



Aftershock (H.I.V.E. Book 7)

By Mark Walden

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Scheming, extorting, menacing, and general evilness are nothing new in the world of villainy—indeed, it's expected, especially at the Higher Institute of Villainous Education. But even so, there have always codes of conduct. Until now.

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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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Aftershock

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, disheveled figure following her. The young girl was dressed in dirty jeans and a threadbare sweater 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 few feet 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 realize what had happened, the thief was already more than fifty feet 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 onto the hood of a parked car and vaulting over his head in a single fluid move. The man turned and gave chase as the girl ran around 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 fifteen feet 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 leaped onto the smooth metal slope that separated the escalators and dropped onto 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 onto the escalator. She stuffed the old woman's

bag inside the waistband of her jeans and ran toward 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 car 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 onto 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 an abandoned factory building leading to the roof. She dropped down through one of the dirty skylights and onto the floor of the long-abandoned attic that was her current hideout. 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 around 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 toward 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 backward, 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 around, driving her fist straight into his nose and knocking him backward. She turned back toward 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 an inch 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 onto 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 gray. 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 toward 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 toward her. "You may try, but it won't make any difference."

The girl felt genuine fear now as she slowly stepped backward, 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 gray 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 labeled "dormitory." She walked inside but Furan remained outside.

“Your bed and locker are at the far end,” Furun 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 Furun 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,” Furun 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 toward Furun, 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?” Furun snapped angrily as he marched toward 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,” Furun said. “Again!”

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

“Still it is peck, peck, peck,” Furun 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 onto 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 toward 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 realize 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 pajamas that were in her locker. Within seconds she was asleep. As she slept, Natalya dreamed 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 toward Natalya, and spoke.

“Peck, peck, peck, little Raven, peck, peck, peck.”

Users Review

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