, continuing her climb without missing a beat. Punchy climbed out with Gemini clinging to him. "I... need... my... wand!!!" she cried. "I need your wand, too..." Punchy groaned.

After a hectic climb, they finally started to reach some actual branches that they could rest on. The branches of this tree were almost as thick as logs themselves, and they'd have to be to hold up Eggman's fort. As they rested, Punchy spied something red glistening in the branches above. "There's the seventh key. It must be the last one... Wedged between two branches. This isn't gonna be easy. If we aren't careful, it'll drop ALL THE WAY DOWN..." he said nervously. "Maybe we can steal one of Tubby's hover-cars to make this easier." Rainbow suggested. "Probably inside the fort. Need the dang keys! I HATE Eggman!" Punchy growled. Their noise drew the attention of some Egg Flappers, meaning their rest was over. "Umm... I'll wait here behind some leaves. You two do the acrobatics." Gemini sighed. Punchy and Rainbow sprang into action, jumping from branch to branch as the Egg Flappers started firing at them! Rainbow's gliding made navigating the treetop a breeze for her, and she was able to catch up to and knock out several more of the robots than Punchy could by simply jumping. Instead, he made his way to the key. "I've had enough of this jungle! I want out! I wanna steal an aircraft from Eggman and not have to climb back down!" Punchy grumbled as he grabbed for the branches the key was stuck between. He tried to grab them both so as not to disturb the key, but then he had no free hands! "...Crud! OK, c'mere, key..." He tried to gently shake the key to him, only to cause the key to slip right through the branches! "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!" he shrieked, activating the Despair Seal in order to throw a proper tantrum as Dark Punchy! He thrashed the nearby robots with dark shockwaves and energy blasts, forcing Rainbow to take cover! Only after all the robots were gone did he revert back to normal, still panting with rage! "Um... Is your little hissy fit over, Punchy?? 'Cuz I wanted to show you what I caught down here!" Gemini shouted from below. Looking down, Punchy and Rainbow saw that she managed to catch the key! "Well... About time you did something useful..." Punchy grumbled. "I CAN TOSS THIS RIGHT DOWN!" Gemini warned. "Uh, I mean, THANK YOU, you beautiful, wonderful person!!!" Punchy replied frantically.

They soon reached the very top of the tree, where Eggman had built a rather impressive fort which despite being much smaller than his normal bases was definitely big for being built in a tree. E-5X, the yellow Egg Pawn, was waiting in front of the large entry door. "Did you guys find all the keys yet?" he asked. Punchy handed them over, and the robot started sticking the keys into locks in the door, but paused after a bit. "Hey, these aren't all the keys!" he said. Punchy, Rainbow and Gemini nearly fell out of the tree in disbelief. "What are you talking about!? Seven keys! For... seven Chaos Emeralds?" Punchy said. E-5X chortled at him. "What? No, the keys are eleven... for the number of letters in Dr. Eggman's real name!" he said. Gemini scratched her head. "He has a real name?" she wondered. Punchy growled at the robot, and then glared at the door. The Despair Seal flashed once again, and in a moment, Dark Punchy had smashed the door clean off its hinges! "Hey! That's cheating, One!" Rainbow shouted. The Despair Seal flashed again, reverting Punchy back to normal. "The door... is OPEN..." he

grunted. E-5X glanced inside and nodded. "So it is. Finally! Now I can tell Dr. Eggman about all the intruders out here!" he said, heading inside first, "C'mon in, guys! We have air conditioning!" he added. Punchy crossed his arms. "Huh? In a tree house?" he said. Rainbow smirked. "This looks like the BEST TREEHOUSE EVER! Let's check it out!" she giggled, rushing in. "Tree FORT!!" E-5X shouted from inside. Punchy and Gemini shrugged and headed in as well.

As they entered the fort, Gemini quickly had second thoughts about going inside. In a cell at the back of the room were two people she recognized: A gray bat with blue eyes and red chest fluff, and a turquoise alligator with red eyes. "What are THEY doing here?? Ohh... They can't find me..." she murmured, sneaking back out the front door while Punchy and Rainbow headed straight for the cell. "So, you guys must be the prisoners I'm here to save." Punchy said. The bat, Adam, grabbed the bars excitedly. "A rescue team! Hey, where's Fred and Evelyn?" he wondered. The Alligator, Cuthburt, just shrugged. "Who cares? Let's get outta here!" he said. Punchy nodded and gave the door of the cell a good whack with his fist! "Not as strong as the door..." he remarked as the cell door crashed open. As Adam and Cuthburt started out of the cell and thankfully shook Punchy's hand, E-5X glared at them. "Prison break!? Not on MY shift! Dr. EEEEEEGMAAAAAN!!!" the robot shrieked! Punchy and Rainbow spun around, hoping to stop the robot, but it was too late! The Egg Mobile emerged from a hatch in the ceiling, and Eggman was covering his ears as he entered the room. "Egad, Jolt! You could wake the dead!" he groaned, glancing at E-5X. The yellow Egg Pawn, apparently named Jolt, hopped over to Eggman and pointed frantically at Punchy and Rainbow. "Look, look, doctor! A prison break, under your very ingenious nose!" he tattled. Eggman looked at Punchy and grinned. "Weeeeeell, if it isn't my old friend Punchy. A rogue agent of mine, like Copter before you!" he said smugly, "It seems as though Bucky's creations can't be trusted!" Punchy growled and stomped towards Eggman. "I'm NOT one of Bucky's toys! And don't YOU forget it!" he shouted. Rainbow frowned. "Why'd you kidnap poor Freddie's friends, Tubby? That was mean!" she said. Eggman shrugged. "Now, Rainbow, I can't have unauthorized animals roaming around my territories! Especially now, with the Covenant of Despair around!" he pointed out. Adam looked confused. "The Covenant of wha? What's going on here?" he muttered. "Hear that? They've never even heard of the Covenant of Despair! So get out of our way!" Punchy shouted. Eggman just growled. "Dummies! I can't let ANY of you go now! You've seen too much!" he said. Rainbow looked around. "What have we seen...?" she asked. In the corner, there was a deactivated robot that looked like a cross between Omega and their old foe, Terra. Rainbow held her eyes. "Whoops! I did NOT see that spoiler!" Punchy was just getting mad now. "Does anyone care about what I want to do today? Detour this, detain that.... ENOUGH!!!" he shouted. "Want me to taser him, boss?" Jolt asked. "No need, Jolt. I will deal with this traitor myself!" Eggman sneered.

The Egg Mobile moved back, and Eggman pressed a button, causing spheres attached to the vehicle to rotate and start exerting a strange sort of force that drew parts from across the room over to it! The parts snapped into place, and the Egg Mobile dropped down in a new form! There were now legs attached to the Egg Mobile, with spikes lining the toes, and arms ending in bumpers. It resembled the mech Eggman had used at Palmtree Panic on the Little Planet, though Punchy wouldn't know it. "Say hello to the Egg Retro! Go ahead and beat this form, there are plenty where this comes from! Ho ho ho ho ho!!" Eggman laughed. Punchy growled. "I think it's about time I told you what I REALLY think of you, Eggman!" he shouted. Adam and Cuthburt slowly backed into their cells again and hid behind the bars. "I suddenly feel somewhat safer back in here..." Adam gulped. Rainbow scowled at them. "Hey! Do you have any idea what One went through to rescue you? At least cheer him on!" she yelled. The Egg Retro charged at Punchy bumper-fist first, and Punchy jumped up to match it with his own fist! Big mistake; The bumper knocked him flying across the room and almost into Jolt, who was busy pulling out machine parts in case

the Egg Retro needed to transform again! "Hey!! Don't you sabotage me, echidna! I'll zap you like a bug!" he warned. Punchy got up and looked around at the machine parts. They were perfect! "Chaos Avalanche!!" he smirked, using his Chaos power to lift several of the machine parts and toss them at the Egg Retro! Eggman tried to bop them back with the machine's bumpers, but he soon found his old mech falling apart! "Take that, and that, and that!!" shouted Punchy, flinging even more junk in an effort to bury Eggman! "Hah hah! You fool! Now, I'll tear right through you!" shouted Eggman, bursting out of the barrage with another transformation of his Egg Retro! There were now a pair of drills mounted to the side of the Egg Mobile, and an extra powerful engine mounted on the underside to give the machine greater lift! "All right! The Mystic Cave Driller!" Jolt cheered, though Punchy just seemed irritated.

The Egg Retro started to chase after Punchy with its drills, while Jolt returned to digging parts out of Eggman's closets. Rainbow glanced at him with annoyance, and walked over to do something about it. "Hey! Lemonpaw! Quit cluttering up the treehouse!" she said. Jolt stomped angrily as he turned to her. "Tree FOOOORT!! And... Lemonpaw? Seriously? It's Jolt! I'm... y'know... electric yellow! Not lemony." he protested. Rainbow rolled her eyes. "I'll keep thinking. But you gotta sit this fight out!" she said. Jolt put his hands on his hips. "No deal. Go suck a lemon!" he snapped. Rainbow made a motion as if to roll up her sleeves, despite not having any, and picked up something hard and metal Jolt had dug out so that she could start beating him with it! Meanwhile, Punchy had climbed a wall and jumped down, punching the Egg Retro nice and hard in order to pop the drills back off it! "You little punk! I'll have to break out the big guns, then..." Eggman growled. The odd spheres on the Egg Mobile once again went to work, pulling in more parts and assembling the most menacing machine yet! It had big, powerful hands, spikes atop the cockpit, and was generally more heavily armored than the previous forms. "Let's see you deal with Big Arm!" Eggman laughed. Punchy glared at it, getting tired and frustrated. He tried to approach the Egg Retro, only to find himself snatched between the machine's two massive hands! "Eeek! One!" Rainbow shouted, ceasing her attack on Jolt when she noticed his plight. "A-and let that be a lesson to... ya..." Jolt said shakily. Eggman laughed as Punchy spun in a ball in the Egg Retro's hands. "Sometimes I wonder why I only try ideas once! This machine was always brilliant!" he grinned. However, they soon heard Punchy growling from within Eggman's grip. A flash of light indicated he'd had enough. Dark Punchy smashed out of the Egg Retro's hands with a powerful dark shockwave, and then fired several dark energy bolts at the Egg Mobile itself! "NO... MORE... MECHS!!!" he roared, causing the odd spheres on the Egg Mobile to explode in his rage-fueled assault!

The Egg Mobile tumbled to the ground, and Eggman coughed from the cockpit. "What... happened? Aw, that does it! No more living in the past!" he grumbled. Punchy had reverted back to his normal form already, and was standing with Rainbow, Adam and Cuthburt. "We'll be going now, doc." Punchy said smugly. Eggman looked around. "J-jolt! Don't just stand around! Do something!" he shouted. Jolt hurriedly stood in front of Punchy. "I'll send him into shock!" he said, taking up karate stances. "Not in the mood." Punchy grumbled. Cuthburt raised his fists, finally ready to be of assistance. However, they were quickly interrupted. A storm of Wrongos swarmed into the Tree Fort, surrounding everyone! Eggman was first to react. "What IS this!? BAS, what are your readings on those things!?" he shouted. The Base Alarm System, which was uploaded into the Tree Fort, replied, "What things, sir? Sensors detect no abnormalities." Rainbow, Adam and Cuthburt all moved in close and raised their guard, while Punchy groaned. "This day just keeps getting better..." he mumbled. Jolt still only paid attention to Punchy. "Hah! It's time for our showdown!" he insisted, only to get whacked with the same metal object by Rainbow again. "Ow! Stop cheating!!" he whined. Just then, Illusi entered the room and hurried over to Punchy. "We were interrupted last time, but now we finish this!" he announced. Punchy crossed his arms. "Ha ha... Good joke Illusi. Thanks for the diversion, but I gotta go now." he said, annoyed. "Mousy,

what's wrong with you!? Why are you attacking us?" Rainbow asked. "And what kinda name's Mousy?" Adam added. Eggman's Egg Mobile rose back into the air and faced Illusi. "Hold everything! Just who ARE you, and what makes you think you can just barge in here like this!?" he shouted. Illusi looked at everyone with frustration. "Silence! This is between me and that Dark One!" he yelled, prompting Eggman to frown. "Huh? But, what did I do to you?" he protested. Punchy rolled his eyes. "He means ME, Eggman!" he shouted. Jolt looked around and chuckled. "Never mind the circly things, boss! My sensors say they don't exist!" he said. Illusi nodded. "True, but they still cause damage." he warned. Punchy was getting tense and ready for yet another fight, but it was not to happen. Behind Illusi, a high-tech bomb was tossed into the fort! "GET DOWN!!" shouted Cuthburt, prompting everyone to duck as the explosive targeted all the airborne threats, meaning the Wrongos, taking them out with several mini-explosions one by one! In a moment, they were all gone, and Eggman's Egg Mobile was a little bit more dented. "Grrr, NOW what!?" he growled. A man with wild, black hair emerged at the doorway. He wore a white lab coat over a blue shirt, yellow gloves, and military grade GUN boots. He was wearing small glasses, and was accompanied by Guard the Gargoyle! "So, uh, I guess this was, uh, Dr. Eggman's base." he said. Illusi turned with a look of despair. "No! Not again!!" he shouted. Guard looked around. "Grrrr... Your bomb appears to have missed a few hostiles, Dr. Nammad." he observed. Punchy sighed. "Traded Illusi for GUN? Just great! How are we gonna get outta THIS mess!?" he grumbled. Fortunately, Fred appeared in a flash of light, along with Evelyn! "Guys! About time!" Cuthburt smiled. Evelyn turned to Eggman and pointed a bazooka at his Egg Mobile. "Sorry, doc! No hitchhikers!!" she said, firing at him to force him away from their group! "JOLT!! THIS IS YOUR FAULT FOR NOT REINFORCING THE DOOR PROPERLY!!" he roared. Jolt chased after Eggman in order to defend him in this tense situation, so their escape was clear! Seeing this, Illusi growled and teleported himself away in a puff of smoke before them. "Freddie! Eve! How'd you find us?" Rainbow asked, only to have the reunion interrupted by Eggman and Nammad. "Jolt, call in all robots patrolling the jungle!! NO ONE INVADES MY FORT!!" Eggman shouted. "Oh, uh... They have reinforcements coming. Perhaps we should, uh, retreat." Nammad muttered. "Grrr... Shall we regroup with the GUN camp in the jungle?" Guard suggested. Nammad nodded, and Punchy turned to Fred. "Well? Let's go before Eggman and GUN start fighting a war in here!" he suggested. Rainbow nodded. "Right! Follow me, One!" she said, running out the door! Punchy's jaw dropped. "R-rainbow!! NOOO!! Th-the magic!! I don't wanna cliiiiimb!!" he whined, chasing after her while Fred warped himself, Adam, Evelyn and Cuthburt away.

Meanwhile, Gemini had done some exploring on her own. Eventually, she managed to find GUN's camp, complete with Dr. Nammad's makeshift laboratory. "Great... now if I can get my wand without being seen..." she muttered, tiptoeing over and ducking behind trees along the way. Very few GUN Agents appeared to be around, since Dr. Nammad was away. Once an agent guarding the lab had turned his back, she crawled her way over and ducked under a table! "Whew... I think I'll stay here and try to feel for my wand..." she mumbled, looking out while she fumbled around the table for anything wand-like. Finally, she grabbed it. "Yes! Got my wand! Wahoo!" she cheered as she climbed out from under the table, only to find a gun pointed at her face. "Drop it!" the agent warned. "Umm... Abra-ka-warpra!" Gemini said, warping away before she could be shot! The agent sighed, looking at the table. "Oh, well... Maybe Dr. Nammad can make do with this one..." he said, looking at yet another wand, which Gemini failed to notice due to being under the table...

Eventually, Punchy and Rainbow managed to return to ground level. It was faster than Punchy feared, because Rainbow gave him a gliding lift. "Well, it's good to be outta the tree, but why do you ALWAYS have to run ahead, Rainbow?" Punchy complained. "You're too slow, One." Rainbow said. Punchy sighed. "Whatever... Illusi will probably be after us again soon." he mumbled. "Why's he so mad at you?"

Rainbow wondered. Punchy shrugged. "Search me! The whole world's nuts!" he grumbled. Rainbow shrugged and stretched nonchalantly. "Well, maybe we should just get out of here and look for my sister..." she smiled. Punchy scoffed. "As if we'd even be able to find..." However, Rainbow immediately started to take off yet again. "Follow me, One! I can't wait to see my sis!" she said excitedly. "RAINBOW!!" Punchy shouted, panting as he slowly headed after her. "She needs to get a clue! Her sister's with a bunch of lunatics!" he said to himself, realizing it was about time he actually told her this for her own good, before she gets hurt!

To be continued...

9 - Eggman's Virtual Kingdom

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 9 - Eggman's Virtual Kingdom
Stage 7(Hero 4) - Super Eggman Land
Minor Boss 3 - Firepaw

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.
Super Mario Bros. elements are (c) Nintendo (just to be safe)

The story thus far:

As the other heroes are beginning their adventures, Sonic the Hedgehog had only just found out that villains such as Eggman and the Covenant of Despair were on the move. Having fought with Anubis the jackal and failed to stop Char and Alpha from getting a Chaos Emerald, Sonic realizes that he may need help to contain this latest threat.

Now, on to the next chapter!

Sonic and Amy decided to head for Tails's Workshop in Central City, since they were in the neighborhood. Of course, Tails wasn't there, but they still didn't find the workshop empty. Charmy Bee was sitting at Tails's TV, playing some old-school video games as Sonic walked in. "Hey, you're not Tails!" Sonic remarked, which was followed by some annoying 8-bit death music. "Aw, man! You made me lose!" Charmy complained, turning around, "Huh? Oh, Vector! Sonic's here!" he called. Vector the crocodile was standing at the back of the room beside Espio the chameleon, who was seated at a PC. "Don't bother me now, Charmy! We gotta hack into this computer!" Vector said. Sonic walked past Charmy and cleared his throat loudly behind Vector. "And WHY are we breaking into Tails's computer?" he asked. Vector turned around hastily. "Oh, right, Sonic! My old pal! You wouldn't happen to have SEEN Tails lately, would ya?" he stammered. "I doubt it." said Espio without looking back, "If he knew where Tails was, he wouldn't be here." he figured. Sonic crossed his arms. "Just what are you guys up to?" he asked. Charmy hopped up excitedly. "Bad guys set Tails's house on fire!" he announced. Vector smacked his forehead in frustration. "CHARMY!! What did I tell you about blabbin' stuff? I'LL do the talkin'!" he shouted. Charmy sighed and returned to his game, leaving a shocked Sonic to respond to this new information. "Tails was... attacked!?" he gasped. "Take it easy, Sonic. I'll tell you what my keen detective skills have figured out!" Vector grinned. Espio turned around and Amy walked over next to Sonic. "This ought to be good..." Espio said sarcastically. Vector cleared his throat. "Okay. Tails was havin' a peaceful morning, working on his heroic plans to stop the Covenant of Despair... When they showed up and BLEW UP HIS WORKSHOP!!" he yelled, inducing a frustrated groan from Charmy. Espio rolled his eyes. "You don't know what Tails was doing this morning." he pointed out. "Why ELSE would they go after him?" Vector retorted. Espio shrugged. "Well, I'd say the most plausible reason was that they were REALLY after Knuckles, and he hid at Tails's place." he said. Vector shook his head. "Now, just because Angel Island fell again doesn't mean Knuckles is involved in this!" he grumbled. Charmy glanced over at them. "Maybe it wasn't even the... uh.... Despair guys!

Remember the robot I found in the workshop?" he said. Vector gasped. "Right! So, Dr. Eggman's working with Despair!" he said hastily. Sonic scratched his head. "You guys don't got a clue, do ya?" he sighed. Espio nodded. "That's why we're looking for any trace of Tails." he said. Vector looked thoughtful. "Now that I think about it, I bet Eggman IS involved." he murmured. Amy smiled. "Hey! I know where Eggman is!" she realized. Vector grabbed her by the shoulders excitedly. "SPILL IT!!" he yelled, causing game over music to play from Charmy's game. "VECTORRRR!!" Charmy whined. "I'll tell you if Sonic agrees to take me on a date!" Amy said craftily. Sonic frowned. "She's making stuff up. If she knew anything, she'd have brought it up earlier." he said. Amy growled at him in frustration. "Oh, yeah!? That's where you're wrong! I just so happen to know that Eggman's ship was spotted near Troblusk City! It was on the news and everything!" she snapped. Sonic nodded. "Troblusk City, eh? I'm there!" he said, speeding out of the workshop before Amy or Team Chaotix could even say anything about going with! "Sonic!! Waaaaait!!!" Amy groaned. Charmy glanced over at her and shrugged. "You could play two player with me!" he offered. Amy sighed. "Yeah... Thanks for the offer, kid..." she grumbled.

Meanwhile, at Troblusk City, Dr. Eggman had returned to his small base after his setbacks in the jungle. He was soon interrupted with unexpected visitors. Razor the Porcupine barged into the base, accompanied by the chief of police, an old human with a droopy gray mustache. "Well, what have we here?" Eggman said, sitting in his Egg Mobile as they entered, "The Troblusk City police! To what do I owe the pleasure?" he asked. The old man glared at him. "I am police Chief Paynson. I've come here to take you in for questioning!" he stated. Eggman chuckled softly. "Questioning?" he asked, like it was a joke. "We want to find out what you know about the Covenant of Despair." Razor said bluntly. "Oh? What makes you think that I know anything about them?" Eggman replied. Chief Paynson wore a look of impatience. "Oh, please. Don't insult our intelligence! They're a dangerous organization that could threaten your plans for world conquest! Why, the only reason you wouldn't be concerned about them would be..." he gasped, coming to a realization. "If you were in cahoots with them!" Razor finished. Eggman grinned widely. "Very well. I won't insult your intelligence. Won't you come in?" he said, motioning for them to come closer. Razor and Paynson took a step backward instead. "No, you're coming with us!" Razor insisted, reaching for his gun. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Oh, no, I insist! Stay a while..." Eggman smirked, "BAS, the accommodations here are terrible. Let's send them somewhere more pleasant!" he said. "Yes, sir!" the Base Alarm System replied! "Hold it!" shouted Razor, only to find an electrified cage rising up from the floor around them! In fact, they had backed away right into it! Electricity crackled and surged from the cage to several odd electrodes on the roof, and soon Razor and Paynson were both zapped, screaming out "Eggmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!!" as they vanished! Dr. Eggman was giddy at this turn of events. "Hooooo ho ho ho ho! With the chief of police as my hostage, Eggtopia can begin to expand into the rest of the city!" he laughed. "Doctor! A Chaos Emerald has been located!" BAS announced. "Perfect! I'm off to check it out! Have a robot wake up Spiny, would you?" he ordered.

In the time it took Sonic to ride the train, he arrived at Troblusk City. Eggman's Eggtopia base with the flashing sign wasn't hard to find, and as he walked inside, he found Eggman standing with his back to the door. "Eggman! You sure were easy to find this time!" Sonic remarked. The doctor didn't turn around, he just chuckled. "Heh heh heh heh... Sonic..." he said, his voice sounding a little off. "Uh, are you feeling all right? You look a little... Sick..." Sonic observed, noting his skin had an almost... robotic hue. The doctor turned around, revealing himself to be Metal Eggman, and yelled "SURPRISE!!" Sonic jumped in terror. "Whoa!! That robot's hideous!" he shouted. "What? How rude!" Metal Eggman frowned. Just then, Spiny the Porcupine emerged from behind Metal Eggman. "Well, if it isn't Sonic. My most

hated enemy!" he sneered. "Huh? Hey, you look a little familiar..." Sonic remarked, looking at Spiny as though looking in a mirror. Spiny stomped his foot furiously. "OF COURSE I DO!! And I can't STAND that! Metal Eggman, let me dispose of this girl scout!" he yelled. "Now, now. He took the time to visit us. We might as well hear what he has to say." Metal Eggman suggested. "Really?" Sonic said curiously. Metal Eggman nodded. "Yes, won't you come in?" he grinned. Sonic stepped under the electrodes on the roof without noticing them. "Huh. How polite of you... Uh, have any of you seen Tails... Or the Covenant of Despair?" he asked. Spiny smiled. "Why, he said the magic words!" he grinned. "Clearly, you know a lot! So, you win a trip!" Metal Eggman chuckled, "BAS, send our winner to Super Eggman Land!" he ordered. "Hee hee hee hee! Game on!" BAS laughed. Sonic looked around in panic as the electrified cage emerged around him. "Huh?? Oh, no ya don't!" he shouted, trying to jump over the cage only to be rebounded by the electricity! "Arrrrgh!! What's happeniiiiiiiiiiiiing!!!!??" he shouted. "Good bye, Sonic! Don't come back!" said Spiny as Sonic was zapped away as Razor and Paynson had been!

Sonic found himself falling. Then, he hit the ground. "Oooof!!" he grunted. "Ugh... Where am I?" he muttered, looking around. He found himself in a strange place, filled with floating chunks of earth that had a strange blocky shape to them. They were flying amidst a clear blue sky, and the only clouds in the sky had smiley faces in them. Among these odd, floating platforms, Sonic could see obstacle courses of gold coins, strange floating blocks, giant iron pipes, and other miscellaneous oddities. "I'm not in Troblusk anymore, am I?" he muttered. "Let the game begin!

Good luuuuuuck!" shouted BAS from seemingly nowhere. "Game...?" Sonic murmured. "This is the virtual reality world of Super Eggman Land!" BAS explained. "Virtual...? Wait... don't tell me...." Sonic said, a look of abject horror coming across his face, "I'M TRAPPED IN A VIDEO GAME!?" he screamed. He then promptly got over it. "Oh, well. If Eggman wants to play with me, I guess I'll have to give it a try." he shrugged. Looking forward, he though he saw Shadow. "If he's a video game mirage, I hope I don't have to fight him." Sonic remarked, heading over to him. Shadow was shouting at a red cat, with glowing yellow eyes, sharp claws and saber-teeth. It also had a long tail lined with spikes. "Enough! I'm not here to play your games!" Shadow yelled. "Then why are you here? Seriously? Meowr?" said the cat. "Hey! Did Eggman trap all of you here, too?" Sonic asked. Shadow shook his head. "I'm questioning this virus, Sonic. Go away." he grumbled. "Hello to you, too, Shadow." Sonic replied. "Wait, you're Sonic and Shadow? Meowr!?" the cat gasped. Shadow nodded. "Yes. Now, tell me where Eggman is keeping the Chaos Gauntlets, why he wants them, what he knows about Despair..."

"...And where we can find a good chili dog in this game!" Sonic interrupted. Shadow glared at Sonic as if to yell at him, but the cat spoke up first. "Viruses don't eat! Meowr! And I'm not even gonna talk about your other questions! I am Eggman's security virus, Firepaw! I'm the boss around this game! Meowr!" he hissed. Shadow smirked a little. "You don't scare me. Actually, you almost make me laugh." he said. "MEOWR!! You can't laugh at me! I'm the law here!" Firepaw snapped. "Nice kitty. Just tell me where the exit is, and I'll leave you alone." Sonic said in a cutesy voice. "You guys just don't get it! You're in MY world! Meowr! Troops! Get over here!!" Firepaw called out, bearing his claws!

Firepaw's "troops" approached, goofy-looking green turtles with blue colored shells. There were three of them, and they dashed towards the hedgehogs in an effort to tackle them. "Hm... These are the gooiest minions Eggman ever thought up." Sonic remarked. Shadow rubbed his head like he was getting a headache. "Let's make this quick..." he groaned. Sonic chuckled. "Look how slow they are! The nerve of Eggman, sending turtles to fight with me...again. Weird, I have an overwhelming urge to hop on their heads!" he said, running over to the nearest Egg Troop and hopping rather than spin jumping! The turtle ducked into its shell, protecting itself from the attack and causing Sonic to stumble to the floor! "Ouch! Coward!" Sonic grumbled. Shadow rolled his eyes. "Be serious, Sonic!" he said. Firepaw hurled his

elastic, flaming tail at Sonic while he was down, but Sonic was quick to somersault out of the way. "Gah! What was THAT?! This is YOUR fault, tortoise boy!" he said, kicking the shell and causing it to go spinning away like a hockey puck! The shell smacked into Firepaw. "MEOWR!! How dare you!" he shouted as the shell bounced off him and spun toward another Egg Troop! The turtle ducked into its own shell, and when the two shells collided, they soared towards Sonic and Shadow! "Yikes!!" Sonic quickly kicked the shell in a random direction, and Shadow found both shells headed his way! He kicked one to the third Egg Troop, but jumped the other, growling at Sonic. "Who's side are you on!?" he yelled. Another shell smacked into Firepaw, and then the Egg Troops were gone. "Dumb Egg Troops! Why do I get all the rejected henchmen? Meowr?" Firepaw sighed, "Never mind the violence. Tell you what. Get through the castle at the end of this level, and maybe I'll give you some sort of prize. Meowr..." he said craftily. "A castle? Sounds like fun!" Sonic smiled, to Shadow's annoyance. "Well, I'm 'glad' you think so. See you later! Meowr!" said Firepaw before warping away in digitized flames. Shadow glared at Sonic. "I'm holding you responsible for wasting my time!" he growled. Sonic shrugged. "Chill, Shadow. Since we're trapped in this game, we may as well play." he pointed out. Shadow crossed his arms. "I'm not trapped in here. I came here on purpose. I need to find the Chaos Gauntlets. It seems a safe bet that Knuckles brought them to Eggman." he explained. Sonic frowned as Shadow started walking. "Knuckles? Aw, great... Not again..." he sighed.

As they started on their way to find Firepaw at the castle, a strange block with an "X" on it appeared. "And so, our heroes began their journey to find the caste." said BAS as the background music changed, "Luckily, a block appeared before them! Surely, it would contain a means to move forward!" Sonic looked around. "Huh? What's with the narration?" he asked. "You get a prize for defeating the Egg Troops. Just take it and go!" BAS snapped. Sonic looked at the block with awe. "I have an overwhelming urge to bonk it from below with my head!" he murmured, walking under it and jumping into it! "YEOW!! Why did I think hitting a metal block with my head was a good idea!?" he groaned upon landing. "Well, it's gotta be good for something..." Shadow teased. A shiny red object popped out of the top of the block, which turned black and blank. "Hey, a Chaos Emerald!" Sonic said, pointing at their prize. "It's a fake..." Shadow sighed. Sonic picked up the fake red emerald and smiled. "Who cares? We can use it to warp to the next floating island!" he said. Shadow raised an eyebrow. "Since when do I need fake emeralds?" he asked. "Well, I can use it." Sonic shrugged. The two hedgehogs nodded in agreement, and struck a pose. "Chaos Control!!!" they said together, warping to the next island. It was crawling with Egg Troops, and some of them were throwing what appeared to be digital Piko Piko Hammers around. "I see Eggman's trying to appeal to my sense of fear..." Sonic remarked. Shadow pointed to a large, metallic blue pipe sticking out of a small peak on the island. "Let's head in there. It might be a shortcut." he suggested. "Right! Video games hide short cuts in crazy places! Let's-a go!" Sonic cheered, his voice taking on an accent for some reason. "Um... I don't know why I talked like that..." he murmured. They charged forward, evading the hammers being thrown at them and passing right through any gold coins in their path! "Hey, what's the deal with these coins?" Sonic asked. "Ignore them! They must be distractions!" Shadow said. As they reached the pipe, a monstrous plant resembling the flowers growing near Eggman's Tree Fort jumped out and tried to bite them! "Grrrr!! Chaos Spear!!!" shouted Shadow, causing the flower to vanish with one strike! "Hey, that was too easy!" Sonic said. "Hey, it's a FLOWER." Shadow replied.

Jumping into the pipe, they heard an odd sound effect as they fell, and then popped out in a dark, cavernous area. "This is too big to be inside that island..." Sonic realized. "Video game." Shadow reminded him. Looking around, they saw the glitched robot, Alpha, hitting an X block repeatedly and making coins pop out. "I'm rich! I'm wealthy! I'm racking up 1ups! Now if only I'd stop dying!" he was

babbling. "Let's go back up the pipe..." Shadow sighed. However, Alpha had noticed them already. "Greetings, plumbers! Could you save me from the creepy bad guys?" he asked. There were some mean looking red moles digging around in the caves, keeping their heads above ground as they went. They looked possibly related to Firepaw. "Who, them?" Sonic asked. Alpha gasped. "It's the Magma Moles! Get 'em awaaaay! They're ON MY SIDE!! Eeeek!!" he yelled, flying into the caverns and starting to shoot at the Magma Moles! The moles, in turn, started grabbing globs of magma from under the ground and hurling it around the caves! Sonic stared for a moment. "Um... Maybe we should help?" he said. "Why?" Shadow asked. "He might lead us to the castle." Sonic suggested. Shadow groaned, realizing Sonic had a point, and ran in to support Alpha with Chaos Spears. Sonic followed, careful not to touch the magma as he sped towards the moles. "All right, ya goofy computer badniks! Take this!" Sonic tried a homing attack, but the mole simply caught him and tossed him aside! "Hey! That's no fair... Oh, fine..." Sonic next went with his gut and ran back, hopping on the mole's head as he did to the Egg Troop before! It fell into its hole and vanished, signifying it had been defeated! "I need a power-up so I can just zap these guys like Shadow and Alpha... Wait, power-up??" Sonic muttered. As Shadow was busy fighting, he didn't notice something big and heavy over his head. Turning, Sonic saw a huge, angry-looking spiked block, and he yelled to Shadow. "Look out above you!!" As the angry spiked-block came crashing down, Shadow hastily Chaos Controlled away, narrowly escaping. "Yeah, REAL fun game, Sonic!" he snapped. Alpha promptly zapped the angry block, and then looked around. "Hey, it's full of nothing in here!" he said. "Um... Good. Now we can get out of here." Sonic sighed. "It's boring in here. I'm gonna go play!" Alpha announced, "Let's go eat mushrooms! Follow you!" he cheered, circling around Sonic. "Huh?? What just happened?" Sonic muttered. "Now, our heroes had rescued the captive princess! Err, robot!" BAS announced, accompanied by the narration music again, "Together, they continue their quest to defeat the evil king... Errr, find the castle!" Alpha looked at Sonic shyly. "Should I kiss you now?" he wondered. "That's it!! Outta the cave!!" Sonic growled, running ahead while Shadow chuckled.

When they found an exit pipe, they arrived on an island where their path seemed to be blocked. There were giant towers of blocks made of red bricks, there were large patrols of Egg Troops armed with boomerangs, and a big, scary looking ball creature with a mouth full of razor sharp teeth, which was chained up near the end of the platform and snarling at everything. "Awww, isn't the Egg Crunch cute?" Alpha said. Shadow crossed his arms. "I guess I'm on my own. Can't expect you to keep up when you have so little Chaos Control experience." he said. Sonic looked around and saw a big, spotted mushroom with a smiley face on it. "Hey, could that be an actual power-up?" he wondered. Shadow shook his head. "I wouldn't, Sonic. You can't trust anything in Eggman's world." he warned. Alpha patted Sonic on the back and pointed to the mushroom. "Trust the fungus, mighty plumber!" he advised. A mean looking mushroom with feet walked by, and Alpha jumped back. "But don't trust THAT fungus!" he added. Sonic shrugged and picked up the mushroom. "I had a good run..." he muttered. After a loud sound effect, Sonic noticed the ground below him start to shrink! In fact, Shadow and Alpha were getting smaller, too. "Hey... Awesome!! I'm a giant!" Sonic realized. Alpha hid behind Shadow in fear. "It's bluezilla!! Save the cheese!" he yelled, making Shadow groan. With his newfound power, Sonic began to clear the way forward, able to just stomp right through the brick towers and crush them to dust! As the Egg Troops came at him, Sonic lightly kicked them away, and was generally able to clear the path by simply walking forward! "All hail Sonic! The smashing king!" he chuckled, while Shadow sighed in aggravation. "Stupid, annoying, pointless game..." he grumbled. Finally, they came to the Egg Crunch, and Sonic thought he could just stomp past it, too. However, it leapt at him and chomped his leg, making Sonic jump back in pain and land in Shadow's arms, very suddenly back to his original size! "Uh, oh... I think that doggy hasn't had his distemper shot." Sonic chuckled awkwardly. Shadow dropped him on the

ground, and as Alpha fired a few shots to distract the beast, they got ready to warp. "Chaos Control!" they shouted, Sonic taking Alpha with them!

They were nearing the castle, they could see it looming ahead, but now they had to cross an obstacle course of moving platforms. Some were moving back and forth, others were cubes that were rotating in midair, and a few were small, blocky platforms that appeared unstable. "I'll meet you at the finish line!" Alpha giggled, flying by with his jetpack. "Cheater!" Sonic shouted. Fortunately, this was a bit more in the hedgehogs' comfort zones. They started running their way through the course, leaping from platform to platform. However, some winged Egg Paratroops started to approach them, and they were lifting some heavy artillery. Their large cannons fired bullets with an EggRobo paint scheme, complete with EggRobo arms and heat-seeking capabilities! The EggBullet Robos flew at the hedgehogs as they reached a group of unstable platforms, which started to fall as soon as they landed on them! "Okay, good timing, actually!" Sonic said, jumping off an EggBullet in order to reach the next platform. Shadow followed Sonic's example, but they found more and more EggBullets fired at them as they tried to navigate the platforms! "This is getting tricky!" Sonic gulped, barely keeping himself on a rotating cube platform. Suddenly, Alpha flew by and fired at several Egg Paratroops, eliminating them and their cannons! "You leave my super plumbers alone! Who else will rake the smiley leaves from my lawn!?" he yelled. Taking advantage of their relative safety, Sonic and Shadow leapt for a small platform with an X block. Sonic hit it, and a huge vine started to grow out of it, like a beanstalk ladder! "Wow, I did NOT see that coming." Sonic said. Shadow started to climb with an annoyed grunt, and Sonic was right behind him.

Finally, they'd arrived at the castle. It was a foreboding building, surrounded by a moat of lava and displaying Eggman's symbol on the front. There were spikes adorning the walls in several places, and there were big, red steel doors. In front of the castle was a big flag pole, with an Eggman flag waving high. Shadow pushed and banged at the steel doors, but they would not budge. "Did you try Chaos Controlling inside?" Sonic asked as he approached. "It's a game, Sonic. The room has to load in order to exist." Shadow said. Alpha spun over upside down in midair. "Game over!" he teased. Sonic glanced around, and looking at the flag pole, suddenly felt a peculiar urge once again. "This is crazy, but I'm gonna try it..." he said, backing up to build up speed, then running at the flag pole! He ran straight up the pole, and then grabbed on to the top, making the flag vanish as he did! A new flag appeared at the bottom, and as Sonic rode the pole back down, a flag with his face on it rose to the top of the pole! Sonic then hopped off and struck a pose. "Yahoo! That'sa so nice!" he said, prompting Shadow to look at him funny. "Err, I mean, that was tight!" he stammered. Suddenly, the steel doors swung open, and BAS started to narrate again. "Our heroes had arrived at the castle. But could they survive the dangers inside?" he said. "Figures." Shadow said. "Woo hoo! Bonus level!" Sonic grinned, leading the way into the castle so they could finally confront Firepaw within.

To be continued...

10 - Firepaw's Castle

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 10 - Firepaw's Castle
Boss 7 - Egg Villain

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.
Super Mario Bros. elements are (c) Nintendo (just to be safe)

The story thus far:

Sonic learned from Vector that Tails's Workshop had been destroyed, and that Tails was missing! After deducing that Eggman might be behind it, Sonic headed for Troblusk City to find him. Meanwhile, the Troblusk City police chief, accompanied by Razor, attempted to take Eggman in for questioning, leading Eggman to take them hostage instead! The doctor then left to search out a Chaos Emerald, leaving Sonic to face Metal Eggman upon his arrival. Sonic ended up stepping into a trap, and landing in a virtual reality video game called Super Eggman Land! Meeting up with Shadow, he faced Firepaw the Virus, only to be challenged to reach a castle at the end of the game world as Firepaw escaped! Sonic and Shadow were joined by Alpha as they explored the game world, finding the glitched robot to be unusually helpful. Now, they've arrived at the castle. What dangers await inside?
Now, on to the next chapter!

The interior of the castle was dark, except for the glow of lava bubbling in lakes surrounding the walkways. Sonic, Shadow and Alpha could see that the castle was heavily fortified, with Egg Troop guards patrolling all over the place. Sonic pointed to a door ahead. "That must be the way to Firepaw! Let's go!" he said, a bit loudly. "Sonic, quiet!" Shadow snapped. "Yeah, in fact, ALL OF YOU BE QUIET!!" Alpha screeched, getting the attention of the guards! Some distant Egg Troops manned some cannons, firing some small balls at the hedgehogs! They dodged, and the balls rolled a bit before hopping up on robotic feet! It looked like a little toy bomb, and it was flashing red as it approached Sonic and Shadow! "B-bomb!! But only I can make BOOM!!" Alpha whined, flying away. Sonic and Shadow nodded to each other and started running past the bombs, which exploded as they went by, destroying the floor and leaving nothing but the lava below! More bombs kept coming as Sonic and Shadow ran forward, speeding away from the rapidly exploding floor! A digital Gohla was spinning lines of fireballs around, blocking the path somewhat effectively, so Sonic and Shadow were forced to leap over them, kicking some Egg Troops into their shells as they passed by and arrived at the door! As the bombs took out the rest of the floor in the room, Alpha flew over to the cannon and fired directly inside it, causing its payload to explode and destroy the cannon and the Egg Troops operating it! "...BOOM!" he said before flying to the door. "He scares me..." Sonic muttered. "YOU wanted him along." Shadow reminded him.

They arrived in a hallway where every once in a while the floor seemed to be separated into bottomless chasms. Skeletal Egg Troops were wandering around, and they could see those same angry spiky blocks from where they found Alpha hanging from the ceiling. "Aww, Egg Bones. They're no fair, 'cuz

they don't go poof." Alpha groaned. Sonic chuckled. "Leave it to me! I'll take care of 'em!" Remembering the rules of the game, Sonic ran up and hopped on an Egg Bones's head. This caused it to break into pieces all over the floor! "Huh... strangely easy!" Sonic remarked, turning and motioning for Shadow and Alpha to follow. "Look out, you idiot!" Shadow shouted as the Egg Bones started to reassemble itself while Sonic's back was turned! "Huh? Yaaaaah!!" Sonic jumped away, then jumped again as he found another Egg Bones approaching him! Then, he grunted as he felt his head strike something hard. "What the!?" A block appeared out of nowhere above his head, and a sparkling star with a smiley face popped out and started jumping around! "Hey... Where'd that block come from?" Sonic grumbled. "It was... invisible..." Shadow growled. "Ooooh!! A star! I will get its autograph and put it on top of a tree!" Alpha chortled. The smiley face on the star reminded Sonic of the mushroom he'd used before. "I think it's another power-up! And I found it, so it's mine!" he said, running off to grab it! As soon as Sonic touched it, it instantly imbued his body with a sparkly energy! "Hey, this power feels familiar..." Sonic said, feeling like he could do anything! He ran right smack into the Egg Bones, causing them to disintegrate into dust on contact! "HA HA!! I AM INVINCIBLE!! I love this game!!" he cheered, dashing at intense speed through the hall, taking out the spiky blocks as they tried to crush him, mainly to make it easy for Shadow and Alpha to proceed, since he could easily outrun the blocks. "...I hate this game..." Shadow groaned, not at all amused by these antics.

The next room seemed relatively simple. There was a locked door ahead, and a switch with an "E" marked on it, likely meant to open it. However, the switch was attached to the side of the wall, high out of reach, and Alpha suddenly claimed to be scared of heights. Sitting nearby, there was a purple mushroom similar to the one Sonic had used before. "All right, Sonic! I'M going to use this mushroom! I've had enough of letting you carry me through the whole game!" he grumbled. "Uh... Shadow, that mushroom looks kinda frowny..." Sonic muttered. "So what?" Shadow said, picking it up. Suddenly, he noticed Sonic appear to grow larger than him again. However, so did Alpha! "What!? ...NO!" The mushroom had shrunk Shadow into miniature size! To make matters worse, a cage suddenly dropped down from the ceiling, trapping Sonic and Alpha! "Meow ho ho howr!! Looks like I win!" laughed Firepaw, appearing in the room with a flash. "Let Sonic out of there right now, cat!" Shadow growled, though his voice sounded a bit high pitched in this size. Firepaw glanced around and gasped upon seeing him. "I missed one!? Hee hee... You took the poison Egg Mushroom! You sound like a chipmunk!" he laughed. Shadow was not amused. "I will RIP your tail off, virus! Do NOT trifle with me!" he warned. Firepaw yawned. "Find me in the throne room, then. Meowr. Bye!" As Firepaw vanished, several Egg Paratroops emerged in his place! "Shadow! Go find some way to restore your size! We'll be all right!" Sonic shouted. "We can blow up each other!" Alpha said. Shadow scoffed. "Yeah, very reassuring. I'll just have to get that cage open..." he squeaked, sighing at how annoying his voice was now. He then growled. He was gonna take out his frustration on these Paratroops! He jumped into the air, shouting "Chaos Control!" in order to warp closer to the enemies! He went from turtle to turtle, punching and kicking them out of the sky furiously, leaping from the last one to get some height and reach for the "E" switch! He flipped in midair and struck it with his foot, and the switch caused the cage to vanish! "Hey, what!? If the switch was for the cage, what about the door?" Sonic asked. Alpha simply blasted the door, and it opened. "Didn't you ever play that one space video game?" he giggled. Shadow smacked his forehead and groaned. "We better find a way to fix my size ahead..." he muttered.

They now arrived at a room filled entirely with lava. The only platform they could see was a line of red blocks. "Not a lot of standing space there... But at least you don't take up much room now, Shadow!" Sonic joked, resulting in a tiny Chaos Spear being shot at his knee. "Ow!" Seeing no other way forward, they climbed on to the platform of blocks. Once they were aboard, it shook, and then started to move!

"Okay... So, is this a roller coaster or something?" Sonic wondered. Alpha flew beside them and laughed as the block platform started to speed up. "Hold on! Fasten your seat belts!" he said. "Seat belts? What seats?" Sonic muttered. "Stop trying to find logic here... And why am I behind you!? I can't see!!" Shadow yelled, pushing between Sonic's legs to get in front. The block coaster started moving and swaying in various directions, back and forth, up and down. As it sped up, Sonic and Shadow found it harder to keep their balance. "Still, not so tough..." Sonic said. Gold coins raced toward them as the coaster went, but they passed just over the hedgehogs' heads, and they weren't too fond of jumping after the seemingly useless items. Alpha, however, was having a blast flying around and nabbing them. "Ding! Ding! Ding! Money, money, money! I wanna use it to buy rings!" he laughed. Soon, however, the roller coaster ride got dangerous. Egg Troops dressed in wizard robes were levitating toward them, swinging magic wands around in a crazed fashion! "Hmm... Think this is how Eggman sees Gemini?" Sonic joked. "Look out! This isn't going to be pretty!" Shadow squeaked. "Oooh, Magi Troops! Can they make brooms fetch water?" Alpha wondered. The Magi Troops hurled colorful spells at the hedgehogs, forcing them to jump as the block coaster bobbed and weaved over the lava! "Waaaah!! Alpha, shoot those wizards!!" Sonic yelled, grabbing desperately for the blocks as he fumbled a jump. "I want enough coins for my own castle!" Alpha said, ignoring the hedgehogs' plight. "Rrrrr... Chaos Spear!!" Shadow fired some tiny spears at the Magi Troops, but they bounced off uselessly. "Stupid, wretched, annoying video game!!!" he roared. Finally, the coaster neared the end of the line, so Sonic picked up Shadow and ran to the edge of the blocks. "We're... outta here!!" He leapt to the platform at the other end, just as the block coaster plunged into the lava as the conclusion of the ride! "...Did you know the blocks were gonna do that?" Shadow asked. "...No, I was getting queasy." Sonic gulped. The Magi Troops, not paying attention to where they were flying as they targeted Sonic, smacked into the walls at the end of the room and fell into the lava at either side of the platform.

Sonic and Shadow found a large, ominous-looking door in front of them, with Eggman's symbol on it. A small character wearing a mushroom-shaped hat was sitting in front of the door. He had a bushy, Eggman-esque mustache, and an "F" on the front of his hat. "Hello, plumbers! I am Fungus, steward of Super Eggman Castle!" he said. Sonic scratched his head. "Huh?" he muttered. "It's a non-player character. There's bound to be at least one in any game." Shadow said, making Sonic glance suspiciously at him. "What? I'm not allowed to know something?" he grumbled. Fungus motioned to the door. "I can unlock this mighty door for you, but it's gonna cost ya! Say, 1000 coins!" he said. Sonic and Shadow's eyes went wide. "You mean... those coins actually... have a purpose!?" Sonic yelled. "I don't even know if we actually properly collected ANY..." Shadow groaned. A virtual wallet appeared before them, and Fungus checked it out. "Hmm... You've collected 23 coins... Sorry, you'll have to go find more!" he said. Shadow clenched his fists angrily. "Maybe I can persuade him... Though probably not, since he's just code..." he growled. Just then, Alpha approached with his own virtual wallet. "Here, jeeves! How many rings did I get?" he asked. "It's coins, Alpha..." Sonic sighed. "Don't get your hopes up, Sonic. This is Alpha, here." Shadow grumbled. Fungus took a look and gasped. "Thank you so much for your generosity! Your 2006 coins will go towards funding a lovely playground for the Fungi children to play, surrounded by refreshing molten lava!" Fungus vanished as the door opened, and Alpha groaned. "He stole my moneys! Where's a donut when you need one? Probably eating a cop..." he sighed. Sonic chuckled awkwardly as he and Alpha moved on, however Shadow hesitated. Nearby was a smiley faced green mushroom. "I don't know... But what more can this game do to me?" he muttered, picking it up. A cheerful sound effect played, and Shadow grew back to his normal size! "Thank you, Eggman. But I'm still going to kick your butt for the rest of the game." he grunted.

Shadow joined them at the next room, which was the throne room Firepaw had mentioned earlier! A

bridge led across a chasm with lava bubbling at the bottom. At the other side, Firepaw was sitting on a fancy throne, taunting Razor the Porcupine and Police Chief Paynson as several Egg Bones blocked them from approaching him. "Oh, Sonic! Meowr! Welcome to the boss round!" he chuckled, prompting Razor and Paynson to turn around. "THE Sonic??" he gasped. Sonic nodded. "Yeah, and you're... Who are you?" he asked. "Meowr... They're cops, can't you tell? It seems they wanted to arrest Dr. Eggman or something." Firepaw said. Paynson crossed his arms. "It wasn't like that! Well... Not JUST like that..." he grumbled. "We were going to interrogate Eggman about the Covenant of Despair." Razor explained. The mention of Despair got the attention of a uniformed dog who was up to something on a high ledge surrounding the room. "Hey, Anubis... They're talkin' about us..." he whispered. Firepaw blew a raspberry at the mention of Despair. "What a joke! Eggman's only helping the Covenant of Despair so that they'll attack GUN! Meowr." he said, earning a glare from the jackal sneaking above. "Yaaay! We win! Game over!" Alpha cheered, shooting into the air randomly. Firepaw glanced at him with confusion. "Meowr? What're YOU doing here, Alpha?" he asked. The robot gasped in reply. "Firepaw! You don't exist!!" he yelled, panicking, "BWAAAAAAAAAAA!!! This whole castle doesn't exist!!! I'm a GLITCH!!!" he screamed, running out of the room! "That was weird." Sonic remarked. "Yet strangely a relief." Shadow added. Paynson turned to Firepaw angrily. "So, Eggman's pitting human against animal, you say? I thought that fiend couldn't sink any lower!" he growled. "OK, I'm bored with these cops. Let's show them the other side of the bars!" Firepaw grinned, "Egg Bones! Toss them in the dungeon! Meowr!" The Egg Bones quickly seized the chief, forcing Razor into action! "Hey, boneheads! Let him go!" he warned, drawing his gun. Sonic and Shadow started across the bridge as well. "Hey! Call those numbskulls off!" Sonic yelled. "And hand over the Chaos Gauntlets!" Shadow added. However, Firepaw stood up on the throne defiantly. "Meowr!! You hedgehogs are in no position to make threats! Like I said, you're in MY world! But I DID promise you a prize if you reached here. Meowr... So, here it is! You win the Egg Villain!!" he cackled as a giant turtle monster dropped on to the bridge! It was green and blue, like the Egg Troops, with a huge, spiked shell, a big, toothy mouth, and generally had an appearance that Sonic swore he recognized from somewhere. It roared loudly, ready for their big boss fight!

Sonic shrugged. "Hey, Egg Villain! If you're our prize, go attack Firepaw!" he said. The Egg Villain growled. "Make me!" it roared. "Well, it was worth a shot." Sonic sighed. Firepaw jumped on the Egg Villain's shell, just above the spiky portion, and created Fireballs in his paws. "Meowr! Now we'll burn all the extra lives outta you!" he yelled. Shadow pointed over behind the throne. There was a big switch on the wall, similar to the one that opened the cage earlier. "Sonic... What do you think that switch does?" he asked. Sonic smirked. "Keep 'em busy and I'll find out!" he said, running ahead! "Hey, rodent! Catch!" the Egg Villain growled, hurling digital Piko Piko Hammers in his direction! "Yaaaaah!! Bad kappa!!" Sonic shouted, swerving out of the way. Shadow raised his hand to aim a Chaos Spear, but was startled by fireballs flung in his direction from Firepaw! "Oh... I almost didn't notice you there." he chuckled. "Meowr! Don't laugh at me! I'm the KING of this castle!" Firepaw snapped, swinging his stretchy tail at Shadow in his rage. Shadow jumped it and tossed a Chaos Spear at him, causing him to tumble from the Egg Villain's back! "MEOWR!! You'll pay for that! Fry him!" he shouted. The Egg Villain turned away from Sonic and blew a jet of flames at Shadow, forcing him to jump and dodge as the giant turtle kept blowing continuous flames! Sonic took advantage of the diversion to run across the bridge, where Razor was shooting at some Egg Bones. "These guys don't quit! I shoot 'em apart and they just pull themselves right back together! Luckily, I seem to be running on video game ammo." he said. "Just get me away from them! But don't hit me!!" Paynson whined. Sonic turned in the chief's direction, bouncing off the Egg Bones around him in quick succession in order to give him an escape route! He then dashed over to the big button on the wall. "How's it going, Shadow?" he called. Shadow was busy evading flames and hammers, and was starting to sweat. "PRESS THE STUPID BUTTON, SONIC!!" he yelled.

So, Sonic jumped up and gave it a kick.

The bridge suddenly started to rumble, and the Egg Villain stopped short, gasping in alarm! Realizing what was likely about to happen, Shadow dashed for the other side while the Egg Villain stood there with a stupid look on its face. Firepaw also started to flee as the bridge collapsed, sending the Egg Villain plummeting into the lava pit below! Victory music played, and BAS gave one final narration. "And so, our heroes defeated the Egg Villain, and his reign of evil ended. Dr. Eggman will be most displeased." As he said this, the Egg Bones vanished, and Firepaw started throwing a tantrum. "No, no, no, MEOWR!!" he shouted. "All right! Now I love this game!" Razor said. "That makes ONE of us..." Shadow groaned. "Greeeeeat... All my minions are toast..." Firepaw sighed as he collapsed into his throne. "And you'll be next if you don't do EXACTLY as I say!" Shadow threatened as Sonic, Razor and Paynson gathered with him in front of the throne. However, a huge blast of fire came from above, destroying the throne! "You'll tell him nothing!" shouted the attacker, Anubis the jackal! As everyone looked up at him, Firepaw laughed. "You tried to destroy me with fire! What a dope! Meowr..." As Firepaw processed what had happened, though, a look of panic came over him. "Wait... YOU TRIED TO DESTROY ME!? MEOWR!?" Sonic squinted up at Anubis. "Hey! You're that guy from the Covenant of Despair!" he realized. Anubis growled at Firepaw. "I don't know what you know of our plans... But I'll destroy this whole castle to make sure they stay secret!" he said. "Meowr... I think that's my cue to log off..." Firepaw gulped, vanishing in a burst of flames! "Meowr! Thanks for playing!" he said in parting. "So, uh... Anubis, huh?" BAS muttered as Firepaw vanished, "INTRUDER ALERT!!! Covenant of Despair members in Super Eggman Land!!" Sonic scratched his head. "The computer's only picking up on that NOW???" he said.

Razor pointed his gun up at Anubis. "Don't move! You're under arrest for treason and terrorism!" he announced. "Come quietly, or we'll be forced to use force!" Paynson added, trying to sound official despite still being flustered from the Egg Bones attack. Sonic remembered why he was here at this point. "Hold it! My best friend's workshop was burned down this morning, and certain detectives say you guys might have something to do with it! Where's Tails!?" he shouted. Anubis looked thoughtful. "The fox? He escaped with the guardian of the Master Emerald. I believe they are now in the employ of Dr. Eggman." he said. Sonic was taken aback. "You... you're lying! Tails wouldn't work for Eggman!" he shouted. Shadow looked at Sonic impatiently. "Could we get back to arresting this guy? It sounded like a good idea to me." he said. Anubis scoffed at them. "You do not faze me. I will destroy you all at once!" he said, turning to the canine agent with him, "Detonate the explosives!" he ordered. "But... They'll blow us up, too!" the dog protested. "Explosives!?" Sonic gasped. "Spineless twit! I'll do it myself!" Anubis grunted, heading for the bombs he'd planted while the dog started to flee for his life! "Shoot! We gotta do something!" Sonic shouted. Shadow nodded. "The Fake Chaos Emerald! Now, Sonic! Don't worry... The real world doesn't need to be 'loaded.'" he said. "We could've warped home at any time!?" Sonic stammered, "Never mind! Over here, everyone!" he shouted. "You are too late!" Anubis snarled, "Once again, farewell, Sonic the Hedgehog!" Anubis covered his hands in fire as he grabbed at the bombs, detonating them with the heat! At that moment, Sonic and Shadow simultaneously shouted "Chaos Control!!!"

Sonic, Shadow, Razor and Paynson emerged back at Eggman's Eggtopia. They appeared unscathed, and the base seemed deserted for the moment. "Whew! That was close! Those Covenant of Despair guys are nuts!" Sonic sighed. Paynson panted with relief. "I used to feel that way about all animals, until I met Officer Razor." he smiled. Razor nodded. "We should get out of here, chief. Dr. Eggman could be back any moment." he said, "Obviously, we're not bringing him in by ourselves..." As they started to leave, Shadow glanced at Sonic. "I have work to do as well. Later, Sonic." he said, heading out the door.

"Your welcome, Shadow. Well, guess I'll hang around here and see if Knuckles or Tails show up..." Sonic muttered to himself. He wasn't alone for long, as he soon heard Knuckles's voice at the door. "Hey, Eggman! I'm back! ...Huh? Sonic...?" he yelled, knowing how this must look. Indeed, Sonic felt what Shadow and Anubis had told him was confirmed. "Rrrrr, Knuckles!! You've gone and done it again!" he yelled, sick of dealing with the echidna's apparent stupidity. "Hold it, there, Sonic! It's not what you think!" Knuckles stammered, hoping to make Sonic understand his situation. However, Sonic wasn't hearing it. "Oh, yeah? 'Cuz it looks like you've been tricked by Eggman for the millionth time!" he shouted. This, Knuckles couldn't take. "Wha... I have NOT been tricked by Eggman a million times!! You take that back!" he growled. Sonic smirked. "You're right. It must be a billion times by now! Ha ha! You're so gullible!" he laughed. "Grrr... Laugh it up, Sonic!! Like you've never been tricked by Eggman before yourself!" Knuckles retorted. Sonic shrugged. "That's enough. Where's Tails? Don't tell me you let Eggman lock him up..." he asked, rolling his eyes. Tails had decided to head off on his own to try to gather information about Eggman and the Covenant of Despair, but Knuckles was too furious to explain that now. "WHAT DO YOU TAKE ME FOR!?" he roared. "Oh, brother. I can tell where this is going... again..." Sonic sighed, raising his fists. "I'm sick of you acting all high and mighty!! It's time I taught you some respect!!" Knuckles shouted back, beating his fists together in anticipation of their fight. Sonic chuckled. "Whatever... Bring it on, knucklehead!"

To be continued...

11 - Into the Clouds

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 11 - Into the Clouds
Stage 8(Dark 4) - Cloud Carnival
Minor Boss 4 - E-5X Jolt

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After rescuing Copter from GUN forces, Kosmo found his hideout at Hollow Manor crawling with robots and Lost Ones. He decided to pack up his things and leave, and Copter tagged along. During the trip, they met Patch the fox and Basker the hound, Covenant of Despair agents who were searching the manor for something. After Kosmo recovered his mysterious, ancient coin from his room, Shadow Chaos appeared and attacked them! After they fought, Shadow Chaos fled as Basker and Patch arrived! They offered to bring Kosmo to Despair's stronghold, and having nowhere in particular to go, Kosmo decided to take them up on the offer. Wanting to keep an eye on Kosmo, Copter went along, too. They found Bucky at the castle, and were about to leave in disgust when the Covenant of Despair's leader, the Darkseeker appeared...

Now, on to the next chapter!

The Darkseeker was not a character you just say "no" to, so Copter and Kosmo found themselves settling in their new, somewhat cramped quarters when Patch came in announcing it was time for their first mission. They headed out of their room and went to the castle's main entrance hall, a large area full of uniformed animals going this way and that, heading down various hallways to other parts of the castle. A certain purple echidna was there, along with a pink skunk with blue eyes and a uniform with a green star instead of the usual red. The skunk spotted Copter and gasped. "Vy... Look who it is!" she said, pointing. Copter gulped and hid behind Kosmo. "Oh, shoot! I didn't even think of them!" he groaned. "Someone you know?" Kosmo stammered. "Hey, you! What are YOU doing here!?" shouted the skunk angrily. Copter stepped out from behind Kosmo sheepishly. "Uh, heeeeeeeey, if it isn't Daisy and uh... Violet! How long has it been?" he chuckled nervously. Violet the echidna glared at him. "Save it, freak! What are you DOING here?" she snapped. "I've been wondering that myself..." Copter sighed. Kosmo looked back and forth between them. "What's going on...?" he wondered. Violet crossed her arms. "Did you actually JOIN the Covenant of Despair?" she growled. "Well..." Copter said, rubbing his head awkwardly. "And who's the weirdo you're hiding behind?" Daisy asked. Kosmo raised an eyebrow. "Weirdo?" he grunted. Copter chuckled awkwardly. "This is Kosmo. Trust me, you don't wanna mess with him." he warned. Violet shrugged. "Fine, but we've got a bone to pick with you! Why are you stalking us!?" she shouted. Copter was flabbergasted. "S-stalking!?! Are you crazy!?" he shouted. Just then, Infin the weasel came up to them. "Come on, girls. It's time for your next mission..." he announced. Violet pointed at Copter. "But, Mitch... It's that fox!" she said. Infin jumped angrily. "Use my code name, dang it! How hard... Wha-- YOU!?" he roared upon noticing Copter. "Hey, if it isn't 'Mitch.' I see you got a

new foot." Copter chuckled, pointing at Infin's robotic foot. "You little punk! How dare you show your face here!" Infin growled. "New foot? Copter, is there something you want to tell me?" Kosmo muttered. Copter grinned. "Well, now I know how that all ended up... Hehe..." he snickered. Infin drew a gun and pointed it at Copter. "It ain't funny, you punk! Ya know what? I'm gonna kill ya right now!!" he yelled. Kosmo growled at him. "Hey! He's with me!" he warned. "Mitch! Why are you loitering around down here!?" said Fera, who just arrived on the scene. "That fox has gotta die! He's against us!" Infin growled. "Not at the moment he's not. Our leader has deemed him worthy to join. Now get to work!" Fera ordered. Infin sighed, slowly lowering his gun. "Yes, ma'am. Come on, girls!" he yelled, heading off. "Don't worry, Infin. I'll totally kick his butt later." Daisy said. Violet hesitated. "If you hurt my friends, I swear I'll make you pay." she said to both Copter and Kosmo before leaving. "How do I find these wackos?" Copter sighed.

Fera called Copter and Kosmo over. "I've got your mission details. Listen up, because this is important. Infin has located the Chaos Boots." she said. Kosmo nodded. "Uh-huh... And what are those?" he asked. "Never mind that. We need them. That is all you need to know." Fera replied, "They are being held at Cloud Carnival, a traveling tourist attraction that is currently near Station Square." she said. Kosmo frowned. "Collect some boots from a carnival? Don't you have anything harder?" he wondered. Fera looked serious. "You can get in and out faster than our other agents." she explained. Kosmo nodded. "I guess it's important, then..." he muttered. "We can't fly you there ourselves. You'll need to procure your own transport." Fera informed them. Copter shrugged. "Sounds like a job for the Hurricane." he said. With their orders received, they started toward the door, but Bucky ran up to them in a hurry! "Kosmo!" he shouted. "Beat it, old man!" he replied. "They haven't told you everything about this mission. Why don't you allow me to accompany you?" Bucky offered. Kosmo kept walking. "I prefer Copter's little plane to my old cell, thanks!" he growled. "Yeah, go make yourself a bride, if you're bored." Copter added. Bucky stopped short. "I... I am not meant to have a bride..." he whispered solemnly. As Kosmo and Copter left, Zipp flew up to Bucky. "Boss?" he muttered. "Go get Zeke and follow Kosmo." Bucky said. "Okay! Um, why?" Zipp replied. "Kosmo's emotional state is a fragile thing. I'd hate for him to get out of control again." he explained. Zipp nodded. "So, uh..." he mumbled. "If he should become dangerous, kill him." Bucky ordered. Zipp smiled. "I love you. You really should make a bride!" he said. "Go... now..." Bucky growled. Zipp saluted and flew off to find Zeke, while Bucky stood with a tear in his eye. "Some men are not meant for happiness....." he sighed.

It was a bit of a trip to Station Square from the Covenant of Despair's base, and Copter couldn't get through to his plane due to interference, so they ended up taking a train from the Mystic Ruins to arrive in the city. Upon exiting the station, a dramatic scene unfolded before their eyes! Katie the Coyote was face to face with Sergeant Drol and Agent 32, who were accompanied by a couple of armed GUN Beetles. "It is time you came with me, madam. I have some important questions for you." Drol beckoned. "I told you, I don't know anything!" Katie protested. "You dare lie to Sergeant Drol?!" Agent 32 yelled. Copter stared in bewilderment. "Looks like that's Gunner's replacement. What's he want with Katie?" he muttered. "Well, if you want to know, we can sit here and listen." Kosmo shrugged. "Enough! I saw you poking around those ruins! You WILL tell me all you know!" Drol shouted, apparently having seen Katie at the ice ruins near Blue Ridge Zone. The beetles approached Katie, making her scream in fear! "You will accompany us to the Cloud Carnival. We have some business there." Drol said. "Keep yourselves locked on to the prisoner, beetles! She's coming with us!" Agent 32 ordered. Suddenly, Chet the cheetah arrived and stood beside Katie! "Hey, are you all right?!" he asked. "This guy's trying to kidnap me!" Katie shouted. "Stay away from my girl, you creep!" he growled. Drol frowned. "Creep? Watch your tongue, knave!" he said. Copter had had enough. "You heard him! Let her go!" Copter shouted, running

down the steps of the train station! Kosmo joined him. "You've got something more important to worry about now! Like me!" he said. Drol took some ear plugs out of his pocket and started to insert them. "Peasants are nothing to fret about. Beetles, use your Shock Screech!" he commanded. The beetles started to make an intense, ear-splitting noise, which was so painful to hear that all of them collapsed onto the ground, clapping their ears! "Gah!! C-can't move!!" Chet whimpered. "I... hate GUN!!" Copter and Kosmo shouted at once. "Take that, pests!" Agent 32 said with his fingers inserted in his ears. "You peasants WILL learn your place! And the Covenant of Despair will fall to my guns!" Drol announced as the beetles silenced. He lifted Katie into his arms, carrying her off while the others writhed on the floor, paralyzed from the "Shock Screech!" "Chet!! Copter!! Help me!!" Katie called, making Chet force himself to his feet. "I'll save you!! Hang on!!" he grunted, hurrying off! Copter climbed to his feet slowly. "They're going to Cloud Carnival? They must be after the Chaos Boots, too!" he realized. "We'd better hurry...If... If we want to save her." Kosmo said, standing up. Copter nodded and brought out the Hurricane Remote. "Hoover, send the plane!" he said. The robotic beaver's voice could be heard through the remote. "You better not bring 'er back wit dings agin! I can bite, y'know!" he warned.

Once the Hurricane arrived, they took off high into the clouds. Among the clouds, there seemed to be an amusement park simply hovering in midair! A closer look made them realize that this was a fleet of ships camouflaged as clouds! They landed the plane on one of these cloud ships and hopped out, taking a moment to look around. "Roller coasters, slot machines, and loads of balloons... It's like a theme park sitting on top of cotton candy." Copter mused. Dr. Eggman's voice boomed over a PA system. "Step right up! Welcome to Cloud Carnival! Remember: No outside food or drink is permitted!" he announced. Copter stared up in surprise. "No way... But then, why am I surprised? High tech cloud ships. Who else?" he groaned. "Well, well. I guess this tourist trap really IS a trap." Kosmo joked. The PA system came on once again. "This carnival is in no way affiliated with the Eggman Empire. Um... I'm not even Dr. Eggman! I just sound like him!" he lied. "You can't fool me!" Kosmo shouted. "You know he can't hear you, right?" Copter pointed out. "Errr... Yeah, I did." Kosmo mumbled. "If you'll excuse me, I'm gonna have a chat with the management about the lack of parking." Copter grumbled, stomping off on his own. Kosmo nodded. "Good idea. We can cover more ground this way." he said. "If you see Katie, give me a holler!" Copter added as he headed off. Kosmo looked around at the flashing lights and cool rides of the carnival, and caught himself smiling. "Odd... This place gets me feeling excited for some reason... I never have been to a carnival." he realized as he started to explore. Even the rings in the park were more festive than usual, they were shiny red rings designed for use only within the park. Kosmo walked over to check them out, but his attention was drawn to some noise up ahead. "That shouting... I think I've found Copter's friend already!" he realized.

Sgt. Drol and Agent 32 were standing beside the remains of their beetle robots. E-5X Jolt was in front of them, accompanied by several fancy purple Egg Pawns carrying what appeared to be trumpets. Katie was standing behind Drol, but Agent 32 wasn't letting her out of his sight. Chet was there, too, and as Kosmo walked up, he also noticed a whitish hedgehog with funny-looking head spines. It was Silver, and he was looking from the robots to the GUN agents curiously. "Hey, what's going on here?" he asked. Jolt jumped upon noticing Kosmo and Silver. "You sneaky intruders, sneaking up here in your sneakers! All of ya! Don't think you're gonna get away with this!" he shouted, glancing back at Drol. "I'm pretty sure I'll get away with whatever I want, even though our robots were destroyed by yours." Drol said. "How do you figure?" Jolt wondered. Drol glanced at Chet. "Are you listening, lowlife? If you ever want to see your friend alive again, you'll cover our escape!" he sneered. Chet grinded his teeth in rage. "WHAT?! You scummy little..." Agent 32 grabbed Katie and pulled out his pistol. "Watch it! If we don't escape soon, I'll pull this trigger and lighten our load!" he warned. "Y-you wouldn't!" Katie gasped. Silver raised his hand

threateningly. "Right! I won't let you!" he shouted. "This doesn't concern you. Back off, before I lose my temper!" Drol snapped. Kosmo stepped forward. "Well, maybe it concerns me!" he said. "You again?" Drol gasped. Jolt glanced at Kosmo a little more directly this time. "Huh? Whoa! It's Experiment 3! Better call the boss, quick! Before he causes the kinda trouble Experiment 1 caused at the Tree Fort!" he babbled. Kosmo glared at the robot. "Hey! I wasn't bothering you!" he shouted. Drol decided to take the diversion as a chance to escape. "Very well, hedgehog. I won't harm the prisoner, so long as we are not followed..." he said, running off with Agent 32 forcing Katie to follow. Chet started after them, but hesitated. "Katie!! ...What do I do now?" he whimpered, not wanting to get her shot. "I should've yanked the gun from his hand..." Silver sighed. Jolt pointed at him. "Hey, you're Silver! Dr. Eggman has us programmed to look out for you, too!" he yelled. "He does?" Silver wondered. "Why, who is he?" Kosmo muttered. Jolt jumped angrily. "C'mon, Carnival Pawns! Let's get all three of 'em!" he shouted. Chet looked over with alarm. "Three of 'em? That means me, too! Why you stinkin' robots!" he growled.

The Carnival Pawns bounded forward and blew their horns, which emitted a powerful shockwave that Kosmo and Chet quickly dodged, but Silver was taken by surprise and knocked back! "Damaging sound blasts? Okay... I'll have to find something to throw back." he grunted. Jolt hopped into the air and started circling above them with his jetpack. "Look out! I'm electrifying!! Ha ha ha ha!" he laughed, sparks flying from his hands! They ignored him and went for the Carnival Pawns, Chet speeding ahead with his claws bared. Being the fastest of the group, he could get past the pawns before they could trumpet-blast him, and swipe his claws at them with all his might! However, the robot's armor proved too strong for him, and he was forced to run as it turned and fired at him again! Kosmo tried to follow his example, though, and morphed into Sonic's form in order to speed past the robots' attacks. However, Jolt fired several bolts of electricity at him as he ran, and he had to change direction! "Oh, so the little yellow toy has some tricks?" he said. "I'm not little!! My color just doesn't stand out like the other pawns!" Jolt shouted. Kosmo shifted into a somewhat larger Egg Pawn with a jetpack like Jolt's. "No, you're short. And I'm coming up there to say it to your face!" he said, taking off after the yellow pawn! Meanwhile, Silver looked for something to use as a projectile for his psychokinesis, but all he could find were balloons. "Oh, well. Guess I'll try 'em..." he decided, his hand starting to glow as he held it up towards a bright red balloon. "Take this!!" he shouted, psychically flinging the balloon at a nearby robot! The balloon bumped into the front of the pawn's trumpet, blocking it as it tried to blow out a shockwave! This caused it to backfire, blowing up the robot! "Huh...? Why didn't the shockwave pop the balloon? Never mind, I'll take it." Silver shrugged, grabbing the busted remains of the robot to fling at the others while Chet was distracting them! In the sky, Jolt was firing bolt after bolt at Kosmo, and he shot back with a generic laser he was able to copy from robots he'd seen before. However, after taking a hit from Jolt and feeling the metal frame of this form shocked throughout, Kosmo shifted into a smaller Chao form. "Now I'm gonna show you why you shouldn't whine about being short. Smaller target, harder to hit!" he yelled, charging at Jolt with high speed, tackling him again and again before he could get a lock on him! "Hey! Stop! That tickles!! ...OK, that doesn't! NOOOOO!!!" Jolt screamed, freaking out.

Jolt dropped to the ground, and seeing that Silver had destroyed the Carnival Pawns, seemed to get nervous. "Heh heh heh... I appear to be outnumbered..." he whimpered, suddenly flying off for another cloud-shaped ship! "Blastooooooff!!! Hey, Eggman! Intruders!!" he shouted. "Good riddance! Too bad he got away, though." Chet panted. Kosmo morphed back into his true form and looked around. "Drol's long gone. Guess I'd better get back to my own mission." he sighed. Chet looked at him with alarm. "Wait, you're not here to help me???" he said. Silver shrugged. "I'd like to help, but if I don't change the future, we'll all be in real trouble!" he muttered. Kosmo glanced at him. "The future? Get outta here..." he scoffed. Chet let out a frustrated sigh. "Well, if you really are Experiment 3, I guess I shouldn't be

surprised. Fine! I'll go save Katie myself!" he said, rushing away. Silver glanced at Kosmo. "You sure you couldn't help him?" he asked. "You sure YOU couldn't?" Kosmo retorted. Suddenly, a bright flash of light erupted from Kosmo's shoe! "Gah!" he gasped, pulling out his mysterious coin, which was glowing again! Silver looked at it curiously as Kosmo slipped it back into his shoe. "Dunno what the deal with that is..." he muttered. Silver nodded. "Know what? I think I'll go with you for a while..." he said. Kosmo shrugged. "It's a free carnival..." he said. Ironically, they soon found out that it was NOT a free carnival. Hanging out near the starting point of a large roller coaster was Copter, who seemed agitated about something. "Hey Kosmo... Did you find anything? I can't find Eggman or Katie or any stupid boots anywhere!" Copter grumbled. "I caught up to that GUN sergeant. But he got away." Kosmo reported. Copter nodded. "Figures. Hey, Silver. Good to really meet ya. Heard about you when that onyx-y island appeared. Tails says you're psycho or somethin'" he muttered. "Um... Psychokinetic." Silver replied. "Gazundheit. Bad news, guys. In order to operate the rides and stuff to make getting around the carnival easier, we need those red Park Rings. Normal rings don't cut it." he grumbled, "And if we try to fly around the coaster, we'll get shot at." Silver looked around and pointed to a bridge between ships. "Maybe we can cross that for free?" he wondered. "Might as well, but the coaster seems to lead to more places." Copter noted. "We can come back..." Kosmo reasoned, leading the way to the bridge.

Crossing the bridge to a smaller cloud ship, they found a giant slot machine sitting in the center of the platform, surrounded with fancy neon signs. Copter looked at it in bewilderment. "Hey... Rouletar!?" he stammered. "What's a Rouletar?" Kosmo muttered. Copter shook his head and shrugged. "It WAS an Eggman battle-bot. Looks like its scrap has been repurposed." he said. In front of Rouletar was a winged feline with light blue fur and green eyes. Her whiskers and ears were yellow, and she had a long, light blue and yellow striped tail. She wore a suit that was blue from the waist up and green from the waist down, and wore blue shoes. It was Whisk the Divine, though Copter seemed not to recognize her. She looked at the slot machine awkwardly. "Hmmm... How do you play it?" she wondered. Kosmo stepped over and pulled on the robot's arm, which now seemed to be a slot lever. "This should start it going..." he muttered. The slot reels started to spin, and Rouletar's eyes opened. "Welcome, game fans! Get three in a row and win fabulous prizes! Where I stop, nobody knows!" the robot announced. Kosmo backed away a step. "Copter, did I just do something dumb?" he asked. "Probably, but maybe he'll pay out park rings." he said. Whisk flew back a ways to get a safe view of the action. "Ooooh, I wonder what we'll win!" she said. The reels stopped on three thunder shields. "Hey, that should be useful for gathering rings!" Silver said. Rouletar chuckled. "You win a thunder jolt! Try again!" The neon signs suddenly lit up brighter and fired bursts of electricity at the group! Silver, thinking fast, grabbed some balloons hovering in the air with his psychokinesis and blocked the electricity with their rubber! "Hey... That was good, I was getting ready to fly us outta here!" Copter said in surprise. Kosmo shrugged and pulled Rouletar's arm again. "I saw rings in those reels! He's gotta be able to pay off!" he said as Copter covered his eyes. "Go, go, go! Let's see something awesome!" Whisk cheered, seeming oblivious to the potential danger. Rouletar laughed as the reels landed on three bumper symbols. "Time for a knockout!" he taunted, spitting several crablike robots called Crawls out of his mouth! The Crawls had bumper-like shields, which they held in front of them as they soared towards Kosmo and the others! Copter tried to smack them with his tails, but was bounced back and ended up spinning around uncontrollably as Whisk laughed at him. Silver caught the Crawls that came towards him, while Kosmo simply morphed into something too heavy to be bounced, Big the cat. He then stomped over to Rouletar and bounced on top of the robot several times with Big's huge belly, busting up the machine and causing it to spit out a few park rings before exploding! "Enjoy...your...daaay..." Rouletar buzzed. "Sorry, pal. We don't got time for games." Kosmo grumbled. "Awww, you broke my toy!" Whisk sighed, flying off, "Meanies!" Copter picked up the park rings and sighed. "Not many... I bet that's all Eggman put in the bot, too..." he grumbled. The trio sighed

heavily and wandered away from the wrecked slot machine, realizing they'd have to search elsewhere for more rings.

They came across an area crowded with balloons, so much so that it was hard to see. However, as a light breeze blew some of the balloons away, they heard a voice grunting dizzily among them. "Scram, helium bags, before I blast you to shreds!" said a frustrated Zipp, whom Copter and Kosmo approached suspiciously. "Ahem!" Kosmo grunted. "Eeep! Uhhh... Fancy meeting you here!" Zipp stammered, hiding a rifle behind his back pathetically. "What are the odds of you showing up here..." Copter said sarcastically. "Don't be silly. I'm just playing carnival games. Like, target practice!" Zipp lied. "Bucky sent you, didn't he?" Kosmo growled. Zipp backed away slowly. "Don't be silly! Next you'll be saying he asked me to assassinate you!" he chuckled. Kosmo glared at him, while Copter motioned for Silver to step back. "Oh, yeah? What makes you think you can even hurt me, bug!?" he snarled. "Nice knowin' ya, Zipp!" Copter waved. Silver looked nervous. "What is that child doing with a rifle?" he muttered. Zipp pulled out his rifle and pointed it at Silver. "Child!? I'm a hornet, ignorant!" he yelled. Kosmo morphed into his gargoyle form, his eyes glowing bright with rage! "We'll see who assassinates who! Here I come, bug!" he shouted, taking to the sky! Zipp promptly dropped his rifle and started to flee, fumbling to unholster his much more maneuverable pistols. "Kozzie, calm it down a minute, pal! You... you REALLY must curb that tendency to overreact!" he babbled, utterly panicked as he sped into the cluster of balloons to hide! Kosmo's eyes glowed brighter as he prepared an attack. "Eat Kosmosis, bug!" he shouted, firing beams from his eyes that popped several of the balloons, forcing Zipp to fly out and shoot back with his pistols! "You don't scare me, transformer! I only fear zombies and clowns!" Hearing that, Kosmo altered his form to appear zombified and to be wearing clown makeup. This made Zipp shudder. "That's not funny!! I need my rifle back!!" he whined, flying off through the balloons. Kosmo morphed back into a normal gargoyle to give chase, exchanging Kosmosis shots as Zipp fired his pistol back at him.

As their chase brought them back over the cloud ship where they started, Copter fired Zipp's rifle into the air to get their attention! Then, Silver grabbed the distracted Zipp and pulled him down with his psychokinesis! "Lemme go!! If you recall, I actually implied that me being here to assassinate anybody was SILLY!" he whined, struggling against seemingly nothing. "By the way, what's got me?" he asked. "My mind!" Silver said. "...Some trick..." Zipp muttered. Kosmo landed nearby and morphed back to normal. "What'll we do with him, guys?" he wondered. Copter crossed his arms. "I say we toss him over the side of the ship and test the anti-air guns. See if we can't actually fly to the next area." he grinned. Zipp frowned. "That doesn't sound good... Wait! Truce! I can help you guys!" he shouted. Silver smiled a little. "That's what I want to hear. Now, what can you do for us?" he asked. "I WAS playing the carnival games! I won tons of park rings! Check my pockets! There's enough for the roller coaster and everything!" he said. Kosmo frowned. "We should at least confiscate his guns." he reasoned. Zipp shook his head. "No way! I can be of use with those guns! Let me put them to work FOR you! ...Unless you're scared of harmless little me..." he grinned. Kosmo scoffed. "Please, of course I'm not scared of you!" he said. Copter sighed. "Well, I am..." However, Silver released Zipp from his grip, allowing him to grab his rifle back from Copter. "You guys won't regret this! We'll make an excellent team!" he chuckled. "I already regret it..." Copter groaned. "Well, c'mon, let's go. The sooner we get those dumb boots, the sooner we can ditch Zipp." Kosmo said, heading off towards the roller coaster. Zipp nodded. "Yeeees... And I can keep my eyes peeled for Zeke along the way..." he muttered to himself.

To be continued...

12 - Despair in the Air

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 12 - Despair in the Air
Boss 8 - E-5X Jolt & Zeke

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After encountering some unfriendly faces at Despair's HQ, Copter and Kosmo received orders from Fera to obtain the mysterious Chaos Boots from Eggman's Cloud Carnival. Since they wouldn't allow Bucky to accompany them, he sent Zipp to spy on them instead. On the way, Copter and Kosmo witnessed Katie get kidnapped by Sgt. Drol, who wanted to question her about events at Blue Ridge Zone, with her boyfriend Chet powerless to stop them! They gave chase to Cloud Carnival, where Kosmo caught up with them, and found that Jolt and Silver had found them as well. Drol used his hostage to escape, leaving Kosmo to team up with Silver and Chet to defeat Jolt. Then, Chet sped off to find Katie. Finding Copter again, and learning that they needed special "park rings" to move through the floating carnival, they set out to find said rings. However, they soon caught Zipp spying on them! After chasing Zipp for a bit, Silver managed to catch him, and Zipp called a truce, offering his park rings in exchange. Now, they're heading for a roller coaster that will take them further into the carnival. But the question remains: Can Zipp be trusted?

Now, on to the next chapter!

Zipp looked around nervously as they boarded the roller coaster. There was still no sign of Zeke since they'd gotten separated upon arrival. "Big oaf's probably distracted by something shiny..." he thought in annoyance as the coaster started to move. "I've never been on one of these before... Hey, shouldn't there be a seat belt?" Silver mumbled. "Hold on to the bar, tight!" Copter warned as the coaster sped up! Both Silver and Kosmo let out a surprised yelp as the coaster zoomed down an incline, and gasped upon seeing a loop up ahead. "Seriously, shouldn't we have seat belts??" Kosmo asked. "...Probably." Copter mumbled. "If you are riding the Looper Coaster, remember to hang on tight! Cloud Carnival is not responsible for injuries incurred from hundred story drops down from the loop-the-loop! We maintain that it is the city's fault for making the pavement so hard." said Eggman over the PA while the group shrieked during the coaster's spin through the loop! "What am I screaming for? I have wings!" Zipp stammered. As the coaster continued along, they suddenly noticed robots heading their way. It was a squad of Hunter robots flying with jetpacks! "Oh, goodie. Sgt. Dope got backup." Copter groaned. "I got 'em!" Zipp smirked, lifting up his rifle and shooting down the robots one by one! However, his rifle was too slow, and the group was forced to duck as the coaster passed the robots he missed, which were all too eager to shoot back! "Don't you have a machine gun in that jacket of yours!?" Copter snapped. Zipp scoffed. "Machine guns are a waste of ammo. Plus, Vortex thought my aim was getting sloppy. I'll show HIM!" he said. Silver looked below them. "Never mind! I think we're getting close to our stop!" he said. Unless they wanted to go around again, they needed to jump off before the coaster returned to its starting point. Now

that they were over a cloud-shaped ship they hadn't explored yet, they pushed their safety bars back and got ready to jump, ducking briefly as a Hunter shot at them again. "Well... good bye, everyone." Copter gulped before being the first to jump, followed by the others!

Using his tails, Copter managed to control his landing and avoid hitting any of the bumpers that dotted the landscape of the next ship platform. Kosmo hovered down disguised as Jolt so as not to attract the attention of the anti-air guns, and Silver used his psychokinesis to steady his landing. As they stood together at one end of the platform, looking ahead, they noted that it looked very much like a giant pinball table, with a sort of bingo game in the center. What they didn't notice, was that they were standing directly in front of a giant pinball flipper, and Zipp was hovering behind it, chuckling mischievously as he aimed a pistol at the mechanism to activate the flipper. "Chase me around and swipe my rings, will ya?" he muttered, firing! The flipper knocked all three of them into the pinball game, sending them tumbling like balls into an obstacle course of different types of bumpers! "Gaaaah!! Why didn't I see this coming!?" Copter screamed. "Ow! Ouch! What kind of sick mind would use people as pinball balls!?" Silver shouted. Kosmo morphed into an actual steel ball in order to lessen the pain from this experience. "I'm going to throw up all over you, hornet!!" he yelled. Zipp chuckled. "You'd have to catch me first!" he shouted, shooting at the flipper mechanisms to try to steer them into the bingo panels! However, controlling three balls at once was tough, and Copter shrieked as he went hurtling over the side of the ship! "Ooops... Well, nice knowin' ya, bro." Zipp shrugged, only for Copter to dizzily fly up seconds later. "I...shall...destroy you...Ziiiiipp..." he gurgled before running back to the side of the ship to hurl. Adding further insult to injury, Silver suddenly bounced off of him, nearly knocking him over the edge again! "ARRRGH!!" he yelled. "Thanks for stopping meeee!" Silver shouted. As Copter turned around, Kosmo also started to hurtle toward him, but as Copter braced himself, Kosmo morphed his tail out and used it to steer himself away from Copter! "Put a stop to this!" he shouted as he flew by. Copter nodded, and stomped over to the other end of the ship. A Carnival Pawn was standing guard at the bridge to the next area. "Turn off this pinball machine!" Copter shouted. The pawn looked at him uncertainly. "It can't be turned OFF! But I can offer passage across the bridge in exchange for the rings you win for a bingo." it said.

Now knowing what to do, Copter ran for the bingo panel in the center of the pinball table! However, some of the bumpers in that area were moving, and to make things harder, Silver and Kosmo were bouncing through that area wildly! "Wow... They're making me dizzy..." Zipp mumbled. Copter tried to run through, only to get smacked again by Silver! "Grrr!! Stop it!! Can't either of you get ahold of yourselves!? You're psychic and you're a morph!! Argh!" Copter growled, flying over them to reach the bingo panel. They had a B and a G, so Copter hopped to the panels they needed, causing the whole table to light up as park rings rained down on them! "BINGOOOO!!" shouted the voice of BAS from nowhere. Zipp flew down to start grabbing rings, only to be psychically grabbed by Silver again. "Hey, what!?" he gasped. "You...stay still...for a while!" he growled. Copter and Kosmo gathered the rings, and the four of them made their way to the Carnival Pawn guarding the bridge, though Silver wouldn't release Zipp. "Good! You've gathered the rings! Now just hand them over and I'll..." Before the pawn could finish speaking, Kosmo morphed his arm into one of the pinball flippers and crashed it down over the robot's head, destroying it! "We're not collecting park rings for a while." he growled, "And I'm gonna play pinball with you, later, Zipp." he said, making Zipp gulp. "Can't anyone just imagine that I was trying to help?" he whimpered. "NO!" they all said at once.

Silver eventually released Zipp as they made their way through the next cloud ship, which was crawling with angry Carnival Pawns and Drol's Hunter robots. It wasn't any trouble for the four of them, though,

and they soon arrived at another roller coaster track. However, a paper was blocking the park ring slot to call the coaster, which read "Out of Order." The roller coaster seemed to be running around and around at high speed. "Attention, visitors! The Velocicoaster is experiencing technical difficulties. I know it provides the only route to the administrative building and the lost and found, but please, stay off the tracks. Unless you always wanted to be a pancake." Eggman announced over the PA system. "How much you want to bet that the Chaos Boots are on the other side of that?" Copter muttered. "Drol probably sabotaged the coaster to keep us from following him." Kosmo mused. Zipp shrugged. "Well, I can fly. See ya." he said, starting on his way across. "Hey, wait for us!" Copter growled, thus beginning their trek across the Velocicoaster tracks. Some Carnival Pawns were ahead, working at one of the coaster's several intersections. Suddenly, the coaster sped by, knocking the robots to their doom! Copter gulped, but Kosmo ran ahead. "Come on, while the track is clear!" he shouted. As they hurried past that intersection and towards the next, they heard something loudly approaching them from behind! "Prepare to be pancakes!" Zipp shouted, flying out of the way as the roller coaster came at them! They jumped across the gap to the safe track at the next intersection, and Copter swiftly knocked aside some Carnival Pawns that were there to greet them with his tails. "Couldn't you morph into a roller coaster yourself and give us a ride, Kosmo?" Copter suggested. "And risk crashing? Also, having your dirty shoes trampling my insides?? Eew." he protested. "Insides...!?" Silver muttered. They made for the next intersection and found some real trouble. There were TWO coasters on the track, and they were both heading their way! "Now what do we do!?" Copter yelled. "Let's hear it for wings! Bye!" Zipp chuckled, flying away. However, Silver motioned for them to head for just before the intersection. "Wait right here... Now!" While Copter and Kosmo leapt for their lives, Kosmo morphing to gargoyle form thinking he'd have to fly over the oncoming coaster, Silver had remained on the track and held the coaster back with his psychokinesis while the other one passed the intersection! "What are you guys doing!? Cross! Cross!!" he shouted. Kosmo grabbed Silver as he flew to the safe track, with Copter behind. Once the other coaster had passed them by, they saw that the way across was more or less clear from here out!

They caught up with Zipp at the administrative building, where a Carnival Pawn was blocking the entrance. "Oh, hey, you guys are alive. Great. Now you can use those rings we picked up earlier to pay this jerk so we can get inside." he said. "Thanks for helping us, ZIPP!" Copter shouted. "You're welcome. Scouting ahead was quite a chore." Zipp teased. Silver sighed. "Could we just pay the robot? We're wasting time here!" he said urgently. Copter and Kosmo handed over their collection of park rings, only for the Carnival Pawn to hand them a big mallet. "That was the fee to take on the challenge to gain ENTRY into the building! Try your luck at Hedgehog Hammer over there!" it said, pointing to an area where a whack-a-mole style game featuring Sonic and Eggman shaped targets was set up. Copter took the mallet, glared at the Carnival Pawn, and then bashed it repeatedly with the heavy mallet until it collapsed in a heap! "That's what I think of Eggman's dumb carnival!!" he shouted. Kosmo chuckled. "Actually, that game over there doesn't look so bad..." he said. "Katie might be in here!!" Copter snapped. Silver nodded. "The time for games is over!" he said. Zipp shrugged. "Maybe we can play on the way out?" he suggested as they all entered the building.

The administrative building was pretty large, and was full of Carnival Pawns busily repairing park equipment and controlling park attractions from computers. In the center of the area, however, was Sergeant Drol, accompanied by Agent 32, who was still holding Katie hostage. Chet had caught up with them, and Zeke the dragon was there as well! "THERE he is!" Zipp said, flying ahead. Between Drol and Zeke was a pair of golden shoes, with a single stripe of ruby along their middles, and wings at the ankles! "Looks like we found the hostage AND the Chaos Boots." Kosmo realized. "Looks like a standoff, too." Silver murmured. "Katie! Hang on!" Chet shouted as Kosmo, Copter and Silver approached. "We

seem to be outnumbered again, boss!" Agent 32 gulped, noticing everyone entering the room. "Nonsense. All area GUN units will be here any moment." Drol stated. Zeke smirked. "By that time, we'll all be long gone!" he said in his raspy, chuckle-sounding voice. "With these shiny new shoes!" Zipp added, hovering beside him. "Sorry, kiddies. Those Chaos Boots are coming with me!" Kosmo said. Zipp glanced at Kosmo and drew his pistols. "Oh, yeah? I don't think so!" he sneered. "What are you saying? Isn't Kosmo taking them to the same place as us?" Zeke asked. Zipp nodded. "Sure, but I don't want to spend all my life waiting for that time bomb to go off! So let's just blast him!" he shouted. Copter's face turned white. "Are you insane, Zipp!? That'll set him off right now!" he stammered, earning him an annoyed glance from Kosmo. "RAWR!! Who cares? I mean, what's scarier, a morph or a dragon?" Zeke chuckled. Kosmo growled softly. "A morph. Shut your mouth!" he snarled. Silver, not one to be ignored, stepped in front of Kosmo. "All of you! Out of my way! I'm not letting any of you leave with those boots!" he shouted. Meanwhile, Katie recoiled from this scene. "I don't like this... Curse my newshound instincts..." Drol reacted by pushing her aside and pressing a button on a remote. "You're making my hostage nervous! I'm calling my mech!" he said, prompting a highly weaponized Flying Dog mech to smash in through the wall!

"Enough! All of you!! How did you all get up here, anyway!?" shouted Dr. Eggman, who's Egg Mobile emerged at the back of the room, accompanied by Jolt! "Great... More good news." Copter groaned. Drol drew a rapier and pointed it at Eggman. "Terrorist knave! You're no better than those Covenant of Despair dogs!" he shouted. "Excuse me, but I'm way smarter than those losers! Egg Pawns, surround them!" Eggman commanded, prompting the working Carnival Pawns to drop what they were doing and start to advance on the intruders! Zipp pocketed his pistols and pulled out a machine gun. "Aw, yeah! This is getting exciting!" he grinned. "I'd say this is getting out of hand..." Silver sighed. "Katie! Let's get out of here, quick!" Chet shouted, hoping to take advantage of the confusion. No such luck, however. Agent 32 pulled a gun on Katie once again! "Not so fast, freak!" he growled. Drol motioned to his mech. "Attack! Destroy Eggman's pitiful robots!" he commanded, backing away to a safe distance. Eggman ordered his robots in kind, and glanced down at Jolt. "You get in there, too! Destroy Kosmo, Copter, and Silver! Especially Kosmo!" he commanded. "Work, work, work!" Jolt groaned, rushing out towards the group. Zeke turned and saluted Eggman as well. "Allow me, doctor! I'll dispose of these pathetic chumps!" he declared, turning to face Copter and Kosmo, "Psst! Don't tell Dr. Dumb-man that I'm really an experiment!" he whispered. "No deal!" Copter growled. "I suggest we team up for now, and settle who gets the Chaos Boots after!" Silver said. "Never mind Eggman and those boots! We gotta help Chet save Katie!" Copter shouted. Kosmo looked a bit nervous as things started to get chaotic in there. "So... much... to think about... How should I respond? In the past, I might just blast everyone, but... Hm, what would Shadow do?" he wondered. Zeke's voice snapped him out of it. "Let's see if you're really as tough as they say you are! RAWR!!!" he roared!

Zeke hopped into the air and soared towards them, followed by Jolt! Some of the Carnival Pawns grabbed their trumpets and joined the fray as well. Copter jumped up and swung his tails at Jolt, missing as the robot swiftly flew up with his jetpack! "Gotta do better than that, fox boy! I'm fast like lightning!" he taunted, shocking Copter with a quick electric bolt! "Zzzzargh! Come... here... I owe you a Chaos Blast..." Copter jabbered, shaking off the shock quickly. Zeke, meanwhile, focused on Kosmo, blowing flames at him as he approached! The morph rolled out of the way and chuckled. "I could use MY dragon form, but how original would that be? Nah, how about this?" he said, changing into a purple pegasus! His hooves clacked loudly against the ground as he built up speed to take off into the air! "Huh? You insult me by turning into a flying horsy!? I'll make fried drumsticks outta you!" Zeke growled, spouting fireballs at Kosmo from his mouth! This left Silver to deal with the pawns. "Hmmm... Too easy." he said,

jumping aside as they blew shockwaves from their trumpets, then grabbing one by one with his psychokinesis and tossing them at each other! While these fights were going on, Zipp was sneaking cautiously towards the Chaos Boots, using his feet rather than wings for a change. "Perfect! No one notices the little hornet! Easiest mission ever! ...Huh!?" As he grabbed for the boots, his hand bumped into Chet's. "Oh, no you don't, bug! Everyone's after these dumb shoes, so I need them to trade for Katie!" he growled. "How... uh... noble? Now GIMMIE!!" Zipp shouted, the two of them trying to wrestle a single boot out of the other's hand, failing to notice Sgt. Drol's mech looming over them, and the other Carnival Pawns surrounding them. "Stop them from taking the boots, pawns!" Eggman shouted. "Eliminate any threats in our way!" Drol yelled. Zipp and Chet both dropped the boot at once, glancing around in horror. "Um... I'll be right back." Chet muttered. "Ditto." Zipp said, brandishing his machine gun. Thus, they split up to fight the robots as projectiles started to fly everywhere!

Jolt was chasing Copter while Zeke was chasing Kosmo. Suddenly, Silver tossed Carnival pawns into both of them, knocking them out of the sky! "Hey! We had it covered!" Kosmo neighed. "Whatever. Let's hurry and grab the Chaos Boots!" Silver suggested. "Hold it!! We're not done!!" Jolt and Zeke yelled at once, rising quickly! The fighting only seemed to be intensifying, with projectiles flying everywhere. Eggman's robots didn't really seem to be decreasing in number much, and Chet decided it was better to try to save Katie before something happened. "Let her go, suit! You got a big robot, you don't need a hostage anymore!" he shouted. Agent 32 released Katie from his grip, but pointed his gun at Chet. "I keep an eye on her until the Sergeant tells me otherwise!" he growled. Katie started to back away, and when she did, she suddenly screamed! Time seemed to slow around her as she, Chet and Agent 32 began to comprehend what had happened. Katie fell to the ground, holding her chest, and Chet screamed in despair. "Katie!! NO!!!" Kosmo kicked Zeke aside with his hooves, landed to the ground, and morphed back to normal as he and Copter heard Chet's scream. "What... no..." Copter gasped. "D... don't worry about me... Get yourself out of here... Chet..." Katie gasped before shutting her eyes. Chet screamed out her name, but the fighting was still going on in the background. Copter observed this scene, and felt rage bubbling up inside him. "No... Not Katie..." he panted. Kosmo observed him, and frowned. "Well, what are we supposed to do about it?" he muttered. Jolt and Zeke started to come up behind them again, and Copter turned to their footsteps, snarling. "ENOUGH!!" he roared, his fur taking on a darker hue and his white fur gaining blue highlights all of a sudden! A massive dark shockwave erupted from Copter's body, knocking over everyone that was standing and immediately bringing an end to the fighting! Copter, too was lying on the ground afterward, though his fur had returned to normal.

Despite the significant events that had just occurred, Kosmo still had a mission. He shakily climbed to his feet and started to retrieve things, first his coin, which had been dislodged from his shoe. It was still glowing, in fact it was brighter than before. "What's up with this? It's like it's reacting to something..." he muttered as he approached the Chaos Boots. Agent 32 was the first to get in his way. "Stop right there!" he said, pointing his gun. "You think you can stop me?" Kosmo questioned. "He can't, but I can!" said Silver, who stood beside Kosmo with his hand raised threateningly. "Don't... No one else has to get hurt." Kosmo sighed. Silver lowered his hand. "But... What will you do with them? Answer that for me." he asked. Kosmo looked unsure. "I... Well... I don't even know what they do..." he muttered. Just then, Basker from the Covenant of Despair entered the room, accompanied by a uniformed bat. "Well done, Kosmo. We'll take it from here." he said. Kosmo stared at them in surprise. "Huh? How'd you get up here??" he wondered. "With our aerial unit. We sent you ahead, since time was a factor." Basker explained. He then knelt down and picked up the Chaos Boots. "Hey! I can't let you take those!" Silver shouted. "I think you'll find you can... In fact, you can't bear to approach me..." Basker sneered, his eyes glowing brighter as a strange, dark blue energy cloaked around Silver, filling him with a paralyzing fear

that forced him to his knees! "Aaaaah!! Wh-what are you!?" he shouted. "What did you do to him?" Kosmo asked. However, they were interrupted by Eggman bringing his Egg Mobile back online. "Hold on! You fools can't get away this easily!" he shouted. "And neither can you." said Sgt. Drol, "My troops should be along any moment." Basker grinned at this. "I'm afraid we've got your troops a bit busy." he said. "What!? Knavel!" Drol shouted. "Seems we've got more trouble than I thought... I'll be in my control room if anyone needs me!" Eggman shouted, retreating along with Jolt and Zeke! Meanwhile, Drol was getting a call from Colonel Gunner about a Covenant of Despair attack on Central City, so he was about to leave as well. "Looks like our way is clear. Let's be off." Basker said. However, Kosmo stopped to glance at Copter and Chet, who were distraught over Katie's dying body. "Wait..." he muttered. "Come on, Kosmo, let's be off." Zipp muttered. "But... Shouldn't we do something!?" he snapped. Basker glanced around. "About what?" he murmured, having actually not noticed Katie lying there before. "Katie!! Hang on!! S-somebody do something!!" Chet wailed. Basker smiled, the wheels in his head seeming to start turning over this.

"Agh... My head... What did he do to me?" Silver muttered as Basker walked over to Chet. "Hmm... Looks like the humans have struck again..." he said. Copter glared at him angrily. "Y-you..." he snarled. Basker placed a hand on Chet's shoulder. "Come, brother. It would not be wise to linger here." he suggested. "What!? What are you saying!?" he yelled. Basker looked at him seriously. "She's as good as dead. If you linger here, you will share her fate. Dr. Eggman will see to that." he insisted, tightening his grip on Chet's shoulder and starting to drag him. "Come with me..." he said. "K-K-KATIIIIIIIIIIIE!!!!" Chet screamed as Basker and the bat dragged him away. Silver rubbed his head as he approached Copter and Kosmo. "Aw, no... he got away..." he groaned, having only now fully regained his senses. "Where are they going!? Katie's still alive!" Copter shouted. "I can fix that..." Zipp grinned, polishing one of his pistols. Kosmo glared at him furiously. "You stay away! You probably shot her to begin with!" he yelled. Then, as things were looking their bleakest, a miracle occurred. Gemini the fennec bashed her way out of a ventilation shaft, hopping into the room! "Whew... First I'm captured by GUN, then Dr. Eggman... I'm really slipping! At least Eggman forgot to nab my wand!" she said to herself. Copter stared in disbelief. "Gemini! Talk about finding just the person we need!" he gasped, running up to her. "Copter! What are you... What's happened here!?" Gemini shouted, horrified. "What does it matter! Basker's right. She's as good as dead!" Kosmo sighed. Gemini hurried over to Katie, holding out her wand. "Ooooh... This looks bad... Now, what was that spell... Recovery!" she said, casting a weak, healing light over Katie. Kosmo watched in wonder as the spell seemed to stabilize the coyote a bit. However, it didn't quite seem to work. "It... it's not enough... She needs a doctor..." Gemini said in panic. "Then we'll have to get her to one." Silver said. "I'll call my plane!" Copter nodded. Kosmo's eyes widened. "They just might...save her." he whispered. "Good for them. I'm getting out of here." said Zipp from beside him. "What about blasting me?" Kosmo asked, turning to Zipp as he was starting to fly off. The hornet just shrugged. "...Stay outta trouble, Kosmo." he said. With the mission at Cloud Carnival over, all that was left was to pull together to try to save Katie's life!

To be continued...

13 - Return to Pumpkin Hill

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 13 - Return to Pumpkin Hill
Stage 9(Hero 5) - Pumpkin Hill

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After escaping from the Covenant of Despair's assault on Angel Island, Knuckles and Tails were shot down by Dr. Eggman, who kept the Tornado and SPOT in storage as an incentive for them to do a mission for him: retrieve the Chaos Gauntlets from a ruin near Blue Ridge Zone. After retrieving the gauntlets, Knuckles saw a vision of Tikal, and when he came to, Tails had sent the gauntlets back with SPOT, who had escaped Eggman. Tails and Knuckles then split up, Tails going to see if he could find info on the plans of Eggman and Despair, while Knuckles headed back to Eggman's base. Once there, Knuckles encountered Sonic, who had just escaped from Super Eggman Land! Sonic had heard that Knuckles was working for Eggman, and the misunderstanding soon escalated. Now, they were ready to fight!

Now, on to the next chapter!

They had tried talking. Neither one would listen to the other. Sonic was convinced that Knuckles had been tricked by Eggman once again. Knuckles was fed up with Sonic's high and mighty attitude. There was only one way to settle this. Knuckles charged at Sonic and hurled the first punch, which the hedgehog jumped clean over, coming at the echidna with a spin attack! This was old news to Knuckles, he shot his other fist upward into an uppercut, connecting with Sonic's attack and knocking him back! Sonic landed on his feet and immediately went into a spin dash, forcing Knuckles to jump and glide over him! However, Sonic had gotten more skilled at this. He hopped mid-dash, turning and speeding into Knuckles as he landed on the ground! "Ooof!! All right... No more games!" he grunted, running at Sonic as he popped out of his spin dash. He threw punch after punch at the hedgehog, which he swiftly evaded, but Knuckles had fought him several times. He knew he could trip him up. After punching left, right, left, right several times, he jumped and slammed both his fists where he knew Sonic would dodge to next, bashing him in the chest hard! "Whoa!" Sonic stumbled backward, and retaliated with a high speed punch in return, which got Knuckles right in the jaw and made him even madder. "Sure you wanna take me on in a fist fight? You asked for it!!" he yelled, starting to really unleash his fury on the hedgehog! Sonic was still fast enough to avoid a good bit of his punches, but he was still getting socked and bashed as Knuckles unleashed a flurry of fists on him! Sonic didn't just take it, though, he fought back with punches and kicks of his own, getting much more hits in, though they weren't as strong since he wasn't able to build up speed. Neither one would back down, but Knuckles finally struck Sonic with an uppercut, heaving him into the air and onto his back! "There...now are you through mocking me!?" he panted. However, Sonic stood up with a smug expression. "Lucky shot. Tell you what, tell me where Tails is and I'll call it even." he said. Knuckles started to lower his fists. He had to respect Sonic, that

hedgehog sure wouldn't quit.

Suddenly, a loud thud was heard as Sonic was struck from behind! "What!?" he stammered, dropping to his knees! Spiny the porcupine was standing behind him, grinning devilishly. "Good work, Knuckles! You've softened him up for capture nicely!" he said. "You!?" Knuckles gasped. Spiny dragged Sonic to his feet as Metal Eggman stepped over to him. "Hey!! Lemme go!" Sonic shouted. "Oho ho ho ho! I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere for some time!" Metal Eggman laughed, smacking Sonic in the chest with his hand, which electrocuted him! "Yaaaaaaaahhh!!!" Sonic screamed as Spiny dropped him to the floor! "Hey! Knock it off!" Knuckles shouted. Just then, the real Dr. Eggman appeared at the door and ran over beside Metal Eggman. "Well done, Knuckles! I may just consider you for a promotion!" he grinned. Metal Eggman nodded. "Yes! I will certainly consider you for a promotion!" he mimicked. "Cut it out! I'm the real Dr. Eggman, you dopey doppelganger!" the doctor snapped grouchily. Knuckles was in no mood for this. "Enough! Both of you Eggmen, let Sonic go right now!" he said threateningly. "Let him go? But he'll trash my lovely Eggtopia! And strangely, my insurance doesn't cover acts of hedgehog!" Eggman said. "Besides, I'm so looking forward to torturing this pathetic waste of quills!" Spiny said, kicking Sonic while he was down. "Not so fast, Spiny. I may still have need of him." Eggman said, "Tell you what, Knuckles. You could get into a hopeless fight with me here, and get yourself locked up with Sonic...or you can do me one more favor, and I promise I'll let Sonic go..." he offered. Sonic looked over at Knuckles. "Never mind me, Knuckles! I'll be okay. Just promise me you'll help Tails take down the Covenant of Despair!" he panted. "Shut your yap, hedgehog!" Spiny growled, slapping him. "Don't do that! I'm trying to negotiate!" Metal Eggman growled. "Both of you keep it down!" Eggman yelled. Knuckles rolled his eyes. "What do you want, Eggman?" he sighed. Eggman clapped his hands, and Char flew into the room. "Yes, doc?" he asked. "Knuckles, I want you to let Char take you to Pumpkin Hill. There, you'll find one of my robots. She'll brief you on your mission." he said. Knuckles nodded. "Harm one quill on Sonic's head, and I'll rip off your moustache!" he warned. "Not the moustache!!" Metal Eggman yelled. "Really... I'll be fine, Knuckles..." Sonic panted, passing out. Eggman looked at him nervously. "Errr... Don't worry about him. I'm a doctor, after all." he said. "That's what worries me the most..." Knuckles grumbled as he left with Char. Eggman turned to Spiny once Knuckles was gone. "Lock him up in the special cell..." Outside, Char led Knuckles to a hot air balloon that Eggman had rented for occasions such as this. "Eggman, free Sonic? Yeah, right. I'll have to mount a rescue when his guard is down, though. Guess I'll check out this mission just to see what Eggman's planning..." he thought as the balloon took off.

Elsewhere, on a bridge overlooking the highways of Central City, Col. Gunner was standing with his Spy, observing the President and the Commander. The Covenant of Despair had launched an attack on a portion of the city, and GUN's forces were busy putting a stop to the uprising. The Commander sighed as he observed the battle that was more or less over. "It was bold of the Covenant... To attack Central City." he murmured. The President nodded. "Yes, the battle seems to be going well... Too well..." he said, turning to walk away. "Mr. President?" the Commander said questioningly. "It seems you don't need me to oversee this battle. Give those dogs no quarter. I don't want to see them in my city again." the President muttered before he left. "Uh... As you say, Mr. President..." the Commander replied. He then turned toward Gunner. "I like how the president's thinking now... I almost wish I'd voted for him." the old Colonel smirked. "Colonel... Something isn't right with the president." the Commander whispered. Gunner shrugged. "You think so? Maybe he just learned a lesson after the Black Arms attacked our planet." he said bluntly. "No... This change happened too suddenly..." the Commander muttered, "I'm going to oversee the remainder of this battle. Colonel Gunner, I have an important assignment for you."

he said. "You don't say? Does it involve shooting Despair freaks?" Gunner asked hopefully. "I'll see to that. I want you to keep an eye on the president." the Commander said. "You mean... protect him?" Gunner stammered. "Not exactly... I want you to watch his activities. I have a feeling there is more to his recent attitude than meets the eye." the Commander explained. Gunner's eyes darted around. "Sounds... treasonous..." he murmured. "GUN belongs to no nation, Gunner. Our duty is the safety of all nations and their people!" the Commander insisted. "Oh, you needn't worry about me, sir. If there is a secret the president is keeping, I'll find it." Gunner smirked. "I'm counting on you, colonel." the Commander nodded before heading on his way.

The balloon carrying Knuckles and Char soon found its way to the haunting canyons of Pumpkin Hill. Landing on an expansive cliffside decorated with brightly lit jack-o-lanterns, they found SPOT standing with an orange and pink robot that Knuckles recognized from when he first awoke at Eggtopia. "Greetings, Knuckles. I am E-4X, code named Firma." the robot said in a feminine voice. Char chuckled awkwardly. "Firma looks too much like Terra, so she freaks me out." he said. Knuckles nodded in silent agreement. "Okay, Firma, why am I here?" he asked. "Your treasure hunting expertise is required to locate the Chaos Emeralds in the area." Firma explained. Knuckles scratched his head. "Is that all? I guess Eggman's too lazy to do it himself." he figured. "A small robot developed by the inferior scientist, Tails, has been brought here to assist your search." Firma added, prompting SPOT to growl. "Inferior scientist? Requesting permission to attack Eggman's robot!" the text on his monitor read. Just then, Knuckles heard some familiar bat wings, and groaned as Rouge landed beside him. "Well, isn't this interesting? Are you taking in stray robots, Knuckles?" she joked. Knuckles rolled his eyes. "You AGAIN? Now what do you want, bat girl?" he groaned. "Agent Rouge! Your presence is not desired. Return whence you came, or be annihilated!" Firma added. Rouge glared at the robot. "Well, THAT'S rude!" she said. "Heh, I could use that robot on Angel Island!" Knuckles chuckled. "I guess you don't want my help!" Rouge shrugged. "Why would I want YOUR help?" Knuckles asked. "The Covenant of Despair is looking for something here. I thought MAYBE we had a common enemy." she replied. "Warning. Failure to comply with Dr. Eggman's command could be hazardous to Sonic's health. Bring the Chaos Emeralds to me once found." Firma ordered. Knuckles sighed. "Yeah, yeah. Thanks for telling Rouge about the emeralds, bot!" Knuckles groaned as he, SPOT and Rouge started on their way. They stopped after a short while when they heard someone crying. Looking behind a creepy pile of skulls, they found Cream and Cheese, who were shivering and scared. "What in the world are you doing here!?" Rouge wondered. Cream glanced up at them and hugged Knuckles, sobbing. "Mr. Knuckles! Miss Rouge! I'm so glad to see you both!" she cried. "Uh... Please stop crying on me..." Knuckles mumbled. "A big battle broke out while I was in Central City looking for Tails. He's gone missing you know. So I ran from the danger, but then I got lost, and now there are ghosts and scary guys in black suits around!" she babbled, trying to dry her tears. "All right... Come with us. We'll look after ya." Knuckles said. "Hey, it's SPOT! He'll lead us to Tails later!" Cream smiled, petting the robo-puppy. Knuckles sighed. "You know, I 'went missing' this morning, too!" he grumbled. "It wasn't hard for anyone to find you. You're loud." Rouge remarked, walking off with the others. "Hey... wait for me!!" Knuckles shouted.

With SPOT's sensors working on sniffing out the Chaos Emeralds, the group followed, ever on the alert. Like Cream said, there were various animals in black Despair uniforms around, but they were busy searching for something, too, and were easy to avoid in their distracted state. "They must be after the Chaos Emeralds..." Knuckles murmured. Rouge shrugged. "Unless there's somehow something else of value here. Which I doubt." she said. They started to near a crypt in front of an old graveyard, and

Cream started to shiver, holding Cheese tightly. "This is where I saw the ghosts..." she stammered. Knuckles rolled his eyes. "Don't be silly. There's no ghosts here. They're probably all out making pumpkin soup or something." he said, trying to calm her down. However, several cloaked spirits suddenly appeared from the crypt! They were losohsts, and they were carrying lanterns lit with blue ghost fire! Knuckles and Rouge prepared to jump into action, but SPOT beat them to it by firing lasers at the Lost Ones, making them drop their lanterns and, since they were without weapons, flee in panic! The shattered lanterns erupted in ghost fire, which spread to the walls of the crypt, forcing Knuckles, Rouge and Cream to back away. "Let's find another way around, huh, SPOT?" Knuckles suggested. "Emerald detected!" SPOT suddenly said, beeping. As his alarm went off, Lospector emerged from the crypt, turning the purple Chaos Emerald around in his hand. "Hey, buddies! Ready for Lospector's Quiz Mania!?" he grinned, "Answer my question right, or get ready to say good night!" Rouge frowned. "Hey! Hand over that emerald, or YOU'LL be saying good night!" she threatened. "Tell you what, win my quiz and I throw in the emerald." he shrugged. "Oooh! I love the quiz!" Cream smiled, "...but why do you look different?" she wondered, recalling Lospector's original form. "I ask the questions here! Now... There's a buncha rails nearby this place. What do folks call that area?" Lospector asked. Knuckles scratched his head. "I don't remember any rails... Were they to do with the train?" he muttered. Rouge smirked. "Ha! I remember when Shadow was chasing you through there! It was Sky Rail!" she said. Lospector chuckled and tossed her the Chaos Emerald. "Nuts, looks like you win this round... Stay tuned!" he shouted, the ghostly flames bursting around him, and then disappearing as he did! "...Give me that!" Knuckles growled, snatching the emerald from Rouge's hand! "Hey! Thief!" she snapped. "And here I thought you were helping me." Knuckles smirked, walking off as Rouge smacked her forehead.

They started to pass through the graveyard, since SPOT's sensors were picking up a faint signal in that direction. As they crept around the maze of tombstones, they soon noticed several Covenant of Despair members gathered around a large memorial statue, kicking and throwing rocks at someone behind it! "Th-those bullies!" Cream stammered angrily, while Knuckles stomped over to them. "Hey, you creeps! Cut that out!!" he shouted. The Despair agents, led by Patch the fox and including a bat, a dog, and a mean looking boar, turned to them and growled. "Well, why don't we have fun with you kids instead? Hee hee!!" Patch grinned. "Get 'em, Cheese!!" Cream shouted, surprising the uniformed animals as the small Chao rocketed into them one by one, smacking them all in the heads and making Patch drop his knives! "They're nuts! Snoorr... I don't like this spooky plaaaace!!" the boar shouted, being the first to run away, the others quickly following him! "You're all cowards! Hee hee!! I'm teeeelling!!" Patch cackled as he followed them. Knuckles stared in disbelief, but they quickly shrugged it off and went to check on whoever was cowering behind the statue. They gasped in dismay as they found Alpha! "Punchy! You saved me!" the crazy robot cheered. "Oh, for cryin' out...!!" Knuckles groaned. "You really are a robot person today, Knuckie." Rouge smirked. "I left Eggtopia to follow Knuckles. Can you find him for me?" Alpha said. "You're nuts! Get lost, bot breath!" Knuckles growled. "Done." Alpha replied. Frustrated, Knuckles started to walk away, and tripped over a buried hand! "Whaaaa!! Zombie!!" he shouted. "Hey, th-that hand is moving!" Cream yelped. "G-get me outta here..." they heard a muffled voice shout. After a little digging, they found Crash the Rhino, who shook the dirt out of his yellow bowler, grumbling to himself. "Bury me alive will they? I hope Zipp shoots them all!" he grunted. "Who did this to you?" Cream asked. "Hm? Oh, I'm Crash. My so-called allies did that. Mr. Patch thought it was a riot." he said. Knuckles nodded. "Well, you can play with Eggman's robot here. I'm busy. I gotta find Chaos Emeralds before the Covenant of Despair." he said. Crash glanced at him. "It's not the emeralds they're after... Something else." he informed them. Rouge sighed. "Well good. If we can trust the word of one of them. Now let's get going!" she said. "Can I come and play, too?" Alpha asked. "NO!!" Knuckles and Rouge shouted at once, running off. "Hey, wait for us...and SPOT!" Cream cried, chasing them.

After some exploring, they found their way to a field full of pumpkins. A few had eerie smiles carved into them, but otherwise this pumpkin patch seemed harmless enough. The red Chaos Emerald was nestled comfortably on top of a large pumpkin, and Knuckles smiled, finally appearing to have some luck. However, Rouge stopped him before he could proceed into the field. "Don't you think this is too easy?" she asked, slipping her old Treasure Scope over her eye. "What do you mean? You're bats!" Knuckles growled. However, looking at the area through the Treasure Scope, Rouge could see plenty of danger that the others could not. "I'm warning you... That pumpkin patch is haunted." she said. Cream backed away a step. "Maybe we should come back in the morning, then." she suggested. Knuckles scoffed. "Bah, it's never morning around here! And how bad could it be?" he said, taking a few steps forward, only to have a ghost jump out at him from seemingly nowhere! "Whaaaaaaa!!!" Knuckles yelled, jumping back as the ghost vanished. Rouge was smirking at him, but Knuckles simply crossed his arms. "It surprised me, is all!" he said. "I can see them. Why don't you let me go in?" Rouge suggested. "No way!" Knuckles grunted, only to be socked by a spirit as he took another couple steps! "SPOT, can you see them?" Cream asked. "Emerald detected." was SPOT's only response. "Aw, but Knuckles needs help..." she whimpered. Rouge rolled her eyes and called out to him. "Duck to the left!" she shouted. Knuckles glanced around, and saw a ghost zooming in high from the right! He stumbled a bit, but avoided it. "Augh! Now you gotta jump!" Rouge yelled. Knuckles leapt up as a pair of ghosts tried to grab at his legs! He hurried towards the emerald, following Rouge's directions until he grabbed it! Suddenly, the ghosts materialized so that all could see them, and they looked furious! "Ummm... I guess now would be a good time to run..." Knuckles gulped. They all screamed and started running like crazy, pursued by the ghosts until they were well away from the pumpkin patch!

"Emerald detected!" SPOT beeped. There was still another emerald somewhere around Pumpkin Hill. "Weird. How'd so many emeralds wind up here?" Knuckles muttered. Rouge shrugged. "They can wind up anywhere. What's the puppy say, kid?" she asked Cream. She pointed to another mountain that made up the Pumpkin Hill range, Ghost Train Mountain. "Looks like some air travel is in order." Knuckles said. They started towards the ledge nearest their destination, when Patch suddenly appeared in front of them! "Hee hee... Look, the tourists are still touring! Fun's over, pals! Well... for you, anyway." he said as a gang of Despair's bat troops flapped down behind him! Rouge batted her eyes at them. "Now, you boys wouldn't wanna create trouble for a harmless little lady like me, would ya?" she asked playfully. The bats chuckled, charging electric sparks from their hands! "You ain't harmless...but ya will be when we're through shocking ya!" one of them snickered. "Stay back, Cream..." Knuckles warned. Suddenly, several lasers were fired at the bats, singeing their wings! "Turkey jerks! Alpha makes you quack!" The crazed robot swooped down and forced the bewildered bats to the ground, where they heard some low rumbling as someone else approached. "Outta the way, echidna! I've got a score to settle!" Knuckles jumped aside as Crash charged by, his horn poised to do some damage to anyone he might run into! The bats tumbled one by one as Crash charged, and then he turned and kicked up some dirt as he glared at Patch. "Hee hee... Hey, derby-boy! Some...joke earlier...huh?" Patch stammered, looking around for an escape route. As Crash chased him off towards the graveyard, Knuckles waved to them. "Thanks for that! ...I think." he said, glad he wasn't trampled in the process. The bats still climbed to their feet, but Alpha was keeping them busy now. "You don't zap me! I zap you! Then we'll go out for garlic stakes!" the robot shouted. "Is that some kinda vampire bat crack!? We're not vampires!!!" one of the bats yelled. "That's one person's opinion. Bye, guys!" Rouge teased as she, Knuckles, Cream and SPOT took to the sky, flying towards Ghost Train Mountain, though Knuckles had to glide. Once they found that final Chaos Emerald, Knuckles could begin to think about finding a way to free Sonic from Eggman's clutches!

To be continued...

14 - The Lost Treasure of the Hill

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 14 - The Lost Treasure of the Hill
Minor Boss 5 - E-4X Firma
Boss 9 - Conan & Patch

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Upon returning to Eggman's base after his mission to Blue Ridge Zone, Knuckles found Sonic, who had just escaped from Super Eggman Land. Believing Knuckles to have been tricked by Eggman once again, Sonic soon got on the echidna's last nerve, and the two started brawling! After a little while, however, Eggman's forces returned to the base and snuck up on Sonic, capturing him! Now, Knuckles was forced to once again take on a mission for Eggman, though he was actually planning on busting Sonic out later, while the doctor's guard was down. Eggman sent Knuckles to Pumpkin Hill, where E-4X Firma sent him off to find Chaos Emeralds hidden in the area. Teaming up with Rouge, SPOT and Cream, Knuckles found 2 Chaos Emeralds and rescued Alpha and Crash from the Covenant of Despair's pranks. While on the way to the third emerald, Alpha and Crash repaid the favor, chasing off the Despair goons that tried to get in their way. Now, all they needed to do was to pick up the last emerald and report back to Firma.

Now, on to the next chapter!

Knuckles found himself climbing one of the towering spires that ended with an eerie, rock pumpkin at the top. SPOT had pointed the way to the Chaos Emerald, and once he climbed to the top, Knuckles found the yellow emerald at last. "Well, that wasn't so hard. Now I gotta get back and rescue Sonic as soon as possible." he said to himself. Looking down at the nearby Ghost Train Mountain, he saw that the spooky train was stopped near Rouge, Cream and SPOT. While Knuckles glided down to check it out, Cream and Cheese were giggling and running around, playing with the ghost that had been driving the train. As Knuckles arrived, he watched them with a dumbfounded expression. "Um... How did this happen?" he asked. Rouge shrugged. "Jasper there is a friendly ghost, apparently. Cream sure got over her fear of ghosts quick when he started getting chatty." she said. Knuckles seemed slightly disturbed, but turned his attention to SPOT. "Detect any more emeralds, mutt?" he asked. "No new signals detected." the text on SPOT's monitor read. "Good..." he sighed, glancing back in the direction the hot air balloon that took him to Pumpkin Hill was in. Cream suddenly ran up to them excitedly. "Mr. Jasper says we can have a ride on his train! C'mon, let's go!" she cheered. Knuckles glanced at the grinning Boom Boo conductor awkwardly, then cracked a nervous smile. "Great... Uh, Cream... Can you find out if the train goes back to the mountain we came from?" he asked, trying not to sound freaked out about this. "Sure! Just a second, Mr. Knuckles!" she replied cheerfully. Rouge smirked widely. "Looks like someone still has to get over HIS fear of ghosts!" she teased. "I am NOT scared of ghosts! I whopped the king of the ghosts at Eggman's pyramid!" he snapped. Rouge chuckled. "I heard you needed to turn the lights on... Was

you scawed of the dawk, wittle Knukwes?" she taunted. Cream returned while Knuckles was growling. "Yup, the train can take us right back! ...Hey, why are you shaking? Don't worry, Mr. Knuckles. You don't have to be scared! Cheese and I are here for you!" she said, hopping off to the train while Rouge tried to contain her laughter. "Mustn't kill bat... Her ghost would never let me rest..." Knuckles growled.

They hopped aboard the platforms-on-wheels that comprised the ghost train's rear cars. "Hold on... to...uh... your balance." Knuckles muttered, looking around for a safety bar or something. The train started down the tracks for a bit before a ghostly aura surrounded it, carrying it into the air! "Well, Jasper wasn't kidding about taking us right back..." Rouge remarked. They couldn't relax during the flight, though; Some Lost Ones were floating around, and spotted them aboard the train! Appropriately, they were pumpkin-shaped losolanturns. These creepy ghosts flew towards the train, spewing fireballs from their mouths! Rouge immediately jumped into action, pulling out some bombs she'd been hiding on her person and lobbing them at the losolanturns, blowing several of them away! "You had BOMBS this whole time??" Knuckles asked. "Yeah, why?" she replied. "Never mind that! There's more monsters coming!" Cream shouted, holding on to Cheese fearfully. Knuckles leapt into the air and soared through the sky, punching out the pumpkins one by one as he passed by, then glided back to the train, landing gracefully. "There, how was that?" he smirked. An explosion overhead startled him, and when he looked around, Rouge was standing with a smug expression. "Missed one." she said. Fortunately, the train had just about arrived.

They politely thanked Jasper and headed for the hot air balloon. Not long after they'd left the train, they found their path blocked by Firma! "My sensors detect the three Chaos Emeralds in your possession." she said. Knuckles smiled awkwardly. "Uh, hey Irma! We were just on our way to take the emeralds to Eggman!" he said. "What??" Cream gasped, only to get Rouge's hand covering her mouth! "The poor thing's sleepy...hehe..." she chuckled. Firma just stood there. "I will take the emeralds from here." she said. Knuckles shook his head. "No way! I'm holding on to these until Sonic is set free!" he insisted. "Do not concern yourself with the hedgehog. He will not be harmed." Firma stated. "How do I know he hasn't been harmed already? I've been tricked by Eggman enough! Not today!!" Knuckles growled. Firma seemed to glare at him. "Acknowledged. Initiating appropriate response." she said, her hands transforming into huge, blunt steel fists! "Battle mode initiated!" she declared. Rouge dragged Cream back a few steps as the fight was about to start. "Outta the way, kiddo! Wouldn't want you to get hurt..." she said dubiously, grinning at the idea of scooping up the emeralds after both combatants exhausted themselves. Firma pounded the ground with her fist hard, the resulting shockwave causing the very earth to burst up violently for a distance, forcing Knuckles to jump the attack! "What was THAT??" he wondered. "I was designed to bend the very earth to my will!" Firma announced, picking up a large chunk of mud from the ground and winding up her arm in preparation to throw it! Knuckles jumped to a nearby mountain wall, climbing up to escape as Firma tossed the huge dirt clump! He safely avoided it, and was now high above Firma, but the robot simply walked to the mountain wall. "I will now proceed to crush you..." she said, hammering the wall with her massive fists, causing it to crack up! "Wh-what the??!! Avalanche!!!" Knuckles yelled, leaping off and gliding away as the rocks crumbled and fell on top of Firma, burying her! "Well... No one ever accuses Eggman of building smart robots." he said.

Suddenly, Firma burst out of the rocks! "...Heavy damage taken! Must return for repairs!" she murmured, "You will pay for this. Sonic will die!" she said in parting, speeding away! "Hey! Come back here! I warn you, if Sonic is harmed, Eggman will NEVER get these Chaos Emeralds!" Knuckles yelled. Suddenly, SPOT started beeping loudly. "Huh? NOW what!?" Knuckles groaned. "Alert!! Alert!!" SPOT was shouting. Cream looked at his monitor. "He says he senses another strong Chaos energy signal. Could it

be another Chaos Emerald?" she wondered. Rouge shook her head. "No... I bet it's what the Covenant of Despair was here for!" she realized. Knuckles sighed. "Guess I better check it out then... And stop them!" he said, looking at SPOT's monitor to get an idea where he was going. Then, SPOT displayed another message. "I will attempt rescue of Sonic in the meantime. Good luck!" it said. As SPOT headed on his way, Knuckles, Rouge and Cream headed for the place where SPOT had detected the signal. It was a cave, and outside the cave, Alpha was hanging out. "Hi, Punchy! I've got those bats trapped in this bat cave! ...Should I watch out for boomerangs?" he babbled. Knuckles shrugged and walked past him, followed by Rouge and Cream. Alpha shrugged back and started to follow them as well. "If the bats get mad, tell them I'm just a harmless clown!" he said. "I sure will..." Rouge sighed.

The cave led to a chamber similar to the ones that held the Chaos Gauntlets and the tailbands. There were hieroglyphs all over the back wall, a few small broken statues here and there, and a pedestal that the Covenant of Despair members were gathered around, including Patch and Crash. A blue hyena with a black tail, spots and mane was there as well. He had grey eyes and a grey muzzle, and purple and green shoes. He was standing off to the side with a wide, toothy grin while Conan the raccoon was front and center, examining their find at the pedestal. It appeared to be a deck of cards. "These... These..." Conan muttered, seeming a bit flustered. "Eeeee hee hee! Mission complete?" the hyena asked. "These cards are forgeries! Pathetic forgeries, at that!" Conan roared, hurling them to the floor in disgust! "Someone must have already taken them! Bah!" he concluded. Knuckles gasped as he realized who's back he was looking at. "Conan?!" he shouted. The Covenant of Despair members turned to face him, Conan smiling as though relieved. "The Master Emerald guardian! How kind of you to bring us Chaos Emeralds!" he said. Rouge stepped forward. "Those emeralds are mine! Keep your hands off!" she shouted, finally sick of playing nice with Knuckles. "Oh, great... The battle of the thieves..." Knuckles sighed. "Eeeee hee... They won't share! What do you think of that?" the hyena said, glancing at Patch. "Hee hee! I'll share with them! Share my knife, that is!" the fox laughed. Crash looked around unsurely. "Should we really still be wasting time here?" he muttered. Knuckles scoffed at Patch and the hyena. "Laugh it up, you clowns. I'll clobber all of you!" he shouted. "Eeeee hee hee! Oh, you'll be fun! So I'll tell you my name. It's Eddie the Hyena!" the blue one replied. Patch pulled out a pair of nunchucks and spun them around as he rapped his introduction. "My name is Patch; and I'm gonna snatch; your pretty little rocks; and knock off your socks! Hee hee!" Conan drew his sword as well. "You don't stand a chance against us this time! Hand over the Chaos Emeralds and the Master Emerald now!" he growled. "Make us!" Rouge snapped. However, before anyone could do anything, an unexpected visitor flew in and took Knuckles by surprise! It was a brown griffin, with tan wings, a white crest of feathers on his head and a white tuft of feathers on his chest. He wore cyan gloves, yellow sneakers with red stripes, and had red eyes. "I'll take those Chaos Emeralds off your hands!" he shouted, wrestling them away from the surprised Knuckles! "Hey! What are you doing!?" he shouted. "Chaos Blast!" the griffin replied, knocking him away in order to secure his escape! "Gaaaah!! The Chaos Emeralds!!" Knuckles shouted. "My name is Talon the Griffin. If you want the Chaos Emeralds back, you'd better remember it!" the griffin said before swiftly flying out of the cave! "THIEF!!" Knuckles shouted. "My emeralds!!" Rouge added, devastated. "What's a Griffith? Did he used to work for kids?" Alpha muttered. Conan frowned. "That was unexpected... Any thoughts, Eddie?" he asked. The hyena shrugged. "Eeeee hee hee... I guess I'll have to take a rain check on this beating. I'll go after this 'Talon!'" he said, running past Knuckles to chase the griffin. "Eeeeeeeee hee! Hope to fight you later!" Eddie cackled.

Conan swiped his sword angrily. "This mission keeps getting more aggravating! You'd best hand over the Master Emerald, or else!" he yelled. "Oh, yeah?" Knuckles growled. "We'll see about that!" Rouge added. The bats in the room flapped their wings and glared menacingly. "We'll back ya up, boss!" they

said. "I'm tired of carving pumpkins. I think I'll carve YOU! Hee hee!" Patch added. Cream, who'd been watching from the back of the cave the whole time, stepped in slowly. "Cheese, we'd better help out! No more hiding!" she said. Just then, Patch hopped down and started swinging his nunchucks around gracefully, threatening Cream. "Hee hee! I'm gonna crack up the Easter bunny!" he laughed. "That... doesn't make sense... Cheese! Help!" Cream yelped, leading Cheese to grab the other end of Patch's nunchucks, fighting over them! "Hey! That's not supposed to happen!! Gimme those so I can bludgeon you with them!!" he shouted. Meanwhile, Conan had started battling with Knuckles much like their previous fight in the tunnels beneath Tails's Workshop, and Rouge was busy fighting off the bats. This left Crash and Alpha, neither of whom really had a stake in this anymore with the Chaos Emeralds gone and no other treasure in the cave, but Alpha was too kooky to leave without a fight. "All right, you bandicoot! I'll blast you back to the unemployment line!" Alpha shouted. Crash scratched his head under his bowler. "I'm a rhino... I don't even know what a bandicoot is!! Never mind. Maybe smashing Eggman's robot is a worthy cause..." he said before charging at Alpha, only to be leapt over and attacked with a spray of laser fire! "I DON'T KNOW WHAT A BANDICOOT IS EITHER!!" he yelled. He then fell over when Conan zapped him with a Chaos Spear from his sword! "No random yelling! I'm trying to concentrate!" he said, only to get sucker-punched by Knuckles! "Concentrate on that!" he yelled. "Leave it to you to resort to cheating! That little inferiority complex must be hard on you." Conan snapped. "Wha???" Knuckles muttered. "It is. Very hard on him." Rouge said as she threw a bat into a wall. "Is this a fight or a therapy session!? Shut it, both of ya!!" Knuckles shouted. "Suit yourself. Now, die!" Conan replied, thrusting his sword back at Knuckles!

The brawl went on for a while, the only ones willing to call it quits being the bats, who Rouge left quite battered and beaten after a while. Conan was getting frustrated as Rouge flew over, ready to involve herself in their fight. "You twit! Why won't you die!?" he growled. "Ha! Give it up, Conan!" Knuckles scoffed. "Never!!" Conan shouted. "Sheesh, he's as stubborn as you are, Knuckles..." Rouge remarked. "You'll pay for getting in my way! Now, the kid gloves are coming off! Get over here, Patch and Crash!" Conan shouted, gathering his reinforcements to him. "Hee hee! Now you get to die in this creepy place like in a bad horror movie!" Patch teased. "I don't like the sound of that..." Cream whimpered. Alpha had a decidedly different reaction. "This oughta be good! Someone gimme some popcorn!" he said. "Come on! I'm tired of this! Go home, Conan!" Knuckles groaned. "Not without the Master Emerald!" Conan insisted. "Then stay all you want. It oughta be fun." came a voice from seemingly nowhere! Looking around, they all saw Lospector emerge through the back wall of the cave, grinning mischievously. "Howdy, fellas. What might bring all of you into such a dark and dismal cave?" he asked. "Lospector?! Not you again!" Knuckles shouted. Conan groaned himself. "Ugh! Lost One... Wait, what's that in your hands?" he gasped. Lospector was holding the cards he always held, which looked suspiciously like the forgeries Conan was looking at when Knuckles and his companions came in. "Oh, these? Heh. Sorry, losers. I found the Chaos Cards ages ago! They let me do all kinds of cool things. Like this!" Lospector chuckled, tossing a card to summon a swarm of Losolanturns into the room, which quickly surrounded everyone! While the Despair members were reacting with alarm, Rouge was glancing at the exit. "I think it's time for me to bail from this dump..." she muttered. "Yeah, me too..." Knuckles added. "Bah! Insolent slime! You have no business holding those cards! I'll slice them out of your hands!" Conan shouted, pointing his sword at Lospector! "Ho ho ho! Sounds like you're askin' to become a Lost One!" the ghost chuckled.

Knuckles tapped Cream on the shoulder and motioned for the exit. "Let's go while Lospector's occupied!" he suggested. Cream nodded in agreement, and while they and Rouge were sneaking toward the way out, they were joined by Crash. "These guys are not worth all this. I'm out of here." he

muttered. "Calling all Lost Ones! We've got runaways!" Lospector yelled loudly, prompting the group to break out into a run! "You look hungry, ghost! Eat laser!!" was the last thing they heard from Alpha as they retreated into the cave tunnel, pursued by the ghostly pumpkins, the losolanturns! They spewed blue ghost fire at the walls, which spread rapidly, covering the walls the whole way ahead of them! "Keep in the center of the cave as much as possible!!" Crash warned. "I want my mommy!!" Cream cried. Knuckles looked back and yelped, ducking as a fireball was shot at his head! "We gotta get rid of these guys!" he yelled. Rouge sighed and glanced back, tossing one more of her bombs at the pursuing losolanturns. The explosion took out some and seemed to disorient the others, buying them the time they needed to escape the cave! "I hope your happy, Knuckles! I wasted all my bombs, and not even one little gem for my trouble!" she grumbled. "You're not getting the Master Emerald!" Knuckles snapped. "Well, you better believe I'm not gonna let you forget how you owe me!!" she retorted. As they escaped the cave, Crash kept running. "I gotta report to my master. Thanks for the assistance!" he yelled. Rouge flew off in a huff without another word, leaving Knuckles with Cream. "Firma probably took the hot air balloon, so I guess I'll be taking you home the long way..." Knuckles sighed. "Or I could talk to Jasper again..." Cream suggested. "Uh... No thanks..." Knuckles murmured awkwardly. As they started on their way to the nearest city, Knuckles thought about everything that had happened, and knew what he still had to do. "Hang on, Sonic! I'm coming to rescue you!" he promised.

To be continued...

15 - The Sunken Ruins

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 15 - The Sunken Ruins
Stage 10(Dark 5) - Seafloor Palace

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Finding no sign of the Master Emerald at Angel Island, Punchy got roped into a rescue mission at Giant Jungle. There, he met Fera, who gave him the Despair Seal, an object that would enable Punchy to change into Dark Punchy and back at will! This made breaking into Dr. Eggman's Tree Fort to rescue Adam and Cuthbert a bit easier. However, on the way out, Illusi attacked, followed by GUN's Dr. Nammad! Fortunately, Fred the fennec arrived to get Adam and Cuthbert to safety, enabling Punchy and Rainbow to escape on their own! On their way out of the jungle, however, Rainbow decided to refocus on finding her sister, and Punchy decided it was time to voice his concerns about this to Rainbow. Now, on to the next chapter!

Punchy caught up with Rainbow when they were back at the main Mystic Ruins jungle area. "Hey, One! Why so slow? You're not THAT tired from climbing the tree!" she asked. Punchy sighed. "Uh, that's not it..." he muttered. "Don't you wanna meet my sister?" Rainbow asked. Since he was asked point blank, Punchy answered. "No, I don't!" However, Rainbow just shrugged it off at first. "Don't be silly, One! We'll catch a train and..." before she could finish speaking, Punchy grabbed her by the arm. "NO!! For cryin' out loud, Rainbow! WAKE UP!" he shouted. "O-one...?" she replied, sounding hurt. "She works for a bunch of bad guys! She's dangerous!" Punchy insisted, trying desperately to reason with her. She responded by pulling her arm away. "She... She is not! She's my sister! How can you even say that!?" she yelled, tears forming in her eyes. Punchy started to panic. "Rainbow, listen to me!" he pleaded. She shook her head angrily. "No, you listen, One! It's always you, you, you!! What about doing what I want for a change!" she shouted. "Rainbow!!" Punchy yelled, but she wasn't listening anymore. "No! Leave me alone, One!" she cried, starting to run off, "I'll find my sister without you! I don't need you at all!" she said, crying as she fled from him, much too fast for him to keep up! "Rainbow!! Wait!! Come back!!" he shouted, trying to chase after her, only to lose her somewhere in the dense maze of trees. "No! I'll never find her now..." he stammered. Stopping to think for a moment, he realized that she was probably heading off to find her sister. "I'd better try the train station..." he sighed, "I gotta fix this before she gets hurt..."

In Central City, Colonel Gunner had just received orders from the Commander to spy on the President, and try to find out why he was behaving unusually recently. It was still the middle of a battle with the Covenant of Despair, but he had to gloat about this to his own Spy. "Now THIS is getting interesting, Spy!" he said to him right after the Commander had left. "It is?" Spy muttered. "Don't you see? The

president and the Commander are against each other!" Gunner grinned. Spy rubbed his head uncertainly. "Maybe it's just a minor disagreement?" he said. "This kind of thinking is why you're a mere pawn, Spy... Well, I have a few last minute commands to give." Gunner sighed, cracking his knuckles and scanning the area for someone. "Dr. Nammad!" he called. The wild-haired scientist hurried over with the blue shades wearing Agent 64. "Yes, uh, sir?" Nammad muttered, glancing around the battlefield skittishly. "How are your experiments coming?" Gunner asked. Nammad's eyes got a twisted twinkle at the question. "Project GXterminate is, uh, running on, uh, schedule. The, uh, Covenant of Despair won't stand a, uh, chance." he reported. Agent 64 stepped forward. "Excuse me, colonel. I was wondering... Couldn't this project be considered, well... Inhumane?" he asked. "Have you ever fought a war, Agent 64? You haven't won until every last enemy is wiped out." Gunner sneered. Nammad looked a bit awkward suddenly. "We've hit a little, uh, snag, though, Colonel Gunner. The energy source we're using isn't, uh, adequate. In order to complete the project, we, uh, need a Chaos Emerald." he said. Gunner rolled his eyes. "Then get one! Take a squad of robots if you need them!" he shouted. "But, uh... I'm no sergeant..." Nammad smirked. "Don't be coy, Ivan. I know what you're capable of." Gunner chuckled. Nammad gave him a knowing smile. "Hehehe... Very well, uh, sir. On my way." he said, walking off. "I'll watch your back, doctor!" Agent 64 said, following him. Spy looked at Gunner curiously. "So, uh... What IS Project GXterminate?" he asked. "Put a sock in it, Spy." Gunner replied.

Just then, Sergeant Drol approached them. "Sir! Where's the Commander?" he asked. "Sergeant Drol! Is the battle won?" Gunner replied, ignoring his question. "Well... My presence is no longer required." Drol stated as the green shades wearing Agent 32 caught up to him. "Report." Gunner said. Drol saluted and gave the information he knew Gunner wanted to know. "I have run across numerous experiments while on the search for the items, sir. They are hindering the operation." he said. "Sonic, too, no doubt." Gunner snarled. "I've yet to see Sonic himself, but I've seen his friends." Drol informed him. Agent 32 looked a bit concerned. "Despair has acquired some of the items, sir. What shall we do?" he asked. "It is time to up our game. Guard!" Gunner called out. Seconds later, Guard the gargoyle dropped from the sky, landing beside Drol! "Grrrr... Yes, boss?" he growled. "You will be working with Drol's unit for the moment. Find Despair's headquarters and retrieve the items they've stolen!" Gunner ordered. "What of the experiments?" Drol asked. "Those freaks? We have no use for them. Destroy them on sight. Bring additional troops if you must!" Gunner snarled. Drol raised an eyebrow. "I am permitted to use... Any means necessary?" he asked. Gunner grinned. "What the Commander doesn't know won't hurt him. That's all I have to say." he replied. "You're a prince, colonel." Drol smirked, turning to Guard. "You heard him, servant. You're with me, now!" he said. "Grrrrr... I am not YOUR servant." Guard snarled. "Never mind his attitude, sergeant. He'll do as you say, or I'll have him transferred to be Dr. Nammad's test subject!" Gunner warned. "Let's keep on schedule!" Agent 32 shouted. "Right. Let's." Drol added, leading Guard and Agent 32 away. Finally, Gunner turned to Spy again. "Listen, Spy!" he growled. "Coffee, sir?" he asked. Gunner nodded. "Yes, but afterwards, I want you to earn your title." he said. Spy looked at him awkwardly. "Sir?" Gunner smiled. "I will serve as the president's bodyguard. While I keep him occupied, you will find out all you can about his recent activities." he said. Spy shivered a bit. "Uh... Sounds dangerous, sir..." he mumbled. "DO IT!!" Gunner yelled. Spy yelped and started rushing off. "Errr, yes, sir! Coffee, first!" he stammered. "If all goes according to plan... Nothing can stop me..." Gunner mused, "Ha ha ha ha ha!!"

Punchy had taken a wild guess on Rainbow's destination and ended up in Troblusk City. He'd heard about this place before, and figured it was a prime location for the Covenant of Despair to turn up, though he wasn't entirely sure that Rainbow would put that together. He found himself wandering the city

docks, not far from Eggman's Eggtopia, and spotted none other than Amy Rose wandering around. Hoping that maybe she'd seen something, he decided to take a chance on her. "Uh... Excuse me, miss. I was wondering if I could ask you something..." he said as politely as he could manage. Amy took one look at him and clenched her teeth in disgust. "Forget it! You're that Knuckles clone who works for Dr. Eggman!" she snapped. Punchy wasn't sure which part of that he was most ticked at, but there was no time to fight. "I AM NOT!! I was just wondering if you've seen an echidna girl around." he said, trying to keep his cool. Amy shrugged. "Oh, is that all? She's right over there." she said, pointing to a motorboat at the docks. Punchy looked, squinting. "Right over... Gah! Rainbow's sister!?" he gasped in surprise. She, Daisy, Infin and Anubis were among the Despair agents boarding the fancy, obviously stolen motorboat. "Hey... Those are those bad guys that came after Sonic in Central City!" Amy gasped. Infin seemed to be addressing the group in preparation for leaving, and Amy was getting freaked as she recognized a certain someone. "That jerk Anubis is with them! I should teach him a lesson he'll never forget!" she shouted. Suddenly, Razor the porcupine's voice was heard booming over a megaphone. "Freeze! Don't move a muscle!" Punchy hid behind Amy before he realized that Razor was headed toward the Covenant of Despair's boat! "How did you escape?!!" Anubis shouted quite loudly and frustratedly, hurtling a fireball at Razor that singed his hat, forcing him to stop to put it out! "Aaah!! My hat!! Stop in the name of the law!!" Razor yelped as Despair's boat was taking off! Amy suddenly grabbed Punchy by the arm and led him to the nearest water vehicle, a certain red and black submarine. "C'mon! Help me hijack this thing Eggman left here! We can't let 'em get away!!" she shouted frantically. Punchy stumbled inside with Amy following. "Well, I don't have the best track record as a driver, but I'll try..." he muttered, pressing a button to turn the submarine on. "Welcome to the EggSub!" said the voice of BAS as the vehicle came to life, "Enjoy your flight!" it said. "FLIGHT!?!?" Amy and Punchy gasped at once.

Despite Punchy's shaky grasp of flying submarine controls, they managed to follow the Covenant of Despair to their destination. It appeared to be a largely submerged ruin, which was once a magnificent ancient palace. Fortunately, despite being mostly underwater, there was an outdoor balcony that was just barely above sea level. This was where Despair had parked their boat, and where Punchy and Amy lowered the flying sub back into the water. As they hopped out, Punchy saw that Rainbow's sister was still loitering near the boat, though most of Despair was already gone. "Well, now what? GUN could be a problem..." said Daisy the skunk, who was loitering with her. "Hey, uh, you!" Punchy said, hurrying over while Amy was busy trying to tie a submarine to a balcony. "My name is Violet. Now, what do you want from me?" Rainbow's sister replied, glaring at him. Punchy frowned. "Your sister is looking for you." he stated. Violet's eyes softened. "Rainbow? She can't get involved in this! It's dangerous!" she groaned, "She should be guarding the secret relic, anyway!" Punchy scratched his head sheepishly. "I think the ship sailed on that a long time ago..." he muttered. Violet sighed. "I've gotta give that sister of mine a good talk, but I'm kind of in the middle of something." she said. This got Punchy rolling his eyes. "Here it comes. So, what ridiculous chore do you have for me?" he grumbled. Just then, Amy showed up, panting. "Aha! Here you are! Now, what are you planning!?" she demanded. Violet ignored her and spoke to Punchy. "We need to get into the deepest room of these ruins." she said. "Buuut, some ancient wise guy hid the key!" Daisy chimed in. Amy pointed at them as if she'd discovered some huge secret. "Ah-hah! So that's your scheme is it? Come on, greenie! Let's find that key!" she shouted, hurrying through the nearest door! "Uuuuhhh..." Punchy muttered. "Be careful, though. Seems that police officer called in GUN." Violet warned. "...No problem..." Punchy replied as Amy ran out and grabbed him. "C'mon! Hurry up before the bad guys find the key!" she shouted. "...whose side am I on?" Punchy muttered.

The interior of the palace looked like it had seen better days. It resembled a massive, moldy, seaweed-infested version of the Chaos Shrine in terms of its architecture, but this building was much bigger and grander than the Chaos Shrine. "So... Despair wants to get into the deepest chamber...? How is THAT possible!? This dump is underwater!" Punchy wondered aloud. They heard something buzz near them, and a voice replied to Punchy. "I think some of the rooms down there are somehow not flooded. Gotta be careful opening and closing the doors so as not to flood them!" Punchy and Amy looked to see Charmy Bee hovering next to them. "YOU!! What in the heck are you doing here!?" Punchy stammered. Charmy looked flustered. "Umm... I forget? Oh, wait! I know! Vector sent me to check out what Dr. Eggman was up to and I followed some robots here!" he said hastily. "Well... buzz along then..." Punchy sighed. Charmy nodded. "Sure thing, Knuckles! Hah! Only kidding. I'd have to be pretty dumb not to know you're Punchy now!" he chuckled before flying off. "You know, we could probably have used his help..." Amy complained. "I think he's helped enough. Now we know Eggman's robots are here as well as GUN." he said, leading the way down the hallway in front of them. Right away, they found squidlike Kuragen robots floating around the hallways! "Yeah, Charmy would just be in the way here! I'll fix these bots! Chaos Avalanche!" Punchy started to grab chunks of the floor with his chaos power in order to fight the robots. This was a big mistake. The floor beneath their feet quickly collapsed, dropping them into the flooded room below! They found themselves caught in a tangle of thick seaweed at the bottom of the lower chamber, but Amy still managed to whack Punchy with her hammer in an expression of her aggravation! As they struggled their way out of the seaweed, a large, red robot approached them. "Organic life forms... Do you not require oxygen to survive?" Punchy stared at the robot, not sure how to react. "Of course... You cannot communicate underwater. This makes questioning you useless..." the robot grumbled. Amy pointed up frantically, trying to mime what she wanted to say. "I calculated that you came from up there, pink hedgehog. Allow me to introduce myself, green one. I am Omega. I have come to battle Eggman's robots." he said. Punchy couldn't care less, he grabbed Amy's arm and attempted to swim back to the roof, though it was somewhat high. "You'll never make it that way. Allow me." Omega said, grabbing Punchy by the ankle and swinging his robotic body around, hurtling them across the room! They soared towards a small hole in the ground, and were suddenly propelled upward as a jet of water shot out of the hole! This geyser sent them rocketing through a hole leading to another room, where they soared high into the air!

They grabbed on to a sort of stone support beam going across the ceiling in order to stop their geyser-driven flight. When they climbed up, they heard a low growling. Punchy glanced over and saw Guard perched on the support beam as well. "Gaaah!! Guard!!!" he yelled. The gargoyle looked at him with a start. "Grrrr!?! How did you get up here!?" he snarled. "Better question is how do we get down!?" Amy stammered. Guard turned to them, holding on to the beam with one hand while clutching his scythe with the other. "Grrrr... What are you doing in a place like this, anyway?" he wondered. "Trying to stop the Covenant of Despair.... and trying to help the Covenant of Despair." Punchy mumbled. Amy hopped down to the water pool that the geyser had shot them out of, swimming to the nearby ledge and finally climbing up to solid ground. "Whew! What a relief!" she sighed. Guard was growling at Punchy, not buying his story at all. "Grrr... If you won't give me a straight answer, I'm going to tail you and find the truth for myself!" he said. Punchy jumped to the wall and started to climb down. "No way! I just ditched a bee and a robot and you're not coming either!" he shouted. "I think Omega ditched US." Amy said, wandering around on her own. Guard followed Punchy from the air as he climbed down. "Grrr... I was called here by the Troblusk Police to investigate the Covenant of Despair, and now you mention them! I can't ignore that!" he insisted. While they were busy arguing during Punchy's climb, Amy checked down a nearby hallway. Opening a door, she found a chamber where the floor was mostly broken up. However, something was unusual about the water in that room. "Guys! Get over here!" she shouted.

Punchy and Guard hurried over to where she was, gasping upon seeing what she'd found. Parts of the room's flooded areas were frozen!

They started exploring the set of chambers ahead, using the trails of ice to cross the water along the way. They noticed that there were some GUN robots frozen in chunks of ice as well, leading them to conclude that this was probably the work of Eggman's robots. They were proven right when they caught up to Freeze the Gizoid, busily creating an ice bridge across some more water in another chamber. The robot turned to them with a cold stare. "Are you the ones who arrived in the EggSub?" he asked, making Amy reach for her hammer. "Yeah..." Punchy replied. Freeze nodded. "Since you are with us, I suppose you are aware of the need to locate the key." he replied, making Amy hastily put her hammer away. "Yes, the key... Any sign of it yet?" Punchy asked. Freeze pointed down. "Since you have arrived, I will begin searching underwater. Continue looking above sea level." he ordered, diving down below! Guard grunted in confusion. "You are with Eggman...?" he muttered. "Try to keep up, devil dog! We're here to stop the bad guys so I can impress Sonic!" Amy smirked, hurrying off into the next room. "She's just as dense as Rainbow, but she's got a big hammer. How did I get into this mess?" Punchy groaned. Suddenly, they heard Amy shriek, so once again they ran to catch up to her! They found her being chased around by Chaos Guardians, the jellyfish-like creatures that had also guarded the Chaos Shrine and Frostbite Maze! However, Punchy was only aware of their passing resemblance to the Kuragens. "Huh?? Eggman's robots came to life!?" he gasped. Amy ran behind Punchy and Guard, forcing all three of them to evade the flailing tentacles of the Chaos Guardians as they approached! "Grrrr!! Take this!!" Guard growled, slashing his scythe at one of them, only to have it bounce off uselessly. They all blinked a couple times at this development, then screamed and ran away, with the Chaos Guardians giving chase!

As they fled, they passed by Charmy. "Hey, guys! I think I know where the key is!" he said. "Not a good time!!" Punchy shouted. With the guardians catching up, Amy smacked her hammer against the ground to pull off a high jump, soaring over the guardians as they passed by her! "Ha! Tricked ya!" she teased, only to anger a pair of them and get them chasing her again! Guard flew up high to attempt to escape, but the Chaos Guardians could fly as well, making it useless! "Grrrr!! I'm not even with them!!" he shouted. Charmy watched them running awkwardly, backing away a bit to avoid being spotted. "Vector didn't tell me this place had monsters..." he whined. Suddenly, a water geyser went off in a nearby pool, shooting Omega up from the lower floor! "Deceptive Eggman robots! How did they know to maneuver me to a geyser!?" he shouted. Punchy, Guard and Amy were about to get cornered, and seeing this, Omega jumped into action, firing explosives at the Chaos Guardians! This got their attention, but still didn't seem to really damage them. "The Chaos Guardians are near-indestructible! It is best to dive underwater to throw them off your trail!" Omega suggested. Punchy shook his head. "No way, I'm mad now! We'll just see if they're indestructible!" he yelled, his Despair Seal flashing a bit before he transformed into Dark Punchy! "Grrrr... Why didn't you do that in the first place?" Guard wondered. "Shut it or I'll give YOU another taste of this power!!" Dark Punchy threatened. He then stomped toward the Chaos Guardians, hurling a dark energy ball at one of them to get their attention. "Hey, squids! Ever hear of calamari?" he growled. The Chaos Guardians flew at him, and he responded by creating a powerful shockwave of dark energy, knocking them all into the walls hard! The guardians quivered and writhed in pain, and Punchy tapped into the Despair Seal in order to change back to normal. "Well, at least they seem to be stunned. Let's go!" he said. "Follow me, guys! I think I can find the key!" Charmy said, flying off towards the door he'd come from, "Hope you all can hold your breath!" he added. Omega hopped back into the water. "Must eradicate all Eggman robots!" he said. "All right. Let's get that key!" Punchy said, running off after Charmy while Guard and Amy followed. "...You knew he could go all

creepy-black like that?" Amy asked Guard. "Grrrr... He seems to have gained power from that bracelet." he said. Amy shuddered as she followed Punchy. As unsettling as his new power was, she'd need help if she was going to take on Eggman AND the Covenant of Despair!

To be continued...

16 - Attack of the Meta-Hydra

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 16 - Attack of the Meta-Hydra
Minor Boss 6 - Infin the Weasel
Boss 10 - Meta-Hydra

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After telling Rainbow that he believed searching for her sister was a bad idea, Rainbow abandoned Punchy, who immediately decided he had to go find her! However, he found Amy instead, and they spotted the Covenant of Despair heading for a sunken palace! Rainbow's sister, Violet was there, and Punchy struck a deal with her to enlist her help finding Rainbow. In exchange, he had to seek out the key to the deepest chamber of the ruins. During the search, he and Amy found Charmy searching for information and Omega looking to pick fights with Eggman's robots. When they found Guard the Gargoyle, he refused to let them out of his sight. The trio then found Freeze, who believed them to be working for Eggman, since Punchy and Amy arrived in one of his vehicles. Ultimately, the group drew the attention of Chaos Guardians, which were patrolling the palace! After Dark Punchy stunned them, Charmy reported that he knew where the key might be, and started to lead them there!
Now, on to the next chapter!

Punchy, Amy and Guard were swimming through a flooded corridor of the palace, led by Charmy. He pointed out a door and started to push, but apparently the small bee was too weak. Punchy and Guard swam over and started to shove the door as Amy watched nervously, seeming to realize something the others didn't. As soon as the door was open, the water started rushing in to the next room, pulling the group in with it! They were flung to the ground roughly, but at least they had fresh air, for the moment. "Well, it's great that this room isn't flooded, but now it's floodING!!" Amy shouted. Punchy and Guard tried to approach the door to close it again, but the water was rushing out too fast, and it was no use! "Well, now what??" Punchy grumbled. Just then, a bright light shone from across the room! "Stiffiam!" With the casting of this spell, the water suddenly stopped moving into the room! The group turned and stared, seeing Fred the fennec holding his wand. "Well... Lucky I was here." he said. Punchy raised an eyebrow. "Yeah... What ARE you doing here??" he wondered. Fred looked around. "We thought we saw a fennec among the agents invading this palace. Turns out it wasn't Gemini, but now I have to locate my companions again. Don't worry, I think I have it covered this time." he said. Guard looked at him a bit suspiciously. "Grrr... Would this have anything to do with what happened at the jungle?" he grunted. Fred shrugged. "Possibly... Well, I bet you're looking for the key. Head that way, before the spell wears off." Fred suggested before using his magic to warp away. "...I was gonna say that." Charmy muttered.

The key, an odd looking ancient relic which appeared to be a fragment of something, was sitting on a stone table. It was surrounded by Orbinauts, red, orb-shaped robots with spike balls orbiting around

them. These robots had apparently come with Freeze, and were guarding the key until the gizoid could find his way to them. "Those bots are pretty well protected by those spikes. Should I try Chaos Avalanche?" Punchy wondered. "Grrrr! You fool! You'll make the whole palace collapse! Grrr... I will use my scythe's energy blasts." Guard suggested. Charmy shook his head. "Are you kidding? It'll just bounce off those spikes! Let me grab the key! Lemme do it! Me me me!!" he shouted, only for Punchy to place a hand over his mouth to muffle him. "Quiet, we're thinking!" he grumbled. Suddenly, the three of them heard several explosions, and glanced to see Amy bashing the robots with her hammer, which knocked the spikes right into the main robots without trouble! She quickly took out the Orbinauts, and then picked up the key! "If you guys are through talking, can we go find the door this goes to?" she sighed. Charmy struggled away from Punchy and raised his hand. "I know the way!!!" he said excitedly.

To reach the deepest chamber Violet had spoken of, they had to dive down once again. It wasn't easy, because geysers kept shooting off along the way, threatening to send them all the way back to the highest floor! Along the way, they found Omega floating towards the bottom. "It is you again... Sensors indicate you possess the key. I shall accompany you to the doorway. Eggman's robots appear to be seeking access to it as well." he said, joining them as they reached the lowest levels of the palace. The thick seaweed immediately tangled Omega, but the robot thrashed his powerful arms and tore it to shreds. "Annoying aquatic plant forms..." he said. The group hurriedly pushed open the next door, once again being dragged in by the rushing water leading to the air-filled hallway. They had no way to stop the rushing water, so they'd have to move on quickly. "Whew, I was about to suffocate!" Charmy panted. "The door should be up ahead! Grrr... Let's go!" Guard grunted, hurrying ahead. "How do you know that??" Amy muttered. Punchy shrugged. "Who cares? Let's just move towards the air..." he sighed. Omega watched them for a moment before he started to follow. "Pathetic air-breathers..." he muttered.

They found the doorway at the end of the hall. Violet and Daisy were waiting for them there. "Huh? How'd you get in here without flooding the chamber!?" Punchy stammered. They pointed to a hole in the ceiling. "We found a better way in. If only there were holes leading past the door." Daisy said. Violet stepped over to Amy and snatched the key from her. "Thank you!" she said. "Hey!!" Amy yelled. Punchy shrugged. "Never mind! Let's leave the key with the skunk now and go find Rainbow!" he suggested. Violet shook her head, walking to a strange sort of puzzle on the wall that the key apparently would fit into. "My mission isn't finished yet. I'm afraid I can't just run off..." she said. Suddenly, Infin the weasel dropped through the hole in the ceiling! "Hey, youse mugs! Why ain't that door open!?" he growled. "We're on it, Infin!" Daisy reported. "Infin, huh? You must be the boss. Listen, you! I'm takin' Violet away from you creeps!" Punchy shouted. Violet glanced back at Punchy. "Excuse me?!" she snapped. "Mind your own business, cucumber!" Daisy added. Infin glared at them. "GET THE GATE OPEN!! I'll handle this!" he yelled, "She doesn't wanna go wit you, punk. Buzz off!" he sneered. Punchy raised his fists. "Too bad. She's getting my friend mixed up in this nonsense!" he said. Infin reached for a gun holstered in the jacket of his suit. "So, that's that, eh? Well we can't have you botherin' our agents! I'll have ta rub ya out!" he shouted, firing an electric blast from his special gun at the floor, which was wet from the water that was flooding in from the entrance! "Look out!" Amy shouted as everyone jumped away, the electric bolt spreading through much of the water on the ground! Guard was forced to flap his wings and pull Amy off the floor to protect her from getting fried, while Punchy grabbed on to the wall and started to climb! The water hadn't quite reached the back of the chamber yet, so Violet and Daisy were safe, but Omega got quite a jolt! "Power overload! You will regret that!" Suddenly, Omega used the surge of electricity to power his jetpack, propelling himself towards Infin at high speed! He tackled the weasel, knocking him into the back wall hard! "Yaaaah!! My metal foot!!" Infin grunted, grasping his foot in pain!

Suddenly, the puzzle on the wall flipped and twisted, revealing a hieroglyph of an ancient echidna! The large doors beside it slid open, and Violet and Daisy exchanged a hi-five. Punchy dropped from the wall and glanced at them. "Huh? Oh, the door's open... Come on, Violet! Your mission's done!" he said. "So is yours, Dark One!" The voice of Illusi the shrew drew Punchy and Amy's attention. "This is getting out of hand, isn't it? ...Maybe I should've brought Sonic..." Amy sighed. As Infin was recovering from his injury and standing up, Anubis the jackal jumped down from the hole in the ceiling as well, proving Amy right. "Is there a problem, Mitch?" Anubis asked. The weasel stomped his metallic foot angrily. "CALL ME INFIN!!" he yelled. Punchy was glancing over at Anubis, but Illusi got his attention again as he was rushing across the wet floor. "Dark One! Stay where you are!" he shouted. This got Anubis's attention as well. "You! In the cape! You are holding an item of interest to us. Hand it over at once!" Anubis shouted. At this moment, Violet and Daisy were rushing into the chamber that had just opened, pursued by Guard and followed by Charmy. Illusi, seeing Anubis, had second thoughts about confronting Punchy now. "Um... I'll be right back, Dark One..." he said, vanishing in a puff of smoke. Punchy, noticing that everyone was getting away, screamed in frustration. "Wait!! All of you!!! ARRRRRRGH!!!" Amy then smacked him with her hammer. "Thanks, I needed that..." he grumbled. "Come on! We're falling behind OMEGA!!" she shouted, noting that Omega, Infin and Anubis had decided to proceed into the next room without them as well. "Right! We'll see about this! ...At least Illusi got chased off..." Punchy said as they ran to catch up.

The next room was very similar to the rooms that the Chaos Gauntlets, Cards, and tailbands had been found in, with a pedestal in the center and a back wall covered in hieroglyphics. However, this room's back wall had been blown open by GUN's forces, led by Sergeant Drol! Guard was meeting up with him at the hole in the wall, while Punchy and Amy ran to catch up with Violet at the pedestal, which was atop a small shrine with steps leading up. "All right, you! Get back here!!" Punchy shouted. Violet, Daisy and Infin turned and glared at Punchy. "You don't know when to quit!" Daisy said. "Ugh... You are such a stubborn..." Violet started to say, only to be interrupted by Amy. "I've held my tongue enough! Now you creeps are gonna step aside and let us walk away with that shiny thing!" she yelled, pointing at the object on the pedestal. It appeared to be a gold cape, with silver trim. Punchy groaned. "Cut it out, pinky. It's hard enough getting through to Rainbow's sister." he said. Suddenly, Razor the Porcupine stomped into the room, pointing his gun around. "FREEZE!!" he shouted. "Aaaand now the cop's in here..." Infin sighed. Charmy buzzed over to Punchy and Amy, looking a bit nervous. "Is this gonna be a warzone like Central City? 'Cuz I went on this mission to get away from that!" he said. Drol shouted up at everyone on the shrine. "Knaves!! You thought you could outwit Sgt. Drol, did you!?" he yelled, making Infin jump. "Cripes, why'd Anubis have ta go lookin' for that shrew!?" he stammered. "Huh? But I thought he came in here!" Amy said in confusion. "Surrender yourselves, and turn over the Chaos Wing, immediately!" Drol warned. Punchy looked at the cape awkwardly. "How is that a wing?" he wondered. Agent 32, who was also with Drol, pointed up at Punchy frantically. "Boss! That's GeneX Experiment 1 up there, too!" he yelled. Guard nodded. "Grrrr!! I have been tailing him, sir! He aided Despair in finding the key to this chamber!" he said. "Tattler!!" Punchy yelled. "Do not be concerned. I have come prepared for such ruffians." Drol said. A hulking machine was waiting in the shadows from inside the hole in the wall, but before it could emerge, Freeze the Gizoid dashed into the chamber, firing an icy bolt that exploded near the Despair members! They all took cover, surprised by the sudden attack. "D'ooohh, now what!?" Infin growled. Freeze leapt up to the pedestal and grabbed the Chaos Wing before anyone could react! "I am E-6X. Also known as Freeze..." he stated, "And if you wish to acquire this object, you will have to bargain with Dr. Eggman!" Omega, who had been waiting at the foot of the shrine, started to fire missiles at Freeze! "Halt! Freeze, you will not get away! I will destroy you and prove that I am the ultimate robot!" he shouted. However, Freeze started fleeing back into the palace quickly, evading the missiles! "Hold!

Robot!! You will turn that over to me at once or be destroyed!" Drol shouted pathetically as Freeze escaped, pursued by Omega. Drol growled angrily when he realized he'd lost another precious relic. "Meta-Hydra!! Get them! And give a special thrashing to that green knave who keeps interfering with my operations!" he commanded.

Punchy could see several robotic heads stirring in the shadows, and he got a bad feeling. "Violet, look out!" he shouted, shoving her out of the way as an intense jet of flames blew at them! A mechanical monstrosity stomped out of the hole in the wall, a mech with seven snake-like heads, each equipped with a different weapon! Amy gulped. "Well... Been nice knowin' ya, greenie. Maybe I should go..." she muttered. Suddenly, Punchy was tackled to the bottom of the steps of the shrine by a winged figure, who soared past the Hydra to attack him! "Prepare yourself, Punchy the Echidna!!" the winged figure said with a distorted voice as Punchy rushed back to his feet! It was the Deathbringer! "I will end you!!" the hooded being shouted. Drol looked a bit surprised, but didn't let this shake him. "Never mind... whoever that is! Meta-Hydra! Don't let them escape!" he yelled. The Meta-Hydra's heads started spouting fire, ice, lasers, and thunder, blocking Amy, Charmy, and the Covenant of Despair as they tried to find a way out. "All right... For now, we better team up..." Violet suggested. Charmy nodded. "Anything you say! I'll take the guy with the sunglasses!" he grinned. "No... It'll take all of us to stop that bot!" said Daisy, drawing a katana. Meanwhile, Punchy was unable to help the others, because the Deathbringer had him on the run, hurling powerful energy blasts his way that, if they should connect, might end his life quite abruptly. "Gotta fight back... Chaos Avalanche!" he shouted from cover behind the shrine. He picked up some rubble left over from GUN blowing up the back wall, and hurled it at the Deathbringer, only to see those chunks destroyed by some well placed energy blasts! Punchy gulped, seeing just what those attacks could do. "Anyone wanna trade me???" he asked. Three of the Hydra's heads were moving in close, trying to snap at Daisy and Infin while they struck back with sword strikes and bullets, respectively. Amy hopped on one of those heads' necks and started to run along it, her hammer readied. "I better find a weak spot..." she murmured. As she went, the other heads tried to hit her with flames and lasers, but Charmy flew up to tackle them and mess up their shots while Violet chucked some dark energy balls at them. Drol glanced at Guard, and he flew up to try and stop Amy, only to get a hammer to the face! "Grrrraaaagh!! How dare you!!" he growled. Amy soon landed on the Meta-Hydra's back, and proceeded to slam it with her hammer hard! "Let's see how your hardware likes this!!" she yelled.

With things seeming to go well with the Hydra, Violet glanced at Punchy and the Deathbringer. The Deathbringer seemed about to strike Punchy with an energy blast, when suddenly a dark energy ball broke its concentration. "You dare interfere?" the Deathbringer growled, glaring at Violet. During all of this, Razor was sitting by the door, standing guard while GUN handled the situation. As he yawned, a sudden tremor stirred him back to his feet. "Whoa!? What was that!?" he gasped. Drol looked around. "Our blasting to get in here may have left the palace unstable... And this violent battle hasn't helped." he said as the Meta-Hydra collapsed in a heap! "Scram!! This place could come down any moment!" Infin shouted. Drol nodded. "We'll have to retreat! It's too dangerous to remain here!" he said. "Not to mention all that's left is Guard." Agent 32 muttered. Drol glanced at Guard. "Gargoyle! Follow the Covenant of Despair! Find their headquarters!" he ordered. Guard nodded and took off as Infin and Daisy were rushing out of the room, the palace starting to shake even more. Violet, however, stopped to observe Punchy, who was still locked in combat with the Deathbringer. They were fighting hand-to-hand now, but they still seemed evenly matched. "I will bury you in this palace!!" the Deathbringer sneered. "Grrraaa!!! You're making me real mad!!" Punchy yelled. "Run for your lives!! The whole place is gunna fall down!!" Charmy shouted in a panic, flying past them out the door. Violet looked at Punchy urgently. "Leave him! Punchy, we have to go!" she said. Amy nodded as she caught up with them. "Umm... What the creepy

girl said!" she panted. Just then, Anubis entered the room. "Violet!! Come, we must leave this place." he said. "Yeah... I know..." Violet replied. Amy pointed at Anubis furiously. "Hey!! You! Now I gotcha! I owe you a beating for threatening Sonic!!" she shouted. Anubis crossed his arms. "Hmph... Sonic is no more. I buried him at Dr. Eggman's base." he said coldly. "Wh... What!?!?" Amy gasped as Anubis turned to leave, "No way!! Sonic is OK!! I'm going to find him right now!!" she cried, rushing off in a hurry. With everyone else pretty much having fled the chamber, which was beginning to collapse, Violet realized she had to act. "Yaaaaaah!! Enough!!!" Punchy shouted, struggling with the Deathbringer. "I agree. It's time to go!!" Violet said, grabbing Punchy around the arms and flinging a few dark energy balls at the Deathbringer as she dragged the stubborn echidna away! As they arrived in the rapidly flooding hall, Punchy glared at her. "I had everything under..." before he could finish speaking, a ball of pinkish light appeared out of nowhere and blinded him! "...control...??"

Punchy found himself in an ancient-looking city. "Violet? I appreciate getting me out of the palace, but where am I...?" he muttered, "...That WAS you, right?" he stammered, looking around. The city appeared in ruins, but there were still signs of life. He saw a few echidnas gathered up ahead, and they seemed to be in an uproar over something. As he approached the crowd, he saw the source of the commotion. Shadow Chaos was there! Tikal was there as well, carrying the Master Emerald, and she was accompanied by Radia and Athair. "Ch-chaos!?" Tikal gasped upon seeing the shadowy creature. Shadow Chaos glared around at the nearby echidnas, who were in a panic. "Aaaaugh! That thing is back!! It's come to destroy us!!" the surviving echidnas were shouting. Athair also looked stunned. "My word! What should we do??" he wondered. Radia frowned. "It's a creature of shadows! Everyone, stay back!" she warned. "Chaos... Please, calm yourself!" Tikal pleaded. This made Shadow Chaos glance at her with a look of confusion. "Quickly, we should get out of here!! It might attack again any moment!" the echidnas shouted, ready to flee the scene. However, a new voice shouted from a ledge of the city's central pyramid. "Hold it right there, shadow creature!" Looking, the people could see a breed of gray wolf, with red eyes and red stripes. He had a light gray muzzle, brown gloves, sandals and gold ankle braces, as well as a gold collar. His most interesting feature was a pair of twin tails, which were gray and ended in red. He leapt down to Shadow Chaos and shouted "Chaos Blast!" The chaotic explosion that resulted seemed enough to send Shadow Chaos fleeing, and the echidnas surrounded the stranger with reverent awe. "The creature fled! He saved us!" they gasped. "I saw what needed to be done, and I did it. Resume rebuilding your homes." the stranger said gruffly. Tikal stared at him in surprise as the villagers left. "You used chaos power... Just who are you?" she asked. The stranger bowed slightly. "They call me Howler. I'm a traveler..." he said. "We could sure use your help in case that creature comes back, Mr. Howler." Athair said. Howler glanced in the direction Shadow Chaos fled. "It will... We will need greater power to be rid of it for good." he said. "Just what sort of power do you think would do it?" Radia wondered. Howler looked back at them. "The ancient power of the Chaos Relics!" he declared. Tikal looked out where Shadow Chaos had gone a bit sadly. "Chaos....." she sighed.

Punchy awoke at the Troblusk City docks, babbling. "Howler? Echidnas?? Where'd all those people I was spying on go??" he muttered until he saw Violet standing over him. "Um... Are you okay?" she asked. Punchy's eyes darted back and forth. "Yeah, sure. Seasick dream." he said. Violet sighed. "I just drug you all the way back here. I'm sure gonna hear it when I get back..." she said. Punchy sighed. "Why are you working with those sickos?" he asked, slowly standing up. "It's the humans that are the sickos!" Violet snapped, "Let's agree to disagree for now... Might as well look for Rainbow..." she sighed. Punchy glanced at the EggSub in the water beside them. "Did we ride here alone?" he asked. "You kidding? We're lucky anyone waited for us..." Violet grumbled as she and Punchy set out to find Rainbow together.

As the ancient palace sunk deeper to the seafloor, Illusi was still hanging around one of the rooms that still had air. "Blast! It seems that the Dark One is gone again! You'd think I'd be able to keep up with him, knowing his whereabouts at all times..." he sighed. Suddenly, he spun around, finding the Deathbringer behind him! "You... You are referring to the echidna with the evil presence within..." it asked. Illusi looked at the being awkwardly. "Um... Doom...sayer...?" he mumbled. The Deathbringer stepped forward and extended its hand. "Come with me... I believe we have a common enemy...."

To be continued...

17 - The Trials of Sandopolis

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 17 - The Trials of Sandopolis
Stage 11-12(Hero & Dark 6) - Molten Sands

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After escaping from Super Eggman Land, Sonic encountered Knuckles. Believing him to have been tricked by Eggman yet again, they inevitably got into a fight, which led Sonic to get captured! While Knuckles is busy trying to come up with a plan, Sonic is trapped in a "special cell!"
Meanwhile, Kosmo and Copter went on a mission to get the Chaos Boots from Eggman's Cloud Carnival. During the chaos of the battle to get the boots, Katie the Coyote was shot! While Basker made off with the boots and dragged Chet off with him, Copter enlisted the help of Gemini and Silver in attempting to save Katie's life!
Now, on to the next chapter!

Kosmo met up with Silver outside the hospital in Station Square. "Well, she made it to the doctor... I guess she'll be resting for a while." Silver said. Kosmo nodded. "Yeah..." he murmured. Silver looked around anxiously. "I'd better go after those guys now. They got away with the Chaos Boots, and I have to see if I can throw a wrench in their plans!" he said, hurrying on his way! "Huh??" Kosmo muttered, watching him go. "Didn't he know I was one of them? Why is he letting me go?" he wondered. Not really wanting to dwell on it, he thought for a bit about what to do now. Though he would surely be wanted back at Despair HQ, he decided to check in with Katie.

He found her in a hospital bed, bandaged up and connected to IV drips. Copter and Gemini were standing at her bedside with worried expressions. "Katie... please be okay..." Copter whispered. The doctor looked at them sympathetically. "I've done what I can. It's up to her now." he said. Kosmo looked at the human doctor awkwardly. "Think a human's qualified to treat a fur?" he wondered. Noticing him, Gemini stepped past Copter and pulled out her wand threateningly. "What are YOU doing here?! Go on, beat it you creepy monster!" she growled. "WHAT!?" Kosmo snarled. Copter quickly planted himself between them. "Hey, both of you! This is a hospital!" he snapped. Gemini glared at him. "Copter, how can you hang around him? After he tried to destroy the whole world before!" she shouted. Copter gulped and turned to Gemini, motioning frantically for her to silence. "Ix-nay!" he said. Kosmo growled softly. "Well, you're still here, aren't you? Did you think I was still all crazed?!" he growled. Gemini looked startled, like she'd never even thought of that. "You feel that way, too, don't you Copter?? I see how it is. All anyone sees when they look at me is a monster!" Kosmo yelled. This got the doctor's attention. "Sir, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave. Undue stress could slow the coyote's recovery." he said. Kosmo looked around the room, and started to run off. "You... I don't need any of you!!" he cried. "Kosmo!!" Copter yelled before turning to Gemini angrily, "Gemini, you dope! I've been keeping an eye on him, not

palling around with him!" he snapped. Gemini looked pale and gasped after hearing this. "Teacher, what have I done?" she thought.

Kosmo had tears in his yellow eyes as he exited the hospital. "I don't... need..." he stammered. "Troubled?" someone called out to him. It was a strange, yellow creature with a blue streak going down the center of her head, as well as blue hair hanging behind her head as well. She wore a light green sleeveless top, burgundy pants and had a forked tail with a band of blue fur ringing near the tip of each end. She had pink eyes and white and light green shoes. Kosmo just wiped his eyes and kept walking. "Go on! I don't need anyone else bothering me!" he grumbled. "I saw what happened at the carnival. They all say really nasty things about you, but... You really worried about her, didn't you?" the odd creature said. Kosmo stopped walking. "Are you spying on me, too?" he asked. Actually, I was sent to keep an eye on GUN. I've learned quite a bit about that snake Drol's activities." she said. Kosmo turned to face her. "GUN? Yeah, right! Unless... You're with the Covenant of Despair..." he murmured, "Looking at you... \. I've never seen your kind before. You strike me as one of HIS experiments!" he realized. "Perhaps we have a bit in common. We're both... unique." the stranger said. "You mean freaks..." Kosmo grunted. The stranger looked a bit angry. "THEY call us freaks! Those who just don't get it... My name's Carrie." she sighed. Kosmo's expression softened a little. "Why did you come here?" he asked. "You looked like a lost soul... I... can relate." Carrie said, "If you seek some truth, try Angel Island in the Mystic Ruins. There's a place there that's important to both GUN and the Covenant of Despair." she whispered. Kosmo smirked a little. "This your way of asking for help 'keeping an eye' on things?" he wondered. "Hoping to see you again, maybe..." Carrie said, walking away. Kosmo thought about it for a moment, then started on his way to the train station. His route unwittingly took him past the entrance to the Hidden Ruins, which Rainbow was on her way home to. "Maybe I shouldn't have shouted at One like that. I'll never find my sister without..." she was muttering as she caught a glimpse of Kosmo through the corner of her eye. "Wait! I'd know that shade of purpley fur anywhere! It's Viola!" she gasped. Just like that, she started to follow in the direction Kosmo had gone...

In the basement of Eggman's Eggtopia base, Sonic's teeth were chattering in the frigid cell that he'd been thrown into. An energy field generated by the cyan Chaos Emerald was keeping him stuck in the cell. Sleeping in a chair in the corner of the cell was Professor Pickle, another prisoner of Eggman. As a security measure, Jolt was standing guard outside the cell. "Can't you at least turn up the heat?" Sonic whined. "No way! I'm going nowhere! I'm not gonna let any more prisoners escape!" Jolt said. Suddenly, BAS started blaring. "Intruder alert!!" As everyone's attention turned to the stairway, they could hear Metal Eggman's voice from above. "Hey, it's just... NO!!! Wait!! What are you doing!? STOOOOOOP!!!" A loud thud followed the robot's screams. "What's all that racket?" Sonic wondered. They then heard Spiny's voice at the top of the steps. "Hey, you!! You got a death wish!?" he growled. "DO YOU!? GET OUTTA MY WAY, YOU FAKE SONIC!!!!" With this shout from Amy, Spiny soon came tumbling down the stairs! Amy followed him down and smacked him with her hammer, sending him soaring to the back wall, out of the way! "WAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!!" Spiny wailed before collapsing, unconscious. Jolt watched in horror as Amy stomped her way in. "Spiny? Metal Eggman??" he murmured. "Who dares stand between me and my Sonic!?" Amy growled. Jolt started to buzz with electricity. "Hehehe, go ahead and touch me! You'll get a terrible shock!" he warned. Suddenly, SPOT dashed down the stairs and stood beside Amy. "Eggman robot detected! Preparing for battle mode!!" his monitor read. "N-n-nice doggy..." Jolt stammered as SPOT started charging his lasers. SPOT then started to chase him. "Save me, Sonic!!" Jolt shouted as he fled up the stairs. Next, Tails came down the steps while Sonic was telling Amy that the chaos energy shield would only repel her hammer. "Hang on, Sonic!" Tails said. "Go away, Tails!

The power of my love will save Sonic!" Amy protested. "How?" Tails asked. "Umm... It just will! So stand back!" Amy shouted. Tails looked up at the cell and saw the emerald plugged into a socket near the ceiling. So, he pulled out a new gadget to take care of the situation. "Activating Chaos Emerald magnet!" he said, using the high powered magnet to pull the emerald down! Meanwhile, Amy tried her hammer anyway, just as the energy field vanished! "Huh? I did it! I did it! Now we'll ride off into the sunset and get married!" she cheered, running into the cell and throwing her arms around Sonic tightly! "Arrgh!! Stop!! Let me go!!" Sonic gasped. "So, we're finally free to leave this drafty cell?" said Professor Pickle, standing up. Tails stared at him in confusion. "Huh? What are you doing here, professor?" he asked.

They hurried up the stairs while Spiny was still unconscious. "Dr. Eggman was interested in the research I was doing into the Chaos Relics." Pickle explained. "Huh? What're Chaos Relics?" Sonic asked. "They're ancient artifacts that were created a long, long time ago. I'd better gather my research notes before I go. Now where did Eggman stash them...?" the professor muttered, looking around. Metal Eggman was sprawled on the floor, looking rather dizzy. "My metal moustache! Y-you'll... pay for... thizzzz..." he buzzed. "Here they are! My notes on the Chaos Relics. The gauntlets. The boots. The cards. The wing. The tailbands..." Pickle mumbled. "The tailbands!?" Tails gasped. Pickle nodded. "Yes, the Chaos Tailbands. Tails, I believe you're the only one who could use them." he said. Amy sighed. "Aw, that's old news! What's Eggman want with the others?" she asked. "I'm not entirely sure he wants them for himself... The Covenant of Despair is also after them." Pickle explained. Sonic shrugged. "Well, we'd better get to 'em first, I guess! Where are they?" he asked. "They were hidden throughout the world. My research was about to take me to the ruins of Sandopolis when Eggman kidnapped me." Pickle stated. Tails nodded. "Sandopolis? So, we need to go to Angel Island." he reasoned. "Quite right, Tails! Those old echidna ruins are housing an ancient secret about the Chaos Relics, by my reckoning!" Pickle smiled. "Then we'd better hurry on over there! Before Metal Eggman wakes up!" Sonic said. "I HATE that hedge-hog! Bzzzzzzzzt... Sniii-iiii-vl-yyyy-yyyy!!" the robo-Eggman babbled as Sonic, Tails, Amy and Professor Pickle exited the base, followed by SPOT, who was finished chasing Jolt around now. Once they were gone, Ridley the Coati emerged from a hidden door. "Did you hear that, Metal Eggman? They're off to Angel Island." he muttered. "Scratch! Grrrrrounder! Behooooold! My latest brrrrilliant scheme!" Metal Eggman mumbled. "So, you're saying it's up to me to follow them? Very well, sir. I understand there's no time to properly report this to the real Eggman." Ridley mused, heading on his way.

Kosmo had gone to Angel Island, and found his way to a crossroads in the mountainous region of the island. There, he discovered Fera, Zeke, and Vortex facing off against Dr. Nammad, Agent 64, and a number of GUN robots! "Looks like Carrie was right." he mused as he approached Fera. "Kosmo! Good timing!" Fera said, focusing her attention on Dr. Nammad. "You're hopelessly outmatched, humans! Lay down your arms!" she warned. "What should we do, doc?" Agent 64 asked with concern. Nammad seemed deep in thought. "I don't, uh, really want to waste perfectly good uh, ammunition so, uh, quickly..." he muttered. Just then, Silver jumped down from a ledge on a nearby cliff, landing between GUN and Despair! "Stop! I won't let you get away, Covenant of Despair!" he shouted. Zeke groaned upon seeing Silver, but otherwise kept his mouth shut. Fera glanced at Kosmo. "Take care of him." she ordered. Kosmo was hesitant, but he called out to Silver. "Hey, you!" Silver stepped towards Kosmo and frowned. "Not now! Can't you see I'm busy here!" he said. Kosmo was about to say something in response, when Rainbow came up behind him! "Viola!! I found you! Now..." As Kosmo turned around, Rainbow stopped short. "Oh, wait, you're not Viola... EEEEEK!! Three!!" she screeched! "Owww!! My ears!!" Kosmo growled. Dr. Nammad was watching this and looked bored. "Maybe we should, uh, retreat

during this diversion." he muttered. "Kosssmo issss taking too long! Let'sss do ssssomething!" Vortex hissed. Fera rolled her eyes and jumped at Silver, knocking him aside with a darkness-charged kick! He was surprised, and tumbled into the nearby cliff wall! Meanwhile, Kosmo was herding Rainbow away from Despair a bit. "Go away!! Don't eat me! I didn't mean to bother you, mister freak!" Rainbow stammered. "SHHH! It's dangerous here." Kosmo whispered, ignoring anything she was saying. "...huh???" Rainbow gasped. "Oh, all right! Get that, uh, Beetle up here! I'll show them how I, uh, modified it." Nammad said. At that moment, things were about to get even dicier, as Sonic and company arrived!

"Huh? Wha? Hey, it's crowded up here!" Sonic observed. "Oh. Uh... It's, uh, Sonic the hedgehog. Just like Col. Gunner, uh, said." Nammad mumbled. "Hold that thought!" Sonic said quickly, dashing straight for Kosmo! "KOSMO!!! What are you scheming!?" he shouted. "Are you... with the Covenant of Despair?" Tails asked. Silver stood up shakily and looked at Sonic in shock. "Guys! You're ignoring the real threat!" he yelled. Fera noticed Professor Pickle with Sonic's group and glared at him. "Sonic... You brought a human here. You're against us!" she snarled. Kosmo gulped. "This isn't going to end well at this rate." he muttered, morphing into gargoyle form quickly and lifting Rainbow into his arms. "Hey, huh?!" she gasped. "All right, flying out! Let's go before they make a mess!" Kosmo said, taking to the sky! "Wait!! Three, lemme go! Take me back!! I gotta find my siiiiiister!!!" Rainbow protested. Tails gasped. "He... He's kidnapping that girl!? SPOT, do something!!!" he shouted. SPOT flew after Kosmo and fired some laser blasts, but they simply struck the cliff and caused a rock slide, blocking anyone from pursuing Kosmo! "Enough! These delays are getting on my nerves!" Fera growled. "I, uh, quite agree!" Nammad added. Silver decided there was just one solution. "Sonic! Let's team up!" he suggested. "I'm afraid you're all, uh, too late." Nammad said as a simple GUN beetle flew in front of him. "Huh? That's just a little baby-bot. I can take those without a hammer." Amy remarked. "You'd be wise not to underestimate Dr. Nammad!" Agent 64 warned. Nammad smirked. "OK, little uh, Beetle. Use Chaos Avalanche." he said. "Do what now!?" Sonic gasped. "I'd take cover! This area isn't stable enough for that!" Pickle warned. The robot started to glow, and the cliff started to shake as rocks started tumbling from above! "Yikes! I'd better move while the getting's good..." Silver said, rushing off in the direction Kosmo had gone. With the modified beetle tearing the cliffside apart, Fera quickly gave up on trying to fight Nammad as well, and hopped on Zeke's back to escape instead. Sonic and the others were forced to scatter, while Nammad and Agent 64 slipped out in the confusion.

Sonic wore a grouchy frown as he found himself carrying Professor Pickle to the desert region of Sandopolis. They soon met up with Tails, Amy and SPOT, who had beaten them to the desert due to Sonic's efforts to make sure the professor made it through the avalanche safely. Shadow and Omega were there as well. "Ah, here comes Sonic now..." Shadow muttered. "Sonic! Why won't you ever carry me like that!?" Amy pouted. Sonic put down the professor and shot everyone a dirty look. "Sorry to trouble you, Sonic..." Pickle muttered, "Ivan Nammad was never this cheeky when he was my student." he said. Tails chuckled softly. "Wow, professor... I had no idea..." he sighed. Shadow crossed his arms impatiently. "So, what's this nature walk you got organized, Sonic?" he asked. "We're going to check out the Chaos Relic ruins! Or something..." Sonic said. "The pyramid. We must go to the pyramid." Pickle stated. Omega pointed into the desert. "Eggman robots and Despair agents are ahead. We came to investigate." he reported. Sonic smirked. "Think Eggman and Despair are playing nice after Anubis blew up that digital castle?" he wondered. Shadow shrugged. "Let's just get moving. Obviously, the action's at this pyramid." he said. Tails turned to Amy. "We'll go on ahead! You watch the professor, Amy!" he suggested. "Hey! I wanna go with Sonic!" Amy protested, "Make Omega watch the professor! He's the slowest!" she snapped. "At least I can handle undersea navigation." Omega said. "Excuse us for

needing to BREATHE!!" Amy growled. "...huh?" Sonic and Tails said at once. Shadow started to leave without them, so Sonic, Tails and Omega quickly took off after him! "Stay with Amy, SPOT!" Tails shouted. As they ran, they could see a metallic blue figure in the direction of the pyramid. "...Metal Sonic!?" Sonic gasped. The robot spotted them, and emitted an angry buzzing noise, prompting several spiky sandworm robots to leap out from beneath the sands and start soaring towards them! "At last, Eggman's robots! Prepare for obliteration!" Omega said. "Errr, yeah. Great, Omega." Sonic sighed.

Kosmo had descended into a cave to escape the dangers above. However, now they found themselves in a cavern of bubbling lava and weak rock walls and floors. They were in Lava Reef Zone. Rainbow backed away a bit once Kosmo put her down. "Well, ha ha... This has been fun, Three, but I better get looking for my sister, now..." she stammered. "Your sister? Why would she be here? ...Is she with the Covenant of Despair?" Kosmo asked. Rainbow stopped backing away and stared at him. "Huh? You care??" she murmured. "Wait up, Kosmo! We need to talk!" shouted Silver as he dropped down into the cavern after them! Kosmo turned toward him defensively. "Hold up, Silver! FERA hit you!" he shouted. Silver looked at him strangely. "Huh? I know. I'm here to work on stopping the Covenant of Despair's plans." he said, "If you're not exactly with them... would you consider helping me stop them?" he wondered. Rainbow looked at him with awe. "Umm... Aren't you scared of him, Shiny?" she asked. "Why would I be?" Silver asked. Kosmo was surprised as well. "You really aren't scared of me? Not even a little? You don't hate me or anything??" he asked. Silver didn't even think about it. "No. So, uh... Could you lend me a hand? I don't really know what the Covenant of Despair is after here." he said. Kosmo thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right." he said. Rainbow smiled a little. "Well, it's settled! We're going the same way, so I'm in, too! Follow me, Three!" she grinned, running off ahead! "H-hey... The name is Kosmo!" he stammered, following her along with Silver. They were soon stopped at a sea of lava. "...Great..." Kosmo muttered. "Heeheehee! Look at you guys staring out at the fire pit! Can't you fly?" giggled someone above them! Looking up, they saw Whisk the Divine. "You again... Are you following us for giggles?" Kosmo asked. "Huh? Who're you? Gwaaa! Who am I!?" she shouted, flapping around in a panic. She then teleported down next to Rainbow. "Eeek! How'd you do that!?" she gasped. "Um... Do you have amnesia?" Silver wondered. "Huh? Oh! I'm Whisk! Hey, where am I?" Whisk said. Silver sighed. "Maybe we better bring her with us. She seems confused." he said. Kosmo shrugged. "I guess I better get started flying us across this..." he sighed.

As Sonic, Shadow and the others stepped inside the dark Sandopolis pyramid, Tails flew up and pulled on a primitive light switch to make the torches on the walls light up, and Professor Pickle quickly located a section of the wall with hieroglyphics that interested him. "Sonic, listen here! Granted, my ancient echidnaese is a bit rusty, but, loosely translated, this says: 'Hero Who Seeks The Truth; You must pass Three Trials to be deemed worthy...'" he said. "Hmm... Could these trials be a way to open the Chaos Relic ruins?" Shadow wondered. Pickle turned and nodded. "It's a place to start. I found more information. 'Trial the First: The Sands Of Time. Escape, Lest You Be Lost To The Sands Of Time For Eternity.'" he explained. Tails had SPOT's back opened up, revealing a keyboard and a screen for him to work with. "I'm setting up SPOT to be able to translate these hieroglyphs, in case we get separated from Professor Pickle." he said. They proceeded deeper into the pyramid, and soon came across what was surely the first trial, the Sands of Time. Quicksand was shifting extremely fast, and would surely swallow up anyone who stepped in it in seconds. However, the sands were solidifying in places, forming safe walkways which would, moments later, return to quicksand. "You'd have to be a quick one to get through here..." Shadow smirked. "...Race ya!" Sonic chuckled, and the two hedgehogs were off on a contest to

see who could navigate the quicksand maze the fastest! "Sonic!! Aw, I better follow in case they get sucked in..." Tails said, snapping his fingers at SPOT so that the robot would transform into hover-scooter mode. Tails hopped on and started to follow the speedy hedgehogs. "Watch over the professor, Amy!" he said. "Not AGAIN!!" Amy whined. Omega fired up his thrusters and started hovering over the sands as well, leaving Amy to pout. Sandworms leapt out of the quicksand as they made their way across, but Sonic and Shadow just bounced off their heads and kept moving, outpacing the quicksand every step of the way! "Slick moves, guys!" Tails said, flying past them. "Hey! That's cheating! Come back here!" Sonic shouted, leaping ahead to some stable sand a distance away in order to regain his lead! Soon, they set foot on the other side, and all of the quicksand solidified, which was fortunate because Shadow had to stop to fish out Omega, since his thrusters could not carry him all the way across. "Eggman will pay for giving me inferior thrust..." he mumbled. "You can come across now, Amy!" Sonic shouted back, only to receive no response. "...Amy?" Both Amy and the professor were gone! "...Um... Good thing SPOT can read the hieroglyphs, huh?" Tails muttered.

Kosmo's group soon found that Dr. Nammad had not come to Angel Island alone. GUN agent patrols were roaming around Lava Reef Zone, though none of them could be sure why. "We don't have time to deal with a grouchy military. How do we get past them?" Silver wondered. Kosmo started to glow, and in a moment he was in the form of his Agent 16 disguise, a purple-haired GUN spy. "Eeep! A yellow-eyed human!" Whisk yelped. Kosmo sighed and pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his coat pocket. "...Don't ask how these got there. I keep them in my sock." he muttered. "I thought you morphed them..." Rainbow said. Kosmo glanced out at the GUN Agents and nodded. "Wait until I get them to look away, then sneak by." he said, tiptoeing out to meet his fellow agents. He first met up with an agent with purple shades and red hair. "Huh... Agent 16! What rock have you been hiding under?" he asked. "Oh... Gunner has me lookin' for those experiments he's so fixated on. How's working for Nammad, Agent 77?" Kosmo replied. Agent 77 sighed. "I dunno, I just got transferred from Drol. I think he finds my shades too flashy." he grumbled. The other nearby GUN Agents started to gather around to shoot the breeze with "Agent 16," giving the others a bit of a distraction. "Wow... Three's really popular as a GUN guy. Who'da thought it?" Rainbow mumbled as she, Silver and Whisk slowly snuck past the GUN agents. Silver stopped to use his psychokinesis on some boulders on the other side of the agents, tossing them against the wall to create a loud noise! "What was that!? We'd better check it out!" Agent 77 stammered. Kosmo watched the others go and smiled. "I'll hold down the fort, fellas..." he said, turning to follow Silver and the others. Once they were safely away, Kosmo morphed back to normal, and then was startled by someone loudly calling his name nearby! "I've been looking all over for you, Kossmo!" Some nearby rocks were revealed to just be Vortex colored brown, and he startled everyone when he reverted to his normal colors! "Well, now that I have your attention... Let'sss have a little talk." Vortex hissed.

To be continued...

18 - Shadows of Chaos

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 18 - Shadows of Chaos
Stage 11-12(Hero & Dark 6) - Molten Sands
Minor Boss 7 - Shadow Chaos

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

While visiting Katie at the hospital, Kosmo was met with hostility and mistrust by Gemini, so he stormed out. He then met Carrie, a fellow experiment who seemed to sympathize with him. She sent him to Angel Island in search of "truth."

Meanwhile, Tails and Amy freed Sonic and Professor Pickle from Eggman's prison. The professor needed to research the mysterious Chaos Relics at the Sandopolis ruins, so they set out for Angel Island.

Once there, Sonic and Kosmo encountered Dr. Nammad and the Covenant of Despair in a standoff! Kosmo spirited Rainbow away from the danger, while Sonic and the others were forced to flee into the desert when Nammad caused an avalanche!

Sonic reached the desert pyramid and learned of 3 trials that must be passed. After passing the first trial, he found that Amy and Professor Pickle had gone missing!

Kosmo, Silver and Rainbow started to explore Lava Reef Zone, and were soon startled by Vortex. He had arrived with Fera, but where does his allegiance really lie?

Now, on to the next chapter!

As Sonic, Tails, Shadow, Omega and SPOT explored the pyramid, the floor beneath them suddenly collapsed, sending them plummeting into Lava Reef Zone! As Tails gently hovered down with his spinning tails, he looked worried. "I hope this didn't happen to the professor. He's too old for this kind of thing." he said. Shadow looked around the lava-heated caverns with a serious expression. "We need to find a way back to the pyramid." he grunted. Suddenly, Sonic started to run ahead. "I see someone in trouble!" he shouted. Up ahead, on a bridge of rocks in front of a waterfall of lava, Espio the chameleon and Charmy bee were surrounded by fiery Gohla robots! "Pitiful Eggman robots! Step aside and allow me to handle them!" Omega shouted. Instead, Shadow stayed put and tossed Chaos Spears at the small, orb shaped robots, smashing them one by one while Sonic tried to find an opening in their orbiting fireballs. "Hey... You don't have to hog all the action, Shadow." Sonic frowned. Espio bowed politely as they all gathered around him and Charmy. "Thanks for your help." he said. "Yeah... Well, good news guys. I found Tails." Sonic said. "They were looking for me?" Tails mumbled. "Aw, that case was closed a while ago. We decided his own robots did it!" Charmy chuckled, making SPOT stare at him awkwardly. "Right now, Vector's got us checking out these ruins on some Despair related hunch. But the floor caved in on us and dropped us in this lava pit." Espio reported. "I CHOSE to follow you, klutz!" Charmy teased, flying around playfully. "You wouldn't happen to have found a way back up, would you?" Shadow asked.

Charmy snickered. "Well, you could fly through the holes in the roof!" he said. Sonic and Shadow shrugged, and started to lead Tails and Omega away. "By the way... Why isn't Amy with you?" Espio wondered. Sonic stopped short. "Huh? Did you see Amy?!" he asked. "She was wandering the pyramid near where we fell." Espio said. "With some old guy." Charmy added. Sonic and Tails sighed. "At least we know they're okay..." Tails said. As they walked off, Charmy turned to Espio. "Hey, how come Vector never goes on these missions?" he asked. Espio shrugged. "He gives some lame excuse every time. Now he's dusting the office..." he muttered. Charmy giggled. "I say he's scared! It's been so long since our last adventure that he's gone all wimpy!" he said. Espio sighed. "Then we'll have to see that he regains his courage... Even if it takes something as petty as name calling!" he muttered, heading off deeper into Lava Reef, with Charmy following.

To their surprise, they found a stairway leading back up to the pyramid. Once there, Tails immediately went looking for a light switch, and once the room was illuminated, they found the chamber they had arrived at guarded by Shadow Chaos! "Huh? Is this... Chaos?!" Sonic gasped. Tails couldn't believe it. "Not again! It's that monster from the frozen ruins!" he stammered. Shadow Chaos approached them slowly, glaring at them. "Well, what do you think it wants?" Sonic wondered. "Revenge, maybe?" Shadow mused. "That's Shadow Chaos. It is a dark manifestation of Chaos that was released from the Chaos Shrine." said a voice in a nearby doorway! "Who??" Sonic mumbled, looking at the coats in the shadows. "Ridley! What are you doing here!?" Tails wondered. Ridley leaned against the wall nonchalantly. "More important, what are you going to do about your short-tempered friend over there?" he asked. Shadow Chaos hurled its arm at the group like a whip, forcing those fast enough to jump over it, but striking Omega! "Creature is hostile! Preparing to terminate!" he yelled. Ridley nodded. "Dr. Eggman's research states that Shadow Chaos is more volatile and prone to anger than Chaos. Watch out." he said. Sonic glanced at Ridley with alarm. "Eggman...? Errr, never mind, I'll get back to ya." he mumbled. Suddenly, making matters worse, several hands wrapped in black bandages burst out of the sand! "Whaaaaa!! Now what!?" Tails screamed. Mummies wrapped in black bandages rose up from the sand, glaring at them! "Well... Those weren't here last time I visited..." Sonic muttered.

Omega pulled in his hands and replaced them with lasers. "I will dispose of the bandaged intruders! You defeat the liquid life form!" he said. As Omega opened fire on the mummies, Sonic ran at Shadow Chaos. "All right, ya black drip! I'll knock the ink outta ya!" he shouted, leaping at Shadow Chaos with a homing attack, only for the "black drip" to jump back and evade it! "Huh? Hey, he's quicker than Chaos 0..." Sonic muttered. Meanwhile, the mummies were shrugging off Omega's bullets and kept coming at Shadow and Tails. "Gwaaaah!! You can't kill the undead!!" Tails yelled, hugging SPOT in his panic. Shadow scoffed. "If they died once, what's so scary about them?" he said. "Their inability to expire again." Omega replied, making Shadow look at him funny. "In this case, it appears logical." the robot said. While they were thinking of what to do about the mummies, Sonic was trying to corner Shadow Chaos. It would jump away and attack from a distance with its stretchy arms, forcing Sonic to jump back, too. "That does it... Eat spinning hedgehog!!" Sonic quickly curled into a ball and went into a spin dash, charging straight for Shadow Chaos! Surprised, the black Chaos tried to stop Sonic by shooting globs of black water from its hands, but Sonic sped past them and smashed into Shadow Chaos, exploding him into a puddle of black sludge! "Ick!! This thing's even more gross than the real Chaos!" Sonic groaned, shaking the gunk from his fur. While he was distracted, the black sludge started to reform behind him, casting a shadow over him. "He's behind me again, isn't he?" Sonic muttered. Suddenly, he was grabbed up in Shadow Chaos's stretchy, almost tentacle-like arm! "Aaaaugh!! Little help, guys!?" Sonic gurgled. However, they were busy watching Shadow tear through the mummies with his various Chaos techniques, sneaking up on them with Chaos Control, breaking them up with Chaos Spear, and burning

them to a crisp with Chaos Blast! "...Now I'm scared of Shadow." Tails murmured. Fortunately, during this Sonic was able to spin his way out of Shadow Chaos's clutches and land on top of the creature, exploding it again!

Ridley clapped as Shadow Chaos slunk away. "Nice moves, hedgehog." he said. "Uh, thanks..." Sonic muttered. "I think he was talking to me." Shadow scoffed. Sonic ignored him and turned his attention to Ridley. "You work for Eggman? So what do you want here?" he asked. "Ah, that would be telling." Ridley smirked. Tails stepped forward. "Hold it, Ridley! I bet you know a lot about Eggman's plan! Like what he wants the Chaos Gauntlets for!" he shouted. The coati rolled his eyes. "Can't you just be happy I sprung you out of jail, fox boy? If I hadn't suggested you and Eggman play nice, you and Knuckles would be stuck." he pointed out. Sonic growled at him. "Hey! Because of that, I got tossed in jail!" he snapped. "You got out, didn't you? I'm not here to toss you back in if that's what you're concerned about." Ridley shrugged. Sonic crossed his arms. "Anything Eggman's up to concerns me. It never ends well." he said. "For him. By the time he figures that out, I'm sure it'll be too late. So long!" Ridley said, turning to leave. "Halt, agent of Eggman!" Omega shouted. Ridley turned and raised his hand. "Chaos Splash!" A ball of water, shining with chaos energy, shot from his hand and exploded against the top of the doorway, splashing water down and obscuring their view of him for a second, which was all it took for him to escape! "Sorry, Omega. He's gone." Sonic said. "Who knows, maybe we'll run into Metal Sonic again." Tails added. "It is no use trying to cheer me up..." Omega grumbled. Sonic started to look around now that the coast was clear. "I wonder if those mummies were the second trial? Well, we won't know until we find more of those hieroglyphics. Grab SPOT and let's get looking, Tails!" he said, heading through the doorway Ridley had escaped through. Shadow looked in the direction Shadow Chaos had escaped. "I wonder... just what is that creature...?" he muttered before following after Sonic.

Vortex was now leading Kosmo, Silver, Rainbow and Whisk through Lava Reef Zone, talking while they walked. "I'm sssorry Zipp tried to kill you. I guesss now he'ssss tried to kill everyone." he said. Kosmo followed with his arms crossed. "And you say YOU want to help me? Yeah, and Bucky's a human." he scoffed. Vortex led them to a stairway before turning to Kosmo. "Our creator hasss hisss own planss... He'd much prefer to think of you ass friend rather than foe." he said. "He is NOT putting me back in a cage!" Kosmo growled. Vortex sighed. "Perisssh the thought." he hissed, motioning for everyone to head up the stairs. "Where are we going?" Silver asked. "And will there be drinks? This place is so HOT!" Whisk whined. "Ssstick with me, Whisssk, and you'll be okay..." Vortex said, blushing a little. "I saw that! Five's got a thing for Angel!" Rainbow teased. Vortex yanked Rainbow by the arm forcefully. "Ssssilence!!" he snarled. Rainbow made a motion as if to zip her lips. "I gotcha. Secret." she grinned. As she skipped up the steps, Vortex scratched his head. "Who told her I wasss Experiment 5?" he groaned. Up the stairs, they found themselves in a long hall within the Sandopolis pyramid. The lights were dimming since the last time Tails lit them, but there was still some light left. "Thisss pyramid isss the ssssubject of Dessspair'ssss raid." Vortex said. "Are they looking to swipe a mummy?" Whisk wondered. As Rainbow looked around, she saw a special-looking tablet covered in hieroglyphics. "Hey, I can read these!" she gasped. "Seriously!?" Silver gasped. "Well, I haven't seen words like this since I was a kid, but... It says something about passing three trials to prove worthiness." she said. "Three trials? What the..." Kosmo muttered. "Read the lassst part." Vortex said. Rainbow shrugged. "Trial the Second: The Sentries of Sandopolis. The Sentries Shall Annihilate All Who Are Not Worthy to Pass." she said. There were statues resembling Chaos all along the hallway. "I wasss afraid of thisss... It'ssss Chaosss Sssshrine all over again!" Vortex hissed.

They looked down the hall ahead of them. "Doesn't look so bad... Maybe the sentries are out on a coffee run." Kosmo said. "The sssstatuesss are the sssentriesss." Vortex hissed. Silver shrugged. "Well, we have to keep moving! Sentries or no sentries!" he said. As they started down the hall and passed the first pair of Chaos statues, the statues started to turn in place, facing them! "Omigosh! The statues are moving!" Whisk gasped. "I TOLD you!" Vortex growled. The Sentries of Sandopolis started firing strange beams from their eyes, forcing the group to scramble past them! Rainbow, however, ran around in circles for a few moments in her panic. "Don't zap me! Don't zap me!!" she yelled. Oddly, they didn't even look at her. Kosmo observed this and, once they were safely past the first pair of statues, he morphed into his echidna form. "The sentries didn't shoot at her, so maybe they like echidnas." he figured. He tested this theory right away, stepping back in front of the statues. They ignored him, just like Rainbow. "Well, we're safe." he said to her. "Great for you..." Whisk sighed. Suddenly, the lights went out! "Oh, just great! Now we can barely see!" Silver groaned. Making matters worse, a white shape emerged in the darkness. It had angry black eyes and pointed ears. "EEEEK!! GHOOOOST!!" Rainbow yelled. Several more ghosts started to emerge, and then began to chase the group down the hall! "Run for it!! Wait, the ssssentriesss!!" Vortex yelled, jumping as a beam came at him! Rainbow looked around and saw a pull-chain near the wall. "What's this do?" she muttered, jumping up and pulling it. The lights came back on, but not very brightly. "Aw, this light switch is broken!" she sighed. Whisk teleported past the sentries as they fired at her and ran over to Rainbow. "Let's hurry! I don't know where we're going, but I don't like it here!" she panted. "You need to see a head doctor, Angel. We're obviously going that way." Rainbow pointed. Looking ahead, Kosmo could see there were still several sentries blocking their path, and the lights were rapidly flickering. "I wonder if I could destroy those statues? ...Probably take too long with these ghosts." he sighed.

They continued down the hall, Kosmo and Rainbow dashing ahead to search for light switches while the others evaded the sentries' beams. There weren't quite enough light switches to compensate for the fact that the lighting mechanism seemed to have been damaged, so the group ended up chased by the ghosts periodically. "Thissss isss getting old!" Vortex hissed, turning to the ghosts in the darkness. "Wait... What are you doing?" Silver wondered. "Chaossss Hole!!" Vortex used Chaos energy to create a small black hole, which started to suck in nearby objects straight away! The nearest sentry statues ahead popped out of their bases and flew into the hole, and the ghosts started fleeing away from it! "Yessss, now who'sss fleeing in terror!?" Vortex smirked. Kosmo pulled a switch to turn the lights on, then looked back. "What in the...? Are you insane!?" he shouted. Whisk was flapping against the pull of the black hole, but was losing ground. "Nooo!! I don't wanna go in theeeere!!" she wailed. Silver grabbed her with his psychokinesis, holding on to the base of the broken sentry statue to brace himself. "Can you stop that thing!?" he shouted. Vortex glanced back at Whisk and gasped. "R-right away..." he stammered, raising his hands to the hole and concentrating on it in order to make it disappear. Rainbow then poked her head out from behind the other busted statue. "Is Two the only one of you guys who isn't the least bit scary?" she groaned. Before Vortex could answer, Kosmo stepped past the last pair of sentries. "Before you do anything crazy again, let me see if there's an off switch for the statues!" he shouted. However, the statues all returned to their neutral positions on their own now that someone had passed the trial. "Hey, that was fast, Kosmo." Silver said. "Uh, yeah... That's me. Gettin' things done." Kosmo muttered.

Beyond the second trial, Vortex looked around and found a stairway leading back down to Lava Reef Zone. "Come with me, everyone. There'ssss a quick sssstop we mussst make." he said. They climbed down and found themselves in a large chamber with small steam geysers in places on the floor, and a huge cliff overlooking the area. From the top of the cliff, Zeke the dragon soared down and blocked the

stairway they'd come from! "Well, well! You've done great, Vortex! There's Kosmo AND the white hedgehog!" he cackled. Zipp flew down as well, hi-fiving Vortex on arrival. "We've still got it, 'Tex!" he smirked. "Eeep... What's going on here?" Rainbow yelped. "Class reunion, maybe?" Whisk said hopefully. "Nope, we've been betrayed." Kosmo groaned. "Funny, I was going to say that!" said Fera the wolf, who was standing at the foot of the cliff with several uniformed Despair Agents! "Well, I wanted to find the Covenant of Despair. Thanks, I guess..." Silver muttered. "Don't thank me. I wasss sssent to take you out." Vortex hissed. Kosmo glared at him. "Me, too?" he growled. "That remains to be seen..." Fera sneered, marching her group of agents toward them. Their group was surrounded, and Silver wasn't about to join up with Despair. With Kosmo's allegiance unclear at best, this was shaping up to be a deadly trap...

To be continued...

19 - Beyond the Lava Reef

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 19 - Beyond the Lava Reef
Stage 11-12(Hero & Dark 6) - Molten Sands
Minor Boss 8 - Fera the Wolf

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair and GUN have both arrived at the Sandopolis pyramid. Sonic and Kosmo each arrived as well, seeking their own kinds of answers.

Teaming up with Shadow, Sonic began to explore the pyramid. After losing track of Amy and Professor Pickle and passing through Lava Reef Zone, they found themselves face to face with the creature that Ridley identified as Shadow Chaos. After defeating Shadow Chaos, they continue searching for their friends and looking to pass the Trials of Sandopolis.

After running into Vortex, Kosmo was led into the pyramid and faced the second Trial of Sandopolis. Working together, the group managed to pass dangerous sentry statues and ghosts, but were then led into a trap by Vortex! The Covenant of Despair was waiting in the next part of Lava Reef Zone, looking to get payback on Silver for getting in their way!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Sonic, Tails, Shadow, Omega and SPOT found their way to a tablet similar to the one Rainbow had read about the second trial from. Tails had SPOT translate the tablet, and he read the translation to Sonic and the others. "Trial the Third: The Chasms Of Oblivion. Press Onward With All Speed, Show Your Conviction, Or Fall To Fiery Oblivion." he said. Sonic chuckled. "Pay up, Shadow! I told you those mummies were the second trial!" he grinned. "This doesn't prove that." Shadow pointed out.

"Whatever..." Sonic said, looking ahead. There were several unstable-looking bridges teetering over the fiery lava pits of Lava Reef Zone below. The bridges were spaced out so that whoever crossed them would have to jump between them. "I guess those are rigged to collapse..." Sonic muttered.

"Affirmative." Omega said. Sonic glanced at Shadow with a smirk. "Rematch? You kinda had to double back to rescue Omega last time." he said. "Maybe the others should wait here." Shadow suggested. "I will scan for alternate routes." Omega said. Sonic and Shadow started across the bridges, which rapidly started to crumble as their feet touched them! While Tails and Omega watched them, though, some robots started coming up behind them. They were GUN's Bomb Hawk robots, a variant on the large flying Hawk robots which was equipped to drop bombs! Omega and SPOT detected their approach and turned around, immediately aiming weapons at them! "Huh?? Waaa! GUN robots!?" Tails yelled when he looked to see what the commotion was. "Dr. Nammad has ordered this area cleared of interlopers! Prepare to be removed!" one of the robots said. Omega immediately blasted that robot, and the other robots started tossing bombs in retaliation! "I will show no mercy to hostile GUN robots!" Omega said. Tails jumped back to avoid the explosions as SPOT brought up a shield to protect him. "Thanks, SPOT,

but I can handle this! Go into offensive mode!" he ordered. As SPOT retracted the shield, Tails jumped forward and whipped his tails at the nearest robot! "You asked for it, GUN!" he shouted. "Do not enter my firing range, fox boy..." Omega grumbled.

Sonic and Shadow sped through the bridges, jumping from one to another as they collapsed. With their speed, this test was a simple matter, and soon they landed on the other side of the chasms, Sonic stepping on the stable ground at the end mere seconds before Shadow. After the last bridge finished collapsing, they felt a loud tremor coming from somewhere below, and a platform attached to a cable slid out of the nearby wall, providing them with a way back. "Wait, there's no way forward?" Sonic stammered. "Sounds like some mechanism below was activated." Shadow muttered. Sonic peered down below. "You think Amy and the professor might head there?" he wondered. "It's our only clue." Shadow sighed. The two of them hopped on the platform and rode it back to the other side, where they found Tails, Omega and SPOT standing among a lot of busted robot parts. "GUN made it to the pyramid..." Tails panted. "Man, you guys sure slowed me down, Shadow." Sonic muttered. Shadow rolled his eyes. "Well, it seems the three Trials opened up something below. We'll have to find a safe way down." he said. Tails nodded. "I'm sure we passed some stairs leading down on the way..." he recalled. "What about Eggman's robots in the pyramid?" Omega wondered. Sonic, Tails and Shadow started to walk away, ignoring him. "I thought it was a valid question." SPOT's monitor read. "Stupid meatbags..." Omega grumbled.

Down in Lava Reef Zone, Kosmo, Silver, Rainbow and Whisk were surrounded by the Covenant of Despair, led by Fera. Zeke, Vortex and Zipp were there as well as some additional uniformed grunts. Fera glared at Kosmo with her good eye. "So here you are. How dare you defy my orders and run off!" she growled. Kosmo was silent, so Rainbow decided to try her luck. "Um... Howdy. Can I ask you something?" she said. Fera scoffed. "I'm busy, girl! Leave me be if you know what's good for you!" she shouted. Silver looked like he was about to speak up, but Kosmo did instead. "Stuff it, Fera!" he snapped. "Wh-what!?" Fera gasped, "Oh, I see how it is. That hedgehog over there has been messing with your head." she said, pointing at Silver. "I think you're the ones messing with people's heads!" Silver growled. "Yeah! Let my sister go!" Rainbow shouted. Fera stared at them. "Your sister...? Kosmo, what rubbish are they telling you?" she asked. Kosmo looked taken aback. "They don't have to tell me anything! Fera! Why would the covenant abandon an innocent fur and leave her for dead?" he growled. Fera crossed her arms. "Hm? Don't be so naive Kosmo. This is war. Casualties are inevitable." she said. "Duh!" Zipp chuckled. Kosmo started to growl furiously. "You... are no different than that snake Gunner!" he snarled. Zeke shook his head. "I'd watch what you say, Kosmo. She's no wimp like half the Covenant of Despair!" he muttered. However, that warning came too late. Fera was fuming! "Y-you... c-compare me... to GUNNER!?!?" she stammered. Vortex backed away a bit. "Sssshoot, hit the deck..." he hissed, while the other Despair grunts followed suit. Fera's body erupted in dark energy, and she hurled a ball of darkness straight at Kosmo! "I'll teach you some respect!!!!" she screamed. Kosmo was knocked backward into Zeke, who pushed him away. "Grah! Now you've done it, morphy!" he grunted. Whisk raised her hand nervously. "Do I have to be caught up in all this, too?" she whimpered. "What do you think, traitor sympathizer!?" a random grunt shouted. "Hey! Leave her alone!" Vortex yelled. The Despair members started moving in to rough up Kosmo's friends, while Fera planned to punish him herself!

"You will learn your place! Kneel before the Covenant of Despair!" Fera had charged some dark energy, and fired it at Kosmo from her hands as a black beam of darkness! He quickly morphed into a bat and started to fly around, evading the beam and heading towards her! She ceased firing her beam and

started tossing dark energy balls at him, knocking him away as he got close! As Kosmo fell to the ground, he changed into a bull and started to charge at her! "Are you kidding?" she smirked, jumping on his back and hanging on as he tried to shake her off! Meanwhile, Zeke had charged at Silver, only to be psychically tossed into the other Despair agents! A uniformed frog, Corky, jumped out of the way and hopped towards Rainbow. "Hello, girly! Whose side you on?" he grunted. "Not yours, Mr. Toad." she said. Corky bared his creepy sharp teeth in rage. "Mr. Toad!!? I hate people callin' me dat!!!" he shouted, lashing his tongue at her! However, Rainbow caught his tongue and gripped it tightly! "Hah! I knew a toad would do that!" she chuckled. "I'b nogh a thoad!!!" Corky protested with his tongue stuck outside his mouth. "I can't understand you, Mr. Toad. Give up, or I'll stick your tongue in one of those steam holes!!" she threatened. At the same time, Zeke was leading the minor Despair grunts in a charge at Silver and Whisk! "Bwaaaaa!! What's happening!? Why are you gymnasts attacking me!?" Whisk yelped. Silver used his powers to toss some of their magical and weapon projectiles back at them, but some were getting close! Finally, Vortex couldn't watch anymore. He stepped in front of Whisk and raised his arms. "Sssstay away from her, you ssscum!" he hissed. Zipp's jaw dropped, and he wasn't sure how to react. "Dude, Fera'll kill you!" he stammered. "That wolf isss not my massster!!!" he shouted, firing Chaos Inferno at some Despair mutts as they got a bit too close to Whisk! All the while, Kosmo kept trying different forms in his fight with Fera, but her dark powers did well to keep him at bay. Now, he was tossing his tail transformed into a mace at her, while she teleported around him! "Stay still, Fera!" he growled. "You seem to be tiring, Kosmo. Perhaps you are not as powerful as our master thinks." she taunted. Suddenly, she noticed the sorry state her allies were in after being battered by Silver, Vortex and Rainbow. "Grrrr! Those weaklings!" she snarled. Kosmo glanced back and chuckled. "I'm still better than most of your covenant." he said. Fera sighed. "Fine, Kosmo! Do as you like! I have more important things to do than mess around with an idiot like you!" she said, "Those of you who are NOT creations, come with me!" she shouted, leading most of her reinforcements away. "H-hey!! What about me, Fera!?" Zeke stammered as he was left behind. "Do you know what she's up to?" Kosmo asked him. "You kidding? She trusts the experiments about as much as you do." Zeke sighed. Rainbow went up to Zeke excitedly. "Oooh! What's your number?" she asked. "No way. I've heard about you. You're not calling me 'ten, ten, ten...'" he said hastily. "Good to meet ya, Ten!" Rainbow smiled. "Let'ssss jussst follow her trail." Vortex suggested. Kosmo stared at him, but Whisk smiled. "He's got my vote!" she said. "Can I come?" Zeke asked. "No way!" Silver shouted. Zipp fluttered beside Zeke as the others started after Fera. "Guess it's you and me, Zekers." he said. "I'm gonna find Fera. You go shoot yourself for calling me Zekers." he growled.

Kosmo, Silver, Rainbow, Vortex and Whisk continued through Lava Reef Zone, and came across a series of lava streams, with chunks of rock floating along the streams. "Oh, neat. Rafts. We don't have to fly across!" Whisk said. "It doesssn't look very sssafe, but Dessspair mussst have passed here." Vortex said. "Well, thanks for the info. I guess we're going that way, too." said Espio as he and Charmy came up behind them. "What the!?! Oh... It's only you, Espio..." Silver muttered. "Hey, why's this crowd hanging around Kosmo? Aren't you scared he's gonna EAT ya?" Charmy wondered. Kosmo growled softly and turned to the lava streams. "That's it! This place is too crowded for my taste! I'm going ahead!" he said, jumping to one of the rock chunks floating in the lava stream. "Oooh, wait! You can fly me across if the platform melts!" Rainbow shouted, jumping after him. "Come on, Charmy..." Espio said, jumping to the next rock platform. "Hey! We were here firssst!" Vortex hissed, leaping after them. With Silver and Whisk following behind, the group started a race from platform to platform across the lava floes, none wanting to be overtaken by the others. Eggman's Gohla robots were floating around the edges of the streams, and tried to fling their fireballs at them as they jumped by! "Whoa! Bad robot! I'm gonna sting you!" Charmy shouted, flying after one of the Gohlas in frustration. Whisk teleported to another of the robots

and kicked it into the lava. "Ooops, I hope no one comes looking for that ball..." she muttered. Kosmo morphed into an echidna, and he and Rainbow started to glide ahead of the others. "Follow me, guys! I think we're almost there!" Rainbow giggled. There were still more robots along the way, but Espio went to work taking them out with his ninja stars. "Sssshow off!" Vortex hissed. Soon, they reached the other side of the lava streams, and as Silver floated to solid ground last with his psychokinesis, he noticed everyone stopped, looking nervous. "What's up?" he asked. There were piles of metal GUN crates ahead of them, meaning GUN had set up camp nearby.

Arriving in Lava Reef Zone, Sonic found the GUN camp quickly. GUN Agents were gathered around a cavern where the rock walls seemed to change to a bluish crystal color. "That must be our destination." Shadow said. "It looks like the Hidden Palace..." Tails realized. Sonic stayed back, out of the GUN Agents' sight. "So, how should we get in?" he wondered. "Eliminate all impediments in our path!" Omega suggested. "They're GUN, Omega! They can't help it if they're getting orders from Gunner!" Tails protested. Suddenly, the GUN Agents started to leave their posts, heading over to check out someone else nearby! It was Agent 16, Kosmo's GUN Agent disguise! "Well, they obviously weren't expecting to see that guy..." Sonic muttered. "Let's hurry by while they're distracted!" Shadow said. While Kosmo was chatting with the guards, he noticed Sonic, Tails, SPOT, Shadow and Omega sneaking their way to the cavern. "Wha....ooooh, is that the time? Uh, yeah, I'm under orders to relieve you guys now." Kosmo stammered. "What... by yourself?" one of the agents muttered. "Well, who's gonna make it down here? You guys should move up to the pyramid..." he replied. However, a loud crash was heard as Omega stumbled over a GUN crate. "Stupid human clutter!" he yelled, forcing Kosmo to point frantically to maintain his cover. "DUDES!! It's one of Eggman's robots!!" he shouted. "Where!?" Omega stammered, making Sonic and Tails slap their foreheads in annoyance. "You, Omega..." Shadow sighed. "It's Sonic! Don't let him reach Dr. Nammad!" one of the GUN Agents shouted. "SHOOT! It's Experiment 3!! I'm outta here!!" shouted Kosmo, quickly morphing back to normal before the GUN Agents could turn around. "Gaaaah!! Monster!! What've you done with Agent 16!?!!" they shouted. "Wha? He ran, didn't you hear him?" Kosmo stammered. Sonic and the others proceeded into the cavern, only looking back briefly. "Did... Kosmo just help us???" Sonic stammered. Shadow shrugged. "Anything's possible..." he said with a knowing smirk.

Inside the cavern, they found themselves in the Hidden Palace where Sonic first laid eyes on the Master Emerald. Not far from the entrance, they found Professor Pickle standing before an open doorway, one that Sonic and Tails definitely didn't remember. "Professor!" Sonic shouted to get his attention. "Ah, Sonic... You're just in time!" he said. "The GUN blockade outside seems to imply we're late!" Shadow said. Professor Pickle nodded. "Well, it's a matter of perspective. Amy couldn't wait for you any longer and ran into this secret room here." he said. "Amyyyy...." Sonic sighed. The professor had a dire look on his face. "The... um... others got here first. Sonic, I'm afraid Amy is in danger!" he informed them. "Then we'd better hurry inside!" Tails said. Sonic glanced back. "Kosmo will be here any moment, I bet..." he murmured, "So, SPOT, you better stay with the professor. Get him outta here if Kosmo seems dangerous." he said. SPOT stepped beside the professor and sat down. "I will do my best." his monitor read. "Right... Well, then, I'll stay here and investigate this part of the ruins a bit." the professor muttered. Tails glanced at Sonic. "Kosmo just helped us. Do you really think he'd harm the professor?" he asked. "This talk is wasting time! Eggman's robots could be in there right now! We must proceed!" Omega declared, stomping into the secret doorway. Shadow shrugged. "There's enough to worry about without worrying about Kosmo. Let's keep moving." he said.

Kosmo, Silver, Rainbow, Vortex, Whisk, Espio and Charmy entered the room moments after the others headed through the secret doorway. "Some stealth back there, Kosmo..." Espio muttered. He and Charmy hurried through the secret doorway without stopping to notice Professor Pickle, but Kosmo stopped and glanced at him. "What's with you?" he wondered. The professor looked over at him and smiled. "Ah, did you come to research the ruins, too?" he asked. Silver scratched his head. "Um... no. C'mon, Kosmo, let's go." he said. "Ah, so you're this Kosmo Sonic was talking about..." Pickle muttered, "You don't appear dangerous." Rainbow's eyes lit up. "Oooh! Speedy's still here! He can help us!" she said. As they started toward the door, the professor spoke up. "I wouldn't go in there. There are GUN Agents and menacing animals in black uniforms... Perhaps you should wait out here with me and SPOT. It'll be safe here. We can discuss the mysteries of the ruins while we await Son--" he was interrupted by Kosmo. "I'm not afraid!" he said. "Maybe Whisssk sssshoud wait here, though." Vortex mumbled. Pickle nodded. "Merely a suggestion. I only want to help you." he said. Kosmo glanced at him curiously. "Why would you do that? ...You don't know me... or any of us." he said. Pickle smiled. "I'm a teacher. It's in my nature." he explained. "Hm? Your... nature...?" Kosmo muttered. "Yes... Think about it, Kosmo. What would you say is your nature?" Pickle mused, turning back to his examination of the nearby ruins. "Huh...? This guy... He's asking me questions like Shadow..." Kosmo thought as he and the others started into the secret doorway. "...Strangely nice, for a human..." he mumbled. The professor smiled to himself as they peacefully walked past him. "You know, SPOT, I think he actually has a good nature. Perhaps he just needs people to approach him with kindness rather than fear..." he said.

The secret door first led to a familiar mural, depicting a certain hedgehog battling it out with a massive machine holding the Master Emerald. However, this was a duplicate mural, and there was a path beyond it leading to an even more elaborate display... but that display was rapidly being demolished by the actions of the people who'd gotten there first!

To be continued...

20 - Hidden Palace Brawl

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 20 - Hidden Palace Brawl
Stage 11-12(Hero & Dark 6) - Molten Sands
Boss 11 - Anubis
Boss 12 - F-8S Hotfoot

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Sonic and Kosmo have each been exploring Sandopolis and Lava Reef Zone with a group of allies. Between the two groups, they passed the three Trials of Sandopolis, causing something to open in Lava Reef Zone below. After grappling with numerous foes, including Shadow Chaos and Fera, the two groups soon passed by Professor Pickle, who had discovered a secret doorway in the Hidden Palace. What awaits them inside?
Now, on to the next chapter!

Behind the familiar mural of the hedgehog fighting for the Master Emerald, there was a larger, more elaborate mural depicting all of the Chaos Relics. Drawn on the mural were several golden objects including a pair of gauntlets, a deck of cards, some winged boots, a shining cape, a sword, a key, and two familiar gold rings. Several drawings on the wall had been blasted, making it impossible to tell what they were, but it seemed apparent that there had been at least ten drawings there, and possibly more. An orange GUN walker was shooting at Zeke and Zipp near the back of the room, and Amy was backed to the wall, caught between them. Fera, Dr. Nammad, and Agent 64 were watching the battle, while Fera's backup was busy battling it out with Nammad's robots. Sonic ran right past the distracted grunts and approached the doctor. "Hey, Dr. Nutjob!" he shouted. Tails, Shadow, Omega, and Kosmo's group were not far behind. "Fera! What are you doing!?" Kosmo yelled. "Were you, uh, addressing me?" Nammad muttered to Sonic, turning around. Fera turned to Kosmo as well. "Go away, you treacherous worm! Unless you'd care to help us trash the place..." she said. Espio and Charmy were looking around from the back of the room awkwardly. "Rats! They came all this way just to blow the place up!" Charmy groaned. "It's probably best to go back and report this to Vector..." Espio muttered, the two of them heading out before things could get any further out of hand. "Wait, why would Despair want to trash this place?" Tails wondered. Dr. Nammad shrugged. "Ask, uh, them. I can only assume it's to, uh, stop us from discovering the, uh, secrets of this place." he said. Silver pointed an accusing finger at him. "Hey! Hold on! Your mech is causing a lot of damage, too!" he shouted. "Silence, hedgehog! I won't, uh, tolerate any back-talk from civilians! I'm, uh, wiping out these terrorists!" Nammad snapped. "What a human way to spin it!" Kosmo growled. "Shiny! Three! Stay focused!" Rainbow stammered. Sonic stared at her. "Shiny? Three?? They're all buddy buddy now?" he muttered. Tails tapped him on the shoulder. "Sonic! You should stay focused, too! Don't forget Amy!" he said. Amy was clutching her hammer nervously. "I'm glad SOMEONE noticed me back here!! That mech and that dragon are having a grudge

match and I can't get through!" she shouted. One of Fera's companions, Anubis the jackal, stepped away from the battle with the GUN robots to further block Amy. "You will not escape! You pesky hedgehogs have been following me for too long. This pyramid will now be YOUR tomb!" he snarled.

Sonic dashed away from Dr. Nammad and swiftly tackled Anubis away from Amy! "You want a pesky hedgehog? You got it!" he said. However, Kosmo suddenly dropped down between them in gargoyle form! Sonic raised his fists, but Kosmo pointed toward Amy. "Go! She's stuck in that crossfire, dummy!" he shouted. Sonic scratched his head. "If this is a trap, I'll--" However, Fera suddenly flung a bolt of darkness at Kosmo. "Grrr, YOU!!" she shouted. "Okaaaaay... Not a trap..." Sonic said, running for the GUN mech, which was shooting jets of flames at Zeke. "Hey, hothead!" Sonic shouted. Zeke dropped to the ground and rapidly flapped his singed wings. "Arrrrrgh!! This mech is crazy!!" he yelped. "And me without a bazooka." Zipp sighed. Dr. Nammad glanced at this scene and smirked. "Oh, uh, good. We're winning. Hotfoot, kill them all. The uh, girl, too." he said. "Wh-what!?" Kosmo stammered, turning away from Fera and Anubis suddenly. "You see? Humans are scum." Fera grinned. Silver stepped forward. "Kosmo, she's just trying to mess with your head!" he said. Suddenly, Agent 64 stepped in front of Dr. Nammad. "Doctor... The girl's just an innocent bystander!" he said with disdain. "Who's in, uh, charge here?" Nammad said, glaring at him. Anubis was taking advantage of Kosmo's indecision to try to sneak up on Sonic, but a Chaos Spear stopped him and alerted Sonic! Shadow jumped beside Sonic and glanced at Hotfoot. "I'll take care of this. You handle Anubis, Sonic." However, Hotfoot ignored the hedgehogs and charged at Zeke, making him panic and grab Amy hastily. "Waaah!! What're you doing!?" she shouted. "Human-err-hedgehog shield! Hedgehog shield!!!" Zeke screamed. Kosmo swiftly flew between Hotfoot and Zeke, morphing his tail into a fox tail to give the cockpit a swift tail whip! "Not so fast, scrap metal!" he growled. Observing this, Anubis turned to both Sonic and Shadow. "How amusing... Well, let's see if I can finish with you in time to destroy your girlfriend myself!" he snarled, creating fireballs in his hands!

As Hotfoot started to target Kosmo, something truly unexpected happened. Bolts of lightning streamed across the room and struck the mech, stunning it! "Get...away...from my experiments Nammad!!" Dr. Nammad turned with a start when he recognized the voice. "B-b-b-Bucky!!" he stammered. Kosmo stared for a moment, then shook his head. "I can handle this myself old man!" he shouted. Bucky pushed past any Despair or GUN forces in his way as he made his way through the room. "Huh? Bucky's here now!?" Sonic stammered. "You've got your own troubles!" Anubis growled. However, Fera saw Anubis facing both Sonic and Shadow and got an idea. "Bucky... I believe Kosmo's right. Let him handle Nammad. I hereby order you as an Agent of Despair to kill Sonic the Hedgehog!" she declared. Bucky stopped short, and the eyes of Vortex, Zipp and Zeke fell on him. "What?" he gasped. "You heard me... Or are you disloyal as well?" Fera sneered. Bucky looked around. "As well as who-- I mean... Very well, Fera..." he sighed, marching over to Sonic and Shadow, sparks starting to crackle from his fingers, "Sonic... I'm afraid this is the end for you!" he shouted. Making things even more dangerous, Metal Sonic came blasting into the room, accompanied by Char and Alpha, who immediately went flying towards Kosmo! "Wheeeee! Robot power! Hiya, freak face!" Alpha chuckled. "Hahahaha! If it isn't the guy that tried to eat us all! Let's gang up on him, Alphie!" Char giggled. Dr. Nammad looked a bit confused. "Eggman's robot? ...Whatever. It's, uh, helping." he sighed. "Ooops... He must've followed me..." muttered Ridley the coati, who was hiding behind the mural at the front of the room.

With intense battles shaping up, everyone started picking sides. "Metal Sonic! You dare show yourself again!? Now I will prove myself the superior robot!" Omega shouted, "Then, that crazed robot is next!" Silver, Rainbow and Whisk looked particularly worried about Kosmo. "He can't handle all of them alone..."

I have to help!" Silver said, rushing to join the battle with Hotfoot and Alpha. "Viola... What are you mixed up in...?" Rainbow whimpered, "Wait right there, Three! I'll help out, too!" she said, attempting to follow Silver, only to be blocked by Corky the frog. "Not so fast, lassy! Ya pulled my tongue, and ya snapped it back like a yo-yo a' pain! Now I git to do the same ta you!" he growled. Meanwhile, Tails started running to help Sonic, but Zipp got in his way! "Hey, squirt, you aren't planning to pick a fight with my boss again, are ya?" he said, pointing a gun at his head. "Don't make me squash ya, Zipp! You tricked me back at Chaos Shrine, and I won't let you mess with me again!" he warned. "Funny... Let's see how cute you are with bullet holes..." Zipp growled, forcing Tails to run as he started shooting at him! Whisk was looking around, seeming a bit dazed, but then looked at Kosmo and Silver. "Oh! They... They look familiar... And those robots are after them! No! I'll stop 'em!" she said, only to have her tail yanked by Vortex before she could go. "It'sss not our fight! If we want to do ssssomething, we sssshould help our creator!" he suggested. Whisk looked around. "Huh? Wha? The creator is in here? But if he created the heavens and everything, why's he need our help?" Whisk wondered. Vortex sighed in frustration. "Masster musst fix your mind..." he sighed. A number of GUN robots surrounded them at this point, so plans to help the others would have to wait. As the battle lines were drawn, Carrie walked nonchalantly into the room. "Well, now... This IS interesting, isn't it?" she muttered. Dr. Nammad's modified beetle blocked her way as she came up behind him. "Intruder! You dare sneak up on Dr. Nammad!?" the beetle yelled. "Who?" Nammad muttered, turning around. Agent 64 shrugged and concentrated on Kosmo while Nammad was distracted. "Guess I'm in charge... Hotfoot! Stop Experiment 3 at all costs!" he ordered.

Red energy spheres attached to Hotfoot's legs started to glow, charging the mech until it fired a burning laser in Kosmo's direction! He flapped out of the way, still in gargoyle form, but started getting pelted with shots from Alpha! "Hey! Outta my way jerky jerks! I can't see anyone's mittens in front of my face!" the crazy robot shouted. "Hey! Leave him alone!" Silver yelled, grabbing Alpha with his powers! His concentration was broken when Char smacked him in the head, and Alpha started shooting at him, too! "Ha! No one gets the jump on us!" Char said, sticking out his tongue. Agent 64 watched this nervously. "Hotfoot might be in trouble if Eggman's robot turns on it... Better send in some bombers." he said. Thus, as Kosmo attempted to approach the flamethrowing Hotfoot mech, he soon found himself circled from above by several Bomb Hawks! "Oh, just great..." he grumbled. Kosmo backed off as bombs came raining down towards him, and he morphed into a Flicky as Hotfoot started charging its mighty heat laser again! "I'd better be hard to hit right now..." he tweeted. Seeing the bombers, Silver smiled. "Just what I need!" he said, grabbing a nearby robot with his powers and hurling it at Alpha! "Whaaaaa!! Watch where I'm flying!!" he shouted, turning to blast the robot that was tossed at him. "Alphie! Focus! It was Silver!!" Char shouted. "If hitting a Chao didn't feel wrong, I'd toss you next..." Silver sighed. Meanwhile, Kosmo the Flicky flew above some of the Bomb Hawks, and Hotfoot fired its heat laser straight at them, the beam piercing right through the robots and forcing Kosmo to fly hastily out of the way! He then morphed into his own, purple version of Hotfoot while he was above some more bombers, crushing them under the weight of the heavy mech form! "He... He can copy Hotfoot!?" Agent 64 shouted, panicked. The mech backed away a step, unsure how to react. However, Kosmo could not copy its weapon systems, and could only shoot weak lasers from its guns. "How do you charge that thing?" he chuckled, morphing back to normal. "Get him!!" Agent 64 yelled.

Sonic and Shadow found themselves evading fireballs and bolts of lightning as Anubis and Bucky started their assault on them! Setting a wall of flame to separate himself from them, Anubis started to cast a spell. "Agents of despair, rise!! Break their bones while I burn them to ashes!!" he called, waving his hands over the ground. Suddenly, several mummified hands wrapped in black bandages burst out of the ground! "Pay up, Sonic. Seems the mummies were with him." Shadow said. Bucky zapped the

hedgehogs quickly while they were distracted, stunning them briefly. "You don't stand a chance against us both, Sonic!" he growled. "I got bored, like, twelve threats ago!" Sonic panted. As Bucky and Anubis were about to assault the stunned hedgehogs, Tails jumped in and struck Bucky with a tail whip! "Gah! Prower!!!" he yelled. "Leave Sonic alone!!!" Tails shouted. Zipp had tried to stop Tails, but GUN's robots intervened, and now he was busy trying to keep them off his tail. Anubis pointed at Tails, and the mummies started to approach him. "What!? M-m-mummies again!?" he stammered. "You will suffer for interfering..." Anubis growled. His smugness was interrupted by a homing attack to the face! "Put a sock in it, mummy boy!" Sonic said. Anubis retaliated by shooting jets of flames from his hands at Sonic, who sped around, taunting him as he evaded the fire! Shadow smacked Bucky with a Chaos Spear, prompting him to take to the air, firing streams of lightning from his fingers as Shadow sped out of the way as well. "You shouldn't have interfered, Shadow! It's a waste to destroy Gerald's creation!" he yelled. "Hmph... Just try to destroy me, old man!" Shadow scoffed. During this, Tails was frantically fleeing from the mummies. If Omega couldn't destroy them with explosives, he didn't expect he'd have better luck. "Go away! Go away!!!" he cried, dodging and weaving between Anubis's flames and Bucky's lightning as he ran. Little did he notice, the mummies were being burned and broken by those projectiles. However, Bucky soon gave up on Shadow and zapped the panicked Tails! "Hey! You dirty rat!" Sonic yelled, jumping away from Anubis to go after Bucky!

Rainbow had goaded Corky into using his tongue again, and managed to tie him up with it, to his aggravation. Omega and Metal Sonic had reached a stalemate when the Covenant of Despair agents in the room decided to try to eliminate them, and rapidly began to regret it. Vortex, Zipp and Whisk were rapidly taking out the GUN robots in the room. This left Hotfoot, Anubis and Bucky. Silver managed to grab Alpha again and hurled him at Hotfoot, confusing and angering the robot. "Stupid mech! You hit me! Now you go BOOM!!!" With Alpha suddenly distracting Hotfoot with a gunfight, Kosmo took advantage of this chance to target the machine's energy spheres. "Let's see what happens when I blow these up! Kosmos!!!" The powerful beams fired from his eyes struck one of the energy spheres as Hotfoot was charging it, causing the mech to backfire and explode! Meanwhile, Sonic and Shadow kept the pressure on Anubis and Bucky, but both of them kept attacking relentlessly. Tails backed off for safety's sake after recovering from Bucky's attack. Sonic and Shadow soon found themselves standing back to back between Bucky and Anubis. "That's it... Let's wrap this up, Sonic..." Shadow panted. "All right... Ready, set..." Sonic muttered. As Bucky and Anubis launched more attacks their way, Sonic bounced high into the air, while Shadow vanished with Chaos Control! In their confusion, Bucky and Anubis didn't see their attacks coming at each other right away! "Gaaaaaah!! Impossible!!!" Anubis wailed as Bucky's lightning zapped him! Bucky howled in pain upon being struck with the flames, and Carrie looked to him in panic. "Oh! Bucky!" she gasped. "Time I made my move..." Ridley said from the shadows.

In the aftermath of the battles, Kosmo and Silver turned their attention to trying to save Amy from Zeke. "Wait... What are you gonna do to me when I don't have a shield anymore?" Zeke asked, refusing to release Amy from his grip. At the same time, Fera was stepping in to deal with Sonic. "You're a much bigger pain in the butt than I imagined, Sonic." she growled. "Leave him, Fera! We're wasting time!" Bucky panted. "I'm not one of your mindless creations, rat!" Fera snarled, "You can't boss me around!" Just then, Amy stomped Zeke's foot and smacked his face with her hammer, attempting to escape from him! "YEOW! Why you little!!!" Zeke howled. "Amy! I forgot about Amy!!!" Sonic gasped. "Hm...? Oh, very well. You go, then. While you're gone, we'll annihilate this place!" Fera grinned, making Sonic hesitate. "Shadow and I can take care of her!" Tails suggested. However, Ridley suddenly blocked Sonic's path! "Well, you've no time for shenanigans right now, hedgehog! I suggest you clear out!" he said. Sonic was

surprised by him, and a sudden Chaos Splash in his face slowed him down even more! "Yaaaah!! Water!!" he cried. Meanwhile, Dr Nammad's modified beetle had its gun trained on Carrie, and she wasn't putting up a fight, so he turned his attention to the matter at hand. "Let's take advantage of all the, uh, diversions and have the, uh, beetle finish the job..." he muttered. However, Carrie was sick of standing idly by. "One side, doc! Comin' through!" she said, attempting to shove past him and make her way to Bucky. Nammad grabbed her arm and flung her in front of the beetle again. "I warned you not to, uh, interfere a moment ago, didn't I? Beetle, use Chaos Avalanche." he ordered. Agent 64's face turned white. "Wait! Stop!! YOU'RE CRAZY!! You'll bury us all!!!" he shouted, catching everyone's attention. "That sounds bad..." Silver muttered. "You don't scare me! I'm Experiment 14!" Carrie shouted, her fists glowing as she prepped an attack! "Fourteen, no!" Bucky shouted, causing Carrie to seemingly fumble, resulting in a pitiful punch that didn't even dent Nammad's beetle. "That's uh, it? Seriously Bucky?" Nammad mumbled. Fera smirked. "But I can finish it off, no problem!" she chuckled.

Agent 64 started to run like crazy, heading for the exit to the chamber. Dr. Nammad apparently intended to bury everyone inside the secret room so that they could never get in GUN's way again! With the situation looking dire, Shadow pushed Ridley aside so Sonic could go after Amy! "Sonic! This dragon has awful breath!" she cried. "...Hey!" Zeke frowned, only to get kicked in the face by Sonic seconds later, who then started to carry Amy away. Kosmo, meanwhile, had morphed into his own speedy hedgehog form, and dashed over to Carrie, picking her up and taking her away from Dr. Nammad! "Kosmo? You came to rescue me?" she stammered. "You seemed to be in trouble..." he said. Nammad was a little surprised by this, but it only made him want to hasten his attack. "Uhhhh... FIRE!" he yelled. "Let's try to make a massive explosion!" Fera smirked, approaching the beetle while charging dark energy, planning to strike it while it was using Chaos Avalanche! "Shiny! We gotta get outta here!" Rainbow cried, rushing over to Silver. The tremors caused by Chaos Avalanche drew SPOT and Professor Pickle's attention, and he ran into the room as Omega, Metal Sonic, Char and Alpha were leaving. "Retreat!!" Omega yelled. "Sonic!? Tails!? What's happening? The cavern is shaking!" the professor panted. "Eeeeeek!! Teleport power! Do something!" Whisk cried. "Wait, Whisk! Over here! I have an idea for you!" Bucky shouted, drawing her near most of the others. Kosmo took Carrie out of the chamber without looking back, while Zeke, Ridley and most of the Covenant of Despair were fleeing as well. As Fera fired a beam of dark energy at Nammad's beetle, Whisk began to glow brilliantly at the same time a terrible explosion rocked the chamber! Agent 64 waited for a moment in Lava Reef Zone, and the only one he saw emerge from the cave was Dr. Nammad. "Sir! How did you get out?" he asked. "Gotta be the, uh, shoes." he said, pointing at smoke trails coming from his boots, "Gunner should be, uh, pleased. We seem to have neutralized quite a few, uh, threats..." he grinned.

To be continued... .. BZZ BVZZZ ZZTZ!!!

The crumbling of the ceiling in the secret Hidden Palace chamber knocked open a part of the back wall, next to the Chaos Relic mural. Here stood Fera, safe after the explosion. "It seems I've located the true secret chamber..." she said, stepping into the dark room. Some dimly lit torches revealed a partially worn mural at the back, quite similar to the mural of the hedgehog battling the robot for the Master Emerald. This one, however, depicted two echidnas, on opposite sides. Between them, a hooded figure adorned with a crown stood mightily, red eyes piercing through the blackness covering his face. Fera gasped, seeming to recognize the echidnas in the mural. Parts of the mural were worn, and seemed to hide objects in each person's possession. Fera shrugged and blasted the mural to pieces using her dark magic, dusting her hands once that was done. "Mission accomplished..." she sighed, teleporting away. One chunk of the mural remained intact, depicting an echidna cloaked in an aura of darkness...

STILL to be continued...

21 - Sewage Scramble

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 21 - Sewage Scramble
Stage 13(Hero 7) - Sewage Scramble
Minor Boss 9 - Techno Sonic

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

As Knuckles set off on his way to rescue Sonic from the clutches of Dr. Eggman, Tails and Amy broke Sonic out themselves! After a treacherous journey through Sandopolis and Lava Reef Zone, they discovered a hidden chamber in Hidden Palace Zone, which the Covenant of Despair was fighting GUN to destroy! After a series of battles, during which Kosmo rendered his assistance, Fera and Dr. Nammad both set off massive attacks that started a huge cave in! Did they manage to escape? And what does all this mean for Knuckles?

Now, on to the next chapter!

Arriving at the nearest city, Knuckles parted ways with Cream, who was eager to reunite with her mother after Despair's attack on Central City. Heading for the nearest train station that would take him back to Troblusk City, Knuckles was soon stopped when a flash of light went off in front of him! Gemini the fennec emerged when the light faded. "Knuckles! There you are! Can you help me? I really messed up!" she said quickly. Knuckles was a bit startled at first, but quickly became annoyed. "Gemini!? ...Um, not to sound mean, but isn't there anyone else you can bug right now? I kinda got my own problems!" he grumbled. Gemini sighed. "Well, Copter's on the case... maybe. He might've given up, though. He's such a flake!" she groaned. "What case?" Knuckles asked, motioning for her to follow as he resumed walking to the train station. Gemini looked at him a bit awkwardly. "I kinda ticked off Kosmo and he stomped off. I'm worried he might go berserkoid or something." she frowned. Knuckles suddenly jumped, staring at her in disbelief. "Kosmo!? That dude who Tails went super to duke it out with!? Where'd he go??" he shouted. "I talked to some people and he might have hopped a train to the Mystic Ruins." Gemini said, pointing ahead to the station. "OK, come on! It might take both of us if he's on a rampage!" Knuckles said hastily, grabbing her arm and rushing off!

Upon arriving at the Mystic Ruins, they saw Shadow and Omega leaving Angel Island from the train, so they decided to start their search there. On the cliff just outside the entrance to Red Mountain, they found a crowd gathered. Sonic, Tails, Amy, SPOT, Professor Pickle, Silver and Rainbow were gathered along with Bucky and his experiments: Vortex, Zipp, Zeke and Whisk. "Uhhh, Kosmo's not heeere..." Gemini said skittishly upon seeing Silver, "Darn, him again? He ignored me before, but I'm sure he'd take me back home if I let him..." she thought. Knuckles looked around in surprise. "Hey! It's Sonic!? He's okay!? ...You mean I've been running all over the place for nothing!?" he groaned. Tails gasped upon seeing them arrive. "Oh, hey Knuckles! I, uh... I promise, I didn't forget about you!" he stammered.

"He forgot about me." Knuckles sighed. Sonic was busy getting chewed out by Amy for taking too long to rescue her. "This is not acceptable! I almost got carried off by Kosmo just like that color-challenged echidna did!" she growled. "Whatever echidna you're talking about, leave them outta this, Pinky!" Rainbow snapped. Knuckles crossed his arms. "Sounds like Kosmo WAS here..." he muttered. Gemini backed away a bit. "I'll hang back here, Knuckles. You talk to 'em. In fact, I think I'll find you later!" she babbled. "Huh?? Why???" Knuckles wondered. At this point, Silver noticed her. "Hey, Gemini!" he called, forcing her to act fast. "Abra-ka-warpra!" In a flash of light, Gemini was gone. Thanks to that light, the entire group finally noticed Knuckles. "Umm... Okaaaay." Knuckles mumbled, "Sonic! Sorry about... um..." he sighed. "Yeah, you were way outta line." Sonic smirked. "What!? Wait a minute!!" Knuckles snapped. "But... Tails told me how Eggman had you over a barrel... Guess I jumped to conclusions." Sonic admitted. Bucky cleared his throat loudly. "I think the fennec had the right idea. We'd best be off." he said. "Hey, what's Bucky doing here?" Knuckles wondered. "He got us outta a jam after trying to kill me." Sonic explained, slowly glancing at the rat, "Hey, why DID you do that???" he wondered. Bucky had already turned his back to leave, and quietly muttered something. "Humans turned their back on me... However... If the Covenant of Despair knew the truth..." he whispered, turning, "We'll be watching, Sonic. Until next time." he said, nodding to Whisk, who promptly teleported Bucky and his experiments away, save for Zeke. "Huh?! Oh, I get it. I'm to find the others..." Zeke groaned, wandering off slowly. "So, what now?" Sonic said, turning to his friends. Professor Pickle wiped his forehead. "I'm quite exhausted. I must return to my office in Central City and rest... Preferably with a plate of cucumber sandwiches." he sighed. Knuckles looked around. "I gotta get those Covenant of Despair jerks so they'll leave my island alone! ...They were just here, weren't they?" he growled. Tails nodded. "I suggest we try Eggman. He's mixed up in this somehow. He might know something we can use!" he said. "All right! I'll tag along, too!" Silver offered. Since they were generally in agreement, they headed off for the train station to once again set out for Troblusk City.

Joined by Rainbow, and parting ways with Professor Pickle, the group soon arrived at Troblusk City. They started on their way to Eggman's not-so-hidden base right away, but they soon stopped when they noticed Covenant of Despair agents hanging around in the middle of the street. What's more, Gemini was there shouting at them. "Hey, isn't that your girlfriend over there, Knuckles?" Sonic joked. "I'm not gonna dignify that with..." Knuckles muttered. Silver scratched his head. "What's she doing here? She shouldn't..." he said, trailing off. Eddie the hyena and Infin the weasel were there, keeping Gemini busy while some gargoyles in black suits were forcing open a sewer cover. "Why would they be sneaking into the sewer?" Tails wondered. Suddenly, a loud tremor startled the group, and drew their attention away from Gemini and Despair! "That came from Eggman's Eggtopia!" Sonic shouted. "Did you seriously just say Eggtopia?" Tails groaned. "What about Despair?!" Knuckles wondered. Sonic started running off in the direction of Eggtopia. "You better hold 'em off, Knuckles! I'll be right back after I check out Eggman's base!" he shouted. Tails, Silver and Amy immediately started to follow him, while Knuckles turned to the sewer entrance again. "Stop!! Come back, you crooks!" Gemini was shouting, following them down the open manhole! Rainbow started towards the sewer as well. "Come on, Knucklehead! Those guys might know about my sister!" she said. "Huh? You're still here?? ...Do you have to call me knucklehead?" Knuckles groaned. Suddenly, SPOT beeped loudly. "Alert!! Alert!!" it said. "Huh? Tails's mutt's still here, too!" Knuckles gasped. Rainbow checked out SPOT's monitor and gulped. "It... It says those guys have bombs!" she stammered. With that information, Knuckles, Rainbow and SPOT quickly jumped down into the sewer after them!

They found themselves in a long sewage canal, with rank water rushing by and a narrow walkway above the rushing water. Not far from the ladder leading back out of the sewer, they found a blue gargoyle

busily planting a bomb against the roof! Below the gargoyle, Gemini was standing face to face with Sergeant Drol and Agent 32! "Please! Listen to me! The Covenant of Despair is loose in the sewers!" Gemini shouted. "She's, uh, lyin'! We're, umm... contractors?" the gargoyle said feebly. Drol was covering his nose with his cape, a very displeased look in his eyes. "I am aware of the situation, you impudent girl! Why else would I be down here in these wretched depths!" he growled. He then spotted Knuckles and Rainbow, and the look in his eyes became more intent. "However, the petty schemes of the Covenant of Despair mean little to me next to the big picture, and I see people to interrogate." he said. Knuckles squinted at him. "Heeey... I know you... I think." he muttered. "Address Sgt. Drol only when he speaks to you!" Agent 32 shouted, seeming not to mind the stench of the sewer as much. Drol pointed at Rainbow. "You! Female echidna! You were at the shore before! Tell me, where was the stone tablet taken?" he asked. Rainbow shook her fist at him. "I don't know what you're talking about, Dork Knight! Besides, you tried to hurt my sister! Shame on you!" she yelled. "Hmm, I'll come back to you." Drol muttered, glancing at the other echidna, "Knuckles, isn't it? I've read up on you. You're USUALLY on GUN's side. Tell me about the Chaos Gauntlets." he demanded. "Umm... I think Eggman's got 'em." Knuckles mumbled. Drol was getting very frustrated now. "You THINK?! Are you echidnas taking me for a fool!?" he growled. Just then, a blast of ice came shooting at the gargoyle from behind the echidnas! "Halt! You will not activate that explosive!" said Freeze the Gizoid! "Whaa!?! Eggman's robot!? I'm outta here!!" the gargoyle shouted, flapping away hastily! Freeze glanced up at the bomb intently. "I will put this on ice. And pursue them." he said. "Looks like Eggman wants his base protected from the explosion, too." Knuckles smirked. Drol growled in aggravation. "If I waste any more time I'll be buried in this filth! Most unbecoming for GUN's Noble Knight!" he said. A familiar-looking robot started to stir behind him, and Drol stepped aside to let GUN's robotic copy of Sonic through! "Techno Sonic! Brute force seems to be the only way to obtain the truth from them! Show them GUN's true might!" Drol commanded!

"Target locked! Preparing to strike!" Techno Sonic said, swapping its hands for laser cannons! "Gemini, get back!" Knuckles shouted. "It's not... targeting me, is it!?" she gasped, scrambling to get away as it opened fire on her! "Wanda! Look out! Didn't you get back your wand!?" she asked noticing she wasn't holding it. "That gargoyle swiped it when I came after him..." she said hopelessly. Knuckles shrugged. "Then I'll take it on myself!" he said, running ahead and dodging lasers on his way to Techno Sonic, hurling his fist straight at the robot! However, he was repelled by an invisible energy shield around it! "I am Techno Sonic Mark 2, redesigned by Dr. Nammad! You cannot defeat me!" the robot declared, opening a hatch on its chest to reveal a sparking electrode. This electrode fired a burst of electricity at Knuckles, throwing him back even more, but he wasn't ready to quit yet. "Nice bug zapper... But in order to protect the Master Emerald, I have to be ready for cheap tricks like this!" he smirked. Rainbow and Gemini backed away a bit to give them room. "Not that I don't have confidence in you, but I'm gonna keep my distance..." Gemini sighed. Knuckles nodded. "Fine, and I'll take this even further away..." he said, gliding across the sewer water to the walkway on the other side! Techno Sonic tried staying put and shooting at him from across the water, but it was too easy for him to dodge at this range. "Don't let him escape." Drol ordered. Techno Sonic fired up its jetpack and flew after him, and Knuckles jumped and glided at him at the same time! The electrode fired at him again, but he glided right through it, clenching his teeth through the pain and punching at Techno Sonic's head, only to be repelled by the shield! It tossed him upward, and he kicked off the roof in order to strike the shield with greater force! Techno Sonic fell into the sewer water, and Knuckles glided back to the walkway Rainbow and Gemini were on. "I guess the shield was still affected by gravity." he smirked. "Don't be dumb. You just made Techno Sonic reroute his power too much." Agent 32 said. Knuckles shrugged. "Well, anyway, the water should short him out..." However, Techno Sonic quickly splashed back out of the water!

Suddenly, a laser was fired at Techno Sonic, striking the electrode on its chest! Its shield had apparently been shorted out by the water, and the laser caused an energy overload in the electrode, causing Techno Sonic to explode! Turning around, Knuckles saw Metal Sonic standing beside Rainbow and Gemini! "{Metal Sonic is the superior Sonic!}" the small text on his eye monitor read. "Our robots stink..." Agent 32 groaned as Drol growled. "So... You were threatening us?" Knuckles said, smirking at them. "Colonel Gunner was right about you... About all of you!" Drol growled, stomping his way past them toward the sewer exit, "Come on, Agent 32! We must find the Chaos Relics!" he sneered. Once Drol was gone, they noticed that Freeze was also gone, but Metal Sonic remained. "Well, can't count on Freeze to stop any bombs other than those that threaten Eggman. Can you find 'em, Gemini?" Knuckles asked. "The Covenant of Despair swiped my wand! I... I'm useless..." she whimpered. "No, you're not, Wanda! We'll all look together!" Rainbow said. "Emergency!!" SPOT said loudly. "Huh? SPOT? I didn't notice you there!" Knuckles gasped. "I know..." SPOT's monitor said, "Explosive signals detected. They will be detonated by remote." it added. "Well, good thing you can detect them... So, why is Metal Sonic still here?" Knuckles wondered. "Yeah, I thought we left you at the floaty island, Robo-Speedy!" Rainbow said. "{Mission Directive: Locate Bombs beneath Eggman's Eggtopia & disarm.}" Metal Sonic's text read, not that anyone could read it. "Seriously, WHY did Eggman take away your voice??" Knuckles groaned. "Maybe he couldn't afford a voice actor...?" Rainbow mumbled. "{Knuckles is following same directive... Team up advised.}" Metal Sonic "thought." The robot pointed deeper into the sewer, and the trio around him all crossed their arms. "I guess... He wants to go with us?" Gemini figured. Metal Sonic nodded. "See, Wanda? You're not useless!" Rainbow said as SPOT started to lead them to the next bomb. "Great... I'm the robot-whisperer..." she sighed.

Soon, they found that the sewer tunnels were less like tunnels and more like an expansive underground complex, a mazelike facility with water being routed in numerous directions. "Shouldn't the sewer water all be going to the same place...?" Knuckles muttered. "Oh, when is anything ever simple!? It HAD to be a stinkin' maze, so we'd never find the bombs in time!" Gemini shouted. Suddenly, the group was startled by something leaping out of the sewer water! "Gah! Techno Sonic lives!!" Knuckles yelled, while Metal Sonic started shooting at the intruder straight away! "No, Robo-Speedy! Wait! It's Bluehair!!" Rainbow stammered. A dazed man in an alligator suit stood smoking from Metal Sonic's lasers, a robotic crab latched to his "tail." He groaned weakly. "Everyone in this city stinks! Sic a crab on me and flush me down a toilet, will ya, city!?" he grumbled. Knuckles blinked a few times. "Are... are you okay??" he muttered. "Huh? Oh, sure! I'm the Great Gator! I love a good swim in stinky, swamp-type water! Um... Please get this pinchy guy off my tail..." he yelped. Gemini reached for her wand, then shrugged, realizing she didn't have it. Knuckles pulled the robot off of Gator, but then several more of Eggman's Crabmeat robots jumped out of the water! "You can shoot them, Robo-Speedy!" Rainbow shouted. SPOT opened fire on the robots instead, Metal Sonic refusing to shoot Eggman's creations. "Can I borrow this?" Gator said, taking the robot Knuckles had pulled off of him and using it to pummel another one! "There! Now who's the smart guy!?" he grinned, only to find the remaining Crabmeats aiming missiles from their claws at him. "Aw, fudge..." With the robots distracted by Gator, the group hurried on their way. "Sorry, Bluehair, we got bombs to find!" Rainbow said hastily. "I'll never eat seafood again!!" Gator shouted.

They didn't get far before running into Vortex and Whisk, who were drawn to the noise caused by Gator and the Crabmeats. "Oh, Knucklessss. We meet again." Vortex said. "No time, Bombs!" Knuckles shouted. "Wait, that'sss our concern, too." Vortex said hastily. "Now what are YOU doing here? You on a date?" Rainbow giggled. Vortex glared at her. "We were keeping an eye on Ssssonic! But Zipp detected the bombsss... Much more presssing." Vortex hissed. Whisk smiled. "Hi, my name's Whisk! Who are all

of you?" she asked. Rainbow quickly realized that she didn't even recognize her. "It's me, Angel! We were JUST on an adventure together!" she said. "Hm? Oh, nice to meet you, Angel!" Whisk said. Rainbow took a moment to process what she'd said. ".....Huh, WHAAAA???" she gasped loudly. "Real battle of wits going on here..." Knuckles sighed. Gemini squinted at Vortex. "Hey, don't I know you?" she asked. "Oh, uh, Gemini, this is Vortex. He helped save you from the Lost Ones when you were a dragon." Knuckles explained. Vortex's eyes widened. "Wait... Thiss isss the dragon!? ...Never mind. We could ussse assssissssss.... Argh!! We could ussse help finding the bombsss." he said. Gemini nodded. "I suggest we split up. SPOT, give the chameleon the coordinates for one of the bombs, and we'll chase another of them." she said. SPOT displayed a map of the sewer with a few blips on it, which Vortex studied quickly. "Good thing I have a near-photographic memory..." he muttered. Metal Sonic buzzed impatiently, and Knuckles nodded in agreement. "Let's get this show on the road, before we explode!" he said.

With Vortex and Whisk heading off in a separate direction, the rest of the group went through a short series of corridors before finding the next bomb. The gargoyles had attached it to the roof, hanging over the rushing sewage water. "Great, and we sent that winged whatever-she-was with Vortex..." Knuckles groaned. Making matters worse, Lospector floated out from under the water! "Greetings and cowabunga, sewer spelunkers! Your ol' pals the Lost Ones are here to save you a lot of trouble... and blow you to smithereens right now!" he grinned. Spiderlike lospides rose from the sewer water with him, their arachnid legs somehow skating across the surface as though it were ice! "Spiders to climb the walls... Why not doom us faster and use the bats?" Gemini sighed. Lospector chuckled. "Thanks, Gems, you just gave me Plan B! ...But I'm actually planning to blow the bomb myself. Lospides, keep 'em busy!" he said, flying off toward the bomb while the spiders skated towards Knuckles and the others! SPOT and Metal Sonic started to fire at them, but their lasers had limited effect on the Lost Ones! "Quick, use your superpowers, One! ...errr..." Rainbow said, glancing at Knuckles and quickly realizing her mistake. With things looking bleak, they suddenly received some unexpected aid! Adam the bat flew up to the bomb, pulling it off the roof and away from Lospector! "Hey... can you do that!?" he stammered. "Bomb's not motion activated. Despair gets what they pay for." Adam said. Evelyn the fox stepped between Rainbow and Gemini, firing a futuristic laser that disintegrated any lospides it contacted! "We got this, guys!" she grinned. "E-eve?! Adam!?" Gemini stammered in disbelief. "No time to chat! Gotta get rid of this bomb!!" Adam shouted, flying off as fast as he could! "Hey, come back with my toy!" Lospector shouted, only to almost get zapped by Evelyn's blaster! "Eeep... I didn't like that I could feel the heat from that... Know what? I got better things to be doing!" Lospector said, flying away through the roof! Gemini growled at Evelyn. "How could you miss!? You could've..." Evelyn gave her a stern look and shook her head. "Well, better catch Adam. He doesn't know how to disarm that thing!" she said, running off. Knuckles stood there with a dumbfounded expression. The lospides that weren't killed vanished under the water once Lospector was gone. "Ummm... I guess... Find the next bomb, SPOT?" he muttered. Gemini looked off in the direction her friends had gone intently. "Oh no... They've come to take me home..." she thought.

To be continued...

22 - The Wrong Wand

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 22 - The Wrong Wand
Stage 13(Hero 7) - Sewage Scramble
Boss 13 - Eddie & Infin

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After reuniting with Sonic, Knuckles was forced to split up with Sonic again when both Eggman and the Covenant of Despair proved to be up to something separately in Troblusk City! Following Despair into the sewers, Knuckles teamed up with Rainbow, Gemini, SPOT and, oddly, Metal Sonic to find bombs planted all over the city's underside!

They found Vortex and Whisk along the way, who studied the bombs' coordinates from SPOT's monitor so they could search them out separately.

At one of the bombs, Knuckles's group received surprise aid from Adam and Evelyn, who Gemini realized were there to take her home. The pair had to leave in a hurry, and with time running out, can our heroes find the bombs fast enough? And will Gemini's mission end regardless?

Now, on to the next chapter!

Vortex and Whisk had fought their way through a number of Eggman's Crabmeat robots, which had apparently been released into the sewer as part of a plan to infiltrate the city. Now, they'd found one of the bombs, attached directly to the underside of a manhole cover. "Thought they could hide it from ussss there, hm?" Vortex muttered. "What do we do? That thing's blocking the way out." Whisk said. "We're not looking to get out! Errr... Jusst leave thiss to me." Vortex sighed. "It's stinky down here." Whisk protested. While they were talking, a beam of ice struck the bomb, freezing it solid and startling Vortex! "What'ssss thiss!?" he hissed. Freeze stood nearby, glancing up at the bomb. "Explosive disarmed. There are still more down here." he said. "Disssarmed? It'sss jusst cold!" Vortex snapped. Freeze started to run off. "If you do not trust me, attempt to dissect it yourself!" the Gizoid shouted. Vortex glanced up at the ice and shivered. "Umm... Let'sss go..." he sighed. "But what about that thing?" Whisk asked. "I sssaid let'sss go!" Vortex hissed, running off. Whisk shrugged, and flapped up to check out the frozen bomb. A loud crash made Vortex spin around, and he saw the explosive device in pieces on the floor amidst chunks of ice. "Um... I broke it..." Whisk said sheepishly. "Happy? Ice disssarmsss the cheap explossive. NOW can we go?!" he groaned. Whisk sighed as she followed him. "I don't think he likes me..." she muttered.

Knuckles, Rainbow, SPOT, Gemini and Metal Sonic were riding the rushing water of a sewer pipe, escaping from lospides that Lospecter had left behind. It was like a smelly, disgusting water slide, but soon they saw a mass of ice blocking their trip! "Iceberg, dead ahead!!" Rainbow shouted. "Good, grab

it!" Knuckles gasped. Climbing onto the ice, the group was soon able to get back to stable ground. "That icy robot must've been through here." Gemini realized. However, SPOT was still detecting a bomb nearby. "Guess he missed something." Knuckles groaned. "{Impossible. Explosive must have been planted after Freeze passed by.}" Metal Sonic figured. Before they could start looking for the bomb, they found themselves getting surrounded by Crabmeats and Kuragens, Eggman's aquatic robots! While Knuckles and SPOT started punching and blasting the bots, respectively, Rainbow and Gemini were stuck hiding behind Metal Sonic. "Can't you reason with them or something?" Gemini asked. Metal Sonic stood firmly, doing nothing. "Are you helping us or what, Robo-Speedy!?" Rainbow yelled. Metal Sonic beeped a little. "{Analyzing situation... Eggtopia may still be in blast zone. Delay does not compute.}" As Crabmeat missiles came searing toward Rainbow and Gemini, Metal Sonic suddenly shot them out of the sky! He then sped into the fray and started to whack the robots with homing attacks, his metal body being impervious to the electric shocks emitted by the Kuragens! "About time you lent a hand, Metal Sonic!" Knuckles said. Rainbow smiled and started to run ahead once there was an opening. "I'll scout ahead! Let's stop those bombs!" she cheered. "Hey, wait! You don't know that's the way!!" Gemini yelled, chasing after her. They came running back moments later, being chased by Iospides again. "Wrong way!" Rainbow shouted. SPOT started leading them down another path, so they hurried to escape the monstrous spiders, swiftly knocking out any robots that happened to get in their path on the way.

They spotted the third bomb, planted on yet another ceiling, but the Iospides were still chasing them. "All right! Deal with the bomb! I'll squash these spiders!" Knuckles yelled. "Solare!!" A sudden beam of light took out the Iospides before Knuckles could approach them! Gemini gulped, and looked around to see Cuthburt the alligator stomping toward her. "You know how many flushed into the sewer jokes I've had to endure from Adam thanks to you, Gemini!?" he growled. "Oh, geez!" Gemini whimpered. Her teacher, Fred the fennec, was standing behind Knuckles, and was the one who had taken out the spiders. "Better stop that bomb. Poppation!" Fred's spell caused the bomb to burst into a harmless display of fireworks, and once it was gone, he turned his attention to Gemini. "T-teacher! What are you doing here!?" she stammered. "Teacher?" Knuckles muttered, scratching his head. "At the moment, I'm defusing bombs..." Fred sighed, "We have to have a talk, Gemini, but first we must get back your wand." he said, crossing his arms. Gemini was a bit surprised how quickly he'd put together the fact that she'd lost it. "O-okay..." she mumbled, quietly sighing with relief that they didn't have to have that talk NOW. SPOT beeped a bit. "Alert!! Alert!!" Glancing at the robot's monitor, they could see that the remaining bombs were all being set up in a single location. "Well... They sure don't like whatever's above that place..." Knuckles muttered. When they looked up, Fred and Cuthburt were already gone. "Well, Freddie's awfully quick. Oh, wait... He coulda teleported us! Aw, he's as bad as Mousy!" Rainbow groaned. "Teleporting's not that easy! It's better to warp small groups around so no one gets stuck in a wall." Gemini said in his defense. Knuckles shrugged. "Whatever! Let's get to those bombs before they blow up the whole city! That many bombs in one place will make a big explosion!" he said, heading off in the direction SPOT started to lead.

They soon found themselves wandering an abandoned subway tunnel. "Are we lost? Why does the sewer lead to a subway?" Knuckles wondered. "Looks like poor planning." Gemini said, noticing water on the tracks. On the way, they saw a gargoyle in a suit, looking a lot like the ones that were with the Covenant of Despair. "Cover me. I'm going in..." Gemini growled, stomping over to him. "Hey, what's a matta you?" the gargoyle grunted. Gemini stomped his foot and shoved him against the wall, growling at him. "My wand! You got it? Know who has it!?" she yelled. "Jeez, youse one whacked out fox! Where's the resta da gang when I need 'em?" the gargoyle groaned. Knuckles and Rainbow stood there awkwardly. "Umm... Maybe point us in the direction of the bombs?" Knuckles suggested. The gargoyle's

eyes went wide. "Ya kiddin me? B-bombs!? I thought we was doin' another smash and grab job! That coven's outta there gourds!" he yelled. "This guy talks funny. Funnier than Six." Rainbow muttered. "What are you saying? You guys in the suits aren't with Despair?" Gemini asked. The gargoyle nodded. "We're a, uh... family business." he grinned. Knuckles crossed his arms. "Ho ho, so it's a gargoyle mafia. Cute." he said. "Ya won't think it's so cute when we fly ya a mile out over the ocean and drop ya... wearin' cement shoes!" he growled, reaching into his coat slowly. Suddenly, Metal Sonic appeared beside him and grabbed his arm, twisting it and making him drop the gun he was reaching for onto the ground! "Gah!! Youse mugs are as nuts as Despair! I'm flyin' out before I blow sky high!" he growled, jumping into the air and flapping his wings hurriedly to get away from them! Gemini started after him, but Knuckles called after her. "He doesn't have it, Gemini! C'mon, let's get going before WE get blown sky high!" he suggested. Gemini sighed. "You're right... But I don't know what good I am without my wand..." she whimpered.

SPOT led the group to a large storage room that Despair had mostly cleared out in order to plant the remaining bombs. Infin and Eddie were there with a few of the gargoyle mobsters, including one particular blue one. "HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!!" Knuckles shouted as he entered! "Geez, what now!?" Infin yelled as he turned around. "Eeee hee hee! Keep working, 'goyles. I know how to handle this goof." Eddie chuckled. "Hey, he can't boss us around! Shoot him, Infin!" one of the gargoyles yelled. "How about you do as he says... or I shoot the bombs?" Infin said, turning and pointing a gun up at the nearest bomb. "You- you don't got the guts!" the gargoyle stammered. "Don't I? Wanna know how I lost this foot?" Infin grinned. "Y-you... You mugs're... insane....!" the gargoyle gasped while his associates whimpered. "Heehee! Who says 'mugs' anymore? Unless they mean cups, that is." Rainbow chuckled. Knuckles growled softly. "Enough! Eddie, stop it right now! You're gonna get people killed!" he shouted. "Eeee hee hee hee! That's the idea, stupid!" Eddie laughed. "Get back my wand, Knuckles. I'll put them in their place!" Gemini said. "Grrrr!! I'll put them in their place myself!" Knuckles shouted, running at Eddie and hurling a punch at him! As the punch connected, however, Eddie vanished and Knuckles stumbled over! "AAAAH, What the!?" Knuckles stammered! "Eeee hee hee hee! BOO!!" Eddie said from behind the girls! "Eeeek!! Sneak attack!" Rainbow shouted as she and Gemini backed away! "Magic!? No... wait..." Gemini murmured. "Hey! What's the big idea!?" Knuckles yelled. Eddie grinned. "The idea? It's me... Kicking your butt... And taking the Master Emerald. Eeee hee hee!" he cackled. Infin turned, pulling a second, more high tech gun from his coat. "We'll waste ya here, and blow the police station and the GUN outpost ta boot!" he grinned. "Huh? This wasn't about Tubby?" Rainbow asked. "Eeee hee hee! Why yes it was! The tubby old police chief! We'll be taking out the humans who run this town..." Eddie began, "...And then we'll own it!" Infin finished. "That's gotta be the most disgusting thing I've ever heard!" Gemini shouted. "Let's clobber these psychos quick so we can stop those bombs!" Knuckles said. Eddie's hands glowed slightly, and then two more Eddie's appeared beside him! "Eeee hee hee hee hee hee!! My illusions will make quick work of you! Eeeeeee hee hee hee!" he laughed. "Aw, it's an evil version of Mousy..." Rainbow sighed. "Illusions? Hah! I'm not gonna fall for that! You're going down!" Knuckles shouted.

Infin was about to pull the trigger while Knuckles was distracted with Eddie, when Metal Sonic fired his own laser at his feet! "Wuzzat?? A robot?" he grunted. "{Eggtopia bombers located! Destroy!}" flashed on Metal Sonic's monitor. Infin pointed his shock gun at Metal Sonic, and the two started exchanging shots while Knuckles charged at the three Eddie's. He took a swing at the first one and it vanished. "Missed me!" Eddie chuckled, "Wrong again!" he laughed as Knuckles knocked out his other copy. He looked around and couldn't see the real Eddie anywhere. Suddenly, a feral alligator tackled him from behind, and he started struggling to force it off of him! "Eeee hee! The things people dump down here!"

Eddie taunted. "Where'd this even...come from!?" Knuckles yelled, struggling. Rainbow slowly approached them, looking for an opening. "St-stay back! It'll take your arm clean off!" Knuckles shouted. However, Rainbow simply struck the gator in the back with a swift karate chop, and it disappeared in a burst of smoke! "Wha...WHAAAT??" Knuckles stammered. "Mousy's critters just take one good hit to knock out. This guy's the same way!" Rainbow grinned. Eddie chuckled and jumped over the echidnas, landing as a quartet of Eddies juggling lit sticks of dynamite. "I'm inspired by our explosive plot to blow you to bits! Try and stop me! Eeeee hee hee!!" Rainbow chuckled nervously. "Did I mention my sister works for you guys?" she whimpered. Knuckles shoved her out of the way and started trying to fight the four Eddies, though he was forced to duck and dodge as the hyenas tossed the dynamite back and forth between each other, laughing at him. "Wise guys... How about this, then?" Knuckles said, changing his tactic into attempting to catch the dynamite tossed at him! "Not sure how this illusion-dynamite works... But the hot potato's gonna burn you!" he said, tossing each stick of dynamite to a different Eddie than it was originally heading for! The hyena seemed to have trouble keeping up as he tried to control all four of himself at once, and soon they missed catching the explosives and were blown away! Once there was just one Eddie left, Knuckles attempted to throw a punch at him again. However, he once again fell right through him! "I think that one almost hit me! Eeee hee!" Eddie chuckled from behind him!

"Quit playin' around! We gotta finish these chumps before the cops catch wind of what we're up to down here!" Infin shouted, struggling to avoid Metal Sonic's homing attacks. "Dr. Eggman has already caught wind of this!" shouted Freeze as he, Vortex and Whisk charged into the room! "Another bot!? Oh dis is just great! Eddie, this operation's blown!" Infin yelled. Eddie backed away from Knuckles and glanced at Infin. "Eee hee... Wasn't that the point, Mitch?" he asked. "I-It's INFIIIIIIN!!! This is why I didn't wanna put my real name on the application form in the first place!" the weasel whined. "Um... Do you surrender yet?" Knuckles asked. Gemini, who had been sneaking toward the blue gargoyle the whole time, suddenly spoke up. "Before you go, GIMME BACK MY WAND!!!" she cried. "Make me!" the gargoyle said gruffly, seeming unfazed that she'd been sneaking up on him. "C'mon, give her back her toy." Whisk said, nudging him. This startled him. "How'd you!?" he yelped. "Whisssk!! Come back here until the bombsss are disssarmed!" Vortex yelled. Eddie grinned. "Eeee hee! That reminds me! Detonate the bombs!" he said. "Ignore him, boys." the lead gargoyle ordered. "No time to waste! Give back my wand right now!!" Gemini insisted. "No way! You'll zap me wit it again!" the gargoyle protested. Infin once again pointed his gun at the bombs. "Right, then. I'll shoot those bombs real quick!" he growled. "One, do something!!" Rainbow shouted to Knuckles. "I'm NOT One-err, Punchy!!" Knuckles shouted indignantly. Before Infin could shoot, Freeze ran ahead and blasted the bombs with ice! Infin fired anyway, but this only dislodged the bombs from the roof, making them crash down uselessly. "Whew! That was close... If Freeze hadn't froze them, they'd blow sky high!" Knuckles sighed. Infin looked completely dumbfounded. "What kinda cheapo explosives we got here!? A little ice clogs 'em up!?" he grumbled. "Oh, well. Guess we can settle for causing a ruckus in the city on our way back to base. Eeee hee hee!" Eddie chuckled. "Huh!? Hey, wait a second! Don't even think about it!" Knuckles warned. However, Eddie started to cover their escape with a swarm of illusion locusts! As Despair and the gargoyles began to escape, Gemini and Whisk grabbed the blue gargoyle. "Hold still, you!" Gemini yelled. "Eeee hee hee! So long!" Eddie cackled in the distance as the locusts vanished. "That was gross..." Rainbow sighed. "I will pursue them!" Freeze said, joined by Metal Sonic as he left.

"No more bombs detected..." SPOT's monitor read, allowing Knuckles to breathe a slight sigh of relief. However, the blue gargoyle was breaking free of Gemini and Whisk's grip. "Outta my way, or get a gut fulla lead!" he warned, pulling out a gun. "Wanda!!" Rainbow shouted. "Whisssk! Teleport!!" Vortex yelled. "Don't shoot me! Don't shoot me!" Whisk cried, vanishing from the sewer in a flash of light!

However, she'd left Gemini. "You gonna move!?" the gargoyle growled. "I... can't..." Gemini whimpered. Knuckles and Rainbow started toward the gargoyle, but they wouldn't make it. Suddenly, a large flash of light emerged in front of the gargoyle! Fred, Adam, Evelyn and Cuthburt stood between the gargoyle and Gemini, and quickly surrounded him! "Who what where!? What's goin' on!? What's happening!? My parole officer was right!!" the gargoyle stammered in a panic. "Teacher!" Gemini cried in relief. "Hand over the wand... Or I'll show you what MY wand can do!" Fred warned. "And if ya don't believe in magic, then how about I just rough ya up!?" Cuthburt growled. "We got ya surrounded, chump!" Adam added. "You okay, Gemini?" Evelyn asked. Gemini nodded, and the gargoyle started to freak out. "I didn't sign up for all this! Bombs and illusions and crazy magic people! I'm goin' straight! Take the stick! TAKE IT!!" he screamed, thrusting the wand into Fred's hands and flying as fast as he could for the exit! "I WANT MY NANA!!!" the gargoyle cried as he left. Vortex shrugged and left now that the drama seemed to be over, and Knuckles and Rainbow rested nearby while Gemini had a proper reunion with her friends. "T-teacher Leo... I... I'm so relieved to see you..." she sniffled. Fred had a stern look on his face. "Gemini.... You're in serious trouble, you know that? Time travel is not to be trifled with..." he said, glancing over Gemini's wand, "Wait a second... This isn't your wand!" he gasped. "What? Of course it is! What are you saying?" Gemini stammered. "I don't doubt that the gargoyle had nothing to do with this... He could barely tie his own shoes." Fred muttered to himself, "How have your spells been lately?" he asked. Gemini thought back. "Well, they worked. I even healed someone with a gunshot wound! Only... it wasn't enough..." she said. "Are you sure the wand's a fake?" Adam wondered. "Positive. It should have put the victim in stable condition if you used the spell right. The wound couldn't be fully healed, but... The victim couldn't walk?" Fred asked. Gemini shook her head. "What's going on here...?" Knuckles wondered, noticing the looks of concern among Gemini's friends. "Was your wand stolen at any other point?" Fred asked. "Eggman's Tree Fort! That Dr. Nammad took my wand! He was experimenting on it! I thought I got it back..." Gemini explained. "Eggman has a Tree Fort?" Knuckles wondered. Rainbow nodded. "It's in the Mystical Ruins. Not far from your island." she said. Fred looked thoughtful. "He must've crafted a replica for some reason... and he still has the real wand! Gemini, we must recover it!" he said urgently. "Awww... Gemini, you really are a troublemaker!" Cuthburt groaned. "Well, I guess I'll leave you with your friends here, Gemini. I'd better catch up with Sonic!" Knuckles realized, starting off to find a way out of the sewer with SPOT. "Good luck, Wanda!" Rainbow said, following Knuckles. "Thanks, Rainbow..." Gemini said. "I'm gonna need it..." she thought. She had to get her wand back, but GUN would not be easy to infiltrate...

To be continued...

23 - Demon Island

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 23 - Demon Island
Stage 14(Dark 7) - Despair Corridors
Minor Boss 10 - Patch & Daisy

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Separated from Rainbow, Punchy went out in search of her, but found her sister Violet instead. To secure her aid finding Rainbow, Punchy went looking for a key to the deepest chamber of a sunken ruin. Inside was the Chaos Wing, a golden cape, but Freeze got away with it. After getting into a battle with the Deathbringer, the ruins started to collapse! Violet was forced to drag Punchy away from the Deathbringer. On the way out, Punchy saw a vision of Tikal, Shadow Chaos, and a mysterious wolf named Howler. He awoke in Troblusk City with Violet, and they set out to find Rainbow at last. Meanwhile, Kosmo went on his own journey through Sandopolis and Lava Reef Zone. Reaching a secret chamber of Hidden Palace Zone, he was drawn into a battle with GUN's Hotfoot mech! When GUN and Fera were about to launch attacks that would destroy the secret chamber, Kosmo hurriedly rescued Experiment 14, Carrie, who sent him to Angel Island to begin with. Now, on to the next chapter!

Kosmo and Carrie were just outside Sandopolis, having just recently gotten out of the pyramid. "Well... thanks for your help." said Carrie, standing a bit awkwardly. "What was all that about, anyway?" Kosmo wondered. "The ruins told the story of the Chaos Relics. Seems like the Covenant of Despair didn't want anyone to know about it." Carrie explained. "And what do you know about it?" Kosmo asked. Carrie sighed. "I was there to support Bucky, Kosmo... He's my creator..." she said. Kosmo growled softly at the mention of Bucky. "But he's NOT our father! He's made that plenty clear to me!" he snapped. Suddenly, someone called out to Carrie. "Fourteen!!!" said Talon the griffin as he flew toward them. Carrie rolled her eyes. "Yeesh! What's the big emergency, 'Fifteen!?' Can't you see I'm talking, here?!" she shouted. "Huh?" Talon muttered, glancing at Kosmo, "Oh, hey there... I'm Experiment 15... Who are you?" he asked. "Experiment 3..." Kosmo grumbled. Carrie crossed her arms impatiently. "What IS it?" she snapped. "I need your help! I... I've run into a bit of trouble infiltrating the Covenant of Despair..." Talon admitted. Carrie stared at him in bewilderment. "What.... You mean they saw you!?" she groaned, "I guess we'll have to pick up this conversation later, Kosmo!" she sighed, starting off with Talon. "Hmm... Maybe..." Kosmo muttered, watching them. "Come on, ya klutz!" Carrie shouted to Talon. "Sorry!!!" he groaned. Unbeknownst to them, Kosmo morphed into a mouse and started to follow them inconspicuously...

Figuring on checking to see if Rainbow had gone home, Punchy and Violet arrived in Station Square. To

avoid attracting attention, Violet had made a stop to change her clothes before taking the train, and was now wearing a simple, pale lavender miniskirt with blue along the edges. She looked much more similar to Rainbow in this outfit. As the two echidnas started their stroll through the city, they noticed Copter standing next to a taxi cab, talking to Mia, the driver. "Stop beating yourself up, Copter... You can't control everything." Mia was saying. "I guess... But I don't know what the heck I was thinking! That whole thing was disaster waiting to happen!" Copter groaned. Once Violet recognized him, she immediately grew furious. "YOU! What are you doing loitering around here!? Didn't you have a mission!?" she yelled, making Copter jump! "Ummm.... Hey, Punchy. And, Violet! Nice outfit. Are you two out on a date or something? 'Cuz I gotta warn ya, Punch, she's a nut." he muttered. "SHUT UP, COPTER!" both echidnas shouted at once! "I'm not on a date! I'm looking for Rainbow! She's Violet's sister! Have you seen her?" Punchy said. Before Copter could respond, Violet interrupted. "I'm a nut, am I?! How'd you like my foot up your--" Just then, Mia honked her horn to get everyone's attention. "Hey, guys! Does Rainbow have rainbow quills?" she asked. "Well... yeaah...." Copter mumbled. Mia nodded. "I saw her follow that Experiment 3 creepo out of town... When I was on my way to visit Katie at the hospital." she said. Punchy crossed his arms. "Copter, did you put the reporter in the hospital?" he asked. Copter glared at him. "Why is that your first thought!? Why not Kosmo?" he protested. "You've got more reason." Punchy said. Violet was looking a bit concerned at this point. "My sister's following Kosmo?" she wondered. Copter groaned. "Ugh! I'm not gettin' away from him today, am I? Fine, let's get to Despair Castle and look for 'em." he said. "You mean... The Covenant of Despair's base!?" Punchy asked curiously. "Long story." Copter shrugged. Violet sighed. "And how will we get to Demon Island exactly? I kinda separated from the group to follow this clown!" she pointed out. "See, Copt? Would my date call me a clown?" Punchy said. "I could see that." Copter joked, "Well, I could call the Hurricane, but it only seats two." he muttered. "Anyone call a cab?" Mia grinned, pulling a special lever that caused her cab to transform! It suddenly sprouted wings, enabling its flight mode! "I warn ya, I charge extra for flight fare!" the cat smirked. Violet stood there looking dumbfounded, and Copter glanced at her and simply said "Don't ask..."

With Violet to guide them, the flying cab soon found its way to the dark, foreboding floating landmass known as Demon Island. Parking the cab in the outer woods, Mia remained behind while the others headed for the imposing black castle at the center of the island. As they drew close, they noticed the area was in an uproar. Basker the hound and Conan the raccoon were outside the front gate, and quickly spotted them. "Violet?? What are you doing out of uniform?" Basker asked. "Ah... Commander Basker..." was all Violet could manage to say. "You're behind this, aren't you, Copter!?" Conan shouted, claspng the hilt of his sheathed blade. "Behind.... what?" Copter stammered. "Intruders have infiltrated the castle. Some reports indicate that they are with GUN, but they have yet to be confirmed..." Basker explained. Copter frowned. "I don't work with GUN, Conan." he growled. "psst... Should I be hiding?" Punchy whispered, though he was ignored. "Violet! No time to change back into your uniform. Pray that your allies recognize you. Get looking for those intruders." Basker ordered. Violet stood up straight. "R-right! Yes, sir!" she said seriously. "What about Rainbow!?" Punchy complained. Violet turned in his direction. "Can it. You look for Rainbow! I've got friends here to account for, too!" she whisper-shouted. "Well... least you're not ditching her for evil..." Punchy whispered back. "Hey! Talk to your boyfriend on your own time!" Conan shouted. Punchy looked at him indignantly. "Do we really look like we're--" He was interrupted by Basker. "I don't care! You can help or stay out of the way! Pick one!" he said, turning back to the gate. "Nice chat, Conan." Copter muttered. "Next time, you must permit me to trim those scruffy tails of yours..." Conan replied, not letting go of his sword. "The intruders blew a hole in the wall. We'll head them off this way." Basker said, leading Violet and Conan inside. Copter and Punchy thus started looking for the hole in the wall. "Kosmo could be behind this. He was ticked about what

happened to Katie..." Copter said. "What if Rainbow's with him? Oh boy..." Punchy gulped. "Hey by the way, what's with the Despair bracelet, Punchy?" Copter asked as they walked. "Well... don't panic if I suddenly go dark, okay?" Punchy sighed. They passed by a single grave stone with flowers left in front of it. Several names had been carved into the stone over time, it apparently being the only form of memorial the Covenant of Despair possessed. A violet and a daisy were carefully preserved at the very center of the memorial, directly in front of the stone. Copter stopped there, just for a moment, a melancholy look on his face. Despite his differences with the covenant, he still felt obliged to pay his respects...

Rouge the bat was flapping around the high ceiling just inside the castle where the hole in the wall was blown. She perched herself atop a demonic statue high on the wall, resting and waiting for the commotion below to die down. Soon, Copter and Punchy came through the hole in the wall, and quickly ran into Daisy the skunk and Patch the fox, who were standing guard at a nearby hall entrance. "Oh, hey. You're that guy that found the key at the underwater palace. Hey, what'd you do with Violet!?" Daisy questioned. "Hee huh? You kidnap her? Are you the intruder?? Can I kill you?" Patch asked excitedly. "Nice friends, Punchy." Copter smirked. Daisy looked from Punchy to Copter, then back at Punchy. "Wait, you're friends with that jerk, Copter!? That's even worse!" she yelled. "My friends? Sounds like you're the one they know, Copt." Punchy remarked. Suddenly, Rouge swooped down next to Punchy. "Guard, what're you... Aw, Punchy! Your green hide blew my cover!!" she shouted, having mistaken him for a certain gargoyle. "Rouge!?" Punchy gasped in confusion. Patch had a goofy look on his face when he saw the bat girl. "Burglars!! Hee hee! Hot winged burglars!" he babbled. Daisy growled and smacked him in the back of the head. "This is no time for hot wings... You little..." she grumbled. Just then, Fera emerged behind Patch and Daisy. "I've got it, you two." she said. "You! You're with the Covenant of Despair, too!" Punchy gasped. "Uhh... Uniform's a dead giveaway, Punchy." Copter muttered. "You didn't forget my name, did you? I'm Fera!! By the way, how's that delightful darkness of yours developing?" the wolf grinned. Punchy shrugged. "I guess it... Comes in handy?" he mumbled. Fera nodded. "Hm... And what's happened to your little friend?" she wondered, "Ah, well. Why don't you show us your progress?" she smirked. "Punchy.... You're not with the Covenant are you? You're not really THAT dumb, right?" Rouge asked. Fera frowned. "Silence! You'll answer for your treachery against furkind after we test Punchy's dark power!" she shouted.

Punchy shook his head. "I don't think now's a good time for Dark Punchy." he said. Copter nodded. "Good call, pal." he smiled. "Hee hee! Dummy! Anytime's a good time for darkness! If I could use it, I'd be zapping stuff like crazy!" Patch giggled. Fera crossed her arms. "Hmph... Daisy, Patch... I think he needs convincing. So convince him." she ordered. Daisy drew her katana, while Patch produced some nunchucks. "Easy, there... You're Violet's friends. I don't want to hurt ya..." Punchy said, backing away. "Well, I don't mind hurting those numbskulls!" Copter growled, rushing in only to get knocked backward by a blast of darkness from Fera! "We're testing PUNCHY... Though I sense darkness in you, too... but it's far too suppressed to be useful." she scoffed. Copter stood up slowly. "Huh? ...Whatever. Knock their heads together and let's go, Punchy!" he shouted. Patch's nunchucks slapped Punchy across the face, starting to get on his nerves as he laughed at him. "Hee hee! I'll pummel you into a pile of busted green quills!" he taunted. As Daisy slashed her sword at him, Punchy was forced to jump back to avoid a nasty cut. "You did something to Violet, didn't you!? Where is she!?" the skunk shouted. This line of questioning made Punchy even madder. "Idiot! You're the ones who ditched her in a collapsing ruin!" he snapped, attempting to punch back, only to be easily evaded and whacked by Patch's nunchucks! "Ow!! Cut that out!!" he yelled. "Hee hee! I haven't even started trying to kill you yet." Patch grinned. "Punchy, don't let them get to you! That's what Fera wants!" Copter shouted. Punchy rolled his eyes. "I KNOW,

you idiot! Why aren't you in here helping, anyway!?" he growled. Copter was about to say something, when he noticed Fera's hands glowing with dark energy. "Is she doing something to you...?" he wondered. As Daisy and Patch moved in for another attack, though, Rouge swooped in and tried to strike them, causing Fera to try to zap her like she'd done to Copter. She'd gotten pretty close, though, and Daisy got caught in the crossfire! "Yow!!!" she yelped. "Um... Oops." Fera frowned.

"Grrrrr!! Get out of the way!!" Punchy shouted furiously. "Hee... hee? Guy looks mad." Patch said, almost seriously. "That's it... Use that rage..." Fera whispered. The Despair Seal started to flash, and a wave of darkness shot from Punchy's body, knocking Daisy, Patch and Rouge away! "Rrrrrgh.... Wait.... E-enough!!" Punchy yelled, stopping darkness before it could take hold of him. "...What the heck are you!?" Daisy stammered. "I... I don't know..." Punchy panted. Fera shrugged and started to walk away, motioning for Daisy and Patch to follow her. "Let's secure these corridors..." she said. Once she was gone, Rouge approached Punchy. "Well, I'd say you owe me one for that... Care to help me look for the stuff the Covenant of Despair stole?" she asked. "Hm? You mean like the Chaos Boots?" Copter asked. Rouge smiled. "See? You're helping already. I knew this'd be worth it. We can also keep an eye out for any other Chaos-related trinket they got." she said. Punchy nodded. "Well... Might as well, while I look for Rainbow or Kosmo." he figured.

As they proceeded into the dark corridors of Despair Castle, they soon found some familiar faces fighting each other. Vector the crocodile was trying to catch E-2X Alpha as he flew around, shooting lasers randomly. "Huh? How'd these two even get up here!?" Punchy stammered. "You kidding? Eggman's robots get everywhere somehow." Rouge groaned. "Omigosh! It's another talking cucumber! And some flying fudge-pops!" Alpha gasped. "Did he just call us fudge-pops...?" Copter growled. Alpha turned to fly away, seeing that he was outnumbered. "Okay! I'll go look for shiny Chaos dealies!" he said as he escaped! "What!?! He's looking for the same thing we are?" Rouge stammered. Vector shrugged. "Yeah, seems Eggman's team up with Despair's just a ruse." he said. "Yeah... Nice deduction... How are you here!?" Punchy asked. "Oh! Uh... heh heh... A detective's got his secrets..." he replied. "You get captured or something?" Copter wondered. Vector frowned. "Well, anyway, I tracked you guys down! Why don't we work together to solve what these Despair goons are up to?" he suggested. Punchy shrugged. "What's one more goofball wandering with us? I'm sure we won't look AT ALL suspicious..." he mumbled.

Continuing their exploration, they tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. If Violet could wander around out of uniform and not get attacked, maybe they could pull it off, too. With Covenant of Despair agents running to and fro searching for the intruders, Copter and Punchy tried to keep a similarly urgent expression. They were passing by what appeared to be a shooting range used to train new recruits when Corky the frog stopped them. "Oi... You ain't got uniforms! Wait a mo, I know dat bat gal! She's dat lady what works fer GUN!" he shouted, whipping his tongue into the shooting range and pulling out a gun, which he quickly took into his hand and pointed at Rouge! "Why'd I have to be so glamorous? Fame isn't such a good thing for a spy..." she sighed. Before Corky could shoot, she flew out of the way, swooping down and kicking the gun aside! "Hey! I need backup here, putzes!!" Corky yelled, getting attention from several Despair agents of varying species. "Well, there goes stealth." Copter sighed, "This way guys! Chaos Whirlwind!" His chaotic wind knocked several uniformed animals over, giving them an escape route! "Great! Get a head start, guys!" Vector shouted, turning to face the advancing enemies as Punchy, Copter and Rouge ran ahead. "Remember me in song, fellas..." Vector grinned, vocalizing loudly and making the Despair agents clutch their ears in agony from his generally terrible singing voice. "Hm, some guys just got no taste." he scoffed, running off to join the others. "Reminds me of my

Spagonian Idol audition..." Corky groaned.

Entering a room with small pools of water in the corners, they found the white Chaos Emerald sitting on the floor. "Beautiful! I was hoping to find an emerald stashed here!" Rouge grinned. Suddenly, Illusi stepped in front of the emerald! "Hello, Dark One... Seems your darkness is getting stronger." he said. "Yo, Illusi." Copter waved. "You here to kill me again!?" Punchy growled. "...Wait, WHAT!?" Copter gasped. Illusi shrugged. "Let's call this a wager... Pass my little test, and you get the Chaos Emerald. Fail, and... well, you don't." he sneered, vanishing. "Hey, wait! What test? Where'd he go??" Vector stammered. Suddenly, the water in the pools started to churn, and the room rapidly began to flood! "Ha! It's illusion water! We can't drow--" Punchy muttered, only to start choking as the water covered his face! He immediately jumped to the surface to take a breath, but was pulled under quickly by a big, red eel! "What's this, a sea Wrongo!?" Punchy thought, struggling to get free. Looking around, he could see that the others were being assaulted by similar eel creatures. As Vector tried to swim away from them, they blew fire at him! "Huh?? Fire underwater!? Oh... Illusions..." Vector grumbled. As Punchy struggled, he thought about using the Despair Seal, but he remembered that this was one of Illusi's tests. "These things probably feed on darkness... Dang, where's Rainbow when I need her?" he thought. Rouge struggled free of the eels attacking her and jumped out of the water, flying above in what limited airspace the room still possessed. "All right... How do I grab that emerald...?" she muttered, only to have to avoid fire that the eels blew at her! "Argh! Someone get rid of these things!" she yelled. Punchy shut his eyes and tried to think. "Just illusions... They're just illusions... Hmm..." With his eyes shut, he couldn't feel anything but the water. He kicked his legs, and slipped right through the eel's grip! "Must be tough, not existing!" he grinned, swimming straight for the emerald while the eel tried to untangle itself! The other eels tried to blow fire at him to stop him, so Punchy tried to pick up the pace... He felt a wave of heat around him as he grabbed the emerald, and suddenly the illusions all vanished! The only water in the room was once again in the small pools, and Illusi stood at the doorway with crossed arms. "When I catch you... I will not be as forgiving as this illusion of me..." he said, vanishing as the other illusions did. The group took a moment to catch their breath, but they couldn't waste too much time. The Chaos Boots were still in the castle somewhere!

To be continued...

24 - Agents of Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 24 - Agents of Despair
Stage 14(Dark 7) - Despair Corridors
Boss 14 - Basker

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Learning from Mia that Rainbow was spotted following Kosmo, Punchy, Copter and Violet headed for Demon Island, the headquarters of the Covenant of Despair, to see if Kosmo led her back there. They found Despair Castle in an uproar over intruders, and Violet went off to help her friends, leaving Copter and Punchy to explore the castle. They found Rouge, who was looking for items that Despair had stolen, such as the Chaos Boots. Teaming up with Vector as well, they soon found a Chaos Emerald guarded by Illusi, and had to pass a "test" to claim it. With Chaos Emerald in hand, the group now continues their search for the Chaos Boots...

Now, on to the next chapter!

The Covenant of Despair was now on alert, and targeting anyone not wearing uniforms as potential intruders. They considered looking for spare uniforms to disguise themselves, but they couldn't find any in Vector's size. Frustrated, Punchy started to rely heavily on Dark Punchy to clear any Despair agents out of their way during their search for the Chaos Boots, which left the others a bit uneasy. "I don't care if he CAN control his dark form now; it gives me the heebie-jeebies..." Rouge whispered behind Dark Punchy's back. "Yeah, doesn't he remember wrecking half of Station Square not so long ago?" Copter grumbled. "Wait, that was HIM???" Vector gasped. "Are you really a detective?" Copter sighed. Dark Punchy glanced back at them, holding up a uniformed bear that tried to get in their way. "Does anyone have something they want to say to me?" he growled, tasing the bear with dark energy. "N-not me!!" the bear whimpered before Dark Punchy tossed him aside! "Um... We wouldn't mind talking to regular Punchy for a minute..." Copter muttered. Dark Punchy snarled a bit. "I'd snap you if he'd let me... Just wait, eventually I'll be the one in control." he said before the Despair Seal flashed, changing him back into normal Punchy. "Problem, guys?" he asked. "You're psychotic!!" Vector yelled. Punchy crossed his arms. "Just blowin' off steam. Yeesh. I didn't kill anyone, did I?" he grumbled, raising an eyebrow. Copter shrugged, and Rouge avoided the subject by looking into the room ahead. "Hey, is that a safe in there?" she mumbled, dashing past Punchy. "...I didn't kill anyone, right?" Punchy asked again, looking worried. "No, Punch. But you seemed kinda tempted." Copter sighed. They quickly joined Rouge in the next room, where she was looking over a heavy-duty safe with Despair's red star on the front. "I'm guessing the Chaos Boots are in there." Rouge concluded. "I could smash it open, but you guys are having anti-dark sentiments right now..." Punchy muttered. Rouge chuckled. "Smash it? Don't be silly. I can crack this thing. Just keep a lookout for me..." she grinned.

While Rouge was busy attempting to crack the safe, one of the many canine agents of Despair showed up. "Hey... You can't be in here..." the dog muttered. Before anyone could react, the dog pulled a whistle from his pocket and blew it! The high-pitched sound called in several hornet-shaped robots reminiscent of Eggman's buzzbombers, only with a nastier disposition. "ROBOTS!? Even up here I gotta deal with dumb robots!?" Copter shouted. "They're our special Beecon drones! Great for checking out dangerous terrain or just... avoiding direct confrontation." the dog said, a big sheepishly. "I think it goes without saying that I need those bugs outta my hair!" Rouge shouted. As the dog fled to avoid "direct confrontation," the Beecons started buzzing around, firing lasers from their mouths while attempting to get in close with their sharp stingers! Right away, Copter started chasing after them, smashing any he could catch with powerful tail whips! Punchy used Chaos Avalanche on some of the statues hung high in the room, dropping them down on unsuspecting bees. Vector, being the largest target, had to take cover from the lasers the most. However, when they came in close with their stingers, he took the opportunity to bite back with his powerful jaws! "Yuck! Blugh! Wish I had gum on me..." he grumbled, thinking of creative tactics he'd used in the past, "So, are these Eggman's robots or what??" he wondered. Copter blew away a few Beecons with Chaos Whirlwind before answering him. "After Despair swiped the Chaos Boots from Eggman? I don't think he'd be giving them his designs... Then again, Techno Sonic works for GUN." he reasoned. "Ugh, now my head hurts..." Punchy groaned as he punched out the last robot, "How's the safe coming?" he asked. Rouge dangled the Chaos Boots from her fingers, smirking. "Done with robots to spare. Anyway, my theory is Despair has its own scientist building the bots." she said. Copter scoffed. "Yeah, who? Bucky?" he grunted. Vector sighed. "Never mind. We better keep moving."

With the Chaos Boots in hand, Rouge's primary mission was complete. "Now I just gotta grab Guard and get outta here. Wish I had some idea where that flying mutt got to." she said. Copter and Punchy both groaned at the mention of the gargoyle. "Guard? Do we have to...?" Copter grumbled. "Well... Maybe he's seen Kosmo and Rainbow..." Punchy sighed. Vector grinned and nodded. "Leave this to me! I'll track down your missing pal!" he said, taking the lead down the next hallway. "He's not my pal!" Rouge shouted. Chasing after Vector, they soon found the croc cornering the same dog that had sent the Beecons after them! "Hey, sparky, how'd you get ahead of us? Plannin' ta pull a sneak attack? Sit! Stay! I gotta ask you some questions!" Vector said, lifting the canine up by his collar. "How come when I do this kinda stuff as Dark Punchy, I get scolded?" Punchy pouted. Vector glanced back. "Hey, I ain't gonna hurt him. I might drop him... If he doesn't talk." he said. The dog struggled in Vector's grip. "Wh-what?? You already robbed the safe!!" he yelled. "Naw, I wanna know if you've seen a gargoyle around." Vector sneered. "Th-there's gargoyles all over the place. We've got the mob doin' some of our dirty work..." the dog whined. Copter shrugged. "Maybe Gunner would be happy with one of those gargoyles instead?" he joked. "You didn't exactly answer me, pup! You see a gargoyle or not? This guy's not with the mob. Think carefully... I'm losin' my grip on ya." Vector growled. "A-all right! Maybe I saw him... But I dunno where he is now! He was clobbering anyone in his way, so I ran..." the dog stammered. Vector gently put him on the ground and pointed down the hall. "Hit the road before we change our minds." he said. While the dog fled, Rouge thought about what he'd said. "Guard's probably going deeper in the castle. Typical. He doesn't care what kind of danger he throws himself, or ME, in." she groaned. Copter shrugged. "Well, good news is that he's clobbering everyone ahead of us. Let's go!" he said, leading the charge down the hallway.

After a while, they arrived in a strange room that was filled with laboratory equipment. There was someone lying on a metal table in the back, with wires and tubes attached. Copter looked around nervously. "Is this Bucky's room? Who's that lying back there? Looks... familiar..." he said, squinting in the darkness. Out of the shadows, Violet, Daisy and Basker emerged, glaring at them. "Violet? So, I see

you made time to change back into your uniform anyway..." Punchy observed, "What about Rainbow!?" he said suddenly. "Don't pretend you care! You haven't been looking for her! You've been sabotaging the Covenant of Despair!" Violet shouted. Copter and Punchy looked confused, while Rouge whistled nonchalantly. "Did you think your thievery would go unnoticed? We know you have stolen the Chaos Boots." Basker said. Copter pointed at Basker angrily. "Ha! Very funny! You stole them first! I was there!" he shouted. "From a man who most likely stole them as well. Must we go into such preposterous politics?" Basker sighed. "As a matter of fact, politics sound good right about now." Rouge said, pressing a button on a gizmo hidden under her glove, "I'll be transmitting the location of this island to GUN! Expect an invasion any moment!" she smirked. Basker smiled lightly. "Hm... Haha... Most amusing." he said. "That's not funny! Shouldn't we be calling a red alert!?" Daisy said in panic. "By the time GUN gets here, the island will be gone... And you will be dead." Basker said calmly. "Grrrrr!! I don't think so!" shouted Guard, dropping down from the roof and brandishing his scythe! Punchy raised his fists as well. "Good timing. Actually, you're late. Violet, outta the way! We're gonna mess up that punk!" he said. Violet glared at Punchy with rage. "I will not! Punchy... Give back the Chaos Boots... Or I'll TAKE them from you!" she shouted. "Girl trouble, eh, Punchy? Hey, red eyes! I got a bone to pick, too! Who have you guys got stashed back there!?" Copter shouted, trying to move in for a closer look, only to be blocked by Basker. "That's none of your concern. Our master has plans for that one. She needs her rest." he said. Daisy started toward Vector and Rouge with her katana. "All right, you..." she growled, only to be blocked as Talon the griffon suddenly dropped in front of her! "Hiiyaaaah!! Hold it right there, stinko!" he shouted. "Whaaaaat!?" she gasped. "My name is Talon! With the power of my psychokinesis, watch as I disarm you and turn your weapon against you!" Talon shouted. A blue light glowed around him, and Daisy started struggling to keep her grip on her katana! "H-hey! Get away, you freak!" she yelled. "Ummmm... I'll take it." Punchy said, watching. "Don't ignore me! I was trained in dark magic by Fera!" Violet shouted, her hands glowing with dark energy! "Fera? Shoulda known." Punchy groaned.

Rouge glanced back at the exit, holding the Chaos Boots in her hands. "Guard, maybe we'd better get these to HQ." she suggested. "GIVE ME THOSE!!" shouted Violet, knocking Punchy back with a quick bolt of darkness before charging at Rouge and grabbing for the boots! Rouge tried to hold on to them, but blasts of dark energy forced her to back off without them! "She's nuts!" she yelled. "Guys! Play keep-away with the Chaos Emerald!" Punchy suggested, first tossing it to Vector, who threw it to Copter next. "I'm gonna have to ask for that, Copter." said a familiar voice that startled the fox. A certain cheetah emerged from the shadows, wearing a Covenant of Despair uniform! "Wha....?! CHET!? What in Eggman's name are you doing in that stupid getup!?" Copter stammered, shocked. "What do you think?!" Chet snapped, baring his claws, "REVENGE!!" Rouge groaned as she watched this. "So, you're not going to toss me the emerald, huh?" she complained, glancing at Violet next, "Then I'd better get back those boots!" she realized. Violet launched a blast of darkness to keep her away. "I suggest you leave while you still can! I may not be fully trained, but my darkness can still destroy you!" she warned. Basker stepped forward as well, raising a hand to Guard threateningly. "Darkness and fear ride hand in hand... Let me show you the power I wield..." he growled, his eyes glowing brighter as he enveloped his hands in a dark blue energy, which he swiftly cast over Guard! "Grr... Rrrraaaa!! What... is this???" the gargoyle gasped. However, a sudden laser blast interrupted Basker's spell! "What?" Basker mumbled, looking at the entrance to the room. Alpha started to fly in, and then pointed his laser straight at Vector. "It's the cucumber again!! You tripped me!" the robot yelled. "Aw, come ON! I said I was sorry!!" Vector shouted. Guard backed away from Basker and shook his head to snap out of the spell. "Grrr.... Your tricks won't stop me!" he growled. Rouge landed beside him, while Punchy found himself face to face with Violet. "Violet... You don't wanna do this..." he growled. "...Yes I do!" she snarled.

Violet started to hurl bolts of dark energy at Punchy, which he sidestepped as quickly as he could. He didn't want to have to fight Rainbow's sister, but she really wasn't giving him any choice. Copter didn't want to fight with Chet, either. "What are you thinking!? Cut it out, you nut!" he shouted. "No, Copter! Eggman or GUN killed Katie! I can't... I can't let them get away with this!!" Chet growled. Copter raised an eyebrow. "I can think of at least two things wrong with your logic. Slow down a sec, pal." he sighed. "You're NOT my pal!!" Chet yelled, punching Copter square in the nose! "YOW!! ...OK, guess I had that comin'..." Copter grunted, "But now that we're even, you better listen!" he yelled. While Copter tried to reason with Chet, Basker was battling Guard and Rouge with his fear powers. With every strike he made with his magic, he seemed to vanish from his enemies' sight, replaced with eerie dark shadows or a writhing mass of snakes! "He's trying to trick us with illusions... like that shrew guy!" Rouge said, only to hear Basker chuckling in her ears. "Illusion implies that I conjured something..." he said, the shadow behind Rouge seeming to leap out to attack her! "Whoa! Back off!" she shouted, kicking at the shadow only to watch her foot go right through it! "Grrrr... Where are you, Rouge??" Guard grunted, looking around. For some reason, he could see neither Rouge nor Basker, though his android sensors could still detect them. Suddenly, the mass of snakes came at him and hurled some snakeheads his way, like a whip! "Grrrr!?! What demon is this!?" he gasped, jumping back and attacking with his scythe's beam! Rouge saw a beam of darkness come from the shadows at that moment. "This isn't funny. Where's Guard?" she growled. Guard noticed the snakes hesitate for a moment, and checked his sensors. "Gr? That can't be right..." Looking around, he saw an oddly-shaped shadow looming over him. "Grrrr! There you are!" he growled, slashing his scythe to fire its beam at the shadow! Basker stumbled over, while the snakes melted away to reveal Rouge, and the shadow-being she was fighting turned out to be Guard. "Well, this is awkward..." she sighed. Meanwhile, Punchy had grown sick of Violet's dark magic and started to fight back with Chaos Avalanche, breaking apart the very walls of the lab to toss at her! She started firing beams of dark energy at Punchy's projectiles to defend herself, but soon a fragment knocked her over! "Ow! I can't believe you'd actually hit a girl!" she said, a whiny, pouty look in her eyes. "Oh, my gosh, you and Rainbow really are related..." Punchy groaned.

With Copter and Chet wrestling over the Chaos Emerald and Violet still firmly holding on to the Chaos Boots, Kosmo suddenly crept into the room and snuck up on Talon. "Hey, fur-feathers! Where'd Carrie get to?" he asked. Daisy grabbed her blade while Talon turned around in surprise, and then she looked at him, too. "Kosmo?? Are you saying there's ANOTHER intruder in here!?" she exclaimed. Basker glanced back, noticing that the person on the metal table was stirring. "All this noise has awakened our guest..." he sighed. A red bird arose from the table, slowly pulling the wires from her body. "What's going on here!?! Am I... at Shadow Arcangel!?" she stammered, zipping her coat closed once she'd removed the wires attached to her body. "That IS Heather!" Copter yelled, his expression growing tense, "That's it!" he growled. Suddenly, light flashed from Guard's eyes. "Gr!? I'm getting a hologram from HQ!" he said as Col. Gunner started to materialize in front of him via the holographic projector in his eyes. "Dude... You've got Gunner in your brain? That is beyond creepy." Punchy shuddered. Violet's face turned white at the sight of Gunner. "HIM!! Murderer!!!" she screamed, startling Punchy. "Guard! Dr. Nammad has informed me that there is a red bird in your vicinity." Gunner began, "He has requested that you acquire this bird immediately. It is... necessary. So do it! Gunner out!" he said before his hologram vanished. Without further delay, Guard started to approach Heather. "Grrrrr!! Ms. Phoenix! This way, if you will! Or I will bring you by force if necessary." he growled. Heather looked extremely confused and nervous. "Huh?? What? Why would you do that!?" she stammered. Just then, a hidden door at the back of the lab started to open up, and Despair reinforcements started to arrive, led by Fera and the Darkseeker! The hooded, red-eyed being immediately fixed his gaze on one individual. "Kosmo! So good that you are here..." he said.

"Did you find who you were looking for, dark one?" Fera asked Punchy. "Fera! Your brainwashing's gotta stop!" Punchy shouted. "Brainwashing?" Chet mumbled. "Like a weird ballet cult." Copter nodded. The Darkseeker did not seem concerned with most of what was going on. "Kosmo... Do not allow them to leave with the Chaos Emerald. Do you understand?" his voice boomed. "I... uh..." Kosmo gulped, even he found the Darkseeker intimidating. "That guy freaks me out..." said Copter as Talon slowly snuck up on him, "HEY!! The Emerald!?" he gasped as it simply jumped out of his hand! "No worries! I've got it!" Talon said, saluting him. At this moment, Illusi was arriving in the room. He looked across and saw Fera and the Darkseeker, and instantly panicked. "No... NO!" he screamed, filling the room with Wrongos which immediately set to work distracting the Despair agents present! "Dark One!! Get out of there now!!" Illusi shouted. "Illusi!? NOW you decide to help me!?" Punchy gasped, staring at him. In the confusion, Guard quickly grabbed Heather. "Let go of me!!" she yelled, getting Copter's attention. "Heather!!" he yelled. This enabled Talon to begin making his escape, pushing past Vector and Alpha on his way out. "Hey! We were minding our own business fighting a pointless fight here!" Alpha yelled. "Um... Yo! Gimme that Emerald!" Kosmo shouted, pushing past them to chase Talon. "Give ME that Emerald!" Rouge yelled, joining the chase. The Darkseeker glared at Illusi and pointed forward. "Agents of Despair! Cut through these illusions and stop those intruders!" he bellowed. "It's HIM again..." Fera grunted. "C'mon, Copt! Let's chase and scram!" Punchy said, him and Copter pushing past Vector as they chased after Guard. "Hey, I gotta get outta here, too!!" Vector yelled, finally running off himself. "GUAAAAAARD!!" Copter screamed. "Birdooooo!!" Kosmo yelled, making Talon stumble briefly. "Birido??? Seriously?" he groaned. "My emeraaaaaald!! I HATE THAT GRIFFIN!!!" Rouge shouted. "I HATE THAT HEDGE-HOG!" Alpha added for no apparent reason. In the confusion of the escape, Punchy somehow found himself reaching the hole they'd entered the castle from alone. "Hello?? Guys??" he muttered. He then took a moment to think. "Rrrrr... Kosmo was in there... Where was Rainbow!? If he's hurt her..." he growled, so frustrated with everything that'd been going on that he was ready to pummel the next person he might run into...

To be continued...in Fall 2014!

25 - Security Breach

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 25 - Security Breach
Stage 15(Hero 8) - EggSecurity Tower
Minor Boss 11 - Jolt & Freeze

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After escaping Sandopolis, Sonic met up with Knuckles before leaving Angel Island. Their group decided to head for Eggman's base in Troblusk City to see what the doctor knew of the Covenant of Despair. As they arrived, however, they saw Despair agents heading into the sewer and heard a loud tremor coming from Eggtopia! They decided to split up, Knuckles chasing Despair while Sonic went to check out Eggtopia...

Now, on to the next chapter!

"Hey, Eggman! What's all the ruckus!?" shouted Sonic, looking around as he entered the small base. However, all he found was a certain orange coat. "Gah! Ridley!" he groaned. "Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert!" BAS shouted. "Some alarm." Ridley grumbled as he turned around, seeing Amy, Tails and Silver catching up to Sonic. "Uh, hey dudes. What's the 411?" he chuckled awkwardly. "Where's Eggman, you maskless raccoon!" Amy shouted, holding up her hammer threateningly. "Raccoons don't wear masks, Amy..." Tails muttered. "I JUST got back from Sandopolis, guys! I was trying to figure that out myself." Ridley stammered. "Well... What about all that noise earlier?" Silver asked. "Obviously, that was Eggman's fleet taking off. You might not have noticed them because they look just like clouds." Ridley explained. "I don't trust this guy!" Amy growled. "He's telling the truth about the cloud fleet... I've seen that before." Silver said. Sonic rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Ridley. Don't tell me Eggman didn't let you in on where he was going." he grumbled. "He doesn't trust people so much anymore. Something about Knuckles and Experiments turning on him over and over." Ridley shrugged. "You know, there's a good reason for that." Sonic smirked. "You sure you can't help us?" Tails asked. Ridley grinned at them mischievously. "What makes you think I'm not stalling you?" he sneered. Suddenly, a familiar voice startled them! "BOO!! Heeeelloooo, do-gooders!" Zipp the hornet appeared from the nearby stairs to the basement! "For the glory of Bucky, or was it the Covenant of Despair? I have just finished planting a feisty little virus in this base's computers!" he grinned. Suddenly, red lights started flashing and BAS went nuts. "ALERT!! ALERT!! Debug mode engaged! It's magically delicious!" the alarm system shouted. "That's just great! Now how will we find Dr. Eggman!?" Silver groaned. "You won't... Not before we do!" Ridley grinned. As Zipp and Ridley started rushing past them toward the exit, Knuckles and SPOT arrived. "Uh... Sonic?" he muttered. "Knuckles! Good timing! Tackle Ridley for me, will ya?" Sonic shouted. However, before Knuckles could react, Ridley struck! "Chaos Splatter!" A burst of Chaos-charged water erupted from his body, smacking away anyone near him and granting him an opening to escape! "GAAAAAH!! WATER!!" Sonic yelled, growling as he shook himself dry, "We gotta

find Eggman! Quick!" he grumbled. "Well... Um... Maybe he's at his Tree Fort?" Knuckles suggested. "Tree Fort? What's that?" Tails wondered. "Rainbow told me it was in the Mystic Ruins..." Knuckles explained. Just then, BAS started babbling. "Daisy~~ DAisY! Gimmie yer ans-er do~~ Egg-man's tak-in ov'r~~ Security Tower~~ too!!" it said in a clearly distorted voice. "What'd he say? Secretary Tower?" Sonic mumbled. "The Security Tower! A GUN building in Station Square!" Amy said, remembering hearing about it on the news back when Copter and Punchy broke into it. "Eggman's... gonna take over a secure GUN building? Are you sure the virus doesn't just have the alarm saying crazy stuff?" Silver wondered. "On the contrary, I think the virus made the alarm spill the beans!" Tails grinned. Knuckles didn't look so sure. "I think the Tree Fort might still be worth checking out, Sonic..." he said. Sonic nodded. "We might as well split up again. You're cool with checking out the fort, right Knux?" he asked. Knuckles nodded, and they started to set out for their destinations...

Meanwhile, Bucky the rat had returned to his ship, Shadow Arcangel. He was seated at the controls, with Crash the rhino standing close by. "So, how did it go, Zipp?" he said into a communicator. "Ummmm... Sonic showed up. Dunno if he knows anything." Zipp replied from wherever he was now. "Right... And what about you, Talon? Report!" Bucky said into a separate com device. "I found another Chaos Emerald! Oh, by the way, um... Red bird mean anything to you?" Talon asked. Bucky's eyes went wide as he contemplated this. "Get back here! Now!" he ordered. Crash looked similarly shocked. "You don't think he means...?" he mumbled. "...I never recovered the body... I'm a fool!" Bucky muttered, turning in his seat. "Crash, get to the capital city! I need eyes and ears down there!" he growled. "Um... What about Vortex and Zipp?" Crash wondered. "There may not be time. Everyone's stretched thin. Go, go, go!" he shouted. "Y-yes sir! Right away!" Crash said hastily, rushing out of the control room. "What have I done..." Bucky muttered, distressed. Suddenly, a somber, strained voice spoke to him. "Do I... detect... sorrow in your voice? Yes... it is unmistakable..." Bucky looked around with a start. "What? Who's there? The ship hasn't detected any new life forms aboard..." he growled. "Just a voice... in your head... Your guilty conscience plaguing you, perhaps?" the voice said. "...rubbish... What voice is this supposed to be, then?" Bucky grunted. "Oh... Let's say... Your old colleague... Nevin Crimm..." the voice replied. "...Crimm?!" Bucky gasped, alarmed. "I sense your sorrow... Care to discuss it with me...?" Crimm offered. Bucky had a cautious look on his face. "I don't care to speak with ghosts..." he sighed, "But... You are on to something. Did I ever tell you about how I met...her..."

A long time ago, Bucky Stein sat in a hallway within an apartment complex. His head hung low, tears flowing down his face like rain. As he sobbed, someone soon approached him. "Are... Are you crying?" asked a voice that was sweet and full of kindness. "N-no..." Bucky sniffled, looking away to hide his face. "Yes you are! ...What's wrong? Are you hurt?" the stranger asked. "Yes... Now leave me be... I'm a monster... And monsters should be left alone..." Bucky sighed. The stranger stepped around in front of his face so he could see her. She was a raven, with beautiful black feathers and loving blue eyes. She wore a purple shirt, white pants, and a necklace made of cyan gemstones. "You're not a monster. Why would you say that?" she asked. Bucky's eyes swelled with tears as he thought about it. "My own family believes it. My mother and father... Just cast me out... Just look at me. I'm a freak." he growled. "How could they say that!?" the raven shouted. "H-huh?" Bucky gasped as the kind girl started to dry his tears with her sleeve. "You're not a freak! Actually... you look kinda... cute." she smiled. "You... you really think so...?" Bucky gasped. "No more tears now. My name's Hope. What's your name, friend?" the raven smiled. Slowly, the heartbroken rat began to smile back. "I... I'm Buck. Buck Stein... It's nice to meet you... Hope..."

"Hope... Where is she... now?" Nevin Crimm's voice asked. Bucky sat slumped in his chair. "Let's just say... I'd rather she were the ghost I was speaking to now..." he said, a tear escaping his eye, "I only pray that she has found peace..." he sighed. "You should know... One's soul never knows peace!" Crimm declared deviously! Bucky growled, standing up. "Haunt me no longer! I have work to do! And no foul spirit is going to distract me!" he roared. "Hmmm... Very well..." said Crimm, falling silent as Bucky fell to his chair, wiping the tear from his face.

Sonic, Tails and Silver hurried towards the Security Tower upon reaching Station Square, going off ahead of Amy, but catching the eye of a certain rabbit. "Mr. Sonic? What's up?" Cream wondered, only to be ignored. "...Cheese, think we should follow them?" she asked, getting an enthusiastic response from the Chao. Near the forest trail to the Security Tower, Sonic's group was stopped by familiar foes. "Sonic! Stop right there, you disgusting princess!" Spiny the porcupine growled. "You realize he's just you with less hair gel." said Zeke the dragon, who was also standing guard with him. "Go shoot yourself!" Spiny snapped. "Hey, spine-puss! Is Eggman home? He left his base in such a hurry he didn't get to see me pretend to trash it!" Sonic chuckled. "Did Zipp trash it? Once he gets here, guard duty's over and we get to rejoin the Covenant of Despair! RAWR!!" Zeke roared excitedly. Spiny stared at him, stunned. "What!? You mean you're actually WITH those insolent pansies!?" he shouted. "Yeah, they bad..." Zeke chuckled, "Wait, what'd you say!? You aren't actually on Eggman's side are you!?" he gasped. "I think he is. And uh... I'm not sure who to root for here." Sonic shrugged. "SHUT UP, Sonic! I'm not on Eggman's side! I'm on my own! That's the only side worth fighting for!" Spiny snapped. Zeke growled at him. "Why you! You traitor! Eat flames!" he yelled, blowing a fireball at Spiny! The porcupine dodged it, and glared at him. "Oh, no he didn't!" he growled. As Spiny and Zeke started brawling, Sonic and the others just continued past them. "Later, guys! Lemme know who wins!" Sonic waved. Cream went skipping by as well, flapping her ears to evade a Chaos Spear as she went. "Hee, so far this is easy!" she giggled.

Sonic, Tails and Silver stopped soon after entering the forest surrounding the Security Tower. Squinting up at the tower, they could see a ship of Cloud Carnival hovering around the roof. "Outta the way, fake Sonic!" they heard Amy shout from somewhere behind them. "Oh, hey Cream..." she said as she ran over to the group. SPOT was with Amy as well. "Huh? Oh... Guess the gang's all here now." Sonic sighed. "SONIC!!! You left me at Eggman's Eggtopia!!" Amy shouted angrily. "So did Tails." Silver pointed out. "How is that helpful?!" Tails groaned. Amy glared at Sonic and Tails. "I bet Silver's the only one who wanted to wait for me, isn't he!? ISN'T HE!?" she snarled. "Amy, please calm down..." Cream said nervously. Sonic glanced at Silver. "Well, maybe you should follow him around then, if he's so great..." he said grumpily. "W-well... MAYBE I WILL!!" she snapped. Tails, who'd had his fill of getting yelled at, checked out SPOT's monitor to find that the robot was detecting something. "It's settled, then! SILVER will be my boyfriend now!" Amy said, linking arms with the bewildered hedgehog. "Wait... what!? D-do I get a say in this...?!" Silver stammered. "No, I don't think you do. I sure didn't." Sonic teased. "S-Sonic!! YOUUU!!!" Amy growled, held back by Silver and Cream as she went to hit him! Tails interrupted them. "Guys! SPOT says he detects Chaos energy in Eggman's base! Errr... The Security Tower!" he reported. "A Chaos Emerald?" Silver wondered. "Or maybe the Chaos Gauntlets..." Tails figured. "Negative. Cannot be the Chaos Gauntlets." the text on SPOT's monitor displayed, but no one paid attention. "Outta the way, Sonic! My new Team Rose will nab the Chaos Gauntlets without you!" Amy shouted. "Huh? Do you think Mr. Big would mind being replaced by Mr. Silver?" Cream mumbled. "Grrr.... No one ever pays attention to the robot. Assessing whether it is important enough to get their attention..." SPOT's monitor displayed. "I have a better idea, Amy. You stay and get acquainted with

your new boyfriend while Tails and I check out the Security Tower!" Sonic smirked. "I'm NOT her boyfriend!" Silver groaned. "We're going, too!!" Amy insisted. "Oh, brother... I miss Knuckles..." Tails sighed.

They started through the forest, Amy steering Team Rose ahead of Tails since they couldn't outrun Sonic. "Why do I get punished for Sonic's problems...?" he growled as he walked at the rear of the group. Cream put a hand on his shoulder. "We could walk together!" she smiled. "HEY! No fraternizing with the enemy!!" Amy shouted. "Tails doesn't work for Eggman!" Cream protested. Suddenly, Zipp popped out of the trees. "Oh, hey... Have you seen Zeke?" he asked awkwardly. Amy growled at him. "Silvy! Swat that bug!" she shouted. "S-silvy??" Silver stammered. "Short for Silvy-wilvy! You love it, right?" Amy giggled. "Um... Errr... Go on, Silvy." Sonic said, trying to keep from laughing. Zipp frowned. "I don't know what's going on with you guys, but aren't you usually trying to stop Eggman? Why are you hassling me?" he pouted. "If you're so noble, then why get in our way at Troblusk City?" Sonic pointed out. Zipp shrugged. "You ask too many questions. Do you have time to fight me? Or would you rather climb the tower together?" he offered. "No deal. Bye!" Sonic said, speeding ahead and prompting Team Rose and Tails to chase him! "H-hey!! Come back here!!! HOW DARE YOU OUTFRAN ME!!!" Zipp shouted, firing several shots in their direction before calming down. "Eh, I shouldn't waste ammo on ya..." he grumbled. As they neared the Security Tower, Egg Pawns started to get in their way, but Sonic easily took out most of them as he went, while Silver tossed the stragglers into the trees. As they reached the front doors, they found them locked tight. A note was attached to the door. "No hedgehogs allowed! By order of Col. Gunner!" it read. "This place stunk even before Eggman got here." Sonic remarked. "I could try to rip the door out... If we want Eggman to immediately know we're here." Silver said. Tails pointed to a small building nearby. "Look, there's a bridge linking that building to the main tower! Maybe we can get in that way?" he suggested. Amy nodded. "Good idea. I'm sure Silvy thought of it...he was just being gracious enough to let someone else speak up!" she chuckled. Silver frowned. "Help me..." he whimpered.

The smaller building was the Security Center, a warehouse that existed before the larger tower was built. The door to the center was open, and inside they found that Eggman had likely already taken over the main tower. Freeze the Gizoid had come this far down from the roof, and was busy talking to, of all people, Lospector! Sonic, Tails and Team Rose attempted to sneak around the GUN crates in the warehouse and avoid being seen so that Freeze wouldn't sound the alarm. "I will ask one final time. What are you, and why are you here?" Freeze said to Lospector. "I told you. I'm just visiting my old stomping grounds before paying a visit to the ol' commander in chief at Central City. Would you believe I voted for him?" Lospector grinned. "What's King Boom Boo doing here?" Sonic muttered. "That's Lospector!" Tails and Cream said at once. Lospector smirked and turned to face them. "Hey, who's skulkin' behind those boxes? Oh, Sooonic the pain-in-the-smoke. Pleasure to meet you all proper and stuff. I'm Lospector the Lost!" he said, waving. Their cover blown, Sonic and the others stepped out to face Lospector and Freeze directly. "Confirmed! Creature is one of the Lost Ones! Advise treating as hostile! Jolt! Get over here!" Freeze shouted. "But I'm guarding the doooooor!" Jolt whined as he flew down from the staircase leading out of the room. "Jolt! I owe you one for... letting me escape!" Sonic said, realizing partway that Jolt was only his cell guard. "Um... You're welcome?" Jolt muttered. Lospector grinned now that everyone was out in the open. "Hey, Sonikku, wanna play cards? I don't have long. I have a meeting with the prez in a few minutes." he said, shuffling the Chaos Cards in his hands! "The President!? Hold it, buster! I won't let you lay a smoky paw on him!" Sonic shouted. "Wait, Sonic! I just realized you insulted me! I'll get YOU!!" Jolt babbled, his body sparking. "Dr. Eggman is busy establishing his new base here. He has been waiting a long time for this chance. You will not

interfere." Freeze added, cold air emanating from his hands! Sonic paused and groaned. "Why is EVERYONE always against me?" he sighed.

Freeze immediately started firing icy beams from his hands, swiftly encasing SPOT in a frozen block! "Oh, no! My icepick is inside SPOT!" Tails gasped. "I could thaw him... And/or crush him to kibbles and bits." Lospector sneered. "Oh, no you won't! Get him, Cheese!" Cream shouted, but the Chao simply flew right through Lospector! "Ew. Chao cooties. I was thinkin' of sparing you for old time's sake, but... Nah." Before he could attack them, though, Sonic jumped through his smoky body! "Oooh! Blue boy's got a bone to pick with me! Too bad I got no bones..." he said, drawing some cards as he turned to Sonic. "I'll keep Casper busy! You guys can handle Eggman's robots, right?" the hedgehog said. Silver grabbed several GUN crates with his psychokinesis. "I'll manage..." he said. "Silvy and I are a real team, not like when YOU were my boyfriend!" Amy shouted, clutching her hammer. "Oooh, awkwardness..." Jolt chuckled, "Well, One, two, three, four!! You ain't gettin' through this door! Five, six, seven, eight!! I... ummm... ohhhh, great..." the bot chanted, throwing off sparks to keep anyone from getting close. So, instead of approaching, Amy threw her hammer at him! "Ow! Hey, can she do that!? I call foul!" Jolt yelled. "Get in there, you clown." said Freeze, who was busy blasting the GUN crates with ice as Silver tossed them. Meanwhile, Lospector was casting spells with the Chaos Cards to keep Sonic on the run, blasting him with flames or tossing balls of water as he kept waving 2 different cards back and forth. "Make up your mind! Fire or water!?" Sonic shouted. "How about flying skulls?" Lospector smirked, tossing another card that turned into a trio of Loskulls! As they started to surround Sonic, Cheese flew over and started knocking the skulls aside! "Hey, I don't beat up your minions, do I Chao? Wait, don't answer that." Lospector muttered. At that moment, Jolt was keeping Amy on the run by flying out of her reach and attempting to zap her, while Freeze started targeting Tails and Cream while they were trying to free SPOT, making Silver's job of defending them difficult. "Hold that thought, Mr. Specter." Sonic said, running off in the opposite direction and quickly bouncing from the distracted Freeze up to Jolt, and then using this momentum to smash the Loskulls with some swift, well placed homing attacks!

Lospector watched Sonic's display and whistled. "That's one bouncy ball there... Can't wait to deflate it." he grinned. "Huh? You make no sense." said Sonic, who was standing in front of him again. Silver had buried Freeze in GUN crates once Sonic gave him an opening, and the Gizoid was sparking a bit as he climbed out. "Zzzzzt!! Security breach!" he yelled. Jolt nodded. "Code blue! Red sneaks are sneaking in the base! All units respond!" he babbled as the two robots fled up the stairs. "Buh-bye, you unlost scamps. I gotta train to catch!" Lospector chuckled as he flew out through a wall! "Thanks a lot, Sonic! You scared 'em off and now the base is on alert!" Amy scoffed. SPOT finally managed to break free of the ice, and Tails sighed in relief to see that he seemed to be functioning normal. "Lay off Sonic, Amy. Let's just follow those bots to Eggman!" he said. "Only if Silvy thinks it's a good idea..." Amy pouted. Silver sighed and joined the others in heading up the stairs without a word. "Huh? Uh... Wait for me, Silvy-Wilvy!" Amy stammered, chasing them. "If this is only temporary, you better not call me Sonny-wonny..." Sonic grumbled. Upstairs, they found a small room leading to the bridge to the main Security Tower. Halfway across the bridge, they found Gator chatting with a GUN agent with purple shades, Agent 77. "...Captain Gator? Why are you here?" Sonic mumbled. "Ohh... That reminds me of the romantic cruise to Eggman's base I took with... Err... I don't care!" Amy said, still pouting. Gator shushed them. "You trying to get me fired for piracy? Sweeping this tower's my day job!" he said. "...And we're the only GUN employees left here." Agent 77 whispered. "Huh? What happened?" Tails asked. Agent 77 frowned. "Everyone was called to HQ very suddenly. Something about an attack by the experiments..." he began, "I was stuck here to keep an eye on the place. And of course, Eggman shows up. As if my day hasn't been crazy enough..." Gator shrugged. "At least Agent 32 didn't flush YOU down

a toilet!" Gator grumbled. "Don't worry. We'll stop Eggman. But you should probably get outta here. It's not safe." Silver suggested. Agent 77 nodded. "There's an elevator ahead, but I can only vouch for the first floor as safe." he said. Sonic nodded. "You've been helpful... GUN should try that more often!" he said.

Exiting the elevator and arriving at the main entrance, they found that Eggman had already made the tower his own! A new red and black paint job and defenses upgraded to include spike traps were among the first things they noticed. They also spotted EggRobos flying around, patrolling the base! "Hello, Sonic!" said Dr. Eggman over the PA system! "I don't like this..." Cream whimpered, holding Cheese close. "Hey, doc! What's up?" Sonic grinned. "You're just in time! I've finished just enough renovations that I can welcome you to my new EggSecurity Tower! Much more spacious than Eggtopia, right? You remembered to wipe those muddy sneakers before coming in, didn't you?" Eggman said. "And what if I didn't?" Sonic smirked. "NOOO!! I just cleaned that floor!" shouted Gator, who had apparently followed them down without anyone noticing. Everyone chuckled awkwardly before leaving Gator to his mopping. Eggman's latest scheme was now underway, and Sonic was determined as ever to stop him!

To be continued...

26 - The Eggman Empire Strikes Back

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 26 - The Eggman Empire Strikes Back
Stage 15(Hero 8) - EggSecurity Tower
Boss 15 - Metal Eggman

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Returning to Eggtopia, Sonic learned from a sabotaged BAS that Eggman was heading to take over the Security Tower. Their group snuck past Spiny and Zeke to get near the tower, but Amy grew fed up with being outrun by Sonic, and formed a new Team Rose with Silver and Cream, calling Silver her new boyfriend.

Arriving inside the Security Center next to the tower, the group faced Freeze, Jolt and Lospecter. The Lost One left saying something about meeting with the President, while the robots escaped to put the tower on alert! Reaching the tower, the group found that Eggman had made it his own... an EggSecurity Tower!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Making their way through the dangerous base, the group came to a room with a big sealed vault, the door appearing to be made from a very strong material. "Rip that door down, Silvy!" Amy suggested. Tails shook his head. "According to SPOT, the Chaos energy signal's not coming from in there. It's above us." he said. "Maybe Dr. Eggman couldn't get the door open." Cream figured. The door slid open as Sonic played with the password-entry pad beside it. "Huh?! I just typed GUN!" he stammered. A small, spherical robot rolled out of the vault. "That wise guy Alpha thought it'd be funny to lock me in here! Ergo, I'm heading back to Eggtopia where it's safe!" the robot grumbled, rolling away. "Hey, I thought Eggman tore that guy apart after Dark Gaia was defeated..." Sonic muttered. Looking around, they found another door, and it led them to another warehouse like the one in the Security Center. "What's the deal with this place? It's GUN's junk heap?" Sonic wondered. SPOT was walking ahead of them, and was suddenly propped up atop a set of spikes that popped out of the floor under him! "Yikes! ...Good thing SPOT's new body's got good armor..." Tails yelled. "I don't feel so lucky..." SPOT's monitor said as the robot flailed its way off the spikes. "So, Eggman set a spike maze in here..." Silver mused. "You can lead us through, right Silvy?" Amy asked. Sonic shrugged impatiently. "Let's just see..." he said, dashing through the warehouse at high speed, faster than the spike traps could spring out from the ground! Soon, Sonic had reached the stairs at the other end of the warehouse. "I think I made all the spikes pop out! Hurry on over here!" he shouted. "It's not that I'm not confident, but I think I'll ride SPOT through here..." Tails sighed. "Erm... I can float you over the spikes." Silver said to Amy, chuckling awkwardly. Amy pouted in frustration. "That show off Sonic... Why is he so awesome?" she muttered under her breath. "Get ready, guys! There's some kinda robot lab upstairs!" Sonic shouted after popping up the steps briefly. "Maybe I'll start clearin' the way!" he suggested. "Leave without us and you're

DEAD!!" Amy yelled.

A hologram of Firepaw met them at the entrance to the robot lab. "Meowr! Sonic! Let's see you pass me THIS time!" he said, only for the entire group to simply walk through his hologram without paying him any attention. "Huh? HEY! ...Don't just let them humiliate me, robots! MEOWR!!" In response to the angry virus's shout, swarms of assorted robots started to emerge from everywhere in the massive GUN lab! EggRobos, Buzzbombers, Gohlas, Orbinauts, and Egg Pawns carrying big metal shields were among the robots seeking to stop Sonic's climb up the tower! "What, this is it? Eggman didn't try building anything in this lab?" Sonic joked. As the blue hedgehog led the charge, smashing bots with high speed acrobatics, the others proceeded in their own way. SPOT started zapping Gohlas and Orbinauts so that no one would need to penetrate their deadly defenses, while Tails and Cream flew up to take on the airborne Buzzbombers. Amy attempted to smack an Egg Pawn's shield with her hammer, only to fall backward, finding the shield to be too tough! "Grrr... I'll get that stupid..." she muttered, only to watch the shield fly up out of the Pawn's hand and get flung through its metal chest, causing it to explode! "Huh? Silveeer! I had it under control!!" Amy protested. "Not from where I was floating... Why don't you help Tails and Cream with those unshielded robots?" he suggested. Amy growled softly. "Are you kidding?? I can hold my own! I don't need them to back me up!!" she shouted. Suddenly, Silver picked her up with his psychokinesis so that an EggRobo's laser would miss her. "Hey!!" she yelped. "Pay attention, Amy!" Silver groaned, putting her back down gently. They both grumbled softly as they resumed fighting, and Sonic ran by with a chuckle. "Trouble in paradise?" he teased. "Come here, Sonic!! I'll show you trouble!!" Amy yelled.

Once the robots were dealt with, the group found another elevator at the back of the lab. Looking inside, they heard BAS's voice welcome them. "Hello, hedgehogs and other creatures! I am the EggSecurity Tower Base Alarm System!" it said. "Is it Alarm or Announcement?" Tails wondered. "Depends on the base." BAS replied, "So, what floor do you want?" it asked. "Maybe we better find stairs, with Eggman's computer in control now..." Silver muttered. "Now, none of that! I give you my solemn promise that the elevator is perfectly safe!" BAS said. Sonic shrugged. "Well, where does SPOT want us to go?" he asked Tails. "Seems like the roof..." Tails mumbled. "Top floor! Going uuuuuup!!" BAS shouted, starting to shut the doors, and forcing Cream and Amy to hurry aboard to avoid getting left behind! "Ugh, this elevator's cramped!" Amy complained. "At least we won't have to walk all the way up..." Cream sighed. The elevator started carrying them up at high speed, and through the windows of the elevator, they could see spider-like robots crawling around inside the building! "I don't feel safe..." Tails muttered. "Just for that, I'm dropping you!" BAS snapped, making the elevator suddenly start plummeting downward! The group screamed as the elevator fell, and Tails frantically apologized. BAS chuckled at them, and moments before they hit the bottom, stopped their descent and started moving the elevator up again! "Just foolin! Ha ha! I love elevators..." BAS giggled. "That makes one of us..." Amy frowned. As they reached the top of the tower, a hatch on the roof opened up, and the spider-like Grabber robots dropped into the elevator and tried to grab everyone! However, Silver quickly stopped them and flung them back up through the roof, shaking his fist as they exploded! "And stay out!" he yelled. "Isn't Silvy cute?" Amy smiled. "Thank you for using BAS-powered elevators. Have a nice day!" BAS said as the doors opened, revealing stairs to the roof. "I could've gotten here faster running up the stairs..." Sonic grumbled.

Having reached the roof, they found Dr. Eggman, Metal Sonic, Freeze, Jolt, Firma, Char and Alpha. The robots were standing guard while Eggman was busy working at a computer terminal he'd apparently brought from the Cloud Carnival ship docked with the tower's roof. There was a gold cape sitting beside the computers. "Hey, Eggman! We were wondering why you couldn't build your own base." Sonic

shouted. Eggman stood up slowly, without turning. "Ho... ho... ho... ho. Welcome Sonic. I am the Eggman. That is what I am." he said, pausing briefly between each sentence. "Um... Is he okay?" Silver wondered. "Nah, he's never okay." Sonic said, crossing his arms. "From here on this tower, my EggSecurity Tower, my master plan to conquer the world will unfold!" Eggman said slowly, turning around, "You... Will not interfere." he said. "Why are you talking like that?" Sonic wondered. "It's a trap, Sonic! We're surrounded!" Tails shouted, noticing that the robots had started to advance on them while Eggman was talking. "Silver! Do something!" Amy shouted. Silver looked thoughtful. "Ummm.... So, errr... Eggman, what do you know about the Covenant of Despair?" he asked. "Is he serious!? Ugh... This charade isn't working..." Amy groaned. Eggman's face looked a bit strained. "The... Covenant of Despair... is my... en...em...y...." he mumbled. "Scuse me, guys. Eggman's talking WAY too slow today." Sonic growled, charging at the doctor! "Halt! Desist! Launching counterattack!" Firma shouted, attempting to shoot at Sonic, but missing and blasting Eggman as Sonic jumped back! "Ennn...eeeeemmy.... Covvvvennant.... Ennnneeennnemmyyyyyy.....!!! Zzzzzzzzzttt!!!" Eggman started sparking and whirring! "What's happening?!" Tails gasped. "Father!!! Noooooooo!!!" Alpha wailed. Then, an explosion destroyed the disguise, and Eggman was revealed to be Metal Eggman! "NOOOOO!!! My perfect plaaaaan!! Now Sonic knows the truuuuth!!!" he shouted. "Not that robot fake again..." Sonic groaned. "NO! I am the REAL Eggman! And I will rule a vast empire from right here at the EggSecurity Tower!" Metal Eggman shouted, making Metal Sonic look at him funny. "Ignore him. I am the true mastermind behind the operation here." said Freeze. "Huh?? You?" Sonic wondered. "Metal Eggman posed as the real Eggman to distract you... And everyone." Freeze said.

"You may have noticed that only one ship in the Cloud Carnival fleet is here. Taking over the Security Tower is merely a ruse." Freeze continued. "Where's the real Eggman!?" Tails asked. "If I were to tell you that, it would defeat the purpose of this trap." Freeze replied. "Aw, I HATE traps..." Cream frowned. Metal Eggman glanced at Freeze and nodded. "Errrr... YES! And a clever little trap it is! Now, all robots advance on Sonic!" he shouted, pointing at the blue hedgehog, "We'll overwhelm him with sheer numbers!" he said. "Well, it was a good scheme... Until I led your double agents up here!" said a voice coming up the stairs behind Sonic and the others! Zipp emerged from below, followed by Spiny and Zeke, with Ridley sneaking up behind them! "Argh! That metallic Sonic!? All right, I'll rally against that!" Spiny growled, stomping toward Metal Sonic. "Anyone call for a dragon? RAWR!!" Zeke roared, flying toward Freeze and blowing fire at him! Zipp started shooting at Alpha as well, and Sonic and Tails stared in surprise. "Bucky's experiments are all HELPING us...?" Tails muttered. "Well... This should be easy." Sonic shrugged. "Hmmm... I'll just help myself to that shiny cape and let myself out..." Ridley whispered, tiptoeing around the roof to make his way to the cape. SPOT, seeing this, started sneaking after him. "This is MUTINY!! Mutiny of the foulest order!!!" Metal Eggman yelled, "And you're saying they were Bucky's lab rats all along!? I won't stand for being duped!! I do all the deception around here!!!" he growled, glaring at his foes. "I'll deal with you MYSELF, Sonic! Firma, get your counterpart in here to terminate his little friends!" Metal Eggman ordered as he ran for the Cloud Carnival ship to find a weapon. "Acknowledged..." Firma said, glancing back at the cloud ship as well. Suddenly, a purple and black robot with the same build as Firma leapt onto the roof from the cloud ship! "Targets acquired... E-3X... En route... To ANNIHILATE!!!" the robot snarled with a crazed voice! "TERRA!?" Sonic stammered. "I see that you are acquainted!" said Metal Eggman as he pulled up to the roof, piloting a huge tank with a sort of rotating turret weapon. Terra raised a metal claw to Sonic. "I have been reborn! I will be AVENGED!! You will DIE!! DESTROY!!!" he boomed. Sonic, Tails, and Team Rose exchanged glances and nodded. "Let's get 'em!" Sonic smirked.

Tails was quickly drawn into a fight with Jolt, so it was up to Sonic to take on Metal Eggman and Team

Rose to battle Terra and Firma. Terra drew his claws into his thick arms and replaced them with buzz saws. "I will slice you to scraps!" he said. "Organics are not made of scrap metal, Terra..." Firma corrected, "Excuse him, his mind could not be totally restored." she said. Terra glared at her, then fired the buzz saws from his hands at Amy and Cream! "Yikes!! That looks sharp!" Cream yelped, flapping her ears to escape the saws while Amy swatted it away with her hammer! The saws went flying back to Terra's hands, while Firma slammed the ground with her fists, shaking the rooftop and making pieces of it crumble under Team Rose! Silver grabbed Amy with his powers and floated away from the hole while Cream flew to safety on her own. "Can't you grab THEM and toss them off the roof??" Amy shouted. "They're... too heavy." Silver muttered, "And they'll resist too much." Fortunately, Cheese flew in and started kicking the robots in the heads, providing a distraction, though he couldn't really damage them. "Puny Chao! I will OBLITERATE you!!" Terra roared. "Oh no! Do something!" Cream whimpered. Silver and Amy ran up to the distracted robots. "Hey, girly-bot! THIS is how you smash stuff!" Amy shouted, whacking Firma with her hammer! Terra turned and fired his buzz saws, but Silver grabbed them with psychokinesis and tossed them back! Terra spun his mechanical body around to evade them, and retracted his saw launchers to replace them with laser blasters. "Try to catch THIS!" he growled. Meanwhile, Sonic was busy dodging bombs fired from Metal Eggman's tank turret. "Quit running! You can't stop my Metal Egg Tank!" he shouted. Sonic raised an eyebrow as he avoided a bomb. "Whaaat? That's the most pathetic name ever! I can't believe I ever fell for you as a phony Eggman!" he groaned. Metal Eggman rotated the tank's turret to change the weapon. "Joke's on you! The other Eggman named this thing! ...He's really short on ideas." he said, firing cannonballs at Sonic from the turret. Sonic zipped out of the way, seemingly easier than before. "Really, why would cannonballs work better than bombs? At least the spike balls you littered around provided a challenge until they rolled away." he teased. Metal Eggman chuckled. "Well, it still stands that you are making NO progress in defeating me!" he said.

Sonic snickered and leapt from cannonball to cannonball, kicking off of them to make his way to Metal Eggman's cockpit! "Hey! You can't do that! Those are projectiles!" the robot protested, but Sonic soon smacked the tank hard, and bounced off it a couple more times on his way to the floor, causing the Metal Egg Tank to start exploding! Metal Eggman detached an Egg Mobile from the machine to escape the explosion. "My beautiful tank! Curse you, Sonic! Curse you back to Super Eggman Land!" he shouted. "Must... Ki-IIIIILL...." Terra was groaning after getting ganged up on by Amy, Cream and Silver. "Enough. Conserve your energy Terra. We will have revenge." Firma said, dragging her counterpart back a bit. "Well, Metal Eggman? Gonna call off these robots and tell us what ya know now?" Sonic asked. "I told you, I'M in charge here!" Freeze insisted, though he was forced to evade Zeke's flames at the same time. "Yes, ice-boy. You look very in charge." Metal Eggman teased. Ridley, who had almost reached the gold cape, suddenly found SPOT jumping in front of him! "Where did this mutt come from? Wait... You're not Eggman's!" he gasped. "Do not move. I am armed to the teeth." SPOT's monitor warned as various weapons emerged from his compartments to illustrate his point. "None of this matters! This tower is mine! And that means I can... um..." Metal Eggman stammered, scratching his metallic head. "Oh, shut up! You give me a bad name!" came the voice of the real Dr. Eggman! "Huh??" Amy gasped. "Where's his voice coming from?" Tails wondered, leaving Jolt flailing on his belly and having difficulty getting back up. The computer Metal Eggman had been working from started to buzz and whirr, and a hatch on it opened, revealing a projector that displayed a hologram of Dr. Eggman! "Here I am! Coming to you live from the Cloud Fleet hovering undetected over Central City!" the doctor announced! "That can't be good..." Silver muttered.

"That isn't me! It's an ILLUUUUSION!" Metal Eggman shouted, hovering his Egg Mobile in front of the hologram. "Shut it!" Eggman growled, shoing him away, "How'd you like my decoy, Sonic?" he asked.

"He's not as ticklish as you, Eggman." Sonic grinned. "Teehee! I wanna tickle him!" Alpha giggled. "Well, be that as it may..." Eggman sighed, "Now you're helplessly miles away, and I'm poised to strike at GUN and the Covenant of Despair at the same time!" he grinned wickedly. "Come again?" Zeke yelped. Eggman clasped his hands behind his back. "Through my dealings with Despair, I found out about GUN's little GXterminate project. Curious how Despair knew about it?" he asked. "Not as much as what it IS..." Sonic said impatiently. "It's an ingenious mechanism." Eggman said, stroking his moustache, "Once completed, it will wipe out all animal life by selectively targeting GeneX force." he explained. "What!?! ...Oh, no!" Silver gasped. "You can imagine the appeal such a device might have for me. I could get rid of you from continents away!" Eggman cackled. "Well, you aren't getting ahold of it! We're headed straight for Central City right now!" Sonic said. "You can try... Ridley!" Eggman called, slightly startling the coati. "Finish fetching the Chaos Wing, and then pick up the Chaos Gauntlets that the robo puppy withheld from me before!" Eggman ordered! Sonic stared in surprise. "Wait... SPOT's got the Chaos Gauntlets!?" he gasped. "Huh?! Why didn't you mention that, SPOT!?" Tails stammered. "Entering defensive modes!" the robo-puppy's monitor said as Ridley approached him. "Give me those!" Ridley growled. Eggman looked back at the Cloud Carnival ship docked to the tower. "BAS! While they're sorting that out... Activate the Cloud Cruiser's self destruct!" he sneered. "SELF DESTRUCT!?" Sonic yelped. "Farewell, Sonic the Hedgehog! I hope you had a blast in my EggSecurity Tower!" Eggman grinned as his hologram vanished! "Self Destruct in 10 seconds!" BAS announced. In that moment, everyone had to act fast. "I gotta get those Chaos Relics!" Sonic determined, speeding past Amy. "S-SONIIIIIC!!! What about us!?" she stammered. "Amy! Over here, quick!" Silver called. Zipp flew over to SPOT and fired some shots at the robot. "'Scuse me, guys. I'LL take those Gauntlets!" he shouted. "Damage taken! Cargo hatch loosened!" SPOT's monitor displayed as Zipp snatched the gauntlets! "Hang on, SPOT!" Sonic shouted as he approached, only to see a pinkish light flash in his face! "Huh?? Light?? No, no, no!!" he cried as he whited out.

Sonic found himself back in a familiar place. It was dark. There was fire. Injured Chao littered the ground. This was the night Chaos was sealed in the Master Emerald. "Oh... no... Not this again." he muttered, "Thanks a lot, Tikal. My friends better still be alive after this!" he grumbled as he sped up the steps of the nearby altar. He heard familiar words and saw familiar sights. Tikal was pleading with the Master Emerald. "The seven emeralds are the servers... Chaos is power, enriched by the heart... The controller serves to unify the chaos..." she said in a panic, gasping as she reached a sudden realization. "The seven emeralds can change our thoughts into power! If this emerald controls that power... Please! You must stop him!" A bright light erupted from the Master Emerald, and Tikal fell to the ground as Chaos was sealed in the Master Emerald. "OK... And now I wake up, right?" Sonic muttered. However, Sonic noted that Tikal was still alive. He'd been led to believe that she'd sacrificed everything to seal Chaos. After a moment, something else started to happen. A dark force started to emanate from the Master Emerald. ".....Huh!?" Sonic muttered. In moments, black fluid escaped from the emerald, taking the familiar form of Shadow Chaos! "What!?! You!?!You came from the Master Emerald?" Sonic gasped. Shadow Chaos flailed angrily, and then leapt down the steps of the altar, fleeing the area! "Hey! Where ya goin!?" Sonic shouted. However, the creature escaped. "So.... The Master Emerald couldn't fully hold Chaos?" he mumbled curiously.

"GAH!! Where am I!?" Sonic yelped as he awoke. Tails was standing in front of him, and they were in Station Square, just outside the entrance to the forest leading to the Security Tower. "You spaced out! Just like Knuckles did at Frostbite Maze! Are you two skipping breakfast or something?" Tails wondered. "I'll have to compare notes with Knuckles later! What happened, Tails?" Sonic asked. Tails looked at the ground. "You won't like it, Sonic. Ridley made off with the gold cape and Zipp got away with the Chaos

Gauntlets." he sighed. "Argh... Sorry, buddy..." Sonic groaned. "There's... More... Silver, Amy and Cream are... missing." Tails whimpered. "Rats! I hope Silver's looking after them..." Sonic said in frustration. "SPOT got rattled in the explosion. I had to call Professor Pickle to pick him up." Tails added. Sonic sighed. "We're not having a good day, huh? I'd better hurry to Central City and try to stop this GXterminate thing before it's completed!" he said urgently. "How can I help?" Tails said eagerly. Sonic nodded. "Go find Knuckles at the Mystic Ruins. He's on a wild goose chase now, and he'd be more useful tracking down those Chaos Relics!" he realized. Tails and Sonic exchanged thumbs ups and then took off on their missions, not letting their setbacks harm their determination to stop Dr. Eggman or GXterminate!

To be continued...

27 - Experiments Unite!

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 27 - Experiments Unite!
Stage 16(Dark 8) - GUN Headquarters
Minor Boss 12 - Rhinolord

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Kosmo, after helping Carrie escape from Hidden Palace Zone, followed Carrie and Talon to their next destination without their knowledge. This destination turned out to be Despair Castle on Demon Island, where he found Copter and Punchy battling with the Covenant of Despair over the Chaos Boots and a hostage, Heather the Phoenix! Guard the gargoyle escaped with Heather as Despair reinforcements arrived, and Talon escaped with a Chaos Emerald. Kosmo had lost track of Carrie, and was forced to follow Copter as he chased Talon and Guard on the way out of the castle. Punchy, however, got separated from the group along the way. With time to think, Punchy realized that Rainbow was spotted with Kosmo before, and started to wonder where she was now, and grow enraged at the morph he now blamed for her disappearance...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Mia sat in her cab, filing her nails in boredom as she waited for Copter and Punchy to return. The first person she noticed heading her way was Vector. "Start that flyin' car!!" he shouted. Behind him was Punchy, who actually arrived ahead of Copter and Kosmo. "Wait up, Punchy!!" Copter panted as he ran his way. "Hurry up, Copt... Huh? You!!" Punchy growled, seeing Kosmo bringing up the rear. "Oh... Hey, Experiment 1." Kosmo said nonchalantly. Punchy clenched his teeth angrily. "Can it, creep! Where's Rainbow!?" he snarled. "Wow. You forgot to tell him your name's not One." Copter mumbled. Punchy ignored him, his gaze fixed on Kosmo. "The whole reason I came to this stupid island was to find Rainbow, 'cuz someone saw her with YOU! What have you done with her!?" he shouted. "Whoa there, dude... I didn't do anything with that nutcase. She followed ME..." Kosmo stammered. "Huh? Even I'm havin' trouble buying that, Kosmo." Copter said, crossing his arms. "What?! YOU followed me, too!" Kosmo snapped. "Oh, right..." Copter replied sheepishly. "No lies! Tell me where Rainbow is or I'll punch those shiny eyes out!!" Punchy threatened, raising his fists furiously! Fera, Violet and Chet were catching up around this point. "Copter?? And those guys!?" Chet mumbled. "Stay back. This looks interesting..." Fera grinned. Kosmo looked a bit saddened as he thought back. "I don't KNOW where that girl is, all right? There... there was a cave-in... I... I couldn't get EVERYONE out, right?" he stammered. Punchy's eyes widened. "What are you saying!? Did... did you get Rainbow hurt!?" he growled. "Punch! Calm it down, dude! You're not thinking straight!" Copter warned. "No, YOU'RE not thinking straight!!! Why aren't you smacking Kosmo with that tailband of yours!?!?" Punchy screamed. "Cut it out, you psycho! It wasn't me!! Fera was the one who..." Kosmo tried to say, but was interrupted. "He hurt her, Punchy. He hurt your friend..." Fera taunted, "Give in to the Despair Seal...! Use the power of darkness!! Punish this

traitor!!" she yelled. Copter glanced at her nervously. "Traitor...? Punish...? Um.... Puuuuunchy?" he murmured, glancing over at the snarling echidna. "KOSMO!!!!" Punchy roared, erupting in darkness and transforming into Dark Punchy! "Um... I did not know he could do that!" Kosmo muttered. Copter backed off and pulled out the Hurricane remote, starting an argument with Hoover to get him to send it while Dark Punchy glared at Kosmo. "Well, finally I've got control over my own form! I should thank you, Kosmo... But I'd rather kill you!" he growled. "What are you babbling about? Gah, I'm sick of you, and however many personalities you've got in there! I'll knock 'em all out!" Kosmo shouted back!

Dark Punchy unleashed shockwaves of darkness, knocking both Copter and Kosmo back! As Kosmo stumbled backward, he morphed gargoyle wings onto his back and took to the air! "I think you forgot... I INVENTED transforming!" he shouted. "No, you didn't!" Dark Punchy growled, tossing balls of dark energy up at Kosmo as he flew his way! Kosmo morphed his tail into Copter's tails and smacked at the dark energy, lessening the impact! "Hey, leave me outta this! I've fought Dark Punchy before..." Copter groaned unpleasantly. Kosmo rolled his eyes and changed them to Tails's tails before dropping down and attempting to strike Dark Punchy with them! The black echidna simply caught the tails in his darkness charged hands! "I'll rip these off!" he growled. However, Kosmo simply morphed them away, turning himself into a hedgehog. "Chaos Control, pal!" he said, vanishing and reappearing behind Dark Punchy! "Oh, yeah!?! DARK Chaos Blast!!!!" Infusing Chaos energy with dark energy, Dark Punchy caused a terrible, violent explosion, throwing Kosmo into a nearby tree and snapping it in half! "Ow... Shadow's spleen..." Kosmo groaned. "Isn't it YOUR spleen if it's your transformation?" Copter muttered. "Help or shut up!" Kosmo grumbled, glowing as he took a new form. Dark Punchy's eyes went wide as he stood before... himself! "Okay, wise guy! Let's see how YOU like it!" Kosmo growled, his hands emitting a light amount of dark energy. "You DARE copy me!?" Dark Punchy roared, hurtling black lightning at Kosmo from his hands! Kosmo sped past it and started punching at him with darkness-powered punches, but his Dark Punchy form seemed notably different from the real thing. "Ha! You are untrained in the power of darkness! In fact, it is practically foreign to you!" Fera laughed. "Huh? It IS!?" Copter gasped. Dark Punchy pushed him back and started zapping him with lightning fiercely, making Kosmo revert to his normal form as he lost energy! "Gaaaah!! Anytime you wanna jump in, Copter!?" he yelled, panting as he struggled to get away. "Prepare to die!!" Dark Punchy snarled. Finally, someone stepped forward. "Punchy... Stop!!"

Violet stepped between Dark Punchy and Kosmo, which made him hesitate for a moment. "Neither of me are too fond of YOU right now, traitor!" Dark Punchy growled. "I... I know... This is all my fault... But this isn't helping Rainbow, and you know it! Now get ahold of yourself!" Violet shouted. "Gee, nice speech. Now, Copter, if you would be so kind as to lend a tail..." Kosmo grunted. However, Dark Punchy was suddenly stopped in his tracks, clasping his head! Punchy's normal voice escaped his mouth. "She's... right! I gotta help... Rainbow!" he gasped. "...And Heather! We need to help them both!" Copter added. "...Carrie..." Kosmo muttered to himself. Fera stomped forward angrily. "Violet! What are you doing!?" she snarled. "My... My sister..." she muttered. "Your... sister...?" Fera gasped. While Punchy grappled with Dark Punchy, Chet ran up to Copter. "So... You're going to save that phoenix?" he asked. "Welcome back, Chet." Copter replied. "I'm NOT back." he snapped. "Dark Punchy.....!! Let me... GO!!" Dark Punchy flashed brightly as Punchy was restored to normal, but Chet had to finish telling Copter something before they wrapped this up. "Guard was talking to that Gunner dude's hologram. He's probably taking the phoenix to Central City. That's where GUN's HQ is." he reasoned. Copter nodded. "Thanks..." he said before returning his focus to Punchy. "Violet... You helped me... Or was it the Despair Seal FINALLY working again?" he muttered. Fera shrugged. "I have something to attend to... You three are free to go. You don't have the Chaos Emerald anyway." she said, turning and leading

Violet and Chet away. "Punchy... You okay?" Copter asked nervously. Punchy nodded. "Yeah... I guess... But YOU owe me, Kosmo!" he said. "How do ya figure?" Kosmo grumbled. "You lost Rainbow. Now you're gonna help find her!" Punchy insisted. "If it's all the same to you, Punchy, why don't we start in Central City. Heather's there." Copter reasoned. "Not to mention Gunner. We all owe him a little payback..." Kosmo added. "But why would Rainbow be THERE??" Punchy snapped. Kosmo shrugged. "GUN forces WERE nearby when I lost her. Maybe she was caught by them." he figured. Punchy scratched his head a moment. "...Okay, fair enough. Remember, if you try anything funny, I can go all dark again!" he warned. "As if that frightened me!" Kosmo scoffed as they started toward Mia's cab. "Could you BOTH please behave!!" Copter growled. "Um, are we ALL riding back, 'cuz we might have a space problem..." Vector shouted, stuffed in the back seat of the cab. Kosmo sighed in annoyance. "I'll fly myself back..." he muttered.

GUN's Headquarters wasn't difficult to find. GUN troops and robots were flocking to the building from all over, something clearly putting them in an uproar. "Do we still wanna do this?" Punchy grumbled as they walked through Central City, heading for the place GUN's forces were meeting at. "Don't worry, getting in will be a cinch." Kosmo said, morphing into his GUN Agent form. "What about us...?" Copter wondered.

"Agent 16" led Copter and Punchy into GUN HQ in handcuffs. "Oh, woe is me! How could I have been stupid enough to fall asleep in that trash can?" Copter wailed, overacting a bit. Somehow, this ruse was working, and it didn't take long for them to find the source of the uproar in the base. They found Gemini the fennec, pointing her wand at Dr. Nammad! However, Agents 32 and 64 were behind the doctor, pointing guns at Adam the bat and Evelyn the fox. "Let them go! I'm the one you want!" Gemini growled. "No, uh... No I don't." Nammad said blankly. Kosmo reverted to his normal form as he approached this scene. "Okay, these guys are blocking the road." he growled as Copter and Punchy discarded their unlocked handcuffs. "Guns on that morph! Protect the doctor at all costs!" Agent 32 growled. Agent 64 nodded and targeted Kosmo. "Gemini! Are you all right?" Copter asked, a bit confused to see her. "Aw, geez. Not again. Why can't you guys get captured AWAY from me??" Punchy groaned. "I'm not captured 'till I'm in a cage! Let's go, Eve!" Adam said. "Wait... for... Fred!" Evelyn grumbled. Dr. Nammad shrugged. "I propose a trade. These, uh, troublesome pests... For the, uh, artificial wand I worked so hard to, uh, make." he suggested. Kosmo looked impatient. "Can't I just move this guy and we can all be on our way?" he sighed. "No, don't! I need to ask him something!" Gemini yelled. "Ask him when he regains consciousness!!" Kosmo snapped. "Let her speak, Kosmo!" Copter insisted. "Huh...?" Kosmo muttered. "She's my... friend. I'm going to help her, too." Copter decided. "Greeeeat..." Punchy said in annoyance. Gemini nodded, smiling at Copter before returning to her business. "Dr. Nammad! Why do you want the fake wand?" she asked. The doctor shrugged. "Well, I can't, uh, use the real one. So I made one that I, uh, could use." he explained. "Then... would you return my wand?" Gemini asked. Nammad thought about it and nodded. "Very well. We'll make the exchange, uh, at the same time." he said. Despite a few grumbings from the nearby experiments who distrusted Nammad, the exchange went by quickly, and Gemini sighed with relief as she finally held her own wand again. "There... Now let my friends go!" she insisted. "Hmmm... No. I, uh, gave up the wand. I need to, uh, be sure you won't use it to, uh, cause any trouble..." Nammad grinned. "WHAT!?" Gemini yelled. "That slime! I knew it!" Kosmo growled. "That was pretty predictable." Punchy sighed. "Can I move NOW?" Adam asked, only to watch Evelyn shake her head. "This artificial wand will, uh, be the final piece of Project GXterminate! Now I, uh, gotta go turn it on." Nammad announced. "G-what-inate!?" Copter muttered. "Enough! Let's get him!" Kosmo yelled. However, Agents 32 and 64 started to shoot to cover Dr. Nammad as he waved the fake wand, causing a blinding flash of light as they escaped with Adam and Evelyn! "Aaah!! They're gone!"

Gemini gasped. "Don't worry, Gemini! We'll get them back! They took Heather, too!" Copter said. "Huh? ...Isn't Heather dead?" Gemini muttered. "Yeah, and they might've took Rainbow! Let's trash this dump!!" Punchy added. "And shut down this extermination thing they mentioned! Sounds dangerous..." Kosmo concluded.

Despite everything on the line and any determination the four of them might have had to accomplish this mission, they were still in GUN's own headquarters. A brief walk further into the base revealed just how serious this was. They had gone down some elevators to get into the base, and now they found an alarming area beneath Central City: a hangar filled with GUN Warships! Making matters worse, GUN had sounded the alarm on them, and this massive area was filling up with Beetles, Hunters, Hornets, armed GUN Agents, and worst of all, Bigfoot mechs! "We're dead, aren't we?" Copter gulped. "I'd like to disagree, but look who's leading this army of death." Punchy pointed out. Shadow the Hedgehog and Guard the Gargoyle were coordinating the troops into a line to block the experiments' advance. "Wait there. I'm going to have a talk..." Shadow said, running up to Kosmo. "What are you doing here, Shadow?" Kosmo growled. "Don't worry. I'm not here to rescue you again..." the black hedgehog said wryly. "When did YOU ever need rescuing?!" Copter stammered. "The President may be in danger. I'm here to investigate at Rouge's request." Shadow explained. "Well, we're here for everything BUT the Prez." Punchy said. "Kosmo?" Shadow asked. "You know who I want, Shadow..." Kosmo replied. Just then, Guard flew over. "GUARD!! Where'd you stash Heather!? I will have Kosmo snap you in two, you bot brain!!" Copter yelled furiously. Gemini held her wand defensively. "I'll pay you back for imprisoning me, too!" she growled. "You don't scare me. Grrrr... She is safely with Dr. Nammad. You'll never reach her." he said. "We'll see about that!" Kosmo growled. "...without my assistance, that is." Guard added. "Did he just say that?" Punchy groaned. "Dr. Nammad... Grrrr... He's insane. His actions will endanger all of us. Grrrr... After assessing the situation, I have deemed it worthy of ignoring my programming." Guard explained. "Prove it!" Copter said. Guard turned around and swung his scythe, firing a beam that blew a GUN Hornet sky high! "Grrrr! We must work together to stop GXterminate!" he growled. Shadow nodded. "You four go. Guard and I will handle things here." he grinned. Punchy flashed and became Dark Punchy. "Not that I lack confidence in your boundless abilities, but I'll just blow a hole in that line..." he said.

Dark Punchy led the charge, knocking bots and agents alike out of the way with dark shockwaves as he bolted past the line of GUN troops! Copter and Gemini added their own attacks as they followed, thinning out the robots that might chase them, while Kosmo brought up the rear in the form of a Flying Dog mech, both confusing and blasting enemy troops that remained to pursue. Shadow busily warped around knocking out GUN forces that started to chase after them, while Guard stayed airborne and fired beams from his scythe where they were needed. However, the group didn't get far past the first GUN Warship before they came across their nemesis. "Ha ha! Furry freaks!" Colonel Gunner stood in their path, accompanied by Sergeant Drol. "Fearful that the end is near, you desperately charge straight into the jaws of your destroyer! Fools!" Gunner laughed. "What'd you say?!" Punchy growled as the Despair Seal returned him to normal. "If I didn't have this seal, you'd be SO dead." he added. "Silence, knave!" Drol sneered, "You stand before Colonel Richard Gunner! The master strategist behind the battle with the Covenant of Despair!" he announced. Copter couldn't contain himself. "Master strategist? HIM?? BWA HA HA HA HA!!!" he started cracking up. "Stop that snickering, you! I owe all of you a long overdue debt of vengeance!" Gunner snarled furiously. Kosmo, having morphed back to normal, crossed his arms in a huff. "Funny... I was gonna say thanks for letting me out, but now you don't even get that. Bloody big nose." he sniggered. Sgt. Drol couldn't help snickering at that as well. "D-drol!!" Gunner gasped. "E-errr... I think the robot is malfunctioning, sir." he mumbled. Gunner glanced back at the huge

tank accompanying himself and Drol. "It'll be fine. Where was I?" he muttered. Suddenly, Spy came running towards them from behind the next GUN Warship. "Boooooooss!! Saaarr-I mean-Colonel Gunnerrrrr!!!" he screamed frantically. "Hey, lookie, it's the dimwit patrol." Copter pointed. "Spyyyyy... You were SUPPOSED to be watching the President!" Gunner growled, grinding his teeth. "Yes, your bossiness! I was! That's just it! The Prez has gone totally bonkers! He's out of his gourd! He must be stopped!" Spy stammered. "He... Are you sure, Spy?" Gunner muttered. "He's plotting something sinister with Project GXterminate, sir." he whimpered. "Well, he can't do much from his little office..." Gunner shrugged. "No, no, no!! You don't get it!! HE'S HERE!!!" Spy shouted. "Come again!?" Drol gasped. "What do you mean the president's up to something sinister??" Gemini wondered. "Eh, who cares!" Kosmo sighed. "Grrr... GXterminate is MY master plan! No one else is getting their grubby mitts on it!" Gunner growled, glaring at the experiments and Gemini, "And once it's activated, it will drain the special energy of the phoenix, and use it to target the same life energy all over the world! The life energy... of furry freaks! GXterminate will eliminate you all in one fell swoop! Ha ha ha ha ha!" he cackled. "You're not going to do that, Richie!" Copter shouted. "Yeah! We won't let ya!" Punchy added. "As though you have any choice in the matter! M73-F/A Rhinolord! Trample these disgusting freaks!" Gunner shouted. Kosmo glared furiously at the colonel. "You are beneath scum, Gunner!" he growled. "Oh, yeah? Aren't I basically doing the same thing you intended to do before? Only I'm going to succeed!!" Gunner retorted. Kosmo gasped, a look of true rage growing over his face. "I'll make you choke on your bile!!" he roared.

The Rhinolord tank charged past Gunner and Drol, forcing the experiments and Gemini to scatter as it charged at them! It was a heavily armored vehicle, much like GUN's smaller armored tank robots, only this one was covered with weapons! "You are fools to march into GUN's own Headquarters like this! You'll never leave here alive now! Ha ha ha ha ha!" Gunner laughed as Rhinolord started firing lasers and bombs from all directions! "Aa-a-Abra-ka-warpra!!" Gemini shouted in panic, vanishing and reappearing on top of one of the nearby GUN Warships. "I'll be back when my heart catches up to me!" she shouted. Copter and Punchy were busy scrambling to avoid the attacks, while Kosmo stood his ground, his hand having morphed into a Hunter's shield. "Hey, Gunner! I'm using your own tech against you! How do you like that!?" he yelled. "Flatten him!" Gunner yelled. "...oh..." Kosmo yelped as Rhinolord came charging his way! However, Kosmo simply added a Hunter's jetpack to his body and flew above the tank quickly! Unfortunately, the tank had laser turrets on top of it as well, and he went spinning out of control as the jetpack was struck! "You stupid, stupid, STUPID machine!! Outta my way!!!" Copter shouted, trying to damage the tank with Chaos Whirlwind! However, it was ineffective. "Punchy, I think we need your dark form..." he sighed. "No... I'm not sure I have enough control over it..." Punchy sighed. Instead, he tried Chaos Avalanche, tossing chunks of the floor at the tank. However, they bounced off uselessly, and the tank started to charge at him! "...warpra!" Gemini appeared beside Punchy and quickly warped him out of the way as the Rhinolord attempted to flatten him. "Whew... Thanks. Hey, you got a nuclear blast spell or something?" he asked. Gemini glared at him disapprovingly. "Oh, nuclear winter. That'd solve things. Your Chaos move pulls apart the floor, right?" she asked. Punchy nodded. "I've already puzzled this out!" Kosmo shouted, morphed into Punchy's form, "THIS is how you Chaos Avalanche!" he said, raising his hands at the Rhinolord as it charged at him! The ground shook, and Kosmo pulled chunks of the floor out from directly under the tank! It flipped over backward, exposing its underside, which seemed decidedly less armored! Copter, who was already flying around to avoid getting flattened, dropped toward the flipped tank and swung his tails, his tailband shining as he tapped into its power! "Stupid, stupid STUPID MACHINE!!" he screamed as the Rhinolord exploded in half!

Gunner wore a familiar dumbfounded expression, followed by outrage. "Grrrrrrr!!! I despise you freaks!

With all my soul! Just you wait, I'll destroy you all!" he shouted. "Um... Sir?" Drol muttered with concern. "Nice speech. Now take us to where you're keeping this doomsday weapon!" Kosmo growled. "You don't know Gunner very well, do you?" Copter panted. "You'll burn, freaks!" Gunner said, stepping back slowly. Suddenly, Spy handed him a coffee mug, on which was a hidden button that he hastily pressed. A hidden platform on the floor started to rise up, carrying the three GUN officials away as a wall of flames blocked the experiments from chasing them. "YOU'LL BURRRRRN!!!" Gunner screamed, sipping his coffee as his platform vanished into the distance. "How'd he do that...?" Kosmo muttered blankly. "Old coward's always got an escape hatch." Punchy shrugged. "Well, we'd better get chasing!" Kosmo grumbled as the flames died down. "You, there... Wait a moment!" came a voice exiting the nearby GUN Warship. "No time, military guy! We've got lots of ground to cover before people start dropping dead from some superweapon!" Kosmo said. "Hold up..." Punchy gasped, "That's the President!"

To be continued...

28 - The President's Secret

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 28 - The President's Secret
Stage 16(Dark 8) - GUN Headquarters
Boss 16 - ??????????

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After nearly losing himself to darkness in a fight with Kosmo, Punchy was snapped out of it with Violet's help. Chet told Copter that Guard was most likely taking Heather to GUN's Headquarters in Central City, so the trio of experiments teamed up to infiltrate the base. Inside, they found Gemini, who bargained with Dr. Nammad to exchange the fake wand for her real one, but lost her friends Adam and Evelyn in the process, Nammad taking them hostage! Deeper in, Guard revealed Nammad's madness, saying that Project GXterminate would threaten everyone, and teaming with Shadow to fend off GUN's troops so the experiments could move on. They faced off against Col. Gunner, who explained that GXterminate would use Heather's energy to target the GeneX energy of all intelligent animals in the world, killing them and leaving the humans! After defeating Gunner's Rhinolord robot, the colonel escaped, but the group was shocked to be approached by the President himself, who Spy had claimed was plotting something sinister with GXterminate as well! Now, on to the next chapter!

Kosmo looked at the well-dressed human suspiciously. "If you're the President... And you're over here... Then who was that spy running from?" he asked. "Listen... I don't know who else to turn to..." the President began, "Someone's been posing as me for some time. He's fooled GUN and propagated a war with the Covenant of Despair." he explained. "Seriously?? Sounds like the work of a morph!" Copter said, glancing at Kosmo. "Please. Eyes would be a dead giveaway. Gotta be a really good human in disguise." Kosmo scoffed. The President looked at them urgently. "Whoever it is, he's after the real me. I've had to go into hiding. Few know I've been here... Those who do tend to disappear. I don't know who to trust... So I thought... Maybe it's time to trust you." he said. "Us? Do you know who we are??" Kosmo stammered. The President sighed. "There's no time to ask such questions. I need you to cover me while I head for the laboratory. Can you do it?" he asked. The experiments all glanced between each other awkwardly, until Gemini piped up. "If he can trust us, we can trust him. Let's go before more troops show up!" she reasoned. "You think they'd attack the president?" Copter wondered.

Unfortunately, the robots, while programmed not to harm the President, were not exactly programmed to obey him, and kept attempting to capture or destroy the intruders despite the company they kept. Fortunately, they were able to reach a relatively safe office area of the base and lock the door behind them using a Presidential emergency code. "I do have a tiny bit of clout with GUN... within my own nation." the prez muttered. Gemini gasped as she looked around the office. "You guys have a worse

security breach than us..." she gulped. The agents working the office were hunched over, moaning. A closer look revealed that they were skeletons! "Urgh... Loskel..." Copter groaned. Punchy looked a bit greener as a memory flashed through his mind. "These things make me vomity..." he grumbled. "How utterly rude! And I was just gonna have a friendly quiz with you!" said Lospector as he floated in front of them, "But now I gotta make this a wager. You win, you pass through. I win, and my lovely assistants nab your President. Make this quick, I have an appointment with another prez." he said. "What do you mean, you sludge!?" Gemini growled. "Now, name calling is for after the game. LOSPECTER'S QUIZ MANIA! What question number is this for the day? Eh, lost count. Okay, just how many of you doofy experiments is there now?" he asked. Copter and Punchy stood there counting for a bit, but Kosmo just put a moment of thought into it. "That griffin seemed young... I'll say... Fifteen." he answered. Lospector grinned. "Final answer? Well, thanks for your candor. I'll take my bones and be on my way!" he said, holding up a card that caused the loskel to vanish! "Hold it!" Gemini shouted, but Lospector escaped through a wall quickly. "...He pumped us for info again, didn't he?" Copter groaned, slapping his forehead.

Heading through a long corridor between areas of the base, the group soon found Whisk the divine skipping along, seeming strangely calm in spite of the alarms going off through the base. "Hey... You're that creature from Eggman's flying carnival..." Kosmo muttered. Whisk looked around with a dazed expression for a moment. "I am soooo lost." she muttered. "I'll say. What happened to that lizard you were with in the sewer?" Gemini asked. Whisk looked at her blankly. "Um... Could you show me to the GX-story-time room? I was invited to story time!" she smiled. Everyone frowned awkwardly at her. "I would recommend you find your way out of here..." the President sighed. "Before that crazy doctor uses you in some experiment..." Copter muttered. Whisk shrugged, and then vanished in a flash of light! "...What's she got to do with GXterminate?" Punchy wondered.

An electronic security door was at the end of the corridor, and the President didn't know the code. "Let me try... Blasting the thing might get us surrounded without Shadow and the gargoyle to bail us out again..." Kosmo said, morphing into a GUN Hunter and plugging himself into the electronic lock. "What the... What are you expecting to?" Punchy began, only to shut up as the door slid open. "This is a bunker, designed to protect the laboratory." the President warned, "I'll follow behind you. Disable the defenses as we go..." he said. As they entered, they found Bigfoot and Flying Dog mechs waiting for them, as well as armored turrets positioned throughout the bunker! "Yeah... we can do that..." Copter muttered. Punchy quickly changed into Dark Punchy, growling as he proceeded into the room! "Good, they'll waste bullets on him. I'll use magic to disable those turrets!" Gemini said, waving her wand and warping ahead of the group! Kosmo chuckled as he stepped into the room. "I've got a fun idea. Watch this!" He glowed brightly and transformed into a slightly smaller version of the Rhinolord tank they had fought earlier! "Hey, no fair! Everyone's got a way to be bulletproof but me!" Copter shouted. "Ahem..." the President cleared his throat. "Yeah, like they'll shoot you." Copter scoffed. The others had ignored his complaints, and were already battling it out with the GUN mechs, bullets, lasers and dark energy flying everywhere! Gulping nervously, Copter charged into the fray, jumping and weaving to avoid the projectiles coming his way! "If I were evil and smart, I'd use the prez as a human shield!" he grumbled halfway to the nearest turret, figuring he'd try disabling the ones Gemini wasn't busy with. He took to the sky, spinning his tails frantically to avoid the shots of the turret and land on top of it! Then, he bumped into Gemini. "Ow! Hey, what're YOU doing here!? Outta my way!" she yelled. "Me!? I thought you warped that way!!" Copter shouted. "I already turned that turret's Chaos Drive into an apple core. Look, it's shooting seeds... oh, it stopped." she said. Copter rolled his eyes and thwacked the turret with his tails, blowing it to pieces with his tailband's power! "...My way's more creative." Gemini pouted.

In the meantime, Dark Punchy's assault was getting notably brutal. He was snapping the metal limbs off the Bigfoot mechs and tossing them at Flying Dogs, and he'd blast clear through a mech to grab its pilot and hurl him to the ground, badly injuring the pilot. Soon, one of those metal limbs knocked Kosmo's Rhinolord form over, and he morphed back to normal to get back to his feet. "This guy's gettin' outta hand again..." he grunted. Copter and Gemini arrived on the scene after disabling the turrets, and gasped at Dark Punchy's onslaught. "I was afraid of this..." Gemini muttered, "Someone should take that crazy bracelet away from him." Copter shrugged. "Yeah, and then they'll take away my tailband. I'm not gonna tell him..." he said. As the last of the mechs fell, Dark Punchy glared straight at the President! However, Gemini appeared in front of him before he could make another move. "SNAP OUT OF IT!" she yelled. Kosmo was soon by her side, and Copter approached Dark Punchy from behind. "We're voting regular Punchy back again." he said. Dark Punchy glanced back at him and chuckled. "Think your vote means anything to me?" he sneered. The Despair Seal glowed softly, but seemed to be struggling. Kosmo cleared his throat. "C'mon, we know he's in there. Don't be dragging this out." he said. "Think what Rainbow would want, Punchy." Gemini said. Dark Punchy groaned as the Despair Seal glowed brighter, and in a moment normal Punchy was back. "...What's wrong with this thing?" he muttered, flicking the Despair Seal gently as though testing it for something.

The laboratory door was open. Inside, they found that Shadow and Guard had beaten them there, as had Colonel Gunner, Spy and Sgt. Drol. Shadow was accompanied by Rouge and Omega, and there were several GUN agents present including Agents 32 and 64. Adam and Evelyn were stuck in a cage at the back of the room, and Dr. Nammad and the "President" were standing over a machine made up of monitors, several antennae, a power core with a blue Chaos Emerald and the fake wand inserted, and Heather the phoenix clamped to a table beside it, with a machine strapped to her chest! Copter, Punchy, Kosmo, and Gemini gazed in alarm at the scene that unfolded before them. "Mr. President! Just what are you doing in here!?! This lab is... dangerous!" Gunner babbled. "I know, Col. Gunner... I'm making sure of it." the duplicate President said. "Huh?" Gunner mumbled. "Our little war is going to come to an abrupt end." the phony President grinned. Dr. Nammad nodded. "Well, uh... That was always the, uh... plan." he stated. Kosmo couldn't take any more. "Hold it, chumps! We have some complaints about your little plan!" he shouted. "You're gonna let our friends go, NOW, or so help me...!!" Punchy growled. As Spy turned around, he shrieked. "Gaaah! Sarge, it's those evil experiments!" he yelled. "If you don't stop calling me sarge, Spy, I swear I'll have you scrubbing toilets..." Gunner grumbled as he and most everyone turned to acknowledge the new arrivals. "Hold on... How is it there can be TWO Presidents in here!?" Shadow gasped. Also growing impatient, Gemini started to stomp toward the cage at the back of the room. "Never mind! I've got to save my friends!" she grumbled. "Gemini, get back here! It's not safe yet!" Copter warned. "Omega, which one's the real President?" Rouge asked. Omega scanned them both from afar. "It is a near perfect disguise... But if I were to venture a guess, I would say the one who just entered is the true President." he said. "Grrrrr!! Then who's this imposter!?" Guard growled, glaring at the fake. "Impossible! An imposter could never pull the wool over my eyes!" Drol protested. Gunner stared at the real President in shock. "Wait... If you're the President... What are you doing with these....???" he stammered. "Richard! That... thing over there... attacked me in my office! It stole my very identity, and has been posing as me all this time!" the President explained, "I was in hiding in this base until these... intruders showed up. I had to place my trust in them." he said. "S-seriously?? You're kidding?" Gunner yammered in utter disbelief. "It doesn't matter!" the imposter President declared, "I saw to it that GXterminate was completed to MY specifications! Turn it on, Nammad!" he ordered. Dr. Nammad scratched his head awkwardly. "Um...? You say you did something to it?" he gulped. "Awww, never mind! I'LL do it!" said Lospector as he emerged through a nearby wall! "Him again!?" Copter,

Punchy and Kosmo all said at once.

Gemini stopped short of the cage upon Lospector's arrival. "YOU... Not here...!" she growled. Suddenly, Copter and Kosmo cringed as they heard yet another person entering the lab. "Excuse me! What is going on in here!?" said the GUN Commander, looking around, "Mr. President! What... There are two of you!" he stammered. The fake president ignored him and explained his scheme. "When this machine activates, it'll run haywire. The flames inside the phoenix will intensify the power of the Chaos Emerald... All life as we know it... will end!" he sneered. Gunner's eyes went wide. "WHAT!?! That's not... But that'll kill you, too! You're insane!" he yelled. Dr. Nammad tried to block the way to the machine. "Get back, Lospector! It's not, uh, supposed to work like that! Let me get in there and fix your, uh, sabotage!!" he said in panic. "Step aside, Ivan, ya bother me." Lospector said, simply floating around him, and then knocking him away with a water-based projectile from one of his cards! Nammad fell to the ground, unconscious, and Gunner began to freak out. "Dro!!! Guard!! Someone stop them!!" he shouted. "Solare!!" Gemini growled, firing a beam of light from her wand in Lospector's general direction! "Whooooops! Missed me, sweetie!" Lospector chuckled, flipping aside. However, she had hit the phony President! "Eeeeeeyaaaaaah!!!" he howled in pain, and his body started to convulse and shake! "Ew, what's happening?? Am I gonna throw up?!" Punchy gasped, covering his eyes. "Aaaah heh heh heh heh haaaa!!!" the fake president laughed as his disguise disintegrated away, revealing greenish bones, clawed hands, and glowing red eye sockets in his green skull! "Oh, my... What IS that!?" Rouge gasped. "It can't be!! It's a Lost One!!" Gemini stammered. Col. Gunner's eyes burned with rage. "A FREAK!! A FREAK has been posing as the President!! Do something!! Kill it!! Don't let it turn on that machine!!" he screamed furiously. The Commander looked stunned, but nodded. "For once... I agree with you, Colonel... Mr. President, you need to get back, sir!" he said. Kosmo nodded and started toward the skeleton. "Come on! That machine's not getting turned on, right?" he said. Copter and Punchy looked at him funny. "Isn't destroying all life what you WANT?" Punchy said. Kosmo scoffed. "Where have you been? That's what the Lost Ones want. All I want... is to be free!" he declared, "And that can't very well happen if I'm dead! Let's go!" he said, leading the way! Gunner glanced at Guard in the meantime. "I want troops in here, NOW! Stop them ALL!!" he ordered. "Grrrr!! Yes, Colonel!" Guard said, hurrying out of the lab. "Ooooooh, sounds like a par-tay! I better dole out some cards to keep everyone occupied!" Lospector chuckled, flying up high and picking out cards for the battle. The green skeleton looked at the experiments as they approached him. "I am Loskeletor! The Lost Ones have been the silent army in this war!" he said with a hollow, ghastly voice, "And now, we are here to take this city for our own! Thou souls shall soon be ours!! Now, meet thy doom!"

Loskeletor's eyes glowed brighter, and red hot beams fired from them, surprising the experiments and making them scatter! Lospector chuckled from above and tossed a few cards around. "Enjoy! I stacked the deck special for this occasion!" he grinned. Three Losol Golems appeared in the lab, large blobs made up of several losol combined together! Shadow, Rouge and Omega sprang into action, heading for the golem closest to the President. "They lack weaknesses... together. So let's try splitting them apart!" the hedgehog suggested. Copter found himself cut off from the others by the second Losol Golem. "You giant ugly gelatin! Don't make me splatter you all over the walls!" he growled, "Go on, guys! I'll catch up!" The third golem went straight for Gemini. "Hah! You asked for it! I've got my wand back! Slibeam!" she shouted, slicing the golem in half with a magic beam, which only succeeded in creating two smaller golems. "Why didn't I see that coming...?" she mumbled, trying to think of a better spell that wouldn't slime everyone with the golem's remains. In the meantime, Loskeletor kept Punchy and Kosmo at bay with his eye lasers, so only one could get close to him at a time. When one got close, he swiped his claws at them, which were not only sharp, but would burst into blue Ghost Fire from time to time,

creating the danger of turning the victim into a loskel! Kosmo morphed his tail into a mace and started to toss it from afar in order to stop this cycle, but one advantage of being a skeleton was that it was pretty easy to bend and twist to dodge attacks! "Heh heh heh! Alas, like my performance as President, this bout must also draw to a close. Now falls the curtain on thou dismal lives!" Loskeletor taunted, rotating his head rapidly as he fired his laser eyes! Kosmo and Punchy ducked hastily, but one of the Losol Golem pieces Gemini had lost track of was sneaking up on them! "Augh! Get away from me!!" Punchy yelled as it jumped on him! "Grrr... Chaos BLAAAST!!" He eradicated the golem with a huge blast of chaos energy, which even rattled Loskeletor's bones! The skeleton reassembled its body back to normal and looked around. "Hark... The fell golems...fell." he gasped.

Lospecter looked around in disappointment. "Aw, no!! My cute little Losol Golems!" he whined. "They're on the ropes! Someone go save that bird, quick!" Kosmo shouted. Gunner growled in frustration. "Don't let them escape with the phoeni-- errr.... the President! Protect the President at all costs!" he barked. Loskeletor's eye sockets narrowed. "We are far from through... Lospecter, I need another dose of the presidential form." he said. Lospecter chuckled. "Heh, sure. We won't let the fact that our cover's blown stop us!" he smirked. "What are they scheming...?" Gemini wondered. "GEMINI!!! Little HELP!?" Adam yelled from his cage. As Loskeletor started toward the President, Kosmo stood in his way. "Hold it, you phony morph!" he growled. "I haven't time to fritter away exchanging blows with such a... boor. Heh heh..." Loskeletor muttered. "Geez... Talk normal, would ya?" Lospecter sighed. Meanwhile, Heather was waking up. "Copter! Why am I hooked up to all these crazy gizmos!?" she stammered as she looked around. "Burn 'em, Heather! Burn 'em to scrap!" Copter shouted, joining Kosmo in blocking Loskeletor. "Pray, excuse me, knave." the skeleton said. "Is... is that creature mocking me?!" Sgt. Drol stammered. Loskeletor swiped his eye lasers across the area, knocking Copter aside and forcing Kosmo and Punchy out of the way! "Copter!!" Heather shouted in concern. Punchy ran to assist him, while Kosmo turned to follow Loskeletor. "It... It's coming this way!!" the Commander stammered. "Spy, you sniveling coward! Get in there!!" Gunner ordered. "I can't hurt the President!!" Spy yelped, running over to hide near the GXterminate machine. Drol turned to the nearby GUN agents. "We'll take care of it! Troops, fire!" he shouted, prompting Agents 32 and 64 to open fire on Loskeletor! Meanwhile, Lospecter popped in front of Gemini as she reached her friends' cage! "Trouble, witchy?" he smirked. "Augh! Stay back, you gassy monkey!!" she shouted. Kosmo glanced back. "Copter, your friend's in trouble!" he shouted. Hearing him, Copter scrambled back to his feet. "Gah! Gemini! I told her it wasn't safe!!" he growled. "That wakes you up??" Punchy mumbled. "Hey, Loskels! Go fetch!" Lospecter grinned, tossing a card that summoned a horde of loskels to surround Gemini!

Guard finally arrived with reinforcements as things started to look bad. Even Omega's guns were failing to affect Loskeletor. "N-no!! Our guns aren't doing anything!!!" Drol grunted, "Guard, get those robots over here!!" he yelled. Behind Guard, a black cat wearing red and blue pants snuck into the lab and approached the GXterminate weapon. "Me-yow!! Look at all this craziness! Well, least I can snag this emerald... I am NOT useless..." he said to himself. However, Col. Gunner didn't fail to notice him. "What!? W-who!? Gah! No time for all these freaks! Spy, deal with the emerald, I need to protect the President!" he shouted. Being the closest to Loskeletor, Agent 64 stood in front of the skeleton, refusing to get out of the way. "G-get back, monster! I am prepared to lay my life on the line to protect my nation!" he declared. "...Huh??" Kosmo gasped, watching this. Shadow and Rouge were speeding towards Loskeletor, having been occupied with Lost Ones summoned by Lospecter up to this point, but Loskeletor didn't seem to care. "Sorry. Your pitiful efforts bore me." he said. Moving with surprising speed and acrobatics, Loskeletor slipped past Agent 64 and everyone in his way, heading straight for the President! "N-NOOOOO!!!" the President screamed, realizing the skeleton was unstoppable! At the

same time, Spy was holding a gun to the cat, and Copter had arrived to aid Gemini, while Punchy was sitting back wondering which direction he should be going, if any. In the next instant, everyone was startled by the President's ear-piercing shriek as he and Loskeletor vanished in a flash of red light! "Mr. President!!!" the Commander shouted. Shadow stopped in his tracks and stared. "No... I was too late!" he growled. Meanwhile, Fred the fennec had appeared behind Adam and Evelyn inside their cage. "Adam! Evelyn! Did Gemini find her real wand yet?" he asked, startling them. "Don't DO that!!" Adam yelled. "ME-YOW!! Where'd you come from with that gun!?" the nearby cat shouted at Spy as he clutched the Chaos Emerald. A voice was heard coming from near them. "Lucky!! Hold on, you dummy!" Kosmo recognized this voice immediately. "Carrie!?" he blurted. As Spy looked for the source of the voice, Carrie appeared out of nowhere next to him! "BOO!!" she shouted! "WHATINTHEWHOTHE WHAAAAAAT!?" Spy screamed, jumping back! "I coulda got out myself... I think..." Lucky, the cat, grumbled. "Guys! I think we gotta go!" Heather shouted as she jumped away from the GXterminate machine. "Before I go Dark Punchy from CONFUSION!!" Punchy yelled. Gunner turned to the dumbfounded GUN Commander. "Don't just stand around! LOCK DOWN GUN HQ!! Don't let anyone out!" he shouted. "Huh? R-right! Exactly right, Colonel! If the President's still here, we can't let him be taken away!" the Commander said, snapping out of his state of shock. Copter tugged at Gemini's arm as she hurled spells at the Lost Ones frantically. "Geminiiii, no time for grudge matches! Let's go!" he insisted. "Meh, I got a city to conquer anyway. Later, foxy!" Lospector said, flying off! Kosmo, Punchy and Heather quickly joined Copter and Gemini, though Kosmo's eyes were fixed on Carrie as she and Lucky made their escape. Gemini and Fred raised their wands and cast their warping spells to get everyone out of there. "GALAPORTA!!" As the light of the spells surrounded them, Colonel Gunner could be heard screaming. "GAAAAAAAH!! How could they ESCAPE!!?? You... BLASTED EXPERIMENTS!!!"

To be continued...

From the author: Thanks for reading! I'm gonna take another break now. I posted these really quick because the impending Halloween Special contained a spoiler or two for these recent chapters. Due to recent personal events, I don't expect to resume posting until sometime next year, so enjoy all the holidays, and bye for now!

29 - Foreboding Dreams

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 29 - Foreboding Dreams
Stage 17(Hero 9) - Dream Temple
Minor Boss 13 - "Shadow Tails"

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Knuckles met up with Sonic at Eggman's Troblusk City base after leaving the sewer. Knuckles decided to check out Eggman's Tree Fort, which he heard about from Rainbow, while Sonic checks out another lead.

After a disastrous conclusion to checking out that lead, Tails decided to go find Knuckles while Sonic heads for Central City to stop Eggman's latest scheme.

Meanwhile, Gemini managed to reclaim her wand at GUN's HQ and rescue her friends again. Now, she's made a hasty escape after witnessing dramatic events unfold in GUN's laboratory...

Now, on to the next chapter!

After emerging outside GUN Headquarters, Gemini bade farewell to Copter, Punchy, Kosmo and Heather, and hastily started to make a retreat before her teacher could catch her and try to make her change her mind about her mission to the past. However, Shadow soon appeared in front of her. "Wait..." he said gruffly as she stopped short. "Huh?? What do you want?" she stammered. "You can use magic... Could you locate the President?" Shadow said plainly. Gemini sighed. "Not really... I'm not great at tracking the Lost Ones when they don't want to be found." she admitted, "You'd think I'd be able to track Lospector's cards or something..." Shadow looked thoughtful. "Hm... What about Sonic or Knuckles? Could you find them?" he asked. "Knuckles has Master Emerald stink all over him. I bet I could find its residue on him even if he lost it." she chuckled. Shadow nodded. "His treasure-hunting abilities might be useful right now... Take me to him."

Since arriving at the Mystic Ruins, Knuckles had been wandering lost for what seemed like ages, trying to find a "Tree Fort" that he figured had to have been built somewhere overnight. "I stumbled into what's left of Final Egg a couple times... I wonder if that was it?" he mumbled as he kicked his way through some bushes frustratedly. Suddenly, some Chaos Spears struck the ground at his feet, making him stumble back a little! "Whoa!!" He fell backward as a blade slashed towards his chest, barely missing him! As he hit the floor, he dropped the Master Emerald, and as he turned himself over to see where it tumbled, he saw a blue boot stop it from rolling. "All I had to do was wait for you to let your guard down..." said Conan, his blade pointed down at Knuckles while he lifted up the Master Emerald with his other hand. "You...put...that...DOWN!!" Knuckles warned. "If you had anything else on you, I'd stick around, but I've got places to be. Ta!" Conan said, fleeing into the jungle! "Come back here!! CONAN!!" Knuckles roared, scrambling to his feet to give chase!

While on the chase, Knuckles ran right past Tails. "There you are! Wait! Knuckles!!" the fox shouted, following after him. Knuckles had kept running straight in the direction Conan had gone, and was entering a section of forest bordered by fog. Beyond the fog was a dense maze of trees, and beyond it, a crystalline building could be glimpsed. Knuckles looked around in a fury. "CONAN!! Argh!! I've lost him!" he shouted. Tails glanced around awkwardly. "Way to go. You found the Forest of Dreams. Um, Knuckles? Sonic sent me to find you. Eggman's invading Central City to steal a doomsday weapon from GUN!" he said. Suddenly, Gemini and Shadow appeared beside them in a flash of light! "Knuckles! We found you!" Gemini sighed. Knuckles grunted angrily. "I can't be bothered. I have to get back the Master Emerald!" he growled. Shadow sighed. "Can you give that thing a rest for a minute? The Lost Ones have kidnapped the President. I could use your expertise finding them. They've got plans to wipe out all life on the planet, so I think that's more important than your rock." he said. Tails looked a bit shocked. "Whoa... Well, at any rate, we'd better get out of here. This forest can play tricks on you..." he said. Suddenly, a loud crash of thunder could be heard as rain started pouring across the forest! "Great... As if things couldn't get worse." Knuckles groaned. "I see a building over there! We'll just wait out the rain!" Gemini shouted, leading the group toward the temple beyond the trees. "Wa-wait!! Magic us across the jungle or something! DON'T GO IN THERE!!" Tails yelled frantically. However, he was ignored, and the four of them soon arrived at the mysterious Dream Temple. They climbed the stone steps and hurriedly entered the crystal doors to get out of the rain. Inside the dark entrance, they found Rouge the bat and Omega drying off as well. "Huh...? When did you get here?" Shadow gasped. "You disappeared without saying anything! I figured either you had a lead, or the Lost Ones got you!" Rouge growled. The darkness within the temple took form as a crystal room, and in the center, a black shadow resembling Tails appeared!

"Shadow Tails!" Tails gasped as the red eyed spectre glanced about the room. "Ahhh... So many new faces... Full of dreams. Full of nightmares!" he mused. Knuckles glared at Shadow Tails threateningly. "Not in the mood, creature. You better reconsider whatever deviousness you're thinking of." he growled. Shadow Tails chuckled. "You're free to try to leave..." he said. However, a quick look back revealed that the door was missing. "Why did I know that was a lie?" Gemini gulped. Shadow stepped to the front of the pack. "I'll take care of this. Put the door back, or I'll use you to bust open a new door!" he threatened. Shadow Tails's body swirled and shifted into a new form. "It's adorable how little you comprehend what you're up against..." he said, emerging as a shadow of... Shadow! "I did try to warn everyone..." Tails sighed. "And yet you returned inside this temple... But I am no longer interested in you, fox." the shadow said, altering his form again into a red-eyed shadow of Knuckles. "What are you interested in? Shadow puppets?" Knuckles asked. "My interest... Is your nightmares!!" his voice echoed, seemingly causing the temple to quake! "Emergency!!" Omega shouted as the quake made everyone stumble. The room was soon consumed once again by darkness, Shadow Knuckles vanishing into this darkness, leaving only a pair of glowing red eyes for a moment, before they, too, blinked out of sight! The temple continued to quake, and the ground seemed to be splitting apart, forcing everyone to move in order to keep their footing! "Waaaugh! This didn't happen last tiiiiime!!" Tails wailed, apparently plummeting into the darkness! "Everyone watch your footing!" Knuckles yelled, jumping into a glide so he could try to seek safe ground. "I'd warp us outta here if I could see...ANYTHING!" Gemini said in panic. Shadow could tell from the distance of the voices that they were being split up. "Omega... track everyone you can with your sensors... if you can still hear me." he suggested. Some faint lights started to glimmer around him. Shadow looked around in shock. "...SPACE!?" He was gazing at stars, and the entire Earth hung above his head!

Gemini saw the temple take a different shape. She stood once more deep in the darkest corner of the forest on Onyx Island. "What....? No! How can I be here!?" she gasped. In front of her was the dark temple of the Lost Ones, the shadows around its door dimly lit by torches of ghostly blue flames. From the doorway, the turquoise vampyric being, Losipher, emerged! He cackled, coming at her with a clawed hand! "N-noooo!! Stay away!!" Gemini wailed, raising her arms defensively, not having time to do much else! A body thrust itself between her and Losipher, quickly pierced by the demon's claws. "...TIIIIIM!!!!" Gemini shrieked, tears streaking down her face as she once more watched the young fawn sacrifice himself, once more witnessed the death of her friend. Ordinarily, this was the part where she'd wake up in a cold sweat. However, the scene continued. Timothy fell to the ground, and Losipher's attention returned to her. "You will be lost forever!!" he snarled, approaching her. However, the island started to shake, surprising them both. "...Shouldn't my teacher be showing up at this part?" Gemini wondered. Instead, the door of the temple burst open again, and slime started flowing out, seizing the landscape. BONDING with it. Slime took the trees, poisoned the soil, even reached back to the mountains and other landscapes on the horizon. Losoars and Lospirits flew out of the temple and out to every corner of the land, screeching in victory, while Gemini felt the slime beneath her feet grab at her, pulling her down! "Wake up!! Waaaake uuuuup!!!" she whimpered, struggling against the bluish-green gel quicksand she was stuck in. "All is lost... All is sorrow... All is now part of ME!!" Losipher moaned, a crooked, toothy smile crossing his hideous face! "No... This isn't right... I went to the past... To stop you!" Gemini cried, holding her ears and closing her eyes, trying to shut this world out. "You cannot succeed. Each move you make... causes this future to become more real." the voice of Shadow Tails rang out in her mind. Her eyes flung open, and she was at the edge of Onyx Island. She could see. The entire world was consumed by the Lost Ones' slime!

"This isn't real... You're trying to deceive me!!" Gemini said weakly. Shadow Tails emerged beside her, arms crossed. "It is you who deceives yourself. You pretend to believe you are making a difference. But in your nightmares, it is clear. Oh, yes..." he said. Gemini tried to turn in his direction, but her feet were still stuck in slime. She could only turn her head. "You're... wrong! I know I've done good... I've saved people!" she protested. "You know there are also terrible consequences that resulted from your actions. Just look at that doomsday weapon, crafted from YOUR wand." Shadow Tails pointed out. Gemini gasped slightly, but did not question his knowledge. If he could conjure Onyx Island, clearly he had his ways of knowing. "I can still fix it..." she whimpered. "You? You can't even keep yourself safe. Or your friends. Your weapon gets stolen. You get captured. Your friends... fall. When have you EVER had any hope of preventing disaster?" the shadowy spectre mocked. The trees behind her cracked and fell over, and Losipher emerged behind her! "You!! Last spark of life!! I shall snuff out thy soul!!!" he roared. Gemini struggled to point her wand, but it seemed useless as long as she was stuck. She was about ready to give up. "You're right... I'm no hero... I'm a klutz. Everyone would be better off... if I just fade into the darkness here..." she sniffed. However, this was not the end. The sound of a propeller cut through the darkness. "Gemini! Hang on!!" Tails was flying up from below, and as she saw him, her spirit was instantly lifted. She reached out and grabbed his hands, pulling her own legs as he pulled her up. Together, they broke her free from the slime, and Tails continued to fly her high into the air, searching for safe ground! "You have chosen to interfere... How predictable, hero of light." Shadow Tails hissed. Suddenly, Losipher moaned loudly and furiously. Massive wings burst from his back, and his arms exploded into tentacles ending in sharp points! "Aaaaugh! I did NOT think he could do that!!" Tails yelped. "Don't gawk at him!! FLY AWAY!!!" Gemini yelled.

Shadow found himself walking across a sort of lunar surface, like a pathway made of meteor materials.

Rouge and Omega had caught up with him, and together they were searching for any sign of the others. Yet, all they could see for miles were stars and blackness. The Earth and the Moon hung in the sky above, lighting the ground below them and casting their shadows upon the lunar pathway. However, something was odd about Shadow's own shadow. Where Rouge and Omega's shadows followed behind them, Shadow's was cast in front of him, eerily glaring up at him as he walked. Glaring... Shadow could swear he could see eyes in his shade. "The infinite blackness of space... A fitting comparison for the darkness within you." Shadow looked around for this voice when it spoke, but he quickly knew where it had come from. He looked to his shadow and saw a pair of red eyes leering up at him from it! "Are you that creature?" he wondered. His shadow ignored the question. "Even on Earth, you often find yourself staring up into the night sky, its infinite abyss of darkness beckoning you... Why do you suppose that is?" the voice mused. Rouge and Omega made sounds of alarm as Space Colony ARK appeared overhead, and as Shadow gazed up at it, he found himself inexplicably pulled inside! Scenes flashed before his eyes. He awoke beside Professor Gerald and Black Doom, and watched the two shake hands, their bargain struck. He was then pulled to another area of the ARK, and watched as lightning crackled through a sealed laboratory door, a frantic Bucky in a tattered lab coat banging against the glass window as scientists panicked! Suddenly, he was pulled away again, and saw vision after vision of his time with Maria. "Enough... Stop!!" he growled, only to hear the voice's laughter in his ears as GUN forces landed on the colony. A soldier pointed a gun at Maria... "ENOUGH!!!" Shadow screamed through tears, shutting his eyes tightly as the gunshot rang out! When he opened his eyes, he was watching a scene of himself, Rouge and Dr. Eggman in the Eclipse Cannon Control Room. "What...? I have no memory of this..." He watched himself toss a Chaos Emerald into the machine. "You are a weapon of destruction... Thus was your original purpose, and thus you shall always be..." the voice sneered.

Shadow found himself in a massive crater. Where was he now? He looked up and saw the Earth above. A memory triggered in his mind. He realized where he was. "This is... The hole in the moon! Eggman... blew this hole with the Eclipse Cannon..." he gasped. His shadow stretched out before him, and seemed to rise into the air, taking form! "And who showed him how to use the Eclipse Cannon? Who's plan was it... to turn this weapon on the world!?" The shadow took a twisted form, a jagged, red-eyed silhouette. It was a shape Shadow recognized, though he was unsure why. The name "Mephiles" briefly passed through his mind. "Take a good look at me, Shadow! I am your destiny! A harbinger of endless darkness and destruction!!" Shadow Mephiles declared. "No... It can't be!!" Shadow grunted, claspng his head. A jumble of memories he'd thought were lost now plagued his mind. He could see a furious, vengeful version of himself, desiring nothing more than the destruction of the Earth. "I left the past behind me... But is it a useless effort? Am I doomed to become the monster Black Doom intended me as...?" he panted, dropping to the floor. "Of course... You know the answer." Shadow Mephiles sneered. As Shadow struggled with his memories, a voice called out to him. "Snap out of it, Shadow!" It was Rouge, and she was rushing into the crater with Omega! "Target located! ...Failure to identify entity..." Omega stated. Shadow Mephiles chuckled. "It's no use. Shadow has already realized the truth... His fate is sealed in the dark..." he said. Rouge scratched her head. "Uh, yeah... Whatever. Come on, Shadow!" she shouted. However, Shadow remained motionless. Shadow Mephiles glared at the intruders and raised his hand, briefly charging energy before swinging his arm in front of him and unleashing a wave of energy that hurtled Rouge and Omega into the air! The lack of gravity caused them to start floating out into space! "Aaaugh! Shadow... we need you!! GET UP!!" Rouge yelled. "System error!!!" Omega babbled. The voices of his friends caused Shadow's ears to prick up. His eyes slowly opened.

In a flash, Shadow was on his feet, and his fist came hurtling toward Shadow Mephiles. "Leave my friends... ALONE!!!" he snarled, knocking the creature back a bit! However, Shadow Mephiles simply

seemed amused by this. "A weapon doesn't have friends." he stated. Shadow stared at the creature intently. "I'm done with your mind games. You see, I decide who my friends are... and you just attacked them!" he said, growling softly. An eerie smile seemed to twinkle in Shadow Mephiles's eyes. "We seem to have hit upon the key theme of your nightmares..." he said, flicking his wrist to send Rouge and Omega screaming further away! "Stop it!!" Shadow yelled, charging at Shadow Mephiles! The creature responded by conjuring meteors above him, directing them toward Shadow with his strange power! He jumped the first one, but was soon knocked into orbit along with Rouge and Omega! "Ngggh!! M-mariaaaa!!" The impact seemed to force his mind to replay the memory of his friend's death once again. "Shadow...why are your nightmares merely your memories? Is it your terror to repeat the past?" Shadow Mephiles mused. Shadow shook his head to snap out of it, and then started to warp. Using what energy he could muster without a Chaos Emerald, he warped from meteor to meteor, and leapt at Shadow Mephiles when he was as close as he could get. The spectre raised his hand in preparation to hurl Shadow away with energy, but the hedgehog acted fast. "Chaos Spear!!" He tossed a single spear at the creature's eyes, forcing it to shield them while he closed the distance. "Now... Take this!!" Shadow had tossed aside his restraint rings, and set to work pummeling the dark creature with a flurry of punches and kicks, taking advantage of the weightlessness of space to keep him on target. With a final kick, he sent Shadow Mephiles soaring into the distance, and the environment around him shifted back to the lunar path they had been walking before. "So... Bad dreams about the past, huh?" Rouge asked, standing safely behind him. Shadow picked up his restraint rings and gave a passive "Hmph." There was still more to be done. Where were the others in this temple?

Knuckles, for his part, was quite perplexed. He was walking through an endless crystal maze. Some doors led back to the same room. Stairways took him to the walls and ceilings, where gravity would shift to allow him to walk upon them. Then there were random trap doors that would drop him into an even more complex variant of this maze. "I wanna punch this building's architect in the face..." he grumbled. This wasn't a peaceful maze for him to puzzle out, either. Reproductions of enemies he had faced in his past would emerge, composed entirely out of what appeared to be living crystal. The annoying lead EggRobo, Robo-Robotnik, would fly about in a crystal Egg Mobile and drop the very same type of bomb that once gave him a rude awakening at Mushroom Hill Zone. Crystalline Boom Boos would pop out of nowhere, prompting him to throw a punch to shatter them into shards. And of course, there were crystal Egg Pawns, the most recurring annoyance Knuckles had ever had the displeasure of encountering over and over again. He took out his frustrations on these and other fragile apparitions, until he came across a door that was larger than the others. He pushed it open, and the entire temple seemed to change shape around him! "Ugh... Not this again... Hey! Shadow! Tails! Gemini, you in here!?" he shouted. As the area began to take shape, he stared up in surprise as he realized where he was. He was now staring up the stone steps of the altar of the Master Emerald! "....I'm home!" he gasped.

To be continued...

30 - Awakening

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 30 - Awakening
Stage 17(Hero 9) - Dream Temple
Boss 17 - Dream King

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

After the disappearance of the President, Shadow decided he'd need help to find him. With Gemini's assistance, he located Knuckles in the Forest of Dreams. Tails was also attempting to enlist Knuckles's aid, but he had just lost the Master Emerald to Conan, and was trying to find the thieving raccoon. A sudden storm forced the group into the nearby Dream Temple. There, they met Shadow Tails, who soon forced the group to split up, dousing the temple in darkness and seemingly causing an earthquake! Gemini found herself at a replica of Onyx Island. Shadow Tails confronted her with terrible scenes, telling her she could only change the future for the worse. Tails arrived to help her, but the Losipher inhabiting Onyx Island grew enraged and attacked!

Shadow was confronted with his own fragmented memories. Shadow Tails, taking the form of Mephiles, tried to convince him that it was his destiny to become a dark weapon, just as Black Doom had intended. However, when Rouge and Omega were endangered, Shadow snapped out of it and fought back! Knuckles explored a perplexing maze, facing replicas of enemies he'd faced before. At the end of the maze, he found himself...home.
Now, on to the next chapter!

Losipher was still chasing Tails and Gemini through the sky, his bladelike tentacles flailing at them as Tails swooped back and forth through the air between them, desperately looking for some way out of this. Gemini cast spells pathetically, watching them bounce off of Losipher uselessly again and again. "You fool... If you are the one to change the future, will you not eliminate your need to travel to the past in the first place? The flow of time is inexorable. The more you fight the tide, the more you seal your fate!" Shadow Tails's voice rang in her ears, making her clutch them and shake her head in denial. "No! You're wrong! It... It HAS to work! Why would time travel be POSSIBLE if it didn't work!?" she wailed. "Gemini... We need your magic! DO SOMETHING!!" Tails shouted, straining his propeller tails in a futile struggle to keep away from Losipher. "It is over! I will now separate your souls from your lifeless bodies!" Losipher growled, thrashing his tentacles at them! "Abra-ka-shine-ra!!" Gemini shone a light at Losipher's face, which briefly blinded him and enabled Tails to find his way to the ground, allowing him to take a much-needed rest. This was a mistake. The ground was still covered in the same slime, which pulled at their feet as soon as they touched the floor! "Ah! Oh, no!" Gemini gasped. Tails looked around nervously. "I... left my tailband with SPOT and Professor Pickle..." he gulped. Shadow Tails emerged next to him, arms crossed. "Such a pity. And that mystic, ancient light that aided you last time seems to have forsaken you..." he mused. Gemini fired some spells at Shadow Tails, but they seemed to go right

through him. "Now, to complete your nightmare... The last remnant of life will be snuffed out of this world... Watch closely, time traveler." he said before fading away.

Losipher dropped down from the sky and started to slash his tentacles wildly at the helpless fox! Tails ducked and weaved in his place, using every reflex he had to try to stay alive a bit longer. Suddenly, Gemini snapped. She couldn't take it any longer. "You... won't... kill... anyone!! Any more!!" she screamed, flourishing her wand and casting a spell...on herself. "Abra-ka-warpra!!" She warped free and appeared in front of Tails, blocking what might have been a killing stroke! "GEMINI!!!" he screamed, unable to do anything further except cover his eyes. However, there was no scream, no sound of death. Tails slowly uncovered his eyes and gasped. Losipher's tentacles had struck her, but a bright light was glowing from her body, seemingly protecting her! "What... is this!?" Losipher gasped. The slime beneath their feet retreated from Gemini's light, freeing Tails from its grip as well. "...Losipher... Begone!!" Gemini pointed her wand forward, and the light from her body burst forth, seeming to erase the Lost Ones' influence from everywhere it touched as it spread through all of Onyx Island and beyond! Losipher was gone! Gemini and Tails looked around for a moment, and then the scenery transformed into the crystal halls of the Dream Temple. "I...don't understand..." Gemini mumbled at last. Tails nodded. "You let your heart do the talking... and you became filled with light. It's kind of like what Tikal told me last time I was here..." he said. They saw a door nearby and knew they had to enter. "Knuckles and Shadow are still in here. They may need our help." Tails said. "Whose idea was it to come in here, anyway?" Gemini muttered. Tails groaned a bit as they passed through the door and started on their way through the next area.

Knuckles climbed the familiar stairs of the Master Emerald shrine, and a look of relief came over his face as he reached the top. The Master Emerald was there, resting where it belonged. This relief was short lived, however, as Shadow Tails materialized beside the emerald. His gaze fixed on Knuckles, he shifted his form to mimic his, becoming a Shadow Knuckles. "Ever dutiful, you sit here, day after day, and watch over this emerald... Sworn to protect it. Your life's one and only purpose, to keep it out of the wrong hands..." As Shadow Knuckles spoke these words, the Master Emerald began to dissolve away, vanishing from right before Knuckles's eyes! "No!!" Knuckles gasped, reaching for it but only finding empty space where the emerald once stood. "You have lost that which you were sworn to guard. It has fallen into the hands of evil. You are a failure." Shadow Knuckles sneered. Knuckles glared over at him. "Oh yeah? I've lost the Master Emerald before. I'll just get it back again!" he snapped. Shadow Knuckles snickered. "Until you lose it yet again. How long until you lose it for good? You are pathetic." he taunted. Knuckles raised his fists at Shadow Knuckles. "Oh yeah? I'd probably have the emerald back by now if you hadn't TRAPPED ME IN HERE!!!" he shouted. This seemed to amuse Shadow Knuckles. He laughed, floating up to the Master Emerald's pedestal and looking down on Knuckles. "Wanna tell me what the joke is?" Knuckles muttered. "No matter what, when separated from that gem, you only think of retrieving it. So stuck in your given role you are. You have even forgotten your friends who are now separated from you in this same temple..." Shadow Knuckles said. Knuckles opened his mouth to deny it, but in truth, he had forgotten about them until just this moment. "...Shut up! I don't have to listen to this!" he growled. Shadow Knuckles crossed his arms, glaring down at him. "Without the Master Emerald, you are nothing... Nothing more than an empty shell of an echidna..." Knuckles growled loudly, clenching his fists. "ENOUGH!!!" he screamed.

Shadow Knuckles anticipated the oncoming attack, and caught Knuckles's fist as it soared at his face. "Predictable. It doesn't take much to determine what your fears stem from..." he sneered. Knuckles

growled and tried to give him an uppercut with his other fist, only to be evaded and socked back with a shadowy fist! "Fears?? Now you're talking about fears!? Stop changing the subject!!" Knuckles yelled. Shadow Knuckles kicked Knuckles to the ground, faster than he could react! "Fear IS the subject, fool! This is your nightmare!!" he shouted. Knuckles got up quickly and flew into a rage, his fists flying wildly in Shadow Knuckles's direction! "I guess if I KNOCK YOU OUT, I'll wake up!!" he shouted. Between punches, Shadow Knuckles seemed to vanish, and as his fist flew past where the creature was, Knuckles suddenly saw that he was about to hit Sonic! "WHAT!?!?" he yelled as his fist flew right through the hedgehog's chest, a look of pain on his face before his body crumbled into dust! "S-sonic...?? What...?" Knuckles said, bewildered, frightened, and angry... with himself. Shadow Knuckles could be heard laughing, though he was nowhere to be seen. "You small-minded imbecile. Not only are you a failure as a guardian, you are a failure as a friend. Is there anything you can't fumble in pursuit of your single-minded obsession with duty?" he mocked. Knuckles looked around, a bit crestfallen. "...So, you may have a point. I kinda mess things up for my friends...a lot. But it works out... Right?" Suddenly, Angel Island began to rumble. Looking around him, Knuckles could see that the island was falling rapidly without the Master Emerald, and breaking up as it descended! "Whoa!! Wait!! What's happening!?" he stammered. Looking above, he could see the Death Egg flying high in the sky. Dr. Eggman flew past his face, carrying the Master Emerald with a claw attached to the Egg Mobile. "Thanks ever so much for the assistance, Knuckles! I'll... name a robot after you... or something." he said as he rose high into the sky, out of the echidna's reach. "STOP!!!" he shouted. Suddenly, the Death Egg exploded in half, becoming the Space Colony ARK, and pointing its superlaser directly at Angel Island. "He's...charging a laser with the emerald!? Wait! NOOOO!!!" Knuckles yelled.

The lunar path Shadow, Rouge and Omega were walking had now led them to the crumbling Angel Island. Tails and Gemini had caught up with them as well. "I guess Knuckles must be up there... But what do you think is happening there?" Tails wondered. "Well, it clearly isn't good." Shadow observed, seeing that the island was falling to pieces. Gemini twirled her wand and nodded. "I'll get us up there, then." she said. Rouge and Omega backed away a little, looking a bit apologetic. "Our assistance must come to an end at this time." Omega said. "Huh...?" Shadow muttered in confusion. "It's fine, Shadow. Actually... We were never REALLY here at all...." Rouge said. Then, the bat and the robot faded away, just like any other illusion of the temple! "What the!?" Shadow gasped. Gemini scratched her head. "This temple really is a mysterious place..." she said. Tails sighed. "Well, we'd better keep going. Knuckles still needs us!" he said. The others nodded, and Gemini used her magic to warp them to the "shore" of the island. Shadow Knuckles met them there. "I'm busy with the echidna. You are free to exit the temple, if you can locate the exit." he stated. Tails shook his head. "We're not leaving without everyone! Drop the games, Dream King!" he shouted. "...Dream King?" Gemini wondered. Shadow Knuckles's glowing red eyes narrowed. "If that is how you will it, that is how you will face it, hero of light. Approach the shrine where the echidna makes his home... If you dare!" he said before vanishing. Shadow nodded. "I guess you're leading the way, Tails... Or should I call you 'hero of light?'" he said somewhat mockingly. "...Tails will be fine..." the fox murmured, a little annoyed.

Knuckles fled the altar as the superlaser reduced it to a pile of rubble! Looking back, he saw Shadow Knuckles standing atop the remains. "What... What ARE you??" he panted. Shadow Knuckles chuckled. "I am as you perceive me. Thus, I am Shadow Knuckles... Yet, I am not Shadow Knuckles..." The mysterious creature's body started to grow and shift, the shadowy form seeming to become clear liquid. Knuckles watched in shocked awe as he beheld the creature take on the terrifying shape of a sea monster! Not any sea monster, though. "...Chaos!?" he gasped. Shadow Knuckles started to flood Angel Island, taking the form of Perfect Chaos! The water was only ankle-deep for now, and Knuckles

was too bewildered to start looking for higher ground. "I am the Dream King!!" the Perfect Chaos replica roared, "Your dreams... Your nightmares... Are my domain! I know your heart from them. You are a hollow, duty-bound shell! You will perish here, on this island! A meaningless, useless death!" he declared. Knuckles looked at the water-covered ground. The Dream King's words struck harder than any attack possibly could have. "...He's right... I'm always sitting around this island. Watching that rock...alone. I guess I reasoned that there was no point thinking about... doing anything else... But what's the point? It never ends..." he mumbled. Suddenly, a bolt of magic flew past Knuckles and struck the Dream King! "Look out!!" shouted Tails, and as Knuckles looked up, he saw the fox fly between him and an approaching Perfect Chaos tentacle! Tails was lifted up, but then Shadow appeared out of nowhere and swiftly pulled him out of the creature's grip! Gemini was soon at Knuckles's side, flinging spells at the Dream King heroically. "Didn't think we'd leave you behind, didja?" she winked. Knuckles gasped, watching his friends battle the massive form of Perfect Chaos in front of him. It unleashed tornadoes, fired beams, and whipped liquid tentacles around, which knocked them around a bit, but did nothing to daunt them from their goal. As a huge beam shot toward Gemini, Knuckles dove to shove her out of the way. They slowly stood up, and Knuckles glared at the Dream King. "I just figured it out." he said.

The Dream King swatted Shadow and Tails aside, and placed his focus on Knuckles. "I'm anxious to hear what you have to say, dutiful one." he sneered. Knuckles raised his fists. "I know my place. It's not Angel Island. It's wherever I'm needed!" he stated. The Dream King scoffed. "A weak answer from a weak mind." he said. Knuckles shook his head. "It's not a weak answer. Not as long as I'm willing to back it up. So, let's test it out... Right now, there's one place I'm needed..." he smirked. The Dream King growled softly, a bit impatient, so Knuckles finished his thought, "...It's between you and my friends!" he shouted. The Dream King stared, his eyes flashing red. "That is your answer?" he snarled. "Just call me... the guardian of all!" he said, making a few practice punches in anticipation of the coming battle. "...Fool. Then try to guard all!!" the Dream King roared. Tails and Gemini tried to move in to help, but Shadow quickly stopped them. "This is Knuckles's fight..." he said. The Dream King whirled a tornado directly in Knuckles's direction, and he glided directly into it, looking to ride it to get some height. As it blew him into the sky, the Dream King opened its maw and blew out a strange, purple smog. This made it difficult for Knuckles to see anything, so he was forced to drop down. However, he found footing much lower than expected. It felt slippery, like ice. "So, this is like a dream, huh? Hmmm..." As Knuckles tried to wrap his head around what was going on, a breeze blew the fog away from behind him, and glancing around, he saw the Dream King, holding up Shadow, Tails and Gemini in his Chaos tentacles! "Hey!! No fair!" Knuckles shouted. "You are doing quite a job so far... 'Guardian of all!'" the Dream King mocked. Knuckles ran to chase, but started to slip on the ice platform. There were more ice platforms leading over to the Dream King, but if he kept sliding, he'd never reach them. "Well... It's obviously not MY dream, or I'd be able to control it. I'll just have to wing it!" Knuckles growled, raising his fist and slamming it down on the ice platform to smash it! It broke in half and swung upward, catapulting Knuckles into the air! "Well... That happened..." Knuckles muttered.

Knuckles broke into a glide and headed for the next ice platform. The Dream King fired huge beams from his mouth at him as he jumped from one ice platform to the next, so Knuckles repeated the same maneuver as before, smashing the platform below him in order to catapult himself higher into the air! It worked, but the Dream King blew that purple smog into his path again, making his target difficult to see. "Cut it out! Chaos can't do that!" Knuckles complained. The Dream King only cackled through the fog. But this was helpful; Knuckles headed for the sound of his voice. Soon, he spotted the glowing red eyes, and swooped toward the bulbous brain of the Dream King's Chaos form! However, the tentacles holding his friends rose up and blocked him! The Dream King laughed hideously as he dangled Tails over his

gaping maw. "Uh... I don't like to rush you, but..." the fox whimpered. Shadow grunted with effort, struggling to get free so he could make a move, while Gemini fumbled to move her wand hand. It was up to Knuckles. He decided to go right through the barrier, socking Shadow's tentacle aside and resuming his glide. "Hey!!" Shadow grunted. "You can take it, right?" Knuckles chuckled sheepishly. "Too late, guardian!!" the Dream King roared, sending Tails plummeting down his throat! "AAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!" the fox screamed, while Knuckles growled furiously and landed on top of the Dream King's "brain." He raised his fists high. "You... SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT!!!" he screamed, slamming both fists down with as much force as he could muster! The Dream King screeched, and a burst of light erupted from the point of impact. The area around them rapidly returned to the crystal room that they had entered the temple from, but with water sloshing all around in a torrential flood, slowly draining through some invisible crack in the center of the room. When it was over, Knuckles, Shadow, and Gemini stood up shakily. Tails was leaning against the wall, watching them with a bored look on his face. "Took long enough for the water to drain." he mumbled. The Dream King hovered before them at the back of the room, a mere shadow with red eyes swirling upon the wall. "I have seen your strength, guardian of all. Well done..." he said before fading into the darkness. The door leading outside then reappeared.

Heading outside, the group puzzled over what had transpired in the temple. "Exactly what IS that temple, anyway?" Knuckles wondered. "I dunno... The Dream Temple." Tails shrugged. "Yes, but what is its purpose?" Shadow wondered. Gemini sighed. "More importantly, why did we even go in there??" she mumbled. The rain had stopped by now. Suddenly, it dawned on Tails. "Waaaaugh! Knuckles, we still gotta stop Eggman!!" he shouted. "And the President's still missing..." Shadow realized. "Yeah, and the Covenant of Despair has the Master Emerald..." Knuckles sighed. These were all separate problems, and it would be necessary to split up to take care of it all. Or would it? "Well... Wait, Eggman's headed for Central City... and the President went missing in Central City?" Tails realized. Shadow nodded. "I'm thinking the same thing. You do what you like, Knuckles. The rest of us are going to Central City!" he said as Tails pulled out his remote to call the Tornado. Knuckles turned to Gemini, but she didn't seem intent on helping him either. "What I saw in the temple made me more... worried... about my own problems... I have to go to Central City and stop the Lost Ones there!" she said. Knuckles frowned, but then he nodded. "If I'm going where I'm needed... It looks like I'm needed most at Central City, too. Who knows, maybe I'll find a clue about the Covenant of Despair there..." he decided. Their destination decided, it was time for the group to begin their journey. Hopefully, they wouldn't arrive too late...

To be continued...

31 - Assault on White Base

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 31 - Assault on White Base
Stage 18(Hero 10) - White Base
Minor Boss 14 - Dr. Eggman & Col. Gunner

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

On Sonic's return to Eggtopia, he learned that Eggman was plotting to take over the Security Tower in Station Square. During the trip through the tower, Amy formed a new Team Rose with Cream and Silver, fed up with Sonic's apparent uncaring attitude toward her. At the top of the tower, Sonic confronted Eggman's forces, led by Metal Eggman and Freeze. However, this was all a diversion while Eggman set up a sneak attack on Central City! As a timer counted down the destruction of the roof of the tower, Sonic was distracted by a vision from Tikal showing the creation of Shadow Chaos, who emerged from the Master Emerald after Chaos was sealed. When Sonic awoke, Team Rose was missing, and SPOT had been damaged. Tails went off to find Knuckles, leaving Sonic to head for Central City to stop Eggman on his own! Little did he realize that Eggman was the least of Central City's worries...
Now, on to the next chapter!

Sonic arrived to find Central City in chaos. Knowing they were up there, Sonic quickly picked out Eggman's Cloud Cruisers in the sky. They weren't hard to spot, really, since they were the clouds that were ejecting robots down into the streets below. GUN had mobilized to attempt to restore order, but there weren't that many of them out in the streets. They were preoccupied elsewhere, though Sonic couldn't imagine what could be more important right now. The Covenant of Despair had also seen fit to take advantage of GUN's apparent moment of weakness, and their agents were busy creating havoc through the streets as well. On top of all that, Sonic could swear he could see Lospirits flying around amidst the robots in the sky. "It's like a bad guy convention... Guess I'd better crash it!" Charging straight into the mayhem, it wasn't long before Sonic heard someone call out to him. "Yo!! About time you showed up, hero!" Sonic stopped short and noticed Kosmo staring at him from across the street, calmly flicking his tail at an Egg Pawn as it approached him, somehow slicing it in two. Sonic approached the morph cautiously. "Funny place to run into you, Kosmo..." he said. "Never mind that. You'll want to know this. Those freaky monsters made off with the President." Kosmo informed him. Sonic looked around worriedly. "Freaky monsters... You mean... Aw, shoot. That's what Lospector was talkin' about!" he realized. Kosmo sighed. "Well, I've had enough good deeds for today. They've been pretty thankless so far. See ya!" he said, rushing off. "Hey, wait! ...Thank...you." Sonic muttered, somewhat concerned about the situation. "Wish he'd have stuck around. I could use help, even from a crazy guy... I don't even know where to start looking for the Prez." he grumbled, glancing around. The President's luxurious home-slash-office-slash-private bunker could be seen on the other side of the city, a landmark that really sticks out. The Black Arms had blown it up once, but it had been rebuilt, good as new. "Guess I'll start by

knockin' at home. If anything, some GUN agents are probably there that I could ask a few questions..." Sonic figured.

Sonic sped through the streets on his way to the President's house, but a certain angry voice made him stop short. "Sonic!!!" growled Amy, leading Silver and Cream down the street toward the startled blue hedgehog. Silver calmly pushed aside any opposition that came their way with his powers, so no robots or creatures bothered them. "Oh, hey Amy! Good to see you're okay--" Sonic said, only to get walloped by her Piko Piko Hammer anyway. "OWW! HEY!!" he yelped. "You dirty, no good jerk! Abandoning the three of us atop an exploding building!!" Amy screeched. "To be fair, only the top of the building exploded..." Sonic said weakly. "Toss him to the sun, Silver!" Amy snarled, but Silver wasn't paying attention. "I... I think there's somewhere... more important I should be right now..." he said, taking off hastily. "I'll help you!" Cream said, chasing after him, probably more out of a desire to stay out of Sonic and Amy's latest fight. Sonic sighed. "I would've gotten you out, but I...passed out. Ask Tails." he said. Amy pouted, wanting to stay mad, but she couldn't help wondering and worrying about why he would pass out. "Well, where are you going, anyway?" she grunted. "Save the President. Monsters got him." Sonic said quickly, resuming his sprint to the President's house. "Wait For ME!!" Amy yelled. Both of them stopped short again when they heard a yell coming in their direction. "Leave me alone, Mr. Toad!!" came the voice of Rainbow the echidna, who was being chased by a certain Despair-uniformed frog named Corky. "You gotta pay, lass! And I'm the one ta make ya pay!" he snarled as he hopped after her. Sonic rolled his eyes. "Am I ever gonna get where I'm goin?" he sighed, dashing at Corky and swiftly knocking him onto his back before he knew what was happening! "Oi!! Who threw that whatever it was at me!?" he shouted, struggling to get back up. "Don't get up, that was just a speeding hedgehog!" Sonic called back as he and Amy resumed their sprint to their destination. Rainbow started to follow them. "Wait up, Speedy! I could use a bodyguard until I find One again!" she said, "Those black suit people are mad at me because of that stuff that happened at the pyramid!" she added.

Like the rest of the city, the President's house was under attack. Some rather massive Egg Pawns were in a shootout with GUN troops at the entrance. Sonic watched them for a moment, and then glanced at Amy and Rainbow. "Any chance you two would be willing to wait out here?" he asked. Amy glared at him, and he chuckled softly. "Well, we could always look for a way around the explosions..." he said. They started sneaking around the side of the building, and they soon noticed some people busily smashing through the wall to make their own entrance! One of them happened to be Vector. "Since when is breaking and entering in your job description?" Sonic asked, making him jump. "SHHH! You wanna draw attention to us!? Seems like every bad guy in the country's around!" he snapped. The other person with Vector, Crash the Rhino, poked his head out from inside the hole in the wall and looked around. "What's the hold up? Hm? Are you coming, hedgehog?" he asked. "Um... Who's that??" Sonic wondered. "Experiment 8. He's here lookin' for somethin' for Bucky. Thought I'd tag along while I try to figure out what happened to the President." Vector explained. "Hey, Eight!" Rainbow waved to Crash. Amy stomped through the hole in the wall ahead of the others. "Whatever! I'll figure all this out AND chase away all the bad guys to boot! Maybe then Sonic will respect me!" she growled. As the others followed her in, Vector chuckled at Sonic. "Lady trouble, huh, Sonic?" he said. "Just stay out of it..." he grumbled. "Maybe you're not being sensitive enough..." Crash suggested, causing Sonic and Vector to stare at him. "...What? Oh, stay out of it..." he mumbled. They hadn't gone too far from the hole Vector and Crash had made before another hole got blasted down the hall in front of them! Some Covenant of Despair agents started to flood the hallway, led by Zeke the dragon! "Hey! What're you doing here!?" Crash shouted. "Attacking human twerps. What're you doing here?" Zeke replied, "...with SONIC??" he growled. "Hi again, Ten!" Rainbow waved. Zeke rolled his eyes. "That's it! GET 'EM! RAWR!!"

Patch the fox and Daisy the skunk were part of the group Zeke was leading, and they charged straight at the five non-uniformed animals before them. Amy quickly blocked Daisy's katana with her hammer. "Out of our way!" she yelled. "What the... Did you just block me with a toy!?" Daisy stammered. Patch came cartwheeling down the hall before taking out his nunchucks, but then Crash stomped over to him. "Hey, you little brat. You remember how things went back at Pumpkin Hill?" he snorted. Patch then backed away a bit, and Crash started chasing him around the hallway! Sonic started speeding down the hall as well, smacking random Despair agents as he went just to soften them up while Vector squared off against Zeke. "I'm gonna fry yo-" while Zeke was threatening him, Vector blew a big bubble from the gum he was chewing, and ejected it right into Zeke's face! "ACK!! ...EEEWWWWWW!!" he screamed. Vector then unwrapped another stick and started chewing again. "Now what were you sayin', chump?" he smirked. Still, this brawl could go on for a while if nothing interrupted it. Fortunately, Guard the gargoyle soon made his way down the hall, leading a squad of GUN's Hunter robots behind him. "Grrr!! There's the intruders! You thought you could blow a hole in this building and not be detected!?" he growled. Seeing this, Sonic ran over to grab Amy and then slip out the other side of the hallway while things were starting to get really chaotic. "Good luck, Vector! We gotta move!" he said. "Aw, nuts..." Vector sighed. Sonic and Amy soon made it to the base proper, but they stopped short as they entered the next corridor. Metal Sonic was right in front of them! "Oh, great..." Sonic mumbled. However, a couple gunshots ricocheted off the robot's metal body. "Push him back, boys!" In the weasel was leading a group of Despair agents in battle against Metal Sonic, and the robot quickly retaliated against them with an electrical charge that knocked several of them over! "Robo-Speedy's busy! Let's go!" said Rainbow, startling Sonic and Amy. "How'd you catch up so fast!?" Sonic asked. "...You stopped." she muttered.

Sneaking past Metal Sonic and Infin, Sonic sighed and chuckled. "Lucky for us they're all so keen on fighting each other." he said. "...Are we maybe losing focus, Sonic?" Amy muttered. Sonic scratched his head, then frowned. "Aw, I came here to see if GUN could help find the President. Well, can't be helped now. Gotta clear out the riff-raff. Better start with Eggman." he reasoned. Opening a door and heading into the next room, they found their path heavily blocked. Laser grids kept the way to the next area of the base pretty well defended. Of course, the base was already on alert, but some weapons mounted on the walls seemed to indicate that these laser sensors were not simply for monitoring the area, but stopping the threat entirely. On top of that, the room was full of robots. Eggman's robots and GUN's robots were busy brawling, but when Sonic, Amy and Rainbow stepped into the room, they stopped what they were doing and turned to glare at them. "Ah, so you're ALL programmed to target me first? Great, we found a squad of Gunner's robots." Sonic groaned. Someone else suddenly arrived at the doorway behind them. "Laser grids! Oh, wonderful!" Rainbow's eyes widened at the sound of the female voice behind her. "...Viola?" she said, turning slowly. Violet was there, dressed in her Despair uniform. "R-rainbow... I told you to return home!" she stammered. "You KNOW each other?!" Amy gasped. Meanwhile, Sonic was busy evading lasers and bullets from various robots. "That's nice, girls... Anyone wanna lend a hand!?!?" he shouted. Violet groaned and looked around the room. "You and I are going to have a very serious talk when I get a chance... But right now I need those robots kept busy while I disable those lasers." she said. Amy and Rainbow both nodded. "You got it, sis!" Rainbow said. "Sonic can handle it." Amy added. "I'M SURROUNDED IN A TINY ROOM WHERE I CAN BARELY RUN!!" he protested. "What's that, Sonic? I can't hear you. I'm way over here looking for something 'more important' than you to deal with." she grumbled. "...Why did you tag along?!" Sonic shouted back, taking out his frustration on a few Egg Pawns by violently bouncing back and forth between them until they were a pile of frayed wires.

A stray laser struck near Amy's feet, so she grabbed her hammer and charged in. "No one shoots at ME and gets away with it!!" she yelled. Rainbow wasn't exactly the combat type, so she casually walked over to where Violet was busy fiddling with the wiring connected to the laser grid. "You know... I've been looking all over for you." she said. Violet groaned. "I'm FINE. I know how it must look to you, but I need to be with the Covenant. You... You should KNOW why!" she hissed. Rainbow's eyes softened. "You know... Revenge won't bring them back..." she said. Violet stayed focused on what she was doing. "I have work to do..." she insisted. Rainbow wiped her eyes and growled softly. "I won't rest until you're back home safe, Viola!" she said. Violet ignored her, and Rainbow began to grow frustrated. "You can't just do whatever you want! I may be your little sister, but I'm the only family you've got, so you're gonna listen to what I say!!" she growled. Growling a little herself, Violet simply pulled out the wires she was tampering with and turned to Rainbow. "I promise I'll come back for a visit... But only if you get BACK to the underground ruins and stay out of danger!" she said, turning to help finish off the robots with a few dark magic blasts. With its power source cut off, the laser grids had deactivated, and it didn't take much work to eliminate the remaining robots in the room. "Hey, thanks. Your sister's handy, Rainbow." Sonic said. Amy smacked him with her hammer again. "She's the enemy! She's got one of those uniforms and everything! And how about a thank you to me!?" she yelled. "Um... Thanks for... the concussion..." Sonic mumbled as Amy stomped to the next hallway. Rainbow glanced at Violet as they started to move on. "I'll go back home after this... But you'd better keep your word!" she said. Violet stared at her. "Why would you think I wouldn't keep my word? Has it really been THAT long?" she asked. Sonic walked a bit slower so he could talk to the echidnas. "So, I gotta ask... Either of you got any advice for dealing with an angry Amy?" he said. "Maybe a football helmet." Violet suggested. "Ha...ha..." Sonic sighed.

As they came to a fork in the hallways, they saw Crash come smashing through some Egg Pawns down the hall in front of them. "...Oh, you guys again." he muttered as he approached the group. "Um... Hey... you there. Seen the others?" Violet asked, apparently recognizing Crash, but not knowing his name. "Gah, they're all over the place." he said. "...Good to know..." Sonic sighed. They all turned and headed for the room at the end of the next hall. The doors were labeled "War Room." Inside was a room full of maps and a projector that the President could use to go over military strategy with. Also, Dr. Eggman and Col. Gunner were seated at the table, having a coffee together. "Ah-HAH!! The military conspiring with Dr. Eggman! Proof that you humans are NO GOOD!!" Violet yelled. "Aw, this is old news, Viola. Tubby and Gramps are old buddies." Rainbow sighed. "The young echidnas today... So disrespectful." Eggman mumbled. "Dr. Eggman was just telling me all about how you were aiding the Covenant of Despair, Sonic, and now look! Here's the proof!" Gunner snarled. Sonic rolled his eyes. "Are you sure you didn't tell Eggman that? Sounds like something you'd come up with." he groaned. "Enough! Ivo and I have decided to call a temporary truce in order to eliminate you pests once and for all! And we have just the machines to do it with!" Gunner said, snapping his fingers. Suddenly, the table in the center of the room exploded, revealing a horde of androids hiding underneath! These androids resembled various Covenant of Despair members, but since so many looked alike, it was clear they were robots. "And don't forget this!" Eggman grinned, snapping his fingers as well. Something blew a hole in the roof, and a menacing, wolflike robot hovered down through it. "Say hello to Techno Fera and the Despair Androids!" Gunner smirked. "GUN's been stealing my designs so much, I'm not sure which I made anymore..." Eggman sighed. Sonic shook his head and chuckled. "I think you guys are takin' this 'war room' a bit literally. Well, at least this is less confusing than 3 different armies..." he grinned.

The Despair androids went on the attack, each with robotic equivalents of their copied selves abilities. Androids of Despair's dark mages, like Violet, would fire lasers rather than use darkness. Androids of winged Despair agents flew about with jetpacks. Some spewed fire or shot missiles. Rainbow was taken

aback by a Corky android, complete with a robotic frog tongue. "Ick!! You guys are out of your minds!" she yelped, jumping away as the android chased her. As things started getting chaotic, Violet initially covered her hands in dark energy, ready to fight with the others. However, the door creaked open behind them, and Violet shivered as Basker peeked his red eyes into the room. "Violet... and Crash. What are you two doing? These fools are not our objective." he stated darkly. Violet stammered a bit, but Crash grunted. "I didn't come with the covenant in the first place! I answer only to Bucky!!" he growled. Basker's vacant expression didn't change. "You will rejoin us, Violet. Now!" he insisted before turning back through the door. "Vy... You have to help us...!" Rainbow pleaded. However, Violet shivered at the idea of disobeying Basker. "I... I can't!!" she whimpered, taking off to rejoin the Covenant of Despair. "V-viola...!" Rainbow stammered in shock. Some androids were about to corner her, but they were suddenly smashed into the wall by a charging rhino! "I've been yearning to thrash those Despair scumbags... Now Eggman's given me just the venue to vent!!" he snarled, taking off through the room and bashing his horn through the androids one by one! This made it much easier for Amy and Rainbow to manage the stragglers, so Sonic stepped to Techno Fera.

The robotic wolf definitely looked like an Eggman creation, with the Despair star emblazoned across its chest. Techno Fera glowed with black energy as Sonic approached. "Hehe... With this robot I managed to harness the power of shadow energy! It won't be so easy stopping her, Sonic!" Eggman grinned. "That's what you always say!" Sonic snickered. Techno Fera then charged at him, covered in a ball of black energy! Sonic sped out of the way, but the robot quickly turned his way and fired off the dark energy as several black bolts! Sonic tucked himself into a ball and rolled along, evading the dark bolts and spin dashing right into the robot's chest! The robot retaliated by jolting Sonic with dark lightning from its hands, but the attack didn't last long. Techno Fera needed to charge up more dark energy! "What are you doing, robot! Finish him while he's stunned!" Gunner yelled. Sonic got up quickly and ran a few circles around the robot, grabbing its metal tail along the way. "Robots, robots, robots... When are they gonna get over their low battery issues?" Sonic sighed, hurling the dizzy robot away before jumping up and giving it a huge whack with a homing attack! Techno Fera buzzed a bit before exploding! While Sonic was taking a bow and the others were relaxing a bit since Crash had easily disposed of the androids, Gunner pointed a gun at the hedgehog's back. "Just stay right there..." he muttered. However, Amy emerged next to him and whacked the gun to the ground with her hammer! "You sore loser!" she shouted, while Eggman hid his own blaster behind his back. "Yeah, seriously, Richard..." he said awkwardly. "Oh... Uh... Nice save, Amy." Sonic said, blushing with embarrassment. Suddenly, hordes of Lospirits and Losohsts swooped into the war room from the hole Techno Fera had left in the roof, led by Lospecter! "Ah, so HERE'S the party! Okay, spooks... Sic 'em!" Lospecter smirked. Gunner banged a specific small country on the map behind him, and the wall flipped around, carrying him and Eggman to safety through a secret passage! "How does he ALWAYS know how to get away!?" Rainbow wondered. Sonic and Amy backed away slowly, uniting with Crash and Rainbow. "So... Now we got what, FOUR armies in here? Any other craziness I don't know about?" Sonic whimpered. "Oh, you needn't worry. You won't be burdened by thinking brains when I'm through with you..." Lospecter grinned.

To be continued...

32 - Project GXterminate

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 32 - Project GXterminate
Stage 18(Hero 10) - White Base
Boss 18 - Loskeletor

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Sonic arrived in Central City to find Eggman's attack already in progress. Not only that, but the Covenant of Despair, Bucky's Experiments, GUN and Team Rose were all caught up in the massive conflict as well. After hearing from Kosmo that the President had been captured by the Lost Ones, Sonic made finding him his first priority, and went to the President's house in Central City as a starting point. While battling GUN and Eggman forces, Sonic teamed up with Amy, Vector, Rainbow, Crash and Violet periodically. Soon, he was faced with the combined forces of Dr. Eggman and Col. Gunner, until their showdown was interrupted by the arrival of Lospector and his army, which Eggman and Gunner quickly fled from. Now, Sonic, Amy, Crash and Rainbow are face to face with Lospector...
Now, on to the next chapter!

Sonic glared at Lospector, but then remembered something. "Wait... If you guys are here, that means the President might be here!" he realized. Lospector set his cards aside and glanced at Sonic with an amused expression. "Well, that's the million-ring question, ain't it? Oooh, and you'd better find him quickly, too, eh?" the spirit mused, "If those fellas in the black jumpsuits find him first, he might end up too dead to appreciate your rescuing him!" he snickered. "Wow... You are one special kinda psycho." Amy sighed. Sonic nodded. "And on that note... I gotta search this whole base quickly!!" he said, starting to run off. However, Amy managed to grab on to his leg before he could get far. "You are NOT leaving me with these monsters!!" she shouted. Sonic glanced at her with slight annoyance. "If we both go, who will watch out for Rainbow??" he grunted. Crash cleared his throat loudly. "I do TECHNICALLY work with her sister... for the moment. I'll probably get fired for helping you as much as I have." he said. "Viola's gotta quit that team..." Rainbow growled. Lospector yawned loudly. "By the time you guys work this out, the Prez will be dead. Lospirits, help them speed this along!" he ordered. As the Lost One ghosts charged at them, the four of them ran for the exit to the war room as fast as they could, slamming the doors behind them. Some ghostly hands grabbed at them through the doors, but didn't pursue them beyond that. Rather, Lospector merely laughed at them. "I'd get a move on if I were you... Eggman and the Covenant are moving on, after all!" he taunted.

Rainbow motioned for Crash to follow her in one direction. "I think Viola went this way! Help me find her!" she asked. Crash sighed. "Sure... We might find who I'm looking for, too, what the heck..." he muttered. As they left, Sonic and Amy took off in a different direction, starting their search for the President. Despite calling off his troops from the war room, it seemed Lospector had set losol and

loskels loose in the base, so they had to deal with some along the way. Sonic set to work on the loskels with some well timed spin dashes down the halls, but Amy used the losol to vent, slamming them violently and furiously with her hammer while snarling and growling! Sonic stopped a distance away from her and sighed. "Still mad, huh?" he asked. "...Well, it's not like this is a new issue, Sonic! You've been ditching me... Since before we met Shadow! How am I supposed to feel!?" she yelled. Sonic groaned. "And how many times did you follow me anyway and get kidnapped??" he retorted. "Well... Th-that's hardly the point!" Amy snapped, "You've started ditching me when I'm in danger!" she growled. Sonic cracked a little smile. "You got out okay, didn't you?" he pointed out. "...Huh?" Amy murmured. Sonic continued talking as he walked ahead. "It used to be I'd try to leave you behind because I... worried about you. I mean, we first met with you getting kidnapped. But lately... I've sorta noticed..." he trailed off. "Huh? ...What?" Amy asked, blushing a little. However, they arrived at a new room where they found Vector seated in front of a computer, and Sonic took that as an excuse to cut the conversation short. "Vector! Found the computer room, eh?" Sonic smirked. Amy crossed her arms, pouting a little. "Thanks a lot, Vector..." she sighed. Vector was busy checking various things on the computer, when he suddenly stumbled upon something. "Sonic... Check this out. It's a communication channel..." he said. A voice came over the speaker. "Who is this? I'm afraid the one normally manning this channel is away on a mission..." Sonic recognized the voice. "...Anubis!?" he gasped. "Sonic... Curse you for finding this frequency. May we cross paths soon so I might burn your blue hide personally..." Anubis replied before hanging up. "Now why do you suppose GUN has a direct line to the Covenant of Despair...?" Vector wondered.

Sonic and Amy quickly filled Vector in on the situation, and they continued together on the search for the President. However, they didn't get far before they found a situation. One of the bases many bunkers had been broken open, possibly by Eggman's robots. Sgt. Drol and a squad of GUN soldiers were being overrun by the robots, as well as a few Covenant of Despair agents. Sonic sighed. "If that were Gunner in there, I might consider leaving him... for a minute." he said. Vector nodded. "Can't have it both ways. If we're tryin' to save the President, we're on GUN's side!" he noted. Amy pulled out her hammer, noticing Infin among the Despair agents. "I'll handle this guy..." she growled. Sonic nodded and took off after the robots, leaping up to strike some buzzbombers that had a few soldiers, and Agent 32, cornered. "I... I had that... covered." he muttered. "No one believes you, shades." one of the soldiers grumbled. Vector took on some of the Despair agents with "sound" warfare. His singing made them fall over, covering their ears. "Hate to resort to that, but who knows what superpowers you Despair guys are runnin' around with?" he said. "Mine WAS super hearing..." a uniformed bat whined, writhing on the floor. Amy approached Infin with her hammer at the ready. "Hmmm..." he mumbled, glancing around. "No dice, I'm not dumb enough to take on Sonic on my own!" he said, firing shock blasts from his special gun at Amy, which she deflected repeatedly with her hammer, leaving Infin plenty of time to escape. With the robots soon defeated and Despair making a retreat, the GUN soldiers let out a relieved cheer for Sonic and his friends. Drol looked a bit annoyed, but he grudgingly stepped to address Sonic. "You need to know... A terrible weapon may be in this base." he began. "...I'm listening." Sonic said. "Project GXterminate. After the President was captured, our Dr. Nammad confiscated the device for safekeeping, but he's been spotted in the base, it seems. I fear he, and Project GXterminate, may have been captured." he warned. Vector groaned. "Greeeat. Anything ELSE we gotta worry about???" he grumbled.

They left the bunker and returned to the route they had been on, soon finding their way to some sort of conference room. The Lost Ones were busy tearing the room apart, but they weren't entirely unopposed. Rouge and Omega were busy battling it out with them. "I sure wonder where Shadow got to..." Rouge grumbled as she swatted aside a losoar bat with a swift kick. "Need any help?" Sonic asked. "I am the

ULTIMATE robot!!!" Omega shouted, blasting everything around him violently and nearly hitting Sonic, too. "...I take that as a no." he replied. "Either of you seen the President?" Vector wondered. "Obviously, we're a bit preoccupied!" Rouge yelled, chucking some bombs at some loskulls that were chasing her. Omega, having cleared some breathing room around himself, stopped to run a quick scan of the area. "Sensors indicate that the President is likely located in the Presidential Office... However, allow 30% margin for error, due to interference." he said. "You've already been more helpful than we ever expect you to be." Amy smirked. "Annoying mouth breather..." Omega grumbled. "We can save the witty banter for later, guys. In addition to the President, we also gotta find some weapon before all these dark forces do. See ya!" Sonic said, leading the way as he, Amy and Vector charged right past the Lost Ones, leaving Rouge and Omega to deal with them. "Don't you dare mess this up, Sonic! I mean it!" Rouge shouted, "My job's on the line, here! ...Not to mention my life, with that doomsday weapon..." she sighed. "Fortunately, that device apparently has no effect on inorganics." Omega remarked. "...Shut up." Rouge growled.

A quick stop to a map display used for tour groups, and they headed directly for the President's office. Along the way, they caught up with Rainbow and Crash. "Hey, any sign of your sister?" Amy asked. "...Nope. This place is huge, she could be anywhere..." Rainbow sighed. "I haven't found who I'm looking for either, but no one cares how my day's going..." Crash grumbled. "Yo, Crash, how's it going?" Vector waved. Suddenly, the PA system came on, and Col. Gunner's voice filled the halls. "Attention, troops! Dr. Eggman is on the run. Seems he couldn't handle a battle on so many fronts. This leaves the animal intruders. I've received word that Sonic the Hedgehog is marching on the President's office. He has no business there, save treason! All troops in the area, stop him with any means necessary!" he ordered. Sonic sighed. "Been a while since he accused me of treason. I was beginning to think he'd gone soft on me." he said. The five of them hurried down the hall to try to beat the troops to the office, but soon they found a number of soldiers in their way, led by Sgt. Drol. "Weapons at the ready, troops..." Drol said. Sonic glanced at Amy, inching in front of her. "I'm not abandoning you this time..." he said. However, many of Drol's troops lowered their weapons, saluting Sonic instead! "...Soldiers!!" Drol growled. "Sir! Sonic saved our hides, sir!" one of the soldiers said. Sonic smiled and nodded, but Drol was livid. "I am your commanding officer, and Gunner is MY commanding officer! We're GUN soldiers! Following orders IS our life!" he growled. Some of the troops held up their guns, but the others stood in their way. "Maybe we're more than just soldiers then. Maybe we still have our humanity!" they said. "At ease, men! We can take it from here!" Sonic suggested. However, all of the soldiers suddenly doubled over... in fear! Basker the Hound was coming from the next hallway, and he was using his power to incapacitate the GUN troops! However, some of them attempted to resist. "Go... Sonic! We'll stop... Despair!" they grunted. Sonic frowned. "I hate to leave them, but we've gotta get to the President and that weapon!" he growled. Amy, Rainbow, Vector and Crash followed him past the GUN soldiers. "That was nice, Sonic, but protecting me from non-dangerous soldiers doesn't get you off the hook!" Amy shouted. "Whatever!!" he groaned, frustrated.

The President's office wasn't far, and inside, the President seemed to be perfectly fine and having a calm chat with Dr. Nammad, who had the GXterminate machine propped up on the table behind him. "Could it be that something's actually easy?" Vector wondered. "Hey, Prez! ...How'd you get away from the Lost Ones?" Sonic asked. Dr. Nammad pulled up a sword with a clear, crystalline blade, which appeared to have a high-tech handle. "Stay back!" he warned. Sonic sped around the President and startled Dr. Nammad, making him fumble his sword a bit. "Eeep! You don't, uh, understand!" he stammered. Suddenly, Amy, Crash, Vector and Rainbow were all stunned by a volley of Chaos Spears, and Conan the Raccoon charged past them, straight for the President. "In the name of the Covenant..."

This is your impeachment, Prez!" he yelled. "Wait... No!!" the President winced. "Now, die!!" Conan said quickly, impaling the President with his blade just as Sonic turned to see what was happening! "No!!" he shouted, followed by a confused "...Huh???" Conan looked a bit puzzled as well, as the President grabbed at the hilt of the blade piercing his chest with a smile. "And thus, it would end... Hadst thou not missed me!" He pulled the blade out of his own chest, tossing it to the floor as his flesh melted and twisted into his true form. Everyone watched in horrified astonishment as the President took the form of Loskeletor! Dr. Nammad was the only one not surprised. "I tried to, uh, tell you..." he sighed. Conan retrieved his sword and backed away as Loskeletor's glowing red eye-holes followed him. "Woe upon thee... I had these simpletons fooled." he growled. Vector stood up and whimpered. "Am I the only one not REALLY hoping we didn't vote that THING into office?" he gulped. "Don't all politicians have two faces?" Crash mumbled. Suddenly, as if things weren't bad enough, Spiny the porcupine kicked open the door! "So, who was the moron who thought Eggman was finished? I've got a troop of robots here that says they're wrong!" he shouted, leading EggRobos into the office! "...Not our day, huh?" Sonic sighed.

Chet the cheetah also sped into the room, passing by the robots and joining Conan. They glanced at each other and nodded before heading straight for the GXterminate weapon. "Hey, step away from the doomsday weapon!" Sonic shouted, only to have a beam shot at his feet before he could pursue them! Loskeletor was still in his way, and he didn't seem to care who got the weapon as long as Sonic didn't get to it. Fortunately, Spiny hadn't come alone. Among the robots he'd brought with him was Metal Sonic, who dashed past Loskeletor and plowed right into Conan, knocking him to the ground and causing Chet to turn around to aid him. "Eggman has ordered us to retrieve that device!" Spiny stated, "But while Metal handles that... I'm going to muss up your pretty little face, hedgehog!" he growled. Dr. Nammad sat back in the President's chair and observed all this, seeming amused. "Okay...uh, may the best burglars win." he grinned. Some Iosoars swooped down from the ceiling and surrounded Loskeletor, apparently having been there the whole time. "Feast upon those wretched, pitiful beings. I shall reap the honor of dispatching the blue one!" Loskeletor cackled, pulling a couple ribs free of his own body as he spoke, revealing the ends that were attached to him to be covered in spikes! Meanwhile, Spiny had conjured some Chaos Spears that he'd begun steering around, preparing to send after Sonic. "Don't I feel special? Two psychopaths, just for me..." he said. Amy and Vector quickly became occupied fending off Iosoars, while Crash and Rainbow were taking on EggRobos. "Yeah, real special!" Amy growled, swatting one of the slimy bats with her hammer. "Gladly trade ya, Sonic..." Crash murmured. As Loskeletor fired his laser eyes and Spiny launched his Chaos Spears, Sonic took off in his effort to evade the two enemies at once. "I may take you up on that, rhino-guy!" he shouted. Loskeletor tossed one of his spiked ribs at Sonic, which he somersaulted to avoid. "Ha! Missed, and you're down a bone!" he taunted. "Speedy, look out!" Rainbow shouted. Sonic glanced back and jumped suddenly as the rib came circling back like a boomerang! However, the distraction got him zapped by a couple of Chaos Spears and knocked to the floor! "Now I got you, stinking hedgehog!" he sneered.

Spiny launched into his signature attack, Spear Storm, firing dozens of Chaos Spears from his body all at once! Sonic quickly curled himself up into a ball and took off toward Loskeletor, who tossed his spiked ribs at the rolling hedgehog in an effort to stop him, but Sonic moved too fast and rolled right between his skeletal legs! "Gadzooks?!" he exclaimed, suddenly finding the storm of Chaos Spears headed his way! The spears riddled Loskeletor into a pile of green bones, but he quickly pulled himself together and fixed his fiery gaze on Spiny. "I allowed thou knavish Sonic doppelganger to act so long as no interference came hither!!" he yelled. Spiny stared at him. "I don't know what you just said, but I'm sure it was a threat!" he snarled. Sonic dusted his hands and snickered softly now that he'd managed to turn

them against each other. However, it was a bit late for that. The door, which had closed behind the last person to enter the room, now smashed off its hinges, and a menacing hooded figure entered. Glowing red eyes pierced the dark under his striped red hood. It was the Darkseeker! He seemed to simply and with great ease hurl aside and EggRobos and Isoars that dared block his way as he approached Dr. Nammad. "Hold it, Mr. Hood! No one goes near the machine over there!" Sonic warned. The Darkseeker barely glanced at Sonic. "You are the blue hedgehog that chose to stand against us rather than rally at our side?" he sneered. "And who are...?" without letting Sonic speak, the Darkseeker raised his hand, and emitting a small dark spark from his finger, knocked Sonic to the floor! "Ooof!" This got the attention of Amy, Vector and the others, but Conan and Chet stood in their way. "You don't want to cross this guy..." Chet warned. The Darkseeker crept over to Dr. Nammad, who cowered before him a little, but stood up and shook his extended hand. "Well, Mr. uh, Darkseeker... A deal's a, uh, deal..." he said, motioning to the GXterminate machine! "Ah! No way... That scientist must be the one who used the line to call Despair!" Vector gasped. "He... sold out his own kind!?" Crash stammered. The Darkseeker turned around, his dark gaze meeting all. "We have what we came for. Those who would stand in our way, know that it is foolishness. I, the Darkseeker, master of the Covenant of Despair, will craft a new world! Any in my way... will perish!" he snarled, kicking Sonic aside as he and Dr. Nammad headed out, while Chet and Conan carried the GXterminate machine. Metal Sonic tried to stop them, but Crash charged into the robot from the side, taking it by surprise and damaging it greatly. "...Regrettably... I am with Despair..." he grunted, taking his leave. As Amy and Rainbow rushed to help Sonic, Gunner's voice came on the PA system again. "All troops... Excellent news. Despair forces are withdrawing. Dr. Eggman has been forced out of Central City by the efforts of our capable Commander. Furthermore, I have managed to locate our President, alive and well. Those monster freaks were apparently holding him on the grounds for some unknown purpose..." he said. Loskeletor gritted his teeth in defeat. "There goeth the source of my machinations... I take my leave of this place!" he growled, leading the Isoar away. Sonic stood up shakily, but otherwise fine. "We'd better get outta here before Gunner comes for us..." he said. "Who was that guy?" Vector wondered. Sonic's eyes narrowed. "...Someone I gotta stop!" he said.

To be continued...

33 - Dark Ascent

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 33 - Dark Ascent
Stage 19(Dark 9) - Lost Plateau
Minor Boss 15 - Shadow Chaos

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Punchy traveled with Copter and Kosmo to Central City in search of Rainbow and Heather. They were soon drawn into conflict at GUN HQ, leading them to encounter the Lost One posing as the President, Loskeletor, who desired to use Project GXterminate to bring about the end of all life. Heather was required to operate the machine, but our heroes managed to free her and escape GUN HQ. Rainbow, however, was nowhere to be found. What's more, as the real President was kidnapped by the Lost Ones, Eggman and Covenant of Despair forces arrived in Central City, each bent on defeating the GUN army and claiming a decisive victory for their causes...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Punchy searched through the city in chaos for any sign of Rainbow, but he began to think that it was a wild goose chase. As the battle between GUN and Eggman died down and it started to become safe for regular people to come outside again, Punchy decided to find out if the trains were running so he could search for her elsewhere. However, he didn't get far before he ran into an old annoyance: Officer Razor. "Stop right there!! I need a LOT of explanations, right now!" he shouted, a bit frazzled by the recent battle. "Arrrgh!! Why couldn't you have been crushed in the undersea cave-in!?" Punchy grumbled. "Very funny!" Razor grunted, "The buzz around town is that you chumps busted into GUN HQ! What's the big idea!?" he questioned. Punchy crossed his arms. "I don't expect YOU to believe this, but we just saved everyone's butts from GUN's own doomsday weapon!!" he explained. Razor mulled that over and nodded. "You're right, that does sound like garbage. Where's your friends, anyway?" he growled. Punchy was really getting sick of this now. "You're IN my way!! I'm trying to find my friend who might be in danger... and EVERYONE'S in MY WAY!!" he screamed. "Awww... Problem, Punchy?" came the mocking voice of Fera as she strutted around the nearby corner. Razor turned and pointed his gun at her in alarm, recognizing her uniform. "Go away, Fera!! Both of you, go away!! Just... LEAVE ME ALONE already!!" Punchy yelled. "Why don't you make us? What's wrong, Punchy...? Are you feeling... afraid? Afraid of the darkness?" Fera goaded him. "Shut up!!" he snapped. "Sir, you're sounding very um... Outta control, here." Razor muttered. "I am not!! Now STAND ASIDE!!" Punchy warned. "Fraid I can't do that! You gotta tell me everything you know, or we're takin' a trip to the station! Your choice!" Razor threatened. Punchy glared at him, while Fera waved her hands in his direction, seeming to cast some influence over the Despair Seal. "His gun is ready to fire... You'd better make a move, Punchy... You know what you want to do..." she hissed. "I... I can't..." Punchy grunted, trying to resist. "The Despair Seal knows what you want..." Fera sneered. "Freeze, wolf! You are interfering with police

business!!" Razor shouted, aiming his weapon at Fera again. Just then, Copter and Kosmo arrived on the scene. "Hey!! What's going on here!?" Copter asked. "Gah! This cop again!" Kosmo groaned. "I don't need help!! I can handle this myself!!" Punchy insisted. Razor sighed. "Now I might need backup... Fortunately, GUN HQ is nearby!" he said, pulling out his phone. "No, no... You are NOT calling Gunner over here..." Punchy growled. "...Hello, Guard?" Razor started. "You have no choice. USE THE DARKNESS!" Fera yelled, casting a black spell over the Despair Seal! "GRRRRRAAAAAAHHHH!!!!" Punchy roared in fury as his fur took on a blacker hue, and he transformed into Dark Punchy! "I-I don't know what you just did, but I am prepared to shoot if necessary!!" Razor whimpered. "Oh, boy... I'm dead for my heroism..." Copter mumbled, running out with the intention of protecting Razor from Dark Punchy. Instead, Kosmo dove in front of the raging echidna and took his dark energy blast, tumbling to the ground in pain! As Punchy roared in rage and satisfaction, a frightened voice called to him. "One!!! S-stop!!!" He glanced behind him, his eyes wide. "Rainbow...?" he winced. "Well, well... It's you." Fera mused. "R-run... Rainbow!! I... I can't... c-control... me!!" Punchy grunted, punching through a nearby wall in his fury! "Yes you can, One! Just try to calm down!!!" Rainbow insisted. "K-KILL!!" Dark Punchy snarled. "N-NOOOOO!!!" Punchy stammered, turning and dashing as far away as he could! "One!! Wait!!!" Rainbow pleaded, trailing after him!

Trapped in Dark form, mired in conflict with the evil presence within his own mind, Punchy fled to the darkest place he could find: Troblusk City. Amy Rose had reunited with Cream and Silver at this point, having found them outside the President's house and explained the situation to Silver. It seemed a good idea for Team Rose to search for Despair's HQ separately from Sonic, but what they found instead was a crazed Punchy. "He's all black and nuts... I think I've seen this before..." Amy muttered. "He seems in pain. We should try to help him." Cream suggested. Silver nodded. "He could do a lot of damage in that state. Let's go." What they didn't notice was that a rather see-through Lospector had approached the crazed Punchy. "Hey, grouchy-face! Don't we look evil today?" he said. "Get.... away from me!!" Dark Punchy snarled. "Which one of you is addressing me? Doesn't matter, you can't touch the shadow-me I've sent to schmooze you. It's fun being 2 places at once! Well, come with me if you want to find a nice place to settle things with the other you." he offered. Having no other ideas, Dark Punchy followed Lospector to the base of Troblusk Plateau, a small mountain just outside the city limits of Troblusk City. "One!! Don't run away from me!!!" Rainbow shouted as she caught up to Punchy. "Gah! Rainbow, get back!" shouted Silver as he arrived with Team Rose in tow. "ENOUGH!! You have all made a mistake coming near me...!" Dark Punchy growled. "There's a good Dark One. Use all that darkness and obliterate these wimpy goodie goods." Lospector chuckled. "No, One!! STOP!! You can fight it!! I know you're in there, and you can still hear me!" Rainbow pleaded. Punchy shook his head. "R-rainbow... It's stronger this time, Rainbow... You n-need... to run!!!" he warned. "No! Snap out of it!" Rainbow yelled. "Yeah! Or I'll have to beat you up!" Amy warned. "Not sure that's helpful, Amy..." Silver sighed. "I... gotta... break free of... Dark Punchy!!!" Punchy growled, staring up the mountain. "Booooring... I guess I'll leave some Lost Ones for you to play with..." Lospector said before flying off. Suddenly, Illusi appeared in front of Punchy with a burst of smoke! "Halt, Dark One!!!" he shouted. "Y-you...." Punchy grunted. "No... Look how deep into darkness you've slipped..." Illusi gasped, "Dark One!! It's over now! If I must use the very aid of the Lost Ones... I will destroy you!!!" he proclaimed. "Why, Illuser! I never thought I'd see the day!" Lospector said, having appeared out of nowhere again to shake Illusi's hand, "Well, if you want my help, that makes this all the more entertaining!" he smirked. "Let's see you try it, you coward!! Maybe I'll be the one to destroy YOU!!!" Dark Punchy snarled. "One, no!!!" Rainbow pleaded. Punchy glanced back at her, fear in his eyes, and then he leapt up to a cliff on the mountainside, beginning an ascent of Troblusk Plateau! "...Where's he goin'?" Lospector wondered. "I'll meet him higher up, then..." Illusi said, vanishing with a snap of his fingers.

The road was rocky, but Dark Punchy followed what road there was up the mountain, seeking a quiet place to hash out the turmoil going on in his own mind. A few Wrongos popped up in his path along the way, but he was too quick and too furious for them in this state, punching them into oblivion before they could be much of a bother. The very rocks of the mountain shifted, seeming determined to stop his advance as well. Lospector watched in amusement as these rocks combined to form a new sort of slimy stone creature. "Lostone don't have much personality, so feel free to whale on them to your heart's content." he said. Punchy took him up on that, assaulting the slimy stone soldiers with all his rage! Some of the stones he knocked apart from them dropped down the mountainside and rolled past Amy, Cream, Silver and Rainbow. "Whatever they're trying to slow him down with, it isn't working." Amy said. Rainbow started to climb after Punchy anyway. "I gotta catch up to One... I have to get through to him and convince Mousy he's not dangerous before it's too late!" she said urgently. Silver frowned. "Uh... Should someone point out to her that he IS dangerous?" he murmured. Cream followed after Rainbow in spite of the dangers. "She's right! He needs our help!" she said. Suddenly, the rocks that had fallen from above assembled into some small lostone creatures, startling their group. "Gaah!! Now there's ROCK monsters!?" Amy yelled, whacking the nearest creature back into pieces with her hammer! Silver gently pushed the others the rest of the way down the mountain with his psychic powers. "We'd better get a move on before those things catch up to us..." he sighed.

Soaring around the cliffs of Troblusk Plateau at this time was Whisk the Divine. She'd come here to get away from the violence in Central City herself, and now she spotted Dark Punchy fighting with Lost Ones on his way up the mountain. Curious, she flew down to him. "Hey there... Need a lift up the mountain?" she offered. Dark Punchy only snarled at her, continuing to assault the monsters in his path. "Uh... What's up with all the monsters? Hey, you look like this green guy I saw in Central City... I think." she said. Dark Punchy glared at her furiously. "Will you SHUT UP!!!" he yelled, firing a blast of dark energy in her direction, which she teleported to avoid! With that, Dark Punchy continued up the mountain without her, while Whisk sat on the rocky cliff, growling softly. "That... wasn't... nice!!" she stammered. As she grumbled in annoyance for a few moments, some hissing voices started chanting around her. "Lossss... lossss..." She looked around to see a pair of LosFoxes climbing the mountain, flailing nine swordlike tails behind them! As they came at her, stabbing their tails in her direction, Whisk first teleported out of the way to avoid injury. "You caught me at a bad time, because I'm MAD now!" she yelled, flapping above them and out of range. She concentrated for a moment, and her wings began to glow, and when they did, she flapped them down hard, kicking up a terrible wind that tore through the LosFoxes, ripping off some of their tails before blowing them into the cliff walls! However, that wasn't quite enough to take out these powerful Lost Ones, and they quickly lunged up at Whisk, pulling her back to the ground! "Eeek!! Lemme go!" She tried to teleport, but simply took them with her! She tried again, but they still clung on! Finally, she warped up high and flew circles in the air, spinning in a desperate effort to shake them off! They soon gave up their grip and fell all the way down to the base of the mountain, but Whisk found herself feeling dizzy. "Time for a nappy-poo..." she said woozily.

Team Rose continued climbing the cliffs, though much more slowly than Dark Punchy could. Fortunately, Dark Punchy was taking out most of the monsters, giving them time to chat as they climbed. "So... Are you still mad at Sonic, Amy?" Silver wondered. Amy frowned in annoyance at the question. "His thoughtless actions could get me killed..." she muttered. Cream sighed. "But Amy, aren't you the one who's always insisting on following him in the first place?" she said. "Wh-what are you saying?" Amy stammered, "That... I put myself in that danger... And it's not fair to put that kind of burden on Sonic... And...and I just mess up everything! That's what you're saying, isn't it!?" she snapped, tearing up a little.

"Eeep! N-no, that's not it at all!" Cream yelped. "But you're right...!" Amy sniffled. Silver sighed. "Look, it's no big deal... I don't think Sonic would leave you behind in danger like he's been doing if he didn't trust you." he said. Suddenly, Rainbow burst into tears as well. "This is all MY fault, too!" she wailed, "If I hadn't left One, he'd still be himself and he wouldn't be in all this danger now!" Silver held his head and groaned. "Please... everyone, stop blaming yourselves. It's not helping." he grumbled. As they climbed, they found Whisk lying on the rocks, moaning and injured. "Angel!!" Rainbow gasped. Silver lifted her gently to her feet with his powers, and she slowly opened her eyes. "Tailsies... So many tailsies..." she groaned. "Are you okay? Can you walk?" Amy asked. Whisk stumbled a bit, so Amy and Cream helped her stand. "Oh no... Did One do this to you?" Rainbow shuddered. Whisk groaned. "Monsters! Clingy monsters!! No... shouldn't have tried to take out my anger on..." she murmured. "Huh...? Um... Why were you angry?" Silver asked. Whisk pointed up towards Punchy. "Crazy guy... spikes like that one..." she said, pointing at Rainbow. "She did run into One... Unless there's another echidna up here." she sighed. Silver nodded. "We'd better take her with us. Can't leave her in this state." he said. Whisk teleported away from Amy and Cream and started walking on her own. "I'll lead the way..." she mumbled. "Wow... she heals fast." Cream said.

As they continued higher up, they arrived on a cliff perfect for taking a short rest. However, when they sat down, the mountain suddenly flashed brightly, and seemed to split into three mountains surrounding them, connected at this one cliff! They were struck dizzy for a moment, and Rainbow shook her head and growled. "Mousy! He's gone and trapped us in one of his crazy illusions!" she realized. "So... you're saying two of these mountains are fake? That's a relief..." Amy sighed. Silver shook his head. "No, it's not. If you try to climb a fake mountain, you'll probably fall...to your doom." he warned. Cream gulped. "Then, what do we do?" she asked. Whisk looked around. "I could try flying up to see if I can find the creep who caused this trickery." she suggested. "Too risky." Silver said, "If he can do this, imagine what he might do to anyone who goes looking for him." he reasoned. "Then I'll whack each mountain with my hammer 'till we find the real one!!" Amy growled, raising her hammer angrily. "H-hold on!!" Silver stammered, pulling away her hammer with his psychokinesis. "HEY!!" Amy yelled. "What did I JUST say about falling!? ...I'll do it." Silver said, psychically moving the hammer to one of the three mountainsides and giving it a good smack! Suddenly, the mountain began to shake, but the ground under their feet remained still. "That one... was fake." Rainbow sighed. The illusion mountain burst into hundreds of green check-marks with eyes, Illusi's Rightos! "Uhhhh... Can I have my hammer back?" Amy said quickly. Silver tossed it back to her as the Rightos swarmed in their direction! Whisk shrieked and teleported out of sight, while Amy started swinging her hammer around and Cheese flew frantically around the area to protect Cream. Rainbow took cover behind Silver, who used what loose rocks were in the area as projectiles to control with his psychic powers, ricocheting them off any Rightos that came near him. Soon, those of the creatures that weren't destroyed had flown by, and the group took a moment to recover. "Do we HAVE to do that again...?" Rainbow whined, realizing there was still another fake mountain. "Hey, everyone!? Is it safe to come down now!?" shouted Whisk from a higher cliff. Looking up, the group let out a sigh of relief to realize that Whisk had found the real mountain. "Just stay there! We'll come to you!" Silver shouted.

Meanwhile, Dark Punchy was nearing the summit of Troblusk Plateau. As he reached a cliff not far from the top, however, a black ooze trickled down from above, and slowly formed into the shape of Shadow Chaos! "Out... of my... way!!" Dark Punchy snarled. Illusi appeared nearby and crossed his arms, floating in midair. "Behold! This creature of shadows has been drawn to the growing darkness within you! It is proof of the beast you yourself have become!" he declared. "SHUT IT!!" Punchy fumed, raising

his fists to Shadow Chaos as they crackled with dark energy. "...Meet me at the summit if you can." Illusi challenged before disappearing. Shadow Chaos roared at Punchy as it approached, but Dark Punchy made the first move, jolting the creature with bolts of darkness from his hands! However, though the jolts sparked through Shadow Chaos's body, it seemed not to effect the creature, and it retaliated by slapping Punchy across the face with its elastic, watery arms! He jumped back and started hurling orbs of dark energy at Shadow Chaos, which the creature didn't even bother attempting to avoid. It merely absorbed the darkness, and this seemed to give Shadow Chaos energy. It sped after Punchy, firing shots of its own black sludge at him as it approached! Dark Punchy growled as he was pelted by this sludge, and then smacked towards the ledge by the speeding creature! "What's wrong?? Why aren't my attacks working!?" he snarled. "...It's absorbing... darkness... We have to... fight normal!" Punchy's normal self struggled to communicate to his darker half. "Rrrr! You'd like that, wouldn't you!?" Dark Punchy hissed, running at Shadow Chaos with his fists charged full of darkness! He took a few swings at Shadow Chaos with his darkness-infused fists, but his hands got stuck inside the beast after a bit! Shadow Chaos roared as it began feeding on the dark energy, grasping Dark Punchy by the throat as it did! "Urrgh... grah.... f-FINE!!" Dark Punchy gasped, relaxing his dark energy and relinquishing partial control to Punchy. "Ch-chaos... Av-avalanche!!" he choked, grabbing at any chunks of ground he could with his Chaos power, and hurling them right back at himself, which resulted in Shadow Chaos taking the hit as well!

Having been freed from Shadow Chaos's grip, Punchy quickly covered it up with rocks using Chaos Avalanche while it was stunned. Dark Punchy then regained control. "This changes nothing! I'm not going back into slumber while you maintain control! It's time for YOU to slumber!" he snarled, resuming his climb to the summit, "And your shrew friend can slumber, too... In DEATH!!!" he cackled. Once he was gone, Shadow Chaos slowly started to seep out of the rocks. However, before it could escape, a shining steel cage appeared over it, cutting off its escape! Emerging from the shadows below the cliff climbed Eddie the hyena and Anubis the jackal. "Eeee hee hee! One down... This illusion cage will hold our quarry nicely." Eddie laughed. "Can you transport it with an illusion?" Anubis asked. "Eeee hee... Maybe if I was on the mother of all sugar highs." Eddie replied. Anubis sighed and lifted a walkie talkie he was holding. "Anubis to HQ, we've acquired S.C., transport required. Over and out." he stated. Eddie shrugged. "I guess we're out for the rest of this mission. Too bad. I feel like we're missing out on the fun. Eee hee..." he chuckled. Anubis sighed. "All that remains of this mission is a simple matter. A single agent can pull it off... And if you want any meddling fools eliminated, the Dark One is more than up to the task." he said, gazing up toward the peak of the mountain. Eddie chuckled. "What did you think I meant by the fun? Eeee hee... hee hee hee hee hee!!!"

To be continued...

34 - The Plateau

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 34 - The Plateau
Stage 19(Dark 9) - Lost Plateau
Boss 19 - The Deathbringer

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Looking for Rainbow, Punchy ran into Razor, who started interrogating him about recent events in Central City. Fera arrived next, and used the frustration Punchy was feeling to manipulate the Despair Seal and trap Punchy in dark form! Dark Punchy fled the city and arrived at Troblusk Plateau, followed by Rainbow and Team Rose, who desired to help him regain control of his mind. Unfortunately, Illusi teamed up with the Lost Ones in a last ditch effort to destroy Punchy before Dark Punchy grows any stronger! To keep his friends out of danger, Punchy steered Dark Punchy up the mountain, battling monsters as he went, but his friends slowly followed him, meeting up with Whisk along the way. Dark Punchy faced Shadow Chaos near the summit, and had to defeat it without using dark powers. After leaving Shadow Chaos behind, the creature was captured by the Covenant of Despair...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Deep in the dark recesses of Punchy's mind, Punchy and Dark Punchy were face to face, struggling for control. "...Dark me! Let me go, right now!!" Punchy growled. Dark Punchy stood in the darkness of the realm of Punchy's mind, a superior smirk on his face. "No thanks... I'd rather just DESTROY you!!" he growled. Punchy raised his fists. "Even if you could... Don't you think that might destroy you, too?" he reasoned. Dark Punchy charged at him in a fury. "I don't CARE!!!" he screamed. Outside the realm of his mind, the internal conflict was taking its toll on Punchy's external senses. He could scarcely see straight, and following what trail remained before the summit of the mountain proved challenging. Lospecter watched him with amusement for a bit, but then let out a sigh. "This is gettin' sad. Put him out of his misery, troops!" he ordered. Lostones, Losol Golems, lospides, and lospirits approached him from all sides, but despite his disorientation, there was still some fight left in Dark Punchy! He lashed out in a frenzy, violently thrashing at anything that came near him with attacks charged with dark energy! All Lost Ones that attempted to attack were torn to shreds, and the others fled like wolves cowering from prey that had proven too mighty to bring down. Lospecter broke into hysterical laughter at this. "Look at the wild animal! Too full of pride to let me put him down mercifully. Very well, you had your chance. I'll make a Lost One of your corpse... Until then, I guess I'll go look for those friends of yours. Toodles!" he said, flying off down the mountain. Within the darkness of his mind, Punchy backed away from Dark Punchy and tried once more to talk sense into him. "Listen! We are walking into a trap, and so are my friends! Let me go, or everyone might die!!" he pleaded. Dark Punchy chuckled at him. "Sentiment WAS your big weakness. It was why you let the Master Emerald go before, and it's why you can't beat me now!!" he snarled, hurling a punch straight at Punchy! The good Punchy endured the hit and socked him back. "If

you won't listen, I'll knock your lights out!" he growled.

Rainbow, Amy, Cream, Silver and Whisk continued to climb the mountain after Punchy. They were making progress with the illusion dispelled, but it wasn't long before Illusi appeared before them personally. "Mousy! Are you here to trap us in another crazy... trap!?" Rainbow asked. Illusi raised his hands calmly. "I only come to talk... My quarrel is not with the five of you." he said. "It's a little late to try to tell us that, Mr. Phony-Mountain-That'll-Drop-Us-To-Our-Death-If-We-Step-On-It!" Amy growled. "Wow, that's a mouthful of a last name..." Whisk murmured. Illusi nodded. "My attention was divided... I'd hoped the illusion would startle you enough to stop you in your tracks." he said. Silver smirked at him. "Just the fact that you're trying to stop us means that you probably aren't prepared to deal with all of us, so maybe YOU should stop in YOUR tracks!" he warned. A Wrongo popped out of nowhere in front of him, startling him, Cream and Amy. "Cut it out with the circly things, Mousy!" Rainbow groaned. The Wrongo floated next to Illusi as he spoke to them. "I'm here to offer you one final warning. We are going to eliminate the Dark One... a very dangerous and... potentially explosive task. I cannot guarantee your safety should you continue." he warned. Silver growled at him. "Oh, yeah!? Well, WE can't guarantee YOUR safety if you keep trying to murder Rainbow's friend! So there!" he shouted. "Can't we try to resolve this peacefully?" Cream whimpered. Illusi frowned. "I've spoken my mind. Any of you who continue up this path will find the fate you have so carelessly sought." he sighed. "And you can bet I'll see to that!" said Lospector, arriving on the scene! Illusi looked up at the spirit in disdain. "I requested your aid in battling the Dark One. You should be up there!" he said. Lospector shrugged. "Better risk/reward ratio down here, cape boy. The anger-management dropout up there was wreckin' too many of my troops. They don't grow on trees, you know! Well, y'know... not as of yet." he explained. Illusi growled in frustration. "I should never have considered an alliance with the likes of you!" he snarled as he vanished in a burst of smoke!

Silver glanced up the trail leading the rest of the way to the summit. Varied Lost Ones had been spawned by Lospector on his way down, and were waiting for them. "We don't have time for this if we want to help your friend..." he said to Rainbow. She nodded. "Then we'll just speed right pass them! Follow me!" she said, rushing ahead of the others up the trail. "What are you, NUTS!?" Amy shouted, chasing after her. The others followed after them, and Silver tried to keep the Lost Ones off their tail as they started to speed past some of them, but they soon found themselves surrounded. "Aw, shoot. Speedy makes this look so easy." Rainbow said in frustration. "Now we'll have to fight our way out of this!" Silver growled. "Help us out, Cheese!" Cream cried, backing toward Rainbow, as neither of them could really fight. Whisk teleported up high and charged energy in her wings to attempt to fight the aerial lospirits and losoars with her wind powers, while Silver and Amy took the fight directly to the creatures on the land. Amy swatted a few lospides with her hammer, only to groan as she noticed the icky mess they were leaving on her hammer's head. "This gunk better come out!!" she groaned. Cheese flew about bonking from lostone to lostone, knocking them just right to make them crumble, and then Silver would grab the stone fragments with his psychokinesis and hurl them at any LosFoxes and Losol Golems that were coming at their group. Still, there were a lot of them, and a few stragglers made it through to Rainbow and Cream. "Ch-cheese!! Where are you!?" Cream yelped as some losoars flew straight for them! However, rainbow took action, throwing rocks at the bats and aiming for their heads, which stalled them long enough for Whisk to swoop down and blow them away with a mighty flap of her wings! "...Thanks, Angel! Even though I totally had it under control..." Rainbow muttered. "Huh? I thought your name was Angel!" Whisk stammered. Cream knelt down and picked up some rocks in the meantime. "Guess I'd better be ready to protect myself, too..." she murmured.

The group's efforts wiped out the Lost Ones that first surrounded them, but more kept swarming down the mountain! "We'll never get anywhere at this rate!" Amy growled. Suddenly, a blast of dark lightning crashed down from the sky above, searing across the mountainside before them and eliminating the Lost Ones blocking their path! As the lightning ceased, the group looked up to see Fera briefly suspended in the air before warping down to the mountainside in front of them! "You! You started this whole thing! You gave One the weird bracelet that turns him dark!" Rainbow shouted. Fera nodded, smirking. "And now he is more powerful than ever! Just as intended." she said. "Listen up! Your Covenant of Despair is working on some dangerous plans! I'm here to stop them, and protect the future!" Silver announced. Fera scoffed at him. "The future? What future is that? One where humans keep us all in cages?! Or zoos? You can keep YOUR future! And you'll never stop ours, any more than you could stop me from destroying the ruins at Sandopolis!" she snapped, turning back to Rainbow. "By the way... Been a while since the last time I was here. This is where I recruited your... sister, was it? Yes... I gave her a choice, and Violet called me right at this plateau to give me her answer." she grinned. Rainbow raised her fists and came at Fera, but Whisk pulled her back. "You poisoned her mind! You messed with her head and now she won't come home until we stop you!!" she yelled. Fera chuckled. "Ooooh... You think? Or maybe that might drive her away even more? Not that you've got a chance of stopping us. I was just thinking... This is a fitting place... To recruit a new agent!" she announced before warping away. As Fera vanished, Rainbow broke away from Whisk and gasped in fear. "One... She's going to catch him and force him to work for THEM!" she shouted. "Not if we get there first!" Amy said, "I'm gonna wipe my icky hammer on her uniform!" she growled. "You really think we can beat a teleporter up there?" Whisk wondered, making everyone stare at her grouchily. "...What?" she mumbled. "Why don't YOU teleport us?" Silver asked. Whisk rubbed her head a bit. "Do what now?" she mumbled, making everyone groan a bit.

Finally, Punchy had arrived at the top of Troblusk Plateau. Meeting him there was Illusi, frowning impatiently. "You took your time scaling this little hill." he said. "Shut your mouth!" Dark Punchy snarled, about ready to snap him in two. "I'm afraid you leave me no choice, Dark One..." Illusi said, hovering into the air out of Punchy's reach, "It is as was foretold... and you must be stopped." he said. Punchy struggled against Dark Punchy to speak to Illusi. "What do you... mean... foretold!?" he grunted. Illusi glared down at him. "I have glimpsed the future once again, as when we first met! You will cause death and pain to those around you!" he revealed. Dark Punchy grinned at this. "Wonderful... Then it sounds like my freedom is assured." he sneered. Just then, he heard someone drop down onto the cliff behind him. "I have found another who is equally determined to stop you. With our combined efforts... Dark One... We will change the future! We will DESTROY you!!" Illusi roared, glowing with strange, blue energy! Turning around, Dark Punchy saw the cloaked, winged figure known as the Deathbringer stalking him once again! "You escaped me in those ruins... But you will not run away again!" it growled. "Who's running, fairy wings!" Dark Punchy growled. Within his mind, Punchy found himself lacking the will to fight Dark Punchy. "...There's no way I can beat both of them myself... I guess I have no choice... but to let you loose!" he said to Dark Punchy. "About time you saw the truth! Now watch me tear these fools limb from limb!" Dark Punchy cackled. "Illusi... I'm so sorry..." Punchy thought, wishing there were some other way out of this, especially now that he knew the reason Illusi had been after him all this time.

Dark Punchy flashed with shadowy energy, and then charged at Illusi first. The shrew split off into copies of himself, and the one directly in front of Punchy burst into a trio of Wrongos as he struck him! "Grrr!! Coward! Hiding behind your illusions!" Dark Punchy snarled. "Do not mistake intelligence for

cowardice... You forgot the Deathbringer." the Illusi said in unison. The Deathbringer hurled one of its killing bolts directly at Punchy! Normally this would mean death for any to have the misfortune to encounter the Deathbringer, but this was Dark Punchy. His body pulsed with darkness as the bolt struck him, repelling it from going through him, but the impact still knocked him back considerably! "...I actually felt that!" Dark Punchy grunted. The Deathbringer flapped its black wings and stared down at him from the air. "I am the most powerful killing force on the earth. There is no darkness strong enough to survive my power for long!" it declared, "You should have left the country when I gave you the chance." Illusi and his illusions each brandished a blue illusion saber, and came at Punchy one by one, swinging their blades at him as they passed by. Dark Punchy tried to strike back, but there were too many to keep track of, and furthermore, this was merely a diversion while the Deathbringer circled behind him. "Enough!!" Dark Punchy roared, blasting back all Illusi with a powerful dark shockwave fired across the whole mountaintop! The real Illusi fell backward while his fakes turned into numerous Wrongos, flying off into the sky. Then, the Deathbringer knocked Dark Punchy over with another powerful bolt, this time in the back! "Ooof!! Knock it... off!!" he panted, climbing back up quickly as the Deathbringer started charging at him, intending to keep him off balance and make it impossible for him to fight back! With Illusi climbing to his feet as well, it seemed even Dark Punchy was no match for these high powered foes. As the Deathbringer slammed its fists into him, knocking him across to the ledge of the mountaintop, and was about to attempt to finish it, another winged being warped directly between them! The Deathbringer stopped short. "Aw, I'm sorry... Did I mess up your shot?" smirked Whisk.

Rainbow hurried over to Punchy while Amy, Silver and Cream joined Whisk in standing in the Deathbringer's way! "You fools... I could end any of you without effort. You would die... for this wretched creature!?" it growled. Rainbow glared up at the Deathbringer with tears in her eyes. "...I don't know so much about that... But... One is willing to die to keep me safe! It isn't Dark One that steered him up here, knowing that Mousy had a trap waiting. He ran up here... away from where I was... He's up here because I followed him! So I won't let you hurt him!" she shouted. Punchy started to struggle against Dark Punchy again, seeing his friends in danger. "R-rainbow... No!! I-I need... To save her!!" he grunted. Illusi called down the Wrongos that had flown into the sky. "Circle around them, Deathbringer. I will deal with these interlopers." he said. "C'mere and say that, cape boy..." Amy growled. The Deathbringer took off into the sky, and the Wrongos swarmed Team Rose and Whisk! What's more, the Wrongos began to multiply before their eyes, making it harder to see what they were doing through the swarm! "We have to get to that shrew!" Silver realized. Illusi was warping around, taunting them. "You want me? I'm over here... No, here!" he said, vanishing and appearing all around them! Amy swung at him and missed, groaning in frustration. "Hold still!" she growled. "I warned you not to follow us up here. Now you'll all have to pay the price." Illusi said. Cream tried to punch a Wrongo, only to get shocked by it! "Eeeek!! I... had no idea... they could do that..." she panted. Meanwhile, the Deathbringer came toward Punchy and Rainbow. Punchy was struggling with Dark Punchy, leaving him disoriented, and leaving Rainbow his only defense. "Y-you leave One alone... You evil Grim Reaper!" she shuddered. "You can't see it... But I'm doing the right thing..." the Deathbringer insisted. Just then, flames shot up from behind Punchy, drawing his, Rainbow's and the Deathbringer's attention! Anubis had arrived, and Fera was with him! "You look like you need a real hand, Punchy... Let me fully unlock the Despair Seal's power!" Fera grinned, firing a beam of darkness straight into the bracelet on Punchy's wrist! As the bracelet glowed, so too did his body spew darkness, and his eyes glow a sinister red. "Rrrrr... RRRRRRAAAAAUUUGGHHH!!!" he snarled!

As Illusi warped about, Whisk grew tired of it and warped next to him, bonking him over the head. "Bad mouse!" she growled. At this point, though, Dark Punchy's transformation got everyone's attention. He

was unleashed on the plateau, and he first charged at the swarm of Wrongos, caring nothing for the friends who defended him before that happened to be caught in the swarm! Blasts of darkness thundered across the mountaintop with every punch from his fists, obliterating the Wrongos and forcing Team Rose to take cover, and Whisk to teleport out of the way! Illusi, however, was not as lucky. He was knocked aside, and the strange key he carries on his person was knocked to the floor! "No, the Chaos Key!!" he stammered as Fera's foot came down over it! "...I'll take that, thanks." she said plainly. "W-wait... Don't do it!" Illusi cried, clutching his arm in pain as he tried to move. The Deathbringer chased after the crazed Dark Punchy, but his frenzied, overcharged attacks left it with no opening to counterattack, leaving it barely able to fly out of range and stare down at the destructive rampage helplessly, hoping for an opening should he tire out. Fera then returned to Anubis, nodding to him. "Take her and let's go." she ordered. Rainbow, who was still standing in earshot of them, and had been watching Punchy in shocked horror, now glanced at the jackal that approached her. "Wait... Y-you did this to One... To get...to me!?!?" she gasped, "N-no!! Get away! O-one!! ONE!!!" she wailed as Anubis hoisted Rainbow over his shoulders, Team Rose being powerless to help her while they were busy trying for dear life to stay out of Punchy's line of fire! Silver growled and shouted out to Punchy. "LOOK!! LOOK WHAT GIVING IN TO DARKNESS HAS DONE TO YOUR FRIEND!!" he screamed, pointing as Fera and Anubis started their retreat down the mountain! "N...NOOO!! R--RAINBOOOOW!!" Punchy shrieked in his mind, grasping his head in agony over what he'd done and allowed to happen. Dark Punchy continued to emit shockwaves across the mountain as Punchy struggled for control. He could see only one way out. Punchy wrested the Despair Seal from his wrist, and smashed it against the rocky ground at his feet! "AAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!!" he wailed in despair as he finally reverted to his normal, green form. Though Team Rose hurried to try to chase Fera and Anubis, it was too late. They were long gone. "...I've... got to... save her!!" Punchy panted. Illusi was slinking away as well, oddly not warping away as he normally would. "...I must get back that key..." he muttered. The Deathbringer landed on a lower cliff, slamming its fist against the wall as rain started to fall. "...I tried to dissuade you." said the Doomsayer as he approached. "Was this why? You knew that girl would end up in their clutches?" the Deathbringer asked. The Doomsayer shrugged. "It's amusing... You never once questioned... Whether you were after the correct echidna..." he said, walking away slowly. The Deathbringer's wings stiffened in alarm. "W...WHAT!?!?" it gasped.

To be continued...

35 - Invasion

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 35 - Invasion
Stage 20(Dark 10) - Hidden Ruins
Minor Boss 16 - Covenant of Despair

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Kosmo and Copter witnessed Punchy transform into Dark Punchy at the hand of Fera. Fearing he'd harm Rainbow, Punchy fled to Troblusk City, and made a treacherous climb to the peak of Troblusk Plateau. At the peak, he faced Illusi and the Deathbringer, but after Rainbow and Team Rose arrived to help him, Fera appeared and overcharged the Despair Seal, sending Dark Punchy into a rampage! Illusi was injured, dropping his "Chaos Key," which Fera took. She then had Anubis kidnap Rainbow, her cries for help getting through to Punchy enough to make him shatter the Despair Seal...but it was too late. Now, on to the next chapter!

Kosmo the morph, Copter the fox, and Razor the porcupine temporarily set aside their differences to follow the trail of Dark Punchy, which led to Troblusk City. They didn't get far before Police Chief Paynson ran over to catch up with Razor. "Huff... puff... Officer Razor! Where have you BEEN!? You know my office has received reports of a potential bombing of the sewer system since I saw you last!?" he panted. Razor frowned. "Sorry, chief. I got a tip about some Despair-related trouble in Central City... Though I'm starting to suspect the covenant sent me there themselves just to rile up that echidna for some reason..." he mumbled. Paynson scoffed. "Never mind that! Aren't those two of those Experiment criminals from the wanted posters!? Why aren't they in handcuffs!?" he growled. Razor glanced at them. "Apart from the fact they saved my life... They're helping with an investigation." he said. Copter waved at Paynson. "Yo, Chief! Don't tell me you forgot about me already?" he chuckled. Paynson's face turned a bit red. "I hate owing favors to criminals... I'll look the other way for now. But we are even, fox!" he said, stomping off. "What's that about?" Kosmo wondered. "I stalled Despair from killing him once." Copter grinned. Just then, Punchy came limping over to them, accompanied by Amy, Cream and Silver. "Punch... Where's Rainbow!?" Copter gasped. Punchy stared at him gravely. "She took her... Fera... All this was just a diversion to get Rainbow!" he growled. Kosmo scratched his head. "That doesn't track... Why not grab her at Sandopolis?" he wondered. Amy shivered suddenly. "Hey... anyone else get a chill just now?" she muttered. In a moment, all of them were collapsing, a nameless terror gripping them! "Gaaah.....B-basker!!" Kosmo gasped, realizing who was behind this before seeing him. The red-eyed hound casually crept over to the morph, his hand raised to cast his spell of fear over the group and incapacitate them. "Your usefulness is at an end... But you still hold one item of value. The last piece of the puzzle..." he said, reaching into Kosmo's shoe and pulling out the gold coin he'd been keeping with him! "N-no!! Give... back... my lucky charm!!" Kosmo growled, attempting to fight Basker's spell of terror and chase him down! However, as he started to move, a shimmering light passed before his eyes,

blinding him with its brilliance. "Gwaaaaaaaaahhhh!?!?"

Kosmo found himself in a vast expanse of tunnels, with large crystals jutting out of every surface. These crystals were varied in size, shape and color, and the cavernous tunnels seemed to snake in every direction. This place might be a treasure hunter's dream, or perhaps nightmare, with so much treasure and no easy way to transport it. Kosmo heard voices coming from one of the tunnels. "Whoever's up ahead... I'm not in any mood for being messed with..." he grumbled, slowly making his way toward the voices. "I sense it... We're getting close..." came a female voice. Kosmo edged against the wall and morphed his body into crystal, hoping to sneak up on these people. Looking ahead, he saw three echidnas and a wolfish creature. Two of the echidnas were Tikal and Athair, and the third was the rainbow-quilled echidna, Radia. Lastly was Howler, the twin-tailed wolf. They stood at the end of a tunnel, looking over a strange crystal formation. On close inspection, it resembled a statue of a great two-tailed fox! "It... almost resembles Copter..." Kosmo murmured. Radia looked flustered. "I sense it here... Where is it?" she grumbled. Tikal was holding on to the Master Emerald, a tense expression on her face. "...There! That gold shimmer...!" she gasped. Upon the "tails" of the crystal statue were familiar rings; The Chaos Tailbands! Howler and Athair each climbed up and wrested one from each tail. "Are we... certain these things will stop Shadow Chaos?" Athair grunted as he pulled the tailband free. Howler glanced at him, nodding. "I'm positive. Eliminating a creature such as this is no simple task. But these objects hold great power... Power that could change the world!" he said, holding up the tailband and admiring it as he climbed down from the statue. Tikal looked up at him with concern. "Just remember why we're doing this... To protect what remains of my people from the evil my father has wrought..." she reminded them. As this scene faded and Troblusk City returned to Kosmo's sight, the morph was certain he was losing his mind. "What... has Basker done to me!" he grunted. Copter waved his hands in front of Kosmo's face. "Welcome back, Kosmo! Now get moving!" he growled. "Huh? Wha...?" Kosmo mumbled. "C'mon! Razor and the others ran off because he got an APB or whatever that Demon Island has been spotted... blotting out the sun over Station Square!" Copter said urgently.

The pair found Station Square cast into darkness, Demon Island ominously hovering overhead carrying untold threats within Despair's stronghold atop it. "This must be what the city was like with Shadow Arcangel menacing it when you first got out... Uhhh... Don't mean to bring up a sore subject." Copter stammered. "I'm just looking for that snake, Basker..." Kosmo growled. Instead, they spotted Guard waving traffic along like a crossing guard. "Awww, are you gonna help kiddies cross the streets?" Copter joked. "I don't need help crossing the street..." said Tommy, who was standing nearby and gawking at Demon Island. Guard grunted at Copter. "Grrr... I've been sent in to handle damage control in light of this apparent attack... Or die trying, I don't think the boss really cares." he groaned. Kosmo nodded. "Well... always a 'pleasure,' Growler." he said. Just then, a certain taxi cab pulled up to them. "Hey, Tommy, get in! Your bro wants you safe!" Mia shouted. As Tommy grudgingly climbed in, Mia's passenger climbed out, with a certain robo-puppy in tow. SPOT was as good as new, and joined by Professor Pickle. "My word, the Tails Tracker really works! Your robot is ingenious, Tails!" Pickle said to Copter. Mia giggled as Copter stared at the old man indignantly. "I'm used to the bot making that mistake, but people?" he groaned. Pickle squinted a bit and stammered a bit. "My, my, I guess I do need glasses... But you do look just like Tails. A relative perhaps? And Kosmo, good to see you again! Um... Could either of you relay a message to Tails or Sonic by chance?" he asked. "Can't the bot do it?" Copter sighed. Pickle looked a bit worried. "I suppose I'd best just tell you. My research has uncovered possibly what Despair is after... An object of great power, rumored to hold a connection to the Chaos Relics! Its exact location has been lost to the ages, but... Apparently it was hidden somewhere down...

right... beneath... our feet!" he announced. Kosmo looked down incredulously. "Now I know you're nuts." he said. Copter, however, turned pale. "No, he's not... And I know why Rainbow was kidnapped...!" he gasped.

Copter started to lead the way to where they needed to go, but slowed a bit when he noticed Guard following. "...You can't come, smiley." he said. Guard scoffed at him. "I'll simply follow you from the air." he grunted. "...Why?!" Copter groaned. "Grrr... You're my only lead on Despair." he said. Kosmo pointed up at Demon Island. "You mean besides THAT, right?" he pointed out. "Grr... Wise guy. The island is meaningless next to their objective!" Guard growled. Copter rolled his eyes and resumed on his way. "Punchy'll kill me for showing you guys this place..." he sighed, "But Rainbow might be down there with them right now." So, Copter led them to the sewer entrance that would lead to the Hidden Ruins, where sure enough, they found agents of Despair standing guard over the open manhole cover. "Well... Looks like bad guys already know their way in there, so I was right in this..." Copter growled. "What the heck do they want in the sewer??" Kosmo wondered. The Despair agents quickly noticed them and started in their direction, but were suddenly blasted out of the way by a volley of explosives! Those of the agents that were still standing were swiftly kicked aside by Rouge the bat, with Omega slowly following along behind her! "Grr!? Agent Rouge!?" Guard stammered in surprise. "Relax, Gunner didn't get impatient with you... so far as I know. We were sent in by the President. He wants us to see what we can do before sending a military force into a civilian city. Clearly, the real deal is back." she said. "For the record, I am still not convinced any meatbag can be trusted." Omega stated. "Yes, yes, we know you didn't vote for him..." Rouge groaned. Kosmo crossed his arms. "Well, this is all fascinating. Can we get moving now!? Those Despair goons stole something from me, and I want it back!" he growled. "Plus Rainbow could be in trouble." Copter added. "Grrr... Not to mention the untold danger that might come from whatever they're after with this invasion..." Guard concluded. Rouge nodded. "...Cover us, Omega. Keep a sharp eye on that floating island while we're gone." she said. Omega clenched his metal fists. "This is a gross misuse of my superior functions... Enemy reinforcements better arrive to amuse me." he grumbled.

Copter led the others down through the sewer passage, and they got their first glimpse of the world hidden beneath Station Square! Kosmo was awestruck. "...How can the giant buildings above not bring the ceiling crashing down on this place!? There are no supports holding the roof up!" he stammered. Guard looked up. "Grrr... The ceiling is completely solid. Structural integrity has not been compromised even through centuries of weight strain." he stated. "Okay... So, somebody really knows how to build a... Big bomb shelter?" Rouge murmured. Copter shook his head. "Yeah... Big bomb shelter. C'mon, let's get looking for Rainbow." he said. Guard barred his way with his scythe. "Oh, hey! What do you want!?" Copter growled. "Grrr... It's not safe. Sensors indicate heavy resistance ahead." Guard grunted. Kosmo nodded. "The guards upstairs were just the beginning, hm? Well, this is where I come in..." he grinned.

Kosmo was soon disguised as a purple skunk in a despair uniform, wearing the shades he typically uses in human form to hide his eyes. He crept ahead, while the others kept their distance behind. Seeing some Despair agents across the dirt road ahead, he gave them a polite wave, and they waved back, turning away from him. Suddenly, he heard a low buzzing noise coming from the nearby building. Peering at the window, he heard voices. "Your wings are too noisy!" whispered one. "I hate hiding! It's boring!" said the other. Kosmo raised an eyebrow, considering speaking to whoever these guys were, but he suddenly felt a punch to the gut from nowhere! "Oooff!! What the!?" he stammered. "I got him, Charmy!!" Espio, who was attacking while camouflaged, was soon joined in the assault by Charmy, flying through the window and tackling Kosmo repeatedly. "Take that, Despair creep! Give back Vector!!"

he shouted. This noisy scuffle was getting the attention of the actual Despair guards. "ESPIO!!" Kosmo shouted, reverting to normal form, "You blew my cover!!" he yelled. Copter and the others quickly joined them, and Espio and Charmy wore sheepish expressions. "I have shamed myself..." Espio mumbled.

Chet the cheetah and Patch the fox approached, along with a gang of other canines and felines. "Well, well, cats and dogs are finally working together... How nice." Rouge sighed, flying up to get an advantageous position as she moved in to attack! Guard started swinging his scythe as well, firing beams from it to knock the enemies off balance, while Espio put his ninja training to use, swiftly knocking out one enemy at a time while Charmy followed him cheerfully. Kosmo was itching for a fight, too, but Copter motioned for him to hold off while he ran up to Chet. "Hey! Before we needlessly tear you to shreds, you mind considering filling us in on what your monkey pals want down here? Or why they'd kidnap my friend?" he asked. Chet crossed his arms. "Hate to say it, Copter, but the details of this mission are pretty hush-hush." he said. Patch stopped swinging his nunchucks around for a second to nod in agreement. "Yeah. I'm one of Fera's pals, and even I don't know. Eh, but fun's fun! Hee hee!" he said, jumping after Rouge. Copter frowned, but Chet wasn't finished speaking. "Look, Copter... I checked into it. I'm not an idiot. I found out that Katie IS alive, and in the hospital... But there's the thing... She...she's vulnerable..." he said shakily, "Basker said as much to me, rather coldly when he found out I knew... I think that was a threat. If I try to leave Despair... They might... hurt her. I can't let that happen. I WON'T!" he growled. Copter nodded, whistling. "Y'know, Chet... I really respect that..." he said before unloading a punch square in Chet's face, knocking him over! "So, stay down! Now we're sorta even for you not listening to me! ...I got you 2-1 on punches to the face, so, the score's a bit skewed overall." he muttered. Kosmo groaned and morphed into a hedgehog. "I'm feeling as impatient as a certain blue guy right now..." he growled, running into the fray in a manner similar to Sonic, and whacking Patch and several other Despair agents with homing attacks, clearing the rest of their path fairly quickly! "...Copter, did you have to delay him? That colorful fox can wear you down..." Rouge complained. "Again!! Again!!" Charmy giggled. "No! ...Being Sonic knocks the wind outta me..." Kosmo huffed, morphing back to normal.

Copter led the way through the ancient roads of the echidna city, searching for any sign of Rainbow or, if convenient, Vector. "If you don't mind my asking... How did you wind up down here, anyway?" Copter asked Espio. "We've been taking the liberty of investigating the Covenant of Despair. We met Vector here after the attack on Central City, and that's when the island showed up..." he said. "So we followed 'em! But Vector saw them pulling away someone he recognized, and he got carried away, and he got captured!" Charmy finished. "So, now abduction's their thing?" Rouge frowned. As they proceeded down the street, they soon found their path blocked by more Despair agents, this time led by Fera and Anubis. "Our master doesn't wish to be disturbed!" Anubis snarled. Daisy the skunk was there, too, katana in hand. "You...! What have you done to Patch!?" she growled. Copter pointed to Kosmo. "He did it." he said. Kosmo rolled his eyes. "You can't stop us with a little motley crew. I don't think you counted on me showing up." he stated. Anubis raised his hands, calling forth his undead, mummified army, which clawed its way to the surface, surrounding the group. Fera smirked as the heroes started to look a bit worried. "Let me extend my thanks to you, Kosmo! We needed that coin of yours. Turns out, it was the final piece of the puzzle, so to speak. Now we have everything we need to open the way!" she taunted. Kosmo growled at her. "You...people... You scouted me out specifically for that coin, didn't you? But I don't understand... Why!? What's it for? What kind of game are you playing, Fera!?" he shouted. Fera chuckled. "It's not my game... And I couldn't tell you what the finale will be, exactly. All I know is that it ends with a glorious shift in the balance of power... And I want a front row seat to see that happen!" she grinned. "Grrr... You don't even know what your master is planning?? None of you!?" Guard stammered.

Kosmo stood up straight, staring over at Fera. Then, he started to snicker. "Huh...?? What is it? What's so funny!!?" she demanded. "Here I thought I was the lost soul all this time... You... All of you with Despair... You are the ones who are lost. You're just mindless puppets, bending to the commands of your master's strings! And it's about time someone clipped those strings..." he sneered. Fera snarled at him. "Well, you'll have to go through us, first!!" she roared.

Anubis's mummies came at the group, and Guard was first to leap into action to take them on, slicing and dicing them with his scythe. Anubis wasn't about to just take this, but Copter stepped forward to challenge him directly. "Hey, I don't think we've had the pleasure. I'm Copter!" he said. "I am the harbinger of death, Anubis. Burn to ashes!" As Anubis's flames seared towards Copter, he blew them out with Chaos Whirlwind! "You were saying?" he smirked. The other Despair agents charged ahead, taking on Rouge, Espio and Charmy. Espio found himself trading blows with Daisy, using an oversized shuriken to parry her katana. "Ninja or no ninja, I'll get payback for Patch!!" she yelled. "Ha! Not bad! Your swordplay is... impressive..." Espio said, barely stopping one of her attacks, and then blushing as the two stood with their blades crossed for an extended moment. "Most impressive... I think I'm... in love...!" he stammered. Daisy's eyes went wide, staring at him for a moment. She lowered her guard slightly. Then, she made a disgusted face and resumed her assault. "Ugh!! Me and a chameleon! Just...GROSS!!" she yelled. "...Just a passing fancy..." Espio sighed. Meanwhile, Kosmo was ready for a long-awaited rematch with Fera. She started by teleporting behind him and hurling balls of dark energy at his back, but he morphed into an ant to evade it! "...What!? Hey! Where'd you??" Fera muttered, unable to see such a small transformation. Kosmo skitted a distance away, then morphed into a dragon, spewing hot flames at her, only to have them blocked by a dark energy shield! "The power of darkness is too strong for your pitiful shape-shifting! You might as well..." Before she could finish speaking, a chaos-controlled boulder slapped her down from the air! "Ooof!!" she grunted, looking over to see an enraged Punchy slowly walking toward her! "...Fera! Where is she!! Where's Rainbow!!!" he yelled. Fera got up and laughed wickedly. "Ha... haha... HAHAHAHAAAA!! You fool!! The Despair Seal is gone! Did you think you could just smash it while in overdrive and not face the consequences!?" she grinned, firing a beam of darkness that swatted him down onto his back! Punchy struggled to get up, but he couldn't. "Hey!! This is OUR battle, Fera!" Kosmo yelled. Fera ignored him and wagged her finger at Punchy. "You're as weak as a kitten... Rejecting the darkness has stripped you of everything it seems. And now... It's time to finish what we started way back when YOU helped us secure the stone tablet at the beach by this city... Thanks for everything, Experiment 1!" she cackled, rushing off and leaving Anubis and Daisy. Anubis was easily able to make his getaway using a cover of flames, but Daisy and the other Despair agents were left to be knocked out by Espio, Charmy, Rouge and Guard. "They weren't gonna tell us anything anyway..." Copter sighed, "Let's go... We have to find Rainbow and Vector... There's no telling what these psychos will do with them if we don't..." Punchy stood up shakily. "I'll... come too... I have to try... to help." he panted.

Elsewhere, traveling in the skies over Route 101 out of Central City aboard Shadow Arcangel, Bucky the rat was zapping some electrodes in his lab, venting his outrage over some recent news. "Using MY creations... As harbingers of extinction!! And Despair... what they plan to do..." he snarled, overcharging the electrodes in his anger and causing an explosion! "So... New job's not goin' well, huh?" Zipp mumbled from outside the door. "I-iss there anything we can do, massster?" Vortex asked nervously. Bucky turned around and nodded. "Get Crash. Turn this heap toward Station Square. You three will wait on Demon Island for further instruction..." he said. "If there is, perchance, an opportunity to shoot up humans..." Zipp mused. "Wait in the shadows! Avoid contact with Despair, and engage no one until I

instruct you to do so!" Bucky ordered. As Vortex and Zipp turned to leave, Lucky poked his head in. "Umm... Wh-what can I do?" he asked. Bucky growled softly. "You've done enough. You've proven your recklessness already. You are not combat ready, get that through your head!" he shouted. "Yeah, but..." Lucky stammered. "LEAVE!!" Bucky shouted. As Lucky scurried off, leaving Bucky alone, the depressive voice of Nevin Crimm met his ears. "Such anger... What fears does this rage mask?" the voice mused. "You again... Everything I've worked for is in jeopardy, and you keep haunting me." Bucky growled. "...It's the work... of Nammad... isn't it?" Crimm supposed, "He... I... and Hope... we all worked with you once..." Bucky nodded slowly. "I remember..." he said.

Hope the raven was sitting up on a desk, watching Bucky with interest as he wrote excitedly on a chalkboard. "If I can make all this work, GUN's rage be damned! The world will be indebted to me, and all the accusations GUN can lobby will be meaningless...especially considering none of it's true!" Bucky smiled. Hope nodded. "Say you work out this 'life force formula.' What are you going to make with it?" she wondered. Bucky hopped up on the desk next to her and held his arm around her tightly. "What are WE going to make! And of course, the answer is whatever we want! Maybe we'll... clone a little Buck and a little Hope..." he said, blushing. Hope patted his head. "Buuuck... We already HAVE a son, waiting for your life formula..." she giggled. Bucky wore an awkward frown. "The fox I saved from the ARK? ...That'll never live. I've... rather mucked it up already." he sighed. Hope hugged him gently, smiling. "You'll find a way. And he'll be our first son." she said. Bucky chuckled. "Okay, okay... But... what else should we try to make? All I can think up are simplistic things like hornets and cats..." he admitted. Hope giggled. "We can start small... But soon you'll create wonders like... a dragon. Maybe a unicorn..." she mused. "Or a phoenix... Maybe mixed with your DNA... So that your daughter will be immortal." Bucky smiled. Hope looked at him with loving concern. "You're really afraid of the concept of death, aren't you?" she sighed. Just then, the door opened, and a young Ivan Nammad entered the room. "Gah! I, uh... Do hope I wasn't, uh, interrupting, uh, anything?" he stammered. "No, professor, what is it?" Bucky said, glancing at him. Nammad nodded. "We're ready to, uh, start our next experiment, Dr. Stein." he stated. Bucky stood up and groaned a little. "These electric current experiments are pointless... Busywork so that you can satisfy your curiosity regarding my abilities." Bucky grumbled. Nammad shrugged. "Regardless, the answers you seek may very well lie in your own, uh, genetic structure." he said. Bucky sighed. "I don't know WHERE the answers I seek are, but that isn't where they are..." he mumbled. Hope hopped down next to him. "Relax. I'm with you every step of the way. Remember that..." she smiled.

A tear stood in Bucky's eye. "Crimm... Your distractions are getting on my nerves! GET OUT OF MY HEAD!!" he shouted, storming out of his lab in an effort to outrun the voice, and his pain. Crimm's voice still echoed in the empty lab, even with none to hear it. "But your recollections... are so... enlightening..." he sneered.

To be continued...

36 - The Secret Relic

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 36 - The Secret Relic
Stage 20(Dark 10) - Hidden Ruins
Boss 20 - Ridley

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
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The story thus far:

Kosmo and Copter witnessed Punchy transform into Dark Punchy at the hand of Fera. Fearing he'd harm Rainbow, Punchy fled to Troblusk City, and made a treacherous climb to the peak of Troblusk Plateau. At the peak, he faced Illusi and the Deathbringer, but after Rainbow and Team Rose arrived to help him, Fera appeared and overcharged the Despair Seal, sending Dark Punchy into a rampage! Illusi was injured, dropping his "Chaos Key," which Fera took. She then had Anubis kidnap Rainbow, her cries for help getting through to Punchy enough to make him shatter the Despair Seal...but it was too late. Rainbow was captured. Punchy enlisted Copter and Kosmo's aid to rescue her, but first Basker jumped them and stole Kosmo's ancient coin! Their chase led them to Station Square, where Demon Island hung ominously in the sky. Joined by Guard and Rouge, they followed the trail to the Hidden Ruins where Rainbow resides. There, they met up with Espio and Charmy, who told them that Vector had been captured, too! With the Covenant of Despair's forces amassed in the underground echidna city, what is it they could be after...?

Now, on to the next chapter!

Copter and Punchy led Kosmo, Espio, Charmy, Guard and Rouge to the temple that Rainbow often stayed in as her home, but a quick search revealed that no one was there. When they came back out, they saw no Despair agents in the immediate area. There was no trail to follow. "Well, now what do we do?" Kosmo frowned. Guard grunted softly. "...Something's jamming my sensors. Grrrr... Might just be... underground interference of some kind..." he said. "Is that a scientific assessment?" Espio murmured. "Grr... I'm a science experiment, not a scientist!" Guard snapped. "Hey! Someone's coming!" Charmy exclaimed, drawing everyone's attention to a strange pair wandering the underground streets. It was Talon the griffin and Char the Chao. Rouge stomped down to Talon with raised fists. "You!! Give me those Chaos Emeralds you stole!!!" she shouted. Talon jumped up and flapped away from her attack, then flicked his finger, tossing her back with psychokinesis! "Calm yourself! ...The emeralds are safe. Away from here." he said, "I just rescued this Chao from the Covenant of Despair." Char had a troubled expression on his face. "They nabbed me when I was on my way to find Dr. Eggman at Central City. They wanted me to help them get to... Um, I better not say..." he mumbled. Copter knelt down in front of Char to be at eye level with him. "Listen... They have more of our friends. If you know where they went, please help us. We'll keep you safe." he said. Char frowned, but nodded. "The servers are the seven chaos! Chaos is power, enriched by the heart! The controller serves to unify the chaos! ...But the other forces of chaos must be controlled by a higher controller!" he stated. Rouge's eyes widened. "Hey... I've

heard that before!" she remembered. "Only we Chao know this secret! Follow me! Char will lead the way!" Char said proudly. The group started to follow Char, but Talon stayed behind, and Kosmo stopped to talk to him before leaving. "Hey... You seen Carrie lately?" he asked. Talon's eyes darted back and forth. "Umm... Why do you ask?" he wondered. Kosmo glanced away. "...Thanks, kid." he muttered, dodging the question.

As the group followed Char through the dirt roads of the underground city, they were being watched from an alleyway by some Despair guards. Violet the echidna and Zeke the dragon observed them, knowing that they were finally heading in the right direction. "...Let me reach out to them." Violet suggested, "Maybe I can persuade them to turn around." Zeke crossed his arms and shrugged. "I'll be there to pick up the pieces when that fails." he smirked. Violet quickly ran into the group's path, and Punchy was the first to walk up to her. "All of you... Please, leave us in peace. What we are doing... It's all for the greater good. For a better world... Wouldn't you experiments like to live free?" Violet reasoned. Punchy growled softly. "That's really nice... But what about Rainbow? Did Fera happen to tell you what she plans to do with her!?" he snapped. Violet, hearing this, stepped back a little. "R-rainbow...? I don't..." she muttered. "Wake up, girl!" Kosmo shouted, stepping beside Punchy, "You've been betrayed, as I was! They've taken your sister! What do you say to that!?" he yelled. Violet continued to back away, tears forming in her eyes. "N-no... T-they couldn't... Why would they??" she stammered, "But then... Why would we be HERE..." she gasped, the truth dawning on her. Just then, Zeke dropped down in front of her! "RAWR!! And what do you think you're doing to my comrade here!? You can punch us out, bury us in a rock slide, leave us for dead in a ditch... BUT don't you DARE make our agents cry!! ...We have an image to maintain!!" he shouted. Guard clutched his scythe and approached Zeke. "Grrrrrr!! All of you, go! Time may be running out! Grrr... I'll deal with this one!" he growled. Zeke chuckled. "I think Bucky likes me best. That's why I don't work for GUN!" he huffed. Guard smirked at him. "At least I can breathe properly." he grunted. Zeke's crackling breath crackled even louder as he spouted flames at Guard, which he flew to avoid! Meanwhile, Char waved the others along. "NOTHIN' ta see here! C'mon, we've got a bad guy party to crash! Keep it movin!" he said. Violet wiped her eyes and started to follow them. "Wait... I must know if what you say is true!" she cried.

With Despair off their backs and the group experiencing a moment of calm, Kosmo hung back and walked with Punchy, who was limping, still weak from everything he'd gone through at Troblusk Plateau. "Hey... What exactly happened to you?" he wondered. Punchy looked down at the arm that previously wore the Despair Seal. "...Fera tricked me. She trapped me with my own dark form... And I could've killed a bunch of people because of it. I destroyed the Despair Seal, and it looks to everyone like it left me weak... Actually, I'm holding back." he said. Kosmo raised an eyebrow. "So that Fera can knock you on your rear?" he muttered. Punchy shook his head. "I still... feel Dark Punchy... He may still have a hold on me. If I let him loose again... What if there's no way back?" he worried. Kosmo shrugged. "I sure don't wanna be you right now." he remarked. Suddenly, bullets came flying down at the group's feet, startling Char into hiding behind Rouge! "Assassins! Don't panic. I'll flush them out..." Espio growled. "They're shooting at us from that building!" Charmy pointed quickly. "What!? How'd you do that...?" Espio stammered. Violet ran up front, blocking the line of fire. "Hold it!!" she shouted. Infin poked his head out of a second story window and shouted down at her. "Hey... Vy!! Move it, ya daft broad! I gots a point ta make wit these clowns!" he shouted. Copter shook his fist cockily at him. "Easy to say from up there, Mr. Monkey-Suit! Come on down and lemme take off your other foot!" he yelled. Violet frowned. "Not helping, Copter..." she sighed. "Yeah, stay still, 'Chopper,' I'll pop yer blinkin' head off!!" Infin yelled, only to be startled when Violet teleported up next to him. "Cheeze, Louise!! It nearly stops my ticker when Fera does that, and I half expect it! What's yer problem!?" he yelled. Violet stared at him seriously. "I

heard... that they have my sister. This mission... Do you know what it's about?" she asked him. Infin scratched his head under his hat. "Well, heck, ain't no one but da leader knows..." he muttered. Violet looked him square in the eye. "I NEED to know... And if that means throwing in with these guys... Well, maybe you'd better shoot me!" she said plainly. Infin stared at her a moment, then took off his hat dejectedly. "Aw, heck... I ain't gonna shoot ya, Violet..." he admitted. She nodded and warped away. "...I hope ya know what yer doin..." he muttered.

Char eventually led them to a corner of the underground city where the walls had been forced open, revealing a series of tunnels that had long been hidden away. "Uh oh... I think they're close." he said worriedly. "To what...?" Rouge wondered. They followed the tunnels, where the first thing they heard up ahead was Vector's yammering protests. "You KNOW you guys won't get away with this! Why, when my boys track you down, you'll..." A loud thud stopped his yacking. "Enough! Your VOICE is grating on me!" came Fera's voice! "That does it!" Espio said, charging ahead with Charmy. "Hey, wait!!" Copter stammered, followed by the entire group dashing the rest of the way through the tunnel to what awaited at the other side! Vector and Rainbow were being guarded by a number of Despair agents, and they were all standing before a great, golden door with a complex-looking lock. The Darkseeker was puzzling over this lock, a couple of agents beside him holding the Chaos Key, Kosmo's ancient coin, and the stone tablet that was unearthed from Emerald Coast! "Rainbow!! Are you all right!?" Punchy and Violet shouted at once. Rainbow glanced up from the corner she was trapped in. "Viola... One... You came...!" she gasped. Fera nodded to one of the animals guarding the prisoners, and he turned to block the group's path, revealing himself to be Ridley the coati, wearing the golden cape he'd retrieved from the Security Tower, the Chaos Wing! "What!? Wait, don't you work for Eggman!?" Charmy said, making most of the others glance at him in puzzlement. "We're detectives!" the bee explained. Ridley nodded. "My tenure with Eggman was a nice ruse dreamed up by my creator... If you didn't dig that up with your 'detective work,' I'm Experiment 12!" he revealed. Kosmo shrugged. "Well, there had to be a twelve somewhere." he said. "When did Bucky pass 9?" Rouge groaned. Ridley sighed. "Well, as I was saying... Being one of Bucky's spies allowed me to look at this Despair conflict from all sides. Eggman's a clown. Gunner's an old fool. In the interest of self-preservation, there really is only one side to choose... Despair!" he declared. Char dropped to the floor in utter disbelief. "ANOTHER traitor!? Aw, and I really liked you..." he whined.

The Darkseeker turned, his red eyes glaring upon the intruders. "If you are serious about self-preservation, keep those fools occupied." he ordered Ridley. "Can do...boss!" the coati grinned, his hands becoming engulfed in chaos-charged water! Most of the group was ready to fight, but the Despair agents guarding the prisoners held some clear-bladed swords to them. "Take a wrong step and we'll Chaos Spear the girl with these high-tech GUN blades! Try to fight us and we'll cut the croc!!" they warned. This made Espio, Charmy, Copter, Punchy and Violet all back down. "Grrr... We can't risk Rainbow's safety..." Punchy growled. Vector shouted out to his friends. "Don't just stand there! I can take care of myself! Espio, Charmy!!" he called, but they didn't move. "We must wait for the tide to turn... A ninja knows patience..." Espio said. Rouge rolled her eyes. "The tide won't turn with everyone standing around!" she said, flying ahead only to have Fera toss balls of dark energy at her! This left Kosmo and Ridley. "...You sure you want to fight me?" Kosmo asked, "Might be easier to fight THEM." he said. The collar of the Chaos Wing cape flashed, and then the cape transformed into a pair of magnificent golden wings, which flapped Ridley up above Kosmo. "Despair comes with its perks. Chaos Splash!!" he fired a burst of water at Kosmo, which he stared at awkwardly, allowing it to hit him, only to realize that a water ball actually CAN hurt. "Ooof!! Okay... Painful water balloons... I guess you asked for it." he said. Meanwhile, the Darkseeker had Rainbow brought before the golden door. "You are the guardian of this

city... Open it." he commanded. Rainbow looked at him, then at the door. "Look, even if I thought this was a good idea, I have NO idea how to open this door! I've never been down here before!" she shouted. The Darkseeker's eyes narrowed. "Don't trifle with me... We will get this door opened, one way or another..." he said ominously. Rainbow shrunk back, chuckling nervously. "D-did you try that shiny key, Mr. Red Reaper?" she stammered. Violet watched this nervously. "I have to get her out of here..." she whimpered.

Kosmo sprouted white wings of his own, making him resemble a Divine. "You wanna fly? Let's fly!" he growled, taking off after Ridley while Rouge and Fera fought below. Ridley kept Kosmo busy by tossing Chaos Splash attacks at him repeatedly, forcing him to focus on his flying for the time being. In the meantime, the Darkseeker worked on the door. He noticed a small, circular impression in the doorway, the designs around it matching the ancient coin. He slid the coin into the impression, and the door started to react, sections of the doorway sliding around like a puzzle, gradually revealing something. All while Kosmo was gaining on Ridley. "All right, aqua-boy! Eat octopus tentacles!" Kosmo morphed his arms into stretchy tentacles and tried to grab Ridley in their suction-cupped grip, but he reacted quickly. "Chaos Splatter!!" A great blast of aquatic chaos-energy knocked back Kosmo as well as Rouge, while Fera warped out of the way! Kosmo had been knocked to the roof, and the suction cups of his tentacles caused him to stick to it. "This isn't... funny..." he groaned. The door finished sliding around, revealing a keyhole perfect for the Chaos Key. The Darkseeker attempted to open the lock with the key, but the door wouldn't budge. "...Yes, of course..." he whispered. At any rate, Kosmo had to act fast. He morphed his arms free of the roof in time to dodge Ridley's next wave of Splash attacks. "I heard you were supposed to be tough! Guess the hype is always bigger than the reality!" Ridley taunted. Kosmo scoffed. "If I ever have room to turn into a dragon again, your covenant's history!" he taunted back. "We'll see... First you have to get past me!!" Ridley said, diving forward with his body becoming enveloped in water, planning to end this quickly! Kosmo flapped towards him as well with a similar intention, all while the Darkseeker once again was addressing Rainbow. "The stone tablet is clear... You must be the one to open the door. I can attempt to open it by force, but there may be a failsafe keeping my prize from me..." he stated. "Aww, wouldn't THAT be a shame." Rainbow said, rolling her eyes. "...We'll see how long you keep up this attitude..." the Darkseeker mused.

Kosmo started to morph into a more mechanical form, soon resembling a winged Egg Pawn. "Ha! You kidding?? An EGG PAWN!? Now you're dead!" Ridley laughed, only to light up with electric sparks when he touched Kosmo! Char picked himself up and gave a cheer. "Aw, yeah! He turned into Jolt! Sweet!" he said excitedly. With the water intensifying the electric shock, Ridley collapsed in a heap, out of commission for the moment, and Kosmo morphed back to normal. "Well... That's a glaring weakness, isn't it?" he muttered. Just then, several people started to arrive through the tunnel, led by Chet. This included Guard, Talon and Illusi. "Figures Illusi would show up..." Punchy grunted. "I'm here to get my item back..." the shrew said, staring at Fera. Rouge flew back to Guard and tagged him. "Fera's tough... Take over." she said. The Darkseeker, however, was through waiting. "Enough! Open this door, NOW!" he growled. Just then, Violet teleported over next to Rainbow. "Don't raise your voice to my sister!!" she shouted, only to be lifted up by the throat by the Darkseeker! "Viola!!" Rainbow cried. The Darkseeker chuckled. "You value her life... Open the door, or you'll see her lose it!" he threatened. "No!!" Punchy gasped, "I gotta... do something!" he grunted. However, Rainbow acted first. "All right!" she said, with tears in her eyes, "Put her down! I'll open the dumb door!" she sobbed. She then turned the key, and the ancient coin glowed brightly as the golden door creaked open! The Darkseeker tossed Violet to the floor and hastily went into the chamber beyond, emerging a very short time later with a great sky blue crystal in his clutches! "BEHOLD!! The Chaos Crystal, object of my long search, and the great controller of the

Chaos Relics!" he said triumphantly. Copter growled softly. "Great... What makes you think you'll get it past all of us?" he said. The Darkseeker chuckled. "While eliminating you all here would be a simple matter... I grant you a reprieve." he said, holding up the false wand that was part of the GXterminate machine! "My power will take ALL Despair agents from this place! Galaporta!!" he said amidst protests from Violet and Chet. After a blinding flash of light, the Darkseeker, the Crystal, and everyone who was wearing a Despair uniform was gone. The Chaos Key was gone, too. However, Kosmo retrieved the ancient coin, which turned to dust in his hand. "So much for luck..." he sighed. "What's going to happen now?" Talon wondered. "The world... will turn red... with the fires of destruction!" Rainbow shivered, "What have I done!?"

Aboveground, Sonic the Hedgehog had arrived in Station Square, though the idea to go underground could never have occurred to him. He met up with Heather the phoenix, who also found her way there. Now that Despair had gotten the Chaos Crystal to their island base, however, said island was emitting some unusual activity. A shroud of darkness was veiling Demon Island from direct sight, making its presence in the sky even more ominous than before! "Okay... Big dark clouds in the middle of the day are never a good sign. Especially when they surround an evil lair of some kind." Sonic said. Heather noticed something else up in the sky. "Hey, look! A plane!" she pointed. The tornado had arrived, and Tails brought it in for a landing in the street near Sonic, the streets having been vacated soon after Demon Island first appeared. "Hey! ...What'd I miss?" Tails asked with concern. "Too much... And weren't you supposed to bring someone back with you?" Sonic recalled. Copter, Punchy, Kosmo and many of the others met up with them the next moment. "Speedy! Nothing but bad news!" Rainbow panted. "The Covenant of Despair's got some 'controller' for the Chaos Relics!" Copter added. Prof. Pickle and SPOT joined them next. "It's as I feared." he said, munching a cucumber sandwich nervously. Tails gulped. "They have the Master Emerald, too..." he murmured. Pickle nodded. "Then they hold the power to control Chaos in its entirety. What fate is to befall the world now?" he sighed. Kosmo looked up and nodded. "We'll have to get up there..." he said, glancing at Sonic, "Right?" Sonic looked at him and gave him a thumb's up. "Well, you've come a long way. I guess we'll need some rides up there..." he smiled. Vector was standing further back, chatting on a cell phone. "Well... we got our ride. C'mon, boys. The client wants to meet." he said. "We have a client!?" Charmy gasped. Vector sighed. "How long do you think we can work for free? Yes, I found someone to pay us for lookin' into Despair! Now let's go!" he said. While everyone was starting to look for a way up to Demon Island, Kosmo was suddenly startled by Carrie appearing out of nowhere. "You...! Where have you been?" he asked. "I heard you've been looking for me. Sweet of you to be concerned, but I'm fine. You were concerned?" she figured. Kosmo nodded slowly. "Dangerous folks you're angering." he said. Carrie winked and walked off. "You, too. See ya around." she said, vanishing before Kosmo's eyes. "...Yeah, but will I see you?" he wondered.

To be continued...

37 - Defending the Arcangel

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 37 - Defending the Arcangel
Stage 21(Hero 11) - Shadow Arcangel
Minor Boss 17 - ??????????

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The story thus far:

Conan got the jump on Knuckles, swiping the Master Emerald and leading him on a chase that got him lost in the Forest of Dreams. As it started to rain, he and some others took shelter in the mysterious Dream Temple. The Dream King presented each of them with different trials, ending with Knuckles battling a nightmare of Perfect Chaos with his friends' lives on the line! In the end, Knuckles realized his true nature as a guardian of all, and as they left the Dream Temple, the group had renewed determination to stop the Covenant of Despair.

Now, on to the next chapter!

After escaping the Dream Temple, Knuckles, Shadow and Gemini found themselves lost in the Forest of Dreams. Tails had managed to escape with his plane, but Shadow and Gemini's attempts to warp out of the maze of trees proved fruitless. "Are we doomed to wander these woods forever...?" Shadow wondered. However, the light above was soon blotted out by a massive object! Looking up, they saw Shadow Arcangel in the sky directly above them! Bucky was standing in the doorway of the section that once jutted out of the earth when the ship was embedded in the ground as a strange ruins. "Need a lift?" he shouted. A quick teleport up with Gemini's wand, and they were all soon safely aboard the familiar dark aircraft. "Excuse any turbulence. For one thing, my usual flight crew is out, replaced with the Chaotix detectives." Bucky said. Vector's voice came over the PA. "Everyone aboard? Can we pull up?" he wondered. Bucky lifted a walkie-talkie. "Tell him to resume course, Charmy." he said. "Yessir! You're the client!" he replied cheerfully. Shadow crossed his arms. "I assume you finding us isn't just coincidence." he said. Bucky led the way toward the control room. "No, you're right. I need all the help I can get right now, and since it seems many of my experiments are occupied, you'll have to do." he stated. Gemini sighed. "Well, I guess there aren't many places I'd rather be right now. Since this is where the Lost Ones were first spotted, I might find clues to help me defeat them..." she reasoned. Bucky opened the door to the control room as they arrived. "First thing's first... You help me, and I'll do what I can to help the three of you." he said. Espio and Vector were both working at the controls of the ship within the control room, neither seeming wholly confident in the other's knowledge of piloting an ancient ruin. Charmy was monitoring the power cells containing the rings needed to keep the ship aloft. Lucky the cat and Spiny the porcupine were loitering in the control room as well. "Everyone, listen up!" Bucky announced, "It is time to defend Shadow Arcangel!"

Bucky turned the group's attention to a radar screen that Eggman had installed in the control room

during his brief tenure as the ship's owner. "As you can see, there's a fleet on our tail. Spiny has verified that it is Dr. Eggman's carnival fleet." he said. "I still say we'd do better pledging our allegiance to Dr. Eggman." Spiny complained. "Yes, that worked SO WELL for you so far!" Bucky pointed out. "Do I hear people talking about me? My ears are burning!" The group was briefly struck speechless as Dr. Eggman himself stepped into the control room, accompanied by Metal Sonic! Knuckles was the first to snap out of it. "Give me ONE reason why I shouldn't come over there and crack your eggshell wide open!!" he shouted. "...I'm not really an Egg?" Eggman said awkwardly. As Knuckles and Vector crept toward him angrily, Eggman waved a white flag frantically. "PARLEY!! Parley!!" he shouted. "Uh... What?" Gemini muttered. "He wants to talk things over." Bucky said, "Make it quick, Robotnik." he growled. Eggman bowed graciously. "Thank you... Now listen, I had to come aboard. The Covenant of Despair found a backdoor into my own system when one of their agents was sneaking around my virtual reality video game! As a result, Cloud Carnival is under their control...and on its way here!" he said. Shadow scoffed. "Amazing. That dumb game is STILL getting on my nerves. Get to the part where you ask us for something in exchange for your help." he said distrustingly. Eggman frowned. "So cold, Shadow. In fact, I came only in the interest of peaceful cooperation...and getting my fleet back, hopefully. I'm even offering Metal Sonic's assistance! Use him in any way you require! He got a little banged up in Central City, but I buffed out most of the dings." he said earnestly. Knuckles frowned. "I don't like it. I've already met my quota for being messed with by you today..." he grumbled. Bucky looked at the radar screen grimly. "There's little choice. We have to trust him." he said. "...But we don't have to like it! Pfffft!!" Charmy said, sticking out his tongue.

Bucky looked around seriously. "The Arcangel's defenses are a number of turrets positioned on the...outer decks of the ship. To launch a counterattack, some of you must go outside and man these turrets." he said. Knuckles stared at him in disbelief. "...What!? You mean to tell me this heap doesn't have defenses you can control from in here!? What are all those controls FOR anyway!?" he yelled. Eggman shrugged. "I didn't view it as a problem myself. I was going to have robots man the turrets when I was in control of the ship..." he stated. Shadow groaned. "Well, now WE have to do it! Come on, Knuckles!" he said, leading him, Gemini and Charmy in a search for the "outer decks." "We'll see about automating some of those weapons!" Eggman said, heading off with Metal Sonic. Bucky stepped outside of the control room and watched them go. "Godspeed..." he muttered. Just then, he heard a voice. "Betrayed... by Despair...? You have a history...of betrayal...do you not?" It was Nevin Crimm again. "I didn't betray you, Crimm. Wheeler abandoned you! I never quite knew what became of you. I can't fathom why your voice haunts my thoughts, honestly!" Bucky snapped. "Perhaps something else... fills you with sorrow... How did your Hope die?" Crimm asked. Bucky growled softly. "...GUN..."

A flash of memories came to Bucky's mind. GUN's Sergeant Murten had found his laboratory, and launched an attack using an early prototype of what would become Diablon. This was more like a souped-up Flying Dog, but even so, the arms added to the machine made it no joke. "There's nowhere left to run, Stein, you mutant! I'll see an example made out of you! No one defies GUN!" Murten growled. Corporal Gunner was the only official witness, and he stood watching eagerly from the sidelines. "If you end him here, sarge, I'll be sure and let the Commander know you did your VERY BEST to take him alive!" he sneered. As Murten launched his attack, however, a shriek came as Hope lunged herself between them! "Don't hurt hiiiiim!!" she cried, only to be pierced by a blade sliding out of the mech's right arm! "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!"

The memories had become too much to bear. "As soon as this is over, I'll raid myself a drugstore and rid myself of your pestering voice!!" Bucky roared. Just then, Vector peered through the door of the control

room. "Scuse me, doc... But that won't do any good..." he grunted, stepping out and glancing around above them, "...I hear him, too! Why don't ya show yourself, whoever you are!" he called out. Bucky's eyes went wide. "That's impossible... Nevin Crimm is dead!" he gasped. The voice of Crimm rang out with raspy laughter, echoing through the halls. "So... my secret is out... I have been whispering to you, in the guise of a lost friend... Searching... for weakness!" he bellowed, "Go ahead and search... You'll never... find me!!" Crimm laughed, his voice slowly fading. "...Well... That was creepy..." Vector said.

Across a few halls, Knuckles, Gemini, Shadow, and Charmy were startled by the sudden laughter of Nevin Crimm, seeming to pass them as it echoed through the hallways. Gemini's hair stood on end. "You all heard that, right?" she whimpered. Charmy was hugging himself in fear. "I TOLD Espio and Vector this place was haunted!!" he shivered. "That laugh... It was... familiar. Eerily familiar..." Gemini shuddered, creeping ahead to the next dark corner with her wand readied. As she peered around it, she covered her own mouth to hold back a gasp. Rivers of loslime were flowing out of cracks in the walls, chanting their ghostly chant of "Lossss... Lossss!!" Shadow and Knuckles took pause when they looked as well. "Something's got the Lost Ones jittery..." Shadow realized. "Hasn't Bucky bothered to get an exterminator in here for these things YET!?" Knuckles growled. Gemini clutched her wand tightly. "Well, he's got me here, now! Blastrotall!!" she shouted, frantically firing shots at the loslime in an effort to clear a path! Before long, however, a ball of electricity breezed past her and the others, clearing the path quickly and efficiently! The electricity faded to reveal Metal Sonic! "...Show off!!" Gemini shouted.

As they continued searching for a way to the outer decks, they found that the measly loslime were only the beginning of their worries. Lospides, losoars, and flaming loskulls were patrolling the halls as well. They didn't really have time to contend with them, and certain members of their group were all but useless against certain Lost Ones. Fortunately, they didn't have to fight through them long, as lasers burst forth from a nearby hallway and drove back some of the creatures! Adam the bat, Evelyn the fox, Cuthburt the alligator and Fred the fennec charged in from the hallway and went to work on the Lost Ones with their futuristic lasers and a little help from Fred's magic. "Oh, good... Your friends are back, Gemini." Knuckles sighed. Metal Sonic crossed its arms and looked bored for a moment, then glanced around at the ceiling. "{Directive: Reach Sky Deck. Current Threat Level: Green. Ignore Threat.}" his monitor displayed as he fired up his engines to fly to the roof, feeling around for something. Meanwhile, Fred made his way to Gemini. "Still searching for your false wand? We must retrieve it to avoid damage to... Um... You know." he said, glancing at Shadow and Knuckles awkwardly. "This ship may just lead me to it." Gemini said. Fred nodded. "Be cautious... I sense a great evil here...somewhere. If we encounter it, there may be grave consequences." he warned. Suddenly, Metal Sonic popped open a hatch on the roof of the hall, and lowered a rope ladder leading to the upper deck! "Huh... Seems Metal Sonic's memories haven't been completely erased. It still remembers its way around this ship." Shadow said. "Get goin, you guys!" Adam shouted. "We got things here!" Cuthburt added. "Take care of our Gemini!" shouted Evelyn. They all nodded. "You can count on me!" Charmy declared proudly. Knuckles rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and I'll watch your back, Charmy..." he said. Metal Sonic led the others to the upper deck, with Gemini hesitating briefly to say a quick goodbye. "...Seems we never can chat for long. Thanks for everything, teacher... And all of you." she smiled. "We won't rest until you're home safe and sound." Fred nodded. Once they were gone, Fred pulled some small, shiny objects from his pockets, tapping his wand to them to return them to full size. "Hey, I didn't know you had those!" Cuthburt said. "I found them here... I'm contemplating what to do with them..." Fred murmured.

They had now arrived on the "outer deck" of Shadow Arcangel, which was essentially Bucky's fancy way of telling them to climb on top of the ship while it was in flight. The gun turrets were arranged at opposite

ends of the ship, some on each of the ship's intricately-designed wings. "This dumb ship's even bigger from above! Looks like we'll have to split up." Knuckles grumbled. "The wind currents are already making my wings tired..." Charmy groaned. Suddenly, company joined them. Some robots from Cloud Carnival had flown ahead of the ships, and Despair wasn't messing around. They'd dug up some E-2000 robots that Eggman had left aboard the ships, painted up like clowns for his carnival. "That paint job on those things...is just disturbing..." Shadow remarked. "Can you talk things over with them, Metal Sonic?" Gemini asked. Metal Sonic stepped back, his programming forbidding him from attacking Eggman's own robots. "Fine! We got this... Charmy, get me up there!" Knuckles said. The bee nodded, grabbing Knuckles and flitting his wings with all his might to carry him to the robots. "C'mon! I've seen you lift Vector!!" he shouted. Meanwhile, Shadow got the E-2000s' attention by throwing Chaos Spears at them. "Come on, jokers! I can take you, even without Rouge and Omega!" he shouted. One of the robots transformed into jet form, firing its powerful laser at Shadow while remaining in this mobile state. The others had their shields turned to Knuckles. "Hey, Charmy... can you manage the thunder shoot?" Knuckles asked. "Too...windy!!" he grunted. "...Fine!" Knuckles jumped into a glide and caught one of the robot's shields. Surprised, it started trying to shake him off, while the other aimed its laser. Once fired, the laser blasted the robot Knuckles was clinging to, while he calmly jumped off of it! Then, Shadow warped behind the other robot. "Even dumber than I remember!" he said, bashing it to pieces with a well-aimed spin attack! He'd also dealt with the third robot, so it seemed they had a chance to take a breather. "Impressive... Your soul will do nicely...!!" a raspy voice rang out, startling them. "Watch out, guys!!" Vector climbed out from the hatch they'd used to get outside, but it was a bit late. A massive mass of slime started to emerge from another hatch not too far away!

The huge mass of slime reared up like a snake, revealing a man's face acting as its "head." It spoke with the voice of Nevin Crimm. "I... have waited... in the shadows... much too long!! The time has come... for me to devour the final soul... that I might be complete!!" he hissed. Gemini stared in abject horror. "You... you're Losipher!! Only, not at your full power yet..." she stammered. The creature sneered at her. "How... do you know... of me? Never mind... I come for... the soul... of the dark hedgehog..." Losipher growled. Shadow stared defiantly at him. "Me? ...That's a big mistake!" he shouted. "Just to be clear, NO interest in my soul?" Knuckles asked, prompting Gemini and Charmy to stare at him. "...What? Don't tell me none of you were thinking the same thing!" he said. "I kinda was." Vector admitted. "Silence! All of your souls... Will be mine... When this is over! Prepare to feel true sorrow!!" Losipher roared. They all took cover as the snake-like demon spit a big glob of slime at them. "Grooooss!!" Charmy whined, but it was about to get worse. The glob of slime started to writhe, forming a swarm of mini-Losipher snakes! Gemini just started zapping them frantically with her wand. "Sick! Disgusting! Vile! Evil!! I... HATE... YOU... LOSIPHER!!" she shrieked, filling Knuckles with a bit of concern. "Personal, much?" he said, glancing at Shadow, Vector and Metal Sonic, "Let's get this monster out of our way quickly, then!" he said. Losipher chuckled at them. "You fools! You have no idea of the terror that awaits you..." he said, the raspiness seeming to leave his voice. Losipher sunk down, his body becoming a vast puddle with his face in the center. "What's he... doing?" Vector wondered. Suddenly, dozens of slimy tentacles rose up from the puddle and seized Shadow, Vector and Knuckles! "Gaaah!! It's the day of the octo-monster!!" Charmy wailed, dropping to the floor and huddling in a corner, terrified. While the others were struggling in Losipher's grip, Gemini and Metal Sonic were busy battling the mini-Losiphers. "{Threat level: Hedgehog blue! Sending S.O.S.}" Metal Sonic's monitor displayed as the creatures started to overwhelm him!

Vector squirmed in Losipher's grip, and tried blowing bubbles of his gum to see if that would have any effect, but Losipher didn't care about it. He was trying to draw Shadow into his waiting maw, devouring

him along with his soul, but Shadow wouldn't come quietly. He fired Chaos Spears at the creature's face, which did seem to annoy him, but it wasn't doing more than delay Losipher. Knuckles was struggling the most. He had no extraordinary power, only his physical strength, and this was little use against a being like Losipher. What he DID have was the Shovel Claws, which he'd been carrying around on the off-chance he'd need to dig up any kind of treasure during the battles with Despair. He struggled to pull them out, and equipping them, slashed through Losipher's tentacle, freeing himself! "Ha! There's the problem with making everything out of slime!" he said, gliding off toward Vector. Losipher glared at him and fired a powerful beam from his mouth in the echidna's direction! "Yaaaaah!!!" Knuckles had to change his course quickly to avoid the beam, and cut Vector's tentacle from a bit lower than he'd planned, but Vector floated down to the ship's deck with one of his big gum bubbles, giving Knuckles a thumbs up as he passed. "That is some weird gum..." Knuckles mumbled. At this point, Shadow got fed up with Losipher. "Chaos BLAST!!!" he shouted, blasting right through the tentacle to secure his escape! The trio then joined Gemini and Metal Sonic, quickly taking out the mini-Losiphers while the real one reared up like a snake again. "Fine... I'll just kill you pathetic fools, then..." he hissed. However, before he could strike, a massive beam of energy struck him from behind, startling him and making him retreat back down into the hatch from whence he came! "This... isn't over!!!" the creature gasped. "What in... What got Losipher!?" Gemini gasped. Metal Sonic pointed up as Dr. Eggman floated down in his Egg Mobile! "Well, that was a close one, wasn't it?" he grinned. A device was attached to the front of his ship, with slots holding a collection of Chaos Emeralds. Five emeralds in fact, including three that Knuckles recognized. "Hey... those are the Chaos Emeralds I tracked down at Pumpkin Hill!!! How do you have those!?" he shouted. With a mischievous grin on his face, the group once again found themselves wondering if Eggman was in fact up to his old tricks after all...

To be continued...

38 - Rage of the Deathbringer

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 38 - Rage of the Deathbringer
Stage 21(Hero 11) - Shadow Arcangel
Boss 21 - The Deathbringer

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Needing a ride out of the Forest of Dreams, Knuckles, Shadow and Gemini joined Bucky on Shadow Arcangel. In the absence of Team GeneX, Team Chaotix was working for him on the ship, since he'd hired them for a case anyway. Eggman's Cloud Carnival fleet was on the Arcangel's tail, though Eggman claimed it was under Despair's control. The group would have to go to the Arcangel's sky deck to man its gun turrets and fight back! After they left, Bucky found out that the voice of Nevin Crimm wasn't what it appeared to be, and this caused the Lost Ones aboard the ship to start becoming active. At the sky deck, the group encountered the real "Nevin Crimm", the incomplete form of Losipher! They fought with him, but the slimy creature was soon chased off by a powerful blast from Dr. Eggman! This blast was powered by five Chaos Emeralds, including the ones Knuckles lost at Pumpkin Hill!
Now, on to the next chapter!

Knuckles stared up at Eggman suspiciously. "I found those Emeralds, but then that crazy griffin came out of nowhere and stole them. Where'd you get them!?" he repeated, as though for the benefit of someone just tuning in. Eggman leaned against the control panel of his Egg Mobile, tenting his fingers. "Where INDEED..... Oh, fine, I borrowed them from Bucky. They were just lying around. Someone should put 'em to use." he explained. Knuckles, Vector and Shadow stood shaking their heads, each looking quite displeased and distrustful. "What!? J-just so we can get out of this mess! I give you my solemn vow that I will return the emeralds just as soon as I retrieve my fleet! C'mon, all I got here is an Egg Mobile!" he stammered. Charmy flitted over beside Vector. "Yeah, we heard your promises before! What happened to our money from that job you tricked us into doing!?" he snapped. "Check's in the mail! The postal service hates me!" Eggman growled. Gemini rolled her eyes. "We're wasting time. Meanwhile that fleet is closing in on us and LOSIPHER is loose on the ship!" she pointed out. Shadow nodded. "We'd better split up to get to those turrets before we start getting shot at." he reasoned. Knuckles shrugged. "Fine. C'mon Vector. Charmy." he said, heading off with the bulk of Team Chaotix. Shadow turned to Metal Sonic. "Come if you want... I'd like to keep my eye on you..." he said. "{Mission: Surveillance Shadow. Warning: Eggman forces now hostile.}" flashed briefly on Metal Sonic's monitor. "I'll... proceed alone... then..." Eggman said awkwardly, "So nice having FRIENDS! GO TEAM!" he added as the others walked off in opposite directions. He smirked to himself and headed for the front of the ship. Moments later, a winged being landed where the groups had been moments before. It was the Deathbringer. "The other echidna IS here... The Doomsayer was right!" it murmured, surveying the area. "What exactly is going on? ...Already the Doomsayer's vagueness has made things difficult for me... I

must tread carefully or risk triggering events more dire than I hope to prevent..." it said, taking to the sky.

Knuckles, Charmy and Vector made their way along one of the ship's wings, careful not to fall, as the wings really had not been designed to be walked on. "Who built this crazy ship, a gang of sadistic fairies??" Knuckles growled. "That'd explain why Charmy's having an easier time heading for the turret than us..." Vector said. The poor footing was going to be a problem, as more of Eggman's robots flew ahead from Cloud Carnival! Knuckles recognized the familiar design of the Cop Speeder robots, only their cars were designed more like bumper cars. "Eggman sure went all-in with this carnival theme, huh?" he muttered, weaving to avoid the speeders as they tried to ram him! "I'll get 'em!" Charmy said, flying after the robots, but finding them too fast for him to catch. Knuckles and Vector braced themselves as the robots came at them again, but then they stopped short! "...Huh??" Knuckles mumbled. Talon the griffin came flapping over, holding his hand out to the robots. "I've got them!" he said, flicking his wrist before the robots went soaring away! He then landed ahead of them, walking to the gun turret in front of them. "Uh... Thanks, but... WHO'S SIDE ARE YOU ON!?" Knuckles shouted. Talon stopped at the turret and turned around. "...Bucky's side. Sorry about before, by the way. We really didn't want Eggman OR Despair to have the Chaos Emeralds... Just didn't seem like a good idea." he said. Knuckles nodded. "So... You were spying on me? Well... You're just lucky it all worked out...sorta." he said. "Bucky had us spying on everyone... He likes to know what's going on, I guess." Talon shrugged. "...A normal person watches the news!" Vector grumbled. "You're one to talk, detective!" Talon said wryly, turning to the turret, "I'll handle this one. You guys... head for more stable ground." he suggested. "You got a deal!" Knuckles sighed, turning back. "What!? We're letting him off that easy!/? But we totally had those robots until HE showed us up!!" Charmy babbled as they walked off. Once their backs were turned, Carrie appeared next to Talon. "Sure you know how to work this thing?" she asked. "Um... No. Hehe..." he chuckled.

Shadow, Gemini and Metal Sonic were crossing the ship's other wing, joined by Espio, who had turned over the ship's controls to Spiny. This group was a bit more sure-footed than Knuckles and Vector, which was a good thing, since a hot air balloon from Cloud Carnival had brought brightly painted Egg Pawns and Motobugs to the ship to do battle with them. While they were occupied battling the robots, Lucky the cat was sneaking around from the rear, looking for an opening to join the struggle himself. He crept close to a Motobug, making a fist. "Dumb robot! Take this!" he growled, punching it hard, only to squeal in pain and jump up and down shaking his injured hand. "Meee-yow!! That armor's hard!!!" he yelled. Shadow noticed what was happening and jumped to the Motobug, kicking it aside with ease. "Go back inside, kid! You'll only be in the way!" he shouted, returning his attention to the remaining robots. "But I..." Lucky stammered. Gemini appeared in front of him and erected a magical shield, blocking a flurry of lasers from the Egg Pawns across from them. "I'm afraid Shadow's right! Not all of us are cut out to be fighters." she said. Metal Sonic tore through the remaining robots in a frenzy of electrified homing attacks, and Lucky realized there really was no place for him among these seasoned battlers. "Fine... I'll head back... All by myself..." he said sadly. Gemini watched him go and frowned. "I feel bad. He means well." she said. "That won't mean a thing when he's dead." Shadow said sternly. Espio hurried ahead to the gun turret and looked it over. "I think I can figure this thing out... Can't be harder than the ship itself. You can all look for the remaining turrets." he said. Shadow nodded. "You've got the map in your head. Lead the way, Metal Sonic." he requested. As they continued on their way, they were unaware that Lucky was in fact still trailing them, using the strange metallic "torches" erected all over the ship to hide as he followed them. "...I can't stay cooped up in my room anymore. I need to do SOMETHING... Even if

I'm not a fighter..." he said to himself.

Knuckles, Shadow, Gemini, Vector, Charmy and Metal Sonic all met up as they arrived at the forward gun turrets, where they found Dr. Eggman busy working on "automating" them. "Are those guns going to be ready before your fleet starts firing on us?" Knuckles asked. "Patience! Genius takes time! Anyway, if you got someone manning the other turrets, they oughta hold us for now." Eggman said. Metal Sonic stepped over to assist Eggman, leaving the others to watch the fleet ominously gaining on them. "This better work... I don't wanna be in a big-flying-ship crash! ...again!" Charmy said. Suddenly, the Deathbringer dropped down among the group, spinning and kicking several of them aside so that it was left standing face to face with Knuckles! "What in the... Doomsayer??" Knuckles stammered. "Far worse. I am the Deathbringer! Knuckles the echidna... Your presence on this vessel is an ominous sign. It heralds a tragedy that I refuse to allow!" it shouted. Knuckles looked at the Deathbringer awkwardly. "Um... Okaaay... Thanks for the heads-up. I definitely don't want to be causing any tragedies... Got any other details for me?" he asked. "Chaos Control!!!" Shadow moved quickly, pulling Knuckles out of the path of the killing blast that the Deathbringer launched at the unsuspecting echidna! "The Deathbringer doesn't talk!" he warned. "Yeah... seems like it." Knuckles realized. "You just... tried to kill him!!" Gemini gasped. Eggman grinned mischievously from his work at the turrets. "Isn't this an interesting turn of events..." he thought. The Deathbringer flapped up above the group and pointed at Knuckles. "I am here to end his life. No one else need be harmed... But if you get in my way, you will pay the price! To alter the future, great costs must be paid. Now, prepare to pay that price!" it shouted.

Shadow stood between the Deathbringer and Knuckles. "...You've killed enough people. It's time you answered for it! And you're going to give me a few answers while you're at it!" he shouted. The Deathbringer seemed unmoved by his words. "You are a nuisance, Ultimate Life Form. You should learn to stay out of matters that don't concern you." it said. Knuckles raised his fists. "Whatever! I'll take you on with or without Shadow! Just come down from there and face me!" he yelled. The Deathbringer swooped down, forcing Shadow and Knuckles into action! Vector, Charmy and Gemini were about ready to step in as well, when Lospector floated in front of them. "So, it's you! You've become a real pesky witch, fennec! Now Losipher's mopier than usual, and it's... well, maybe not ALL your fault, but I'm blaming you!" he growled. "What's Losipher even doing here!?" Gemini shouted. Lospector crossed his arms. "What? How 'bout what are YOU doing here! I can stash my secret weapon wherever I want!" he snarled, "And your tone is getting on my nerves now. I'm not even gonna waste cards on you. You shouldn't have barged aboard here!" he said, snapping his ghostly fingers. Lospirits rose up through the floor, their ghostly bodies able to pass right through it! "Hmm... The more solid guys might be a while... Maybe one card will help us pass the time." Lospector said, drawing from his deck, and then using his card to zap the lospirits with lightning, electrifying them! "...That doesn't quite seem fair..." Vector muttered. "They're all yours, big guy!" Charmy grinned, pushing him forward. "Gee, thanks..." he muttered. Metal Sonic glanced over, observing the struggles unfolding. "{Threat level: Indigo. Action advised...}" his monitor read. Eggman noticed this and knocked on his metallic head. "We're not the target of those creatures. Stay focused! If this situation is to work out in my favor, timing is key!" he said. Charmy and Vector worked fast on "Plan A" of battling the Lost Ones. Charmy was bashing a drum, while Vector got out a microphone and started belting his particular brand of "music." Lospector held his head, but the lospirits just stared at him. "...I knew this wouldn't work without Espio..." he grumbled.

Shadow circled around the Deathbringer, hitting it with Chaos Spears in an effort to slow the creature down. It stayed airborne, evading some of the spears, but keeping most of its focus on Knuckles. "Your friend is of little consequence to me! I will not fail to eliminate you!" it shouted. Knuckles evaded a few of

the Deathbringer's killing blasts, but with the dark being flying out of reach and seeming unfazed by Shadow's attacks, this felt more like an execution than a fight. Fortunately, they still had one ally that wasn't otherwise occupied. Fred the fennec warped onto the scene, holding some glittering objects in his hands. "I had a feeling you all would be in trouble long about now. Knuckles! Catch these!" he said, tossing the objects to the red echidna. Knuckles dove to catch the objects, while Shadow warped in front of him to block the Deathbringer's shot. "You can try those blasts on me... If you think I can be killed so easily!" he growled. Knuckles examined what he'd caught and gasped. "These are... the Chaos Gauntlets!! How...?" he muttered. "I found them aboard the ship before Eggman could. You must use their power now!" Fred said, warping back below the deck. Knuckles had a look of uncertainty as he slipped them on over his gloves. "I guess they can't be worse than those playing cards..." he said. The Deathbringer blasted Shadow aside, leaving him injured and weak. "No more interference! Prepare for your end!" it yelled. As a killing bolt tore toward Knuckles, he acted on instinct, and slammed his gauntlet-armored fist straight into it! The bolt bounced right back, forcing the Deathbringer to dodge its own attack! "You... DARE!?" it growled. "That was pretty sweet! Let's see if these things can do anything else..." Knuckles smirked. He charged at the Deathbringer, swatting aside the creature's blasts as he approached, and when he was close he hurled a punch in its general direction! A surge of energy came from the Chaos Gauntlet, and it sent his punch soaring into the air as a projectile of light! The Deathbringer was knocked back, but more angered than injured. "Let's see you take... THIS!!!" it roared, unloading a frenzy of blasts straight at Knuckles!

Using the Chaos Gauntlets as shields, Knuckles survived the onslaught, but was knocked around the roof as the Deathbringer's furious assault followed him! He finally landed at a computer console near where Eggman had been working, just as the Deathbringer stopped to take a breather. Eggman had retreated a bit to avoid being caught in the blasts, even hopping into his Egg Mobile. "Whew... Knuckles, while you're down there, be a dear and push that flashing button, will you?" he asked, wiping some sweat from his brow. Knuckles glanced at the computer console briefly. "Well... if it'll start the guns up, couldn't hurt..." he said, pushing the button quickly. The Deathbringer was about to launch another attack on Knuckles, when it found itself jolted by lightning from behind! "If you are here to bring death... Get OFF my ship!!" growled Bucky, glaring at the Deathbringer as the weapon systems whirred to life. Eggman started chuckling softly, which soon crescendoed into triumphant laughter as the guns turned around and fired upon Lospector and the Deathbringer, startling them into retreating! Lospector dove down into the ship, while the Deathbringer flew up out of range. However, the guns didn't follow it, they stayed trained on Knuckles, Gemini, Vector, Charmy and Bucky. "Thanks for giving me access to your weapon systems! And coming out here, too! Now I can hold all of you hostage!" Eggman sneered. Bucky crossed his arms. "Really? To what end?" he asked. Eggman pointed at him. "YOU, Dr. Stein! You're coming on a little trip to Demon Island with me, along with these Chaos Emeralds! I can strike a bargain with Despair's leader, which in turn could prove most beneficial to me..." he said. Bucky nodded. "That story about your ships was a ruse, of course. But what makes you think I'll just go with you? You don't have THAT much of an advantage..." he said. Metal Sonic then emerged from behind Bucky, forcing Lucky into the line of fire! "Ouch! Owww! Stop that!" the cat grumbled. "You place a bit more value on your experiments than you do on Shadow and Knuckles, don't you?" Eggman sneered. Bucky had a look of hopelessness on his face. "You... you wouldn't..." he stammered. Eggman grinned. "The guns are in Metal Sonic's control. I give the order, and your experiment count drops...maybe to a more manageable number!" he said. "I... discussed creating a cat... with Hope... she would have thought of him as a son... I can't let him die...!" Bucky stammered, stepping forward with his hands up. The Deathbringer seemed enraged by this turn of events, and fired a blast at the Egg Mobile, only to find it shielded with the power of the five Chaos Emeralds! "Ha! I don't care how strong you are, you're no

match for five emeralds! All aboard, Bucky!" Eggman said, taking Bucky and Metal Sonic aboard his Egg Mobile before beginning his escape from the Arcangel. "...Eggman!!!" Knuckles shouted, "You made me press that button, but I will NOT be defined by your tricks!! You hear me!!" he yelled. "Go ahead and keep the gauntlets! Knowing where they are might prove useful to me later!" Eggman shouted back, laughing.

The Deathbringer stood on the ship, seeming distant. Gemini was busy casting healing magic on Shadow, despite his protests of not needing it, and Espio joined Charmy and Vector, discussing what they should do with their client captured. Lucky sat nearby, moping. Knuckles had taken off the Chaos Gauntlets and was staring at them, feeling somewhat useless. Suddenly, rain pelted the Arcangel, and the Doomsayer stepped to the group. The Deathbringer spun around, clenching its fists. "Your vagueness cost me time! If you had informed me better from the start, I could have prevented things before they progressed this far!!" it yelled. The Doomsayer stared blankly. "Do not presume yourself more special than the fox or the echidna just because you wear a black robe. You receive no more prophecy than I choose to unveil." he stated. "Some prophecy you gave me! I had what, all of two minutes to prepare!!" Knuckles complained. "My warning was only of the end of the world." the Doomsayer hissed, "It is nearer than ever now. Should the Agents of Despair complete their dark designs... NONE SHALL SURVIVE!!!" With strikes of lightning, the Doomsayer vanished, along with the Deathbringer. Shadow climbed to his feet unsteadily. "You heard him. We've got to get to their island... and catch the doctor while we're at it." he said. Vector nodded. "C'mon, boys! Let's get this ship on course!" he said, leading Espio and Charmy away. Knuckles tucked the Chaos Gauntlets under his arm and followed after them. "I guess... we're in command of Shadow Arcangel. Let's hope Spiny takes that well." he muttered. It was finally time to take the fight to the Covenant of Despair, but while they seemingly held all the cards, would there be any way to stop them?

To be continued...

39 - The Depths of Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 39 - The Depths of Despair
Stage 22(Dark 11) - Despair Depths
Minor Boss 18 - Illusi

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Kosmo, Copter, Punchy and others journeyed to the Hidden Ruins beneath Station Square, hoping to rescue Rainbow and stop the Covenant of Despair's scheme. Unfortunately, Ridley had turned to Despair's side, and bought the Darkseeker enough time to open the door to the Chaos Crystal, the "controller" of the Chaos Relics that Rainbow was meant to be guarding.

As Demon Island hangs ominously over Station Square, Knuckles joined Bucky aboard Shadow Arcangel and attempted to defend the ship with the help of Dr. Eggman. However, it all proved to be a trap set by Eggman so he could steal the 5 Chaos Emeralds Bucky had collected, as well as Bucky himself, all as bargaining chips to deal with Despair!

Next, all heroes must make their stand on Demon Island!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Demon Island was well defended. Dr. Eggman had bordered the island with his Cloud Carnival fleet, and that was the least of it. Dr. Nammad had been planning to go over to Despair's side for some time, and he'd sabotaged several GUN Warships during his time in Central City, so now he could call them to the island via remote, and add them to the blockade. Arriving to meet this mighty wall of battleships was a small, blue biplane. The Tornado, piloted by Tails, was occupied by SPOT, with Sonic and Amy standing atop the wings. Eggman observed their approach from his Egg Mobile. "Hehe... Blow them out of the sky!!" he called to his fleet. A torrent of bullets came at the Tornado, but then, these shots were blown aside by Chaos Whirlwind! Copter arrived, piloting the Hurricane, with Punchy, Rainbow and Heather holding on to the wings for dear life. Hoover's voice came over the plane's radio. "Uh... Copter... Yer not doin' anything reckless wit mah baby... Right?" he stammered. Copter chuckled nervously as the Tornado and the Hurricane dodged and weaved their way toward the blockade. Bringing up the rear was Mia's flying Taxicab, which was a bit crowded with people wanting a ride to Demon Island. Razor, Silver, Cream, Cheese and Illusi were all squeezed into the cab. "Nobody sneeze, or I might spin outta control..." Mia grumbled. The GUN Warships started joining Eggman's fleet in shooting at them, but a great, purple eagle flew past their radar, tearing at their gun turrets one by one! "Kosmo made it through! Never thought I'd be glad to see him..." Amy sighed. Rouge and Guard flew over to some of the other warships and joined the assault, but their efforts weren't doing much good, even with Tails and Copter attempting to shoot back with their planes. Fortunately, more help arrived quickly. Shadow Arcangel once again blotted out the sun over Station Square, but this time, it was under Chaotix control. "Everybody in position? Aim and fire!!" Vector shouted, prompting Shadow, Knuckles and Gemini to fire

the Arcangel's turrets rapidly, obliterating some of the Cloud Carnival cruisers with ease! This wasn't all, either! A massive, blue GUN Warship made its way to the battle from the direction of Central City. "Steal our Warships, will you!?" Col. Gunner roared over a loudspeaker, "Well, face the wrath of the GUN Assault Carrier, then! YOU FREAKS ARE FINISHED!!" Dozens of fighter planes launched from the Assault Carrier, turning the skies above Station Square into a real warzone. "Well... I think they have their hands full. Let's land on the island!" Punchy suggested. "GET US OUTTA HERE!!!" Razor pleaded to Mia, seeing that she was driving the only vehicle without weapons. The heroes gradually slipped their way past the blockade, leaving Eggman to contend with Gunner for the time being.

Demon Island was being heavily guarded by this time. Every agent of the Covenant of Despair had been pulled out of the field and posted as guards everywhere. The vehicles had to be hidden in the forested area around the edge of the island. While Sonic, Copter, Razor and the others took a moment to rest from their trip, they watched Shadow Arcangel attempt to land on the island as well, while any Despair agents patrolling the area under it fled for dear life! In the shadows, a certain trio was also watching Shadow Arc's landing. "Ssssuch a clumsy landing... The masster isss not in command." Vortex realized. "Um... What does that mean?" Crash gulped. Knuckles and Shadow exited the Arcangel and joined Sonic, Tails, Team Rose, Copter, Punchy and Kosmo. Rouge and Omega greeted Shadow as well. "How exactly did YOU get here, Omega? You don't fit on any of those planes." Shadow realized. "I procured transport with Col. Gunner." the robot explained. Tails addressed the group urgently. "According to SPOT, there are enemy forces ALL OVER this island. Eggman's thrown his robots into the mix as well." he said. "Yeah, his fleet was kind of a dead giveaway that there'd be robots here." Copter pointed out. "Well, they've got all the advantages for now... So the best thing to do is probably to split up." Sonic suggested. Knuckles nodded. "The ol' divide and conquer. If they're too fortified in one direction, chances are our other groups will find a way through!" he said. Team GeneX approached them, having overheard enough. "Hey... Why isn't Bucky part of this party?" Zipp asked. Knuckles and Shadow exchanged glances. "...Eggman took him. No idea why." Knuckles frowned. While everyone else was making plans to storm Demon Island, Illusi had snuck away, and found Fera waiting at the edge of the road to Despair Castle. "The Sonic Heroes are on your doorstep, along with some furious GeneX Experiments. But it's not yet too late... You must return the Chaos Key to me." he urged her. Fera scoffed. "...You're wrong, old rodent... It IS too late. Nothing can stop the Covenant of Despair now. You would do well to leave, while you can!" she said, warping away with her dark magic. "...I will do what I must..." Illusi sighed.

Punchy started exploring the island on his own. "According to Tails, the Master Emerald is here somewhere. I can make things right and nab the emerald to boot, but... Can I do it without slipping into darkness again?" he sighed, "Just in case, I should stay away from everyone. Rainbow, especially." Suddenly, a familiar bright light passed in front of him, hovering in the air! "Huh!? What's with that... weird ball of light...? Hey, I've seen it before!" Punchy gasped, watching as it hovered through the air, heading for a cavern hidden in the woods. He started to follow it. "I think... It wants me to go that way..." he muttered. "HEY, ONE!!" Punchy was suddenly startled as Rainbow came running up to him. "Where do you think you're going without us!?" she shouted. "Wha... Us?" he mumbled, glancing behind her to see Copter and Heather slowly catching up. "We're all eager to get some payback on the covenant, Punch, but goin' off on your own's just nuts." Copter said. "Actually, I have mixed feelings. They brought me back to life, but they're hurting what few friends I have. It's crazy." Heather sighed. "Obviously, they wanted to use you for something. Like they used Rainbow and her sister." Copter reasoned. Punchy sighed and pointed into the cave. "Hey, look! I found something!" he interrupted. They peered into the dark cavern, but noticed there were faint lights here and there. "Creepy... Could be a secret entrance to

their base?" Rainbow said thoughtfully. "Well, everyone else is gonna check around outside, so let's try in here." Punchy suggested. "Right! Hang on, Viola! Follow me, everyone!" Rainbow said valiantly. As they headed into the cavern, SPOT crept along behind them, its nose to the ground almost like a real dog. "...Chaos Emerald detected... Plotting course to retrieve Chaos Emerald." flashed on its monitor. After a moment, SPOT started into the cavern. The robo-puppy wasn't the only unexpected guest that had found the cave, either. Zipp poked his head out of the bushes, pressing a button on his helmet to speak to his teammates. "Hey, Vortex... I may have found something..." he said.

The dark cavern was vast, seeming to tunnel through much of the lower portion of the island. It was also dangerous, full of deep, expansive chasms. Sometimes, the only way across these chasms was to pass a narrow bridge of stone. It was while they were crossing one of these bridges that they saw it. Enemies on the other side, heading their way. "Great... Despair has the cave guarded, too. Well, that figures." Copter grunted. "Umm... There's something off about those guys." Heather noticed. The various Covenant of Despair agents' eyes were glowing red, and their bodies were totally black, as if they were in fact composed of shadows. "Well... You did say this was DEMON Island..." Punchy gulped. They hurried across the bridge as the shadowy figures started to attack them with dark magic! From their position, mounting a counterattack would be difficult. Heather jumped to the front and used her flames to shield them, but this was a temporary solution. Fortunately, they weren't the first ones to find the cave. A Chao and a hammer bashed a couple of the creatures, and then a barrage of rocks knocked the others down the nearby chasm! Rainbow pushed past Punchy to greet their new allies. "Shiny! Great to see you again!" she smiled. Silver, Amy and Cream, united as Team Rose, had beaten them to the cavern. "We were here first, experiments! We're gonna take out Despair real quick, and I'll impress Sonic!" Amy bragged. "Uh... sure... Tell you what, we'll tag along, and you can take all the credit. We're mostly in this to rescue Rainbow's sister." Copter said. "...Oh..." Amy said awkwardly, a bit ashamed of her selfishness. "Thanks for the help, by the way." Heather said. Silver nodded. "Those demons... They're not really Despair agents. They were created from the dark energy collected in the island, which Despair's mages use. That's why some of the demons look like them..." he explained. "...Some?" Punchy muttered. "This place is REAL scary..." Cream shuddered. They shrugged it off and kept moving. "Don't worry, Hoppy. No demons can stop all of us!" Rainbow said cheerfully.

Of course, since only "some" of the demons resembled Despair agents, it wouldn't be long before the group encountered other varieties of the demons. The demons also took the shape of the Beecon drones that Copter and Punchy had faced the last time they were on the island, and some took shapes that were decidedly not of their world. As long as the demons were small, the combined forces of Team Rose, Copter, Punchy and Heather were more than enough to keep them at bay, even with Rainbow essentially unable to defend herself. Soon, however, much larger, lizardlike demons started to appear, and while Silver and Amy were busy battling them on one side of the cave, Copter and Punchy stood between a big, snarling demon and Rainbow. "I got him... Chaos Avalanche!!" Punchy shouted, dropping some stones from the roof directly on the demon's head! This was not as great an idea as it seemed, because the demon started flailing around dizzily, and knocked the surprised Punchy across the cavern into a distracted Cream! They started to tumble over a chasm, so Copter leapt in after them! "Hold on, guys!!" he shouted in a panic. Rainbow glared at the dizzy demon and pushed it down another chasm. "How do YOU like it!" she shouted before running to the pit that Copter, Punchy and Cream had just fallen into. "O-one!? Please be alive!!" she called, unable to see in the darkness deep below. "We...We're okay!!" he called back, panting. Copter had managed to slow their fall, but now they were stuck on a much lower level of the cave, with Copter too exhausted to attempt flying back up, much less carry anyone. "There's a path down here!" Copter called up, "We'll try to meet up with you guys later!"

Rainbow had a look of concern, but Silver kept a serious expression. "The best way to help them for now is to keep ourselves safe. Let's go..." he reasoned. Partway down the chasm Punchy and the others had just fallen down, there was a hole where a tunnel ended. Vortex and Crash peered down from the hole. "They've been sssplit up. That lowerssss their chancesss." Vortex hissed. "What should we do?" Crash wondered. Vortex glanced back the way they came. "...Keep ssssearching. If there'sss any chance thiss cave will lead usss to the massster, we musst invesstigate it." he said.

It was quiet for a bit after the lizard demons were defeated, so Amy decided to chat with Rainbow. "So... I see you got away after being kidnapped..." she said. "...No, I didn't." Rainbow frowned, "They didn't need me anymore." Amy looked at the ground for a moment, then put a hand on Rainbow's shoulder. "I'm sorry... I can't imagine what you've been through." she said. "I can. Shortly after being brought back from the DEAD, GUN tried to turn me into a doomsday weapon." Heather grumbled. "...Whaddya want, a medal?" Amy snapped. Silver stopped them suddenly. "More demons... Talk later!" he shouted.

Team GeneX was exploring elsewhere. Zipp's helmet could detect a "strange energy" that manifested when the larger demons were on the move, but they had no means of detecting or evading the smaller demons. Crash was charging ahead, ramming through the demons shaped like Despair agents, while Vortex and Zipp shot at the Beacon demons with Zipp's guns. "You're a lousy shot, 'Tex!" Zipp complained. "Jussst keep usss away from thossse giantsss." he hissed. "Do we HAVE to save Bucky? I mean, I bet we'd do fine without him." Zipp grumbled. Vortex grabbed him by the collar. "Don't even joke about that..." he snarled. Crash rubbed his head after he finished a charge. "I'm neutral, really... I mean, the boss DID kinda get us into all this by joining up with Despair in the first place, even if it was a covert thing..." he said. Vortex groaned. "Thiss isss why I'm in charge." he scowled.

Punchy led the way in the lower caverns, while Cream walked close to Copter. Cheese had fluttered down to join them, of course, and Cream held him tightly for security when they weren't battling demons. Copter was a bit uneasy about how close she was keeping to him. "Uhhh... Cream... Could you gimme...some room to breathe?" he mumbled. "Huh?" Cream said, blushing a bit, "It's just... You remind me so much of Tails... I feel better in this darkness when I'm close to you." she said. Punchy snickered at this. "Guess you got a girlfriend, Copter. You two sure are cute!" he joked, earning him a tail whip in the back. "Ooof!" Suddenly, they were blinded by a headlight! "Whazzuh!?" Copter gasped. "Tails detected!!" The robotic voice was very familiar to them. "Hey, that's SPOT!" Cream said, shielding her eyes. The robo-puppy walked over to Copter and sat as though at its master's feet. Punchy glanced at it, rubbing his chin. "Hey, uh, 'Tails', you don't suppose that confused bot can fly?" he asked. SPOT hopped into the air, hovering with its jet-paws. "...Looks like we've got a way up!" Copter said.

Arriving at the upper sections of the cavern again, Punchy and company didn't get very far before they found the way forward barred by a wall of Wrongs! "Oh dear... That guy from the mountain again..." Cream murmured. "...Illusi?" Copter muttered, looking around for him. The shrew stepped through the wall of Wrongs to meet them. "I let you go to rescue your friend, Dark One... but now I'll finish what I started!" he declared, rising into the air and taking a pair of Wrongs by their centers, spikes erupting from their circular bodies as he held them! "I'm sick of this, Illusi!! Would you just tell me WHY in the heck you decided to kill me after all that time you spent helping me before!?" Punchy shouted. Illusi looked away from him. "I will not speak of the future I saw... And I will not allow it to come to pass!" he yelled, swaying his hand to cast an illusion that made the surrounding area even darker than it was already. Copter and Cream backed away to see that it was like a dome of darkness, meant to deter them from interfering in the battle. "Uhhh... Hey, SPOT, get any readings on this?" Copter asked.

"Specify target." SPOT's text replied. "...The BIG wall of BLACKNESS right IN FRONT of us!!" he growled. "...Might I suggest a CAT scan?" SPOT replied. "This is bad... Punchy's trapped in there..." Cream realized. "Yeah... And I can't just run in there and leave you alone..." Copter sighed.

Punchy rubbed his eyes in the darkness. "The same trick you tried on me when we first met!? Great, but don't you think I've learned a thing or two since then?" he taunted. Illusi hurled one of the spiked Wrongos at him, giving him a painful smack in the chest before it boomeranged back to the shrew. "GAH!! That stings!!" Punchy growled. "This is not a test this time! You will not leave this darkness alive!" Illusi yelled, flipping in midair and tossing both spiked Wrongos! Punchy jumped to the side, knowing that he had to at least move. Illusi exerted control over the Wrongos as they flew, sending them arcing in Punchy's direction, but they were still creatures, and they kept jabbering Wrongo-speak as they flew. "Chaos Avalanche!" Punchy pulled up some chunks of the ground near him and used them to block, causing the Wrongos' spikes to get stuck in the stone! "Clever... I suppose I'm done toying with you." Illusi said, splitting off into duplicates of himself as he'd done at Troblusk Plateau. The hands of the duplicates sparked with lightning. "You call yourself 'Punchy.' So it is fitting you die by the fist!" his duplicates declared in unison, along with the real Illusi! They charged at him, giving him jolting jabs from their lightning-charged fists. Despite knowing that these were illusions, it didn't seem to lessen the pain of the assault. "Aaaaarrgh!! ILLUSI!!!" Punchy tried to fight back, blindly throwing his fists about, but he could only see the duplicates just before they went to strike him! If this kept up, he'd be dead in minutes. "Ch-CHAOS...AVALANCHE!!!" Blind to his enemy, and surrounded, Punchy decided to go for a last-ditch attack, pulling a large portion of the ceiling straight down around himself! Rocks started falling all around, crushing the duplicates of Illusi and forcing Copter, Cream and SPOT to fall back from where they were awaiting the outcome of the battle. The dome of darkness started to dissipate, and Illusi stood over a partially buried Punchy. "...You seem much weaker than last time... Yet I fear the darkness remains dormant in you... This must end now!" he said, raising an illusionary blade!

"Mousy, STOP!!!" The distracted Illusi suddenly found himself socked in the side of the face by Rainbow, of all people. "Back off! ...Oh, no..." he said, noticing that Heather, Silver and Amy were with her, and Copter and Cream were starting toward him as well. "I'll help you up, One..." Rainbow whimpered, kneeling down to work on digging him out. Illusi glared around at the group surrounding him and sighed in defeat. "You'll never understand... Very well. I must retrieve what Despair took from me. Then... my odds of completing this task will improve..." he grumbled, pushing past Silver and Heather and stomping off into the darkness. Some clapping was heard in the shadows as Punchy was dug out of the rocks, and Vortex emerged with Zipp and Crash. "Nice work. That noisssse brought everyone here." he said. "What're YOU doing in here?" Copter grumbled. "Despair doesn't return our calls since they kidnapped Bucky." Zipp sighed. "So... You're saying you're here to help us? That hasn't worked out well before... At least with the hornet." Silver grumbled. "Well, we DID find the door to the castle." Crash said, "We can take you there, but it's locked. We need to find a key." Amy shrugged. "Well, it stinks, but I guess we need your help. Just remember, if you turn on us, Sonic'll fix you!" Amy warned. "Oh, don't tempt me! I always wanted to try my hand shootin' speedsters!" Zipp chuckled. Most of them rolled their eyes, and they all started further into the cavern together. Punchy limped at the back, needing to take it easy for a bit. "You just relax, One. We'll watch out for ya until you're rested up." Rainbow said before rushing up to the front of the group as always. Once no one was looking, Punchy's fur flickered black for a few instants, and Punchy grunted as he forced himself back to normal. "What... What was that...? All the dark energy... In this cave... I feel it doing something... to me..." he thought, "Dark Punchy... He's coming back! I'm gonna have to be careful, or everyone here is gonna be in serious danger!"

To be continued...

40 - Illusi's Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 40 - Illusi's Despair
Stage 22(Dark 11) - Despair Depths
Boss 22 - Fera

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

It's down to the wire! All heroes made a valiant aerial assault on Demon Island, forced to struggle their way past a blockade of battleships supplied by Dr. Eggman and Dr. Nammad. The arrival of Col. Gunner in a GUN Assault Carrier gave the heroes the opening needed to land on Demon Island, where they split up to divide and conquer their foes.

Seeing Tikal's ball of light, Punchy was led to a dark cavern leading to a secret entrance to Despair Castle. He was joined by Rainbow, Copter and Heather, and gradually was joined by SPOT, Team Rose, and Team GeneX. After yet another bout with Illusi, Team GeneX revealed that they'd found the entrance to the castle, but a key was needed to get in. They set out to look for it, but the dark energy of the cavern has begun to take a toll on Punchy, making him flicker into his Dark form!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Their rather large group had come to another narrow stone bridge spanning a chasm. Worried that too much weight might cause the bridge to collapse, they decided to cross two at a time. While Punchy waited his turn, that familiar orb of light passed in front of him again. "Huh?? ...Well, I guess I got time..." he mumbled as the world went white. When his eyes readjusted, he was in front of the Master Emerald shrine, sitting in the water surrounding it. "...Why am I wet?" he grumbled, looking around. There were Chao huddled around him, looking frightened. "Huh...? What're they hiding from?" He then heard a loud crash, and Shadow Chaos splattered against the steps of the altar! Howler was coming toward the creature. He wore the Chaos Tailbands on his tails, the Chaos Boots on his feet, and brandished the Chaos Sword. "My collection of Chaos Relics already makes me more powerful than any being who walks this world! Stay down, slime creature!" he warned. Tikal, Radia and Athair were following behind him. "...He has power-lust... Do not give him any more relics." Radia warned. "...Do you honestly believe we could stop him?" Athair whimpered. Shadow Chaos slithered down the steps, and reformed in front of the Chao, blocking them. Tikal's eyes went wide. "Shadow Chaos... He only wishes to protect the Chao, as Chaos did! When he couldn't find them, he raged... Now all he wishes is to ease Chaos's sorrow by protecting them for the part of him that is sealed in this emerald!" she said, clutching the Master Emerald tightly. Howler came up to Shadow Chaos with incredible speed and slashed him with the Chaos Sword! "I... am the god... now!!" he growled. As Punchy watched in astonishment, everything started to go white again, and he found that Copter, Rainbow and SPOT were the only ones left beside him. "...Looks like you haven't recovered yet, One..." Rainbow sighed. "Huh... I'm okay now..." Punchy grunted. Copter groaned. "Well, everyone left without us. We'd better move before the demons in here

start swarming us." he said. Punchy nodded, and they started crossing the bridge together.

Beyond the bridge, there were three pathways. Since they needed to find the key, the groups each ended up taking a different path. Amy, Cream and Silver took a long, maze-like path that was riddled with deep holes. Fortunately, Cream and Silver could fly to a degree, enabling Amy to walk on the limited paths, when the paths became limited. Unfortunately, the demons born of dark energy were also wandering this area. These demons were more on the demonic side, and were clawed, snarling giants that otherwise didn't much look like anything of the Earth. Cream was even too nervous to send Cheese after these creatures, so she backed behind Amy and clutched the Chao tightly. "Why did I listen to you and go in the cave!?" she wailed. Amy tried to wallop one of the demons with her hammer, but it simply grabbed it out of her hands! Fortunately, she always had another on her person, but now she was getting unnerved as well. "They just seem to get stronger the deeper in we go!" she yelled. Silver wrenched the hammer out of the demon's grip with his psychokinesis, and walloped it over the head with it. "Stay strong... I'll get us through this..." he stammered. Suddenly, a bright red light lit up the cave, drawing the demons' attention! A few gunshots stunned the startled beasts, and then a crazed feline rammed one, sending it tumbling into the others and dragging them all over a nearby ledge! "I'm... sick... of monsters!!" shouted Mia, who obviously had her share of run-ins with the demons to get this far into the cave. The red light, which was a flare, soon subsided, and Razor the porcupine stepped out of the shadows to greet Team Rose. "We figured the cave entrance might be safer than trying to breach the castle directly. Boy, were we ever wrong. Now I'm outta flares." he said. Silver stared at them. "Shouldn't you have run out screaming at the first sign of demons??" he stammered. "Nah, I've driven through Central City at rush hour." Mia shrugged. Amy nodded. "Right... Have you seen a key lying around?" she asked. They shook their heads. "Oh well... At least we can work together from here." Cream sighed.

Copter, Punchy and Rainbow were following SPOT's radar through the cavern. It was detecting something, and they wondered if somehow it was able to detect the key. Before long, however, they found some actual guards posted in the cave, led by Corky the frog. "Gah! It's dat blighted echidna dame agin! Come ta yoink my tongue an' hold it fer ransom!! Slit 'er throat and see how humorous she is then, boys!" he shouted. "Hostiles detected!" SPOT said in a robotic voice. "Gee, you think?" Copter grumbled, running ahead to start bashing Despair agents with his tails. Punchy picked up SPOT and placed him in front of Rainbow. "Protect her, or I'll smash ya." he warned. Before he could turn around, Corky's tongue grabbed his wrist. "Hah! 'Ow I ought aah!!" he said with his mouth open. Punchy's fur flickered black, and his eyes flickered red. "Get your filthy tongue off me..." he snarled. "Um... One?" Rainbow gasped, starting toward him, but blocked by SPOT's energy shield. "Protect mode." the robot said. Corky pulled him closer with his tongue and started bashing him with his fists, while Dark Punchy started to flicker stronger. "This cave is filled with darkness... You'll regret making me angry..." he growled. Corky released his wrist and slapped his face a couple times with his tongue. "Ha ha ha! Look at you! The cave's worn ya down! Yer no match for Corky da frog! Kiss my feet 'an maybe I'll let one o' you echidnas live..." he taunted. Punchy's eyes turned bright red, though his fur stayed the same. "You won't be killing the green one... I still need him. I think I'll kill you!!" he said with Dark Punchy's voice! He then grasped Corky by the throat and lifted him up as though he weighed nothing, hurtling him at a canine agent and sending them both plummeting down a chasm! "Punchy, no!!" Copter shouted, diving into the chasm after the Despair agents! Rainbow watched from behind the shield in fright as Punchy swiftly knocked out the remaining guards. "One... snap out of it! COME BACK, ONE!!" she shouted. Punchy's eyes suddenly returned to normal as Copter flew out of the chasm with Corky and the mutt.

"...No murder, Punch... We're still hoping to get a pardon if Gunner ever gets fired, and murder will kill that chance." he panted. Across the chasms, Illusi had been watching them. "...I must hurry. Time is running short." he muttered, heading deeper into the cavern on his own.

Somehow, Heather found herself wandering with Team GeneX in their search for the key. Luckily, Zipp's helmet had an app for that. He'd been to the door, and scanned the keyhole with his helmet. Now, he could use its radar to search for anything that might fit the keyhole. "So... been a while, huh, guys?" Heather said awkwardly. "Yesss... Um... We are grateful for your...sacrifice..." Vortex said as cordially as possible. "I was really sorry when you died." Crash added, more sincerely. As they walked, demons resembling Despair agents crept toward them. They scowled at Team GeneX, not immediately attacking. "...What's with them? They're freaking me out..." Heather shivered. "As long as they're not attacking..." Zipp shrugged. Then, they all jumped back as a demon resembling Zeke stepped forward. "...Traitor!!" it groaned in a low, ghastly voice. Looking around, they noticed that many of the demons appeared familiar to them. One resembled Patch. "You've turned your backs on us..." it moaned. They were getting surrounded fast, and Vortex scowled at them as they chanted "Traitor... traitor..." repeatedly. "We are no traitorsss!!" he hissed. A demon resembling Basker approached Heather. "We revived you... Saved you from death itself... How can you turn away from us...?" he growled. Heather lit her hands on fire. "Maybe I didn't ask to be brought back! You think of that? And I don't trust the people who attack my friends!" she snapped. Crash let out a loud grunt. "Our allegiance belongs to Bucky, and no one else!" he yelled. "Except for maybe me!" Zipp added. "Enough of thissss... Tear thessee ghossstsss apart!" Vortex snarled. Heather shot flames at the Basker demon, while Crash charged through "Patch," and Vortex leapt atop Zeke and started burning him with Chaos Camouflage, which covered his body with Chaos energy. Zipp just shot wildly at the other demons with a pair of pistols, and they were out of the way in no time. Vortex panted, tired from using Chaos Camouflage. "We know what sside we're on... Let'sss go." he hissed.

Zipp led them, conveniently enough, to the place where Team Rose exited the maze-like area they'd been exploring. There, they found something red and shiny. "Well... This'll fit in the lock... but you won't be able to turn it." Zipp muttered, examining the key in his hands. "Seems like they split the key into pieces. That's usually a pretty secure idea. If anyone finds a piece, they won't think anything of it because it doesn't look like anything." Razor said. "What'sss with the cop?" Vortex growled. "There are people up here who have to answer for terrorist activities in Troblusk City... I might be out of my jurisdiction, but when they're hovering over my hometown, I don't care." the porcupine grumbled. "So... Think the other pieces of the key are nearby?" Amy asked, getting the conversation back on track. Zipp groaned. "My helmet can only track the part that fits in the keyhole. With the key in pieces, it's useless!" he grumbled. "I say it's THAT WAY!" Mia shouted, pointing down the only path available that the two groups hadn't come from. "...Good point..." Silver sighed. Cream patted Cheese and followed along as the group continued on their way. "It's nice and crowded again! Let's see any monsters bother us now!" she giggled. Crash frowned and didn't say anything. He simply hoped for them to split up again soon so that he might get a word in edgewise. Heather noticed how quiet he was being and nudged him. "What's the matter? Uncomfortable in crowds?" she asked. "...You're one to talk. Didn't you freak out at the Sun Festival?" Crash pointed out. "Yeah, death has a weird mellowing effect on a person..." she muttered. "Hey!" Silver called back to them, "Hurry up! If you get left behind, the demons will pick you off for sure!" he warned. After that, everyone traveled in a much tighter group, nervous about being caught alone in the dark with demons...

While everyone else was having a nice chat in their large group, Copter, Punchy, Rainbow and SPOT found their way to the flat handle of the key, which had a Covenant of Despair symbol on it. "Okay... symbol... little notch for inserting something... I'm guessing the key is in pieces." Copter sighed. Rainbow smiled. "At least it's not something crazy, like having to find SEVEN keys... Right, Two? One?" she said. "Broken key's still crazy. Anyone ever heard of a regular hide-a-key?" Copter complained. Punchy was flickering into dark form again, and he collapsed to his knees, apparently growing exhausted from holding Dark Punchy back! Rainbow hurried to his side. "Rainbow... You and Copter... Go without me..." he grunted. Rainbow lifted his arm around her shoulder and pulled him to his feet. "...Nonsense, One. You'll be fine. We just need to get you outta this cave." she said. Punchy glanced at her. "After all we've been through... How can you still WANT to help me?" he sighed. She chuckled softly, not letting the difficulty of carrying him bother her. "We had one little fight, One. That could never change anything... You're my best friend..." she reassured him. His body slowly stopped flickering, and he stood up beside her, seeming perfectly fine. "...Thank you..." he sighed. Copter groaned as he held SPOT around like a flashlight. "Just kiss already! How long are you gonna draw this out!?" he grumbled. "M-mind your own business!!" Punchy snapped, blushing profusely. "Did someone say kiss? I want one!" Suddenly, Mia emerged from up ahead, and taking Copter by surprise, planted a kiss right on his nose, making him fall over and blush even redder than Punchy! "Wh-wha-WHERE'D YOU COME FROM!?" he stammered. Razor and Silver stepped out of the shadows beside her. "Oh, Copter... You found another piece of the key. Great work!" Silver said. Shining SPOT's light ahead, Copter could see everyone peering back at them. "Who's kissing in there!?" Amy yelled, being nosy. "NO ONE!!" Punchy shouted back. "Then can we PLEASSSE get on with it!?" Vortex groaned.

After everyone had gotten over their varying degrees of embarrassment, it wasn't long before they'd arrived at the secret door to Despair Castle, a black door with the red, thirteen-pointed star on it. There were chasms even here, on either side of the door. Fera the wolf was standing in front of the door, blocking their way. However, she freely tossed Copter the third piece of the key, which connected the teeth to the base. "Uh... You letting us in?" he asked. "Only if you can get past me..." she smirked. Silver crossed his arms. "Heh... That should be easy. There's only one of you, and I've lost count of how many of us there are." he pointed out. However, Fera had no intention of battling all of them. She raised her hand, and flicking her wrist in Punchy's direction, she somehow pulled him toward her! She then raised both her hands, casting a wall of dark energy between Punchy and his friends! "Hey!! Let One go!!" Rainbow shouted. Fera grinned. "I'll let him go, but you won't like it... I knew you'd be drawn here, Punchy. The Despair Seal tempered your darkness, and now it seeks greater darkness to strengthen itself... That it may be unleashed again! I can help there..." she said. Punchy growled. "Even without the Despair Seal... You can still manipulate me... But you will never enslave me! You failed to do so at the mountain!" he shouted. Fera shrugged. "Fine. I'll just unleash your dark side... On your friends. Then if you're feeling guilty, you can hurl yourself into one of these holes!" she cackled. Outside the dark barrier, Illusi pushed past the crowd and banged against the dark energy. "If you've come to kill Punchy, you gotta wait your turn." Copter grumbled. Illusi ignored him and called out. "Fera!! Enough!! End this madness now, I implore you... I BEG you!!" he cried, his normal composure giving way to an absolute panic. "Mousy...? You look pale!" Rainbow gasped. Fera barely glanced at him. "We all had our chance to define who we are... Now it's time for you all to see EXACTLY who I am... and who your dear Punchy really is!!" she sneered. Punchy clenched his fists and glared at her. "So be it, Fera!" he said.

Fera began by sending bolts of dark lightning Punchy's way. He began to flicker black again from the attack, but he shrugged it off and came at her with his fists! "You used me... Just to kidnap Rainbow! Then you used her sister to get to her!" he yelled as he threw punches at her, which she took through a

dark energy shield, lessening the blow and adding to the dark energy making Punchy flicker. "Despair prays on...despair. That shouldn't be so surprising. Now, your rage shall lead to even greater despair!!" Fera declared, warping behind Punchy to pummel him with punches and kicks charged with darkness! He stumbled forward, and turned around with a red-eyed gaze. "Chaos BLAST!!" He fought back with a massive explosion of Chaos energy, resisting the urge to use the darkness his body was absorbing as much as possible. Fera was thrown back, but stopped in midair, using her dark powers to levitate. "Good... but you can do better!" she said, tossing balls of darkness toward him relentlessly! Punchy tried to evade them, but too many were coming, so he had to fight back. "Chaos Avalanche!!" he growled, using Chaos energy to pull up chunks of the ground and hurl them at the wolf! She warped safely away from the attack, but Punchy's body was starting to hold the black color, his green fur becoming more of a flicker. "Fera... NO!!!" Illusi shouted. "You gotta fight the darkness, One!" Rainbow cried. "Should we be... hiding?" Cream wondered nervously. Punchy charged at Fera, his fists flying at her furiously now that she was back on the ground. "Ooof... That's it!! Remember... I hurt your friends! Come at me with all your rage!" she grunted, seeming not to care about any injury she sustained. Punchy bashed her across the face, knocking her back and swiping the hair away from her normally covered right eye. The eyelid was sewn closed, and there was intensive scarring across the socket. Amy and Cream held their mouths, and others gasped upon seeing this. "...Human cruelty...has no limits. So my cruelty must also defy limits!!" she snarled, firing a massive beam of darkness directly into Punchy's chest! He groaned in pain, but the groan soon descended into demented laughter as his flickering ceased, and he fully transformed! "...Funny... I have a similar policy about MY cruelty!!" Dark Punchy roared.

Fera removed the dark barrier, grinning at her handiwork. "You're free now, dark one. Wreak your brand of cruelty on those wretches who dared contain you in that weak shell of an other self!" she commanded. Dark Punchy scowled at her. "Dark one?!" he snarled, rushing at her and catching her off guard, slamming her against the doorway! "Wh-wha!?" she stammered, firing jolts of dark lightning in an attempt to defend herself, but Dark Punchy simply absorbed them! "Never... call me... ONE!!!" he roared, smashing her across the face with a powerful, darkness-charged punch, rending her unconscious! Illusi staggered forward, turning completely pale. "My vision... No... It was unstoppable..." he mumbled as Dark Punchy lifted the unconscious Fera over his head. "Punch... Punchy, she's out...!" Copter stammered. "One, no!!!" Rainbow cried. However, Dark Punchy ignored them, and slammed her against the wall once more before tossing her limp body down the nearby chasm! "NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!" Illusi ran to the chasm and pointlessly extended his hand toward Fera, watching as she plummeted into the depths below. He started sobbing, but Dark Punchy wasn't through. "I should hurl you in there, too..." he growled. However, Rainbow stood in his way! "Enough, One!" she shouted. "I warned that wolf against calling me ONE!!!" Dark Punchy roared, only to be slapped by a tailband-powered tail whip from Copter! "Back off, you! We're talking to Punchy, here!" he said, stepping beside Rainbow and taking her hand. Heather joined them, taking Rainbow's other hand, and Amy took her hand. "...What's this??" Dark Punchy grunted. "You can do it, Punchy!" Heather shouted. "Fight back, and free yourself!" Amy called. "Come back, Mr. Punchy!" Cream added, joining in. All of his friends started calling to him, chanting his name, showing that they still cared for him, in spite of everything. And Dark Punchy convulsed, as though pained by these words. He collapsed to the floor, and his color slowly reverted to green. "...So much for getting pardoned..." Punchy panted, staring at Copter. "You were not yourself." he replied. Team GeneX took the key fragments and went to open the door, while Razor stood beside Illusi. "...Are you all right?" he asked. "She's gone... It's too late..." he said, heartbroken, "I loved her as though she were my own child... How am I to go on now?" he whimpered, kneeling over the chasm on his hands and knees. A look of guilt passed over Punchy's face. "Let's...get outta here..." he winced. Silver led them through the door Team GeneX had opened, looking back at Illusi thoughtfully. "...War casts

darkness on all our lives. We need to end this one before things get any darker..." he stated.

To be continued...

41 - Storming the Castle

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 41 - Storming the Castle
Stage 23(Hero 12) - Despair Castle
Minor Boss 19 - Terra & Firma

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair, having stolen the Master Emerald, the Chaos Crystal, the GXterminate machine, and gotten Dr. Eggman to kidnap Bucky on their behalf, have fortified their island stronghold above Station Square, preparing for their endgame.

However, a band of heroes have infiltrated Demon Island, and set out to put a stop to Despair's schemes once and for all! Now, Sonic and Knuckles are nearing the main entrance to Despair Castle.

Do they have what it takes to succeed in a daring forward assault?

Now, on to the next chapter!

Sonic, Tails and Knuckles, joined by Gemini, had reached the front gate to Despair castle. "Well, now that we're here, what do we do? Knock at the door?" Knuckles wondered. Sonic shrugged and nonchalantly knocked at the door. "Yeah, like they're really gonna just let us in..." Tails sighed. A familiar voice called from the other side of the doorway. "Hahaha! Who iiiis it??" Char said in a singsong voice. Sonic groaned softly. "Char... How'd you get to be the doorman?" he wondered. Char chuckled. "Eggman worked a miracle to get us back in the covenant's good graces! I bet he's got a brilliant plan... I got a pretty sneaky plan myself!" he snickered, pulling the door open! "Huh?? He's just...letting us in?" Gemini gasped. Char had a big grin on his face. "This'll teach those goons for tryin' to kidnap me! Hurry inside before someone sees ya!" he said. Sonic and Knuckles shrugged, leading Tails and Gemini into the castle's entrance hall. It was pretty empty; Apparently Despair's agents were busy guarding more important areas. "Well... Thanks, Char." Sonic muttered. Char nodded. "Oh! Before you go... Look out in here. Eggman's robots were added to the staff, and so were some GUN robots brought by a crazy scientist." he warned. Tails scratched his head. "You're being unusually helpful..." he muttered. "I hate this place, and I want out!" Char complained, "If you're looking for all the loot the covenant swiped, I'm afraid they got it scattered around the castle to make it tough to find. Well, I'm outta here so I can claim I was in the bathroom when you broke in. Bye!" he said, fluttering away. Knuckles crossed his arms. "Figuring out where to go first could be impossible... Maybe Bucky would be able to help us if we could free him." he figured. Sonic looked around the entrance hall, trying to decide which way to go first. "Yeah... He was a big help during the Kosmo and Soleanna fiascos... Even if he did try to zap me last time I saw him." he murmured. Gemini pointed to the path straight ahead. "Let's just head as deep into the castle as we can and see what we find! Hopefully we find the copy of my wand before it gets used in that doomsday weapon again!" she said.

Despair Castle was painted with a lot of black and red, with the thirteen-pointed star of Despair as a main focal point of the decor. There were doors and pathways everywhere. It was a massive place. As Sonic and company proceeded down a long hallway, a bright light shone from an adjoining hallway, and SPOT scampered out to greet them, sitting at Tails's feet. "Hey, where have you been??" Tails wondered. Just then, Sonic found himself tackle-hugged by Amy. "It's the light at the end of the tunnel!! You have no idea what I had to endure to find you again, Sonic!" she cried, squeezing him tightly. Cream was close behind her, and met Tails with a much gentler hug. Silver had also come out, and Gemini gave him a friendly hug as well. "Silver! It's been too long!" she smiled. Zipp the hornet was with them as well. Knuckles took one look at him and said "I ain't huggin' ya." To which he stuck out his tongue. When the cuddly reunion was over, they took a moment to question why Zipp was there. "Aside from the fact that my brilliance got them in here in the first place... I split up with my team to look for Bucky. Duh." Zipp explained. Suddenly, a loud thud was heard from the adjoining hallway across from them. "Awww, did I miss the hugs? I wanted one! Well... I guess we can still be friends and play." The crazed robotic voice was all too familiar. "Oh, no... Alpha!" Sonic turned around, and sure enough, the thud was Alpha landing behind them. He was accompanied by some of Eggman's most recent creations: Egg Fighters! They were used a lot during Eggman's plot to unleash Dark Gaia, and now the blue robots were back for more! Tails looked at this army and decided to try something crazy. "...ALPHA!! Look out behind you!!" he shouted. Alpha turned his head around and, seeing the Egg Fighters, let out a robotic scream. "Everything is blue!!! It's an evil conspiracy!! Save me, blue hedgehog!!" he yelled before flying up into the air, acrobatically flipping around near the high ceiling. "Uh... I don't know if that was good thinking or not, Tails." Sonic said, scratching his head. "Me neither..." Tails admitted.

As a battle started to break out in the hall, the noise drew the attention of some Despair agents, who came to observe from a balcony above. They were Conan the raccoon and Anubis the jackal. "Sonic... He has proven every bit as persistent as that doctor warned us..." Anubis growled. "And look, that pathetic excuse for a hunter has come to get back his emerald. How quaint." Conan grinned. Anubis started to raise his hands. "I must summon my servants..." he snarled. "Hold on, there... Wouldn't it be prudent to put a guard on all those valuable Chaos Relics we've been gathering?" Conan suggested. Anubis glanced at him with a serious look. "It is in good hands." he stated. "It could be in better hands... You wouldn't happen to know where they're being held...?" Conan asked. Anubis glared at him. "...Safe from the likes of you!" he growled. Sighing, Conan drew his Chaos Sword and shot some Chaos Spears at Anubis, making him waste some fiery blasts on blocking them so that he'd have an opening to kick the jackal off the balcony! "Gaaaaaaahhh!! Traaaaaaitooooor!!!" Anubis roared, bursting into flames as he crashed onto an Egg Fighter! "Hey... What's up, Anubis?" Sonic waved. Conan glanced down and waved melodramatically. "Good bye, Covenant of Despair! I begin the ultimate treasure hunt now! Thanks so much for gathering so many of the Chaos Relics in one place! And fox boy... I know you've got the second Chaos Tailband! I'll get them both soon enough!" he shouted before escaping somewhere in the upper floors of the castle. Silver stared up at the balcony for a second. "Well... At least we're not the only ones Despair has to worry about." he said. Anubis stood up slowly, his body covered in flames. "...I will deal with that traitor... Just as soon as I've burned all of you to cinders!!!" he snarled. Zipp started shooting him, but his bullets seemingly couldn't penetrate Anubis's flames. "Well... I guess if the fall didn't kill ya..." he grumbled. However, Silver simply buried him under a pile of broken Egg Fighters that he tossed with his psychokinesis! "That oughta slow him down!" he said.

While fighting the Egg Fighters, Sonic soon spied an Egg Mobile sneaking by into the hallway up ahead. It was just Metal Eggman, but his sneaking seemed suspicious enough to check out. "Hey! Where do you think you're goin'!? It's not like an Eggman to take off without taunting me or something!" Sonic

shouted, speeding after the metallic doctor! "Go ahead! Try and catch me! This time I've got you beat, once and for all!! Gah ha ha ha!!" Metal Eggman cackled. "You're not the real Eggman, you know!!" Sonic shouted. Metal Eggman growled at him and started flying upward, finding an opening leading into one of the castle's many towers. In order to chase him, Sonic had to run for the wall, picking up enough speed to run UP the wall! "Sonic!! ...Be careful!!" Amy shouted, bashing aside an Egg Fighter before watching Sonic disappear up into the hole in the ceiling leading to the tower. Metal Eggman glanced down as he rose up the tower and yelped, weaving around bridges as he led Sonic higher and higher up Despair Castle. Some Despair agents tried shooting at Sonic from the bridges spanning through the inside of the tower, but Sonic just moved swiftly upward, moving back and forth just slightly to make himself difficult to hit. Soon, they were at the highest point inside the tower, where a number of metal beams were pretty much all there was to stand on. "Nowhere left to run, Egg-bolts! Now what can you tell me about the REAL Eggman's plans here?" Sonic shouted from his perch on a metal beam. "I AM the Eggman!! Ask me about MY plans!! Or... don't. Actually, my plan is to lure you up to this high point." Metal Eggman said, shifting from rage to amusement. Other robots dropped down from the ceiling and landed on the metal beams, surrounding Sonic! It was Terra, Firma and Freeze! "...How'd these obviously non-flying robots get up here!?" Sonic stammered, "That's all that surprises me, really." Terra slammed his robotic fist against the wall. "You have escaped me enough times now! THIS TIME, YOU DIE!!" he roared. "To restore my counterpart's honor, I will destroy you." Firma added. Freeze simply turned his fist to ice, glaring at Sonic.

The three robots all lunged at Sonic at once, hoping to knock him from the beam and send him plummeting to his doom! However, he simply jumped them and landed on another beam. "Good try, but I'm still fast without much space!" he taunted. Terra withdrew his claws into his arms, replacing them with machine guns, while Firma chased after Sonic directly, and Freeze started firing blasts of ice at the metal beams to make them slippery! Sonic slipped past Firma, running and jumping around the beams to avoid Terra's bullets and look for an opening for a counterattack. "No, no, no!! HIT him, you imbeciles!!" Metal Eggman shouted, "Look, watch me! I'LL get him!" he growled, adding his own lasers to Sonic's troubles! "All right... It's not that I don't like you goin' to all this trouble just for me... but..." Sonic jumped into the air, bounced off Freeze, and then went hurtling toward Metal Eggman! Determined to take the hedgehog out, Terra pointed his machine guns in the direction Sonic was heading. "Huh?? N-no!! Don't shoot ME!!!" Metal Eggman yelled. "You are not Eggman... Must DESTROY Sonic..." Terra buzzed. As Sonic ricocheted off Metal Eggman's Egg Mobile, a hail of bullets hammered the hovercraft, causing the control panel to start sparking. "Hmm... Looks like Terra failed obedience school." Sonic shrugged from the beam next to Metal Eggman. The Egg Mobile started shaking uncontrollably, and Metal Eggman himself buzzed violently. "N-no... I... am... the Eggman!! You cannot... stop... the Eggzzzz... Empirezzzz... Sniiiiiiiiivleeeeeeeyzzzz!!!" An explosion from the Egg Mobile followed, and Metal Eggman went plummeting down the tower to the hall below! "Uh... Heads up, guys!!" Sonic shouted, only to be struck by an icy beam from Freeze! He jumped away before it could freeze him solid, but his fur got a bit icy. "Gah! That's c-cold...!" he shivered. "I will put you on ice before any more of us are shut down!" Freeze hissed. Terra and Firma turned to Sonic as well. This battle was still far from over!

By this point, Zipp had managed to follow Sonic up to where he was fighting the robots. "What's the big idea dropping a fat robot on me!?" he shouted as he arrived. Sonic barely glanced at him. "Zipp...? Eh, I'll take it..." he sighed. Zipp started by firing at Firma, drawing her attention. "Hey, chubsy! Didn't anyone ever tell you pink and orange are a bad combo!?" he said. "...Impediment detected. Must eliminate quickly." Firma stated. Of course, Sonic still had to deal with the projectiles coming from Freeze and

Terra. Zipp helped a bit, but that wouldn't matter much once the next meddler flew up. It was Alpha, and he was flailing his arms and spinning his head in a crazed fashion. "WHO KILLED MY DADDY!?!?" he squealed. Used to Alpha's nonsense by now, Sonic simply pointed at Terra. "He did it." he tattled. Terra glanced at Alpha with cold, robotic eyes. "What is your major malfunction, Alpha?! Sonic the Hedgehog is our ENEMY! Restore your primary directive, or I must annihilate you!!" he said. Freeze nodded in agreement. "Due to our inability to fly, your aid would be most preferable." he pointed out. Alpha straightened his body out, his eyes resting on each of the other robots, and then on Sonic. "Sonic the Hedgehog... Enemy... Fruitcake registration...deleted. E-X Series... Also enemy. Must SAVE...by exploding!" he said in a monotone voice. Sonic stared with wide eyes, and then gulped. "I felt perfectly in control of this situation until Alpha showed up..." he admitted. Terra roared in frustration. "Destroy me if you can!! I will OBLITERATE YOU ALL!!" he screamed. "Terra...!" Firma groaned, hearing this. "...Except Firma!" Terra added. At this moment, shots started flying everywhere. Zipp was busy shooting back at anyone who fired at him, and Alpha and Terra were shooting at everyone! Sonic, trying to dodge, found himself slipping on the icy beams! "This couldn't be how it eeeeeeeends!!!" he wailed, plummeting down as Metal Eggman did moments before! Tails was on his way up, riding SPOT, but he was too close to see Sonic in time, and missed catching him! "Oh, no!! S-SONIC!!!" he cried. Sonic was screaming his lungs out, he couldn't think of much else to do. However, he soon spotted Knuckles climbing up the wall! "...Hold on!!!" Knuckles grunted, jumping slightly and grabbing Sonic's arm before catching the wall again with his other hand! "Whew!! I... won't let you down this time... Sonic!!!" Knuckles grunted. "Thanks... Can I switch arms? You darn near pulled the one you're holding off when you caught me..." Sonic panted.

Tails soon caught up with them, and gave Sonic a ride back to the ground. Zipp and the robots soon followed. Although the robots couldn't exactly fly, they could hover to a degree, and that enabled them to reach the ground safely. "We'll finish this down here with your little friends, then!" Freeze said. Team Rose was busy exchanging blows with Anubis and a few of his mummy minions, while Gemini was handling the remaining Egg Fighters. This left Zipp and Team Sonic to take on Alpha, Terra, Firma and Freeze. Zipp gladly flew after Alpha. "I have a score to settle with you! First all that craziness at the security building, then your boss nabs Bucky, then you knock a vintage six shooter out of my hands while we're fighting up there! Yes, I know it only has six bullets, but it makes a standoff even more dramatic!" he shouted. Knuckles stood up to Firma while Sonic and Tails took on Terra and Freeze together. "Split up Terra and Firma... They work best together." Tails suggested. "I owe 'her' a beatdown anyway..." Knuckles growled. So, the fights began! Firma started slamming her fists around, creating mini-earthquakes, while Knuckles jumped around her looking for an opening to land a punch. Sonic sped around Terra and Freeze while Tails dug around a hatch in SPOT's back, looking for something to aid the battle. He held up his Chaos Tailband. "Hmmm... No, that's probably overkill..." he muttered, plopping it back inside. Meanwhile, Sonic bounced off Freeze and Terra, annoying them a great deal. "Your pitiful jumps no longer bother my armor!" Terra shouted. "Oh, yeah?" Sonic said, building up some speed so he could wallop Terra with a bunch of jumps all over him, hammering his armor with repeated homing attacks! Freeze tried to aim while he was moving around. "Just keep that up... I'll put a chill on you!" he said, only to be whacked in the head with a wrench! He glanced at Tails with annoyance. "Maybe the tailband would've been better..." he muttered. Stepping aside, he let SPOT fire a laser at Freeze, knocking him over!

Silver tossed Anubis toward the robots, and the disoriented jackal spewed fire over Terra, Firma and Freeze, with Sonic and Knuckles moving aside just in time to avoid it! The robots were looking a bit battered now, and Firma stepped over to Terra, lifting him up over her head. "NOOO!! MUST..."

DESTROOOOY!!" Terra wailed, flailing his limbs in protest. "We will require upgrades. Retreat for now." Firma said, carrying Terra away. Freeze, seeing this, realized he had no choice but to follow them. Picking himself up, Anubis growled and started to retreat as well. "I will alert the castle to Conan's treachery... And then I will return for my vengeance!" he grunted. Alpha remained, and Zipp was busy banging on the robot's head, wondering why it wouldn't just blow up. "Well... That was a warm welcome. I guess this castle's gonna be loads of fun." Sonic said. Just then, the real Dr. Eggman emerged from the tower above! He had a magnet under his Egg Mobile, which he used to lift up Metal Eggman's remains. "So, Sonic... Bash me to pieces, will you. I notice you're much more cordial to Metal SONIC!" he grumbled. "We oughta do it to the real you!" Amy growled. "Yeah, and where'd ya stash Bucky, you rotten egg!?" Knuckles shouted. Eggman kept his Egg Mobile a safe height above his adversaries, as the Chaos Emeralds were gone from it. "Tell you what. You can keep Alpha around and see if he leads you to him. Maybe you'll get lucky. You know how his brain is." he grumbled. "Keep tap dancing on my head! It tickles!" Alpha giggled, making Zipp fall to the floor in frustration. "Curse you, Eggman..." he sighed. Gemini looked at the doctor curiously. "Those Chaos Emeralds... what'd you do with them? ...You didn't put them in the doomsday weapon!?" she stammered. Eggman chuckled. "Do you think I'd start up a device that might be used to kill me? Am I that insane? Don't answer that. Anyway... Since you've helped me out so much today, Knuckles, I thought I'd mention that I've seen the Master Emerald around! It's even in one piece! Now let's see if you can get it back that way..." he taunted before flying off. "Hey, wait!! Where was it!? EGGMAN!!" Knuckles shouted futilely. "Relax, Knuckles. We'll find it." Sonic said. Silver nodded. "...The fate of the world might depend on it..." he murmured ominously.

To be continued...

42 - Despair's Prisoner

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 42 - Despair's Prisoner
Stage 23(Hero 12) - Despair Castle
Boss 23 - Eddie

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Our heroes are pulling out all the stops to defeat the Covenant of Despair! But the mission is complicated by Dr. Eggman being thrown in the mix. Sonic, Tails and Knuckles have united to form "Team Sonic", and with Gemini's help, began exploring Despair Castle from the main entryway. They were soon joined by Team Rose and Zipp, and teamed up to battle a squad of Egg Fighters led by Alpha. Seeing an opportunity now that the covenant was beginning to have its hands full, Conan turned on his allies and went to search for the Chaos Relics stashed in the castle. Sonic chased Metal Eggman into a trap, and was surrounded by Freeze, Terra and Firma. However, Metal Eggman got scrapped, and with the help of his friends, Sonic sent most of the robots packing. The real Eggman arrived to gather Metal Eggman's remains, and left Alpha behind as a "reward" of sorts, leaving our heroes to continue searching for the Master Emerald, Bucky, and Project GXterminate before Despair puts their fiendish plans to action!

Now, on to the next chapter!

At the end of the long hall they'd been traversing, the group found a big, important-looking locked door. Sick of looking for keys, Amy's first instinct instead was to try bashing it with her hammer. Knuckles tried his fists as well. This door was made of tough stuff, or otherwise magically reinforced, because it wouldn't budge. Gemini stepped over to the door. "Abra-ka-unlockra!" Obviously, the door WAS magically sealed, because the spell failed as well. "...Well, I'm still technically in training." she sighed. SPOT perked up, beeping as though detecting something. The robo-puppy started heading for another, unlocked hall nearby. "Looks like SPOT is onto something!" Tails said. Sonic shrugged. "It'll have to do. I'm getting bored waiting for us to figure a way past this door." he said. "But, what if the doomsday weapon is in there??" Silver said urgently. Zipp patted his shoulder. "I'm SURE it is. But we can't get in yet. We'd best find a bargaining chip to force them to let us in, don't ya think?" he suggested. Silver crossed his arms. "We don't have time for such a roundabout strategy!" he said. "Then GET A MOVE ON, Silver!" Knuckles yelled, pushing him forward, "Thinking about how we can do the impossible is pointless!" As they headed into the next hallway, once they were all out of sight, Alpha looked at the locked door and kicked it in the hinges, causing it to fall over backward with a thud! "It's beautiful! Wall to wall chili dogs!" he gasped. "Hey! Where's Alpha!? HEY, YOU!! NO SNEAKING UP ON US!!" Amy shouted back. So, Alpha hurried back to the group with a squeak. As they were walking, Gemini was waving her wand carefully, trying to detect the Master Emerald for Knuckles. "...Well?" he asked. "I know you'll find this frustrating, what with how I detected it at Eggman's base from all the way at Shadow Arc

before... But there's too much magical interference here. I just can't pinpoint it. I know it's here, I just don't know where." she sighed. Knuckles scratched his head. "Well... You tried. I'll tear this whole castle down if I have to... I'll find it." he grumbled.

They found themselves going down a winding hallway with a red carpet. Up ahead, they heard a voice that was familiar to some of them. "Slow down... I think that's Jolt up ahead." Silver warned. The electric yellow Egg Pawn was bossing around some lesser Egg Pawns up ahead. "SONIC will be on his way here! Set up those thunder-traps and lightning pendulums! He's not making a fool out of me... um, US, again! And we'll get his little friends to boot! They'll never see us coming with this twisty-turny hallway! Hehehehehe!!" he chuckled. "Unless you talk really loudly and we hear your whole plan!" Sonic shouted, stepping out and grinning at Jolt smugly. The Egg Pawns hurriedly put together their traps, but Sonic simply sped by them, getting through the hall before the thunder mechanisms on the floor could zap him or the electrified pendulums in the halls could strike him! Jolt watched him, stammering in frustration, but then glanced back at the rest of the group. "AHA!! You didn't figure on your little friends! How about this, give yourself up and maybe I'll let them go!" he shouted. Sonic chuckled, shaking his head. "I'll scout out ahead, guys. You can handle this, right?" he said, speeding away. Jolt stood stiffly, seeming to have overloaded. Gemini started walking ahead of the group, calmly casting spells at the "thunder-traps" to disable them. "Reverize..." she said, casting a spell that drained the power from the electric traps. Alpha flew ahead and grabbed at the pendulums, playfully swinging on them until they loosened and fell down. "Wheeee!! BOOM!! Those swings are funny!" he giggled. Zipp, Silver and Amy took out the hapless Egg Pawns that had set up the traps, but left Jolt alone in his seemingly frozen state. Cream knocked on his head as she passed by. "Gee, Mr. Robot... Don't take it so hard. What did you think would happen if you were being bad?" she said before following the others. With the danger easily removed from the path, SPOT regained the lead, searching out the signal he was detecting. Once they were out of sight, Jolt moved again. "Ah... I scared 'em off, eh? Yeah... That's it..." he murmured, "Now I better find an outlet to recharge. I'm beat!" he "sighed."

The group reunited with Sonic by a doorway where a lot of buzzing and whirring was coming from the next room. "Sounds like someone's working with tools... Maybe the doomsday weapon's in there?" Tails wondered. They headed inside and found a laboratory, where Despair agents in white uniforms were hard at work building new robots and weapons! They were being aided by none other than GUN's Dr. Nammad. "You!? ...How can you work for these guys!?" Silver gasped. Nammad chuckled. "Survival of the, uh, fittest. So how could I not? The only way to, uh, survive the coming... boom... Is to side with Despair. They'll keep me alive and, uh, maybe reward me handsomely..." he grinned. "You and Eggman are a disgrace to good scientists everywhere!" Tails growled. Sonic shook his head. "Don't put him with Eggman. I'm sure Eggman plans to betray Despair. This guy... Somehow he's a bigger scumbag than Eggman! He actually intends to watch them slaughter his own kind!" he shouted. Nammad backed away a step. "Oooh, I uh, detect some tension here..." he mumbled. "Picked up on that, eh??" Amy said, holding up her hammer. "Where's that fake wand you created!?" Gemini growled. With tensions rising, Dr. Nammad glanced at the back door briefly. "Oh... That wand is safe... Still connected to Project GXterminate..." he squeaked, nonchalantly pressing a button on the edge of a lab desk. In reaction to the button, a number of robots sprung to life! They loosely resembled Eggman's Spinner robots, but with a more compact, black design and blades ending in spiky "teeth!" These robots started to fly at the group, and Nammad ran for the back door! "Be sure they don't, uh, follow me!" he said to the Despair scientists, "Adios, my fuzzy friends! See ya on the other side..." he grinned as he escaped. Knuckles jumped away from one of the black Spinners and growled. "I have no clue who that guy was... But I don't like him." he grunted. "He's GUN's Dr. Nammad!" Gemini informed him, "And he's responsible for the

doomsday weapon!" she said.

The white-suited scientists, mostly foxes and owls, picked up various weapons in preparation to defend themselves. "Hoot... You shall not defeat the Covenant of Despair!!" an owl shouted, trying not to look too ridiculous. Silver, Gemini and Zipp took charge of the situation with the Spinners, using their powers and weaponry to take them out without the need to touch them. The scientists had equipped themselves with high tech arm cannons, laser rifles, and handfuls of odd-looking bombs. The remaining Spinners started to glow as well, firing energy beams from their blades as they spun around! Sonic and Knuckles ducked behind an energy shield Tails had SPOT set up, but the shield was quickly disabled by an electrical explosion from the odd-looking bombs! "Yikes! ...Better keep away from those, SPOT!" Tails yelped. Knuckles growled and pulled out the Chaos Gauntlets. "If they wanna play hardball... I could try these again..." he said. "I dunno, Knuckles. Both tailbands can make Copter go super, and obviously the others are stronger in groups, too. We wouldn't want you accidentally goin' nuclear." Sonic warned. As they discussed this, Cheese flew ahead and started whacking the Despair scientists, disrupting their aim! Alpha was following him around, shooting up any Spinners that followed them! "Heehee! Wait for me, Char!!" the robot giggled. Cream scratched her head as she watched. "He... thinks Cheese is that other Chao?" she mumbled. Amy charged forward with her hammer. "Whatever!! They gave us an opening!!" she yelled, bashing at a fox as he tried to defend with his arm cannon! Silver glanced at Team Sonic and nodded. "We'll handle this. You guys better move on while you can!" he suggested. "What? But... will you be okay?" Tails asked worriedly. Sonic sighed. "He's right. We can't let these guys distract us from the big picture!" he said, hurrying for the back door that Dr. Nammad had escaped through. SPOT scampered that way as well, so Tails and Knuckles followed. "...Huh?? Hey, don't ditch me!!" Zipp shouted, flying off after Team Sonic. Gemini warped out of the action and joined them as well, leaving Team Rose and Alpha to deal with the scientists.

Dr. Nammad had gotten away, but SPOT managed to pick up the signal he'd been following again, and it wasn't long before they reached the source of the signal. It was the seventh Chaos Emerald, the green one, and it was set in a wall above a prison cell, being used to generate a force field not unlike the one that had been used by Eggman to contain Sonic. It wasn't Bucky held in the cell, however. In fact, it was Shadow Chaos! The creature raged against its cage, bashing against the force field, but to no avail. Guarding the cell was Patch and Infin, but they looked a bit taken aback as Team Sonic, Zipp and Gemini arrived. "Um... It was HIS idea!!" Patch yelped, pointing at Infin and recoiling away from the intruders. "Oh, yoiks! No one said we'd be dealing with Sonic's whole posse! What do youse want!?" Infin groaned. Zipp pointed a gun at the weasel, who responded in kind. "How about you lead us to Bucky, or I blow your blinkin' brains out?" he growled. "How 'bout I blow yer brains out just fer fun?" Infin growled. Gemini warped beside the two of them and pointed her wand around, startling them. "Now, we'll have none of this!" she yelled. Patch clapped excitedly. "Good trick! Now saw Mitchie boy in half!" he giggled. Infin groaned and held his forehead. "A magician, too... Fine, we give... Whatever ya want. It ain't worth it no more." he grumbled. Sonic nodded. "Great... Could we start with that Chaos Emerald, or would it be dangerous, with Shadow Chaos and all?" he wondered. A new voice echoed through the room. "Eeee hee... It'd be very dangerous, but you're in danger as it is! Eeeee hee hee hee hee!! You thought you'd waltz in to our castle and just take what you want THIS easily!?" Knuckles glanced around uneasily. "That laugh... It's familiar... Eddie!" he growled. Gemini nodded. "How could I forget..." she groaned. With a flash of blinding light, Eddie the hyena materialized in the room! "Eee hee... I was in here the whole time, actually. But, an illusionist never reveals his secrets." he chuckled, glancing at Infin and wagging his finger, "Tsk, tsk... You know our policy about surrenders..." he said.

Eddie wasn't alone. Beacon robots flew into the room, and several of Despair's dark mages warped in as well, cloaked in black hoods, so their faces couldn't be seen. The group suddenly found the odds turned drastically against them. "Umm... Can I use the gauntlets now? Because I'm not great with magic..." Knuckles muttered. "Then WHY do you want to USE magic??" Tails pointed out. Eddie grinned at this situation. "I have a killer idea. Warp them into Shadow Chaos's cell and leave them there. It'll be fun. Eeee hee hee!" he said. "They've got a magician, they'll just port on out!" Infin pointed out. Eddie gave him a droll look. "Well, then kill 'em!" he ordered. "Not... so... fast!!" came a voice that lifted Gemini's spirits. Reinforcements arrived in the form of Fred the fennec, Adam the bat, Evelyn the fox and Cuthbert the alligator, and they set to work giving Team Sonic a little breathing room by blasting the Beecons with their futuristic lasers while Fred took on some of the mages with his magic! Gemini swiftly warped over to her friends to aid them, and SPOT joined in as well, firing lasers as the enemies scrambled to fight back! This left Team Sonic and Zipp, and they were intent on taking on the leaders of this Despair group. Zipp turned his attention to Infin again. "I don't care who leads me to Bucky...and I get a feeling you don't know anything anyway." Zipp said. "Heh, your opinion. But they call me Infin fer a reason... I know it all! Not that I'll tell the likes a' youse!" he growled. Tails faced off against Patch in the meantime, who spun around his nunchucks as he twirled his tails in anticipation. "Hee hee... And they called ME a freakazoid. Look at you with the tail!" Patch teased. Tails shuddered at the insult, but seeing Patch's various discolored splotches of fur, he could tell that he'd probably been on the receiving end of worse before. "All right... This might look like I'm kicking your butt... But it's all to set you free!" he said, hoping defeating Despair would save its more innocent members. "...Hee hee!! Hee hee hee hee! You are gonna be some REAL fun!" Patch cackled. Meanwhile, Sonic and Knuckles squared off against Eddie...

Eddie's hand glowed lightly, and he made a blue Knuckles and red Sonic appear in front of him! Sonic stared in amazement. "...Illusionist." Knuckles shrugged. Nodding, Sonic clenched his fists at his doppelganger. "Red's not really my color. I'll have to destroy this imposter!" he said, charging at it! However, the red Sonic dashed behind him with equal speed! "Huh?? Wha?!" Sonic babbled. Eddie chuckled at this, but Knuckles wasn't interested in playing the game. He stomped over to the red Sonic and bashed it over the head! "It only takes one good hit to stop an illusion! And he wasn't expecting me to ignore my copy!" he grunted as the Sonic copy went poof! Sonic shrugged and bashed the hapless Knuckles copy, but Eddie didn't care much. "Eeee hee hee hee! You like to hit each other, don't you? Fine with me!!" he laughed, raising his hands and blinding them with bright light! When Sonic's eyes readjusted, Knuckles was missing. Eddie was beside him instead. In fact, Eddie was everywhere! "Um... I don't know how you did it, but... You turned everyone into you?? PUT EVERYONE BACK!!" Sonic yelled. "Eee hee hee! But everyone's so much better looking this way!" Eddie replied, throwing a punch at Sonic! He jumped aside quickly, but more punches came his way fast! "Eeee hee hee! Stand still, you blue gumball!" he laughed. Sonic watched him as he jumped back and forth. His stance was familiar as he came at him. "...Knuckles??" he muttered. Knuckles was trapped in the same illusion, but to him, Sonic and everyone else was Eddie. "You bring Sonic and everyone back, RIGHT NOW!!" he yelled. "Eeee hee! What, am I too fast for you?" Eddie chuckled, evading him quickly. Of course, it was really Sonic, and he realized that he had to get Knuckles's attention by doing something Eddie COULDN'T do. He curled into a ball and dashed at Knuckles, catching him off guard and knocking him over! "Ugh!! Hyenas can spin dash!? Wait..." Knuckles muttered, looking up as he was sprawled on the floor. The real Eddie was hovering overhead. "...Hee hee... Would you believe I'm Tails?" he said. The "Eddie" on the ground helped Knuckles up, and they leapt at the real one, knocking him down and dispelling the illusion!

Eddie stood back up, ready for more. "Eeee hee hee! All right, there's always plan B and C..." he grinned. At this point, Tails knocked Patch aside with a tail whip and held out a device he'd managed to get ready in the confusion: the Chaos Emerald magnet! It pulled the green emerald free from the wall, instantly powering down the force field that was keeping Shadow Chaos trapped! "Shadow Chaos! You're free now! So, what do you say to the guys who caged you?!" Tails shouted. Eddie, with his back turned to Shadow Chaos, jumped slightly. "Hee... He wouldn't hit a guy with glasses, would he?" he said, putting illusion glasses on his face. Shadow Chaos roared and slammed the hyena out of his way, then melted into a puddle in order to slither its way out of the room quickly and easily! "Jeez, shoot and cripes!! That THING is loose in the castle!!" Infin cursed. Patch climbed to his feet, chuckling incessantly. "Heeheehee... I laugh uncontrollably when I'm nervous... Heeheehe... Whatta we do?" he babbled. Infin glanced at the dazed Eddie, then at Sonic and his friends. "Gah... Never mind them! C'mon, boys! Let's get that goopy creature contained, quick!" he shouted, leading the mages in pursuit of Shadow Chaos! Zipp stuck his tongue out at him as he left, while Gemini and her friends took a breather, tending to some injuries Adam had sustained. Sonic and Knuckles turned to Tails. "Good job, buddy... I get the feeling hyena-boy wasn't gonna quit easily if you hadn't done that." Sonic said. Knuckles nodded. "Yeah... Least we got a Chaos Emerald out of this." he added. Tails added the emerald to the collection of items in SPOT's hatch, a serious look on his face. "We may have got this far, but the Master Emerald and the other 5 Chaos Emeralds are still missing... And that doomsday weapon's still in here, too." he pointed out. Sonic looked at the cell curiously. "What was Shadow Chaos doing locked up here, anyway?" he wondered. Zipp groaned. "Aw, these guys are after EVERYTHING. The Chaos Relics. Bucky. Heather. They're NUTS!" he said. Sonic nodded. "Yeah, maybe..." he agreed. One thing was certain, they had to be stopped, before things could get any worse!

To be continued...

43 - Team Dark Vs. Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 43 - Team Dark Vs. Despair
Stage 24(Dark 12) - Despair Castle
Minor Boss 20 - Zeke

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair, having stolen the Master Emerald, the Chaos Crystal, the GXterminate machine, and gotten Dr. Eggman to kidnap Bucky on their behalf, have fortified their island stronghold above Station Square, preparing for their endgame.

However, a band of heroes have infiltrated Demon Island, and set out to put a stop to Despair's schemes once and for all! Among them is Kosmo the morph. Formerly an agent of Despair, Kosmo has seen firsthand the hypocrisy of their organization, and now works against them...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Having worked with Despair before, Kosmo had time to learn some paths around the island and into their castle. He headed for a side entrance to the castle, and he found Shadow, Rouge and Omega there as well. "Hostile approaching..." Omega warned. "That's cute." Kosmo frowned. Rouge glared at him slightly. "We didn't exactly hash things out yet. What makes you think you can just show up now and pretend to be all friendly after what you pulled at Shadow Arc!? You disguised yourself as ME!! I felt so violated!!" she shouted. Shadow glanced at her. "Was I so different at first? I could just as easily have gone a different route, had there been no one other than Black Doom to guide me..." he said. Kosmo sighed. "This is boring..." Then he morphed into Rouge and used her superior leg strength to kick the door open! "HEY!! STOP BEING ME!!" she screeched. Suddenly, something teleported amongst them with a flash of light, surprising them, and causing Omega to whip out his guns hastily. "What's all the commotion down here?" said Whisk the Divine, the one who'd just appeared among them. Kosmo recognized her, and morphed back to normal so that she might recognize him. "You're that creature I met under the pyramid..." he recalled. Whisk stared at him, blinking in confusion. "Under a pyramid? That sounds heavy... You look familiar, though... And so does he." she said, pointing to Shadow. Omega withdrew his guns slowly. "Annoying experiments. These distractions will deter our mission." he said. Kosmo glanced at Shadow. "And what mission is that?" he wondered. Shadow crossed his arms. "Shouldn't that be obvious? We're to disable the GXterminate machine, and gather up any Chaos Relics we can find along the way. However, Gunner wants the machine returned to him... I say we destroy it." he suggested. Kosmo nodded. "A wise plan... But those relics are too powerful to give to GUN. I'm not sure who would be best to take them... Maybe I'll just have to hold on to 'em." he shrugged, "Don't get bent outta shape, though. I'm not here for that. The Darkseeker has put a hold on people... hurt people. Those who aren't here by choice, we should try to set free. Some are just here to rescue Bucky... Maybe I can talk them out of it..." he said. Shadow shrugged, and Whisk mimicked him. "Let's go, then." he

said.

They didn't get too far into Despair Castle before they found their path blocked by a squadron of GUN robots! Various types of Hunter and Beetle robots stood in their way, and Whisk was immediately startled into teleporting behind Omega. "Don't shoot! See! We've got a robot, too!" she stammered. Agent 32 was standing near the front with these robots, and seeing Kosmo, didn't feel the need to ask further questions. "Shadow's thrown in his lot with that freak! Blow them to fuzzy bits!" he ordered. However, the voice of Sergeant Drol overruled him. "Stand down, troops!" He stepped past the robots with Agent 64 in tow. "B-but Sarge!" Agent 32 whined. "He said stand down. Don't fret, your bloodlust won't go to waste." Agent 64 said smugly. Shadow smiled slightly. "Good to see you, Drol." he said. "Wait, you guys are pals??" Kosmo stammered. Drol rubbed his chin. "Not initially... But the more I saw of Project GXterminate, the more opposed to it I grew. After the incident at GUN's headquarters, I had a brief chance to discuss the situation with Shadow. We agreed... The project must be destroyed." he said. Rouge nodded. "This guy isn't Gunner, even though he works for him. It's hard to imagine anyone being as despicable as that old creep, anyway." she said. Drol snapped his fingers, and Guard flew past the robots to him. "Agent Guard will obey me for now. I am ordering him to go with you and find Project GXterminate." he stated. As he did, agents of Despair started to flood the hall, led by an irate Corky. "Oi, more intruders in here!! I'm gettin' right sick o' this, I am! Gimmie a laser rifle!! I'll blow their blinkin' brains out!!" he shouted. Drol drew a gun from his holster, and his fellow agents joined him. "We'll hold them off as best we can! Get going and stop them before they activate that machine! All they need is a suitable source of life energy... So they might start wiping out the human population any moment!" he warned. Whisk sighed. "Oh, as long as it's just the human population!" she said. Shadow shook his head. "Hmph... I've got a bad feeling it's not that simple. Let's move!" he urged everyone.

In spite of Drol's assistance, more Despair agents kept on coming, so even after speeding past the distracted first wave, the group still had to deal with more, as well as Beecon and Spinner robots that had been let loose in the castle. Each member of the group would have to pull their weight to move forward, so they all started fighting. Guard flew ahead into the fray, tossing beams from his scythe at various uniformed animals while slashing the weapon directly at robots. "Grrrrr!! I've got a lot of frustration to vent right now, so just KEEP COMING!!" he snarled. Omega had a similar attitude, wailing on bears and bulls that blocked his way with a frenzy of punches from his mighty robot arms. "You are merely stepping stones to Eggman!! Where is he!?" he shouted. Whisk was a bit more passive, warping here and there, confusing her enemies into running into each other. If any of them touched her, she warped up high and shook them off. "All I know is that the guys in black suits are bad! ...At least I hope so." she grumbled. Rouge occupied herself with the robots, flying after the bees and the Spinners and giving them well-aimed kicks to take them out of commission. "This is what they get for ripping off Eggman! ...I think I may have said that about GUN once, too..." she sighed. Shadow, of course, was the MVP of the fight. He hurled Chaos Spears, threw punches, warped to the other side of the hall as needed, and slammed tougher animals with homing attacks to the head! He even nailed Corky as he passed him by. "D'ohhh!! Blimy hedgehogs..." he groaned as he passed out. Kosmo was also quite busy, but with so many enemies, he had to keep his transformations to a minimum to avoid tiring himself out. So, he kept it "simple" by using his mace-tail ability, turning the tip of his tail into a spiked ball, twirling and hurling it around at enemies as they neared him. "If I get bored of this, I guess I could turn my arms into swords or something..." he muttered, smacking Corky back down as he started to get up. "This job sucks..." the frog groaned in pain.

After working their way past the enemies, they soon passed by a number of rooms, most of which

seemed relatively empty. However, they heard voices coming from one room, and decided to check it out. Inside, they found some familiar faces. There was Espio, Charmy and Vector, along with Crash, and they were looking over maps laid out on some desks in the room. "Ah, Shadow... Your timing is impeccable!" Vector remarked. "Grrr... What are you up to, Crash?" Guard grumbled. Crash took off his hat and looked a bit distressed. "Apologies for siding with Despair at the President's place... Now that they've taken Bucky, I'm fully out of their employ." he stated. Kosmo shrugged. "Tomato, tomahto. What ARE you guys doing?" he asked. Espio pointed to the map. "These are floor plans for this very castle. We were lucky to stumble across them..." he said. Charmy looked bored. "Yeah, real lucky. We found homework..." he mumbled. Rouge and Omega stepped forward. "Hmmm... Maybe you should commit these to memory, Omega." she suggested. "Acknowledged..." the robot said, scanning the document. Shadow crossed his arms. "How useful is that really? Does it give any indication where Project GXterminate might be hidden?" he asked. Vector rubbed his head a bit. "Errrm... Nah, there really isn't a vault or anything like that I can see... But I did flunk out of architecture school." he admitted. Espio pointed out some spots on the map. "I've figured out that we are here... There are what appear to be prisons in these locations. If we find and release some prisoners, they might help us. The enemy of my enemy is my friend." he reasoned. Kosmo scoffed. "Unless that happens to be a certain RAT..." he grumbled. Crash placed his hat back on. "Regardless, I'm looking for Bucky. You can join my search, or not. He'd surely be useful in our battle here." he said. Whisk nodded. "I vote we free the prisoners! I want to make some friends!" she smiled. Shadow shrugged. "We'll check it out. Bucky may not be in the cell we visit... But we may find SOMETHING of value on the way." he reasoned.

Team Chaotix decided to check out another section of the map, while Crash went along with Team Dark and the others. Omega had saved his scan of the map to his internal memory, so he gave them directions as they traveled. They soon came across, oddly, a break room-esque area, with a water cooler and vending machines. "...Who knew? The Covenant of Despair are tools just like anyone else." Rouge said. Hanging out in the break room were a few gargoyles dressed in fancy suits. Apparently, they were former members of the gargoyle mob, and had joined the Covenant of Despair after their dealings with them. When the gargoyles noticed the intruders entering the room, most of them pulled out guns, while one held up a candy bar like a gun. "Errr... This thing's loaded! With peanuts!" he grunted stupidly. Most of the group got ready to fight, but Guard stepped forward and held up his scythe calmly. "Grrr... You have one chance to surrender." he warned. The largest of the gargoyles scoffed at him. "Look at you! Pawn of the humans! How can you disgrace gargoyles everywhere like that? Huh!?" he snapped. Guard growled and flipped his scythe into a defensive position. "Look at yourselves! Grrr... My sudden appearance may have messed things up for your kind, made you come out of the shadows... When I wasn't even an actual gargoyle, just a mere science project. Grrrr! But what gargoyle-kind has chosen to do once joined with the world... That isn't my doing! You have formed criminal organizations... You have aided terrorists... So... Grrr... Who REALLY disgraces the species, huh?! There comes a time when we all must stop placing the blame upon others for our own actions!" he shouted. The gargoyles glanced among themselves and nodded. "Then face the consequences of YOUR actions!" they growled. Tired of this, Shadow, Kosmo, and Omega charged into the crowd of gargoyles, quickly knocking the weapons from their hands and dropping them on their tails! Crash patted Guard on the back as they started to leave. "Nice speech, pal. Very riveting." he said. Guard grunted in annoyance and followed the others to the next area.

The seven of them soon came to what appeared to be a small fighting arena. This was the place where the Covenant of Despair trained with physical weapons, such as Patch's nunchucks or Daisy's katana. Here, Zeke the dragon swooped down from above and blocked their path to the next door! "RAWR!!

Hope you guys are ready for some action!" he roared. "Move aside! We've got no time for the likes of you!" Shadow grunted. Kosmo nodded. "Also... Didn't you get the memo? Bucky's been captured. You ought to be trying to free him, shouldn't you? You know, instead of picking fights with us." he said. Zeke chuckled softly as Talon the griffin flapped over beside him from above. "We know... but it's too dangerous to try and free him. If we obey Despair... Bucky won't be harmed!" he declared. Crash stared at them in disbelief. "What!? But... the boss'd never tell us to surrender! How could you even think it!?" he growled. Kosmo stared at Talon with concern. "Wait... What about... Carrie?" he asked. As if responding to him, she appeared between Zeke and Talon briefly. She looked greatly distraught. "...I'm sorry." she said before vanishing again. Whatever she was going to do, she was going to do it invisible. The back door opened, and Chet the cheetah walked into the room to join the experiments blocking their path. "I heard what they said... I know what it's like, being on this side... Just for the sake of a loved one. So, I'll fight, too! Even if I have to fight Shadow and Kosmo!" he shouted. "They're all fools..." Omega muttered. "I kinda feel for them, though..." Rouge sighed. Talon held out his hands in preparation to fight, glancing around at the weapons resting in the corner of the room. "There may not be many of us... But my psychokinesis will make up for it! Prepare yourselves!" he warned. Zeke flapped into the air and pointed at Shadow. "I'll take the tough guy! RAWR!!" he shouted. Chet bared his claws, ready to fight as well. "Who wants some??" he grunted. Guard shook his head at him. "Grr... You're out of your depth, kid." he said. Chet ran up to him, his speed nearly taking him off guard, and was barely blocked by his scythe. "...We'll see!" he said.

As Talon's psychokinesis started sending various weapons flying through the room, a pair of red eyes peeked at the battle through the back door. "Hmm... Let's see how this plays out..." their owner mused. Whisk found herself teleporting around to avoid the weapons, while Crash had a strange sort of swordfight using his horn to parry a psychically controlled blade. Rouge was busy jumping around Omega, using him as a shield as she tried to figure out a way to reach Talon and take him out of commission. Kosmo turned his own hide into steel, avoiding any severe damage from the weapons, but making him too heavy to fly up to Talon. "...Hey, Carrie!? You in here!? We should talk about this!" he shouted, but getting no response, he went to plan B. "Fine... Hey, Whisk! Whisk! Slow down!! Get over here!" he said, chasing after the flighty Divine. Meanwhile, Shadow was busy with Zeke. The dragon loved to blow fire, but Shadow wouldn't stay in place long enough to get hit by it. The weapons flying everywhere made getting close to Zeke a challenge, though. So, he tried Chaos Spear, but Zeke's flames seemed to just burn them up! Chet was making things difficult for Guard as well. His speed was just sub-super, natural for a cheetah, and he kept running around the gargoyle, striking him from behind. "Gaaah!! Grrrr!! All right..." Guard grumbled, jumping into the air and striking down with his scythe, firing several beams! Chet skidded to stop, and crashed right into the beams! "Ughh!!" he groaned, falling over. "Grrr... Avoid further battles. The best thing you can do is return to your loved one safely." he suggested. Kosmo passed by Shadow and Zeke on his way to catch Whisk. Glancing at them, he had a thought. "...Throw me at him." he said. Shadow stared at him, and Kosmo morphed into a boomerang with eyes. Shadow chuckled softly and picked him up, tossing him into the air. Zeke took a break from blowing flames to taunt Shadow. "What's the matter? Too many flying weapons for you to think about tele-warping up here!? Ha ha!" he laughed, only to get whacked by an arcing Kosmo boomerang! "Duy...!?" Zeke dropped from the sky and landed on his head, winding up unconscious.

As boomerang-Kosmo came back, he morphed to normal and caught Whisk as she appeared between him and Shadow! "Port us to HIM!" he said, pointing to Talon. "Eeep! Okay, OKAY!!" she yelped, vanishing and reappearing next to the griffin. "...What!?" Talon gasped. Kosmo jumped from Whisk and morphed himself a strong pair of twin tails, like Copters, using them to whip Talon down from the sky! He

then twirled those tails to gently lower himself to the ground. A pair of yelps were heard as Talon hit the floor, and Kosmo rushed to them as he saw that the griffin had landed on top of Carrie! "Hey... Are you okay? This is why you shouldn't go around invisible..." Kosmo muttered. Talon climbed off her slowly, and then shook her in panic. "Aaah! She's out! No, Carrie! Wake up!!" he cried. Kosmo started to look more concerned, even like he felt guilty. "She'll... be okay, right? You... you shouldn't have fought us!!" he growled. The others had started to gather around them now that the weapons had stopped flying around and Zeke was out of commission. However, they suddenly backed away as the rear door opened and Basker the hound stepped into the room. "...This girl is important to you... Isn't she, Kosmo?" he said, a small grin crossing his lips. His hands glowed with dark blue energy, and everyone but Omega started to be gripped with fear, backing away from him! "...Shadow? What is the problem?" Omega wondered. Shadow in particular seemed to be in a trance. To him, Basker had taken a much more sinister form, one that he saw in the Dream Temple. "...Mephiles??" he whispered, mystified. Basker crept to the unconscious Carrie and lifted her over his shoulder. "...If you value her safety... You would do well to stay out of our affairs from this point onward. If however, you entertain the notion of rescuing her... Come and find me..." Basker challenged, stepping out of the room before freeing the group from the grip of fear. Once freed, Shadow berated Omega. "Why did you let him go!?" he shouted. "Why did YOU let him go?" Omega rebutted. Talon was still in a state of fear, however. "He took her!! He took Carrie!! No, no, no!!" he cried. Kosmo glanced at him. "You gonna be okay?" he asked. Talon shook his head. "No... Because Carrie... Was the source of my power! She is the psychokinetic one, not me! She wanted to keep her power secret... So I pretended it was mine. I have no power... I can't save her!" he wheezed, utterly panicked. Kosmo nodded. "Don't worry... I can!" he said.

To be continued...

44 - Fear and Courage

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 44 - Fear and Courage
Stage 24(Dark 12) - Despair Castle
Boss 24 - Basker

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Kosmo has joined "Team Dark" in their mission to find and destroy Project GXterminate before it is used by the Covenant of Despair. Along the way, they met Sgt. Drol, who aided their mission by sending Guard with them. Finding Team Chaotix with a map of the castle, the group started heading for a prison cell where they might find someone to help them, joined by Crash, who was searching for Bucky. They were stopped by a group of experiments who had been blackmailed into helping Despair due to Bucky's incarceration. This included Talon and Carrie. After the battle, Carrie was knocked unconscious by Talon crash-landing on her, and Basker decided to kidnap her as further insurance, since Kosmo seemed to care about her. It was at this point that Talon revealed that Carrie was the true source of his power: she used psychokinesis while invisible to make it appear that HE was the one with powers! Now, this mission has become a rescue mission!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Parts of Despair Castle had become a veritable warzone, with the forces of Eggman and Despair battling it out against any who dared challenge them. Kosmo, Shadow, Rouge, Omega, Guard, Crash, Whisk, Talon and Chet had arrived at just such a warzone, where Dr. Eggman and Metal Sonic were leading robots against the likes of Team Chaotix, Razor and Mia. Razor had given Mia a spare gun, so at least she wasn't totally useless, but the five of them were pretty well outnumbered until Team Dark showed up. "The doctor... He's gotta answer for what he did at Shadow Arc." Shadow scowled. Eggman noticed him enter and flinched a little. "Ehhh... Shadow! Fancy, seeing you here! Did I mention double-crossing you earlier wasn't personal? ...Oh, forget it. Metal Sonic, focus attack on Shadow!!" he shouted. As Metal Sonic started coming at them, Shadow decided to meet him head on. "Go on without me! I'll catch up!" he shouted back. Omega's eyes seemed to glow redder with rage. "EGGMAN!! Target acquired!! At last, vengeance is mine!!" he shouted, crazed. "Oh, GET OVER IT, you defect reject!!" Eggman yelled. This only made Omega angrier, and he charged into the army of Egg Fighters that Eggman was commanding. Rouge shook her head. "I guess I'm with them... Take care, Guard." she sighed, flying off into the battle. Chet glanced at Razor and Mia regretfully from the back of the crowd. "Grrr... You should go to them." Guard suggested. Chet looked at him ashamedly. "Like THIS?" he said, pointing out his Despair uniform. "Actions talk louder than clothes." Crash stated. Chet nodded slowly, and charged ahead, slashing at an Egg Fighter with his claws as he reached Mia and Razor! They stared at him for a moment, but then Razor sighed and smiled. "You are one piece of work, you know that?" he said jokingly. "Welcome back, dummy." Mia smiled. Kosmo watched and nodded. "Let's get

moving. That cell isn't finding itself, after all." he said, leading the rest of the group around the action. Unbeknownst to them, two extra people were following them. "...Thanks for taking me this far." whispered Tommy, who had somehow managed to sneak up to the island with everyone else. "No problem... They wanted to leave me behind, too." said Lucky, sneakily following Kosmo's group with young Tommy.

On the way to the next hallway, the group found more of Eggman's Fighters and Pawns blocking the path! Talon, feeling powerless, began to freak out a bit. "There are enemies all over! We'll never get Carrie outta this! It's hopeless--" As he was whining, Whisk slapped him upside the head. "Don't start molting all over me!" she growled. Kosmo raised his fists. "We'll just have to steamroll these tin cans real quick! Maybe I'll even turn into a steamroller!" he growled, only to see the robots begin exploding from several attacks from behind them! Chaos Spears blew through the robotic chests of these robots, and when they finished collapsing into heaps, Spiny was left standing behind them! "Am I seein' things?" Crash muttered. "Yeah, since when can Sonic use magic spears?" Whisk gasped. Spiny stomped his foot furiously. "Come on!! You're all fellow experiments!! YOU shouldn't make this mistake!!" he groaned. Kosmo sighed. "She's sorry... sir." he said, "Thanks for savin' us the time." he added. Spiny chuckled. "Right... Well, the doc had it comin! Of all the things he could do next, throwin' in his lot with Despair was the wrong call! I don't care what his so-called 'reasons' are! Despair felt like insulting me, so I'll never join them!" he shouted. Kosmo smirked. "Seems like they're ticking off almost everyone anymore." he remarked. "Grrr... Are you coming with us, then?" Guard asked Spiny. The porcupine stepped out of their way. "I wholeheartedly support your endeavor... But no, I'm not going to be joining your merry band. I only serve one person... And that's me!" he grinned. Talon sighed. "We could really use you, though..." he grumbled. "I know..." Spiny bragged. Kosmo scoffed. "Who needs him? C'mon, let's keep moving!" he said, continuing onward. Lucky and Tommy waved politely as they passed Spiny, and he scratched his head. "...Hopeless..." he sighed.

Soon, the group found greater security measures blocking their progress. Thick metal doors designed to keep out intruders had been slammed shut in the hallway ahead of them, and the only way to open them was through facial-recognition scanning. Kosmo cracked his knuckles and grinned. "This should be simple. I just need the face of a high-ranking Despair agent. Let's go with Basker..." he said, morphing only his head into that of Basker the hound. The device started to scan him, but suddenly an alarm went off! "Huh?? What the..." Kosmo stammered. Guard slapped himself in the forehead. "Rrrr! We should've known this wouldn't work! Basker's eyes glow red, but look at Kosmo!" he grunted. Kosmo's eyes still glowed yellow. The retinal scan included with the face scan picked up on this minor difference. "That is one good security-scan... Probably set up just for me..." Kosmo muttered. Crash adjusted his hat and gently pushed Whisk and Talon aside. "Everyone, stand back... This looks like a job for me." he said. Talon crossed his arms. "Are you kidding? It's METAL!!" he said. "You'll bust that horn..." Kosmo pointed out. Crash smirked and started to run at the door. "Chaos CHARGE!!" he yelled, his horn bursting in Chaos energy as he ran at the door, followed by his body as he picked up speed! The power of his Chaos ability allowed him to tear right through the thick door, leaving a hole that the others could pass through! "Yeah... or I could just teleport..." Whisk pointed out. Crash shouted back from the other side. "They got wall lasers!! And more doors!! I'm gonna keep charging!!" he yelled. Guard folded in his wings. "Grrr... This isn't very accommodating to us avians..." he said, looking at the somewhat compact hole. "I'm not sure that's the correct use of the word 'avian'... We're not birds." Talon remarked. Kosmo morphed into a feral hawk. "Speak for yourself! I'm gonna tear up those wall lasers..." he said, flapping through the hole. As everyone moved on, Lucky and Tommy hesitated at the hole. "...Maybe we should turn back?" Lucky wondered. Suddenly, they saw Terra chasing after them. "Intruders!! KILL!!" he yelled.

Lucky and Tommy shrieked and fled into the hole, which Terra banged against, unable to fit through.

At the last security door in the bunch of security doors, instead of mere wall lasers, there was a squad of Despair agents blocking the way. They seemed a bit dumbfounded that anyone even managed to get in there, but they were ready to fight all the same, and there were even some dark mages among them. Talon watched the others getting ready to fight their way through, but he couldn't build up the courage to join them. "Guys... I'm just dead weight, aren't I? I... I'm gonna go back!!" he shouted, heading for the previous door that Crash had busted a hole through. As he passed through it, he ran into Lucky and Tommy, who were surprised, to say the least. "Me-yow!! D-don't drag us back to Shadow Arc, Talon! We just want to help in some way!! Any way! Bucky was kidnapped 'cuz of me!" Lucky shouted. "And... and my friend Katie was hurt and these guys were just gonna leave her! They even took Chet! And I stowed away in Mia's trunk to get up here and everything!!" Tommy whined. Talon hung his head sadly, indicating that he wasn't planning to scold them. "...Carrie was taken, too. And... I can't save her." he said hopelessly. Lucky and Tommy stared at him for a moment. "Yeah... we probably can't do anything, either..." Lucky admitted. "But we'd hate ourselves more if we stayed behind doin' nothing!" Tommy pointed out. Talon gasped, glancing at the brave youngster before him. "You know... You're right. We can't just give up. I'll go with you guys for now. Maybe together, we can come up with something." he said. In the meantime, those Talon had left behind were fighting valiantly. Crash simply charged ahead and broke through the final security door, while Guard took on the mages with his scythe's beam attacks, keeping his distance from them. Whisk whipped up some magical winds with her wings, knocking around some more agents, and Kosmo finally used that steamroller form, chasing around the other agents until they cried "uncle."

The remainder of Kosmo's group now neared the prison from the map that Team Chaotix had found before. However, there was still one obstacle before reaching that prison. Violet the echidna, Daisy the skunk and Ridley the coati were guarding the entrance. "So, we meet again, Kosmo... Never mind that I don't have the Chaos Wing now. You don't have the element of surprise anymore, either." Ridley warned. "You got water. I got everything else. I win." Kosmo said smugly. Daisy growled at him. "I knew you'd be trouble when you showed up here with COPTER! I'll cut you to ribbons!" she shouted. Violet was less enthusiastic. "You should all just turn back... The Darkseeker's too powerful, anyway..." she sighed. Whisk squinted at Violet and gasped slightly. "You look so familiar... Why do you look familiar..." she wondered, "Right! That colorful echidna! I forget her name. But she was really brave! Even when that other echidna was freaking out and crazy!" she said. Violet stared at Whisk. "You... You're talking about my sister? ...Somehow she seems stronger than I am right now... And she has no powers. Maybe... I should just fade into the shadows..." she said sadly, backing away a step. "Hey!! Stop messing with Violet's head!!" Daisy growled. Ridley's hands became covered in glowing water. "Who cares!? We won't back down!" he shouted. Kosmo rolled his eyes. "Fine... You'll regret it when I bust out the prisoners and we completely overwhelm you. I'm not wasting any more time with Carrie in trouble." he said, his body glowing and shrinking down into the form of a snake! As he slithered his way past Ridley and Daisy, Guard fired beams from his scythe to distract the Despair agents. "Grrrr! Never mind him! You get to deal with us!" he growled. "Allow me to take Ridley... I don't feel right hitting a lady." Crash murmured. "Exactly why I'm gonna get ya!!" Daisy shouted. Ridley tossed a ball of water at Guard, which he sliced with his scythe. "Grrrr!! Very well... I was designed to take down experiments, anyway!" he growled. Whisk stood next to Violet and sighed. "Can't we all just get along?" she frowned.

Kosmo morphed back to normal outside the cell door. The cell had been padded with rubber. Inside, Bucky was watching over Carrie as she rested on a dingy mattress. "...So, it's you..." Kosmo grunted, "In

order to free Carrie, I have to let out the guy who wanted me locked up forever. Is this supposed to be some weird poetic justice??" he growled. Bucky sighed without looking over at him. "Poetic justice for which one of us?" he asked. Kosmo shrugged. "Is she all right?" he asked. "She's unconscious, but fine. Carrie is a 'Mirage,' a species that is like an illusion... It theoretically does not technically exist. Due to my scientific prowess, however, Carrie is no illusion. So her injuries are real... Unlike an illusion, she does not simply vanish with the possibility of manifesting again later." Bucky explained, getting a bit caught up in the science of it. Suddenly, Basker emerged from the shadows of the corner of the prison room. "How touching... A father-son reunion. But come now, Kosmo... Surely you know you cannot defeat me." he said bluntly. Kosmo turned to face him. "Oh, yeah? Take me on in a real fight, and we'll see!" he challenged. Basker chuckled softly, the drowsy look never leaving his red eyes. "You came all this way, and for what? What do you actually hope to accomplish? Are you so eager to join your friends in this little cage? ... Or will you once and for all bow down and swear your allegiance to the Covenant of Despair!?" he snarled, starting to sound uncharacteristically fired up. Kosmo morphed himself into a purple form resembling Shadow, glaring at Basker with contempt. "First... I'm gonna kick your butt and open this cell. Then... I'm gonna take down your boss and free everyone he's trapped in his control!" he shouted. Basker's eyes started glowing more brightly all of a sudden. "You know, I think the cell is too good for you... It is DEATH, then!!" he roared!

Basker's hands started glowing deeply in a dark shade of blue, and Kosmo was quickly struck with that same inexplicable terror once again! He started to hallucinate, seeing Bucky in place of Basker, but with the same red eyes. "Terror is absolute power... As you cower, fading into the darkness... I will obliterate you!!" To Kosmo, Basker's attack appeared as Bucky's lightning, but in reality, he was merely kicking him while he trembled at the ground. "...You have no chance against fear itself! A pity, really..." Basker smirked.

Outside, Crash was busy fending off Daisy's katana with nothing but his horn to parry her with. "I said I wouldn't hit a lady, but you're pushin' it!!" he growled. "Surrender and I'll stop!" Daisy grunted. Guard was busy chopping Ridley's water blasts with his scythe, occasionally shrugging off any that struck him. "Grrrrr!! How can you work for these fiends after they've captured your creator!? Where is your loyalty!?" he shouted. Ridley stopped to answer him. "...What good is loyalty when you're dead? You of all people should understand me... You work against Bucky for GUN!" he yelled. Guard grunted. "...That is my programming...not my will." he said, charging at Ridley to resume his attack!

Back at the prison, Bucky called out to Kosmo. "Stand up to your fears! Fear is a necessary reflex against danger, but you cannot allow it to control you completely! Remember who you are! You are one of the most powerful forces on Earth! Fight back!" he shouted. Kosmo had by this time morphed into a sea turtle, and was cowering inside his shell while Basker kicked it around, but perhaps he could still hear Bucky's words? As his shell bounced off the wall, he poked his head out and snapped at Basker's hand, surprising him long enough to enable him to morph back to normal. "So... not content to hide in your shell, are you?" Basker growled. Kosmo growled, struggling as Basker's eyes and hands glowed brighter, turning up the fear. The hallucinations became increasingly terrible, the world around him seemed to fade into blackness, and frightening monsters seemed to be creeping around him in these shadows. However, Kosmo focused, and began to morph himself! "I... do not fear... the dark! I am a morph! The dark... should fear... me!!" he growled, transforming into a great dragon! Basker stared with wide eyes. "There's no way...! No one can function...under the pressure of such terror!" he gasped. He then scrambled to escape the wrath of Kosmo's fiery breath!

"Ugh... Talon, keep it down..." Carrie was starting to regain consciousness by now. When she opened her eyes, the situation quickly became clear to her. "Oh... Throwing me in here was a mistake." she

growled, standing up and approaching the cell door. Her eyes glowed blue for a moment, and then, using her psychokinesis, she ripped the door clean off its hinges! Basker looked back in shock, releasing his hold over Kosmo in the process. "What...?! Impossible!" he said in astonishment. Bucky quickly stepped out of the cell and zapped the hound with his electricity. "Threaten my experiments, will you!!!" he shouted, leaving Basker convulsing on the floor! "I should kill you... Instead I'm ordering you to get out of my sight!" he growled. Basker shakily stood up and ran for the exit. "Don't...think...this is over!" he stammered. Kosmo, still in dragon form, stared at Bucky for a moment. "...I shouldn't let you off the hook, either..." he growled. Carrie stepped between them, but Bucky placed a hand on her shoulder to silence her. "There is a matter that's bigger than both of us right now. A device on this island with the potential to kill us all in mere moments." he said. Kosmo nodded, morphing back to normal. "Then I guess we find it..." he said. Carrie looked at him as Bucky headed out of the room. "Did you come to rescue me again? ...Maybe now you realize I don't really need it..." she snickered. Kosmo sighed. "You're welcome, I guess..." he grumbled. A flash of lightning told them it was time to rejoin the others. Outside, they found Ridley cowering at Bucky's feet, while Daisy was hiding behind Violet. It seemed Bucky had the situation well in hand. "Stop sniveling, Ridley! I understand your motives. You're a coward. But whatever Despair promised you, I promise they won't deliver." he said. Ridley looked up nervously. "Um... wh-what do you mean, exactly?" he stammered. Suddenly, Whisk yelped loudly, falling to the floor! As everyone turned to see what had happened to her, they saw Basker lift her over his shoulders! "A divine... Surely she has unique life energy... Listen well, Bucky. Come to my master, the Darkseeker. If you do not, your precious experiment will be used to power Project GXterminate!" he shouted, using his fear-power to stop Crash and Guard, thereby covering his escape! Kosmo looked a bit shocked. "Won't using an animal in the machine make it target...animals? Don't they want it to target humans?" he stammered. Bucky's eyes narrowed. "This is a threat, or a bluff... but we can't risk it. We have to find the Darkseeker." he said. Violet looked a bit nervous. "Um... I could take you to him... But I'm not sure if I really want to go there..." she shuddered. "There's no choice. Let's go!" Kosmo said. Finally, it was almost time to face the leader of the Covenant of Despair...

To be continued...

45 - The Castle Towers

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 45 - The Castle Towers
Boss 25-28 - Dr. Eggman, Shadow Chaos, ???

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Punchy and his allies snuck into Despair Castle using a section of dark tunnels, which were filled with dark energy. Along the way, Punchy saw yet another vision from Tikal, suggesting that Shadow Chaos merely wished to defend the Chao that Chaos failed to protect. After losing himself to Dark Punchy during a fight with Fera, Dark Punchy hurled an unconscious Fera down a chasm. Her death devastated Illusi, who had been fighting to prevent this future all along, having viewed Fera as something of a daughter to him.

Knuckles joined Sonic in his hunt for the Master Emerald, but after a battle with Eddie, all they managed to do was snag a Chaos Emerald that was keeping Shadow Chaos held captive, thus freeing the beast. Punchy is now searching for Violet with Rainbow, while Knuckles still seeks the Master Emerald. But danger still lurks throughout Despair Castle...

Now, on to the next chapter!

At a crossroads, Knuckles decided it was time to say good-bye to Sonic for now. "I've gotta find the Master Emerald, Sonic. I'm sure you'll be alright on your own." he said. Team Rose had caught up with him, so it wasn't like he was leaving Sonic shorthanded. "Sure, Knuckles. Heck, why don't you bring Tails along, too. I'm feelin' a bit crowded here." Sonic sighed. Amy took his arm. "I'm sure you're just kidding!" she said. Tails called SPOT and joined Knuckles. "I can calibrate SPOT to try looking specifically for the Master Emerald... Though Gemini's right, we may have trouble with interference." he said. Gemini stepped over to join them as well. "I owe you one for everything you did for me back when I was stuck as a dragon, so I'll help you out now." she said. "I thought the sewer and Shadow Arc and the Dream Temple made us even." Knuckles grinned. Gemini sighed. "How much help was I, really? Besides... I feel like dead weight with Silver and Sonic. You might actually be able to use my help." she said. Silver frowned. "Gee, sorry..." he grumbled. Knuckles sighed. "I remember when I used to work alone... Okay, come on!" he said, heading off one way with Tails, SPOT and Gemini while Sonic headed the other way with Team Rose. What they didn't realize was that Team Dark was just arriving at this same crossroads, a central area of the castle. "Hmmm... There goes Knuckles... I bet he's off on the hunt for that Master Emerald you said he lost..." she said to Shadow. "...Sounds like him." Shadow muttered. Rouge grinned mischievously. "Which implies he hasn't found it yet..." she said, trailing off. Shadow groaned. "If you must, then go. You're no good to us distracted." he grumbled. As Rouge hurried off, Omega stepped to Shadow. "If she gets to leave, then I request permission to track down Eggman!" he said. Shadow rolled his eyes. "What happened to the urgent mission we were on!?" he groaned.

Knuckles arrived at the base of the East Tower of Despair Castle, one of two large towers at the center of the fortress. Inside, he found a large, mostly empty room with a winding stairway leading all the way up the sides of the tower. Here, Dr. Eggman dropped down from above in his Egg Mobile to block their way! "Ah, Knuckles... Hey, where's Sonic?! Eh, no matter. My sensors indicate that YOU have what I want. Hand over the Chaos Gauntlets and the final two Chaos Emeralds, if you don't want this to get messy!" he threatened. Rouge ran into the room hurriedly. "You have Chaos Emeralds!? Erm... Of course, you can't give them to him!" she shouted. Knuckles looked back at her in surprise, but returned his focus to Eggman quickly. "R-right... What she said! Why don't YOU turn over YOUR Chaos Emeralds instead!" he yelled. Tails shook his head. "Yeah, right..." he sighed. Eggman looked down at his controls. "All right... You asked for it... You know, before I settled on making my fleet a carnival, I had another idea in mind. I had picked up these nifty cloud-camouflaged ships cheap, so I was going to go with a weather theme. But then, I realized, Tails has the Tornado, and the Cyclone, and I think he's trademarked the name 'Typhoon' as well. And I already did Hurricane. So what would I name anything? Nice, Tails. I can never do an evil weather station." he grumbled. Tails scratched his head. "Uhhh... Sorry?" he murmured. Eggman then started pushing buttons on his controls. "One idea DID make it past R&D, though... So say hello... To the Egg MAELSTROM!!" he pulled a red lever, and several flashing rods and tubes popped out of the Egg Mobile's underside. They started to rotate, and strange black atmosphere started to generate around the Egg Mobile! "...Okay... This is making me nervous..." Gemini muttered. Knuckles scoffed. "It's just a little cloud!" he said. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck out from the cloud, forcing the group to scatter very hastily! "Aaaah! ...See? The chance of getting struck by lightning is really tiny." Knuckles sighed. Eggman chuckled. "That's if the lightning has something bigger to strike... But let's play a bit. How would you like some golf-ball sized hail?" he snickered, as large balls of ice started flying out of the cloud generated by the Egg Maelstrom! Tails shielded himself with his tails and glanced at the steps. "We may have to get above him... Someone try the stairs!" he suggested.

Meanwhile, Punchy had been exploring the castle for some time, joined by Rainbow and Copter. They still hadn't found Violet, nor had they spotted the Chaos Crystal that Rainbow had allowed to be stolen to protect Violet. Having arrived at the castle ahead of everyone, Sonic was only just catching up to them. "...Hey, guys. Seen anything helpful?" he asked. Copter shrugged, so Sonic continued ahead. "See you at the finish!" he waved. Amy and Cream continued with him, but Silver stopped to converse with them. "Rainbow... We've gotta find that Chaos Crystal. Few even know about it, but it's a big piece of the puzzle here. It's something that the Darkseeker has been single-mindedly searching for this whole time." he said. Rainbow nodded. "I know... and I know what might happen if we don't get it..." she shivered. Copter raised an eyebrow. "I'm a bit fuzzy on the whole thing, honestly." he muttered. Silver sighed. "Because of events at this castle, my future ends up devastated. Gemini, who comes from the same time, doesn't know. She left from a different timeline. Her actions may have influenced the new timeline..." he said, a bit uncertainly. Punchy rubbed his forehead. "This is giving me a headache. Can't we just go beat up this Darkseeker and be done with it?" he asked. Copter shuddered. "I've met him. He induces fright just by being in the same room..." he said. Silver nodded. "Regardless, this is what we must do. Since you are among the few who know the urgency of finding the Chaos Crystal, I'm going with you now. Lead the way, Rainbow." he asked. Rainbow pointed at herself uncertainly. "...Me? Why, Shiny?" she asked. "As the guardian, you share a bond with the crystal. One that you may not yet fathom, but we need it now. You should be able to sense when we get close to it." he said. Rainbow sighed frustratedly. "Sure... Even though I was never able to even FIND it before... Why not?" she grumbled. "I believe in you." Punchy said, placing a hand on her shoulder. Rainbow smiled at him and

nodded. "Well... that's the important thing. Follow me, guys!" she said, running ahead.

The four of them arrived at the West Tower after a bit of a jog. It was very similar to the East Tower. Here, they found Illusi in their path. His fur was a mess, and his cape was wrinkled and tatty as well. His eyes were bloodshot, and he generally looked awful. "So... Dark One! Still playing the hero after what you've done!" he yowled woefully. Silver frowned. "...Maybe we shouldn't have left him alone..." he realized. "Poor Mousy..." Rainbow said softly. Illusi stomped at the ground, and as though on command, Shadow Chaos dripped down from the ceiling! "I found someone else who's furious with you! ...Remember this guy! After you splattered him across the mountainside, Despair captured him! Seems you've been messing up everyone's lives!" he shouted, almost crazed. Copter looked astonished. "...They actually caught it?? But...WHY???" he stammered. Punchy growled at Illusi. "Stop blaming me for what happened to Fera! Even before it happened, you blamed me instead of trying to warn me! Maybe I could have HELPED prevent her from dying!! But she PUSHED me and PUSHED me! She FORCED Dark Punchy out!! And it backfired on her!" he shouted, furious at everything that had happened. Illusi glared at him. "Enough!! Shut your mouth! Fera... She was all the family I had... And now you'll know what it's like to suffer like I've had to suffer!! Shadow Chaos! Take your vengeance!" he cried, prompting the big drop on the floor to take shape and hurl its stretchy arms across the room, trying to slap all four of them at once! Copter jumped the attack, but the others were knocked aside swiftly. "C'mon, guys! None of you saw that coming!?" he grumbled, "Well, you don't scare ME, Shadow Chaos!" Copter growled. Shadow Chaos morphed into a big ball of black water and leapt at Copter, slamming him against the wall hard! As he fell to the ground, Copter groaned. "That's new..." he mumbled. Punchy stood up and shook his head. "Cut it out! Your fight's with me!" he growled. Shadow Chaos fired several blasts of black sludge at him, but he retaliated. "Chaos Avalanche!" he cried, trying to pull up parts of the ground to toss at Shadow Chaos. He found himself pummeled with sludge instead. "Oooogh!! Wh-what!? Why didn't it work!?" he gasped. Illusi grinned. "I'm placing all my energy on an invisible barrier. It won't let you dislodge any part of this room..." he sneered. Punchy groaned. "So, I'm basically Knuckles... Errr... No one remember I said that, please..." he grumbled.

A side effect of the Egg Maelstrom was causing rain water to splatter all around it, getting in the eyes and affecting aim for the likes of Gemini, who took to casting shields after a stray bolt from her wand grazed Rouge's wing. Eggman was done playing with hail, though, and had started flinging bolts of lightning all around the room, which was putting a real strain on Gemini's and SPOT's shields. Tails was busy flying around, trying to get past the lightning to fight back, but he was a bit preoccupied dodging to move forward. Then there was Knuckles. He'd retreated to the back wall, and started to climb it. There was no way Eggman would let them get to the stairs directly. "I just need to get... high enough." he groaned as he hit the bottom of the stairway snaking around the walls. Eggman was lower than this, sure, but Knuckles's gliding would put him below Eggman by the time he reached him. He looked back for a solution, and then chuckled softly. "Well, worth a shot..." he said, jumping from the wall and breaking into a glide! As Tails and Rouge were busy evading the lightning in the air, they heard Knuckles's voice behind them. "Gangway!!" he shouted before landing on Rouge's back, leaping from her in order to gain extra height as she dropped like a stone! "Aaaagh!! KNUCKLES!! HOW DARE YOU!!?" she screamed, flying up after him as he resumed gliding toward Eggman! "That did seem rather rude... I should zap you out of the sky!" Eggman chuckled, firing a bolt straight at Knuckles! "Proplasmr!!" Gemini called, casting her shield around Knuckles quickly! As the lightning jolted the shield, Knuckles kept up his momentum and hurled a punch straight into the dark cloud surrounding the Egg Maelstrom! Rouge then changed course and kicked at Eggman's control panel, and the whole

machine started to spark! Knuckles was jolted a bit, and fell to the floor, while Eggman rubbed his bald head in concern. "...Technical problem... I'll be right back!" he said, flying his machine up into the tower! Rouge landed beside Knuckles, as did Tails, and they looked at him with concern. "...You all right?" Tails asked. Knuckles groaned as he opened his eyes, and suddenly, everything went white! "What...?! What hit me...?!" he stammered.

Knuckles was back in front of the Master Emerald shrine. "...Why am I back in front of the altar?" he muttered, "And why am I wet?" he said, sitting in the pool of water in front of the shrine of the past. The Chao that were there were now fleeing. They finally seemed to realize that their former home was anything but safe. Howler, equipped with the Chaos Tailbands, Chaos Boots, and Chaos Sword, had defeated Shadow Chaos. Now, he turned to Tikal. "...I'll take that Emerald now!" he said, zooming up to her and snatching the Master Emerald from her hands before she could act! "W-wait!! St-stop...!" Tikal pleaded, feeling weaker as the emerald moved further away from her. Athair ran to her side, helping her to her feet. "Princess Tikal! ... What is your game, Howler!? That emerald is not part of our deal!" he shouted. Radia stepped back slowly. "He has grown too powerful... He must be stopped!" she gasped, hurrying away quickly. Howler held the Master Emerald in front of Shadow Chaos. "With this emerald... I beseech you, Dark of Chaos... Fall into slumber with my soul... And fuse with my body!! That we might carve a new world, in MY image!!" he howled. Shadow Chaos flinched, and then started to swirl, turning into a shadowy mist that was being drawn toward the Master Emerald! Tikal stumbled away from Athair and stood in front of Howler, blocking Shadow Chaos! "Enough! Now I see what you are... You are a seeker of power and control... Like my father, and like Ix of the Nocturnus! There is but one fate for greed-driven fools like you!" she declared. Howler pointed the Chaos Sword at her, but then flipped around and whipped her aside with his tailband-powered tails, instead! Tikal tumbled towards the edge of the nearby cliff, but Athair hurried to catch her! "I'm afraid there is naught we can do, princess... We've led him right to all the power he craves!" he said gravely. The scene started to fade away from Knuckles's eyes, and he felt Rouge slapping his face. "Wake UP, you dolt! This isn't over yet!" she shouted. "Ow... Thanks, Rouge..." he grumbled, standing up. At this point, Eggman was returning with the Egg Maelstrom, and he wasn't alone. "...What's a castle without a knight, eh?" he said, chuckling. A human wearing high-tech armor resembling knight's armor was coming down the stairs. He opened the eye-hatch on his helmet to reveal himself as Dr. Nammad. "Can't be too, uh, careful when going up against you, uh, animals." he sneered, holding up an odd staff that glowed with electrical energy at the tip. "Fine... I'm ready for round two!" Knuckles growled.

Punchy, Copter and Silver had been fighting Shadow Chaos, while Rainbow tried in vain to tell Illusi to put a stop to this. Suddenly, after smacking Copter and Silver aside again, Shadow Chaos lunged at Punchy, and seemed to stab its hand through his chest! "No, One!!!" Rainbow gasped, but quickly recovered when she saw how little pain he seemed to be in. He couldn't move, though, and as he struggled, a dark force seemed to pulse inside Shadow Chaos. The dark creature slowly changed its shape, matching the form of Punchy, but with Shadow Chaos's yellow eyes. Illusi chuckled darkly. "Shadow Chaos has tapped into Experiment 1's darkness and merged with it... Now, see what it's like to truly face down your own dark side!" he roared! Shadow Chaos released him, and then spoke with Dark Punchy's voice. "...Finally... A chance to tear up that prison of a body that I've been confined to! Ha ha!! This feels GOOD!!!" he shouted, smashing Punchy across the face with his watery fist! Punchy stumbled back, but shook it off. "So, I won't go dark? ...Good... I've been wanting to really let loose!! First... this is for Rainbow!" he growled, charging at "Dark Punchy Chaos" and throwing several furious punches right into its chest! It didn't seem to do much, but he didn't care as long as he got to blow off steam. Copter

and Silver thought about helping him, but instead ran over to Illusi, who was watching intently and ignoring Rainbow. "THIS is your big plan!?" Copter yelled, "UNLEASH Dark Punchy?? Have you gone INSANE!?" he shouted. Silver nodded. "This won't end well. Remember, this is just the way Fera died. If she couldn't control the darkness, what makes you think you can?" he said. "Shut up! I don't care what happens to me... I just want vengeance..." Illusi growled. Dark Punchy threw Punchy back with a dark shockwave, and then tossed balls of black water at him to injure him further. "No big rocks to throw at me? You are an ANT railing against a god! I'm just taking my sweet time squashing you!" Dark Punchy sneered. Punchy got up and raised his fists. "I don't need Chaos Avalanche to deal with you... You don't got a cliff to throw me from now." he smirked.

Dark Punchy swung the elastic arms he got from Shadow Chaos at Punchy, letting sparks of dark energy fly through them to make them more dangerous. Punchy jumped them and came at the liquid form of his darker half. "Now, this one's for Kosmo! Without you, Copter might've talked me out of that fight!" he yelled, drilling right through Dark Punchy Chaos with his fists, only to find that he reformed himself easily. "Your heart really wasn't in that one, was it? Well, this one's for me!" Dark Punchy snarled, jolting Punchy with dark lightning! He then started to warp all around Punchy, bashing him with punches and water blasts while barely giving him an opening to hit back! "...Mousy! Stop this! He... He'll die!!" Rainbow cried. "I should step in..." Copter growled. "Wait." Silver said, "I don't think Illusi here has it in him to let that happen." Illusi glared at him. "You're a bit naive, aren't you?" he growled. Punchy tried futilely to punch a couple times, and finally grew frustrated. "Grrrrr... And this... This is... for FERA!!" he shouted, to Illusi's surprise, "CHAOS BLAST!!" The chaotic explosion knocked Dark Punchy to the ground, splattering against the floor, and Illusi fell to the ground as he came to a realization. Copter guessed at it. "...It wasn't Punchy that killed Fera. It was Dark Punchy. The guy you just let out." he said. Illusi sat with tears in his eyes. "...I wanted someone real to blame... Someone I could punish... But Fera herself forced the Dark One out... And the one who allowed Fera to turn to darkness... was me." he sniffled. Rainbow placed a hand on his shoulder, her own eyes tearing up a bit. A mist escaped Shadow Chaos and flowed back into Punchy, knocking him over. "Ugh! That was foul..." he grumbled. Dark Punchy's voice spoke in his mind. "It seems I could only bond with that creature temporarily... In trying to destroy you, I nearly destroyed myself... I'm going to chew on that for a while..." he said before the voice faded. Then, Shadow Chaos pulled itself together and slithered away quickly. Copter sighed. "I'm sick of all this tension. Let's find Violet and that crystal and quit this dump!" he said. Silver nodded. "I couldn't agree more!" he smiled. Illusi stood up slowly and shakily. "...I will join you. Violet was Fera's charge. I will consider it my duty to see her safely out of this place." he said. Punchy nodded and smiled a little. "Good to finally have you back, Illusi..." he said.

As Dr. Nammad stood beside Dr. Eggman, Gemini lost her temper. "Why, Nammad?! Why waste your intelligence building doomsday machines and giving them over to people like the Covenant of Despair!?" she shouted. Nammad glared through the armor. "Aside from obvious speeches about self-preservation and the promise of, uh, rewards... GUN was squandering my genius! Talking beetles? Pitiful shooting swords? ...I once played at playing GOD! Uh... that is... until Bucky had it out with me. So when the Darkseeker came to me with the plan for Project GXterminate... I knew I had to bring it to Gunner." he sneered. Tails and Knuckles both looked dumbfounded. "Wait... Despair was behind the weapon thing from the beginning??" Tails stammered. Eggman stroked his moustache curiously. "Fascinating... But enough of that. There's still the little matter of the Chaos Gauntlets and Chaos Emeralds! Dr. Nam! Let's show them your stuff!" he chuckled, pulling a lever on the Egg Maelstrom to start it up again! This time, the first bolt of lightning struck out toward Dr. Nammad, who caught it with his mechanical staff! "...Now,

I'll play god once more! Face my, uh, WRATH!!" he yelled, using his staff to bend the lightning and send it sweeping across the room, jolting a surprised Gemini and barely missing the others as they leapt out of the way! "Oh, no! ...Gemini! Are you...?" Knuckles gasped. Rouge lifted her unconscious body into her arms. "I think some of that magic was still protecting her... But I'd better get her outta the way... You stop them for us, Knuckles!" she said sternly, flying up to the winding staircase with Gemini. Eggman chuckled. "No, no... I insist you stay. It'll help Knuckles make up his mind!" he said, spewing several large hail stones from the Egg Maelstrom in Rouge's direction! Tails jumped up, flying into the path of the hail to block it! However, this wasn't well thought out, and he fell from the sky, wounded. "Aw, shoot!" Knuckles growled, glancing at SPOT nearby. "You gonna help?!" he yelled. SPOT scampered over to Tails and erected a shield. "Yeah... Not what I meant..." he grumbled.

Knuckles glanced at Dr. Nammad and got an idea. "So, the staff controls the lightning, eh...?" he muttered. He then started to charge at the armored doctor, but Eggman fired a bolt for Nammad to direct straight at him! Fortunately, Knuckles was expecting it now, and his friends were more or less safe, so all he had to do was jump and evade it. Eggman wouldn't let this slide, though. "Thunder and hail isn't all the Egg Maelstrom is limited to! Behold!" With a few button presses, a funnel of wind shot out from the Egg Maelstrom; A mini-tornado! It picked Knuckles up and blew him into the air, but he caught the wind and started to glide. "Whew..." he sighed, but the tornado was keeping him from moving forward. Just then, a laser from SPOT seared past Eggman's head, getting his attention! Tails had carefully aimed the robot to draw the doctor's focus away from Knuckles. "Aching for more, eh, Tails!? I can pummel you with hailstones all day, you weather-name-hog!" he shouted, causing the tornado to dissipate as he switched to tossing hail at Tails. Knuckles came flying at Nammad, but he just snickered at him and swung his staff as the echidna approached, jolting him with stored up electricity! "Yaaaah!! Shoulda... seen that coming..." Knuckles grunted. "So, you made it to me. Uh... Now what, stupid?" Nammad chuckled. A blast of magic from above struck at Nammad's feet, startling him long enough for Knuckles to shrug off the jolt and deliver a good smack to Nammad's arm, causing him to drop the staff! "...Thanks, Gemini!" he called, looking up to see her kneeling on the steps, smiling weakly while Rouge stood beside her, looking frustrated, possibly because she wouldn't rest. Knuckles took Nammad's staff and ran in front of Eggman with it. "Hey! Why don't you try zapping me NOW!?" he shouted. Eggman scratched his head. "Really, Knuckles? Well... Who's to say you can even control that thing. It'll serve you right to get fried!" he grinned, firing a bolt directly at Knuckles! It struck the tip of the staff, but then it started bending all over the place as Knuckles tried to get control of it! "Eeeeeaaaaargghh!! Watch out, everyone!!!!" he groaned as Tails jumped the bolt, and Gemini and Rouge ducked it from their high perch. Eggman laughed hysterically at Knuckles's pathetic attempt to control Nammad's device, but the scientist was getting nervous. "I... um... I'm out of here!!" he yelped. "No, you don't!" Tails muttered, running after him and tossing something that stuck to the back of Nammad's armor as he escaped. At this moment, Knuckles swung the staff desperately, and the lightning split, partly spraying across the back of the room, while a stray bolt jumped back and hit the Egg Maelstrom! "AAAAIIIIIIIEEEEE!!!" Eggman wailed as his machine started blowing to pieces. However, as miraculous as always, his Egg Mobile continued floating. Dr. Eggman coughed, and started to float away. "I'll... get back to you..." he mumbled. "By the way, doc... That machine had nothing to do with maelstroms." Rouge said as he passed by her. Eggman sighed. "I KNOW... What was I gonna call it... the CLOUD?" he groaned. Once he was gone, Tails started looking over SPOT's monitor while Rouge and Gemini made their way back down. "What're you doing?" Knuckles asked. "I managed to plant a tracking device on Dr. Nammad before he escaped! If my hunch is right... He should lead us right to Despair's big boss!" Tails explained. Gemini smiled. "Great! If we take him down, he'd have to turn over that fake wand and the Master Emerald!" she coughed, "Excuse me... I'm gonna need a self-healing spell, if my book has one..." she

sighed. Knuckles nodded. "Well, as soon as Gemini's ready, let's go. It's about time we put an end to this, once and for all!"

To be continued...

46 - The Darkseeker

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 46 - The Darkseeker

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The machinations of the Covenant of Despair have led to this.

Our heroes charge through Despair Castle with a singular goal in mind: find the Darkseeker! He is holding Whisk as bait to draw Bucky to him, he holds the Master Emerald and the Chaos Crystal, and he is responsible for all of Despair's activities.

As all heroes near his throne room, certain echidnas finally come face to face...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Exiting the east and west towers, Knuckles and Punchy's groups entered a hall that met in the center and proceeded straight into the heart of Despair Castle. Here, the Master Emerald guardian met up with his clone. "Punchy? ...Figures. I lose the Master Emerald, and here you are, no doubt looking for it, same as Rouge." Knuckles groaned. "Hey! I resent your tone!" Rouge snapped. Tails waved politely to Copter. "Long time, huh?" he said. Copter shook his head. "Good, great. Gang's all here." he grumbled. Punchy smirked a little. "So, no Master Emerald, eh? But it's here. I sense it... And so do you." he observed. Knuckles nodded. "I'm finally getting close to it! I'll make Despair sorry they ever messed with me!" he growled. Rainbow rubbed her head a bit. "The big gem...? Is that what this tingle in my brain is...?" she mumbled. The other echidnas glanced at her curiously, and Illusi realized what was happening to her. "She's sensing the Chaos Crystal! She is its guardian, and has a link to it just as you other echidnas are linked to the Master Emerald!" he said. Gemini gasped when she looked at the shrew. "My gosh, Illusi... Are you okay? You look like... well, I remember looking sorta like that once... Did someone die!?" she gasped. Silver shook his head. "Not now, Gemini..." he sighed as Illusi hung his head sadly. Tails was busy checking SPOT at this point. "Well, judging by these signals, those 'controller gems' could be ahead. Let's check it out!" he suggested. Rainbow nodded. "Great! Follow me! I can totally guide us this time!" she smiled. Knuckles glared at Punchy a bit. "...Am I gonna have to fight you, though?" he asked. Punchy snickered. "I think you got your hands full with bat girl there. I got other things to worry about." he said. Rouge was rubbing her chin, lost in thought. "The emerald or the crystal...? I probably can't carry both..." she mumbled. Punchy groaned at this, and Knuckles laughed, but before he could start on his way, a familiar orb of light appeared before him! "Gaah! Tikal! You're here again!" he gasped. Punchy and Copter stared in surprise as well. "Tikal!?" they gasped. "What are you trying to tell us!?" Knuckles asked, as the world went white around him, and only him.

Knuckles stood atop the steps of the Master Emerald shrine. From here, he witnessed the full spectacle of Howler's madness play out as storm clouds gathered around them. Howler, equipped with the Chaos Tailbands, Boots and Sword, mercilessly defeated Shadow Chaos as it stood defiant in its desire to

defend the Chao. Howler then stole the Master Emerald from Tikal, planning to use it for a truly fiendish act. "With this emerald... I beseech you, Dark of Chaos... Fall into slumber with my soul... And fuse with my body!! That we might carve a new world, in MY image!!" he howled. Shadow Chaos flinched, and then started to swirl, turning into a shadowy mist that was being drawn toward the Master Emerald! Tikal stumbled away from Athair and stood in front of Howler, blocking Shadow Chaos! "Enough! Now I see what you are... You are a seeker of power and control... Like my father, and like Ix of the Nocturnus! There is but one fate for greed-driven fools like you!" she declared. Howler pointed the Chaos Sword at her, but then flipped around and whipped her aside with his tailband-powered tails, instead! Tikal tumbled towards the edge of the nearby cliff, but Athair hurried to catch her! "I'm afraid there is naught we can do, princess... We've led him right to all the power he craves!" he said gravely. "...I just saw this, Tikal... What's going on?" Knuckles wondered, "What's so urgent?" Tikal's last vision was interrupted by Eggman's return, and she had to allow Knuckles to face him rather than complete the vision. Now, he could see the rest. As Shadow Chaos was starting to be drawn to Howler, the Chao started to return, escorting Radia, who was carrying something. It was a great crystal: the Chaos Crystal! "Forces of Chaos not bound by emeralds... Are yet bound to this controller! Please aid us, Chaos Crystal! Stop the Chaos Relics!" she pleaded! As she did, the Crystal glowed brilliantly, and Tikal saw her chance. She scrambled to Howler and grabbed at the Master Emerald, wresting it from his grip! "N-no!! My power!! You cannot take my power!!!" he screamed, slashing Tikal across the chest with the Chaos Sword! "Aaaaaaah!!!" Tikal screamed in pain, and Athair ran to Howler in a rage. "You DARE strike my princess!?" he roared, giving Howler a mighty punch to the face, which knocked him to the floor, and ended his hold over Shadow Chaos. The creature stayed still on the ground, a weak puddle of black fluid.

Radia held up a deck of golden cards. "You did not know of these. I kept them from you. The Chaos Cards will hold you still... forever!" she cried, drawing a card that shined brightly over Howler, turning him to stone with its light! His relics fell to the floor beside him; Even the cards could not petrify the other relics. Radia then joined Athair by Tikal's side. She had been mortally wounded, but she was already bound to the Master Emerald anyway, so her body was merely fading. "These relics... Are too much power... You must hide them away again..." Tikal panted. Athair nodded, tears in his eyes. "We will, princess." he said, choked up. Radia glanced at Shadow Chaos. "...This Dark is despair personified. It would be safest to seal it away as well. I suggest with the tailbands. He who can wield them will be able to stop Shadow Chaos's rage." she said. Tikal nodded weakly. "...My heart... is part of the Master Emerald... Along with Chaos's. It will need protection. Its power over the emeralds, and over Shadow Chaos, will bring many thieves..." she said gravely. Athair held her hand. "W-we can watch over it together!" he sniffled. Tikal smiled up at him. "We will, Athair... You, as the guardian... Me... as a spirit..." With these words, the remnant of her body faded and turned into a beautiful ball of light, which went inside its home within the Master Emerald before fading. Athair, Radia and the Chao shed tears for their friend, and the scene started to fade away from Knuckles's sight. Only Copter remained beside Knuckles, having volunteered to watch over him. "...What did you see?" he asked. Knuckles looked at Copter grimly. "...I saw Tikal die... And I saw the source of all this evil..." he growled.

Violet and Daisy led Bucky, Kosmo, Crash, Ridley, Guard and Carrie straight to the Darkseeker's elaborate throne room. There, the Darkseeker sat upon the throne. At his left was the Chaos Crystal and Dr. Nammad, and to his right was the Master Emerald and Dr. Eggman. In front of him, Project GXterminate was set up with the red Chaos Emerald and Whisk strapped in. Basker waited in the shadows, along with other agents of Despair hidden by the darkness. "So, you have come... As

predicted." the Darkseeker said. "I brought them for the glory of Despair, master..." Ridley said, bowing. "Stuff it, Ridley!" Violet snapped. Bucky raised his hand, calling for silence. "Release my experiment. She is not yours to sacrifice for your scheme." he growled. The Darkseeker turned to Dr. Nammad and nodded, so he released Whisk from the straps. "She is unconscious. Remove her... and strap yourself in." the hooded fiend ordered. Bucky growled softly. "...I will do this... But you must know that use of this weapon has to be a last resort. Your true goal must be the power of the Chaos Relics..." he said. Carrie used her power to lift Whisk and gently bring her to Crash to hold, while Bucky strapped himself to the machine. The Darkseeker's eyes then narrowed. "You... coati. Prove your loyalty. Turn it on." he growled. Among the many who looked shocked by this was Dr. Nammad himself. "Y-y-you... you, uh, can't do that! My impression was that the, uh, plan was to hold the world to ransom! If you use Bucky in the machine... All life on Earth will perish, even with the safety measures I put in place!" he stammered. Kosmo raised his fists. "Come AGAIN!?" he snarled. Bucky nodded. "I'm afraid it's true. The machine draws GeneX energy to attack matching GeneX energy. I am a fur now... But... I was born a human. Residual human GeneX force still lives within me!" he announced. The Despair agents in the shadows howled in rage, realizing they'd been working with a half-human for some time. Dr. Eggman reached for the Chaos Emerald in the confusion, but the Darkseeker snarled loudly at him, frightening him. "Eeep! Uh... Oh, come now! Surely you expected me to double cross you just as I expected you to double cross me!" he growled. "What's all this about Bucky being human??" Everyone spun around as Sonic entered the room, followed by Amy and Cream. "Sonic!! Get me out of here, or the Darkseeker will kill everyone on Earth!" Bucky shouted.

More people started to arrive behind Sonic, starting with Punchy, Rainbow, Tails, SPOT, Silver, Illusi, Gemini and Rouge. Dr. Nammad blocked Ridley, who admittedly seemed less than enthusiastic about killing himself with a doomsday machine. "Minions... Get the Chaos Emeralds!" the Darkseeker bellowed. "Is this a bad time?" Tails wondered. "Viola! Grab the crystal and let's get out of here!!" Rainbow shouted. Violet turned to Rainbow and looked at her like she was crazy. "FORGET THE CRYSTAL! Let's quit this place!!" she yelled. Then, Basker bashed her over the head. "Insubordination will be punished!" he growled. Eddie appeared next to Eggman, and surrounded him with duplicates of himself, overwhelming the doctor and swiping the Chaos Emeralds that were still on his person! "Aaaaaugh!! Robots!! Get in here and help me!!" he shouted. Basker pushed aside everyone in his way through his fear-powers, and kicked SPOT, knocking loose the remaining Chaos Emeralds and the tailband it was holding! "H-hey!! You...can't!!" Tails shuddered. As these treasures started toward the Darkseeker, however, a great rage took hold of the crowd. Gemini fired a bolt from her wand at him! "You stole my magic for mass-murder!!" she cried furiously! Punchy ran up and called for Chaos Avalanche, hurling a chunk of the floor straight at the hooded menace. "You made Fera mess with my head and kidnap Rainbow!!" he yelled. "Throw one for Viola, too!!" Rainbow growled. Tails steadied SPOT and fired a laser at the Darkseeker. "You burned down my workshop!!" he cried. The Darkseeker shrugged off these attacks, and then more visitors started to arrive and add to it! "Your agents kidnapped Chet!!" Razor shouted, firing his gun at the Darkseeker as he entered. "AND they left Katie for dead!!" Chet added, running in to add his claws to the assault, only to be repelled by a dark energy shield! Fire pelted the shield next as Heather came at him. "You intended to use ME in that machine!!" she yelled. Shadow and Omega arrived and started hurling projectiles as well, joining Silver as he tried to bring down the roof on the Darkseeker. "You ruined the future!!" Silver cried. Talon, Lucky and Tommy came in throwing rocks. "Let Bucky go!!" Lucky yelled. Kosmo finally morphed into a dragon and blew flames at the Darkseeker. "THAT was for Carrie!!" he shouted. Then, Wrongos surrounded the Darkseeker, covered in spikes. "You...corrupted Fera...to her DEATH!!!" he screamed, sending his creatures at the Darkseeker only to watch them destroyed by the barrier. Sonic was about to join this

when the Deathbringer flew in. "...You fiend! Release him now, and end this madness!! On second thought... I'll end it!!" it said, firing a deadly bolt at the Darkseeker! It smashed the dark energy shield, but even this failed to scratch the Darkseeker! "...Are you all through? ...My turn..." the Darkseeker said, raising a hand sparking with darkness, and waving it across the room in an arc, blasting everyone with an intense, room-filling storm of black lightning! All the heroes were floored, but Sonic quickly returned to his feet. "...That all ya got?" he grinned. At this point, Knuckles and Copter were arriving with Team Chaotix. "Good, we got an audience." Knuckles said, "So, I gotta know: What's your connection to Howler?!" he shouted.

Punchy and Kosmo turned around in surprise. "...Howler?! I know that name...!" Punchy gasped. The Darkseeker crossed his arms and chuckled. "Hehehehe... So, out and about are you, Tikal? Well, that's just fine. I hope you're watching! I'm going to destroy your world now..." he said, taking the Chaos Emeralds to Project GXterminate, and removing his hood as he placed them around the machine! Knuckles's jaw dropped, as did Punchy and Kosmo's. "You... it can't be!" Knuckles gasped. Standing before them WAS Howler, his eyes glowing red, a golden crown with a sparkling purple jewel resting atop his head. "I was freed from imprisonment many centuries ago, by a fellow wearing a hood, possessing glowing yellow eyes. He gave to me this Chaos Crown, which bestowed immortality upon me! I was reminded my purpose..." he said, his twin tails poking out from beneath his cloak, "I am the Chaos Relics' chosen one!! I was born capable of using the tailbands! And I alone shall rule!!!" he howled, reaching to turn on Project GXterminate. "Oh, no you don't!" Sonic snapped, speeding at the machine like lightning, and then rushing back quickly. It didn't seem as though he'd done anything. "...The machine cannot be damaged so easily, pest." Howler sneered, "My crown will protect me alone from this weapon's blast...FAREWELL!!" He pressed the button to activate the machine, but the red Chaos Emerald that was directly installed sparked and shattered inside it! "WHAT!?" he roared, glancing at Sonic, who tossed the real emerald in his hand and caught it! "I knew that fake I got at Super Eggman Land would come in handy!" he chuckled. Shadow shook his head. "He still has SIX emeralds, stupid." he groaned. "No, he doesn't!" Kosmo shouted, rushing over and snatching the white emerald! More heroes followed suit, enraging Howler. "Any who want protection from my weapon, BRING ME THOSE EMERALDS!!" he barked. Patch stepped out of the shadows. "Hee hee... I wanna live! Lemme at those twerps!" Vector smirked and led his team into the fray. "Keep-away with the Chaos Emeralds!!" he shouted. "You played this game with me at Shadow Arc... It didn't end well..." Eggman grumbled.

Despair agents charged into the crowd, bent on gaining the Chaos Emeralds. A few of Eggman's robots, including Metal Sonic and Alpha, finally arrived as well. "Good, you're here! Get me those Chaos Emeralds, would you? I'd hate to leave this train wreck empty handed." he ordered before slinking away in the same direction Dr. Nammad was going. Metal Sonic charged in and tackled Guard, who was carrying the blue emerald. "Grrraah! Robot!! Return that at once!!" he snarled. Daisy was going toe-to-toe with Patch for possession of the yellow emerald. "That machine will kill EVERYONE! Patch, are you out of your mind!?" she shouted. Patch's eyes seemed to spin around in his head as he spun his nunchucks and giggled crazily. "Okay, dumb question..." Daisy admitted. While the others fought for the Chaos Emeralds, Knuckles ran for the Master Emerald. Eddie appeared in his path. "Eeee hee hee! Where do you think you're going??" he asked. Knuckles punched at him, but his fist went right through him! "Eeee hee hee! That tickles!" he laughed. "...I don't have time for your tricks!" Knuckles shouted, walking right through the illusion. "...Hey!!" Eddie grumbled. Illusi tapped him on the shoulder. "I know that trick..." he said. "Eh...?" As Eddie turned around, Illusi socked him in the jaw! "The face isn't protected..." Illusi muttered, rubbing his hand as Eddie fell over. Meanwhile, Basker was bringing several heroes to his knees with his fear-powers, including Amy, Cream, Talon, Lucky and Crash. "St-stay close

to me Cheese... I'm so... frightened!!" Cream shivered. Basker ignored the girls and started pummeling Talon and Lucky. "You thought to infiltrate our organization... Spy on us?! You pitiful experiments!! Take a look at your pathetic creator now! Ha ha!!" he taunted as he punched and kicked the young experiments. Suddenly, he heard a rifle cocked, and looked up to see that Vortex and Zipp had arrived. "Sssstep away from our brotherssss... Or get a hole in your head!" Vortex hissed. "I wanted to say that!" Zipp whined. Basker grinned. "As you wish..." he said, stepping toward them and filling their hearts with fear! Vortex and Zipp unleashed attacks in their panic, and these attacks flew past Amy and Cream! Cheese jumped to protect Cream, and a bullet grazed his bow tie, very nearly striking him! "No, Cheese!!" Cream whimpered. Suddenly, a roar of rage shook the room. Shadow Chaos burst through the door, and, seeing the attacks directed toward the Chao, started plowing through heroes and Despair agents alike in a crazed desire to protect it! Howler grinned smugly. "...The guest of honor is here..." he said.

Howler picked up the Master Emerald and the Chaos Crystal. "I will strengthen my bond with the power of two controllers! I beseech you, Dark of Chaos... Fall into slumber with my soul... And fuse with my body!! Together, we will control the Earth...the universe!!" he proclaimed. "...The cheese!" Alpha added comically. Knuckles had just reached Howler, but he was too late. "No!! You can't!" he stammered. "...I already have!!" Howler roared. The entire room began to shake as Shadow Chaos groaned, its body slowly dissolving into a black smoke. "H-hey... What's happening!?" Mia yelped. Copter gulped. "If Knuckles's vision is right... Then this guy is gonna fuse with Shadow Chaos... And we can't turn off his crown with the Chaos Crystal to stop him!" he said. Tails made a beeline for SPOT. "We CAN go super and stop him! The tailbands!!" he said before realizing that Basker had taken his tailband along with his emeralds. "Oh... Wait, the Darkseeker's WEARING mine!!" he realized. The room shook again, and a few people fell over. "Hey, Viola?? Why does the ground feel all shaky?" Rainbow asked. "...I just had the craziest dream!" Whisk mumbled, waking up finally. Howler cackled as the entire island started shaking. "This island floats because I WILL it! Such is the extent of my dark power, honed over centuries! But now this island is no longer necessary. I will fuse with Shadow Chaos, and this island will FALL!!" he explained. Sonic looked at him blankly for a moment. "...Oh..." he said. Then, everyone who could scream started screaming. "Let's get OUTTA here!!" Amy cried. "I'm never hiding in someone's trunk again!!" Tommy yelled. "Someone better be paying us for this!!" Espio groaned. While people inside Despair Castle were looking for a way out in their panic, Colonel Gunner was noticing the shakiness of Demon Island from his GUN Assault Carrier outside. "...We seem to have an advantage. Let's blow that hunk of rock out of the sky and send it into the ocean! Fire missiles! Try to put it on a crash course with the coastline!" he ordered. Spy crept over to him timidly. "B-but Sar-Colonel... We have agents on that island! Guard and Drol and Rouge!" he whimpered. Gunner picked up a coffee mug that was sitting in a cup holder attached to his seat. "...A few casualties are to be expected, you twit. Besides, everyone I hate is up there! I WIN!! GAH HA HA HA HA HA!!!" he laughed, a bit hysterical. The GUN Assault Carrier's missiles knocked Demon Island away from Station Square, and since it was falling anyway, Gunner had surprisingly done the right thing.

As the island plummeted into the ocean, a massive whirlpool formed around it. Dark clouds were forming around the island's crash site, and they seemed to be emanating from the island itself. These events were apparently side-effects of Howler's fusion with Shadow Chaos. Professor Pickle observed the mayhem from the shore of Station Square, a look of worry on his face. "The Chaos Crystal's prophecy must be coming to pass... This is a very bad sign. What will become of this poor city?" he muttered sadly. Katie, who had awoken, could see the dark clouds from her hospital window. "...What am I missing? Mia... Chet... Razor... Please, be safe..." she whispered. The situation was much worse from

the island itself. Despair Castle was crumbling, and everyone was rushing to escape, though Rouge had to drag Knuckles. "He... He's got the Master Emeraaaaald!!!" Knuckles shouted. "Yeah, no kidding. Why don't we all get out alive before planning out how to get it back!?" she grumbled. Guard was focused on locating and helping Sergeant Drol and the other GUN agents at this point, but the only one he could find close to the throne room was Agent 64. "Grrrr! Drol, does he live?" Guard asked. "I... I think so... I broke off to try and rescue Dr. Nammad!" Agent 64 explained. "...That was foolish." Guard stated. "Maybe... But saving people is why I joined GUN in the first place!" he replied. Punchy and Rainbow were running through the crumbling castle with Violet in tow, while Kosmo flew ahead in dragon form, clearing debris. "Should we... I dunno... be trying to stop Howler or something?" Punchy wondered. Violet shuddered. "I'm not sure we even can!" she admitted. "Sure we can! Heck, we got Three on our side!" Rainbow pointed out. "...And he's RUNNING." Punchy rebutted. Sonic was having the most intense time escaping. He was forced to carry Amy as he ran through the crumbling west tower, jumping from section to section as the floor, or wall, collapsed under his feet! Tails rode on SPOT in "Extreme Gear Mode" to follow them, occasionally jumping and spinning his tails to avoid some falling rocks. "We're gonna need those Chaos Emeralds, huh?" Tails said. Sonic nodded. "Good guess, buddy." he grunted. Amy held onto him tightly as he ran. "Thank you, THANK YOU for not leaving me this time!!" she cried. "No problem..." he sighed.

The island was splitting apart, and the fragments were being carried around in the giant whirlpool. As the island split into pieces, the heroes found themselves getting separated on the different chunks of Demon Island. As Copter climbed to his feet after being tossed into the water and tossed back onto a piece of the island, he found himself separated from everyone but Guard. "...Someone up there hates me." he groaned. "Grrr... You're my last choice, too." Guard grumbled. Tails had been separated from Sonic as well, but he found Cream on the section where he wound up. "Hey... are you all right? I got worried when I couldn't find you before..." Tails said, hugging her. Cream looked around frantically. "I... I can't find Cheese!" she cried. A few panicked chirps gave away Cheese's location, and Tails lifted a broken section of black bricks to find the Chao nursing a sprained leg. "...We better find the others, and get you two someplace safe." Tails said. Elsewhere, Sonic and Amy found Kosmo. He was lying on the ground, still and unmoving. "Well... Let's bury him at sea." Amy said. As they stepped over to him, his eyes opened very quickly, and it made Amy jump. "Gaaah! The monster's not dead!!" she yelped. "So... this is what it's like to be in a hurricane..." Kosmo groaned. Sonic helped him up, and they looked around. "...This island... It's become a real... pit of Despair..." Sonic murmured. Kosmo glanced at him. "I guess we got some time before this dump sinks, so what's the play?" he asked. Sonic shut his eyes and crossed his arms. "We stop the Darkseeker... Whatever it takes!"

To be continued...

47 - Pit of Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 47 - Pit of Despair
Stage 25 - Pit of Despair
Boss 25 - The Darkseeker

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

Knuckles witnessed the end of Tikal's story. Howler attempted to fuse with Shadow Chaos using the Master Emerald. Radia used the Chaos Crystal to stop his Chaos Relics, but when Tikal moved to stop him, he mortally wounded her with his sword! Radia trapped him in stone with the Chaos Cards, and she and Athair hid the relics once more.

In the present, it was soon revealed to all that the Darkseeker was in fact Howler, freed from his stone prison, and kept alive for centuries through the magic of the Chaos Crown! His efforts to obtain the Chaos Emeralds soon put Cheese in danger, and Shadow Chaos appeared to defend the Chao! This was what Howler was waiting for, and he set about using the Master Emerald AND the Chaos Crystal to begin a stronger fusion with Shadow Chaos! His magic ceased supporting Demon Island, and it fell into a great maelstrom in the ocean, breaking into large pieces in the whirlpool!

Now, on to the next chapter!

With everyone scattered across the pieces of the island, the situation was looking quite dire. Sonic, Amy and Kosmo quickly realized that they were probably the closest people to Howler, having found themselves still inside the crumbling remnants of Despair Castle. "We've gotta stop this guy... Chaos Emeralds or no Chaos Emeralds!" Sonic realized. Kosmo nodded. "It may be difficult to leave this... 'island' otherwise." he sighed, looking at the stormy weather through a hole in the wall. Some coughing was heard nearby, and they turned to see Zipp stumbling into the room, his wings heavy with water. "If you need a volunteer to put a bullet between that guy's eyes... I'm in..." he wheezed. Metal Sonic stepped in behind him. "{Emergency... Assessing priorities... Rescue Dr. Eggman: Priority #1.}" he concluded. Sonic looked at him standing there with his blank, robotic stare, and nodded slowly. "Okaaaay... In the absence of Tails and Knuckles, I say welcome aboard." he said, smiling awkwardly. Amy groaned. "Can we really trust... ANY of these guys?" she whined, glancing at Kosmo as well. Zipp flitted into the air and buzzed right in her face. "Get in the way of my payback against that Darkseeking creep and I'll give you something to distrust!!" he growled. Metal Sonic buzzed with alarm, pointing to the crumbled hall ahead! Shadows resembling agents of Despair were climbing out of the rubble, their eyes glowing red! Zipp backed away from Amy and reached for his holster. "Ugh... Demons!" he groaned. "...Demons??" Kosmo muttered curiously. The creatures from the dark cavern were now emerging across the rest of the island!

The demons resembling Despair agents were not much of a treat to Sonic and Kosmo, but their group

faced more demonic demons as they moved along, including giant lizards and rabid hellhounds. Zipp's bullets had little effect on the larger demons, but Amy's hammer seemed to bother them a bit more. Metal Sonic plowed through foes with an electrical tackle, and Sonic ran circles around the lizards, making them dizzy. Kosmo noticed some Chaos Spears flying up ahead, and hurried to help out whoever was getting swarmed. "Having problems, Shadow?" he asked while considering what to morph into. "I'm NOT Son-- wait, Shadow?? That's different..." an unexpected voice replied from the center of the swarm of demons. Sonic sped over to where Kosmo was and stretched his legs quickly. "Hang on, dude! We'll get ya outta this!" he said. The voice from inside the swarm started to protest. "Is that Sonic?? No! I REFUSE to be rescued by SON--" Sonic ignored him and leapt into the air, bonking demon heads one by one with his homing attack while Kosmo tossed aside any that neared him using the form and trunk of an elephant. "--IC!! ...Curse you, you blue boy scout! How dare you humiliate me!!" shouted Spiny, the porcupine who was being menaced by the demons. Amy, Zipp and Metal Sonic quickly caught up with them, and Amy frowned on seeing Spiny. "You again... Here with Eggman, no doubt." she grumbled. Spiny fixed up his spines and looked away from her. "No, I'm here for Bucky at the moment... And as soon as he's safe, I'm done with him and ALL of you!" he snorted. Zipp smirked at him. "Awww, you won't send us a Christmas card? I'm hurt, nine!" he teased. "Stuff it, four!!" Spiny snapped. Kosmo morphed back to normal and tugged Zipp along. "He deserves his choice. At least he's not here to get in our way." he pointed out. As they started to leave him, Spiny shouted after them. "I was NEVER with Despair! Get those facts straight! Oh, and if you see a treacherous frog named Corky, shoot him for me, would ya, Zipp!!" he yelled. "Sure, whatever!" Zipp called back.

Continuing their journey through the remnants of Despair Castle, the group passed by a broken down passage where it seemed some Egg Fighters had been trapped in a cave-in. Sonic and Amy laughed when they noticed it. "Serves Eggman right! You'd think his robots would be able to blast through that rubble." Sonic chuckled. Metal Sonic stepped forward and scanned the debris. "...Ummm... Metal? You're not gonna...?" Amy mumbled. "{Allies trapped. Checking structural integrity... Proceeding to assist!}" Metal Sonic curled into a ball and spun rapidly, his metal spines becoming as razors! He quickly bore through the debris, freeing the Egg Fighters! "Greeeat... What a hero..." Zipp grumbled. "Well... maybe they'll be on our side?" Kosmo surmised. However, the robots immediately began chasing Sonic around, who initially ran in circles from them out of sheer bemusement. "Metal, can't you get your friends to behave like you!?" he yelled. Metal Sonic tilted his head and then shrugged, giving Sonic his answer. "Typical Eggman intelligence..." Amy sighed, taking her hammer and bashing the first robot chasing Sonic, prompting everyone but Metal Sonic to join in the massacre. Metal Sonic smacked his head in frustration, some lines of code inside him seeming to realize that he'd wasted everyone's time. Zipp patted his metal back almost comfortingly before shooting the last Egg Fighter. "There, there, pal... I got a brother who can't get over dumb programming, too. Gargoyle. Perhaps you met him? Maybe you don't remember because your head's been tinkered with." he said. Sonic groaned and started ahead without another word, so everyone else followed him. "If we're going to work together, we should try to bond a little! Isn't that what you goody-goods do!?" Zipp shouted.

Eggman's robots weren't the only hapless enemies in the castle. Further ahead, the group came across a number of tied-up dogs, cats and bats in despair uniforms. They also found the ones that had tied them up: Chet the cheetah, Mia the cat, Officer Razor the porcupine and his little brother, Tommy. "Great, it's Sonic!" Razor sighed. "We're saved!" Mia cheered admiringly. "...You know, I took out most of these goons..." Chet grumbled. "We know!!" one of the dogs groaned. Kosmo glanced at Tommy curiously. "You brought the kid here??" he asked. "Hey..." Tommy muttered as though offended. Upon noticing the company Sonic was keeping, Razor scratched his head a little. "I guess you need to accept

any help you can get right now, huh...? Even if it's from...shady folks." he said, glancing from Kosmo to Metal Sonic. "Yeah, that's pretty much it." Amy nodded. Mia kicked at one of the uniformed cats lightly. "We've been debating what to do about these fellas... We can't very well cart 'em off to jail in this situation, and we can't leave 'em here to drown..." she said. Kosmo nodded. "When this came up with robots, we just tore them apart..." he said darkly, making the Despair agents turn pale. Zipp nodded fiendishly. "I'm game for that..." he chuckled. Sonic growled a little and knelt down beside the apparent leader of the Despair group, a bat with some fancy medals on his uniform. "Hey... Can we count on you guys to get out of our way if we untie you?" he asked. The bat glanced around awkwardly. "...Boys!?! What say you?" he cried. The Despair agents all talked at once, seeming to be in agreement. "We've no desire to drown... Or be torn apart." the bat said. Chet glared at them. "Can we really trust you guys? I've BEEN in your group..." he trailed off. "Then you know we're not all bad..." a feline replied to him. Razor smiled wryly and knelt down to begin untying the captives. "Give 'em a chance... After all... I once gave a chance to a certain shifty cheetah, and I haven't regretted it yet..." he winked. Mia looked at Zipp, Kosmo and Metal Sonic. "Yeah... but does the same apply to THEM?" she wondered. Tommy nodded. "I think so, yes." he smiled. Kosmo smiled a little. "...I like this kid." he said.

Together with Razor's group, they started to near Howler's throne room again. As they approached, a projection of Howler appeared before him, constructed of dark magic. "I knew you would return... Your kind doesn't know when to quit." he sneered. "Pray, what kind is that?" Razor asked. Howler chuckled. "You know what you call yourselves. Heroes." he said with a scowl. Kosmo shook his head. "I never called myself a hero." he remarked. "There's a better term for you anyway... Meddlers. Call it cliché, but it's what you really do. No one asked you to interfere. The only reward you will receive for your supposed 'noble' actions... is a world of pain!" he snarled. Sonic put his hands on his hips defiantly. "Excuse me? World of pain? I think that delivery is addressed to you! You are the one who meddled in people's lives uninvited!" he snapped. The Darkseeker snickered. "I offered a home and a family to the poor wretches who sorely needed it... A common enemy to lost souls raging at a society that had no patience for their troubles... Isn't that right, Kosmo? And Chet?" he grinned. Chet stepped back a bit, feeling a tinge of shame, but Kosmo stood firm. "You preyed on the insecurities of the meek and hurt... You deceived them with the intent of DESTROYING them!!!" he shouted. "...Are you jealous?" Howler smirked, "Your plot was nowhere near as clever." he taunted. Kosmo gritted his teeth. "I... was as hurt and messed up as the minions you deceived! My own creator locked me away out of fear! But... being stopped by those foxes gave me clarity. The insane destruction you crave...that I once craved... not even a god should have that right! All beings should have the right to their existence!!!" he declared. Sonic smiled at him, and Amy stared in surprise. "I...may have misjudged him...a little..." she admitted. "Is it wrong that I feel a bit attracted to him right now?" Mia added. Sonic gagged at that. "Okaaay, speeches are over. Can we talk to you face-to-face, Howler?" he asked. The Howler-hologram started to fade, but howled one last thing. "My name... is DARKSEEKER!!!"

Razor turned to his brother. "Tommy, stay back here with Mia!" he said sternly. "Ohhhh..." he whined. Mia shuddered. "You're braver than me, kid. I don't wanna go in there." she told him. Tommy nodded. "All right... I'll stay and protect you!" he said, while Mia gave Razor a sly wink. The rest of them proceeded into what was left of Howler's throne room. He was hovering above his throne, and a smoky mass vaguely resembling Shadow Chaos was swirling above him. The Master Emerald and the Chaos Crystal were glowing beside his throne, and the GXterminate device was still in place as well, with Bucky strapped into it. "I may need more time to complete the transformation... But I can still easily dispose of any pests that attempt to stop me!" Howler growled. Bucky glanced at the machine he was strapped to. "He still intends to activate this thing!" he shouted, motioning to a purple Chaos Emerald that had been

inserted into it! Sonic took a running stance. "Don't worry... He won't get the chance!" he said. Howler chuckled. "Even had you brought the other emeralds or the relics, I would merely have to ask the controllers to stop them. I hold control over all the power now. And I have had centuries to hone my own dark magic! You are fools to challenge me!" he snarled. "Is he really doing this talk with ME?" Kosmo said cockily. Razor and Zipp prepped their guns and joined Sonic and Kosmo. "You guys focus on him. We'll disable that weapon!" Razor said. "We'll save ol' lab rat and nab the emerald to boot!" Zipp grinned. "I've told you not to call me that!!" Bucky yelled. Amy, Chet and Metal Sonic stepped forward as well, but Howler wasn't interested in listening to any more threats or trash talk. He pulled his hood over his face, leaving only his glowing eyes visible. "Then you all can die here... and be spared the terror of seeing my final form!" he snarled, raising his hand and flicking his fingers to send a shockwave of darkness through the room, which tossed everyone into the air! Sonic was quick to regain his footing, while Kosmo morphed bat wings onto his back and started to fly. The battle was on!

The Darkseeker hurled massive arcs of black lightning at Sonic and Kosmo, which tore through large portions of the room, forcing the others to back off! Metal Sonic was struck by this lightning early on, and seemed to lose a great deal of power from it. Sonic was fast, but he needed an opening to strike the Darkseeker. Kosmo tried to fly above the lightning, which made Howler alter his focus and blast at him with his other hand! Realizing he couldn't dodge, Kosmo morphed into an electric eel, still bearing tiny wings as well, and tried to absorb the lightning. However, this was dark lightning, possessing different properties, and his shrieks of pain quickly reached Sonic's ears. "Enough goofing around...! Let's see how you like a hedgehog to the face!" he growled, leaping at the Darkseeker! He ceased his lightning attacks, and suddenly covered his body in black spikes, taking Sonic by surprise! "Yeow!! You hedgehog wannabe!!" Sonic yelled, hopping away from him while holding his foot. Kosmo was standing nearby, panting and nursing his wounds as well. So, the Darkseeker decided to add further injury. He lowered himself from his floating position and whipped his tails at Sonic, tapping into the power of the tailband he'd stolen from Tails to send the hedgehog flying! "Whoooooaaaa!!!" he wailed, while Amy dove to catch him! "Oooof!! S-sonic... Are you alright...?" she gasped, a bit crushed under him. He groaned and rolled off of her. "This guy sure is tough..." he grumbled. During this distraction, while the lightning had ceased, Razor and Zipp saw their chance to approach the GXterminate machine. However, the Darkseeker wasn't that easily distracted. He smacked Kosmo aside with his tails as well, and then snarled loudly at the gun-toting pair. "Uhhh... Shoot him!!" Zipp yelled, firing pointlessly at the immortal Howler. With the Chaos Crown on his head, he could not be killed. "So... You die first, then." he growled. Zipp, disagreeing with that idea, buzzed behind Razor quickly, while the cop just kept shooting. Howler created a dark spike in the palm of his hand, which he started to extend toward Razor! "NOOOOO!!!" Before Razor could be struck, Chet had sped between him and the Darkseeker, but this would cost him everything. The dark spike pierced him right through the red star on the chest of his uniform, and poked through his back! Razor watched in despair as his eyes started to fade along with the dark spike. He caught the young cheetah in his arms, and held him as he was dying. "R-raze... Tell Katie... I-I'm sorry...." Chet panted as his life left him.

Sonic and Kosmo returned to their feet, seeing what the Darkseeker, what Howler had done. "I... have had... ENOUGH!!!" Sonic shouted. Kosmo looked on at the pain Razor was clearly feeling, tears falling over his murdered friend. A massive pang of guilt struck him as he realized he nearly caused pain far worse once, and now he never wanted to witness such pain again. "...You're going down, Darkseeker!" he said. Howler stepped over to the GXterminate machine, looking for the button. "You insolent pests are slowing down my transformation! I will be a god, and no being will stop me! BECAUSE ALL BEINGS WILL DIE!!" he roared, pressing the switch! The emerald, the fake wand, and Bucky all started to glow

brightly, and waves of evil energy started to blast throughout the world, targeting all life! It was working slowly, and would give all creatures a painful death. Colonel Gunner clasped his chest from his seat aboard the GUN Assault Carrier, cursing the furry freaks that had clearly gotten the last laugh. Katie started to wheeze from her hospital bed, panicking as she had no clue what was happening to her. Professor Pickle collapsed by the shore of Station Square, and everyone on Demon Island was feeling the effects as well. Everyone, that is, except the robots. As Sonic, Razor, Amy, Zipp and Kosmo were falling down, slowly choking to death, Metal Sonic remained upright. However, he was still less than energetic from being blasted earlier. Still, Kosmo noticed how he wasn't collapsing. "...M-machines... Yes..." he panted, glowing and transforming with all the strength he had left! He took the form of Metal Sonic, and Howler fired lightning right at him as he noticed this, but Kosmo sped out of the way and charged at the GXterminate machine! "You can attack all humans and animals... But a morph is neither! A morph is everything and nothing!! I'm whatever I need to be! And right now... I need to stop you!" he shouted, grabbing for the false wand on the machine and wresting it free, turning it upside down in the machine! This messed up the flow of its magic and its circuitry, and caused it to start imploding! Bucky, deciding he had nothing left to lose, added his own lightning to the mix, causing the entire machine to explode!

Part of Shadow Chaos flowed into Howler, and his eyes started to glow orange rather than red. "...Very well. I will soon be a god, anyway. And you are all weak now." he grinned. Most of them started panting, trying to regain their breath, but Howler wouldn't allow them to recover. He raised his hand, and the wall behind him crumbled against the might of a wave from the ocean! "I gain new powers as the fusion takes hold! Let me test them...on you!" He then pointed out at the people before him, and a wave of black water crashed into the throne room, carrying all of them away in its terrible force! When it subsided, his enemies had been banished, but the Chaos Emerald remained. "...It won't be long, now... The world is at long last... MINE!"

To be continued...

48 - Death & Disorder

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 48 - Death & Disorder
Stage 25 - Pit of Despair
Boss 26-27 - The Lost Ones; The Covenant of Despair

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Darkseeker has been revealed as Howler, and his schemes are reaching fruition! Kept alive for centuries through the magic of the Chaos Crown, Howler desires nothing less than the world! His efforts to obtain the Chaos Emeralds soon put Cheese in danger, and Shadow Chaos appeared to defend the Chao! This was what Howler was waiting for, and he set about using the Master Emerald AND the Chaos Crystal to begin to fuse with Shadow Chaos! His magic ceased supporting Demon Island, and it fell into a great maelstrom in the ocean, breaking into large pieces in the whirlpool!

This didn't stop Sonic and Kosmo from attempting to halt his plans. He still had Bucky strapped to the GXterminate machine, and intended to use it. When Razor attempted to get to the machine while Sonic & Kosmo were fighting Howler, he found himself under attack! Chet jumped between his friend and the Darkseeker, ending up sacrificing himself! Howler then activated the machine, nearly killing everyone in the world, but Kosmo realized that machines were unaffected by it, and became a robot himself in order to avoid GXterminate's influence and destroy it! However, Howler's transformation was starting to progress, and he washed away his foes in a black wave...

Now, on to the next chapter!

Tails and Cream were on a segment of Demon Island's floating debris that contained both part of Despair Castle and part of the forest surrounding it. They had met up with Gemini outside the castle walls, and together they searched for any others that might have been injured in the fall of the island. Tails set SPOT to the task of scanning for life-forms, and they came across an angry Vortex trying to sneak around first. "Tailss!! Sssshining a sssspotlight on a camouflaging chameleon iss rude!!" he shouted. Tails chuckled nervously. "Uh... Okay, he doesn't need our help... Let's keep moving..." he sighed. "Hey! Don't turn your back on me, Prower!!" Vortex yelled, following them. They hadn't gone far before they came across Lucky and Talon. Other than being a bit rattled, Lucky seemed okay, but Talon had a busted wing. "Do any of you have a splint or something...?" the griffin groaned. Gemini looked over his wing and held out her wand. "Recovery!" Her healing spell seemed to work wonders, and Talon stood in awe as the pain left him. "...Um... Thanks!" he said. "Just be glad I got my real wand back." Gemini smiled. "This is all very cute... Now if some of you could GET ME DOWN FROM HERE!!" The agitated voice of Bucky the rat startled most of them, but Lucky jumped right up a tree! This happened to be where the voice was coming from, though. "Ah! Hey, how'd you get up here...?" he chuckled nervously. Bucky groaned miserably. "I was thrown by a mutated megalomaniac, what do you THINK?!" he snapped. Tails and Cream flew up to help the rat and the cat down from the tree, and once

he got down, Vortex greeted him with relief. "Masster... I wassss jussst on my way to resssscue you!" he said. "Save it. The world needs rescuing. That machine may have been stopped, but that madman's still fusing with Shadow Chaos. We need the Chaos Emeralds." Bucky said. Tails nodded. "Right! Good thing we have SPOT, then!" he grinned. Cream looked a bit nervous. "Shouldn't we maybe find Mr. Sonic? He might be able to stop this before it gets any...scarier." she said. Bucky frowned. "Not without the emeralds, I'm afraid."

As SPOT started to lead them in pursuit of an emerald, their activities did not go unnoticed. Still, a small number of people following them didn't bother Bucky in the slightest; They had to know that they were in grave peril, right? No one would dare hinder him in defeating Howler. SPOT led the group to the cavern where the dark demons of the island originated from. Vortex, having been there already, took a moment to warn the group, but it meant little. "We have to get the Chaos Emeralds at any cost. Fortunately, these demons should be no match for us..." Bucky said. Lucky scratched his head. "Which 'us' is he talking about?" he wondered. Of course, as they entered, various crazed demons came at them straight away, but Bucky and Vortex immediately fried the initial welcome committee with lightning and Chaos Inferno, respectively. "...I've no patience for these mindless energy-echoes." Bucky grumbled. Tails sighed as he followed them into the cavern. "Glad he's on our side this time..." he said. "Stay on your toes, though... Those things could come out of anywhere..." Gemini warned. Deeper into the cave, she was proven right, and had to add her magic to the defense of the group as the demons swarmed from all sides! Tails and Cream stuck close together, covering each other's backs as they fought the monsters in front of them with all their might! Lucky and Talon were running around in a panic, and Bucky soon grew tired of it. "Fifteen! Enough of this foolishness! Remove your gloves and fight!" he shouted. Talon gulped. "B-but... I look like a freak!" he protested. "Newssss flasssh! You look like a freak either way!!" Vortex yelled. Sighing miserably, Talon pulled off his gloves, revealing powerful birdlike claws that may not be filled with superpowers, but could certainly be used for combat purposes! He then jumped behind Lucky and started slashing the lizard-like demons that were chasing him, tearing them into mists of darkness! It seemed Bucky was right, the demons had proven to be little more than a nuisance to their team.

The group's reward for fighting through hordes of demons was finding the white Chaos Emerald. Bucky walked over to pick it up, but stopped suddenly as he heard wings pass overhead. Zeke the dragon dropped down in front of him, carrying Ridley the coati on his back! "Hey! Bucky! Great thing we found you!" Zeke said. Vortex glared at them. "You're the onesss that have been ssssneaking around in the ssshadowsss! What are you sssscheming!?" he hissed. "Oh, now, you wound me, Vortex! Surely I'm not still working for Howler after he just tried to KILL me! Give me some credit!" Ridley pointed out. Tails looked around suspiciously. "Something does seem fishy, though... SPOT, gimme a light!" he said, shining a light up at the ceiling near where Zeke had recently flown by. Corky the frog was sticking to the roof, possibly with suction cups, and cursed now that the light was on him. Then, he shot his tongue straight down into Tails's face, blinding him with frog-slobber! "AAAAGH!! Gross-gross-gross!!!" he wailed. With the light off him again, he started moving, and Zeke quickly picked up the Chaos Emerald. "We can still get a pretty penny for this from the right buyer, eh? Gotta get something outta this disaster!" he grinned. Lucky pushed past Bucky and stared up at Zeke. "...Put...that...down!" he warned. Zeke simply patted his head. "Cute..." he chuckled. Suddenly, Corky landed behind Bucky. "I slice Mr. Rat's throat, think of da reward I git from cranky-pants Gunner!!" he grinned raising a knife! As Bucky was turning around, however, a bolt from the shadows stopped Corky cold, his knife falling to the floor. "...Tell me mum... I hated 'er guts! There, I said it..." Corky wheezed as he fell to the floor, dead! Everyone glanced at Gemini. "I didn't do THAT!" she shouted as the Deathbringer flew out into the open, charging at Zeke next, who was still holding the Chaos Emerald, and was not as bright as Ridley was to make a

break for it at this point. The Deathbringer landed behind Zeke, and growled furiously at him. "For a Chaos Emerald...?" it snarled. Before the Deathbringer could strike, though, Bucky jumped between them, pushing the winged being back! The Deathbringer was knocked off-balance, and its hood fell off, no longer covering its face! This meant nothing to most everyone in the room, but to Bucky, everything both instantly made sense, and was shattered. "...Hope?? But...It's impossible!" he gasped. The Deathbringer was Hope the Raven, a voice-altering device fitted over her beak and a scar across her left eye. "I... Never wanted you to know... Buck... I only wanted to protect you..." she said. She began to stand up, when suddenly, something shot out from the darkness and pierced her chest! "N-NOOOOOO!!!" Bucky screamed. A slimy tentacle, followed by more slime covering her body as Losipher emerged from the shadows! "You were indeed... followed... I followed your tales... of Hope... And I decided that... if she indeed was alive... her soul...would make me complete!!!"

While a few stared in horror, Vortex ran ahead and reached for Hope's hand, hoping to pull her out of Losipher before he could devour her! However, a red beam seared between them, making him jump back to get a view of what had intervened. "Tis time for the proper ending... All life's but a walking shadow, and such shadow is best portrayed by the Lost Ones!" said Loskeleton as he crept out from behind Losipher. Lospector hovered down from the ceiling as well. "Hey, Bucky-boy! Why don't you finish the story you were telling us Lost Ones? I'm so eager to hear the end of it..." he grinned. Bucky was near in shock. He'd already witnessed the death of his old love once. This couldn't be happening. "No...It cannot be her... I watched her die... I... AVENGED her!!!" he snarled.

"There's nowhere left to run, Stein, you mutant! I'll see an example made out of you! No one defies GUN!" Sergeant Murten, Gunner's predecessor and former mentor, had tracked down Bucky's laboratory and attacked him with a powerful predecessor to the Diablon mech. Gunner was there, but only as an observer. "If you end him here, sarge, I'll be sure and let the Commander know you did your VERY BEST to take him alive!" he sneered. Bucky was tired of running. Tired of GUN's accusations and hatred. "So, you've found the rat-man. Using my accident as part of the premise to shut down Space Colony ARK wasn't enough for you psychopaths... You'll hurt everyone around me to ensure my silence. Heck, by now I doubt many of you are alive who even know what I'm talking about...so this is pointless. Just end me, and let my friends go!" Bucky shouted, resigned to let this be finished at last. Murten smiled fiendishly. "Whatever brings your twisted mind peace..." he said, charging at him! As Murten launched his attack, however, a shriek came as Hope lunged herself between them! "Don't hurt hiiiiim!!!" she cried, only to be pierced by a blade sliding out of the mech's right arm! "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!" Bucky caught her as she fell backward, but she was fading fast. "...Don't let them stop you... You...are...good!" she wheezed before fading. Murten pointed the blade at Bucky next. "If there's no one else that wants to be stupid, let's finish this..." he said. Bucky glared up at him with complete fury, all warmth and compassion gone from his soul. "Yes... Why DON'T we!?" he shouted. He then stood up and fired massive arcs of lightning at Murten's mech, the likes of which he'd never done before, and might never muster again! Murten tried to catch this lightning with the blade and direct it away, but there was simply too much energy! "Th-this is impossible!! No creature can have this much power!! You can't survive with such force in you!!!" he shouted. Gunner backed away to avoid the lightning, and soon broke into a run as the mech started to burst into a fiery explosion! "You... You MURDERER!! You're nothing but an ANIMAL now, Stein!! I'll see you fry, one of these days!!!" he shouted back as he escaped.

"And you cried and cried all night in a corner somewhere. How touching! Seems the doc failed to check-see if his girl was actually dead!! Ha ha ha!!" Lospector laughed. "What are you...?" Bucky said, but now it was too late. Lospector's chatter was meant to keep everyone busy while Losipher finished feeding, and now Hope had been fully absorbed into his mass of slime! "Oh, no... No!!" Gemini gasped, realizing what was about to happen. The slimy mass of Losipher began to take form, and as a sorrowful moan shook the cavern, he soon stood before them in his completed, vampire-esque glory! "Gaze upon me, and know true despair! I am Losipher the Lost!!" he roared. Bucky started sparking in rage. "I don't know how she was alive, but return Hope to me, NOW!" he growled. Losipher sighed. "Demands, demands... Her soul is mine now. I feel her suffering... How she wanted to return to you... Pitiful, really. Yet she felt shame at what she had become... Is that closure enough before I add your soul to join hers?" he sneered. Suddenly, Losipher started getting struck repeatedly by spells from Gemini's wand, until Tails grabbed her and pulled her airborne to dodge beams from Loskeletonor! "Watch the temper, Gemini! ...Why am I getting a familiar vibe from this?" he whimpered. "Some nightmares do come true..." Gemini frowned. Lospector shook his head as they flew away from Loskeletonor. "These guys have no respect. Hey, Losipher! That wand wench has been a thorn in my side for too long! Kindly bring me her head, would ya? That'd be good." he said. Losipher nodded. "I recognize her... I will devour these souls, and end her life!" At these words, Losipher started to grow in size, and sent tentacles from his arms to chase the group throughout the room! Bucky and the experiments attempted to resist, but Losipher simply shrugged off every attack! Even Zeke wasn't safe, and dropped the Chaos Emerald as he was caught in a tentacle! Cream hid behind SPOT, holding Cheese tightly and hoping the robo-puppy's shield would hold, but it didn't look good. Suddenly, something truly unexpected happened. The demons returned, but these demons resembled Shadow Chaos, and they quickly surrounded Cream and Cheese, seeking to protect the Chaos as though they really WERE Chaos! Lospector watched this awkwardly. "Uhhh... Do we eat pure darkness?" he asked. "In truth, I hadst believed we WERE pure darkness." Loskeletonor said. The enraged demons charged the Lost Ones, and Lospector quickly got nervous. "Let's just go, fellas! We got our win for now! Tomorrow is another soul-stealing day!" he said, prompting Losipher to grudgingly drop everyone. "...We'll meet again..." he sneered.

As everyone was resting, Fred the fennec teleported in and found Gemini. "...I sensed Losipher... I'm glad you're safe." he said. Gemini's face was filled with tears. "Somehow, I caused him to fully form earlier!" she cried. Fred patted her head. "Now, none of that. You can't say it was purely your doing. You aren't the only one traveling through time today." he said, trying his best to comfort her. Meanwhile, Tails was picking up the Chaos Emerald, while the experiments were gathered around a distant Bucky. "...Do I know anything anymore?" he muttered. A pair of yellow eyes met his gaze in the dark. "You know part of the story. Allow me to conclude it..." a dark voice said. Tails's ears perked at the sound. "...The Doomsayer?" he gasped.

The Doomsayer recounted the rest of the tale. After killing Murten, Bucky stumbled back to his lab and passed out, too full of grief to carry on. Hope laid where she fell, her body broken, and her life seemingly gone. Soon, raindrops started to fall over the area. The Doomsayer had arrived. "So young... So promising... You could be of use. I grant you a Divine rebirth! Awaken!!" A strange magic surrounded Hope's body, and a beam of light shone down upon her, seeming to lift her into the air as she was both restored and transformed! A pair of strong, black wings burst out of the back of her shirt, and as she landed on the ground, the Doomsayer handed her a black cloak to replace the tattered clothing. "...You have been reborn. You are an offshoot of the Divine species... Your power being a forbidden sort unworthy of the name. I name you... Deathbringer." the Doomsayer said. Hope looked at him nervously.

"Deathbringer...? No... What about Buck? I can't do this to him..." she stammered, "We work to create life, not destroy it!" The Doomsayer nodded. "Regardless, I have need of you. And I know you won't let your debt to me go unpaid. Afterward, you can use your gifts to aid your friends, if you so choose..." he offered. Hope looked at the hood a moment, and then dejectedly put it on. "Very well... Where do I start?" she said.

Bucky glared at the Doomsayer. "You expect me to believe that you've mastered raising the dead?" he growled. The Doomsayer backed away a step. "Why don't you ask... your son." he said, starting his usual vanishing act. "Come back here!!" Bucky shouted, trying to catch him, only to find him gone in a flash. "...We should get back to the emerald hunt..." Tails suggested. Bucky scoffed. "Fine. Do as you like... I might as well even go along with you... Someone's gotta pay for all this suffering, and it might as well be Howler!" he snarled.

Copter found himself stuck with Guard, and the pair of them had washed up farther away from Despair Castle, not far from where Shadow Arcangel had been parked on the island. Heading for the ship, they met up with Heather and Team Chaotix. "Heather! Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes..." Copter sighed. Guard grunted in annoyance and glanced at the crumbling castle in the distance. "Grrr... It would seem the Covenant of Despair is no more. My objective is complete." he stated. Vector shrugged. "Yeah... not dying from that weird death-wave would seem to say we won... But why don't I feel like celebratin?" he said. "Cuz we're trapped in a killer storm! Duh!" Charmy shouted. Copter sighed. "Well, let's see what I can do about that..." he said, pulling the Hurricane Remote from his pocket. He pressed a button and got Hoover's voice coming over a speaker. "Sorry, sparky! I recalled the plane when that there island started gettin' all wobbly!" he said. Copter sighed. "Yeah, I figured you'd have done that. Now I need it back!" he stated. Hoover laughed a bit before responding. "Yer nuts! The Hurricane is MY baby! I ain't sendin' it down into that mess fer nothin! No way, no how!" he said before hanging up on Copter. "Hoover!! Hoover, you buck-toothed tin can!! If I get outta this alive I'll have you rebuilt into a blender!! ...Probably have to ask Tails to do it, but that's beside the point!" he growled. Heather looked at him worriedly. "So... no luck?" she asked. "I was wondering how you were intending to fly everyone to shore on a little biplane, anyway." Espio muttered. Guard shook his head. "We can't leave yet... Grrrr... It occurs to me that I must see the other GUN agents to safety..." he grunted. Vector nodded. "This island's goin' down... We should try to get EVERYONE off!" he reasoned. "Um... how?" Charmy asked. They all stood with stupid expressions for a moment until they noticed the huge ship right near them. "Right! We'll fly everyone out on Shadow Arc!" Vector suggested. Heather nodded. "Good idea! Um... I'll stay... And guard the ship... You guys have fun playing in the storm..." she said, running inside. Copter nodded. "Understandably, she doesn't like water." he said.

Copter, Guard and Team Chaotix started into the woods, looking for anyone in the vicinity who could use a ride off the island. What they found instead perplexed them. There were Covenant of Despair agents everywhere, and they appeared to be fighting amongst themselves! "...Hey, cool! The bad guys are beating themselves!" Charmy snickered. "Not cool, kid. We came to get everyone off the island... if we can." Copter muttered. "Uhhh... Maybe there are lifeboats of doom or something these guys can use when they're through whaling on each other..." Vector grumbled. "You don't get what's happening, do you?" came a voice from seemingly nowhere! Copter and Vector jumped in surprise, but Guard pointed his scythe and growled. "I can detect you, so do not think to sneak up on us!" he warned. Carrie appeared in front of him and smirked. "I can yank that stick right out of your hands with my mind, so

watch yourself. Hi, Carrie, Experiment 14... Now that that's out of the way, someone wanna call off dog breath?" she said. "Down, Fido." Copter smirked. Espio seemed rather unfazed by all of this, and knew the question to ask. "Were you saying you know what's going on with these agents?" he asked. Carrie nodded. "Yeah. Pays to wander around invisible. Basically, most of the Covenant of Despair feels kinda betrayed by the Darkseeker... rightfully so, I guess. But they still liked the IDEA of the Covenant of Despair. So I guess you could say they're... hashing out who the new leader will be." she said. "If I got to be the leader, would I get free candy?" Charmy asked, making everyone glare at him. "...What? I wasn't gonna be an evil leader!" he protested. Copter groaned. "This is just great. Take down the Darkseeker, and we still gotta deal with his psycho followers that won't quit. He HAD to make a cult that was bigger than he was, didn't he!?" he grumbled. Carrie chuckled. "Relaaaax! You guys stress easy. Just knock out the heads of this craziness and I'm sure it'll stop. Follow me if you've got a mind to try. Watch your step!" she said, carefully heading right through the chaotic rumble ahead. Copter sighed and joined the others in following her.

They would soon find several commanders leading the free-for-all from a wide clearing. Leading one band of agents was Eddie the hyena. "Eeee hee hee!! See those traitors to our master, the Darkseeker!? Reward their lack of loyalty with severe pain!" he cackled. Directly opposing him was Basker the hound, who appeared to be intimidating his minions at least partly. "The Darkseeker has abandoned us... The time has come for a new master of this Covenant, and who better to lead than I? We shall tear down our opposition through fear!" he snarled. Fighting among these agents were gargoyles from the mob, who seemed to be led by Infin the weasel. "Fight past 'em, boys! Let's grab what loot we can and quit this death-trap!" he shouted, zapping anyone that neared him with his electric gun. At the back, Illusi the shrew emerged, and sent his Wrongos into the fray as well. "You...all...are...FOOLS!!" he yelled, "The Covenant of Despair was a giant trap for you and the whole world, laid by the Darkseeker! Rather than fighting over who should continue it, you SHOULD seek to dissolve it once and for all!!" he shouted, though his speech was largely ignored. Copter and his friends inevitably found themselves caught right in the middle of this four-way skirmish, whether they wanted it or not. The Despair bosses each had a bone to pick with at least someone in his group, and Team Chaotix wasn't held in high regard by the various agents fighting there, either. As the first wave of random agents started to occupy the team, Copter and Guard started to head for Illusi. "Cape boy can probably help us if we get his attention..." Copter reasoned. Carrie started to go with them, but Basker blocked her way! "I'm not one for petty revenge... But I do wonder how you'll fare without your maker to electrocute me!" he growled. Carrie vanished from his sight and chuckled. "Find me and find out!" she taunted. In the meanwhile, Illusi had gotten tied up fighting with Eddie, and they were tossing illusions all over the place. Copter and Guard were about to intervene, when Infin started shooting at them! "Well! My two least favorite people, together! Only one missin' is the cop that took my foot!!" he growled, coming at Copter and kicking with his metallic foot to illustrate his point! Guard blocked it with his scythe and growled. "We have no quarrel with you right now. Grrrr... You should be seeking refuge from this place!" he said plainly. "Yeah, well, so should you, moron." Infin scoffed.

Before Copter could join Guard in fighting off Infin, a Chaos Spear struck at his feet! Conan the raccoon was coming down from above, his normal cape having been swapped with the Chaos Wing, which he was using to fly! "Copter! You knew I'd be coming for you, so let's not waste any time playing around! Hand over your tailband and I'll let you resume...whatever it is you're doing." he demanded. Copter twirled his tails and flew up to eye level with Conan. "Hey, here's an idea, Conan! Go try and swipe the Darkseeker's crown. See how that goes!" he growled. "It'll go a lot better with the tailband. Obviously, you won't hand it over, so... die!!" As Conan thrust his sword straight at Copter, he flew over the attack

quickly and kicked off from his head to get away! "Yeah, try it! I might just toss you off the island this time!" he grumbled. While everyone else was busy fighting, Charmy was buzzing around, humming in amusement, enjoying the fact that no one appeared to be paying attention to him on account of the fact that he was a little kid. "I bet I could fly right into the bad guy's throne room, yoink his crown, and be a big hero before anyone knows I'm gone! Brilliant, Charmy!" he chuckled, stopping suddenly in midair as he noticed a sparkle in the woods nearby. "Hey... Could that be it!?" he gasped, hurrying over to check it out. "Hey! Oooof!! Where ya goin, Charmy!?" Vector shouted, though busy fending off some assorted Despair agents. Charmy dug through the bushes at the edge of the clearing, and pulled out a shiny yellow Chaos Emerald! "Aww, I thought this was something more useful..." he sighed. "Hold on to that, child!" shouted Illusi, taking a break from battling Eddie to advise him, "The Chaos Emeralds may prove vital in stopping the Darkseeker!" he said. Eddie appeared between them and growled at Illusi. "What's this grudge you have against my master?? Eeee hee hee... Wait, that's right... You owned the key. Our bad." he smirked. Illusi snarled furiously at him. "The key? You think this is about some meaningless Chaos Relic!?" he snapped, shooting a beam of pure energy at Eddie from his eyes! "FERA WAS KILLED FOLLOWING YOU FOOLS!!" he roared.

Copter was busy evading Chaos Spears from Conan's sword, but he noticed Illusi's sudden outburst. "Geez, he's still intense..." he muttered. Conan slashed his sword at the distracted fox, blocked by the very tailband he was out to steal. "Grr! Don't take me lightly! I will have ALL the Chaos Relics, and none will stand in my way!" he shouted. "I'm afraid not, my riches-driven friend... Because the Relics all belong to ME!!" Howler's voice stunned the combatants into a sudden halt, and as they looked around for its source, a black, watery image appeared in the sky overhead! It was Howler, already gaining control over Shadow Chaos, and using it to project himself as a watery double. "So much you have gathered in this place... Now, all sources of power are MINE to command!" he declared! From the direction of the forest his back was turned to, big black tendrils started to lash out at the people in the clearing! They were watery tendrils, much like the kind Shadow Chaos could use, and they rapidly snaked their way into the crowd and went straight for Copter and Conan! Without much resistance, the tendrils wrested the Chaos Wing, Chaos Tailband, and Chaos Sword from them! "AAAAH!! N-nooooo!!" Conan wailed, falling to the floor with a growl of defeat as his treasures were stolen from him! "This is bad! Now he's got both the tailbands!" Copter grunted, feeling a bit overwhelmed himself. "No! Stop! Bad giant arm!! Give back my shiny!!!" Charmy squealed, pulling at his Chaos Emerald as the tendril dragged it away, too! "Charmy, don't let him get you, too!!" Vector shouted, while Espio jumped into action and grabbed the bee before he could be taken away by the dangerous enemy. "Put me down, Espio!! He's got my Chaos Emerald!!!" Charmy whined. "...Be grateful he is not taking your life." Espio sighed. Carrie and Basker even called a truce at this point, seeing how grave the situation was getting. "...I need to move my forces in a strategic retreat..." Basker sighed. "Looks to me like there won't be anywhere to retreat to soon..." Carrie shivered. "Grrrr... Can we even stop him now?" Guard questioned. Copter glanced at him and shrugged. "I'll look into that... You guys get as many as you can aboard Shadow Arc...before it's too late!" he said, hurrying off to catch up with Howler!

To be continued...

49 - Approaching Despair

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna
Chapter 49 - Approaching Despair
Stage 25 - Pit of Despair
Boss 28-29 - Anubis; Shadow Howler

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?
GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Darkseeker, AKA Howler, has begun fusing with Shadow Chaos. Time is running out to stop him, and our heroes are scattered across the broken pieces of Demon Island, which are being pulled underwater in a maelstrom.

Washing up near Tails and a band of his experiments, Bucky went off to search for the Chaos Emeralds for the inevitable showdown with Howler. Ridley, Zeke and Corky sought to steal the emerald he found, and when Corky tried to kill a distracted Bucky, the Deathbringer killed him! Soon, it was revealed that the Deathbringer was Bucky's lost love Hope, revived by the Doomsayer, but the reunion was cut short by Losipher, who devoured her soul to become whole! The Lost Ones escaped, leaving an emotionally shaken Bucky to follow Tails in pursuit of the next emerald.

Meanwhile, Copter got caught up in the power struggle left in the Darkseeker's wake, as his former commanders battled for leadership of what was left of the Covenant of Despair. Conan emerged during the chaos, wanting Copter's tailband, but Howler sent out a representation of himself to snatch everything: the tailband, Conan's Chaos Relics, and a Chaos Emerald!

Now, on to the next chapter!

Punchy found himself lost in what was left of Despair Castle, wandering with Silver, Omega, Char and Alpha. They were a bit slowed by some bickering between the two robots. "And I say the best pie is coconut cream!!" Alpha shouted. "I repeat: Robots have no taste receptors! That Dr. Eggman continues to use you is an obvious insult meant for me!!" Omega shouted back. "Actually, it's meant for Sonic..." Char chimed in. "Will you robots stop arguing about pie!? I'm starving!!" Silver growled. Punchy tried to ignore them, and was searching around frantically. "C'mon! Help me find Rainbow and Violet so we can blow this popsicle stand!" he said. "Popsicles? Did you just hear me say I was hungry? Don't talk about food!" Silver groaned. Punchy saw a door ahead with a light coming from the next room. "Light? In this dump? Now THAT'S suspicious. I'm gonna take that door off its hinges!" he said, running over and knocking the door down with a good WHACK from his fist! "Shhh! One, open the door like a person!" They found Rainbow inside the next room, which was the lab. She was quietly sipping tea, oddly enough. Stranger still, she was enjoying this tea with Dr. Nammad. "Oh, please. Uh, come in. One or two sugars?" he asked, seeming WAY too mellow. Punchy stared with a somewhat freaked expression, but Silver walked in with a cheerful smile. "Hey, tea cakes!!" he said happily. "Gimmie one! Gimmie one!" Char giggled, flying in as well. Punchy scratched his head after getting over the surprise. "Uh... Rainbow... You know you're having tea with the bad guy, right?" he said. "He's also a former coworker,

One!" Rainbow said. "Huh? No, not Char!" Punchy grumbled. Dr. Nammad sipped his tea calmly. "I'm not the, uh, bad guy. I'm just an innocent opportunist who made a, uh, mistake. There's not much I can do about it now, so, uh, might as well wait this out in comfort..." he said. Punchy glared at him a little, and then Omega burst into the room, startling everyone. "There is no time to waste! Annihilate him and let's go!!" he shouted. Nammad backed away a bit and gulped. "I'll, uh...pack you some cakes for the road..." he mumbled.

With Silver's belly satisfied, Punchy started them on the search for Violet next. If he could get the sisters to reunite, he'd be satisfied enough to start looking for a way off the island. Unfortunately, before traveling too far, they found Terra and Firma instead. They initially focused on Alpha, paying little mind to the others. "At last, we have found an ally! Tell us, have you located Master Eggman?" Firma asked. Char shrugged, while Alpha gave a less direct answer. "We found the perfect tea to go with lemon meringue pie! What's your favorite pie?" he asked. Terra raised his fist angrily at this response. "You will answer the question, or be DESTROYED!!" he yelled. Of course, Omega wasn't about to stay out of this. "How dare Eggman duplicate my design not once, but twice! He thinks I can be replaced, but I am the ultimate robot!! And I will prove it by destroying you ALL!!" he shouted. Punchy and Rainbow started to look really tired of this really fast. "...Think we could just leave them?" Punchy wondered. "They'll probably all team up to get us if we do..." Rainbow sighed. Silver growled in aggravation. "Well, we don't have TIME to deal with a robot war! HYAAAAAAA!!!" Using his psychokinesis, fueled by a bit of rage, he grabbed Terra and Firma, lifting them into the air and hurling them against the damaged wall, sending them right through it and out into the swirling vortex of the maelstrom outside! "WE'LL GEEEEET YOOOOOOOU!!!" Terra roared as he soared off into the ocean! Alpha and Omega glanced at the furious hedgehog, who was breathing hard. "...Now behave, or THAT will happen to YOU!" he warned. Punchy looked at the crumbled wall curiously. There was something sparkling that was stuck in the rubble. "Hey... what's this?" he muttered, walking over and pulling something out of the pieces of the wall. What he found was the Chaos Gauntlets! "Huh?? How'd these get stuck in the WALL!?" he stammered. "...That red-eyed reaper sure tossed everyone and everything good, huh?" Rainbow said. Char nodded. "That's pretty cool! I wonder what else we can find..." he said.

The castle was still slowly crumbling, but the group continued on to the remains of the West Tower where Punchy had fought Shadow Chaos not too long ago. Now, several of the remnants of the Covenant of Despair were there, including Patch, Daisy, Anubis and Violet. "Viola! Thank goodness we've found you!" Rainbow called, however her sister had a bit of a frightened look on her face, as did Daisy. Anubis was threatening the girls, and Patch as well, with his flames. "...Our former 'master' may have forsaken us, but make no mistake that the Covenant of Despair... the TRUE Covenant of Despair, will continue on! You can either be a part of it...or be destroyed!" Anubis threatened. "Hee hee... Since we're talking here, can we negotiate vacation time? Wearing this tight uniform day in-day out is murder in and of itself!" Patch said, eliciting a growl of aggravation from Anubis. "Hey! This doesn't look like a friendly recruitment interview!" Punchy shouted. Anubis turned to face him, and glared at him with disdain. "The former covenant was weak! Fera was weak! The true Covenant of Despair will command both loyalty and efficiency from its agents... And YOU won't be a part of it, false guardian!" he snarled. Punchy shook his head in annoyance. "Never gonna let that go, huh?" he grumbled. Rainbow nodded. "Yeah, I mean, sorry we almost killed you and all, but you started it." she said. Anubis raised his hands and started to summon his undead army from under the ground! "Then I'll also finish it! Any who wish to defy me shall be crushed by my agents of Despair!!" he snarled as his black-clothed mummies burst out from under the ground! Alpha shrieked upon seeing them. "The dead walk the floor!! It's the rapture!! Save us, oh mighty Ra!!" he babbled, flying up high and out of range of the mummies and Anubis.

"Alphaaaaa!! You have lasers to blast 'em!! Come back!!" Char shouted, chasing after him. Daisy drew her katana and growled... then stepped in front of Anubis. "I'm afraid he's right. We're Covenant of Despair members... So put 'em up!" she said. Patch joined her with his nunchucks, making Anubis smile a little. "Welcome back to your senses... Now destroy them!" he ordered.

Violet had a look of protest as her friends went to fight her sister and her friends. "Daisy, Patch... Stop it!" she shouted, only to be ignored. Fortunately, Silver was there to deal with them. He pulled their weapons from their hands using his psychic powers, much to Daisy's chagrin. "Not THIS again!! Can't anyone fight fair!?" she shouted, pulling out a second sword that she started carrying for just such an occasion. "After that griffin did this to me, or was that someone else, I decided I would be prepared in the future!" she said, fending off her own psychically-controlled blade with the one in her hand! Meanwhile, Omega set to work blasting through the mummies, creating an opening for Punchy and Rainbow to approach Anubis. "Do I really gotta kick your butt again? Just let Violet go, and we'll leave quietly!" Punchy said. Anubis created fireballs in his hands, growling at them. "We remember our first encounter quite differently, don't we... I remember nearly destroying YOU!" he snarled, tossing the fireballs directly at Punchy! He dodged quickly, but Rainbow still squeaked with alarm and pointed at him. "...What?" Punchy said, only to notice that his tail was on fire. "Gaaaaaaaah!!" He ran around hurriedly, trying to put it out, while Anubis started throwing more fireballs his way! "Hey! Quit burning One!" Rainbow shouted, shaking her fist at him. "I am not afraid of you, girl... I'll set you ablaze, as well!" Anubis growled, sending a jet of flame in Rainbow's direction! However, she quickly vanished into a beam of dark energy, which reappeared behind Anubis, revealing Rainbow AND Violet! "Don't TOUCH my sister!!" Violet shouted. Anubis glared at her. "I will deal with your insubordination after these fools are dead..." he said, only to be punched across the jaw by Punchy during his distraction! "You REALLY need to do less threatening and more paying attention!" he chuckled. Anubis rubbed his cheek and snarled. "I will take that under advisement... Now BURN!!" he shouted, hurling flames straight at Punchy! "Chaos Avalanche!!" Punchy struck back, tossing chunks of rock straight into the flames! Neither side of this fight was willing to give in easily...

Suddenly, bullets started flying everywhere, whizzing past Daisy and Patch and startling them! "Hee hee!? Cheese it, the fuzz!" Patch shouted, scurrying away as quickly as he could. Several GUN agents were storming the tower, led by none other than Dr. Nammad and Sgt. Drol! Seeing this, Anubis allowed his mummies to crumble lifelessly. "For now, it appears the tide has turned against us... But watch your backs! The true Covenant of Despair will rise again!!" he said, leading Patch and Daisy in a hasty retreat! With the enemies gone, Alpha flew back down and jumped up and down in celebration. "We won! Let's celebrate with some cake!" he cheered. "So, it's cake now?" Char sighed. Punchy looked at Drol, a bit confused. "You found us... AND you're helping us?" he stammered. Dr. Nammad waved to them with a smirk. "I did some thinking since we met. And, uh, I decided I could do more to, uh, help. So I searched out Drol and led him to you." he said. Drol looked a bit exhausted, but also relieved to have found someone. "I do hope you are someone with a plan. We collected some of the Chaos Emeralds... But beyond that, I admit I am drawing a blank... A tad humiliating for GUN's noble knight. As loath as I am to place my trust in YOU, Experiment 1, I am loath to die here even more." he said. Agents 64, 32 and 77 were each there, holding the blue, red and green Chaos Emeralds, respectively. Silver started to approach them, intending to accept the emeralds. "If I find the others, I'm sure I could figure a way to stop Howler..." he said. Unfortunately, Howler wouldn't allow this. "You'll have to pry those emeralds away from me, first!!" Howler's black, liquid projection appeared at the back of the tower, and the black tendrils of Shadow Chaos came snaking their way in and quickly snatched each emerald away from the GUN agents! As Howler laughed and started to escape, Punchy broke into a run to chase him!

"HOWLER!! Enough is enough!! You're going down if I have to pry those emeralds from your slimy...flippers!!" he screamed. "One!! Slow down!! Think about this!!" shouted Rainbow, chasing after them! The others weren't far behind. But where would this chase lead them?

Elsewhere in the crumbling castle were most of the remaining heroes on the island, including Shadow, Rouge, Crash, Whisk and of course, Knuckles. They had been journeying for a while in search of the Master Emerald and the Chaos Emeralds, but so far only found Illusi's elusive Chaos Key, which was essentially worthless to them. What's more, Demon Island's shadowy demons were roaming everywhere, and Lost Ones were loose in the castle to boot. "If we can just find those Chaos Emeralds, I can put a stop to that Darkseeker with or without Sonic!" Shadow growled in frustration. Knuckles punched out a despair agent demon in their way and glanced back at him. "Well, hopefully Sonic's having better luck, 'cuz we're NOWHERE on this so far!" he grumbled. Rouge was busy flying around, kicking away losolanturns as they came at the group, and Whisk was trying to imitate her, only to get her foot stuck in the pumpkin-creature's mouth. "YUCK!! I'm outta here!!" she yelped, teleporting right out before it could bite down! "Please... don't copy me..." Rouge sighed. Crash charged through several large demons with his Chaos Charge technique, easily clearing a path through them! "This way! Hurry, those monsters are just gonna keep comin'!" he shouted. As the others followed, Shadow covered the rear, blasting back any stragglers with Chaos Spears as they headed through the next door and slammed it shut! "Can I go home now?" Whisk whined, "This stopped being fun um... well... I can't really remember it being fun." she said. Knuckles frowned. "You guys can all go if you want... I have to get the Master Emerald back from Howler. Although... At this point it kinda feels too late..." he muttered. Crash shrugged. "Well, I can't leave without Bucky... So I guess I sorta understand. But that emerald's just a rock, you know..." he said. Knuckles shut his eyes and shook his head. "...It's not about the...rock. I have a duty... And I can't abandon it now, no matter how bad it looks..." he explained. Shadow sighed as though bored. "Nice speech. Hate to remind you how short on time we are!" he grumbled, leading the group ahead.

As the group passed into the weapon-training room of the castle, they found the last remaining allies that weren't busy elsewhere: Adam the bat, Evelyn the fox and Cuthburt the alligator! They were busy shooting at some Lost Ones that were flying around the room, and Shadow was quick to notice that Cuthburt was clutching the cyan Chaos Emerald in his hand! "Finally, some luck! Let's fight off these creatures so that they'll give us that emerald!" he suggested. "Yeah, or just 'cuz they're friends of Gemini..." Knuckles added. "Well, if you're gonna help us, HELP US!!" Adam shouted, finding himself a bit overwhelmed by losoars in the corner of the room. "Geez, Adam... You're always in trouble..." Evelyn groaned. While Knuckles, Shadow and the others joined Adam, Evelyn and Cuthburt in fighting the Lost Ones, the back door creaked open, and some robotic eyes peered inside. "I'm ready... I am SO ready! Gimmie the order, doc!" said Jolt, one of the two robots. "...So, we have come full circle, and Knuckles is the opposition. I am prepared." said Freeze, the other robot. They watched for a bit as the group was busy fending off the Lost Ones. Whisk's wings glowed as she flapped them hard, sending a magical wind to tear through any creatures in front of her! Knuckles and Crash stayed to the ground, knocking away any monsters that came near them with physical attacks, though it only destroyed lesser Lost Ones. Rouge had a couple bombs left in her GUN supplies that she brought with her, and used them to take out some losohsts that were carrying blades around, looking rather menacing. Shadow sped around using an assortment of Chaos attacks to take out as many Lost Ones as he could quickly. They were pretty well distracted, so Jolt and Freeze crept into the room pretty much unnoticed. They snuck up towards Cuthburt, and then Jolt pretended to clear his throat. "Huh?? Hey, who let robots in here!?"

Cuthburt muttered. "We require your Chaos Emerald... Hold still..." Freeze said, blasting cold air at Cuthburt to freeze his feet while Jolt wrested the emerald from his hand! "Ha ha ha! Too easy!!" Jolt chuckled. "Huh?? Hey, you bots! Bring that back!!" Knuckles shouted, leading a chase as the pair of robots fled through the back door!

Most of the group went to chase the robots, and Jolt chuckled, tossing the Chaos Emerald to Freeze. "Keep-away! Run this to the doc, pal!" he shouted. Knuckles looked at Freeze, and noticed he was wearing some familiar golden shoes with wings on them. "Hey, no fair! He's wearing the Chaos Boots! They'll give him super speed!" Knuckles said, having seen Howler use this power through the last visions from Tikal. Shadow scoffed and ran ahead. "I'll catch him, then!" he shouted. Freeze glanced back at them, and then started to speed up. "Keep up with me if you can..." he said, leaving all of them but Shadow in his dust! Crash started to charge after them, but Knuckles grabbed his tail to slow him down. "...Let's follow the other one... I think they're going to the same place." he reasoned. Jolt chuckled and fired up his jetpack, flying ahead of them as fast as he could manage. "You've all been very helpful finding that emerald! See you in the funny papers, chumps!" he laughed as he took off! Ahead of the group, Shadow was keeping pace with Freeze pretty well. The Chaos Relics weren't meant for robots, and it was quite possible that Freeze wasn't even capable of tapping into the boots' true power. He began to grow concerned that Shadow would catch up, so he turned suddenly and started blasting cold air throughout the hall! Shadow jumped to avoid it, but Freeze sped around him and struck him in the back, freezing most of his body solid! "...You will not interfere with Dr. Eggman. Good bye." he said, running off. In a few moments, Jolt flew by, and the others found Shadow like this. "K-keep...chasing them!" Shadow said, his teeth chattering. Rouge stopped and sighed. "They can keep chasing them... I guess I'd better get you out of this..." she groaned. Knuckles nodded and continued chasing Jolt, soon reaching the East Tower of Despair Castle once again. There, Dr. Eggman was holding the Chaos Emerald, seated in his Egg Mobile. "Knuckles...and friends. How good of you to join me. I was just working on a counter-strategy to combat Howler..." he said. Whisk pointed behind him. "You prepared to counter that creepy-crawler?" she asked. Eggman turned around as he heard a shriek behind him, but it was too late! A black creature jumped from the wall and struck the Egg Mobile, knocking it to the floor! "Aaaaagh! Th-the thrusters are damaged! Wh-what was that!?" Eggman gasped. Looking back behind Eggman, the group could see the shadowy form of Howler!

A good look at the shadowy image of Howler, and it quickly became apparent that this was not the real Howler. Its body was totally black, except for its glowing eyes, and it had a generally feral presence. "Is that a... demon?" Whisk wondered. Crash nodded slowly. "I've heard it explained... That the demons here are made of the darkness collected on the island, and that's why some of them look like Covenant of Despair members that were spellcasters..." he said. Knuckles raised his fists slowly. "Well, Howler's apparently had centuries to cast spells... So this demon could be pretty nasty!" he reasoned. Jolt and Freeze approached the "Shadow Howler" in order to defend Eggman, but the demon blasted them across the room with a swift beam of dark energy! Eggman yelped and looked at Knuckles pleadingly. "Do something, Knuckles!! I... I'll give you the Chaos Emerald! I promise!" he whimpered, pounding at his Egg Mobile's controls uselessly before giving it up and abandoning ship to hide behind the echidna. "You are unbelievable, Eggman! But since I really can't see how you're gonna pull a fast one this time, you got a deal!" Knuckles nodded. Of course, Shadow Howler wouldn't make it so easy! He appeared drawn to the Chaos Emerald, and started charging at Eggman, firing bolts of darkness at both Crash and Knuckles as they tried to block his path! Crash was knocked away, to be caught by a somewhat panicked Whisk, while Knuckles stood his ground, allowing Eggman to run back and get to his robots for protection. "You may not be Howler...but you're gonna be practice! Now quit chasing people and fight

me!" Knuckles growled. Shadow Howler glared at him, and jumped his way, performing a spinning tail whip with his two tails, bashing Knuckles back a bit! Knuckles responded by throwing a couple punches at the demon, but they didn't seem to do much good against pure darkness. "...Tough demon..." he muttered, jumping and gliding for the wall as Shadow Howler started shooting powerful bolts of dark lightning at him continuously! Crash and Whisk tried to approach, but the lightning was flying everywhere! "This thing's almost as tough as the real deal! Now what do we do?" Crash grunted.

Dr. Eggman chuckled and pointed directly at Shadow Howler. "Fire! While it's distracted!" he shouted. Jolt and Freeze fired electricity and ice directly at Shadow Howler, slowing it down and freezing a portion of its body! Knuckles saw his chance now. "Uh... Thanks, Eggman!" he said, jumping back down and gliding straight for Shadow Howler, evading blasts of darkness as he aimed straight for the icy patch of its chest! With a good, strong punch, his fist went right through the ice, and Shadow Howler faded into a mass of scattered dark energy with a shriek! Finally, it appeared there would be time for everyone to catch their breath. "Save the 'we make a good team' speech, Eggman. I still want that Emerald back." Knuckles panted. Eggman held it up as though thinking about it, when suddenly, it was snatched out of his hand by a watery black tendril! "Wha-HEY!! I do all the sneaky stealing around here!!" he shouted. Freeze fell over as the Chaos Boots were yanked from his feet as well! The watery projection of Howler emerged at the back of the room to mock them, just as Shadow, Rouge, Adam, Evelyn and Cuthbert were catching up! "A valiant effort by all... But none shall oppose me! The time for humanity's rule over Earth is over... Now, the reign of the Darkseeker shall commence!!" he roared! As Howler began to escape, Knuckles started to chase after him. "Wait just a second, Howler!! You have something that belongs to me!!" he shouted. "Face it... You guardians have failed. You existed solely to stop me, and you were utterly pathetic in that effort..." Howler taunted. Shadow and the others started to give chase as well, but they started getting tripped up by the same tendrils that had stolen the Chaos Emeralds! "Howler's transformation is almost complete!! We've got to do something, NOW!" Shadow growled. "I am gonna do something!" Knuckles shouted, not letting himself be daunted by the tendrils in the least, "I'm the guardian... And I'm gonna find a way to set it all right!!"

To be concluded...

50 - Final Chapter - Knuckles, Guardian of All

GeneX - Knuckles the Echidna

Chapter 50 - Final Chapter - Knuckles, Guardian of All

Final Boss - DESPAIR

Note: Sonic the Hedgehog and related characters are (c) SEGA and Sonic Team. You knew that, right?

GeneX and related fanchars are (c) 2BIT (TheGreatGator), the author.

The story thus far:

The Covenant of Despair was a construct of the Darkseeker, a centuries-old being who's true name is Howler. Convinced that he is the Chaos Relics' chosen one, he deceived Tikal into helping him find them, and sought to fuse with Shadow Chaos to become a "god."

These ambitions did not change over the centuries. He was thwarted initially, but he built the Covenant of Despair to help him track down the Chaos Relics and Shadow Chaos again, and to defeat the guardians of the Master Emerald and the Chaos Crystal, so he could use them in his fusion rather than have them used against him.

His ambitions have come to fruition. He has even gathered up the Chaos Emeralds. Nothing short of a miracle can stop him from achieving his godhood now...

A band of heroes race to attempt this miracle, including the descendants of the echidnas who stopped Howler centuries ago...

Now, on to the next chapter!

A band of the heroes was now advancing on Howler's throne room once again. Those that had come to oppose him included Sonic, Knuckles, Copter, Punchy, Bucky and a handful of people that had traveled this far with each of them. "Copter... Your tailband!" Tails gasped, noticing the unusually naked tails of his clone. Copter sighed. "He got them... The Darkseeker got both of them... And more Chaos Relics, too." he growled. Bucky hurried over to Sonic and handed him the white Chaos Emerald, the one emerald Howler hadn't stolen. "I think you're going to need this." he said. Sonic nodded slowly. "Greeeeat... Don't got a single other emerald, but I guess it's better than nothing." he muttered. As the group approached the entrance to the throne room, they found the Doomsayer standing in the path. "YOU!!!" Bucky snarled. "Doomsayer..." Knuckles muttered, "You fit the description of the guy that gave Howler his crown... But that's impossible, isn't it?" he asked suspiciously. The Doomsayer stood with crossed arms. "As impossible as restoring life to the dead, I would wager... Questioning why will do you no good. Howler's destiny was not to remain in stone forever, and that should suffice. Is it destiny that he be the harbinger of doomsday as well? Or will that honor fall to another, in the very near future? It matters little... The world will end, and nothing you can say or do will stop it." he said darkly. "If you've got nothing helpful to say, then get lost, Grim Reaper 2!" Rainbow shouted. The Doomsayer stared at her for a second before beginning to vanish in a storm of hail. "You may want to check that math..." he murmured as he vanished. Sonic glanced back at Amy and some of the others that had followed them this far. "This guy's really dangerous by now! Some of you ought to go back and try to get as many people off the island as you can!" he suggested. Amy nodded slowly. "Be safe, Sonic!" she said, "...Or I'll

never forgive you!" Sonic chuckled softly. "Same to you..." he sighed.

Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, Copter, Punchy, Rainbow, Violet, Shadow, Silver and Kosmo entered the chamber where the Darkseeker, Howler, awaited. His eyes now glowed yellow, his transformation very nearly complete. "Back for more, are you? Pathetic, foolish beings... You should have crawled under some rocks when you had the chance! But let it not be said that I am not a generous god... Have your precious emeralds!" he said, tossing the Chaos Emeralds back to the group freely! He chuckled at their perplexed stares. "I have no need for such baubles... And with the Master Emerald safely in my grasp, they are mere stones to you. Pity." he sneered. Sonic started to charge at Howler at high speed. "Not after I take it from you!" he shouted. What was left of the walls of the throne room crumbled around them, and with a wave of his hand, a wave of water splashed into the room, picked up Sonic, and carried him out into the maelstrom! "Sonic! Hang on!" Shadow shouted, running after him only to be caught up in a second wave and dragged out to sea as well! Tails hastily called for the Tornado with his remote, and with the room around them basically gone, it easily found him. He hopped into the plane and took off after Sonic without delay. "Sonic can't swim... I have to fish him out of there!" he said in a panic. Kosmo morphed into a gargoyle and flew after him. "I'll go look for Shadow, too... But I'll be RIGHT BACK, Darkseeker!!" he growled. "Go ahead... Take all the time you need..." Howler sneered. Silver had a grim look as he noted how fast their team had been cut in half. "This isn't going well... We need that Master Emerald, now!" he said. Knuckles and Punchy both nodded. "We're on it..." Punchy said as they both started to cautiously approach Howler.

Howler pulled out the Chaos Sword that he stole from Conan, and pointed it at the echidnas as they approached him. "Do not entertain any notions of stopping me. I have collected the majority of the Chaos Relics... And I will have them ALL! Including the gauntlets and the key that lie in your possession!" he said threateningly. Knuckles and Punchy both stared in surprise, taking out the key and the gauntlets respectively since it was apparently no use hiding them. Most of the other relics were in the room as well, with the crown and the tailbands being worn by Howler, and the boots and wing sitting at his feet between the Master Emerald and the Chaos Crystal. Apparently, Howler was too busy fusing with Shadow Chaos to put them on. "...Yeah, we got these relics... But you'll have to take 'em from us!" Knuckles growled. Silver stepped forward as well, ready to help, but Copter stayed back with Rainbow and Violet. "This is gonna get crazy... And me without my tailband... Rainbow, you should take your sister and get out of here!" he suggested. "Ha! What, are you SCARED?" Violet said mockingly. "...Yes." Copter admitted. Howler chuckled at the bravado of the echidnas. "I could simply hurl you to the ocean as I did your friends... But I have something more amusing in mind..." he said, raising his hand to Punchy and sending a blast of darkness straight at him! Punchy let out a howl of pain, and quickly started to transform into Dark Punchy! "One!! One, no!! Fight it!!" Rainbow shouted. Howler cackled as Punchy fell to the floor, growling savagely as Dark Punchy was taking over. "Your friend cannot help it! Once your heart has given way to darkness... Darkness owns it! If you are incapable of embracing it... It will control you! Now, watch as your dear 'Punchy' destroys your only remaining heroes!" he laughed. Bucky and Illusi watched from the doorway, gritting their teeth. "Dark One... If you are more than mere darkness, prove it now!" Illusi whispered. "We may just be doomed..." Bucky sighed.

Silver tried to approach Dark Punchy. "H-hey, buddy... Hate to bother you, but I gotta get those gauntlets from you real quick..." he muttered. He got a bit too close, though, and Dark Punchy smacked him across the room with his fist, forcing Copter to hurry and grab him before yet another hedgehog could fall out into the maelstrom! "One!! Snap out of it!!" Rainbow called out. Knuckles put the Chaos Key on the ground slowly and spoke to Punchy calmly. "Easy, Punchy... Remember, I'm on your side for once..."

he mumbled. Dark Punchy grunted, and slowly looked around the room, before fixing his gaze on Howler. "...I know..." he growled. Inside his mind, Punchy and Dark Punchy were symbolically shaking hands! "Though I'm loathe to admit it, we require each other... If that Darkseeker has his way, we both die!" Dark Punchy said. "Hey, working together, we both should be stronger than ever! So let's teach this punk a lesson! Then...we can go back to hating each other. Whatever..." Punchy agreed. Howler stared in surprise as Dark Punchy hurled a blast of dark energy his way! He simply slapped it aside, but the diversion was enough for Knuckles and Punchy to approach the Master Emerald! Howler sent some watery tendrils to clutch the emerald tightly, keeping it in place so Knuckles couldn't do anything with it. "As long as the Master Emerald is in my grip, the Chaos Emeralds are useless! You've failed, guardian!" Howler sneered. Dark Punchy helped himself to the Chaos Wing in the diversion, while Knuckles looked hard at the Master Emerald, gritting his teeth. "There's more...than one way...to be a guardian! The Master Emerald may be important, but my duty is greater! I am a guardian of ALL! And to stop you, Howler, I'll do WHATEVER it takes!!" he shouted defiantly, raising his fist with fury! "...What are you doing!?" Howler gasped, realizing too late exactly what Knuckles was about to do! With a mighty punch, Knuckles shattered the Master Emerald into pieces, scattering those pieces off into the distance! This in turn restored the glow of the Chaos Emeralds, but also filled Howler with rage. "What...have...you...DONE!?" he roared!

The Chaos Crystal glowed brightly, and Howler's body seemed to turn to black liquid as his transformation fully completed! The bands on his tails started to glow, and with a terrible roar, he took to the sky, ready to unleash his rage upon the world! "Um... That's bad, right?" Copter stammered. "The Darkseeker has reached his final form... He'll devastate the whole world, leaving few survivors..." Silver said shakily. Knuckles looked back at the seven Chaos Emeralds scattered on the floor. Sonic wasn't here to use them, but somebody had to stop Howler. He raced down to the emeralds without a second thought. "This started with me and the Master Emerald... Well, it started with my family, anyway... Now, it's only right that I try to end this, one way or another!" he declared. Dark Punchy chuckled. "Nice speech..." he said, sliding his hands into the Chaos Gauntlets as he wore the Chaos Wing on his back, "You'll excuse Greenie and I if we don't leave this whole mess only to you." he smirked. Rainbow stared in amazement. "One and Dark One...are really working together?? The whole world really has gone nuts..." she murmured. Violet nodded. "Maybe so, and maybe it'll be just enough to stop the Dar...to stop Howler!" she said. "Good luck, you two!" said Bucky from the doorway. Dr. Eggman peered in as well. "...What? We're relying on Knuckles now? ...Uh, I mean... Yeah! Go, team! ...I'm getting the heck out of here..." he mumbled unconfidently. Knuckles shut his eyes and nodded to himself. "...Everyone's counting on me... Time to show 'em what I got!" he shouted!

The Chaos Emeralds started to glow and hover in the air, encircling Knuckles. As they spun around him, he, too began to levitate in the air, his body beginning to feel their power! With a brilliant flash of light, he transformed, his fur taking on a brilliant, golden hue! He had become Super Knuckles! "...Gold? Last time it was kinda pink! Guess I got upgraded! All right!" he said, flying up a bit, soon joined by Dark Punchy, who was flying using the Chaos Wing. "Good. Great. Now you just might be able to pull your weight in this battle. Let's go show that 'Darkseeker' who's boss!" he shouted. Knuckles chuckled at him. "Nice working with you, too... I guess I should say something clever and dramatic like Sonic would... Let's give him a KNUCKLE-SANDWICH!!!" he yelled, making Dark Punchy roll his eyes and fly off ahead. "...What? I thought that was pretty good! ...Eh, what do YOU know!" he grumbled, flying after him.

Howler met them out over the ocean. He glared at them with contempt, but also with a hint of agony. "...WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!?!?!!" he shrieked! "What!?" Dark Punchy gasped. Super Knuckles

watched him, seeing that his movements had become a bit erratic. "When I shattered the Master Emerald, I must've interrupted his transformation. Now he can't totally control it, it seems..." he realized. Howler's body started to ripple and stretch, and he roared as his body seemed to be tearing itself apart! "Well...this might be easier than we thought..." Dark Punchy said. Knuckles shook his head. "I think he's...taking on some of Shadow Chaos's less pleasant traits... He's turning into a writhing mass of anger and sorrow!" he shouted. Howler let out a mournful roar as his body grew to a massive size, his legs meeting with the ocean and seeming to merge with it, while his arms seemed to become giant tentacles under Shadow Chaos's influence! Howler attempted to maintain some of his original form, but it was at least partially corrupted in the transformation, becoming a watery, translucent shadow of what he once was! "I am a GOD!! I am...rage!! I am sorrow...! I...am... DESPAIR!!!" he roared, the crown on his head glowing strongly as he glared menacingly at the echidnas! "...Look out!" Knuckles gasped, dashing out of the way as Howler, or "Despair," flailed his giant tentacles at them with tremendous force, creating huge waves as they crashed against the ocean's surface! Dark Punchy laughed. "I've bested Shadow Chaos before! Bring it, Howler!" he shouted.

Not too far away, the Tornado was circling around, searching for Sonic. Kosmo was flying around as well, and both he and Tails glanced at Despair in awe. "...Well, Howler found something I'm pretty sure I can't transform into. Good for him..." Kosmo gasped. Tails shook his head and looked back to the ocean, quickly spotting Sonic. Fortunately, the maelstrom had mysteriously died down, though the pieces of Demon Island were still sinking. Tails brought the Tornado down, finding Sonic jumping back and forth on Terra and Firma's heads as they floated in the water. "Great timing, Tails! Not sure how long I can keep this up!" he sighed. "Sonic!! You and your friends will SUFFER for this humiliation!!" Terra shouted. "Dr. Eggman will have to de-rust us first..." Firma stated. Sonic hopped on the Tornado's wing with a chuckle. "You'd think he'd know better than to use rusty robots in a coastal city! So, Tails, what's the situation?" he asked. Tails pointed to "Despair," and Sonic chuckled nervously. "Who's that fighting with Knuckles...? Why do I got a very bad feeling?" he murmured. "Hey!! Can someone pull me outta here!?" sputtered Shadow, who was tiredly trying to keep his head above the ocean's surface.

As the final battle with Despair was getting under way, Violet approached the Chaos Crystal that the Darkseeker had left behind. "...We could use this! We could stop the Chaos Relics and weaken Howler big time!" she realized. Rainbow stepped up to stop her. "Wait! If you do that, One will fall! And that big...thing...will still be there, only a bit weaker! I know One's messed up a lot, but we should give him a chance to make it up..." she pleaded. Copter nodded. "That's a very good point... Will you girls excuse me? I NEED my plane, right now! Pick up, Hoover!! This is no joke!! If you don't send that plane over right now, I'll personally take your head off!!" he shouted at the Hurricane remote. He had a point, one way or another, they needed a way off the island. "...I should get to my ship..." Bucky realized, rushing off in a hurry!

Super Knuckles had already been injured and sent looking for rings by now. Fortunately, as a general rule, rings were generally drawn to places where super-formed beings were doing battle, even out here in the middle of the ocean. Dark Punchy worked to hold Despair off, firing blasts of energy from his fists using the power of the Chaos Gauntlets. This was more effective than any dark energy attacks he could use, as Despair was pulsing with dark energy himself, being a fusion of Shadow Chaos and the Darkseeker. Still, the combined power of the Chaos Crown and the tailbands made Despair seemingly impervious to damage. "Those gauntlets...are wasted on you!! They belong...with a GOD!!" Despair roared, sending arcs of black lightning searing across the sky toward Dark Punchy from his tentacles!

Ordinarily, Dark Punchy would merely absorb dark energy, but this was on a level beyond even him! Though he tried to absorb it, he was flung backward by the force, howling in pain! "Hey, dark me! Attacks are meant to HURT you! Don't just LET him hit us!" Punchy said in his mind. "You want to try your luck alone? You'd be fried to a crisp in seconds!" Dark Punchy grunted. Knuckles flew back and briefly watched Punchy argue with himself. "Ahem... Am I interrupting?" he muttered, "We'll never stop Howler like this! We gotta knock off that crown of his!" he pointed out. Despair laughed at the notion. "Try it... You cannot even approach me!!" he roared! Knuckles and Punchy took up his challenge, charging straight for the transformed giant. Despair swung his arms and somehow created massive tornadoes, swirling across the surface of the water straight toward the echidnas! Knuckles weaved to avoid them, but Dark Punchy was quickly swept away by one of them, and tossed far into the distance! "Fine... I'll get it!" Knuckles growled. Despair smirked and opened his mouth, firing a massive black beam from it that surprised Knuckles and knocked him back, dislodging a few rings from him as well! He stared at Despair and flashed back to his bout against "Perfect Chaos" in the Dream Temple. "...I am not...a failure! I am more than just the Master Emerald's guardian... And I'm going to prove it!" he said, gritting his teeth with determination!

Meanwhile, Demon Island was rapidly sinking. Fortunately, many of the people on the island had found their way to Shadow Arcangel, which was fairly accommodating in size. Team Chaotix gladly stepped aside from piloting duty to allow Team GeneX to take their rightful places at the controls, and even Bucky managed to make it back in time for takeoff. He made an announcement over the PA system left over by Eggman as they prepared to launch. "Attention, passengers... Hold on tight for the main flight AWAY from Demon Island. This flight is an act of courtesy and kindness on my part, so I'll ask that you GUN agents and Covenant of Despair members behave yourselves for the duration of the trip... And that goes for everyone else, too! Don't think I forgot you, Dr. Eggman!" he shouted. Dr. Eggman glanced at Dr. Nammad from his seat in one of this ship's many rooms. "Sheesh, you kidnap a guy one measly time and he treats you like a criminal!" he grumbled. "Uh... Tell me about it... Hey, can we, uh, get some water in here?" he asked Guard, who was standing outside the door making certain that the two scientists were indeed keeping out of trouble. "Grrrr... There's plenty of water OUTSIDE the ship..." he growled. Eggman growled softly. "Just you wait... Plots for revenge are coming to me as we speak..." he grumbled. As Shadow Arcangel started taking off, Mia's taxi cab took to the air as well, carrying herself, Razor, Tommy, and Chet's body. "Here's hoping there's no turbulence on the way... We're already burying one person too many..." Mia frowned. Those few that hadn't secured transport off the island were forced to swim for it, heading for the shore of Station Square...

Once again, Dark Punchy had to create a diversion while Knuckles gathered up rings. Dark form didn't run on rings, but there were limits to his power. What's more, neither Punchy nor Dark Punchy quite knew how to access the full power of the Chaos Gauntlets, so the energy blasts being fired from them weren't quite as powerful as they should have been. Despair took a moment to taunt him in his futile efforts. "Look at you... You will never know the workings of the Chaos Relics as I do... But why suffer a terrible death here? You know darkness, as I do... With the proper guidance, you could be a great ally to me... Together, we could rule the earth!" he offered. Super Knuckles was on his way back, and noticing the calm between the two of them, felt a bit uneasy. Dark Punchy seemed to be considering Despair's words. He smirked at the giant. "Tempting... But the world should be mine alone!" he shouted, beating his fists in the air repeatedly to send dozens of energy blasts from the Chaos Gauntlets straight for Despair's yellow eyes! Knuckles smiled and flew in to join the assault, looking for an opening to get at

the Chaos Crown! Despair shot out his tentacle arms, weaving them into a giant black web pulsing with dark energy, which blocked the path to him! Through the holes in this "web," he fired giant black beams at the echidnas, keeping them both at bay. "...There's only one way to get at that crown... But I'll need a lot of speed. I hope the emeralds give me that..." Knuckles gulped. Dark Punchy nodded. "Go... I'll keep him occupied." he said, heading straight for Despair. "Hey, melty-face! All that black sludge makes you look FAT!" he shouted, charging the Chaos Gauntlets with dark energy to fire black bolts from them, which looked impressive, but didn't seem to do any better than the normal shots. "Fool! My darkness is stronger than yours! I simply absorb it!" he laughed. Punchy smirked and fired more of these blasts, while Despair simply laughed at him. "What do you hope to accomplish, vermin?" he sneered. "Just figuring that you enjoy the darkness so much, you'll lower your guard..." Dark Punchy grinned. "...WHAT!?" Despair snapped. While he was distracted, Knuckles was building up speed, and aiming lower, at Despair's chest! Before Despair could untangle his tentacles and block him, Knuckles rammed his chest fists-first, and started to drill his way through Despair's liquid body, heading up to his head! "Y-you fool! I am invincible! You cannot harm me!" he growled, only for Super Knuckles to crash through his head, snatching the crown! "Guess what, pal? You're NOT immortal anymore!!" he shouted.

Despair shrieked and sent bolts of black lightning everywhere, trying to take out the echidnas once and for all! However, without the Chaos Crown, his body was starting to go from black to gray. "That crown's the only thing that's been keeping Howler alive for all these years!" Dark Punchy smirked, "Without it, he's a VERY old man... I'd say that old age is catching up to him!" he shouted. Knuckles nodded. "Let's grab those tailbands, quick!" he suggested, flying around behind Despair, followed by Dark Punchy! "Stop!! I am a GOD!! You cannot DO this to ME!!!" Despair screamed, trying to smack them away with his tailband-powered tails! The echidnas were knocked aside, and it seemed apparent that Despair still held some power from the two tailbands combined! But at this point, Rainbow intervened. "Those Forces of Chaos not bound by the emeralds... Are still bound to this controller! Chaos Crystal, help us! Stop the Chaos Relics!" Rainbow shouted, causing the Chaos Crystal to glow, and the active relics to stop glowing! "Huh, what?? Yaaaaaah!!" Dark Punchy gasped as the Chaos Wing turned back into a cape, causing him to fall! "Gotcha!! Hang on, Punchy!!" Knuckles shouted, holding on to his hand tightly! With the tailbands now inactive, Howler's mortality took full effect, and he quickly started to de-combine from Shadow Chaos in a dramatic fashion, the hulking Despair creature melting into the ocean! Knuckles was stuck carrying Punchy, but he still went to the trouble of flying in to grab the tailbands as they slipped off the melting monster's tails, a band being snatched in each echidna's hand! As Howler's influence was fading, Dark Punchy faded as well, reverting back to normal Punchy. "That was nuts! Aaah! Don't drop me, Red!!" he gasped. "Quit callin' me Red, and I'll think about it..." Knuckles sighed. With a final howl of defiance, Howler and Shadow Chaos sunk into the ocean together. The black liquid creature seemed to drag the elderly Howler to the bottom of the ocean in an act of vengeance, though this might mean the end of them both in the crushing oblivion of the ocean's depths. At last, the Darkseeker was no more...

Realizing that the only way the tailbands and the Chaos Wing could have both lost power was by the Chaos Crystal, Knuckles headed back to Demon Island to look for Rainbow. Sure enough, she was still there, along with her sister and Illusi. The shrew had reclaimed his key from the collection of relics left behind by Howler, but he seemed reluctant to escape with it. "Thanks for the assist, Rainbow... Good of you to trust me to pick up Punchy." Knuckles said. Rainbow chuckled. "Now, what kinda guardian would you be if you let him drown?" she said. The echidnas brought the gauntlets, wing, crown and tailbands to the pile including the boots and the sword. Copter was quick to make his presence known, and reclaim both tailbands. "Excuse me! I'll take those! Me and Tails have a claim on these little guys!" he grunted. His plane, the Hurricane, was running behind him. "I'll take 'em as payment for the ride to shore. Who's

coming?" he asked. Knuckles looked at the relics, and then at Illusi. "...Only took one? You're less greedy than Copter, anyway." he chuckled. Illusi sighed. "Despair stole this from me... And then my dear friend paid the price... I have nothing left..." he sighed. Punchy looked at him sympathetically. "Come on, Illusi. That's not so. You have her memory. Honor that memory." he said, picking up the Chaos Sword and handing it to Illusi, "Take these relics." he told him. Illusi stared in shock. "This... this is too much power for any one being..." he said. Rainbow nodded. "That's why you're perfect for this, Mousy! You'll see they stay out of the wrong hands!" she said. Knuckles shrugged and looked up as he heard the Tornado flying his way. "That's my ride... Chaos Emeralds don't keep you airborne forever..." he sighed. "Hey! Knux!! Awesome job!!" Sonic shouted to his friend. Knuckles waved up to him with a wry smile. "Thanks, but could've been better... I gotta find the Master Emerald pieces now!!" he groaned. To that, everyone gave a light chuckle, and even Illusi cracked a slight smile. "...In Fera's memory... I will keep these Relics she was charged with seeking safe..." he sighed.

So at last, the aftermath of the Covenant of Despair's schemes could take its toll. For only through this could the world begin to heal and return to normal. Bucky brought Shadow Arcangel to the Mystic Ruins, letting off his many passengers at the edge of the jungle so they could head for the train station. Of course, many experiments remained aboard the ship, for a while at least, to help see everyone off safely and to console their creator, who was still a bit shaken over watching his long lost love die a second time. "Hope... Whatever else she did, she watched over us this whole time... Now it's up to me to take greater care and watch over all of you myself..." Bucky said solemnly. Ridley and Spiny had packed what little things they had on the ship into a pair of knapsacks. "...If it's all the same to you, I'll watch over myself." Spiny grumbled. "With GUN always after us, I don't see how it's safe here. Perhaps we'll meet again, and maybe next time things will be different..." Ridley sighed, leaving with Spiny. "Aw, good riddance! We don't need any sssslimy traitorsss here..." Vortex hissed. Heather and Whisk watched them go, seeming to wonder if they should go as well. "You two!" Bucky called, "I think I owe you both a proper examination... Whisk, your memory has become an issue. We need to start exploring options to see if we can't fix that..." he said. Whisk had a blank expression. "Fix what?? Who exactly are you?" she stammered. "I see what you mean..." Heather sighed. Elsewhere, at the ship's exit, was Zeke and Lucky. "Where do you think you're going?" Lucky asked the dragon. "What do YOU want kid? Put me in jail for siding with Despair? I'm through with that, okay!? I'm gonna go out and see the wider world!" he said, flapping his wings and taking off, "You want my advice? You should do the same!" he shouted. Lucky looked outside the ship curiously. "...The wider world...? Hmm... Maybe I should go..." Not far from the ship was Lospector, Losipher and Loskeleton. "Hmm... How much you wanna bet we're not welcome in there anymore?" Lospector murmured, "Might be time to find some new digs..."

Of course, Mia took Razor to the hospital to deliver the news about Chet to Katie without delay. It seemed cruel to tell her while she was still recovering, but it also seemed it would be cruel to withhold this information. Katie broke down sobbing upon hearing that her boyfriend was gone, but fortunately she had Mia's shoulder to cry on. Tommy brought Razor's boss, Chief Paynson, to the room after a moment. "...Officer... I've heard wild rumors about what you've been through... I expect a full report... Um..." he mumbled, looking at the sobbing coyote, "...Get to it when you can... From what I hear, there may be a promotion in it for you." he said. Razor shrugged. "Honestly, chief... I think I could better do with a vacation at the moment..." he sighed.

Outside the hospital was where Copter landed the Hurricane, hoping to visit Katie while his friends went their separate ways. Kosmo had also arrived there, and he met Carrie and Talon there as well. "Oh, if it isn't Miss Mirage..." Kosmo murmured. Carrie chuckled softly. "Sorry about the deception... Me and Talon were both...kinda scared... So we pooled our talents so he seemed strong and I...hid." she

admitted. "We were kinda born right into a war..." Talon sighed, "Peace is gonna seem strange." he said. Kosmo nodded. "Yeah... Let me know if peace ever happens... So, anyway... See you around?" he said to Carrie. She smiled and nodded. "...Someday, Kosmo... I'll see you...but whether you'll see me is another story..." she grinned, vanishing before his eyes.

Dr. Eggman managed to make it back to Eggtopia, where BAS was still singing crazily. "VANDALS!! Who would dare sabotage my security system!!?" he shouted furiously. "Oh, boss!" said a small, round, red robot that was busy at Eggman's control terminals, "What a relief! I've been trying to fix this mess ever since Sonic left!" he explained. "Grrrr... Nice job STOPPING him, Orbot!!" Eggman yelled. Making matters worse, Alpha and Char started singing along with BAS. "Even though you're only make-believing, laugh clown, laugh!!" they sang. "...What decade does BAS get his song catalogue from?" Jolt asked. "Never you mind!" Eggman grumbled. "This noise is irritating. Shall I annihilate the source?" Terra suggested. Metal Sonic buzzed in annoyance, and Eggman nodded in agreement. "I'm gonna need a new base..." he sighed.

The remnants of the Covenant of Despair also wandered to Troblusk City. They found Hollow Manor, Kosmo's former home, and decided to hide out there for the time being. "Like it or not, we're in this together... For now..." Basker sneered. "Eeee hee hee! We'll rebuild the Covenant of Despair somehow or other!" Eddie chuckled. "And who will lead it?" Anubis growled. "And will there be better health benefits this time around?" Infin grumbled. Patch and Daisy were standing with the minor agents in the back, feeling rather uneasy about their future. Conan was there, too. "Why are we here, exactly?" Daisy muttered. "Hee hee! Wanted criminals, duh!" Patch pointed out. Conan's eyes narrowed. "Whatever... I'm only here until I find what belongs to me... And am able to resume my hunt once again..." he growled.

The GUN Assault Carrier picked up Sgt. Drol and the rest of GUN's forces on the way back to Central City. Gunner's relief at finding them may not have been all that genuine, but his pleasure at the Covenant of Despair's apparent defeat certainly was. He was quick to call the Commander with the good news. "The Covenant of Despair's island has been blown out of the sky! Reports indicate that their leader has fallen, and the Chaos Relics have been lost. Project GXterminate has been destroyed, but all around I'd say we did well." Gunner bragged. "The efforts of your unit will not go unnoticed, Colonel!" the Commander stated. The President was also present for this video conference. "Excuse me... Is there any word on the creature that posed as me?" he asked. Drol cleared his throat. "Some agents claim to have sighted it on the island, but nothing conclusive..." he said. Team Dark was present for this conversation as well, and were all too eager to rain on Gunner's parade. "Reporting! Dr. Eggman has escaped!" Omega blurted. "A great deal of Despair agents fled the island, too. No telling what threat they pose." Shadow said. "You should also expect those Chaos Relics to resurface at some point!" Rouge added. Guard grunted as if he was going to say something, but Gunner growled over him. "That's quite enough! We are aware there is still work to be done! But the point is, Despair will not be doing anything drastic without their HQ. We can rest easy tonight." he stated. The Commander nodded. "I'm proud of you Colonel... Normally you'd be taking the carrier on a manhunt for every last animal that escaped you. Let's wait and see if this victory was final first." he said before hanging up. Gunner stared with wide eyes. "...Wait... I think I've been duped just now..." he stammered.

Gemini sat on the shore of Station Square, watching Demon Island sink with sadness. "My attempt to change the past just made things worse... Now Losipher is loose earlier and people have died..." she sniffled. Silver sat beside her, looking unsure of what to say. "You know... Time travel isn't easy... I'm not always able to find the answer I'm looking for either. I just keep hoping I can change just enough to

make the future a better one..." he said. Fred, Adam, Evelyn and Cuthburt watched them from a short distance away. "...Shall we take her back?" Cuthburt whispered. Fred frowned. "By law, we're supposed to... But she's not ready. If we take her back now, she'll never be the same..." he said. He then waved his wand, and the four of them vanished in a brilliant light, leaving Gemini and Silver alone. Professor Pickle met Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and SPOT at Station Square. Amy and Cream met them as well, greeting Sonic and Tails with great enthusiasm. "So, everyone... It seems you've rescued the world yet again! I'd love to hear all about it! I can set up a plate of cucumber sandwiches back at the library!" Pickle offered. Sonic chuckled softly, and Tails gave a reply. "Sorry, professor, maybe another time. I've got a workshop to rebuild..." he said. "I'll help you!" Cream offered. "You kidding? He needs speed! I'll help him out!" Sonic grinned. Team Chaotix suddenly interrupted them out of the blue. "Hate to break this up... But I believe we've done you a lot of service today..." Vector muttered. "Should we mail one of you a bill?" Espio said bluntly. Sonic and Tails stared at them. "We never hired you!" Sonic stammered. "Oh, no! You're not weaseling out on us!! Everyone's always doing that!!" Charmy shouted. "He SAID he didn't hire you!!" Amy growled, raising her hammer. The three shuddered and ran off, while Knuckles started digging up the nearby beach sand, pulling out a Master Emerald shard. "I gotta pass, too, Prof... I got work to do... A guardian's work is never finished..." he sighed.

The Doomsayer stood on the remains of Demon Island as it sunk deeper underwater, only a bit of ground remaining. "You can only stave off the end so long..." he muttered. Tikal appeared beside him, her ghostly form looking a bit defiant. "Perhaps if the Chaos Relics find the right owners, this end you speak of can be defeated!" she suggested. The Doomsayer chuckled softly. "A slim hope..." he said, vanishing in a cyclone of hail! "...A slim hope is all that's needed..." Tikal sighed.

The End BZZ BVZZZ ZZTZ!!!

Some time later, after yet another disaster was averted, all of Sonic's friends and a few additional acquaintances were gathered at his birthday party. It was originally a much smaller occasion, but after a certain Dark crashed the party, seemingly everyone was there. This included Illusi, though he kept his distance from most of the partygoers, turning over the Chaos Key in his hand. He wandered over to Shadow Arc once Bucky was done sending past selves back to their original time periods. The two leaned against the wall of the ship and heaved heavy sighs. "Burdened by a loss?" Bucky asked, "I could tell..." he sighed. Illusi nodded. "I had begun to heal, but that trip to Demon Island brought it all back..." he said sadly. Bucky nodded. "Just seeing certain areas from afar... Without entering... It brought back thoughts of the one I lost... But there was no time for such thoughts. Funny to say, considering where we were." he mused. Illusi clutched the key tightly. "I just keep wondering if there was anything more I could have done..." he said. Bucky shrugged. "All we can do is focus on what we're doing now." he sighed. Illusi looked hard at the Chaos Key and nodded. "You're right... And there is something important I must do..." he realized, turning the key and then vanishing in a burst of smoke.

Katie sat beside Copter, who was looking at the picture of himself, Kosmo, Razor, Mia, Vector, Chip and Dimentime in Shamar that Tails had given him. "That's...an odd bunch. When was this taken?" she asked. Copter shrugged. "You know, I haven't the foggiest idea." he chuckled. Katie placed an arm around him, sighing longingly. "I'm very grateful to you for coming for me... I used to rely on Chet for that sort of thing... but..." she said, choking up. Copter hugged her gently, but briefly. "I rescued everyone I could... Maybe I went a little nuts when I couldn't find you... But don't get the wrong idea..." he said nervously. Katie nodded slowly. "I understand... I did kinda hurt you before... Maybe someday, we'll both

be whole again... And if we're available, who knows?" she smiled. Copter smiled back and nodded. "Sure... Obviously, anything can happen. This picture proves it!" he grinned.

While Knuckles finished his cake and Sonic's party was winding down, he quietly reflected on everything that had happened. After all, Demon Island WAS contained in White Space, so it got him thinking. "Weird to see the Covenant of Despair again... So glad they've been quiet all this time..." he muttered. "Hey, Red!" said Punchy, sitting next to him, "Where's my cake?" he smirked. "...YOU weren't invited. Much like Gator over there." he said, "But it's strangely nice seeing ya. You keepin' your cool?" he asked. Punchy chuckled. "Dark Punchy's... mostly in check..." he said, "And how's the non-time-travel Master Emerald, anyway?" he wondered. Knuckles sighed. It had been a chore, but he did manage to restore the Master Emerald and return it to Angel Island. "Fortunately, no problems since the Covenant of Despair fiasco. World's been amazingly quiet." he smiled. Punchy chuckled. "I bet you're getting soft! I'll have to pay you another visit real soon!" he taunted. Knuckles tossed his plate in Punchy's face. "Whatever, greenie!" he laughed.

"Now that I know the full story behind my duty, I feel a great weight lifted from me. Angel Island is my home... but so is the world. To be a true guardian, sometimes I must leave my post and fight for what is truly right. I'm Knuckles the Echidna, Guardian of All!"

End