

CHAPTER ONE

I SAT IN A chair on a large, outdoor stage, my hands in my lap. The sun was bright and shining today—which was pretty rare for New York—allowing me to see all of the hundreds and hundreds of superheroes gathered in the area below the stage. The crowd was comprised of members from the Neohero Alliance and the Independent Neoheroes for Justice, which was pretty rare, since the two organizations don't usually hang out together. But it wasn't surprising; ever since the Neohero Summit earlier this year, the NHA and INJ had been working more closely together to deal with crime and villains than ever.

I wasn't the only superhero on the stage, however. Sitting to my right was Blizzard, my girlfriend and one of my teammates; Treehugger, who had put a large yellow flower in her hair for this occasion; Stinger, who looked as bored and uncomfortable as me with all this sitting around; and Shell, who was reading some kind of book on quantum physics or something on his phone, which I couldn't see due to how far away he sat from me.

Sitting directly in front of us were the members of the Neohero Alliance Leadership Council: the powerful Mr. Miner, the strong Lady Amazon, the quick High Fly, the mysterious Beyond Man, my own mentor Mecha Knight, and the alien Nicknacks. Only Omega Man was missing, but that was because he was back in his room in the NHA headquarters preparing for the speech that he was going to give to open the ceremony today.

The ceremony was about the unveiling of a new attraction on Hero Island: The Justice Statue. I glanced over my shoulder at the statue, which was a huge behemoth made out of marble that towered over every other neohero in the area. It depicted Omega Man and the Midnight Menace—the leaders of the NHA and the INJ—clasping their hands together in friendship, a symbol of the new alliance between the two organizations. The Statue itself had been under construction for a couple of months now, ever since the end of the last Neohero Summit, and today was its official unveiling to the public at large. There were even cameras set up to livestream the opening ceremony to the world, though there weren't any actual members of the press present due to security concerns.

But the Statue had not actually been unveiled. It was covered in a huge, thick blue shroud, fluttering in the wind every now and then. I only knew what it looked like because I'd seen the initial plans for it when it had been first proposed, but I had yet to see the finished Statue. According to Mecha Knight, who had been one of the supervisors of the building project, it was one of the most impressive statues he'd ever seen, but I guess I'd see that for myself soon, after Omega Man opened the ceremony.

I had to admit, though, that I was wondering why we were doing this. Mecha Knight had told me that the ceremony was supposed to be the place where the alliance between the NHA and the INJ would be officially announced to the world. The two organizations weren't merging; however, we were now going to be officially allied and working together for the common good. I'd even heard rumors that Omega Man was going to announce the creation of a new team consisting of members from both organizations, though Mecha Knight had refused to tell me what the Leadership Council had discussed with the INJ's leadership.

Speaking of the INJ's leadership, I saw their leaders sitting on the left side of the platform, parallel to us. The Midnight Menace, tall, shadowy, and menacing, was instantly recognizable, but he looked a bit out of place in the bright light of the sun. The other members of the INJ leadership looked less jarringly out of place and were even talking among each other, though due to all of the noise from the crowd I couldn't hear what they were talking about.

I wondered if they were just as bored as I was. I mean, sure, I understood that this ceremony was hugely important in the superhero community, given that it was going to change the dynamics of the superhero community in ways that weren't quite understood completely yet, but I still wondered why I should be here. I was more concerned about supervillains taking this time to commit crimes and cause trouble, though Mecha Knight had pointed out to me that any supervillain in New York who'd tried to cause trouble now would be insane, given that the combined might of the two largest superhero organizations in the country were here today. Still, this felt like a useless formality to me; I would have much preferred to be back in the House (which was the base for my team) training than sitting here waiting for Omega Man to show up and unveil a giant statue to the world.

My thoughts were interrupted when a familiar voice shouted, "Bolt!" and caused me to look up to see a tall, handsome guy of about my age walking toward me. He wore a costume that looked kind of like mine, except his was blue and yellow and he wore a long, flowing cape that even I had to admit looked cool.

"Strike?" I said, rising from my seat as the leader of the New Heroes—the INJ's equivalent of the Young Neos—approached. "What took you so long? You told me you were coming, but I didn't see you when the INJ arrived earlier today."

Strike flashed a large, far too shiny smile at me as he stopped in front of me and shook my hand. "Ah, sorry about that. The Lightning Triplets just wanted to go and see the Museum, so we went there ahead of time to make sure we got to see it before the unveiling of the Justice Statue. Sorry for not telling you."

"The whole team is here?" I said. "Where is everyone?"

"Over there," said Strike, jerking a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the INJ's leaders. "See? We just got here."

I looked over Strike's shoulder and saw five other teenagers sitting in seats behind the INJ's leaders. One of them was a girl about a year or two younger in a pink costume, who I recognized as Dizzy, while the guy with the green, slimy skin was Slime, and the three bouncing and chattering fourteen-year-olds were the Lightning Triplets: Volt, Watt, and Lumen.

"Yeah, I see them," I said. I looked at Strike again. "It's been a long time since we last spoke. How have things been in California?"

"Just the usual," said Strike with a shrug. "Fighting supervillains and criminals, helping with certain super secret projects that Midnight Menace would kill me for if I told you about them ... you know, just the basic things."

"Right," I said. "Are you guys still based in the Cavern?"

"Yep," said Strike, nodding. "But we're finally expanding. We're going through the lowest levels and cleaning out all the junk and modernizing it. Your visit convinced the Midnight Menace that that place needed to be updated and modernized and made safer for the team and visitors."

“Cool,” I said. “I’ll have to come by again sometime and bring the whole team with me this time.”

“Sure,” said Strike. “I’ll talk with Menace about it, though I’m sure he won’t object.” Then Strike hesitated, and added, “And I’m sorry about your father, Bolt. I know I said this at the funeral, but—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupted him. “I’m over it. But thanks for the condolences. I appreciate them anyway.”

Strike nodded, but I could tell he was obviously uncomfortable. But I really was over Dad’s death ... well, okay, not entirely, since I don’t think you ever truly get over the death of a loved one, but I didn’t think about it as much as I’d used to. I had come to accept it and didn’t really want to think about it anymore; I was more interested in focusing on the future, though I still visited Dad’s grave every now and then when I felt like it.

“Okay,” said Strike. “Well, I’m going back to sit down with the others. It’s almost noon, which is when Omega Man is supposed to deliver the opening remarks, so I should get back to my seat before Menace notices and scolds me for talking to you.”

“Sure,” I said. “We can talk again after the unveiling of the Statue, okay? Catch up and stuff, have our teams mingle.”

Statue nodded and then turned and ran back over to the seats where his own team was situated. As for me, I just sat back down on my chair and crossed my legs again, ready to wait for Omega Man’s arrival, although I didn’t see him anywhere in the sky when I looked up.

As soon as I sat down, however, Treehugger leaned across Blizzard and said, “Bolt, was that Strike?”

I looked at Treehugger. “Yeah. The whole New Heroes are here, actually, so we’re going to hang out with them after the ceremony.”

“Uh, right,” said Treehugger. “But, um, can you get Strike’s autograph for me? Please?”

I tilted my head to the side. “You want his autograph? Why don’t you get it yourself? He’s a pretty nice guy.”

Treehugger’s eyes widened like I’d just suggested that she climb Mount Everest naked. “Get it *myself*? Bolt, he’s too ... too *handsome*. I can’t just ask him myself.”

I glanced at Strike, who was now talking with Dizzy about something, and then looked at Treehugger again. “He’s not *that* good-looking. Sure, he’s not butt ugly, but I think you’re overreacting. Don’t you agree, Blizzard?”

Blizzard brushed back a few strands of her snow white hair and said, “Oh, I don’t know. Strike is pretty cute, but not as cute as you, of course.”

“But hard to talk to?” I said. “I mean, maybe it’s because I’m a guy, but I really don’t see what’s so scary about him. Sure, he’s got magnetic powers and can shoot lasers from his eyes, but so what? I can shoot lightning from my hands and you’re not afraid of me.”

“You don’t understand,” said Treehugger. She covertly glanced at Strike. “I just ... can’t, okay?”

I was about to say that I really didn’t understand when suddenly I heard a *whooshing* sound in the air and looked up in time to see Omega Man coming in for a landing. He looked as regal and heroic as ever, his cape fluttering behind him as he lowered down onto the stage.

Omega Man’s mere presence was enough to silence all of the gathered heroes in the crowd below and he hadn’t even said anything yet. Of course, Omega Man was basically a living legend, being one

of the first modern superheroes and having been actively fighting crime longer than almost anyone here. His back was to me now, but I could imagine his square jaw and chiseled features well enough.

Omega Man adjusted the microphone on the podium in front of him and then looked around at the crowd below before saying, “Welcome, one and all, to the unveiling of the Justice Statue, a project that I have been personally helping to build ever since the end of the last Neohero Summit. I want to especially welcome the INJ members and leaders who came here for the unveiling, because we know that California is quite a way from New York and that it is not an easy journey to make, even for superhumans like us.”

I leaned back in my chair, my arms folded over my chest, while the rest of my team looked more alert than they had before. Omega Man had that effect on people. Although he never spoke very loudly, he had a way of attracting attention to himself whenever he was giving a speech. Sometimes I even thought that Omega Man had some sort of hypnotic power in addition to his other ones, though as far as I knew Omega Man’s power set was similar to mine, except stronger.

“Many of you have been looking forward to this day,” said Omega Man. “We all have, I think, not only to see the Statue, but also to learn of the concrete, practical ways in which our two organizations will work together in the future. We have a particular announcement that will be of great interest not only to everyone here in person, but to everyone watching at home from the livestreams as well, particularly our younger viewers.”

I wondered if that was the team I’d heard rumors about. I looked over at the New Heroes and saw that they looked just as interested in hearing about this new announcement as I was. I guessed that the Midnight Menace and the other INJ leaders had not told them about it, either.

“But before we do that, I would first like to unveil the Justice Statue,” said Omega Man. “Having seen it ahead of time, I can assure all of you here that it is truly a magnificent statue, easily one of the best in the world. It was designed and crafted by a team of world-class sculptors under the supervision of our own Mr. Miner and the INJ’s Quakefoot, creating a Statue unlike anything that we’ve ever seen on Hero Island.”

“Just show it already!” someone suddenly shouted from the crowd, though I couldn’t see who it was from here.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Omega Man. He stepped aside and then gestured at the giant veiled statue behind the stage. “Without further ado, I present to you all: the Justice Statue!”

The giant blue veil was suddenly pulled down by a team of Hero Island workers, who had been standing around the edges of the veil waiting for the signal. The veil fell down with a flourish, revealing the Justice Statue in its entirety. I had to twist around in my seat to look at it, as did my teammates.

The Justice Statue was truly immense. Like the plans I’d seen before, it depicted Omega Man and the Midnight Menace shaking hands; in fact, it was so realistic that it was almost like they’d blown up the actual Omega Man and Midnight Menace and put them inside stone. It was incredibly detailed, even showing the Midnight Menace’s shadows in a way that eerily resembled the real thing. I knew Mr. Miner had a talent for sculpting, but seeing this example of his work—even if he had collaborated with others—really blew my mind.

Suddenly, the sound of hundreds of pairs of hands clapping together at once pierced the air. Nearly every person in the outdoor area was clapping, the sound practically deafening even though there

weren't any walls for the sounds to bounce off of. Even the New Heroes and INJ leadership were clapping, though the Midnight Menace's clapping looked a lot more reserved than the clapping from the others.

Nonetheless, I could tell that everyone approved highly of the Justice Statue. In fact, the mood of the entire crowd was lifting, even getting to the point where at least a few people whistled pretty loudly. The rising mood even began to infect me, making me think that maybe this ceremony wasn't going to be so boring after all.

Then my earcom crackled and Valerie—the AI that had been Dad's assistant before he passed and who was now essentially my assistant—said, her voice barely audible over the claps and cheers of the crowd, “Bolt? I have urgent news.”

“Urgent news?” I repeated as I stopped clapping and put one hand on my ear. “What is it? Can't it wait until later? I'm busy.”

“No, it cannot,” Valerie said. “I know that you are in the middle of a major ceremony, but my sensors have picked up something coming fast, which you need to tell Omega Man about.”

“Tell Omega Man?” I said. “Why can't you tell him yourself?”

“Omega Man does not have an earcom, unlike you,” said Valerie, “so I cannot contact him and warn him about what my sensors have picked up. But you can, and you must, because it is coming, and fast.”

“What's coming?” I said. “A supervillain?”

“I'm not sure,” said Valerie. “Sensors indicate that something huge is coming directly toward Hero Island. Its trajectory indicates that it will probably land somewhere near the center of Hero Island, directly on top of the Justice Statue itself.”

I immediately looked up at the sky, but saw nothing except empty blueness and the bright, shining sun. “What is it? I don't see it.”

“Again, I don't know,” said Valerie. “All I know is that it appears to have been launched from orbit. I think it is likely that it is a missile of some sort.”

“A nuke?” I repeated in horror. “A nuke would completely level Hero Island and kill everyone on it.”

“It may be, but I have not detected any nuclear launches from Russia, China, North Korea, or any other country that has nuclear weapons,” said Valerie. “Regardless, I doubt it will be good. That is why I said you need to tell Omega Man, because he might be able to stop it whether it is a nuke or something else. And you'd better do it quickly, because it is getting closer and closer in every second and will likely be visible to the naked eye soon.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks for telling me.”

As soon as I said that, I suddenly saw a tiny dot in the sky. At first, I thought it was just a bird or maybe a plane, but as it grew larger and larger, I realized that it was the missile that Valerie had just told me about. And even worse, no one seemed to have noticed it yet.

So I hopped up from my seat and ran over to Omega Man, who was busily clapping along with everyone else. In fact, he was clapping so much that he didn't even notice me until I shouted his name and he looked down at me in surprise.

“Bolt?” said Omega Man. “What's the matter? Did you see something?”

“Yes,” I said. I pointed up at the sky, directly at the missile falling toward us. “Valerie just told me about a missile coming straight for us. We don’t know what it is, but we can’t let it land.”

“A missile?” Omega Man repeated. He looked up at the sky as well, his eyes narrowing. “You’re right.”

The rest of the crowd must have started to notice it as well, because less and less people were clapping and more and more people were looking up or pointing at the incoming missile. More than a few looked ready to take flight to stop it, but I wasn’t sure how many of them had the super strength that would also be necessary to stop it.

“We need to stop it before it lands on Hero Island and explodes,” I said.

“Of course,” said Omega Man. “There’s no time to shoot it down, which would be unwise if it turned out to be a nuke. We’ll need to stop it ourselves.”

“Ourselves?” I said, looking at Omega Man in surprise. “You mean you and me working together to stop it?”

“Of course,” said Omega Man. He smiled. “What, afraid you can’t keep up with an old geezer like me?”

I just smirked back. “Nah. I was actually worried that *you* wouldn’t be able to keep up with *me*.”

Omega Man chuckled. “Then why don’t we get started?”

Then Omega Man launched into the air, flying so fast that he became a blur even I couldn’t follow. The air from his flight actually knocked me back, but I recovered quickly and zoomed after him into the sky, eventually catching up to him, but I had to push my limits to keep up with him. Soon, we were both flying side by side toward the massive missile in the sky.

And when I say ‘massive,’ I mean *massive*. From a distance, it had looked pretty small, but as we drew closer to it, the missile became ridiculously huge. I estimated that it was twice as big as the House and it was shaped like a spear, with a huge missile head that looked as big as a car. I had never seen a missile like this before, but I didn’t stop to analyze it. I just looked at Omega Man, who nodded at me once before returning his attention to the missile, which we were rapidly drawing closer to with each passing second.

We slammed into the missile; not enough to make it explode, but enough to severely slow down its trajectory. And good god did it take almost everything I had to do that; the missile was flying hard and fast, pushing against us, the flames from its rocket exploding behind it. Even Omega Man struggled to hold it back, and he was much stronger than me.

Still, we managed to keep it from getting closer to the Island below. I had no idea what we were going to do with the missile once we stopped it, but I could only assume that Omega Man had a plan. Maybe we would throw it into the sea or something.

But then a panel just behind the missile head slid open and a laser cannon rose from within and aimed at us. It immediately started firing yellow lasers at us, striking both of us and sending us flying away from the missile. The lasers hurt and even made me feel strangely weak, but I managed to regain my balance in time to see the missile rocket past us, still heading toward the crowd of superheroes on Hero Island below.

Shaking my head, I flew after the missile and was soon joined by Omega Man, who was now scowling. More lasers fired from the missile, forcing us to weave and dodge to avoid getting shot. But this also forced us to slow down, which made it impossible to reach the missile.

“Bolt!” Omega Man suddenly shouted, pointing at the laser cannons that had risen out of the missile. “Take out the laser cannons while I try to stop the missile! Use your lightning powers!”

“Sure!” I shouted back.

I increased my speed and shot toward the missile, with Omega Man shooting past me and going underneath the missile to intercept it. More lasers fired at me, but I fired several bolts of red lightning at the cannons, instantly causing them to explode, although I missed a few, which continued to shoot at me.

But their focus, at least, was entirely on me. Omega Man had gotten to the front of the missile again and was trying to stop it once more. This time, he was actually succeeding. The missile was visibly slowing down, but it was still falling and would likely reach the Island soon anyway unless we could actually stop it for good.

Omega Man must have come to the same realization as me, because he shouted, “Bolt, destroy the rocket!”

I nodded again, destroyed the few laser cannons I’d missed the first time, and then zoomed over to the missile itself, which I landed on even as it pushed against Omega Man. The heat of the rocket was almost too much even here, especially with the wind raging around me, but I looked for a fault line or crack I could take advantage of to break the rocket off from the rest of the missile. Of course, I was also deeply aware that if I hit the wrong spot, I could blow both me and Omega Man straight out of the sky with the missile.

I slammed my fist into a part of the missile that looked weak. Immediately, large cracks started running along the missile’s behind and the rocket even sputtered, but it was still connected to the missile and still pushing it toward the ever closer crowd below.

So I raised both of my fists and brought them down on the rocket as hard as I could. My fists smashed through metal, but it wasn’t just metal. There was some kind of weird blood and organic tissue underneath the plating as well, even appeared to be intertwined with the metal and wiring, but I didn’t get a good look at it because the rocket exploded off the end of the missile.

The explosion was enough to send me flying off the missile, hurtling uncontrollably through the air. But I managed to regain control of my flight quickly enough and stopped in midair, though I was covered in icky soot and a weird green liquid that looked kind of like blood but smelled like crap. Still, I didn’t seem to have suffered any major injuries, so I thought I was going to be okay.

Then I remembered that Omega Man was still trying to stop the missile and I looked down to see that, though the missile no longer had its rocket, it was still falling toward the earth and pushing Omega Man with it. But I could tell that it was already slowing down, thanks to Omega Man’s strength and its lack of a rocket, although he clearly couldn’t stop it on his own entirely.

So I shot down and joined Omega Man at the front of the missile. We used all our strength to stop it, but a quick glance over my shoulder told me that we were still getting closer and closer to the ground with every second.

But the rest of the superheroes were already scattering, leaving us a good space in which to land the missile. So, slowly but surely, Omega Man and I carefully lowered the missile down onto the ground, where it now lay very quietly. It didn't even explode, though I didn't relax right away.

Taking my hands off the missile, I wiped away the sweat that had accumulated on my hair as Omega Man said, "That was a close one."

"I'll say," I said. I looked at the missile again. "But what is it? And is it ... bleeding?"

That was the best way to describe it. The back part, where the rocket had been, was smoking and oozing that disgusting green blood that had gotten all over me. It was the weirdest thing I'd ever seen, and I'd seen plenty of weird things in my time as a superhero.

Omega Man's eyes widened. "Oh my god. I think I know what that is."

"You do?" I said, looking up at him in surprise. "What is it?"

But Omega Man didn't answer. He looked around at the crowd of assembled superheroes and shouted, "Everyone! Get as far away from this thing as you can, before it blows—"

Without warning, the missile suddenly exploded.