



## Chapter One

“I cannot *believe* that moron,” Camryn McNab muttered.

From behind her on the Hawk quadcopter, she heard snickers from her squad mates. She whipped around to glare at them. God, even their leader—rough, rugged Roth Masters—was grinning.

“It is not funny,” she insisted.

“I think it looks pretty,” Sienna said. The small, curvy brunette looked like she should be in a kitchen baking, not decked out in carbon fiber armor, about to head into a battle with invading dinosaur-like aliens.

Cam pointed to the combat helmet on her head. “He put an *H* on my helmet...in *rhinestones*.” Even though she couldn’t see the offending letter, anger was a wild churn in her belly. The man could light the fuse on her temper faster than anyone she’d ever known. “And he glued them on with some high-tech adhesive.” When they’d been prepping for their mission, and she’d discovered the tampering, she’d tried to pry the rhinestones off, but they weren’t budging.

At the back of the Hawk, Taylor Cates started laughing. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail and as she doubled over, it fell over her shoulder. “Can you picture big, bad Hemi with sparkly rhinestones?” She held her middle as she laughed.

Beside Taylor, their second-in-command, Mackenna ‘Mac’ Carides, was biting her lip to fight back a laugh. Hell, even quiet, stubborn Theron was smiling. He’d been doing that a lot these last few days, since he and Sienna had turned from friends to lovers.

“Go ahead, laugh it up,” Cam said darkly.

Hemi Rahia, bane of her existence, wouldn't know what hit him when she got back to base.

He was a soldier on Squad Three—a group of men also known as the berserkers, for their wild fighting style. He was also a big, muscled, tattooed, aggravating moron.

“Coming up on the targets,” a male voice called back from the cockpit. Their top Hawk pilot, Finn Erickson, was at the controls today. Beneath her, Cam felt the quadcopter move into a turn.

Cam put any thought of pranks, revenge, and Hemi out of her head. It was time to focus on their mission.

Over a year and a half ago, aliens had invaded Earth. Almost overnight, she'd gone from a member of the United Coalition Airforce's Combat Support Squadron, protecting airfields, aircraft and personnel, to a member of Squad Nine.

Home was now a former underground coal mine, called the Enclave. All the fighting squads were made up of survivors from former military and police groups, or—in the case of the berserkers—people from questionable backgrounds who knew how to fight. Her squad consisted of a bunch of kickass ladies, their fearless leader Roth, and big, quiet Theron. They were tight, and she was proud as hell that they made an awesome team.

Now, they fought to protect the inhabitants of the Enclave, as well as to defeat the Gizzida. Her jaw tightened, and she pressed a hand against the wall of the Hawk. Cam liked fighting back. She looked out the side window at the setting sun. It was New Year's Eve, and she had no idea what the new year would bring. None of them did.

Would they finally be able to beat the Gizzida, and all the strange and terrifying creatures they used as weapons? Would humanity survive to rebuild their world?

She shook her head. Her thoughts were turning far too melancholy and deep.

“Let’s get this mission done.” They were off to destroy a large pack of hellions—alien hunting dogs, with poison-filled bellies. She straightened and looked at her friends. “I want to get back for the big party tonight.”

Everyone at the Enclave was excited for the party. She knew how important it was for everyone to blow off a little steam, and celebrate all the little good things that they still managed to find in the middle of this alien apocalypse. Cam wanted to drink, dance, and find some hottie to kiss at midnight.

She recalled a certain moron had taunted her on their last mission to rescue Theron and Sienna from an alien encampment. In alpha-male style, he’d already claimed her New Year’s kiss.

*In your dreams, Rahia.*

“I want to get back to the party, too,” a deep voice said, interrupting her thoughts.

Cam narrowed her eyes suspiciously on Theron. The man hated parties. “You just want to bang Sienna’s brains out.”

Theron tilted his head, his face thoughtful. “Yep.”

Since her friends had hooked up, they’d been inseparable. They were so damn perfect together. The big man and the sweet soldier. Cam saw pink fill Sienna’s cheeks as she stared at her man.

It was sweet, but it wasn’t for Cam. *No, no, no.* She was *not* built for long-term. Fun, easy, and sexy...that was what she liked, and frankly, all she could manage. She came from two people incapable of love.

*No.* That wasn’t true. Her parents were only capable of toxic, soul-destroying love.

She felt the Hawk start to descend. Out the window, she could see a strange, red-orange glow ahead.

Roth shouldered in beside her. “What the hell is that?”

They were south of the Enclave, but the landscape still consisted of rolling, green hills. Between two hills was a large, pockmarked patch of ground. It looked like it had been bombarded by meteors. Each of the holes glowed orange from underground.

It reminded Cam of a trip she’d taken to Hawaii once, to see the lava field near the volcano on the Big Island.

But she knew this strangeness had nothing to do with volcanoes and everything to do with the aliens.

“Whatever it is, it’s not our priority,” Roth said. “I’ll pass the intel on. For now, the drone team reported a large group of hellions in the area, and they’re getting too close to the Enclave. We need to clean them out.”

Mac swung her carbine off her shoulder. “Let’s do this.”

Moments later, the Hawk was hovering above the ground and Roth slid the side door open with one powerful shove. “Time to go hunting.”

Cam leaped out, her boots hitting the grass. The sunset had turned the western horizon brilliant shades of orange and pink. She raised her carbine, the feel of it familiar under her gloved hands. She moved into formation with her squad, falling in behind Mac.

“Anyone see the hellions?” Mac murmured.

Cam saw green grass, clumps of trees in the distance near a farmhouse, and that eerie orange glow in the distance, but no mangy beasts.

“Squad Nine.” The cool, feminine voice came through their earpieces. Arden was their comms officer, who sat back at base, feeding them intel. “You have a pack of ten hellions inbound.”

“Ten?” Sienna shuddered.

“Be ready,” Roth said, tone hard.

“There!” Mac yelled.

Off to the left, Cam heard the yips and snarls. A pack of scaled, spiked, alien dogs was bounding toward them. Each animal had a powerful body, spikes along its back, slavering jaws filled with sharp teeth, and glowing-red bellies filled with poison.

Squad Nine opened fire, green laser blasts whizzing through the twilight. Cam aimed, taking down the first alien hunting dog. Its belly burst open, spraying out corrosive red fluid. Other hellions fell, their angry snarls and howls of pain filling the air.

“Grenades out.” Theron’s deep voice.

Cam watched as the grenades sailed through the air. They were made with cedar oil, which for whatever reason, the hellions and the closely-related canids, found strongly repulsive.

As the grenades exploded, sending up a fine mist, she watched the hellions scatter in a chaotic frenzy, spinning and snapping at each other. Several turned and ran into the growing darkness.

“Take them down,” Roth ordered.

“On it.” Taylor was down on one knee, holding a long-range laser rifle. Cam watched as, one by one, the fleeing dogs fell. Taylor was good. She might even give Hell Squad’s charming sniper, Shaw Baird, a run for his money.

“More hellions coming in from behind you,” Arden said.

As soon as Arden spoke, a low growl reached Cam’s ears. She spun and spotted the incoming hellions.

“On our six,” Cam called out.

She fired on the animals, but these particular ones had wised up. They dodged the laser fire, bounding closer.

Roth lunged past her, a large combat knife in his hand. As one giant hellion leaped at him, he jumped into the air to meet it.

Roth was a badass. Cam swung her carbine onto her shoulder, and pulled her dual laser pistols from the holsters on her thighs.

As the other hellion came at her, she held her weapons up, walking calmly toward the creature as she fired.

Its belly exploded and she leaped back to avoid the sizzling poison. The red fluid splattered the ground, rapidly eating through the grass and dirt.

Cam turned and watched the final hellion fall under Sienna's carbine fire. Cam looked at Roth and saw him stand, then lean down to wipe the blood off his combat knife.

Cam sucked in a deep breath, adrenaline pumping thickly through her veins. Taylor smiled at her and Cam smiled back. All in a day's work for Squad Nine.

"All hellions on scans have been neutralized," Arden said. "Get back to base, Squad Nine."

"Arden, there is an area southwest of us," Roth said. "Pockmarked ground that's glowing orange. It has 'Gizzida' written all over it."

"Passing that intel on to the drone team. We'll have them investigate." The cool, elegant woman rarely sounded flustered. "For now, it's getting dark, and there have been reports of alien swarms just south of your location. Time to get back to base."

Cam kicked the carcass of a hellion out of her way. She did not want to run into a swarm of bat-like aliens that could pick flesh off bones in seconds. At least the suckers only came out at night. "Plus, we have a party to get to."

“There’s the Hawk.” Roth waved them toward the incoming quadcopter.

The Hawk had dropped its illusion, its gray hull visible. As it descended, it kicked up dust around them.

Cam leaped aboard, followed by her squad mates. As the Hawk rose, she turned back to stare at the strange orange glow in the distance. For a second, she thought she saw shadows moving over the glow. Then Roth slammed the door closed.

Shaking off a sense of foreboding, she turned to her friends. “Party time, people.”

Sienna dropped into a seat, grinning. “I’ve got a super-sexy dress to wear tonight.”

Cam watched Theron’s gaze sharpen on his woman. Smiling, Cam dropped into her own seat, stretching her long legs out in front of her. She had a sexy little dress of her own to wear tonight. Not that she was dressing up for anybody. Just herself.

However, if an annoying, helmet-interfering jerk happened to see her, she was going to make sure he got a good, long look at what he couldn’t touch.

She closed her eyes. A party was just what she needed. She’d dance, get a little buzz from some homebrewed beer, and she’d find some fun in the middle of this shitty alien apocalypse.

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Hemi Rahia strode up to the large double doors. They swooshed open and he stepped into the Enclave’s Command Center.

His squad mates and his brothers were already down at the New Year’s Eve party, but Hemi had something he needed to do first before he joined them.

Through a glass wall, he saw the drone team operators hunched over the controls of the drones out in the field. But he pulled his gaze back. He wasn’t interested in the drones today. He

spied some of the comms officers sitting in front of their comp screens, and zeroed in on one dark head.

“Hey, Arden.”

At the deep rumble of his voice, the brunette swiveled, her eyes widening. “Hemi.”

She was pretty, in a neat, elegant way. Not Hemi’s style, he preferred attitude and fire. But the one thing that caught him was what he saw in her eyes—a heartbreaking sadness.

He cleared his throat. “I’m after an update on Squad Nine’s mission.”

“It went fine. They’re on their way home, and eager to get to the party.”

Something tight in Hemi’s gut eased a little. “Good.”

A small smile tilted Arden’s lips. “I heard about the rhinestones.”

Hemi shoved his hands in the pockets of his cargo pants. “How mad was she?”

Arden pressed her tongue to her teeth. “Mad.”

Hemi grinned. *Good*. He and Camryn had been circling each other for months. Most days, it felt like a fucking lifetime. The woman had personal armor stronger than carbon fiber. And she could run. Hell, she had the legs for it, that was for sure.

But tonight, it stopped. Tonight was the beginning of a new year. It was time for him and Cam to begin new things.

“Thanks, Arden,” he said. “See you at the party.”

Her smile dissolved. “Maybe. Happy New Year, Hemi.”

He headed out of the Command Center and down the corridor in the direction of the dining room, where the party was being held.

Hemi knew winning the war against the aliens was a long shot, but he also knew that he, his brothers, the other soldiers—they'd never stop fighting. They'd fight to keep kids safe, to protect the survivors who'd made it this far, to give humanity a chance.

But that didn't mean life didn't go on.

He thought of his mother. His Ma had lost her husband and been left to raise three rambunctious boys alone. She hadn't complained, she'd just gotten on with it. Surrounded by family back home in New Zealand, she'd made a home for him and his brothers. And eventually, she'd met a good man, and Hemi had scored an amazing stepdad who'd instilled in him a strong sense of right and wrong.

And his Pa had also given him a great example of how you treated the woman who was your everything.

Hemi liked women, and liked being buried deep inside their warmth and softness. God, they smelled sweet. But his Pa had told him that with the right one, the one who was worth the trouble, everything was so much better.

And Hemi knew Camryn McNab was his.

Every gorgeous, courageous, attitude-filled inch of her.

Now he had to convince her of that...if only he could get her to stop running.

He heard the music and laughter coming from the dining room. He pulled up short. The room had been transformed. Blue-and-silver fairy lights flickered all around the darkened room. A disco strobe light cast bright sparkles across the packed dance floor. A few older couples were swaying beside a group of teens bumping and grinding to the music.

All of the dining hall's tables and chairs had been moved to one side of the room, and a large number of people were sitting, eating and drinking. Nearby several long tables were filled with

food. He saw a huge black man with one arm missing near the tables, barking orders at some of the kitchen staff. Chef had run the kitchens at their old base in the Blue Mountains. He'd been injured on their race to the Enclave, but he was clearly getting back on his feet.

Hemi spotted his squad, grabbed a homebrewed beer from the buckets near the door, and headed their way.

They were a scary bunch of badasses. Big, tough, inked...and he'd never fought with a better team.

His brother, Tane, was sprawled in a chair, cradling a beer between his knees. He had his dreadlocks pulled back at the base of his neck, and his gaze was angled toward the dance floor. It looked like he was brooding.

Brooding was standard MO for Hemi's little bro. Tane had seen too much in the jungles of South America, working as a mercenary. Hemi had eventually gone to work with him, specializing in kidnap-victim recovery. They'd lost a few, and rescued a few who'd never be the same...hell, some of the stuff they'd seen was enough to turn Hemi's iron gut.

Still, nothing was as bad as the horrors the Gizzida cooked up in their labs.

Hemi turned his head to follow Tane's gaze. It didn't take him long to find the pretty little silver-haired woman. Their resident alien was dancing with the teens, her skin and hair glowing under the bright lights.

Selena had pale, silver-white hair, and even paler skin. Tonight, someone had decked her out in a glittery blue dress, and she was smiling. He grinned. The woman had no rhythm at all, but it looked like she was having fun. She was another person snatched by the raptors and abused, but since the squads had rescued her, she was slowly blooming. He couldn't imagine how it felt to be so far from your planet and everything you knew, with no way home.

Hemi looked back at his brother. Yes, Selena was blooming and his jaded, hard-ass brother seemed to be very aware of that. *Interesting.*

The rest of his squad mates were gathered nearby. Ash Connors was leaning against the wall, his colored ink displayed by the rolled-up sleeves of his dark shirt. The women fucking loved the man's pretty face, but for some reason, he was solo tonight. Come to think of it, Ash had been showing up solo for a while now.

Ash's best friend, Levi King, was sitting near his friend, a pretty, giggling schoolteacher in his lap. Levi's hair was pulled up in the man bun they all gave him hell for, and he was grinning indulgently at the woman.

The other two berserkers, Griff and Dom, were talking quietly. A couple of women were eying the two, trying to get up the courage to approach them. Hemi snorted. Yeah, good luck with that. The former cop and ex-con, and the former mafia enforcer were dangerous and moody as hell. He knew they fucked women when it suited them, but for the most part, they enjoyed doing the chasing.

His friends all fought hard, partied hard, and did whatever the fuck they wanted.

He scanned the room, trying to see if anyone from Squad Nine had arrived.

"Hey, Hemi."

A beautiful woman who barely reached his shoulder moved in close to him. Her dangerous curves were packed into a red dress and a cloud of dark hair curled around her face. He stifled a sigh. He'd fooled around with Sal a few times at Blue Mountain Base and she'd made it clear she wanted to take it further. The woman was nothing, if not persistent.

"Hey, Sal."

“Got any plans tonight?” She stroked her hand down his arm. “I’d like to rock your world to welcome in the new year.”

“Generous, but I’ve got plans.” He scanned the room again. Big plans.

Sal pouted, but nodded. Casual sex wasn’t frowned on since the invasion. In a world gone to hell, where so many people had lost their loved ones, being close to someone was sometimes the only thing that helped get people through the long, dark nights.

And living confined in such a small space, people were forced into close proximity.

“Have a good one,” he told her.

She looked back over her shoulder. “You’re missing out.” She blew him a kiss.

He sat down beside Tane and his brother raised a brow. “You have plans?”

“Yep.” Hemi sipped his beer.

From behind him, Levi snorted. “About time. Your balls must be blue by now, Rahia.”

Hemi shot the man a finger. “You seem very worried about my balls, King.”

Levi smiled. “We all know which sexy Amazon you’re panting after. Can’t say I blame you.”

Hemi lunged out of his chair, but Tane grabbed his arm and yanked him back down.

Levi didn’t even flinch. The man’s grin just widened, and he sipped his drink.

Hemi knew his friend was just yanking his chain. He sat back, waiting and watching. He tried to calculate how long it would take Squad Nine to get back, and then shower and change. All around him, people were dancing and laughing and drinking. He spied a couple kissing wildly in a shadowed corner.

Finally, he saw Roth enter, with his arm around his partner, Avery. They headed over to where Hell Squad was hanging out.

Anticipation licked at Hemi’s gut. She’d be here soon.

Next up, he saw Mac and Taylor appear. Both the women were looking gorgeous in slick little dresses of bronze and green, respectively. Mac made a beeline towards Niko, the Enclave's civilian leader. The man yanked his woman in for a hard kiss. Taylor was only a few steps behind, heading toward her man, Devlin.

Theron and Sienna appeared. The couple had only just tumbled head-over-ass in love, and they'd done it in the middle of a dangerous mission. Hemi and his squad had been there to help rescue them from the middle of an alien encampment. Theron kept a possessive arm around Sienna, who looked cute as hell in a red dress with spots on it. They had a glow about them that said they'd done more than shower after getting back from their mission.

And then there she was.

Cam stepped into the room, looking around.

*Holy fuck.* What the fuck was she wearing? Hemi's hands tightened on his beer. She was wearing a black dress, but there was nothing simple about it. The hemline was short, showcasing her absolutely fabulous legs. On top of that, the neckline dipped low in front, practically to her waist, and was covered in some sort of silver beads that shimmered in the light.

It was too easy to imagine his hand bunching up that tiny skirt and wrapping those long legs of hers around his hips.

He took another sip of his drink.

Hell yeah, tonight she was his.