

CHAPTER ONE

BOLT COULD PUT UP WITH a lot of things. You had to if you wanted to be a superhero. Things didn't necessarily always go the way you planned, so there was always a degree of improvisation to any superhero career. That was just how things worked and, while that approach had benefited Bolt well so far in his short life, it could still be quite tiring. His girlfriend, Blizzard, hated improvising more than him, which was why Bolt always had to reassure her that things would work out in the end, no matter how bad things looked now.

But as Bolt stood on top of the roof of a building in downtown Golden City, staring down some guy who called himself Rubberman, who had knocked out his only friend Shade and was currently holding her hostage, and accusing Bolt of being a criminal for not having a 'superhero license' (something Bolt still didn't understand) and talking about how he was going to arrest him ...

Well, Bolt could be forgiven for losing his patience. Especially since he was stranded in an alternate universe he knew nothing about, with no way of getting home and no way of calling for help or stopping the evil alien god that was going to conquer the multiverse.

"Now," Rubberman was saying, sounding very much like a police officer giving orders to a suspect, "I'm going to have to ask you to come in quietly. Otherwise, I will have to use force to apprehend you, but I'm not very interested in harming you or your friend here. Please put your hands behind your head and get on your knees."

"Sorry, but I've got places to be and things to do," said Bolt. He nodded at Shade. "And I need her if I'm going to go to those places and do all those things I need to do."

Without hesitation, Bolt fired a red lightning bolt at Rubberman faster than Rubberman could react. The lightning bolt hit Rubberman dead on, sending red electricity crackling up and down his form. The attack should have knocked Rubberman down in one hit, maybe even sent him flying, but to Bolt's shock, Rubberman just stood there, a look of surprise and confusion on his face. He hadn't even let go of Shade, who was still wrapped in his elongated arm like a mouse caught by a snake.

"Electricity?" Rubberman said, glancing at his unharmed body. He looked up at Bolt. "Tell me, are you an empowered human or does your suit have some kind of electrical properties? I've never seen a superhero capable of throwing lightning bolts like that, especially red ones."

Bolt stepped back. "That attack should have taken you out in one hit. How did you survive?"

Rubberman patted his chest. "I'm not just called Rubberman for branding reasons. My body is made of rubber, the toughest rubber around. Rubber doesn't conduct electricity, so your electric attacks are useless against me. Even my suit is insulated from electricity."

But then Rubberman shook his head. "It doesn't matter. By attacking me, you've shown that you are unwilling to come quietly, which means I have to use the minimum force necessary to take you into custody."

Rubberman launched his other arm at Bolt and wrapped it firmly around his neck. Bolt gasped in pain and clutched the rubber arm, which tightened around his neck and made it harder to breathe. He realized that Rubberman was trying to knock him out by choking him. He activated his super strength and ripped Rubberman's arm off his neck, allowing him to breathe freely once again.

A shocked look appeared on Rubberman's face, but Bolt just rushed toward Rubberman and punched him in the face. His blow sent Rubberman's head stretching backward, but like a rubber band, Rubberman's head snapped back and slammed directly into Bolt's face. The headbutt made Bolt

see stars, causing him to stagger backwards from the impact before Rubberman swiped his legs out from underneath him, sending Bolt falling down onto the roof instantly.

Bolt tried to get back up, but Rubberman wrapped his arm around his neck again and squeezed harder than ever. Bolt gasped in pain again, his eyes watering from the pain. Darkness was gathering at the edges of his eyes, unconsciousness threatening to overtake him if he didn't get back up.

So Bolt launched into the air as hard and fast as he could. He got a good distance above the building before he came to an abrupt stop and gasped for air. Looking down, Bolt saw Rubberman still standing on the roof below, but he had now wrapped his legs around the legs of the nearby water tower, which was why Rubberman had not gone flying with him into the air. His arm was, however, stretched out ridiculously long, which would have looked comical if Bolt wasn't choking.

"Lightning, super strength, and flight?" said Rubberman. "Never met an empowered human as powerful as you. Did you drink some kind of experimental serum or are you just special?"

Bolt would have responded with a clever quip of his own, but he was rapidly losing air and he knew he didn't have much time before he lost consciousness and fell to the roof below. Yet Rubberman's powers seemed almost custom-designed to counter his own. Bolt had faced a lot of tough opponents over the years, but never had he met someone whose powers were so well-suited for countering or even outright negating his own.

Think fast, Bolt, Bolt thought. You don't have much time, but you need to beat Rubberman somehow.

An idea occurred to Bolt. It would be risky and cause a lot of damage, but it might just work. It might not defeat Rubberman, but if all it did was make him let go of Bolt, then that would be enough.

Activating his super strength, Bolt turned to face Rubberman and then rushed down toward him as fast as he could. He slammed into Rubberman hard enough to smash them both through the roof of the building and go crashing down through floor after floor until they hit the bottommost floor. When they crashed into the floor, Rubberman's grip on his neck loosened and Bolt ripped it off. Then Bolt grabbed Rubberman's arms and twisted them behind his back, tying them together into the tightest knot he could make.

"There," said Bolt, standing up and looking down at him. "Let's see you bounce back from *that*, rubber dude."

To Bolt's shock, Rubberman's eyes snapped open and he glared up at Bolt. "Nice try, illegal, but perhaps you forget that my *entire* body is rubber, not just my arms."

Before Bolt could react to that, Rubberman's legs stretched up around him and constricted like a snake. Bolt once again gasped for air, but then Rubberman twisted his legs and slammed Bolt into a nearby wall. Dazed from the impact of the blow, Bolt nonetheless activated his super strength and began fighting against Rubberman's legs, but they were constricted so tightly around his body that it was like trying to throw off his skin.

"Sorry, criminal," said Rubberman. He quickly undid his knotted arms, causing them to retract back to their original size and length. "You're a tough one, I'll admit, but I've faced tougher before."

Rubberman's legs suddenly constricted around Bolt. Alarmed, Bolt tried to fly again, but Rubberman suddenly tightened his legs around him so much that Bolt fell back down onto the floor.

"I'm not going to let you fly away again," said Rubberman, strain in his voice from the effort of keeping Bolt down, "no sir. I'm going to knock you out so you'll be easier to take to the police, but I'll do more than that if I absolutely have—"

Without warning, the shadows contracted around Rubberman and suddenly two shadow tendrils reached out of the darkness and wrapped around his arms. Surprised, Rubberman struggled to break free of the tendrils but failed. Unfortunately for Bolt, while Rubberman's legs did loosen slightly

around his body, allowing him to breathe normally again, they were still wound too tightly around his body for him to break free of them.

"What is this?" said Rubberman, looking at the shadow tendrils in confusion and horror. "Is this another one of your powers? Just how many powers do you have?"

"Actually, that would be *my* power," said a voice from within the shadows.

Shade materialized out of the shadows, looking at Rubberman with a smirk on her face. Bolt was happy to see her, but unfortunately, Rubberman's legs were still wrapped too tightly around his body for him to speak. He could only smile when he saw her, though Shade did not return the smile because she was focused on Rubberman, who was still struggling to break free of the shadows.

"Shadows?" said Rubberman. "This doesn't make sense. Shadow doesn't have physical properties. How can it constrict me like this?"

"Same way your body can stretch and bend like rubber," said Shade. She cocked her head to the side. "Only, I'm not sure rubber will be very useful against my shadows."

Rubberman scowled. "I can't believe it. Two empowered humans, and they're working together. What are the odds of that?"

"It's not as unlikely as you think," said Shade, folding her arms across her chest. "I mean, sure, superhumans are a minority in the world, but lots of them know each other."

"What are you talking about?" said Rubberman. He shook his head. "Never mind. Let me go now or else I will arrest you, too."

"I'll let you go, but only if you free Bolt first," Shade insisted, gesturing at Bolt.

"I am not going to let him go," Rubberman snapped. "You two are criminals and I don't make deals with criminals. As a licensed superhero, it's my job to bring your kind to justice."

Shade smiled a rather chilling smile. "Did I forget to tell you what I'd do to you if you refused?"

Another tendril extended from the shadows, this one as sharp as a knife. It stopped in front of Rubberman's throat, making him look down his nose at it, his breathing suddenly becoming shallower.

"If you say no, then I'll slit your throat and let you bleed to death here and now," said Shade sweetly. "But you don't seem like the suicidal type, so I'm going to give you a chance to be reasonable and let Bolt go. Can't arrest 'criminals' if you're dead, right?"

Bolt had always known that Shade's flirty and fun personality hid a more ruthless individual who was more deadly than her appearance suggested, but it was rare for him to actually see it. Right now, Bolt saw Shade's true ruthless nature, even if it was obscured somewhat by her falsely sweet tone. It was a reminder to him why Cadmus had chosen Shade to be his right-hand woman and eventual successor as the Director of the Department of Superpowered & Extraterrestrial Beings, and why he was glad she was on his side right now.

Rubberman must have sensed it, too, because he seemed to be thinking deeply about Shade's offer. His eyes darted from the shadow knife at his throat to Bolt and back again as if he was trying to figure out a way out of this situation that didn't involve allowing so-called 'criminals' to escape.

Finally, after a couple of tense seconds, Rubberman's legs loosened around Bolt and retracted back to their original length. Bolt gasped for breath and scrambled to his feet, dusting off his costume as he rose to his full height.

"There," said Rubberman. He glared at Shade. "I let your partner go. Are you happy now?"

"Quite," said Shade, her smile wider than ever. "But I'm still not sure you will leave us alone, so I'm going to keep you restrained for just a little while longer while Bolt and I talk and figure out where we are, okay?"

"What?" said Rubberman, his eyes widening in rage. "You agreed to let me go if I let your friend go. You lied."

"I'm with the government," said Shade. "Lying is what we do." Then her smile suddenly became fierce. "Besides, you'd have to be *really* naive to think I'd let you live after you tried to arrest us both."

The shadow knife pulled back as if to slit Rubberman's throat, but then Bolt laid a hand on Shade's shoulder and said, "Wait a minute, Shade. Don't kill him."

Shade looked over her shoulder at Bolt. Her smile was gone, replaced by a frustrated scowl. "Why not? He attacked us and tried to arrest us both. Not to mention he manhandled me with those icky rubber arms of his. If we spare him, he'll never leave us alone."

"Because we need facts," said Bolt. He scratched his chin. "And I remember Beams mentioning a 'Rubberman' to me when we first met. This guy might be the Rubberman he was talking about."

Shade frowned, then sighed. "You're right. We have no idea where we are or how to get back home. Director Smith always says a captive is better than a murder victim because a captive might have useful information you couldn't get on your own."

"Uh, right," said Bolt, who wondered what other kinds of 'helpful' advice Cadmus had given to Shade over the years. "Let me talk to the guy. You restrain him with your shadows and make sure he doesn't try anything, okay?"

"Fine," said Shade, nodding. She suddenly looked at Rubberman. "But if you try to do *anything* to hurt Bolt, I'll slit your throat before you even feel it. Got it?"

Rubberman nodded, though he didn't look very happy about it. "Sure. Not like I'm in any position to bargain with you, anyway."

Bolt walked up to Rubberman, being careful to keep a safe distance from him. "You said your name is Rubberman, right?"

Rubberman nodded slowly. "Yes. I hope you didn't forget that already."

"No, I was just trying to make sure I was addressing you correctly," said Bolt. "Tell me, do you have a sidekick named Beams?"

Rubberman frowned, though this time more out of confusion than anger. "A sidekick? No, of course I don't have a sidekick. And if I did, I wouldn't name him *Beams*. That sounds too much like 'beans,' which usually isn't the kind of image you want to be associated with your brand. Only an idiot would name their sidekick Beams."

Bolt tapped his chin thoughtfully. He suspected that Rubberman was telling the truth and that Beams had also told him the truth about working for Rubberman. Both could be true due to the nature of alternate universes, which were created whenever a decision was made in their main universe. It was rapidly becoming clear to Bolt that he and Shade had somehow ended up in an alternate universe of Beams' universe, one where Beams never became Rubberman's sidekick. That didn't mean Beams didn't exist, but he probably wasn't a sidekick or a superhero.

Makes sense, Bolt thought. I bet the divergence point was Beams not going to work for Rubberman, though this information doesn't help us figure out how to get back to our universe.

"I see," said Bolt. "So you're the superhero of Golden City, right?"

"Right," said Rubberman. "My job is to provide support to the police while also dealing with criminals that are beyond their reach. I work for the Munroe Acquisitions company, which puts a lot of limits on what I can and can't do."

"Huh," said Bolt. "I've never heard of a superhero working for a company before."

"You must be new, then, because it's a pretty common practice," said Rubberman. "Lots of acquisitions companies own the IP rights to dozens or even hundreds of superhero brands. Most

acquisitions companies just buy out already established superhero brands and never make their own, mostly because they're about as original as all big major corporations in the world."

"Like your employer?" said Bolt.

Rubberman's face suddenly became pale. "Please don't tell my boss I said that. Sasha doesn't take criticism or insubordination too well and I don't want to lose my job, even if I don't own the Rubberman brand anymore. I still need work."

Bolt found it odd how Rubberman went from a confident superhero unafraid to take on two very powerful superheroes by himself to becoming a scared employee terrified at the mere thought of offending his boss with a fairly inoffensive observation of mega-corporations.

If this is how superheroes act in Beams' universe, then I'm glad superheroes aren't a business in mine, Bolt thought. I'd hate to be a slave to some big mega-corporation that just wants to exploit my 'brand' for their own profit at the expense of my freedom.

"Don't worry," said Bolt, "I have no intention of telling your boss anything you've said. I'm more interested in finding out if you know of a way to dimension-hop."

"Dimension-hop?" Rubberman repeated. "What's that?"

"You know, like traveling between alternate universes and stuff," said Bolt. He mimicked jumping with his right hand. "Simple stuff."

Rubberman's frown deepened. "You mean like in science fiction movies? I'm not sure that's even possible. I mean, I'm more of a businessman than a scientist, but I think that any scientist who discovered something like that would have publicized it already."

Bolt rubbed his forehead in exasperation. "Meaning you don't know how to do it."

"Yep," said Rubberman, nodding. "Why do you want to know? You aren't seriously going with your whole 'superheroes from another universe' shtick, are you? Because I don't think that the judge who will see you and your friend in court is going to be particularly persuaded by *that* defense."

"One, we actually are from another universe," said Bolt, holding up a finger. "And two, we're not going to court because you're not going to arrest us. Simple as that."

"Keep telling yourself that," said Rubberman. "Once your friend here lets me go, I'll make sure to bring you both to jail, as you deserve."

Bolt sighed, while Shade said, "Can I kill him now, Bolt? Pretty please? He's getting on my nerves and he's just being a huge jerk."

"Not yet," said Bolt, waving at Shade to stand her ground. "I still have some questions for him."

Shade pouted but said nothing as Bolt turned back to Rubberman and said, "Suppose I wanted to find dimension-hopping technology or a place experimenting with it. Where would I go to find such technology?"

"McCoy Robotics," said Rubberman. "They're a robotics company with a factory just outside of town to the north of Golden City. They primarily specialize in robotics, but I've heard rumors of them experimenting with other forms of technology as well."

"You think that a robotics company might be experimenting with dimension-hopping tech?" said Bolt.

Rubberman shrugged. "Like I said, I've just heard rumors. I've only been to the factory a couple of times in connection to crimes I've investigated, so I don't know for sure how many of those rumors are true. They could be—and probably are—all fake."

Bolt scratched his chin. It seemed a little too convenient that they ended up near a company which might provide exactly the technology they needed to go back and stop the Dread God, but maybe they just got lucky. Of course, it was equally possible that this would all turn out to be a false lead and they

would find nothing, but so far it was their only clue and Bolt was not going to ignore it just because it *might* turn out to be false.

“All right,” said Bolt. “Shade and I will go to that robotics factory outside of town. And you, Rubberman, will take us to it.”

-

Read the rest [HERE!](#)