

### Mushroom King Volume 1: A Baker Will Rise

Have you ever been punched in the face before? Well I have (dozens of times before, but who's counting?). In high school, while fighting crime; wherever it happens, it doesn't feel good. It especially hurts when you get hit by a two hundred and fifty pound guy, like this: WHAM! A left hook to my jaw sent me reeling against the grocery store wall. Breathing heavily, I launched a kick to his shin. "S-so," I panted. "You don't *like* the name Fun-Guy?" I dodged another punch aimed for my face.

"No, I think Dr. Lichen is much more..."—this time his punch landed in my gut — "*sophisticated*. If you want bad guys to respect you, you gotta have a respectable name. I think it works with the mushroom theme real nice." Coming up with a decent alias.... Tough times for a superhero, right? And I'm not your average superhero either; I have the most absurd superpower ever: I can control and enhance the abilities of— you guessed it— fungi. How ridiculous is that?

"You know, you might be right," I said, as I threw spores of "bleeding tooth" mushroom in his face. "But it's so hard to find a cool nickname related to *mushrooms*." The spores swelled up mid-air into full blood red sacs that burst into the villain's eyes, blinding him. Lucky shot, too— last two times I tried that, I missed! He stumbled a bit, wiping the jelly from his eyes; I seized my chance and pounced on his back, wrestling him to the floor. Before he could burst out of my hold, I pulled out my handcuffs and wrangled them on his wrists; but just before I could pull him to his feet, something far worse happened: Captain Thunder arrived.

People tend to underestimate the little guy. They see the pumped-up muscles and perfectly formed physique of the bigshot superheroes and forget all about us small fries in the

background. But hey, what do I know? I'm just your local town baker from down the street. People overlook me all the time; they'd rather pay attention to Quincy Briggs, AKA Captain Thunder. How do I know his secret identity, you ask? *Please!* Stevie Wonder could see that, plain as day! I mean, come on, a flimsy mask that barely covers his cheekbones is going to fool me? How can no one else figure it out?

I had that jerk scoped out from the first time he walked into my bakery. Every Monday he comes in to have his regular: a strawberry rhubarb danish and caramel macchiato. Oh, all the girls just *swoon* and drool at every blindingly white smile he shoots them. He's a perfectly swell guy, Harvard grad, soon to be CEO of Menax Oil, and most importantly, bane of my existence. He leads a double life as Captain Thunder. His superpower: the ability to shoot lightning from his fingertips. I mean, the guy even looks like a total Greek god: bronze skin, gelled hair, perfectly square hero's chin. But it's even worse, if you can believe it... he gets hit by lightning *one time* and ends up being able to manipulate it at will! How unfair can this get?

But enough backstory: Captain Thunder's booming voice called out: "I can take it from here, good citizen!"

"I've got it wrapped up, thanks," I said through clenched teeth. No way this bozo is going to take the credit for *my* arrest!

"No, no, I insist! Criminals can be very dangerous, you know." With his muscles rippling under the fine fabric of his professionally sewn suit, he lifted the thug up by his shirt and out of my grasp. Just as I am about to protest, the media came swarming in, with their cameras flashing, all of them focused on Captain Thunder. Where did they even *come* from?!

A reporter yelled over the commotion: “Captain Thunder! Captain Thunder! Who is this man you’ve arrested and what has he done? Is this boy standing next to you your new sidekick?” Oh no I’m not! I can’t stand this! This could have been my big break, my step to fame, and this attention hog was going to take it away from me? Over my dead body!

“No, I am NOT his sidekick,” I seethed. “I’m the one who—!”

“This is just a concerned civilian who saw a robbery in progress and made a citizen’s arrest.” He was beaming, hair perfectly in place for the cameras, and I’m standing here out of breath with a swollen eye. I can’t believe this. As the reporters clambered over themselves to get a statement from Captain Bigshot, I straightened my trench coat and got a last word in with the offender.

“I’ll catch you later Cecil, thanks for the name tips,” I said, deflated.

“Yeah, no problem! Maybe we can catch up over coffee once I get outta the slammer?” I gave him a thumbs up and a quick nod, then started out for the refuge of my tiny apartment...

I’m not as lucky as Mr. Perfect. Me, I’m just a simple baker. Sure, I love my job; I went to school for it, you know. It pays the bills and I enjoy making things *people* enjoy. I’m just Connor Bekett, the baker boy from down the street. At least I thought that’s who I was, until I had the accident. I got into baking for the chemistry of it, you see — the science behind the art. So, when the famous culinary institute La *Meunière* the next city over opened its doors for a rare public tour, I jumped at the chance! Little did I know that would be the start of a new life for me...

During a demonstration on the art of ingredient ratios in croissant making, I made a fool of myself by tripping over an entire 55-gallon drum of a baker’s yeast slurry, covering my arms

and legs in it. I was so embarrassed I left the group to find the bathroom to wash up. Of course, none of the blasted doors had signs on them, and I was too upset to take much notice, so I just picked the first door I could find: inside was a fairly large room with the silhouettes of what looked like contorted mixing equipment along the walls. Curious, I searched the wall and found the light switch — but instead of the lights, all the machines in the room roared to life! From nowhere, something snapped my head back and everything went black. I woke up on the floor a couple minutes later, and the yeast all over my skin was gone. I got up, found my group again, and finished my tour (why waste good tickets?). Later on, I discovered that the room I was in was a DNA splicing room and when I was in there, I had unwittingly spliced my DNA with the baker's yeast on my skin. After weeks of splitting headaches, and mushrooms growing from my ears, I realized that I could control all forms of fungus and enhance their effects to my will. Why couldn't it be laser eye beams or shapeshifting? Heck, I'd take a freezie ray gun over this!

So it was the morning after my tango with that beefy thug and I was back working in the bakery. My friend Alice was there, sipping a coffee while leaning over the counter to talk to me.

“Geez, you look terrible!” Alice is the only person who knows my secret identity. We've been best friends since high school and I can't keep secrets from her, anyway. Probably because she can read minds, but she's never admitted it. She also helped me make my costume and usually cleans me up after I get beat up from my nocturnal adventures. “Where did you get that shiner from?”

“Wow, thanks. Just what a guy wants to hear,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes. “I got pummeled by a guy trying to rob a grocery store...Nice guy, really.” I winced as she prodded my bruised ribs.

“You need some kind of armor underneath your costume. A trench coat isn’t going to protect you from getting creamed. Maybe you could get some Kevlar underneath or something.”

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “I’ll just spend all of my savings on some bulletproof spandex.”

“Speaking of spandex, Captain Muscles is here,” she said, rolling her eyes. Sure enough, dressed dapper as usual, Quincy “Top Gun” Briggs strolled in through the glass door, walked up next to Alice, and slipped his arm around her shoulder.

“Good morning Alice! Your presence here is enough to brighten any man’s day!” he threw her his best award-winning smile. Alice inched away, gingerly taking his arm off her shoulder.

“Hello Quincy,” she said blandly, turning away from him.

“I’ll have a caramel macchiato and a strawberry rhubarb danish,” he informed me before turning back to Alice. “So, Alice. What would you say if I asked you out to dinner this Friday?” Before Alice could respond and, sadly, before I could deck him where he stood, we all heard a piercing shriek come from the doorway. We all spun around to see a woman, disheveled and scratched up, running into the shop.

“Run while you can!” She screeched, eyes darting around wildly. “He’s gonna blow up the nuclear power plant!” On that note, she turned around and booked it to the streets, purse flying behind her.

“How rude. She didn’t even stop to order something.” Alice remarked, shaking her head.

“Looks like that’s my cue. Sorry my dear, I’ll have to catch your answer later. I’ve got business to attend to.” He gave Alice a wink before he rushed out the door.

“Creep,” Alice muttered as she took a bite out of the danish that Meat Head had left on the counter. “Looks like you gotta go too,” she said, her mouth full. I tore off my apron and ran to the bakery restroom.

“Dana! Can you take my shift? I promise I’ll help you with your research paper for that college class!” I yelled to my slothful coworker, who at the moment, was slouched on some flour sacks, reading a comic book.

“Yeah yeah sure,” she replied, not even looking up. Ten minutes later, I was fully dressed in Mushroom Man garb, utility belt around my waist, and headed out the bakery door, toilet paper trail stuck to my shoe. I set off at a brisk jog five blocks down to where the plant lay. By the time I got there, I was wheezing, hands on my knees. Dear God, I really need to go to the gym, I thought. That or discover a species of roller-skate fungi!

Wiping the sweat off my brow, I saw a tiny object flying in the air towards me. It kind of looked like a doll... Oh crap, it was a person! Letting out a shamefully unmanly yelp, I dove out of the way, just as Captain Thunder “thundered” back to Earth...literally! He skidded on his back and landed next to me on the ground. He was a wreck: cuts and scrapes lined his body; he had a massive bruise on his jaw, its purple shade was eclipsed only by the swelling of his left eye. That professionally tailored uniform was covered in scuffs, even his bright yellow cape was in tatters. His perfectly gelled hair was an unholy mess and he was missing a boot. Moaning, he reached out to me with his gloved hand and grasped my pant leg.

“You’ve got to get out of here,” he croaked, hands trembling. He took another ragged breath and gripped me tighter, eyes wide. “He’s too strong. Save yourself!” And with that, he slumped back to the ground, unconscious. I’m not going to lie: I wanted to get out of Dodge

pronto after seeing the look on his face. But if I only used my powers to make dough rise faster, I wouldn't be able to look at myself in a mirror in the morning. This was my chance to make a difference. So, trying not to pee my pants, I carefully stepped over his body and entered that forebodingly dark power plant. Oh, sweet Mother Mary, what kind of monster could beat the tar out of Captain Thunder? I mean, sure I'd like to give him the "ol' one-two," but not beat him to within an inch of his life! Quivering like a leaf, I pulled out *Mycena Chlorophos* spores, a bioluminescent type of mushroom, from my utility belt and held them out in front of me like a flashlight. I tiptoed through the dark and dingy plant... and tripped on Captain Thunder's missing boot! I was cursing myself silly, when I saw a light off in the distance. Extinguishing my mushrooms, I crept towards the light, trying my best to stay hidden. What I saw was perhaps the strangest thing I've ever seen, and I've seen plenty of grown men dressed in costumes. In front of me, I saw a glowing seven foot giant of a man in a jumpsuit, hugging the nuclear reactors, seemingly leeching the energy from them. I didn't know what the heck was going on, but I knew I had to stop him!

Pulling out my trusted Anemone Stinkhorn spores, I threw them right at the feet of the guy and watched as the spores grew. Soon enough, "Tiny" ran out, coughing and gagging as the rotting stench of the mushrooms blossomed. Seeing a perfect opportunity, I launched out of hiding and punched the sputtering guy square in the chest and cried out as I just about broke my hand. As I was nursing my wound, he hauled back and punched me right in the jaw. Seeing stars, I flew across the room and landed in a pile of empty barrels. He then lumbered over to me, picking me up by my shirt and pulling me up to his face.

"Who are you?" he boomed.

“I’m Professor Shroom,” I mumbled, head spinning. “It’s, uh, nice to meet you?”

“That’s the stupidest name I’ve ever heard!” He proclaimed. “Professor *Shroom*?” He shook me by my collar. I grit my teeth, reaching into my utility belt.

“No need to get personal, here.” I threw spores of a Puffball mushroom on the floor and the area exploded in smoke. Twisting out of his grasp, I kicked the back of his knees and watched as he went tumbling down to the ground. As the smoke started to dissipate, I saw Monstro getting back onto his feet, so I took a flying leap and landed on his back, beating my fists onto his head. “What do you want with the power plant?” I yelled, clinging on for dear life.

“You capes don’t understand!” He roared, thrashing from side to side, trying to get free. “They did this to me and no one even cares!” With a mighty war cry, he grabbed me by the back of my trench coat and sumo-threw me to the floor. This wasn’t a fight I could win. Gasping for air, sprawled out on the concrete and about to get squashed by fists bigger than my head, I realized I was going about it all wrong.

“Before you club me to death,” I croaked, holding my hands out to shield my face. “Can I ask what happened to you? How did it come to this?” It was a long shot, but maybe I could talk my way out of this. Thinking for a moment, he lowered his meaty fists and looked me in the eyes.

Slowly, he said “My name is Damien Thorn, but now I am known as Nuclear Fallout.” (Now that was a totally cool super villain name!) “I was a worker here at the plant when the catwalk I was walking on collapsed and dumped me into a vat of nuclear waste. I woke up in the hospital, glowing and able to absorb energy from every machine I touched. When I came home,

my wife and kids freaked out and ran away screaming. I was a monster! Worse, I couldn't pay the hospital bills and the insurance from the plant refused to cover it."

"Wow, that was rotten of them," I said, putting the pieces together, "So you're trying to destroy the plant to make them pay because they won't take responsibility for what happened to you, or even lift a finger to help fix your condition?" I say, putting the pieces together.

Damien swallowed hard and nodded. I could see tears starting to surface and he wiped furiously at his eyes.

"Hey there," I said, gingerly picking myself up off the floor. "Things will turn around. You just have to hang in there. I know you don't know me, but I know what you're going through. I've had plenty of people screw me over in my lifetime, but I've also been a victim of tyranny from people 'just having a bad day.' Think about the people who'll suffer from you destroying the plant! I get your pain, but making everybody else's day just as bad as yours isn't fair to them. Honestly, this power you have is pretty incredible, and I bet you could use it for good and maybe even help pay off your debt!" Tears spilling everywhere, Damien scooped me up into an enormous bear hug. I groaned in pain as I heard the bones in my ribs and back start to pop. Dots appeared before my eyes...Is this how it ends?

He finally released me and I sighed in relief. Still crying, he said, "Thank you so much! I never really thought that someone could be so kind to a complete stranger!" He set me down and relief washed over me.

"No problem, buddy. Now go call your wife and explain what happened, I'm sure she'd understand and welcome you back with open arms once she knows what's up."

As I limped out the doors of the power plant, I saw Captain Thunder being wheeled into an ambulance. Walking over to him, he saw me and motioned for the paramedic to stop.

“You took out Nuclear Fallout huh? Amazing! I know I told you to run, but you didn’t. I admire that. It takes a true hero to stand up despite all odds and face whatever opposes him to save even one innocent life. You saved mine, as well as the people of the city. How did you beat him anyways? I couldn’t lay a scratch on him!”

“I didn’t,” I admitted. I pointed to the glowing man assisting some emergency workers with fallen wreckage, “In the end, Damien Thorn defeated Nuclear Fallout. Sometimes you can’t win a fight with your fists. I was just real with him and listened to what he had to say. You’d be surprised how much that could mean to a person. You should try it sometime.” I turned around to leave but he grabbed my arm.

“You seem...familiar,” he said, eyeing me suspiciously. “Who are you?”

Now it was my turn to flash him a smile. “They call me the Mushroom King. And fighting crime is the 'yeast' I can do!”

“And that was how I saved the day!” I say proudly to my audience. Alice blows her dark bangs out of her eyes and pops her bubblegum.

“Bravo, genius. You just exposed your secret identity and that of Captain Thunder to the whole crowd!” She motions towards the empty bakery. I shake my head and step off the table I’d been standing on.

“Everyone’s a critic!” I proclaim dramatically, heading back to my station.

“Yeah,” Dana calls out from the back room. “And it needs more Biffs!”

“Who’s Biff?” I ask, perplexed.

“You know, *Biff, Pow, Wham?* Every superhero has ‘em! Makes it more exciting.” She calls back.

I sigh. Sometimes, you just can’t please anybody!