



Chapter One

One job down. Five hundred and seven to go.

Noah Kim ducked out of the small doorway and into the bright afternoon sun. He pressed a hidden button on the outside and watched the door—camouflaged to look like rock—slide closed. Once it was shut, there was no way to tell a secret entrance was hidden there.

He turned and started walking into the trees, headed back to Blue Mountain Base.

The secret storage facility he was working in was a ten minute walk from the main base. When they'd turned the former military base into a haven for survivors of the vicious alien invasion that had decimated Earth a year and a half ago, none of them had known this secret storage area was here.

Noah had discovered it when he and his tech team had been busy upgrading a part of the power system. He'd stumbled across old electrical cables that led in this direction from the main base. From what he could tell, the facility had housed some sort of power generator, as there were still giant turbines in place, but over the years—as energy technology increased and nuclear generators had become safe and solar-power systems viable—it had become obsolete.

The best thing about it, though, was the facility wasn't listed on Blue Mountain Base's official plans. Plans they'd recently discovered the leader of the United Coalition of Countries had sold to the aliens in return for his own safety.

Noah scowled. *Bastard*. President Howell had saved himself, and not the millions of people he'd vowed to protect. Noah stopped, forcing himself to take a second to breathe in the fresh mountain air to calm his temper. Summer was approaching, and temperatures were beginning to rise. In fact, the afternoon was hot.

Right here, right now, surrounded by the tall gum trees and hearing the rustle of small animals in the bushes and the sounds of birds overhead, Noah could almost pretend the invasion had never happened. That the dinosaur-like raptors had never arrived in their monstrous, giant spaceships and wiped out all the major cities on the planet. His gaze turned to the east, but the view was blocked by the trees. Still, he knew the ruins of Sydney were there—the once-beautiful, busy capital of the Coalition. Now, nothing more than a broken, deserted ruin.

One of those shattered skyscrapers had housed Noah's billion-dollar, online tech company. He'd always loved electronics, from the time he was old enough to tap on a comp. He'd driven his parents crazy, tinkering with things. At the age of five, he'd freaked his mother out by disassembling the toaster because it kept burning his toast. After he'd put it back together, it had worked like new. At ten, he'd pulled his father's comp apart. Noah had inherited his father's short temper. But after a fiery outburst, and after Noah added a few improvements and reassembled the comp, his dad had loved his faster device.

Noah had started work in a private R and D company in his teens, making a small fortune in salary. Then he'd started his own company, made his first million at seventeen, and his first billion at twenty-five. Kim Technology Inc. had been known as a hip, creative place to work, and a place on the cutting edge of tech. He'd been inundated by bright, young grads looking for work. Some days, he'd wished he wasn't the boss. Some days he hadn't wanted all the calls, emails, and meetings—he'd just wanted to lock himself in his tech lab and fiddle with his latest ideas.

Well, now he got to hang out in his tech lab all the time. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot of tinkering now, though. Mostly he kept the base's ventilation running, the lights on, and the hot water hot, and fixed every other damn problem the residents had. He started walking again, scraping a hand through his straight, black hair. It had gotten so long, it brushed his shoulders, something that would have given his old-fashioned grandmother heart failure.

The thought of her made him smile, and a small pain burned in his heart. God, he missed her and his parents. His Aussie mother and South Korean father had been on a vacation in South Korea, visiting his grandmother, when the aliens invaded. Some small part of him hoped they'd survived, but Seoul had been wiped out, just like every other major city around the world.

He rounded a tree and kept moving. He never used the same path to the storage facility twice. Devlin, second-in-command of the base's recon team, had scouted out a few different routes with him. Dev had warned that they couldn't risk leaving a trail the aliens could spot.

In the storage facility was the base's last hope if the aliens found them.

General Adam Holmes, head of Blue Mountain Base, was working overtime with Noah to get Operation Swift Wind organized. They had to get it operational *before* the aliens attacked.

And everyone knew it was only a matter of time.

Noah stepped into a clearing, taking a second to enjoy the sun—he missed it, being stuck underground. He might love being hunched over a desk with electronic components spread in front of him, but he'd also been a keen surfer. Bondi Beach had been a favorite place of his to escape to on the weekends.

Needless to say, he didn't get to surf anymore.

Suddenly, there was a loud rushing noise in the sky. Frowning, he glanced up—and saw a small raptor ptero ship whizz by overhead.

Fucking hell. He froze. What were they doing so close to base?

Another flew past. Its shape was so distinctive—like the flying dinosaurs of Earth's past, it had two large wings, and narrowed into points at both the front and back. Red lights glowed along the wings and what had to be the cockpit window at the front.

Fear spurred him to action, and Noah started to run. He glimpsed the pteros wheeling around, pointed wings aimed at the ground as they executed impossibly tight turns. Apparently, it had been too much to hope that they hadn't seen him.

Shit.

They flew straight back in his direction.

Noah pumped his arms, his heart thumping in his chest. He went to the gym, kept fit. But deep down, he knew he couldn't cross the clearing in time.

Green poison splattered the ground around him. He skidded to a halt, dirt flying, and dodged to the side.

Frantically, he checked he hadn't been hit. Nearby, he heard the sizzle as the raptor poison ate through the grass and dirt. He knew the stuff paralyzed, and apparently hurt like hell. He ran again, pushing for all the speed he had. He glanced back and saw the ships turning again for another pass. *Shit, shit, shit.*

Suddenly, people poured out of the trees. Soldiers dressed in black carbon fiber armor.

“Noah!” Marcus Steele yelled. “Get down.”

Noah dropped.

Marcus was leader of the base's roughest, toughest group of commandos—Hell Squad. The rest of Hell Squad's soldiers fanned out. They were all holding their carbines, aiming into the

sky. One of them, Reed MacKinnon, held a modified carbine Noah knew could also fire explosives.

And the squad's sniper, Shaw Baird, was balancing a laser-guided missile launcher on his shoulder. The squad's only female soldier, Claudia Frost, stood beside him, her laser scope held up as she targeted the enemy.

"Steady," she said. "Steady. Fire!"

Shaw fired the rocket launcher. The missile launched, Shaw absorbing the recoil. The rest of the squad members were firing their carbines.

Noah couldn't stop himself, he looked back over his shoulder.

The missile flew straight and slammed into the lead ptero.

It exploded in a ball of flames.

Noah held his arm up to shield his face from the huge explosion. The second ptero peeled away and, quick as lightning, disappeared.

Noah released a shaky breath. *Hell.*

"Okay?" Cruz Ramos, Hell Squad's second-in-command stood above Noah offering him a hand.

He took it and got to his feet. "Yeah. Glad you guys arrived when you did."

"We're on base patrol today. Elle saw the damn things zipping in."

Elle was their comms officer. Noah knew she was in the base somewhere, monitoring drone feed and providing her squad with intel.

The rest of the squad strolled forward, their largest, quietest and deadliest soldier, Gabe, bringing up the rear.

"That was closer than we've ever seen them," Marcus said.

"Hell, that was too damn close." Shaw set the missile launcher down.

They all stared at the beautiful blue sky.

"Yeah," Noah answered. He felt a heavy weight settle on his shoulders. He had to get the kinks ironed out of Operation Swift Wind...because right now, if they had to evacuate, they wouldn't make it.

"How's the Swift Wind convoy going?" Marcus asked, as though the man had read Noah's mind.

Noah shrugged. “We have a pretty motley collection of vehicles for the convoy. I’ve retrofitted all of them with small nuclear reactors, so they have power.”

Shaw pulled a face. “Why do I hear a huge *but* in your voice?”

“They’ll run, but I can’t hide them.”

The Hell Squad soldiers were all quiet, their faces grim.

“Can’t you put illusion systems on them?” Reed, a former Coalition Navy SEAL, asked.

Noah wished. Illusion systems provided a cloak—messed with a vehicle’s signature on raptor scans, blurred it from sight, and used directed sound waves to distort any noise. He shook his head. “I don’t have the parts to outfit every vehicle with its own illusion system.”

“Shit,” mumbled Claudia.

Yeah, because if even one vehicle was visible and they were running from the aliens, one vehicle would be enough for the enemy to pinpoint their location.

Noah rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m working on an illusion system to cover the entire convoy.”

“I take it that it would need to be a large system,” Marcus said.

“Yes. And right now, I can’t power it.”

“Not even with a nuclear reactor?” Cruz’s voice held a Mexican accent.

“No. It’s complicated—”

Shaw leaned close to Claudia. “That means he thinks we’re dumb.”

Noah shook his head. “A large-scale illusion system seems to cause nuclear reactor instability.”

Reed shifted. “What about the alien power cubes?”

Reed’s fiancée, Dr. Natalya Vasin, was a brilliant energy scientist who had been helping unravel the mystery of the alien energy cubes they’d liberated from the raptors.

“They don’t interface easily with our tech. Natalya’s been helping, but while we can activate the cubes, pull them apart, and put them back together, we can’t seem to use the cubes to power our stuff reliably.”

“Damn,” Reed muttered.

Damn was right. Noah felt that crushing weight again. The survival of every man, woman, and child in the base was his responsibility.

And he was failing them. He had to get this right, or people would die.

As he followed the others back to Blue Mountain Base, those words kept thumping in his head. But once he got back to the comp lab, the massive pile of work waiting for him provided a much-needed distraction. He could think more about the power problem later. For the moment, he rolled up his sleeves and got busy.

Almost got it. Noah leaned over his battered desk, hand holding the tiny comp chip he'd just fixed steady as he inserted it back into the comp. Delicate work, but he'd always had steady hands.

Just as he maneuvered the chip into its slot, an alarm started blaring.

Noah jerked, the chip flew out of his tweezers, hit the floor and skittered under the neighboring desk.

He sucked in a breath, and closed his eyes. *Count to three, Kim.*

Finally, he opened his eyes and pulled his glasses off—he only needed the damn things when his eyes were tired. He stared at the orange light flashing above the door. He'd known the evacuation drill was happening this evening...he'd just lost track of time.

He pushed his chair back, then went looking for his missing chip.

Noah knew the drill was important. If the damned aliens invaded the base, they had to be ready to leave. He just wished they had a protected convoy to leave in.

The comp lab was empty, most of his tech team out fixing various things around the underground base. He reached under the desk, searching for the chip. Yep, this was definitely a far cry from his millionaire existence before the alien invasion.

He thought of his parents again. The last time he'd seen them, they'd fought. He'd been off the rails a little, rolling in money and prestige. Yeah, maybe he'd let it all go to his head.

He'd had a collection of expensive sports cars, a fancy penthouse apartment in the city, and had always been at the latest parties and hottest nightclubs. And after the hell Kalina had put him through, he'd worked his way through a long list of glamorous party girls.

His father had been trying to get him to wake up and focus on what really mattered.

“Well, Dad, your pep talk didn't work, but the alien invasion certainly did the trick.” Noah cursed, maneuvering his arm awkwardly until his fingers closed over the chip. Exhaling loudly, he went back to his desk and finally got the chip in place.

He glanced up, and the small glowing cube and bits of alien tech on the corner of his desk snagged his attention. And made his jaw tighten.

The lab door slammed open and Roth Masters—leader of Squad Nine—stood in the doorway.

“Kim, alarm means you evacuate.” The man was tall and built big. He had a rugged face and ice-blue eyes, and could look pretty intimidating.

Noah had never let anyone intimidate him. “Got work to do, Roth. It’s only a drill.”

“Yeah, and everyone needs to have this down pat in case it turns into the real thing.”

Noah scowled and waved at the tech on his desk. “If I don’t get this work done, there won’t be anywhere for people to evacuate to.”

Roth blew out a breath and nodded. “Marcus told me you’re working on power for the illusion system for the Swift Wind convoy.”

“Yeah.”

“No luck?”

Luck. There was a concept Noah thought about a lot. He reached back and snagged a couple of his dice off the shelf behind him. One was red with white dots, the other a shiny, metallic silver. He had an entire collection of them—of all shapes, sizes and materials—although it was only a small portion of what he’d owned before. These were all he’d managed to save.

“Not yet.” Lady Luck was being pretty stingy with him lately.

Roth’s gaze landed on the alien cube. “You trying to use the alien energy cubes?”

“No, Masters, I hadn’t thought of that.” When the soldier lifted a brow, Noah sighed and sank back in his chair. “Sorry. We’re working on it, but it seems like everyone needs something these days.”

Yep, everyone wanted a piece of him. Some days it felt like he was back at his tech company, where he had accountants to hassle him with budgets, his management team with some new strategy, and tech geeks who wanted jobs, or for him to endorse their latest invention. Oh, and the people who’d wanted money. Women who’d wanted money. Just like his fucking ex-wife.

Roth grinned. “I could always use more tech to test in the field. Marcus keeps riding me about the fact he never gets any of the good stuff you cook up.” The man’s grin widened. “I’d like to keep bugging him.”

Noah snorted. He knew the rivalry between the squads was all in good fun. “Get in line, Roth. I have comps in the schoolrooms to repair, the Swift Wind convoy to work on, and the ventilation’s playing up in sector four.” A ping came from Noah’s comp. He glanced at the screen and when he saw the message, he rolled his eyes. “Oh, and now Captain Dragon has damn well broken the comp in the prison area...again.”

Roth lifted a brow. “Captain Dragon?”

“Bladon.” Captain Laura Bladon ran the prison area and interrogation team with a damn iron fist. Every time he had the misfortune to step foot in there, she made his life hell. She lived and breathed her work—one of the few things he found admirable about her. She wanted to beat the aliens, no matter what the cost, and that was great—but damn, she needed to loosen up. “I reckon if she could breathe fire, she would.”

Roth’s lips twitched. “It would match her hair.”

That it would. An image of Laura’s vibrant red hair flashed in his eyes. She kept it tightly braided, but even when she was nagging him to get her comp system fixed, he wondered what it would look like left loose and falling around her shoulders.

The alarm that had been shrilly blaring suddenly cut off. The silence was deafening.

“Guess the drill’s over,” Noah said.

“Yeah.” Roth glanced at his watch. “I need to go and debrief on the evac. Next time, can you play nice and at least make it look like you’re evacuating?”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

Roth shook his head. “Avery wants to have a few people over for dinner some time. Squad Nine, Hell Squad, you. I think she and Elle have it in their heads you’ve been working too hard and need to chill out.”

Avery Stillman was a former Coalition Central Intelligence Agent. She’d been rescued from a tank in an alien lab and had helped Roth uncover some secrets about the aliens. And in the process, they’d fallen in love. They’d also recently discovered another secret human enclave, hidden underground not far from Blue Mountain Base. A viable, alternative place for them to go if they were attacked.

And sweet Elle Milton was Noah’s friend. Noah liked her a lot, had even briefly considered dipping back into the relationship waters for her...but Elle had only ever had eyes for Marcus.

Everyone in base was still shaking their heads over the former socialite and the scarred soldier—beauty and the beast.

“Sounds good,” Noah said.

But as Roth left, Noah stared at the man’s back. They fit, Roth and Avery. Elle and Marcus. They made each other happy and found their own little piece of heaven in the middle of hell. Noah’s hand tightened on the edge of his desk. Hell, before the alien invasion, he hadn’t believed in connections like that. But each couple had gotten lucky.

Noah lifted the dice, turning them over in his hands. Luck was a capricious bitch, that was for sure. She blessed some and cursed others.

His comp pinged again, and he saw another more insistent message from Captain Dragon. With a grin, he flicked his screen off. That was one thing he’d learned since the apocalypse—you had to enjoy the small pleasures, wherever you could find them.