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Opening extract from

Escape Velocity

Written by

Mark Walden

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For Sarah, for Megan, forever

chapter one

The bustling crowd appeared to part before the couple as they strode purposefully along the river bank. It was early morning in London and while the other pedestrians bumped and jostled each other this man and woman seemed to emit an invisible aura that kept the crowds from getting too close.

The man was tall and distinguished, the greying hair at his temples the only real clue to his age. He wore an immaculately tailored black suit and long black overcoat, the blood red cravat at his throat providing the only splash of colour. The woman beside him looked younger, her short dark hair framing a pale but strikingly beautiful face. She also appeared less relaxed than her companion, her eyes scanning the crowd intently.

'I don't like this, Max,' Raven said quietly.

'So you have said on at least seven previous occasions,' Dr Nero replied calmly.

'It's a trap,' Raven replied quickly, 'and an obvious one at that.' She struggled to keep the frustration from her voice.

'That's as may be,' Nero said, the hint of a smile appearing at the corner of his mouth, 'but Gregori is one of my oldest and most trusted allies. If he tells me that he must meet with me urgently, then I cannot afford to ignore his request.'

'But why here?' Raven asked quickly. 'Out in the open, exposed like this?'

'Gregori will have his reasons,' Nero replied. 'He is too old and wise to take such risks lightly.' Nero hoped that this display of confidence in his old friend would reassure Raven, but he too was secretly concerned that Gregori had felt it necessary to take such a risk. Gregori Leonov, like Nero, was one of the most senior members of the ruling council of G.L.O.V.E., the Global League of Villainous Enterprises, and attaining such a position was largely dependent on having extremely well-honed survival instincts. It was hard for Nero to imagine what might drive his old friend to meet in such a public location, but he knew it was not a request that he could choose to ignore.

'I hope that your trust in him is not misplaced,' Raven replied sharply, her anger betrayed by the slight strengthening of her usually subtle Russian accent, 'because if this

goes bad it will go very, very bad very, very quickly.'

'Which is exactly why you're here despite the fact that Gregori insisted I come alone,' Nero said, an edge of impatience in his own tone now.

'Sometimes you have too much faith in me, Max,' Raven replied unhappily. 'We should leave now; this is unwise.'

'That is my decision to make, Raven, and mine alone.' Nero used her codename deliberately, a subtle but pointed reminder that while he valued her counsel it did not give her the right to push him too far.

'Very well,' Raven replied, stopping and staring at him, 'I shall make myself . . . unobtrusive.'

'See that you do,' Nero said, glancing at his watch; it was near the appointed time for their meeting.

'Signal me if you have the slightest reason to suspect anything.'

'Of course,' Nero said. 'Let us hope that it's not necessary.'

'Indeed,' Raven replied, her expression grim, and she turned and vanished into the crowd of passers-by.

Nero turned and continued walking along the riverbank towards the spot where they had arranged to meet, in the shadow of the London Eye. The vast wheel loomed above Nero and he could not help but be impressed by its scale. He had seen some staggering feats of engineering

and construction in his time, not least the construction of H.I.V.E., but this was still a striking monument.

'Hello, Max.'

Nero's inspection of the giant wheel was cut short by the sound of his old friend's voice, but when he turned to face him he was shocked by what he saw. Gregori Leonov had always been a bear of a man, famed for the spine-snapping embraces that were reserved for his closest friends. But that was not the same man as stood before Nero now. He was thinner and looked years older, his skin grey and his eyes darting about as if expecting a sudden attack. He made no move to embrace Nero; he did not even offer his hand but instead just gave him a small, sad smile.

'Gregori,' Nero replied, knowing that he had not been able to keep the surprise from his face at seeing his fellow council member so reduced.

'It is good to see you, old friend,' Leonov said quietly. 'I did not know who else I could turn to.'

'What's wrong, Gregori?' Nero asked, genuinely concerned for his friend.

'You came alone?' he responded, staring at Nero.

'As alone as I ever am,' Nero said, suddenly not wanting to lie.

'Of course, I should not expect you to be without your guardian angel,' Gregori replied with a slight smile.

'Natalya is many things, Gregori, but she's no angel.' Nero raised an eyebrow.

'No, I suppose she is not,' Gregori chuckled.

Nero was glad to hear his old friend laugh and for the most fleeting moment Nero could see a hint of the man he used to know before the grey pall of unhappiness fell across his face again.

'Come, my friend,' Gregori said, taking Nero by the elbow, 'I have arranged for us to have somewhere more private to talk.' He steered Nero towards the steps leading up to the boarding platform for the carriages that were slowly rotating around the enormous wheel. He ignored the queue of tourists, simply nodding to one of the attendants and stepped into a waiting capsule. Nero suspected that the attendant was significantly better off now than he had been when he had woken up that morning. The door slid shut behind them and they began their slow ascent over the cold, grey waters of the Thames.

The glass-walled capsule was designed to hold two dozen people, but now, with just the two of them on board, it seemed to Nero to be the most private and yet strangely exposed place they could possibly meet. Gregori stood holding the rail, looking out over the water, seeming to take a moment to gather his strength before he turned to Nero and spoke.

'What do you know of the Renaissance Initiative?' he

asked, looking straight at Nero, his eyes narrowing.

'Rumours on the wind, nothing substantive,' Nero replied evenly. It was a lie, of course; he had learnt more than he truly cared to know of this secret project when he had questioned Cypher after his abortive attempt to take over H.I.V.E. the previous year. Cypher had been insane, there was little doubt of that, but Nero had no reason to disbelieve what the man had told him. Indeed, his own painstakingly discreet enquiries had only served to verify what he had fervently wished not to be true. Number One, the supreme leader of G.L.O.V.E., was secretly trying to rebuild the psychotic, impossibly dangerous, rogue artificial intelligence Overlord, his efforts concealed from the rest of the world's villains by a shadowy organisation known only as the Renaissance Initiative. Nero could not even begin to guess what Number One's motives could possibly be. Nero's own life-threatening ordeal at the hands of the nightmarish machine intelligence was enough to tell him that this plan was not just dangerous but demented. Nero could make no sense of it; Number One had been instrumental in destroying the rampant AI and yet now he seemed to be secretly attempting to bring it back to life.

'I suspect that you know rather more than that, old friend,' Gregori replied sadly, 'and I also suspect that you know who is truly behind this madness. I have beaten you

in too many games of cards not to know when you are bluffing.'

'Let us assume . . . hypothetically . . . that I do,' Nero replied carefully, rather annoyed that Gregori could read him so well, 'but why are we here today?'

'Because you know as well as I do – no, *better* than I do – why Number One cannot be allowed to succeed in this.'

That was it; Gregori had said his name, Number One. That made this a conspiracy, even if at this moment it only included the two of them. More powerful men had lost their lives for far less. Nero knew he could still walk away, still pretend that he did not know what Gregori was suggesting, but to do so would let this insanity continue unchecked and would also almost certainly cost Leonov his life. It was a price that Nero was not prepared to pay.

'Max, it is worse than you know,' Gregori said, shaking his head. 'Number One is not just trying to rebuild Overlord – I wish to God it were that simple.' Gregori rubbed his eyes, letting out a long sigh.

'What is it, Gregori?' Nero said, putting his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'What is he planning?'

'I discovered something, Max, something that I was never supposed to know. Number One found out and he sent the Reapers after me and my family.'

Nero's eyes widened. Every member of G.L.O.V.E. knew of the Reapers. They were Number One's personal

executioners, an utterly ruthless death squad that left no one alive in its wake. They were the stuff of nightmares and Number One had turned them loose on Gregori.

'My wife, my daughters, they're gone, Max – executed by those butchers. It was a miracle I survived.'

Alarm bells rang suddenly in Nero's head. The Reapers never left survivors, unless they wanted to. If they had tracked Gregori, followed him there . . .

'Why did he do this, Gregori? What did you find out?'

'We have to stop him, Max. He's –'

The glass behind Gregori cracked like a spider's web and his eyes went wide with shock. Nero tried to grab him, to support him, but he crumpled to the floor, dead before he hit the ground. There had been no gunshot, no sound at all, but the sniper's bullet had found its target with lethal accuracy. Nero suddenly felt horribly exposed, nearly a hundred metres above the ground in a glass bubble with no reason to assume that he would not be the next target. He pressed the button on the side of his watch; she may not be an angel but he had to put his faith in Raven now.



Raven watched from nearby as Nero and Gregori boarded the capsule and it was slowly carried upwards by the rotation of the enormous wheel. She was not happy. The two

men were getting harder and harder to see as the capsule climbed higher and higher into the air and Raven got up to move to a better vantage point. Suddenly she heard a noise that sent an electric jolt of adrenaline through her body. None of the surrounding pedestrians had heard it; it was, after all, no louder than a small polite cough. But to Raven it was the unmistakeable silenced report of a high-powered rifle. Her eyes shot upwards and she saw the bullet hole in the toughened glass of the capsule that Nero had been standing in far overhead. Without hesitating, she shed her long black overcoat and exposed the black leather body armour and tactical harness that she had been wearing underneath. She broke into a run, heading straight for the Eye, the insistent bleep of Nero's emergency signal sounding in her ear.



On a distant rooftop, an observer peered through powerful binoculars at the scene that was unfolding below. He was completely bald but for a neatly shaved band of white hair that ran above his ears and around the back of his head, giving him an almost monkish appearance. He wore a small radio headset, which crackled into life as he lowered the binoculars to reveal his cold grey eyes.

'Longshot One to control, secondary target is down, primary is in scope,' a voice reported in his ear.

'Hold fire, Longshot One,' the man instructed calmly, 'but keep him targeted. He leaves here with us or he doesn't leave at all, understood?'

'Roger that, holding on target,' the voice replied in his ear.

'Longshot Two to control,' another voice cut into the channel, 'I have an unidentified tactically equipped female heading towards the target zone.'

The man raised the binoculars again and scanned the area at the base of the wheel and instantly picked out a black-clad figure running at full tilt towards the structure.

'It would appear that we have flushed the wolf from the flock,' he said to himself with a thin smile. He raised the tiny microphone to his lips. 'Control to all units, unidentified female is new primary target. Wait until she is clear of the crowd, then take her down.'

Several voices signalled their acknowledgement of the new order. The man pitched his binoculars upwards, focusing on the single figure left standing in the capsule that was now nearing the apex of its climb.

'Control to all aerial units, you may begin your approach.'

Raven felt a cold chill as she ran across the square towards the wheel. There was no mistaking the distinctive pulsing

thump of helicopters and they were getting closer all the time. And then something that sounded like an angry hornet buzzed past her ear and she knew that she was now the sniper's target. She dived behind a nearby ticket booth and the glass above her shattered in an explosion of tiny fragments. People were suddenly screaming and starting to run as more shots ricocheted noisily off the metal walkway, inches from her. There was no chance of spotting her unseen assailants. To do that she would have to expose herself and, judging by the frequency of the shots, there was more than one shooter out there. The moment she stuck her head out to get a fix on their positions it would be taken off. She pulled a small grey cylinder from the webbing on her chest and struck it hard on the ground. The device ignited instantly, flooding the area with thick white smoke.



Trapped in the capsule, Nero felt a growing sense of helplessness. Raven had been right: it was madness to allow himself to fall into this trap, but he had not been thinking of the risk, only of the note of desperation in his friend's voice, and now he was paying the price. In their world it was unusual to find someone that you could really trust and those people became impossibly valuable. It was a weakness that whoever was responsible for this

understood and was clearly prepared to exploit. He knew that they wanted to take him alive – if not he would already be dead – and that meant he had to try to escape: capture was not an option for Nero. He searched the capsule desperately for anything that might be of use, but found nothing. He could only wait and pray that Raven would be able to get to him.

From far below he could hear screams of panic. He rushed to the end of the capsule and peered down towards the base of the wheel just in time to see the whole area filled with thick, billowing white smoke. He felt suddenly calm. If anyone could get him out of this, she could. A hint of movement caught his eye and he turned to look up the river. Heading towards the wheel, in tight tactical formation just a couple of metres above the surface of the water, were four black helicopters, and hanging from their sides were the unmistakeable silhouettes of heavily armed soldiers.

'Whatever you're going to do, Natalya,' Nero muttered to himself, 'do it fast.'



The bald man continued to watch through his binoculars as the woman dived for cover at the base of the wheel, shots peppering the structure she was hiding behind.

'Watch your targets, Longshot units,' the man said

calmly. 'I would rather avoid civilian casualties if possible.'

Suddenly the woman's position was engulfed in white smoke.

'All units go to thermal imaging,' the man instructed. 'Wait for her to break cover then take your shots.'

As he watched, a tiny projectile trailing a thin line shot out of the cloud and struck the central hub of the wheel, fifty metres above. Moments later the woman shot straight upwards out of the smoke, rocketing along the line she had just fired.

'Longshot Three to control, she's moving too fast. I've got no shot,' the man's radio reported.

'Stay on her,' the man barked, a sudden edge of panic in his previously calm voice. 'Aerial units, hit that capsule NOW!'



Raven hit the curved steel of the Eye's hub at a run, her grappler line snapping back into its wrist-mounted housing. A shot ricocheted off the metal near her feet with a spark and she dived forwards, rolling in the air so she landed on her back, sliding towards the spokes of the massive wheel. She fired the grappler again, the mono filament cable snaking up towards Nero's glass cage. The unit on her wrist bleeped to confirm a solid hit and she pressed the controls to send herself rocketing skywards

again. She slammed into the capsule hard, stretching desperately for the small metal rungs that ran up the side of it to the roof. She caught hold of one of the tiny hand-holds and swung free, more than a hundred metres above the cold grey waters of the Thames. Suddenly she felt a searing pain in her thigh as one of the snipers nearly found his mark, leaving a deep graze that began to bleed profusely. She hauled herself up, trying to ignore the pain in her leg. Nero stared at her from inside the capsule, a look of grave concern on his face. She reached the roof and tried to pull open the emergency access hatch, but it was firmly locked. She frantically searched the pouches on her harness for the gear that would let her blow the hatch, but froze as an enormous shadow fell across her and a huge gust of wind threatened to pluck her off her perch. Helicopters surrounded the pod on all sides; each one was filled with special forces troops, the uniforms bearing a strange logo of an angel holding a sword that she had never seen before. They all had their weapons trained on her. She looked down through the glass beneath her and saw Nero slowly shake his head.

'Go,' he said, though Raven only saw his lips move, and despite every instinct screaming at her to ignore him she knew that he was right.

'Put your hands on your head and stay on your knees,' a voice commanded over a speaker mounted on the nearest

helicopter, 'or we will open fire.'

Raven turned slowly to face the helicopter and raised her hands, then in a lightning movement she tossed a smoke grenade that she had palmed moments earlier into the helicopter. Smoke instantly filled the cabin and Raven sprinted the few feet towards the edge of the capsule roof and leapt. She just caught the landing skid of the helicopter as the blinded pilot sent it spiralling down towards the river. She started to haul herself up, knowing that if she could just get into the cabin she might be able to fight her way to the controls. Suddenly, what felt like a giant fist punched her in the back and she lost her grip, falling like a rag doll towards the icy water below. There was a small splash as she hit the surface, and then nothing.



'Good shot, unit four,' the bald man said calmly as he watched the woman's limp form hit the water. 'Have the river dragged. I want to see the body.'

He allowed himself a small crooked smile as the special forces team rappelled down lines from one of the helicopters on to the roof of the gondola. Their mission was accomplished. They had their prize.