

Chapter One

I kept my face pressed to the quadcopter window, looking out at the long stretch of golden beach below.

I'd lived in Australia for three weeks now, and I loved it. To be fair, I hadn't seen much of my new home since I'd been too busy working. But what I had seen, I liked. The weather was fantastic, the house I'd been given was cute and comfortable, and the landscape was amazing—from rolling green hills to swathes of native bushland. It was so different to where I'd grown up in Southern California.

Below, I watched the waves crashing onto the sand, mesmerized by the stunning shade of blue. The beaches did remind me of home. It was hard to imagine what it must have been like when our parents were kids, when they were able to swim and play at the beach. I'd heard stories of picnics on the sand, beach volleyball, and every inch of sand covered in towels, umbrellas, and sunbathing bodies.

Not anymore.

Ahead, we approached the remnants of a ruined seaside town. I leaned forward. The buildings were all destroyed to varying degrees, vegetation reclaiming the land and growing out through doors and windows. Several overturned, rusted cars littered the streets. My mouth tightened.

Not all parts were so beautiful.

Thirty years ago, an alien invasion had decimated not only Australia, but the entire planet.

Humans had fought back and won. The Gizzida—reptilian, dinosaur-like aliens—had been defeated. But they'd left a planet-wide trail of destruction in their wake.

"I have a visual," a female voice said from the cockpit. "Two minutes to contact with the creatures."

I straightened, my hands gripping my carbine weapon.

The aliens had also left behind horrible, dangerous hybrid creatures. In their labs, they'd mixed their DNA with that of Earth's native fauna. They'd created monsters that liked to hunt...and were hungry.

I glanced across the quadcopter, my gaze taking in the tough soldiers sitting beside me. I'd moved all the way to Australia to join Hunter Squad. They were known all over the world as one of the top monster-hunting squads on the planet. I'd done similar work with the military in the United States, alongside my science studies. My focus had revolved around researching the monsters.

No two creatures were alike. They'd mutated and bred, and held little resemblance to the animals used to create them. Every time I thought I'd found an answer on how to eradicate them, I discovered a dozen more questions.

I looked at Jameson Steele, seated across from me. He was our squad leader, and the son of Marcus Steele, legendary leader of the famed Hell Squad. Hell Squad had been instrumental in beating the Gizzida.

Marcus' son took after him. Jameson had rugged features and was a hell of a leader—strong, steady, and good with a carbine.

He caught my gaze and gave me a chin lift.

I nodded. *Yes, I was ready.*

Next to Jameson, sat Kai Rahia. Tall, leaner, with black hair and brown skin, he was the squad's second-in-command, and an excellent tracker.

Then there were the twins—Zeke and Marc Jackson. They looked near identical with muscular bodies and tanned skin, except Zeke kept his dark hair cut short and Marc's was longer and shaggy. Other than that, they were total opposites. Night and day. Zeke was quiet, and Marc talked, laughed, and joked all the time.

The last soldier on the team was our medic—North Connors.

I controlled my scowl. He hadn't been unfriendly, but he hadn't exactly been welcoming, either. It was like he'd taken one look at me, and put me on probation. I looked at him through my lashes. The man had a hell of a face—a cut jaw, handsome features. I'd seen more than more one woman flutter her lashes at him over the last few weeks.

I was used to proving myself. When I'd first joined the squads back home, I'd had to work with people who either underestimated me or felt the need to protect me. There'd been one idiot who'd leaped in front of me every time we were in a fight. I'd had to disabuse him of that instinct. I'd been raised by a single dad, and he'd taught me to stand on my own two feet. He'd always told me to never let any obstacle get in my way. My heart squeezed. I missed him. He'd died a year ago, but some days, it felt like yesterday. We'd lost my mom when I'd been a toddler. She'd been injured in the invasion, and had battled ongoing health issues in the years after.

But we had a big extended family, and dad had made sure I'd never felt the lack.

But losing dad...

It's why I'd left San Diego and moved to Australia. I shifted on my seat. Everything back

home reminded me of him. I'd had to get away.

When my Uncle Cruz—although technically he was just a distant cousin—had told me that Hunter Squad needed a new member, I'd leaped at the chance.

Jameson had been welcoming, as had the others, but North did not seem happy.

His gaze met mine across the Talon quadcopter. He had ice-blue eyes surrounded by a ring of dark blue.

I lifted my chin. No one intimidated me. I didn't know what his problem was, but I had the skills and experience to be here.

We had a little stare-off until our pilot spoke again.

"I've seen some ugly monsters before, but these ones might win the prize," Colbie said.

I wasn't the lone female on the squad. Our pilot was the best quadcopter pilot I'd ever flown with. Our comms officer—who was currently sitting back at base in the control room—was female, too. Sasha Rahia was Kai's cousin. They were both the children of other famous soldiers from the invasion.

All the people on this squad were the sons and daughters of legends. It was a privilege to be here.

Jameson rose and moved toward the cockpit. He grunted. "Ugly fuckers."

"All right, Hunter Squad—" Sasha's voice came through my earpiece clearly "—you're approaching the inhabited town of Swanhaven. The town guards spotted a small pack of monsters outside the walls today. They called us in."

I looked out the side window of the Talon. Six dark creatures were running up the beach. They looked misshapen, their gait off, but they were still fast. They reminded me of dogs...sort of.

I wished I had time to snap some images and take some notes. I had a huge database of monster types and characteristics.

Later, Jess. For now, stop the nasty monsters, then you can study them.

“Hunter Squad,” Jameson said. “Let’s do our thing.”

Marc tapped his carbine. “Let’s put down some monsters.”

I glanced at North one more time and found his cool gaze on me. Then I looked away and gripped my carbine as the Talon lowered toward the beach.

I had monsters to kill.

I double checked my medical backpack.

When we were in the field, if someone was injured—I was it. Next, I checked my weapons. My carbine was fully charged, and my combat knife was in place in the sheath on my thigh. I tapped my fist against the armor plating on my chest. We all wore lightweight, protective armor.

Time to go monster hunting.

Jameson slid the side door of the Talon open. I watched Jessica Ramos leap out. She was short and curvy, but all toned muscle. And she knew how to use her carbine.

You shouldn’t be looking at her ass, Connors. She’s your squad mate.

Gritting my teeth, I jumped out of the Talon. The sand shifted under my boots. Lifting my head, I spotted the monster pack ahead. They were making low, throaty noises.

“Form up,” Jameson ordered.

We jogged up the beach in a tight group. Despite the warm, yellow sand, no one frolicked on the beach, or swam in the ocean anymore. I shot a quick glance at the waves. A second later, the shadow of a large, sharklike shape moved through the water. The Gizzida had left monsters in

the ocean too. It was no longer safe to swim.

In New Sydney, at the famous Bondi Beach, they'd created a seawall to form an ocean pool. It was mostly safe to swim there, but the monsters still occasionally tried to climb or jump the wall.

I refocused on the monsters ahead of me. They turned and saw us coming. They made some weird, grunting noises.

They were ugly things. They moved on four legs, and had bulbous backs, with bumpy, brown, scaly skin. One of them skittered around, kicking up sand, and the skin on its back was almost translucent. Through it, I could see an ugly, greenish-yellow glow.

I frowned. I wasn't sure what it was, but I was certain that it wasn't good. "They have some sort of fluid in that back bulge. Be careful."

My squad all murmured their acknowledgment.

We'd learned the hard way that the monsters were often poisonous.

One of the pack, the largest creature, let out a grunt. As a group, they rushed toward us.

"Come to papa," Marc said.

We all aimed our carbines and fired.

The monsters shuddered under the laser fire, and several broke off, running for the nearby sand dunes. One got clear of the carbine fire and jumped at us.

Jess lunged forward, dropping to one knee, and fired up at it. The back of the monster burst, greenish-yellow goop hitting the sand. I tensed, but Jess rolled to the right and out of the line of fire. The creature's body hit the ground and twitched on the sand.

"Oh, gross," Marc said.

The sand sizzled. The stuff in its back was like acid.

"Follow the others," Jameson barked.

We turned right and ran toward the sand dunes. I heard two loud grunts, and two of the creatures rushed at us.

“No, you don’t.” Jess fired her carbine, jogging up the sand dune, focused and calm.

The creatures dodged, skittering backward.

“There’s another one still on the beach,” Zeke said. He diverted to attack it.

“I’ve got your six, bro.” His brother followed him.

Ahead of me, Jess crested the small sand dune, then froze. “Oh, fuck. Back up!”

She ran back toward me, her boots skidding in the sand.

“Hunter Squad, I’m picking up a huge bunch of signatures ahead,” Sasha said. “They appeared out of nowhere. Watch out!”

A swarm of the creatures came over the dune.

Fuck.

“They were hiding in the sand,” Jess yelled.

We sprayed them with laser fire, and I heard Jameson curse. I ripped a grenade off my belt, touched the button, and tossed it.

Jess was almost back to me. I kept firing at the crest. The closest monster to her nipped at her heels. Weirdly, its body was shaking uncontrollably.

What was wrong with it?

“Hurry up, Jess.” I aimed my carbine at it, just as it exploded.

Green-yellow goo flew everywhere.

I ducked. Some fluid splattered on the sand centimeters away. I watched the sand dissolve with a hiss.

Hell, Jess had been too close to it.

I lifted my head and saw her fall to the sand. She rolled down the dune. Jameson and Kai kept firing on the last of the pack.

Pushing up, I raced over to her.

She rolled over, her face panicked. “Shit, it burns.”

The goop was eating into her armor on her back and side. I unbuckled the straps on her chest armor and ripped it off her. “You’re okay. It’ll be okay.”

I saw her shirt had been burned through, and there was a nasty burn on her side and under her ribs. It extended around her back.

“*God.*” She hissed, biting her tongue.

“Hold on, Jess.” I glanced up to make sure Jameson and Kai had us covered, then I tore my backpack open. I yanked out a pressure injector, dialed up the dosage and pressed it to her neck. It was a dose of painkiller and antibiotics.

“That’ll help,” I told her. “Hold still.” I yanked out a tube of med gel and started spreading it generously over her burns. The enhanced gel accelerated healing.

Her tense body relaxed. I carefully treated the burns, trying not to notice her tanned skin. I half listened to the squad taking out the last of the monsters.

“Have you seen a monster like that before?” I asked her to distract her.

She ran a hand over her mouth. “No. Poisonous ones, yes. But not quite like these. None that exploded.”

I dressed the burn, pressing adhesive bandages over it. I was careful not to hurt her. “Can’t say I’ve seen them before, either.”

She was quiet for a beat. “I think that’s the most you’ve ever said to me.” Her brow creased. “You’re trying to distract me.”

I met her dark gaze. “Is it working?”

“Yeah.” She heaved out a breath.

“You’ll need a dose of nano-meds when we get back to base. You’ll be as good as new. Not even a scar.”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t care about scars.”

“It would be a shame to mar your pretty skin.”

Her gaze flicked to mine. *Hell, why had I said that?*

My gaze dropped from her liquid brown eyes to the freckles sprinkled over her nose and cheeks.

Jessica Ramos messed with my brain. I ground my teeth together. That was the only explanation for why I was excruciatingly aware of her, why being near her made my damn skin itch. I didn’t like it. I was steady, dependable. My job depended on that. Hell, people’s lives depended on it. I didn’t like when I felt out of control.

I hadn’t been keen when I’d heard she was joining the squad. We hadn’t had much luck with our last few recruits, and Jess was an outsider. She wasn’t from around here. I was worried she’d upset the rhythm of the squad. I glanced over and saw Jameson slapping Kai on the shoulder. Several dead monsters lay at their feet.

The members of Hunter Squad were like family. We’d grown up together, and I’d do anything to keep them safe.

“Those things lured us into the dunes where more were waiting,” Jess said quietly.

“Yeah.” Lately the monsters were displaying disturbing behaviors. Communicating with each other, working together. It was more than a little worrying.

“I’ve seen packs of similar monsters have a loose hierarchy.” She stared at the dead creature.

“And show some signs of cooperation, but not like this.”

I finished pressing an adhesive bandage on her wound.

“Thanks, North.” She touched the bandage.

I nodded.

Then Jess pulled out her comm unit, increased the screen size, and started taking notes.

“What are you doing?”

She didn’t look up. “I want to note down everything on these monsters.” Her fingers flew over the screen. “Description, behaviors.” Her focus was on her device.

I watched her and realized she’d forgotten I was there.

Good. I straightened and packed up my backpack. Over the last few weeks, I’d seen that Jess was a good soldier. It looked like she was going to make it as a member of Hunter Squad.

She was my squad mate. That was it. Soon, I’d think of her just like the others.

And stop looking at her ass.