

**SUPER-HUMAN.
SERIOUSLY
UNPREPARED.**

**IT'S
ONLY THE
END
OF THE
WORLD**

J.A. HENDERSON

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For my son, the real Charlie Ray.
With grateful thanks to Eve, Samantha, Siobhan and Anne.

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KELPIESEGE

One Month Earlier

Gerry Ray's head shot up, penlight clenched between his teeth. One by one, the overhead lights were flickering to life.

"Someone's coming, Frankie!" he hissed. "I thought you were keeping a lookout!"

"My bad." A metallic voice crackled out of the computer speaker on a nearby desk. "Everyone makes mistakes, Gerry."

"Not a bloody Artificial Intelligence! You're supposed to be infallible."

"Well, that's nice of you to say, but I took myself offline while you corrupted Manticorps' databases. Y'know, in case you wiped me by mistake."

"I'm sorely tempted now. You said the place would be empty."

"It was when you broke in. Not my fault your sabotage is taking so long."

"What will I do?"

"You could always pretend to be the pizza delivery guy, but I'd suggest hiding."

Gerry crouched down in a corner, scrunched behind a chrome console, sweating face pressed against the cold metal.

A group of men and women in white coats made their way through the room, oblivious to his presence. The crowd were

practically falling over each other to please a stout middle-aged woman marching in the centre. Small wonder. She was vice president of Manticorps and her foul temper was legendary.

“We’ve made another breakthrough in the Marginal Science Division, Mrs Magdalene,” a tall man said excitedly. “What we’ve achieved is nothing short of extraordinary.”

“That’s vice president,” the woman snapped. “And it better be or you’ll regret dragging me out here at this time of night.”

“We felt it best for you to witness the results in person.” The lead scientist elbowed his companion out of the way. “Our new research is... eh... highly controversial. Not the kind of thing you can send an internal memo about.”

“Make it quick then.” Mrs Magdalene looked at her watch. “I’ve got tickets for *Wicked* and it starts in half an hour.”

She pressed her pass key to the lock. The door slid open with a whoosh and the human convoy vanished into the corridor of Manticorps’ Marginal Science Division.

Gerry Ray waited until they were well out of earshot. Then he scrambled to the nearest computer and began to type.

“Shouldn’t you be escaping, Gerry?” Frankie asked. “This is no time to be posting your predicament on Facebook.”

“As soon as the vice president of Manticorps and her research team reach their destination, they’ll see we’ve ruined their precious research.” Gerry finished with a flourish. “So I’ve overloaded the security systems in the east wing and shut the entire section down.”

“You’ve done what?”

“It’s fused the electronic doors.” He grinned triumphantly. “They’re trapped in their own labs.”

“Then get out now,” the voice said urgently. “I’ll take it from here.”

“They’re not going anywhere.” Gerry sprinted down the corridors and out of the building.

As he raced across the car park, there was a dull whump behind him. He skidded to a halt and turned.

A plume of smoke was billowing from the roof of the Marginal Science Division and he could hear muffled screaming from the flaming interior.

“Oh my God.” Gerry Ray put a trembling hand to his mouth. “Frankie, what have you *done*?”



Part 1

The Shake-up

A lot of people try to shape the future.
Parents. Governments. Bankers.
The police. But it's the young ones
who live in it. And we will fight for it.

- Matt Wolf, *Teenage*



Charlie Ray huddled under the covers, listening to the stranger hiding in his cupboard.

He'd woken when he heard the window slowly slide up. The creak of a floorboard and the click of the cupboard door softly closing had convinced him he wasn't dreaming. Now a strange crunching noise emanated from inside.

He opened one eye and saw the digital clock read 3.00 a.m. Far too late for any of his friends to be playing a stupid prank. Anyway, he didn't have any friends.

Charlie lay perfectly still, pretending to be asleep, forcing his breathing to remain rhythmic. A month ago he would have pulled the pillow over his head and curled into a ball, hoping the intruder would leave him alone.

Not any more. These days, the only thing that scared Charlie was himself.

His mother was sleeping in the next room, but he had no intention of shouting for help. There was no way he was going to put her in any kind of danger. This was his problem and he would deal with it.

He remained motionless, calculating which object in his room would make the most useful weapon. There was a guitar on its stand by the window, a baseball bat leaning against the

bookcase and a baseball Blu-Tacked to the second shelf. A heavy paperweight lay on his computer desk.

Charlie threw back the covers and rolled across the floor. He grabbed the bat and sprang to his feet, clutching it in both hands.

Pthhhhhp.

He blinked rapidly.

“You in there.” He looked incredulously at the closed cupboard door. “Did you just... *fart?*”

“Couldn’t help it,” a muffled voice retorted. “I’m scrunched up like an accordion.”

Charlie could see the key was still sticking out of the cupboard’s lock, so he marched over and swiftly turned it. The handle rattled a few times then stopped.

“Uh oh.”

“Yeah. You’re trapped, whoever you are,” Charlie announced. “Now I’m going to call the police.”

“Good luck with that, buster,” the voice scoffed. “Your phone is in here with me. I’m lookin at your photo gallery right now.”

Charlie glanced at the desk. Sure enough, his phone was gone. “*Why?*”

“Cause it’s boring in the closet and I wanted to have some light entertainment while I ate my crisps. What’s a prawn cocktail anyhow?” Charlie heard the sound of a packet being scrunched.

“I’m finished now,” the voice continued. “So open this door or I’m gonna post that video you recorded of yourself singing along to Beyoncé in front of the mirror.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” The boy’s head was spinning. “Who *are* you?”

“Just let me out. I ain’t gonna harm no one.”

“I’m going to get my mum and she can call the police on *her* phone.”

“You might find it a smidge difficult to rouse her,” the voice said apologetically. “I was told to put a few sleeping pills in her hot chocolate so she wouldn’t disturb us.”

“You did *what?*” Charlie’s jaw tightened. “Nobody messes with my mum. Not after all she’s been through. Nobody!”

He unlocked the door and yanked it open, bat raised above his head.

A girl burst out of the darkness and crashed into him. Charlie landed on his back with a grunt, the intruder squarely on top.

“Surprise!” she giggled, then got quickly to her feet.

The boy stared in astonishment as she did an awkward little dance on the spot.

“Gotta go to the ladies’ room,” she gasped. “Had a whole bottle of Coke before I got here. 1.5-litre size.”

“It’s at the end of the landing.” Charlie was too taken aback to say anything else.

“Back in two shakes.” She hobbled out of the door. “Nice tartan PJs, by the way.”

When she returned, Charlie had changed out of his pyjamas and was sitting cross-legged on the bed, tapping the baseball bat into his palm.

He studied the stranger carefully. She was a well-built girl with cold blue eyes and her round face was framed by a glossy shoulder-length bob. She wore a sparkly green top, short skirt and large black boots over crimson striped tights. He supposed she was quite pretty, in an odd sort of way, and looked about the same age as him.

“That’s better.” She grinned, revealing a huge gap between her front teeth. “I must have a bladder the size of a pea. Should have gone before I climbed up your drainpipe.”

Her way of speaking was decidedly strange and reminded him of the old gangster movies his father, Gerry, used to watch. But he didn't like to think about his dad. Not if he could help it.

"Why were you in my cupboard?" he demanded.

"Nobody but you can know I'm here, see? I had to hide until I was sure your mom was out cold." The stranger shrugged. "Sides, I thought it would be funny."

"Do I look like I'm laughing?"

"You sure don't seem the jolly type," the girl muttered. "I reckon your face would slide off if you tried to raise a smile."

"Excuse me?"

"The name's Daffodil McNugget." She held out her hand. When Charlie refused to shake it, she stuck a finger up his nose.

"Stop it!" He batted her away. "I want some answers or I *will* call the police."

"All right, grumpy." Daffodil backed off. "A voice in my head told me to how to find you, so I could pass on an important message. Happy now?"

"Well, that explains a lot." Charlie clutched the bat tighter. "Want me to whip you up a tinfoil hat?"

"Ooh. Is that what the in-crowd are wearin these days?" Daffodil glanced down at her clothes. "Only I reckon it might clash with my outfit."

"Oh, dear God."

"Relax, will you?" She rolled her eyes. "I'm only joshin."

"Stop 'joshin' and start explaining before I wallop you with this bat. Who the hell *are* you?"

"That's a real thorny subject. See, I don't actually *remember* who I am." Daffodil scratched her temple uncertainly. "In fact, I don't recall much at all."

"Is that why you made up such a daft name?"

“You’re one smart cookie, Chaz!” She beamed. “Howd’ya figure it out?”

Charlie jerked his thumb at the bunch of yellow flowers his mum had plonked on the dresser to brighten the room. Next to it was an empty carton of Chicken McNuggets.

“Ah.” Daffodil pulled a face. “That obvious, huh?” She shrugged. “Call me Mac if you like.”

“There are several things I feel like calling you and ‘Mac’ is at the bottom of the list.”

“All right grumpster.” She looked at him quizzically. “Ain’t you even a little curious about why I’m here?”

“I’d be a lot more curious if it wasn’t the middle of the night.” Charlie rubbed his eyes. Now that he could see the girl wasn’t some robber, he was more annoyed than alarmed. “Right now, I’m leaning towards escorting you out the front door, using the toe of my boot. My neighbour has a four year old. Go hide in his wardrobe, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“Wise guy, huh?” Daffodil adjusted her tights and smoothed down her skirt, while Charlie tried not to stare. “I already said I’m here ‘cause I got a message for you.”

“From an imaginary voice in your head.”

“Nothing imaginary about it,” she corrected. “He’s called Frankie and he knows *everything*.” Her voice lowered in admiration. “He told me what an accordion was and how to put pictures online. I should ask him about prawn cocktails next.”

“The kid next door could tell you all that.” Charlie pointed his bat at her. “Get out of my house. I won’t warn you again.”

“Whatever.” Daffodil gave a disdainful sniff and turned to go. “But the message ain’t from Frankie. It’s from a guy called Gerry Ray.”

Charlie was off the bed in an instant.

“Wait!” He grabbed her arm. “*What* did you say?”

“The message is from a guy called Gerry Ray,” she repeated. “Hey. You both got the same last name! Is he some kinda relative?”

“Gerry Ray is my father.” Charlie steered Daffodil to his computer chair and sat her down. When he let go, his hands were shaking. “And I haven’t seen him since he walked out on us.”

Charlie Ray – your average teenage boy, right? Not so much. As it turns out...

1

Charlie's parents aren't boring – they're radical computer hackers

2

He's the opposite of ordinary – thanks to the Jekyll serum, which has made him basically a superhero (minus the spandex)

3

People are out to get him. And us. Apparently Charlie's the only one who can save humanity from MASS EXTINCTION

With the help of a rogue AI and smart-mouthed Daffodil McNugget (yes, that's seriously what she's calling herself), Charlie sets out to stop Armageddon. And if he can't...

~_(\ツ)_~

It's only the end of the world.



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