



Chapter One

Though some might protest about being on base patrol, she didn't mind it. Mackenna Carides lifted her carbine and stepped carefully through the long grass, her gaze scanning ahead for anything out of the ordinary.

She had to admit, though, she still wasn't used to the lack of trees around their new home. This place was nothing like Blue Mountain Base.

It'd been over a year and a half since aliens had invaded Earth. A year and a half since the dinosaur-like raptors had sent down their ships and troops and decimated the planet. Mac, and her fellow soldiers in the Army of the Coalition of United Countries, had been part of the military response. Her jaw hardened. She'd watched a lot of friends die in the fighting. She'd fought for days on end, pulled survivors out of raptor claws, and finally found a haven in a secret underground military base in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney.

But now, even that was gone.

Mac ducked through a large gap in a sagging fence. Several weeks ago, the aliens had finally sniffed them out and attacked Blue Mountain Base. In a wild and dangerous move, the human survivors had formed a convoy and made a mad dash out of the mountains.

It had ended here. At a new haven built in an old underground coal mine. The Enclave.

"Man, I am enjoying the food here."

Mac turned to look at her patrol partner. Camryn McNabb was tall, slim, and gorgeous. Everyone on their squad called her the glamazon. With short, dark hair, dark skin inherited from her African mother, and that long, lean body, Cam knew exactly how to work what she'd been born with. Right now, though, she was covered with black carbon fiber armor, and she carried her carbine in an easy, familiar grip.

"We had good food at Blue Mountain," Mac said.

"Never said we didn't," Cam continued. "But that garden they have here...they grow all sorts of great stuff. Have you seen the raspberries?"

"Yeah." Mac had stolen a few—big, juicy, and damned delicious. She would never admit it to a soul, but she had a secret addiction to decadent tastes and smells. She hid her vice under her

tough reputation. At barely an inch over five feet, her fellow soldiers tended to underestimate her. She made sure they only ever did it once.

She looked over at Cam. In Mac's entire military career, she'd never been a part of a team as good as this one. All the squads were made up of survivors from every branch of the military and law enforcement. Squad Nine's leader was Roth Masters—a tough, no-nonsense soldier. Mac considered him a hell of a boss and a friend. Apart from Roth and the big, silent Theron, the rest of the squad was all women. They respected the hell out of each other, had saved each other's backs too many times to count. They worked side-by-side with the other squads, including the infamous Hell Squad, and every day, they did their bit to protect their group of human survivors and fight back against the aliens.

She scanned the landscape—rolling hills covered with green grass and stands of trees. The Enclave had been built by the former President of the United Coalition. Instead of fighting for his people, he'd made a deal with the Gizzida aliens, and built this small, cozy Enclave. He'd then selected a small group of people he'd determined deserved to be saved.

Bastard. President Howell was dead now, and Mac couldn't bring herself to feel very sorry about it. Now, the Enclave was filled to the brim with its original survivors, and with those who'd escaped the onslaught of the Blue Mountain Base attack. It had only been two weeks, and they were all still finding a way to live together. She figured it was going to take longer until they all trusted each other. Still, Cam was right—the food was damn good.

Mac's earpiece crackled to life. "Mac? Cam? You two there?"

It was the smooth, calm voice of Arden, their squad's comms officer. She was beneath their feet inside the Enclave, in the secure comms control room.

"Receiving," Mac answered.

"I have Lia from the drone team on the line. She wants to talk to you. Seems that she's having some issues with one of her drones."

Mac touched her ear. "Put her through."

A second later another voice came on the line. "Hi, Mackenna. This is Lia."

"What can we do for you, Lia?"

“We have a drone out to the south of the Enclave on standard reconnaissance. It seems to be jammed, and its feed isn’t getting back to us. None of the other drones are picking up any alien activity. Can you check it out and see what’s going on?”

Mac scanned the sky to the south. She didn’t see anything there, but the drones—tiny quadcopters that could fit in the palm of her hand—were hard to spot. Plus, they all had small illusion systems that rendered them near-invisible to alien sensors, and blurred them on visual. The only thing Mac could see in the blue sky was a bird soaring high overhead.

“No problem. We’ll head that way and take a look.”

“Thanks,” Lia answered. “Let me know if you find anything. I’m guessing it’s just a malfunction, but I want to make sure.”

Mac nodded her head toward the south. “We need to go and check on a drone.”

The two of them headed that way, picking their way through the long grass. All around the Enclave, the landscape appeared undisturbed and overgrown. The security team worked hard to ensure there were no tracks or obvious signs of occupation. Mac knew the place also had state-of-the-art defenses, and they could completely lock down in the event of an attack.

But the key thing helping to keep them safe was the small fleet of drones. They were vitally important for providing intel for the squads. When the aliens had first attacked, they’d destroyed all the planet’s satellite systems. Luckily, Noah Kim, the tech genius at Blue Mountain Base, had repurposed drones so that an expert team could fly them and provide information on the aliens’ whereabouts. That information was fed to all the squads and without it, they were blind.

It was a brilliant, sunny day, and, for a second, Mac could almost imagine that the invasion had never happened. Right here, at this spot, all she saw were beautiful hills, blue sky, and bright sunshine. Birds were chirping, and from here there was no sign of the destruction the aliens had wreaked. She knew just to the north lay the remains of Sydney, the former capital of the Coalition. Nothing was left of the once-thriving city, other than rubble and dust.

Mac released a long breath. Damn, she was still feeling a little raw and twitchy after their wild race out of the mountains. The aliens had come close to capturing them numerous times. People had died. She closed her eyes for a second. It still hadn’t fully sunk in that they were somewhere safe.

“I do miss the old base,” Cam said, “but man, I *love* the swimming pool.”

Mac smiled. The Enclave's indoor, heated swimming pool was proving very popular. Personally, Mac liked the Garden. It was accessed through a long tunnel, and sat up on top of an escarpment. It was built inside a bowl of rock and open to the sky—but with a retractable roof, in case of danger. It got lots of natural sunlight. Something she'd missed in the rabbit warren of Blue Mountain Base. And she was pretty darn happy with the fancy, well-equipped gym here, as well.

But, as she spotted an abandoned processing plant from the old mine, the metal rusting and sagging, her hands clenched on her carbine. She knew she couldn't fully relax, couldn't let the luxurious surrounds of the Enclave let her go soft. They were at war, in a fight for their very existence. She needed to be in peak physical condition and ready for anything.

It was one of the things her father had taught her. *No tears, little girl. Toughen up and face that problem head-on.* She thought of her father and her two brothers. As far as she knew, they were dead. Her brothers had been somewhere in Texas when the first wave of the invasion had hit. Her father had been on an oil rig off the north of Scotland. Her chest went tight. She'd never heard from them, and the one message she'd ever gotten through to one of the survivor outposts in Texas hadn't received a response.

Mac's mother had died when she was young and her father had dragged Mac and her brothers around the world as he'd worked on different oil rigs. There had been no chance to collect precious things, or get used to a certain house or place. She'd learned never to depend on anything, because it could be gone in a blink.

"I don't see any drones," Cam said. "No aliens, either."

Mac didn't see anything out of the norm, either. She looked around again, and once again watched the beautiful bird—some sort of hawk or eagle—dipping and flowing overhead. She touched her ear. "Lia? No sign of your drone, and no sign of any alien activity that might be jamming it."

"Thanks, Mac. The intermittent signal is coming from about ten meters west of your current location."

"On it." Mac wandered toward a lone tree in that direction.

Then she spotted the drone snagged in the branches.

“Looks like some drone pilot is going to get a ribbing from their colleagues,” Cam murmured with a smile.

Mac smiled and touched her earpiece. “Lia, we found it. Hung up in a tree.”

Lia’s expulsion of breath came across the line. “Damn. Must be a malfunction. I’ll talk to Noah and his tech team, and see if we can work out what happened to it.”

“Roger that. We’ll bring it back in for you.” Mac looked at Cam. “Ready to go climbing?”

Cam scowled. “Why me?”

“Because I outrank you.”

“You never pull rank.”

“I do when it comes to looking like an idiot climbing a tree.”

Muttering under her breath, Cam climbed the wide trunk of the tree and pulled herself up into the branches. After a few minutes and a few more curses, she’d freed the little drone.

As Cam dropped it down, Mac caught it and watched as Cam dropped down as well, landing in a light crouch. Mac turned the drone over.

“Hell, it’s pretty battered.” One of the rotors was mangled, and the side of it was dented.

“Yep, someone is going to catch hell for crashing this little baby,” Cam said.

A second later, Arden was back on the comm line. “Mac, there’s a war meeting in the Command Center. All squad leaders and their second-in-commands have been requested to attend. Roth said he’ll meet you there. A relief team will come out shortly to take over patrol from you guys.”

War meeting. *Great.* “On my way.”

Cam and Mac headed back toward the entrance they’d used to exit the Enclave. It was cleverly hidden in the ground, and impossible to find if you didn’t know where it was. As they approached, she saw two other soldiers leaving the Enclave to take over patrol.

Mac couldn’t help but grin. These two were from Hell Squad—the toughest, meanest, most efficient squad around. It was headed by the battle-hardened Marcus Steele, but the two coming toward her were Hell Squad’s sole female soldier and its sniper. The two also happened to be crazy in love, and had just recently finally admitted it to each other.

Shaw Baird was tall, slightly lanky, with shaggy hair streaked with gold. When he spotted Mac and Cam, he shot them a flirtatious grin. Mac was pretty sure flirting was in the man’s

DNA. In addition to being an excellent shot with his long-range laser rifle, he'd also been a notorious ladies' man before he'd finally faced his feelings for Claudia Frost.

Beside him, Claudia stood tall and straight, her dark hair pulled back in a long braid. There was no doubting from the badass look on her face that she could quite easily take down a raptor twice her size. Mac had seen her in action, and would have the former SAS soldier on her team any day.

Mac watched as Shaw leaned in to Claudia and whispered something. The woman rolled her eyes and gave the man a smack in the arm. That just made him grin more wildly.

A relationship like this, love...it had to soften a woman. Claudia didn't look any different—except for the light in her eyes when she looked at her lover—but surely that love would eventually seep in, and make that tough look on her face disappear. Mac knew that had to be a weakness.

“Nothing much to report,” Mac said. “I suspect you guys will just have a lovely stroll in the sun.”

“After the last few months,” Shaw said, “a stroll in the sun sounds damn nice.”

“We just rescued a drone for Lia.” Mac held up the small quadcopter. “Landed in a tree.”

“Malfunction?” Claudia asked.

Mac shrugged. “Looks that way. The geek squad is going to take a look at it. Certainly no aliens around.”

“You two stay alert.” Cam's grin was a little cheeky. “No hanky-panky.”

Shaw waggled his eyebrows. “But I'm so good at hanky-panky.”

That earned him a whack in the back of the head from Claudia.

They waved goodbye, and Mac and Cam climbed down through the hatch and dropped into the tunnel.

“I'll drop you at the Command Center and then take the drone to the tech lab,” Cam said. “After that, I'm off to the pool.” She rubbed her hands together with glee.

Mac handed over the drone as they headed out of the tunnel and into a wide, carpeted corridor. Ahead, people were walking in small groups, talking and laughing.

This was where the true differences to Blue Mountain Base were really noticeable. There was thick, plush carpet on the floor, and framed artwork lining the corridor walls. It didn't quite mask

the fact that they were underground, but it had a state-of-the-art lighting system that mimicked natural light. Blue Mountain Base had felt like a concrete rabbit warren of military tunnels, and while they'd all done their best to make it seem like a home, it hadn't ever come close to the Enclave's luxurious feel.

They made their way through the corridors—Mac was finally learning her way around. They reached the Command Center, and passed the large glass windows that looked into the high-tech hive of activity. There were walls covered in flat screens, and multiple comp stations set up with various people working at them. In the main meeting area in the center, she saw most of the squad leaders and their seconds were already there.

Then she spotted *him*.

Nikolai Ivanov was one of the leaders of the Enclave. He stood in front of the group in jeans and a dark T-shirt. In the two weeks she'd been here, she'd done her best to avoid him. Something about the man made her itch. He was an artist, but she'd seen him in the field once when they'd first reached the Enclave. He might paint, but he was no simple artist.

After their convoy had arrived, Roth had been assigned to Niko to trade information and bring him up to speed on all the squads' capabilities. Roth had delegated the job to Mac.

So she'd been forced to spend a few tense hours meeting with Niko in his office. The man had this way of watching her... She brushed the thought away. She was probably just being silly. The man was an artist and clearly liked to watch people.

She looked at him now through the glass. A long, lean body, dark hair that was close to brushing his shoulders. Although she couldn't see them from this distance, she knew his eyes were a piercing green.

Then he looked up, and his gaze hit hers unerringly.

Mac held it, not letting herself fall for the panicked need to look away. She felt the punch of heat to her belly, absorbed it with annoyance.

Then she broke contact and looked away. If she ignored this *thing*, it would go away.

“What was that?”

Cam's voice made Mac jolt. “What?”

“Oh, don’t play coy with me, Carides. What the hell was that look I just saw? That panty-melting, I-want-to-lick-you-all-over look that the man—that handsome, sexy-as-sin, artist man—just gave you.”

Mac resisted the urge to stiffen. It would just give Cam more fuel. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Mac, you see everything. Girl, the man is *hot*. And if you missed it, I said hot with underlined, italicized letters.”

Mac sniffed. “Aren’t you going swimming?”

Cam’s dark gaze narrowed. “You toss every man over your shoulder and slam him into the training mats. Why not have a little fun for a change? Drag this one down and ride him like a pony.”

“Cam!” Mac hated that she could picture that image of her and Niko far too clearly.

“What are two lovely ladies like you doing in a place like this?”

Cam stiffened like she’d been hit with an electric prod, and Mac barely suppressed a smile. *Saved by the berserkers.*

The two men striding down the corridor were the leader and second of Squad Three, better known as the berserkers. These men were wild. The berserkers had been cobbled together from men with...dubious backgrounds. Mercenaries, bikers, and...well, it was best not to ask too many questions.

Tane and Hemi were brothers, although Tane was a little taller and leaner than his brother, with a harsh, handsome face that was framed by heavy dreadlocks. He stalked closer with a stride that reminded Mac of a big jungle cat. Hemi was rougher, stockier, and had a dark beard that didn’t hide his wide smile. He sauntered like a rock star and his gaze was firmly on Cam.

“Rahia, just keep your mouth shut,” Cam bit out. “Every time you open it, you make me want to punch you.” Her smile took on an edge. “And I’m still in my armor, so that means I can really hurt you.”

“Aw, Camryn, you still angry with me about that whole pink helmet incident? Isn’t it time to forgive me?”

Mac winced. “Hemi, it’s best you don’t bring up the ‘painting the helmet pink’ thing.”

“Why not?” Something wicked danced in his eyes. “Cam looks so pretty in pink.”

Cam made a growling sound. She took a step forward, and then slammed her fist into Hemi's stomach. To the man's credit, he barely doubled over, but the air did rush out of him. Cam had a hell of a right hook.

"Tane." Cam nodded at Squad Three's leader.

Tane gave her a nod and a faint smile, then Cam sauntered down the corridor like a model on a catwalk.

Mac looked at Hemi. "Dude, I don't know what your game is, but I really don't think pissing Cam off all the time is a good way to sweet-talk her into your bed."

Hemi grinned. "She'll come around. I have a certain charm."

Mac shook her head and pushed open the doors to the Command Center, the men moving to follow her.

She headed to where Roth was standing with Marcus Steele and Hell Squad's second in command, Cruz Ramos and his partner, Santha Kade. Mac nodded at some of the other squad leaders, but avoided looking toward the front of the room.

It didn't matter, dammit. She was still very conscious that Niko's gaze was on her the entire time. She could feel it like a physical touch.

She heaved out a breath. *Just ignore it. It'll go away.*