

[CHAPTER ONE]

PRIDE COMETH BEFORE the fall, or so my father always used to tell me. It was one of Dad's favorite sayings because, according to him, he'd seen so many people in his time as a lawyer fall precisely *because* of their pride. Proud of the fact they 'tricked' the judge or jury, arrogantly believing their overpriced lawyer could get them out of even the stickiest situations, and a few even outright bribing him as a judge, thinking that because they could bribe a judge once, it meant all judges were bribable.

Dad, of course, was always happy to prove them wrong. But he stressed to me that pride could fell *anyone*, no matter how smart, intelligent, or powerful you might think you are. I learned that lesson personally when I went into a football game in high school thinking I was invincible and could carry the game myself. That resulted in the worst loss for my high school football team in its 100-year existence, mostly due to my arrogance making me sloppy.

I was 25 now and not playing in football or any other professional sport, but Dad's lessons from old still came creeping back into my mind whenever I found myself in over my head.

Such as when I find myself about to get crushed to death by a giant ice octopus, for example.

Hanging upside down by my foot about sixty feet off the pavement, I knew that the only reason I was in this situation was because I didn't listen to Recover's advice to stand back and wait. Or maybe it was when I accepted a Team Mission with the Difficulty Level of 'Suicidal' because we had already completed a so-called 'Impossible' mission and 'Suicidal' sounded less dangerous than 'Impossible.' Heck, it probably started even earlier this morning when I got up and brushed off the great breakfast my Sidekick, Cyclone, had made for me because I was busy and didn't think I needed it, which left me with a small Hunger debuff that caused me to lose -1% in Intelligence until I got something to eat.

Regardless of the exact mistake that led up to this moment—where I was probably going to die a horrible death and thus fail the mission—I could hear my old man's voice in my head berating me for being such an idiot. Of course, my dad didn't know I was still alive. He, along with everyone else in the real world, 'knew' that I died in a car accident while pursuing a petty small-town criminal known as Bryce Cunningham. He had no idea my mind had gotten uploaded to Capes Online, the biggest and most popular VRMMORPG in the world, or that I was the superhero Winter who had saved the game twice already.

And based on the current trajectory of my life, he probably never would. Which was for the best. Dad didn't care much for VRMMORPGs and he would probably be ashamed if he found out my mind had gotten uploaded here.

But all of that was immaterial to the current issue, which was that I was hanging upside from one leg and all the blood was rushing to my head and making me feel dizzy. Capes Online might have just been a game, but it was also the most realistic game I'd ever played, practically indistinguishable from real life except for a few concessions by the developers for ease. That meant that being held upside in-game was just as much fun as it was in real life, which was to say, it wasn't.

"Winter!" a voice cried out below. "Don't worry! We'll get you down!"

Snapped out of my thoughts, I looked down at the street below. Where had once been a bustling city street full of Civilians going about their daily lives was now a deserted street. Crushed cars were strewn here and there, trash cans had been smashed flat, and there were big

potholes that were probably going to be a pain for the Adventure City Public Works Department to fix later. Thankfully, there were no dead Civilians, although I knew that at least a few had been injured in the ice octopus' initial attack.

But the street wasn't entirely deserted. A stout but muscular man, clad from head to toe in green armor that resembled an armadillo, was crouched behind one of the overturned cars. Crouched next to him was a teenage girl wearing a simple blue bodysuit and boots. Unlike the man, who was staring up at the monstrosity with appropriate caution, the girl was scrolling through her smartphone, apparently completely unaware of her surroundings. I knew that Hop Scotch, the teenage girl, was generally more aware of her surroundings than she let on, but I couldn't deny it was very frustrating to see her behaving like her usual self when we were in real danger of failing the mission.

The armored man, on the other hand, was Dillo, a member of Team Winter and also Hop's Hero. Although somewhat cowardly, Dillo at least knew how to take situations seriously. He was more of a tank than me, but the reason I was hanging up here and he wasn't was because I had told him to stand back. I had reasoned that my own Ice Powers might give me immunity to the icy powers of the giant ice octopus and didn't think Dillo would need to tank this one.

Actually, now that I think about it, that was another example of my arrogance getting the best of me. Guess today was just one of those days where each mistake just snowballed into the next. I just hoped the snowball would stop growing soon.

"Yeah, getting me down now anytime would be great!" I shouted back at Dillo. "Seriously, the blood is rushing to my head!"

A deep chuckle came from behind me that sounded like bubbling water. "What's this? The famous Hero Winter, the slayer of Dark Kosmos and savior of Adventure City, is begging for help? How amusing."

Startled, I looked over my shoulder and found myself staring directly into the face of the ice octopus Tentacold. Unlike most octopuses, Tentacold's face was partially human. His eyes were like those of an octopus, while his mouth was more human-like and his nostrils were octopus-like. All in all, it was an incredibly creepy, unsettling appearance, not helped by the nametag [KAIJU TENTACOLD] helpfully hovering over his head.

"I'm not *begging* for help," I said, gritting my teeth. "I'm figuring out a plan with a Teammate. There's a difference."

"You mean your Teammate who is currently hiding behind a car?" Tentacold inquired with a smirk. "Very brave, that one is. Perhaps your reputation as a brave Hero with a powerful Team was just a rumor, and nothing more. I have yet to see proof that you are really as good as your reputation suggests."

I scowled, but there was nothing I could do to shut him up. When Tentacold first appeared on the streets of Adventure City, robbing the First National Bank, he had been about the size of an average full-grown human being, perhaps an inch or two taller to make him seem like a real threat. Although humanoid in appearance, he had had six tentacles and a weird face to show that he wasn't entirely human. Lore suggested that Tentacold had once been a human being who was genetically modified with octopus DNA in order to make an immortal, but that didn't explain how he became a Kaiju of all things.

It happened quickly. My Teammates and I wasted no time in getting to the First National Bank, where we managed to confront Tentacold—who appeared to be working by himself—before he could get away with the cash. It had seemed like a simple mission, especially since we

had already completed these sorts of missions before. I didn't even understand why it had been given the 'Suicidal' Difficult Level until he transformed.

I still wasn't sure how he did it. It looked like Tentacold drank an item called [Growth Serum], but I didn't get a chance to Scan it in great detail before he transformed into a gigantic ice octopus the size of a small skyscraper. That was when Tentacold snatched me up and got me into my current predicament. And even though I had been in Capes Online for over a month now, I hadn't realized just how much more there was for me to learn until I saw Tentacold transform.

What made this situation even worse for me was that Tentacold was immune to Ice Powers. His Weakness, according to Scan, was Fire, but I didn't have any Fire Powers. Ice Beam, Freezing Touch, Ice Shackles ... all of it useless. Hell, he even had a Power called Snow Pillow that allowed him to absorb all Ice-based damage and convert it into HP, a fact I accidentally discovered when I hit him with an Ice Beam after he had taken some damage from my Sidekick and he got healed as a result.

What started as a simple mission to thwart a bank robbery quickly turned into a battle for survival. None of my Teammates had died yet, but given that Tentacold was Level 150 and had over 1,000 points of Health, plus a fairly hefty Strength and Defense, it was only a matter of time before he wiped us all out. And if he did that, we'd lose all our EXP and half our money. We might respawn, but it would still cause us to fail the mission, which would suck because this mission had some pretty good rewards. Namely, 10,000 EXP for *each* Teammate and +20 Fame and Trust for the Team and every individual Teammate. Losing those rewards would suck.

The only good thing about this situation was that my Ice Man Costume meant I was immune to Ice damage as well. But seeing as Tentacold was going to crush me to death with one of his tentacles, even that didn't mean much.

"So you know my name?" I said. I didn't know what Dillo and the others had planned, but if I could distract Tentacold, then I would.

"Of course I do," said Tentacold with a deep chuckle. "Every Villain in the country knows your name. After all, you defeated Dark Kosmos. I also heard rumors you defeated the Stalking Shadows and, of course, you've put a fair few petty crooks and criminals behind bars as well. It would be strange if I *didn't* know your name, Hero Winter."

I bit my lower lip. Ever since the Blackout, my reputation was now at 'Household Name,' which meant that most NPCs—Hero, Villain, or Civilian—knew who I was even if I hadn't met them. It was nice because it meant Civilians were more likely to offer me missions and opportunities I otherwise wouldn't have gotten. It sucked, however, when I got the attention of a Villain like Tentacold. It was the double-edged nature of Fame, both the Stat and the concept in general.

"Many Villains fear you, but frankly I am unimpressed," Tentacold continued. "The only reason I drank that Growth Serum was because I thought I would need it in order to defeat you and your Team. Yet it appears that I wasted a very rare and hard-to-get item on some low-level Hero and his equally low-level Teammates for no good reason. Growth Serums aren't cheap, you know."

"Mind telling me where you get them?" I said. "And do they work just for you or do they turn *everyone* who drinks them into Kaiju?"

“That is my little secret, Hero,” said Tentacold. He chuckled. “Nice try. But I can’t get too angry. I do have a couple of extra Growth Serums on hand, so it wasn’t *entirely* a waste. Besides, if I kill you, that will raise my Infamy and make the other Villains respect me and other Heroes fear me. So killing you won’t be a waste, either.”

“You might not want to do that,” I said. “Killing me wouldn’t give you a lot of experience. Would be a waste.”

“No experience is ever a waste, my caped friend,” Tentacold reassured me. “If I had your mindset, I would never have gotten as strong I have. Every little bit counts.”

I might have agreed with that statement if it wasn’t currently coming from the mouth of a monster that was about to kill me, but luckily I didn’t have to say anything else, because at that moment I heard a soft *ping* and, looking in my Team chat, saw a message from Dillo:

Dillo: Winter, get ready to fall. Funky’s about to send in Lennox. Once he does, Cyclone will catch you and Recover will heal you. Just a heads up.

As soon as I read that message, I heard a soft flap of wings nearby and then a massive blast of flame came out of nowhere and slammed into the tentacle wrapped around my leg. Tentacold roared in pain as the fire ate away at his tentacle, causing the ice to melt. When the ice holding my leg melted, I immediately plunged to the street below, screaming in terror as the pavement came closer and closer to my face.

But then I heard a whizzing sound above me and two hands grabbed my shoulders, stopping my fall halfway. Gasping in surprise, I looked up and saw a familiar green-suited Sidekick, his large eagle-like wings beating furiously, holding onto me for dear life. His face was hidden behind aviator goggles, but I had no trouble recognizing Cyclone, my Sidekick.

“Thanks for the save, Cy,” I said as Cy flew us away from Tentacold, who was still roaring in pain from the flame that had melted his tentacle.

“No ... problem ... boss,” said Cy in a heavily strained voice. “Just ... doing ... my ... job ...”

Uh oh. Cy wasn’t as strong as me. I was afraid he might not be strong enough to get me over to safety without dropping me, but luckily we reached the roof of a nearby apartment complex and landed. I hit the roof with a roll and rolled to my feet, wincing at the pain in my leg, which was broken where Tentacold had been crushing it. Cy, on the other hand, practically belly-flopped onto the gravel-covered roof, panting hard as he tried to catch his breath.

“Boss ...” Cy said in between pants. “Boss ... I’ve got something important ... something important to tell ... to tell you ...”

Looking over my shoulder, I said, “What is it, Cy?”

Still panting hard, Cy said, “You might want ... to lay off the carbs ... for a few weeks ... or months ...”

I sighed heavily. Even though I had known Cy for over a month now, I still found myself surprised by the strange way his mind worked every now and then. “Thanks for the dieting advice, Cy. I’ll take it into account if we survive this.”

Just as I said that a golden aura covered me suddenly and I got this notification:

[Hero Recover] used Full Heal on you! Health restored 100% and all debuffs lifted!

Debuff lifted: Broken leg. Your leg is no longer broken.

I smiled when I read that notification, which I really didn’t need to because I knew I was healed as soon as I felt the pain go away. Nonetheless, I looked over to the side and said to Recover, “Thanks, Recover. Really needed that.”

Recover stood a few feet away from us. She was the resident Healer of the Team. With her pink and white spandex suit that nicely fit her body, she was also rather easy on the eyes, though I didn't really like the big letter 'R' on her chest. I wondered if she had gotten that added by a tailor or something.

"No problem," said Recover, lowering her hands as she smiled at me. "That's what I'm here for, after all. But next time, you might want to listen to my advice about running headlong into combat against an enemy we've never fought before. Right, Brawn?"

Recover's Sidekick, Brawn, was a man with muscles that appeared to be made out of rock. He nodded once and said, "Yes, Miss Recover. Winter is lucky he did not get killed, which would have surely caused us to fail the mission."

"Well, I *do* have a pretty high Luck Stat," I said as I rose to my feet, dusting off my Costume. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I might be safe, but Tentacold is still active."

Recover smirked. "Not for long."

I was about to ask her what she meant when I heard another huge roar come from the streets below. It didn't sound like Tentacold's roar, however. Instead, it sounded like the roar of a dragon, a roar I had heard once before. I rushed over to the edge of the roof and my jaw fell at the scene playing out in the streets below.

Tentacold wasn't the only Kaiju fighting in the streets of Adventure City now. A large dragon, with glowing golden scales and a twenty-foot wingspan, stood before Tentacold, smoke rising from its nostrils. When it roared, the sound had even caused Tentacold to retreat, though I noticed the ice octopus was still standing his ground and looked ready to fight the new threat anyway. The nametag [KAIJU LENNOX] hovered over the dragon's head.

"Holy crap," I said, putting a hand over my eyes to block the sun. "Is that Lennox?"

"Yep," said a calm, cool voice behind me. "And yes, he's Transformed again."

Startled, I looked over my shoulder and saw yet another member of my Team approaching. He was a tall, lean black guy wearing the weirdest hodgepodge of armor and Equipment you'd ever see on a Hero. A mail chest plate, a football helmet, squelchy rubber boots, huge work gloves, and even bigger shoulder pads all added to FunkyFresh94's, er, 'unique' appearance.

Despite how eccentric appearance, however, Funky was probably one of the most powerful and competent members of the Team, helped by the fact he was a Beastmaster with a powerful dragon under his control. I hadn't seen any other Beastmasters with dragon pets yet, but I assumed it was just another one of his eccentricities. He seemed to have a lot of them.

"How is Lennox going to beat Tentacold?" said Cy. Everyone had joined me at the edge of the roof now, watching the fight between Tentacold and Lennox that was about to unfold. "Tentacold is at least twice his size."

"Size doesn't matter," said Funky. He put one hand on his hip, his eyes focused on his dragon below. "As a Fire-based Tamed Beast, Lennox is practically *designed* to kill him. One solid Fire Breath ought to do the trick."

Lennox's throat glowed red hot as the fire built up within him. Flames began to spark out of the corners of his mouth. Tentacold seemed to realize what was about to happen as well, but the streets were too narrow for him to dodge the attack. He just raised his tentacles in front of himself defensively, although I doubted that would save him from Lennox's coming Fire Breath.

Funky pointed at Lennox. "All right, Lennox! Melt that monster to the—"

Funky stopped speaking abruptly, even though no one had interrupted him. His gaze became unfocused like he was staring at something only he could see, and he muttered, “Oh, no. Not *now*.”

“Not now?” I repeated, looking at Funky in alarm. “What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing,” said Funky, although the frustration in his voice told a different story. “I can deal with it later. I—”

Funky suddenly started phasing in and out of existence. For the first time since I’d known him, a panicked expression appeared on Funky’s face. He put his hands on his chest but seemed unable to stop himself from disappearing.

“No, no, no,” said Funky frantically. He looked at us. “Sorry, guys. Looks like I’ve got to go and deal with something in the real world. I’ll be back as soon as I—”

Right at that moment, Funky disappeared entirely. As soon as he vanished, I got this notification:

[Hero FunkyFresh94] has logged off. He will not be online again for 72 hours.

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