

# CHAPTER ONE

A DAY AT THE BEACH HAD seemed like a great idea to Switch when Arachnid, her homeroom teacher, had announced it to her class. True, it was meant more to be a training exercise by letting them test their powers near the ocean, but Switch had always loved going to the beach and intended to take advantage of the sun as much as she could. She had only ever been to the beach a handful of times in her life and that was because her mom had always been worried that Dad might rise out of the ocean and kidnap her and her twin brother, Bait, from under her nose.

But with Dad in prison, Switch had thought that the trip to the beach would be without much incident. She was now starting to realize just how wrong she was.

The class of twelve young Academy students—chaperoned by Arachnid—had arrived at a beach in New York near a small town called Mountain. Why it was called ‘Mountain’ when it was on the beach and there weren’t any mountains nearby for miles in every direction, she had no idea. She suspected that whoever had named the town didn’t know what a mountain was and named it thus because of the small hill near the town’s entrance, though it was equally possible that whoever had named the town was just drunk.

*I wonder if the guys who are attacking us know why it was called Mountain,* Switch thought as she dodged a spear that had been thrown at her face. *Probably not.*

Switch’s opponent was a large, powerfully built man in a wet suit, wielding the kind of spear fishermen sometimes used to spear fish in rivers, except this time, the man was trying to spear *her* on its very sharp and very pointy end and had been trying to do so for the last few minutes.

*Has it really only been a few minutes?* Switch thought, jumping backwards out of her attacker’s reach and landing on the soft, cold sand. *It feels more like a few hours, really. Maybe my sense of time is off.*

Switch carefully watched the spear-wielding man. He didn’t come after her right away. He just stood there, holding the spear in both hands, his face obscured by his diving helmet. She didn’t see how such a big diving helmet could possibly be practical on land, but so far the spear-wielding man had displayed an uncanny ability to fight on dry ground in his diving gear. Whoever he was and whoever he worked for, Switch didn’t know, but she did know that he wasn’t alone.

All around her, other similar men in diving gear were in combat with her fellow students. Some of the attackers had already been defeated. Out of the corner of her eye, Switch saw Tommy blast a man in diving gear in the chest and knock him back into the water, where he didn’t rise again. But most of the attackers were still on their feet and still fighting, swinging spears, swords, and other sharp weapons at the students. She knew that Arachnid and Bait were around here somewhere, but she was too busy keeping an eye on her enemy to know where they could possibly be.

*If there’s one thing I’ve learned from Combat class, it is that you should never take your eyes off your enemy,* Switch thought. *Not even for a moment and not especially if your enemy wields a very sharp spear.*

Her opponent stepped forward, but Switch fired five nail bullets at his feet, forcing him to jump back.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Switch, shaking her head. “You and that needlessly pointy spear of yours are going to keep a healthy distance away from me. It’s better for both of us.”

The man didn’t say anything. He just held his spear before him defensively, but he didn’t run at her. Maybe he was waiting for a moment to strike or he wanted to see what she was going to do next.

But that was fine by Switch. She remembered how relentless the divers had been when they emerged from the sea not more than five minutes ago now. They had appeared abruptly, emerging

from the ocean with surprising speed. And they probably would have succeeded in killing her and her fellow students if Tommy hadn't sounded the alarm and alerted the rest of the class to the divers.

*I don't know how much of a difference it is going to make, though,* Switch thought, glancing around the beach briefly. *These guys are tough. Just who do they work for, anyway?*

Switch's thoughts were interrupted when her diver suddenly charged toward her. Switch fired several handfuls of nail bullets, but the diver expertly knocked them out of the air with his spear and slammed the side of his spear into her side. Switch immediately fell onto the sand, gasping for air, but managed to roll out of the way just as the diver's spear plunged into the sand where her head had been mere moments before.

Rolling to her feet, Switch winced at the pain in her stomach where the spear had hit her. It had been like being hit with a baseball bat tipped with metal, but Switch would have to ignore it for now because the diver yanked his spear out of the sand and rushed toward her again.

Rather than shooting more nail bullets at him, Switch grabbed a handful of sand and threw it at his diving helmet. The sand burst uselessly against his helmet's visor, but the diver still stumbled slightly, perhaps surprised by the brief lack of vision. Switch lunged toward him, tackling him in the middle and sending them both falling onto the sand.

While on top of the diver, Switch straddled his waist and squeezed her thighs around his stomach as hard as she could. The diver grabbed at her neck, but Switch immediately fired a nail bullet at his shoulder and deeply embedded itself in there, causing his shoulder to bleed. The diver clutched his shoulder, but then Switch yanked his helmet off his head and threw it away.

Switch expected to find the face of a normal human being underneath the helmet, but when she pulled the helmet off, she was astonished by what she saw. The face was vaguely humanoid, but it was also covered in metal. It looked like some kind of robot, or maybe cyborg, with blinking red lights where the eyes should be and a strange radio-like mouth where the mouth should be.

"What the hell are you?" said Switch, staring at the strange creature in shock. "A Pokacu?"

The cyborg (which Switch decided it was) didn't answer. It just reached up and wrapped its fingers around her throat and squeezed, causing Switch to gasp for air. She tried to tear its hands off her neck, but the cyborg had a grip like iron and she didn't have Bait's super strength with her.

Desperate for relief, Switch fired three nail bullets into the cyborg's neck. The nail bullets tore through his neck like paste, causing some kind of strange green blood to splutter out all over her costume. That would have made Switch throw up in disgust, but she was too focused on surviving against this strange creature to care.

The cyborg's grip on her neck loosened enough that she was able to knock its hands off her. The cyborg grabbed at its neck and made odd sputtering sounds like it was trying to breathe, but then its red eyes went dark and its arms fell onto the beach like sticks. The cyborg went extremely still underneath her.

Gasping for air, Switch rolled off the cyborg and crawled away from him backwards as fast as she could. She winced at the sticky green blood that got on her costume and at the sand sticking to her underside, but at the moment, she was too busy staring at the cyborg to care.

But the cyborg really seemed to be dead. It didn't move even slightly, nor did it make any noises.

*Oh my god,* Switch thought. *I think I actually killed the damn thing.*

That should have put Switch at ease, but it instead had the opposite effect. She had taken the life of another creature, something she had never done before in her life. Well, she had killed a few bugs, of course, but this cyborg was closer to humanity than a bug. Mom had killed people before, that much she knew, but until today, Switch hadn't ever done it herself.

*Think about it later, Switch, Switch told herself. Focus on the battle. His friends are still alive and still trying to kill your friends, which they will if you don't do anything.*

Shaking her head, Switch slowly rose to her feet and took this brief pause to see how the rest of the battle was going.

All across the beach, Academy students were in combat with the cyborgs. She saw Bait throwing super strong punches at his cyborg, who dodged his attacks with surprising fluidity and grace, while Arachnid was fighting three cyborgs at once, using his agility to dodge their attacks and respond with web blasts that limited his enemies' movement. Though the cyborgs were fighting ferociously, it was pretty clear to Switch that they were on the losing end of the battle. None of her classmates had fallen yet, while more than a few cyborgs lay on the beach, either unconscious or, like Switch's cyborg, outright dead.

It hadn't looked like that even just a few minutes ago, though, when the cyborgs first emerged from the ocean. Not that Switch was complaining, however. The more cyborgs down, the better, in her opinion.

*But where did they even come from in the first place? Switch thought, glancing toward the sea. There isn't an underwater city of cyborgs on the bottom of the ocean, is there?*

Whatever the origin of the cyborgs, Switch knew that she needed to help her classmates. The quicker they defeated these cyborgs, the quicker they would be able to find out where they came from and why.

*Or just go back to the Academy, Switch thought. She looked out toward the shining blue ocean, her lips turning in a frown. A pity, that, given how beautiful the sea is today. I sure would have liked to at least go for a swim, but at the same time, I also don't want to get killed by cyborgs, either.*

That was when Switch noticed a disturbance in the water several miles from the shore. At first, she thought that it was just the wind blowing or perhaps a fish of some sort was swimming close to the surface of the ocean.

But the disturbance grew larger and larger; it looked to be at least five hundred feet long, maybe even longer. That made Switch think that it might instead be a whale, but then she realized that whales didn't get over five hundred feet long.

Soon, however, it became rapidly clear that the large object rising from the ocean wasn't a whale at all. In fact, it wasn't even a living creature. It looked like an over-sized submarine, its massive body shaped like a cylinder. It was absolutely gigantic, rising so high out of the water that it even towered over the trees along the shore of the beach. It was probably also bigger than the houses in Mountain itself, though Switch didn't know for sure.

What she did know, however, was that she recognized the giant submarine which rose from the depths of the ocean. It had been two months since she had last seen it—two months since she'd last stepped foot inside its massive interior—but Switch could never forget the gigantic submarine that rose out of the sea before her.

*Not a submarine, Switch thought, trembling despite herself. A palace. At least, that's what Dad called it, and I honestly can't disagree with that description of it.*

Two words could be seen written along the side of the submarine. They read:

*The Atlantis.*

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