

CHAPTER ONE

Eighteen years ago ...

PROJECT REVIVAL IS DEAD," said the voice over the laptop. "It's over. Finished. We are done."

Those words hung in the air like the webs of a spider in the corners of the ceiling. It was rather impressive when you considered how the two men sitting around the small metal table in the center of the room were the room's only two inhabitants.

One of the men was a young man in his twenties. Though athletic and well-built, he was obviously not the kind of man who could be mistaken for an athlete. His messy brown hair, thick horn-rimmed glasses, and sharp, piercing gaze told of a man who was more at home behind a computer screen attempting to work out complex programming problems than a man who liked to play touch football on the weekends. His white lab coat even made him look like a scientist, though the insect-like helmet on his lap and gauntlets covered with buttons made it clear he was not 'just' a scientist.

Sitting across from him was another curious figure. Unlike the young man, this man was clad head to foot in a suit of black and silver armor that looked like something from the Middle Ages, except updated to modern times. Blue eyes glowed from within the eye holes in the helmet, while a sword was sheathed at his side. He looked more machine than man, which was a lot truer than it first seemed.

In between them sat a bulky laptop computer. Its screen showed no face, but instead a black background with the word 'BENEFACTOR' in all capital letters written on it. The laptop itself was hooked up to a couple of high-tech speakers designed to make the voice's words clearer, as well as hooked up to a microphone to allow the two men to speak to it. Or rather, to the faceless man on the other side whom neither of them had actually seen but had worked together with closely over the last year or so.

"It's official?" said the man in the white lab coat, looking at the laptop.

"Indeed it is, Genius," said the voice on the other end. "I just sent out an email to all workers to cease all cloning operations and shut down every Vault in the country, with orders to seal each Vault securely and ensure their entrances are well-hidden from curious eyes."

"What about the Vaultwork?" said the man in the black armor in a monotone voice unlike that of a robot.

"It will remain active, but closed off from the wider Internet, Mecha Knight," said the voice. "We don't want a repeat of what happened with Holly."

The armored knight, Mecha Knight, nodded curtly. "Of course."

"It's quite sad," said the voice. "When we first started this project, I really believed we would advance humankind's scientific understanding. Think of how much the world would change if we had perfected the cloning process."

"A world where supervillains could infinitely clone themselves to repeat their crimes, time and again?" said Genius. He was doodling on a piece of paper, though it was clear from his comment he was paying close attention to the conversation. "That is not a world I want to live in, Benefactor."

The voice—belonging to a man known only as Benefactor—chuckled. "Come now, Genius. If you really believed that the cloning process would be used primarily by villains, you would never have agreed to lend your scientific prowess to the project in the first place."

Genius stopped doodling and looked at the laptop, his gaze cold. "When I first signed up for Project Revival, I was blinded by emotion. I didn't seriously consider all of the ramifications of helping you. Now I wish I did."

"You have *emotion*?" said Benefactor in surprise. "You are even more robotic than Mecha Knight, and he's actually a robot. No offense, Jack."

"None taken," said Mecha Knight. "Although I am not entirely without emotion, either, despite my mechanical body."

"I am still human," said Genius softly. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "A human with powers, perhaps, but no less human than anyone else, still subject to the same vices and temptations as anyone."

"True," said Benefactor. "You know, one of the reasons I've always respected you two is because of your down-to-earth personalities. Unlike some supers, you've always acknowledged your humanity and certainly never tried to pass yourself off as the next step in humanity's 'evolution' or some crap like that."

"Humility is necessary in order to keep us from becoming the very villains we've sworn to fight," Mecha Knight replied.

"Agreed," said Genius. "More than a few villains I've met became that way only because they didn't acknowledge their limitations."

"Absolutely true," Benefactor agreed. "Still, if things had been just a bit different, I am sure we could have perfected it. We could have beaten death itself, even."

Genius shook his head. "I understand what you mean, but it's not possible. You can't defeat death. You can put it off, but sooner or later, everyone dies. And I do mean *everyone*. And they *don't* come back."

Genius put a lot of emphasis on those last two sentences to make it clear where he stood, but Benefactor simply said, in his usual chipper voice, "I guess you're right. Maybe it was arrogant of me to assume that I could combine my wealth with the brainpower of two of the smartest men in the world to beat death. In a world where men can blow up whole cities with a thought and women can fly, I guess there are some things that can't be changed after all."

"It would appear so," said Mecha Knight, though Genius caught a hint of disappointment in his voice. "Will any of our data be made available to the medical establishment, at least? It would be a disappointment if the discoveries we made during the process went to waste."

"Absolutely," said Benefactor. "I plan to personally, although anonymously, donate our research to science departments in many of the best universities in the country. Hopefully, it will result in some amazing scientific discoveries that will aid humanity."

"Would that really be wise?" said Genius. "The nature of our experiments were ... questionable, to say the least."

"It will be just fine," said Benefactor glibly. "Science must always be used for the good of humanity, which means making our knowledge available to as many people as possible. That is the only way humanity can progress to greater heights."

Genius nodded, though he was still slightly skeptical about it himself. "Right. Are there any last things we need to deal with before we leave?"

"Yes, there is one last thing," said Benefactor. "I need you and Mecha Knight to sign a nondisclosure agreement regarding your involvement in Project Revival."

Genius and Mecha Knight both looked down at the sheets of paper in the center of the table that were in a folder. Mecha Knight took his first and scanned the contract, while Genius took his and looked it over curiously.

“An NDA?” said Genius, looking at the laptop again. “Why do we need to sign these?”

“Because I don’t want the details about Project Revival to leak out to the rest of the world,” said Benefactor. “It would be very dangerous if the Vaults—and the knowledge contained within them—were to fall into the wrong hands, wouldn’t you say?”

Genius nodded. He pulled a pen out of his coat pocket and signed his name along the bottom of the NDA. “Very well. I have no intention of speaking about this Project to anyone. What about you, Mecha Knight?”

Mecha Knight hesitated for a second, but then he pulled out his own pen and scratched his name along the line at the bottom. “Fine. I can live with not telling anyone about this.”

“Very good,” said Benefactor. “You two can leave your NDAs here. My assistant will stop by later to pick them up and deliver them to me. We’ll send you your copies in the mail later on.”

Genius and Mecha Knight both pushed their NDAs back to the middle of the table and then Genius said, “Is that it, then? Are we finally done?”

“I believe so,” said Benefactor. “That is, unless either of you have some last issues we need to address?”

“No,” said Genius as Mecha Knight shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Excellent,” said Benefactor. “Well, I must say it has been a great honor working alongside you two over this last year. Despite the ultimate failure of this project, I believe the knowledge we learned from will help science advance into new frontiers. This is likely the last time I will speak to either of you ever again, but I wish you two the best of luck in all your future endeavors. Thank you.”

With that, the word ‘BENEFACTOR’ on the screen was replaced by a message stating ‘CONNECTION TERMINATED.’

Genius looked at Mecha Knight. “What do you think, Jack?”

Mecha Knight folded his hands on the table. “I think I will be glad to be back on Hero Island. The others are probably wondering where we are.”

“Same here,” said Genius. “Ashley is probably worried about me. Kevin has been more of a handful than we thought and he isn’t even a year old yet.”

“Children are a lot of work, aren’t they?” said Mecha Knight idly. “I don’t have any myself, but my sister has a few and I am surprised she ever gets anything done given how much effort they require.”

“I can barely get anything done with Kevin around,” said Genius, shaking his head. “Every time I sit down to work, he cries. And even stranger, he only stops crying when I hold him and not Ashley, at least most of the time.”

“I guess he’s going to be a daddy’s boy, isn’t he?” said Mecha Knight.

“Most likely,” said Genius. Then he frowned and looked at the NDAs they just signed. “I’m glad Project Revival is over, honestly. I’m not a religious man, but I am starting to think that there are things humans are just not meant to mess with.”

“I can hardly argue with you about that,” said Mecha Knight. He pressed a hand against his chest. “But I can’t say I am not a little disappointed, for reasons you understand. If Project Revival had worked ...”

“If it had worked, Jake would have remembered me,” said Genius. “He didn’t. What we cloned—created—wasn’t Jake. If Project Revival had gone on, I am sure it would have harmed you as well.”

Mecha Knight lowered his hand. "Perhaps you're right. This body of mine has served me well so far, but I miss feeling human."

"Like aches and pains after you get beat up by a supervillain who can bench press a mack truck?" said Genius, rubbing his shoulder.

Mecha Knight shook his head. "No, I don't miss that. It's the small things. Water on my lips. Drinking a hot cup of coffee on a cold winter morning. Feeling another human being's skin against my own. This body saved me from death, but I sometimes wonder at what cost."

"Life is better than death, Jack," said Genius. "If we hadn't built your body, you would be dead now."

"True," said Mecha Knight. "This way, I guess I'll live forever until someone accidentally deletes my consciousness, I suppose."

"Don't look at it that way," said Genius. "There are a lot of people who would gladly trade their life for yours. You still have a role to play, both in the Neohero Alliance and the world at large, regardless of what body you have."

Mecha Knight nodded, although he didn't seem entirely convinced by Genius' argument. "You're right. I probably shouldn't worry about it so much."

Genius smiled. He stood up and picked up his helmet, holding under his arm. "Well, I'd say it's about time for us to go. I told Ashley I would be back home in time for dinner and you know how she gets when I'm late."

Mecha Knight also stood up. "Don't worry. I've seen what happens Ashley when she gets angry. I understand."

Genius nodded and the two of them walked toward the door. Genius opened it and allowed Mecha Knight to leave first, but he paused before leaving and looked over his shoulder one last time at the laptop that had been Benefactor's only connection to them. The 'CONNECTION TERMINATED' message was still displayed on the screen and Genius wondered for a moment if he would ever see Benefactor again.

Probably not, Genius thought, shaking his head and closing the door behind him. He sounds so old that I bet he's going to die sometime soon. In some ways, that's sad, but like I said, you can't escape death. Eventually, it catches you ... and never lets go.

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