

## Chapter One

“Can you see it yet?”

The Talon pilot huffed out a breath. “Not yet. Like the last ten times I told you, when we’re in visual range, I’ll let you know.”

I swallowed a growl, frustration chewing on my gut like acid. Stepping back from the cockpit, I dropped into a seat in the back of the Talon quadcopter. It wasn’t fair of me to take it out on Gavin. After all, he wasn’t our regular pilot.

No, our regular pilot had crashed, alone, in the middle of the Blue Mountains.

At night.

In monster-infested bushland.

My jaw clenched so hard that my teeth ground together. Energy rippled through my body and my hands clenched.

I wanted to fucking be there.

I wanted to find Colbie.

“We’re going to find her.”

At the deep rumble, I lifted my head to look at our squad leader, Jameson Steele.

He had a rugged face, brown hair, and muscular body clad in light-weight body armor like me. He looked exactly like the experienced soldier he was.

He leaned forward and gripped my shoulder. “Marc, we never leave anyone behind. We’ll bring her home.”

“Jameson...” My throat was thick. “She’s tiny. She’s not a soldier. I know she flies us around, and she’s amazing at it, but she doesn’t fight.”

Not like us.

We were the monster hunters.

Thirty years earlier, the Earth had experienced First Contact. But the aliens hadn’t been friendly and looking to make friends. No, the dinosaur-like Gizzida had tried to take over the planet.

They’d dropped their bombs, devastated our cities, and killed so many.

Humans, including our parents, had fought back.

The Gizzida had been destroyed...but they’d left something behind.

They’d conducted experiments during their time on the planet, injecting their DNA into the local wildlife, into humans. I sucked in a deep breath. They’d created abominations that still hunted us to this day.

“We know how bad the monsters can be.” I dragged in a harsh breath. “Colbie is out there. Alone.”

That was, if she’d survived the crash. My gut locked. I couldn’t even let that thought take root.

“We’re getting her back, bro.” My twin brother Zeke, sitting beside me, nudged my side.

Around me, the rest of the squad nodded in agreement. Kai, North, and Jess, all wearing light-weight body armor and holding their weapons, looked focused and determined.

Kai Rahia—tall, lean, with bronze skin and black hair—was the squad’s tracker. North

Connors—whom I’d heard the ladies describe as tall, dark, and handsome—was the team’s medic. Jess Ramos—North’s better half—was short, curvy, and fit. She was a hell of a soldier and our squad’s monster expert.

I nodded. “We’re bringing her home.”

I knew Colbie would be waiting for us.

She’d hold on.

I loved needling our tiny pilot. She lived up to her red hair and was feisty and opinionated. She was also the best pilot I’d ever seen. She could make a Talon do things no one else could.

“Why do you think she went down?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Jameson said. “But what I *do* know, is that it would take something drastic to take Colbie down.”

I tried not to tap my boot and worked to get a lock on my shit. This wasn’t like me. I was the easy-going twin. Zeke was the intense, moody one, while I was the life of the party.

I didn’t want to think about death. So many people had died in the initial alien invasion. Humanity had since worked hard to rebuild and protect our growing towns, but things were still dangerous. I knew life could be short. My uncle, my father’s twin, had died fighting the aliens.

Dad still felt that loss to this day.

Zeke was named for our uncle, while I was named for Marcus—head of the legendary Hell Squad who helped defeat the aliens—and who was also Jameson’s father.

I vowed every day to live my life to the fullest. We all knew how easily good things could be snatched away in the blink of an eye.

But I couldn’t stay calm and controlled now. All because of the feisty, little redhead who was in danger.

“I have a visual on the crash site,” Gavin said.

I leaped up and pushed ahead of Jameson.

Through the cockpit window, the Talon’s downlights swept over the sea of trees. It was pitch black out there; we were far from any towns, including New Sydney.

I saw a gouge where something had ripped through the trees, and the light glinted off metal.

My stomach dropped.

“Fuck,” Jameson muttered from beside me.

The Talon was in pieces. How could anyone have survived that?

*God, Colbie.*

Jameson’s face hardened as he studied the site. The light illuminated several monsters picking through the wreckage. There was no sign of Colbie.

“The trees are too thick for us to rappel down.” Jameson turned to face the squad. “We’ll have to use the new wing suits.”

Our tech guru, Maxim, had recently incorporated wing suits into our armor. He was part scientist, part inventor, and part genius. He kept our weapons and tech upgraded, and was always working on some new gadget to help us. I’d had a lot of fun testing the wing suits, but we’d never used them in an active mission.

But I didn’t care about that. Whatever it took to get down there and find Colbie.

Jameson lifted his chin. “All right, Hunter Squad, let’s do this.”

Vibrating with energy, I pressed the controls on the side panel and the side door of the quadcopter opened. The cool, night air hit me in the face.

“Okay, Hunter Squad, I’m seeing multiple monster heat signatures,” a throaty female voice said in my tiny earpiece.

Sasha Rahia—Kai’s cousin— was our comms officer. She was currently sitting back at base in the control room, monitoring the feeds to give us intel.

“Take those ugly fuckers down and bring our girl home,” Sasha added.

“Roger that, Sasha,” Jameson said.

“Be careful down there,” Gavin called out from the cockpit.

I gripped the side of the door frame and glanced out. I wanted my boots on the ground.

Jameson and Zeke stepped up beside me. Jess, North, and Kai were on the other side of the Talon.

“Let’s go,” Jameson ordered.

I didn’t need any further encouragement. I leaped out of the quadcopter and touched the controls on my armor. My helmet closed over my face, and small wings extended out from my back, controlling my glide.

As I glided downward, I aimed for the crash site. Everything else around it was dense trees. There was a *whooshing* sound behind me, as the others followed.

Monsters came into view. These were doglike, with four legs, and brown, scaly skin. As I flew in closer, I lifted my carbine.

*Steady. Steady.* I was in range.

I opened fire.

The carbine whined, green laser lighting up the night. Below me, the creatures yelped and growled.

The laser fire intensified as the rest of the squad opened fire. I circled around the crash site, trying to find a flat spot where I could land.

I landed first, my boots hitting on dirt and broken metal. I caught my balance, just as a

monster dog launched at me.

“Come on, asshole.” I fired at its head until it slumped. I spun to fire on another, as the wings retracted back into my armor and my helmet retracted. Cool air washed over my face.

The rest of my squad touched down. Zeke was closest to me, and we swiveled together, firing in sync. A monster leaped onto a rock, tossing its head back, and howled.

Zeke and I fired together. The creature shuddered under the impact, then slid off the rock.

Silence.

“Think that’s all of them.” Jameson’s helmet retracted and a flashlight on the shoulder of his armor flickered to life.

I slapped at my shoulder and my flashlight beam speared into the night. I kept a solid grip on my carbine.

Up close, the wreckage of the Talon looked even worse.

The main body was crumpled like a soda can. The four rotors had broken off. My heart pounded as I stared at the ruined cockpit.

Jameson moved forward, his rugged face grim. He heaved some metal aside, uncovering the pilot’s seat. Then his face relaxed slightly. “She’s not here.”

Emotion shuddered through me.

She’d made it.

She’d survived the crash and gotten out.

“Sasha, report back to Colbie’s family,” Jameson said. “She’s not in the Talon.”

“Acknowledged,” was Sasha’s relieved response.

I’d seen Finn Erickson when we’d left Squad Command. Colbie’s father—a decorated pilot from the invasion—had been losing his shit about Colbie’s crash. Jameson’s father, Marcus, had

been trying to keep him calm.

I stared down at the body of a dead monster. She'd made it out. That meant she was out here alone, no doubt with more monsters hunting her.

North crouched nearby. "I see why she crashed."

That's when I spotted the twisted, mangled body of the bird-like monster tangled in the Talon's rotor. It was all scales and feathers, about the size of a hawk. There were more scattered remains of the monster birds all around. I kicked one.

"I've seen these before." Jess pulled out her communicator and snapped some photos. "They come out at night, and work as a swarm."

A muscle flexed in my jaw. Colbie would've done everything she could to keep her bird in the air. She loved that damn quadcopter. "We have to find her."

Kai circled the wreckage, his gaze on the ground. If anyone could find Colbie, it would be him. Kai's dad was a former berserker, a member of Squad Three from the invasion days. Tane had been its leader. Kai's mom was an alien. Selena's species were an enemy of the Gizzida, and she'd been brought to Earth as their prisoner. She'd been rescued, and Kai's dad had fallen in love with her.

She also had some pretty amazing powers. Her species was connected to nature, and Kai had inherited some of her abilities. He could read the Earth.

*Where are you, little lark?* I stared into the darkness. Somewhere in the distance, a monster roared.

"I've got blood," Kai said.

My heart lurched and I stumbled over to him.

"Not much," he added. "She must've been scratched."

Air shuddered out of me.

Kai straightened. "I've got her trail."

"Let's move," Jameson said. "Hunter Squad, form up."

With my carbine in my hands, I moved to follow Kai.

I had no idea how he could pick up anything in the darkness, but I trusted my squadmate wholeheartedly. My carbine was up and at the ready. I'd keep the monsters off his back while he found Colbie.

As Kai moved through the trees, he paused several times, touching leaves, pressing his palm to the ground. Around me, the scent of eucalyptus filled the air, along with the damp tang of rotting leaves underfoot.

"You okay?"

I glanced at Zeke. "I'll be better when we find Colbie."

My brother was quiet for a beat. "You're...really upset."

"Yeah. She's out here alone." I met his gaze. He had the same dark-blue eyes we'd both inherited from our mother. My brother never discussed feelings. He tried to talk the least amount possible.

"What?" I prompted.

"I think Colbie means more to you than you're admitting."

"She's my friend."

"Mmm."

The noise made me tense up. "I'd feel the same if any of the squad was missing. Hell, I remember what it was like when you were taken."

That had been the worst moment of my life. We'd been twelve, and it had been Kai's sister's

birthday party. Amaia had wandered off to pick flowers, and Zeke had followed her. They'd been snatched by a monster.

It had been three days of hell. Our parents had been terrified. I'd been terrified.

Zeke was like a piece of me. He'd always been there, both of us never had to speak to know what we were thinking. We worked in sync together.

I'd known he'd been alive, I'd felt that connection. But I wasn't sure if he'd stay that way or come home safely.

Zeke gripped my arm. "We're getting her back. And if you don't want to talk about what she means to you..." He shrugged and moved in front of me.

I felt like ants were crawling over my skin. I didn't get tangled up with women. I had a good time, made sure any woman who shared my bed knew it was temporary, and I always left them exhausted from a hot, sweaty, good time. That was it.

I shook my head. I wasn't going to dissect my feelings for Colbie out here, especially not when she was alone and her life was in danger.

Suddenly, Kai jerked to a halt.

"Kai?" Jameson said softly.

"We aren't alone."

Tensing, we all formed up, our weapons aimed into the darkness.

I breathed through the adrenaline pumping through my system.

The seconds stretched into a minute. *Come on, you fuckers.*

The monsters rushed us, launching out of the darkness.

I pressed the trigger and the wash of green laser gave me a clear view of them.

There were four of them. They were humanoid, which always turned my stomach. There was

probably some human DNA in them.

They were all over six and a half feet tall, with legs like tree trunks. They had gray, scaly skin, hairless heads, and long snouts. One swung a thick branch like a club.

I could also tell there was lots of raptor DNA in these ones. The raptors had been the main Gizzida, the brains of the operation. My dad had told me they'd been fierce fighters.

I ducked the branch as the creature swung it.

Hunter Squad kept fighting. Zeke was beside me and we directed fire on the monster in front of us.

Across from us, I saw Jess and North fighting another one. Jameson was cursing as he traded blows with another. I couldn't see Kai, but I heard his carbine firing.

With a roar, my monster swung the branch again.

*Fuck this.* It was wasting our time. We needed to be looking for Colbie.

"Cover me."

Zeke moved, his laser hitting the monster's face. I slid under the branch, right at the monster's feet.

I aimed my carbine up and fired.

Gore splattered my armor. With another roar, the monster toppled like a felled tree.

Then Zeke was there, holding out a hand. I let him pull me up.

The carbine fire had stopped. With one glance, I saw that all the monsters were down. I smiled.

"Nice job." Jameson rolled one of the monster's bodies off the path.

Kai searched the ground again, then waved a hand. "This way. I have her trail."

My mouth flattened into a line and I followed him.

*I'm coming, Colbie. Hold the fuck on.*