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Crisis Point

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BAD FEELINGS

Toby had had a bad feeling from the moment he'd woken up. And now he knew why.

The ground shook as a barrage of energy bolts tore the road apart around them. Cars and lorries were strewn across the autobahn. Toby, Lorna and Emily hid behind an overturned truck that still smouldered from the damage it had received. The heavy rain hissed as it came into contact with the vehicle's hot metal surface.

A cow walked by, mooing loudly at Toby adding a sense of surrealism to the scene. A cattle wagon had been hit, and now fifty confused animals were wandering aimlessly across the battlefield. Toby focused his attention back on the problem at hand.

'We're outnumbered!' he shouted over the noise of car alarms and further explosions. He shivered. He hadn't been counting on travelling the world tonight and was only wearing his jacket and jeans.

'I know that! Do you think I'm blind?' Lorna shouted back, her voice shrill with tension. She gripped the necklace around her neck. It had been a present from her boyfriend, and looked very expensive. He had claimed it was a good luck charm. Lorna hadn't wanted to come on this mission, but as usual her brother had convinced her. She still believed that the Hero Foundation hadn't rewarded them properly for stopping the archfiends Basilisk, Worm, Viral and Trojan.

Emily peeked around the truck. Their ski-masked opponents had turned their attention to their target - an armoured security truck that lay nose-first in a crater. She counted six villains.

‘They must think we’re dead. They’re trying to open the truck,’ she reported.

Toby thought hard. For this mission they had been limited to three superpowers apiece - one transportation, one defensive and one attack. The limitation was part of the Hero Foundation’s restructuring of Hero.com, the website from which they downloaded their superpowers. The Foundation was currently updating its technology. After the destruction of its headquarters, it still couldn’t run Hero.com to its full capacity. A fifty-percent reduction was in force across all Downloaders until the system could be completely rebuilt.

More like interfering than restructuring, thought Toby bitterly. They were woefully underpowered for this mission, and without Pete fighting by their side, they no longer felt like the super-team they once were. Toby’s mind drifted, wondering how his friend was doing—

The ground shook as the doors to the armoured car were blown off. There was a lot of shouting in German. Somebody didn’t sound very pleased.

Toby risked a peek, turning on a small device lodged in his ear, impossible to see with a casual glance. The Parser began instantly translating the language.

‘You’ve burnt the money, you idiot!’ screamed one of the villains.

Toby grinned as burning Euro notes blew past on the breeze. Dumb criminals were his favourite kind.

‘Only some of it,’ said another thug defensively. ‘Look, this lot’s fine.’

‘We’re not here for the cash,’ said a female voice. That must be Monika, the one they had been briefed about. ‘But grab as much cash as you can, anyway. Look for the black box.’

Lorna nudged Toby's arm. 'It's now or never, while they're distracted.'

Toby nodded. 'Let's take them in a pincer.'

The six villains, all surprisingly short, were hauling heavy money boxes from the back of the van. It took two of them to lift each one.

'Game's over!' yelled Toby as he stepped from cover, all alone.

One of the thugs raised his hands, his fingers glowing a vibrant orange - but his companion pushed the thug's hands down.

'This one's mine,' said Monika. 'I thought we got rid of you?' she snarled at Toby. The villain took off her skiing mask. Orange-hands did the same.

Toby hesitated. He had been expecting hardnosed criminals.

'You're... just kids?'

Monika took offence at the term "kid", neatly translated by the Parser, which picked up the vibrations in Toby's larynx and translating his words into whichever language was needed.

'You're a kid yourself,' she snarled.

'You're all Downloaders?' asked Toby in surprise. Their briefing from Hero.com had said the gang were supervillains.

The other thugs took their masks off and looked curiously at Toby.

'He's one of us,' said Orange-hands.

'Is that right?' said Monika with a curious frown. 'You found Villain.net too?'

Toby sighed. Of course Villain.net: the rival superpower platform to Hero.com. These idiots had obviously fallen for the Council of Evil's annual spamming campaign to lure new recruits.

‘Sorry guys,’ said Toby smiling. ‘I shop at Hero.com.’

The words penetrated the villains’ heads as Toby spurred forwards: super-fast. He hit the nearest directly in the chest at sixty miles an hour, hurling him through the air, and slamming him into a cattle truck.

Toby skidded several metres on the wet tarmac, crashing into a car, before he could change direction. That was the problem with super-speed; it wasn’t like he’d seen in the movies where changing direction was instantaneous. He could run as fast as a bullet but had to slow to almost normal speed before changing direction.

He just had time to trip another crook flat on his back, knocking him out cold, before the others reacted.

To the criminals, Toby was almost a blur moving in perfectly straight lines. They saw two of their friends go down before Monika whipped her arms out - her limbs stretched like rubber and writhed like a snake. Her arms tangled Toby’s feet.

Toby crashed to the floor like a wrecking ball. He rolled across the carriageway completely out of control - smashing through the median divider and into the opposite lanes. Luckily the traffic had halted when the super-thugs had wreaked havoc stopping the security van. Toby lay catching his breath, every part of his body aching.

Lorna and Emily had sprung from cover the moment Toby had moved into action. By the time Monika had tripped Toby, Lorna had clambered up the rear access ladder of a tanker that had jackknifed across the road. From there she fired her first shots, a series of glass flechettes that swished through the air. Whatever they touched turned instantly to crystal.

The first few hit the security van, which immediately crystallized with an ear-shattering crack. Another clipped Orange-hands as he raised them to shoot. Straight away, the kid turned translucent.

Emily effortlessly bounded over a bus, covering six metres - landing in the middle of the crooks. She jabbed her fingers into one villain's back. He collapsed, fast asleep.

Emily swung for Monika, but the girl lashed out - her rubbery arm lassoing around Emily's hands, drawing them together. Emily hesitated. Monika seized the moment and kicked Emily's elbows - forcing Emily to jab *herself* in the face. The self-inflicted punch delivered the narcoleptic blow. Emily collapsed, instantly out of the fight.

'Em!' screamed Lorna.

Monika ducked as Lorna reigned down a volley of glass darts. She leapt sideways, Lorna's missiles turning the ground to crystal behind her. Monika threw herself forward, tumbling like a gymnast, coming to rest behind a cow. Lorna tried to avert her enfilade - but two darts hit the cow, turning it into solid crystal, cutting off its startled moo. Even though she knew the effect was temporary, Lorna felt guilty about involving the animal.

It was enough of a distraction for the sixth villain to unleash his powers. Superheated air pulsed from his body, exploding on his targets with devastating force. He wasn't aiming for Lorna; he was aiming for the 37,500 litres of petrol in the tanker beneath her feet!

Toby looked up in time to see the tanker truck explode in a brilliant orange mushroom cloud that lit up the autobahn. The blast knocked him backwards and shattered every vehicle window in a hundred-metre vicinity.

‘Lorn!’ Toby rushed forward, ensuring his super-speed didn’t kick in. The last thing he wanted to do was run uncontrollably straight through the tanker inferno. He leaped over the median barrier, noticing that Monika and her sidekick had grabbed a case and were escaping across the road.

‘I got the box!’ the boy yelled.

Toby didn’t care, the welfare of his sister and Emily was more important.

The vehicles around the blasted tanker were charred and damaged. Emily and the unconscious villains were lying unharmed on the ground protected from the blast by the vehicles they had fallen behind. The crunch of crystal underfoot could only be the remnants of the truck, the poor cow and - Toby shivered - the crystallized villain.

‘Lorna?’

He tried to get close to the flames, but the heat was too intense. He felt tears well up, but the flames evaporated them. He couldn’t lose Lorna. Not after everything they had been through.

‘Lorna, where are you?’ His voice cracked with emotion.

‘What’s the problem?’ said a voice from behind.

Toby spun around - Lorna was right there. Toby laughed with relief and felt the urge to hug his sister. Then he came to his senses and in his best peeved tones he said, ‘Where did you go?’

‘Duh! I teleported before he could shoot me.’ She knelt next to Emily and felt for a pulse. ‘She’s fast asleep.’

The sound of a powerful revving engine got their attention. On the opposite side of the motorway, the two remaining villains had found a car

transporter that had veered off the road. It was full of brand new Porsches - one of which they had hotwired and were now escaping in.

Toby watched the bright red car zip past. Monika was at the wheel, cackling loudly.

'That's so cool!'

'Don't let them get away!' shouted Lorna. 'They have the box!'

Stopping the villains from seizing the box from the armoured car had been their primary mission - although they had no idea what was inside it. As usual their plan was going wrong. They both hesitated for a moment, unsure how to pursue the fiends. Then they looked at each other with the same idea, and the same lopsided grin.

They ran across to the transporter and jumped into the next Porsche, Toby making sure he used a little super-speed to beat his sister to the driver's seat. He released the handbrake and the car rolled smoothly off the transporter.

'We don't have a key,' Lorna said.

Toby scrambled in the glove box, and then behind the sun-visor where the key is always put in films. Nothing. Then he had a bolt of inspiration. He touched the ignition and concentrated on firing a small jolt of his attack power. A spark cracked between his finger and the engine roared to life.

'Brilliant!' yelped Lorna. 'Seatbelts!'

Toby pushed the car into gear, as he'd seen his parents do so many times. If they could do it, it must be easy.

The gear engaged with a nasty crunch. He took his foot off the clutch and braced himself for the ride of his life—

The engine stalled with a wheezy croak. Lorna looked at him in disbelief.

'What did you do?'

'I don't know! It just stalled!'

'Let me try!' She already had her seatbelt off.

'No! I'll try again.'

He tried a second time, and a third. In frustration, Lorna ordered her brother to swap places. But she proved to be no better than he was.

'How hard can this be?' fumed Lorna.

'They're getting away! We better stop messing around and do something.'

Toby sighed, climbed reluctantly out of the sports car - then he ran forwards like a rocket.

'That's more like it,' mumbled Lorna.

The two villains pushed the car to its maximum speed of 186 miles per hour. Window-wipers battled rain that was falling so heavily it never cleared from the glass, but they were lucky because the traffic was jammed behind them making the autobahn ahead completely clear.

The boy had wedged the case on the tiny excuse for a backseat. He leaned back and opened it, taking a fist of hundred-Euro notes out. He whooped with delight.

'Have you got the black box?' asked Monika urgently.

The boy delved into the case again and handed it over. It was small and long like a pencil case, but with no obvious way of opening it. Monika

shook it, but it didn't rattle. She put it on her lap for safety. Retrieving the box is what the mysterious Villain.net had asked her to do in return for her powers and she wasn't going to fail - she was enjoying the night so far. So she'd lost a few of the gang back there, but she hadn't really liked them much anyway. Having downloadable superpowers more than made up for hanging around with a few bored teenagers.

Monika glanced in her rearview mirror and frowned. Something was coming through the cloud of spray kicked up by the sports car. It was difficult to make out exactly what it was because the rain blurred the window. When she looked again their pursuer was gone.

The boy noticed that Monika seemed preoccupied. 'Everything alright?'

She turned to speak to him - and her mouth hung open in astonishment. He followed her gaze to outside *his* passenger window.

Toby was running alongside the car, arms and legs pumping so fast that they were a blur. However, the rest of him was perfectly clear. His head was bowed against the rain, which painfully whipped his skin.

'Stop the car!' he yelled.

The girl was so shocked that she slammed on the brakes. The Porsche squealed as it skidded across the wet road. She lost control and the car slewed sideways as it aquaplaned. She tugged the steering wheel hard in the opposite direction - bad idea.

Toby slid to a halt, his feet kicking up a massive curtain of water. He watched as the Porsche spun in circles, grinding to a halt in the centre of the autobahn.

Inside the car it was like being trapped in a washing machine. Euros now plastered the interior. Monika felt sick, and when she looked at her companion she saw he was about to hurl.

'Don't you dare!' she screamed.

Toby walked towards the car, lightning crackled between his fingers as he readied himself for a fight. Lorna teleported next to him with a loud bang.

'You took your time,' he commented dryly.

The passenger door opened and the boy was kicked out in a cloud of Euro notes and vomit. He looked pitiful. Then the Porsche wheelspun and accelerated straight for an exit ramp.

'I give up,' groaned the kid.

'I'll take care of him,' said Lorna. 'You go after the girl before she kills someone.'

Toby zipped off in pursuit. The Porsche skidded into a busy traffic lane that led into the heart of the city. Toby paused for a second to take in the heavy traffic and the Porsche wildly careening through it, and then shot forwards.

Monika drove at frightening speed, weaving through the traffic always seeming to be centimetres from colliding with other vehicles. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that Toby was powering along behind her.

Toby had no idea how he was going to stop the car, but he was thankful he wasn't going full speed so he could still change lanes without too much effort. He gave a brief thought to how this must look to other people, and hoped after a casual glance their eyes would trick them into thinking he

was on a motorbike rather than on foot, because superpowers were supposed to be secret.

The Porsche jolted right to avoid a stationary bus. Toby hadn't been paying attention and had to side step at the very last moment. Terrified he would trip, instead he found himself sidestepping into the door of the car alongside him. The high-speed impact buckled the side of the vehicle, forcing the driver to slam on the brakes in a cloud of burning rubber. Toby heard the crunch of other vehicles rear-ending the stricken car.

Ahead the Porsche swung around a corner. Toby slowed down, his trainers skidding across the slick road, swinging him out into the middle of a busy crossroads where the traffic was already in turmoil in the wake of the Porsche.

He was slowly catching up. If he reached out he could grab hold of the spoiler. Monika suddenly changed lanes. Toby followed—

The Porsche passed across a set of tramlines - missing a tram by millimetres. Then something bizarre happened—

Toby's vision shimmered and stretched, as if he was watching events unfold through a distorted funfair mirror. Then it snapped back to normal as *the Porsche passed across a set of tramlines - missing a tram by millimetres - again!*

Déjà -vu. Toby was so unnerved that he ran straight into the tram.

One side of the tram crunched inwards, glass shattering. Passengers screamed as the tram rocked off its rails, bashed through several cars before toppling over onto its side in a horrendous crash.

Toby rolled from the wreckage unhurt. He was protected from anything more serious than a few scratches by the regeneration power that was now routinely blended with all downloadable powers on Hero.com - all part of the upgraded technology.

He shook his head to clear the wooziness. When he looked up he saw that the Porsche had stopped at the end of the street. Monika was watching the destruction with a huge smile.

She put the car in gear - and was startled by a bang from the seat next to her. Lorna appeared and snatched the black box from Monika's lap.

'I'll have that!' Then her expression turned to one of disgust. 'Am I sitting in... puke?'

Monika extended her arm - and nothing happened. She looked at it in surprise. What had happened to her powers?

'Aw, didn't you know? Those Villain.net powers are knock-offs. They don't last too long. Sorry.'

Monika stomped on the accelerator and the car jerked forwards. Lorna was expecting the move. She reached out and yanked the wheel, aiming straight for the edge of a bridge.

'Are you crazy?' screamed Monika.

The Porsche broke through the barriers, sailed through the air, and splashed into the river.

Toby ran to the bridge to watch the expensive car sink. Lorna appeared next to him with a bang. Toby smiled with relief.

'Where is she?'

Lorna pointed over to two police cars that had finally caught up with the chase. The policemen surrounded a shocked Monika who was cowering on the riverbank.

'You teleported out.' Toby was impressed.

'It was a close call. I couldn't teleport with the package. It blocked my powers.'

Toby smelled something unpleasant. 'Urgh! You smell of puke!'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

Toby tried to ignore the smell. 'Where is the package?'

'It's at the bottom of the river,' she said watching the last bubbles rise from the Porsche. 'I'm sure the Foundation can salvage it. At least we stopped those villains from getting their hands on it.'

'We should get back and tell them.'

'First, let's get Em.'

They moved away from the growing crowd, and in a dark side street they teleported back to the armoured truck.

The autobahn destruction looked the same, but Emily had vanished along with the other villains. They combed the area, but could find no trace of their friend. They were forced to stop the search when they heard the approaching sounds of the emergency services.

Toby felt a wave of nausea. Something odd was happening. He needed Pete with him more than ever, and not for the first time, he wondered how his best friend was doing.

It was the most wonderful feeling Pete could remember experiencing. Everything was going right. Everybody was following orders. Stacks of gold bullion glistened in the sun, rising from the pure white sands in perfect stacks. He briefly pondered why the gold was stacked on the beach, but reasoned that it was part of what was turning out to be an unusual day.

Two figures ran across the sands, breathing hard in the noon heat. Their battered costumes did little to cool them down. The pair slumped on their hands and knees, gasping for breath. He was surprised to see them here. He had thought they were both dead.

The first figure looked up, lank black hair pasted to his bone white complexion. At the sight of his distinctive high-browed head, the name came flooding back to Pete. Doc Tempest. The first villain he'd ever fought.

'I have failed you. Please... please forgive me! I'm nothing more than a wretch!'

Tempest snivelled like a baby. That made Pete feel even better. He kicked out, marvelling at how muscular his own leg looked. His boot knocked Tempest over, the supervillain groaned and rolled onto his side.

'Failure will not be tolerated!' *He* roared. *His* voice possessed a powerful timbre.

The second figure looked up. A heavy cloak that was worn around the edges masked his face. Strong stone hands reached up to the hood as he spoke.

'This is what you wanted,' said Basilisk. 'Wealth, power, control... it's all yours to do as you will. It's all within your grasp. You are powerful;

unstoppable.’ The hood fell off and a scarred face looked back. It was a shockingly recognizable face.

It was Pete’s own!

‘Join us!’ demanded Basilisk.

Then blackness. Pete felt his body jerk and a piercing alarm sounded in the distance, a monotonous drone underlining it. Ghostly voices drifted past.

‘...Massive embolism!’

‘He’s going to flatline.’

‘Clear!’

A THUMP, louder than the Big Bang echoed through Pete’s skull. Soothing warmth quickly followed it, and the monotonous tone began to dance again.

The annoying voices faded away, and Pete opened his eyes on his new empire once again.

It was everything he had *ever* hoped it would be.