



Resistance The Gathering Storm

By William C. Dietz

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Within a year, most of Europe had fallen. Only Great Britain, after struggling desperately, had kept the conquerors at bay. But as the Chimera were repelled, they were evolving. Building. Planning.

America. November 1952.

The Chimera have crossed the Atlantic. Their lightning strikes on American borders are devastating. Cities are lost. Small towns overrun. Citizens transformed into monstrosities. Enter Lieutenant Nathan Hale, U.S. Ranger. A veteran of the Chimeran conflict, he is uniquely immune to the alien virus. And when regular troops can't stem the Chimeran onslaught, Hale and his special-operations team meet the menace head-on.

But while they battle the relentless Chimera, deadly power games rage in the White House. And when Hale discovers a far-reaching conspiracy, one with deadly consequences for the human race, his allegiance to country and mankind is stretched to the breaking point.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

William C. Dietz is the bestselling author of *HALO: The Flood and Hitman: Enemy Within*, plus thirty other science fiction novels, some of which have been translated into German, Russian, and Japanese. He grew up in the Seattle area, served as a medic with the navy and the Marine Corps, and graduated from the University of Washington. Dietz worked as a surgical technician, news writer, college instructor, television producer, and director of public relations for an international telephone company prior to embarking on a full-time writing career.

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Chapter One

Hide And Seek

South of Huron, South Dakota

Thursday November 15, 1951

The snow-clad hill didn't look like much, but the granite that lay just a few feet below the topsoil had been strong enough to hold its own against a retreating glacier thousands of years before, and was likely to be there for millennia to come. But to the men hidden on top of the snowy rise, the hill's durability was less significant than the vantage point it provided—their current position enabling them to watch enemy troop movements, and, God willing, ably defend themselves if attacked.

The current temperature was at least ten degrees lower than normal, a grim reminder of the ever-growing Chimeran threat now facing humanity. The alien race had somehow altered Earth's atmosphere, and now Lieutenant Nathan Hale's breath fogged the air as he lay on his belly, training a pair of binoculars on the highway below. He wore a winter white parka and matching pants over a wool uniform and thermal underwear, and despite all this he was *still* cold.

Hale ignored his discomfort as he studied the scene in front of him.

He remembered with longing the white ribbon of road as the one that he and his family had traveled each year on their way to the South Dakota State Fair in Huron. Even though he'd been back in the United States for months, Hale hadn't been allowed to contact his foster parents or his sister. Had they fled south into Nebraska, or remained on the ranch? Three generations of his family had weathered the elements, the economy, and the land itself, but the invasion would be too much, even for them.

If still on the ranch they were in terrible danger. Having conquered most of Asia and Europe, the Chimera had now turned their attentions to North America. Chicago had fallen to the invaders in October, quickly followed by important strategic locations in Wisconsin and North Dakota. Now, as the enemy continued to move south, the Army and the Marine Corps had been forced to pull back into an ever shrinking "Fortress America."

As Hale peered through a thin veil of steadily falling snow he knew that a ring of defense towers were being built to the south, constructed with the goal of blocking the Chimeran advance. But would they be enough? Hale had his doubts. He'd been a member of the ill-fated 3rd Ranger Regiment, and had seen first hand the

atrocities that had happened in England. No matter how many defense towers the government put up, the Chimera would keep coming.

Hale's thoughts were interrupted by Sergeant Marvin Kaweck. "We have company, sir.... Ten o'clock."

Kaweck was directly to Hale's left, his right eye at the scope of a L23 Fareye 10X. Particles of dry snow continued to accumulate on the back of his parka. As Hale put the binoculars up to his face and panned to the left, three Chimeran drones emerged from the veil of snow, flying roughly six feet off the ground. The drones darted about like hunting dogs in search of a scent.

Even though most of the civilian population had fled south, Hale knew that non-military resistance groups like Freedom First continued to operate behind Chimeran lines, where they had met with some success. The arrival of the drones told Hale that the stinks were concerned about the possibility of an ambush.

The presence of Chimera on Highway 281 was exactly the sort of Intel that Hale, Kaweck, and Private Jim Jasper had been ordered to gather.

Hale felt his stomach muscles tighten as one of the drones left the edge of the road and came straight at him. Flying about four feet off the ground, it seemed determined to reach the top of the hill, snow sleeting down through the beam of light that swept the area in front of it. Had their cover been blown?

"I have it." Kaweck's voice sounded tight. "Just say the word."

Hale didn't *want* to say the word, because if Kaweck brought the drone down, all hell would break loose. The team was three miles inside the gray zone, and escape would be risky enough already. But as the construct continued up the hill towards their position, there seemed to be very little choice.

Hale had already opened his mouth to give the order when a white-tailed jack rabbit broke from cover, bringing the drone to an abrupt stop. The unlucky animal hadn't traveled more than ten feet before a single shot rang out and the rabbit tumbled head-over-heels through the air, coming to rest at the bottom of the hill.

The Chimeran scout hovered menacingly for a moment, then pivoted towards the road and followed the slope back downhill. Hale released his breath, surprised to learn that he'd been holding it. "Jasper," he said softly. "How's the back door? We may need to pull out soon."

Jasper was lying in the prone position five feet behind the other two men. He was facing west, his M5A2 Folsom Carbine at the ready, providing security for Hale and Kaweck. "The back door's wide open, sir," Jasper replied. "We're good to go."

Hale was about to acknowledge the report when he felt the ground tremble beneath his chest. "Holy shit," Kaweck swore. "What the hell was *that*?"

Hale adjusted his glasses as a phalanx of forward-leaning Steelheads emerged from the curtain of swirling snow to his left. But something far worse was right on the creatures' heels.

The thing was a giant smudge at first, an amorphous mass that could barely be seen through the swirling snow. Moments later, the Mauler came into focus. The beast stood thirty feet tall, each step spanning twenty feet of highway, shaking the very earth as each of its enormous three-toed feet hit the ground. Hale knew the grotesquerie could spew something akin to napalm, as well as corrosive pods that exploded on contact.

Fortunately, the huge pack strapped to the Mauler's back indicated that the creature was currently being used to transport supplies. The observation gave Hale a brief moment of relief. While a couple of well-placed rounds from a rocket launcher might bring the beast down, the lightly armed recon team wasn't carrying that kind of firepower.

There was no way to know what was in the packs or where the Chimera were headed. But those were questions for Intel to answer. Two additional Maulers appeared behind the first. Their sloped backs were covered with snow, and jets of lung-warmed air shot out of their nostrils as they followed the first leviathan south.

Hale put the binoculars down to take notes. He was careful to jot down the time, the direction that the Chimera were traveling in, and how many of each form there were. Then, as the last of the stinks disappeared into the white haze, he buttoned the book into his breast pocket.

"Okay," he said loud enough for both men to hear. "I don't know about you, but I could use a hot shower, and some of that slop they serve in the mess hall. So let's get out of here. But remember....those bastards have six eyes--so don't break the horizon."

Kawecki had seen lots of action, and knew Hale's comment was directed at Jasper, who had been in a dust-up or two but was relatively inexperienced for a Sentinel. Most members of the elite combat organization were ex-Army or Marine Corps ground pounders with lots of special ops experience, Hale being an excellent example. But while the serum developed by the Special Research Projects Administration (SRPA) often enabled Sentinels to recover from what would have otherwise been fatal wounds, the bug juice--as some of the men called it--certainly couldn't counter the effects of a direct hit from a Chimeran mortar. So casualty rates remained high, and newbies like Jasper were increasingly common, and frequently had plenty to learn.

Jasper was fully aware of the fact that the veterans were watching him closely as he elbowed his way forward and slid head first down the slope. Snow came in through his open collar and chilled his skin as he brought his feet around and used them to brake. Reaching the bottom of the incline, Jasper took cover behind a group of snow-capped rocks. A quick look around told him the horizon was clear, and he raised a thumb.

Kawecki descended the hill next, quickly followed by Hale. The team traced their own barely visible footsteps from earlier down into a dry ravine, with Hale on point, Kawecki in the two-slot, and Jasper bringing up the rear. Walking drag was a tough job that required Jasper to pause from time to time in order to eye the trail behind them before running to catch-up.

Though dry in November, the ravine would be half-filled with runoff come spring--if there was another spring. It led Hale to a half-frozen stream. Running water could be seen through holes in the ice, producing a cheerful *gurgling* sound, which served as a suitable accompaniment to the *crunch, crunch, crunch* made by their boots, and the occasional *crackle* of broken ice.

The landing zone was still a good two miles to the south, but Hale knew it would take the pick-up plane time to get there. He triggered his radio. "Bravo-Six to Echo-Three.... Do you read? Over."

“This is three,” came the immediate reply. “I read you five-by-five.”

“We’re about forty-five minutes out,” Hale responded. “And we’re tired of walking.”

“Say no more,” Echo-Three replied cheerfully. “Marilyn and I are on the way.”

Hale grinned as he jumped from one sheet of ice to the next. Echo-Three’s much-patched VTOL bore a beautifully rendered likeness of a scantily clad Marilyn Monroe on the left side of the fuselage. “I can’t wait to see her,” Hale answered sincerely. “Over.”

After that the journey to the LZ became a seemingly endless obstacle course as the three men were forced to repeatedly cross the partially frozen stream to avoid reaches of deeper water, large rock formations, and sections of thin ice.

As smaller tributaries joined the stream from either side, the banks rose higher and it became a river. The terrain was a mixed blessing—while the lower ground around the river allowed them to travel unseen, the thirty-foot-high banks would make it almost impossible to escape if they were attacked.

Everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly until Hale rounded a bend and saw a wall of snow and earth explode out of the embankment ahead. Tons of soil slumped into the river, forming a momentary dam before being almost immediately washed away.

Kawecki quickly caught up and both men came to a halt. “Jeez, Lieutenant, what the hell...”

Hale shook his head, holding a finger to his lips. “Listen!” A faint rumble gave way to a vibration beneath his boots. “Burrower!”

A fraction of a second later Hale heard Jasper holler, “Contact!” and the Private’s carbine rang out with rifle fire.

More earth slid down into the river as a whirling drill head broke through the embankment, quickly followed by a cylindrical machine roughly the size of a locomotive. It lurched to a stop, half its length hanging out over the river. Steam rose like a shroud around the Burrower as snowflakes made contact with the Chimeran construct.

Hale had seen the machines before, back in England, and knew they had been used to flood London. Now, as at least a dozen heavily armed Hybrids opened a hatch and dropped into the channel below, it was clear that this particular Burrower was also being used as a transport.

It was too late to retreat. Jasper continued to fire bursts upstream at a separate enemy. “It’s an Attack Drone, sir! I haven’t been able to make a dent in it.”

Questions quickly stampeded through Hale’s head. *Had they been spotted by the drone back on the hill? Were the Burrower and the Attack Drone working in tandem? Or was the seemingly coordinated attack the result of random bad luck?* The problem with the Chimera was there was no way to know.

Not that it mattered. The only option now was to fight back.

Geysers of snow, dirt, and water shot up into the air as the drone opened fire. The Sentinels scrambled for cover behind a cluster of water-smoothed boulders. “I’ll deal with the drone,” Hale said grimly, as he put his

shotgun aside. "You take care of the Hybrids."

As the other men nodded and turned their attention towards the still steaming Burrower, Hale readied the Belock Automatic. The grenade launcher had been slung across his back and qualified as the heaviest weapon they had.

The drone consisted of a central housing, sensor arrays, and a pair of weapons pods. Muzzle flashes sparkled as the machine fired and projectiles *pinged* off the boulders Hale was hiding behind. Chunks of rock flew in every direction.

Hale waited until the drone was close enough to engage. He'd have to expose himself momentarily in order to fire. He knew from experience there was only one way to defeat the machine—he'd have to strike at its heavy-duty shield and beat it down.

Hale fired, jumped back into cover, and fired again, each flaming projectile exploding in a puff of black smoke. Most of his shots hit their target, taking a gradual toll on the drone's shield.

Something hit Hale's left arm. He was unsure whether it was a round or a piece of flying debris, but it hurt like hell. He triggered another grenade before taking cover again.

It was a battle of attrition that continued until the drone's shield finally went down. A thin stream of black smoke churned out of the machine as it slowly lost altitude. The drone continued to fire, forcing Hale back into cover as the Belock *clacked* empty.

He dropped the grenade launcher and grabbed the Rossmore shotgun. The weapon wasn't high-tech, but it packed a wallop, and had saved his life more than once in England.

The 12-gauge was barely in position when Hale heard a loud *thrumming* noise directly over his head. He turned his head away and fired both barrels. There was a significant recoil, followed by a loud BOOM as the machine took two loads of double-ought-buck from less than six feet away. The drone exploded, peppering Hale with small pieces of shrapnel. He stung in a dozen places, but he'd worry about that later. The threat had been neutralized.

Kawecki heard the explosions behind him, but he was so busy dealing with the hybrids he didn't have time to look.

One of the most numerous Chimeran forms, Hybrids were incredibly tenacious and adaptable. Standard Hybrids were barely humanoid, with six eyes and a mouthful of needle-sharp fangs for teeth. The Chimeran virus could break a human body down into its constituent parts, creating a new form, each being appropriate to its purpose.

"There's a bunch of stinks hiding behind that ledge!" Jasper shouted. "I'll drop a grenade on them."

"Don't let the bastards tag you!" Kawecki warned, but Jasper was already head and shoulders above the rocks. He fired the carbine's under barrel grenade launcher, and as the grenade hurtled towards its target, one of the hHybrids fired a Bullseye tag. It hit Jasper, doing no visible damage as the Sentinel took cover.

But in the second before the exploding grenade blew its head off, the Hybrid managed to trigger a dozen Bullseye rounds. The projectiles ripped through the air towards the tag that had been fired moments earlier. The sparkling swarm circled about Jasper's head. "No!" Kawecky shouted desperately.

But it was too late. All twelve of the bullets slammed into Jasper one after another. It was more damage than even a Sentinel could sustain, and Jasper jerked spasmodically as the slugs tore him apart.

Hale arrived just as Jasper went down, and having reloaded the Belock, loosed a barrage of explosive projectiles against the enemy position. Hybrids screamed as some were blown apart and others began to burn. They ran thrashing in every direction, batting at the flames as Kawecky continued to pick them off.

Then the battle was over, and an eerie silence settled over the much trampled section of riverbed.

Hale knelt next to Jasper's mangled body, somberly removed his dog tags, and dropped them into a pocket. Then, with an efficiency borne of grim experience, he stripped Jasper's corpse of items that he and Kawecky might be able to use.

As much as he wanted to take the body back for a proper burial, they were still half a mile short of the LZ, and it was likely that more Chimera were on the way. Rather than leave Jasper's remains to be picked over, Hale pulled the pin on a thermite grenade, dropped the cylinder next to the body, and backed away. There was a flash as the device went off, followed by an eye-dazzling glow as powdered aluminum combined with iron oxide to produce molten iron and aluminum oxide. Hale had moved a good thirty feet away but could still feel the wave of intense heat as half a dozen rounds of loose ammo cooked off.

He wanted to say something, to thank Jasper for his sacrifice, but there wasn't any time. Kawecky was once again firing his Fareye upstream. "We got Howlers, Lieutenant.... Six, make that five, all southbound."

Hale sighed. "Okay." He dropped the empty Belock in favor of Jasper's carbine. "Let's haul ass."

He caught a whiff of ozone as they passed under the Burrower, splashing through knee-deep water and emerging on the other side. The radio was on and Hale spoke into the lip mike as he ran. Each burst of words was interrupted by the need to suck some air. "Bravo-Six to Echo Three.... We have one man down, KIA.... We have five Howlers on our tails.... We're southbound in the riverbed.... ETA about ten minutes.... Over."

"This is Three," the pilot replied grimly. "You keep a-coming Six.... We'll take care of those Howlers. Over."

The pilot sounded confident, but as the big lion-sized quadrupeds uttered the long blood-curdling cries from which their name had originated, Hale had his doubts. The Howlers were continuing to close the gap. "Let's slow them down!" Hale shouted as he skidded to a halt at a bend in the river.

The now-discarded shotgun would have been effective at close range, but regardless Hale had no desire to get up close and personal with the Howlers if he didn't have to. He felt a surge of adrenaline as their combined fire brought the lead Chimera down, momentarily slowing the rest of the pack as the two humans turned and ran again.

The ground was uneven and the ice-covered rocks seemed more slick than ever as water splashed away from

their combat boots. The two men followed the clearest possible path from one side of the river to the other.

Then, miraculously, the VTOL was suddenly coming straight at them, traveling only ten feet higher than the top of the river bank. *Marilyn's* engines roared defiance as she passed overhead, and Hale could feel the plane's prop wash as the pilot opened fire.

Looking back he saw a curtain of spray appear as hundreds of high-velocity rounds chewed their way through the water to strike the on-coming Howlers. They went down screaming and thrashing, the river running red with their blood as it broke around his boots.

"Tell *Marilyn* I love her," Hale said appreciatively. "She's the most beautiful lady in the world!"

Having turned upstream, the VTOL wagged its wings as it roared overhead. Ten minutes later what remained of the team was safely on board and strapped in.

The mission had been successful--but had the trade-off been worth it? Had Jasper died for something? Or was his death one more sacrifice in an unwinnable war? Hale had to believe in the first option--or he risked plunging into an abyss of despair.

The Sentinel closed his eyes and allowed his head to rest against the bulkhead. He was exhausted, but sleep refused to come. In Hale's hand, clutched so tightly that the metal cut into his flesh, was a pair of dog tags.

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