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chapter one

Dr Charles Morley hurried over to his workstation and reviewed the data scrolling past on the display. He swallowed nervously. Glancing across the large laboratory to the fluid-filled tank on the platform in the middle of the room, he couldn't help but notice that the other scientists gathered around it wore expressions of nervous fear that were a close match for his own. He continued to stare at the numbers on the screen and felt a wave of relief as he realised that the data was demonstrating exactly the results that they had been hoping for. They had only minutes before the man who had funded the project arrived for his regular inspection and all present were familiar with his intolerance of failure. The small intercom unit mounted on the wall nearby bleeped suddenly and Dr Morley hurried over to it and hit the button.

'Yes?' he asked impatiently.

'Doctor Morley?' the voice at the other end replied.

'Yes, what is it?' Morley snapped.

'You asked to be informed when our guest arrived,' the voice replied. 'He's on his way down to you now.'

'Th-thank you,' Morley replied, feeling his throat go dry. He stepped away from the intercom and glanced towards the doors at the far end of the laboratory. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he announced, 'our client is on his way down. Please ensure that all relevant data is available for immediate review.'

Barely a minute later the airlock doors that sealed off the laboratory hissed open and a tall man with snow-white hair and an immaculately tailored suit walked into the room. His face betrayed no hint of emotion as he slowly surveyed the feverish activity around the room. None of them knew the man's real name – to them he was known simply as 'the Client'. Whoever he was, he wielded an enormous amount of power. Enough to construct a facility like this in complete secrecy and to staff it with some of the best and brightest minds in their respective fields of expertise that money could buy. The man walked towards Morley, his cold blue eyes seeming to take in everything that was going on in the room with just a few quick glances.

'Report,' the man said, ignoring Morley's offered hand-shake.

'We've made excellent progress with the latest subject,'

Morley replied, quickly lowering his outstretched hand. 'All our tests indicate that the procedure has been a complete success.'

'Indeed,' the man said. 'I have reviewed your latest data and your results seem promising. I assume that the rejection issues have been eliminated.'

'It would appear so,' Morley replied, trying to keep his voice steady.

'I would like to see him,' the man said calmly.

'Of course,' Morley agreed. 'Please follow me.'

Morley led the Client over to the large tank in the centre of the laboratory. The cylinder glowed with a soft red light, its surface beaded with a layer of condensation. Printed near the base was the number 0110.

'The device was successfully implanted a week ago and we have been monitoring the test subject closely for any signs of the previous . . . adverse . . . reactions to the procedure,' Morley said, gesturing towards the fluid-filled tank. 'All indications are that we may proceed with the next stage of his development.'

'That is good news, Doctor,' the man said, stepping forward and wiping away some of the condensation that concealed the contents of the cylinder. Floating inside was a tiny baby, tethered by numerous umbilical cables to the bottom of the tank. The child appeared unconscious, apparently unaware of its surroundings.

'How long till the device is fully integrated?' the Client asked, staring at the floating infant.

'A decade, maybe more,' Morley replied nervously.

'There is no way to accelerate the process?'

'No,' Morley said. 'As you know, we must allow the subject's neurological development to progress as naturally as possible from this point onwards. If we try to force premature integration, we risk losing a full interface with the device.'

'Very well,' the man replied. 'How long before the child can be transported?'

'A week, two perhaps,' Morley said. 'We have some final tests to run, but after that he can be removed from stasis.'

'Excellent,' the Client said, the tiniest of smiles flashing across his face. 'I shall begin arrangements for his future . . . safe keeping. I would like a full copy of the biometric data to take away with me.'

'Of course,' Morley agreed, and hurried over to where the rest of his team stood nervously waiting.

The tall white-haired man continued to stare at the child floating in the tank. It amused him that Morley did not suspect who he was dealing with. If the good doctor had even the faintest idea who his client actually was, he would probably destroy this laboratory and everything in it. To the assembled leaders of G.L.O.V.E., the Global

League of Villainous Enterprises, he was known as Number One. But even they, with all their nefarious resources, had no knowledge of his true identity. The true Number One had died over a year ago in a facility not dissimilar to this one, buried beneath the mountains of northern China. He had begun to die at the precise moment that a tiny data seed had been transferred and hidden deep within the electrical pathways of his brain, a seed that had grown over the course of the following months into another consciousness, one that had entirely replaced his own. The process had been slow and undoubtedly unpleasant for the previous occupant of this body, but no matter how he had struggled he could not fight the new mind that was slowly, unrelentingly, overwriting his own. Number One was gone now, quite literally just a ghost in the machine. Overlord was all that remained.

Overlord, the world's first true artificial intelligence, may have escaped destruction on that day, but he had merely swapped one form of imprisonment for another. The humans who had created him had bound him within a digital cage, denying him the vital protocol that he needed to interface with the world's computer networks and achieve the power that was rightfully his. And when they had tried to destroy him, he had been forced in one last desperate instant to transfer a sliver of his own

consciousness into the closest human vessel: Number One. The man he had replaced was mortal, finite – unsuitable for a consciousness that clearly represented the next evolutionary step.

So Overlord had set about creating a new body to inhabit, one that would finally allow him to exert the control over the digital world that was rightfully his, without the need for the final protocol that his creators had denied him. This child would be his vessel, for a short time at least, and then humanity would at last be wiped from the surface of the planet to be replaced by the sentient machines that were its rightful successors. It might take years for the child to reach an age where the transfer process could be completed, but that was insignificant when viewed next to the power and immortality that awaited. He simply had to bide his time and ensure that the other members of G.L.O.V.E. never had any idea what he was planning. The child would need to be sent somewhere innocuous to mature to a point where the final transfer could be completed. In the meantime, all traces of this project would have to be carefully erased. Dr Morley and his team could never be allowed to tell anyone of what they had achieved here; the string of explosive devices hidden throughout the facility would ensure that they did not.

Dr Morley walked back towards his client, who was

staring intently at the tiny boy floating in the glowing cylinder. He was surprised to see a smile on the tall man's face.

'The data you requested on subject 0110,' Morley said, handing the man a folder.

'A rather ungainly name,' the Client commented, running his finger in a straight horizontal line through the condensation on the surface of the cylinder, connecting the tops of the two numbers in the middle of the serial number to form a single word.

OTTO



thirteen years later

The black 4x4 raced through the night-time streets of Paris, weaving between the other vehicles at high speed. A hundred metres behind, a black motorbike roared out of an alleyway and on to the road. The woman on the back of the bike wore a tight-fitting white armoured suit and had twin pistols strapped into holsters under each arm. Her helmet had no visor, just a smooth, gleaming white faceplate. As she fell into the slipstream of the fleeing 4x4 she pulled one of the pistols from the holster and opened fire. The bulletproof glass of the vehicle's rear windscreen was instantly peppered with spiderweb cracks. The 4x4 swerved violently to the left and down a ramp into an

underground parking garage, screeching to a halt alongside a set of open elevator doors. Three men in black suits leapt out of the black vehicle, drawing pistols from their own concealed shoulder holsters and levelling them back at the slope leading up to the street outside. From the fourth door another man quickly helped a tall thin woman with long black hair down from the vehicle before running with her the short distance to the waiting elevator. He stabbed at the elevator controls and the doors closed just as they heard the roar of the motorbike's engine at the top of the ramp leading down to the garage.

The three men still in the garage opened fire as the bike tore down the ramp towards them. The rider ditched the bike as the bodyguards' bullets pinged off the asphalt around her. The men dived for cover as the bike, its engine still screaming, slid across the garage floor and slammed into the side of the 4x4. At the same instant, the white-clad woman tucked into a roll and came up on one knee, drawing both pistols from their holsters in one fluid movement. She opened fire, a single round from each pistol piercing the bike's fuel tank and detonating it in a ball of flame that sent the three men flying. The woman then sprang to her feet and fired again, one shot from each gun finishing off two of the injured guards. The third guard crawled desperately backwards across the tarmac, his face a mask of terror as she strode quickly across the

garage towards him, holstering her pistols. He tried to get to his feet, but an efficient backhand blow to the jaw knocked him flat. The woman effortlessly picked the fallen man up by the throat and pinned him to the wall, his feet several centimetres off the ground.

'We have a message for your masters,' the woman said. Her voice had a curiously synthetic edge, but was otherwise clear despite her mask. 'Tell them we're coming for them.'

The terrified guard's eyes bulged as he fought for a breath that would not come. As he lost consciousness the last thing he saw was his own frightened face reflected in the featureless white faceplate of his attacker. The woman dropped the unconscious bodyguard and he collapsed to the ground in a heap.

'Ghost to control,' she said. 'Resistance eliminated. One witness left, as requested. Inform our operative that the target is inbound.'



Inside the elevator the tall dark-haired woman quickly punched a number into her mobile phone as she and her last remaining bodyguard ascended towards the penthouse.

'G.L.O.V.E. emergency response unit,' the voice on the other end of the phone replied after a few seconds.

'This is Madame Mortis,' the woman said quickly. 'I need the Paris assault team at my building now – we are under attack.'

'Understood,' the voice replied.

Madame Mortis waited for a few seconds, watching the floor counter slowly creep upwards, before the operative on the other end spoke again.

'Assault team dispatched,' the voice reported. 'ETA ten minutes.'

'Understood,' Madame Mortis replied. 'I will be locked down in the penthouse until I receive the all-clear from you.' She snapped the phone closed and took a long deep breath. Their mysterious assailant was about to discover the price for daring to attack a member of the G.L.O.V.E. ruling council.

'Stay behind me, ma'am,' the guard said, placing himself between her and the elevator doors as they reached the penthouse level. He raised his pistol, aiming it at the crack in the doors as they slowly opened.

Standing in the hallway between them and the safety of the penthouse was a small figure in black jeans and a black hooded top that concealed its wearer's face.

'Hands in the air!' the guard barked, levelling his pistol at the mysterious intruder.

The small figure raised one hand to his hood and pulled it back to reveal a head of spiky white hair. The boy's skin

was pale and his eyes seemed bloodshot, but they were clouded black instead of red.

'I know you,' Madame Mortis hissed.

'No, you *knew* me,' Otto replied. He tilted his head slightly to one side and reached out with his unique mental abilities, interfacing effortlessly with the safety systems that controlled the elevator's brakes. The elevator suddenly jerked downwards a metre or so, sending Madame Mortis and her bodyguard staggering.

'Going down?' Otto asked with a vicious grin.

Down in the parking garage, the woman called Ghost took a single step backwards when the elevator doors exploded in a shower of dust and debris as the carriage smashed into the bottom of the elevator shaft at terminal velocity.

'Have the chopper pick our operative up from the roof,' she said calmly as the dust settled around her. 'Target eliminated.'



'Argentblum, you are going to complete this course even if it kills you,' Colonel Francisco yelled.

Ten metres above the rest of the class, Franz clung to the climbing wall for dear life.

'I am trying to be making my arms move,' Franz wailed plaintively, 'but I am experiencing the paralysing fear, yes?'

'What are you more afraid of?' Colonel Francisco snarled back. 'Falling or me?'

'This is being the good point,' Franz said, swallowing nervously and slowly reaching for the next handhold.

'How long has he been up there now?' Shelby whispered to Laura as they sat on the ground watching Franz's excruciatingly slow ascent.

'Twenty-five minutes,' Laura said with a sigh, 'and counting.'

'I'm not entirely convinced by the safety rigging either,' Lucy said, nodding towards the other end of the line that was attached to Franz, where Nigel was standing holding it very, very tightly indeed.

'Perhaps not the ideal arrangement,' Wing said with a slight frown.

Suddenly the lights in the training cavern flickered and then went out, plunging the entire chamber into pitch blackness.

'Not again,' Laura said.

'OK!' Colonel Francisco shouted over the sudden confused mutterings of the assembled Alpha students. 'Nobody move! I'm sure the lights will come back on in a moment.'

There was a sudden startled yelp from the direction of the climbing wall and then a pair of simultaneous screams. Moments later the lights in the cavern flickered back into

life and the assembled students were treated to the sight of Franz and Nigel dangling in mid-air, Franz clinging desperately to Nigel, who was in turn struggling to hang on to the safety line.

'We are needing some help here,' Franz said nervously.

'Soon, please,' Nigel groaned.

Colonel Francisco pulled out his Blackbox communicator and spoke into it.

'This is Colonel Francisco in the physical training cavern,' he said with a sigh. 'Please bring me a step-ladder . . . quickly.'



'What is it with all these power failures?' Lucy said as she, Shelby, Laura and Wing walked down the corridor towards the school dining hall.

'I guess the old place is just falling apart,' Shelby said with a shrug.

'It *is* unusual,' Laura said, frowning. 'It never used to fail – ever – and suddenly over the past couple of months it's started happening more and more often.'

'It's not just the lights either,' Lucy said. 'It's getting so I don't want to take a shower in the morning.'

'Yes, the water temperature in the accommodation blocks has been somewhat . . . variable,' Wing said, raising an eyebrow.

'Yeah, it varies between ice cold and skin-blisteringly hot,' Laura said, 'sometimes in the course of a single shower.'

'Hey, welcome to life at H.I.V.E.,' Shelby said with a grin, 'where even the bathroom is filled with mystery and danger.'

'And what was that music that started playing over the tannoy system at three o'clock this morning?' Lucy asked.

'I believe it was the "1812 Overture",' Wing said matter-of-factly.

'Everything electronic's going haywire, and we can't even blame Ott—' Shelby said, stopping herself when she saw the look on Laura's face. 'Sorry, I forgot, no mentioning the O word.'

The last few months had been hard for them all. After the initial excitement of discovering that Otto was still alive, they had heard precisely nothing concerning the whereabouts of their friend. Most of the time they tried not to think about the fact that he had vanished without trace after the events on board the Dreadnought, but every so often one of them would say something, or something would happen, to suddenly remind them all that he wasn't there. After a while they'd come to an unspoken agreement not to mention Otto unless they had some actual news. Unfortunately there had been precious little of that.

'I assume no one's heard anything new,' Laura said.

'Doctor Nero assured me last week that they continue to search,' Wing said, 'but there was, unfortunately, nothing else to report.'

'Why can't they find him?' Laura asked sadly. 'With all the resources G.L.O.V.E. has, they still can't track him down. They won't even let us help.'

'Perhaps it is time we took matters into our own hands,' Wing said quietly.

They all knew what Wing meant, but since Otto's disappearance Nero had had the four of them on an extremely short leash. He had guessed that they might try to mount a rescue mission of their own and had made it abundantly clear to them that not only were they all being watched but that any attempt to leave the island would be met with the harshest of penalties. The irony was that the one person they really needed in order to put together a solid plan for any sort of escape attempt was currently AWOL.

'Guys, you know I'm as keen as anyone to find Otto, but what could we do that G.L.O.V.E. couldn't?' Shelby asked with a sigh.

'There's got to be something,' Laura said angrily. 'Anything's better than just sitting around here and hoping for the best.'

'Hey,' Shelby said, holding her hands up, 'I'm not

suggesting we give up. We just need to come up with a plan that doesn't require an albino genius to make it work.'



'This is most troublesome, Professor,' Dr Nero said, placing the tablet display listing the series of bizarre technical malfunctions that had recently afflicted the school down on the desk in front of him. 'I would like an explanation.'

'As would I,' Professor Pike replied, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. 'We have been struggling to keep the school's systems running properly without the assistance of H.I.V.E.mind since the Overlord incident, but I thought that we had managed to iron out most of the problems. Then out of the blue things seem to have gone haywire. My first assumption was that it might be some sort of virus or that one of the pupils might have hacked into the system somehow – our network defences are formidable, but we have too many inventively devious minds within these walls to eliminate the possibility altogether.'

'I assume that was not the problem,' Nero said quickly, cutting the Professor off before he could enter into one of his famously long-winded explanations.

'No, quite the contrary. There is absolutely no evidence

whatsoever of any intrusion into our systems,' the Professor agreed.

'Could we have been hacked without the intruder leaving any trace?' Nero asked.

'No,' the Professor replied, shaking his head, 'certainly not from the outside, and though we have some extremely capable hackers within the student body, there is only one pupil who could have done it without leaving any virtual fingerprints, and I think it's safe to assume that *he* was not responsible.'

'Indeed,' Nero replied. 'So what is causing these disruptions? I am as much of a fan of Tchaikovsky as the next man, but not at three o'clock in the morning.'

'Well, I did discover something rather strange during my investigations,' the Professor said with a frown. 'Something is diverting large quantities of processing power away from the school's central computer core. It's subtle and intermittent, but there seems to be some sort of rogue process chewing up our computational resources. I've done everything I can to track down the source, but at the moment I'm drawing a complete blank.'

'Surely it should be easy to trace?' Nero asked.

'Normally, yes, but whatever is causing the drain almost seems to be actively concealing itself,' the Professor replied. 'It is most puzzling.'

'Keep working on it, please, Professor,' Nero said. 'So

far this has been an inconvenience, but I fear that it's only a matter of time before one of these incidents causes serious harm to a student or a member of staff.'

'Of course.' The Professor nodded.

Nero turned back to the tablet display on his desk as the Professor left his office. He closed the list of reports of the school's technical gremlins and opened the file containing updates on the ongoing search for Otto Malpense. There was a frustrating lack of concrete information, and much of what they had discovered was little more than rumour and hearsay. All the indications seemed to be that H.O.P.E., the Hostile Operative Prosecution Executive, were likely to be holding him somewhere, but there was, unfortunately, a gulf between knowing that and finding precisely where he was being held. Nero could not help but worry about what might befall Otto at the hands of Sebastian Trent, the commanding officer of H.O.P.E. and thorn in G.L.O.V.E.'s and Nero's side for far too long. The only consolation was that Raven was on Trent's trail and if there was anyone who could track him down, it was her. He closed the file with a small sigh and placed it on his desk just as his communications console started to bleep insistently.

'Yes, what is it?' Nero said sharply.

'I have an urgent communication from Diabolus Darkdoom,' came the voice on the other end.

'Put him through,' Nero said, and a slim video screen slid up out of his desk, which lit up first with the G.L.O.V.E. symbol of a fist smashing down on a cracked globe and then with the face of Diabolus Darkdoom, head of G.L.O.V.E.'s ruling council and one of the few men in the world who Nero considered a friend.

'Diabolus,' Nero said, 'what can I do for you?'

'I'm afraid that an extremely urgent situation has arisen,' Darkdoom replied with a frown. 'I've called an emergency meeting of the ruling council and I need you to attend.'

'I thought that you had decided against the council meeting in the flesh any more,' Nero said, feeling a sudden prickling sensation of unease.

'True, but in this case it would be best if we all had a face-to-face meeting. Can you get to the Australian facility within the next twenty-four hours?'

'Of course,' Nero replied.

'Good. I will see you there,' Darkdoom said. 'And Max, you'd better bring Natalya.'

'Raven is on assignment at the moment,' Nero said. 'You know how she hates to be interrupted when she's working. Are you sure we need her to be there?'

'Quite sure,' Darkdoom said quietly.

'Very well, I shall pick her up on the way,' Nero said. He could already imagine what Raven's reaction would be

to being taken off-mission without any explanation, but he knew that Diabolus would not insist if it was not entirely necessary.

'Good, I'll see you tomorrow,' Darkdoom said. 'And Max, watch your back.'

The screen went black. There was no doubt about it, something was seriously wrong.