

1.

ZACK!

My brother is a superhero, and I could have been one too, except that I needed to go for a wee.

My name is Luke Parker, I'm eleven years old and I live in a mild-mannered part of London with my mum, dad and big brother, Zack. He wasn't always a superhero, but with a name like Zack you've got to wonder if my parents had a hunch that one day he'd end up wearing a mask and cape and saving orphans from burning buildings. I mean, come on! It's not a name, it's a sound effect. It's what you get in a comic when a superhero punches a supervillain. Pow! Blam! Zack!

It seems to me that in life you are faced with clear-

cut moments when things could go one way or another. Vanilla or chocolate. Smooth or crunchy. Drop the water bomb on Dad's head, or hold fire. It's up to you which choice to make and sometimes all it takes to change the way your whole life turns out are four little words.

"I need a wee."

It was the fateful evening. Zack and I had been in our tree house for about an hour and I was bursting. I was reading an old issue of *Teen Titans* by torchlight and Zack was doing his maths homework. He's always been a bit of a swot. Before he became Star Lad, at school he was star boy.

"Then go," he said, solving another quadratic equation with a flick of his pencil. "I'm not stopping you."

The truth was I didn't want to go down the rope ladder in the dark. It had been hard enough climbing up it in the first place. It's not that I'm unfit or anything, but put it like this: you won't ever see me on an Olympic podium. I suffer from hay fever and have funny-shaped feet that mean I have to wear these things in my shoes called "orthotics". When Mum first told me I needed them I was excited. I thought they sounded like supersoldier-power armour, but when they finally arrived they turned out to be bendy foot-shaped supports and not a cybernetic exoskeleton suit. That

was a disappointing Thursday.

I hung my head out of the tree house door. “Maybe I could just wee from here?”

“Out! Get out of here, you disgusting child!”

Zack is only three years older than me, but when I’ve done something to annoy him he calls me a child. Of all the things I can’t stand about my big brother, being called a child is number forty-seven. Not that I have a list.

OK. I do have a list.

Even before he became a superhero the list was up to number sixty-three. Now it’s almost at a hundred. He is *very* irritating.

I climbed down the rope ladder and went into the house.

I did a wee.

When I returned to the tree house a few minutes later, Zack was sitting there silently in the dark. I knew something was up because he’d stopped doing his homework. I grabbed my torch and levelled the beam in his face. He didn’t even blink.

“Zack, are you all right?”

He nodded.

“Are you sure? You look ... different.”

He nodded again, very slowly, like he was working

some complicated thought out in his head and then said in a croaky voice, “I think ... something amazing just happened to me. Luke, I’ve changed.”

Now this didn’t come as a great surprise. About six months before, Dad had taken me aside for what he called a man-to-man chat. We sat in his shed – I think that’s because it’s the most manly room we have – and Dad explained that from now on I might notice some changes in my big brother.

“Zack’s embarking on a great journey,” said Dad.

“Brilliant! When’s he leaving? Can I have his room?”

“Not that kind of journey,” said Dad with a weary sigh. “He’s going through something called puberty,” he went on. “His voice will be different, for instance.”

“Ooh, will he sound like a Dalek?”

“No, not like a Dalek.”

“Pity.”

“He will become hairier.”

“Ooh, like a werewolf?!”

“No, not like a werewolf.”

This puberty lark didn’t seem up to much. There was other stuff, to do with privacy and girls, but to be honest, after the let-down about the Dalek and the werewolf I stopped taking it in.

So, when Zack told me in the tree house that something

had changed, I knew exactly what to say. I pursed my lips and gave a serious nod like I'd seen the doctor do when he told me I had glandular fever. "I'm afraid that you have caught puberty."

He ignored me and stared at his hands, turning them over and over. "I think I have superpowers."

2.

ZORBON

Zack had gone completely bonkers—too much homework will do terrible things to a boy’s mind. But then I grew suspicious. He knew how much I liked comic books and was constantly poking fun at me for what he called my childish obsession. I smelt an ambush.

“Superpowers?” I folded my arms and sneered. “What, so now you can fly and shoot lightning from your fingertips?”

A curious expression spread across his face. “I wonder,” he mused, sticking out one hand, flaring his fingers at me like some cheesy magician. Lightning did not shoot from his fingertips. But I was too stunned

to notice since something equally remarkable was happening.

My torch flew out of my grip, spun through the air and landed in Zack's outstretched palm with a slap. His fingers closed around it and he grinned.

Im-poss-ible!

But Zack had done it. He had made the torch move just by thinking about it and doing a lame hand gesture. Somehow it was true. My brother had an actual superpower!

Telekinesis, to give it its official title. Lots of superheroes have this ability in comics, but this was the first time I'd seen it in real life. I hated to admit it, but it was cool. Supercool. Not that I was going to tell Zack that.

"No lightning bolts then," I said, pretending to be disappointed.

"What?!" He looked at me like I was stupid. "Did you see that? Did you see what I did?"

I couldn't keep up the pretence – I was impressed. But my awe quickly gave way to something else. I was as green as the Hulk; more jealous even than last Christmas when Zack was given an iPhone, and I got shoes.

"It's not fair! How come *you* get superpowers? You don't even read comics." I ranted for a few more minutes

– when I get going I have been known to turn purple – and then, finally exhausted, I flopped down on the floor and felt my face crumple into a sulk. Although I was seething with envy I had to know. “How did it happen?”

Zack stared past me, his eyes fixed on some hazy spot on the wall, and began to describe the incredible – and incredibly recent – events.

“Just after you left I heard this distant rumbling noise and so I looked out of the tree house. There were lights in the sky and I thought it might be a meteor shower. And then I realised it was heading this way – fast. The sky was filled with hundreds of glowing white lines. But just as they were about to hit, they came to an almighty sudden stop. Then I saw that it was no meteor shower...”

He paused and drew a long breath before saying in a whisper, “It was a trans-dimensional spacecraft.”

I gasped. Up until then the most exciting story Zack had ever told me involved a bad haircut and a Chihuahua. And I’m not convinced he was telling the truth about the Chihuahua.

“It was a large blue oval hanging in thin air, right outside there.” He extended a trembling finger and pointed. “As I watched, a door in the side of the craft slid open with a sound like ‘bloop-whoosh’ and a luminous figure emerged on a beam of light. He wore

a shiny purple suit, a cape with a high gold collar and gold boots. On his chest were three gold stars that pulsed like heartbeats. He had a dome-shaped head, which was completely bald, and a wispy beard that he stroked when he spoke. He gave me a three-fingered salute and introduced himself as Zorbon the Decider, an inter-dimensional traveller and representative of the High Council of Frodax Wonthreeen Rrr'n'fargh. Everything he said sounded like he was talking in capitals. Zorbon explained that he came from another universe that exists in parallel to ours. It's almost exactly the same as our universe, he said, except there the colours green and red are reversed, and sponge cake tastes different." Zack looked thoughtful. "Not entirely different, just a bit different."

I could tell by his daydreamy look that Zack found this boring fact particularly fascinating and there was a significant danger that he'd carry on talking about sponge cake. "Never mind about the stupid cake! Get to the superpowers!"

Zack shook himself out of his trance. "Oh yeah. Well, Zorbon said that I'd been chosen by the High Council for a mission of utmost importance to both our universes. A mission so vital that were I to fail, the consequences would be cataclysmic for *trillions* of beings."

“Two universes? You have to save *two* universes?” Typical. My brother couldn’t be happy saving just one. He was such an overachiever. “But why you?” I wailed.

Zack stared thoughtfully out of the door. “Apparently this tree house is the junction between the two universes.”

This was incredible. Mind-blowing. Our tree house, a portal between two worlds. On the other hand ... “So?”

Zack shrugged. “I guess I was the first person Zorbon met when he came through.”

I was speechless. My mouth moved but no words came out, just a sound like air escaping from a balloon. That’s not how you choose a saviour of mankind. There has to be at least a prophecy written in an ancient book. This was like giving the Sword of Ultimate Power to a goldfish.

“To ensure my success,” Zack continued, “Zorbon said he was authorised to bestow upon me six gifts – powers, if you like – to aid me in my cause. Then he raised his palms, said something in this really weird alien language –”

What, as opposed to a really *normal* alien language? I thought but didn’t say anything.

“–There was this flash of red light – or maybe that should be *green* light,” Zack went on. “I felt a surge of energy through my whole body. Every atom of my

being was on fire. When it finally stopped, Zorbon bowed and said 'IT IS DONE.' I asked him what was done? What powers had he bestowed? What was my mission? 'I MUST NOT SAY, FOR IF I DO I RISK ALTERING THAT WHICH IS TO BE. AND AS ANYONE WHO UNDERSTANDS THESE KINDS OF SITUATIONS WILL TELL YOU, THAT WOULD BE A VERY BAD THING. ALL WILL BECOME CLEAR. IN TIME,' he said. Then he gave me this enigmatic smile and left. But just before the door of his craft slid shut he said there was one thing he could tell me. This really scary look came over him and he said, 'NEMESIS IS COMING'. And then he was gone. *Bloop-whoosh!*"

I stood there with my mouth wide open. So much to make sense of. So many questions. However, one thought pushed its way to the front of the queue. "But I was only gone five minutes!" The most important five minutes in the history of the world and I'd missed them because I needed a wee. "I bet if I'd been here, Zardo the Decoder would have chosen me," I grumped.

"His name was Zorbon the Decider. And you weren't here." Zack shrugged. "Should have held it in, shouldn't you?"

It was so unfair! I was way beyond acting like a

normal, sensible person. “Get him back. Tell Bourbon the Diskdriver he made a mistake and he has to come back and give me superpowers too.”

“Zorbon the Decider,” corrected Zack once more. “And he decided I was the one. Not you.”

“I don’t believe you. We can’t know for sure unless you call him.”

“Call him? Oh yeah, because he left his phone number. Uh, what’s the code for the parallel universe again?”

I detected a note of sarcasm in the question. Zack was teasing me, which was a rash thing to do given that at that very moment I was more furious than I’d ever been in my entire life.

“What are you doing now?” he asked.

I stalked round the tree house, tapping the walls every few feet. Wasn’t it obvious? “Searching for the portal to the other universe.” I pressed one ear to the back wall. “I think I can hear it.”

“Luke.”

“Shh!” I hissed. I could definitely make out a sound. “Yes. Something’s coming through. Sounds like scratching. Could be inter-dimensional mice.”

“Uh, Luke...”

I spun round. The scratching sound was coming from Zack. He clawed at his chest through his shirt. As usual,

he was wearing his school shirt because, he said, it put him in the right frame of mind for homework. (I know. And I have to live with him.) Something weird was going on underneath. I screwed up my face and pointed. “What’s that?”

A soft glow pulsed beneath the material like a night-light. He popped the buttons, gripped each half of his shirt and pulled it apart to reveal his bare chest beneath. I swear I could hear trumpets.

Despite what Dad had said, there was no hair, but there was something else. Inked across his chest were three glowing stars.

“Zorbon had stars just like these,” said Zack. “I wonder what they mean.” He ran a finger over them.

“I’ll tell you exactly what they mean. They mean you’ve got a tattoo.” I shook my head. “Mum’s going to kill you.”

Zack ignored me. He straightened, drawing himself up to his full five feet and one inch, and a calm, thoughtful expression came over him. “I know what the stars mean,” he breathed. “I. Am. Starman!”

I raised a finger of objection.

“What?” he snapped.

“Uh, sorry, but there’s already a Starman. You’ll probably get sued.”

Zack gave a huff of irritation. “Fine. Whatever.” He drew himself up again. “I. Am. Star Boy!”

He swivelled his eyes towards me, just to make sure. I gave a little shake of my head.

He threw up his hands in frustration. “There’s a Star Boy too?”

“I’ve told you a million times, you should read more comics.” I tapped my cheek thoughtfully. “How about Star Lad?”

“Star Lad?”

Zack mulled it over. He rolled the name around his mouth a few times, trying it on for size. He said it in his own voice and then in a deep voice and then he paused. “Star Lad or Starlad?”

I wasn’t really listening. It had just occurred to me what the design on his chest reminded me of. It looked just like the stars you get on ready meals telling you how long you can freeze them. Based on the pattern on his chest, Zack should be thoroughly defrosted before use.

He planted his hands on his hips. “I. Am. Star Lad!” Then angled his head thoughtfully. “Or perhaps Starlad. I. Haven’t. Yet. Decided.”

And that’s how it happened. My brother is superpowered and I...

... I am powerless.

3.

STAR LAD

The fate of two universes lay in my brother's hands. In my hands was a cauliflower.

It was the day after Zack became Star Lad – he'd rejected Starlad, figuring if at some point he needed an insignia to put on a shirt, "S" was already taken. We were in the kitchen helping with dinner.

"Zack, darling, peel the potatoes." Mum handed him a large bag.

I caught his eye and grinned. Even superheroes have to peel potatoes.

"Of course," he beamed. "It'd be my pleasure."

He gave me a sly look and shuffled off to a corner of

the kitchen. He was up to something. I crept up behind him. His eyes were narrowed at the potatoes, one hand extended towards them. The potato skins were falling off in perfect, unbroken spirals. They were peeling themselves. I was shocked. “You can’t do that,” I hissed.

“Why not?”

“First rule of being a superhero: you can’t go round using your powers for vegetable preparation.”

He screwed up his face. “I doubt that’s the first rule. Or any rule.”

“No, well maybe not, but with great power comes great responsibility. Gordon the Dishwasher—”

“Zorbon the Decider,” sighed Zack.

For some reason I had a mental block about the name. I think it was because I was massively miffed about what he’d done and couldn’t bring myself to remember his stupid alien extra-dimensional name.

“Yes, Whatsisname the Whatever. He didn’t give you telekinetic abilities so you could help in the kitchen.”

Zack looked sheepish. “You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. Trust me, you don’t want to abuse your powers. It’s a slippery slope from superhero to supervillain. Sure, it starts innocently enough peeling potatoes with telekinesis, but the next thing you know you’re holed up in a secret volcano base with an army of

evil minions and plans for world domination.”

Just then Mum called across the kitchen. “What are you two plotting, hmm?”

“Nothing,” we said at the same time.

Of course we couldn’t tell her what had happened to Zack. Second rule of being a superhero is that you have to keep it a secret. If the villains find out your real identity then they lure you into a trap by kidnapping your loved ones. It’s pretty basic stuff, and easily avoidable if you take simple precautions.

Mum and Dad gave each other these really lame smiles and then Dad said, “Boys, it’s really nice to see you two getting along.”

It was true. Not that it was nice, but that Zack and I hadn’t been getting along for some time. We used to be best friends when we were younger, but these days we mostly communicated by yelling, slamming doors and giving each other dead arms. In fact, we’d probably talked more since last night than we had in the last three months. I caught him looking at me with this sad expression, like he missed the old days.

“What are you looking at, turnip-head?” I said. Oh come on, I had to do something. The situation was in real danger of turning mushy.

Thankfully, Zack responded by punching me in the

arm. It didn't break or fly off, which meant that super-strength wasn't one of his six powers. Interesting. I picked a point on his chest, drew back my fist and threw a punch of my own. From this range I couldn't miss. And I didn't.

I bounced.

When my fist got within a few inches of his body, I felt it hit something springy and invisible.

"A force field! You've got a flipping force field!" I whispered in amazement.

Before I could say anything else, Dad pulled us apart, gave us a lecture on appropriate behaviour and sent us out of the kitchen to cool down.

Fifteen minutes later dinner was ready. All through the meal I watched Zack like a teacher in an exam room, waiting for him to push his cauliflower across his plate with his mind or flick a pea off his force field. Or ... what else? Zebedee the Doolally had given him six powers that he needed for his mission. Telekinesis and a force field were two; what were the other four? And what about the mission? All we knew was that "NEMESIS IS COMING".

After dinner, when I was meant to be doing my homework on the computer, I decided to poke around on the Internet and see what I could find out about Nemesis.

There was a lot of information. I sifted through pages and pages of the stuff before reaching my conclusion.

In Greek mythology, Nemesis was, and I quote, “a remorseless spirit of divine retribution.” I didn’t understand all of it, but this Nemesis guy sounded pretty bad to me. Then it hit me like a thunderbolt: Nemesis had to be the name of a supervillain, and Zack had been given powers to defeat him.

I was about to navigate away from the page when I noticed something. I had read the entry too quickly. He wasn’t a “he” at all. Nemesis was a girl! Well, that made perfect sense to me.

Star Lad’s arch-enemy was a girl.