



## Chapter One

It was too damned quiet.

Roth Masters studied the ground below from his birds-eye view. He moved the controls and the Darkswift—a sleek, powered, two-man glider—turned left.

Not a single alien to be seen. Just the way it had been for a full week. Not that you could forget what had happened. Below, the ruins of Sydney spread out before him. Shattered buildings, burned-out vehicles, overgrown parks and gardens. There wasn't much left to tell you it had once been the beautiful harbor capital of the United Coalition of Countries.

He lifted his gaze and spotted the alien ship in the distance. It sat on the remains of Sydney Airport's runways. It looked like a giant beast, crouched and ready to dive into the water nearby.

Shit, he could hardly believe he'd been inside that ship just a few days ago. While he was there, he'd helped destroy the aliens' power source.

But while the raptor patrols weren't back out in the streets yet, he could see lights on near the ship. His jaw tightened. They were recovering.

"No sign of any raptors," a sharp female voice said. "Not even a lost canid."

He turned his head and eyed his second-in-command. Mackenna Carides was small, but tougher than the carbon fiber of his armor. "Nope."

They were both lying on their stomachs, with the heads-up display in front of them and the dark canopy enclosing them in the cockpit. He knew Mac loved to fly, and Roth, after a beer or two, could wax pretty lyrical about the Darkswifts himself. He wished he'd had them when he'd been a part of the Special Operations Command with the Coalition military.

Now, Squad Nine used the Darkswifts to infiltrate raptor territory and spy on the aliens, or to provide backup for any of the other commando squads from Blue Mountain Base who came into the city to fight the aliens.

Usually it was Hell Squad—the roughest, toughest squad on the base.

Speaking of which...Roth tapped the control screen. "Steele? You there? See anything on the ground?"

“That’s a negative, Masters.” The gravelly voice of Hell Squad’s leader came through the comm line.

Roth turned the Darkswift again. On the ground, he spotted the six members of Hell Squad moving down a rubble-strewn street. They were all in black armor, carbine weapons up.

Off to his left, he caught sight of two blurred glimmers in the sky. The rest of his squad. Taylor Cates and Camryn McNab were paired in one Darkswift, while Sienna Rossi and Theron Wade were in the other. The crafts’ illusion systems were up, rendering them near-invisible to the aliens’ sensors, and blurring them visually.

Squad Nine didn’t have a nickname like Hell Squad. But with Roth and Theron as the only two men, a few people had tried to give them some pretty lame ones. Roth smiled to himself. Once, someone at one of the base’s Friday night parties, after too many homebrews, had called Squad Nine the Harem.

The women, some of the best soldiers he’d ever served with, had taken offense. After that, no one had ever dared to mention the word harem again. No one had even dared give them another nickname. His smile widened. His squad was tough, a little mean when riled, and it was best not to cross them.

They reminded him of his little sister, Gwen. She would have been exactly like the women on his team. His smile dissolved away. If she’d ever had the chance to grow into a woman.

Roth’s gut tightened, and he forced the ghosts of past failures away. His only focus now was on fighting the aliens. He had to be better, faster and smarter. He had to make sure no one on his team got hurt.

An explosion of shouts from Hell Squad knocked Roth out of his thoughts.

“Fuck me. What the hell is that?”

Roth recognized the voice of Hell Squad’s sniper, Shaw. Roth peered out the cockpit windscreen, but the Darkswift had moved too far around. He tapped the controls. “Turning back. Anyone got a visual?” he asked his team.

As the glider turned in a sharp but graceful arc, he heard an indrawn breath through his earpiece.

“Boss, I can see it.” It was Taylor. The brunette was the best shot on his team, and had eyesight like a bird. “It’s some sort of...crocodile-like alien. Not sure how to describe it, but it can *move*. It’s attacking Hell Squad.”

Finally, the Darkswift leveled out, and Roth got a good look down below. “Hell.”

The alien did look like a crocodile, but not like any living today. This sucker had long legs, and was galloping toward the squad, leaving a trail of water from the harbor. The damn thing had been lying in wait.

Hell Squad opened fire with their laser carbines, concentrating their blasts on the creature. It had tough, dark skin and long, snapping jaws filled with sharp teeth. It also had those demonic, red glowing eyes all the aliens possessed.

And dammit, the laser fire wasn’t making much of a dent in the animal’s heavy, protective scales.

“Hell Squad, get out of range. Squad Nine, aim your fire on the creature.” Roth glanced at his second. “Mac?”

“Got it.” She thumbed the controls, lining up the Darkswift’s laser cannon to aim at the giant alien creature. Her brow was creased in concentration.

A second later, laser fire spewed from the three Darkswifts, lighting up the afternoon air with traces of green.

This time, the creature stopped. It spun in an ungainly circle and then raced back toward the water.

“Keep firing,” Roth yelled. “Take it down.”

But the creature appeared impervious to the laser cannon. It ran at full speed back toward the harbor, looking more like some giant dog than a crocodile. Then it leapt into the water with a huge splash.

The Darkswifts ceased fire. Roth circled over the water, but soon all he could see were tiny ripples in the near-smooth surface. No sign of the alien.

“Roth,” the calm, competent voice of Squad Nine’s comms officer, Arden, came through the line. “A raptor patrol just appeared on the screen. Five hundred meters to the east.”

Each squad had comms officers back at base, who fed them intel gathered by small drones. Arden was quiet, competent and dependable. When she spoke, they listened. Roth muttered a

curse. He'd known the aliens' absence had been temporary, but they'd hoped it would last longer than this. "Steele—"

"We see them, Masters. Engaging."

Roth flew overhead, ready to offer assistance.

It wasn't necessary.

Roth watched Hell Squad do what they did best. They mowed through the humanoid alien raptors like some sort of living machine, even though the bastards were all over six and half feet tall and made of pure muscle. He listened to Shaw and the others yell and make smart-ass comments. Roth shook his head. If he didn't know better, he'd say that Hell Squad had missed fighting the aliens.

"Raptors are down," Marcus said. "Thanks for your help, Nine."

"You got it, Marcus." Roth nodded at Mac. "Heading back to base. Hell Squad, a Hawk is en route to pick you up." Even as Roth said the words, he saw the dark shape of the quadcopter appear in the sky as it dropped its illusion. Its four rotors were spinning and it was descending right to Hell Squad's location.

Once he knew that Marcus' team was taken care of, Roth turned his craft to head west.

"Okay, Nine," he said. "Let's head back to base."

Almost as one, the three Darkswifts wheeled around and fell into formation, one on each side of Roth's craft. With their destination locked in, and the ground beneath just a blur, Roth's thoughts turned dark. Today's encounter confirmed that the aliens were heading back into the streets. They'd be rounding up more and more human survivors to take back to their ship, to shove into alien tanks and to strap down in labs to experiment on.

He let out a long breath. This battle with the aliens continued to feel like they were taking one step forward, followed by three steps back. Humans needed more intel; they needed an edge, something bigger. Something much more damaging. They were never going to be able to defeat the aliens and survive as a species if they just kept annoying the aliens like a swarm of insects.

They had to hurt them.

Santha Kade's team of recon officers was doing a great job of sneaking into alien territory, gathering intel, and getting back out. They were working on the problem, trying to find

something—anything—that might help tip the balance and finally let them win this damn war. It just wasn't happening fast enough for Roth.

He knew better than anyone that you couldn't get complacent. His chest constricted. You had to push forward, you had to take the offensive. If you just waited around, people died.

He also suspected there was someone on base who knew more—much more—about the aliens than she was sharing. And he didn't like that one bit.

“What's put that mean look on your face?”

He didn't look at Mac. As his second-in-command, she'd gotten damn good at reading him, and it was annoying as hell. “Nothing.”

Mac snorted. “Liar.”

Yeah, he was. Because he was thinking about a woman he'd pulled out of one of those damn alien tanks. A woman who'd fought him with a skilled fierceness he reluctantly admired.

A woman who could give him exactly what he needed—he just had to put more pressure on her until she cracked.

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Avery juggled the heavy box in her arms and tossed the last few vegetables in.

“Hey, careful with those,” snapped a voice.

She turned and hid a grin. “Quit bitching, old man. I won't hurt your precious carrots.”

Old Man Hamish—all weathered, wrinkled skin and spiky gray hair—huffed out a breath, but she could tell he was trying not to smile. Everyone else tiptoed around the man who kept Blue Mountain Base's hydroponic garden blooming and well-stocked, but Avery didn't. She knew that under the cranky bluster he was just lonely. She'd had a lifetime of experience spotting lonely.

“You are a mouthy one,” Hamish grumbled, plucking at his checked shirt.

“And you love it.” She cocked her hip. “Why worry about the carrots and potatoes? They're just going to get chopped up and tossed in a pot.”

“Because I want them to taste good. People in this rabbit warren deserve something nice.”

Avery's smile melted away. That was the truth. "I'll take good care of them. Like I always do." She'd been reduced to agent in charge of vegetables. It was a far cry from her job as a special agent for the Coalition Central Intelligence Agency.

Forcing the frustration away, she turned her attention back to the box.

Hamish's cloudy blue eyes narrowed. "Still got you slaving away in the kitchens?"

"We all have to help out."

"You should do what you're good at," the old man said. "I'm pretty sure that ain't chopping and stirring."

A heavy knot tied up her insides. Once, she'd prided herself on being good at her job. At protecting people, and defeating the bad guys.

Then she'd failed, and that failure had killed billions of people.

"The medical team won't give me clearance." She'd been among those rescued from an alien lab. And even though she'd been lucky and hadn't suffered any injuries, the doctors were being cautious. It grated. Avery wanted to be out there fighting, not in here cooking. "And anyway, I'm not sure what I'm good at anymore, Hamish." Avery hefted the box higher, not sure where those words had come from. "Besides, I enjoy coming down here and trading barbs with you too much."

Hamish crossed his arms and scowled. "You'd do better on the squads, going out there and fighting those damn aliens."

That knot got tighter. "Thanks for the vegetables, Hamish. See you later." She pushed open the door with her hip and escaped.

As she made her way down the tunnel, her shoes echoed softly on the concrete. She tried not to think about the past, but it slammed into her like a hard punch to the gut.

Well, some of it did. There were a lot of blank patches and blurry memories she couldn't make out, no matter how hard she tried. Out of the ones she could recall, there were some memories she wasn't certain were real or imagined.

At the junction of three tunnels, she turned left, heading for the ramp up to the kitchens and main living quarters. After living here in Blue Mountain Base for the past several weeks, she knew her way around. It was home to hundreds, a haven from the alien apocalypse above.

An apocalypse she'd been tasked with preventing. *Yeah, you did a brilliant job there, Avery.*

A headache sprung up behind her right eye and she gripped the cardboard box tighter.

She'd been the golden child at the Coalition Central Intelligence Agency. Special Agent Stillman had been on the rise, bringing down bad guys, fighting terrorists, protecting the Coalition's citizens.

Her headache spiked up a notch and she hoofed it up the ramp. She remembered when the aliens, the Gizzida, had made contact with the Coalition. She remembered the initial negotiation meetings...then nothing. Nothing until she'd been yanked from a tank in the alien's huge Genesis Facility by the base's squads. She'd woken, disoriented, with huge holes poked in her memories.

And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember where she'd been the last year.

Frustration grew inside of her, and Avery powered down the corridor more quickly, turning a corner and nearly mowing down someone. "Oh...sorry."

"No problem." Elle Milton smiled at Avery. "It's Avery, right?"

"Yes." Avery knew she shouldn't be wary of the pretty, dark-haired woman. But she knew that Elle was the comms officer for Hell Squad. Avery lifted the box an inch. "I need to get these to the kitchen."

As she started back down the corridor, Elle settled into step beside her. Avery swallowed a groan.

"I'm heading to the landing pads. Squad Six is on their way back."

Squad Six was Hell Squad's official name. Avery just nodded.

"And Squad Nine. They were out on recon." The woman wrinkled her nose. "Came across a new kind of alien."

Oh, Avery wanted to pepper Elle with questions, but she wasn't an agent anymore...she was just a kitchen hand with a memory like Swiss cheese. Instead, she bit her tongue and made an appropriate noise.

"How are you settling in?" Elle asked.

"Fine." Avery winced. Oh, that didn't sound terse or defensive at all.

The other woman just smiled. "I don't see you around much."

"Chef keeps me pretty busy in the kitchens." *And I spend the rest of my time in my quarters, either trying to remember, or working out to regain my fitness.*

A bright smile lit up the woman's face. "The man is a genius. Crazy that aliens can invade, and we can all still eat well." Her gaze traced over Avery's. "If you need to get out, or need someone to talk to, I'm always available."

*Right.* When she wasn't shackled up with one of the most dangerous men in the base—Hell Squad's leader, Marcus Steele. Avery just couldn't work out how the pretty former socialite and the rough, scarred soldier went together. But Elle had an almost incandescent look on her face. One that screamed happiness, even in the middle of hell.

Avery felt a sharp stab of...something. She shook her head. It was crazy to care for someone when the world had gone to hell. Especially someone who went out there every day to wade through it. As far as Avery could see, Elle's happiness was on shaky ground. "Thanks. I do need to get back."

Elle's smile dimmed a little. "Sure thing. Bye."

Avery quickened her steps. The door into the kitchen appeared ahead. Elle seemed nice, but Avery just couldn't seem to make herself befriend people. Part of that was learned from her time being shuffled around the foster care system. You befriended people and cared about them at your own risk. The next day, someone would be there to take you away, and your new "friend" would be gone.

The other part of her wanted to scream at everyone—*I'm the one responsible for all of this. You living deep underground, dressed in second-hand clothes and all your loved ones dead, because of me.*

She wasn't sure she could be free and easy, like Elle. And she was damn certain she'd never radiate happiness.

Avery reached the door, jammed the box between the wall and her hip, then slapped a hand to the door lock. She quickly grabbed the box again and as the lock beeped, she pushed through the door.

Delicious scents assailed her. She had to admit, the food in the base was good. Definitely much better than the frozen dinners she'd lived on before. Since she'd been pulled from that alien tank—and thank the lord, she hadn't been in there long enough to start the transformation from human to alien—she'd quickly gotten used to eating well here at Blue Mountain.

The man in charge, General Adam Holmes, ran the base with smooth precision, and she couldn't fault the work he'd done. He'd worked hard to transform the former military base into a home—with living quarters, a school, an infirmary, and dozens of storage rooms for any and all scavenged goods they could find. Still, at the end of the day, it was a military base as well, home to those squads who went out to fight the aliens every single day.

“Took your time, Av.”

Avery set the box on a shiny silver workbench and looked up at the enormous man nearby.

The massive giant of a man didn't seem to have a name, going simply by Chef. He was six foot eight with massive shoulders, skin the color of black coffee, and most often a wide, easy smile. He was the friendliest man she'd ever met...unless you messed up any of his food.

Then he could be downright cranky.

“Keep your hat on, Chef. I had to work my charm on Old Man Hamish. You know he begrudges every floret of broccoli that leaves his gardens.”

Chef made a harrumphing sound. “Bring it over here. I need to get that spinach in the stew.”

She set down the vegetables he'd asked for. “Heaven forbid we don't have enough spinach in your masterpiece.”

“No respect,” Chef muttered, but his teeth flashed white in his face.

She shook her head, smiling. “Temperamental.”

“Don't know why I put up with you.”

Avery started unpacking the rest of the vegetables. She knew they were lucky to have the fresh stuff at all. The shelves behind her were stacked with cans and dry goods that had been scavenged over the year and a half since the invasion, but slowly those stocks were dwindling, and eventually, they would run out. “You put up with me, Chef, because no one else will work with you.”

“We both know you won't stay working in here for long.”

Her hand paused, clutching a leek. She deliberately placed it on the chopping board. “Trying to get rid of me already?”

“Nope. But, girl, you have skills...they'll decide to use them.”

Avery closed her eyes. First Hamish, now Chef. She should have kept her mouth shut about her past employment. It was true, she wanted to be out there, fighting, helping bring these aliens

down, but for now, she was grounded. “I have some pretty mad kitchen skills, too. You need them.”

Chef snorted. “Girl, you can barely boil water. That’s why I make you chop and stir.”

She shot him a smile...just as the kitchen door slammed open. She turned and froze. *Not again.*

Roth Masters strode in, still wearing his lower body armor. On top he wore a simple, faded, green T-shirt that stretched across a broad chest and shoulders. The neckline was soaked with sweat and his dog tags hung in the center of his hard chest. His rugged face was set in hard lines, his sandy hair falling over his forehead, and his ice-blue eyes were laser-focused.

On her.