

KID

NORMAL

AND THE **SHADOW
MACHINE**



ILLUSTRATED BY
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The Mystery at the Standing Stones

What goes through the mind of a superhero in the moments before a battle? Thoughts of bravery? Dreams of triumph? A dash of fear? A thrill of excitement?

Mary Perkins was thinking about pies. She gripped the handle of her umbrella tightly and squinted out of the *Banshee's* windscreen at the watercolour crimson streaks of a late October dawn painted across the sky ahead, as the Super Zeroes' car toiled and bumped along a very uneven forest trail. Her stomach was churning and sloshing like a washing machine full of soup.

The summons from the Heroes' Alliance had woken Mary in the small hours of the morning – her wristwatch-shaped HALO communication unit buzzing and flashing like an electric wasp trapped beneath the duvet. But

it wasn't just the rocky ride that was making Mary feel so sick, or the time of day. Mary was anxious and queasy for a whole host of other reasons too, none of which we can tell you about right now because it would completely ruin the plot.

Nellie sat at the controls, silent as always, peering ahead through the trees with both hands gripping the control wheel of the silvery-blue car. The *Banshee* was equipped with twin jet engines and they could easily be roaring through the sky towards their destination. But the instructions from the Alliance had been clear: no flying. Approach as stealthily as possible. This was war – and the first rule of war is: always try and take the enemy by surprise.

Mary was sitting beside Nellie in the co-pilot's chair. She tried desperately to focus on the mission at hand, even though her brain was still filling itself with thoughts about pies. She glanced down at the screen in the centre of the control panel.

'We should be almost there,' she said without turning her head, twitching her glasses up her nose with one hand and tapping buttons with the other.

'Looks like there are several other Alliance units meeting us at the edge of the forest.'

Behind her she heard a faint hissing noise, and turned to see that one of Billy's ears had inflated. 'Bit nervous,' he whispered.

'We're all nervous, Billy,' Mary replied, 'we can't afford to mess this up ...' A fresh wave of anxiety hit her, and her stomach performed a spectacular double somersault complete with twist. 'Again.'

Billy grimaced, smoothing down his errant ear.

Behind him, Mary could see Hilda. She was sitting cross-legged on the cold metal floor at the back of the *Banshee*, gazing out at the forest as it rolled past. Even the normally bubbly red-haired summoner of tiny horses seemed tense. And Mary knew why.

With that thought, her gaze flicked to Murph Cooper. The leader of the Super Zeroes was sitting next to Billy. He was pale, quiet and pensive. He was showing no interest in the control screen or, apparently, the upcoming mission. It was as if an invisible storm cloud of misery was radiating from him, raining drops of sadness across the whole team. He'd been like this for weeks now,

and it was becoming impossible to ignore the impact it was having.

The reason Mary had been thinking about pies was this: she'd always imagined their little band of Heroes as a kind of pie. She, Billy, Hilda and Nellie were like the filling. Individually they were all great ingredients, like meat, potatoes, vegetables and gravy, but it was Murph who brought them together so successfully. His leadership was the pastry that held the Super Zeroes in place. But over the past month, cracks had started to appear in that pastry. Their pie was falling apart. And it was all because of a new, unwanted ingredient ...

Mary watched Angel's silvery-blond hair reflecting light from the early morning sun. She was sitting on the floor near Hilda, looking bright and enthusiastic as usual. Apparently Murph's drizzle of angst wasn't hitting her.

It's not that there's anything bad about Angel, Mary thought to herself. It's just that she's the wrong ingredient for our pie. We're a delicious meat pie, and she's ... well, she's ...

'She's jam,' murmured Mary to herself decisively. That was it. *There's nothing wrong with jam in everyday*

life – it just has no place in a meat pie. In fact, it spoils the pie completely.

‘Did you just say, “She’s jam”?’

asked Billy from behind her.

Mary sat up straight and blinked, once again tapping at the instrument panel. A small winged letter ‘Z’ showed their own position. Several other symbols were converging on the same spot.

‘I said, “Jam ... erm ... stand by,”’ said Mary loudly. ‘We’re here.’ Looking up and out of the windscreen again, she could see that they were approaching the edge of the trees. A wide green sward was visible beyond.

‘Super Zeroes, halt at the treeline and stand by,’ crackled a voice over the radio.

‘Roger and wilco,’ Nellie replied softly, reaching out her right hand to ease back on the throttle.

The *Banshee* slowed to a standstill at the very edge of the forest.

They were close to a huge clearing that sloped uphill to a jagged stone circle. Its monoliths were silhouetted against the crimson sky, and a deep



ditch had been dug near the crest of the low hill surrounding them.

‘Ooooooh, a henge!’ exclaimed Hilda, moving up beside Mary. **‘I love a good henge!’**

The excitement of seeing an ancient monument seemed, for a second, to have overtaken her worries about the risk of another failed mission.

The rising sun was framed perfectly between two of the gigantic stones. Sunbeams fired across the clearing towards them, cutting through the misty dawn like lasers. It really did look extremely cool.

‘All units in position,’ came a serious voice over the speaker. Mary glanced back down at the control panel. The symbols representing different Heroes’ Alliance combat units were now arranged in a rough circle around the edge of the clearing. Whoever their target was, they had them surrounded.

‘Attention all units,’ came the voice again. ‘This is your mission commander, Vapour Trail.’

‘Oh wow,’ said Hilda, wide-eyed. ‘Vapour Trail’s, like, the best skimmer in the whole Alliance. **She’s a total legend.’**

Mary was heartened slightly by this news. Even if Murph wasn't going to shake himself out of his grump, at least the mission as a whole was in the hands of a highly skilled Hero.

'We have surrounded one of the key players in the Alliance of Evil,' Vapour Trail went on. 'He is known as The Druid. We have intelligence that he's on the verge of a major attack which could compromise us severely. His base is located underneath this stone circle.'

'Henge,' corrected Hilda quietly.

'Our mission for this morning is perfectly simple, people,' went on their commander. 'We will advance on the circle ...'

'Henge,' whispered Hilda.

'Shush!' Murph shushed her irritably. It was the first time he'd spoken in an hour.

'... and contain The Druid and any other Rogues we might find there,' continued the voice from the radio. 'All wings report in.'

'Super Zeroes responding,' said Nellie into her silver headset. 'Rain Shadow active ...'

'Equana active,' chipped in Hilda.

'Mary Canary active.'

'Balloon Boy active.'

'Kid Normal active,' came Murph's flat, small-sounding voice.

'Angel active,' completed Angel, filling Mary's brain with further thoughts of a jam-bespoiled meat pie.

More voices were now checking in over the radio. Hilda's eyes regained some of their sparkle as she heard the names: 'Ram-Man responding ... Kid Convection responding ... Lady Marmalade responding ...'

'What do you think Lady Marmalade's Cape is?' Hilda said. 'Do you think she's got, like, really sassy dance powers?' She clicked her fingers either side of her face and wiggled her head, attempting some amateur sass of her own.

Mary watched her friend fondly. Maybe this mission would be OK after all. In any case, it was their last chance.

'T-Rex responding ... Dough-Boy Responding ... John responding ...' the list over the radio continued.

'What sort of a Hero calls himself John?' Billy wondered. 'There are a lot of Heroes here, you know.'

This Druid character must be dangerous.' His ear puffed up again at the thought.

'All units advance,' Vapour Trail told the assembled Heroes. 'On my signal, halt your vehicles and engage. Let's make sure The Druid doesn't get the chance to put his plan into action, and we'll be home in time for eggs and bacon.'

Nellie moved the throttle gently forward. The *Banshee* rumbled out of the trees and started up the shallow gradient towards the standing stones.

Mary watched as more vehicles emerged into the chilly dawn light. To their left was a black-clad figure astride a large quad bike. On their other flank was a military-grade armoured car, painted in a camouflage pattern. Beyond that was a group of five figures on motorbikes.

The Heroes converged on the stone circle. As they neared the wide, shallow ditch, Vapour Trail gave the signal.

'We've got him surrounded,' barked her voice over the radio static. 'Out of your vehicles and engage. Don't let him through the cordon! **Move, move, move!**'

Inside the *Banshee*, the Super Zeroes were all looking at Murph, waiting for him to leap into action. But he seemed lost in thought. Mary was about to speak up herself when Angel took the initiative.

'Come on, then!' Angel urged the others, pushing herself to her feet and smacking the button that opened the side door. 'You heard the woman – it's Hero time!'

The Super Zeroes followed Angel as she pelted down the ramp, gasping as the chilly early-morning air hit their tired faces. They took up position in front of the car, just where the ground sloped downwards into the ditch.

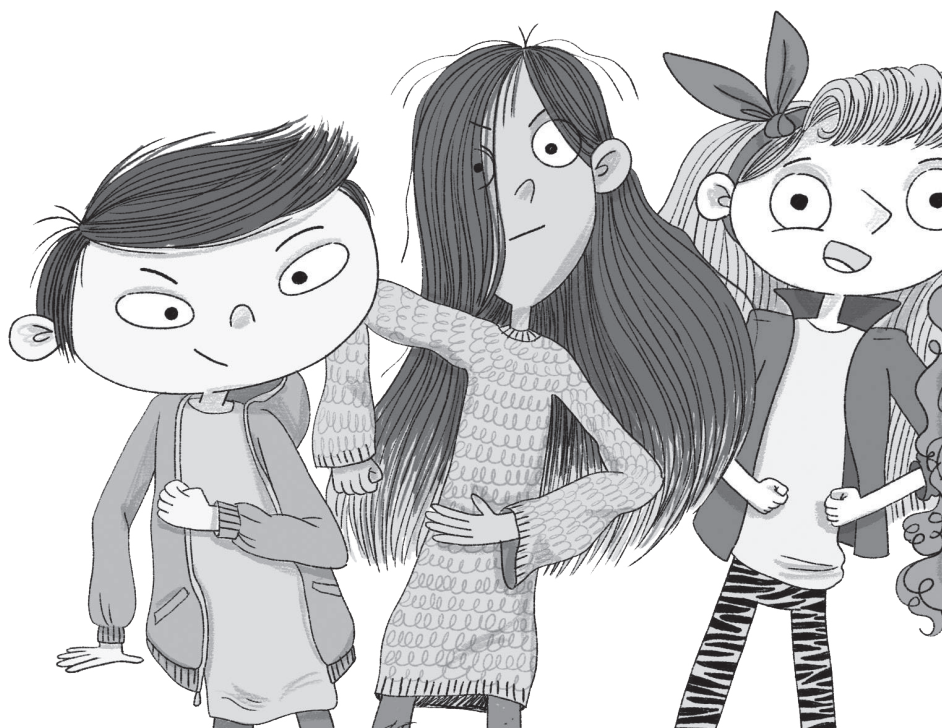
'There he is!' shouted a voice away to one side.

In the centre of the standing stones, they could see a figure struggling out from a gap between two fallen boulders. It was a tall, thin man with a straggly beard. He was dressed in a long pale-coloured robe and sandals, and his long unwashed hair trailed over his face.

'He doesn't look so scary,' said Mary out of the corner of her mouth to Murph. 'We've obviously caught him by

surprise in the middle of his organic spelt porridge.' She'd hoped to lift Murph out of his lethargy with some of their old banter, but he didn't respond. If anything he looked even more pale and sick than before. Mary sighed inwardly. This mission was vitally important – and if Murph wasn't going to lead them, they would just have to do without him. They would be a pastry-less pie. A stew, in fact.

'Hey-do the dilly-do, ding-dong a-dill-o!' cried The Druid in a high-pitched, nasal voice, looking at the ring of fearsome Heroes



arranged around his stone circle. *Henge* – sorry, Hilda.

‘I see I have some guests for breakfast, dill the dill-o.

**Hey nonny, ninny-neigh, ting-tang
a-spimp-o.’**

‘O-kaaay ...’ Mary turned to the others. ‘I think we’re dealing with a grade-A, certified, one-banana-short-of-a-monkey-brunch kind of villain here.’

Angel nodded and moved across to stand beside her. Murph stepped sadly into the background.

‘Ping-pong, a-pill-o,’ continued The Druid, spinning on the spot and hopping from leg to leg like an exotically



dressed heron on a hot beach. 'My guests look like they want to play, holl the derry-doll. **Ka-BLAMBA!**'

He gestured with a wizened hand at the armoured car next to the *Banshee*. There was a huge crash as a large bush grew out of the ground beneath the vehicle within seconds, flipping it over backwards. It rolled down the hill and slammed into the trees below.

'Ha! Flower Power!' screamed The Druid. 'You just got rhododendron'd!'

'Charge!' shouted the voice of Vapour Trail from the other side of the circle.

Then they saw her – a tall woman with highly muscled arms and legs, floating a couple of metres off the ground. They watched as she flipped herself horizontal and flew directly at The Druid, leaving a smoky haze behind her in the dewy air.

But before she reached him, The Druid spun rapidly on the spot, moving his hands together in a complicated gesture. A web of vines sprang up between two of the standing stones, and Vapour Trail was trapped as she tried to fly through. She struggled vainly as the tendrils twined their way around her arms and legs.

'Seize him!' she shouted desperately. 'He mustn't get away!'

'Let's roll,' shouted Mary to the others, pelting across the wide grassy ditch and up the other side towards the stones. Angel's silvery-blond hair flew in the chilly breeze to one side of her, Hilda's red curls bobbed on the other.

Several teams of Heroes had already converged on The Druid's lair, and they struck with all their might. They hit him with the power of their combined Capes, one Hero shooting bolts of fire at him from her wrists, and another attempting to trap him between thick sheets of ice that he conjured from nowhere. But The Druid was ready for them. He summoned saplings out of the earth that shattered the ice and allowed him to scramble up on top of one of the stones. Then he held back the other Heroes by creating clumps of mistletoe that quickly filled the ditch with springy shoots that were impossible to cut through.

'Mistletoe the dilly-o!' he taunted them in his thin – and, let's be frank here – really, really irritating voice. **'Wing, wong a-willow.'** Next,

a circle of trees sprang up around him, completely concealing him behind their golden, drooping branches.

'This is like watching one of those garden makeover programmes on fast-forward,' panted Billy. 'I wonder if he's going to add a water feature?'

'We're about to add a kick-his-butt feature,' said Hilda grimly. It didn't make a huge amount of sense, but give her a break. It's actually not that easy to make up quips in the middle of a battle, whatever the films say.

Hilda's face creased in concentration and her two tiny horses popped into existence. 'Go and keep an eye on the New Age weirdo,' she told them, and they cantered off between the willow trunks.

'Horsies!' Mary heard the surprised voice of The Druid say from behind his curtain of leaves. 'Where did you spring from, my fine-fetlocked fellows? The derry-o,' he added as an afterthought.

Mary looked around her. The Druid had disappeared into the clump of willow trees at the other side of the stone circle. Billy was beside her, and as she turned she saw Nellie appear between two of the enormous stones, with Angel following behind.

No other Heroes seemed to have made it this far – the only other person Mary could see was Vapour Trail, still struggling in her prison of vines.

'You four!' the commander shouted to them desperately. 'Do something!'

'Where's Murph?' said Angel as she joined the others. 'I thought he was behind me!'

Wide eyes and shaken heads were the only answer.

'He must have got caught in mistletoe-geddon back there, like everyone else,' Mary hedged.

One of Hilda's horses was trotting back out from the impromptu willow thicket, tossing its mane. 'Looks like he's still in there,' interpreted Hilda.

'Nellie, time to charge yourself up,' Mary instructed.

'Yeah, great idea!' enthused Hilda. 'I just checked my watch, and it's Druid-electrocuting o'clock!' Again, let's cut her some slack here. It was a very tense moment.

Nellie concentrated, holding out one hand, palm upwards. The clouds above them began to boil and thicken, and there was a sudden clap of thunder.

'Stormy-borm a-bill-bob!' they heard
The Druid mutter to himself like a total loon.

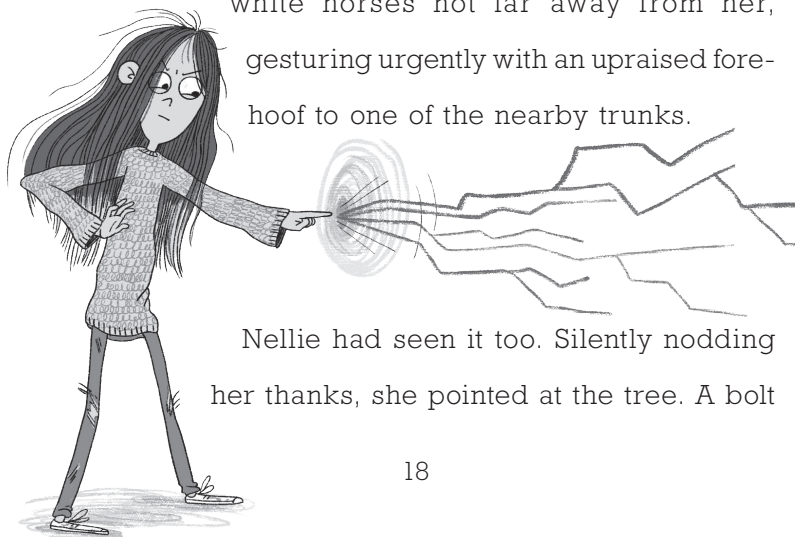
Nellie set her face in a serious scowl and stalked towards the trees, one palm raised. A fork of slim silver lightning – so thin it looked like a delicate shard of cut glass – suddenly sparked between the dark clouds and her outstretched hand. Her palm began to glow with bolts of blue electricity.

Mary beckoned the others and followed.

'Go get him!' Billy encouraged Nellie in a whisper. 'I'm right behind you if you need anything, erm, you know ... ballooning.'

It was dark between the willows, and Mary had to squint through the gloom to make out the stone atop which The Druid had been squatting. He was nowhere to be seen – but suddenly she noticed one of the tiny

white horses not far away from her, gesturing urgently with an upraised fore-hoof to one of the nearby trunks.



Nellie had seen it too. Silently nodding her thanks, she pointed at the tree. A bolt

of lightning shot from her finger, slamming into the trunk and prompting a startled cry of **'Ow, get off! That hurt!'**

He's forgotten all about the ding-dong a-dill-o's now the chips are down, thought Mary grimly to herself as Nellie fired another bolt.

The Druid leaped out from his hiding place, holding a hand to his singed posterior, which was emitting a very pleasing wisp of smoke. Like an overdressed squirrel, he grabbed a branch and swung himself into the boughs of the smoking tree, evading Nellie's lightning bolts as he scrambled rapidly upwards.



'I'm out of charge,' Nellie said to Mary, holding out her hand sadly. The blue electricity had indeed vanished.

'Back to the edge of the thicket,' Mary ordered.

They were so close to capturing this Rogue. Hope flared inside her like a match striking. If they could go back to the Alliance in triumph, just this once ... maybe everything would be forgiven.

Suddenly, at the edge of the willows, she saw the unmistakable flash of unwashed hessian between the leaves. This was her chance.

‘There he goes!’ she cried, drawing her umbrella out of her raincoat pocket like a knight of old flourishing his sword. As she did so, she pressed the button so the handle extended and the yellow – canopy? – sprang open. We’re not sure what that part of an umbrella is called, but you know what we mean, right? Anyway, Mary sprang into the air to head off The Druid, who was bending a large branch downwards.

The Druid grasped the end firmly, kicked off the trunk with his feet, and used the branch like a catapult to *sproing* himself skywards. Mary tried to counter him in mid-air, but she was met with a jet of hibiscus that hit her in the face and knocked her backwards.

The Druid landed on all fours atop one of the other standing stones and began to leap around the circle

from stone to stone, like a fugitive tree frog in unsuitable footwear. He quickly reached the other side of the circle and dropped out of sight.

Mary managed a shaky landing, brushing blooms off her raincoat, and raced after the other Super Zeroes, who were already giving chase – urged on by Angel.

‘Don’t let him get away!’ roared Vapour Trail, struggling to move as the vines entangling her started to wither away and vanish. The willow trees, too, had begun to wave themselves back into the ground like a garden makeover TV show in reverse.

As Mary dashed between two of the standing stones, she could make out The Druid crossing the wide ditch. He darted sideways, through the gap next to the *Banshee* where the armoured car had been, and raced away down the hill.

‘Back to the vehicles! After him!’ came Vapour Trail's voice from behind her.

Mary broke into a sprint to try and catch up with Nellie, who was already pounding up the ramp into the *Banshee*. She arrived just in time to see their pilot throw herself into her chair, flicking switches as she

did so and reaching for the throttle. But there was no sound – and no lights winking on the instrument panel. Nellie tapped the screen, looking bemused. It was blank.

'It won't start!' came a cry from outside. The Hero with the quad bike was kicking at the foot pedal in vain.

Mary turned and looked around at the other vehicles ranged around the brow of the hill. It quickly became apparent that not a single one of them would start. They could not give chase.

'Stand down, stand down!' Vapour Trail sounded furious as she strode across the ditch. 'He's gone. Mission failed. Repeat, mission failed.'

Mary walked slowly back down the ramp, exchanging worried glances with Billy and Hilda.

'Never mind,' Angel tried to encourage them as she approached. 'We did our best, didn't we? Shame Murph wasn't there to help, eh? What happened to ... Oh, here he comes.'

Mary turned to see Murph, dishevelled and ashen-faced, climbing out of the ditch not far away. 'Where were you?' she blurted out, only her icy shock keeping her temper in check.

'I got stuck ... you know, in the, um, ivy ... ?' muttered Murph, avoiding her eye.

Vapour Trail was scowling across at Mary as she spoke into her HALO unit: 'Affirmative, he's escaped. Some Heroes did reach the target, but they were unable to capture him. **Mission failure.**'

Several hours later, the five Super Zeroes stood awkwardly on the rug in front of Miss Flint's large, polished wooden desk. Two burly Cleaners, dressed in their black uniforms, had been waiting for them as the *Banshee* landed. They had curtly dismissed Angel and brought the others here to face the head of the Heroes' Alliance.

Miss Flint's desk was littered with maps, letters and important-looking documents, and a large screen up on the wall was flashing constant messages. **ROGUE ACTIVITY REPORTED IN SECTOR 317A**, read the urgent green letters. **CLEANER INTERVENTION REQUIRED IN SECTOR 562T**. She looked tired and stressed. And furious. Really, really furious.

'Well?' she snapped as soon as Mary had closed

the door behind them. 'I'm told by Vapour Trail that you lot were in a prime position to stop The Druid getting away, and you blew it. Another failed mission.'

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary saw Murph step forward slightly. 'It's not their fault,' he began falteringly.

But Miss Flint looked in no mood to listen to explanations. At that moment a large red telephone on the desk began buzzing and flashing, and she snatched at the receiver. 'Yes? Where? Dispatch any units you can spare. Now!' She slammed the phone down.

'Anything we can help with?' asked Mary meekly.

'You have got to be joking,' replied Miss Flint scathingly. 'On the basis of your recent missions, **I might as well send ... I don't know. A cat!**' Miss Flint wasn't great at sarcasm, but her message was coming across loud and clear. 'We're in the middle of a war here, in case none of you had noticed!'

There was an embarrassed silence. Nellie scuffed a toe of her sneaker across the swirly patterns in the rug.

Miss Flint sighed and clasped her hands in front of her. Her expression softened slightly as she looked around the room at the five of them, her gaze lingering

on Murph in particular. 'You all know that I have been your biggest champion,' she said in a strained voice. 'Especially since I've had to learn what it's like to be a Hero without a Capability. I had hoped that with Kid Normal at the helm, you would be a shining example of how the Heroes' Alliance could change for the better.'

Mary felt a tiny warm nugget of hope. Maybe, just maybe, they were going to be given another chance to prove themselves.

'It seems I was wrong,' continued Miss Flint.

The warm nugget of hope was plunged into a bucket of cold water, then placed on a flight to Antarctica with all the aeroplane windows open. And the in-flight meal was ice cubes.

The next three words Miss Flint said were, Mary decided, the three worst words in the entire universe, ever. Worse than 'Kiss for Grandma', worse than 'No Wi-Fi network', worse even than the previous record holders, 'Pineapple on pizza'.

'Hero status revoked,' said the head of the Alliance, looking regretful but determined. 'Please place your

HALO units on the desk. You're being stood down.'

'What? No!' blurted out Hilda. **'But ... there's a war going on!'**

'No buts,' countered Miss Flint. 'No "What? No!"s. As you rightly point out, Miss Baker, there is a war on. And you are helping us lose it. You've become a danger to the Heroes' Alliance, and it can't be tolerated.' She shuffled the papers on the desk back into order, seemingly unable to look them in the eye.

Mary felt mortified for herself, but even more so for poor Hilda, who had always been so proud of her status as a Hero. Surely, she thought, Murph wouldn't sit back and let this happen. Surely this would stir him to action. She looked across at him, but was startled to see that he had already taken his HALO device off his wrist and was dropping it on Miss Flint's cluttered desk.

'Murph ...' blurted out Mary. **'You're not ... giving up?'**

Murph said nothing. She tried to read his expression as he pushed past her and out of the door but he kept his head down. Shaking her head, Mary unfastened her own HALO unit, motioning for the other three to

do the same. They dumped them beside Murph's, each making a dull clatter as it hit the wooden desk. Miss Flint's telephone rang again as they began to file out of the room.

'Yes, I can talk now,' she snapped into the handset. 'The issue's been dealt with.' Her words were cut off as the heavy wooden door slammed closed behind them with soul-slapping finality.

Mary was even more aghast to see that Murph was already walking away from them. His slumped, defeated-looking back was some distance away, about to turn a corner in the long passageway.

'Oi!' she called after him furiously. Murph stopped, looking sheepish, as the four of them joined him.

Mary's mind was a jumble of frustration, confusion and – she suddenly realised – anger. Perhaps Angel wasn't the reason their pie had failed. Maybe it was the limp, soggy pastry that was supposed to hold everything together. After weeks of strain, Mary's kind and patient nature finally snapped, and she rounded on their leader.

'Well, congratulations,' she told him, her face burning. 'You just got us kicked out of the Heroes' Alliance.'

She was expecting Murph to snap back at her. A really good argument might have helped to clear the air. But instead, he just looked at her, ashen-faced and miserable.

He coughed slightly. 'Look, I know I've let you down ...' he said softly.

'Let us down?' crowed Mary sarcastically. 'Whatever makes you say that? Because we're basically trying to help the Heroes' Alliance fight this war without a leader? Because you just completely blew another mission by hiding in a ditch as The Druid scampered past you? Because you've not been bothered about the Super Zeroes for ages, because you're too busy looking after Angel?' She felt tears of frustration bubbling at the corners of her eyes but was too furious to wipe them away.

'Easy, Mary,' Billy broke in. 'Murph would never blow a mission on purpose.'

'And The Druid was a tricky customer,' Hilda piped up. 'I mean, the rest of the Alliance team didn't even get close to him. He managed to get one over on Vapour Trail and she's, you know, a proper Hero.'

‘WE’RE supposed to be proper Heroes!’ raged Mary. **‘We shouldn’t be going all starry-eyed about the older lot!’** Or be feeling inadequate because some of our Capes are a bit ... well, weird. Or because our leader doesn’t even have one.’ She felt her face flush. That had sounded more biting than she’d meant it to, but she was too frustrated to stop herself.

Murph looked truly stung at her mention of his lack of a Capability. ‘What happened to “You don’t need superpowers to be a hero”?’ he asked quietly.

Mary stared him in the eye, shaking with anger. Some part of her brain was telling her to stop – that there were some things that you just can’t take back once they’ve been said. But it was too late. She heard the words coming out of her mouth with a kind of cold horror: ‘Well, maybe you do need them, Murph. Maybe you do.’

We’ve all said things we don’t mean when we’ve been angry, or scared, or frustrated. ‘I hate you.’ ‘We’re not friends any more.’ ‘Yes, the cauliflower sounds delicious, thanks, please give me an extra-large helping.’

As soon as the words are out, you wish you could reach out and grab them back. But words – and especially the wrong words – are one-way, unstoppable missiles. Launch them at your peril: you never know who's going to get hurt.

The silence roared in Mary's ears. She realised she'd gone too far, but she'd been desperate to say something – anything – that would get a reaction. She just wanted to see even a flash of the old Murph. The one who would talk back to her – bicker, disagree,



laugh at her sarcasm or raise his eyebrows in mock weariness.

But he said nothing.

Without a word, Murph turned sharply away and walked off down the corridor, leaving the remaining four Super Zeroes staring dumbstruck after their leader.

A few minutes later, Mary, Hilda, Billy and Nellie were sitting in the *Banshee* preparing for take-off. 'I guess we'd better offer Carl the keys back,' Mary said sadly,



looking around at the bare, functional cockpit with its familiar smell of oil and warm leather.

'Is Murph ... coming with us?' asked Hilda in a small voice.

'I don't know,' Mary replied flatly. 'I just don't know what's going on with him, to be honest.' She sighed. 'I suppose I'd better go and see. Carry on the pre-flight checks,' she instructed Nellie, who nodded, head bent over her clipboard.

Mary returned to the spot where Murph had walked away from them. The passageway ended in a sturdy wooden door. Opening it, she found herself in a large ornamental garden. Its tall shrubs and frozen fountains were coated with crystals of frost. Mary's breath condensed in the chilly early-evening air as she crunched down a pathway, following the footprints that were clearly marked in the gravel.

She could hear faint voices coming from up ahead of her. One of them was quiet and calm, but the other sounded angry.

The footprints left the path and wandered across a patch of frozen grass, so her own footsteps were

muffled as she approached a large hedge, and peeped round the edge. Murph was sitting alone a little way away from her on a wooden bench. Mary spotted a glow in his hand and realised he was talking into one of the Heroes' Alliance's old HALO units, the ones that looked like a phone. But who was he using it to talk to?

Mary strained her ears to hear through the misty, cold air.

'Did you succeed in your task today?'

The voice was deep and mocking, and Mary had to clamp a hand to her mouth to stop herself screaming in shock and horror as she heard it. She would have recognised that voice anywhere.

It belonged to the most feared supervillain in the world. A Rogue with the ability to steal superpowers. The greatest enemy of the Heroes' Alliance.

It was the voice of Magpie!

Mary felt winded by what Murph said next. 'Yes,' he was replying. 'I managed to sabotage the mission. I disabled the electrics in the vehicles with a TEMP unit.'

'Splendid,' gloated the voice. **'Really, really splendid.'** My associate was able to escape, and I

hear he has something rather special planned which will keep those fools in the Heroes' Alliance on their toes. Little suspecting that you are right in their midst ...'

Mary felt as if the whole world had tilted and twisted around her. *Murph* had sabotaged their mission against The Druid! She felt as if she must be dreaming.

Was Murph ... working with Magpie?



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