



## Chapter One

“Finn, get your ass down here!”

Finn Erickson heard Marcus Steele’s gravelly voice across the comm line. Finn fired at the alien vehicle on the ground below, and then pulled his Hawk quadcopter into a tight turn. Below, he saw Hell Squad and its leader, Marcus, battling a large raptor patrol. Even though the humans were clad in black carbon fiber armor, they still looked small compared to the giant humanoid aliens.

“I’m coming,” Finn said.

“Make it quick,” Marcus growled. “Gabe’s bleeding like a stuck pig.”

Finn touched the controls again, his Hawk responding in an instant. He spotted the big form of Gabe Jackson. The man was fighting with a brutal ruthlessness. He didn’t look injured, but Finn expected that as long as he was breathing, a man like Gabe would keep fighting.

Hell Squad had been fighting since the day the aliens had invaded. Finn knew the tough group of soldiers wouldn’t stop until the Gizzida were gone.

If they were ever gone.

Finn fired again at another big, ugly, squat alien vehicle. Then he spotted a good place to land, and started his descent.

He didn’t touch the skids to the ground. It was too hot. Instead, he hovered just above the grass. “Make it quick, Marcus.”

Ahead, in the distance, he saw more alien vehicles bumping over the now twisted and overgrown patch of road. *Damn, they just keep coming.*

It had been almost two years since the world as they knew it had ended. The Gizzida—dinosaur-like aliens—had arrived out of the blue, in their giant ships. They’d wanted the Earth’s resources. The biggest one being humans themselves.

The side door of the Hawk was yanked open. Finn looked back, and saw Hell Squad jumping aboard.

“Finn?” A sweet, feminine voice sounded from his comm panel. “Drone feed is showing incoming pteros.”

Elle Milton was the comms officer for Hell Squad, not to mention, Marcus’ fiancée.

“I see them, Elle.” Finn tapped the screen on his control panel and saw the dots zooming in from the north. He yelled back over his shoulder, “Strap in!”

He sent the Hawk upward at high velocity. He heard a *thump* from the back, and then cursing.

“We have incoming pteros. A lot of them. I need someone on the autocannon.”

The alien ships were close enough now that Finn could make out the distinctive pterosaur shape. Large, fixed wings sharpened to a pointed cockpit at the front, along with a long, tail-like back end.

His hands danced over the controls, his Hawk responding instantly. As the raptor ships started firing their deadly poison ammunition, Finn threw the quadcopter into evasive maneuvers.

Flying had been his obsession since he was a boy growing up in Norway. It didn't matter if he was under fire from aliens, or just out for a scenic glide. He loved it.

He heard the autocannon in the back returning fire.

He guessed it was Shaw Baird, Hell Squad's sniper. The guy had a magic touch with any weapon and a hell of an aim.

As they raced across the sky, Finn tried to anticipate the pteros movements, guess where Shaw needed him to be. With some fancy flying, he got Shaw in position twice to take down the alien ships. Finn watched with a satisfied smile as the pteros hit the ground and exploded into balls of flames.

Soon, the remaining pteros turned back, and they were free.

Finn leveled out the quadcopter and turned them toward home base. The Enclave.

The secret human hideaway was built in an old underground coal mine south of Sydney—the former capital of the United Coalition of Countries. The Enclave hadn't been their home for very long. They'd barely been there a month. Their previous base—an old military installation in the Blue Mountains to the west—had been attacked by the aliens. It had sent the Blue Mountain Base survivors on a wild race out of the mountains to find sanctuary. Thankfully, the Enclave had taken them in.

Finn liked the place. It'd been specially designed for the purpose of safely housing people, and was way more luxurious than the retrofitted base in the mountains had been. And, although it had taken a little time, the people of the Enclave were finally warming up to the Blue Mountain Base survivors.

Together, they were stronger. Together, they had a far better chance of driving the Gizzida away.

Finn raised his voice. “Ladies and gentlemen, turbulence has ended. Enjoy the rest of your flight, and thanks for choosing to fly with Erickson Air.”

“Can it, Finn.”

Finn grinned to himself. The accented voice belonged to Cruz Ramos, Hell Squad’s second-in-command.

“Lousy service, though. Where are my drinks and complimentary peanuts?”

That cocky voice belonged to Shaw.

So much had changed in the last two years. Finn had been part of the Coalition Air Force before the invasion, and while he’d flown some combat missions, it had been nothing like what he was doing now. Now, he flew Hell Squad around—the toughest squad that they had. And that was both a privilege and an honor.

Since the invasion, he’d seen too many friends and colleagues die. He had no idea about his family. Pain speared through him briefly, like raptor poison to his chest. His mother, father, and siblings lived in Norway, and to this day, he had no way of knowing what had happened to them. He’d heard Norway had been bombed...but the limited communication they’d had in the early days had been unreliable. And since then, the aliens had found a way to block it.

Finn took a deep breath. He liked to believe that his family was still in their village, way up in the north. Safe.

Soon, the site of the Enclave came into view. From the air, there was nothing to indicate that thousands of survivors were living below the surface. It was all overgrown, rolling hills, the rotted remains of some old coal mines, and the broken ruins of some abandoned towns.

He slowed the Hawk and brought it to a stop, hovering in the air. He reversed the rotors and started lowering. On the control screen, he saw the ground beneath the Hawk open up. The doors of the hangar were opening, creating a gaping hole in the ground.

Soon, the Hawk’s skids touched concrete. He powered down the engines, undid his straps, and left the cockpit.

The blood-spattered Hell Squad started to leave the Hawk. He slapped Cruz and Shaw on the back. The men lifted their chins in response.

As Marcus argued with a silent Gabe about heading to the infirmary, Finn watched Shaw toss an arm around Hell Squad's lone female soldier, Claudia Frost. Somehow, Shaw had convinced the deadly, dark-haired woman to take a chance on him. The two were crazy in love, and the sight of them made Finn grin.

While Hell Squad's job was over, Finn's wasn't. He had to take care of the love of his life. He circled his Hawk slowly, running through the mental checklist of things he needed to inspect.

In the air, she was hidden by a state-of-the-art illusion system that blurred her visually, and made her near-invisible on raptor scans. She ran on a small thermonuclear engine, and with her four rotors shrouded, she was virtually silent.

He moved around to the front of the Hawk, and gave the metal an affectionate pat. "Good job today, baby."

Then he frowned, noting a small patch of what looked like melted metal. Raptor poison must have touched it. He made a mental note to get maintenance to check it out. The damn stuff could burn through anything. Luckily, this looked like a tiny, manageable spot. They only had a limited fleet of Hawks left, and they couldn't afford to lose another. He'd already had the displeasure of crashing one.

He heard footsteps crossing the hangar, in a familiar, crisp, purposeful rhythm. Finn turned his head, and zeroed in on a redheaded woman heading to the office area.

His mouth went dry. Lia Murphy didn't look his way—probably on purpose—so he took his time to study her.

The head of the drone team—the tiny quadcopters they used to gather their intel and spy on the aliens—was of average height, but that's where average ended. She had red hair—not a vibrant wine-red, but a softer red that made Finn think of sunsets. She had a downright beautiful face, and the creamiest skin that Finn had ever seen. She was slender, but there was no missing the full breasts and the gentle curves under her clothes.

She was also annoying, opinionated, and not to mention a hell of a kisser.

For a second, Finn was tossed back to that adrenaline-fueled moment that took place on his Hawk on a previous mission two weeks ago. Hovering over an alien warship, having just taken out the drone killer that had been attacking their drones, Lia had kissed the hell out of him.

"Erickson? Erickson?"

Finn blinked and focused on a stocky, older man in baggy coveralls standing in front of him.

“You want your baby fueled?” the man asked.

“Ahh, sorry. Yes, sure thing, Keith.”

The old man shot him a strange look and ambled off, and Finn shook his head, trying to focus. He had work to do. He shouldn't be thinking of luscious redheads, no matter how beautiful they might be. He patted the side of his Hawk again. She was the only woman he needed. She didn't argue with him, she didn't twist him up in knots, and she always did as he asked. That was everything he needed.

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Lia Murphy sat straight in her chair, listening to the jumble of talking going on around her. It was one of their daily meetings in the Command Center. Marcus from Hell Squad was talking in his deep rasp that made Lia think of gravel and smoke.

“There were more raptor vehicles out on this last mission,” the man said. “They're hitting us hard.”

General Adam Holmes—the man in charge of security and military operations—nodded. “Our intel is suggesting that. The intel team, with help from the drone team, is slowly increasing our intelligence picture on the aliens. And you're right, we are seeing more alien vehicles on the ground.”

“And pteros.” This came from Finn Erickson.

Lia didn't look in his direction. The Hawk pilot had confidence down to a fine art. Lia had been a commercial pilot before the invasion, and had met a few combat pilots. Finn fit the mold. Confidence bordering on arrogance.

“So where are they building all these vehicles and pteros?” Cruz asked. “On their mothership?”

The aliens' huge mothership was sitting at Sydney Airport. It was an enormous monstrosity, but Lia couldn't see them manufacturing large vehicles inside of it.

Nikolai Ivanov stepped forward. The dark-haired man was the civilian leader of the Enclave. “We don't know yet. We need to keep looking.” The handsome artist looked in Lia's direction. “Lia? Report?”

She cleared her throat and stood. “We have more drones coming online, and we’re focused on training more drone pilots.”

From behind her, Finn snorted. She ignored him. The man didn’t believe flying a drone made you a pilot. *Idiot.*

“The two flight simulators we’ve set up for training are working out really well. We’ve asked for volunteers with any sort of flying experience, and we have a good-sized group we’re running through the simulations for flying both the drones and the Hawks.” She took a breath. “Out in the air, we’re slowly covering all the area across Sydney and the regions beyond with the drones. Getting a picture of raptor numbers and their infrastructure.” She frowned. “We do have an area where the drone feed is getting jammed frequently. It’s happened several times.” She looked over at Elle Milton, who was seated behind a comp. “Elle, could you pull up the map for me, please?”

The brunette nodded, and a map appeared on one of the many screens on the wall.

“The area is north of the city, what was originally the Central Coast. Every time we send drones into that area, they get jammed. I suspect the aliens are protecting something.”

“What was there before the invasion?” Niko asked.

“It was resort towns, and weekend homes for people who lived in Sydney. Nothing I can think of that would be that interesting to the Gizzida.”

Holmes stroked his chin. “Okay, Finn, can you please plan a mission to get up there? We need eyes on the ground to see what’s going on.” The general’s laser-blue gaze circled the room. “I don’t need to remind you all how important it is that we fill in all the gaps in our intel grid.”

Lia knew it was vital. They needed to have a full picture of the aliens, so they could plan out a strategy to drive the raptors away for good.

“Our other priority,” Niko added, “is establishing reliable contact with the other human bases around the world. We already know of the underground base at Groom Lake in Nevada, and a few smaller ones scattered around the globe. But the aliens have been jamming our contact with them for a long time now. We get partial messages that aren’t very clear. We don’t know their status, if they’re still functioning.”

Still alive. Lia heard the unspoken words echo in her head.

And following that thought, the familiar sting of grief flowed through her. She knew the people most important to her hadn’t made it. It still hurt, even after two years.

“How?” Roth Masters asked. The muscular man was the leader of the almost-all-female squad, Squad Nine. “How can we stop the aliens jamming our long-range communications?”

“The tech team is coming up with a plan,” Holmes said. “Noah?”

Noah Kim stepped forward. The tall man always made Lia think of a pirate, with his long, dark hair combined with an intense, narrow face, and a near-permanent scowl. The man was a genius. “The aliens have blocked our long-range comms because they’ve managed to destroy the infrastructure between us and the other havens. My team is working to devise what we’re calling an amplifier. It’s a device that can boost the signal. We are designing it to be watertight, so it can be dropped in the ocean and stay hidden beneath the water. It’ll do its job, and hopefully remain invisible to the aliens.” He looked around the room. “Anyone want me to go into the technical details?”

“No!”

“Nope.”

“No need.”

Lia hid her smile. The squads had been subjected to Noah’s tech talk in the past, and they weren’t fond of it.

Holmes gave a faint smile. “I don’t think that’s necessary. Thank you, Noah.”

Finn was frowning from where he stood, leaning against the wall. “How far out does this thing need to be dropped?”

Noah’s face darkened. “At the moment, far. As in, middle-of-the-Pacific far.”

*Oh, no.* Lia straightened. “That’s impossible.” She knew the Hawks weren’t designed to fly that kind of distance. They were made for short-range combat. “We don’t have any aircraft that can fly that far.”

During the invasion, the Gizzida had very purposefully destroyed airports and aircraft. There were no supersonic craft left that could make the journey in a fraction of the time. Lia’s fingers twitched. She’d flown supersonic jets before the invasion. For a second, she let herself think about that moment when you went supersonic. The slight jerk, the feeling of speed. God, she missed it.

“Once we’ve finished making the amplifier, I’ll let you know.” Noah shrugged. “We’re still working on the prototype, and I’m hoping we’ll be able to devise a way for it to travel itself. That way we can drop it offshore and let it do its thing.”

Lia didn't think the man looked particularly hopeful.

"Well, if we keep drowning in pteros, we won't be able to get even one kilometer offshore to drop this thing," Finn said.

The general nodded. "Let's find out where the aliens are manufacturing their vehicles. Make that a priority."

There was a flash of movement, and Lia saw a handsome man in dark trousers and a crisp white shirt step forward. She knew Devlin Gray was a key part of the intelligence team. "Santha and I will make it our team's priority." He glanced at the head of the intel team.

Santha Kade nodded.

"Okay, everyone." Niko shoved his hands in his pockets. Lia noticed a streak of blue paint on his jeans. "Remember, enjoy your downtime. We don't want anyone to get burned out."

The meeting was over. As everyone started to move out of the Command Center, Sakura—one of Lia's best drone pilots—fell into step beside her.

"Enjoy your downtime. You know why he says that?" the tiny woman asked with a smile.

"Because we're in the middle of a stressful fight for survival? Because it's important to stay sane and find some pleasure where you can?"

Sakura shook her dark head. "The man is snuggled up with Mac from Squad Nine." The woman waggled her eyebrows. "I can only imagine what kinds of things a sexy man like that gets up to in his downtime."

Lia shook her head with a smile. She pictured Mackenna "Mac" Carides. The second-in-command of Squad Nine was a tough, no-nonsense soldier. "I'm not sure Mac snuggles."

Sakura watched Niko stride out of the room. "I bet she does with him."

Lia had to admit, his jeans did great things for his ass. And walking right behind Niko was Finn. He was dressed in black cargo pants, and they did equally good things for the pilot's ass.

She felt a traitorous curl of heat in her belly. Finn might be overconfident and arrogant, but he was good-looking arrogant. He had tousled blond hair, painfully blue eyes, and a body he honed to muscled precision. Hawk flying could be demanding, and Finn made sure he was in peak condition for his job.

Lia blew out a short breath. She wasn't supposed to be thinking about Finn Erickson. She stomped down on her desire. Getting attached to people in this crazy world of theirs made no

sense. She'd already had a vital part of her ripped open, broken, and smashed. She would never, ever risk caring for, or loving someone, again.

She looked at her watch. Besides, she had a date to train potential new pilots. That's all she could care about.