

21% MONSTER SERPENT STRIKE

THE STORY SO FAR

21% monster boy Darren Devlin has joined forces with 19% alien boy Marek Masters, 17% sabre-toothed polar-bear Aurora Valero, and 16% alien girl Genie Okojie to form Helix 51. Their objective – destroy Xastris, the shadowy, ruthless organization that transformed them into genetically-modified superhumans.

But Xastris's plans go deeper – they intend to use the technology they've created to take over the world. It's time for Darren and his friends to stand and fight – not just to save their own lives, but the lives of millions.

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For Gemma, Sophie and Eoin,
Thank you for being all that you are
and everything you will become.

Dad xxx

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USBORNE



CHAPTER 1

BREAKING THROUGH

A surge of nocturnal energy gripped Darren Devlin as he watched the sun set and breathed in the cruel, south-east wind. To the west stood Blade Castle on the great arch of black rock that hung above Oxster Harbour – a shallow inlet that had been deserted for decades.

The legend of this island told of a giant who had drowned while escaping back to Scotland, chased by an Irish giant called Finn McCool. Only the black bones of his shoulder and arm remained above the waves.

Marek had called the story, “baseless drivel”. To Darren, however, it felt like a warning. The giant had been running away, just as Darren had been running ever since he’d found out he was twenty-one per cent monster. A giant was human-like but not quite human, just like him and Marek Masters, his nineteen per cent alien friend. Darren had

almost drowned twice since he'd met Marek. Once in a river and once in the same ocean that now covered his face with spray. They had escaped to this island after Xastris, the secret organization that wanted them dead and believed Marek already was, had destroyed their bunker hideout by sending Marek's brainwashed sixteen per cent alien sister, Genie, to kill him.

Even though Xastris were much bigger than they were, Darren knew the time had come to stop running. They had to stand and fight for the chance to live, to be free, and, for Darren, the priceless opportunity to go home.

Darren heard a scurry of robotic activity over the crash of the waves and his anticipation rose. He roared at the sea and it roared back as he lolloped towards the castle with its many windows illuminated against its shadowy walls. As he went, the western tower came into view. Light from its windows was more diffuse than the rest thanks to the thin layer of ice on the inside of every pane caused by refrigeration installed for the comfort of Aurora María Ash-Valero. Thanks to her seventeen per cent sabre-toothed polar bear genetics, Aurora found spring nights on a remote Scottish island a little on the warm side.

He passed the church, where robots scurried, and waved to Otto as it bounced in beach ball mode, legs extended around its hand-sized crab-like body, through the main

door. Seeing Marek's favourite mini-robot confirmed that Marek would soon return. Darren grinned and carried on.

Ahead of him, the lights in Aurora's tower went out one at a time. She exited and headed in his direction while tying her long pure-white hair into a businesslike ponytail. Her flip-flops flapped as she walked with her usual loose-limbed confidence, a grin spreading across her face as wind rippled her T-shirt and shorts.

"Hey, Blue! Did you see Otto bouncing your way?" she called.

"Yeah." Darren smiled back as Aurora reached him.

"Won't be long till the mission."

"Awesome!"

They walked towards the church together. Darren had grown in the last few months and his hair had darkened to a deep blue as he'd steadily become more obviously a teenager. However, at close to two metres tall, Aurora still towered above him as he took almost two strides for every one of hers.

Aurora tapped Darren on the shoulder and pointed to the graveyard. Genie was standing amongst the weathered tombstones. She looked up in tense readiness, ignoring her ebony braided hair as the stormy wind whipped it around her face. Her eyes turned luminous green as she jumped upwards with smooth power. From behind her, twelve

palm-sized discs flew into the air. She twisted to follow their erratic flight and flung out her hands. A shower of laser throwing stars cut through the cluster of discs and four fell to the ground.

Aurora whistled, “Way to go, Genie! Four down in one strike!”

The green light faded from Genie’s eyes as she landed. She batted away Aurora’s praise. “I was getting seven or eight earlier on, but then the wind got up.”

“You’re getting better, though,” Darren said as they drew close.

“You say that, Darren, but it’s so slow,” Genie answered as the remaining eight discs landed beside her in a neat circle. “I’d have to let the XCEL technology in my brain take over more to hit them all. But...you know...”

Darren took “you know” to mean *I might accidentally turn into a lethal cyborg XCEL-Genie obsessed with killing my brother and anyone else who gets in my way*. It was easy to see why she was being cautious.

Aurora scooped up one of the discs Genie had hit and tossed it from hand to hand as its perfectly smooth, black surface cooled down. “*Mi abuelita* used to say, ‘You start bad at everything but finish good at something.’” She passed Genie the disc. “We’re going to need you good when we go up against Xastris.”

Genie gave her a wry smile. “Did your gran have a saying for everything?”

“She was pretty full on with the wisdom, yeah,” Aurora answered and then noticed a change in Genie’s expression as she turned to look at Darren. “Okay, guys. This is me subtly leaving the conversation.”

She flip-flopped her way towards the church leaving Darren and Genie alone.

Genie’s dark, angled eyes widened as she gave Darren a stern look. “You haven’t talked to him, have you?”

Darren shifted uncomfortably. “Not yet.”

“You need to.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Genie held up the disc Aurora had handed to her. “Otto doesn’t want to test-fly the big version of this. Marek needs to use his lugholes and listen. He gave Otto the ability to develop self-preservation algorithms. He can’t complain that Otto’s using them.”

Darren pulled a face. “It might work better if you ask him. I don’t get all the details.”

Genie’s eyes flitted over Darren’s face as she read his thinking. “Yes, you do.” Her Midlands accent became more pronounced as she raised her twin-thumbed left hand and tapped him in the chest with a long straight finger. “Marek listens to you. Stop ducking it. Anyway,” she added, “I’ve

got other things I need to bend his ear about. *Please, Darren?*”

Darren raised a hand in defeat. “Yeah, okay.”

Genie smiled, gave Darren the briefest of hugs and jogged towards the church. The eleven remaining discs rose into the air and followed her before falling one by one into her small, black backpack.

Darren followed at a trudge, but then broke into a run at the sound of the Super-SQUID rumbling inside the church. Worrying about difficult conversations with Marek could wait. Darren and Aurora’s next mission, their sixth designed to fool Xastris into thinking that the two of them were on the run, to provide cover for Marek and Genie, who were still pretending to be dead, was imminent. He entered and came to a halt between Genie and Aurora. Hundreds of screens that covered the walls in between old stained-glass windows flashed up image after image. Marek’s new Super-SQUID, a multicoloured portal already forming, stood at one end at right angles to an equally new Super-SLAM whose speed-halting technology was yet to be tested.

Marek entered through the Super-SQUID portal, one highly polished shoe at a time, wearing his trademark dark Gieves & Hawkes suit and tie. He made a dramatic flourish with both arms. “All is ready for Helix 51’s social media breakthrough moment!”

Part of the church floor slid back, and a large oval table rose into view. Marek tapped at a couple of keyboards and a three-dimensional image of the inside of a factory formed above the table. Darren watched as groups of pixels became more sharply coloured and then faded as an OCTOPUS swarm, consisting of millions of flying organo-cypher nanobots of Marek’s own design, transmitted images while they followed their hive queen around the building hundreds of miles away.

Aurora approached the image. “Looks pretty messy in there.”

“The factory is deserted. There’s a lot of abandoned machinery,” Marek replied, “which I believe is why the smugglers chose it for their exchange.”

Darren watched as heat signatures moved slowly around the building. “There’s quite a few of them.”

“Yes, heavily armed bodyguards of the kind you both have a track record of beating up. I believe, Darren, you are winning twenty-four to twenty-three in the petty criminal bashing competition?”

“Hey, no fair!” Aurora objected. “One of Darren’s fell on his face during the last mission. No way that counts!”

Marek shrugged dramatically. “I didn’t make the rules. You only asked me to keep score. There’s nothing I can do about a criminal with a poor sense of balance.” He waved

a twin-thumbed hand. “If I may continue, the Borrok brothers...”

“Who are the Borroks?” Aurora asked.

“Glaswegian diamond smugglers. They’ve brought blood diamonds, illegally sold to them by some brutal warlords, into the country and used some old associates of mine to do it. But never mind the Borroks. It’s this lady they are selling to that we’re interested in.” Marek grinned. “Madame LaVache. She buys illegal diamonds and sells them as legitimate ones. Drug barons use her services to hide their money from police. She’s suspected of illegal activities by several law enforcement agencies in Europe and South-east Asia, but they have no strong evidence. Thanks to us, they’re about to get all the evidence they need!”

“Just doing our bit for the community,” Aurora said with fake piety.

Marek tapped his phone. A photo appeared on one of the flat screens on the wall. It showed Darren and Aurora climbing over a stone wall near some sheep. “As you know, to help fool Xastris, I’ve been laying a false social media trail for the past two months. I present you with the latest instalment – I deep-faked this photo of you two while I was checking out the factory. I hypnotized a group of bike riders nearby. In six minutes’ time, they will post it on their social media.”

“Nice one,” Darren said.

Marek gave an arrogant smile. “I know. Now, there is nowhere to SQUID you outside the factory that won’t give their bodyguards warning. So, I’m SQUIDing you into the basement. You’ll need to make it look like you got in via the sewer otherwise Xastris may guess you were SQUIDed in and that will give the game away. When they realize I’m not dead, it will seriously limit how much trouble I can cause them.”

Aurora grinned. “We can do that.”

“Good,” Marek answered. “Remember, we need this video to spread on social media before Xastris can shut it down like they did those other times. If the video is unforgettable, we stand the best chance of it spreading fast enough to break through. I’ll use the OCTOPUS swarm to put on a little light show to make the security camera footage something special.” He nodded towards Genie, who had drifted to stand by a computer keyboard. “Then my sister can use her dramatic flair for editing to create a truly memorable meme. And, Darren, remember your eyes. That monstrous glare of yours makes for unforgettable TV.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Darren blushed while, behind Marek’s back, Genie faked a comical model pose that would make the most of his eyes.

Aurora clapped her hands as Marek fired up the Super-SQUID. “Okay, *hombres*. Let’s kick some criminal butts!”

* * *

Darren and Aurora spent a couple of minutes faking an entrance from the sewers and then eased open the door to the basement. Darren could hear muffled voices as he moved through. “I go left. You go right. Attack them from different sides.”

Aurora’s eyes narrowed. “Why d’you want to go left? You trying to open up a lead on me? Still no fair you’re one bad guy up.”

Darren shrugged. “I’ll go right if you want.”

Aurora’s suspicious expression deepened. “You trying to trick me, Darren? Why d’you want to go right?”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t believe you!”

Darren sighed. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

A minute later, having had his rock wrapped and his scissors blunted, Darren made his way left until the main floor came into view. Darren activated his camo, the fabric altering colour to match his surroundings, and crouched behind a rusting conveyor belt. Opposite him, behind a crate, crouched Aurora. She grinned as she undid her ponytail and shook her long white hair free. She whispered so faintly that only Darren’s sensitive ears could hear, “Let’s put on a show!”

CHAPTER 2

KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

Nathan Reaver stood at the window of his Washington DC office and sneered at the old buildings that were the heart of democracy in the United States. Such weak people walked those corridors of power, he thought, failing to tackle the huge danger the world faced.

Finally, we start, he thought to himself.

Today was the first meeting of the full Xastris Council in eleven years. It was only the ninth time the group had met in person since 1947 – when the original members had gathered in a government facility near Roswell to swear oaths of secrecy. Having all nine councillors in one place was considered too risky for anything but the most vital situations. But now (Reaver reflected as he entered his personal lift and allowed a small camera to security scan his iris) they had arrived at the most important moment in

the history of the world – when the whole of humanity must be readied to fight for its survival.

He exited into an underground tunnel and approached a door, which slid open automatically. He entered a windowless room where a round table stood surrounded by nine evenly spaced chairs. Each chair had an “X” and a number between one and nine carved onto its wooden back. He went to sit in “X1” and waited, still and watchful like a bird of prey. He did not acknowledge the five men and three women who then entered the room. He let them sit for a while, savouring the atmosphere and then spoke with an authority borne of the knowledge that every word he uttered was pure truth.

“Councillors, friends...welcome. This is a historic moment that could not have been dreamed of in 1947 when the only known alien to visit this planet crashed near Roswell in New Mexico. As you know, its spacecraft contained technology we could never have imagined.” Reaver paused. The other councillors knew as well as he did that to their political leaders, the technology had seemed like a gift. And so, they had agreed to use Nazi stolen gold recovered after the Second World War to form Xastris – an entirely deniable agency of the NATO alliance. No money would be needed from governments. No orders would be given. There would be no evidence in any

government file that Xastris existed, such was the need for secrecy about the existence of intelligent alien life. Today’s governments and leaders don’t even remember that Xastris existed.”

Reaver continued, calling on the Xastris mission to inspire them. “We were founded with just one aim – to use the scientific and technical knowledge from that spacecraft to secretly improve Western technology in order to protect Western civilization and secure Western political power. This we did and we were very successful: the white heat of the 1960s technological revolution followed by the microchip, the internet, and genetic modification.”

Now, Reaver paused again and looked from councillor to councillor and saw each of them nod as he delivered his next line. “But we came to realize this was not enough. Back in 1947, we were visited by just one peaceful alien. But we know that if there is one species who can reach Earth, there must be many others. Inevitably, some will be warlike, and we will need to use the knowledge we have gained to defend Earth.” Reaver extended a hand towards Councillor Nine. “Friends, we have an update on deep space activity and events closer to home.”

Councillor Nine pushed two files to each of them. “Our analysis of the Alpha Centauri star system, from which our alien visitor appears to have originated, shows it has very

likely been in the grip of an intergalactic war for at least the past seventy years and there is now clear evidence, on page four, that the war is rapidly heading in our direction.

“If you now turn to the red file, you will see that a year ago, the xeno-nanosensor we hid on NASA’s *Voyager II* deep space probe picked up a signal from a huge alien presence passing close to our solar system. Then, just six months ago, an alien ship collided with an Indian commercial satellite and broke up in our upper atmosphere – the second alien ship we know to have crashed on our planet. In my view, and Councillor Five agrees with my scientific analysis, this represents an imminent threat to our survival. And it is time we acted.”

“Thank you, Councillor.” Reaver stood. “Now, we, the Xastris Council, must take the most difficult decision of our lives. We must ensure Planet Earth is ready to defend itself from violent alien threats.” Reaver’s voice rose. “We know, sadly, that no threat – even nuclear destruction, climate change or global pandemics – has been great enough to make humanity unite. To make the kind of sacrifices we all need to make to defend against alien attack. Politicians and governments are too weak. Ordinary people prefer to ignore the threats we face. Xastris must take over the world. We have made our plans and prepared for a decade. Today, the question that I must ask each of you is

are we ready?” Reaver turned to each councillor in turn. “Councillor Two?”

“The Political Manipulation Division is ready. Our analysis shows that the opportunity we have in two weeks’ time is unique. It will allow us to simultaneously take control of all of the most powerful countries in the world. From there, total covert control of the planet is achievable in just one year. It is the correct moment, and we may not get another as good for decades.”

“Councillor Three?”

“The Media Division is prepared. We can guarantee a traditional and social media blackout of at least ninety minutes for us to make our move. That will be followed by a tsunami of fake news to give additional cover.”

“Councillor Four?”

“The Sleeper Division is primed. We have agents in key political, military and law enforcement positions to manage any issues directly after we take control.”

“Councillor Five?”

“The Science and Technology Division is fully focused on this mission. All projects are green. XCEL technologies are tested and ready. GENESIS remains willing.”

“Councillor Six?”

“The Logistics Division is at full readiness. The first one hundred days after Operation Serpent Strike is planned

down to the hour. All civilian and military contingencies are in place.”

“Councillor Seven?”

“The Non-Governmental Threats Division is ready to move. Major environmental, human rights and political campaign groups can be neutralized within forty minutes of your go order. We are fully co-ordinated with Councillor Four to activate sleeper agents and take full control.”

“Councillor Eight?”

“XSP Division is prepared. All other Xastris special projects are suspended. We have agents ready to deal with any...unexpected problems.”

“Councillor Nine?”

“Off World Threats Division will refocus on providing near-Earth interference to provide us with additional cover. Primarily, military and communications satellites.”

Reaver smiled. “We are ready to control every major government from the shadows and take the tough decisions that need to be taken. People who do not contribute to our society – the poor, the politically untrustworthy, and the uneducated will be sacrificed for the common good of us all. We will use them to create an army of one hundred million XCELS to protect us. As XCELS, they will pay their debt to humanity.”

Reaver spread his arms. “Councillors, we were founded

by democracies. The nine of us must uphold those values of freedom even though we cannot allow others to use them. That way, the principles of freedom will be kept safe until humanity can ensure its survival when aliens invade. So, as always, we nine must vote. All those in favour of initiating the final phase of Serpent Strike, raise your hands.”

The Councillors raised their hands and pride swelled in Reaver as he did the same. All these Councillors had made sacrifices for Xastris. His own – manipulating Genie Okojie, who he loved like a daughter, to give her own life in order to kill Marek Masters – caused a lump in his throat. He extended his arm towards the middle of the table, his fist closed and facing down. Eight fists joined his as he said:

“Ex Astris Scientia et Potestas!”

Eight voices responded as one. “From the Stars, Knowledge and Power!”

Reaver had only just returned to his office when he was interrupted by a communication from his Head of Surveillance.

“Go ahead, Dr Sanchez.”

“The Helix children, they struck again. Video went up on social media fifteen minutes ago.”

“Shut it down,” Reaver ordered.

“We’re trying, but it’s spreading like wildfire.”

“In fifteen minutes? How?”

Sanchez looked worried. “Because it’s amazing. Look.”

Reaver watched a security camera video showing a deserted factory. Two men stood with a small bag between them on the floor. Opposite them stood a woman with a suitcase. Heavily armed bodyguards stood around the three, eyeing each other menacingly.

Suddenly, a person materialized between the two men. As he dodged a gunshot from one and punched the other, the factory lights began to rapidly flash on and off, plunging the scene in and out of darkness. Flashes of gunshots illuminated moments of blackness and, as Reaver watched, Aurora Valero appeared. Her hair flailed, caught spectacularly in the moments of light amongst a shower of diamonds as she swung her fists at the criminals surrounding her. Then, everything was dark. After a pause the lights returned to show a scene of carnage. Criminals lay unconscious with diamonds and cash scattered around them. Valero was nowhere to be seen.

The scene became blurred and Reaver took an involuntary step back as a pair of monstrous yellow eyes, seemingly suspended in mid-air, drew close to the camera. Then the camera swivelled, and the video finished on graffiti scrawled in red paint across a wall:

We are Helix 51

Reaver felt his teeth grind. “How are they managing this, Sanchez? And how did they get so good at it!”

“I don’t know,” Sanchez admitted. “We’re not going to stop this one.”

Reaver methodically thought through the situation. This was bound to bring attention, which must be what Devlin and Valero wanted – their very existence, and the hybrid DNA in every cell of their bodies, threatened to expose Xastris.

“Who do we have in Europe who isn’t involved in Serpent Strike?” he asked.

“Only Team Delta. They’re in Norway, chasing Mr Ducas.”

“Ducas can wait. He’s a threat now he’s gone rogue, but he can’t expose us as easily as the Helix children. Tell Commander Khan to get his team to the UK.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reaver cut the call, let his eyes rest on the graffiti and wondered uneasily what he was missing.