

Hell Squad: Gabe

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Chapter One

“We’re losing him!”

Dr. Emerson Green ignored her nurse’s cry, gritted her teeth and kept working. Her gloved hands and arms were covered in blood up to her elbows, as she focused on saving the man on her operating table. “More blood.”

Norah Daniels, the most reliable nurse on Emerson’s team, worked to pump blood into their patient.

Emerson stared up at the glowing screen of the high-tech monitor attached to the man. It was one of only two that had survived the alien invasion and she was grateful they had it.

“Come on,” she urged. He wasn’t responding. He was bleeding somewhere, but she couldn’t damn well find it.

“Max, can you isolate any sources of bleeding?”

The surgical robot beside her moved one of its four slender arms. “Negative, Dr. Green,” the robot’s modulated voice intoned. “The extent of the foreign damage is hampering my abilities.”

Emerson leaned over the patient’s open belly. She stared at the ugly damage the aliens had done to him—cutting him open, burning, scoring—carrying out their obscene tests. She had no idea what the aliens were trying to accomplish in their horror labs, but the patients the human commando teams had managed to rescue all had hideous injuries they’d have to deal with for the rest of their lives.

Not to mention the nightmares.

Emerson had tried to put them back together, to heal them. But some of them would always have scars—visible or not.

Her safety glasses fogged and she cursed under her breath. “New glasses.”

Another nurse hurried to change out Emerson's glasses. There was some problem with the base ventilation. She knew the tech team was working on fixing it, but these things took time. Keeping a hidden underground base full of survivors running was a full-time job and their solar-power system was overloaded on most days.

"His pulse is dropping."

Dammit. There was too much blood. The extensive scarring and fresh injuries were hiding the problem, and no matter how much she searched, she couldn't find it. The muscles across her shoulders were stretched to breaking point. "Give him a shot of noxapin. A hundred mil."

When Norah didn't obey, Emerson looked up. "What's wrong? Come on."

The woman's round, dark-skinned face was tense. "We're almost out."

Noxapin was a highly experimental drug that hadn't finished trials before the aliens had invaded. But it had been magic at keeping people alive long enough to survive surgery. Emerson had counted herself lucky that the medical supplies they'd scavenged had included it.

But they were almost through their stores, and clearly no one else believed this man was going to make it.

"Give it to him." She wasn't damn well giving up. On anyone.

They kept working. Emerson worked around Max as the robot's arms, with their different attachments, helped her. Emerson was in charge of the base's medical teams, it was her responsibility to do everything she could to help and heal anyone who was sick or injured. She mightn't be out on the front line, fighting the dinosaur-like raptors, but this was her way of fighting. Sewing people back together, saving their lives, pumping them full of nano-meds when their bodies were too injured to heal themselves.

Except whatever the aliens had done to this man had changed him so much that the tiny medical robots, that could heal a person in just hours, had stopped from working.

But she refused to give up. She'd been treating wounds and putting people back together ever since she'd first seen the huge alien ship blotting out the night sky over Sydney. Images flashed behind her eyes. She and her colleagues at the North Sydney Private Hospital had run up to the roof as soon as the ship had been spotted. An ugly, almost animal-looking thing.

Emerson had had a prime view when the small raptor ptero ships had poured out of the mothership and rained down on the unsuspecting humans below.

Most of whom had died.

Well, she damn well wasn't losing this one. She kept working, clamping, cauterizing, cutting out damaged tissue. She barked out orders for the surgical robot, for equipment, blood, more drugs.

"Emerson? Emerson?"

With aching tiredness dragging down on her, she looked over at Norah.

"He's gone, sweetie."

That's when Emerson's brain registered the constant shrill tone of the monitor.

She looked down. The man's face was relaxed, his skin pale. A dramatic contrast to the bright red of his blood all over her hands.

Sorrow dug into her like a burrowing worm. It knew just where to head to inflict maximum pain. "Time of death, 5:35 pm." She deactivated Max, the robot's arms slowly lowering. She stepped away from the table.

Another life she hadn't been able to help. She let herself feel the full punch of the pain, the anger, the sorrow and the failure. Then she shoved it down.

She couldn't afford to wallow in it. There were always more patients, more injured, more people depending on her.

As she tugged her gloves off and scrubbed her hands, she relaxed the tiniest fraction. She loved her job, even when it sucked. Being a doctor...it was her calling. Before the invasion, she'd loved the high-pressure atmosphere of the ER, and had grand plans for her career. After a short time dabbling with surgery, she'd committed herself to emergency medicine. She'd loved the pressure, loved the idea of running her own ER one day.

Perhaps she should have been careful about what she wished for. Because now, she was in the ultimate high-pressure job and, for better or worse, she was the boss of medical.

Limited equipment, a motley mix of staff with varying backgrounds, and an unending stream of sick and injured.

She rubbed her now-clean hands against her face. She needed some coffee. Needed to get this nagging tiredness to take a hike.

Sleep would be best, but that wasn't going to happen. She hadn't slept well for two weeks.

As she hit the tiny kitchenette in the corner of the infirmary to make her coffee, a lump lodged in her throat. She'd spent too many nights lately in a lather of sweat, fighting back screams.

Damn raptors.

She thought of the man who'd died on her table. He'd been the one who deserved nightmares about their alien aggressors, not Emerson. She'd been their prisoner for maybe an hour. Sure, they'd beaten her, but she'd survived.

Hell Squad had rescued her. And the team's toughest soldier, Gabe Jackson, had held her as she'd cried.

Emerson sipped her coffee. She didn't deserve to have flashbacks and be traumatized by what amounted to nothing by most of her patients' standards. The caffeine hit her bloodstream. Much better. Still, if she didn't get some sleep soon, she might need to consider a sedative.

Nope. Her entire body rebelled at the thought. Not an option. If she got called out of bed in the middle of the night—which happened on an awfully regular basis—she needed all her senses sharp, not fuzzy from drugs.

She spun, walking past the line of infirmary beds. Currently only one bed was occupied—by a teenager with a bad case of the flu. It was a minor miracle. She'd recently gotten all the raptor-experimentation patients cleared to live in their own quarters in the base. Most had to come back for regular monitoring and treatments. But, for their recovery, being in their own space was important.

“Doc!”

Emerson jolted, Norah's shout almost making her spill her coffee. “What?”

“Hell Squad's on their way in. One of them is injured.”

Emerson's heart stopped. Squad Six, also known as Hell Squad, was one of the base's commando squads. Every day the squads—made up of any soldiers and officers from any and all branches of the military and police forces who'd survived the initial alien attacks—went out to do reconnaissance, rescue survivors, protect the base and fight the aliens.

Hell Squad was the roughest, toughest and deadliest of the squads.

They mowed through aliens like a laser scalpel.

“Who's injured?” she asked, setting her coffee down.

Norah bustled around to get Exam Room One ready. “The scary one. Gabe.”

Emerson felt as though the floor had shifted beneath her. She pressed a palm to the wall. *He'd be fine.* Nothing could keep Gabe down for long.

The doors to the infirmary burst open and Emerson turned. Gabe was being carried between two other men—Marcus, Hell Squad's leader, and Cruz, the second-in-command. The muscular

men had their arms around the bigger, taller Gabe. Thankfully, their black carbon-fiber armor had a built-in, light exoskeleton that helped with lifting, because at six and a half feet of tightly-packed muscle, she knew Gabe wasn't light.

She stared at his blood-splattered face, her stomach clenching. Turbulent gray eyes looked back at her. He was alive, conscious, and mostly on his feet—that was what was important.

“Over here.” She pushed back the curtain and waved them in. Norah hovered nearby. Emerson gestured at the nurse with a jerk of her head. “Finish up, Norah. I can take care of this.”

The woman raised her brows. “Okay. Not going to argue with you, Doc. Phillip is on duty tonight and in the office if you need help.”

“Thanks.” Phillip was a paramedic, and he, along with his boyfriend, Rick, were key parts of her medical team. Emerson yanked the curtain across.

“Not sitting on the fucking table,” Gabe growled in a low voice.

“You'll do as ordered,” Marcus growled back.

Hell Squad's leader had a voice that sounded like gravel and a scarred face that went with it.

“Chair,” Gabe insisted.

Emerson pursed her lips. He was scratched up, deep gouges in his armor. *Through his armor.* She hissed in a breath. What the hell had gotten through his armor?

“Just put him in the chair,” Emerson bustled forward. She didn't have time for them to have a pissing match. “Cruz, out.”

The lean, handsome man stepped back far enough to be out of the way, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I'll stay. You might need help to hold him down. Or beat sense into his rock-hard head.” His accent—American with a large dose of Mexican—had driven most of the base's single females into fits of delight, until he'd up and paired himself with a woman almost as dangerous as Hell Squad. The single ladies were still in mourning.

Emerson huffed out a breath. “Fine. Just stay back.” She moved to Gabe and stepped between his legs. She pulled her portable m-scanner out of her lab coat. It was getting a little dented and was prone to shorting out at inconvenient times. Noah Kim, head of the tech team, had repaired it multiple times already, but he'd warned her it was on its last legs.

She ran the scanner over Gabe. “What happened, big guy?”

“Raptors.”

She rolled her eyes. Gabe was a man of few words, but still. “I’ve never seen them tear through armor.”

“Idiot went off half-cocked.” Cruz’s voice sizzled with anger. “Tore into them like Rambo.”

“I was—”

“You should have waited for the team.” Marcus did not sound happy.

The scanner beeped, and as she read the results, the tightness in her chest loosened. No major damage. Some minor blood loss, and some very deep gouges that had to hurt like hell. “You’re lucky. You won’t need surgery, just a small dose of nano-meds.”

His impassive face didn’t change, but she got the impression he wasn’t happy about even getting nano-meds. The microscopic machines had revolutionized medicine fifty years back. A dose could heal a person in hours, instead of days or weeks. But they needed professional medical monitoring, or they could get out of control and wind up killing the patient.

She touched the jagged armor. “Let’s get this off.”

He sat still and silent as she leaned over his broad shoulders, stripping the armor off. She felt the heat pouring off his dark skin. Marcus held out a hand and took the armor from her. When she stepped back and finally got a good look at Gabe’s injuries, she hissed. They appeared far worse than the scanner indicated. The left side of his chest was a bloody, ragged mess of scratches. In one, she swore she saw the flash of rib bones. “Gabe.”

“It’s fine.”

She grabbed her pressure injector, dialed up a painkiller, and before he could protest, slammed it against the side of his thick neck.

Gray eyes bored into hers.

Cruz had a handsome face, but Emerson found Gabe’s so much more compelling. She’d seen his medical report, so she knew his father had been African-American. His skin was a deep, dark bronze, and with his shaved head, strong features, and storm-gray eyes, he was worth a second or third look. But he also radiated a menacing, dangerous intensity that had most people searching for a hiding place.

Gabe didn’t appear to notice or care. Apart from with his squad members, he didn’t socialize.

And since he’d lost his twin brother to the raptors almost three months before, he’d withdrawn even more. That dangerous edge turning razor sharp.

She grabbed some sterile cleaning pads and set to work washing the blood away.

“He gonna live, Doc?” Marcus asked.

“Yes. The nano-meds will have this healed up in an hour or so.”

“You got lucky, Gabe.” Marcus shook his head. “You’ve held it together this long, don’t lose it now.”

Gabe remained stubbornly silent.

“The last two weeks, you’ve been taking more and more risks in the field.”

Emerson’s eyes widened. *What?* Since that mission to recover the patients, and her moment of captivity?

Marcus crossed his muscular arms. “You’re going to get hurt worse than this, or get yourself killed.”

Gabe’s jaw worked. “I’ll do what I have to do to take down as many alien bastards as I can.”

Marcus slammed a closed fist into the exam table, the metal rattling. Emerson jumped.

Marcus’ face twisted. “If you don’t care if you die, think of your fucking team, then. You’ll get one of them killed if you keep this up.” Hell Squad’s leader turned and stormed out.

Cruz shot Gabe a sympathetic look. “Get your shit together. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. If you need to talk, I’m here.” He nodded at Emerson and left.

Emerson prepared the nano-med injection, measuring out the correct dose. She hooked a monitor up to Gabe. “Is what they said true?”

“I don’t want to kill myself.”

His voice was toneless and her heart tripped in her chest. He might not want to commit suicide, but he didn’t much care if he died, as long as he took out as many raptors as he could when he did.

“Zeke wouldn’t want this—”

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

The fierce growl made her sigh. “Fine.”

Gabe gripped her wrist. “I’m going to kill every single damn raptor in Sydney. That way the one who shot Zeke and the ones who fucking beat you black-and-blue will be dead.”

She couldn’t look away from him. They stared at each other, the silence stretching between them.

Then he released her. “Do it.”

The thought of him taking reckless risks, getting himself killed, had her anger spiking. She jabbed the injector into his arm harder than she should have. He grunted.

She watched the metallic-silver liquid drain from the injector, the tiny machines powering into his blood stream.

His gaze never left hers. She saw the muscles in his neck strain and he gritted his teeth. His body tensed, his back arching slightly. The nano-meds hurt on the way in, and right now they were replicating fast, traveling through his bloodstream and targeting the areas that needed healing.

“You keep taking risks out in the field, you’ll end up dead.” She wanted to touch him, to smooth a hand down his stubbled cheek. She shoved her hands in her lab coat instead.

“Don’t need a lecture,” he rasped between clenched teeth.

No, he wanted very little from her. She’d learned that the hard way. “Zeke wouldn’t want this.” She raised her voice. “Phillip?”

“Yes, Doc?” The tall man appeared, peering around the curtain.

Emerson shoved the electronic tablet at him. “Please monitor Mr. Jackson’s nano-med infusion. Don’t let him leave until you say he can.”

Phillip cast a dubious look at Gabe, as if weighing up their differences in height and weight. “Okay.”

“I’m off to grab something to eat.” And shower the day’s hardships away. She cast a final glance at Gabe.

He was staring at the floor.

If he wanted to kill himself, there was nothing she could do about it. Her heart hurting a little, Emerson strode out of the infirmary.