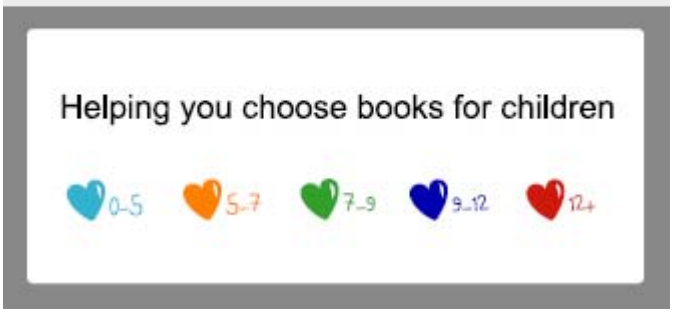
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opening extract from

H.I.V.E Higher Institute of Villainous Education

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Chapter 1

Otto woke with a start as the whole world seemed to tip beneath him. He opened his eyes, squinting against the sudden brightness, and was startled to see the surface of the ocean rushing past just a few metres below. It took him a second to realise that he was looking through the side window of some kind of aircraft, a helicopter, judging by the muffled but insistent thumping of rotors coming from overhead.

'Where am I?' Otto whispered to himself, staring out at the vast expanse of open water.

'A very good question.' The measured voice startled Otto and he turned to face the tall Asian boy who had been sitting silently in the seat beside him. 'And one which I hope will be answered shortly.' He looked at Otto with a calm expression. 'Perhaps you can shed more light on our current situation?'

There was no emotion in his voice, only mild curiosity.

He appeared to be considerably taller than Otto and his long dark hair was tied back in a neat ponytail. This was in marked contrast to Otto's short, spiky hair, which was as white as snow and had been since the day he'd been born. The boy wore a loose linen shirt and trousers and black silk slippers. Otto was still wearing the jumper, jeans and trainers that was the last thing he remembered putting on.

'I'm sorry,' Otto said, rubbing his temples, 'I have no idea where I am or how I got here. Just a splitting headache.'

'It seems, then, that we have both been subjected to the same treatment,' Otto's fellow passenger replied. 'The headache will fade shortly, but I suspect your memory of recent events will be as elusive for you as it has been for me.'

Otto realised that the boy was right. No matter how hard he concentrated he had only the vaguest recollection of the events leading up to his current situation. He had an image of a dark figure standing in a doorway, its hand raised and pointing something at him, but after that, nothing.

Otto turned his attention to a closer inspection of his new surroundings. A clear plastic screen separated them from the two black-clad pilots in the cockpit. One of the men glanced into the rear compartment and, seeing that Otto was now awake, made an inaudible comment to his co-pilot.

Otto was not accustomed to feeling nervous but he could not suppress the prickling sense of unease that was creeping over him. He tried to release the buckle on the harness that was holding him in his seat but the device refused to release. He wasn't going anywhere. Quite where he would go even if he did manage to free himself was another matter – all that he could see through the windows in all directions was featureless ocean. It seemed that they had little option but to sit tight and see where this mysterious journey would take them.

Otto looked ahead through the partition, searching for any sign of a possible destination. At first he saw nothing but the ocean stretching interminably ahead of them, but then he noticed something on the horizon. It looked almost like a volcano rising up out of the ocean, a tall column of black smoke billowing from its severed peak, but at this distance it was difficult to make out any more detail.

'That is the first sight I have had of land since I woke nearly an hour ago,' the Asian boy said. He too had spotted the island that was coming into view. 'I suspect that we are nearing our destination.'

Otto nodded – the helicopter was heading straight for the island and the pilots were now busying themselves flicking switches and adjusting controls in the cockpit as if preparing to land.

'Maybe we'll get some answers when we get there,' Otto said, continuing to peer at the island that was growing ever larger ahead.

'Yes,' the boy responded, still staring straight ahead. 'I don't like being kept in the dark, and I'm curious to know why someone should want to gather such a cargo and transport it across such great distances. It would be wise to question the motives of those who abduct people in this way.'

The helicopter closed the distance to the island quickly and was soon racing above the treetops of the jungle that surrounded the volcanic peak. As they neared the island's centre the machine rose in the air, scaling the sides of the apparently active volcano before plunging into the dark clouds of smoke at its summit. Otto knew at once that things were not as they appeared. If they had flown into a true volcanic plume, the helicopter would have been burnt to a cinder in seconds but instead it slowed, dropped into a hover, and began to descend into the boiling clouds.

Otto felt another twinge of apprehension as the helicopter continued its blind descent. There had to be somewhere to land down there, he reassured himself. The Asian boy, meanwhile, continued to sit impassively, staring straight ahead, his hands calmly folded in his lap, apparently unconcerned by the nature of their

proposed landing site. The hovering machine continued to fall but now a hazy light could be seen from below, illuminating the dark clouds that were beginning to thin visibly. Suddenly they dropped out of the cloud and Otto peered out of his window at the bizarre scene below.

Beneath them was a cavernous flood-lit bay, dominated by a central landing pad, with dozens of men milling around it. They all seemed to be wearing orange jumpsuits and hard hats and were busily preparing for the helicopter's imminent arrival.

'We appear to be expected,' the boy remarked, looking out of the window. 'Perhaps now we shall have the answers we seek,' he continued, sounding as if this was the most normal thing that had ever happened to him.

The helicopter came to a rest on the landing pad with a gentle bump and the two boys' seat harnesses popped open with a click. Several of the men in orange jumpsuits now approached the aircraft. Otto noted the large black holsters slung from their hips.

As the guards approached, the other boy turned to face Otto and said, 'My name is Wing Fanchu. What might I call you?'

Only slightly phased by Wing's directness, Otto replied, 'Malpense . . . Otto Malpense.'

A guard opened the door on Otto's side of the helicopter and gestured for him to get out. As Otto stepped down on to the concrete landing pad he began to appreciate the true scale of the concealed hangar. A dozen sleek, jet-black helicopters, identical to the one that had brought them here, stood arranged around the pad, their matt surfaces seeming to absorb the light from the floodlights that illuminated the bay. Grim-faced guards were positioned at regular intervals around the pad, and Otto decided that it would probably be best to do as their new hosts instructed, for now at least. Wing too was surveying their new surroundings with the same unchanging expression of mild curiosity. If he was surprised at all by this bizarre facility, his face betrayed no hint of it.

'Proceed up the stairs and through the main entrance,' the guard instructed in a gruff voice. 'You will be given further instructions inside.'

Otto looked in the direction that the guard indicated and saw a broad staircase carved from the cavern rock leading up to an enormous set of heavy steel doors. Otto and Wing walked towards the staircase, Otto wondering what might be hidden behind such an imposing entrance. There was a sudden grinding noise and he looked up to see two huge panels sliding together, closing off the crater entrance to the landing bay, sealing them inside. Floodlights positioned around the roof of the landing bay now

provided the only illumination, and Otto shuddered as the panels closed shut with an ominous crunch.

The two boys reached the top of the staircase, the heavy metal doors rumbling open as they approached. They passed through into another cavern, not as large as the crater hangar, but just as impressive. The floor was highly polished black marble and the rock walls of the cavern were lined with enormous slabs of the same gleaming black stone, dotted with sturdy-looking brushed-steel doors. The far end of the hall was dominated by an imposing granite sculpture of the globe being cracked and splintered beneath a giant clenched fist. At its base was a plinth, upon which were emblazoned the words 'DO UNTO OTHERS'.

In front of the sculpture was a low stage with a central lectern, around which twenty or so children stood whispering nervously to one another. They all appeared to be around the same age as Otto, and he could see that they were as confused and apprehensive as he was; he just did a better job of hiding it. Guards stood dotted around the perimeter of the room, watching them all carefully. Otto remained calm, taking this opportunity to study these guards more closely. They had the look of hired thugs but they appeared strangely disciplined. Each one of them had a large holster on their hip and Otto could tell that

they would not be afraid to use these weapons if necessary. Or, more worryingly, if not necessary.

A door hissed open in the wall off to one side and a tall man, dressed in black, strode purposefully across the stage to the central lectern. Everything about this man was imposing, from his immaculate black suit and blood-red cravat to his raven hair with streaks of silver at the temples. He regarded the crowd before him with a look of cool calculation, his handsome features giving Otto no real clue to his age or nationality.

'Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to your new home.' He gestured to the stone walls of the cavern that surrounded them. 'Your lives as you once knew them are over,' he continued. 'You have been selected, all of you, the worst, the most cunning, the most mischievous minds from around the world – selected to become part of an institution like no other. You have all exhibited certain unique abilities, abilities that set you apart from the mediocrity of the teeming masses and which mark you out as the leaders of tomorrow. Here, in this place, you will be furnished with the knowledge and experience to best exploit your own natural abilities, to hone your craft to a cutting edge.'

He paused and slowly surveyed the pale, wide-eyed faces before him.

'Each of you has within you a rare quality, a gift if you

will, a special talent for the supremely villainous. Society would have us believe that this is an undesirable characteristic, something that should be subdued, controlled, destroyed. But not here . . . no, here we want to see you blossom into all that you can be, to see your innate wickedness flourish, to make you the very worst that you can be.'

He stepped out from behind the lectern and walked to the edge of the raised platform. As he loomed over them he seemed to grow taller and some of those at the front of the group edged backwards nervously.

'For today all of you have the unique honour and privilege of becoming the newest students of the world's first and only school of applied villainy.' He spread his arms, gesturing to the walls around them. 'Welcome to H.I.V.E., the Higher Institute of Villainous Education.'

With that, the enormous black marble panels that had lined the walls of the cavern started to slide down into the floor with a low rumble, revealing yet more caves and corridors leading off into the distance. The adjoining caverns were just as huge as the one they stood in and all seemed to be filled with strange, bustling activity of one kind or another. Some were lit by strange lights or shrouded by venting steam, others were filled with greenery, some were lined with mysterious machines or structures and there was even a waterfall visible in one. A

sudden column of flame leapt into the air in one cave and there was the sound of cheering. In another, dozens of black-clad figures were sliding down ropes from the ceiling high above, while below them yet more people, this time dressed in white robes, were performing some form of martial arts exercise with practised synchronisation.

Hundreds of children could be seen making their way to and fro throughout the caves, and while some of them seemed to be dressed like the guards many of them were dressed in much more bizarre outfits. Otto noticed distant figures wearing full chemical protection suits, and others in what looked suspiciously like spacesuits. One group even seemed to be wearing bullet-proof vests with huge red and white bull's-eyes painted on the front of them.

A remarkable display, Otto thought to himself, but, just like the journey that had brought them here, it felt as if it was designed to overwhelm and disorientate, to keep them off guard. Otto studied the other caverns, quickly memorising as much as he could of their layout, the connections that ran between them and the obvious areas of greatest interest. The others in the group seemed to be content to gawp bug-eyed at the display, but Otto thought that the man who had been addressing them was just as impressive. Clearly Wing had felt the same way – he had not taken his eyes off him from the moment he

had begun speaking and, even now, as the panels hiding the other caverns had retracted completely, Wing did not look away, his expression still betraying no hint of his emotions.

The man on the platform smiled at their astonished faces. Then he spoke again and silenced the excitedly talking group. 'If I may have your attention –' a demand not a request, '– my name is Dr Nero, and I am the founder and controller of this facility. While you remain within its walls you will rest safe under my protection, and all I ask of you in return is your unswerving loyalty and obedience. I do not expect I shall have it, but I always ask nicely the first time.' He smiled at them in a way which made it perfectly clear that it would not be advisable ever to have to be asked a second time. 'I am sure that you all have many questions, and with that in mind we shall proceed with your further introduction to H.I.V.E. First you will be escorted to your induction briefing, where there will be a short presentation that will answer at least some of your many questions. Immediately following that, you will be given a short tour of some of the most important locations within the facility and an introduction to life at H.I.V.E. from one of the school's senior teachers. I'm sure I will see all of you again over the coming days, but until then I wish you all the best of luck, and I hope you enjoy the tour.'

As he finished speaking the guards began to usher them all away from the platform towards a doorway set in the main cavern wall. Over the doorway was a sign sporting a stylised image of a head with a light bulb over it, beneath which was the text 'PLOTTING ROOM TWO'. The room's doors slid silently apart as they approached inviting them to enter.



Dr Nero stood watching as the group walked away across the cavern floor and proceeded through the doors. It never failed to amuse him the way in which their jaws dropped when they were first faced with the true scale of the facility that he had established here. It was his firm belief that one should never understimate the power of a first impression, and that it was always better to keep the new intake of students in a state of bewildered confusion at this stage. There was less chance of any unruliness that way, something which was a very real risk when dealing with a group of young people who had already set about redefining the world standard for misbehaviour. Besides which, there was always one – that was the other purpose of this bit of theatre. There was always one of the new students who was unfazed by this, one who was not distracted by such cheap gimmicks – one to watch. And he had been there, the boy with the snow-white

hair, the one that he had to keep his eye on. While his fellow students had goggled at this little display of power, talking amongst themselves excitedly, pointing this way and that, this boy had merely observed it, noted it, as if filing the information away for future use. Yes, he would be the one to watch. And Nero had noticed something else unusual – the tall Asian boy standing next to the white-haired recruit had been staring straight at him, not distracted in the slightest by the amazing sights around. He had studied the Asian boy's features – there had been something strangely familiar about him, but he could not place precisely what it was. So I shall need to keep both eyes open in future, thought Nero, smiling. This should be an interesting year.

'You can come out now, Raven,' he said softly.

A figure detached itself from the shadows at the base of the sculpture and stepped forward into the light. Clad entirely in black, face hidden behind a mask with black lenses covering the eyes, the figure moved silently towards him. Nero thought the shadows almost seemed to follow the figure as it approached.

'Please remove your mask, Natalya. You know I hate talking to you while you're wearing it.'

Raven nodded slightly and pulled the mask off to reveal her pale but beautiful face, perfectly symmetrical but for a livid curved scar that ran down one cheek. Her

eyes were a cold blue and her dark hair was cropped close to her skull.

'As you wish, Doctor.' She had a slight accent that betrayed her Russian origins, trained in infiltration and counter-intelligence by the very best that the Soviet system in its cold-war prime had had to offer. 'But one day you will tell me how it is that you are the only one who can still see me, when to all others I am invisible.'

'Perhaps one day I shall tell you, my dear, but for now there is something else I wish to discuss with you. I understand that you were responsible for the student recruitment operation this year.' Nero turned back to the lectern from which he had addressed the new intake. He pressed a button on the control panel mounted there and a panel slid back to reveal a small screen displaying an image of the assembled group from a few minutes earlier. He pointed at the figure of Otto. 'This student, who is he?'

Raven looked down at the screen. 'Otto Malpense. Scholarship student, but I was not informed of the identity of his sponsor. He was responsible for the incident involving the British Prime Minister. I conducted his retrieval personally.'

'Interesting.' Nero was impressed. The incident Raven mentioned had just made global headlines, but there had not been any word of the capture of the perpetrator or

even who might have been responsible. The fact that it had been the work of this child was quite remarkable, and only served to reaffirm Nero's initial impression of the boy. He made a mental note to check exactly who had sponsored Malpense's selection and scholarship. Some of the scholarship students were orphans, some were runaways but, critically, none of them had concerned relatives who might set the forces of justice upon H.I.V.E.'s trail. Malpense was one of these students.

'I want you to keep a close eye on that one, Natalya. I suspect he has . . . potential.' In much the same way that an unexploded nuclear bomb has potential, Nero thought to himself. 'And this boy here, who is he?' He pointed at Wing, who, being significantly taller than the others, stood out clearly.

Natalya paused for a moment, studying the tall boy with the long dark ponytail. 'That is Wing Fanchu, sir. His retrieval was carried out by our Far-Eastern operations division. He is, I believe, a private student. I am not fully familiar with the details of his background but I do know that his retrieval was complicated. Several men were injured when they attempted to subdue him, which, as I'm sure you are aware, is extremely unusual.'

Indeed it was unusual, Nero thought. Children were usually put forward for selection by their parents or guardians, who, having already expressed an interest in

'alternative' forms of education, would be discreetly informed about the facility and the unique opportunities it offered. Some of the parents were former pupils of H.I.V.E. themselves and some simply wanted their children to continue in the 'family business'. The children would all have been monitored over the course of a year to see if they had the necessary gifts for a future education at H.I.V.E. Secret tests were administered or staged opportunities for villainy were set up for them, in order to see how they would respond. Should they, unbeknownst to them, pass these tests, their parents would be informed and, upon transfer of a significant sum of money to a secure Swiss bank account, they would be enrolled.

The parents were under strict instructions that none of the new students should be informed of these future educational arrangements. This policy had been introduced after there had been several unfortunate incidents in the early years of the institution involving successful applicants who had excitedly shared news of their future at H.I.V.E. with friends, despite specific instructions to the contrary. Indeed, one particular incident of this kind had led to the school being transferred from its original location in Iceland to its current home on the island. From that point onwards the rule of strict secrecy was enforced and so the unaware students had to be retrieved

discreetly by Nero's operatives at the start of each new school year.

At least that was what normally happened; clearly Wing Fanchu's retrieval had been anything but discreet, which was bad for business, especially the type of business that H.I.V.E. was involved in.

'What happened, exactly?' Nero asked, deactivating the screen on the lectern.

'As I understand it, sir, the retrieval team were following standard operating procedure. They had hit the boy with a sleeper as he walked alone in the gardens of his family home. One can only assume that the strength of the charge had been set incorrectly, since the boy managed to disable two of our men after he had been hit. He injured one more operative when he awoke in the ambulance on the way to the assembly point and attempted to escape. You should be aware that on this occasion it took two more sleeper shots to subdue him.'

Nero turned to Raven, raising an eyebrow. 'Meaning it took three hits in total to eventually subdue this boy, a total charge which should knock a child out for a week and yet already he appears fully recovered? He almost seems more suitable for the Henchman programme. Do you know if Colonel Francisco has reviewed his file?'

'Yes, sir, but the Colonel said that he scored too highly in the mental aptitude tests for enrolment in the pro-

gramme and he should be in the Alpha stream instead.' Her expression hardened – like all of the staff at H.I.V.E. she disliked reporting failed operations to Nero. 'Rest assured I intend to keep a particularly close eye on him.'

'See that you do, Natalya, and make sure that Security are informed of his apparent resistance to standard pacification measures.'

'Of course, Doctor. Is there anything else?'

'No, you may go. Report any suspicious activity related to those two directly to me.'

'Yes, sir.' And with that she slipped her mask back on and disappeared into the cavern's shadows.