

CHAPTER ONE

DOCTOR MIND'S skepticism about the existence of the multiverse was shaken when Mr. Space and Captain Galaxy kidnapped, er, *recruited* him into their multiversal team of heroes, and outright shattered when he ran into an alternate version of himself who was everything he was not (and then some).

Up until the moment that portal opened in his bedroom and Mr. Space and Captain Galaxy stepped out of it, Doctor Mind had always believed that multiverse theory was unscientific. It just made no sense to him. He didn't understand how a person's decisions could somehow branch out, resulting in countless alternate universes where something different happened in each one.

Hell, there wasn't even any real evidence for it, either. While not *technically* a real doctor, Doctor Mind had studied enough of the science behind multiverse theory to know that it had no actual basis in reality.

With no evidence, no hypothesis to test, and no logic, Doctor Mind had seen no reason to treat it as a serious scientific theory.

Now, however, Doctor Mind was beginning to wish he had.

If only because it would have saved him and his partner, Trickshot, from walking into a trap that neither of them could escape from.

That happened later, however.

In the present, Doctor Mind stepped through the portal into 'Universe 76821' alongside Trickshot. Having passed through a dimensional portal once before, Doctor Mind already knew what to expect. Their surroundings shifted from the creaky wooden cargo hold of the *Iron Wind*—a ship that could cross the multiverse but still looked like an eighteenth-century sailing ship for some bizarre reason—into an alleyway of a city that looked somewhat familiar to Doctor Mind, though he couldn't place when he might have visited it before.

It was like stepping through a doorway from one room to another. Only this room was in a completely different reality and actually wasn't even a room but an entire universe and ... yeah, the more Doctor Mind thought about it, the more multiverse theory *still* made no sense to him despite his experiences.

Before he could fully scan his surroundings, however, Doctor Mind heard a crackle in his right ear and Mr. Space's overly-cheery voice practically explode in his ear, "Doctor Mind, Trickshot! Did you guys make it to Universe 76821 okay? Any missing limbs, long-term emotional damage, or even just mild discomfort?"

Doctor Mind blinked and looked at his perfectly whole body. "Um, no. I think we made it through okay. Right, Trickshot? Trickshot?"

Doctor Mind was addressing a young teen hero who stood next to him. Clad in red-and-blue spandex, with a flowing red cape running down his back, and the letters 'TW' etched into his chest, Trickshot looked like everything a superhero was supposed to be.

Except Doctor Mind was pretty sure that real superheroes did not smell like Axe body spray (although teenage boys who thought they were hot stuff certainly did).

Trickshot's face was pale and clammy. "I'm ... I'm fine, Doc. I am not going to throw up."

Doctor Mind looked at Trickshot doubtfully. "I ... didn't say you were, Trickshot."

Trickshot nodded once firmly. "Good. Because I'm not."

Doctor Mind raised an eyebrow. He was starting to have his doubts about Trickshot's health, but deciding not to argue with him, Doctor Mind simply tapped his earcom and said, "Everything's fine. We made it through the portal unscathed. Generally."

"Good to know!" said Mr. Space. "While IEA dimension-hopping tech is made in accordance with the highest standards, dimension-hopping can sometimes have unexpected side effects, especially on inexperienced hoppers like you two. Such as dimensional nausea, for example."

Trickshot grunted, which did not escape Doctor Mind's notice, as he said, "Dimensional nausea, eh? What's that?"

"A common side effect of dimension-hopping has for people whose bodies have not acclimated to the disorienting effects of interdimensional travel," Mr. Space explained like a kid reciting a math answer in class. "Very similar to carsickness and can cause nausea or even vomiting. It shouldn't last long, especially for experienced dimension-hoppers."

Trickshot immediately covered his mouth, which also did not escape Doctor Mind's notice, as he said, "Vomiting, eh? Good thing none of us are going to *vomit*, right, Trickshot?"

Trickshot just glared at Doctor Mind but didn't answer.

Which just made Doctor Mind smirk at him even more.

"Enough talking," came Captain Galaxy's curt, no-nonsense voice through the earcom. "If you two made it safely to Universe 76821, then start searching for the Sheath. Get it before Prince Karos and his Fallen Court do."

Doctor Mind nodded and glanced around the seemingly-empty alleyway in which they stood. "Right. Only one problem: How do we *find* the Sheath?"

"Your earcoms come equipped with holographic maps that will show you where you two are in relation to the Sheath," said Mr. Space. "Tap your earcom twice to see it."

Doctor Mind, frowning, nonetheless tapped his earcom a couple of times. A holographic image suddenly appeared on the opposite wall of the alleyway. It showed two glowing orange dots at the bottom of the map and a singular glowing red dot at the top.

"What do the dots represent?" said Doctor Mind. "Candy?"

"You guys," Mr. Space chirped. "The orange dots are you guys while the red dot represents the Sheath. As you get closer to the Sheath, you should see the orange dots get closer to the red dot."

Doctor Mind furrowed his brow. "Looks like the Sheath is north. That where we need to go?"

"If the map says it, then that's what you have to do," came the quieter but still serious voice of Prince Tojas Malock. "I helped design it. It can't be wrong."

Doctor Mind raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You have a lot of confidence in yourself."

"I am the Prince of Telos," Tojas replied. "Confidence is what is expected of me. Where are you from?"

"Can you guys knock it off?" said Captain Galaxy sharply. "Unless you *want* Karos to get the Sheath first."

"Okay, okay," said Doctor Mind. "We'll get it, don't worry. Right, Trickshot?"

Trickshot still said nothing. He nodded ever-so-slightly while making a sick grunting sound at the same time.

"All right," said Captain Galaxy skeptically. "If you need help, call us through your earcom. That's what we're here for."

"Yeah," said Mr. Space. "Otherwise, you're on your own. Good luck!"

With that, Doctor Mind heard a soft *click* in his ear, indicating that his earcom had turned off.

"All right, kid," said Doctor Mind, glancing at Trickshot. "Looks like it's time for us to—kid?"

Trickshot's face was as green as grass now. Without another word, he rushed over to a nearby dumpster, ripped off its lid, and immediately ducked his head inside. Although Doctor Mind could not see him, he could certainly *hear* Trickshot vomiting into the dumpster.

Shaking his head in disappointment, Doctor Mind looked at the map and said, "All right. While you do *that*, I think I'm going to figure out exactly where this so-called 'Sheath' really is."

Loud gunshots suddenly rang in the air, followed by the sound of tires screeching against the pavement, and then the sounds of multiple cars crashing into each other. Screams of fear and surprise filled his ears, prompting Doctor Mind to whip his head down the alley, toward the source of the noise.

"What was that?" said Doctor Mind in surprise.

Trickshot, raising his pale face out of the dumpster, said, "It sounded ... sounded like a car crash ... probably want to check on—"

Trickshot's face suddenly became bright green again and he resumed puking out his stomach into the dumpster.

Doctor Mind, deciding that Trickshot needed some privacy, ran down the alleyway. Bursting out of the alleyway, Doctor Mind stopped and stared in amazement at the scene playing out before him.

In the middle of the street, four cars had all apparently crashed into each other at the same time somehow. The cars were practically piled on top of each other, with broken tires, shattered glass, and other parts of the vehicles scattered everywhere around the pile-up. Smoke and steam rose from the hoods and tires of the cars, while an odd screeching, whining noise came from under the hood of the yellow taxi that had apparently taken the brunt of the crash. The smell of burning rubber and spilled oil filled the air.

But it was not the cars themselves that got Doctor Mind's attention. Rather, he was looking at the two figures standing at the foot of the pile-up.

One looked like no longer than six or seven, dressed in a fancy gangster suit that made him look like a character straight out of those old black-and-white gangster movies. The other was a much older-looking man with a shock of gray hair and wild, crazy eyes, wearing an identical suit to his friend, although his was green instead of black.

The two men were armed and pointing guns at a couple of people kneeling before them. Not far away, several police officers stood, guns drawn, positioned behind the doors of their cruisers. It appeared that the two sides were having a stand-off, focused so intently on each other that no one seemed to have noticed Doctor Mind yet.

"Allen and Jacob Toho!" one of the police officers called out, who looked vaguely familiar to Doctor Mind for some reason. "Let the innocent citizens go or else!"

Doctor Mind's eyes widened. Allen Toho? That was the name of—

"Or else what?" Allen Toho, the baby-like man he'd noticed earlier, snapped. "You'll shoot? Pretty sure we have faster trigger fingers than you."

"Yeah," Jacob Toho, the older-looking of the two, chimed in. "Just let us go with our loot and we won't touch a hair on these peoples' faces."

Despite the tenseness of the situation, Doctor Mind could not help but blurt out, "Babyface? Book-Burner? What are *you* guys doing here?"

Doctor Mind's questions drew the attention of everyone, cops and robbers alike, toward him.

That wasn't unexpected.

Their reactions, however, were.

Allen and Jacob Toho both looked as if they'd crapped themselves several times over. Their skin became pale and sweaty and they looked like they were about to drop their guns and give up right there and then. Allen even said, "D-Doctor *Mind* is here? No way. You're supposed to be on vacation."

Doctor Mind blinked. "What vacation?"

Allen shook his head and glared up at Jacob. "Jacob, you idiot! It was *your* job to make sure that Doctor Mind would be out of town when we pulled off our heist. I oughta put a bullet in *your* brain for being such a fuck-up, you little twat."

Jacob, despite being twice as tall as his brother, winced and cringed under Allen's berating. "Sorry, brother! My contacts assured me that Doctor Mind would be playing chess in Cheskia right now. I didn't know he'd show up today, either. Please forgive me."

Doctor Mind just blinked again. The reason he recognized those two was because he'd known them back in his universe, although they'd been very different.

Allen Toho had been the superhero known as Babyface. A former Faker, Babyface had left the team after betraying them and leaving them to die at the hands of Death Skull the Murderer. Babyface had

tried to have Doctor Mind killed so he could take over his business, but when that plan failed, Babyface became a criminal in his universe who was still on the run from the law.

As for Jacob, he'd been Babyface's older brother, a failed writer turned supervillain called Book-Burner, who had helped Babyface with his schemes.

Last I saw, Book-Burner had been in prison, Doctor Mind thought. *What's he doing free? Did he break out or something or—?*

Of course. If this was an alternate universe, then perhaps here, Book-Burner had never been arrested in the first place.

Shouldn't be hard to beat them both, Doctor Mind thought. *Neither of them is that strong, honestly.*

As for the police, they had an even stranger reaction. The lead officer immediately lowered his gun and said, "All right, guys. No need to use our weapons. Doctor Mind can take it from here."

"Wait, what?" said Doctor Mind to the police officer in surprise. "But aren't you worried about the criminals holding innocent civilians hostage?"

"Not that you're here now, Doctor," said a young-looking black police officer with extremely large ears. He and the other officers were already setting down picnic baskets and blankets near their cruisers. "We know you've got this."

Doctor Mind looked at the hostages. "Surely *you* guys are worried about the police not taking this seriously, right?"

The hostages were a young blonde woman in her thirties and a middle-aged man who might have been a bank manager. They both wore identical smiles of hope and relief on their faces, as if all was right with the world already.

"Why would we be worried when you are here, Doctor Mind?" asked the woman. "That's a funny joke."

"Indeed," said the bank manager. "So long as you are here, we literally have nothing to worry about."

He then winked at Doctor Mind, like Doctor Mind was in on some sort of brilliant in-joke.

Unfortunately, Doctor Mind had no idea what was going on here or why everyone thought he was so great. Sure, he didn't lack self-confidence in himself, but he still thought it was a serious situation that required people to take it that way.

On the other hand, Doctor Mind wasn't sure who was going to have a heart attack first: Babyface or Book-Burner. The two shook and sweated so much that they looked close to fainting on the spot.

"What are we gonna do, bro?" Book-Burner whispered to Babyface. He started pointing his gun toward himself. "Maybe if we shoot ourselves, we can avoid getting our asses kicked by Doctor Mined."

Babyface grabbed Book-Burner's gun before he fully turned it on himself, however, and snapped, "Stop being stupid, you idiot. Although Doctor Mind's presence here is unexpected, we can still escape without our spines being snapped in half."

Doctor Mind frowned. "I wasn't going to snap your spines in half."

Babyface and Book-Burner jumped like Doctor Mind had poked them with white-hot cattle prods.

"Quiet!" Babyface said. He pointed his gun at the back of the woman's head again. "Try *anything*, and I swear to God, I'll put so many bullets in her head that her brains will look like uncooked beef when I'm done with her!"

"And I, too, will put bullets in this man's head!" Book-Burner declared. "Only I am not clever enough to come up with a sufficiently gory descriptor of what his brains will look like when I am done with him. It won't be pretty, however."

Doctor Mind narrowed his eyes. He knew that he could probably pull the guns out of their hands with his telekinesis, but he suspected that they would pull the triggers if they even just felt their guns being tugged at.

If only I could distract them, Doctor Mind thought, his hands balling into fists. *Then I might be able to—*

“I can’t take the stress anymore!” Book-Burner cried. “It’s like asking Betsy to the prom all over again, except worse! Die!”

Book-Burner pulled down on the trigger of his gun and a loud *blam* echoed from the barrel of his gun. The police screamed.

Doctor Mind screamed.

Even the man who had been shot in the back of the head screamed—

Wait, what?

Doctor Mind looked more closely. The bank manager, despite screaming his head off, appeared completely unharmed. Smoke rose from the barrel of Book-Burner’s gun, but Doctor Mind did not see a bullet anywhere. He didn’t even smell gunpowder.

But didn’t he pull the trigger on his gun? Doctor Mind thought. *I heard the bang. I saw his finger pull the trigger. Where’s the bullet?*

Book-Burner, evidently, had the same question, because he opened his eyes (having closed them after pulling the trigger) and looked at his unharmed hostage with surprise.

“Huh?” said Book-Burner. He looked down the barrel of his smoking gun, scratching the back of his head. “What happened?”

“I was going to say the same thing, idiot,” said Babyface. He gestured at the bank manager’s head. “How the hell did you miss at point-blank range?”

“Actually, he didn’t miss at all,” said a strong, authoritative, even majestic, voice above. “He simply fired blanks.”

All eyes, including Doctor Mind’s own, were drawn to the figure standing on top of the building overhead.

He was tall and strapping, clad from head to toe in snow-white spandex and golden armor. A long golden cape flowed down his back, flapping majestically in the wind, while a fancy-looking golden helmet with a glowing green jewel set in the center sat on his head.

It was Doctor Mind’s double. His twin.

And he looked incredibly badass.

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