

The Last Guardian

Chapter 16

Harry jolted awake in the darkness. He was drenched in sweat, and his heart thumped against the inside of his chest like it was trying to break out. For a few seconds, he just stared into the dark, blank ceiling, waiting for his vision to adjust. The air felt cold on his skin, but under the sheet, he burned like an engine left running too long. He wiped the back of his palm across his sweaty forehead. A harsh tingle ran up his arms and legs and pooled in his chest.

He sucked in a slow breath and let it out, trying to get himself under control. Next to him, Lana breathed in and out softly, a sound that would have been cute if Harry wasn't on the verge of panic. He slid a hand over to her shoulder and squeezed it, as much for his own reassurance as hers.

Lana rolled onto her side, pulled down the cover, and blinked at him with puffy, sleepy eyes. She was naked, and her hair was splayed over her cheek. She peered up at Harry with a look that could only be described as sexy. "What time is it?" she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

"It's still dark out," Harry said. He tried to keep his voice light, but it came out shaky. "Sorry for waking you."

Lana squinted at him, then ran a hand down his chest. Her palm came away slick with sweat. She propped herself up on an elbow. "Are you okay?" she asked, now properly awake.

Harry shook his head. "It feels like my skin's crawling," he said. "I think something's wrong with me."

"Nightmare?" she asked.

He shook his head again. "No, not that. It's different." He pushed the sheet down and swung his legs off the bed. The cool air hit his bare body, but he barely noticed. He braced his elbows on his knees and hunched forward, trying to shake the feeling out of his limbs.

Lana sat up too, the sheet falling from her body. Her skin seemed extra pale in the dim bedroom. She pressed a palm to his back, then drew it back sharply, like she'd touched a stovetop. "You're burning up," she said. She reached for his face and touched his feverish forehead.

Harry didn't answer. He could feel a strange energy humming under his skin, building and building with nowhere to go. He glanced over at Lana, and his vision fuzzed around the edges. The hum inside him became a full-on vibration, and the next thing he knew, the world exploded in green.

It started at his sternum. It was a single, blinding point of light. Then ripped through him in a wave that lit up the entire room. The green energy poured out of his body, igniting the air with crackling light. He could see the bones of his own hands. For a second, the pain was so sharp it pushed every thought out of his head. He grunted and clenched his eyes shut. It was over as soon as it began. The green light vanished, and Harry collapsed forward, panting.

Lana screamed, clutching the sheet to her chest. She crawled toward him and grabbed his shoulders. "Harry! Harry, talk to me!" Her voice was loud and frightened.

He coughed, then looked at her through watering eyes. "I'm good," he gasped. "I'm okay. It's gone."

Lana stared at him, not convinced. She ran her hands up and down his arms, searching for a wound or sign of injury. "What the hell was that?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Harry said. His voice was steady. "I think there was something wrong with me, and my power reacted to fix whatever it was. Sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out." He forced a smile and wiped a streak of sweat from his chin.

Lana exhaled shakily. "You could've warned me." She sounded mad, but her hand didn't leave his shoulder.

Harry shrugged and caressed her arm. "I didn't know it was coming," he said. "It feels better now, though. A lot better." He looked down at himself. There were no marks or any other sign that anything had been wrong. He ran a hand over his chest, then over the muscles of his stomach, and everything felt just like it always did.

Lana sat back, clutching the sheet tight around herself. "You still look like hell," she said.

Harry snorted. "Yeah, but now I feel like a million bucks." He stood up. His body moved with effortless ease. The tremor was gone, replaced by a restless energy.

He crossed to the window and pulled back the curtains. He lifted the window, letting in the pre-dawn light. The fields outside were dark, and the wind was rustling the trees. He pressed his forehead to the glass and squinted into the gloom.

Lana got up, leaving the sheet behind, while not caring about her nudity. She walked over and stood next to him. She reached up and put her hand on his shoulder. "What is it?" she asked, her voice softer.

Harry sniffed the air and made a face. "Something's off out there," he said. "Can't you smell it?"

Lana inhaled, then shook her head. "It just smells like grass and wet dirt. Maybe a little manure."

“Not that,” Harry said. “Something else. It smells like a chemical, maybe. It’s ...” he paused, then wrinkled his nose, searching for the word. “It’s almost ... metallic.”

Lana frowned. She pressed her hand to his back again, then let it drift down his spine. “If you think you’re coming down with something, you should go back to bed,” she said.

He shook his head. “I’m not sick. I think there’s something wrong out there.”

“Like what?” Lana asked.

Harry stared out the window. He tried to zero in on the scent, to follow it with his mind. A thin trail of chemical stink cut through the town, almost invisible to the naked eye, but Harry’s nose found it easily. It led west, toward the industrial side of Smallville, where the lights of the LuthorCorp plant glowed against the horizon.

“LuthorCorp,” Harry said, turning from the window. “It’s coming from there.”

Lana made a face. “You’re not planning to go out there, are you?” She hugged him tightly and looked at him, suddenly sounding small and a little scared.

Harry smiled handsomely at her. “You know me,” he said. “I have to check it out. It might be nothing. But if it’s something, I don’t want it spreading.”

Lana didn’t answer right away. She chewed her lip, then looked him in the eyes. “Be careful, okay?”

He nodded. “I always am.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s a lie.” Harry laughed and then kissed her on the forehead.

The air around his body shimmered. For a split second, he was a blur of pale skin and shadow, and then a suit of midnight black and deep green tightly wrapped itself around him, as if it were painted on. Lana couldn’t help but check out his muscular ass. A mask shimmered over his face, leaving only his mouth and eyes exposed. He smiled at Lana. “Quit staring at my ass.”

She smiled in spite of herself, but her worry didn’t fade. She reached for his hand and held it tight. “Don’t do anything crazy,” she warned.

Harry squeezed her hand back. “I promise. I’ll be back before you know it.” He leaned in and kissed her. It was quick, but her lips lingered on his longer than he expected. He gave her one last look, then turned and strode to the window.

Harry apparated outside and hovered high in the air. He closed his eyes and reached out with his senses. The chemical trail was stronger up here, and it prickled in his sinuses. He inhaled

deep, then exhaled, and green light flared around his body. He launched into the sky, arcing upward in a perfect curve. The cold wind slapped at his face, but his powers kept him warm.

He climbed higher, and Smallville spread out below him. The dark patchwork of fields was dotted with light from their farmhouses. The lights of downtown Smallville were easy to spot, as were the bright lights of the LuthorCorp plant. He turned west, following the invisible trail of chemical stink, his body a streak of green and black against the blue-black sky.

The LuthorCorp plant was two miles west of Smallville, and even before Harry reached the perimeter, the stench of chemicals had grown so strong it was like a punch in the face. The smell was acrid, greasy, with a sharp undercurrent that tickled the back of his throat. Harry landed on the roof, rolling through the dense fog of chemical exhaust that spilled from the plant's stacks.

The building's industrial lights glared through the mist. Rows of parking lot lamps flickered below, and somewhere inside, klaxons screamed out a warning. Harry called on his green energy, and his suit shimmered, blending him into the darkness. He moved silently as a ghost, dropping from the roof to a fire escape, then down the side of the building to a loading dock. His feet barely made a sound on the concrete.

He slid past a row of dumpsters and pressed himself flat against the brick wall. Two security guards in hard hats hustled past, their radios crackling. Harry counted five seconds, then stepped through the wall, intangible for just a heartbeat. He suddenly found himself in a hallway lit by humming fluorescent lights. He walked past offices and cubicles, keeping his form invisible to the naked eye. Harry followed the stench, and it led him deeper into the plant, down to a reinforced door marked with black and yellow tape. He phased through, and it was like walking into a war zone.

The main chamber was a cavern of steel and glass. There were catwalks strung high above, pipes running every which way, and a mess of monitoring equipment. The stink of chemicals was so thick that it coated the inside of Harry's mouth with something like battery acid. Workers in hazmat suits swarmed around the edges of the room. Half of them were yelling into walkie-talkies, and the rest pointed at a control panel, where red lights blinked in chaotic patterns.

In the center of the chamber was a room-within-a-room. It was behind thick, reinforced glass, about the size of a tennis court. Inside, the floor was smeared with greenish liquid, and pipes had ruptured, sending steam and sludge everywhere. The ceiling had caved in, and a mess of twisted wiring dangled down, sparking blue arcs onto the wet floor.

Three scientists huddled by the glass, shouting at each other over the alarms. Harry watched one point at the ruined chamber and then clutch his head with both hands.

Two bodies lay sprawled just outside the glass. They were regular workers, not scientists, and they convulsed on the concrete, their limbs jerking in awful, puppet-like spasms. Their faces were red and slick with sweat. One had bitten clean through his tongue, blood pooling on the floor. Harry flickered back to visibility, and the nearest scientist saw him, recoiled, and tripped over his own feet. The other two spun around, startled.

Harry ignored them. He knelt next to the convulsing workers and checked for a pulse. Both were rapid but strong. He hovered a hand over the first one, and green light spilled down, wrapping the man in a gentle cocoon. The spasms slowed, then stopped. Harry repeated the trick on the other one, who came to with a gasp.

By then, the scientists had regrouped. The eldest of the group was a balding man with thick glasses fogged at the edges. He straightened his lab coat and tried to sound authoritative. "Who are you?" he demanded. "You can't be in here. This is a restricted ..."

Harry held up a finger. "Quiet." His tone cut through the alarms and the shouting, and everyone stopped talking.

He glanced over his shoulder at the ruined lab, then back at the scientists. "What the hell happened here?" he asked.

The bald scientist tried again. "That's classified. You need to leave ... now." He thumbed a button on his radio. "Security, we've got a breach in Lab Six. Unknown male, black and green suit ..."

Harry rolled his eyes and reached for the green power. The room pulsed with sudden light. He flicked his hand, and all three scientists lifted gently off the floor, suspended in the air like sad, middle-aged balloons. "Let's try that again," Harry said. "What happened, and what are you making here?"

The scientists panicked, kicking and grabbing at nothing. The bald one's glasses fell off and dangled by their cord. "Please!" he yelled. "Put us down!"

Harry cocked his head. "Tell me, and I'll consider it."

The youngest scientist, who couldn't have been more than thirty, blurted out, "It was an experiment! We were testing a new compound! It was supposed to be contained ..."

Harry pointed at the bodies on the floor. "You call that containment?"

The head scientist finally gave up. He dropped the radio and babbled, "We were working with meteor rock. We're creating a new synthetic gas for the military. However, meteor rocks are highly unstable, and the pressure spiked past critical. The rest of the team panicked, and ..." He gestured helplessly at the convulsing workers, then at the ruined lab. "I tried to tell them, but

nobody would listen. The gas leak set off the emergency protocol, but we couldn't shut it down in time."

Harry stared at the bubbling green puddles in the glass room. "What does this stuff do?" he asked.

The scientist stared at the floor. "Theoretically, it triggers the amygdala and induces a full-blown fear response. The idea was to incapacitate enemy combatants ..."

"So it's a fear bomb," Harry guessed.

The scientist nodded miserably. "Basically, yes."

Harry sighed. He looked at the two workers, now sitting up and trembling. "Did it leak outside?" he asked.

The scientist looked away, then nodded. "The entire east wing vented before we could stop it. Some of it must have gone up the stack. We were able to trigger a burn-off, so the stack only vented for a few seconds."

Harry frowned. That meant the chemical cloud was drifting over Smallville, right now. He let the scientists dangle in the air for a moment longer, then set them gently on the floor. They landed awkwardly, and the youngest fell flat on his bottom.

Harry strode to the control panel. His presence there set off a second wave of panic, and two more guards came sprinting into the room. They saw Harry, then stopped dead, recognizing him from the security briefings that everyone in the region had probably seen by now. The lead guard went for his sidearm, but Harry didn't even flinch.

He looked at the head scientist. "Can you neutralize the gas?"

The scientist shook his head. "It's already dispersed. The only way to stop it is to let the wind take it out of the area, or..." He trailed off.

Harry thought for a moment, then held up his hand. His power swelled, and a surge of green energy shot from his fingers, snaking through the air and into the ruined glass chamber. The liquid inside began to bubble, then vaporized in a flash of green fire. The pipes snapped straight, the wiring zipped back into place, and the whole lab repaired itself in seconds.

The scientists stared at him in dumbstruck awe. Harry turned to the guards. "Nobody comes in here without full gear, understood?" Both guards nodded, their eyes wide.

He turned back to some other workers on the floor. They were starting to convulse but were still conscious. He held out both hands, and the green energy wrapped around them. Their shaking

stopped, and Harry kept the healing flow steady for another minute, until they were all able to stand.

The silence that followed was total. Harry eyed the head scientist. "Congratulations. You just gassed the whole town."

The man blanched, his hands trembling. "We didn't mean to ..."

"It doesn't matter," Harry said. "LuthorCorp is going to have a lot to answer for. You can spin it however you want, but the people won't be pleased. I suggest shutting this whole project down."

He apparated out, appearing high in the air. From there, he looked out over the fields and the town beyond. The sun was still not up, but a faint, sickly haze hung in the air above Main Street.

Harry took one last breath, still tasting the chemical stink, then launched himself into the sky and headed for home.

The Last Guardian

Harry landed in the backyard and went straight through the kitchen door. The clock in the kitchen read 5:44 a.m. The whole house was dark, but there was a sliver of light under their bedroom door. He rubbed his eyes, feeling the burn of chemical residue in his sinuses. He wasn't sure if it was psychosomatic or if the meteor gas had clung to him on a molecular level. He wanted nothing more than to scrub his skin raw, but he needed to check on Lana first. He crept down the hallway and slipped inside.

It swung open, and Lana was there, barefoot, wearing a tiny nightgown that showed off most of her sexy legs. She had a phone in one hand and her hair in a sloppy bun. She took one look at Harry, darted over, and threw her arms around his neck.

"Are you okay?" she demanded. "You were gone for half an hour!"

Harry chuckled and hugged her back. "It wasn't that long," he said, but his voice was hoarse from the chemical burn. He let her hold onto him. Her arms were warm and tight, and after a moment, he kissed the top of her head. She shivered at his touch.

She pulled back and looked at his face. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes wide with worry.

"LuthorCorp had a chemical leak," he said. "They were making a nasty gas with refined meteor rocks. It hit the town early this morning, but I fixed the damage. I'm not sure if the town's people will be affected. I'll keep an eye on things and step in if I need to, but we'll just have to wait and see."

Lana's nose wrinkled cutely. "Is that why you smell like a gas station bathroom?"

Harry snorted. "Probably. You should go brush your teeth before you start criticizing."

She laughed, and the tension drained from her shoulders. "You're the worst," she said, but her fingers stayed on his arm, squeezing gently. "And just so you know, I DID brush my teeth," she added, poking him in the ribs.

Harry drew a deep breath and met her eyes. "You didn't feel weird while I was gone, did you?" he asked.

Lana shook her head. "No. Why?"

He smiled and held out his hand. "Let me do a quick sweep, just in case. If any chemicals got into your system, I can flush them out."

Lana hesitated for a second, then nodded. "Alright. But if I turn into a meteor freak, I'm suing you for emotional distress."

He took her hand, and green light blossomed between their palms. The energy ran up Lana's arm and spread over her body in a soft glow, leaving her face illuminated and her eyes even bigger than before. She looked down at herself, then back at him. "Weird," she said. "It feels like a thousand soda bubbles in my veins."

"It'll pass," Harry said, watching the glow fade. "There you go. All clear."

Lana let go of his hand. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked in a small voice.

Harry smiled, then let his suit flicker away. He stood there naked as the last of the green shimmer crawled off his skin. "Never better," he promised.

Lana burst out laughing. "Show-off," she said. She let her eyes roam over him, not even trying to be subtle. "You know, the first time I saw you naked, I thought you were a Greek statue come to life. Now I just think you're an idiot."

"A Greek statue with a nice ass?" Harry asked hopefully.

"That's debatable," she shot back, but she was smiling again. "Are you going to stand there all morning, or do you want to take a shower and wash off the gross smell?"

Harry pointed at her. "I like the way you think."

He turned and padded into the bathroom, leaving Lana behind. He heard her giggle as he closed the door. He flipped on the light and climbed straight into the shower.

The water was freezing at first, but it grew hotter with every second that passed. He scrubbed every inch of his skin, then let the water pound against the back of his neck. The chemicals had left his skin feeling greasy and nasty. After a second round of scrubbing, he let himself relax, his head bowed under the hot spray of water. Then, the shower door clicked open.

He looked up, and a naked Lana slipped in, blushing so hard she looked sunburned. She pressed her back against the tile and peeked at him from under her lashes. "Is this okay?" she asked nervously.

Harry smiled and nodded. "It's more than okay," he assured her.

She stepped closer, and water ran down her sexy body. She touched his chest and ran a finger down to his stomach. Her eyes immediately found the massive erection pointed straight at her smooth, toned belly.

"It's happy to see you," he teased, and Lana laughed.

She shook her head and leaned into him. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her flush to his body. He felt her shiver before melting into his embrace. She tilted her face up, and he kissed her. At first, it was gentle and loving, but it quickly deepened. Their bodies pressed together under the spray, and her arms snaked around his neck as his hands roamed down to cup her ass. She moaned softly against his mouth.

He picked her up easily, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. The motion was fluid, like they'd practiced it a hundred times before. He pressed her against the cool tile, and she gasped at the sensation, burying her face in his neck. She could feel his cock pressing against her entrance, but she didn't worry about him taking things too far. He had already promised to let her decide when the right time was. Lana knew the time was coming very soon, but she didn't want their first time to be in the shower. Still, she giggled and teased him by rubbing herself against him. Harry groaned pitifully and kissed her again. Lana smiled into his lips, feeling freer than she had in a very long time.