

1

Multiplicity

People who lived in Multiplicity said it was the best place to live in the world. Everything about Multiplicity was big or fast or strong. The houses were grand, the streets were clean, and the office buildings were titanium star-scrapers with towers that went up into the bright blue sky.

But, best of all, Multiplicity had its very own super heroes!

Every day the *Multiple Times* had a new story about how Captain Excelsior and his daring band had foiled another sinister scheme or

locked up another mutant menace or overcome another rampage of reckless robots. When people looked up at the sky they didn't squint and wonder: 'Is that a bird or a plane?' They waved and cheered and shouted: 'Hurrah for Captain Excelsior and the Hero Squad!'

The super heroes were the official protectors of the city. Multiplicity had its own police force, of course, but they only dealt with the small crimes: burglaries and traffic offences and things like that. Whenever there was a really big problem, like an alien invasion or a doomsday device, the mayor would pick up a bright red phone to call the Hero Squad and get them to sort it out. Whatever the problem, they were always able to handle it.



The leader of the Hero Squad was Captain Excelsior. He was tall and handsome and had piercing grey eyes and gleaming white teeth. He'd been an ordinary man until the day he'd been unlucky enough to visit the city museum. It

was the same day as an alien spaceship had landed on it and squashed it flat. Captain Excelsior had been injured and nearly died. But the aliens hadn't actually been invading, they'd only stopped to ask for directions, and before they left they used their advanced alien technology to heal him. Ever since then he'd had incredible powers: he could fly, he could run faster than the speed of sound, he could shoot laser beams from his eyes, and he could hear a whisper in a soundproofed room five miles away. But he only used his powers for good and if someone was in trouble all they had to do was shout: 'Help! Captain Excelsior, save me!' and Excelsior would turn up right away to rescue them.

The second-in-command of the Hero Squad was Princess Power. People said she was the most beautiful woman in the world. She was also very intelligent and even before Captain Excelsior had been given his abilities she'd been defending the city, using all sorts of special machines she'd designed herself. She had a rocket pack, and she carried a golden bow and arrow and a utility belt full of gadgets and

gizmos. When she zoomed out of the sky with her golden hair rippling in the wind and her beautiful blue eyes searching for villains, innocent people would confess to crimes, just so she would notice them.

The third member of the Hero Squad was Animo. He came from a mysterious floating island in the Pacific Ocean where everyone was vegetarian and people lived in harmony with the animals. Animo was telepathic: he could speak to birds, insects, mammals, and amphibians in their own languages. Because of that, animals would do whatever he wanted. If he needed to cross a river, a hundred fish would make a bridge for him to walk over; if he needed to climb a cliff, a hundred snakes would knot themselves into a rope for him to climb; and if he needed to fly, a hundred birds would come and lift him up into the air.

Together, the Hero Squad was unstoppable. But, all the same, villains never learned and kept trying to take over the city and defeat the heroes. People in Multiplicity were often late to work because they stopped to watch the Hero Squad swooping down out of nowhere to foil an evil

plot—sometimes before it even started—and then give interviews to all the reporters and pose for photos in the newspapers. Living in Multiplicity was exciting! People enjoyed reading about the fiendish plans and daring exploits in the *Multiple Times*, or watching the latest deadly device trying to take over the city . . . as long as it was from a safe distance away.

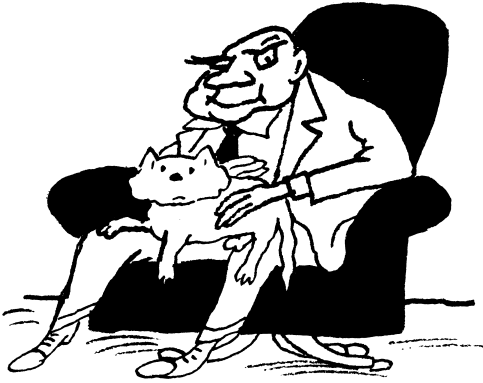
But not quite everyone who lived in Multiplicity admired the Hero Squad.

Dr D. Void was having a bad day.

Bad was D. Void's reason for being. He was a villain, and not just any common villain either. He was an Arch Villain. He was the one responsible for suggesting sinister schemes, manufacturing menacing mutants, or rows and rows of robots designed to rampage across the city.

He did all this from his lair, in a secret location deep beneath the city. Dr D. Void was very proud of his lair and had spent a lot of time designing it so that it fitted with his idea of what an Arch Villain's lair should look like. It had

secret passages and false walls, it had a laboratory packed with devices for taking over the world, it had hundreds of henchmen ready to do whatever the boss commanded, and thousands of television screens from which D. Void could see what was happening anywhere in the city. Right now those television screens were showing something very bad—and not bad the way D. Void liked it.



Everything had been going so well. Earlier that day, giant tanks driven by D. Void's henchmen had driven out of

the secret base and into the city. D. Void had smiled and laughed as the news stations had shown pictures of the tanks rolling over parked cars and knocking down phone boxes, and people panicking and running away to avoid being squashed. The giant tanks had rolled right up to the doors of Multiplicity's biggest jewellery store and blasted open the

glass windows and all the jewellery cases. Then they had used massive shovels to pick up rings, bracelets, and necklaces and load them into scoops attached to their roofs.

D. Void had giggled and sniggered as he thought of all the valuable jewellery he was stealing. Building dreadful devices cost money and he had to pay the wages of all his hench-people as well. He was looking forward to getting all that lovely glittery gold and silver and those gems into his hands. He might have to construct an extra large safe to fit it all in. But just as he was doodling a design for a wickedly clever combination lock, the television screens started to show something new . . .

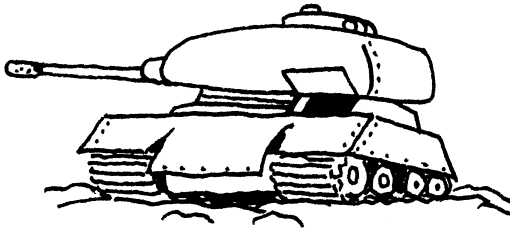
The Hero Squad had arrived. Princess Power touched down in a cloud of pink smoke from her jetpack and the news cameras showed her crossing her arms and shaking her head as she stood outside the jewellery store. Dr D. Void grabbed his remote control and turned the sound up just in time to hear her say, 'You villains just made a big mistake. I'm here to tell you that the shops close early today!'

Dr D. Void ground his teeth. Heroes always

had some kind of smart remark to make like that. It was adding insult to injury the way they treated evil schemes like some sort of a joke. Frantically punching buttons on his computer console he contacted the henchman in the first battle tank.

‘What are you waiting for, you idiot?’ he yelled. ‘Blast her!’

In the first tank the henchman heard D. Void’s voice come booming out of the



speakers and rolled his eyes. He didn’t want to remind the doctor that he’d told them to fire only on his orders. Instead he pulled the levers that would turn the blasting turret around and looked through the periscope to aim the weapon at the princess. He saw her tossing her blonde hair and winking at him,

but only for a second. Then Captain Excelsior zoomed up in front of her and his eyes glowed red as he looked at the tank. The henchman slammed his hand down on the fire button and there was a terrible tearing sound and a loud bang. As the inside of the tank filled with smoke, the henchman coughed and choked and fumbled for the door release so that he could escape.

Back in the lab Dr D. Void could see what had happened on his television screens. Captain Excelsior had used his laser vision to weld the gun turret closed, and when it fired it had exploded like a burst banana.

‘Don’t use the blasters,’ the doctor ordered, punching buttons so he could talk to the henchmen in all the other tanks at once. ‘Just roll right over them! Crush them like bugs!’

The tanks started to move backwards to where the princess and Captain Excelsior stood but before they reached them, the television screens went black and fuzzy. Dr D. Void reached for the computer console, trying to get rid of the static, but then he realized it wasn’t something wrong with the screen. Animo had

arrived and with him was a swarm of insects, and not just any insects. They were hornets, the largest, most aggressive type of wasp.

The hornets zoomed up to the tanks and poured through the blasting turrets and into the jewellery scoops, buzzing angrily. After five minutes the doors of the tanks opened and the henchmen came running out, rolling and jumping to try to get away from the stinging insects.

'You cowards, get back in there!' Dr D. Void yelled but his henchmen couldn't hear him. All he could do was pound his fists on the computer console as he watched the Hero Squad taking their bows, as all the people who worked in the shop came out of hiding and cheered.

Then a news reporter appeared on one of the television screens saying, 'Another inspiring victory for the Hero Squad. Stay tuned as we go to an exclusive interview with Captain Excelsior himself.'

Dr D. Void grabbed the remote control and pressed buttons at random to change the channels. Unfortunately he pressed the ones for the Natural World and the Military History channels and all his screens filled up with

pictures of wasps and tanks. With a shout of frustration he pulled a blaster out of his pocket and fired at the screens instead. Thirty seconds later he was reeling out of the room, his eyes streaming as he tried to get out of the thick black smoke.

Meanwhile, Captain Excelsior was still taking his bows, Princess Power was posing for photographs, and Animo was giving autographs to anyone brave enough to approach him through the swarm of hornets. A news reporter rushed up to the Hero Squad, with a camera crew following behind her, eager for her exclusive interview.

‘Captain, please let me be the first to congratulate you on behalf of the people of Multiplicity on another heroic victory,’ she said breathlessly.

‘Thank you.’ Captain Excelsior beamed at the cameras. ‘But I’m only doing my job. I’m just happy we could stop the thieves and save these honest people’s business.’

The owner of the jewellery store certainly did

look very grateful; he was kissing Princess Power's hand in thanks. However, the staff looked less happy. They'd realized that they would be the ones who'd have to clean up the broken glass and get all the jewellery out of the wrecked tanks. Cleaning up wasn't hero work.

Sure enough, when they'd finished giving their interviews, the Hero Squad left, waving one last time for the cameras. Animo's hornets had made themselves into a flying carpet, lifting him up into the air to join Captain Excelsior and Princess Power as they flew back to their official headquarters in the Hero Heights skyscraper.

And in a small house on the corner of Excelsior Street and Futurus Avenue, a ten-year-old boy with straight brown hair and scowling brown eyes turned off the TV with a snap. He didn't like super heroes any more than Dr D. Void did and for a very simple reason. Captain Excelsior was his dad.