

CHAPTER ONE

YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING this. You *really* shouldn't be doing this. At all."

I paused and looked over my shoulder. TW floated just a few feet behind me, like a ghost, though he was actually just the holographic representation of the artificial intelligence that inhabited the Trickshot Watch. He resembled my Grandfather with his gray hair and sweater vest, though his bluish, transparent hue made it impossible to mistake him for the real thing. He was also doing a good representation of Grandfather's disapproving frown at the moment.

"Come on, TW," I said, looking back toward the street below, "it's not every day that you get to see one of the best superheroes in the country visit *your* home city."

"You should be training," said TW. He gestured at the summer sky. "Look at how clear and bright the sky is today. Perfect for testing your flight capabilities, rather than crouching here on the roof like some kind of bandit."

"I can already fly pretty well," I said without looking at TW. "What would more flying do? Besides, I thought I wasn't supposed to fly around during the day because that would risk someone seeing me, which I thought we both agreed that we're not trying to do?"

TW sighed. "You know what I mean. You've come a long way in the month since you started training, but you've still got a long way to go. The threat Gregory told me of is still coming and you need to be prepared for it, whatever it is and whenever it gets here."

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I said, still without looking at TW. "I'll cross that bridge when I get there. Right now, I just want to see Baron Glory. Once I see him, we can go back to training, okay?"

TW made a disapproving noise behind my back, but he didn't argue with me. TW could be a pretty stern teacher when he wanted to be, but I was still perfectly capable of ignoring him when I needed. It helped that he was just a hologram, so there wasn't anything he could do to make me obey him. I did feel a little guilty for ignoring him, but come on, I'd been training ever since summer vacation started. I deserved a day off from my training.

But I had to admit, TW had a point about me skipping out on my training. Ever since I defeated the drug cartel known as the Injectors and sent their leader and a good chunk of its membership to prison, my motivation for training and learning how to use my powers had not exactly plummeted, *per se*, but it no longer felt as urgent as it once did. Sure, I still trained regularly, but I wasn't as focused as I was before and it wasn't as enjoyable as it used to be. It felt more like a slog than a treat, even though I was getting better and better at using my powers all the time.

Regardless, the day was still fairly young. I would just train later, after I saw Baron Glory himself.

It was easy to distract myself from my own thoughts. Below, thousands of people filled the streets of Rumsfeld, talking, chatting, and moving around all the time. The noise was loud, almost deafening, but I didn't mind it, because Rumsfeld was normally a pretty quiet town and seeing so many people walking and talking made things more, rather than less, interesting. Dad, on the other hand, had complained about how congested traffic was today due to how many people had gathered in the streets to see Baron Glory's arrival, because it made it harder for him to get to work on time. It would have made it harder for me to get to school, too, but luckily summer vacation started at the end of last month, so I didn't have to worry about going to school at all.

Among the assembled crowd of people below, I spotted baseball caps and t-shirts with Baron Glory's logo—a sword crossed with lightning—emblazoned in bright colors, making them stand out against the sea of masses walking or standing on the sidewalks. Vendors were hawking their wares,

selling Baron Glory merchandise like coffee mugs and hats, though it all looked like knockoffs to me. Police officers patrolled the perimeters of the street, present to make sure that the crowd didn't get out of control.

But most people paid little attention to the street. Most people kept glancing up at the sky, which made sense, because that was where Baron Glory was supposed to come from. Thus far, though, there was no sign of Baron Glory but rumor was that the famous superhero was supposed to fly by overhead at some point on his way to a meeting with Bug Bite. No one knew why Baron Glory, who was actually from New York, was going to meet with Bug Bite, but I bet it was important, whatever it was.

In any case, I hoped to catch at least a glimpse of Baron, because he was one of my favorite superheroes. He became famous about five years ago when he defeated the supervillain known as Titan King, who had tried to destroy the nation with a nuclear bomb. After that, Baron exploded in popularity, to the point where even people who didn't live in New York knew who he was. He was also the President of the National Association of Superheroes, having served for two terms so far, and was always consulting with federal, state, and local governments in regards to laws regulating supers. He even had a movie coming out next year about his fight with Titan King.

I wished I could get an autograph from him, but given how I was technically an illegal superhero, I didn't dare risk showing my face to him. That's why I chose to hide behind the sign of Jerry's Pizza Shop, because it hid me extremely well from the crowds below, while at the same time having a large enough opening between the sign and the building itself that I could see everything going on below.

Of course, I wouldn't stay here forever. Once I caught a glimpse of Baron Glory, I would leave. As an illegal superhero, it wouldn't be wise for me to draw attention to myself, no matter how much I wanted to meet Baron Glory.

All of a sudden, a little boy, wearing a Baron Glory t-shirt and sitting on his father's shoulders, pointed to the sky and shouted, "Hey, what's that?"

The entire crowd of people looked in the direction the boy pointed. So did I, adjusting my goggles to make it easier to see what was coming toward us.

At first, I saw nothing but the bright, empty blue Texas sky, but soon I saw a tiny speck on the horizon, drawing closer and closer to us with every second. The crowd below must have seen it as well, because I heard people suddenly chatting among themselves excitedly. A few people even began to blow air horns, though even the honking of the air horns was barely audible above the collective cries of the crowd.

But I ignored all of the noise below in order to focus on the dot in the distance, which was getting bigger and bigger all the time. I crouched low, pulling my cape more tightly around myself to keep myself hidden, but I didn't tear my eyes away from the dot in the sky. This was it. I was going to see Baron Glory himself. I would be able to brag to my best friend Kyle, who was also a Baron Glory fan, about this tomorrow. It was going to be awesome.

Soon, the dot got close enough that I could see it was indeed the good Baron. Like me, he wore a cape, but his was black, which stood out against his all-white costume. He didn't have goggles like me, but he did have a sword sheathed at his side, while his sword and lightning logo stood out against his chest, a bright silver color which reflected the summer sun's rays awesomely.

But Baron didn't slow down. He just flew straight past the crowd without looking down even once. The crowd collectively turned to follow him, but before everyone finished turning, Baron was already gone, a mere speck in the distance.

“What the heck?” I said, staring after Baron. “I know he’s got places to be, but come on. Surely he could have slowed down at least a little to say hello to everyone?”

TW shook his head. “Well, you saw him, just like you said you wanted to. Can we leave and begin your training for the day? I’m getting bored of standing around here doing nothing.”

I bit my lower lip and looked down at the crowd. Disappointment was obvious on the face of every man, woman, and child present. A few people were futilely taking pictures of the empty sky on their phone, like they were vainly trying to get the speck known as Baron Glory on their phones at least once, while other people muttered among themselves in clear disappointment at the fact that they had taken so much time to get out here for what amounted to nothing. The police, on the other hand, looked relieved that nothing bad had happened, probably because it meant they didn’t have to put themselves in harm’s way.

I couldn’t blame the people. All of us had been looking forward to seeing Baron, but he had come and gone so quickly that he might as well not have come at all. I guess we shouldn’t have been surprised. It wasn’t like Baron had officially announced his arrival here or anything. It was just a bunch of people getting excited at the idea that they might see someone famous in person, even if only for a moment.

Rising to my feet, I said, “All right, TW. I guess we can leave now. I did manage to see Baron, so it wasn’t a *complete* waste of time, but—”

“But you could have spent it in better ways,” said TW. “I’m glad you’re ready to leave anyway. I thought I might have to drag you kicking and screaming back to our next training session.”

I was about to point out that TW was a hologram and therefore couldn’t even touch me before I noticed movement in the distance, in the direction that Baron had flown. I looked in the distance and noticed a speck getting closer and closer to us.

“Hey, what’s that?” I said, pointing into the distance.

TW looked in the direction I was pointing. “Hard to tell, but probably nothing. Perhaps it’s a bird or a plane, but whatever it is, it’s certainly not—”

TW was interrupted by an audible sonic boom, followed by something flying by so fast overhead that I didn’t even follow it. I quickly dropped back down to my knees and looked through the gap between the sign and the building and was amazed by what I saw.

Baron Glory had returned. He was flying in circles above the crowd, who had gone momentarily silent in shock at his reappearance, but once they realized he was really here, people began cheering and chanting his name over and over again.

“Baron! Baron!” the people chanted. “Baron! Baron!”

Baron Glory waved down at the people as he flew. His attention was focused on the people in the street, so I doubt he would have noticed me even if I hadn’t been hiding. As it was, I suddenly felt glad that I’d chosen to hide, because I didn’t think I could beat Baron Glory in a fight.

Baron Glory did a few more laps around the crowd, even doing a few flips and dips in midair to entertain the people, before coming to a stop above the very center of the crowd, where everyone would be able to see him. This put him close to Jerry’s Pizza Place, though again, with all of his attention on the crowd, he didn’t seem to notice me.

“Hello, people of Rumsfeld, Texas!” Baron shouted, his voice seemingly magnified by some unknown means. “I am pleased to see so many fans of mine have taken time out of their day to welcome me to this wonderful city. I was just on my way to meet with your local superhero Bug Bite, but when I saw so many of my fans here, I had to double back and give everyone a small show for

showing up. I know that this wasn't convenient for many of you, so consider this a treat from me to you."

"Wow," I said as the crowd broke into spontaneous applause. "He's so humble and nice. Pretty different from what I thought."

"I think he's a show off, myself," said TW, floating next to me. "Those New York superheroes always feel the need to make a spectacle of things. They're almost as bad as the Californian supers, who seem to think they're living in those superhero action flicks everyone's watching these days."

"They're not quite wrong, are they?" I said, glancing at TW. "Look at all of the people in the crowd recording Baron on their phone. I bet this isn't the first time he's been recorded by complete strangers like this."

"I know, but there's a difference between doing the right thing and being a show off just for the heck of it," said TW. "And Baron Glory seems like a show off to me, whatever good he may have done back in New York."

I rolled my eyes. TW may not have been Grandfather, but he had inherited a lot of his personality traits over the years of working with him. One such trait was his constantly judging other supers by the harsh standards which Grandfather had apparently held himself up to. I didn't see that side of TW's personality too much, but when it did show up, it could be grating even when he was right.

"Anyway, I must be going now," said Baron Glory to the cheering and chanting crowd below. "As much as I love to stick around and talk to fans, I have an important meeting to attend to with Bug Bite and I can't be late. I wish I could tell you what we're going to discuss, but rest assured that if all of our plans fall through, then not just the city of Rumsfeld, but the entirety of the United States of America, will be safer than they've ever been before."

The crowd burst into even louder cheers at that. Me, I was just curious what he and Bug Bite were going to discuss. Was the National Association of Superheroes going to open a branch here in Rumsfeld or something?

"But before I leave, I have some gifts I can give to you all for showing up to greet me in such a warm fashion," said Baron Glory. He pulled something out of his pockets and held them out for people to see. "Baron Glory brand stickers! Not only can you put them on stuff, but they're also collectible and, I hear, sell extremely well on the resell market!"

"Stickers?" TW said in disbelief. "He's giving away *stickers* to the people?"

"Seems kind of childish, I agree," I said. I frowned. "On the other hand, I wouldn't mind having a few Baron Glory brand stickers, especially if they're as valuable as he says they are."

TW shot me a warning look. "Don't."

I held up my hands to show that I wasn't serious, though if I could have gone out into the crowd and picked up a few of those stickers, I probably would have in all honesty.

"There's more than enough for everyone," said Baron Glory, waving the stickers back and forth above his head, "so everyone, please just settle down and form orderly lines where I land so everyone can get—"

A gunshot suddenly went off in street below. It was loud, sounding like it came from right next to me, but I didn't see anyone on the roof of Jerry's Pizza Place aside from myself and TW.

But I had no time to wonder where the gunshot came from, because before the startled eyes of every person in the area, Baron Glory fell to the street below like a rock.

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