

Rhiannon Lassiter



HEX
SHADOWS

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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SHADOWS

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

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, *The Guardian*

‘A convincing, pacy story.’

The Independent

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

Michael Thorn, *TES*

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Painted Honours

Alaric swung his flitter past the craft moving to intercept him and guided it into a spinning roll, setting a collision course for the bridge ahead. At the last minute he directed the vehicle upwards again and shot over the bridge, instead of into it, allowing the people crowding it to see the words emblazoned across the side of the flitter, proclaiming in brilliant gold: *Power to the People*.

As he guided his flitter around for another pass, avoiding the pursuing Security Services, Alaric glanced at the pandemonium below. The five skyscraper sections that formed the offices of the European Federation Consulate were surrounded by protesters. The bridges and archways that linked the Consulate to the rest of the level were blockaded by skimmers and pedestrians waving banners that carried the same slogan as Alaric's flitter. Portable holo units were mounted on the skimmers, projecting images on to the walls of the EF building. Other units, concealed among the protesters, created phantom images of flitters to distract the Seccies from their real targets. As protests went, it was a successful operation, but Alaric was aware that ultimately all their efforts would be useless. Already EF officials and Seccie operatives were pushing the crowd back from the doors of the Consulate and soon the demonstration would disintegrate.

Alaric was not under any illusions that this protest would change EF policy. It would be enough if news of the demonstration reached the public. Above the confusion flitters mounted with vid and holocams observed the scene, logos of the media networks painted prominently across the small aerial craft to distinguish them from the flitters of the demonstrators. The media was the real audience and Alaric was well aware of it. After passing low over the bridges he headed upwards to tumble past the news crews in a victory roll, displaying to advantage the words on his flitter. Next to the golden slogan was another logo, a red Celtic dragon coiled around a sceptre, the symbol of the most prominent political pressure group at the gathering. Alaric's group called themselves Anglecynn and would use any means from peaceful protests to terrorist attacks to expose the corruption and illegality at the heart of the European Federation. The dragon emblem was a warning to the watching masses that the EF could expect more than demonstrations if they disregarded the people who defied their control.

Even as he exhilarated in the thrill of the chase, Alaric longed to do some real damage, to hit the EF hard and fast and show that Anglecynn was a force to be reckoned with. But, despite their standing in the media, the group was too small to tackle the might of the European government on its own. Alaric knew his own limitations and, as he saw the Seccie operatives producing crowd control weapons down below, he knew that for the moment they had been reached. Clicking on his com unit he addressed the protesters in the other flitters:

'Time to pull back, people. They're bringing out the big guns.'

The five flitters swept away from the crowds and up

past the media crews. Taken by surprise, the Seccies were late in giving chase, and the little flitters took advantage of their delay to split up, each seeking a different path through the skyscraper maze of London to their rendezvous point in the depths of the city.

Several miles away and on a level somewhere in the middle of the city a black-clad figure turned away from the holoscreen with a derisive half-smile.

‘Amateurs,’ Raven said, without emotion. ‘And naive at that.’

‘Why naive?’ Wraith asked. He had been watching the feature with the same fixed concentration he gave to all political reports but now he fixed his grey eyes on Raven, who had turned back to the mass of circuitry she had spread out over the blue-grey carpeting of the apartment.

‘The machinery of political protest is defunct,’ Raven replied, with a cynical expression, ‘rendered obsolete by the microchip and the data pathways of the net.’ She paused as she searched through a pile of tools for one she needed. ‘This protest will vanish amid myriad media images, travelling faster than light through the information age. The records we released from Kalden’s lab were discredited and eliminated within the week, the media nets moved on to new scandals and no one even blinked. You don’t use the media by feeding it, but by controlling it.’ She flicked a glance at the girl still sitting in front of the holoscreen. ‘Ali should be able to tell you all about it.’

Ali Tarrell glanced up at the sound of her name and blushed as she registered what Raven had said. Ali’s knowledge of the way the media worked was, at best, tenuous. The life she had had with her media mogul father had ended a year ago, vanishing even as she had

become one of the invisible people, slipping between the cracks in the system and officially on record as exterminated for possession of the Hex abilities.

Ali turned back to watching the news, imitating Wraith. He found all forms of protest fascinating, as he still hoped that the Hexes could gain legal rights by taking their case to the European Federation which had issued the original law permitting their extermination. Raven was openly contemptuous of such a plan but Ali, coming from a more conventional and law-abiding background, favoured the idea. She still aimed to earn the respect of the ganger who had rescued her and her gaze lingered on his features, which could have been chiselled out of white marble, framed by equally white hair. The news report moved on to another story, losing Wraith's interest, and Ali looked away guiltily, glancing back over her shoulder to check that she had not been observed by the other occupants of the room.

Kez was nowhere to be seen and, to Ali's relief, Raven was again absorbed in her tangle of components. Although Raven was able to enter the virtual network that connected all computer facilities, she was as interested in the mechanics of machinery as in their data-streams. Ali wondered if that was why Raven seemed so much more able than her. Although Ali was two years older than the other girl, her abilities were much more limited. It was a fact that Raven never ceased to remind her of. Ever since their first meeting, Raven had exhibited contempt for someone she clearly regarded as an inferior imitation of herself.

Ali glared silently at Raven, whose long black hair fell over her face as she scrutinized the insides of the computer she was designing. It was particularly galling to recall that Raven was the kind of person that Ali would

have despised during her old life on the right side of the law. Ensnared within a clique of popular pretty girls she would have felt safe to sneer at Raven, whose behaviour she considered to be almost psychotic. As if she could read her thoughts, the dark-haired girl looked up, her obsidian eyes meeting Ali's challengingly. Ali looked away again, not wanting a confrontation. The younger girl had been in a black mood for days, brought on by an argument with Wraith, which was lifting only now. Ali wouldn't have minded seeing them at odds, but the argument only served to remind her of the fact that, no matter how much they argued, they seemed determined to stay together. Ali had hoped Raven would take off someday but the possibility seemed remote. And Wraith, despite the fact that he condemned the apartment every day, showed no signs of intending to move elsewhere.

The apartment was not as luxurious as the one in the Belgravia Complex, where Ali had lived until six months ago. It was in a different area of the city and on a different level from her home. But it was desirable and expensive enough for Wraith to worry that they were unnecessarily exposed to the Seccies or the CPS. Raven wasn't worried about the Security Services; they had enough difficulty policing the ganglands without worrying about Hexes living secretly in the heights. But even she admitted that the CPS was a danger, if not to her, then to the others. They still had immense legal powers to kidnap and exterminate anyone with the Hex abilities. However she insisted they were better able to watch out for them here than in a place that they would have to defend against more conventional criminals.

Ali might admire Wraith but she was alarmed by the alternative he proposed. She didn't want to move down

into the darkness of the ganglands any more than Raven did. However, her reluctance was motivated by fear and she suspected that Raven's was the result of pure stubbornness.

Just then the door to one of the bedrooms slid open and Kez entered. He had been a London streetrat before he joined up with Wraith and Raven. Since then he had changed enough for the brother and sister to trust him not to betray them. But Ali was still uncomfortable with the boy. Partly because of his gangland history and partly because Kez obviously admired Raven and she did nothing to discourage him. But the fact that Kez was able to take care of Revenge was an advantage to his presence as a member of the group.

Wraith and Raven's sister had never recovered from her stint in the CPS laboratories. As far as Ali could understand it, the eleven-year-old's brain had been directly linked up to a computer database with no experience in handling the dataflow. Most of the other children who had been experimented on in this way had been burned out, becoming mindless wrecks. But Revenge, who had possessed a greater potential to become a fully functional Hex, had survived the experience, though not unscarred. Most of the time she could function well enough to take care of herself, but her thoughts were so disengaged from her surroundings, scrambled as they were by the experimentation, that it wasn't safe to leave her on her own. Ali, Wraith, Kez and Luciel, the boy they had rescued from the CPS lab, divided the responsibility among them. Raven refused, considering the task a waste of her time. She spent hours in further research on the data she had stolen from the lab. From the questions she would occasionally ask them, Ali and Luciel suspected she was devising her own

experiments to test the Hex abilities but she had said nothing to either of them and Wraith was too absorbed in his own project to notice. He was collecting information on the judicial process of turning people with the Hex gene into criminals, hoping to form a group of Hexes and their sympathizers who could work to challenge the extermination laws.

While Ali had been speculating on her companions Wraith had been thinking about what his sister had said. Turning away from the holoscreen, he crossed the room to sit on the arm of the chair next to her.

‘How would *you* organize a protest, Raven?’

‘I wouldn’t,’ she replied, not even deigning to look up.

‘Why not?’ Kez asked curiously, joining in the conversation.

‘They serve no useful purpose,’ Raven said. Putting down the tool she was working with, she looked up, her gaze shifting to include Ali as well as Wraith and Kez in her communication. When Raven chose to give her point of view, she always spoke to an audience. While Wraith often condemned her behaviour as reckless, he didn’t deny that her judgements, when based on her own cynical philosophy of how the world worked, were rarely proved to be wrong.

‘A protest is a public admission of incompetence,’ Raven said coolly, shaking her hair out of her eyes. ‘Its purpose is to draw attention to a situation in the hope of altering it. But, except in a few rare cases, the situation does not change because those who would care about the issue are either already alerted to it or, once they become aware of it, because they have seen the protest, believe that something is already being done. Demonstrations are just another form of media entertainment. They change nothing.’

‘The protesters against European Federation control don’t believe that,’ Wraith pointed out.

‘Naive,’ Raven shrugged. ‘As I said.’ Her expression turned wry as she continued: ‘But in any case, the anti-EF front doesn’t believe in the power of the people any more than I do. Did you notice that wasn’t the only symbol the flitters carried?’

‘There was a red dragon,’ Ali recalled. ‘The reporter said it was the insignia of a terrorist group.’

‘The group is called Anglecynn,’ Raven informed her. ‘They’ve been flooding the public nets with material for the past few years, combining information about EF corruption with threats of their next attacks.’ She gave a half-smile. ‘They’ve actually been quite effective at destruction of property, even a few attempted assassinations. They’re a small group, without much cohesion or strategy, but they might yet prove successful. The slogan on the flitter is not the real message, the dragon is. It reminds the EF that Anglecynn don’t just rely on media stunts to get their message across.’

The flitters cruised slowly through the darkness. After the chase through the high-rise levels and the tension travelling through the ganglands further down, the silence of the lower levels was almost soothing. The lights of Alaric’s flitter slid across the shadows, illuminating the debris that had built up around the roots of the massive skyscrapers. Centuries-old graffiti etched the ancient support struts with faded colours; light gleamed eerily back from the consumer graveyard beneath him; layers of obsolete luxuries sifted like sand into a rubble composed of the discards of the rich, long since scavenged and rejected by the poor and now abandoned like the roots of the city itself. The street-lighting had long since failed and

the lights from the flitters pierced the darkness like a desecration.

The distant sounds that filtered down from above had gradually melted away and now the silence was complete. Alaric shivered and activated his comlink.

‘Alaric to Jordan. My scanners show no signs of pursuit or surveillance. Do you concur?’

‘*I concur,*’ the girl’s voice came back over the channel. ‘*No spooks or bugs. All scans are spangly and clean, now let’s blow this joint and go home.*’

‘Agreed,’ Alaric replied drily and opened a new channel. ‘Alaric to Dragon’s Nest. My team is back and there’s been no sign of a trace. Are we clear to come home?’

There was a buzz of static, punctuated by echoes from other signals before a voice replied briskly.

‘*Our scanners agree there’s no trace. Your team is cleared to approach, Alaric.*’

Alaric’s hands moved swiftly over the control panel, speeding the flitter up as he signalled to the others that they were allowed to approach. Together they navigated the maze of support struts that rose from the sea of debris to become lost in the darkness above. The scenery passed by unchanging until the gloom was broken by a sprinkling of light in the distance ahead. The flitters slowed down as they approached a large plaza rising a little above the rubble and forming the forecourt to a skyscraper section which was not as damaged as the rest. Dim light shone from the windows as the flitters touched down on the cracked and pitted surface of the plaza and lit the way for the five newcomers to enter the building.

Alaric fell into step with one of his companions as they neared the door. Jordan glanced up at him, brushing her

untidy brown hair out of her eyes, as he rested an arm over her shoulders.

‘You did good work,’ he told her.

‘We all did good work,’ she said, stopping to wrap her arms round his waist. ‘But it’s back to garbage city for all of us.’

Alaric frowned and rested his chin on the top of Jordan’s head, drawing her into a hug so he wouldn’t have to meet her serious blue-green eyes. The girl’s voice was muffled as she continued:

‘We all talk big, Alaric, but the EF knows we’re not a serious threat. We’re flies to them and they’re just waiting for the right time to swat us out of the sky.’

‘Then we’ll have to convince them otherwise,’ Alaric said firmly. But as he took Jordan’s hand and led her into the building he wondered how that was ever going to be accomplished.

Anglecynn’s headquarters were a safe refuge for the terrorist group. Far from the policed upper levels and ganglands alike, no one could find them in the depths of the city. They could expand through the abandoned buildings without fear of retribution and they had made the area their own. To Alaric and Jordan, Dragon’s Nest was home and they relaxed as they entered its confines, secure in the knowledge that the proximity sensors would alert them to anyone approaching long before they neared the refuge. A short corridor leading from the entrance hall of the building took them to a large communal room. As Jordan headed for the battered Nutromac unit in the corner of the room, Alaric collapsed in an equally dilapidated chair and slung his feet up on the table in front of him. Heaving a deep sigh he stretched and sank back into the chair only to be jolted upright again by something landing hard in the centre of his chest.

It was a computer disk, and Alaric regarded it with confusion for a moment before its owner appeared in his field of vision.

‘Got a job for you, Alaric,’ Liz said, sitting on the side of the table.

Alaric groaned quietly. Like most of Anglecynn’s so-called ‘administrative’ staff, Liz tended to disregard the work of the actual protesters. Unfortunately the group’s efficiency depended on the information that Liz and others like her managed to dig out. Alaric could have pulled rank as a veteran of the group but instead he picked up the disk and looked questioningly at Liz.

‘Information came through contacts yesterday,’ she told him. ‘Managed to filter through sources to us today. Comes from a sympathizer in the know – I thought you’d better take a look at it.’

Alaric had barely assimilated this brusque communication when Liz disappeared again and he was left looking quizzically at the disk as Jordan turned up with two cups of a thick black coffee substitute.

‘Thanks,’ he said absently, taking a sip of the acrid substance, and then got wearily to his feet.

‘What’s up?’ Jordan asked, glancing at the disk Alaric still held.

‘More work,’ he told her. ‘Hopefully shouldn’t take too long. I’ll join you in a while and we can grab some food, OK?’

‘Kay,’ Jordan replied, taking over the chair he’d vacated. ‘Wake me up when you’re ready.’

Alaric made a mock grimace at the sight of her relaxed figure, tousled her hair affectionately and went to find a computer unit and check the disk.

Although most of Anglecynn’s real members lived in the city’s depths, they had sympathizers and contacts in

more exalted surroundings. The disk was marked as being a transmission from a Daniel Hammond, an Anglecynn sympathizer and the son of the recently appointed security minister. According to the appended file he had been approached by an Anglecynn contact and asked to find out what provisions were being made for the prevention of terrorism. This transmission was his response and as Alaric reviewed the file he found it increasingly odd, especially considering the amount of anti-EF activity.

Since appointment of Adam Hammond as Security Minister (4.10.2368) plans have been in progress for a new crackdown on terrorism, especially activities prejudicial to British relations with the European Federation. These plans have been superseded as of 3.1.2369 after a meeting between Adam Hammond MP (Security Minister and Head of the Security Services), Governor Charles Alverstead (Head of the CPS) and a Dr Kalden (unknown). Minutes of this meeting have been suppressed. The new security strategy is not focused on anti-EF terrorism. It is instead focused on supporting the CPS in their legalized extermination of mutants possessing the deformative Hex gene. The Security Services have pledged themselves to the elimination of all mutants within five years. Their efforts are concentrated on this one aim. Particular emphasis is being laid upon the capture of a mutant known as 'Raven' (described as a terrorist with the Hex gene). Transmission ends.

Alaric considered the transmission for some time, trying to understand all its implications. The increase in terrorist

activity and the expansion of the ganglands had been the primary motivations behind the British Prime Minister's appointment of a new Security Minister. Now, if this information was correct, that Security Minister had decided to throw other considerations aside to support an organization that, because of its activities, had a politically unsavoury reputation. The combined threat of gangland crimes and terrorist attacks had been ignored in favour of apprehending a rogue mutant on the basis of a single meeting with the Head of the CPS and an unknown scientist. Alaric frowned at the screen. Other members of Anglecynn would rejoice in their good fortune in not being the focus of the Seccies' attention for a change. But Alaric found this new development too unusual to celebrate. Still frowning, he left the computer unit on and went to find Liz.

It took him some time to locate her in the rambling building. But he eventually tracked her down to a room several floors up where she and other Anglecynn members were watching a holoivid projection of the raid on the EF Consulate. Crossing the room as unobtrusively as he could, Alaric came up behind Liz and touched her on the shoulder.

'Can I talk to you for a minute?' he asked.

Liz glanced up at him, looking slightly puzzled, then shrugged and followed him out of the room. Once they were in the corridor, Alaric kept walking, leading her back to the room where he had viewed the disk.

'That transmission you gave me,' he said. 'Have you had a look at it?'

'Yeah,' Liz nodded. 'Good news, if it's true. But it seemed a bit dodgy. Do you think it's a fake?'

'No, I don't think so.' Alaric thought for a second. 'At least if it is, it's very subtle.' He paused as they entered the

room he had only recently vacated and guided Liz towards the computer unit. 'I want you to check something out for me.'

If Alaric had wanted to pay Liz back for preventing him from relaxing earlier, he would have been disappointed. Liz didn't raise a single objection as she slid into the chair in front of the keypad, waiting for further instructions.

'I want you to find out about the people mentioned in this document,' Alaric told her. 'Charles Alverstead, Dr Kalden, whoever he is, and this mutant, Raven. I want to know what's so important that the Seccies can't be bothered about tracking down an armed and dangerous terrorist group like us.'

Liz grinned but she was shaking her head as well.

'I'll do what I can,' she said. 'But I'm no hacker. I'll find out what's on the public databases, maybe a little more, but don't expect huge results.'

'Just do what you can,' Alaric reassured her. 'Any information would be better than nothing. Tomorrow I'll try and find out something more from this sympathizer: Daniel Hammond.'

Daniel was watching the news. His father had been pleased when Daniel joined him, finding his son's serious demeanour a welcome change from his daughter's levity. Caitlin was in her room sulking because the news interfered with watching one of the many amorphous programmes that dominated her life. But Adam Hammond had been firm. Not only did he insist that the news was a priority, today there would be an article of special interest to him, since the Security Services had provided it. Unknown to him, Daniel was watching for the same reason. His father's work had never been of much interest to him until Adam's elevation to Minister for Security.

Daniel's tenuous connection to Anglecynn had meant that his father's work had suddenly become more compelling, since it meant life or death to Daniel's associates. The transmission he had sent the day before, risking prosecution as a spy, was a reaffirmation of his commitment to the anti-EF front.

He didn't know what was going to be on the holovid this evening that so interested his father. But Adam rarely insisted on his right to watch the news, deeming it not worth Caitlin's complaints at being separated from the vid screen, so whatever it was must be important. However, article followed article without provoking any reaction from his father. The repeat of a feature on the attack on the EF Consulate drew a frown but that was already old news. Daniel shivered at the thought of what his father would do if he ever discovered his son's connections with the same demonstrators he condemned.

The feature came to an end and Adam leaned forward expectantly; Daniel focused on the screen as the next article began.

'In related news, the mutant terrorist with the illegal Hex gene, who was responsible for the destruction of a CPS facility causing the deaths of one hundred and thirty-seven men and women last year, is still on the loose. It is believed that the terrorist, who styles herself 'Raven', is hiding among the criminal element in the lower levels of the city. Today Adam Hammond, the Security Minister, said that information leading to her capture would be treated in the strictest confidentiality and he warned that citizens should beware of approaching Raven, who is probably armed and certainly dangerous. Nothing has been seen of Raven or the terrorists associated with her this year but last year her activities prompted a statement by the Prime Minister.'

The report cut to a segment of old footage showing the Prime Minister giving a statement to the House.

‘ . . . The invasion of a CPS extermination facility, the fabrication of records from that facility, the publication of those records and eventual destruction of the facility concerned are all acts of astounding terrorism, perpetrated by a group of criminals sympathetic to the cause of illegal mutants. Rest assured these criminals will be caught . . . ’

The segment ended and the reporter continued:

‘Despite those assurances Raven has managed to elude the Security Services and is suspected to be planning acts of even greater atrocity. Political analysts cite this as an argument for greater EF control of Britain. The European Federation has the resources necessary to apprehend dangerous criminals of this kind without risk to those who capture them. But even without the aid of the Federation it seems the mutant plague will be finally brought to an end. Mr Hammond has pledged the Security Services to a widespread eradication programme, supporting the CPS in their mandate to rid this country of Hexes for ever. Britain will show the way by taking the first step and encouraging the rest of the world to do the same.’