

True Heroes – Maxwell Alexander Drake

TRUE HEROES

1 Carnage lay everywhere I looked.

2 The main structure, a pile of rubble that used to be an office building, had caved in
3 after its front wall had been blown away. The buildings on either side had partially
4 collapsed as well, leaving a pile of bodies, or pieces thereof, interwoven between glass,
5 bricks, twisted steel, and broken furniture. The smell of burning flesh, so near the aroma
6 of frying pork, hit my nose. I gagged.

7 It was an image I may never forget.

8 I admit, I instantly gave up on the people in the wreckage. My mind just couldn't
9 comprehend anyone surviving... that!

10 Instead, I turned my attention away from the main blast area and started scanning
11 the surrounding urban landscape.

12 It didn't look much better.

13 Shop windows lay shattered down the debris-strewn street. Cars sat at the curbs,
14 dented and smashed—a few still burning. Small sections of other buildings had been
15 demolished in what seemed like random patterns.

16 The dead and dying lay everywhere. I had entered a warzone.

17 Marcus stepped up next to me and whistled. “Eight o’clock in the morning on a
18 *Monday*. Couldn’t have picked a worse time or place.”

19 I shifted to look at my partner. I’m not sure it’s possible for a black man to turn pale,
20 but he was giving it one hell of a try.

21 The look of fear and revulsion on his face must have broken the spell I was under. I
22 agreed with his statement, but all I could do was shrug. “Crappy time. Crappy place.
23 But we’ve a job to do.”

24 I shut my ambulance door and stepped to the back. Opening up the rear, I reached
25 in and grabbed my med kit. Before I had time to turn around, Marcus was reaching past
26 me, getting his medical bag as well.

27 I pointed to a blond-haired woman slumped against the corner of a building,
28 cradling her head in her hands. Blood flowed at a steady clip from between her fingers.
29 We sprinted over, kneeling to either side of her. I reached out and grabbed her wrist.
30 “It’s going to be all right, ma’am. We’re paramedics.”

31 I pulled her hand away from the wound, and realized I had probably just lied to her.
32 She had taken a nasty blow to the head that had not only torn away a large part of her
33 scalp, but a section of bone beneath as well, exposing grey matter. How she remained
34 conscious was a mystery. “We’re going to lay you down now, ma’am.” The false

35 confidence I poured into my voice was probably unneeded. I doubted she even knew
36 we were there.

37 I nodded to my partner and the two of us twisted her away from the wall and laid
38 her on the rubble-strewn sidewalk. I put pressure on the wound with one hand and
39 took the gauze Marcus offered up with the other. “Get the gurney. We’ve got to get her
40 out of here fast or she won’t make it.”

41 The harsh wail of emergency sirens ripped through the city streets as Marcus
42 dashed back to our unit. We may have been the first on scene, but the entire
43 metropolitan emergency force would be arriving soon. It was an all-too-familiar event
44 these days.

45 The newspapers had dubbed it the “Rise of the Supers.” When it happened, most
46 people hailed it as a great advancement for humankind. Had I been alive back then, I
47 probably would’ve agreed. I mean, normal people popping up all over the globe with
48 amazing abilities and powers... incredible!

49 Then the human factor kicked in. And all roads of power lead to the seven deadly
50 sins.

51 Greed, gluttony, sloth, lust, envy, pride... and wrath.

52 Oh sure, we still had Supers who felt obligated to uphold justice. To protect us
53 “Normals.” But, give random people god-like powers and it won’t be long before some
54 of them take on the god persona for real.

55 I glanced about the area once more and the sight drove home what that reality
56 meant to the world now. A score of paramedics, police, and firemen were combing
57 through the rubble, pulling people out. From where I knelt, I couldn’t tell which of the
58 bodies being dragged from the wreckage were alive or dead. Based on what I had seen
59 at other “Supers Showdown” locations, I knew the casualty rate would be in the
60 hundreds this time, if not thousands.

61 *And every one will be a Normal. Damn Supers!*

62 Marcus returned. Between the two of us, we got our patient stabilized, on the
63 gurney, and strapped in. My partner moved to the end and as he started pushing the
64 gurney toward our ambulance, I heard a groan coming from down a side alleyway.
65 Glancing back, I realized no one would come this way for hours. All the action was
66 centered around the main area of devastation, and I did not want to leave some poor
67 schmuck to die alone. I whistled to get Marcus’ attention. “I heard something. Get her
68 loaded up. I’ll be back in a sec.”

69 Marcus gave me the thumbs up and I headed into the alleyway with my medical kit
70 in hand. The alley survived intact, for the most part. As I rounded a dumpster,
71 however, I noticed a large chunk of brick wall lying at an awkward angle against a
72 doorframe.

73 It wasn't until I moved around to the side of the debris that I saw him. No amount of
74 training in the world could have prepared me for the sight. Half buried, face bruised
75 and bleeding, black suit ripped, black cape torn to shreds. Only his mask was intact. I
76 stood there dumbfounded, just staring down at whom I'd found.

77 "Holy shmoly! Is that who I think it is?" Marcus' voice scared the crap out of me and
78 I jumped.

79 Spinning in panic, I looked down the alleyway to see if anyone else was around.
80 "Keep your voice down!" I returned my attention back to the man in black. "Yes. It's the
81 Raven. Help me get him out from under this."

82 Luckily, the piece of wall did not have him pinned and we were able to slide him
83 out from under it without much trouble. Once we had him out in the alleyway, though,
84 we just stared from the Raven to each other like ten-year-olds who had just found a
85 dying bird. We were at a total loss as to what to do next.

86 Then the man in black moaned again.

87 Marcus knelt down and reached for the Raven's mask. "Let's take a peek at who he
88 is."

89 "Are you nuts?" I lunged forward and snagged his wrist. "No one knows who the
90 Raven is."

91 Giving me an exasperated look, Marcus tried to shake off my hand. "I know, stupid.
92 That's why we should take this opportunity to find out. Do you realize how much
93 money we could get for *that* information?"

94 I understood exactly, but I was having none of it. Tightening my grip, I yanked
95 Marcus to his feet and shoved him toward the alley's exit. "There's a woman in our unit
96 that's barely stabilized. Get her to the hospital *now* or she won't make it."

97 "Are you kidding me?"

98 I just pointed. "Go! Now!"

99 "Man, you trippin'." He nodded his head in the direction of the Raven. "What're
100 you gonna do, anyway?"

101 I glanced back. "I don't know. Help him until he's on his feet again, I guess. Let him
102 get out of here before anyone else finds him. He is invulnerable, after all."

103 Marcus just shook his head. "I can't believe you're passing on a chance like this."

104 I gave him a grin. "But you got my back, right?"

105 He let out an exasperated sigh. “Man, I always got your back, Bro.” He held out his
106 fist and we bumped. “I’ll get the woman to First General and be back as fast as I can. Be
107 safe.”

108 I couldn’t help the smile that sprang to my lips as I watched Marcus back our
109 ambulance from the scene and flip on the siren. We’d been partners a long time. Friends
110 for longer than that. He would be good to his word and I knew it.

111 *Still, I may have bitten off more than I can chew.*

112 My smile faded as I turned and headed back into the alley.

113 The Raven was right where we left him. Heaving a sigh, I knelt down and opened
114 my med kit. A quick check of his pulse showed it was strong and steady. I felt around
115 his body, looking for obvious signs of trauma, but couldn’t find any. Not that I had
116 expected to.

117 I had seen the news footage of this guy battling Rogue Supers for decades. Watched
118 as he was bashed by thrown cars, crushed under items that would kill a Normal. The
119 Raven was one tough cookie. Truth be told, I probably admired him more than any of
120 the others. Marcus was not wrong—outside of the occasional news footage of the Raven
121 fighting, nothing was known about this guy.

122 Probably why I liked him so much. He didn't revel in the spotlight, soaking up the
123 praise of the populace like so many of the other Supers. He just showed up, did his job,
124 then disappeared.

125 *Which is exactly what he needs to do this time.*

126 Not finding any obvious signs of damage and knowing what I knew about this man,
127 I broke open a stick of ammonium carbonate and waved it under his nose in the hopes
128 that it would revive him—not something I would do to a Normal who was unconscious
129 and found lying under a pile of concrete.

130 The smelling salt achieved its desired effects and the Raven's eyes fluttered open.
131 Faster than light, his hand shot out and strong fingers wrapped around my throat. Out
132 of reflex, I reached up and tried to pry his grip from my neck. In an instant, I knew that
133 if this man wanted me dead, I was powerless to stop him.

134 He pulled me close. "Where is the Obliviator?"

135 I tried to answer, but he held me too tight. For a moment, I thought he wasn't going
136 to let go. Then with a nod, he relaxed and pulled his hand away.

137 "My partner and I were the first on scene." I coughed, rubbing my neck more out of
138 impulse than need. "When we arrived, all the Supers were gone." I shook my head.

139 "The fight's over, man."

140 The Raven lay back and closed his eyes. He stayed that way for so long I thought he
141 had drifted off into unconsciousness once more. I flinched when his eyelids popped
142 open. "Help me up." He reached out a hand.

143 Taking hold of his forearm, I pulled the Raven up into a sitting position. From there
144 it felt like he gained a million pounds, and I could not budge him an inch.

145 "Wait. Stop." The calm in his voice clashed with the look of fear in his eyes.

146 "What? Why?"

147 "Just stop." The Raven shoved me so hard I fell back on my rump.

148 "What the hell, man?" Even though it was stupid against someone with super
149 powers, I got up pissed. "I'm just trying to help!"

150 The Raven's face relaxed. "I know, son. I get it. It's just..." He shook his head.

151 I knelt back down next to him. "Just what?"

152 "Look." He locked eyes with me. "I appreciate what you're trying to do. I really do.
153 But I need you to listen to me, son. You need to get out of here. Now."

154 Fear stabbed into me with every word the man spoke. I spun, half expecting a cadre
155 of thugs spilling into the alleyway. Then I thought of all the people—firemen, police,
156 paramedics—still milling about in the street. "Is the Obliviator coming back? I have to
157 warn everyone to get away!"

158 “No, son. It’s nothing like that.” The Raven’s shoulders slumped, and for the first
159 time I noticed how old he looked.

160 It made sense—I had been following his exploits on TV since I was a preteen. The
161 dude had to be in his fifties! The realization made me look at him in a whole new light. I
162 bent over and hooked my hands under his arms. “Well, at least let me help you up.”
163 But the Raven made no attempt to move, and I failed to budge him by a hair.

164 Instead, his head drooped. “I can’t get up, son.”

165 “What do you mean? There’s nothing on your... oh...”

166 He stared up at me, an unmistakable look of defeat plastered over his features. “I
167 can’t move my legs. I can’t even feel ‘em.”

168 My hand went unbidden to my mouth. “But you... your... invuln...”

169 The Raven gave a mirthless laugh. “Apparently not, son. Apparently not.”

170 Then his request hit me full in the chest. “And you want me to leave you here...
171 why?”

172 Giving me another broody chuckle, he fished out a steel vial from a hidden pocket.

173 “Look, kid. The world we Supers live in is different from yours.” With the flick of his
174 thumb, he sent the cap twisting off and whirling into the darkness of the alley. “Still, it’s
175 much the same, as well. I’ve felt the changes in me for some time now. Not much at

176 first... just little things, you know?" He looked up at me as if I could have any hope of
177 relating to what a Superhero considered "a little thing."

178 He shrugged when I failed to answer. "Bruises that healed slower than they should.
179 Hell, bruises that should've never been bruises in the first place."

180 Tilting his head back, he drank down whatever the small steel container held. He
181 made a face like a four-year-old taking medicine for the first time. Sticking out his
182 tongue, he made a gagging sound. "That's why I had the Good Doctor whip me up
183 some of this."

184 Pointing to the vial, I wondered how many medical advancements the Supers hid
185 from us Normals. If one dose could fix up the Raven, what would it be able to do for
186 that poor blond-headed woman earlier? "So, how long should it take for that stuff to
187 kick in?"

188 "Shouldn't be too long." He tossed the empty container into the dumpster and lay
189 back down. "You can be running along now, son."

190 There was no way I was going to leave the Raven laying helpless in a back alley. Not
191 that I had any aspirations of protecting him if a Rogue Super reared their ugly head.
192 Still, for me it was the principle of the thing. Besides, how often had I dreamed of
193 having a chat with the one and only Raven?

194 Instead of doing as he directed, I sat down cross-legged next to him. This caused
195 him to prop himself up on his elbows, giving me a hardened look. "I said, beat it kid!"

196 As a paramedic, I had dealt with people who did not want my help. I just smiled. "I
197 got nowhere to be. I can wait at least until you are able to stand."

198 The Raven laid back down and closed his eyes. "I'm afraid that's not how this
199 story's gonna end, son. But I guess it no longer matters. Stay if you want."

200 "Wait? What?" My heart skipped a beat. "What was in that vial?"

201 His silence did nothing but stoke my panic.

202 Jumping to my feet, I rushed to the dumpster. "What was in that vial!" Trash filled
203 the bin almost to the rim. I gave a half-hearted attempt at moving it around, but in the
204 dim light of the alley, I realized it was hopeless.

205 Spinning, I dropped to my knees and yanked open my bag. I knew its contents by
206 heart, and was certain I had nothing to combat poison. Still, I searched with the
207 ignorant hopefulness of a child.

208 A black-gloved hand reached out and rested on top of mine. "I guarantee you, son,
209 there's nothing in that bag that will counteract what the Good Doctor put in that vial."

210 Shrugging off his hand, I continued searching for a few more moments. Finally, my
211 shoulders slumped and my breath left me with a sigh. Fat tears sat in the rims of my

212 eyes and I blinked them away. I let the silence build between us, not wanting to look at
213 the man I had known for so long, yet had just met for the first time. The Raven lay back
214 down, content to let the silence stand between us.

215 I couldn't. "Why?"

216 Without opening his eyes, he waved one hand in a "whatever" gesture. "Why
217 what?"

218 "Why would you... Why let it end this way?"

219 My statement caused him to laugh with genuine mirth this time. "This wasn't a snap
220 decision on my part, boy! I've had a good run. Besides, there ain't no pension fund
221 waiting for me. No Medicare to see me through to my golden years."

222 "What?" It was not the answer I was expecting. "You're committing suicide because
223 you don't have a 401K plan?"

224 He shrugged again. "You make it sound so petty."

225 "Because it is petty!"

226 The Raven pushed himself up to his elbows and locked eyes with me. "How old are
227 you, son?"

228 It was my turn to give him the silent treatment. Though after a moment, I just felt
229 stupid for doing so. "Twenty-seven."

230 “It was almost sixty years ago when I found out I was different. Stronger, faster,
231 practically invulnerable.” He pulled his eyes from me and stared off toward the back of
232 the alley. “I didn’t ask for this. Never wanted it.” A spasm of pain raced across his face.
233 “You know why I do what I do?”

234 I shook my head. “No one knows anything about you. Who you are. Where you
235 came from. Nothing.”

236 “My mother was a nurse. She was one of the first to die when Supers started
237 appearing around the world. When so many went Rogue. One night while she was
238 working, a crazy Rogue Super who could not control her powers exploded. Wrong
239 place, wrong time, I guess.”

240 He looked back at me. “I was about three when it happened. After she died, I was
241 raised in a state home. It was not until I was a teen that I discovered I was one of them.
242 A *Super*.” He spat the word out like a curse. “I’ve seen what the newspapers have said
243 about me. The good and the bad. But I never cared much for any of it.”

244 Another spasm of pain ripped through the Raven, causing his entire body to tense.
245 Flexing his jaw, his lower lip quivered as he held his breath for a second.

246 It amazed me that he was strong enough to keep talking.

247 “You stayed here, to protect me—my identity—because you see me as something
248 I’m not. You think I’m a hero, son, but you’re wrong.” A seizure hit him, strong enough
249 to force the Raven to his back. “I did what I did out of spite, nothing more.” He forced
250 the words through clinched teeth. “I hated the Rogues for taking my mother from me.
251 And that hate was all I had. It’s what kept me going all these years.” His jaws clenched
252 and he fell silent for a moment. “Doesn’t matter now. It’s almost done.”

253 “But like this...?” I couldn’t believe what was happening. It all seemed... surreal.

254 The Raven’s eyes fluttered open. “You know who the real Superheroes are in this
255 world?” His words came out in a croak, and it killed me to see him in such pain and be
256 powerless to do anything about it. Raising his arm, he poked a gloved finger into my
257 chest. “People like you.”

258 His face went slack and his arm dropped to the dirty pavement. I watched as his
259 chest compressed the last breath from his lungs. His eyes were still locked with mine,
260 though they held no life.

261 I knelt there, speechless. This man had told me almost nothing about his past, yet I
262 suspected he’d opened up more to me than to anyone he’d ever known. As I stared
263 down into his lifeless eyes, an understanding of how difficult it must be to live life as a
264 Super began to form in my mind. I knew it was only the tip of the iceberg.

265 What had this man lived through? What had he experienced?

266 I felt the tears on my cheeks before I realized I was crying. I'm not sure what hurt
267 worse, the loss of this man's life or the certainty that no one would ever know who he
268 truly was.

269 I looked around the dingy alleyway and it struck me how mundane the place was to
270 have been the scene for such a pivotal event. Regardless of his reasons, for nearly fifty
271 years the Raven had fought against the Rogue Supers. He had stopped innumerable
272 crimes, saved countless lives. And never had he asked for anything in return. Even in
273 death, he asked for nothing.

274 *You may not have asked for anything, but I can still give you something.*

275 I rushed from the alleyway and had to throw a hand over my eyes to protect them
276 from the harsh glare of the sun. Very little had changed. I'd been in the alley for
277 perhaps half-an-hour at most.

278 It felt like I'd been in there a lifetime.

279 Emergency vehicles littered the area. Sprinting to the nearest ambulance, I was
280 elated to find it still held a gurney. I unlocked it and pulled it out, letting its wheels fall
281 into place. I took a moment to search the side compartments until I found what I
282 needed.

283 With gurney leading the way, I raced back to the alleyway. I'm not sure if anyone
284 noticed me, but if they did, they didn't even ask if I needed a hand.

285 When I got back to the Raven, I cut his costume off and stuffed it into a half-full
286 garbage bag from the dumpster. It took everything I had to roll him into the body bag—
287 a bit more than I had to get him on the gurney. I'm still not sure how I managed it.

288 As I exited the alleyway, Marcus drove up in our unit. I was glad to see him. I think
289 I was prepared to do it, but I was not looking forward to stealing another team's
290 ambulance.

291 Parking, he jumped out and walked over to me, a confused look about him as he
292 pointed to the body bag. "Is that...?"

293 "Yeah."

294 "Is he...?"

295 I nodded. "Yeah."

296 "But I thought he was..."

297 I gave him a mirthless laugh that mirrored the Raven's. "Apparently not, son.
298 Apparently not."

299 He gave me an odd look, but let my comment slide. "What are you playing at?"

300 I ran a hand through my sandy-brown hair. “I was thinking I would take him to the
301 morgue, register him as a John Doe.”

302 Marcus made a face like I’d just slapped him. “You think that’s what he’d want? If
303 no one claims him it’ll mean a state cremation.”

304 Lining the gurney up with the back of our unit, I shoved it in and locked it into
305 place. “Oh, I have a funny feeling someone’s gonna claim him. Then those someones are
306 gonna make sure he gets a proper burial. Something nice, I should think.” I turned and
307 smiled. “But not too nice. The someones who are claiming him don’t have a ton of
308 money.”

309 Marcus made his face again. “You mean...?”

310 “Yeah.”

311 He kicked a piece of brick on the ground. “Oh, man! I was gonna use that money
312 when we were in Vegas!”

313 “I know.” My grin broadened. “But you got my back, right?”

314 His frown deepened. “Man, I always got your back, Bro.” He held out his fist and
315 we bumped.

316 We climbed up into the cab and I threw it into reverse. Before I took my foot off the
317 break, I paused and turned to Marcus. “You know, the Raven was right.”

318 Marcus looked confused. “About?”

319 Pointing out the front window, I indicated all the people still picking through the
320 destruction. “You don’t have to be a Super to be a hero. You only have to be willing to
321 give more of yourself than you take.”