



Antigravity Heroes

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CHAPTER I

When Villains Hide. They're Not Scared.
They're Scheming.

I stood at the center of the hospital's physical therapy room. Mobile beds lined the walls, all turned so the young occupants could see me.

"Then when the octopus grabbed Sam," I said as I acted out the scene, "it tried to drag her into the moat while she hung on to a tree root with both hands."

The children gasped. Sam, standing next to me and wearing her usual purple shirt and cape, black skirt and leggings, and silver gadgets belt, used sign language to translate for Maddie, a deaf girl who sat propped up in a bed directly in front of us. Maddie gasped as well.

"That's when I dove into the moat and swam across it as fast as I could." I made swimming motions with my arms while Sam continued translating. As she did, I wondered how much she was adding. It seemed like she always spiced up my stories with her own comments.

After several minutes of storytelling, I finished with me electrocuting the panther using Mastix, then falling to the ground unconscious. When I added that I awoke in a hospital much like this one and I obviously

recovered fully, the children applauded, and Sam and I bowed.

When the clapping stopped, I looked at Sam. "You're next."

"Coolio." She opened a children's picture book. "Can you do the sign language while I read this and turn the pages?"

I looked at the drawing on the first page, a pink flamingo standing on one leg. "Good choice."

"Yep. Flamingos are Maddie's favorite."

"Glad to do the signing. Your artwork is amazing."

She smiled from ear to ear. "Thanks."

Sam read the book with dramatic flair, forcing me to add similar flair to my hand signing, which, at times, almost made me break out in a sweat. But the kids loved it, and that made the effort worth the trouble.

When she finished to another round of applause, a video cameraman standing near the door turned his camera off and gave us a nod, his bald head shining under the ceiling's fluorescent lights. "Perfect. It'll play on the stadium's new Jumbotron monitor at the festival. We've already sold a couple of thousand tickets. That'll put the fundraiser over the top."

I smiled. The new children's ward would soon be constructed. "Thanks, Drew."

"No problem." He handed me my phone. "Your transmission app worked perfectly. It sent the video to TVs in the other kids' rooms without a glitch."

"Great." I slid the phone into a pouch on my gadgets belt. "I'm just glad the TVs had a wireless input option. It wouldn't've worked otherwise."

“Well, it’s a great device for the kids who were too sick to join us. You and Samantha are heroes to them in so many ways.”

“Thanks again.” My chest swelled. Maybe the feeling was too prideful, but I couldn’t help it. Getting a pat on the back after all we had been through really felt good. Yet, every time I experienced that emotional lift, another thought always brought me down. Dad wasn’t here to see us ... to give us a hug ... to say how proud he was of us. That would be super amazing.

When Drew exited the room, Mom walked in. She greeted Maddie in sign language, then spoke out loud. “I’m sorry to interrupt the good time you’re having with my kids, but it’s been two hours, and it’s time for their lessons.”

The children let out a chorus of “Awww!” Yet, they knew it was time for us to go.

From her bed, Maddie signed, “Autograph” with a questioning expression.

“Sure.” I withdrew a pen from its pouch between my pocketknife and organic-material-detecting spectacles. Although it looked and wrote like a normal pen, it also held one of my newest inventions, a super tiny camera that could transmit video to my phone. I formed my words carefully so she could read my lips. “What do you want me to sign?”

She pulled her bedsheet, exposing a casted leg. A nurse had told us earlier that she was in a car accident two days ago and suffered a broken tibia and some internal injuries, and her mother was recovering from a concussion in another wing. The rescue worker told the nurse that Maddie, ignoring her broken leg,

dragged her mother out of the burning car, saving her life. She was a real hero.

Smiling, I signed her cast, then Sam signed her name under mine. She added, "When life hurts, remember that the Hertz kids love you."

After saying our good-byes, we rode home with Mom. While there, we changed to gym clothes, grabbed motorcycle helmets, leather jackets, and, hearing that it might turn cold, other fall-weather gear. Since we hadn't charged our powers with the superhero invention lately, I added the device to my gym bag. The new version, built by Gilbert and me, looked like a big flashlight, the kind with a handle on top, smaller and easier to carry than the original version, the one that got destroyed in the car bomb.

Once we were ready, Mom took us to the elementary school where Sam and I used to go. Now that we were famous, it was hard for us to attend classes without distracting everyone, so Mom decided it was better to homeschool us with Damocles, the Officer Joe version, as our physical education teacher, Gilbert for science and math, and Mom for all the other subjects when she wasn't working at Magruder's.

We arrived at the school after normal hours. Mom dropped us off and headed for her waitress shift. We then entered the school and proceeded to a classroom attached to the gymnasium. After we took off our jackets and shoes and hung them and our helmets on various wall hooks or laid them on low shelves, we put on our karate gis and waited for our teacher.

At first, after our fight with the Nirvana zombies, Mom started our karate training, but she couldn't

remember what we needed to learn to attain blackbelt status. Then Damocles took over, and he really knew his stuff. Whenever Mom didn't have to go to work, she joined us, and we all learned super fast. Mom said there was no way she would let us go around superheroing again unless we could protect ourselves. And she got pretty tough, especially with self-defense moves and choke holds. She could subdue almost anyone her size or smaller in under three seconds flat.

"I guess I'll try to call Damocles." I reached into my pocket for my phone.

"Wait." Sam touched her wristwatch. "We should test them."

I smiled. Sam was proud of my invention, a watch with built-in audio and video communications, as well as a tracking device that would let anyone find us, that is, anyone who knew our secure tracking codes. I also made one for Damocles, and he wore it proudly.

"Sure. Go ahead."

She touched a button on her watch and said, "Call Damocles."

A moment later, his voice came through, quiet and tinny, almost drowned by an engine roar. "Is that you, Princess Queenie and a bunch of other names I can't remember?"

She spoke into the watch's hidden microphone. "Yep. We're here at the school, O King of Karate. Where are you?"

"Still downtown. Sorry I'm late. Traffic is awful, even for a motorcycle. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"See you then." She touched the button again, terminating the call, then narrowed her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, you heard him. He’s on his Harley.”

“Yeah. So?”

“On the video, I could see the sky behind his head. Lots of birds were flying around. I mean, lots of them. Way more than usual.”

I shrugged. “It’s probably nothing. Sometimes they flock in weird places.”

“True.”

While we waited, we sparred. Since Sam’s superpowers were temporarily gone, I was able to get in some blows and block most of hers. Normally she was way too fast for me to get my fists past her arms or to stop her speedy punches.

Soon, Damocles walked in, locked the door, and slid off his cowl mask. Sam and I stood barefoot on a padded mat, faced Damocles, and set our fists and feet in a ready stance. As we prepared to go through our practice routine, a shadow fluttered at a nearby window. Then something squawked.

I glanced that way. Nothing appeared at the other side of the glass, though the light had dimmed, far darker than usual for the late afternoon hour. Maybe a storm was coming, and a bird got spooked.

“Today I’ll conduct your final test,” Damocles said, drawing my attention back to him. “If the two of you working together can take me down, then you’ll be ready to face Mephisto or any other human obstacle.” As he looked at Sam, he half closed an eye. “How long since you were zapped with the superhero machine?”

Sam lifted a hand and spread her fingers. “Five

days. I don't have any powers, I promise. I'm as weak as a toothless earthworm."

I squinted at her. "Earthworms don't have teeth."

"That's what I said. Toothless." She returned my squint, wrinkling the few freckles around her button nose. "What's your problem?"

"Your statement implied that some earthworms have ..." I heaved a sigh. "Oh, never mind."

Damocles rolled his eyes. "All right, you two. Focus. We have to be ready for Mephisto, with or without superpowers."

I resisted the urge to roll my own eyes. We hadn't heard a peep from Mephisto, also known as Chet Graham, in several months, enough time for me to turn thirteen, Sam to turn nine, and time for Nirvana to repair much of the damages from Mephisto's earthquake machine. Everything was as normal as it could get.

Yet, we knew he probably lurked somewhere, plotting calamity. Being an evil genius, he likely had done a lot of scheming over the months. "All right," I said, readying my fists again. "Plan TTH, Sam. Let's go."

"Plan TTH. You got it." Sam dashed toward Damocles, dropped to her back, and slid between his legs. Once on the other side, she rose to all fours behind him.

The moment Damocles twisted to look for her, I leaped and slammed both of my feet into his midsection. He stumbled over Sam and toppled flat on his back. Sam and I leaped up and sat on his heaving chest as he laughed. "That was fantastic!"

When we got off him and helped him up, he looked

at us in turn. "Great teamwork, you two, and your use of footwork and balance was perfect." He blinked. "By the way, what does TTH stand for?"

"Trip Turnip Head," Sam said. "You fell for it, so I'm sure Turnip Head will."

"Right. Your nickname for Mephisto." After dusting off his gi, Damocles clapped his hands. "Well, you certainly passed with flying colors. You two can handle yourselves even without superpowers."

"We're already black belts," Sam said, touching the black belt around her waist. "What color do we get now?"

"No belt change." Damocles handed each of us an embroidered letter D emblem. "You get the Damocles seal of approval. Sew it to the front of your gi and—"

A rumble from outside interrupted. The dim light faded even more, now an eerie darkness. I looked toward the window, then at Damocles. "Something's wrong out there."

Damocles gave the window a worried glance. "All right. Have a look."

Sam and I hustled to the window. When I slid the sash up, cool air poured in through the screen. Outside, a black cloud covered the western sky, our first-floor view partially blocked by several two-story houses across the street in this Nirvana suburban district.

"Gotta get a better look." I pried the screen loose and drew it into the room, then leaned out. The cloud drifted to one side, then to the other, as if blown by random winds. It all looked so strange, unearthly.

A raven leaped from its perch atop the closest house and swooped toward me. As it drew near, it

extended its claws, ready to scratch. I jerked myself back inside and slammed the window shut. In a wild flutter, the raven hovered at window level and clawed at the glass for a few seconds before flying away.

Sam shuddered. "Okay. That was creepy."

"Yeah. We need to find out what's going on."

Damocles nodded. "We got a late start. We can be done for the day."

I stripped off my gi and wadded it into my duffle bag. After putting my jeans on over my gym shorts and straightening my red Nirvana T-shirt, I nodded toward the door. "Let's head outside."

Sam took off her gi and stuffed it into her bag. "We'd better power up first. I'm as weak as a—"

"I know. I know. A toothless earthworm."

"Nope." She pulled her cape from the bag and began attaching it to her shirt as she grinned. "A toothless comb."

When I gave her another squint, she touched her hair, pushed back by a pink band that clashed with her light brown locks. "Combs have teeth, and they're useless if you try to—"

"Don't explain. I get the joke."

Damocles withdrew clothes from his own bag. "You two power each other up. We'll all go together."

I pulled the superhero device from under the wadded clothes. "You first, Sam."

She stood in front of me and squared her shoulders. "It's time for Princess Queenie Unicorn Iris Ponyrider to ride again!"

I flipped the switch. "The short nickname again?"

As dazzling white light bathed her body, she

nodded. "It's so you'll use my whole name instead of an ana-whatzit."

"You're thinking of an anagram. I always turned your name into an acronym. It's a word made from each letter in your list of names." When the device's timer turned the light off, I grinned. "So, let's hear a quip, Princess."

"A quip?" she asked as she took the device from me. "What do you mean? Like the crack of a whip, only with a Q sound in front? That would be a quack, right? Like a duck."

I glanced at Damocles. Now wearing his cowl mask, camo pants, and a D-emblazoned shirt, he held a hand over his mouth as if stifling a laugh. He knew that I was referring to an acronym, the PQUIP that represented her names.

I smiled and nodded at Sam. "Right. A quack. Give it all you've got."

When she flipped the switch, she shouted, "Quack!"

As her voice echoed in the room, the light turned on and covered me with its ultra-bright wash. If the cell-enhancing radiance worked as usual, it wouldn't give me super strength, speed, or hearing, like it did for Sam. Yet, it would make my skin and bones tougher, less likely to break even when pounded by enormous pressure or scratched by something rough or sharp. And I also seemed to heal faster after a charge.

The moment the light turned off, Sam set the device in the bag, grabbed her jacket from its hook, and put it on along with her gadgets belt, socks, boots, and gloves, moving at super speed. She then picked up her

helmet from the floor and looped our gym bag's strap over her shoulder. "Let's go!"

"Slow down, Flash," I said, smiling. "Let the normal humans catch up."

After Damocles and I gathered the rest of our stuff, the three of us hustled from the room, through the empty gymnasium, and down the school's hallway, our footsteps echoing against the lockers and walls. When we exited onto a sidewalk, we looked down a street that gave us a good view of the darkness veiling the sun just above the western horizon.

"That's not like any cloud I've ever seen," Damocles said as he put his gadgets belt, jacket, and helmet on.

I glanced at his belt. Mastix hung from one of the hooks. Although we had practiced a hundred times, the weapon never worked properly for him. The thongs emitted a few sparks at best. Apparently it still didn't recognize him as a true superhero.

Sam aimed her super-sharp eyes at the darkness. "I see birds. Thousands of them. And they're coming this way."