

Rise of the Guardians

Von Aqua111

Kapitel 3: Meeting with fate

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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.