



# ANNA HACKETT

**CRUZ**  
HELL SQUAD

## Chapter One

Crouched in the shadows on the roof of a half-destroyed bank, Santha Kade looked through her high-tech binoculars and watched the alien invaders patrolling the streets below.

A year ago, these dinosaur-like raptors had decimated the Earth. Their huge ships had appeared in the skies...then they'd launched a vicious, unforgiving attack. Now they had bases in all of what was left of the planet's major cities.

Here in Sydney, the once-shining capital of the United Coalition, they'd ruthlessly razed the city. They'd left skyscrapers in tatters, the Harbor Bridge a shattered ruin...and humanity broken, afraid and on the run.

Santha's hands curled around her binocs. So many had died. Millions of lives...gone. Some survivors remained hidden in what had once been their homes, but they were slowly moving on or being weeded out by the raptor patrols.

She reached for her weapon. Her hand closed on her Titan tactical crossbow—the metal was cool under her fingers and the self-loading mechanism was filled with her own homemade bolts—and she felt herself grow calm, steady. Some gave up, some ran...and others chose to fight back.

She zoomed in with the binocs and studied the face of the lead raptor. Thick, gray, scaly skin covered his elongated face and his eyes were blood red. The aliens were all big—over six and a half feet—and carried a lot of muscle. They wore a kind of metallic armor on the bottom half of their bodies, and huge boots. Their top half was all tough skin, crisscrossed with what looked like leather for holding their claw-like blades, or for the snipers, their bone-like projectiles.

Looking at them made Santha's throat close in a choking rush. Why the hell had they come here? Why, with no warning, had they decimated the human race? Destroyed friends and families. Killed beloved sisters. She lowered the binocs and gripped her thigh. Her fingers dug into her skin through her black cargo pants.

It didn't matter. She didn't care. Whatever their reasons, she was going to make them pay. Focused, she lifted the binoculars again.

The raptor at the back of the patrol came into view and a muscle ticked in Santha's jaw.

This one was the leader for this area. Santha was sure of it. She'd been spying on them for months, taking notes, marking down their installations, picking off small raptor patrols when she could.

She wouldn't ever be able to find the raptor that had beaten her sister to death, but she could sure as hell take down the one who'd given the order. Who'd brought these aliens here and ordered them to kill.

This raptor was a little taller than the rest, skin smoother and a darker shade of gray. Santha had nicknamed this alien, *the commander*. The commander had an air of authority and looked at everything like it was his—or her, who knew what gender they actually were?—domain to rule.

*Not for long, asshole.* Santha lowered her binoculars and took a deep breath. She wanted to leap off the building and shoot the commander through the goddamned head. Another deep breath. But not today. She needed more intel first, and she wanted to take out the leader and their main base in the city.

She caught a movement in the sky out of the corner of her eye. As she stared at the bright, blue expanse, she didn't see anything but fluffy white clouds.

She kept staring. *There.* A blur of something winked for a second.

Santha knew what it was. A Hawk quadcopter, with its illusion system up, flying in from the west.

Other humans were fighting back, too. From a secret base west of the city.

She watched where she guessed the camouflaged Hawk was flying and wondered if Hell Squad was on there. If *he* was on there.

She only had a little contact with the few survivors still hiding in the city. Most had left for the country or for Blue Mountain Base—the underground military base that had become a haven for survivors. But everyone had heard of Hell Squad. A group of soldiers so deadly, they mowed through the aliens as easily as taking an afternoon stroll.

Normally, she would have written that sort of reputation off as exaggeration, but she'd seen them in action. She'd even helped them a couple of times.

And she watched them...a lot.

Especially the sexy soldier with the dark, liquid eyes, sensual grin, and an accent that made her insides flutter.

Cruz. His name was Cruz Ramos.

She'd met him several weeks ago, when she'd helped them fight off aliens so the squad could get in to destroy a key raptor communications hub. Hell Squad had blown the damn thing sky high. And for a month, the raptors had scrambled around with limited communications. It had made Santha's job a hell of a lot easier. She'd spent days out picking off lone raptor patrols who couldn't call for backup, and blowing up their facilities.

But they'd recently repaired the damage.

Santha shivered and shifted her binocs to where she'd last seen the Hawk's illusion. She caught a glimpse of gray steel as the copter dropped lower to land. She told herself to stop watching and focus on the raptors instead. After a quick—and futile—mental debate, she lifted her binocs again.

Zooming in gave her a perfect view of the now-visible Hawk in an empty parking lot. The side door slid open and a big man with broad shoulders and a scarred face leaped out, laser carbine clutched in his hands.

Marcus Steele. Hell Squad's leader.

Another man followed, with an intense face and a shaved head. He was a mix of races, but from the shade of his dark skin, she'd guess one of his parents was black. The predatory way he moved told her he knew how to fight, and that you didn't want to meet him on the battlefield and be on opposing teams.

Two more people exited the Hawk. A man and a woman. Sniper, by the looks of the lanky man's long-range rifle, and a dark-haired woman who looked like she ate nails for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Then a young man leaped out. The sun glinted off his blond hair and eager face. She knew Hell Squad had lost one of their team to the raptors about a month back. She guessed this green kid was their replacement.

Then her heart leaped. *Cruz*.

He landed beside Marcus and was saying something, even as his gaze scanned the area around them.

Okay, so the way the man was put together worked for her. No harm in looking. He was shorter and leaner than his teammates, although by no means soft. She wished she could see through his black body armor. Santha bet the view beneath would be just as fine as his handsome face. And oh boy, that was a hell of a face.

Then Santha thought of Kareena. Her sister had been so beautiful and full of life. And now she was no longer here to tease Santha about her interest in handsome men.

Santha moved the binoculars away from Hell Squad.

She was out here to get revenge for Kareena. Not ogle Cruz Ramos.

Then Santha caught movement about a kilometer from Hell Squad's landing spot. *Raptors*. Crouched amongst the ruins of a small office building.

She zoomed back to the Hell Squad. They were moving now, led by the sniper and the tough-looking woman. The team moved together like a well-oiled machine, something she knew took practice. She'd been like that with her team. A pang hit her as she thought of the men and women who'd been like family to her. Now all dead.

Then she noted where Hell Squad were headed. Toward the raptors.

She swung back to the aliens, and spied the small dish set up near the top of their hiding place. She knew what it was. A jammer. It would jam the feed from the drones Hell Squad used to locate the enemy.

Hell Squad were moving right into a raptor ambush.

*Dammit*. Her heart kicked against her ribs.

Standing, she slung her crossbow over her shoulder, then grabbed the line she had tied to the top of the building. With her Kevlar gloves on, she simply gripped the rope and swung off the side of the building in a wide arc, sliding down to the ground.

Her feet hit concrete and she bent to absorb the impact.

A half-second later, she was sprinting for her bike.

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Cruz Ramos kicked his boot through some rubble on the street. Under the pile was a small, tattered teddy bear.

He crouched and picked up the toy. He wondered what had happened to the child who'd owned it. Cruz looked up and scanned the empty houses. Some splintered doors stood open, the

roofs damaged, windows broken, the walls smoke stained. Other homes looked perfectly normal, like a happy family still lived inside.

He wanted to believe the child had gotten away, maybe made it to Blue Mountain Base. But inside, Cruz felt a growing numbness. He dropped the toy. He knew what had happened to the kid who'd loved the stupid bear.

Sometimes he wondered why the hell he and the squad bothered. Fighting off the empty, dark feeling, he focused on the rest of his team.

Marcus was nearby, alert for anything that might crop up, and murmuring to the team's communications officer through his comms device. He was a hell of a team leader, always had a plan B when shit hit...which it always did. Hell Squad got the best missions.

In his own earpiece, Cruz heard their comms officer, Elle, laugh at something Marcus said. Cruz almost smiled. She did a hell of a job providing their intel...and she was also officially the love of Marcus' life. Cruz shook his head. He'd watched the two of them dance around their feelings for months. He would never have guessed slim, classy Elle—former society girl—and rough, tough, battle-hardened Marcus Steele would be a match made in heaven. But they fit.

The team's sniper walked past Cruz, followed by Hell Squad's female team member. For once, Claudia and Shaw weren't bickering. A minor miracle. They were both quiet and focused.

“So, we gonna whip some raptor butt?”

The voice from beside him made Cruz roll his eyes. “Kid, you want to keep your voice down.”

A clearing throat. “Right.”

Sam Jenkins was on a trial run to fill the empty slot on Hell Squad. The best soldiers were already on the squads, so the pickings were slim for replacements. As far as Cruz could tell, Sam was young, eager, but with limited experience. He'd been in the United Coalition Military Academy when the invasion had hit. His shininess would either wear off real quick and he'd quit, or he'd get himself killed.

Cruz glanced at Gabe, who was just a little behind them. He had a way of moving that was spooky and completely silent. He could disappear into shadows in the blink of an eye. His brother had been almost as good.

*Jesus, Zeke.* Whenever Cruz thought of their fallen teammate, he felt a flood of anger. But even that flash of emotion faded quickly. Consumed by the growing deadness inside that he couldn't seem to shake.

Death. Destruction. Blood and fighting.

Sometimes, he couldn't remember what he was fighting for anymore.

Something tingled along Cruz's senses. He slowed, turning his head to study the surrounding buildings. Nothing moved. Even the air was still.

He stopped and turned in a slow circle.

Marcus held up a closed fist. The team halted.

"Cruz?" Marcus murmured.

Cruz couldn't see or hear anything that should have set off his internal alarm. "I don't know, *amigo.*" But something was wrong.

"Marcus?" Elle's voice. "We've lost the drone feed. I can't see you guys or what's around you."

As Marcus cursed, Cruz's gut cramped. Yeah, something was really off.

Then he heard a noise. Cruz spun, and straight ahead, speeding toward them, was a slim figure in black. Her black hair flew out behind her and he saw the tip of her crossbow over her shoulder.

*Santha.* Everything in him flared to life.

Her sleek, black bike was electric and made no sound. Perfect for sneaking around the city.

As she got closer, he saw her face, watched her wave one arm at them madly.

*Shit.* "Everyone, take cover!" he yelled.

Seconds later, raptors streamed out of a building ahead. Their weapons made a distinctive noise as they fired. Dark-green ooze splattered the road in front of the team. It sizzled and hissed as it ate through the asphalt.

He knew the damned stuff burned and paralyzed. He ducked in behind an abandoned car. *Madre de dios,* another thirty seconds and they would have walked right into the raptor cluster fuck.

Looked like the aliens had fully recovered their communications and were out for some payback.

Hell Squad dived for cover. Cruz watched Santha coax more speed from her bike. Even with the gunfire, she rode straight, heading for him.

She skidded the bike in a tight turn and came to a stop beside him. “Ambush. Had to warn you.”

With a nod, he sprung to his feet and leaped on the back of bike.

She swiveled. “What the hell are—?”

“Ride.”

She did. They raced through the raptors. Cruz aimed his carbine and pulled out his secondary weapon, a smaller laser pistol. He fired both weapons, taking down any raptor in range.

Santha turned the bike again and Cruz held on his with knees. They moved through the aliens again and Cruz kept firing. His team members were firing as well.

He and Santha did another loop. She anticipated his needs, slowing down, speeding up, tuning to avoid the raptor gunfire. Even in the middle of hell, he took a second to appreciate her lean body pressed back against him.

Then he saw a huge raptor, over seven feet tall, dragging Sam across the ground by his ankle. The young soldier was struggling and had lost his weapon.

*Dammit.* “Slow down!”

She did and Cruz leaped off the bike.

He unloaded his carbine into the raptor. It took a rain of laser fire, but the giant raptor finally tumbled to the ground like a felled tree.

Sam lay writhing, his right leg bent at an odd angle. Cruz yanked the kid up and hefted Sam over his shoulder. The kid probably weighed more than Cruz, but the slim-line exoskeleton in Cruz’s armor helped him lift heavy loads. He ran for cover.

Behind an overturned minivan, he set Sam down. The kid was moaning, his eyes wide and jittery. “T-thanks, Cruz.”

Claudia appeared. “He okay?”

“Leg’s broken.”

“I’ll take a look.”

The team didn’t have a field medic, but they all had basic training. As Claudia splinted Sam’s leg, Cruz ducked out of cover to check on Santha.



She was still on the bike, riding toward the remaining raptors. She held something in her hand.

He frowned, and then, when he realized what it was, he grinned. Damn, she was his kind of woman, a queen among warriors.

She tossed the grenade into a group of raptors then made a tight turn on the bike. She rode back, standing up to make a small jump over some rubble. Behind her, the grenade exploded, flames reaching into the sky. The screams and grunts of wounded and dying raptors filled the air.

“They’re retreating.” Marcus’ gravelly voice came through Cruz’s earpiece.

The last of the raptors slipped away through the ruins in full retreat. Warily, gun up, Cruz walked into the middle of the street.

Santha stopped her bike with a skid. The rest of Hell Squad came out of cover.

“Thanks for the warning and the help,” Marcus said.

She nodded. “You should get going. Their usual MO is to come in with a larger force, and a pack of canids.”

Cruz grimaced. He hated canids. The alien hunting dogs were vicious and relentless.

Marcus cursed. “We were supposed to check for some survivors our drones spotted in a school about a block from here.”

Santha shook her head. “They left three days ago. Don’t know where they are now.”

Marcus nodded. “Thanks.” He touched his ear. “Elle, can you send a Hawk our way and have the doc meet us back at base? Jenkins is injured.” Marcus glanced at his team. “Hell Squad, let’s move out. Gabe, carry Sam.”

The armor’s exoskeleton meant that carrying a team member, even for several hours, wasn’t hard, but Cruz knew Gabe probably didn’t need the help of the exoskeleton.

Cruz stepped close to Santha. “Come with us.”

Another shake of her head.

He moved closer until his body was just a whisper from hers. He smelled her—sweat and a fragrant woody scent. “Come back to base. There’s a place for you there.”

“I’m not leaving.”

*Dammit.* Cruz barely resisted the urge to kick something. He hated the idea of her out here, alone. “Why not?”

Her green eyes flashed. “I have work to do.”

He leaned closer and saw her stiffen. “Don’t you get lonely?” he asked quietly.

“You think being with a bunch of strangers will help with that?” She tilted her head. “You’re with people all the time and you’re still lonely.”

Cruz felt his muscles tense. He stepped back. “What are you going to do?”

She revved the bike. “Keep fighting.”

With frustration like a noose around his neck, he forced himself to nod. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

She flashed him a smile. The first he’d ever seen from her. “Sure thing, soldier.”

She gunned the bike and shot away.

Cruz watched her disappear from sight. Yeah, she was right. Even surrounded by his team, he was lonely as hell.