



## Chapter Seven

The Library was strange without Jip. Farg and Mace were lethargic. They said nothing to me as I walked the steps up to my lab, my hawk's nest, Ubu at my side. I closed the door behind us and quickly crossed to look down on to the great long table and the sad puppet-like gestures of the children. There they were, Bella and Race, staring back at me quite openly. Our eyes locked, my pulse raced. I gave a little wave; a gesture that I felt was foolish. My plan was to give the formula to Hasame when he arrived, in order to send him away satisfied and pleased. Wait until the under-city youth had been placed to rest, then spirit Bella and Race away on Hasame's tandem Rim. Here was the flaw in my plan. Getting Hasame's Rim.

I pulled my hand away from the window; Bella and Race bowed their heads back to their books. I knew for sure now that their condition was similar to mine. Clear of Callic. We were all thinking for ourselves, even Ubu. It was now or never, but how to get hold of the tandem Rim.

I held out two of my potions, the antidote to the sinister Callic Dimension 5, to Ubu who now gobbled them down without my having to sneakily hide them in his food.

'I have to go and see Bella and Race,' I said to him, holding his muzzle gently in my hands. 'We are leaving this place, my friend, and you are coming too.' He wagged his tail and gave the smallest of barks.

Down on the library floor, Farg sat slumped, hardly alive. Mace dragged himself along the great table, lost in his own thoughts. I stood by Farg's perch and swivelled the Index around so as to read it. My action barely registered a response from the shattered Lair.

'Time for the children's Callic,' I said. He grunted and pushed a jar of Callic towards me.

On reaching Bella and Race, a frantic wave of expectation washed through my body. I placed my potion on the table as usual. Their tiny hands slowly slid across the tabletop to collect them. I leant between the two of them to do this. Our bodies touched, sending a shock-like electric spike through my whole being. Race picked up his manual, opening it wide, close to his face. A single blue feather slipped out of the binding, spinning in a perfect spiral, falling to the floor. It landed silently on its quill; tip upright, before gracefully flopping flat under the legs of Bella's chair.

'We need to talk to you Solo,' Race whispered under the cover of his book. He then placed the book flat on the table top, touching my retreating hand with his own. Bella leaned into my upper arm.

'Tonight at your rest. When the Lairs are plugged in,' I said under my breath, as I crouched down to grab the feather and place it in my coat pocket.

I stood slowly, giving a sly look back towards Farg and then across the room at Mace. To my relief, they had no interest in my presence. I went from child to child giving them their poison. I had to hold back my tears as I rounded Jip's empty chair, almost colliding with Mace who was still in a kind of dream, pacing the room, as if he had been hexed. He was wringing his fingers, pulling at them, stretching them and letting them go. His screen, a dirty grey, lifeless. I completed my rounds and filled in the Index, and shoved the book under Farg's screen waiting for his imprint. His screen was the same ashy grey colour I'd not seen before.

'I need your imprint,' I said. 'I've completed the dosages and need to do some work for Dr Hasame.' At Hasame's name Farg let out a hiss.

'Hissss-a-m-e.' The name came from his voice box like a viper's strike. 'Hissss-a-m-e,' he spewed. And he snatched at the Index, missing it with his contorted fingers that behaved as if his hands were disconnected from his brain. He tried again, this time sliding it closer to his chair, he pushed down hard with his gloved thumb staining the page with an oily smudge. 'Hasame will burn you too, Half-light. When your need has run its course. Now get away from me, you piece of rotten flesh. Go back to your lab; you're not welcome here. Chute bait. We will get to hear your screams, see your tongue block your airways, your eyes roll, see the fear, see you shit yourself as he casts you to hell, back to the very place you came from. And your own will eat what is left of your stinking rotting flesh.'

Mace was approaching from the other end, as Farg's tirade echoed through the library.

I needed to fend off Farg's sadistic threats. I needed to escape the conflict that Mace too, was hoping to deliver. I slowly walked away, just in time to make it appear normal. I could feel the two Lairs behind my back, penetrating my skull with their hatred. I slipped my gloved hand into my pocket to check that the feather was safe and undamaged. With my hat covering my face, I ascended the stairs to my lab, believing, hoping it would be the last time I would walk these steps. I couldn't wait to hold the feather in my bare hands to touch its fine down, to see that colour, the colour of the sky that had changed my life forever.

In my lab, I went about writing down the formula for Hasame. Then I measured and weighed the components that made Callic Dimension 5 into a small vessel for his inspection. Mixed together, the paste is put through a pill-making machine, which spits out solidified tablets. This sat in its corner, corroding at its evil mouth.

I gathered up what I had left of my own tablets, wrapped them in paper and distributed them equally into both boot leggings. I would have to make them last for the four of us. I hoped I had enough to complete our total release from the Lair's ambitions.

Ubu was nudging my coat pocket. I tried to wave him away, I even gave him a gentle tap on his snout, but he persistently burrowed away at the leather. His determination almost knocking my legs from under me. I growled, I frowned and put my hand over the pocket opening, but he brushed it aside with his nose. I had to hold on to the bench for balance. He was the most animated I'd ever known. It was obvious I would have to show him the feather. I carefully removed it from my pocket, making sure I had the quill end in my grip. I had hardly removed it before he was upon it, his ears pricked, his tail rigid and he buried his wet nostrils inside its comb-like form. He moved his head up and down the length of it as if playing a mouth organ then bolted for the door, scratching at the jam fiercely. He returned to the feather and repeated his actions.

'Calm down boy. What's wrong?' I pleaded as I replaced the feather to the safety of its hiding place. Finally, he seemed to understand that he wouldn't get his way, and sat on his haunches by the door, with an excited look on his face.

It was getting late in the shift and Hasame would soon arrive. My

plan was to meet him on Library Lane, where he would park his Rim. I would take Ubu with me. We would be like a welcoming committee. I would hand him my notes, knowing that this wouldn't be enough, that he would want to see the measuring and mixing himself, set his screen on the dyes, liquids and powder. I needed him to show me how the Rim operated. I was going to flatter him, congratulate him on his fine machine, the tandem. I would have to keep Ubu on a tight lead, something I preferred not to do.

We walked out the side entrance on to the laneway. Mace and Farg's Rims were parked, even Jip's, which he wouldn't be needing now, in their usual spots, dormant within an alcove that recessed into the library's outer wall. It wasn't long before Hasame pulled in.

'Dr Hasame,' I said, sliding up to his machine as he turned a switch on the T-bar. 'I hope your meeting went well.' Ubu's head struggled to escape his collar. I pulled hard on the chain, bringing him to heel. He gave a little yelp.

'What's with the dog's behaviour? You might have to increase his dosage.' Hasame placed his hideous fingers around Ubu's mouth holding the jaws clamped tight. Struggling for air, Ubu's eyes rolled back in his head. Then Hasame let go. I jerked on the lead again, feeling sick in my stomach at the abuse this lovely creature was suffering.

'What's that smell?' Hasame blurted out. 'It smells similar to the snail's cages, like the undergrowth, like the air that's...'

'It's just me, my clothes,' I cried out. 'I haven't changed or washed since our trip. I went straight back to work, to get your codes, samples, figures ready.' My hand was extended, passing my calculations to Hasame.

He ripped them out of my gloved hand, stashing them into his own pocket. 'I want samples, you idiot, I want the real thing, not just a piece of paper with figures that I most likely cannot understand.'

'I have that ready for you, Dr Hasame, up in the lab. It's just that I thought I'd meet you, to greet you on this important day.'

I felt him soften, his screen realigned square to his shoulders. 'Yes, you are right Solo, Half-light. A most historic day. It's right that you should meet me.'

'Dr Hasame, after our trip out to see Mink, I've felt the desire to become a Lair. It was while riding with you. I thought yes, I could operate a Rim. A Rim made me feel like a Lair. Doctor, when will I too become a Lair?'

‘Solo, you are the most interesting Half-light.’ His fingers were limp at his side, like palm fronds in a breeze. They made a rush of tiny notes, a busy sound, rapid, like the sound a teacup makes when moved from a saucer, and over in the blink of an eye.

‘I will personally sponsor your education to transcend, into Lairdom. Keep a screen on you, so to speak. You could be just the Half-light we are looking for.’ He began to shuffle past me. ‘Now for the quantities. The Master is impatient.’

‘Dr Hasame, show me how it works, the Rim.’ His finger stiffened. ‘If I’m to become a Lair, I need to know how they operate.’

Hasame’s screen appeared to be pulsing, as a heart beats. Spears of bruised red leaped around the perimeters of the flat plane. He leaned forward, intensely, scanning my eyes. Ubu moved in behind my legs. He towered over my upturned face. I felt an electric current dance through my bones. I wanted to pull my hat over my face. I stood there petrified. His fingers turned U-shaped, onto themselves, then turned into hooks. They, too, were feeling out my spirit, stalking, as a periscope might do. He started to wriggle, his whole body seemed confused.

‘Dr Hasame,’ I squeaked, ‘It’s me, Solo, Half-light, you said I’d be made into a Lair.’ The bruised red arrows disappeared. He straightened, his fingers moved like serpents’ tails back to their normal size.

‘No Half-light has ever controlled a Rim. None has ever asked. But then again, no Half-light ever knew they were to be Lairs. Our destinies are in the Master’s hands. He makes us in his image. Some Half-lights do indeed get to control Rims when they transcend, become reborn as Lairs.’

‘Your Rim is strong and a tandem sets you apart from the others. The Master must treasure you, for you to have such a fine machine. Help me with my education, Doctor.’

He turned to his Rim. ‘This lever here is for the speed change.’ He moved it up and down, a smooth rhythm in his action. ‘Once you have your Rim on the rail, you turn this knob at the end of this lever to power up. The three floor pedals have different functions, the first is to lock yourself to the rail, the middle one to unlock from the rail and the third to...no, no, this is impossible. I can’t show a stinking Half-light how to move a Rim, no matter who he is. Half-baked Half-lights cannot use Rims. They must be programmed first. Your place is in the lab. Now let’s get there.’ He grabbed my ear, the gloved fingers

radiated heat as he squeezed down tight to spin me around. Ubu was now getting tangled in my footing. I tripped, landing on my knees. Hasame's fingers lurched forward, almost strangling me by my collar as he whipped me to my feet. He lashed out at Ubu with his boot. Hissing, agitated, he pushed hard on my back, propelling my body forward. I let go of Ubu's chain and he scrambled up Library Lane. 'Stinking rotten creatures, to hell with you all. Get that dog. I'll see you in the lab.' Hasame stepped through the side entrance.

'Ubu, Ubu, come here,' I called, patting my thigh. 'Come on.' I couldn't blame him if he didn't come, after the treatment I had given him. He stopped still in his tracks and turned. The chain abruptly catching up, sliding to a halt by his side. 'Come on boy, it's all good. Trust me.' He sauntered slowly back, head low to the ground until he reached my outstretched appeal for forgiveness.

'We have to disable Hasame's Rim,' I said to myself. I had to think quickly. How, how? I tapped the side of my head as if it would loosen the answer. 'Yes,' I thought, then I tipped the Rim on its side, surprised by how light it was. Under its riding platform, linkages elbowed their way to a hub on the inside of the drive wheel. Wing nuts held the rods in place. I undid one and pulled the lever out of its housing, wrapping my hand tightly around our key to freedom. This I put into the opposite pocket to the one in which the feather hid. I was a walking treasure chest, loaded up with our keys to freedom. I raced back to my lab. Hasame had my figures in one of his wormlike hands; the other held a beaker of lithium. He placed it back in its cradle.

'Make the paste in front of me. I want tablets to show our Master.' I was breathless from running up the stairs, Ubu panting at my side.

'NOW! Half-light,' he screamed.

It was a simple matter. I mixed the powders together first, poured the lithium in, then blended it into a paste. I started the pill machine and fed the paste down its throat. The pills fell randomly out of its mouth onto a tray. Gathering them up, I sealed them in a Callic jar. Then I passed them to him, asking at the same time when would I become a Lair.

'Sooner than you know,' he murmured, holding the bottle up to his screen. 'Sooner than you know. The Master will be pleased,' he chanted. 'Pleased indeed.'

We followed Hasame to his Rim.

'Give that dog plenty of Callic or he is for the Chute.' He placed

the cart on the rail, stepped up onto its platform and placed his foot on the first pedal. Now he was stamping down with his whole body. Clack, clack, then the pedal popped through the floor.

Hasame sprung from his vehicle. A slap stung my face and he hurled abuse at me.

‘This is your fault, stinking meat. Half-light flesh. I knew I should have slapped you from the start.’ He dragged the Rim from the rail, discarding it, broken, to a parking space.

‘I’ll take Jip’s piece of junk! Get out of my way.’ And then he was gone. I fingered the wing nut inside my pocket, overjoyed, knowing that I had my tandem and soon we’d all be free.