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The Liberators

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Chapter One

Blackwood darted through the crowds like lightning, his feet pounding on the pavement, splashing in puddles. The chill of December seared through his bones. Around him the press of people on their Friday shopping trips surged and flowed; a flock of pigeons scattered, startled. Blackwood pushed past an old lady, overturning her trolley. He saw a railing ahead of him, checked behind, and leaped over it in one bound, landing lightly on the other side. It was raining, and he was panting, and he could feel the taste of blood in his mouth, and drops of tangy sweat rolled down his cheeks. The stab wound in his shoulder throbbed. He had been running for half an hour, and he had lost all communication with Hunter, and one of the Liberators was just behind him.

Blackwood's heart thrummed. The crowds parted, and he saw the Liberator – laughing, his hands in his pockets, his long hair blowing in the wind, mouth open

like a dog about to bite; an unholy aura of brightness surrounded him. Blackwood ran faster. Two Acolytes had chased him all the way from Hyde Park, and now here he was, approaching Paddington Station, its bulk looming. How had he let himself get into this mess? He'd been so stupid. But he still had the Koptor, and that was the important thing.

The Acolytes, he thought, he could deal with. He could escape them, outwit them, he was strong, young. But he didn't stand a chance against the Liberator – and then the Koptor would be lost, and then . . . He couldn't let that happen. He sent up a prayer, and sped across a road, diving over a car bonnet, stumbling a little, but picking himself up and carrying on. A gust howled over him, making his coat billow out; he threw it off, and it floated away, like a strange bird.

The object he clutched was glowing and humming. It was too precious to lose; it was the only thing that could stop the Liberators. Blackwood gritted his teeth and leaped over a dustbin, and the Acolytes quickened their pace.

He paused at the corner of the street, and looked over his shoulder, peering at every face. The two Acolytes were running towards him, their expressions set into hardness. He recognised them. He glanced

ahead. It is not over yet, he thought, and he continued to run. He was breathing harder, ragged and gasping. Haring down the street, he slipped and slid on icy puddles. He ignored his freezing feet. His muscles were beginning to ache. He had to push himself. There was only Hunter left; he could not afford to abandon her.

Ahead of him were two women, marching towards him determinedly; behind him was the tall, laughing figure of the Liberator. Pushed on by fear and adrenalin, Blackwood dived into the railway station; saw Acolytes approaching from the other side; with a terrible shock he realised that the only avenue open to him was underground. They're driving me down there, he thought. They must know he'd got the Koptor. But maybe he could hide it, maybe he could pass it on to somebody else. . . . Please don't let me fail, he thought, then inhaled deeply, filling his lungs, and went down the escalator to the tube station.

He jostled through a group of commuters, making them turn and stare. There was a stream of people going through the barriers; he stood close behind one, slipped through, and stumbled forwards.

Blackwood tripped down the escalator and paused at the entrance to the northbound platform, ready to turn down it, to jump on a train, to escape.

But how could it be? There was an Acolyte – no, two Acolytes – coming towards him, dressed like normal office workers, but he could see it in their eyes, he knew it – he backed away, and sprang down the other tunnel, the white walls flashing by him, the posters screaming messages he didn't listen to.

He reached the platform. If only a train would come, he might have a chance to get away; but turning, he saw four more Acolytes approaching from the other end of the platform. He looked up and down, left and right. He looked at the Koptor in his hand.

Blackwood took in the other people on the platform in an instant: an old man, quavering, wobbling on his stick; a row of tiny children; some rowdy young men. And then Blackwood felt a disturbance in the air, and he knew that the Liberator was nearby. He couldn't give up the Koptor. He must dispose of it. Pass it on to someone innocent, someone who could continue the work.

Freedom, thought Ivo, tasting the word, stretching his arms out as if he were flying. My own adventure into the centre of the earth. Darkness behind me, darkness ahead.

Ivo was thirteen and a half, and he had just left his new school for the winter holidays. It was Friday afternoon, two weeks before Christmas. That day, after

lunch, he'd taken a train with a lot of other students, and they'd all splintered off, saying their cheery goodbyes, making plans to meet soon. He was now alone, riding the escalator down into the chasm of Paddington tube station. The hum of the machinery was edgy and scuzzy. He folded his arms in again, to let a rushing commuter past, and rested on his suitcase, which crouched on the step behind him, heavy with books and discarded school clothes.

He loved riding down escalators – and today he revelled in the sense that he was travelling somewhere otherworldly, perhaps even the kingdom of the dead, for who knew what lurked down there? He was coming to London, on his own, for the first time, and he was so excited he could barely restrain himself from shouting. Ivo held out his arms once more for a moment, as if embracing it all, feeling for a second that he was hovering, and then he came to the end of the escalator and into the maw of the underground station, his bag hitting the floor with a clunk. He bought an Oyster card, went down one more escalator, lugged his bag on to the platform and stood, just behind the yellow line, waiting for a train.

There were hardly any people on the platform to begin with. Ivo could hear the distant rumble of trains, like monsters in the deep, and for a moment it felt as if

he might be one of the only people in this strange underground city, but more filtered through – tourists with cameras slung around their necks, a raucous rugby team on their way to a match, a row of tiny red-capped children in pairs being marshalled by some stressed adults.

Somebody bumped into him and then gripped him by the shoulders. Fear clutched at Ivo. It was a man, tall and thin, young, with crazed, shining eyes. His black hair was plastered to his forehead, his cheeks were reddened; a fat vein throbbed conspicuously in his forehead. The man was panting heavily. Ivo was so shocked he could not speak. Then the man leaned into him. Ivo could smell sweat and a powerful sense of dirt. He noticed that the man's clothes were torn, and he saw what looked like a knife wound in his shoulder, barely cleaned up. Ivo stood frozen, a sick taste rising in his throat. The strange apparition said, in a clear, but low whisper, something that Ivo did not understand, that sounded like 'Remember: Kop-tay thurson', and then grabbed Ivo's hand and thrust something into it.

'Keep it safe. Keep it hidden. They have found me. Remember: *Koptay thurson*. There is no more time. I am Blackwood. They are coming.' He leaned in closer still. 'No one has seen us. You must continue.'

The man released him and moved on quickly, the

incident over in moments and to any passer-by it would have looked as though the man had simply bumped into Ivo and muttered his apologies before hurrying on. The man stood a few paces down the platform from Ivo. Ivo began to say something but the man turned to him and he had such a crazed look about him that Ivo's words perished in his mouth.

Ivo opened his hand. Inside it was a small black object about the size of a mobile phone, which felt heavy and cold. He thought about throwing it away, but instead, bemused, and uncomfortable at the man's insistence, he pushed it into his pocket.

A brightness dazzled him, and Ivo became aware of a man who seemed to radiate power walking past him down the platform. He was wearing a red coat that was embroidered with yellow, green and blue flowers, a purple scarf looped around his neck. The man had long blond hair that fell to his shoulders, but his back was to Ivo, and for some reason Ivo was rather glad that this was so. He moved with a liquid, grumpy grace, stopping behind the man who had bumped into Ivo. The madman – did he say his name was Blackwood? – stiffened and straightened, but did not look behind him. Ivo felt an obscure sense of danger rising within him.

He noticed that four or five other people had

positioned themselves behind the man in the red jacket. This would not have troubled him, but they all seemed to share a purpose. Looking around, Ivo saw that the other people on the platform were oblivious to all this. There had been bombs on the underground, attacks at airports; people were nervous, unfriendly. A newspaper fluttered beside Ivo's feet; its headline warned of global economic meltdown.

A semicircle had formed around the madman, as if to make sure that he could not move off, but he made no attempt to escape. What is going on here? wondered Ivo. It looks like they're trapping him.

The train roared into the platform, and Ivo shook himself; he was overreacting. The rush of air whipped his hair and scarf, momentarily covering his eyes; he pushed his scarf down. A mechanical, patrician voice warned him to 'Allow passengers off the train first, please.' He shifted himself and his bag into the next carriage along from the man in the embroidered jacket, and the doors swooshed shut, the train juddering into action. Ivo noticed that nobody else, apart from the little group around Blackwood, had got into that carriage. All had been obeying some unheard signal that was telling them to stay away, as if they had seen a suitcase with no owner.

The moment they entered the tunnel, lights flickered:

the carriage went into darkness, and then the cold, clear artificial brightness flooded back on. Ivo's excitement at being in London on his own had tempered, now and he held on to a pole for support watching a young mother holding her baby carefully. She smiled at him. He smiled back, and brushed away some scraggles of brown hair that had fallen over his eyes. He saw himself reflected in the window, wrapped in a long, black overcoat, his school scarf, orange and green, warming him, and above he saw the carriage lights repeated endlessly, hanging like full moons.

There was a scuffling noise in the next-door carriage. Ivo strained to look but could not make out anything past the packed shoulders of the people around him. His anxiety suddenly vanished; he began to feel inexplicably elated, and he sensed a bubble of happiness burst in his stomach. He felt as if a shaft of sunlight had speared through him. He had to share this with everyone. He looked round at the other people in his carriage, and they were all smiling too. It was a joy that Ivo had never felt before – pure and unmixed. The young mother was giggling, the baby emitting peals of gurgles. The rugby team were guffawing, slapping each other on the back. Ivo too began to laugh, not caring that he did not know what he was laughing about. Laughter filled his ears, rolling like breakers on a

shoreline. Ivo felt that he could do anything, become anything; he felt as strong as a lion, as free as an eagle.

The lights flickered again, then went out completely. Through his snorts Ivo could make out dim shapes, smell the musty, stale smell of the tube that had taken on a sharper edge – something like lush vegetation, something like fresh woods after rain, something like wine. All around him was laughter. It was beginning to sound frenzied. The lights flickered on and off, like a strobe, and Ivo saw the distorted faces of his fellow passengers, but this made him laugh even more.

A scream rose above the hysteria, but nobody stopped laughing. And that was when it began to change, and Ivo began to feel scared: it was madness that had infected the carriage, and Ivo felt himself borne helplessly on this crashing wave. He didn't want to help whoever was screaming. Instead he just doubled up, mirthlessly choking out laughter, at the whim of some greater force, a huge, physical presence, ruthless, merciless, endless. Ivo clutched his head. He could only think of himself.

When the noise and the laughter stopped, all that could be heard was someone weeping. The lights flickered back on and Ivo blinked in the sudden glare. People stirred, voicing their fear, their confusion. The baby started to cry, its mother holding it very close to

her, her bag falling to the ground as she whispered softly to it.

Sense began to return to the passengers. The train was pulling into Edgware Road. People shouted through doors to find out what was going on.

'Shall we pull the alarm?'

'Was it a bomb?'

'There was no explosion.'

'Is anybody hurt? I'm a doctor,' said somebody, but nobody answered. Nobody was hurt physically. The train benignly opened its doors. Everybody in the carriage glanced uneasily at each other, wondering what they should do. There was no announcement from the driver. People filed out, uncertainly – confused, frightened. Then there began a wailing of horror in the carriage next to Ivo's, and a crowd formed.

'Oh my God . . .' shouted someone. 'Keep those children away.'

'He's dead! He's dead!'

'Who was in that carriage? Stop them!' yelled somebody.

The tiny red-capped infants were hurried off the platform. Ivo, ignoring a man who tried to block his path, elbowed his way out and pushed to where he could see into the next carriage. It took him a while to realise that the small, soft, glistening thing he was

looking at, lying on the blue checked seat, was a severed human hand.

The arrival of officialdom was announced by three men in reflective jackets, who immediately started jabbering into their walkie-talkies. Ivo was pushed away by the crowds towards the exit. Sickness surged through him. He knew the dead man was Blackwood. He'd been dismembered. How could this have happened? thought Ivo. What force could possibly rip a human body apart?

Disoriented, Ivo let himself be pulled along by the crowds away from the platform; before he knew it he was on the other side of the barriers, back above ground. He noticed with a grateful sigh that he was still holding on to his bag. As if in a dream, he pulled out his mobile phone and dialled a number. Policemen stormed into the station; an ambulance drew up outside; nobody paid any attention to him.

He listened to his phone. As his Uncle Jago picked it up, he saw, moving in the opposite direction from everyone else, cool and calm, the man in the embroidered jacket, his blond hair falling unconcernedly around his shoulders. Someone should stop him, Ivo thought. But he couldn't say anything. And he could only hear his Uncle, saying his name, over and over again, and then he slid to the floor.