

Rhiannon Lassiter

# HEX

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

# HEX

Rhiannon Lassiter wrote *Hex* when she was seventeen. She was born and brought up in London but now lives in Oxford with two small cats that sit on her manuscripts. She has recently completed her second novel, *Hex: Shadows*.

## Reviews of *Hex*:

'A pacy sci-fi adventure thriller, both engrossingly written and confidently plotted . . . this is a considerable debut from a young writer from whom there will be much to look forward to.'

*Books for Keeps*

'*Hex* shows a considerable narrative style and a real flair for atmosphere.'

Philip Pullman, *Guardian*

'A convincing, pacy story.'

*Independent*

'A riveting first novel . . . a compulsive page-turning narrative complete with shoot-'em-up finale and a satisfying resolution.'

Michael Thorn, *TES*

# 1

## Hover through the Fog

It was the middle of the night in London but two miles above the ground the city was wide awake. Lights shone in the windows of the city towers and glared in the headlights of vehicles speeding along the network of arched bridges that linked the gleaming heights. Winter was drawing in and the thick fog that wrapped itself around the towers made visibility poor. Wraith piloted his flitter between the skyscrapers with care, still unfamiliar with the complex controls, but other flitters whipped past in an instant, their occupants in search of the city's nightlife. Wraith ignored them; he was on a more serious search and had much further to travel. As he guided the flitter lower down, a holoscreen ad sprang to life ahead of the craft and Wraith blinked with annoyance as he shot through the centre of a phantom image. Slogans glared from other 2D screens, flashing suddenly out of the murky darkness, advertising some of the delights the city had to offer; signs flashed everywhere, blurring into the distance as far as he could see. This was obviously the centre of clubland, the signs advertising casinos, cinemas and clubs, all exclusive and expensive – a playground for the rich. The flitter was still descending slowly and Wraith was forced to concentrate harder on the controls as the network of bridges became denser, with fewer spaces for the aerial craft to pass through.

Wraith was beginning to wonder if he should have hired a skimmer. Travelling across the bridges was beginning to seem safer than flying between them, wreathed as they were in fog. Another flitter banked and wheeled round directly in front of him and Wraith had to pull back hard on the controls to prevent himself crashing into the support struts of one of the bridges. He halted the flitter centimetres away from the thick metal bar and let it hover while he caught his breath.

As the flitter hovered, the display screen on its control panel sprang into life and the fizzing grey pixels swirled before resolving themselves into an image. Raven grinned out of the screen at him as her voice came out of a speaker instead of through the transceiver surgically inserted in his right ear:

*'Taking a rest, brother?'*

'Raven.' Wraith frowned at the screen. 'How are you doing that? This isn't a vidcom.' The flitter was an old model and as far as he knew the screen was only capable of showing views from the cameras positioned on the four sides of the vehicle.

'*Ways and means,*' Raven said enigmatically and her screen image winked. Leaning forward to look at it, Wraith realized that it didn't have the resolution of a vidcom image or the accuracy. Raven's representation of herself was schematic. Her dark eyes stared out of the screen, framed by a mass of tangled black elf locks. But the image was basic and two-dimensional. He shrugged, used to Raven's secrecy about her Hex abilities, understandable since any of them was enough to get her killed. His expression grew grimmer at the thought but he smiled as Raven raised an eyebrow to ask:

*'Want me to drive?'*

'Can you do that from where you are?' Wraith asked in surprise.

'Of course,' Raven told him and lights glowed on the control panel as the flitter began cruising again. '*Keep your hands on the controls,*' she warned him, '*otherwise people might wonder how come you're not crashing into things.*'

'OK,' he nodded. 'But it would be easier if you detached yourself from the circuitry and piloted this thing for real.'

'*I'm investigating,*' she said sharply. '*To do that I need to be in the net.*'

'Have you found anything yet?' Wraith asked, his voice softer. The screen image shook her head.

'*Nothing,*' she told him. '*You'll have to try a physical search. The records we're looking for don't seem to be on the main net.*'

'What about a secured system?'

'*I can get into those, it just takes a little longer,*' Raven told him. '*But I don't think this is going to be a computer job. It'll take a flesh and blood search for us to find Rachel.*'

'Don't worry,' he assured her. 'We'll find her.'

'*Yeah.*' The image nodded. '*I have to go, Wraith. There's a lot of documentation we're going to need while we're in this city. It'll take me some time to change the records.*'

'OK,' Wraith told the screen as Raven's image fizzed and was replaced with the normal camera view.

'*Stay ice,*' her voice said with a faint laugh. '*You can try to drive now.*'

Wraith took hold of the controls again with reluctance but found that it was becoming easier to pilot the craft. The towers and bridges were still well lit and it took a

moment for him to realize that he was seeing fewer street signs and fewer vehicles were speeding along the bridges or passing him in the air. This district seemed to be more residential. The bridges widened out into plazas at intervals and it took Wraith longer and longer to find gaps to pass through to lower levels. He could almost believe that he was gliding over the ground as he glimpsed tree-lined avenues and stretches of grass beneath him. But his destination lay further on and further down. Eventually the buildings began to look less well-kept, the street lighting grew dimmer and the plazas disappeared.

The flitter sank deeper into the darkness, passing deserted levels of buildings and damaged bridges. Wraith resisted the inclination to turn up the headlights, knowing that this darkness would be home to the urban parasites that haunted every city. He had no intention of falling prey to London's criminal element, although it was among them that he hoped to find what he sought. But the darkness did not continue for long. Below the flitter the greasy lights of gangland were appearing.

As London had grown up into the sky, it had left its slums behind on the ground. Now far below the gleaming heights of the skyscrapers lay the urban jungle of gangland. The high-rises were where they had their corporations, hospitals, schools and homes. But outside the protective inner circle were the wastelands of the abandoned suburbs where the gangers thrived. These levels were rarely policed, the security services only venturing in when a politician ordered a pre-election clean-up. The people who lived in these slums didn't have an official identity; they couldn't get jobs or medical treatment, no children would ever see the inside of a school. The only way to survive was to join a gang or try to make a living outside the law. Prostitution, black-

market trading, illegal drug-dealing – vices old and new found a home in every city in the 23rd century. Wraith had no doubt that London was exactly the same.

It was the first time he had visited this city but he worked according to a well-proven method, navigating the flitter slowly past the walkways until he found what he wanted. The first person to approach the craft was a boy, who quickened his approach as its window slid down. Wraith placed his age at about thirteen years old but his hazel eyes held the jaded cynicism of an old man. His clothes were torn and his skin was grimy but his bronze hair was clean and glimmered under the dim streetlights.

‘You looking for something, friend?’ the boy asked. ‘Drink, women, drugs? For twenty creds I can tell you where to go.’

‘I’m looking for a guide,’ Wraith replied, considering the small figure. ‘I need someone who knows the city, who can tell me who owns the turf. Would that be you?’

‘I can tell you what you want to know,’ the boy declared emphatically. ‘Thirty creds.’

‘Get in,’ Wraith told him, releasing the door control so that it hissed open.

‘Creds first,’ the boy said, extending a slender grasping hand.

‘Here.’ Wraith dug out a handful of coins from his jacket pocket, more than the boy had asked for, but he didn’t hand them over at once. ‘Get in,’ he said again and, after a moment’s hesitation, the boy obeyed. He was reaching for the coins almost before the door had hissed shut but Wraith waited until the flitter was back in motion before giving them to him. They disappeared immediately into an inside pocket of the boy’s battered denim jacket. Wraith smiled grimly as his passenger

became immediately less wary, apparently satisfied with the transaction.

‘So why are you looking for gangers?’ the boy asked in an indifferent tone of voice.

‘I’m not,’ Wraith told him and saw the wary look spring back into the child’s experienced eyes.

‘Hey, friend, you better not be thinking of nothing skitzo,’ his passenger cautioned, his muscles tensing and a hand reaching for the door release.

‘Don’t try that,’ Wraith told him, speeding up the flitter as an extra emphasis. ‘I want information. If you can’t give it to me, I’ll let you out. If you can, I’ll make it worth your while. OK?’

‘What sort of information?’ The boy had stopped looking ready to run but he was still tense and suspicious.

‘I want to find someone who knows how to work the ganglands, who can put me in touch with the right people for a deal. Information retrieval, you scan?’

‘I scan.’ The boy nodded. ‘You’re looking for a fixer. But I can’t get you an intro, I don’t know anyone personal. I can only tell you a place, right?’

‘A place is fine,’ Wraith agreed. ‘I’ll make my own way after that. But make sure it’s someone competent.’

‘The Countess is electric,’ the boy told him. ‘But she’ll cost you.’

‘That’s not a problem,’ Wraith replied briefly. ‘Where’s the place?’

‘Creds first. You agreed.’ The hand was extended again.

‘Right.’ This time Wraith handed over a fifty credit piece. ‘But she had better be worth it.’

‘Sure thing, friend,’ the boy replied. ‘Turn off here, you need to go down a couple more levels.’

Despite a few misgivings, due to the fact that this



method had not been universally successful, Wraith found that he had chosen his guide well. Kez had been working the streets long enough to know the names of the major players in gangland and, when a few more coins had changed hands, became loquacious enough to fill Wraith in on the gangs who claimed the territory they were passing through. These areas overlapped, naturally, and like anywhere else gang-feuds were continually in motion. A few times Wraith picked up speed when he saw another craft, not waiting to find out if it displayed gang colours. Kez evidently approved of his caution and the boy was quick to assert that he had no ties to any gang.

‘Staying neutral’s the only way to do business,’ he shrugged. ‘I pay tolls to the enforcers like everybody. Try anything else and you’ll get flatlined. But I don’t wear colours and I don’t hang with the gangers, except for business.’

‘I scan.’ Wraith nodded. It was the same in any city. But the facts that had become clichés for him long ago left a bitter taste in his mouth when personified in a child who would be lucky to make it through adolescence.

It wasn’t long before they reached their destination. Wraith let the flitter coast down gradually to rest on a wide walkway which passed the building Kez had indicated. He reached back for the pack that contained his possessions and released the flitter’s doors. Kez got out slowly, watching as Wraith coded the doors shut. It wouldn’t deter a thief intent on stealing the vehicle but he didn’t imagine that much would.

‘Thanks for the directions,’ he told Kez. ‘Catch you around.’

‘I could wait for you while you do business,’ the boy suggested and Wraith gave him a sharp look. He didn’t delude himself that Kez had become attached to him after

a ten-minute conversation. After the rate he had been handing out credits it was no surprise that the boy was unwilling to see the source of supply dry up. Usually he would have made it clear straight off that their association was terminated. But here, in a city he didn't know, he didn't make any objections.

'You can wait here if you want,' he shrugged. 'But I'll be some time. You can watch the flitter for me.'

'Sure thing,' Kez agreed, leaning back against the small craft as Wraith began to walk away.

The only obvious approach to the building Kez had identified as belonging to the Countess's operation was along a narrow spur of walkway which still seemed in relatively good repair. But as Wraith headed towards it a figure detached itself from the shadows and stepped in front of him to bar the way. It was a big man, dressed in combat gear and holding a heavy assault rifle menacingly. Muscle, Wraith realized, hired to guard the building.

'You lost, friend?' the man asked, tightening his grip on the rifle.

'I'm looking to do some business,' Wraith told him, his own stance carefully non-threatening. He had weapons if he chose to use them, but this was a formality, not a genuine confrontation.

'The Countess know you're coming?' the guard asked.

'Not yet, I'm from out of town.'

'A ganger?'

'Not any more.'

'OK, go on in,' the guard said eventually. 'But no trouble.'

'Thank you,' Wraith acknowledged and stepped out on to the walkway. It was only a short distance to the main door of the building, which stood open. The windows

were metal-shielded all the way up to the next level, giving the building the appearance of a fortress. Apparently the Countess was good enough to maintain considerable security precautions and Wraith was favourably impressed.

The inside of the building was dark and when he stepped inside the door he stood still for a moment, blinking to adjust to the dim lighting. He was standing in a wide empty hall, obviously designed as the foyer of a corporation building or hotel. There were about eight doors leading off in various directions but all except one were shielded and blocked up with rubble. The only empty door was protected by two guards, a man and a woman, both dressed similarly to the man outside. They stood at ease as Wraith approached, but they held their weapons with a cool confidence.

'State your name and business into the vidcom,' the woman told him, stepping aside to reveal a screen set into the wall. 'The Countess will decide whether to see you.' The screen was dark, not revealing the person on the other end, either the Countess herself or someone working for her. The unit itself was a recent design, probably programmed to scan as well as transmit.

'Wraith,' he said levelly. 'I need to find some people for a deal.' There was a pause before a dry voice spoke out of the vidcom.

'What kind of deal?'

'An investigation,' he said into the unit. 'I can't say any more here.'

'All right,' the voice said, after waiting for a few moments. 'You can come up, but leave your weapons behind.' Wraith hesitated. But from the look on the guards' faces this issue was not open for discussion. Reaching into his jacket he brought out his laser pistol,

then he removed the blade from the sheath on his back and handed both weapons to the female guard.

‘What’s in the bag?’ the woman asked.

‘Clothes, computer disks,’ Wraith told her and the woman nodded in confirmation after glancing at a readout beside the screen. Obviously he had been right about the vidcom scanning him.

‘OK, you can go now,’ the male guard told him and Wraith nodded. Their system was not infallible; it had failed to scan the extra knife he had not given up, but there were probably more guards further up.

The main hall had been dilapidated and dark but as Wraith walked past the two guards everything changed. He found himself at the foot of a wide staircase, the floor, walls and ceiling covered in a brilliantly reflective shielding. He couldn’t see the light source but the stairway was brightly lit. He could see his own figure reflected disorientingly into infinity and found it difficult to balance with any sureness. That was undoubtedly intentional, he thought as he made his way up the stairs. They curved gradually and he couldn’t be sure in what direction he was heading. However he must have climbed up at least two floors by the time the stairs came to an end and he found himself standing on a narrow landing, staring at his own reflection in a blank, mirrored wall. His face gleamed eerily from the metal surface like a ghost: grey eyes set in a narrow, chalk-white face, framed by wild white hair.

Part of the wall slid away silently to reveal the Countess’s centre of operations. Terminals and screens covered the walls, connecting her to her information network. Cases of equipment were stacked around the room, all flawlessly new. In the centre of the room stood the woman he had come to see. She was thin and above

average height, dressed plainly in black. Her dark hair had been cropped close to her head and the effect was one of unconcern with her appearance. She wore multiple armbands, ten on each arm, set with mini-screens and remote control buttons for the different kinds of terminal around the room. Sharp, brown eyes regarded him from a fierce, bird-like face.

'Come in,' she ordered. 'Tell me what you want.'

'Are you the Countess?' Wraith asked.

'I am.'

'I need your help.'

'So you said.' The Countess frowned impatiently.

'What is it you want?'

'I'm trying to find someone in the city,' Wraith said quickly. 'A girl, about eleven years old. She hasn't shown up on any of the computer nets yet.'

'How do you know?' the fixer asked sharply, her eyes sweeping over him appraisingly. 'You're no hacker.'

'I'm here with my sister,' Wraith admitted. 'She's the hacker.'

'A physical search will take time,' the Countess told him. 'But I can use some contacts if you can give me some more info on the girl.' She crossed to one of her terminals.

'Her name's Rachel,' Wraith told her. 'She's my younger sister. I haven't seen her for two years. Rachel was living with adoptive parents when they took off with her. They haven't contacted us since but I heard news they were in London.'

'Are you planning a retrieval operation?' the Countess asked. 'To get the girl back?'

'No.' Wraith shook his head. 'I just want to know if she's OK.'

'All right.' The fixer nodded. 'I'll need all the

information you have on her and on the couple who adopted her. Names, pictures, bio details, the works.'

'Right.' Wraith pulled out an unmarked computer disk from his bag and passed it to the fixer. She slotted it into the machine and Wraith watched as a blur of details flickered across the screen. When the transfer of information had been completed the fixer tapped a few keys to bring up Rachel's image.

'I'll have this sent out to some contacts,' she told him. 'That way we should find out something. But it's strange that the girl doesn't appear on the net. There should at least be school records.'

'Yeah,' Wraith agreed. His gaze was fixed on the picture. Rachel looked like any other kid: brown hair in a neat bob, big shining brown eyes and a crooked grin. But Wraith knew it was crucial that he find her, and not just because she was his sister.

'When I've had some initial reports in we can decide whether or not to hire some people to search more actively,' the Countess told him. 'That should be in a few days. But I'll need a basic fee now.'

'How much?'

'Five hundred,' the fixer told him and Wraith nodded. The price might be a little high, but he needed the Countess's support more than he needed to haggle over money.

'OK,' he agreed and reached for a cred card.

It had taken Kez two minutes to get into the flitter. He hadn't been able to catch sight of the owner's code but the flitter was an old model and it was easy to force the hatch open. It was done before the guard further down the walkway had noticed anything untoward – and there was nothing suspicious about Kez getting into the flitter when

he had arrived in it. Once inside the boy cast a practised eye over the controls. The white-haired guy had operated it clumsily but Kez had driven this kind of craft many times before. He powered up the main drive and watched with satisfaction as the control panel lit up. Then he frowned. The console's view screen was fizzing strangely although it had been working normally on the way to the fixer's building. He punched a few buttons to get an image but nothing worked. Shrugging, he decided to take the flitter up without the screen; the front window showed enough without it. He reached for the controls and froze as a voice rang out of the speakers.

*'If you're serious about stealing this flitter, prepare for the ride of your life.'*

'What?' Kez looked around quickly, but there was no room for anyone to hide in the tiny craft. 'Who is that?'

*'Wouldn't you like to know?'* the voice came back at him. It was a girl's voice and she was laughing. Kez sneered.

'Whoever you are, you ain't gonna do nothing on the other side of a com channel,' he told it and grabbed the controls. The flitter lifted off the bridge smoothly and then Kez was thrown back in his seat as it leapt forward into the air. He was no longer holding the controls but the flitter swept easily past the buildings, faster than he'd ever seen one move before. Laughter was ringing in his ears and the voice spoke through it.

*'But I'm not on the other side of a com channel,'* it said and the flitter went into a wild spin. Kez clung to the sides of his seat, clutching for the safety harness as he was whipped around by the gyrations of the craft. Once he had the clasps snapped in place he grabbed the controls again, but the entire panel was dead. He let go, recognizing the futility of the attempt, as the flitter came

out of its spin and streaked upwards through the city's levels. It was the fastest ride Kez had ever taken and to his surprise he found himself enjoying it. He whooped in delight as he sped past the hazards of the metropolis.

Then a siren went off and, looking back, Kez saw two flitters start in pursuit.

'Seccies,' he warned automatically.

'*I see them,*' the voice told him and the flitter dived. The screen sprang into life to display the back view from the craft and Kez watched as within seconds the Security Service vehicles were left behind. As soon as they were out of sight the flitter assumed a more usual speed as it coasted through the city.

'That was wild,' the boy grinned. 'I ain't never seen driving like that.'

'*Thank you,*' his companion replied, and suddenly a girl's face appeared on the screen. She was older than him, about fifteen, with a fierce grin. She bent her head in a mocking bow as Kez stared.

'You really are something,' Kez said, impressed.

'*Of course,*' she replied.

'But if you're controlling this hunk of junk, where are you?' he asked suspiciously. 'It's impossible. No one can do that. It's like magic.' Then he tensed. 'You're not some kind of freak, are you?' The screen fizzed and the image disappeared abruptly. The flitter touched down on one of the walkways and the driver's door hissed open, obviously a sign for him to leave.

Kez realized he had made a mistake. He looked out into the night. He wasn't far from his usual patch and it wouldn't take him long to get back there. But something about the mysterious ghost-like stranger and now this other ghost in the machine had caught his imagination. He stayed firmly in his seat.



'Hey, calm down,' he told the fizzing screen, hoping no one would pass and see him talking to a flitter. 'I didn't mean to offend you, but I never met a Hex before.'

*'Are you intending to broadcast the information to the entire neighbourhood?'* the girl's voice asked coldly, her words a confirmation of his suspicions.

'You opened the door, not me,' Kez reminded her. The door stayed open and he looked hopefully at the screen. 'Why don't we start this whole thing again?' he offered. 'I'm Kez,' he said leaning towards the screen hopefully. The door slid shut and after a moment the screen came to life again.

*'I'm Raven,'* the girl told him, as the flitter took off. *'The guy you were about to steal this flitter from is my brother, Wraith.'*

'I wouldn't have got much for it,' Kez shrugged. 'It's a real old model.'

*'Wraith won't be too pleased about you trying to steal it at all,'* Raven said. *'Especially after he gave you nearly a hundred credits.'*

'Could you maybe not tell him?' the boy suggested.

'Maybe,' Raven grinned. *'Since you survived the ride.'* She winked at him. *'But don't try to cheat him again, OK?'*

'Sure thing,' Kez agreed as the flitter touched down in the same spot it had occupied before. 'Hey, Raven, when do I get to meet you in person?'

*'Tonight, if you can find Wraith a safe place to stay,'* she told him as the door opened again. Kez got ready to get out, but Raven's voice called him back. *'And Kez, don't tell him anything about this. That I spoke to you, or that you know what I am, OK?'*

'I scan,' Kez saluted the screen and Raven winked again before her image dissolved. Kez sat grinning back at the

screen until he realized he had better get out of the flitter before Wraith got back.

When Wraith returned, Kez was leaning against the side of the flitter in the same position as when he had left, watching him with intent hazel eyes.

‘Business OK?’ he asked as Wraith approached.

‘Yeah, I think so,’ Wraith replied. ‘Anyone try to steal the flitter?’

‘Not with me here,’ Kez told him but felt an unusual pang of guilt as he caught the cred coin he was tossed. ‘Hey, friend,’ he said, as Wraith keyed open the flitter doors, ‘you got someplace to stay tonight?’

‘Not yet.’ Wraith looked at the boy in some surprise as he got back into the car, but decided he was hoping for more money.

‘I’ll show you a place,’ Kez offered, ‘if I can hang with you a while.’

‘You will?’ Wraith got into the flitter and watched as Kez swung quickly into the passenger seat. He didn’t want any additional burdens on this trip and he opened his mouth to refuse when a voice buzzed from his transceiver, too low for Kez to hear.

*‘Accept the offer, brother. The sooner you find a place, the sooner I can meet you.’*

‘OK,’ Wraith said, in response to both his sister and Kez. ‘Where to?’

The place Kez directed him to was a shabby flophouse deep within the slum district but not part of gangland. It was a dismal area, most of the buildings derelict. The room Wraith and Kez were given was probably better than most. It possessed three beds, made up with grubby sheets, a rickety table and chairs and a computer unit

with a vidscreen. Its only window was boarded up and a second door led to a small bathroom. Wraith dumped his bag by one of the beds and Kez seated himself on another.

'How come you asked for three beds?' he asked and Wraith looked at him sharply.

'I'm meeting my sister,' he said shortly.

'You going to call her and tell her where you are?' Kez asked and Wraith shook his head quickly.

'No need. I have a tracking device so she can find me.' He pulled out a cred card from his jacket and held it out to Kez. 'Why don't you go get something for us to eat?' he suggested, hoping to be able to avoid the boy's questions for a while. 'Get enough for three.'

'OK.' Kez took the card. 'What do you want?'

'Anything,' Wraith shrugged. 'No, wait a minute.' He thought for a second. 'My sister likes Chinese food.'

'Sure thing,' Kez grinned and was gone. Wraith wondered for a moment if he had been wise to give the boy the card which had about eight hundred credits on it. But since Kez seemed so eager to hang around with him, he was unlikely to do a flit. He lay back on his bed to wait.

Twenty minutes later there was a knock at the door and, without waiting for an answer, it swung open. Wraith sat up and then leapt to his feet as he saw his sister. She was carrying a duffle bag and dressed in black combat gear and a fringed suede jacket. Her black hair was wet and straggled into her dark eyes but she was grinning as she hugged him. Wraith hadn't seen her since they had arrived in England three days ago. They had separated then, nominally in order to attract less attention but in actuality because Raven was used to independence.

Wraith, Raven and Rachel had been placed in an

asylum blockhouse when their parents died. Wraith had been fifteen, Raven nine and Rachel five. Blockhouses were safe but dreary and unpleasant, and those children unfortunate enough to end up in one dedicated all their energies to escaping. Wraith had achieved this by joining a gang, the Kali, as an enforcer. Shortly afterwards Raven had also escaped. Her determination to do so had become a necessity when Raven had discovered that she was a Hex. Mutants who possessed the Hex gene were no more welcome in Denver than anywhere else in the world. Regular sweeps were made of the asylums to detect anyone who showed signs of mutant abilities. If Raven had been discovered she would have been turned over to the government for extermination. At the first opportunity Raven had made herself scarce and entered the ganglands, working as a highly efficient computer hacker.

But neither of them was able to take care of Rachel. According to Raven she had never shown any signs of being a Hex and was therefore safe enough in the asylum for the time being. Later Wraith was relieved when a couple had requested to adopt her. He hadn't imagined that they would abscond with Rachel. Their disappearance had impelled Wraith to take action to find them. If Rachel did turn out to be a Hex she would be in danger and he considered himself responsible for her safety. But it was not until she had been gone for two years that Wraith had had any leads about her whereabouts.

Raven had been uninterested in his search. The fact that her life had been in danger since she was a child had affected her personality. Wraith saw her very rarely as she had become increasingly difficult to communicate with. Her moods ranged from paranoid depression to reckless

hyperactivity. It had been so long since they had been close that Wraith could not be sure why Raven had agreed to accompany him to London. But he appreciated her presence. Not only was it useful to have a Hex with him, he also had a deep affection for his sister. The fact that Raven rarely appeared to reciprocate his affection worried and angered him.

Now Raven pulled back from the hug awkwardly and ruffled her hair to cover up her reaction.

'It's raining really heavily out there,' she told him.

'Here,' Wraith offered, throwing her a blanket from his bed. 'Use this.'

'Thanks.' Raven wrinkled her nose. 'It's not very clean, is it?' She glanced round at the room dismissively.

'The Hilton was booked up,' Wraith replied wryly as Raven started to rough-towel her hair.

'So I see,' she said, her voice muffled by the blanket. 'What happened to your friend?'

'I sent him to get something to eat – he was asking too many questions.'

'Oh.' Raven's head re-emerged and she began to comb her hair absently with her fingers.

'We should get rid of him,' Wraith urged. 'He's the most mercenary child I've ever met and completely amoral. He'd sell his own soul for a few credits.'

'He's a streetrat, Wraith,' his sister said flatly. 'Money's all that stands between them and the abyss. You're mercenary too, you've just become inured to it.' Finishing with her hair she walked over to the wall terminal and started punching buttons. 'This is really ancient,' she protested.

'It's operative,' Wraith said shortly, not allowing her to change the subject. 'What about the kid?'

'We'll discuss it later,' Raven replied. Then she smiled

and pulled out a flat package from her jacket. 'Here, this is for you. Your new identity.'

'Thank you.' Wraith took the package and opened it. Inside was a neat stack of cards. Three bank cred cards and an ID card. The ID card had the name Ryan Donahue printed neatly under an image of Wraith; the same was on the three certified cred cards. Wraith examined the ID card carefully. 'What else is coded into this?'

'You're an American freelance holo vid producer,' Raven told him. 'Media people always look like gangers.'

'What about you,' Wraith asked.

'I'm Elizabeth Black, a researcher for a fictional US vidchannel,' she told him. 'We can use the IDs together or separately.'

'Clever,' Wraith commented.

'I'm glad you approve,' Raven was saying when they heard footsteps outside the door and a knock.

'Come in,' Wraith called and Kez entered.

It was obviously still raining outside as Kez was soaking wet, but he was carrying two large paper bags which he held out triumphantly as he came in. Raven swooped on them before Kez had even shut the door. He watched as she unpacked the plastic cartons of Chinese food quickly. She looked older than her computer image and less approachable. But she had the same mocking smile and her black hair fanned out in a silky cloud around her face. She and Wraith were like the positive and negative versions of the same photograph; their features were almost identical but the colours were reversed.

Raven made no mention of their earlier meeting, introducing herself only as Wraith's sister. Wraith seemed unwilling to discuss anything with Kez but Kez's questioning eventually elicited the information from

Raven that they were trying to hunt down their younger sister.

'But I'm going to make some contacts while I'm here,' she added, chasing a grain of rice with her chopsticks. 'I might come with you the next time you visit the Countess, Wraith.'

'I told her you were a hacker,' Wraith said diffidently. 'She might offer you work.'

'That's not a problem,' Raven shrugged. 'I could use the credits.'

'Are you going to log on again now?' Wraith asked as Raven got up from the table.

'Later,' she told him. 'I've got to get some rest first.' She unlaced her large black army boots and lay down on the bed fully dressed. She was asleep in under a minute and Kez looked at Wraith in surprise.

'She's a heavy sleeper,' he explained. 'Don't worry, you won't wake her.' He got up and headed towards the bathroom. 'I'm going to take a shower – don't steal anything.'

'Hey!' Kez began, but Wraith had already left. He grimaced at the closed door. Wraith had obviously decided that he wasn't to be trusted without even knowing about his attempt to make off with the flitter and despite the fact that Kez had returned the cred card. Sullenly he pulled a chair in front of the computer unit and idly punched buttons to operate the vidscreen. He could only get a few channels and he flipped through them several times before switching the unit off again. Raven was still out of it and Kez decided to follow her example. He didn't bother to take off his boots, crawling under the covers and wrapping himself tightly in the thin blankets. By the time Wraith returned from the bathroom Kez was already half asleep.