

## CHAPTER ONE

HAVING NEVER BEEN ON A field trip before, Switch—real name Grace Gregg, daughter of two of the world’s most infamous supervillains, and a student at the Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans—didn’t know much about them. She was aware, via pop culture, that they usually involved a class of students going to some place for ‘educational’ purposes, such as a museum or historical site, with a teacher or two to chaperon. Students usually looked forward to them, because they were a good excuse to get out of class and see more of the world. Sometimes they could even be genuinely interesting and educational, but having little firsthand experience herself, Switch couldn’t really say for sure.

But one thing Switch was sure about: Most field trips didn’t involve the students getting ambushed by a group of mysterious supervillains who called themselves the Neo-Visionists.

Crouching low behind the Museum’s gift shop counter with her fellow students, Switch peeked over the top. She saw a flash of flame cross the atrium, followed by a *thwip* of web, and then someone screaming in pain. She even thought she caught a glimpse of their chaperon, Arachnid, swinging across the atrium and kicking one of the Neo-Visionists in the face, but then someone grabbed her arm and yanked her down to the floor harshly. She looked in annoyance at the person who had grabbed and saw that it was her twin brother and fellow Academy student, Bait.

“What was that for?” said Switch, rubbing her arm. “I was just looking.”

“You heard Arachnid,” Bait said without even sounding apologetic. “He said we need to keep our heads *down*. He doesn’t want us to get hurt.”

“Oh, come on,” said Switch. “We’re perfectly safe in this gift shop. Besides, what’s the problem with looking? I want to see Arachnid kick those idiots’ asses.”

“Stray blasts have been known to kill people in these kinds of superhuman fights,” Bait said, shaking his head. “Including other superhumans. Lots of superheroes have died because they thought it was safe to just ‘look.’”

Switch folded her arms across her chest. “How do you know that? You don’t have much more experience fighting supervillains than I do.”

“Because, unlike you, I actually pay attention in our History and Combat classes,” Bait said. “You know, the classes we need to take in order to become actual superheroes? The ones you keep complaining about?”

Switch opened her mouth to argue, but then Tommy—another one of their classmates, who didn’t yet have a code name like them—leaned forward and whispered, in a harsh hiss of a voice, “Can you two keep it down? I don’t want those Neo-Visionists to overhear us and find us while Arachnid is distracted.”

Tommy’s eyes were wide and round with fear behind his glasses. Behind him, the other students who had come along on the field trip were huddled together near the shelves full of coffee mugs, postcards, and other things you usually found in a gift shop. There were about a dozen in all, each one with a superpower of their own that they were learning to use, though you wouldn’t have guessed it by the way they all acted like scared little kittens.

“So what if they hear us?” said Switch. She punched her fist into her other hand. “We can take these losers. If Bait and I can beat Tsunami, then we can beat these guys easy.”

The sound of cracking marble made the students jump, but when it became clear that the floor outside of the gift shop had cracked and that they were safe, Bait leaned toward her and said, in a

harsh whisper, “You know that we got lucky that time. If we try to ‘help’ Arachnid this time, we’d just get in the way because he’d get distracted trying to protect us.”

“We’re perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves,” Switch said. She tapped the glowing orange stone on her chest. “And with our Blood Gems, those Neo-Visionists idiots won’t see our unorthodox fighting style coming.”

“It doesn’t matter if we can take care of ourselves or not,” said Bait in annoyance. “Arachnid says we need to sit back and let him deal with it. I promised him we’d keep the other students safe.”

Switch glanced at the other students—who were all watching her and Bait with fear in their eyes—and then at Bait again. “So what? They’ll be safe here even if we leave. And besides, I thought *you* were the one who wanted to fight bad guys and be the hero, yet you’re the one saying we should stay in here and hide like cowards.”

Bait sighed. “There’s more to being a hero than running around beating up bad guys, you know. Sometimes, the most heroic thing you can do is stand back and protect those who can’t protect themselves. It’s not cowardly.”

Switch opened her mouth to argue the point, but then thought better of it. Bait could be very stubborn whenever he wanted to be. Trying to convince him that they should go out and help Arachnid defeat the supervillains who had ambushed them was tantamount to trying to convince the tide to stop coming in. Once Bait set his mind on something—especially if you could convince him that it was what a ‘real’ superhero would do—he didn’t budge, no matter what.

But Switch was going to figure out a way to fight the Neo-Visionists one way or another. When she first started attending the Academy, Switch had had no interest in becoming a superhero, but ever since defeating Tsunami a month ago, Switch now wanted to become a superhero just as much as Bait, if not more so. She loved the praise and admiration that superheroes got every time they saved the day and she wanted some of that for herself.

*I bet that’s why Arachnid told us to hide in here,* Switch thought, listening to the sounds of battle raging just outside the gift shop. *He wants all the glory for himself. Well, I’m sure he cares about us, too, but he probably still wants the glory for himself and not for a bunch of kids.*

Earlier today, Switch, Bait, and ten of their fellow Academy students, along with their chaperon Arachnid, had come to the Museum of Superhuman History in Washington, D.C. The Museum had opened in 2010 and chronicled the history of superhumans in America, starting with the first appearances of confirmed superhumans in 1986 and going on to present day. The field trip was chaperoned by Arachnid, who was currently fighting the Neo-Visionists by himself. The field trip was supposed to be part of their History class, helping them to better learn and understand more about the history of superhumans and how they lived in America. The reason their History teacher didn’t come was because she got sick and couldn’t come with them, though Switch wished she had, because Arachnid needed all the help he could get to fight the Neo-Visionists.

The field trip had been pretty boring at first, mostly because Switch found history of any sort boring, but when they reached the gift shop, their class was suddenly attacked by a group of supervillains calling themselves Neo-Visionists. They had come seemingly out of nowhere, locking down the Museum and threatening to kill any Museum visitors or employees who tried to fight them.

But these Neo-Visionists hadn’t realized they were up against Arachnid, one of the strongest and most vicious teachers in the Academy. As a result, Arachnid had challenged them to a fight while ordering the students to hide in the gift shop. This also gave a chance for the other Museum visitors and workers to run and hide or call the police, though Switch didn’t expect the police to show up anytime soon due to how slow they were.

Switch didn't know very much about these 'Neo-Visionists,' as they called themselves. She seemed to recall a History lesson about a superhuman cult called 'Vision' that had infiltrated the NHA once before it was rooted out by a superhero named Bolt, though she didn't know if these Neo-Visionists were related to the old Visionists or not. Nor did she care. Regardless of their origin or their ideology, these Neo-Visionists had threatened her life and needed to be stopped before they harmed or killed innocent people.

*And we could help Arachnid beat them, if only Bait wasn't such a coward,* Switch thought, glancing at Bait with a scowl. *Honestly, even if it was just the two of us working together, we could beat those Neo-Visionists with no problem. Maybe the other students can't help, because they've never fought a supervillain before, but we can. After all, I seriously doubt that these Neo-Visionists are anywhere near as strong as Tsunami was.*

But Switch knew that if she tried to leave, Bait would use force to make sure she couldn't. And not just ordinary force, either. Bait had super strength, super strength he was more than willing to use to hold her down if necessary. He would claim it was for her 'protection,' but Switch knew that Bait was just too afraid to actually go out and fight.

*I need a way to distract him,* Switch thought. *Some opportunity to—*

A loud scream from outside the gift shop made all of the students jump, except for Switch, who quickly peered over the top of the counter to see where the scream had come from.

Through the gift shop's front windows, she could see a girl—probably about her age, based on her appearance—lying on the floor as if she had tripped over something. The girl was curled into a ball, as if trying to avoid the webbing and fire blasts which flashed across the hallway outside. Then a man in a dark robe appeared over her, walking toward her with his hands held high, glowing with some kind of purple energy, as if he was about to blast the girl into pieces.

"Hey, that girl is about to get hurt!" Switch said, looking down at Bait. "We've got to help her!"

But Bait shook his head and said, "Switch, we don't know who that girl is and—"

"I don't care," Switch snapped. "Unlike you, I'm going to be a *real* hero and save her, no matter who she is."

With that, Switch launched herself over the top of the counter, just barely avoiding Bait's outstretched hands, landed on the other side, and sprinted out the gift shop door toward the girl and the Neo-Visionist. The Neo-Visionist stood over the girl, chuckling darkly as the purple energy around his hands grew darker and darker, while the girl sobbed in fear, though for some reason she didn't look up at the Neo-Visionist at all. Maybe she thought she was going to die and didn't want to see her own death coming toward her.

With a yell, Switch jumped into the air and kicked the Neo-Visionist in the chest. The Neo-Visionist staggered backwards, but before he could respond, Switch swept his legs out from underneath him, causing him to fall head first onto the floor, smacking his head against the marble floor and falling unconscious instantly.

Panting, Switch looked down at the girl and said, "Are you okay?"

The girl—who had been sobbing uncontrollably—suddenly stopped, though she did sniffle every now and then. "Y-Yes. Who are you? Are you one of those Neo-Visionists?"

Switch shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'm a student from the Theodore Jason Academy for Young Superhumans and I just saved your life."

"Oh, th-thank you," said the girl between sniffles, who for some reason still wasn't looking at Switch. "I th-thought I was a goner."

"No problem," said Switch, flashing her a smile. "But you really should look where you're going, especially in these situations. And why aren't you looking me in the face, anyway? That's what people usually do when they talk to other people."

The girl looked up at Switch, which was when Switch noticed her dull, unseeing gray eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm blind. I should have mentioned that."

"Oh," said Switch. "Blind, huh? Well, what were you doing—"

Switch was interrupted by a roar of flame and looked up to see where that sound had come from.

Arachnid was doing battle with the Neo-Visionists. He was clinging to the ceiling, having just barely avoided being burned to death by one of the three Neo-Visionists standing below, a portion of the ceiling smoking from where a fireball had crashed into it. The Neo-Visionist in question was literally on fire. In fact, he looked to be made of fire and was glaring up at Arachnid with sheer hatred. The other two Neo-Visionists wore those same dark cloaks that all Neo-Visionists seemed to wear, so Switch didn't know what they looked like, nor was she interested in finding out.

"What was that?" said the girl, clinging to Switch's leg in panic. "I heard fire. Is the Museum on fire?"

"No, you silly girl, it's not," said Switch, trying to pry the girl off her leg. "It's just another one of those Neo-Visionist freaks. One of them is on fire."

"On fire?" said the girl in a high voice. She sounded like she was close to fainting. "That explains the smoke and heat, then."

"Don't worry," said Switch. "I'll get you into the gift shop where you'll be safe. Just come with me and—"

Switch was once again interrupted, this time by the Neo-Visionist she thought she had knocked out coming out of nowhere and punching her in the gut. Switch gasped and fell, but then was caught by the neck and slammed to the ground by the Neo-Visionist. She gasped for air, but couldn't get any into her lungs because the Neo-Visionist was squeezing the air out of her.

"Stupid girl," said the Neo-Visionist in a deep voice. "Don't you realize that you stand against equality and justice? That is why you will die today."

The Neo-Visionist's other hand exploded with burning purple energy. He brought his glowing fist above his head, but before he could bring it down on her, Bait appeared out of nowhere and punched the Neo-Visionist in the face.

Bait's punch must have been powered by his super strength, because the Neo-Visionist flew off Switch. He crashed into a display case featuring a picture of Omega Man shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, hitting the wall so hard that the huge picture crashed down on top of him. Once again, he didn't get up, but this time, Switch was certain that the Neo-Visionist was down for the count.

Gasping for air, Switch sat up and rubbed her neck. She looked up at Bait and said, "Thanks, bro! I think you might have actually killed him that time. Probably the only way to keep him down."

Oddly enough, Bait was not smiling. He just grabbed her by the collar of her uniform and yanked her up to her feet. "What were you *thinking*? I *told* you to stay in the gift shop, not run out into the atrium and nearly get yourself killed."

"But I saved that girl's life," Switch argued, gesturing at the blind girl lying on the floor, now curled into a fetal position and sobbing again. "Isn't that what heroes do?"

"Yeah, but you also almost got yourself killed," Bait said, still not letting go of her collar. "And if you'd done that, I would have taken the blame for *your* mistakes. As usual, I might add."

“Whatever,” said Switch, rolling her eyes. She yanked her collar out of Bait’s hands and glared at him. “Because we’re both out here, you can take the girl into the gift shop with everyone else, while I’ll go help Arachnid.”

Switch tried to walk past him, but Bait grabbed her elbow and forced her back, nearly causing her to fall on to her behind. She caught herself before she fell, however, and glared at Bait, who folded his arms across his chest and looked at her with disgust.

“No,” said Bait firmly. “All three of us are going into the gift shop, where we’ll stay until backup arrives to help Arachnid or until Arachnid beats these guys himself. And that’s final.”

Switch sneered. “You’re not the boss of me. We’re the exact same age, so stop acting like you’re the responsible older sibling.”

“Then stop acting like a spoiled brat,” Bait said. “Maybe if you acted your age for once in your life, you’d—”

But Switch never did get to figure out what would happen to her, because at that moment, a ring of fire appeared around her, Bait, and the girl. The sudden appearance of the flames caused the girl to yelp and jump to her feet, though she was far enough away from the flames to avoid getting burnt.

“Fire?” said Bait, looking around in alarm. “Where did this come from?”

“From me,” came a harsh voice on the other side of the flames.

Switch looked through the flickering flames and saw the fiery Neo-Visionist from before standing outside the ring, one hand out. He was grinning widely, his head resembling a burning skull, while the other two Neo-Visionists stood on either side of him.

“Hey!” Arachnid suddenly dropped down from the ceiling behind the three Neo-Visionists and stood up, taking a fighting position as he did so. “Let my students go now, fire-face, or else.”

The fiery Neo-Visionist turned around to face Arachnid, though he never pulled his hand away from the ring of fire. “Certainly, Arachnid, but on one condition: You stand back and let us destroy the Museum of Superhuman History for good. If you don’t, then you can say goodbye to all three of these brats. Trust me, human flesh doesn’t smell great when cooked.”

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