

# CHAPTER ONE

I KICKED OPEN the doors to the bank and, stepping inside dramatically, pointed and said, “Halt, evil-doers! For I, Doctor Mind, the superhero of Freedom City, am here to put an end to your criminal ways and protect the innocent from your predation!”

There was no response at first, save for the sounds of the water fountain in the middle of the foyer bubbling. I immediately inhaled the scent of roses and vanilla in the air, which seemed to be coming from the plants situated on either side of the entrance.

But then the sound of guns being cocked could be heard and I suddenly found myself staring into the barrels of well over a dozen automatic weapons from various points in the room. Each automatic weapon was held by men wearing identical ski masks and bandannas around their mouths, with the letter ‘O’ emblazoned on the chests of their black long-sleeve shirts.

Nor were the gunmen the only people in the room. On the left side of the lobby, five people knelt with their hands behind their heads before one of the gunmen, who was keeping his gun trained on the hostages rather than me, probably to keep them from escaping. Four of the five people were clearly the bank tellers, all four of them trembling in fear, which was understandable, even if I knew that none of them were in any actual danger.

After all, I was the one who planned the bank robbery in the first place.

The fifth person, by contrast, looked a little different from the others. She was a young, dirty-blonde-haired woman in a blue pantsuit. She put on a convincing scared expression like the bank tellers, but broke into a hopeful smile when she saw me. “It’s Doctor Mind and his young sidekick, Goggles! They’re here to save us!”

“That’s right,” said a young, high-pitched voice to my right. “We’re here to save the day like we *always* do. Zip Lightning!”

I looked to my right. A teenage boy who could be no older than fourteen-years-old stood by my side, mimicking my own ‘hands on hips and chest thrust out’ stance. He wore a slightly bulky purple-and-orange costume that would have made him look like a hockey player, if not for the thick goggles strapped to his face that made his eyes look even bigger than they normally did. Goggles confidently stared down the gunmen without a hint of fear, though I felt like he could have at least looked a *little* bit more afraid so he wouldn’t accidentally upstage me on my own show. And his catchphrase was annoying, although I would give him feedback on that later.

For now, I nodded and said, “That’s right, my boyish sidekick! As soon as we heard about this bank robbery, we hopped into the Mindmobile and headed out to Freedom City First National Bank as quickly as we could. It appears that we got here just in the nick of time, too.”

I said that while gesturing at the huge bank vault door open on the other side of the lobby, directly opposite the entrance. The gigantic metal door hung open on its hinges, where another half dozen or so gunmen were carrying out huge sacks of cash. The gunmen stopped what they were doing as soon as they saw us and dropped the sacks in surprise, landing on the floor with loud *thunks*. The men scrambled to pull out guns from their holsters and pointed them at me awkwardly, which I thought was a bit late.

Not as late, however, as the gunman nearest me, who stood next to a couch and said, with a slight stutter, “Uh, D-Doctor Mind? What is *he* doing here?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at that comment. He was supposed to say that *before* I explained how I found out about the robbery, not after. It looked like I would need to go back to the drawing board on these constructs, whose AI clearly needed more work if I was going to put on a convincing performance.

Fortunately, I was good at improv, so I folded my arms in front of my chest and said, in my best dramatic superhero voice, “I learned about it from a certain Channel Sixteen news reporter, who may or may not have secretly started livestreaming the entire thing on the Internet as soon as the robbery started.”

Goggles nodded. “Yeah. Once again, the Internet saves lives.”

I ignored Goggles’ somewhat irrelevant comment to glance at the woman who knelt among the hostages. She flashed me a smile and, holding up her phone, said, “Gee, I wonder who could have done it.”

The gunman standing nearest her immediately pointed his gun at the woman’s face. “You musta done it!” He shot me a glare. “Take one step closer and I’ll put a bullet in the dame’s head. Got it?”

“There’s no need for such ... *brutality*, Ian,” said a smooth voice from within the vault. “A dead hostage is utterly useless for bargaining. And I fully intend to bargain my way out of this.”

A tall, muscular man in red-and-black armor stepped out of the vault. Unlike the bank robbers, the man did not carry a sack of money with him, although he looked like he could have carried away the entire contents of the vault by himself if he wanted. Long, ram-like horns curled out of the top of his helmet, which obscured his chin and mouth, although it left his dark eyes open, glaring coldly at us. A large ax hung from the man’s belt, but it didn’t seem to impede his movement whatsoever as he walked past the tellers’ desks and stopped in the midst of his gunmen.

I scowled. “Blood Storm. I should have known you were behind this. Only a supervillain as crazy and greedy as you would do something as vile as robbing a bank and holding its employees hostage.”

Blood Storm shrugged. “What can I say? I just want to live the good life and you can’t live the good life without millions and millions of dollars. Preferably stolen from someone else.”

Goggles stepped forward and pointed at Blood Storm. “Well, this is the end of your vile criminal schemes, Blood Storm. Doctor Mind and I will make sure of it.”

Blood Storm laughed. It was clearly *supposed* to be a menacing, evil laugh, but it came out jerky and unnatural, almost like Blood Storm was trying too hard to sound evil. Which he clearly was. I thought I told Bryan—Blood Storm’s real name—to lay off the evil laughter because he clearly lacked a talent for it. “Ha! You may have foiled my plans in the past, my archenemy, but not this time. After I finish robbing this bank, I will steal purses from little old ladies and candy from babies. I might even litter. Wouldn’t *that* be terrifying?”

*Definitely* trying too hard.

At least the hostages didn’t seem to notice anything was off. The bank tellers trembled on their knees at Blood Storm’s boast, but Penny Peters, the young Channel 11 reporter, said, “You can boast all you want, Blood Storm, but everyone knows that Doctor Mind and Goggles will end your reign of terror today.”

Blood Storm chuckled at Penny. “How can Doctor Mind possibly stop me when his body is riddled with bullets?”

Blood Storm pointed at me and Goggles. “Men! Fire at will!”

The Outlaws all raised their guns, took aim, and fired.

But no bullets came out of their guns. Instead, when they pulled on the triggers, a soft *click* noise could be heard and tiny flags popped out of their barrels, unfurling to reveal the word *BANG!* on them in brightly-colored letters.

Confusion appeared on the masked faces of every Outlaw in the room, including the Outlaw threatening the hostages, who poked the flag peeking out of his gun. Even Blood Storm looked nonplussed by this sudden turn of events, his head whipping back and forth as he looked at his minions’ weapons.

“What ... what happened?” said Blood Storm, raising his voice, probably for dramatic effect. It sounded a bit forced, but more natural than his evil laughter. “Why aren’t Doctor Mind and his sidekick riddled with bullets?”

I grinned. “That would be me. Knowing ahead of time that you Outlaws would try to shoot me, I had your real guns swapped out with fakes. Because you are a bunch of stupid criminals, it probably never even occurred to you to check your guns to make sure they were actually loaded.”

“Or real at all,” Goggles added triumphantly.

“He’s right,” said one of the Outlaws, lowering his fake gun sadly. “Goes to show you what happens when you don’t keep track of your own equipment. I feel so dumb.”

The bank tellers all gasped, but it was the middle one, a gray-haired old man with the nametag ‘AARON SAMOSA,’ who cried out, “Amazing! Doctor Mind really is the cleverest superhero ever! He somehow anticipated Blood Storm’s bank robbery and ruined it ahead of time! What a genius.”

I grinned even more. Aaron, like the other bank tellers, wasn’t in on the act. He had no idea that this entire situation—including my rivalry with Blood Storm—was staged. He didn’t know that the reason the guns were fake was because I had supplied them to the ‘Outlaws’ for the sole purpose of adding drama to the show. He certainly couldn’t have known that ‘Blood Storm’ wasn’t even really my arch-nemesis and that no one was actually in danger here.

I, of course, wasn’t going to spoil the fun. After all, I was Doctor Mind, Freedom City’s greatest and only superhero. The more people who believed in that idea, the more money and fame I got.

“Impressive trick, Doctor Mind,” said Blood Storm with a hint of respect in his words, “but you do realize, of course, that we still outnumber you and your sidekick two to one. Even if we can’t shoot you to death, we can still overwhelm you through sheer numbers alone.”

My grin, I will admit, turned into a smirk. “Then let’s even the odds.”

I pressed my fingers against the cold, metallic Mind-Bender Crown on my forehead and concentrated. I focused my mind on the fake guns held in the hands of the eighteen or so Outlaws gathered in the bank and felt the familiar tingling sensation of the Crown’s power at work. It felt as if the Crown had given my mind eighteen extra hands, and I knew, from three years of experience, exactly what to do with those hands.

I thrust my physical hands forward and the guns in the hands of the Outlaws flew out of their hands and into the air. The Outlaws cried out in surprise as the fake guns swirled near the ceiling, looking for a moment like a veritable tornado of weaponry before, with a flick of my wrist, I sent the guns flying back down toward the Outlaws. Each gun slammed into the face of an individual Outlaw hard enough to knock them flat off their feet. The fake guns, moving as fast as my thoughts, flew far too quickly for even the nimblest Outlaws to avoid. A melody of skulls cracking under impact from metallic guns broke through the air like a symphony orchestra, not to mention looked really cool.

In seconds, all of the Outlaws saved for Blood Storm lay on the floor of the bank in various states of injury. Many of them were still awake, groaning in pain and clutching their heads, while others lay totally unconscious, blood slightly leaking out of the sides of their heads. I didn’t hit any of them hard enough to kill them, but I was glad they weren’t actual humans. Otherwise, this would have *really* gotten me into trouble.

With a dramatic wave of my hand, I made the fake guns clatter to the floor all around Blood Storm, who stood there with an expression of pure shock on his face.

I waved at the fallen Outlaws. “What were you saying about the odds again, villain?”

Blood Storm shook his head and put on what, I guess, was supposed to be his fiercest expression, although to me he looked more like he was trying not to fart. “I don’t need good odds to beat you two. Those Outlaws were merely weighing me down, anyway. I will wipe the floor with both of you with my own bare hands.”

I raised a hand. “Actually, why don’t we make this more interesting by evening the odds? Goggles, check on the hostages. Make sure everyone is safe and escort them outside if possible.”

“Sure thing, Doctor,” said Goggles. He frowned. “But what are you going to do?”

I stepped toward Blood Storm, who was punching his fists together. “I am going to beat down Blood Storm with truth, justice, and the American way!”

As Goggles hurried off to check on the hostages, Blood Storm bellowed and ran toward me quickly, though not quickly enough to surprise me. It helped that Blood Storm and I had already practiced this fight, so I simply stood there for a moment, counting down the seconds, waiting for Blood Storm to get close enough for me to do my thing.

Then, when Blood Storm was less than a foot away from me, I thrust out my hand while activating my Mind-Bender Crown and flipped my index finger upward, like I was pulling on a string. An invisible force struck Blood Storm in the chin and sent him crashing into the ceiling overhead. Blood Storm gasped in pain, but I wasn't done yet.

Spinning and twisting my hands theatrically, I used my telekinesis to slam Blood Storm down onto the floor hard enough to make a small crater. Blood Storm actually cried out in pain and even shouted, "Too much! It hurts!"

Alarmed, I thrust my hand toward me and Blood Storm flew toward me. I caught Blood Storm by the collar of his costume and brought in his face close enough that we could whisper without the hostages overhearing and hissed, " 'Too much'? 'It hurts'? That's not what a supervillain who's getting his ass kicked by a superhero would say."

"Sorry," Blood Storm whispered back with a wince. "It's just that I didn't expect you to hit me so hard."

I sighed. "Look, Bryan, we need to keep up appearances, otherwise the rubes will notice and start asking questions. Do you want the rubes to start asking questions?"

Blood Storm shook his head slightly. "No. But I don't like getting thrown around like a ragdoll, either."

I shrugged. "Shouldn't have agreed to be the villain, then."

With that, I punched Blood Storm in the face. And just as planned, Blood Storm collapsed onto the floor with a *thud*. He was still breathing and clearly still alive, although I had to say that he was better at pretending to be in pain than I thought. Then again, given Blood Storm's complaints, maybe he actually *wasn't* pretending.

Deciding not to follow that train of thought, I turned to the hostages, where Goggles was just untying the last of them, and, spreading my arms, I said, "Employees of Freedom City First National Bank! My sidekick and I have officially defeated the villainous Blood Storm and his band of criminal Outlaws, all without letting them get away with a single penny! You are free to live your lives with peace and security, knowing that your bank is a villain-free workplace once more."

Penny began clapping and cheering, followed by the other bank employees and customers, who all started hooting and hollering my name. I grinned, lowering my hands to my sides, mentally noting another successful con. That was good because my meeting with the mayor was tomorrow, where I would discuss renewing my contract with the city for another year. I always liked to pull these sorts of cons off before a meeting with the mayor because it gave me some leverage for negotiations, though given how supportive Mayor Addison was of me in general, I expected the meeting to go—

The front doors of the bank exploded like someone had set off a bomb. Penny and the bank employees screamed and dropped to the floor, while Goggles threw himself on top of the hostages to protect them from flying debris.

Acting quickly, I thrust my hands out and created a telekinetic shield around myself that caused the flame, smoke, and debris to pass harmlessly around me or bounce off my shield and strike the walls, floor, and ceiling. Because Blood Storm was behind me, he was protected by the shield, too, though I paid him no attention because my focus was on keeping the shield up.

An instant later, the explosion faded, allowing me to drop the barrier slowly and look around at my surroundings.

The bank lobby was a total mess now. Most of the entrance, including the walls supporting the doors, had been blown out completely, leaving nothing but blackened stone, twisted metal, and thick smoke obscuring the entrance. The doors themselves lay at my feet, broken and partially melted, the stench of

smoke and melted metal filling my nostrils. The potted plants had been burned or smashed to bits, their pleasant smells hidden under the stench of ash that hung in the air.

Most of the Outlaws lay with layers of dust and ash on them. A few had even stirred, lifting their heads to see what all the commotion was.

Heck, I was curious to find out, too, because this explosion most *certainly* was not part of the con.

“Doctor Mind?” said Goggles’ scared voice. “Sir?”

I looked to my right. Goggles lay on top of the shaking and crying hostages, looking mostly unharmed, although his costume was very dirty and his goggles partially obscured by the smoke. Penny, the poor girl, was shaking harder than anyone, keeping her head firmly down and her arms firmly on her head.

“What ... what happened?” said Goggles. He looked around the lobby with a lost expression on his face. “Was that explosion part of the plan or—?”

“N-No,” I said. I coughed after inhaling some smoke. “I don’t know what is going on.”

“It must be Blood Storm,” said Aaron, who was still lying on the floor. “This must be part of his backup plan in case he got defeated by you!”

I was about to debunk that idea before a figure emerged from the smoke cloud that had once been the front doors of the bank.

And I say ‘figure’ literally because, although it had a humanoid shape, the figure didn’t look even *remotely* human. It was tall—easily eight, maybe nine-feet-tall—wearing big, bulky black-and-purple armor which looked like a mixture between the armor of a samurai and something straight out of a military sci-fi video game. A ridiculously long, thick blade was holstered by its side, but it was the thing’s head that caught my attention.

That was because its ‘head’ was a literal flaming skull, hovering apparently of its own free will, encased in what looked like purple fire. The skull’s eyes glowed with a lavender light as it surveyed the bank lobby, shifting from the hostages to the Outlaws to Goggles before finally landing on me. Instinctively, I stepped backward, which was perhaps not *heroic* but I wasn’t feeling very heroic right now.

Pointing a finger at me, the figure said, in a deep voice like a gong, “Ah, there you are. I’ve been looking for *you* all day.”

Doing my best not to look like a complete coward in front of the hostages, I said, “Me? Why? And who are you, anyway?”

The skull-headed figure grinned. He immediately drew his blade from his sword faster than my eyes could follow and pointed it at me. The sword’s blade extended like a pole, stopping less than an inch from my neck, making me freeze in place as I tried to look at the sword and the figure holding it at the same time.

“You may call me Death Skull the Murderer,” said the figure. “And I have come for the fight of a lifetime with the legendary superhero of Freedom City, Doctor Mind himself.”

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Read the rest of “Fake Hero” [HERE!](#)