

# CHAPTER ONE

**W**HILE BEING A SIDEKICK DIDN'T pay nearly as well as being an actual superhero, Alex Fry—better known as Beams, the sidekick of the famous superhero Rubberman—had come to love the job. In the year since he had started working as a sidekick, Beams had saved his city from multiple threats, not to mention learned a thing or two about the actual superhero business itself from his boss, Rubberman, who was more like a mentor than a boss. Beams enjoyed protecting his city, family, and friends from the criminals and supervillains who sought to harm them, and he had to admit that having his own fan club and getting paid to do it wasn't so bad, either.

But if there was one thing Beams both loved *and* hated about the business, it was the unpredictability of it all. Some days, you might find yourself preventing a bank heist being pulled off by the local criminal gang. Other days, you might find yourself going toe-to-toe with a fanatic who believed that holding a high school full of students hostage was the ideal way to stick it to the man. And on others still, you might have to avoid getting killed by an assassin hired by a rival corporation that wanted your boss' business.

And then, on some days, you found yourself at the vanguard of a full-on alien invasion of Earth, made even worse by the knowledge that Beams could have prevented it entirely if he had just thought through things a bit better six months ago.

The day had started out normal enough. Beams had woken up, showered, and got dressed before having breakfast with his parents and his older brother, James, who was in town for the summer due to his college being out for the summer. James, being the helpful big brother he was, had offered to take Beams to the local mall to help him pick up chicks, but Beams had refused because he had to get to work. Beams' workload had increased since the start of summer, though it was mostly because Beams didn't have any school in the summer, which meant he had more free time to dedicate to Rubberman's business.

Looking back, though, Beams wondered what would have happened if he decided to play hooky. Beams never believed in the whole 'butterfly effect' phenomenon, but he wondered if there was an alternate universe somewhere where he accepted his brother's offer to go pick up chicks and the alien invasion never happened.

*It's not helpful to regret the past,* Rubberman always told Beams. *Just learn from your mistakes and make sure you don't repeat them in the future. That's all we can do.*

That was true enough, but when a huge alien spaceship descended from the sky above and sent out dozens of strange, flying creatures screeching at the top of their lungs, Beams wondered how this was *his* fault.

It happened when Beams was about halfway between his house and the Elastic Cave, his boss' base. He had taken his usual shortcut to the Elastic Cave's false storefront entrance, hoping to get to work early so he and Rubberman could get started on their daily patrol. Rubberman had informed Beams that they would be doing their usual afternoon patrol today, with Rubberman using the Rubbermobile and Beams using the Beams Cycle. Beams loved the Beams Cycle, because it was a motorcycle designed specifically for him and he rarely got to ride it.

The sky had been cloudy and thundering, with lightning lighting up the sky every now and then, but it didn't make sense to Beams, because the weather app on his phone had said that it was supposed to be bright and sunny today. It was especially strange given how it was August, which was

usually the hottest and driest month of the year for Texas. But Beams had dismissed it as the weather app being wrong as usual and hadn't thought to bring along his umbrella or raincoat.

Still, the thunder had become so severe that Beams almost considered turning around and heading back home when the alien spaceship first descended from the sky.

At first, when Beams saw it, he thought he must have forgotten his glasses and was maybe seeing an airplane or something. But when Beams raised his fingers up to his eyes and felt the rim of his glasses, he realized that his eyes were working perfectly fine and his glasses were on his face where they were supposed to be.

Coming to a stop on his bike, Beams looked up at the massive alien spaceship as it descended from the clouds like some kind of god. The spaceship resembled a giant flying saucer, except with a weird pillar-like thing sticking out underneath it. Lightning crackled along its surface and Beams realized that the thunder he had heard earlier was not actually thunder at all, but the engine of the ship itself. Though the ship looked unarmed, an ominous chill went down Beams' spine nonetheless.

A sudden ringing from his pocket made Beams start. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and, seeing it was Rubberman, answered the call and said, "Hey, boss, do you see what I'm seeing?"

"If what you're seeing is a gigantic alien spaceship hovering over downtown Golden City, then yes, I see it," said Rubberman's voice over his phone. "I'm watching it through the monitors in the Elastic Cave. Where are you?"

Beams looked around at his surroundings. "I'm in an empty alleyway near downtown Golden City, about halfway between my house and the Elastic Cave."

"Okay," said Rubberman. "Adams suggested I call you to make sure you're okay."

"Nah, I'm fine, boss," Beams said, glancing up at the spaceship, "though I'm not sure for how much longer, given how dangerous that thing looks."

"Get to the Elastic Cave as fast as you can," said Rubberman. "We have no idea how dangerous these aliens are, so—"

All of a sudden, the phone connection cut out. Beams looked at his phone screen and saw that he had no data at all, which was odd because he had just renewed his plan yesterday.

Beams dialed Rubberman's number again, but he just got the out of order sound. That wasn't good.

Slipping his phone back into his pocket, Beams decided to make a run for the Elastic Cave when he heard a strange screeching sound above. Looking up, Beams wished he hadn't, because the creatures he saw flying down from the spaceship would live in his nightmares forever.

They looked like giant bats, flapping their massive wings as they peeled off the core of the spaceship and scattered across the city in every direction. Their high-pitched screeches filled the air like exploding bombs and, though they flew well enough, there was something distinctly unnatural about how they moved. They flew as though they were used to a different level of gravity, though there was something more disturbing about them that Beams could not put his finger on.

One of the bats broke off from the rest and headed directly for Beams. It came fast, too fast for Beams to put his costume on. But Beams did manage to jump off his bike at the last second. As he hit the street, the bat's claws snatched his bike, snapped it in two like a stick, and threw both halves away. The bat flew back up to the sky, while Beams scrambled to his feet and looked up at the creature.

That was no bat. Though its general physical appearance was bat-like, it had bug-like eyes and a beak like an eagle. It looked like no animal Beams had ever seen on Earth, but given where it came from, that wasn't surprising.

The bat turned in an arc and rushed back toward him like a bull. Beams took off his glasses and fired twin eye beams at the bat. The lasers struck it head on, but the bat alien thing didn't even slow down.

It just screeched in anger and flew toward him faster than his eyes could follow, pushing through his lasers as though they weren't even there.

Cutting off his laser beams, Beams closed his eyes and fired his lasers. They rebounded against his eyelids and Beams suddenly felt energy flow through his body.

Opening his eyes again, Beams leaped directly into the air, causing the alien bat to go underneath him. Beams jumped higher than he intended, however, and reached out and caught the ledge of a nearby building. He pulled himself up onto the roof of the building and scrambled to his feet, feeling both exhausted and yet energetic.

Looking up, Beams didn't see the alien bat at first until it landed on the other side of the rooftop hard enough to crack the roof and sent tiles falling off to the street below. The alien bat growled and flared its wings out, though Beams thought it was just trying to intimidate him more than anything.

"What *are* you?" said Beams. "Can you even understand what I'm saying? Or are you stupid as well as ugly?"

The alien bat screeched again, but instead of rushing toward Beams, it made some kind of strange sucking sound and suddenly spat something out of its beak at him. Something green and ugly hurtled across the air toward Beams, but Beams jumped to the side, just barely avoiding the thing, which struck the part of the roof where he'd been standing mere moments before.

Coming to a stop, Beams looked over at the green thing and felt his stomach sink. It looked like snot, but the way it hissed against the roof tiles told him that it was actually some kind of acid. That meant Beams had just barely avoided getting splashed with acid.

"Oh, so you can spit acid now, too?" Beams said, looking over at the alien bat. "What else can you do? Can you pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time as well?"

The alien bat didn't respond. Its wings suddenly folded over against its body and the alien bat began rushing toward Beams on four limbs, screeching the entire time.

Surprised, Beams nonetheless jumped into the air over it, but the alien bat suddenly jumped into the air and slashed at him with one of its claws. Going too fast to control his trajectory, Beams got slammed in the chest by the bat's claw and fell back down to the roof below. He hit the roof hard and nearly rolled off, only catching the edge of the roof at the last second. Jerking to a stop, Beams looked down and realized that he was a couple of stories off the street below, meaning that if he fell, he'd likely break his legs.

Then Beams heard the sounds of the bat's claws tearing across the roof and its head suddenly appeared over the edge of the roof. The alien bat was looking straight down at Beams, snapping its beak repeatedly, like some kind of nervous habit.

Only too late did Beams realize that the alien bat was preparing another round of acidic saliva, this time aimed directly at his face. And this time, he had no way to dodge.

*I hate Mondays*, Beams thought as he stared up into the monstrous face of the alien bat above him. *I hate them a lot.*

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