

The Last Guardian

Chapter 18

The storms that night were fierce, and by nine, thunder was hammering the house, and lightning was flashing outside his bedroom window. Harry lay in bed with a book open. He spent the first hour trying to ignore the rumbling sounds, but it was impossible to concentrate. Eventually, he gave up, got out of bed, and went down the stairs to the living room, where he found the windows ablaze with light every few seconds. Wind shrieked against the siding. The whole house seemed to be shaking apart, and he wondered if this was how it always felt, living at the mercy of Kansas weather.

He flopped onto the couch and checked his phone, half expecting to see a text from Lana, but there was nothing. She was working the late shift at the Talon, and he knew she'd promised to call if anything got bad, but he still checked the notifications every five minutes just in case. He turned on the TV for background noise, and the screen lit up with urgent red banners. TORNADO WARNING ... ALL COUNTIES. The volume was high, and the emergency alert system blared loudly. Harry flinched at the sudden banshee wail.

He watched the bottom tape scroll as the emergency anchors repeated safety tips. A map showed the entire state under siege, with the worst of it heading north. The news cut to live helicopter footage of a funnel cloud dipping from the clouds, then touching down and devouring a random field. Harry watched as a century-old barn exploded outward, and the pieces vanished instantly into the darkness.

He sat forward with his elbows on his knees. The feeling of dread wound through his stomach, but it was different from the normal anxiety people felt when going through a bad storm. He felt responsible for every building, every scared family hunched in their basement, and every animal unlucky enough to be in the path of the swirling vortex.

The feeling was so heavy that it made it hard to breathe. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on Lana's voice in his memory, which was usually enough to bring him back, but tonight it only made things worse. He imagined her alone in the dark Talon with the wind shrieking through the windows, shivering on the floor, and hoping the roof didn't peel away.

He reached out for her mind, just as he learned to do. It wasn't anything intrusive. It was just a quick peek to make sure she wasn't in trouble, but all he caught was a swirl of coffee, a few mildly worried thoughts, and the blare of distant sirens. He smiled despite himself. She was fine. Lana was strong, and she would probably roll her eyes at the very idea of cowering in the storeroom. If she needed help, she would call.

Lightning split the sky so close that the crack made Harry jump. TV beeped again. There was no way he was going to sit here all night watching the disasters unfold and doing nothing. He

stood, stretched, and walked to the window. He could see the next storm front marching toward town. The thunderhead was low, black, and menacing.

Harry concentrated, and a green shimmer passed over his body, replacing his clothes with his standard superhero outfit. The sensation was never less than thrilling. He loved the feeling of being powerful enough to make a difference.

He quickly glanced at the mirror in the foyer and grinned at his own reflection. He opened the front door, and the wind nearly tore it out of his hand. Rain slashed sideways, stinging his face and soaking him through in seconds. He let the door slam behind him, took two running steps toward the edge of the porch, and shot upward into the void.

The rain blurred everything as he rose through the thunder clouds. Harry quickly broke through into the moonlit layer above. Up high, the air was cold and clear. Far below, the storm clouds stretched as far as he could see. Harry hovered for a moment, taking in the sight of dark clouds flashing yellow with every lightning strike.

He closed his eyes and opened his mind. The noise was overwhelming at first. There were thousands of thoughts, shouts, prayers, memories, and regrets, all tangled together in a mad storm of humanity. He let them flow over him for a few seconds before searching for the ones in trouble.

He located one. There was a cluster of terror out in the middle of nowhere. He could feel a bus full of people huddled together on the floor as the driver tried to call for help. Their location flickered in his mind like a dot on a radar screen. Harry locked on, and everything else in his mind faded away. The only thing left was the desire to help. He streamlined his body and shot toward it, leaving green light behind him like the tail of a comet.

The Last Guardian

It was supposed to have been a routine trip. He'd made the same trip a hundred times before. The Greyhound bus was running late due to bad weather, and the driver was already anxious about making up lost time on the last leg to Wichita. Now, just an hour and a half from the city limits, he sat with both hands tightly gripping the steering wheel. Just outside the windows, everything had become a howling, twisting nightmare. The rain battered them so hard that visibility was down to only ten feet or so, and the wipers were useless. Wind slammed into the side of the bus so violently that the whole vehicle shuddered and groaned, as though the metal skin was about to rip away.

A sudden gust had caught him off guard while crawling through a low spot in the road. The bus hydroplaned, skidded sideways, and the wind picked up the back end, sending it lurching into the ditch. The impact was jarring but not catastrophic. Thankfully, no one had been seriously hurt, but now the tail end was sunk deep into the muddy bank. When he tried to drive out, the wheels only spun and dug deeper. The situation was bad, but not unmanageable ... at least

until the tornado sirens started up somewhere in the distance. They could all hear the shrill cry over the storm.

He tried to call 911, but his phone had zero connection. He tried again and again, but the damn call just wouldn't go through. Little did he know that a tornado had twisted the local cell tower into scrap metal. The police scanner on the dash was a wall of static, and the only words he could pick out were "twister," "take shelter," and "debris field." He kept scanning the empty fields out the windows, hoping to see a farm or barn or anything to run to, but there was nothing. There was only an endless plain of flat, empty land, and the rippling black curtain of rain.

Inside, the passengers were losing it. Someone started crying in the back, and then others joined in. A woman was on her knees, mumbling prayers in Spanish while clutching a rosary. A big guy near the front kept saying "not like this, not like this," over and over, rocking in place with his hands jammed under his armpits. There was a teenager in a denim jacket swearing at the driver, demanding to know why he wasn't doing anything, and when the driver snapped at him to sit down and buckle up.

He felt responsible for all of them. He was supposed to be in charge. He was supposed to keep everyone safe, but now the best he could do was brace himself and hope the glass didn't blow out under the wind's heavy assault. The wind sounded like a freight train, rising in pitch and volume until the whole bus was shaking on its chassis. The driver could feel the vibrations all the way through his body, and it terrified him. Someone vomited, and someone else started screaming, which only made the terror worse.

He told them to get low, head for the aisle, and hold onto something sturdy. He didn't know if it would help, but it gave people a task and kept them from panicking further. The bus lurched again, and the driver thought for a moment that they were rolling, but it was just the wind lifting the frame and dropping it back down. The tornado was close. He could feel the pressure change, and his ears popped. The roof vibrated, then flexed inward with a series of thunderous bangs, as if a giant were pounding on it from above. It was large hailstones, he realized. That wasn't a good sign.

He yelled out, "Hang on! It'll pass," but he didn't believe it. In his head, he was saying his goodbyes to his loved ones, not that anyone would hear them when the bus got torn in half.

He was still mentally saying goodbye when the tornado appeared. It was a massive, spinning, writhing black pillar, lit from within by jagged bolts of lightning. It was the most beautiful and horrifying thing he'd ever seen, and for a second, he just stared, mesmerized by the sight as it bore straight down on the bus.

The passengers were all screaming now, but over it he heard a new noise. There was a deep thud on the roof, like something heavy had landed on top. Then there was a flash of green light, and the wind pressure changed so violently that he thought his eardrums would burst. The bus lifted, but instead of being ripped apart, it felt as if hands were guiding it while holding everything

together. The passengers yelled, and the driver did too. Suddenly, everything in the bus began floating, as though gravity no longer had any affect on them. The driver only stayed in his seat because he was strapped in, but when he looked over his shoulder, he saw that every passenger was just hanging in the air, spinning slowly. Bags, books, cellphones, and anything else not secured were lazily spinning in the air. The driver blinked in confusion, and through the rain-streaked glass at the front he saw a figure outlined in glowing green. The figure floated in the air with his arms outstretched while the tornado did its best to rip him to pieces. Large chunks of debris slammed into the glowing figure, only to be instantly disintegrated by the flaring green light.

The driver watched, open-mouthed, as the man in green swept his arms together, and a green, translucent shield formed in front of the bus. The tornado smashed into the shield with a deafening crash, and there was a flash of green light so bright that he was temporarily blinded. When his vision finally cleared, the tornado was gone, and the fields around the bus were flattened. The bus was still in the air. Every window was intact, and the frame hadn't so much as buckled.

The driver let out a shuddering breath he didn't realize he was holding. He looked around to see the passengers frozen in shock, staring at the green light still crackling outside. The man hovered down to eye level with the cab, and for a second they looked at each other. The driver had no idea who this was, but he recognized a miracle when he saw one. The green man lowered the bus gently onto the road. It was then that the driver noticed that the tornado hadn't disappeared. It was just further down the road, continuing to chew up the landscape.

He slid the window open, and the cold rain streamed in as the man in green hovered just outside. The hero's hair was plastered to his forehead, and his eyes glowed with hypnotizing green light.

"Are you folks okay in there?" the man asked. His voice was calm and steady, as if all he'd done was change a tire.

The driver nodded dumbly. "We're ... yeah. We're okay." The rest of the bus was silent. He felt the urge to thank the guy, but it stuck in his throat.

The man in green nodded, glanced over the passengers, and then grinned. "Good. Stay put for a few minutes and let the tornado get some distance. Then get to safety." Then he shot upward, trailing emerald light as he went.

For the first time in his life, the driver believed in superheroes. He wiped his face, which he realized was covered in cold sweat. He leaned back in his seat and started to laugh. He couldn't help it.

He watched the green light until it faded into the sky, and when he turned back, he saw his passengers chattering, crying, and hugging each other. The storm outside was still raging, but inside the bus, there was only a sense of awe.

He turned the key, and the engine coughed, then roared to life. He didn't know how, but he felt a sudden certainty that they'd make it safely to Wichita tonight.

The Last Guardian

Harry shot over the devastated farmlands, tailing a monster tornado from high above as it carved a path of destruction toward a cluster of rooftops on the horizon. He concentrated, and his vision zeroed in on the neighborhood grid. He counted the rows of houses, the small, manicured backyards, the parked cars, and plastic swing sets. They were all targets well within the tornado's crosshairs. He cut through the updrafts, trailing emerald light, and felt the jolt of airborne debris pelting his shield as he closed the gap with the racing vortex.

He reached the subdivision seconds before the tornado, and from a hundred meters up, he could see residents on their lawns, gaping skyward in horror. People ran for doors and cellars. Arms flailed as people scooped up their kids and pets. The tornado's roar grew so deafening that it drowned out even his own hammering heartbeat. Harry hovered directly above the main street, braced himself, and shaped his will into a wall of light that expanded like a green dome over the entire block.

He could feel the tornado's violence as it vibrated his bones, and the pressure seemed to drop out of the sky and suck the air right from his lungs. The leading edge of the twister struck his shield with a battering ram of wind and shrapnel, and the shield shimmered, threatening to buckle under the strain. Harry focused harder. He'd never tried to protect this many people at once, especially not against a force of nature that wanted to destroy everything in its path. He poured raw energy into the shield and reinforced it, and he tried not to think about how he was the only thing separating the people below from the storm's wrath.

The tornado hit the dome at full ferocity. The noise was apocalyptic. It was like a freight train derailling at full speed. The shield rippled as tons of water, glass, metal, and organic debris hammered it. Harry felt the strain in his power as the storm's energy tried to tear his construct apart. The wind spun him end over end, but he forced himself to stay upright and bend the dome around the buildings, even as the tornado's suction tried to pull him away.

The tornado passed over the neighborhood relatively quickly, but it must have felt like an eternity for those below. They experienced every bit of the mighty roar, the battering chaos, and the unrelenting pressure. Harry gritted his teeth and braced himself against the invisible current, refusing to let his mind wander for even a split second. If he let up, even slightly, the shield would pop, and the houses would be turned to rubble. He could see flashes of terrified faces through shuddering windows and felt their hope, their fear, and their desperate need for a miracle.

The tornado finally moved past, and the shield's pressure eased. Harry let out a deep, relieved sigh and watched as the tornado moved to open land, taking a good chunk of the neighborhood's trees and fencing with it. But all the houses were intact, and that was all that mattered. The dome faded, and Harry drifted lower, scanning for any sign of damage. The people below emerged from their homes, blinking in disbelief, and some pointed up at him with wide eyes. A few kids waved happily. Harry waved back before taking off. The storm was still raging, and there were still people in need of saving.

The Last Guardian

Harry lost track of the time he spent keeping people safe over half the state, but eventually the supercell storms moved on, and the worst of it was over. The adrenaline faded, leaving him tired and hungry, but mostly relieved that he hadn't missed anyone. By the time he got back to his own house, the storm had become just a drizzle, but the wind was still fairly strong. His uniform faded away into green mist as soon as he appeared in the living room, replaced with jeans and a t-shirt.

He wandered to the fridge, opened it, and stared blankly at the shelves. Eating felt like a chore right now, but he needed the energy. He pulled out a loaf of bread, peanut butter, and a jar of strawberry preserves, and he made himself a sandwich. He was halfway through his sandwich when his phone rang. He looked at the screen and saw Lana's name.

"Hey," he said, happy to hear from her.

"Hey, yourself," Lana replied in her usual sweet voice.

Lana explained that the Talon had been a ghost town all night, and she'd have closed hours ago if not for her stubborn refusal to ever lose a shift to weather. The tornadoes had scared off every regular, and the late-night crowd had vanished after a sheriff's deputy came in and asked everyone to stay indoors. She'd spent the last hour restocking the back room and organizing muffin tins out of sheer boredom, but there was nothing left to do.

"I'm about to lock up, so if you want to come and save me, now's the time," she said in her happy, teasing way. Harry agreed immediately. She told him she'd head up to her old apartment and wait for him.

The moment the call ended, Harry exhaled and felt the exhaustion fade away. He'd been running on adrenaline for so long that everything now felt slow and peaceful. Harry thought about driving his new truck to the Talon, but he figured the roads were probably still bad. Instead, he closed his eyes and pictured the apartment's living room. He apparated away with a soft pop.

Lana's old apartment was mostly barren, but there were still a few pieces of furniture left behind after the move. Lana herself was perched at a small dining table by the window, cradling a mug of coffee and staring at the rain. She wore a loose, oversized sweater and tight jeans. Her hair was up in a messy twist that Harry found particularly sexy. As soon as she saw Harry, she smiled prettily, and her eyes lit up like she'd been counting the seconds until his arrival.

"Wow, you got here fast," she happily said, standing and coming over to him. She looked so beautiful that Harry forgot how tired he was.

He opened his arms, and she slid easily into his embrace. They kissed softly, and Lana shuddered when he squeezed her tightly. She pressed her forehead against his and inhaled deeply. "You smell like rain," she said. He laughed and nuzzled her cheek with his nose.

"In case you hadn't noticed, it's been pouring for the last few hours."

"Oh, I had," Lana replied, glancing out the window with a wry smile. "So ... What have you been doing the whole time?" she asked.

"You know ... just relaxing at home, being bored out of my mind and wishing you were with me," he teased and ran his hands over her shapely hips.

Harry grinned, but Lana's eyes sparkled with mischief. "What's so funny?" he asked, knowing full well she had something on her mind.

She pulled him over to the couch, snuggled up against him, and grabbed the TV remote. "You have to see this," she said. She flicked on the news, where a local anchor with her blonde hair plastered comically to her head was shouting into the wind about the unprecedented tornado cluster. The camera cut to shaky footage of a bright green sphere shielding a hospital as a tornado went right over it. Then there was another clip showing a herd of cows floating in green light before being safely set down on the far side of a severely flooded creek. It was unmistakably his handiwork. The footage ran on repeat while the news ticker updated them on the current weather conditions.

Lana muted the TV and looked at him sideways. "So. 'Relaxing at home,' huh?"

He chuckled, unable to keep a straight face. "Technically, I was relaxing ... in between saving cows and hospitals."

Lana prodded his ribs, making him squirm. Harry tickled her ribs, causing her to squeal. Harry pulled her onto his lap, and he kissed her. Lana deepened the kiss and ground herself against his crotch. Harry then pulled away and kissed her forehead, making her mewl cutely.

She giggled and kissed him again, threading her fingers through his hair. He felt the tension drain from his body in a way that only Lana could achieve. They stayed together for a few minutes, moaning into each other's mouths.

Eventually, Lana pulled away and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Take me home?" she asked softly.

Harry smiled at her. "Is the Talon all locked up?" he asked.

"Yep. I got the key in my pocket," she said, patting her thigh.

He pretended to consider it, then said, "Well, in that case, your wish is my command." He squeezed her ass with both hands, and she squealed as he scooped her up and spun her once. She clung to him, laughing, with her face buried in the crook of his neck.

He looked at her, and the green energy was still flickering in his eyes, and she smiled with all the warmth in the world. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," she answered with a beautiful smile.

Harry held her tight, gathered his will, and with a rush of green light, they vanished from the apartment.