



## Chapter Four

I'm standing by the porthole looking down onto the streets of Lair City. Ubu lies, spread comfortably on the floor, having little doggy dreams. He whimpers, sharp darting noises while his belly undulates in a constant rhythm; in out, in out. It was easy disguising my potion in his food. He was so hungry, wolfing it down, his hot dry nose muddy with food, caked clay-like at the tip of his nose. Even in this short period together, I can see thankfulness in his demeanour. A release from the constant doses of Callic 5.

Soon we will have to return to the library to Bella and Race. I haven't rested very well. I'm having small panic attacks that wash over me, spreading a chill from the tips of my toes all the way to the top of my scalp. It's the fear of uncertainty. Thoughts niggle away at the edges of my memory. Pieces of my past flash by, in much the same way as the Lairs I see below me on their Rims. I can't catch them, or hold them long enough to register their importance, and this is what is causing my uncertainty. This uneasiness sits in my desperation to talk to Bella and Race, and the appearance of Dr Hasame and his syrupy words. My eyesight and hearing are improving and I'm worried that it is showing. I have vitality I never knew and even though I haven't rested well, I feel okay.

I can feel a little wet mouth and tongue lapping at my fingertips. It's Ubu, who stretches, all his weight pushing down on his front legs, his body arched. He yawns and sits on his haunches, staring up at me. I have one last look down onto Data Street and head for the bathroom to wash my face. The water feels great, the air a tad sour.

I search my pocket for my potion for Ubu and as I turn to return to the lounge, I trip over Ubu who is under my feet. He scrambles out of the way, tail between his legs, as frightened as I. My hands slap the

wall and my hip lands heavily against the shower cubicle with a loud crunching sound; adrenalin pumps through my body as I manage to stave off a fall to the floor. My knees buckle and I lower myself into a crouching position. Ubu's head peeks around the doorframe, all eyes and lowered ears. He waddles over, tail swishing to push me, finally on my backside. I laugh, reclining onto my back to be covered in slobbery saliva. His front leg paws at me. I push him away with a giggle on my lips. He thinks it's some kind of game and bounces back, all legs and swinging head. A huge feeling of well-being, hope, love, rushes through every part of my body as I roll over onto my stomach covering my head with my hands, as Ubu's snout tries to lift my hands away.

'No, Ubu,' I squeal. 'No Boy.' It sounds so strange as the words get caught in my laughter. I find myself struggling for breath and I'm truly happy for the first time in my life. Gulping in bites of air, I get to my feet, a grin on my face. I lean down to pat Ubu's head, his ears so soft. He's still keen to continue our playtime. I wonder at his colour. Perfect black and white. He's a marvel of GE, of science. I almost forget myself and find a part of me admiring the Lairs and their handiwork, but I'm saved by a shudder and collect my emotions in time. I know their dark ends. I've seen their cruelty, smelt their putrid anger.

Again, I had no problem with Ubu and my disguised potion. He eagerly whacked it back in no time at all.

Jip was alone in his high chair, counting out Callic Dimension 5 when we returned to the library. 'Jip, where is Mace?' I asked. "Are you here alone?"

'Yes. Mace is with Dr Hasame. Farg too. Here, I've counted the Callic out. You can dose the little brats. And that foul beast. Arrgh, you two stink. Poo, here take the Callic and get away from me. Especially that foul creature.'

'I'll put Ubu up in my lab. Where did you say Mace and Farg were?'

'You don't need to know where they are, Half-light. You'll find out soon enough. Mace is right about you. We all hate your very being. It won't be long before you won't be needed. We will celebrate that day. The day we send you down the Chute, into hell, where you belong. Now get on with it. And don't you ask me another question. Ever.'

Jip's words tailed off as I climbed the stairs. I just walked away, halfway through his diatribe, realising what a waste of time it was to try and be part of their world. I felt I had something over Jip. I knew he had fudged the ledger and he knew I knew. I walked into my lab with

Ubu trailing behind me on his lead to find Mace and Farg moving bottles of Callic around on the shelves. Both their heads swivelled to stare at me and to my horror I also saw Dr Hasame, sitting at my chair. Without looking, he called my name.

‘Solo, so you have called your dog Ubu. Are you enjoying your companion?’ he asked, as he got to his feet to look at us. ‘We’re just checking the Callic Dimension 5 supplies. We seem to have more than we should. Two whole bottles. Do you know why that is, Solo?’

My heart jumped in my chest. I swallowed hard and covered my reaction by leaning down to remove Ubu’s collar and chain.

Dr Hasame had the Index Book in his worm-like hands. His screen was that cool milky green, his words gently seeping out of his voice box in his bowler hat.

‘I am puzzled how it is that two whole extra bottles should be here. You have been doing your work properly, have you not? Can you explain this? Look here, check for yourself.’ And his fingers grew as he pushed the Index Book across the room in one remarkable movement. I’d seen their fingers squirm, rotate, wriggle and grow to hideous proportions often, but not like this.

Dr Hasame’s fingers covered the distance in a smooth even flow, six feet or more towards me.

‘Yes Dr Hasame, I can explain this to you, but I need to tell you and you alone. I’ve thought to bring it to your attention next time we met, but you have found this for yourself.’

I could sense Mace and Farg heating up; a hissing sound low and muffled was oozing out of their hats. Dr Hasame’s fingers were still suspended in front of my face, clutching the Index. His head sharply turned towards both Lairs. His screen started to turn a much deeper green as his fingers snapped back with an elastic sound to normal proportions.

‘You two! You two go back down to the Library.’

There was an edge to his voice I hadn’t heard before. ‘I want to talk to Solo alone.’

Mace could not control himself. He grabbed at his own fingers. Farg took a step to the side.

‘Dr Hasame,’ Mace pleaded. ‘We feel we need to know about this problem ourselves. We know you can’t trust this weasel Half-light. He will lie and spread his stinking words like shit from his arse all over you. Don’t...’

Mace did not have time to finish his plea before something absolutely unseen in the whole of my 53 years happened. Dr Hasame's fingers whipped out the rod from the side of his boot. Its tip glowed, sparkled, emerald green in his hand and in a milli-second he was at Mace's side pushing the rod's tip into Mace's open palm. Mace screamed the most mind-shuddering scream, as he tried to knock the rod away with his other fingers, but Dr Hasame just gripped these tight with his own free hand and pushed harder into Mace's gloved hand. It was terrifying. Farg had recoiled into the corner as Mace's screen went black. A gurgling watery noise came from his voice box as Dr Hasame withdrew the rod, flinging Mace's hands aside.

I had cowered at the other end of my lab with Ubu, who was whimpering. Mace was shuddering, swaying on his feet; he wrapped his fingers around the burnt glove, locking them together. The world was coming unstuck. The atmosphere was electric.

'Farg' Hasame shouted, 'take Mace away and plug him in. I want to be left with Solo. Alone.'

Farg was all terror, full of jerky little movements as he gathered his boss and helped him out of the room.

'I'm sorry you had to see that, Solo,' Dr Hasame spoke as he turned to find Ubu and I huddled at the far end of the lab. 'This is not like me, but Mace knows better than to question my decisions. Now Solo, you can explain to me why it is that there are two spare jars of Callic 5 here in your lab.'

My throat was dry, and my legs were wobbly. I had knocked my hat off, backing away. I was half way down to pick it up only to find it being delivered to me by Dr Hasame's elastic fingers.

'If I could just show you through the Index,' I said. 'The children missed their dosages when I was ill. When you were with me at my apartment. Jip forgot to administer in my absence. That was for three shifts and I think you will find this is how there are two extra bottles. He won't admit it, but it's true. I've had him on about it. I double dosed everyone yesterday and I'm just about to do the same now.'

'Jip, you say. His imprint is in here,' Dr Hasame said pointing his index finger at the ledger, 'and the dosage figures are correct when added together.'

'I know, Dr Hasame. I put those figures there then I got Jip to imprint the numbers.'

Dr Hasame moved close up to the window. He stood glaring down

on to the Library floor, fingers locked behind his back. He spoke at the glass.

‘I think Jip might have served his usefulness. I’m going to have him removed. Jip’s time has come and I want you to see how we deal with defunct Lairs. Leave your dog here and come with me.’

I nervously touched the rim of my hat and quickly looked at Ubu as Dr Hasame’s fingers grabbed the back of my neck with a vice-like grip – solid. Firmly, he led me out of my lab down the steps to the library, never letting go, until he had jockeyed my frame to within inches of Jip in his chair.

‘Bloody Half-light, what do you want?’ he spat out. It was then that he noticed Dr Hasame. ‘Oh Dr Hasame,’ Jip said, squirming in his chair. Suddenly, Jip knew all was not well. Hasame stood statue-still, his screen shot bars of red across the normal milky green. Jip’s started going black at the edges, and his fingers almost disappeared, his gloves just limp shells flapping in the wind.

‘Don’t say a thing. Jip, you need to be plugged in. You look terrible.’ Hasame pulled Jip by the arm to his feet in one movement. ‘Solo is going to help me plug you in.’ Jip’s voice box produced the same gurgling sound that had come from Mace’s sound box, and his bowler hat rattled on his head. And there was a squooshy sound coming from under his leather coat. ‘Come on Jip, let’s go and show Solo how it works.’ There was a determination in Hasame’s voice that was not to be argued with. Jip shuffled and minced his way across the library floor past all the children to the Lairs’ private rooms, which were located next to the children’s dormitory. The door was always locked. I had never before seen inside this place of rest and pleasure. We all stopped at its coded lock.

‘Come on Jip, let’s get to it. Open the door.’

Jip’s fingers were useless, retracted, nowhere to be seen, his gloves like empty sausage skins. Hasame leaned over and pressed the combination and the door clicked open. Hasame pushed Jip’s back. Jip stumbled; a queer smell dripped from under his hat. I followed Hasame and the door clicked shut behind us. It was intensely bright inside the room. Mace was laid out on a table that projected out of a slot in the wall. It was the most curious sight. His hat had been removed and hung on the wall, a little to the side of his body. His boots were off, and to my horror, I noticed his feet had the same proportions as his hands. Long slender rubbery digits, ghastly white. But it was Mace’s head that truly

amazed me. My eyes almost popped out of my face in fascination. Where the screen finished, a cylinder protruded, which had a thread winding its way to a flat metal plate that capped his head. Two wire tubes were screwed into this plate. They snaked their way in a loop to a small box set into the wall. A switch and a dial with a blue light pulsed to the timing of a heartbeat. A low hum filled the room.

Jip smelt so bad now that I was almost gagging. I had my hand up to my mouth. Jip was trembling. I felt my flesh crawl. Dr Hasame stood directly in front of Jip.

‘Now Solo, this is what it is to be plugged in. Though you are not designed to have such pleasure, I thought it would be of interest to you to see this. Jip needs to be plugged in, don’t you Jip?’ All this he said without looking at me, his screen looping and hissing.

Hasame’s fingers reached for Jip’s bowler hat and with a quick jerk, he broke the lock on the thread and unscrewed Jip’s hat, spinning it effortlessly right off his head. His screen immediately went black and Hasame threw the hat across the room. It landed with a tinny sound, clattering into the corner. Hasame hit a switch and another table slid out of the wall. He tipped Jip onto it, screwed the wires into his top plate, then turned the dial and the blue light started pulsing. Side by side, Jip and Mace lay. Mace without boots, Jip with his on. Hasame then turned the dial to full and Jip’s coat flew open, his boots began to shudder and his fingers grew wildly, loose-spaghetti-like, spilling over the table onto the floor. The smell of burning wire and flesh filled the room as Jip’s body convulsed and danced upon his coffin. His belly started to blow up like a balloon under his garment, then his screen went bright red, and a clear liquid leaked from the seals that held his screen in place. Then with a banshee howl, the screen exploded, sending shards across the room, and Jip was no more.

I was overwhelmed by the smoke, stink and sound. Hasame found me by the wall vomiting, blurry-eyed and frightened. Hasame dragged me from the room by my collar, clicked shut the door, depositing me against the outer wall like a bag of potatoes.

‘Ah Solo, look at you.’

I was ash-grey and streaks of my own stomach contents splashed my coat and footwear.

‘You need to clean yourself up and do your work. The children have been neglected and I won’t stand for that. As you have just witnessed, there is no room in the great Lair Empire for lazy incompetent fools

like Jip. We are about to make the leap. One giant step into history. And you, Solo, will be part of this event. After you have dosed the children, and that will be a double dose, I will take you to see where the snails are bred. They are such joyous creatures. I spend many hours with them relaxing amongst their homely ways. Come, to your feet Solo. Do your duty and continue our great plan. I will go and talk to Farg and have him dispose of the fool Jip. Mace is fortunate. He will live to serve Lair City. But he will see Jip's corpse next to him as a reminder of who is in charge of their destinies. I'll make sure of this. Farg will unplug Mace first. He will awake to my full wrath and understand the meaning of duty. Meet me at Farg's high chair when you're done.'

Dr Hasame then strode off down the long table past the comatose children, towards Farg. I could see Hasame pointing and gesticulating towards the massacre as I entered the children's washroom. I wiped myself as clean as I could and held my head under the tap, letting the water bring back a slice of sanity. I noticed my hands were shaking as I cupped them to splash my face. I gulped the water like an animal. As tears came to my eyes, a salty taste touched my lips. I walked around in little circles trying to collect myself, took several large, deep breaths and re-entered the library still in shock, totally out of my depth. Hasame was busy with Farg close to the plug-in room as I started the job of distributing Callic Dimension 5 to these poor idiot children. It was a simple thing to give Bella and Race my own potion, and I sensed recognition from them. It was fortunate the library was in a state of chaos. I went and I did what Hasame had asked of me, to register the dosage in the Index and waited. Soon Hasame appeared.

'Farg is going to put the children to rest. Then he is going to clean up the plug-in room. I would like to be there to see Mace's reaction, but I have promised you that I'd show you where the snails evolve. Solo, you can bring Ubu with you if you like.' Hasame's voice had returned to that honey tone, all affection and care. 'I can see you're efficient in your work. Just look at this Index. Very tidy.'