

The Soleanna Chronicles

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The Story:

A Mini-Series for my fan char, Ekyt. I'll continue this if people like it.

The Game:

This is based on the game, Sonic the Hedgehog (2006), released for the Xbox360 and Playstaion 3.

Provided by Fanart Central.

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1 - Welcome to Soleanna

The Soleanna Chronicles.

Note: This takes place before Sonic the Hedgehog (2006) (Out now for Xbox 360 and Playstation 3!) I guess you could call this my game adaptation, so this is officially sanctioned by Next Guardian (Hoo-Rah!). This is meant as a solo series for my main char, Ekyt. Hope you like it!

“Princess Elise? Princess?” Elise felt a gentle hand shaking her. Her maid, Marietta, was shaking her awake. Another night at her desk. “Oh, thank you. What time is it?” “It’s ten o’clock Princess. I thought you would like to take some time before the speech to have some food.” Elise smiled kindly. “That’s a good idea. Thank you.”

The nation had been rocked by a series of kidnappings. The bodies had been found days later. Elise, as acting ruler, felt it her duty to help her people through this hard time.

Quinn Ramei smirked and sipped at his decarte’, an alcoholic drink native to Soleana. “Found the bodies, have they? It’s a safe bet they’ll never find me...but it’s time for me to have my moment in the sun. Princess Elise is going to sign the country over to me!” “Meow?” Quinn’s cat, Dexter, meowed at the prospect of food. He stroked the black and white cat with his fingertips while it purred contently.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened until an hour before Elise’s speech. A stranger walked into town from the forest, leaning on a staff. Solenanna’s people always took strangers in. But this one was different...he was somewhat tall, and pale, with dark brown hair, and hazel eyes that darted around, searching for a threat. And that was his face! He wore a long, black coat, with pants that were slightly darker, and a white shirt that seemed to fit perfectly. Not at all the traditional dress. No one made a move. Finally, a shopkeeper welcomed him. “Welcome to Soleanna, traveler!” A smile crossed the stranger’s lips. “Thank you. I’m afraid I don’t know the currency here...” The stranger said in a cheerful, but somewhat raspy voice. “But here. For that pair of shoes. Mine are worn out...” The man...boy...however old he was, handed the shopkeeper some strange green paper, which obviously had value, wherever he had come from. “Thank you. Here you are, and welcome to Soleanna!” The stranger thanked him again and swapped shoes. These, he knew, had to be special. The shoe makers in Soleanna were legendary.

Elise stepped out onto the balcony, smiling and waving at her people. They cheered, and a few younger boys, who obviously had a crush on the beautiful princess, blushed and cheered louder than everyone. “Someday, we’re going to grow up and be guards for the Princess!” One boy in a hat said. “Yeah! Let’s call ourselves the Soleanna boys!” The six boys agreed on that, and listened intently to the speech.

The stranger looked at the crowd. He guessed that the girl talking was someone important. **Looks too young to be a leader...** He listened anyway, because she had a gift for speaking. At the end, even he felt reassured that this country was going to be fine, despite the deaths.

“...I know we have hit a rough patch as a nation, but as a nation, we can overcome it! Thank you!” Elise

smiled once more, and blew a kiss at her admirers. Quinn Ramie ghosted up behind her. "HEY! WHAT ARE...!!!" she yelled out as they struggled. She brought her foot down onto his foot, and kicked backward, hitting him in the shin. Quinn let go, as Elise ran for it.

The town pushed toward the castle. Something was happening to their beloved Princess! The stranger raised a curious eyebrow, and then...took off! Those shoes had gas, if you knew what to use for fuel. He darted around to the main entrance of the palace (The balcony was on the back, facing the town square), guessing by where Elise's latest cry for help came from, that she would be rushing out these doors any second...

Elise ran down the stairway and bolted out the doors. She hit someone. "I'm so sorry!" She gasped in surprise. The stranger looked nonplussed. "Are you okay?" He asked, as he helped her up. "Someone is trying to kidnap me, or kill me!" The stranger nodded. "I can help you." "He's dangerous!" she exclaimed. "That's okay. I'm new here, but I'm guessing that you're the ruler. Your safety takes priority." The stranger heard footsteps. "Stay behind me!" He cautioned her. She nodded and stepped backward, not taking her eyes off the doors.

Quinn burst through the doors and ran right into someone. "Out of my way! I must see the Princess!" The stranger grabbed him. "No you don't. I'm new around here, but I can already tell you're the town villain. Congratulations on being my first enemy." Quinn punched the stranger in the stomach. The stranger retaliated with swift right hand, before pointing his walking stick at Quinn. "GUARDS!" Elise yelled. Quinn took off. The guards grabbed the stranger in the black coat. "NOT HIM! THAT ONE!" She pointed at Quinn's back. The soldiers weren't going to catch them. "You! Your badge is gold! Give me that, I can catch him!" Ekyt yanked the badge off and stuck it into the bottom of his shoe. He took off incredibly fast, catching Quinn. "Here." He threw the kidnapper at the guard's feet. He turned sharply and started to walk off.

Princess Elise was stunned. "Please, catch him!" she asked one of the guards. "Excuse me!" she called out. The stranger turned around. An arm seized him roughly around the neck. "Come quietly. The princess wants to see you." The stranger ducked down without warning, flipping the guard over using his arm for leverage. "I can walk."

More guards rushed at the stranger. "Don't attack him!" Elise yelled. The stranger walked quietly over to her, as if daring one of her guards to attack. "I-Th-thank you." Elise said, with a small bow. "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there." The stranger was hit with the barrel of a rifle between the shoulder blades. "It's customary to kneel!" the guard barked. The stranger seized the gun and threw it into the water nearby. "Try asking nicely, and maybe your toys won't wind up broken." The man in the black coat said threateningly. Elise smiled at it; it was funny some how. "Do you have a name? Oh! Wait, where are my manners?! Please, come inside." Elise gestured to the castle.

2 - One Strange Day...

Elise ordered the servants to bring drinks. She asked nicely, actually, more than gave orders. Something that impressed her guest, though he didn't show it.

Elise and the servants led the way up a marble staircase, covered in a red carpet. The place was huge, cathedral-sized ceilings. Paintings were everywhere. The stranger was definitely out of place.

Elise finally sat down at a table and gestured for him to do that same. "So, do you have a name?" Elise asked gently. The stranger smiled. "I'm Ekyt." "I'm Elise. I'm the acting ruler of Soleanna, even though I'm only a Princess." She said with a smile, sipping at a drink in a cup with a gold rim. "Oh, I'm sorry! I'm not trying to brag!" Ekyt, as she now knew him, smiled understandingly. "I understand, it's alright." Elise was surprised that someone who was so young...younger than her...could switch personalities, but in a good way. "If you don't mind my asking...how old are you? 14? 15?" Ekyt answered "18. No one believes me, but I'm 18." Elise cocked her head. "Really? I believe it, talking to you. You look younger, I must admit....anyway, I've heard that you're a traveler. Have you traveled far?" "I'm not really a traveler. I knew where I was going. Hoping I could do some good...get away from my world for a while..." Elise's smile faded. "What happened?"

"I'm something of an outcast. Where I come from, it's not "cool" to be the good guy anymore. Chivalry is dead. I never cared to be accepted by a society like that. I read a lot about history. And I read about Soleanna. I decided to come here." "And it's a good thing you did! That man would have killed me...or worse..." Elise said, unconsciously fingering her pendant. "Worse than death?" Ekyt asked, in a calm voice. "Yes. You seem, before my father dies, he concealed in me the ability to unlock a great...but terrible...power, known as the Flames of Disaster. They could wipe out nations. But we're peaceful." "Inside you? How do you...I mean...I'm sorry, that's just being nosy." Ekyt backed off. "No, I've needed to tell someone. If I cry, then the Flames can be unleashed. Things have been hard, and keeping my emotions in check is even harder. I'm only fifteen, and I'm alone..." "You're very strong then. You're leading a nation with that on your shoulders. You're a very good speaker. I just got here, and I was ready to do anything to help this country." Ekyt told her, truthfully. "Really? That's amazing! You know...I think you're the only one near my age here...my generation was hit hard by the Flames of Disaster when they were first unleashed...It's great to have someone to talk to that understands!"

Ekyt left the castle, almost as much a mystery to Elise as though he had never talked to her. "I don't understand..." Elise commented to herself. "It's like he told me what I wanted to hear without actually telling me anything...But he was so nice!" She sighed and looked out the window. She thought she spotted him in the distance. "Miss Elise?" Marietta stunned her. "Oh, I'm sorry Marietta. I was just..." "He is a handsome boy Miss Elise." Marietta said with a smile. "Oh, really!" Elise giggled all the same. For the first time in a long time, she felt like a teenager instead of a ruler.

Ekyt leaned back against a wall. "Better find some permanent digs around here...Was she putting the moves on me? That's nice and all...but I doubt I'm a good match." He had too many horrible experiences with humans to even consider a relationship.

Six boys confronted Ekyt. "We're the Soleanna boys! Someday we're going to protect the Princess." One said in a snotty voice. "Congratulations." Ekyt said, trying to get some emotion up. **Mouth little...no, no, that's in the past, no need to get all defensive. He's a kid.** "And we don't think you can handle the job. I'll make a deal with you: If you can best us in our best sports, we'll back off your case." Ekyt narrowed his eyes. "Sure. If it'll make you feel better. I know you're a little concerned I'm moving in on your turf, but I just helped out because it was the right thing." "YOU KISSED HER DIDN'T YOU!" a blond boy with a sideways hat yelled. "No...why is that on your mind? YOU want to kiss the Princess, don't you?" Ekyt returned with a grin. "Um, guys, let's leave him alone."

Ekyt walked around the city, stopping suddenly to take note of something, then walking again. A few people walked up to him, thanking him for saving their Princess. One old woman, with gray hair in a tight bun on her head actually talked with him. "The Princess, she fancies you boy." She said, with a toothless smile. "You have better sources than I do." Ekyt returned courteously. "It's all in the cards boy. Long has she waited for a male to court her." Ekyt laughed good naturedly. "She could do better than me." The old woman smiled again. "She has room for another in her heart...blue, very fast...yes, not human. Make time quickly boy, for soon it will be too late." Ekyt stopped to look at her. "The cards say that she 'fancies me?' The cards must be wrong. No human has cared for me, family aside. A Princess?" "Don't doubt the cards boy! It's all here! Hero, yes, you will be a hero, your ambition. A footnote in history...time will tell...Blue, speed, yes, yes... very soon...yes." "Well, thank you. Right now, I've got to go." Ekyt bowed courteously.

"Miss Elise?" The new maid, Bridgette, walked in carefully. "What's the matter Bridgette?" The new maid was twelve years old, and very shy. Her family had been among those killed. "I-I tried to get the records of those I-inside the city. But the one you said...he d-doesn't...isn't a citizen." "Thank you anyway Bridgette." Elise said quietly. "Not a citizen? Then how did he...get past the guards?"

Ekyt found a new home underneath Soleanna. It was a never-used sewer system. Soleanna's people had found a different way to deal with waste, so this was perfect. The only person who knew where he lived was the shopkeeper who sold Ekyt his shoes. After he had helped Elise, the old man had taken a liking to him.

Elise paused as she went to light the torch. It would celebrate the Soleanna new year. "Miss Elise?" She looked up and shook her head. "Sorry, I'm fine." She held the torch to the center of a pedestal. It went ablaze, as the crowd cheered. A hand was on Elise's shoulder. "Congratulation, my Princess." It was that stranger with the coat...Ekyt. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you." Elise told him fondly. Ekyt managed a smile and a wave at the people, who seemed happy to see him and Elise. "Miss Elise? Miss Elise!"

Elise was shook awake by her maid. "I'm sorry. I just had the strangest dream..."

Ekyt sat up, nearly hitting his head on the grate. "What? Something is really wrong here..." Ekyt had a dream that he standing next to the Princess...Elise, that was it. She lit a torch, and people cheered. "That old lady's fortune telling must have gotten to me." He muttered.

"Oh, Madam Primrose! Please, come in! What's my fortune this week?" Elise asked excitedly. Madam Primrose was always right. "New boy, yes...Handsome, young...three years...You met him...yesterday!" Elise nodded tentatively. "Hmm...heroic...yes, yes...sturdy...loyal..." Elise grinned broadly, liking where this

was going. "Good ruler, yes...but not the one, no...he cares, yes...blue...animal, very fast animal, fifteen years old...yes, perfect match. Human boy...hmm...pain...pain...girl too." Madam Primrose stopped. "You will get closer to him, but your real love is a blue, fast animal. The boy, he is destined for pain, heroism, but pain. He too will meet another...but he cares for you, your majesty...in what way, I cannot tell..." Elise gulped. "Thank you. I need to walk, clear my head."

Ekyt stretched and yanked his coat straight. He climbed out from under a bridge. It was another beautiful day (Didn't it ever rain here?). He was trying to figure out that dream. Suddenly, someone bumped into him. "Oh, I'm sorry, I just...it's you!" Ekyt was staring at Elise. "Good Morning Princess." She grabbed his arm. "Please, come with me. We have to talk."

3 - The Game Begins...

“The fortune teller? I met her...your fortune sounds exactly like mine.” “Yes, it does...please, there is something you aren’t telling me...I need to know...why are you here?” Elise asked Ekyt. Ekyt sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I mentioned that I’m an outcast in my world. I could never be a hero there. I came here to clear my head. It just happened that whackbag attacked you that same day.” Elise nodded. Ekyt had admitted to himself that she was beautiful. No one would say otherwise. She seemed to have a fascination with him. “Ekyt...What pain is she talking about? I...don’t want to see any of my subjects in pain.” She said hastily. “The fortune told all. I have a high tolerance for pain. It probably means that I’m going to do something risky to be the good guy.” Ekyt admitted. “It involves me...I know it does...and our fortunes...they’re exactly alike...that’s not coincidence. It said that we...like each other.” Ekyt nodded. Elise hugged him suddenly. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to see you in pain, especially if it means that you and I won’t be...” Elise restrained herself. “I’m sorry. It’s all this stress...” Ekyt nodded. “Elise...I don’t know what to think. Except for...you could do better than me...” Elise couldn’t believe he had just said that.

“That doesn’t mean that I’m not in love with you.” Ekyt gave her a shy smile, and blushed heavily. He had never had to say that before. Elise gave him a strange look, before breaking into one of her tell-tale smiles. “If it’s okay...if only once...before whatever this is happens...” Ekyt wasn’t sure where she was coming from. She leaned toward him. **Huh? I can’t be reading this right...What girl could want me? And did I really say I was in love with her? And what is going to cause me pain?** Elise leaned forward and kissed him. Eventually, word reached his shock-numbed brain and he managed to kiss back. She wrapped her arms around him amazed at how thin he was. He managed to make his arms work and hug her back. It was such a nice change, having someone want him...no matter how cool the movies made being a loner seem...that all seemed to vanish as their lips met.

The kiss lasted longer than either one expected. There was a good reason for that: As the kiss ended, Elise seemed a little light-headed. Ekyt gently took hold of her gloved hand and led her to a bench. “Are you alright?” he asked her. “Yes...I’m sorry...that...was...my first kiss...” “Mine too.” Ekyt admitted. Elise suddenly became very interested in the grass. “Tomorrow is...the ceremony...the Soleanna New Years day...C-Could you come with me?” “I’d be honored Princess.” It had gotten dark. “Would you mind escorting me home?” Elise asked shyly. “No problem.” “So, where do you live?” Ekyt laughed. “I’m sorry...it’s just really different...look below you.” Elise looked down to see a sewer grate. “You poor thing! I can’t believe that!” “I chose it Princess. I’ve always had to be secretive and alone...so I naturally picked the one place no one would go...”

THE NEXT DAY:

“Miss Elise?” She looked up and shook her head. “Sorry, I’m fine.” She held the torch to the center of a pedestal. It went ablaze, as the crowd cheered. A hand was on Elise’s shoulder. “Congratulation, my Princess.” Ekyt said, smiling at her. One of the “Soleanna boys” gave him a look. Ekyt shrugged. Elise smiled to the crowd.

All of a sudden, robots appeared on all sides. People screamed and ran, some stood frozen to the spot,

staring. A huge air ship descended. "Greeting Princess...My name is Doctor Eggman. You have something I need..." Ekyt's staff swung out, cracking robots aside. He stepped in front of Elise. "A Doctor? You? Of what? Do you research diets? You need one fat boy. Leave the Princess alone. She has nothing you need." Eggman tilted his head toward Ekyt. CRACK! "Ugh!" Ekyt fell to the ground, his shoulder bleeding heavily. A bullet was lodged in his collarbone. Elise knelt next to him and pulled it out. "You evil monster!"

WHOOSH!

A blue wind raced through, destroying the robots. "No! It's that blasted hedgehog again!" Sonic the Hedgehog ran up. He scooped up Elise. "We've gotta get out of here!" "Wait, what about him?" Elise pointed. **Thanks for everything Ekyt. Please take care of yourself. I'll never forget you.** She knew that this was the pain and the end of her first love. It might sound cruel, but she wasn't sad. At least she had time to admit how she felt. Somehow, the blue hedgehog holding her was THE one... "Linda can take care of him. I hope he's alright..."

Linda, a pretty deep-pink echidna saw the human struggling to his knees using his staff. "Hold on." Ekyt looked over at her. His heart skipped a beat. **So this is what the fortune teller meant...Elise met that hedgehog...and now I'm meeting this girl...she was right. Best of luck Elise...and thank you...for everything...** "I'm alright." Ekyt assured the girl. "You could've fooled me! You've got a hole in you, and you're gushing blood...I hate to ask this, but please let me have your shirt. If that keeps bleeding, you're in trouble. From the way you fought, we might need you." The echidna girl smiled kindly as Ekyt shrugged out his shirt with great difficulty. She tied it around his shoulder. The echidna girl was deep-pink in color, and she had purple bangs. With her black vest, white shirt, and black boots, she looked like a tough girl. She grabbed his hand to help him up. Right there, Ekyt could tell she could be feminine when she needed to be. "You were in love with her, weren't you." The girl echidna asked him. "I was. But it wasn't supposed to last." Ekyt told her everything. He couldn't believe it. At the end, Linda hugged him. "I figured out what the fortune means." "I think I have too." Ekyt said, a small smile crossing his face. "Thanks for saving me. I would've bled to death if you hadn't fixed my arm."

Elise and Sonic collapsed in a field, exhausted from the run. Elise looked worried. Sonic put a hand on her chin. "Elise...smile." She did. The two kissed.

Linda stared at his muscular chest for a moment. That was out of character for her. She never had time for boys. But this boy seemed...special. And physical attributes weren't the first things she had noticed about him. But it didn't hurt either...

Ekyt couldn't believe that he had loved, lost, and loved again all in a matter of days. Linda was beautiful, but that wasn't the first thing he noticed about her. But it didn't hurt either...

"I-I..." Linda sat him down gently. "Can I kiss you?" she asked, shyly. "Huh?" "I'm sorry, it just sounded right...Please, forget I said..." "No. It's not that. I'd- I'd like that very much..." She ran a hand down his chest before she slid her arms around his back. He mimicked her movement, with one arm, his left arm hanging by his side. When the kiss happened, the pain dulled. Linda looked at him, surprised to see his reaction. "Even though I was told about you ahead of time...I'm just shocked that you could care about me...I know you could do better than me..."

TO BE CONTINUED???

THE READERS DECIDE! BE HONEST! YOU'RE NOT GOING TO HURT MY FEELINGS IF YOU SAY NO!

SPECIAL: BLOOPERS!

Ekyt: Elise, can I kiss you?

Elise: Uh, I don't know, You live in a sewer...

Ekyt: TAKE 2!

Ekyt: Elise, can I kiss you?

Elise: YOU USED THAT SEWER GRATE TO LOOK UP MY SKIRT, YOU PERV!

Ekyt: 0_0 Um, no, I didn't.

Elise: WHAT, I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH TO PEEP?! IS THAT IT?!

Ekyt: Take your downers spunky!

TAKE 3

Ekyt: Elise, can I kiss you?

Elise: (Leans forward)

Ekyt: Hey, a dollar!

Elise: (Falls down)

Ekyt: Sorry, but I can buy awesome stuff with a dollar!

Elise: Buy a brain, you dumb @\$!

TAKE 4

Ekyt: Elise, can I kiss you?

Elise: (Leans forward) Oh, come one man! Heard of mints?!

Sonic: We've gotta get out of here (drops Elise into the water)

Sonic: Crap...

TAKE 2

Sonic: Hang on Elise, we've gotta get out of here!

Elise: Alright, you hunk o' hedgehog! (Hits his butt)

Sonic: Huh?

Elise: What, it's just an ad-lib. You gotta try new stuff.

Sonic: (Drops her in water)

HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT!

4 - The Saga Continues...

NOTE: Obviously, this will not follow the game's route perfectly. Just for the record...So, here we go!

Soleanna's citizens were in a panic without Elise. "What will we do?!" "Mommy, I'm scared!" "Who was that blue hedgehog?" Elise's attendants were standing near Ekyt and Linda. They were staring at him, for some reason. "What's going on?" Linda asked them cautiously. "We're waiting for orders from the master." One pointed at Ekyt. "Me? How did..." "Elise named you her successor if she couldn't fulfill her duties. It's an age-old law that forces you to accept the throne until a replacement is deemed appropriate."

Ekyt walked up the palace steps, still shocked, but not showing it. Linda stopped. "Best of luck." Ekyt stopped. "You don't want to come in?" Linda pointed at herself. "I didn't know I was invited!" "You just saved my life." Ekyt pointed out. "Yeah, but I've helped a lot of people. Most don't say thanks. Then again, you're not most people, that's easy to tell."

Sonic stopped running and let Elise down gently. "Oh! You're hurt!" Elise knelt down and pointed at his arm. Sonic had tied a bandage around it. "It's nothing." he said evasively. "Don't say that! Oh, this is all my fault!" Elise exclaimed. "Elise...smile. That's all I need." Sonic told her. A butterfly flew up and landed on his nose. He turned slowly to Elise. She brushed it away, finally giving Sonic a glowing smile. "Hold on!" he told her. "I can't run that fast!" she told him. "Just put your head down and run!" Sonic called back. She kept up with him as he towed her around the meadow. The breeze Sonic caused when he ran felt good, fluttering the feathers in her hair. "I've never run so fast before!" Elise told him, panting and laughing in amazement. "If you have time to worry, run." Sonic said with a trademark grin and thumbs-up.

"I know you don't approve of me being here." Ekyt said to the maid. "No, I just." "I understand. I'm a stranger here, whether I helped the Princess or not." Marietta (the maid) told him "The princess is fond of you." Ekyt nodded. "So she said...But her heart belongs to another. I'm hardly royalty." He said, with a hollow smile. Marietta's heart softened. No matter how confident the young man acted, or how cool he tried to be, his heart had to be torn open, and his mind had to be on overload. "Can I get either of you anything?" "He'll take a bandage, and I'll take a some water. (Laughs). I'm sorry. Could you tell me where I could stay? I can't go anywhere until Shadow gets back. Wherever he is. Or Sonic, for that matter." "You can stay here, of course. It seems that you've piqued our ruler's interests." They both laughed. Ekyt didn't hear any of this; or at least he acted as though he didn't. "I'll go get a guest room ready. Excuse me." Marietta tapped Ekyt on the shoulder. "If you'll take some advice, you might want to give your people a quick speech." Marietta gave him an accepting smile.

Sonic carried Elise through the jungle. "We're getting outta this cave!" They shot around some robots, who couldn't hope to match Sonic's speed. "Wow! Thank you Sonic! Is it safe to go back to Soleanna?" she asked. "I'm not sure yet. We'd better give Eggman time to leave." Sonic told her. "I hope Ekyt does okay as ruler." Sonic looked at her. "Ekyt? What's an 'Ekyt?'" "He's that human boy. He's acting ruler since I'm gone." Sonic looked uncomfortable. "Were you and him- together?" Elise looked troubled. "One kiss, that was all. It was foretold we would meet, and that he would be

inflicted with pain to help me, and I wouldn't be part of his life...at least not romantically." Sonic looked at her. "You feel bad. You shouldn't Elise. I'm sure he understands."

"Thanks again for the help Linda." Ekyt told the pretty echidna. "Oh, it's no problem. You'd better give that speech." "Yeah."

The crowd gathered around the balcony. "It's him! Let him speak!" There were hushed whispers, followed by silence, as they looked at the young man on the balcony. His coat billowed like a flag behind him. "I know you're all concerned for the Princess. I want to assure you that Elise is fine. That "Blue Wind" you saw was a hedgehog. I have it on good word that he's a hero. And you can all rest assured you'll get your Princess back. In the meantime, she had asked me to watch over the country. And I'll be honored if you'll accept me Soleanna."

Linda watched as Ekyt launched into a speech, one that had the crowd transfixed. He was asking for their acceptance. Linda felt like she had known him longer than a couple hours. She leaned against the wall, eyes half-lidded. It had been a long journey. She suddenly heard a commotion.

The people cheered. One voice rang out. "Where is the Iblis Trigger?" A silver hedgehog marched through the crowd, followed by a female purple cat. "We're listening to a speech stranger. You can wait until it's over!" The shoemaker yelled out. The people shouted agreement. The man glowed green with energy, and was thrown violently against the wall. The newcomer had made a motion with his arm, and his palms were glowing with the same color as the man he had just threw. "Step aside, please." Ekyt jumped down, landing with a CLOMP sound on the brick street outside the palace. "I don't know who you are, but you aren't going to just walk in and attack people." Ekyt said pleasantly, but sternly. "You can't stop me! I need to find the Iblis Trigger!" "No one will get in your way if you don't attack." Ekyt said calmly. One of the Soleanna boys kicked Silver in the shins. Silver raised him up with what Ekyt recognized as telekinetic energy. "You little brat!" "Put him down!" Ekyt snarled. The town had never seen him angry, and backed away. Silver threw the boy on a roof.

Ekyt suddenly felt his body seized by some unknown energy. "You have gotten in my way. You must be disposed of!" Ekyt flew backward into a wall. A table flew into him. A pile mounted on him.

Linda saw this from the balcony and took action. She glided into Silver, breaking his concentration. Ekyt pushed a table off, his arm bleeding again, and a cut on his forehead. He watched as Silver lifted Linda up. Lowering his shoulder, he charged Silver. He caught him from behind. Linda landed on her feet. "Get everyone to safety! I'll hold him off!" The purple cat jumped in. "Wait, please, wait!" She ran over to the silver hedgehog. "I'm sorry. He's young. He wasn't supposed to attack anyone but the Iblis Trigger. If you were from our world, you'd understand..." In a ball of fire, the two left.

Ekyt walked over to Linda. "You alright?" "Peachy." She responded. The town gathered back around. "He's left! Can anyone reach the boy on the roof?" "I can!" Linda responded happily. She climbed back up on the balcony and glided across to the roof where the "Soleanna Boy" was trapped. She brought him down to cheers. "Are you the new Princess?" the boy asked. "Huh? Oh, no! Him and I aren't together!" she exclaimed, blushing.

Sonic was suddenly hit by a force as he ran through town. Eggman had stolen Elise, thanks to the distraction caused by that Silver Hedgehog. He had just got done wasting some of Eggman's mechs.

Now this Silver hedgehog was going on about him being the “Iblis Trigger.” Whatever that was. The only explanation that hedgehog was giving was with tables and chairs from a café. “That’s it! You’ve got me mad! Let’s go imitation-hedgehog!”

Ekyt looked at the scene and smiled to himself. **Not that I’d object to being with her. It’s not even her beauty that I’m attracted to! She’s so...pure, I guess. She deserves better than me...And what about Elise? I hope she’s alright...It’s hard to believe that our “relationship” was one kiss...admittedly a good one, and a first for both of us. All of a sudden, I’m ruling a country, a beautiful good Samaritan saves my life, I save hers...busy day...Wait, what am I thinking?! Is it an insult to Elise to meet a girl so quickly...though we’re not together, she just said so...I just don’t know what to think...Elise, I hope you’re okay...**

“Here you are. This is the best guest room. Right across the hall from the young Prince.” Marietta joked. Ekyt raised an eyebrow. “You’re not afraid of being across the hall from a wolf like me?” Linda laughed. “You know, most girls would probably be insulted that a boy would jump from one girl to another so quickly. But you know, you have been so open and honest with me, that I haven’t doubted for a minute that you really **are** as innocent as you seem.” Ekyt wasn’t sure what to say to that. “How about a goodnight kiss?” Linda said mischievously. Marietta smiled. All the world loves a lover. She leaned forward, eyes closed. He started to do the same. She ducked into her room and shut the door. WHAP! “Ah!” Apparently Ekyt had bounced off the door. “Sorry, try again tomorrow kiddo! ‘Night!” Linda laughed at the joke. Somehow, she knew he wouldn’t be bothered.

Ekyt smiled. She had him, hook, line, and sinker. Or, sucker, in his case. “I don’t think I’ll be sleeping too well Marietta.” Ekyt said, still smiling. “You’d better at least get some rest. You’ll have a busy day tomorrow.”

5 - Saying Goodbye...

Ekyt woke up early, having dozed off briefly. He had a strange dream that Elise was kissing that blue hedgehog...

He got up and went about his morning routine. He tossed on his coat last and walked out the door. He winced as his left foot hurt, from a table landing on it. "What is it that "Silver" hedgehog wanted? Something about an "Iblis Trigger?" What's an Iblis, for starters..." Ekyt wondered aloud. He walked downstairs and out the door.

He had just stepped out onto the light-yellow brick street when two creatures fell from a void in front of him. A black hedgehog with some red, and white bat wearing a pink top and leather pants. "Great landing Shadow." The bat said sarcastically. "Hmmp." Rouge, the white bat, looked up, seeing the human. He offered her a hand up. "Thanks kiddo. I'm Rouge, and this surly bag of angst is Shadow." Ekyt didn't seem surprised. "I'm Ekyt. I'm, um, apparently ruling this city until the Princess gets back." "The Princess...gone? AGH!" Shadow roared. "What Shadow means to say, is have you seen a blue hedgehog?" "Yeah, he was carrying the Princess. And he's over there...oh man!"

Sonic and Silver were fighting. Silver finally caught sonic and used his telekinetic abilities to throw Sonic into a wall. Sonic slid down, half-conscious. "It ends here, Iblis Trigger!" A pink hedgehog jumped in the way. "No Silver!" she shouted. Her red skirt billowed in the wind. You could hear the fabric move in the silence. "Out of the way Amy!" Ekyt grabbed Silver. "That's enough! I've warned you..." Silver swung at Ekyt. Ekyt ducked and kicked upward, twisting his body around, putting some mustard behind the kick. "OOF!" Silver fell backward. "Thanks! I've gotta go save Elise!" Sonic said with a thumbs off. He ran off. Silver punched the ground. "NO! I HAD HIM! I HAD THE IBLIS TRIGGER!" Silver chased after Sonic. "You've met this hedgehog before?" Shadow asked. "Yeah. He saved the Princess." Rouge tapped her chin and walked around Ekyt. "Hmm. I'm guessing you're ruling because you and the Princess are an item...I can see where she'd like that..." "Were an item. I met one of your group, an echidna girl..." "Linda? Wow, you wolf!" Rouge said, slapping his shoulder. "Linda's not an easy girl to handle. She's tough, and almost as beautiful as me." Ekyt widened his eyes in a comic expression. "Well, it was kinda in the cards..." Shadow har-umphed impatiently. "We need that girl back so we can leave." "Shadow! This is true love!" Rouge said in an exaggerated voice.

Ekyt climbed up the stairs. "You're party's here." Ekyt told Linda, without the usual briskness in his voice. "Huh? Shadow and Rouge? When'd they get here?" "Just now." "Hmm. Oh well. Get out so I can change my clothes." She said with a small grin. "What, I can't stay?" Ekyt mumbled. A shoe hit him in the back of the head as he walked out. "I wasn't serious!" he protested. "I know. It was just in case you were."

Linda glided down to where Ekyt was talking to Rouge and Shadow. "Ah, here's the queen herself! String 'em along and break their hearts, eh?" Rouge gave Linda a mocking punch on the arm. "Oh hush. At least I can do better than Knuckles." Rouge rolled her eyes. "When you have an ace, you play it." Linda said, grinning broadly with a shrug. She turned back to Ekyt. "Hey...you got a minute?" She asked. "Yeah, no problem." Ekyt said, falsely chipper.

Linda escorted him away to an alley. "Thanks...for everything." Linda told him. "I didn't do anything. Thanks for saving my life...twice." Linda shrugged. "You'll do fine. The people like you here. And Elise'll be back soon." Ekyt tilted his head, looking past her. "Looks like Shadow wants to leave." "How's your arm?" "Still attached, thanks to you. I doubt I'll be perfectly comfortable, but that's never stopped me before." Linda fixed the collar of his coat. "You'll get there." She hugged him, and he managed to return it. "Well, I'm sure I'll see you again." Linda told Ekyt. "Sure, happens all the time." Linda ran off, with a quick wave over her shoulder. "Chaos Control!" the one called "Shadow" called out. The three vanished into thin air.

"Sir? Where did the girl go?" Marietta asked. "She had to go home." Marietta's face dropped. "Oh. I see. Hmm...Well, you have nothing to do today, why don't you explore the city?" "Thanks Marietta. Maybe I'll check out the forest or something."

Sonic and Elise jumped from the Egg Carrier. At the same time, Shadow fought with a sadistic shadow monster, Mephiles. Mephiles looked like Shadow, except with purple quills. "You can't hope to beat me with your limited power!" Mephiles taunted. "Why risk yourself for those (meaning humans) who will turn on you later?" Shadow reached for the rings on his wrists. "If they decide to turn on me..." clink, one ring hit the floor, "Then I'll fight, like I always have..." Shadow took off in a blaze of fire, skating furiously through the Mephiles clones, destroying them.

"Are you okay, Elise?" "Thanks to you Sonic!" She kissed the stunned hedgehog. He picked her up again, and started running before Mephiles was in his way...

Ekyt was miserable. He had walked around the town, then had slunk into his darkened bedroom. "Two of them...Is this what the fortune teller meant by pain? Or was that my arm and leg? Either way, I think I got a raw deal...but that's nothing new. I shouldn't be surprised. Those two could have anyone they wanted...And there's more to life...like kicking Eggman out of this city and getting Elise back in command...She knows what she's doing, while I'm learning it as I go along, lighting that firecracker when I come to it...I have to do something...but what?" The answer would soon become apparent.

6 - Keeping up Appearances

Elise and Linda...in a matter of two days...

Ekyt felt like he had been hit in the stomach...with a brick...a sharp brick that was on fire...He just didn't think he could deal with this. But he had to; He wasn't going to let Elise down. One kiss with her, then a hug with the other one. He was sure one of them was the one. Even though he was still young, Ekyt had already formed his opinion about the world, and it wasn't likely to change. Humans (With few exceptions) had turned their backs on him, he could easily reciprocate.

He decided to check out the forest, feeling he had to get away from everything for a while. He had little to do as a "ruler" anyway, Soleanna all but ran itself. He made it out of the forest, to a beach he hadn't known was there. He heard a cry for help. He saw the "Soleanna Boys" trapped by a series of robots. Ekyt dove into action:

(NOTE: IF YOU'VE PLAYED THE GAME THIS IS BASED ON (SONIC THE HEDGEHOG for XBOX 360 and PS3), THEN YOU KNOW EKYT IS ABOUT TO GET HIS FIRST LEVEL BASED ON A VIDEO GAME! SO...

Wave Ocean

Ekyt ran along the sand near the water. Palm trees dotted the landscape. He jumped over a small hill, encountering his first enemies. Three robots, standing near boxes. Ekyt kicked one, using that one as a springboard to the next robot. The last one was near the water. Ekyt pushed it in. He looked down and saw he had a long drop, followed by a set of loops. He looked around for something that would help. He saw that some parts of the robot left gold behind when they were destroyed. Ekyt put them into the bottom of his shoe. The shoes took the power in. Ekyt ran straight down, and then around the loops. He had never felt so free! The wind through his hair and all that jazz...it was actually true.

Ekyt saw a couple more robots, floating above him. He needed to get up on that ledge, but how? He saw his answer in the form of a spring (From the Sonic Games). He bounced on it, reaching the ledge. The two robots moved menacingly toward him. Ekyt threw his staff at the one in front, knocking it into the other one. They collided and exploded, leaving more gold for Ekyt. Good thing. He had a set of docks he had to run across to reach those kids, and, much like Sonic, he wasn't the greatest swimmer. He backed up and jumped, running at full speed, hitting the dock safely. The dock he had been on before was suddenly SWALLOWED (!) by a humongous shark. "Oh man! What is going on today?!?!" Ekyt yelled. Then he decided it might be a good idea to run. He saw a weird, treadmill-looking pad. (Sonic gamers will know it as a speed booster) Not knowing why, Ekyt stepped on it. He shot forward incredibly quick. He hit another one, then another, and another, each time narrowly avoiding the shark.

He saw a spring and decided to hit it, seeing where it sent him. Before he could do that, the shark had a hold of his coat. "Leggo!" Ekyt punched the shark in the nose (What you're actually supposed to do to stop from getting eaten, lol). It let go and swam off.

Now he had to figure out how to reach those kids. There was a vine, but it looked pretty sturdy. It wasn't

that far of a fall, so Ekyt climbed on. "Hang on!" he shouted, as much to himself as to the kids. He grinded down in (Just like in your Sonic games), leaping off and hitting a spring. He saw himself aimed for a wall. It wasn't a showdown he was going to win. In desperation, he put his legs and staff out and pushed just as he hit the wall, sending himself flying toward the beach. He dug his staff in as he landed, kicking the robot into one of it's friends. He scooped up the gold it had left, and stuffed it into his shoe. "Cover your eyes gang!" Ekyt ran in circles, kicking up sand. The distraction worked. "You guys head back to town, I'll make sure these things don't follow you." The "Soleanna Boys" ran for it.

Ekyt waited for the sand to die down. A strike from the robot knocked him backward. Ekyt aimed low and heard his staff connect with a "CLANG!" of wood meeting metal. The robot went down. Ekyt thrust his staff like a spear and drove it home, eliminating that robot. He swung it around and watched as it flew off his staff, hitting it's companions. The three went off the cliff. "Time to go home."

7 - (Not) Letting Go...

Ekyt slunk back into town, tired from the fight. He knew he wouldn't sleep, regardless. Between the pressure of being an impromptu ruler, and the pain over Elise and Linda both deserting him, Ekyt slumped into a deep depression. He climbed up into the castle, realizing he wanted to leave Soleanna. It was a nice place, but it held too many memories.

But he couldn't leave. He felt obligated to help out until Elise was back. He looked out the window, as if he could find an answer out there. It was another perfect day. And Ekyt saw it get even better. Sonic was leading the group back, carrying Elise. Ekyt's spirits brightened. He could leave!

Sonic and Elise were inside the hall that held the tiny flame that was left of Solaris. Elise looked at it, then shook her head. "I can't Sonic. If I blow this out, it'll be like this never happened. I'll have never met you." "Elise, there's no choice, we have to stop this disaster from ever happening." Elise shook her head again. "I can't do it! Let's talk to Ekyt...it's only fair..."

"Don't do it." Ekyt advised. Sonic looked surprised. "I'd love to forget everything, but it's not a good idea. That would leave Soleanna defenseless. And I don't think you want to forget each other." He said the last part in a friendly manner. He looked tired, and stressed. "You okay bud?" "Just tired." Ekyt said, forcing a grin. "Elise, I'm glad everyone is safe. It's a relief, especially since your people missed you. They're a great bunch." Ekyt got up, pushing with his staff. "It was nice meeting you Sonic. And your friends. Best of luck to all of you." Ekyt made his way briskly down the stairs. Sonic blasted past him. "And where are you going?" Ekyt shrugged. "I was just going home to get some rest. I haven't slept in three days." Sonic gave him a suspicious look, but said nothing.

"He's gonna leave Elise." Sonic informed her. "What?" "He's gonna leave. I can tell." Elise shook her head. "Can Shadow stop him?" Sonic grinned. "I think so. But I'll double check."

Ekyt thanked the stand owner for the drink. Soleanna didn't have alcohol (Not that Ekyt would have drank it anyway), but this thing they called a "Soleanna breeze" was great. He heard a sound behind him. He kept drinking, paying no attention. He finished, draining the glass, and turned to leave, only to find that black hedgehog...Shadow, that was his name...in his way. "Pardon me." Ekyt stepped to the side and walked down the narrow alleyway. Shadow re-appeared in front of him. "The Princess wants me to make sure you stay." Ekyt considered this. "Sorry. I'm leaving. This place holds too many memories." Ekyt tried to walk by, but Shadow stuck an arm out. "I think you're misunderstanding me. I'm not asking, I'm TELLING." Shadow tried to grab Ekyt by the shirt. "Forget it. I'm not fighting you Shadow." Ekyt still had some gold from the robots, and he stuffed it into his shoe now. He blasted off, running along the side of buildings. Shadow skated along with him.

Elise and Sonic observed this from the castle. "Sonic, please, stop him!" Sonic tapped his foot. "Okay. You hang here." Sonic took off, gathering speed.

Ekyt jumped across to the other side of the buildings hitting an awning, then running across a bridge. Sonic caught up. "Hey bud, the Princess wants you!" Ekyt kept running. "I'm leaving." He called back

flatly. "I don't want to have to stop you..." Sonic warned. Ekyt responded by running faster. Sonic did too.

Ekyt was a huge stone wall. His lips thinning in concentration, he pushed off hard toward the wall, jumping, his legs crouching as he hit the wall. He bounced off and hit the ground running. Sonic ran up the wall and back down. He was just keeping pace with the human until Shadow showed up.

Shadow skated toward Ekyt, angry that he had gotten away. The chase led them to the town square. Shadow reached out and grabbed Ekyt's coat, knocking him off-balance enough to make him fall. He jumped on, grabbing Ekyt. Ekyt twisted, rolling onto his feet. Before he could make a break for it, Shadow tackled him again. Ekyt grimaced in pain as his ankle was twisted for sure. "Now just come quietly." Shadow threatened. Ekyt leaned on his staff to get to his feet. "Fine. But I'm not staying. I've got things to do." Ekyt snarled.

Elise sat, worried, with Rouge and Linda. "Don't worry honey, they'll be fine." Rouge told her. They had watched the high-speed chase. Linda nodded in agreement. "Those three are tough." They turned as Ekyt hobbled in. Sonic and Shadow flanked him on either side. Ekyt was looking daggers at Shadow. Elise and Linda stood up at the same time. "I'm glad you're okay!" Elise told Ekyt with a smile. "Who's okay? I'm tired and my leg hurts like hell, and your lackeys here won't let me leave!" Ekyt shot back, furious at the situation. "Easy Tiger. Aren't you curious as to what happened?" Linda asked. "No." Ekyt returned flatly. "I'm interested in leaving this place and the memories it created behind." Everyone seemed taken aback that their normally good-natured friend was this angry. Elise and Linda both felt guilty; the two of them leaving him hadn't helped him.

"Where do you plan to go if you leave?" Elise asked gently. "Why does it matter? I've done some good here, now I'll go do good at another place that needs me..." "We need you here." Elise said. "No you don't. There are plenty of capable fighters here." Ekyt gave a stern look around the room before hobbling out.

Linda got up. "I'm going to talk to him. It's my fault he's like this." "No, it's mine." Elise said. "I broke up with him." They said as one. Then they exchanged glances. "Both of us...and then...oh boy. I think I understand why he wants to leave." Linda said, gauging the looks around the room before continuing. "That doesn't mean I'm going to let him."

8 - Prisoner of Peace

A fat guard with glasses kept watching Ekyt, who was getting progressively more annoyed. "You should know those weapons are illegal." The guard said in a strict tone. "You should know you're full of crap." Ekyt returned, pleasantly. "Don't insult me peasant!" Ekyt stepped up to him. "Is that a threat?" "You could say that." The guard answered snottily, his upper lip twisted in a strange smirk. "You go ahead and try fat boy. See where it gets you." The guard apparently took offense to that and swiped at Ekyt. Ekyt didn't move, save for tilting his head away. His right fist sunk through a layer of blubber in the guard's stomach, hitting something like muscle, before he pulled it back out, leaving the guard lying.

More guards came running. "How dare you?! He was our leader!" "Get bent." Ekyt retorted flatly. The two guards exchanged glances. No one talked like that in Soleanna. Ekyt shook his head. "Okay, I'll leave you to figure that out." **Morons.**

Ekyt's leg felt better, so he gingerly stretched it. Perfect. He tapped his foot a couple of times. No pain. Good. Now he could leave. "Hey." Ekyt felt a hand on his shoulder. He ducked quickly and turned around, his fists raised. It was Linda. "Oh. Sorry." Linda gave him a questioning look. "Are...you okay?" "Yeah, foot's better." Ekyt replied tightly. He had turned to the side, keeping his head toward her. "Not thinking of leaving, are you?" She asked brightly. "No. I **AM** leaving, no thinking involved." "Hold on there! Why on earth do you want to leave? It's great here!" "Matter of opinion." He stated simply. She looked down. "I'm really sorry about this..." Ekyt had heard that line before. Before he could move, Silver's telekinesis had him trapped.

Elise stood up as Ekyt was marched into the room. The room was a favorite of hers; bright and sunny, white and marble with high ceilings. "Thank you so much Silver!" "My pleasure Princess." He let Ekyt go. Ekyt spun around, his eyes wide, like a cornered cat. He tackled Silver, ramming him into the wall. Ekyt's leg swung up and cracked Silver in the jaw. "Wrong move freak." "Please, don't hurt him! He was only acting on my wishes." Elise admitted. "I figured." Ekyt spat, walking toward the door. He was met by Sonic and Shadow. Ekyt narrowed his eyes, before spinning backward away from them, hitting Silver. No one made a move for a few moments. "Stay." One word that echoed throughout the room.

"I'll make you a deal." Ekyt announced. "Leave me alone, and I'll stay. I'm not stupid." He wasn't sure where this was coming from. "I'm tired of being jerked around. I'm sick of being tortured by my own thoughts and insecurities night after night. Not to brag, but a lesser man than me would have cracked. I'm eighteen, and I'm not happy unless I'm the hero. But there's one problem: I'm not. I'm not a hero. I've been a mock-ruler, and I've been at the right place at the right time, but the fact is I'm not a hero. I'm a foreigner here who doesn't belong." Elise stood up. "It's my fault isn't it? That fortune..." "Fate is fate Elise...I don't blame you...you and I know what that fortune meant, and I want you to have the best life possible." He turned to Linda. "That's why I want to leave. I'm a curse. I'm the kiss of death. I kiss Elise once, she gets kidnapped. I give you a hug, you almost get killed by this "Mephiles" whatever-it-is. The common denominator is me. That fortune predicted my pain. Maybe that wasn't my arm or leg, or losing two girls that I was never "with" in the first place. Maybe it meant the guilt I'd feel about the pain I'd caused."

Sonic, who had been listening quietly, piped up. "Why don't we vote? Who wants him to stay?" Everyone but Silver and Shadow raised their hands. "You're not the kiss of death pal. You've been here a few days, and you've already got the whole town looking up to you. Don't throw it away." Elise gave Sonic a squeeze. To Ekyt's surprise, Linda did the same.

Ekyt didn't know what to think. He agreed to at least stay another day, to sort things out. The highlight: A goodnight kiss from Linda.

**NEXT ISSUE: EKYT AND LINDA ADMIT THEIR FEELINGS TO EVERYONE EXCEPT EACH OTHER!
ELISE AND EKYT CLEAR THE AIR, AND A FIGHT BREAKS OUT!**

9 - The Last Stand

Ekyt wandered around, the best his leg would allow. He eventually hit the Soleanna desert. "Solaris' breath warms the sands..." Ekyt recited from the thick volume he had read about Soleanna. Legend, they said, but who could be sure? After having and losing two "girlfriends" in two days, Ekyt would have believed anything was possible. He looked out across the desert. It reminded him of a movie. Of course, ordinarily, it would have been some intrepid, cool, hero making his way across the desert to uncover some unknown artifact. **Me, a hero? That'll be the day.**

"The desert? I barely survived that!" Silver exclaimed. "Good riddance." Shadow muttered. "YOU barely survived Silver? WHOA, I guess we'd better worry then." Linda shot back sarcastically. "What next, are you gonna hit the "Iblis Trigger" with your purse?" Silver looked taken aback. He probably was, for that matter. Elise laughed, though she had a worried expression on her face. "Don't worry Elise. If things go wrong, I can help." Sonic assured her. "But won't that make him more upset?" Elise fretted. "I'd wager he'd rather be upset than dead." Linda reasoned. "Couldn't we have both?" Shadow muttered to Rouge. "Don't be an @\$\$, for a change!" Linda and Rouge exchanged glances. "C'mon, let's leave these guys to be macho by themselves. How about some girl talk Elise, Linda?" Rouge offered. "Oh, okay." Elise was surprised to be included.

"So, Elise, is it fun to be a Princess?" Rouge asked. "Not all the time, but it's very nice most of the time. The people you meet, having people look up to you..." Elise smiled slightly at the thought. "So...if you don't mind my asking...what DID that fortune you keep talking about say?" Linda asked, curious despite herself. Elise told them. "...And it said that he's going to find someone, but he's going to have a lot of pain first...I'm worried, every part has come true so far..." Elise mentioned quietly. "No worries Elise, That little guy took a gunshot wound, he can handle anything that's thrown at him, don't you worry about that." Rouge stated, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You know Linda, if you weren't so obviously smitten with him, I might go after the little jewel myself." Rouge taunted. "Shut up!" Linda told her vehemently. "It was a hug, no big deal!" Elise looked worried. "You look like you've got a dirty little secret Elise." Rouge taunted. "Huh? Well, I...kind of...kissed him? He was my first..." She said shyly, blushing. "That's news to you Rouge?" Linda joked. "He told me first thing. I really admire his honesty." "And his chest muscles." Rouge added. "Yeah- wait, what?!" Rouge danced out of Linda's reach. "Then you won't mind if I give him a big 'ol smackeroo then?" "O-Of course not!" Linda said defiantly, crossing her arms.

Ekyt climbed up onto the big marble pillar, looking out across the endless waves of sand. "Peaceful...creepy, but peaceful." He stood with his arms crossed, as the sand angrily hit his coat. "Time to go...to Soleanna." He had almost said home. **Soleanna's not my home. Transplant or not. Unfortunately, the hedgehog's are watching my every move. I can't outrun that blue one, Sonic, I can't break that Silver one's telkenesis, and that Shadow-whatever has got those freakin' impossible powers.** To top it all off, he still didn't know what to think. Elise was cautiously treating him well, kind of like you would treat a bomb, gently, but with worry. Linda was acting like nothing had ever happened, and Rouge...man, she was hard to read? He guessed she was just the flirty, friendly type, but who the hell knew anymore? He jumped down, putting his staff into the sand to vault over a pool of quicksand.

Rouge, Linda, and Elise stood at the town gates, waiting for Ekyt. Elise seemed shyly amused, while Linda and Rouge had locked horns in a friendly manner. "You won't do it!" Linda told Rouge confidently, wishing she FELT confident too. Just how DID she feel about that boy?

As Ekyt walked in Rouge fluttered up to him. "Watch and learn, you amateurs." She muttered to Elise and Linda. "Hey big guy, you remember me right?" Rouge asked saucily. Linda snorted laughter at the look on Ekyt's face. This wasn't going Rouge's way at all. "It's...Rouge, right?" Ekyt said, a tad of uncertainty in his voice. "Why don't I give you something to remember me by..." she said saucily, with some frustration dripping into her voice. She grinned at him, showing her fangs, guessing that he thought they were cool or something. As she leaned closer, Linda watched nervously. "Damn it! Forget it!" She yanked Rouge away. "She was about to kiss you! No love behind it! And you were going to go with it?" "What? Rouge was going to kiss me? She's out of my league, not to mention taken! Hell, everyone here is out of my league!" The last part came out a little angry. "I do appreciate the thought Rouge." He said, giving her a kind smile. "Anytime kiddo. It's strange how violent Linda gets when she" "Rouge, I will de-fang you if you finish that sentence." Ekyt looked at Elise, then at Linda. His mind was already on overdrive. Then these three showed up. "Well, pardon me. I'm going to get a drink. That desert is brutal."

Ekyt wanted no part of Rouge. That would only bring trouble. Elise's heart belonged to Sonic, and he understood that. Linda...he couldn't figure out what was going through her head. Did she like him, didn't she? He closed his eyes, letting his eyes get a break. He hated Soleanna, and wanted nothing more than to leave. But how could he? He was practically a prisoner here.

"I thought so! I knew it! You're head over heels in love with him!" Linda slapped a hand across Rouge's mouth, silencing her, though Rouge continued with muffled laughter from behind Linda's hand. "OW! Don't bite, you sadistic bat!" Linda yelled, still laughing. Elise smiled at Linda. "I'm happy for you. And for Ekyt. I was so worried what would happen. It seems the fortune has come true." "Wait, what about the pain?" Linda asked. "Oh no..."

Ekyt was standing by a railing, looking at the water that ran through Soleanna, like veins. He looked at his reflection, and didn't like what he saw. A miserable-looking baby-faced kid. He was furious with himself for feeling bad for himself, but felt bad for himself for being furious. It was a horrible cycle that was eating him alive. Suddenly, the beautiful, sunny day, was clouded. Ekyt looked up, seeing the source. Eggman's aircraft. Good. Ekyt needed to blow off some steam. The robots fell in a circle around him. "I was hoping for the hedgehog...but you'll do..." Eggman laughed. Ekyt looked around. Ten to one odds. Ekyt shrugged, a slightly maniacal grin spreading across his face. "Heck, I'm the underdog anyway!" He spun his staff around, breaking one robot, grabbing the gold it left and stuff it in his shoe.

With the speed burst, Ekyt bounced off two robots, then in between them, letting them shoot themselves. "You're as dumb as your creator!" Ekyt laughed, jumping up to attack one more time. His graceful leap turned into a dive as the muzzle of a rifle swung around and struck him in the stomach. He hit the pavement hard, his head bouncing off. He rolled to the side when another muzzle swung and cracked him on the side of the head. He felt his vision go fuzzy as he wobbled on his feet. He could have sworn there were six robots left...now there were twelve? "Give me the princess! I know you can deliver her to me!" Eggman called. "Get bent!" Ekyt called back, slurring his words slightly.

Eggman looked furious. He took aim with a pistol as Ekyt jumped away. It struck his ankle, forcing Ekyt to do a stupid roll to stop himself from falling into the water. He had cut his face up on the concrete. His staff was long gone. Ekyt, figuring that this was his last fight, forced himself up to his feet. He held onto a guardrail for support, his eyes darting wildly around...

10 - Strictly Taboo

Ekyt struggled to stay upright. He didn't picture himself dying this way...then again, he didn't picture himself in a strange love...what the hell was it anyway? A love octagon now? Ekyt was hanging onto the guard rail, staring with intense hatred back at Eggman. "If my time is now, so be it. But I will sell my life at a high price Eggman." Ekyt managed to get his arms up into a guard. He saw his staff, just out of his reach. A sudden surge of dizziness caused him to fall down to one knee. His staff looked like it was on a bungee cord. He managed to reach out and grab it, swing it into the legs of the three nearest robots. He saw the tell-tale glint of gold. Gold could mean life to him. Struggling to his feet one more time, he managed to make a falling grab at the gold, stuffing it into his shoe. In his condition, the speed he was going to hit was just as likely to kill him as one of Eggman's mechs. But at least he'd dictate the terms of his last few moments. Eggman, seeing what was about to happen, ordered his robots to pursue Ekyt.

Soleanna's landscape morphed into a blur as Ekyt ran, his arm behind him now. He saw a possible way of winning. Lengthening his stride, he sped up, aiming for a mirror. The Soleanna mirrors were special. They could transport you to another place. Ekyt didn't know or care where that mirror lead. But he was going to make it.

Linda, Elise, and Rouge felt the rush as they ran by. "Sonic? No, that's...Ekyt? What on earth?" Elise narrowed her eyes, squinting to make out the blur. Ekyt had three strides on the robots, and six on Eggman, who had his personal transport join the chase. "Sonic! Please, help him!" Elise yelled to Sonic, hoping he would hear her. "C'mon kid, zig, zag!" Rouge was punching in the air, shouting instructions. Linda was silent. "Rest in Peace." She said somberly, figuring this was the end for him.

I haven't even figured him out yet! Is he in love with me? Elise? Rouge? But he just shot down Rouge! And Elise dropped him! Wait, so did I! But that was different! Damn, I'm so confused...I guess it won't matter. He can't hold out for long...unless he gets help... Linda sprinted past Elise and Rouge. "Are you crazy, you'll never stand a chance! Better him than you!" Rouge called. **She's got it bad...C'mon Linda, you can do it...**

Ekyt saw the mirror. He ran faster, his leg throbbing, the trail of blood behind him broadening. That concussion was taking its toll. He managed to slide just before the mirror. In went the robots...and Eggman! Without thinking, Ekyt swung his staff into the mirror, smashing it.

Linda saw him smash the mirror and cheered inwardly. Until she saw the robots from behind. Ekyt saw one of them in a shard of broken glass. He picked it up and, spinning, threw it. He flipped himself over; he was so unstable. Linda ripped two of the robots to ribbons. The last one was coming at her from behind. Ekyt struggled to his feet and jumped, planting both feet into its "Chest" He landed hard on his back, but managed to knock the mech back into the water, where it exploded. He dove in front of Linda as a piece of metal flew back in. It struck him in the back. He managed to stay up until Linda moved. Then he just let himself fall. "My God! I'll get help." "No." Ekyt's voice was sharp. Wincing, he crawled to his staff and pulled himself up. "I'll walk. I don't need help. But...thanks for the save..." he said to Linda. "Where are you going to go?" "Back to my sleeping area. I can't call it home..."

"Elise!" Linda ran up breathless. "I saw...the fortune came true...almost...The great pain he was supposed to feel...Now he;s supposed to find love." "Not likely. He hates everyone! He doesn't want to be here. And...I don't think I love him...the fortune must be wrong..." Elise looked at her sympathetically. "Maybe the fortune didn't mean you Linda. It could have been anyone. Don't worry yourself. If you don't love him, I'm sure he'll understand..."

"I don't understand a damn thing!" Ekyt had been lucky. The bullet had just nicked his ankle, not penetration. The concussion was mild. His back had been destroyed by that piece of metal, though, and the scar across his forehead that lead down under his eye didn't seem to want to stop bleeding. He sat there alone, wondering why he had decided to come here. And wondering how he had managed to fall so far. From being the sweetheart of a princess to lying in a sewer, hiding from the world. Moodily, he wound a bandage around his torso, then his ankle. That left the gash across his face. What could he do about that?

He climbed up out of the sewer grate, still depressed. He thought he saw Elise coming, so he dove back into the hole. This was pathetic. He was hiding from a fifteen-year-old girl who had never harmed a fly?

Ekyt climbed up, and immediately felt the whoosh (!) of Sonic's arrival. "How ya feeling pal?" "What does it matter?" Ekyt answered, then sighed. "I'm sorry Sonic. I just don't have an idea what to do right now. If I had some idea of how Linda felt about me, I could at least clear that up." Sonic tapped his shoe. "I'll tell you what I told Elise. If you have time to worry, run. C'mon, let's take a run."

"Let's check this place out. I cruised through here, and it's pretty cool! See if you can keep up!" Sonic blasted ahead through the snow of the White Acropolis (Level in the game). Ekyt ran after him. The two of them kicked up snow. "You know, you're doing pretty good for yourself!" Ekyt called over to Sonic. "What can I say? I live right! I've got to thank you for stopping Elise from blowing out Solaris' flame. This is the kind of thing I want to remember!" Sonic jumped up, which gave him more of a speed boost. "Watch out up here! There's a lot of big snowballs. If you run into one of those things, it'll leave a mark!" "Thanks for the warning!"

Ekyt was starting to see why Sonic liked to run all the time. It was really...free. While he was attempting to keep up with Sonic, his thoughts drifted back to Linda. **We're at a stalemate...One of us has to say something...If I can fight robots, I can talk to his girl, right? But what about her and I being together? Why do I even care what anyone thinks, I never did before! If I decide by the end of the run that I'm in love with this girl, I'm going to kiss her...**

"Linda...if you don't mind my asking...What do you REALLY think of Ekyt?" Elise asked Linda. "Oh, I can't stand him!" Linda exclaimed, jokingly. "No, seriously, he's got some cute things about him. But I'm just not sure what to think. When I talked to him, and questioned him, it's like he told me what I wanted to hear without actually giving me answers." Elise giggled. "The same thing happened to me! What you do, is you pin him down. Put some pressure on him and he'll answer. Honesty is so important in this day and age." Linda paused, cocking her head slightly. "Tell me...what do you think of him? Does he like me?" Elsie smiled at her. "He hasn't said as much, but he does. I can tell. I can judge people pretty well, and he's honest."

"Sonic, what do you think Linda thinks of me?" Ekyt called over. "She likes you man! No doubt about it!" "How can you be so sure?" Ekyt called over, dodging one of the big snowballs. "She gave you **the**

look.” WHUMP! Ekyl hit a snowball, embedding himself in it. Sonic laughed hysterically as Ekyl pulled himself out. “Ha ha.” Ekyl said flatly. **She likes me? Wait, what’s “The look?” and how do I feel about her?**

Linda paced at the town gates. Sonic and Ekyl came bursting in, Ekyl panting. He spotted Linda and decided he was going to do it.

Linda saw Ekyl and decided to ask him straight out. She had already decided her feelings for him.

“Linda, I’ve been thinking.” “Me too. I need to know how you feel about me.” Linda asked him outright. She expected his trademark stoicism. Instead, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I hope that was the right answer Linda.” He told her, smiling slightly. Returning the smile. “I-I’ll let you know!”

For a change, Ekyl had the courage up, while Linda was the one leaving the question unanswered.

11 - Right Answer

“Apparently, that was the wrong answer.” Ekyt muttered. “Don’t take it to heart kiddo, she was surprised. Give her time.” Rouge advised. “Oh, I intend to. I plan to get the hell out of here.” Rouge took out a file, sharpening her fangs. “I’m a vampire bat kid. Once Sonic or Shadow catches you, I’m going to bite you on the neck. We’ll see how far you run with me sucking the life out of you.” She smiled in such a friendly way that Ekyt couldn’t tell if she was serious or not. “I have a better idea; one that will work out for both of us...” “I’m listening, handsome.” Rouge said, floating in a relaxed position. “Alright, here’s my plan...”

“Elise, are you okay?” Sonic asked. “Oh, Sonic, I’m fine. I was just worried about Ekyt and Linda. He kissed her, and I know that’s what she’s been wanting, but she’s so confused...”

Ekyt listened for the right pose. “Ready Rouge?” “Ready kiddo. But be gentle. Don’t scratch my million dollar assets.”

The door burst open. “Hello, your majest!” Ekyt said brightly. He had Rouge around the neck, her arms tied behind her back and her wings tied together. “Ekyt? What is...I.” “I’m leaving. You wouldn’t want me to have to hurt this poor girl would you.” Rouge was looking at Sonic and winking. Sonic winked back and jumped across the table, into Ekyt. Rouge burst free of her “bindings.” “Nice try, but I can’t let you go.” Ekyt cursed. “I have all the respect in the world for you Sonic, but if you try to stop me...” Ekyt suddenly jumped out the window, hitting the pavement running top speed. Sonic jumped after him.

“Why do you want to leave now?! I thought things were settled!” “They are! Linda isn’t interested in me; and she was the only reason to stay. Now, I’m getting out of here!” “Think about it first. Do you really want to leave somewhere so peaceful?” “I like my life insane, not boring as all get-out!” Ekyt yelled to Sonic, who was gaining. “Me too, but even I like Soleanna! With Eggman around, life won’t get dull anytime soon!” “With Elise by your side, your life won’t get dull either. Me, I’m going the route I had always gone before. Like Foreigner so poignantly sang: “I’m a loner but I’m never alone! Every night I take one step closer to the danger zone!””

The mirror was in site. So were the two hedgehog’s blocking his path. “For the love of- Will you leave me alone?” Ekyt made a U-Turn, deciding to pick a different mirror. Shadow’s chaos control put him in front of that mirror too. This time, Ekyt kept running. Shadow used his chaos spear attack, which drew three slashes across Ekyt’s chest. Already angry, that pushed Ekyt over the edge. He dove on Shadow, putting an arm across his neck. “Never screw with me. Ultimate Life Form or not, I’ll put you down...” “Is that so? Well then, feel free to bring it on!”

Ekyt was seized by Silver’s telekinesis. He struggled effortlessly, finally giving up. “Fine. You caught me...again. Why don’t you ask the princess to lock me in the dungeon.” Ekyt asked sarcastically. “Well bud, we’d have to find some charges...” “Let me out to do some then!” Ekyt shouted at Sonic. “Let’s see, I’ve done kidnapping (Rouge, even though she was a willing hostage), bribery, since I paid Rouge to go along with that scheme, extortion, from robots, need that gold. So, cuff ‘em in irons?” (That one was for you Flash! Lol!)

“Why would you want to do that? You know I care for your safety.” Ekyt remained stoic. “Well your majesty, if you want to make sure I stay here, the only way to do that is to lock me up. Go for it, I won’t resist. At least I’ll get some peace and solitude.”

SHHHCLING! The heavy iron door slammed in Ekyt’s face. “Good riddance, you bribe-takin’, donut-suckin’ trigger happy, fatass fuzzball, P.I.G.” Ekyt snarled at guard. “What’d you say?” “Are you deaf AND dumb? You play the role very well.” Ekyt shot back. He wouldn’t have said that if he didn’t hate this particular guard. He had gotten in Ekyt’s face a few times. Not something the kid took kindly too.

Linda felt her cheek, where he had kissed her. “I ran off on him? Did I actually do that? He must hate me! I’ve got to find him!”

“He’ll be in there, Ma’am.” Linda walked in to find Ekyt lounging on a cot, not seeming to care about much of anything. “There you are!” she said, with a sigh of relief. “The new place suits me.” Ekyt muttered, looking at the gray cinderblock walls. “Listen, I’ve come to tell you that...well, come here...”

She kissed him on the cheek. “You DID have the right answer.” (Reference to last issue)

12 - Fate Takes a Turn (Or Shot Down)

Ekyt looked through the bars, not quite believing what he was hearing. It sounded too good to be true. As with most things, it was.

“But you see...I’ve...kind of got...someone else...” Linda stammered. Ekyt listened in numb shock. “I guessed as much.” Ekyt said suddenly. “Huh?” “You’re a beautiful girl. My curse, my destiny, my future, is this staff and this coat. When I took it up, I swore I was done with everyone and everything. THAT’s why I’ve been trying to leave. I don’t want to get too attached to a place. Then I met Elise, and then you...and I forgot myself. It’s a mistake I’ve never made before, so forgive me if I’m not reacting right.” Linda looked amazed; he had taken the news well compared to what she thought. Linda reached across the cell, to the table nearby. She handed him the keys. “Don’t let me stop you from escaping. And...thanks for understanding.” She said as he opened the cell. “I’ll never forget you Linda.” She enveloped him in a hug, which he returned. One last look at her, and her ran out the door.

“OOF!” Ekyt bounced off something. “Where do you thinking you’re going?” One of the guards from before asked. “Wherever my feet take me. You should use yours more, you’ve got quite the spare tire there.” Ekyt said, stepping backward as the guard’s rifle swung around. “Give me a reason...” Ekyt kicked the gun to the side, then stepped in and punched the guard. “That good enough? But let’s get rid of your little toy, someone might get hurt.” Ekyt threw the rifle away. They had confiscated his gold, so his only hope to get out of Soleanna was to fight his way out.

“Ekyt’s on the loose, you’d better go get him.” Linda supplied in a flat tone. “He explained something to me, something you should know Elise.” Sonic ran to find Silver, Tails, Knuckles, Rouge, Shadow, Omega, and Amy.

Ekyt looked cautiously around the corner. “Damn! They’ve got a task force after me...Oh well, Get out or die trying.” Dropping his stealth, he stepped out into the street.

“Please Ekyt...Don’t leave.” Amy begged. Ekyt kept walking. “You could do so much here!” Tails exclaimed. Ekyt kept going. “Stop or I will be forced to attack!” Omega declared. Ekyt kept walking straight at them. “This will be YOUR mistake!” Silver warned, picking up a box with his telekinesis. He threw it at Ekyt, who kicked it out of the air, smashing it, without missing a stride. Shadow shot a warning chaos spear at him. But Ekyt ignored that too. Knuckles and Linda (Ekyt at least knew who Linda had picked- he should have guessed.) looked at each other. Linda stepped aside, but Knuckles walked directly in Ekyt’s path. He smashed the ground, creating a pothole. Ekyt leapt it, eyes straight forward, staring them all down. Sonic stepped in his way. “You don’t want to leave Ekyt. I can tell.” “How do you know? You’re not me.” Ekyt told him, still walking. “I’m warning you, we’ll attack if we have to. You’re a good guy, I know you’re just confused.” “I know perfectly well what I’m doing.” Ekyt returned.

They attacked.

Sonic and Shadow used homing attacks, while Amy swung her hammer and Knuckles punched. Silver

threw boxes and rocks.

Ekyt blocked, kicked, and punched. He landed a hard uppercut to Shadow's chin while he thrust his leg backward into Sonic's stomach. His hand slashed up next, breaking the handle of Amy's hammer. Linda just watched, secretly cheering him on. Knuckles was one of the toughest, since Ekyt had never fought him before. Knuckles threw punches rapid-fire, while Ekyt, whose expression hadn't changed, blocked again and again, throwing his own fist occasionally.

For all their attacks, they didn't want to hurt Ekyt, just wear him down. Then the guards came. For some reason, Ekyt had enough and kicked one into the water, in the process taking his nightstick and throwing it at another. He threw the last one into a building, then grabbed his hair and rammed his stomach onto Ekyt's up thrust knee. But more guards came running, and Ekyt was finally overwhelmed. He continued to fight. Finally, three nightsticks to his head aggravated the concussion he already had, finally putting him back down. Shadow's eyes glowed red as he prepared to chaos blast Ekyt.

"Don't do it! Back off!" A voice said, as a woman stepped in front of Ekyt. Ekyt forced his head up, getting ready to jump in front of the brave girl, to give her a few moments of cover if Shadow attacked. He stepped in front of her, without even seeing who it was. "Don't hurt her. I've got nowhere to run. If I have to fight my way out, I am going to get out." He looked at Sonic and friends, leaning on his staff, the blood rushing down his head, mixed with sweat that was stinging his eyes.. His numbed brain registered that Linda and Elise were both in the group. Then who had just stopped Shadow from attacking.

It had been Rouge.

"Rouge? You?" Rouge grabbed him under the arms and flew up onto a roof top, with him in hand. "Good thing you're so light!" Rouge exclaimed. "Why'd you help me?" Ekyt asked, his head beginning to clear. "Linda told me what you had said, and what she was planning to tell you. I wasn't joking entirely when I told her I wouldn't mind going after you myself. And I almost did. Elise stopped me, and told me what Linda had said. About you not wanting to get too attached." She shifted, forcing him to sit down while she was standing, pacing around him. "Kidido, you're already attached. How about this: If you stay and protect Soleanna a little while longer, I'll tell them to let you go if you decide you don't like it." "Rouge, there are so many things I need to forget...I mean, I've been rejected three times, and broke my own vow to myself." He said, a little emotion spilling into his voice. Rouge offered him a hand, pulling him up. "Fate takes some strange paths. This one's another turn, I know. But maybe it's not a bad turn. Change isn't bad by definition. Change is what you make it." She told him. "Just like fate." He answered. "Right. Now, up we get! Thatta boy!" She pulled him and into a hug, which he returned, though surprised. "I'm sorry...about Linda and Knuckles." Ekyt said. "Old news kiddo. Besides, Knux and I were never officially together, y'know? I hope I find someone someday. What good is being beautiful if you have no one to admire you?" she said comically. Ekyt nodded his agreement. "So, we have a deal? We'll say, a week. If you decide you hate it, you can leave in peace. But, if you try to leave before that, my fangs will wind up in your neck." She said, smiling, to show them off. Ekyt grinned himself, thought it was a small grin. "Not the worst fate in the world. But you have my word, no more escape attempts from the city. For a week." "I'll hold you to that handsome. Let's go back to the others."

13 - The Monster I've Become...

Ekyt walked around the city, trying to get his bearings back. The moon was out, shimmering on the water, creating a beautiful backdrop. Ekyt noticed none of this, though. His world was black. He felt as though something had changed about him...He wasn't sure whether it was good or bad, though. He felt...vulnerable, but at the same time...powerful. Such an odd breed of emotions just fueled his desire to leave Soleanna. But he had made a promise, and no matter what changed, he would keep that promise. Much as he would regret it.

Sonic jumped and shimmied his way up the bell tower. "Nice night...I just can't enjoy it! I feel guilty for feeling threatened by Ekyt. I mean, he IS human, and Elise would probably go for a human...but didn't she pick me? However confused he is, I'm just as confused. I should apologize..."

Ekyt was sitting up on the roof Rouge had put him on earlier. "I should apologize to Sonic. If they would have just let me leave, I wouldn't be sitting here with my head throbbing. But I guess they're doing what they think is best, the same as me...This apology is going to be my last act of tolerance..." Ekyt said to himself, not understanding exactly what he meant himself.

Sonic and Ekyt met. "Listen, I've got to apologize about Elise..." Sonic began. "It's fine Sonic. She picked you, and I'm happy for you." "We're cool then?" "Sure." "Alright! I'm sorry about Linda too...you're having a rough time aren't you?" Ekyt gestured out across Soleanna. Little crime, little pollution.

"Sonic, I'm a human. I don't think I was meant to see this pristine world. The flowers, the trees...everything...it's like it's unreal...too perfect...I get a sense of uneasiness...and my intuition is usually right." Ekyt said, risking a glance at Sonic. Sonic grinned. "Elise did say a lot about her past...and she finally explained that fortune to me." Ekyt stopped at that. "To me, a fortune is a foretelling of a coincidence. A trick of the mind. No matter how true it may become..." Ekyt's stoic face glanced out across the water. "I'm not going to make a move on Elise. I'm not going to make a move on anyone. You're lucky that you have a complete cast of friends to back you up. Me...I'm going to rely on myself. After all, I'm the reason I've even got this far. See you around." Ekyt left, leaving the blue hedgehog somewhat confused.

"Help! Thief!" Ekyt stepped out in front of the crook. "Put it back." He said dryly. The crook took off running. Ekyt chased him, wishing he had some gold about now. Finally, after running, he threw his staff at the crook's legs, tripping him up. "That works." Ekyt got down next to him and ripped the bag out of his hand, putting a knee into the back of his neck. "This yours? I doesn't LOOK like it's yours." The criminal sputtered. "Keep struggling if you want to see the monster I've become..." Ekyt lifted the man to his feet, throwing him into a stack of boxes. The man pulled out a knife, and made his move.

Linda sat up on the roof. "You okay?" Knuckles asked. "Oh, I'm fine, I was just wondering how Ekyt was doing..." "I wouldn't worry about him. He's tough. He'll handle it." Knuckles told her.

Rouge let a tear fall from her eye. "What am I crying about? He and I were never together...I find

someone, someday...until then, jewels will do.” She said, trying to force a smile in the face of her misery.

The man lunged at Ekyt with the knife. Ekyt only had time to get his forearm in the way. He gritted his teeth as the knife cut him. “THAT was a mistake!” Ekyt grabbed the man’s knife hand and easily snapped the wrist. He put a knee into the man’s rib cage, and finally threw him back into the boxes. “I think I’ve made my point.” Ekyt picked up the knife and threw it into the water. “Think before you try that again.” He snarled.

As he made his way down the street, Ekyt heard a small sob that was quickly stifled. He turned sharply to find Rouge angrily brushing the tears from her eyes. “Rouge? You okay?” Rouge looked up. “Oh, it’s you. Yeah, I’ll be okay big guy. Thanks for asking.” “It’s no problem...let me know if I can do anything.” Rouge flew into him, in what would best be described as a flying hug. “Get Knuckles back for me!”

Sonic decided to follow his own advice and took a run. “That guy needs to learn he can count on others...but why would he? He’s handled everything himself...and then he melts when he meets Elise and Linda? I haven’t known him for long, but that doesn’t seem like him at all...”

14 - Confused Emotions and Gentle Impulsions

Rouge begging Ekyt for Knuckles was the scene Sonic walked in on. "You're a womanizing jerk." Sonic spat. "Sonic, it's not me...she wants Knuckles. Elise wants you. Linda wants Knuckles. Go have a chat with Knuckles if that's how you really feel." Ekyt said, doing his best to comfort Rouge.

"I've been living in New Soleanna (An addition to Soleanna, with beach-front condos)." Rouge told him. "Let me get you home, then I'll talk to Knuckles." Ekyt suggested/promised. Rouge sniffled. "I'm sorry I got all...weepy on you." "It happens Rouge. No worries. We'll get this straightened out." Ekyt looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Is Sonic normally like that?" Rouge shook her head. "No. I think he's worried you're going to go after Elise." Rouge said thoughtfully, her eyes red from the crying. "Here's my place." Rouge pointed to a condo. "I'll get Knuckles over here."

Quinn Ramei ducked behind some boxes, looking for an opportunity to strike. (Remember Quinn from Issue 1? –NG). He saw a crying bat, which that ROTTEN human was consoling. "Perhaps...leverage? The good guys are so easy to manipulate." He muttered. He ran across the street and into an open window. A second later, Rouge screamed.

"Knuckles, she misses you." Ekyt said flat-out. "Hmph! She dumped me for you, you know! I hope you two had a good time that night!" Ekyt's obvious confusion showed, because Knuckles said "You mean...you didn't...she lied to me?" "Probably to make you jealous." Ekyt guessed. "But I lov- I mean, we were friends!" "Now's your chance to make things right." Ekyt told him solemnly. "Speaking of that, I've got one more wrong to right."

"Elise, do you have a minute?" Ekyt asked. "Oh, certainly, what's on your mind." "Sonic thinks I'm trying to get you back. Would you mind telling him I've done nothing of the sort?" Ekyt asked cheerfully. "I will Ekyt...but, please...what do you think of me?" "You're beautiful, intelligent, and taken." Ekyt told her, truthfully. "And, if I might ask, what do you think of me?" "You're a mystery." Elise said with a shrug. "Good answer, that's what I was hoping to hear." Ekyt said, meaning every word.

"So you see...I still have feelings for Rouge." Knuckles admitted to Linda. Linda smiled and nodded. "I understand Knuckles. You'd better go get her..." As soon as Knuckles left, Linda sat down hard, depressed. "Something on your mind..." Linda jumped, but calmed as it was Ekyt asking. "Oh...sorry, I was just lost in thought." She replied. "I understand, I've been there more than once myself. Anyway...if you need to talk, I'll...I'll be around." Ekyt told her, working up the nerve to put a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"You fat fiend!" Rouge bit down on Quinn's hand. "Shut up!" he said, aiming a pistol at her temple. "HELP!" she yelled. Ekyt and Knuckles came crashing through the door. "Don't move, or I kill her!" Quinn called. "If you want a hostage, we'll trade." Ekyt said. "Fine by me. I want you kid." "Alright. Let Rouge go and I'll walk over." "Ekyt, don't." "It's fine Rouge, don't worry about me." Ekyt assured her as he walked over. As he got close, the gun aimed at him, his hand flashed up as he stepped to the side. At the same time, Knuckles grabbed Rouge and dove out of the way.

Ekyt's left palm struck Quinn in the nose, followed by his right leg hitting Quinn in the right temple. He spun and fell down. Ekyt grabbed him by his greasy ponytail and dragged him outside, grinding his face into the cobblestone streets of Soleanna. Ekyt found a guard and threw Quinn at his feet. "One for the jail." He said simply. Quinn tried to run, but Ekyt tripped him and, in one move, snapped his ankle.

Linda, dressed in a red half-shirt (It was hot, she thought, even though she hated displaying herself like that) and a pair of black shorts. She wandered around, finally seeing Ekyt throwing the man down.

"Can we talk...Ekyt, listen, I know we're not more than friends, but I just...need to know that I can count on you for that?" **I want to be more than that Ekyt. You're the only person I can trust...** "Of course you can." Ekyt said, pertrurbed. "I- Sonic? What are you?" Sonic had sped up, looking daggers at Ekyt. "We've got to talk...pal."

15 - The Rift Grows

Ekyt and Sonic were having a stare-down. Ekyt hadn't forgotten how Sonic had forced him to stay in town, thereby humiliating him. Sonic was SURE that Ekyt was after Elise.

"Look, I'm going to ask you to lay off Elise." Sonic said, uncharacteristically. "I can't lay off something I don't do. She likes YOU." Ekyt supplied with a slight snarl. "For that matter, you wouldn't have this paranoia if you had let me leave like I wanted." Sonic's glare got harder. "Are you telling me that this is my fault? You're a womanizing jerk, and it's because I wouldn't let you leave town?" "Except for the "Womanizing" part, I'd say that's accurate." Ekyt said, trying to diffuse the situation. This was Sonic's turf, Ekyt was here by chance, and he didn't want to be. So why not just agree, as long as what little bit of a reputation he had was safe. "You're saying you're a jerk?" Sonic said incredulously. "Yeah, I guess. Jerk is in the eye of the beholder."

Linda was sitting there the whole time the two guys were looking like daggers. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. "Sonic, come ON! The only time this guy's been near Elise is when you or Silver, or Shadow has dragged him there. You're insanely jealous over nothing." Sonic didn't agree. "He's a human, he would be attracted to other humans! It's in his nature!" "How would you know my nature? Maybe I'm attracted to echidnas!" Ekyt said, getting progressively redder in the face. "What, you gonna shack up with Knuckles?" "No, you know damn well what I meant!" Ekyt snarled. Linda coolly walked up to the two of them. She put a hand on each of their shoulders for a moment, then banged their heads together?" "What the hell?" they said in unison. "Will you cut the macho crap? Elise isn't into that and, frankly, neither am I!" Linda blushed as she realized what she had just said.

Elise joined the conversation just as Sonic and Ekyt were about to fight. "Oh, please don't fight you two!" Both stopped on her request. "Sonic, Ekyt isn't after me. We talked about it...the fortune came true...almost all of it. I've picked you." Sonic looked taken aback, while Ekyt showed no emotion. "While we're trading confessions...I have one..." Linda said.

"Rouge, I'm glad you're okay!" Knuckles exclaimed, helping the scared girl to her feet. "You? Came back? Knuckles, I...NEVER WANT YOU NEAR ME AGAIN!" she snarled. "You didn't do anything to help me! I had to count on a HUMAN to save me! He would taken a bullet for me!" "So would I! He just beat me to it!" Knuckles yelled. "I saved your life once! More than once! I saved you from falling into that vat of lava (That was in Sonic Adventure 2)!" Rouge stopped, embracing him suddenly. "Knuckles...I'm so confused..."

"My confession is..." Knuckles suddenly ran up, punching Ekyt hard in the face. A slash mark appeared under Ekyt's left eye. Knuckles stood, hyperventilating, while Sonic tried to hold him back. A wall of guards got between the two. Ekyt, however, dropped his good manners. He leapt over security, punching at Knuckles. The two brawled, as security tried in vain to break them up. Knuckles rolled up on top of Ekyt, his right fist coming down. Ekyt raised his left fist. It continued this way until Elise's guards started pulling the two apart using nightsticks. Ekyt and Knuckles forgot their battle and started fighting the guards.

Finally, they were pulled apart. Both panting, Ekyt had gotten the worst of it. His heart wasn't in the fight. "Wait, why the hell did you just hit me?" Ekyt asked suddenly. "Rouge loves you!" Knuckles shouted back. "What?" Three voices at once. Ekyt, Linda, and Rouge all said. "Knuckles, I never said that! I said he saved my life!" Knuckles felt incredibly stupid, and it showed. "It's cool Knuckles. If I thought someone was homing in on my girl, I'd have done the same thing." That was a small lie, but it saved Knuckles considerable embarrassment.

Ekyt closed his eyes. "I really should leave Elise. I'm causing rifts I don't even know about until it's too late. You've got a great city. I want to make sure it stays that way." Ekyt walked toward the gate. Rouge flew next to him. "You know what I said would happen if you tried to leave?" Rouge asked him, deadly serious. "Yes. But I don't think you'll do that."

Rouge leapt on him, trapping his arms at his sides with her legs, biting his neck. "Get off! You're crazy!" Ekyt shouted. "Get off Rouge!" Linda said, yanking her off. "I warned him!" she called, laughing. "You could have killed him!" "Relax, I didn't really bite him!" Rouge laughed, pointing at Ekyt. His face and neck had turned red in embarrassment. Rouge proceeded to stir the crap even more.

"You know, you were about to make some big confession Linda. What were you going to say?"

16 - Trying Something New...

Linda's confession was shocking. "I-I can't stay here!" she said. Heads snapped toward her. "I just can't!" she said, without explanation. She walked away. Ekyt watched as all the heads that were previously aimed at Linda turned toward him. "What?" "You should go get her." Rouge said. "Huh? Why? I mean, I don't mind. But" "Look, she couldn't say her REAL confession! She likes you! Wake up!" Rouge told him firmly. "Like heck she does. She'd like me dead I bet." Rouge shook her head. "Just go get her kid. She needs someone sympathetic to talk to. And that ain't me."

Linda stopped short, hearing the footsteps behind her. She moved into a guard position, turning in an attitude of offense. She let her guard drop at Ekyt's curious look. "Something's on your mind." Ekyt said simply. "Yeah. Why are you here?" Linda snapped. Ekyt gave the smallest of grins. "Let's just say that's on the back burner, and an apology is on the front." "You want an apology?" Linda asked incredulously, not wanting to believe the human could be so incredibly thick. "No, I need to give you one. I've been a jerk. Well, I've been that way for a while, the point is that YOU don't deserve it. And...well, if you need someone to talk to...my ears are ready to listen." Linda bit her lip nervously. "Well..." She whispered something to his ear. "Really? Whoa, De ja vu deluxe!" Ekyt told her. "I think we can solve this...but you have to be 100% sure about this..."

"She wants to do WHAT?" Rouge exclaimed. The stunned group stared at Ekyt, no hatred in their eyes anymore, but shock scrawled all over their faces. "She wants to be human." Ekyt repeated, trying to keep the shock out of his voice. "And you told her she could?" Shadow questioned. "She can make her own decisions. You're the one who can make it come true." Ekyt intoned. "And who said I'd do it?" Shadow growled. "No one. But I think you will." Ekyt said pleasantly. "And why is that?" "You don't want to see that girl unhappy anymore than I do." Ekyt replied.

"You're sure about this Linda?" Linda was trying to get herself ready to try being a human. It scarred her. "I'm sure. I'll never know until I try." Ekyt nodded in agreement. "Well, best of luck then." He hesitated. "At the risk of sounding like a moron, I'm going to go ahead and say that I'm sure you'll be as beautiful as a human as you are as an echidna." His embarrassment seemingly getting the better of him, Ekyt strode briskly away. But had he seen it, he would have deemed it worth it. Linda smiled for the first time in days.

"Chances are this to be temporary." Elise recited from the book of Chaos Incantations. These weren't spells persay, but enhancements to Chaos Powers. Shadow could perform it easy.

Ekyt paced outside, restless, his stoicism failing him.

"Linda?" Ekyt didn't dare believe his eyes. He had fallen for only one human (That would be Elise). THIS one was special.

Long red hair, streaked with light purple highlights, white skin lightly tanned, and even sort-of teeth-fangs. He could tell it was Linda by the figure and the voice.

“What do you think?” she asked nervously. “Beautiful...” Ekyt sputtered. Gently, her hand (Now glove-free) found his. “Can we talk?” Her emerald green eyes pleaded silently, telling Ekyt this was a matter of some urgency.

The human Linda was dressed in the white t-shirt the “echidna” Linda wore, but no vest. That was folded neatly in her apartment. Linda disdained skirts save for special occasions, but it was brutally hot. She decided on a pair of jean shorts that fell just shy of her knees. They were ill-fitting, slightly tight, but it was short notice. She vowed that, IF she kept the “Human” thing, she would have the clothes to suit it.

“What I need to know...did you mean what you did?” Linda asked Ekyt. “Which thing?” he asked. That wasn’t an easy question to answer. “When you...kissed me. Did you mean that.” Ekyt nodded shyly, at a loss for words, coming across as a 12 year old who has a crush on an older woman rather than being the older one in the kinda-sorta-maybe-not sure- relationship.

“I’ve got to admit, you helped me decide this.” Linda admitted. “Really? If anything, I thought I would have talked you out of it.” Ekyt answered truthfully. Linda cocked her head slightly, her hair moving with her. That was strange, having hair. Her fur was soft, but short. This was long and wavy and seemed to get Ekyt’s attention, whether he meant to give it or not. “How so?”

Ekyt, with a sigh, said “Well, you’ve seen me, always being miserable.” Linda laughed. “I already know you’re a special case Ekyt.” She held onto his hand with both of hers, staring him in the eye. “Look, I’m going to apologize for running out after you got the guys up to kiss me. It was the right answer, and I hope you and I can mend fences and be friends...” she said in a hopeful voice. She then added a kiss on the cheek; he had done the same thing when he got the nerve up to admit feelings for her.

If he was reading her right, she had just done the same thing. Astounded, Ekyt looked back at her. “There’s no animosity Linda. I was the jerk, wanting to leave. But you all might have been better off without me.” “Not likely. You’re someone I can talk to regardless of circumstances. It means a lot.” Linda said, giving him a small grin. “How about a fresh start...” Linda stood up, still holding his hand. “S-Sure.” He stammered. He took another look at her. “Linda...if you don’t mind my asking...what REALLY made you want to be human?”

17 - The First Six Hours...

“The REAL reason.” Ekyt emphasized. Linda looked nervous, but recovered quickly, giving the impression that she was hiding something. “Well...It’s like this. There aren’t a lot of echidnas, and there are lots of humans.” She was still gripping his hand and upper arm as she finished. “I’m hoping I’ll meet someone, I guess. My brother died young, and he was alone...I don’t want the same thing to happen to me.” She tried to gauge his reaction. If he HAD one, he kept it hidden very well.

Two younger guys, about 16 or so, decided to make some...well, some comments to Linda that made her new ears redden. “Why don’t you idiots back off? If you’re trying to get my attention, let me warn you, you’d get the WRONG kind of attention.” Ekyt put an arm on her shoulder gently. “Relax, don’t get worked up over these clowns.” “Who’s the freak in the coat?” At that Ekyt’s head snapped up. He strode menacingly toward them. “I was under the impression you just insulted her, and then myself. So, if I were in your position, I would apologize to her.” Ekyt said, a smile on his face despite his obvious anger. “Or what...freak?” Ekyt’s smile vanished at that. “I seem to have touched a nerve.” Ekyt grabbed the kid by his shirt and stuffed his forearm under his chin. “It’s not a nerve you want to touch. Now apologize.” Ekyt’s voice left no room for argument.

“Ekyt, let it go. These guys are idiots.” Linda muttered. “You’ve had more hands on you than a doorknob!” The one Ekyt wasn’t currently choking laughed. He stopped when Linda tackled him and began to crack him across the face. The one Ekyt was dealing with was struggling to get away. He kned Ekyt in the stomach. Finally having enough reason to lambaste the little punk, Ekyt did so. This touched off a fight as two more of their friends came running.

Ekyt tossed the kid he had just hit down, and stared down the two others, who no longer seemed so intent on helping the guy Linda was demolishing. Instead, they helped their other friend up and ran off. Ekyt watched them run, then gently pulled Linda off what was left of the guy she had just demolished. “Okay, I think you’ve made your point.” Ekyt said gently as Linda stopped struggling against him. “I guess so. Still...I wonder why he said that...I never got that reaction before...” Linda said thoughtfully. It hit her as she went to scratch her head, feeling hair instead of fur. “It’s a human thing. Unfortunately.” Ekyt replied. “If you don’t mind my asking...there’s something you’re not telling me. That’s perfectly alright; I don’t want to pressure you.” Linda looked as if she was going to say something, but stopped. Ekyt decided to fill the gap. “So, are you going to stay human?”

As they walked back toward the others, one man saw fit to swat Linda on the butt. Ekyt swung around, grabbing the man around the neck. “I don’t approve of that. And I’m sure she doesn’t either dirtbag.” Ekyt clamped down for a minute, holding the struggling man easily (Cool thing about pressure points), despite the man having the strength advantage. “Ekyt...may I?” Linda asked. Ekyt, not fully understanding, let the man go. Linda slapped him so hard it drew blood. She knelt down near his face. “I hope you’ve learned something.” She said pleasantly.

“I DID tell you the truth...Just not all of it.” Linda said. Ekyt looked over, taking a minute to remember what she was talking about. “That’s alright. It’s your business, I shouldn’t have pried.” “You weren’t prying, you were being concerned. That means a lot in and of itself, you know. “The fact is, this is

something you need to know. I have twenty-four hours to decide to stay this way. That's not to say I couldn't be a human again, but if I stay human, it's permanent." Ekyt was wondering why she was saying all this.

He couldn't relax too long. He suddenly realized Linda had stopped. She had a gun to her back. "What? What is it you're after?" Ekyt asked the man holding Linda around the neck. Linda look more angry than scared. Ekyt made eye contact with her and decided to let her handle the problem...mostly. "I'm after this little dumpling here" The man said with a hearty laugh. "What is going on today? I've had to rip WAY too many people apart today. If you like your jaw where it is, you'd better back off..." Ekyt warned. "One step and I kill her!" Linda's eyes flashed upward. "You haven't asked me my opinion." Linda said simply. She turned around slowly, her hands up.

As soon as she did, she grabbed the man's gun hand while stepping to the side. He shot, missing her. She kicked him in the back of the head to distract him before bringing her elbow down on his wrist, breaking it. She kicked the gun away, calling for someone to get him medical attention.

"Ekyt, I need to tell you this. I" Linda's voice trailed off. Ekyt was holding his left arm. His stoic expression didn't fool her. "Let me see." She said. "I'm fine." He said evasively. "Don't lie to me. I can tell. I'm still echidna inside." She said flatly, insinuating that her senses were better than average. "Okay, but you're going to regret looking." He held his arm out. "My God, that shot hit you?!" "It just nicked the end of my shoulder." He said, ignoring a growing burning sensation.

Linda looked at him. "Look...you don't have to be all stoic around me." Her eyes met his briefly. "It's not just around you. It's everyone. I've been this way for a long time. Never related to people. I think you're the first human to fully accept me for who and what I am. I think I even scared Elise." He said with a small smile, which turned to a grimace briefly as a new wave of pain shot through his arm. Linda looked at him, a worried expression crossing her smooth features. "I'm going to say this really quick Ekyt, before we get interrupted. I wanted to try being human because of you. The stuff you do, it really impresses me. It never occurred to me all the trouble I would get in being human. I'm going to stay a human for the rest of the twenty-four hours at least, I'm not sure what I want to do." Ekyt nodded in an understanding manner. "I think you'll make the right choice, I can't pretend to know too much about you, but I can tell you're not just another pretty face. You're smart."

Linda considered this. **Anyone else would most likely be crying, and he's telling me I'm pretty and smart? This is a rare breed of cat...It's not fair for me to string him along like this...he deserves a definite answer...but I can't say it either way...** "C'mon, let's get this bandaged up."

As she wound a bandage around his shoulder, he chuckled softly. "You know, that's not a normal reaction to getting shot." She said mildly. "I was just thinking that this is how we first met...me getting shot and you bandaging me up. Of course, at that point I was a lot better off. I was ruling a country. Now I'm trying and failing to escape the same country. I must come across as pathetic." Ekyt murmured, some merriment in his voice. "No you don't!" she said, letting a little too much of her feelings creep into the short sentence. "You're not pathetic! You'd just been dumped by two girls! If anyone is pathetic, it's me! I tried to be something I'm not, just to impress...everyone." She had stopped herself just in time.

But she had a feeling the mysterious human in front of her already knew how she felt. She wondered if he was as confused as she was.

18 - O-KAY...

Ekyt still couldn't believe the beautiful human girl he was walking with around Soleanna was Linda. But something didn't feel right, though he couldn't put his finger on *what*.

He had found her attractive as an echidna, and just as much as a human! He was worried, though, she was attracting a lot of unwanted attention. She seemed to notice the same thing, but smiled in such a nice manner that Ekyt forgot his concern for the moment.

"I never appreciated how beautiful Soleanna is until now!" Linda exclaimed. "If you don't mind my asking...what's with Shadow? He seems more angry than usual." Ekyt commented. "Sonic's acting weird, too." Linda said thoughtfully. "I wonder if..." Ekyt's voice trailed off. "What?" "I wonder if they're worried about losing you to me." he finished. "Why would that worry them?" She said, while a nasty thought told her **You know how he feels about you, and you know how YOU feel about HIM. THAT'S their issue.** Linda dismissed the thought. "I mean that they might feel I'm a threat, seeing that I'm different and all. Kind of like you're hanging out with the wrong crowd."

Ekyt was uncomfortable with the whole thing. He had a great deal of respect for all those involved in this, and wanted them to respect him in return. A vicious thought struck him then. **Who the hell cares what they think? I like this girl, why do I need to worry about them?** The same voice in his head answered. **But does the girl like you? She hasn't said so yet. Suspicions aside, it's not a good idea to rub it in their faces...Not that you've ever cared, and you aren't going to start now. If you mind your own business, then the others might follow suit.**

Linda's attention was diverted by a shop keeper. "I could use a girl like you around...bring in the guys." he said. Linda raised an eyebrow. "No, thanks. I'm not the kind of girl that likes all that attention." The shop owner shrugged. "Suit yourself doll, your loss." "I'm sure." Linda answered coldly. She turned to find a surprise.

"Stay away from her!" Shadow snarled at Ekyt. "And you'll stop me? I doubt it!" Ekyt shot back. "Guys, c'mon, this is stupid, she can be with whoever she wants!" Sonic, at least, seemed to ke regain his old attitude. "He'll ruin her, just like he ruined himself!" Shadow said, poking Ekyt in the chest. "If you touch me again, I swear...."

"Guys! C'mon!" Linda broke up the fight quickly. "Shadow, who I spend time with is my business. Ekyt, you don't need to fight EVERYONE who insults me! I swear..." She couldn't help but laugh after she finished, thinking something along the lines of **Boys are so stupid...** The thought disturbed her some, as she'd never thought like that before.

"Ekyt, am I different? I mean, aside from the new body." Linda asked. "No. Well, yes. You're not comfortable, are you?" She shook her head. "I'm glad people think I'm beautiful, but it's not me." **I already know YOU think I'm beautiful either way. You love me for WHO I am...You're a rare one Ekyt.**

Linda-Su let the process wear off. She returned to her echidna form, happy with knowing she was liked for who she was personality wise. "I'm glad you're back to being you Linda." Ekyt told her. "I tried it because of you. You make humanity look better." She joked. "I wish. But at any rate, I'd better go. I've decided to stick around, as a vigilante. I have some experience." He said. "Okay, see you later." she said, kissing him on the cheek, much to BOTH their surprises.

19 - Blaze Returns

“That was just a thanks!” Linda replied quickly. “I appreciate that. I” WHUMP! Shadow had suddenly attacked Ekyt. “I saw you kiss her! I’m going to kill you!” Ekyt had enough of that pretty quickly. “SHE kissed ME. And she can kiss whoever the hell she wants! Hell, she could make out with Rouge and” “I’d like to see that!” Knuckles exclaimed. “Shut up!” Everyone yelled at him. Ekyt and Shadow were still going at it, until Shadow played his ace.

CHAOS BLAST! Ekyt was rocketed backward into a wall. “What on earth? How the...Never mind. If you don’t want to fight fair...” Ekyt stuffed some gold into his shoes and took off, hitting shadow with his shoulder before he could even react. They raced along buildings, attacking each other with kicks and punches. Sonic joined in, trying to force the two apart. “C’mon, break it up guys! Stop already!” They ignored Sonic and kept attacking each other. Sonic stopped suddenly. They both turned to see why. WHAM! UGH!

The second sound was a groan, caused by the first sound, which was two creatures hitting a brick wall at top speed. Then there was a third sound. “Are you okay?” in stereo. Shadow was up and skating, Ekyt was laying there wondering what just happened. He looked up to see Elise, Rouge, AND Linda looking down concerned at him. “I’m fine.” He said, pulling himself up. Three sets of hands helped him. Ekyt winced. Sonic ran over. He wasn’t looking too happy. “Elise...if he’s the one you wanted...you should have just said so...” Sonic started to walk away.

Ekyt had seen enough. “That’s it. Look, you can try to keep me here all you want. The only thing that’s happening is I’m causing problems. I don’t mean to, I really don’t. But I’m going to leave and let the rest of you keep your sanity.” “Don’t go past the forest, or I’ll bite a hole right through your neck. I’m not joking this time hot stuff.” Rouge licked her fangs, the sun gleaming off them.

Ekyt left quickly, not wanting to be stopped again. **What is Linda thinking? Does she like me? And why am I thinking of that? I like her...love her...who knows anymore. I liked...loved...Elise. I don’t even know what the hell love is! And Rouge...she’s up to something...it’s like she’s...flirting with me. I don’t mind the attention, but I’d just like an honest answer. From any one of them! For Christ sake, just tell me how you feel! If it’s no, it’s no! I’m a big boy, I can take it...**

The forest was a great place. Mountains, fresh air, and a pond. No mosquitoes. Ekyt was near the pond when he saw a cat stranded out on the water. There was a small island, and a purple cat was standing on it. How she got there was apparent by the mirror next to her. “You okay?” Ekyt called. “I can’t swim across!” Ekyt thought for a moment, swimming wasn’t his strongest point either. He COULD, but he doubted he could get her back safely. “Use the mirror! I can guide you over with my staff! Put the mirror in the water!” She cat did as she was instructed. Ekyt used his staff to pull her in. “Thanks!” she gasped. Then she fell over. Ekyt saw a burn up her whole back. “Oh damn! Hang on!” He ran back to town, holding her in a fireman’s carry.

“What on earth?” Ekyt burst through the gates to the city. “Where’s the doctor?” he yelled. He put the cat down for a minute, when he was frozen.

It had happened enough for Ekyt to know that it was Silver's telekinetic abilities. Ekyt was thrown hard. Silver let go too soon out of anger, and Ekyt was on his feet. "What the heck are you doing?" "Don't YOU go near Blaze!" Silver shouted. Ekyt jumped as Silver went for a sweep kick. "What the heck is a "Blaze?" Do you mean the girl I just saved?" Silver stopped attacking. "You...saved HER?" Ekyt launched into the story.

Silver looked at Ekyt sideways. "LIAR!" He threw Ekyt through a window, then leapt inside after him...

20 - It Finally Happens

There was a brief struggle inside the window. No one wanted to leave Blaze, and they figured that Ekyt and Silver needed to settle things. CRACK!

Ekyt stepped out of the window, blood at the corners of his mouth, carrying an unconscious Silver. "He shouldn't have tried to jump me." Ekyt muttered. "What the hell did you hit him with?" Linda asked, never having seen Silver bested so quickly. "A chair." Ekyt answered, dropping the unconscious hedgehog roughly onto the ground. "Now that I've handled that, I'm out of here."

"You don't want to do that." Shadow murmured darkly. "And why don't I want to do that? 'Cause I'm relatively sure I DO want to leave." Shadow smirked. "You're really clueless. LINDA is the one keeping you here. She and Elise and Sonic want you here. I sure as hell don't...respect is something earned...not bestowed." He gave Ekyt a significant look. "I don't expect to have your respect. And I doubt I ever will. No matter what I do to earn it, you're not going to like me because of Who and What I am. Those are just straight facts. But I don't mind saying: I respect you. Think about that."

Ekyt made for the gate again. He was blocked by Sonic. "Damnit! You don't trust me, why the hell are you keeping me here?!" Sonic grinned. "You know, I do trust you. I forgot that Elise is the kind of girl that likes everyone. You've been true to your word, and that's something I can respect." Sonic stretched his legs casually. "You could walk past me right now, and I could chase you down. But that's not what either of us want. This is a decision you have to make."

For some reason, those words hit home with Ekyt. "I just don't want to make everyone miserable. And things are still...awkward. With Rouge and Elise and Linda. I don't know what to think." Sonic stretched some more. "Let me tell you this: Elise and Rouge are the type who like everyone. Linda, however, isn't. She's a rebel. It would take something pretty big to make her the "nice girl" all of a sudden. I don't know, it could be a coincidence, but since you came, she's been a different girl. Happier. But there's something she's holding back...maybe YOU could help her..." Sonic didn't say any more. He didn't have to. He had gotten his point across.

Linda was massaging her temples, trying to focus. She had pulled her hair up into a pony tail, since it was so brutally hot. "Linda...do you have a second?" Ekyt asked. Linda shook herself out of her stupor. "Sure. What's up?" she asked amiably. Ekyt could tell she wasn't saying something.

So he kissed her.

The kiss ended. Ekyt didn't say anything; he just stroked her hair for a moment. Then he got up and, with a significant look over his shoulder, left her to think about what in the hell had just happened.

21 - A Tough Call

“He just...kissed you?!” Rouge exclaimed.

“You just kissed her?!” Sonic exclaimed.

“Yeah...I think...Was it real?” Linda said/asked.

“Yeah...I think...Was that real?” Ekyt said/asked.

“Holy! I didn’t give the kid enough credit!” Rouge exclaimed. “I’m happy for you Linda!” Elise said with a huge smile.

“Holy! I didn’t think you’d go THAT far! Way to go!” Sonic exclaimed. “I’m happy for you man. Figures you bag the only echidna, though.” Knuckles said with a grin.

Ekyt and Linda walked away and bumped into each other. “Oh, um hi.” She stammered. “How are you?” Ekyt asked, trying to keep his voice firm. Linda motioned toward a park. “Maybe we could talk there?” Ekyt nodded and followed her lead. Once inside the park, which was empty. The kids were at home for dinner. So they beautiful park, with it’s lush green trees and clear blue stream. “I’m sorry if that was wrong.” Ekyt murmured. “But I couldn’t keep you... or me...on the edge any longer. You deserved to know how I felt about you. Whether you feel the same way or not, I’ll understand.” Ekyt didn’t even try to sound casual; it wouldn’t have worked anyway. Linda seemed to struggle with her words. “I don’t know what to think...You are easily the best guy I’ve ever met...I just don’t know if I could handle a relationship...” Ekyt smiled at her, gently taking her hand. “I’d rather you were ready...I’m happy being friends, and nothing else. Just...keep in mind that I respect you. I’m not going to say any more, because I’m sure I’m not making this choice easier.” He gave her a small, fond, but somehow worried, smile.

“Ekyt...wait.” She got up after him. He turned around into an embrace. “Thanks for understanding...I’ll be ready for a boyfriend someday, and I hope that, if it’s not you, it’s a guy like you.” She ran a hand down his cheek, then kissed him lightly where her hand had been.

“You said WHAT?!” Rouge exclaimed, wincing.

“She said WHAT?!” Sonic exclaimed, wincing.

“I’m not ready yet...” Linda said, blushing.

“She’s not ready yet...” Ekyt said, his ears turning red.

“Oh boy! Is he fine with this?” Rouge asked.

“And she’s fine with this?!” Sonic asked.

"I think so. He was nice about it." Linda said thoughtfully.

"I'm pretty sure. She was nice about the whole thing." Ekyt said thoughtfully.

Boyfriend/Girlfriend or not, the two had to band together, as did everyone else. Eggman was back, and he had a new enemy for them to face. This enemy promised to take them all down. Eggman wasn't interested in ruling Soleanna, or owning any of it's secrets.

He wanted to destroy it.

22 - Emotional Roulette

Ekyt sat still, trying mediation for the first time in a long time. It wasn't working, for a number of reasons. With a sigh, he got up, stretching his back out. Lying without a shirt on a mass of rocks wasn't his cup of tea. He decided to explore the underground "caverns" that made up the never-used sewer system. He didn't feel like going above ground today.

Why was Ekyt so tense? Well, his birthday was coming up (August 25th, same as mine, lol). He was nervous by nature. Or the girl he was sure was THE one just shot him down. Take your pick. Likely, all three were disturbing him at the moment.

His tour didn't take long. He had wandered aimlessly in a circle. With a sigh, he gave that up and found the darkest spot he could. Thinking back to karate, he forced himself into a kata. One with a lot of breathing, so he could settle himself down. He couldn't concentrate, kicking the wall in frustration. He had tried everything, he couldn't settle down. The fight or flee instinct came into play. For once, he wanted to flee rather than fight.

Linda pulled off her night clothes, then hurriedly tossed on her underwear and fresh clothes. She had more energy than she'd had in a while. "Amazing what having an older guy interested in you can do." She said to herself as she gulped down a healthy breakfast and started to exercise.

Ekyt pulled on his shirt, giving up on the exercise for now. He pulled on his coat, feeling as though the only thing in the world he could trust was it's fabric. It had never let him down. His own emotions and strength had. **I always could pride myself on being in control of my world...now I can't make that claim. Damn!**

Linda felt great physically. Emotionally, she was concerned. Even if there wasn't a relationship, Ekyt was still her friend. She hadn't seen him. He hadn't left town (Sonic and Shadow would have dragged him back), and he wasn't likely to hide, so that left staying home. Wherever THAT was. She knew the sewers, but where? And should she go find him?

Ekyt climbed out of the sewer, muttering to himself. "Let me down!" Someone had Rouge, and was holding her against the wall! Ekyt ran over, stepping in between the two. "Don't do that to a lady you scumbag." He said. He needed an outlet, and here it was. The man punched at him. Ekyt didn't bother to move, save for putting up a forearm. He decked his opponent, a greasy-looking guy with long salt and pepper hair, wearing bad clothes from the 80's. The man got up and ran for it. Ekyt wanted to go after him, but settled for helping Rouge up instead. "Are you alright?" he asked her. She had taken a nasty spill. And Ekyt saw why. That prick had tied her wings together. "Hold still. You're going to have to trust me." Ekyt told Rouge, who nodded, seemingly unable to speak. Ekyt pulled the rope from her wings, which she spread gratefully.

"Any idea why that guy was after you?" Ekyt asked. "Because I'm so hot?" Rouge asked, keeping a straight face. "Most likely." Ekyt admitted. Rouge's enthusiasm dimmed. "I know kiddo, she shot you down. But don't take it to heart. Linda's still kind of new here. On our planet, she's an adult. Here,

she's considered a kid and treated like one. Ekyt nodded. "It's not just that, it's my birthday." He admitted. "It's in fifteen days. It's just another reminder that I'm getting older, and that I haven't done a stellar job with my life in 18 years." He said, spilling part of what was bothering him.

Rouge new Linda was the main reason the tough as nails vigilante was in as much pain as she had ever seen him. Birthday's sucked, though they were preferable to the alternative. But no doubt he felt aged because of Linda. **I wonder...**Rouge thought, suddenly mischievous.

"You know, no one remembered my birthday, back in April." She said thoughtfully. She had him sit down on a park bench (There was an abundance in Soleanna). "And it didn't bother me. No one celebrates their birthdays in our group. Mostly so we don't offend Shadow, who doesn't know his birthday. But the recognition would be nice. To have the world revolve around you for one day." Ekyt smiled without much enthusiasm. "I'm sure that if you asked, every guy would gladly give you all the attention you needed." Rouge laughed. "Yeah...but it's the ones that don't return the signs that intrigue me. You, for example." She sat down beside him. "You, I just don't get." She inched closer, suppressing a giggle as he flinched slightly. "You appear to be human..." (inches closer) "You appear to be male..." (right up against Ekyt now) "Yet you don't respond to any signs I send you." "Signs?" Ekyt said, trying to sound calm. Rouge put a hand on his chest and her head on his shoulder. "Siggnnnsssss..." she whispered into his ear, her breath on his neck. Ekyt guessed she was either trying to seduce him, or was getting ready to bite him. Rouge climbed onto his lap, facing him. She smoothed his hair out, then elected to stare him down. His hazel eyes wouldn't accomadate her. "Most men, in this position, would return the embrace." She said cheerfully. "This is an embrace?" Ekyt questioned. Rouge snuggled up even closer; She couldn't get any closer to him. This was Akward for Ekyt. If he looked away, he might appear as though he wasn't paying attention. If he looked at her, he felt like a pervert. Though it was against typical human nature, he wished she would get a proper shirt. (Lo! Sorry, this all stemmed from a comment one of my professors made: Your neckline should not be at your waist.)

Rouge put an arm around his neck, and one around his shoulders. "You know...I'm scared. What if it happens again...What if I get attacked, or worse?" Rouge appeared to be shaking. "Hold me...please..." she choked out, in an academy-award winning performance. She clung to Ekyt tighter. For his part, he couldn't do anything. His limbs weren't responding to his garbled brain waves. He made them work, and he embraced Rouge gently, comforting her. She looked at him, the buried her face in his neck. He felt her hot, wet tears hit his neck. "I'm always calm!" she moaned. "Now, I'm freaked out!"

Linda jogged around the path, finding a stunned and troubled looking Ekyt, and Rouge, who was doing a heck of an acting job. "Rouge. I thought we discussed this." The Linda realized the young bat wasn't acting. Linda sat down on Ekyt's other side, trying to calm Rouge down. "I'm sorry Ekyt." She said, out of the blue. "I'm sorry too. I shouldn't drag you into my problems." They both kissed him on the cheek, then jogged/flew away abruptly.

"What the hell. I can't get a relationship, but I can get TWO of them to kiss me? How the hell did that happen?" There was a bigger problem. After tonight, Rouge had shown him a compassionate side, one of a lonely girl that needed companionship. He had been shot down by Linda, so why not date Rouge?

I can't do it. Can I? GAH! Damn my conscience! Why do I feel like it would be betraying Linda? We were never together, and we aren't now! That did little for Ekyt's problems, however. His birthday

was still looming on the horizon, and it seemed his girl trouble was just beginning.

23 - Guilt Without Reason

What is wrong with me? Any other guy would be delighted...but I have to turn a simple, innocent gesture of friendly affection into a conscience-bender! At least I don't have to worry about the "how does she feel about me" thing anymore...damn, I wish I did...and this mediation crap isn't working! Ekyt snapped to himself. Not the technique, but the fact that it wasn't working was irritating him to no end. He got up and looked out across Soleanna. Another perfect day. Even THAT irritated him. It was going to be a LONG day.

Rouge and Linda couldn't help but chuckle at Ekyt's reaction to their affection. Strange how all men reacted differently. They didn't have long to worry about that. Eggman was trying to attack again, and this time he had a friend that made Rouge drool. "Take a look at THAT guy." She said breathlessly. "Almost worthy of YOU Rouge." Linda said, rolling her eyes. "Sure is kiddo...I mean, Ekyt's a nice guy...but THIS one...yeaahhhh." She couldn't take her eyes off the echidna that was strutting down the town square. Mostly because he was being obnoxious to the citizens. "Rouge, I'll catch you later." she muttered.

She found Ekyt leaving the forest, muttering. "Ekyt, trouble!" she called. He looked up. She admired him; he could put aside their collective awkwardness to get the job done. "What's up?" "This new guy, he's this echidna. He's with Eggman, and treating people like crap. Rouge fell for him." Ekyt muttered something to himself, then nodded decisively. "Okay, let's go. Lead the way." They both took off full speed for this new problem. With Sonic and Co away with Elise on some ambassador mission, it would be up to these two.

The echidna was someone Ekyt knew. "It's Shihan James." He said, his tone awed. "I knew he was a money-hungry jerk, but I didn't think he'd sink THIS low...He'll be tough, and he won't be alone...Linda, can you get everyone into the castle? This is kind of...personal." Ekyt strode over to the echidna.

"It's been a while Tom." He said flatly. "Ekyt? My star pupil! Have you seen the error of your ways?" "No. Have YOU seen the error of YOURS?" Ekyt questioned. "The reason I kicked you out of my school was your attitude. Not at all befitting of a warrior carrying my crest." "I wouldn't carry your crest, and you know that. I know you're here, and I know why. And I'm sorry you have to leave so soon." Ekyt said forcefully. "I think not." Linda was back at his side. "Hiya teach." She said grimly. "You know him?" James smiled. "Of course she knows me! I trained her! The same I trained you! You were my brightest...pity you chose the wrong path." The echidna made a gesture, and his warriors came out of nowhere. Half of them were male, half were female. Ekyt and Linda exchanged glances. "Fight or flee?" "Both." Ekyt said. Fighting while running full speed wasn't easy, but it was the best option.

Linda threw some knives she had concealed on her (Ekyt was mad he hadn't noticed- then he was relieved that they were friends), driving the enemies back some. Ekyt spun his staff around behind his back, hitting one. "Here!" he called to Linda, tossing his staff over. She jumped on a fence, running across it, foot over foot. Ekyt was amazed. He couldn't do that when he was being formally trained. For some reason, he was proud and annoyed at the same time. He threw a barrel backwards to vent some frustration.

They were nearing the warehouse section of Soleanna. Linda vaulted from the fence, over the outer wall, and inside, not missing a step. Ekyt couldn't pull that off. So he turned to fight instead. Half followed Linda inside, the other half (Minus the one Linda had taken out, and minus the two Ekyt had hit with the barrel) squared off. That's when Ekyt saw they were armed. And he wasn't.

Crap! He suddenly saw his answer. If he couldn't outfight them, he'd outsmart them. He jumped into the forklift he had seen, and drove it full speed at his enemies. Not honorable, but preferable to death at this point. Little did he know the fight was just picking up.

Inside, Linda was in trouble. She was cornered, her weapon long gone. She took a fighting stance against an older woman, a sensei. A one on one duel began.

Ekyt had been right. This was going to be a long day.

24 - One Injured Party

Having dispatched of his crew, Ekyt climbed up and over the gate to check on Linda. On the way, he saw some gold. Someone had lost a watch. Perfect.

Linda defeated the first two of the enemies with an impressive array of techniques. She saw Ekyt run over, picking out the man in the group and pairing off with him. Ekyt won quickly after cracking the man on the point of his chin. "Any ideas?" Linda called over. "Just one." He said, stuffing the watch into his shoes. "Get ready to hold on!" he called as he hit top speed, scooping her up.

He ran, feeling both of their heartbeats. She had grabbed him around the neck, while he carried her in front of him. They zipped along, looking for an escape. Those warriors that Shihan James had trained were keeping up somewhat. "Time to go! Hold on!" he said, making a leap and slamming down onto a sewer grate, which gave way. They landed hard, Ekyt taking most of the punishment. Linda landed on her hands and knees, one arm and leg on either side of him. "You okay?" she asked. "Never better." He groaned, getting up. "We can't stop now. James won't settle for a fair fight. We've got to think this out." Linda told him. He nodded his agreement. "Hey wait...hold still..." She said urgently. She lifted his head up, not liking what she saw. "You hit your head pretty hard. Come on, you're going to have to show me where you live. We've got to get you patched up." Ekyt shook his head. "They'll know by now, they'll be looking for us. I'm fine, really."

"So, James taught you?" "In the loosest sense of the word. If knowledge is power, he doesn't want to share the power." Linda told Ekyt. Ekyt grinned in agreement. "If you can't make him money, then you're no use to him." Ekyt paused, the grin fading from his face, replaced by a thoughtful look. "I'm...sorry. If my words made you uncomfortable." They didn't need to discuss what he was talking about (His love confession). "It's alright. It would have hurt more if you hadn't said anything." Ekyt nodded slightly. "How about you tell me about yourself?" Ekyt suggested. "I know I'd never get anything out of you, mystery man!" she laughed. "Sure. My parents were fascinated with Japan and it's culture. So I was introduced to Martial Arts early. And I just kept the habit up." Ekyt closed his eyes slightly, answering a moment later. "I started martial arts for the protection they offered. Comes in handy." He paused, suddenly lighting a match. He put it to a candle he had pulled from somewhere, sending a flickering flame across the hidden area they were in. Linda sighed suddenly. To her surprise, Ekyt asked "Are you okay?" She nodded. "Sometimes I wish I could have been...just a girl...instead of a female warrior...having nothing on my mind but boys and fashion (This is NOT a shot at my female audience, I don't mean those words in any way! So please don't form a lynch mob!)...Wishful thinking, I guess." "Nothing wrong with that." Ekyt said. "What about you? Have you ever regretted the path you've taken." "Every day I wonder if I've made the right choice. Am I really helping anyone? Is it best for me? And I get the same answer every day: I'm doing the right thing. If I died defending someone, I would die with a clear conscience." Linda nodded, understanding.

Night fell soon, giving an advantage to James' black-clad warriors. Ekyt passed Linda some clothes. "Try these on. They won't win any prizes for fashion. But we can't wear our own clothes, we'd get caught easily." Linda raised an eye. "What?" Ekyt asked, surprised. "I'm not changing in front of you, perv!" she said with a laugh. "Aw crap. Are you sure I can't convince you?" Ekyt said mockingly. He

left, changing into his own other set of clothes.

They sat a while longer, resting. Ekyt suddenly got up, hearing a scream. "I can't do this anymore. I'm going out there and fighting these guys off." He climbed up a ladder and out a manhole. He picked it up and threw it, hitting one of James' students in the leg, breaking it. Another rushed him with a dagger. Ekyt caught his wrist, then shifted his momentum, moving forward. He stepped on his foot, while bending the arm. He heard the tell-tale CRACK of broken bones. As the man sobbed in pain, Ekyt stepped on his face, knocking out teeth, then reached down and relieved him of his weapon. Ekyt's cruelty came for a reason: The man had punched an old woman who was begging him not to rob her.

Linda climbed up after him. "Here, you take this." Ekyt said, handing her the knife. "This'll even the odds a little." Linda said happily. "I'll avoid their vitals." Ekyt wasn't sure if she was serious or not. He didn't ask, feeling he could trust her. And there wouldn't have been time to argue anyway. "My finest fighters...good luck! I doubt your meager skill can overcome them!" Shihan James' taunted. Ekyt started to retort, but was beaten to the punch by Linda. "After we're done beating the tobacco juice out of your little escort here, we're going to come and break all your bones. When you heal, we'll be back to break them all again. Sound fair?" Ekyt gulped. James was going to be tough. He had no desire to cripple someone either.

But enough thought, they had a battle to win.

25 - Issue 25 Special: Linda's starring role!

Linda had waited a long time to face Shihan James again. She had briefly thought of him as brilliant, and somewhat attractive. Then he had attacked her home, after she had defeated him in a sparring match, more or less exposing him as a money-hungry fraud. She wondered how Ekyt's problem with the Shihan had come to fruition. She forced that from her mind as a knife slashed at her. She blocked it with her forearm, knowing she'd get a small cut. She snaked her arm around and rotated her body, breaking the arm and freeing the knife in one motion. He followed through by stabbing down, towards the man's leg. It struck home, in the meat of the quadriceps. Nowhere vital, but it would slow put him down.

Ekyt stepped aside, punching a little too hastily, a sweeping knife meeting his hand. He pulled up short, exposing his tricep muscle in a costly mistake. The knife cut through it, not deep, but it hurt. Ekyt breathed out, as if he could exhale the pain, and struck with his other hand. From behind a bo struck him in the back of the knee, forcing him to the ground. He knew his ankle was hurt. Unable to stand, he fought from his knees, and then from the ground, so he could see his attackers better. The knife slashed into the stone in the street, blunting it. Ekyt had rolled aside and kicked just as the knife struck the ground. It clattered away. Unfortunately, that left his head open to a kick that scrambled his brains, but good. He felt the knife plunge down one more time, and put a hand up to block it. Pain seared through it, seeming to intensify, before he finally gave in to the pain.

Linda's backfist struck hard. She looked over at Ekyt briefly. She couldn't pause to check his vitals, but she KNEW he was alive. Somehow. But the blood coming from the back of his head and his exposed muscle was disconcerting. With a small "Kiya!" of effort, she slammed her knee upward into an oncoming attacker's groin, folding him over in pain. Her knee rose again, hitting the nose this time, shattering it. One more kick, this time a front snap kick, broke the orbital bone. In the same motion, she kicked backward, striking someone's stomach. She spun to face THAT enemy, a roundhouse kick meeting his lips, knocking his two front teeth backward.

Ekyt laid still, the pain ripping him apart. Was he dying? Was he ALREADY dead? He lifted his head up, nearly vomiting as the world spun for a few moments. **Concussion for sure...what the hell hit me?** Another voice answered that one. **Not important...the mission...find Linda, protect the innocent...damnit, why won't my body respond? MOVE!** The last word was an order to himself. It didn't work. He had never felt this helpless. **Lay still...don't sleep...Linda needs you...** Those three thoughts plagued Ekyt. He couldn't move, and didn't know what kind of damage he had sustained. He found he couldn't care. His one emotion was hate. He HATED being this helpless. He cursed, before swearing to himself that he would be in better shape next time.

Linda fist struck home, buckling the last of her foes. The sound of clapping reached her. Shihan James was clapping, smiling that annoying, false smile that he had made his trademark. "I always knew you were bright Linda." "If I was so bright, I would have caved your head in as soon as I knew what a fraud you were!" she snarled in reply, tossing her bangs out of her eyes. "A fraud? I trained those warriors. You caught me at a moment of weakness...One I have not forgotten." "Then let's settle it!" Linda snarled. James laughed. "No. Not here. Not on your terms. When we fight, it will be on MY terms. Besides, you would be at a disadvantage now...you are injured...and your friend, once my star

pupil...Maybe he's dying." "You're lying, just like you lied about everything else!" "Perhaps...perhaps not...Perhaps you had better find out for yourself. Farewell for now." He barked a few words in some foreign language- probably Japanese- as his warriors withdrew. They disappeared in a flash of smoke and fire. Linda looked back at Ekyt. Her eyes widened with fear. She expected the worst...

Ekyt tried to sit up once more, a more or less futile effort. **You're stronger than this! Get up!** he commanded himself. No more rest. "Take it easy." A comforting voice told him. "It's just me, the fight's over. C'mon, we've got to get to safety...hang on tight!"

Linda leaned over Ekyt, her fingers automatically checking his pulse, her head pressed against his chest, listening for breath. She was relieved to find both, normal as they could be under the circumstances. "Take it easy." She told him, breathing a sigh of relief. "It's just me, the fight's over. C'mon, we've got to get to safety...hang on tight!" She picked him up, thanking God he was so light. Supporting his neck the best she could, she ran as fast as she dared to Soleanna's medical facility. She knew Ekyt would object, but she couldn't do anything for an injury like this. She hoped some of their "voodoo medicine" would work.

Ekyt sat up, panicked. He found he could move again. "Relax! Someone get him down!" Linda was the one, knowing she was the only one he wouldn't fight right now. "Okay, you're okay. Easy. Easy. You took a hard shot to the head, and we had to reboot your body to" "I was in a coma?" Ekyt demanded. "No! Some medicine of theirs snapped you out of this...stupor, I guess." Ekyt looked at his bandaged hand and arm, then felt gingerly for his leg. "No breaks." Linda informed him happily. "But, for God's sake, take it easy!" Ekyt closed his eyes, getting up slowly and looking out the window. "So...I am mortal...human...I always hoped I'd be something better..." Linda didn't here any of this. He turned around. "Thank you for saving me Linda. Not that it's the first time you've done that." Linda blushed at the compliment and managed to sputter "Thanks", though Ekyt's attention was already divided. "Can I leave anytime?" he asked a nurse. She nodded. "Most stay for a couple days after this...but your friend tells me you're not average." Ekyt shrugged. Linda jumped up. "Hey, wait up!" she called, chasing after him.

"What are you going to do?" Linda asked Ekyt, her voice mellow despite the fact that she was worried about his answer. "I'm going to take a rest in the forest, I think. Get my head clear." He said, gesturing at Soleanna's rich countryside. "What about you?" Linda shrugged. "I'm going to stick around, and just try to rest up." After Ekyt admitted his feelings for her, the awkward tension between them rose and fell like a roller coaster. Now was one of the awkward times.

Ekyt climbed up the hill in the forest. It was rocky, with little grass growing. Ekyt found a rock large enough to sit on, to think. He needed to figure out his situation. **All the times I've fought...I was working with an expert...Who knew? How did it go? Chaos suppression? Two steps...first...that was it...Isolate your mind, block out distractions. Easy, since there isn't anything here...Two, analyze, let logic take over...** His swirling torrent of thoughts were anything BUT logical. Ekyt screwed his eyes shut. **Okay, settle for isolation for now...damnit! He was the better man...and she was the better woman...I am most certainly below what she could accept for a person...Loyal to a fault, they told me. It got my head kicked in...but then she saved me, regardless of my weakness...could my weakness be an endearing trait? That's a horrible thought!**

Linda sat at home, sipping at some tea she had made, grimacing. It tasted horrible. With nothing else to do, she kept drinking it. She wondered how Ekyt was doing. She couldn't tell what, but something was behind his stoic eyes. Something deep, emotional. It wasn't her rejection, she had figured that out. She wished she knew what it was. She could help. With a sigh, she stopped the attempt at drinking the foul swill currently in the hot mug in her hand. She needed to find a solution, or she'd never relax...It hit her. She got ready to try her hand at being something she wasn't. Maybe it takes one to know one, she thought.

Ekyt went over the kata again, not certain he had it correct. He moved slowly and deliberately, a drastic change from his usual quick pace. He breathed deeper too. Finally, in frustration, he gave up on the kata. He had hoped the wilderness would settle him, force him to think things out without distraction. Unfortunately, he had no luck doing that. His hand, where the knife had hit him, hurt like hell every time he moved. His tricep was more or less healed, as was his ankle and head. The hand wouldn't stop bleeding, so he had wound a bandage around it, ripping off a length to tie around his head as a sweatband. He was beginning a rigorous workout, shadow boxing empty-hand, with a dagger, with a stick, throwing knives, every kata he could remember, innumerable sword draws, and then the basics of everything he had just done.

That was his plan, anyway. But depression had taken up residence in his mind, rooting deep. He sat down hard, wondering why he was bothering. Soleanna had enough skilled fighters, couldn't he do something else to help? He wasn't great at medical procedures, he didn't have the stomach like he used to. Running a shop was too mundane for him. What he needed was a good trainer, one who could help him get better, better than he was at his peak. **Wishful thinking...waste of time...what about being "normal?" Maybe I should drop the damn ninja act...find a girl who's in my league, settle down...what am I thinking, I'm 18! Wait, crap, I forgot! My birthday...the 25th...19? Big deal. One year closer to my body quitting on me.**

Linda stepped out of the hall, checking her reflection. That wouldn't do. Her hair was fine, but her face...might attract attention...She wound a bandage over it, thinking that she could always explain it with an injury.

She found Ekyt quickly. She was alarmed he didn't get to his feet and grab a weapon. He didn't ask who she was, nothing. Then she realized how deep in thought he was. She shook his shoulder. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. "Oh my God!" he toppled backward, away from her. Linda rolled her eyes. Some things never changed. "It's just me! Take it easy!" Linda removed the bandages.

Ekyt saw it, but didn't believe it. She was human again! "Linda..." "Relax. This is temporary (Maybe, she thought). I'm guessing that if it takes one to know one, it takes a human to know a human. So don't fight me on this, I read about this." "I COULDN'T fight you off if I tried." He said with a wry grin. Ignoring the remark, she placed her fingertips on his temples. She gritted her teeth, finally jerking her hands away in pain. "So THAT's what you're feeling...pain...blinding pain...and I'm guessing it's not physical. You're sad too. Most likely because of me." Ekyt gave her a sideways glance. "When the heck did you learn to read emotions?" "It's not hard. I know you too well, you might as well tattoo them on your sleeve. Now, the WHY is eluding me. Care to tell me?" "Nothing to tell really. I'm just a little down because I'm not as competent a fighter as I should be." "Who the hell told you that?" "Think about it. I'm always getting hurt. I might win, but I'm stupid along the way. That's to make up for my personal shortcomings as a fighter. I'm familiar with four martial arts, but I never have the guts...never

did..." "To what?" Linda asked.

She made quite a site as a human girl. She was different from the last time she tried this form too. She had a ponytail, like usual, with the bangs falling over her left eye in front. But her hair stayed pink, with purple highlights. Last time her hair had been red. Her body composition stayed the same. She kept her clothing from the fight, which was a pair of black gi pants that fell just past her knees. So it wasn't a true gi, but that was the best way to describe it. She had put her vest aside in favor of a white T-shirt that seemed to fit just perfectly without being too revealing or too show-offy. She had to cut it slightly down at the neck, hemming it so it looked as if it were made that way. Over that she put a new vest, a black one with red symbols etched on it; her name in Kanji. The vest buttoned, so it was less of a detriment in a fight.

"To what?" she repeated. He looked at her beautiful green eyes. "To kill...to destroy someone else's life to preserve my own. If I had just done that, I wouldn't be hurt. Linda shook her head, her hair tossing back and forth getting his attention. She grabbed his right hand (The one not hurt) with both of her (Now gloveless since the transformation) hands. She made eye contact with him. "You can't beat yourself up like this. You're a better fighter than you give yourself credit for." "But I'm not good enough...I never was. Is there really a place for me around here? People were perfectly happy before I came to town, and chances are it wouldn't register if I left." "And go where? Where would you find the support you have here?" Linda knew her point had struck home, at least in this respect. Looking up at the rapidly darkening sky, she decided not to press the issue anymore tonight. Still holding his hand, she forced him to look her in the eyes. He had a scary, hollow look to him. Whatever was eating him up was becoming a huge problem- fast. She had no idea how to cure it. So she did the only thing she could. "You're tougher than this...stronger...all you did just to get here...saving the princess...you might not be something bigger or better than human yet, but you're on your way. Don't give up on yourself." She didn't get a verbal response, but she was sure she felt his hand tighten for a split second. Then he DID respond:

"I need to learn. To reboot myself, and master these arts. James will be back. And I've got to be ready." "WE'VE got to be ready." She corrected. She released his hand and set up camp for the night.

26 - Fighting Dreamers

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Linda watched the knives quivering in her target. Three bulls-eyes. She glanced over at her companion. The expression on his face was the strangest cross between concentration and nothingness Linda had ever seen. His form wasn't perfect, though there wasn't exactly a "textbook" form, different people taught differently.

Thwack! Thunk! Clang! Damnit! Those were Ekyt's sound effects. His first knife struck home, just short of the bull's-eye. The second sound was the back end of the knife hitting the bull-eye square, the third sound was the knife striking the target on its side. The fourth sound was a not-entirely-stifled curse on Ekyt's part. "Hey, relax! Just adjust your form a little. She leaned across his left side to correct his right arm. It looked like an inadvertent hug, and Ekyt felt his cheeks burn slightly. "Feel better?" she asked, after she had adjusted his grip slightly. He nodded. "Okay, NOW throw." He did, finding the knife to be shaking in the dead-center of the target. Linda smiled and nodded. "C'mon, rest that hand." She said, pointing at his left hand, which had turned an angry shade of red, a sign that it was time to apply some medication to prevent infection.

As he sat down, Linda got a glimpse of the wound. She grimaced, wishing she hadn't seen it. She watched Ekyt pick out a certain plant and rub it in gently, then re-bandage the wound. At her questioning look, he shrugged. "I get stabbed a lot, I might as well know something to help it out."

Linda found Ekyt didn't need any help with his bo work. Empty hand wasn't bad, just a few small improvements. Knives had been the worst of it for sure. But he didn't have any of the skills you saw in masters. His running wasn't soft and controlled. But he had never been trained. There was no time for it now. Just time enough to hone the skills he already had. Put two sticks or swords in his hand, and he was lethal. That was his problem, she knew. He didn't WANT to kill. She was praying that nothing drove him to that point. His innocence was part of him, not the ideal part to have ripped out.

Then he had a question for her. "How long are you..." his voice trailed off. Linda kindly picked up the conversation. "Human? Until about noon." She saw Ekyt's eyes widen. "What is it?" she asked, worried. "Linda...it's at least 3 o'clock." Linda immediately panicked. "I'm still human? That's not good! Not good!" She got up, but felt Ekyt's hands push her back down. "Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4, out for a count of three, and rub your temples." Once she had done that, she found she had stopped hyperventilating. "Okay, Chaotic Suppression technique: Isolate your mind's pureness. I can't tell when that's happened, so I'll tell you step two. Step Two is analyzation in a logical manner of your problem."

Linda tried to calm down, finding Ekyt's techniques to be helpful. She isolated her mind, but it didn't last long as the thought "What if I'm stuck like this?" keep drifting across her thoughts. Eventually she was visibly shaking, wondering what she had done wrong when she administered the "Medication" to herself. She felt Ekyt's hand on her shoulder. She realized she was on her knees. He had sank down as well. "You've done so much to help me...I can return the favor. I can fix this..."

"NO!"

Her single word echoed through the forest. "If this is meant to be, it's meant to be. Either I'll find a cure, or I'll stay a human." Ekyt didn't entirely understand. He had spent so much time disowning his heritage, his ancestry, his being, that he had never once given thought that an alternative might be worse. "If that's what you want...I'm sorry I got you into this mess...If my crybaby @\$ was tougher...better...We would both be okay right now. It's not a mistake I'll make again..." She sank lower, then leaned forward and embraced him.

Linda grabbed Ekyt in an embrace, not knowing what else to do. She didn't HATE being human. It felt weird; how the hell did they keep warm in the winter? Her senses seemed dulled too. Except for touch. The touch of the light fabric of Ekyt's black T-shirt seemed pronounced. Her own clothes felt more comfortable. A knife felt colder. It was strange, but she found these thoughts calmed her down. She didn't want to let go of Ekyt though, it was as if he was the last link to her old life, as well as a bridge to her new one. Gently, she held one of his hands. "How touching." A cold voice said. Ekyt noticed it, and reached carefully for his boot knife...

Shihan Carl James laughed cruelly. "Is THIS what you've become Linda? An emotional wreck? And A HUMAN? When will you understand? When will you learn? Humans and all they stand for are bad! My students came to me as humans, and I put them back as warriors...a class you may still keep."

Ekyt stood up, gently letting go of Linda's hand. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve, finding that the emotional attack had done more damage than she thought. She looked around, noticing that they weren't surrounded. She felt Ekyt move away, stepping in front of her.

"Carl, I will not stand here and allow you to ridicule her. She's worth more than you, and she's a better fighter! She saved my life, made me see how stupid I've been...I may never reach mastery, but for this...This isn't something I can stand by and allow to happen." He was standing straight up, taking off his headband and winding it around the exposed knuckles of his right hand. "You, as I recall, were unconscious most of the last fight. What makes you believe you can even REACH me?" he called. "Even if I can't...I'm not letting this girl die." Ekyt threw his boot knife at James, who grinned and caught it between two fingers. "You've improved...pity you won't get the chance to further your skills...you might have been a worthy adversary someday...BUT NOT TODAY!!!" He threw the knife back, knowing Ekyt's thoughts.

Ekyt stood still, in front of the emotionally stunned Linda. He couldn't catch a knife. But he couldn't move either. The knife would hit Linda. He sensed her moving slightly. He deepened his stance, forcing himself to prepare for intense pain...even death.

Linda saw the knife coming. She snapped out of her stupor, lunging lightly to her feet and leaping in front of Ekyt. She caught the knife and flipped it to a reverse-grip.

"AH! You have a guardian angel Ekyt! GET THEM! MY HONOR DEMANDS IT!" His warriors charged, the first wave holding back.

Ekyt saw the weapon and knew if he could just get one somehow, their advantage would be lessened. He got his chance as two veered for him, one slightly ahead of the other. He feigned a low kick and high punch. As the nameless black-clad enemy blocked high and low simultaneously, Ekyt swung his foot

around in a crescent kick, sweeping the bo aside and landing a reverse punch to the man's forehead. Immediately, he kicked at the bo. He couldn't get it in time, and if he couldn't have it, neither could the enemy. Such was the enemy's grip that when Ekyt knocked the bo down, he heard the snap-crack of many small bones breaking. The bo clattered to the ground. It bounced once on the rock-ridden soil and was retrieved by Ekyt, who caught it deftly in time to thrust inside his enemy's guard to hit his temple with a precise amount of force. Not a killing blow, but enough to render him unconscious.

Linda suddenly felt alive again. Ekyt's words had soothed her, and now she was focused on making sure she STAYED alive to live them. A bo slashed down at her, an easy strike to avoid. She thrust with a nukite (Open hand) finger strike, hitting just below the man's rib cage. In this position, she could rip the rib cage completely out. (Yes, it can really happen) She chose not to, settling instead for yanking on some weak abdominal muscles. The man screamed with pain, begged her to stop. She did when he fell unconscious from the pain. She glanced over at Ekyt, who had procured a bo for himself. He met her glance and tossed her the other one from the unconscious man, also adding a pouch of stars to her bounty.

Ekyt threw the two weapons over, knowing even that the odds were grim. Then again, that had never stopped him, and Linda was the happiest he'd seen her since she'd become human for him. For him...he knew that would haunt him, although he had to admit to himself that he enjoyed having another human to talk to, let alone a beautiful female one. Even one that HAD shot him down...It didn't FEEL like that, though. For once, he felt...peaceful.

James cursed, but stifled it quickly. "My next wave is more deadly! Good luck, former students!" "Blow it out your" But Linda's words were cut off by a few whizzing knives. She was forced to do a backward handspring, reaching into the pouch of knives to return fire. She saw a blur suddenly, and knew what James was doing. He had a group of elite warriors, ones that could run so fast they could blur. They were coming, and getting close rapidly. She started to warn Ekyt, only to find him hitting the deck and sweeping his bo out, tripping one would-be assassin. Ekyt was on him quickly, breaking both ankles to put an end to that enemy's biggest weapon. He relieved him of his weapons. His eyes suddenly widened in surprise. He threw a series of knives that came very close to Linda.

Linda dodged backward, watching the knives stick in the ground, wondering why Ekyt would throw them. Then she saw one knife had stuck in a foe's foot. She cold-cocked him without thinking about it, yanked the knife out and slashed some tendons (Nowhere vital) in one motion, then threw it at the latest approaching warrior. She and Ekyt both threw a series of knives, forcing the foe off-course. Linda's flying side-kick put him down. A whip cracked down, striking Linda hard, followed by a hard-thrown stone. She grasped her head; the rock had been large and sharp. Another followed, this one striking Linda on the temple, knocking her out.

James sputtered, his false-charm gone. "You two will burn in hell for this! I'll personally see to it!" Ekyt had enough. He charged James, who flung his hand down, snapping Ekyt's bo in half. Ekyt dropped it, not going to face an unarmed enemy with an undue advantage. James grinned and made his first move. He jumped high in the air and came down, with Ekyt dodging aside as rights and lefts came at him. Ekyt blocked the last with his forearm, grunting slightly, then throwing an elbow, bringing it back, then snap-kicking as James got too close. James flipped backward, but in mid-flip Ekyt's boot caught him full in the stomach. The human kicked low, aiming for James' upside-down head. He missed narrowly as James extending foot forced Ekyt to dodge back. Ekyt leapt over the leg-sweep attempt, then ducking as

he landed, avoiding a punch that could have killed him. Uncoiling, he lunged, tackling James. James tried to knee Ekyt in the groin, but Ekyt blocked the attack hard enough to hurt James' knee slightly. They grappled on the ground, both landing strikes that were unimportant.

Then James surprised Ekyt by aiming for his throat with an elbow, then snap-kicking him in the chest. It knocked Ekyt down and James pounced, pinning his arms and putting his knee on Ekyt's chest in such a way that made kicks impossible. "It seems you've met your end, doesn't it? Quite an effort you put forth. It'll be a shame that I must dull my knife on you...I'd torture you, but you're not alone. And I know you're too strong to give up." He held a shuriken-styled knife to Ekyt's throat, the cold metal touching it. Ekyt swallowed, and the knife made a small mark on the middle of his throat as it rose to allow the saliva to pass. A tiny drop of blood rolled down, running down Ekyt's throat, and landing on his now-mortal enemy's blade. James laughed. "Any last words?" Ekyt smiled serenely. "I'd gladly die for Linda...if I'm doing just that, giving her a chance at life, then it was worth it. Because I know she'll kick your sorry @\$@ straight to hell." Ekyt said all this calmly, a fire in his eyes that made James shiver a little.

Linda got up, feeling the small lump on her head. She looked around and saw a scene that horrified her. James pinning Ekyt down, a knife to her friend's throat. Silently, she took action.

Linda's arms drew behind her as she ran, using the skill she never knew she had. She was running so fast she was blurring. She was inches away from James before he registered her running. He made the mistake of removing the knife against Ekyt's throat without getting up. Linda kicked him square in the mouth, the knife clattering away. Ekyt scrambled up, grabbing the knife away before James could grab it.

Without speaking, Linda threw everything she had at James, who could only block maybe half of the vicious kicks and punches thrown at him. He pulled a knife on her, only to have it clatter away.

James was defeated. He dropped to his knees and pulled off his headband, then his black belt. He lowered his head in submission. "Ichini-san!" he called. One of his faceless warriors ran up. "You...you are my kaishaku-nin. Carry on in my name...son." Before he could be stopped, James drew a dagger across his stomach, drawing a plus-shape in his stomach, his eyes flickering with something strangely between delight and hatred. "You...I-lose." He said with a smile, before his head fell forward. Ichini drew his sword and swiftly cut off the man's head to end his suffering.

Turning to Ekyt and Linda (Who both looked away, not seeing or hearing anything of this), he said "My father showed you disrespect...for that, I am sorry. I can tell you did not mean him death." Ekyt and Linda both bowed respectfully as Ichini picked up his father's body. "Ichini...your father was a great teacher...don't make the same mistakes he did. I remember you from class, the most talented...don't throw it away for money you don't earn." Ekyt said. Ichini nodded slightly, his face covered with a black handkerchief. "You...you and the girl...I respect you two. I may yet decide to avenge my father's death...for now, however, we part as friends." He leapt off into the rapidly-darkening hills.

Linda turned to Ekyt, her newly-human face showing signs of tears. "Thank you." She said in a whisper. Ekyt was puzzled at that. "You saved me, I should be thanking you. And I do." She shook her head. "We'd BOTH be dead now if you hadn't helped me discover that there are worse fates than being a different species. Whether you believe it or not, you are living proof that there IS some good in the

human world.” Ekyt was still puzzled, and it showed. “My weakness nearly got us both killed...” “But you wanted to correct that weakness. And you did. When you threw that knife, I knew you had gotten it.” “I had a good teacher.” He said dismissively. Linda rolled her eyes, smiling slightly.

Then she embraced him, drawing him closer. Resting her head on his shoulder, she breathed a sigh of...contentment? Ekyt didn't understand, she could tell. So she dug her head into his shoulder more, with no intention of moving at the moment. She felt his hand gently running through her hair. She thought he might have finally picked up some romantic sense, before she realized that he was making sure she wasn't injured. With a growl of frustration, she muttered “Boys are stupid.” In his ear.

“What?” he said, not sure he heard her. “Never mind.” She answered quickly, content with the fact he was actually hugging back now. **He's not my boyfriend, just a friend who happens to be a boy...and we've just saved each other's lives numerous time in the span of a single day...I guess you'd call this bonding...**

27 - What We Believe In

Linda released her embrace on Ekyt. She didn't know WHAT, but she saw *something* inside his darkened hazel eyes that was comforting, though unnerving by the same token. She drew back slowly, feeling a little unsteady. That rock had hurt, and being unconscious wasn't fun either. "This is happening too often." She said suddenly. "What do you mean?" Ekyt asked, not sure to what she was referencing. "These attacks...injuries...just because we CAN fight, doesn't mean we SHOULD!" she protested. "We're...well, you're often given little choice in the matter." Ekyt said calmly. THAT'S what Linda had seen.

Ekyt continued. "I've lost my nerve...not my will or soul. Not yet. But that's next. I can feel it." He said this all in a calm, cold voice. "And you're not scared?" Linda couldn't help asking. "I'm terrified. But there's not much choice in the matter. If I only have so much time to make the difference I need..." "You're not going anywhere!" Linda told him. "Not physically." He answered, this time his voice showing some passion. "But what's going to happen when I lose the will to fight, or even worse, the soul that keeps what passion I have left burning? I've got to" Linda darted behind him, grabbing an arm, forcing him backwards. Ekyt couldn't believe it.

"You had better say "I've got to fix this." If you were suggesting giving up..." She let him back up. "YOU might not have the will, but I do. And YOU have the strength. We're going to fix this. Fix YOU." "I can't ask that of you or anyone else." "You didn't. I SAID it." She told him, giving him a mock-dirty look. "I know better than to try to defy you." He muttered, smiling slightly. "Good boy. Now, let's"

Her words were cut off by the sound of whizzing shuriken. The two leapt in opposite directions. Ekyt threw a knife himself in the general direction of the shots. Three answered his. He leapt to a tree, and threw one more. He ducked aside just in time as another knife answered his, scraping the bark on the tree. Ekyt saw his attacker, and could pick out the writing on his jacket. "Sho-Bu e yuku? Winning and losing people? THAT'S too much of a coincidence to ignore... I should be able to pick out their style...give Linda a chance..." He darted out from behind the tree, dodging to the side, sending a knife flying at the right time. As the attacker leapt aside to dodge it, Ekyt's right leg flashed out in a *kakato geri* (Heel push kick), thrusting the attacker backward into a tree. Ekyt's next instinct was to knock him out, but suppressed that in favor of his second instinct. **Gather information...**

Linda leapt down from a tree, watching Ekyt hold the struggling student up. "Let's just see what rank you are..." Ekyt yanked the jacket up. "Brown? A student? Why would you try to attack us?" Ekyt knew the silent treatment would follow. It did. "Okay, let's get a look at you." Ekyt pulled off the bandages over the student's face. "Thirteen years old, at most." Ekyt reported. "Fourteen dipshoot." Ekyt raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you're talking now. Good. Then you can tell me what I want to hear." The eerie calmness in his voice scared Linda. "If you have enough energy to make stupid remarks, you can answer my questions then, can't you?" "Good. Let's start with this: Who sent you?"

Ekyt: Who sent you?

Student: ...

Ekyt: Don't make this harder...I'm not a nasty person at heart...

Student: ...

Ekyt: (moves closer) I want to know who sent you. Don't make me ruin you...

Student: No one. I'm acting of my own will! You killed my sensei!

Ekyt: Your sensei...Carl James?

Student: (nods)

Ekyt: Linda...he needs to know what REALLY happened.

Linda understood what Ekyt was doing. He helped the boy up. "I'm sorry I got a little rough. Join us for some food, please. You need to know what REALLY happened. If you still hate me, then we can fight at the end." Ekyt told him.

They sat in a circle around the fire. Ekyt wasn't much of a cook, or much of an eater, but by God, Linda could cook! He HATED dumplings, and he was scarfing them down. Coming from a kid who ate one meal a day, that was huge! He let Linda do the talking. If he had been in the kid's position, he wouldn't have been too receptive to a story from the guy who just trounced him.

"And that's what really happened. He killed himself after we defeated him. His son left us as a friend." Linda said gently. The kid, who they found out was named Ginn Ota-yuji, nodded with rapt attention. TOO rapt for Ekyt's liking. If Linda seemed dubious, she wasn't showing it. "Then I am very sorry for my attack." Ginn told them. "There will be more soon." He said in a low voice. "We need to get away from here, quickly!" Ginn got up, apparently to suit actions to words. He pulled up short and put a knife to Linda's throat. "One move and I'll kill her!" Linda didn't look scared, but Ekyt could read her, the same as she could read him.

"Alright. You've got us. Now what are you going to do?" Ekyt's cold, toneless voice asked Ginn. Several men jumped out of the bushes. All black belts. "That." Ginn told him, laughing. "Suddenly, several small needles hit Ekyt on his shoulder. He looked back to see venom seeping into his skin. "It's not poison...you've simply been branded." Ginn told him. "And the brown belt...the age...a disguise. One you fell for readily." Ekyt made no move. He hadn't felt this angry since...that wasn't important. What WAS important was the situation at hand.

"Tie the girl up. Full body bind. SHE'S the threat. Leave the boy to me." His warriors, something between ninjas and samurai, leapt away. "You...come with me. My threat stands." Ekyt followed, wondering why he had been allowed to keep his weapons. "You are...skilled. But unrefined." "And you're one to judge?" Ekyt said, hatching a plan. "Yes, I am. Your meaningless taunts are hardly worth the time...yours or mine. Especially since yours grows shorter every time you open your mouth." "Instead of making threats, why don't you tell me what you plan to do with her?" "She is now my property. Come."

Linda didn't resist as they tied her ankles, shins, just above her knees, arms at her waits, then another high around her chest, even binding her head to the huge. She saw Ginn and Ekyt walking over.

"You see...she's my bride. And your death...that's my wedding present." He left Ekyt to stew, walking over to Linda. "And you, lovely...you will be my wife and slave..." he ran a hand down her front, then back to her hair. She moved her head away, but he grabbed her. "Time for our first kiss..."

Ekyt thought back...when had he been this angry? What brought his emotions out? Of course, it hit him.

Being the sacrificial lamb for someone else's bonehead mistake. He tied his self-worth to what he was doing. When that became nothing, in effect, so did Ekyt. All his emotions except hate died.

A year later, just as he had felt the pangs of first (and second) love, and the aching pain of first (and second) rejection, Ekyt lost his emotions again. Hate surged through him suddenly, and an intense adrenaline hit him. With a yell of rage, he barrled across the field, drawing two daggers and running, slashing at anything that came near him.

Ginn heard the commotion, but didn't turn, since he knew his guards would handle it. He laughed cruelly at the helpless look in the girl's eyes. He grabbed her chin and moved his head closer.

Ekyt slashed at two men flanking him, striking the forehead and upper leg of his enemies.

Ginn saw Linda's eyes brighten. He turned just in time to see a foot flying at him. He dodged aside, noting that a knife had almost struck him.

Ekyt stood in front of Linda as Ginn picked the knife out of the ground. He felt Linda's hand with his, stabbing a knife gently near her hand, then moving her wrist toward it, so she could see the rope without being seen.

"Your mistake was thinking that I would stand by and let you hurt her...Understand that you're dealing with someone who has nothing to lose...and nothing to be gained. EXCEPT for the knowledge that he took out a problem before his time was up." his dialogue was peppered with hatred, nearly scaring Ginn. But Ginn's experience took over.

"YOUR mistake was putting your life in front of the girl. NOW what do you do? If I throw at you, you die. If I throw at her, she dies." "You aren't listening." Ekyt hardly spoke above a whisper. "When I said I'd die for this girl, I meant it. I'd DIE for this girl. Ask your henchmen. And ask yourself this: Now that you've kicked the tiger, woken it up, can you survive it's bite?"

Linda sawed at the rope, hoping Ginn didn't throw until she got free. **Come on, come on, he shouldn't have to save you!** She cheered silently as the ropes broke. She grabbed the knife and cut herself free.

Ginn laughed. "How noble!" he threw the knife. Ekyt stared at it, flying toward him. Somehow, he felt calm. The knife sailed closer, aiming for between his eyes. A killing strike. He felt for his last weapon...

Linda moaned. She wasn't free yet, and she knew Ekyt wouldn't move. She said a silent prayer that the knife would somehow miss them both, or at least Ekyt.

Ekyt ducked low, cutting Linda's ankles free, the last thing binding her to the rock. He got back up in time to watch the knife near his face.

Linda reached up and grabbed the knife out of the air. "NOW I'm going to kill you." Linda told Ginn. Ginn smiled. "I think you won't." He zipped over to her, swiftly grabbing her by the hair. It had grown longer, halfway down her back. Ekyt stopped; They were so close! They couldn't die now! Not here!

He watched Linda grin wickedly at Ginn, rotating her knife to a reverse-grip. "It won't help you to stab

me in the leg, you know.” Ginn said. “I know.” Linda told him. She grabbed his hand, the one that was holding her hair. She cut off what he was holding. “Now Ekyt!” she called.

Ekyt took aim quickly at got ready to throw his knife. “Gah!” he shouted suddenly, the knife flying aside. His shoulder was killing him. It was like someone had taken a lit torch to his skin. He fell to his knees, the pain running through him. Ginn laughed. “You like that? I’ve set it to burn you every ten minutes! Fool! That’s no tribal tattoo, I would NEVER disgrace my village by allowing their tattoo to reside on your body! It’s venom. And I just activated it’s remote sequence!” He turned to Linda. “You have a choice: Save him or kill me. And I know what you’ll pick...” He threw a smoke bomb down, disappearing. Linda ran over to Ekyt.

“AGGH!” Ekyt’s almost primal yell shocked Linda to the core. “Hang on Ekyt! This is going to hurt, please trust me!” She used her dagger to rip his shirt off, cutting off a strip. She put the knife below the surface of his skin, then she pried the tattoo up. Immediately, she noticed a change for the better in Ekyt. He was on his hands and knees, breathing heavily, but the yells had stopped. “You’re okay now. The poison didn’t have a chance to penetrate. You’ll be okay. I’m going to wrap your shoulder, okay? I won’t hurt you...” He nodded, still too hurt to answer.

She wound his torn shirt around his shoulder. She glanced at his chest and back inadvertently. She gasped at the nearly hundred cuts that criss-crossed his body. “My God...all those...were for me...” Ekyt shook his head. But Linda could read him. He wouldn’t own up to it, but they all HAD been for her. “Let’s just go a short distance, then we’ll rest. Can you walk?” she asked. He nodded. “Let’s go.” His voice was back, but only at a whisper.

They made it to a campsite Linda knew about. There was a long-abandoned tree stand, high up on an Elm tree. It was well hidden, the perfect place to hide out and plan. They had to go back to Soleanna, but not until Ekyt was healed somewhat. She needed his help. Unconsciously, she felt her hair.

“It looks nice.” Ekyt’s voice came. He was standing up again, and talking, but different. “Thanks. All those cuts on you...they WERE for me, whatever you say, they were for me.” Ekyt nodded. He had his arms folded in front of his chest, leaning back. “Thanks for the save. When that poison hit me, I was just paralyzed...” She waved his thanks aside. “It’s no problem.” “Your hair really does look nice this way...but if I could...” He reached gently for her hair and, in the back, tied a torn part of his shirt around it. “A ponytail?” she said thoughtfully. He nodded. “Looks rebellious.” She said, admiring herself in the reflection of her knife. “What the hell, I’ll keep it.” “What do we do next?” Ekyt asked. “Wait, wait, your voice...it’s different.” Ekyt gave a narrow smile at that.

“My will...to live, to fight...it’s back.”

28 - Level Of Mastery

Ekyt looked out the window. “You know, I” he stopped suddenly, then picked up in a raised tone. “I’m tired of getting attacked! I’m killing the next one who does!” he looked at Linda meaningfully. She nodded and stood near the door, knife at the ready. Three came flying in from the window, one clipping Ekyt in the chest, skimming across his flesh, tearing a good line of skin out from one pec to the other, the knife slanting down, before sticking in the floor. He cursed. “We’ve got to get out of here...I know! Get ready to hold on tight!” Ekyt grabbed a vine. “Go to 352 Grace Ave, near the cemetery. Tell them I sent you.” Linda wrinkled her nose. “And what about you?” “Trust me.” Linda hadn’t heard him talk so...confidently before. “Okay...I’ll see you there.” “Right.” “Promise?” “I promise. Let me go first, then swing immediately.”

Ekyt leapt to the ground, throwing a series of knives, then running through the forest, zigzagging so he wouldn’t be caught in the line of fire. He tagged one enemy in the jaw, pulling off his gold chain. He couldn’t use it until Linda got out of the way. Suddenly, he saw a wall of humanity blocking his path. He fought the odd soldier, one managing to break Ekyt’s hand. Ekyt got past all that, bloodied and exhausted. “You had a good run kid. Now give it up, and come with us...” The all had reformed. Ekyt looked toward Linda at the corner of his eye. She was gone. “I’m going to set my weapons down.” He announced. He bent down, but instead of sacrificing his weapons, he put the gold chain in his shoes and did an about-face. His shoes lent him power and speed. He ran the opposite way.

Linda ran through the town, bleeding, hair short, and clothing ragged. She made it to the place Ekyt had told her about. It was a dojo. She knocked on the door and barked “Ekyt sent me to see the master!” The door swung open and she was lead inside.

The dojo was smaller, blue gym mats covering most of the floor. A young man, maybe 15, showed her to the Master’s place of meditation. He blushed slightly as he bowed her in. **Wow...she’s pretty...and she’s my age! I wonder if she’s taken...**he thought, pulling his gi straight.

Master Sukuto looked up as the girl walked in, bowing respectfully. “Might I ask you name?” he asked in a slightly accented English. “My name is Linda, Master, and Ekyt sent me to see you.” Master Sukuto’s eyes brightened. “THAT is a name I haven’t heard in some time...please, make yourself comfortable...will he be joining us?” “Yes Master, if all is well.” At her worried look, Master Sukuto handed her a cup of tea. “Please, tell me of the trouble that you and him are experiencing.” Linda was going to ask how he knew, but figured it was scrawled all over her face. “We’ve been attacked repeatedly...the Shihan was” “James.” Master Sukuto muttered. He sighed. “I knew one day he would fall this way. How did he die?” “Seppuku. His son, Ichini, was his Kaishaku-nin.” Master Sukuto nodded. He was nearly bald with age, and his smile was slightly lopsided. When he stood, he was tall, but slightly bent over from age. He looked at his koi pond, watching the fish. “Since he died, we’ve been attacked multiple times, and one of his students tried to force me into marriage.” Master Sukuto looked troubled, but managed a smile. “Ekyt...no doubt he let the man know how he felt through his mouth and fists?” “That’s what happened.” Master Sukuto suddenly looked more lively. “Linda, if you were a student of James, you were a student of mine, correct?” Linda hadn’t mentioned that she had, ah, changed since. “Yes Master. I was an echidna before...” Master Sukuto gave a big grin. “Linda, you

were always the star of the class! When Ekyt gets here, we must talk at length. For now, please rest. Here, you are safe.”

Ekyt leapt up onto a branch that was full of knives. He jumped off it hard, knocking it to the ground, hitting one of the men chasing him. These ninja-samurai-whatevers could keep up, and that wasn't good, since he was almost at top speed. There were two left. Ekyt took a chance and forced himself to run faster. He blasted away, where the attackers finally gave up.

Ekyt knocked on the door. It swung open immediately, and he was escorted to Master Sukuto's room. “Ekyt! What happened to you?!” Linda rushed over, checking his wounds. “Ekyt, you have returned!” Master Sukuto gave a thin smile and indicated him to kneel. “Now that you are here, you need to know something: Linda, I think of you as my daughter, and Ekyt, I think of you as a son...the one's I've never had, and never will. It is unknown to my students, but my time is running short. I'm in the late stages of Hepatitis. I have only enough time to set my affairs straight.” Ekyt and Linda knew they weren't supposed to speak, so neither did. “Linda, you were the brightest star I had, with Ekyt not far behind. Therefore Linda, I ask you to take over my school...my home.” His words were spoken emotionally, which was a rarity for the Master. Linda looked over at Ekyt, who gave an encouraging nod. “Of course Master. Thank you.” She bowed. “Well then, it's time you were awarded this.” Master Sukuto handed her a black belt, with nine small, gold stripes on it. “Your 10th degree, mastery level belt. I will announce this to the school, now that I have someone I can trust.”

Ekyt would have lied if he had said he wasn't feeling slightly left out. Linda deserved it though, and he was genuinely happy for her. He watched as she and Master Sukuto talked to the students, all of whom seemed emotional to hear about their Master's chronic condition.

After they talked, Master Sukuto asked to speak with Ekyt. “You seem more troubled than usual.” It was part question, part statement. “Master, it HAS been a rough time...I had admitted to Linda my feelings for her. But we're “Just friends.”” Master Sukuto nodded sagely. “Ekyt, I have no doubt about what you can accomplish.” The old man's breathing became very ragged. Every movement seemed to hurt. “Master, is there anything I can get you?” Ekyt asked him. “No. But I have something for you...it's in the black package near the door. Take it after my death. It will not be long now. Please, do not be sad...It is my time to move on, now that I'm nearly one hundred years old...please, take care of yourself...” The old man closed his eyes. Ekyt heard his breathe stop. “I will master...I will.” Ekyt said, a tear trickling out of each eye as he gave the old man's hand a final shake, then arranging them in the *peace over power* position (An open hand in front of a fist) before bowing from the room.

Ekyt walked out. At Linda's look, he shook his head sadly. She hugged him, trying to comfort him, since he was obviously shaken. “I'm fine.” He assured her. She kept her worried look in place, but kissed him on the cheek anyway.

Linda wore the belt proudly for a few weeks, during that time talking with Hagakure, a boy that had taken a deep interest in the martial arts. One day, out of the blue, he kissed her. Linda blushed, but didn't object.

Someone else did.

Ekyt closed his eyes and shook his head. “I can't say I didn't see it coming...” he muttered to himself.

Hagakure had been eyeing Linda for some time. Ekyt had been wearing a black gi of mourning out of respect for Master Sukuto. Now he tied a black band around his head. "Kata: Seiunchin." He muttered, before trying to do the "breathing kata." His breath didn't want to work with him. He found he was more choked up than he should have been. Or was willing to be, more accurately.

He became the emotionless statue again. If he sparred, winning or losing, he kept the same stoic impression on his face. It wasn't out of bitterness; He had a lot on his mind. And besides, stoicism could be a handy weapon in the martial arts.

He stepped aside to let himself catch his breath. "You okay?" Linda's voice came. "Oh, yes Master." This wasn't out of the ordinary, they adhered to guidelines pretty strictly. "Just checking in..." she said, worried. "Master, can I have the key? I'm going to stay late tonight." She tossed him the key to lock up. "I'm going to go get some food with Hagakure, do you want anything?" she asked. "No thanks. I had my meal today." Ekyt said cheerfully. "Okay then, see you tomorrow." Linda left with a small wave.

As soon as she was gone, Ekyt grabbed his pouch of throwing stars. He pulled off his gi top so the sleeves wouldn't get caught. He threw all fifty knives. Forty out of fifty hit the target, thirty of those hit the bull's-eye. Great scores. "Damnit!" Ekyt knocked the target over, his knives clattering to the floor. He breathed heavily, muttering curses, when he heard a timid voice. "Ekyt-sensei?" Ekyt spun to see Hagakure.

"Oh, I'm sorry Hagakure, didn't hear you come in. What's up?" "Sensei, Linda explained something to me...were you close to her." Ekyt frowned. "You might say that, but not in the traditional respect." "I mean, were you ever...boyfriend/girlfriend?" "No. I...er, we never got that far." He said, hoping it sounded light and off-hand. Apparently not. "I never meant to cause a rift between you two." "There's no rift Hagakure. I've been distracted lately, with Master Sukuto dying, and the extra training." "She speaks of you a lot." "Hagakure, you have nothing to feel guilty about, I know that's why you are here. Everything's fine, don't worry. You're her age, and you two will be fine." "If you say so, Ekyt-Sensei." "I do. Go have fun."

The next day, Linda asked him to pick three students. "They are your group. Teach them what you know. We're going up against some rival schools in a few weeks, and they've got to be ready. Do you mind going into combat with them?" Ekyt shook his head. "Not at all. I'll share their fate."

Ekyt looked at the line-up. "Utsugi...Donalds...Takami." The three stepped forward. Utsugi Pong-ai was a Japanese kid, roughly 13, with the best throwing arm Ekyt had ever seen. He had a crop of black hair, styled into an aggressive crewcut, and a slight form, with long, sinewy muscle. Kayla Donalds was a girl, roughly 14, with blond hair pulled into a long ponytail, with a long whip of hair over one eye. She looked a lot like Linda, he thought. She had a great mind, medical knowledge, and an incredible amount of drive. Not to mention she could fight; the girl was deceptively quick. Then there was the dark horse, Chakaro Takami. He had started out as something of a jokester. Then something sobered him and he became one of the best student they had. Ekyt wanted to know what. But in this case, he wanted the kid to get a vote of confidence. The young man's face was set into a dark, neutral expression, similar to Ekyt's. He had taken to Ekyt's teaching style. Of the group, he was the oddest looking. He was just about Clorox white, but had shoulderblade-length black hair, which somehow made him look taller, though he was about 5 feet 2 inches in reality. He was also skinny, with a rapid metabolism that wouldn't allow him to put on weight and, by the same token, muscle. Then there was the fact that

“Chakaro Takami” was his adopted name. He wouldn’t tell his real name, saying that his ignorant parents had given it to him.

The four trained together exclusively for the next two weeks. It was more a matter of fine-tuning what they already could do, rather than teaching new techniques. And it quickly became apparent that Takami would make a great leader someday, along with the fact that the team gelled instantly, save for Takami and Utsugi having a couple quarrels over Kayla’s affection.

The night they were set to leave for the tournament, Linda pulled Ekyt aside. “Look, I just need to know everything’s fine between you and Hagakure.” “Of course.” Linda rolled her eyes. “You’re lying to me. I appreciate you protecting my feelings, but I want you to be truthful with me, right now: Do you have a problem with me dating Hagakure?” “No. I had my chance, things didn’t work out, right? No reason for anyone to feel guilty...I’m sorry, can we talk about this later? I’ve really got to get the team going.” Linda nodded, choked up.

So, I’ve got a new boyfriend who’s just about everything I want in a man. But in the process, my best friend is becoming distanced...Did I make the right choice? All these thoughts were old to Linda. But no matter how old, she still didn’t have an answer to them.

“Okay, listen up everyone.” Ekyt called. All his students lined up. “Here are the rules: No fatal strikes, incapacitating only. You will be facing some students from your rival school. I want no unprovoked attacks outside of the tournament. Stay together, stick with me unless I say otherwise, and keep your guard up. We’re going to be facing the other teams in different areas of combat. Water, plains, mountains, and forest. If any two teams are tied, there will be a sudden-death round, one that will incorporate all the battle fields.” His students nodded eagerly. “Good. You’re the most talented group here, you can pull it off.” Donalds had a question. With a small stammer, she asked “Will they be allowed to kill?” Ekyt looked at her, then nodded. “Though the rules say not to, some may not be above killing to get what they want. So, stay on your guard...”

Ekyt rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had lost out on Linda, THAT much was evident. So now he was the statue again. This time, he had his WILL to fight, and his heart was in it for the kid’s sake. It was his SOUL that felt like the problem.

Ekyt and Linda, miles apart, had the same thought: **Is this right?** Ekyt, whose unrequited affection had never stepped him from doing the right thing; and Linda, who loved Ekyt enough to tell him what she thought was the truth, both had a second thought:

I’ll miss him/her...

With that last thought, Ekyt wished he had never kissed her. Without meaning to, he had made this more painful for both himself and Linda. He vowed to make things right. As he looked at the other sensei, all bigger and more powerful, he add “If I make it” to his last statement. He didn’t need to think that. All of a sudden, the Master’s and their personal escorts came. Linda’s eye met Ekyt’s briefly. It was time for them to sort things out...make things right. Ekyt knew what he would do. He would confess his love again, and be honest, then admit defeat.

29 - A Huge Mistake

Ekyt and his students stood at attention as Linda, the new Master, walked by. She had to adopt a surname for the occasion. She didn't remember hers, since she had been orphaned for years. She took on the surname "Ushiro", which could be derived from Sukuto in terms of origin. It was usually given to a first-born son, but as a surname, it was acceptable.

Ekyt noticed her chosen "retainer" was Hagakure. Immediately, he was the "statue" again, though everyone thought it was out of respect. The Master went to their respective students, offering encouragement and wisdom. Linda looked out of place, Ekyt thought. He didn't think it with contempt. But he realized how much of a shock it had to be for her, her life suddenly changing out of nowhere. It further shocked him how deep her training had run.

Out of all of them, Ekyt was the only one not wearing a belt, due to his...unconventional training. He had skipped most of the basics, while learning black-belt level work. But he had never gotten the black belt. So his rank couldn't be determined. He was accepted as a sensei, without question. He watched Linda approach his students, all of whom seemed to sense Ekyt's problem. **That or that big mouth Hagakure told them about our conversation...** he thought, his eyes glancing at the sky.

"And how are you?" Linda asked. Ekyt was still looking at the sky. She had seen that look before. She put a hand gently on his shoulder. Ekyt swiftly drew his dagger, forgetting that Linda was there. "Sorry." He quickly apologized. "I'm fine, thanks." He added at her worried look. "Uh-huh. So, care to explain why you pulled a knife on me just now?" Ekyt winced inwardly. "Reflex reaction, my nerves are on edge." Linda put her hands on her hips. "Riiiiight. That's why you're staring at the sky." "It's calming." He said by way of explanation. Linda agreed. "Let's talk for a moment, Hagakure can watch your" "No." he spoke the single word with more force than he meant. He looked at them over his shoulder. "Chakaro, you're in charge. Remember what I said." Linda raised a sardonic eyebrow, but said nothing. "The tournament is for them. He's been wanting a taste of leadership." Ekyt muttered. Linda and him walked away.

The warm hug they had shared seemed like years ago. Now there was a cold void between them, it seemed. From Ekyt's perspective. Linda, it seemed, had taken his words to heart. The "Don't worry about it, I'm not upset" part had been a lie, utter crap, but Ekyt still had his humanity in him, however hard he tried to rid himself of the stigma of being "just human." He cared about her. He would shoulder THIS burden alone.

"Hey! That guy wants to fight!" Utsugi snarled, drawing his dagger. "Hey, you know what Ekyt-Sensei said!" Kayla protested, grabbing his wrist. "Oh, come on, he's not really a sensei. And he HAS to say that. Let's ask our "fearless leader" what HE thinks." Chakaro wasn't one to talk much, but when he did, it had impact! "I think we should do what he said." Utsugi, always quickest to draw, either didn't hear him or ignored him, because he took off.

"Ekyt, come on! We've talked about this, right? We were both okay with seeing other people!" "As soon as I find that "other person" I'll agree. I don't blame you. If the attraction wasn't there, it wasn't

there. Right now, I'm responsible for these kids." Ekyt tossed a glance over his shoulder.

"You're gonna pay!" Utsugi yelled, running incredibly quick toward the "offending" student, who clearly had no idea what the problem was. But he drew his weapon anyway. Suddenly, a knife flew in and landed in Utsugi's path. He looked to see where it came from.

"You wouldn't be thinking of attacking, would you Utsugi?" Ekyt's calm voice reached Utsugi's ears. "He baited me sensei!" "He did nothing of the kind." Ekyt strode over, nodding at the offending group's sensei. When the nod was returned, Ekyt pulled his knife out of the ground. "Now, what made you think that attacking was a good idea? What do you know about your enemy?" "N-Nothing." Utsugi stammered. Ekyt stood up. "Sensei, look out!" The other sensei and his group had taken the small distraction as a chance to attack.

Chakaro darted ahead of the group. Ekyt mentally noted that he was taking responsibility. Good quality. In a way, we was looking forward to seeing how his kids would do. Utsugi was the youngest, but strongest. Kayla was the smartest, and the middle. Chakaro was the oldest, but least experienced. He and Kayla were both fifteen, and at times showed their frustration with Utsugi and his actions.

Now was one of those times. Ekyt and the other sensei stared at each other. "Let the kids go at it?" the other sensei offered, peace of power sign showing his sincerity. "Why not? Good luck." Ekyt called back, as he and the sensei stepped away. Their two three-man teams clashed.

Chakaro stepped in front of Kayla, reading the attack. Utsugi had no such premonition; he wanted the action. Kayla didn't push past, but asked Chakaro to help him. He nodded, leaping ahead, his leg twisting out into a side-kick, which struck another student high on the chest. Using that as momentum, he sprung upwards, dodging a knife attack. The stray attack was heading for the masters.

Ekyt and the other sensei nodded to each other, both taking off. The smaller Phillipino man whose student threw the errant knife drew his own knife. He threw, hitting the metal at precisely the right point, knocking it to the ground. It clattered to one of the master's feet. He wasn't a man you wanted to mess with. He quickly took aim with the knife, throwing in a strike that wasn't going to miss.

Chakaro saw the knife flying toward his enemy. "Hey! Heads up!" he called. The kid turned and had a deer-caught-in-headlights look. Chakaro thrust his hand out, aiming to slow it. To his surprise, he found the knife resting between his fingers.

The Phillipino sensei was having angry words with the master who threw the knife. Ekyt broke up the fight, telling them to "Wait until the tournament starts!"

Kayla and Chakaro threw Utsugi a look of disgust. He returned it with a scowl, muttering "I'm the only one who defends the honor of this school." That was a mistake. Ekyt turned on his heel and faced him. "Utsugi, as skilled as you are, you should know that you are NOT the only one defending this school. What you did would have done more harm than good, had it not been stopped. An innocent student nearly lost his life because you couldn't wait an hour until the tournament started." "What concern of that is mine? They are the enemy." Ekyt shook his head. Linda walked over at that point. "Utsugi, you are dismissed." She said, leaving no room for argument. He glared at her, then stalked away.

“Dismissed? Wasn’t that a little...harsh?” Ekyt questioned. “Not when he’s representing my school. Keep them on a tight leash, okay?” Linda asked. She was Hagakure and went off to hold council with him. Ekyt’s fist tightened. They were going to win this tournament. If they didn’t...

“Ekyt-sensei?” Ekyt heard Kayla’s quiet, shy voice calling him. “Yes Kayla?” “Is everything alright? Is Utsugi gone?” “Yes, I’m afraid so. The Master dismissed him because...her own reasons.” Smiling shyly, she giggled “You and Master Ushiro were close, weren’t you?” Ekyt almost allowed a look of shock to penetrate his face. Then he laughed. “You’re sharp Kayla. In a way, we were. We still are, in another way. But, no, we were never dating.” He said, looking at the sky. “Kayla...who would you recommend to replace Utsugi?” he asked suddenly. “Well...I don’t know...” Ekyt knew she was just being shy. “I would pick you.” Ekyt’s brow furrowed. “Me? I’m not eligi-...” Ekyt’s thought was cut short. He WASN’T a sensei on the traditional meaning...he was still, technically, a student... “That’s a good idea, very astute. But it wouldn’t be fair...” Kayla nodded. “I’m sorry sensei. I can’t read your thoughts, but I know this tournament means a lot to you. I-if yo-you need to t-t-talk...” she gestured vaguely and left.

“Okay, we’re down to three of us. That’s not necessarily a disadvantage.” Ekyt told them. “We can move quicker and more stealthily. And our numbers aren’t too far off, so the “strength in numbers” theory is gone. But we still have to be careful, be on our guards...” Ekyt was talking to his team near the entrance of the first test. The ice course. “Put on your jackets, and don’t stay still too long, unless we have a fire or some other means of keeping warm.” Ekyt had pulled his old coat out of storage, thanking God it was a trench coat of the right color. Chakaro and Kayla nodded, both pulling on their silver and white jackets, and white gloves. Boots that matched were added, secured tightly.

“Here we go. Run to the first checkpoint, watch for my signal.” Ekyt told them. They ran inside the frozen wasteland. Ekyt pointed with two fingers to a snowdrift. They ran to it and dove, keeping their heads down. Ekyt pointed to a tree. Chakaro shimmied up it in the blink of an eye. He was barely visible above the snow-topped Pine.

Evidently, someone saw him. Ekyt motioned for Kayla to stay still and watch Chakaro. He crawled around the snow bank, chancing a look around. A throwing star whizzed toward him, forcing him to dodge away. “Kayla, they don’t know where you are. Stay down, for now. Chakaro and I are going to return fire.” Ekyt nodded his head toward Chakaro, who tossed a knife lazily in the air. Just before it hit the ground, he threw another, this one much harder. They heard a cry of pain as it struck home. “Wait for them to make their move, don’t throw just yet. Kayla, watch my back.” “Gladly!” She said, a little too loud. “Huh?” Ekyt turned. “I said “Okay!”” she said, blushing.

Ekyt shrugged. He hadn’t heard what she’d said, and it was likely “Okay.” He saw the wounded warrior down. He was wearing a light blue. “School of Ice...They’re plotting an ambush, it would seem...Clever...but not quite the usual standard...” He was hoping his words would draw the other two into the open.

Chakaro fell down beside Kayla. “Did I just hear you say something about Sensei having a nice back?” he ask, a hint of mischievous tones in his voice. “Isn’t he cu...I mean, of course not! He’s our teacher, get your mind out of the gutter Chakaro!” Chakaro looked over the snow bank again. “Interesting...he’s flushing them out...they’re actually biting...get ready...” Kayla nodded.

“So, a spy. What is your intention with our wounded?” A rough-looking young man asked Ekyt. “I want to bandage his wound. It’s not fatal, if that’s what you’re wondering.” “Was it your group who attacked us?” another demanded. Ekyt raised his eyebrows. “Sorry, you’ll need a little more tact than that if you want info.” The kid raised a dagger. “How’s THIS for tact?” Ekyt punched him in the face, offhand. “Not enough.” “C’mon, let’s just waste him. We know he’s leading SOMEONE...” “How do we know? He could be an older student. He’s not wearing a belt, or a headband...” Ekyt grinned. “Maybe I’m on your side...Mercenaries ARE legal...why would I care about your wounded otherwise?” Ekyt said. “He’s got a point Yori...can you offer us proof of where your loyalties lie?” Ekyt nodded. “Stay here. I’ll bring you a prisoner. I caught one...There’s another on the loose, I saw him...I think he’s called “Utsugi.”

Ekyt ran back over to his team. “I’m going to wave them over. Be ready to attack, blunt weapons.” He said. Chakaro shook his head. “That’s not a good idea sensei. They won’t trust you. We need a way to get their wounded, as leverage.” Ekyt looked thoughtful, the nodded. “Okay. Kayla, what about you?” She had been staring blankly at him. “Kayla?” he asked gently. “I’m fine! I think we should go with your plan!” Ekyt looked over at Chakaro, who raised his eyebrows, laughing silently. “Okay. Chakaro, what do you suggest?” “I say you go bandage their wounded. Then, distract them while Kayla and I sneak up and hit them.” “Good idea, normally.” Ekyt said. “Why not now?” Chakaro wanted to know. “Because they’re coming over. Quick, Kayla, tie me up! Chakaro, be ready to slice me free.” Kayla nodded. “Wait sensei...we have to make it look like a struggle...” Ekyt nodded. “I trust you...hit me.” Ekyt told him. He pulled his gloves off and cut his shirt open, just enough to show the cut across his chest. Kayla made a small sound. Ekyt looked at her again. “I sat on a rock.” She said.

Ekyt made a sound of muffled surprise, as he let a pair of hands drag him down. “They’re coming...” Chakaro muttered. “Ice school? Of course, we WOULD face them on their home field...” Kayla was humming slightly. **Sensei is sooo hot! He would melt the snow!** She had to suppress another giggle. Chakaro threw her an amused look. “Throw me out there.” Ekyt whispered. They did.

“Yori did you hear...” Ekyt’s apparently unconscious form landed at their feet. “Oh wow! Someone did a number on him, look at that cut!” “Mind your own first.” Chakaro was behind them, a knife at Yori’s throat. “Now put the knife down, gently!” he ordered. Yori’s friend did, looking for an opening. “I wouldn’t do that!” Kayla whispered. She kicked low, knocking his legs out, then dove on top and hit him on the temple. “Okay, we give up! We give up! Don’t kill us!”

Ekyt and his crew stood up as the tournament’s proctor came over. “Two points for victory, One for no injuries, One for speed.” He announced. Four points out of five, not bad. If they hadn’t wounded the other guy, it would have been five out of five.

They walked back outside, peeling off their extra layers. Linda was waiting, with Hagakure. “How did you do?” she asked. “Four out of five.” Ekyt said, almost too fast.

Kayla stared at Ekyt. She sighed. Chakaro walked over. “Funny. You used to do that to me.” When Kayla didn’t smile back, Chakaro shrugged. “You might have a chance with him, you know.” “What do you mean? He’s out of my league!” Chakaro wagged a finger. “Maybe not Kayla. He’s only 18, for starters. Second, I know he’s single. Third...you’re adorable.” It had been a poorly-kept secret that Chakaro had feelings for Kayla. “Thanks Chakaro! You’re so sweet!”

“Ekyt, you sound like you lost!” Linda exclaimed. They had dropped the formality, and were talking as

friends now. "My students did well enough...I'm more concerned about my performance." "What do you mean?" Ekyt took a deep breath. "I already admitted my feelings for you. I haven't lost them, no matter what I pretend." "Ekyt-sensei!" Kayla ran over. "Kayla? Are you okay?" She kissed him. He backed up, looking at Linda. "Kayla? What are you thinking?!" Linda shouted. "Back off, he's mine now!" she called. Ekyt shook his head, denying that vehemently. She pulled out two daggers, forcing Linda to do the same. "C'mon, this is ridiculous!" Hagaukure ran toward Ekyt and slashed. Ekyt dodged backwards, drawing his own dagger. "What the hell is going on?!" Ekyt shouted.

Linda was taking on Kayla, not a fight Kayla was likely to win. Linda was a warrior, Kayla was too, but more of a perky cheerleader-type. Hagakure attacked Ekyt. "Listen, I don't blame you! But I didn't do this!" "You told her you still loved her! You told me it was okay!" "I'm only clearing the air!" "You're no sensei you fraud!" Hagakure screamed, leaping close and stabbing down. Ekyt blocked upward. "Listen to me! She's with you! I'm not taking her away! Think about what you're doing!" Ekyt shouted back.

"You dog, you had your chance with my sensei!" Kayla shouted. "Kayla, I understand, I really do! But you've got to calm down and think this through!" Linda told her.

Several knives sailed toward them. "Enough of this!" Chakaro was standing on a tree branch, kneeling. "Look at you. Two of you attacking your sensei's, when they've done nothing wrong! Kayla, when I said you had a chance with him, I didn't mean to french him! We've got at least three more days, let's hold it together."

"He's right." Linda said. "Ekyt, you were right to talk to me. Hagakure, thank you for defending me, but I assure you, Ekyt is no predator. Kayla, I understand your feelings, but you can't manifest them by attacking others. Now, let's form a union, right now."

Ekyt offered his hand to Hagakure. He took it, shaking gently. Then he clamped down. His knife stabbed down. Ekyt moved his hand away, putting the young man in an armbar. Then he felt a hot pain in his leg, and saw a knife sticking out of it. He pulled it out and threw it away. He tightened the arm bar, wrenching Hagakure, who grunted and tried to fight Ekyt off. Ekyt swept his legs and heel-stomped him on the arm, knocking out the nerve center.

Kayla apologized to Linda. "I'm sorry Linda...I've just been so lonely since my parents died...And he was alone too...I can read emotions, and I knew why he was upset...he really loves you." She said. "Kayla, it's okay. But let's not attack each other anymore. We'll forget this happened. Okay?"

Ekyt motioned Chakaro over. "Chakaro, you've been the voice of reason this entire time. You get to lead the next mission, the plains."

The plains were dangerous, to be sure. But with teammates attacking each other, and shaky alliances being formed, Ekyt realized that things were about to get worse...

Student Name Reference:

Chakaro Takami

Utsugi Pong-ai
Kayla Donalds

30 - Emotions: Love, Hate, and Determination

Chakaro looked at his team. Ekyt-Sensei made a good point, he realized. Maybe leadership was his thing...and maybe he was leading his team into a trap. Ekyt had gone out of his way to make sure the jr warrior was ready.

Linda, Ekyt, Hagakure, and Kayla all stared at each other. "We've got to keep our focus. We could lose, or worse, be killed, if we don't. Regardless of personal feelings." Ekyt shed his coat, now wearing a camouflage gi. His team did the same. "Expect the plains to be windy." Ekyt warned them. "I don't recommend throwing very often, since the wind can be unpredictable. Close combat with heavier weapons might be best. Expect water." Chakaro looked at the group. "There won't be much cover, either. We should move quickly, and rest only as often as absolutely necessary."

Sonic zipped back into town. He saw some of the ruin caused by Shihan James. He found a note from Ekyt, which gave him an address, and an explanation. Sonic grinned wryly, shaking his head. "Never ceases to amaze, those two...still, I wonder how their love confession went..." HIS hadn't gone well, telling Elise that he was in love with her. ELISE was okay with it, but Amy had taken it hard, and had stalked off, muttering something under her breath.

Linda watched the three talk strategy, when she heard a familiar voice at her elbow. "Linda?" "Amy! How was the trip?" Lind asked, immediately regretting asking. "Terrible! Sonic is in love with Elise! I never realized how worthless I was...I'm just a cheerleader!" She didn't cry, but looked dangerously close. "You know, maybe you should train with us..." "Huh? What do you mean?" "Well, I'm the Master of this do, er, school. And I know one sensei who you might just be comfortable working with." Amy followed Linda's gaze to a grim-looking Ekyt. "Ekyt? He's a teacher?" "Well, sort of (laughs). He CAN teach, even though he's not technically a black belt." "What are they doing?" Amy wanted to know. "Getting ready for a fight. Would you like to watch with me?" "Sure!"

"Any idea what team we're facing?" Chakaro asked Ekyt. Ekyt shook his head. "If last time is any indication, and it might not be, then our opponents will be of the Wind school." "Sometimes no information is better than wrong information, we shouldn't trust that." Chakaro murmured. Kayla seemed focused, despite all the chaos of yesterday. "We've got time before the tournament starts again. Double-check your equipment...if you need me, I'll be in that tree." Ekyt pointed at a big Oak tree, then suited actions to words.

Ekyt made himself comfortable in the tree, then sat down and cupped his hands in front of him. **Let's try mediating again...Clear the mind...Good. Problem: Emotions. Too many. First not enough, now too many. Love, hate, determination. What's the most important. Love we can cast aside. Hate clouds the mind. Determination. Love...No. My chance at love has passed, it's time to make peace with that ending. What does a warrior need with love? Determination and skill are more important...Still, I don't think I'll ever forget Linda...Would I still defend her with my life, for reasons other than being duty-bound to her? I can't tell...** He stopped his thought process, with it taking nearly the whole hour, tossing decisions and answers back and forth, not coming close to a final answer.

Chakaro looked at his team, trying to figure something out. His hair seemed to get in the way, and he needed to blink constantly. "Okay...when I signal to you, we run for the first point of cover. That might be pretty far away, so pace yourself if it looks like more than a mile. Ekyt, you take the right, Kayla, you take the left. I'll take the middle. Stay slightly behind me." Ekyt nodded. Tactically, all this made sense. He expected mostly open ground, with few hills. If they found cover, they would most likely find a fight for that cover. By going ahead of them, Chakaro was going to draw the enemies into the open. Ekyt would have never gone along with the plan, had he been in charge. But maybe Chakaro was onto something. Ekyt wasn't the only one to have spent the time trying to mediate. Chakaro was better at it than him, and already a more skilled fighter. Ekyt had experience to draw from, and was a voice of reason.

"BEGIN!" The proctor's voice rang out.

Ekyt watched Chakaro run ahead, with a slight jealousy, watched him run with his arms behind him, like a more skilled Shinobi than he was. But darned if the kid wasn't faster! Ekyt made a note to ask him about this change in styles.

The plains were as Ekyt expected. "Look where you're going!" Chakaro called back to them, leaping over a couple small puddles, then adjusting his course slightly as the wind kicked up. The nearest point of cover, a mass of tall-growing grass, was in sight, and so big that the course alteration didn't matter. They dove inside. Chakaro heard something, and indicated for the others to stay down, but watch for his signal.

Ryuto flicked his cigarette aside. "Man, you gotta do that? It's a filthy habit, and you're likely to burn down the whole field." His friend, Genji, admonished him. "Oh, get bent." He lit another one up. "Are you TRYING to give us away?" Lakota asked, in her high-pitched princessy voice. "Yup, you bet!" Ryuto answered with gusto.

Chakaro indicated his group to stay still. These clowns were almost in sight, he could see their jackets. What he didn't see was their leader, leaping down behind him. Before he could move, the instructor grabbed him from behind, forcing him into an arm bar. Chakaro rolled forward, then spun to deliver a kick to his attacker's chin. Kayla seized him around the neck, yanking him to the ground. As he resisted, Ekyt kicked at the back of his elbows. Both arms went numb, allowing Kayla to slip a gag on his mouth. Then they both tied him up.

"Hey, what was that?" Genji asked. "Just the wind. You don't think those rookies from this "unknown school" are actually a threat, do you?" Ryuto chuckled. "You shouldn't underestimate them. They're likely to do more damage that way." Ryuto shrugged and took another drag from his cigarette. "Whatever. Point is, they're not gonna get the drop on us."

Chakaro snuck up, seeing one of the enemy sitting with his back to a tree. One was standing at it's base. The third, a female, was poking at the fire, probably trying to keep it going against the suddenly-harsh wind. Getting the information into his head, Chakaro retreated back to the others.

"I've got their positions, and names. One is Genji. Another one, a smoker, is called Ryuto. Kayla, you stay here and guard the instructor; Ekyt and I aren't going far." Kayla nodded, looking at the now-unconscious man. He had resisted, and almost broken free, to the point where Kayla had to crack

him in the point of the jaw with a hammer fist. He would stay unconscious for another ten minutes.

Ekyt knew the name “Ryuto” and knew his habits and description. But seeing him again...Ekyt felt his head fog up. Ryuto had been a bully, who had picked on Ekyt incessantly. Ekyt would dream about his taunts, but even in his dreams, he never stopped them. **You can do this now! Now's your chance!** What came out of his mouth was: “Kayla should go. This is a battle between students.” **You bastard! You coward! What the hell are you doing?!** Ekyt's left fist suddenly struck his own face. “Kayla!” he called. “Wait. I've got...got to ha-handle this...” Ekyt's voice trailed off. “Ekyt-Sensei, take it easy, please! Lay down for a few moments!” Ekyt had already sank to one knee, his hands out in disbelief. “I haven't earned that title Kayla...I haven't earned the right to be here...” “You need to lay down! Come on, take it easy, you'll be fine.” Chakaro shook his head. From behind, he clasped his hands together and brought them down on the back of Ekyt's neck, hitting a pressure point that would knock him unconscious for a few minutes. Give his mind time enough to reboot. Or so Chakaro hoped. At this point, though he liked Ekyt, he had to admit that “sensei” would be a liability.

Kayla and Chakaro paired off, each finding a willing partner. Kayla and Lakota started trading blows. Kayla's spin kick narrowly missed, and it forced her to block with the side of her hand as Lakota aimed a *chudan* (Straight) punch at her neck. She turned it aside and faked a low kick. Lakota bit, and that gave Kayla time to attack with her left hand, a quick side-hand strike to the a pressure point on the spine that knocked Lakota out.

Sensei Hayuka got up and moved his body, still bound tightly with rope, over to a rock. He began to sway back and forth, trying to force the ropes to weaken. He looked at his “counterpart instructor,” who was currently on his stomach, head turned to the side, out cold. Leaving him, Hayuka, a tall man with a high tolerance for pain, his hair cut in a bowl-shape, joined the other fight.

Genji and Ryuto found they had their hands full with Chakaro. He darted in and out and between them. “You handle him!” Ryuto told Genji. Ryuto grabbed Kayla from behind and held her for what looked like a killing strike with a dagger from Hayuka.

Ekyt felt his head, not feeling anything out of the ordinary. “What the hell was that?” he wondered aloud. He suddenly saw Chakaro peel away from Genji. Then he saw why. His temper flared his adrenaline, and Ekyt drew two daggers and flipped them to reverse grip. He decided to try Chakaro's running technique. He needed to move fast.

“Hey freak! Back off!” Chakaro shouted to Hayuka. He stopped his knife strike long enough to turn. Chakaro's flying side kick hit the sensei hard, but barely staggered him. Chakaro continued to throw everything he had at him. A hit from the man's huge right hand knocked him away. He heard Kayla cry out. Ryuto had pressed a knife to her skin, cutting her chin. “Kayla!” He tried to get back to her, but couldn't reach.

Genji didn't even have time to raise a guard when Ekyt's elbow smash struck home. He the unconscious student aside quickly, then ran toward Hayuka. “Chakaro! Help Kayla! I'll handle this!” Ekyt kicked the big sensei in the leg. As a huge hand swung in a decapitating strike, Ekyt dodged to the side and kicked higher up on the leg. He repeated the move again. Sensing someone coming, Ekyt judged the footsteps. They were close enough...now! He jumped, landing both feet on his stunned enemy's back. Hayuka's hand smashed down, knocking his student unconscious yet again. Ekyt had

jumped off Genji's back at the last second. He aimed both feet at Hayuka's face. They both struck, causing two black eyes and a cut lip. Ekyt landed on his hands and pulled off a handspring, landing safely away.

Chakaro couldn't pretend to agree with everything Ekyt said. But when he came to Ekyt for advice about chivalry one night, the lessons took. Never hitting a woman, for starters. Seeing Kayla, a girl he liked strongly, cut like that...it made his blood boil. But he couldn't attack. "Please, let her go." He begged Ryuto. "What's in it for ME, runt?" "You can have me! Please, let her go!" Ryuto gave Kayla a hard shove. She landed at Chakaro's feet. "Chakaro..." she whispered in awe. "Don't worry about it. I'll be fine." He assured her. He walked over to Ryuto. Slamming his knee into the smoking joker's groin, he muttered "Rule number one, numb-nuts: Don't drop your guard."

Ekyt threw a sequence of kicks. Low, high, low, high, all roundhouses. The next strike was a front snap kick, into another roundhouse, followed by a sidekick, then landing a back kick. He spun around, watching the big sensei stagger. Cocking his right fist, Ekyt struck again, a hard shot to the solar plexus. The big man went down. Ekyt's anger, however, did not. He spun towards Ryuto.

"I had to live with your taunts for years Ryuto. It's time to avenge that wasted time." "Of course Sensei." I don't need to remind you of your nicknames, or the various other things I used to make fun of. I don't need those anymore. I have some new taunts. What are these little punks you threw at us? THESE are your students? Fitting, I guess. As worthless as their sensei!" Ekyt chuckled. "You always DID have a stupid sense of humor Ryuto. Bullying all the others into laughing at your lame jokes. Forcing them to be your "friends." Don't you understand? YOU are the loser, the wimp, the jerk. You don't have one real friend. And not one REAL skill. You bullied your way into this tournament without any real skill. Pity, you always had the potential, but never the drive. Lazy jackass." Ryuto charged. Ekyt made no attempt to move. Ryuto wondered why. He didn't wonder long.

SPLASH! He had run straight into a puddle that had become a pond.

"HALT!" The proctor yelled. He turned to the team. "Who is leading?" Ekyt nodded at Chakaro. "Two points for victory...one point for speed...one for ingenuity." "What about no injuries?" Chakaro asked. (Kayla's cut doesn't count, as it is considered minor. An "injury" would be a serious wound that would stop a warrior from participating) "Your sensei was unconscious..." The proctor's voice held a questioning tone. "I'm afraid he was in the right to do that." Ekyt spoke up, chewing on a toothpick, somehow looking at ease and more intense at the same time. "I had become a liability to the mission. He made a smart choice." The proctor hesitated for second. "You were never one to lie Ekyt. Full points for no injuries."

Amy cheered. "They won!" Linda had to hold it in (for now).

Sonic zipped to the dojo, finding it empty, with a note mentioning a tournament at an undisclosed location. He shrugged. "Those two can handle themselves. I wonder how Elise is doing?"

Elise wasn't sure what to think. She was a very genuine person, and realized Sonic was too. He had admitted feelings for her. Didn't she owe him an answer? She wanted to make sure it was the RIGHT answer first. The truth was that she loved Sonic back. But saying it was different. And she still felt guilty about what happened with Ekyt, though he continued to treat her as a friend, and seemed to

understand.

Linda and Amy stood together, waiting for their group to come out. Chakaro led the way, somewhat bruised. Save for the cut on her chin, Kayla was okay too. Ekyt looked like hell had frozen over. Physically, he was fine. But Linda, who could almost tune into his thoughts, knew something had happened when he saw Ryuto. She decided to let him bring it up. "Chakaro, congratulations! You led an excellent mission!" Linda exclaimed. Chakaro blushed at the praise, muttering his thanks. "Kayla, I hope you're alright." "Yes Master, I'm okay." Kayla asked to speak with Chakaro.

Chakaro and Kayla walked over to the shade of a tree growing near a dirt road. "I hope that goon didn't hurt you." Chakaro spoke in a low voice. "Just a little scratch." Kayla said brightly. "Anyway, I just wanted to congratulate you and...apologize." "Apologize? For what?" he asked. Kayla kissed him on the cheek. "The kiss I gave sensei...I should have given it to you..."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ekyt saw Kayla kiss Chakaro. A half-smile crossed his lips. "Jealous?" Amy asked jokingly. "No. Relieved. I don't know if Linda told you, but she made a play for me the other night. It's not right, a teacher and a student. Not in this case." Amy nodded. "Ekyt, you know something about love, right?" Ekyt shrugged. "How to mess it up." Amy nodded. "Sonic admitted he loved Elise, and now I don't know what to do." She admitted. "Well, find another outlet. You're intelligent, and you've got energy. Why not try martial arts?" he suggested. "You never know...if Chakaro, the goofy prankster-turned-warrior, can find love thanks to martial arts...why not you?"

"Mountains. The next test. What do we know about them?" "It's more likely to be a lot of hills, and ONE mountain." Kayla said. "Okay. Now, hills and mountains. What is the best way to deal with those?" Chakaro shrugged, but Kayla immediately said "Climb no higher than necessary to gain an advantage, rest frequently, and have a good amount of supplies." "Very good Kayla. This is your mission to lead." "Are you sure I'm ready?" Ekyt raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't. Now, we..." Ekyt stopped as he saw a team, along with a sensei walking over, all showing peace over power signs. Ekyt indicated that they should return the sign.

"I see we are unlucky enough to draw you for the next round." The other sensei began. Ekyt realized that this was the group Utsugi had started the fight with. This sensei had jumped to the rescue of both groups from a knife-happy Master. "I'm Ekyt, I didn't get a chance to introduce myself last time." He said, bowing slightly. "Reian Akamatsu." The man returned. "Our two teams are going to be quite the matchup. My group and I just stopped to wish you luck during the tournament." Ekyt and his group sat down again, offering spots to their enemies. "Tea?" Ekyt asked them. "I promise, it's not poisoned." He said at their worried looks. He had just taken some himself. And as they had not been expecting them, it wasn't likely they would honestly consider the tea poisoned. "Yes, thank you."

Linda watched the two groups drink and talk. She was worried, but said nothing. Fellowship between schools was something they worked very hard to achieve. Besides, she knew Ekyt could handle it.

"These are my students; Kenpo Urashi (A severe-looking Japanese boy, roughly fourteen, nodded tersely.); Julayla Urashi (A severe, but pretty Japanese girl, maybe eighteen, with long black hair tied back somewhat, gave a friendly smile and a small wave), and Jurai Gyamoto (A decidedly American-looking boy, roughly 12, nods nervously, spilling tea). We are the Mountain School's Elite." Ekyt nodded and smiled at all of them. "This is my group: Kayla Donalds (Now in civilian clothes, resting

up. She had her hair fixed up. Jurai gave her a longer look than the others, before Kenpo coughed his disagreement.) and Chakaro Takami.” The other school nodded it’s greeting. “We must leave to get ready for the test. But best of luck.” Sensei Akamatsu offered. “Thank you, and to you.” Ekyt returned.

In an hour, the next challenge would begin. Ekyt wasn’t having a good day. First his courage deserted him, now he’s got to go face extreme heights? “Best that we get some rest. If you haven’t tried meditation, I’d recommend it.” Kayla kissed a blushing Chakaro one more time. Ekyt almost frowned in disapproval, but held it in. **If I can’t rid myself of emotions yet, I’m going to hide them. Plus, this should help stop that dust from getting in my lungs when we climb those mountains...something tells me we’ll wind up at the top, dueling for our lives.** Ekyt thought, slightly amused, as he tied grabbed his winter gear and cut the top off a ski mask, pulling it up over his neck and mouth. Breathing through his nose forced him to stop his hyperventilating. He hoped it would last, he needed his wits about him hundreds of feet in the air.

31 - Jinsei nanakorobi, ya'oki

"It's too much of a coincidence to ignore." Kayla said suddenly. Chakaro had been scarfing down his food, while Ekyt sat, apparently unaware or uncaring that there was food in front of him. "What do you mean?" Chakaro asked around a mouthful of ramen. "The Ice School elite on the ice field...the Wind school Elite on the windy plains...now the Mountain School elite in the mountains. Everyone else is on their home turf against us." "You're right, it's no coincidence. But we can't do anything to stop it. Besides we've got nine out of ten points so far. The training has just paid off." Chakaro said thoughtfully. They both looked at Ekyt, who looked up slowly from a book he was reading. "Jinsei nanakorobi, ya'oki." Ekyt muttered. "Say what?" "It means "Life is falling down seven times, getting up eight. A proverb Musashi stood by. In this case, it means the deck is stacked against us, but we've got to triumph anyway. These meetings are an accident, someone doesn't want us to win...or wants to make sure we have a hard time winning. Either way, we've got to stay on our guard. That, and we're a three person team, instead of the four our opponents have. But that doesn't matter so much." He straightened up, arching his neck for a second, then turning his eye back to his "students." "Has anyone else looked at the scores so far?" "You told us scores aren't important." Chakaro said. "Did I? Well, it's going to go against my next bit of advice: No detail, no matter how trivial it may seem, is worth ignoring. Now, we know we've done well, but where has everyone else placed?" A quick look at the scores told them.

"Our closest rivals are the mountain school, with seven points, and the "Hidden Forest" school, with...9." "What does that tell us?" "Look at the other scores." Ekyt motioned at the sheet. "I've never head of these schools! 1 point, 1 point, 2 points..." Kayla read off. "I still don't see what this tells us." Chakaro asked questioningly. "How many other students have you seen around? This is a big tournament. So you should have seen other students." Chakaro narrowed his eyes, trying to remember. "Only the Mountain School." He admitted. "So, either this tournament is rigged somehow, or we've gotten incredibly lucky. I doubt luck; it's too easy of a scapegoat. The only other possibility is that all these teams have been eliminated somehow." Ekyt tapped the sheet. "There's a pattern between the names of the schools we HAVE seen, it looks like. Mountain, Ice, Wind. But these other teams. Tiger, Lion, Goat...which doesn't belong? Kayla, you know a lot of the other schools...what does the Tiger school teach?" "I don't know, I haven't read about them." She said sheepishly. "You're right. You haven't, because there's nothing TO read. They don't exist. But this proves that something IS going on, and we've got to be careful...don't share this info with anyone." "Even Master Linda?" "ANYone." Ekyt emphasized. "Sometimes withholding information from others is as important as obtaining it."

"Chakaro!" Kayla waved him over. "Kayla?" he asked, noting the urgent tone in her voice. "I think Ekyt-sensei is having a problem with Linda. We should tell her." "Ekyt-sensei told us not to." "She's the Master, we're supposed to be loyal to *her*, before Ekyt-sensei." Chakaro hesitated. "If you want to tell her, go ahead. I'm going to talk to Ekyt-sensei."

Ekyt vaulted up into the tree, looking around to make sure it wasn't occupied, then settling down with *The Book of Five Rings*, by sword master Miyamoto Musashi. (A great book I'd recommend to Martial Artists and Non-Martial Artists alike.) "Sensei!" Chakaro spoke in a low, but urgent whisper. Ekyt had heard someone coming, but only for the last second or so. "Chakaro?" "Sensei, Kayla is going to

tell Master Linda. I know what you said, but..." "I thought I could count on someone telling her. She needs to know, but not from me." Ekyt said with a small grin. "Are you and Master Linda fighting?" "No. Not anymore. We were never officially together, so I can't be too upset." "You are anyway." Chakaro said, then wondered if it was wise to say anything. Apparently it was, because Ekyt closed his book and nodded. "Very good move, telling me. You ARE supposed to show loyalty to the Master above all. But endangering the mission isn't something ANY master could be proud of. Besides, by know, Linda will already know. Amy was in the bushes behind us when we were talking earlier." Chakaro hadn't noticed her, and that ashamed him now. "Don't worry about not noticing her, I planted her there. She's the messenger."

Ekyt stretched his wrists, which had taken a beating with all the blocking and throwing he had been doing. "You like Kayla, don't you?" Ekyt said, offhand. "Huh? Well, I..." "I've already lost one friend because of misguided love...I didn't want to lose another. You've got all the talent you need Chakaro, and you'll be a true sensei before me. I'd rather you thought of me and this tournament in a good light...for reasons I can't explain. I just want you to know...I had no idea Kayla was going to kiss me, and, although she's an attractive girl, I never intended to return that affection. I tend to think of her as more of a daughter..." Chakaro wondered if that meant Ekyt thought of him as a son, but didn't voice it. "Any moment now..." Ekyt didn't seem disturbed when a shuriken with a message tied to it struck the tree near his head. "Anyone looking?" he asked Chakaro, though he looked around himself. Then he opened the letter, reading it. Chakaro could only see Ekyt's eyes, the rest of his face being covered, but his eyes had a strange life in them now, like nothing he'd ever seen.

Linda waited, actually pacing, for Ekyt to come. "How come you didn't tell me this personally?" Linda asked immediately. "Throw anyone watching off. They wouldn't be expecting a civilian...or a team member...to spill the beans." Linda looked angry, then cracked up. "God, you're such an @\$#! You'll never change!" "Not likely." Ekyt agreed. She let her laughter die down, then said "What do you think about all this? Why sabotage the tournament?" "Whatever their reasons, whoever "they" are, it's not working very well if their aim is to get us killed. And they're being obvious about it. So I wonder if it's a trap within a trap." A warning came that the next fight would start in a few minutes. "I'm going to go prep my team." Ekyt said, not looking at Kayla.

"We've got our info, equipment double-checked, clothes set. Good. Kayla, you're leading." "You're not angry with me sensei?" "You were right to tell Linda, despite what I said. So, no." Ekyt answered. "It's time to go." "We should try to get the height advantage." Kayla said, to everyone.

They walked inside. "That's not gonna happen." Chakaro said. "Why not?" Kayla wanted to know. Chakaro pointed. "What?" The Mountain School was already on the mountain. "Someone IS out to get us...but who...and why..." Ekyt wondered aloud. "Never mind. We've got to get up there...Wait!" Ekyt held up an arm. "They've got a signal fire going...something's happened...Good Lord..." Ekyt dashed forward, the others following, wondering what was troubling Ekyt. Then they saw it too.

Black-clad warriors scaling the mountain. Lots of them. "Hidden Forest School...that's the "who" but not the "why." Ekyt muttered. "We've got to help them!" Kayla said. "It's not our fight...we should take advantage of their weakness." Chakaro said. They both looked to Ekyt. "We've eaten with them...our two schools bonded...it's our fight now. We've got to move fast."

Chakaro grabbed two of the enemies' legs, surprising them. They fell ten feet, landing hard on their

sides. Chakaro punted their respective heads, taking care of those two. Kayla scurried up the mountain. She used to rock-climb when she was younger, and was something of a dare-devil beneath the shy exterior. She leapt down, planting her feet onto the top of one foe's head, driving him into the ground, where his feet took the brunt of the blow, breaking them both. Ekyt scrambled higher, trying to get to the other school. He was grabbed around the ankle at one point, but he stabbed down, cutting the hand that was holding him. Putting the knife between his teeth and promising himself he wouldn't do that again if he could help it, as the cold steel scraped against his enamel, he scrambled to the top of the mountain.

"Ekyt? You must leave! It is YOUR head they are after!" Sensei Akamatsu begged. "I'm not going to leave you at their mercy Reian. My students are on their way too. If it's ME they're after, take my students and go! Let the master's know." "I will not leave you!" Reian sounded appalled at the idea. "It's time I came of age Reian. I need to know I've got the warrior's soul...this is beyond a tournament now..." "I'll send my students. I'm going to share your fate. You've proven yourself a very true and genuine friend. Our two schools are linked through our friendship, the two villages connected by a mutual appreciation. It's time that was proven! Kenpo, Juyalya, Jurai! Take Chakaro and Kayla to their master, notify ours! Go, now! Hurry!" Ekyt mentally noted how impressed he was at how quickly they obeyed. **It's now or never...I can't ask my students to share my fate...I realized I would die for them, the same I would have once...still died for Linda. I guess I'm getting my change to prove it on this God-forsaken rock...**

The numbers started to mount as the two instructors fought off wave after wave of enemies. They had started at the edge of the mountain, knocking enemies off, knowing that they may be killed from the fall. Ekyt looked down at one point to see one of the warriors commit seppuku on his way down. Some of them actually tucked and rolled with the fall, since the mountain wasn't huge. A huge, rocky hill that flattened out was a better description.

Soon the two instructors were pushed back to back, the number of enemies swelling. They were tiring quickly. Reian was nursing a broken hand, and Ekyt had taken a throwing knife to the bicep. The enemies suddenly stopped and parted. Ekyt didn't like what he saw.

Linda was sitting, sipping some God-awful swill that one of the other masters had made. **This sucks...I miss the action...Do these guys do ANYTHING but chug tea? I mean, I like tea as much as the next person, but Good God, enough is enough!** "Master Linda!" Kayla and Chakaro ran up, along with Julayla, Kenpo, and Jurai. "Master, they've been ambushed! Ekyt-Sensei is helping Reian-Sensei fight off the enemy!" In an excited voice, Jurai continued. "Yeah! They're in real trouble! I don't think they'll last much longer without help!" Linda and Mater Yukami nodded at each other. "Lead the way Jurai."

"You." Ekyt snarled at the approaching Master. Ginn Ota-yuji grinned back at him (He's the molester that went after Linda and poisoned Ekyt a couple issues ago). "I see you've taken to hiding your face in shame. Is it Sensei now?" "Do you know this jackass?" Reian asked. "He tried to molest my gir...friend. My friend." Ginn smiled. Ekyt continued, a small stream of blood running down his face from a cut on his eyebrow. "I won't lay claim to "sensei" but I will say I am an instructor. And you listen to me, you arrogant bastard! If it's MY head you want, then settle this with me! Grow a set; learn what it means to be a warrior!" "It means power." "It means preserving who and what you love! If you haven't figured that out yet, you never will." Ginn ordered his men back. "You have a big mouth. Tell me, how did it feel when I felt up your girl? Wait...she wasn't YOUR girl, was she?" Ekyt right fist went off like a gunshot

against Ginn's nose.

"They're up there!" Chakaro pointed. "We've got to get up there Yukami-san." Linda said. He nodded agreement. "We're coming, too! Those are our sensei's up there!" Linda watched Ekyt punch a familiar man. "Ginn...my God...let's go!" Linda's temper had reached its boiling point. Her running became a blur as she dashed to the mountain.

Ginn got up slowly, putting a hand to his broken nose. "I was going to let my men kill you...now, I think I'd rather have the honor." "Talk is cheap Sensei Windbag." Ekyt said, a lot more confident than he felt. Ginn attacked with a primal scream, while Ekyt dodged. Reian took advantage of the situation and threw knives rapid-fire, clearing out the mountain. Fifteen men died in his attack, but at this point, there wasn't much choice. Reian glanced at Ekyt. The two nodded, and he dashed down the mountain to help the Masters.

As they fought, with Ekyt on offense most of the time, Ginn called out "Fool! He could have been your salvation! Now you'll die up here!" Ekyt ignored him, but suddenly a pang of anxiety hit him.

"Remember how high up we are? Ryuto? Remember him?" Ekyt blocked, a split second too late, as Ginn's knife slashed his stomach. Ekyt stopped it from penetrating with his forearm, but it was still a tough injury. Ginn laughed and stabbed down again, his right arm bloody to the elbow.

Linda and the others were attacked. But the "good guys" were in a zone, dispatching their enemies. "Linda-san, go to him" Yukami told her sagely. She nodded, dashing up the mountain.

She leapt up in front of Ekyt. "My God...no..." she spied him lying on the ground, three visible stab wounds on him. His breath was ragged. Fearing the worst, Linda pulled back the covering over his mouth. Blood was oozing out the sides of his mouth. She pulled off her vest and laid it under his head. She turned toward Ginn, hatred on every inch of her face. "You...miserable...bastard...I'll see you to your grave if he's dead! But it takes a lot to kill him, and I won't let you touch him! Not again!" But her head wasn't totally in the fight. She missed a couple easy strikes and Ginn was right there to take advantage.

Come on. Come on. Come on. You can't let him win! Ekyt's subconscious was arguing with his fatigued and possibly dying body. **Now is NOT the time to be weak! Now is the time to fight...you've got to do it.** Ekyt remembered meeting Linda for the first time. She had stopped him from bleeding to death after he had gotten shot. Then he thought of the two of them in the forest, the brief time when they BOTH had been happy and alive. She made as beautiful a human as she did an echidna. Then she had hugged him, to the point where he was sure that she loved him back.

Then his mind changed. Back to his training. To Sensei talking. What had he said...

"These techniques are to be used only as a last resort. Protecting your life, or someone else's. They push your body to its limits, and are fatal to one, if not both combatants." "I understand." He heard himself say.

Linda was on one knee, clearly defeated. Her mind had been on Ekyt, and her fighting had suffered. "Too bad girl. Now instead of marrying me, you'll die, just like that other slime. You'll die, and I'll enjoy it. Then I'll finish what I started. But this time, you won't have that guy to take a knife for you." Linda had to choke back tears. She looked at Ekyt, praying for a miracle. "Come on. Come on. Wake up. I'd do anything...do you understand? I'd die for you too..." "And you'll have your chance!" Ginn yelled, a

stabbing motion starting.

“I understand!” The word had come out loud. Ekyt’s eyes opened and his adrenaline peaked. He rolled forward and slashed his leg upward, hitting Ginn just under the chin with the bottom of his foot as he braced himself on the ground his hands and other knee.” Ginn’s body raised up two inches, an arc of blood coming from his broken nose. Ekyt followed up, swing himself from one hand to the other, aiming his heel at Ginn’s head, connecting with a solid THUNK! Ginn and he were both up now. Ekyt hit a flurry of punches, driving Ginn to the edge. Ekyt literally picked him up and smashed his head against a rock, sending the wobbling Ginn to one foot on the edge. Ekyt uncoiled from a crouching position and hitting Ginn in the chest with a flying sidekick. Both of them tumbled off the mountain.

“OH MY GOD!” Linda threw herself toward the edge, afraid at what she’d see, but forcing herself to look at the same time. She could have cried.

Cried with relief.

Ekyt was hanging on to a lowed edge, with Ginn grabbing at his leg. “If I’m going down, you’re coming with me!” Ginn yelled. Ekyt suddenly felt so tired...in another world, he grabbed a throwing knife from the hidden case high up on his leg. He cut his pant leg and watched dispationaly as Ginn fell. He felt Linda grab him and haul him back onto the edge, but he couldn’t do anything.

“You did it. Thank you so much. We’ll keep you alive, just hang on!” she said around tears of joy. Kayla joined her next, hoping to put her medical expertise to good use. “This isn’t good...The bleeding needs to stop...if we can do THAT, he’ll be okay. But I don’t see how.” Ekyt got up, his right eye closed. “Bleeding needs to stop?” he looked down at himself. “Thass juss a little pinprick.” He said, attempting to smile. He gave that up, since he couldn’t feel most of his face, and what he DID feel hurt like hell. “Please Ekyt, don’t play the tough guy! Lay back done.” “Heck with that.” He pulled off his gi top and cut it into strips, wrapping around the three stab wounds across his chest, and the slash across his stomach.” Linda smiled despite herself. “You’re a strange one Ekyt. Goofy, but you wouldn’t be you otherwise.”

As Kayla and Linda helped Ekyt back, he walked through the other students. Chakaro fell into step with them, swinging at anyone who got too close. “Reian.” Ekyt said. “What?” “Reian. I have to talk to Reian.” “It can wait.” “No it can’t.” Ekyt said.

They dragged him over to Reian. “I would consider it an honor if you would allow me train with you.” Linda shrugged, okaying it at Reian’s questioning look. “On the condition that you don’t leave the school you are currently attending. It seems as though your students and Master care about you very much.” Through his bleery eye, Ekyt made out the forms of Kayla, standing upright, her hands on her hips, nodding. He saw Chakaro, who was standing his arms crossed, nodding. And then Linda, who nodded herself, grinning from ear to ear.

“I accept. See you in class.” Ekyt said, forcing the half of his face he could now feel into a wry half-grin.”

“What possessed you to use those techniques?” Linda asked. Ekyt was now cleaned up, black gi pants and a white t-shirt, and a black, short-sleeved jacked over that. “Last line of defense, use to defend.” He

answered. "Fine. But on top of a mountain?" Ekyt shrugged. "Is THAT where I was? I thought I fell already by that point." She knew he was joking, but it still worried her. In what was most likely the biggest lie ever told, Ekyt uttered two words that summed up his current outlook on life:

"I'm fine."

NEXT ISSUE: UNFAMILIAR TURF: LEARNING MOUNTAIN-STYLE!

32 - Hidden Anger Rising

“Chakaro, you ready? How about you Kayla?” They were both looking at Ekyt, not sure what to think. “Yes Sensei.” They said as one. “Good to hear. Let’s go.” Ekyt’s face was still covered, along with a black headband, for reasons neither student was sure of. He was dressed in a formal black gi, disdaining the hakama, saying “That pain in the @\$@ skirt is hard enough to get on without a bad leg.” It was true, they had to admit, that hakamas sucked to try to put on. So many freakin’ cords and knots, it got confusing. “Oh, wait, before we go...I’ve always said medals don’t matter, but in this case...” Ekyt handed them each a gold medal. “What’s this for?” Kayla asked, genuinely confused. “You won the tournament. Didn’t anyone tell you?” “No.” Chakaro answered in wonder. How had they won, their sensei had almost been killed!

The three walked out. Well, two walked out, and one gimped out. Ekyt had a crutch propped under his arm, and bandages bulging under his gi, and you couldn’t see his face...or one eye, which had been hurt in the fight. But the eye you COULD see was beaming. Master Linda called the class to attention. “Kiotsuke!” The students all stopped their respective exercises to pay attention. “As you know, one of our instructors suffered a series of horrible injuries at the tournament. And I’m going to ask him to come forward now, and say something about it.” Ekyt, who hadn’t been expecting this, shot Linda a mock-dirty look with his eye, then gimped gamely to the center of the dojo.

“This isn’t about me. It never was. Medals mean nothing, technique is what matters...except in this case. Two students from this school defied the odds, assassination attempts, and being one team member short to win the tournament.” Applause reached Ekyt’s ears; he hoped Kayla and Chakaro had heard it too. “What about you?” one student yelled. Ekyt realized it was Harutomo, an advanced belt (Brown in this case) student who showed incredible promise. “Just a few wounds in the line duty.” Ekyt said modestly. Linda walked out again. “What he means is he nearly died defending the honor of this school...as well as my honor. It was from the brink of death he found an inner strength that enabled him to truly defy the odds and win, using techniques forbidden, save for extreme cases. These techniques carry the risk of potential death, for not only the receiver, but the person executing the move. So, with three stab wounds, a slashed stomach, and a nearly-broken leg, the honor of our school was defended successfully.” Another cheer rose. “But this isn’t about me. It’s about two of your number...well, three, actually. But for now, the first to. Kayla, Chakaro!” The two students came to the center of the dojo, standing front and center. Ekyt stood behind them, studying the class. “It is with immense happiness I present Kayla Donalds and Chakaro Takami with their black belts and promote them to “Senior Students.””

After the cheers died down, Linda spoke again. “One of your number has been chosen to join Ekyt-Sensei’s group. Whenever you’re ready Ekyt.” Ekyt limped toward the students, then pointed his crutch at Harutomo. “Do you accept Harutomo?” The stunned boy nodded. Ekyt tried, somewhat successfully, to bow to him. He returned the gesture. “Then welcome.” Ekyt directed him toward Kayla and Chakaro.

At that point, the dojo doors opened. Ekyt and his group scurried to the front. They weren’t expecting visitors, and everyone knew better than to interrupt class. That left intruders. Chakaro, Kayla, and

Harutomo took defensive stances, drawing their weapons. "Hold on."

Ekyt stepped forward and spoke some words to whoever was outside the door. "May I introduce Sensei Reian Akamatusu of the Wind School Elite, and Master Yukami, the Master of the Wind School." Linda made her way next to Ekyt. The four bowed to each other. "What are they doing here?" was the common whisper. Juarai, Julyalya, and Kenpo stood near Ekyt's group. "The Wind School will be participating in a "knowledge exchange" with our school. While they will tend to their duties as instructors, Sensei Akamatsu will show some techniques here, as well as open his school to anyone wishing to attend. Likewise, Sensei Ekyt will be attending the Wind School by the same token."

Chakaro, Kayla, and now Harutomo, all spoke quietly in the corner. "I'm not letting Ekyt-Sensei go alone in his state. I'm going with him." Harutomo said. He and Ekyt had always gotten along, but now more so that he was elite material. "Same here. In his state, he needs us." Chakaro agreed. "Count me in." Kayla said brightly. "In the meantime, we have a mission." Chakaro said, speaking even lower. "Ekyt-Sensei and Linda had something happen between them. We need to know what." "But it's none of our business!" Kayla argued. "You saw what happened on that mountain. There was something more there that Ekyt was defending, besides honor..."

Linda and Ekyt were sitting alone near the koi pond. This was where Master Sukuto had died, leaving Linda in charge of the school. "Any luck with a cure?" Ekyt asked. Linda shook her head. "No. But you know, being human isn't so bad. I seem to meet the bastards, yourself included, though." She joked. It looked like her friend wasn't in a bantering mood. "I'm sorry things got out of hand on the mountain." He said suddenly, after a few moments of uncomfortable silence. "You saved me." "You wouldn't have needed saving if I hadn't been in trouble." Ekyt returned, tossing some shrimp to a turtle swimming around the koi pond. "That reminds me..." She put a gentle arm around his shoulders. "Thanks for the save." She pulled down his face covering on one side so she could give him a kiss on the cheek. She put the covering back on his face. "Why d'you wear this thing?" she asked, tugging at the covering. "Oh, it's from an anime series." Ekyt muttered. "You're full of crap. Now, how 'bout you tell Master Linda the truth?" He hesitated. She could read him pretty well, much to his chagrin. "Emotions?" she asked. He nodded, slowly meeting her eyes. "Emotions are what make you who and what you are." "Exactly. That's my problem. I either have no emotions, or too many. Until I learn to control them, I'm going to keep them hidden." "Boy oh boy. You never fail to amaze me." She said, shaking her head in wonder.

At that moment, Hagakure came in. "Master, I'm here for our..." he trailed off upon seeing Ekyt. "Don't let me stop you Hagakure, I just needed to ask her a couple questions." Ekyt said, taking up his crutch. "You were awfully close to her to just be "asking questions."" He said suspiciously. Ekyt's visible eye narrowed. "If you're accusing me of something, get on with it." "I think you want her back. I'll sooner slit my wrist than let you have her." He said. "Don't let that stop you." Ekyt snarled. The two were inches away. "Come on, come on!" Linda forced her way between them.

"Hagakure, he was telling the truth. You can't go leaping down the throat of everyone who comes near me." she said, exasperated. "Isn't that what a boyfriend is for?" he asked, a legitimate questioning tone in his voice. "Of course not." Ekyt said, amazingly calm. "Not JUST that." "Please, share your endless knowledge!" Hagakure challenged. "Here's some knowledge: You are pissing me off." Ekyt muttered. "Don't make the mistake of threatening me, you talentless piece of crap. You had your chance, it didn't work. Now bow out gracefully." Hagakure shot back. "I care about her, as a friend. Who she picks as her boyfriend is her business. If it's you, congratulations. But keep this in mind: I

promised her I would protect her, no matter what. She picked you. I'm not mad about that. But what IS annoying me is the fact that you're trying to break up my friendship with her. I'm no threat to you, when it comes to Linda anyway." Ekyt gave him a look with his eye, clearly a warning.

The next week, Ekyt, followed by Chakaro, Harutomo, and Kayla went to the Mountain School's dojo. When Ekyt went to the door and was negotiating their way in, his students dropped back. "We've got to grill him now. I heard...I heard him and Hagakure threatening each other the other day." Kayla said in an urgent whisper. This was indeed big news. He and Linda's boyfriend had fought? They had seen no change in their sensei, but to be fair, they could only see one eye. "Welcome!" A pretty girl answered the door, welcoming them in. Ekyt bowed and went inside, the others following his lead.

"Ekyt-Sensei, you have healed well!" Reian came over to greet them. "Reian-Sensei, I'm looking forward to this "knowledge exchange," as the masters put it." "I see traces of many martial arts in your style. Your hunger for martial knowledge must be insatiable." Reian said, a grin spreading across his face. "More or less." Ekyt said. He might have been grinning back, but his mouth wasn't visible. "It is a true shame that we did not have a chance to show our skills at the tournament. It would have been...fun...to spar with you." "Likewise." "Will you be participating today, or just looking around." "Well, that's up to my group." Ekyt turned around, finding only Chakaro standing behind him. With a quick glance, Ekyt found Kayla talking animatedly with another girl, and Harutomo trying some food a student had offered him. Ekyt momentarily debated on whether to call them back or not, but it clearly wasn't a disturbance, so he didn't say anything. "Sensei?" Ekyt turned around to see Chakaro looking stoic, like usual, but nervous at the same time. Ekyt saw why, and had to stifle a laugh.

Chakaro was fifteen. It seemed that every girl within that reasonable age had been staring at him for the last few minutes. "Enjoy it while you can Chakaro." Ekyt said, raising his visible left eyebrow. "Why are they just...staring?" Ekyt had forgotten how shy Chakaro had been initially. Likely, he had been the same way Ekyt had been. He hadn't met the special girl that would pull him out of his shell. Thinking about it, Ekyt realized he wasn't out of his shell either.

"Whoa, what's with your sensei?" The girl Kayla had been talking to pointed. "Him? Well...I don't know. He got hurt recently, but the covered face thing came first. His right eye was hurt pretty bad, so I'm guess that's why it's hidden." She answered thoughtfully. "Does he have a girlfriend?" the other girl asked, giggling. "No." "Does he realize that hiding his face like that makes him more attractive?" "I doubt it. See, Ekyt-Sensei is kind of...clueless when it comes to girls." She said, shrugging. "Have you kissed him?" the other girl asked. "Yeah. Well, I mean, he didn't see it coming, actually. His face was priceless!" "Is he your boyfriend?" "No. THAT'S my boyfriend." She pointed at Chakaro. "You'd better take a number then." Kayla saw all the girls staring at him. "Why, those thieving doges!" she muttered, laughing, knowing full well Chakaro wouldn't respond to them.

The Mountain School's course was grueling. But at the end of the day, there was noticeable improvement. Ekyt grabbed a chin-up bar and propelled himself upward, managing 12 punches before he landed. Chakaro did a flip and 10 punches. "Show off." Ekyt muttered to him. "Hey, you told me to enjoy the attention while I've got it. I'm just keeping it." Ekyt chuckled, noting that "Chakaro's Angels" were still staring at him with rapt attention.

"So, Ekyt-Sensei, how is Master Linda?" Chakaro asked, offhand. "Good, as far as I know." Something about Ekyt's tone got Chakaro worried. "Look, um, Ekyt-Sensei, I think I understand somewhat. I f you

need someone to talk you..." "Thanks Chakaro. You've probably noticed most of my face covered. It's not just injuries. I used to be stoic, much as you are now. Then I met Linda, and she got me to break out of my shell somewhat, so to speak. But we're not...well, you get the point. So I regret it. I should never have put a love that couldn't have worked over being a warrior." Chakaro looked at him questioningly. "You have a chance with Kayla. Linda...is out of my league. Hell, I'm not even playing the same game. She won't admit it, and maybe she doesn't honestly believe it, but my guess is" "Sensei, she used to be an echidna, didn't she?" Ekyt's left eye narrowed. "THAT," he said, "Is something you'll have to take up with her. I can't say any more about that."

Ekyt looked out across the rainy landscape. It was a light drizzle, hardly worth the name. Ekyt walked out into it, in the middle of the big grassy field where Sonic had kissed Elise, marking a definite end to his first, incredibly brief romance. His second hadn't even existed, he realized now. All he had left was his training. He breathed out, exhaling the bad vibes, inhaling the damp new air. He pulled his black, short-sleeved jacket into a more comfortable position. He heard someone coming. He could tell it was someone making an effort to be silent by the long, deliberate steps. His hand reached for the staff laying next to him. A knife hit the clay next to his hand, prompting him to tuck and roll forward while grabbing a knife of his own. He found Hagakure staring at him.

"We need to finish this!" he yelled, throwing another knife. "I already conceded defeat." Ekyt said flatly. "I don't accept that! Master Linda won't truly be mine until YOU are dead!" He pulled out his weapons. Sai. Ekyt's bo was too far away, so he held two daggers, one tight against his arm for blocking, the other in an attacking grip.

Battle theme: Breaking the Habit by Linkin Park

The two circled, each daring the other to attack. "You brought death upon yourself!" Hagakure called the first time their weapons met. A shower of sparks came up, a metal meeting metal came up. They fought each other, not giving an inch, before Hagakure tried to overpower Ekyt. Ekyt leapt backward, sliding slightly in the wet grass. He faked a low roundhouse, then struck high. His attempt was blocked with a flick of a sai, knocking the knife back. Ekyt's other knife arced up, with both sai meeting it. The sai slashed forward, forcing him to do a horrible backspring, his mostly-healed wounds pulling at his skin. The sais slashed down again, forcing him to roll away. He flung his leg out, out of the sai's reach, trying for a leg sweep. It connected. Ekyt heel-kicked the sais into the ground. Hagakure got up, forgetting his weapons. Ekyt put his knives away.

An uppercut rattled Ekyt's head pretty good, but he blocked the second attempt with a sweeping forearm, which he turned into nose punch, hitting home seconds later. Hagakure turned his leap backwards into a spinning heel kick forward. Ekyt backed up a half-step, then executed a crescent kick, sweeping his opponents guard long enough for a snap-kick to the chest.

"STOP IT!" Linda was zipping across the field, Sonic with her. Ekyt stopped, but didn't take his eyes off Hagakure. Good thing, because a punch came toward Ekyt's face. Ekyt leaned back and to the side, snapping his hand across his opponents arm in a block, following through with a side kick, adding a back kick to the combo, spinning again for a roundhouse, a punch, then a front kick. He used his landing as a launch pad for his new agility. He jumped higher than usual, his foot striking Hagakure's jaw, knocking him down. As he was going down, he struck, hitting Ekyt's jaw in a "cutting" strike. The impact knocked them both backwards. Sonic zipped between them. "I saw the whole thing." Ekyt saw something else.

“Look out!” he yelled, hauling Sonic to the ground as knives flew over. “I didn’t know what was worth fighting for...but I do now...” Ekyt’s anger had hit the boiling point. He kicked at Hagakure’s hand, which was reaching for more knives. He heard it break. In the same motion, he stepped hard on Hagakure’s foot, snapping most of the smaller bones. With his motion perfect, he punched him hard in the stomach, then grabbed his headband and rammed his knee into Hagakure’s head.

“Okay. That’s enough. He started it Ekyt. You were right not to trust him.” Hagakure was laying still. He sat up, grinning at Ekyt. “You fool. Have your tramp.” He threw knives at Linda’s back. Ekyt pulled her down, kneeling in front of her, then returned fire with the butt-end of a knife. It sailed in a true trajectory, then it landed hard between Hagakure’s eyes, knocking him out.

“I can’t believe it...” Linda couldn’t believe it, her boyfriend had attacked her, and the boy she had rejected had put his life at risk to save her. She still didn’t feel the same way, but decided her new protector would be her old protector. “Thank you. I’ve been a dog, and I’m really sorry.” She decided to give him a hug. Unfortunately, his back foot slipped in the mud, and she landed on top of him. “Sorry.” He muttered, the area under his visible eye turning red. “S’okay.” She continued her embrace, then pulled his headband off and kissed his forehead.

“Master!” Utsugi was kneeling before Ginn. “What have you to report?” “Ekyt has healed and is training both with Linda and at the Mountain School Elite dojo.” “Very good Utsugi. Very good indeed. It is time to plan our next strike...this time, we can’t have his students interfering...”

33 - What's Worth Fighting For?

“Focus is the key to winning at most everything. Chess, checkers, cards, sports...and duels. There’s going to come a time when it won’t be sparring watched by a sensei. It will be a very real battle, for your life, or someone else’s. What I’m about to show you is ONLY TO BE USED IN A LIFE OR DEATH SITUATION OR TO PROTECT SOMEONE YOU REALLY LOVE.” Ekyt had his three students, along with Reian and his three. “Reian, what we discussed?” Ekyt asked. “Ready.” Ekyt struck, fingers curled in so that his knuckles were protruding. At the range he was at, and how much power was concentrated into four very small outlets of energy, there was no doubt this was a killing strike, or at the very least, an incapacitating strike.

They all watched in horror as Ekyt’s knuckles struck the throat of Reian. “My God...” “THIS is a killing move. I’d rather my students didn’t kill, but...then again, you aren’t my students anymore, save for this circumstance. After this...troubling time has passed, you all need to take on a student, save for you Harutomo. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.” “Now, you all saw what happened on that mountain. THAT was a case of defending your life, and the life of someone you...care about...care about very much.” Ekyt said, his visible eye showing a little sign of emotion.

“Something’s wrong Chakaro. Something is seriously wrong with Ekyt-sensei.” Kayla muttered. “Yeah...but what?” Chakaro asked. Harutomo, who was a keen observer, said “Ever since last night, he seems more...ill...than usual.” “But what happened last night?” Kayla wondered aloud.

Ekyt’s jacket blew a little, annoying him. Thanks to another day of training at the Mountain School, he could now scale trees in an incredibly short amount of time. He was standing on top of one right now, concealed high up in its branches. “They know...” he said, thinking of the look his “students” had given him. “They know something is wrong...but they don’t know what. They’re a sharp bunch, somehow they’ll find out about that fight the other night...” Ekyt felt under his face covering. There was a gash he could fit the tip of his pinky in to. And he didn’t even want to feel his eye. He hadn’t checked it sense the battle, worried that there wouldn’t be anything TO feel.

“Ekyt-sensei?” Ekyt heard Chakaro calling him. He dashed down the tree, landing next to his student. “Look, something’s wrong, and I’m going to ask what. I don’t expect you to tell me, but I’m going to hope you trust me enough.” “I trust you Chakaro. Things have been hazy for me since Linda more or less rejected me. Then the duel with Hagakure...it should never have happened. It didn’t NEED to. I hope he’s not seriously hurt.” “What about you sensei?” he asked, pointing at Ekyt’s face coverings. “Well, my face is fine. I can’t explain why I wear THAT, but my headband...” He pulled it down, giving Chakaro a look at his eye. “Oh...Wow...” Ekyt’s eye looked mutilated. “Doctor says it’ll heal in its own time.”

Suddenly, they both heard the sound of something heavy landing in the grass. Or, somethings. People. “Get them! The student is the priority!” the leader yelled. Ekyt saw these weren’t the skilled assassins he was used to. **But if Chakaro’s the target, why wouldn’t they send their best? And why would the student be the priority? Why not just kill me?** Ekyt decided to ponder that later. These might not be high-class warriors, but they were still a threat.

“They’ll be getting in close.” Chakaro whispered. “They don’t have a place for throwing weapons. If we keep them at a distance, they won’t be effective.” Ekyt nodded. He ran towards a tree, leaping for a branch. He succeeded in grabbing it; he followed that up by breaking the branch off, cutting it in two with his dagger before he hit the ground. Two bo’s now at their disposal to keep the enemies away.

A few swings of the bo later, the fight was over. **If they’re targeting the students, the others are in danger...but why target them? And who? Wait, wait. Utsugi...he left without a word. The power-hungry kid is likely to...oh no!** “Chakaro, we’ve got to get back to the dojo. The others are in danger, if I’m right. But we might be walking into a trap. Maybe it’s better if you” “Forget it Ekyt. I’m a sensei now too, no matter how young I am. I can’t preserve my own precious butt over everyone else. You yourself taught me that.” Ekyt didn’t like it, but couldn’t argue. “Alright, if you’re sure.”

Thirty men poured into the room, the first few grabbing Kayla and Harutomo, despite their efforts to fight. There were simply too many. “Let them go!” Linda called, not happy with this turn of events. She leapt into the fray, trying to fight against the rising tide of enemies to reach her students. That was when she heard the sound of glass shattering.

“Oof! Damnit!” Ekyt cursed. **mental note: bad idea to use body to break glass.** an voice told him. Chakaro had leapt in uninjured beside him and had attacked, drawing some attention away from Linda. Ekyt got up quickly, leaping in front of Linda. To his left, Chakaro had been knocked unconscious, blood spurting from his head. He was alive, and would probably be fine, if the goons didn’t get him. Ekyt looked again to find a knife striking Linda. The sudden pain forced her to drop her guard. Ekyt saw what was going to happen next, and could only think of one thing.

More knives flew towards Linda. She was doubled over in pain. She heard the knives coming, but found her legs unwilling to cooperate with her mind in an effort to move. She heard running and looked up to see Ekyt leap in front of her, his back toward the knives.

It was one of those moments where everything turned black and white, and time seemed to move in slow motion. Ekyt leapt, a look of determination in his visible eye. That turned to a wince of pain as three knives struck the flesh on his back. He hit the gym floor hard, the blue protective mats cushioning his head as he fell. Linda looked to see her other students rushing away from their exercises to fight. Little Terrence, a white belt, took out two enemies before he was unceremoniously backhanded and sent sprawling. Julie and Sue, two orange belts leapt after his attackers. Her instructors were fighting, trying to give her a chance to escape. Instead, she would share their fate. “RUN IF YOU CAN!” Linda called, taking up a guard, driving her elbow into the nose of a black-clad goon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Chakaro stir, then get to his knees, flinging a set of well-aimed knives at his opponents. But a more amazing sight was happening at her feet.

If you want something bad enough...if it’s important enough to you...you find the strength to continue...by whatever means necessary.

Linda watched in amazement as the gym stopped. The boy, man, warrior, was getting up, three knives sticking out of his back. They all watched as he pulled them out, one at a time, then pulled his jacket over the wound. No one moved or breathed. Until he returned the knives to their owners by virtue of a good throwing arm.

The injury seemed to give him a boost of adrenaline, as he tackled three enemies, bashing two heads together, and throwing the third into the wall. When a fourth charged him, he stood still, until the man was in range. Then he swung for the fences with a backhand strike. Or so everyone thought. He turned that into an open-hand strike to the temple, then launching into a jumping spin kick, and, upon a perfect landing, threw an uppercut. "That son of a dog isn't human!" one enemy yelled. One made a move for Linda. She cut him down without taking her eyes off Ekyt. Three rushed him at once, all slashing down with their knives. She couldn't believe that he used a forearm block, and couldn't believe it worked, for that matter. She saw him draw his own dagger and slash across three arms, then three stomachs, then three thighs, then three knees. Somehow, his blows had evaded killing. "Don't scream, no one cares. Besides, you'll live. I wouldn't stain my blades with your death. Unless you force me." Ekyt had been holding the man close to him, letting him drink in the sight of one, somewhat bloodshot eye, showing him his future. One that held death.

"Tactical retreat!" The leader barked. "Cowardly retreat!" Ekyt yelled back. When the leader hesitated, a knife hit him in the ribs, breaking two. "Go coward." Ekyt spat. The dojo cleared of all but the students, who were looking at their sensei with a mix of admiration and fear.

Linda and Chakaro ran over to his side. Eventually, he crumpled to one knee, a slight shaking mass. "I'm fine." He managed, his voice shaking like his body did. Finally, he fell down to his stomach. "He'll live." Linda announced as she knelt near him. "I'm still awake, I'm okay." Ekyt whispered. Then he tried getting up again. "Where are you going?" "To get my students." He said, pulling himself up, sweating from the effort. "I can't let you do that." Linda told him. "I have to. I'm not letting those kids die." "You don't have the strength, you can barely stand!" "If it's important enough, you find the strength." He quipped, dragging himself over the door. "Fine, but I'm going." Linda said. "Me too." Chakaro added. "Count me in!" "Yeah, me to!" "I'm down with that!"

"No. Black belts, I can't stop you from coming. Anyone below, I ask you respectfully to stay here." There was no protest this time. Someone handed Ekyt a crutch, which he took, leaning heavily on it, making his way out the door. "Man, I thought I was tough for taking a punch from Haruchika-sensei, but that guy is THE toughest son of a dog I've ever seen." The others looked on in awe, nodding. "Three knives in the back? How many years of training does THAT take?"

Ekyt found one of the men he had wounded laying on the ground. "Hey dirtbag. You're gonna tell me right now where my students are!" he snarled, lifting the semi-conscious man up. "The Master will kill me." "I'LL kill you. Now talk." Ekyt held a knife to his throat, putting the smallest bit of pressure on his neck.

Ekyt walked into the building alone. One eye, face covered, and holding a crutch tight to his body. "I thought we'd see you here Ekyt." Ginn grinned at him. "Did I introduce my latest pupil?" Utsugi stepped out from the shadows. "What a power play! Are you trying to laugh me to death?" Ekyt asked in a bored voice. "If you want your students back, I'd suggest being nicer." Ginn threatened. "If you've hurt one hair on their heads, I'll forget I'm a good guy." Ekyt shot back. "Utsugi, show him." Utsugi showed a very beaten-up Kayla and Harutomo tied back to back. Both were hardly conscious. "You can go over to them. Go on, play the hero."

Ekyt limped over to Kayla and Harutomo. He felt for a pulse, finding two, much to his relief. Kayla had a

black eye and a cut lip, along with a nice cut on her skull, just beneath her hair. The blood from the cut turned her hair from blond to red. It was sickening, but Ekyt moved on to check Harutomo. "That one, he fought bravely to protect the girl. If he's alive, I'll be surprised." Ginn's voice made Ekyt want to kill him, but he couldn't risk the two of them.

"Alright Ginn, fine. I'll give myself up if you let them go." Ekyt leaned on his crutch, not taking his eyes off them, as if sheer will was keeping them alive. "I have a special request. As soon as you've done it, I'll let them go." "What." "Commit Seppuku. No Kaishaku-nin. But you die, right there. That is, IF you want to save them."

Kayla woke up and heard what was happening. "Ekyt-Sensei! You can't!" she yelled. "It's the only choice Kayla." He answered. "Untie them and let them to the door, and I'll make the first cut." Ekyt said. Ginn agreed to the terms.

Ekyt's shaking, sweaty hand grasped the dagger. He slowly raised his other hand to the handle, holding it in both hands. "Please sensei, don't do it!" Kayla was sobbing. Ekyt stared straight ahead. He moved the dagger toward his stomach...

"GET THEM!" Linda shouted. Ten instructors joined her in the rush, fighting off Ginn's men. Two peeled off to help Kayla and Harutomo, checking their vitals, and nodding, much to Linda's relief. They would both be okay. She darted into the middle of the battle. A downward hammerfist aimed for her nose. She blocked it with an upthrust forearm, then turned her hand and bashed her opponent's nose. She kicked backward, feeling her leg hit her target. She helped Ekyt up. He was panting and shaking. She knew something inside his head had just taken a beating. He held the knife to his chest, like it was his sole salvation. "Fight or flee?" Ekyt's voice answered in a whisper. "Both. You, however, flee right now." "I'm not leaving you." Ekyt said, his voice matching his body and shaking.

The battle was short, but fierce. It is remembered for one odd detail.

"Ekyt! You were no sensei of mine!" Utsugi called, challenging him. Ekyt was staring straight ahead, back to back with Linda, unmoving. It was only when Utsugi threw a knife at him did he bring his crutch up to knock the knife away. His shaking body didn't want to cooperate, but this was personal.

"You were no student of mine." Ekyt spoke in a whisper, though it had the same effect as if he had shouted. Utsugi threw away his knife pouch. "You've already lost Utsugi. Would a winner throw away his weapon like a spoiled brat? You've lost your focus." Utsugi ran at Ekyt full-speed, showing all the potential Ekyt had seen before. In his state, though, Ekyt could only do one thing for defense. He turned around and let Utsugi run. "Hah! Gotcha!" Utsugi yelled, getting ready to slash Ekyt to ribbons.

Ekyt spun back around, bracing his crutch under his forearm and stabbing. He hid the stunned Utsugi in the stomach, knocking him backward. Utsugi's own knife came down and pierced his hand, going through to the floor. Ekyt tapped the knife with his crutch, turning the knife into a restraint.

Ginn cursed. He had been defeated again. This time by a lame human whose mind had been affected in an attack, by 10 instructors, some barely pubescent, and by a newly inducted master. "You haven't seen the last of me! My clan will rise to fame again!" he yelled, picking up Utsugi's unconscious form and running for it. No one gave chase.

Ekyt's visible eye was half-lidded. "Ekyt...you've been through so much...I hate to ask...but as your friend, I know I need to. What happened in the fight? When you froze up?" Linda asked. They were outside talking, titles not being wanted or needed. "Old anxiety. Probably fatigue settling in." Ekyt answered, closing his eyes. Linda followed suit, but laid her head on his shoulder. "I don't know if I was ever meant to be human, but I'm enjoying myself. Aside from the assassination attempts, anyway." Ekyt didn't move, not wanting to disturb her. "I don't know if I was ever meant to be anything MORE than a human. But I'm going to try." "You took three knives in the back, rescued your students, and dueled with a crutch. You're only borderline human Ekyt." She gave him a fond (but gentle, avoiding all the wounds) hug. She felt for his hand and found the bandaged appendage. She gave it a quick squeeze, warming it against the chilling air, before leaving Ekyt to collect his thoughts.

Kayla and Harutomo joined Chakaro and talked animatedly about everything. Until the end. Chakaro nodded stiffly, then left the group to talk to Ekyt.

Ekyt was looking at the moon through the trees, trying mediation. "Ekyt-Sensei?" "Chakaro, how are you feeling?" "Physically? I'm great." "What happened?" Ekyt asked, having a suspicious feeling he knew the answer, while praying he didn't. Unfortunately, he was right.

"Kayla broke up with me."

34 - What The Future Holds

"I'm really sorry to hear that Chakaro." Ekyt told him solemnly. "It's just like you and Master Linda." He muttered. "You and her lasted longer than Master Linda and I did. We were never officially together. Besides, you'll have something to fall back on." "What do you mean?" Chakaro didn't understand. "Have you ever noticed how hard I throw myself into training? It's not JUST to prove I belong. It's because this is who I am. You already know I'm not a black belt. But what you might not know is that you are going to surpass me. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but MUCH sooner than you think." Chakaro gave him a sideways look. "You're always saying that...tell me WHY." Ekyt smiled, though he knew it wouldn't be seen under his covered face. Pulling out a box, Chakaro made a face. "What?" Ekyt asked. "I don't like smoking." "Neither do I. These aren't cigarettes. A sensei from an anime, I forget his name, smoked two packs of cigarettes. I don't do that. I chew these toothpicks instead. It's a measure against anxiety." He poked one through his face covering, resting it in his mouth.

"To answer your question. Why? Why you, right?" Chakaro nodded, tugging at his ear ring. That was his anxious habit. "Because YOU want it. Ancients might have thought that the martial art chooses you, but YOU choose the ART. Something drew you to this school, the same as me. But no matter how much I WANT it, I have limitations that I need to surpass. That will take time. But you...you've already surpassed YOUR greatest limitation." "I can't have! Look at me! I broke up, I lost it, all over that dog!" Chakaro's display was rare. Ekyt closed his eyes. "Let me ask you a question: WHY did Kayla break up with you?" The question caught Chakaro off guard. "She said I wasn't the one, and she was in love with Harutomo." Ekyt gulped. "Are you upset because you miss her...or because you lost a battle? Think about that. If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

Harutomo and Kayla stood, gaping at Chakaro. "He took that better than I thought." Harutomo said, some amusement creeping into his voice. But Kayla shook her head. "No...He was furious...I've never seen his eyes like that..." "Well, at least you were honest with him. I think he'll forgive you for that." "Pardon me." Ekyt hobbled through with his crutch. "Ekyt-Sensei! How is he?" Kayla asked. Ekyt shrugged. "Chakaro? Who can tell?" Kayla grinned. "I think YOU can. You might only have one eye right now, but you're as observant as anyone. More so, actually. So, how is he?" Ekyt shrugged. "He hasn't really confided in me as to how he feels. Now, if I can get around to the point of interrupting your talk..." "Oh, sure, sorry." Harutomo said. "Kayla, it's time for you to take on a student." Ekyt told her. "A white belt, one you can take all the way up. Harutomo, you are to assist her." "And what about Chakaro?" Harutomo asked. "Chakaro is taking on another project." He said mysteriously. The others wanted to ask more questions, but Ekyt spoke too quickly. "Congratulations, both of you. Harutomo, you have earned your black belt, and Kayla, you are now ni-dan (Second degree) black belt. You two will be working with Master Linda as head instructors." "What about you?" "I'm injured." Ekyt said shortly, again ending the conversation.

"Chakaro, how about a quick game of Chinese checkers?" Ekyt asked. **Let's see how sharp this guy is...** He and Chakaro sat down. In a quick game, Chakaro had Ekyt defeated in an astounding series of moves. But he had looked asleep the whole time, eyes half lidded. **Very sharp. Quick as a whip...but he's lost his motivation...There has to be a way to get it back. Otherwise, he ends up like me...Not good.**

A loud gong rang throughout the dojo. All the students stopped what they were doing. Linda looked out. She saw an unruly-looking kid, dressed in all black. "I've come for a match, a comparison of techniques!" he called. "And who might you be?" Linda asked. "I'm Jumao Abesuki!" he called. The students exchanged nervous glances. "I can fight Master." Ekyt started to shed his jacket. "I don't want to fight someone injured. I want a challenge." One of Linda's blue belts jumped forward. "Come and get it!" he called. Jumao darted forward, leaping and rolling in the air to the side of the kick, then sweeping his opponents legs, putting a knee across his throat in the same motion. "Pitiful. I'm sorry, but I came for a real challenge."

Ekyt pulled of his coat this time, dragging himself in front of the others. But a figure darted in front of him. "I'll handle this." Ekyt stepped back, grinning under his mask. "Be my guest Chakaro." Ekyt said, shrugging. Linda pulled Ekyt aside as the fight began. "You're letting him do this? In HIS state?" Ekyt nodded toward the battle before continuing.

Note: **BOLD** indicates Ekyt's narration.

This might be exactly what he needs...I had a talk with him earlier, and said some things that would have cracked a lesser warrior than Chakaro. But he wants this... Chakaro and Jumao both leapt forward, colliding in mid air, both bouncing backwards, skidding a few steps, then charging again. This time, Chakaro was the one who was sent flying. "You're stronger than the last one." Jumao pointed out. "Thanks captain obvious." The blue belt snarled. Chakaro recovered and punched hard, hitting only the air as Jumao proved to be quicker than he looked. He zipped behind Chakaro. What he didn't know was that Chakaro's favorite technique came from this position. **Watch this...He's so focused on this duel, he's pushed everything else aside. He doesn't act it, but he's incredibly smart. I tricked him into a test, playing Chinese Checkers with me. I've never been beaten so quickly...Now he's thinking of this like the board...another move ready to be made...**

Chakaro thrust his elbow backward, but only half-way, just enough to make his enemy bite. Then the REAL strike came. Chakaro flung his head back into Jumao's nose. Jumao's eyes teared up, giving Chakaro the opening he needed to kick backward to the shin, then throw his elbow into the stomach. **He's got it now...I've never seen a combo like this. One side striking, arm and leg in tandem.** As his right leg went high, his fist went low. Then his left leg went low, with his left fist aiming high. All four moves struck home in roughly one second. His next move was an arm grab, turning that into a quick shoulder throw. He held onto the arm, grabbing Jumao's head. Chakaro put his knee into Jumao's back, making the hold look even more vicious. Apparently, it felt that way too, because Jumao was screaming for the match to end. Chakaro uncoiled himself. Jumao was kneeling in front of him. "I'd be honored to call you teacher." He said, leaving a stunned Chakaro to think about that. He looked at Ekyt, who nodded. "Sure." He helped the defeated party up.

So...the last of my first group...surpasses me. I'm proud of them all. Kayla quite the heartbreaker. Harutomo will be fine, if he can just curb his desires. And Chakaro...If he gets his focus back, there'll be no stopping him.

Good for all of them. But now, I've got to face my own biggest limitation.

Myself.

Ekyt stood at the edge of the koi pond, watching the fish swim aimlessly. **Trapped by their limitation...just like me. Am I a fish too, metaphorically speaking? There must be more...more than this.** Linda ghosted up next to him. “You okay?” she asked, knowing he wasn’t. “I’m alright.” He said. “Proud of those three.” He said, referring to his students. “They had a good teacher.” “I’ve got to meet this guy.” Ekyt said. “Oh, stop that. You know I meant you.” “Because I’m such a stellar example...I’m so hogtied by myself...” Linda put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Aren’t the cherry blossoms beautiful?” she said out of nowhere. The white and pink petals fluttered to the ground. Ekyt was apparently unimpressed. “I’m ready to take my next set of students.”

“You should really let yourself heal.” Linda said cautiously, her human features showing her worry for her friend. “I doubt I’ll ever completely heal. I’m taking my chances.” Ekyt said. “You know, you don’t have to train so many students, not rapid fire like this. But I admit, I’d like you to work with my elite squad instead. With you taking leadership. Besides, You, Chakaro, Kayla, and Harutomo work well together.” “Chakaro and Kayla in the same group? That’s kind of begging for a problem, isn’t it?” Ekyt asked. “Not if he’s as good as you say. I trust you.” Linda said. “Alright. Do we have an assignment?” “Well, I’d like the four of you to be our “diplomats” to find other willing schools ready to do a knowledge exchange.” Ekyt nodded; it made sense. “Understood.” He said crisply. “Ekyt?” Ekyt looked up. “Don’t give me that military crap, okay? We’re friends of good standing.” “Right, sorry.”

Damnit! It’s always friends with her! And me! I never wanted...never NEEDED anyone before. And yet I’m begging for her attention like a sad little puppy! How many times do I have to be rejected before the fact that there’s no chance in hell of this working sinks into my skull?!