



ALAN GRATZ

HEROES

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In order to accurately reflect the historical time period, some characters' dialogue in this book includes racially offensive language that was used in the United States during the 1940s.

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THE ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1941

“It’s an attack!” Stanley cried. “Enemy airplanes—dozens of them. Coming in low over the water!”

“They’re shooting machine guns,” I added, turning in my seat. “Dropping torpedoes—”

“Fire! Explosions! Shrapnel everywhere!” Stanley said.

The water around us was a sparkling mirror, the sky bright blue without a cloud—or plane—in sight. My best friend Stanley Summers and I were sailing across Pearl Harbor in our little aluminum motorboat, headed home from baseball practice. Stanley was steering and I was sitting facing him. We were talking out a story idea for the superhero we were creating together. I was the writer and Stanley was the illustrator. It was going to be the greatest comic book ever.

“And flying up to meet them,” I went on, “is Warhawk, Protector of the Innocent. Guardian of Freedom! He smashes one plane with his fist and uses his heat vision to destroy another. Bullets ping off his chest—”

“Wait, Frank,” Stanley cut in. “Warhawk has too many superpowers.”

I paused, confused. “What do you mean?” I asked. “He’s got as many powers as Superman.”

“Superman’s a cheat!” Stanley said. “He’s super strong and super fast, he can fly, he has X-ray vision, *and* super hearing, *and* super breath. It’s boring!” He shook his head. “Our character should have *one* superpower. Like how Captain America has super strength or the Flash has super speed.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “Oh, come on,” I said. “You’re telling me you’d rather be Captain America than Superman?”

“Heck yeah!” Stanley said. He took his hand off the tiller to give me a crisp salute. “Stars and stripes, baby! Wouldn’t it be amazing to get the Super Soldier Serum?”

I wanted to say yes. But Steve Rogers hadn’t known *what* that Super Soldier Serum was going to do to him before he took it. What if it had killed him? Or turned him into a monster? I wouldn’t have taken that risk. Not even for the chance to be Captain America.

But I wasn’t going to admit that to Stanley.

I held tight to the sides of the boat as Stanley steered us

toward Ford Island. A light breeze wafted the smell of pineapple and sugarcane across the bay, and the palm trees along the shore swayed. Somewhere a radio played the soft, plinky sounds of Hawaiian ukulele music.

In some ways, it felt like someone had already slipped me the Super Soldier Serum. I'd grown *twelve inches* in the last year. Now, at thirteen years old, I was taller than my mom. I was like one of those Charles Atlas ads you saw in the back of comics: *Send for this free book, and go from scrawny runt to Greek god in just three months!* Only I didn't feel like a Greek god. I was always tripping over my own big feet, and I felt clumsy and awkward in my new body.

Stanley was the opposite. He was comfortable in his skin, with a casual confidence that I tried to copy but could never quite get right. Like his clothes. While I wore a T-shirt and rolled-up jeans like most boys our age, Stanley stood out in his white shorts and oversized Aloha shirt with bright red flowers. He did his own thing and didn't worry what anybody thought of him. Stanley and I looked different in other ways too—I was white, with skin that turned pink from sunburn, blue eyes, and wavy light brown hair. Stanley was a cross between his Japanese American mom and his white dad, with tan skin, dark brown eyes, and straight black hair. But we were brothers, forever and always, thanks to our love of comic books.

“How sold are you on the name Warhawk?” Stanley asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Hmm? Not particularly,” I said. We’d taken his name from the type of fighter plane my dad flew in the Navy, but I’d never loved it. It made our hero sound like he was always looking for a fight. “You got any other ideas?” I asked Stanley.

“No,” he said. “You’re the writer. I was hoping you had something.”

I thought about it as I looked out across the water. Ringing Pearl Harbor like stone sentinels were the steel-gray battleships and cruisers and destroyers that made up the US Pacific Fleet, all enjoying a lazy Saturday afternoon in port.

The big ships gave me an idea.

I turned toward Stanley, feeling a rush of excitement. “How about ‘the Arsenal of Democracy’?” I said. It was something I’d heard President Roosevelt call the United States on the radio.

There was a war happening overseas. Adolf Hitler, the evil leader of Nazi Germany, was trying to conquer all of Europe—and maybe the world. Hitler had made a pact with Italy and Japan to form the Axis powers. Great Britain, Russia, China, and most of the other countries in the world—the Allies—were fighting against the Axis. But so far America had stayed out of the war. We still wanted to help, so the US had become “the arsenal of democracy,” cranking out ships and planes and tanks and guns to loan to the Allies.

“I don’t know,” said Stanley. “It’s kind of . . . *wordy*.”

Stanley’s lack of enthusiasm took some of the wind out of my sails, but I wasn’t ready to give up.

“It’s like the Sentinel of Liberty,” I argued, knowing how much Stanley loved Captain America’s nickname. “And we can call our character Arsenal for short.”

“Okay, yeah,” Stanley said, smiling as he came around. “And maybe he uses a shield, just like Cap. Something like this!”

Stanley pulled a pencil and paper from his pocket and started sketching.

Which was a bad idea, because he was the one driving the boat.