

CHAPTER ONE

BOLT"? A VOICE CRACKLED through my earcom suddenly, seeming louder than normal due to how quiet it was tonight. "Are you in position?"

Startled by the voice, I tapped my earcom and said, "Don't worry Brains. I'm exactly where you told me to be. Not like I have anywhere better to be tonight anyway."

In my mind's eye, I could just imagine Brains' disapproving frown at my flippant remarks from behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "Right. I just wanted to make sure you were still in position so this mission is a success. We've been planning this for months and I don't want to leave anything to chance."

I smiled, even though Brains could not see my face. "Like I said, don't worry. I may be young, but I'm a team player. You can count on me."

"Good to hear," said Brains. "Anyway, you know the signal. Once you see it, then you do your part, but do NOT act before then. Understood?"

"Perfectly," I replied. "I'm well-known for my patience. Ask my girlfriend."

"Right," said Brains with more than a hint of skepticism in his voice. "Well, you won't have to wait much longer. The informant is already en route to your location. You should see his car pulling up in front of the building any minute now."

I peered out the window of the abandoned apartment building I had made into my temporary base, but right now the back alleys of Showdown were quiet and empty. "I don't see anyone yet. You sure he's coming?"

"He just sent me a text telling me he's on the way," said Brains. "Again, I must caution *patience*. The man we're after is a dangerous crime boss who has escaped justice dozens of times over the last couple of years. Last thing we need is to act preemptively and give him an opportunity to escape. If we can get him tonight, we can dismantle his entire criminal empire for good."

I nodded. "Gotcha. Anything else I need to know?"

"That's about it," said Brains. "So I'm going to hang up now and leave you be. Honey and I are—"

"Honey?"

"Vanish," Brains corrected himself. "My wife."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, Vanish and I are just about ready to do our parts," Brains continued. "Again, don't act until you see the informant, and if you notice anything suspicious, call me immediately. See you later."

With that, I heard a soft *click* in my ear that told me that Brain had ended the call. I lowered my hand from my ear and frowned. Though I was looking at the streets below, I was still thinking about how Brains repeatedly stressed my need for patience. As much as I liked the guy, he seemed to think that because I was younger than most superheroes—just 18-years-old, while most adult supers were in their twenties and thirties, sometimes older—that I needed more guidance than most.

"It's not like I'm a kid," I muttered under my breath to no one in particular. "I've saved the world more times than I can count. I don't need to be told what to do all the time."

"He's just trying to make sure everything is in order," said another voice in my ear, this one feminine and cool. "According to the NHA's membership database, Brains is well-known for his conscientiousness and attention to detail. It probably is not anything personal."

I almost started when I heard her voice, but relaxed when I recognized it. "I know, Val, but it is still annoying. Maybe he will look at me differently after we pull this mission off."

"Perhaps, but I don't think the Leadership Council sent you here to try to prove something," said Valerie. "They sent you here for the purpose of helping Brains and Vanish crack down on a recent spike in crime in Showdown. I would suggest focusing on that rather than how the adults in your life treat you."

I sighed, but as always, I found it hard to argue with Valerie's logic. Valerie was an AI program originally designed by my father, the legendary superhero Genius, to act as his personal assistant, but after Dad's death, Valerie passed on to me as my personal assistant. She was smart and very good at researching anything I asked her to, but she was not afraid to tell me when I was out of line and to focus on the mission at hand than my own feelings. She may have been my assistant, but she was hardly my slave.

I liked Valerie, but as an AI, I felt like she really didn't always understand what I, as a human, was going through. Maybe it was a bit entitled for me to expect the kind of respect that older and more experienced superheroes commanded on a regular basis. Even so, I was a full NHA member now, not mere a member of the Young Neos or even worse, a student at the Academy. I was starting to wonder if there was more to getting respect from other adults than just getting my NHA membership card.

In any case, I didn't dislike Brains or his wife, Vanish, at all. They were great people and good superheroes who were clearly focused on protecting the citizens of Showdown from all kinds of threats. In the month since I'd arrived in Showdown, I had seen them both work very hard to catch criminals and protect civilians. And it was all about to culminate tonight with the capture of the infamous supervillain and crime lord Gregorio 'Earth King' Russo.

For the past few months, the city of Showdown, Virginia had been plagued by a spike in criminal and supervillain activity, ranging from bank robberies to the sale of illegal weaponry to local criminals and gangs. While Brains and Vanish were capable of handling almost any level of crime, the recent upsurge had been too much for them to handle on their own, so the Neohero Alliance had sent me to help.

According to Brains, most of the recent spike in crime could be traced back to a man named Gregorio Russo, or, as he was known in the criminal underworld, Earth King. Unlike most supervillains, Earth King rarely acted out in public. He instead acted behind the scenes, striking deals with drug cartels and selling illegal weaponry off to the highest bidder. As a result, he had never been arrested himself, although plenty of his associates or minions had been arrested in his place.

Tonight, however, that was about to change. According to the intelligence which Brains and Vanish had gathered, Earth King was supposed to be in the building directly across the street from me tonight. Although it looked like a simple hometown bakery on the outside, Frank's Bread & Donuts was actually supposed to be the meeting place between Earth King and a client. Earth King was allegedly going to try to sell some salvaged powerless gas to this client tonight, which was when we were supposed to pounce and arrest him.

But we had to be careful. Earth King was extremely paranoid about getting arrested and was known to bail out on a potential meeting with a new client if he even suspected that it might be a trap. That was why it had taken many months for our informant—a charismatic young man named Albert Doyle—to set up this meeting, because he had to take it slow so Earth King wouldn't become suspicious. Even the location had to be carefully chosen. Fred's Bread & Donuts was one of Earth King's favorite restaurants in Showdown, so it was chosen in order to lower Earth King's guard.

Of course, even if Earth King did show up, capturing him would still be difficult. As his name suggested, Earth King could not only control dirt but turn his body into earth. More than once, Earth King had evaded capture by the police or superheroes by turning into dirt and sinking into the ground. That was why everyone who was part of this operation tonight was armed with powerless gas pellets that we could throw at him. I had a few in the pockets of my costume, which I was eager to get rid of because I hated carrying around these pellets even when necessary. I was worried they would burst open in my pockets and make me powerless, which would definitely ruin our plans.

The plan tonight was simple. Doyle would drive up to Frank's Bread & Donuts, where he would then walk up to the front door and knock. One of Earth King's minions would let him inside and he would go to the back of the building, where Earth King himself would be, waiting in the bakery's office. There, Doyle would chat with Earth King for a few minutes, pretending to be interested in buying weapons from Earth King. Meanwhile, Brains, Vanish, me, and the Showdown City Police Department would surround the building and ensure that neither Earth King nor any of his minions could escape.

With any luck, Earth King would be on his way to Ultimate Max prison tonight and the crime levels in Showdown ought to return to their normal levels. And if not ... experience told me that it wasn't helpful to dwell on what would happen if things went wrong. We'd just have to improvise, which was something I had a lot of experience doing.

Suddenly, a light blue sedan with white bumpers pulled up in front of the bakery. The door popped open and a short, stout man with long hair hopped out. I had to stifle a laugh because I always found the antics of Albert Doyle, our informant, amusing. Unlike me, Doyle was just an ordinary human being with no powers of his own, but he cared about Showdown just as much as any superhuman and he had been the one to volunteer to meet with Earth King when Brains first came up with this plan months ago, or so I heard. He was just a security guard working at the Braindome, our base in Showdown, but so far he had shown himself to be a lot more than *just* an employee.

Doyle definitely was not showing any fear as he walked up to the front door of the bakery. He held up a hand, paused as if for dramatic tension, and then knocked loudly and quickly on the door before stepping back. He folded his hands behind his back and waited, whistling patiently for Earth King's men to answer.

Sensing that it was almost time to act, I leaned closer to the window, keeping my eyes fixed on the front door to the bakery. Once the door opened and Doyle went inside, it would be go-time for all of us.

But no one came to answer the door. I saw Doyle walk up to the glass door and peer inside, cupping his hands around his eyes to help him see better. Then he stepped back and looked to the left and to the right briefly as if he was looking for something.

"Doyle," came Brains' voice through my earcom, which was on the same group frequency as Doyle's. "What's the matter? Why haven't they let you into the bakery yet?"

"I was about to ask the same question myself," came Doyle's Southern drawl. "Just looked inside, but it's dark as a cave and I can't see anything."

"You don't think Earth King somehow knew this was a trap and bailed at the last minute, do you?" said Vanish, her concerned voice coming loud and clear over my earcom.

"Impossible," said Brains. "I saw Earth King arrive in his limousine less than an hour ago and I haven't seen him leave the bakery since. Nor has the sewer team reported seeing anything unusual in the sewer below the building, either."

"Maybe he just didn't hear you," I said. "Try knocking again."

Doyle chuckled. "I knocked about as loudly as I can. Earth King ain't a spring chicken, but I know he's not deaf, either. Something's up and I'm not sure what."

"Check to see if the door is unlocked," Brains suggested. "If it is, open it and go inside. We'll surround the building as soon as you enter."

"But what if they notice?" said Doyle.

"If Earth King is already gone, then it doesn't matter if they notice or not," said Brains. "Just go inside. You'll be perfectly safe."

"Okay," said Doyle doubtfully. "The door seems unlocked, so I'll just let myself in. If something happens, I'll let you guys know."

I tensed, watching as Doyle walked up to the front door and opened it. He hesitated for a moment before disappearing inside, the door swinging shut behind him on his way in.

"Okay, I'm in," said Doyle in a soft voice. "Smells like bread, but I don't see anyone."

I gulped but said nothing. If Earth King really was gone, then this entire plan would go to waste and we'd be back to square one.

"Keep looking," said Brains. "I already told the cops to start surrounding the place. Perhaps Earth King's minions are hiding somewhere."

"Doubt it," said Doyle. "Place looks like no one's been in it since—"

I suddenly heard what sounded like a chair scraping against the floor, followed by Doyle saying, "Who's there?"

"Doyle?" said Brains. "Did you find someone?"

Doyle, however, did not seem to be paying attention to what Brains said, because he said, "Now who in the *hell* are—"

Doyle was cut off by a single gunshot. And then I heard him fall to the floor of the bakery with a dull *thud*.

Read the rest [HERE!](#)