

The shockwave from the explosion threw Otto tumbling out of control through the air. He could hear his own quick panicky breathing, suddenly loud within the confines of the helmet. The stars in the night sky spun past crazily, huge pieces of burning debris whistling past his falling body, close enough to touch. He thought back to his training and tried to control his plummeting body, attempting to break out of the chaotic spin that he found himself in as he fell. Slowly he brought the tumbling under control and now he was just falling, albeit in a slightly more controlled way. He glanced at the pale green figures flickering across the head-up display in his helmet. He was falling too fast; he needed to slow his descent or he'd never make it. He spread his arms and legs, his body acting as an airbrake, reducing his speed.

'Twenty thousand feet,' a soft electronic voice chimed in his ear. 'Descent velocity beyond acceptable parameters.'

All that Otto could see below was blackness. He knew that the target was down there somewhere, but without any lights or visible landmarks by which to orientate himself he just had to hope that the GPS numbers on his visor display were correct and that he could use them to find the drop zone accurately.

‘Fifteen thousand feet,’ the voice said, just as calmly as before. Otto’s brain immediately translated the delay between the announcements into an accurate calculation of the speed at which he was falling. Still too fast.

He didn’t know if anyone else had survived the explosion. It was too dark to see if he was alone. It wasn’t just the frigid air temperature at this altitude that sent a shiver running down his spine. He could very well be on his own out here and he doubted that he could successfully complete the mission solo.

‘Ten thousand feet.’

As the voice calmly reported the shocking speed of his descent Otto started to feel a slight sense of panic. There was still no sign of the target, the numbers on the display all looked right but there was no visual reference to support them. Suddenly a green cross-hair popped up in the middle of Otto’s visor. The onboard navigation systems had determined that was the drop target – Otto just had to pray that they were right. If the instruments’ careful calibration had been at all affected by the chaotic

events of the past few minutes, if the targeting was out by even a few feet, then he really was approaching a very, very terminal velocity.

‘Five thousand feet.’

The cross-hair was growing larger and larger. Otto made tiny corrections to his body’s position, trying to keep the cross-hair centred. He couldn’t afford to miss by even the tiniest degree. The wind continued to roar past his body, almost seeming to suck him towards the ground.

‘Four thousand feet.’

Otto was in the final stages of his descent now. All of his recently acquired knowledge about making a jump like this seemed very detached from the actual terrifying experience.

‘Three thousand feet.’

The target stayed centred in the head-up display, getting larger with every passing instant. The plan had to work, Otto thought to himself – there was no other option. What he was doing was insane, by any reasonable measure, but there was no way Otto was going to let whoever was responsible for the events of the past twenty-four hours get away with it.

‘Two thousand feet.’

Somewhere below him was the man responsible.

‘One thousand feet.’

Somewhere below was the man that Otto had to find.

'Five hundred feet.'

Somewhere below was the man who had murdered Wing.

'Four hundred, three hundred, two hundred, one hundred.'

Otto closed his eyes.

'Zero.'

chapter one

two weeks earlier

Nero strode down the street towards the opera house. He did not like leaving the school unattended and was even less fond of the regular meetings of G.L.O.V.E.'s ruling council, but he understood that they were a necessary evil. Number One had issued his usual invitation to the world's elite villains for one of their regular councils and he knew that it could be a fatal mistake not to attend without a spectacularly good reason. As he approached the huge building he turned away from the main entrance and headed towards a narrow alley that led down one side. He noted with amusement that even the back alleys of Vienna were scrupulously maintained as he reached the opera house's stage door.

The elderly doorman behind the desk looked up from his morning newspaper as Nero entered.

'I'm sorry, sir, but only performers and production staff are allowed beyond this point,' he said, one hand reaching

beneath the desk.

‘That’s quite all right,’ Nero replied, noting the subtle change in the man’s posture, ‘I’m here for the audition.’

‘Audition, sir?’ the doorman replied, his eyes narrowing.

‘Yes, I believe that the auditions for the new production of *Faust* are taking place today, and I would hate to miss them.’

The doorman’s hand came back out from under the desk as his previously guarded expression broke into a slight smile.

‘Of course, sir. The rest of the performers are already here. If you would just follow me.’ The doorman rose to his feet and gestured for Nero to follow him along the corridor and into the gloomy expanses of the backstage area. Nero noted with interest the props and scenery which were crammed into every nook and cranny, relics of performances past.

The old man continued to lead him through the twisting maze of discarded sets until eventually he stopped in front of a dusty scenery flat painted with a depiction of a rusty iron portcullis. He slid the canvas-covered board to one side to reveal a solid-looking wooden door in the wall behind. He unlocked the door and stood aside.

‘There you are, sir. They’re waiting for you just inside,’ he said.

Nero opened the door and entered a small, steel-lined

elevator carriage with no visible controls. The door shut behind him and a soft, computerised voice filled the elevator.

‘Please remain stationary while identity confirmation takes place,’ the voice instructed. There was a brief flash of bright white light, forcing Nero to blink hard to clear the spots that were suddenly swimming in his field of vision.

‘Retinal scan complete. Welcome, Doctor Nero,’ the voice continued as Nero felt the elevator begin to descend.

Nero often found himself wondering on these occasions just how many of these secret facilities G.L.O.V.E. maintained around the world. He knew that he had never attended a council meeting in the same location twice. He wondered if perhaps they were used just a single time and then demolished. Certainly, it would be absurdly wasteful to use such a facility only once, but money was one thing of which G.L.O.V.E. had never been short.

The elevator doors slid silently open and Nero stepped into another steel-lined corridor which lead to a large pair of frosted glass doors a short distance ahead. Engraved in the glass was the fist and shattered-globe logo of G.L.O.V.E., the Global League of Villainous Enterprises.

Nero walked down the corridor, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the brushed-metal walls. The glass doors hissed apart to admit him as he approached and suddenly

he could hear several familiar voices engaged in animated conversation. One voice rose above the others.

‘. . . for the last time. I told him that I did not tolerate incompetence in my organisation and had him thrown out. Unfortunately we were at thirty thousand feet at the time.’

Nero smiled as he heard the deep Russian-accented voice and the booming laugh that followed. It belonged to one of his oldest friends, if there was such a thing in the treacherous world that the people in this room inhabited. As he entered the room several familiar faces turned in his direction.

‘Nero! We were beginning to think you were not coming.’ The voice belonged to Gregori Leonov, one of the longest surviving members of G.L.O.V.E.’s ruling council, having served Number One loyally since almost the creation of the organisation. Physically he was a mountain of a man, his grey hair shaved close to his rounded skull. He strode towards Nero and gripped him firmly by the shoulders before kissing him on both cheeks.

‘How are you, my friend? It has been too long. I suppose those little demons in training are keeping you busy, yes?’

‘It is good to see you too, Gregori,’ Nero replied, smiling. ‘And yes, H.I.V.E. is still keeping me very busy.’

‘Of course it is,’ Gregori grinned. ‘You are a more patient man than me, Max. I think I would have been

driven mad by those children long ago. But after seeing how my son has changed since he returned from your school I am thinking that you must be a miracle worker, no?

‘Yuri was one of my best pupils, Gregori, you know that.’ In fact, Gregori’s son had been one of Nero’s tougher educational challenges. He had been ceaselessly hostile when he first arrived at H.I.V.E., refusing to accept that he was going to have to remain at the school until his education was complete. Nero had immediately recognised the signs of a boy who had been used to getting whatever he wanted from an early age and that it would be hard work turning him into a suitable heir for one of his oldest friends and one of the most powerful men in G.L.O.V.E. The challenge had been to channel that rebellious anger in better, more productive directions without eliminating it altogether. H.I.V.E., after all, was not in the business of producing model citizens.

‘You are too kind, Max. He was a monster when he was sent to H.I.V.E., but now he is one of my most trusted and capable lieutenants. Why, just last week he led a highly profitable raid on a gold train in the motherland. There were no casualties; the team got away clean and several of the more experienced men on the team said it was all down to his leadership. Like I say, a miracle, and now I have enough money to buy one of those English football

teams that it seems every member of G.L.O.V.E. owns these days.' Gregori grinned.

'I'm glad that you're pleased with the results,' Nero replied with a smile. It was always satisfying to hear of the successful exploits of former pupils.

Suddenly a soft but insistent beeping came from the console at the centre of the conference table and the various members of the council started to take their seats. As the assembled master villains settled into their places, Nero was pleased to see that so many of the dozen council members who had attended the last meeting were also present here today. It was an unfortunate consequence of their chosen line of work that it was not unusual for a council member to be suddenly replaced by a new and often unfamiliar face at these meetings. Some were captured and incarcerated, some were killed in the line of duty, some fell victim to their own doomsday devices and some were more *actively* replaced by the new attendees. The most unfortunate ones were those who had displeased Number One, the leader of G.L.O.V.E., and their fates were best left unimagined.

There was one member of the council, however, that Nero was not pleased to see, a man who was becoming an increasingly irritating thorn in his side. He sat at the opposite side of the table from Nero, his expression unreadable, his face concealed by a smooth oval mask of

flawless black glass. His name was Cypher, and over the past years he seemed to have made it his business to attempt to undermine the credibility of both H.I.V.E. and Nero himself. It was unusual for Number One to allow one of his senior commanders to conceal their identity from the other members of the council, but in Cypher's case he appeared to be prepared to make an exception. That was probably due in a large part to the fact that his record since he had joined G.L.O.V.E. had been so exemplary. He was a technical genius and his elaborate and cunning schemes had netted G.L.O.V.E. enormous returns, both in money and power. Indeed, many now saw him as the brightest rising star on the council. Nero however disliked not being able to look into the man's eyes. There was something unnerving about seeing only the distorted reflection of your own face in that black mirrored glass. Cypher would doubtless have much to say about the recent events at the school.

The heads of all of the council members turned as one as a large screen descended from the ceiling at the head of the table. It flickered into life and, as usual, the silhouetted figure of Number One appeared on the screen. There were no distinguishable features to the man, just the enigmatic shadowy figure to whom all of the assembled villains had sworn their unswerving loyalty.

'Greetings, ladies and gentlemen. I am glad to see that

you were all able to make it,' Number One said, his voice betraying no hint of a discernable accent. He had never attended one of these meetings in person and there was no reason to have suspected that this would be the first time.

'I have studied all of your preliminary status reports and I am pleased to say that I have been satisfied with your overall level of performance since our last meeting,' he continued. 'There have been a couple of unfortunate incidents, but nothing that would jeopardise the ongoing survival of the organisation.'

Nero had no doubt that the near destruction of H.I.V.E. by the rampaging plant monster that the Darkdoom boy had created was one of these 'unfortunate incidents' and he was not keen to discuss the events further at this meeting if he could avoid it. It was not wise to show any sign of weakness to the men and women in this room, just as it was never wise to be the slowest antelope when lions hunted.

'I have also reviewed your preliminary proposals for new initiatives in the coming months and I am largely pleased with what I have seen. I do, however, have a couple of specific questions that I would like answers to.' As Number One said this Nero could detect a subtle change in the atmosphere around the table. While G.L.O.V.E.'s council members were given a relatively free hand in the

running of their more minor day-to-day operations, it was required that they all present their plans for any grander schemes to Number One for this type of review. All of them knew that Number One had an uncanny ability to find any flaws in these proposals and none of them wanted to see their best-laid plans picked to pieces in front of the rest of the council.

‘Madam Mortis, I have reviewed your proposal for using cybernetically controlled sharks as an undetectable assassination method. You make some interesting points, but I do find myself wondering exactly what one is supposed to do if the target in question doesn’t go swimming in the sea.’

Madam Mortis shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She was a painfully thin woman, her jet-black hair pulled back so tightly that it looked more like a method of torture than a hairstyle.

‘I also can’t help but feel that after the first successful elimination of a target any subsequent uses of these animals may attract unwelcome attention. As the saying goes, one shark attack is an unfortunate accident, two shark attacks is a conspiracy.’

‘There were additional plans to use other animals, but –’ Madam Mortis protested weakly.

‘Yes, I reviewed them too. I fear that a sudden rise in wild animal attacks on our enemies may draw rather

unwelcome attention . . .’

The meeting continued in a similar vein with each of the council members detailing the successes and failures of their organisations over the past few months. It was soon Nero’s turn to give his report on the status of H.I.V.E., and he dutifully reported the figures on new student intakes and the various successes of recent graduates. He had decided not to go into more detail on the recent events at the school, knowing full well that the other assembled villains would have read the report that he had submitted to the council with an explanation of the events surrounding the creation and eventual destruction of the mutated plant creature. He hoped that would be enough to satisfy the other members of the council, but as he completed his report with a summary of the repairs that had been necessary after the incident he was interrupted.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor Nero, but I think we all deserve a fuller explanation of just how you allowed this creature to nearly wipe out an entire generation of future G.L.O.V.E. operatives,’ Cypher said calmly, his featureless mask turning to face Nero.

‘The report that I submitted provides all of the necessary detail, Cypher,’ Nero replied. He had expected this.

‘Indeed, that report was most revealing. What it showed me is that maybe it is time that we either placed control of H.I.V.E. in more capable hands or perhaps

finally considered that your school has outlived its usefulness to this organisation.’ Nero could have sworn that he detected a note of smug satisfaction in Cypher’s voice.

‘The school has been training G.L.O.V.E. operatives for many years without anything of this kind happening before,’ Nero replied, trying to keep the note of irritation from his voice. Cypher had made it clear on many previous occasions that he was not a supporter of the school. ‘I see no reason to overreact to what was an unfortunate but unforeseeable accident.’

‘Just like the accident that led to the school being relocated a decade ago, I suppose,’ Cypher replied, ‘an accident that cost several billion dollars to rectify and almost led to the discovery of the facility by at least one law enforcement agency. When you add that to the repair bill for the recent fiasco it appears that H.I.V.E. is becoming rather an expensive indulgence, wouldn’t you say, Doctor?’

‘Perhaps you would rather that we left the training of future members of this council to common criminals, then,’ Nero replied, ‘because that is what would happen if H.I.V.E. did not exist.’

‘My dear Doctor,’ now the note of sarcasm in Cypher’s voice was unmistakable, ‘this organisation existed long before your precious school. Are you suggesting that this council is incapable of ensuring its own future survival?’

Nero was used to this verbal fencing with Cypher at council meetings, but this was quickly becoming annoying.

‘I have no doubt that this organisation would survive without H.I.V.E., Cypher, but would it be as successful without the training that new operatives receive at my school?’

‘Your school, Nero? I was under the impression that it was G.L.O.V.E.’s school, not yours –’

‘Enough!’ Number One said sharply, breaking into the argument. ‘I tire of listening to you both bicker like children. H.I.V.E. has not yet outlived its usefulness to G.L.O.V.E., but I have made it abundantly clear to Doctor Nero that I will not tolerate any more incidents of this type at the school. I expect that to be the end of the matter, unless you feel that I am handling this matter incorrectly, Cypher?’

‘No, sir. As always, the final decision is yours.’ For all of his recent successes Cypher appeared to know better than to openly question Number One’s decisions.

Nero had been a loyal G.L.O.V.E. operative for more years than he cared to remember, but for the first time he was starting to experience doubts about the direction in which the organisation was heading. Cypher was just one representative of a new breed of villain that seemed suddenly to be filling the ranks of G.L.O.V.E. These new

members seemed to lack all of the grace and finesse of the older generation. All too often the answer to their problems lay in violence and chaos. This was not the way that it had always been; Nero had always been impressed with the way that Number One had kept the more homicidal excesses of his council members under control. It was this discipline that had stopped G.L.O.V.E. from becoming just another bloodthirsty criminal cartel, but in recent months that control over the council members seemed to be slipping. No, Nero mentally corrected himself, what worried him most was not that Number One's control of the council was slipping, but that control was being deliberately relaxed.

'Is there any other business?' Number One asked as the meeting drew towards a close. None of the assembled master villains seemed to have anything to add.

'Very well,' the shadowy figure continued, 'I shall see you all again in a couple of months. Until then . . . do unto others.'

'Do unto others,' the members of the council replied, echoing the G.L.O.V.E. motto as was traditional at the end of these gatherings. The screen went dark and as quickly as their audience with Number One had started it was finished.

Nero rose from his seat as Gregori approached. There was a look of irritation on the big Russian's face.

‘That was unnecessary,’ he said quietly, glancing over in the direction of Cypher, who was now engaged in hushed conversation with Baron Von Sturm on the other side of the room.

‘Yes, but not unexpected,’ Nero replied. ‘Cypher was never going to pass up an opportunity to criticise me so publicly.’

‘Maybe so, old friend, but you need not worry. The council know how well you run the school. No one pays any attention to his complaints.’

‘You may not believe him, Gregori, but some people will.’

On the other side of the room Cypher was still talking to the Baron, both men occasionally glancing over at Nero. There was little doubt as to the topic of their conversation.



As Nero walked away from the opera house he considered the events of the meeting. The attack by Cypher had been predictable but he could not help but be worried by his masked adversary’s directness. Once upon a time Cypher would not have dared to question Nero’s authority so openly at a council meeting, but it seemed that he now felt no such reluctance. Nero had always disapproved of open hostility between council members. He had seen too

many petty arguments evolve into dangerous and costly blood feuds, but frank confrontation between the two of them seemed more and more inevitable every time they met.

As he continued walking he started to feel a growing sense of unease. Any villain who had survived as long as he had developed a sixth sense that warned of danger and Nero had learnt long ago not to ignore it. He slowed down and stopped to look into the window of one of the many expensive shops that lined the street. There, on the other side of the road, clearly reflected in the window, were two men who were trying a little too hard to appear inconspicuous. He was being followed.

He set off again, now acutely aware of his two unwelcome companions. He continued down the street until he came to a quiet alleyway and quickly turned down it. The alley was a dead end, exactly as he had hoped. Behind him he heard the sound of footsteps as the two men followed him into the shadowy passageway. Nero deliberately slowed his pace, hearing his pursuers getting closer as he walked further into the shadows.

'Stop,' one of the men said. They were now just a few metres behind him. Nero did as he was instructed, slowly turning to face the two men, one of whom was now pointing a large pistol fitted with a bulbous silencer straight at him.

‘There’s really no need for that,’ Nero said calmly, ‘Why don’t we just all have a little chat.’

‘Shut up,’ the man holding the gun replied. ‘No talk. The amulet, now.’ He held out his other hand.

‘Amulet?’ Nero replied. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ He knew exactly what they were talking about, but what he needed to find out was how they knew about it.

‘We know you have it with you. Give it to us now or we’ll take it from you!’ The gunman punctuated the threat by cocking his weapon.

‘Gentlemen,’ Nero said softly, ‘each and every one of us makes decisions in the course of our lives, some good, some bad, but you at least will have the dubious pleasure of knowing that this was the absolute worst one you’ll ever make. Natalya . . .’

The throwing star seemed to simply appear in the gunman’s forearm. He dropped the weapon, howling in pain, as a shadow detached itself from the rooftops above and dropped into the alleyway. The unwounded man was quick – he had been trained well. He had drawn his own weapon and almost raised the gun to a firing position before there was a flash of silver and the pistol fell to the ground, neatly sliced in two.

Raven advanced on the startled men, her dual katanas drawn.

‘Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine,’ Nero smiled. ‘She seems to take it rather personally when people threaten my life.’

The two men continued to retreat as Raven advanced, their confidence replaced with panic.

‘Now,’ Nero continued, ‘a wise man once said that life was nasty, brutal and short and, unless you want to find out just how nasty, how brutal and how very, very short, I suggest you tell me who sent you.’

Fear overtook panic in the two men’s eyes as Raven moved closer to them.

‘No, please . . . we don’t know who hired us . . . it was an anonymous contract. Please, don’t . . .’

Suddenly a beeping sounded from one of the cowering men. He appeared surprised as he looked down to see a small red light flashing in the centre of his own belt buckle. Raven acted without hesitation, sprinting towards Nero and diving into him, knocking them both to the ground as an explosion filled the alleyway, instantly vaporising the two would-be assassins.

Raven rolled off Nero as the smoke cleared.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked as Nero sat up slowly.

‘Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Natalya. Which is more than can be said for our two new friends.’ There was no trace left of the two men, just a black scorch mark on the cobbles where they had once stood. ‘Whoever hired them

certainly didn't want them talking to us, that much is clear.'

'They were with you from the moment you left the meeting,' Raven said. 'They knew exactly where you'd be.'

'I know,' Nero replied. There was only one inevitable conclusion that could be drawn from that. Whoever had hired them had known about the council meeting.

'It has to be him,' Raven continued. 'No one else would dare to act against you as overtly as this.'

'Perhaps, but we have no proof. Whoever sent those two saw to that.'

In the distance sirens wailed. Unsurprisingly the explosion had drawn the attention of the Viennese authorities.

'For now we need to get out of here and back to H.I.V.E.,' Nero said, brushing the dust from his suit. 'Then we'll decide how to proceed.'