

CHAPTER 1

The silent city around Lieutenant Ken Hale felt like an empty crypt. After the alien Xaros wiped the planet clean of all human life and nearly scoured away the last traces of civilization, the city of Tucson, Arizona reflected the Earth as a whole.

Once home to millions, Tucson was now a few dozen square miles of high-rise towers and sprawling commercial centers surrounded by scrub desert. Highways leading in and out of the city cut off neatly into tumbleweeds and pampas grass. Several towers were missing perfectly cut sections, like God himself reached down to cut away a slice. The Xaros drones had deconstructed most of the surrounding city with arcane technology, transforming every scrap of human-made material into a tactile form of energy dubbed Omnium.

Deep within the city, the fire of humanity kindled.

Hale ran down a street, careful not to leave boot prints in the small sand dunes washed against the curbs. He passed a sporting goods store, the interior covered in mold, racks of clothes rotting on their hangars. Perfect holes the diameter of his fist perforated the building, evidence of a disintegration beam fired by the Xaros drones that had killed whoever had taken refuge in the store decades ago.

The disintegration holes allowed nature easy access to the buildings that hadn't been removed by the Xaros. Mother Earth would reclaim the land slowly, and as surely as the Xaros technology had erased the rest.

"Where did you see it?" Hale asked, speaking into his IR net. The infrared broadcaster in his helmet and armor connected him to the Marines around him, the beam weak enough not to be detected by their quarry.

"Over the baseball stadium, maybe a mile away," Gunney Cortaro said.

Hale raised his gauss rifle and sidestepped across a blind alley, glancing up to scan for threats.

"Watch your corners. Damn things are tricky," Hale said. "Bailey, you have a firing point?"

"One sec, sir," Lance Corporal Bailey said, the smack of her chewing gum carrying through the IR net as she swiped and pinched on a screen attached to the back of her left hand.

She double-tapped, and a section of the map popped up inside Hale's helmet. A dashed line traced from the building to the distant stadium.

"The fifth floor?" Hale asked.

"You want me to make the shot or not ... sir?" she asked. Hale tapped his fingers against his gauss rifle, then caught himself. His Marines would spot the nervous tic, and the last thing an officer should ever do was portray indecisiveness. Bailey, short and squat, cradled a gauss carbine in her arms, the two halves of her rail rifle strapped to her back.

"Sir," Cortaro said through a private channel, "she'll hit it. I've seen her put two rounds in a quarter twice that distance away."

"It's the escape route I'm worried about," Hale said to Cortaro. He switched to his team frequency and sent the building to his Marines with the swipe of a finger. "Here's our sniper's nest. Let's move out. Standish, take point."

Standish, the lanky corporal, ran ahead without one of his usual quips. He stopped aside a building parallel to a four-lane street and took a quick glance up and down the road.

Maybe Standish is ready for sergeant's stripes, Hale thought. Torni, their team hacker, kept up with Standish, staying a few steps behind him.

"Face-first into battle, Marines!" Standish said as he sprinted across the road.

Maybe not.

Cortaro and Bailey waited until Standish and Torni found cover on the other side of the road, then crossed.

Hale glanced at the last two Marines: Yarrow, the medic, and Orozco carrying the Gustav heavy gauss rifle. It hurt to replace the Marines he lost to the Xaros, but the reality of war demanded a fully manned squad. He joined the new Marines and sprinted across the roadway.

Urban combat alternated between offering excellent cover and concealment among the buildings and debris, and being exposed like a sitting duck while racing from building to building.

Hale fell back and slid, his armor scraping against the concrete as he slowed to a stop next to Cortaro.

"Show off," the sergeant muttered. "Target building is right there." Cortaro gestured to a commercial building, its glass walls obscured with mold. The upper floors were stripped away, and steel beams jutted into the sky like broken bones through punctured skin.

“Let’s go.” Hale ran for the building, passing a car missing its rear half. A family of cats bolted from the car as the Marines made their way to the building, silent but for the slap of their boots against the concrete.

Hale stopped in front of the double glass doors and raised his rifle as Torn and Standish dug their fingers into the seams between the doors. Hale braced himself as they struggled to slide the door along the rusted-out runners. The new gauss rifles could fire armor-penetrating, cobalt-jacketed tungsten rounds as fast as he could pull the trigger, and each shot would kick like a mule against his shoulder.

He pressed a thumb against the activator on the special launcher attached to the bottom of his gauss rifle. The launcher held a single quadrium round, one of the few weapons that could incapacitate their foe for a few seconds. After the battle for the Crucible, the alien jump gate in orbit around the dwarf planet Ceres, quadrium rounds were few and precious.

The doors slid open with a tortured shriek, and Hale winced as the sound echoed up and down the block. If their enemy was paying enough attention, the sound would serve as a giant spotlight on their location.

The first floor of the building was nothing but decaying reception desks, rotted-out leather chairs and a piece of modern art that looked more interesting as time and nature ground it into dust.

“Next time just go through the glass,” Orozco said. He aimed his Gustav heavy gauss rifle down the street and slammed his rear heel against the ground. Clamps against his lower leg snapped to the ground, and servos whined as the clamps anchored him to the ground. The new version of the Gustav packed enough punch to shatter a drone with a single shot, but the human body wasn’t the ideal chassis for the weapon.

“How about next time you tell that good-idea fairy on your shoulder we’re on a stealth mission?” Standish asked.

“Shut your traps and get up those stairs before I save you the trouble and punt your ass up there,” Cortaro growled.

Hale jogged through the waiting room of what remained of a legal firm and found the stairs. He eased the door open with his hip and swung his rifle up as he scanned the stairwell. The stairs cut off in open air, an overcast sky above them.

“Fifth floor,” Hale said. He took the stairs two at a time and even with the pseudo-muscles built into his armor to aid him, he was huffing from exertion by the time he got to the upper levels. Hale swore to spend more time on physical training once this mission was over.

A conference room took up the whole side of the building with a sectioned, ornate oak table running through the middle of the room. High-end holo projectors that once cost more than Hale made in an entire year lay covered in dust.

“This’ll work,” Bailey said from behind Hale. “Someone cut out the glass while I put Bloke together.” The sniper swung the rail rifle off her shoulder and set the pack on the conference table. She unzipped it and began reassembling the weapon with a practiced ease. Fully assembled, the rail rifle was taller than Bailey. She ran a cloth down the bisected rails that served as the weapon’s barrel and gave the tips a quick pat.

“Table,” she said to Standish. The Marine grabbed a segment of the conference table and pulled it parallel to a gap in the glass wall that Torni was cutting out with a suction cup and a motorized hand saw.

Bailey unsnapped a plastic case from her lower back and grunted as she raised it up over the table. It slipped from her hands and thumped against the wood, a corner kicking up splinters. Standish winced as it fell to its side.

“Seriously?” he asked.

“Damn battery pack is heavier than my mother-in-law,” Bailey said. She scrambled onto the table and ran a power cable from the battery pack into the butt stock of her rifle. A whine filled the room. Bailey went prone and settled against the table, scanning for her target through the weapon’s scope.

Hale tapped into the feed from Bailey’s scope and saw the distant stadium. A shadow wove between rusted-out billboards and came to a stop just beyond the foul pole, an orange streamer still flapping in the breeze. An oblong black drone hung in the air, stalks twitching and scratching at the air around it.

“There, next to the Tesla ad,” Hale said.

“I’ve got it,” Bailey said. She slid a cobalt bolt the size of her forearm from the weapon’s carry sack and set it atop the rails. The electric hum grew louder and the bolt quivered as it floated in between the rails held aloft by magnetic fields.

Bailey spat out her gum and let out a slow breath.

The rail rifle fired with a clap of thunder. Glass shattered and blew out into the empty city as the hypersonic round seared through the sky, igniting oxygen in its wake and leaving a thin trail of fire that burnt out within seconds.

The clink of falling glass echoed through the building with the fury of a monsoon's downpour.

Hale looked through the window frames ringed by jagged glass. Pigeons and doves spooked by the blast flit through the air. The stadium had a new burning hole through two sides of its walls.

"Did you get it?" Hale asked.

"I'm sure of it. Won't be anything left to see after Bloke here is done. ... What the hell?" Bailey peered through her scope, then her head shot up. "Contact."

A drone rose from behind the stadium and flew straight for them.

"Take it out!" Hale shouted. His Marines took careful aim and fired, their gauss rifles snapping with each shot. The drone jinked through the air, untouched by the shots.

"How could I miss?" Bailey asked aloud.

"Baily, set your charge. Forty-five seconds until it gets here," Hale said.

Bailey rolled onto her side, unplugged the battery from her rifle and took a green cylinder off her belt. She twisted the cylinder hard until something within it clicked, then she attached it to the power cord.

"We should leave," Bailey said. She rolled off the table, scooped up her carry bag and ran for the door.

The Marines followed her, tromping down the stairs like the hounds of hell were on their heels. Hale vaulted over the railing and let gravity take him down the last fifteen feet. He hit the ground and rolled forward, rising with his rifle ready and watching for the drone to swoop down on them.

He made it to the outer wall and stopped. A timer ticked down against his visor.

"Forty-three ... forty-four ...," he said.

The building shook as the rail rifle battery case overloaded and blew the top two stories into fragments. Flaming debris rained down onto the street, wrecking cars and shattering what glass had survived Bailey's earlier shot.

Hale waited two seconds after the last hunk of what remained of the conference table bounced across the asphalt, then he backed up and ran through the glass wall. Slivers of glass scraped against his armor and crunched beneath his feet as he ran onto the street. His full body armor could take a direct hit from a gauss rifle—broken glass was hardly a concern.

He swung his rifle up and looked through the sky, no sign of the drone. Maybe his gambit worked and the explosion took out the drone as it reached the building.

“Get to the extraction point. No use keeping quiet now,” Hale said.

They had to make it to an overgrown football field half a mile away and signal a drop ship to make their escape. Hale kept glancing at the sky as they ran, his confidence rising as no drone appeared.

They followed a highway leading beneath an overpass that cut off against the encroaching desert. Hale took a signal flare locked against his utility belt and popped the cap off. He turned from the overpass to address his Marines.

“OK ... we need to—”

Hale ducked and swung around as Yarrow raised his weapon and fired a shot over Hale’s shoulder. A drone clawed its way around the side of the overpass and fired a ruby-colored ray of light over his head. Hale fired off a hip shot but the bolt glanced off the side of the drone and bounced against the side of the overpass. Two more bolts of light lanced through the air around him. Hale hit the drone again and it collapsed against the desert.

“Everyone alright?” Hale asked as he turned around. His Marines lay sprawled across the road, still.

He felt a vibration through the air and looked up. A drone hung over him, tendrils swaying against an unseen current. A blast of light hit him in the chest and his armor locked. Hale fell to the ground, his visor flashing KIA over and over again, accompanied by a nerve-grating buzz. He’d been Killed In Action, and Hale cursed himself for the series of mistakes that had led to this.

“End exercise,” a baritone voice said.

Air shimmered and warped around a humanoid form as it moved to Hale. The cloaking field fell away, revealing an alien standing six feet six in Marine fatigues. Wisp-thin, sand-colored feathers ran over its head and aside a flattened snout. Greenish-brown scales served as skin around its reptilian eyes and over its mouth.

Steuben of the Karigole species reached down with its four-fingered hand and picked Hale up with ease. The Karigole set Hale on his feet like he was fallen toddler and held the Marine up. The claw points at the ends of his fingers tapped at a forearm computer and Hale's armor unlocked. Hale pulled his helmet off and wiped a hand across his sweaty face. The Karigole looked Hale over and he smacked his lips.

In the months since the Karigole had begun training the Marines, Hale had never found a good way to read their expressions but he was pretty sure this one was unhappy. Hale unlocked the armor for the rest of his Marines and they stirred, their complaints overlapping through the IR net.

"You have failed this training event," the Karigole said. He looked up at the drone still floating overhead, an Ibarra Corporation construction droid outfitted with training lasers and an armor façade to mimic a Xaros drone. The faux Xaros zoomed away on its antigravity engines.

"Damn you, Steuben!" Bailey got to her feet and ripped her helmet off. She stalked toward the alien, her hands balled tight, and squared off against the alien, her head barely at his chest level. She wagged a finger at him.

"You cheated! You had that drone move before I could kill it and made me miss!"

"Stand down, Marine!" Cortaro said as he ran toward the confrontation.

"Admit it, you shonky poofter!" Bailey demanded, her Australian accent coming to the fore as her anger rose.

Cortaro grabbed her by the collar and tugged her back from the Karigole.

"The little one is correct. I did interfere and alter the parameters of the exercise," he said.

"'Little one'?" Bailey struggled against Cortaro's grip but couldn't get loose. Cortaro pulled her around the corner of a building as she protested and hurled more insults at the Karigole. Her shouts fell away and Hale could hear Cortaro's stern tone in the air.

"Rest of you, gather 'round," Hale said. The rest of the Marines were quiet, eyes downcast. Hale wasn't sure if they were bothered more by their failure or Bailey's loss of control. They formed a semicircle in front of the alien. Orozco stuck a wad of chewing tobacco into his lip. Standish and Torni drank from water packs slung over their shoulders.

"Steuben," Hale said to the alien, "would you please explain what happened."

Steuben, as the Karigole preferred to be called, looked over the Marines, his face inscrutable.

“Your team infiltrated the target area successfully and chose an appropriate firing position for a long-range engagement. The conditions of the exercise were then altered. I wanted to see how you would react to the unexpected,” Steuben said.

“I’d say we’ve already had plenty of experience with the unexpected,” Standish said. Tornj jammed an elbow into his side.

“You destroyed the drone under the overpass, but then you all made the same error.” Steuben pointed a clawed finger to the sky. “You did not look up. You must always look up. The second drone killed every last one of you with ease because you had tunnel vision. Your evolution is as a terrestrial species. You perceive your battles in two dimensions. But the Xaros can fly, maneuver in three dimensions with ease.”

Steuben extended his finger toward the burning building where black smoke rose and tapered into the wind. His head turned around nearly backwards as the alien looked at Hale, his eyes blinking slowly and one at a time, the lids moving from side to side instead of up and down.

“You,” Steuben said to Hale, “you blew up my training area.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Yarrow asked. The Marine was young, barely out of his teens, and his close-cropped red hair stood out against a pale complexion that suffered beneath the Arizona sun.

“The maneuver has merits,” Steuben snapped.

“It was a good idea, Yarrow. Keep them coming,” Hale said. The Marine beamed at the compliment. Hale scratched his face, suddenly unsure of just how much paperwork he’d have to fill out for the loss of equipment and destruction of civilian property, not that the owners were around to claim compensation.

“Had I not redirected other drones to intercept you, I’m sure you would have made it to the extraction point without issue,” Steuben said.

The Marines groaned and shook their heads.

“You cheated,” Standish said. “We would have been just fine but you went and cheated.”

“I do not know this word, ‘chet-ed,’” Steuben said.

“It means you didn’t follow the rules that were laid out,” Hale said.

“Rules? In war?” Steuben flicked a claw beneath his chin and clicked needle-sharp teeth. “What rules do the Xaros follow? What do rules serve in any fight for survival? The purpose of

this exercise was to put your squad under stress so you learn something.” The alien pointed a finger at Hale. “Did it succeed?”

“Yes,” Hale said.

“If you had completed the exercise with ease, you would have gained nothing and I would have failed in my mission to prepare you hairless apes for what is to come,” Steuben said. “Rules, chet-ed, foolish notions of a species that thinks it is fighting for anything but its very existence.”

“Thank you, Steuben. We are better for this lesson,” Hale said.

Steuben clicked his teeth together and looked at the smoking building.

“The next squad will be here in two hours. I must adjust the exercise,” the alien said.

“Mr. Steuben Karigole, sir,” Bailey said from behind him. Steuben turned his head around a hundred and eighty degrees to look at the sheepish Marine, Cortaro a step behind her, his arms crossed. “I want to apologize for my behavior. I am a shame to myself, my team and my Corps. I acted innap—”

“Accepted,” Steuben said. “Now leave, all of you. I have work to do.”

Hale called up their true extraction point, a battery recharge station five miles to the east, and sent the way point to the squad.

“Double interval, march pace. Yarrow, take point,” Cortaro said. The Marines put their helmets back on and peeled away from Steuben, weapons pointed to the flanks of their formation as they walked into the desert.

Hale walked next to Cortaro and opened a private channel to his head enlisted Marine.

“What was that all about?” Hale asked.

“She’s a hothead, sir. Doesn’t care to have her talent called into question. She isn’t real happy about ‘taking orders from an alien’ either,” Cortaro said.

“The Karigole aren’t the Xaros,” Hale said.

“She’s not the only one that thinks that way. Plenty of people out there who’d like to throw the Crucible into the sun and Ibarra with it,” Cortaro said. Marc Ibarra, the genius industrialist who’d engineered a plot to keep a sliver of humanity alive and defeat the Xaros that conquered the solar system, had died during the invasion, but his consciousness lived on inside some sort of alien probe. Hale had led the team that rescued the probe from where it hid from the Xaros occupation, and even he wasn’t sure if he fully understood what Ibarra had become.

“She need to see a chaplain?” Hale asked.

“She’ll sit down with one when we get back to Phoenix. Plus, she’s got a ‘group of mates’ from her home country she meets up with most nights,” Cortaro said.

“Aren’t they the Australians that get drunk and break things a couple times a week?”

“We all grieve differently, sir. You still want her with us on this mission? We could find another sniper before we leave,” Cortaro said.

“We’re not going to give up on her. There’s not a Marine, soldier or sailor in this fleet that didn’t lose someone to the Xaros. She can do the job, baggage or not. What about the others?”

Orozco lifted up the edge of his visor and spat a wad of tobacco juice into the dust.

“Big guy’s deadly with the Gustav, doesn’t say much, stays out of trouble and is on time for everything. Give me a dozen more just like him and I could have reconquered Taiwan,” Cortaro said. “Yarrow follows you around like a damn puppy dog and he’s so new he squeaks, does a good job too.”

“Torni and Standish holding up?”

“Torni spends a lot of time at church. I see her at every morning Mass I manage to make it to. Standish ... he’s just Standish,” Cortaro said.

“You good?”

“I’ve got this. My Marines. We’ve all got shit to work through,” Cortaro said. The Gunnery sergeant lost his wife and four children to the Xaros, more than anyone else Hale knew. Every time Hale had tried to offer a sympathetic shoulder, Cortaro had thrown up his defenses and changed the subject as quickly as he could. Hale didn’t think this time would be any different.

Hale closed the private channel and went back to the squad frequency.

“I’m telling you,” Standish said as Hale joined in mid conversation, “they killed all the crows too.”

“You’re so full of it your eyes are brown,” Torni said. “Crows didn’t have cities, language, or an Internet full of cat videos. Why would the Xaros wipe them out?”

“Because crows can use tools,” Standish said. “When I was a kid back on the farm, I saw one jimmy open a lock with a piece of metal. Zoologists have known about that since the turn of

the century. Heck, crows even have—had regional dialects. The Xaros had to know they were kind of intelligent. That’s why they killed them all.”

“What makes you think the Xaros did that, corporal?” Yarrow asked.

“You seen any crows since we’ve been out here? Has anyone seen one since the fleet did its little time jump—skip, whatever we’re calling it—to sidestep the invasion?” Standish asked. “I asked some of the guys that went to scout out the other surviving cities and none of them saw crows. The Xaros wipe out anything that uses tools. That’s my hypothesis.”

“I don’t know how crows would be any threat to whatever those things were doing on Ceres or what they had planned for Earth,” Yarrow said.

“Look, kiddo, just admit I’m right about the crows—or we make a bet. You see a crow in the next month and I give you a month’s pay. No crows and you give me a month’s pay,” Standish said.

“We’re about to leave the solar system for God knows how long and you want him to take that bet?” Torni asked.

“Thank. You. Ms. Torni.” Standish kicked a pebble at her.

“Are we getting paid again?” Yarrow asked. With all the world’s banks and electronic records wiped out by the Xaros, reestablishing a working economy had taken a backseat to rebuilding the only remaining city of Phoenix and repairing the fleet after the Battle of the Crucible. With every human either in the military or part of the Ibarra Corporation that provided for all its employees’ needs through robot labor or 3D printing factories, there hadn’t been much of a need for currency and trade.

The Marines looked over their shoulders at Hale, expecting an answer from the captain.

“Let’s worry about getting back from Anthalas before we worry about bank accounts,” Hale said.