

Zero Hour (H.I.V.E. Book 6)

By Mark Walden

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Bad news for the Higher Institute of Villainous Education, aka H.I.V.E.: Overlord is reborn and has developed the chilling ability to move from body to body, erasing the host's personality—and ultimately killing them. Overlord must find Otto, the only host designed to truly contain him, and for that he needs to know the location of H.I.V.E. He also plans to take control of a secret U.S. Army facility that is home to the Autonomous Weapon Program, a computer-controlled system uniquely vulnerable to Overlord's control.

In the face of these threats, Nero is forced to activate Zero Hour, a plan designed to deal with any member of G.L.O.V.E—the Global League of Villainous Enterprises—who is on the brink of true global domination. Nero also knows that Otto must not be allowed to fall into Overlord's hands, and a desperate race across the globe begins.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the H.I.V.E. series: 'A comedy thriller, full of baddies, action and lashings of humour' Sunday Express 'An exuberant Dahl-esque escapade' Financial Times 'Exciting, clever and all in all brilliant' Sunday Telegraph

About the Author
Mark Walden spent a decade as a video game designer and producer before becoming a fulltime writer and father. He has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Twentieth Century Literature, Film, and Television, both from Newcastle University. He is the author of the H.I.V.E. series and lives with his family in the United Kingdom.

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Zero Hour

chapter one

A thin, elderly-looking man sat in a darkened office, facing an array of screens. At first glance a casual observer might have thought that he was ill, but closer inspection would have revealed the fine black veins covering his skin. Nothing was left of the man who had once inhabited this shell. All that mattered now was that it belonged to Overlord.

Overlord watched as the screens lit up one by one with the digitally distorted faces of his most loyal followers: men and women who had honored his legacy and continued the work he had begun while imprisoned inside the body of another. His Disciples.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “I have called this meeting to discuss a very important matter. I have reviewed the plans that you initiated during my enforced absence, and while many are impractical, one has true potential. Its code name is Tabula Rasa, and although its scope is currently rather limited I believe that with some simple modifications it can be made . . . effective.”

“Master,” one of the faces said, “what can we do to assist?”

“The facility that contains the substance we require is quite secure,” Overlord replied. “I believe that Furan can provide the manpower necessary to handle that side of the plan, but we will also need to address the greatest threat to our success, G.L.O.V.E.”

G.L.O.V.E., the Global League of Villainous Enterprise, was an organization that had once been entirely under his control. That had been, quite literally, in a previous lifetime. Now it was under the control of Maximilian Nero, a man who had been a thorn in Overlord’s side for far too long.

“We can eliminate that threat,” Overlord continued, “but I shall need your assistance. I am sending you the details of a number of key G.L.O.V.E. facilities around the world. When I give the signal, you are to attack and destroy them. I, meanwhile, will put into action a plan to eliminate G.L.O.V.E.’s leaders in one fell swoop. I will transmit the details of your targets to all of you shortly so that you may make your

preparations. Our time is coming, ladies and gentlemen. Soon we shall remake the Earth in our image and there will be no one to stand against us."

The screens went blank again, and Pietor Furan stepped forward out of the shadows.

"I do not mean to question you," Furan said, "but Tabula Rasa was one of our more extreme initiatives. I take it that you have an idea for how we can modulate its destructive power?"

"Of course I do," Overlord replied, "but to do it we need one last piece of the puzzle. We need Otto Malpense, and I know exactly how we're going to get him.



Otto ducked behind the low wall, trying to control his breathing, his ears straining for any sign of his pursuers. He knew that they were out there, but all he could hear was the slow drip of water from a leaking pipe nearby. Raising himself up just far enough to look over the wall, he scanned the wide-open concrete floor of the abandoned warehouse. The only illumination was provided by the dirty cracked skylights far overhead. He crept out, moving as quickly and quietly as possible from one area of shadow to the next. Suddenly he heard the crunch of someone stepping on loose gravel, and he flattened himself against the wall, raising his silenced pistol to shoulder level, ready to fire.

A shadowy figure rounded the corner and just had time to grunt with surprise as Otto's pistol coughed twice, the shots catching his target square in the chest. The hunter slumped to the floor with a thud, and Otto broke into a run. He knew that in the silence of the deserted building even the suppressed sound of his shots would have given away his position. He was halfway toward the other side of the open area when a bullet buzzed past his head and hit the wall twenty yards away, with a puff of ancient plaster dust. He dived and rolled behind a wooden crate, knowing full well that the shelter it provided was temporary at best. As if to hammer that message home, another bullet passed through the crate in an explosion of splinters just inches from his head and struck the ground nearby. He looked desperately for anything that would provide him with more substantial cover and spotted a concrete support column about ten yards away. To reach it he would have to cross open ground.

Time seemed to slow down as he glanced at the splintered hole in the crate and the tiny crater in the concrete floor where the bullet had ricocheted away. He subconsciously calculated the trajectory of the bullet, his mind drawing a line back from the crater and through the crate. Springing up from behind the crate, he sighted his pistol and fired three times. There was a scream of pain from somewhere off in the darkness, and Otto sprinted for the comparative safety of the column. He pressed his back against the pillar, listening for signs of pursuit but hearing nothing. Suddenly there was a flicker of movement from off to his right, and he spun round, raising his weapon. He gasped as he felt a sudden sharp pain in his chest, and looking down, he saw the silver hilt of a throwing knife protruding from the center of his chest. He collapsed to his knees, his pistol falling from his numb fingers, and as the darkness swallowed him, he saw a familiar figure detach itself from the shadows nearby and walk toward him.

"I am sorry, my friend," Wing said, looking down at him as Otto lost consciousness.

There was a sudden flash of white light, and the warehouse seemed to melt away, to be replaced by a brightly lit cave with a smooth metal floor.

"Exercise terminated," H.I.V.E.mind said calmly. "Holographic projectors and variable geometry force fields

offline."

Otto rose groggily to his feet, feeling his strength gradually returning.

"There is such a thing as too realistic, you know," he said, rubbing at his sternum and trying to forget the pain and shock that he had felt just a few moments before.

"That's the whole point, Mr. Malpense," Colonel Francisco said, striding across the empty cavern as Wing helped Otto to his feet. "The neural feedback suit allows you to feel all of the pain without suffering any of the physical injury. It ensures that you take these training sessions seriously."

That may have been the proper name for the bodysuit that Otto was wearing, but he definitely preferred the nickname that it had earned among the students of H.I.V.E.—the Agonizer.

"Good work, Mr. Fanchu," Francisco said. "You took your target down without hesitation, but I would still rather see you using your sidearms."

"It was not necessary," Wing replied with a slight shake of the head.

"Well, one day it might be," Francisco replied with a frown. "Let's hope you won't hesitate then. The end result is the same, after all."

Wing gave a small nod. Otto understood very well why his friend had not used his gun. The first and only time that Wing had shot somebody, it had been his own father. Wing had saved Otto's life but still had not forgiven himself for killing Cypher and breaking the solemn vow he had once made to his mother never to take a life.

"Thanks a lot, Otto," Shelby said as she walked toward them, rubbing her shoulder. "When the heck did you become such a good shot?"

"Beginner's luck," Otto replied with a shrug.

"And did you really have to shoot me twice?" Laura asked, still looking slightly groggy from being rendered temporarily unconscious by the neural shock administered by her own Agonizer suit.

"You gave away your position, Miss Brand," Francisco said with a slight shake of his head. "How many times do I have to tell you about watching where you're walking?"

"Sorry, Colonel," Laura sighed. "I'll do better next time."

"Let's hope you do," Francisco replied. "Out in the real world there won't be a next time. H.I.V.E.mind, please upload the result of today's exercise to the central academic server."

"Upload complete," H.I.V.E.mind replied.

"Good. That's all for now, ladies and gentlemen," the Colonel said. "We'll be moving on to wilderness environments next week, so please review the tactical briefings on your terminals. Dismissed."

Otto, Wing, Laura, and Shelby met in the assembly area five minutes later after changing out of the neural

feedback suits and into their black Alpha stream jumpsuits. They were just about to head back to their accommodation block when the doors on the other side of the room hissed open and Lucy, Franz, and Nigel walked toward them.

“How did it go?” Laura asked Lucy, noting the slight scowl on the other girl’s face.

“Don’t ask,” Lucy said with a sigh.

“I am thinking that you will be wanting to tell the others of my glorious victory,” Franz said with a huge, beaming smile.

“Okay, okay.” Lucy winced.

“Franz won?” Shelby asked, trying hard to not sound too astonished.

“Yes,” Franz replied proudly. “I am being like the shadow in the night. They can run but they cannot hide.”

“You got lucky,” Nigel said, sounding slightly irritated.

“Luck is not being the factor,” Franz said, shaking his head. “I am just being too good for you.”

“Well,” Otto said with a grin, “I for one want to hear all about it.”

“It does indeed sound like a glorious victory,” Wing said. Even he was struggling to keep a straight face.

“I’m not going to be allowed to forget about this in a hurry, am I?” Lucy said as Franz walked out of the room with Otto and Wing, explaining in great detail how his extraordinary stealth and cunning had been instrumental in defeating his opponents.

“Don’t worry. There’s no shame in losing,” Shelby replied.

“Really?” Lucy asked hopefully.

Shelby burst out laughing, setting Laura off too.

“I think this is going to be a very long day,” Nigel said to Lucy with a sigh.

Three men sat in a crowded bar in Colorado, a frosted half-full pitcher of beer on the table between them. The first man raised his glass.

“A toast, guys, to the MWP-X1 and the brave, intelligent, and handsome men that are gonna show the world what it can do tomorrow.”

“I’ll drink to that,” the second man said, raising his glass.

“It’s going to take more than one glass of beer for me to find either one of you two freaks handsome, but ah, what the heck!” the third man said, raising his glass.

“Let’s just hope that the General doesn’t find out that we’re not all tucked up in our bunks,” the second man said with a grin. “I’m not sure that this is what he meant by a good night’s rest.”

“Well, he can’t throw us in the brig till after the demonstration,” the first man said, “so I guess we’ll be okay for the next twenty-four hours.”

“After twelve months of living in the desert with him barking orders at us every day, I figure that’s the least he owes us,” the third man replied.

“You better not be complaining, son,” the first man said, putting on a gruff Southern accent, “because you should be proud—proud to be a part of the future of this great nation’s armed forces.”

“Sir. Yes sir,” the second man said, saluting the other man with a grin.

The three of them sat chatting and laughing for another half hour. None of the other people in the bar would have guessed by looking at them that they were the test pilots for one of the most confidential advanced military research projects on the planet.

“We should get going,” the third man said eventually, finishing his beer. “It’s gonna be an early start in the morning.”

“It’s an early start every morning,” the first man said with a sigh as he too finished his drink, “but yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“We better get some R & R after the demo tomorrow,” the second man said. “I’ve had enough desert to last me a lifetime.”

The three men got up from the table and left the bar, walking out into the cool night air and crossing the parking lot.

“What the heck—” the first man said angrily as they rounded the corner of the building. A shadowy figure was standing beside his truck, working a long thin bar down between the rubber seal and the glass of the driver’s side window. “Hey! Get away from my truck!” he yelled.

The thief’s head snapped around, and he saw the three men sprinting toward him. Abandoning his attempt to break into the vehicle, he ran into the darkness beyond the edge of the lot, with the others in close pursuit. They gained on him quickly as they sprinted across the dusty scrubland, and when the first of them got to within a couple of feet, the pilot dived forward, hitting his target in the small of the back with his shoulder and bringing him to the ground with a crunching thud. He rolled the thief onto his back and put one knee on the struggling man’s chest.

“You picked the wrong truck to steal, buddy,” the first man said as his two companions pinned the thief’s arms to the ground.

“Actually,” the other man said with a smile, “it was precisely the right truck.”

There were three small coughing sounds from somewhere behind the men, and each of them felt a sudden sharp sting on the back of his neck. The thief caught the first man by the shoulders as he fell forward, unconscious, and his two companions collapsed to the desert floor beside him. The thief stood up, brushing

the dust from his jeans as three figures wearing black combat fatigues and night vision goggles appeared from the darkness, lowering their tranquilizer dart guns and walking toward the unconscious men on the ground.

“Good work,” Pietor Furan said as he pushed the goggles up onto the top of his head. The smiling thief gave a small nod.

“Get them onto the truck,” Furan said to the two men beside him. “We don’t have much time.”

“Ahhh, Lieutenant Barton. I’m glad to see that you’re awake,” a voice said from somewhere in the darkness that surrounded him.

Barton tried to sit up but was stopped by the straps that bound him firmly to the bed.

“Who are you?” Barton asked, an edge of panic to his voice. “How do you know my name?”

“Perfectly reasonable questions under the circumstances,” the voice replied, “but I’m afraid that we don’t have time for a full explanation. Let’s just say that I am someone who is eager to ensure your full cooperation.”

“You can go to hell,” Barton said angrily.

“Your two friends had a similar reaction,” the voice replied with a sinister chuckle, “but they soon started to see things my way.”

“What do you mean?” Barton said, feeling sudden fear for the safety of his friends. “What have you done to them?”

“Exactly what I’m going to do to you,” the voice replied.

There was a whirring sound, and a metal arm with a syringe mounted on the end moved into position next to Barton’s neck. With a hiss it slid forward, plunging the needle into the struggling man’s artery. Barton felt a burning sensation spread across his skull as the contents of the syringe were injected.

“You have just been injected with the latest generation of a substance called Animus,” the voice explained calmly. “You should consider yourself lucky. Previous generations would have killed you instantly, but this will just make you more . . . cooperative.”

Barton thrashed on the bed for a few more seconds, and then his struggling subsided and he lay still, his eyes staring blankly into space.

“Good. Are you ready for your new orders?” the voice asked.

“Yes, sir,” Barton replied.

“Excellent,” the voice said. “Now, here’s what you’re going to do . . .”

The technician lifted up the metal cover and plugged his laptop into the data port next to the cockpit, watching as the screen filled with a series of diagnostic displays. Hearing footsteps at the other end of the long gantry behind him, he glanced over his shoulder. A man in a flight suit and mirrored sunglasses walked toward the cockpit, a helmet under his arm.

“Morning, Lieutenant Barton,” the technician said. “She’s prepped and ready for launch. Me and the other guys all wanted to wish you the best of luck with the demonstration today.”

The pilot didn’t reply as he walked past the technician, climbed into the open cockpit, buckled himself into the single seat, and pulled the helmet onto his head. The technician quickly disconnected the computer as the cockpit’s armored canopy whirred down into place and locked shut with a solid thud.

“Yeah, well, excuse me for breathing, Mr. High-and-Mighty Flyboy,” the technician muttered under his breath as he walked back along the gantry.



General Collins walked up to the lectern and looked at the banked rows of seats filled with men and women in a mixture of business suits and military uniforms. He smiled with satisfaction at the thought of what he was about to show them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Advanced Weapons Project proving ground. I appreciate the fact that many of you have accepted the invitation to this demonstration without having any idea of exactly what it is that you are going to be shown today. I hope that what you are about to see will not be a disappointment. For some time now this facility has been responsible for the research and development of cutting-edge military systems—machines that will win not only the wars of today but also the wars of tomorrow. And so it is with great pride that I welcome you this morning to the first demonstration of the next generation of the mobile armored weapons platform. Since the First World War the tank has been the dominant force on the modern battlefield, but with the advent of increasingly advanced anti-armor weapons systems, it has become clear that something new is required. A vehicle that would have all of the strengths of its predecessors but none of their vulnerabilities or limitations. A vehicle that would change the very nature of warfare in the twenty-first century. Ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely proud to present . . . Goliath.”

There was a low rumble from somewhere behind the stands, and then three huge shapes roared over the heads of the startled audience and landed with ground-shaking thuds on the desert floor several hundred feet away. Each machine stood about a hundred feet high, towering armored metal giants with multibarreled Gatling cannons mounted on each arm and rocket pods on each shoulder. Positioned in the center of each of the giant mechs’ chests was a black glass cockpit shrouded in heavy armor. The machines walked forward, taking up position facing the crowds, the fluidity of their movements strangely at odds with their size and weight. Collins noted with satisfaction the sudden buzz of excited chatter from the assembled dignitaries.

“Goliaths represent unquestioned battlefield dominance. As agile in the air as they are on land, they are a force multiplier of enormous power and versatility,” Collins continued. “But why just tell you what they can do, when we can show you instead?”

He picked up a walkie-talkie from the lectern and thumbed the transmit button.

“Okay, boys. Let’s give these people a show.”

The Goliaths turned to face away from the waiting audience and toward the decommissioned tanks that were positioned downrange. The first of the giant machines raised its arm, and the huge rotary cannon mounted on its forearm spun and with a buzzing roar opened fire. The derelict tank was ripped to pieces by the heavy-caliber shells, shredded pieces of twisted metal flying in all directions. The rocket pods on the shoulders of the second of the three machines rotated slightly, locking on to another one of the distant armored vehicles. Two rockets streaked from each of the pods, trailing white exhaust plumes, slamming into the doomed target, and sending flaming chunks of armor plate scattering across the desert.

“As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, the Goliath is capable of taking out ground targets with ease, but as I’m sure you all know, the greatest threat to any ground vehicle on the modern battlefield comes from the air. So let’s show you how they deal with just such an airborne threat.”

High above the proving ground the Predator drone that had been circling banked toward its preassigned target, locking on to the third Goliath far below. The Hellfire missile detached from the drone’s wing, its engines igniting and sending it screaming toward the stationary mech far below. A black dome mounted on the top of the targeted Goliath spun round and fired a pencil-thin beam of high-energy laser light at the incoming missile, instantly detonating it in midair.

“The Goliath’s antiballistic laser system can take out anything from a missile to an incoming artillery round or tank shell. Put simply, you can’t kill what you can’t hit. Of course, each unit is fully outfitted with the latest in ground-to-air weaponry, but for the sake of this demonstration let’s get a little more up close and personal.” Collins turned and nodded toward the pilot of the third machine, and the vectored thrust engines on its back ignited, sending the Goliath rocketing into the sky. The members of the audience quickly picked up the binoculars they had been given and watched as the giant machine streaked toward the unmanned drone with a speed and maneuverability belying its size. The pilot brought the Goliath within range of the frantically weaving drone, matching its wildly evasive flight path turn for turn. The crowd watched as the giant armored machine drew level with the Predator and then simply swatted it from the sky with a single swipe of one giant armored fist. The blazing debris of the drone tumbled toward the desert far below.

“I hope the Air Force boys weren’t expecting that one back,” Collins said with a grin, drawing an appreciative laugh from the assembled dignitaries. “As you can see, Goliath blurs the line between ground-based and airborne weapon systems. It is truly the master of both land and sky.”

From somewhere behind the spectators came the distinctive sound of helicopter rotors, and the audience twisted in their seats, eager to see what the next part of the demonstration would bring. Moments later three black helicopters passed low over the crowd, the downdraft from their thumping rotors kicking up clouds of dust from the desert floor. They came to a hover in front of the stands and opened their side doors. Three squads of well-armed troops in black body armor rapidly climbed out and descended zip lines to the ground.

“What the heck—” Collins gasped. This was definitely not part of the demonstration. He grabbed the walkie-talkie from the lectern.

“All Goliath units cleared to engage unknown hostiles!” he barked. “Take these suckers out!” He waited for confirmation of his orders from the pilots of the three mechs but heard only static. “I say again, engage unidentified hostile forces.”

The three Goliaths started to move, but instead of opening fire on the unknown soldiers who were sprinting toward the spectators, they simply shifted into position alongside the helicopters as they landed two hundred feet away, then raised the Gatling cannons on their arms and leveled them at the startled crowd, barrels

spinning, ready to fire. Collins could do nothing but watch helplessly as the men in black raced up the stairs on either side of the grandstand and trained their rifles on the frightened spectators. A couple tried to run but were quickly overpowered and pushed to their knees, hands behind their heads. As Collins stood frozen in disbelief, a single figure climbed down from the side door of one of the helicopters and made his way up the steps to join the General on the platform. As the man reached Collins, he pulled a pistol from the holster on his hip and pointed it at him.

“General Collins,” he said with a smile, “my name is Pietor Furan and this demonstration is over.”

Otto woke with a start, his head buzzing with pain. He staggered to his feet and stumbled through the darkened room, heading for the bathroom at the rear of his living quarters. He slapped the switch on the wall, and bright white light blinded him for a second. As his eyes adjusted to the glare, he stared at his own reflection in the mirror, and a fresh bolt of pain lanced across his skull. He fought against the rising tide of nausea and disorientation, studying the pale face that looked back at him from the glass. A thin red line, like a fine cut, traced across his right cheek. Otto ran his finger along the fresh wound, feeling an unusual warmth as the gash seemed to widen and separate. Then he gasped in horror as the gash flared suddenly with red light and the skin began to peel back from his cheek, revealing what looked like blood-covered glass. He recoiled from his own reflection as more bright red lines spread across his skin, the flesh falling away to reveal a multifaceted crystalline face beneath. Otto opened his mouth to scream, but all that came out was a thin screech of static, rising in pitch, slowly resolving into a voice that was both alien and yet hauntingly familiar.

“You’re mine,” the voice said. “You always have been and always will be.”

Otto staggered backward as he felt an unbelievable rush of pressure inside his skull, and finally, as terror and pain overwhelmed him, he screamed.

Wing held Otto’s shoulders as his friend thrashed on the bed making a thin, strangled screeching sound.

“Otto,” Wing said, sounding alarmed, “wake up!” He shook Otto gently, trying to stir him from whatever dream was tormenting him. Otto’s eyes flicked open, filled with terror for a few moments before they focused on Wing’s face. He closed them again and took a couple of deep breaths, trying to slow the hammering beat he could feel inside his chest.

“The dream again?” Wing said, sitting down on the edge of Otto’s bed.

“Yes,” Otto said with a sigh, sitting up, “but it’s getting worse.”

“Was it him?” Wing asked with a frown.

“Yes,” Otto replied, his voice little more than a whisper. “Overlord.”

It had been the same every night for weeks—the terrifying sense of his personality being erased and Overlord reasserting control—ever since he had been rescued from the clutches of Sebastian Trent and had been purged of the Animus liquid that had made him little more than an obedient puppet. Otto could still remember what it had felt like as the psychotic artificial intelligence called Overlord had taken control of him—the utter helplessness he had felt as the AI had tried to kill his friends while Otto had been trapped, a

passive observer, within his own body.

“You cannot go on like this,” Wing said calmly. “You have not slept properly in weeks. This is consuming you.”

Otto knew that his friend was right. He felt almost constantly exhausted and was starting to dread falling asleep. Sometimes he was reluctant even to close his eyes, for fear that he would be met yet again with more terrifying visions of the fate that he had so narrowly avoided.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Otto said. “Overlord is dead. We all saw him die. So why can’t I get him out of my head?”

“Sebastian Trent kept you prisoner for months, and throughout that time you were fighting a constant battle to keep Overlord in check,” Wing replied. “It is perhaps not surprising that you have yet to fully . . . recover.”

Otto smiled at Wing’s slight hesitation.

“You mean it’s hardly surprising that I’m losing my marbles.”

“I did not say that.”

“But you were thinking it,” Otto said. “Everyone is.”

“We are all worried about you,” Wing replied. “None of us can even begin to imagine what you must have been through. We want to help in whatever way we can.”

“I’m not sure that there’s much you can do,” Otto said, “unless you happen to have a supply of powerful tranquilizers that I don’t know about.”

“Unfortunately, no,” Wing replied. “Though I do know of ways to render you unconscious without causing you too much discomfort.”

“I’m not sure we’re quite at that stage yet,” Otto replied, raising an eyebrow.

The group of captured dignitaries stood in stunned silence as Furan’s men surrounded them, their weapons raised. They had been herded away from the demonstration area and marched under guard along the road that led from the open desert to a nearby canyon. The Goliath mechs stood off to one side, their torsos slowly rotating as they scanned the surrounding area for any sign of hostiles. A hundred feet away stood a huge pair of steel blast doors set into the red rock of the canyon wall, and beyond those doors lay Furan’s ultimate target, the headquarters of the Advanced Weapons Project. The fortified guard posts on either side of the entrance were now just smoldering burnt-out shells, the soldiers who’d manned them having made a brave but ultimately futile attempt at resistance.

Furan gestured to the two guards who were holding General Collins, and they dragged the struggling man toward him.

“General,” he said calmly, “would you be so kind as to order the guards inside your facility to open the blast doors?”

“You know there’s no way I’m going to do that,” Collins replied defiantly.

“Yes, we were rather expecting that was what you would say,” Furan replied. He pulled the radio from his belt and spoke into it. “We have secured the canyon. You may begin your approach.”

A minute later the canyon was filled with the sound of rotor blades, and a helicopter appeared overhead, slowly dropping down and landing gently on the road nearby. The side door slid open and a frail-looking man climbed out. He wore a long black overcoat, despite the scorching desert heat, and walked slowly toward Furan and the General, leaning heavily on an ebony walking stick. The man’s hair was white, his parchmentlike skin stretched tightly across his face, and his dark sunken eyes added to his almost skeletal appearance. As he neared Collins, the general could hear him wheezing, each breath seeming like a monumental effort.

“A pleasure to meet you, General,” the old man said, fighting for breath as he spoke. “I see that you have chosen not to comply with the wishes of my associates. I understand. A man in your position has . . . responsibilities.”

“I don’t cooperate with terrorists, if that’s what you mean,” the general growled.

The old man laughed, the sound little more than a wheezing hiss.

“Terrorists?” he replied. “You Americans and your simplistic labels. We are much more than that. We are going to change the world.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” the General replied firmly. “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I help you.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that you won’t have very much say in the matter,” the other man said with a smile. He reached out his hand, and the General watched in horror as the skin of his forearm bulged and then tore, black tendrils slithering forth over the wrist and hand.

“Who are you?” the General gasped, recoiling in disgust.

“You may call me Overlord,” the old man said, his hand snaking out with startling speed and grabbing the General’s jaw, his grip abnormally strong. “And you are going to be my new home.”

The black liquid slithered over the old man’s hand and into the General’s mouth with horrifying speed. The General let out a single startled gurgle as the inky slime slid down his throat. Seconds later both men collapsed, the older man hitting the ground with a thud, his dead, vacant eyes staring up into the sky. The General thrashed about, clawing at his neck and chest as the Animus fluid invaded his nervous system, spreading like a burning wave through his body. Furan watched impassively as the man twitched a couple of times and then lay still. For a few seconds the General didn’t move, and then his eyes opened wide and he gasped, taking a long, deep breath. Slowly Collins climbed to his feet and turned to look at Furan, his face now covered in a slowly fading pattern of veined black lines.

“Much better,” Overlord said, rolling his head around on his shoulders and stretching his neck. He gestured

toward the frail body that he had inhabited till just a few moments ago. “Dispose of that.”

“Yes, sir,” Furan replied, beckoning over a pair of his troops, who dragged the elderly body away.

Overlord strode toward the blast doors and placed his hand on the scanner mounted on the concrete frame. A cover slid back to reveal an alphanumeric keypad, and he quickly punched in a long string of numbers and letters. With a low rumble the heavy blast doors began to slide open.

“Send your men in,” Overlord said as Furan walked up beside him. “Crush any resistance. We don’t have much time.”

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