



Chapter Eight

Being in the Library was unpleasant, with the two Lairs arguing over who would put the children in their dormitories. Mace's temper almost at boiling point. He had lost Farg's usual arse-greasing respect. Farg's ego was now openly challenging.

'Do it yourself. I no longer see you as Head Director. You're lucky Hasame hasn't terminated you.' They stood screen to screen, their fingers interlocked, scrambled, twisting, pushing at each other. Their voice boxes reverberated, rattling in their bowler hats. 'It's because of you that we have to do the stinking job of feeding and toileting these foul-breathed flesh-rotting Half-lights. You do it Mace.'

They didn't seem to care or even notice that I was watching this outburst, their loss of control.

Mace booted Farg's leg. A hard thud echoed across the library walls. He then manoeuvred himself behind the hapless Lair, shoving him against the wall. There was this cracking sound from Farg's voice box, its grill jumped out of his bowler hat, shattering into small pieces on the library floor. His screen went the deepest indigo, his hideous fingers leaped to the gaping cavity. They squirmed across the opening. A barrage of meaningless noise exuded between his splayed digits. Farg lashed out at the homicidal Mace with his own boot but Mace caught Farg's leg, anchored it under his arm and yanked it high. Again, a nauseating crunching, cracking metallic sound filled the room. Farg slumped to the floor, rotating around and around like a spring being wound tight. Mace's screen flicked and crackled fizzed and glowed like hot coals. He was yelling at Farg in a Lair language I'd never heard before.

Race had his hand over Bella's arm. Ubu and I had walked up behind them. The two children were terrified, startled by the Lair's behaviour. I put my arms around their shoulders, offering comfort. I could feel

their bodies trembling, their small faces searching for assurance and protection. Ubu burrowed in between us all, he too frightened by the chaos, the madness that steamed from Mace.

‘I’m taking you away, when you have been put to rest,’ I said. ‘I’ll come when Mace has plugged himself in. Don’t be scared. I will look after you both.’

‘Please hurry, Solo, we can’t stand this any more. We are not like the other children. Look at them. All this means nothing to them. They have no fear. It’s as if they have no feelings or understanding of what is happening. Mace will kill us soon, feed us to the Chute.’

Mace, now all menace, prowled around Farg who had ceased to rotate. ‘You deserve this Farg; I’ll teach you who is Head Director. It’s not you, it’s me, you sorry excuse for a Lair. It’s ME! You should be on your knees asking for my patronage, you flea, you weevil.’ He had come to a standstill, towering over Farg, whose screen lay on its side, spluttering shots of insipid colour across the blackish monitor. His leg convulsed in jerky uncontrolled spasms.

‘You have made me ill-tempered, violent. You have turned me against my own kind.’ Mace’s voice now softened, the fiery red coals evaporating from his contorted screen, his movements less erratic. Farg lay helpless, prising at his voice box, his mortality fading away. It was then that Mace turned to look about the Library.

‘You, Half-light,’ he screamed. ‘You, you will put the stinking piss-soaked morons to rest. You will say nothing of this to Hasame. If you do, I will tear you limb from limb and I’ll feed you to that carnivore, that four-legged monster that smells as much as you do. And when he shits you out, I’ll feed that to those two that you think so special.’ He was pointing at us, with claw-like talons cupped, huge hands large enough to tear our heads from our bodies. I felt Bella and Race involuntarily jump in their seats. I pushed down on their shoulders.

‘Yes Mace, I’ll look after the children, put them to rest, see to their toilet. This shift has come to an end.’

I started to move them. Like zombies sleepwalking, they got to their feet, a production-line of children, unaware of their future. They lined up to be fed and watered and put to rest. Race and Bella played the game, blank expressionless robots under the gaze of the now normal Mace. I settled Bella and Race in their beds, patting the back of their small hands. With smiling, nodding faces, their eyes locked to mine. I smiled and said, ‘Soon, very soon, be ready.’

Ubu trotted behind as I clicked shut their door, leaving it unlocked. Mace was dragging the limp Farg by his coat along the floor towards us to their place of seclusion. Ubu and I moved in the opposite direction across to the other side of the library, down the corridor of books out of Mace's unholy presence into the shadows of the shelves. We waited until they disappeared into their hideous room – a place I would never forget. He pulled at Farg's lifeless frame. His boots were the last part of his awful being I was ever to see.

When Ubu and I re-entered the dormitory door, the two children ran to huddle into my arms. I placed a finger to my lips to ask for their silence. Ubu nudged and nibbled at their tender hands, tail wagging. We were a group. A group of three humans, and a dog. 'Just follow me,' I said bending to their ears. 'You must be quiet.' I opened the door and peered around the doorway. It was all clear. I placed my hand in Bella's; she placed hers in Race's. Ubu bounced out in front of us into the empty Library, out towards the side entrance we stole. Slightly hunched, we crept forward, slowly at first, until we made it to the safety of the bookshelves and their silent cover.

Outside, Hasame's abandoned Rim waited next to Mace's and Farg's. Down the alleyway, Lairs flashed by. The air felt heavy; perhaps it was just the fear, the tension built up inside me. Ubu and the children, as a collective, stood by the Rim as I turned it over and replaced the linkage. I removed the wing nut from my pocket displaying it to them with a grin, as if it held the answer to the question which lined their beautiful faces. I screwed the nut into place, returned the Rim to its upright position, then pulled it to the rail and clamped it down. I turned the knob at the end of the lever as Hasame had shown me. The headlight snapped into life. It powered up.

'Bella, you get up front here with me, Race you hold on to your T-bar like this,' I said, showing the young boy how it was done. 'Ubu can sit with you. Take Ubu's collar off him, Race.' Race did as I asked, passing the collar to me. I cast it into the corner of the garage and pulled the power-up lever down, too hard, almost spilling our whole troupe to the highway. They let out a cry as they frantically clung to the T-bars. Ubu was dislodged and stumbled to his feet.

'Sorry, fella,' I said. It took a few moments to coax him to jump up onto the Rim again. This time I pulled the lever down slowly, and we crept our way along the rail. I tried stepping on the third pedal – the one Hasame had omitted to explain to me. The vehicle came to an

abrupt halt a few feet from Data Street. I powered down, the light diminished. I was wishing I had found bowler hats for the children to disguise them. But then, I thought, they would have been far too large for their gracious heads.

‘By Jingo, Bella, what do you think? What is this place?’

Shhh’, I whispered.

The Rim sat idle, Lair City’s smog rolling around the edges of the buildings enveloping our group in a veil of grey mist. It was chilly, and Bella and Race shivered. The smog stung their eyes. They were rubbing them, causing further irritation. Solo could hear the struggle they were having trying to breathe in the polluted air. Solo could just make out Data Street.

He started up the Rim, its headlamp cutting away the smog to reveal the rail. They coasted out into the traffic and headed, Solo hoped, in the right direction. He was looking for the fast rail that Hasame had taken them on to the snail cages. He was sure the Lairs would try to stop them, a party of four aliens, riding a tandem: Dr Hasame’s tandem. He felt it would definitely attract attention or some kind of inspection, yet this did not happen. The Lairs were oblivious to their presence.

At first, he thought he was lost, had taken a bad turn, until he saw the upturned cake tins that caught his attention on his last journey. The kids and Ubu were much happier now that the Rim was moving. They breathed easier, their eyes were more comfortable.

Solo was looking for the express rail. He knew it to be somewhere close by. Panic rose in him as he started to circle the cake tin building. He removed one of his hands from the T-bar and fingered the feather in his right hand pocket. ‘Please, please,’ he said to himself. ‘I must find the express rail.’ Bella coughed, removing her hand from the T-bar, bringing it to her mouth and wiping her eyes. Solo reached his arm around her and he gave Bella a little squeeze.

‘It’s here, it’s somewhere here,’ Solo said in an exasperated voice. The Rim turned and the headlamp swung across the final corner before they would be back to square one, to where they had started.

‘There it is,’ Solo shouted. Even Ubu could sense the relief in Solo’s voice. He stopped the Rim and asked the children to step down. They huddled together up against a wall. Solo stepped on the disengagement pedal, unlocking the Rim, and dragged it to the express rail.

‘Come on,’ he called. Rims were sliding by on both sides of the

rail. Bella and Race had to be careful not to be knocked down as they rushed to alight Hasame's Rim, Ubu by their side. Solo reached into his left boot and retrieved four dosages of the precious pills.

'Here,' he said, passing them out to the children, swallowing one himself, then fed Ubu by hand. 'Now you must hold on tight,' he said. 'Race, make sure Ubu is between your legs, make him sit.' He clamped the Rim in place and powered it up. The headlamp shot a bright acrid-yellow beam of light onto the rail. They could feel the Rim's vibrating impatience, like a horse on a short rein.

The Rim took off, Ubu falling back into Race's knees. They gripped their T-bars firmly as their bodies jerked backwards. They flew past buildings and Rims, across bridges, and down the tunnels that Solo's earlier journey had taken him on, until he could see the gate-house looming up in front of him. He slowed the vehicle to a crawl, stopping it a few feet from the gate.

'Say nothing, don't move, you must appear to be on Callic, just like all the children back at the library,' he pleaded. 'Bow your heads and make your hands limp.'

He stepped off the Rim and walked to the gate. The same Lairs were there, and they appeared edgy. They examined him through the grill. 'It's you,' the taller one said. 'What is it? Where is Dr Hasame?'

'I have two new Half-lights for the snails, hand-picked by Dr Hasame himself. They are to be slime collectors, apprentices to Lek. Dr Hasame feels Lek is old and needs to pass his knowledge on. These are our best underlings, our prized students. Look at them yourselves. Are they not great examples of our Lair Empire? Are they not proof of the power of Callic Dimension 5?'

The two Lairs followed the direction of Solo's outstretched arm, which was gesturing towards the Rim and the children. 'This is not the way it's done, Half-light. We know when we are to receive new Half-lights,' the shorter one said while removing one of the hoops from over his head. He stood, his screen glaring, looping. The ring started to glow ice-blue in his ugly fingers.

'Are you going to question Dr Hasame's orders again?' Solo blurted out. 'Do you need him to be here with me? Are you crazy? I'll go back and get him.'

The taller one said, 'Wait. No need to get excited.' His screen turned a bilious green, his fingers turning on themselves. 'We will have to see these stinking Half-lights ourselves, check their condition.' The

shorter one started spinning the ice-blue circle around his wrist. 'How is it Half-light, that you are delivering these snail workers? Hasame always performs this task.'

'He is busy with the Master, preparing Callic that will give you freedom. Callic that will change the Lair Empire.' The Lairs looked at each other. The shorter one stopped rotating the ring, and it came to an abrupt stop on his wrist, its colour fading.

'Let's see these Half-lights. Bring them through.'

The taller one slipped into the gatehouse and pressed the control button. The gates opened.

'Well, go on, get them and bring them through. Let's see these snail slime collectors, Lek's successors.' There was fierceness in the smaller one's voice.

'I've never known a Half-light to operate a Rim,' the smaller one said to his companion. 'It's not acceptable. What is our Empire coming to?'

'He was here with Hasame only last shift. I'm not ready to be squeezed by him again. Do you want to risk that? To have Hasame's venom and anger wrapped around your damaged body? I know I don't. What's the matter? They can't go far. Only into the snail cages. If it's not right, at least we will know where they are. Let's look after us for a change. Be clever. Avoid Hasame's anger'

'I suppose you are right. As you say, where can they go? Let the snails have them for company. Besides, I don't want to get too close to them; they stink. Foul-breathed animals that they are.'

Solo returned to the Rim. Bella and Race had their heads bent low, their bodies limp, obediently following Solo's request. He powered up the Rim and cruised through the gates only to be waved on by the two Lairs. Ubu snarled at them as the Rim slid by.

Down the causeway they travelled and the smog parted to reveal patches of the blue above the open walls, until the entrance and the blackness that invaded the Rim and its occupants swallowed them up. Before Solo knew it, he was at the second gate, its bars illuminated by the Rim's headlamp. The keypad panel dimly lit the wall.

'This is so scary, Solo, so dark. Those Lairs, have you met them before?' Race and Ubu had crept forward on the Rim, huddling closer. The two children groped for each other's hands. 'Bella, are you okay?'

'Yes, Race, I'm okay. Did you see the sky, before? It's as Carroll Shanks said. I want to go back. I want to see the sky.'

‘You must be quiet,’ Solo said. He seemed anxious. ‘And it’s not as you have been told. Carroll Shanks doesn’t care for your well-being. He is a puppet of the Lairs. He feeds you to them to save his own skin. Now be quiet while I think.’

Solo had his eyes shut, trying to reconstruct Hasame’s combination in his mind. He pushed randomly at the keys. They refused to oblige. The gate stayed shut. He selected many combinations, his fingers poking, prodding away at the keypad with no success. He was becoming frustrated; the only sound was that of his own manic stabbings. His voice added a kind of mad harmony to his efforts. ‘Come on, open, open.’ Still the gate stood obstinately shut, stubborn to Solo’s failing fingers. ‘Open up!’ he screamed.

‘You are frightening us Solo,’ Bella said. ‘It’s too dark in here. We want to go back. I can hardly see you. We should go back.’

‘You can’t go back, don’t you understand. We have to get through this gate. Hasame will kill us all if he catches us. There is no other way but through this gate.’ A desperate edge clung to Solo’s words.

‘We are hungry and cold. We need to have a drink.’ Race said. Solo could hear the deterioration in Race’s voice. It sounded tired. It struggled to cut the thick stale air.

He renewed his attempt to break the code with countless combinations of numbers, until his fingers hurt and sweat trickled down his forehead, across his brow into his eyes, sending him into a frustrated rage. He slumped against the wall, slid down on to his backside and pulled his legs up to his chest, and dropped his head to his knees, and cried.

‘I’m sorry,’ he sobbed. ‘I’m so sorry. I thought I could show you the sky, the earth, the trees. I know where it is, and it’s just beyond this damned gate,’ he blubbered.

The two children left the Rim and went to his side. They hugged the slumped body and wept with him.

‘Solo, we must go back or we will die in here anyway. Dr Hasame could forgive you. He needs you for your solutions.’ Solo laughed an ironic laugh in between his sobs. ‘He doesn’t need any Half-light now. I’ve given him the formulas to the Callic that I developed. He will find us and mutilate us, before casting our broken bodies down the Chute. I’ve seen what they do. They enjoy pulling us apart.’

The Rim’s headlamp cut through the bars, mocking their situation, casting long dense shadows up the tunnel floor. Ubu was whining,

pacing up and down at the gate, and pushing his snout through the gap where the bottom bar met the floor. He started to scratch at the floor, his paws frantically trying to dig his way to the other side.

Solo gently pushed aside the draped children, like a blanket from a bed, and got to his feet. The idea of digging their way through struck like lightning.

Ubu lifted his head; his front paws bloody, his tongue hanging from the side of his mouth, wildly panting from the exertion. Solo bent at his knees to inspect, praising the dog's effort with soft, appreciative words. 'Good boy Ubu.' He hadn't achieved much, for all his pains, yet there was a glimmer of hope. Solo stopped the dog from doing any more harm to his heroic paws by placing his arm around the dog's neck. Ubu went rigid and began to whimper. Then he barked: a bark that rumbled from deep inside his canine soul. Solo moved back into the tunnel, collecting Bella and Race. He called Ubu, but the dog refused to budge. Teeth bared, he delivered another loud bark that tapered off into a bone-shattering growl. Then Solo saw what he was growling at. It was a silhouette hobbling its way towards them, like a deformed experiment. It dragged itself closer to the wall, avoiding the Rim's light.

Race's teeth began to knock against themselves. Bella had her head tucked into Solo's chest. The silhouette disappeared. Ubu cowered amongst the troubled troupe. They could hear a scraping sound getting closer and a tinkering of metal.

Solo jumped up and disconnected the Rim. Now in pitch blackness, they heard a spine-chilling, hacking cough, followed by the sound of someone spitting, then banging on the bars of the gate.

Bella was beside herself with fright. Race, too, close to a fit. They pushed harder against each other, trembling, throats dry, holding their breath.

Suddenly, a beam of light punched through the solid air, directly at them. Solo covered his face with the crook of his arm against the blinding light. Ubu bounced across the Rim to the other side of the tunnel, and started howling, snarling, snapping at the gross monster that had found them out. Solo plucked up the courage to confront the threatening torch. 'Who's there? Who are you?' he spluttered, 'Show yourself. We are Half-lights come to work with the snails. I am Solo, with my friends Bella and Race. We come directly from Lair City's Library.'

The light spun around onto Ubu, who yelped and whimpered back to the others, the light trailing behind his rapid retreat.

They heard a rattling as the torch was placed on the floor, revealing a pair of shockingly cracked and swollen feet. They had a sickly purple tinge in the yellow glow. The nails were split and one big toe appeared to be missing. 'Speak to us,' Solo hollered, 'have you no tongue?' There was no answer. 'Of course!' he said aloud. 'Is that you Lek?' Still no reply. 'If it is you Lek, I understand why you don't speak. Hasame stole your tongue. We need your help. We are trying to escape the hellhole of Lair City. We seek your help. Help us Lek. Let us in.'

The monster bent to retrieve his light, its face displayed momentarily in the beam. The children screamed.

'It's okay, children, it's Lek. I know him; he's the head snail-keeper.'

To Solo's relief, the gate slid up into its slot in the tunnel roof. The old Half-light turned to retrace his steps, his light swinging from side to side.

'Quickly, let's go. No, not on the Rim,' Solo said. 'Leave it, hurry. We must catch up to Lek.'

The four of them trotted off after the head snail-keeper, who dragged one leg behind his body, towards the ever-increasing light at the end of the tunnel. Now Bella saw the hunched back of Lek, and his poor condition. They caught up with the head snail-keeper just as he hit the opening. The sky and the air, at first blinding, warmed their chilled and aching bones. The two children walked around each other, their heads tipped back, laughing with joy. 'It's true, there is a sky. Oh thank you Solo,' they chirped, like little birds on the clearest of mornings. 'Oh Solo, it's so beautiful, more beautiful than we could ever have imagined.' They danced and clapped. Ubu ran around them, happy to be part of their game.

Lek now stopped, turned and grunted, waving them to follow. This way, he gestured. Down past the cages that were full of trees and grass and a heavenly smell. The two children took in huge gulps of air, their faces beaming, ecstatic, prattling away to each other. The earth, the sky, drove all fatigue from their young bodies. At last, the old hunchback arrived at a huge cage. Solo recognised it immediately as Mink's cage. Lek opened it with one of his keys at his side and beckoned the four to enter. There they were, in the clearing where Solo and Hasame had been, only the shift before.

Lek removed one of the keys from his key ring. He then kicked away

at the slimy earth until he had bare ground, then he wrote into its soft brown surface, 'You hide here with Mink,' and waved them towards the bush and foliage, locking them in as he left.



Chapter Nine

‘Where’s my Rim?’ Hasame was beside himself with rage. He’d brought a Rim Specialist along to repair what he’d thought was his damaged tandem, only to find it gone.

He marched into the Library from the side entrance, expecting to throttle Mace. Steam was rising out of his voice box. He moved in large deliberate strides, his boots slapping down hard on the library floor. They echoed in the empty vault. It took a moment, such was his anger, to realise the place was empty. Empty of Lairs, empty of children. He slid to a halt, the momentum causing his arms to swing wildly around his body. He wrapped his fingers together, twisting them into a ball, and screamed so loudly the grill on his bowler nearly blew out. ‘MACE! MACE!’

In no time at all he was at the children’s dormitory, flinging the door open. It crashed against the inner wall. His screen turned a violet-rage-red; spots of green popped and pinged, his fingers flayed about.

‘NO!’ he screamed, racing up one side then down the other. The children slowly turned in their beds, oblivious to his ranting. Some of them woke, their eyes immune to Hasame’s volatile condition. ‘MACE!’ he screamed again, now realising two beds lay empty. He flung himself towards the plug-in room, smashing the door down with the full force of his weight. The door slid across the room, splintering against the far wall.

Mace lay on his bench, plugged in. Farg lay flat, contorted on the floor. One leg bent back under his body in a most unnatural way. He lay in a pool of oily substance, his screen cracked and out of commission. Farg’s fingers were deep inside the opened voice box. His coat was open, fanned out, stained and stiff. Hasame stepped over his lifeless body, kicking at Farg’s one good leg. Hasame’s fingers shot forward at

enormous speed, preceding his body by a good yard. They anchored around Mace's screen, pulling him from the table. He bounced across the floor, cables and tubes making a tearing sound as they were ripped from the wall. Oil spewed from the gashes in the wall created by their sudden removal. It was like an animal bleeding, seeping down the wall onto the floor. Hasame snatched at the snaking pipes and dragged Mace through the greasy fluid, yelling a tirade of undecipherable words.

Mace's screen rolled into consciousness, hissed and crackled. Hasame pulled Mace to his feet. The Head Director, hatless, stood wobbly and dazed. The tubes, like dred-locks, whipped across his screen. His fingers, which had disappeared up the cuffs of his coat, now timidly explored the frigid air, reached towards his top plate, grabbing at the tubes with surprise. He tried to unscrew the couplings. Hasame slapped Mace's searching fingers aside.

'I shall terminate your useless body. I shall pull you apart finger by finger, then toe by toe, and feed them to those neglected Half-lights. Curse your stupid screen.' Hasame whacked at it with a fury Mace had never known.

'Where is Solo? Where is my tandem? There are two children missing! Explain all this to me. You are the Head Director here. You will pay with your being!' Hasame seemed to have no interest in Farg's demise. He was frantically pushing and hitting Mace around his stomach area. 'You'd better have the answers. Right now!'

Mace was still trying to disengage the tubes attached to his head. At last, he succeeded, as Hasame's blows bent him double. The tubes flopped to the floor with a dull plop.

'My hat,' he squirmed, 'I need my hat.' Hasame's fingers darted past Mace's screen to where his hat hung, jammed it down hard across the top plate. He screwed it on the gibbering Lair, twisting his screen almost off his shoulders. Mace let out a loud cry of pain as Hasame booted him in the thigh.

'Where is Solo? Which two children are missing?' He had Mace cornered up against the wall. 'And where is my tandem?'

'It will be those special two that are missing, they were burnt ones. I could sense it. I was about to have them put to the Chute. They smelt bad. Solo is all rotting flesh to me. I hate him. You are the one that's been protecting him. And your tandem I know nothing about.'

Hasame paused for a moment, moved a step back. He appeared to

be mulling over Mace's words. 'But how did they escape from your care? Right from under your screen?'

'Solo must have them at his apartment. You gave him too much freedom.'

'Freedom?' Hasame shouted, 'what would you know about freedom? Your days of freedom are finished.'

'Well, why did you give him that foul creature, that dog for companionship? They have been inseparable, Doctor.'

'You have lost control of your position. You are incompetent. Useless to the great Lair Empire. I'll have to make an example of you. So other Lairs understand the punishment for not doing the Master's work. The children from the Under-city are all burnt now and will have to be cast down the Chute. It's a waste of many shifts, good Lair energy.'

Mace's screen looped erratically as Hasame's fingers felt for the tubes that lay amongst the oil on the floor. They rose as his fingers retracted, squeezing the rubber hosing.

'What about Farg? Why has he perished? Why?'

'He was defending the stinking Half-light and his dog. He was encouraging them to rebel against the Master. He had fused, so I had no choice.'

'So you terminated him?' Hasame's words were measured, cold, deliberate. He was tapping the tubing against his own leg.

'I did what I had to do, what any reasonable Lair would do.'

Hasame lashed out, without warning, at the side of Mace's screen. Mace lifted his fingers to protect himself. He was too late, the hosing crashed into the boxing sending Mace tumbling to the floor with a deafening thunder. His screen was coming apart at its joins, his hat rolled on its edge, swamped by the oil that now covered the rest of the room. Sparks flew like fireflies as Mace's body convulsed, splashing puddles of oil over Hasame's boots. He re-attached the tubes to Mace's top plate, dragged him, his legs still in spasm, by the rubber hosing, head first. A trail of oil littered the floor towards the front steps of the library, leaving Mace's body convulsing on the one spot, slowly expiring.

Hasame descended the steps and walked along Data into Library Lane, returning with the Rim Specialist who had a length of rope swung over his shoulder. Together they returned to Mace who was struggling for life where he had been dumped.

'Sling the rope over that lintel' Hasame said. The Rim Specialist did

as he was told, with one easy movement; the rope whistled its way across the beam.

The Specialist worked at the knots with expert hands, his fingers moving as knitting needles to complete a stitch. ‘Now hoist him up,’ Hasame ordered. The Specialist heaved on the rope until Mace was upright, dangling a foot or so above the ground. He was in a bad way, but still alive. The Specialist tied the rope off around a column. A small crowd of Lairs gathered. They stood transfixed by Mace’s treatment. The crowd grew quickly, Rims coming to a stand-still, creating the impossible – a traffic jam in Lair City.

‘You see this Lair? Take a good look at him. He has failed the Master. He has failed you all. He has failed this great City. He has murdered one of his own. He has murdered Farg.’

The Lairs called out in unison: ‘To the chute, to the chute.’

‘No,’ said Hasame, ‘That would be too good for this Lair. ‘No, he will stay here for you all to see.’

Hasame ordered Mace’s gloves to be removed, and his boots pulled off. His strange worm-like digits, opaque, hung as sausages in a butcher’s window. He grabbed a pair of tin cutters from the Specialist and proceeded to clip Mace’s fingers and toes off. A minute groan leaked from somewhere inside Mace’s head. The fingers and toes fell on top of each other, some bouncing and rolling down the steps, landing at the feet of the gathering crowd. The Lairs visibly frightened by Hasame’s power.

Mace’s time had indeed come. He had been left as a scarecrow, a symbol – a warning to all other Lairs, that Dr Hasame was judge, jury and executioner.

Hasame re-entered the Library and, together with the Specialist, cast each poor, demented Half-light, one by one, down the Chute.

He locked the main doors to the Library from inside and left by the side entrance, locking that from the outside. He stepped onto the Specialist’s Rim and they disappeared down Library Lane, out onto Data Street.



Chapter Ten

Solo had led Bella, Race and Ubu only a short distance into the foliage. They could see through to the clearing from under the little campsite they'd made, next to a tree trunk that rose well beyond their vision, into the sensed rather than seen blue sky. Ubu was fossicking around in the undergrowth.

'Where are we, Solo?' Bella asked. She was rubbing her hand along the bark of a tree. Race had his hands in the mulch-rich soil. It fell through his opened fingers. Both the children's eyes were bright and alive.

'You are in a snail cage,' Solo replied.

'What's a snail cage?' Race inquired.

'It's where the Lairs keep snails. Two snails live in here. Mink and her partner. I haven't met Mink's partner but I have met Mink.'

'Will we see Mink?' Race wanted to know.

'Most likely, but I can't say for sure. I don't know how large the cage is or where they are. Lek would know, but he can't talk. He has no tongue.' The children shuddered.

'Solo, we're hungry and thirsty.'

'I know, so am I and Ubu as well. We should rest now, then we will find some food.' The three humans were exhausted. Solo called for Ubu. He trotted back to them and sat next to the two children.

'Ubu is so wonderful,' Bella said as her eyes fluttered, blinked, then closed. She was asleep. It wasn't long before Race and Solo too, were overwhelmed by tiredness.

Solo woke to Ubu snarling and growling, his head pointing towards the clearing. He heard the cage door being unlocked, and crawled on his belly to get a better look.

A small Half-light was letting himself in, one hand holding a carry

bag, while the other closed the door. From a distance, he looked like any child Half-light, but as he walked across the clearing, Solo's face took on a startled expression.

The child's complexion had a violet hue, his hair falling out, much the same as Lek's, and he walked with bowed legs, bare-footed. His hands, up to the wrists, and his feet to the ankles, were black. He wore no top and his chest displayed a myriad of pus-filled sores. Callic filled his eyes. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and hollered. Race and Bella now awoke to Ubu's snarling.

'Sssh, Ubu, it's okay,' Solo whispered, putting his arm around the dog's neck. He gave a little bark and quieted down. Race and Bella had crawled up to see what Solo and Ubu were spying on.

The Half-light stood there holding up the bag in front of his face.

'Oi, oi,' he called. He now placed it at his feet and stepped back into the sunlight that bathed the clearing.

'By Jingo, Bella, that's Delpha. Remember? We were jealous of him being transcended before us? Delpha,' Race called out, 'It's us, Bella and Race.' Race was getting to his feet to go to meet the boy. "No, it can't be, Race," Bella said, "Delpha was so handsome.'

'It is, Bella, I tell you, it's Delpha.' Solo put a hand up to stop Race from revealing their cover. 'No Race, wait.' Race called out once more. 'Delpha!'

Delpha did not respond to Race's recognition. He stood there patting the bag, repeating, 'Oi, oi.'

'It's Delpha, Solo, we know him.'

"You used to know him Race, but Delpha is not Delpha any more. He is a slime collector. A product for the Lairs' needs. He collects slime to make Callic Dimension 5 and I'm afraid he will not recognise you. The snail slime has poisoned his body.'

Delpha opened his mouth, full of rotten teeth, and called for the last time, 'Oi, oi,' turning his back on the hidden group. They saw that his ears were rotting from the side of his head and his back had the same crusty sores. He let himself out and locked the cage, moving out of sight, obscured by the foliage.

Solo worked his way close to the edge of the undergrowth and pushed Lek's long wooden pole out towards the bag, catching it with the loops. He tried to lift it, but the fulcrum was wrong, the bag too heavy. He rushed out, grabbed it like a frightened animal and threw himself back under the cover of the bush, panting from the effort,

and dropped the bag at the base of the tree. They all gathered around it, Ubu's head now inside the opening. Solo pulled him away and cautiously peered inside.

He fell back laughing. Race and Bella, unsure of his behaviour, looked at each other. Race let out a chuckle, then Bella did too. Before long they were all rolling around the undergrowth, laughing. 'Oh it hurts,' Race said holding his stomach, tears of laughter running down his face; it was like some mad circus act. Ubu joined in, bouncing all over the hysterical scene. Their laughter slowly receded into spasms of giggles and snorts. Silence eventually returned. Their chests heaving, mouths gulping for air. The children found themselves lost for reasons why such an emotion could move them to such happiness, to such an infectious response to Solo's laughter.

'The bag has food and water,' Solo said, trying to regain his breath. 'Have a look. See for yourselves.' Race reached out for the bag. With a pained expression on his face, he rummaged through the bag like a desperate fox, removing the contents piece by piece on to the forest floor. Bella's mouth began to salivate. Her eyes followed each item to the ground. She was crying now, tears of relief. She could feel the hole in her stomach that needed to be replenished.

'Go ahead, eat and drink' Solo cried. 'We are being looked after. Your wishes have come true.'

Race tore at the wrapping that covered the dark chunks of compressed meat. He broke off pieces and passed it to his companions. Ubu's vanished in seconds then he raised his head, licking his teeth, with ears pricked, waiting for more.

'Oh, it's very salty,' Bella said. Race just kept breaking pieces off.

'I don't care, I'm so hungry.'

Solo now passed around a container of water, to the sound of chomping and slapping of lips.

'It's good. What is it Solo?'

'I don't know, but it fills the space,' he said with a heavy, silent suspicion that it was snail meat dried and compressed. 'And Bella is right, it is very salty.'

'What is in the other packets?' Solo asked.

With his starvation appeased, Race now quietly opened another wrapped parcel. A dozen or so yellow-orange-coloured balls rolled like marbles across the ground, coming to rest against Bella's splayed legs. She gasped with glee. 'You try one first Bella!' Race picked one up

and held it out to her in the palm of his hand. She took it and bit into it. Liquid splashed out in a fine spray. Juice seeped from the corners of her mouth. The delight spread to her eyes as she tried to talk with a mouth full of the delicious fruit.

‘Mmm,’ she said as she broke the little seeds with her teeth. ‘It’s wonderful, so sweet.’ They were all tucking into them now, Ubu swallowing his whole.

The sun filtered through the branches. They sat in a patchwork of shadow and light. Race and Bella, without a care in the world, their tummies full, stretched out amongst the undergrowth, earth and trees, soaked it up like snakes on a hot rock. But Solo knew better. It was just a matter of time before the Lairs would track them down.

‘We can’t stay here,’ he said. ‘The Lairs will find us. We have to move deeper into the forest. Hasame will know where to come and he won’t come alone. They don’t like it here, yet they will still come and they won’t stop till they have us.’ Solo was packing up what was left of their feast when he heard the gate open again. Across the clearing, he could see Lek dragging his leg towards them, his hunch like a boulder balanced on his back. Solo walked out to meet the snail-keeper.

‘Hello, Lek!’ The old snail-keeper nodded. He cleared the ground as he had done before and scratched the words: ‘they after you’ into the dry dirt. ‘Will they be here soon?’ Solo asked. Lek nodded, and wrote, ‘hide back cage.’

‘Thank you old man,’ Solo said. He went to give him back his wooden pole, but the old snail-keeper waved him away.

‘Go, go,’ he wrote. He then wiped away the messages with his disfigured foot. The two Half-lights, aware of the impending danger, looked at each other.

‘Good bye Lek, we will always be in your debt.’ The hunchback scurried away, his bad leg dragging behind. He took one last look at Solo, and then locked the gate, disappearing from sight. Solo found the children watching from the underbrush with Ubu at their side.

‘Come, we must go,’ Solo said, slinging the bag over his shoulder. ‘They know.’ As they went deeper into the covered world of the snails, they passed many clearings much the same as the one at the cage door. Slime tracks could be seen oozing this way and that across the forest openings. Solo made sure Bella and Race did not step in them. The sun was getting low and a chill accompanied the darkening sky. All three of them amazed at the variety of leaf and fern. Ubu went every

which way, always returning, crossing their path, in and out of the dense bush, head to the ground smelling his way to the next clump of interest.

Solo realised Bella and Race needed to rest, and made his mind up to stop at the next clearing. It was getting more difficult to make their way through the forest. The trees were crowding closer together, the interlocking branches creating a maze for our travellers to duck and weave their way through. It was tiring work; more than once the bag Solo was carrying snagged on the limbs. The kids too were having trouble, their coats caught and torn, their boots also getting a battering under their weight. At last, Solo could see a new clearing. His back was painful from all the crouching and bending to avoid his head getting caught in the branches. He had long since removed his hat, and tucked it into the carry bag, tired of it being knocked off. 'We'll stop here,' he said, with weariness in his voice. Bella and Race collapsed to the ground, their legs like jelly, their mouths like sandpaper. Solo passed around the water bottle. Night was setting in, the air cool, fast becoming cold.

They gathered together. Ubu arrived finally to make the group whole. Even he seemed happy for the rest, flopping down, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

'The light's going. We will have to stay here till it returns. It will be just as hard for the Lairs to find us in this darkness as it would be for us to go on,' Solo said. 'We should be safe for a while.' He produced the last of his pills from his bootleg and handed them around. Bella and Race rejected the offer. Solo looked closely into their eyes. 'Yes, perhaps you are right,' he said, and threw the pills into the night, knowing their instinct for survival had returned. A deep feeling of happiness welled up from inside his heart, creasing the edges of his mouth. He moved over to the children and held them tight against his body. Bella said, 'it's so cold.' Race agreed. 'Yes it's cold, Solo,' his teeth clenched tight.

The group huddled together trying to sleep, but the cold made it impossible to relax. They could see a scattering of jewels in the sky, winking through the tops of the trees. A breeze ruffled the leaves. Solo was fingering the feather in his pocket, like a talisman. He pulled it out, spinning it in his fingers, as Bella and Race managed to finally drop off to sleep. He wrapped his coat around their precious bodies after encouraging Ubu to nestle in amongst their fitful dreams.

Solo woke them at first light, offering the last of the food and water. They were sore and achy, stiff from the previous day's labour and the cold night's sleep. In silence they ate. The children shuddered when Solo retrieved his coat. Ubu stretched, shook his pelt and yawned, his teeth pearly white in the dawning light.

'Do you have the feather?' Race asked.

'Yes, it's in my pocket.'

'Can we see it again, touch it?'

'Of course,' Solo replied, taking it from its snug hiding place. Bella cupped her hands to receive it. Solo placed it there as if it were the most precious object in the Universe. Race slid up next to Bella. 'Let me hold it too, Bella.' She tipped her cupped hands and the feather floated into Race's upturned palms.

'You'll have to tell me where and how you found the feather,' Solo said. The words went over their heads. They seemed hypnotised by the colour, which glowed with an unearthly blue hue. Ubu too was transfixed. He stood close, rigid, his hair on end. Solo felt a little envious, seeing the feather glow in their hands as it had never done for him.

'The feather knows you,' he said. 'It glows in your hands.' Race, now distracted by his words, came around. 'What's that you say Solo?'

'Never mind. You'll have to tell me one day, how you got the feather.'

'Yes, we will,' Race said mindlessly.

Slowly, the feather started to vibrate and the intensity of its colour increased until it became transparent. Then, the most astonishing thing happened. It levitated from Race's palms into mid-air, as if it had a life of its own. It hovered for all of them to see, then tumbled back into Bella's outstretched hands, its brilliant hue fading back to its original colour. 'I think you should give it back to me,' Solo said, 'just for safe keeping. I know it responds to you both and the time will come when it will be yours to understand, but for now, I'd better protect it.' They passed it back to Solo, who wished for a second he could make the feather come to life. Just then, they heard the snapping sound of branches. 'Get down,' Solo implored. Each of their hearts jumped a beat. Each had fear in their eyes. Ubu understood, jumping a fallen log and hiding low with the other travellers. They watched as Mink slid into the clearing, followed by her partner, who was even more impressive in size. His head swivelled to and fro amongst the

tall ferns, foraging. His shell was enormous and had the same pattern as Mink's, perhaps a tad darker. They circumnavigated the clearing, nibbling at the ferns, leaving a track of ooze, a yellow brownish slime, in their wake.

The first rays of sunlight tipped the higher treetops, pushing back the long cold night. The clearing took on a life of its own. The snails disappeared back into the undergrowth to the sound of snapping branches and ferns, back into the camouflage of the forest.

'By jingoes,' Race said. 'Was that Mink?'

'Yes, and her partner. Let's get to the side of the clearing and warm up a bit.' They had all forgotten how cold they were, with the excitement of seeing the snails. The sun was warm. Solo, who had suffered the most without protection or coat, and felt his bones might shatter, appreciated the warmth the most. He stood with his head held high, arms wide as if greeting a long lost friend.

'We will have to keep moving. We have to find the back of the cage. That's where Lek told us to go.'

'Can we stay here for a little longer, please, to warm up some more?' Bella pleaded.

'Well, for a short time,' Solo replied.



Chapter Eleven

‘Where are they?’ Hasame was shouting. He had hold of Lek by what hair he had left, smashing his head against the wire cage. The sound, retreating along its length, as a wave echoes along a beach.

‘We know they have been here, you stinking Half-light. We found my tandem at the Jaw Gate, just inside the tunnel. I will pull your eyes out next, you filth.’ Hasame had his disgusting fingers jammed into Lek’s eye sockets. His screen was looping wildly, his voice box at a deafening volume.

Hasame was standing with a half dozen other Lairs, all of them covered and taped. They carried the ice-blue rings across their shoulders and had prodding wands tucked in their boots. They stood silent, while Hasame interrogated the old snail-keeper. The poor Half-light moaned as his head bounced off the wire fencing, awful noises coming from his tongue-less mouth.

‘Kart, go get me two slime collectors. Bring them back here; I’ll get this filth to show us.’ Kart moved off at an extraordinary pace down the gridded path. He returned with Delpha and another slime collector, both in the same horrendous state of slow rotting from the outside in. Lek had a terrified look on his face but the two slime collectors were unaware of the impending danger. Their eyes were glazed from Callic. Hasame threw Lek to the ground in one violent movement. His rotting flesh peeling away as he slid across the concrete path. Hasame seized the nearest child and flung him against the cage. He hit it with a thud, and a moment of recognition flashed across the slime collector’s eyes. Hasame’s cruel fingers rotated and sprung like spears into his rotting mouth to rip his tongue out in one outrageous brutal, savage movement. He held it high above his screen as the poor Half-light crumbled down the wire into a foetal position onto the hard path.

Blood spilled between his tar-black fingers, which searched vainly for his missing tongue. The other Lairs, unmoved, passively looked on, untroubled by Hasame's madness. He turned to display the pulsating lump of flesh to them. He then tossed it at Lek, who now had perched himself on all fours, scrambling towards the demented Lair's feet, groping at his legs, a pleading expression filled his face. Hasame had Delpha now, against the snail cage, about to rip another tongue from its socket. The slime collector, incapable of holding his own weight, was pinned like a rag doll.

Lek was nodding and pointing towards Mink's cage, making a gurgling sound, desperately trying to catch Hasame's attention. He let go of Delpha, who collapsed in a heap next to his tongue-less mate. He had wet his pants, a puddle of urine stinging his feet.

Hasame kicked Lek squarely in the face, sending him backwards into the opposite cage. Hasame's fingers extended the distance in a flash, pulling Lek's keys from his belt.

'We have to put on better screen protectors if we are to go in there,' Kart said flatly. 'We won't survive in this sunlight even with the cover of the forest.'

'We don't have that luxury, you fool.'

'Where can they go? They're inside a snail cage.'

'They got this far! They could make it to the Desert of Circles! Do you want to go there?'

The Lairs started checking their tapings, checking their protective sheets for reassurance. They weren't happy. Their screens showed it, but they were more afraid of Hasame than the sunlight, so they followed him into the cage.

'I'll be back for you, Lek,' he shouted through the wire. 'You will never see your snails again. Your eyes are mine.' The old snail-keeper, now tending to his slime children, battered and broken, wept.

Inside the cage the Lairs moved slowly. You could smell the fear they had of tearing their screen protectors or getting their taped cuffs snagged on a branch. Hasame herded them forward. They looked awkward, robotic, in the dappled environment of tree fern and earth. They crossed the clearing, to be swallowed up by the alien world, a world so different to Lair City, with its smog, permanent night and humming machines.

It was the blind leading the blind. They tagged each other, like a line of caterpillars ready to go where the front caterpillar ventured. 'This

is no good,' Kart moaned, 'We should wait for them at the entrance. They'll die for want of water and food in here.'

Hasame stopped in his tracks. 'They must be found. Now!' The sharp edge to his viciousness somehow dampened in the lush undergrowth. 'If they escape, I will hold you all responsible. You have no idea how important it is to the Master that we bring them back. He personally wants to crack their foul minds open. I'm under strict orders to do this. To bring them to him. The Lair Empire has never had one human Half-light escape. The next time I hear you put your stupid ideas forward, I'll kill you. Now, shut up and let's go get them.' They walked the trails that Mink and her partner had made, slime dripping from their jackboots.

* * * * *

They travelled through the heat of the day, taking short rests. Solo urged them on, knowing the Lairs to be close; at least on their trail somewhere inside the snail cage. He wanted to make it to the back of the cage before night returned and stopped their progress. He held on to Lek's drawn words: 'hide, back cage.' His charges stumbled, hungry, their clothes tattered; he himself was in not much better shape.

He could feel the earth incline. They were now walking a rise, and the forest started to thin, without trace of fern and bush. A hot, arid breeze filled the air, making breathing difficult. They laboured to make it to the crest. The children, silent and bent, leaned into their work, heads bowed. Ubu was first to the summit, followed by Solo. He stood, struggling to keep his footing, as a howling wind hit him like a furnace, taking his breath away. He quickly retreated below the rim and lay flat on his stomach. Race and Bella struggled up, collapsing on either side of him. A whistling sound flew over their heads, as Solo turned his head, to retrace their steps and to look at the lure of the forest behind them. 'The back of the cage is over the top,' he said. What he saw made his heart miss a beat. A barren landscape stretched, parched and burnt, arid for some distance before the end of the cage could be reached. There was no shelter or forest to hide in, just open sand to the end along its boundary as far as the eye could see. No place to hide from the Lairs. He felt trapped, isolated, vulnerable. He feared he had signed his and the children's death warrants. He buried his head in his hands to hold back his tears, his failure. Ubu tunnelled under his armpit and licked his ear, nuzzling towards his face.

‘What is it, Solo?’ Race managed to squeak. Bella lay prone, incapable of speech.

‘We must go back into the forest for the night. It’s too exposed. We will be seen up here. Tomorrow, in the new day, we will find a way.’ His words, hardly convincing, dropped listlessly from his mouth.

The children, too exhausted to enquire further, dragged themselves down the slope into the forest behind them. They found a small clearing a short distance inside. It wasn’t the best cover, but it would do for now. They collapsed into a heap together, too tired to think of food or water. The sun, getting low over the tree tops, struggled to warm their bodies in the oncoming dusk. Bella dreamed of Powerflower. Solo dozed fitfully. Ubu whimpered in his broken sleep. Race was dead to the world.

* * * * *

The Lairs moved from clearing to clearing. Hasame, obsessed with his mission, fearing the wrath of his Master, whipped his marshals along at a quicker pace than Solo and the children had managed. They discovered the first campsite that Solo and the children had made the night before. Finding it made Hasame’s determination stronger. He promised rewards, promotion to the Lair that first found the Half-lights. They increased their pace, hunting down their prey, moving in the twilight into the dark until it was impossible to go on. Their screens stood out, glowing, looping in the evening air. Even Hasame agreed to Kart’s reasoning that they had to make camp for the night. They stood around in a tight circle, without a plug-in room. There was no place to sleep to recharge their monstrous lives.

‘They’re not far ahead now. Stinking filth, I can smell them,’ Hasame claimed. ‘Remember, we need them alive for the Master,’ he said.

Kart ventured to ask about the Master. ‘Is he like us Doctor?’

Hasame’s screen flashed in the night momentarily, then settled. If the children or Solo were closer, they would have died of fright. ‘No Kart, he is not like us. He is a God. He is the most magnificent creature on this planet. All-powerful, all-knowing. He knows where we are right now. This space we occupy. What we are thinking, how much we adore him. There is no other higher in the Universe. He has plans for us Lairs and Lair City that will astound you all.’

The Lairs listened in awe, little sounds of approval seeping from their voice boxes.

‘Will we ever see our Master?’ Kart asked.

‘Yes, all of Lair City and its inhabitants will soon feel and see his presence. He plans to walk amongst us sooner than you imagine. To lead through example, to wear the proud uniform of Lairs, just as yourselves are uniformed, to plug in amongst you. This he will do when we have the stinking Half-lights – especially the traitor Solo.’ Solo’s name came out of Hasame’s voice box as if he were spitting out poison.

‘We will track them down before first light.’

* * * * *

Solo was worried. He awoke as night deepened, and paced around the small clearing, racking his mind for their next move. What he had seen and felt on the mound frightened him. So alien, so vast and open. The wind’s howling voice bit at the edges of his mind. And, unlike the Lairs, they needed food and water. His fingers traced the edges of the feather in his pocket. At least the air was warmer, coming across the hill to make their lives slightly more comfortable than the night before. The children slept fitfully on.

Solo wanted to explore their situation. A part of him wanted to retrace their steps to see how close the Lairs were, another wanted to climb the hill and move across the desert-like terrain to the back of the cage and understand what lay beyond. He decided on the back of the cage. He called out to Ubu to follow, and together they climbed the rise. He was expecting the same hurricane at its top and was totally surprised to find it still. They stood together looking out over the arid landscape that glistened in a star-studded night. The gradient was much easier on the far side. The two of them set off at a trot, across the undulating surface towards the wire fence that sparkled, shimmered as they got closer. He was relieved that it was nearer than it had seemed. Sweat trickled down his brow. He savoured its wetness in his mouth. They arrived at the cage’s end with a somewhat lightened heart. But soon his joy was tempered by reality. Where to from here, even if they were to make it? Ubu paced the edge, head down amongst the dry sand. Solo stood, hands holding the grill, staring out into the void. He pulled and shook at its unyielding tight mesh. He had thought perhaps they could climb it, but realised the impossibility, and they had Ubu. Dogs don’t climb. His frustration was profound. He was staring down at his feet when his eyes nearly popped out of his head. He rubbed

them, hardly believing what he saw. ‘Ubu, Ubu,’ he said. ‘How? What? Ubu, look at you.’ Ubu was on the other side of the cage, leaping up, his paws poking through the gridded cage, with a bark that sounded to Solo like laughter.

He ran up the side of the cage calling his dog. It was comical, not knowing how to get to Ubu. Solo went one way, then the other, until at last he found it, a break in the wire large enough for a dog to get through. Reunited with Ubu again, he took his hat off and jammed it into the wire frame. ‘Come on Ubu, we must get Bella and Race. You’re such a great dog Ubu. Come on boy.’ And they set off again back the way they had come.

Solo and Ubu reached the summit just before dawn. Solo stood still for a moment, looking back towards the forest. He noticed the square glow of Lair screens moving towards their camp. They were spread out as if they were lanterns hung for a special occasion. Unfortunately, they were moving. Moving towards where Solo had left his beautiful children.

He moved as he had never before moved, his feet barely touching the ground, to the camp, with Ubu some distance ahead of him.

He woke Bella first, his hand over her mouth and a finger to his own, then he woke Race in the same fashion. They were groggy and scared by his actions. He whispered that they must go, go NOW! He pointed into the undergrowth and it was then that they too, saw the chilling light of the screens, stalking them, fanned out in a semi-circle.

‘Quickly,’ he said, ‘to the hill.’ They were just on their feet when the first Lair broke through the cover. Ubu pounced, gnawing at his leg. The Lair was reaching for the side of his boot, when Ubu attacked his hand wildly, excitedly, snarling. The clapping sound of his teeth was loud as Ubu ripped away the Lair’s limb. The Lair went berserk, thrashing out his other hand, trying to retrieve it. The camp erupted into chaos.

‘Run, children, run,’ Solo screamed. ‘To the hill.’ He swung Lek’s wooden pole in an arc, connecting with the distraught Lair’s hat, knocking it off the Lair’s head. The Lair crumbled to the ground, making the most unearthly sound.

Another Lair stepped through into the clearing, confused at sensing his friend’s condition. His fingers were in the process of expanding, shooting out to wrap themselves around Solo’s neck, when he too emitted an ear-piercing scream. Ubu had pounced, sprung in mid-air

to grab his extended fingers, savaging them from his wrist. Solo's pole struck at the same time at the newcomer's legs. The two Lairs writhed on the ground like spinning tops set in action.

Bella and Race were now halfway up the hill. Solo and Ubu turned on their heels to follow. From over his shoulder, Solo could hear Hasame's voice screaming, demented, hysterical.

Kart was the closest to them as they fled up the incline towards the children. 'Keep going,' Solo yelled, 'Run, run for your lives.' He saw them disappear over the rim of the hill, as Kart was upon him. The Lair had nothing but evil intent. Kart's strides quickened and his fingers shot forth at deadly speed, wrapping themselves around Solo's calf, bringing him to the ground with a solid thud. Ubu turned, his eyes manic, snarling. The Lair, distracted, twisting to confront the flying Ubu, had his screen torn as the first beam of sunlight penetrated the fleeting night sky. He stood like a statue, puzzled. His head wobbled on his shoulders before a banshee scream escaped his hat. His fingers snapped back like elastic towards his screen, leaving Solo grovelling in the sand. Shards of plastic and hosing exploded across the arid field.

Solo crawled hand over foot to the rise, rolling and tumbling down the decline towards the children, who lay paralysed at the foot of the hill. Ubu pranced over the top as Hasame's bowler hat met the skyline, followed by what was left of his troupe.

Solo gathered Bella and Race in a single movement, backing them away from the posse that seemed reluctant to pursue them across the desert-like vista. Hasame howled out Solo's name, cursing the Half-light's parentage.

They kept backing away, facing the Lairs on the hill. It was a stand-off. Hasame whacked another Lair in the back, sending the poor creature down the slope towards the group. But it was a lacklustre Lair that regained his footing. Turning to stare back at Hasame, the Lair took a few steps forward, then stopped again, turning to look back at the other Lairs. Ubu growled, snapping. The Lair cowered, and took a few retreating steps. Hasame's fingers flashed over the separation to his fellow Lair, and ripped the protective shield from his screen. He shuddered uncontrollably and turned to face his executioner, his own boss, then exploded.

'You won't make it, Half-light. The Desert of Circles will have your bones,' Hasame screamed, as the party of four sped away towards the

back of the cage. They could hear Hasame's voice trailing off as they escaped towards the unknown. The Desert of Circles.

'What is the Desert of Circles?' Race asked.

'I don't know,' Solo replied.

Hasame booted small pieces of Kart down the incline, ill-tempered, unnaturally silent. The two amputees stood perplexed, their stumps held aloft by their one good hand, waiting for their boss and fellow Lairs. Hasame, without acknowledging them, ripped their protective screens from under their hats. He just kept walking without any break in his stride, back into the forest. They were left wailing, crying out. A loud explosion echoed across the arid landscape, towards Solo, Bella, Race and Ubu.