

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES, I WISH I had a normal job like most teens my age. Like working at a fast food restaurant or a convenience store or even mowing lawns for the neighbors. Flipping burgers or bagging groceries would be a lot easier than fighting supervillains who like to rampage through downtown Golden City in giant mecha suits. And I'm not even paid more than if I worked in a restaurant, either. I'd have to talk with my boss about getting a raise one of these days. It didn't help that today was Sunday, which was normally my day off, but my boss called me in to deal with this emergency and I couldn't say no, not when we were dealing with a real threat here.

Not that a pay raise was my biggest priority at the moment. As I crouched behind an overturned sedan, trying to catch my breath, I was more concerned with defeating the aforementioned supervillain in a giant mecha suit who was currently searching for me and Rubberman, my boss. Although I heard him smashing the street and yelling some really nasty threats at us, I couldn't help but peer around the side of the overturned car to get an idea of what the villain was doing.

Right in the middle of the street stood a gigantic mecha. It was about two stories tall and shaped kind of like a tank with arms and legs. Its body was covered in blackened laser blast marks from where I'd hit it dozens of times over the last hour, but its hide was incredibly thick, because even my strongest eye blasts couldn't pierce its skin. The mecha had twin machine guns on its shoulders and carried a gigantic sword half as long as a school bus in its hands. Its plating was mostly silver and gray, while on its back was a rocket pack which apparently helped it fly. At its feet lay a bisected car, cut cleanly by the sword's energy blade, smoke rising from both halves, though thankfully the car's owner had apparently fled at some point.

In the head of the robot—which was shaped like a bucket—sat the villain in question, a guy who called himself Lord Mechanika. You'd think, with a name like that, he'd be some kind of big, imposing regal figure with a cape and clothes fit only for royalty, but in truth, he was kind of a scrawny computer nerd (not hating on nerds here, because I'm kind of one myself). Thick glasses were perched on a long, hooked nose, from which crazy black eyes flashed like bombs. He wore one of those stupid nerd chic T-shirts with a Star Trek quote on it or something, but I couldn't read it from a distance. I could, however, tell that Lord Mechanika wore gloves and boots with wires that disappeared from sight, gloves and boots that apparently let him control the mecha itself like it was an extension of his body. It would have been an impressive creation if he wasn't also a psycho who was trying to kill innocent civilians for no reason.

"Rubberman!" Lord Mechanika shouted, his screechy voice amplified by the speaker where the 'mouth' of the mecha would normally be. "Show yourself, you coward! Or are you afraid of the power of Lord Mechanika and his Death Mecha of Doom? Not that I blame you, because this is the most advanced mecha on the planet. Even the US military doesn't have access to this kind of technology!"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Death Mecha of Doom? Seemed kind of repetitive and melodramatic, but given how he had already wrecked half of Main Street and given both me and Rubberman a run for our money, I should probably take him more seriously. That's kind of hard to do, though, given how high-pitched his voice is.

Speaking of Rubberman, I glanced at the building tops to see if I could spot him. Unfortunately, I couldn't see Rubberman anywhere at the moment, but that wasn't surprising. Rubberman had told me to find cover while he set up a trap to disable Lord Mechanika's robot, which I was more than happy to do, given how ineffective my laser blasts were against his machine's tough hide. Even so, I couldn't help but silently agree with Lord Mechanika, though for different reasons, because the longer

it took Rubberman to set up his trap, the more time Lord Mechanika had to cause more property damage and either kill or harm any civilians. Granted, most of the people in the area had either fled or locked themselves inside the safety of nearby homes and businesses, but that didn't mean much, given how Mechanika's 'Death Mecha of Doom' could easily level a whole skyscraper it wanted. And given how frustrated Lord Mechanika sounded, it would not be long before he began smashing up even more cars and street lamps in an effort to get Rubberman's attention.

But then, that was basically why Lord Mechanika was doing this stuff in the first place.

According to what I've been able to piece together from Lord Mechanika's partially coherent shouts of rage, he was a normal robotics engineer known as Greg Elliot, who worked for McCoy Robotics, a robotics company with a factory near Golden City. Elliot, however, was also a superhero fan; in particular, he was a fan of my boss, Rubberman, and once tried to get his autograph at some event Rubberman was at, but apparently my boss had rudely ignored him or something.

So Elliot—excuse me, 'Lord Mechanika'—did the logical thing that any spurned fan would do and built a mecha that wouldn't look out of place in a mecha anime. Apparently, he's made it his life mission to destroy Rubberman for the crime of rudely refusing to give him his autograph or something like that.

I know Rubberman always says that most criminals and supervillains tend to be petty megalomaniacs who pull these sorts of stunts just to feel better about themselves, but I didn't really believe it until today. For that matter, I wondered what Lord Mechanika thought would happen after he beat Rubberman; did he intend to perform the time-honored supervillain tradition of attempting to take over the world?

I shook my head. Focus. I had to focus. Rubberman always told me that I let myself get too distracted sometimes and that being distracted can often get you killed in a fight. I needed to stay behind this car and wait for Rubberman's signal, a signal I could miss if I wasn't careful. I would worry about Lord Mechanika's terrible motivations for becoming a supervillain later.

Pulling my head back behind the car, I was prepared to keep an eye out for Rubberman's signal when a sudden shriek of terror caused me to look around the car again.

Damn it. Lord Mechanika held in his right mecha hand a thin, dark-haired teenage girl who was probably my age. She was pretty cute, I gotta admit, almost elf-like in her prettiness, but I didn't know where he had gotten her from, given how the street was supposedly evacuated when Mechanika attacked. Perhaps she accidentally wandered into the street or something; not that it really mattered, given how Lord Mechanika could easily squash her between the fingers of his mech like a bug. The girl, to her credit, was struggling to free herself, but it was pretty obvious that she was completely at Mechanika's mercy.

"Rubberman!" Lord Mechanika shouted, waving the girl above his mecha's head suddenly. "See this innocent, sweet girl I have here? Unless you come out and fight me like a man, I'll squeeze her until she pops like a balloon. And I'm not bluffing. I wouldn't hesitate to hurt girls like her, who always choose those dumb jocks over the nerds who run this society in the first place!"

Great. In addition to being a spurned fan, Lord Mechanika was also a loser still hung up by the fact that he had been rejected by some hot girl in high school. I'm starting to think that Rubberman was actually understating just how petty most supervillains and criminals actually are.

Regardless, that girl needed to be rescued. I didn't see Rubberman anywhere, but I figured that he was too busy setting up his trap to actually save the girl. That was bad, because Lord Mechanika looked like he was definitely going to kill her if Rubberman didn't show up.

I know that Rubberman told me to stay put, but I couldn't, in good conscience, continue to follow his orders if that meant letting an innocent person die. Rubberman would probably be angry with me, but I decided I would worry about that later after the girl was saved.

I dashed out from behind the car and, stopping next to a street lamp, shouted, "Hey, Elliot! Put the girl down now or else!"

Lord Mechanika looked at me and growled. "You're not Rubberman. You're just his stupid sidekick. What, is Rubberman so afraid of getting his pretty costume dirty that he's sending *teenagers* to deal with me?"

I bit my lower lip. "It doesn't matter. I said, put the girl down *now* or else."

"Or else what?" said Lord Mechanika. He chuckled. "Look, kid, I know that your eye beams can't hurt my machine, so fighting me would just be a waste of time. Why don't you go back home and do your homework or something?"

"Sorry, but I can't just let freaks like you harm innocent girls like her," I said. "I mean, I know you were probably rejected by a girl like her in high school or something like that, but threatening to kill an innocent teenage girl doesn't make you look like a big, bad supervillain. It just makes you look like a pathetic loser, to be frank."

Lord Mechanika's eyes widened in rage behind his glasses. "Loser? I'll show *you* who's a loser! Die!"

Lord Mechanika's shoulder machine guns suddenly swiveled toward me. I dove back behind the overturned sedan I had been behind just moments before. A volley of bullets struck the roof of the car, creating a deafening sound of lead clashing against metal, but luckily none of the bullets managed to pierce the car. Still, Lord Mechanika probably hated me even more than Rubberman right now, which meant that he probably wasn't going to stop until I was blasted into tiny little pieces. Mechanika may have been a loser, but he was a loser with a robot equipped with shoulder machine guns and carrying a giant sword, which meant that he was both more dangerous and yet somehow more pathetic than he normally would have been. I was starting to regret pissing him off.

A large shadow suddenly appeared over me and I looked up in time to see Lord Mechanika's huge sword coming down toward me. With a yelp, I rolled forward, just barely avoiding the huge sword, which slashed through the sedan as easily as butter. Rolling back to my feet, I looked up at Lord Mechanika's mech and fired twin laser blasts at the machine, which were amplified by my helmet's refracted glass visor.

Unfortunately, the lasers only glanced off the side of the mech, which Lord Mechanika did not even seem to notice. His mecha turned to face me, raising the sword above its head while the girl in its other hand continued to scream her head off. Despite its size, the mecha was fast and it brought down its sword on me again, this time faster than I could dodge.

So I unleashed a powerful, continuous blast of lasers at the sword. The lasers struck the sword dead on and, to my surprise, actually cut through it, splitting the blade cleanly in half. The top half went flying off in a random direction, while the lower half remained in Lord Mechanika's hand, though instead of bringing it down on me, he just stared at it in shock for a moment, like he could not believe that his sword was broken.

But then Lord Mechanika threw the lower half of sword away and snatched me up and lifted me up into the air. I began beating on the huge mech's fist, but even after a month of heavy training with Rubberman, my own fists were useless against the iron grip of Mechanika. And when he squeezed me hard enough that I thought I heard something snap, I gave up. The girl had given up, too; she was not screaming, but instead whimpering in fear. And, despite how terrible the situation was, I couldn't help but notice how cute she was.

“Rubberman!” Lord Mechanika bellowed, his voice even louder up close. “I have your stupid sidekick! If you don’t come out and face me like a man, I will crush him and the girl like soda cans!”

I heard the sound of rubber snapping into place and Lord Mechanika turned around, forcing me and the girl to turn with him. Standing in the center of the street, near a pothole created by Lord Mechanika’s steps, was Rubberman himself. His hands were balled into fists, but he looked less likely to throw a punch at Lord Mechanika and more like he was frustrated at his own powerlessness. His blue and white suit was slightly dusty from his previous clash with Lord Mechanika, while his normally sleek black hair was also messier than normal.

“Here I am, Elliot,” said Rubberman, spreading his arms. “Now, put down Beams and the girl.”

I looked at Lord Mechanika, who was now smirking in a way I didn’t like at all. Lord Mechanika took a step forward, a rather disgusting chuckling sound coming from his throat.

“First, the name is Lord Mechanika, not Elliot,” Lord Mechanika said. His smirk turned into a downright evil grin. “And second ... I never intended to spare the sidekick or the girl. The only reason I kept them both alive for so long is because I know how much more you like these two kids than your biggest, most passionate fan.” He lifted us slightly higher in the air. “Therefore, I am going to kill them both right in front of your eyes. Their deaths will be your biggest, most painful failure ... and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Lord Mechanika’s grip on me tightened. I tried to scream, but the grip of his mecha squeezed the breath out of my lungs. The girl was also trying to scream, but she must have been squeezed just as hard as me, because the only sound coming from her mouth was a weird croaking noise (not too different from what came from my mouth, actually). I heard Rubberman screaming my name, but I couldn’t respond, nor did I focus on him. I felt like I was being crushed underneath tons of cinder blocks and my vision was starting to go black. I would have fired my lasers, but I was in too much pain to concentrate long enough to shoot even a weakened version of my lasers.

I looked at the girl, whose face would likely be the last one I would ever see. She really was beautiful, with long hair that really brought out her dark eyes. A part of me wished I could have gotten to know her better before we died together; I didn’t even know her name. She was looking at me, too, perhaps having the same thoughts I was about wishing we could have gotten to know each other before we died.

Just as the darkness of death began to tug at the corner of my eyes, the crushing feeling stopped. At first, I thought Lord Mechanika had just stopped crushing us in order to lower our defenses, to give us and Rubberman one last bit of hope before he finished us off, but then a string of the foulest curse words I knew—including more than a few I didn’t recognize—came from the mech’s speaker.

“What the hell?” said Lord Mechanika. “Why aren’t you two being crushed to death? Why isn’t the Death Mecha of Doom responding to my controls?”

Surprised, I looked over at Lord Mechanika. He was desperately moving his limbs every which way, but despite the facts that his arms and legs flew everywhere, the mech stood perfectly still. It was like someone had flipped an off switch in the mech. I looked over at the girl and was relieved to see that she was still conscious, though she looked like she was in great pain just like me.

Then, somewhat abruptly, the pressure around my waist lightened considerably. The mech still held me, but it was no longer crushing me to death in its grip. Nor was it crushing the girl to death, either.

“What?” said Lord Mechanika. “No, Death Mecha, this is *not* what you’re supposed to do. You’re supposed to *crush* them to death, make their blood and guts explode everywhere, imprint their deaths upon Rubberman’s memory for the rest of his damn life! Stupid robot!”

I guess the Death Mecha must have had a mind of its own, because it just ignored Lord Mechanika's orders. It slowly lowered me and the girl to the street, carefully placing us on the street while Lord Mechanika cursed even more foully than ever. The Death Mecha let go of us; I staggered, my waist hurting, but the girl nearly collapsed out of exhaustion. I quickly dashed over and caught her before she could hit her head against the street. She was very light in my hands and she grabbed me, perhaps instinctively, her grip a lot stronger than she looked. She was also shaking; she probably wasn't used to being in such dangerous situations before.

"Are you okay?" I said. I was glad that my suit absorbed sweat, because I was sweating hard right now and I didn't want to get my sweaty hands all over this pretty girl's body and clothes.

"Yeah," said the girl. Even her voice was beautiful, almost musical in a way. I noticed she had cute short earrings shaped like raindrops on her ears. She gingerly touched her waist. "Nothing is broken, just ... hurts a lot."

I sighed in relief, but then a new round of cursing came from above and I looked up. The Death Mecha stood perfectly still now, its arms outstretched, while Lord Mechanika was throwing a temper tantrum in the cockpit.

"Stupid, stupid, dumb robot!" Lord Mechanika screamed, almost screeched. "I built you! You should *not* be disobeying me! You useless piece of scrap! I should never have built you in the first—"

The Death Mecha immediately smashed its fist through the cockpit, grabbed Lord Mechanika, and, with the sound of snapping wires, pulled him out of the cockpit. Lord Mechanika was still screaming, but a quick squeeze from the Death Mecha's hand caused him to shut up pretty quickly.

Still, Lord Mechanika apparently couldn't keep his mouth shut, because he said, "Stupid machine. I don't know why you're rebelling against me all of a sudden, but I demand that you put me down this instant."

The Death Mecha apparently took Lord Mechanika's commands quite seriously, because it abruptly dropped him like a rock. Because the Death Mecha was at least five stories tall, Lord Mechanika was probably going to go *splat* when he hit the ground. That would have worried me, but given how annoying Lord Mechanika was, I didn't make any move to attempt to intercept his fall.

But then a shadow flew past me, causing me to look up, but I didn't see anything. I was about to dismiss it as my imagination or maybe some kind of bird when the girl suddenly gasped. "Dad!"

I looked back over at the Death Mecha. Lord Mechanika had not, unfortunately, splattered against the ground like paste. Instead, he had been caught in midair by a superhero I'd never seen before. He wore a green and yellow costume, very similar to Rubberman's, except less stretchy. A cape flowed down his back, while a black domino mask covered his eyes, leaving the rest of his face exposed.

Lord Mechanika—who had been screaming when he had been dropped—looked at the new hero with bewilderment. "Who the hell are you? You're not Rubberman."

The new superhero chuckled. "Very observant one we have here. Yes, I'm not Rubberman, though that doesn't mean I can't put you in jail like him."

Moving faster than my eyes could follow, the new superhero quickly clasped a thick set of handcuffs around Lord Mechanika's wrists. Not that Mechanika seemed likely to try to resist arrest, though; he was so scrawny in comparison to the new muscular hero that he probably would have hurt himself if he tried to attack him. It helped that Mechanika didn't actually have any powers of his own. Without his mech, he was just a useless, bitter former fan boy and nothing more.

"Charlotte!" came a voice nearby, one I didn't recognize.

The girl—who was apparently named Charlotte—and I both looked over to the right to see someone running toward us. He was a teenager who couldn't have been older than me, wearing an orange and

black jumpsuit, in addition to a strange helmet which left the bottom of his mouth exposed, but had a strange laser-pointer type device attached to the right eye. The boy looked a lot stronger than me, too, like he worked out more or something.

"Charlotte, are you okay?" said the boy. He stopped a few feet from us, his attention entirely on the girl in my arms. "Did that freak hurt you? Do you think you'll need to go to the hospital?"

"No, I think I will be fine," said Charlotte, who sounded far less afraid now that Lord Mechanika was defeated. "Thanks to Dad and this guy, I didn't get hurt as badly as I could have been, though I'll need to rest for a while."

The boy's attention abruptly turned to me. He glanced at the way I held Charlotte and tensed, though I didn't understand why he seemed that way.

"Hi," I said, somewhat awkwardly. "I'm, uh—"

"Beams," the boy said. He said my name neutrally, yet at the same time it sounded kind of like an insult. "Rubberman's new sidekick, right?"

"Uh, right," I said. "How did you know who I am?"

"Because I told him about you, of course," said Charlotte. She hugged me more tightly all of a sudden. "I can't believe I was rescued by Beams himself! This is like a dream come true."

"Uh," I said, glad that my visor hid my face, because I was blushing furiously all of a sudden. "That's nice, but um—"

Thankfully, I didn't have to finish my sentence, because the new superhero landed near us. He unceremoniously dumped Lord Mechanika—whose ankles were also shackled now—onto the ground and ran over to Charlotte with a concerned look on his face.

"Charlotte, are you—" said the new superhero, before the boy piped up and said, "Yeah, she's fine. She just told us."

The superhero sighed in relief. "Whew. That is good to hear. Still, I am going to take you to the doctor after this and get you x-rayed just to make sure that that monster didn't break any bones."

"Okay, Dad," said Charlotte. She hugged me again. "By the way, Dad, this is Beams. You remember him, right? The greatest sidekick ever?"

The superhero's attention turned to me. Unlike the masked boy, this guy didn't look at me with disgust, but rather with interest. "So you're Rubberman's new sidekick everyone is talking about. Glad to meet you."

"Uh, same to you, um—"

"Myster!" Rubberman suddenly shouted behind me. "Long time, no see, old friend!"

Startled, I looked over my shoulder to see Rubberman walking toward us. He had a huge grin on his face, which was matched by the grin on the new superhero's face. The new superhero walked past me and shook hands with Rubberman firmly.

"Rubberman," said the new superhero, whose name was apparently Myster. "Great to see you again. It's been a while since Tokyo, hasn't it?"

"Indeed it has," said Rubberman. "Thanks for saving my sidekick, by the way. Elliot isn't much of a threat, but I have to admit that he did have me in a bind there."

"Oh, don't thank me," said Myster. He gestured at the masked kid. "Thank my own sidekick, Cyberkid, for stopping the mech in the first place."

Cyberkid raised his nose into the air, like he was proud of himself. "Wasn't too hard. I've controlled bigger machines than that before."

"Well, I'll just split the difference and thank both of you for your help," said Rubberman. "But what brings you to Golden City? I thought you were protecting North Wood nowadays."

Myster's smile suddenly turned into a serious frown, like Rubberman had just wandered into a serious subject. "I was going to get to that. It involves you."

"Oh?" said Rubberman, his own smile turning into a puzzled frown. "What is it? Do you want a figure based off yourself in my upcoming toy line?"

Myster shook his head. "No, it has nothing to do with licensing deals. There is an assassin in Golden City ... and he's coming for you."