Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Villain.net

Written by

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For Mum
Always being there . . .

From: Andy Briggs
To: VILLAIN.NET readers everywhere
Subject: Careful on the web!

As you know, the Internet is a brilliant invention, but you need to be careful when using it in your plans for world domination . . . or just doing homework.

In this book, the villains (and heroes!) stumble across the different websites accidentally. But VILLAIN.NET and HERO.COM don't really exist. :-(I thought them up when I was dreaming about how cool laser vision would be. The idea for VILLAIN.NET suddenly came to me – especially the scene when Jake shoots the . . . Oh wait! You haven't read it yet, so I'd better not spoil it! :-) Anyway, I began writing and before I knew it, the idea had spiralled into HERO.COM as well. But I had made up all of the Internet stuff. None of it is really out there on the web, unfortunately.

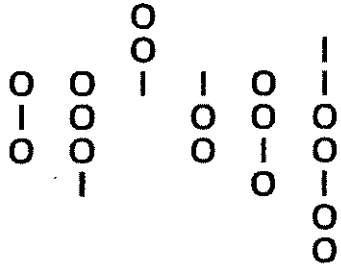
Here are my cool tips for safe surfing on the web: keep your identity secret (like all heroes do), stick to safe websites, make sure a parent, teacher or guardian knows that you're online, don't bully anyone else – that's seriously not good – and if anyone ever sends you anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, don't reply, and tell an adult you trust.

I do have my own website, and it's totally safe: www.whichsideareyouon.co.uk

Be safe out there!

:-)

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Storming the Beach

The assault force emerged from the ocean as silent as wraiths.

Jake Hunter watched them from his craggy vantage point. With the distinctive crunch of leather, Jake clenched his gloved fist. His confusion and anger seemed to enhance his superpowers. And after all the betrayal, lying, and violence that had surrounded him recently, the powers felt stronger than ever. It felt as though pins were stabbing his fingertips.

'Rats . . . there go my gloves,' he muttered under his breath as his fingernails extended like cats' claws, thickening as they ripped through the tips of his gloves. They formed long razor-sharp talons that shone like black marble in the moonlight.

A week ago he had just been an ordinary schoolboy. And now he was a superpowered global fugitive wanted for theft, kidnapping, blackmail; and he was instrumental in the pending destruction of the planet.

Not bad for a fourteen year old.

The spear of rock he was standing on poked from the

surrounding jungle and allowed him to see clear across the island. It was bathed in the silver light of a full moon, which highlighted the white-sand beach. It could almost be paradise were it not for the fact that Jake's actions had cost him *everything*: family, friends, and security.

Cost him his whole life.

Knowing that it was all his own fault did not lessen the anger he felt inside. Anger was the only thing keeping him going right now.

The line of black amphibious Sea Crawlers that emerged from the ocean spoilt the view for him. The Crawlers were the size of buses and rode on a set of caterpillar-tracks like tanks. Once they had safely landed ashore, hydraulic ramps powered down at the rear of each vehicle and soldiers emerged in military formation. Jake could just distinguish that they were all armed with rifles and wearing bulky combat jackets as they raced towards the tree line.

They were Enforcers—an elite force of soldiers created by the United Nations specifically to control super-powered misfits such as Jake.

They must be warm with all that gear on, thought Jake. He was sweating profusely and wiped beads of sweat from his brow, taking care not to poke his eye out with his lethal talons. The tropical heat was relentless, even at night. His black jeans clung to his legs. Worse still

they rode up his backside but he couldn't pull them loose for fear of slicing himself with his claws.

Jake rose into the air. It felt just like rapidly ascending in a lift. He focused his mind, realizing that he was going to need a lot of firepower if he was going to take out the invading party. His fingers stretched painfully apart as an invisible power swelled in his palms. He closed his eyes and it felt as though he was holding a pair of bowling balls at arm's length. When he flicked his eyes back open, they burnt like fiery coals. His vision was bathed in red, enhancing living creatures from the general background clutter by showing the electrical pulses through their bodies. He now saw them as shimmering figures, almost like angels. There was nowhere for them to hide.

Jake tilted forward and was suddenly rocketing over the palm trees. Within thirty seconds he was at the beach before any of the advancing army could reach cover.

To the men on the ground it looked as if a huge black vulture was descending on them. They all raised their rifles to fire as he swooped overhead, arms extended towards the ground.

Jake felt twin cones of force erupt from his hands and punch into the Enforcers. Some of the men were hurled through the air. The troopers left standing had the presence of mind to squeeze their triggers and shoot.

Most of the bullets missed Jake, and combed through the air in the wake of his flight path. But some of the Enforcers remembered enough from their training to 'lead' the target—shooting *ahead* of Jake's trajectory. These bullets struck him.

To Jake, the impact of the bullets felt as if he was being tickled. They struck an invisible shield inches from his body—and the air sparkled with fine blue crackles as his translucent force-field absorbed them.

Jake brought himself upright, hovering just metres off the ground, and spun round, firing another cone of energy. To anybody watching, the cone looked like the heat haze that danced above the surface of a road on a hot day. His blast hit one of the Sea Crawlers just as the last Enforcer jumped out. The Crawler buckled like a can and flipped sidelong, rolling a dozen times across the sand before splashing into the water.

Jake shot vertically up as another volley of gunfire shredded the palm trees behind him. The soldiers took the opportunity to sprint for their lives across the beach, dragging fallen comrades to their feet and into the shelter offered by the trees.

Jake was so high he was beyond the range of the weapons. He paused to take in the impressive view of the island, which sprawled around the smouldering cone of a gigantic volcano.

He stared beyond his feet, and far below he could

easily see the electric signatures of the troops who thought they were safely concealed in the jungle. He let out a heavy sigh, knowing he had better finish this off.

Jake dived straight down, arms outstretched, and willed another burst of energy from his hands. It zeroed straight for the second Sea Crawler.

The Enforcers cowering in the trees watched as an invisible hammer smashed the Crawler's cab a metre under the sand—the tail of the vehicle was left poking at an angle into the air.

'Sarge!' wailed a terrified young soldier.

'Pipe down!' growled a muscular sergeant with a Scottish accent.

Jake landed with a thump on the beach, facing the men. He allowed his long claws to tap rhythmically against his leg, in what he hoped was a menacing manner. His clothes absorbed the moonlight, and his glowing eyes gave him a fearsome appearance.

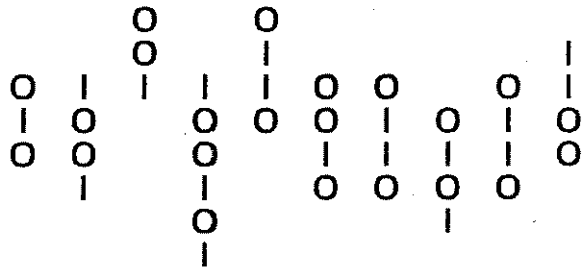
'Er . . . right . . . ' he mumbled. He couldn't think of *anything* suitably threatening to say since his head was still swimming with recent revelations.

Then the ground shook, making every bone in his body vibrate and his fillings jangle. The braver of the troopers risked a glance behind, through the foliage, at the volcano. A massive plume of smoke spewed from the volcano's cone, lit by flaming debris.

It had begun.

Jake's antics over the last week had been truly awful, even by his own standards. But they were nothing compared to the erupting volcano and what it signified. Jake knew that the Core Probe had been launched and was now burrowing to the centre of the earth.

After the backstabbing treachery of the last few days, it looked as if he'd either be dead or in a cell on Diablo Island before he found out the consequences of his actions.



Spam

The alarm clock's bleep was unceremoniously loud, forcing Jake's eyes open from a dreamless sleep. His hand snaked out and thumped the clock silent, but it had started a chain reaction that would ultimately lead to school.

His mother's muffled voice yelled from the kitchen. 'Jacob! Get some breakfast, time to get up!'

The rest of his family was already up. His mother was eating a bowl of cereal as she peered through her glasses at the newspaper, while his father watched a small television set on the counter, running a twenty-four hour news programme. His sister, Beth, was in the crisp blue uniform of her private girls' school, reading a letter that she waved at him as he stumbled downstairs.

'From my pen-pal in New Zealand!' she said excitedly.

'So? Is she too poor to have email?' That wiped the stupid grin from her smarmy face. Beth scowled at him, then turned back to her letter.

'Toast?' his father asked as he loosened his overtight tie.

'Nah,' muttered Jake as he slumped into his chair.

'Sleep well?' asked his mother without taking her eyes from the paper.

Jake shrugged, and an affirmative 'mmm' rumbled from the back of his throat. He'd found this method of answering almost any question usually threw his parents off asking anything further. Sure enough, his mother nodded and continued reading. Jake disliked these family moments together, but, try as he might, he couldn't fault his parents. They worked hard, provided a comfortable home, were never short of money, and allowed their children to have a huge amount of independence. But somehow Jake had never felt comfortable. While the independence had made his sister a nerdy brainbox, Jake had gone down a different track—and he was beginning to regret it.

On his walk to school, girls threw him flirting, shy glances. He was a good-looking boy, with short, spiky blond hair. Even the school office secretary, only a few years older than him, tended to be extra nice no matter how often he was sent to the headmaster's office. Perhaps only girls could see the softer side to him?

Boys gave him a wide berth, and an appraising look. Jake Hunter was the school's most formidable bully—somebody not to cross. But there was a vague aura of

respect from his fellow pupils for the way he manipulated the adults, and on several occasions had defended people from being picked on by rival school kids infiltrating their territory.

But Jake was unaware of this side of his reputation. The other boys' actions made him feel both angry and lonely. Not an emotion he'd share with anyone, of course. He'd started by always standing up for himself, and this had naturally seemed to lead into bullying others. Now 'bully' was a tag he was forced to wear, a pre-emptive act that actually prevented *him* from being bullied by the more unscrupulous characters in school.

Those losers had become his friends.

He made it most of the way to school alone before he ran into his crew. They might be his friends, but he didn't really trust any of them, and he knew the feeling was mutual.

Anthony Culkin, or Big Tony, was huge. He claimed he had big bones, but even as Jake approached, Big Tony was already polishing off his packed lunch.

'Hunter!' he said by way of greeting, chunks of half-chewed sandwich falling from his mouth. The others turned to acknowledge their unofficial leader.

Knuckles, aka Raymond Olson, was a little taller than Jake, and much stronger. His face was pale and greasy and his small squinting eyes made him resemble some kind of rodent. He flicked his head to one side, then the

other, like he'd seen boxers do before a fight. The result was a hideous crack from somewhere in his neck. Jake was sure that wasn't healthy but he tried not to react.

Scuffer was a small kid, who made up for his stature with a bad attitude. Warren Feddle was his real name, and he took time to thump anyone who dared use it. If anybody had an attitude problem, it was him. Scuffer was the worst of the bunch. He had a real criminal mind and enjoyed inflicting pain.

Jake never did that. He beat up some of the kids who irritated him, but it wasn't *personal*. Jake merely saw it as the order of things, a food chain with the cunning predators at the top, and the dumber animals underneath. But Scuffer, he was a nasty piece of work. *Everything* he did was personal.

'Look! It's the Professor!' Scuffer yelled with delight. They all followed his pointing finger. Sure enough the lone figure of the 'Professor' was slouching as he walked to school, looking as miserable as Jake felt. His back was to them, and he hadn't sensed the sudden danger he was in.

'Let's grab his pack!' suggested Knuckles with his irritating shrill voice that didn't fit his muscular frame.

And do what with it? thought Jake. But already the gang was charging recklessly across the street, yelling at the top of their lungs:

'Hey! Professor!'

'Gonna pound you, geek!'

The kid turned, looking aghast, and fled as fast as he could. Jake dimly remembered his name was Pete. He was as harmless as a fly; but then again, flies never punched back.

Despite himself, Jake cheered up a little and beamed as he joined in the pursuit. *The thrill of the chase,* he thought.

During the lessons Jake entertained himself by flicking pieces of soggy chewed paper at his victims across the class. The teachers shot him suspicious glances, but it was an art form Jake had perfected over the years so he remained undetected.

Jake and his gang prowled the yards at lunchtime, like sharks through a reef. But today people were avoiding them quite successfully, and there was very little in the way of fun to be had. So they ended up kicking a soccer ball around on an empty field. Of course, one of the teachers took exception to this innocuous activity and yelled at them to get off the field.

Typical, thought Jake. Do something harmless and they get shouted at, but when they were deliberately starting a fight they always got away with it. That proved to Jake that justice was more a concept than a reality.

One of the few lessons Jake and Scuffer were actually

in together was computer class. Jake sneakily surfed around the Internet, glancing at his favourite rock band website: 'Ironfist'. He had been reading through the message board, where some fans were heaping praise on their new release, when Scuffer leaned across and tugged his sleeve.

'Look at this,' he whispered conspiratorially. He held up a USB memory stick.

'What is it?' said Jake.

'My uncle's computer got a virus. It's so new his virus checker didn't pick it up. It trashed everythin' he had, all his documents, music, and photos. All gone. 'Cept he didn't realize that when he'd tried to back up his stuff, he copied the virus on to this. Wanna see what happens when we stick it in the school network?'

Despite himself, Jake couldn't help but laugh out loud. The teacher threw a glance his way, but was too involved in helping another pupil with a problem on her screen. Crashing the school network would be a terrible offence; and therefore a great scam if they could get away with it.

'Sure, go ahead.'

'Put it on your computer then,' said Scuffer forcing the memory stick into Jake's hand.

'No way! If they trace it to me I'll get expelled!'

'So?'

Jake knew he would never hear the end of that from

his parents. He glanced at the boy next to him who was staring between a problem sheet and his answer on the screen. Jake didn't pause for thought. He reached out and scrunched the boy's question sheet into a ball, then threw it across the room. The boy looked at him with a mixture of fear and astonishment. He hesitated, then without breathing a word, climbed from his chair to retrieve his discarded sheet.

The moment the boy's back was turned Jake thumbed the USB drive in the computer port. He gave it a few seconds and hoped the virus was copying itself across, before yanking it out just as the boy picked up the paper and spun back around, apprehensively returning to his seat.

Jake and Scuffer swapped grins then looked enthusiastically at their own screens. From the corner of his eye, Jake saw the boy was straightening out his answer sheet, unaware that the virus was infiltrating his machine. Jake decided to check his emails as he waited.

The boy frowned when he looked at his screen where a spinning egg timer had replaced the cursor indicating his computer was busy. He experimentally jiggled the mouse. Nothing happened.

Jake typed in his password and accessed his email. He had a few pieces from the 'Ironfist' website, and one from Big Tony which was a photo of a chimp riding a motorbike. Jake shook his head; Big Tony was always

forwarding junk to people on the assumption that if *he* found it funny *they* would too.

'Miss Campbell,' said the boy in a timid voice.

Jake glanced at the boy's screen: the computer pointer was moving across the screen unaided, opening any file or folder it came across. This resulted in a mass-opening of programs, all executing in a torrent of separate windows that flooded the screen. It was as though an angry poltergeist had taken over.

Jake hid his mirth and checked another email. This one was peculiar; the sender's name was the same as his own. The name 'JAKE HUNTER' burned on the screen with the subject message:

'JAKE, JOIN ME AND RULE!'

He moved the mouse across.

'Miss Campbell!' screamed the boy so loudly that everybody turned to look at him. 'I think my computer's got a virus!' His screen was thick with windows opening so fast that it flickered.

'Daniel, what have you done?' began Miss Campbell.

'ALL DATA ERASING' suddenly appeared on the boy's screen in letters big enough for the whole class to see.

'No!' he yelped as the computer screens either side of him turned deep blue, and a mass of computer code raced across them. The Internet browser disappeared as Jake was about to click on the mysterious email.

Computers began to crash like dominoes around the classroom, leaving a wake of complaints from surprised students.

'Turn them off! Turn them off!' yelled their teacher, but it was too late, the virus had spread in a spectacular manner through the school network and onto the servers where it was particularly destructive.

Jake felt a flurry of activity behind him and braced himself for the reprimanding hand of Miss Campbell on his shoulder.

'What have you done?' she cried.

Jake looked up, relieved to see that Miss Campbell was towering over the boy next to him. The boy's face was a picture of shock, something that made Jake smile all the way home.

Jake managed to avoid spending too much time with his gang after school; he just didn't feel in the mood to be standing around on a street corner as it got dark. He'd left them outside Patel's newsagent's with the shopkeeper loudly complaining that they should hang out somewhere else.

Jake just wanted to head home. Lately he'd felt *something* was missing from his life. Everything he did seemed a little too predictable and boring. He was smart enough to know that only *he* had the power to change that.

* * *

Loud 'Ironfist' tracks pumped from his computer speakers, and with any luck it would bother his sister. Jake called up his email and saw he had one unread message. He clicked on it.

FROM: Jake Hunter

TO: Jake Hunter

SUBJECT: Jake, join me and rule!

The sender's email address was different from his own; in fact, following the swirling @ sign was a jumble of characters that seemed assembled from dozens of world alphabets. It was complete nonsense, probably just spam: junk email. But with nothing else to do Jake sighed and clicked on it anyway.

The email opened up in a separate window that drifted through several different languages before settling.

'Jake Hunter, unleash your true potential and click here to join me at VILLAIN.NET—the world awaits you!'

Jake hesitated, the mouse pointer hovering over the link. *Why bother?* he thought. As if in answer to the unspoken question the text shifted on the screen. Jake read it in surprise.

'Because you feel you need something *more*. I offer you the power to rule the world with a simple mouse click. Join me, Jake Hunter. It's in your blood.'

Jake frowned. Somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to make it stand out from the usual spam he got. Then

a thought occurred to him: this must be just another of Big Tony's stupid emails.

The screen suddenly went black.

Jake felt a moment's dread, and hoped he hadn't just infected his own computer. The screen changed to a blinding white that hurt his eyes before slowly fading to reveal a plain looking website. A banner declared:

VILLAIN.NET—WELCOME!

Underneath was a single animated icon. Jake clicked on it, waiting for something stupid to appear. Several new icons appeared below a message.

'You have been selected to receive a great free gift that will allow you to conquer the world.' As long as the gift involved shooting something then he wouldn't complain. A game would help him relieve the boredom. He continued to read. 'You will be granted a single temporary power for demonstration purposes. After you have demoed your ability you will be met by one of our representatives. Click below.'

Jake glanced through the range of icons on offer. Some were stick figures with various lines and shapes emanating from them, others were just shapes and logos. One particular logo seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. He clicked on it.

The screen rippled as though made from liquid and he could have sworn it warped into a slender finger that tapped him gently on the forehead. The whole

experience was over in a second, leaving Jake a little dizzy and doubting anything had actually happened. He certainly didn't feel any different, and when he looked back at the screen, the website had vanished.

'Stupid site,' muttered Jake. He must be more tired than he thought. With resignation, he cranked up the music, turned his attention to his television set at the foot of his bed, and powered up his Xbox console. Within a minute he was lost in a world of rampaging monsters. Midway through the game he noticed a symbol on a door within the game's environment. It was the same as the one he'd clicked on earlier and now he recognized it.

It was a radiation-warning symbol.

Jake awoke with a surprising spring in his step. He met his gang and thoroughly enjoyed chasing the Professor; delivering a wedgie to him that was so severe they could hear his boxer-shorts rip. Leaving the geek on the floor, writhing in agony, the bullies strolled into school.

Jake nonchalantly asked Big Tony what the website link was supposed to be, but Tony had such a blank expression that Jake assumed he must have already forgotten sending it.

Maybe it was because he was feeling unusually cheerful

that the day was passing quickly and at break he noticed a pretty girl, with long brown hair, smiling at him. Jake felt a little embarrassed and was thankful he'd parted company from his gang. He had seen her many times before and knew her name was Lorna, but he had never summoned the courage to speak to her.

Now he found they were walking in the same direction.

'Hi, Jake.'

'Hi,' he mumbled, staring at his feet.

'What are you doing over the holiday? Any plans?'

Jake felt his mouth become dry, and had a sudden attack of nerves as she looked at him with deep brown eyes. 'I . . . er . . . nothing. Usual stuff, probably. You?'

Lorna shifted nervously, but didn't stop smiling. 'Same. Nothing new.'

They stopped outside the woodwork block, which was Jake's destination. They looked at one another in silence for an uncomfortably long time, lost for idle conversation. Then Jake noticed three kids, a couple of years his junior, were picking on a boy who was clearly cornered and outnumbered. Seeing an opportunity to break the silence and act the hero, Jake intervened. The three bullies made a quick escape, thinking that Jake was protecting his mantle as school thug—while their victim stared wide-eyed, thinking Jake wanted the honour of beating him up.

'Hunter!' screamed Mr Falconer, the woodwork teacher, as he rushed from the classroom. 'Stop that right now!'

Jake looked confused. The bell suddenly rang and a friend of Lorna's came up and pulled her towards her classroom and out of sight. Mr Falconer was upon him, bristling with rage.

'I saw what you did!' rumbled the teacher, obviously getting the wrong end of the stick.

Jake frowned and looked around for the boy he had saved, but the kid had vanished into the mass of pupils filing into their classes.

'What're you talking about? I was helping that—'

'You can explain yourself in detention!' snarled Mr Falconer.

The last place anybody wanted to be on Friday, just before a holiday, was in detention. That included the teachers and it made Mr Falconer's temper all the more aggressive.

'This is unacceptable behaviour, Hunter,' he snapped as he paced back and forth.

'I told you, I was stopping that kid from being beaten up!'

'A likely story! Save your lies!' Mr Falconer's finger quivered with rage. 'I know your type, Hunter. I had to

put up with them myself when I was a lad. Picking on younger kids; you should be ashamed of yourself!'

Jake was so angry at the injustice of it all that he felt a burning pain in his gut like very bad indigestion and he felt uncomfortably warm. The words slipped from his mouth before he could stop them. 'Are you stupid? Or does that slap-head of yours make you deaf?'

Falconer went apoplectic. 'That's it! I'm going to make sure you have detention for the rest of the year—'

But Jake wasn't listening. He'd zoned out and was looking around with a frown. 'Do you smell that?'

'I'm talking to you, Hunter! Don't ignore me!'

'It smells like burning wood.'

Mr Falconer opened his mouth to argue back, but stopped as the distinctive odour caught his nostrils. It was getting stronger by the second. They both scanned the room with growing concern before spotting fine white smoke curling from the planks of wood stacked against one wall.

'Fire!' yelled the teacher rather pointlessly.

Before he could move towards the fire alarm the workbench in front of him was suddenly ablaze. An orange tongue of flame punched towards the ceiling and caught the tiles. Mr Falconer backpedalled in astonishment as all the other wooden workbenches around him joined the inferno.

Jake looked around frantically. Even the window

frames had started to smoulder, and a small potted plant on the corner of the teacher's desk was now aflame. Jake knew he should move, but something bizarre caught his attention—

His hands and arms were glowing with a green energy that randomly shot out from his body and set fire to whatever it touched. Luckily Mr Falconer was turned the other way, running towards a fire extinguisher.

Streamers of green energy lashed from Jake's body, and he watched in amazement as they struck the steel legs of the stools around the room and buckled them as if they'd suddenly turned to rubber.

Mr Falconer stretched for the fire extinguisher on the wall—but pulled his hand away from the invisible wave of heat radiating from the cylinder as another streamer caught the metal tank and it began to melt like wax. The pressurized contents exploded outwards, metal fragments embedding in the burning benches next to Jake and the teacher.

More ceiling tiles ignited with a loud WHUMP, and the flames rapidly spread above them, dripping burning debris down.

'Hunter! Get—' Mr Falconer stopped in surprise. He saw Jake's entire body was glowing with a green aura that extended several centimetres from his body. Even as he watched, Mr Falconer could feel his moustache start to singe. He batted at it and looked around in panic

for an escape route, but the room was now thick with smoke.

A distant fire alarm was triggered, but that was drowned out by an earth-shattering crack as lumps of the flaming ceiling started to drop. A chunk of plaster struck Mr Falconer's head, and he fell unconscious to the floor.

Jake's anger had been replaced by fear and he ran for the door, fuelled by an instinct for self-preservation. He glanced at his hands—the weird glow had vanished. He hesitated at the exit.

The room was now a cauldron of fire, but strangely, Jake didn't feel the heat at all. He looked down at the prone body of his teacher, who moments before didn't have the time of day to listen to reason. Now the flames were approaching him with each passing second.

Jake hesitated. He knew he should go back inside and drag his teacher out, but the room was blazing and he doubted that anyone could survive a rescue bid.

And whatever power had erupted from him now seemed to have faded away so there was no certainty he would survive either.

Precious seconds ticked by as Jake hesitated . . .