



Chapter One

She loved the feel of a carbine in her hands.

Kate Scott paused, her gaze scanning the rolling, green field ahead. It wasn't that she liked killing people. As a career Army officer, and now head of the security team at the Enclave, it was more that she liked knowing she could handle whatever came her way.

Especially if it was an alien raptor.

Her hands tightened on her weapon. Nope, she didn't mind killing the Gizzida. The aliens had invaded Earth two years ago and promptly decimated the planet. All the cities were in ruins, and most of the planet's population was dead. Any survivors were fighting for their lives, or held in captivity, enslaved by the raptors.

Kate pulled in a deep breath, then released it slowly. This pretty, green field was south of Sydney—once the bright, busy capital of the United Coalition—and didn't give any clue to the devastation the rest of the planet had suffered.

Beneath her, far underground, lay the Enclave—a purpose-built sanctuary for human survivors. Built by the lying, murdering, and thankfully, now-dead former president. For over a year, Kate had lived here, thinking she'd been on the righteous side of the fight.

Until survivors from Blue Mountain Base had arrived. Men and women who'd been busy fighting back and saving others, while Kate had been blissfully hiding out. Old guilt nipped at her. It didn't matter that the survivors were now fully integrated into the Enclave, and that they were all working together to fight the aliens and survive. She hated that she'd been an ignorant fool.

"It's so nice to be out in the sunshine."

The voice beside her made Kate turn her head. Kendra was a new member of Kate's team. The young blonde had begged and pestered Kate until Kate had allowed her to join. Right now, decked out in carbon fiber that made her look like she was playing dress-up, the young woman had her head tipped up to the blue sky.

Kendra smiled. "I love the safety of the Enclave, but I miss the sun and fresh air sometimes."

"Enjoy it, but stay focused," Kate said.

The young woman's smile faded and she nodded. "Of course."

Kate stifled a sigh. Pre-invasion, Kendra would still be at university, going to parties, dating, and pondering her career choices. There was a bright, eager look on the young woman's fresh face. God, she made Kate feel ancient. Kate had joined the Army straight out of school, gotten her engineering degree, then lowered her head and made a career in service to the Coalition.

She'd been good at it. The order, structure, and sense of purpose had suited her.

After her disastrous and short-lived engagement at twenty-eight, the years had somehow whizzed by. Before she'd known it, she'd been in her late thirties. She'd turned down several promotions to stay in the job she'd loved. And while she'd dated off and on, she'd never felt fireworks. She'd never met a man she'd wanted to keep around or start a family with.

Her fingers tensed on the metal of her carbine. Looking back, the men she'd dated had been good men, well-matched, but they'd never been... hot-blooded or wild with desire for her. Kate had long ago accepted that she was not a passionate woman.

When she'd been selected for a special operation providing presidential protection, at first she'd been honored and thrilled. It had come at just the right time. Her gut curdled. She'd had a mission under her command go wrong—horribly wrong. She'd been ready for a change. As it turned out, President Howell had fooled them all. She'd protected and defended the bastard, and all the while, he'd been bargaining with the aliens to ensure his own comfort and survival. And he'd tossed the rest of humanity under the bus in the process.

“Captain?”

Kate blinked at Kendra. Shit, she'd just warned the woman to stay focused and here Kate was, ruminating.

“Let's keep moving,” Kate said. “We need to check the security around all the Enclave entrances.”

Kendra's shoulders straightened. “Yes, Captain.”

They skirted a clump of trees, checking the Enclave's hidden entrances. Kate studied the ground, ensuring there was no sign of the Gizzida or any tampering.

The aliens knew the general location of the base, and unfortunately, they'd even made it inside once. After that incident, Kate had worked hard to block that part of the Enclave off, and ensure the rest of the main base was safe.

She walked onward, the grass crunching under her boots. She frowned. In most places, the grass was long and lush, but in this patch, the grass was dried and brown. She looked up and spotted another patch not far away. Had to be bugs, or something, probably.

Scanning their surroundings once more, she looked beyond another stand of trees, branches swaying gently in the breeze. This area, not far from the coastal city of Wollongong, had been a former coal mining area. The Enclave itself had been built in an old mine. In the distance, she could see the rusted ruins of an old processing plant from a neighboring mine.

“Captain, I wanted to thank you again,” Kendra said.

Kate looked up. “For what?”

“For letting me join the security team. I’ve been wanting to do something to help for so long, and I know I’m young and inexperienced—”

“You’ll learn,” Kate said. “And you shouldn’t thank me. It can be a tough job.”

Kendra nodded. “I know. But I’m helping keep the Enclave safe and protect my family.”

Kendra was one of the lucky ones who had her parents and sisters alive and with her. “So, thank you.”

God, the young woman was thanking her for letting her work hard and risk her life. The world was such a mess.

Something rustled in the trees.

Kate whipped her carbine up and saw Kendra do the same. Kate’s heart thumped as she stared down the sight of her weapon. Kendra’s fast breathing was loud but the woman was still. Lifting a hand, Kate gave a signal, and together they moved forward.

“Shit,” Kendra muttered.

Kate looked over and saw the woman studying her carbine. “What’s wrong?” Kate moved her gaze back to the trees. The rustling was louder now.

“The laser pack on my carbine just died.” The woman’s voice was panicked. “I’ve got nothing.”

Kate scowled. “Did you check it before we left?”

“Of course.”

“Pull out your backup pistol and stay behind me.” Kate touched a hand to her earpiece.

“Enclave, are the drones picking up any alien activity?”

“Nothing, Captain.” The polite, feminine voice belonged to Elle Steele, one of the comms officers. “All clear.”

Suddenly, a kangaroo burst out of the trees, bounding across the grass with a powerful flex of its legs. It didn’t even look in their direction. Kate lowered her weapon, shaking her head.

Kendra gave a nervous laugh.

As the animal bounded away, Kate glanced down at her carbine. As she watched, the lights flickered out on her laser cartridge.

What the hell?

She lifted it and pulled the trigger. Nothing. Her heart slammed against her ribs. One carbine failing was possible. It happened. They worked hard to maintain their equipment, but they no longer had an endless supply of new gear or parts. But two weapons failing at the same time...

Kate didn’t believe in coincidences. She examined her carbine and confirmed that it was dead.

“Enclave, our weapons are malfunctioning. We’re heading back to the western entrance.”

“Acknowledged,” Elle said. “The relief patrol will meet you there.”

“Thanks, Elle.” Kate glanced over at Kendra, anger churning in her gut. She hated the idea of them being stuck out here with no protection. Damn sitting ducks. “I’ll take these weapons to get checked out.”

Kate stomped through the grass. Out here, malfunctioning weapons could mean death. And to top it all off, she now needed to head down to the armory attached to the Enclave firing range and see the man who ran it.

Her body tightened, her muscles vibrating with tension. She had no idea why, but just the thought of this one particular man affected her in ways she didn't want, and certainly didn't like.

Get the job done, Kate. Drop the weapons off. Easy.

She gave herself a mental shake. She always did her job, no matter what. She'd concentrate on the malfunctioning weapons and not the big, muscled man who elicited unwelcome, annoying, and frankly uncomfortable feelings inside her.

Suddenly, she sensed something. "Down." She waved at Kendra and they both dropped to the grassy ground.

Kate scanned the sky and saw a plume of dark smoke in the air, rushing in their direction. Her pulse spiked, then she saw a shimmer and realized what it was.

A Hawk was incoming with its illusion system up, but it had been hit. She watched it pass overhead and she scanned again, making sure there wasn't an alien ship on its tail.

Not that she could do much with a useless weapon in her hand.

No alien ptero ships appeared. The sky was clear and blue.

She lifted her chin. "Let's go." She had a weapons expert to chew out.

The Hawk quadcopter barreled through the narrow ravine. The rock walls looked so close he felt like he could reach out and touch them.

Damn, Erickson was a hell of a pilot. Manu Rahia tightened his grip on the autoturret he was sitting in and drew in a deep breath.

“Aliens still on our fucking tail?” Hemi, Manu’s brother, called out.

Manu focused. The airspace behind them was clear. “Nope. Think my last shot took that ptero down.”

A hand slapped Manu’s back. “You are a hell of a shot, bro.” Hemi’s grin was wide and white in his bronze face. He was built like a tank, his dark hair pulled back in a stubby ponytail. “Just like old times.”

A feeling like sludge moved through Manu’s gut. “Yeah.”

Except it wasn’t. He wasn’t a berserker anymore. Damn, it hurt to admit just how much he’d missed this. Missed being out there fighting the aliens face to face.

He turned his head, taking in his brothers and the rest of his old squad in the quadcopter. His younger brother, Tane, the squad’s leader, stood still, gaze zeroed out the side window. Alert and prepared, that described Tane perfectly. He was tall and lean, his dreadlocks pulled back from his face.

Hemi was leaning against the wall beside Manu, grinning. Hemi laughed a lot, even more since he’d tumbled head-over-ass in love with Camryn McNab from Squad Nine. The passionate pair certainly kept things interesting. For all his humor, Manu knew his brother was far more perceptive than he let on.

Manu smiled. He was damn lucky to have his brothers here. So many had lost all their loved ones in the invasion. Family was the most important thing to him. An acute pain cut at him. Pain for his big, sprawling family back in New Zealand. He dragged in a breath. His ma and step-father had raised three wild boys to be men who gave a shit and loved their family. Manu had tried contacting the area where his parents had lived and gotten nothing. And then there’d also been his extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins.

His hands curled into fists. He knew they couldn't all have made it, and the thought fucking killed him. *Bastard aliens.*

He looked back at his brothers. He had to look after the family he had right here. He'd always known that the good-natured Hemi would gladly take a tumble for the right woman. He'd made a hell of a good choice in the long, sexy Cam. His gaze switched to Tane.

His youngest brother was a different story. Hard and composed, Tane had done shit as a mercenary, shit he'd never talked about, and it had changed him. Once, as a good-looking teenager, he'd smiled a lot, but he'd come back from the jungles of South America a different man. Working as a mercenary had knocked the soft edges out of Tane, and left something sharp and honed in their place.

Manu liked to think that, in time, Tane would still find a woman who'd soften him again and give him some beauty, some comfort, and most of all, love. But the alien invasion had made the odds of that a lot stiffer.

But, there were lots of people who were beating the odds. On the seats at the back of the Hawk, the rest of the berserkers sat. Former cop and ex-con Griff Callan had his eyes closed and beside him, former Mafia enforcer Dom Santora sat even stiller than Tane. The dark-haired man always reminded Manu of a snake coiled and ready to strike. He trusted both men with his life. In the row behind them, Levi King and Ash Connors sat, both of the former bikers laughing about something. Considering both men had just claimed two of the prettiest women in the Enclave as theirs, it wasn't surprising they looked relaxed and happy, even though they'd just been under fire.

Squad Three, known as the berserkers, were rough and tough. They played hard and fought harder...fighting back against the Gizzida aliens who'd invaded, destroyed, and were still fighting to control the Earth.

Manu had been a berserker too. He looked down. In his carbon fiber armor, it was impossible to tell one of his legs was made of metal and alloy. Impossible to tell that the fucking aliens had destroyed a piece of him.

"We're clear," Finn Erickson called from the cockpit. "Nice shooting back there. We only got hit once."

Manu craned his neck and spotted the plume of smoke behind them. "Critical?"

"Nah," Finn replied. "I'll just have to put up with the bitching from the Hawk maintenance team."

"And some teasing from your woman," Levi added. "Over who's the better pilot."

Finn laughed. "That, too."

Finn's woman, Lia, was head of the drone team. Manu thought the guy didn't sound too cut up about her teasing him.

"When you asked me on this mission, you didn't say we'd get shot at and chased by pteros," a deep voice said.

Manu looked at the final occupant of the Hawk. Noah Kim ran the tech team back at the Enclave.

"Suck it up, Kim," Hemi said. "It's good for you to get out of your geek lab occasionally."

Noah snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. "I like my lab."

"I appreciate you guys coming." Tane looked at Noah, then at Manu.

Manu shrugged. "We didn't help much."

This had been a recon mission. A few weeks back, the berserkers had discovered a strange alien device—a black octagon—hidden in a submerged dome off Botany Bay. No one knew what the hell it was, just that the Gizzida were trying to keep it a secret, and in all likelihood, it was a weapon. A weapon to wipe out the last surviving pockets of humanity.

Problem was, since that mission, the aliens had moved the fucking octagon and no one knew where it was.

“That black glass certainly looked Gizzida to me,” Manu said.

They’d just investigated a site in the Blue Mountains, where the Enclave drones had picked up an area where the trees had all been flattened by...something. In the center of it, had been black glass and the twisted, burned remains of something that looked and smelled Gizzida.

Manu, who now ran the armory and firing range, had come to offer his weapons expertise. Noah, who was a genius with all things electronic, had come to help as well.

A sense of unease moved through Manu. He was pretty certain what they’d seen in the mountains had been a test site. The aliens had tested something ugly.

They had the remains of whatever the hell it was in a strong box in the back of the Hawk. Manu and Noah would get to work analyzing it when they got back.

What they hadn’t expected was to find themselves face to face with three alien ptero ships intent on taking them down.

“Those pteros didn’t know what hit them,” Levi called out.

Manu smiled and cracked his knuckles. Of course, all three pteros were now steaming piles of ruin. Damn, it felt so good to be back out on a Hawk. A burn of anger and resentment cut through him, heavily layered with grief.

He loved working at the firing range. He had a good team, and when he wasn't busy maintaining weapons, he was studying the aliens' toys and tinkering with his own weapon designs.

But it wasn't the same as being out here, taking down the aliens. No matter how much he might wish things were different, he wasn't a berserker anymore.

"Manu, you are the shit on that turret," Ash added.

Manu lifted his chin. Except he knew someone even better than him. His thoughts went back a few weeks. To when he'd taken a ragtag group of volunteers out to provide support to the berserkers on the deadly dome mission.

He'd stood in a Hawk beside a certain head of Enclave security and watched her work the autoturret like a virtuoso.

Captain Kate Scott, of the fit body, poised face, and huge blue eyes. She screamed sensible, tough, and dedicated to her job. Except for her lips. Manu smiled. The woman had full lips that were made for sin.

"Manu?"

He blinked and saw Tane studying him. He cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Taking down aliens."

Tane tilted his head, one of his dreadlocks falling over his broad shoulder. "No, you weren't."

Damn, sometimes it was annoying having brothers who knew him so well.

"Welcome home, gents," Finn Erickson called out from the cockpit.

Manu glanced out the window and saw a field of green grass ahead. Below it, was the Enclave—home to several hundred humans trying to survive this alien apocalypse.

Hemi dropped into a seat. “Home. That means a hot shower, a beer, and my woman.”

As the others laughed, Manu looked at the check-plate floor. His gut hardened. He was happy to be home, even if he was missing the woman part of Hemi’s equation, but a part of him didn’t want to get off the Hawk. A part of him wanted to savor this moment.

But as he always did, he shook off the feeling. He had an important job to do at the Enclave and he was sure as hell going to do it to the best of his ability.