

Final Sanctuary Gaulon – Chapter One

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Chapter One

It's the year 2415 and this is not how I envisioned my life turning out. I'm sure things were much different back in the twenty-first century before the corporations took control and the U.S government was dissolved. Back when the harsh weather conditions hadn't forced people to live in the massive shield protected metropolises known as Sanctuaries. If I'd been born in the twentieth century I wouldn't have been forced to shoot firearms let alone join a special ops team. I wonder if this is the future people back then would have envisioned. The world never turns out the way we want, I bet they expected us to be living in cities on Mars by now and flying to work with jetpacks.

The name's Liam... Liam Hayes. I've served with the Immortals for nearly three months, they're the special ops team I mentioned earlier. It was a bit of a surprise really. I'd never heard of the Immortals before I joined up, no one had. In fact if they hadn't needed me on the team, I probably still wouldn't know about them. The Immortals recruited me largely because of my technical skills. The team had an opening and they needed someone who could crack systems and not leave any traces behind, someone like me. On the battlefield I use the codename KillSwitch, it was the same codename my predecessor had used and their predecessor before that. The codenames are passed down from member to member creating the illusion that the team is immortal. Our team is privately owned and funded by The RavenCroft Humane Trust, a private corporation that has been in place since the mid-twenty first century, in it's infancy it helped deal with the fallout from the great impact. The R.H.T was set up by a self-made billionaire and philanthropist, Brandon RavenCroft. Back then it was mostly a charitable organisation set up as a crisis response agency, providing medical aid, support and services. Over the next two centuries RavenCroft evolved into a worldwide mega-corp providing medical services and treatments.

So how did they find me? Well to answer that I should start at the beginning. I grew up in an outer suburb of Gaulon. Gaulon was the last and the greatest of the Sanctuaries to be built. The corporations wanted to escape the growing regulation and control of the governments in the other Sanctuaries. So they built Gaulon to be a beacon of Capitalism and installed a corporation friendly government of their own. That's not to say it was all happy families and smiles. Things were good up until I turned twelve, when my father walked out

on me and my mother who had been recently diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. We had trouble affording the treatments and we had no one to turn to. Even back then I was good with computers, I'd developed over a dozen hacker programs and found myself becoming increasingly withdrawn at school. I started working as a freelance programmer. With the anonymity of the Internet it doesn't matter if you are twelve or thirty-five. I was juggling school and working in my spare time but it didn't matter. My mother went into remission. The cancer wasn't cured but it wasn't spreading either. She eventually became well enough to come back home and rebuild our family life. We had a few good years together until she went into relapse. Life went back to living from paycheck to paycheck.

When I hit the age of sixteen I decided that I was going to fix our money problems once and for all. I tried to raid ten million dollars from RavenCroft bank accounts. It was all going fine until I tried to log out of the system, I was traced at the last minute. The next day a couple of officials from RavenCroft offered me a position working for the corporation. They said it was either that or they turn me over to the police. So I signed up and went legit. I was finally working on real projects that actually meant something and making good money. It was officially classified as "Strategic Research" but was basically hacking into networks and stealing intellectual property. That was fun for a while but after a year or so I was looking for a challenge. That's when a man named Graeves approaches me, he says he's the head of special projects within RavenCroft. And that if I join a team of elite operatives he'll see that I'll never have to worry about my mother's medical bills again and have access to cutting edge research within RavenCroft. So I signed up, at times I wish I hadn't but considering that my mother's life was at stake, what choice did I have?

In Gaulon there are two major RavenCroft facilities. There is the R.H.T Tower located in central Gaulon which is the corporation's public headquarters. Then we have the RavenCroft Biological Research Center where RavenCroft conducts research into infectious diseases and other biological agents. The center is actually its own self-contained town outside Gaulon, with its own airport and security. Publicly it is so that RavenCroft can protect its research and prevent infectious agents from escaping containment. But in reality this is the Headquarters of RavenCroft's covert operations located underground known as "The Vault". It is the base of operations for the Immortals and the organisation's most heavily guarded secrets. Back during the cold war in the twentieth century, The Vault had been built as a nuclear bunker for use by the U.S military. The Vault was abandoned after the collapse of the U.S government and RavenCroft moved in.

I'd been at The Vault for just under twenty minutes, it was 0700 hours and I was about to be thrown into a debriefing session. It was standard practice at RavenCroft for the Immortals to be debriefed and questioned by one of the higher-ups usually that was by Graeves. It wouldn't have been so bad if the mission had gone to plan, but there had been complications, lives had been lost and my team was partly to blame for it all.

I arrived at the briefing room where two out of three of my other team members had already arrived. Claire Xin a.k.a. Eidolon who doubled as the team's doctor and assassin, was leaning back against the wall to the briefing room dressed in a pair of black pants with a blue shirt. Standing next to her was Nate Parker a.k.a. Lazarus, the team's leader dressed in a pair of camouflage pants and a black T-shirt.

I've always felt more comfortable around my fellow team members whenever they were out of their Biosuits. What's a biosuit you ask? Well to put it simply they're highly sophisticated, lightweight suits of body armor that is organic in nature. We're talking about living organisms that have been artificially engineered for combat. My biosuit is the world's most advanced organic super computer, it has been designed to allow me to directly interface with virtually any network capable operating system across the globe. Lazarus' biosuit is essentially a power generator. It's been created more for combat and can generate electrical currents in much the same way as an electric eel. Malcolm Jones a.k.a. Vulcan who's been absent since the end of our last mission has a biosuit designed for muscle enhancement and shielding. It's impervious to most forms of attack and boosts his strength eight times over. His biosuit has been reinforced with armor so that in battles he could safely act as our first line of attack. Finally there is Eidolon.

Eidolon has the most fascinating of all the biosuits, for hers has a low level of sentience. Claire once told me that at times she could empathically sense her biosuit's emotions. She said that that the biosuit sang to her on occasion, not in any known language but rather in soft pitched tones. She shares a strange neuropathic link to her biosuit due to the fact that a small portion of it has been embedded in her nervous system at the back of her head, just above the neck. Designed for stealth, her biosuit is capable of becoming invisible simply by altering the cells to seamlessly blend into the environment. Eidolon's suit has also been designed for hand to hand combat. Attached to the suit are organic blades that are literally as hard as steel, as light as aluminum and sharper than a samurai sword.

As I made my way over to my team mates, I felt a sense of apprehension, knowing that they'd ask what I'd found out about Vulcan. We'd been told next to nothing about his status since getting back. Lazarus had 'hinted' that he wanted me to look into it, "Morning folks how're we all doing?" I asked.

"Morning Liam" The two said in turn "I feel exhausted I got perhaps two hours sleep at best, I kept thinking about the mission, what I did and whether or not we made the right choices," continued Claire.

"Hey, you did all that you could, we all did, if you hadn't been on the mission, I doubt any of us would be standing here," Said Nate trying to comfort her.

"I know you're right, I mean this is a war isn't it? And in a war there's collateral damage and casualties, I get it." replied Claire with a hint of anger and frustration.

"Just try to focus on the lives we do save and not just the ones we lose and remember if we hadn't been there, well that collateral damage would have been a whole lot higher," said Nate as he tried to reassure her.

"You're right as usual," answered Claire hesitantly.

"So Liam did you put that hacking brain of yours to use and find anything out about

Malcolm's condition?" asked Nate.

It was the question I'd been dreading but had been expecting on my way over. Hacking was my specialty and yet without access to my biosuit there were limits to my abilities. "I checked all the local hospitals and there's no sign of the big guy meaning he hasn't been transferred out of here. My guess is that he's somewhere on the base." Before I could continue I noticed Graeves heading towards us. Graeves was in his early fifties, but age hadn't slowed him down an ounce. The man's mind was sharp as a razor blade. His hair looked like it had been dyed brown and he was slightly overweight. He had no sense of humour.

After dispensing with the usual superficial greetings and pleasantries I followed my two teammates into the briefing room and took a seat. Graeves was the first to speak. "I don't think I need to lecture you on the failings of your last mission. Based on your reports, it seems that you did all that you could under the circumstances. This debriefing isn't about assigning blame, but rather providing us with a better understanding on what happened. Mr. Hayes if you could in your own words tell me about what happened right up to when you arrived at your target destination."

It all started on June 12, the mission had been pushed back a week due to the intense electrical storms. We'd all been briefed on Doctor Addler, we'd seen his photo and knew that he'd gone over to the mega-corp, GenFourier a year ago, our satellites had picked up signs that about a hundred infected humans were headed in his direction, nobody had a fragging clue what had drawn their attention, but my money was that it had something to do with Addler's research. According to our latest intel reports he'd been commissioned by GenFourier to develop a cure to the Death Plague.

The Death Plague that was the name we'd given it at RavenCroft. The first reported outbreak was in Egypt, four years ago. At the time many people thought it was a hoax, but RavenCroft and the corporations knew better. It was a disease unlike any other. Once a person became infected their very essence seemed to fade away, they'd undergo a series of mutations, Their skin would become pale in colour, their veins would protrude becoming more visible and their teeth and nails would become longer and sharper. They lost their ability to communicate verbally and acted more like feral animals than human beings. They became cannibalistic and fed on the weak and infect the strong. There was little we knew about the infected, only that their numbers were silently growing.

This was to be my third mission piloting the Valkyrie. Built more for maneuverability than combat, the Valkyrie is a revamped military dropship. Designed to carry a compliment of up to nine people, the Valkyrie is a light-weight airship armed with two rail guns and heat seeking missiles. RavenCroft also had some non-standard modifications done. The most notable are its silent jet propulsion and cloaking. Making it ideal for covert reconnaissance and extractions.

Once we'd suited up I piloted the Valkyrie towards Addler's lab. The flight itself was mostly uneventful. We were a little on edge about the whole situation. The prospect of us ending

up like fried chicken from the electrical storms was hardly comforting. My biosuit had me patched into nearby orbiting RavenCroft satellites and I was able to pilot the Valkyrie safely around the storms without incident. We were almost at the target destination when I noticed something of interest.

"Lazarus, you better take a look at this. I'm intercepting some interesting radio communications from a GenFourier dropship. It's trying to contact GenFourier Headquarters but can't get a signal out because of the electrical storms."

"Where are they? Are they headed towards Dr. Addler?" Asked Lazarus.

"The signal is very close they're a few hours behind us. They're relaying data consistent with an evacuation. Which is odd because to our knowledge there isn't supposed to be any GenFourier installations nearby. I did a general surface scan of the surrounding area and picked up something I think you'll find interesting."

"So what's down there? Are they shooting a swim-suit calendar?" asked Lazarus

"Not exactly, I've located a village six kilometers out from the research facility. Unfortunately I can't get a visual due to the electrical interference but take a look at the data." I said as I brought it up on the display screen.

The tactical display indicated that there was a village large enough to house about three hundred civilians, that's a rough figure. The village was about 2 square kilometers in size. Scans indicated a number of buildings located at the base of a valley, surrounded by a forest.

"One day it'll be supermodels, in bikinis...One day." Lazarus muttered to himself, his eyes glazing over. "I guess we better figure out what the hell a human settlement is doing out here." Lazarus said directing his question at nobody in particular. "Can you land the ship in that clearing? This looks like something we need to investigate," he continued pointing to an area about a kilometer out from the town.

"Sure" I said "But we'll have to make it brief. The infected will be all over this valley in twelve hours."

"Those are civilians down there KillSwitch, you ever see the infected run rampant through a town? I have and it ain't fragging pretty. Those demons turn the strongest and kill and feed on the rest. If you're lucky they do it in that order. We need to get this town prepped for evacuation now." Vulcan added. I'd never really understood why he'd hooked up with The Immortals. His religious convictions seemed at odds with our mandate.

"First up we don't know who's down there. It might be civilians or the whole village could be made up of GenFourier staff. Secondly, I hate to break it to you guys, but an evacuation is going to be next to impossible. This ship could carry a handful of them at best, and we can't call for help, that electrical storm is fragging up our comm systems and even if I could get a message through it would take RavenCroft a good seven hours to send us any support.

That's assuming that an evac-team could get past the storms and that anyone would be left alive by the time they got here. More likely than not the population would be either dead, infected or food by that time." I replied.

"Vulcan, we'll do everything we can for the civilians, but ultimately their survival isn't our priority. Addler's research is of vital importance and we have to focus on saving it and him. We'll go down to gather information. It's absolutely essential that none of you mention the few hundred or so infected people headed towards their town. If they get wind of the situation and realise we have a way out of town, the Valkyrie will get swamped by the locals. You guys think it's hard putting down the infected, just see how you fare against a whole town of civilians wanting a ride out of here. We can carry out eight, maybe nine of them and that's it. Any more and the ship won't get off the ground." announced Lazarus.

"Look here on the monitor, the valley is boxed in by a cliff face and a river. Even with a car you wouldn't get very far. There's no hope for these people," said Eidolon

"There's always hope," snapped Vulcan

"Like I said we'll do what we can. We'll head into the town posing as scavengers and see if we can find out anything of value," replied Lazarus

"So Mr. Hayes, am I to understand that you were against the decision to enter the town?" asked Graeves.

"At first, yeah I didn't think it was a good idea. I mean Sir, when you see the faces of regular people that you can't help, isn't it going to make leaving them all the more difficult? A part of me wishes we hadn't gone in, so that I wouldn't remember their faces, as though their deaths would seem less significant if I hadn't seen the victims. It's a lot easier dealing with numbers on a page than the reality of the situation. So yeah I was against going in, however the decision to go in was the right one. If you'll allow me to explain," I replied.

"Very well continue," said Graeves as he wrote something in his notepad.

So as I was saying, we landed the Valkyrie about a kilometer from the outskirts of town so that the locals wouldn't hear our dropship landing. We adjusted the colour schemes on our biosuits to make them look less conspicuous. We headed into the town to investigate. A signpost on the outskirts told us that we were in the town of Ragnus. It was just after 1800 hours and the sun was setting. Most of the streets were quiet and the people that were around kept away from us. The first thing we noticed when we got into the town was that it looked rustic quaint and simple. There were cobblestone roads, houses made from timber and bricks. This was a town that had been built to last, either the community had been relocated to an abandoned town or the citizens had taken pride in building it themselves. We headed to the local tavern, Lazarus felt it was the best bet for gathering information.

The tavern had been made up to look like an old fashioned saloon complete with the classic swinging saloon doors. Lazarus' face lit up when he saw the place. The building itself was a wooden structure, there were a handful of tables, a piano in the corner and an assortment of drunks.

Lazarus eagerly went to order a round of drinks whilst the rest of us sat down at the only available table. One that occupied only by a short overweight middle aged man with brown hair and breath you could smell a mile away. He was how shall we say, two slices of bread short of a sandwich.

"The guy was probably the village idiot," butted in Claire.

"So let me make sure I've got this right, you took time out from your mission to go have a chat with the village idiot?" interrupted Graeves

"Actually, in spite of his intellectual shortcomings he did provide us with some useful information," announced Nate grinning away like a Cheshire cat.

"Okay continue from where you left off," said Graeves to Liam.

The village idiot turned to us and smiled, "Those are some fancy threads you folks are wearin, what are ya? Lemme guess extreme sports nuts right? I'll betcha planning on scaling up the rockside or something." He said looking us up and down.

"Sure... why not?" said Vulcan knowing full well that this fellow was so drunk he probably wouldn't remember half of the conversation by morning. Vulcan leaned his pulse cannon against the table. That thing weighs a ton and is about as long as my arm.

"Nice gun, whatcha use it for?" he asked eyeing Vulcan's pulse cannon.

"Hunting rabbits." said Vulcan with the straightest face I'd ever seen.

I took it upon myself to make a few introductions. "The name's Johnny, that's Ben, Sue, and over there with the drinks is Reed," I announced, I pulled the names out of an old movie I saw once when I was a kid.

"The names Barnell but my friends call me..." before he could finish, Eidolon chimed in "A drunken moron?"

"Don't be like that. I'm a nice guy if you gets to know me," said Barnell looking mildly offended.

"Sorry, I suppose that was a little harsh," said Eidolon half heartedly.

"Just a little, but hey you could always make it up to me by ditching these losers and heading back to my place."

"Sure but only if Reed, my husband, can come too. We've been looking for a guy to share and I think you're his type," replied Eidolon as she smiled seductively.

"Oh well I'm not, err I mean to say I'm, well I aint into guys, but hey if you ever want to go solo just let me know"

"So what did I miss?", said Lazarus as he returned with the drinks and took a seat across from Barnell.

"Exceedingly little. Reed this is Barnell," said Vulcan motioning to our guest as Lazarus started passing out beers.

"Barnell. You look like a man that needs another beer", Lazarus says as he offers him a pint.

"So Barnell, anything much been happening here in town lately? You guys must entertain yourselves out here somehow. Actually wasn't there that one story about a guy who went on a killing spree with a chain-saw?" asked Lazarus turning to Barnell

"No, that was Angus Town up North. Now those people knew how to have a good time," interrupted Vulcan.

"Well, no chain-saw massacres here. but we've had people going missing. I think it's about twelve all up. Sheriff Groats aint done jack about it. He reckons they all just up and left for one of them fancy-ass dome cities. You wanna hear what I reckon?"

The bar-maid had come over to clear some empty glasses, "You telling that Alien story again, Barnell?"

"It aint no story!" Barnell snapped at the bar-maid before turning to the table in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Some people been blaming coyotes but I tell you GenFourier's behind it, they set this town up for the aliens. So they can do their experiments and such," Said Barnell before standing up.

"But none of these fraggers will listen to a drunk like me, yer all chicken shit every last one of you!" he shouted as he waved his hand around pointing to the other drinkers in the bar. He then staggered for a few steps before passing out on the floor.

"I think we've heard all we need to hear, finish your drinks we're moving out." ordered Lazarus.

"Okay I'm glad you got the information, but consuming alcohol on a mission is a major breach of protocol" interjected Graeves.

"Well Graeves. I knew you were going bring this up," starts Nate raising his hand.

"That's why when I ordered the beers, I asked the barman specifically for the non-alcoholic variety. He didn't have any on tap but he was able to rustle up a few pints from out the back. So as you can see I made sure we stayed on protocol," finished Lazarus with his signature Cheshire grin.

"I knew those beers didn't taste right," whispered Claire to Liam.

"Ok. Ok. That's enough. Mr. Hayes, you can continue," said Graeves waving off Nate.

We finished the beers and a few minutes later we were back on the streets of Ragnus. It didn't take us long to identify GenFourier's local headquarters. Their headquarters in Ragnus was a complex about the size of a small hospital. It was sealed up from the public by a concrete wall with electric barbed wire at the top to stop people from climbing over it. It was the one building that looked oddly out of place in Ragnus. When we got there we stood outside for a couple of moments before deciding on our next move. I could tell by the look on Lazarus' face that he wanted to go inside and take a look. It was pretty obvious that there would be valuable information inside.

"KillSwitch do you have an ETA on how long it'll be before the infected reach Addler?" he asked as he looked over the building.

"Yeah and it's not good. There's now a second group moving in to outflank the town. The infected are also moving faster than we've anticipated. They'll hit Addler in forty minutes and the town in an hour. If we don't head back to the Valkyrie now, we might as well just abandon our mission altogether," I answered as a feeling of dread washed over me.

Before anyone could respond, a GenFourier transport ship rumbled through the air flying overhead and landing several meters away inside the complex. I'd heard about these ships but never seen one before. They're nowhere near as sophisticated as our dropships but they're sophisticated enough to navigate around most storms. Five armoured troops jumped out of the back of the ship. Two of them took up guarding positions at the entrance to the ship whilst the remaining three troops made their way into the complex.

"If anyone's got a piece to say, then now's the time" Asked Lazarus

"We can take them Lazarus, with two ships we can evacuate a lot more people. Morally it's the right call." declared Vulcan.

Who was to say that the lives of the GenFourier staff were less sacred than those of anyone else. To the best of our knowledge nobody had been forced to live here. Everyone knew the risks when they moved to Ragnus, it was just unfortunate for the rest of the public that GenFourier didn't give a rat's ass about the townspeople.

"I disagree. We should stick to the mission, there are bigger things at stake here, like it or not

Doctor Addler is the key to stopping the virus from spreading any further. Saving him and his research has to be our first priority" replied Eidolon

"We're not going to abandon our mission or the people of Ragnus. First off though, it looks like there's a GenFourier party we haven't been invited to." said Lazarus as he grinned from ear to ear.