

GUARDIANS OF PORTHAVEN

SHANE ARBUTHNOTT



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/// SHANE ARBUTHNOTT ///

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Summary: In this science-fiction novel for middle readers, just as fifteen-year-old Malcolm prepares to take on the traditional role of Guardian of his city, he learns some shocking truths about his family.

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To the rebellious superheroes in my life: my children,
Avery, Lachlan and Leah. You make the world a better
place.

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ONE

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome your newest Guardian, Malcolm Gravenhurst!”

Malcolm tugged at the knot of his tie and blew out sharply. A few feet in front of him his uncle Felix stood at the balcony railing, announcing him to the world. Felix turned, smiling at Malcolm and motioning for him to come forward. Malcolm forced himself to step up beside his uncle. He looked down at the ballroom full of people below them. Most were in finely tailored suits and gowns. Above their heads a flock of camera drones hovered, lights flashing in staccato bursts as they took pictures of him. He could identify the reporters in the crowd because they were the only ones not applauding. Instead they were fiddling with their bulky control bracelets, trying to maneuver their drones for the best angle.

The rest of the crowd was made up of politicians, shareholders in the Gravenhurst family’s businesses, and other prominent citizens of Porthaven. Many of the faces were familiar to him, though he knew hardly any of their names. These people had their own drones as well, of course—but they were the personal sylv models, like the one Malcolm had waiting back in his bedroom. He wished he had it now. He always found it reassuring to have the small silver orb hanging over his shoulder.

Beyond the crowd, through the floor-to-ceiling windows that ringed the entire room, Malcolm could see the city, the lights of its skyscrapers glimmering across the glass, crowding close to Gravenhurst Tower like a throng of supplicants.

Malcolm reluctantly turned his attention to the crowd. He half raised his hand to wave, but Felix's long fingers came down on his, pushing his hand back onto the railing.

"Don't wave," his uncle said softly without looking at Malcolm. "Just stand, and smile if you can manage."

"How long do we have to stand here?"

"An uncomfortably long time."

As cameras flashed and the crowd applauded, Malcolm attempted a smile. It felt as stiff and uncomfortable as his tie, so he dropped it.

"Today marks Malcolm's fifteenth birthday," Felix announced to the room, "and the beginning of his larger responsibilities as a member of the Gravenhurst family. We are here today to honor him as he takes on the mantle of Guardian of the city of Porthaven, as his mother and grandparents did before him."

More applause from the people below. Malcolm felt his knees wobble a little and gripped the railing tighter.

After what felt like an hour, the applause faded and Felix finally stepped back from the railing. Malcolm went with him, letting out a long breath as he turned to face his uncle. Felix adjusted the handkerchief in Malcolm's pocket.

"There. That's the worst part over."

"I thought it was all the worst part," Malcolm said softly.

His uncle shrugged. "Well, this next part could be fun, don't you think? Showing off a little bit?" He smiled down at

Malcolm, and Malcolm found himself returning the smile despite the nervous energy tying knots in his muscles. “They’ll love you. Now, let’s show them what a Gravenhurst can do,” Felix said, putting a hand on Malcolm’s shoulder and guiding him to the curving stairway down to the lower floor.

Malcolm could feel sweat running down the insides of his arms and hoped the dark jacket would hide it.

The crowd parted before him, revealing the gleaming walnut dance floor at the center of the room. On one side of the floor sat three concrete blocks, each four feet cubed. Malcolm stepped onto the wooden floorboards. People and camera drones immediately filled the area behind him, cutting him off from his uncle. Tall as Felix was, Malcolm couldn’t see him through the crowd. But then, as if he knew Malcolm was searching for him, Felix stepped back up onto the stairway. He gave Malcolm a reassuring nod.

Malcolm took his place in the center of the room and stared around. The sheer number of people was paralyzing. He closed his eyes, trying to focus on something besides the crowd. *We practiced it a million times. And after this you can finally do real hero work.*

He raised his arms and started. There were gasps from the audience as Malcolm’s armor unfolded from his skin, darkly glittering facets passing outward through his clothes and then snapping into place. Malcolm still wasn’t sure how it worked—the armor could pass through whatever he wore like it was intangible, but once it was in place it was as hard as steel.

The armor fully encased him. To the people around him, it would look like he’d been shrouded in gray glass, obscuring his features and smoothing out his edges until he looked like

a crude sculpture. From Malcolm's perspective, the room just dimmed a little, like he'd put on shades.

It felt strange to use his powers in front of all these people. Ever since they had manifested five years ago, he had only been allowed to use them around his family. Not that he hadn't known this was coming—he'd trained for this moment his whole life, even before his powers came in, practicing combat and acrobatics alongside basic geometry. He'd known since birth that he would become a Guardian and use his powers to protect the citizens of Porthaven. It was what the Gravenhursts did. But his powers still felt private to him. Intimate. His armor put another layer between him and the crowd, but somehow he felt like he was stripping naked in front of the cameras.

All eyes were fixed on him. He sought out familiar faces in the crowd. There was Felix on the stairway, smiling proudly. His aunt Aleid stood nearby, wearing a broad-shouldered suit that looked almost military on her. She wasn't smiling—but that was normal for her. Malcolm's cousin Melissa, dressed in an immaculate navy suit, stood near the back wall next to someone Malcolm thought might be the mayor. And up on the balcony where Malcolm had been a moment before was Malcolm's grandfather, Hendrik. He looked out over the room, stony-faced. When his eyes met Malcolm's, his expression didn't change in the slightest.

Fingers snapped in the crowd, and Malcolm turned. His cousin Eric had wedged himself between two of the reporters. He raised one eyebrow at Malcolm and twirled his hand, signaling him to get on with it.

Malcolm nodded and flexed his arms a few times. The armor was no impediment—it moved and flexed with him as easily as his skin—but the same couldn't be said for his suit. He'd always trained in looser clothes.

I guess I could have just taken the jacket off. Too late now though.

He dropped into a crouch, then leapt straight into the air. With the enhanced strength his armor lent him, he soared several yards up, almost to the roof of the huge room. He flipped in the air then landed with a thud.

Oh crap. I think I cracked the floor. He was used to working in the gymnasium, with its more durable maple flooring. He glanced at his grandfather and saw him frown.

He jumped again, this time doing a backflip and landing more softly. He then went into a series of flips and tumbles he had trained long and hard to be able to do. It wasn't the high jumps that were tough—he was pretty sure he could jump straight through the roof if he wanted to. The hard part was keeping control, using just enough force. If he went into the crowd at the speeds he was moving right now, he would break bones. He stumbled on his last landing but stayed on his feet. As he made his way to the concrete blocks, applause rippled through the room.

He bent his legs and wrapped his arms around the first block. There was another gasp from the crowd as Malcolm lifted the concrete into his arms and placed it on the block next to it. Then he lifted both of those blocks onto the third. Finally he gripped the third block and lifted the full stack of three.

The crowd applauded loudly again, and the cameras flashed. The blocks each weighed more than a car, but for Malcolm, with his armor up, they felt about as heavy as a stack of textbooks. He started to relax, to enjoy the crowd's obvious wonder. This was nerve-racking, but it felt good too. It felt free.

And then an image of the blocks tumbling from his arms popped into his head—if he leaned too far forward, the top

block could slide off and crush that reporter with the paisley tie. He put the blocks down.

He leapt to the top of the cement blocks and paused for a moment, checking to make sure no one was close enough to be hit. Then he raised his fist and brought it down.

The force of the blow cracked the concrete, and he dropped down onto the next block. He struck twice more, breaking through each block in turn until he stood on the dance floor again, chunks of concrete in a ring around him.

While he waited for the dust to settle—for pictures, as he'd been coached—he glanced up at his grandfather. There was a grim smile on his face. Malcolm exhaled.

As the cameras began snapping again, Malcolm dropped the armor. The facets folded in on themselves and disappeared through his suit and into his skin. He forced a smile as he turned to make sure he showed his face to the cameras on all sides. Eric stood just behind one of the cameras, giving Malcolm a thumbs-up.

Felix stepped smoothly through the crowd to join Malcolm, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“As you can see, Malcolm promises to be an excellent asset in our battle against the klek. We are proud to have him join the rest of the Gravenhurst family in keeping Porthaven and its people safe.” There was another burst of applause, which quickly died down. “We will take five minutes of questions,” Felix said, and then everyone was surging forward, shouting, drones humming over Malcolm’s head to record his every word.

“When did your powers manifest?” “Tell us more about your powers. How strong are you?” “Are you scared to fight the klek?”

Malcolm's ears rang under the constant questions. "Um... I first got my powers a few years ago. And the armor protects me pretty well, so I'm not too scared. Maybe just, like, a little nervous."

"So the armor is durable? Enough to protect you from the klek?"

"Well, it can stand up to gunshots. With the klek...I guess we'll have to see."

"And what about outside the klek?" one reporter shouted, physically pushing his drone so close that Malcolm flinched backward. "You won't be fighting aliens all day, after all."

"Well, um, I'm responsible for keeping the city safe now, and that's where I'd like to focus. I've only ever fought the klek in simulations before now, right? So I'll have to get used to the real thing, I guess. And I have this idea about—"

Felix's hand came down hard on Malcolm's shoulder. He looked up at his uncle, who smiled at him and shook his head subtly. Malcolm turned back to the reporter. "I've still got lessons and everything too. School stuff."

"And socially? Anyone special?"

"Any...oh, you mean am I dating anyone? No, no, not right now." Between his training and his lessons with private tutors, Malcolm didn't really spend time with people his age. Even when he was at one of the Gravenhursts' charity events, he spent more time with adults than other teens. He knew Eric's romantic relationships got a lot of press, and there were always one or two camera drones following him wherever he went. The thought made Malcolm start to sweat again. "Um, maybe later?"

"Are you worried about dying in the line of duty, given what happened to your parents? Your grandmother?"

The room seemed to go silent—even the drones stilled. Everyone looked at the journalist who had spoken as if he'd just slapped Malcolm in the face. Malcolm scowled, but not at the journalist. He could see the old familiar pity in the eyes of the crowd around him, the pity that told him that when they looked at him they saw a tragedy, not a person.

“Well, Malcolm?” Felix said at his side. Malcolm looked up at his uncle and saw no pity, only wry amusement, like he was embarrassed for the reporters. “Want to answer the question?”

Malcolm nodded. “I don't really remember my parents,” he said. “I was only two when they died. And I mean, yeah, the klek might kill me too. They're dangerous, I know that. But I'm a Gravenhurst. We've got powers that no one else has, and that means we've got the best chance against the klek. We're the only ones who can really fight them, right?”

“But aren't you a little young to be a Guardian?” the reporter persisted. “Your cousins didn't take up the mantle until they were eighteen, I believe.”

“I'm young, yeah, but my powers are strong. My aunt and cousins have been doing this alone for a long time, since my grandfather retired to run the business. I want to help.” Malcolm looked up at Felix. Felix smiled and nodded.

“Is that really all you want though?” another reporter said—Malcolm noticed it was the one with the paisley tie. “Your cousins have other ambitions. Might you follow Melissa's footsteps into the business side of things? Or take up acting, like Eric?”

“Um...I don't know. Honestly, all I ever wanted to be was a superhero.” Malcolm paused, realizing what he had just said. “I mean, not a superhero, a Guardian.” Chuckles rumbled through the crowd. “Sorry. That wasn't what I meant. I—”

“Malcolm has always been determined to live up to his role as a Guardian,” Felix said, stepping forward. “Even more so than my own son and daughter, who of course bear the mantle admirably but have interests that lie elsewhere.” He smiled out at Eric, who looked back blandly. “From a very early age, Malcolm was aware of the responsibilities that come with being born a Gravenhurst, being born with these extraordinary powers. And he has prepared to shoulder those responsibilities with a determination that reminds me very much of my sister, Aleid, or our parents. I think what Malcolm is trying to say is that he loves this city, and his sole interest in these early days is to protect it, to earn the trust and respect of its citizens.” He looked down at Malcolm with an easy smile.

“Um, yeah. Yeah,” Malcolm said, nodding gratefully.

“And with that, the time for questions is over,” Felix said. “Members of the press, thank you for coming to celebrate with us. Malcolm will make himself available for interviews at a later date. If you could make your way to the doors, our valets will see you out.”

There was another round of flashes, which caught Malcolm off guard and left him blinking lights out of his eyes, and then the reporters and the camera drones were all heading for the door, ushered along by Felix’s long arms.

“Like a deer in the headlights,” a voice said behind Malcolm.

He turned. His cousin Eric was standing there, a drink in his hand.

“But don’t worry about it. You’re young enough to pull off the doe-eyed thing. The press will eat it up.”

“You think?”

“Sure. As long as you don’t—”

“Malcolm,” his grandfather said beside them, and both Malcolm and Eric stopped moving. In the hubbub of the party they hadn’t heard him approach. Now he loomed over them both, wide shoulders stooped slightly forward. Malcolm wanted to step back, but he didn’t dare.

“*Superhero*, Malcolm?” he said with a frown. “I thought you took your role as a Guardian seriously.”

“I...I do, sir. I take it very seriously.”

His grandfather rubbed his chin, stubble scraping against his rough fingers. “I suppose little harm is done. The public may enjoy it. Humanizing, perhaps. But I think we should look into getting you a new tutor for media relations. Melissa can write up some talking points for you in the meantime.”

“Oh. Um, yes. Sir.”

His grandfather nodded. “Speaking of Melissa, she is over there waving rather emphatically for you. Happy birthday,” he added and then nodded to Eric before walking away.

Malcolm looked at Eric, who stared after their grandfather. “Not the best reaction,” Eric said. He turned to Malcolm and saw the expression on his face. Eric shrugged. “But hey, you should have heard what he said about *my* debut.” He shivered. “And with that fond memory, I’m going to go get another drink.” He put his empty glass down on one of the chunks of concrete and headed for the bar.

Malcolm stood alone for a moment. People had arrived to clean up the mess of concrete, and someone was swiftly nailing down the board Malcolm had split with his first jump. He watched them work while he pulled at his tie, trying to settle it somewhere it wouldn’t press against his Adam’s apple. Then he scanned the crowd until he found Melissa, who was indeed gesturing for him to join her. Malcolm made his way over.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile as she wrapped her hand around his arm and turned him to face the man beside her. “Malcolm, this is Mr. Jacoby, the head of our merchandising department.”

The rail-thin man stuck out his hand, and Malcolm shook it. “Very impressive, the way you moved in the air. Do you perhaps share some of your aunt Aleid’s talent for flight?”

“No. Just, like, high jumps.”

“Ah.” The man deflated a little. “Still, your power has a nice visual impact, and I think enhanced strength will be a big seller. I can see several opportunities...”

Malcolm nodded, trying to listen while the lights of the city winked through the window at him.



Hours later, when he had shaken the hand of every shareholder and influencer Melissa could find for him, Malcolm was finally released to wander the ballroom on his own. The crowd had continued to thin, and Malcolm found a quiet corner under the curving stairs, beside the catering table. He noticed an obliterated cake, which still bore a few smeared letters in blue icing: *HAPP BI*. He hadn’t even known there was a cake.

He turned to look out the window. Up close to the glass, Porthaven was more than just glittering lights. He could see the clustered skyscrapers of downtown. Some were built in improbable shapes, like the double helix of the Salvas Dynamics Tower, or the Coleworth Financial building that curled over the city like a shepherd’s crook. Hover tech and ultralight materials, invented by Gravenhurst R&D, made otherwise unstable configurations possible.

Other buildings were more traditional—tall rectangular towers of gleaming glass or gray concrete. But even they

were capped with fanciful green-light projections—glowing minarets, swirling clouds or surreal landscapes. Back when the company had released the projection technology—before Malcolm was old enough to remember—the Gravenhursts had successfully campaigned for laws to make sure architectural projections could only be used aesthetically, not for advertising. Down at street level, things got more garish, but up here the result was this gleaming dream city, half real and half illusory. It was probably the thing he was most proud of about his family—aside from the way they protected Porthaven from a perpetual alien threat, that is.

And there were possibilities for even greater things. Now that everything in Porthaven ran off the ambient energy grid—cars, lights, personal devices, everything—their emissions were down to zero. Once they got that tech working outside of Porthaven, his family could solve climate change overnight. But so far, for some reason, their technology wouldn't play nice with the rest of the world. Something about the alien tech having landed here first, he supposed.

Malcolm heard footsteps behind him. Felix stepped up to the window, his smiling face reflected in the glass.

“A bit much, isn't it?” Felix said. “All these people here for you, but not really for you precisely.”

“Yeah.” Malcolm looked around the room and was happy to see that it was mostly empty now.

“You did us proud, Malcolm,” Felix said. “And, to answer the question you're too polite to ask, yes, you can leave whenever you wish.”

Malcolm smiled sheepishly. “That obvious?”

“Only for those who know you well,” Felix said.

Malcolm nodded and turned to leave. Then he paused. "Is it hard, being here for this? I mean, because you're..."

"Powerless? It's okay to say it, Malcolm. I'm not sensitive about it."

"I know, just with the whole big debut, showing off my powers, and you being the only one in the family..."

Felix shrugged. "There are things to be envied, certainly. But I don't think the debut night is one of them. From the outside, it doesn't look like much fun."

"It's not. But still—"

"I'm fine, I assure you."

Malcolm studied his uncle. Felix didn't look upset, or left out, but he could be hard to read sometimes.

"Why did you cut me off? When I was talking to the reporters?" Malcolm asked.

Felix sighed. "Because I knew what you were going to say, and it would have been a mistake to speculate publicly about expanding our responsibilities as Guardians. It would have generated ill will toward the family."

"But we should—"

"No, Malcolm." His uncle put a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Your job is to fight the klek, not fight crime. You are not a comic-book superhero, despite your hopes. Leave the rest to the police."

"But I could help people with more than just the klek. I could—"

"You could get involved in a lot of situations you don't understand and make them worse," he said. "Or you could get yourself killed and leave us with one less Guardian to fight the true threat. We have discussed this." His grip on Malcolm's shoulder relaxed. "I know you want to help

people, Malcolm. And you will. You know Porthaven needs you. Now go to bed, before you're forced to spend time with your grandfather."

Malcolm nodded. He wanted to say more, but he couldn't think of the right words. So he did as his uncle suggested and left the party.

A dozen floors down, he stepped off the elevator and went into his bedroom. He walked past his tall bookshelves, past the wide window and into the alcove where his bed and dresser sat. His tie and collar had left deep grooves in the skin of his neck, and he probed them with one hand while he threw his jacket and tie onto the floor with the other. He picked up his sylf drone from the bedside table and thumbed it on. The small silver orb turned weightless in his hand, and glowing green readouts sprang into life in the air around the drone as it lifted off his palm.

"Did I miss anything?"

His sylf chimed and then projected a list of notices into the air in front of him. Malcolm swiped through them—mostly people tagging him in the media that had popped up about his debut. He wondered if he should respond, but the social media department would probably rather he left that to them. He dismissed the notices with a wave of his hand and looked out the window, the sylf returning to its familiar place just behind his right shoulder.

Things were still and silent this far up. But down below, the city was wide awake. Countless cars crawled the streets, while gleaming hoverpods zipped past them above. Late-night crowds gathered outside restaurants and bars, their drones flocking around them like curious birds. Even beyond the glimmer of downtown, the city stirred, innumerable lights piercing the darkness.

He'd been staring out this window at the city of Porthaven since before he could remember, but now it looked different. It was his city now, his responsibility. He'd been dreaming of this day since he knew what it meant to be a Gravenhurst, since he'd tied a blanket around his neck and his aunt Aleid took him flying.

He finished getting undressed, crawled into bed and dreamed of fighting monsters.

TWO

“So when do you think the klek will—”

Malcolm’s question was interrupted by a kick to the back of his head. It didn’t hurt through the armor, but it unbalanced him and sent him sprawling onto the floor of the gymnasium. He slid a fair way before stopping—Eric seemed to be hitting harder than usual today.

“Focus,” Eric said, dancing around Malcolm. “The klek aren’t going to stop to answer your questions.”

Eric flipped over gracefully and brought his heel down toward Malcolm’s head again. Malcolm rolled away, but Eric twisted himself in midair and landed on his hands, turning his dropkick into a spinning kick that took Malcolm’s feet out from under him.

“Hey! Let me stand up at least!”

“The klek don’t do that either.” Eric jabbed the side of Malcolm’s head with a punch before jumping away with a grin.

Malcolm pushed up hard with his hands, sending himself into the air and landing on his feet. He got into a proper stance, legs bent, arms up, and then feinted left with a kick before stepping right to try to grapple his cousin. But Eric planted his hand on Malcolm’s armored head and deftly flipped himself over Malcolm before kicking him in the back and sending him to the floor again. Malcolm lashed out with

a foot as he fell, hitting Eric's leg, but Eric calmly turned the new momentum into a somersault and rose again.

Malcolm grimaced. His cousin's power meant he never lost his balance—he moved with inhuman grace and agility at all times. Which had made him an amazing action hero in his film career, as well as the world's most frustrating sparring partner.

“Come on, Eric, seriously! When do I get to fight the klek?”

“How would I know?” Eric said, sauntering over to give Malcolm a hand up. “They're alien invaders. They don't send us a schedule or anything.”

“But we're always ready for them. I just assumed we had some way of knowing—a special sensor or something—and that when I became a Guardian you would—”

Eric turned his hand on Malcolm's arm into a throw, and Malcolm went sailing across the room. Not for the first time, he wished his armor weren't so light. His cousin couldn't hurt him much, but he tended to toss Malcolm around like a rag doll. Malcolm managed to tuck and roll to his feet just in time to block Eric's next kick, but when he spun to retaliate he found Eric halfway up one of the ropes that dangled from the ceiling.

Malcolm dropped his armor. “Stop for a second, Eric!”

Eric swung on the rope, and for a moment Malcolm was certain he was going to hit him again, even without the armor. He got into moods like this sometimes—got a look in his eye like he wasn't just practicing.

Malcolm flinched but held his ground as Eric swung closer and touched Malcolm lightly on the tip of his nose with a closed fist. “Boop.”

“Please, Eric. Talk to me for a little bit, okay? No one else will answer my questions.”

Eric sighed and sent himself into a graceful spin on the rope, hanging by one hand. When he stopped spinning, his face had softened. “Look, there’s no special sensor. When an attack is happening, Aunt Aleid will send you a text and come pick you up.”

“That’s...that’s honestly it?”

“It’s not complicated. We show up, smash the alien robots and get back to our day.”

“But, I mean, we’re fighting a constant alien invasion. ‘Aunt Aleid will send you a text’? That seems so basic.”

“I don’t make the rules.”

“What about the secret hideout in the basement of the Tower? When do I get a key?”

Eric snorted, then slid down the rope to land lightly on his feet. “I’ll tell you when I find out.” He folded his legs and sat on the floor in one smooth motion.

“You don’t have the key? But I thought it was, like, our base of operations.”

“You think a lot of things, it sounds like. But that’s not how it works. Only Grandpa Hendrik, Aleid and Felix go in the basement, and I’m pretty sure it’s just where they keep the sketchy business records. There’s no secret handshake either.”

Malcolm sat next to his cousin. “Can you at least tell me more about the klek?”

Eric shrugged. “Tell me what you already know.”

“I only know, like, the basic stuff. The stuff everyone knows.”

Eric nodded and twirled his hand to indicate Malcolm should go on.

“I mean, the original klek gate fell to Earth and the klek started popping out. And our grandparents were close when it fell, and it did something weird to them and gave them their powers. They used those to destroy the gate. And that stopped most of the klek, but every few weeks, new ones teleport in even without the gate.”

Eric nodded. Malcolm waited for him to say something, but Eric just smiled that lopsided smile the tabloids liked so much.

“So tell me the real stuff!” Malcolm finally said after a long silence. “Where do they come from? What the heck do they want? How do they get here even without their gate thing?”

Eric shrugged.

“Seriously? You don’t know anything more than that?”

Eric shook his head. “Don’t think too much about it. The klek are just a thing that happens, like a storm. The big ones can put up a fight, but otherwise?” He shrugged. “They invade, we stop them. Simple.”

“Okay, well, what about the tech? I know we started using the klek technology to make new stuff, but the tech only works in Porthaven. Why?”

“Yeah, that is weird, isn’t it?” Eric said. “And also, why don’t they use the tech to invent anything cool, like jetpacks? Or giant robots we could use to fight the klek? I’ve been asking for giant robots for ages, but Grandpa always gives me that look.” He laughed. “But seriously, Malcolm, I can’t answer any of these questions. I’m not sure anyone can.”

Malcolm shook his head. “That can’t be—”

Without even getting up from the floor, Eric reached out and grabbed Malcolm's wrists, twisting them until Malcolm was pressed face-first into the floor beside his cousin, shoulders aching. "Ow," he said into the cold, smooth wood.

"I can tell you this," Eric said, casually pinning Malcolm with a knee on his back. "The klek are metal right through. Just machines. No pilots or anything. I used to wonder if they might not even be intelligent, you know? They sure don't seem very smart. Maybe they're just programmed to invade. They're like tools that got away from their makers or something, and that's why they keep on coming even though we stop them every time. Like ants trying to get into someone's house."

"Used to wonder? What do you think now?"

"I try not to think about it at all, honestly. They're alien. They don't make sense. Find something better to do with your time, cuz." Eric stood, finally letting Malcolm get to his feet. "The klek are dumb, but they don't pull punches. Now spar with me, or I'm just going to start kicking your butt anyway." He raised his arms in a loose boxer's stance and gestured Malcolm forward.

Malcolm sighed and raised his armor. He knew already he wouldn't win—likely wouldn't even land a hit.

He lifted his fists and stepped forward. "Think you could go easy on me for once? As a birthday present?"

Eric smiled and kicked Malcolm in the face.



Sore and tired, Malcolm stepped into the shower in his room. The water jets on all sides scoured him with hot water, and he instantly felt better.

Once he was done, he toweled himself dry and pulled some more of his workout clothes from his closet—light cotton pants and a white T-shirt. His laundry from the night before had vanished from his room while he was training.

He checked his sylf. It was 2:00 p.m. on a Saturday, which meant he didn't have any tutoring this afternoon. And apparently he didn't have a battle with the klek coming up either.

Find something better to do with your time, Eric had said. Malcolm looked toward his bookshelves, at the rows of graphic-novel spines. Most of them were the fictionalized tales of his own family, which seemed to be relaunched each year. He hadn't read them all, but the publishers always sent him copies. The most worn books, on the lower shelves, weren't about the Gravenhursts. They were his own collection—Squirrel Girl, Ms. Marvel, the classic Claremont and Davis run of Excalibur that he'd worked hard to collect. Ones about heroes who didn't just do it as a job but tried to do every ounce of good they could in the world. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his time. He pulled on his running shoes and left the room.

He stepped off the private family-only elevator eighty floors down, into the busy lobby of Gravenhurst Tower. People with blazers and briefcases moved in and out of the public elevators on the opposite wall, busy at work despite it being the weekend. Near the front doors, security guards with slim, silvery body armor sat at the wide front desk, watching people through the green visors that let them scan for weapons. People without clearance checked in their sylfs at another desk farther in. Malcolm wasn't sure what the point of all the security was. Who would commit a crime in the home of the only superpowered family in the world?

As he approached the front door, Orin—the doorman—nodded to him and tipped his hat, pulling his red jacket

straighter. "Going out, are we, Mr. Gravenhurst?"

"Yeah. Just for a bit. It's not in the schedule."

"I'll call you a pod, shall I?"

"No, that's okay, Orin. I'm going for a run."

"Is there something amiss with the sim suites? Usually you take your runs there."

"No. Just...fresh air."

"Are you sure, sir? Have you mentioned this to anyone?"

"Yeah, Felix knows. See you later!" Malcolm dashed through the front door before Orin could call Felix to confirm. Outside he started running as he had said he would, his sylf whirring louder as it sped to keep up. People looked at him sideways as he passed, but he hurried away before they recognized him. He ran until he was out of sight of the Tower, then armored up and leapt skyward.

He came down on the balcony of a building a block away and looked around. Gravenhurst Tower loomed over him and the rest of the city, its silvered windows reflecting the blue sky perfectly, making it look like the framework of a building more than a full skyscraper. The Tower flared toward the top, like a giant scepter rising out of the ground. It looked like it should fall over at any moment, but nothing would ever topple the Tower.

Malcolm turned his attention groundward. He wasn't sure what to look for. Was there a lot of crime here, in the richest part of the city? Probably, but mostly white-collar. The kind that armor and superstrength wouldn't help with. He needed to go somewhere with street crime.

After a moment his drone ascended to join him. It wasn't going to be able to keep up with him, he realized. He signaled it with a click of his tongue, and it flew immediately