

# CHAPTER ONE

A COLD JANUARY BREEZE BLEW through the streets of Golden City, causing Robert Jones—better known to his friends as Bobby ‘The Fist’ Jones—to shudder. He pulled his coat more tightly around his body and readjusted his blue scarf. His scarf had been a gift from his last girlfriend, which he still kept even though it had been years since they broke up. He didn’t care. It was a comfy, warm scarf and his neck tended to get cold.

*‘Course, I wouldn’t even be getting cold if I didn’t have to stand guard tonight,* Bobby thought with a frown on his face. *But someone has to stand guard and it just happened to be me.*

Bobby glanced over his shoulder at the door to the warehouse behind him. Locked behind the rickety wooden door were his fellow Three Fingers Gang members, including their leader and founder, Johnny ‘Three Fingers’ Diamond. Tonight was supposed to be some kind of important business meeting for the gang. Three Fingers was going to outline to the others their operations for the next six months to a year. It was weird how Three Fingers, who, as far as Bobby knew, had never even graduated high school, nonetheless ran the Three Fingers Gang like it was a small business, complete with ‘business’ meetings outlining their objectives over the next half a year to a year.

*Not that it matters,* Bobby thought, shaking his head and turning his gaze back to the dark, empty streets in front of him. *Between Rubberman and the police, I’m pretty sure that we’re all going to end up in jail one way or another over the next year or so.*

Bobby, of course, would never actually say that aloud. Bobby might be a high school dropout and near-illiterate himself, but he knew that Three Fingers would *never* tolerate that sort of talk from him. Despite his lack of education, Bobby had enough street smarts to be able to tell the difference between what his boss *thought* would happen and what was more likely to *actually* happen.

Since the Hero War a year ago, Rubberman and his sidekick, Beams, had been working with the police to crush crime in Golden City. In the last six months especially, Rubberman and Beams had arrested more criminals—including quite a few of his fellow Three Fingers gangsters—and busted more crime operations than Rubberman himself alone had in the previous five years alone. Bobby had only come face-to-face with Rubberman and Beams a handful of times, but each time had just barely managed to get away.

Still, the writing was on the wall. Three Fingers would never admit it, but Bobby knew that gang recruitment had steeply fallen over the last five years especially. He should know, seeing as he had been one of the primary recruiters for the Three Fingers Gang and could claim that about ten percent of the current membership was due to his efforts. Even so, it had become harder and harder to get even desperate, petty criminals to join. It seemed like everyone was afraid of Rubberman and Beams and, to a lesser extent, the police.

*Bet the Golden City government is getting their money worth with those two,* Bobby thought in a disgruntled way. *Probably save them more tax money than the police.*

That was what really bothered Bobby. It wasn’t the cold of the January night, but rather the fact that the days of the Three Fingers Gang were nearly over. He would not

be surprised if the gang was disbanded in a year, maybe a year and a half if they were lucky. A part of him wanted to tell Three Fingers himself that, but again, his boss was kind of like a mini dictator, so Bobby was usually smart enough to keep his opinions to himself. In fact, Bobby was already thinking of leaving Golden City for greener pastures before he could end up rotting in a cell with five other guys for the next twenty or thirty years.

His thoughts were interrupted by the clinking of metal against asphalt. Looking up, Bobby couldn't see much beyond the light over the door behind him and the dim street lamp nearby didn't help much. Yet he was sure he had heard something. It might have just been a cat, though. Golden City had a lot of stray cats.

*Clink.*

There it was again. Bobby's hand instinctively reached for the pistol at his side, but he didn't draw it yet. Instead, he said, "Is anyone there?"

No response at first.

*Clink.*

Bobby gulped. He didn't like it. Maybe it was just a crazy homeless person wandering the streets. That wasn't exactly uncommon in Golden City, either. Still, Bobby had always had good instincts for this kind of thing. He sensed that there was *something* beyond his immediate vision, something that might be a problem for him and the gang. A part of him feared it might very well be Rubberman and Beams, yet that couldn't be true. Bobby had ensured that no one outside of the gang knew about tonight's meeting. That is, unless someone had snitched on them, which, given the gang's current luck, wouldn't surprise Bobby if it was true.

Drawing his gun, Bobby said, "I know you're there. Show yourself or I'll feed you lead."

*Clink.*

Finally, a person emerged into the light under the nearby street lamp. The person was unlike anyone Bobby had ever seen. While he was definitely not Rubberman or Beams—*Thank God*—he was also not a police officer, nor a crazy homeless person or a cat, unless crazy homeless people and cats were starting to wear weird-looking power armor, that is.

The figure standing beneath the lamp was taller than Bobby by about a head or so. He was clad from head to foot in green and black power armor that looked more like something out of a science-fiction movie than real life. A large 'o' was cut into his chest, which seemed oddly familiar to Bobby, but right now he was too focused on determining how dangerous this whacko was rather than figuring out where he might have seen that number before. The figure didn't appear to have any weapons—no guns, knives, nothing. Yet something told Bobby that the man's armor was a weapon in itself.

"Who are you?" said Bobby. "You aren't Rubberman or Beams. Are you a new superhero in town trying to establish your street cred or something?"

The figure shook his head. "Nay, rodent. I am not a superhero. In fact, I am as against superheroes as you and your fellow gangsters are."

Bobby didn't relax. "Uh-huh. So what exactly *are* you, then? 'Cause you don't look like any of the criminals in Golden City I know."

The figure raised his hand. "That is because I am not from around here, rodent. I am an emissary sent from a much more powerful man, a man whose reach and criminal empire makes your tiny gang look like a bunch of rowdy children stealing candy from babies."

Bobby raised an eyebrow. "You sure talk eloquently, mister, but if you're here to talk to Three Fingers, get out of here. He's in an important business meeting right now and doesn't have time for fancy talkers like you. You want to deal with Three Fingers, you gotta schedule a meeting with him first."

The figure shook his head again. "I am sorry, but I don't negotiate with inferiors. When dealing with unimaginative street vermin like yourself, *you* are supposed to alter your schedule to accommodate *me*."

Bobby snorted. "Oh, yeah? What makes you think you're so much better than us, Tin Man? Just 'cause you're wearing shiny, fancy-looking armor? Boss don't care how you look. Gotta have a better reason than that to let you meet boss."

The figure's glowing green eyes fixed on Bobby. "I see you don't understand. Tell me, which two individuals in Golden City are the biggest threat to your gang's operations?"

Bobby frowned. He didn't know where this conversation was going and he was tempted to call for help, but decided he would see what Mr. Fancy Pants was trying to get at first. "Rubberman and Beams, obviously."

"I agree," said the figure. "According to our research, they've been picking off your gang members one by one over the last year or so. The Three Fingers Gang isn't even half as strong as it once was and is on the precipice of total destruction. Is that correct?"

Bobby's frown deepened. He didn't know what words like 'precipice' meant, but he did understand 'total destruction,' so he nodded. "Yeah. Sounds like someone did their homework."

"Please," said the figure with a dismissive wave of an armored hand. "All I've done is what any student of crime would do before moving into a new area they are unfamiliar with. But more importantly, what our research has shown is that you can't compete and that this area is ripe for takeover."

Bobby's hand rested on the handle of his pistol, though it was concealed under his coat and he was sure Mr. Fancy Pants couldn't see it. "Compete? With who?"

The figure sighed. "Tell me, Robert 'Bobby' Jones, you understand evolution, correct? Survival of the fittest, the strong replacing the weak, the mammals replacing the dinosaurs, and so on?"

Bobby scrouged his eyebrows. "I 'member my science teacher saying something like that in high school, but I'm not in the mood for a science lesson from some random idiot high on his own supply like you."

The figure didn't seem fazed by Bobby's insults. "Crime is much the same way. All over America, ordinary criminals like you are a dying breed. In the past, organized crime and petty gangsters like yourself could survive. Even when the Superhero Regulation Act was first enacted, your kind could survive and even thrive, especially in the smaller cities where superheroes had either a limited presence or no presence at all. But what you backwoods rednecks don't understand is that times are changing."

"So what if they are?" said Bobby. "We can handle them."

“No, you clearly can’t,” said the figure with another dismissive wave. “Look at how your gang has fared against Rubberman and Beams. You can handle police, but superheroes and their sidekicks are in another league. Especially the enhanced ones with powers. Ordinary criminals like yourself and your fellow rodents are no match for the power that the average superhero wields, even in an irrelevant backwoods town like Golden City.”

Bobby’s temper flashed, but he didn’t draw his gun. He planned to shoot this moron, but he needed to keep this guy talking so he wouldn’t try to run away or escape. “So what’s your point? You saying we all should just go to the police and turn ourselves in?”

“That would be the *wise* thing to do, yes,” said the figure, “but my broader point—which your high school dropout brain clearly can’t anticipate—is that natural selection applies to crime just as much as it applies to nature. When the Ice Age happened, dinosaurs died off due to not being able to adapt. The furry mammals, however, were perfectly equipped to handle the new Ice Age and thrived. You and your kind are like the dinosaurs in this analogy, while the superheroes and their sidekicks are the Ice Age. Or perhaps meteorite would be a better comparison, given how your kind’s ranks have been absolutely devastated by their actions in such a short time.”

“Now you sound like my high school English teacher with your ‘analogies’ and crap,” said Bobby. “Boring.”

The figure sighed. “Now I remember why I dislike talking to people like you. Regardless, the point is that criminals must also adapt to changing environments in order to survive. Whereas old-fashioned gangs like yours are on the way out, a new form of organized crime—represented by me and mine—has risen to meet the modern environment. We are the next step in criminal evolution. We are the future. And you are the past.”

Bobby’s eyes narrowed. “Is that what you want to do, then? Just tell the boss that we’re outdated and that you guys are gonna take over?”

“Partly,” said the figure. “But I didn’t come just to *tell* you that. Oh, no. I came to do something else.”

Bobby snorted. “Well, guess what, Tin Man. Golden City is *our* turf. If you and your gang want to take over, you’re gonna have to fight all of us. Of course, the boss is pretty reasonable. Maybe we can work out a deal.”

The figure laughed, a slightly metallic sound. “Sorry, but superiors do not negotiate with their inferiors. Do you know what superiors do to their inferiors?”

“Beat them?” said Bobby.

The figure looked Bobby directly in the eyes. “Slaughter them like sheep.”

Bobby had just enough time to draw his gun, but it was the very last action he did before his head went flying off his shoulders, courtesy of the armored figure, who had somehow crossed the gap between them in less than a second. Claws that had popped out of the figure’s gauntlets now gleamed under the night light with Bobby’s blood as Bobby’s corpse collapsed to the floor. Bobby didn’t even get a chance to scream, and based on the fact that Slasher could still hear the Three Fingers Gang talking on the other side of the door, he knew none of them even suspected their poor pal Bobby had just been killed.

Lowering his bloody claw to his side, Slasher sighed. He enjoyed killing backward criminals like Bobby. They were, after all, only standing in the way of progress and evolution. Even so, he had hoped not to dirty his claws until he needed to.

*Oh, well, Slasher thought, a smile crossing his lips behind his helmet as he reached for the doorknob. At least none of his fellow gangsters know I am here. Even if they did, however, it would do them no good, because no one can escape the eye of the Order of the Zero Knights once it has fallen on them.*

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