

PROLOGUE

Joshua Brent Blevins had wanted to be a superhero for as long as he could remember. The only problem was he didn't have any super powers. But Josh wasn't about to let that stop him.

It was a humid summer day in the early 21st century—on an earth much like our own—that nine year old Josh Blevins and his friend Eddie Gardner, also age nine, stood outside the yard belonging to Littleton, Tennessee's newest resident.

"You go knock," Josh said, pointing to the front door of the old two-story brick house.

"Me?" Eddie asked. "You're the one who wanted to come here. You go knock!"

"Let's go do it together," Josh said.

"I don't know, Josh," Eddie said. "Jimmie Donnelly said he saw them bring a coffin in there!"

"Jimmie don't know nothing! My mom said it was a sarcophagus, like those they buried the Pharaohs in—something this guy probably picked up during his travels. And besides, he ain't no spook. He's not that kind. He's—he's—well, just look!"

Josh reached into his back pocket and pulled out a rolled-up comic book for Eddie to see. This comic wasn't like any Josh'd ever shown Eddie before. It was very old, its pulpy edges in tatters. Eddie unrolled it and flipped through the pages. They were poorly illustrated compared to the cover's near-photographic painting. Eddie closed the funny book and looked at the cover once more. Across the top in big, bold cursive script it read,

THE ADVENTURERS

Beneath the funny book's title, the cover showed a handsome blonde man in a mask, cape, and pants that bulged out at the thighs. The man in the painting held a beautiful young woman at his side. They both swung across a lake filled with fierce alligators snapping at them with long, terrible jaws.

"What kind of pants are those?" Eddie asked.

"Jodhpurs," Josh said as if that explained everything.

"Oh," Eddie said. "That's cool. But so what?"

Josh snatched the funny book out of Eddie's hand, glaring at him as if he were the most ignorant person in the world. He stabbed the cover with his index finger.

"So," Josh said, "I think that's him!"

"What? Jimmie said the guy who moved in here looks like he's a hundred years old!"

"Not him now, Eddie! But when he was younger."

"That's silly, Josh. What would someone like that be doing in Littleton?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's incognito."

"In-cog-what?"

"Lying low so the bad guys can't find him."

"I don't believe that. You're just dreaming again Josh. You play *superhero* so much you've gotten things mixed up in your head!"

"I have not," Josh said. "It's him, Eddie! It has to be. He's my only chance!"

"Chance for what?" a smooth, regal voice asked.

Josh and Eddie stopped talking and turned their heads in the voice's direction. Looming over them was a tall, silver-haired man. He was old, and rested some of his

weight on a fancy black cane, but he was still far from the hundred-year-old man described by Jimmie Donnelly.

Josh heard Eddie gasp. Josh turned and saw his friend sprinting down the street like his head was on fire and his butt was catching.

“Chance for what?” the old man repeated in his upper-class British accent.

Josh opened his mouth to speak and something in no way resembling the eloquent speech he’d practiced for two days came out.

“To be you! Or rather, to be *like* you. I don’t have any superpowers, but I saw you didn’t either. And then you came to town! Out of all the places in the world you showed up in Littleton and I knew it had to be fate, because I want to be a superhero more than anything in the world.”

Josh sucked in a huge breath of air.

“I lie awake at night just dreaming about it! And I knew it was you! I could tell! Eddie didn’t believe me, but I knew it was. Please teach me! I’ll work day and night! Well, not during the day, because I have to go to school, except in the summer, and I have to sleep at night, but I could still come in the morning and after school! I—”

The old man reached down and took the funny book from Josh’s hand. Josh stopped talking and held his breath in anticipation. The old man gazed at the funny book. A crooked smile crossed his lips. Then he handed the comic back to Josh.

“I’m sorry, lad, but that was a long time ago. There are rules now. The Academy—”

“They’d take me if you trained me! I’ll do whatever you tell me, honest! Please, Mister! It’s everything I ever wanted.”

The old man sighed and shifted his weight on his cane.

“The shaolin monks of Kaochan Village made me wait ten days before admitting me into their temple,” the man said. “However, you look aptly determined. And I’m admittedly not getting any younger!”

“I’m Fearless,” the old man said, a mischievous smile upon his face. “Captain Charles Fearless. Not Mister. And how are you called, young sir?”

“Joshua Blevins, sir. Uh, Josh.”

The Captain looked Josh up and down, then poked Josh’s ample belly with his cane.

“That’s quite the paunch you’ve got there, Master Blevins. Especially for such a young lad as yourself.”

Josh gulped in embarrassment.

“Nothing we shan’t work off, though,” the Captain said.

CHAPTER 1

“Bishop to D6,” Captain Fearless said. “Now, do a handstand and close your eyes.”

Josh drew his body into a hand-stand atop the yard bench where he’d been sitting. In his up-side-down position, Josh’s shaggy hair hung from his scalp like a brown mop. Captain Fearless switched the two chess pieces, removing Josh’s from the chess board painted onto the table between them. The Captain waited until Josh had closed his gray eyes and then placed one of his rooks that Josh had previously captured back into play. The old man leaned back in his lawn chair, a satisfied grin on his face.

It was over eighty degrees outside, yet not a single bead of sweat could be found on Josh. Earlier in the day, Josh had ventured into his mental fortress—a thought construct he'd built over the years inside his mind to organize his memories and increase his bodily control. That was one of the first things Captain Fearless had shown him how to do during his five years of training. Chance had entered the fortress's boiler room, his mind's representation of his internal thermostat, and turned the boiler's gauges down to a pleasant seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.

“Now where was I?” Captain Fearless asked. “Oh yes—so there we were, the Don and myself, leaping roof top to roof top! The island erupting around us—”

“Bishop to G1. Bishop takes rook,” Josh interrupted. Josh opened his eyes and reached for his chess piece, balancing himself atop one muscular arm. The Captain's intense physical training had long ago burned away Josh's childhood chubbiness. Josh was now a lean and chiseled teenager; his every muscle a coiled spring, his every tendon a knotted cord.

“No peeking!” the Captain roared. “See the pieces in your mind, Joshua. You know where they are, where they've moved. Now think!”

Joshua obeyed and closed his eyes. In his mind's eye, he saw the chess board and its pieces in detail. With his eyes closed, Josh reached out and clasped his bishop. He slid it along the board to the Captain's rook, avoiding the other game pieces, and swapped the two out.

“Our rapiers clashed,” the Captain continued, “even as plumes of fire exploded into the air! Then the Wrath drew his forty-fives and all heck broke loose! Sara continued to struggle with her bonds as the crane lowered her inch by inch toward the bubbling

molten lava. Pawn to E5. Repeat everything I have said, verbatim.”

“Care for an omelet, Josh?” Josh said.

“Since the game began, Master Blevins, not since you came over this morning. Insolent whelp!”

Josh recited their conversation without error.

“Now in Chinese.”

“Mandarin or Cantonese?”

“Mandarin will do quite nicely, thank you. Watch your tone.”

Josh sighed and once again retreated into his mental fortress, accessing the room that held foreign languages, then the anteroom of Asian dialects, then the small closet containing Mandarin. Josh opened the closet and the sing-song words glided from his mouth.

Josh finished his recital and then said, “Queen to A1. Queen captures rook. Check!”

“Check—?” the Captain said as he scanned the chess board in disbelief. “Yes. Well, um—recite the thirteen laws of Atlantean hydrodynamics,” Captain Fearless said, “In reverse.”

“You just want more time to—”

“Balderdash!” Captain Fearless roared. He pressed a button on the head of his cane. It compressed with an audible click. Josh’s eyes opened wide in alarm at the sound.

“Uh-oh!” Josh said. “I know you hate loosing, *but did you have to activate the booby traps?*”

Josh swung his feet down to the ground and executed a series of back-flips,

dodging the barrage of rubber darts that came hurtling out of their hiding places among the Captain's hedges.

Josh made it to the tall cedar fence at the edge of the yard without a single dart touching him.

"Josh, one," Josh said. "Fearless, zero!"

Infuriated, Captain Fearless pressed another button on his cane.

"That can't be good!" Josh said.

Josh was about to take evasive action when he saw his mother's car pull into the Captain's driveway.

"Josh!" his mother yelled as she exited her car. "It came! It came!"

"It came?" Josh asked, momentarily forgetting the Captain's booby traps. "It really and truly came?" A yell of joy burst from Josh's lips. But it was clipped short as a rubber dart slammed into the back of his head. Josh slumped to the ground, his head spinning.

"Confound it, Joshua Blevins!" the Captain said. "Even the Wrath had more focus than you!"

Smiling, Josh got up and rushed over to his mother.

Joyce Blevins was a tall woman with close-cropped brown hair frosting to gray. Josh thought the two jobs she worked had made her terribly thin. Josh kissed Joyce on her cheek. She returned the gesture and then handed him the envelope she'd been carrying.

The envelope was egg-shell white. Josh's name and address were written on the front in bold black Old English script. Josh flipped it over and saw the Burlington

emblem—a bolt of lightning encased within a circle. The sight of it set Josh’s heart racing.

Josh tore the envelope open, his mother and the Captain peering over his shoulders. Josh unfolded the letter. It read,

Dear Mr. Blevins,

We thank you for your interest in Burlington. Your academic record is very impressive. In his letter of recommendation, Captain Charles Fearless speaks most highly of your accomplishments under his tutelage.

However, we regret to inform you we are unable to approve your application.

Burlington Academy is an institution dedicated to the training of young persons with extraordinary powers and abilities. We’re afraid that, as a normal human, the Academy has nothing to offer you.

Should anything change in regard to your normalcy, such as your obtaining superpowers by way of lab accident or exposure to unnatural radiation, please feel free to resubmit your application. Until then, best wishes in whatever human endeavors you pursue.

Sincerely,

Xenoman, Ph.D., M.D.

Dean of Students and Member of The Board

Burlington Academy for the Superhuman

Member, The Brotherhood of Heroes

Josh felt the sympathetic hands of his mother on his shoulders. He raised his head in disbelief. This wasn't true. This couldn't be happening. He'd worked and studied the better part of his life forsaking friends and after-school activities just to get into Burlington.

He thought of all the mornings of getting up at four A.M. and running until his tongue practically dragged on the ground while everyone else lay dozing in their beds. All the evenings honing his fighting skills in the Captain's back yard while his classmates played football or basketball. All the weekends spent in study, memorizing formulas and philosophy while all the other kids played virtual reality games or zoned out on holovision. It had all been for nothing. All of it. A waste of time. A waste of his life.

Josh felt anger and despair bubbling up within him. He tried to relax, to calm his mind the way the Captain had shown him on countless occasions. But it was no use. He'd sacrificed everything. Everything!

Josh wadded up the letter and threw it to the ground. His mother's hands slid off his shoulders.

"Josh—" his mother pleaded. "Son—"

Josh wasn't through. He stomped the letter again and again. Then he kicked at it. His shoe caught turf and he fell on his face for the second time that evening.

"I've failed!" Josh said.

Josh rose to his knees and cried.

Joyce walked over to comfort him. He pushed her away at first, but soon relented, wrapping his arms around her waist, pressing the side of his face into her belly. She stroked Josh's hair and rocked him.

“It’s alright son. It’s alright. Shhhhhhh.”

“No it’s not,” Josh sobbed. “No it’s not. I’m a failure.”

“Nonsense. You’re the best son a mother could ask for. You’re going to do great things, Josh. Great things.”

“No I’m not. I’m a failure. Just like my father.”

Joyce’s loving hand became a claw gripping the hair on the back of Josh’s head. She jerked it back and leaned over so she looked Josh in the eye. He was so shocked at this he stopped crying.

“Josh, I know how hard you’ve worked for this. How much this hurts you, son. How much this hurts all of us. But don’t you ever, *ever*, call your father a failure. He did the best he could by us. More than you’ll probably ever know! But that’s not the point. You’re not your father—you’re *Josh*. That’s what matters.”

Josh stared up at his mother. He considered her words in silence and then hung his head. “I—I’m sorry, Momma. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know you didn’t, son,” Joyce said. “I know you didn’t.”

“Don’t fret, lad,” Captain Fearless said. He now stood by Joyce and Josh, his hand resting on his pupil’s shoulder. “I’ve faced tyrants, inhuman monsters, even a sword-wielding angel once. We’ll get you into Burlington. They’ll rue the day they denied Captain Charles Fearless’ apprentice!”