

## CHAPTER ONE

**W**HEN KEVIN JASON—ALSO known as the superhero Bolt and leader of the Young Neos—received the message from Mecha Knight summoning him to the Tower of Heroes, he immediately knew that he was in trouble. And based on Mecha Knight’s message, he was in *deep* trouble, certainly the kind of trouble that he couldn’t solve with his fists.

Most importantly, however, Kevin was in trouble with the Leadership Council of the Neohero Alliance itself. The Leadership Council was the ruling body of the NHA, made up of seven (formerly eight) members elected by the rest of the organization to make important decisions and to lead the organization wisely. Kevin’s supervisor, Mecha Knight, was a member of the Leadership Council, but Kevin doubted that Mecha Knight was going to be able to help him today.

Kevin knew he was in trouble because he knew what the Leadership Council was supposed to do today. In addition to their usual daily duties, today was the day that the Leadership Council would finally vote on whether to induct Kevin into the Neohero Alliance as a full-time member. The vote had been put off several times already, once because of the opening of the new school, but Mecha Knight had assured Kevin that the vote would indeed happen today regardless of whatever else happened. Kevin was glad to hear that, because he’d grown very impatient waiting for the Council to vote on his membership application and he had been anxious to get it over with.

But the message that Kevin received was not a congratulations for being voted into the NHA, nor was it an apologetic confirmation that they had voted against him. The message from Mecha Knight read thusly:

*BOLT—please come to the Tower of Heroes, to the Council Chamber, top of the Tower where the Council meets. The Council wishes to discuss something with you. Please come as soon as possible. Thanks.*

The message was vague, but it was that exact vagueness which troubled Kevin. Something came up that must have interrupted the vote but for some reason required Kevin’s presence at the Tower. He had visited the Tower several times in the past, but it was unusual for him or anyone else in the Young Neos to be summoned there on such short notice like this. Since Kevin had taken the day off from his usual superhero duties anyway, he had no trouble leaving the House and flying across Hero Island to the Tower of Heroes in the center of the Island, though he did tell the rest of his teammates where he was going so they would not be concerned about his disappearance. Except, of course, for Shell, who was in New York City today visiting his cousin, but Kevin figured he would just tell Shell about what happened when he got back.

The Tower of Heroes was a tall building standing on top of the main headquarters, a massive, sprawling compound where the majority of the NHA’s members stayed in between missions. The compound was also home to a variety of training rooms, meal halls, medical stations, and other places, though the headquarters was open only to members of the NHA and not to any of the tourists or guests who visited Hero Island on vacation.

But Kevin didn’t pay much attention to that. He just flew up to the roof of the Tower of Heroes and entered through the open ceiling, though as he descended into the chamber within the ceiling closed above him. That meant that the Leadership Council didn’t want to risk someone listening in on this conversation. Under ordinary circumstances, that would not startle Kevin, but given the circumstances, it made Kevin nervous.

He became even more nervous when he landed on the floor and looked up at the seven superheroes seated on the chairs—more like thrones due to their height—before him. It was the assembled

Leadership Council: Omega Man, Lady Amazon, Mr. Miner, High Fly, Beyond Man, Mecha Knight, and Black Blur. It was rare to see all seven of the Leadership Council members in one place like this, but Kevin did not dwell on that too much, because he sensed that he had just landed in the middle of what must have been a very serious argument between the Council members.

He thought that because the Leadership Council members wore disagreeable expressions. They kept exchanging annoyed glances with each other and with Kevin, even though Kevin had just arrived and he hadn't even spoken to them yet. The only one who seemed normal was Mecha Knight, but even he looked uncomfortable in his throne, occasionally glancing at Kevin with apologetic eyes, though what he had to apologize to Kevin for, Kevin did not know.

"Bolt," said Omega Man, who sat on the throne in the center of the thrones. He was a large and muscular man, even stronger than Kevin, wearing a blue and red suit with a stylized 'O' on his chest, in addition to a black cape hanging off his neck. "We are glad that you made it here so quickly. It speaks well of your character that you didn't waste any time in answering our summons."

Though Omega Man seemed affable enough, Kevin could tell that Omega Man was doing his best to remain civil. He had no idea why until he noticed the way Mr. Miner and Black Blur exchanged incredulous glances, which told Kevin that they clearly did not agree with what Omega Man said, though apparently they weren't going to argue about that right now.

"Well, I wasn't doing anything important, so I didn't have any reason to delay coming here," said Kevin, bowing before the seven Council members before standing upright again. "May I ask what I was summoned here for? Does it have something to do with my membership application? Because if so, I can explain why I put down my mom as a reference—"

"It does," Omega Man interrupted, without showing any sort of enthusiasm. "And it does not."

Kevin blinked. "That's ... not very clear, Omega Man."

"Show some respect," Lady Amazon said. She pointed a muscular hand at me as if accusing me of some horrible crime. "Just because you are the leader of the Young Neos doesn't mean you have the right to disrespect Omega Man or any other member of the Leadership Council."

"But what else should we expect from the son of Genius?" said Black Blur, leaning back in his chair with his fingers steepled together. "I don't recall his father being a very respectful man. Like father, like son."

Kevin scowled. He didn't like it when anyone spoke badly of his father, but before he could respond, Omega Man raised a hand and said, "Enough. I need to explain to Bolt why we summoned him here and I can't do that if the rest of you are mocking him."

The other Council members went silent, although both Lady Amazon and Black Blur looked annoyed at not getting to make jabs at Kevin anymore. Kevin still didn't know why they wanted to bully him, but he supposed he would find out soon enough.

"Now, then," said Omega Man, lowering his hand. "Bolt, the matter which we summoned you over is related to your application. Well, I mean that technically the application itself is correct. You filled out all the boxes correctly and gave complete, thorough, and accurate information about yourself, your powers, and your history."

"Thanks," said Kevin. "It took me a long time to do, but I was very careful the whole time. I did have some help from my friends, but most of it was me." He put his hands on his hips. "That means that it should be accepted, right?"

"Right," said Omega Man slowly. "Under ordinary circumstances, we would have a perfunctory vote and you would be inducted into the Neohero Alliance as a full-time member. In the past, we have never had any trouble voting on inducting members of the Young Neos into the NHA; indeed, our

records show that the Council has always voted unanimously in acceptance of the applications we receive from Young Neos members old enough to join the NHA. That is because the Young Neos have a reputation for producing excellent young superheroes who go on to do great things and most members who apply for membership are already well known to us anyway, so there usually isn't a need to debate the merits of new applicants."

"Like me," said High Fly, gesturing at himself. "Went from Young Neos member to NHA member to Council member in a period of five years. I know I shouldn't toot my own horn, but—"

"Then don't," Mr. Miner suggested.

High Fly glared at Mr. Miner, but Kevin took advantage of this moment to ask, "Well, then what is the problem? If I filled out the application correctly and you guys have never had any problems voting for members of the Young Neos, then I honestly don't see what the issue is."

"Your situation is ... complex, to put it mildly," said Mecha Knight in a carefully measured voice. "And a bit contested as well."

"Oh," said Kevin. He rubbed the back of his head. "Is it because my dad is Genius, one of the Four Founders of the NHA? I know he's dead, but trust me when I say that I want to be an NHA member based on my own merits, not on the reputation of my father."

"Your parentage isn't the problem," said Omega Man. "The problem is that your actions recently have been a bit ... questionable, as well as possibly in violation of the Constitution of the NHA."

"What do you mean?" said Kevin. "I've never done anything against the Constitution, at least not intentionally."

"And your memory is poor, too," said Black Blur. He folded his arms across his chest. "You don't remember everything that you've done recently?"

"It would be helpful if you could be a bit more specific," said Kevin, before adding, "*Sir*," because he nearly forgot.

Not that it made Black Blur like him anymore. The speedster just jumped off his throne and began walking toward Bolt, his arms folded behind his back. "Where to start? First, there was the incident a month and a half ago when your twin brother, White Lightning, ended up in the hands of a dangerous supervillain team. This despite promising the Leadership Council that you would protect your brother and keep him safe from anyone who might wish to use his powers for evil. Such a stunning example of incompetence should have earned you a suspension right away, but certain figures within the Council managed to convince the rest of us to let this breathtaking example of incompetence slide."

Kevin knew who these 'certain figures' were, largely because Black Blur very pointedly glanced at Mecha Knight when he said that. Mecha Knight, to his credit, did not respond or show any emotion, though he seemed to be watching Black Blur as carefully as the rest of the Council.

"Second, there was the alliance you made with the supervillain known as *Electrica* a month ago," Black Blur continued as he walked around Kevin in a circle, making Kevin have to turn his head uncomfortably in order to keep an eye on him. "That goes against not merely the NHA Constitution, but against the code of superheroics itself: Namely, that you do *not* work with supervillains except under extraordinary circumstances or when given permission by the Leadership Council, permission you were explicitly denied."

"But it *was* extraordinary circumstances," said Kevin defensively. "If we hadn't worked with her—"

"Silence," Black Blur said, without stopping or looking at him. "I am still talking. If you interrupt me again, I will ensure that you never get voted into the Neohero Alliance for the rest of your life."

Kevin shut his mouth immediately, but deep down, he was annoyed. He could explain everything that Black Blur had accused him of so far. He decided that he would explain it all as soon as Black Blur finished speaking, but that was hard to do, because the accusations were the most outrageous that Kevin had heard in a while, closer to what he experienced from Neo Ranks and its unfair reporting than what he expected of a member of the Leadership Council.

"And finally, there was the event at the Academy two weeks ago, in which your actions nearly created another rift between the NHA and the INJ," Black Blur finished, stopping in front of Kevin and looking at him in the eyes. "Even though we know you were not yourself back then, it was still a huge embarrassment that hurt the reputation of the Neohero Alliance, in addition to creating further tension between the two organizations. Promoting you to full-time member status would cause undue controversy with the INJ."

"This is ridiculous," said Kevin. "I—"

"Bolt," said Mecha Knight, interrupting Kevin before he could answer Black Blur's accusations, "please calm down. Those of us who are for your induction into the NHA have already made all of the arguments you are going to make."

"But—"

"Mecha Knight is right," said Black Blur with a smirk. "We know what you're going to say. And none of it changes the facts or the belief of several Council members that you are not ready to become an NHA member."

Kevin's hands balled into fists, which he did mostly to keep himself from doing anything he'd regret. He said, in a forced calm voice, "So you guys are divided on me, then."

"Exactly," said Black Blur, nodding. He gestured at himself. "I, Mr. Miner, and Lady Amazon voted against you, while Mecha Knight, High Fly, and Omega Man voted in favor of you. It is a tie."

"What about Beyond Man?" said Kevin. "Did he—"

"I have abstained from voting this time," said Beyond Man. He was a thin, pale-skinned man in white robes who looked like a ghost. "Simply put, I believe both sides are equal in terms of their reasoning and evidence for their decisions. As a result, I cannot decide if I support or oppose your membership into the organization."

Kevin couldn't believe what he was hearing. He hadn't realized just how controversial some of his most recent actions over the last month and a half had been. He had been aware that not everyone on the Council liked him, but Mecha Knight had assured him that his vote would go through smoothly. Yet the Council was now divided straight down the middle, with half for him and half against, and with Beyond Man abstaining, it didn't look like his membership application was going to be accepted anytime soon, if ever.

"As I said, these are unusual circumstances," said Omega Man. "Never, in the history of the NHA, have we ever been divided on this issue. It is simply unheard of, which is why we summoned you here, as we felt you should know about it."

"Blatantly ignoring the NHA Constitution is also unheard of among Young Neos members, but here Bolt is anyway," said Black Blur.

Kevin stepped toward Black Blur, but when he blinked again, Black Blur was back on his throne safely out of Kevin's reach. That was probably for the best, because Kevin doubted he would be able to get away with laying hands on a member of the Leadership Council, but he still glared at Black Blur anyway just to make it clear how he felt about him.

"He did not blatantly ignore the NHA Constitution, Blur," said Mecha Knight in his usual monotone voice, although Kevin caught a hint of frustration in Mecha Knight's tone. "If he had not worked with Electrica, innocent lives would have been lost."

"Would they have been?" said Lady Amazon in a sharp voice. "Mecha Knight, I think your close relationship with Bolt is ruining your judgment. I know you well enough to know that you would be voting with me and the other two if this wasn't Bolt we were talking about."

"My judgment is just fine, Lady Amazon," said Mecha Knight, his voice even sharper than his sword. "Unlike you, I can actually control my emotions."

"What was that?" said Lady Amazon, rising from her throne like she was ready to fight. "Do you want to say that to my face, tin can?"

"Enough bickering!" said Omega Man, raising both of his hands. He looked at Kevin apologetically. "Do you see the problem? We cannot discuss this in a calm, rational way. We need to come to a decision and quickly, before this conflict weakens the unity of the Council."

"There must be something I can do to make you guys vote for me," said Kevin. He looked at Black Blur, Lady Amazon, and Mr. Miner. "I mean, I don't agree with your accusations, but if there is anything I can do—anything at all—to convince you guys that you should vote for me, I'll do it."

"Being accepted into the Neohero Alliance is that important to you?" said Black Blur, tapping his chin in thought.

Kevin stepped forward again. "Yes. I've always wanted to be a member of the NHA ever since I was a young kid, even before I discovered my superpowers. It's what I want more than anything else in the world, except for Blizzard."

That was true. Kevin didn't have anything else going for him if he was kicked out of the NHA. He knew that independent superheroes existed, of course, but he also knew that it was exceptionally harder to fight supervillains and criminals if you didn't have a large organization like the NHA behind you. That wasn't even getting into the fact that Kevin didn't have any other way to support himself, because the NHA currently provided him and the other Young Neos with all of their needs and he would lose that if his application was rejected. Nor could he simply stay in the Young Neos; now that he was eighteen-years-old, he'd have to leave, as the Young Neos was a team designed specifically for superheroes who were not adults.

"There's nothing you can do to make us change our votes," said Lady Amazon, folding her arms across her chest. "You had a whole year to prove yourself, but you failed."

"Speak for yourself, Lady," said Black Blur. He stopped tapping his chin and looked down at Kevin. "You know, in order to get your application approved, you only need one of us to change our votes, right?"

Kevin nodded. "Yeah, I know that. Are you going to change your vote in favor of me?"

"Maybe," said Black Blur. He tapped his fingers together. "On one condition."

"What condition is that?" said Kevin. "I'll do anything, anything at all. Just tell me and I'll go do it right away."

"All right," said Black Blur. He leaned forward, a strange amused smile on his face. "I want you to track down and capture the supervillain Electrica in one week."

"You want me to capture Electrica?" said Kevin in surprise. "Did I hear you right?"

Black Blur nodded. "Yes, you did."

"But ..." Kevin bit his lower lip. "I don't know where she is. And no one has ever captured her before. She's always escaped capture from every superhero who has ever cornered her. She even broke into Hero Island without getting caught, for Pete's sake."

“True, but capturing Electrica would be enough to convince me that you would be a good NHA member,” said Black Blur. He leaned back in his chair. “After all, my main objection was your working with Electrica. If you captured her and have her thrown into prison like any other supervillain, I could overlook your other mistakes. You don’t even have to capture her kids, though if you could, that would be great, too.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” said Mecha Knight. “Electrica has been a thorn in the side of the Neohero Alliance for over a decade, much worse than most supervillains. Capturing her would be a smart move and a great way for Bolt to prove that he has what it takes to take on real supervillains as a member of the Neohero Alliance.”

“But I’ve already saved the world several times,” said Kevin in annoyance. “It’s not like I’ve never fought ‘real’ supervillains before.”

“And it isn’t like you have much of a choice in the matter, either,” said Black Blur. “If you refuse to do this, I will not change my vote and you will never become a member of the NHA. Of course, it’s your choice, since you are an adult, but I would suggest you think it over before responding in a way you might regret.”

Kevin considered just telling Black Blur off and flying out of the Chamber. He didn’t know if Black Blur really believed that he could find Electrica or if he had just given Kevin this condition in order to give him false hope; given how Black Blur had never been one of Kevin’s biggest fans, Kevin figured that the latter was more likely. Yet Black Blur had made this offer in front of the other Council members; would he really risk ruining his reputation with his fellow Council members just to mess with Kevin?

*And like he said, I don’t have much of a choice, Kevin thought. There’s no way I could convince Lady Amazon or Mr. Miner to change their minds, but if Black Blur is being even partially truthful about rethinking his vote, then I have to take this challenge, no matter how impossible it seems.*

“All right,” said Kevin, nodding. “I will find and capture Electrica in a week. You can count on that.”

“As cocky as always,” said Black Blur, “but it’s good to hear that you’re up to the challenge. It starts ... now.”