



## Chapter Six

The Rim's headlights repelled the mist from the rail. Solo hadn't seen a tandem Rim before. Dr Hasame rode up front, Solo behind hanging onto the pillion T-bar. He glanced around the streets and alleyways, which were new to him, across Lair City. They sped at a much faster pace than Solo had thought the Rims could move. He had decided not to bring Ubu, afraid that Hasame would notice the dog's renewed spirit, and guess he was lacking Callic Dimension 5.

'Solo, Half-light, are you enjoying the ride?' Hasame yelled into the wind. Solo wondered why Hasame's hat had not blown off, then remembered it was screwed on. He himself had to hold on to his own with one hand. He began to realize Lair City was huge – a great deal larger than he had imagined. Hasame had put them on an express rail. Right down the middle they trolleyed, flashing past other Lairs on either side who now seemed to move at a mundane pace. Where did they all go, what was their purpose, these Lairs, so uniformly the same?

Whoosh! was the sound as they passed. Hasame delighted at their speed, turning his screen, which was a tangerine colour, to check Solo's expression.

They passed over the flyovers, went through tunnels and out again. The design of the buildings rushing by was such that Solo could only guess at their use. Some were squat, like up-turned cake tins, others skinny and tall. On and on they went till they reached what appeared to be the outskirts of Lair City. Hasame slowed, then stopped at a huge gatehouse. Two Lairs in yellow coats moved to greet them. They too, had the prodder-type weapons at the side of their boots. One of them had rings much like a hoopla that crossed his body, resting on his shoulder.

‘Dr Hasame, what an unexpected visit,’ the taller one said. ‘Is all well in Lair City?’

‘Yes, all’s well, let us in. I have a Half-light with me. His name is Solo, Chief Chemist from the Library. He is here to study the snails. Now open the gates and let us through.’

‘This is an unusual request, Dr Hasame. We have no record of such a visit. We will have to check with the Mainframe.’

Hasame’s screen fizzed, made a little popping noise as he dismounted the Rim and rattled his way towards the two Lairs.

‘I am Dr Hasame,’ he screamed, ‘and you will do as I say.’ He grabbed hold of the Lair carrying the Rings by his coat collar and pulled him with a thud up against his own body.

‘Now Doctor, there’s no need for this,’ the other Lair stuttered.

Hasame immediately let go of the poor Lair’s collar and spun around towards the other one.

‘I am Dr Hasame,’ he repeated.

‘Yes Doctor, do not worry. All is well; we will do as you ask.’ Hasame stood glaring at the two unfortunates, then returned to our Rim. I tried to keep my head hidden and gripped my T-bar waiting for the acceleration I knew would come. I didn’t want Hasame to see my fear – my fear of him.

The gates were now open. To my surprise, Hasame slowly moved the Rim up to the gates at a gentle speed. The Rim stopped on the other side as the gates closed. Again, he dismounted and walked into the gatehouse. I could see him through the glass, wrapping both arms around the two Lairs, his fingers dancing down by their stomachs. His screen, back to its normal milky green, flickered and looped as he squeezed the two Lairs close. His strength seemed monstrous. I could see their screens going black as if he was suffocating the very power out of them. Harder and harder he squeezed them until, just when I thought they would shatter, he let them go. They stumbled across the gatehouse interior, slumping out of sight as Hasame returned to the Rim.

His hands were agitated, groping for the T-bar. He said nothing and we were off again, down a causeway, which had a hint of blue trying to bleed through the insidious smog. I found myself gazing, head tipped up, as we passed the canyon-like walls that now threatened to engulf us as Hasame guided the Rim down a dip and into a tunnel. It was very dark with only his headlamp to show us the way. The only sound was the hum from the Rim. The patchy sky high above us pulled at my



*Bella, Race & Powerflower in the Library*

mind. It was only a glimpse, yet deep inside me there was a feeling I had felt before, one of amazement. Somehow the air was refreshing, transporting. If it affected Hasame he didn't show it. We continued to descend on a slow gradient, cocooned in blackness. I could feel the tunnel contracting, getting smaller till finally we reached yet another gate. This one was much smaller. Hasame brought the Rim to rest, inches away from its metal teeth. He leaned across the front of the Rim and punched the coded lock. It was as if he had forgotten his tandem passenger. It was unlike him not to use his fingers to do his reaching. He seemed weary. The door slid upwards into a recess in the tunnel's ceiling with a loud clang. We went through, and the gate closed behind us.

Now I could see a light at the end of the tunnel, some way off in the distance. We travelled towards it extremely slowly. A sound roared, as if a storm was about to be upon us. A hellish wind pushed against us as we moved towards the opening. It expanded as we approached its bright glow. I could have walked as quickly as we were moving. I couldn't work it out; the quality of light was mystifying, almost unreal, well, actually unreal. Next, Hasame stopped the Rim at a box that was built into the side of the tunnel wall. He opened a small door and removed what appeared to be a piece of plastic sheeting. The eerie glow of his screen bounced around our confined space. He then placed this plastic over his screen, clicking it in place, muting the effect of his screen's illumination.

'I need to wear this protection,' he said. 'The light is bright and deadly to me, but you, Half-light will be safe in your present condition, not being a Lair.' His voice sounded tired.

We accelerated off, out of the tunnel into what can only be described as the most wondrous light I've yet known – clean, clear – into a massive open-air quadrangle.

There in front of us, huge cages, massive structures with gridded pathways that were devoid of rails for the Rims. Inside these cages, trees and fern, rotting logs, vegetation so thick clawed to break out of their trapped circumstances. Hasame brought the Rim to a halt. His actions were slow, deliberate. I was totally awestruck, bathed in light from the unpolluted blue sky under which these cages sat.

At first I thought we were alone. But then I detected movement inside the cages. A rustling – faint, but there. Hasame was checking the buttons on his coat, patting his bowler hat, securing the lock. He

produced some tape from his pocket and taped down his sleeves where they met his gloved hands, which had retracted, shrunk.

‘Welcome to the snail-houses,’ he said. ‘My beloved snails. Without them, Lair City would not function; Callic 5 could not be made. Come Solo, let’s go and meet some of my favourite creatures. Sometimes I think I care for them more than I do for my own race. Solo, yes, I can see you are impressed. It’s the sky. We tried to farm the snails ourselves at first. We used good Lair stock, stronger, hardier types, played with their genes, yet the sky always broke them down. They malfunctioned, grew sick and perished. Now we use Half-lights, like you. It seems your stock can handle the environment. They live and die here. We have no trouble as long as the Callic holds. You see, we are still dependent on Half-lights. Some of the children you are now educating will end up here as snail-carers, slime-collectors; you will see them, meet them some time.’

We walked down the aisles between the cages. The smells were devastating, triggering sensations both alien and familiar. Cages after cages that housed the said snails.

‘Solo, I’ve brought you here so you can understand the beauty of the essential element to Callic Dimension 5. The Master stumbled upon it many centuries ago, back when he was creating our great Lair Empire. He no longer deals with them himself. He has left this to me. He is too busy controlling and planning our future.’

All was silent, empty of the snail carers, even the snails themselves. My textbooks and manuals had pictures of snails, so I knew their structure and I also knew their habitat. Nothing, though could possibly have prepared me for the air, the sky, and my emotions. My skin had goosebumps, my senses were almost out of control. Finally, we reached a cage that Hasame appeared to be most interested in. He caressed the grilled framework.

‘In here, Solo, lives our most precious breeding pair. They have the place to themselves. Your Half-light cousins collect their offspring and nurture them to adulthood.’

I was hardly paying any attention to Hasame; I was enjoying the warmth of the air, its clarity. But the mentioning of the Master made my ears prick up and my heart jumped a beat.

‘Solo! Are you listening to me?’

‘Why yes, Dr Hasame, your most precious snails live here. It’s just that you mentioned the Master. Will I ever meet him?’

‘Don’t be stupid! You filthy Half-light! Think yourself privileged to meet the snails.’ Hasame’s voice had taken on a brittle, corrosive streak. ‘I was hoping to see these snails from the cage’s perimeter, but it seems we will have to go in and find them. ‘You wait here, while I get a key from one of your shitty Half-light brothers. And if you ever, and I mean EVER, place the Master’s name on your filthy tongue again, I’ll rip it from your mouth and feed it back to you. Do you understand?’

Timidly, I replied that I understood.

It was hard to gauge Hasame’s demeanour as the plastic sheeting covering his screen blocked out all identifiable colour, my usual way of telling how Lairs were reacting to my presence. My life was being seriously shaken, turned upside down.

I could see Hasame returning down the hallway of cages with a Half-light trailing behind him. The closer they got the more terrified I became. The Half-light was hunched over himself and dragged one leg, with a scraping sound, after the other. His eyes were milky white and his teeth were rotten, his complexion an evil yellow and spotted with black sores. He wore no hat and his hair lay limp, stringy. His scalp could be seen where small clumps of hair was missing. A large bunch of keys hung from deformed hands of leather, swollen at the knuckles. He smelt weird. He smelt just like the snail powder I used in making the Callic 5. He paid me no attention while unlocking and opening Hasame’s favourite cage, where his darling snails were in hiding. We all entered and the hunchback closed the door behind us.

‘This is Lek, our head Snail-keeper. He doesn’t talk, he has no tongue. You have no tongue do you Lek? I pulled it out, didn’t I?’

The glee in Hasame’s voice was chilling. The old Half-light just nodded. We were standing in a clearing, dense bush and under-foliage spreading before us.

‘Where are they Lek?’ Hasame shouted.

The old Half-light pointed off to his left.

‘Go, bring them out here you useless cretin.’ Hasame checked his taped cuffs and buttoned coat as the crippled hunchback grabbed a large wooden pole that had been leaning up against a tree trunk and disappeared into the undergrowth.

‘Solo, the Master and I are most interested in the measurements of your formula for Callic Dimension 5. We realise you have changed the balance and we are most pleased with the outcome. Your results with the children have improved our usable numbers and they convert

into Lairs in a seamless transition, such as we have never had before. We want you to show us how you have changed the balance and we promise you a greater position in Lair City. We could give you Mace's job, you'd be great Director material, or perhaps you would like Lek's job better.' He laughed his weasel laugh.

I could hear a thwacking sound and a breaking of branches. A guttural noise, like choking, was interspersed between the hollow chimes. I'd been looking at my feet while Hasame prattled on. To my disgust, the clearing floor had a film of gunky slime, which stuck to my boot soles.

I knew then, in my very existence, that I was going to try and escape Lair City and I was going to take Bella and Race with me.

'Dr Hasame, I don't deserve such elevation, and the formula isn't difficult to adjust, but I need a little time in my lab to write the formula down. I'll do this on our return to the City.'

'I want it now!' Hasame hollered, "If you don't tell me I'll rip out your tongue.'

'Dr Hasame, I don't carry it around in my head. I have to use the calculations that are back in the lab, the scales to make sure of exact weights.'

A crushing, snapping sound could be heard and it grabbed Hasame's attention, before he could continue his demands, his threats.

I lifted my gaze in the same direction Hasame was now facing. It was clear that the choking sound was Lek herding the pair of snails out from their hideaway, and it was those very snails making the crushing, snapping sounds.

At first, a pair of long antennae protruded out into the clearing, feeling the air. It reminded me of Hasame's contorted fingers groping, rotating – and then the head came into the light. It recoiled, only for Lek to whack it again on its shell. Its trumpet-like mouth lifted in profile, turning back for the humidity of the undergrowth and its own shell. It had no eyes and blindly swung its sad face back towards the clearing. You could hear Lek's stick, tap tap tap, his choked voice grunting in some mad shepherd's tongueless vocabulary. The snail had magnificent striping that hooked in a wave pattern, from where its eyes should have been and down its giraffe-like neck. Its movement was languid, cautious. Interlocking spirals circumnavigated its moss-green protective shell, which was the size of a small house. Lek too, could now be seen, dwarfed next to this fantastic creature. He had

moved around to the side and prodded the snail's head to the ground. It moved forward, a trail of slime dripping from its undercarriage.

'I wanted them both!' Hasame screamed.

Lek just bowed his head. Hasame grabbed the stick off the crippled Half-light and brought it down across the hunchback's shoulders, then threw it across the clearing into the foliage. Lek accepted the blow without a hint of complaint.

'Isn't she beautiful Solo? Our oldest national treasure. Mink.' There was tenderness in Hasame's tone. 'Say hello to Solo, Mink. He is also fond of you.' Hasame was careful that Mink's head did not touch him, side-stepping the snail's antenna in a little dance that was comical. I had to stop myself from laughing – a new human emotion that I managed to cover with a cough.

The snail was trying to retract its head back into its shell.

'All right, Lek, take Mink back. She has babies to make. So, what do you think, Half-light? Quite special, isn't she?' Hasame said this as Lek turned Mink around on herself, her slime sticky, glinting in the heat of the clear blue sky.

I was beside myself with happiness and wonder. Dangerously so. I swallowed two of my pills while pretending to wipe my mouth hoping my eyes would glaze up quickly. I kept looking at my boots, lifting them to watch the slime trickle back to the earth.

Earth, Sun, Sky. I had to hold myself back in my body at the excitement of these revelations.

'Now, Half-light,' Hasame said, as we stepped through the gate. 'You say you don't have the quantities of Callic Dimension 5 in your head. Perhaps I could squeeze them out of your tiny brain, or maybe it is as you say, and you need your lab. It's been a stressful day and I need to plug in, rest. I'll come for the formula on your next shift. You will have it ready, won't you?'

'Of course, Dr Hasame. It will be waiting for you. I'll make a batch for your inspection. I'll show you personally if you would prefer.'

'See, I knew you were the right person for Mace's job. After you have given me the quantums, I will move Mace on. Your time has come to be a Lair, Solo. I would like to arrive early, but I have to see the Master first thing. So I will see you late in your next shift.'

We returned to Hasame's Rim and the tunnel stood like a gaping mouth ready to consume my happiness, back to smog and hideous Lairs. We reached the box in the tunnel's wall for Hasame to remove



his protective screen. He unwrapped the tape from around his cuffs and stretched his grotesque fingers. His body shuddered, his screen returned to its normal milky green glow, illuminating the tunnel walls. The wind whipped around my ears, my coat catapulted forward, towards the Gatehouse. We moved much faster now, with the wind at our backs, towards Lair City.

At the Gatehouse, the Lairs were there waiting at attention. They had the gate opened. They stood as sentinels at each gatepost. We sped by, to their relief. Back into the traffic and the movement of many Rims and Lairs, pass the buildings that looked like upside-down cake tins, back to Data Street and Library Lane.

‘I’ll leave you here, Solo,’ he said, pulling up to a jerky, jarring stop. He seemed to be in a hurry. He then sped off.

Ubu was lying just inside the door of the Lab. The Library was silent and empty. The children at their rest. Soon, I said to myself, soon Bella, soon Race. Ubu greeted me, his sharp paws scraping down my coat in his excitement.

‘Ubu,’ I said as I patted his glorious white shiny mane. ‘Come on boy, let’s get out of here.’ He was as pleased as me to be going. We walked out the side door into Library Lane, out on to Data Street and back to my apartment. I was hatching my escape. It would be soon. I had watched Hasame operate his Rim and I had to get hold of it. I’d memorised the way to the snail’s cages. ‘I’m going to steal Hasame’s Rim,’ I thought to myself. I swallowed hard, my Adam’s apple jumped in my throat, my gloves felt slippery on my hands, while my stomach churned and a chill spread up my spine.