

CHAPTER ONE

HOW CAN SOMEONE SO big, so heavy, and so obnoxious be so hard to find?

I crept along the roof of a building, doing my best not to be noticed by the huge crowd of screaming and shouting people below. There were hundreds of people, maybe even thousands, and they were all packed in the same street venue, waving American flags and wearing blue hats with the words 'MAKE AMERICA NORMAL AGAIN' in white lettering. Men in dark suits wearing sunglasses and carrying holstered guns at their sides stood at various points around the area of the rally, mostly around the entrances or exits, and I knew there were probably also Secret Service agents in the other buildings, too. On the stage in front of everyone was a tall podium, with two large American flags standing behind it. Dozens of reporters from all the major news networks and websites had preferential space in front of the stage to cover the event, but it was impossible to tell what they were saying due to the loud cheering and screaming of the crowd.

Frankly, I was surprised at how many people had gathered here in Fallsville, Texas today. It was a city of maybe 15,000 and it never drew crowds this large for anyone, but I guess that Adam Lucius Plutarch—the head of Plutarch Industries, current presidential nominee, and formerly known as the supervillain the Billionaire—really was as popular as everyone said he was. I didn't see him on stage yet, but he was most likely going to appear soon.

I wasn't here for Plutarch, however. I was here because I was searching for a minor supervillain who, like any self-respecting minor supervillain who usually worked as a lackey for more major villains like Manifest, had robbed a bank in Fallsville. His name was Steel Skin, so named because his skin was like steel. He was also big enough to pick me up and throw me around like a rag doll. Ask me how I know.

The only reason I was after him was because I happened to be in town to buy my first car from a dealership, because I was going to college next year and would need a car of my own to get there. But I sort of forgot about that when I saw Steel Skin running down the street with a huge bag of money over his shoulder and the police ineffectually shooting him with their guns in an attempt to stop him.

So, like any burgeoning superhero, I suited up and went after him. I actually managed to corner him, but then he threw me around like a rag doll (see above) and somehow managed to disappear after that. I saw him running in the direction of this Plutarch rally, so I came here to find him, thinking he might try to either blend in with the crowd or maybe cause a scene and escape in the chaos.

That brought us back to my current predicament: Where the hell did he go?

Seriously, there was no way that a man as huge and burly as Steel Skin could hide near a rally as huge and loud as a Plutarch rally. There were Secret Service agents everywhere, for one, and likely some G-Men, too, but I didn't see any. Not that that surprised me, considering Plutarch's well-known anti-neohero rhetoric and his promise to 'make America normal again.' I wasn't sure how he intended to do that, but it wasn't my job to make sense of his political platform. I just needed to stop Steel Skin before he hurt anyone.

I tapped the earcom in my ear and whispered, “Val, have your sensors found Steel Skin yet?”

“Negative,” said Valerie, who was technically the personal AI assistant of my Dad, but she also helped me because I was his son, “although the huge amount of people present makes it difficult, almost impossible, to locate him or any other individual.”

I sighed. “Looks like I'm going to have to look for him the old-fashioned way, then. But do you know if Steel Skin happens to have any other powers besides his tough skin and super strength? Like teleportation or invisibility, perhaps?”

“Again, negative, Bolt,” said Valerie. “His Neo Ranks page states that he has only two known powers. And at the age of thirty, he is well-beyond neohero puberty, so he is unlikely to spontaneously develop any other powers out of the blue.”

“Then maybe he is using some kind of technology to hide himself,” I said, cringing at a particularly sudden shout from the crowd below. “Stole something from the government, maybe?”

“Unknown,” said Valerie. “It is possible that he has an accomplice. He has been known to serve the supervillain Manifest and the Earth King in the past and has allied with other villains such as the Programmer.”

I groaned. “So I might have to fight *two* villains, then. That will be fun.”

“It is only a theory,” said Valerie. “Nonetheless, I suggest you keep your eyes open. Even villains as dim-witted as Steel Skin can occasionally have moments of cleverness.”

I nodded. “All right. I'll just—”

I was interrupted by sudden shouting in the streets. I looked over the edge of the building and saw another huge crowd of people—this one lacking any American flags or MANA hats—approaching the rally. This crowd was almost as huge as the one in the rally, but they carried signs with them that said things like 'PLUTARCH IS A BIGOT' and 'PLUTARCH FOR PRISON 2016.' The protestors in that crowd sounded really angry, shouting and screaming and waving their signs so crazily that I was worried that the signs might go flying out of their hands and hit someone if they weren't careful. At the head of the protesting crowd was a fat girl who looked to be about my age, but had weird green hair and had very short hair that was almost completely shaven off, which made me feel sick when I saw it.

“What is that?” I said, staring at the protestors, who looked like an army on the move, albeit a very messy and disorganized one.

“Anti-Plutarch protestors,” said Valerie. “According to the news, Plutarch's rallies have been plagued by large crowds of protestors who disagree with his policies and do not believe he would make a good President.”

“So they're just here to protest Plutarch, then,” I said.

“Presumably,” said Valerie. “Unfortunately, many of Plutarch's rallies have been marred by conflicts between his supporters and his protestors. They have never led to any deaths, but many people usually get hurt.”

“Just great,” I said, looking from the loud crowd of anti-Plutarch protestors and the Plutarch supporters gathered before the stage. “If a riot starts, Steel Skin will probably use it to escape. I can't let him do that.”

“Didn't your father say that you aren't supposed to be hunting down supervillains?” said Valerie. “Genius has repeatedly said that you should focus on your studies, not on fighting crime or bringing su-

pervillains to justice.”

“I know, I know, but there aren't any other neoheroes in Silvers or Fallsville and Steel Skin is a threat to normal people who the police can't stop, so I've got to stop him no matter what,” I said.

“Then I will have to report you to your father,” said Valerie. “Genius will not be happy to learn about this.”

“Do what you want,” I said, looking around the area for any sign of Steel Skin. “When I get home, I'll tell Dad—”

Once more, I was interrupted, but this time from the Plutarch supporters, who had suddenly burst into even louder cheers and screams. I thought at first that Steel Skin had attacked the crowd, but then I noticed a man was walking on stage.

The man was tall, probably six foot two, and he wore a very expensive-looking black suit. He was probably in his late sixties, but he didn't look it, because he stood and walked upright like a much younger man. He appeared to be wearing a blonde wig of some kind, though no one in the crowd seemed to care, because they were screaming at him like he was a rock star. He waved at the crowd, his large smile and white teeth visible even from a distance.

“Is that Adam Plutarch?” I said, watching as the man walked over to the front of the podium, which had bullet-proof glass barriers in front of it.

“Affirmative,” said Valerie. “Founder and CEO of Plutarch Industries, among hundreds of other Plutarch brand businesses. He is one of the two major presidential nominees for the office of President of the United States, running against the opposing nominee Barnabas Sagan. He was also the supervillain the Billionaire, though he retired from supervillainy eleven years ago.”

This was the first time I'd seen Plutarch in person. He didn't look that different from other big businessmen I'd seen, so I didn't understand why the people were going crazy over him. “How do we know he really isn't a supervillain anymore?”

“According to his Neo Ranks page, he has worked with the G-Men to put several of his old supervillain colleagues behind bars, such as the Vile Four,” said Valerie. “But not everyone in the neohero community believes he has truly reformed. Some think it's just an act, but no one knows for sure.”

I nodded. “Well, it looks like he's about to make a speech. And since I hate political speeches and don't see Steel Skin anywhere, I think we should leave. Maybe Steel Skin didn't come here.”

“Agreed,” said Valerie. “You should probably go back to the dealership and get your car, just like your father told you to do.”

I rolled my eyes. “Valerie, you're even worse than Mom sometimes, you know that?”

“Your father simply expects me to make sure you don't put yourself in unnecessary danger,” said Valerie. “He just wants you to live a normal life.”

I was about to say that I couldn't live a 'normal' life if I could knock down buildings with a single punch when I noticed a couple of Secret Service agents speaking to each other. They looked to the left side of the stage, like they saw something, but before they could draw their guns, a massive, shirtless man—with skin that shone like polished steel—burst onto stage screaming. He knocked aside the two Secret Service agents like bowling pins and ran at Plutarch screaming.

“There he is,” said Valerie in my ear dryly.

I shot off the roof of the building, flying through the air at super speed, people gasping and pointing

at me from below. I landed hard on the stage, creating a small crater, in between Steel Skin and Plutarch.

“Hey!” Steel Skin shouted, skidding to a stop in front of me. He towered above me, his thick steel skin reflecting the light of the sun above. He pointed at me. “Get out of the way, pipsqueak. Plutarch is mine.”

“Sorry, but I already let you get away with stealing from a bank,” I said. “If I let you get away with murder, I’d have to hang up my suit and buy a car.”

“Do I look like I care?” said Steel Skin, his voice rumbling. “Move or I’ll use you as a stick to beat Plutarch with.”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head. I glanced over my shoulder at Plutarch, who still stood there behind me. “Mr. Plutarch, are you all right?”

Plutarch shook his head and looked confident again. “Of course I am, kid. He didn’t even touch me.”

“You won’t be in a second, Plutarch,” Steel Skin growled. He pointed over my head at Plutarch. “I’m going to get you for betraying us, you bastard!”

“Betraying?” I said.

“Ah,” said Valerie in my ear. “According to Steel Skin’s Neo Ranks page, he once belonged to a supervillain team called the Vile Four, organized and funded by Adam Plutarch. Apparently, every member of the Vile Four is currently in jail, thanks to Plutarch’s working with the G-Men to capture them.”

“Except Steel Skin, obviously,” I muttered. “Looks like we got a good old revenge motive, then.”

Then I said to Steel Skin, “I don’t care why you want him dead. If you want to get to him, you’ll have to go through me first.”

Steel Skin’s hands balled into fists. “All right, kid, I’ll beat you into paste and then turn Plutarch into paste, too, and mix you together so no one knows who is who!”

I was about to say that that was gross and didn’t really make any sense, but then Steel Skin’s fists came flying at me like cannonballs. I caught them and held Steel Skin back with my super strength while a couple of Secret Service agents escorted Plutarch off the stage. People in the crowds below screamed and cameras flashed, but I didn’t pay attention to them. I just had to get Steel Skin away from here, because I knew that any fight between me and him would put the lives of innocent people at risk.

Steel Skin was strong, but I held my ground. We struggled against each other before Steel Skin suddenly headbutted me. It was like being hit by a crowbar, briefly dazing me long enough for Steel Skin to pick me up and slam me through the stage floor.

I crashed onto the street underneath the stage, stunned by the blow. I saw Steel Skin jump over the hole, which meant he was going after Plutarch. Shaking my head, I flew up through the hole and tackled Steel Skin in the back, knocking him to the stage floor before he could get far.

“Get off me, you stupid kid,” said Steel Skin, grabbing at me on his back, but I was small enough that he couldn’t reach me.

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “Not until you promise to go to jail quietly.”

Steel Skin growled and then rolled over onto his back, which meant that I now found myself being crushed underneath his massive bulk. I gasped for air, letting go of him, causing Steel Skin to stand up and run away.

I thought he was going after Plutarch again, so I rose to my feet, but then I saw him rip the podium off the stage and hurl it at me. I had only enough time to say, “Uh oh,” before the podium slammed into me with the force of a car. I was sent flying through the back of the stage, knocking down several American flags in the process, which caught and tangled me in their cloth.

Oh, god, my head was so dizzy, but then I heard bullets being fired and immediately snapped back to normal. I stood up, tore the American flags off my body, and flew into the air above the rally.

Below, I saw Plutarch enter a large black car, while Steel Skin was running toward it. A couple of Secret Service agents—who were either really brave or really dumb—were shooting bullets at him, but the bullets just deflected off of Steel Skin's body harmlessly. He knocked them both aside like flies just as the engine for the car revved.

But before Plutarch's car could go, Steel Skin grabbed its back and held it tight. The car's wheels screeched against the pavement, but the car didn't even budge under Steel Skin's grip. He grunted and tipped the car over onto its side, causing its wheels to spin uselessly in the air. Then Steel Skin climbed on top of the overturned car, probably intending to pull Plutarch out of it.

I wasn't going to let him, so I shot through the air and body-slammed Steel Skin, sending him flying off the side of the car. He hit the pavement and rolled for several feet until he crashed into another car that had no people in it, where he lay with a stunned look on his face.

Landing on the street between Plutarch's car and Steel Skin, I said, “Look, man, we could do this all day, but I've got things to do and you've got things to do, so why don't we just call it a day?”

Steel Skin grunted. He stood up slowly, but then grabbed the car he had smashed into and brought it down on me. I had no time to dodge, so I raised my hands to protect myself from the impact.

At the last second, however, the car exploded into a flock of white birds. The birds flew away into the sky, chirping happily and peacefully, while Steel Skin and I looked after them in disbelief.

“Huh?” said Steel Skin, staring at the birds, dumbfounded. “What happened to that car?”

I was wondering the same thing. That, and if there was any car insurance company in the country that covered 'car turning into a flock of white birds.' Maybe it went under 'Acts of God.'

Steel Skin shook his head and glared at me. “Did you do that? One of your stupid powers or something?”

I held up my hands. “Hey, I'm just as surprised by this as you are. Maybe that's a sign from God that you're not supposed to try to assassinate presidential candidates who put your criminal friends behind bars.”

Steel Skin grunted again. He ran at me, but then a rope flew out of nowhere and wrapped around his legs. Steel Skin slammed into the street face-first, which would have made me feel bad for him if he hadn't been trying to kill me.

“What the hell?” said Steel Skin, looking at the rope tied securely around his ankles. “Where did this come from?”

“That would be me,” said a voice somewhere above me.

I looked up just in time to see a girl floating down through the air toward me. She looked to be about my age, with long, blonde hair, a purple domino mask, and a cape and robes to match it. She had a magician's wand in her hand, a wand that was currently glowing with energy. She was actually kind of hot, even though her robes and cape didn't let me see much.

As the mysterious girl landed, Steel Skin snapped the ropes binding his legs and stood up. He pointed at the girl, who stood a few feet away from me and seemed unconcerned that a giant shirtless man was pointing threateningly at her.

“You!” said Steel Skin. “Did you turn that car into pigeons?”

The girl sighed. “They’re *doves*, not *pigeons*. Not that I expect a man of your mental capacity to be able to tell the difference, but I feel it’s important to keep this distinction clear.”

Hot *and* sarcastic? Sign me up.

“Who cares about a bunch of birds?” said Steel Skin. He punched his fist into his hand. “I’ll turn both of you into paste just the same.”

Steel Skin ran at us. I made a move to meet him, but the girl waved her wand and said, “I got this. You just sit back and watch.”

Before I could ask her how she was going to stop 300 pounds of pure steel and stupidity, the girl waved her wand again and pointed it at Steel Skin.

Immediately, a huge titanium box appeared out of nowhere and clamped tightly around Steel Skin, leaving only his head exposed. Steel Skin tried to break free, but even I could tell that his strength, as great as it was, was no match for the box that held him.

“There,” said the girl, lowering her wand and smiling satisfactorily. “Easy.”

“I was expecting something a bit ... more fantastic than a box,” I said, putting my hands on my hips and looking at Steel Skin (who was now shouting all kinds of curses at us) with disappointment. “Like an explosion or something.”

“Sometimes the simplest solution is best,” said the girl. “Steel Skin won’t be getting out of there until I want him to. And by the time I want him to, he should be safely behind bars in Ultimate Max prison where he belongs.”

I nodded. “Right. Well, uh, what’s your name? I’m—”

“Bolt,” the girl finished for me. She smiled. “I’ve heard of you.”

“You have?” I said. “But we’ve never met.”

“Your fight with Master Chaos last month was streamed all over the world,” said the girl. “Everyone saw it.”

“Ah,” I said. “That’s right. I almost forgot. Well, now that you know my name, it’s time for you to tell me your name.”

“Incantation,” said the girl simply. “I am the apprentice of Thaumaturge. You’ve heard of him, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s one of the leaders of the Neohero Alliance, right?”

“Yep,” said Incantation, “and he taught me everything I know about magic, though he’s not here at the moment.”

“You can use magic?” I said. “Real magic? I thought our powers were genetic.”

Incantation looked like she was about to say something before a loud, boisterous voice behind us shouted, “Hey, kid! Good job!”

Incantation and I looked over to see Adam Plutarch—whose slightly crooked wig was the only indication that his car had been turned over—walking toward me with a couple of Secret Service agents in tow. He didn’t seem even slightly fazed by the fact that a giant shirtless man with metal skin had just

tried to kill him; then again, as a former supervillain, he'd probably seen far stranger things.

As Plutarch approached, I noticed Incantation step away. She was glaring at Plutarch like he had insulted her mother, even though Plutarch wasn't even looking at her.

"Amazing, simply amazing," said Plutarch. He looked over our heads at Steel Skin, who was still cursing up a storm. "I have never seen such an efficient defeat of a loser like him." He looked down at me with a big smile. "Good job, kid. If I knew your real identity, I'd offer you a paid internship at the White House after I win the election."

"Oh, that's, er, generous of you, Mr. Plutarch, but it was really Incantation here who beat him," I said, gesturing at Incantation. "I could barely hold him back."

Plutarch's big, friendly smile vanished as soon as he looked at Incantation. Incantation met his gaze, even though Plutarch was much bigger and stronger than her.

"Incantation, huh?" said Plutarch. He didn't sound nearly as friendly as he had a moment before. "Apprentice of Thaumaturge, right?"

"Yes," said Incantation, which was the only word she said.

"Well, then," said Plutarch, his tone colder. "Thanks for the help. I make a point of thanking the people who save my life, however I may feel about other people they know, so thank you."

Incantation didn't say anything. She just folded her arms across her chest and glared at Plutarch, who held her gaze for a moment before looking at me again. There was clearly some bad history between them, or at least between Plutarch and her master, though I didn't know much about it.

"Anyway, my men here have already called the police and contacted the G-Men to take Steel Skin away, so you two can leave now," said Plutarch, waving in a random direction like he didn't care where we went.

"Um, all right," I said. "Then I guess we'll—"

"Hold on," said Plutarch, interrupting me suddenly. He leaned closer to me. "Hey, you're Bolt, right? That kid who defeated Master Chaos?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's me. Why?"

Plutarch's smile widened considerably, which made him look kind of creepy. "Most kids your age don't have that kind of accomplishment under their belt. I think you're going places, kid. And if you ever need any wisdom gained from a lifetime of success, just give me a call."

Plutarch drew a card out of his front pocket and handed it to me before I even realized what was going on. I looked down at the card and saw that it had Plutarch's name and contact information written on it.

"All right," said Plutarch. He gave me the thumbs up. "See you later, kid. Never stop dreaming!"

With that, Plutarch turned and walked away, with the two Secret Service agents following behind him. I didn't know what to say to that. I just looked at Incantation, who had folded her arms over her chest and looked incredibly displeased.

"Um ..." I said. "Want to go out sometime?"

Incantation looked at me like I had just said something stupid. Then she shook her head and said, "No, but I would like to talk with you about something, about the reason I helped you beat Steel Skin."

"Talk?" I said. "About what?"

"Let's go find some place private to talk and I'll tell you there," said Incantation. "I don't want

Plutarch or his goons listening in on our conversation.”

I looked over at Plutarch, who was now talking with people who appeared to be his campaign advisers, and then looked at Incantation again. “Sure. I've got time. Let's go.”

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