



Chapter Two

‘What are you doing here?’ boomed Mace’s voice as I walked into the Library. ‘You have one more shift to yourself to get to know this smelly thing – here, pass me that chain, must keep up its Callic 5.’

Mace grabbed the chain abruptly from my grasp and produced two Callic 5 tablets from his coat pocket. ‘Here, you pest, come on, open your devilled mouth, come on. Rodent, viper, open...open.’

The dog fought, pushing its head from side to side, struggling to reject the pills, but Mace just ripped open its mouth and shoved them deep into its jaws. Its eyes rolled and it tried to cough them up, to no avail.

‘Here Mace, give the dog to me. It’s my dog; I’ll give him his Callic 5 in future.’

‘Well,’ Mace asked again, ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I missed my work. I feel much better. I want to be part of the great Lair Empire, to do my bit. I know where the children are in their programs. It’s a delicate time.’

‘They’re just fine, the snotty little things. I really don’t think we need you – half-baked Half-lights. More trouble than you’re worth. Your breath stinks from the garbage you eat; in fact your whole body stinks’ he said, turning to look at his assistants. They laughed that weasel laugh they have and their fingers grew hideously long, dancing in their gloves.

‘Well’ I said, ‘You’ll have to take that up with Dr Hasame.’

The hardness came to Mace’s screen, as it turned to the colour of ball bearings. A rattling sound squeaked from his voice box in his bowler hat. I felt the anger steam off him.

‘Get to your position and get on with your work, Half-light, and take that foul thing with you.’

I knew I had made a real enemy. I would have to be more careful than ever. Not only with Mace, but with Jip and Farg too.

I looked down at the dog. He was shivering, in reaction to the Callic 5, and I thought ‘you poor thing. I just want you to be you. A real dog.’ I leant down and whispered in its ear. ‘You be you.’ His eyes turned up at me in such a way it nearly broke my heart. “You be you,” I said again under my breath. Then it struck me – what to call my dog. ‘Your name is Ubu. U.B.U. Come on Ubu, come on boy.’

We walked down the corridor of books, Ubu and I, out into the main hall. All the children were sitting facing each other across a massively long table. They were all sedated and slowly turning the pages of the reform books with instructions that had the same message on each and every page: how to be a Lair; diagrams of Rims and their parts, pedals, brakes, accelerators, headlights; diagrams of Lairs fully kitted out, hats gloves, coats, books; maps of Lair City, buildings and bridges, where you could go, where you couldn’t; a history of Lair City and its future. It showed Lairs holding the hands of children, even photos with adult humans as if the whole thing was like one happy family – the most natural thing in the world. Each page had a heading: ‘The Master Wants’ or ‘The Master Says’.

‘Is it the legendary Zekai Manci? The fabled one, The Master Lair?’ I’d asked myself. I’d thought at one time I might ask Mace, but now I knew not to.

There is a morose atmosphere here in this place, with the long rows of children being attended to by Mace’s assistants. Jip at one end of the table, Farg at the other and Mace prowling throughout the building. The most startling thing to me was how not one child or Lair gave Ubu the slightest glance. It was as if Ubu did not exist – or me, for that matter. Down the length of the table we walked, my eyes peeled for Bella and Race. There they were, peas in a pod in this insidious prison that was Callic Dimension 5. Was I too late? Had the Callic turned them forever? I felt a rush of insecurity. I felt lost, I saw my dream evaporating. There was no glint of acknowledgement as we passed so close. I brushed up against Bella, pretending to lift my hand to my hat. No response. Jip’s screen flickered momentarily, then returned to its normal hazy glow.

We passed Jip and headed for the stairwell that would take us up into the labs and store rooms high above the library floor. I must say that this is a place that I often get to myself. It was here that I first

thought of my plan for Bella and Race, substituting Callic Dimension 5 with a code so similar it's almost impossible to detect. Physically you appear to be on Callic, but there is a fundamental difference. My potion saves your nervous system and makes you mildly high. Your eyes glaze and seem lifeless, just as with Callic, but it leaves you with the ability to think for yourself. Bella and Race had been thought of as 'burnt', a Lair word for slow-changing children. I'd been asked to up their dose, so I imagine that Mace would have taken care of this himself in my absence. I'd have to check the charts to see if I was right, but just looking at them, even from my aerie up here in the roof, told me he had more than likely doubled the dose.

Callic Dimension 5 is made from the Datura plant, small quantities of arsenic, lithium and a dye, which gives the tablets their distinctive purple colour. The dye comes from snails. Snails which the Lairs grow and feed on Datura. I've never seen these labs or the conservatories that they breed the snails in. I only get the dye in a powdered form, as I do the arsenic and Datura. The lithium is a liquid. Callic Dimension 5 is made by mixing the exact portions of these ingredients. If given in the wrong quantity, it's lethal. The child has spasms, and will swallow its tongue. They die slowly, thrashing madly, eyes rolling around in their heads, their tongues swell and choke off the airways, they turn blue, purple, like the Callic 5 pills. I've seen it, but at the time, it didn't register. It was just another underworld child who couldn't cope. I know it fascinates the Directors when it happens, which is rare now. They, Mace, Farg and Jip, all stand around the victim, circle them, their screens dancing in excitement. The fingers go wild, totally uncontrollable, and it takes them some time to calm down. They always get me to remove the bodies. I know it's callous; they go down a chute at the back of the Library. I don't know where to.

'Burnt' children have been threatened with overdoses of Callic 5. Now it scares me that Mace would do it for entertainment. Perhaps to Ubu, Race or Bella. I feel protective.

You see, I too have been taking my own potion, and it's changing me, which scares me. I feel emotions. I feel the blood coursing through my body, the beating of my heart.

I see them, these Lairs; I know they're sinister, black. Perhaps I'm giving them too much credit. Perhaps they're simply very clever robots. Programmed tissue and bone that's turned to tin. They think they don't smell, but they do. They smell oily and acrid, like the smell

of burnt plastic-coated wiring, and when they get angry, their putrid odour leaks out of them.

Once in my aerie, my first instinct was to search for my potion. These too are in pill form, identical to Callic Dimension 5. I found them in the same place, tightly sealed in a clear jar amongst dozens of similar jars full of Callic 5.

Ubu quietly sat in the corner chasing mice in his head. A chessboard of black and white, a game being set up between the Lairs and myself. It was my move. I joined him in the corner and started to stroke his head, running my hand down over his neck to his shoulders, talking softly at the same time. 'You be you, Ubu.' He lifted his head and looked straight into my eyes. In my other hand, I had two of my own pills. I placed my hand under his mouth, my palm opened with the pills sitting like two eyes. He turned his head away from them. I knew I didn't have the heart or the strength to shove them down his throat as Mace had done. My first move looked like a stalemate. How was I going to win Ubu's trust?

I gently removed his collar and the chain rattled snake-like in my hands as I put it on the bench. I felt unsure, stuck. I needed to know more about dogs. Closing the door behind me to the sound of the now snoring Ubu, I descended the stairs to the Library. I had never had cause to look at any of the books in the library. My whole training had been chemistry, and these books had been in the labs, so I realised I had no idea where to start.

I walked down the first corridor of books, the shelves halfway to the ceiling. Thousands of books, stacked perfectly shoulder to shoulder. A mountain of information that I'd had no call to examine until now. I grabbed the first book I could. It parted randomly in my hands, pages flipping over in a rush to find its equilibrium, gently coming to rest somewhere about its centre. There in bold black type, the words 'The Master Says, The Master Wants'. I turned the pages; the same headings 'The Master Wants, The Master Says'. A chill spread as page after page drew the same result. 'The Master Says, The Master Wants'. Book after book. I found myself slashing hands across these clones of information, thumbing blinding through hundreds. Like a jack-in-the-box I pulled them randomly. Each corridor, each stack, churning my stomach, sending shock waves through my spine. My hair stood on end. It was overwhelming. It was the same book that each and every child was reading, now, at the long table. The whole Library a

spider's web of indoctrination. A web built on what the Master says, the Master wants – the Master's web.

Who is Zekai Mancini? Is he the fabled Master? Could the legend, the myth, be real?

My knowledge of dogs was going to have to be through trial and error. The pressing need now was to get my potion to Bella, Race and Ubu. But each step I took sent my thoughts spiralling down a long bleak staircase into a black hole. I was giddy, unsteady on my feet, my breathing shallow. I reached out for the bookcase to stop myself from falling, leaning against the very books that caused such a head spin. I could see the Undercity kids at their books, with their lacklustre complexions, their blank eyes, their mouths shaping the words, the words of the Master as a fish in a bowl, mouths in silence. I thought I'd vomit. I gagged. I was desperate to hold down my heartfelt fear. My mind might be expanding, but my emotions were in a complete spin. It was hard to see how I could change all this. I felt small. I was shrinking, as all around me expanded. My body was shaking...my skin crawled. My hearing, a blur of sound compacted into a single high-pitched hum, strangling any definition. Perspiration drops lined my forehead. I was afraid to be found in this state by a Lair.

I got my breathing under control first, mopped my brow with the back of my hand, and slowly normal hearing returned. With my legs still wobbly, I took my first step, inching my way, my weight leaning against the bookcase. Preservation kicked in. Struck by a realisation that I was the only being in Lair City that felt human emotions, human fear, I straightened myself. I was in desperate need of water and made my way to the children's washroom, gathering my thoughts with each step. A few children were in there, accompanied by Jip.

They were always tagged, even at their toileting. They too needed food at this stage of their conversion, and a small canteen stood next to the bathroom. Mace hated these areas and always allotted Jip or Farg these chores. His arrogant air of superiority was well above such stations.

Gulping down a mug of water, I remembered Ubu and my original mission to find out about dogs. Ubu too would need water, in fact, like all us Undercity beings, food as well. Yes. I'd put his pills in his food. Disguise it. How clever of me. Feeling better about solving this dilemma, I steadied myself to go to the long table, check the charts and see Bella and Race.

Farg had left the washroom and was now perched in his high chair in command of his end of the long table. Jip at the other end. Mace was midway down the table with his fingers caging some small child's head, his screen hissing, his fingers probing – was this child 'burnt', in need of a higher dosage? He immediately felt my presence. His screen following my footsteps down the long table. His fingers retracting from the innocent child's head.

'What is it Half-light? What are you looking at? Have you been neglecting this Underling's Callic? It feels like another burnt one to me, like those two up there.' He said this, pointing a finger, which doubled in size, directly at Race and Bella. 'Those two are burnt. You're not doing your job properly, Half-light.'

'You know Mace, I haven't been here. You know that three shifts have passed.'

'What? What? What are you saying? You piece of rotting flesh. What are you suggesting? That I haven't been up to the task?'

I kept walking towards Farg's end of the long table. Mace kept pace at the other side. We met, with Farg separating us.

'I've come to check the entries, to do my work; you think what you like, Mace.'

'Think what I like? Think? What is this? Think? You don't think. It's not your place to think, freak, Half-light. It is your place to do, to do as I say. Perhaps you're burnt as well, useless to us now.'

He spun around Farg, and grabbed my neck with one hand while his other grabbed a bottle of Callic from Farg's desk.

'Here, Farg, pour some of these into my hand, come on Farg, Farg!'

'Mace, what are you doing?' said Farg.

'I'm going to pour this whole jar-full down his sick throat. Think? I'll stop that sort of crap. Half-lights don't think!'

Mace's anger was such that he crushed the jar, spilling the pills and glass in an explosive rage. Jip came flying down the long table. All their screens were turning that smouldering red they do at times like this.

'No Mace,' I heard Jip calling. 'No.'

Jip gripped Mace's hand, removing it from my throat. The acrid smell of burnt plastic seeping out from under his bowler hat, out through his voice box. Farg had knocked what was left of the broken jar and Callic from Mace's hand.

'I'm here to do my work Mace. This is what Dr Hasame wants. I'm

here to check the Underlings' dosages, just as I have done for all my time here. What is your problem?

'You. You rotting Half-light, you.' And with this he lurched towards me again, but not with the same conviction. I calmly turned to Farg's desk and started checking the index, completely ignoring Mace's existence, though in the back of my mind I knew I was running out of time.

Jip and Farg moved Mace away from the table. It was while they were doing this that I noticed Bella and Race watching this outburst with some kind of register. If the Lairs had seen this, I know it would have been the end. But they were too busy with their own anger and trying to pacify Mace.

Bella's and Race's eyes quickly returned to their books, heads down in that comatose state, like the rest of the Undercity youth that filled the great table.

'Mace, listen', said Jip, 'you know what Dr Hasame wants, he told us all. They have plans for Solo. Hasame would go crazy if you were to ruin any of his plans. We have to put up with his rotting flesh and stink. Hasame feels he is brilliant. You know our success rate has been improving all the time and for that we get more freedom, and Hasame puts it down to the Half-light's solutions. We all would be deactivated, reprogrammed, perhaps scrapped, if anything went against Hasame's wishes. And Farg and I like it here. Hasame would have us assigned to toilet duties, dishing out filthy food. No more meetings with Hasame, no more special treats. Imagine that. No, Mace, we have to bide our time. He'll slip up. Hasame will tire of him. He has promised that soon there will be no need for Half-lights once they believe Lairs can control the formulas to give us permanent life. Calm down Mace, Farg and I are of your species. We are Lairs, and Lairs will rule all in time. We will be there with Hasame making these decisions. Hasn't he promised us that? Leave the Half-light to us. You go and plug in for a while, we will control theseimps and their Half-light brother.'

Mace turned and stared at me. In a calm voice, he said, 'that piece of filth's programme is coming unstuck. Make sure he takes his Callic 5 as well. You do that Farg, do it now. Yes, you are right. I'll go and plug in. You do some sensing. Read them all. Every one of them.'

They separated, Jip mincing his way back down the long table, Farg back to his perch next to me. Mace rattled on his way, fingers working overtime at his side, to his private rooms. These, a mystery to me, were off to the side of the children's dormitories.

‘You, Solo,’ Farg breathed in a metallic tone, ‘get on with your work. Mace should have strangled you!’

‘Yes Farg, I shall. I’ll start distributing the Callic Dimension 5. Do you have another jar?’

‘Give those two,’ he said pointing at Bella and Race, ‘a double dose. They look burnt. Mace wants this. He senses they’re slow and considers them a waste of good Lair time. Here,’ he said shoving a jar of Callic 5 towards me. ‘He wants to throw those two down the Chute. We both agree, Jip and I. Do it now, Half-light. Dose them first, in front of me. So I can register it.’

I picked up the jar and tried to open it, struggling. The lid would not move. Farg could see this and without a word or moving from his perch, extended his fingers to some horrible length to rip the top off the jar.

‘There. Get on with it Half-light.’

My problem now was exchanging the Callic for my own potion for Bella and Race. I tipped the jar over, sent some of the pills across the table and some to the floor.

Farg let out a moan. ‘Stinking Half-light. Pick them up, you deadhead’. It was then that he noticed the glass and pills from the jar Mace had smashed. He hissed as he climbed down to clear the mess. This gave me time to grab several of my own pills out of my pocket. Holding these snugly in my grip, I picked up what was left in the jar on the table and walked across to Bella and Race. Farg’s attention turned to me as I placed the pills in front of those poor Underlings, who, without lifting their heads, knew to take them. Farg seemed satisfied and continued to clear the debris around him.

At the far end of the table, Jip was slowly moving from child to child placing his fingers completely over their heads, little birds in a cage, his screen clear, feeling for any abnormalities. He would have to assess Bella and Race as well. Then the game would be up. I had to think fast. I confronted Jip after he had assessed only a few of the children.

‘This is no good, Jip. These children haven’t been given their Callic for the last couple of shifts. There is no point in assessing them. Look here.’ I grabbed the head of the next kid he was about to traumatise. ‘Look, look at these eyelids. Pink in the corners. No good. Who’s been in charge of administering Callic 5 while I’ve been away?’ Jip stumbled backwards a step.

‘Not me,’ he squealed. ‘No one told me to do it.’ And with that I knew they had neglected their duties.

‘Well, what are we going to do? Should I record it, report it to Mace? Perhaps Dr Hasame?’ I had a chance to do something for Jip. This would help my situation amongst these Lairs. I seized it quickly.

‘Look Jip, I’ll keep quiet about this. We’ll just have to give all of them an extra dose. I’ve done Bella and Race. I’ll keep my mouth shut. You tell Mace you’ve assessed them and all is in order. What do you think? And I’ll agree with the Index and no-one will know.’

‘I could blame you, Half-light.’

‘No, Jip, you can’t. Remember, I wasn’t here. I was with Dr Hasame.’

‘I’ll put the blame on Farg.’

‘Well, do so, go on, go tell him now. Why don’t you blame Mace as well? I know it was your position Jip, because your imprints are on the register.’

‘I should rip your head off Half-light, and kick it through the library.’

‘Really, Jip!’

‘You, Solo, are walking a sharp edge. I’m going to be on to you. Just get the Callic into these Underlings and do your recording. I’ve checked them all anyway. It’s all in order. Double dose them all. Right now!’

Jip turned away in a manner that seemed impossible, his shoulders dropped, his fingers retracted, shortened. He knew he had no option, and these developments excited me. I felt power for the first time. Power over a Lair. He, Jip, was right. I was walking a sharp edge, and I felt ecstatic. Jip’s steps were shorter as he shuffled down a corridor of books, almost a shadow, shrinking into the darkness. He was in retreat, obviously weighing up what had just taken place. A Lair, lying his way into a corner.

I quickly went about giving the children their Callic Dimension 5. I was thinking, I want to save them all now. Farg took mild interest as I completed the registration book and indexed.

I returned to my lab, somehow lighter in step. A little bounce in my shoes. It occurred to me that the Lairs could read this too easily. I was heading for trouble, yet I felt happiness, and a freedom that could undo me.

For a moment all my old ways crushed me and I crept to the window

of my aerie and peered over the window frame, scared that Jip would be with Farg, sending scorching screens in my direction. But all was quiet. Normal. Both Lairs at their posts at the long table and no sign of Mace, who would be plugged in for some time yet.

It took a moment or two to register Ubu's presence, standing by the door panting, still in the throws of the Callic. I grabbed his collar and chain from the desk, checked my pockets for my own pills, and then slipped the collar over his head with calming banter. He accepted the action without much fuss. I led him down to the Library floor and out the back of the building, onto Data Street and the constant whoosh of Rims and Lairs where the sickly chrome yellow light and gluggish blue mist evaporated into the polluted sky. Ubu plodded along after me, as I tried to keep my step in check, head slightly tilted, my hat tipped forward, hiding my smile. A phantom Half-light, going about his business.



Chapter Three

Bella is my best friend in the Undercity and above here in Lair City. We didn't know below as Undercity, one of the names it is referred to up here. We knew it as Mount Paris. It's a place of levels and mazes, of corridors and stairs, chutes and electrified grills. Each level is separated from the one above and the one below. Everyone wants to be on Level One where Carroll Shanks keeps the law; where Carroll Shanks pulls the strings; where Carroll Shanks is the Emperor, where Carroll Shanks is King.

Level One has better food, cleaner water, less crime, more space. Level One is where the children 'transcend' to Lair City. All these children are selected by Shanks to be elevated to the glory of Lair City. Carroll Shanks is a god. He is the God of Mount Paris and to be sure, you'd better understand this, because if you don't, you're heading for the Chute – a slide that is reputed to be a trip to hell. Bella and I grew up many levels below, on Level Six.

Carroll Shanks has an apartment said to be the most magnificent dwelling in all Mount Paris. It is large enough for ten families, yet he resides there with only his wife and four children. Two sons and two daughters.

In the surrounding apartments are his henchmen and most loyal followers, who are fanatical in their devotion. Carroll Shanks is from a long line of Shanks. His father and his father's father all held title of God, Emperor, Supreme Leader, and one of Shanks's sons will also rise to such a station in time.

I can't tell you just how many levels there are to Mount Paris. I have only been from Level Six upwards. No one ever wants to go down and our parents always warned us off such thoughts. Not that we needed to be told; seeing through the grill was enough to know we had it

better. Occasionally a few new folk would appear from the level below, full of tales of terror – muggings, rapes, murders, chaos – which, to me, seemed much the same as what we were living with on Level Six. They would assure us though that this was not so, that Level Seven was hellish compared to our existence.

I guess you can see how it works; it's a replacement system. Someone goes down the chute for some reason or other. You can slowly rise through the levels if you're lucky enough. It's a domino effect. Mine and Bella's parents have moved three levels in their lifetimes – from Level Nine to Level Six – but both Bella and I were born on Level Six.

The first time we ever set eyes on Lord Shanks was in the Community Vault. Each floor has one. They are vast cavernous halls for public meetings. They are at the centre of each level. These meetings are a high point in each and every level's calendar. It's the day Shanks reads the names of those to rise a level. And those to be thrown to the chute are brought out of their prisons, paraded and flung down the gaping jaws of the unknown. Some scream, others disappear without a murmur, but the gathered crowd is hysterical, drunk and gleeful. Of course, there are those like Bella's and my parents who quietly stand to the side, who would have it another way. But they know not to complain, as this is considered treason and this also can bring on the Chute. They hold us close to them and pretend to enjoy the spectacle, raising their cups to the boom of the crowd as each soul is cast into hell.

We come from every corner of the level: the gardeners, butchers, the brewers, ironmongers, grocers, the legal toffs who get the front row. Each level has its own hierarchy, who in turn answer to the one and only god – Carroll Shanks.

The list of chute offences is almost uncountable, but number one is a weapon of any kind not associated with your form of employment. On each level, as far as I know, the enforcers have ultimate say. These men rule with very tight fists and weapons that only they may carry. And they like their power. They are cruel men who take what they want, when they want, and we are all scared of them.

The meeting halls have a centre stage which is circular so all can see the great Emperor. Shanks's men stand around the perimeter, holding long electric prodders that look much like spears, vigilant eyes peeled ready to stun any fool who comes closer than is allowed, indicated by an inlaid white line fifteen or so feet from Shanks's dais. They look

splendid, affluent and healthy, the elite guard – King Shanks’s personal bodyguards. They are backed by our own level’s enforcers.

Shanks paces around his stage like a second hand on a clock, cajoling all of us on. As each new victim is plunged through the jaws of hell, he gesticulates, arm raised, head held back, screaming for a chorus from his subjects. His list of names fluttering in his hand, as the crowd roars in approval, the names hiss from his lips, his eyes roll as he whips his loyal followers into a frenzy.

‘This man is a rapist. His name is shit. He will meet the jaws of hell, he is for the chute. What say you, good people of Level Six?’

We roar with excitement as the poor devil is dragged up on stage to be slapped by Shanks.

‘This man is shit, does not deserve your company,’ he yells as he kicks the grovelling coward in the thigh. ‘This man is for the pit.’

With an evil laugh he throws the man from the stage to the floor where he is dragged across the vault, pelted, kicked and spat on by the good people of Level Six, to the jaws of hell, the Chute.

How can I explain this carnival of horror to you? The demonic crowd, the terror in the eyes of the punished, the doors of hell, the Chute. The Chute is only opened for these occasions. Normally it sits there, its sliding doors bolted down, a painted ogre on the wall, all teeth and gaping mouth of fiery red, until it is parted like a starving mouth, greedy for victims to appease its insatiable appetite. When not in use, when it sits idle, it is still the scariest thing on Level Six, quietly waiting for Carroll Shanks to open its chilling mouth. Everyone gives it a wide berth when travelling through the communal vault. When Shanks arrives, he caresses it, strokes it, and then ascends to his throne, his platform. He talks of it as one of his children, the Chute, the jaws of hell.

‘Today, good people of Level Six,’ he screams, ‘Today, the Chute will clean your lives of these parasites. These evil pieces of shit. What do you say?’

We cheer, we call his name in unison, we thank him, our great god Carroll Shanks. ‘Thank you, Emperor, Yes, Yes, Yes!’ we all scream.

When the evil ones are committed to their indignant ends, scratched, punched, broken-limbed and cast away; when the crowd has been completely entertained at fever pitch, and the last victim tossed to the reported hell; when Shanks seems like some wild animal frothing at the mouth, face as red as a beetroot, sweat dripping down his forehead,

he suddenly stops pacing and stands perfectly still. Head bowed, he wipes his face and his mouth with the back of his hands and the crowd goes silent. It shuffles, a cup is dropped; you can hear the whispers of the others demanding quiet. It is an age-old ritual and Carroll Shanks plays out every second.

Carroll Shanks has control, his shoulders soften, his voice drops a tone, he smiles behind his clipped beard. He pulls his black hair into a tail and drops it behind his back. Now, all benevolence and honey, he brings his hands together, and takes a small step forward.

‘Ahh, good people of Level Six. Your children are your freedom. The way to the top. Your way to Lair City and above ground, sunlight, blue sky, grass.’

It was as if Shanks’s voice had hypnotised the swaying throng, spellbound. They oohh and aahh.

‘Above is the way, and I’ve come for your children, those the Lairs have asked for. Your best, your brightest children.’

We were standing with our parents who, till now, had no interest. They put their hands on our shoulders. Bella and I exchanged glances, it felt electric. I could feel the pride in my father’s hands. ‘It’s ordained’ my parents whispered to each other.

‘Yes, good people of Level Six, this is your day, your time. We have come for Bella and Race. Where are they? Bring them to me.’

You could hear the disappointment through the vault as parents and children breathed a deep sigh. Then all eyes were on us. All in the great hall turned. Bella’s and my parents were beaming. They embraced and grabbed our hands and we parted the crowd like a hot knife through butter. I felt like I was flying. Bella too, floating. We were going up, up, to see the sky; and our parents’ reward, a trip to Level Five and a better life. Carroll Shanks had descended to the floor, was walking towards us. We were like two arrowheads coming together from opposite directions. The world moved faster; we started to run, Bella and I, and the last of the human wall parted like a curtain and there he was, down on one knee, arms extended, calling ‘Bella, Race, come to me’. We threw ourselves at him, turning our heads over our shoulder to check our parents’ approval. We were in heaven, our parents’ faces flushed with joy. Shanks stood gently seeking our hands. He turned and we all followed. My parents, my best friend and I at the side of Lord Shanks.

Stairs were brought, his elite guard, like statues, stood on either side

and we, Bella and I, followed Carroll Shanks to the sky. Our jubilant parents walked with heads held high. Shanks gathered us under his arms, beckoning our parents to stand with us. Collectively, we five together. A family. A breed apart. The day we left Level Six forever. The day we began our journey, Bella and I, to Lair City. The day we were to see sky, grass and light.

‘Good people of Level Six. The Lairs have chosen Bella and Race to continue your fate. You have been blessed! What say you?’ implored Shanks. ‘Do you agree? Are these children your best?’

With that, an ocean of voices cried out as one. ‘Yes, Yes, Yes!’ The vault erupted into chaos and clatter, music and laughter.

He, Shanks, shepherded us around his dais so all could see. We waved, blew kisses to the folk we knew. My parents leaned down to touch the heads, the shoulders and hands of the ecstatic crowd. Children and adults no longer worried about the perimeter line on the great hall floor. Children we grew up with called our names. They all rushed the stage, all envy gone, to wish us well. A carousel, like a spinning top, we received their love while Carroll Shanks stood, centre stage, arms held high rotating himself eyes tipped towards the vaults ceiling crying out: ‘Bella, Race, Bella, Race.’

As I look across now, at Bella, I still feel the love for her I had on that fateful day – something I now know I’m not supposed to feel. ‘Bella’, I whisper, she moves her ear towards my speech.

‘Yes Race, what is it?’

‘Bella, have you noticed how Solo looks at us? Almost talks with his eyes, brushes up against us.’

‘Yes I have,’ she whispers back.

Jip was in his high chair. His screen fluttered momentarily. His head moved in our direction. Then he went back to his Index, scanning, routine work.

‘Bella, we need to talk. Try to sneak into my bed when they lock us into our rest.’

‘Okay Race, tonight then.’

Jip’s screen moved in colour, his head moved quickly. He was on his feet. He started moving to his left, then to his right. He seemed confused. His head started nodding on his shoulders, his fingers twisted, almost grabbing at themselves. He turned and looked down the Library’s corridors, trying to source the location of sound. Bella and Race froze back into their normal stupor.

Jip walked around the end of the great table and peered vacantly down the length of the table and chairs. He whirled around, retracing his steps to the other side, to repeat his actions. He stood still, almost cocking his screen at a forty-five degree angle. He stayed like this for a moment and returned his head back squarely on his shoulders. Then he climbed back onto his high chair.