



Book One

# EPIC ZERO

Tales of a Not-So-Super  
6<sup>th</sup> Grader

By

R.L. Ullman



Epic Zero: Tales of a Not-So-Super 6<sup>th</sup> Grader  
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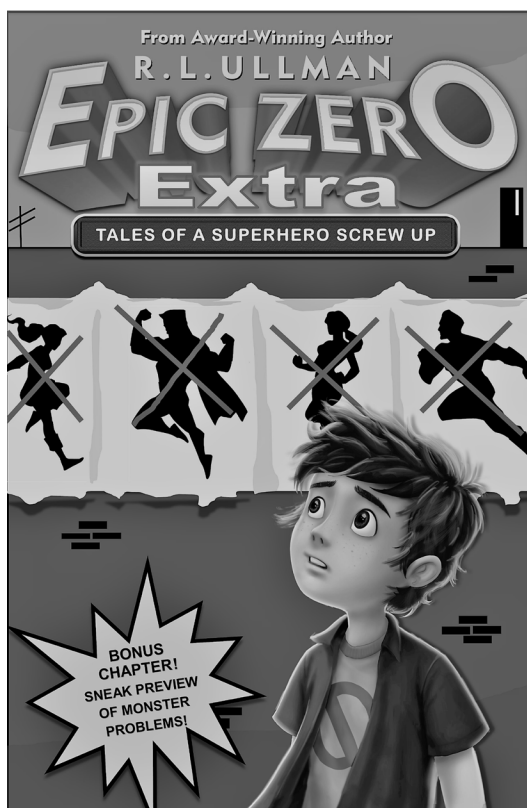
For Matthew and Olivia,  
never stop soaring



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“What a fun read! I knew this was a great children’s/young adult book when my 11-year-old kept trying to read it over my shoulder. This is a delightful read for children and tweens, even for children who don’t always enjoy reading. I loved the main character, I loved the message, I loved the illustrations; I just plain loved this book.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Tracy A. Fischer for Readers' Favorite.**

“An awesome and inspirational coming of age story filled with superheroes, arch-villains, and lots of action. Most highly recommended.” **Rating: 5.0 stars by Jack Magnus for Readers' Favorite.**

“With Epic Zero, Ullman reminds me of why I used to love superheroes.” **Rating 5.0 stars by Jessyca Garcia for Readers' Favorite.**

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ONE

## I HATE MY BIRTHDAY AND HERE'S WHY

**T**he alarm clock wails like a banshee, but I've been awake for hours. Without lifting my head from the pillow, I silence it with a well-practiced karate chop. I've stalled long enough. Just like on every other birthday I can remember, it's time to see if I've gained any Meta powers overnight. I take a deep breath. Then, I launch into my standard testing routine.

I close my eyes tightly and then open them as wide as I can. No heat vision or pulsar beams come shooting out. *Not an energy manipulator.*

I flex my fingers and toes but don't sense any mystical forces coursing through my veins. *Not magical.*

I try to remember last week's pre-algebra homework.

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Can't remember—which is doubly depressing since I got a C the first time around. *Not super-intelligent.*

I carefully feel around my head, body, and limbs. No evidence of sprouting horns, tail, or extra appendages. *Not a Meta-morph.*

I sit up, grab three tennis balls from a can next to my bed, and start juggling. After keeping the balls in the air for a whopping three seconds, they all hit the ground and bounce limply away. No improvement to pre-existing poor hand-eye coordination. *Not a super-speedster.*

I stand up, walk over to my dresser, and reach underneath. It's packed with clothes and probably weighs over 500 pounds. I count to three and lift with all my might. Dresser doesn't budge. Possibly broke my back. *Not super-strong.*

I jump on my bed, put my hands out like Superman, and hurl myself across the room. I hit the floor hard, belly-flop style, knocking the wind out of me. Note to self, next year try the other way around—jump from floor onto bed. *Not a flyer.*

One more to go.

I close my eyes and concentrate on reading the mind of someone close by. I hear a loud knocking and then—

“Elliott Harkness, get out of bed you loser! You'll be late for school!” My sister, Grace, is at my door. No minds read. *Not a psychic.*

That makes me 0 for 8 on Meta powers. Another year, another epic failure.

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I drag myself off the floor, pull on some clothes, and trudge into the bathroom. In the mirror, I find my unremarkable self staring right back at me—short and scrawny with a nest of brown hair and eyes the color of shoe leather. I look too young to be twelve, too plain to be popular and too ordinary to ever be a Meta.

You see, I live in a family of superheroes. We're part of a super-team known as the Freedom Force, the greatest heroes ever assembled. In our lingo, a "Meta" stands for Meta-being, which is what we call a person, animal, or vegetable—don't laugh, it's happened—that possesses powers and abilities beyond what's considered normal. There are eight Meta types: Energy Manipulation, Flight, Magic, Meta-morphing, Psychic, Super-Intelligence, Super-Speed, and Super-Strength.

On top of that, there are three power levels: a Meta 1 has limited power, a Meta 2 has considerable power, and a Meta 3 has extreme power. If you don't have any powers at all, then you're known as a Meta 0. We call them "Zeroes" for short, which also stands for ordinary.

Just like me.

I turn out the lights and head for the Galley. I have fifteen minutes to scarf down some breakfast before school. When I get there, I find my super-family at their usual stations.

Mom is leaning against the fridge, arms crossed and brow furrowed, "packing" sandwiches into our lunch bags without using her hands. You see, Mom's a Meta 3

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psychic who goes by the superhero handle Ms. Understood. Her powers include telekinesis, which allows her to move stuff around using only her mind, and also telepathy, so she can read other people's minds.

As you can imagine, having a mind-reading mom presents some serious challenges! She claims to use her powers only in the line of duty but based on how often I get in trouble, I suspect she isn't telling the whole truth on that one.

Like most mornings, she's already in full uniform, just waiting to see what evil the day brings. She wears a black bodysuit and mask to blend into the shadows, where she can put her deadly powers to work undetected. Plus, her superhero insignia looks like a giant eye, which not only intimidates the bad guys but also makes you think twice about drinking milk straight from the carton!

Dad is ironing his cape by the breakfast nook. He takes law and order to a whole new level. On the law side, he's the leader of the Freedom Force and goes by the name Captain Justice. He's got Meta 3 super-strength with muscles so dense he's pretty darn invulnerable. And look out when the bullets start bouncing off of him!

On the order side, let's just say that he likes things tidy. His red, white, and blue uniform must be crisply pressed, and there can be absolutely no dirt or smudges on his pristine, chest insignia of the golden scales of justice. He's so obsessive, he even lifts my furniture to hunt for dust bunnies! Like, someone please create a

criminal distraction!

Grace, my fourteen-year-old sister, is perched on a stool, worshipping herself in a compact mirror. She's a Meta 2 flyer, but my parents expect her powers will eventually reach Meta 3 levels. She's still learning to be a hero but lately seems much more interested in becoming an international celebrity. When she started out I suggested the name Self-Centered Lass, but she ignored me and chose Glory Girl. Glory Girl? Really? Please, get over yourself!

"Good morning, Elliott," Mom says.

"Morning," I say, waiting for some cursory acknowledgment that it's my special day. But there's nothing.

See, I know my life probably sounds glamorous and all, but trust me, it's not. Living with a bunch of do-gooders comes with some major drawbacks. At the top of the list is the fact that while superheroes are really great at the big things—like thwarting the forces of evil—they really stink at the little things.

Like, for example, remembering their kid's birthday.

I grab a cereal bar out of the pantry.

"Not hungry?" Mom asks.

"Nope," I say. "Not anymore."

"Well, Grace," Dad says. "Looks like you made the morning paper."

"I did?" Grace squeals with delight.

"You sure did," Dad says. "Look at this headline."

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Grace snatches the paper and starts reading. “America’s newest Meta-star does it again! Wow! I look amazing!” She turns the paper to reveal the front page, featuring her in her Glory Girl outfit standing over an unconscious supervillain known as Catastro-flea. “Doesn’t my costume totally pop?”

Truthfully, she did look kind of awesome in her crimson bodysuit featuring white shooting stars across her top and legs—her cape billowing perfectly in the wind. But I wasn’t going to tell her that.

“Looks like people are starting to take notice of your super-skills,” Dad says.

“Maybe Captain Justice should hang up his tights,” Mom jokes.

“You might be right, dear,” Dad says. “Maybe I’ll ride out my golden years in a Fortress of Solitude.”

“Sure you will, Dad,” Grace says, rolling her eyes. “I’ll call Meta Meadows Retirement Home and see if they’ve got a spot for you. Hope you like tapioca.”

“I haven’t had tapioca since the Ghoulish Gourmet tried poisoning my dessert at the Mask of the Year Awards,” Dad says. “On second thought, I’ve probably got a few more years of caped crusading in me.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Grace says. “Speaking of capes, I’ve been thinking about shaking up the whole hero thing. Maybe getting some brand sponsors and putting their logos on my costume. You know, like sports stars do. Do you think I need an agent for that?”

“Grace, you know we don’t work for money,” Dad says.

“Oh, come on!” Grace says. “Aren’t we allowed some perks with the job? I mean, we’re on call, like, all the time.”

Just then my phone vibrates in my pocket. It’s a text message from TechnoRat:

<TechnoRat: Dog-Gone barfing in Mission Room. Can u clean up now?>

Dog-Gone is the name of our German Shepherd who has the power to turn invisible. One second he’s sitting there, staring you down with his pitiful big-eyed begging act, the next he’s gone. Conveniently, his powers seem to activate whenever food goes missing. I’m guessing he hijacked someone’s breakfast when they weren’t looking.

Cleaning up after Dog-Gone is bad enough but doing it on my birthday just seems like cruel and unusual punishment. I should’ve gotten a super fish.

I exit the Galley to the West Wing stairwell, my sneakers echo down the fifty-five steps and five stair landings. Oh, I should probably mention that my house is kind of unusual. You see, we live in a satellite parked deep in outer space called the Waystation. The Waystation serves as the Freedom Force’s headquarters, as well as the home away from home for most of the team.

You may be wondering why we’re up here. Well, let’s just say we do our jobs really well and there are plenty of

creeps out there who'd love nothing more than to show up on our doorstep and try to settle the score. In fact, that's exactly what happened a few years back when the Slaughter Squad busted through the gates of our old headquarters on Earth. They almost had us, but that's why we moved to the Waystation—because up here we're *way* out of reach.

I stop at the utility closet to grab a mop, a bucket, and some disinfectant because Dad's such a germaphobe. Knowing Dog-Gone, I'll probably have to wait around for all the invisible chunks to turn visible to be sure I don't miss anything. It takes me a while to collect the cleaning stuff because it's all shoved in the back, like someone wanted to hide it or something.

Finally, armed with everything I need to tackle the job, I make my way to the Mission Room and open the door.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

The cleaning supplies clang to the floor.

To my surprise, standing before me are all of the members of the Freedom Force: my parents, Grace, Shadow Hawk, TechnoRat, Blue Bolt, and Master Mime.

“Happy birthday, Elliott,” Mom says.

“H-How?” I stammer.

“Tricked you, didn't I?” TechnoRat says, sitting on my dad's shoulder and stroking his whiskers with a smug look on his white, pointy little face.

“What about Dog-Gone?” I ask.



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“He’s fine,” Dad says. Dog-Gone appears from beneath the round conference table, his tail wagging a hundred miles per second. I swear he’s smiling.

“You didn’t think we’d forget your birthday, did you?” Mom asks.

I shrug. “Well...”

“Can we just get this over with?” Grace mutters.

“Grace, please,” Dad says. “It’s your brother’s day.”

Then, Master Mime uses his magic to conjure up a giant purple finger that flicks out the lights. Mom brings over a huge cake with twelve lit candles and everyone starts singing Happy Birthday, except for Master Mime and Dog-Gone, who obviously can’t talk.

“Now make your wish,” Mom says.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath when...

“Alert! Alert! Alert!” The alarm from the Meta Monitor blares through the Waystation. “Meta 2 disturbance. Power signature identified as Reptvillian. Alert! Alert! Alert!”

Before the lights even come back on, the Freedom Force springs into action. Blue Bolt and Master Mime are already gone. I just catch the flames from TechnoRat’s jetpack and the silhouette of Shadow Hawk’s cape as they disappear from the room. Dad and Grace leave without saying a word. I’m all alone with Mom who’s still holding my cake.

“Elliott,” she says. “I’m so sorry.” Her eyes look sad, but her body’s leaning towards the door. I can tell she

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wants to split.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Go ahead, somebody needs you.”

She brushes my cheek. “My baby is so grown up.”

I take the cake from her. “Oh,” I say, “don’t forget that Reptvillian is a Meta 2 on super-strength, but also a Meta 1 psychic, although he hasn’t shown any evidence of telekinesis.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Mom says. “Don’t be late for school.” Then, she winks and leaves.

I look down at the candles still burning on my cake. I never did make my wish. Not that it matters anyway.

I’m still a Zero.

# Meta Profile

## Captain Justice

□ Name: Tom Harkness

□ Height: 6'3"

□ Race: Human

□ Weight: 220 lbs

□ Status: Hero/Active

□ Eyes/Hair: Blue/Blonde



### META 3: Super-Strength

□ Extreme Strength

□ Extreme Invulnerability

□ Extreme Jumping

### Observed Characteristics

Combat 95

Durability 96

Leadership 100

Strategy 94

Willpower 91