

## Chapter One

**Vigilantes, The:** *New York City-based Type 3 supergroup active primarily within a two-year period in the mid 1990's. It formed somewhat accidentally as several freelance heroes converged during their efforts to combat the First New York Bank robbery string by the **Vortex Group** (See Part 4: Villain Groups). Upon arresting the Vortex Group and basically bored with their solo careers, the heroes decided to form up as a consolidated team. Memberships varied over the months, but group levels never exceeded more than eight individuals. Leadership remained relatively stable under the notably unstable founding member **Stinger** (See Appendix B: Historical Heroes). The Vigilantes were known to have encountered many Type 1-4 villains with varying levels of success. Documented encounters include the alien overlord **Praetox** (See Part 3: Villains), the energy metamorph **Afterbirth**, and the **Monopoly Cartel** (See Appendix C: Historical Villains and Villain Groups). It is widely speculated the Vigilantes disbanded due to intense personality conflicts within the group and with other supergroups and heroes working in the New York City area.*

*A noted ally of the Vigilantes, the android **Ahbold IV** (See Part 1: Heroes), subsequently used the opportunity to privately fund a "replacement" group of teenage heroes that he dubbed "The New Vigilantes" (See **New Vigilantes, The**), though the memberships of each team were mutually exclusive. The original Vigilantes never achieved more than a modest level of fame, especially beyond the immediate NYC area, despite several Type 4 heroes temporarily in its lineup and a few unconfirmed reports of the team "saving the earth on no less than four occasions." Most of the heroes associated with this group's membership are now considered inactive or are presumed deceased.*

*-Excerpt from "The Complete Guide to Super Powers and Groups" by Cassandra Jean Beaumont*

Some time later, rain continued to fall all around Eric Cooper.

*Figures, the man thought morosely. This stupid costume's a rental, and now it's so waterlogged, those guys at the pizza place are probably gonna make me buy the damn thing.*

Eric sighed deeply, letting his head droop in the heavy hippo mask. The head shifted as he moved, momentarily obscuring his vision. He brought his hands up to his face to fix himself, but he found it was surprisingly difficult while holding the sign ("Harry Hippo's Pizza Plaza is HIPPO-LICIOUS!") and his soggy early evening snack (four greasy pieces of pepperoni and sausage pizza in a brown paper sack) in his soaked, three-fingered hippo hands. He twisted the mask to line up the holes to his eyes...just in time to step into a large puddle settled in a broken piece of sidewalk. A fresh wave of chilling water washed into the fabric on his right leg and settled into his oversized shoe.

"Dammit..." he mumbled to himself.

Thunder rumbled across the low-lying clouds as Eric continued walking down the nearly deserted street. It was just after sundown, but the shrouding rain made it seem that much darker. It was another sad, dreary day in his sad, dreary life.

The paper of his snack sack finally gave way, and the plastic-wrapped pizza slices splashed to the ground with a solid plop. Eric gave another sigh and held up the remains of the bag to his eyeholes. With a little stiffness, he bent over to collect his food, feeling his ample belly spill out over his legs within the hippo suit. The hippo head shifted again, and Eric used a fuzzy hand to prop the mask up to rest back on the top of his head as he gathered the wet slices from the ground. Eric pursed his lips together as he watched half the toppings on one piece slide off onto the pavement, but then he shrugged and started eating the rest in the rain. He'd be home soon, and if he was hungry then, he would just see what was in his refrigerator. Maybe some of those chili cheese fries would still be in there. Oh, wait. He already ate those with some of that old ketchup and that half-eaten can of Cheez Whiz. He remembered that because he also had some of that milk that expired almost a month ago with it. He spent the rest of the night on the john with really bad stomach cramps.

*Yech.*

His huge hippo feet dragging, he turned a corner and headed south, directly into the blowing wind and rain. He blinked in the water, seeing that he had another four blocks to go until he reached his apartment complex. Next time, he thought, he would hold off on buying those extra hotdogs and save some money for bus fare. It was a long way from lower Manhattan to his tiny, one-bedroom place in Queens. Walking was such a drag, and it always made him tired and even less motivated than normal.

*It wasn't always like this*, he glumly thought. Back in the day, he could just strap on his trusty jet boots and zip all over the city-heck, all over the country-with them. Yeah, that was back when he was worth something. Back when he could make all the girls swoon and all the guys wish they could be just like him. Back before he was fifty pounds overweight. Back when he had more money than he could spend. Back when he was a *hero*.

Lost in his distressing thoughts, he almost missed the steps leading up to his low-rent apartment building. Eric took off the hippo head, put it under his left arm, and with great soggy steps, he turned and walked up to the door buzzer. As he input his code ("1111"--nothing too complicated to tax his brain), the door opened. He stepped into the dingy apartment entrance lobby. Eric was mildly but pleasantly surprised to see his next-door neighbor Rachel Perkins and her seven-year-old kid Greg (*or Glen or Gary or Gerny - something that started with a "G," that's for sure*) standing near the creaking elevator and rusting wall mailboxes in front of him. The woman was really pretty, but a life of drugs and bad choices had brought her here. Ever since the old days, little kids made Eric uneasy, and Rachel's kid was no exception. That kid had utterly stopped any chance Eric had with her...more than once.

*Lousy kid.*

Rachel was a stripper, but when Eric had referred to her as such, he got a nice slap on the face with a "correction" that she was an "adult entertainer." Maybe he shouldn't have patted her butt when he had talked to her, either. Whatever she described he job as, though, tonight she was looking as superficially good as ever. Eric's watery eyes were drawn to the woman's sequined bra and mini-skirt visible under her dingy denim jacket. When she saw Eric, she started, cleared her throat, and continued

walking with her kid. Eric tried to ignore the look of tired disgust in her eyes as she looked at him. Nonetheless, she was polite.

"Oh, hiya, Mr. Cooper. How's Daddy today?" she asked, chewing on some gum. Eric, of course, had no idea that Rachel used the name "Daddy" whenever she was talking to any scum-sucking, overweight, sleazoid that had any desire to cram money under her G-string. Like any of those suckers, he took it as a sort of endearment. But...he also felt old, and 35-years old was too young to feel so old...

Eric tried his best to suck in his gut and puff out his chest. He hoped his long brown hair looked okay and that maybe, just maybe, Rachel thought his blue eyes or even his jowls looked sexy. He was suddenly aware that he had a line of pizza sauce trailing from his lip down to his t-shirt collar and hippo costume top. He hoped he looked smooth as he brought up one of his oversized mittens to wipe off his face.

"Hey there, Rachel. Comin' home from work, I see."

"Yeah..." She paused to look at Eric in his drenched gray costume. "You, too."

Germey curled his little lip in utter disgust as he held his mom's hand. To Eric, he said:

"You're *stupid*."

Rachel looked momentarily startled by her son's outburst, but she said nothing to correct the boy.

"Heh. Uh, yeah. Thanks, kid." Eric tried to play it off, but he just wanted to grab Germey and slam him through the wall! *Oh, I could do it, too! I still have my super-strength! Maybe I could fire up some energy blasts and send that kid flying, and then we'll see how "stupid" that weasel-y kid thinks I am!*

Eric's anger flared briefly, but then he just sighed as Rachel and Germey exited the lobby and went back into the first floor apartment hallway. Eric gave them a half-hearted wave. Germey stuck his tongue out at Eric and made a nasty little face, but Rachel never looked back. Eric let his gut out with another sigh. Who was he trying to impress?

A short rickety elevator ride up two floors and a short shuffle over dingy carpet brought him to the door of his ratty apartment on the third floor. He groped for his keys for several minutes before fumbling with the lock and forcing open the sticking door. He reached in and

turned on the light. Cockroaches scurried to the safe darkness of his bedroom. Eric stepped into his claustrophobic place, throwing the ad sign down to the floor along with his costume's head and three-fingered gloves. As he did he noticed that rain seemed to be leaking down from his apartment ceiling onto his old couch. Then he realized with a shudder that it wasn't rainwater, but rather some kind of nasty runoff from Rodney "Jay" Byrd's apartment above.

He found and grabbed both the TV remote and a half-eaten bag of Fritos. After a little coaxing, the TV flared to life, and he idly pressed through several channels while crunching through a handful of the corn chips. There was some news story on about that big fire upstate, but Eric had already tired of that sometime shortly after it was reported last week. Next was a game show that seemed to have been on for decades, and the next channel had one of those "news and entertainment" shows. The bubble-headed hot blonde was interviewing someone for some charity event or something. Eric lifted up the remote to flick the channel, but he paused when he saw that the blonde was interviewing one of those superpowered heroes from the Light Brigade, "The World's Greatest Force for Good."

"Loser," Eric mumbled jealously. Now utterly depressed, he shut the flickering TV off right as the Light Brigade hero was showing his perfect teeth. But Eric had squeezed the remote so hard in his effort to shut that guy up that he inadvertently cracked the remote clean in half.

"Dammit, not again..." he moaned, throwing the remnants of the remote onto the broken chair in the corner. They clattered against the remains of at least several other television remotes.

For what seemed like the thousandth time, Eric stood in the middle of his place and wondered how his life had become so wrong. He had it all...once. But now?

Taking a deep breath, he went over to a pile of semi-dirty laundry and discarded fast food sandwich boxes and dug through it until he found what he was looking for: his "Great Hero Box." Gingerly picking it up, he shuffled over to the couch, and plopped down, careful to sit away from the eerie drippings from above. He carefully opened the box, and again, he let his mind go back in time.

Inside the box, he had a small collection of the newspaper and magazine articles he could find from the time when he was actually

worth something. He practically had all of them memorized by now, but each picture of him from the old days seemed to mock him. Eric smiled as he reminisced. He used to be an awesome force for justice! He used to be feared by villains everywhere! He used to be envied by men everywhere! He used to be loved by women everywhere! He used to be *Stinger*, leader of the Vigilantes!

He reached out a pudgy hand and brushed his fingers against an old *Times* photo of a beautiful brunette girl of about twenty wearing a black leotard, a brilliant pink shirt and matching boots.

*She always had the most wonderfulest smile*, he thought as he felt a strong pang of sadness. He felt his eyes water up a little.

She was his once. But then out of the blue, four years after the two of them had left all of the superheroics behind, she left. She just...left. His life became a downward spiral shortly thereafter. For six years, he sank lower and lower.

*Six years...*

"Sugah..." he breathed quietly.

For a while, he had kept in sporadic contact with some of the others, but in these last few years, he somehow slogged through each day alone, wondering how much lower he could sink. Man, he missed the old days...He missed the teamwork. He missed the fun times. He missed the camaraderie. But mostly, he missed the satisfaction of stomping evil into the ground and dealing with the throngs of people who thought how great he was for doing it.

He was alone.

He was forgotten.

He was living his worst fears. He didn't know how much longer he could go on...

With a small pop and sizzle, the bare light bulb overhead fizzled out. But that was okay.

He felt it would be better to be in the dark.

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Earlier in the day, Jimmy Jameson was having a *much* better afternoon. The watch on his lower left arm beeped.

"Ooooh, coooool!" Jimmy breathed excitedly. "3:17!"

He sighed contentedly. He turned to look at the glorious New York skyline. Even though it was raining some, the weather did nothing

to dampen the guy's spirits. In fact, Jimmy always liked the way the rain made the city shine that much more. Life was good. The way Jimmy saw it, life could only get better if he grew another set of arms so he could do *more* cool stuff at once.

But four arms were enough. For now.

With his upper set of hands, Jimmy straightened his pristine Geneticorp custodial engineering uniform while he gathered up his window-washing supplies with his lower hands. As he picked up his empty bucket, he glanced over the scaffolding and gave a suspicious look down.

*Another blow for justice!* Jimmy thought happily.

He shrugged...twice, once with each set of arms. At least today he wouldn't have to empty his bucket like he normally did. He was glad that the idea had come to him to empty it this new way.

Jimmy moved efficiently, pressing the motor start button and bringing the scaffolding up several floors. To Jameson, his schedule was everything. It was what kept order and serenity in his life. It was important to keep it because there once was a time when Jimmy didn't have that kind of order and serenity.

Thinking about that time in his life made Jimmy troubled, and Jimmy absolutely hated to be troubled. Jimmy hadn't gotten all the way over how those people at that one *particular* comic book company had sued him--*sued* him--just for being like one of the greatest comic book heroes of all time! So what if Jimmy could stick to walls and flip around and exude ultra-neat "chemical adherent." For one thing, Jimmy was *real*, or at least Jimmy thought he was real, and his super-favorite comic book hero of all time was, sadly, not so real. So how could that give anyone the right to sue Jimmy and take everything away from him? It didn't! But somehow they did! Jimmy was gravely disappointed and troubled at first when he was told he could do nothing remotely "spiderish", lest he face even more lawsuits. His superhero days were finished, and he was very, very sad.

But *then* he got this absolutely wonderful job working for Geneticorp, and he had never been happier. The pay was great, the uniform was oh-so-snazzy, he got to chat with everyone, and he got to do all sorts of cool stuff and see cool things as he cleaned the building up. When he saw any bugs, he got to eat them, too! So what if he was

always being watched (he just *knew* he was, especially when he was outside and above the front entrance)? But the best part was that he met and was able to help the two coolest people in the world: Zebulon Zahari and his sister Mira. Doc Zahari was super-smart, and he was always letting Jimmy help with super-neat experiments. And Mira was as nice as she was smart. Jimmy had no idea how a woman so nice managed to run all of Geneticorp so smoothly. Sometimes, they would let Jimmy be on the Board and sign stuff! They even gave him his own private e-mail account so that he could contact them and all the Board of Directors whenever he liked!

*But...shhhh!...that was s'posed to be a secret.*

Jimmy didn't know for sure, but he figured Mira had something to do with giving him his cozy little house on Long Island. Geneticorp sure knew how to take care of its people!

Jimmy hummed a nonsensical tune as he made his way to the break room on the fifteenth floor. It was his favorite break room, and he wanted to be sure to stop in for a cup of coffee before clocking out for the day. The music system in there was super duper.

"Ah, 3:20!" Jimmy smiled as he went into the room. "Oh, hey, guys! How's it goin'?"

The two people already in the break room looked up from their conversation by the coffee maker. Jimmy saw that one of them was Mike Kempfer, a webpage designer from the ad department. He was okay. Len Slaganhaven, on the other hand, was a serious grouch.

*If that guy spent as much time being nice to people as he did fixing and shaping his hair, he would be a much better guy, thought Jimmy. Then again, it was carefully molded and shiny!*

If Jimmy was a more cynical kind of person, he would have seen more disgust in Len's eyes as the man saw him enter the room. But as it was, Jimmy just took the man's half-hearted greeting at face value. Mike Kempfer cleared his throat and took a sip of coffee.

Jimmy smiled happily and squeezed by Kempfer to the machine. With one set of hands, he took his oversized coffee mug and poured himself a steaming cup. With the other set, he broke open six packets of sugar and stirred it into the cup. Jameson turned to the pair of co-workers.

"So what's up?" he cheerfully inquired.

Slaganhaven frowned sourly (*must be gas*, thought Jimmy), but Mike answered, "Not much, J-Man. We were just talking about how weird it is that all the break rooms have the same three 'Spice Girl' songs cycling over and over again in the speakers."

"Yeah," Len added. "It's like some kind of freak wanted those songs, and someone high up in the company management put them in rotation just to placate that idiot."

Oblivious, Jimmy nodded and sipped his coffee. "That *is* kinda weird. But I like those songs, though. Very peppy!" He noticed that it was, in fact, "Spice Up Your Life" playing lightly in the background. Suddenly, something on his giant coffee mug caught Jimmy's eye.

"Uh oh."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "What is it, Special J?"

Jimmy raised the mug and held it up to the two men for them to examine. "Oh, it looks like someone came along and got confused about whose coffee mug was whose, and he went and wrote his name with a Sharpie onto my mug!"

Kemphfer did his best to suppress his laughter, coughing politely while holding up the cup to his face. Slaganhaven grinned evilly. Jimmy laughed, too. It *was* kind of funny. Who would be silly enough to confuse his mug with anyone else's?

"Golly, this guy has to be pretty silly to do something like that. Well, we better go find this 'Dork' guy and clear up the confusion."

Mike was unable to hold his laughter, and he doubled over giggling. Jimmy giggled, too, though he didn't quite understand why it seemed so funny. Slaganhaven just shook his head, threw his empty paper water cup into the trash, and motioned for Kemphfer to follow. Wiping away a tear from his cheek, Mike finished his coffee and followed Len to the door.

"Oh, hey, guys!" Jimmy said, thinking of something. "Either of you see my mop lately? I seem to keep misplacing it."

Mike, smiled, winked and pointed at Jimmy as the two men walked out.

He said slyly, "Maybe 'Dork' took it."

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Much later that night, things were winding down at "*El Infierno Toxic*." The tourists and college students that normally clobbered most

of the Tijuana bars avoided that place, mostly due to its reputation as a place where murders happened as a matter of course. If you didn't get killed going there, you usually wished you did before the night was over.

That suited Billy Beaumont just fine.

He threw back another shot of Absolut.

*Ah, the sweet, sweet nectar of hard liquor.*

It was easier to forget stuff at times like this, times when you were focused so much on just keeping your balance and your consciousness that everything else just kind of fell away. Briefly, Billy caught his reflection distorted in the shot glass. The longhaired, unshaven hobo in a worn leather duster who stared back at him was less than flattering.

Dusty Lopez laughed and slapped him hard on the back. The blow almost knocked Billy off the stool, but he threw out his arm and barely caught himself on the edge of the bar. That caused Dusty to laugh even harder. Billy, who was once known generally (and still known in the Mexican underground fighting circuit) as "Swindler," managed to pull himself back up on unsteady feet. With bleary eyes, he looked over at Dusty Lopez: tough guy, philosopher, and most important of all, good drinking buddy.

Billy's tongue seemed thick and nearly immobile. "I ththink...I winnnn..."

Lopez nodded, smiling. The mustached man drank his own shot of tequila before answering.

"*Si*, you won fair and square, *mi amigo*."

"Tha's 'cuz you keep drinkin' tequila. Gotta change yer poison from time t' timmme." Billy swayed, but he kept his footing. "And ththat is fitty bucks, pal. Americannn."

"Of course," his drinking friend agreed. Through his bloodshot eyes, Billy watched Lopez closely as the latter dug into his old leather jacket. The man may be one of the closest things Billy had to a friend here in the pit that was Tijuana (and he may have helped Billy get out of a scrape or two), but Lopez was still a thief who'd sell out his mother if the price were right. Billy steadied himself on the bar as Dusty handed over the money.

"Maybe you should use this to pay off some of what you owe to Salvatore, eh, *mi amigo mutante*."

Billy gurgled a laugh, feeling bile in the back of his throat. Yep, he drank pretty quickly tonight. He'd better watch so he wouldn't puke at the bar.

*Better wrap things up here...*

"Yeah," he slurred. "Fitty buckssss won' make any diff'rence. 'Sides," he added, burping, "I'm too small a fish fer himmm...ta worry about...for a gamblin' debt."

Lopez poured himself another shot. "Well, I think when he finds out what you did to his sister, you get *mas grande* in his eyes." Dusty's eyes flicked to Billy's belt. "Just because you are pretty fancy with that little staff of yours won't keep you safe then, eh?"

Billy moved his hand to the collapsed battlestaff hitched to his belt. He raised an eyebrow to Lopez, grabbed the shot of tequila in front of his friend, and downed it without a second thought.

*That was tasty*, he thought, even though he couldn't even taste it at that point. Turning to Lopez, he replied, "That ain't all I got."

"*Si?* Maybe you think your little rat friend can help you, too, huh?" Dusty laughed.

Billy roughly grabbed his wide-brimmed hat on the bar top to his right and pushed himself away from the bar. He raised an eyebrow at his friend and put the hat on his head.

"Mr. Squeakers'd kick all their butts."

Dusty laughed again as Billy tipped his hat and slowly stumbled to the bar's front door. The thief poured himself another shot and called after Billy.

*"Tu madre se cogio un burro."*

Billy stopped at the door, laid a steadying hand on the frame, and called back.

*"Que malooo que...tu eress mas feo que un burro."*

Lopez chuckled as Billy staggered out into the street. The man swayed side to side as he sung off-key in Spanish about some beautiful but completely untrustworthy *senorita*. He could feel all of the alcohol he had drunk trying to come back up, but he was very experienced at this sort of thing. He knew he would make it back to his shack.

He burped. Okay, it was 50/50 that he would make it back tonight.

For the last year or two, this had been Billy's life. He had run across a streak of luck so bad it would have made any gypsy proud of her curse. It all started when he had decided to trust that one particular woman, and it went downhill from there. After all that SuWaron business, he had wandered all across Mexico and the American Southwest until...he ran into trouble caused by another woman. He eked by now, taking odd jobs here and there, but he knew he was never close to what he used to do, what he used to be. It was a sad state of affairs when the money from recycled aluminum cans was a primary source of one's income. It was even sadder that of all the people on earth, his best friends were a middle-aged fence and a very capable rat...

Dizziness overwhelmed him, and he lurched over into a stack of split trash bags and overflowing garbage. First he retched, then he vomited, then he retched again, and finally he passed out onto the dirt. Some time passed by before Dusty Lopez found him on the ground. The man ran a finger over his mustache as he kneeled down beside Beaumont. Then he reached into Billy's pocket and deftly retrieved his fifty dollars.

"I thought you might not make it home, *mi amigo*." Lopez picked Billy's limp body up and over a shoulder. "I take you home, and it only cost you...fifty dollars. American."

...

Stinger retreated, his hands glowing in gathering energy. Suddenly, Gerny the giant muskrat-cyborg ripped away the enormous stacks of marshmallows and lunged at him. Frightened, Stinger jumped to safety in the nacho chip bin. Gerny jumped in after him, but it was the creature's fatal mistake. As it touched the chips, it immediately started to disintegrate.

The evil creature-kid's words echoed in Stinger's brain.

"Dyin's STOOPID."

As Stinger climbed out onto the ledge, a crowd of beautiful bikini-clad women rushed up to him, showering him with five-dollar bills and batting him lightly with pillows. Somewhere a bell was ringing...louder...more insistent...All of the bikini girls started holding their ears...

A wave of disorientation passed over Eric as he blearily opened his eyes. A grimy light was coming from his right somewhere. It took

several seconds to remember that he was on his lumpy bed back in the private hell that was his apartment. He wasn't "Stinger" anymore. He was just a worthless punk.

The bell was still going off, seemingly louder and more pounding with each ring. Dimly, Eric realized it was his phone. It rang so seldom that it always seemed to catch him off-guard nowadays. He moved his flabby arm to reach for the phone. It was buried under several pizza boxes. Eric panicked a bit, thinking that by the time he would answer, the phone would stop ringing.

*Ah, success.* He wearily brought the receiver to his ear.

"Mmm'llo?" he said blearily.

"Hello, Stinger!" The voice coming through the line was eerily cheery and had a strange buzzing quality, but something about it seemed...familiar...to Eric. But it was too early in the morning for Eric for his brain to make any connections. It would have to be at least one or two in the afternoon before that would happen, but when it got that late, he would only think about eating and watching old TV re-runs...

Slowly his mind returned to the present. "Is this for another gig? Because if it is, I'm already booked doing Barney Bear at 7-11 for the next week. Maybe the week after?"

"No, Stinger," the voice replied. The strange buzzing increased. "This is much more important. I'm here to kill you."

The voice was very pleasantly matter-of-fact about it, like he was telling Eric that it looked like it was going to be mostly sunny for an upcoming picnic.

"Say what now?"

It was then that Eric realized that the voice on the phone was not calling him "Eric" or, as the debt and tax collectors used, "Mr. Cooper." No, the creepy yet somehow familiar voice called him by his old superhero name...

Suddenly, Eric's world exploded around him.

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