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opening extract from

Villain Net 4: Collision Course

written by

Andy Briggs

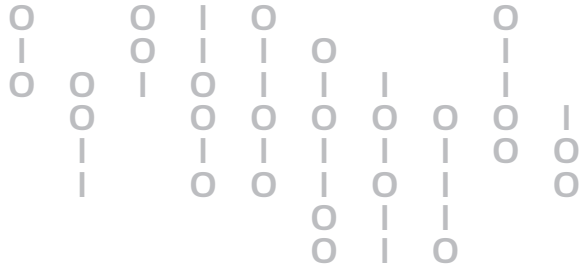
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The Beginning

White-capped waves pounded the wooden-hulled galleon as it ploughed through the stormy sea. Lightning streaked across the sky, striking the mast and setting the sails afire. Even the heavy rain couldn't douse the flames as they consumed the Jolly Roger that crowned the mainmast.

The Buccaneer was a tough ship, but she couldn't take much more punishment. The damage was so heavy that she now resembled a ghost ship patrolling the high seas for unwary sailors.

Most of the crew cowered below decks, getting drenched with salt water as the sea flooded from above. Only three figures were brave, or stupid, enough to stay on deck.

The captain clung to the wheel, a rope around the waist binding him to it as he tried to steer the vessel headlong into the waves. If a wave broadsided the ship it would undoubtedly keel over, drowning all on board. He coughed violently, blood dripping from his lips. During the voyage he had developed

the wasting disease. He knew he was dying; there was no cure.

His first mate cowered against the balustrade, arms wrapped around the damp wood. A dozen waves had tried to dislodge him; only grim determination kept him anchored. The navigator had both arms and legs tightly wrapped around the mizzenmast, his eyes closed to battle the stomach-pummelling seasickness he felt.

The men were hardened sailors used to cheating the elements, but none thought they would make it out of this storm alive. They all suspected 1846 marked their final adventure.

'The storm is getting worse!' screamed the first mate. 'We'll die out here if we don't find shelter!'

'What will you have me do? I can't see or steer!' retorted the captain between hacking coughs. He had started to hate his first mate and the idiot's brother they had recruited as navigator. The brothers both possessed strange powers, a form of witchcraft that had driven them from their home town and made them take to a life of crime. The captain tolerated them because their unusual gifts were sometimes useful on raids.

'This is the devil's work!' cried the first mate. 'I swear if I get out alive I'll change my ways!'

'Use your gifts, man! Get us out of here!'

'There's nothing I can do!' snapped the first mate.

'What about your lousy brother? Can't he conjure up something? It's his fault he led us into this monsoon!'

'If he could he would! His ability is only—'

The first mate's words were swallowed as the boat was suddenly hoisted upwards on the crest of a wave with such ferocity that the force dropped both men to their knees.

The boat rose momentarily out of the sea as the wave dispersed beneath it—the vessel fell into the trough carved in the water. Timbers creaked, threatening to break.

'What in the name of all that is unholy . . . ?' muttered the captain as he suddenly realized why the wave had spectacularly broken. 'Look! LAND AHOY!'

The navigator ran to the railing and threw up over the edge. He wiped his mouth with his dirty damp sleeve as he stared thankfully at the land. 'At last we can get off this death trap!'

The wave had carried them into a sheltered bay. A dark island lay before them, lit for a fraction of a second by a bolt of lightning that revealed dense jungle and craggy rocks.

'We're saved!' cried the first mate, shaking his brother's shoulder. They both whooped and danced an improvised jig propelled by sheer joy.

The captain didn't join in. There was something about the jungle that felt wrong. He wordlessly guided the ship towards the pebbled beach.

Alerted by the change in the ship's movement, the crew had come out of hiding and watched with hope in their hearts as they dropped anchor.

The captain, first mate, and navigator headed ashore in a rowing boat, with four members of the crew, the only ones who had not weakened during the dismal voyage.

The navigator kissed the pebbly beach as the pirates landed. 'Oh! Beautiful land! It's so good to be back!'

The captain regarded the dark trees with suspicion. One of his men must have picked up the unusual vibe and stood with him, whispering.

'Don't feel right, Cap. Don't feel natural.'

The captain nodded. Then something caught his eye—a phosphorous purple glow amongst the trees. He glanced at the rest of the crew who were busy celebrating at the water's edge.

'Come on,' he nodded towards the jungle.

The two men used their sabres to cut away hanging creepers that blocked their path. The glow came from a boulder on the ground, no bigger than a man's head. They edged closer, finally seeing the source of the unusual light.

'It's a rock!' said the crewman in surprise.

The captain knelt, holding his hand over the stone. There was no warmth from it but the hairs on his arm stood upright as they passed through the electrically charged air. He didn't know what it was, but he sensed its importance.

He took a deep breath to cover the nerves he felt, then reached out and touched the stone. A spark jumped between the rock and his finger with a loud electrical crack. He jumped backwards; his crewmate already had his sword drawn, expecting an attack.

'Cap? Look!' There was no mistaking the tremor of fear in the voice. The pirate was staring at the captain's hand—

It was glowing! A fine luminescence clung to the captain's fingers as he flexed them. Strange sensations washed through his body.

'What is it?' hissed the crewman.

'I don't know. But whatever it is don't breathe a word to the others!'

To emphasize his point he wagged his finger at the man. A bolt of energy suddenly shot out and blasted a hole through the man's chest. He was hurled several metres backwards, hit a tree, and fell down dead.

The captain stared at his hand in amazement. How had he done that? He looked back at the purple rock. Whatever it was had given him the power, and he realized that the hacking cough, which had been tearing

his lungs apart, had disappeared. He took a deep, clear breath for the first time in weeks. The rock had given him power . . . and saved his life.

He crossed over to his dead companion.

'Rest your soul,' he said, running his hand across the man's eyes to close them.

At his touch, the dead sailor suddenly shot upright with a throaty gurgle. The captain recoiled in shock. The hole was still in the man's chest; big enough to put his head in.

In panic, the captain shot another energy bolt at his undead companion, killing him for the second time. The pirate collapsed and an eerie silence settled over the jungle once again.

The captain looked around. He would make this mysterious island his new home. An opportunity to make a difference.

A chance to put his mark on the world.