

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday, August 31st, 1:04 PM, 2038 ...

JUST MY luck that my best birthday ever would be ruined by a couple of supervillains. And not just any supervillains, either, but supervillains who held a grudge against me for beating them in the past.

Only this time, I didn't think I could beat them.

Dang it. I'm doing that thing again that Cora always tells me I'm not supposed to. That is, I'm jumping to the exciting bits before properly setting things up. That's supposed to be a good way to start a story (although this is real life I'm writing about, not fiction), but Cora says it just makes things confusing, so I'll start from the actual beginning:

My name is Ashley Carrie Jason, though you can also call me Crafter. I'm the daughter of the famous superheroes Bolt and Blizzard and the granddaughter of the late superhero Genius, a member of the First Generation of superheroes and a legendary hero himself. As you can tell, superheroes pretty much run in the blood, even if I'm not officially a superhero myself yet.

Anyway, today is my nineteenth birthday, which amazes me because I never thought I'd get this far. I have a rare genetic disorder known as Hernandez's Disease which basically causes my powers to slowly kill me over time. According to scientists, I'll probably die by the age of twenty or twenty-one when my body can't handle the damage that my powers cause to it. Granted, I am taking an experimental drug to treat it, but whether it will actually help me live past twenty-one ... the jury is still out on that one.

Regardless, I was never one to skip birthday celebrations, especially today.

So my boyfriend, Barrett, and I decided to celebrate together by going to my city's local park. It seemed like a safe idea at the time. We'd have a picnic lunch together, walk around for a bit, maybe play a bit of frisbee, and possibly even feed the ducks that lived in the park's pond. Although it was your usual hot Texas August day, we were able to set up our picnic blanket under a big oak tree with plenty of leaves to provide shade, which actually made it nice.

What made it even nicer was how few people were in the park today aside from ourselves. A few kids played at the jungle gym, while some joggers could be seen running up and down the park's various pathways. The ducks quacked happily in the pond below, while a soft breeze blew through, the cool air feeling like a kiss after being in the summer heat.

It was perfect. Which was why I really should have expected the supervillain attack.

But again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I sat cross-legged on the blanket, eating my peanut butter sandwich. Barrett lay on his side next to me, eating one of the hot dogs we had packed. He looked really cute lying that way, his dark hair combed back as sleekly as ever, while his pale skin had grown somewhat tanned over the summer. His plain black t-shirt and jeans fit his muscular body really well.

Taking a bite out of my sandwich, I said, "Thanks for taking me to the park today, Barrett. I'm really enjoying it."

Barrett, however, apparently did not hear me. His eyes seemed to be fixed on something I couldn't see.

Feeling slightly annoyed, I said, "Barrett? Hello? Earth to Barrett? Can you hear me?"

"What?" said Barrett, snapping out of his thoughts and looking up at me. "Were you saying something?"

I sighed, but said, in my most polite voice, "I was just thanking you for taking me to the park today. It's been nice."

Barrett smiled, though he still looked distracted. “No problem, Ashley. Anything for my girl, even if it’s not a very fancy birthday date.”

I chuckled. “That’s fine. I just like getting to spend time with you alone, which we really haven’t gotten to do since you came here.”

Barrett chuckled as well. “True. It is hard to find privacy in your parents’ house.”

Barrett was staying with me and my parents over the summer. Normally, Barrett would have spent the summer in his home country of Superbia, the only superhuman nation on the planet. But due to, er, an unfortunate series of events, Barrett was stuck here in America and definitely not going back to Superbia anytime soon.

Because Barrett had nowhere else to stay, Mom and Dad had allowed him to sleep in our house’s guest room. This had the unintended side effect of letting my parents get to know Barrett better, which worked out better than I hoped. Mom seemed to like Barrett a lot and approved of our relationship. Dad liked Barrett, too, but he seemed a bit distant toward him for some reason. Dad was pretty protective of me, though. Maybe that was why Dad treated Barrett that way.

Looking at Barrett, I said, “You seem distracted. Did Dad say something to you? If so, don’t—”

“No,” said Barrett, shaking his head. He looked up at me with a longing look in his eyes. “I just miss Superbia.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling stupid. “Right. I forgot. You’re in exile.”

Barrett nodded. He sat up and sipped his water bottle, though he didn’t seem to enjoy it. “Don’t apologize. I should be the one apologizing. Today is your birthday. I should be thinking about how to please you and make sure you are having a good time, not thinking about my own problems.”

I bit my lower lip. The ‘unfortunate series of events’ I mentioned earlier was me and Barrett basically trying to overthrow Superbia’s ruler, the infamous Dragon King, who also happened to be Barrett’s dad. The coup was unsuccessful, though, forcing Barrett and me to flee Superbia. That basically made Barrett an exile. The news even called him the Exiled Prince, which was not an inaccurate title, though I obviously never called him that.

Despite his exile, I knew how much Barrett loved and missed Superbia. It was his home, after all, the only one he had ever known. I couldn’t imagine how he felt, knowing that his own father considered him a traitor, which didn’t even account for how the other Superbians felt about him. Given Superbia’s total isolation from the rest of the world, we didn’t know for sure how the Superbians felt about Barrett’s ‘betrayal,’ but it probably wasn’t good.

I reached out and rubbed Barrett’s shoulder. “No, it’s fine. I know how you feel. I wish things didn’t have to be this way, but they are.”

Barrett sighed again. “I just hope that this war is ended quickly. I don’t want anyone from either America or Superbia to die just because of me.”

I bit my lower lip. I’d forgotten about the war, which was easy to do because it didn’t seem like much of one, at least so far.

Back in June, Dragon King had declared war on the United States. He had used my attempt on his life as justification for Superbia going to war with America and threatened terrible retribution on the States for my ‘crimes.’

Despite that, I hadn’t heard stories of the US military marching off to war. President Karen Parker, the current President of the United States and a super herself, had promised to deal with this declaration of war swiftly and with as few US casualties as possible. I’d heard that President Parker had sent multiple offers to Dragon King to discuss peace with him, but apparently, Dragon King had been serious about cutting off *all* communication with the outside world, including with other world leaders.

Frankly, the whole ‘war’ idea seemed dumb to me. The United States was way bigger and stronger than Superbia. Superbia might have been an entire nation of superhumans, but their military was tiny in comparison to ours. I couldn’t imagine Superbia lasting long in any sort of drawn-out conflict with the

US, but then, maybe that's why Dragon King had yet to actually attack the country. Perhaps he was waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

"I know," I said, "but on the bright side, the Academy is open again. In less than two weeks, we'll get to go back to school and see everyone again. Won't that be fun?"

That was true. Although the Academy usually opened in the first week of September, Barrett and I had received emails from the Board announcing that the start of the school year was pushed off by a couple of weeks. No details were given other than giving the faculty time to adjust to 'changes' recently made, but what those changes were, it did not say. Hopefully, they were good changes.

And fortunately, Barrett was still going to the Academy to complete his fourth year with me. Although Barrett's tuition was no longer being paid by his parents for obvious reasons, the G-Men—America's government-run superhero team—had agreed to pay the rest of Barrett's tuition until he graduated. This was apparently in gratitude for saving me from Superbia and providing some important intel on the country, though I was skeptical of the government's involvement in anything.

Still, I couldn't complain too much. After all, it meant that Barrett and I would go back to school together, something that had worried me after we left Superbia.

Barrett nodded, though he still looked distracted. "Yes, it will be nice to see everyone again. But ... there's something else I was thinking about, too. Something much more important than school."

I tilted my head to the side, curious. "Oh? And what would that be?"

Barrett took a deep breath. He looked away from me, a habit of his I recognized all too well. He always did that whenever he had something important to talk about. "Our relationship."

I nodded. "Yes, what about it? Is there something specific you wanted to discuss or—?"

Barrett looked at me, his eyes locked on mine. "I wanted to discuss our future together. After we leave the Academy."

I gulped, my neck suddenly feeling hot. "After we leave the Academy? Well, I mean, we'll probably become superheroes, but—"

"Not that," said Barrett, shaking his head. He grabbed my hand and held it tight without breaking his gaze from me. "*Our* future together. You know what I mean."

"I ... I ..." I gulped. "Yes, I do."

Barrett nodded once more. "I know it makes you anxious to think about, but I've never loved a woman as much as you, nor in the same way. I can't imagine life apart from you. I don't know if I could even return to Superbia without you. Do you feel the same way?"

I gulped. "I mean ... yes."

Barrett frowned. "You hesitated."

"What?" I said. "I didn't hesitate."

"Yes, you did," said Barrett, his frown deepening. "Why are you lying about this?"

I bit my lower lip. Barrett could be really perceptive sometimes. When he noticed you lying, he didn't let go.

Seeing no point in lying any further, I sighed and said, "Because I'm scared, Barrett."

Barrett raised an eyebrow. "Scared? Of what?"

"Me," said an all-too-familiar harsh voice before us. "If she's smart."

Startled, Barrett and I looked away from each other to see a man standing a few feet away from us.

The man wore a red-and-purple spandex costume with a parasite-like design on the chest. His face was partially obscured by a helmet that looked like the head of an insect, complete with fangs. On his back was a large, mechanical backpack that reminded me of the shell of a beetle.

I stared in horror at the man. "No way ... Parasite? What are you doing here?"

Parasite—my archenemy and one of the most dangerous supervillains in the world—grinned. "What does it look like? Keeping the promise I made to you back in Superbia. That is to say, I am here to kill you."

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