

Rise of the Guardians

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Kapitel 8: Son of Moritori

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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.