KID NORMAL

AND THE SHADOW MACHINE



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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-blonde 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.

'Oooooh, 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.'**



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