

Rise of the Guardians

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Kapitel 1: In a dream

Author's note:

The main part of this story happens several hundred years after the main storyline in the comics so it is alternate universe completely. I also have to add that I nearly stopped reading the comics after the Guardians disappeared so my story is based on the Archie comic storyline up to this point and what happened then is slightly altered to fit my needs.

I'm not sure if the Guardian's Avatars could be called my own creations or if they still belong to the original Brotherhood creators so I simply say that they all are (c) Ken Penders/Archie Comics.

This first chapter might be a bit short - it's actually thought to be some kind of epilogue but since most fanfic sites don't upload epilogues or name the first uploaded file automatically "Chapter 1" I also call it a chapter since I want my story to have the same amount of chapters no matter where I upload it.

End of author's note

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## Rise of the Guardians

### *Chapter 01 - In a dream*

His breath was going fast as he quickly turned to all directions, always ready for an attack. He wiped the blood that was dripping from a wound on his forehead away from his eyes but neither that nor the moon above helped him to see too far in the darkness. The forest around him remained calm so far but it was a creepy, unusual silence. Normally it was buzzing with activity even at night - little insects, nocturnal birds and other animals - but now it seemed as if everything had fled from the menace that was hiding somewhere in the dark.

Something was waiting for him between these trees; he just knew it. A Guardian separated from the others - that was too good to be true for them and he was sure they didn't want to simply let that chance pass by. Or maybe the never-ending battles now had separated all Guardians from each other and they only didn't attack him because they had to focus on someone stronger at the moment. He could only pray to Aurora that they were still alive.

Another step and something suddenly dropping from above knocked him to the floor, ridding his lungs from the breath he had been holding for a few seconds. Claws dug into his side. With a scream the Guardian fired a Chaos blast against the attacker which made him stumble backwards in pain. The Guardian got quickly back to his feet, one hand pressed against the bleeding gash, the other glowing with Chaos Energy. The Dark Legionnaire in front of him already had recovered enough for a next attack. His eyes were gleaming with murderous intent when he lunged at the Guardian. The latter quickly activated a Chaos shield but it was too weak. The first attack destroyed it and there was no time to dodge the second.

His attacker let out a cry of fury and pain when he was hit by another Chaos blast - a

very mighty one this time - and slammed against a tree. The Legionnaire struggled back to his feet and when he saw that the other Guardian's legs had given in he rushed for an attack. But bodily weakness never meant a lack of Chaos Force. Two slashes with emerald green glowing blades of pure energy, the Legionnaire fell and remained lying motionless. That attack obviously had drawn the last bit of strength out of his body and the Guardian dropped to the ground. The other was kneeling at his side only seconds later.

"Spectre!"

He now noticed the wetness on the previously dry ground. First he believed it was the blood of his own wound but then he saw the large gash on the dark Echidna's back and the puddle of crimson under him. It seemed he had narrowly escaped another fight before.

Spectre's eyes weakly flickered open.

"S-Sabre..."

"Don't speak. Save your energy for healing", the younger Guardian silently said but with rough voice Spectre continued, "We are the last remaining ... the others ... they are dead ... they are all dead ..." His voice faded.

Sabre stared at him. The pain spreading inside of him made him want to scream; made him want to cry but not a single sound came over his lips. He only sat in silence with Spectre in his arms and waited until the pain had finished lacerating his heart and the numbing emptiness could embrace him.

"Come on. First we have to get out of this forest and then we will find a way to make them pay dearly", he finally said. All his hope had faded - how much chance could two Guardians stand against a whole army - but he still tried to sound firmly.

"Do you really still want to fight?" Spectre bleakly asked. "If so then you should better leave me here. I can barely walk anymore and would only keep you up."

"No way", Sabre replied and this time he didn't even need to fight for a vigorous tone in his voice. "I have lost too many relatives without being able to even try to help them so now I won't leave you all alone facing certain death."

If it hadn't been for the wound at his side Sabre would have carried Spectre on his back but since the pain would have brought him to his knees he supported the dark furred Guardian instead. Slowly they moved on step by step and the younger male forced himself not to give in to the pain, neither the physical one nor the one that was ripping his heart into pieces. Instead he concentrated on the safety of the other.

Spectre's legs gave up carrying him another time. His breath came in shallow gasps.

"I ... I can't. I'm sorry. Just let me stay here."

"Don't give up now. We're soon out of this forest. And if we reach the bastion of Echidnaopolis..."

The rest went unheard when a sudden explosion blew them apart. As Sabre's eyes snapped open again he found himself surrounded by Legionnaires. Spectre was lying outside of the circle, motionless and Sabre didn't even have to take a closer look to know if he was dead or alive. The enemy's lack of interest in the dark Guardian was the best sign. He couldn't think anymore. The red veil of rage had sunken down before his eyes. With a cry of fury he jumped up, his body glowing with the last bit of Chaos energy he still had left. But also the Legionnaires readied their weapons and as soon as the Guardian attacked they opened fire.

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Eyelids snapped open to reveal clouded eyes of blue. The young Echidna set up a bit and wiped the wetness off his cheeks. That dream again... Another time he had cried in his sleep over relatives he never had. It must have been the sixth time this week he dreamed about the same thing and he always woke up at the same scene. But why did this dream haunt him so much? Just being named after a Guardian who died centuries ago didn't mean he also had to be a Guardian in his sleep every night.

With a sigh Sabre got out of bed, opened the window and looked over the houses of Echidnaopolis bathed in the light of dawn - that way even the last drowsy parts of his brain had the proof he was still in the city and not in a dark forest surrounded by Legionnaires.

He took a few deep breaths while letting his thoughts wander - back to his dream and the history of Angel Island. He didn't know how the Guardians had fallen. Had it really been the way he always dreamed? One thing he knew for sure - after their deaths the Legion took control and it needed centuries of battles and greater wars until the Echidnas were free once again. The Dark Legion continued existing but they were a smaller group now and no real threat to the other Echidnas at the present time. Some people even said they would never be a threat again but Sabre doubted that. There still had been attacks on Echidna towns and villages in the south. To Sabre that looked as if they hadn't given up believing in their great comeback one day yet and they only had stayed away from Echidnaopolis because it was too strongly guarded by the EST - for now.

Hopefully the next greater war wouldn't happen during his lifetime. Thank goodness the twenty years of his life he had been able to spend in peace so far.

"But even if the tide would turn we would face our destiny, wouldn't we 'Guardian' Sabre?" he said to his face in the mirror. With a chuckle he grabbed his blue tunic - blue because it was his favourite colour but it also had the positive side effect that he looked more like his Guardian namesake that way - got dressed and left the apartment.

Kapitel 2: Stairs of memories

Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 02 - Stairs of memories

Sabre walked through the busy streets of Echidnaopolis, his thoughts still circling around the dream. He barely paid attention on where he was walking to. His feet knew the way. First to a café to get some breakfast and then ... well, wherever he wanted to go next - he still could make plans for that while sitting in the café.

Another Echidna crashed into him. Sabre stumbled back and nearly lost balance but the other caught him.

"Whoops, sorry pal, didn't see you." The other Echidna smiled sheepishly. "But nothing happened and now you should better forget that you have ever seen me. Bye." With that he quickly continued his walk.

Sabre followed him with his eyes and scratched the back of his head. What a strange guy. Suddenly he noticed something - the little money bag he had worn on his belt was gone. He cursed and ran after the stranger but unfortunately the other Echidna turned around and when he saw he was followed he started running as well.

At first the thief stayed on the main street and tried to disappear somewhere in the crowd but when he couldn't cast off his follower he made a turn into a backstreet. Sabre knew it was a dead end. Now there was no way he could escape. But when he ran around the corner his gaze fell on another male with lavender fur who stood on the wall at the end of the street.

"Pass it, Sojo!" he called. The thief threw the bag up to him then quickly climbed one of the trash cans and his partner helped him up the wall. They already had jumped and landed on the other side before Sabre reached the wall. Breathlessly the young Echidna stopped. Now he really lost them. He didn't even try to climb one of the cans since he already had seen that he would have needed the help of someone else to reach the top of the wall. At least his little bag hadn't contained too much money or anything else of importance but that still didn't mean he had wanted to throw it away. Sabre groaned. What a great way to start a day. Hopefully the rest would be better.

Thoughtfully he stirred in his cup. His coffee might have been cold by now but Sabre barely paid attention to that. He had the feeling that he knew the thieves but he had no idea why. He never had heard the name Sojo and since lavender wasn't a too common colour for males he surely would have remembered the other one if he had seen him before. It also was very unlikely that they were long forgotten class mates from primary school or kindergarten since both looked like they were older than him. Sojo must have been at least twenty-five, the lavender guy maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

He took a sip from his cold coffee and suddenly remembered that he hadn't returned home after his bag had been stolen and now he also had nothing to pay with. Whatever. He was a regular and well-known customer in this café so maybe they would allow him to pay during his next visit. Still he didn't like the thought he was in debt to anyone.

The part of the shopping street the café was located at was very popular with the

young people so he already had seen a lot of teens pass by without really paying attention to them. But the scene at the other side of the street now caught his eyes. Two teenagers were close on a younger one's heels shouting something. Telling from the grins on their faces they were probably mocking him. When the younger one in the white coat didn't react one of the older guys pushed him. The boy obviously wasn't in the mood for a discussion or a fight, turned around and wanted to walk away but the large group of guys that had appeared behind him apparently were with the two others and they pushed him back into the arms of one of the mockers who grabbed the boy's arms and held him tight while his friend slowly walked closer with a threatening grin banging his clenched fist into the meat of his left palm. Sabre lightly rose from his seat. If they really were stupid enough to start a fight on the open street he surely didn't want to stay back and watch the boy getting beaten up.

When the one guy lunged out the boy kicked hard against the shin of the guy holding him who cried out in pain and let go of his victim. Quickly the teen in the white coat spun out of the way, the attacker hit his friend's face instead and nearly knocked him out. So one was already out of the ring only seconds after the battle had begun. The other guy launched another blow which the boy dodged by dropping to the ground and when the guy wanted to swoop down on him he rolled on his back and rammed his feet into the attacker's stomach.

Sabre watched with slightly opened mouth. That boy surely knew how to defend himself and although he had barely fought, he already had taken down two guys larger than him. But now the crowd had tasted blood and four more guys entered the ring. No matter how good the boy was at fighting, this was definitely unfair. The chair fell over when Sabre jumped up and bolted out of the café. He didn't know how he alone should stop a crowd of a good dozen guys but he just had to try to help.

"Stop that immediately!" he shouted when he squeezed through the cheering crowd but the one of the fighters he tried to drag away just gave him a kick that made him stumble against the ring of Echidnas.

"Hey, this is our business so stay out of it, old man", someone behind him complained. Old man? The youngest here probably was the boy in the white coat and even he wasn't more than four years younger than Sabre.

Again he rushed into the fight eager to help the younger male who could barely defend himself anymore. That raging mob was probably capable of beating him to death.

"Get off of him!" Sabre shouted desperately. His skin was tingling as if electricity was dancing on his fur.

"I said *get away from him!*"

A green glow suddenly surrounded him and a wave of energy burst out of his body. It didn't harm anyone, only pushed the guys back some steps but Sabre couldn't have done anything more effective. Most of them immediately fled; the few who stayed back for some more seconds still considered attacking him but then also decided to run away from this "freak".

Sabre gazed into space. What in Aurora's name had he just done? But whatever it had been, it was gone now. The green glow had faded and his skin didn't tingle anymore. Quickly he returned his attention to the young male who was kneeling on the ground, staring at his rescuer with wide opened eyes while wiping blood off his muzzle. When their gazes met the teenager quickly lowered his head and stared at the ground instead.

"Are you okay?" Sabre stretched out a hand and waited for the boy to take it. "Why on

Mobius did these goons attack you?"

"Some of my former class mates", the younger male mumbled and remained sitting on the floor, "I always have been an outcast and things like that are nearly usual. But don't worry, my wounds heal fast. And thank you for your help."

Sabre gave him a look of commiseration - and noticed that some of his bruises already had disappeared.

"Looks like 'old man' Sabre isn't the only freak here. Sorry, I didn't mean to call you a freak", he quickly added when the boy quickly lifted up his head and stared at him again.

"Have ... have you said Sabre?" the younger one whispered breathlessly.

"Uhm, yes, that's my name."

"So you haven't just used a Chaos shield, something that has never been seen again since the last Guardian died but also have a Guardian name."

Sabre chuckled. "Hey, don't get too excited about it. It's just a name. Apparently my parents once thought it sounded cool to name their son after a warrior who died centuries ago. And this shield ... I have no idea why I suddenly could do something like that but I have never done it before and also don't know how to repeat it. I'm sure that I'm not a reborn Guardian."

"I ... I somehow have the feeling that I haven't thanked you enough for saving me", the teen suddenly said.

"You said 'thank you', that's good enough."

"No, let me at least invite you to a cup of coffee or something like that."

"You never give up, do you?" Sabre asked and a little smile wandered over his face.

"Well, I already have a cup of coffee but you can pay that for me if you really want to. By the way, I have told you my name so what is yours?"

For a second the younger Echidna hesitated but then he answered, "My name ... is Locke."

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"I don't think you have invited me just to say 'thank you'. So what else do you have on your mind?" Sabre asked when they were sitting in the café.

Locke turned his cup in his hands.

"I wanted to find out more about you. How can it be possible that someone uses Guardian moves without being a Guardian? As far as I know these abilities can be trained or inherited but Knuckles, the last Guardian in the line, died before he had offsprings. The line of Edmund was eradicated completely. And I also don't think that you have been trained."

"You seem to be very interested in the Brotherhood", Sabre noted.

"At first it was just a little hobby because I wanted to know where my name came from", Locke replied. "But soon I collected any information I could get about them."

"Good that at least someone still knows a lot about history. I barely remember the basics. I learned about them at school and am glad if I can name more than my own namesake", Sabre said. 'And I probably know his last few minutes thanks to my dreams', he added in his thoughts.

"I always thought my name combined with a rapid healing ability was a strange coincidence and my fascination in technology and history I blamed on reading somewhere that the Guardian Locke had these interests and then thinking I had to copy him. But actually I had these interests long before I knew about the

Brotherhood. And today I met another one with a Guardian name and one of their trademark abilities. That is not a coincidence anymore."

"But if we really are Guardians reborn ... why have we returned several hundred years later?" Sabre said. His head slowly started buzzing and he still couldn't believe that Locke's theories might be true although something inside of him told him that it was that way. "What is so different about nowadays compared to any other time during the past centuries?"

"I wish I knew", Locke answered. "Maybe I already could have solved that riddle if I was able to sleep a bit longer."

Sleep? That made Sabre prick up his ears.

"For some days I always have the same dream", Locke continued. "The Brotherhood members have been separated during the battles with the Dark Legion and I'm all alone at night, trying to fight my way to the bastion of Echidnaopolis. During a silent minute Spectre teleports at my side to tell me that some of the other Guardians have fallen but before he can say anything else the next attack wave is there. If it hadn't been for Spectre I would have died immediately because I haven't noticed them at all in the darkness but he shields me with his own body. Their first volley he gets right into his back but although he's losing a lot of blood that only caused him to go berserk. We try our best and are able to fight them off but I'm already wounded too badly and in the end I succumb to my injuries. I think Spectre catches me when my legs finally give in and holds me in his arms until the end but at that time I can only feel anymore and don't see anything else but blackness. And that his the time I always wake up. But I still hope that one day I will stay asleep and I get an explanation why these dreams are haunting me."

Sabre's eyes were still on Locke but he looked right through him.

"That is where he got his injuries", he mumbled. "He tried to protect my son. No, not mine, Sabre's son." He groaned and held his head. The buzzing became faster and more confusing.

"Is something wrong?" the younger male asked worriedly.

"Everything is right as it should be - that's what's wrong", Sabre said and when he saw Locke's confused gaze he added, "I mean, it seems as if fate predestined us to be the next generation of Guardians to fight whatever is threatening the world so everything is right for fate. But we know nothing - neither that we are Guardians or chosen ones or whatever, nor what we have to fight, nor where the others are or if there are no others and we are the only ones - that's the wrong part."

Locke made a pensive face. "I guess all we can do now is to wait and see what happens next."

"Do you know someone called Sojo?"

The question was out before Sabre could hold it back and now he wondered why he even asked. Of course Locke didn't know him. First of all the thief was nearly ten years older and second why should this boy be concerned with muggers?

"Sojo? No, I don't think I know that name. Unless of course it's the short form of Sojourner but I can't remember the Guardians ever used that nickname. Why do you ask?"

"Oh it's just ... I think I heard that name once and since I remembered it right now I thought it could be important."

He also could have told him the truth but he didn't want to destroy the young Echidna's image of the good guys called Guardians by telling him that someone of the new Brotherhood was a member of a street gang. Or maybe he had nothing to do



with them at all and his name similarity was a strange coincidence - another one.

"I think you are right", he said after a while. "For now we really can't do much more than waiting for instructions."

"We might go our separate ways again after today", Locke added, "but sooner or later we will meet again for it's our destiny."

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Late at night Sabre was lying in bed, staring into the darkness. At the beginning of that day he still had been a normal Echidna with strange dreams. Now that time seemed to be far away. Under other circumstances he would have believed Locke's theories to be the stories of a boy with too much imagination but it was no coincidence that two Echidnas with Guardian names had dreams about the same war only from different points of view and furthermore he had felt the Chaos energy tingling on his skin, had seen it breaking out of his body. And of course there also was Locke's rapid healing ability.

Provided that he could even sleep in with so many thoughts in his head - would the dream return tonight the same way it had been the past few days or would it mix with something he had heard today? Or maybe he was finally able to get past the scene he normally woke up at. Sabre closed his eyes and waited for the sleep to come.

Once again he was running through the darkness but something was different. Instead of soft forest ground he felt stone under his feet. Torches lit up at his sides and he could see that he was running on a narrow street leading through emptiness. Around, above or under him there was only pitch black darkness. After a few more steps the torches revealed stairs going up in front of him. He looked up, tried to figure out how high it was but the steps disappeared in the darkness after several meters. Sabre continued running.

Step by step, higher and higher his way led him. By now he must have been several hundred meters over the road he had come from and though he hadn't stopped a single time he didn't feel tired. Of course not, this was all just a dream. Or wasn't it? Normally he just saw the things that happened in his dreams as a given thing and neither wondered if nor was absolutely sure that he was still dreaming. This was more like he had been sucked into a different reality and he was wide awake while running through it.

"It is him. He answered our call", a female voice suddenly echoed through the darkness.

"He really looks like the Guardian", a male voice added.

"But he is still so young", a second male voice came. It sounded worried. "A Guardian would just have finished his training at that age and would have ancestors with a lot more experience by his side. And the others are as inexperienced as him."

"I know", the female answered with sadness in her voice, "but time is running out and we have no other choice."

Sabre stopped to listen.

"Who are you?" he called.

"Go on and you will see", the first male answered. "You're not too far away from us anymore."

Not too much later he reached a platform lit up by a bright white glow but the longer

he looked at it the more the glow faded and three figures took shape. Sabre's mouth opened in astonishment. He knew the female. Anyone who had ever entered an Echidna temple had seen her at least once in his life. And by recognizing her he also knew who the other two had to be. Aurora, Athair and Merlin - the Neo Walkers.

"Welcome, young Echidna", Aurora greeted him. "I wished we could have met during less troublesome times."

"What is this place?" Sabre asked.

The goddess looked around. "I don't know. This is your dream and we are at a place you thought to be worthy for gods to appear at."

"Today we already had been in something that looked like Haven or went through hell", Athair said. "At least that's what I picture hell. And believe me, it might look spectacular being surrounded by black rocks and lava and fountains of fire erupting whenever someone wants to say something but it's also pretty uncomfortable and way too hot."

"You mentioned trouble", Sabre said, returning his attention to Aurora. "But what trouble? I thought we lived in peaceful times."

Sadly Aurora shook her head. "Not anymore. Thirty years ago we suddenly felt that trouble was lying ahead. Neither did we know what to expect nor when the darkness would strike. That was also the time the first Guardian Avatar was born. We didn't choose him - it was more like the Guardians' spirits chose each of you themselves. Every time the darkness upon us grew stronger another Guardian Avatar came into the world with Locke being the last. We had so many years to tell you what you were destined for and to let your training begin but we always thought it to be too early and that we could still take our time since the darkness wasn't spreading too fast. And now it's too late."

"It actually was my fault that we waited for too long and I feel sorry for it", Athair said.

"I thought at such a young age you wouldn't be able to understand and that the early training would only take your childhood away. Since I once had been a Guardian the others accepted my advices and did nothing. I wanted to avoid the mistakes of my ancestors but did other ones instead."

"But what is this darkness you were speaking of?" Sabre asked. Each second he felt more confused.

"How much do you know about the last war the Guardians fought in and the short period of time before it?" Merlin asked.

"Not too much", Sabre replied. "Maybe just a few basics. The Guardians had disappeared after fighting the Dark Legion off in the chamber of the Master Emerald but they were back right in time when Enerjak returned. They were able to defeat the demi-god but stood no chance against the mass of Legionnaires."

"At least you know the base", Merlin said. "Then let us fill up the holes. At that time an Echidna called Dr Finitevus held the weakened Guardians captive to study the Chaos Force with the ultimate goal to resurrect Enerjak. At first he planned that the demi-god's new body would either be the Guardian Knuckles or Remington, the son of the former Grandmaster Kragok. But then the megalomaniac Echidna decided to make himself a godly being."

"But although Enerjak is purest Chaos energy he can't be controlled, no matter how much you have studied the Chaos Force", Aurora continued. "He might have taken Finitevus' body but not in a way the doctor had planned it. Either he died from the Chaos overload or the demi-god drew the last bit of life out of him - Finitevus was no more. When he still was in Dimitri's body Enerjak once had found allies in the Dark

Legion and so he took control over them once again. The previous war against the Dingoes and Robotnik had weakened the Legion but after Enerjak's return they quickly gained more and more followers - all of them people who wanted to survive because Enerjak granted them protection while fighting against him and the Legion led to a sure death."

"And then the Guardians returned", Athair now started telling. "Finitevus might have wanted to ban them into another Zone once he had gained enough strength but Enerjak had no interest in them anymore and simply ignored them because he didn't see them as threats in their weakened state - one of his biggest mistakes. Once they regained their strength they didn't linger over fighting Legionnaires for too long, immediately went for Enerjak and were able to ban him back where he came from. But even with their leader now gone the Dark Legion still had the strength of the many. The Guardians continued their fight but they soon succumbed to the enemy. That was my hardest time as a god. What is it good for to be a godly being if you can't help your relatives when they need you? Destiny had decided it was their time and not even as a god I can fight off destiny. Like behind a wall of unbreakable glass I had to watch how each of them fell. At least now I should have helped them if I already abandoned them in the past."

Sabre saw tears glint in the former Guardian's eyes and with a feeling of commiseration he said, "I know how hard it is to lose someone. But it wasn't your fault that you couldn't help them. I'm sure the Guardians would have understood that. If anyone knows about strict rules it's them. I also don't think you ever really abandoned them. The Ancient Walkers chose you to lead the Forgotten Tribe and as you said if destiny calls no one can fight it. Besides with leading the tribe you did nothing else but helping your people who needed you - that's something every Guardian does."

Athair gave him a thankful smile. "I know you are not my son but you look so much like him. Hearing these words from Sabre really means a lot to me."

"I'm sure it was the Guardian in me as well who spoke", the young Echidna said. "He might have been mad about your decisions in his youth but understood it when he was older."

"I wished we could help you in the task lying in front of you", Athair sighed, "but you are on your own. That leads us back to our story once again. If you learned your history lessons then you know about the long years of war until the Echidnas were free from the Dark Legion and peaceful times followed. However about thirty years ago we felt a wave of darkness originating from the Legion. They were still a small group - not more than bandit hordes who were attacking villages once in a while but were fought off very quickly - but we couldn't get rid of the feeling that they were planning something. Whatever demon they tried to summon, he at first only gained strength bit by bit with yearlong breaks between each bit - and after every gain one of the Guardians who had fallen in the war, except for Knuckles, was reborn. We don't have an explanation why he was the only one missing but maybe we weren't the only ones to think they had more time. After Locke the break lasted for nearly sixteen years but then the darkness erupted and we were finally able to see what they had planned. Enerjak has returned. And this time he doesn't need a body. Inside his armour of gold he's pure living Chaos Energy."

Sabre was filled with horror when he listened to the last part of the story. It was not just a nightmare for the Echidna kind to come true but it also sounded as if the only ones who were able to stop it was a small group of inexperienced Echidnas who didn't even know each other. But then courage flooded his heart. If his fate was inevitable

then he had to face it.

"Okay, I'm ready. Just tell me where to find the others and what to do next and I will try my best to stop Enerjak once and for all."

"You already sound like a true Guardian yourself", Merlin said. "Your way might be a hard one but facing it with courage is the best way to get through it. First of all go to the chamber of the Master Emerald. The Emerald will find a piece of itself in each of you and grant you the help you need. But how to use the Chaos Force you will have to find out by yourself and you will have to prove that you are quick learners because while you are training Enerjak's might is growing as well and people will start joining the Dark Legion again. The best way would be to go straight for him and not to lose time and energy by fighting the Legion but this is just a suggestion from me. Who knows where destiny leads you. I can only wish you all the best."

"The morning is near, young Guardian, and we have to depart but although we can't help you too much I want you to know that our blessings are with you", Aurora said.

"Good luck, Sabre", Athair silently said.

Sabre's eyes snapped open. He was still lying in his bed, a new day had begun and the sun was shining through his window although he had the impression it was darker than usual. Like in trance he stood up and went out of his sleeping room.

The Echidna who stared back at him from his bathroom mirror looked as if he had seen a ghost. No, worse than that, he had seen the return of Enerjak, at least in his imagination.

"Remember what you promised yourself yesterday", he told his reflection. "You said you will face destiny once the tide has turned. And now the time is ripe. Besides you won't have to do everything all alone."

'Yes, you will have Echidnas by your side who know as less as you and one of them is a sixteen year old tech freak with an obsession for Guardian history', a little voice in his thoughts said but he shoved it to the back of his mind.

"At least he's a good fighter and it seemed he can learn fast. We all will have to learn fast."

He quickly packed up things he might have needed on his journey - the Chaos Chamber was a good while away and he wanted to be prepared for everything - then he left his apartment and hoped it wouldn't be the last time he saw it.

'Destiny, here I come.'

Kapitel 3: Meeting with fate

Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 03 - Meeting with fate

Now the wide fields of high grass with a few trees here and there lay before him. It wasn't like Sabre never had left the city before but he never did it without company and their walks weren't leading too far away. And now he had to go all alone to a place that wasn't just far away but also forbidden for anyone to enter - not because anyone still feared that the Master Emerald could be harmed but rather because it was said to go near it was as dangerous as to go near an atomic bomb shortly before detonation. But Sabre had the allowance of three gods and since they hadn't seen it necessary to warn him it couldn't be more dangerous than facing anyone from the Dark Legion.

He hadn't wandered for too long when he suddenly heard something behind him. Someone was running towards him. For a second he thought about dodging into the high grass but this cover would have been of little avail since his follower already had seen where he was.

"Sabre! Wait!"

Sabre spun around when he heard his name. He knew this voice and his presumption was confirmed when he saw the flaming red fur and the white coat of the younger Echidna.

Heavily breathing Locke stopped in front of him.

"I ... I didn't know where to find you in the city ... and then I wasn't even sure if ... you got the message as well", he brought out gasping. "But if you don't mind ... I want to travel with you."

Sabre felt relieved for it meant he now didn't have to go all alone but he was also worried. If the gods had seen him, Sabre, as too young what had they thought about Locke? And what about his family? He couldn't imagine that they would have let him go that easily. He put his hands on Locke's shoulders.

"I'm glad to have you with me and I also know that you don't have any other choice than starting this journey too but still I wished you didn't have to. Someone so young shouldn't carry such a burden on his shoulders. Not even I feel actually ready for it. And what about your parents? Do they even know what their son is going to face?"

The expression on Locke's face darkened.

"The Guardians were much younger than me when they were left all on their own." He hesitated shortly but then he continued, "And my parents are dead. My mother died when I was still a little kid and my father ... I hope he's dead too. Not because I hate him so much I wish for his death but that at least would mean he hadn't just run away from his family before I even was born. I'm sure no one at the orphanage would miss me. To the other kids I'm just the strange nerd and the supervisors wouldn't mind too much if a kid disappeared. Wouldn't be the first time that happened. In the best case we later see the missing kids as the newest members of thief gangs."

Sabre stared at him unbelievably.

"But ... there has to be at least someone. I guess you're still going to school. Wouldn't your teachers or at least your classmates notice your absence?"

"No, I'm not going to school anymore. You might have noticed that these guys I called my former classmates have been older than me. They were from the class that graduated this year."

"You already... But you can't be older than sixteen."

"To be honest, I'm fifteen. But I used nearly every second of spare time to study - not just the things we would have learned at the moment but rather everything I could lay my hands on. That way I was able to skip grades. Everything because I wanted to prove that orphans aren't just a worthless burden to society like they always said in the orphanage but can also be successful in their lives." A sparkle of determination was glowing in his eyes.

Sabre tightened his grip on Locke's shoulders.

"How could they say something like that? You are not worthless. No one is. And anyone who wants to argue the converse we will show the truth. We are members of the new Brotherhood of Guardians. I don't think there's a better position for orphans like us - or anyone."

The corners of Locke's mouth twitched upwards to a smile but then he quickly became serious again when he said, "Orphans like us... Does that mean you grew up in that misery too?"

"No, not at all. I used to live with my grandparents."

'I was able to experience all the love you had been missing for nearly all of your life', he added in his thoughts and felt a sting in his heart. Whatever dangers lay before them - he rather wanted to go through them with Locke at his side than to leave him back where it might have been safer but where the boy also was alone again. It was strange - he knew Locke for only one day now but still felt some kind of connection between them. Was it the same bond their Guardian namesakes once had shared? No, not really because Sabre felt still too young to be a father - and Locke was too old to be his son. In their case it was rather a bond of brothers.

"Shall we continue our journey?" Sabre said and nodded to the forest that was seen in the far distance. "I at least know where to go now but as soon as we reach the forest I would have to guess the rest of the way because I never have gone further and only know the approximate direction where the chamber could be but not where it actually is."

A little smile wandered over Locke's face. "Don't worry; the Guardians' records gave me enough information to lead us there."

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Under a lone tree in the sea of high grass they rested. The sun stood high above them but the forest now wasn't too far away anymore. In the best case they would reach the chamber of the Master Emerald in the late afternoon.

The past hours Sabre had learned more about the Brotherhood of Guardians than his whole life before, things no one could have told him except a history expert - and except Locke. For example to Sabre it always had seemed as if Steppenwolf had been known as "the great Steppenwolf" from the time he assumed the mantle of being a Guardian. There were statues of him in the city, streets and places were named after him and even centuries, millenniums after his death people remembered him as a great one. Sabre never would have expected the grave problems and prejudices Steppenwolf had to fight among the people he had sworn to protect. Even one of the High Council threatened to kill him and the other Council members simply stood by

because they felt the same way.

"How did you get all these information? I thought most about Guardian history was either lost or always had been kept a secret by the Guardians themselves?" he asked.

"Not lost", Locke corrected, "just really hard to find. And secrets can be leaking sometimes. Even the Guardians recorded something from time to time and didn't keep everything in their heads only. Some of the terminals they had used in Haven II had been found and their protections had been cracked. Most records are now open to the public though I doubt too many people are interested in it or even have noticed it."

"You've got a point there. I also didn't know about it. Sometimes I wished I had learned about it earlier..."

He was brought up short by a sudden noise. It had been short and silent but he was sure it had been there - something that sounded like ripping grass and breaking open earth. Unless this grass field was the territory of very big moles this sound was nothing that could have been heard in an open field too often. Sabre stood up, signalled Locke to follow him silently and walked back into the high grass. Everything was silent except for the usual sound of the wind and the chirping birds and insects but all of his senses were alarmed.

"Down", he whispered all out of sudden, grabbed Locke's arm and dragged him to the ground.

Cowering under the cover of the high grass they suddenly heard someone walking around. It must have been at least two persons and from the sound of their slow dragging steps they weren't used to walking on this kind of terrain - or walking in general. The two Echidnas exchanged frightened gazes. Where had these two strangers come from without getting noticed? Had they crawled through the grass? Or maybe - Sabre remembered the sound he had heard - they had been under the earth the whole time.

The steps came closer. If they kept walking that way it was only a matter of seconds until they could see the two Echidnas. Sabre protectively wrapped his arms around Locke. Whatever Chaos attack he had used to get rid of Locke's attackers, he hoped he was able to do it another time.

And then they slowly could see one of their followers. He wore the cloak of a Dark Legionnaire, half of his face was replaced by cybernetics but maybe it would have been better if the other half had been covered in metal as well. Part of the fur there was missing; the rest was clotted with earth and the skin underneath looked dark brown and somehow dead. He turned his milky white eye towards the two Echidnas and a sound like a low hiss escaped his lips when he reached into his robe to fetch a weapon. That second a wave of Chaos energy broke out of Sabre's body - he could neither control nor stop it, it was purely instinctive - and pushed the Legionnaire back several steps. Locke jumped up the same time as Sabre did.

"To the forest!" he cried out and started running.

Sabre spun around and followed the younger Echidna. They might have been two Guardians against one Dark Legionnaire - the second they only had heard moments ago was nowhere to be seen - but they also knew they were a Guardian with basic knowledge of close combat and another Guardian whose only ability was an uncontrolled shield that could just push back but not hurt anyone against an armed Dark Legionnaire with probably years of fighting experience.

The earth before Sabre's feet suddenly ripped open. The second Legionnaire shot out

of it, rammed Sabre and pinned him to the ground. Sickening sweet smell of putrefaction suddenly was in the Guardian's nose.

With a cry Locke returned and tackled the attacker off Sabre. The Legionnaire recovered quickly and grabbed Locke's leg when the young Echidna tried to rob away. With all his strength Locke slammed his boot into the Legionnaire's face. A blow like that normally either would have knocked out anyone or at least would have made them coil up covering their face in pain but the Legionnaire only flinched as if he was surprised by the attack and gave Locke enough time to pull his leg out of reach before returning for another strike. Locke rolled out of the way and the attacker was pushed back by another Chaos shield.

Sabre pulled Locke back to his feet and dragged the younger Echidna with him when he headed for the forest again.

"We can make it. They aren't fast runners."

But obviously they were fast learners. Their running skills had improved since they appeared in the grass field for the first time. The forest slowed them down a bit because they avoided obstacles instead of jumping over them like the two Guardians but they never lost their tracks and even if they were out of sight the Guardians could still hear them. Sabre's lungs were burning and he knew he wouldn't be able to run for much longer before his legs gave in. Locke at his side seemed to have the same problems. Only seconds later the boy fell to his knees but when Sabre stopped he saw that he hadn't fallen or simply given up. The younger male had started shoving leaves and earth to the side until a rusty metal plate became visible.

"Help me with that", he gasped, grabbed the handle and tried to pull it open.

With their last strength they managed to open it wide enough to slip through and pull it close again from the inside. The wet slippery path led down, deeper underground. They followed it half running, half sliding and at the end of the slope they broke down on the moist rocky floor heavily gasping.

"Wouldn't they find the trapdoor too and follow us?" Sabre asked as soon as he was able to breath slower again.

"No, not if the old protection systems are still working. Just like the one entrance of Haven in the northern part of the Sandopolis Zone can only be paced when you're a Guardian this path can also only be entered by them", Locke explained. "They can open the door but they won't see more than the forest ground underneath it. Even if they go back under the earth they wouldn't be able to enter any part of the tunnel. It's protected all around."

He breathed deeply for a few more seconds before he spoke again. "What in Edmund's name have they even been? Zombies?"

Despite the seriousness of their situation Sabre had to smile. In Edmund's name - that phrase had only been used by the Guardians which meant it hadn't been heard anymore for centuries.

He turned his head and his gaze followed the tunnel. Actually he had awaited darkness all around them but the whole corridor was filled with a dim green light.

"Why is this place so good protected after all? Where are we?"

Slowly, shakingly Locke stood up.

"We are right where we wanted to be. This is one of the entrances to the Chaos Chamber. Now it's just a short march before we reach our destiny."

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When they entered the brightly lit Chamber they saw that two other Echidnas already were in there. The red furred male with the green vest leaned against the wall, the other one with the blue tunic and the unusual lavender fur sat on top of the Master Emerald.

"You again?" Sabre said mostly surprised but also with a hint of anger in his voice.

"Hey, get down! Don't you know it's dangerous to even touch it for someone without experience?" Locke called out looking terrified.

"Put a cork in it, youngster", the lavender furred male answered. "I keep sitting where it is comfortable and as long as this gem doesn't burn my butt it still IS comfortable. And to your question", he continued and gave Sabre a wry smile, "yes, we again. You won't get rid of the burglar twins that easily."

"Twins?" Sabre asked. "You don't look very much alike."

"We aren't even the same age, let alone brothers", the male in the green vest now answered. "But we like to call ourselves that way because we stick together like twins."

"And after we got the call we are Guardians too." The lavender male tried to make a bow while remaining sitting. "Allow me to introduce, Sojourner and Thunderhawk, the one and only Guardian twins."

"And we are Locke and Sabre", Sabre replied.

"Since you two made it that far as well and also are named after Guardians I guess we are colleagues from now on", Thunderhawk said and loosened a small and to Sabre well-known bag off his belt. "Our codex says we don't steal from members of our gang and since we belong together now you can have it back. Only the money I can't return."

Sabre just shrugged, "You can keep the bag too if you want to. It was nothing of great importance."

"Whatever you want", Thunderhawk said and put it back onto his belt.

"So, does anyone know what we shall do now?" Sojourner asked curiously. "The three gods only told us to come here and gain our strength but nothing happened so far."

"I wished I knew", Sabre said heavy-heartedly. He should have known that it wasn't so easy to gain Guardian strength.

"The Guardian Harlan came to develop a deeper understanding of the Chaos Force through deep meditations", Locke said. "Maybe we are supposed to do that too. It helped the first few Guardians to get a better control over Chaos Energy after all. Well, except for Steppenwolf maybe because someone who was able to rip open a passage to the Twilight Zone single handedly must have had outstanding knowledge of the Chaos Force."

Sabre smiled and rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming now - the other two would get a crash course in Guardian history as well.

But then Thunderhawk interrupted. "Heck, stop that, you wannabe nerd. I neither have enough patience for meditation nor for history lessons. Both won't help us far in this case."

"Hey, don't call him like that", Sabre sharply said.

Locke only lowered his head. "It's okay", he bleakly said. "I have gotten far worse names in my life. Compared to them it's nearly a sweet nickname. It's only that I had hoped something would change now that I am a Guardian. But I was probably wrong." Sabre turned around.

"No, it is definitely NOT okay. You are a Guardian and with no matter of age or

knowledge shall be treated like one. This wannabe on the Emerald has to learn some manners before he can become a member of the Brotherhood."

Now Sojourner left his place at the wall and stepped between Sabre and the Master Emerald.

"Listen, I don't want to start our task, whatever we have to do, with problems. We will get into them soon enough anyways", he silently said. "Thunderhawk might be a loudmouth at times but he normally doesn't attack people psychically on purpose. It's just ... He's as insecure as all of us and I think he wants to cover that up. I'm sure he's sorry."

"Sorry, if I hurt you, colleague", Thunderhawk suddenly said as if he had heard Sojourner. He sighed and leaned back. "This is hopeless. I'm sitting on top of it and still I'm not feeling any strength. We all are grown-up Guardians and don't know a bit about the things we should be able to control. We are pathetic."

"Oh, I wouldn't see it that way", Locke, now in a slightly better mood again, replied. "Think about Steppenwolf. He was an adult too before he even started his training and he became one of the best." A sparkle was glowing in his eyes when he added, "Just imagine we could also get as good as him one day. Then the new Brotherhood would start with four times Steppenwolf."

"Make that five times", a voice suddenly said.

Four heads were spinning around and even without asking for a name they knew immediately who was walking towards them. He was dressed in a dark violet long-sleeved tunic instead of the cloak and his boots weren't surrounded by a cloud of smoke but he wore a silver helmet and his red eyes and a fur of such a dark red that it appeared to be black if it hadn't been for a little bit of red shine in the light of the Chamber added the rest of a very Spectre-like appearance.

"Is something wrong?" he asked and tried to suppress a mocking grin when he saw their faces. "You look as if you have seen a ghost. Or have you rather seen ... a Spectre?"

Locke was the quickest to recover from his surprise. "No, we just didn't expect you anymore, especially not with an appearance so all out of sudden."

"Well, let's say I was kept up by a bunch of Legionnaires."

"You too?" Sabre asked alarmed. "Were they ordinary Legionnaires or did they look like the zombies we met in the high grass on our way from Echidnaopolis?"

With widened eyes Spectre stared at him. "They have reached the grasslands already? Enerjak's dark waves are spreading quicker than I thought. Before I left I only knew of the desert mummies."

"There are more of them?" Locke asked unbelievably.

"There's an army of them, enough to raze all of the desert towns to the ground. But the living Legionnaires keep attacking like the bandits they had been before so they don't draw too much attention since they can't cope with Echidnaopolis' army combined with backup from the other villages - yet."

"But what shall we do?" Sabre asked desperately. "We neither know how to use our abilities nor where we can find Enerjak."

"The dark shadow started spreading from the desert and the last information I had about Enerjak's location was a Legion camp in the south of the Sandopolis Zone. But it is a well protected and very large camp. Even with my lead we wouldn't have the slightest chance to get out alive again if we don't know a few good attacks." The dark furred Echidna looked at the Master Emerald and shot Thunderhawk on top of it a

disapproving glance. "It really showed no reaction? I thought we would get help from it."

Locke shook his head. "Maybe a bit of a tingle on the skin but else nothing at all."

"Then we have to learn it all by ourselves on our journey to the south. We wouldn't be the first Guardians who had to learn by themselves. If we stand around here and wait for a miracle we will only waste precious time."

Locke and Sabre just looked at each other and nodded but Sojourner and Thunderhawk exchanged sceptical gazes.

"Who says we can trust you?" Sojourner asked and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Just because you look like a Guardian doesn't mean we immediately have to follow you. You seem to know awfully lot about the Dark Legion and Enerjak."

"I know how to listen", was Spectre's short answer.

"And you have a very good knowledge about that Legion camp or why else do you think you are able to lead us in there? Or will you rather lead us into a trap?" Thunderhawk added.

"I have been a spy for years and know what ways we could go without being detected."

"A spy ... maybe", Sojourner said. "But I would rather say you are a Dark Legionnaire." Within the blink of an eye Spectre's behaviour changed. Before he had rather been defiant and it seemed as if he wished this conversation to be over as fast as possible but now his eyes narrowed and he looked as if he wanted to go for their throats but only hadn't done it so far because Sabre and Locke were still standing in his way.

"Call me a Dark Legionnaire again and you'll be sorry for the rest of your life - both seconds of it", he snarled. "And you get down the Emerald immediately or I'm going to fillet you."

Thunderhawk scowled at him but slid down the Master Emerald anyways.

Sabre quickly stepped between Spectre and the two others.

"Calm down, please. We already had a bad start before and I don't want this to escalate now. I also don't say that I fully trust you but that's just because I don't know you yet. Still I will go with you since you are the only one with information about Enerjak so far."

"I trust you. You are Spectre", Locke said as if carrying a Guardian name was explanation enough.

The dark male at first shot him a slightly surprised gaze but then took Locke's unbreakable belief in pure and honourable Guardians for granted.

"Well, looks like we don't have any other choice if we don't want to split the Brotherhood from the beginning", Thunderhawk sighed reluctantly. "But be assured we will keep an eye on you."

"Rather keep that eye attached where it belongs to and watch out for Legionnaires", Spectre grumbled.

Suddenly a cracking noise was heard and it sounded as if it came from the floor.

"Oh no ... not that again..." Sabre whispered and turned his horrified gaze at Locke. "I thought they couldn't get in here."

"Not as long as you don't carry a little part of Chaos Energy in you, just like Guardians do", Spectre exclaimed instead of the youngest Brotherhood member. "But Enerjak is purest Chaos Energy and these creatures are only alive because they are fuelled by his might."

The cracks in the floor opened wider and slowly the mummified warriors crawled out.

Kapitel 4: The Death Legion

Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 04 - The Death Legion

The Guardians backed away until they were standing with their backs against the Master Emerald. Soon they were surrounded by at least twenty Legionnaires. No one of them carried a weapon but their sharp claws left no doubt that they knew other ways to kill.

Even though he was shaking with fear Sabre made a step forward and stood protectively in front of the other Brotherhood members.

"I will push them back and try to give you cover", he loudly said. "Just find a way out of here quickly."

Fleeing also meant leaving the Master Emerald in a chamber full of Dark Legionnaires but Sabre knew exactly they hadn't come for it - they had come for the Guardians only.

And suddenly Spectre was at his side, his fists surrounded by a faint glow, determined to fight.

"Do you really think we want to leave you behind? I was raised to be a warrior and even though I couldn't take my usual weapons with me I still know some other ways to fight.

"I know how to fight too", now Locke said. "And I also won't leave you alone."

"We have experienced a few gang fights", Thunderhawk exclaimed. "Maybe that knowledge would come in handy now."

"Either all of us get out of this alive or no one", Sojourner said.

At first the mummified warriors remained at their positions, swaying insecurely from side to side - they obviously hadn't awaited too much resistance - but then one of them charged at Locke and though the Legionnaire's blow was blocked and he got kicked back against the other mummies they saw it as their signal for an attack.

Sabre was attacked by four of them the same time. His shield was soon broken by their furious slashes. The Guardian was able to dodge the first blow that came through his barrier but then claws hit his face. He stumbled back, one hand pressed against his bleeding cheek, the other arm stretched out in front of his face in a hopeless gesture to block the next strike. The Legionnaires thought their victim to be helpless and lunged for another attack but two of them were hit by Chaos blasts, and slammed against the other two. The blast hadn't been too strong but the black spots on their chests indicated that any living being now would have had a painful burn. Sabre stared at them and it needed him a few seconds to realize it had been his own attack, fired from his own hands he still had stretched out in front of him. But he had no time to wonder what he just had done or better yet how he had done it because the zombie Legionnaires didn't remain knocked out for too long.

Neither Sojourner nor Thunderhawk cared if they could use any kind of Chaos attacks or not. The lavender furred male had drawn two short daggers from his belt and tossed his friend one of them. Now they fought back to back trying to deal slashes

before one of the surrounding Legionnaires could do. The mummies might not have been able to feel pain but they also had limbs to lose and moreover a lot of wires to cut.

"There's too many of them and they are fast", Sojourner cried out and narrowly blocked another strike.

Thunderhawk suddenly had an idea. "Quick, we have to get up the Emerald. Then we can fight them off one by one when they try to climb up too."

Two completely surprised Legionnaires were rammed out of the way when the two Echidnas rushed to the Master Emerald. Sojourner helped Thunderhawk up then the lavender furred male reached out a hand to drag his friend up as well but before Sojourner could grab it a Legionnaire jumped at him and slammed him to the ground.

"Sojourner!" Thunderhawk cried out. He barely noticed that his dagger had started glowing when he lifted it over his head and jumped off the Master Emerald. "Get away from him, you bloody bastard!"

The dagger hit the Legionnaire's metallic back but instead of ricocheting it thrust into his body, Thunderhawk slashed down and cut the mummy into half.

"Are you ... are you okay?" Thunderhawk asked breathlessly and knelt down beside Sojourner. He still was a bit shocked of what he just had done but even more concerned about his friend's well-being.

"I-I think so..." Sojourner stuttered but then his eyes widened. "Watch out!"

He pushed Thunderhawk down and shot a blast over his head. The mummified Legionnaire stumbled and broke down on top of Thunderhawk. Disgustedly the lavender male pushed and kicked the enemy off him.

"Yuck, they smell like rotten bodies."

"Thunder, they ARE rotten bodies."

Both of them got back on their feet just to find themselves surrounded by Legionnaires again.

"Great... any other good plans?" Sojourner mumbled.

"Just one. Fight for your life."

Spectre was the only one of them who actually seemed to know a bit how to use the Chaos Force. His blasts neither were strong nor too accurate but at least it looked as if he knew what he was doing and the energy didn't just uncontrollably erupt from his body.

Soon the Legionnaires were shying away from attacking him too often and only fought when he came near one but they still encircled him and prevented him from coming to the other Guardians' help.

Another time he blasted a Legionnaire out of the way to escape the ring and another time he only closely avoided getting slashed into pieces when the circle around him narrowed for a short time until the blasted enemies had recovered.

"Will you finally stop that crap and either fight with me or let me through?" the dark Guardian brought out between clenched teeth.

"We only have the order to follow you and then kill the Guardians", one of the Legionnaires suddenly answered. His voice was rough and slurred as if he hadn't used it for years. "There's no need to harm someone like you."

"Then I'm sorry to tell you that I am one of the Guardians now too."

The undead warrior let out a dry cough that sounded a bit like laughter.

"No Dark Legionnaire will ever be a Guardian. You might think you are one for now, you might also know a bit of their abilities but deep inside your heart you will always

remain one of the tribe you have been fighting for nearly your whole life."

Spectre's eyes narrowed.

"Don't you ever call me a Dark Legionnaire again!" he roared and his blast didn't just hit the one who had been speaking to him but also knocked out the two beside him. Immediately the other enemies lunged at him again and since he had taken down more than one this time their attacks had become more furious. Spectre tried to create a shield around him just like Sabre had done it several times but it simply didn't work and the few attacks he knew weren't enough to get them away from him for too long. More and more slashes hit him and nearly forced him to his knees but he didn't want to give up fighting yet. He thought of the other Guardians. No one had been trained like him to be a warrior - during their mission they would need him as much as he needed them. Moreover if he fell without cutting down at least the majority of them the others would be completely overrun and then it was only a matter of seconds before they fell too. He couldn't let this happen. The energy wave breaking free of his body was the first attack he couldn't control but therefore it was stronger than the blows he had dealt before - strong enough to take out every enemy close to him.

Spectre knew the Legionnaires were only out cold for a short time and would return after a while but at least they were out of his way for now. He rushed to Sabre who had been able to knock out three of his enemies but now had been brought down by the last one and rammed the Legionnaire off Sabre before he could slam his claws into the young Guardian's chest. After he was sure the Legionnaire was out cold for a while he returned to help Sabre up.

"T-thanks", the younger male said still shaking a little. He looked around and with horror he saw that the zombified warriors Spectre had taken down just a few seconds ago were slowly standing up again and coming closer. "Isn't there any way to stop them?"

Spectre shook his head. "Not unless we either become as strong as the real Guardians very quickly or try to do the same as Sojourner and Thunderhawk and behead them and even they don't seem to have much success." Still he stepped beside Sabre ready to continue fighting the approaching enemy. "But I don't want to give up yet. That one stronger blast of mine proved we are also capable of doing the mightier Guardian attacks and I'm sure we will be able to send these corpses back to where they belong sooner or later."

'Provided they aren't able to kill us first', Sabre thought.

Leaping forward the mummified Legionnaire slashed across Locke's chest with razor sharp claws. Thin red lines appeared on the edges of his ripped coat. With a gasp Locke staggered backwards only to crash into something soft. The young Guardians spun around and his eyes widened in shock when he found himself face to face with another Legionnaire. The zombie reached back ready to deal a blow too and the only way Locke had to escape this was to drop to the ground. The claws were whooshing only centimetres over his head, hitting the other Legionnaire with full force instead and slicing him open. Locke had to suppress the urge to gag when something plashed to the ground close to him.

Claws were launching down on him and he quickly rolled out of the way. Behind him metal drove into stone floor and the second the Legionnaire needed to drag his claws out again Locke used to leap back onto his feet. Balling up his hands he dealt a blow right across the Legionnaire's muzzle. The cyborg toppled backwards onto the floor. It

looked as if he was out cold but Locke knew exactly this would only last for a few seconds. But what else could he do? The only way to completely stop them would have been to either hit them by a fully powered Chaos attack - which Locke couldn't do - or to slice them open - the sharpest weapon the Guardian carried was a pocket knife. Helplessly he looked around, still avoided looking at the rotten pile only steps away from him. The others were still fighting and some Legionnaires were already down but only the minority of them was gone for good while the rest just waited for a quick recovery.

He just had decided to run over to and help Sojourner and Thunderhawk when the sight of a Legionnaire Sojourner had brought down only seconds ago made him stop. Was that little trail of liquid underneath him blood? Could there really be living warriors among these corpses. He knew he was wasting time by examining this Legionnaire instead of helping his team members but he just had to find out. He knelt beside the cyborg and touched the dark liquid. No, it wasn't blood. This liquid was too greasy. It could have been oil. Of course, something must have been used to let the old metal parts which probably had been lying buried under earth for decades run smoother. An idea formed in his head. Probably it wouldn't work but he had to use this one chance.

"What the heck are you doing?" Sojourner cried out when he noticed the boy kneeling beside the Legionnaire. "That thing can come back to life any second. Stay away from it!"

But Locke barely listened to the things around him when he grabbed his pocket knife and carefully started removing and exchanging wires. He also could have cut them right through but he tried not to. Cutting them would have destroyed this one but if the plan in his mind worked he could destroy more of them.

With a roar the Legionnaire jumped up and pushed Locke away. Due to the sudden movements some wires were ripped apart sending out a shower of sparks but they didn't seem to have any life supporting functions. Locke crawled backwards as fast as possible when the cyborg towered above him, claws lifted up for a deadly strike. Sparks emitted from different cybernetic parts of his body.

'This isn't working!' it shot through Locke's mind when he rolled to the side and narrowly escaped the blow. Again the razor claws swooped down on him and this time he knew he couldn't avoid them anymore in time. He squeezed his eyes shut and awaited either pain or death but neither came. Carefully he blinked then snapped his eyes fully open. The picture in front of him was terrifying yet strangely fascinating. Sparks had ignited the little trails of oil and the dry skin. The Legionnaire stumbled around like an aimless Echidna torch. He didn't seem to feel pain but knew that the fire would destroy him if he couldn't find a way to extinguish it. Whenever he ran into another Legionnaire he set him on fire as well. Some tried to avoid him but paid their short lack of attention on the Guardians by either getting struck down with a Chaos blast or the slash of a dagger.

"This ... this is it..." Thunderhawk panted as soon as the last mummified warrior was destroyed. "We really ... made it ..."

Locke sank to his knees looking as if he was close to vomiting. Sabre knelt beside him and put a comforting hand in his shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

The younger Echidna only nodded slowly.

"Don't worry, that often happens after the first few battles against the Death

Legion", Spectre said. "You will get used to it."

"The what?" Sojourner asked.

"Death Legion - that's what we call these desert mummies", Spectre explained. "And the zombies from other regions too now that they are slowly awakening everywhere. Silent, deadly creatures - though some of them might still be able to talk if their tongues haven't gone rotten already - capable of moving underground. The Dark Legion itself would have needed years to return to their former strength even after Enerjak's return but with the Death Legion at their side they will come to power very fast. That's why I'm so eager to get to the Legion camp in the Sandopolis Zone. If we give Enerjak more time he will also be able to awake Death Legionnaires in the north - or absolutely everywhere he finds corpses that haven't already completely dissolved."

Thunderhawk snorted. "You might be on our side or lead us into a trap, I still don't know, but one thing's for sure - you are freaking crazy. How in Edmund's name are we - five Echidnas who can barely handle their abilities - supposed to bring down a god?"

"We will have to learn on our journey", Spectre said. "We already made a large step ahead by discovering we had them in us. When I arrived here you were still concerned because nothing special happened to you and now during the battle all of us used Chaos based attacks. We now only have to learn how to control them."

"And even now I stayed a freak", Locke silently mumbled.

Sabre knew exactly what he meant - he also had noticed that the younger Echidna hadn't shown a single hint of Chaos abilities aside of his fast healing.

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"I know we all are tired", Spectre said when they stepped out into the evening forest, "but I think it would be an advantage if we either train a bit more today or go as far as we still can. What do you rather want to do?"

Sabre still felt so shakily that he didn't believe he could do either and he also saw that Locke felt the same way but Sojourner answered, "We definitely already had too many fights to start with. I just want to leave this place behind me."

Thunderhawk nodded as well and since neither Sabre nor Locke had an opinion about it Spectre said, "Alright, then let's move. If we're fast we can still reach the rocky hills before it's completely dark. It would be a good and protected place to stay the night as well."

Another time the Echidnas were running through the forest but now they were heading south, into territories only one of them knew.

## Kapitel 5: Old wounds and new abilities

### Rise of the Guardians

#### *Chapter 05 - Old wounds and new abilities*

The night had already fallen in and the rocks to both sides of their uphill path were merely silhouettes against the moonlight but still they barely had made stops and continued following Spectre into the unknown. Sabre noticed that Locke was falling behind but he also felt more and more exhausted. Thunderhawk and Sojourner might have been used to running parcours through the city day by day and who knew what Spectre had been trained in but if they continued in that speed they would soon lose the two youngest Brotherhood members.

"Can we ... please rest? I don't think ... we can continue much longer", Sabre panted not daring to speak too loud in case enemies were in hearing range but the others still had heard him in the silence of the night, first slowed down a bit and then finally stopped.

"I think we have come far enough anyways and this looks like a good spot to rest", Spectre said. He was heavily breathing as well but else barely showed any sign of exhaustion. "I think we can even risk a campfire. The rocks protect us from any sight. Still I want to keep guard - just in case."

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"Do you think we can trust him?" Thunderhawk asked and stared into the flickering campfire. He and Sabre were the only ones awake. Sojourner and Locke were sleeping close to them while Spectre had disappeared between the rocks a good while ago and not been seen or heard since.

"I really hope so. We are following him into terra incognita after all. But then again why should he have been chosen by the Guardians and told to go to the Master Emerald by the Neo Walkers if he was our enemy? He might look threatening at first but, heck, he's Spectre after all."

The lavender furred male just slowly shook his head. "I'm still not sure what to think of him. He seems to know awfully lot about the Dark and the Death Legion. Is that really because he was spying on them for quite a while like he said or is he actually one of them and was sent to lead us into a trap? Enerjak must already have found out something that could threaten him was going on or else there wouldn't have been so many zombies in the Chaos chamber. They clearly weren't out for the Master Emerald. Just having a Guardian name doesn't automatically mean that he's also a Guardian. In some villages Steppenwolf is still well known and honoured and there are also a lot of people named after him - still we don't have a Steppenwolf in our team."

"If he had wanted to finish us off he would have done it right in the chamber and not fought together with us", Sabre said. "Besides where does his knowledge of the Chaos Force come from if he wasn't chosen to be a Guardian? Edmund's bloodline has died out and meanwhile Dimitri's as well since all of the Grandmasters were either killed during the centuries-long battles or banned into the Twilight Zone long time ago. If his abilities weren't inherited where else has he gotten them? I'm sure Enerjak doesn't teach his followers how to use Chaos based attacks. My only explanation is

that he is a chosen one too."

"And still I can't deny that I have a bad feeling about him", Thunderhawk said and looked around. "Where on Mobius is he anyways? Since we have started to rest he has been avoiding us."

"I think he is still out on guard duty", Sabre said and stood up. "But maybe it's better if I go out and look after him. He might be tired too."

Carefully Sabre climbed through the rocks always ready for an attack. He might have trusted Spectre but who knew what else was lurking in the darkness.

"Who's there?" someone suddenly whispered.

Sabre spun around but then sighed in relief when he recognized the figure in the moonlight.

"Good grief, Spectre, you startled me."

"I'm sorry but I had to make sure you weren't a Legionnaire without having to attack", the older male said and came closer. "Why have you left the fireside? Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"I only needed to rest a bit, not actually sleep and after a while I wondered if you might have been tired too. Don't you want to come back to the others? I can stay here and watch over you all for a while now."

For a moment Spectre hesitated and Sabre could read in his eyes that he really considered going back to the fireside but then the dark Echidna shook his head.

"I'm not sure if I'm even welcomed. You might trust me - more or less - and Locke does it for sure but the other two... Being watched with hostility is worse than staying all alone in the darkness."

"They barely know you yet so it's no wonder they are distant", Sabre tried to console him. "Just give them a bit more time and they will accept you too."

"They accepted you and Locke although it looks like you didn't know each other before", Spectre said. "This isn't just the distance someone would keep to a stranger. They are seeing a possible enemy in me. And at least in one point they are right."

He started rolling up one of his sleeves and in the moonlight Sabre saw the cold shine of metal.

"I am a Dark Legionnaire", Spectre calmly continued. "But I never wanted to be one and it's making me sick when others are calling me that way. My mother had been killed by them when I was about eight years old and they had taken me with them. I could neither flee - where could I have gone - nor do anything against them - it would have been me alone against an army. So I kept my head down just for pure survival. But I could collect information about them in the hope I once would be able to use it against them. Unlike others they forced to join their army they never managed to break me. When I had these repeating dreams I finally saw a flicker of hope to get out of this hell. It had to mean something if I dreamed about being a Guardian every night although I only experienced the terrors of the Legion by day and so I basically neglected my daily training routine to concentrate on hidden power living inside me. That's the reason why my attacks don't come uncontrollably most of the time unlike yours - I concentrated on them from the beginning and didn't suddenly have to attack or defend myself. Of course some of the others grew suspicious of me after a while - no one calls in sick for such a long time and locks himself up in his room without ever visiting the medical bay - but I wanted to take that risk. And when the Neo Walkers talked to me I finally saw my chance to escape had come. The houses of slavery are a bit outside the Legion camp and the slaves enter and leave it through an old tunnel

system - a good slave is one who stays invisible and unheard unless their masters want them to show themselves. Of course they are guarded too a bit but while a Legionnaire leaving the main camp will be held up and asked inconvenient questions he would be widely ignored when leaving the barrack colony because picking a slave personally isn't forbidden. The only thing left to do after that was running and trying to be far away before they noticed my absence."

The whole time Sabre had listened silently and with wide opened eyes. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that Spectre still tried to hide something about his past - not just didn't tell it because then the story would have lasted forever but really hiding it on purpose. But then again, telling him about all this only hours after they had learned to know each other already had been a major act of faith.

"I'm only asking you not to tell about it to anyone else yet", Spectre said after a while. "Locke can hear it. He will understand. But for Thunderhawk and Sojourner it will be enough if they hear I'm a Legionnaire to stop listening and see their theories confirmed. I still want to wait until they trust me as well."

"I won't say a word about it to anyone else but Locke", Sabre promised and then he added, "Are you sure you don't want to come to the fireplace and take a rest?"

"No, not for now. Maybe I will later that night but so far I don't feel tired at all."

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Thunderhawk was still awake when Sabre returned. He was cutting around on a piece of wood that looked more and more like a boomerang. "Heck, where have you been so long?" he silently asked. "I was nearly afraid a Death Legionnaire might have eaten you."

He lifted up his boomerang as if he wanted to try it but then decided otherwise and lowered his hand again. Probably he was afraid to lose it somewhere in the darkness in case it didn't come back.

Sabre sat down between the sleeping Locke and Thunderhawk again.

"I just talked to Spectre for a while. Watch duty in a silent night can really be boring. He said he wasn't tired yet and wanted to stay out there for a bit longer but he will return later that night."

"That's good", Thunderhawk mumbled and concentrated on his boomerang again to see if it still needed improvement.

For a while they were sitting wrapped up in silence then Sabre said, "How did you two come to the thieves' gang? Locke told me some kids from the orphanage he grew up in joined street gangs."

"I wasn't an orphan", Thunderhawk replied, "but most of the time I felt like one. My oldies barely cared about me. They gave me a place to live and I didn't have to starve but else I always felt that I was the unwanted child. I guess they only didn't give me away because else the neighbours would have talked bad about them or something like that, don't have any other explanation for it. No wonder I always was a troublemaker. I didn't bully other kids but I never listened to authorities and had no problems breaking rules. Soon after I dropped out of school I joined one of the thieves' gangs. Probably the first good decision I had made in my life because it was the first time I learned to accept a subordinate role to others and that some rules are there to be followed if you don't want to get into massive trouble with your own colleagues or end your life in a gang fight with a knife in your back."

Sabre remembered the daggers Thunderhawk had used during their fight against the

zombies. The gun control law was very strict, thank goodness or else some of the gang wars would have gotten out of control but also other weapons could cause deadly wounds.

"Have you been in a lot of fights already?" he asked.

"Only a few and I never killed someone - only dealt a lot of cuts. Some zombies today were my first kills ever - if you really can kill something that's already dead. These daggers were mainly a tool instead of a weapon. If you stick them in small gaps between bricks you can use them as help for climbing."

With a sigh Sabre leaned back a bit and stared at the sky.

"It's somehow sad to know that all of those who have been chosen to be Guardians are outcasts in some way."

"The original Guardians were outcasts too", Thunderhawk said. "Wielding powers no other Echidnas possess or being seen as some sort of royalty doesn't sound normal to me. Besides I doubt all people approved everything they did. Maybe the Guardians chose us on purpose - because we would be different from others."

"What about Sojourner?" Sabre asked. "Why was he in the gang?"

Thunderhawk looked down on the Echidna sleeping at his side and Sabre could see a hint of guilty feeling in his eyes.

"To be honest, it was my fault that he ended up in this mess. If I had the ability to change the past then I would use it - even though it would mean that we probably never would have become such close friends - just to make this crap undone. I was already in the gang when I learned to know him and he was a kid of maybe eight or nine years. I was a teen, burglary wasn't a full time job and the other gang members weren't my jailers. I could do whatever I wanted with my spare time and so I hung out with other teens in the parks a lot and also learned to know Sojo. I don't know why I even got that stupid idea but one day I dared him to go with me on one of my trips and steal something as well. I don't remember what it was - just some cheap crap from a supermarket - I didn't want him to take anything more expensive since I didn't want him to get into too big troubles in case he was caught. Well, he was caught but I never expected what could have followed. He was still too young to get punished by the law so the worst he got was a lecture by the guy from the EST and he had to pay whatever he had stolen. But obviously his family didn't see him as too young to get his butt kicked out of the house. Unlike me he once had a family who cared about him - or at least he believed he was loved by them - but it all ended all out of sudden just because of some stupid dare. They didn't want to have him in their house for any longer because he had brought dishonour over them or some similar shit and furthermore they believed he would continue being a criminal once he had started. Obviously their 'love' didn't go far enough to deal with a child who committed even the smallest crime once - feeling dishonoured and getting rid of him was an easier way. I never felt guiltier my whole life. He was just a child and suddenly had no place to live anymore because of me. Of course I offered him to live with me in my room - I couldn't have cared less about what my parents said about it anyways. At first I was afraid that Sojo would also see it as my fault and hate me for what I had done but he was just so thankful for every little bit of help I could offer. From that time on we were inseparable. I introduced him to the gang and taught him how to survive on the streets. Soon we were known as 'the twins' since we only existed as a duo."

Thunderhawk leaned back to look at the stars as well.

"I can't say that Sojo and I didn't have loads of fun together but sometimes I wonder if he couldn't have had a much better life, far away from the streets, if it hadn't been for

me."

"Or he would have ended up in a boring office job, longing for more adventure his whole life long and you are actually his saviour", Sabre replied.

Thunderhawk laughed. "Yes, or that." He turned around so he could face Sabre. "And what about you and Locke? What makes you the outcasts and how did you learn to know each other?"

"Actually the story of my own life wouldn't even be that interesting", Sabre said. After hearing Spectre's, Thunderhawk's and Sojourner's stories he felt like an outcast among the outcasts - they all had their sad stories while his own life wasn't that much different from most other Echidnas.

"Doesn't matter as long as I know you a bit better afterwards", Thunderhawk replied. And so the younger Guardian started telling.

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Sabre slowly opened his eyes and tried to blink the bright daylight away. Beside him Thunderhawk was still fast asleep. Damn, had they really dozed off without waking up any of the others to take over their guard shift? But at least they now knew how far they could trust Spectre since they all were still alive.

"Has the first Sleeping Beauty finally woken up?" he heard a voice over his head.

He looked up and his mouth opened in surprise.

"Spectre! How in Edmund's name did you get up there? I didn't know you could levitate."

The dark furred Echidna was sitting in empty air several feet above their heads.

"Me neither", Spectre replied, "at least not until I jumped off one of the higher cliffs."

"You did what? Have you gone insane?"

Now the others had woken up as well and gave the oldest Guardian astounded looks too.

Carefully Spectre landed between them but instead of an answer he signalled them to follow him. They climbed up a small path between the rocks that ended abruptly at the edge of a higher cliff - not high enough to kill someone who fell down there but still hitting the bottom might have resulted in a few broken bones. Spectre held out a hand towards Sojourner.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

The younger Echidna gave him a sceptical look.

"Well ... not really."

"That's even better."

Before Sojourner or anyone else could react Spectre had grabbed his hand and dragged him down the cliff.

Sojourner cried out and squeezed his eyes shut but when the expected impact failed to appear he risked a gaze and his eyes widened when he saw they were gliding through the cliffs of the rocky hills. Spectre still held his hand but he either did it to help Sojourner navigate or just in case the younger Guardian could drop after all and didn't carry him. It was the Chaos Force inside his own body that held him in the air. He let out a loud laugh.

Spectre turned his head and smiled at him. "A great feeling, isn't it? But I advise you not to think about what you're doing or how you're doing it too much - at least not before you are able to control the Chaos Force a bit better."

When they landed again Sojourner stood a bit shakily at first and had to be supported by Thunderhawk but the grin still hadn't disappeared from his face.

"You know this also could have failed", the lavender furred male said with a hint of reproach in his voice.

"I know but I had to take the risk", Spectre said and when Thunderhawk glared at him he quickly added, "Listen, in the worst case I still could have caught him but I had to take one of you by surprise to confirm my theory. I thought about it the whole night. We have to find a very quick way how we can learn to unleash and control our powers. Everything I know I learned by myself too but I needed several days for it and we don't have that time. And then I remembered our battle in the Chaos chamber. We used attacks we never had used before simply because we had it in us the whole time."

He suddenly turned around and shot a small Chaos blast at Sabre. It was only a very weak attack and he would barely have felt it if it had touched him but instinctively he activated his shield.

"You see?" Spectre continued. "Drop a baby into water and it will start making swimming movements without ever having learned it. So I dropped myself off a cliff and the Chaos Force caught me. Our instincts help us unleash our powers and if we concentrate and remember the feeling we will also be able to control them soon. You can try that right now if you want to, Sabre. Just close your eyes and ... *feel*."

Sabre closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on something although he wasn't even sure what. What had the Chaos Force felt like? He imagined another attack and tried to defend himself against it. His skin tingled lightly as if sparks of electricity were dancing over his fur.

"It really works", he heard Locke whisper.

Sabre opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by a faint green glow. That shield was so weak it would have been destroyed if a butterfly crashed against it but it was something he had created with his own will and he knew he could also make it last as long as he wanted. He looked around and caught Spectre's eyes. A smirk curled the dark furred Echidna's lips.

"It's a beginning", he said.

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Another time Locke's chest was hit by a Chaos blast. It was just a very weak one but still it made him stumble and fall. This time he remained sitting on the ground.

"There's not use in continuing this training", he bleakly said. "I will never learn it."

Sabre who had been his training partner for the past few hours knelt beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't give yourself such a hard time. Not even you can learn everything at the speed of light. We're all beginners. Just look at me. I would barely stand a chance if a goldfish attacked me."

He had hoped to cheer Locke up a bit but the boy only gave him a saddened look and said, "But at least you have already used the Chaos Force several times and I don't even want to mention how much Sojourner and Thunderhawk have improved."

Sabre watched the other training battle and had to admit Locke was right. The 'brothers' were still lacking strength but they compensated it with speed and knowledge how to attack as a duo without having to exchange words to let the other know what to do next. Spectre had a hard time blocking all their attacks.

"Maybe it's also because of me that you haven't been able to use Chaos based abilities

yet", Sabre said. "I simply don't look threatening enough. When I attack your instincts don't tell you to defend yourself because I look as if I wouldn't even harm a fly."

"Time out!" Spectre called and walked over to the two youngest Guardians. "What's the matter?"

"He's a bit down because he wasn't able to do any Chaos attacks yet", Sabre answered.

"I'm a lost cause", Locke mumbled.

"No one is a lost cause until I say so", Spectre answered.

"But it's true. I have learned so many things about the Guardians and the Chaos Force and now I feel like I know nothing at all. Everyone is able to use at least light attack or shielding abilities on his own and I couldn't even do anything when the desert mummies attacked me. And you ... you seem to know absolutely everything. You have learned it all on your own and now even are skilled enough to teach others. I can never be that good."

"No one expects you to catch up with someone who had several more training hours than you on your very first lesson. Besides I also have some major lacks in my knowledge about the Chaos Force. For example I'm a total dead loss at shielding. I can counter attacks with own attacks but that's not the same and won't defend me as good as a real shield. Now please get up again."

Locke sighed deeply but followed his wish.

"And now give me your hands. Don't worry; I won't drag you down a cliff until you want me to."

If that had been an attempt to cheer the boy up Spectre had failed as much as Sabre.

"Getting pushed into a threatening looking situation is just one way to learn. I used another one by remembering how it felt to use Chaos energy in my dreams and recalling that feeling during my wake hours. Or maybe a combination of both might help you too. If you have forgotten how it felt in your dreams I can help you remembering it."

A faint glow appeared around their hands. Locke closed his eyes so he could better concentrate on it. A good minute later Spectre slowly went back a few steps and let Locke's hands slip out of his.

"I will let go now but keep that feeling memorized and your eyes shut for a little longer."

The dark Echidna went back a few more steps then he lifted up a hand and shot a blast towards the youngest Guardian. Locke's hand moved up fast. Before even his eyelids had fully snapped open he had countered with an own attack. The two Chaos forces contacted and bounced off in different directions.

"Congratulations", Spectre said with a smirk.

Sabre punched the air. "You did it!" he called and his reaction caused Sojourner and Thunderhawk to exchange amused looks.

The corners of Locke's mouth twitched and he showed one of his rare little smiles.



## Kapitel 6: Desert rose

### Rise of the Guardians

#### *Chapter 06 - Desert rose*

Thunderhawk narrowly evaded one of Spectre's Chaos beams.

"Ha! You have to be quicker than that, old man", he laughed and tried an attack on his own but Spectre countered it with ease.

Sabre made a short pause in his training with Sojourner and Locke to watch the two others. Had it really been just three days ago that Thunderhawk had accused the dark Echidna of being a Legionnaire and wanted to have an eye on him twenty-four-seven? He and Sojourner still might not trust him fully but they at least accepted him and something like a friendly rivalry had grown between them. Today something very rare had happened - the duo Thunderhawk-Sojourner had split because each wanted to test his strength in a one on one battle against Spectre. Of course the oldest Brotherhood member was still at an advantage - even if he had to fight both of them the same time - but the two had massively improved the past few days. They all had improved a lot. Even Locke lost the last bit of doubt in himself when he figured out what he was capable of doing. Sabre still lacked a bit in attacking but his shield was something he could definitely be proud of. Spectre simply was terrible in creating them and the others could shield themselves quite good against the weaker attacks but a mountain could crash on Sabre and his shield would withstand it. The ones with such incredible strength cost a lot of energy though and he probably wouldn't be able to make it last longer than a few minutes but he still was proud of it.

A boomerang glowing with Chaos energy missed Sabre's head by only a few centimetres and disappeared somewhere in the bushes.

"Sorry", he heard Sojourner's call. "That was actually meant for Thunder."

"What the..."

Thunderhawk interrupted his training to check his belt where normally the two daggers and the boomerang should have been fixed only to find the latter gone. He laughed.

"Hey, how did you get that? Don't you know a thief shouldn't steal from his gang members? Just wait until I get you."

But before he could run after Sojourner a weak Chaos blast hit his back and made him stumble.

"And don't you know the first rule of a battle?" Spectre asked with a grin. "Never turn your back to the 'old man', especially not when he's smiling."

Later that day they continued their march through the desert. The rocky hills they had already left behind over a day ago but the rugged landscape could still give them cover in case they needed it. In the distance a long wall and a few small huts outside of it could be seen. Spectre had said that they would reach the Legion camp in the evening. And then? They neither knew how to enter it nor where exactly Enerjak was nor how they could defeat him. Then they could only hope that the gods and their Guardian namesakes were both with them and could help them to get out of this alive.

"How are we even supposed to get into the camp?" Sabre finally spoke out what everyone thought.

"The tunnels under the slave compound", Spectre shortly answered. He seemed to get more nervous the closer they came to the camp. They all were strung-out but no one's nerves seemed to be as tense as Spectre's. Sabre could understand him only too well. If his family had been killed and he had been forced to work for the killers most of his life he also would have avoided to go back to them at any cost.

"But aren't the slaves guarded as well?" Sojourner asked.

"There are a few Legionnaires around but never enough to observe the whole camp and it's also not necessary. The desert is the best guard", Spectre said. "The slaves are given enough to live but too less to store up enough for a march through the desert. The nearest villages are miles away. They still could be lucky and find one of the few nomad tribes but unless they know where the nomads are at the moment it is sheer suicide."

The dusk gave them additional cover when they were hiding between the rocks close to the houses of slavery and waited for a patrol to disappear out of sight then they moved on. The staircase down to the tunnel was unlocked and soon they were slowly walking through the darkness.

"This part isn't very long", Spectre whispered. "I don't think we will need light for now. It will be bright enough again once we have reached the other door to one of the corridors inside the base."

"There might have been barely any soldiers outside the camp but I'm sure there will be enough inside", Thunderhawk whispered. "In the brightness we won't be able to hide that good."

"We will be hidden very well. You'll see once we get there", Spectre answered.

The tunnel led to something that looked like a narrow corridor at first but through one of the barred windows at one side they could see that it actually was a very large corridor split into two parts - the bigger brightly lit main corridor and the small side corridor, separated by a wall and only lit by the light shining through the bars of the few windows and rare doors.

"This is how slaves can go to the different rooms without getting seen too often. We can normally walk in here and as long as we keep our heads lowered and don't behave too self-confident Legionnaires passing by on the other corridor will barely take note of us", Spectre silently said and made a gesture to follow him.

They walked deeper into the core of the fortress. Several times the corridors had crossed and by now they fully had to rely on Spectre's knowledge of the area. Without him they would have been completely lost. At another crossroad he suddenly stopped.

"This is crap", he whispered. "The whole time I tried to follow the source of the Chaos Force but it seems to be everywhere and it's not getting stronger."

"Could it be because of all these energy fuelled zombies?" Sabre asked.

"No, even in that case we would be able to sense Enerjak. Such a great amount of energy simply can't be ignored. I'm slowly getting the feeling that he has left the camp."

"But where else could he..." Sojourner started. He was interrupted when a larger troop of soldiers passed by on the main corridor. They dragged four young females

with them - the youngest one probably just about Locke's age.

"Looks like they caught some new slaves", Spectre said tonelessly.

"Have we ever asked why the Legion even needs slaves?" Locke asked while he slowly walked closer to the window. The troop had stopped now as if they were waiting for something or someone.

"Mainly because there are not enough females in the Legion and without the slaves they would slowly die out", Spectre silently said and sounded as if he rather wanted to skip the topic. "Enter one of the slave houses and you will mainly find females there except for a little boy now and then who still had been too young to become a soldier. The slaves are misused for reproduction. And also for a lot of fun. The strongest children are taken away from their mothers as soon as possible to make soldiers out of them - the younger they are the faster they will forget where they really came from and can become loyal Legionnaires although they are only 'half-bloods'. The weaker children are often doomed to die in the wilderness."

The other Guardians stared at him with wide opened eyes except for Locke who still couldn't avert his eyes off the prisoners. The females didn't struggle anymore. With lowered heads they stood between their abductors, shivering, silently weeping and awaited their fate. The youngest turned her head to look at the barred windows and caught Locke's gaze. There were no tears in her eyes but the young Guardian could see the desperation in them and the silent cry for help. His grip on the metal bars tightened.

"What are they waiting for?" Thunderhawk whispered.

"Probably a higher officer who tells them if the slaves are needed already or can be brought to their huts first", Spectre snarled.

Now another, smaller troop neared - probably the officer Spectre had spoken of and some of his personal guards. Locke silently gasped.

"No! That ... that can't be possible. He is ... dead. He has to be. No one can live for more than a thousand years."

Now the others rushed to the window as well.

"This guy looks familiar somehow..." Sojourner slowly said.

Sabre felt his insides freezing. The leader of the second troop looked exactly like Moritori Rex. But how could he still be alive? He must have survived many centuries and still didn't look older than sixty.

"He has learned to use the Twilight Zone for his own purposes. Meanwhile he doesn't even need to retreat there anymore because he ages slower than any living being even without it", Spectre said.

Thunderhawk turned around and flinched when he caught Spectre's eyes. He had seen a lot of angry looks but never this kind of burning, raging hate that filled the dark Echidna's eyes right now.

Moritori wandered around between the prisoners to take a closer look at them.

"That is very good", he said with a pleased smile. "Finally some fresh meat again. We could really need that. Our oldest slaves are very close to their thirties already and if we didn't need females that badly I already would have ordered their deaths years ago."

He now caught sight of the youngest female and his malicious grin widened a bit more when he grabbed her chin and lifted up her head.

"It sometimes amazes me what beautiful roses can grow in the desert. As much as I hate to have someone in bed who already exceeded her mid-twenties, as much I love

to have young blood like you. You will love to hear that your first order as a new slave is to please me tonight."

Her shocked gaze quickly turned into disgust and hate and instead of an answer she spit into his face.

Moritori stumbled back but he recovered quickly from his surprise, rushed forward and struck her hard enough that she fell to the ground.

"If you don't know where your place is you have to learn it the hard way", Moritori hissed. "I could have been nice to you but my punishment will be severe and don't await any mercy."

Sabre noticed that Locke beside him stiffened and his fists started to glow with Chaos energy.

"No, please keep it down. We will find another way to help her but we can't rush headlong into a whole troop..."

Too late. At one go Locke ripped the metal bars out of the wall and leaped through the hole. He rushed through the crowd and sliding came to a stop between Moritori and the female.

"Get one step closer and..."

He had no idea what he should do if they really attacked so he let his sentence unfinished and hoped the 'and' would sound threatening enough.

"Who do you think you are, soldier?" Moritori asked angrily but then his eyes narrowed when he realized who he really had in front of him. "A Guardian..." he hissed and drew his weapon.

The same second the wall exploded and four more Guardians stormed the corridor.

"Alarm the camp! The intruders are here!" Moritori shouted and sirens started howling while more and more Legionnaires were approaching.

"Holy ship, there's too many of them!" Thunderhawk gasped.

"Run! Just run!" Spectre cried out, turned into the corridor with the least enemies so far and blasted the few Legionnaires who had appeared there out of their way.

The other females had been dragged away when the walls exploded and were out of the Guardians' reach but the girl still knelt behind Locke. The youngest Guardian grabbed her hand and dragged her with him.

Soon the corridors were flooded with Death Legionnaires. The only reason why the Guardians were still alive probably was because barely anyone of the undead army carried ranged weapons. The few of them who did or the members of the Dark Legion rather shot into the flood of zombies and so they used their guns as little as possible. That was not a big advantage for the Guardians though since the zombies were many, tough and their claws could be deadly weapons as well.

At first the Guardians also had attacked the Legionnaires at both sides so they kept their distance but soon they mainly concentrated on finding a way out and only used their Chaos powers if nothing else could have prevented them from getting slit open. Spectre had to change directions several times since their way appeared to be blocked. Finally he yanked open a door and the five stumbled down a corridor again. Lamps or torches were still missing in the underground tunnel but this time their own aura of Chaos energy lit up the place.

"This isn't the one we came in through and I also have no idea where it leads", Spectre panted, "but I hope the tunnels are connected to each other."

Sojourner turned around and then he laughed which sounded pretty odd at their

current situation.

"They aren't following us anymore", he called out. "The zombies are blocking each other because they all try to get through the door the same time. I'm sure we can make it out if..."

His next words were drowned by the sound of shaking floor and crumbling walls and ceiling.

"They are breaking through!" Spectre shouted. "Faster! We have to get away from here before everything is collapsing."

And that moment part of the thick ceiling ripped open. Boulders rained down on them. Sabre immediately activated his shield. Whirling dust was everywhere. He breathed it in, it made his eyes water and since he barely saw anything he could only hope that the others were close enough to be protected as well. When the earth stopped shaking, the dust settled and the Chaos shield slowly faded the only light came through a crack in the ceiling. Large boulders were blocking the way of the corridor they had come from ... and two of the Guardians were missing.

"Thunderhawk! Sojourner!" Spectre cried out and wanted to run to the pile of rocks but Sabre grabbed his arm, dragged him and Locke, who had protectively wrapped his arms around the girl, closer and activated his mightiest shield. Not even a second later a strong shiver went through the tunnel again and the rest of the ceiling above them collapsed.

Now there really was no escape left. Bright light shone at them when they stood coughing in the pit that once was a tunnel, surrounded by Dark Legionnaires who smirked down at them.

"Stay down", Spectre whispered while he stepped protectively in front of them. "They won't hesitate shooting you but they will think twice if they really want to kill me."

"What makes you so sure about that?" Sabre asked but he got no answer.

The crowd was set in motion when they formed a walkway for Moritori. A whisper was in the air and Sabre presumed that the soldiers were telling their Grandmaster about their glorious victory. He was shivering with anger and the same time he felt so helpless. A look into Locke's eyes told him that the boy was feeling the same. And Spectre? He still had turned their back at them, stood like a statue and stared up at the Legionnaires.

"What did I hear?" Moritori asked. "Two of the Guardians are gone for good already. Now those are great news. Well, probably bad news for the Guardians but who asks them anyways?"

He now appeared at the edge of the pit and looked down at them. A smile appeared on his face when he saw Spectre and to Sabre's, Locke's and even the girl's surprise he knelt down and stretched out a hand towards the dark Echidna as if he offered help to climb up.

"I knew you would make it back", he said. "Welcome home ... my son."

## Kapitel 7: Betrayal

### Rise of the Guardians

#### *Chapter 07 - Betrayal*

Sabre quickly alternated in staring at either Spectre's back or Moritori. Had he really heard that right? His son? What was going on here?

The dark Echidna still stood like frozen on the spot but the worst was that so far not a single word had come over his lips - nothing that would have destroyed the terrible suspicion which was now slowly crawling through Sabre's mind. In the Chaos Chamber he had nearly jumped at Thunderhawk for calling him a Dark Legionnaire but the Grandmaster might not even been given a dirty look.

"I need to talk to you about our ... Guardians", Moritori said to Spectre and the last word he rather spit out than spoke out. When Spectre didn't react he made a quick gesture and then continued, "Don't worry, they won't get killed before you return so you won't miss any of the fun."

At first the dark furred Echidna still hesitated but then he climbed out of the pit while ignoring the Grandmaster's helpful hand.

"Follow me, my boy. I wouldn't be too happy if I knew this scum could hear every word of a family discussion." He turned around and gave the three Echidnas who remained in the pit a snarky grin. "And you don't run away while we're gone, do you hear me?"

"What is this all about?" Locke silently asked. His voice was shivering. "This ... it just can't be. Spectre is a Guardian, not a Legionnaire. He can't be the son of a Grandmaster. He only went with Moritori because he has a plan. I'm sure he has a plan." He sounded like he tried to clutch at a straw.

Sabre thought otherwise. He hadn't told anyone about Spectre's past, not even Locke, but now he regretted it. He knew what Spectre was and still he blindly trusted him, they all did. No, not all of them - Thunderhawk and Sojourner had always kept their distance. And now they were dead - the only ones to mistrust him all the time were also the first ones to be topped.

Spectre returned and stopped a bit away from the edge. He completely ignored the two Guardians and turned his attention to the Legionnaires only when he said, "I have always been a Dark Legionnaire so why should I stop being one just because I have travelled with Guardians for a while. Of course I will return to you."

"You treacherous bastard!"

Sabre's scream was nearly drowned out by the soldiers' cheers or snarky laughs.

Locke silently stared at them without really seeing anyone. He looked as if his world just had crumbled before his eyes.

Spectre only shot them a quick glance then he turned around and walked away.

"Get them out of our sight now", Moritori commanded, "all three of them."

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"S-Sojo? Are you okay?"

"Ugh ... I could feel better if you weren't such a heavyweight. How the hell did you

gain so much more weight?"

"That's not just me ... there are some rocks on my back."

Thunderhawk slowly propped up on his arms and debris slid off his back. They were surrounded by complete darkness again and the only thing they could hear was their own breaths.

"Seems like we're the only ones in this part of the tunnel", Sojourner silently said.

"Hopefully the others are alright."

"They sure are", Thunderhawk replied. "They have Spectre with them."

He looked around in the hope his eyes would still adjust to the darkness. They both had often worked in the night and so their sight in the darkness was actually pretty good but in this tunnel they were surrounded by such an absence of light that not even their improved eyesight helped the slightest bit.

"I think we can risk some Chaos energy", Sojourner said and in his palm a little green glowing orb appeared. "Where do you think the others are now?"

"If they were able to continue their way down the tunnel they can be anywhere now but if the Legionnaires caught them and haven't executed them immediately they are probably in some kind of prison. We will just have to sniff around a bit. Come on."

Since one way of the tunnel was blocked by boulders too heavy to move they only could walk back to the door they had come in through. The corridors were empty again - a good sign that their friends were held prisoner because if they were still on the run the place would have been brimmed with soldiers and if they had been killed the duo had expected at least a little celebration. Thunderhawk just wanted to fully open the door when Sojourner held him back and nodded at a corner several meters away. A Death Legionnaire was standing there half hidden.

"It seems to be only one", Sojourner whispered, "So he shouldn't be too much of a problem. But I don't think we can shoot that far and when he spots us he will have alarmed others before we can even approach him."

"Probably too far for our own range but not too far for this", Thunderhawk said and lifted up a glowing boomerang. "I only have to get him a bit further away from that corner. Just stay back and watch the master."

He slipped out of the tunnel.

"Hey, mould face!"

The Death Legionnaire spun around and a Chaos boomerang drove right through him. Both Guardians waited for a little longer but after neither other Legionnaires entered the corridor nor the zombie came back to life they assumed the coast was clear.

"Ew, a rotten pile", Sojourner said with a chuckle. "I think our little tech wiz would be grossed out by now."

Thunderhawk stared down at the corpse for a few seconds.

"I think soon I will be grossed out as well but it could work."

"What the hell are you doing?" Sojourner asked with a disgusted look on his face when he saw that Thunderhawk tried to pull the robe off the Legionnaire.

"Camouflage. It has to be. And now stay here. I think I heard another Legionnaire not too far away."

He tried not to breathe too much when he put on the robe and ran down the corridor. When the other soldier came in sight he slowed down a bit and lowered his head.

"Hey, I have heard that some Guardians were caught." It was just a shot in the dark but what could have gone wrong with such a statement? If he was correct the Legionnaire

would confirm it and if not he would just be stared at as if he had gone insane. He really earned such a look but then the soldier said, "Where have you been the last minutes? Of course they were." He grinned at him. "Don't tell me you slept in your cabin the whole time and missed all of the fun. Well, too bad for you if you have because they are now locked away in one of the prisons."

Thunderhawk silently cursed which only caused the Legionnaire to widen his grin.

"I guess the only thing you could do now to have at least a bit of fun is mocking them. It's not even that far if you really feel like doing it." He nodded at one of the corridors. "Just down there and through the door to sector H. We have chosen the cells there because they were the closest."

"Good, I will think about it", Thunderhawk said, turned around and walked away again as calm as possible.

"And better take a shower before you do so", the soldier called behind him. "Not even Guardians have deserved such a stench."

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In their cell Sabre was marching in circles. He wished he could attack the door or the walls just to give vent to his fury but both were of a thick, sturdy material, able to reflect attacks and he didn't want to risk hurting himself or the others in his blind rage. Actually he believed it to be his fault. They had all followed Spectre because he had tried to convince them he could be trusted although he knew exactly what he had been and like sheep they were led to the slaughter. Spectre was a disgrace for his Guardian namesake. Why was a Legionnaire - Moritori's son - even named after a Guardian? Maybe Spectre had been Moritori's worst enemy in the past and he had chosen it on purpose so he at least could bring discredit on this name? Sabre didn't know enough about the Guardian history to be sure. Probably Locke did but his mind seemed to be far away at the moment.

Since they had been brought to the cell Locke had been sitting leaned against the wall, arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the opposing wall. The girl who had introduced herself as Lara knelt beside him, a hand on Locke's shoulder and looked at him helplessly. She had tried to comfort him but the boy barely reacted to anything.

"Locke..." Sabre started, not sure how he should continue. Somehow he knew how Locke must have been feeling - a boy who never had someone he could call a friend, now finally found others he believed he could trust but lost two and was betrayed by one of them only a few days later.

"I knew about it. I knew what Spectre was and I'm sorry that I haven't told you earlier. We weren't betrayed by a Guardian but just followed a Dark Legionnaire who never wanted anything else but carrying out the mission he had been given."

"But he knew when and where the Guardians would meet for the first time", Locke silently replied. "That was something only we and the Neo Walkers knew. If he never was a Guardian how did he find out about that? Why should the gods speak with a Legionnaire about it?"

Yes, why? The gods were deceived in him. Probably he had been born as a Guardian but over the years the Legion had sucked every little bit of good out of him and drilled him for their purposes.

"However he found out about it, it doesn't matter anymore. We're doomed anyways."

"What do you think they will do with us now?" Lara asked frightened.



Sabre closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "I don't know but I'm expecting the worst."

"Aw, you're too negative, Sabre-tooth."

"Yes, we're sure they only want to invite us to a barbecue party and then dance the Sirtaki with us."

Sabre's eyes snapped open. It couldn't be. Every logical part of his brain told him that they couldn't be alive anymore after being buried under such heavy boulders. He didn't care.

Locke now also had lifted up his head and was staring at the door while Sabre already had rushed to it so he could better understand what Sojourner and Thunderhawk were saying.

"This lock is the newest version of the C-400 magnetic type series", Sojourner said.

"I'm not too familiar with them yet but I think I can do it. Might take a while though."

"Are you alone or is anyone with you in there?" Thunderhawk asked.

"Locke and Lara are with me. They are both okay as well."

"What about Spectre."

For a second Sabre hesitated but then he decided to tell them the harsh truth immediately.

"Spectre betrayed us", he bleakly said. "He is Moritori's son."

Silence ensued - even Sojourner had stopped working on the lock for several seconds.

"No ... this can't be... I can't believe it..." Thunderhawk said tonelessly.

"Wait a moment, you and Sojourner have been the ones who didn't trust him from the beginning and as far as I remember you had always wanted to keep an eye on him. Your suspicions had been right all the time. So why of all Echidnas is it you who suddenly can't believe that we had a traitor among us? I have seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears. You can ask Locke and Lara because they have witnessed it too. Moritori called him his son and after a short talk with him Spectre came back to us and announced that he always had been a Legionnaire and always will be."

He hadn't wanted to shout at Thunderhawk but he had to give vent to his anger or else he was afraid he was going to burst.

"Have you heard what Moritori said to him?" Thunderhawk asked.

"No, Moritori just made a gesture and said he should come with him so they could talk undisturbed but after such an announcement I don't expect it was anything too good."

"You might have a point there - but probably whatever he had to say wasn't too good for Spectre as well. You said he made a gesture. What if he signalled Spectre that if he won't come with him his troops would open fire immediately or something similar? And then the deal with Moritori had been that he would let you live if Spectre joined the Dark Legion. What other choice did he have?"

Thunderhawk's words sounded logical but something inside Sabre had locked itself up against explanations and wanted to stay angry at Spectre.

"And why did Moritori call him his son then? It wasn't necessary at all to force him to that deal."

"I don't know. Maybe he is but does that matter? My parents were idiots who barely cared for her son but that doesn't mean I am the same. Sabre, you haven't looked at Spectre when we saw Moritori for the first time. I have never seen eyes that were burning with such hate like his. Someone with so much hate for a Grandmaster would

never become a Dark Legionnaire, at least not a loyal one." He paused and when Sabre knew nothing to respond he continued, "And what about the training? Spectre made sure that all of us were prepared as good as possible within a very short time. If he had planned to turn us in then he would have taught us barely anything or nothing at all."

"I really hope he's right", Locke whispered.

Sabre turned around. He hadn't noticed that Locke and Lara had come close to the door as well.

"I might not know too much about any of you but what your friend said sounds ... logical to me", Lara carefully said. "I think it might be true."

Sabre opened his mouth to respond something but then he sighed and only said, "If you want to forgive Spectre that easily..."

"I'm not sure if I really have forgiven him", Locke silently said and stared at the floor, "at least not until I have heard Spectre's version of the whole story. So far I only hope Thunderhawk is right because I don't want to live with the knowledge that a Guardian is a Dark Legionnaire at heart."

"Got it", Sojourner suddenly said and it sounded as if he had a big grin on his face.

The door swung open.

"Good, and now we only have to get out of the damn camp before they find out a bunch of Echidnas are missing from the cells", Thunderhawk said.

"Do any of you still remember which way we came in?" Sabre asked.

"Well ... at first we have to get from sector H to sector D where we had been before and then..." Thunderhawk deliberately answered but then he continued, "Ah, screw it, I have no bloody idea. Let's just start walking, try to remember our route while we're on our way and hope for the best."

Only a few corridors later they had an unpleasant surprise - the giant gate that separated the different sectors wasn't moving an inch.

Thunderhawk cursed.

"Why is that thing locked now? We could pass it without problems only a few minutes ago."

"I told you it might be a trap", Sojourner said. "That Legionnaire probably smelled a rat - even though you tried to cover it with the stench of a corpse. For someone with the smell of a zombie you behaved too lively and everything went too smooth so far." Locke's gaze wandered up and down the gate until he pointed at a small bay in the wall between gate and ceiling.

"There's an unprotected part of the opening system. If I could get up there I could try to jam it."

"Why wasting time with technical nick-nack if you can have it fast and easy?" Thunderhawk said, dragged the boomerang from his belt, shortly took aim and shot. Sparks rained down on them when the wooden weapon crashed with the electronic and got stuck in it. The door opened so fast that it slammed against the next wall. The noise echoed through the corridors.

"Well, I can't say it wasn't fast", Sabre commented, "but I doubt there's a single Echidna left in this building who hasn't heard it. Come on, we have to find one of these side corridors quickly so we have at least a bit of cover before they all are out for us again."

Thunderhawk gave the stuck boomerang a last wistful glance but since they had too less time to climb up and try to get it out he just shrugged and followed the others.

It didn't happen only once that they had to return to the last crossway and head for another corridor because every single path in the one they had taken before seemed to be a dead end with locked doors only. Neither Locke nor Sojourner knew any ways to open them - at least no fast ways and time was the least thing they had at the moment because they now could hear soldiers marching through the corridors. Actually they also could have stopped running right now and waited for their enemies to approach since with every locked door they passed it became clearer they followed a path planned by the Dark Legionnaires in advance.

Suddenly one of the doors was slammed open, a Legionnaire dashed into the corridor, grabbed Lara's arm and pushed a weapon against her head.

"Screw it, our little hunting game is over. I don't want to wait anymore. Don't move or your little girl will be dead."

Locke's movement was so fast no one saw it coming and only a second later the Legionnaire was lying on the floor coiled up in pain. But after that attack more and more Legionnaires decided their time of waiting was over and stormed the corridor.

"Out of our way!" Thunderhawk shouted and drove a blast through the Legionnaires in front of them. "If you want us then you will have to drag away our dead bodies."

Sojourner fell behind so he could be their rear-guard. Sabre was ready to use his shield in case the unarmed Lara needed it but so far it wasn't needed anymore. The Legionnaires had weapons but they didn't use them at all and only tried to stop the Guardians by getting in their way.

"What the hell are they doing?" Locke called. "Why aren't they attacking?"

"Because they are waiting for them!" Lara cried out and pointed at something over their heads.

On a bridge that led over the corridor Death Legionnaires had appeared and aimed with their guns. Sabre breathed in sharply when one of their blasts hit his arm. It barely hurt but an ice cold feeling suddenly spread through his arm and he could hardly move it anymore.

"They are trying to immobilize us", Sojourner gasped and only a few seconds later he broke down to his knees when a blaster hit him as well.

"What a pathetic attempt to escape. But at least you saved us a lot of work because we now only need to drag you half of the way", a Legionnaire said walking closer to the paralyzed Guardians with a smug grin on his face. "Get them to the arena. Some of our projects need to test their new cybernetics and I'm sure all of us are eager to see how our little Guardians will prove themselves in a battle against them."

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The arena was a large room with a very high ceiling. The network of bridges and planks along the walls or above their heads was filled with Dark and Death Legionnaires - the audience to whatever would happen now. The Guardians had been tossed into the middle of it and some seconds later the paralyzing effect slowly wore off so they could stand up again.

"Welcome to my little testing area", the well-known voice of Moritori sounded over their heads. "I might have promised one of my sons not to damage you too much before kicking your bums out of my camp but now that I already have the chance to test the latest cybernetics on real Guardians I couldn't resist. If you don't survive this

battle then you wouldn't have been worth living anyways. And now let me introduce you to our projects E-108, Hades and E-109, Lanzer."

Two doors at opposing sides of the room opened and two Legionnaires stepped out of them. It was hard to tell if they belonged to the Dark or the Death team because their amount of cybernetics even overtopped the late Xenin's and made them completely look like robots. The one who had written the number 108 on both of his shoulders had long razor sharp claws, the other one was lighter built and had no visible weapons yet but a faint glow was shining through the wires on his chest and indicated they had tried a Chaos Core once again. Thunderhawk pulled the daggers from his belt, handed one of them Sojourner and the other one Lara.

"I'm sure Sabre will try his best to shield you but I don't know how much you can depend on him once the battle gets too rough and I want you to have at least anything to defend yourself", he explained to her. "I hope you know how to handle it." "I learned to defend myself against desert predators", Lara said and gladly took the dagger. "But don't you need one too now that your boomerang is gone? And what about Locke and Sabre?"

"Let's just hope we three improved enough so we don't need weapons anymore."

Now Lanzer's body was fully surrounded by the faint glow. He ran forwards a few steps, jumped, flew up a little higher and then while gliding towards them at full speed he stretched out his arms and Chaos beams shot from his palms. The Guardians and Lara leapt out of the way and the attack only missed by centimetres.

"Hey, no fair, he's attacking with our own weapons", Sojourner shouted when Lanzer made a turn at the end of the arena to come back for another blast.

Hades was coming closer too but slower, more carefully and walked around them like a cat encircling its prey.

Thunderhawk let out a laugh.

"A hummingbird and a kitty, how cute. Let's split up for this battle. Sabre, Locke and Lara, you stay with the clawed slowpoke. Sojo and I will try to find out if the birdy can keep up with our speed."

He and Sojourner ran to the other side of the arena. Hades spun around and for a second it looked as if he wanted to run after them but then he decided otherwise and charged at the three Echidnas closer to him.

Locke parried the strike with his bare hands, claws cutting through flesh. Both combatants stumbled back, the Legionnaire in surprise, Locke holding his hand in pain but only a few drops of blood fell down to the floor, his rapid healing ability already had closed the major part of the wound.

"You're good little Guardian", Hades said. His voice sounded too clear for being a zombie or a robot so somewhere beneath all this metal and wires there still had to be a living Echidna. "The question is, how long can you keep going."

His next attack was towards Sabre. The Guardian could protect himself against the first blow but the second destroyed his quickly created and not too strong shield and only a leap backwards prevented him from a slash through the chest. A roundhouse kick by Locke hit Hades and sent him crashing against the balustrade of one of the lower bridges. With a cry of fury he dashed off the bridge, crashed against Locke and nailed him to the ground. One of Sabre's Chaos attacks hit him but it only pushed him a bit off Locke, not far enough that the youngest Guardian was out of his reach. He raised one of his claws...

Lara's dagger found a less protected part on his back, drove through the wires and

then into flesh. The Legionnaire howled with pain and spun around, tried to slash the female with both of his clawed hands. The same second he was hit by two different Chaos blasts and sent flying several meters away. For a few seconds he remained lying motionless but then he slowly rose again and showed them a wicked grin.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but you missed everything important", he said and coughed up blood.

Another time Lanzer shot by over their heads and Sojourner and Thunderhawk had to dodge a rain of Chaos energy. They shot their own attacks at him but barely grazed him.

"This thing is flying pretty fast", Thunderhawk growled. "If we remain on the ground and he stays in the air it's a very unfair fight. Sojo, you have been gliding once. Do you think you can do it again?"

"I think once I'm in the air I could stay up there for a little while but I can't start gliding from the ground."

"And if I give you a little jump-start?"

Thunderhawk bent over a little, his hands formed a stirrup. Sojourner put a foot into it and when he shortly nodded his friend jerked up and catapulted him into the air. Sojourner barely had the time to control his flight when Lanzer crashed into him. The Legionnaire tried to shake him off but the Guardian quickly wrapped his arms and feet around him. Lanzer couldn't attack him or else he would have hit himself too so he tried to aim at Thunderhawk instead but missed him by a good metre. The blast hit the wall and left a crack there. Thunderhawk drew his breath in sharply when he looked at the wall.

"Dear Aurora... that thing isn't just fast; it also has a strong shot. Sojo, be careful, do you hear me?"

In the air the younger Guardian was still wrestling with the Legionnaire. Lanzer couldn't fly straight anymore and only tried his best not to collide with any of the bridges. Finally Sojourner was able to draw his dagger and slammed it into one of Lanzer's cybernetic eyes. The Legionnaire screamed in pain, covered his eye, now really crashed into a bridge and fell. Sojourner managed to turn them both around so Lanzer was under him before they hit the ground and so the Legionnaire absorbed most of the impact. Still feeling a bit dazed Sojourner stumbled away from him before Lanzer could charge up his next attack. The Legionnaire leapt back to his feet and raised an arm to deal another strong blow but before he could do so a crescent-shaped Chaos attack slashed through his side. He quickly turned around to face Thunderhawk and the returning Chaos boomerang hit his head, leaving a deep cut there as well. With a cry of rage Lanzer shot beams in two different directions. Thunderhawk narrowly dodged the attack but it hit Sojourner's side and the younger Guardian fell. Believing Sojourner was out of his way now, the Legionnaire turned his full attention to Thunderhawk and readied another Chaos blast. But then Sojourner propped up on his heavily shaking arms, managed to sit up on his knees, lifted up his dagger glowing with energy and shot it towards Lanzer. The weapon drove through metal and flesh and right into his Chaos Core. For a second Lanzer stood still, eyes opened wide then he toppled over. Thunderhawk ran to Sojourner and was just able to catch him before he sank back to the ground.

"Are you ... are you okay?"

"It just burns so much", Sojourner mumbled. "But give me a minute and it will heal." Thunderhawk nodded and looked up at the other battle that was still going on.

Hades had become faster but there were several burn marks on his armour, he was bleeding and it was obvious he wouldn't be able to continue for too long anymore. He couldn't attack all three Echidnas the same time and wherever he turned he could be sure to either be shot by another Chaos blast or to get stabbed. Finally his legs gave in and he sank to the ground.

The four Guardians and Lara came together in the middle of the arena again. Now that the battle and most of the adrenaline rush were over they noticed the deafening noise in the room. Were the Legionnaires really cheering for Guardians or were they just screaming for more blood?

"As you have seen your newest cybernetics still have some major flaws", Thunderhawk called at Moritori and hoped he could even be heard through all the noise. "But we played along and now keep the promise you have given to your son and let us go."

"Oh yes, you have proven that you are worthy warriors but still I have a last task for you. Don't worry, it's something very easy and can be done very fast then you are finally allowed to go", Moritori said and a malicious smile spread on his face. "I only promised my son to let the Guardians go but I don't think he mentioned the slave. Like I said, she will be punished for not obeying my wishes and a slave who doesn't obey a Grandmaster's wishes is facing death penalty."

Locke's grip on Lara's hand tightened and he lightly changed position so he was protectively standing in front of her while giving Moritori a silent death glare. And then the Grandmaster revealed his last task.

"Kill the girl, then you are free to go wherever you want to."

In the resulting silence Locke's voice sounded like a thunder boom.

"Like hell we will! You can be glad I'm not able to levitate or else I would have come up there to kick your sorry ass!"

"I don't think this is your final answer", Moritori calmly said and the sound of cocking guns was echoing through the hall. The Legionnaires on the bridges closest to the Guardians had readied their weapons.

"I give you a little more time to think your decision over", the Grandmaster said. "Either you kill the girl or all of you will be killed - one by one so that the remaining ones can watch how their friends are dying."

Immediately the other Guardians encircled Lara and glared at the Legionnaires on the bridges but they knew they had come to a dead end. They either had to become murderers of someone they had sworn to protect and one of their own team - because before they could kill Lara they would have to eliminate Locke first - or they would die. They only could decide between two wrongs.

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Author's note:

The name similarity between the Lara in this story and Lara-Le is not because I was too lazy to find a new name - it has a reason. I will probably mention it in the next chapter - and if not in the next then in one of the following.

The Chaos Core already made its appearance in one of my older fanfics where Dark Legion scientists built it into Xenin's chest and I wanted to mention it yet again.

## Kapitel 8: Son of Moritori

### Rise of the Guardians

#### Chapter 08 - Son of Moritori

*Unwillingly he followed Moritori through the crowd of Legionnaires and away from his friends. What other choice did he have? The Grandmaster's gesture told him in no uncertain words that the other Guardians were doomed if Spectre didn't do whatever he wanted.*

*"What was this pathetic show supposed to mean?" Moritori asked as soon as they had come to a stop a few metres away from the pit. "Have you really wanted to betray us and attack us with the help of four ... untrained Guardians? Don't you know that a man who grew up in the house of his master but doesn't show loyalty isn't worthy being called a man – or even worth to live?"*

*The whole time Spectre had silently stared at the ground but now he bared his teeth.*

*"I grew up in the houses of slavery and my childhood ended with my mother's death. My loyalty rather belongs to the slaves than the Legion."*

*Moritori's eyes narrowed. "You will think otherwise when we are finished with you. We know how to handle Legionnaires who don't toe the line and soon you will function as one of our weapons again - a precious weapon since you know how to handle the Chaos Force now."*

*Spectre lowered his voice until it was merely a whisper but it didn't sound less menacing.*

*"You will have to use my dead body as weapon because you will never be able to break me."*

*He knew that Moritori's threats weren't idle though. Every Legionnaire had a chip implanted that could control his mind and memory and Spectre was sure that one of his surgeries included such a chip.*

*"I expected something like that", the Grandmaster said with a sudden smile, "and so I have an offer for you. These two Guardians are still young, mere boys. They are no threat to an army like ours. I will let them go - provided that you work for us again. Refuse and they will end up with a few dozen bullets through their precious little heads."*

*Spectre was shivering with anger.*

*"You ... if you do that you have forfeited your life as well."*

*"My boy, I am several hundred years old and have experienced countless battles. Do you really think I am afraid to die? And my death will change nothing. Enerjak will continue his rage over the island and your two Guardian boys will remain dead - in the worst case they will return to join Enerjak's zombie army."*

*Spectre glared at him but then he lowered his gaze and without a word returned to the pit. He couldn't look his friends in the eyes when he made his announcement - these painful words he never would have wanted to say - and only shot them a quick glance before he left. He had bought them freedom - but to what price?*

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Sitting on the mattress that had been his sleeping place for over two decades, his arms wrapped around his knees, Spectre stared at the opposing wall with the damaged mirror. The things that had happened earlier this night were still spinning

through his head. He had betrayed them. It didn't matter if he had saved their lives - they didn't know about it and so he would always remain a traitor in their eyes. Slowly Spectre stood up and walked to the other side of his room. Sabre had just cursed him and Spectre wouldn't have minded that for too long but he couldn't forget the pain in Locke's eyes - this silent "But we trusted you..." Yes, Locke who also had to bear a lot of strikes against his soul from young age on had trusted him despite his strange attire, despite his short temper and although he barely knew him just because he was Guardian. And now Spectre had smashed that fragile soul into pieces just like he did with that mirror years ago. The dark Echidna stared at his broken reflection. No one ever had cared to remove it - not even the splinters from the floor - and he had kept it because it reminded him about the pain of his past.

When he had been locked into this room for the very first time over two decades ago he had slammed his fists against it until his hands had been bleeding heavily and the mirror was smashed into pieces. It had been only hours after his mother's death and his "surgery" and he didn't know any other way to deal with the pain in his wounded soul. Moreover he didn't want to have to look at the creature he had become. Spectre picked up one of the splinters. Shattered - like his childhood, probably like his whole life.

Back then the children were allowed to stay with their mothers for way longer than nowadays but probably the way it was now was better for them - they were still too young to fully realize what was going on when they were suddenly taken away from their home and family and they got used to the new situation way faster. But back then Spectre had been old enough to know what had happened.

He had tried to struggle free from the Legionnaire who wanted to drag him to the camp, had heard his mother's screams and begging for mercy. They hadn't killed her before his eyes but hearing that they did, had been as horrible. And she only had to die because she had reached an age Moritori didn't tolerate anymore.

The pain grew even stronger when they ran the blood tests on him to find out his father, or better his master for the years of training, and he heard it was Moritori, the man who had ordered to kill his mother.

He had hoped he could have escaped the Dark Legion by following what the gods told him in his dreams and joining the Brotherhood. But there was never any escape from the past. Things like this lived with you always.

Spectre squeezed his eyes shut, rammed his fist into the mirror another time and then left it there until he could feel blood dripping down his fingers. No, he wasn't a mindless Legionnaire yet. He could still feel even though it was just pain at the moment, still had the chance to do something so he wouldn't end up in the Legion another time. He drew his hand back and allowed the previously suppressed Chaos Force to heal his cuts within seconds. They would never break him.

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Spectre walked through the dark short tunnel that led to the houses of slavery. He couldn't even think about escaping - at least not at the moment as long as Locke and Sabre weren't out of Moritori's reach - but he wanted to provide the escape of others. He had found plans where nomad tribes had been spotted lately and copies of them



might have been very valuable - no, they would be beyond price to the people he went to see now.

During his escape a few days ago he barely had taken notice of the barracks the slaves inhabited but now he took a closer look at them. The last time he had walked through the narrow paths between the huts he had been merely eight years old and though it felt very strange to be back again he found that nothing had changed during that time - a few very small huts that were mainly used when they needed some sleep and a very large hut that was their common room where they had to be most of the time so an incoming Legionnaire would have it easier to choose if he saw all of them at once and could compare them immediately. It was in the middle of the night but Spectre was sure he would find most of them in the large hut.

The silence he was greeted by inside the large room was only interrupted by the dry sobs of the new girls who had found comfort between a few of the females who had already been here for longer. Some of the others shot him icy glares at first but then they came closer nevertheless, trying to look as willing as possible though the flaming hate in their eyes hadn't disappeared. Spectre wondered how other Legionnaires could even stand this freezing atmosphere.

"You seem to be new. I can't recall ever seeing you here", one of the females closest to him purred. "Don't be afraid, darling; we will take good care of you."

"I'm not here for ... for that ... Actually I wanted to ... give you the chance to escape", Spectre stuttered silently. This atmosphere was cutting his breath off.

"Of course, dear. You will make us feel free and like flying and what not else for one night. We know the game", another one said.

"No, I mean it for real", Spectre said, this time loud enough that everyone took notice of him. "I have grown up in these houses and although they have taken me away and tried to break me my heart always belonged to you. I never have been a true Legionnaire and never will be."

"Spectre ... is this you?" he heard a silent astonished voice.

A female who had been sitting between the new girls before stood up and made a few careful steps closer. "It's me, Kali. We have played together when we were children."

"K-Kali?" Spectre stuttered and flashes of memories shot through his mind - pictures of the little girl he once had known. She might have been five years of age when he left the houses of slavery and now she had grown into a beautiful woman.

With a few quick steps she closed the gap between them and threw her arms around Spectre's neck.

"I'm so glad you're still alive. After what had happened all these years ago I thought I would never see you again."

After all this coldness her near was soothing and he regretted that he had stayed away from her for such a long time. He might not have been able to protect her from everything but he just could have been there for her like he always had been in his childhood. But he had been ashamed, so ashamed of the creature he had become.

At first he wanted to say something but then just closed his eye, silently buried his muzzle in her spines and tightened his embrace. For a few second he was neither Legionnaire nor Guardian, neither weapon nor defender, neither traitor nor saviour - he was just Spectre.

"Do you really think he's still one of us?" one of the other females destroyed the wonderful moment. "You only know the child but can we also trust the man?"

"I still trust him and would follow him wherever he would lead us", Kali said firmly. She let go of Spectre but the warm feeling in his heart stayed.

"Today you would be able to get out of the camp completely unnoticed", Spectre said.

"I haven't seen a single guard anywhere."

"They are probably all at the arena", one of the new girls said.

"The arena? What are they doing there? I didn't know they wanted to test something again."

"The other males who had been with you ... I heard the Legionnaires brought them there. And Lara too. They wanted to test new cybernetics."

Spectre felt his guts twisting. Moritori had lied to him and, even worse, he had fallen for his empty promises.

"Even if there are no guards around I doubt we will be able to survive a march through the desert", another female said.

"There's a nomad tribe not even two miles away. Some Legionnaires have scouted the territory a few hours ago and the tribe was their next target", Spectre quickly said and handed Kali the map and a small technical device that - amongst other things - could be used as a compass. "Once you get there tell them they should try to reach Echidnaopolis as fast as possible. The bastion is probably the last place you can be safe now."

"But what about you?" Kali asked. "I don't want to be separated from you again."

"Me neither but I still have to help my Guardian friends. We will follow you later though so look for me in Echidnaopolis because I will be there."

'Hopefully', he thought but loudly he added, "I promise."

Kali hugged him a last time. "Then please take care", she whispered.

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Spectre ran through the deserted corridors. On his way to the arena he came by a door that once had blocked the way to some prison cells but now had been slammed open so hard that the wall behind it showed cracks. Chaos attacks would simply bounce off this kind of door so the only way to blast it open like this would be to jam its system. This was definitely Locke's signature, Spectre thought at first but then he noticed the boomerang stuck in a small gap between ceiling and door. For a few seconds he simply stared at it. He was astounded by such accuracy but more important was that this weapon meant Thunderhawk was still alive - and probably Sojourner as well. He closed his eyes, concentrated for a short moment and levitated up to the boomerang so he could pull it out of the gap. It would have been a shame if a good shooter had to be without his best weapon.

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The Guardians were standing back to back glowering at the weapons levelled at them. "I'm slowly losing my patience", Moritori snarled. "Voice your decision now or get shot."

"You shouldn't have waited because our opinion stays exactly the same as before", Sabre said as calmly as possible.

"What nice words. I will try to remember them so they can be carved into your gravestone", Moritori laughed. "Legionnaires, shoot them."

Something was shot but it wasn't one of the expected blasters. It was glowing green with a wooden core. The boomerang drove through the line of armed Legionnaires, knocked the weapons out of their hands, flew a loop through the arena and then returned to its shooter. Unbelievably the Guardians stared at the figure that had just stepped through the entrance and now slowly approached them. His sudden appearance couldn't have been more spectacular if he had blown up the whole building.

"The only one who is likely to die are you even if I have to kill you with my bare hands", Spectre growled and glared at Moritori but the Grandmaster only silently laughed.

"You still haven't given up fighting against your destiny, my boy? Don't be silly. Either you die in this arena or you survive, will have your memory chip activated and resign yourself to your fate as one of our weapons. There's no escape for you - and neither is for the other Guardians."

"I make my own destiny", Spectre said firmly.

"So be it", Moritori snarled and drew his weapon.

"Sabre!"

It wouldn't even have needed a call because Sabre activated his shield the second Moritori and all other Legionnaires who still had a ranged weapon aimed at them. He wasn't sure how long he could hold it being fired at from all directions but at least he was buying them precious seconds.

"I noticed the crack in the wall", Spectre quickly said. "If this had been caused by one Chaos attack we might be able to blow it with our combined attacks. The arena is in the far east of the camp and if I remember correctly behind this wall there's only the desert. Sabre, keep your shield up until the very last second. Get ready ... now!"

The wall crumbled under their combined forces, tore several bridges and staircases along it into the depth. Before the dust had settled or the Legionnaires recovered the five Guardians and Lara were out in the desert.

"We can't run forever", Thunderhawk shouted. "Even if we manage to get out of their reach without getting shot in the back we still have the desert in front of us and without supplies we won't survive for too long."

Spectre suddenly stopped and the Guardians behind him crashed into him.

"And what if we teleport out of their reach?"

The others stared at him.

"Teleporting is one of the highest levelled Chaos abilities", Sabre said. "Even if we combine our powers again we can't be sure how far we make it and it will use up all our energy. Besides we don't even know where to go."

"But I know", Spectre said. "I have seen the maps not too long ago and it would be a major help if we can get as close as possible to the next village. Just hold on to each other and I will take the lead."

A few startled Echidnas fled when six strangers suddenly appeared in the village square but came back when they noticed that the majority of them didn't look like Legionnaires. The Guardians stood upright for just a few more seconds then they all broke down to the ground.

"What has happened?" one of the village people asked Lara who knelt beside Locke and was the only one conscious. "How did you get here that sudden? I don't see any

Fire Ants with you."

"We just escaped from a Legion camp", Lara explained. "These five are Guardians and used all of their energy to get us here."

"Guardians? But the last of their kind died centuries ago. How can there be five of them again?"

"We are reborn", Sabre who had regained consciousness fastest mumbled. "Enerjak is rising and so the Guardians have to do the same." His head was spinning but still he managed to slowly stand up. "The Legionnaires will be out for us and it's only a matter of time until they reach this village. You have to get away. We all have to get away from here. Echidnaopolis might be the last safe place now."

"We are not afraid of the Legion. They are just a bunch of bandits and we often had to drum them out of our village."

"They haven't been a few bandits anymore for decades", now Spectre who had gotten up as well joined the conversation. "With Enerjak's help they might have grown to a few hundred thousand by now. But they kept up their image as long as possible to cosy you along so they had more time to form a large army and Enerjak could regain his former strength. Now that he's back they don't need to hide any longer."

"Give us a few hours to prepare ourselves and we will come with you to Echidnaopolis. We will also send out messengers to warn other nearby villages."

After the other Echidnas had disappeared and the Guardians and Lara were alone at the square Sabre glowered at Spectre.

"You still have a lot of explaining to do, son of Moritori."

"Please, don't call him like that", Lara said. "It's not his fault that he has such a father and moreover he saved us all. How can you still be mad on him?"

"You wouldn't understand. This is Guardian business."

Lara crossed her arms in front of her chest. "As if someone who found out he's a Guardian just a few days ago would understand it better."

Sojourner silently chuckled. Sabre rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Touché. But after Spectre betrayed us once how can we be sure that he won't do it again?"

'No one can be sure - not even I', Spectre thought.

"Sabre is right - I have to explain", he silently said. "But I also have to say that I never really betrayed you. What I did was to save your lives and I never wanted to hurt anyone of you."

He looked at them alternately and most of all he tried to catch Locke's gaze but the youngest Guardian had turned his head finding the ground something more enjoyable to look at.

"Where shall I start? Best would be with the houses of slavery. My mother was one of the 'desert roses' like Moritori calls them - kidnapped from a nomad tribe. I grew up among the other slaves, not in the Legion camp. It is very likely that I am not Moritori's only child but even if there were others who lived long enough to become Legionnaires later on I never heard of them. However, I knew my maternal half-brothers and -sisters... but I was the only one of them allowed to live. I wanted to protect them, I wanted to protect all of the children in our camp, but how much can a little boy do against a bunch of soldiers, moreover since I didn't have even the slightest bit of the Chaos abilities I have now.

And then the day my mother was sentenced to death came. Her crime? She had reached an age Moritori couldn't tolerate anymore. I didn't have to see it but hearing

her screams and knowing what was going on was horrible enough. Though I rather would have wanted to join her in death my fate was to become a Legionnaire. Just a few hours later I had these enhancements of shame that replaced previously intact body parts and they ran paternity tests on me to find out who should become my training master for the first few years. Can you even imagine my feelings when I heard that the one who ordered my mother's death - and also was responsible for the deaths of so many others - was my father? From the first day on my hate on Moritori was only nearly exceeded by Moritori's hate on me but he since he always wanted to have an eye on me he couldn't allow anyone else to train me. At least I had the satisfaction that the older I grew the more I started to look like one of Moritori's most hated Guardians. It's a mystery to me why I even was allowed to live for such a long time if he mistrusted me that much but I guess it could have been the strength he saw in me. Power-hungry as he always had been he didn't want to destroy such a strong yet dangerous weapon and he relied too much on the memory chips in my head to control me if the worst came to the worst. But in all these years he was never able to break me. I have to admit that I was sent on several missions to attack tribes or even the villages but I have never killed anyone. Their 'perfect' weapon only showed perfection during training but was a dead loss in real life battle.

Then one day the dreams about the Guardians started and I - in the hope it meant I was destined to be something else but a Legionnaire - taught myself how to control the Chaos force by remembering the feeling in my dreams. When the gods spoke to me I saw my chance to finally get out of this hell."

"But if you were so glad to get out of this why did you lead us there?" Sabre asked.

"Because I was sure to still find Enerjak there. As eager as I was to escape as much I wanted to destroy the damn demi-god. This Legion camp was the place where he was called back to life thirty years ago. Probably this was also the reason why the first Guardian was born there - at least one of us was needed on the spot. Enerjak also remained here why he regained strength. I knew I couldn't take it up with him all alone but maybe the whole Brotherhood could and so I led you there. But either Enerjak smelled a rat or simply made up other attack plans while we were on our way - whatever it was, he had left the camp during my time of absence.

When the Legionnaires had cornered us, Moritori led me away to make me an offer - your freedom for my slavery. After all these years I should have known better but still I was stupid enough to accept and to hope Moritori would keep his word.

Believing you were already out of the camp I wanted to do at least one good deed and went into the houses of slavery with maps where the Legion scouts marked the locations of recently detected nomad tribes. I haven't been in the slave camp anymore since my mother's death. Can you imagine how delighted - and sad the same time - I was when I saw Kali, one of my earliest childhood friends? I hadn't even dared to hope I would ever see her again alive but was such a fate really worth living? Moreover I had let her down all these years because I was too ashamed of myself to ever enter the houses of slavery again. I really hope she, the other females and their kids are, together with one of the tribes, on their way to Echidnaopolis. It was also one of the females who told me that you have been brought to the arena.

By the way, when I was on my way to the arena I saw a strangely damaged prison door and found this thing between its controls."

He handed Thunderhawk the boomerang.

"Thanks, but I wouldn't have minded if you had kept it now that I'm able to create them with pure Chaos energy. I have Sabre's little bag; you have my boomerang -

heck, soon we all will have something that originally belonged to one of the others. Maybe Sojo should take Locke's pocket knife next", Thunderhawk said and grinned. Spectre shook his head. "No, I don't think I can handle a boomerang and wanted to know it in more skilled hands than mine. Should I ever need another weapon than my own Chaos abilities, I still have the gun they gave me right after my 'comeback' to the Legion. I only haven't tossed it away so far because it's a good reminder on my own naiveté - for trusting a Grandmaster."

The lavender Guardian looked at him for a while in pondering silence then he stretched out a hand.

"I know Sojo and I had our differences with you in the past few days but to me it sounded like you were speaking with your heart. Whatever you have done, I don't think you betrayed us on purpose."

Gladly Spectre accepted his and - a second later - also Sojourner's hand.

"I believe you too but there's one thing I don't understand at all", Sabre said. "Are you sure you have this chip implanted like any other Legionnaire? If so then why did they never use it? How could they hope to use you as their weapon if you kept your free will?"

"I seriously have no idea. Sometimes I have a strange feeling as if something inside of me tried to drag me back to the Legion or push me to obey their orders but I can suppress it."

"Maybe your Chaos Force damaged it. Or the Guardian inside of you protects you", Locke said. It had been the first time since Spectre's return that he spoke and now he also could look into the dark Echidna's eyes again. "I'm glad to have you back", he continued. "We should have known that no Guardian would ever betray us."

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A statue of Steppenwolf decorated the village square and to its feet the Guardians sat while they waited for the people to finish their preparations. Thunderhawk with his love for heights sat on top of the statue like he had done on the Master Emerald but this time Spectre didn't care to shoo him off. Locke and Lara had wandered off a bit - to see a little more of the village like they said.

"I have a bad feeling about these two somehow", Sabre said. "I'm sure if dashes in females' names were still common she would be called Lara-Le and I think after a few of Locke's history lessons you all know what happened about Locke and Lara-Le a few centuries ago. Seeing these two gives me a feeling of repeating history."

"Aw, you're sounding like a helicopter parent, Sabre", Sojourner said. "Loosen up a bit. They are just two teenagers with a little crush on each other. What could go wrong?"

"This isn't just a little crush - it rather looks like the beginning of the Soultouch", Spectre said. "But like Sojourner said, there's no need to worry. If one Guardian has learned his history lessons then it's Locke and I'm sure he will try his best to prevent the mistakes from the past. I think the 'worst' we can await from him one day is that he names his son Knuckles."

"And remember what really brought Locke and Lara-Le apart back then", Sojourner said. "It was Knuckles' early training and that he concentrated on his duties more than on his family life. We might be Guardians too but we are still allowed to live free and don't have any strict duties."

"And what about the duty to go out and defeat Enerjak at the risk of our own life?"

"Hm, well, yes, that's something we have to do. But that's something different."

Defeating Enerjak is necessary for all Echidnas' survival. Abandoning a child just because it's a Guardian child is not. I don't have any problems with the idea to train our own kids to become Guardians one day but I hope we know something better to do than to traumatize our own children. Knowing that we all didn't have the best starts in our own lives at least they should have it better."

Meanwhile Locke and Lara had returned to the place though they still kept their distance.

"Take a look at them", Spectre said. "Have you noticed the change in Locke when he's with her? Do you still rather want to see them separated if you knew she's doing him a world of good?"

Sabre turned his attention to the two as well. He couldn't remember ever having seen Locke smiling. There had been these moments when the corners of his mouth twitched as if he tried to smile and the sparkles of excitement in his eyes when he could talk about his favourite subjects but never the sparks combined with a true hearty smile.

"For the first time since we knew him - maybe even for the first time in his life - he's truly happy", Spectre silently said. Something in his voice caused Sabre to turn around again.

"The two are reminding you of someone, aren't they?" he said with a little smile. It sounded like a question but it rather was thought to be a statement.

"Maybe", Spectre answered evasively.

"I'm sure Kali is safe and they will soon have reached Echidnaopolis. If that's also the beginning of the Soultouch that I can see in your eyes then you should have felt it if something bad has happened."

"Can you really be sure she isn't related to you if Moritori screws anything with a heartbeat?" Sojourner blurted out and was hit on the head with a boomerang.

"Yes, I'm sure", Spectre answered and sounded a bit annoyed. "I also knew her mother and if she could tell us the name of the soldier who was Kali's father I think I could believe her."

Sabre was glad when one of the village people interrupted them to tell they were ready for departure before the conversation could get even more awkward.

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They got ahead fast and in the late afternoon they already had reached the eastern spur of the rocky hills. Now Echidnaopolis wasn't too far away anymore.

"I would never have expected to see our home that soon again", Sabre said.

"Me neither", Locke replied. "But I don't think we can stay there for too long. Maybe just a little while to rest and find out where Enerjak has moved to now."

"I'm sure we can already see the city from up there", Sojourner called and ran up the rocky path, Thunderhawk right behind him. But when they had reached the top they stopped as sudden as if they had hit an invisible wall.

"What's the matter?" Sabre asked as soon as the other Guardians caught up as well. He climbed up the last few rocks and when he looked down at the valley his eyes widened in shock.

A sea of black and silver - an army of Death Legionnaires - streamed from the northwest. A small troop was in front of the gates at the southern part of the city. Parts of the outer wall were lying in ruins already. The bastion of Echidnaopolis was

under attack.

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Author's comment:

I already had this chapter in my mind and had been looking forward to writing it since I had begun the whole story. It might be the only chapter in the whole story without any bigger fights, has a lot of heart in it but it's also mixed with a bit of humour - I had the feeling that even these Guardians need a little smile once in a while or else they might break under the pressure - and I really hope I got the right mix so it wouldn't turn out too comedic in the end.

This chapter was lacking battles; therefore I have planned to do way more of them in the next one. A war is up ahead.

One more thing: I'm not too familiar with writing about wars so the next chapter is a little challenge for me and the plans I have for it make it look like it could get a longer chapter, probably the longest in this story. It could be possible that I upload it with a bit of delay, depending on how much time I have to write, how good I can handle the challenge and how long it turns out to be in the end. It might also go better than expected however, so I'm simply saying, you can await the next chapter in the next two or three weeks.

Kapitel 9: Battle for Echidnaopolis

Rise of the Guardians

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...

Moritiori 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 stared 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.

Kapitel 10: Unexpected home

Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 10 - Unexpected home

Despite their exhaustion the Guardians only sank to the ground as soon as they appeared in the Forbidden Zone but didn't black out this time.

This part of the island never had too abundant vegetation before but now it was just a barren wasteland. The ground was churned up, the few dead trees uprooted. Smoking ruins in the distance indicated where once a village or town could have been.

"Seeing something like that in the area that once had been the Guardians' territory ... it's terrible..." Locke mumbled tonelessly.

Sabre wandered off a bit, his eyes on the hills in the north. Somewhere there they would have to face Enerjak soon. He didn't know what the demi-god was even doing that far north but now an awful thought was slowly forming in his mind. This wasn't just the place where the Guardians had lived but also where most of them had found their final resting place. Many centuries had passed but what if for some odd reason Guardian bodies didn't rot as fast as other bodies, just like they didn't age that fast? What if Enerjak was looking for them? A troop of zombified Guardians was about as terrible as if the demi-god himself took part in the battles.

"Sabre, watch out!"

The sudden call ripped him out of his thoughts but he couldn't react as fast as Spectre crashed into him and protectively wrapped his arms around him. Not even a split-second later the ammunition of a Death Legionnaire's gun was emptied into the dark Echidna's back. Silently Spectre broke down to the ground and nearly dragged Sabre with him who tried to catch him but lost balance.

With a loud curse Thunderhawk shot his boomerang at the Legionnaire and knocked him off the rock he was standing on but now several more of them appeared on top of the hills - not an army like the one that had attacked Echidnaopolis but still a few dozen. The way they looked they had died recently - probably in the battle for the ruined village - but there was no doubt they all were dead, telling from wounds no Echidna would have survived or sometimes just from life missing in their eyes.

Moving like reflections Thunderhawk and Sojourner were the first to attack and sent twin blasts against the nearest Legionnaires. Locke was next to rush into battle while Sabre stayed back to protect the last bit of life that could still be left in Spectre's motionless body and attacked from afar.

The experience they had gained in their battle for Echidnaopolis was immense and even without the driving force of Spectre the Legionnaires were knocked out fast.

Now after the last enemy was gone Sabre knelt down at Spectre's side shivering. The blood on the ground had dried and the wounds under the dark fur nearly healed but still Spectre showed no sign of regaining consciousness and his breath came in shallow gasps.

"This seems to be some special kind of weapon", Locke said examining one of them. "Whatever kind of dark energy they contained, it looks like Spectre is fighting it at the moment."

"So what are we going to do?" Sojourner asked, despair in his voice. "We can't leave a wounded Guardian behind in the middle of nowhere but we also can't take him into battle with us. Teleporting somewhere safe to leave him there is also out of question since I doubt we four have the energy left for teleporting."

Sabre only silently stared at Spectre. No one had put the blame on him but still he made serious reproaches against himself. If only he had watched out for enemies instead of walking around lost in his thoughts in a hostile area. If only he had activated his shield a second earlier instead of letting someone who couldn't create a Chaos shield of any kind protect him.

"I will carry him", he eventually said and somehow had to think of his dreams. The Sabre back then didn't have the possibility to carry the half dead Spectre because of his own wounds but the Sabre from now had mostly healed up and only felt exhausted.

When he picked Spectre up he was surprised how much of a lightweight the dark Echidna actually was. He might barely have touched their supplies but just a few days of fasting wouldn't cause someone to lose that much weight. It rather seemed like he had been through several periods of starving.

'How much else that you didn't want to tell have they done to you in that damn Legion camp?' Sabre grimly thought.

"Can you feel that too?" Locke asked after they had been walking for a while. "At first I thought it was only my imagination but now it's getting stronger the further we go." The others had noticed it as well some time ago. At the beginning they believed it to be the waves of Chaos energy Enerjak was sending out but meanwhile it felt different - like sensing the first signs of spring after a long, hard winter.

"I'm also sure I never had been here before but still the whole area looks more and more familiar to me", Locke thoughtfully continued. "I wonder if..."

He stopped talking, indicated to the others that they should stay back and slowly continued his way.

"Be careful", Thunderhawk said. "We don't need another wounded Guardian."

"I doubt any enemy will ever be able to enter this part of the area", Locke replied and stopped when he had reached a certain point. "I think it's here. Whatever might happen now, follow me."

A second later he was surrounded by blue flames suddenly shooting out of the floor and when they were gone Locke had disappeared as well. The others exchanged bewildered glances but then they decided to do what Locke had told them and continued walking until they were engulfed by the cold blue flames.

At first darkness awaited them but only seconds later the lights went on. Bright neon lights, some of them flickering, others hanging off the ceiling shone on a half destroyed and long abandoned corridor with several rooms leading away from it. Before them Locke buzzed around, enthusiastically examining the metal covered walls, the doors, absolutely everything he could reach without running away too far. The same way a treasure hunter must have looked when he found the lost treasure in the long forgotten temple.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked and turned around. His eyes were sparkling with excitement. "This is Haven. We are where the Guardians used to live."

"Haven..." Sabre silently said as if he just had realised what this word meant. "But ... hasn't it been completely destroyed centuries ago?"

"If it's destroyed then why did the protection still work?" Sojourner asked. "And how could it know we are Guardians too and let us through. Or why is there still electricity?"

"Yes, it was destroyed by the Quantum Beam", Locke said. "But that doesn't mean it was destroyed beyond repair. Think about what the Guardians used as Haven II. This complex we're in in was their home; Haven II was just a storing place with a bit technology in it. I doubt it was more than a transitory workplace for the time Haven was reconstructed but they never had the time to even start with it. This lair was built to withstand millennia and while the Quantum Beam might have damaged some of the walls or the electronic devices it never could touch the inner core. Haven was never shut off; it just ... slept for all these centuries waiting for the Guardians to return."

Marvelling the others followed Locke through a few of the accessible rooms and corridors. The youngest Brotherhood member moved around as if he was born in here.

It was a strange kind of feeling - they were walking through a long abandoned, half destroyed and completely unknown complex but still they felt as if they had returned home after a long time of absence.

"Let's get Spectre to the medical bay", Locke suggested. "I doubt we can use any of the devices there but at least it's a place to rest."

Tentatively Thunderhawk tried a few of the medical equipment but gave it up fast.

"Even in a place built for eternity nothing works", he commented. "Should we ever want to move into Haven we might have to exchange about everything except for a few walls, the ceiling, the floor and the neon lights."

"And the beds in here still look usable too", Sojourner said.

Carefully Sabre laid Spectre down on one of them. The dark furred Guardian was shivering, cold sweat dripped off his forehead, his breath was still fast and shallow.

"This isn't looking too good", Sabre said. "Whatever he's trying to fight, it seems he's losing."

"There might still be a way to help him without needing any of the equipment", Locke said. "Therefor I need to connect with his mind. But I'm not sure how good it will work if none of us has ever used this kind of connection before."

"If it's our only hope then just do it", Sabre said.

"Alright ... can you help me with the helmet?"

Carefully they took Spectre's helmet off - that he also had some cybernetic spines barely surprised them anymore - then Locke placed his hands at Spectre's temples and closed his eyes.

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Running through a deserted wasteland, similar to the one Enerjak had chosen as his newest residence, Spectre was only accompanied by whispering voices. He couldn't understand what they were saying and he also knew that it was better not to try to.

A moment later he stopped dead in his tracks. Just a few meters ahead of him a faint green glow had appeared that now slowly took the shape of Enerjak.

"Poor Echidna, carrying the call of my Legion inside of him and still trying to run from his fate."

The demi-god's voice was silent but therefor it seemed like it was coming from everywhere and not just from the glowing figure.

"I'm not running", Spectre shouted. "I only have decided to be in control of my own destiny."

"Then look around and see what your destiny is holding for you. Go on, I allow you to snap out of the unconsciousness my Legionnaire's weapon has sent you into - provided you make it out of this wasteland."

The dark furred Guardian turned around and his eyes widened in shock. Thousands of wraithlike Legionnaires - spirits of these that had fallen and put to eternal rest on the battlefields around Echidnaopolis - surrounded him and Enerjak. The first few were flying towards him. Spectre wanted to defend himself and to his horror found all of his abilities disabled. He was completely and utterly at their mercy and of course the spectral Legionnaires didn't care how defenceless their victim was when they drove through his body, taking part of his energy with them each time.

Though he knew how low his chance to get out of the wasteland before the last bit of life had been drained from his body was Spectre struggled along, dragging a trail of attacking beings with him. And when his legs were about to give in a familiar voice called his name - a voice he hadn't heard any more for over two decades. The Legionnaires were shying away from the black orb that had appeared in their middle and unbelievably Spectre stared at the female who was standing in this dark gate.

"M-mother?"

She smiled and stretched out a hand.

"Come, you must hurry. The dark orb won't keep them away for too long. Follow us into the darkness. It's the only safe place for you."

"Spectre, no! Don't give in to the darkness!"

The call behind him sounded as if it was coming from far away and he barely listened to it. Like hypnotized he walked towards the black gate, stretched out his hand to take his mother's. Now other Echidnas had appeared inside the orb as well, people he had known in his past but lost such a long time ago. Other people from the camp, his brothers and sisters... Kali...

At her sight Spectre recoiled and snapped out of his trance. No, it couldn't be true. It couldn't be possible that there had been a second attack on Echidnaopolis during their absence. Kali was still alive - she had to be.

Within the blink of an eye the shadows of the past were gone and all that was left were the orb and the spreading darkness, swirling around him like thick black fog.

"Spectre!"

This time the call was closer and he also recognized the voice of Locke. The fog hindered most of his movements already but still he managed to turn far enough to see the youngest Brotherhood member. The wraithlike Legionnaires held him back but he struggled to get closer to his friend.

"Take my ... hand!"

The darkness now was all around him. He barely saw anything but he felt Locke's fingers when he bent forward and stretched out his arm as far as he could. But before he was able to grab his hand Spectre was suddenly jerked back into the core of darkness.

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Locke stumbled back so sudden as if something had crashed into him but Sabre caught him before he collided with the wall.

"The darkness ... It's consuming him ... I couldn't help anymore", the youngest Guardian mumbled before his head sunk against Sabre's chest.

"He just lost consciousness", Sabre explained when he saw Sojourner's and Thunderhawk's worried gazes. "It all was probably a bit too much for him."

"Then let him rest for a while", Thunderhawk said. "I think we all might need a bit of it by now unless we want to face Enerjak feeling completely drained. We don't even need to search for rooms since the sick bay has two more beds we can share."

Yes, rest...

Sabre now too noticed how tired he actually was. For days they hadn't slept anymore and barely eaten or drunken. Actually they all were at the edge of their powers and the only thing that had kept them going was a permanent adrenaline rush. But in the safety of Haven they suddenly were aware of their exhaustion again. Their actual plan might have been not to rest until Enerjak was defeated but now in their sanctuary they realized that it would have been pure suicide to even get near the demi-god with such a lack of strength.

When they dozed off they knew exactly that they were still in hostile territory, their enemies never too far away, but it all didn't matter as long as they were protected by Haven.

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When Sabre slowly opened his eyes he at first wasn't sure what had even woken him up. Probably it was the lack of Locke at his side.

The youngest Guardian aimlessly wandered through the room, sometimes he checked on Spectre, sometimes he started trying to repair one of the medical devices but he never could concentrate on something for more than a few seconds. He created the impression of someone who was in desperate need of sleep but still tried to keep himself awake.

Sabre stopped him when he passed by his bed again.

"Locke, you really need some rest. Have you even slept at all?"

"No, I have gotten up as soon as I snapped out of unconsciousness. I just ... couldn't sleep anymore", the younger Echidna said evasively but the way he looked told the opposition, namely that he really had to force himself to stay awake.

"No, it rather seems as if you try to damage your health even more than Enerjak already did", Sabre said sounding really worried. He grabbed Locke's arm and dragged him down to sit beside him on the bed. "What is wrong?"

Locke wrapped his arms around his body and stared at the ground.

"Not having to sleep was a salvation. But now I'm afraid that ... everything will come back to my mind as soon as I close my eyes."

He didn't want to continue but Sabre also understood without further words. Masses of Legionnaires, people dying right in front of their eyes and now Enerjak at the very end of it. They all went through the same but the others seemed to have found their own ways to deal with it. Locke on the other hand suffered silently and his occasional enthusiasm for everything concerning the historic Guardians wasn't enough to help him through the pain. Just a boy of fifteen but if someone looked into his eyes he could see the sorrow of a war veteran.

With a sudden touch of affection Sabre wrapped his arms around Locke and while the

younger male didn't return the embrace he also didn't draw away and leaned his head against Sabre's shoulder.

Probably Sabre wasn't able to put Locke's mind at ease but maybe Haven itself was. It might have sounded strange but Sabre was sure that something hidden inside this complex had been whispering in his dreams - words of courage and confidence, words that Locke didn't hear because he hadn't been asleep.

'Why not?' he thought. Haven had been the home of several generations of Guardians and it was very unlikely that not a single bit of them had remained in here - if nothing else then at least part of their work that had been stored to the main computer, the core that was still keeping Haven alive.

"Do me a favour and close your eyes", he silently said. "No, I don't want your mind to wander around aimlessly and come back to the things you desperately try to forget. I want you to concentrate ... on Haven. Let your mind wander through that instead - not the Haven you have seen but the one your Guardian namesake knew from head to toe."

Sabre didn't know too much about Haven but he scratched together even the last little bit of the things Locke once had told him and kept on talking until the arms Locke had still wrapped around his own body loosened up a bit and the relaxed expression on his face indicated that he had finally slept in.

With a little smile Sabre tried to lean back a little without waking up Locke again so he could also get a bit more sleep.

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Author's comment:

When I first imagined that little moment of comfort between Sabre and Locke it only looked like an overload of cuteness in my mind. Then a bit later I realized that it also could have been a little hint on a romantic moment. I didn't even mean it that way, not at all. ^^; You can interpret it any way you want it though but I still rather see it as bromance than as romance.

This chapter also was a bit inspired by Captain Harlock. The main computer of the Arcadia, Harlock's ship, contains the mind of Harlock's late friend who once had built the ship thus giving the Arcadia a bit of its own free will. At first I only thought of Steppenwolf's mind still being present in Haven's core but then it sounded better if a little bit of all Guardians was still there in some way.

Kapitel 11: Downfall

Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 11 - Downfall

The darkness enclosed him like quicksand and besides the constant whispering there was no other sound. Spectre cowered in the dark and covered his ears but that only made the voices inside of his head louder. He still couldn't understand the words but he exactly knew their meaning. It was the call. The memory chip had been activated and in his weakened state he wouldn't be able to withstand for too long. So the wraithlike Death Legionnaires never had attempted to kill him - they only wanted to make him vulnerable. But why him? If Enerjak needed reinforcement he still had a lot of other Dark Legionnaires and his own zombie army. Why was he focussing on him now?

Spectre's eyes snapped open when sudden realization hit him: Because he was with the Guardians. Locke's appearance in his mind proved they still stayed close to him and hadn't given up on him yet, not knowing that the Legionnaire inside of him would soon take control over him and they all were in grave danger.

No, he wouldn't let this happen. As long as he was alive the Legionnaire inside of him would never take control. With a roar he unloaded his anger and jumped back to his feet. He would continue this fight even if he had to stay in the darkness forever.

'Why do you still struggle? You aren't worth being called a Guardian. You have killed.'

These first clear words that echoed around him hit him like whiplashes and left bleeding welts in his self.

"I never used any kind of weapon against anyone except Moritori - and his death was a salvation for all the living ones", Spectre answered as firm as possible.

'But you were with the Dark Legion on countless missions, you saw what they were doing and didn't interfere. You bear part of the blame for many deaths.'

"But others survived although they were doomed to die because I stood in front of them, refusing to do what the officers commanded me to do and thus was standing in another Legionnaire's line of fire."

'I know every evil thought that once spun through your head.'

"I'm aware of that."

'Actually you are longing to embrace the darkness. You could be so strong. With your knowledge of the Chaos Force you could even be stronger than Enerjak one day.'

"Maybe."

'Forget the puny Guardians. Give in to the darkness.'

"No."

'Give in to me...'

"No. I know you. I have always known about your existence. For a long time I have fought against you and I'm not willing to quit the field. I know who you are ... Spectre. For so long I always have been afraid of my inner self - of what Enerjak's people could have made of me. But now I have been through too many things that proved me the opposite, that I am a true Guardian rather than the creature - Moritori's son - I had been born as. You don't frighten me anymore."

The sudden silence roared in his ears. For a little while he stayed in complete emptiness and then light flooded over him - so bright that he had to close his eyes. It remained mostly silent but now he could feel and hear a light breeze, the air was hot and he was sure to stand on sand. When Spectre slowly opened his eyes and blinked the brightness away he was looking at the dunes of the Sandopolis Zone. Most people wouldn't have been too happy if they suddenly found themselves in such a landscape but Spectre was a son of the desert and this was home to him. But was this even real or was he still caught in his own mind? And why if he had won over the Legionnaire inside of him had he not woken up and was still kept in a state between dream and unconsciousness? He had the feeling he soon would know.

"I know you are here", he said without turning around. The presence of the trinity was so strong there was no doubt on who had come to visit him in his dreams. "Please, tell me what plans you have for me and this time be a little less vague than the last time."

"We are sorry to hear that."

"Though we are sure we have never met before."

"But don't worry, young Guardian. We are here to help you in a task so grave not even the Neo Walkers could offer you much aid."

"They can't fully estimate Enerjak's powers or weaknesses."

"But we can for we created him."

Spectre's eyes widened. Yes, it was a trinity but these were definitely not the voices of the Neo Walkers. He spun around and stared at the three floating tiki-masks.

"But ... you are dead", he said unbelievably.

"We are as dead as the Brotherhood of Haven."

"And the same time we are as alive as them."

"Our earthly shells might have been destroyed."

"The Chaos Force that formed us however can only be destroyed by a force of equal strength."

"We are as indelible as hope."

"Or death."

"Or destiny."

The Ancient Walkers alternated in speaking but it was never clear who of them had said what. The place-switching voice was making Spectre feel dizzy after just a short time.

"But if you still had existed all this time and also known how to destroy or at least defeat Enerjak then why haven't you stepped into action earlier or prevented him from coming back in the first place?"

"We exist in the same way as the Guardians before you."

"Or as the Chaos Force living inside of you."

"You also found out what you are capable of doing in the time of greatest danger."

"And we appear at the end, when you are still in need of advice before your last step." Spectre had closed his eyes to prevent himself from switching his gaze between the masks trying to find out who of them was actually speaking at the moment.

"So ... if it's just pure Chaos Force you are made of right now ... Wouldn't that mean I am actually talking to the Chaos Force inside of me?"

"Probably."

"It can be possible."

"What do you think?"

The dark furred Echidna rubbed the bridge of his nose and slowly shook his head. He

didn't know what he should think about it. But today he already had seen Locke inside of his mind, had fought against his own darkness and had won a verbal battle against his inner self so talking to the purest form of Chaos Energy shouldn't really surprise him anymore.

"You might not have been destroyed because you are more or less Chaos Force come to life but as far as I know the same counts for Enerjak as well. How should five Guardians be able to destroy something like that?"

"It's not exactly the same."

"We created him so he holds part of our strength."

"But we haven't given him the full power we are able to wield."

"If you want to compare our powers then compare the Chaos Energy existing on the whole planet with the energy of several dozen Chaos Emeralds."

"Barely anything can control the incredible source necessary to destroy us."

"But five Guardians can channel enough energy to defeat Enerjak."

Spectre let out a dry laugh.

"That would be like shooting the Master Emerald into his ugly mug ... Channelling such a high amount of energy would only be possible if we Guardians were standing right in front of the Master Emerald so how are we supposed to do something that powerful in the middle of nowhere in front of a demi-god?"

"You forget that the great source of energy you need will be right in front of you during your last encounter."

"Enerjak is, in fact, a living, breathing Master Emerald."

The Guardian's eyes snapped open and he stared at them, mouth slightly opened.

"Wait ... do you want to say we have to rip the Chaos Energy out of his body and then shoot it back again?"

"Precisely."

This one-word-answer sounded as if it had been spoken by all three the same time.

Spectre stared at the ground when a terrible thought crept through his mind. Such a high amount of energy wouldn't just destroy the demi-god - it would also kill the Guardians. Realizing that, all out of sudden there was only emptiness inside of him. He could neither feel fear of death nor desperation - just a freezing coldness that spread through his body.

'So be it', he simply thought. They couldn't escape their fate anyways. Maybe they had already vaguely known it from the beginning - at least he now felt as if he had always known it.

Then he noticed the slow disappearance of a presence.

"Wait..." he silently said.

"We thought you already had made up your mind and there was no need for us anymore."

"Just one more question", he said. "How am I supposed to get out of here? If I only dreamed then I could simply wake up but this doesn't feel like a dream."

"Follow the call."

"The call of Haven."

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Slowly Spectre opened his eyes and blinked at the sight of a neon light.

'Haven...' he thought. He never had been at this place but there was no doubt he was in the former home of the Guardians.

Carefully he turned his head to have a look around. On the bed to his right Thunderhawk and Sojourner were sleeping. They looked as if someone had thrown them there and knowing them they probably just had dropped backwards and slept in where they had landed. The other bed to his left was the resting place of Sabre and Locke. Sabre had protectively wrapped his arms around the younger male's body. Spectre stared back into the neon light and waited. He didn't want to wake them up just to tell them they all had to die.

"S-Spectre...?"

The whispered words caught his attention and he looked back to the left. Locke blinked the drowsiness away and carefully shoving Sabre's arms aside he stood up.

"Oh Aurora be thanked, you really made it out of the darkness."

"And not just that", Spectre said while sitting up. "I also have found out a thing or two about Enerjak."

A little while later when they all had woken up Spectre told them about his dreams - or whatever they had been. He hadn't mentioned the deadly fate that awaited them eventually but he believed the others thought about the same as he before and found his presumption confirmed when Sabre said tonelessly, "So that means we Guardians only came to existence to be sacrificed for the greater weal in the end."

"Not necessarily", Locke said thoughtfully. "Let's take Chaos Knuckles as an example. Being hit by loads of Chaos Energy didn't kill him - it rather turned him into a living Chaos Emerald. He died when he unloaded all of it but Aurora sent him back to life. However he lost all of his abilities in the process and had to wait for them to return. Another example is Finitevus. His body also absorbed a lot which caused him to go insane and more or less turn into a weaker form of Enerjak. So actually we have three options: we could simply die, we could turn into living Chaos reactors for a few seconds until we unload our energy, die and get resurrected weak as kittens or we could just go insane."

Thunderhawk laughed humourlessly. "Three great options we have there. But at least it sounds better than an inevitable death. Shall we go now? I only want to get that over and done with."

"Locke, you seem to know Haven better than we do. Is there another exit further in the north and closer to Enerjak or do we have to get back where we entered?" Sabre asked.

"If the way there isn't blocked then yes", was Locke's reply.

"Is everyone ready for our last step?" Spectre asked a hand on the northernmost gate, steely determination in his eyes.

"Not at all", was Sabre's honest answer. "But even if we waited for years we still wouldn't be so let's just do it."

Another time they walked through the blue flames but they ended up in a different location. The ground was torn up even worse and Chaos Energy was in the air tingling on their skins like electricity. Standing at the edge of a pit staring down they watched Enerjak slowly gliding over the wasteland, sending out waves of energy every now and then that ripped open other parts of the ground.

"He's searching ... for the Guardians' bodies", Locke whispered.

"And we can't let him find them", Sabre grimly added. "But how on Mobius are we supposed to get close enough if one of these waves means an instant death?"

"I know how fast I am so I will draw the attention on me to give you four the chance to



attack from behind", Thunderhawk decided. "He hasn't fought anything for centuries so his battle skills might be a bit rusty at the beginning ... hopefully. And even if my swiftness won't be enough ... four Guardians will suffice to channel all the energy as well."

"No, I won't leave you alone again. If anything then he should concentrate his attacks on both of us", Sojourner said resolutely.

Thunderhawk opened his mouth but he couldn't bring out a word when he looked into Sojourner's eyes. The younger male was determined to either live or die together with his friend. For a moment the lavender Guardian closed his eyes as if he was in pain but then he simply said, "Let's go."

When the two Guardians glided off the edge into the pit Enerjak immediately noticed the movement of the corner of his eye, spun around and shot a wave of Chaos energy at them. They quickly dodged by dropping a few feet but then they caught their fall and continued bearing down on him.

The gold and blue armour surrounded by a faint green glow might have been an impressive sight already but it was only a nice little adornment knowing about the strength living within the demi-gods body. Getting hit by one of these attacks had the same effect as sitting on the Master Emerald when it detonated.

Sojourner and Thunderhawk shot along closely over the ground and darted sideways when another attack roared towards them. It hit the floor and the force of the impact let earth and rocks rain down on the Guardians. But aside of exploding terrain and the sounds of Chaos blasts Enerjak fought in complete silence. Neither a word of threat or scorn against his enemies nor battle cries. The demi-god knew his power and there was no reason to intimidate his opponents in a verbal way.

At first his attacks really were barely targeted but he regained his old skills fast and the Guardians' flight manoeuvres had to become riskier and riskier when they wanted to prevent him from turning around while narrowly escaping death each time.

And then they suddenly received a mental message - the others were close enough to channel Enerjak's powers. Sojourner and Thunderhawk stopped dead a few meters away from him but so did the demi-god as well now. Too late he had realized the Guardians' actual plan. Energy was ripped from his body and this time he let out a scream of pain and rage. He fired another Chaos wave but it only fuelled the five living Chaos batteries surrounding him.

Arms spread the Guardians levitated a few centimetres over the ground. The amount of energy rushing through them made it impossible to move - even breathing was hard. Then the mental command came, given by all five the same time.

*'Release...'*

Blinding green light flared up and for a few seconds the wasteland called the Forbidden Zone was bathed in it. Pain as if they were ripped into pieces flashed through the Guardians' bodies. And then it all abruptly ended and they were dragged into the numbing darkness.

## Kapitel 12: Dayspring

Author's comment:

That's it, the last chapter. It's a bit shorter which means I'm ending with a chapter as short as I began. It's a bit of a strange feeling - it's not too long ago that I started growing to my Guardian avatars and now it's over again.

But at least it's not the end for my Echidna-plot bunnies. They have still been happily nibbling around on other plots even while I wrote Rise of the Guardians and hopefully another story - might it be about the Guardians or the Dark Legion again for a change - will be there soon.

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Rise of the Guardians

Chapter 12 - Dayspring

The dust hadn't fully settled yet when Locke slowly opened his eyes. He blinked a few times then squeezed his eyes shut for a second and opened them wide again. No, it hadn't just been his imagination – the fine sand particles were standing still as if time had stopped completely. Then he noticed the soft mossy ground he was lying on. Where was he? Had they all been teleported again? Or had they really died and this was the afterlife?

Carefully he tried to sit up and winced when he felt something soft at his side but quickly turning his head he saw it was Sabre lying next to him. The older male had just regained consciousness and looked at him with half opened eyes.

"Have we made it?" he silently asked.

"I don't know", Locke answered unsurely and looked at the other Guardians not too far away.

"At least we are livelier than some people had wanted us to be the past few days", Thunderhawk replied drowsily. His eyes were still closed but a grin spread over his muzzle.

Now when the Guardians had awoken the sandstorm frozen in time slowly cleared up and they could see more of the surrounding area. Mossy rocks, short grass, here and there a tree - not the most abundant vegetation but compared to the barren wasteland Enerjak had created it was a paradise.

"Where on Mobius are we?" Sojourner asked.

"This place is merely a memory but one day the Forbidden Zone can look like that again."

The voice that had spoken sounded familiar somehow but ... older.

The five Echidnas slowly turned around and stared at the five other figures that had silently approached them. If it hadn't been for a few little differences they might as well have looked at their own reflections.

"Being greeted by you ... does that ... does that mean we are really dead?" Locke asked but he sounded as if a yes as answer wouldn't bother him too much as long as he heard it from one of the original Guardians. Not much and he would have knelt down before them in awe.

"No, if anything then we are allowed to die now", his older self answered.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sabre asked.

The Guardian Sabre scratched the back of his head. "Well, we hardly understand it ourselves but it was as if we were caught in a world in between for centuries. Our bodies were dead but Aurora's heralds never came for our souls. All this time we had the feeling we were still needed for something. And then, one by one, we were ... reborn ... somehow. But you had no memories of our past except for the last few minutes of our lives."

"What if it had been your destiny chosen by the Ancient Walkers?" Spectre said remembering his dream about them. "They might not have been able to keep you alive but they kept your souls from moving on to the next level because they knew about Enerjak's return and gave you a second chance. But no one might ever know if we defeated him once and for all this time or if he just had been locked away and is waiting for his next rise to power."

"I really hope that he's gone for good. Don't tell me all this stress was good for nothing", Sojourner quickly said.

"Well wasn't it a lot of fun after all?" the Guardian Thunderhawk said with a grin and crossed his arms behind his back.

"Oh yes, when you ignore the fact that our lives were permanently in danger it was the greatest thing that could have happened to us", Thunderhawk said and mirrored his older self. "When can we do it again?"

"That's not funny", the two Sojourners pouted.

Sabre suppressed a chuckle and returning his attention to the older Guardians he became serious again.

"But what will happen to us when you die? Will we still be the same? What about our abilities?"

"We only helped you to become stronger and more skilled that fast", Guardian Spectre explained. "No one can learn something he normally would need years to within just a few days except if he has a fully experienced Guardian living inside of him. You might lose some abilities but it's nothing you can't learn again within the next few years. Your personalities however are your own."

"Aw, and I thought our little nerdy boy will become a party dude without a tech freak Guardian inside of him", Sojourner chuckled and playfully nudged Locke's arm which the youngest Guardian only countered with a weak smile before he turned to the original Guardians and asked, "But ... does your death mean we will never be able to see you again?"

"Get the dried blood out of your coat, grow a beard, look in the mirror and then you will see at least one of us", Guardian Sabre responded. "Well, maybe growing a bit older might also help. Or take a look around to see the rest of us. You might not be related to us - except for Spectre since he's Moritori's son after all - but you couldn't look more like us."

"Probably another one of these strange ideas from the Ancient Walkers - just like letting me be reborn as the real son of this cockroach", Guardian Spectre added with a forced crooked smile. "I hope you will remain loyal to yourselves further on and not try to be our copies in more than looks."

"Don't worry, Thunder and me have a few little ideas what to improve in that mess called the Brotherhood should it continue to exist", Sojourner grinned.

"Please, no", Spectre sighed but he did so with a little smile on his face.

"Do me a favour and take better care of Lara than I was able to do", Guardian Locke

whispered, so silently that only the younger Locke could hear him.

"I will", was the younger male's silent reply.

"If everything is said and done then let's do it", Guardian Sabre said. "Our lives for yours."

He and the other original Guardians reached out their hands and the younger males took them. The colours of the world around them blurred and slowly faded into black.

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When Sabre opened his eyes dust mixed with slight drizzle rained down on him. Beneath him he felt earth and rocks. At the horizon, half hidden by clouds the first rays of the rising sun could be seen.

They were alive... Enerjak was defeated and they were still alive. Sabre wanted to let out a laugh but that only resulted in a coughing fit when he breathed in dust.

"Dammit, if being a Guardian means I have to wake up on dirty floors every few hours then I want to quit", he heard Thunderhawk curse.

"Another day ... and Enerjak is really gone..." Locke silently said when he got up and looked at the first sunrays. "I have seen so many dawns but I never really saw them as a symbol for new hope for the Echidna kind ... or even the start of a new era."

He turned around and his gaze held a bit of sadness.

"But with Enerjak and probably also the Dark Legion gone the Brotherhood will come to an end too, won't it? We are more or less useless now."

Sabre knew what was going on inside of his younger friend. And probably inside of Spectre as well though the dark Echidna never would have admitted it. In the past few days they had grown together like family and friends the same time - two things neither Locke nor Spectre had most of their lives. What would happen if they dissolved the Brotherhood now?

But before Sabre could think of an answer Sojourner responded, "Can hippos fly? Of course not. Why would the other Guardians have left us some of their abilities and the chance to relearn some of the others if they were useless anyways now?"

Without taking his eyes off the highlighted clouds Spectre added, "Enerjak is defeated for now but who knows when he will return. And if not he then there will be others. This island still needs its Guardians."

"And even without new dangers there are still a lot of wounds to heal, the city and the towns to be repaired and rebuilt", Thunderhawk continued.

"Haven..." Locke said lightly dreamful. "I want to see Haven again. It can be repaired and then we can use it as our base or even our new home."

He returned his gaze at the sunrays.

"But most of all I want to see Lara again."

"And I want to be with Kali again", Spectre silently said.

Sojourner suddenly turned to look at the others. "Hey, will we just stand here and watch the sun the whole day long or finally go and realise our dreams?" He spun around and dashed away. "The last one in Echidnaopolis is a desert mummy."

"Oh no, you will never be able to win a race against me", Thunderhawk called and followed hard on his friend's heels.

Sabre gave Locke an amused look.

"What do you think? Will they be able to keep that speed until Echidnaopolis?"

"Not sure", Locke replied. "But if they are we shouldn't miss it. Come on!"

And with that the two youngest Guardians followed the others as well.

At first Spectre only raised his eyebrows but then with a suppressed grin he teleported himself away only to reappear a few meters ahead of the others and started running in the direction of Echidnaopolis too.

"Hey, teleporting is unfair", Thunderhawk shouted.

"You don't have a chance against me anyways", Spectre called back. "Sooner or later you will have to stop for air while the one with the cybernetic lungs can run for way longer."

"You have WHAT? Please tell me this was just a joke."

But Spectre only laughed and sped up a little more. When had he ever felt that free? Probably never in his whole life. But he was willing to learn.

Before them the wasteland of the Forbidden Zone and soon the grass fields stretched for miles, wide and open as their future. Together they had faced the darkest nights and somehow fought their ways through it. Whatever destiny was still holding for them they would face it too, together.