

CHAPTER ONE

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD KEVIN JASON—also known as the superhero Bolt, one of the youngest members of the Neohero Alliance, and probably the most famous young superhero in the world—found himself facing his hardest challenge yet.

Standing outside of his girlfriend's room in the House, Bolt didn't understand why he was so anxious. He rarely worried about anything. That's what his girlfriend, Blizzard, did. Perhaps his lack of worry came from the fact that he was stronger than even most other superhumans. But even before Bolt discovered his superpowers what seemed like a lifetime ago now, he'd always been carefree and free of worry. Some might have accused him of not taking life seriously, but that was far from true.

The way Bolt saw it, being a superhero was all about danger and putting your own life at risk. Whether that was as simple as stopping a thug from stealing an elderly lady's purse on the street or killing an interdimensional alien god with plans to conquer the multiverse, the life of a superhero was never a boring one and definitely never a *safe* one. In Bolt's short life as a superhero alone, he'd faced near-death more times than he could count, and had seen death itself even more often.

Which brought Bolt back to his original question: What was he so worried about now?

He was on Hero Island, the headquarters and base of the Neohero Alliance, the largest and most well-known superhero organization in the world. More specifically, he was in the House, the base of the Young Neos, the NHA's resident young superhero team. It was a building he was familiar with, having been the leader of the Young Neos before graduating to full-time NHA membership. He was even more familiar with it because Blizzard, his girlfriend, was still on the team.

Not for much longer, Bolt reminded himself. *Just a couple more hours, that's all.*

That was true. Blizzard was now eighteen, which meant she was eligible to graduate from the Young Neos to full-time membership in the NHA. Her graduation ceremony, in fact, was supposed to be today in exactly two hours from now. Bolt had been granted time off by Brains, the superhero who he worked with in Showdown, Virginia, to attend the ceremony, and he was currently waiting for Blizzard to finish preparing for the ceremony so he could escort her to it. He would sit on stage beside her and watch as Blizzard went through the exact same ceremony he had gone through nearly a year ago now.

Once Blizzard completed the ceremony, she would be considered an official, full-time member of the NHA. Bolt hoped that meant she would get to work with him in Showdown, but even if she didn't, he thought he would still see her more often than he did now.

Because Bolt was not anxious about the ceremony. No, he was anxious about what he was going to do *after* the ceremony. And all of his anxiety was currently trapped inside a small, soft little cloth box in his right pocket.

Bolt had played out the scenario in his head multiple times over the last month or so. After Blizzard went through the ceremony and was officially declared a member of the NHA by Omega Man, a member of the NHA Leadership Council, Bolt would get down on his knee, whip out his engagement ring, and ask her to marry him, there and then, in front of the Leadership Council, the Young Neos, and a good portion of the NHA general membership.

Just thinking about it made the hairs on the back of Bolt's neck stand on end. And he still wasn't sure why. He wasn't putting his life in danger. The fate of the world didn't depend on whether Blizzard married him or not. It was just his own happiness and his own future at stake.

Although when you put it THAT way, maybe it is important, Bolt thought with a slight chuckle.

This was not a spur of the moment thing, either, which Bolt's late dad, the superhero legend known as Genius, would have appreciated. Bolt and Blizzard had been dating for nearly two years now. Although they were both still very young, Bolt honestly could not imagine himself with any other woman. Nor could Blizzard imagine herself being with any other man, as far as he knew. Bolt wasn't the kind of guy to rush these sorts of things, but at the same time, he didn't see any point in delaying the inevitable.

But it *wasn't* inevitable. And that was where Bolt's anxiety started. Blizzard might very well say *no*. She might say she wasn't ready. She might—

Snap out of it, Bolt, Bolt told himself harshly. *You've never doubted yourself before now. Imagine thinking this crap when you fought Master Chaos or the Dread God. Where would you be then?*

Again, it was silly to feel so fearful when Bolt was as physically safe as he was ever going to be, but that did nothing to make his feelings go away. If anything, his anxiety became even worse the more he dwelt on it. Which was the main reason why Bolt didn't consider himself much of an intellectual or thinker. It wasn't that he was dumb. It was that he liked to keep moving, spend less time thinking and more time doing. Doers saved lives. Not thinkers.

It was times like these that Bolt wished Genius was still alive. Bolt had already talked about this to his mom, but it wasn't the same and both he and his mom knew it. The closest thing to a father figure Bolt had nowadays was Mecha Knight, his mentor, and Mecha Knight had never been married as far as he knew.

Gotta figure this crap out all on my own, it seems, Bolt thought with a sigh.

His thoughts were interrupted when the door to Blizzard's room opened and Blizzard herself stepped out and smiled at Bolt. "Well? What do you think?"

Bolt's jaw dropped. Blizzard always looked drop-dead gorgeous, but—whether it was because she was wearing a new costume or because he was still thinking about proposing to her—she looked positively stunning now. Her snow-white hair flowed across her shoulders like snow on a mountain top, her icy blue eyes shone out like stars against her tanned skin, and her lips were a bright, tasty red. A white hood and cape flowed down her shoulders, while an ice-blue bodysuit clung to her shapely body. She somehow looked both ready to fight and ready to dance at the same time.

Bolt loved it. And he loved her.

Blizzard tilted her head to the side in confusion. "Um, Bolt? Is something wrong?"

Bolt shook his head and stuttered, "Uh, no. You look beautiful. Really beautiful."

Bolt cursed himself. He didn't mean to say that. He had meant to be a lot more eloquent, but unfortunately, words were never his strong suit.

Fortunately, Blizzard just chuckled and said, "You *always* say I'm beautiful, but that's okay. Makes me a little less nervous about the ceremony."

Snapped out of his own thoughts, Bolt said, "You're nervous about the ceremony?"

Blizzard nodded. She adjusted the collar of her hood. "Yes. The Leadership Council is going to be there and even my parents and sister have come to see me. Can't forget you and the other Young Neos, too. It's really important and I don't want to mess—"

Bolt stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Blizzard in a tight but comforting hug. "Relax. It's going to be fine. You saw my ceremony. Just give a short speech, answer Omega Man's questions, and everything will go fine. Easy peasy."

Blizzard smiled at Bolt. "Yeah, you're right. I just overthink things too much sometimes."

Bolt gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "Which is one of the things I love about you. You think. I don't."

"Don't say that," said Blizzard, playfully smacking his arm. "I worry. You don't. That's why *I* love you."

Bolt smiled back. *If only she knew*, he thought, a thought that certainly didn't reach his lips.

But now that Bolt was actually holding Blizzard, he found it impossible to let her go. He didn't care that the ceremony was going to start soon. He wanted to hold her, hold her forever, and he could feel the engagement ring burning a hole in his pocket.

Perhaps Blizzard could sense what was going through his head because she said, "Bolt, are you all right? You look distracted."

Bolt took a deep breath. *Okay, time to wing it, like I usually do.*

“Blizzard,” said Bolt, locking her gaze with his own. “There’s something I want to ask you, something ... important.”

Blizzard paused in his arms, never breaking her gaze. “Yes? What is it?”

Bolt took another deep breath to steady himself, although Blizzard’s expectant—even anticipatory—gaze made that nearly impossible. “Will you ... will you ...”

“Come to the Tournament of Heroes?” said a British-accented voice out of nowhere.

Startled, Bolt let go of Blizzard and immediately looked around for the source of the voice. That was when he spotted it.

Standing just a few feet away from them was a creature that resembled a generic Grey alien ... in a tuxedo that looked more expensive than the House. The alien stood with his arms folded behind his back, his large, black eyes staring unblinkingly at Bolt and Blizzard. He was obviously not an NHA or Young Neos member, but Bolt wasn’t sure where he had come from.

“What the—?” said Bolt. “Who are you? Val, can you scan this guy and tell me who he is?”

“Negative,” came the voice of Valerie, Bolt’s personal AI assistant, in his ear. “Sensors indicate that he does not exist.”

The alien snort. “Artificial intelligence scanning systems? Why, you humans really *are* primitive. Once again, I find myself questioning why His Majesty is so fascinated by your kind.”

“As if you were invited to enter the House,” said Bolt, his hands balling into fists. “So who are you and how did you get in here? Are you a friend of Nicknacks or something?”

The alien’s ‘lips,’ if you could call them that, curled into a disapproving scowl. “Oh, I am not related to the Pokacu. Such a barbaric race, even more so than humans. No, I’m not even from this universe. This is my first time here, but if your behavior is indicative of how your people treat visitors, then I am even more skeptical about His Majesty’s decision to invite you to the Tournament.”

“I’m not sure what universe *you’re* from, but in *my* universe, trespassing is illegal in most places,” said Bolt. “And where I’m from—Texas—trespassers get shot.”

Bolt’s hands sparked with red electricity when he said that. He didn’t want to have to use force against this guy, whoever he was, but the last time a bunch of aliens from other dimension invaded Bolt’s universe, it hadn’t ended well. The alien guy didn’t look anything like the Darzens, but he could have been just as bad. At the very least, Bolt didn’t appreciate his uptight and elitist attitude.

The alien looked unfazed by Bolt’s threat. “Hmm, yes. I am aware that humans have a tendency to resort to violence to deal with intruders and outsiders. It’s the story of your people.”

“Violence isn’t necessarily always bad,” said Bolt. He stepped in front of Blizzard. “Sometimes, it’s necessary to protect the ones you love.”

As Bolt said that he glanced at Blizzard. He knew Blizzard could protect herself, but he still wanted to protect her anyway. He didn’t trust this alien one bit and didn’t want him to harm Blizzard.

The alien shrugged. “Let’s agree to disagree. Anyway, we are wasting time. The Tournament is starting soon and I still need to gather the rest of the competitors.”

“Tournament ...” Bolt repeated. “That Tournament of Heroes you mentioned earlier?”

The alien nodded with a smirk. “I am glad you remembered. Considering your propensity toward violence, I feared for your short-term memory.”

“My short-term memory is just fine,” said Bolt. His fingers sparked again, despite his best efforts to keep his powers under control.

“I’ll take your word for it,” said the alien. “Anyway, allow me to introduce myself properly, like a civilized being. My name is Sigil and I am the servant of King Aeno, the King of the Multiverse.”

“Aeno?” Blizzard repeated. “I’ve never heard of him. Bolt, have you?”

Bolt shook his head. “Can’t say I have, no.”

“King Aeno usually keeps to himself,” said Sigil, “but recent events in the multiverse have caught his attention. Therefore, you, along with three other superheroes, have been personally invited to participate in the Tournament of Heroes.”

“The Tournament of Heroes,” Bolt repeated again. “And what will happen if I *win* said Tournament?”

“You will be declared the Greatest Hero in the Multiverse, naturally,” said Sigil. “His Majesty is interested in determining who the greatest hero in the multiverse is, so he is hosting a tournament consisting of the multiverse’s greatest heroes and villains to decide who is the greatest of them all.”

Bolt looked at Blizzard again in confusion before returning his attention to Sigil. “That does sound fun, but I am afraid I am going to have to pass. My girlfriend and I have an important ceremony to attend and—”

“The Tournament won’t take long,” Sigil promised. “You will be back in time for whatever appointments you have scheduled. You have King Aeno’s guarantee.”

Bolt blinked. “A two-hour Tournament doesn’t sound very exciting to me.”

“It will last much longer than that,” Sigil said, “but I’m sure you are familiar with how time works differently in different universes. Trust me, you can come with me and not miss a thing back here.”

Bolt frowned. Sigil was right about time and other universes. Time went faster in some universes than it did in others, that was true, but Bolt still didn’t want to go. “Even if you’re right, I’m still going to have to decline. But if this is going to be some sort of annual tourney, maybe I can go next year.”

Sigil’s cold eyes locked on Bolt. “I forgot one thing: ‘Invitation’ is something of a misnomer. It is an order, straight from the lips of King Aeno himself. Which means you must come, regardless of whether you want to or not.”

Sigil thrust his hand forward. A band of green energy shot out from his hand and wrapped around Bolt. Shocked, Bolt’s super strength kicked in and he tried to break it, but the energy band didn’t even budge under his strength.

“Bolt!” said Blizzard in alarm. She grabbed the band only to pull her now-smoking hands away. “Ouch!”

“Now that I have you where I want you, I think it is time for us to go,” said Sigil to Bolt coolly. “King Aeno is not known for his patience and he rarely shows mercy to those who test his patience.”

Before Bolt could say anything, Sigil snapped his fingers.

In the next instant, Bolt’s surroundings changed from the main hallway of the House to a courtyard of a castle he didn’t recognize.

Where a fight between a couple of superheroes had already broken out.

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