

CHAPTER ONE

WITH ENERGY STILL FLOWING through my body, I leaped into the air, narrowly avoiding Crusher's crablike claw. As I flew upward, I reached out, grabbed the middle yard of *The Mystery* and hauled myself up onto it. The wind rushed around me as I carefully held onto the mast. I was a good thirty feet or so above the deck of the airship, and if I moved even one inch in the wrong direction, I'd fall to my doom. Well, perhaps it wouldn't *kill* me, but it would definitely hurt.

Holding onto the mast's main rope, I looked down at the desk. The vigilante known as Crusher was looking up at me with a mixture of surprise and anger. He probably hadn't known I could jump so high, which was understandable, because I hadn't known it until a week ago myself.

"Get down here, you brat!" Crusher shouted, waving his huge, crablike claws at me threateningly. "Fight me like a man, why don't you?"

"Nah, I'm good," I said. "You just stay down there with your claws. It's best for both of us if you do."

Crusher shouted a really foul curse word and immediately began scaling the mast, but he didn't make it very far before I fired my lasers and struck him in the chest. He fell flat on his back onto the main deck of *The Mystery*, where he lay with a stunned look on his face.

"I don't know about you, but I can do this all day if I have to," I said, gesturing at my helmet. "But if you want to keep trying to get up here after me, I won't stop you. You're basically target practice for me."

Crusher scrambled back to his feet and immediately began climbing again. I would have given him credit for persistence, but given how he was being persistent about trying to kill me, I couldn't quite tell him that.

I was about to fire another energy blast when I heard a blasting of rockets. I looked up just in time to see a man with a jetpack land on the other side of the yard that I stood upon. He was tall and birdlike in appearance, wearing green flight armor and a helmet which looked like the kind that fighter pilots wore. His clawed feet sank into the yard's wood, which allowed him to maintain his balance, despite the heavy wind.

"Greetings, my little friend," the vigilante said with a bow. "I am Vultura and I saw you giving my friend Crusher a little trouble. Climbing up onto the mast was a smart move, or would have been, anyway, if I hadn't been around."

I didn't even wait for him to stop speaking before I fired lasers at him. But Vultura dodged the lasers easily and then shot darts from a launcher mounted on his wrist at me. I managed to dodge some of the darts, but one of them slammed into my right shoulder, causing me to nearly slip and fall to my doom. But I held on tightly to the rope and managed to regain my balance, though the pain in my shoulder was so intense that all I wanted to do was let go and fall.

"You dodged my darts well," said Vultura with a chuckle. "But you got lucky that time. This time, you won't be so lucky."

Vultura aimed his wrist-mounted launcher again. At the same time, Crusher below was already more than halfway up the mast. It was now clear to me that I would either get riddled with Vultura's darts or get crushed to death between Crusher's claws. I thought about jumping, but that would just end up with me breaking my legs or getting hurt, and it definitely wouldn't stop Crusher and Vultura from coming after me again.

Right before Vultura fired his darts, however, a loud screeching sound exploded in my ears and a large mechanical bat body-slammed Vultura. Shocked, Vultura fell off the mast. He tried to activate his jetpack, but the metal bat—which I recognized as Zip, Cyberkid’s personal drone—tore through the jetpack with its sharp claws. As a result, Vultura crashed onto the deck, where he lay either unconscious or dead; probably unconscious, though the blood leaking out of his helmet didn’t make me very confident about that.

Regardless, I was so shocked by Zip’s sudden appearance that I didn’t move until I heard a familiar voice nearby shout, “Beams!”

I looked in the direction from which the voice came and saw Cyberkid flying toward me on his rocket boots. The mechanical laser covering his right eye flashed as he flew.

“Cyberkid!” I shouted back, waving at him. “Thanks for the save!”

But Cyberkid just pointed at me and shouted, “Jump!”

I didn’t know what he meant until I heard the sickening crunch of claw into wood. Looking down, I saw that Crusher was less than a foot below me. He was too close for me to knock off with my lasers, nor could I kick him down.

So, without further thought, I jumped off the yard into the sky, just barely missing Crusher’s claw, which snipped at the bottom of my foot as I fell. I could hear Crusher shouting at me to come back, but I didn’t pay him any attention because I was too busy focused on the deck, which I was falling toward rapidly.

But then Cyberkid caught me and, with surprising strength, lifted me up to the foremast of *The Mystery*. He placed me in the foremast’s crow’s nest, which was the highest point on the ship. I slumped back in the crow’s nest, clutching my shoulder, which was still bleeding due to the dart lodged inside it.

“Beams, are you all right?” said Cyberkid, who was now hovering just outside the nest above me. “Your shoulder—”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, though I was aware of the strain in my voice when I said that. “You just need to go back down there and help the others fight the vigilantes.”

“Are you sure?” said Cyberkid. His one exposed eye narrowed. “Your shoulder could get infected if it’s not treated quickly.”

“Not like we can get any medical attention for it at the moment, now can we?” I said. I waved my hand at him. “Go! I’ll stay here and try not to move too much.”

Cyberkid frowned, but nodded once and then turned and flew back down to the deck below. When he left, I slumped down even further into the nest, almost lying flat on my back, and breathed a long sigh of pain. Despite what I’d told Cyberkid, I wasn’t sure my shoulder was going to be fine at all. It was hard to tell just how deep the dart had lodged itself into my shoulder, but I was sure it was deep enough to leave me with a serious wound if I didn’t get it treated quickly.

But at the moment, I couldn’t simply go to the hospital and have it treated. I was still in the middle of a battle, after all, even if I was currently not participating in it myself. A battle that, unfortunately, did not seem to be going our way the last time I checked.

It started about half an hour ago. *The Mystery*—the airship/mobile base of the superhero Myster—had been patrolling the skies around Golden City when it was suddenly attacked by a dozen or so members of the Vigilante Legion, who teleported onto the ship thanks to the teleportation abilities of one of their members. Rubberman and I had been on board at the time, which was probably the main reason the airship had been attacked, because Rubberman and I were the number one enemies of the Legion.

But *The Mystery* also had a crew of a half dozen superheroes and their sidekicks, which led to the current all-out brawl going on the deck below me. Even from up here, with wind blowing wildly all around me, I could hear the sounds of fists slamming into jaws, guns being fired, rubber snapping, and electricity zapping someone unfortunate enough to be in the way. Hearing the rubber snapping actually made me feel better, because Rubberman and I had gotten separated early on at the start of the battle and I hadn't been sure of his current status.

Not for the first time, I was glad that the Golden City government had contacted Heroes United to request a few dozen extra superheroes to defend the city. Rubberman hadn't seemed very excited about it, but I was glad we had allies, because there was no way that Rubberman, Adams, and I could defeat the Vigilante Legion on our own. The vigilantes may have lost their leader, but it didn't seem to have slowed them down at all. If anything, they seemed even more vicious than before, which meant that Iron Angel had either been a moderating influence on them or they were under new leadership that was telling them to go all out.

In any case, this wasn't the first clash between Heroes United and the Vigilante Legion, although it was the first one on such a large scale. The past few clashes over the last couple of weeks had either been clashes between individual members or clashes between small teams of two or three. With a dozen vigilantes versus an equal number of licensed superheroes and sidekicks, there was no telling who would win, although the winner of the battle wouldn't matter if *The Mystery* crashed, which seemed very possible, given how much damage had been inflicted on the ship already.

Sitting upright, I peered over the side of the crow's nest to see how the battle was going. From a distance, it was a little hard to follow individual superheroes, especially since all of the fighters were crowded so closely together, but I saw Myster trading blows with a man in huge metal, tank-like armor, while Rubberman was dodging slashes from a vigilante wearing a generic pirate costume but wielding a very real-looking scimitar. Both sides looked about equally matched to me, but sooner or later one side would emerge victorious. I just hoped it was mine, because if it wasn't ... well, I didn't want to think about that.

But then I noticed one of the vigilantes lurking in the shadows near the ship's fore. The vigilante in question wore strange, bug-eyed goggles and a bizarre keyboard-like device on his chest. He didn't look like much of a fighter, which was probably why he was trying to sneak away. I also noticed he had a bag tied around his waist full of small balls, but the cloth bag was too thick for me to see through. Something about the way they moved around his waist and the way he sneaked around made me think that those were not just balls.

As I watched, the vigilante opened the door to the lower decks and stole inside before anyone on either side of the conflict could stop him. Looking back at the battle on the deck, it seemed like no one had seen him enter except for me. Again, I didn't know much about him, but if he was sneaking around trying not to draw attention to himself, then he was obviously up to no good and didn't want to get caught doing it. And then there were those balls again; something told me they far more dangerous than they looked.

I tapped the side of my helmet and said into my radiocom, "Boss, I saw one of the vigilantes sneak into the ship's lower decks. Looked like he was up to no good."

"I'm a bit busy at the moment, Beams," came Rubberman's voice over the radiocom, sounding slightly strained. "You should go deal with it yourself."

"But I'm—"

A loud screeching noise came from my radiocom, forcing me to shut it off immediately before it could damage my hearing. At that exact moment, Cyberkid flew by again, being chased by yet another

flier, this one a man with hawk-like wings extending from his back. Though the winged man was quick, he did not seem to notice me, so I aimed my lasers at his wings and, at the right moment, fired.

My lasers struck his right wing at the exact moment it spread wide. With a cry of shock and pain, the man plummeted to the deck like a rock, while Cyberkid stopped in midair and turned to look at me.

"Thanks for the save!" said Cyberkid, waving at me. "He would have gotten me if—"

"I don't care," I interrupted. I pointed at the door where the other vigilante had sneaked into. "One of the vigilantes broke off from the rest and is now inside *The Mystery's* lower decks. We have to stop him before he causes any damage."

"We'?" Cyberkid questioned, glancing at my shoulder. "I don't think you're in any condition to go anywhere at the moment."

"It's just a flesh wound," I lied. "It's not as bad as it looks. I'll be fine."

Cyberkid looked at me skeptically, but then shrugged and flew over to me. He scooped me into his arms bridal style (which felt kind of awkward) and then lowered us both to the deck below. When we landed, Cyberkid kicked open the door and rushed inside. I followed, ignoring the pain in my shoulder as best as I could, though the bleeding was harder to ignore.

Once we passed the threshold, the sound of battle outside became a lot more quiet, especially when I closed the door behind us. We stood in a narrow wood hallway, which stretched ahead toward the front of the ship and had about three or four doors on each side. There was no sign, however, of the vigilante himself.

"Where did he go?" I said, looking around the narrow hallway in confusion.

Cyberkid looked at me in annoyance. "Are you *sure* you saw one of the vigilantes sneak into here? Because if not—"

"I did," I said defensively. "He had weird goggles on his face and a bunch of balls in this bag tied around his waist."

Cyberkid paused. The part of his face that was not hidden by his helmet revealed a growing sense of horror. "Goggles?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Big, bug-eyed ones."

Cyberkid's one revealed eye widened. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?" I said. "What do you mean by that?"

Cyberkid, however, did not respond. He just turned and ran down the hallway, forcing me to run after him in order not to get left behind. He turned down a corner and ran down a wooden staircase which appeared to lead to the lower decks, going down two steps at a time, while I had to do one at a time in order not to aggravate my shoulder injury.

"Cyberkid, what's the problem?" I said, my breath ragged as we reached the end of the staircase. "Do you know the guy?"

Cyberkid abruptly stopped and turned to face me, frowning grimly. "Know him? I *met* him. He was Myster's last sidekick, before I started working for him. He quit working for Myster three years ago to strike out on his own, though I met him once when Myster threw a sidekick reunion party last year. Not sure why he became a vigilante, though."

"What are his powers?" I said. I tried not to show any pain, but my shoulder wound was getting harder and harder to ignore.

"He has none," said Cyberkid in a grim voice. "Like me, Blast was technologically-gifted, but his own talents lay mostly in creating explosives. As in, bombs, and big ones, at that."

My eyes widened in shock as I realized what Cyberkid implied. "You don't mean—"

"I do," Cyberkid interrupted me. He turned around again. "While Myster and the other HU heroes are busy fighting his allies, Blast went down here to set explosives to blow up the ship. He's probably going to blow up the engine, which would be enough to cause the whole ship to fall like a rock."

In my mind's eyes, I saw *The Mystery* fall abruptly down toward Golden City below before crashing and exploding into tons of pieces. "That will kill everyone on board, including his own allies."

"They probably plan to get off the ship with their teleporter," said Cyberkid. "In any case, we've got to find him fast before he has time to set off his explosives. The longer we stand around talking, the more likely his success becomes."

And the more infected my shoulder became, but I didn't say that aloud. I just followed Cyberkid through the lower decks of *The Mystery*, taking the shortest route possible to the ship's engine. I had never been down this low in *The Mystery* before, and the farther down we went, the more muffled the sounds of battle above became, until soon I couldn't hear the battle raging above us at all.

But I could hear a loud engine humming somewhere up ahead. That sound grew louder as the sounds of battle above grew quieter. I half-expected us to run across one of Blast's bombs in the hallway, but given how we didn't run into any of them, I guess Blast must have been in too much of a hurry to set bombs for anyone following him. Or he was so convinced that he had sneaked in unnoticed that he simply never felt the need to set any traps.

Finally, I spotted a door up ahead, a cracked open door, which was helpfully labeled ENGINE ROOM. It was ajar, but Cyberkid kicked it open anyway and the two of us rushed inside without hesitation.

The sound of the engine humming and rumbling was deafening now that we were actually inside the Engine Room itself. The engine was a huge, mechanical device that looked like an overgrown car engine, except far more complicated and advanced. Pistons worked hard against the main body of the engine, electricity crackled, lights flashed, and its innards rumbled and hummed like a rock song. The engine took up about half of the entire room, which was impressive, because the Engine Room was easily one of the larger rooms on *The Mystery*.

But I paid little attention to that, because I spotted Blast standing near the foot of *The Mystery*. He was bent over, messing with something, though I couldn't tell what due to his body blocking my view of it.

Cyberkid stepped forward and shouted as loudly as he could, "Blast, you idiot!"

Blast must have heard him, because he looked over his shoulder, but instead of frowning or scowling, he just smiled, which made him look very creepy, especially with those goggles covering his eyes.

"Ah, Cyberkid," said Blast as he rose to his feet and turned around. He had a nasally voice, but it didn't make him any less scary. "Myster's newest child slave. Er, I mean sidekick, of course."

Then he looked at me and his smile grew even wider. "And Rubberman's brat? My, my. I came down here only to blow up this engine and turn this airship into a falling fireball of doom. I didn't think I would get the honor killing the brat who put our leader behind bars."

"You won't," I said. I winced at my shoulder wound, but stepped forward beside Cyberkid. "You're not going to blow up or kill anyone. Come forward quietly and we won't have to get violent."

Blast threw back his head and laughed. "Ha! You kids really are brainwashed, talking like those damned fake heroes. I don't remember talking like that when I was a sidekick, but I guess it doesn't matter. I've already set up the bomb, as kids these days say."

Blast stepped aside, revealing a large, flat blinking device set on the foot of the engine. On the device was a five minute timer that was, to my horror, already counting down second by second.

Cyberkid looked at Blast in shock. "Turn off that timer *right now* or else."

"Sorry, I can't do that," said Blast with a shrug. "It's an automatic timer. Besides, even if I did turn it off, I would still be able to blow it up. I have the detonator right here, after all."

Blast held up a small device in his right hand, which had a single red button on it. His thumb hovered over the button threateningly, but did not press down on it yet.

"The original plan was that I would come down here, set up a few well-placed bombs, and then leave before the timers finished," said Blast. "Then I would tell Traveler—that's our teleporter, if you didn't know—and we'd all retreat. We'd trick you and your bosses into thinking you had won the battle right up until the moment the bombs went off and you all died; however, it's clear that I won't be able to do that now. Oh, well. Traveler has orders to teleport the other vigilantes away if I don't return in two minutes, so even if I die, at least my allies will leave. Can't say the same about *your* allies, however."

"Then we'll disarm it," I said. I looked at Cyberkid. "Cyberkid, have you ever disarmed a bomb before?"

"Doesn't matter," said Blast. He waved the detonator above his head. "If either of you two brats try to stop the bomb before the timer is up, I'll press the button on this detonator and blow us all to kingdom come. And, unlike those fake heroes you work for, I'm not lying."

I believed him. Blast looked and sounded completely serious about detonating the bomb before the timer finished. I could probably shoot the detonator out of his hand from a distance, but Blast probably expected me to do that, given how he knew who I was. And even if I did blast the detonator out of his hands before he could activate it, that didn't mean we would be able to disarm the bomb itself.

Blast glanced at the timer. "Three and a half minutes left. I should warn you that the blast will probably kill all three of us instantly when it goes off, but *The Mystery* will likely remain airborne for a bit longer than that. I could have made it sink immediately if I'd had set more bombs, but really, more bombs would have been a luxury rather than a necessity at this point."

I hated Blast's rambling, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I had a feeling that if I said anything, Blast would use that as an excuse to activate the detonator and kill all of us.

I looked at Cyberkid, wondering if he had any ideas. He, however, looked just as helpless as me. He was scowling, his hands balled into fists, but it seemed like he had no idea how to stop Blast, either.

"You two sure are quiet," said Blast. "No witty banter to try to make me upset? Or are you coming to terms with your mortality? Perhaps your lives—as short and insignificant as they are—are flashing before your eyes. Maybe you're even silently cursing your bosses for putting you in this situation in the first place."

I wanted to tell Blast to shut his mouth, but again, I was worried he was just looking for an excuse to activate the detonator. A glance at the timer on the bomb revealed we had only two and a half minutes to stop it. I didn't know for sure how big the explosion was going to be, but if it was going to be big enough to cripple the engine and crash *The Mystery*, it would definitely be big enough to kill all three of us instantly.

We didn't have more time to waste. Our best bet was taking out Blast and then having Cyberkid disarm the bomb. And the only way to do that was to knock the detonator out of Blast's hand, which I would have to do quickly, because if I hesitated for even a second, Blast would press the button and kill all of us.

"Still very quiet," said Blast. "That's good, of course. Most kids are too noisy these days, especially teenagers like—"

I didn't let him finish his sentence. I fired my beams, aiming directly at his hand. Two lasers struck his detonator hand, knocking the detonator out of his grasp. Blast cried out in pain and grabbed his burned hand, but I wasn't going to let him recover. I launched myself across the room, using the last of my previous energy boost, and kicked him in the jaw. My boot cracked against his jaw and he immediately collapsed onto the floor, unconscious.

Landing on the floor, I grimaced and grabbed my shoulder, which was now bleeding worse than ever. Nonetheless, Blast was down, though the timer showed that we had only one and a half minutes left.

I didn't even have to say anything, however, before Cyberkid rushed over to the bomb and immediately knelt before it. He began examining the bomb, running his hands over its smooth outer shell as he attempted to look for some way to open it. At least, I assumed he was, because I didn't know what else he could do be doing.

"Cyberkid, have you figured out how to stop it yet?" I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the engine's rumbling again.

"Not yet," said Cyberkid, his voice frantic. "If I could open it, maybe I could rewire it, but—Ah, here we go!"

Cyberkid pried the outer shell off and threw it aside. Bunches of wires—red, blue, and green—were crisscrossed underneath the timer, which now showed about one minute and five seconds left. Cyberkid froze, staring at the wires as if he had never seen anything like them before.

"Cyberkid, what the hell are you doing?" I shouted, not even bothering to hide my anger. "Cut the right wire, damn it, before it explodes!"

"I ..." Cyberkid shook his head. "I don't know which wire is the right one! If I pull the wrong wire, it could set off the bomb early and kill us all."

I scowled and looked at the timer. Forty-five seconds. "Haven't you disarmed bombs before? Shouldn't you know which wires detonate it?"

"You just *assume* I know how to disarm bombs because I'm a tech guy," Cyberkid snapped. "Did it ever occur to you that I'm not a bomb technician? Just because I'm good with *some* tech doesn't mean I'm good with all kinds of tech."

I gulped. The timer now said we had less than thirty seconds left. "Then what the hell are we supposed to do? Just sit here and pray for a miracle?"

"I—" Cyberkid put his hands on his head and stared at the bomb uselessly. "I don't know. I can't stop this bomb. I can't save us."

Cyberkid sounded so pathetic when he said that, which made me angry. But I forgot about my anger when I looked at the timer one last time and saw that twenty seconds had somehow passed already, leaving us with less than ten seconds left.

I did not hesitate. I jumped forward, grabbed a fistful of wires, and, ignoring Cyberkid's protests to the contrary, ripped all of the wires out of the bomb at once.

I expected the bomb to explode. I expected a fiery explosion of death to envelope all three of us and cripple the engine. I expected to be lying half-dead on the floor, feeling *The Mystery* falling to its doom, where I would die as soon as the airship crashed into the city below.

None of that happened.

Instead, the timer stopped beeping and froze at exactly five seconds before detonation. And I knew that it would not explode even if Blast pressed the detonator. I knew that *The Mystery* was saved.