

1

Minus One

Multiplicity was one of the most exciting places to live in the world. Everything there was bigger or brighter or better than any other city. The skyscrapers were taller, the cars were faster, even the sky seemed bluer.

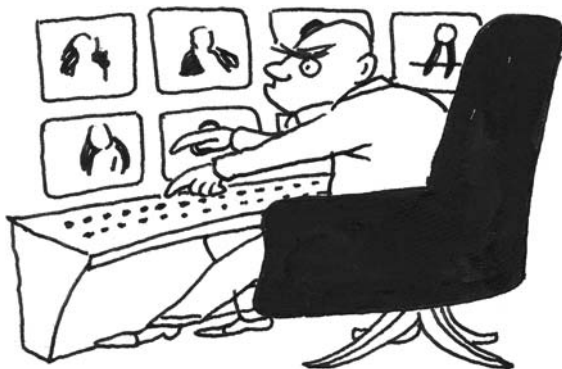
But most importantly, Multiplicity had the Hero Squad—its own super heroes. Captain Excelsior, Princess Power, and Animo had a base at the top of a skyscraper called Hero Heights and whenever the city was in trouble they'd come running, or flying, or with a herd of elephants—ready to save the day.

People said that Multiplicity must have its own arch villain as well. Someone must be responsible for all the cunning plans and evil schemes, and for commanding the criminals from behind the scenes. But the Hero Squad had never been able to find out who it was.

If they had, they might have been most interested in the news that Doctor Damian Void, respected scientist and renowned inventor, was leaving the city that very day in a spaceship of his own design.

Doctor D. Void waved goodbye to the watching crowd as cameras clicked, whirred, and flashed. He was amused that all the people cheering had no idea he was Multiplicity's secret arch villain.

As the doors of the spaceship slid shut he quickly went over to his big black chair facing a wall of computer screens and turned them on. Pressing buttons on his remote control he opened a transmission channel to his secret lair and one of the screens showed a muscled man with ginger hair sitting in an identical black chair.



Doctor D. Void's spaceship was decorated, like his secret lair, in shades of black. The secret base also had a large number of white angora cats which shed fur over everything, but D. Void had been persuaded that cats would not enjoy the trip into space.

'The final preparations have been completed,' D. Void said. 'I will be away for at least six months. I expect you to keep up our criminal campaign against the city, Tench.'

'Yes, Doctor.' Terry Tench nodded. He was feeling excited and nervous about being left in charge. As a professional henchman he didn't often get the chance to make decisions. He was already day-dreaming about taking over the whole city before the doctor returned.

'The countdown begins in five minutes,' the doctor said. 'Don't fail me, Tench.'

Turning off the control screen Doctor D. Void looked around. Black robots were zipping up and down the black corridors, checking that everything was ready to go. Black crates and barrels of provisions and equipment had been secured with black bolts and screws to the black plates of the deck. In D. Void's own cabin a black bottle of champagne was chilling in a black ice bucket. All the same, something was missing.

'Jewel!' shouted the doctor. 'Where are you?'

Jewel was D. Void's daughter. She had long shiny black hair and brilliant green eyes and she wanted to be a scientist when she grew up. She certainly didn't want to be a super villain, or a villainess, or even a henchperson. Jewel thought villainy was a lot more trouble than it was worth.

As she lived in a secret lair, she hadn't got a lot of friends. Her best friend was Toby Tench, Terry Tench's son. She was using her video phone to say goodbye to him and she noticed he was looking excited. Toby always said Dr D. Void's plans were pretty pathetic and sometimes Jewel

wondered if secretly he thought he could do a better job.

‘I’m just happy for Dad,’ Toby said, seeing that Jewel was frowning. ‘This is a big opportunity for him.’

‘A big opportunity to cause trouble,’ Jewel said. ‘Don’t forget you’re not a villain or a henchman, Toby. You’re a Zero.’

The Zeroes were a secret club. Jewel and Toby were members. So were Ben, Pippa, and Marcus: the children of the Hero Squad. They’d made friends because they were all embarrassed by their parents and weren’t impressed by fiendish schemes or daring deeds. The Zeroes weren’t on the side of heroes or villains. Instead they supported all the people who didn’t have special powers or wear costumes or stand out in any way.

‘I know!’ Toby said. ‘Don’t forget I’m starting at Ben’s school next week. It’s going to be great learning new things instead of just boxing and karate and how to salute.’

‘I’m excited too,’ Jewel admitted. ‘I’ll miss you all but we’re going to be exploring space. I can’t wait to find out what it’s like.’

'Maybe you'll meet aliens,' Toby agreed.

In the background, a countdown began to boom through the ship:

'Lift-off in sixty seconds, fifty-nine, fifty-eight . . .'

Reaching for the off-button, Jewel said:

'I'd better go. Say goodbye to the others from me. I'll call again when we pass Pluto!'

On the other side of the city, the rest of the Zeroes were watching the spaceship-launch on television. A reporter was standing at the edge of the launch site.

'Today Doctor Damian Void and his daughter will be the first human beings to explore the solar system and the galaxy beyond,' said the reporter. *'Behind me you can see the spaceship Black Hole where the countdown has already begun. We go now to a direct link to the spaceship's computer pilot for the rest of that countdown.'*

They were in Pippa's bedroom and, as always, it was a mess. Pippa Power was a tomboy; she had short dirty-blonde hair and wore a grubby T-shirt and torn jeans. On her right hand was a pen and ink tattoo of a spider. Pippa loved sports

and her room had piles of roller-skates and tracksuits and games everywhere.

Pippa lived in Power Towers. Recently the Towers had been damaged by a horde of rampaging robots and had needed to be rebuilt. There was still scaffolding outside. The old Power Towers had been pink from top to bottom. Pink used to be Princess Power's favourite colour. Luckily she'd changed her mind about that and now Power Towers was a shinningly bright white on the outside. The inside mostly hadn't been painted yet although Pippa's room was finished and now had black and purple striped walls.

'I'm glad your room was finished in time for us to watch the launch,' said Marcus, as the countdown continued on the huge TV screen. 'It's really cool. So your mum went off pink after all the trouble with the robots?'

'Yeah,' Pippa grinned. 'Even her hero costume's red now. But she still has a lot of pink dresses.'

'My dad's changed a bit too,' Marcus said, still keeping an eye on the screen. Marcus was small and asthmatic and wore glasses. A lot of things

scared him, like animals and sports and anything large. This used to be a problem for him since his dad was Animo, a super hero who could control animals and who lived in the middle of his own private zoo. But during a crisis Marcus had shown his dad how good he was with computers and his dad had been so interested that now Marcus was starting to get more confident about everything in his life.

‘He’s stopped spending every day with the animals,’ Marcus explained. ‘He’s even got his own computer now,’ he added proudly. ‘And I’m teaching him how to use it.’

Meanwhile the countdown was nearly over and Ben waved at the other two to be quiet.

‘The spaceship’s about to take off!’ he said.

Ben was the leader of the Zeroes. This wasn’t because his father was Captain Excelsior. It was because when the Zeroes first met Ben had more reason to hate heroes and villains than any of them. His dad was always so busy saving the world he didn’t have much time for Ben. But he’d promised to change and this time Ben hoped it would be true.

‘Eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six . . .’

The rockets that powered the ship rumbled, glowing yellow, then blue, then finally white hot. Leaning forward the Zeroes joined in the countdown.

'Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . ZERO!'

On the television they saw the rocket rise up from the ground and streak up into the sky, rising higher and higher until it was just a dot. On the ground the crowd were cheering and in Pippa's room the Zeroes joined in.

Turning off the television, Pippa grabbed a packet of crisps from the table and opened them so messily that fragments went all over the room.

'I can't believe Jewel's going to be gone for six months,' she said.

'She's so lucky,' Marcus said, sounding envious. 'Imagine all the things she'll see, like comets, and supernovas . . .'

'I'm just glad the ship took off safely,' Ben said, finally relaxing. 'You have to admit, not all Doctor D. Void's inventions work the way they're supposed to.'

The others nodded. It was true. Doctor D. Void's fiendish devices were sometimes just a

little too fiendish for their own good. His robotic spiders had a tendency to climb up buildings and try to eat helicopters. His mechanical mole-men would dig huge holes and then sulk in the bottom. His mutants and monsters always oozed slime whether they were supposed to or not.

‘Where’s Toby?’ Marcus asked and Pippa replied:

‘He said he’d come as soon as he could.’

At that moment the door opened and they all turned to see a six-foot tall furry robot standing there. Poppet was one of Princess Power’s assistants and up until recently it had been a bright pink. Now its fur was a snowy white, like a polar bear or a yeti.

‘Your friend is here, Miss Pippa,’ Poppet said in its high squeaky voice and stepped aside so that they could see Toby standing behind it.

‘Hey, guys,’ he said, grinning. He had brought a bag of snacks with him and he poured them out on to the table as he came to join them. ‘Jewel said to say goodbye to you all and that she’d call on her way past Pluto.’

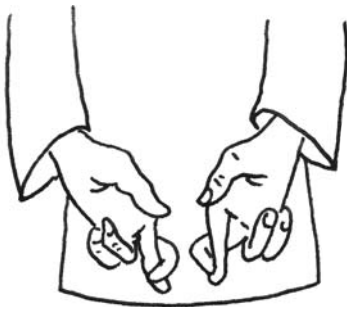
The Zeroes cheered again. But as they

quietened down there was a noise outside the window. It sounded as if it came from everywhere at once, a sort of whistling roar. They all looked at the window and then Marcus gasped and pointed.

'Look!' he said. High up in the sky was a small dot. But it was getting bigger. Something was falling through the air.

'Oh no.' Pippa ran to the window and opened it, climbing out on to the balcony and squinting up at the sky. The others joined her, all trying to see the object as it fell.

'Doctor D. Void does it again!' Marcus said.



Ben didn't say anything. His fingers were crossed on both hands and his eyes were shut as he wished with all his heart that Jewel would be OK.

Out on the streets, people had also noticed the falling spaceship. Standing on corners and

looking out of windows, they stared as it came plummeting down through the sky. Even for Multiplicity this was an unusual event and because they expected the Hero Squad to save the day no one wanted to stop watching.

On the balcony of Power Towers the Zeroes weren't quite as confident. They knew the Hero Squad could make mistakes. As the tiny dot got closer, Marcus grabbed a pair of binoculars from Pippa's room and tried to focus them on the spaceship. It was difficult because the ship was getting closer all the time, but finally he managed to get a fix on it and he gasped.

'What is it?' Ben said anxiously.

'It's a different spaceship!' Marcus announced. 'It's not the Black Hole. Doctor D. Void didn't get it wrong after all!'

'Let me see!' Toby said and took the binoculars. 'He's right,' he said after a minute. 'It's not black, for one thing. And it's round . . . like a flying saucer.'

'You mean it's aliens?' Pippa said excitedly. Although it was Marcus who liked computers Pippa had one as well which she mostly used for playing space invaders. Shading her eyes she

stared up at the sky. The spaceship was much closer now and the whistling sound was changing into a hum. The windows of the skyscrapers rattled and shook as the noise seemed to come from everywhere at once.

'It's slowing down,' Marcus said.

He was right, the dot no longer seemed to be falling, instead it was hovering over the city and they could all see that it was a silver disc, shaped a little like a saucer.

'It's landing, you mean,' Ben said and he was right. From their vantage point, they could see the saucer getting lower and lower in the air, until it was hovering over Circle Square, one of the biggest open spaces in Multiplicity.

'Come on then!' Pippa said, excitedly. 'We can get there in ten minutes if we run. You don't want to miss aliens landing, do you?'

'That depends,' Marcus said thoughtfully. 'If they're invading, I wouldn't mind missing it.'

But Toby and Ben were already running after Pippa and, checking his inhaler was in his pocket, Marcus followed more slowly. He was as relieved as they were that Jewel's ship was all right but he didn't think aliens landing was

anything to be pleased about. He'd played space invader games too and he knew the aliens always had the best weapons. Doctor D. Void had never managed to take over the city and Terry Tench wasn't likely to do any better, but space aliens sounded as if they might just manage it.

By the time the Zeroes reached Circle Square a crowd had gathered. This always happened in Multiplicity and normally the Zeroes just yawned. None of them were impressed by the Hero Squad's battles with mutants or machines or whatever D. Void had invented that week. But this time they had to push through the people to get a good view of where the saucer was still hovering just a couple of metres off the ground. Luckily, Toby was strong for his age and Pippa was tough but it took a while to get to the front of the crowd. Just as they were about to get into the front row Ben caught up with them and grabbed the back of Pippa's T-shirt to slow her down.

'Hold on,' he told them. 'Look who's coming.'

It was the Hero Squad. Looking up into the air they, and the rest of the crowd, could see three flying figures.

Captain Excelsior could fly and, as soon as he'd heard the news about the flying saucer, he'd gathered the rest of the Hero Squad and come straight to Circle Square. Now he posed on the top of a nearby skyscraper, waiting for the others to catch up. In his uniform and mask he looked brave and mysterious.



Princess Power had a rocket pack. This, like her costume, used to be pink. But now it was red, like her new jumpsuit, and a plume of red smoke followed her as she rocketed through the sky in a series of loops and swirls. The red smoke hung in the air for long enough for the people below to see she was spelling out words.

‘Never fear, the Hero Squad are here,’ Marcus read out, catching up with the others in time to see what was going on.

'She's such a show-off,' Pippa muttered, hiding behind a taller person in the crowd. If their parents spotted them, they'd probably be sent home and she'd miss all the excitement.

'They all are,' Marcus replied, spotting his dad.

Animo couldn't fly, but it didn't matter since he could speak with animals. A giant eagle was swooping through the sky with Animo hanging from a trapeze held in its claws. Heights didn't bother him and he was swinging back and forth on the trapeze and doing somersaults as the crowd cheered.

The Hero Squad landed in the square not far from the flying saucer and everyone went quiet, waiting to see what would happen. There was a loud hiss and from the middle of the saucer a ramp appeared, coming down to touch the paving stones. People held their breath as an eerie blue light shone out from the opening in the middle of the saucer.

Ben realized his fists were clenched. He wondered if he was the only one who remembered it wasn't the first time aliens had landed in Multiplicity. Ten years ago his father had just been an ordinary man called Keith

Carter. But he'd been unlucky enough to be visiting the city museum on the day an alien spaceship had arrived and squashed it flat. Keith had nearly died but the aliens hadn't meant to squash the museum, they'd only stopped to ask for directions and they'd apologized by rebuilding it and by giving Keith the special powers that had made him a super hero. That was all very well, but if they'd never come in the first place, Keith Carter would still just be an ordinary person. Ben was wondering if it was the same aliens this time and thinking about some of the things he'd like to say to space travelling busybodies who turned people's dad's into heroes without asking.

Toby was worried as well. His dad had only just been given his first chance to show that a henchman could run a lair of villains. What if these aliens were even more villainous than Doctor D. Void and tried to take over the city. Not only would the doctor be annoyed, he might blame Toby's dad for it. Even worse, what if they were heroes? Terry Tench might be able to hold his own against three super heroes, but if the aliens joined them he might be in serious trouble!

Pippa and Marcus were both squinting into the blue light. Pippa was wondering if the aliens were going to be oozing blobs or tentacled monstrosities and was rather hoping they would be both. Marcus was wondering the same thing and had his fingers crossed that they wouldn't be either. Around them the crowd whispered to each other as three shadowy figures appeared in the blue light and began to come down the ramp.

'They look human,' Marcus whispered, feeling relieved as he counted three people, each with the usual number of arms and legs and no tentacles whatsoever.

'Boring . . .' Pippa said, disappointed, but as the three figures marched down the ramp and faced the Hero Squad she was as fascinated as everyone else.

The aliens certainly looked human. The tallest figure was a man dressed in a blindingly white costume. He had a gold helmet that hid his face, a long golden cloak, and golden boots. It was an even more impressive costume than Captain Excelsior's and the man looked confident as he strode forward into the square.

The second figure was a woman. She had long

black hair and was wearing a blue jumpsuit that showed off her figure, but her face was hidden by a sapphire mask that glittered in the morning sunshine. People sometimes said that Princess Power was one of the most beautiful women in the world but, even with the mask, this woman might be the most beautiful in the galaxy.

The third was another man. He was wearing heavy metal armour that shone against his ebony skin. He had a metal visor over his eyes that displayed a shifting panel of coloured lights, like a computer screensaver. The lights were strangely hypnotic and the crowd's whispers hushed as he joined the other two.

The Hero Squad faced the newcomers and

everyone wondered who would speak first.

Captain Excelsior had just opened his mouth when the man in the white costume suddenly spoke in a voice that rang out across the square.



‘Greetings, people of Earth and citizens of Multiplicity,’ he said. ‘We come in peace.’

There was a cheer from the crowd. People might enjoy seeing the Hero Squad fight villains, but these newcomers looked very confident and it was a relief to know they weren’t planning to let loose with ray guns and laser beams in the city centre.

‘I am General Excellence,’ he said. ‘And these are my companions, Quanta and Mesmeron. We are super heroes from a faraway planet and we have come to Multiplicity to invite your bravest men and women to join with us in an intergalactic group to fight villainy. You can call us the Infinity League!’

The other two, Quanta and Mesmeron, turned to wave at the crowd as they cheered again and even the Hero Squad clapped.

But the Zeroes weren’t cheering. Pippa sniffed a bit as Quanta shook out her long black hair and blew kisses to the crowd.

‘Just what we need,’ she said, sarcastically. ‘A group of even bigger show-offs than the Hero Squad.’

Marcus wasn’t cheering either. The lights on

Mesmeron's visor were making him feel a bit queasy and he had to look away.

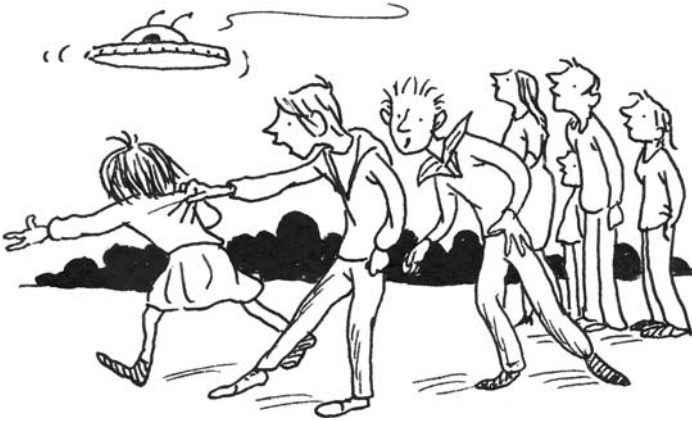
'Why do they have to wear masks?' he muttered. 'It's not as if anyone knows them here.'

'It's not as if anyone *wants* them here either,' Toby agreed angrily. 'How's my dad supposed to keep his job if there are six super heroes running around the city instead of three? It's not fair.'

'My dad was supposed to be spending the weekend with me,' Ben said sadly. 'I bet he won't have time now.'

It looked as if he was right. The Hero Squad were shaking hands with the Infinity League and it was obvious to everyone that they were inviting them to come to Hero Heights. The ramp closed up, leaving the saucer still hovering in the square. Then, as Captain Excelsior and the Hero Squad took off again, the Infinity League followed. General Excellence could fly as well as Excelsior could, Quanta's boots were rocket powered just like Princess Power's jet pack, and Mesmeron's armour hissed and whirred and then transformed into metal wings that lifted him into the air while Animo was still waiting for the eagle to return.

The crowd cheered again a couple of times and some of them hung around looking at the saucer, but it was clear the show was over. The Zeroes looked at each other rather glumly. A camera crew had arrived from one of the news stations and was still filming the disappearing figures of the heroes. A reporter was facing the camera and saying:



'... so on the very day the intrepid Doctor Damian Void sets off to explore the galaxy, the galaxy has come to us with an invitation for the Hero Squad to join in a daring new endeavour. Who knows what battles they'll be joining out in space ...'