

Hell Squad: Reed

Anna Hackett

Chapter One

“Moving in on the target now.”

Reed MacKinnon kept his voice low as he murmured into his comms device. He crept forward silently on his belly, toward the edge of the roof of the ruined house.

Below, he heard a woman sobbing, a man shouting, and aliens snarling.

Carefully peering down, he saw the group of seven raptors towering over a human couple. The man and woman looked like they'd been on the move for a while. Their clothes were tattered and dirty, and they had a hungry, desperate look. And now they had aliens waving ugly scaled weapons in their faces.

Reed lined up his mayhem carbine. The weapon had a mini-missile launcher attached, but he wouldn't need that right now. Through his scope, he stared at one of the dinosaur-like humanoid's faces with its gray scales and red eyes. Nope, a good ol' laser shot to the head would be enough.

He waited patiently for his squad's leader to make the call. Reed couldn't see his teammates, but he knew they were nearby somewhere. Shaw would be looking down the laser scope of his long-range sniper rifle. Claudia would be silently bouncing on her heels, ready to rush in. Gabe would be a ghost, hiding in the shadows with his big-ass combat knife in hand. Cruz would be steady and calm, waiting for Marcus' command. And Marcus, he'd be gritting his teeth and pissed off, waiting for the right moment to hit these aliens and rescue the couple.

“Just leave us alone,” the man below yelled.

One seven-foot-tall raptor kicked out with a huge, booted foot. He caught the man in the chest, sending him sprawling in the dirt.

“Don’t!” The woman scrambled toward her partner, tangled blonde hair falling around her face. “You’ve taken everything. Our homes, our children, our planet. What more can you want from us?”

It was true. The raptors had come in their huge alien ships and annihilated almost all life on Earth. They’d ruined the cities, decimated most of the population, stolen resources. But there was more they could take. The real, hideous reason they were here. Reed’s gut roiled. Freedom was every man’s right, and these bastards had flown halfway around the galaxy to take humanity’s freedom away from them.

Reed stared down his scope. Well, these humans weren’t about to roll over and make it easy. The aliens were going to get a hell of a fight.

One raptor soldier snagged the woman by the collar of her shirt and dragged her toward the black, squat-looking vehicle covered in spiked armor plating nearby.

“Shaw, on my command, take out the patrol leader, then the alien next to him.” Marcus Steele’s gravelly voice rasped over the comm. “Reed, you take out the big bastard on the right. Gabe and Claudia, move in and take out the other three. Cruz, you can have the guy holding the woman. I’ll disable their vehicle and driver.”

Battle calm flowed over Reed. Another few tense seconds passed. The woman was screaming at the top of her lungs now and her struggling husband got a kick to the head for his attempts to help his wife.

“Go,” Marcus said.

Hell Squad burst into action.

A single laser blast and the head raptor fell to the ground. Damn, Shaw was a hell of a shot. Reed squeezed the trigger on his carbine and watched his target fall. Then there was an explosion of movement below as the rest of the team swung into action.

They were so good. Reed felt a flash of pride. He’d been a United Coalition Navy SEAL before the alien attack, and the men and women on his SEAL team had been amazing soldiers. He’d thought they were the best.

Then he’d joined Hell Squad.

They came from a mix of backgrounds. Any surviving military members had been banded together into the squads that now fought back against the aliens occupying the ruins of Sydney, Australia—once the beautiful harbor capital of the United Coalition. The Coalition was the result

of the amalgamation of countries like Australia, the United States, Canada, India and some European nations.

Now Sydney was just burned-out ruins, shattered beyond repair. He didn't know about the other capital cities around the world, but it was a safe bet they were all in the same condition. He'd been on a diving vacation in Australia when the invasion hit. He'd spent months heading south to find what was left of the human military.

Reed watched Gabe move, faster than any human should be able to. The dark, intense man was a machine. He'd already taken down two raptors and beside him, Claudia—Hell Squad's lone female soldier—jammed her carbine against a raptor's chest and opened fire.

By the time Reed slid off the roof, the fight was over. Raptor bodies sprawled on the ground. Cruz was carrying a sobbing woman over to her husband, while Claudia checked the man's injuries. All in a day's work for Hell Squad.

Reed stared up at the sky. A thunderstorm was threatening on the horizon, lightning flashing in the dark clouds. Far in the distance, he saw red lights zipping across the sky, away from them, thankfully. It was a raptor ptero ship. He swung his weapon over his shoulder. He doubted the aliens would give up easily, but neither would the humans.

Reed would fight for his freedom, for the freedom of every person sheltering in Blue Mountain Base—a military base buried deep in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney—until the day he died. He knew what it was like to have everything taken from you—even your dignity. And in the past, he'd seen fellow soldiers who'd been taken captive and suffered atrocities beyond comprehension.

No one had the fucking right to do that to anyone.

His gut tightened. He'd watched one of the best soldiers he'd had the privilege of serving with be rescued from enemy hands...only to never fully recover, living a life rushing from one bad decision to another.

Yeah, he'd fight these aliens, or die trying.

An image of huge brown eyes flickered through his head. He fought for her, too. For her to be free of the ugly memories of what the aliens had done to her.

“Aw, fuck.”

Marcus' harsh exclamation made Reed glance over. His boss stood at the rear of the raptor vehicle with its back door wide open.

The squad hurried over. Reed glanced in and his jaw went tight. *Fuck.*

Humans huddled inside. Some were unconscious, sprawled on the floor. Others clung to each other, staring with wide, frightened eyes.

Jesus, some of them were just kids. Reed's hands clenched on his carbine. Fuck these alien invaders to hell.

"Get 'em out." Marcus pressed a hand to his ear. "Elle, we have human survivors. Ten of them. Send the Hawk in to pick us up."

"Roger that, Marcus."

Elle Milton's smooth voice came over the line. Their comms officer was the last member of their squad. She fed them intel, raptor numbers and saved their butts when the fighting got too hot. She'd also taken on the mammoth task of smoothing out Marcus' rough edges.

"And have Emerson and the medical team on standby when we get back to base," Marcus added.

"I will," Elle responded. "Come home in one piece."

Reed caught a slight softening in the man's scarred face. Looked like Elle was having some success. Their fearless leader was so in love with the classy, young woman. Reed felt his chest tighten. Must be nice to know you had someone waiting for you.

"Hawk's here, *amigos*," Cruz said. "Let's get these people on board."

Reed looked up. For a second, he didn't see anything, then he spotted a vague shimmer in the air—it looked like a heat mirage. The shimmer changed as the Hawk pilot turned off the quadcopter's illusion system. The dark-gray copter rapidly descended to their location, its four rotors spinning. After its skids touched dirt, the soldiers began carrying the human survivors to the Hawk.

They loaded the shell-shocked people in, setting them in the seats, securing safety harnesses over them. As Reed helped the last person out of the alien vehicle—a slim, young man—he spotted something in the back. Something blinking. With a frown, he handed the man over to Shaw and climbed into the vehicle.

On the floor at the back was a small cube the size of his palm. It was black but glowed red intermittently. It looked a lot like the data crystals he knew the raptors used to store data. But the data crystals didn't glow. He picked it up. It had some weight, but wasn't very heavy, and it wasn't hot.

“Reed? What have you got?”

Marcus stood outside, his tough form silhouetted by the sun.

Reed held up the cube. “What do you think this is?”

Marcus frowned. “Hopefully not something that explodes. Elle? Reed found some raptor tech. Sending an image through now.” Marcus yanked a camera off his belt and snapped a few shots.

Reed knew the drone Elle had hovering somewhere nearby would pick up the images and relay them back to base.

A moment later, Elle made a humming noise. “The pics are coming through now. Hmm, I think we’ve seen something like this before. Let me just check with Noah.”

Noah Kim was the comp and tech genius who ran the base’s tech team. He kept the lights on and all the electronics running.

“Bring it in!” Excitement rang in Elle’s voice. “It’s some sort of energy source. We found one before, but it wasn’t operational. Natalya wants it.”

Just the mention of her name made everything in Reed come to brilliant life. Dr. Natalya Vasin. Genius energy scientist. Beautiful woman. Alien torture survivor.

“Got it, Elle.” Reed slipped the energy cube into a small bag on his belt. “Tell her I’ll drop it off to her at the comp lab.”

Reed imagined Natalya at her desk, wearing one of those fitted skirts and prim white shirts she seemed to favor. They always made him want to mess her up a little. *Cool it, MacKinnon. She’s still recovering.*

Cruz appeared. “Survivors are loaded. Let’s get back to base for a cold beer and a warm woman.”

Shaw snorted from near the Hawk. “Easy for you, you have a woman waiting for you. Some of us have to work to find ours.”

Claudia sniffed. “And you have to work extra hard to make up for your lack of personality and lack of stamina.”

Shaw raised a brow. “Ha, look who’s talking, Miss Snarky Sharp Edges. No one could get close enough to you without suffering cuts.”

Claudia gave him an icy smile and shot him the finger before she bounded into the Hawk.

Reed climbed in, casting one last glance around the ruined suburb surrounding them. The storm was getting closer, the smell of impending rain in the air. He breathed deep and savored it.

He was grateful to be at the base, but he hated being hemmed in. He breathed again. He missed the ocean, and the mountains—real ones, not what passed for mountains here in very flat Australia. The underground tunnels of the base and the recycled air kept them safe and comfortable, but sometimes he felt the walls closing in on him.

And he didn't have a warm woman to snuggle up to. As the Hawk took off, he grabbed a handhold on the roof. Marcus had Elle. Cruz had the lovely and dangerous Santha. Even silent, scary Gabe had managed to hook up with the base's smart, sexy doctor. Claudia was a frequent attendee at the base's regular Friday night gatherings, but if she had a special somebody, she was keeping it quiet. Shaw was the opposite, quite happily working his way through the single ladies at base.

Reed stifled a sigh. Since the attack, most people happily embraced casual sex. It was a way to celebrate life, stay sane, and feel close to someone. But while the offers had come in regularly and frequently, Reed had deflected them with a smile and a wink. He wasn't exactly sure why. He loved women, in all their shapes and sizes. Before the attack, when he was on leave, he'd always found someone to cozy up to. Usually some athletic type who loved the outdoors, like he did. But he never let it get serious—not when he could be shipped out to God-knew-where at any minute. He'd liked his life free and unattached.

But now—he fingered the cube in his pocket—now he felt a hankering for something else. And unfortunately the woman he wanted wasn't ready for what he had to offer.

Natalya Vasin stared at her comp screen scrutinizing the data displayed there. *Hmm...* As she pondered the problem, she lifted the tiny photovoltaic cell from her desk. She'd pulled it apart, working on a solution to make it more efficient. Shaped like a leaf, the cell sat on disguised trees above the base, absorbing the sunlight, and powering the secret human haven below.

Since she'd been at Blue Mountain Base, she'd extended the daily hot water availability from two hours in the morning to all through the daylight hours. But she really wanted to get hot water twenty-four hours a day. It was her own private little goal. She *loved* her showers. Even more so after she'd been unable to have one for four long, horrifying months.

As her throat closed, she swallowed and forced the memories away. *You're in Blue Mountain Base. You aren't there anymore.*

The tightness eased enough to let air into her chest.

She turned back to her comp screen, and shoved her glasses farther up on her nose. She still wasn't used to the heavier black frames, but in an apocalypse you couldn't be picky. She'd lost her lovely wire frames in the initial invasion as the alien bombs had fallen. Thankfully, she only needed to wear her glasses when her eyes were tired and strained from too much time in front of the comp screen. She jotted a few notations on her tablet and read them again. Yes, that would help, and maybe give them another two percent output. But she knew it wouldn't be enough.

Then her gaze shifted to the tiny piece of amber glass resting on the desk.

The tightness in her chest returned and she purposely slowed her breathing. The innocuous piece of glass was an alien substance. From a tank used to trap humans...and turn them into aliens.

Memories rushed at her. The sounds of the raptors, the scary sight of their strange organic technology, the scent of their lab, the horrible sounds of wailing. Her own screams. Her hand went to her neck and she felt it...the top of the ugly scar that ran down her chest.

They'd experimented on her. They'd cut and hacked into her body.

And Natalya was no longer the woman she'd been before.

Before the invasion, she'd been a renowned energy scientist, and a guest lecturer at Sydney University. She'd been hired by energy companies to consult for exorbitant amounts of money. She'd been confident, certain of herself, normal.

Then the aliens had broken her.

No. She slammed her fist down on the desk, rattling the comp screen. She might be battered, but she wasn't broken. She'd regained all the weight she'd lost in the raptor lab—Doc Emerson had been forcing high-calorie meal replacements into her for weeks. She was working. She was being useful.

And she was damn well going to be normal again. She was also going to do her bit to fight back against the raptors.

Her gaze fell on the amber glass once more.

Preliminary scans had shown it was an excellent semiconductor. They might be able to use it, integrate it into the base's energy system and boost the supply.

Girding herself, Natalya made herself pick the glass up.

Up close, she saw tiny black striations running through it. They were irregular and looked almost like veins.

She picked up her hand-held analyzer and ran it over the glass. She studied the results, her eyes narrowing as she pondered the implications. Maybe, just maybe, they could splice thin layers of it into the photovoltaic cells. But she needed to run a lot of tests on it first. And needed to make sure this alien tech wasn't...alive and able to do damage.

The comp lab door opened and she looked over her shoulder.

Reed. She stilled, a slight tremble running through her.

He was still wearing the bottom half of his black carbon-fiber armor, but he'd removed the chest plates, leaving him in a tight, white T-shirt that stretched over wide shoulders and left muscled, tanned arms bare. His tousled brown hair was streaked with gold. He radiated life and vitality, and the scent of him made her think of the sea.

His face was bold, with strong lines, and he had eyes the color of polished gold. A lion's eyes. That's exactly what she thought of every time she saw Reed MacKinnon—a healthy lion on the prowl for a sunny spot to lie in. Or prey to hunt.

Oh, and she'd do anything to be that prey. She was pretty sure the sexy soldier would be shocked to know the secret, X-rated fantasies she'd had about him.

"Hey, Natalya."

She managed a nod. "Reed."

"How are you doing?" he asked in his lazy drawl.

"Fine." She barely controlled the snap in her voice. He always asked her that, watching her with that patient gaze. She suspected all he saw when he looked at her was a damaged, fragile woman. He'd been the one to carry her out of that raptor lab when Hell Squad had gone in to rescue survivors. He'd been the one she'd clung to. He'd been the one to sit by her bed in the infirmary for days as she'd recovered. And he'd been the one who'd witnessed a few of her bad moments in the weeks that followed her rescue.

She wasn't damaged, dammit. She took a deep breath. "You're back from the mission?" *Oh, brilliant, Natalya, of course he was back from the mission.*

He tilted his head, watching her. "Yeah. Rescued some humans the raptors were dragging off."

To another lab, probably. Natalya swallowed the lump in her throat. But, she reminded herself that Reed had blown up the alien's secret Genesis Facility where they'd been turning humans into aliens.

"I found this." He held up a black cube. It pulsed with a red light.

Oh. She jumped up and snatched it from him. "It's an energy source. I studied one that was damaged, but this...it looks like it's in perfect working order." She looked up and found Reed staring at her. "What?"

"Never seen you look so...covetous of anything before."

She felt heat in her cheeks. "You haven't seen me about to get in a hot shower."

Something flashed in his eyes and Natalya did a mental groan. God, had that really come out of her mouth? She'd never been this silly around a man before. She turned her back on him, knowing her cheeks were flaming now.

She set the cube on her desk and ran a hand through her short hair. Another thing she could thank the aliens for. She'd loved the long dark hair she'd once sported, but the aliens had shorn it off. At least it had grown back enough, and with a decent cut, the short style didn't look half bad.

Reed edged closer, his big body lightly brushing against hers. "So, you think the aliens use this cube as a power source? Like a battery?"

At that one tiny, accidental touch, she felt a spark of electricity skate through her. She tried to ignore his effect on her and focus on his words. "I don't know anything for certain. I need to study it more, but I'm hoping it could be an energy source we can use or..."

"Or?"

Their eyes clashed. "Something we can use against them."

His gaze sharpened. "Really?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I don't know yet." Her jaw tightened. "But if we can, then I'll make it happen."