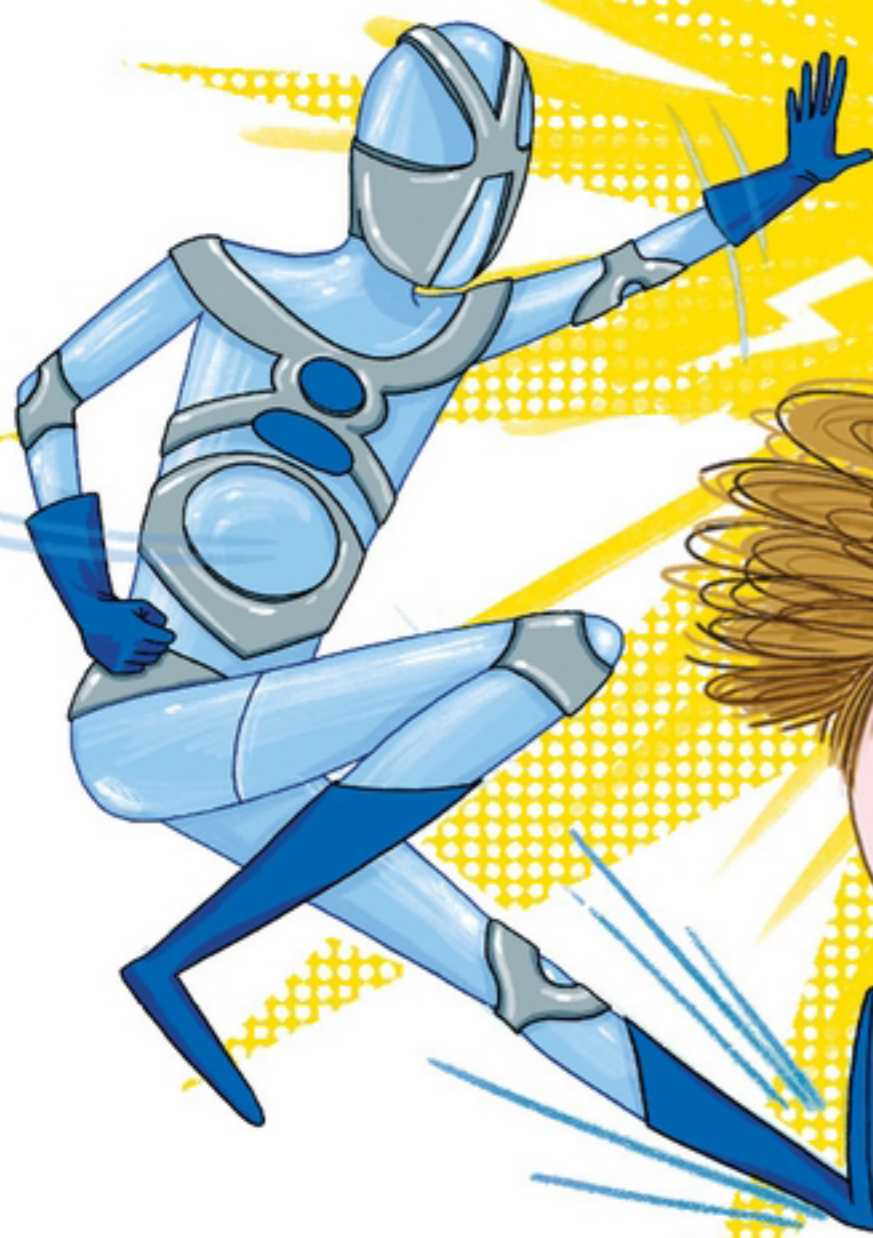


KID

NORMAL

AND THE ROGUE HEROES



ILLUSTRATED BY
ERICA SALCEDO

GREG JAMES



CHRIS SMITH

BLOOMSBURY

KID NORMAL

AND THE
ROGUE HEROES



**GREG & CHRIS
JAMES SMITH**

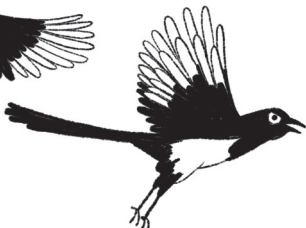
ILLUSTRATED BY
ERICA SALCEDO



BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
And four for a boy.
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret
never to be told.





1

The Treasures of Amasis

Running a team of crime-fighting superheroes is a complicated business, especially when you're not allowed to tell your mum.

And it's even worse, thought Murph Cooper as he glanced at his watch, *when you're supposed to be home by half past eight.*

Murph's mum had made him promise to be back in time for a special end-of-the-summer-holiday takeaway, but it was already seven forty and he hadn't even started to save the day yet.

'Showtime,' said Murph, turning to the rest of his team. 'Let's move.'

The five members of the Super Zeroes crunched up the gravel driveway in front of them. Up ahead was an impressive stone building with a large sign hanging from one brass handle of its entrance doors.

The sign read: **Museum Shut.**

Murph beckoned his team over to one side of the path, where they crouched down behind an enormous ornamental fountain.

'This is the place,' he hissed over the trickling of the water.

'So, what are we up against this time?' asked Mary, the late afternoon sunlight reflecting off her bright yellow raincoat. 'I suppose it's too much to hope that the HALO unit has actually given us some useful information for once?'

Murph pulled what looked like a mobile phone out of his pocket and stared at the green-tinted screen. Text scrolled across the top:

ROBBERY IN PROGRESS ... NEUTRALISE.

Beneath this was a map marking the museum's location with a blinking lightning-bolt symbol – and just next to it, a tiny winged letter 'Z' showed their own position. This handset was known as a HALO unit, and it was the Super Zeroes' only connection to the Heroes' Alliance. It had been handed to Murph months earlier by the head of the Alliance, Miss Flint,

on the day they'd become the youngest heroes ever to join that legendary but notoriously mysterious organisation.

Murph thought back to that day. None of them had known what to expect. What actually happens once you become a superhero? Is there a special shop where you pick up your costume? Do you get issued with a cool utility belt and a selection of gadgets? Does a wizened old butler come and live at your house to give you advice when the whole hero-ing lark gets a bit too much for you emotionally?

Murph now knew the answers to all these questions, and they were – in no particular order – no, no and no.

In fact, from what he could tell, the world of Heroes seemed to have changed a great deal since the 'Golden Age' of a few decades ago. These days, Heroes operated in the shadows, for fear of being exposed and causing panic in a world that was scared of anything seen as too different or hard to understand. So their missions were carried out in secret, using only the most basic information from the Alliance. No adoring crowds, no newspaper headlines and most

definitely no costumes. But still, on a few occasions this summer, the HALO unit had flashed its small green light to indicate that the Alliance had a job for the Super Zeroes, and, costumes or no costumes, Murph's heart always did a little skip like a mischievous lamb at the sight.

'Just says there's a robbery in progress,' he told Mary, looking at the closed front doors. 'But we can't go in that way – whoever's in there would see us straight away.'

It was a humid day, and Murph eased his sticky T-shirt away from his sweaty back as he cast his gaze about for another way in. High up in one honey-coloured stone wall, a window had been left slightly open. Below it was a wide window ledge and the blinking red light of a security camera.

'Nellie,' whispered Murph, 'we need to take out that camera.'

The figure at the back of the group silently stuck up a thumb. Nellie, who was wearing her usual ripped jeans and baggy jumper despite the heat, slipped out from behind the fountain. Darting from shrub to shrub

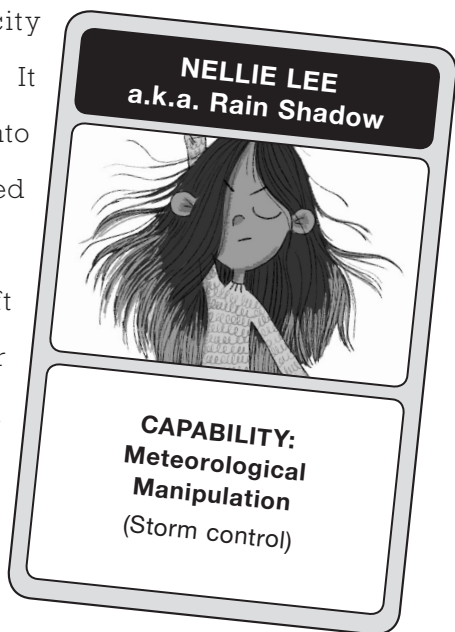
to avoid the camera's line of sight, she scuttled over to the wall, holding her hand out, palm upwards, as she went.

The clouds above the museum began to grow darker. There was a rumble of thunder, and all at once a lightning bolt forked down and hit the camera, which fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. Another, smaller bolt of electricity branched off and down. It seemed to disappear into Nellie's hand, which glowed with dancing blue fire.

Nellie made a swift chopping motion with her glowing hand and mimed wearing binoculars to signal to her friends the words, 'Camera's out.' That doesn't make much sense

written down, but get your hands out and have a go and you'll see what we mean.

'Good work, Nellie,' said Murph, as the others ran



over to join her. 'Right, time to get inside.' He turned to Mary. 'Would you do the honours?'

Mary nodded, producing a small, folded-up yellow umbrella from her raincoat pocket and pressing the button on the handle.

'Hang on!' she said.

'Oh no, what's wrong? What's the hold-up?' asked Billy, who was prone to being the voice of doom at times like this.

Mary looked at him in exasperation. 'No, *hang on*. As in you're going to need to grab on ...' she explained patiently.

Billy gave her the universally recognised stretchy-mouthed face that means 'Oops, sorry.'

They each grasped the handle of the umbrella and began to rise into the air like ... Well, it's quite difficult to compare it to anything really. They looked like a bunch of flying child-grapes. They looked like five kid-shaped fish on a hook. Most of all, they looked like five children hanging on to an airborne umbrella.

Mary steered them towards the window ledge.

MARY PERKINS
a.k.a. Mary Canary



CAPABILITY:
Terrain Circumvention
(Flying, with or without umbrella. But she prefers with. Wouldn't you?)

'Right, so what do we reckon they're here to steal?' asked Murph as they rose. He was still quite new to the town and until now hadn't realised it even had a museum. 'What's the most valuable stuff here?'

The others shrugged.

'I heard there's a whole display about the history of cheese graters or something,' whispered Billy.

'My dad said the woodwind gallery is really fascinating,' said the final member of the Super Zeroes, Hilda, her red curls tickling Murph's nose as she spoke. 'Apparently they've got the region's oldest bassoon,' she added excitedly.

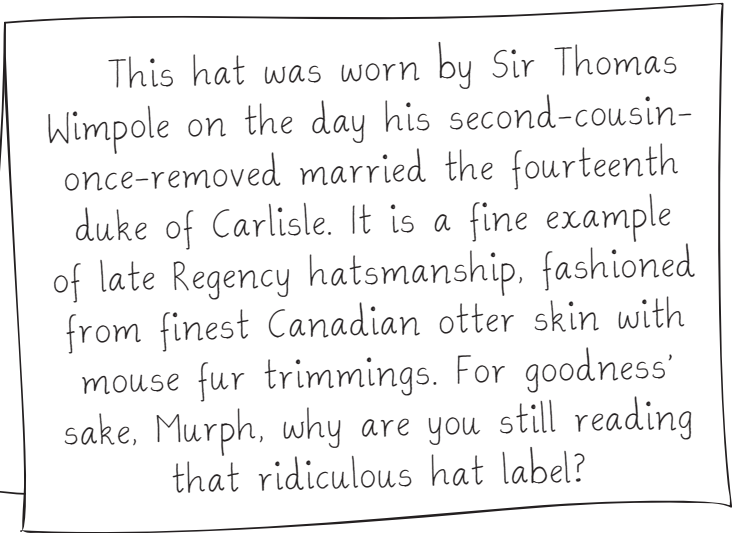
Murph grimaced. 'I don't think anyone's going to want to steal that,' he retorted. 'Sounds like you'd be doing everyone a favour if you did. Well, we'll just have to get in there and take a look.'

The five Super Zeroes squeezed on to the ledge

and one by one dropped through the open window and into a dimly lit room. It was lined with glass cases filled with hats.

That's right: in a museum that did indeed contain a display devoted to cheese graters, they had been unlucky enough to drop straight into the Hat Room, the least interesting exhibit in the whole place, and possibly on earth.

'Worst. Museum. Ever,' said Murph softly, reading the label on the nearest display case.



This hat was worn by Sir Thomas Wimpole on the day his second-cousin-once-removed married the fourteenth duke of Carlisle. It is a fine example of late Regency hatsmanship, fashioned from finest Canadian otter skin with mouse fur trimmings. For goodness' sake, Murph, why are you still reading that ridiculous hat label?

Murph realised that last part wasn't written down. It was just Mary whispering in his ear.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but who in their right mind would want to steal anything from this museum?'

'The thieves aren't here for the hats –' Mary began.

'Nah, course not. Who'd be wearing a hat in this weather anyway?' Billy broke in. 'Your head would go all sweaty.'

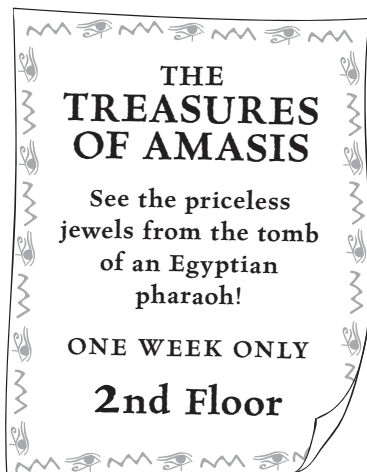
'No, I mean the hats aren't worth stealing but –' Mary tried again.

'What about this lovely one?' cried Hilda. She had her nose pressed up against another large case. 'It's divine, look! A genuine 1920s horse hat! It's even got holes for its little ears.' Billy and Nellie headed Hilda's way. Even Mary was beginning to look a bit interested.

Another complicated aspect of running a team of crime-fighting superheroes, thought Murph, is to not let them get sidetracked by weird hats.

'Can we focus, please?' he said through gritted teeth. 'Mary was about to say something important.'

'Oh yes,' said Mary. 'I was saying that whoever's robbing this museum is here ... for *those*.' She pointed to a brightly coloured poster near the doorway.



The Zeroes looked at each other, all raising their eyebrows and going **'Oooohhhh'** at the same time in an impressive display of coordinated realising. Mary nodded smugly.

The five crept through the doorway, Hilda giving one last longing look back towards the horse hat.

The landing was in darkness, but at its end a large stone staircase led to the second floor, and they could hear a faint chinking and clumping coming from down there – definitely the sounds of people up to no good.

Murph's attention was caught by a glowing red panel on the wall turning green. **ALARM SYSTEM DISABLED**, it read.

Murph beckoned the Super Zeroes towards the

top of the stairs. As they craned their necks over the banister they could make out soft voices and the light from a torch moving on the floor below. They could just hear a woman's voice crooning, 'Come to Aunty, my pretties ...'

Murph felt a thrill of fear, like someone had tickled his back with a choc ice. What weird kind of a thief described themselves as 'Aunty'?

He made a zipping motion across his mouth for silence and beckoned his team of Heroes onwards, down the dark staircase ...

Penelope Travers owned one of the finest collections of Egyptian antiquities in the country. Well, legally speaking she didn't actually own it, because most of it had been stolen. But she certainly *had* a large collection of Egyptian antiquities back home at her family mansion, and tonight she was planning to add to it.

The burglar's eyes sparkled like damp globes of raw pork as she waddled around, gloating over the glinting treasures that filled the museum's glass cases. 'Have you disabled the alarm, Hugo?' she snapped.

'Yes, Aunty,' cringed a smartly dressed young man who had been busily tapping at a panel on the wall. 'We're ready to rock and roll.'

'Don't use that ridiculous expression,' barked Penelope, wagging a portly, ring-encrusted finger in his general direction. 'Now, where's my other nephew? Come over here, you great lumbering brute of a boy.'

A third figure galumphed into view. It was a hugely thick-set youth, whose belly was fighting against his shirt and very, very nearly winning.

'Have you got the bags, Rupert?' she asked.

'Yup,' he replied, not being a great one for banter.

'Then it's time to add some more pretties to my little collection,' breathed Penelope Travers. 'And I think we'll start with pusskins over there.'

She heaved herself over to a plinth in the centre of the room, on top of which stood a gleaming golden statue of a cat with green jewelled eyes. 'Come to Aunty!' she coaxed, reaching out a clammy hand.

But at that moment she was distracted by a strange noise. It sounded, impossibly, like the clip-clopping of a tiny horse's hooves. The would-be cat burglar peered

over her shoulder, but could see nothing through the gloom.

When she turned back, the golden cat was gone.

'Where is it?' shrieked Penelope, scrabbling at the plinth and looking around frantically, as if the treasure had wandered off like a real cat and would be somewhere close by, licking its bottom.

She thought she caught a glint of yellow towards the back of the room, and her eyes narrowed. 'There's someone over there. **Ru-PERT! Get them!**'

'My pleasure, Aunty,' grunted Rupert. He lumbered over to the enormous golden sarcophagus at the back of the gallery. Its label read:

The Mummy of the Pharaoh Amasis
DO NOT TOUCH

'I can't see anyone, Aunty. Just a mummy,' called Rupert.

'Look for them, then!' came Penelope's bossy voice from behind the cabinets. 'They must be hiding somewhere.'

Rupert edged towards the upright tomb, reaching out a hand to open the lid and see if anyone was lurking inside.

'Come to Papa, mummy,' he murmured to himself, proving why he should stick to banter-free conversation.

Suddenly, the sarcophagus burst open. Ancient bandages flew everywhere like streamers at the most bizarre party ever, and Rupert screamed in pure terror as the preserved remains of the pharaoh Amasis

shot out of the coffin and ballooned towards him.

He turned and ran, shoving his aunt out of the way as he pelted out of the room



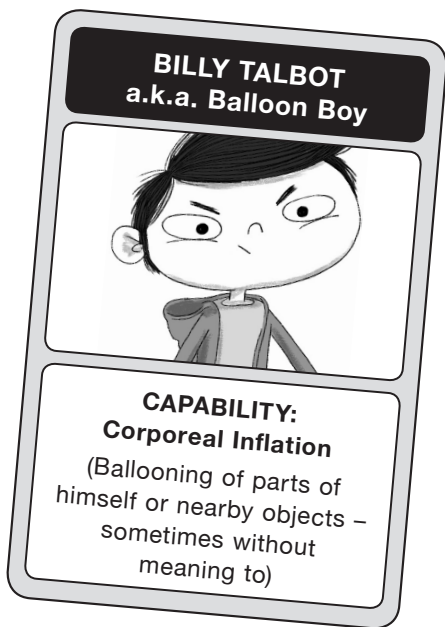
and away down the stairs.

Behind the tomb, Billy looked across at Murph, who was hiding in the shadow of a nearby sphynx, and gave him a large thumbs up with a large thumb.

Penelope Travers' other nephew, Hugo, had watched in horror as his beefier brother had fled. He was just starting to sidestep towards the door when his aunt stopped him.

'Not so fast,' she barked. 'I didn't come all this way to leave without these pretties. **Get back there and snag me something shiny! NOW!**'

Now, Hugo was scared of inflating mummies, but he was even more scared of shouting aunties. He edged tentatively forward, hoping to swipe something and get out quickly. His eyes rested on a brightly polished metal jug standing on its own on top of a



display cabinet. He made a grab for it, but as he did, another hand shot out from behind the cabinet and touched the jug at the same time. Its metal surface was immediately covered with tiny, criss-crossing blue lines of electricity. Hugo's body jerked and danced as the electrical power of Nellie's stored lightning raced all the way through him. He snatched his hand away and careered off down the stairs after his brother.

'Useless boys,' harrumphed Penelope to herself, straightening her shoulders. 'Well, as the old saying goes: if you want something stealing, steal it yourself.'

She clumped to the nearest cabinet, which held a display of animal statues: crocodiles, cats, snakes and, at the very front, two tiny horses.

'Stop right there!' came a voice from behind her. Penelope spun around.

Framed in the doorway, standing with hands on hips in the internationally recognised Hero stance, was a young boy. His hair was tousled and his jeans scruffy, but he was looking at her confidently and coolly.

'And just who are you supposed to be?'

PC Pipsqueak?' crowed the thief arrogantly.

'I don't really know what that means,' said Murph. 'But your little shopping trip's over.'

'Oh, I don't think it is.' Penelope was playing for time. 'In fact, I'm going to gather up these ancient statues and walk right out of here. And there's nothing you can do about it.'

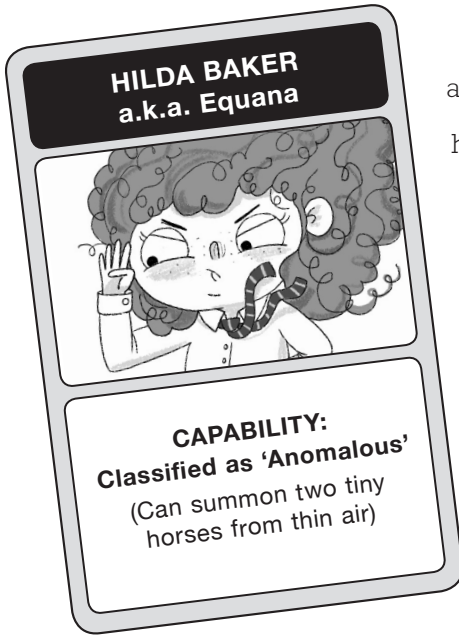
She reached into the cabinet and grabbed the horses before making a run for the door.

Just as she got to the top of the stairs, she decided to stop for a little gloat. Now that she knew the source of all this chaos had been one puny boy, she was confident she'd be back at her mansion in time for tea, ancient Egyptian horse statues in hand.

'Come on, then, pretty horsey,' she fluted, holding one statue up to her face. 'Let's gallop away from this funny little boy.'

Penelope just had time to register that it really was a *very* realistic statue before the horse lunged forward and bit her firmly on the nose. She screamed, and flung the tiny horse away from herself.

'Careful!' came a shout from behind a bookcase.



Hilda ran out and dashed to the horse, which was lying on the stone floor.

'Artax, are you OK?' she whispered. The little horse whinnied in a comforting way. Hilda

glared at Penelope furiously. **'Nobody hurts my horses!'**

At that moment Penelope realised that she was still holding the second horse. She squealed as it pirouetted neatly, kicked her squarely in the chin and sent her toppling all the way down the stairs, her arms flailing and her face wobbling like a jelly on top of a washing machine.

All five Super Zeroes came together at the top of the stairs to gaze down at the now-unconscious burglar.



'Good work, Hilda,' congratulated Mary as she drifted down from the ceiling. She was clutching her umbrella in one hand and the golden cat statue in the other. 'And nice work with the exploding mummy, Billy.'

Billy grinned. 'It was Murph's idea,' he admitted.

'Our best ideas usually are,' said Mary. They all turned to their leader.

Murph blushed and lifted the HALO unit to his

MURPH COOPER
a.k.a. Kid Normal



CAPABILITY:
None
(Leader of the
Super Zeroes)

mouth. 'Alliance, come in. Super Zeroes here. Museum suspects neutralised. Please advise CAMU.' Signing off, Murph looked around his friends in satisfaction at a job well done.

'Copy that, Super Zeroes,' came a calm voice from the handset. 'Police will be in attendance shortly. Clear the scene and keep out of sight. Good work.'

As the screen went blank, Murph looked at his watch. It was 8:25.

'Myaaargh! I'm gonna be late for dinner!'

Mary smiled and flumphed her umbrella at him. 'Need a lift home?'

Outside the museum, Penelope Travers was being pushed into the back of a police van.

'But there were children,' she was gibbering.

'At least two children. One of them may have been electric. And one of them had horses! Tiny horses! One bit me!'

'Yeah, absolutely, love, we'll look into that straight away,' mocked the police officer, who some weeks later would be awarded a medal for capturing one of the country's most notorious cat burglars. 'We'll get the tiny horse detectives on the case, don't you worry. For now though, get in the back of the van.'

He helped a still-complaining Penelope into the van, not noticing the flash of yellow that took off from a high window ledge and disappeared into the low cloud.

Murph could see drops of dew sparkling on Mary's hair and woollen scarf as the two of them cleared the clouds and began skimming across town. One of her hands was holding tight to her umbrella – the other was wrapped around his waist. Away to the west, the sinking sun was just beginning to gild the edges of the clouds with pink. It looked like a giant plate of mashed

potato that had been dusted with a delicate frosting of strawberry-flavoured sugar – which sounds disgusting but actually looked very pretty.

It made Murph feel slightly uncomfortable though. Ever since Mary had rescued him from certain death-by-pavement by grabbing on to his hand and flying him out of danger a few months ago, it was as if his awkwardness dial turned itself up a few notches whenever they were alone together. And now, floating in silence above rosy-white puffs of cloud, it was in danger of going all the way up to eleven.

To break the tension, he asked, 'So, erm, how's your new umbrella working out? I thought you said that you didn't really need one to help you fly any more.'

'Oh, well, it still seems easier with the umbrella. Helps me focus, if that makes any sense,' Mary replied airily.

It made no sense at all to Murph, but he was so glad the silence had been broken that he gave a nervous, neighing laugh for no real reason.

Mary looked at him knowingly. 'Anyway, enough chit-chat. You're late enough as it is.' And with that, they descended into the strawberry-dusted clouds.

At eight thirty precisely, Murph's mum marched to the door of their house and looked angrily down the street.

'Murph!' she shouted into the evening air.

'Yes?' fluted an innocent-sounding voice from behind her. She spun round to see her youngest son tripping down the stairs like a carefree pixie who has been at home for literally hours.

'Er ... Oh. I didn't hear you come in,' she said, confused. 'Anyway – come on, it's last-night-of-the-holiday takeaway. Get stuck in before your brother has all the prawn crackers.'

'Save some for me, Andy, you greedy great elephant!' yelled Murph, pelting for the kitchen.

Not a bad evening's work, he thought to himself. Robbery averted – and home in time for lemon chicken. Maybe this Hero business isn't that complicated after all.

He could not have been more wrong.

A LONG WAY AWAY, a man in black sat on

the cold stone floor of his cell and listened.

Eyes closed, head cocked, he tuned his super-sensitive hearing like a radio, scanning the world above him. He listened to words being uttered miles and miles away and sifted them like river sludge, searching calmly for the nuggets of gold that he could use to forge a plan of escape.

For years he had listened and heard nothing of use. But now, at long last, something had changed. He had scented it in the salty air, like the turning of a distant tide.

It was time. Time to take up his work once again.

The man in black opened his cruel eyes. With one pale, spindly hand he reached out and grasped a small stone.

Looking for all the world like an ancient, stooped bird in his tattered black clothes, he hunched over and used the stone to write on the granite floor. It made a hideous screeching – but there was no one except him to hear. Nobody else had been into this cell for thirty years.

But that was about to change.

He stopped only when he was surrounded by letters – large, uneven, white.

He heard the whine of a camera as it focused in on the message, relaying it to a screen somewhere in the world above.

The message on the stone read:

**I AM READY TO TALK.
BRING KID NORMAL
TO ME.**



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