



## Chapter One

He planted his boot in the middle of the alien raptor's gut and kicked.

The six-and-a-half-foot dinosaur-like alien fell back with a grunt. Ash Connors lifted his carbine, aimed it straight at the bastard's scaled chest, and fired.

Behind him, Ash heard shouts and then a man's wild laughter. He turned his head and saw the rest of his squad—all wearing dark, scarred armor—taking down the remainder of the raptor patrol. They were standing on an abandoned city street, in the once busy and bustling Sydney, former capital of the now-destroyed United Coalition of Countries.

Big, bearded Hemi Rahia was smiling as he sprayed carbine fire around and finished off another raptor. Beside him, his intense brother Tane, their squad leader, fired his carbine in quick succession, taking down another of the scaled, humanoid aliens.

*You fuckers picked the wrong planet to invade.* Ash spun, aimed, and fired some more shots.

Nearby, the sunlight glinted off a pair of knives as Dom Santora lunged and slashed at two raptors. His moves were so fast that Ash could barely see the whirl of the blades. On the other side of Dom, Griff Callan relentlessly fought hand-to-hand with another huge raptor. It didn't matter that the alien towered over Griff by several inches. The former cop and ex-con was powerful, and filled with a dogged determination. It also helped that they all wore battle armor that contained slimline exoskeletons, which made them a match for the bigger, stronger aliens.

A husky female voice came through Ash's earpiece. "Three more raptors just popped up to the north of your location. Coming out through a burned-out bank building. Take them down, Squad Three. Make it hurt."

Indy Bennett was their comms officer. She was safely ensconced back at the Enclave, watching drone feed and sending them intel. But not being physically in the fight didn't hide her bloodthirsty streak.

"Ash, watch out!"

Levi King's shout made Ash swing around. He spotted his best friend, the man who was his brother—even though they didn't share blood—sprinting toward him. Like the rest of his squad, Levi didn't wear armor on his arms. As he ran, he pumped his muscled arms, his chest splattered

with raptor gore. He swung his carbine up and leaped into the air, kicking out as he went up, and sprayed carbine fire behind Ash.

Ash dropped to his knee, sighting down the scope. Several raptors burst up from under the pavement, concrete and dirt flying everywhere. Shit, the fuckers had been lying in ambush. One reared up in front of Ash, swinging out with a giant, clawed fist.

Ash ducked, rolled, and came up beside Levi.

His friend grinned. "Ready?"

"Bring it," Ash replied.

Together, they opened fire, the two of them working in unison. They moved forward steadily, keeping up the hail of laser fire. They mowed down the last of the raptors.

When they were done, no raptors were left breathing. Levi let out a laugh and pumped a fist into the air. Ash lifted his carbine up to his shoulder.

"Time to get out of here, Squad Three." Tane's deep voice was a low growl, with a touch of New Zealand in it. His dreadlocks framed his hard face as he pressed a finger to his ear. "Indy, send in a Hawk. We're ready to head back to base."

"You got it, boss-man," Indy answered. "Quadcopter is en route."

"What the fuck is that?" Hemi said.

Ash looked down into the hole where the raptors had been hiding. Inside, giant cables—some as thick as his chest—lay in a tangle. They pulsed and glowed with a red light.

The raptors—proper name for the bastards was the Gizzida—had advanced tech that combined electronics with organics. These cables were scaly, and the way they pulsed reminded him of blood vessels.

"Get some pictures," Tane said.

Griff stepped forward and pulled out a recording device.

"I'll take a closer look," Ash said.

Tane inclined his head. "Do it."

Ash leaped down into the hole. They'd been sent out to this location because the drone team had picked up huge power fluctuations in the area. He looked around. "Looks like an old tunnel. Maybe it was used for maintenance or storm water drainage?"

He touched a gloved hand tentatively to one of the cables. It looked like a giant snake. Damn, they were ugly. What the hell were the aliens doing with them? He took one last look

around in the dimly lit passage, then hoisted himself out of the opening and back into the sunlight.

“The Sydney Advanced Distributor Tunnel System isn’t far from here,” Levi said. “It was dug out about a decade ago, when the traffic problems in the inner city got too bad. There’s an entire system of traffic tunnels under the city center.”

Ash’s gut tightened. “And now the Gizzida are using it. Protected and out of sight. Damn.”

A muscle ticked in Tane’s jaw. “Get the pics. We’ll take the intel back to the general, and see what he wants to do about it.”

As Griff took more images, Ash walked over to an overgrown strip of grass near the crumbling sidewalk and scrubbed his boot against it to clean off some of the gore.

“Fuck me.” Beside him, Levi grinned and stretched his arms over his head. “I’m pumped after that fight. I need a woman. I could fuck all night long.”

Ash shook his head and smiled. Levi fought hard, played hard, and lived hard. He always had, even when they were boys. Levi had taken over the Iron Kings Motorcycle Club in Sydney at the age of twenty-one, in a messy coup. He’d been young, but he’d fought, bled for it, and sacrificed everything to pull the club out of the darkness their old leader had sunk it into.

Levi had always been brilliant with bikes, cars, and engines. He could make anything purr—from a modified motorcycle, to a custom car, to a woman. And Ash had been by his side through almost all of it. Since the aliens had invaded, the world had turned into a fucked-up place, and the Iron Kings were long gone. Ash paused for a second to think of his lost brothers. Through everything, there was one thing Ash had never doubted, and that was Levi’s loyalty. His best friend was loyal to the bone.

“You need a pretty, energetic thing, too, bro.” Levi swung his carbine up onto his shoulder. “Take the edge off.”

“You worrying about my love life, King? You want to paint my nails, too?”

Levi snorted and together they walked over toward the others. “Where you stick your dick is up to you. But you have been spending a lot of nights alone.”

Ash cast a look at his friend and saw a glint of worry on Levi’s face. “I’m fine, Levi.”

His friend studied him hard. “If you’re not, you let me know.”

Ash lifted his closed fist and they bumped knuckles. They’d first bumped knuckles as six-year-olds, after they’d beaten the hell out of each other behind the Iron Kings clubhouse. Ash

couldn't remember, but he was pretty sure their fathers had been inside drinking or fucking. In the battle to prove who was the bigger six-year-old badass, it had turned out to be a draw, and a lifelong friendship had been forged.

And now, for two years, they'd been fighting the invading aliens. The Earth had been devastated, leaving pockets of humanity to run, hide, and fight for survival. He and Levi had joined the Squad Three berserkers and were part of the frontline, pushing back against the aliens. This was a dark, dirty job, and some days it was a heavy weight.

"Hawk's here," Tane called out.

Looking up, Ash caught a glimmer in the blue sky above. The quadcopter was coming in with its illusion system up. As it neared the ground, it dropped its illusion, and he studied the dull, gray hull and the four spinning rotors. The aircraft ran on a small thermonuclear engine, with the rotors shrouded, so it was silent, giving no sign of its presence—with the exception of the dust it kicked up around them.

It hovered a couple of feet above the ground, and Tane leaped up on the skid and pulled the door open. They all jumped inside.

"Welcome aboard," the pilot, Finn Erickson called back from the cockpit. "Clear skies are forecast, but buckle up in case of any alien-induced turbulence."

"Just fly the Hawk, Erickson," Hemi hollered.

Levi settled back in a seat. "When we get back to the Enclave, how about we grab some dinner, a few beers, and then we find some feminine company?"

"Beer sounds good," Ash said. "After that, I have—"

"—plans." Levi's gaze narrowed. "Is it a woman? You holding out on me, Connors?"

Ash leaned back. "You sure you don't want to paint my nails?"

From behind them, Hemi chuckled.

"Fuck you," Levi said good-naturedly, dropping his head against the headrest.

Tane slammed the door closed, and a second later, the Hawk shot upward into the air. Ash stretched his legs out in front of him, and crossed them at the ankles. He turned his head to look outside, catching one last glimpse of the strange cables buried in the ground. He was sure the geek squad would be able to work out what the hell the aliens were doing, and how to stop them.

*The geek squad.* Instantly, his thoughts turned to a pretty, curly-haired member of the tech team who watched him with a wary gaze. Marin Mitchell, who looked cute as hell, had a husky

voice designed to drive a man to think dirty thoughts, and a brilliant mind. He exhaled slowly, picturing her sweet curves.

The Hawk banked at that moment, and Ash's attention turned back to the window. The ground below was nothing but devastation, stretching out as far as he could see. His hands curled into fists. He had grown used to seeing it. The abandoned houses, toppled skyscrapers, burned-out shops, overturned vehicles, and overgrown yards and parks. All destroyed. He knew it was the same all over the planet. Every now and then, though, it hit him hard that the world as they knew it was gone.

He released a frustrated breath. He knew better than anyone that anything good never stayed around. Once, he'd tried to take what he wanted, grab onto his passion and build a better life for himself. He tasted the sweet and the fresh, but then life had slapped him down. Life always turned around and slapped everybody down.

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. If there was one thing he'd learned in life, it was not to reach for things he didn't deserve.

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“DINNER. NOW.”

Marin Mitchell huffed out a breath and lifted her gaze to look at her boss. She had her glasses on, so it took a second of blinking before her vision adjusted, and his hawkish face came into view. Noah Kim had a handsome face, and straight, black hair and dark eyes, thanks to his South Korean heritage. As usual, he was scowling.

“I've got work to finish,” she said.

Noah crossed his arms over his chest. “You haven't stopped all day. I don't need you fainting in my tech lab.”

Marin eyed the stacks of alien data cubes piled on her desk. She'd gotten data off a bunch of them, but some had extra layers of encryption, and she was determined to break them. They'd been brought in a few weeks ago by one of the berserkers. The image of the handsome, sexy man with gorgeous, colorful tattoos that traveled up and down his arms drifted through her head.

Then she squelched it. She wasn't supposed to be sitting here daydreaming about badass men who were so far out of her league it wasn't funny.

She picked up one of the cubes. "I'm close to breaking the encryption on these last cubes. I got through one, and the info on here talks about an alien data hub. Some central hub where the aliens are storing their information. *All* their information, Noah."

Noah's gaze was unwavering. "That's great. Dinner. Now."

With a huff, Marin set the cube down. "You know you're bossy, right?"

"Yep."

She followed him out of the tech lab, passing around benches loaded with bits of electronic wiring and computer guts.

"I don't know how Laura puts up with you."

Noah shot Marin a look, and then smiled. It relaxed his entire face, and made him even more handsome. "I make up for my bossiness in other ways."

Marin held up a hand. "Please, don't say anything else. I don't want to know." She didn't need the mental images of the couple in her head underscoring her own lack of any sort of romantic relationship.

They headed out into the hall. Laura was Captain Laura Bladon, head of the interrogation team and prison cells. To say that the arrogant Noah and the serious Laura had struck sparks off each other initially was...an understatement. But now, the fiery couple was one hundred percent, passionately in love.

Marin had never been in love.

A sigh escaped her. All her life, she'd dreamed of having someone who loved her for her. Someone who looked at her and got that same hot spark in his gaze she saw in Noah's when he looked at Laura.

But Marin had been the typical too-smart, too-geeky, too-absorbed-with-other-things student at school. She didn't know the first thing about wearing trendy clothes, or putting on makeup. As her jeans and baggy, blue-checked shirt attested, she liked to be comfy.

It hardly mattered what she wore. The good-looking guys at school had never given her a single glance. At university, some of them had wised up a little and she'd dated a bit. But no one had ever really set off any sparks.

She pushed her glasses up, and headed into the dining room after Noah. It was then she realized that her shirt had an ink stain on the front of it, and her untamable hair was in a messy nest of curls that she'd tied up on top of her head. She was pretty sure she'd lost a pen in there, somewhere, too.

*Oh, well.* Not much she could do about it, and besides, she wasn't trying to impress anyone.

In the dining room, many of the Enclave's residents were already seated at tables, laughing, chatting, and eating. She followed Noah over to where some of the other tech team guys were already hunched over plates of food.

"Sit. I'll get you a plate." When he stalked off, she barely resisted poking her tongue out at his broad back.

The guys at the table called out hellos. They were an amazing team to work with. The Enclave had some of the world's best tech minds, and once they added Noah and the remnants of the team from Blue Mountain Base, Marin had to admit they were pretty darn formidable.

She sat down beside Eric, a lanky guy with sandy hair in need of a cut, and glasses. "Hey, Marin. How are the cubes coming along?"

She nodded. "Getting there."

"You playing in the Pre-Emptive Strike battle tonight?" Eric's blue eyes lit up. "Everyone's going to be playing, and looking to take you down."

She smiled. This was the other reason she'd been pushing so hard to get her work finished. The computer game was one of the highlights of her life. "I'll be there. And I'm gonna kick your ass."

Some of the others responded to her comment with wisecracks and good-natured grins. Eric smiled. He really was cute in a sweet, geeky way. If only she'd felt a spark of attraction to him...

"You want to team up?" he asked hopefully.

Her heart knocked against her ribs, and she gave him a small, apologetic smile. "I already have a fight partner." Excitement sizzled through her. She couldn't wait to sign on tonight and join up with him again. Since they'd connected in the game a few weeks ago, they'd played together almost every night, and become an unstoppable duo.

Eric's face fell. "Right. The mysterious SuperSoldier3."

“Yes.” Marin scanned the table, and then the dining room. She had no idea which gamer geek was her mystery fight partner. She swallowed. She just prayed he wasn’t some teenage boy pretending to be older.

A part of her screamed at her to ask SuperSoldier who he was, but another part was too afraid. They played well together, and then stayed online on the base’s network afterward, talking. Sometimes for hours.

She knew his childhood hadn’t been great. His mom had left, and he and his sister had been raised by his dad. Who, to Marin, didn’t sound like he’d win father of the year. SuperSoldier had confessed he’d gone to college, been so excited to start a new life, but his sister had gotten mixed up with drugs, and so he’d dropped out to help his dad. He’d ended up working in the family business.

Marin had told him about growing up with a never satisfied mother and an oblivious father. She’d told him about feeling more than a little awkward in social situations. She knew she wasn’t terrible to look at, but parties or social gatherings made her uncomfortable, and it was hard work to keep a smile on her face. She’d told him about loving her work, and her driving need to learn and figure out problems.

She really liked him.

Every time she was online, she thought about asking his real name. But, truth be told, she was too afraid she’d be disappointed, or worse, *he’d* be disappointed if they revealed their true identities. She didn’t want to ruin the fantasy.

A commotion at the doorway made her look up. A group was entering the dining room. *Hell Squad*. Her breath hitched as she watched them. Marcus Steele strode in, his arm around his wife, Elle. They made such a fascinating couple. The battle-hardened soldier, and the smart, sweet comms officer. The big, tough man was completely in love with Elle. They gave Marin hope that one day, even in the chaos the world was now, she’d find something like what they had. Although Elle was also a former socialite. She was the kind of woman that Marin’s mother would have loved to have as a daughter. Helena Mitchell had been constantly perplexed by her daughter.

The woman who followed Marcus and Elle made Marin sit up straighter. Claudia Frost was the only female soldier in Hell Squad. The woman was tall, tough, and badass. She was wearing khaki cargos and a dark T-shirt, walked with a slight swagger, and exuded confidence. She was

Marin's hero. Oh, who the hell was she kidding? She was Marin's girl crush. Claudia was everything Marin wanted to be in her dreams.

A man followed one step behind Claudia. With shaggy brown hair that contained gold strands, and an easy smile, Shaw Baird was pretty easy on the eyes. He slung an arm around Claudia's shoulder and the woman elbowed him in the gut in response. But a second later, he pulled her in for a quick kiss, and Claudia clearly didn't mind.

The rest of Hell Squad and their partners followed behind. These were the men and women who went out there every day to fight the Gizzida. Every day, they risked their lives to keep the Enclave safe. They were heroes.

Marin knew she was doing her part with the tech team. They kept the power on, the water hot, and the systems running, and they helped decode alien tech and information for the squads.

But she knew it wasn't nearly the same thing as putting on armor, picking up a carbine, and climbing into a Hawk to face the aliens.

She toyed with the food on her plate, only half-listening to the flow of conversation around her. She always felt like this...always on the edge, trying to do her best, but never feeling like it was enough. Like she was enough.

*God, Marin. You're in the middle of an alien apocalypse. Suck it up.*

Suddenly, she heard the sound of deep voices and raucous laughter filled the room.

Another group entered the dining room, and the air caught in her lungs. The berserkers had arrived.

She watched, riveted, as the all-male squad passed through the doorway. The berserkers were rough, tough, and dangerous. From what she'd heard, they didn't all have military training. In fact, a few of them had rather dubious backgrounds. Former mercenaries, bikers, criminals...

They were the most amazing men she'd ever seen, and she could admit that something about them made her insides quiver. They were all big, muscled, and covered in tattoos. She glanced around the room and noted more than a few women staring.

The head of the squad, Tane, had brown dreadlocks that fell around his dark, intense face. His brother Hemi was shorter, and a little broader. He had a dark beard and a booming laugh. Both men's arms were covered in amazing Maori-style tattoos.

Griff was talking with Dom. The former cop had hair clipped short and a powerful body. She knew Griff had gone down for some crime, and she wondered again just how a cop survived

in prison. In comparison, Dom was all darkness. He moved in a fluid, elegant way that made you want to just watch him walk. He had a lean face, black hair and black eyes. Something about him always set off Marin's hindbrain, telling her to hide or run.

Levi had his gold-streaked brown hair pulled up in a man-bun at the back of his head. If any of the tech team tried that hairstyle, she knew they'd look silly. Levi, however, did not.

Then her gaze fell on Ash Connors.

Her pulse spiked. He was a little more handsome than the others, but no less sexy or dangerous. Both his arms were covered in sleeves of ink in shades of black, red and blue. She loved looking at those tattoos. Every time she did, she saw different images in them.

As she watched, two women sauntered up to the berserkers, all smiles and flirty looks. Levi grinned at a curvy brunette and tugged her in close. The other woman, who was tall with a fall of honey-blonde hair, leaned into Ash.

Marin looked down at her plate. Those were the kind of women big, wild, sexy men liked—gorgeous, confident, and sexy. All the things she wasn't. She glanced at her watch. There was still a bit of time until the Pre-Emptive Strike battle, but she suddenly wasn't hungry anymore.

"I'm off." She grabbed her dishes, stood, and nodded at the rest of her team. "See you on the battlefield."

After she cleared away her dinnerware, Marin headed back to her room. She liked the Enclave. It had been purposely built in an underground coal mine to serve as a sanctuary by the Coalition's former, and very corrupt, president. There was a lovely garden, a hell of a computer system, and even artwork on the walls to brighten the place.

After pressing a hand to her door lock, Marin stepped into her quarters and flicked on the lights. She knew it was the same as others in the base had—small living room with a kitchenette, and a bedroom off to the side with a tiny bathroom. It wasn't much, but it was home, and she was grateful for it.

She'd loaded her bookcase with books she'd snagged from wherever she could find them, and had a kickass computer and screen set up at the desk pushed against the wall. She eyed the widescreen. She'd scavenged the parts for the comp herself, and knew she had one of the sweetest gaming setups in the Enclave.

Marin took her time changing into some comfy, cutoff jean shorts, and a clean T-shirt. Then she cleaned up the clothes she'd dumped on the floor over the last few days. She wasn't the

messiest person in the world, but when she got busy with her work, she sometimes let the housework slide. She wrinkled her nose. Housework was so overrated.

Finally, she glanced at her watch. She stroked the face of the men's watch. It had been her father's. It was all she had left of her absentminded, smart, but loving dad.

Her pulse jumped. The game was starting. She sat down at her computer and pulled on her headset.

Time to kick some ass.