

## CHAPTER ONE

ALL STINGER WANTED TO do was go down to Hero Island's South Beach and have a good time. He expected to lie down and relax, maybe go for a swim or build a sand castle or even fly around and chase the seagulls that often landed here. And if there were any female members of the Neohero Alliance here in their bikinis, well, Stinger would have a nice view to enjoy as well. It helped that South Beach was restricted exclusively to members of the Neohero Alliance and the Young Neos; that meant that it was usually one of the least habited parts of the island, as tourists were not allowed to visit here. Going to South Beach was one of Stinger's favorite downtime activities, aside from playing video games.

But Stinger certainly hadn't expected a giant iceberg to run aground on the beach, sending seagulls fleeing in fear, nor had he expected a crazy, blue-skinned man with a crew cut to pop out of the iceberg, yell something about destroying Bolt, and immediately start shooting ice bolts at Stinger. Of course, Stinger had been able to get his costume on due to wearing his waterproof suit-up watch at all times, but that didn't quite help him as he darted through the air trying to avoid getting swatted out of the sky by gigantic ice chunks that were half his size.

Dodging a particularly large ice chunk, Stinger halted in midair and looked down at the beach below. While South Beach had not been particularly warm today due to the fact that it was later October and Hero Island was off the coast of New York, the arrival of the ice man below had caused the temperature to drop like a rock. Large portions of South Beach were covered in snow and sleet, which gave Stinger very little room to land, while the gigantic iceberg itself gave off such intense cold waves that Stinger could feel it even from the other side of the beach.

His real attention, however, was on the ice man below. The ice man was muscular and wore a skintight wet suit which showed off his six pack abs quite well. The ice man's eyes were blazing with anger and, as Stinger watched, the ice man already had two more ice chunks in his hands. The ice man hurled both chunks at Stinger, which Stinger once again dodged, his wings buzzing furiously as the ice flew past him.

*Where is everyone?* Stinger thought, glancing at the screen of his suit-up watch. *I can't keep dodging this guy forever!*

When the ice man appeared, Stinger had sent an emergency message to the rest of the Young Neos to come by and help him. Bolt had immediately sent him a reply confirming that the team would be there soon, but that had been five minutes ago, which made Stinger wonder what the hold-up was. He knew that Talon wouldn't be able to help, since she was in New York City visiting her mother, but the rest of the team was still here and they usually didn't take very long to get suited up in these kinds of emergencies.

*Must be White,* Stinger thought with a scowl. *He's always so slow and clumsy that I wonder how he gets out of bed in the morning without cracking his skull sometime.*

Now, Stinger *could* beat the ice man on his own, but the problem was getting close enough to him to paralyze him with his venom. The ice man radiated such intense coldness that ice appeared wherever he stepped, while Stinger's own powers required that he get into physical contact with his target in order to paralyze it. That was why Stinger had spent the last few minutes just dodging and keeping outside of the ice man's range; it was all he could do until his friends showed up to turn the tide.

"Get down here!" the ice man suddenly shouted. "Now!"

"No," said Stinger, shaking his head. "You'll have to come up here and get me yourself if you want me that bad."

Stinger didn't really mean that. He just said it to taunt the ice man, which was why he was surprised when the ice man launched himself through the air via an ice pillar that exploded out from underneath him. Stinger tried to fly to the left, but he was too late. As Stinger dodged, the ice man reached out and slapped one of Stinger's wings, instantly covering it in a thick sheet of ice.

The sudden change in weight caused Stinger to go spiraling down to the beach below. Remembering his training, Stinger hit the sand at a roll, rolling several feet before stopping in a crouching position. His head spun from the impact of the landing, but he shook his head, only to groan when he felt an intense cold on his right wing. Looking over his shoulder, Stinger saw that his right wing was covered in ice. He tried to flap his wings, but the ice made it too heavy to move or lift him off the ground.

*Uh oh, Stinger thought. Looks like I'm grounded.*

A shout to his right caused Stinger to see the ice man walking toward him. The ice man had summoned two ice swords in his hands, causing Stinger to stand up and start backing away. But then Stinger stopped when he felt cold water splash against his boots and, glancing over his shoulder, he realized that he had been pushed against the sea, which meant that he had nowhere to run.

"Y-You are an an-annoying little insect," said the ice man, who had an odd stutter. "O-Once I am done with you, I am going a-after Bolt next."

"Bolt?" said Stinger. "What did he do to you? Call you Frosty?"

"D-Doesn't matter," said the ice man. He stopped and pointed one of his swords at Stinger. "B-Bolt is my main target, but I will k-kill anyone who gets in my way."

"You do know that this is Hero Island, right?" said Stinger, glancing to the left and right in the vain hope of finding a way out of this situation alive. "There's dozens and dozens of veteran superheroes here, not counting the Young Neos. You'll have to kill a lot of people to get to Bolt."

"I d-don't c-care if I have to kill the entire Neohero Alliance in order to get to him," said the ice man. "I h-have no choice."

The ice man raised his swords, but before he could do anything, there was the sound of a rushing wind and something rushed by the ice man so fast that it was a dark blur. The blur not only managed to disarm the ice man by shattering his swords, but it also punched him in the stomach, causing him to fall to his hands and knees on the beach gasping in pain.

At first, Stinger thought that the blur was either Bolt or White, since their super speed often allowed them to look like blurs when they were running around. But then the blur came to a stop before Stinger, allowing him to realize that the blur was not Bolt or White at all.

The superhero who stood before Stinger was tall and lean, wearing a black bodysuit that slightly resembled Stinger's, except it had no holes for wings. The superhero wore goggles that showed his harsh brown eyes, while his mouth and chin were left open to the elements. The superhero was more lean than muscular, while the letters 'BB' on his chest indicated who he was.

Stinger gasped. "Black Blur? What are you doing here?"

Black Blur was a member of the Neohero Alliance's Leadership Council, having been voted in after one of its previous members had betrayed the NHA and left the organization. Stinger had met Black Blur a few times, but he didn't have too much experience with him. About the only thing he knew about Black Blur was that he was a speedster and he didn't like Bolt very much, although he didn't know what Black Blur's opinion of the rest of the Young Neos was.

Black Blur looked down at Stinger with a slightly haughty expression. "I heard that there was a direct attack on South Beach from an unidentified supervillain and, since I was near South Beach anyway, I came to deal with it. But I didn't quite expect the supervillain in question to be this man."

Black Blur said 'this man' as if it was the worst insult he could muster. He looked over at the ice man as he said that, who had already risen back to his feet, although with the way he rubbed his stomach, it was clear that Black Blur's blows had already done a number on him.

"Blur," said the ice man with a snarl. "I didn't know you were still in the NHA. I t-thought that you h-had already gone on to greater things."

"And I didn't know you had gone back to your old ways, Rime," said Black Blur. "Attacking Hero Island by yourself is an excellent way to earn a one way ticket back to Ultimate Max."

Rime? Stinger knew who that was. Earlier this year, Bolt had been thrown into Ultimate Max—the best and only supervillain prison in the United States—on trumped up charges, but had managed to break out with help from some of the other prisoners. One of those prisoners had been Rime, a former superhero who had murdered a superhuman rights activist. Rime had been pardoned by President Plutarch due to his help in defeating Mastermind, but that had been months ago and Stinger didn't know where he had been during that time.

"I d-don't want t-to go back to prison," said Rime, shaking his head. "I-I just want to save my family, and the only way I can d-do that is by killing Bolt."

"I'm no fan of Bolt myself, but as a member of the Leadership Council, it's my duty to defend my fellow NHA members from all who would harm them," said Black Blur. "And that includes members of the Young Neos such as Bolt." Black Blur suddenly glanced at Stinger. "Young man, you should stay out of this fight and let me handle it. You're clearly in no condition to fight someone like Rime."

Although Stinger understood why Black Blur said that, he couldn't help but feel annoyed by Black Blur's condescending tone. It wasn't like Stinger was some random kid off the street. He was a superhuman in his own right with plenty of experience under his belt. But he supposed he couldn't argue with Black Blur, given how his right wing was still frozen solid.

"I-If you won't g-get out of my way, then I h-have no ch-choice but to kill you as well," said Rime.

Black Blur smirked. "If you can touch me."

All of a sudden, Black Blur rushed toward Rime, moving faster than Stinger's eyes could follow, but Rime immediately slammed his feet on the beach and the sand in front of him suddenly became frozen solid. Black Blur suddenly appeared, slipped on the beach, and went sliding down the ice toward Rime at a crazy fast rate, but Rime summoned a thick ice wall at his feet, which Black Blur slammed into so hard that he cracked it. Black Blur then lay there on the ice, looking stunned, before Rime pinned him to the ground with a foot and formed a razor-sharp ice dagger in his right hand. Rime raised the dagger above his head, no doubt to bring it down on the dazed Black Blur, but Stinger was helpless to stop him.

That was when Stinger heard a familiar shout and then Bolt slammed into Rime's back. The blow sent Rime flying across the beach until he crashed into the sand and lay half-buried in the frozen sand, his eyes wide with shock. Stinger looked in the direction from which Bolt had come and saw the other members of the team also making their way down the beach toward them, which made Stinger feel much happier than before.

"Bolt!" said Stinger in surprise. "Good timing! I didn't even hear you coming."

"It's nothing," said Bolt, waving off Stinger's praise. "By the way, are you okay? Your wing is frozen."

Stinger winced at the coldness on his wing, but said, "It'll be fine. We just need to melt the ice."

Bolt nodded as Black Blur sat up, groaning in pain as he rubbed his forehead where he had crashed into Rime's wall. Bolt held out a hand to help Black Blur up, but Black Blur rose to his feet on his own

without even acknowledging Bolt's hand, aside from a rather annoyed glare at it like he thought Bolt was insulting him.

"Bolt," said Black Blur, with more than a little disgust in his voice. "I see you're late as usual."

Bolt folded his arms across his chest, looking at Black Blur with a lack of respect. "And you're just as grateful for my help as ever. A real role model to the next generation of superheroes for sure, Councilman."

Black Blur looked annoyed at Bolt's sarcasm, but before he could respond, Rime shouted, "Bolt! There you are!" and everyone looked over at him.

Rime was standing again, having dug himself out of the sand. His hair and suit had sand on them still, but despite having been sent flying, Rime looked ready to go another round. His eyes were focused especially on Bolt, like he was trying to make Bolt die just by glaring at him hard enough.

"Rime?" said Bolt. "Is that you? What are you doing here and why were you fighting Stinger and Black Blur?"

"B-Because they got in my way," said Rime. He pointed a single finger at Bolt. "M-My r-real target is you."

"Me?" said Bolt, putting a hand on his chest. "Why me? I haven't done anything to you."

"I-It doesn't matter what you did to me," said Rime. "I-If I don't kill you, my family will die."

"What are you talking about?" said Bolt. "If your family is in danger, we might be able to help you if you'd just tell us who put them in danger in the first place."

Unfortunately, Rime either did not hear what Bolt said or he did not care to answer, because he raised his fists again and unleashed a barrage of ice spheres at Bolt and Black Blur. Bolt and Black Blur easily dodged the ice spheres and both went after Rime, but Rime launched himself into the air again thanks to another ice pillar under his feet. White Lightning tried to catch him in midair, but Rime fired a block of ice at him, which knocked White out of the air easily.

Rime landed on the beach in front of Blizzard, Shell, and Treehugger. Treehugger immediately summoned vines from the sand that wrapped around Rime's legs and tightened, but the vines instantly froze and shattered, followed by Rime actually punching Treehugger in the face. Blizzard unleashed a blast of snow at Rime, but Rime caught it and hurled it back at her, knocking her down onto the sand along with Treehugger.

Shell tried to capture Rime with his red energy bubbles, but Rime dodged them, grabbed Shell, and hurled him over his shoulder with one hand. Shell flew crazily through the air until he crashed into the sand and rolled up next to Stinger's feet, where he lay with glasses askew and a dazed look on his face.

"Shell, are you okay, pal?" said Stinger, looking down at Shell in surprise. "Can you hear me?"

Shell blinked several times before sitting up and rubbing the back of his head. "Ugh. That guy is way stronger than he looks."

"Tell me something I don't know," said Stinger, glancing at his frozen wing. "He manhandled you and the others like nothing. And I'm not sure that Bolt and Black Blur will be able to stop him, either."

As if on cue, both Bolt and Black Blur rushed toward Rime, but Rime created a huge ice barrier with spikes sticking out of it around him, forcing Bolt and Black Blur to veer out of the way and retreat dozens of yards to avoid getting impaled by the ice. It was clear to Stinger that Rime was not going to go down easily, but he had no idea how to help until an idea suddenly came to mind.

"Bolt!" Stinger shouted, causing Bolt—who had paused to stare at Rime's ice barrier in disbelief—to look over at him. "Give me a lift over the barrier!"

"Why?" Bolt said. "Got a plan?"

"Yeah," said Stinger, nodding. "But I need your help to do it. And Black Blur, you'll need to distract Rime for it to work."

Black Blur looked a little annoyed at being ordered around by a kid half his age, but thankfully he nodded once and said, "All right. I'll follow your lead, but if anything goes wrong, I'm taking over immediately."

Stinger nodded in reply as Bolt flew over and grabbed Stinger under his armpits. Bolt raised Stinger into the air over the barrier, while at the same time Black Blur rushed around the partial barrier. Rime started shooting ice balls at Black Blur, who kept drawing in close but pulling away at the last minute in order to keep Rime sufficiently distracted. Meanwhile, Stinger and Bolt were nearly directly above him ... just a couple more feet and ...

All of a sudden, Rime jerked an arm upward and fired an ice dagger up at Stinger and Bolt. It came too fast to dodge, although Bolt did try to move. Unfortunately, the ice dagger struck Bolt in the shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain and lose his grip on Stinger, who fell like a rock toward Rime below. Stinger screamed, but he still crashed into Rime like a rock, knocking them both to the ground. Rime was stunned, but only temporarily, so Stinger pulled back one of his wrist stingers and jammed it into the side of Rime's neck. He felt the paralyzing venom leave his body and enter Rime's neck.

Nonetheless, Rime managed to throw Stinger off his body. Stinger hit the ground, but before he could get up, Rime was already on his feet and pointing one of his hands at Stinger. Stinger propped himself up on his hands and knees, but there was no way he would be able to move out of the way in time to avoid getting frozen to death by Rime.

"I d-don't know what that was a-all about, kid, but it won't help you beat me," said Rime. "A-As I said, anyone who gets in my way will die."

Stinger smirked. "You *really* don't know what my powers can do, do you?"

Rime looked confused for a moment, but then his face twisted with pain and his body became as rigid as a tree. He then fell over onto his side on the snow-covered sand; his eyes still moved, but the rest of his body was finally paralyzed by Stinger's venom. Even so, Stinger could clearly see the hatred in Rime's eyes, which made him thankful that Rime could not currently hurt him.

Suddenly, Black Blur appeared by Rime's side. He looked down at the paralyzed superhuman with clear disgust before glancing at Stinger and saying, in an offhand way, "Nice job, Stinger. You neutralized the threat."

"Uh—" said Stinger, but Black Blur continued to speak.

"I will call for some agents to be sent down here to transport Rime to the Hero Island Jail," Black Blur continued. "As for you and your teammates, you should go to the Hero Island Hospital to have your wounds inspected and healed."

Stinger nodded in agreement, but he was too tired to get up just yet. Besides, he was wondering why Rime had appeared out of nowhere and attacked them like that or what Rime meant when he said that he had 'no choice' in the matter.

*Something tells me there is more going on here than meets the eye, Stinger thought. As always, though I don't know how I'm going to explain to Talon what happened here. Maybe Valerie will fill her in on Rime's attack by the time she gets back.*