

CHAPTER ONE

I STOOD WITH MY HANDS on the clear glass wall, staring at Blizzard—my girlfriend—sleeping on the other side. With her eyes closed and her hands folded on her stomach, she looked like she was just taking a nap ... or would have, anyway, if it wasn't for the IV drip attached to her hand. Or her skin, which was normally a dark brown, but was now a sickening gray. Even her snow white hair looked thinner and grayer than usual, especially at the tips. Her chest rose and fell in an irregular rhythm and my blood pressure would spike every time there was a gap for longer than a few seconds, but then I would calm down again when she resumed breathing. Her heart monitor showed steady, regular spikes, but it barely reassured me that she was going to be okay.

"Bolt," said a man in a kind voice behind me. "I understand how much Blizzard means to you, but we need to talk. Staring at her won't cure her."

Reluctantly, I tore my gaze away from Blizzard and turned to face the man who had spoken. He was a rail thin middle-aged man in a white costume, similar to mine in material and design, except his had a blue hand on the chest. He was sitting at a small table with a clipboard and a pen before him, which had notes written on it in a barely legible scrawl. "Are you sure there's nothing that you can do for her, Touch?"

The man—real name Orson Karl, but better known as Healing Touch, the local healer and head doctor for the Neohero Alliance—nodded grimly. "I am sorry, but it's true. I've been working hard to heal her, but she hasn't gotten any better. In fact, I would say she's only gotten worse under our care, despite giving her the best medical care available."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're Healing Touch. You can heal any disease with, well, a touch, can't you? How can you not just touch her and will her sickness away?"

Healing Touch sighed and rubbed his forehead. "My powers are not magic, Bolt. In order to heal a disease, I first need to understand it. And I don't understand this disease afflicting Blizzard at all. I have checked all of my medical books and even consulted with some of my doctor friends outside the NHA, but no one knows what it is or how to heal or even treat it."

I bit my lower lip. "But you're the greatest superhuman doctor in the world. If you can't heal her ..."

"Neomedicine is still a very new area of medicine," said Healing Touch. He picked up the clipboard and scanned it, though I wasn't sure what he was looking for. "Doctors and physicians are still struggling to understand how disease affects superhumans differently from normal humans. Some doctors have even predicted that, with the rise of superhumans, would also be the rise of superhuman diseases, though for a while there I wasn't sure that would happen."

I glanced over my shoulder at Blizzard's prone form again. "Are you telling me that Blizzard has been infected with a disease only superhumans can get?"

"That's my current theory," said Healing Touch as he put the clipboard down again and folded his arms in front of his chest. "It explains why all of the usual methods have failed to cure her. I believe this same sickness has affected Vanish as well, although she seems to be taking it better than Blizzard, perhaps because she is older and has a more developed immune system."

My hands balled into fists at my sides. "Is this why you called me out all the way back here to Hero Island? Just to tell me that Blizzard has come down with a disease exclusive to superhumans that has no cure?"

"I didn't say it had *no* cure," Healing Touch added hastily, "I just meant that it may be a while before we find a cure and—"

"Then why did you call me out here in the first place?" I said, throwing my hands into the air. "Just to tell me that my girlfriend is going to *die*?"

"I didn't call you out here to tell you that," said Healing Touch, holding up his hands as if to pacify me. "I just wanted to give you an update on her situation. I just thought it would be easier for you to understand the situation if you saw it for yourself in person, rather than hear it over the phone or via text or something like that."

My hands shook, but I said, in a calm voice, "What about her parents and her sister?"

"They were here yesterday," said Healing Touch, lowering his own hands onto his lap. "They've been calling me every day to find out how she is progressing. They are very concerned about her, which is only natural, although it is a little annoying sometimes because I don't always have something new to tell them."

"Did you tell them what you just told me?" I said. "That Blizzard's illness is new and there might not be a cure for it?"

"I did," said Healing Touch, nodding. "They were not happy to hear that, and it took me hours to convince them that the safest place for Blizzard right now was here. Her father seemed to think that they just needed to find another doctor to tell them something different, even though I told them that nearly every reputable doctor in the country would tell them exactly the same thing."

I nodded. I wasn't surprised. Blizzard's parents were hugely supportive and protective of her, especially her dad. I wished I could have seen them before I got here, but I suppose it was for the best. I didn't want them to blame me for Blizzard's condition, not when I wasn't responsible for it. "I see."

"But I just don't understand how she got sick," said Healing Touch, glancing at the clipboard again. "You told me she inhaled a huge amount of powerless gas in an enclosed environment over a long period of time, yes?"

I nodded again. "Yeah. And the gas was mixed with poison, too, to make it even deadlier. I guess it must have somehow created a disease with no cure or something."

Healing Touch shook his head. "What kind of madman would do such a thing? I cannot imagine why someone with enough chemical knowhow to combine powerless gas with poison and unleash that on someone. Why not put that knowledge to more constructive use?"

I looked at Blizzard again, thinking about how she looked when the EMS people pulled her out of that office in Showdown full of powerless gas. "Some people just like to kill, Touch. They want people to suffer, even if those people did nothing wrong."

I was thinking about the Neo-Killer. He had been a serial killer who targeted superhumans, though he had a special hatred for me due to his belief that I was responsible for the destruction of San Francisco. He had gone out of his way to make my life a living hell, up to and including poisoning Blizzard. The last I saw, the Neo-Killer had been caught in an explosion of one of Dad's underground Vaults, but when I went to look for it later, his body was missing, so I wasn't sure where he was or if he was even still alive.

All I knew was the mere thought of the Neo-Killer was enough to make my blood boil. Wherever he was and whatever he was doing now, I just hoped he was suffering even worse than me. He deserved it.

"Very true," said Healing Touch. "I should know that, given how much experience I've had as a superhero. Still, I guess I've always been someone who believed in helping people, rather than hurting, so I have a hard time imagining why someone would want to do the opposite."

"Same here," I said. I ran a hand through my hair. "How much longer do you think Blizzard has before ... well ..."

Healing Touch hesitated. That wasn't a good sign.

"Touch?" I said. "Did you hear my question? How much longer does Blizzard have before she dies?"

Healing Touch gulped. "Well, it's hard to say, given the unknown nature of this disease, and it's possible she might survive because even a doctor like me could be wrong, but—"

"Touch," I said flatly. "Get to the point."

Healing Touch took a deep breath. "In my professional opinion, if Blizzard does not recover soon, she will be dead in a week."

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