

## Chapter One

“Get us in closer.”

Holding the handgrip overhead, I looked out the open side door of the Talon quadcopter. Its four rotors droned quietly as we flew in over the dense Australian bush.

We were on the edge of the Blue Mountains, just inland of New Sydney.

And we were hunting a monster.

“Jameson, the creature is tracking northeast,” a female voice said in my earpiece. It was our comms officer, Sasha.

“*There.*” Beside me, Kaitoa Rahia pointed.

Kai was the same height as me, but leaner, and with black hair that he kept cut short. His Māori heritage was stamped all over his face. We often ran together, and the guy was fast. He also had quick instincts that had saved my ass too many times to count.

“I see it.” I studied the flash of movement in the trees below. The thing was crashing through the vegetation. “Sasha, keep tracking it. We’re going in.”

The monster reached a clearing and I got a good view of it. It was like something out of a nightmare. It lumbered on four legs, its slow movements deceptive. It had a thick, scaly hide, and several razor-sharp spikes along its back.

I lifted my carbine and checked the charge on the laser weapon. “Hunter Squad, are you ready

for some monster hunting?”

“Hell, yeah,” my squad shouted back.

I met their gazes one by one. Like me, they all wore light-weight, gray combat armor. They were my squad mates, my friends, the people I trusted to always have my back. We’d grown up together in the ruins of a world destroyed by an alien invasion. Our parents had taught us grit, toughness, and determination.

Our parents had beaten the aliens. Now, we were helping to keep the rebuilding world safe from the horrors the aliens had left behind.

Zeke and Marc Jackson were twins, both six foot five and muscular. They looked identical, with brown skin and square jaws, but their personalities were the total opposite. Zeke was always scowling, while Marc was grinning, ear to ear.

North Connors was checking his small medical backpack. The ladies loved North, and frequently referred to him as tall, dark, and handsome. He was our squad medic, and had the steadiest hands and head out of all of us. He was dedicated, triple-checked everything, and rock solid in a crisis.

The final member was our latest recruit. Scott Simms had blond hair and pale skin, and was currently fidgeting with his carbine. He’d only been with us a few weeks, and I wasn’t entirely sure he was going to make it. He was decent enough with a carbine, but he was nervous. I was keeping a close eye on him, and to be honest, I wasn’t sure I trusted the kid to have my squad’s back.

That was something my father had taught me—that you had to trust every member of your squad with your life. No hesitation. Marcus Steele had been the best squad leader ever. One day, I wanted to be as good as him.

“Colbie, swing us around,” I ordered.

Our pilot glanced back from the cockpit. “On it, Jameson.” There was a grin on her pretty face, her red hair peeking out from under her flight helmet. Then she turned the Talon on a dime, swinging the aircraft in over the clearing. No one could fly like Colbie Erickson. It was in her blood.

My gaze found the monster below, following its path through the trees. It had attacked a nearby town and injured three people. It had to be stopped.

“Hunter Squad—” I attached the rapid rappel line to my belt “—let’s move out.”

Kai and Scott flanked me, both checking their lines. I knew that behind me, on the other side of the Talon, Zeke, Marc, and North were doing the same.

“Go!” I leaped out of the quadcopter, Kai and Scott with me.

The rappel lines whizzed as we dropped toward the ground.

My boots hit the dirt, and with the push of a button, I disconnected the line. I whipped my carbine up and walked forward.

My squad formed around me.

“Let’s do this,” I murmured.

The monster turned and saw us. It threw its head back and roared.

I smiled and aimed my weapon.

We opened fire.

“Take that, asshole,” Marc called out.

The monster shuddered under the impact, then turned and ran.

“Go,” I roared, breaking into a sprint.

My squad raced through the trees. I pumped my arms, leaping over a fallen branch.

“We’ll cut it off,” Zeke yelled.

I nodded. “Do it.”

He and his brother disappeared into the dense bush.

A moment later, I came out in another clearing. It was silent. No birds chirping, no rustling in the bushes.

The monster was here.

I met Kai’s green gaze, and my best friend nodded. He was our best tracker. He dropped to one knee, studying the ground.

The creature couldn’t hide forever.

Our parents had beaten the aliens by creating a weapon that had destroyed the reptilian Gizzida. But during their time on Earth, the aliens had liked to experiment. It was how they’d reproduced. In their labs, they’d spliced their DNA with the DNA of different animals...and humans.

Some of the hybrid creatures had survived the weapon’s detonation. Now, they hid deep in the forests, lakes, and rivers. Breeding, mating, mutating further.

Every now and then, they crawled out of the shadows.

My squad and I were the ones that put them down.

I kept moving through the trees, scanning for any sign of the monster. I slapped a branch out of the way and spotted something else. A house. It was long-abandoned, with the roof caved in and the windows broken.

I lifted my hand and pointed.

Scott, Kai, and North followed me toward it.

“Looks pre-invasion.” Scott’s voice shook a little.

“Jameson, I see a heat signature to the west of your location,” Sasha said, her voice clipped and focused. “Fifty meters.” She was using satellite images to give us intel.

I swiveled to the west and saw a flash of movement. The monster crawled up the wall of the house to the roof.

“One o’clock,” I barked.

The creature let out a roar and leaped.

Strange tentacles flared out from its neck.

I whipped my carbine up and fired. The others joined in. The creature screeched, flopping onto the ground. It rolled through the dirt, then leaped up and sprung...at Scott.

*Hell.*

The monster took the young soldier down, vomiting a sticky, gray substance all over him.

I ran, swinging my carbine onto my back, and leaped onto the monster. I was careful to avoid the spikes as I yanked out my combat knife.

Gripping the hilt, I slashed down with all my strength into the thick hide at the base of the monster’s neck.

It spun, baring its fangs, and leaped off Scott’s prone form. I held on tight, riding it like the wild brumby horse my friends had dared me to ride as a teenager. I’d damn-near broken my neck back then, but didn’t plan to this time.

*Come on.* Gritting my teeth, I pushed the blade in harder.

“Jameson, get clear.”

Zeke’s shout had me leaping off the monster. I hit the ground and rolled.

My squad mate stepped into view, holding a boxy weapon with two probes on the front of it. Blue electricity crackled on the end.

He fired.

Electricity shot through the air and hit the creature, skating over its body. It jerked and shook.

The rest of the squad fired their carbines.

I slid my knife back into its sheath. Another monster bites the dust.

Then, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Something had just darted into the abandoned house.

“There’s another one,” I called out. I jogged toward the door, sliding my carbine off my shoulder.

“Jameson, do not go into the house alone,” Sasha’s voice echoed in my ear. “Wait for backup.”

I knew if she’d been here, and not hundreds of kilometers away at Squad Command, she’d be up in my face. One thing Sasha wasn’t, was shy.

“I’ve got this, Sash.”

My comms officer made an annoyed sound. “You knuckleheads never listen to me.”

“Sure we do. Most of the time.” I shoved open the door and it creaked.

Inside the house, everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. The place was abandoned, but there was furniture still in place, books on the shelves, shoes by the door. Someone, a family by the look of the toys tossed on the old rug, had called this home. I walked in carefully, my boot crunching on broken glass.

*Where are you?*

I hadn’t gotten a good look at the monster, so I wasn’t exactly sure what I was dealing with. I scanned around, then moved into the kitchen, then into another living area.

There was an old flat-screen TV on a low stand, a dusty couch, and a pair of armchairs with

some of the stuffing pulled out. I guessed that some critter had gotten into it over the decades to make a home.

This family had probably run during the invasion. I wondered if they'd made it. My jaw tightened. Many hadn't. The Gizzida had killed billions of people.

But they hadn't wiped us out.

No, for all our flaws, humans had grit, and a strong instinct to survive.

Outside, I heard my squad shouting. No doubt they had the monster contained.

A floorboard creaked.

I whirled, lifting my weapon.

A huge, clawed hand knocked the gun out of my damn hands. It flew and hit the wall.

*Fuck.*

This monster was more humanoid than most. It had grayish-brown, scaly skin, and walked upright, on two muscular legs. I was six foot three, but it towered over me by a foot. Its muscles bulged, and it had overlong arms, and glowing red eyes.

It snarled and attacked.

It hit me like a fucking tank. I whipped an arm against its neck, holding off its snapping jaws. Its face was close to mine, and its breath smelled rank. It snarled, raw hunger glowing in its red eyes.

"Not today, asshole," I gritted out.

I whirled and rammed a punch into its midsection. Damn, it was like hitting a brick wall. Sasha was shouting in my ear, but I blocked her out.

Grinding my teeth together, I shoved. We spun, and the monster slammed me into the wall. Pain vibrated through my body.

Then it whirled and tossed me.

I crashed through a wooden coffee table, and hit the floor. Something twinged in my torso.

Swallowing a groan, I pushed up. A broken table leg was right in front of me. I snatched it up.

The end of it was pointed and sharp.

The monster came at me with a roar.

I stabbed out with the table leg. It sunk into the thick flesh in the creature's midsection, and the beast roared.

"Yeah, you don't like that, do you?"

Its claws raked against my body armor. Then it pulled its fist back, and swung.

The blow sent me staggering back. My head slammed into the wall and my ears rang.

*Shit.*

I reached out, my fingers closing on the TV on the stand beside me. I gripped it hard, and with a huge swing, I aimed it at the monster.

The screen hit its head and shattered. The creature let out a garbled, angry sound.

I turned to run. A heavy blow hit my back, and I crashed to the floor facefirst.

*Shit.* The air rushed out of me, my ribs hurting. Then I lifted my head, and spotted my carbine on the floor, just ahead of me.

*Yes.* I stretched out an arm. My fingers brushed the end of it. The monster's steps made the floor vibrate.

*Fuck.* I stretched even more.

My fingers closed on the carbine, and I rolled onto my back.

The monster lunged at me, and I pressed the trigger. I fired right in its face.

Gore and blood splattered me.



Suddenly, more carbine fire joined mine.

Kai walked into the room, his expression deadly.

The monster landed heavily on my legs. Dammit, that hurt. I kicked the dead weight off me.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Kai walked over and held a gloved hand out.

I took it and let him haul me up.

“I hate when they’re humanoid,” Kai said.

“Me, too.”

We both knew it meant that this creature had some human DNA. The Gizzida had held hundreds of thousands—maybe millions—of people in their labs. Done terrible things to them.

I blew out a breath. “Thanks.”

Kai lifted his chin.

“Is he still alive?” Sasha’s sharp voice.

I met Kai’s gaze. His unique brilliant green eyes that he’d inherited from his mother were alight with amusement.

I shot him the finger. Yeah, we both knew that our comms officer would give me a mouthful about going in alone and ignoring her when we got back to base.

“I’m still breathing,” I said.

Sasha’s harsh expulsion of air came across the line. “You’re supposed to *listen* to me, Jameson Steele.”

“I do, Sasha. I promise I do.”

She made a grumbling sound.

Kai and I headed for the front door. “Is the monster contained?”

“Yeah. It’s dead.”

“Scott okay?”

Kai winced. “Ah, no. Not sure he’s gonna make it on the squad.”

*Damn.* When we stepped outside, I spotted Scott sitting on the ground. He was fine, but his expression was vacant, and he was still covered in sticky, gray monster goo.

North was with him. We often teased North for being pretty, but the guy was a hell of a medic. He had a calm demeanor that people responded to. He was a trained doctor, and I was secretly glad he also liked being a soldier.

The twins were slicing bits off the monster. Zeke was named for their uncle who had died during the invasion. Marc was named after my father, Marcus.

“Quit that, you two,” I called out.

Marc held up a fang and grinned. “These are worth good money.”

I stomped forward, hiding my limp. My hip hurt like hell and my ribs were throbbing. Dammit, it probably meant a trip to the infirmary when we got home.

“Call Colbie,” I said. “Let’s get out of here. I need a beer.”

Kai moved into step beside me. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ll get it looked at when we get back. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“You need more than a beer. You need to get laid.”

I scowled at him. “Says the man who never gets laid.”

Kai shrugged a shoulder. “I’m choosy.”

No, he wasn’t. He’d had the same problem as me. We both wanted women who were off-limits.

My thoughts turned to blonde hair, light blue eyes with dark eyelashes, and a wide smile. My

pulse jumped.

Then I squashed it.

I wasn't going there.

The woman I wanted was too smart for me, married to her job, and a family friend. Hell, she was one of my best friends. We'd grown up together, and I had no right thinking of her the way I did.

I couldn't remember the exact moment that I suddenly realized that Greer Baird had breasts, but it was some time in our teenage years. We'd gone swimming at the river, our parents on duty to keep an eye out for monsters. Greer had shed her clothes to reveal a tiny, blue swimsuit...and looking at her had felt like being hit with a ton of bricks.

As we'd grown, I'd also come to appreciate her sharp mind, her focus, and her dedication to her engineering work.

She was a good friend. I called her parents uncle and aunt.

I shook my head. Greer didn't look at me that way, anyway. Not once. It was for the best. I'd forced myself not to call her lately. She had her boyfriend. I controlled a grimace. The asshole was nowhere good enough for her.

Some distance would help me get my head on straight where Greer was concerned.

The Talon came into view overhead.

"Let's go home, people. The beers are on me."