

21% MONSTER ICE GIANT

A BRIGHT LIGHT SUDDENLY CUT THROUGH THE WATER. DARREN HAD TO TURN HIS HEAD AWAY AS PAIN EXPLODED BEHIND HIS EYES. HE SQUINTED AS HE LOOKED BACK TO SEE A SMALL SUBMARINE SLIPPING THROUGH THE WATER TOWARDS HIM, ITS TWO LARGE PROPELLERS SPINNING IN FITS AND STARTS AS IT SLOWED AND TURNED ITS BEAM AWAY FROM HIM, SWEEPING THROUGH THE WATER. AS HE WATCHED, THE BEAM BEGAN SWEEPING BACK TOWARDS HIM. AN UNREAL FEELING OF PANIC GREPT THROUGH HIM. THERE WAS NOWHERE TO HIDE.

For my wife, Michelle
Thank you for everything,
And all the other things.

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P. J. CANNING



PROLOGUE

Nathan Reaver ducked as he jogged away from the helicopter and got into the waiting BMW. MacTire, his tall, fair-haired driver, scanned the area around the landing pad, one hand drifting towards the pistol concealed beneath his jacket, before getting in. Reaver checked his Rolex watch as the car pulled away into London's wintry afternoon streets. He adjusted his suit and smoothed his usually neat white hair, which had been disturbed by the helicopter's downdraught, and then opened his comm.

“Good to see you back, Mac.”

MacTire looked in the rear-view mirror, his right eye concealed behind an eyepatch made of dark glass that fitted monocle-like in between cheekbone and eyebrow, and answered in his Texan drawl. “Good to have a fellow American for company, Mr Reaver.”

Reaver smiled and pulled a file of papers and photographs from his briefcase. He opened it and lifted a memo:

Communication from Councillor Eight to Councillor One

CONFIDENTIAL: For Nathan Reaver's Eyes Only

DESTROY AFTER READING

Nathan, thank you for investigating my Xastris Special Projects division. I have serious concerns about the recent mission failure when the XCEL cyborg prototype was lost. Here is the background:

In October of last year, we became aware of a twelve-year-old boy, Darren Devlin, who had exhibited superhuman strength and uncontrolled rage while destroying his school. Miss Inghart, supported by Ifan Ducas of the Tactical division, led a Triple E mission to Extract, Evaluate, and then Eliminate the boy if it turned out he was a Helix child. Laboratory tests indicated he was genetically 21% Monster.

Inexplicably, Miss Inghart chose to reinterpret her orders. She hoped to tame the boy so that we could use him. He escaped custody with the help of Marek Masters. Together, these two Helix children evaded us on several occasions, using Marek's nineteen per cent alien abilities. The mission ended with the loss of the XCEL

prototype. After sustaining significant damage, the cyborg ceased transmitting during an underwater struggle with Devlin and has not been recovered, despite extensive searches of the local river systems and the North Sea.

Over the last three months, I have changed the leadership of the European division of XSP. Miss Inghart is the subject of a kill order and remains on the run (see recent intelligence from Mr Ducas about possible locations). Masters and Devlin remain at large and Devlin's sister, Daisy (age 16), is being held at Bleakmoor Prison on my orders, in the hope of flushing Devlin out into the open.

I do not need to remind you of the vast threat that Masters represents or of his abilities that continue to grow stronger thanks to his part-alien genetics. However, Devlin makes him even more of a concern. Devlin has immense strength and speed, as well as highly developed senses, including exceptional hearing and excellent night vision. He is also able to swim underwater for long periods and has extraordinary camouflage abilities. Of greatest concern is that, based on his poor school reports, Devlin may lack the mental capability to resist Masters's powers of persuasion even when Masters is not using his alien-hypnotic abilities. Analysis of the Devlin household

social media and TV streaming services show that Devlin has never used social media and does not watch television. He also cannot read which means that Masters is likely to be his only source of information, and he may be unaware of his sister's arrest. So now, Masters finally has an ally he can influence to inflict as much physical damage on Xastris as Masters does online.

Nathan, I need you to both recover the situation by retrieving the XCEL and spearhead our efforts to eliminate Marek Masters before he causes further harm to our organization.

Ex Astris Scienta et Potestas

Choi Yeong-Ja, Councillor Eight

Reaver shredded the memo, as MacTire continued to drive, and then slowly flicked through the file until he reached a page with a photograph of a blonde, professionally dressed woman he knew well. Underneath the photo was printed:

Family name: Inghart

First name: Liv

Age: 38

Nationality: Norwegian

Ethnicity: White

Expert areas: Child criminal psychology, covert manipulation techniques, non-physical interrogation, weapon classifications 1 & 2

He stroked his neatly trimmed beard thoughtfully as he looked at the photo and then carried on reading until MacTire opened the comm again: "Nearly there, sir."

Reaver glanced out of the window at the row of grubby houses. "Drop me here."

MacTire pulled over. "You want me to take care of this?"

Reaver smiled at his driver as he got out of the car. MacTire, he thought, would enjoy this mission a little too much. "No, just circle the block."

"Sure thing, sir."

Reaver walked along the street, allowing the evening breeze to billow his long black coat. The effect, with his intense weather-beaten eyes, tanned face and large curved nose, made him resemble an angry eagle. He rang the doorbell and waited calmly as the figure of a woman came into view behind the cracked, frosted glass of the shabby front door. His hands drifted, out of habit, to the gold cufflinks on his wrists, each carrying the single letter X.

Miss Inghart opened the door. Her eyes widened with shock before flicking to look behind Reaver, who watched

her coldly. “Yes, Miss Inghart, I am alone. I suggest you do not run. It will only make it worse.”

Miss Inghart’s face drained of colour. She stepped back. “Come in, Mr Reaver.”

Reaver allowed Miss Inghart to lead him through to a lounge decorated with peeling wallpaper and a stained carpet. She stood to one side as he draped his coat over a chair, brushed a stray piece of cotton off his handmade suit, and fixed his gaze on her.

“Miss Inghart, the recent failure of the XCEL mission is due to your poor decisions. You were given a rare second chance, after allowing Masters to escape Xastris during Operation Snowline, because your exceptional record with Marek should have helped us catch him.”

Miss Inghart looked at the carpet. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Reaver ignored her answer. “Then you tried to run and hide after Masters outwitted you. I admit to being disappointed. I know you understand the importance of the Xastris mission. The need for secrecy. I thought we could rely on your loyalty.”

Miss Inghart looked up at him. “I know I made mistakes.”

“You did.” He placed a small phial of amber liquid on a coffee table and waited. Miss Inghart stared at the phial. She looked faint. “I could still be useful... I know Marek. I’ve met Darren Devlin...”

Reaver interrupted. “How many opportunities to fail do you want? Not even three years ago, five agents died during Operation Snowline on your watch. And now, the loss of the unique XCEL prototype?”

She gave him a plaintive look. “But think of all my success! I tamed Marek when others thought it was impossible and I know how to keep Xastris secrets. I’m not a threat to you... I could be an analyst, not an agent. I’m of some use, surely?”

Reaver silenced her merely by hardening his expression. Her pleading disgusted him – she had shown no mercy as a rising star in Xastris before her fall from grace. He and Xastris owed her nothing. All that remained was one final act of duty that she owed them. He gestured towards the phial.

Miss Inghart went to say more, but then her shoulders sagged. She picked up the phial with a steady hand. Her other hand shook at her side. She moved over to the window where the setting sun caught the liquid and scattered amber light across the dirty walls.

“Beautiful,” she said, her expression distant. “Is it the snake venom?”

Reaver nodded. “From the black mamba.” The dirt in the room made his skin crawl. *Get on with it*, he thought.

“Do you mind,” Miss Inghart said hesitantly, “if I open

the window? To hear the birds one last time?”

Reaver nodded his head a fraction. Miss Inghart wiped away a tear with her wrist and opened the French windows to reveal a small overgrown garden. He watched as she breathed in deeply and then drank the entire contents in one gulp. She staggered, grabbed the back of a chair and fell to the floor, one arm crossing the threshold into the garden as she landed.

Reaver approached and watched her breathing slowly stop. Then he lifted his jacket, shook it to remove any dust and put it on as he stepped over her body and exited the house, leaving the front door swinging gently in the breeze.

CHAPTER 1

LONDON CALLING

As the sun set on a cold January day in London, something climbed an old stone tower by the River Thames. It was the size and shape of a person, but its outline shimmered and matched the colour of the stone as it moved quickly up the tower and swung onto the roof.

A keen-eyed bystander might have spotted a circle of swirling colour appear by the figure that had climbed the tower wall, but only the local ravens noticed. They cawed loudly as a tall, thin teenage boy stepped carefully out of the swirling colours onto the roof, straightened the jacket of his dark suit, and adjusted the insect-like night vision goggles that covered his eyes. His name was Marek Masters – nineteen per cent alien and the cleverest, and possibly the most dangerous, person alive.

“Ready?” he whispered as he pocketed his SQUID –

the Sub-Quantum Ultraionic Interdimensional Device that had opened the colourful portal he'd just stepped through.

In response, the shimmering something seemed to solidify into a short and unusually broad teenage boy who lowered the hood of his camo jacket to reveal a pair of amber-yellow eyes – watchful and somehow not quite human. A thick scar carved a path across his temple from above his left ear until it disappeared into his wild hair that had become steadily more blue and less blond over recent months. The scar was the only visible trophy of the October night when the boy had defeated the XCEL – a killer humanoid cyborg with shining green eyes.

He was Darren Devlin – twenty-one per cent monster, wanted by the police for destroying his school and hunted by a secret organization for being alive at all. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Marek smiled and produced a laser knife from a pocket. He used the bright green laser to cut through the lead roofing and then stepped back as Darren pulled a section up to form an opening and looked in.

“Pitch black,” Darren whispered and tipped his head. “I can hear buzzing. That’s all.”

Marek took a reading with his phone. “It’s a heat sensor system.” He picked up a small device from the roof that Darren had placed there moments before his arrival.

“Do you mind just popping down and putting the locator beacon on the floor? I’ll then SQUID past the sensors.”

“See you in a bit,” Darren whispered and activated his camo, thankful that it disguised his body heat just like it made him hard to spot. He lowered himself, bat-like, through the hole, gripped the ceiling and then swung, hand over hand across the roof. He reached a wall and clambered silently down to ground level. Standing in the complete darkness, he put the locator beacon on the floor and closed his eyes as Marek SQUIDed beside him in a blaze of coloured light.

He still had spots in front of his eyes as Marek placed a sphere on the floor that flooded the room with soft green light and then removed his goggles.

Darren looked around and groaned. “Marek!”

“What?” Marek said, smiling broadly.

“We’re supposed to be training!”

“I’ve just watched you tunnel under the River Thames, climb the Tower of London evading six layers of security, and work with me to use my technology to break into the highest security room in London. How is that not good training?”

Darren pointed. “The Crown Jewels, Marek! Really?”

Marek bounced on the balls of his feet. “I know! Aren’t they fabulous?” He approached the priceless crown and

sceptre, getting his face close enough to mist the security glass that protected them. “Just look at the craftsmanship. Quite extraordinary.”

Darren put himself between Marek and the crown. “We said no stealing. Just break in, break out, and leave no trace!”

Marek waved a dismissive hand. “Okay, okay, I may have got a little overexcited but what harm would it do if we *borrowed* them for a few days?”

“No!”

“And if we returned having replaced the world famous Koh-i-Noor diamond with a fake...”

“No way!”

“Please?”

Darren growled with frustration. “It’s still stealing!”

“Ah!” Marek raised one of his three long, straight fingers. “Technically, the crown belongs to the Crown. So, legally I’m not sure you can steal something that belongs to itself.”

“That makes no sense!”

“I know,” Marek said happily. “I’ve been reading up on English law, and it’s fascinating what you can get away with.”

Darren looked at the glittering jewels. They did look extraordinary.

Marek whispered in his ear. “Go on...don’t you at least want to touch them? Perhaps lift it out of that case for me? Pick it up...”

Darren shook his head.

“Please? You could put it on my head...just for a minute?”

Darren picked up the locator beacon instead. “Nope. I’m climbing up there and we’re putting the roof back. Then you’re SQUIDing back to the bunker and I’m going to get some air.”

Marek sighed. “If you insist... You know, Darren, you’ve been in a really bad mood these last few days. I think you need to snap out of it.”

Darren rubbed his hand through his wild hair and shook his head. “Whatever. See you on the roof.”

A nightly challenge had been Marek’s idea. Back when they had agreed to join forces to take on the shadowy organization they only knew as XSP, Darren had dubbed the two of them Helix 51. The idea that they were part of a unique family of fifty-one children whose DNA had been tampered with during an illegal secret experiment gave their mission meaning. They had both enjoyed discussing what they might do to honour the forty-nine who had died and take down the organization behind Project Helix. They had both been excited by the idea, but while Marek

had remained enthused, Darren had slowly become disheartened.

Unlike Marek, who had his computers to track Project Helix across the world, Darren had nothing to do but wait – and he felt useless. Each day, as he slept fitfully under his bed in Marek’s bunker, thoughts of home in Farlington filled his mind. His brain played and replayed the night of the XCEL attack – its speed and strength and especially the cyborg’s luminous green eyes as it tracked him through the trees. It filled him with guilt at how close he’d come to getting his sister killed. The desire to see his family, and the equally powerful need to keep them safe by staying away, tore at him, pulling him in opposite directions.

Several times a day, he would ask Marek if Daisy and his parents were still safe at home. After several more weeks, Marek had lost his temper: “Honestly, Darren! If you ask me that again, I really don’t know what I’ll do!”

Marek’s waspish tone had set off a moment of intense anger in Darren. He’d aimed a punch at a flat screen TV on the Command & Control centre wall and only just handled his temper in time. Instead, he’d slammed his fist onto the large table that dominated the middle of the room. Robots had scurried for cover as Marek looked on with one eyebrow raised.

“Well, that thoroughly tested my bots’ self-preservation programming.”

Darren looked at the array of mini-robots who were watching him from a safe distance and felt guilty. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Marek shook his head. “Forgiveness isn’t in their programming, I’m afraid. They are very much evidence based. Hold onto that temper of yours and they’ll adapt. If not, don’t expect them to keep your room tidy or sort out your next delivery of steaks.”

“I’m trying!”

Marek’s eyebrows formed a V-shaped frown. “You’re a little tense, aren’t you Darren?”

“It’s all this waiting around.”

“I prefer to think of it as preparing – gathering information, working on emergency escape plans, and so on. I’ve managed to hack the frequencies the people behind Project Helix used when the XCEL attacked us, for example. I told you, if I can find that XCEL and we get our hands on it, there’s a lot we might be able to do with it. A lot of damage to our enemies. It’s critical, really. I’ve also disrupted the illegal sale of materials needed to make xenocide to limit their ability to kill me with those pesky poison darts. I’ve even narrowed down the list of possible schools they used for the Helix experiment to less than thirty.”

“But I’m not doing any of that stuff. I’m just sitting around like a lemon.”

“Good point. Tell you what, we could start experimenting again!”

“I’m not getting in another scanner,” Darren warned him, as memories of Marek’s previous set of experiments on him came flooding back.

“I was thinking more of testing your physical abilities – a different challenge every day. Meanwhile, I’ll ensure Daisy is quite safe and you won’t ask me about it. Agreed?”

Darren had quickly stopped thinking of the nightly challenges as experiments. They seemed more like training and he’d immersed himself in them. Marek became fascinated by Darren’s habit of choosing to tunnel under buildings to gain entry. “It explains a few things. How you know which way is north and whether it is night or day even when we’re underground. Also, those big shovel-like hands and hard nails. Much like a mole’s, really. I just can’t see how it all fits together. What kind of monstrous creature can climb, swim, tunnel and fight, let alone hide as well as you do?” He’d clapped his hands together gleefully. “That’s the fabulous thing about science. It doesn’t matter how much you discover, you’re always left with more questions!”

But that night in the Tower of London, it was true that Darren was in a bad mood and had been for a week. Training

was losing its appeal and to make things worse, tomorrow was his thirteenth birthday – a day when he should have been at the heart of his family and free to be himself. Thinking about it caused a very real pain in his chest just where his own heart was beating. He felt the need to be outside and alone. So, as Marek completed his repair of the roof, Darren activated his camo and swung off the Tower of London. As he climbed down, the darkness wrapped around him, easing the tension in his chest as the sharp, north-easterly wind carried the sounds of London calling.