

The Ring of Chaos

By nextguardian

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My part for MrGimp's colab fic! Please let me know what you think!

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1 - CH I: The Saga Begins

Setting: Ekyt, eighteen years old, is shunned by his home world. Having enough, he leaves, headed for the floating island. Something told him to go there...what, he didn't know.

He's been alone for a year now, save for training as a guardian. A surprise to him as well as anyone else. Not even a member of the echidna race, he has become one of their elite. But he has yet to master it. He's not entirely sure why, but he's got a feeling that SOMETHING is about to happen to him. His intuition fails to tell him good or bad, however...

The Ring of Chaos Chapter 1

"Come now, we all have something special we can do." Knuckles coaxed the human. "Knux, I've always been a loner. **IF** I was special, something would have shown through by now..." the human answer miserably. Lately, he'd been feeling the brutal sting of rejection. "You're a guardian! An echidna elite!" Knuckles exclaimed. "Maybe that's it...Knux, you've got people who trust you, some who love you. The only people that love me, all four of them, are on my homeworld! I'm RESPECTED here, but only because of the position." "That's not true. I respected you since you knocked me on my @\$\$..." Knuckles muttered. Ekyt laughed. "That was a lucky punch. As I recall, you wound up beating me all over the chaos chamber..." Knuckles shrugged in response. "Anyway Knux, I'm not some Jedi. I can fight only in the means of a human...sad to say." With that, Ekyt was summoned to the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood consisted of Locke (Knuckles' father), Poil-la (A descendant of Dmitri, an evil echidna garnished with the power of twelve chaos emeralds), Spectre (arrogant and outspoken, master of "Special effects"), and Athair (The only one to refuse the mantle of guardian.). No one was the leader, though most deferred to the age and experience of Athair, and the wisdom of Locke. Locke was a master guardian, and he had high moral standards. By all accounts, with his white, full-length robe, he was an unforgiving leader. But not the case.

It was Locke that had summoned Ekyt, and not under the best of circumstances. The four members of the Brotherhood all sat behind a stone table, decorated with ancient echidna symbols. Ekyt, his long coat swishing behind him, entered, his usual stoic face marred with a slight concern. The Brotherhood only summoned the guardians if there was trouble. Ekyt wondered why they had sent for him, and not Knuckles as usual.

Locke: Welcome Ekyt.

Ekyt: (bows) You summoned me, master?

Locke: No need for formality lad. Please, come sit at the table...

Ekyt raised his eyebrows at that, but did as he was told. He noticed a cushion he hadn't seen before and sat on that, laying his weapon, a simple bo staff, across his lap.

Locke: Put simply, there is a task we need to have you perform...One unsuitable for my son...

Ekyt: ...

Locke: And I must ask that you...make a sacrifice.

Ekyt: (Leans forward) What kind of sacrifice...

Locke: I wish I could tell you the specifics...I have come to think of you as a second son, though I know your father survives. This task...it may consume you, it may take your life...

Ekyt: I signed up, I'll do what you ask Locke. I'm honored that you think of me that way. I'm willing to do the task, whatever it takes...

Locke: For that you have to talk to Poile-la...

Ekyt turned and bowed to Poile-la. She was the only female on the council. "Your task will come in parts. The first part is...wait. Locke, we must hold the ceremony first..."

Locke looked up, surprised, but narrowed his eyes in sudden understanding. "Agreed." He stood up, offering Ekyt a cigarette. "Stand up, please." Ekyt eyed the "cigarette" suspiciously. "I don't smoke Locke." Locke smiled slightly. "And ordinarily I wouldn't ask you to. This isn't a cigarette, and it won't harm you in any way. It will be the culmination of your training...you've reached "Mastery" level." Ekyt was surprised at that. Locke, sensing this continued. "My son bears the guardian's crest. The white stripe of purity. You have earned the right to do the same. Take one breath of this, and the stripe will appear on your chest." Locke moved the cigarette away suddenly. "However, you must have the...traditional dress." Ekyt groaned inwardly, but said nothing.

The "traditional dress" was a white cotton shirt, torn from midsection to neck, and matching white "pants." These pants looked more like a skirt, however. Ekyt felt like a complete idiot, but went along with it. He tied a sash, black in color, around his waist and made his way back to the chamber.

The ceremony was simple. Ekyt and Locke bowed to each other.

Locke: Upon attaining the level of "mastery," one's body and soul must be cleansed. A clean slate upon which no marks must appear. The trials of a guardian are hard and long, a life-long investment. One that may reap rewards, but may equally end in death. A guardian must accept this, and move beyond acceptance. Your training never really ends, it continues in a circular motion. As you teach your pupils, you learn yourself. A never-ending quest...Provided you accept...

Ekyt: I do

Ekyt's voice stayed strong, mercifully. He was worried that his voice would crack from emotion. This meant a lot, to be accepted. And yet, something seemed missing...

Locke: Then breathe the smoke of purification, inhaling perfection, and exhaling sins.

Locke handed Ekyt the "purification stick," which the human took. He inhaled, then exhaled. A black; not gray; black wreath of smoke encircled his head for a moment or two, then disbanded.

"Open your robe." Locke said. Ekyt did so, seeing the white mark form across his chest. He was almost afraid to touch it. "Congratulations...guardian." Locke said, a tired smile crossing his face. "Now, your mission..."

2 - CH II: Duty Bound to Die

Poile-la stood up. "Guardian, you are going to be the first to know. Hard time are upon us. The time has come to make emergency plans..." Her voice trailed off. "I need you take my daughter to our capital city, to negotiate with their leader, Ganaga-rel." She spat the name, as it was no secret the guardians didn't get along with him. "You must ensure her safety, whatever the cost...Do you understand?" Ekyt bowed. "I understand. You have my word; I will protect her." Poile-la smiled. "You **MUST NOT** leave her side. No Matter What. You are duty-bound to her now, your loyalty must come to her rather than Haven and it's occupants (Haven is the Brotherhood's meeting quarters). If we fall, you remain guardian to her."

The words were still ringing in Ekyt's head as he got into his own clothes again. He was stopped by Knuckles. "The want you to wear the shirt along with this..." Knuckles handed him a black robe. "Knux, what are they talking about? There's something they aren't telling me..." Ekyt started. Knuckles stared his friend in the face. "It's nothing...they're overreacting...But...all the same...take care man." Knuckles shook his hand. That was so out of character for Knuckles that Ekyt had trouble accepting the gesture. **Almost like...he's saying goodbye to me...He knows something...**

Ekyt was summoned back to Haven. This time, an echidna girl was sitting with them. "My daughter, Linda-Su." Poile-La said by way of introduction. Ekyt, who never had time for girls, blushed slightly and bowed to her. She inclined her head in return, not looking thrilled with her escort. She was pretty, to be sure. Long, deep pink dreadlocks with light-purple highlights. She had the figure of a martial artist; functioning rather than overly-muscular. She looked as though she could handle herself with ease, while maintaining a feminine air. "We have a gift for you before you leave with her. I hope it serves you well..." Locke handed Ekyt a broadsword, one that mounted with the scabbard on his back. It's handle was heavy, solid silver, and the blade itself was beautiful as such things go. It's steel had been folded to remove any imperfections from the blade.

Sliding the sword on his back, Locke explained a...catch. "The sword can not be used to kill, in the hands of a guardian. There is chaos energy stored in it, the type only a guardian can command." Ekyt nodded in understanding. "Off you go then. May Steppenwolf guide you..." Began Locke. With a small grin, Ekyt returned "And May Dmitri's shadow never fall on you." It was a slogan of the guardians, a prayer of sorts. He bowed to the council one more time, before he held the door open for Linda-Su.

He held the hover-car door open for her. It was similar to what humans would call a "limo," it was obviously high-class, even with a driver. Linda-Su sat down and indicated that Ekyt should sit as well. He sat across from her, bowing his head slightly in respect.

Linda-Su: You can stop with the council's outdated rules guardian.

Ekyt: ... (Surprised)

Linda-Su: Yeah, I know. I seem like I'd be a stuffy prude, right?

Ekyt: (Lying) No, not al all.

Linda-Su: You're full of it. (laughs) I must say, though, I'm surprised my mother let a "soldier" accompany me...

Ekyt: I had the feeling she didn't have many warm feelings toward guardians, and even less toward

humans.

Linda-Su: Yeah. I can't blame her. A human killed her parents, and a guardian killed her husband.

Ekyt: I'm sorry...

Linda-Su: Don't be! I'm glad he's gone, that evil bastard!

Ekyt: ... (shocked)

Linda-Su: He founded the Dark Legion.

She darted forward suddenly, turning head to the side. "I see you've met them." She ran her hand gently down the back of his neck, under his hair. "They left their mark on me." Ekyt murmured. "Lien-Da had an, ah, romantic interest in me. My answer put a rather large hole in her ego." Linda-Su sat back down. "You've met my evil half-sister then." She said, leaning back. "I wasn't aware of that..." "Yes, she's my half-sister. She's the black sheep of the family." Ekyt looked sadly at her. "She caused me a lot of pain. I can tell she's caused a lot for you too." Linda looked at him. "You're alive. They would have killed a guardian..." Ekyt gave rueful grin. "Not if I didn't cooperate. And I didn't. I was whipped, beaten, even shot." Linda gasped. "And you lived...fate maybe? I never believe in that stuff, but I'm starting to wonder..."

Ekyt could relate to that. Linda-Su had dropped her stiff manner, now seeming more like a "girl" than an stuffy aristocrat. She frowned as she contemplated him. "I don't recall having seen you before." "I've met someone who looks just like you. Julie-Su." "My sister. My ONLY sister." She emphasized. "You would, training with Knuckles." She leaned forward, her hands cupping her chin. "You seem nice...If you don't mind telling me, why are you here? I mean, we don't get many humans..."

"Well, I come from earth. I'm...different, however. I didn't like what I saw on earth. I was bullied, almost killed at least two times. I had enough. I wanted to do something good with myself. So I came here." He had given her the short version. "You're a nice boy...humans are unpredictable...but you...I feel I can trust..." she looked slightly uncomfortable, having said that.

"Did they tell you WHY I need an escort?" Linda-Su asked, suddenly nervous. "No, it never came up. I just had my "mastery" ceremony. I felt like they weren't telling me something..." Linda-Su suddenly looked regretful. "There's a reason they sent you. I have to show you something..." She rummaged in her bag for a moment, pulling out a gold ring, adorned with a small chaos emerald. "The Ring of Chaos. I'm supposed to deliver it. But I can't handle it's power. It gives you power, but at the cost of your life force. They sent you because you can handle the powers it holds. They rushed you to mastery and" "They WHAT! I want no part of something I didn't earn!" he almost yelled. "I'm sorry you have to hear this Ekyt." He stopped his rage at her using his name. Gently, her hand found his. "They've sent you to...to die."

Ekyt sat back, his face returning to it's stoic form. "I'm supposed to die?" he repeated. She nodded, still holding his hand. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to die." Sighing, Ekyt exhaled roughly. "I'm duty-bound to you, and I aim to see it through. No matter what the cost..."

Linda had an urge to hug the human and not let go. "It's amazing you can take death so upright..." she said, instead of the whole "hugging" thing. "Death is a part of life. Accepting it is another matter. I'd rather not die...and when it's my time, I will sell my life at a high price."

3 - CH III: The Ring's Power

Ganaga-rel watched the hover-car pull into the station. "Guardian slime. Sending that dog to see me...They're lucky the circumstances are dire. I already have my answer, so I won't have their pestilence polluting here for long..."

Ganaga-rel was a wretched echidna. Rarely seen by his "subjects," he was a black echidna. His original color was red, but the filth had built up over the years. He was tall and imposing, and carried a sword cane encrusted with jewels. He carried a dignified air, despite his outward appearance.

Ekyt pulled in disdain at his robe. "Sorry, I'm used to my trench-coat." He muttered at her amused glance. "Trench-coat...wait, wait, I DO know you!" Linda-Su exclaimed. "You were banished..." she said, her voice trailing off. "Yes, I was." Ekyt answered. "But it was a mistake. The Brotherhood was being manipulated at that point...I have no doubt by the scum we're about to see..." Ekyt said disdainfully. He offered an arm to Linda-Su to help her out of the hover car. She gave him another glance, nodding her thanks. "Once we get inside, it would be best for you to address me as "master"."

"Enter." Ganaga-rel said sternly at the knock he had been dreading. To his surprise, a young echidna girl entered the room, followed by a...human?" "Hello Ganaga-rel. I trust you are well?" Linda-Su immediately said. Her companion said nothing, merely eyeing the office, his dark hazel eyes searching for a threat.

"Please, sit, Linda-Su. I haven't seen you since you were the size of my arm." He said, attempting to sound pleasant. "It HAS been awhile." Linda-Su answered. "I must say, I am surprised that they sent one so young...and your escort isn't by-the-book either." Ganaga-rel said a little roughly. "He's a full-fledged guardian, qualified as any." Linda-Su replied. "I see. Well, let's get down to business. I'm certain you've come to negotiate..." "Of course. We need the firepower your army can offer." Linda-Su said, meeting his eyes with a hard gaze.

"I see. But, I'm afraid I have no-one to spare. My city is as much at risk as your...dwelling." "Then we have nothing to discuss." Linda-Su said, standing up. "That was rather rude...I'm certain your actions are your mother passing her regards..." "Kindly leave my mother out of this." Linda-Su warned. Ganaga-rel put a filthy hand on her arm. "I think we have things to discuss...I was almost your father...yes, yes. Your mother was rather...easy, to put it nicely...in her younger days." "If I didn't know better, I'd say you just insulted my mother Ganaga. That would be a mistake." Linda-Su said in a warning tone. "I'm simply telling you the truth. I certainly hope you don't become that way Linda-Su. As much fun as we had together...Yes, fun I'm afraid I can't outline further..." Linda-Su tried to pull away. "Let go of me you disgusting pervert! I hope you drop dead of your own slime!" Linda-Su snarled. "What did you say to me you little whore?!"

At this point, Ekyt saw Ganaga's cane come up. Ekyt looked closely, seeing it was a sword cane. He sprang into action.

In a flash, he had Ganaga laid out on his desk. Ekyt put his forearm on Ganaga's neck. "You will take

back what you said." Ganaga pushed him off. "I will not! I'm going to kill the both of you!" Linda looked ready to fight him, but Ekyt stepped in front of her. "Master, please stay behind me."

"You're doing her bidding? You clearly are aware of what you're doing...Why would you take the orders..." Ganaga asked. "I'm duty-bound to her. I'm a man of my word." Ekyt answered as the two circled. "I see. More loyal than smart boy." Ganaga thrust his cane outward, the sword flashing out. Linda winced, but then almost laughed with relief. Ekyt stepped to the side and brought his staff down on the cane. The blade was now only a fraction of an inch out. Ganaga suddenly thrust the cane upward, stabbing Ekyt in the ribs. He missed the vitals, so the fight continued.

Ekyt used his staff to rip the cane out of the echidna's hands. He stepped on it hard, snapping the blade off. In the same motion, his left leg swung around, landing heel-first on the tyrant's nose. "That will do guardian." Linda-Su told him. He bowed in deference, stepping back. She stepped toward the heap that was Ganaga.

Linda: Had you not been so...inhospitable...I would have had an item that would interest you...

Ganaga-rel: It's a time of war! Only a weapon will interest me!

Linda: And that's exactly what I have. And I believe a short demonstration is in order.

Linda "ordered" Ekyt to put out his right hand. She put the ring on his finger. Somehow, he knew how it worked. He felt a terrible evil surge through his body. Then he felt peace. His good side was in control. He raised his arm, and watched as Ganaga-rel was lifted to his feet. Ekyt, without knowing why, clenched his fist. Ganaga-rel gasped. He couldn't breathe; some invisible force was squeezing his wind pipe.

Ekyt felt an urge to not let go. To just kill him. Linda-Su seemed to sense this. "Guardian, release him." Ekyt did as he was told. Linda-Su watched, trying to keep her face dispassionate as Ekyt suddenly was hit with a surge of pain.

It felt as though he had been stabbed again. The pain spread through his body, to the point where Ekyt ALMOST wished anything would end it. The ring fell off his finger, as if it knew what it was doing, and the pain began to subside.

Ganaga coughed out "I will send troops to your aid. I can't spare much, but I will! Please, leave, I don't wish to be hurt again." Linda-Su, satisfied with the answer, turned to Ekyt. "On your feet guardian!" she snapped. He got up. a hand over his ribs. "It's time to go."

They got back in the hover car, when suddenly the driver turned around. Or, was thrown around, more accurately. Two of Ganaga-rel's thugs had murdered him, with a stab wound in the side of his neck. Linda-Su turned pale. Ekyt suddenly dove forward, pushing the dead driver out of the way. "We need to leave master!" he called. He sat in the pilot's seat and took off.

Two black hover cars followed him. "I'm going to lose them! Hang on master!" he called, feeling stupid calling this girl younger than him "master." "We're heading over the Forbidden Zone. If we jump out, we'll be safe! Only the guardians can get in!" Linda-Su nodded. She grabbed onto him, hands clasped firmly around his waist. He blushed, but opened the door and dove out. It wasn't far to the ground. He landed, twisting on his side to make sure landed safely. "Run Master!" he called, drawing his sword.

"No. I ORDER you to forget them and come with me!" she said in a commanding voice. Ekyt hesitated, but put the sword away and ran with her.

Locke heard them walking in. Linda-Su took her seat in front of the council, while Ekyt stood at attention. "He agreed to send troops after some...persuasion." Linda-Su reported. "I see. And has Ekyt served you well so far?" "Yes he has. Ekyt, please come here for a moment." Ekyt did so, kneeling at her side. "Show them your wound..."

He did as he was told. "THAT" she began at their questioning looks "came from a sword cane. That stab was meant for me. He gave Ganaga-rel a demonstration of the ring on my orders, and I have no doubt it opened his wound further." She said, trying, but failing, to sound as though he was just a pawn in a game of chess.

Ekyt gladly pulled his robe closed again, still feeling dumb for wearing it. After he had escorted her to the door, Locke beckoned him back. "Take her to your home tonight. Take food, water, and extra clothes." Ekyt wanted to question him, but didn't. "As you say Locke." He responded as per custom.

4 - CH IV: Death's Shadow

Ekyt was told to wait until night fell on the lush green paradise that was Angel Island, before taking Linda to his home. He was to gather supplies quickly, and then protect her at all costs at a location in just outside Knothole village in the Great Forest.

"Okay Master, it's safe." Ekyt called to Linda as he cautiously opened the door. "I told you, don't do the "Master" crap unless someone is around. I hate it." She said moodily. She turned a questioning eye to him. "You don't seem to mind it." He shrugged. "It's my job to do what you say." She shook her head. "I'm sorry about treating you so roughly back there. I hate doing that. You deserve better than that." She said truthfully. For some reason, her beautiful green eyes caught his attention. "You're only doing what's expected of you. I can tell you don't like it. I don't take it personally."

Ekyt offered his bed to her. She sat down on the edge. "What about you?" she asked with a frown. "This room has no windows, so I'll just be outside the door." Ekyt replied. "That won't be comfortable. Why don't you sleep here, and I'll go out there?" she offered. "No, really, you need your rest. I'm used to worse conditions. I call this "home," but the fact is I'm rarely here. I usually sleep near the chaos emerald." He said. "Orders?" she asked, playing with the pillow. He shook his head. "No. Just...stupid, I guess." He answered, forcing a smile. "That's not why, but I don't expect you to tell me." she looked at him with a piercing glance. "But I DO expect you to tell me why we're going into hiding."

Ekyt had his hands on his sword; he had pulled it off for the night. "I'm not sure. The Brotherhood seems to think you are particularly at risk. From what or who, I can only give the usual guesses. But normally Haven would be the safest spot...Unless they think there's a traitor inside it...or the enemy found out where it was..." he said thoughtfully. Linda stopped her questioning. With a laugh, she said "You like a freakin' Jedi! I didn't notice it, but the robe, and using that ring earlier." Ekyt grinned, ruefully. "I wish I was. Then I might be something special." Linda gave him a questioning look. He had already learned what THAT LOOK meant. He was supposed to tell the truth. "I feel like I'm a pawn in giant game of chess, and my only job is to protect the queen." Hastily, he added "I'm not objecting. I just wish they took me seriously." He muttered, his voice turning cold.

Suddenly remembering who he was talking to, he apologized quickly and bowed without thinking of it. She laughed and threw the pillow at him. "I can see why you'd feel that way. I don't blame you. But you know...you ARE allowed to relax. You don't have to be so by-the-book around me." she looked down when she said it, giving Ekyt the impression that something else was weighing on her mind. He wanted to go over and comfort her.

I can't believe I thought that! She's a mission, nothing else! Focus! Ekyt didn't believe a word his mind was telling him.

He heard a knock at the door. "Damnit! Is our stuff ready?" Linda-Su asked with a curse. "Yes, we're all set. I think it's best if you're ready to run." He said, almost unnaturally calm.

Another knock at the door. Ekyt opened the door. "Can I help you?" Two cloaked individuals walked

inside without an invitation. Ekyt primed himself to attack, but stopped upon seeing Locke and Athair. "We need to counsel with you and Linda-Su now." Locke said gravely.

They all sat around Ekyt's table, a thick oak table of average size. "We just barely escaped. Linda-Su, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your mother was murdered..." Linda clasped a hand to her mouth. "My God...when, and who did it?" She said, sounding faint. "It happened no more than an hour ago. Spectre is also dead." Locke supplied. "I'm very sorry Linda-Su. Your mother asked me to give you this..." he handed her an envelope, which Linda opened with shaking hands.

Inside was a final will and testament, leaving all Poile-La's worldly possession to Linda-Su. Linda finally allowed herself to cry. Locke stayed with her. "Guardian, a word." Athair said, beckoning to him.

The two went outside. Athair turned to him, handing him two hooded cloaks. "You must travel as soon as the girl is stable on her feet. Take a horse. DO NOT let her ride without you. She may be tempted to come back to Haven. Tell her it is destroyed. DO NOT let her go near it. Do you understand?" Ekyt nodded. "Athair...if I may ask..." "Go ahead guardian." The older echidna said, seemingly amused by Ekyt's sudden courage. "Why all the secrecy for her? I know she's important somehow, but I'd like to know why she's so much at risk." Athair stared into Ekyt's eyes. "You know much guardian. We did not send you die, though I have no doubt you would, should that be your duty. Locke and myself hoped you would live. We chose you over Knuckles for reasons that will become clear soon. For now, I'll leave you with this: If Knuckles had been the one guarding her, there would have been a war by now. You were chosen, for one reason, because of your discipline. Something my Great-Great-Grandson lacks. Other reasons you must hear, but not from me."

Ekyt went back inside. Linda had composed herself somewhat. "Athair told you your orders?" Locke asked. "Yes. My plan is to give her a little time to compose herself, then set out." Locke nodded. "Good luck to you both. This may very well be the last time we meet guardian. I hope you can forgive me for knowing I was likely sending you to your death." "Of course Locke. I knew the job was dangerous. The one thing that bothers me is that I was rushed to mastery. I didn't master it, did I?" Ekyt asked. Locke gave a hollow smile. "You just did. You had the integrity and intelligence. And you've proven to have the intensity. And you've just now proven a pureness of heart."

"What am I going to do?" Linda asked Ekyt, allowing herself to show some emotion. "I'm only fifteen. I'm too young to be orphaned. And Julie-Su...at least she's got Knuckles. Her and Mom never got along. But we were close...I just don't know what to do..." Ekyt started to sit down, but Linda-Su motioned for him to sit next to her. "I know I'm no more than a mission to you." She said. Ekyt was surprised at that. "THAT was a lie I told. I legitimately care about your well-being." Linda sniffled, before trying to stiffen her face. Her smooth features were covered with tears. "D-do you mind if I..." She laid her head on his shoulder, wrapping her hands around his slim waist. "I don't know what to do..." Ekyt gulped. "Don't YOU go anywhere." Linda said, a sad smile crossing her face. "I need you. You've saved my life once already." "It's my...more than my job. It's my pleasure." Ekyt said, returning the smile. He handed her a cloak. They were black and hooded, full-length. "For now, we have to run." He said. She nodded, taking the cloak. "Oh, there's one more thing..." Linda said. She handed him the will. "My mother thought highly of you. There's a letter in here, addressed to you. But I've been cautioned not to let you open it until we're safely hidden."

Linda picked the horse, a beast black as the night sky. It whinnied softly at her gentle touch. "No saddle,

just a bridle." She said offhand. She looked over at Ekyt, who was looking hesitant. "I get the feeling you're a little intimidated by my innocent widdle howsey." Linda said, the last part in baby talk. "Sorry. It's big and powerful. Something I tend to be cautious of."

He mounted the animal and offered her a hand up. She gripped him around the waist. "Off we go." She said quietly, a tear for her mother rolling down her cheek. Ekyt coaxed the horse into galloping, their cloaks billowing behind them. They both took a last look at their home, wondering if they'd ever be back...

5 - CH V: A Friendship Forged

They rode quickly throughout the night, the horse's hoofs making hardly a sound on the dew-covered grass. Just before daybreak, Ekyt and Linda-Su found their path blocked by two strangers, also in black cloaks. "Dark Legion." Ekyt whispered to Linda, who cursed. "Murder them." She muttered. Ekyt hoped that wasn't an order.

"Let us pass!" he called, disguising his voice. "I think not...guardian." Ekyt dropped the false voice. "We have no need to deal with you." "Well, WE need to. We want your cargo." The echidna's mouth was visible, and it twisted into a sneer. Tossing back his hood, Ekyt dismounted, asking Linda to stay there. "I think not." He called, drawing his sword, daring either one of them to come forward. The echidna nearest took the challenge, drawing a sword laced with technological bits.

They circled, Ekyt staring him down. They both brought their swords down at the same time, the blades meeting with an angry sound. Ekyt pushed off the sword, swing low. The cloaked echidna jumped. Ekyt stopped in mid swing and brought the butt end of his sword in, hitting the echidna in the jaw with it, then stepping back and thrusting.

Linda looked away. She didn't want him to kill them. He didn't seem like the type. As it turns out, he wasn't. Either by choice or by accident, Ekyt stopped the sword. But it had a mind of its own, driving itself into the echidna's arm. Ekyt, finally understanding why he had to use the sword (Remember, it only works for guardians, and it won't deliver a fatal blow), swung low, cleaving the echidna's leg.

The two echidna's split up. One went for Linda. She had a small, blunt weapon of some kind under her cloak. She cracked the echidna in the face. "I should have killed you like I did your mother!" he shouted.

Everyone stopped. Linda jumped off the horse and onto him, swinging for the fences with the weapon. "I'll rip your damn head off! She did nothing to deserve death! You, however just signed your own warrant!" In the distraction, Ekyt's opponent got back on his horse. Ekyt made a quick decision to jump back on his steed, so as not to lose the high ground. While Linda paint-brushed the other echidna, Ekyt and the remaining enemy charged. Ekyt made to draw his sword, but instead swung his staff into the echidna's mid-section. Rolling it into his other hand (While they're both riding full speed), he swung the staff around his head and behind his shoulders, cracking the echidna behind the head. He fell off the horse, which stepped on him as if kept running.

Linda had beaten the guy to within an inch of his life. She was about to go for the last inch when she saw Ekyt. For some reason, the sight of him sobered her and stopped her from killing him. She deftly leapt back on the horse. Ekyt got it to gallop.

"We should get as much ground as we can before they report back." Ekyt said quietly. They rode in silence for a short time. Linda-Su piped up finally: "You know, I saw you watching. I was going to kill that guy, but something stopped me. You didn't want me to kill him, did you?" Ekyt shook his head. "No, I didn't. I'd hate to see you become a murderer. Honestly, he's more likely to get killed because he failed Lien-Da (Dark Legion leader and Linda-Su's half-sister). I know she doesn't take failure kindly."

After about an hour's ride, they reached the spot in the Great Forest. It was a cabin of sorts, hidden from view by the trees. "We should get supplies from Knothole first." Linda-Su said. "It's supposed to be stocked." Ekyt replied. "How do you know?" Linda questioned. "I own the cabin. When I was banished, I lived here. There's food and water for a year for two people." He said, unsmiling.

Linda cocked her head. "Do you ever smile?" Ekyt stopped and turned around. "Not too much anymore." He returned her look. He had slicked his hair back somewhat, hoping that at first glance he wouldn't be picked out by an enemy. He had plenty, for the record. He fixed his hair now while he asked "If you don't mind my asking, what brought that on?" Linda giggled a little. "Well, it's just...you look kind of cute when you do?" THAT brought a smile to Ekyt's face. "Well...Thank you. I appreciate the kind words, though I'm surprised."

Linda's smile stayed in place as he led the horse to a lean-to with a gate, making sure it had food and water. "Well, you know, I might have to be all serious and stuffy with the Brotherhood, but I'm still a girl! You can't expect me not to get into the "dashing hero on a horse" bit! I'm SURE that was an accident." She said the last part with comical sarcasm. Ekyt turned to her. "I never got the chance to be a "boy." I've always been a "freak", and now a "guardian." I never had time for a relationship, or even recreational girl watching. I've trained my whole life. And for no other reason that it seemed to be the right thing to do. Maybe that's why I appreciate beauty more on the occasions I see it." He said, trying to force himself not to look away from her. Linda was trying to interpret what he just said.

Later that night, as she was getting changed to sleep, her thoughts drifted to his words. **He never had time? I'm duty-bound too, and I still get to notice guys...I wonder if something happened? He seems to just be a nice, level-headed kid who wants to do his job well...Kinda cute though. The air of mystery...It's like he can tell me what I want to hear without actually giving anything away. I don't think he does it intentionally...not with me anyway. I'm not sure, but I think it's more than "duty" that's got his attention right now.** She leaned back in her bed. He insisted she get some sleep. Instead, she was trying to get used to the fact that her mother was dead and that she'd likely never go home again. **At least I've got my "servant." God, he seems so innocent! Was he serious when he said he never even considered a relationship? I hope whatever it is he's wrestling with in his head is something he'll come to terms with soon...** With that, she turned off the light and tried to sleep. Her last thought before she let sleep consume her was that things could have been worse. She had begun to think of her "servant" and "protector" as more of a friend.

Ekyt locked all the doors, double and triple checking them. I'm duty bound to her...She IS more than a mission to me. She actually cares what's going to happen to me...That means a lot, more than she could understand. When she told me I was cute...I never got that. I have no idea how to react to this! It's like she's not thinking of me as a "guardian" and someone who just has orders to do this...I wonder if she requested me...Athair DID say there were other reasons that I was chosen... Ekyt went out to check on the horse once more before he sat down outside her door. I hope she gets some sleep. She needs her rest...Underneath that beautiful exterior, she's really a...girl, for want of a better word. She seemed so vulnerable after she heard her mother died...it was almost like she wanted me to do something about it...what could I have done? Given her a hug? Oh, come on! She's your boss! I doubt she thinks of you as a friend, you're not even on the same page! Then again, with everything else that's happed in the last two crazy days, nothing would surprise me.

The next morning, however, he DID get a surprise. He was cooking, planning on letting her sleep as long as possible. Bacon, eggs, sausage, toast. That's when she ambled into the kitchen. For so early, she looked perky and ready to go. Not a fur out of place. "Can I have some?" she asked pleasantly. "It's all for you." He said without missing a step. "Really? Huh...wait, you know, I've never seen you eat!" Ekyt shrugged. "I eat when I'm hungry. Besides, guardians are trained to go without food for days at a time. The supply last longer that way." There was truth in that sentence. But he was also too nervous to eat.

Linda-Su nibbled at some toast thoughtfully. "You remind me of a movie I saw once. You're like the mysterious martial arts master that tries to hide how deadly he is and shows no emotions." "I'm hardly a master." Ekyt said with a snort. "Then you're a jedi! I was right the first time! I mean, the robe, the attacks, the knowledge!" She was having a ball with this. To her surprise, he was fun to banter with. It became a contest to see if she could get him to break character. It didn't happen until she caught him completely off-guard. And at that point she was totally serious.

"Thanks again for everything. Don't give me that crap about doing your job either. NO ONE works THAT hard." She laughed for a moment, then turned serious. "You know, when I heard my mother was dead, I was really upset. But...you calmed me down...I don't know how, but when I put my head on your shoulder, I just calmed right down." She wrapped her arms around him, putting her head into his chest. "So, really, thanks for everything. You're the most loyal person I know." She said. He returned the hug awkwardly, he hadn't had to do it too many times before. "Loyalty is everything to a guardian. It's nice to hear that." He said, 100 percent truthful. She gave a hollow smile. "Well, I'm glad it meant something." Then, not thinking anything of it, she kissed him on the cheek.

She started to walk away, but stopped. He had frozen, too. **Did I just...kiss him? What the hell?** she thought, her mind racing. "I'm sorry...I just...forgot myself." She sputtered lamely. "It's alright, I don't mind. I mean..." "I know what you mean." She said quickly. She went to get ready for the day, leaving him to his thoughts.

Did she just kiss me? It was just a kiss on the cheek. That just means she's grateful, no big deal...right? How the hell do I know? I've never been kissed before! Not seriously! he argued with himself. **And I still haven't! She's emotionally unstable. It's my job to make sure she's as comfortable and safe as possible. If that made her feel better, then I'm doing my job...** Ekyt had a feeling that their thoughts were similar: Both full of crap. There was a friendship forming between the two, whether either of them realized or not.

6 - CH VI: The Wound Deepens...

Ekyt woke with a start, his hand grasping his sword. Slowly, he put it down, the cold sweat bristling across his body, making every movement feel strange. His hand reached for the envelope near him, a letter from Poile-La, Linda's mother. He read the first of two notes, his hand shaking.

Guardian:

The time has come for me to make you understand your role. But first, the situation must be explained.

The Dark Legion is gaining followers, and is soon going usurp it's leader, Lien-Da. Kragok, the group's true leader, was exiled to the Zone of Silence. But alas, evil does not disappear so easily.

There is to be a great war. It MUST be prevented. You were chosen as a host for the Ring of Chaos. You were chosen from the beginning of your training. It was foretold, the coming of a human guardian. Athair and Locke are aware.

When you read this, I will undoubtedly be dead. Perhaps you have thought it your duty to simply die. Guardian, I ask not that you die, for that is an unbearable burden for one so young. It is true you were rushed to mastery. Please, do not feel it is unearned. As you will soon understand, we had no other alternative.

So I ask you now, protect my daughter, for there is more to the prophecy, which I cannot hope to explain in a letter. But I can tell you that you MUST stop the war. The only way to stop it is self-sacrifice...Or, rather, the only APPARENT way.

Guardian, you must think things through. In the meantime, Linda-Su will face a hardship. I fear she is little more than a kept woman's child, though I know better.

This is the reason I asked you to stay duty-bound to her. I'm afraid I may be biased, not at all a guardian's trait, however, she is still my daughter. Please, serve and protect her until the end...

The letter ended without signature. Ekyt was tempted to read the second letter, when something gold fell onto his lap. It was a large watch. Confused, Ekyt opened it. He saw it was more than a watch. A small note with it read simply "It was my Father's. As I have no son, perhaps you have use for it."

"Ekyt?" Linda's voice came softly to him. He got up out of her way. "Good morning. I hope you slept well." Ekyt said, a small bow adding to his words. "Ekyt, If what our letters say are true (Ekyt didn't ask how she knew what his letter said), the we have to leave." She didn't have a care-free tone in her voice, indicating this was a serious matter. "We shouldn't leave half-cocked. I don't know how to stop the war yet. I was asked not to sacrifice myself. If I did, that would end the war between the guardians and the Dark Legion, they would have what they wanted. I was told there's another way, but I have no idea what it is." Linda chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I think...we need to hold council with Knothole's leaders." Ekyt started to question that, but stopped. Linda gave him a curious look. As he walked away

to get the horse ready, she whispered to herself "You can talk to me Ekyt."

"I'm too young to face death...But if that's what's asked of me, I haven't got a choice! I'm going to take it upright. That's the most I can do..." Ekyt didn't lack courage, but desperately wanted to find another way.

The door was suddenly kicked it. Ekyt heard it and raced toward the house, founding himself and Linda outnumbered hopelessly. "Glad you could join us guardian. We have come for you...surrender yourself, and we leave the little lady alone." Ekyt glared, an intense hatred spreading through him. "Leave her out of this! This is between us, you cowards!" **I've got to buy her time to escape...There's only one chance...**

We all must face death at one point. It is a fact of life. Life is a part of death. An endless circle. Ekyt's time had come. He drew his staff and sword. He needed to reach Linda, she was the key...

The Dark Legion, fifteen of them, all turned toward him. Grinning, they drew their swords. "Brave guardian. It's a shame...we know you aren't a true master...and we've killed better fighters than you. But if you've chosen your path..." "I have! And I will stay loyal to the Brotherhood! I might not live to see it through, but I promise you I will set events in motion that will destroy you and your master!" Ekyt didn't know WHAT the hell he had just said, but it struck a chord. "I'll see you to hell myself guardian!" one yelled. He charged.

Ekyt parried his blow, catching the echidna's sword between his staff and own blade. He snapped the two together, breaking the sword, while swiftly kicking the echidna in the sternum, knocking him into the wall. Another rushed forward. He struck fiercely, only narrowly missing Ekyt as he rolled backward, swing his leg low and his staff high, both connecting. This couldn't go on, it was taking too long...

Linda watched in horror. She at first thought she was paralyzed by fear. Instead, she found that Ekyt himself was preventing her from helping him. He had created an invisible wall, that neither she nor her assailants could cross. How long he could maintain that wall was anyone's guess. It was already draining him, she could tell.

Ekyt didn't need to maintain the wall for long, only long enough to create an escape for Linda-Su. He had gotten in front of her, but was facing fifteen angry echidnas. The hallway they were in was narrow, which gave Ekyt an advantage as they could only attack two at a time. But how to get her out...If she made it to the horse, she would be safe in Knothole...but how? Suddenly, it hit him.

What mad him think of this, he didn't know, but as he blocked and dodged, he whispered to Linda-Su "Give me the ring. I'm going to make a path. Take the horse and head to Knothole." She handed him the ring, though she had no intention of leaving him.

He had served her so loyally, the least she could is return that loyalty.

Ekyt put the ring on his finger, feeling a surge of evil. He suppressed it the best he could. He held his sword and staff, both glowing with energy in front of him. He swung them both into the wall, opening a hole. "GO!" he shouted, holding back the fifteen enemies with his rapidly draining power. He threw them backward, and guessed he had time for one last strike. He swung his staff and sword into the wall once

more. He scrambled through the hole as the house began to collapse...

Linda reigned the horse in near Ekyt. "Come on! That's not going to stop them!" Ekyt turned to obey, when the backlash of the power hit him. His face contorted, but he refused to make a sound. The ring rolled off his finger as he blacked out. Linda cursed, then dove off the horse to pull him up onto it. Good thing he was so light...

Linda got the horse to gallop, getting them almost to Knothole. She turned back to check on Ekyt. "Oh My God..." she said in a hushed tone. His breathing was shallow, and his chest was a mass of blood, despite there being no wound...

"That damn ring...If I had known...please, stay with me. Steppenwolf, Edmund, may your guidance watch and protect him..." she said, a tear in her eye. She feared the worst, and with good reason...

7 - CH VII: Revelations

Linda-Su sprinted to Knothole. The King and Queen had recently stepped down due to health concerns, leaving their two eldest children, Princess Sally and Prince Elias, in charge. They were always concerned when an echidna showed up, least of all the heiress of a prominent member.

Linda-Su was panting as she bowed to Sally and Elias. "Linda-Su? Are you okay?" Linda nodded, then changed her mind. "You know Ekyt, he's the human guardian? He needs medical attention! I'll explain, but I fear the worst..." Sally and Elias exchanged grim glances. "Of course. Elias, you know him better, will you see to that?" "Of course Sister."

Ekyt woke up, laying on the ground. He looked down at his chest, feeling the mass of blood. "What the hell...this is mine...but it isn't ALL mine...I wasn't even hurt...that damn ring...I don't know what it's doing to me, but I will see it destroyed." That would come later, he was more concerned with finding Linda-Su. Pulling his robe closed after wiping the worst of it off. His strength had returned, so he climbed back on the horse, heading for the remains of Castle Acorn.

The castle had been destroyed in the terrible war against Dr. Robotnik. Now, the Freedom Fighters (Sonic and co) had taken some of their land back. The citizens were now hidden safely within the castle. They had repelled a few minor invasion attempts by Robotnik's remaining robots. The mood was one of jubilation as though the war was finished. Ekyt didn't approve. But then again, he was a strange case. **Perhaps some people need hope to survive...Maybe I do too...But when hope fails you, strength is what will push you forward, or so it is told...If that IS true, then I worry for the sake of most of those who will remain...they will be few in number...** Ekyt was simply reciting the proverbs to pass the time, however appropriate they turned out to be.

Ekyt hitched the horse up. Two guards stepped in front of him. "I'm with Linda-Su, part of a delegation from Angel Island." Ekyt said. "Have you proof?" One barked. "There's no time for that! Escort me in if you don't trust me!" Ekyt snarled, shoving the man aside. He had a job to do, and damned if some guard was going to stop him.

He kicked open the doors, to find Elias, Linda-Su, and Sally staring at him. Linda-Su got up and ran over to him. "You're alright...thank Steppenwolf, you're alright!" She couldn't believe it. "Only a fraction of the blood was mine Linda-Su. We need to know more about the ring and what it does to its bearer." Elias, Sally, and Linda-Su all looked away as one. "You know something of it?" Ekyt was furious. "Well...yes. You already know it saps the life force of its bearer. It also taps into a source of great evil. Great power, but great evil. It would kill an echidna easily. That's the source of the blood." Elias explained.

Linda-Su looked nervously at Ekyt. He had his hand inside his robes, feeling his chest. "You knew, didn't you?" Ekyt said quietly. Linda-Su would have preferred it had he yelled. "I did. But I couldn't tell you. You had to find out yourself." She saw a spark in his eyes. "Why do I have to learn everything by suffering! What the hell is it going to hurt if I hear the risks first? I'd like to think I'm disciplined enough to the point where it wouldn't cloud my judgment!" he shook his head, sorry for the rant. "I'm sorry,

that's not fair to you...you have to follow orders, the same as I do...forgive me for saying that." Ekyt bowed slightly, heading off to find lodging for the night.

Linda followed him as he navigated the castle's passageways. "Look, I understand you're upset, and I certainly understand why!" Ekyt found the door he was looking for. Linda would be safely hidden here. "You should get some rest, you've had a trying day." Ekyt said by way of response. There were two beds in the room, along with a desk. It was decorated royally with the crest of King Acorn. "You're going to keep me company tonight, right?" Linda asked. Ekyt spared a glance over his shoulder. "I'll be on guard." His answer was slightly rough. He couldn't help it. He just couldn't understand why things were working this way.

Linda-Su sat down, not happy about the turn of events. "Please...sit with me for a minute." She said/asked/ordered, patting the bed next to her. Ekyt sat down, his eyes straight forward.

"I think we need to talk...And...wait a minute...open your robe!" she exclaimed. Ekyt didn't want to, but he reluctantly opened his robe. His white shirt (The same one he wore at the ceremony) was blood stained. Linda put a cautious finger to it. "You're still bleeding." She said, surprised. "It's nothing." Ekyt answered. "Take off your shirt. You're hiding something." She said, not wanting to order him around, but knowing at the same time it was the only way she was going to get an answer out of him.

Ekyt started to, but had to stop, wincing in pain. "When I passed out, I cut my shoulder on a rock. I can't get the shirt off." Linda-Su, praying that nobody saw this, reached forward and pulled his shirt off for him. She felt him tense up, as though he was ready to attack, even though she knew he wouldn't.

She took a look at his shoulder first. It was a minor wound that would cause him discomfort for a couple days. She looked at his back, seeing a few scratches, but nothing major. Then she looked at his chest and nearly passed out. "Ekyt, I thought you said this was nothing!" she exclaimed, sickened by the amount of blood. "It's nothing. Take a closer look, most of it's not mine. That ring must somehow use the blood of it's enemies AND it's bearer to attack." He was breathing heavy, mostly due to nerves. It felt wrong to be sitting there, half-naked in front of a girl who just happened to be his boss. **She cares about my well-being...** Ekyt thought, not for the first time, but surprised nonetheless. **This is disturbing...between the blood...and the fact I lost my temper...I'm not master of anything...she must know that. Maybe I was right. I'm a glorified pawn in a game of chess, protecting the queen...except now the queen doesn't want her pawn hurt...That's the way war works...there's more she's not telling me. But I'm not going to ask, I'm used to secrets. They'll reveal themselves in due time, more than likely...**

Linda-Su narrowed her eyes. "There's something you aren't telling me Ekyt...about why you're the way you are." Ekyt looked up. She had just thrown him a curve ball. "I'm sure I covered everything..." Linda smiled comfortingly. "You know you can talk to me. I want to know. As a friend." Ekyt coughed slightly, not hiding his surprise as well as he hoped. With a sigh, he began:

"It's been almost two years since I arrived on Angel Island. I didn't know of what went on behind the scenes. The Brotherhood was divided on their opinion of me. Locke was all for giving me a chance, however unconventional. Spectre...he wished me dead, and I think he tried, at times, to make sure that happened. Athair knew something the rest of them didn't, and he refused to say. Your mother...she didn't like me, but was willing to let me try." Ekyt paused briefly to catch his breath, then continued.

"They tested my will many times...at one point they had me killed, to test my loyalty. I passed, but I was bitter...Very bitter. I felt I was deserving of more trust than that. I was told "This is how we do things" and then banished when I confronted them. That hurt. What you've got to understand is, that without the job, I'm nothing more than a pathetic human who never found his niche on his own planet. So, after I was welcomed back by Locke, I trained non-stop. The tests continued, and I grew more bitter. But loyalty kept me bound to their traditions."

He stopped. Linda looked away. "This hasn't been fair to you, has it? All the effort you've put in...the loyalty you've shown...and you're asked to die..." She looked at him, her beautiful, emerald-green eyes glistening. She took his hand, holding it for a moment. "I promise you...no order such as that will pass my lips...of that, I can give you my word..." She held his hand, raising it, bending her wrist and his into the form of an ancient echidna symbol meaning "promise."

She held it there for a moment, as was the custom, before placing his hand gently back down. He looked away. "This means a lot...The fact that you actually care for my well-being...it's a nice surprise." He managed to say, embarrassed to no end. He had always been the untouchable, mystery character that no-one could figure out.

"Of course I care!" she replied, surprised at his reaction. "Did you think I didn't?" "I don't know what I thought...or even if I thought at all..." He got up, using a towel he had found to wipe the blood off his chest. He looked out the window. It was a peaceful day, belying the turmoil that was engulfing everyone involved.

Linda-Su placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. He flinched at the touch, but turned around to see what she wanted. She pulled him into a hug. Her tears ran down his chest. "I miss my mother Ekyt...she was always my pillar of strength. My father could rot, the world could end, but she would always be there...always..." She looked up at him, her chin resting on his chest. "Do you understand any of this? You show so little emotion, I can't tell." Ekyt closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "I feel it. It's just my training, or maybe my nature, that doesn't allow me to show it. I DO care. I don't like to see anyone unhappy, least of all those he treat me courteously."

Linda-Su was a bit startled; he hadn't said something so deep since she had known him. She decided now to tell him one of the reasons he was chosen for this mission.

She sat on the bed, while he knelt at her feet. "Another damn custom...you never give those a rest, do you!" she laughed. He turned red, apparently not sure how to reply. She spared him that trouble by continuing. "You have shown me so much respect Ekyt. Most everyone disliked me, thinking I was nothing but a pampered, spoiled princess. And even though I've kept secrets from you, there you are, staying loyal to the Brotherhood's orders. I don't deserve that, the same as you didn't deserve me keeping secrets, orders or not. Right now, I want to remedy that." Ekyt looked up curiously, but stayed kneeling.

"You already know you were chosen for this mission because you were human. I don't know many other reasons, but I can tell you this one: Before she died, you earned my mother's favor by defying the Dark Legion. She deemed you worthy to protect me. And believe me, coming from my mother, that's a big deal." Ekyt looked up again, questioningly. "So there was something else besides me being a sacrificial lamb...and, please, if you know...why did they rush me to mastery?" Linda-Su shook her head.

"I don't know. You could have guarded me just as well without it."

Ekyt had an idea. "It must be the ring...only a full guardian can control it, right? That must be it." Ekyt looked down at his chest. Disdainfully, he put a hand to his stripe, as though he was going to try to pull it off. "You know, if sickens me. I'm wearing this, the mark of an elite group, and I'm not deserving." He looked down bitterly. Linda-Su grabbed his arm and pulled him up next to her. "I think you've earned it. But what matters is you think you have. I hope someday you'll feel like you earned it."

Ekyt bowed his head, and thanked her. He struggled to get his shirt back on (his left shoulder was still aching) and pulled his robe back on, pulling the belt tight. "I have a bad feeling...you'd better get some rest while you can..." Ekyt said, looking out the window. "A bad feeling? About what?" Ekyt shrugged. "I don't know, but every time I've had a bad feeling on this mission, something's happened." "Oh, you're overreacting!" Linda-Su said. Ekyt smiled and nodded. "I hope you're right."

At that moment, Prince Elias ran in. "Sorry to bother you, but we could really use your help, if you're up to it!" He had his sword in his belt. "What's happened?" Linda-Su asked. "We're under siege! Robotnik built his force up since the last attack; we need all the firepower we can get!" Linda-Su chanced a glance at Ekyt. "Remind me not to doubt your intuition again."

8 - CH VIII: The Blessing of Guardians...

Ekyt ran to the top of the castle, Linda-Su right behind him. A ladder suddenly went up with a loud CRACK right near him. He peered over the edge. A group of robots were climbing it. Ekyt, who was running on pure anger, brought his sword on the wood just so, spitting it. The rungs broke in two, stopping the robots. Ekyt then pushed the ladder, destroying the robots on the way down.

A few had managed to break into the castle on the upper levels. Ekyt watched in horror as some of the inhabitants were thrown off the castle. If they lived, they were prisoners. If they died, their heads were severed and exhibited on pikes, leaving the remaining inhabitants of the castle to contemplate their own fate if they lost.

Elias ran up to Ekyt and Linda-Su. "I'm going to surrender the castle. I've made a deal with Robotnik: He spares us as long as we leave the castle without resistance." "That's a horrible idea! When has Robotnik ever kept a promise?! And what kind of half-assed freedom would it be if we surrendered?" Elias was at a loss for words. "Elias, I don't know about the others, but I'm fighting. You can go if you want. I'm going to defend this castle to the last." Elias smiled. "I think you've brought me 'round old friend." He turned to the inhabitants. Raising his sword in salute he yelled "No Retreat!" Everyone answered him: "No Surrender!"

Ekyt headed to the lower level. Linda-Su was trying to talk him out of it. "It's suicide!" she argued. "No it's not. I've had worse odds. I could use the ring and end this war before it starts." He held it, contemplating it. Linda-Su hated to do it, but she had no choice. She couldn't bear to see him die. Too many had been lost already. This human seemed like a constant in her life, and one she wasn't prepared to lose. "Guardian, stand down!" She said/ordered. Ekyt stopped. "Please don't ask that of me...I've never run from a fight." He said, despairing that he already knew her answer. "Stand down. It's not your fight." Ekyt looked for a moment as though he was going to defy her. "Give me the ring." She said quietly. Ekyt hesitated, then bowed. "As you say master." He said, sadness creeping into his voice. "If we get through this, you'll understand Ekyt." Ekyt wanted to say something back, but only bowed again. **If she's going to play this by the book, I will too.** He thought, almost childishly.

Linda-Su had to stifle a laugh as Ekyt knelt by her side, head down in a sign of submission. **This is so funny! It's almost cute how he's "teaching me a lesson."** I knew he'd be mad that I did this, but I thought he would defy me...

Ekyt was summoned, along with Linda-Su to Elias' personal quarters. "They're going to try to flush us out." Ekyt said immediately. "What's our supplies like?" Elias hesitated. "Not good." He admitted. "We have too many women and children who eat, but don't fight." Ekyt stroked his chin. "We should only wait long enough to plan, then attack ourselves..." "We don't have the firepower! It would be suicide!" Elias exclaimed. "You didn't have the firepower against Robotnik, and that's a war you won! I sure as hell don't want to wait around for my head to be on a stick!" Linda-Su offered her stance. "Who's leading them? If Robotnik didn't have the manufacturing means two months ago, there's no way he could have gotten it so quick..." That question stumped them all. "It must be a magical presence. A guardian's equivalent..." Ekyt said thoughtfully.

"We weren't really related." Linda-Su said suddenly. At Ekyt's questioning look, she finished. "My Mother I mean...I never met my real mother...she was exiled when the Dark Legion took over briefly..." She said sadly. "I...knew myself master." Ekyt admitted. "How did you know?" "I've met your mother. When I was banished myself. She had saved my life. I was attacked from behind, my neck nearly broken. I was stabbed, and when she pulled the knife out of me, she told me it had stopped a half inch from my heart. She bandaged me up...There are something's even guardian's can't survive, though they call us "immortal.]" He stopped, giving her a questioning look. "I know...that's why I stopped you." She told him. "I don't want to see you killed...I know you're going to put yourself at risk again...and I can't stop you...Just as I know you're going to allow yourself to be killed to stop this war!"

The last part surprised Ekyt. "It's no wish of mine, rest assured! If anything, fate! Poile-La asked me to find away around death, but nothing's come to me...All I know is that ring must be destroyed...There's evil around that can control it. I can sense it...guardians avoid killing whenever possible. With all the blood that shot out of the ring, through my body, that ring has caused too many deaths to have been controlled by a guardian only..." It was Linda-Su's turn to be surprised. "You mean...there's something more powerful than the Brotherhood?" "Something killed them, didn't it?" he countered, suddenly angry. Beyond angry.

He looked over at the window, and did a double take. "My God...Linda-Su, is that who I think?" Linda-Su looked over herself. "Spectre? But he's dead! And what's he doing with them?" "He's not dead enough!" Ekyt said with a snarl. He headed toward the door. "Wait!" Linda-Su called. Ekyt turned, bowing. "Just...don't kill anyone!" she stammered. Ekyt nodded, inclining his head. "It was never my intention...But, as you say..."

Ekyt bade Elias and seven guards to watch Linda-Su while Ekyt went to face Spectre. "But he's a master!" Linda-Su argued. "I'm the only one here who can match him power for power, I've got to try!" he said forcefully, praying she wouldn't order him not to. She did not. Instead, she absently straightened his robe while talking to his chest. She couldn't look him in the eyes. "Please...take care of yourself...and return safely." She bade. He knelt briefly, head inclined. "I shall." He promised.

As he walked away toward a likely death, Linda-Su recited some of the guardian's creed.

*May Steppenwolf guide you,
and may Dmitri's shadow not fall on you.
Should the time come to fight,
May Edmund's sacrifice be not in vain.*

*May guardians, past and present,
Alive and deceased,
Here now and forever,
Watch over and protect you.*

*By Steppenwolf's example,
The hopes and prayers of all species,
Lie with you.*

*May this creed bless you,
And give you the strength and courage
Needed to face a perilous task,
One which few would take.*

9 - CH IX: A Vindictive Strike

Ekyt rode the horse over to Robotnik, the Crest of the Guardians plainly visible on his chest, and King Acorn's banner fluttering behind him. Jumping off, he urged the horse to head back to the castle, not wanting it slain. He drew his sword, a new dagger from Elias in the sash around his waist. He placed his bo and sword in front of him, in the manner of guard.

A few robots made a move, each commanded individually. These Ekyt cut down with relative ease. The next wave was similar, and all destroyed. The wave after that doubled in size, twenty robots attacking. But all from one direction, so there was no trouble yet. Ekyt's bo kept them away. If they dared try to attack, they were easy prey for his sword. It could kill no-one living, but robots weren't living, so there was no trouble.

"Stop the attack!" a voice commanded. Spectre strode forward. There was noticeable change about him; his right eye and left arm had been replaced by robotic replicas. "You've joined them, haven't you." Ekyt said, as though discussing the weather. "Of course. Power has been my chief interest. The special effects I used to fake my own death were mere child's play. As was fooling the council into thinking YOU could be the girl's savior!" Ekyt couldn't conceal his anger any longer.

"You've betrayed us, and I don't aim to let it go unpunished. Every innocent life you've taken shall be redeemed!" Spectre laughed. "You were always bright...that's why I disliked you...you posed the greatest threat. You were never as skilled as Knuckles, but you are definitely smarter. You've got common sense, and are devoid of ego. All strengths, qualities that are prized among guardians." Ekyt replied with a dry "I'm flattered."

Out of respect for his opponent, as per guardian customs, he dropped his spare weapon. His sword fell to the ground; he had chosen his bo. The dagger remained in his sash, as he saw that Spectre too had a dagger. Spectre smiled; not a reassuring gesture. "So be it. You've chosen death over life. Perhaps you are more noble than wise..."

Spectre's weapon was a sword. It was 30 inches long, slightly longer than the average of it's make. It curved, making it ideal for cutting. The hilt was adorned with spikes, as was the scabbard (saya, in this case).

Spectre's sword swung down, an easy strike to block. Ekyt did so, bring the reverse end of his staff up. Rather than meet the blade, Ekyt stepped to his left, to the outside of the strike, knocking it away, following the strike. He swung the staff's opposite end around in a windmill motion, which was broken into two sets of two strikes. The near end of Ekyt's bo came down, followed immediately by the back end, all high strikes on both sides, as he switched hands, hoping to beat Spectre's guard. Spectre blocked all four and returned with a stab, which Ekyt brought his bo down on.

He maintained contact, shuffling forward, hoping to strike Spectre's thumb. Spectre flipped the staff and sword's positions. Ekyt recovered quickly, using a kick as a pacifying strike, before landing the first hit of their duel. He flipped the staff into a long-range grip, bracing it under his forearm, and swung, followed

by a thrust. Spectre dodged the initial strike, but the thrust hit home, dead center of the solar plexus (Center of chest, roughly).

Ekyt and Spectre both turned as they heard the sound of hooves behind them. Elias had taken Ekyt's advice, and now there was a charge on the battle field! Spectre muttered some words, enclosing the two in a dome. "No more distractions! This needs to be settled!"

He swung his sword from his leg, catching Ekyt by surprise. He had enough time to swing the back end of his bo across in a sweeping block, but was hit with the case as Spectre spun, rolling off Ekyt's body so as to maintain contact. The spiked case dug into Ekyt's side, tearing his robe and causing blood to pour out from the small, but numerous, punctures.

Ekyt kicked backward, hitting Spectre's knee. His staff hit the ground, as Spectre managed to dodge the downward blow. The next strike aimed for Spectre's temple. That was blocked by Spectre with the hilt of his sword. He attempted to strip the bo away from Ekyt, pulling him in close. Ekyt switched his grip and shifted his momentum, causing Spectre to lose his balance momentarily. Ekyt used the opening to bring an elbow down across Spectre's shoulder blades, knocking him to the ground briefly.

Spectre was up in an instant, his sword flashing out in three strikes, in an abiniko (fan) pattern. All high strikes, Ekyt blocked them with his staff lengthwise in front of him. He brought the top end of the bo down in a strike to the head, which Spectre batted aside, scoring with a kick to the chest.

Linda-Su watched the duel. Her guards were circling her on horseback, swords drawn. "C'mon, c'mon." she cheered aloud. "Beggin' your pardon miss, but how do you know the lad?" One of her guards asked. "He's my escort for this mission." She answered. The creature on horseback, a strange mix of echidna and hedgehog, grinned. "I only ask because I trained with him. Trust me. He won't flaunt it, too modest, but if anyone here is a match for that echidna, it's him. He spared me a few moments when I asked him to show me his chaos powers." "He has chaos powers?!" Linda-Su interrupted, surprised. "Yes, but perhaps too noble to use them. I wish he would, for his own sake." The rider's beast whinnied softly, as if it too was worried about the outcome of the battle.

"If I may, what's your name?" Linda-Su asked. "I'm called Gareth by legal terms, but most call me Garth M'lady." He said, tipping his helmet in a sign of respect, since it wasn't advisable to bow on horseback. "Garth...What kind of chaos power did he have?" Garth thought for a moment, clicking his tongue. "I forget what he called it, but he could summon power from the emeralds. Chaos...Vortex, that was it. It gave him about 30 seconds of incredible ability, during which time he couldn't be harmed. But afterward, he was completely drained of energy for five minutes." Garth talked with a hint of an oriental accent, Linda-Su guess Japanese by his mannerisms. He sat upright in his saddle. "You seem carefree." Linda-Su pointed out. "I feel as though every moment alive should be enjoyed." Garth said by way of explanation, even when saying something so serious maintaining a care-free, but somehow serious, air. "I hope he'll be alright." She said, watching him take a hard shot from Spectre. "He will be, I'm certain. You seem fond of him." It was part question. "As a friend. He's been more than loyal." She responded quickly, not wanting Garth to get the wrong idea.

Ekyt's bo hit Spectre's forearm, and then snaked clockwise across it, stripping his weapon. At the last moment, Spectre re-directed his momentum, forcing the bo out of Ekyt's hands. Immediately, both drew their daggers. They tuned, knife hand forward, spare hand guarding their hearts, shoulders forward.

Spectre slashed forward, catching Ekyt's robe. Ekyt backed up quickly, pulling off his robe and wrapping it around his left hand so he could block. He sacrificed the ability to switch hands, but Spectre was the more skilled of the two, so blocking could be the difference between life and death.

Both daggers slashed forward, cutting their respective forearms slightly. That was to be expected; if you used knives, you got cut, no way around it. Their wrist stayed in contact, as they stuck in a high, low, high pattern. Ekyt's other hand, covered with his robe, managed to connect with a punch to the jaw. Spectre's left hand narrowly missed, as Ekyt's hand hit slightly before.

Spectre drew back. "Enough of this foolish child's play! I will end this now!" Ekyt's arms snapped to his sides as he was raised in the air, unable to move. He concentrated, willing himself to fight it. He shrugged off the chaos attack, which surprised Spectre, as Ekyt's dagger plunged down, hitting the echidna's knife arm, forcing him to drop the knife. Ekyt right foot hit the echidna's temple, knocking him down.

Do it now! You must kill him! Stop the war... But Linda's pleading voice ran through his head. "I can't do it..." he whispered to himself. Meanwhile, Spectre had recovered. He moved his hand forward quickly, knocking Ekyt backwards. His bionic arm seized Ekyt around the neck, while his mutilated right arm regained the knife.

Linda-Su watched in horror as Spectre's chaos abilities held Ekyt up in such a way that he was two feet off the ground, unable to defend himself...

Ekyt's arms again snapped to his side. He couldn't throw off the mental attack this time. Spectre hit him hard in the face, gripping his chin. "You had the chance to end it. To chance what was foretold. You were an admirable adversary, human." His right hand drew back while his left arm gripped Ekyt's chin. "I want you to see this coming. I want you to meet death face-to-face." With that, his dagger drove into Ekyt's heart...

Linda-Su's group of guards had to move quickly to keep up with her. The siege, meanwhile, had been unsuccessful. They had retained the castle with a minimum of casualties. But no-one could celebrate...

Linda-Su dove beside his body while Spectre ran for it. Even with his power, he couldn't fight off the whole army. "My God...no...no...this hasn't happened." But she had to accept it: Ekyt was dying.

Ekyt's eyes flickered and opened. Linda-Su was crying over him. He raised an arm toward her, which she took with a shaking hand. "Stay strong Linda-Su. May Steppenwolf guide you..." He died then, the life leaving his eyes. Linda-Su made up her mind then to stay strong. It was what her "servant" would have wanted. She repeated the last part of the blessing to him:

"And May Dmitri's shadow never fall on you." She said in a whisper near his ear. She gave him a soft, brushing kiss of respect, a last thanks for loyalty his lips already impossibly cold...

10 - CH X: The Solution

Linda-Su asked that Ekyt's body not be moved for a full day. Given that he was the last one close to her, they agreed. Prince Elias declared a day of mourning. Locke and Athair couldn't be reached...

Linda-Su sat by herself, holding his robe, which had fallen from his hand after his death. His last words were her sole salvation. She took off her normal clothes, though she didn't have the heart to destroy them. She mended his robe and pulled it on herself, over a white outfit, signifying Purification of the Soul. She bowed her head in silent prayer for his soul. His robe was slightly big for her, so she hemmed the black material.

"Attention, please!" Elias called. The hall silenced. "As you have all undoubtedly heard by now, a guardian who came to our aid, Ekyt, an adopted son of the House of Dmirti, was slain in battle by a vindictive foe. I witnessed it first hand. Such was his integrity that he refused to kill his defeated opponent. Integrity means little to the Dark Legion and Robotnik, and even less to the turncoat known as Spectre. I'm here to tell you he died a hero's death. He gave us time enough to turn the tides of the attack and retain the castle. I ask you all to know raise your glasses in a toast to his departed soul." Every chair scraped across the floor, every glass was raised. "To Ekyt, a legend of our time!" Elias shouted. It was repeated. The glasses were drained as Ekyt's body was carried in by four of the fighters he had known.

There was a hushes silence across the hall. Everyone stood up as his body was carried past. Those who were fighters drew their swords, holding them, point toward him. One baby cried and was comforted silently by her mother.

Linda-Su thought he looked peaceful. She had asked his body not be changed from it's final position. It had not. His body hadn't been cleaned. He was still wearing his white shirt and black pants. The cloak he had worn on the journey covered his wound, hiding it from view. Linda-Su was to be the final ceremony's celebration leader. She was stunned. Even though they had been no more than friends, Linda-Su had felt that she could trust him...tell him her deepest secrets, her secret ambitions, all without fear of being laughed at. It was like she had a best friend, a servant, a protector, and a guardian, all in one. For that to be gone so suddenly...it tore her heart out. She ran a hand down his face, amazingly nearly unmarred after such intense combat. His cheek was so cold...she just couldn't believe it. She remembered she was supposed to day something about him...but she knew so little.

"Ekyt was certainly a guardian's guardian. And I'm sorry to say that I didn't much chance to know him in the short time he served as my escort. I felt like I could tell him anything...Even when I gave him an "order", something I didn't enjoy and didn't need to do often, no matter how unsavory the order, or how dangerous the task, his answer was always a show of respect. I can say all this now, and I wish that I had been able to tell him as much.

It's time you all learned of his task. It was one of great importance, and not one that is enviable. He was to deliver the Ring of Chaos (gasps) to Mount Fate. But his first duty was to protect me. We were to leave today. To seal the power inside his body. And he was to..." She cried for a moment, but stiffened

her face almost instantly. "He was to die. He was to destroy the ring, and become the terrible power's physical host. It was then that he was to draw his dagger across his stomach and leap from the cliff...to end it's horrible power...in effect, preventing a war that may not be winnable..."

Ekyt was standing in a familiar red area. He had died once before, only to be told he was being tested. He resented it at the time, but now wished THIS time was a test as well. Instead, he looked at his clothes. A white robe, tied with a black sash. White pants. He felt his head. No wound, and a piece of black cloth was around his head.

Everything was in order. He was to meet the "Final Council." He had met one member, Aurora, a sweet girl who appeared sixteen, though she was far older. She had an interest in him, he guessed romantic.

Ekyt knelt down, somehow unafraid. Terribly sad, but not scared. Perhaps it was because guardians were trained to take death upright. As he knelt, mulling his feelings over, Aurora was the first to greet him. With a sad smile, she welcomed him.

Aurora: Welcome guardian.

Ekyt: Good to see you again Aurora. It's a shame, the circumstances aren't ideal...

Aurora: It's good to see you, too. I witnessed your death...

Ekyt: I hope it was satisfactory (smiling)

Aurora: (laughs) Of course! Quite spectacular, though I'd expect nothing else from you.

Ekyt: Such high standards...I don't suppose this is a test...

Aurora: (sadly) I'm afraid not guardian. This really is your final council...

Ekyt: Aurora, why is it called the "Final Council?" What's there to discuss? The fact is Spectre was the better one the battlefield...

Aurora: I think you'll find that there are those would disagree...Council; I summon you to come forth!

Three figures joined Aurora and Ekyt. Ekyt looked closely; he had to, they were all covered in white cloaks. Kneeling, Ekyt bowed. They removed their hoods one-by-one.

First was Steppenwolf, the first to assume the mantle of guardian. Then their was Edmund, Steppenwolf's father, a great scientist. The last to remove the hood forced a reaction out of the ever-stoic Ekyt.

Ekyt: Poile-La!

Poile-La: Yes Guardian.

Ekyt: I apologize for my mission not being completed.

Poile-La: You have nothing to be sorry for...I could hardly ask for a better protector for my daughter.

Ekyt: (bow) And I could scarcely ask for higher praise...

Steppenwolf: Ekyt, it's an honor to meet you. You were the first human guardian, something even the wisest of the Brotherhood, as well as our council, could not have foreseen. Respect is certainly in order...

Ekyt: The honor is mine... (Bows again)

Steppenwolf: Your training took very well...Something that didn't sit so well with your murderer...

Ekyt: He bested me...

Steppenwolf: No. He did not. I ask you to remove that thought from your head. You died with integrity, something he could never hope to have. It was your integrity that set you apart.

Ekyt: But it was my "integrity" that killed me!

Steppenwolf: Dying with honor is preferable to living in disgrace.

Ekyt: ...

Steppenwolf: When my father created the guardian's position, it was to protect Angel Island. Something ALL guardians have done, but few with the same vigor you displayed. And even less with the respect you showed.

Edmund: Death is a master we must all face guardian...However premature it may feel, death is final.

Ekyt: I understand. I failed Linda-Su, and death was the price I paid...I was bitter that I was rushed to a mastery I hadn't earned...a mastery I never will earn...I may bear the crest of a guardian, but I don't deserve it.

Poile-La: That is where we disagree with you.

Aurora: Yes. You see, dying honorably is high in our favor...

Edmund: And you were deemed for great things, no doubt. To have killed yourself as originally planned by our ancestors would have been foolish...and unnecessary...

Steppenwolf: Ekyt, it's time for you to return.

Ekyt: But death is final...No matter how premature...

Steppenwolf: (smiles) We decide that...and we've decided you are to return. And you are to have a new chaos ability that will only show itself when the time is right.

Poile-La: Guardian, if I might ask a favor...give my daughter this package...and serve her to the REAL end...

Ekyt: (shocked) Of course...I will.

All: Then return, with out blessing!

A surge of white light struck Ekyt's body. "What the hell!" Linda-Su exclaimed. Ekyt's body was changing...the blood was disappearing, the wounds closing...his shirt mending itself. The whole hall gasped.

Ekyt sat up, a white cloak in his hands, the package from Poile-La on top. A few fainted, most were rubbing their eyes. Ekyt felt his body, not believing it himself. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Linda-Su had her hand on him, her eyes wide. "It's really me." he said, as surprised as she was.

"My God...I've never seen this..." Elias muttered. Linda-Su didn't notice, instead she flung her arms around him. Forgetting herself, she kissed him rather passionately, much to his shock.

Linda-Su stopped kissing him, remembering her status, as well as his. "Thank you for all the loyalty...I hope that little token got my point across..." she said, smiling and blushing. He blushed himself. "I think I get your point. But right now, I've got to give you this, and then we should be on our way. By your orders..."

As Linda-Su opened the package, Ekyt was asked a million questions. About his death, about why he didn't kill when he had the chance. About his chaos abilities. Why didn't he use them? And what was death like? Ekyt answered patiently, before noticing Linda-Su giving him a strange look.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "I'm just...I'm glad you're alive." She said shyly. "You know, you're my best friend. Everyone thinks I'm this stuff heiress..." "I hardly think they'd believe that once they got to know you." He said kindly, meaning every word. "I apologize for the...scene I caused..." she muttered. "It's okay...That was kind of...my first kiss." He admitted. They blushed in unison. "It meant a lot. Thank you." He said, bowing with a smile. "The pleasure was mine." She returned.

Suddenly all business again, Ekyt straightened his face. "Since you've taken to my robe, this will do. Let's finish this mission." "No." she said defiantly. "I forbid you to complete this mission! I can't let you die again!" she told him firmly. "I can't promise you I won't die, but I CAN promise you it won't be by my own hand...The Final Council gave me a clue, and I think I've worked out the riddle..."

11 - CH XI: Inside Your Soul Chaos Resides

"Thank you for the wonderful funeral Elias." Ekyt said, bowing and shaking his hand. "You're a friend of the realm, I wouldn't have had it any other way. You're certain you can't wait here for a while longer?" Ekyt shook his head. "Linda-Su's orders. She's right, this ring is a menace, and it must be destroyed. And there's only one way...one I can't reveal...but it's going to hurt...it's going to hurt bad..."

Ekyt and Linda-Su were back on the path to the mission's end. She was still wearing his black robes, while he was wearing a set of white ones. A symbol of his death. His steed matched, being a vibrant white in color. It was a magnificent animal that needed no coaxing to gallop.

"How is it that you're alive?" Linda-Su finally asked. "Steppenwolf and the Council decided that my death was premature, and that I had enough integrity to return. Besides, I could hardly rest in peace knowing my mission had gone unfinished..." Linda-Su was about to answer when Ekyt suddenly reigned in his horse and motioned for her to do the same.

Down the road, he saw a couple robots. His bo staff was in front of him, in a cautious guard. He got off his horse and approached the robots. "Have you any news of the guardian's death?" he called out. "State your name." "Have you news? I'm anxious to hear of his death..." "The guardian was killed by Master Spectre." That was enough for Ekyt. "Please, give your master my regards!" He sprang out, hitting one with his staff and grabbing the other, hitting it twice with his staff, then pushing it hard into a tree. It crackled for a moment, then the energy died.

Ekyt clambered back onto his horse. Linda-Su smiled at that. "I'm glad you're alive. Truth be told, I really don't know what I'd do without you..." He had no answer, so she asked her next question. "How do you plan to destroy the ring?" Ekyt shrugged. "I was told I had a new chaos power that would reveal itself when the time was right. I can only assume that's the right time." He paused for a minute, only the *click-clack* of the horse's hooves was heard. Then he continued. "I hope I'm serving you alright...I always thought I was better suited to command alone than to serve under another...but I have to admit...Serving you is no chore...You're not a hard master to please...I hope that doesn't come across as offensive..." he said hopefully. "No, not at all, it's an honor that you think that highly of me." Ekyt said nothing, though he thought **I have no experience, but I'm relatively sure you don't tell a girl that kisses like that...well, you don't tell her that you feel cramped by being forced to serve...That would be a lie...I really DON'T mind serving her...I wonder what I should think of that? I know she's more than a mission to me, and I to her. It must come with friendship. Friendship...something I haven't experienced until just recently...Something that I hope I'll experience again...I feel strange...I can't identify it, though. What does that mean?**

The imposing shadow of Mount Fate was in site at last. Linda-Su and Ekyt tied the horses up and began the climb.

They weren't alone. As they reached the halfway point, the mountain leveled off. Linda-Su wanted to rest. Ekyt understood that it had been a trying day for her, so he didn't voice a complaint. He pulled off his robe, giving it to her to wrap up in. "What about you?" she asked. "Please, don't be concerned with

me. My job is to guard you, not to preserve myself." His answer was so much like him that Linda-Su had to laugh. "Please, sit for a minute..." she requested, patting the ground next to her. He kneeled there, his hands resting on his legs. "Do I have to ORDER you to relax?" she joked. He nodded, serious. She laughed. "Okay, I ORDER you to relax." Ekyt leaned back, still looking at her.

Linda-Su: Why didn't you use your chaos powers when you were fighting Spectre?

Ekyt: You knew?

Linda-Su: I was told you had them. They would have saved your life...Why didn't you do it.

Ekyt: It's not how a duel works. (shrug)

Linda-Su (nods, changes subject) The times are changing Ekyt...You'll notice my speech has changed.

Ekyt: (Nods)

Linda-Su: It's almost time for me to reveal the truth to you...A truth I have had to keep guarded...One so disturbing that even you would show shock...

Ekyt: When will I know?

Linda-Su: After the mission...I know you are still uncomfortable...

Ekyt: Yeah...I just can't shake the feeling I don't belong here...

Linda-Su was about to explain that when Ekyt sprang to his feet and struck what appeared to be the night sky. But a "Crack!" was heard when the side of his hand connected with something solid.

Ekyt felt the one assailant, keeping one hand on him. He kneed him twice, then tossed his aside, grabbing the second assailant. That one had no more luck with Ekyt; he would up falling to the ground while Ekyt held his hand in place after a hard uppercut.

Linda-Su got up. "We've got to keep moving! We've got to get to the top and seal that ring! That's the only way to..." she stopped, shaking her head. "No, no, later, right now we've got to go!" They climbed as fast as they could.

Upon reaching the summit, Linda-Su handed Ekyt the ring. "You know what you have to do?" Ekyt nodded. He drew his dagger. She grabbed his arm. "I forbid you to kill yourself." Ekyt nodded again. "As you say." He put the dagger lightly into his arm, carving symbols onto his flesh. He didn't look like he was in pain. Linda watched in shock as the same symbols appeared on the ring. She was even more shocked to find both he and the ring were bleeding.

"After them!" Linda-Su cursed. More enemies! Ekyt kept carving away, seemingly unconcerned.

Ekyt had the last symbol on his skin. It appeared on the ring as well. The blood stopped flowing on both. A fierce wind kicked up. Ekyt chanted some words as his enemies were blown backward:

*The time has come,
Upon reaching the mountain's summit,
The guardian gives flesh willingly,
To appease the angry entity called "war"*

*In out hearts, chaos resides,
Unlocked with purity, for good,
Unlocked with power, for evil,*

*The two must co-exist,
With neither dominating the other.*

*For where there is good, there will be evil.
Where there is sun, there must be rain,
Where there is water, one must drown,
Where there is fire, one must burn...*

*It is in this burning out souls become clean,
Once more ready to live, to stamp out destruction,
For good shall always triumph over evil.*

*As long as there are defenders of freedom,
Friends of liberty, and allies of justice,
Good shall not perish,
But live on for generations,
Continuing in a never ending cycle.*

*Now I call upon chaos' powers,
Good and evil alike,
Take residence in this object,
Seal away the destructive forces within!
Seal away the over-powering evil!
Release the good this day,
Here my call!*

From Ekyt's hand, the ring was raised up. It shook, releasing first a green beam, then a purple, a yellow, a blue, a white, a red, and a gray. The colors rotated, swirling and forming symbols in the air, spelling out symbols.

Then it ended. The chaos the ring had bestowed was stored away safely, the ring itself a casualty of it's own powers.

The children soon told stories by the fireside, about the death and re-birth of a hero. About how, against all odds, he became a guardian in his own right.

But that came later. First, a series of events happened, one that even the two present have a hard time describing.

Ekyt put his arms down, sagging, exhausted. "So that was it...the ability to seal away the evil...thank you...I hope I have the courage for one more trying event..."

He turned to Linda-Su. He was still kneeling. "Linda-Su...Master...So much has happened in three short days...but I feel like I've known you my whole life..." He paused, wondering how to continue. "I read my second letter that your mother gave me. It explained SoulTouch. That's an ability between a guardian and their soul mate to identify each other. And I think...I know...that it's you." He reached behind him, grabbing the ring, now a plain, gold ring. When he placed it on her finger, it became anything but

ordinary.

"I love you." Ekyt had managed to say it. "I know as a servant I shouldn't say that, but after SoulTouch revealed itself, I could no longer deny it." He paused. She was beaming at him. "Please, on your feet if you're able, we're equals." She helped him up. She stepped into him, hugging him. "I love you, too." Their eyes met, and then their lips met, a tender kiss between two lovers who had journeyed to hell and back together. The kiss cemented an unbreakable bond between the two of them.

NOTE: STOP HERE IF YOU LIKE THIS ENDING! BUT FOR THE TRUE ENDING, CONTINUE READING THE NEXT CH!

12 - CH XII: Bowed, Not Broken

Linda-Su was about to test the unbreakable connection between them. "Ekyt...I don't know how to say this...but...we can't be together." Ekyt nodded, as though he understood, when in reality he had no such notion. "I understand. I hope my words haven't troubled you." He said, again bowing.

"No, nothing like that! They're the very words I longed to hear! But I'm betrothed...my second letter..." she was visibly upset with it, though both knew there was little they could do. The best, they guessed, was to forget that those words were ever spoken. It would remain their secret, hers throughout her impending marriage. His words, however, were to live inside him, tearing at his soul.

But Linda-Su...his master, as it was...she couldn't know. He had to act as though it meant nothing to him. However hard. "When is the wedding, I would be honored to be allowed to attend." He heard himself say. "Once the time of hardship is over..." she answered. "It's horrible you have to bring about its end...I know how hard it must be for you to have to serve me now..." "As hard as it must be to issue orders." Ekyt returning, showing understanding. "I could always dismiss you, if it would be to your comfort." Linda-Su offered, clearly displeased with the prospect. Without hesitation, Ekyt answered. "My comfort doesn't matter! Do what's comfortable for you. But know that I would serve you to the end. Whatever your orders..." He choked on the last word; he was surprised he had lasted that long.

Ekyt had already made the decision to continue to live by the book. More than ever, the feeling that he didn't belong was pushed to the fore, though he refused to give it thought.

They were to head back to Angel Island now, having completed the first part of the mission. He had destroyed the ring's power. He noticed that Linda-Su hadn't yet removed it from her finger. Suddenly devoid of emotion, he found that he couldn't care. He had loved her, still did. He knew love was something that you didn't fall out of in seconds; that it would take time to get over it. He knew felt like a slave, a feeling he hadn't had before. He hated it, and he hated himself for going along with it.

He noticed that hate and love were his only emotions. There was nothing in between. When he was with Linda-Su, he felt both. When he was alone, he felt only hate...a hate so strong he felt as though his very soul was on fire.

One night, as he was on her leave for a short while, he found the waterfall he used to inhabit after practice with Knuckles. He stripped quickly and let the cool water wash over him. "What the hell?" He stepped away. The water had turned to blood. "I never did that before!" he exclaimed.

"Of course not dumbass!" Knuckles was walking over as Ekyt was drying off. "Knux, good to see you're okay, and the same as before." Ekyt said with a smile. "Do you know why that happened?" Knuckles asked, pointing at the red waterfall. "No idea...well, lots of ideas, all as stupid as the next." Ekyt said with a dismissive snort. "You're a full guardian, but you were the host of the ring's power. All the evil it did, a trace of it remains inside you..." "How do I get rid of it? I don't want that crap in me!" Ekyt looked down at his body, as though daring it to speak out against him. "This damn body always betrays me...I should have thrown myself off that damn cliff." Ekyt bit his tongue big time. He didn't

throw swear words around, and narrowly avoided saying worse.

"What would that solve?" a new voice said. "Archimedes...I was wondering when you'd arrive..." Knuckles said, holding a fire ant up to his face in the palm of his hand. "I've been watching kid...lemme talk to the new guy for a second..." Archimedes turned his attention to Ekyt. "You're the human..." "That's me. Unfortunately." He spat. "I heard about your dilemma, and I want to wish you luck with it. If you're ever corned with a problem, just whisper my name and I'll be summoned to you." Knuckles laughed. "Aside from breathing fire, you shouldn't count on his help! He'll give you a damn riddle to solve instead of talking to you straight." "Wise @\$\$." Archimedes said in amusement.

Ekyt left the two, thanking them for their support, while harboring a vicious desire to rip them both apart. **The evil inside the ring...now inside me...that's a scary thought...as if I needed another reason to hate myself...damnit!**

Linda-Su bathed herself. She sat in the water with a washcloth. As she washed neck, her thoughts drifted back to the boy...man...guardian...serving her. It was becoming increasingly obvious to her that he was hiding something. It wasn't a secret, she guesses, just something that he had to come to terms with. "Must have been my rejection..." If only he had known that when he has confessed his love, she had never had a happier moment. To have to erase that moment hurt her, but she guessed that someone who trained in solitude, with no one there to lick his wounds, would take it harder. His "pawn in a game of chess" theory felt true to her now. "Best to not think of it, and just go back to a master-servant relationship...If I hadn't kissed him when he returned from the dead...Maybe the emotions wouldn't have been so strong..."

With a sigh, she continued her bath, doing her best not to think of him.

Ekyt had made the decision in his own mind to become the ultimate servant to his training...and to her, until he was dismissed. He found a place for them to hide for the day, as they would have to travel by night. It was an alcove of trees, only one narrow opening, big enough for their horses to squeeze in as well.

He quickly made her bed, feeling like a damn maid. But that was his job, and he was going to see it through. She entered the alcove, refreshed in body from the bath. Her soul was still burdened. "Have a good night master." He said with a bow, somehow managing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "And where will you rest?" She asked, looking around. "Let that be the least of your concerns ma'am." He said, keeping his voice neutral. She said no more, though he could sense she wanted to. He was trying to keep this from being difficult for her. He had to shoulder the burden himself. He was expendable, she was not. A horrible truth, but one he had already faced.

Ekyt kept his broadsword, though the weapon suddenly disgusted him, as if it had betrayed him. His bo he had shouldered, and his dagger in his sash. His sash was white, to match the rest of his robes. He had always worn black, but Linda-Su had kept his robes. He didn't want them anyway. He had died in them, and it would have been creepy. So she didn't offer to return them, and he didn't ask.

He also decided he wouldn't be so shy about using his chaos powers on the battlefield. In a one on one duel, he would follow the traditions.

He had hit rock bottom. The servant to the object of his affections, an affection she wanted to return but could not. He felt betrayal everywhere. "How much...how much more can they ask of me? I've died for their cause, and I'm serving their heiress. After death, what is there to fear, besides failure?" he started a fire to warm himself, and to keep himself awake. Not that he felt like he could sleep now, or ever would again. He took up his dagger and a thick branch, whittling away at it to pass the time. Before he knew it, he had created a spear. He laid it gently over the fire, letting the flames lick it, hardening the point. He tested it, smiling hollowly as it had made a fine weapon. Taking up flint, he sharpened his dagger before sheathing it.

The dagger was from Elias. **A true friend...** Ekyt thought. He had shown Ekyt loyalty. And that meant a lot. Ekyt heard his voice change slightly. There were no light tones in it when he spoke.

Linda-Su noticed too. She curled up in her bed, thinking how unfair the situation was. Why didn't SHE decide who she wanted to marry? Why wouldn't they let her fight her own battles? Of course she could fight, but not like a guardian. In that respect, she was like her sister, Julie-Su. Except she and Knuckles had a mutual respect and disdained formality. Julie-Su wasn't angry at not being named the heiress, as she didn't want the responsibility anyway. She could do what she wanted, and could choose who she spent her time with.

Just before sunset, Ekyt gave the horses water. Their journey, if all went well, was to be a short one, but he had grown fond of the beasts, no longer fearing them, instead listening to the story their eyes told, and marking their unquestioning loyalty.

"I trust you slept well?" Ekyt asked, kneeling while handing her a tray of food. "Very well, thank you. It helps when someone talented is guarding you." She said with a smile. She watched him force himself to return it. "Thank you for the praise. When you are done, we should head out..." he said, looking at the sky and guessing there would be no rain. While it would drown out the sound of their horses, it would make them easier to track.

After they had ridden, Ekyt suddenly dismounted, holding his steed astride him. "If it's to your favor, stealth may be a good option." She got down as well. "We should hide the horses..." she said thoughtfully.

After that deed was done, Ekyt paused. "How should this be handled? I've been ordered not to leave your side, but I can't very well drag you into the Dark Legion's headquarters..." "And why not? I can handle myself!" "Of course, master, I meant no offense...but it would be an unnecessary risk." Smiling, she said "Allow me to be the judge of that." Ekyt said no more, instead giving her a slight bow.

"Who's there?" "The guardian. Lien-Da is prepared to see me." Ekyt said. **I wish I wasn't duty-bound to Linda-Su. I wish she HAD dismissed me...maybe the Dark Legion would have shown me loyalty...** He immediately rescinded that thought, hating himself for allowing such a "dirty" thought to pass through his head.

Lien-Da was sitting with two guards. She was an attractive, but incredibly vicious, echidna. With her long red dreadlocks and black leather outfit, she looked as ruthless as her position commanded. The exact opposite of Linda-Su. Lien-Da had overthrown her own brother, to whom she should have been loyal, and usurped his power. "Guardian, it is great to meet again at last! I trust your trip was well?" "Would

have been better had I not been dead a day before. But that's not why I'm here. I'm here to make you aware of the current events...or, more accurately, SHE is to make you aware." "You never DID enjoy serving under others, did you? Perhaps that's why you rejected me." Ekyt didn't care to banter any longer, however angry he was.

Linda-Su and Lien-Da exchanged bitter glances. "It's my duty as your sister to tell you this: Our half-brother, Kragok, is preparing an army to attack you. His attack will come within the week. And, however distasteful I find the order, we are to offer our services to your side." She indicated a kneeling Ekyt, his head bowed in submission. He hated himself for this. Linda-Su looked down at him. Lien-Da smiled. "So, my sister found herself a hot little servant? Good for you sis! Though I'm not sure what he sees in you..." "I'm betrothed Lien-Da, you would know that if you hadn't betrayed the family." Lien-Da laughed, ignoring the crack. "And just who are you betrothed to little sister?" Lien-Da was fifteen years older than Linda-Su, who was fifteen. "Your son." She spat in hatred.

Ekyt's head snapped up. "Master...He's evil! He'll mistreat you horribly!" Linda-Su nodded. "I know..." Ekyt indicated with his head. "If I may..." "Certainly." Linda-Su said, wondering what he was up to. Ekyt got up to his feet. "If I might dispense with customs, I'd sooner slit my wrists than let that little bastard hurt you. Even if there's nothing between us but my loyalty anymore..." Linda-Su was touched. "I'd rather be marrying you! But customs are customs...If there was only a way around this..."

One of Lien-Da's guards removed his hood. "Sorry sweetie, you're mine! Enjoy having a slave now, because when I get you, you're going to be mine! And we're going to have fun...Well, I will." Linda-Su looked too surprised to defend herself when he slapped her.

Ekyt jumped in front of her immediately. "Touch her again and I'll kill you! I will NOT have you insult my master!" he said warningly. "You've lost you bastard! Give up! She will be my wife! And I hope you'll allow me to watch when you slit your wrists." "You're an asshole! You will NOT touch my master again!" Ekyt snarled. He had somehow gotten customs hand hatred mixed into a volatile concoction. All the anger he had felt was now boiling out.

"Don't make a mistake guardian. If you value your life, back down! I've killed many creatures, one more won't hurt! I'll have killed you and wiped my sword clean before you've even hit the ground!" He held his sword out as proof. Ekyt spun his bo around, knocking the sword down, stepping in and hitting him with an uppercut.

The other guard attack. Ekyt punched him straight out, knocking him down, his head splitting open on the marble floor. Lien-Da tackled Linda-Su and the two wrestled around, Linda-Su started to get the better of the fight.

Ekyt and Mikhail were now fully engaged. Weapons were thrown aside as they exchanged fists, elbows, knees, and forearms. Ekyt wasn't sure why he was fighting. Win or lose, Linda-Su would have to marry him...unless he was dead.

But Ekyt was no killer. He planned on breaking the cocky echidna in half, but at no point did he mean to kill him.

Ekyt spun around the echidna's back and grabbed his head, ramming it onto Lien-Da's desk, then

bringing his knee up for a critical strike. Mikhail made a feeble attempt to punch. Ekyt caught his arm and snapped it with an arm bar. Mikhail made no more attempts to attack, instead sobbing on the ground holding the arm Ekyt had broken.

The fight was over almost as soon as it began. Ekyt and Linda-Su had won. "I hope you're stronger against Kragok sister." She taunted. "I'll see you at the wedding!" she snarled back.

13 - CH XIII: Night of Solitude

Linda-Su and Ekyt rode in silence, listening for the sounds of other horses. There were none after a half hour, so Linda-Su chanced a question. "You know a lot about customs guardian...Who decided I was to be betrothed to Mikhail?" Ekyt gripped the reigns on his horse so hard his knuckles turned white, matching his robes and steed. "It's decided by the Brotherhood." He answered. "Could I...could I appeal their decision?" "Yes, you could. But you'd need substantial evidence." "You saw the whole thing, you're a guardian! They won't question you!" Ekyt slowed to a walk to get along side her horse. "If you're sure you don't want to marry him...You have my support."

"Where are we headed?" Linda-Su asked, for Ekyt had been blazing the path. "To a private spot some friends set up. It's protected by a camouflage spell, I'm told. A friend of mine, Espio (He's a chameleon) had an uncle who could perform such spells. There's a bath, along with food and begging." He said. Linda-Su rubbed her hands together in a comically greedy manner.

They soon reached the spot Ekyt had heard off. It looked like a solid bit of underbrush, but Ekyt walked right through it. Linda-Su followed him and saw a slice of heaven. She immediately wanted to take a bath, but she was concerned about the mixed company. Not that she didn't trust Ekyt, but it still felt wrong. Ekyt sensed this and offered to leave. "I couldn't fight off the Dark Legion by myself, they're looking for us...how about I just put you on your honor not to watch?" Ekyt nodded, immediately turning away. "I need those rocks to get a fire going anyway, I'll be over there. Master." He added the last word as an after-thought. True to his word, he began trying to build a fire, the wind fighting him.

Linda-Su washed up, thinking. **My mind is made up...whatever the punishment, I will NOT call Mikhail my husband...but will Ekyt come with me, since I'll likely be banished? Of course, that's IF the council doesn't agree. They HAVE to agree...they won't doubt the words of an heiress AND a guardian...** "Ekyt...If I'm banished, what happens to you?" His voice came from behind the rocks. "I've been told to serve you until I'm dismissed. I stay with you, if you'd have me." Ekyt responded. "Of course I would! I just"

Just what she was going to say was drowned out, replaced by splashing. Ekyt chanced a glance over the rocks, seeing someone holding Linda-Su's head underwater. With a roar of rage, Ekyt leapt over the rocks. He pulled his robe off and tossed it over Linda-Su, so now he could freely watch her attacked. "Mikhail!" he exclaimed, standing in front of Linda-Su. "Of course guardian! But it seems you have a choice. You can chase me, or you can save her. Take your pick!" Ekyt saw that he had stuffed something in her mouth, something she couldn't get out. "You're a vile bastard!" Ekyt snarled, but headed toward Linda-Su as Mikhail ran for it.

"Don't panic master!" he said, so calmly that she DIDN'T panic. All her private areas were covered with the robe, so she was receptive to his help. "Okay, hold your mouth still. I promise I won't hurt you." He said. He pulled his dagger out. She nodded, breathing through her nose. He put the dagger into her mouth very carefully. He pulled out the object. "Master, shield your eyes!" He threw the object as far as he could. It exploded in a shower of flames.

Linda-Su couldn't believe it. Tying the robes shut, she gaped at him. "What the hell was that? And who attacked me?" "It was a bomb, of sorts, triggered by it being removed. And it was Mikhail that attacked." Ekyt said, disdain dripping into his voice. Linda-Su got up from her sitting position. "You're very brave...and loyal..." She pulled his head down gently, kissing him much as she had done when he had "Come back from the dead." She stroked his cheek tenderly while he seemed skittish to touch her. The kiss ended and she smiled and finished her sentence. "I hope that it's no chore having to take orders from me. I feel that we're equals. But orders are orders, I guess." She smiled, decided to have a little fun with her shy escort. "This robe is a little revealing, it seems, but it will have to do until my clothes are dry." The splashing had caused them to get wet, but they would be dry in a few minutes near the fire Ekyt had built.

She was shivering, despite being near the fire. "May I..." she gestured vaguely. "Of course master..." Ekyt said, not understanding what was going on. She moved over next to him, laying her head against his chest, her arms gripping his. She guessed from how tense Ekyt was that he had no idea what to do. Slowly, shaking, he put an arm around her shoulder. She burrowed her head into his chest, laughing silently as he was blushing horribly.

All too soon, the minutes of...cuddling (**It wasn't cuddling! She was cold, and I was a source of heat!**) were over. Ekyt turned away again as she dressed herself. "I'm afraid your robe got dirty, as long as the night is fair, we should clean it. I don't want you getting sick..." She said in a thinking tone of voice. "I had planned on bathing myself once you were asleep." He said. "You can trust me not to watch! Besides, I worry Mikhail will come back." "It was never a question of trust, master, I just didn't want to put you in an uncomfortable position." Ekyt said, ears reddening. "Go ahead and bathe now, you have my honor that I won't look until you're safely underwater. You're unarmed, that's my worry."

Ekyt pulled his clothes off, dipping himself into the warm pool of water, sighing contentedly. The water was clean, but the bubbles from the small waterfall made it opaque. "Can I look yet?" She said jokingly. "Yes master." He answered, still uncomfortable, not knowing why. **It's not like she hasn't seen my chest before, it's not big deal...she's just your master, who happens to be a woman! Calm down!** Ekyt washed his lower body below the water, then focused on his upper body, which was a mess of cuts and slash marks. "Don't those hurt?" Linda-Su asked. "They sting now. They hurt when they were created." Ekyt answered.

Linda-Su looked up at the moon. "I wish we could stay here forever...it's perfect here." Realizing how that sounded, she changed the subject. "I thought about marriage...I'm too young, I'm not ready." "I feel the same way." Ekyt responded, gritting his teeth as the water his a particularly nasty cut. Linda-Su looked over in concern, and couldn't help smiling at what little of him she could see. His chest muscles weren't the huge, unnatural looking muscles that some get, they were built up, but smaller, more athletic looking. His arms matched that description as well.

Ekyt, after warning Linda-Su, got up and dried off, putting his clothes and robe back on. "How long should we stay here?" Linda-Su asked. "Until morning, then we should find another spot. The Dark Legion knows where we are. But more importantly, you should get a good amount of sleep." Linda-Su nodded. "But I order you to rest yourself." She added. "We'll be without guard then master." He argued. "I'd rather have an awake and alert guard than one who will fall because he is deprived of sleep." She said with a smile. Begrudgingly, he laid down on the extra bedding. He stayed awake, though he could feel the rest making a difference.

Come morning, he would need all the energy he could get...

14 - CH XIV: A Great Pain

Ekyt watched Linda-Su fall asleep. She moved in her sleep, as though troubled. Then again, who wasn't? Ekyt felt like he didn't belong, let alone in a high position like guardian. The constant fighting was taking its toll on his body. Though he did his best to keep it hidden, his shoulders slumped from depression when no-one was watching, and his right elbow and left knee were stiff. All minor injuries, par the course for a guardian. He was amazed that nothing worse had happened.

Linda-Su heard the distant whiney of horses, waking her up from a fitful slumber. She was drenched in a cold sweat from the dream she had. What had it been? She couldn't remember. And that was the least of her problems. She sensed Ekyt kneeling beside her as her eyes struggled to focus in the early morning's dim light. "Master, they have a force of two hundred...not one I can hope to fight off...What do you want to do?" he asked, though he had his own plan. "Do whatever you think is best...is there a hope of running?" Ekyt shook his head. "They have us surrounded. The stone is too shallow to climb..." He looked around, as if disbelieving his own words.

Lien-Da smirked. "Well, well, well. My little sister and her big, bad guardian. We meet again. This time, on MY terms." She said, an unpleasant smile crossing her face. She made a move toward Linda-Su, which earned a scathing look from Ekyt. "My, my, you have your little puppy trained well!" "Stick your fingers near the puppy's mouth and see what happens." Ekyt snarled, having every intention now of fighting until he was gunned down. "Sit boy, sit! Now, sister, as your little pet told you, you're surrounded...what WILL you do?" Linda-Su looked over at Ekyt. Ekyt looked around, hatred etched on his face.

Slowly, not making eye contact, Ekyt dropped to one knee. He looked up one more time, then let his head fall, acknowledging that he was bested. "Secure him first. I expect resistance from him." "Don't hurt her." Ekyt said, quietly but clearly. "That will depend directly on you...guardian." Lien-Da sneered.

Ekyt was treated as a high-security prisoner. Four sets of shackles across his ankles and wrists, arms bound to his sides by chain, even a mask over his face to protect against biting. "I think that will hold him. If he doesn't cooperate, cut him. Nowhere vital, and just enough to get our point across. Understood?" A chorus of "Understood!" greeted Lien-Da's ears.

"You see sister, after your rude departure, Mikhail and I discussed what should be done. He doesn't want this wife killed (Linda-Su's fur bristles slightly at the words), but he hates your servant. And as much as he would like to have a human slave, he'd rather have him killed. Save the trouble later. So you're going to watch, and see what my "doctors" can do, and what information he holds..."

Ekyt was chained on a table, his shirt stuffed in his mouth. They immediately whipped the helpless guardian, who didn't struggle or attempt to make a sound. "Why don't we start by you telling us where the island's master emerald is?" Ekyt just stared straight ahead, eyes glazed over. Unimpressed, a fist connected with his face. "I asked you a question guardian. How about an answer, that's certainly the polite thing. Guardian's are always polite, right? Why tarnish that delicate bit of information. Now: WHERE is the Island's last chaos emerald." Apparently not feeling like bantering, Ekyt said "Have you

checked up your @\$\$? That's where your head is." A flurry of punches hit him. One Dark Legionnaire drew a knife and made a slow, painful cut down the right side of Ekyt's face. He started at the forehead, traced around the eye, and down the cheek. It was agonizing for Ekyt, but he said nothing at all.

Linda-Su was standing next to Lien-Da, trying desperately to think of a way out of this. "Little Linda...my my my. It seems like your puppy isn't willing to talk. I do hope they don't kill him...Mikhail wants that to be his wedding present." She smiled again, stretching the whip in her hand. Linda-Su looked for something, anything, that could help them. She smiled nastily as she found what she was looking for.

Why don't I tell them? Why do I show loyalty when I won't receive any in return? And with Linda-Su marrying Mikhail...why do I care?... Because you're going to stop it, whatever the cost. You know what that girl means to you, even if love only goes one was in this case... A spark ignited in Ekyt's eyes. Lien-Da came over with her whip. "Guardian." "dog." Ekyt acknowledged. "What? I should have you killed!" "Not likely. You hold a soft spot for me...and your son's wish. He'll be the one to TRY to kill me. But I've bested better than him. So, if I might be so bold...Get bent!" Ekyt smiled. They had made the mistake of pulling his gag out. Ekyt bit down on Lien-Da's hand, breaking two fingers.

Linda-Su ran into the room, and swung something over her head. It hit three soldiers, knocking them out. "Sister...I've waited a long time for a REAL fight against you...now we will see who the better fighter is!"

"Master! Her left hand is injured, two broken fingers!" Ekyt called from the table. Linda-Su and Lien-Da grappled, fighting over whatever it was Linda-Su had in her hands. Ekyt realized it was the pocket watch he had in his old robes...the one's she was wearing! It was a heavy watch, encrusted with bits of diamond and chaos emerald, made chiefly of gold. He watched as it clattered toward him, pried loose from Linda-Su's hand during the struggle.. The chain was in reach. Ekyt reached for it, finally succeeding in getting it. He sawed at the ropes holding him down, freeing himself quickly. He was filled with an energy he hadn't felt in a long time.

Three guards got up, going after Ekyt. Bam! Bam! BAM! Three guards went down. Three straight right hands. Ekyt picked up one by his robe and threw him onto the table. He picked up the knife that had cut him. He hit the guard with the butt end, knocking him out. Another jumped him from behind, hanging on Ekyt's back. Ekyt backed into the wall, then jumped, kicking his legs out from under him, squashing his attacker. The last guard punched at Ekyt, who dodged aside and grabbed the echidna around the neck while sitting on his arm. He heard the tell-tale Snap-CRACK of muscles snapping and bones breaking.

Linda-Su grabbed her sister around the neck, punching her with her free hand. She kicked her leg up, cracking Lien-Da under the chin. She spun around with an elbow-backfist combo, before kicking again. Lien-Da ran for it. Not her lucky day. She ran into Ekyt. "Surprise" he said, tilting his head slightly and grinning. He gave her a shove back toward Linda-Su, whose leg was flying toward her sister's head. It made contact with a dull THUD. Linda-Su jumped on her sister and punched again and again, finally stopping when she was covered in blood that wasn't hers up to her elbows. "dog." She said under her breath.

"Master, if you hang on to me, I can get us out of here quickly." She did, climbing up into his arms. "Hold on tight." He admonished. He took off at a blinding speed, powered by the ring. "Watch out for that pit!" Linda-Su called. Ekyt gulped, hoping that a chaos emerald was in range, and that all Knuckles'

training took.

Linda-Su watched in amazement as Ekyt closed his eyes, concentrating while he ran, the pit approaching impossibly fast. She was even more amazed when he floated over it, hitting the other side running.

Once they were out of the complex and out of range, Ekyt gently put Linda-Su down. He knelt down immediately. "Are you injured?" He asked. "No, not at all." She replied. "Thank you for the save master." Ekyt said, bowing. "I should be thanking you. You did the saving at the end."

They rested only when they were near the Chaos Chamber. A stone basin of water was in there, along with the brilliantly glowing emerald. Linda-Su couldn't believe Ekyt. Two black eyes, a cut that ran all the way down his face, and an innumerable amount of whip marks. He said nothing of it, instead cleaning himself up and then kneeling by her side again. "It would be best to stay here until we can contact the Brotherhood." Ekyt said, deep in thought. "How do we contact them?" she asked. **Will he ask them about my wedding? If they force me to marry Mikhail, I'll...I'll...** She couldn't think of what she would do, so she let the thought die and instead watched him think of his answer.

"Archimedes can summon them." He said finally. He looked up at her. "If it's still to your favor, the subject of your wedding can come up." Linda-Su smiled and knelt down too. She kissed the top of his head. "I was wondering that myself. I don't want to marry him. Tell them they'll have MY funeral to deal with if they force me." She smiled at that for some reason. "I want to pick my own husband. Marrying when there's no love involved seems wrong." "It IS wrong. Ruining someone's life for a ridiculous old custom is absurd." Ekyt voiced his opinion in such a way that Linda-Su instantly agreed with him.

After making sure there was enough food, Ekyt went near the emerald to sit. He slid down it, closing his eyes in relief as though he was finally comfortable. It was strange that a big rock with such great and horrible power could bring comfort. Power didn't guarantee comfort, comfort didn't guarantee power likewise. It was a mixture of the two that was the ideal solution.

Tonight they rested, tomorrow they challenged an age-old law that governed the entire society, and prepared to defy their orders of assisting the Dark Legion.

15 - CH XV: The Impossible Decision

Ekyt sat by the master emerald while Linda-Su explored the chamber. She pointed to six marks on the floor. "Ekyt, what happened here?" she asked. Ekyt didn't need to look to see what she meant. "When Dmitri (Evil scientist echidna) tried to absorb the power of the twelve chaos emeralds that were used to hold Angel Island up, with the chaos syphon (A machine that sucks the energy out of the chaos emeralds) he created with his brother, Edmund (A great scientist and the one who created the position of "Guardian"), he miscalculated how much power the syphon could hold. It was supposed to lower Angel Island back to it's roots on Mobius, but instead it overloaded. It had reached it's limit in power..."

(Flashback)

Edmund: Dmitri! In the name of reason!

Dmitri: Reason? Reason has HAD it's day, brother! And besides...

(Everything starts to shake and collapse)

Dmitri: What has started...Cannot be undone!

???: It is true...Brother, you cannot hope to stop me!

Edmund: Dmitri? Stop this madness!

???: The power of eleven shattered chaos emeralds howl within me! I am immortal!

Edmund: Dmitri, we can help!

???: Dmitri has died, brother. He is replaced by a new being, infinitely powerful...so speaks ENERJAK!

(End Flashback)

Ekyt continued. "The burn marks are from eleven of the emeralds exploding, their power drained." "And what happened to Enerjak? Did he die?" Ekyt looked up at this, a worried expression creasing his face. "No...He started the Dark Legion. They all worship him and his views that technology is superior... He's still alive, he was banished to the Zone of Silence by one of the guardians, Tobor" Ekyt ended his story, looking over at Linda-Su, who was deep in thought. "I feel disgusting, being related to such a horrible being!" Ekyt didn't know what to say, he had long disowned most of his own relations.

Linda-Su watched Ekyt work. **He's a nice guy...Perhaps I can have some fun with him...** "Guardian, you do not mind calling me "master?" She asked innocently. "No...master." The question seemed out of place. "Are you certain it doesn't give you a thrill?" Ekyt raised an eyebrow. "Fairly certain master." "It's rather a turn-on, isn't it?" Linda-Su was cracking up. She didn't mean any of this, but Ekyt's face was so red, and he was tripping over his own words as though unfamiliar with speaking. "Perhaps your mind isn't on your work guardian...or is too much so." **This is hilarious!** "Master, if you'll pardon the query, what brought this up?" Linda-Su finally had to spill the beans. "I was simply teasing you Ekyt. You never relax." It was part question, part observation. "No, I never have. I simply hope to do my job well master." She rolled her eyes. "I can summon Archimedes whenever you are prepared." Ekyt told her. "I'm ready. Thank you again for doing this." "It's my honor, master. I don't wish to see you hurt. I could hardly have earned my title without resisting this wedding!" he replied. "I promise, your loyalty will not go unnoticed, and not un rewarded. Perhaps I could give you my sister as a wife." Linda-Su said the

last part with a laugh.

"Archimedes!" Ekyt whispered. Holding out his hand for the fire ant to appear in. BAMPF! He did. "What's up kid?" "Could you summon the Brotherhood? It's a matter of great importance." Ekyt said. "Sure thing kid. Expect them in two minutes." "Thank you Archimedes."

Locke and Athair appeared. "You summoned us guardian? You have impeccable timing, as we need to speak with your master." Locke said. Ekyt, who was bowing, led them to an area set up for sitting. Ekyt knelt, as was the custom.

"Let us hear your report, then we will exchanged problems." Athair declared. "Linda-Su, what have you for us?" "The Dark Legion was not receptive to our help. We were attacked three times, one an attempt to kill me, one a session to torture Ekyt. He divulged nothing, though he paid a heavy price." She pointed at his face, the knife mark apparent. "I see. If they do not wish out help, then we must stay out of it. We have warned them, that is all we can do. Now, onto the problems!" "Ours first, if you don't mind." Locke stated. "Please, continue Locke."

"Very well. Since Spectre's defection (They have since heard the story from the Final Council), and Poile-La's death, we are in need of more support in Haven. A guardian willing to pull double duty. For that, we have chosen my son Knuckles." Locke chanced a glance at Ekyt, who was kneeling and listening politely. Locke could read the human well. **He did not like that...He had hoped for that position...He doesn't understand all of it...**

Also, we need another new member...Linda-Su, we'd like that to be you." Linda-Su was stunned by the offer. "Of course...but, please...what happens to him?" she asked, pointing at Ekyt. "Ekyt would become the acting guardian, and lose his training status, since Knuckles would have to be in Haven a lot of the time." **Interesting...loyalty to a guardian...a human one at that? The path fate takes is like the forked tongue of the snake...each my be equally poisonous...What path will she take?** Locke thought.

Linda-Su had a question. "Before I answer, I'd like to present my problem, as the two are intertwined." "Proceed." Athair said with a nod. "I would be forced to marry Mikhail...And he's proven himself to be vile. Evil. Ekyt will vouch for me." Ekyt nodded. "He tried to kill her with a bomb and by drowning." He said simply. "Your marriage will be canceled should you join the council. If not, you must marry him."

Linda-Su looked over at Ekyt. He nodded, giving her a small smile that reassured her. "I accept." Linda-Su said. "Excellent. Consider your wedding canceled." Everyone's gaze turned to Ekyt, who was kneeling on the floor, listening, but not giving anything away. "Guardian, you are dismissed from your current mission." Ekyt bowed his head, conveying that he understood.

Linda-Su was set to follow the Brotherhood. "I guess...that's it then." She said. "Certainly not! We'll see each other again ma...Linda-Su." An uncomfortable silence followed those words. "Locke, Athair, if I may have a few minutes with the guardian..." "Of course Linda-Su." Locke said, understanding.

As soon as they were gone, Linda-Su turned to Ekyt. "I...I don't know what to say." She said. "The wedding was stopped. That's what matters." "What about you?" she asked, curious and saddened at the same time. "Guardians are mysterious creatures by nature...we lead a lonely life by choice, and are

the sworn enemy of many a race. And myself worst of all...I don't belong here Linda-Su. A human like me was never supposed to see this lush, green paradise. I was never meant to succeed, I guess." He said with a rueful smile. "You will succeed! This isn't the end of the world!" "No, it's not. My world collapsed long ago." He answered mysteriously. "Now what happens?" "I guard the emerald. Or, I would, if I wasn't about to tell them I resign."

"What?" Linda-Su squawked. "They rushed me to mastery. A title I don't deserve. Other things...everything points to failure." She noticed his stoicism failing him. "Just one time...I wish things could have worked out perfectly."

"Locke, if I may have a word?" Ekyt asked, bowing. "Of course." "Locke, I'm here to tell you of my resignation." Locke had a difficult time hiding his surprise. "What brought this on?" "I didn't earn my mastery level, and I can't be sure I've earned any of this." Ekyt replied. "And you can't serve your master anymore." Locke said, hands inside his sleeves. "I know there's no point in lying to you Locke...I was in love with the girl...I still am. I don't want to hold her back, and I don't want a life I didn't earn!" Locke nodded. "I refuse to accept your resignation. You will be guarding the emerald until my son relieves you." Locke's voice left no room for argument. A resigned Ekyt bowed, saying nothing. As he walked away, Locke said to himself "May Steppenwolf guide you lad..." The human had to figure it out on his own...

"They refused to accept my resignation. I'm not a guardian, I'm a prisoner." Ekyt spat. "Damnit!" He broke a table by stomping on it. "Please, calm down!" Linda-Su asked. She was worried that he wouldn't follow her orders; but it was needless worry. "I apologize." Ekyt said with a small bow. Linda-Su hesitated, then hugged him. "Thank you. For everything. For protection, for loyalty..." She stroked his cheek, looking into his eyes. "...And for being a true friend. I hope you can forgive me for joining the council...and I hope you figure out your life."

"You're already forgiven for joining the council. As for figuring out my life...I'll never forgive myself into being duped into taking a title that was never meant for me." he shook his head in bitterness. Linda's hand stayed on his cheek, the other wrapped around his slim waist. He had managed to do the same. "I really don't want to not have you by my side..." She was now pressed as tight to him as she could be. "I enjoyed serving you...as much as one can enjoy serving." He said with a hollow smile. Next their mouths met for one last kiss before they would have to go their separate ways...

"Linda-Su...wait...do you have the letters from your mother?!" Ekyt suddenly exclaimed. "Yes, I have yours and mine, why?" "Because I think I've just understood something..."

16 - CH XVI: A Mistaken Identity

"Locke! This is a test!" Ekyt shouted. The older echidna turned slowly. "It is not your place to determine that guardian." "If it is coming in a direct violation of my current orders, it is. My last standing orders were from Athair and Poile-La. I am to serve Linda-Su until the end of the war. My loyalty is to lie with her, not with the Brotherhood." Locke looked angry, but Ekyt didn't back down. He stared back, kneeling next to his master's feet.

His jaw was decorated lightly with stubble from days on the road. Linda-Su thought that it was attractive on him, though she would prefer him to be smooth-shaven. Her thoughts returned to the present. A stare-down between two guardians was a rarity, and it never ended well. She prayed that it would be an exception.

Locke finally smiled. "Very astute guardian. Indeed, this WAS a test, one that you passed. You have just proven to me that you know when to stand up and fight for what is right. You are not dismissed from Linda-Su...unless that is to her liking." Locke and Ekyt bowed to each other, with Linda-Su in total shock. "Linda-Su will be your...master, of sorts...you are to guard the chaos emerald. Congratulations."

"You went against the council!" she exclaimed. Ekyt was still kneeling next to her. "There are worse fates than guarding and serving you." Ekyt said, managing a small smile. "You seemed...disappointed...that you weren't the one chosen for the position in Haven." Ekyt's small smile disappeared. "Oh...that...it was foolish of me...I thought that if I served in Haven, I might somehow earn my mastery level. And..." He hesitated, until she motioned for him to continue, "I...have never been the elite...Just for one time, I would like to feel as though I'm good enough." Linda-Su had never seen her guardian so emotional. He spoke again, this time with anger behind his words.

"I didn't earn my mastery...I'm not sure I earned being a guardian...I'm just a body that knows loyalty...nothing more to them...I sacrificed so much to get to where I am...and I'm still...unchanged." He got up, pulling his outer robe off. "The ceremony will be tomorrow...may I attend master?" he asked her. "Of course! It's your ceremony!"

The ceremony was set to take place. Ekyt was to wear his normal clothes to the ceremony.

But there was a problem.

As Locke began the ceremony, the chaos emerald turned black. "It will not accept a human as its sole guardian...Ekyt, there is a choice you must make...you must either embrace a transformation and become an echidna in order to prove your loyalty to the emerald, or you will be dismissed."

Ekyt was floored. He was beyond anger or grief. "I will accept the transformation, provided it can be reversed, should I find the change unsatisfying." Ekyt said clearly. "Agreed. The transformation will take place once you have removed your clothing."

Ekyt wasn't about to change in mixed company, so Linda-Su left.

Ekyt laid on the emerald, feeling its strange warmth on his bare back. "Guardian, you must only lay still, the rest will be performed by our actions." Laying there naked on a big rock was uncomfortable, but Ekyt had worse. The nudity really bothered him.

As he lay still, Locke took some red paint and wrote symbols on Ekyt's forehead and chest. Then, with black ashes from Mount Fate, he marked under Ekyt's eye with it. "The process is gradual guardian. Do not open your eyes." Locke's voice told him. "Understood."

Linda-Su paced outside. **The guardian has certainly become a part of my life...I'm unsure how I feel about him...a human and an echidna...His loyalty is one of his greatest attributes, one prized among the guardians...and myself.** The last thought made her laugh. Linda-SU calmed down suddenly. No matter HOW she felt about him, she knew one thing: The young man had been through worse, and he would surely be fine this time.

"Guardian, you may open your eyes now." Ekyt opened his eyes and sat up, not knowing what to expect. He saw that he was an echidna. He appeared to be a red color (most echidna males are red on Angel Island), and had the curiosity of having brown tips on the ends of his dreadlocks, in addition to a black stripe on each dreadlock. He looked at his hands. Five fingers, no spikes. He looked at the rest of his body in amazement. "Now the ceremony can be completed."

The ceremony itself was hazy for Ekyt. He was still shocked he was an echidna, and, even though he now had the fur of an echidna, he still felt naked. But the white guardian's crest on his chest stood out more, and for once he felt he had earned it. Ekyt was presented with black gloves. They had spikes on them, just like Knuckles'. They handed him a strange pair of long "Pants," like a cross between a tight hakama and a kilt. It was black in color, decorated with intertwining red and green slashes.

"I hope he's okay..." Linda-Su muttered to herself. The door opened, and an echidna that Linda-Su had never seen before came out. The echidna immediately knelt before Linda-Su. That's when she realized that Ekyt had returned. She tried hard not to stare. **I believe I've just fallen in love...no, it's wrong! I will NOT love based solely on looks!** She could sense that her guardian wasn't entirely comfortable with his new body.

"Before you begin guarding...it is time Linda-Su met her mother." Locke declared. "So, you are to escort her to her Mari-Su's abode. It is on the edge of the Mopian Jungle." Ekyt bowed to convey that he understood. His tail whacked him in the back of the leg.

"Whenever you are ready master, we can depart. I am told I can glide, which will save us time on our trip." He said this carefree, but Linda-Su sensed there was emotion behind his voice. She chose not to bring it up, as she already guessed what it meant.

The young man dislikes some qualities of his species...But that does not mean that he wishes to change himself. He wants to change others...