

CHAPTER ONE

YOU KNOW, I REALLY loved my dad—the legendary late superhero Genius—and to this day I have nothing but respect for his legacy and accomplishments, but there are some days where I wish he hadn't been a hyper-intelligent inventor who could build almost anything he could imagine. True, I had benefited a lot from his inventions, such as my suit-up watch and earcoms (and, of course, I can't forget about my Teleportation Buckle, which was useful for traveling long distances quickly), but sometimes his inventions could be ... erratic.

For example, while I understood why Dad set up security systems in his old Vaults to make sure no one stole any of the cool inventions within, I couldn't help but wonder if he went a bit overkill with the murder robot that wielded an ax capable of cutting through wood as easily as butter. Or the little rat-shaped drones that clawed and bit at your feet and then exploded if you tried to grab them. Oh, and I wasn't a big fan of the electrified steel net that fell from the ceiling, either, and attempted to squeeze me to death.

It didn't help that all three of those things happened at once. Well, I should say *were* happening, because I was still in the process of trying not to get killed by these things. It was times like this that I wondered if Dad actually was a superhero or if he had actually been a mad scientist in disguise because I could easily imagine a mad scientist making these kinds of machines to kill people who he didn't want sneaking into his laboratory.

I lay in the entry hall of Vault F, which was located somewhere in the beautiful mountains of Colorado. Because it was October, there wasn't much snow on the mountains yet, though Valerie, my AI assistant, had informed me that the local weather station predicted a huge snowstorm about to hit the mountains tomorrow. Even if the storm had hit today, however, it wouldn't have mattered, because I was going to spend that time inside Vault F.

Before Dad died, he had created a series of underground Vaults scattered all across the country. Each Vault contained Dad's various inventions and prototypes and they were never supposed to be opened. Heck, their entire existence was supposed to be a secret. Recent events, however, had led Valerie and me to start searching them out and checking out each one to see what they hid inside them.

But if I had known how dangerous the security systems were ahead of time, I probably would have stayed home.

When I first opened the door to Vault F, I hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary, nor had Valerie reported sensing anything, either. The most interesting thing about this particular Vault, according to Valerie, was that it was the first and oldest Vault, which meant that some of Dad's earliest technology and inventions were likely in here. We assumed, therefore, that Vault F's security systems were more primitive than the security systems of some of the later Vaults, which meant it would be easier to get inside.

How wrong we were.

Almost as soon as I passed the threshold, a loud siren suddenly blared. A hole in the ceiling opened and a thick electrified steel net dropped on me. Then a bunch of small, rat-shaped drones (which Valerie helpfully informed me were Drodents, which was such an awful pun that only Dad could have thought it up) popped out of nowhere and began biting at my feet and ankles. I kicked at them as much as I could, but that was how I discovered they exploded when you hit them hard enough.

Things got even worse when the wall on the other side of the room, next to the staircase leading down to the rest of the Vault, slid aside and a massive murder robot stepped out of it. Well, Valerie

said that the hulking tank of a robot was actually called a Protector, but I preferred murder robot because it wielded a massive battle ax with what looked like blood on the blade. It didn't help that its single optic glowed red, which just supported my theory that it was designed to murder people.

Oh, and it hit like a freight train, despite being so slow. I rushed it in an attempt to ram into it, but it just backhanded me with one of its hands, which sent me flying into the wall on the left side of the room. Luckily, I was tough enough that I could take that kind of hit, but the impact of the crash still made my head spin. As I lay there trying to recover from the impact, I realized that anyone else who had taken such a hit would have died instantly.

"Bolt, do you require my assistance?" asked Valerie through my earcoms. "Or would you prefer I call Brains and Vanish back in Showdown and request backup?"

I shook my head as I struggled against the netting. "Nah, Val, I'll be good. Just got taken by surprise, but I think I should be—Ow!"

A Drodent had bitten my left foot, sinking its needle-like teeth through my costume and into my flesh. I raised my leg and smashed it down onto the floor, but then the Drodent exploded and I grunted in pain as the flames wrapped around my foot, though thankfully my costume protected my skin from getting burned.

"You appear to be in pain," said Valerie. "Perhaps you should retreat for now and come back later. I suspect the security robots will stop attacking you once you leave Vault F's vicinity."

Gritting my teeth, I said, "I said I'll be *fine*, Val. Now shut up and let me think."

Another Drodent lunged at me, but I flew straight up into the air. Unfortunately, the ceiling in here wasn't very high, so I had to pause in midair before I smashed my skull against the ceiling. Looking down, I saw the Protector looking up at me, its single red eye glowing harshly. The Drodents were gathered underneath me, but it was pretty obvious they couldn't jump up high enough to get me.

"Can't get me up here, huh?" I said to the Protector, smirking. "Guess Dad didn't give you the ability to fly, did he?"

The Protector said nothing. It raised one of its hands, however, and fired a blast of electricity at me. Alarmed, I flew off to the side, just barely avoiding the blast, which struck the wall I had been floating in front of and exploded, creating a small blackened crater where it struck.

"Okay, this is getting ridiculous," I said. "Time to fight back."

Activating my super strength, I snapped my arms outward. The abrupt motion caused the netting to break and fall off me onto the floor below, but even before it hit the floor, I rushed toward the Protector, which raised its battle ax above its head. It swung the battle ax down, but I swerved out of the way at the last second and flew around the robot. The Protector smashed its ax into the floor and immediately began trying to pull it out.

Landing behind the Protector, I whirled around and slammed my fist into its back as hard as I could. My fist smashed through its wiring and I sent a powerful burst of red lightning into the Protector's body.

Without warning, the Protector's head exploded off its body. Red lightning blasted out of its neck and the sound of wires frying and snapping could be heard within. Ripping my fist out of its body, I kicked the Protector's lifeless body over, which fell flat on its face with a loud *crash*. Smoke rose from the hole in its back, a sign that the Protector was out for the count.

But the battle wasn't over yet. The Drodents immediately converged on me, zooming toward me as fast as their short legs could carry them. There were too many for me to take out at once, but perhaps I didn't need to.

I mentally counted down to three and then shot up into the air, nearly crashing into the ceiling before changing course. The Drodents, however, could not respond to my escape nearly as quickly. They all crashed into the Protector's body and exploded at once, their small explosions combining to create a much bigger one that rocked the entryway. It even knocked me out of the air, sending me crashing to the floor, though I regained my sense in time to roll with the crash back onto my feet.

Shaking my head, I looked up to see the results of the explosion.

It wasn't pretty. A pile of twisted, burning metal lay in the center of the entryway, the bulk of it being the Protector's body, but I could make out a few Drodents, too. But the explosion had been so big that it was impossible to tell individual Drodents from each other. Not that I cared, though. I was just happy that all of the robots were dead.

Rising to my feet and dusting off my pants, I said, "Well, Val, that was an interesting death trap Dad left for us. I was expecting a bit more, though."

"You certainly didn't sound as confident before you destroyed the robots," Valerie said.

I scowled. "Whose side are you on, Val? Don't tell me you feel solidarity with the bots just 'cause you're an AI."

"Solidarity is for humans," Valerie replied. "As an AI, I can't really 'feel' anything. I thought you would have known that by now."

I shook my head. "It was just a joke, Val. Didn't Dad program you with a sense of humor?"

"No," said Valerie bluntly. "He did, however, program me with the ability to learn. I suppose I am still adjusting to your sense of humor. Genius was less prone to joking around than you were."

"Don't sweat it," I said. "What matters is that we beat Dad's death trap. Now time to see what they were protecting."

I didn't bother walking this time. I flew into the air and down the staircase on the other side of the room. Like Vault B in New York, this staircase went down some ways below the earth. It probably would have taken me like ten minutes to walk down it, but I flew down it in less than a minute and landed in front of a simple metal door. It was already unlocked, so I simply pushed it open and stepped inside the pitch black Vault.

As soon as I stepped inside Vault F, the lights turned on automatically, allowing me to see my surroundings. Admittedly, I did worry that the activation of the lights would trigger another murder robot, but no ax-wielding crazy robot jumped out to attack me, so I took this moment to see exactly where I had ended up. I expected to see dozens of crates and boxes of every size stacked on top of each other, each one filled with different inventions made by Dad, like Vault B.

Instead, I found myself standing in a bare, wide open concrete chamber that smelled vaguely of dust and cement. Fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling, their light reflecting off the polished concrete floor. There were no screens or any decorations on the walls at all. It looked kind of like an empty nuclear silo, even though Dad didn't make nukes (as far as I knew, anyway, which didn't mean much given all of the secrets Dad had apparently kept from me and Mom).

"Val?" I said. "Are you sure this is one of Dad's Vaults?"

"Yes," said Valerie. "I consulted the list of Vaults we retrieved from Vault B and this is most definitely one of them."

"Then where is ... everything?" I said. I spread my arms wide. "It's totally empty. Don't tell me someone raided this one, too."

"Unlikely," said Valerie. "Remember, this Vault was locked when we found it. You even had to dig the entrance out by hand."

I looked down at the mud stains on my costume and grunted. "Don't remind me. But why would Dad lock up an empty Vault? Why would *anyone* lock up an empty Vault?"

"I am not sure," said Valerie. "Human behavior still doesn't make much sense to me. If I had access to the Vaultwork, I would probably be able to find out why this place is empty."

I knew what the Vaultwork was. It was Dad's own miniature version of the Internet, which he had developed as a way to communicate between all of the Vaults easily. Valerie had spent the last month or so trying to gain access to it, but she hadn't had much luck so far, thanks in no small part due to the destruction of Vault B, which had been our only port of access to the Vaultwork.

"There's got to be *something* here," I said. "I mean, other than the crushing sense of despair that I was just nearly killed by a bunch of robots for no reason."

I took a step forward, but as soon as I did, the floor began to shake underneath me. I looked down, but the floor did not split under my feet.

"An earthquake?" I said, looking around wildly. "Colorado doesn't *have* earthquakes, right?"

"Actually, Bolt, Colorado *does* have earthquakes," said Valerie in that same tone she always used whenever she was about to correct me on something. "According to the Colorado Geological Society, more than seven hundred earthquakes of magnitude two and a half or higher have been recorded in the state of Colorado since eighteen sixty-seven. There was even a magnitude six point six earthquake back in eighteen eighty-two which—"

"Can you give me the history lesson later?" I snapped. "If this earthquake destroys the Vault, I'm out of here. Not worth risking my life for—"

I was interrupted when the floor stopped shaking. A second later, a fine split appeared in the center of the chamber and slowly began to retract open. As the hole opened, four objects rose out of the floor. Three of them resembled chairs with odd headsets attached, while the fourth was a computer terminal of some sort. They slowly rose out of the hole in the floor until they fully emerged and became still.

I didn't move, however, because I wanted to make sure nothing else was going to happen. But soon, it became clear that whatever had happened was over, which meant I was probably safe to approach unless those chairs turned out to be electric chairs.

Cautiously, I walked up to the chairs and stopped several feet away from them, keeping a safe distance from them in case they turned out to be a trap. I peered at the chairs more closely to try to figure out what they were.

They were futuristic-looking chairs, each one identical to the next. They bore an uncanny resemblance to the Detector, a machine Dad had made back a while back to help detect the powers of young superhumans, but somehow I didn't think I was looking at Detector prototypes.

That was because of the odd-looking headsets attached to the backs of each chair. The headsets reminded me of those virtual reality helmets that I saw back at the House on Hero Island. My brother, White Lightning, had become fascinated by a VR game which Mecha Knight had bought for the Young Neos and he wanted to show the game to me. I never cared much for VR games, though, but then I was never a big gamer in the first place.

The computer terminal had a screen, a keyboard, and a mouse, all hooked up together on top of a tall podium. My guess was that the terminal and chairs were connected somehow, though I couldn't guess what they did or how they worked. Dad's inventions, despite their brilliance, were also usually easy to figure out from a glance, but this was incomprehensible to me.

"Val, what do you think this setup is supposed to be?" I said, putting my hands on my hips and tilting my head to the side.

"I am not sure, Bolt," said Valerie, "but I had to guess, I would say it resembles a gaming setup, similar to the one in the House on Hero Island."

"Was Dad a gamer?" I said. "I don't remember him liking video games all that much, though if he was, that's a weird thing to keep a secret."

"Genius didn't play video games very often," said Valerie. "I think he had much more fun building his inventions than playing games."

I walked over to the terminal and tapped a couple of random keys. "Let's see if this computer tells us what it is. Maybe if I press the right buttons—"

The screen suddenly flashed on. At first, it was just a blank blue screen, which made me wonder if it was broken, but then text suddenly started appearing on the screen:

"WELCOME," the text read. "VAULTWORK ONLINE IS FULLY OPERATIONAL AND READY TO PLAY. PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE."

Vaultwork Online? Maybe Dad really *was* a gamer after all.

In any case, I wanted to find out more, so I pressed a random key and more text popped up:

"DNA SCANNER INDICATES THAT YOU ARE NOT GENIUS. PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF, USER."

I froze. This thing came equipped with a DNA scanner? And how was I supposed to identify myself?

Not knowing what else to do, I typed, *MY NAME IS KEVIN JASON, THOUGH I ALSO GO BY BOLT. I AM GENIUS' SON.*

Then I took my hands off the keyboard and waited for a response.

After what felt like an eternity of waiting, another message started appearing on the screen, but unlike the last two messages, this one shook me to my core:

"WELCOME, KEVON JASON, SON OF GENIUS. I HAVE BEEN WAITING TO MEET YOU FOR A WHILE."

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