



Chapter One

The building was empty.

There was nothing here.

Shaw Baird slammed his combat boot into a rotted cardboard box and sent it skidding across the concrete floor. He and his squad were searching an abandoned factory. Before the alien invasion, it looked like it had made cars. Old conveyors and pieces of once-high-tech equipment filled the large space. But after a year and a half of being abandoned—as what was left of humanity ran to avoid the raptor aliens—the machines were now sagging and rusty.

And up until a few hours ago, the raptors had been using the place to hold human prisoners.

Shaw's fingers tightened on his laser rifle. Something had tipped the scaly bastards off and they'd run.

Taking one of Shaw's squad mates with them.

Frustration boiled through him and he gave another box a kick. This one was filled with small metal parts. They clattered across the floor, making a huge din.

An ugly blackness welled in his gut. Over a week ago, the aliens had invaded Blue Mountain Base—the haven the human survivors had made deep in an old underground military installation. Many had died, the place they'd called their home had been destroyed, and now they were all on the run. But during the attack, Claudia Frost—Hell Squad soldier and all-round badass—had been taken.

A large hand clamped down on Shaw's shoulder.

"We'll find her," a deep, gravelly voice said.

Shaw looked over at his squad leader. "It's been a fucking week, Marcus."

In that week, Shaw had barely slept, barely eaten. How could he rest when he knew Claudia was suffering? He'd seen the results of the aliens' testing and experimenting on human prisoners, and they weren't pretty.

"You need to keep it together," Marcus said quietly. "We won't stop until we find her, and I need you in top form to help us do that. *She* needs you."

That ugliness in Shaw ebbed and flowed, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He nodded. He'd already made a promise to himself, to her, that he would get her home.

“Over here,” a voice with a touch of a Mexican accent called out.

It was Cruz, their second in command. Marcus and Shaw shared a brief glance, before they jogged over to where Cruz was crouched by the far wall.

“Fuck.” Shaw's jaw tightened.

Hanging from a piece of equipment were two sets of makeshift chains. Shaw studied them. One set was smeared with blood and there were drops of blood on the floor.

He crouched, touching the sticky stain. It was still bright red. “Hasn't been here too long.” He closed his eyes.

Cruz held a small hand-held scanner. It beeped. He looked up and nodded.

“She was here,” Marcus said.

Shaw opened his eyes and saw his squad mates form up around him. Reed, the former Coalition Navy SEAL, and big, silent and deadly Gabe. Marcus and Cruz. They were all tough, tenacious soldiers and Shaw respected the hell out of them.

“We never leave anyone behind.” Marcus' green gaze moved over all of them, before settling on Shaw. “We will *never* stop until we get her back.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “But for now, we have to head back to the convoy.”

Shaw swallowed a curse. The human survivors from Blue Mountain Base had escaped the base attack in a motley band of outfitted vehicles. They were moving slowly through the mountains, hiding where they could. Thankfully, their head tech geek and electronics genius, Noah Kim, had gotten a huge-ass illusion system operational for the convoy. It essentially kept the convoy near-invisible from the aliens hunting them.

But the squads were still vital for protection and defense. Each team was cobbled together from any remaining soldiers who'd survived the invasion—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Police. Hell, some fighters on the squads weren't even military. Squad Three, known to everyone as the berserkers, were simply hardcore. They rushed in and fought with a crazy, wild abandon. Most of them were former bikers, mercenaries or possibly even criminals...sometimes it was best not to ask.

It didn't matter who you were before. Now everyone had to join together and find a way to help in the fight against the Gizzida.

He touched Claudia's blood again. What the hell were they doing to her? He exhaled a long breath. She was tough as nails. She'd been former Special Air Service like him. Funnily enough, they'd barely known each other before. She'd been on a different SAS team.

But now...now she was a vital piece of him. And he was only just realizing how vital since she'd been taken from him.

"So, who was in the second set of chains?" Reed asked, with his American twang.

"Don't know. But if they're still alive when we find Claudia, we take them too," Marcus said. Then he cocked his head, touching his ear. "Go ahead, Elle."

Elle Milton was their comms officer. The pretty brunette was sitting in a large truck with the convoy. The comms truck had been retrofitted with all the necessary equipment to let the squads' comms officers continue to do their jobs—feeding the squads intel, route information, and raptor numbers.

"Marcus, there is a lot of movement just south of your location," Elle said.

Shaw straightened. That had to be the raptors they were after.

"But that wasn't what I wanted to tell you." Her exhalation came across the line. "General Holmes needs you back here. There are raptor search patrols getting close to the convoy's current location. We need to move again, and we need Hell Squad back here."

Shaw bit his tongue. The protective part of him—the part born and honed by taking care of his little sister in the hellhole of their childhood—knew they had to protect the convoy. There were innocent kids and elderly people, mothers and fathers, scientists and doctors. People who had already been through so much. They needed the squads to keep them safe, especially now that they were on the run.

But a larger part of him wanted to go after Claudia.

She'd been in alien hands for a week. They all knew she was running on borrowed time.

The scar on Marcus' rugged face flashed white. "Back to the Hawk."

They formed up, but Shaw had to force his legs to move. Cruz took the lead, and they headed out.

Shaw kept a tight grip on his long-range laser rifle. *I'm coming, Claudia. Just hang on.* The rifle was a familiar touchstone under his hands, and helped him keep some control. He'd been surprised when he'd first joined the Army to discover he had a knack for sniping. He could read all the environmental factors, judge a shot, and stay steady through it all until the perfect time to finally pull the trigger.

Right now, he desperately wished for a raptor patrol to appear so he could take them down.

But as they jogged across cracked pavement, where straggly grass poked through the cracks here and there, and a sagging chain-link fence ringed the area that he guessed was once the employee parking lot, no raptors jumped out to attack. None of the various types of predator aliens the raptors used like attack animals came at them.

Ahead, the air shimmered. The Hawk quadcopter dropped its illusion, its dull, grey metal body shining in the morning sun. It ran on a tiny thermonuclear engine, with four rotors that were shrouded to reduce noise.

They climbed aboard and the pilot, Finn Eriksson, leaned back from the cockpit, scanning them. His mouth pressed together. "No luck?"

Shaw gave one savage shake of his head. "Missed her."

"Fuck." Finn sank back into his seat. "Strap in. Time to go home."

The Hawk's rotors turned and the quadcopter took off. Shaw knew Finn would have engaged the illusion system. While it didn't make them completely invisible, it blurred them to anyone who might be looking in their direction, messed with the Hawk's signature on raptor scans, and used directed sound waves to distort any noise.

It wasn't a long flight. They swept easily and quickly over the endless trees of the Blue Mountains. He knew that behind them, to the east, lay the ruins of Sydney, once the capital of the United Coalition of Countries. Nations like the United States, India, and Australia had banded together to form the Coalition, and Sydney had been the jewel—a melting pot of people and cultures, a center for business, art, and pleasure.

And then the alien invasion had reduced it to burnt-out houses, shattered skyscrapers, broken landmarks.

Here in the mountains, staring down at the sea of trees, it was hard to imagine an alien apocalypse had occurred. But as they passed over small towns, it was easy to see there was no

life. The towns were abandoned and still, ghosts of their former selves. Their former inhabitants were either dead, or captured by the aliens, or they'd fled, searching for shelter at places like Blue Mountain Base.

Or the Swift Wind Convoy, as they were now known.

The Hawk slowed and started its descent. Looking out, Shaw saw nothing but another abandoned ghost town, with an overgrown town square, and empty buildings with abandoned cars parked at skewed angles in the street.

But once they passed through the convoy illusion system and touched down, he saw what was being hidden.

Vehicles were parked in military precision outside what Shaw guessed had once been a school. Trucks, buses, and cars were all parked in a way that would let the drivers jump in and take off with a second's notice...a precaution, in case the aliens tracked them down and they had to evacuate.

Marcus pulled the side door of the Hawk open. "Get some rest. As soon as we get new intel, we're heading back out."

Shaw leaped out of the Hawk and instantly started pulling at his chest armor. Around him, he saw the survivors of Blue Mountain Base bustling with activity. Some were military, wearing a mixture of uniforms and whatever the hell they could scavenge. Some were working on the Hawks, others on the convoy vehicles. Civvies were mingling here and there. He saw some kids running around, kicking a soccer ball.

Shaw envied them being able to find some fucking semblance of normality and enjoyment in the middle of chaos.

Reed slapped him on the back and headed off to find his fiancée, Natalya. The energy scientist would probably be helping the geek squad somewhere. Gabe gave him a solemn nod and followed the others. Hell, even big, deadly, and not-very-talkative Gabe had a woman of his own—the sexy and smart head of the medical team, Dr. Emerson Green.

"Get some sleep, Shaw," Marcus said.

"I'm going to check in with the drone operators and see if they've spotted anything—"

Marcus scowled. "You mean bug them until they bug me to get you off their backs."

Shaw slung his rifle over his shoulder. "Whatever it takes."

“You’re running on fumes, Baird. Get some rest, or you’ll be no help to her.” With one hard look, Marcus strode away, no doubt to drag Elle back to their makeshift quarters. Marcus never missed a chance to get his woman naked.

Shaw had been happy for his squad mates, as they’d all found women who gave them some good in the bad. He’d always preferred to enjoy the variety the single ladies offered, rather than tie himself down. He didn’t want someone dependent on him, waiting for him to screw up.

He was good at screwing up when it mattered.

But now, watching the guys go, he felt a flash of envy. There were women waiting for his friends, to hold them tight and make them feel better for a little while.

He rubbed a tired hand over his face. He’d give anything right now to have Claudia beside him, ribbing him about being a crap shot or about one of his latest sexual escapades.

He headed back toward one of the converted buses that were filled with bunks for the single squad soldiers. Marcus was right. He’d barely had more than a couple of hours of sleep over the last few days, and if they got a lead on where the raptors had Claudia, they’d need to move fast.

But he was still going to check in with the drone operators, first.

He rubbed at his face again and realized he’d cut himself on something. He’d thought his temple had been damp with sweat, but it was blood. He rubbed it between his fingers, and thought again of those bloodstains on the concrete at that factory.

Someone moved up beside him. “Hey, Shaw.”

He looked down and saw Liberty. The curvy blonde was gorgeous, and made no bones about the fact she loved sex. Most people looked at Liberty and didn’t see beyond the beauty. But Shaw knew she worked just as hard as the squads behind the scenes to keep the convoy survivors calm and in good spirits. He’d heard that if you needed shampoo, soap, lotion, or—for those whose contraceptive implants had stopped functioning—condoms, Liberty could get her hands on it.

Liberty offered him a smile designed to send all the blood in a man’s body south. “I’ve arranged to have the truck I share with some of the other single ladies to myself for the next hour.” Her smile widened and her hand stroked down his arm. “I thought you might like to keep me company.”

Casual sex wasn't frowned on like it once had been. Since most people had lost their loved ones in the invasion, sex was a way to get skin-to-skin with someone and hold on tight. To find some laughs in the darkness and not feel so alone.

For some, for him, it had always been about outrunning the darkness and the memories for a few hours.

Now, Liberty's nice little offer, something that he would have been all over a week ago, made his stomach turn over.

"No."

She frowned at him, and Shaw rubbed the back of his neck.

"Sorry. I'm tired and hot and dirty..."

She smiled. "It's okay." She touched his arm again, her expression becoming concerned.

"You haven't found Claudia yet?"

Just hearing her name made his throat go tight. He shook his head.

Liberty's fingers tightened on his arm. "Hang in there, Shaw."

He didn't even watch her go. His gaze turned inward. It wasn't him who had to hang in there, it was Claudia.

Shaw turned and headed toward the bus the drone operators used.