EARTHFALL

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LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK SYDNEY

By Mark Walden

In the H.I.V.E. series

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

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The boy ran down the rain-soaked street, weaving between abandoned cars. He crouched behind one of the vehicles and tried to quiet his laboured breath. At first he heard nothing, but then behind the noise of the falling rain he made out another sound – one that in recent months he had learned to fear. The high-pitched whine was getting louder, and that meant the Drones had tracked his scent. The boy forced himself to his feet, pushing the long black hair out of his eyes and set off down the road again. He didn't look back – if there was anything behind him he would rather not know.

He ducked through the broken door of one of the shops lining the street and ran between shelves stocked with now useless electronic devices. Vaulting over a counter at the far end of the shop, he grabbed the handle of a door marked 'Staff Only', silently praying that it wasn't locked. The handle turned and he stepped into

the gloom of the room beyond. As the door closed again, he was plunged into darkness. The boy unzipped one of his coat pockets and pulled out a small torch. He played the thin beam of light across the rows of shelves piled high with boxes of all shapes and sizes. Not so long ago, these boxes contained expensive luxuries; now they were just relics of a world that had been lost, probably for ever. He knew that the pouring rain would mask his thermal signature and the telltale sounds of his desperate flight, but it would not make him invisible. He had to keep moving.

He quietly made his way to the back of the storeroom and found the loading bay. To his left he saw the electronic control panel that would once have raised and lowered the rolling steel shutter, and cursed under his breath. He dropped to one knee and tried in vain to pull the shutter up, but without electricity it was pointless – it was locked firmly in place. He froze as the high-pitched whining sound became louder again and he heard the sound of shattering glass coming from behind the Staff Only exit. Fighting a rising tide of panic, the boy looked around the storeroom. He realised, with mounting horror, that heading back through the shop was his only way out.

The boy switched off his torch and slid along the wall in the darkness, trying desperately not to make even the

tiniest sound. He stopped as something cold and hard pressed into his back. Turning, he ran his hands over the cool metal cylinder hanging on the wall, feeling a tiny flicker of hope. Then the door to the storefront exploded in a flash of bright green light. He was knocked to the floor by the force of the blast, temporarily blinded by the brilliant burst of light. He lay stunned for a couple of seconds before he was roused by his own terrified voice screaming in the back of his head, telling him to get up; he had to run. He reached for the cylinder and grabbed it, slowly pulling himself to his feet. He froze, not even daring to breathe as something floated through the shattered remains of the door, just a few metres away. It looked like a horrific mechanical jellyfish. The metallic skin that covered the bulbous disc of its body rippled in a disturbingly organic way as clusters of glowing, multifaceted eyes swivelled and twitched, scanning the room. Hanging below its body was a writhing bundle of flexible tendrils, each ending in a vicious, barbed tip. The Drone turned and flew towards him with a piercing screech, its tentacles raised. The boy did not hesitate – he squeezed the handle of the fire extinguisher and the Drone was instantly enveloped in a billowing white cloud of carbon dioxide gas. The boy continued to spray the screeching, flailing machine as he ran past it, heading for the door. He yelped in pain as one of the

Drone's limbs lashed out, its razor-sharp tip slashing straight through his clothes and leaving a long gash across his chest. The boy threw the extinguisher at the creature and ducked through the mangled doorway, knowing that he had bought himself a few seconds' head start at best. He leapt over the counter and sprinted through the store and into the street. He took the first turn on his left into a debris-filled side alley, looking over his shoulder as he ran. There was no sign of the Drone, but he heard a piercing, unearthly screech that was immediately answered by several identical calls from nearby. The boy knew that he had to get off the street. The rain was starting to ease and in the eastern sky he could see the first signs of dawn. He might be able to outrun the Drones, but they would call for other hunters and against many he knew he had no chance – not in daylight.

He ran out of the far end of the alley and turned right. If he could just make it the hundred metres to the end of this street, then he would be safe, for the moment at least. From somewhere overhead a low, throbbing rumble made the boy glance upwards before quickly dashing for the cover of another nearby shop doorway. Directly above him a huge triangular vessel, its gleaming black skin pulsing with thick veins of sickly green light, flew low over the rooftops. Beams of bright white light

speared out as a series of portals opened on its underside, and swept along the streets below. The boy waited until the vessel had passed directly overhead and then sprinted towards the other end of the street. He knew he had just seconds now; he had seen ships like this one before. Ducking behind a wrecked van that was lying on its side in the road, he pulled a short crowbar from his pack and began levering open the manhole cover beside him. At the far end of the street the vessel banked slowly round before coming to a halt, hovering in mid-air. The boy watched as a hatch opened in the bottom of the triangular craft. A black metallic pod ten metres tall slowly floated down and came to rest on the road below. The boy pushed the manhole cover to one side with a grunt and quickly climbed down on to the rungs of the ladder set into the wall of the concrete shaft below. He started to drag the manhole cover closed behind him as the pod began to open. A huge metallic claw wrapped itself around the edge of the opening and something enormous emerged from the shadows within. The boy pulled the manhole cover shut, his heart racing as he climbed down the ladder. Halfway, one foot slipped out from under him and he fell the last couple of metres, landing on his back in the fetid drain water that ran along the bottom of the tunnel below. He winced in pain, but fought the urge to cry out as earth-shaking footsteps

thudded overhead. He held his breath as they got nearer and nearer, the vibrations shaking dust from the tunnel ceiling. The footsteps passed directly above him before receding away into the distance and the boy finally let out a long, relieved sigh.

'Too close,' he muttered to himself under his breath. He reached into his pack and pulled one of the half dozen recently foraged tin cans from inside and inspected it. 'After all that, these had better be the best baked beans ever made.'



The boy trudged through ankle-deep water in the sewers, the light from his torch playing over the crumbling brickwork on either side. He rounded a bend and stopped in front of a gate held shut with a padlocked chain. He pulled out the key that hung on a loop of string round his neck and undid the lock, stepping into the passage beyond, before securing the gate once more. He knew that if they found him down here the chain would make little difference, but it made him feel better all the same.

He walked along the passage and into the chamber ahead of him. There was a large circular cistern, filled with water in the middle of the room and a grate far overhead that allowed at least some of the daylight from the world above to filter down to where the boy stood.

He headed up a staircase that spiralled around the cistern, leading to a door marked 'Maintenance'. Using a disposable lighter he lit the gas-powered camping lamp that sat on the shelf just inside the door. He closed the door, then carried the lamp and his backpack over to the table on one side of the room. He sat down on the folding metal chair in front of the table and started to unload the contents of the pack. He looked at the six cans of beans that he had managed to find in the flat above one of the local shops. It was enough for a week, ten days at the outside.

Every day it was getting harder to find food as the Walkers systematically looted for anything edible. Fresh water was difficult to locate too, ever since the taps had run dry. He was starting to wonder if London was still the best place for him to be. Sure, there were lots of places to hide and initially there had been plentiful supplies everywhere, but the Walkers were stripping the city bare and it seemed like there were more and more Drones patrolling every night. If things kept on this way, it was only a matter of time before they caught him.

'Might be time for a holiday in the countryside,' the boy said.

He shook his head with a sigh; he had to remember to try not to talk to himself. At first it had been comforting, but after a while it had made him notice all the more

acutely that there was now no one left to answer. He pulled the water bottle from the side pocket of his pack and allowed himself one quick swig. The one advantage of the rain last night was that he had at least been able to top up his water supply. It certainly wasn't mineral water, but it would do. He put five of the tins on the shelf above the table and opened the sixth one, eating the beans cold from the tin with a spoon. When he slept, he dreamt about hot cooked meals, but even though he had managed to find a camping stove on one of his earlier foraging expeditions he rarely had the time or the motivation to use it. He scraped the last of the tomato sauce out of the tin and threw it into the corner of the room, where it joined many others.

The boy slowly pulled off his coat and T-shirt and stood in front of the mirror that hung on the front of one of the storage cupboards, inspecting the gash across his chest. He was relieved to see that the cut didn't seem too deep despite being sore to the touch. He stared at himself in the mirror for a moment longer. He'd lost probably a third of his body weight over the past few months and the slim face topped with long, straight, jet-black hair that stared back at him seemed strangely unfamiliar. Once upon a time he had been teased about his weight by other kids, but now he knew that they would never make fun of him again. If someone had told

him back then that he would one day actually miss Simon Haines shouting 'fatboy' at him in the playground, he would have told them they were mad. Now he'd happily put up with it just so he could hear another human voice again.

He opened one of the storage cupboards that lined the room and pulled out a small first-aid kit. He cleaned the wound with an antiseptic wipe and wrapped a bandage round his chest a couple of times to cover it, picking up the slashed and bloodstained T-shirt with a sigh. It looked like he would need to do some clothes 'shopping' soon too. That could wait for another time though. Right now he was exhausted.

The boy lay down in his sleeping bag on top of the inflatable mattress on the other side of the room and picked up the small battery-powered radio that lay next to his bed. For five minutes he slowly rotated the tuning dial with his thumb, listening for any sign of a human voice between the static, but there was nothing, just the relentless white noise that he had been listening to for the past eighteen months. He turned the radio off and closed his eyes. The encounter with the Drone had very nearly been a disaster. He knew that he couldn't afford to make mistakes like that and not for the first time he found himself wondering if he should try to find himself more substantial weapons. At the moment he carried

nothing deadlier than a Swiss army knife when he went above ground, but the problem was finding something more useful. For a while he'd carried a baseball bat, but that had just been a pain to lug around. What he needed was something light but effective, a gun ideally, but there were very few of those to be found lying around, especially now that the Walkers had hoovered up anything useful or dangerous for their masters. He'd just have to keep looking, he thought to himself as he slowly drifted off to sleep, and hope that in the meantime he could avoid any more close encounters.



The boy awoke with a start. His dreams had rarely been pleasant since that day eighteen months ago, but this one had been unusually vivid. He'd been slowly walking towards a cliff and could not control his legs. He just kept on taking one step after another, getting closer and closer to the edge. The final, inevitable fall was what had woken him. He opened his eyes and checked the old-fashioned wind-up watch that had replaced his own when the battery had failed a month earlier.

'Whoa, nice job there, Rip Van Winkle,' the boy said, raising an eyebrow. It was ten o'clock at night. He'd slept for nearly fourteen hours. Suddenly he was shaken by a coughing fit that made the gash across his chest flare with

searing pain. He lifted the bandage and looked at the wound beneath. The area immediately surrounding the gash was an angry red colour and there were fine green lines just under the skin that seemed to be spreading out from the site of the injury and across his chest.

'Just what I need,' the boy said to himself as he got to his feet unsteadily. He had learned from experience how dangerous an infected wound could be, but he'd hoped that by cleaning and dressing it he would have avoided any complications. He opened another one of the storage cupboards and looked along the shelves of books inside. He'd realised early on that his best chance of living through this was by learning the basic skills needed for survival and so one of the first books he'd looked for was a first-aid manual. Books were easy to find; the Walkers didn't seem to care about them at all and so bookshops and libraries still had full shelves. It was a good job too, because if they hadn't he suspected that he would have been driven mad by boredom long before now. He flicked through the book and made a note of the names of the antibiotics he would need to find. He knew it wouldn't be easy – hospitals and pharmacies were some of the first places that the Walkers had stripped.

He used a piece of duct tape to patch up the tear in the bloodstained T-shirt and pulled it carefully over his head,

wincing with discomfort. He slipped his coat on and picked up his pack before opening the door leading to the cistern room. A confused frown appeared on his face as he saw the daylight flooding in through the grating far overhead. He quickly looked again at his watch.

'Oh no,' he whispered.

It wasn't ten o'clock at night, it was ten o'clock in the morning – he'd only been asleep for four hours. Pain lanced across his chest again and he suddenly realised how serious the situation was. If the infection from the wound had already spread that far, there was no way he could wait until nightfall to go out and search for antibiotics. By then he might not even be able to climb the ladder to the surface. The only option was to go topside in daylight, but that was practically suicidal. Another coughing fit came from nowhere and he reached for the railing in front of him to steady himself as the room seemed to spin round him for several sickening seconds. As he fought for breath and the spinning slowly stopped, he knew that he had no choice.

It was really very simple: maybe get killed up there, or definitely die down here, alone in the dark.