

Chapter 1

I killed three people to get here. Unhooked their karabiners and watched them fall. I fended off five attacks – one from a giant who slammed into me head-on, squeezing the air from my lungs. His hands were too chunky to unclip me first go, and I was too fast to let him try again.

Now I stand at the top alone. Below me, our skyscraper city glitters like a snowflake picked out in a million lights.

I'd never imagined Estrella was this big, this breathtaking, from above. But now I can see the symmetry of it all. The city's skyscrapers radiate from a central tower in eight perfect rows like spokes on a wheel, like the compass points they're named after. They reach into the distance, one hundred towers in every direction, connected by concentric tunnels for trains and pedestrians. And from up here, on top of Central – the midpoint and the tallest

building of all – the whole thing looks more like a giant, frosted web than a star.

Star is a prettier image to sell, I guess. Estrella: the star city. Though most of us call it London Star. Because that's what this place is. Or was. London.

A voice crackles in my earpiece. 'Red 2, you're the last Red in the game. Get your token and get back down to the finish line.'

I don't want to leave – not yet. I need longer to take it all in: the space, the lights, the skyscrapers we call scrapers or towers, and the penthouses that perch on their tops, private pools glistening beneath domed glass roofs. Somewhere there's a penthouse sitting empty: the prize. A Level 1 apartment. Imagine that as an address!

I turn to look at one of the most famous addresses in London Star. The penthouse of the first skyscraper in the South arm: S1/1, the home of my hero, Hoppi Burbeck. Beneath the dome, his huge swimming pool shimmers green and blue, and a large stargazer telescope points down. I'd hoped to see him, but I knew I wouldn't. He doesn't appear in public, and on screen he wears filters for privacy; few people know what he really looks like.

My gaze sweeps over the rows of apartments below Burbeck's home, and I notice how the décor becomes increasingly ordinary as the wealth decreases. Increasingly bland and not as bright. Everything below Level 80 is swallowed by gloom, and the ground at the

very bottom is so black it could be nothingness. Toxic oblivion: a wasteland where no human should go.

‘Red 2. Time is running out.’

The warning voice jolts me into action. I quickly collect the Red token and tug at my abseil rope, tied to Central’s mast. When I’m certain it’s secure, I shuffle backwards and climb over the edge of the roof. Above me, there’s a spray of stars, like a reflection of the city on a black velvet ceiling.

Then *slam!* A Blue has done a running abseil round the underside of the scraper’s lip. They careen into me, sending me spinning out into space then crashing back into the wall. The Red token slips from my grasp, but I manage to catch it, just, and I jam it into my mouth so my hands are free. The Blue is waiting for me to come to a standstill, so he – or she – can unclip me and send me to my death. I don’t stop. Instead, I keep spinning, pushing my feet off the scraper and twisting myself round, feeding out my rope, freefalling through the air.

Through my earpiece, I hear the Blue – a female voice – tell me that I’m in critical danger, that she will help to steady me, and maybe we can do a deal. Become an undercover Blue, she suggests. I don’t trust her. So I keep on falling, out of control, swaying side to side, descending fast. I plummet past windows of warmth and safety – families in their living rooms, gym fanatics in exercise pods, kids in social hubs. My eyes are blurring, but my ears are trained on the Blues’ conversation: they’re

discussing tactics. They're discussing me, and only me.

So I'm the last Red, and my token really counts. If I don't deliver it, the Blues will win.

With uneven teams, I'm easy to pick off – if not here, then down at the finish line on Level 100 – and my guess is they'll be gathered there, watching me descend, ready to attack. The only way to get to the finish line un-ambushed is to come up from underneath. But to do that, I'd have to swing into the danger zone: the mile-high space between the last habitable level of the skyscrapers and the sea of junk below. Level 100 to the ground, known as the Drop.

It's not the greatest idea – and how will I do it without them seeing?

I catch sight of a Bolt Train pipe below – an enclosed train track heading out to Cardiff Grid, or maybe Birmingham Wheel. No matter. This is my only chance.

When my feet next make contact with Central, I push off at a sharp angle, letting the rope stream through my fingers so I'm flying – wild and frightening. I can see them now: three Blues spaced out in a line, just above Level 100. And they're looking up, waiting to catch me in their net. My rope loops around the beam of the Bolt Train pipe and I swing under it like a pendulum, below the last level of city lights and through the darkness. I pray I haven't misjudged it. That I'm not about to hit the rubbish tips.

A warning beep sounds in my ear. That's not good.

I grip the rope hard, lifting my legs. Then I'm on the upswing, and ahead is the end point: a band of green light. All I have to do is touch it. Touch it and I'm through. The Blues spot me and scramble down as fast as they can. But it's too late. I'm there, I'm flying towards the finish line, slamming into it, pressing my token against the beam. It flashes red. It's over.

'You made it, Red 2. Just in time.'

The floor rises, the lights flicker on and the cityscape vanishes, taking my exhilaration with it. Dullness returns, like fog. With a sigh, I unbuckle my harness and exit the game pod. Outside, other players are emerging from theirs, blinking and looking at their unscathed hands, which a minute ago were sore from rope burns.

A young man in a suit appears. He's not one of the big officials, although he'd like to be. His badge says *Damar, StarQuest Marshall*. He flicks open the blades of his razor pad with one hand, fanning out his work screens.

'Good semi-final, everyone?'

Some murmur. Some cheer.

'I'm going to read out four team identifications. Could those who are *not* called please make your way to the changing rooms, as you have not been successful.'

Elimination lights are lit on the helmets of every other person in my team. As the only Red left standing, I know I'm through.

'So, here it is: those going through to the finals are...'
Damar drags the relevant details out from his pad, one

by one, and the pages hang in the air. ‘Red 2, Blue 2, Blue 4, Blue 10. Well done, you four. You’re StarQuest finalists.’ Damar nods approvingly at us and claps his hands, folding his razor pad in the same movement.

The rejects clap dutifully and slink away, muttering about how unfair the game was, how it wasn’t thought through, how someone else should have been eliminated instead of them. And when they’ve gone there is a collective release of tension – spontaneous laughter – and the four of us turn to each other and shake hands. I can’t see much through my gaming helmet but, judging from the height differences, I figure three of us are female. Blue 10 is big – he’s the one who nearly got me; he shakes my hand like he wants to break my bones. I see it for what it is – intimidation, not a greeting. The only reason I’d want to find out who he is, is so I could keep away.

Our identities have been kept secret until now. We’ve played all the other rounds in private heats, sworn to silence to prevent match fixing. But now that we’ve reached the finals, everyone will know our names. Everyone will want to know everything.

‘Will there be media?’ Blue 10. Definitely male.

‘There’ll be coverage. But don’t expect red carpets and designer clothes.’ Damar laughs. ‘This isn’t *The Hunger Games*, you know.’

