

CHAPTER ONE

YOU KNOW THAT OLD saying, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’? I never really understood it, because whenever things changed in my life, they, well, changed. I mean, when I got my superpowers almost a year ago now, I went from being an ordinary high school student with an ordinary future ahead of him to being a young superhero in charge of his own team. Pretty sure that blowing up alien planets is not something that most people would describe as ‘ordinary,’ after all ... or getting banished to another universe by an evil alternate universe version of your own father, for that matter. That’s definitely not ordinary.

But now, sitting in the cell of a jail where I was being kept until the police arranged for me to be transported to a more ‘secure’ facility, I realized that there was more truth to that saying than I originally thought. Even though I was in an alternate universe where it seemed like up was down and down was up, I was back in jail yet again.

And what’s funnier is that on both occasions I was imprisoned, it was on trumped up charges. The first time, I had been arrested because of my involvement with a cult that had tried to rescue its leader from the government, even though I had been essentially brainwashed to serve them the entire time. I didn’t think it made much sense to put me in jail with actual criminals, but then again, the government didn’t often make sense.

The second time, it was—or maybe I should say ‘is,’ since I’m currently in jail right now—because I apparently wasn’t wearing the really dull purple and gray uniforms that all citizens of ‘Rationalia’ (the name of the city I had ended up in) were supposed to wear. Also, because I sassed the police officer and had displayed ‘ignorance,’ which is apparently considered bad enough around here to justify jailing people for.

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t put up with this. I would have used my super powers to fight off any police officers who tried to arrest me; then I would have run away and figured out how the hell to get back to my universe, where the alternate evil universe version of my father named Mastermind was located.

But the police of this universe were much more effective and better armed than the police of my universe. They shot me with a pellet of powerless gas, which had quickly sapped me of my powers, and then attached a weird, blinking collar around my neck that they had informed me was a ‘power suppression device.’ They didn’t explain exactly how it worked, but it seemed to somehow negate my powers while I wore it. It reminded me of a similar device from my universe.

But this device was harder to get off than that one. It was locked with a key card that I didn’t have access to at the moment, and because the collar was made of some kind of thick metal, I couldn’t tear it off. I mean, if my powers weren’t currently being inhibited, I might have been able to rip it off with my super strength, but as this device was the reason I couldn’t use my super strength, that was kind of a pointless thing to think about.

And, of course, my hands and feet had been chained together with cuffs that were uncomfortable and severely restricted my movement. Just like the collar, I couldn’t break them or even loosen them a little to make them a bit more comfortable.

So I was forced to sit in my tiny cell; I mean, it was *tiny*. It was about as big as a broom closet. The cot was even smaller; it was so small that I probably couldn't have slept on it even if I curled up into a tiny little ball. When I'd been thrown in here, I'd said jokingly, "What is this, a cell for ants?"

Unfortunately, that meme didn't seem to exist in this universe, or maybe the guards didn't have a sense of humor, because they just slammed the door shut and left me alone without saying a word. That was fine, though, because I was getting tired of them lecturing me on my 'ignorance.'

I had no idea what was going to happen to me next, though. Yes, I knew I was going to jail, but the way the guards talked, it sounded like they were going to do something else to me as well. Maybe they were going to 'educate' me on the laws of this city. Something told me that that wasn't going to be exactly painless.

In any case, I was surprised at how none of the guards seemed to recognize me as the son of their leader. Then again, I had not told them that Mastermind was my father (or at least an evil alternate universe counterpart of my father, anyway) and from what I could tell, it wasn't like Mastermind had shown pictures of me to everyone he knew. All of the statues and TV screens only seemed to display Mastermind, like he was some kind of god that the people were supposed to worship.

Regardless, it was pretty clear that Mastermind had expected this to happen. That's why he sent me here, to his home dimension, because he knew his men would arrest me and throw me in jail. Maybe he even expected them to execute me, but even if they didn't, there was no way I could go back home. After all, I didn't have any dimension-hopping technology or powers myself, so I was basically stranded here, for all intents and purposes.

That filled me with a sense of dread, a dread I'd never felt before. That was because I had never been in a situation quite like this before. Even when I traveled far from home, I never was totally stranded. The closest equivalent to this situation was when I went to the Mother World of the Pokacu, but I wasn't sure I could count on Mecha Knight or anyone else opening a portal to bring me back home this time.

That didn't stop me from worrying about how everyone else was doing, of course. Mastermind and White Lightning were both still alive and Mastermind's plan was, presumably, still in motion. Granted, White Lightning had been electrocuted horribly and Mastermind had been shot in the chest, but something told me that those wounds wouldn't slow their plans down very much.

I was especially worried about the Apocalypse Switch. I still didn't know what it was, but if Mastermind wanted it, then it was pretty obviously important. I hoped that Blizzard, Ivan, Rime, Triplet, and Emma were able to stop them, though when I remembered how badly Blizzard, Emma, and Triplet had been injured, I doubted it.

In particular, I was very worried about Blizzard. I didn't like being separated from her for very long. Especially since there was no guarantee that I would ever see her again. I might be stranded in this dimension for the rest of my life ... assuming, of course, I wasn't executed for the crime of 'ignorance.'

That meant that I would need to figure out how to escape. I didn't know if Ultimate Max was still operational in this universe or not, but I guessed not, because Mastermind had told me that there were only about 100 superhumans in his dimension anymore. Either way, I figured my chances of going

back home were higher outside of prison than inside, but as long as I wore this collar, I wasn't going anywhere.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I heard footsteps coming down the hallway outside of the cell. Soon, a guard—who wore thick purple and gray body armor, which seemed to be the official colors of Rationalia—appeared in front of my cell, the same guard who had tossed me in here a couple of hours ago.

“All right, ignorant criminal,” said the guard. “I have arranged for a van to transport you to the Rationalian National Prison, so you're coming with me. If you try to resist, I will use force to subdue you.”

I frowned as the guard inserted the key card into the cell door. “That's it? I'm just going to prison, like a common crook?”

“You're not just going to prison,” said the guard. “As per the Superhuman Extermination Act of 2020, you will be put to death upon arrival at the Rationalian National Prison.”

“I'm going to be executed?” I said in shock. “Why?”

“Because the law states that all superhumans who don't serve Mastermind must be killed,” the guard explained. He spoke to me like I was a really stupid kid. “Superhumans are a danger to Rationalia. Our Great Leader has decided that they must be killed; therefore, we are going to execute you.”

“But I'm your leader's son,” I said. “Kevin Jason. Don't you know who I am?”

The guard snorted. “Yeah, and I'm the Queen of England. You're not the first rogue superhuman to claim to be Our Great Leader's dead son, so don't even try to lie to us.”

“Run a DNA test,” I said. “That will prove my relation to him. You don't need to take my word for it.”

“DNA tests take a long time to do,” said the guard, shaking his head. “Besides, the law says you have to be killed and we're supposed to follow the law. Now stop talking; your voice is annoying.”

The guard raised a device in his hands that looked like a remote control and pressed a green button on it.

Immediately, a terrible shock emitted from the collar around my neck, causing me to gasp in pain. I slumped backwards, feeling like I had just stuck a fork into an electrical outlet, while the guard lowered the device in his hands, a grin of satisfaction on his face.

“Not so talkative anymore, are you?” said the guard. “But if you want to keep lying to me, I'll be more than happy to give you a few extra jolts. I've found that that is an effective way of dealing with liars like you.”

I didn't say anything to the guard, but that was because I was already thinking of how I was going to escape. I just sat there, looking slumped over and defenseless, as the guard opened the cell door and walked over to me, an arrogant grin on his face.

“Okay, criminal,” said the guard, reaching out toward me with his large hands. “Get up and come with me. No funny—”

I didn't give him a chance to finish because I kicked him in the groin. I may not have had access to my super strength at the moment, but that didn't mean that a good kick to the privates still couldn't hurt him.

The guard cried out in pain and fell, knocking his head against the side of the narrow walls. Before he could get up again, I kicked him in the head, knocking him out in an instant. He immediately went limp, though now he was in my way.

Still, the guard appeared to be out for the count, so I stood up. I took his key card from his pocket and used it to unlock the shackles around my arms and legs, but when I tried to use it on the power suppressor, it wouldn't work. Damn it. That meant there was a different key for my collar, but I didn't know who had it or where it was being kept.

Ah, well. It looked like I was going to have to rely on my wits and quick-thinking to get out of here, rather than my powers. I had no idea where to go, though, but I would figure that out once I escaped this place. I took the guard's pellet gun from his side, as well as a baton he also carried; maybe I didn't have my powers, but that didn't mean I had to be unarmed and unprotected.

Rising to my feet, I stepped over the guard and peered out of my cell. The hallway outside was empty; no guards or anything. I didn't even see any security cameras, which was strange, because that seemed like a huge security risk to me. Maybe this was a very poor police department that couldn't afford security cameras or something.

Anyway, the coast was clear and I remembered the path from here to the exit, so I decided to retrace my steps until I reached the exit. After that ... I would figure out what to do next. And it should be easy; I saw no guards or security cameras or anything else that could stop me.

So I took one step out of the cell. The second my foot touched the floor of the hallway, an earsplitting alarm suddenly went off. Not only that, but the lights began flashing red, causing me to start, but I didn't see anyone or anything coming to check on the alarms.

But I wasn't going to stand still and let them find me. I ran toward the other end of the hallway, in the direction that would eventually take me to the exit, but then a panel on the wall slid away, revealing a hidden room, and a robot stepped out of it, blocking off my path.

The robot was tall and large, but also lean. It had purple and gray armor and kind of reminded me of the Pokacu soldiers that had participated in the invasion of Earth, except it was totally mechanical and lacked flesh or any other organic parts. Its head resembled Mastermind's helmet, except for the glowing red eyes.

Skidding to a stop, I watched as the robot raised its hands, like it was about to shoot me, even though it didn't have any weapons in its hands.

"Escapee detected," said the robot. "Objective: Capture escapee. Kill if necessary."

The robot's hands folded back, revealing cannons in its arms. It aimed the cannons at me and fired, sending a blast of black energy flying toward me.

I dove, hit the floor, and rolled just underneath the black energy, which burned by overhead. I rolled back up to my feet in front of the robot and instinctively lashed out at it with my fist, before I remembered that I didn't have my super strength a second before my fist slammed into the side of the robot's head.

Ow! My fist hurt. I clutched my hand, which felt like all of the bones had shattered, and staggered backwards, but then the robot grabbed me by the throat and lifted me off the floor, its robotic eyes glaring at me.

"Escapee is resisting," said the robot, "albeit not very effectively. Neutralize escapee."

The robot held up its other hand—which now had long spikes poking out of its fingertips—and slammed it into my side. The spikes pierced my suit and my skin; it felt like being stung by five wasps at once.

Yelling in pain, I slammed the guard's baton I'd stolen against the side of the robot's head as hard as I could. The blow connected and actually made the robot let go of me. I landed on the floor and used my momentum to roll between its legs and emerge on the other side.

Then I swung my baton, aiming for the knees, and smashed the baton against the knees. It wasn't enough to shatter them—without my super strength, I was pretty ordinary in terms of strength—but it did make the robot stumble and fall onto its knees.

Since I knew I couldn't beat the robot, I turned and ran, but I immediately felt very sluggish. It was like I had taken some sleep medicine all of a sudden. I staggered forward, trying to keep my eyes open, but it was a losing battle.

Then I heard the robot getting back up and looked over my shoulder to see that it was now facing me. Its expression hadn't changed, but something about the way it stood made me think it was feeling very smug.

"The paralyzing knockout venom I injected into your body is currently making its way through your blood stream," said the robot. "I estimate that you have ten minutes before it knocks you out. It won't kill you, but it will make you easy to capture."

That was what the robot had been doing when he stabbed his fingers into my sides: injecting me with a venom that would knock me out. And if he was telling the truth, then I didn't have much time before it took me out.

So I said, "Ten minutes is more than enough time for me to get the hell out of here. Bye."

I aimed my gun and fired at the robot's face several times. I hit him with half a dozen powerless pellets, which exploded into a thick gas cloud that the robot likely couldn't see through. It had raised its arms to protect itself, which gave me the opportunity to turn and run.

I ran down the hallway, but even as I ran, I heard the robot coming after me. But I didn't look over my shoulder, because even though I knew that that didn't have any bearing on whether the robot caught up with me, I just wanted to focus on getting out of here alive than see if the robot was still chasing me or not.

I heard something charging behind me and I looked over my shoulder to see that the robot was aiming its energy cannons at me again. The cannons were charged with energy, which meant they were about to blow up any minute now.

But I also noticed a fork coming up at the end of the hall, so I immediately turned left (which I couldn't remember if it was the correct way back or not, but I was in such a hurry to escape that I didn't care).

As a result, I managed to avoid the energy blast, which exploded against the wall behind me. I continued running, but also shot more powerless pellets behind me without looking. I had no idea if any of them actually hit the robot or not, but as long as it slowed him down, I didn't care.

But as I ran down the hallway, three more guards suddenly appeared at the other end, each one armed with what looked like the powerless pellet guns that I was using. They immediately aimed their guns at me, causing me to skid to a halt again.

“Stop, criminal!” one of the guards shouted. “Or we will shoot!”

Biting my lower lip, I heard the sound of metal clanking against the concrete floor and looked over my shoulder to see the robot coming at me. It stopped at about the same distance away as the guards, which meant that I was effectively trapped between the robot and the guards.

Not only that, but the robot’s venom was making it harder and harder to think clearly. I wanted to sleep and knew that I would fall asleep very soon, but I couldn’t afford to. If I fell unconscious now, I would be captured again and maybe killed. I couldn’t allow that.

Yet how was I supposed to escape or even resist? With the robot behind me and the guards ahead of me, I was trapped. And there were no rooms for me to escape into, either. It seemed like my escape attempt was about to be foiled.

I tugged at the collar around my neck. It still wouldn’t budge.

“Drop your weapons and put your hands on the back of your head,” one of the guards snapped. “Or else.”

As much as I hated to do it, I didn’t see any point in resisting. There was a possibility, at least, that the guards might just keep me alive, at least until they took me to the prison where I was going to be executed. Complying with their demands seemed like the only option available to me at the moment.

So I gently lowered the baton and the nearly empty powerless gas gun onto the floor. But just as I stood up again, I heard something that sounded like a car engine rumbling. It sounded like it was coming from the wall to my right, but I didn’t see anything other than the wall. The guards and robot must have heard it as well, because they also looked at the wall in confusion as the sound grew louder and louder.

Then I realized what was about to happen and I dived onto the floor, covering my head with my arms, just as the wall exploded. Chunks of cement and plaster flew everywhere as the front of a large truck burst through the wall. I heard the guards cry out in shock, but I didn’t pay them any attention because I was looking to see if the truck had created a hole for me to escape through.

Unfortunately, the truck left no room in the wall for me to escape through, so I just stared at it. It was a large truck—not quite as large as an eighteen wheeler, but definitely not a small little Toyota, either. It looked more like an armored van, actually, like the kind banks use to transport money. It was unmarked, however, so I didn’t know who it belonged to or who had chosen this moment to burst through the wall with it. Nor could I see into the driver’s side of the vehicle, because the windshield was heavily tinted.

All of a sudden, the driver’s and passenger’s doors flew open, followed by gunfire from both doors. I ducked my head and covered it with my arms while the guards ran back the way they came, using the corner for shelter from the rain of bullets, although one of them did get hit in the forehead and fall to the floor, seemingly dead upon impact.

Not that that mattered to me, however, because the guys in the van were still shooting and I was still basically out in the open without any protection. I didn’t even try to move, however, because I didn’t want to put myself directly in the path of the bullets.

But then the gunfire suddenly came to a stop and someone jumped out of the driver’s side of the vehicle. Well, the gunfire stopped on this side; on the side where the robot was, I could still hear gunfire

and could still hear bullets denting metal, which likely meant that the robot was being held off by the attackers.

The person who had jumped out of the driver's side ran over to me and I raised my head high enough to see that the person was a woman I had never seen before. She looked like she was in her late twenties; at least, I assumed so, because she was wearing a ski mask over her face that didn't let me see anything except for her blue eyes. She also wore body armor; not like the kind the guards wore, but much rougher and in black, like she had gotten it secondhand from somewhere.

She was also armed with a gun, the kind that shot bullets, not the kind that shot powerless pellets. She held it like she was an expert marksman, but she didn't aim it at me, thank goodness.

"You!" the woman shouted, her voice muffled behind her mask. "Who are you?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," I said, taking my hands off my head as I looked up at her. "And who are your friends? That was a pretty dynamic entrance you guys just did."

The woman's eyes widened when she saw my face. She actually took a step back, as if I was threatening her with a gun, even though I was completely unarmed at the moment and was actually at her mercy due to the fact that she had a gun and I did not.

"It can't be ..." the woman said, her voice so low that it was almost impossible to hear over the sounds of the bullets. "Kevin?"

The way she said my name was like she knew who I was, but before I could ask who she was, the venom finally kicked in and I suddenly lost consciousness.