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Opening extract from

Villain.net
Power Surge

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NEW KID ON THE JOB

A light drizzle flattened Jake Hunter's spiky blond hair to his scalp. He scowled; no amount of superpowers or wealth could prevent the little things from annoying him, and these days he had trouble keeping his temper under control. To unleash his anger would be to unleash volatile superpowers that were almost beyond his control.

And they were not a good substitute for a jacket with a hood.

His contact was running late. He glanced around the sprawling expanse of St Mark's square, which, despite the poor weather, was busy with tourists. The domed Basilica at the end of the *piazza* made him think of Moscow where his friends had decided to mug him for a case full of money. Then he had been chased by a superhero called Chameleon. That had been fun, although it didn't feel like it at the time. His nemesis was now a crystalline sculpture in Jake's Gothic Transylvanian castle.

Jake mused how quickly his life had changed since he opened that spam email inviting him to join Villain.net. Now he had immense powers at his fingertips. He was not only able to absorb multiple superpowers from Villain.net like a sponge, and amplify their strength, but he could also combine them to create unique powers that had never been seen before.

But the price he paid was an addiction to them.

His DNA had become entangled within the website and now he was cursed to continuously download from Villain.net in order to stay alive.

Both the Hero Foundation and the Council of Evil desperately wanted to probe his powers to use him as a super-weapon. Rather than live a life on the run, Jake had chosen a side and accepted a seat on the Council.

However, he considered it a temporary position.

A man approached him through the crowd. He was huge. It wasn't fat it was just that his body seemed square. His massive bald head ran straight into his shoulders without the benefit of a neck. He wore expensive high-collared shirts to conceal this fact, but he still attracted stares from gawping tourists. He was a key figure in the Council of Evil and his name was Momentum.

'I hate Venice,' stated the big man as he reached Jake.

Jake shrugged. His list of pet-hates was too long to discuss here.

'It gets us away from the Council's prying eyes,' said Jake. 'I don't think they'd approve of what we're doing.' They walked towards the Cathedral, turning at the large clock tower and approached the waterfront. 'I wasn't sure you were going to come.'

'Why? Did you think I'd set you up and put you into danger all on your own?'

Jake smiled. 'Why not? I would. I have to admit, I thought you'd back out of our plan.'

Momentum grunted noncommittally. 'I'd be doing this with or without you. We just need to make sure we don't end up like Chromosome.'

Chromosome was the villain Jake had replaced on the Council of Evil. Necros, the unofficial leader of the Council, had discovered her plot to recruit Jake and use his unique powers to overthrow the Council. She had been swiftly eliminated.

‘Chromosome was trying to create a team of supporters from within the Council. Of course people were going to betray her. It’s stupid to trust so many villains. My plan is a little more... subtle.’

Momentum arched an eyebrow - or he would have done if he possessed any facial hair. ‘Really? How subtle?’

‘Only you, me, and Mr Grimm know about it. That way, any treachery will be easier to discover.’ It was a veiled threat and Jake took some satisfaction when he noticed Momentum shift uncomfortably.

They reached the busy waterway and stopped near the jetty. It was the Venetian Lagoon, which was much wider than the canals in the main part of the city. Other populated islands lay fifty meters offshore, a chain of boats running between them.

Momentum studied Jake. ‘And what makes you think I wouldn’t betray you?’

‘I’m a naturally trusting person,’ said Jake with a smile. ‘Plus, we’re officially in business together. Don’t forget, I’m paying you for that other *“thing”.*’ He held out his hand expectantly.

Momentum hesitated before reaching into his pocket and pulling out an MP3 device. It looked tiny in his hand. Jake took it, examining it closely. He’d paid several million for this small device - money he was forced to steal from a bank vault. That kind of crime wasn’t really his style, but it was an important safety catch in his overall plan.

Not that long ago a powerful ability had been used to wipe, not only his family’s memories, but also their ability to even see Jake. It took the unique

powers of a now dead superhero, called Psyche, for him to restore their memories and their ability to see him.

But the victory was short lived.

Mr Grimm had been forced to separate Jake from his family once again before the Enforcers, a non-superpowered combat team, had arrived to arrest him.

Shortly after that, the Council of Evil had offered him a position. The choice was power and glory, with them or a stable and average life with his family - but without his powers.

Before Jake could decide, Grimm had delivered more bad news.

His family had been hospitalized. It seems the superpower he used to restore his parents memory was not strong enough - he had given them a half dose, it was all he had. They had fallen unconscious, and when they woke, their memories had been lost again - but not completely, as Jake discovered when he went to visit them.

This time, they could see him; they just had *no idea* who he was! Jake was a stranger to them. The police had been called and Jake was, once again, forced to flee from his family home.

Mr Grimm had told him that some of Psych's power had been donated to the Hero Foundation before he died. The Foundation HQ had since been destroyed by Basilisk - the same archfiend who had introduced Jake to Villain.net. However the last portion of Psych's power now resided inside the most unlikely hero who was currently in a coma.

With everything stacked against him, Jake accepted the position on the Council of Evil. His old fury had flared up against both the Council of Evil and

the Hero Foundation who had messed up his life. He vowed that once he got his family back, he would destroy both organizations.

This was war.

Jake didn't want to dwell on that, it only made him angry. He pressed "play". A stream of white noise poured from the speaker - the high pitch warbling of computer data.

'You're sure this will work?'

'It's a Data-Rendered-Aural-Inhibitor - or a Draizor for short. I stole the technology directly from the Foundation. Pete Kendall is being subliminally conditioned as we speak to reject his heroic leanings. There is a hidden device in his room feeding him instructions at a frequency only he can hear. Those same instructions will also make him susceptible to the Draizor. The data tones on the device in your hand are designed to specifically interfere with the neural-processing of his superpowers.'

Momentum noticed a puzzled expression spread across Jake's face. He dumbed down the explanation. 'The Draizor plays high-pitch tones and a hypnotic voice beyond our ordinary range of hearing, that will prevent Pete from using his powers against you. It will cause him pain. Think of it as a safety catch for your lethal weapon.'

Jake slid the Draizor into his jacket. 'And are you going to tell me what your interest is in Pete?'

'Both you and Pete are unique because of the sheer number of powers at your disposal. When Pete smashed through dozens of vats of raw superpowers and absorbed them into his system he became one of the most

powerful beings on earth. Unlike you, he can't create new abilities at will, but we think he can manipulate the ones he does possess to a devastating effect.'

Pete's abilities sounded impressive but Jake was only interested in the comatose hero because inside him lay the last surviving sample of Psych's superpowers. Within that power was the memories needed to unlock his parent's amnesia.

Jake sniggered. 'And you think you can use him and his powers like people have tried to use me?' Momentum was free to use Pete how ever he wanted just as soon as Jake got what he wanted.

'I have my plans. We all have our secrets. And I'm not as trusting as you are, Hunter.' The latter comment was laced with sarcasm. 'But I am willing to help you in your crusade against the Council as long as you wish to bring it down and promise not to take the lead position for yourself. I tire of their rules and regulations. Their bureaucracy is making any decent world domination plan a nightmare. Already this year they have turned down twenty three applications.'

'I want to see the Council fall,' said Jake with determination. They were responsible for turning his life upside down. Villain.net had hooked him and turned him into a monster.

'Good, because here is our first opportunity.'

Momentum pointed to a large boat that was docking against the jetty. It had a single logo in the corner that Jake instantly recognised as belonging to the Enforcers - the United Nation's private, non-superpowered, army. Since the Hero Foundation's main headquarters had crashed into the Mongolian Desert, courtesy of a gang of rogue-supervillains, the Foundation

had been scrambling to rebuild and update their equipment. The devices they were now using were rapidly leaving the Council of Evil behind in the technology race. Rather than invest millions into researching alternatives, the Council were simply stealing consignments of gadgets as they were bring delivered to Foundation facilities, like the one Jake had discovered in Venice.

Once the boat had docked, the rear section was raised on hydraulic rams and four heavily armed Enforcers marched out and took position on the jetty, keeping nosey tourists at bay. To everybody else this looked like a secure bank or gallery transfer that happened regularly across the city. Both the Foundation and Council had discovered that by operating in plain sight nobody asked questions.

The two supervillains knew that onboard was a consignment of hi-tech gadgets that were powered by small quantities of superpowers. They had been designed so that nobody had to download many superpowers in one go and they would have more control over them. Momentum thought they were perfect for their plans to defeat the other supers - fellow villains first, followed by the Hero Foundation. Momentum had called it, “a new world order.”

With a bass-heavy rumble, a vehicle glided from the back of the boat and onto the jetty. It was a hovervan - a hybrid between a security van and a hovercraft. Jake hadn’t been expecting that.

‘Ready?’ snarled Momentum, who was already psyching himself up for an attack.

‘Go for it,’ said Jake, happy to let Momentum do all the hard work.

Momentum charged forward. Each footfall got heavier and heavier until the concrete splintered with each impact. The Enforcers immediately

spotted the threat and open-fired. Bullets bounced from Momentum's skin, although his thousand-pound suit suffered multiple rips and tears.

He clobbered into two of the Enforcers, scattering them like bowling pins. One was hurled into the water, the other spun high into the air, before thumping down onto the jetty.

The hovervan's driver spun around to try and avoid an impact. True to his name, Momentum became almost unstoppable as he built up speed - but as a result his dexterity suffered too. The hovervan had managed to avoid a direct hit, but Momentum still clipped the fender. Metal crunched under impact and the vehicle spun uncontrollably on its cushion of air - forcing the two Enforcers inside to almost pass out from the sudden G-force.

Momentum skidded to a halt, concrete rucking under his feet as though it was carpet. Tourists were now screaming and running as two Enforcers shot at him. Momentum covered his face and charged again.

Jake watched as the big man dispatched the shooters, but came under fire from others standing on the back of the boat. Momentum was loosing his temper and ignored the hovervan – choosing instead to run towards the boat. The carbon fibre hull shattered as the big man's struck. Jake heard the Council member bellow victoriously before the boat shattered like an egg and collapsed into the lagoon taking the villain and the Enforcers under.

As the boat broke apart, the hovervan accelerated into St Mark's Square. A horn bellowed, scattering tourist and pigeons. Jake ran in pursuit. He wasn't the fastest runner and dared not raise too much suspicion by flying after the vehicle.

The hovervan turned out of sight around the Basilica. Frustrated, Jake teleported across the piazza. It was a short jump, and nobody appeared to notice despite the thunderclap that announced his arrival. He watched as the hovervan zoomed through the narrow streets, and out of sight once again. He dared not teleport again as he had no idea where he was going and could end up stuck in a wall which meant certain death. Teleportation was also his only ticket away from Venice, and while he could use it to jump short distances, he needed a big enough “charge” to get away.

Jake sprinted through the street. The hovervan was heading straight for a canal. Now Jake realized why the Enforcers had chosen such an unusual mode of transport. The hovervan leaped off the jetty and splashed into the water. The air cushion bobbed it back above the water and the vehicle shot along the canal.

If Jake didn’t act fast he could easily lose the hovervan in the complex narrow system and although he knew the Hero Foundation had an outpost here, he didn’t know *exactly* where. Time was against him.

Jake launched himself into the air and flew after the hovervan. He heard a gasp from a knot of tourists and there was a wave of camera flashes. No doubt the Enforcers would attempt to brainwash the tourists, convincing them what they had seen was perfectly normal. They didn’t seem to care about the consequences of scrambling people’s minds.

The hovervan was more reckless than he was. A gondola cutting across a junction was torn in half - the occupants leaping clear before the wooden boat was destroyed. Jake swooped around the corner so fast that his

feet touched the building in front of him, forcing him to run along the vertical surface as he took the turn.

He was gaining on the hovervan. He hurled a lightning blast that dented the toughened roof of the vehicle - momentarily forcing it low into the water where it kicked up a spray that fogged Jake's vision.

When it cleared, there was a bridge in the way! Jake was flying too fast to avoid it. He had the fleeting glimpse of an astonished pedestrian's face before he slammed through the narrow stonework.

His shield absorbed the impact, preventing him from being splattered like a bug across the masonry. Centuries old stone cracked from the collision and he severed the bridge. As the footbridge collapsed into the water behind him, he spun wildly out of control - ricocheting between buildings either side of the narrow canal. Bricks crumpled and windows shattered as he pinballed.

Jake forced himself to a hovering stop to prevent further destruction. He had hoped that the theft of the equipment would go without a hitch - but as usual, things had gone wrong. Back in control, he shot after the hovervan as it turned another sharp corner.

Jake easily caught up with the vehicle and fired another lightning blast that blew one of the doors open. Several crates of equipment spilled out, falling into the canal.

'Rats!' snarled Jake. Water-damaged equipment was no good to him. Jake surged forward - his fingers centimetres from grabbing the top of the vehicle. Then he became aware of two things simultaneously - a large motor yacht moored to the side of the canal on one side and a pair of fast

approaching supers, flying on the other. Jake firmly gripped the top of the truck.

A pulse of energy suddenly struck the hovervan from the side - forcing it to veer into the moored yacht. Jake gripped tight as he was yanked sideways. The vehicle hit the yacht with a loud crunch that echoed down the canal. The yacht acted as a ramp - forcing the hovervan to lift from the water. It rolled through the air. Jake spun with the van, riding it like a bucking bronco.

The hovervan barrel-rolled from the canal and landed onto its roof in another smaller piazza filled with market stalls. Sparks kicked from the vehicle as it dragged across the concrete. They stung Jake's eyes and he let go.

A fruit stall cushioned Jake's fall. The broken hovervan rolled through several stalls before stopping. All around him, people screamed and ran for safety. Jake climbed unsteadily to his feet.

Two figures flew into the plaza - dressed, like he was, in casual clothing. It was a boy and a girl several years older than him.

'This catch is ours!' yelled the boy.

'No chance,' said Jake automatically. He was puzzled, if they were heroes why were they attacking their own delivery? Which could only mean they were villains. And Jake hated villains just as much as he despised heroes.

'Who's going to stop us kid? You?' laughed the girl.

The two Enforcers climbed from the cab of the vehicle. They were badly beaten from the impact. The two new villains wasted no time in

shooting both Enforcers with an energy blast that sent them sprawling through more stalls. Even Jake thought that was excessive force.

'Who are you?' asked Jake eyeing an unfamiliar logo on their sleeves. 'You know the Council has guidelines—' Jake couldn't believe he was telling somebody else off for breaking the rules.

'The Council of Evil are as antiquated as the Foundation,' snarled the boy. 'We're from Forge.'

The name meant nothing to Jake. He didn't want to get involved in a scrap - which showed how much he had matured since he had become the Dark Hunter. He preferred to find a sneaky way out of any situation he found himself in. Instead he resorted to the special weapon used by the rich and famous:

'Do you know who I am?'

The teenagers looked at him blankly. Then the girl laughed. 'No, should we?'

Jake felt his cheeks burn from embarrassment. If you had to explain to somebody that you were famous, or infamous, then clearly you weren't.

'I'm the Dark Hunter!'

This got a reaction - a flicker of fear crossed both the teenager's faces. Clearly they'd heard of his reputation.

'But you're only a kid,' said the girl.

Jake's temper snapped and he felt a surge of heat leave his finger. So much for the peaceful option! The lightning blast hit the girl like a sledgehammer. She hit the hovervan so hard that the metal dented and she slumped onto the ground, unconscious.

‘NO!’ screamed the boy and instinctively ran to the girl. It was an amateur mistake to turn his back on Jake. Jake fired a searing red fork of lightning at the boy. It sent him sprawling headfirst through a souvenir stall. Miniature porcelain gondolas broke over his head.

Jake stalked over to him. ‘What’s Forge?’ The boy rolled over, gasping in pain. He stared defiantly at Jake. Jake gripped the boy’s collar. ‘I asked you a question!’

Jake suddenly felt a hail of needles shoot into the side of his face. The white-hot pain was unbelievable. He dropped to his knees and turned to see that the girl’s hand were a mass of spines like a porcupine. The ones she had fired at him were immediately replaced by more forming from her knuckles.

The next needle volley impacted into an energy shield Jake made appear around his arm. The speed of his manoeuvre surprised the girl.

Jake was losing his temper. He could feel the powers inside his body burn like fire.

Jake’s vision tainted red and the girl appeared to glow as her body’s electrical system became visible, highlighting her like an angel. He took some satisfaction in hearing her gasp as his eyes burned a menacing red.

Jake held out his hand and the girl became rigid. An invisible force hoisted her into the air and slowly crushed her body. She screamed.

‘What is Forge?’ yelled Jake.

She looked as though she was about to reply - but the boy suddenly swooped up and plucked her away. Jake wildly fired at them, blasting the rooftops of buildings as they disappeared behind them.