

# Rise of the Guardians

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## Kapitel 9: Battle for Echidnaopolis

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#### *Chapter 09 - Battle for Echidnaopolis*

The battle at the southern gate was short. During their fights against the mass of Death Legionnaires in the camp and Hades and Lanzer in the arena the Guardians had gained a lot more experience and furthermore they now had Spectre at their side.

"Cease fire!" Sabre called out to the soldiers of Echidnaopolis who were standing at the top of the walls, weapons still readied. "We are Guardians and a group of refugees from the south is with us."

The gate was opened to let them in. An Echidna in the uniform of an EST commander greeted them.

"We haven't awaited people from the desert areas but now you are the second group from there to arrive and you came just in time. Have you seen the army approaching from the northwest? When the attack on these gates started we sent out messengers with the request for help but instead the Legion army came."

"The northwest ... of course ..." Spectre suddenly said and when the others stared at him he explained, "Wherever Enerjak is, there are also most Death Legionnaires and so many from the northwest means he must have reached the Forbidden Zone."

"Enerjak?" the commander asked. "But he was destroyed hundreds of years ago and is now merely but a myth."

"Unfortunately not", Spectre replied. "As a spy in the large Legion camp in the desert I have witnessed how he regained his strength and later the five of us went to destroy him once again but we failed because he was no longer in the camp."

"Wait a moment... A large camp in the desert? And only you five wanted to destroy a demi-god?"

"Possible if you are a Guardian", Sojourner said with a smug grin.

"Guardian? Okay, this is definitely a bit too much for me right now. Please, come with me. Before the main force of the - how did you call them - Death Legion has arrived we need plans to regroup and in the meantime you can tell me more about the whole situation."

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After the Guardians had told as much as possible of their story and of what they knew about the Legions and Enerjak the EST commander who had introduced himself as Davis said, "I might not have believed it if the proof of part of your story wouldn't

soon reach our gates. Now I am just glad you came to help us. Where will you Guardians be in this battle? We have sent all of the EST members and everyone who can hold a weapon to the northwestern walls, only the two desert groups shall stay in the south in case of another attack although I don't expect one anymore."

"Send a few more people to the south. Sojourner and Thunderhawk will assist them as well", Sabre said. "The largest army will come from the northwest but I am sure the desert Legions haven't given up following us yet. Spectre, Locke and me will be with the main force although I rather want Locke to stay in the city instead of fighting on the open field because I'm afraid a few Legionnaires will try to get in through the less guarded sides and in this case I want to have at least one Guardian in the city who can protect the civilists."

The other Guardians and Commander Davis agreed with his plan and started on their way.

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"I wished you had stayed in the center of the city where it's safer", Thunderhawk said to Lara. He and Sojourner were standing at the female's sides like bodyguards while they along with the other desert Echidnas were looking out for approaching enemies from the top of the southern wall. They also had tried to find Kali and were relieved to hear she was staying back in the city, helping out in the houses of healing.

"Is it because you think I am too weak, because I'm still a girl? I know how to fight and I'm not willing to stay back", was Lara's determined answer.

"No, in the arena we have seen that you are a good fighter and if it was for us you would be an honorary Guardian", Sojourner said. "But I'm afraid that should something happen to you Locke will bite our heads off."

Lara lightly smiled at him. "Don't worry; I will try not to cause you too much trouble."

"I think I can see something coming", Thunderhawk said.

Due to the arising darkness they were hard to make out but then the others also saw the shadowy figures moving over the hills.

"Telling from the way they are walking these are Dark Legionnaires only", Sojourner said.

"And I bet the coward called Moritori is nowhere among them", Thunderhawk grimly added. "Get ready. We can't allow a single one of them to pass these walls."

Spectre and Sabre stood before the gates, flanked by Echidnas armed with flame throwers, Molotov cocktails and close combat weapons. These weapons were ancient but the only ones that could destroy Death Legionnaires. Only the fighters in the south had been equipped with the high technology weapons since they were most likely to face the Dark Legion only.

"Are you frightened?" Spectre asked because he had noticed that Sabre was shivering.

"No, I ... I am okay, just very nervous", Sabre answered. In fact he was shaking with fear. Whenever they had fought the Legions before it always had happened all out of sudden and too fast to feel fright but standing there watching a large army storming towards them and knowing the strongest bastion of Echidna kind was at hazard filled him with dread. But he didn't want to admit it in front of all these people who were counting on him and his strength as a Guardian.

"That's good because I am dying with tension as well", Spectre calmly said.

"You neither sound nor look like it."

"Because I am a Guardian. The people are counting on us and should we show fear they would lose their courage as well. But on the inside I am nervous as well."

Sabre turned around and watched Locke walking in circles on top of the outer wall. The boy had chosen that place because from there he could shoot at approaching enemies but also had a good view on the city.

And then Davis' call rang out. "They are close enough. Open fire!"

Molotov cocktails flew over their heads, set the grass and the first few zombies ablaze. Only seconds later the Guardians and the close combat fighters stormed forward.

Sabre leaped through the flames. The stench of burning corpses stung in his nose and the smoke was burning in his eyes. In the beginning he still tried to have an eye on Spectre - despite his strength his lack of defence made him an easy target for the Legionnaires with ranged weapons - but the dark Echidna raged through the enemies like a dervish and soon had disappeared in the chaos.

Should the people of Echidnaopolis have had certain strategies before, it was all rendered void as soon as the battle began. Now they just attacked whatever zombie was in reach while trying not to get slashed into pieces. Death Legionnaires went down like flies but for each fallen two new enemies entered the battlefield. The people didn't fight for the city anymore - they fought for their lives.

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Another Legionnaire was struck by a Chaos boomerang and fell. Guardian abilities couldn't kill, at least not immediately but they could cause wounds - most of them invisible - bad enough to die from later on. Knowing this was far from helping the battling Guardians; it rather made it worse.

Thunderhawk didn't feel like a hero whenever he was able to take an enemy down, only like someone who had won another one or two minutes for the city. He didn't care that he was running through blood or jumping over dead bodies anymore - after a little while his mind had blocked out these pictures and he forced himself not to look down - but what pained him was the thought that he could have caused these deaths. Before the Dark Legionnaires were still the cruel, bloodthirsty creatures they always had been pictured as but now in the middle of the war they turned out to be members of just another Echidna tribe who fought and died for their cause. But to what prize? In the end if they were victorious there would be no need for them anymore and Enerjak would eradicate them as well. And were really all of them fighting out of loyalty? How many of them had been forced to join the Legion just like Spectre and now only fought because they had no other choice - because if they refused they would be equally in mortal danger in their own camp as on the battlefield?

A shot from behind grazed his skin and he quickly spun around but before he could blast back the Legionnaire's eyes widened and he toppled over. Behind him Sojourner stood. Blood dripped from the dagger in his hand.

"So I'm letting you out of my sight just once and you nearly get assassinated. What would you do without me?" He tried to smile but failed. The fights had wiped even the last little hint of his usual smile from his face.

"Probably bleeding out on the battlefield", was Thunderhawk's honest answer.

"Where have you left Lara?"

"She's still on the wall trying not to accidentally shoot one of us. The moon might be

bright but not bright enough for our shooters to make out dark robes in the night."  
"Then they are lucky to have two Guardians who have been trained to see in the dark."  
Side by side they rushed back into battle with the only wish to end it as fast as possible.

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How many Legionnaires had Sabre taken out already? He didn't know anymore but it must have been hundreds of them. He was bleeding from several wounds, his whole body was hurting and his energy was slowly fading.

And then he saw him - the only living being among an army of corpses. Moritori attacked as well but only if nothing else was possible anymore and mainly gave orders to the Death Legionnaires.

So the people of Echidnaopolis were all giving their lives to protect their city while the leader of the undead enemy army was staying back in safety - it was making Sabre sick. Without wasting another thought he stormed forward, mowed down mummified Echidnas on his way. He wasn't proud of the little victories he achieved despite his exhaustion nor did he feel triumph when the Death Legionnaires came to the conclusion it was better to avoid him. He only focussed on one main target - their Grandmaster.

Unfortunately Moritori noticed the approaching Guardian, parried Sabre's blow and shot a blast on his own which hit the weakened Guardian right at the chest, causing him to collapse. Slowly with a smirk curling his lips the Grandmaster walked closer.

"I think you underestimated my powers, little Guardian. Don't worry, that happens to most at their first attempt to attack me. Sadly they never get the chance for a second try."

He readied another Chaos beam when suddenly a black figure rammed him.

For a few seconds Moritori and Spectre were rolling over the ground in the attempt to kill each other with bare hands then a blast - it was unsure who of the two had created it - separated them.

"Your strength won't help you too much anymore", Moritori said as soon as he was back on his feet. "This battle has been long and you're all tired while I'm still fit. Go ahead, try to attack me but I can tell you that you have already lost from the very beginning."

Spectre smiled grimly. "Don't worry; I still have the strength of three of us."

Yet Sabre saw that he looked exhausted as well. Wounds were hard to make out on the dark fur but since parts of his clothes were torn to shreds he probably had a lot of them.

"Don't waste your time with this scum. It would be better if you help Davis kick some rotten asses", Spectre said when he noticed that Sabre had gotten up again. "I can handle this on my own."

'Are you really sure?' Sabre wanted to ask but he saw that now wasn't the time for arguing and ran back into battle.

"So you already had support but sent him away again", Moritori stated and shook his head. "Is it pride, do you think only the disciple is able to compete with his former master or are you just plain stupid?"

"Make it an easy decision and take all of it", Spectre snarled, lunged forward and fired a mighty blast.

Surprised by the sudden vehement attack Moritori barely had the chance to block it

but he recovered very quick and returned the fire before Spectre could charge up another attack. However the Guardian was quick enough to dodge all of his blasts.

"Don't make this battle longer than it should be and stop jumping around, boy. It will only make you more exhausted until you die", Moritori said with a mocking grin.

Spectre's hand drove through the air and glowing streaks like claw marks remained in mid-air but they only stayed in place for a second before they shot towards Moritori and drove right through his body. With a gasp the Grandmaster stumbled backwards pressing his hands against bleeding wounds.

"Nice move", Moritori brought out between clenched teeth. "But useless nevertheless. That will heal fast. Guardian abilities aren't meant to kill someone, believe me; I have studied them long enough."

Spectre didn't even wait for him to finish talking when he fired his next attack but the Grandmaster countered with a mighty blast on his own. The two forces collided and caused an explosion hitting both combatants.

Spectre painfully scraped himself up only to sink down again as a sharp pain shot through his body. He awaited Moritori to take advantage of this situation but the attack failed to appear. With a groan he managed to prop up on his arms and slowly stand up. Now he noticed that Moritori had to fight with similar problems. The explosion had wounded the Grandmaster badly, even worse than Spectre, but he still managed to stand upright.

'He is right. I can't kill with these attacks', Spectre grimly thought.

Probably Moritori would die from inner wounds nevertheless but that was neither fast nor certain. Spectre didn't want to see him suffer - enjoying the torment of others was the trait of a Legionnaire, not a Guardian - he just wanted him dead. More than anything else in the world he wanted him to die.

"Is that all you've got, boy?" Moritori rasped. Blood was dripping from the corner of his mouth but he still managed a smirk. "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot. You can't kill so you will have to wait for me to die from my wounds. But while you wait I will heal up again. Accept it, Spectre; you will never get rid of me."

"Maybe I won't get rid of you that way..." Spectre said. A thought had formed in his head and he slowly reached for the Legion weapon he had hoped he never would use. "But this will be successful for sure."

With a quick movement he drew the gun from his belt and pointed it at Moritori but didn't shoot. His arm started shivering so much that he had to hold the weapon with both hands or else it would have been impossible to aim. He never had wanted to use this gun, had sworn to himself to never kill anyone with it...

Moritori should have died from Spectre's hands, not with the help of filthy Legion technology.

"I bet I would have shot you before you even have formed the thought to shoot me", the Grandmaster calmly said. "Why did I even leave you alive and not just kill you like the rest of her brats. You're just the same. Weak-willed like your mother."

"She wasn't weak-willed!" Spectre shouted. His fingers twitched but he just couldn't pull the trigger.

"But it's true. She once was a beautiful desert rose, good enough for me to make her my own personal sex slave and only let those Legionnaires to her I had personally chosen instead of the whole camp. I even let her first son alive. And how did that bitch thank me? With even more hate and reluctance. Her death served that little whore right."

"Shut up!" Spectre shouted but the Grandmaster continued, "And now her son will die

just like that filthy bitch."

He drew his gun as well. A shot rang out.

And Moritori fell.

The gun dropped from Spectre's slackening hands and while he started at the dead body in front of him his body started shaking with laughter, at first only silently but then he broke out into roaring laughter. Around him the war raged on and he stood still laughing like a madman.

It all was over. Sure, there was still a city to save and a demi-god to kill but these were tasks of the new Spectre, the Guardian - the biggest part of the old Spectre, the Legionnaire without the hope to ever escape, had died with Moritori.

"They are in the city!" an Echidna called from the top of the walls. "Some of them got through somehow and now they are attacking in the city!"

It was enough to snap Spectre back to his senses. The dark Echidna turned and dashed back to the gates. Outside there were thousands of fighters - and they needed all of them there - but inside they only had Locke.

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Sojourner and Thunderhawk ran over the rooftops of Echidnaopolis. The attacks at the southern gate were just about to subside when the call came - Legionnaires in the city. Some of them must have taken advantage of the darkness to slip through the destroyed parts of the wall.

A bullet hit the ground a few steps away from them.

"Blast! They are even up here", Sojourner exclaimed.

A Legionnaire jumped out of his hiding spot to take better aim but was hit by a Chaos attack and nearly pushed off the roof. Another one who just had appeared at sight was quickly disarmed by a boomerang.

"Something's not right about them", Thunderhawk called out after he had been able to knock out another Legionnaire shortly before he got the chance to shoot. "They are too hesitant and fight like they never held a shotgun before. I doubt they are even Legionnaires."

"But we have to attack them unless we want ourselves to get killed", Sojourner replied.

"Cease fire!" a sudden call rang out.

The Legionnaires immediately stopped their attacks and quickly disappeared into the shadows again. The Guardians turned around and finally they spotted the last remaining Legionnaire on a nearby building, supposedly the one who had given the command. The dark cloaked Echidna took a run-up, jumped over the narrow gap between the buildings and landed in front of them.

"I'm sorry to correct you, Thunder, but we ARE Legionnaires. But thanks to the lousy gun law in this city we are just more skilled in the use of other weapons."

"Why does he know your name?" Sojourner whispered but Thunderhawk only stared at the Legionnaire with lightly opened mouth.

"That voice ... no, it can't be..." he silently said.

"Why not?" the other answered and took off his robe. Without it he was just a normal Echidna, no visible cybernetics of any kind. "These idiots nearly shot my former homie. Can't let this happen, at least not as long as there's still hope for you."

"Who is this?" Sojourner asked again and this time Thunderhawk answered, without taking his eyes off the Legionnaire.

"Farkas - he once had been what I later became to you. He got me into the gang, taught me whatever was necessary to survive on the streets and somehow was like an older brother to me. However, when he was caught and thrown into jail all contact between us suddenly was cut off for the next years to come. The day I met you it already had been over a year ago since I lost Farkas. How did this happen? Why have you joined the Legion?" The last two questions were already directed towards Farkas again.

"Because they helped me out of the cesspool I had been locked up in and I didn't see any reason to stay loyal to the people of Echidnaopolis. There always had been Legionnaires in the city - unknown to others because they had barely any visible cybernetics or none at all. All this time they peacefully lived among their enemies they actually were lying in wait for Enerjak's return so they could attack this rotten city from the inside once the day had finally come. The bastion now has enemies coming from every side imaginable; there is no chance for them to win this war - but I can at least give you two a little chance to survive. Join the Legion and together we can have our revenge on these who made us outcasts."

"You are disgusting me", Thunderhawk snarled. "As one of the Guardians of this island I will fight for my people, no matter the outcome and not just run and hide behind Enerjak like a little sissy."

"And you are disgusting me too. What have these people ever done for us other than kicking us when we already were down? Where's the reason to protect them?"

"Where's your reason to kill millions who never knew us just because a few treated us badly?"

"So you want to say you are my enemy from now on?"

"Yes."

The former friends glowered at each other then Farkas said, "Enemy or not, I don't think you will attack me. You might have noticed that I only have the standard weaponry of an ordinary thief. Or have Guardians sunken that deep that they will attack someone who can barely defend himself?"

"Not when I stick to the rules and handle the situation as if you have joined an enemy gang. No Guardian abilities, no shotguns, just our usual weapons and our skills. It will be a fight between thieves."

Now Farkas let out a dry laugh. "A grandmaster of thieves versus his former disciple... Oh, I think I have been a good teacher to you but I doubt you alone can take it up with me."

"He won't be alone", Sojourner immediately said but Thunderhawk stretched out an arm to hold him back.

"No, this is personal. Besides, even a Guardian has to respect the rules of the streets."

"But..."

"Please, I think you are more needed elsewhere. There's just one single Guardian to protect the inside of the city and if he had gotten help by now then it certainly means they need you in the north. I will be with you again as soon as possible."

Sojourner shot him a distressed gaze. Since they met they had been practically joined at the hip and he absolutely hated the thought to leave his friend alone in a fight. But in the end he had no other choice but to wish him luck and leave.

Sojourner's steps merely had faded away in the darkness when Farkas attacked

without warning but within a blink Thunderhawk had drawn his dagger and parried the blow. He tried to return the slash but could merely graze his skin when Farkas jumped back. The thief was able to grab the edge of the chimney behind him, pulled himself up and when the Guardian wanted to follow he leaped down on him, his knife ready to strike. Thunderhawk quickly dodged out of the way and though the next blow came fast he could also avoid that by dropping to the ground and the knife only hit the bricks behind him. Farkas might have been superior in strength but Thunderhawk could even it up with his quickness. He shot up his dagger, hit Farkas shoulder and only narrowly prevented being stabbed through the head in response by a combat roll. The lavender male leaped back to his feet and ran to the edge of the building. He didn't flee however - no thief ever fled such a battle. If one of the combatants ran away into the darkness it only meant he would attack from ambush a few seconds later.

Thunderhawk balanced over the wooden plank that bridged the gap between two houses. At first Farkas followed him but then he came to an abrupt stop a few feet away from the edge. The Guardian didn't turn around but a second later he knew that he better should have to know what his opponent intended to do. The edge of a climbing hook hit between his shoulder blades and he was ripped back, only prevented himself from falling into the deep by quickly spinning around and grabbing the edge of the plank. Farkas had reeled in his climbing tool and threw it again but a boomerang collided with the hook mid-air, it bounced back and nearly hit its owner. In the meantime Thunderhawk had climbed up the plank again and disappeared into the night. Frantically Farkas turned around and tried to spot his opponent in the darkness. The Guardian silently rushed over a higher rooftop. Without knowing it Farkas had come right his way and now was directly under him. Thunderhawk dropped and slammed him to the ground. His dagger slashed through the thief's chest but he tried not to cut too deep. He only wanted to make his former friend unable to fight, not kill him. With a scream of pain and rage Farkas reared up, tossed Thunderhawk off and counterattacked.

Somewhere in the street canyons green light could be seen. At least one Guardian already tried to fight back the attackers inside the city. The Guardian in Thunderhawk just wanted to end this fight as fast as possible and return to the main battle but the former thief still wanted to fight for the honour of the street clans.

The two combatants slowly encircled each other, heavily breathing. Both had several cut wounds. The slash on Thunderhawk's back bled heavily but he suppressed his rapid healing. No Guardian abilities didn't just mean no Chaos based attacks or shielding - it also included gliding and healing. Farkas could barely use his arm with the wounded shoulder anymore and was clearly more exhausted but still he didn't look as if he wanted to give up too fast. And then he quickly turned around, jumped up some crates at the brink of the rooftop and ran to their edge.

"Farkas, no!" Thunderhawk shouted when he realized what the other had planned. From up there another even higher building could be reached but the gap between the buildings was wider, even hard to reach for a very skilled thief and Farkas was already lacking strength. Too late, Farkas leaped off the crates. His chest hit the edge of the other rooftop. For a second he was half hanging in empty air, his hands desperately seeking for something to grip on, then he slipped off.

Without hesitation Thunderhawk rushed to the edge of the building and jumped. He didn't know how to levitate or even glide but at the moment he couldn't care less. All



he wanted was to reach Farkas before he hit the ground and cushion the impact with his own body if necessary. He stretched out his arms, was able to grab Farkas' wrist and the same moment the Chaos Force caught him. He had no idea how he did it but their fall reduced speed until they were slowly gliding to the ground.

"Why ... have you caught me?" Farkas asked. He was standing shakily but at least he stood.

"Have you wanted to die?"

"No but ... with this mistake I have clearly lost the fight and the rules say that the loser is doomed to die."

"I know the rules and I have respected them up to a certain point. But I am also a Guardian and I can't simply let someone die because he slipped off a roof."

"Now that would be the first time someone would have wanted to help a thief."

"It doesn't matter who you are. I even would help a Dark Legionnaire."

"And still you fight against them."

"But I hate it", Thunderhawk said with a saddened look in his eyes. "We all hate it and still we have no choice if we don't want this city to fall. Should Enerjak win then not even the Legion is save anymore. He will get rid of them too as soon as they have served their purpose. Go ahead and continue being a Legionnaire if you want to. If we win we will spare you like all the other survivors and if we fail you can at least live for a little bit longer than the other Echidnas."

For a little while Farkas only silently stared at him.

"Thunder, I..." he started.

A shot rang out. Farkas eyes widened and he toppled forward right into Thunderhawk's arms. Blood was dripping from a wound on his back and formed a crimson puddle on the ground.

Slowly, horrified Thunderhawk lifted up his head and looked at the direction the shot had come from. Several meters away a Legionnaire - a real one this time - still pointed his gun at them but made no move to shoot the Guardian as well.

"We never should have taken these incompetent mercenaries" the dark cloaked Echidna sneered. "Playing the tough guys first and then they can't even kill someone just because they once knew each other."

With a scream of fury Thunderhawk shot his dagger towards the Legionnaire. The weapon glowing with Chaos energy drove right through his body and the cyborg collapsed dead.

Carefully the Guardian knelt down with Farkas in his arms but there was nothing he could do anymore. Eyes once so full of life emptily stared into the night sky and reflected the shine of the street lamps. Thunderhawk leaned his forehead against Farkas' chest. Tears he couldn't choke back anymore were slowly running over his face.

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From his position on the wall Locke at first still took part in the defensive fight when he noticed several Death Legionnaires leaving their attack formations and heading to the east. Immediately he followed them.

And then he saw the other Legionnaires. They were already inside the city, trying to open the unprotected east gate for the mummified warriors. Locke jumped off the wall and shot a blast at the ones closest to the gates but stopped his attacks

immediately when he realised that something was awfully wrong about them. These Echidnas has no guns and only tried to counter with short ranged weapons though they weren't too successful against a Guardian, barely seemed to have experience in any form of battling and though they wore black robes Locke was sure there wasn't even a single cybernetic enhancement to hide. As soon as he stopped a few of them took the opportunity to grab his arms and drag him away from the gate. The young Guardian struggled to free himself without using the Chaos Force - no matter what these people had planned right now, they were still the ones he had sworn to protect and he couldn't harm them with his own attacks.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted. "The Death Legion will mow you down as soon as you open the gates and with them inside the walls this city is doomed."

"Don't be stupid boy", someone answered. "We were doomed from the beginning. Joining the Legion and giving them what they want is the only way to survive."

"No, it is not. Nothing is lost yet. Besides these zombies won't make a difference just because you **look** like Dark Legionnaires. I doubt most of them can even see. They can only sense you and to them you won't **feel** right."

The gates were opened just a little bit but immediately slammed fully open by the forces pushing against it from the outside. The Echidnas' initial excitement was rapidly drowned by panic when the Death Legion turned against them and raged over them like a storm of claws.

"Don't stare, run!" Locke exclaimed and pushed away one of these who had previously held him. He raced through the chaos of the fights, leaped over the bodies of the first fallen, closely avoided claw strikes and shot at the gate. The wings of the portal were slammed shut again and prevented more Legionnaires from coming in. Then Locke spun around to return the attacks. Several zombies had been crushed by the closing gate but there were still enough of them inside and the living that had remained to fight them back barely stood any chance. Locke stormed through between the fighters, just tried to blast as many Legionnaires as possible while avoiding hitting his own people. Imploringly he hoped that at least a few of the Echidnas would flee and make it back to safety. He barely saw what happened around him but his ears were filled with screams and the rasping sounds the zombies made and he smelled blood and the stench of death.

The battle was over as soon as it had begun. After the last Death Legionnaire had fallen Locke was the only living being left. Dead bodies were lying scattered on the place; blood covered the ground and also had drenched his clothes.

Locke pressed a hand against his mouth and stumbled forward into one of the streets that led deeper into the city. He didn't care where he was going, just wanted away from here.

Someone touched his shoulder. The young Guardian spun around only to find himself in a warm, loving embrace. He wrapped his arms around Lara as well, leaned his forehead against her shoulder and now noticed how much he was shivering.

"We followed a few Dark Legionnaires who were able to get past the destroyed wall but then we lost track and split up searching for them", she explained her sudden appearance in the middle of the city. "Then I saw people running away from the east gates and heard about the battle there. Locke, have you been there as well? Are you alright?"

"I'm ... I'm a failure", Locke stuttered into her shoulder. "So many of them are ... dead

... and I couldn't prevent it."

"It's not your fault", Lara silently said and caressed his cheek. "You already did your best by defending Echidnaopolis from way more intruders than the fighters inside the city could have handled and you never would have had the chance to protect all of them. You helped the majority to escape and these who stayed already had made up their minds to fall, if necessary, for the safety of others."

"And what about my other weakness? I can't be a fighter if corpses with gaping wounds and blood make me want to throw up. What kind of Guardian is backing away from these things?"

"A good one because if you can't stand it I think you would want to prevent things like that from ever happening again. This island doesn't need warlords who love the sight of blood - it needs Guardians."

For a little longer they silently held each other, then Locke slowly let go of her and said, "There's still a war going on in the northwest and I'm sure they need another Guardian. Please, stay back in the city where it's a bit safer. I know that you can fight but ... I don't want to lose you."

She smiled weakly. "With Legionnaires roaming around in the city I don't think it is safe anywhere. But I will try my best."

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Dark Legionnaires stormed through the city like suicidal maniacs. Desert people were there as well to prevent them from entering houses as good as possible and so the cyborgs were running amuck on the streets shooting down everything that moved. However these smaller battles were quickly stopped whenever the dark furred Guardian arrived.

Spectre ran through the empty streets. At the moment everything was silent again and the uninjured desert Echidnas had either returned to their guard post in the south or went to reinforce the line of shooters at the walls in the northwest but he wanted to make sure all Legionnaires were really gone before joining the others in the war again. He noticed a movement but a quick glance told him it was just one of the females from the houses of healing searching for people who still needed help. Spectre just wanted to continue his search when he stopped dead and took a closer look at the female. She now had noticed him too. For two or three seconds they only stared at each other, then Kali suddenly rushed forward, flung her arms around Spectre's neck and he felt her warm lips on his. He was caught completely off guard and before he could react it was over and she had taken a few steps back.

"I ... I'm sorry ..." she stammered surprised by her own action. "I ... have to go ... I'm already out there for too long and ... the others might be worried ... I hope Aurora protects you."

"I ... hope that for you too ..." Spectre mumbled when she turned around to run off again. A second later he wanted to slap himself for not reacting faster and just standing around like stunned.

"Kali, wait!"

Before she had even fully turned around he was by her side pulled her into embrace and kissed her. For a few heartbeats they felt as if they were at a completely different place, a place not as cold and not in the middle of a war. The world around them could fall into pieces - for this short moment they couldn't care less.

"Don't worry, my feelings for you are mutual", Spectre silently said and as soon as these words were out he felt like an idiot. As if something like that still needed to be said now... But Kali only smiled at him.

"I just wished it could have started during another time and at another place", she said. "But then again, the Legion camp might also not have been the best choice. Seems like there never would have been a good time for us."

"It's perfect the way it is. It gives me yet another reason to keep fighting and though we barely might be able to see each other at the moment we will have a lot of time to spend once it is over. All I have to do before that is defeating a demi-god."

He spoke light-heartedly but only to hide what he really felt like inside. People could have simply given up and chosen either a quick death or would have been allowed to live a little bit longer if they joined the Legion but instead they were fighting and dying because they believed in the Guardians. But what if they failed just like the first time? He was sure they had no third chance.

Somehow she seemed to understand what was going on inside of him.

"I know it's a heavy burden but I also know your strength - and by that I don't mean any Chaos based abilities. You have been a Guardian from earliest childhood on - someone who always wanted to protect us - and you didn't give in and obeyed the Legion because you never forgot who you were. To know what you are fighting for is worth a thousand Chaos abilities."

She gave him one last kiss then stepped back.

"Good luck", she whispered.

Her words were still echoing through his mind when Spectre ran back to the main battlefield. The same way he already had felt in the houses of slavery - for a short time he had been nothing else but just Spectre. And somehow he found this to be more comforting than being looked up at because he was a Guardian. If they took it up with Enerjak and also were able to defeat him eventually then not because they were outcasts and different from all others. It was because they never forgot who they were. And that there was something worth fighting for.

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Even though his attacks had become weaker most Death Legionnaires still thought it was better to avoid him which gave Sabre the chance to a little breathing pause. His legs had threatened to give in a few times but he forced himself to stay upright because he was afraid to suffocate in the smoke of the smouldering grass. Their best weapon was their enemy the same time.

"Come on, Sabre-tooth. The cavalry's here. Don't give up now."

The young Guardian quickly turned around to see Sojourner blast his way through the zombie Echidnas. Sabre couldn't have been gladder about his help but the same time a bad feeling crept over him when he saw that Sojourner was alone.

"Where ... where is Thunderhawk?" he asked as soon as the other Guardian was closer to him.

"He's still in the city, dealing with other Legionnaires", Sojourner answered but avoided Sabre's gaze. The younger Echidna immediately knew there was more behind it than Sojourner wanted to tell but he couldn't figure out what. Thunderhawk and Sojourner were able to read each other's minds like open books but anyone else who

wanted to do the same soon found out that these books were written in a language no one was able to translate. For the moment Sabre could only shrug it over.  
"Good, shall he take care of the goon squad in the city. We'll finish the battle outside."

"Have you noticed that?" Sojourner called out. "Are these the reinforcements Davis awaited?"

Coming from the north, not much more than half a mile away from the Guardians, a group of Echidnas tried to fight their way through to the city. Sabre only had wanted to interrupt his battle long enough to give them a quick glance but now he stopped and took a closer look at them.

"Sojourner ... that's only a ring of fighters and they are trying to protect little children and elders in their middle. They rather look like the last survivors of a calamity in the north than the expected fighters. Come, we have to get them into the city!"

Both dashed through the lines of Legionnaires, formed the advance-guard and the rear-guard of the small group and tried to protect them as good as possible from approaching enemies while they led them to the gates. It was a major help that Spectre returned the same moment and raged over the Death Legionnaires like a nemesis. Also Locke was back on top of the wall and held off some of the zombified Echidnas who wanted to follow them through the gates.

"What happened?" Sojourner asked when he led the majority of the group through Echidnaopolis to the houses of healing where they should be given their quarters for now. The rest of them capable of fighting returned with Sabre to the battlefield.

"Our town close to the legendary Forbidden Zone was attacked by these Legionnaires", one of the elders explained. "At first we still tried to fight but then more and more of our fallen warriors joined the zombie army. It was terrible. We remaining survivors tried to reach the bastion only to find it under attack as well."

Sojourner's guts twisted when he thought about the fate that was awaiting Echidnaopolis as soon as Enerjak stopped collecting souls in the north and concentrated his full attention on the city. Many had fallen and each of them was a potential new Death Legionnaire.

On his way back to the battlefield Sojourner nearly ran into Thunderhawk. The back of the lavender Echidna's tunic was shredded and though his wounds already had healed dried blood indicated where they once had been. For coming right from a battle against a former friend he looked strangely calm and collected.

"Are you okay?" Sojourner asked and Thunderhawk knew he didn't mean his bodily well-being.

"I will be alright..." he said.

They exchanged gaze and Sojourner only silently nodded. No more words were necessary - he understood without them.

For a while they silently walked beside each other then Thunderhawk said, "From the rooftops I could already see the first streaks of sun. A new day doesn't only bring new hope, it also made me see how much we have decimated the lines of enemies. It might only be the first wave we will destroy but once they are gone Echidnaopolis will at least have a little bit of time to rest and recover."

Sojourner smiled sadly. "But unfortunately no rest for us, at least not until Enerjak is destroyed."

Thunderhawk sighed but then a little smile wandered back onto his face.

"Alright then, let's bring it on. I also have other plans today and don't want some damn god to bugger them all up."

At first Sojourner was a little bit surprised by Thunderhawk's sudden mood swing but then he only was glad to see his friend hadn't given up his spirit yet.

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The sun was already standing up high again when the last Legionnaires were defeated. But it was no happy victory. So many had fallen and it was only a matter of time until the next wave of enemies would arrive.

Davis returned from his lookout on top of the wall to the Guardians at the gate.

"Nothing to see yet. Regarding the time they need to get from the farthest point of my sight to Echidnaopolis I doubt they would be here before somewhere in the middle of the night even if the next army had appeared a second after I left my guard post", he said. "Are you sure you want to go already without recovering a bit more first?"

"We would love to", Sabre replied, "But after we heard what had happened in the north we know that we might have to find and defeat him before the next enemies arrive. I'm not sure if the city can withstand too many attack waves anymore."

The Guardians had planned to teleport so they wouldn't lose too much time but since that cost most of their energy they wanted to land at the edge of the Forbidden Zone first and then walk the rest or else five completely drained Guardians would have appeared right in front of Enerjak's nose.

"Are you all ready?" Spectre asked.

The others only nodded grimly before combining their powers. Another time the world around them blurred when they were dragged away from their home city into Enerjak's new realm.

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Author's comment:

Another chapter I'm kinda proud of. I never have written about so many battles within just one single chapter and now somehow have the feeling I don't want to see another one for at least the next few weeks to come. XD But since this story isn't over yet there will still be a few more though not as many and smaller ones.

It's also the longest chapter so far and will probably remain the longest until the end of the story. The others will be a bit shorter again. At least they look shorter in my head but who knows how they will really turn out in the end - also this one had looked like a maximum of 10 pages at first.