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# HIVE: Aftershock

Written by

## Mark Walden

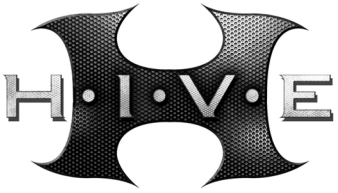
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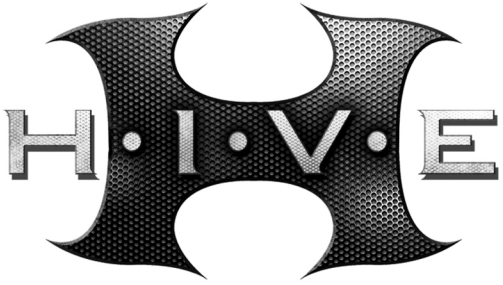
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# Aftershock

*The H.I.V.E Series in reading order*

Higher Institute of Villainous Education
The Overlord Protocol
Escape Velocity
Dreadnought
Rogue
Zero Hour
Aftershock




# Aftershock

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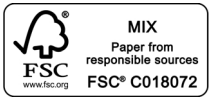
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*For Sarah*
*I love you*

# chapter one

## twenty years ago

As the well-dressed old woman left the restaurant, she didn't notice that she was being watched from the dark alley across the street. The woman pulled her long coat tighter around herself and set off down the street, oblivious to the small, dishevelled figure following her. The young girl was dressed in dirty jeans and a threadbare jumper that looked several sizes too large, her long dark hair hanging down over her dirt-streaked face. She gained on the woman but was careful not to move too quickly for fear of attracting attention. As she drew closer she gave a small flick of the wrist and a knife appeared in her hand, as if from thin air. The girl increased her pace, finally breaking into a run only when she was just a couple of metres from her target. The knife flashed through the air slicing cleanly through the strap of the woman's handbag as the young girl sprinted past her, snatching the bag before it hit the ground. In the

split second that it took for the woman to realise what had happened the thief was already twenty metres away.

'Hey, stop her! She's got my bag!' the woman yelled helplessly.

A man walking on the same side of the street made a grab for the girl but she evaded him by leaping on to the bonnet of a parked car and vaulting over his head in a single fluid move. The man turned and gave chase as the girl ran round the corner, weaving between pedestrians. She sprinted across the road, dodging the traffic, heading for the brightly illuminated red M sign on the other side of the street. Two policemen were standing near the entrance to the Metro, talking to a homeless man.

'Hey! Officers! That girl, she's a thief! She just stole that bag!' the man shouted, pointing at the girl.

The policemen ran to intercept her but she hurdled the railing of the stairwell leading down into the Metro station, landing gracefully on the steps five metres below. The policemen struggled past the passengers coming up the stairs. She sprinted through the underground train station, passing by the elaborate stained glass windows set into the marble walls, heading for the platforms. She leapt on to the smooth metal slope that separated the escalators and dropped on to her back, sliding down between the startled passengers and hitting the ground running. At the end of the lower concourse she stopped for a moment, listening to

the sounds of the trains as the two policemen pushed their way on to the escalator. She stuffed the old woman's bag inside the waistband of her jeans and ran towards the platform on her right just as the train started to pull out of the station. She stopped running, watching as the train accelerated away from the platform, waiting for the perfect moment. Just as the policemen rounded the corner behind her she began to run again, leaping into the air at the precise instant that the last carriage whistled past in front of her. She caught the handles on either side of the door on the rear of the train and hung on as it shot into the darkened tunnel.

'*Do svidaniya!*' she shouted at the two astonished policemen standing on the platform as they disappeared from view.

She clung on to the back of the train as it thundered through the tunnel, waiting patiently for the light that would signal their arrival at the next stop. As they pulled into the next station and the train slowed to a halt, she hopped on to the platform and joined the crowd of people heading for the surface. She walked up the stairs leading out of the station and decided to make her way home. A few minutes later she was climbing up the fire escape on the side of a disused factory building leading to the roof. She dropped down through one of the dirty skylights and on to the floor of the long-abandoned attic that was her current

bolt-hole. She headed over to a table on the far side and picked up a box of matches and lit the oil lantern that stood on it. In the small pool of yellow light she examined the contents of the stolen bag.

'How many times have I got to tell you,' a voice said from the shadows, 'you don't work on my turf.'

The girl spun round as four boys in their late teens emerged from the darkness at the other end of the room.

'What? Did you think that I wouldn't be able to find you? You thieve on my patch and I will always know where you are. Now we're going to have to teach you a lesson, you know, just to make sure that you understand the rules,' the leader said as he walked towards her.

'I'm sorry, Boris,' the girl said, as the boys moved to surround her. 'I'll give you a cut of my take. Hey, have it all if you want. I don't want any trouble.'

'Too late for that – you had your chance. In fact, I think that this time I will be the one giving you a *cut*, yes?' he said, pulling a knife from his pocket and holding it up in front of him.

One of the other boys lunged for the girl but she quickly dodged sideways and punched him in the mouth. He staggered backwards clutching at his mouth, blood oozing between his fingers. Boris watched as the other two uninjured boys ran at the girl and she dropped low, her foot lashing out at one of the boys' ankles and sending him

flying. As he hit the ground with a thud the other boy grabbed the girl's arm and she spun round, driving her fist straight into his nose and knocking him backwards. She turned back towards Boris just in time to see him coming before he slammed into her and knocked her to the ground. He pinned her down and held the knife in front of her face, the reflected light from the lantern glinting in its blade.

'And now I'm going to make an example of you,' he said, bringing the tip of the knife to within a couple of millimetres of her eye.

There were four muffled pops and a look of surprise on Boris's face as a blood-red patch began to spread across the white material of his T-shirt, directly above his heart. The girl cried out in fear as Boris's body toppled forward on to her. She pushed him off, leaping to her feet as two figures emerged from the darkness at the other end of the room. The man was tall and muscular with dark hair that was peppered with grey. He slid the silenced pistol back into the shoulder holster that he was wearing beneath his immaculately tailored suit. He had emotionless eyes which gave him a terrifying air of ruthlessness. The woman standing beside him was equally tall and strikingly beautiful, her long dark hair hanging straight down to her shoulders. The suit she wore was clearly just as expensive as the man's. Unlike the man, however, she was smiling. The girl backed away from them as they walked towards her,

almost tripping over the body of another of the four boys that they had just murdered.

'Hello, Natalya,' the woman said, still smiling. 'I cannot tell you how glad I am to have finally found you.'

'Stay away from me,' the girl replied, still retreating. 'Stay away from me, I'm warning you.' She snatched Boris's knife from the floor. 'I mean it. I'll cut you if you come any closer.'

'No, you won't,' the man said calmly, still slowly walking towards her. 'You may try but it won't make any difference.'

The girl felt genuine fear now as she slowly stepped backwards, holding the knife defensively in front of her.

'Who are you? How do you know my name?'

'My name is Anastasia Furan and this is my brother, Pietor,' the woman replied. 'I have been searching for you for a long time, Natalya. I want you to come with us.'

'Why would I go anywhere with you? I don't even know you,' the girl replied.

'I am going to make you an offer, my dear. You can come with me now and let me try to channel your obvious talents more . . . *effectively*, or I can walk away and Pietor will shoot you and dump your body in the Moskva river,' Anastasia replied. The fact that she didn't stop smiling made the threat even more terrifying.

'So I don't really have a choice,' Natalya replied.

'You will find as you grow older that choice is rarely more than an illusion, Natalya,' Anastasia replied, holding out her hand. 'Shall we go?'



The van pulled to a stop and the rear doors opened. Natalya squinted at the sudden brightness. The back of the van had no windows and during the journey the only light had been from a small grille that separated the front of the vehicle from the rear. She stepped out into the cobbled courtyard of what could only be described as a castle. The main building in front of her was surrounded by a high wall capped by battlements that were being patrolled by armed guards. At regular intervals along the walls were high towers topped by guard posts with searchlights on their roofs. Natalya had never seen anything like it before and she stood gaping for a moment before Pietor Furan motioned for her to head through the large wooden doors that led into the main building.

Inside they passed through a security checkpoint before walking into the central yard where dozens of children of all ages were sparring. They wore grey combat fatigues and black boots and were responding quickly to the barked commands of the instructors who were dotted around the area. Furan walked through the cloister surrounding the yard and led her up several flights of stairs to a door

labelled 'dormitory'. She walked inside but Furan remained outside.

'Your bed and locker are at the far end,' Furan said. 'Your uniform is on the bed. Get changed and return to the combat training area.'

He closed the door behind her as Natalya walked the length of the dormitory. At the far end she found a uniform identical to the ones she had seen the other trainees wearing. She quickly slipped out of her tattered street clothes and pulled on the new uniform before heading down to the training area. There she found Pietor Furan standing in front of a group of children who all seemed to be about the same age as her. Some of them glanced at her with curiosity as she approached.

'Eyes forward,' Furan barked. 'The next hour will be spent in full-contact sparring. You will swap partners every five minutes. Any sign of hesitation or mercy for your opponent will be punished. Begin!'

The children all divided into pairs in silence as Natalya watched. A boy approached her and gave a small nod of the head before dropping into a fighting stance. Natalya barely had time to react before he launched a punishing volley of lightning fast punches and kicks, knocking her to the ground. He offered her his hand and pulled her up from the ground.

'Dimitri,' he whispered as he helped her to her feet.

'Natalya,' she whispered back. 'What is this place?'

'They call it the Glasshouse,' Dimitri said, glancing nervously towards Furan who was watching the trainees on the other side of the area. 'Attack me, quickly.'

Natalya threw a couple of weak punches at Dimitri which he blocked with fluid ease.

'What was that?' Furan snapped angrily as he marched towards them. 'Hit him!'

Natalya threw another punch, which again Dimitri blocked.

'I said hit him, not peck at him like a raven pecking at a corpse,' Furan said. 'Again!'

Natalya attacked Dimitri again, trying harder to make any of the blows count. Still she could not get through his defences.

'Still it is peck, peck, peck,' Furan yelled.

'I'm trying!' Natalya turned and yelled angrily at him.

Furan backhanded her hard across the face, knocking her to her knees. She tasted blood in her mouth.

'How dare you raise your voice to me,' he said, standing over her. 'No matter. In time you will learn some respect, my little raven, that much I can promise you.'



Natalya collapsed on to her bed exhausted. The first day of training had been brutal and relentless. Her muscles were

sore and she knew that beneath her uniform she had to be covered in bruises.

'Sorry about earlier,' Dimitri said as he approached her bunk. 'If I'd let you hit me, Furan would have beaten the snot out of me.'

'I would love to talk but I'm afraid it makes my face hurt,' Natalya said with a pained smile.

'Don't worry,' Dimitri replied, 'it gets easier. Well, maybe not easier so much as you notice the pain less.'

'Is he always like that?' Natalya asked.

'Who? Furan?' Dimitri asked. 'Yes, I'm afraid so. You don't want to get on the wrong side of him, trust me. He's not the really scary one though. That's his sister, Anastasia. She's the one who makes my blood run cold.'

'Yes, we've met,' Natalya replied. 'And I know what you mean. So how do I get out of here?'

'What?' Dimitri asked with a frown.

'I don't know about you but I'm not planning on staying,' Natalya replied. 'So how do I get out of here?'

'Shhh,' Dimitri whispered, sitting next to her on the bunk, 'talk like that will get you killed. It's not like we don't all think about it but, if they find out you've been talking about it, you'll end up in the hole or worse.'

'So it's impossible,' Natalya said.

'I didn't say that,' Dimitri replied with a wink, 'you just have to be careful who you talk to about it.'

'Dimitri, Dimitri!' Another boy shouted, running down the dormitory towards them. 'Have you heard, there's a new girl here, she was brought in by Fur . . . oh, hello.' The boy blushed as he saw Natalya.

'And this idiot is my friend, Tolya,' Dimitri said with a lopsided smile.

'Hi, I'm the new girl,' Natalya said.

'Nice to meet you,' Tolya replied. 'Sorry, I didn't realise you were going to be in our dormitory.'

'Yes, this is my bed and if you guys don't mind I'm afraid I'm going to have to use it right now. I'm exhausted,' Natalya said.

'Of course,' Dimitri said with a smile. 'See you later, Natalya.'

Natalya gave a small wave as she rolled over in her bunk, not even bothering to put on the pyjamas that were in her locker. Within seconds she was asleep. As she slept, Natalya dreamt she was in a snow-covered field, watching Anastasia and Pietor Furan standing over her corpse and laughing as a raven fed on it. Anastasia Furan stopped laughing, turned towards Natalya and spoke.

'Peck, peck, peck, little Raven, peck, peck, peck.'

# chapter two

NOW

The main hall at H.I.V.E. fell silent as Dr Nero walked across the stage to the lectern. Standing in neatly ordered rows on the polished black granite floor in front of him were the third year students of H.I.V.E. They had come from all four corners of the globe but were united by one thing. They were the children who had demonstrated a gift for the nefarious or some talent for villainy, something uniquely special that had attracted the attention of H.I.V.E., the Higher Institute of Villainous Education. They were all being trained in the art and science of villainy, being prepared, upon graduation, to take their place within the organisation known as G.L.O.V.E. The Global League of Villainous Enterprise was the most powerful clandestine group of international mega-villains that the world had ever known. The head of its ruling council, and also the headmaster of H.I.V.E., was Maximilian Nero, the very