

**THE AMAZING  
ADVENTURES OF  
NATE BANKS**

**THE COMIC CON**

*by*  
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***For Theresa, Teacher Dave, Mr. Dell'Ergo,  
Mr. Wheeler, Miss Tarkoff, and all the other  
teachers who helped me get here.***

***(Especially the ones who put up with kids reading my books  
in class when they should be paying attention . . .)***

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## ***Donut Stop Believin'***

It was a typical Thursday afternoon—or at least what had become typical for me—and I was training in the damp cave that served as Doctor Nocturne's secret headquarters. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a fuzzy yellow blur headed in my direction. I had to bend my knees to maintain my balance while I leaned backward, allowing the tennis ball to sail harmlessly past my chin. Quickly, I straightened up and focused on the four TV monitors in front of me, their images cycling every few seconds.

Three sprinters reached the finish line at the same time, a man hailed a taxi, a flag fluttered in the breeze, and a scared cartoon pig stared out his window at an angry wolf on his doorstep. One at a time, the images changed. The image of the flag became one of a lizard darting its long tongue out to nab a dragonfly, and a second later,

the image of the little pig in the house made of sticks switched to an image of three kids playing soccer.

Another tennis ball headed toward my legs. I leapt off the narrow stone pillar where I stood, relying on my legs to find their own way back onto the small, flattened surface. By now, I hardly ever fell, even when I wasn't looking. And I rarely looked, since I didn't dare take my eyes off the monitors.

My left shoe hit a patch of moss that was growing on the flattened stalagmite, but my right leg instinctively adjusted itself to support my weight until I had a more solid footing.

For two months, I had been training every Monday and Thursday after school. I'd gone from struggling just to stand upright on one of the slippery, slimy stalagmites to jumping easily from one stalagmite to another. Even so, every training session seemed more difficult than the last.

After I spent almost four minutes dodging, leaping, and ducking while keeping my eyes on the hundreds of pictures and video clips on the monitors, my legs couldn't take any more. I saw the tennis ball heading toward my chest, but when I rolled my shoulder away from it, the heel of my shoe slipped off the stalagmite, and the rest of my body followed.

Lying on my back, I stared up into the impatient face of

the man I used to know as Doctor Nocturne. A few weeks earlier, he had officially passed on the name and the duties as Kurtzburg's resident superhero to his daughter. He now went by the name Keystone. The Phantom Ranger had suggested it because the former Doc Noc was an essential part of the superhero community, providing training, equipment, and support to anyone who needed it.

Also, Keystone sounded better than his real name, which was Orpheus.

"How many people did you see wearing blue shirts?" Keystone asked with his gruff Southern accent. "What was the license plate number on the white pickup truck? Where did the man drinking the coffee buy it?"

"Blue? I think seven. Maybe eight," I answered. "The license plate on the white one started with a four. Four NW . . . J, maybe? Then I think five-seven-six. And if you're talking about the guy who was hailing the taxi, his coffee cup said 'Donut Stop Believin'."

Keystone set his jaw and frowned slightly, offering a hand to help me up. "Close enough, I guess."

I smiled, knowing that "Close enough, I guess" translated to "Wow, great job! I'm very proud of you!" in Keystone-ese.

With a tug, Keystone pulled me to my feet. He might have been retired from day-to-day crime fighting, but

you'd never guess it from looking at him. Apart from a few gray hairs and the cane he leaned on, Keystone would have fit in alongside any superhero you could name. With his broad chest, powerful arms, and stern, chiseled facial features, Keystone looked about half his age.

The same couldn't be said for Hubert.

Once upon a time, before my dad was born, Hubert had been a superhero named the Dart. He'd long since hung up his uniform and settled down in a condo in Florida. But then, two months ago, a little incident with the supervillain Red Malice had pulled him out of retirement for one last showdown.

When I first met Hubert, we were in a hospital, and I mistakenly assumed he was a patient. His withered old body leaned desperately on a walker, and tubes from an oxygen tank ran up into his nose. They didn't seem to do much good, though, since he couldn't make it through two sentences without taking a break for a deep, rattling gasp.

That made it all the more surprising when he had run from Maryland to California in less than ten minutes. He could have done it faster, too, if he hadn't stopped to change clothes in Florida.

The Dart's superspeed came from the Ring of Mercury, an ancient artifact that he'd passed along to Fiona, one of my best friends, during the showdown with

Red Malice. Now Keystone was training her, too. She was currently blazing along around at six hundred miles an hour on a treadmill—or something that resembled a treadmill but had jet engines attached. The two turbines spun the reinforced belt at nearly supersonic speeds. Even though sound dampeners were built into the engines, the entire cave echoed with the whine of Fiona’s superspeed training device.

“Balance!” Hubert shouted over the racket. “The most important thing to a speedster is balance.” He wheezed and coughed from the effort it took to shout over the roar of the turbines. “Don’t worry about going faster— hhhhheeeehhhh— worry about going straighter.”

Fiona had no trouble with speed. In fact, she struggled to go slowly enough to stay on her feet. She needed to learn to control herself. When she ran, it looked as though her upper body was trying to stay attached to legs that were barreling forward at an insane speed.

When I’d met Hubert, my hand had brushed against the Ring of Mercury for a split second. I had instantly had a nearly uncontrollable urge to run anywhere, in any direction. Just touching the ring for a second had left me completely exhausted, so I couldn’t imagine what wearing it on my finger would be like.

Keystone pulled the large switch that supplied power

to the treadmill, and the cave filled with a long whine as the turbines spun to a stop. Fiona stumbled as the path beneath her slowed. She slipped off the end of the belt and collapsed on the ground, desperately clawing the ring from her finger and dropping it on the stone floor.

“Balance,” Hubert reminded her. “If you’re leaning half an inch to either side, you’re going to be two miles off course after a minute’s run.”

With a shaking hand, he offered her a box of raisins from his fanny pack. She snatched it without a word, shredded the top, and dumped them all into her mouth at once.

“Remember what I told you,” he said. “Eat lots of potassium—hhhheeeehhhh—raisins, lima beans, potatoes, and squash. Superspeed drains it right out of you.”

As Fiona chewed, her eyes widened, almost like she was waking up from a nap. “Thanks,” she whispered hoarsely.

“What’s next?” I asked Keystone as he handed Fiona a bottle of water, which she emptied in seconds.

“Next, you guys head home,” he said. “It’s almost five o’clock in Kanigher Falls.”

Fiona and I made eye contact long enough to share a relieved sigh.

“You’re both coming along, but you have a long way



to go,” Keystone grumbled. That was one of the highest compliments I’d ever heard him give us. “Now pack up and head upstairs.”

I had nothing to pack, but Fiona carefully strung the Ring of Mercury onto a chain she wore around her neck, trying to touch the dark blue metal ring as little as possible.

The entrance to Keystone’s secret cavern is hidden along the craggy coast of Gerber Bay. To get in directly from the outside, you need to maneuver a narrow road along the cliffs that skirt the bay, wind down a tight tunnel, and cross a wide chasm. A car is too wide to fit through the tunnel, and a person could never leap across the chasm, so a motorcycle is the only option.

But since there were four of us, we had to use the other entrance, a long pneumatic elevator that runs from the rear of the cave up into the kitchen pantry of Orpheus Duncan’s palatial mansion. One at a time, we took the ride, like bullets fired back to the surface world.

Every room in the mansion was dark. Even when you entered a room and the lights came on—triggered by a motion sensor—they were dim and kept the corners hidden in inky blackness. Occasionally, you’d see a framed photograph of a younger Keystone with his daughter before she became Doctor Nocturne, or the

baseball bat that hung above the fireplace in the living room, but mostly you saw darkness.

Not that we had much time to see anything, no matter what the lighting was like. Keystone hurried us through the house to the garage, which was about the size of a museum. Fiona and I crawled into the backseat of a gray sedan while Hubert wrestled with his walker, trying to get into the front seat.

Keystone started the car. “When you get home, do your homework, get a good night’s rest, and stay out of trouble until next week,” he ordered us as he backed out of the garage.