

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, September 1st, 2036, 12:02 AM ...

I THOUGHT I woke up tonight to calm down my crying baby brother. Turned out I actually woke up to protect him from the crazy anti-superhuman murderer in the window. Life is like that sometimes.

Let me back up a bit. My name is Ashley Jason. As of yesterday—August 31st—I am seventeen-years-old and am going to be starting my second-year at the Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans tomorrow (and yes, the Academy was named after my late grandfather, the famous superhero named Genius).

I'm also dying of an incurable genetic disorder that affects one in a million superhumans, but that's not relevant at the moment. I'm taking medicine to treat it, but I'm not sure there is any medicine you can take to treat getting murdered by a crazy person who hates your guts.

It started at midnight the night of my seventeenth birthday, as I said. Being the early bird that I was, I had already turned into bed long before the rest of my family. It helped that I was dead tired. My seventeenth birthday had been full of excitement, starting with a family visit to a local amusement park, then a birthday party with just me, my family, and my best friend Cora, and finishing off with a trip to see the newest superhero blockbuster movie that recently came out. I could never enjoy these movies when I watched them with Dad, though. Dad was a superhero and he would always complain and nitpick about the inaccuracies in these kinds of movies, especially if they were made by normals.

I managed to enjoy it well enough, though. *Bronze Man 3* might not have been a one hundred percent accurate depiction of what life was really like for superheroes nowadays, but it was still a fun action romp. I also learned that one of my teachers—Anna Barrington, or as she is known, the Fashionista—apparently designed the costumes for the movie when I saw her name in the credits. That surprised me, even though I knew that the Fashionista had worked in Hollywood before becoming a real superhero.

So anyway, that night I slept soundly in my bed in my room with the door and windows closed. I didn't bother to lock either of them. Silvers, Texas was a typical small town where everyone pretty much knew everyone else. Crime wasn't too high and the worst crime you ever heard of was someone stealing tools from someone's shed. In all of my seventeen years of living here, no one had ever broken into our house, so I never had reason to suspect that someone would try something that stupid.

I say 'stupid' because my parents—Kevin and Emily Jason, better known as the superheroes Bolt and Blizzard—are two of the most well-known supers in the country. Every person in Silvers knew who my parents were and exactly what they could do. Also, my younger brother, Jake, and I were both strong supers in our own right, even if we weren't quite as powerful as our parents yet.

You'd have to be a complete idiot to try to break into our house when all four of us are home at the same time. Unless you happened to be packing enough powerless gas to take out a whole family of supers, something which this crazed murderer apparently—

I'm getting ahead of myself again. Where was I? Oh, yes. Getting woken up by my baby brother, Ronny, who slept in his own room on the second floor of our house that happened to be adjacent to mine.

I loved Ronny. Really, I did. Ronald Theodore Jason was my nine-month-old younger brother. Little Ronny came into the world on December 25th, 2035, making him a Christmas baby. That was probably why Mom dressed him almost exclusively in red and green baby clothes, had painted the walls of his room those colors, and even found red and green diapers for him. Don't ask me where. Mom could be so weird sometimes.

But, however happy I was that I had another little brother, it was kind of ruined by the fact that Ronny cried. A lot.

I knew babies cried, but I'd never seen a baby cry as much as Ronny. He practically came out of Mom screaming and never seemed to let up except during nap time. You'd think Ronny would sleep at night, but if anything, his crying seemed to get worse. Or maybe it was just because I was so exhausted that his crying only *seemed* worse, I don't know. I swear Jake didn't cry this much when he was a baby, even though I can barely remember what he was like as a baby. I definitely didn't, either, no matter how many times Dad insisted I was a huge crier as a baby, to the point where he joked that crying was my superpower.

So when I heard Ronny crying, I just had to get up and calm him down. Yes, I know it was technically my parents' job to check on Ronny when he was upset, but my parents' room was on the first floor of the house while my room and Ronny's room were on the second. Thus, it was usually quicker for me to check on little Ronny at night than it was for them, even taking my dad's super-speed into consideration. Thus, Mom and I had taken turns checking on baby Ronny all summer long, with Dad occasionally showing Mom mercy and sacrificing his sleep to give her a chance to catch up on her rest some nights.

Jake, naturally, never helped. He always claimed that he was just a really sound sleeper and never heard Ronny, but frankly, I think he just didn't want to have to help change diapers or lose sleep over a baby. It was annoying, but I knew from experience that trying to get Jake to help with Ronny was a losing proposition. So it was almost always quicker to check on Ronny myself than to try to get Jake to do it, even though his room was just across the hall from mine.

That didn't leave me in a very good mood, though, when I tossed my blankets off my legs and stood up from my bed. Especially when I realized that Dad must have accidentally turned the air conditioning off or something. It was so hot in my room that I could feel sweat making my old Pink Pony t-shirt stick to my back. Gross. Maybe that was why Ronny was crying.

Regardless, I slipped on my bunny slippers and shuffled down the dark hallway to Ronny's room. I didn't bother to turn on any of the lights because Ronny's room was right next door to mine. Plus, I didn't want to blind myself, which would put me in an even worse mood than before. In hindsight, though, turning on the lights might have saved me a world of trouble later on.

Anyway, I opened the door to Ronny's room. That made Ronny's cries—which had been slightly muted by the walls and door of his room—even louder. I cringed at Ronny's cries but still entered the room anyway, leaving the door open behind me as I stepped inside.

As I thought, Ronny's room was just as hot as mine. Poor Ronny lay in his crib crying his head off. By the softly glowing night light next to his crib, I could see that his cute baby face was an ugly red, with tears flooding down his face. He also had a long dribble of snot running down from his nostrils to his chin, but fortunately, I didn't smell any dirty diapers. If I had, I probably would have started crying, too.

I rubbed my eyes and, walking up to Ronny's crib, said, in the gentlest voice I could muster on four hours of sleep, "Hey, bro, it's okay. Big sister is here. It's fine."

Ronny, of course, kept crying. Whether it was because he still hadn't mastered the English language or because he was a literal crybaby, I wasn't sure. I just knew that I would need to pick him up if I wanted to get him to stop crying.

Sighing, I scooped up Ronny in my arms and began rocking him back and forth, saying, "There, there. It's okay. Just go to sleep ... please stop crying ... I need to sleep, too ..."

To my surprise, Ronny stopped screaming. His face was still red and his nose was still dribbling snot, but he seemed a lot less upset. That was a veritable miracle. It used to take hours to make Ronny stop crying once he started. Admittedly, he still wasn't *asleep*, but at least he wasn't crying anymore. Maybe he would go to sleep if I rocked him for a few minutes.

First things first, though. I walked over to the dresser next to his crib, grabbed a baby wipe, and began wiping the snot from his nose. Ronny, as usual, didn't like it when I wiped his nose, trying to turn his head and face away from me so I couldn't do it.

“Come on, Ronny,” I said, trying—and probably failing—to hide the frustration in my voice. “If I can handle getting up in the middle of the night before my first day of school, then you can tolerate having your nose—”

A loud *crack* at the window interrupted me. I looked over my shoulder, wondering what had created that noise when something small and round smashed through Ronny’s window and landed on the floor between me and the door. Turning around to look at it, I could barely make out what the object was, other than it was small, round, and appeared to be made out of metal. A red light blinked on top it, bright in the darkness of Ronny’s room.

Then, without warning, the ball let loose a high whining sound and exploded. A huge cloud of powerless gas suddenly filled Ronny’s room, causing me to hack and gasp as the gas entered my lungs. Ronny, of course, immediately started crying, though I couldn’t blame him. The sticky, stinky gas stung my eyes, making them water and making it hard for me to see, especially in the darkness of the room. Couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like for poor Ronny.

“What the—?” I said as Ronny screamed in my arms. “Powerless gas—? Who—?”

Without warning, someone smashed through what remained of Ronny’s window and hit the floor at a roll. The figure rose to his feet and, pulling out a gun, quickly swept it across the room, though he came to a stop when he saw me and Ronny standing beside Ronny’s crib.

Ronny’s night light let me see that he was a man in black tactical gear. Leather bulletproof armor covered his chest, arms, and legs, while his face was hidden behind a large helmet with a silver faceplate. Red lights gleamed from either side of his faceplate, making them look almost like demonic eyes. On his right shoulder, a symbol of what looked like Earth with a human ring formed around it could be seen, though I didn’t recognize it.

The gunman looked as shocked to see me as I was to see him. He lowered his gun and said, in a slightly muffled voice, “Huh? What are you doing here? I was told only the baby was in this room.”

“I’m his older sister,” I said, bringing Ronny closer to my chest. “I should be asking who *you* are because I’m pretty sure this isn’t your room.”

The gunman continued to look surprised to see me, but he shook his head and raised his gun again. “Never mind. My orders were to kill the baby, but if I have to kill a mutant freak like you, too, then so be it. Tell me, freak, are you ready to die tonight?”

“Mutant freak?” I said. “That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

The gunman chuckled. “You supers are all the same. You destroy our cities and kill our people but then lecture us on politeness. The world needs to be cleansed of your kind.”

“What the heck are you talking about?” I said. “And who are you?”

The gunman, however, fired his gun at me twice. The only reason he missed was probably due to the darkness of the room and the thick powerless gas messing with his aim. I did jump out of the way, but my reflexes weren’t *that* fast and I accidentally tripped over my own feet. I landed on my back on the floor, still holding a crying Ronny, who I had managed to avoid dropping.

Gasping hard and blinking back the tears, I looked up in time to see the gunman standing over me, his gun aimed at my face.

“Who am I, freak?” said the gunman. “I’m one of the Guardians of Humanity. And I am going to protect humanity from *you*.”

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