From Award-Winning Author L.ULLMAN R 4 TALES OF A NOT-SO-SUPER 6th GRADER



EPIC ZERO

Books 1-3

Epic Zero: Tales of a Not-So-Super 6 th Grader Epic Zero 2: Tales of a Pathetic Power Failure E pic Zero 3: Tales of a Super Lame Last Hope

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But That's Another Story.. Pre



EPIC ZERO: TALES OF A NOT-SO-SUPER 6TH GRADER

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I HATE MY BIRTHDAY AND HERE'S WHY

The alarm clock wails like a banshee, but I've been awake for hours. Without lifting my head from the pillow, I silence it with a well-practiced karate chop. I've stalled long enough. Just like on every other birthday I can remember, it's time to see if I've gained any Meta powers overnight. I take a deep breath. Then I launch into my standard testing routine.

I close my eyes tightly and then open them as wide as I can. No heat vision or pulsar beams come shooting out. *Not an energy manipulator*.

I flex my fingers and toes, but don't sense any mystical forces coursing through my veins. *Not magical*.

I try to remember last week's pre-algebra homework. Can't remember which is doubly depressing since I got a C the first time around. *Not superintelligent*.

I carefully feel around my head, body and limbs. No evidence of sprouting horns, tail, or extra appendages. *Not a Meta-morph*.

I sit up, grab three tennis balls from a can next to my bed and start juggling. After keeping the balls in the air for a whopping three seconds, they all hit the ground and bounce limply away. No improvement to pre-existing poor hand-eye coordination. *Not a super-speedster*.

I stand up, walk over to my dresser and reach underneath. It's packed with clothes and probably weighs over 500 pounds. I count to three and lift with all my might. Dresser doesn't budge. Possibly broke my back. *Not super-strong*.

I jump on my bed, put my hands out like Superman and hurl myself across the room. I hit the floor hard, belly-flop style, knocking the wind out of me. Note to self, next year try the other way around—jump from floor onto bed. Not a flyer.

One more to go.

I close my eyes and concentrate on reading the mind of someone close by. I hear a loud knocking and then—

"Elliott Harkness, get out of bed you loser! You'll be late for school!" My sister, Grace, is at my door. No minds read. *Not a psychic*.

That makes me 0 for 8 on Meta powers. Another year, another epic failure.

I drag myself off the floor, pull on some clothes, and trudge into the bathroom. In the mirror, I find my unremarkable self staring right back at me —short and scrawny with a nest of brown hair and eyes the color of shoe leather. I look too young to be twelve, too plain to be popular and too ordinary to ever be a Meta.

You see, I live in a family of superheroes. We're part of a super team known as the Freedom Force, the greatest heroes ever assembled. In our lingo, a "Meta" stands for Meta-being, which is what we call a person, animal, or vegetable—don't laugh, it's happened—that possesses powers and abilities beyond what's considered normal. There are eight Meta types: Energy Manipulation, Flight, Magic, Meta-morphing, Psychic, Super-Intelligence, Super-Speed, and Super-Strength.

On top of that, there are three power levels: a Meta 1 has limited power, a Meta 2 has considerable power, and a Meta 3 has extreme power. If you don't have any powers at all, then you're known as a Meta 0. We call them "Zeroes" for short, which also stands for ordinary.

Just like me.

I turn out the lights and head for the Galley. I have fifteen minutes to scarf down some breakfast before school. When I get there, I find my superfamily at their usual stations.

Mom is leaning against the fridge, arms crossed and brow furrowed, "packing" sandwiches into our lunch bags without using her hands. You see, Mom's a Meta 3 psychic who goes by the superhero handle Ms. Understood. Her powers include telekinesis, which allows her to move stuff around using only her mind, and also telepathy, so she can read other people's minds.

As you can imagine, having a mind-reading mom presents some serious challenges! She claims to use her powers only in the line of duty, but based on how often I seem to get in trouble, I suspect she isn't telling the whole truth on that one. Like most mornings, she's already in full uniform, just waiting to see what evil the day brings. She wears a black bodysuit and mask to blend into the shadows, where she can put her deadly powers to work undetected. Plus, her superhero insignia looks like a giant eye, which not only intimidates the bad guys, but also makes you think twice about drinking milk straight from the carton!

Dad is ironing his cape by the breakfast nook. He takes law and order to a whole new level. On the law side, he's the leader of the Freedom Force and goes by the name Captain Justice. He's got Meta 3 super-strength with muscles so dense that he's pretty darn invulnerable. And, look out when the bullets start bouncing off of him!

On the order side, let's just say that he likes things tidy. His red, white and blue uniform must be crisply pressed, and there can be absolutely no dirt or smudges on his pristine, chest insignia of the golden scales of justice. He's so obsessive, he even lifts my furniture to hunt for dust bunnies! Like, someone please create a criminal distraction!

Grace, my fourteen-year-old sister, is perched on a stool, worshipping herself in a compact mirror. She's a Meta 2 flyer, but my parents expect her powers will eventually reach Meta 3 levels. She's still learning to be a hero, but lately seems much more interested in becoming an international celebrity. When she started out I suggested the name Self-Centered Lass, but she ignored me and chose Glory Girl. Glory Girl? Really? Please, get over yourself!

"Good morning, Elliott," Mom says.

"Morning," I say, waiting for some cursory acknowledgement that it's my special day. But there's nothing.

See, I know my life probably sounds glamorous and all, but trust me, it's not. Living with a bunch of do-gooders comes with some major drawbacks. At the top of the list is the fact that while superheroes are really great at the big things—like thwarting the forces of evil—they really stink at the little things.

Like, for example, remembering their kid's birthday.

I grab a cereal bar out of the pantry.

"Not hungry?" Mom asks.

"Nope," I say. "Not anymore."

"Well, Grace," Dad says. "Looks like you made the morning paper."

"I did?" Grace squeals with delight.

"You sure did," Dad says. "Look at this headline."

Grace snatches the paper and starts reading. "America's newest Metastar does it again!' Wow! I look amazing!" She turns the paper to reveal the front page, featuring her in her Glory Girl outfit standing over an unconscious supervillain known as Catastro-flea. "Doesn't my costume totally pop?"

Truthfully, she did look kind of awesome in her crimson bodysuit featuring white shooting stars across her top and legs—her cape billowing perfectly in the wind. But, I wasn't ever going to tell her that.

"Looks like people are starting to take notice of your super-skills," Dad says.

"Maybe Captain Justice should hang up his tights," Mom jokes.

"You might be right, dear," Dad says. "Maybe I'll ride out my golden years in a Fortress of Solitude."

"Sure you will, Dad," Grace says, rolling her eyes. "I'll call Meta Meadows Retirement Home and see if they've got a spot for you. Hope you like tapioca."

"I haven't had tapioca since the Ghoulish Gourmet tried poisoning my dessert at the Mask of the Year Awards," Dad says. "On second thought, I've probably got a few more years of caped crusading in me."

"I figured you'd say that," Grace says. "Speaking of capes, I've been thinking about shaking up the whole hero thing. Maybe getting some brand sponsors and putting their logos on my costume. You know, like the sports stars do. Do you think I need an agent for that?"

"Grace, you know we don't work for money," Dad says.

"Oh, come on!" Grace says. "Aren't we allowed some perks with the job? I mean, we're on call, like, all the time."

Just then my phone vibrates in my pocket. It's a text message from TechnocRat:

<TechnocRat: Dog-Gone barfing in Mission Room. Can u clean up now?

Dog-Gone is the name of our German Shepherd who has the power to turn invisible. One second he's sitting there, staring you down with his pitiful big-eyed begging act, the next he's gone. Conveniently, his powers seem to activate whenever food goes missing. I'm guessing he hijacked someone's breakfast when they weren't looking.

Cleaning up after Dog-Gone is bad enough, but doing it on my birthday just seems like cruel and unusual punishment. I should've gotten a super fish.

I exit the Galley to the West Wing stairwell, my sneakers echo down the fifty-five steps and five stair landings. Oh, I should probably mention that my house is kind of unusual. You see, we live in a satellite parked deep in outer space called the Waystation. The Waystation serves as the Freedom Force's headquarters, as well as the home away from home for most of the team.

You may be wondering why we're up here. Well, let's just say we do our jobs really well and there are plenty of creeps out there who'd love nothing more than to show up on our doorstep and try to settle the score. In fact, that's exactly what happened a few years back when the Slaughter Squad busted through the gates of our old headquarters on Earth. They almost had us, but that's why we moved to the Waystation—because up here we're *way* out of reach.

I stop at the utility closet to grab a mop, a bucket and some disinfectant because Dad's such a germaphobe. Knowing Dog-Gone, I'll probably have to wait around for all the invisible chunks to turn visible to be sure I don't miss anything. It takes me a while to collect the cleaning stuff because it's all shoved in the back, like someone wanted to hide it or something.

Finally, armed with everything I need to tackle the job, I make my way to the Mission Room and open the door.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

The cleaning supplies clang to the floor.

To my surprise, standing before me are all of the members of the Freedom Force: my parents, Grace, Shadow Hawk, TechnocRat, Blue Bolt, and Master Mime.

"Happy birthday, Elliott," Mom says.

"H-How?" I stammer.

"Tricked you, didn't I?" TechnocRat says, sitting on my dad's shoulder and stroking his whiskers with a smug look on his white, pointy, little face.

"What about Dog-Gone?" I ask.

"He's fine," Dad says. Dog-Gone appears from beneath the round conference table, his tail wagging a hundred miles per second. I swear he's smiling.

"You didn't think we'd forget your birthday, did you?" Mom asks.

I shrug. "Well ..."

"Can we just get this over with?" Grace mutters.

"Grace, please," Dad says. "It's your brother's day."

Then, Master Mime uses his magic to conjure up a giant purple finger

that flicks out the lights. Mom brings over a huge cake with twelve lit candles and everyone starts singing Happy Birthday, except for Master Mime and Dog-Gone, who obviously can't talk.

"Now make your wish," Mom says.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath when...

"Alert! Alert! Alert!" The alarm from the Meta Monitor blares through the Waystation. "Meta 2 disturbance. Power signature identified as Reptvillian. Alert! Alert! Alert!"

Before the lights even come back on, the Freedom Force springs into action. Blue Bolt and Master Mime are already gone. I just catch the flames from TechnocRat's jetpack and the silhouette of Shadow Hawk's cape as they disappear from the room. Dad and Grace leave without saying a word. I'm all alone with Mom who's still holding my cake.

"Elliott," she says. "I'm so sorry." Her eyes look sad, but her body's leaning towards the door. I can tell she wants to split.

"It's okay," I say. "Go ahead, somebody needs you."

She brushes my cheek. "My baby is so grown up."

I take the cake from her. "Oh," I say, "don't forget that Reptvillian is a Meta 2 on super-strength, but also a Meta 1 psychic, although he hasn't shown any evidence of telekinesis."

"Thanks for the tip," Mom says. "Don't be late for school." Then she winks and leaves.

I look down at the candles still burning on my cake. I never did make my wish. Not that it matters anyway.

I'm still a Zero.

Meta Profile

Name: Captain Justice Role: Hero Status: Active



VITALS:

Race: Human Real Name: Tom Harkness Height: 6'3" Weight: 220 Ibs Eye Color: Blue Hair Color: Blonde

META POWERS:

Class: Super-Strength Power Level:

- Extreme Strength
- Invulnerability
- Enhanced Jumping
- Shockwave-Clap

CHARACTERISTICS:

Combat	95
Durability	96
Leadership	100
Strategy	94

Willpower 91



I SEEM TO BE QUITE THE TROUBLE MAGNET

I can't decide what's worse, being abandoned on my birthday or watching Grace take off to save the day while I have to go to school. Yet, here I am, standing in the Transporter like a good little soldier, trying to make it to class before the attendance bell goes off. The Transporter is a teleportation system between the Waystation and Earth. It scans your body down to the subatomic level, scattering everything at point A and reassembling it at point B—all in a matter of seconds.

The Transporter, like the Waystation and every other gadget the Freedom Force uses, was designed by TechnocRat. It's amazing to think he was once just an ordinary rat in a secret government laboratory, but after being injected with an experimental brain tissue growth serum he became the smartest creature on the planet. He sometimes gets edgy with less intelligent people also known as everyone else, and he hoards camembert cheese by the barrelful—the snobby, expensive kind, but the ideas that come out of his little noggin are astounding.

Moments later, I feel the pins-and-needles sensation of my atoms pushing back together. I watch the overhead console change from green to red and then the Transporter door slides open. Suddenly, I'm no longer in the Waystation at all, but am staring at the inside of a spacious suburban living room.

It has a large white sofa, two navy blue sitting chairs, a wooden coffee table and a flat screen TV. Against the far wall are bookcases filled with the classics and framed pictures of Grace and me as little kids. Every room in the house, from the kitchen to the bedrooms, is fully furnished. We even have spare clothes in the closets and shelf-stable food in the pantry... It's like we actually live here, but the beauty of it is, we don't. It's the Prop House.

We call it the Prop House because that's exactly what it is—a prop designed to make people think it's our home. Our parents wanted us to attend regular school and try to be "normal." So, in order to be eligible for public school, we had to have a proper mailing address. That's where the Prop House comes in. No one knows it's just a front that houses the Transporter up to our real home on the Waystation.

To prevent anyone from discovering our true identities, my parents make routine appearances as suburbanites in the neighborhood; picking up the morning paper or mowing the lawn. On the rare occasion that someone rings the doorbell, deafening alarms blast through the Waystation. One of us typically me being the only one around—then has to race to the Transporter and make it down to answer the Prop House door as if nothing's out of the ordinary. Usually, it's not a problem, but it can be awkward if you're in the middle of a shower, or worse, stuck on the can.

Note to self: I really need to talk to TechnocRat about installing an intercom system from the Waystation to the Prop House. Then I could talk to people and ask them to hang on a minute or, in the case of those annoying vacuum cleaner salesmen, just tell them to "get lost!"

I step into the living room and wrap my hand around a miniature Statue of Liberty model sitting on an end table. When I pull sideways the figurine makes a clicking noise and a gigantic mirror slides down from the ceiling, concealing the Transporter. Then I walk out the front door and lock it behind me.

It takes me five minutes to reach Keystone Middle School. It's week six of a forty week school year and I diligently check off each and every day on my wall calendar. The middle school pools three local elementary schools, which means there are three times the number of sixth-graders I try to avoid. Don't get me wrong, I can make friends if I want. But why bother? It's not like I can ever bring anyone back to my house to hang out.

Just then my phone buzzes. It's a text from Mom:

<Mom: Sorry about bday! Have a gr8 day! Luv u!>

It's not unusual for Mom to check up on me after a total parenting disaster like this morning. Believe me, I appreciate it, but I'm never quite sure if it's for my benefit or hers. I'm in the middle of texting her back when I run smack into what I think is a brick wall. Turns out it's another student.

"Sorry," I say.

"You got a problem?" rumbles a deep voice from high above.

"No," I answer, my neck craning so far back to see the kid's face I think my head's going to fall off. Angry eyes bear down from beneath a bushy unibrow that looks like it may flutter off and attack me. "I didn't mean to crash into your ... giganticness."

"You making fun of me?" says kid giant.

"Well, no, I ..."

Then I notice students circling around us. They're coming in waves, like sharks drawn to chum. I don't like where this is heading.

"You're annoying," kid giant says.

"You must be pen pals with my sister," I say. "Now how about we walk away and pretend this whole thing never happened?"

Then the kids start closing in, chanting "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Great, now I'm the morning's entertainment. I want nothing more than to lift up into the air like Grace and fly out of here. But, of course, I can't. I'm a freaking Zero.

Kid giant grabs my shirt collar.

"Hey, c'mon!" I plead. "You don't want to do time for hurtin' little old me?"

Then I see his massive fist go back. And that's when everything goes dark.

Well, I may be the first kid in history to be hospitalized for fainting during a fight. The nurse told me I apparently crumpled to the ground right before the big lug swung at me and was rescued by the Cafeteria Lady who happened to be in the parking lot pushing a cart of strawberry milk.

It's just so embarrassing on so many levels.

And to top it off, my mom had to leave the Freedom Force to meet me at the hospital while they ensured I didn't have a concussion. After taking me home to the Waystation and confining me to bed rest, she left me alone with my neurotic thoughts. Now all I can do is sit and wonder what creative nicknames my classmates are going to bestow upon me tomorrow.

Elliott the Unconscious? Harkness the Horizontal? The Narcoleptic Kid? The possibilities seem endless. And, oh, the fun Grace is going to have with this one.

After several hours of reliving my nightmare over and over again against

the backdrop of mindless cartoons, I'm antsy to get out of here. I need to do something to take my mind off it all and I know just the thing!

I yank off the covers when Dog-Gone, who's curled up at my feet, gives a low growl.

"Oh, knock it off," I say. "I don't care what Mom told you. I'm getting out of bed."

Dog-Gone turns invisible. The dude who said dogs are man's best friend clearly never met mine.

"Hang on," I say. "I'll give you a treat if you don't tell her."

Dog-Gone reappears with a cocked ear. But then he disappears again. That dog really knows how to work a bribe.

"Two treats," I say quickly. But he doesn't show. Not that I expect him to anyway because I know what he's really after. "I'm not giving you the whole bag," I say. "You'll get sick. Three treats or nothing and that's my final offer."

After a few seconds, the mercenary reappears, his tail wagging in victory.

"Okay, then. Follow me. And be quiet about it."

Trust me, sneaking around when there's a Meta 3 psychic on the premises is no easy task. I can only hope Mom is caught up in some complicated forensics analysis or something and won't bother mind-linking with me.

We make it safely down to the Galley where I pay off my debt of three doggie treats. I tell Dog-Gone to make himself invisible, and then I tip-toe my way up to the Monitor Room. This will definitely take my mind off of things.

You see, the Monitor Room houses the Meta Monitor, which is our oneof-a-kind computer system that operates like a burglar alarm on steroids for detecting super powers. The Meta Monitor constantly searches for disturbances in the Earth's molecular structure. Like the uniqueness of fingerprints, each and every super power leaves a distinct and detailed signature. The Meta Monitor reads this signature and then matches it with its extensive database of Metas to determine who, or what, may have caused it.

Currently, there are four hundred and thirty-two villains in the database. Two hundred and seventy-one are under lock and key. Ninety-nine are considered inactive—in other words, they either got out of the game, were wheeled off to an old age home, or vanished off the face of the Earth. That leaves sixty-two bona fide nut jobs out there who are completely unaccounted for and just waiting to stir up trouble.

How do I know all this? Well, I guess you can call Meta-mining my hobby. I've spent countless hours digging through the database, studying up on every villain I could; memorizing their origins, aliases, powers, weaknesses, fighting tendencies and so on. I figure if I'm going into the family business, then I should probably have this stuff down cold. Plus, it beats the pants off of doing homework.

The Meta Monitor has state-of-the-art telescopes that can pick up visuals of any point on the Earth's surface. I key in a few commands and the screen begins rotating through a number of famous landmarks. The White House; The U.S. Capitol; The Hoover Dam; Mount Rushmore. Everything looks peachy. Nothing suspicious. Maybe if I fish where the fish are?

I punch in some more commands and up pops an image of a gigantic prison. It's known as Lockdown, or more formally, Lockdown Meta-Maximum Federal Penitentiary. It's the only super-maximum-security prison specifically designed to contain the world's most dangerous Metas. Dad told me that Lockdown almost didn't happen. The skeptics didn't believe that one place could safely hold so many super-powered criminals. After all, the potential for something to go horribly wrong increases dramatically when only a few feet of concrete separate the most evil beings on the planet.

Over time, however, Lockdown has more than proven its worth. One reason for this is TechnocRat, who designs each and every cell to neutralize the special abilities of its occupant. For example, if a villain has Meta 3 super strength, then his or her cell is outfitted with super-malleable walls designed to absorb the energy of a power punch and send it back with twice the force. TechnocRat can devise a way to contain any criminal. And fortunately, its worked every time.

The other reason is my dad. His day job as warden of Lockdown allows him to keep close tabs on the inmates. Of course, his Meta identity is a secret so none of the villains know that he's the one who put them there in the first place.

It's also a well-guarded secret that the only set of blueprints for Lockdown and the way out of each and every cell is stored in a special vault right here on the Waystation. That's another reason our headquarters is in space. It keeps the prisoners on Earth and their escape plans in orbit.

Well, it seems like there's nothing doing at the prison either. Perhaps—

"Elliott Harkness!"

I jump a foot off my chair.

Busted.

I turn around to find Mom standing with her hands on her hips, also known as full anger pose. Dog-Gone is by her side. I should've given that mutt four treats.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Mom asks. "You're supposed to be in bed."

"I'm bored," I answer.

"And since when does boredom give you permission to ignore the doctor's orders?" she asks.

"Um, when I'm really bored?" I answer. "Besides, I thought you might have sent a telepathic hint to my mind suggesting it would be okay. So, whose fault is this really?" I smile. She doesn't. Never, *ever*, try reverse psychology on a psychic.

"Okay, okay." I set the Meta Monitor on auto-pilot and slide off the chair. "Nothing ever happens on my watch any—"

"Alert! Alert! Alert!" the Meta Monitor blares. "Meta 3 disturbance. Repeat: Meta 3 disturbance. Power signature identified as Meta-Taker. Alert! Alert! Alert! Meta 3 disturbance. Power signature identified as Meta-Taker."

"Really?" I say. "Like that couldn't have happened a minute ago?"

"Elliott, not now," Mom says, racing to the console. It looks like she's seen a ghost.

She hits a few buttons and a visual of the villain called Meta-Taker appears. The first thing I notice is the outfit. He's wearing a dark hooded cloak, like some sort of monk. But when he moves, you can see massive muscles rippling beneath his robes. Then, the camera pulls in closer and I do a double take.

His skin and hair are pale white, like bone—and a strange orange energy that seems to have a life of its own blazes around his eyes. For his tremendous size he's surprisingly graceful, yet there's something robotic about him. And he's standing near a gigantic hole in the ground which makes the whole scene look like the Grim Reaper surfacing from the underworld itself.

Dog-Gone growls.

"Um, Mom. What's up with that guy?"

"His name is Meta-Taker," she practically whispers. "He's the most

powerful enemy we've ever faced. We thought he was dead ... buried alive ... it's been over twenty years."

"Well, I can assure you, he ain't dead," I offer.

"No, he's not," she says, her voice quickening. "I'm activating the distress signal."

As soon as she says that, I know it's serious. Each member of the Freedom Force wears a special nano-communicator housed inside an everyday object—like a watch or a necklace—which produces vibrational patterns signaling different things. The distress signal is reserved for the most urgent of issues and directs the team to head immediately to the Waystation —do not pass go—do not collect 200 dollars.

"I need to get ready," Mom says.

"I'll help," I say.

"No," she says forcefully. "This isn't a game. This is a job for the Freedom Force."

I look down. The words sting.

"Elliott," she says, grabbing my hands. "Trust me. You need to stay here, where it's safe, and rest up. Keep an eye on Dog-Gone."

"I understand," I say reluctantly. "Be careful."

"I will," she answers, squeezing my hands before leaving.

I take a deep breath. Dog-Gone and I stare at the image of Meta-Taker.

I heard what she said, but I'm getting awfully tired of sitting on the sidelines.

Then a light bulb goes off.

"You know what, old boy," I say. "You're not the only one here that's good at hiding."

Meta Profile

Name: Ms. Understood Role: Hero Status: Active

