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opening extract from

H.I.V.E.

Dreadnought

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chapter one

The young girl ran through the knee-deep snow, her breath escaping in ragged gasps, leaving a trail of thin white cloud that hung in the air. She could hear the sounds of pursuit all too close behind her, the barks and snarls of dogs and the coarse shouts of the men who followed them. She could hardly feel her bare feet and lower legs any more as she plunged on through the deep icy powder, the dark ancient trees of the forest surrounding her in all directions. She wore nothing but a tattered dark blue dress made of a rough material that offered little protection from the biting cold.

As she ran over the crest of a small hill, the girl tripped on a rock concealed beneath the blanket of snow and fell, tumbling down the slope. Staggering to her feet, she spotted the vague outline of a cottage, its dark walls half buried beneath deep white drifts. She stumbled towards it, desperately rattling the handle of its only door. It was locked.

The girl gritted her teeth and kicked the wooden door hard, ignoring the pain in her foot. The door refused to budge. She cursed under her breath and kicked again, harder. The ancient lock gave way and as the door flew inwards the girl half staggered, half fell inside. She quickly shut the door behind her and looked around the darkened room. It was obviously a hunting lodge: stuffed animal heads were mounted on the walls and animal skins were scattered on the floor and chairs, but there were no signs of life. Everything was covered by a thick layer of dust which the girl disturbed as she frantically searched the ground floor for anything she could use as a weapon.

Outside, several men in heavy cold-weather outfits ran towards the cottage, led by the vicious snarling dogs straining at the leashes they held.

'The trail ends here,' the first man said in Russian. 'She's inside.'

'Go get her,' said the tall man at the rear of the group. The men on either side of him unslung the rifles that hung across their backs and headed towards the house. They pushed the door open and cautiously entered. Seconds later a single shot rang out from somewhere inside the cottage. Then silence returned to the snow-covered forest.

'Vasilly? Gregor?' the tall man called out, but there was no reply. 'Send the dogs in,' he said with a frown.

Two large, heavily muscled dogs sprinted across the snow and into the cottage. There was sudden noisy barking and then a quick panicked whimpering sound before silence descended once again.

'What should we do, Mr Furan?' one of the dog handlers asked, staring at the darkened windows of the cottage.

'Wait here,' the tall man replied and pulled a handgun from his belt. He walked towards the house and went inside.

'How old is she?' the first dog handler asked.

'I don't know,' the other man replied. 'Ten, eleven years old maybe?'

'She's not going to make it to twelve if Furan has anything to say about it.'

Suddenly, there was a pained yell from inside the house and one of the windows shattered, exploding outwards in a shower of glass as a wooden stool flew through it. The girl dived out through the jagged hole and rolled to her feet, sprinting off through the snow, darting between the trees. Furan staggered out of the cottage, blood streaming from under the hand clutched to his right eye. He raised the pistol and took careful aim at the fleeing girl. He squeezed the trigger, the shot seeming unusually loud in the quiet of the snowy forest.

The girl spun, the bullet striking her in the shoulder, and she collapsed on to the snow. She tried to struggle to

her feet but Furan was already on her, pistol-whipping her to the ground, knocking her out cold.

Furan stared down at the unconscious body of the pale, dark-haired girl with his one good eye. The fresh blood stained the snow crimson beneath her shoulder. Her breathing was laboured. He raised the pistol, pointing it at her head. He stood there for a moment, blood dripping from his ruined eye, seemingly unsure whether or not to pull the trigger before he slowly lowered the weapon.

'No, Natalya,' he said, his voice cold and hard, 'that would be too easy. Rest assured though, you won't escape again. This will be your last flight, my little Raven.'

☭☭☭

twenty years later

State trooper Sam Fletcher was having a bad night. He knew he'd drawn the short straw when he'd been dispatched to the old gas station on the desert road. Mrs Trenton had called to complain, as she did at least three or four times every month, that she was being harassed again by mysterious flying objects and lights in the sky. Sam had known it would be a waste of time, but the Sheriff had insisted that he go and check on the batty old woman. She'd been all alone since her husband had passed away recently and the Sheriff was a friend of the family, which explained why Sam had ended up being

sent out there at that time of night. He'd sat in the old woman's front room while she went on about the strange noises she kept hearing and the lights she kept seeing in the sky. On that particular evening she complained that something had flown low right over the house and scared the living daylights out of her as she'd been feeding her chickens in the backyard.

Sam had dutifully listened to her ramble on and had eventually left, promising her that he would look into it and see if the local US Air Force base knew anything about the mysterious aircraft. It would be a futile task; in this part of Nevada they were no strangers to unusual aerial activity, but the kinds of aircraft that were being tested around those parts were not the sort that the air force would be prepared to discuss with someone like Sam. Chances were that some bored fighter jockey had buzzed the Trenton place at a lower altitude than was technically permitted just to liven up a test flight. It wouldn't be the first time something like that had happened and he was fairly sure that it wouldn't be the last. With a weary sigh, he reached for the radio on the dashboard and spoke into the handset.

'Dispatch, this is Car Four, come in, over,' he said.

'Hey, Sam, you rounded up those little green men that have been spooking Clara yet?' the voice at the other end asked.

'Yeah, got myself three genuine extra-terrestrials cuffed in the back of my car right now, Maggie,' he replied. 'Matter of fact I – WOAH!'

The trooper jerked the steering wheel hard to the left as his headlights suddenly illuminated a dishevelled figure running straight down the middle of the road towards him. The car's tyres screeched in protest and he dropped the radio handset, both hands flying to the wheel as he fought to control the wildly fishtailing patrol car. Cursing under his breath, he brought the car to a shuddering halt on the side of the road. He stopped for a moment to gather himself and let out a long, deep breath before grabbing his flashlight and stepping out of the car. The powerful beam of the torch lit up the man who Sam had just narrowly avoided running over as he staggered towards the car.

'Sir, please stay right there,' Sam shouted, his other hand resting on the holstered pistol on his hip. 'You know how close I came to hitting you? Care to explain what you're doing running down the middle of the road way out here at this time of night?'

'Please, you have to help me,' the man said. Sam couldn't quite place his accent but it sounded European. 'They're out there, they're after me, they could be here any minute.'

Sam's first instinct had been that he was dealing with

some drunken bum who'd somehow got stranded in the middle of nowhere, but there was something strange about this man. His face was covered in desert dust but he was clean shaven and his hair was neatly trimmed. His clothes were also covered in dirt but the suit he was wearing was well cut and his shoes were expensive. In fact the more that Sam looked at him the less he seemed like someone that you'd expect to find wandering around in the desert twenty miles from the nearest town.

'Who's after you?' Sam asked, walking slowly towards the man.

'The Disciples,' the man said, his eyes filled with fear. 'I know what they're planning. We have to stop them – the government must be warned.'

Not a drunk, but a religious nut, Sam thought to himself.

'What's your name, sir?' Sam asked.

'Tobias Scheckter,' the man replied, looking nervously up at the sky.

'OK, Mr Scheckter, can you tell me what exactly you're doing out here on your own at this time of night?'

'I'm a geologist,' Scheckter replied. 'I have been working for some men, doing calculations, just theoretical. Or at least I thought so . . . oh God. I have to get to a phone,' he continued frantically, 'or a radio. Let me use your radio.'

'Just calm down, sir,' Sam replied. 'Let's take you back to town and see if we can't sort this all out.'

'You don't understand. There's no time!' the man yelled, lunging towards him.

Sam stepped to one side and used the man's own momentum against him, just as he'd been trained to do, forcing the struggling figure to the ground and reaching for the cuffs clipped to the back of his belt.

'I'm afraid you just earned yourself a night in one of our holding cells,' he said, snapping the cuffs closed on the man's wrists. He dragged the stranger to his feet and quickly bundled him into the back of the car, then climbed into the driver's seat. The man in the back was muttering to himself in a foreign language that Sam didn't recognise. He started the car and set off down the road towards town with a sigh: this night was just getting better all the time.



'Do we have him?' the voice asked over the loudspeaker mounted in the centre of the control console.

'Yes, we have a biometric match but he appears to have made contact with a local police officer,' the thin man seated at the console replied. He pushed at the joystick he held in one hand and the grainy image of the police cruiser on the road below sharpened as the camera

zoomed in. 'What are your orders?'

'Terminate him immediately,' the voice replied. 'He knows too much.'

'Very well,' the thin man replied. He pressed a button on the console and the car was highlighted by a green box. Then he lifted the transparent plastic guard that covered a large red switch labelled with the single word 'COMMIT' next to the joystick .

'Do svidaniya, comrade,' the man at the console said with a small, sadistic smile.

High above the Nevada desert the sleek black unmanned drone banked towards its target. The heat from the car's engine far below gave the on-board computers a perfect infrared target against the cold expanse of the desert surrounding it. The spherical unit mounted under the drone's nose rotated and painted the target with an invisible beam of laser light, as a hatch slid open in the aircraft's belly and a missile dropped down and locked into place. Moments later the missile detached from the drone and fell away, its rocket motor igniting only when it was several metres below the launch platform. The inertial guidance system steered it flawlessly along the invisible laser beam that the drone was projecting and mere seconds later it speared into the roof of the police car, the eight kilogram shaped charge in its nose detonating and consuming the vehicle in a ball of fire. Blazing fragments

scattered across the road, pieces tumbling across the cold desert floor and igniting the coarse scrub that dotted the barren landscape.

As silence returned to the desert, a burning debris field was the only sign of the two men's futures that had just been snuffed out and the secret that had cost them both their lives.



'Who is she?' Otto asked quietly, looking down at the girl sat alone on one of the sofas in the atrium of their accommodation block.

'I am not sure,' Wing replied. 'All I have heard is that she is joining the Alpha stream.'

Otto already knew that much, but, as far as he was able to determine, that in itself was extremely unusual. New Alphas were inducted annually into the first year; they were never admitted into a more senior year. Not before now, at least. Clearly there was something about this girl that was special and Otto was determined to find out what.

'Perhaps the girls will know more,' Wing said with a nod towards Laura and Shelby, who were approaching from the other end of the corridor.

'Stalking the new girl, Malpense,' Shelby said, jabbing him in the ribs with her finger. 'You do know how creepy that is, don't you?'

'It's not stalking,' Otto replied, 'it's surveillance.'

'Just getting creepier,' Shelby said with a mock shudder.

'Has anyone actually gone and spoken to the poor girl yet?' Laura said, sounding slightly cross. 'I don't suppose anyone's stopped to think about what it was like for us on our first day here. At least then we were all newbies together. Just try and imagine what this must be like for her all on her own. Shelby and I are going to go and say hello. You coming?'

'OK, OK,' Otto said, holding up his hands. 'Let's go and roll out the H.I.V.E. welcome wagon.'

'There's a wagon of some kind?' Wing asked, looking confused.

'Come on, big guy,' Shelby said with a grin and pushed Wing ahead of her down the corridor towards the stairs.

'We could always see what information the central server has on her,' Otto said, still looking down at the girl. 'That's if you fancied having a poke around.'

'I hardly think you need my help with that,' Laura said, pulling Otto away from the balcony.

'Nah, I'm trying to lay off the out-of-body experiences at the moment,' Otto said, sounding distracted.

In recent months Otto had discovered that he had a unique ability to interface remotely with electronic devices or data networks. In theory it made him the most efficient hacker on the planet, but the reality was more

worrying. More than once he had almost lost himself within the electronic world, which had left him feeling slightly unsure about the actual benefits of his skill. Number One and Sebastian Trent had both sought to reverse the connection in order to control Otto – and both had very nearly succeeded. Now he found himself increasingly wary of allowing anyone else the chance to exert a similar influence over him.

'Besides, you're a natural,' Otto said. Laura had been inducted into H.I.V.E. after hacking into the U.S. government's early warning system so that she could use its resources to listen in on the mobile phone conversations of girls who had been picking on her at her previous school.

'It may not be that easy actually,' Laura said with a frown. 'Professor Pike has beefed up a lot of the network security since H.I.V.E.mind . . . well, you know.'

H.I.V.E.mind, the artificial intelligence that had been in charge of H.I.V.E.'s computer systems, had sacrificed himself to help defeat Overlord and to save Otto's life. It was still something that Otto did not really want to think about.

'You mean it might actually be easier to just talk to her then?' Otto said with a grin.

'Shocking, I know,' Laura replied, 'but sometimes the old ways are the best.'

They headed quickly down the stairs and caught up with Wing and Shelby as they crossed the atrium towards where the girl was sitting. She looked up from her binder as the four of them approached. Her long, straight, jet black hair contrasted sharply with her pale skin and deep blue eyes. There was no doubt that she was pretty but there was something else that Otto felt when he saw her, a certain familiarity.

'Hi, I'm Shelby and this big hunk is Wing,' Shelby said with a grin, 'and these are our two resident brainiacs, Laura and Otto. We thought you might need someone to show you around. My guess is if you're feeling anything like I did on the day we arrived then you've got about a million questions and not many answers. Right?'

'It is a little . . . overwhelming,' the girl replied with a shy smile. 'My name's Lucy – Lucy Dexter.'

'It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Miss Dexter,' Wing said, giving a short bow.

'I think he means hi,' Otto said with a grin and nudged Wing.

'Indeed, hi,' Wing said, raising an eyebrow.

'So what do you think of the old place?' Laura asked, gesturing vaguely at the walls surrounding them.

'It's . . . well, I suppose the word is . . . unbelievable,' Lucy replied. She sounded slightly shell-shocked.

'A secret school for the super-villains of the future,

hidden inside a volcano on a remote tropical island – what's so hard to believe about that?' Otto grinned.

'Aye, sounds perfectly normal to me, which is, you know, deeply troubling whichever way you look at it,' Laura added.

Lucy laughed and gestured towards the folder she'd been flicking through.

'I've been given the tour and I'm working my way through the induction manual that they gave me but, to be honest with you, I'm not even really sure why I'm here. One minute I was at home reading in bed and the next thing I knew I was waking up on board a helicopter with some crazy Russian woman.'

'Oh don't worry, we're familiar with the crazy Russian woman,' Otto laughed. 'One piece of advice though: I wouldn't call her that to her face.'

'Not if you're a fan of the whole not eating through a straw thing anyway,' Shelby said, grinning.

'I do not believe that Raven would ever assault a student without good reason,' Wing said with a frown.

'I know. I was just, you know, exaggerating, because . . . funny . . . never mind,' Shelby said with a sigh. Otto tried very hard not to laugh.

'Is it true that you don't get to leave here until you've finished all six years?' Lucy asked. 'Have you guys really not been off the island since you arrived?'

'Well, technically that's true,' Laura said, sitting down on the sofa opposite, 'but we've had a couple of . . . erm . . . unofficial excursions in that time, and there's the occasional training mission that's taken us off the island. In fact there's one in a couple of days, so you won't have to wait too long before you see the outside world again. Admittedly it's an Arctic survival course, so the outside world will mainly consist of endless fields of snow and ice, but, still, it's a change of scene at least. Anyway, we always seem to end up back here, one way or another. Why, you're not thinking about leaving us already, are you?'

'No,' Lucy replied quickly, looking slightly nervous, 'it's not that. It's just that . . . well . . . doesn't this place sometimes feel a bit like a prison?' She looked at each of them in turn.

'I suppose it did once,' Otto replied, 'but after a while it started to feel like home. Some of us don't really have very much to go back to in the outside world. Besides which, this lot would be completely lost without me.' Otto grinned.

'Oh aye,' Laura said, rolling her eyes. 'I for one don't know what I'd do without you putting all our lives in danger at least once every few months.'

'Nothing worse than a nice quiet life with no one shooting at you,' Shelby said, flopping down on the sofa

next to Laura. 'What would we do without bullet-magnet Malpense?'

'Hey, that's not fair,' Otto said, sounding hurt. 'Sometimes it's knives, or even bombs.'

'Sounds like you lot have had an interesting couple of years,' Lucy said, looking worried.

'Welcome to H.I.V.E.,' Wing replied with only the hint of a smile.