

## The Last Guardian

### Chapter 17

Harry waved as the farmer's pickup pulled away, towing the purchased tractor behind it. The tractor's fresh paint gleamed in the afternoon sun, and Harry felt a warm thrum of satisfaction watching his handiwork roll down the dusty lane. Three thousand dollars in cash was tucked into his back pocket, and the weight of it made him grin. He'd spent only a few minutes fixing the thing, enabling him to sell it cheap, and the look on the farmer's face when he'd fired it up had been worth every minute.

"If you have any problems with it, just call me!" Harry called after him, cupping his hands around his mouth.

The farmer waved back, one hand on the steering wheel of his ancient Chevy. The truck belched a cloud of black smoke as he hit the gas, and Harry watched them disappear around the bend, the trailer bouncing over a deep pothole.

He turned and kicked a clod of dirt. The sale had gone well. The farmer had tried to talk him down to two thousand, but Harry had held firm. Three grand was still a steal for a machine that ran as smoothly as this one did, and the farmer knew it as well. He figured he'd give it a shot anyway.

His phone rang, and he fished it out of his jeans. Lana's name flashed on the screen. He flipped it open to answer, tucking the phone between his ear and shoulder as he headed back toward the house.

"Hey, Lana," Harry happily greeted her. "What's up?"

"Harry," she said, and he heard her take a quick, shaky breath. "There's something going on in town. People are sick. A lot of people. The hospital's standing room only, and they're bringing in more ambulances."

Harry's mouth went dry. "Sick how?" He, of course, already knew the answer.

"I don't know exactly. The news is saying it's some kind of chemical exposure, but they're not giving details." She dropped her voice, like she was trying not to be overheard. "I saw three police cars go by with their lights on, heading toward the Luthor plant. Do you think it could be ..."

He didn't let her finish. "Where are you now?"

"At the Talon. I'm helping Chloe set up cots in the back room. Some people came in feeling dizzy, and now they can't drive home." She paused. "Harry, should I be worried?"

He was already striding toward the barn, away from where any neighbors might see. "No," he said firmly, though his own heart was starting to hammer. "Just stay put, okay? I'm coming to get you."

"Meet me at the hospital. I've got a few people here who have lost consciousness, and I need to get them some help. There are no ambulances available, so I have to drive them myself," Lana told him.

"Alright. Just be careful. I'll be there in a few minutes," he told her, then hung up before she could say more. As soon as the call ended, he broke into a run, ducking into the barn where no one could see him from the road. He pressed his back against the rough wood siding and closed his eyes.

The green energy came easily, rushing through his veins like a flash flood. It tingled across his skin, raising goosebumps even as it wrapped him in the tight black and green fabric of his suit. The mask formed last, covering the upper half of his face while leaving his mouth free. He took one deep breath, then pushed off from the ground.

The barn walls whipped past his face, and then he was airborne, arcing up into the clear blue sky. Smallville spread out below him in a patchwork of fields and rooftops. From up here, he couldn't see anything wrong. The only thing out of the ordinary was the lack of traffic. No one was driving. He squinted and saw ambulance lights in the far distance. He had hoped that the chemical leak at the LuthorCorp plant wouldn't cause a wide-scale disaster, but if Lana was scared enough to call ...

He pointed himself toward town and flew faster.

## **The Last Guardian**

Harry spotted Lana from high above. She was pacing in the hospital parking lot, her arms wrapped around herself to ward off the cold. He dipped lower, slowed his flight, and landed behind a row of ambulances where only a few startled paramedics could see him.

He stepped out from between two emergency vehicles and waved. Her face lit up, and she ran toward him, not even breaking stride when she registered the green and black suit.

"Harry!" she whispered, grabbing his arm. Her fingers dug into the strange material of his costume. "I was starting to think you'd taken the long way."

He shook his head, scanning the crowded parking lot. Dozens of people milled around, some sitting on the curb, others leaning against car hoods. A few wore masks, and he saw at least three people vomiting into the hospital's decorative shrubbery.

"What's happening inside?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

She tugged him further from the main doors. "They're not letting anyone else in. There are too many people already. The waiting room is full, and they've set up cots in the hallways." She bit her lip. "I talked to a nurse who came out for a smoke break. She said it's some kind of chemical exposure, but they don't know exactly what."

Harry nodded, already expecting as much.

A sudden commotion at the ambulance bay drew his attention. Two paramedics were rushing a gurney toward the doors, and the person on it was convulsing, their body arching off the thin padding. Without thinking, Harry rushed over, pulling away from Lana's grip.

"Hey!" she called after him, but he was already weaving through the crowd.

He reached the ambulance just as the paramedics were wrestling the gurney through the double doors. The man on it was elderly, his face flushed an unnatural red, and foam flecked the corners of his mouth. One of the paramedics was shouting vitals to the nurse who met them at the door.

"... seizing for three minutes straight. BP one-seventy over ..."

Harry didn't let them finish. He pushed past the nurse and laid his hand on the old man's forehead. The green energy surged from his palm without him having to consciously call it, washing over the man's face and chest in a shimmering wave.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" The paramedic grabbed for his wrist, but Harry ignored him while keeping contact with the patient. The paramedic tried to pry his arm away, but it was like trying to pull a tree out by its roots. His arm didn't budge an inch.

The convulsions stopped. The man's back arched one final time, then he collapsed onto the gurney, his breathing suddenly deep and even. Harry pulled his hand back, watching as the red flush faded from the man's cheeks.

The paramedic stared at the patient. "What did you ..." He trailed off, his eyes widening as he took in the green and black suit, and the mask covering half of Harry's face.

"Is he ...?" The nurse started to ask, but the old man's eyes fluttered open.

"Where's Jenny?" he mumbled, trying to push himself up on one elbow. "Need to ... finish the north field before dark."

Harry stepped back, letting the medical staff swarm around the suddenly conscious patient. Over their heads, he caught Lana's eye. She was hovering at the edge of the crowd that had gathered, her face a mix of worry and pride.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder. "You need to come with me, right now." The security guard's voice was firm, but his hand trembled slightly. Harry could feel the man's uncertainty through the tight grip.

"Sorry," Harry said, shaking his head. He turned, and the guard's eyes widened as he took in the full sight of the strange costume. "There are too many people who need help."

He brushed the guard's hand away and strode toward the nearest group of waiting patients. A young mother sat on the curb, her toddler crying in her lap while she pressed a tissue to her own bleeding nose. Harry dropped to one knee beside them.

"Can I help?" he asked, and the woman jerked in surprise, nearly dropping her child.

Before she could answer, he reached out and touched the child's feverish cheek. The green light flared again, softer this time, and the toddler's crying cut off mid-wail. The boy blinked up at him, confused but no longer in pain.

"What did you do?" the mother gasped, pulling her child closer even as she reached out to touch Harry's arm. "Wait a minute ... are you really ...?"

Harry didn't answer, but smiled kindly nonetheless. The legend of a mysterious hero had been steadily spreading through the area, and it seemed that she was a fan. He was already moving to the next person, a teenage boy who was slumped against his friend's shoulder, barely conscious. One touch to his forehead, and the boy's eyes snapped open, clear and alert.

A murmur ran through the crowd, growing louder as more people turned to watch. Harry kept moving, from one sick person to the next, letting the green energy flow through his fingertips. With each touch, he felt a little more drained, but the sight of someone's fever breaking or their labored breathing easing kept him going.

"Everyone, back up! Give me space!" The shout came from a doctor who'd rushed out of the emergency room doors. He pushed through the gathering onlookers, his white coat flapping. "You there! Who are you? What are you doing to these patients?"

Harry straightened, wiping sweat from his upper lip. The mask was starting to feel stifling in the heat. "I'm trying to help these people," he simply stated. "They've been exposed to chemicals from the LuthorCorp plant. If you're looking for answers, you should start there."

The doctor's face twisted, caught between hope and professional skepticism. "You can't just ... we need to document ..."

A scream cut him off. Across the parking lot, an elderly woman collapsed, her husband shouting for help as she began to seize. Without hesitation, Harry pushed off from the ground, letting the green energy carry him in a short, controlled leap over the heads of the crowd. He landed softly beside her and dropped to his knees, his hand already reaching for her twitching arm.

The convulsions stopped the moment his fingers touched her skin. The green light washed over her, brighter than before, and Harry felt the slight pull on his energy. While it was draining to heal these people, Harry had more than enough energy to carry on. When he pulled back, she was breathing normally, and her eyes fluttered open in confusion.

"Ma'am? Can you hear me?" he asked, supporting the back of her head with his free hand.

She blinked up at him, then gasped. "You're ... you're the one from the news. The green ghost guy."

Before he could answer, a new voice cut through the growing buzz of excitement. "Step away from her! Now!" A different security guard stood ten feet away, his service weapon drawn and pointed at the ground. His hand shook visibly.

Harry slowly raised both hands, showing they were empty. "I'm just trying to help," he said, keeping his voice calm. He could dodge a bullet if he had to, but the people around him couldn't.

"I said step AWAY!" The guard's voice cracked with tension, and he raised the gun slightly.

Time seemed to slow. Harry could see the man's finger tightening on the trigger, and he could track the minute tremble in his aim. In the split second he had to decide, Harry flicked one finger, and a thread of green energy lashed out, wrapping around the gun and dissolving it into dust before the guard could pull the trigger.

The man stared at his empty hand in shock, then looked up at Harry with naked fear. The crowd around them had fallen silent, everyone holding their breath.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," Harry said, annoyed at having to stop his work to deal with a security guard with an itchy trigger finger. "And it's probably not a smart idea to draw a weapon around patients," he stated, glaring at the security guard who was already slinking back. He turned back to the elderly woman, helping her to sit up with her husband's assistance. Then he stood, facing the growing crowd of onlookers.

He studied the scene, and there were at least fifty sick people still waiting. One at a time would take too long, and there were probably others around town who hadn't made it to the hospital.

He closed his eyes and reached for the green power. Instead of letting it flow out through his hands, he pushed it down through his feet, into the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. The

energy spread in a rippling wave, flowing outward in all directions, and he felt the moment it touched the first sick person. There was a jolting connection that made him gasp.

More and more connections snapped into place as the green light washed over the crowd. He heard gasps and shouts, but he kept his eyes shut, focusing on the web of energy linking him to every person within a hundred yards. With a final push, he sent a pulse of healing energy through that web.

The drain was much harsher than doing it one at a time, but Harry held strong. One after another, people began to glow green, and the chemicals were purged from their systems. The green wave spread, covering the entire hospital, and he was sure there were quite a few surprised people inside.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. The connections snapped shut, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. The drain wasn't as bad as he first thought.

Every person the green wave had touched was staring at him. Some were touching their own arms or faces in wonder, others were helping their neighbors to their feet. The security guard with the vanished gun was crouched beside a young boy, checking the child's pulse with shaking fingers.

"Harry."

He turned at the whisper of his name. Lana stood at the edge of the crowd, her eyes wide but steady. She gave him a tiny, encouraging nod.

He straightened his shoulders and turned to the nearest doctor, who was frantically checking the vitals of three patients at once. "They should all be stable now," Harry said. At least he hoped they were. "But you should still check everyone. Some might need fluids or ... I don't know. I'm not a doctor."

The man looked up, his professional mask slipping to reveal naked astonishment. "What did you do?" he asked the same question that was probably on everyone's mind.

Harry just shook his head, not keen to give a lengthy response. There were still people in need. "I need to check the rest of the town. There might be people who couldn't make it to the hospital." He didn't wait for a response, just pushed off from the ground and rocketed into the sky with a burst of green energy. Some yelled in shock, and others cried out in awe, pointing to Harry's retreating form.

From up high, he could see the whole town spread out before him. Somewhere out there were more sick people, more lives in desperate need of help. He took one deep breath, then launched himself forward, leaving a trail of green energy in his wake.

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Lana was curled on their couch, remote in hand, as she watched the evening news. Harry watched her from the kitchen doorway for a moment before making his presence known. He thought she looked quite sexy sitting there on the couch. Harry couldn't help but smile. Her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she'd changed into an old Met U sweatshirt, with a stretched-out neck that hung off one of her shoulders. She looked very comfortable.

The local news was showing footage of the hospital parking lot, where a crowd had gathered. He stepped into the living room and teasingly cleared his throat.

She jumped, then relaxed when she saw him. "There you are," she said, muting the TV. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten about me."

He walked over and collapsed next to her on the couch with a groan. The springs creaked in protest. "Sorry. I got held up." The understatement made him want to laugh, but he was too tired. His arms felt like they'd been stuffed with lead weights, and there was a persistent ache behind his eyes that had nothing to do with the flickering television. The reception was always bad out here in the middle of nowhere.

Lana studied his face, her eyes narrowing. "You look like you've been through it. The news says that you've been going at it all afternoon," she said, nodding toward the TV where the news had cut to a press conference outside the hospital.

He looked at the TV. The hospital administrator was standing behind a podium, fielding questions from a dozen shouting reporters. The tape at the bottom of the screen read, **MIRACLE IN SMALLVILLE?** in bold red letters.

"I just helped out a little," he said, leaning forward to grab the remote from her hand. He turned the volume up.

"... can confirm that all seventy-three patients who presented with symptoms have been stabilized. We're continuing to monitor them, but initial tests show no trace of the unknown compound in their systems."

The reporter's voice cut through the general clamor. "Dr. Mercer, are the rumors true that this was the work of the same individual who's been spotted around town? The so-called 'Green Ghost'?"

The administrator's face tightened. "We're focused on patient care, not speculation about ..."

Harry muted it again. "I can't believe they're calling me the Green Ghost," he snorted. "They could've picked something with more pazazz. 'The Emerald Knight' or 'Big, Green, and Sexy' or something."

Lana's hand found his knee and squeezed. "You're avoiding the question. Did you really heal everyone at the hospital?"

He looked down at her fingers. They looked small and pale against the fabric of his jeans. He brushed his fingers over the back of her hand, loving how soft her skin was.

"I suppose so," he finally said. "I wasn't really focusing on curing anything in particular. I just pushed out my power and let it do its work. After that, I went from house to house, checking to see if anyone needed help. I found quite a few people in really bad shape."

Her eyes went wide. "Harry, that's ..." She seemed to struggle for a word, then just shook her head. "Are you okay? You look really tired."

He waved it off. "Yeah, I'm tired, but it's nothing a long night's sleep won't cure." He leaned his head back against the couch cushions and closed his eyes. "It was worth it, though. You should've seen this little girl's face when her dad stopped coughing. She thought I was some sort of superhero."

Lana's fingers tightened on his leg. "The whole town's talking about it. Chloe's been texting me non-stop, asking if I've seen the Green Ghost. She really wants to be the first to get an interview," she snorted, then paused. "Nobody's made the connection yet. To you, I mean."

He cracked one eye open to look at her. "You think they will?"

She shrugged, the motion making the too-big sweatshirt slide further off her shoulder. Harry leaned over and kissed her bare shoulder, making Lana smile lovingly. She ran her fingers through his messy hair. "Smallville's not that big, but most people here are pretty clueless. I think you'll be fine as long as you're careful." She reached for the remote and turned the volume back up.

The news had moved on to helicopter footage of the LuthorCorp plant, where a dozen emergency vehicles were parked in haphazard rows. "... containment has been confirmed, but officials are still urging residents within a two-mile radius to remain indoors with windows closed. The EPA has been called in to ..."

Harry tuned it out, instead taking a moment to rest his eyes. Lana's hand moved from his knee to his arm, and her thumb rubbed small circles over his skin. "You should eat something," she said. "You haven't eaten since lunch, have you?"

Harry opened his green eyes and smiled cheekily at her. When he shook his head, she made an annoyed noise and stood up, pulling him with her. "Come on. You're taking a shower and then eating some food, even if I have to sit on you to make it happen."

He let her tug him to his feet, pretending to put up more resistance than he actually felt. "Is that supposed to be a threat? Because it sounds more like a reward," he teased, leaning down to press a quick kiss to the top of her head.

She rolled her eyes, smiled, and swatted at his chest without any real force. "Go shower before you stink up the whole house."

He was halfway to the bathroom when she called after him. "Harry?" He turned, resting one hand on the doorframe. She was still by the couch, remote held loosely in her hand, the blue light of the muted TV flickering across her face. "I'm proud of you," she said simply.

The words warmed him more than any shower would. He gave her a tired smile. "Thanks, Lana. I'm proud of you, too ... you know ... for what you did for the people in the Talon. By the way, I made sure to take care of them, too," he told her. Lana blushed at his praise. Harry chuckled at her embarrassment.

"You know, Lana? I'm so tired that I can barely lift my arms. I might need someone to scrub my back," he cheekily hinted. Lana huffed, but she couldn't stop the smile from forming on her gorgeous face. She stood up and turned off the TV.

"Fine. I'll order pizza and join you in a minute. But remember ... no hanky panky until after you've eaten," she teasingly warned.

"Scout's honor," Harry said, crossing two fingers behind his back.